



Corridor of uncertainty: E.L. Doctorow as a postmodern writer

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Abstract

The paper seeks to throw light on E. L. Doctorow's vision of history through the postmodern perspective. Postmodernism is a de-essentialising and de-naturalising critique of all the meta-narratives which claim to ground knowledge, ethics, meaning and truth within some monolithic pattern. It uses such staples of the older humanist tradition and undermines them from within. The paper will highlight how Doctorow uses postmodernism to reveal the illusory nature of our claims to know truth from the outside. For this purpose, it will analyze his novel – *the Book of Daniel* – and focus on his use of some postmodern features like irony, parody, ambiguity, self-reflexivity, metafiction and uncertainty. It will also dwell on the double-coded nature of his perception of postmodernism, thereby revealing its liberating potential as well as political quietism.

Keywords: uncertainty, history, narrative, self-reflexivity, heterogeneity, metafiction

Introduction

Confusing and baffling as postmodernism is to define, there lies at the heart of it what Francis Fukuyama called as *the end of history* or Jean Francois Lyotard termed as *the end of grand narratives*. It is a reaction to the grand narratives of modernity, whether they be clustered around the Hegelian conception of the universal *Spirit* or summoned in the name of the Marxian desire for socialism. In the postmodern time, nature has been replaced by culture, classes by masses, history by genealogy, absolute by relative, real by hyper-real, truth by power and discourse. Its spirit is pervaded by ontological and epistemological skepticism.

The changes witnessed in the socio-economic and cultural arena are witnessed in the literary and artistic realm as well. In architecture, for instance, the traditional syntax is combined with newer elements so much so that Charles Jencks defines it as double-coding. Modernist architecture was meant for the special elite, but postmodern architecture is designed for the common man. In music too, the traditional causal chain is broken and we witness a perpetual present. The same kind of transformation is seen in the postmodern novel where disintegrated people move in disintegrated environment rendered in disintegrated language.

For postmodernism, there is no readymade corridor of universal judgment between falsehood and reality, no sealed border between fact and fiction, work and text, or between signifier and signified. This uncertainty which evokes the feeling of being trapped inside an absurdist theatre is enacted by the postmodern writers in their works. The notion of history as possessing an immanent purpose is shattered in such works. It is shown that there is no truth but only interpretations. This angst-driven condition is brought to home by dissolving the conventional boundaries through the use of postmodern artistic techniques which can be conveniently put under the rubric of what Linda Hutch eon has termed as *historiographic metafiction*. Such type of fiction has been

written by writers like Salman Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, Don De Lillo and E.L. Doctorow.

Doctorow's fiction constantly questions the received notions of truth, meaning and history. His version of postmodernism is typically American yet trans-historical, spirit of the age yet an attitude brought to that age, politically emancipatory yet paralyzing. It is not that he gives an ontological priority to the one over the other; Doctorow is rather the very name of the postmodern ruthless effacement of priorities. In a way, he sketches his narratives, as they say, according to the demands of the situation itself. The post-world war era opens up on his pages with all its disturbing alarms and euphoric intensities.

Doctorow has been called as the historian of his age which is true in one sense, for he depicts the disappearance of the American past vividly. However, historical reconstruction is not the only approach by which his oeuvre can be accessed, for it would be an un dialectical assessment of his rich and diverse thought. Rather, he *critically* revisits history and thereby wins the acclaim of being a postmodern bricoleur than a mere historian of the age. Going against the humanist perception that characterized much of the representational view of reality, Doctorow questions the *absolute, ahistorical, transcendental*, and sketches a relative, fluid, heterogeneous narrative. This heterogeneous perception of reality is not only narrated as historians do, but like a genuine postmodern artist *enacted* in his *libidinal* writing.

The crisis of representation that haunts the contemporary world is both a source of despair and hope. If it brings the tragic feeling that history doesn't provide the vantage points of given, natural, universal perception, it also unfreezes the metaphysics and provides voice to the underdogs of the system. This constant tussle between ideology and utopia is portrayed and suffered by Doctorow.

Doctorow's narratives are not the traditional panaceas whereby one can finally rest with no representational dilemmas. His characters are always haunted by the will to

understand the roguish conditions and the persistent failure of such an effort. Daniel in *the Book of Daniel*, for example, has been presented by him like a detective who attempts to unravel the mystery of his parents' trial. However, no guiding star meets his eye in this search. He proves to be a quintessential Doctorowean hero/anti-hero of *imperative failure*.

Reality for Doctorow is fleeting and evanescent. He not only narrates but enacts this view of reality in his writing. This is done by frequent change of narration between first and third person. During the course of his narrative, the reader is initially taken into confidence that the events shall be narrated with scientific impartiality. "ON MEMORIAL DAY IN 1967", the narrator says, "DANIEL LEWIN Thumbed his way from New York to Worcester, Mass, in just under five hours" (Doctorow 3). The capitalised constructions in this sentence about temporal and spatial co-ordinates create the semblance of truth. However, in the very next sentence the reader's confidence is shaken when the impartial narrator proves to be Daniel himself: "I mean the early traffic was light" (3).

This constant movement between first and third person narration brings home the tussle between subjectivity and objectivity. It shows the will to know things from some archimedean point and at the same time the painful awareness of its failure. In this connection, Linda Hutcheon's comment is worth quoting in detail:

It is the function of irony in postmodern discourse to posit that critical distance and then undo it. It is also this doubleness that prevents any possible critical urge to ignore or trivialize historical-political questions. As producers or receivers of postmodern art, we are all implicated in the legitimization of our culture. Postmodern art openly investigates the critical possibilities open to art, without denying that its critique is inevitable in the name of its own contradictory ideology. (15)

Such postmodern dissolution is enacted by constant forward and backward movement of narration in time. After talking about the past event (see above), Daniel abruptly changes the gear to the present moment of his writing dissertation about which he says that "[t]his is a Thinline felt tip marker, black. This is composition Notebook 79c made in U.S.A by long Island paper products, Inc." (Doctorow 3). Amidst the dislocation of temporal coordinates, Doctorow keeps on shifting the narration: "This is Daniel trying one of the dark covers of the Browsing Room. Books for browsing are on the shelves. I sit at a table with a floor lamp at my shoulder" (3).

The frequent change of narration shows the futility of ever achieving any coherent conception of history. For Doctorow, there is no unmediated spot from which to understand things. Daniel tries to recover the past of his parents and through it Doctorow tries to recover the past of America. Something seems to have gone wrong with the notion of the America dream which Doctorow attempts to discover.

Daniel meets different persons to enquire about his parents. However, rather than finding any reliable source of information he gets contradictory and confusing answers which refuse to form a conclusion. One character in the novel, Arite Sternlicht, thinks that Daniel's parents were themselves

responsible for their plight. For him, the "whole frame of reference brought them [Daniel's parents] down because they acted like defendants at a trial" (Doctorow 186).

If Daniel and thereby the reader forms a perspective where Daniel's parents are shown to be their own gravediggers, this perspective is shattered when Daniel encounters the reporter, Jack P. Fein, who believes the system itself responsible for their death. "Shit," he says to Daniel, "between the FBI and CP your folks never had a chance" (Doctorow 258).

Even the perspective of Fein is not unitary. He complicates the situation further when he says:

You know that. Your folks were framed, but that doesn't mean they were innocent babes. I don't believe they were a dangerous conspiracy to pass important defense secrets, but I don't believe either that the U.S. Attorney, and the Judge, and the Justice Department and the president of the United States conspired against them. (Doctorow 260)

Doctorow seems to endorse the Derridean assertion of the inescapability of the metaphysical closure. Derrida's comment is significant:

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (354)

Doctorow's concern is to recover the historical truth of the Rosenbergs/Isaacsons trial but he is no naive historian in believing to excavate it without trials and tribulations. He puts Daniel in situations which transcend Daniel's and the reader's perceptual faculties. Nobody gives Daniel the full picture. His search for truth faces many kinds of hindrances. Even his foster father, Robert Levin, is reluctant to give him the answer. Instead of providing him any clue, he asks Daniel if he has read the file. For Daniel, this answer too is useless as well as frustrating because he "can recite that file by heart" (Doctorow 267). What he needs is something that can make him reach at the actual events that have happened. However, alas, events have been already turned into facts. Hutcheon expands on the issue:

Have we ever known the 'real' except through representations? We may see, hear, feel, smell, and touch it, but do we *know* it in the sense that we give meaning to it?... Our common-sense presuppositions about the 'real' depend upon how that 'real' is described, how it is put into discourse and interpreted. (31)

Daniel is continuously torn between the will to order and the painful awareness of its failure. He thinks that he can objectively render the events by being an unbiased narrator: "Daniel opened his eyes the lawyer had set back down" (Doctorow 331). Nevertheless, he is aware that it is *his* version of things he wants to present. Therefore he adds in his personal voice: "I think he had only wanted to show Linda

that he could act comedably” (331).

One wonders what kind of a truth seeker Daniel is. On the one hand he fumes at the half-picture presented to him by others, on the other he is himself suspicious of his own mode of analysis. If he is in high spirits regarding his father's experience of life, he also believes him to be “a selfish man” (Doctorow 40). Adding more confusion to his version, he adds: “or may be no” (40). In this way, Doctorow sends shock waves to the traditional notion of narration which once claimed to know things from the *outside*.

Like everybody else in the novel, Daniel too has his theory. His search for the absolute truth meets massive disappointment, for he too is engulfed in the postmodern force-field that pervades the whole novel. In a typical postmodern fashion, Daniel is uncertain about his parents' involvement in the crime. To take an example, Daniel says:

In any event, my mother and father, standing in for them [other couple], when to their deaths for crimes they did not commit. Or may be they did commit. Or may be my mother and father got away with false passports for crimes they didn't commite. How do you spell comit? (Doctorow 52)

For doctorow, there seems to be no truth except the truth that there is no truth. “Of one thing”, Daniel says, “We are sure. Everything is elusive. God is elusive. God is elusive. Revolutionary morality is elusive. Justice is elusive” (52).

With such statements, Daniel comes close to Hamlet. Like Hamlet, he overthinks the situation in which he is caught up. Something is wrong with the state (pun intended) of America and Daniel is summoned to set the wrong right. However, like his Shakespearian counterpart, he meets failure. He is “ghost-driven, half-nauseated, violent, desperately obliged to those on the other side of grave, and yet feeling himself unequal to the task” (Douglas 34). Daniel constantly moves back and forth in time. Neither past seems solid to him nor the present. When he dwells on his past, he is unsure of his childhood residence: “I was born in Washington, D.C., but I remember no home before weeks Avenue in the Bronx. We moved there in 1945 when I was four years old. Or may be in 1944 when I was five years old” (Doctorow 118).

Daniel is an unreliable narrator. He does not “remember who drove the car” when he reminisces his leaving for the boarding school (Doctorow 290). He “can't remember” what happened when he first met his parents in jail (Doctorow 305). This is how Doctorow highlights the historical amnesia which characterizes the contemporary American society. Winifred Bevilacqua Farrant expands on this type of narration in these words:

While the classical historical novel presupposes a narrator who not only has total knowledge of all the facts but is consistently neutral and detached in presenting them and is therefore capable of providing an unmediated transposition of historical reality into fiction, Daniel naturally lacks both omniscience, since he was child when the events he is narrating occurred, and dispassionateness, because those events destroyed his primal family and wounded him deeply. (98)

The postmodern world is bereft of any standards which might claim to know things from some unwavering ground. Its horizon is porous, ethereal and uncertain. Daniel fails to conclude anything substantial about his parents:

I have put down everything I can remember of their actions and conversations in this period prior to their asserts. Or I think I have. Shifted it through my hands. I find no clues either to their guilt or innocence. Perhaps they are neither guilty nor innocent. (Doctorow 159-160)

Doctorow not only highlights the fictionality of the work of fiction but also underscores the poignant feeling that all history is fictional, a construct, a text. Time and again he brings to our notice that the work of art and history are marked by disruptions and discontinuities. No master-narrative, design or plan runs the turbines of history. In his works, history and the work of art continuously interpenetrate each other, and thereby nullify all efforts of compartmentalisation, regimentation and hierarchical approach.

There is a porous border between fiction and reality in the postmodern artwork. This can be witnessed in *the book of Daniel* as well. Doctorow breaks the reader's willing suspension of disbelief. There are frequent digressions towards the things that lie outside the novel which reveal its *constructed* nature. There are references to the editor of this novel as well as to the reader. Daniel is always aware that he is writing history and at the same time a novel. In a capitalised construction, there is “A NOTE TO THE READER” (Doctorow 67). The note reads:

Reader, this is a note to you. If it seems to you elementary, if it seems after all this time elementary ... If it is elementary and seems to you at this late date to be pathetically elementary, like picking up some torn bits of cloths and tearing them again. (Doctorow 67)

This direct address to the reader shatters the illusion of the conventional narrative technique which produced an assuring and comfortable place for the reader. The mirage of truth is broken here by bringing home the fictionality of the work of fiction. This fictionality points out the fictionality, constructedness, elusiveness and incoherence of reality and history. History, Doctorow intends to show, is without any in-built design, plan, goal and purpose.

During the narrative of this novel, he constantly uses postmodern techniques to draw our attention towards the constructedness of his narrative. This also applies, in his scheme of things, to history itself. He also uses such techniques to show the constructedness of history. Rather than being *given, natural*, lying something *there* to the gaze of any critical observer, history is *constructed* by us. Rather than *reflecting* reality, we *create* it through our particular belief systems.

Nevertheless, there is a method in this madness. Doctorow's narrative does not stop at hopelessness, angst or escape. He believes in going through the postmodern uncertainty so completely that we move, as it were, inside out to the other side. The lesson is not to escape but to suffer

unrepresentability so thoroughly that we become capable of fashioning new representations. “If it is that elementary,” Daniel and Doctorow continue in their address to the reader, “then reader, I am reading you. And together we may rend our cloths in mourning” (67).

Daniel does complete his mourning, unlike his sister who dies of angst. In a way Daniel moves beyond postmodernism by the leap of faith. He is fully conscious of the fact that the unwavering spirit of finding truth can lead one nowhere. It can only destroy families and he is not ready to put his family in the blackhole of our existence. At the end of the novel we are told that Daniel quits hunting for truth which had been so persistently haunting him. On the contrary, he makes peace with himself.

Putting the pressure of all the insurmountable hostile forces (economic, political, social) on Daniel and his sister, Doctorow’s experiment puts forward two alternatives – escape or death. In an interview with Paul Levine, Doctorow says:

The specific dramatic interest I had was solely in terms of what happens when all the antagonistic force of a society [here postmodern] is brought to bear and focussed on one or possibly two individuals. What kind of anthropological ritual is that? (Trener 61)

Doctorow prefers the path chosen by Daniel. He is fully aware of the fact that we cannot move back in time and reach to the traditional representational purity. The backward journey is that of a futile infinite regress. Instead, we need to move beyond.

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