

# Introduction

If one were to look for two novels that would enable one to comment on the changing nature of American historical fiction, one would have serious difficulty in finding two other novels that complement each other as perfectly as Dos Passos' The 42nd Parallel and Doctorow's Ragtime. Indeed, both works share a great number of features, while at the same time being so different in other – quite significant – respects.<sup>1</sup> In the following study it is not my intention to give a detailed, extensive and systematic analysis of each of the works in question, neither do I want to deal with the novels in the contexts of their authors' work. As the bibliography below suggests, this project has already been undertaken several times and, for the most part, with very satisfactory results. That is why in this comparative study, I rather focus on an area that has not been discussed to such a large extent: I am following a number of significant divergences in the artistic treatment of American historical reality as exemplified by both novels.

Dos Passos' The 42nd Parallel and Doctorow's Ragtime correspond to each other from a variety of points of view. Both works cover the same period of American history, starting approximately at the turn of the century and culminating around the United States' entry into the Great War. Both have a similar social and to some extent spatial scope. In The 42nd Parallel as well as in Ragtime one can find representatives of working class radicalism (Mac; the early Tateh), traditional or newly-established middle class figures (Eleanor Stoddard and Eveline Hutchins, Janey Williams; the New Rochelle family) and highly successful characters whose new careers have catapulted them among the most powerful groups in the country (Moorehouse in the realm of "public relations"; the "new" Tateh in the new booming film industry).

Beside having created a wide variety of fictional characters, both authors have introduced into their texts a number of "fictionalized" historical personages. The same historical figures of the day appear in both works, such as the great anarchist Emma Goldman, her lover Ben Reitman, the Wobbly leader Big Bill Haywood, and T.A. Edison, just to name a few.<sup>2</sup>

The spatial scope of The 42nd Parallel as opposed to Ragtime is broader, nevertheless it is still possible to find significant spacial overlappings. Dos Passos follows his characters throughout most of the country, whereas the actions in Ragtime are largely confined to the Eastern seaboard. The 42nd Parallel is successively set in Connecticut, Chicago, the Mid-West, Seattle, California, Goldfield in Nevada, New York, Washington, D.C., and the narrative even on occasion spills over into the neighboring countries of Canada and Mexico, thus covering the whole North American continent. Both novels share only the setting of New York, the similar seaside resorts of Atlantic City and Ocean City, and – surprisingly – Mexico.

The political views of both writers – one can easily discern them from the texts in question as well as from their interviews – are also markedly similar. “America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake” (R 41) concludes Doctorow’s Freud upon visiting the United States, having experienced its poverty, noise, speed, crudity, lack of taste and sophistication. Although this may not be Doctorow’s own view, he remains very critical of many aspects of the American society, hinting at numerous betrayals of its most fundamental beliefs. Similarly, the early Dos Passos would certainly have no hesitation in subscribing to the fictional Freud’s dismissal, for his America is a country of an originally great idea that has gone wrong, a country whose language has been violated and corrupted and even its most successful and powerful representatives are destined to wind up on the losing side. Since both authors share strong sympathies for the disempowered, earnestly highlighting the dark sides of the American experience, thus questioning the general availability of the American dream, they can be located on the left of the political spectrum.

Thus, to sum up, within the thematic and spacial similarities shared by the two novels it is possible to detect different approaches to the material. In both texts different aspects of characters and the portrayed society come to the foreground, different conceptions of reality become apparent. The fictional worlds of The 42nd Parallel and Ragtime are not identical and their altered character can be – to a great extent – attributed to the changing awareness of the respective ages both writers are, in one way or another, products of. It is some in the long series of differences that the following chapters will examine. First, however, I would like to further underline the intense correspondence between both authors and their respective times.

## **Dos Passos and the Modern**

A closer look at Dos Passos and Doctorow will reveal that both of them resonate a great deal with the spirit of the times, employing narrative forms and themes

typical of the respective stages in the intellectual and cultural developments of their day. John Dos Passos, beside having been hailed as “the principal American literary influence of the twentieth century” (George Steiner in Pizer i), has been regarded “as a writer whose varying interests during the 1920s and 1930s clearly exemplify the broad changes occurring in American intellectual and literary life of those decades” (Pizer i) just as Doctorow is seen as a “remarkable phenomenon” who “tells us much about the state of modern American culture.” (Levine 8) As these quotes further imply, both authors have been very successful at their respective projects. Beside being responsive to ideas that were in the air, they managed to make them accessible to the common reader: their works were praised by a number of notable critics and found general appreciation in the population at large.

As I have already indicated, I believe that there is reasonable ground for putting forward a convincing argument that both authors are approximately equally receptive to current ideas of their respective ages. Dos Passos’ conscious use of a variety of modernist techniques can serve as one of the most obvious examples. The four narrative methods or – to use Donald Pizer’s terminology “modes” – Dos Passos employs in order to express an overall, representative and – if possible – objective picture of the country and its reality (The Camera Eye, Narratives, Biographies and Newsreels) bring him into the proximity of many a modernist mind and artistic movement. The combining of a multitude of fragmented images, references and media quotations reminds one sometimes of T.S. Eliot, the intensely subjective, discontinuous narrative voice of *The Camera Eye* bears some resemblance to the stream-of-consciousness kind of prose by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The multitude of juxtapositions and cross-sections, e.g. those of newspaper headlines and fragments of articles within the Newsreels, the intricate interplay of the four modes (e.g. the correspondences between *The Camera Eye* and the narrative sections; the narrative and the Newsreels; the biographies as contrasted with the lives of the fictional characters) as well as the interplay of themes and motifs within the intersected narratives resemble the art of collage, the montages of modernist filmmakers and the experimental practices of Brechtian avant-garde theater.

Or let us mention Dos Passos’ preoccupation with the personal past. Though limited to *The Camera Eye* sections, it is in accordance with a general modernist shift of attention toward the subject, away from the impersonal historical past. As Stephen Kern sums up, “the historical past was the source of social forces over which they [thinkers of the day attempting to shake off the “burden of history”] had little control; it created institutions that had lasted for centuries; and it limited their sense of autonomy.” (Kern 63) Instead “they focused their attention on the personal past, because they believed it to be a richer source of subject matter than the remote and impersonal historical record. The personal past was

something over which they might gain some control.” (Kern 63) If we have a look at Dos Passos’ novel we can detect the same opposition. While the characters of the narrative modes appear to exist in a vast and complex world beyond their control, very often reduced to mere objects of impersonal social forces acting upon them, The Camera Eye segments offer a “recreation of a state of mind through image and symbol;” combined together The Camera Eye segments form “a larger poem of the coming into maturity and vision of the artist’s imagination” (Pizer 58), a vision that, if not liberation, offers relief.

A further example can be found in the Newsreel sections. Here, Dos Passos illustrates the critical concern of the early modernist period with the simultaneity of experience that was created by journalism. “In 1904 Paul Cladel wrote that the morning newspaper gives us a sense of present in its totality, and an editorial in *Paris Midi* of February 23, 1914, characterized the headlines of one daily paper as simultaneous poetry.” (Kern 70) Indeed, Dos Passos’ montages, consisting of newspaper headlines, fragments of articles and popular songs, suggesting the barrage of chaotic and very often meaningless information one is exposed to every day, do sometimes read like poetry, albeit very sarcastic poetry.

Furthermore the method of montage should be stressed. Just as the modernist filmmakers developed it in order to be able to express several simultaneous actions, so did the writers. Like the surrealists who would put together their automatic texts, like Joyce, who in his *Ulysses* improvised montage techniques to show the simultaneous activity of Dublin as a whole, not a history of the city but a slice of it out of time” (Kern 77), Dos Passos, too, in his Newsreels expresses the multiplicity of actions happening throughout the country at the same time.

In the article “Manhattan Transfer: Dos Passos’ *Wasteland*” E.D. Lowry examined the close structural as well as thematic affinities between Eliot’s ultimate modernist poem and Dos Passos’ novel that preceeded the composition of the U.S.A. In this novel, Dos Passos tried out a number of methods that he later further refined in the U.S.A. “Like Eliot”, says Lowry, “Dos Passos disintegrates the usual discursive ordering of experience so as to bring together apparently unrelated fragments of actuality which, seen in juxtaposition, coalesce into a new unity expressing a total view of the subject. The two writers, coming to grips with the clashing contradictions and chaotic quality of modern life, capitalize to the utmost on the possibilities of shock effect, discord, discontinuity.” (Lowry in Hook 53)

The influence of Eliot on Dos Passos is also highlighted by Donald Pizer. According to him, Eliot is, along with Whitman, the principal influence on the style of the Camera Eye sections. “From Whitman comes an emphasis on grammatical and verbal parallelism as a basic structural device within an unmetrical form, and from Eliot the organization of each of the Camera Eye segments into

a series of brief narrative vignettes that themselves rely largely on private image and symbol." (Pizer 58)

The preceding paragraphs demonstrate how closely Dos Passos responded to the intellectual and artistic developments of his day as well as to those prior to it. The variety of methods and traditions he availed himself of indicate a highly articulate and informed writer. One can only agree with Melvin Landsberg that the "U.S.A. is not the work of a proletarian, but of a Harvard-educated middle-class radical familiar with many lands, tongues and literary traditions." (Landsberg 188)

## Doctorow's "Historicism"

Similarly, E.L. Doctorow's concerns relate closely to the recent developments both in American academia as well as in American culture at large. The educated general reader may appreciate his constant preoccupation with American history, his reexamination of many typically American themes and motives, the richness of his literary allusions. Scholars working in the field of cultural studies might use many ideas one finds in Doctorow's novels as illustrations of their academic production: beside dealing with the question of social injustice he examines problems of open and hidden racism, interaction of cultures, imperialism, cultural construction of human body and identity; neither is his prose devoid of relevant feminist insights. Even the representatives and supporters of post-modernist thought might view his novels favourably, for Doctorow conceives his works as consciously intertextual,<sup>3</sup> problematizes the adequacy of modern science, highlights the indeterminacy of human experience. Likewise, he is aware of the shortcomings and false pretensions at the heart of our logocentric culture; throughout his work he pays a lot of attention to political and philosophical aspects of language and discourse, thus paralleling the "linguistic turn" of a number of recent theories.

However, probably the most well-known connection between Doctorow and his times is related to his notion of history. An informed reader of his texts cannot help noticing how much weight he assigns to the question of history and its narrative construction. Beside incorporating this view in his fiction and indicating it in his interviews, Doctorow explicitly identified his position on the matter in the much quoted 1977 essay *False Documents*. This essay came to be regarded as his central theoretical piece. Naturally, Doctorow is neither the originator, nor the sole promoter of this idea, which belongs to an old tradition dating back, if not to Gorgias and the ancient sophists, at least to the famous intervention of Friedrich Nietzsche. ("There are no facts in themselves, for a fact to exist we must first introduce meaning.") (EC 23) A similar tradition flourished on Ameri-

can soil in the 1930s when Charles Beard and Carl Becker published their famous essays "Everyman His Own Historian" (Becker), "What Are Historical Facts?" (Becker), "Written History as an Act of Faith" (Beard). Such a relativist view, i.e. one that actually destroys the idea of a solid, objective, determinable truth, has found, along with other Nietzschean ideas, a strong following in today's pluralistic, post-modern times whose most characteristic feature is the gradual turning away from the epistemological certainties of the earlier centuries to a world of multiple, conflicting interpretations – or versions – of reality.

However, to regard Doctorow as pure relativist would not be entirely correct. Doctorow's position, as stated in *False Documents*, is slightly different since his major concern is the narrative aspect of history and the "artificial" boundary between a historical and a fictional text. In this respect Doctorow becomes a sort of an intellectual twin of Hayden White, one of the current leading theoreticians in the field of historiography. In the following extract White makes the point that descriptions of events already constitute interpretation of their nature. Speaking about 19th century historians, White says that they

*did not realize that the facts do not speak for themselves, but that the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is – in its representation – a purely discursive one. Novelists might be dealing only with imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the object of a representation is a poetic process. (White 125)*

Such statements resonate surprisingly well with Doctorow's notion that "history shares with fiction a mode of mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning." (EC 24) The essay on the next page culminates in academic sound-bites "history is a kind of fiction" (EC 25) and "facts are images of history just as images are the data of fiction." (EC 24) Doctorow then goes on to completely abolish the boundary between fiction and nonfiction: "there is only narrative." (EC 26)

The fragility – or perhaps impossibility – of the boundary can be also demonstrated by a brief comparison of two recent extracts, one taken from a novel, the other from a "history book proper."

Text No. 1

*A century ago, the stout midriff was a sign of mature success in life. Affluent Americans devoured heavy meals at huge banquets. They accepted the congratulations of afterdinner orators. The speaker announced the marriage of material and spiritual progress. His audience nodded approval. There*

*was no limit to American abundance. There was no impediment to the partnership of Protestantism and science. The audience applauded. They rose stiffly to leave. It was an age of confidence.*

Text No. 2

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

The former text is the opening paragraph of T.J. Jackson Lears' invaluable study No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880 – 1920, published in 1981, the latter is taken from the first two pages of Ragtime. Beside the clear stylistic parallels – or indebtedness on Lears' part – one can see that it is hardly possible to tell which of the two texts is the more or the less fictional one. It appears that “historical writing proper” and historical fiction are – if not one and the same thing – certainly very close. History, indeed, has “moved closer to fiction as fiction, for many writers, has moved closer to history” (Parks 17) and writers have become much more aware of the narrative status of their texts.<sup>4</sup>

However, fiction for Doctorow is not only the medium through which composed stories about the past can be communicated. Its role is more important. It is “the most ancient way of knowing, which (...) recomposes all the functions of language that had been split by modern history.(...) It is vital for human survival.” (Parks 15) As Doctorow himself put it: “Fiction gives counsel. It connects the present with the past, and the visible with the invisible. It distributes the suffering. It says we must compose ourselves in our stories in order to exist. It says if we don't do it, someone else will do it for us.” (Doctorow in Parks 15)

If both Dos Passos and Doctorow appear to be similar in so many different ways, both portraying the same historical period while using similar – or sometimes even the same – figures, spaces, themes, voicing corresponding concerns about the American reality from a similar, i.e. leftist point-of-view, and if both writers at the same time represent voices that are, in one way or another, informed by the cultural and intellectual developments of their day, then, I believe,

it may be possible to take them as representative for the purposes of my investigation. Thus, using these two novels that are, on so many different levels, as close as can be, yet also, in their treatment of the similar subject matter so different, I will attempt to comment on how the fictional treatment of the American reality has changed in the course of this century, from American high modernism through the more recent period of post-modernism. I would hesitate, however, given the narrow scope of the project, to make any far-reaching, general conclusions from my findings. At their best they might be seen as a small probe, indicating a certain direction along which American historical fiction as representation (or composition) of reality is moving.

## Notes

1. It would be surprising not to find a number of studies where the two novels are compared. In his 1976 article John Seelye for instance highlighted the novels' affinity:

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

(Seelye 22)

In her 1978 paper, on the other hand, Barbara Folley has discussed the differences in Dos Passos' and Doctorow's notions of history. While realising a number of obvious similarities between both works, Folley located Ragtime next to novels like for instance Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, Berger's G. and Fowles' The French Lieutenant's Woman. As a truly Marxist critic, Folley finds little sympathy for Doctorow's idea of history: although she praises Ragtime for its radical outlook and for its dealing with the questions of class, race and gender, she sees the novel as "manneristic" and "associated with the period of decadence;

*if it does not suggest that history is meaningless, it does imply the meanings we find in it are chimerical and at best highly subjective. What I ultimately find disturbing about Ragtime (...) is its underlying postulate that whatever coherence emerges from the historical world is attributable to the writer's power as teller of his story...*

*is a more inspiring work, insofar as it leaves one with the sense that the problems which Dos Passos confronts reside to a large extent in his materials themselves, and not just in the working of his own historical imagination. (EC 175)*

2. The problem of the fictionalized real-life figures has also been discussed by other critics. Leonard Kriegel, for example, has commented on the different degree of "fictionality" of the "real-life" characters in both works. In his article Kriegel makes the obvious point that unlike Dos Passos, who drew a clear line between the lives of his fictional characters by interrupting his narration and inserting the biographical sections as separate units, Doctorow "had managed to do something more intriguing. In Dos Passos' great trilogy, the biographical is used as a counterweight to the fictional. In Doctorow, the stuff of J. P. Morgan is, indeed, the stuff of fictional life." (EC 159)

3. The best known Ragtime example is of course the story of Coalhouse Walker Junior. The depiction of the black piano player's fight for justice is an updated version of the early 19th century novella *Michael Kohlhaas* by Heinrich von Kleist, which in turn is itself based on a historical chronicle. As John Ditsky noted, both texts come close in a number of ways. "Not only are the names Michael Kohlhaas/Coalhouse Walker quite similar (...), but the succession of events is essentially the same in both works." (EC 180) Both texts also include leading names of the time (Luther, in Kleist's case). However, "It is the *spirit* of the two pieces that is the most stunningly parallel: in both, there is the offhand telling of an outrageous miscarriage of justice, with the result that the reader of each shares the wrath that impels the central character of each to a path of violent retribution." (EC 180) For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of Ragtime see John Ditsky's article *The German Source of Ragtime: A Note* in Trenner's collection E.L. Doctorow. Essays and Conversations.

4. Doctorow's historicizing fiction has been regarded as part of a whole international phenomenon. Barbara Folley groups Doctorow together with Berger, Marquez or Fowles, Paul Levine places him, beside Marquez, also next to such established writers as Grass and Solzhenitsyn. The same marked turn toward historicization can be regarded also in the works of many other contemporary American writers (Styron, Mailer, Malamud, Barth, Pynchon, Pen Warren).