

## THE TRUE VOICE OF THE AMERICAN FICTIONIST: E. L. DOCTOROW

Francisco Collado Rodríguez & María Ferrández San Miguel (U. Zaragoza)

### ***Introduction: Some notes about his life and works***

Edgar Lawrence Doctorow passed away on July 21, at the age of 84, leaving a legacy of twelve novels, three short story collections, a play and three essay collections that have earned him a reputation as one of the most important American literary figures of the past half century. Upon his death, President Barack Obama paid tribute to him as “one of America’s greatest novelists.” E. L. Doctorow was born on January 6, 1931 in the Bronx, the son of Rose and David Doctorow, second-generation Americans of Jewish Russian origin. He attended Kenyon College, where he majored in philosophy and graduated with honors in 1952. Then, he completed a postgraduate course on English Drama at Columbia University and served for two years with the USA Army in Germany.

Doctorow began his literary career in 1960 with *Welcome to Hard Times*, while working as senior editor with New American Library. This first novel, a book that eventually qualified as a “post-western,” was a response to the poor-quality manuscripts that he had reviewed as script reader for CBS Television and Columbia Pictures. Six years later, he published *Big as Life*, a science fiction novel that never satisfied readers, publisher, or the author himself, who did not allow it to be reissued. While working on his third novel—*The Book of Daniel* (1971), a historical fiction that deals with the conviction and execution of a fictional couple inspired by the Rosenberg case—Doctorow was offered a post as writer in residence at the University of California at Irvine, the first of a number of teaching appointments that he held throughout his life, including positions at Sarah Lawrence College, Utah, Princeton, and New York University.

*The Book of Daniel* granted Doctorow a reputation as a respected novelist. Yet, critical and commercial success did not come together till the publication of *Ragtime* in 1975, a historical

fiction set in New York during the Ragtime Era. In the following years, he wrote an experimental play—*Drinks before Dinner*—and began to articulate his innovative views on narrative in a number of essays, among them his most influential “False Documents” (1977). Four new works were published in the 1980s: the dazzling and eerie postmodern novel *Loon Lake* (1980), Doctorow’s first short story collection *Lives of the Poets* (1984), *World’s Fair* (1985)—considered by critics his most autobiographical text—and *Billy Bathgate* (1989), an unconventional gangster story that was runner up for the 1990 Pulitzer Prize. *The Waterworks*, a Gothic-like detective story, followed in 1994.

During the last fifteen years of his life, the writer published some of his most ambitious works. His end of the millennium novel, *City of God* (2000) has baffled critics with its sophisticated philosophical and ethical concerns. His second collection *Sweet Land Stories* (2004), together with *The March* (2005)—a historical fiction set in the last years of the American Civil War—and *Homer and Langley* (2009)—a rewriting of the life of the eccentric Collyer brothers—would follow, confirming Doctorow’s position as one of America’s most appreciated contemporary writers. The title of his last collection of short stories, *All the Time in the World* (2011), seemed to foresee a long list of books to come, but it would only be followed by *Andrew’s Brain* (2014). Doctorow’s last novel, considered by some to be the odd one out, continues to puzzle readers with its unconventional narration, which offers readers the possibility to peek inside the mind of a cognitive scientist.

Written over the course of five decades, Doctorow’s works have garnered numerous prizes and honors, such as three National Book Critics Awards (for *Ragtime*, *Billy Bathgate*, and *The March*), the National Book Award (for *World’s Fair*), two Pen/Faulkner Awards (for *Billy Bathgate* and *The March*), the National Humanities Medal, the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Fiction, and the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction, among others.

Doctorow’s readiness to experiment with different narrative genres and the intense moral ethos of his fiction draw the portrait of a very distinctive author from other writers of his period. Paradoxically, his works are located in the unstable position of stories that frequently deny their own truth while still affirming their possibility to teach readers valid ethical answers for the times we live. The following pages offer a brief critical approach to four of his novels, as samples of the rich and ultimately puzzling qualities of one of the greatest literary minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

With a few notable exceptions, critics of Doctorow’s early novels did not hesitate to classify him as a postmodernist writer. Williams (6) goes so far as to claim that any critical

attempt to approach Doctorow's fiction must take into consideration its indebtedness to the impact of postmodernism and poststructuralism. Many of these critics acknowledge that a wide number of thematic and stylistic features of Doctorow's early fiction emanate from the postmodern context in which he took his first steps as a writer. Indeed, the novelist's formal and thematic affinities with postmodernist fiction are undeniable, on account of his books' metafictional concerns, their intertextuality, and their attitude towards history, reality and fiction, among other features. Yet, there is a strong sense of contradiction inherent both to his fiction and non-fiction. Although his writings manifest a strong commitment to skepticism and place a strong emphasis on the fictiveness of literature, they simultaneously show that Doctorow is fully convinced of the privileged role of fiction with respect to truth, ethics, and knowledge.

Indeed, novels such as *Welcome to Hard Times* and *The Book of Daniel* engage with social, political and historical realities in an extremely meaningful way, which suggests a movement beyond postmodernism and towards the recuperation of faith in meaning and the possibility of truthful textual representation. Certainly, some critics would seem to agree with the tenet that despite sharing some of the most common features traditionally associated to a postmodern poetics, Doctorow's early novels also implicitly reject the postmodern contempt for the outside world and reinforce the position of the subject and its relation to the other, thus avoiding the ultimate epistemological skepticism and pervasive relativism usually associated to the postmodern ethos. Indeed, these novels seem to stage a return to the idea that art can provide a sense of reality, echoing the novelist's own claim (in Trenner 48) that his fiction endorses a "poetics of engagement" with the ills of contemporary North American society. Such an engagement may be best perceived in the novels' emphasis on empathy and injustice, and in their underlying ethical scope.

### ***Welcome to Hard Times* and the new American Western**

Published in 1960, *Welcome to Hard Times* was E. L. Doctorow's debut novel. At its simplest, the book is a historical fiction set in the Dakota Territory in the 1870s, following the discovery of gold. It deals with the destruction, rebirth, and final eradication of a small frontier settlement during the colonization of the West. However, in spite of its setting, characters and action, *Welcome to Hard Times* is a highly crafted and socially-committed novel that contains tales of tremendous struggle, suffering and pain and puts forward a newly critical and much

bleaker version of the myth of the West. In it, social relations are shown to be based on violence, oppression and individualism, causing the characters to suffer long-lasting distressful conditions.

Asked in an interview about his reasons for writing a western when such type of fiction was so diametrically different from the kind of books that more serious writers had been producing at the time, Doctorow explains that he “liked the idea of using disreputable genre materials and doing something serious with them” (Morris 77). His efforts were in fact part of the postmodernist trend that was emerging at the time in opposition to modernist high-brow poetics and sought to replenish fiction through the assimilation of marginal, non-canonical genres—such as science fiction, the detective story, or the western—into mainstream literature. In addition, the popular western plausibly attracted Doctorow’s attention because, in the socio-political climate of the time, the mythical vision of the West that the genre had been projecting offered interesting possibilities for ironic re-formulation. That traditional understanding of the West had depicted the extension of the frontier as an essential factor in the myth of American exceptionalism by allowing for constant personal and national regeneration.

*Welcome to Hard Times* inaugurates a complex engagement with suffering and oppression on Doctorow’s part. The novel narrates events of extreme violence, representing the main characters’ resulting psychological conditions, their causes and their consequences. The novel also problematizes the relationship among the effects of guilt and shame as well as among the trauma categories of victim, perpetrator and bystander, highlighting the extremely thin line that separates them. *Welcome to Hard Times* further succeeds in disrupting and subverting long-time fixed images of masculinity and femininity. In addition, the novel denounces the prevailing model of gender domination and violence, seeking to undermine the type of society that supports itself on patriarchal gender configurations of production and consumption. This is achieved through the creation of a polyphonic text that incorporates not only themes, but also forms compatible with feminism. Finally, the novel represents the failure of the western community, which is ultimately destroyed by its inhabitants’ inability, or unwillingness, to function according to the ethical dictates of empathy and selfless cooperation. In short, *Welcome to Hard Times* deals fundamentally with the social impact of power relations, which are shown to be shaped in very complex ways by issues of traumatic victimization that derive from a diminished sense of community and a lack of empathy. With *Welcome to Hard Times* Doctorow pioneers a bleak view of human nature and social and gender relations on the frontier, which in the novel functions as a metaphor for contemporary society.

Moreover, this first novel is an extremely sophisticated narrative that uses its disguise as a western to perform three key critical tasks. On a cultural or historical level, the book

demythologizes frontier experience and westward expansion, undertaking the postmodern task of subverting the master narrative of myth. Thus, by playing against the expectations of the genre, *Welcome to Hard Times* allows Doctorow to provide a newly critical and much bleaker version of the myth of the west and of social interaction in the historical frontier. On a literary level, the novel succeeds in revitalizing the genre of the western, freeing it of outdated conventions and inaugurating the trend that has been termed 'new western' or 'post-western.' Finally, on an ideological level, the novel draws relevant parallelisms between the historical period in which the novel is set and the one in which it was published. In other words, the novel uses its disguise as a western to provide critical commentary of some of the social ills of postwar American society, namely its fierce individualism, its hegemonic gender configurations, its lack of empathy and its obsession with capital. This critical vein was relevant at the time of the novel's publication and undoubtedly remains relevant nowadays, which makes it possible to extend the novel's ethical approach to contemporary western society.

With *Welcome to Hard Times*, Doctorow managed to turn the tale of a western town into a tool to debunk essentialist views of gender and trauma and to denounce social injustice through the rejection of the rule of the either/or, anticipating himself to the ethical turn in literature that would take place in the late 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the denunciation of injustice and the promotion of empathy motivate Doctorow all through his career as a writer, becoming key elements in his ongoing ethical literary project. Thus, it is possible to conclude that E. L. Doctorow managed to transform and revitalize the genre of the classical western, bestowing upon it unprecedented literary sophistication and transforming it into a genre capable of yielding ethical meanings which are still relevant nowadays, more than fifty years after the novel's publication.

### ***The Book of Daniel* and the complexities of trauma**

*The Book of Daniel* was released eleven years after the publication of *Welcome to Hard Times*. Published in 1971, it eventually achieved remarkable critical success, becoming finalist for the National Book Award. At its simplest, the novel is the fictional rendering of the conviction and execution of the Isaacsons from the viewpoint of their surviving son. The plot is loosely based on the actual trial and execution of the Rosenbergs, the New York communist couple who were convicted and executed in 1953 for conspiracy to commit espionage leading to the development of the Soviet nuclear program. However, *The Book of Daniel* is much more than a political and historical fictionalization of a well-known event of American history; it is also the testimony of a

survivor, a tale of trauma, horror, violence and guilt that depicts Daniel's struggle to find a narrative line that will reconcile him with his traumatic past. Eventually it becomes the confession of a sadist perpetrator who seeks to counteract his helplessness through the domination and victimization of his family; but it is also the account of his attempt to recover the memories of his traumatic past and assimilate the traumatic experiences that are responsible for his present condition. His terrifying memories have returned to haunt him, triggered by his sister's suicide attempt fifteen years after their parents' execution, and they prompt him to write the story that we are reading.

*The Book of Daniel* is a complex novel focused on the disastrous consequences psychological trauma may bring for the individual. As a trauma narrative, the book succeeds in rendering and formally representing the contradictions of the protagonist's mental condition and his struggle to assimilate the traumatic memories of his childhood. Indeed, the novel explores the causes and consequences of extreme traumatic events not only on a thematic level but also on a formal one, bringing narrative techniques to their experimental limit: fragmented voice, disrupted chronology, metafictional self-reflexivity, intertextuality, unreliability, etc. Among the consequences, the dangers of helplessness and lack of agency are emphasized, since they lock the protagonist into a spiral of violence and obsession with power that leads him to victimize his own family. Indeed, the novel also problematizes the relationship between the categories of victim and perpetrator, highlighting the extremely thin line that separates them in the context of psychological trauma. Thus, *The Book of Daniel* seems to favor a non-judgmental, anti-categorical narration in which the protagonist occupies a liminal position in the continuum that trauma theory establishes between the roles of victim and perpetrator. In other words, Daniel unambiguously represents the mutual status of both roles, deserving neither full sympathy nor absolute disapproval from the reader. *The Book of Daniel* further stages the difficulties that trauma victims face when attempting to articulate traumatic memories, reflecting on issues of reliability and accuracy, the conflict between knowledge and denial, and the different means through which the traumatic past may be retrieved and transformed into narrative memory. Finally, the novel explores the possibility of healing through the mechanisms of intertextuality and narration (*scriptotherapy*), highlighting the importance of bearing empathic witness to the pain of others so that the process of working through may begin.

In short, *The Book of Daniel* deals fundamentally with human suffering and the social impact of injustice. Disguised as a fictionalized memoir or autobiographical novel, the book narrates a tale of extreme suffering that exposes a number of American social, economic and political structures as mechanisms of control and alienation that have a strong traumatizing

potential and easily render the individual powerless. It depicts a flawed judiciary system in which people can be convicted and executed without sufficient evidence as to their guilt and represents the failure of social structures and institutions to provide for those who inhabit the margins of North American society. In addition, the novel warns of the disastrous consequences of individualism, which has brought the country to its current level of alienation and isolation, advocating our duty to bear witness empathically to the suffering of others and urging us to withhold simplistic judgment. These warnings were necessary in the 1970s and unfortunately still seem to be in need nowadays. Thus, as it was the case with *Welcome to Hard Times*, *The Book of Daniel* becomes an all-encompassing denunciation of social injustice through the rejection of the rule of the either/or, anticipating itself to the ethical turn in literature that would eventually take place in the late 1980s and 1990s.

### ***City of God* and the hope for conciliation**

Doctorow's dense novel *City of God* (2000) represents both a kaleidoscopic analysis of 20th-century American culture and a complex playground whose target was postmodern eclecticism and the necessity to bring forward a new moral stand connected to contemporary scientific concepts and to a posthumanist understanding of life. In other words, the novelist seemed to support in his book views that would re-establish confidence in the possibility of a Prime Mover, in line with the epistemological position defended by some atoned poststructuralists in the Turn to Ethics period.

Metafictional techniques, the role assigned to voice, and the use of metalepsis pointed to a postmodern book whose story, however, helped to dissolve the contemporary cultural antagonism existing between science and the tandem religion–metaphysics, a blurring of categorical borders that also announced the end of the eclectic postmodern ethos that had dominated the last decades of the 20th century.

Being a new reflection on old concerns of the author, *City of God* unfolds along a main story located at the end of 1999, in his beloved New York. Thus, both setting and period are overcharged with symbolism, in line with the author's inquire into the state that metaphysical, religious, and scientific grounds have reached by the turn of the millennium. At a moment in which Theory (from Nietzsche to Derrida) has decreed the end of metaphysics—and, therefore, also of religion—Doctorow resorts to contemporary scientific notions to help in the dismantling of Theory and reinstate the human intellect to a condition of permanent (metaphysical) doubt. The

writer begins *City of God* with a long digression about 20th-century ideas on the creation of the universe and on the role of a possible God for it. However, from a narratological viewpoint the beginning of the narrative also impels readers to wonder who the narrator of the digression is. The voice might be its main protagonist's, Father Tom Pemberton, or Everett's, the writer within the main story who plays the part of Pemberton's biographer, or even a reincarnated Ludwig Wittgenstein's... Thus, the sense and quality of human doubt as the actual mover of our species is also enhanced from the textual level.

The abundant presentation of blurred boundaries in the book is mostly focused on different aspects of contemporary culture and brought about by a series of literary strategies that can be summarized as follows: the crossing of narrative levels (metalepsis); the crossing of ontological levels (mostly regarding the role of cinema and the figure of a writer who writes an embedded biography); the use of textual fragmentation manifested in a plurality of narrators (some of them historical figures); the repetition of motifs, key words or sentences in different contexts and by different voices; as regards narrative time, the persistent avoidance of chronological linearity; the use of intertextuality, the title of the novel itself being the main metaphor in this respect; the crossing of traditional gender roles; the blurring of genre barriers (parody of the detective novel); the mixture of Christian and Jewish religions; and, finally, the dissolution of borders between religion and contemporary scientific theories. Obviously, a detailed analysis of every one of these strategies would prove excessively long for the purpose of this essay and a few indications about the most daring strategies deployed by the writer will have to suffice. Thus, it has to be stressed the peculiar division of the novel into different sections, passages narrated by different voices that also echo similar devices in Doctorow's previous fiction. To its formal fragmentation, the novel adds a strong intellectual density that demands some knowledge not only from philosophy but also from contemporary physics. In addition, the book qualifies as a piece of Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction" mode, with the intervention of figures such as Wittgenstein or Einstein. Everett has to fictionalize Pemberton's life, which opens up to the extra level of a film been produced out of all this, thus giving the book a strong Baudrillardian touch that leads to paragraphs as the following:

Something weird has happened, so that I'm convinced that the people who ostensibly make them are no more than instruments of the movies themselves, servers, factotums, and the whole process, from pitching an idea for one, and getting the financing and finding a star, I mean, the whole operation ... in fact the entire booming culture of movies—all of it is illusion, as the movie is supposed to be, a scripted reality, whereas it's the movies themselves that are in control, preordaining and selfgenerating, like a species with its own DNA. (108-109)



But, above all, we may conclude that Doctorow is playing with all his technical strategies in pursuit of the most characteristic human intellectual quest of all times: the finding of a sound metaphysics that may justify the meaning of life. Christianity, Judaism, and scientific theories enter a long dialogue in the book, in a sustained attempt to find links between contemporary science and its discoveries, and the traditional role played by religion. Doctorow starts his intellectual scientific path where American historian Henry Adams left it in his autobiographical *Education*: at the beginning of the 20th century. Where Adams's concern is with thermodynamic entropy—as the epitomic Law of the Industrial Revolution—and the implications it might have for human societies, Doctorow's is with relativity theory, quantum physics, language, and contemporary theories of chaos.

Being both a human and a heavenly detective, Pemberton concludes that his religious—that is to say, metaphysical—doubts demand a return to the origins of Christianity, when it was still a sect of Judaism. Thanks to reflections coming from religion and from eminent Jewish minds, such as Wittgenstein's and Einstein's (a philosopher making scientific inquiries and a scientist inquiring into philosophy), the metafictional story veers along a process of *conciliatio oppositorum* between philosophy and present science as proof that human beings are not ready to give up on metaphysical questions. By the end of the novel female Rabbi Sarah offers a pantheistic conclusion that, as readers may hint, seems to reveal also the writer's inmost wishes. She suggests the possibility of a reunion between science and religion as a way to transcendence:

Suppose then that in the context of a hallowed secularism, the idea of God could be recognized as Something Evolving, as civilization has evolved—that God can be redefined, and recast, as the human race trains itself to a greater degree of metaphysical and scientific sophistication. With the understanding, in other words, that human history does show a pattern at least of progressively sophisticated metaphors. So that we pursue a teleology thus far that, in the universe as vast as the perceivable cosmos, and as infinitesimal as a subatomic particle, has given us only the one substantive indication of itself—that we, as human beings, live in moral consequence. (256)

And, once more, living in moral consequence seems to be the aspiration of Doctorow's protagonist in his last novel, published in 2014.

### ***Andrew's Brain* or the final recapitulation of American History and its reporting witness**

The protagonist and narrator of Doctorow's last novel is Andrew, a cognitive scientist, academic and teacher who seems to have fallen prey to bipolar depressive manifestations. Along less than 200 pages readers know about his conversations with and written communication to somebody who seems to be a psychiatrist. Once again, the narrating voice shows doubts, it is difficult when not impossible to fix meaning, and the report becomes contradictory, clearly operating as the writer's final warning that we are a narrative species, inconsistent and not to be trusted. Wisely, Doctorow provides his attentive readers with clues to know from which dreamy or actual experiences his protagonist imagines or invents the "reality" he is reporting to his analyst. Intertextually, Andrew himself establishes strong connections between his own life and Mark Twain's, and with two of the characters in Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*. Ironically, Andrew also dishonors his very name, which comes from classic Greek "aner/andrós," meaning the male human. In his own (invented?) reality, he is the well-intentioned man who always ends up bringing death and chaos to the people close to him. His life progressively turns into structural trauma, strongly resembling the paradigmatic situation of contemporary Western societies.

Along his narrative, and denying his own belief that life is not like a movie (an impression many people seem to hold nowadays), he ends up presenting his lifetime as sketches from a tragi-comedy to culminate in a number of quick episodes where he tells his analyst about his relation with President George W. Bush, his roommate at Yale. By then attentive readers may have realized that *Andrew's Brain* is more than it looks in a first reading of the book. In a sense, it is Doctorow's political testament, a compilation of his ideas on the United States of America and on the collective psychotic personality of the most powerful country in the world, capable of publicly defending the values of democracy and privately denying such values to its own citizens.

However, *Andrew's Brain* is not only a political allegory. It is also a witty experiment on reflection and the essential role this characteristic plays in the constitution of human societies. And, once more in the writer's oeuvre, the book represents the quest for a lost humanity. From the thoughts of its cognitivist protagonist, the story traps readers into an apparently neat puzzle, assumingly deconstructing Descartes's logic with a clever question: "How can I think about my brain when it's my brain doing the thinking?" (32) In any case, the textual assumption is that his brain is doing all the thinking, from the first to the last page of the book. As a cognitivist, one of his fundamental targets is, from the beginning, to find out how the brain becomes the mind, that is to say, how consciousness appears. And once more echoes can be heard from Doctorow's earlier fiction: if man discovers how to duplicate the process to create consciousness, then man

becomes God and from there, with the help of genetics and technology, we enter the apocalyptic period of a posthumanity bound to disaster and to its own extinction. "What else can we do," Andrew tells his analyst, "as eaters of the fruit of the tree of knowledge but biologize ourselves?" (5). Doctorow does not need more words to draw the sketch of a posthuman America and realize that in *City of God* he had not counted on man as the new deity capable of bringing with him the seeds of his own destruction. Adapted to our times, the hypothesis of Laplace's Demon reappears in a new guise in the pages of this last novel, as a powerful computer that may have "the capacity to record and store the acts and thoughts and feelings of every living person on earth around per millisecond of time" (42). But, in a much more ironic mood, Andrew combines his knowledge of contemporary science with his disgust for political illiterate scoundrels to tell his listener the words he employed to terrorize Bush and his two grotesque advisors with the findings of cognitivism:

I gave them Android's last lecture on neurological developments around the world. I told them the great problem confronting neuroscience is how the brain becomes the mind. How that three-pound knitting ball makes you feel like a human being. I said we were working on it, and if they valued their lives, or life as they knew it, they would do well to divert whatever government funding there was for neuroscience and add it to the defence budget. [...] Computers, of course, I said, and animals genetically developed to have more than the primary consciousness of animals. To have feelings, states of mind, memory, longing. [...] Yes, I said, and with all of that the end of the mythic human world we've had since the Bronze Age. (185–86)

After his final lecture to those "prime examples of human insufficiency," Andrew does a handstand, thus becoming the Holy Fool of Mussorgsky's opera, as the only way out of the White House and its suffocating atmosphere, while Doctorow explicitly sides with the voices of other contemporary writers such as Amiri Baraka or Kurt Vonnegut in their unambiguous denunciation of the utter stupidity and extreme danger that some American political figures represent for the future of the planet. With impressive erudition, *Andrew's Brain* and its protagonist offer readers, in Doctorow's literary testament, a final promise of political redemption. Literature, again, becomes illuminating.

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