

Pospíšil, Tomáš

## Body

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# Body

In the introduction I have highlighted the intensity with which both Doctorow and Dos Passos resonate with the developments in the critical discourse of their day. However, examples of this artistic feeling for ideas that seem to be “in the air” at a particular moment go beyond Doctorow’s incessant concern with the narrative aspects of history or Dos Passos’ conscious use of modernist techniques. For instance, I would like to have a closer look at Doctorow’s treatment of the body in Ragtime and compare it with writings on the same subject by Michel Foucault. The French philosopher, in particular in his later works – Discipline and Punish and History of Sexuality – opened up a new field for examination of the human body in that he described it as a matrix on which our cultures inscribe themselves. Regarding the body as “the inscribed surface of events,” Foucault sees the job of the genealogist as exposing “a body totally imprinted by history.” (Mascla-Lees, Sharpe 146) Foucault’s impact can be properly assessed by the recent proliferation of scholarly texts that take his ideas as a point of departure. “Titles like *The Body in Pain*, *Customizing the Body*, *The Woman in the Body*, *The Word Made Flesh*, *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, *The Tremulous Private Body*, and two recent special issues of *Representations*” (Mascla-Lees, Sharpe 145) signify the enormous spread and appeal of Foucault’s ideas.

In the following chapter I will point out the close affinity of some of Ragtime’s important motifs and themes with the Foucauldian notions of the body as a cultural construction and site of possible resistance to the disciplining power of culture. Such affinity is even more interesting if we take into account that Discipline and Punish appeared in French in 1975, and in 1977 in English and History of Sexuality, Vol 1. was published in Paris in 1976, and only two years later in New York. Although it is apparent that Doctorow could not have been directly acquainted with the French philosopher’s theoretical studies – Ragtime came out as early as in 1974 – it is striking to what extent ideas of both writers resonate with one another: the condition Foucault theorizes on received – quite independently

– a very close expression in Doctorow’s narrative. In certain respects, e.g. in his attention to the questions of the specific construction of the female body, Doctorow goes even further than Foucault. A subsequent examination of the representation of the cultural construction of the body in similar characters from The 42nd Parallel might render another in a long series of similarities and/or differences between these two books.

## Doctorow and the Female Body: Nesbit & Goldman

According to Foucault, “the space of the body [is] the irreducible element in our social scheme of things, for it is upon that space that the forces of repression, socialization, disciplining and punishing are inflicted.” (Harvey 213) However, as much as they agree with this basic Foucauldian premise, some contemporary feminist critics have pointed out that the conclusions the French philosopher drew from his critique were not far-reaching enough. Sandra Lee Bartky, for instance, reminds us that “Foucault treats the body as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life.” (Bartky 63) For her, Foucault is “blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine.” (Bartky 64)

Where Foucault appears quite vulnerable to what I regard as legitimate critique from a part of the feminist camp, Doctorow offers no such possibility. Unlike the great French thinker, he does pay attention to the specifically feminine. In fact, Sandra Lee Bartky could have used several passages from Ragtime to illustrate the points she herself makes. These issues come to the foreground of the novel in connection with the characters of Evelyn Nesbit, an actress and one of the first sex-symbols in American culture, and Emma Goldman, the famous turn-of-the-century anarchist and champion of sexual liberation. Doctorow’s Emma Goldman, for instance, upon noticing that Evelyn Nesbit wears a corset, lectures: “You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Look at me, even with my figure I have not one foundation garment. I wear everything loose and free-flowing, I give my body the freedom to breathe and to be.” (R 64) By allowing her body to enjoy its freedom, Goldman puts into practice the Foucauldian notion that the human body is the only site of power from which “resistance can be mobilized in the struggle to liberate human desire.” (Harvey 213) Bartky would undoubtedly second this reading of the body, while inevitably adding a gender-specific extension, on the grounds that the disciplining of the female body – as opposed to the male body – is much more severe. Bartky in fact describes the strong female internalisation of the current disciplining practices as actually transforming, or even constituting, the female identity and subjectivity; thus, in order to achieve

some kind of liberation, women's resistance must generate much more energy and overcome more severe obstacles. Goldman's refusal to comply with the aesthetic imperatives, requiring for instance a woman's figure to meet certain, narrowly defined, aesthetic standards, hints at a possible way out of what I would call the "internalisation trap" (i.e. the desire on the part of most women to actually correspond to the beauty standards of the period). By dressing loosely, for instance, Goldman offers one of the possible platforms of resistance in an otherwise repressive world. Similarly to Winston and Julia's lovemaking in Orwell's 1984, which meant the creation of a space of resistance for and by their bodies, Goldman's rejection of accommodation is an important political act.

Such an attitude must have come as a shocking revelation to Nesbit, who was, just like most women of her era, most willing to shape her body according to the demands of her culture. Her character is a poignant example of how sexed bodies are produced. By meeting the aesthetic requirements (e.g. being of the right size and weight, dressing in a socially acceptable and fashionable manner with all the necessary accessories, applying the proper amount of make-up, etc., etc.) she becomes an "attractive" woman. Such achievement does not come as a matter of course, and is less the result of a female's "natural" beauty than the result of an aesthetic achievement on the part of the woman. It is hard work to be "pretty;" it is both metaphorically and literally painful. The meeting of the aesthetic demands of the turn of the century culture, for instance, left visible temporary traces on the woman's body. "Marks of the stays ran vertically like welts around Nesbit's waist. The evidence of garters could be seen in the red lines running around the tops of her thighs. Women kill themselves, Goldman said."<sup>1</sup> (R 66)

Goldman is quick to realize the grand scope of Nesbit's self-discipline, endurance and skills of self-presentation. She expresses this idea at a political meeting where she spots Nesbit among the audience: "There sits among us this evening one of the most brilliant women in America, a woman forced by the capitalist society to find her genius in the exercise of her sexual attraction - and she has done that, comrades, to an extent that Pierpont Morgan and John D. Rockefeller could envy." (R 57)

Thus, being highly successful in the disciplinary project of bodily perfection, Nesbit gets elevated to the status of THE attractive woman, and becomes an aesthetic example for others to follow, the darling of the media, a precursor of an endless series of attractive females in American public life. However, as Bartky says, "to succeed in the provision of a beautiful or sexy body gains a woman attention and some admiration but little real respect and rarely any social power. A woman's effort to master the feminine body will lack importance just because she does it: her activity partakes of the general depreciation of everything female." (Bartky 73) Indeed, though the object of male desire, Nesbit's reputation

leaves much to be desired. She is only admired as a beautiful sexual body, as an object with a potential for scandal, never as a professional person in her own right, a woman of considerable achievement. Her career, unlike the careers of her successful male counterparts, is duly accompanied by lack of respect. As Doctorow's Goldman points out, regardless of Nesbit's mastery, which in her field is comparable to that of Morgan and Rockefeller, "her name is scandal" whereas "their names are intoned with reverence and respect." (R 57) It is also quite paradoxical that the image of a sex-symbol to which she has been "elevated" is just a sophisticated fabrication that has nothing in common with reality. This cannot escape Goldman's brisk mind. "It is ironic that you are thought of in homes all over America as a licentious, shameless wanton" (R 65), she remarks as she undresses Nesbit in her room, and notices the beauty's rigidly mistreated body.

But of course scandal and sex sell and few people bother about their very loose connection with reality. As Doctorow shows, some scandals are more exciting than others, and the one Nesbit was involved in had all the necessary ingredients of a successful story for media coverage: there was sexual obsession (Harry K. Thaw's mad passion for Nesbit), a crime of passion (Thaw's murder of the architect Stanford White, her former lover) and the inevitably central figure of a beautiful woman (Nesbit, of course).

The bad reputation and lack of respect Nesbit faces in her public career prompt the question why a thinking person would strive for such a dubious and problematic kind of self-fulfillment at all? A possible answer might be that meeting the demands of the popular (male) taste was probably one of the few ways to succeed as a female in the turn-of-the-century America. Due to the strict patriarchal environment, the number of roles for an ambitious woman to play was severely limited. In a sense, the potential to provide an image of an attractive woman was Nesbit's only marketable commodity. Yet Doctorow's treatment of Nesbit has yet another dimension than the critique of the system of creation of sex-stardom by the media and of the unequal opportunities of women on the early twentieth century job market. His Emma Goldman is well aware of the enormous power popular images like the one created by and around Nesbit have in pacifying the discontented masses and containing the revolutionary moods in society: it creates a different kind of desire than that to make a better world. "Carrying his newspaper with your picture the laborer goes home to his wife, an exhausted workhorse with the veins standing out in her legs, and he dreams not of justice but of being rich." (R 89)

In a beautifully written scene Goldman starts to massage Nesbit's body till she relaxes. Her "body found its own natural rosy white being and began to stir with self-perception." (R 66) As Goldman finishes the massage of the front part of Nesbit's body, the disciplined star, suddenly appears to have awakened to

a new dimension of sexuality: "Her pelvis rose from the bed as if seeking something in the air.(...) the younger woman began to ripple on the bed like a wave on the sea." (R 67) Unfortunately, Nesbit's exploration of the new auto-erotic possibilities of her body is interrupted by the sudden intrusion of Younger Brother, who bursts out of the cabinet where he was hiding. His ejaculating, "rampant penis" brings Nesbit back to the areas of traditional male-female sexuality. For the rest of the novel, her bodily awakening, which is paralleled by an awakening of the mind, remains only partial. She may start to support radical causes, but she would not go as far as to change her values, desires, or lifestyle. Nesbit is the second to last character whom we encounter before the end of the novel. "The beautiful and passionate Evelyn Nesbit had lost her looks and fallen into obscurity." (R 334) As in the case of a deaf musical composer or a singer who lost her voice, one cannot help but feel sorry for somebody whose whole career was centered around a sole feature or skill that disappeared down the memory hole of time.

### **The Limits of Bodily Disciplinization: Houdini**

The body seems to be one of *Ragtime's* persistent images and the reader encounters it in most characters. Another fictionalized real-life figure who uses it as a tool is the famous escapologist Harry Houdini. In order to be able to perform his spectacular tricks, Houdini subjects his body to a rigid training. His approach to his body (and possibly the choice of acts that he performs) corresponds to the general development in American society of the day. At the turn of the century, in large masses, Americans started to embrace the ideas of the "gospel of health," whose major component lay in the care of one's body and regular training. A muscular body became the ideal of beauty. The first issue of the magazine *Physical Culture*, which was published in 1899, proclaimed that "Weakness is a Crime." Thus also Houdini's repertoire had to be of a somewhat more athletic nature, requiring severe working out. "He kept himself as trim as an athlete. He did not smoke or drink. Pound for pound he was as strong as any man he had ever run up against. He could tighten his stomach muscles and with a smile invite anyone at all to punch him there as hard as they liked." (R 33) "His dedication to the perfection of what he did, reflected an American ideal."(R 32)

Houdini's mastering of his own body makes him a well-known figure, a celebrity of sorts. Yet he realizes that there are limits to what he can achieve in his line of business. After all, he remains a mere entertainer, somebody who can be hired to satisfy the whims of the wealthy and who at times, awaiting his performance, has to share the ante-room with dubious fellow-comedians, like a group of freaks who were brought along with him to the pseudo-renaissance

palace of Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish to amuse her rich guests. The experience of looking at the midget figure of Mrs. Lavinia Thumb gives him a revealing insight in what his real position in the society is. Despite his considerable investment in further development of his capabilities, and the pain such self-inflicted practice entails, the gain is relatively small. He will never be able to change his social status, no matter how far he goes in his training. Disciplining one's body is not enough: as Tateh's rise to success and satisfaction suggests, one also has to master the narrative.

Although it might seem that Nesbit's or Houdini's popularity at the time was something superficial, unimportant, which could be ignored as a passing fad, Doctorow has used them to illustrate that things are more complex than that. Although they appear to be mere apolitical entertainers with little knowledge about their own roles in the society, the roles cannot be neglected. Their careers are cultural constructions with a certain purpose, the enormous following of Nesbit's scandal has strong political implications and even her beauty, as Doctorow's Goldman suggests, has a political dimension. Doctorow is making the point that popular culture cannot be bracketed out as something less important than, say, business or politics. Popular culture is an integral part of the American reality. Much of what the United States is now – its values, attitudes, lifestyles, perception of the world – is in one way or another informed by its popular culture.

## **Middle Class Bodies and “the Other”: Father and Mother**

As I have shown, Nesbit's body becomes an erotic object with an enormous capacity to create desire; Houdini uses his body as a machine in order to dazzle the masses. Even the “marginalized” politician, President Taft, has a body: “There was a new President, William Howard Taft, and he took office weighing three hundred and thirty-two pounds.” (R 86) Then the narrator goes on for almost two pages about the changing bodily fashion in America, i.e. the movement in the popular taste from a somewhat round shape toward a more athletic, lean figure. He maintains that Taft's “accession to the one mythic office in the American imagination weighed everyone down. His great figure immediately expressed the apotheosis of that style of man. Thereafter fashion would go the other way and only poor people would be stout.” (R 87) Here again Doctorow points out how much our taste and subsequently the way we regard, treat and form our bodies vary from one moment in our cultural development to the next.

Doctorow's authorial concern with problems relating to the body remains strong even in the other group of characters, those that truly originated in his

imagination. Interesting developments in the characters' awareness and enjoyment of their bodies, (which, by its nature, contains a strong sexual element), can be seen in Father and Mother in the New Rochelle family. At the beginning of the book Father, who is a successful businessman making his money by producing flags, buntings, fireworks and "other accoutrements of patriotism" (R 3), is presented as a "burly man with strong appetites." (R 12) In the course of the novel, however, we see his gradual physical and mental decline, a metamorphosis of aging, the process of losing one's passions, turning into coldness, estrangement, solitude and finally silence. His wife, on the other hand, undergoes a contrary development. At the beginning one sees her as a frigid middle-class woman, plagued by the weekly rite of marital intercourse. Later, however, Mother manages to overcome her inferior position in the family and discard most of her severe inhibitions. Although she does not fundamentally challenge the patriarchal family structure, and finally ends up in another traditional relationship, she becomes a more equal human being, capable of opening up to sensual pleasures. The more Father's sensual opportunities shut down, the more those of Mother open up.

Doctorow has thus taken up and combined two traditional themes: that of bourgeois sterility, symbolized by the character's physical decrepitude and sexual impotence, and that of a woman's mental and physical awakening. In so doing, he has used a great number of usual details, so characteristic of the chosen material. There is for instance an ironic comment about the repressive character of the sexual manners of Victorian America, which is expressed by the contradiction in Father's attitude toward Mother's enjoyment of sexuality. Thus Father, despite having "strong appetites," "appreciated his wife's reluctance to assume the indelicate attitudes that answered to his needs." (R 12) Also, when being made love to, Mother shuts her eyes and holds "her hands over her ears"....and thinks: "Yet I know these are the happy years. And ahead of us are only great disasters." (R 12)

Mother's coming to power in the family is also presented in a traditional manner. It comes as a consequence of Father's participation in Peary's expedition to the North Pole. Although his previous ventures as an explorer were supposedly beneficial to the marriage, upon his return from the Arctic both Father and Mother realize that "this time he'd stayed away too long." (R 114) He feels isolated and excluded because much has changed while he was gone. During his absence Mother was left with a number of such problems as her son's upbringing, looking after her father, running the household, and above all, making the necessary business operations in Father's firm. Her mastering of her husband's professional duties demystifies them in her eyes and reveals to her their banal, material, repetitive character. The magic of Father's powers is gone. The fact that she is without any serious difficulties able to assume his role sets her on an



equal footing with him. However, her development does not stop there. When an abandoned black infant is found in the garden and soon after his mother – Sarah – is captured, Mother decides to give them permanent shelter. This decision, made in her own right, seals the newly acquired status quo. From that moment onwards, she is the dominant member of the family.

Father's diminished social role goes hand in hand with the changes in his physique as a look in the mirror reveals

*"a gaunt, bearded face of a derelict, a man who lacked home. (...) He was shocked by the outlines of his body, the ribs and clavicle, white-skinned and vulnerable, the bony pelvis, the organ, hanging there redder than anything else. At night in bed Mother held him and tried to warm the small of his back, curled him into her as she lay against his back cradling his strange coldness."* (R 114)

The increasing coldness of his body is further paralleled by the changes in the nature outside, as the fall sets in. "The fallen leaves were covered with frost and lay like lapping waves about the house. The wind blew. He had come back with a slight limp." (R 115)

Also Father's strong (sexual) appetites weaken. Unlike at the beginning of the book, he no longer desires Mother's body; it only arouses his "quiet appreciation." With the gradual fading away of physical capabilities, Father loses any possible remnants of mental flexibility. His fossilized mind makes him another victim of the rigid, patriarchal and racist values of his society which he so eagerly, self-righteously and complacently represents. Although being a basically well-intentioned person, he is unable to transcend the boundaries of his prejudice. "You have traveled everywhere and learned nothing" his brother-in-law charges when they meet for the last time. By-passed by life, a stranger in his own family, on occasions painfully aware of his own withering away, yet, in spite of all this, unable to change anything in his condition, Father finally dies in the wake of America's entry into World War I, as one of the passengers of the sunken steamer *Lusitania*.

Father's death comes as a magical gift to Mother. (In fact she profited from the apparent desire on the part of the author to end up with some kind of a happy ending. Indeed, such a gift was necessary, since Mother, unlike some other awakened women in American letters (Edna Pontellier from Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, for example), is not ready to transcend the norms of "proper" social and sexual behavior. She may have gone a long way toward a better understanding and enjoyment of her "self" and her body, but she has not gone far enough. Toward the end of the book one can certainly see a different woman; nevertheless she stays within the magic spell of the social norms of her class of the time.

When the family moves to Atlantic City, for instance, the revitalizing atmosphere of the seaside resort allows Father – for the last time – to approach his wife with desire and she is able to respond to it. At the same time she becomes aware of the attention her attractive countenance gets from the other male guests of the hotel (in particular the attention of Tateh from the other narrative strand of *Ragtime*). But her mind is still tangled with a dense web of paradoxes: although she greatly enjoys Tateh's apparent freshness of vision, charm and, above all, sensuality (all qualities in which her husband is lacking) she would not dream of leaving her spouse. If Chopin's Edna Pontellier had been in her place, the marriage would have been terminated immediately. But Mother is more rational, less passionate, and certainly much less advanced a "feminist." Father must be properly "retired" at the bottom of the ocean. She duly appears in black for a year and only then feels free to start another – traditional – marriage. Or another telling detail: as her husband emerges from water after bathing, she notices a visible outline of his "maleness" on his wet swimsuit. The fact that she "found that image distasteful" (R 259) shows to what extent she is still bound by the limits of the Victorian taste and attitudes toward sexuality.

Doctorow's concern with the questions of social construction of the body is not limited to an examination of American, i.e., Western, male and female bodies. Briefly but poignantly he also introduces the notion of "the other," another in a long series of themes that he shares with the international academic community. In his delightful account of Father's participation in Peary's expedition to the North Pole, Doctorow makes a number of points that normally appear in present-day academic writing. However, despite the same or similar messages, there are also differences. The most marked ones seem to lie in Doctorow's brevity, lightness and extraordinarily high entertainment value. The whole account of Father's North Pole experience takes less than ten paperback pages, yet, beside the problem of "other bodies," Doctorow manages to deal there with the following questions: American imperialism; the logocentric character of Western culture; race; the closing down of the frontiers of space; the fluidity and indeterminacy of our experience, the inadequacy of our scientific methods.

As the expedition reaches Cape Columbia and sets up a permanent base there, the preparations start for the final "dash across the sea ice." (R 77) However, before the arrival of the suitable spring weather, Peary's men must endure a severe polar winter. While waiting and getting ready, they are dependent on the assistance of the local Eskimo population. The Eskimo families move on the ship, they start "camping on the decks and in the holds" (R 79), the contacts of the two races become immediate. Thus, the scene is set for an important cross-cultural encounter. Father, a respectable representative of the middle-class values, who – as the reader remembers – appreciated his wife's reluctance to an-

swer to his bodily needs, is abhorred when witnessing an Eskimo intercourse: He was

*“shocked to see the wife thrusting her hips upwards to the thrusts of her husband. An uncanny animal song came from her throat. (...) The woman was actually pushing back. It stunned him that she could react this way. This filthy toothless Esquimo woman with the flat brow and the eyes pressed upwards by her cheekbones, singing her song and pushing back.”* (R 79)

The Eskimo woman is as “other” as can be. Her facial traits make her appearance different in a way which is regarded as undesirable, her neglected body defies the Western standards of hygiene and body care. The most shocking element, however, is the woman’s active participation in the act. The combination of all these elements lowers her, in Father’s eyes, almost to the status of an animal, hence the “animal song,” coming from her throat. By way of contrast, Father can’t help remembering his wife: “He thought of Mother’s fastidiousness, her grooming and her intelligence, and found himself resenting this primitive woman’s claim to the gender.” (R 79)

Later, however, when he is sent back from the trip across the ice and waits for Peary’s return, driven by hostility of the fierce elements outside, the desperate Father “clasped with gratitude the foul body, like a stinking fish, of an Esquimo woman. He had put his body into stinking fish. The old Anglo-Saxon word he had hardly dared think of.” (R 115) Having sex with an Eskimo woman represents in his mind an unheard of trespassing of the morally acceptable behavior, a trespassing verging on sodomy (notice the metaphor of the fish). Father’s feeling of guilt afterwards may be one of the major causes for his radical withering away.

It would be naive to think that the object of Doctorow’s critique is Father and his rejection of the different lifestyle, appearance and low hygienic standards of the Eskimos. In fact the author portrays him as a basically well-wishing person, if on occasions somewhat complacent and self-righteous. Doctorow’s major target is of course the ethnocentrism of American society. The juxtaposition of “the other” woman, whom Father regards as active, animal-like, different-looking, primitive, generally horrific and thus inferior, with his wife, whom he considers refined, sophisticated, intelligent and therefore superior, speaks volumes about the underlying assumptions of the culture he is a product of. If we leave the realm of the cultural production of the body and the related racial, aesthetic and hygienic assumptions, Doctorow’s ironic attack on the Western ways is even more explicit: “There was no question that the Esquimos were primitives. They were affectionate, gentle, emotional, trustworthy and full of pranks. They loved to laugh and sing.” (R 78)

As a way of “keeping oneself under control” during the long, dark, severe winter, Father writes a journal. At the same time he realizes that he is unable to relate the sexual experiences, “except in a kind of code.” (R 79) The system of “language and conceptualization” (R 78) as developed by the Euro-American tradition is therefore based on a severe repression.

Doctorow appears to be calling into question the whole system of rationalizations as practiced by our (Western) cultures. The famous explorer Peary, for instance, developed a system of how to survive in the Arctic, an achievement he had been very proud of. However, “In its essentials,” says the narrator mockingly, “ – that is, in the use of dogs and sledges and the wearing of fur clothing and the living off local fauna – Peary’s system merely adopted the Esquimo way of life.” (R 77) It seems to me that the difference of the two cultures can be best summed up by highlighting the words “system”, related to an American explorer, as opposed to “way of life”, related to the Eskimos. Thus, at the height of winter “Peary and most of the men withdrew to the theoretical considerations of his system and so protected themselves against their fear. The Eskimos, who had no system but merely lived here, suffered the terrors of their universe.” (R 78) The distance between the two cultures could not be bigger. Doctorow’s narrator thus appears to be saying that the systems of rationalizations, conceptualizations, permeating our lives and thinking give us protection (albeit a rigid one), while at the same time they deprive us of the possibility of having an authentic experience, as one is locked out of nature forever.

Peary’s expedition to the North Pole also enables Doctorow to illustrate other major ideas the novel examines i.e., the idea of indeterminacy of experience, which is linked with the crucial theme of dissatisfaction. If there is a narrative center of the novel, it can be located in the character of the Little Boy, with whom the narrative voice – on the very last page – merges. On one occasion the little boy listens to his Grandfather telling him stories from Ovid’s Metamorphoses. The stories “proposed to him that the forms of life were volatile and that everything in the world could easily become something else. (R 121) “It appeared that nothing was immune to the principle of volatility, not even language.” (R 122) Pondering on the changes going on around him the Little Boy is led to sum up in one of Ragtime’s memorable lines that “the world composed and re-composed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction.” (R 123) When Peary reaches the Pole, both themes find their expression in the following paragraph:

*Peary lay on his stomach and with a pan of mercury and a sextant, some paper and pencil, he calculated his position. It did not satisfy him. He walked further along the floe and took another sighting. This did not satisfy him. All day long Peary shuffled back and forth over the ice, a mile one*

*way, two miles another, and made his observations. 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. (R 84–85)*

It is equally difficult to find the exact spot containing the main message, the core of a novel, particularly when one is exposed to a novel as rich as Ragtime. Nevertheless there is no question that the above quotes belong to the few possible candidates. Together with the arctic explorers one might conclude: “Nevertheless there was no question that they were there.... Give three cheers.... And let's fly the flag.” (R 85)

## **The Great Manipulator with a Cold Body: J. Ward Moorehouse**

In the 42nd Parallel there is no character that might be, like Doctorow's Goldman, interpreted as a spokesperson of the Foucauldian notion of the body as a site of power from which resistance can be generated. Nevertheless, since Dos Passos takes great pains to present the maximum amount of sensory details, the clothing, appearance and bodily conditions of individual characters are frequently mentioned. Thus it is possible to follow how the characters use their bodies in order to communicate with their environment and how their bodies (and their awareness of their own bodies) are formed by their culture.

J. Ward Moorehouse, one of the memorable characters of the whole trilogy and a dominant figure of The 42nd Parallel, has been very often mentioned in connection with his supreme skill: a masterful command of rhetoric for the sake of his own success. Clark sees him as “involved in creating illusions, in affecting public opinion” (Clark 143,144), Pizer regards him as “a living paragon of the American myth of success, in that he embodies not only the essential beliefs but also its power to control and to blind” (Pizer 128) and Colley dismisses him on moral grounds as a “professional mystifier,” one of those manipulators, whose “fluency to use words is a treason to language.” (Colley 75) The quotes show that Moorehouse's capability of manipulating the language and thus creating a narrative favorable for accomplishing his own goals is a central trait of his personality. Yet to say that Moorehouse masters only the language would be a gross underestimation of his overall skill to communicate positive images of himself. Along with his supreme handling of language goes his no less excellent use of body language.

Moorehouse's figure has certain common features with Tateh and Father from Ragtime. Like the Jewish immigrant Tateh, who changed his appearance,

adopted a new name and title (Baron Ashkenazy), and has ended up as a successful film maker, Moorehouse has discovered that the formula of how to succeed in the American society lies in a total self-construction. One has to supply to the people what they want, one has to form oneself according to the requirements of the situation. Like Father, on the other hand, he gradually loses the potential for passion and becomes increasingly asexual, insensitive and cold. Dos Passos conceived Moorehouse as an illustration of the traditional notion that the upper classes are parasitic and essentially impotent.

Unlike Tateh, however, Moorehouse does not have to abandon his former convictions as he never allows himself the luxury of dreaming about or fighting for a "better world." There is even some kind of honesty in his consequent effort to better his own situation rather than worry about the situation of the society around him. At any rate, for a person, born on the symbolic Fourth of July, socialism was never a real option. Born to poverty in the dismal town of Wilmington, Delaware, and having been brought up in a numerous family of a crippled drunkard, he is conditioned to embrace the American dream of material success. He wants to escape his family and the depressing environment he grew up in. He detests his father, whose failure in the world made him leave college. When he meets a possible partner, he dreams of making a "big enough pile" (FP 203) to be able to marry her on his own terms.

Moorehouse soon realizes that he has the necessary tools to make his dreams come true. Right from his earliest childhood we see him endowed with an invaluable asset, a great "gift of gab." Johnny "graduated from highschool as head of the debating team, class orator, and winner of the prize essay contest with an essay entitled "Roosevelt, the Man of the Hour" (FP 191); rhetoric in the service of a popular political topic – the very formula for success. It is no coincidence therefore that the biographical section immediately preceding is devoted to William Jennings Bryan. Its name (The Boy Orator of the Platte) (FP 187) as well as its theme (the career of a politician who was willing to lend his voice to any cause that appeared popular at a given moment) establish a number of links between the career of the "silver-tongued" and "big-mouthed" politician and that of the successful manipulator Moorehouse. Both are labelled as "orators," Moorehouse raises in the world thanks to the conscious use of his "boyish" appearance; a fine example of an effective Dos Passosian juxtaposition.

As in the case of Mac, Dos Passos refers to Moorehouse by different names as the character develops and his nature changes. As a young man in Wilmington he is presented as Johnny, a name evoking sympathy and compassion: Moorehouse's childhood was indeed far from cheerful. Later Johnny travels on assignment of the real-estate firm he works for to Ocean City, Maryland. He immediately accepts a job offer of the local real-estate company and it does not take long till he gets married to Annabelle Marie, the extravagant daughter of

Doctor Strang, who is the chief real estate investor in the city. When they write the invitation card, his bride decides to use his second name Ward, rather than John, because it sounds more “distinguished.” The marriage makes Moorehouse a member of a different class, and so Dos Passos follows the order of Annabelle Marie: “The wedding came off in fine style and J. Ward Moorehouse found himself the center of all eyes in a wellfitting frock coat and a silk hat.” (FP 210) With a different name, in different clothes, Moorehouse reached a new stage in his development.<sup>2</sup>

The distance between Johnny and J. Ward equals the distance between the state of innocence and that of moral deprivation. Moorehouse’s moral flexibility is an acquired quality. When he reaches Ocean City he is full of ambition, ready to abandon ties that might hinder his future prospects or those that are unnecessary (relations to his family or Miss O’Higgings, his unmarried piano teacher), but his love for Annabelle Marie is – at least in its initial stages – honest. When she goes out with another man, his suffering is genuine, and when she seduces him, “his heart is pounding” (FP 207) with true excitement. Being already pregnant with another partner, it is Anabelle Marie who is the more corrupt of the two. The pieces of the jlg-saw puzzle of Annabelle Marie’s relationship toward him (the departure of her other suitor, her red eyes, nausea) come together as he overhears a conversation of two bellboys at the hotel where she is staying. When he hears that the “blackeyed Lizzie” is “hot stuff,” who has slept with “every sonofabitch in town not excluding niggers” (FP 208), his shock is genuine, too:

*He walked down the street without seeing anything. For a while he thought he'd go down the station and take the first train out and throw the whole business ballyhack, but there was the booklet to get out, and there was a chance that if the boom did come he might get in on the ground floor, and this connection with money and the Strangs; oppurtunity knocks but once on a young man's door. He went back to his cottage and locked himself in his bedroom. He stood a minute looking at himself in the glass of the bureau. (...) The image blurred. He found he was crying. (FP 209)*

Moorehouse’s gradual corruption is also conveyed by another subtle symbol. When the newly-married couple cross the Atlantic for their one-year-long honeymoon, the voyage is unpleasant, the sea is rough, and Moorehouse is sick most of the time. Only during the last few days of the crossing does the situation get better and Ward and Annabelle Marie find out that they “are a good team,” i.e., performers capable of dazzling the ship’s high society. After his divorce and a longer period on his own in Pittsburg, he “decides” he is in love with another wealthy girl. Once again on the high seas, embarked on a voyage to Europe, the passage is fine. “Ward was only seasick one day.” (FP 273)

With Moorehouse's rise, his projects become increasingly morally questionable. He begins his manipulations with writing, from today's point of view, a harmless booklet about the advantages of settling down and investing in Ocean City in the hope of boosting a real-estate boom in the area where he has his own (and his wife's) investment, and ends up, backed by the means he gained from his second marriage, as the owner of a public relations company with a very dubious aim: to settle "in a peaceful manner," through "cooperation" labor disputes or, in other words, to pacify the unions for the benefit of the big business.

No matter what one might think about his morals, like many a successful entrepreneur, Moorehouse is a fast-learning, hardworking man. When in Paris on his first honeymoon he starts learning French, to make up for the lack of his college education. He goes to the opera to practice his French, he works for a Paris newspaper. In Pittsburg, asked to run an advertising and promotion bureau of a local steel company, he learns constantly: how steel is tempered (in order to impress people at executive meetings), or how one plays golf (in order to become socially acceptable with the higher classes). As soon as he realizes the new social and seductive potential of an automobile, he immediately learns how to drive and purchases one. At that time he finds himself at a stage when he wants "a woman to sleep with" (FP 268) and feels he "ought to be married and have an establishment of his own." (FP 270) It does not take long and his car brings him through a snowstorm to a far-off roadhouse. Next to him is his future (second) wife Gertrude, daughter of the late industrialist Horace Staple. Bound by the snowstorm they are forced to stay overnight. Thus Moorehouse's efforts are rewarded, although Dos Passos refrains from explicitly telling the reader how (hence another difference from Doctorow). One thing is certain, though: "Six months later they were married." (FP 273)

As already pointed out, Moorehouse's command of language finds an equally important counterpart in his body language. His communication with his environment is total, the impact generated in this way is strong. In particular his blue eyes and his boyish looks stand out as a highly effective tool that he uses for the sake of "winning friends and influencing people." Dos Passos thus says that in the hands of an expert, some particularly attractive bodily features can turn to devastating weapons, breaking women's hearts, eliminating doubts of potential employers, and cracking the cautious defenses of one's business partners. The book abounds with examples of Moorehouse's use of these features, almost invariably followed by a positive development for his career.

His power of persuasion would not be as strong if it were not for a conscious and sophisticated management of the outer layers of his body: the language of his clothes is equally effective. At his marriage he appears very "handsome" in a "wellfitting frock coat and a silk hat." (FP 210) From his first wife he learns the trick of matching the color of his tie with that of his eyes to further enhance



the delicate interplay between his clothes and parts of his body. He is quick to learn from the persons of importance, whose company he keeps seeking out. Take for instance, his meeting in Paris with Mr. Oppenheimer, an influential banker, and Mr. McGill, his future employer in Pittsburg:

*He got out at the restaurant and was just paying the taxi when he saw Mr. Oppenheimer and another man arriving down the quai on foot. Mr. Oppenheimer wore a gray overcoat and a gray derby on the same pearly color as his moustaches; the other man was a steelgray individual (he is an owner of a steelworks, of course – my note) with a thin nose and chin. When he saw them, Ward decided that he must be more careful about his clothes in the future. (FP 216)*

It is hardly surprising to see him on his voyage back to the U.S. soon afterwards, walking around the first-class, wearing a “Scotch tweed cap and a Scotch tweed overcoat to match with a pair of fieldglasses slung over his shoulder.” (FP 220)

In order to succeed, Moorehouse knows that one has to conform: politically, culturally, aesthetically. Every detail counts. Meeting the already high hygienic standards of the day is another necessary part of the composite picture of his personality. Dos Passos highlights here the paradox of modern society, that the same culture, demanding from its people that they stay elegant, well-kept and clean, at the same time ravages the natural landscape with monsters of industrial factories, with furnaces, like mouths of a dragon, casting flames into the early morning light. The depiction of this contrast belongs, in my opinion, to the most notable passages of the novel. While observing through the washroom window of his train “black hills powdered with snow, an occasional coalpipe, rows of gray shacks all alike, a riverbed scarred with minedumps and slagheaps,” “Ward shaved, cleaned his teeth, washed his face and neck as best he could, parted his hair. His jaw and cheekbones were getting a square look that he admired. “Cleancut young executive,” he said to himself as he fastened his collar and his necktie.” (FP 223) The contradictory movements toward cleanness of the body on the one hand and pollution of the landscape on the other are not a reason to worry for clean-cut young executives on the rise. With all their energy, learning skills and powers of cultural accommodation directed toward their personal well-being, they are blind to this dimension of the development of the society that they so eagerly accelerate. In a great rush to make it, they leave behind a waste land, a valley of ashes, a landscape with “minedumps and slagheaps.”

The brilliance of Moorehouse’s performances enables him to bridge with striking ease the seemingly unbridgeable gaps between his rhetoric and reality: he is always capable of turning a situation for his own good, and can find

a way out of the worst predicaments. Toward the end of the book, for instance, as his relationship with his second wife, the sickly Gertrude, falters, he becomes platonically involved with Eleanor Stoddard. She is a fashionable, attractive woman, making her living as an interior decorator. He sees her as somebody who gives his life an "artistic" dimension. She acts as his "spiritual" partner, an elegant jewel of sorts. Surprisingly though, he does not seem to be interested in her bodily attractions and when Gertrude makes him a jealous scene, he claims that "there is no other woman in his life." (FP 344) Despite his vows, Gertrude threatens to leave him. If his wife really decided to put an end to their marriage, the consequences for Moorehouse would be disastrous. His newly-established information agency, still depending on the financial support from Gertrude and her family, would face immediate bankruptcy. Also his reputation would suffer. Moorehouse's solution to his marital (but above all financial) crisis bears a touch of genius. He cleverly uses the exhilarating atmosphere surrounding the U.S. entry to World War I; as the United States declares war on the Central Powers, he decides to invite Eleanor to his home and thus resolve the matter. Gertrude, Moorehouse and Eleanor Stoddard have dinner together. Eleanor assures Gertrude that their relationship is as "pure as driven snow." (FP 365) At the same occasion Moorehouse tells his wife that he offered his services to Washington, "on the Public Information Committee that Mr. Wilson was gathering about him." (FP 364)

*"I'm leaving for Washington tomorrow....Of course I shall serve without pay."*

*"Ward, that's noble of you," said Gertrude. He walked over slowly until he stopped beside her chair, then he leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. "We must all make our sacrifices.... My dear, I shall trust you and your mother..."*

*"Of course, Ward, of course... It's all been a silly misunderstanding." Gertrude flushed red. She got to her feet. "I've been a damn suspicious fool..."(FP 366)*

Again, Dos Passos gives a description of a total performance on Moorehouse's part where the superb command of speech is paralleled by no less accomplished performance of the body as he stops at the right place at the right time and kisses his wife on the forehead – an absolutely right thing to do, given the circumstances. When one reads scenes like this, it is not difficult to agree with Cowley and his charge that Moorehouse commits a "treason on language." For instance, what Moorehouse calls a "sacrifice," i.e. his employment in Washington, was in fact the only way out for him, a brilliant last-minute move to save

his firm, career, way of life. Its elegant shamelessness might remind us of the note which he wrote to his first wife Anabelle-Marle at the moment of their separation. In the note he demanded "some compensation for the loss of time, etc. and the injury of [his] career that has come [to him] through [her] fault." (FP 222) But it was exactly the first marriage that catapulted him to a different class where he became somebody who, standing on the deck of a luxurious ocean-liner could think of his home town of Wilmington, as something he had left "far behind like a ship hull down on the horizon." (FP 220)

If we decide to trust Moorehouse and Eleanor as far as the "purity" of their relationship is concerned (the text, in my opinion, contains sufficient evidence to support such claims), we will witness in Moorehouse a somewhat similar development to that of Father, whose body and mind in the course of Ragtime become increasingly sterile and cold. Notice also the striking occurrence of the fish metaphor in both works. In Ragtime it signifies "the other", i.e., the Eskimo woman as a probable cause of Father's turning into coldness, in The 42nd Parallel it signifies coldness itself, for Moorehouse gradually becomes an emotional zombie. "You re cold as a fish... You re just a fish." (FP 345), shouts Gertrude at Moorehouse with contempt during a marital scene preceeding their reconciliation. Whereas in Father's case, however, bodily and mental decrepitude go hand in hand, in Moorehouse's character we see a contrary development: the colder (or more impotent) the body, the smoother and more effective the mind. As if all the energy, barred from the realms of the sexual or sensual got channeled into his work, which consists largely of the production of narratives.

Moorehouse's sensual coldness in general, and his reluctance to enjoy sexual pleasures in particular does not apply only to his ailing wife and his bohemian friend Eleanor. All the women around him are neglected in the same way. So too are most bodily pleasures. When he visits Mexico, unlike some members of his entourage, he does not "make up to the girls" as his hosts hoped. As "things [get] noisy" and the party gets going in the "Mexican way," Moorehouse disappears to the balcony where he and Ben, Mac's friend and an ambitious local dealer, have "a long talk about the oil situation over their cigars." After a typical Moorehouse speech about the necessity of "cooperation" between his American business contacts and the Mexican government in the spirit of "fair play," and the need for proper information, he is assessed by Mac in the following manner: "Jeez, Ben, that's a smooth bastard." (FP 327, 328)

The Mexico episode reveals that Moorehouse's production of narratives has got hold of his whole personality, he is unable to leave the universe of his trash rhetoric; in other words, he can never stop and have a good time (something what a character like Mac does most of the time). Dos Passos shows him as a person who has fully internalized the cliched deceptions he emanates, his mental universe seems to be solely consisting of the platitudes

he uses for his own benefit.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically then, his strongest asset becomes also his main shortcoming. He appears to be locked in his manipulative half-truths, unable to see himself or his surrounding, at least for a moment, from a different point of view, unable to act in a different (for instance more relaxed and/or sensual) way.

Moorehouse's care for appearances is truly all-pervading. Even the cigar Moorehouse smokes is more a sign he has adopted, an important part of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of his new self of a successful public relations man, rather than a sensual vice that one would indulge in for the sheer pleasure of it. The careful reader of The 42nd Parallel will have namely noticed that at the beginning of his first narrative he neither "drank nor smoked" (FP 192, 199) and was "keeping himself clean for the lovely girl he was going to marry." (FP 192) As an aspiring working-class kid he thought that cleanness, combined with asceticism, was the best policy. However, having met the unconventional and promiscuous Anabelle Marie, who clearly belonged to the upper class, he realized that matters were not so simple. Being very flexible, he immediately took to the habit of smoking an occasional cigarette "to keep her company." (FP 205) Just as he stayed in line with his first wife's cigarette smoking, at a certain point of his career he changed to cigars: it became clear to him that they were generally understood as distinct signs of upper-class prosperity. To see the power of the sign, one can only turn to the scene of Mac's arrival to Goldfield, Nevada, a town on strike, under siege from the militia of the whole state. The prole Mac arrives there because he wants to work on the staff of the miners' magazine *Nevada Workman*. In order to fool the local authorities, he spends his "last quarter on a cigar to keep up the burjwa look." (FP 117) The camouflage works. Mac is allowed to enter the town and stay.<sup>4</sup>

The above lines have perhaps given a plausible explanation of why it is impossible for some people, even a world-famous escapist like Houdini, to escape their own class, despite the brilliance and spectacularness of their performances, and why some others succeed in this difficult, improbable project with relative ease. The main reason is that Doctorow's Houdini masters his body in order to dazzle people as a recognized entertainer. His bondage is based on the fact that he performs as a performer. And as such he is bound to fail. He might make enough money to be able to afford the expensive hobby of flying, but he will never make history; he belongs to the episode. It is at the moment when a performer stops being regarded as one – the memory of Ronald Reagan comes here to mind – when he or she starts to matter. Only then one acquires, beside wealth, also prestige and power. To perform without appearing that one does so is thus the reason behind Moorehouse's and Tateh's success stories. Of the two, Moorehouse is the more "accomplished" person, since unlike Tateh, he never stops. As he acts out his narratives constantly, his nature undergoes a complete

change. He is no longer capable of wonder at his striking rise in the world; he becomes oblivious of his poor Wilmington origin. He truly becomes a new man.

As I have pointed out, Moorehouse's achievement lies in complete mastering and subsequent internalisation of the features (opinions, use of rhetoric, behavior, body language, clothes) he has consciously adopted for the purpose of his social advancement. Dos Passos views and presents Moorehouse's achievement with strong suspicion. The more accomplished one becomes – be it Moorehouse as a great manipulator or the marginal Fred Hoff as an ardent revolutionary – the more one loses one's humanity. For Moorehouse is essentially a blind man lacking insight, empathy and feeling. Likewise, he is deprived of the possibility of having a serious emotional involvement: the women around him invariably leave him – both emotionally as well as physically – cold.

If the inhuman character of Moorehouse functions in the novel as the most successful character, then one can clearly see the degree of Dos Passos' indictment of the modern American society where only people endowed with Moorehouse's qualities are capable of making it, whereas more human characters, like Mac, are doomed to live in poverty. Nevertheless Moorehouse's material and social rise represents, in many ways, a failure, too, for the modern man of achievement – locked in his social role as well as in the system of his internalized beliefs – remains just an emotionless, empty and blind cog wheel in the impersonal machinery of the modern society.

## **The Price of Class: Eleanor Stoddard**

As I have shown in my discussion of the character of Evelyn Nesbit, Doctorow, through the character of Emma Goldman, appears to be hinting at the lack of possibilities on the part of talented women in pursuit of a career in turn-of-the-century U.S.A., as well as at the double standard with which successful men and women are viewed and appreciated by the public. Evelyn Nesbit's reputation inevitably suffers because of her career as a "mere" actress, her name becomes synonymous with scandal. Moreover, what is more important for her career is not her mind but her beautiful, sexy body. When she loses her looks, her only marketable commodity, she falls immediately into obscurity. There are a great many more channels open for ambitious males and the names of the most successful ones, e.g. Rockefeller or Morgan, are mentioned with reverence. The fact that Morgan suffered from a skin disease that "had colonized his nose and made of it a strawberry of the award-winning type..." (R 145) did not interfere with his finance operations; neither did it diminish his enormous power.

On the other hand Dos Passos, by introducing the characters of Eleanor Stoddard and Janey Williams into the fictional world of The 42nd Parallel,

presents the range of possibilities on the part of women as somewhat broader than Doctorow's choice of characters seems to suggest. In other words, *Ragtime* offers no equivalent to Dos Passos' female characters, who live on their own, and who, each according to her own abilities, rise in the world. Of the two, Eleanor Stoddard is undoubtedly the one who can boast better results.

In many respects Eleanor represents the female version of J. Ward Moorehouse. Both characters are predominantly concerned with the "pursuit of their own happiness," but it is elusive, not to be attained in the social spheres they finally reach. The childhood of both characters was marked by poverty and social deprivation, both of them are generally insensitive and avail themselves of similar ruthless means for the sake of a rapid social advance. They egoistically take advantage of other people and once they are no longer in the position to help, they are discarded with about the same amount of thought as one pays, say, to a used paper plate after a party. In a particularly revolting scene which gives a clear indication of Dos Passos' indignation, the young Eleanor, living beyond her means, comes to ask her father for money.

*She so impressed him with her rise in the world and the chances of a raise that he promised her five a week, although he was only making twenty himself and was planning to marry again, to a Mrs. O'Toole, a widow with five children who kept a boardinghouse out Elsdon Way*

*Eleanor refused to go to see her future stepmother, and made her father promise to send her money in a money-order each week, as he couldn't expect her to go all the way out to Elsdon to get it. When she left him she kissed him on the forehead and made him feel quite happy. All the time she was telling herself that this was the very last time. (FP 242)*

The multifaceted similarity of Moorehouse and Eleanor is further underlined by the proximity of their narrative sequences in the novel. Their segments appear practically next to one another, which suggests the authorial intention to depict their careers as running along parallel lines; as if their emergence on the scene expressed a more general trend Dos Passos observed in the society, i.e., the rise of a new, modern generation of men and women, a generation that he regarded as predominately egoistic, unscrupulous, emotionally cold and spiritually hollow.

As in Moorehouse's case, Eleanor's life rests on appearances. Her major desire is to escape her own working-class family, the crudity of her father, an office worker at the Chicago stockyards. Since she is equipped with all the necessary qualities for such a move – a strong will, narrative skills (i.e. reading the social signs of class and arranging one's self according to them so as to achieve

and subsequently maintain the highest possible social standing) and more than a sufficient amount of recklessness, she inevitably succeeds. Eleanor is as hard-working and attentive to detail as her male counterpart: she takes French lessons to be able to impress some “classy” Americans, she frequents the Chicago Art Institute where she “rather pretends to look at the Whistlers than look at them,” (FP 231) she adores the same artists and artistic schools as the people whom she imitates, she moves to an upscale residential hotel, although she cannot pay the bills – at least not without her “crude” father’s help.

In Eleanor’s mind there is an incessant obsession with whiteness. For her, whiteness equals refinement, beauty, freedom from the necessity to engage in a material activity to make one’s living, whiteness is symbolically connected with a place in the high society to which she aspires to belong. Being an insightful writer, Dos Passos presents, by means of her character, plenty of material for a possible cultural critique of how value is ascribed by culture either to a certain privileged color (with all the consequences such a process entails) or disciplines (“high” art, literature, classical music etc.). The knowledge of fine arts, the habit of going to exhibitions or frequenting the opera then, in Eleanor case, function as a signal she sends out to persons of importance she would like to befriend: I like Whistler, therefore I am worthy of your company. (But of course the company Eleanor aspires to is as ridiculous as she is. Dos Passos’ depiction of the Chicago artistic community is very sarcastic, he mocks its pretenses, lack of taste and above all the “conventionality of unconventionality,” a trait one very often finds in such communities.)

“Refined” is another central term characteristic of Eleanor (see my discussion of free indirect discourse in the next section), one that constantly occupies her mind, a stock word she uses to express admiration. What exactly could be labelled by this inflationary epithet? “Refined” is the French language, the French accent, European art, visits to the opera, dinners in posh hotels, tea on silver plates, the New York arts community as opposed to the Chicago set, and of course money, lots of money, not the fiver a week from Eleanor’s father, but the millions she hopes to inherit from Miss Perkins, a wealthy elderly widow whom Eleanor – in a somewhat vulture-like fashion – gets attached to.<sup>5</sup> The use of the word “refined” not only expresses Eleanor’s predictable preferences but also her severe limitations, for she is – just like Moorehouse – “differently abled” on the emotional front. So much does she admire appearances, empty displays of class and culture, that there is simply no other dimension: she is incapable of love and despite being so “pure” (hence the irony), her morals are somewhat questionable.<sup>6</sup>

“Refined” also means ethereal, with preferably as immaterial a body as possible. The ideal bodily features from Eleanor’s point of view are thin lips, white, thin, carefully manicured hands, all features traditionally regarded as “aristocratic,” features she can flaunt. On the other hand stout, material bodies – like the

one of her father's – are invariably regarded as “vulgar.” Bodily contact makes her virtually sick. Eleanor's deep resentment of the physical can be best shown on the following extract:

*The cars going home would be crowded Sunday nights and young men and girls sticky and mussed up and sunburned from an outing in the country or on the dunes. Eleanor hated them and the Italian families with squalling brats that filled the air with a reek of wine and garlic and the Germans redfaced from a long afternoon's beer drinking and the drunk Finn and Swedish workmen who stared at her with a blue alcoholic gleam out of wooden faces.*

(...)

*Once, when the car was very crowded, a curlyhaired man rubbed himself up against her suggestively. The crowd was so thick she couldn't pull herself away from him. She could hardly keep from screaming out for help; it was only that she felt it was so vulgar to make a fuss. Uncontrollable dizziness came over her... (FP 230)*

This attitude is determined by her childhood experience that was marked by similar sensations. From the outset “Eleanor hated her father, a stout redhaired man smelling of whiskers and stale pipetobacco.”(FP 226) She disliked the “stench of his clothes.” Eleanor's traditional elitist idea that the material aspects of the body, e.g. its smell, solidity, stoutness, are signs of low origin and should therefore be suppressed – is actually destroying her possible enjoyment of her own as well as other people's bodies and greatly diminishes her capacity for sensual pleasures.

As I have demonstrated above, J. Ward Moorehouse's social assent is accompanied by a marked turning into coldness of his body. It is at that stage when he commissions Eleanor to decorate the new house he and his wife are building “near Great Neck.” (FP 292) What results is a mutual sympathy, a “romantic” relationship of a platonic kind. Not a surprising development given the characters' similarity. Both are ruthless social climbers and traders of appearances, champions of self-discipline and pretense, successful people who have managed to become somebody. Yet, insensitive as they are, they still can be lonely. They have severed their own roots, abandoned their original families and in their new milieu they find nobody who would understand the scope of sacrifice it takes to become somebody else. For the price, according to Dos Passos, is high: Eleanor, too, is as cold as a fish. So they stick to one another, two players who, in the pursuit of a better position, forfeited their bodies.



## The Docile Female Body: Janey

The third woman around Moorehouse toward the end of the book, beside his wife Gertrude and his exquisite friend Eleanor, is his ardent, alas platonic admirer Janey Williams, a Washington girl of impoverished middle-class origin who later in the book becomes his secretary. She is less important for Moorehouse (he probably views her as a skillful and reliable machine of sorts and devotes to her as much attention as one does, say, to a functioning xerox) than she is for the narrative structure of the book. It is through her narrative sections that Dos Passos shows, quite explicitly, how culture in its various manifestations gets inscribed in a person's mind and body. Janey is portrayed as a passive vessel who gets filled with other people's views (in particular those of men). She vegetates like a kind of sponge, sucking in the voices of her class and society, making them her own and acting – or suffering – accordingly. With no single idea of her own she resembles an anonymous, mass-produced store window dummy who happened to be granted life by the god of dominant discourse. In the earlier stages of her narrative, with a striking insistence, Dos Passos mentions how she spent her Sunday afternoons. These afternoons were invariably boring, lazy and dull. So is Janey. Dos Passos' implied simile is incredibly apt: Janey is dull like a Sunday afternoon.

Janey might be not interesting as a personality (although she is – typically – interesting for several males in the novel as an object of their sexual desire), but her presence in the book is important for a number of reasons. 1) Her character indicates the emergence of a new type in American workforce at the beginning of this century: an unmarried woman in pursuit of a professional career, living on her own or with a female friend. 2) The reader is able to stay in touch with further professional and personal developments of J. Ward Moorehouse, presented through the prism of Janey's narrative. 3) The culturally-construed condition (both inner and outer) her character finds itself in, makes an important statement about gender in turn-of-the-century American society.

Given her gender, cultural background and conditioning, it is perhaps possible to regard Janey as a success, though not a spectacular one. As a typist and secretary she is fast, precise and reliable. She is flexible enough to meet moderate challenges and on several occasions change her job, which ultimately pays off with her employment at Moorehouse's agency. Unlike her friend Alice, an even less imaginative girl and a victim of her stark Methodist background, Janey is capable of developing, albeit along some predictable, preset, mainstream lines. Her slow yet steady professional progress is to some extent paralleled by her personal development. From a shy, withdrawn girl who, under the influence of her friend Alice, believed that men "had only one idea" (FP 162) on their minds, she turned into a girl who regarded herself as not being "afraid of men any-

more." So, she "kidded back and forth with young clerks in the elevator about things that would have made her blush the year before." She also "knew just how to catch a boy's hand by the wrist and push it away without making any scene when he tried to get too intimate". (FP 183) Later on she even gets experienced enough to be able to handle such an outspoken womanizer as the union leader H.G. Barrow.

Along with her maturing social skills we can trace a similar development in her handling and forming of her own body. "She discovered that just a little peroxide in the water when she washed her hair made it blonder and took away [her] mousey look. Sometimes when she was getting ready to go out in the evening, she'd put a speck of rouge on her little finger and rub it very carefully on her lips." (FP 183)

She is the example of the moderately successful person who, both as a relatively desirable female and skilled professional, achieves her success – through conformity. She simply stays in line, with her opinions, looks or way of life and it pays. Hers is not the spectacular rise across the boundaries of class and identity, she is not capable of "reconstructing herself completely," since she is lacking Tateh's, Eleanor's or Moorehouse's imagination and audacity, a vital mixture if one really wants to make it. Unquestioning the laws and values she lives by, not understanding the reality around her, like a trained monkey who finds out that pressing one button will yield a banana, while the other button results in an electric shock, Janey achieves her "moderate progress within the bounds of law."

Despite her apparent success on the social front, there remains something dark at the center of her psyche. She is uneasy about her gender, there is an underlying, all-pervading fear of her own sexuality. The consequence is the enormous difficulty with which Janey comes to terms with her body. There are two telling moments when her self-consciousness about her body comes clearly to the surface. As a young girl she undertakes a boat trip with her brother Joe, and Alec, a handsome boy she is secretly in love with. It is a Sunday, the three teenagers find themselves in a canoe, the boys are paddling toward their destination:

*After a while the boys stripped to their bathing suits that they wore under their clothes. It made Janey's throat tremble to watch Alec's back and the bulging muscles of his arm as he paddled, made her feel happy and scared.*  
(FP 157)

Later, after a pleasant picnic, as they go for a walk, Janey

*felt sick and drained out (inside). She was afraid her period was coming on. She'd only had the curse a few times yet and the thought of it scared her*

*and took all the strength out of her, made her want to crawl away out of sight like an old sick mangy cat.* (FP 158)

The damage done to Janey's mind by her cultural conditioning is quite obvious. Janey regards Alec's male body with admiration, while at the same time she loathes her own. As a woman she has internalized her "inferiority." No wonder that she often feels "scared," no wonder that the pervading feeling she has towards her body is one of uneasiness. She even goes as far as to regard the manifestation of her womanhood – the period – as a "curse."

Dos Passos, an excellent observer with a sense for detail, presents a considerable number of incidents that reveal the formation of Janey into a docile, self-conscious woman. Very often she gets ostracized by her brother Joe and his friends. Only occasionally the boys treat her as "one of them" (FP 152), which turns into moments she "likes best." When their brutal father gives Joe his weekly spank, Janey suffers a lot. On one particular moment, when her father gets especially cruel, Janey intervenes on Joe's behalf. But Joe is far from grateful: "A girl can't butt in between men like that" (FP 155), he tells her later on. Even on the trip described above we can find another line in the same vein. While picnicing, Janey is "happy because (the boys) included her when they talked just like she was a boy too." (FP 157)

Janey's later encounters with men do not give her much chance to lose her inhibitions. On the surface she might have learned the necessary social skills how to handle them, but inside she is as insecure as ever. One hot July night in Washington, Jerry Burnham, a friend and former colleague from work, takes her for a ride. The signs of his true intention abound. He is carefully setting the scene for seduction. He takes her out of town to a big hotel, amuses her with stories. He insists on her drinking a gin fizz because, as he says, it is cooling. Naturally, instead of cooling her down, the drink makes her "lightheaded." When he approaches her on the way home, she resists. In a short break between Jerry's attempts, they have a cigarette. Janey starts speaking about marriage, but soon, as if she were trying to gain time, she mentions Joe:

*"I'm worried about my brother Joe... He's in the navy, Jerry, and I'm afraid he's going to desert or something.... I think you'd like him. He's a wonderful baseball player."*

*"What made you think of him?" Do you feel that way toward me?"* (FP 177,178)

The answer to Jerry's question is, in my opinion, no. As he "kisses her very gently" she likes "his lips gentle against hers that way." And then

*she was falling through centuries of swampy night. His hot chest was against her breasts bearing her down. She would cling to him bearing her down through centuries of swampy night. Then all at once in a cold spasm she felt sick, choking for breath like drowning. She began to fight him. (FP 178)*

Janey's mentioning of Joe in this situation is not as accidental as it seems. On the conscious level Janey loves Joe, but as we have seen, her relation to him is tainted by deep underlying problems. Being her role-model in the most formative years, he functioned as her main indoctrinator, the cause of her female inhibitions, the mouthpiece for the crippling sexist values present in the American lower-middle class of the beginning of this century. Without even realizing it, he stands for the culture that makes her feel inferior as a woman. Thus, as Jerry attempts to seduce her, Joe comes to her mind. Jerry's gentle kisses make the memory disappear for a moment, but as he presses harder, Janey's inhibitions surface again, Joe's spell reasserts itself: the fear, the cramp, the pain are back.

Jerry's regrettable reaction at this crucial moment does not enable Janey to overcome her problems. On the contrary, it almost plunges her back to share her friend Alice's conviction that men have only "one idea." Indeed, Jerry is interested in Janey's body only. "I'd give anything to have you" (FP 177), he exclaims. Thus he disregards her mental suffering and misinterprets her reluctance. Instead of aiding Janey to get rid of her fears and joining her patiently on a long journey toward recovery, i.e., toward coming to terms with her body as a woman, which might ultimately result in a healthy, mutual enjoyment of consensual sexuality, he chooses to make a dramatic departure:

*"I suppose you think I ought to apologize to you for being a swine," he said.*

*"Jerry, I'm sorry," she said,  
"I'll be damned if I will..."*

*(....) "I suppose you ought to hold out for the wedding bells. Go ahead; that's your business. I can get what I want with any nigger prostitute down the street here ... Goodnight."*

It is therefore not that surprising that as soon as Janey meets Moorehouse, whose dynamism manifests itself mainly through his rhetoric (which Janey finds attractive despite its obvious clichés) and who appears to be sexually benign, she starts to admire him. He is important, good-looking, and, above all, non-threatening. With her secret affection for her employer and a good job where she feels fulfilled, Janey seems to have achieved a kind of balance. It is certainly not

much. She still lacks self-confidence, courage, a meaningful relation to a partner. But it is probably all that she – given her intelligence, cultural background and place assigned to her by the society – could have hoped for.

Janey's narrative contains some of the most effective instances of Dos Passos' technique of free indirect discourse, a device he uses throughout the book with all the major characters. "To describe it in broad strokes, the author adopting the device writes of a character in the third person but seeks to describe his or her thoughts, feelings and even actions in an idiom closely associated with that of the character." (Pizer 66) Eleanor Stoddard's constant use of the adjective "refined" comes to mind here. Janey, being a simpler person, resorts to the less "spectacular" word "fine." Here is Janey on Washington's Lafayette Square on a clear, sunny winter afternoon.

*There were children and nursemaids grouped on the benches. A man with a grizzled vandyke with a black portfolio under his arm sat down on one of the benches and immediately got up again and strode off; foreign diplomat, thought Janey, and how fine it was to live in the Capital City where there were foreign diplomats and men like J. Ward Moorehouse. She walked once more round the statue of Andrew Jackson rearing green and noble on a green noble horse.... (FP 304)*

The stylistic poverty of the extract parallels Janey's intellectual impoverishment. She is modest enough to be satisfied with her life in the proximity of "foreign diplomats and men like J. Ward Moorehouse," although she will never be able to meet them as an equal. Her reaction to the statue is also quite typical: no ideas, just a stock repertoire of repetitive platitudes.

Although on the social scale of The 42nd Parallel Janey is not a remarkable success, she remains one of the most important characters of the novel. Fifty years before the proliferation of feminist theories of the cultural construction of gender and the closely related theories of the formation of the female body, Dos Passos – as an attentive novelist – already provided an exquisite example of how the process works. Through her family situation as well as through her position in the culture at large Janey has internalized notions about her own inferiority; being a frequent object of sexual harassment she is unable to come to terms with her own sexuality; and her life among dogmatic and limited people hampers her future intellectual development. There is no doubt that Dos Passos very often mocks her character, but he always presents Janey as a victim of the determining cultural forces that operate in the society, repressing her energy, censoring her self, molding her into a ready-made female, unthinking, docile, conforming. So, between the lines one can also detect compassion with her victimization. Because of the number of relevant insights about how

a female body and mind are created, I would venture to call Dos Passos an early feminist writer.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have dealt with several major characters of Ragtime and The 42nd Parallel (Goldman, Nesbit, Houdini, Father and Mother of the middle-class family from the former and J.Ward Moorehouse, Eleanor Stoddard and Janey Williams from the latter) from the point of view of the authorial attention to the cultural construction (and also self-construction) of the body. Both authors pay a lot of attention to these questions, actually expressing a condition that was later theorized by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. While Doctorow makes a number of points explicitly e.g. through the character of Emma Goldman, Dos Passos is attentive to the condition of the body and its outer layers implicitly, due to the amount of realistic description in his fiction.

Dos Passos and Doctorow go further than Foucault in that they specifically deal with the construction of the female body. Evelyn Nesbit's body, for instance, in order to correspond to the beauty standards of the day is virtually mistreated, distant from what can be seen as a comfortable, "natural" state. But culture does not only get inscribed on a woman's body, it also structures her mind and limits her professional opportunities. Since a woman's main asset is located in the realm of her body, she may become a sex-symbol with a bad reputation (Nesbit), or object of harassment and unwanted sexual advances (Janey Williams). A woman's mind, by means of her cultural conditioning, generally remains complacent, lacking self-confidence and insight (Janey Williams). On the pages of Ragtime the female characters may experience a partial sensual awakening as well as spiritual opening up (Mother, Nesbit), nevertheless, they do remain within the confining realm of Victorian ideas about "proper" gender-roles.

Unlike Doctorow, Dos Passos also introduces female characters that correspond to the social developments of U.S. society in the early twentieth century, i.e., women who move to the city to live on their own, pursuing a career (Janey Williams, Eleanor Stoddard). The self-conscious Janey hardly rises above the rank allocated to her by the society, while Eleanor succeeds in breaking out of the boundaries of her class. Insensitivity and recklessness are unfortunately the prerequisites for such a rise. What Eleanor suffers from throughout the whole novel – perhaps as a consequence of her rise, perhaps as another necessary prerequisite – is the loss of capacity to enjoy her body.

Both writers also use male characters whose bodies, in the course of the novel, become increasingly impotent and cold, thus expressing a traditional notion of bourgeois sterility. In Ragtime it is the character of Father. His Anglo-

Saxon figure gets symbolically supplanted by the immigrant Tateh, a much more vital and imaginative character, who is capable of "constructing himself along the general flow of American energy" and who in turn contributes to the shaping of the "flow." In The 42nd Parallel it is J. Ward Moorehouse, a character whom Dos Passos uses to question the Horatio Alger myth. Moorehouse experiences the same kind of rise as an Alger hero, yet he remains incapable of sensual or emotional fulfillment. Thus, in the world of Ragtime there remains some hope, which is largely connected with the ethnic element: although Tateh's role is presented as a problematic one, he still is a winner of sorts, occasionally capable of savoring the fruit of his personal "reconstruction." The world of The 42nd Parallel, sparsely inhabited by other ethnic groups, offers no such opportunity to its insensitive winners.

Both authors also describe the methods for rising in the world. They view this problem in similar terms: beside mastering totally one's own body in all its aspects (clothes, hygienic standards, accent) one also has to master the narrative. Moorehouse's conscious use of body language as well as his manipulations of language parallel to a great extent Tateh's self-construction as a European film maker of noble origin. The character of the great escapist Harry Houdini on the other hand suggests that the sole disciplining of one's body is never enough. He succeeds only to the point where his body is circumscribed by its social location of a performer while the true performers are running the country and hardly anyone notices how well they perform.

Doctorow's novel, unlike its earlier counterpart, also has a cross-cultural dimension, which was probably prompted by an increased general awareness and appreciation in the United States of "the other" cultures outside the Euro-American context. Doctorow discusses the problem of "other bodies," bodies that were structured by a different cultural situation. By means of the depiction of Father's encounter with the Eskimos during his participation in Peary's expedition to the North Pole, Doctorow attacks Euro-American ethnocentrism and American imperialism and illustrates the logocentric character of Western culture.

## Notes

1. Although most women these days dress much more comfortably and garters are becoming rather exceptional, the current construction of the female body is no less severe. It is possible to argue, for instance, that the habit of dieting, brought about by the current ideal of a slender – or thin – figure, may be more harmful to one's health than the combined wearing of corsets and garters day after day. Walking in high-heeled shoes and applying certain kinds of cos-

metics might represent further items on the long list of painful things with possibly malevolent effects.

2. Clark interprets the name Ward, which suggests “the district or division of a city,” (Clark 136) as being related to Moorehouse’s early career in the real-estate business. The American natural landscape is gradually more and more violated by the processes of “fencing off” perpetrated by the land developers; this process also functions as a metaphor for the betrayal or subversion on Moorehouse’s part of “natural values.” His surname, of course, quite obviously, expresses greed as an underlying quality of the materialistically-oriented American society.

3. There is a touch of ambiguity related to this particular quality of J. Ward Moorehouse’s. A full internalization of one’s half-truths, no matter how platitudinous or manipulative they are, might even be interpreted as the strength of conviction. Pizer, who makes that interesting reversal, goes on to say that “Moorehouse fails to understand, not because he is lying to himself, but because his belief is so full and strong that he cannot see the truth. He becomes, in short, a living paragon of the American myth of success, in that he embodies not only its essential beliefs but also its power to control and to blind.” (Pizer 128)

4. In 1968 Dos Passos gave an interview which was later published in the collection Paris Review Interviews. Ironically, Dos Passos’ section is headed by his photograph where the writer is lighting – a cigar. The great critic of the American establishment, the eloquent left-winger of the 1920s and 1930s “keeping up the burjuwa look.” How significant is this detail as an expression of the development of Dos Passos’ political views later in his life!

5. The inheritance turns out to be rather disappointing. Instead of the millions Eleanor secretly hopes for, she is given a handsome diamond brooch in the shape of the locomotive, a “perfect example of the Gilded Age taste.” (Colley 73)

6. Apparently this is inevitable in Dos Passos’ universe. The stories of both Eleanor and Moorehouse show that an ambitious person of a low social background simply cannot avoid dirtying one’s hands: Janey Williams, on the other hand, who, compared to Eleanor, keeps a remarkably clean slate, and who tries not to pretend and hardly ever lies, is simply doomed to remain where she has always been – a member of the lower-middle class, happy enough to get a job as Moorehouse’s secretary.

Since Eleanor’s “classiness” is tainted, she has to put up with mere pretenses for the rest of her life – this is always the case of the first generation that makes the decisive move. Only the descendants, perhaps, can assume a true quality of a higher class.