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Robert Haise Graham
University of the Pacific

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DOCTOROW'S RAGTIME JOURNALISM

An Essay

Presented to the Graduate Faculty

Department of English

University of the Pacific

In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Arts

by

Robert Haise Graham

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This essay, written and submitted by

Robert Haise Graham,

is approved for recommendation to the

Graduate Council, University of the Pacific.

Department Chairman or Dean:

John Seaman

Essay Committee:

Charles Lewis, Chairman

Robert Knighton

Louis Lutter

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At the publication of Ragtime in 1975, E.L. Doctorow remarked that "one of the governing ideas of this book is that facts are as much of an illusion as anything else. And that the line between fact and fiction is not as clearly defined as we think it is."¹

Certainly there are no such clear lines in Ragtime. But the history of the novel in general--from its haziest beginnings in the seventeenth century to its nearly indefinable state in the 1970's--shows that novelists normally have had little trouble separating fact from fiction.

Narrative tradition indicates two sharply distinguished streams, flowing separately at times and merging at others, carrying with them the novelist and his inclinations. The novelist attempting to arrive at some metaphysical truth has shown an allegiance to a fictional branch of narrative; his loyalty is to romantic ideals, to fanciful creations, to things as they might be. The novelist who has attempted some psychological or factual truth has normally allied himself to an empirical branch of narrative; his loyalty is often to recorded history, to accountable facts, to things as they are.

In the last third of the twentieth century, the definition of these two streams is perhaps as clear as it has ever been. On the one hand, authors like Barth or Nabokov show

an overriding concern with the made object, with art as artifice. On the other, novels of the new journalism, for example, In Cold Blood or The Armies of the Night (especially Book Two), attempt the truth with very little reordering of the facts.²

Yet Doctorow's words keep floating back: "facts are as much of an illusion as anything else." And even the most cursory reading of Ragtime would indicate there is much truth in its author's statement. Ragtime is the story of a clearly fictional family whose value system is threatened and in large part changed by the very factual figures of Henry Ford, Harry Houdini, Emma Goldman, and others. The family is a composite or archetypal family and are thus given only familial roles for names. Obviously the facts of history alone will not work for Doctorow's story the way they worked for Norman Mailer or Truman Capote; otherwise, Doctorow would not have needed his likeable family from New Rochelle. Nor can artifice by itself carry the cargo in Ragtime the way it did in Chimera or Lolita; too much of the cargo is tied up with the facts of American history.

Doctorow has a curiously complex problem in Ragtime. He wants to say something meaningful, to arrive at some truth about the ragtime era of America; he wants to reveal the essence of the people of that era, who and what affected them, whom and what they affected. But the facts alone cannot solve Doctorow's problem. They will provide

only locatable, accountable, recorded deeds. Art, by itself, cannot solve the problem either, since the problem is too bound up in history. The problem of Ragtime, then, is to conjoin somehow the accountable facts and the unrecorded effects those facts might have had. Ragtime needs to show how the historical figures of the early twentieth century and their philosophies affected unnamed families and caused much social unrest and change.

Doctorow's solution is what might be called ragtime journalism. The new journalism attempted to create realistic novels that convinced us of their factual veracity by using real people and scenes to present an authentic recreation of reality. But Doctorow uses real people and scenes to create an unauthentic reality, to create a very obvious fiction.³

He creates a fiction because Ragtime has a fictive (or metaphysical--but not historic) point to make. Doctorow must necessarily direct us to art, to fancy, rather than to the concrete facts of history. Yet the truth Doctorow wants us to see is dependent upon our re-examination and our redefinition of certain aspects of history. We already know the historical figures from reality--Houdini, Ford, Morgan, Booker T. Washington, Goldman, and the rest. These people after all are our traditional heroes of young twentieth century America. But we know them, Doctorow seems to want to say, incorrectly.

Therefore, we need to take another look at our heroes.

We need to see these people not as history shows they were, but as the effects of history suggest they might have been. Consequently, Doctorow needs to create a new situation for Houdini and his contemporaries, and it must necessarily be a fictional situation because Doctorow wants to show history's effect on ahistorical families. Then, and perhaps only then, can we review the salient points of their lives. Then we can get at the truth in front of, behind, in spite of, and in addition to the facts.

Doctorow's ragtime journalism, the metaphor of ragtime, is essential to this end. Doctorow uses ragtime music both to provide a structure for his novel and to determine a point of view that will realistically make an artistic point.

There is obviously no factual record to indicate that the historical figures of the ragtime era involved their lives with either the fictional family or the "mad coon" from St. Louis Doctorow creates for us. But we need to experience how they could have. Doctorow can best aid us in this postulate by creating a blatant fiction--he needs the fictional interaction of real and nonreal characters to chronicle the young years of twentieth century America, replete with its social and moral atrocities, Doctorow thus reorders human time to compel the reader, virtually force him, to experience the association of the very real figures of history with the equally real myths and misconceptions of our culture. Ragtime, like the music from which it draws its name, offers a syncopated look at history.

Syncopation is the continuous superimposition of an irregular rhythm overtop of a regular one. In the piano rags a regular pulse is maintained by the left hand alternating a low bass note with a heavy accent on the first and third beats of the measure. Pitted against this regular meter is a constant series of rhythmic displacements in the right hand.⁴

Ragtime is, in John Brooks' admirable phrase, "a novel in ragtime."⁵ The springboard to an understanding of how the musical rag structures Ragtime is Father's reason for keeping a journal: "This was a system too, the system of language and conceptualization. It proposed that human beings, by the act of making witness, warranted times and places for their existence other than the time and place they were living through."⁶ And that is what Ragtime does: it makes witness; it guarantees other existence, other temporal and spatial zones for its historically factual figures. It moves the people of the right hand--the "real" figures of history--overtop the regular pulse of the people of the left hand--Father, Mother, Mother's Younger Brother, and the rest of the family unit.

A close examination of each of Ragtime's four sections shows how perfectly the ragtime metaphor works, how brilliantly it pits the regular meter of art against the rhythmic displacements of history, how it presents "ragged time," time torn apart.⁷

The first section of Ragtime is composed largely of the steady, rhythmic beat of the family: Father, Mother, The Little Boy, Grandfather, and Mother's Younger Brother.

Father is the predominant chord; he is "a burly man with strong appetites" (10), an altogether conventional, regular man whether he's overseeing the manufacture of flags and bunting or dropping sweat on Mother upstairs on Sunday afternoons. One feels, too, that the pace of life at the time mirrors Father's own pace. "Patriotism was a reliable sentiment" (3): parades, concerts, fish fries, picnics, and other social gatherings were the order of the day. As far as Father knows, there are neither Negroes nor immigrants. Part One then establishes the regular pulse of the rag, the stable, steadying bass note. We see the Family before it changes. We see the carefully fashioned harmony that allows Father to move rhythmically along without ever analyzing who or what he is, without ever having to care very much about the time he is a part of.

But behind the conventional rhythm and the controlled harmony, one can also begin to hear the strains of some discordant melody. Houdini unaccountably appears at the Family's house, and America's first world war is foreshadowed and foretold. Father is preparing to leave Mother for a polar expedition with Admiral Peary, yet we're told that his marriage nonetheless flourishes. Mother has premonitions of "great disasters" (14). Evelyn Nesbit, Harry K. Thaw, and Stanley White in tandem commit a titillating, shocking crime, but Emma Goldman's radical philosophy begins to uncover much greater civil and social atrocities in the century. And it turns out that there

are Negroes, that there are immigrants, and the quality of life for them is not all picnics and parades. Younger Brother is deeply troubled and unhappy. Mother, in Father's absence, stares "at the ceiling as if to see through it," looking to find her own answers as she begins to assert her individuality.

This discordant melody is reflected in the shadow pictures that Tateh sells on the street; they are themselves shadows of the musical rag in this section of the novel. We hear of Tateh that "with nothing but a small scissors and some glue he would make your image by cutting a piece of white paper and mounting it on a black background" (37). In other words, we glimpse the real thing and the change it goes through; we see the profile and the shadow behind it, the traditional chords and the syncopated accompaniment.

Tateh and his Little Girl, Younger Brother, Mother and Father, and the rest of the fictional characters who dominate this section are tunes interwoven with history and changing time. Interplayed themes structure the section: behind Father's illusions is reality; behind his complacent stagnation is the Family's need for growth and change; behind the isolation are the need and the search for identity.

The first section of Ragtime offers the most carefully controlled rag in the novel. We come to suspect that the regular pulse of the American way of life is not the only

music to be heard. In the background is displacement, a syncopated treble that accounts for the changes that are to come in the next section. Overtop the steady and predictable left hand hovers a disrupting, disorganizing right.

In the second section, Father returns home. He finds "everywhere signs of his own exclusion" (91). He has changed physically. He is no longer the dominant chord in the Family. Mother is confidently, independently, making her own moves, in the home and in the bed. The Little Boy has a life outside of his father's. Sarah no longer knows her place. The business has prospered. Even Father's smell sets him apart.

And outside the Family, displacements are also occurring. Immigrants are struggling to become inhabitants, wanting the same rights as other citizens. Negroes are struggling to become blacks. There is civil unrest: riots, strikes, change.

And there are other intricate polyrhythms and opposing syncopations operative in this section. The Little Boy is fascinated by the "duplicable event." He cares little for the first-hand knowledge offered at school, but instead stands alert and ready to examine silhouettes, discarded journals, transformation, motion pictures, images of truth, images of himself in the mirror, and "tracks made by the skaters, traces quickly erased of moments past, journeys taken" (99). The theory of the interchangeability of parts suggests the shared design of people everywhere and

the duality of history. Pierpont Morgan tells Henry Ford that "the rules of nature operate so that our individual differences occur on the basis of our similarity" (122). That is, our view of ourselves might be clearer if we review our ancestors, our history. And within both the duplicable event and the interchangeability of parts is a rag-like structure. The constant pulse of reality, of self, is always played against illusion, against the deranging forces of history.

Surely the most important single event in this second section is the appearance of Coalhouse Walker. A forerunner of today's black militants, Coalhouse is a proud man, a footstool for no one. He is the catalyst for all the major action in the novel. From the time Mother digs up the brown baby until Coalhouses's body "jerk[s] about the street in a sequence of attitudes as if it were trying to mop up its own blood" (255), Coalhouse Walker is a "cluster of syncopating chords" set over "the thumping octaves" of convention and regularity. Walker's appearance nearly halfway through the novel is eminently appropriate. He is the fulcrum of Ragtime; at his entry, the seesaw tips his way. Ragtime music is characterized by its introduction of new themes. Walker not only plays ragtime, he is ragtime, or at least one of its major themes. His syncopated melody breaks in to disrupt further the rhythm of American tradition.

The second section of Ragtime ends with a discernible

change in the carefully fashioned rag of the first part. There is a hint now that the bass notes are being more and more dominated by the treble. Younger Brother, riding between the cars of the milk-train, is as alert to that possibility as anyone.

He considered throwing himself under the wheels. He listened to their rhythm, their steady clacking, like the left hand of a rag. The screeching and pounding of metal on metal where the two cars joined was the syncopating right hand. It was a suicide rag. He held the door handles on either side of him listening to the music (143-4).

The steady beat of Father, convention, regularity, and stagnation is still to be heard, but always in the background; and becoming louder, now, are the syncopated melodies of Coalhouse, urban and technological progress, upheaval, growth and change, threatening to drown out everything else.

The third section illustrates Father's attempts to stay above water, to regain and to maintain his regular rhythm. Father takes the Little Boy to a baseball game and Mother to Atlantic City, hoping that an afternoon of tradition or a change of air will bring back the comforting sense of life that has slipped away.

The baseball game deserves particular attention, because in its ragtime-like construction it works as a metaphor for Coalhouse's intrusion into Father's world. For Father, baseball is the game Harvard played "twenty years before, when the players addressed each other as

Mister and played their game avidly, but as sportsmen, in sensible uniforms" (194). That sensibility has been upset by the disorder of modern baseball, its baggy uniform, its obscenities, its fights, and its spitting, its teams of immigrants. On one of the teams is Charles Victor Faust, "a fool who, for imagining himself one of the players, was kept on the team roster for their amusement" (194). When the players become bored with Faust, they send him packing, leaving him to die alone in an insane asylum. Like the Negroes Father thinks can be useful through proper guidance, Faust has served his purpose. Once again, the steady pulse of Father's world has been interrupted by unsettling notes.

The order that is essential to the composition of the rag is beginning to break up. The music of this section is the muted and vitiated melody of nostalgia. Appropriately, Coalhouse wants "no music in the basement quarters" that serve as his hideout: "No instrument of any kind" (206). The frenzied beat of the rag has slowed down in this section; there is only the sound of the brass band, of some new melody on the dawn of some new era.

The final section of Ragtime brings the "coming conflagration," the tying up, the summing up, as ragtime music winds down and some new strains can be heard tuning up for America's plunge into World War I. The ragtime music of the early part of the novel has been carefully decimated in this final chapter. The rhythms have been separated from the melodies, the bass from the trebles. The noise,

at least for awhile, is blended into a quieter, unhurried song. Father, Younger Brother, Coalhouse, Sarah, and Grandfather are dead. Mother and Tateh are married. The blacks and the whites have blended into an "Our Gang" semblance of togetherness.

Ragtime music is in part characterized by its call and response figures. Part One of Ragtime might be looked upon as the call, a panoramic vision of all the major themes and characters in the novel, a time of quiet convention and complacent rhythm. Part Two is the response, the displacement of Part One. The intricate patterns and delicate polyrhythms of history and reality begin the breakdown of the first rag. Part Three is also a call, Father's attempt to return to the conditions of Part One. The final section is the response, the recognition that a new reality always replaces the old illusions. The music of the coming years may be no more pleasant than the ragtime music was, but the rag is over: "by that time the era of Ragtime had run out, with the heavy breath of the machine, as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano" (270). For a time at least the rhythmic displacements of the right hand have drowned out those pulsing bass notes of the left.

It would be impossible to examine the musical rag of this novel without discussing the "musician" who plays the rag. Because Doctorow has a double problem in Ragtime, because he is trying to present both the left hand of order

and the right hand of intrusion, both the actual facts of history and the artistic effects of that history, he needs a narrator who can deftly handle the intricate polyrhythms and the contradictory impulses of both hands.

Normally, the narrator of a novel has been called upon to do one of the two things, either be a witness in history or a witness to it. The diagram below helps make the strategies more visible.

Substance:	Actual (History) Psychological	Fanciful (Literature) Metaphysical
	↑	↑
Narrator:	Restricted 1st-person Eye-witness	Omniscient 3rd-person Surreal or super real

Traditionally then, "the natural form of mimetic narrative is eye-witness and first-person. Circumstantiality, verisimilitude, and many more of the qualities which we recognize as identifying characteristics of realism in narrative are all natural functions of the eye-witness point of view."⁸ Conversely, omniscient, third-person narrators are usually employed to expound metaphysical truths, not only to "see all" but to "be all" as well, fancifully creating art and artifice.

This is not to say that third-person narrators are never asked to detail or render actual substance, or that first-person narrators are not at times asked to arrive at metaphysical insights. But traditionally, they do one or the


other. Occasionally, when an author needs two distinct or separate narrators, one perhaps to chronicle history and the other to present aesthetic truths, he will use multiple narrators, separate points of view to carry the narrative cargo.

But Doctorow has a duplex problem in Ragtime. He is both trying to establish history and to undercut it at the same time. His narrator, consequently, is truly unique. Throughout the first two-thirds of the novel, the reader has every reason to suspect that he is reading a novel by an effaced, omniscient narrator, from the point of view of one who stands outside the action, interpreting and evaluating events. After all, the fictional characters are spoken of in the third person: "Father and Mother went upstairs and closed the bedroom door. Grandfather fell asleep on the divan in the parlor. The Little Boy in the sailor blouse sat on the screened porch and waved away the flies.... Mother's Younger Brother boarded the streetcar and rode to the end of the line" (4). We perhaps wonder at the Little Boy's remarkable clairvoyance when at the end of Chapter 1 the narrator surprises us with, "Warn the Duke, the little boy said," but we assume that the narrator (not the little boy) will explain that phenomenon in the course of the novel.

Yet at the beginning of the third section of Ragtime, the narrator adopts a curiously personal tone. He says (emphasis mine), "Our knowledge of this clandestine history comes to us by Younger Brother's own hand" (205). He almost

seems to be saying, "I have an active place in this history." There can be no doubt what that place is by the end of the novel. In the final chapter, on the penultimate page, the Little Boy says, not talking now about some universal figure or some symbolic representation, but about an actual relation, "Poor Father, I see his final exploration" (269). "I see his final exploration." This is the first and only "I" of the novel. Suddenly the nameless, omniscient narrator of more than two-hundred pages is the Little Boy in the sailor blouse, now locatable throughout the historical and imagined events of the ragtime era. The narrator of Ragtime, then, is composed of conflicting impulses, two hands, played separately, one atop the other. He is both omniscient and limited, locatable in time.

To further undercut the historical inclination in Ragtime, Doctorow permits his third-person narrator to chronicle the actual events of the novel (the accountable actions of Houdini, Ford, Morgan, etc.) and his more limited narrator to reveal the metaphysical truths of the book (the philosophy of the duplicable event, the fictional actions of Coalhouse and the Family).

Substance:	Actual Facts		Fanciful Family
Narrator:	Embodied Locatable in time		Clairvoyant Omniscient ⁹

Both go against tradition, but it is the fanciful events (the Family) that give license for the reordering of the

historically accurate events. Without the former, we might never discover the truth of the latter. Like Coalhouse at his piano, playing the clear, flower-like chords and the bouquet-like melodies, the Little Boy narrates Ragtime from two perspectives, balancing the regular bass notes of art against the clinking and pounding melodies of history.

It is significant, and no doubt deliberate, that the narrator of Ragtime almost never questions or gets excited.¹⁰ Virtually the only form of end punctuation in Ragtime is the period; the predominant sentence pattern is the simple declarative. Father at one point is said to be "using the historical tense," and certainly that is the verb tense of the great majority of the novel. The effect is also deliberate: the narrator, the omniscient side of the Little Boy, is asking us to believe in all that has happened; the historical tense implies an actual history.

Yet at the same time, we note that there are no quotation marks in the novel. No one is quoted directly. The effect now is that the narrator, the locatable narrator, reminds us that these people did not say these exact things; the novel is a fiction, an artificial creation.

The narrator thus establishes some historical pretense, and then undercuts it. He says, "believe this happened" and "don't believe it."

Ragtime is a book of duplex emotions and goals, a syncopated look at history. It is a novel written about the ragtime era of America, and also a novel written in

ragtime structure. It is a book about the rag: music, expansion, compression, syncopation, displacement, interplay. And it is a book about time: facts, the actual, the accountable, the locatable.

When ragtime music is played faster than its proper speed, it is always difficult, and perhaps impossible, to separate the intricate melodies, rhythms, and intertwining themes. Hence, Scott Joplin's words:

Do not play this piece fast.
It is never right to play Ragtime fast ...

This epigraph for Doctorow's novel relates as well to Ragtime as it does to ragtime. Played at some traditional narrative speed--using traditional structure and point of view--it would be impossible for the novel to encompass, and it would be impossible for the reader to separate, the historical facts and the metaphysical truths. But Doctorow's ragtime journalism is not traditional; it assimilates to its own myth, finally, the historical figures and the myths they popularized, the syncopated temporal and spatial zones of their chronologies, and the fanciful and metaphysical effects they caused. Then, and only then, does the interplay of the chords and melodies make infinite novelistic sense.

FOOTNOTES

¹Blanche Moss, "E. L. Doctorow," Westchester (Mamaroneck, New York, November, 1975), p. 60.

²Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's excellent study, The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), provides invaluable underpinning for this theory. Their first chapter, "The Narrative Tradition," pp. 3-16, is particularly helpful. This chapter explains in detail the deviational model that serves as the basis for Scholes and Kellogg's investigation. The model suggests that narrative, particularly long narrative, has emerged from an "epic synthesis" and embodies the "two antithetical types"--empirical and fictional--already mentioned (p. 13).

³Journalism attempts to answer the "who," "what," "where," and "how" questions. But the new journalism and those narrative strategies like it go beyond basic journalistic inquiries, go to art and attempt to answer "why."

⁴Terry Waldo, This is Ragtime (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1976), pp. 4-5.

⁵In "Book World," Chicago Tribune, July 6, 1975. Nor was Brooks the only reviewer to pick up on Doctorow's use of the ragtime metaphor. Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., writing in the Chicago Review (vol. 27, iii, Winter 75-76), pp. 138-144, notes briefly that "through the metaphor of ragtime music Doctorow achieves an architectural complexity... fascinating for the reader." George Stade, in the cover story of the New York Times Book Review, July 6, 1975, p. 2, says: "plink-a-plink, a-plink-plink, a-plink-plink. The rhythm of the sentences and events in this novel is the verbal equivalent of ragtime. The left hand pounds out the beat of historical change. It modulates from the WASP to the immigrant to the black families as through the tonic, dominant and subdominant chords upon which the right hand builds its syncopating improvisations. These are variations on themes provided by representative figures and events of time."

⁶E. L. Doctorow, Ragtime (New York: Random House, 1974, 1975), p. 63. [All subsequent references to the text are from this edition with page numbers in parenthesis.]

⁷Terry Waldo, in This is Ragtime, p. 4, notes that "although no one now living seems to know for sure the original meaning of the word 'ragtime,' it seems to have come from the phrase 'ragged time'--tearing time apart."

⁸Scholes and Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative, p. 250.

⁹One might also mention Doctorow's use of narrative license in this connection, the way Doctorow moves the reader beyond clairvoyance and into the future (present). We see the way the boy has matured, the way he has grown along with the events. We see too that the novel is reflective by the narrator's incursion into present time. These thematic concerns, however, do not necessitate the complex point of view Doctorow gives us. The structural concerns do.

¹⁰The narrator does ask rhetorical questions ("And what of Tateh and his little girl?" [75]; "And what of Younger Brother?" [203]) and does use exclamatory phrases to cue our ears to the frenzied pace of America's technological growth ("Tracks! Tracks!" [80]; "Spring, spring!" [164]). Toward the close of the novel, as the rag begins to break down into disharmony, one can also notice an increase in question marks and exclamation points, as though the narrator is preparing us for the "coming conflagration."

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