

VULNERABILITY AND ACTING: STIMULUS AND RESPONSE IN DOCTOROW'S *RAGTIME**

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ABSTRACT: *Almost all of E. L. Doctorow's characters in Ragtime suffer from a certain degree of vulnerability, a state of great weakness, fragility, wound or harm that cues them to act in such a manner that is analogous to acting on stage or in cinema. This profuse use of the world-theater analogy allied with vulnerability helps us understand Ragtime, which reviews the most significant and dramatic events in America's last hundred years or so. These events have spawned vulnerability that affected the life of Doctorow's characters so profoundly that different types of personas emerged. In my paper an attempt is made to understand how the roles of these personas arose, what Doctorow tries to discover through the medium of acting, how it is associated with vulnerability. In addition, I will study how acting and vulnerability interact with the structure and the narrative technique hoping to provide novel perceptions into Doctorow's novel.*

KEYWORDS: Modern American fiction; Jewish American fiction; E. L. Doctorow; *Ragtime*; Vulnerability; Acting; Personas.

INTRODUCTION

Almost all of E. L. Doctorow's characters in *Ragtime* suffer from a certain level of vulnerability, a situation of vast helplessness, delicateness, injury or maltreatment which cues them to act in such a manner that is parallel to acting on stage or in cinema. While some are physically vulnerable, others, to employ Leblanc's standards, are ill with moral and social vulnerability (Leblanc 2011, 13). Moreover, Doctorow presents circumstances where an individual, a group, a society, or even a state can be vulnerable. More important, he, in the same manner as S. L. Cutter and colleagues, advocates that when people fail to respond to real or potential vulnerability, their weakness and fragility, their proneness to emotional or psychological injury, to social damage, and to moral hurt, criticism or censure, heap on (Cutter et al., 2003 261). His purpose is to assert that vulnerability is a chief rational, moral and ontological perception that encloses manifold connotations allied with our everyday practices.

However, Doctorow does not define vulnerability as a concept. Rather, through Houdini's analogy between living and acting, he suggests his central view of acting as a metaphor for human behavior that is fuelled, hindered, disturbed or fostered by vulnerability. Houdini believes,

There was a kind of act that used the real world for its stage. He couldn't touch it. For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of

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his life if people walked out of the theater and forgot him? The headlines on the newsstand said Peary had reached the Pole. The real-world act was what got into the history books. (Doctorow, 1974, 82)

The quote is very important. It discloses a sequence of cause and effect centering on vulnerability and acting. There are two types of vulnerability stimulate Houdini. One is cognitive psychology which is held as sort of vulnerability that occurs when a certain individual runs into a disquieting encounter, where the cognitive vulnerability forms a maladaptive consequence that will possibly cause a psychological disorder (John H. Riskind and David Black 2005, 122-6). Another is social vulnerability, which is believed to come about in the wake of manifold aggravations and jolts, in environment or society and, as a result, the individual cannot tolerate, anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from them (Blaikie et al. 1994, 9).

Moreover, Houdini seems to refer to two kinds of acting which use two different stages: the act, which uses “the real world for its stage” compared with the act, which relates to the traditional theater. Because this acting is associated with illusions, deceit and magic, it is characterized by a few interconnected phenomena of vulnerability. One pertains to epistemology for this type of acting is alienated from truth and fact; another to morality as it deviates from true knowledge and sincerity and the final deficiency is social because this acting caters to the lower tastes and base desires of others. Therefore, it fails to recruit audiences and is soon overlooked. It does not last or get “into history books.” This implies that the audiences are the judges who tell good from bad acting.

The world act, however, is laudable and hence convincing since it reflects integrity, truth, grace, and glory. This kind of acting, Houdini asserts, is what gets “into the history books.” The actor or the human being must exert his effort to select his roles, play them well, and convince crowds of audiences of their merit so that his roles can be judged as “real” and recorded in history books for future generations.

Houdini’s analogy also denotes that these two stages are not separate. Rather, the real world type is an extension to the theatrical stage. An actor who excels at the traditional theater and is well remembered by his audience will accomplish success in the real world and guarantee a place in history books. For the same reason, the relation of dependency can be reversed. A botch on the traditional stage leads to a crash on the world stage and triumph or failure in the real world exacts a similar response on the stage. In other words, no matter what type of acting an individual endorses, he or she is geared towards vulnerability. The actor recorded in history books generates a sense of vulnerability that motivates him to maintain or promote his elevated acting; the other’s failure engenders a deeper sense of vulnerability that chains him.

Houdini’s theory of acting and its interrelatedness with vulnerability sounds remarkable. It not only binds several correlated cobwebs having to do with playwrights, performances, spectators, theaters and critics, offering what is ultimately an amalgamating metaphor in the novel but also spells out stimuli that influence, motivate, foster or disturb human behavior.

Yet, it is perfective, selective, radical, even racial and, ironically subject to weaknesses and hence vulnerability. At best, it is hard to define and difficult to attain. At worst, it ignores the modest successes of oceans of crowds, rises above the common levels and condemns the failures without which people cannot appreciate their accomplishment or balance their deeds. Moreover, it encourages the accomplishment of pure statuses whose contents are difficult to

specify, access or assess. *En otras palabras*, Houdini's thesis concerning the two human species is polar and has no dynamic potential. This means that it does not offer any kind of transaction, interchange, give-and-take, dialectic, and a gathering of irreconcilable ends. Nor does it realize the function of vulnerability in motivating or retarding human conduct.

In addition, Houdini assumes that only good acting is recorded in history books. In fact, history does not eternalize the deeds of good figures only. It still registers evil figures the like of Caligula, Rome's 3rd emperor, Nero, Rome's 5th emperor, Vlad Dracula, the prince of Wallachia, Ivan, the Tsar of Russia from 1533 to 1584 and Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the French Revolution before he became a tyrant in 1794. To this list, I might as well add modern personages such as Hitler, the Nazi leader, Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust, Stalin, the Soviet dictator from 1922 to 1953, and Khrushchev, the Russian Premier. The latter, for example, won the admiration of Saul Bellow, the Noble prize-winner (Bellow 1961, 106-107).

Therefore, these characters managed to get into the history books and attain their absolute individualism by imposing a dominance-submission relationship on others. They treated themselves to Philip Wander's principle of the First Persona (the speaker and his intent) or the "I" in speech, and the Second Persona, that is, the "you" in discourse, both of whom enjoy open channels of contact and free possibilities of links and expressions. Worse, they referred to others in accordance with the notion of The Third Persona "the 'it' that is not present, i. e. the weak and vulnerable people that are objectified in a way that 'you' and 'I' are not" (Wander, 1984 209).

The theories of Houdini reinforced by Doctorow's varied use of the world-theater analogy allied with vulnerability help us understand *Ragtime*, which reviews the most significant and dramatic events in America's last hundred years or so. These are the waning of the WASP institution paralleled by the mounting flow of migration from Europe (political, psychological, and social vulnerability); the dawn of Freudian sexual awareness followed by the reformed American woman's awareness (psychoanalytic, cognitive and gender vulnerability); and the growth of the industrial assembly line and the manifestation of a thorough assessment of capitalism (economic and class vulnerability). These events have hatched vulnerability that modified the life of Doctorow's characters so overpoweringly that diverse types of personas arose. To understand the roles of these personas and their association with vulnerability, I will classify them into four main groups: first, people like Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan, who, owing to a strong flow of vulnerability, have established themselves in history books as absolute first personas, the playwrights submitting all people to their wishes. Second, people like Houdini, Coalhouse Walker, and Nesbit, who, confused by their vulnerability, try to boost their own roles and be great actors but finish up with very modest accomplishments. The third group of characters, represented by Father and Mother's Younger Brother, are a pure model of Wander's third persona. These types fall victims to their vulnerability. And the fourth group includes the Boy and his Mother, and Tateh and his daughter whose various senses of vulnerability are harnessed in such a manner that fundamentally bears witness to the ease with which Houdini's theory can work. In addition, I will study how acting and vulnerability interact with the structure and the narrative technique hoping to provide innovative insights into Doctorow's novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan, the arch-capitalist financiers and the exceptionally wealthy tycoons are classical examples of the first type of characters, i.e. first personas who have managed to enter history books on account of their strong sense of vulnerability. Henry Ford experiences ecstasy because he has “caused a machine to replicate itself endlessly” (112), and established “the theory of industrial manufacture” which maintains that “not only the parts of the finished product be interchangeable but that men who build the products be themselves interchangeable parts” (113). At the core of Ford’s invention are economic, cognitive and social types of vulnerability. He fears competitions and losses and is worried over his self-esteem and social rank. Thus, his invention sustains the idea of himself as the industry emperor, the absolute playwright, or first persona and people as mere individuals whose personal values and abilities are no longer cherished; they are deemed as permanently vulnerable people, neglected actors or ignored third personas, who play minor roles subject to Ford’s wish.

Similarly, J. P. Morgan is gripped with the principle of volatility manifested by his beliefs on reincarnation and repetition. During a lunch visit paid by Ford to Morgan in his stylish home on Madison Avenue, Morgan unveils his faith in “universal patterns of order” that keep repeating themselves over time giving “meaning to the activity of this planet” (123). He also proposes his discovery of “a sacred tribe of heroes, a colony from the gods,” i. e. first personas, “who are regularly born in every age to assist mankind” (118). Because he considers himself fit for a god, Morgan sees in Ford the resemblance to Seti I, the great Egyptian Pharaoh. Morgan’s notion centers on the idea of the double, and hence acting, a motif that suggests links with vulnerability and psychoanalytical theorizations, particularly the works of Otto Rank. Put differently, Morgan’s proposal is pertinent to Rank, who maintains that the narcissistic esteem of one’s own ego, the horror of the destruction of the self (a strong sense of vulnerability), leads to the construction of an image similar to the self in the double. In this way, one assures a second life (1971, 85) and guards oneself against a state of vulnerability.

In order to strengthen their immunity to vulnerability even further, they both agree to establish “the most secret and exclusive club in America, The Pyramid, of which they were the only members” (127). Importantly, Erving Goffman, who sees social interaction in our daily life from a “dramaturgical perspective,” uses a similar term, “secret society,” to label the relationships among members of any group of people working as a “team” (1959, 105). Likewise, the two money emperors are content they belong to a superior race, adhering to rules and norms preventing outsiders from joining or sharing its power. Believing their stage is the ideal type of acting endowed with superior moral sense, they mastermind a script, which they insist on and impose on others as they please, when they please. More important, they distance themselves from the stage where they are in contact with people, a source that causes vulnerability. Their elated positions as exalted first personas imply they impose roles tailored to their desires on neglected third personas while they have parts in a different script whose members are semi godly figures or first personas, immune to all forms of potential vulnerability.

However, Ford’s propositions that affirm the spirit of the duplicable and Morgan’s theory that confirms the cyclicity of history imperil their personal achievements are likely to bring about economic, social or psychological vulnerability. To forestall any danger, they establish themselves as extreme power who, to use Habermas’s account, make the state serve their interests. This is most obvious when the state creates the circumstances under which the activities of Morgan and Ford, representatives of the free markets, become valid and perpetual

in the eyes of the people within the social system (Habermas, 1976 21). Moreover, they make sure that their notion of volatility paradoxically gives “fixity” to the existing racial, social and economic differences, to use Holquist’s notion (Holquist, 1988 463). This means they plan to fix their status as permanent first personas with everyone else as a neglected third persona. Otherwise stated, they scheme to make the spiritual, economic and racial superiority immune to weaknesses or fragility and to maintain situations where people outside of their power circle remain ignored, vulnerable and marginal third personas.

Paradoxically, their extreme self-exaltation and focus on their individual personas create a state a condition connoting vulnerability. Each fears the other despite their launched agreements. Morgan inquires about Ford’s religious beliefs, but Ford responds with hesitance. Ford is fascinated by Morgan’s idea of reincarnation insofar as it reinforces his concept of his own genius and Morgan invites Ford to join him on a trip to Egypt, but the latter declines. What sharpens their discrepancies is the sense of irony with which the unidentified narrator describes their meeting. Morgan’s solemn efforts to comprehend historical mysteries completed by his journey to Egypt is contrasted with Ford’s superficial enquiry. In a book, which costs him twenty-five cents, Ford finds some illuminating ideas on reincarnation enough to set his “mind at rest” (127). In addition, Morgan’s passion and enthusiasm is juxtaposed with Ford’s assurance and self-discipline. While Morgan discloses his concept about reincarnation with bated breath, Ford is ironically preoccupied with his shoes.

Absurdly, it seems that Houdini’s theory meets the notions of Ford and Morgan but the truth is that both Ford and Morgan are two narcissistic first personas who underrate human beings and turn them into neglected third personas. Worse, their practices and philosophies, to employ G. Thomas Courser’s ideas, make the others vulnerable in two dimensions. First, they abuse and exploit people and second they misrepresent people by speaking “for” them and “about” them without their awareness (2004, x). As such, Houdini’s theory and the notions of Morgan and Ford challenge Wander’s “Third Persona,” which, grounded in ethical roots, emphasizes the emancipation of “human potential” (Wander 205) and the acknowledgement of the oppressed social voice. Unlike them, Wander does not come to glorify first personas or morally improve their behavior. Rather, his target is the neglected third personas, whether groups or individuals who have been historically deprived of human rights, or have been biased against due to their age, sexual preference, gender, citizenship, race, or religion (Lucaites, Condit, and Caudill, 1999 370). Similarly, Courser’s major concern is with the ethics of representing vulnerable subjects and fight situations “that render subjects vulnerable.” These situations “range from the age-related (extreme youth or age) and physiological (illnesses and impairments, physical or mental) to membership in socially or culturally disadvantaged minorities” (Couser 2004, xii). Judith Butler, too, inveighs against attempts of annulling human life and supports Emmanuel Levinas’ call for “a struggle to keep fear and anxiety from turning into murderous action” (Butler 2006, xviii.)

The list of the second group of characters includes Houdini, Coalhouse Walker, and Evelyn Nesbit, all of whom are placed in settings that render them vulnerable. They are all members in socially or ethnically underprivileged subgroups. Houdini’s vulnerability is caused by his membership in the middle class. That is why the rich always humiliate him despite his accomplishments; Coalhouse Walker’s vulnerability rises from his ethnic belonging and Evelyn Nesbit’s is caused by her poverty and gender. According to Houdini’s principles, they are supposed to be great actors since their achievements were recorded in historical documents. However, they are portrayed as weak, helpless people who are engaged in a fierce struggle to

enhance their own roles and be great actors but end up with achievements less than they desire. This suggests that Houdini's theory does not really imply that entering history books is the criterion for good acting. Rather, it is the ability to attain the rank of a first persona who employs a playwright's consciousness on multitudes of neglected or vulnerable people without being subject to their influence. In other words, it is the talent to shield oneself against vulnerability and at the same time to create conditions making others vulnerable, i. e. to impose roles on others. Houdini's theory of acting avoids showing the horrible situations of vulnerability or hidden ugly tracks leading to history. Houdini's failure, Walker's victimization, and Evelyn's defeat reveal the ugliness of its politics, and the abuse of technology represented by Morgan and Ford.

Houdini, as already indicated, has deep perceptions concerning life and people's conduct. His theatrical accomplishments qualify him to enter books of history but weirdly he does not consider himself a great actor. His socio-economic level turns him into a fragile person. In consequence, he uses his vulnerability as stepping stones to improve himself. Making use of the technological developments, which dawned in the 20th century, he invents newfangled and exhilarating supernatural escapes. He uses airplanes to experience flying and resorts to cinema to control time. Although he becomes an entrepreneur of his craft, he admits that he is never accepted by the upper class falling thus back into the realm of impeding vulnerability. He believes he remains "a vaudevillian" (25) or "a trickster, an illusionist a mere magician" (83) who cannot distinguish his real life from his tricks and escapist entertainments. The narrator says,

Despite such experience Houdini never developed what we think of as a political consciousness. He could not reason from his own hurt feelings. To the end he would be almost totally unaware of the design of his career, the great map of revolution laid out by his life. (29)

His problem, as the quotation illustrates, lies mainly in his failure to understand the great power of his art and in his lack of "political consciousness." Otherwise stated, Houdini, in the manner of Morgan and Ford, has all the characteristics that enable him to sway the lives of crowds, namely be a first persona with the role of a playwright who is immune to vulnerability by capacity of detaching himself from that script and therefore assure himself a solid place in history books. Yet, he remains a third persona, a weak and helpless person whose life is manipulated by others.

One such dominator is his dead mother. Motivated by his anxiety over her loss he tries to reach her. He redecorates his house in such a way that hints at her permanent presence and even dresses up like her when he attends ceremonies to communicate with the dead. Even though his performances become more sensational and breath taking, they, nonetheless, intensify his worries and sense of vulnerability because they transcend his physical capacity: "Every feat enacted Houdini's desire for his dead mother. He was buried and reborn, buried and reborn" (170). Although his feats depend on the force of volatility, he fails to make use of this principle in the same manner as Morgan, Ford or Tateh or see that life itself is a process of repetitions and replications. Rather, Houdini is condemned to ceaseless, volatile and sensational entertainments without being able to grasp the force of replication in life, to come to grasp with the present or to devise a script which he can impose on a wide audience and consequently enter history. When the book ends, Houdini stays almost a third persona, a trickster or a phony performer who makes a show of appearing to struggle in releasing his strait jacket to convince his audience that "he was legitimate" (267).

Likewise, Coalhouse Walker, the skilled pianist who lives in an era dominated by the philosophy of interchangeable parts and cinema and stands for the ragtime period, has little chance to enter the field of good acting, despite his triumphs. With the melodies of his ragtime piano compared to “bouquets,” it is believed that there are “no other possibilities for life than those delineated by the music” (132). So, Walker creates a new cultural form which is also connected with theater. Like a true playwright-actor, he changes his appearance and talk, adopts a courteous behavior, buys himself a luxury car and readies himself to marry Sarah, the mother of the brown child found in the garden by the WASP mother. However, Walker’s new appearance and behavior provoke the whites’ sense of vulnerability: “Walker didn’t act or talk like a colored man. He seemed to be able to transform the customary differences practiced by his race so that they reflected his own dignity rather than the recipient’s” (134). This description of the American society where there are two completely split societies, with the black community leading a fenced, officially directed circle of life is interesting. It is actually a classical example of Goffman’s concept of a “total institution” (1961, 11). Within this system the individual, like an actor, should follow the role assigned to him by the playwright, observe the limits set to his masquerades, keep the confines imposed on each co-member of the production and co-operate with the “performance team” (1959, 79-80). As long as an individual, Goffman affirms, acts in accord within the norms of the institution, he saves “the show,” otherwise public discrepancies are certain to happen and the individual is subject to different kinds of punishment (1959, 165). By abandoning his position as a neglected third persona, or oppressed voice reflected by transforming “the customary differences practiced by his race” which “reflected his own dignity rather than the recipient’s,” Walker has not only violated the norms existing among the American society but has awakened the sleeping vulnerability characterizing the American society. To be specific, he was expected to maintain his status as a weak, vulnerable actor. However, his achievements coupled with his appearance and luxurious car not only indicate his transcendence of vulnerability, i. e. his assigned role, but also tease others’ sense of vulnerability. He provokes many white people especially the firehouse men who challenge him and damage his Model T in punishment. After he fails to obtain social justice, Walker, like the Isaacsons in *The Book of Daniel*, refuses to compromise and is unnecessarily killed, as a result. However, the Isaacsons submit themselves to the authorities, the first personas and are legally executed, while Walker gives up the piano, which could have endowed him with power to be a master of duplication, or be a first persona-playwright.

Ironically enough, Walker is related to the system of interchangeability in more ways than one but like Houdini, he is blind to its essence. He sets up a fierce war to have his car repaired but he is unaware that the car epitomizes the notion of duplicity, mastered by Ford. Nor is he aware he has become a leader of a revolutionary group whose members choose to adopt the collective name “Coalhouse” and become representation of him. He also seizes the house of J.P. Morgan the man who proposes the theory of the cyclicity of history. Unfortunately, he chooses to play the role of violator, a person plagued by his ethnic vulnerability in a script designed by the system and fostered by Morgan: he becomes an outlaw who is eventually killed by a firing squad.

Likewise, Evelyn Nesbit is “an aspiring actress” (20) whose figure is actually a model for replication, but surprisingly she fails to benefit from the redemptive qualities of the cinema. She is introduced as “an artist’s model” (20), “an inspiration for the concept of the movie star,” “a sex goddess” (71) and a media celebrity. But like Houdini and Walker, Evelyn is unconscious that she has the power to control historical changes and conflicts, and thus be a

first-persona-playwright and enter history as a great actress. Instead, she accepts to play debased roles demonstrating the weak, vulnerable, neglected third persona in a variety of scripts. According to Emma Goldman, Evelyn is a poignant example of the working, weak, fragile and vulnerable classes who identify with their oppressors and oppress those beneath them. She is quoted as saying:

I am often asked the question How can the masses permit themselves to be exploited by the few. The answer is by being persuaded to identify with them. 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. (71)

Due to her poor consciousness, Evelyn endorses degraded, fragmented and conflicting roles delineated by both Harry Thaw, the famous criminal, and the successful architect Stanford White. She is to play the role of a weak, helpless woman. In Thaw's script, she is asked to sign an affidavit accusing the other of beating her. However, she rejects Thaw's offer and follows White's instructions. When Thaw reads the affidavit, he proposes marriage. And after the murder of White, she is condemned to daily rehearsal of the testimony she will give in her husband's trial for the sake of money, away from a major role in cinema. Even after she develops an interest in Tateh and his little girl, and attempts to help them escape the poverty of life as an immigrant on the Lower East Side, she remains stuck with her low style of acting. One day she goes off with a professional ragtime dancer and claims that they are "going to put together an act" (95). Still, her role challenges Houdini's theory: she enters history, has a strong influence on people's lives and is considered a great actress.

The third group of characters are represented by the figures of Father and Mother's Younger Brother, who are pure models of Wander's weak, fragile or vulnerable third persona. Both are treated as "the 'it' that is not present, that is objectified in a way that 'you' and 'I' are not" (209). Moreover, they are negated through discourse and history despite their great potentials and immense contributions. Father is the manufacturer of flags and fireworks, who gathers wealth easily by exploiting the national enthusiasm for patriotic displays. He is an amateur traveler and the president of the New York Explorers Club to which he makes a yearly payout. And Mother's Younger Brother is an innovator in the realm of explosives and weaponry. Paradoxically, both try to speak aloud, to defy their vulnerability and break through the walls of silence they are enclosed within through flags, fireworks and explosives.

To be more specific, the Father's resort from isolation and deterioration (a temporary state of vulnerability) to the status of the neglected audience (a perpetual position of vulnerability) is caused by a variety of factors. First, he feels weak against the drastic changes in history, social life, work and industry typifying his period. Second, although he is a member of a scholarly upper class East Coast family, his father has wasted their family money and as a result has led his lonely son into conditions of extreme social and cognitive vulnerability: solitude, extra caution, superfluous restraint, and constant misery. In addition, Father seems to have been forever misplaced through his efforts to adapt to his altering environment full of immigrants. Therefore, despite his high socio-economic position, emotionally he has led a life resembling that of an immigrant and so suffers psychological, social, economic and geographical vulnerability. Above all, his failure to accomplish a deep sense of self-knowledge nullifies his social and economic status, and he always finds himself among the rejected and neglected third audience.

Similarly, Mother's Younger Brother suffers from a wide range of vulnerability especially social. He is a gloomy chap who finds his identity in relation to other people. For that reason, he spends his life looking for a playwright who can assign him in an ideal role that can reflect his idealistic principles and creative skills. He initially joins his sister's family where he adopts the role of a silenced actor and works at the family factory. Falling short of his desires, Mother's Younger Brother falls in love with Evelyn Nesbit. Again, he joins her script satisfied with the same role of a silent, neglected actor. After she dumps him, he is left with no role to play or a script to link up with. He is not even a third persona. Resentful and disheartened, he energetically joins Coalhouse's team with a dubious role. His new role that enables him to fight injustice qualifies him to be a second persona parallel to all the members of the team. He ultimately feels as if his life has a sense of purpose. Nonetheless, as a Coalhouse among Coalhouses, he is deprived of an independent role and thus a persona. After the dispersal of the team, he travels all over the United States and subsequently to Mexico, where he is engaged in a number of radical battles and where he eventually passes away as an ignored third persona. His legacy of inventions, however, could have provided him with the ticket to enter history and be a great actor.

The list of the fourth group includes the Boy and his Mother and Tateh and his daughter, whose achievements largely testify to the workability of Houdini's theory.

Owing to his extreme youth, the Boy is placed amidst situations that render him vulnerable. By definition, he is physically, socially, mentally, culturally and psychologically vulnerable. Rather than succumb to these impairments, he turns these types of vulnerability to incentives that strengthen his character. Precocious, intelligent, observant, and curious, the Little Boy possesses an enormous curiosity about the world around him and consistently expresses engagement in it. Listening attentively to his grandfather's stories of metamorphosis out of *Ovid*, the Little Boy is assured that these stories were "of people who became animals or trees or statues. They were stories of transformation. Women turned into sunflowers, spiders, bats, birds; men turned into snakes, pigs, stones and even thin air" (97). They engage the Little Boy's imagination and confirm "to him that the forms of life were volatile and that everything in the world could as easily be something else" (97). In other words, these stories not only fight solidity, motionlessness and submission to permanent conditions of weakness or vulnerability but also encourage change and boost hope. They motivate man to reject a fixed condition of compliance and to endorse a strategy allowing a change from one persona to another. It is this feature that helps the Little Boy, despite his young age, to understand that life, like cinema, is volatile and duplicable. In fact, the terms have roots in cinema, which is itself a world of acting and theater. In an attempt to emphasize this connection, the narrator reminds us that:

He liked to go to the moving picture shows downtown at the New Rochelle Theater on Main Street. He knew the principles of photography but saw also that moving pictures depended on the capacity of humans, animals or objects to forfeit of themselves, residues of shadow and light which they left behind. (97-98)

The Boy, who is introduced as a moviegoer and one well-acquainted with the principles of photography, affirms that cinema relies on the actors' ability "to forfeit of themselves" without being subjects to worry, anxiety or vulnerability. To test the validity of this assumption, the Boy finds "proof in his own experience of the instability of both things and people" (90). And he takes to studying himself in the mirror:

In fact, he continued the practice not from vanity but because he discovered the mirror as a means of self-duplication. He would gaze at himself until there were two selves facing one another, neither of which could claim to be the real one. The sensation was of being disembodied. He was no longer anything exact as a person. He had the dizzying feeling of separating from himself endlessly. (98)

The Boy's disembodiment is comparable to Daniel's. Whereas the latter performs the role of Inertia Kid who stands for total disconnection, the former tries to test the endurance of the duplicated event. As a result, Daniel's performance is dangerous while the Boy's is similar to the feeling of an actor before the camera. It is the feeling of initial fragility and weakness that is conquered little by little. According to Walter Benjamin, "the feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's own image in a mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable" (1968, 230-1).

The Boy also notices that the process of duplication marks the genius of the 20th century. As one who has tried and perceived the notion of interchangeability, the Boy believes that when it is applied in real life, it helps people to live their life with ease and without any sense of vulnerability that causes the loss of one's personality or personal dignity. It is accomplished when people make a compromise, that is, when they "forfeit portions of themselves" (97), in the way actors do on the screen. When people treat their selves as subject to interchangeability and control the process of duplication, they are liable to see the essence of reality and, thus, achieve their individuality and overcome vulnerability or experience the sense of relaxation and pleasure coming from complying with the duplicability of life.

Does this mean that the Boy support the notions offered by Ford and Morgan? Not quite so. While those latter figures treat themselves as first personas and regard others as permanently vulnerable people or undervalued human beings, the Boy offers redemption and individuation. In other words, by interchangeability, the Boy perhaps hints at one's ability to play different roles and transition from one persona to another and by controlling it. He may also refer to one's ability to be a playwright, an actor or a member of the audience, who can play his role well, free from all chains i. e. forms of vulnerability.

When the Boy goes to watch a baseball game with his father, he gives a true demonstration of his meaning. Although he is a spectator, he is filled with a pleasure caused by accepting the principle of repetition and inter-changeability of things. Questioning the source of joy that the Boy has, the Father asks:

What it you like about the game is, he said. The boy did not remove his gaze from the diamond. The same things happens over and over, he said. The pitcher throws the ball he can hit it so as to fool the batter into thinking he can hit it. But sometimes the batter does hit it, the father said. Then the pitcher is the one who is fooled, the boy said. (195)

Obviously, life is compared to a baseball game and people to players. Just as baseball depends on repetitiveness so the events of life are circular. In order for baseball players to enjoy the game and for people to enjoy life, they have to recognize that nothing fundamental can be changed or destroyed. There is no need to submit oneself to vulnerability. All that players have to do is to change places and people likewise have to adapt themselves to life's volatility.

Indeed the Boy can translate his theoretical approach into practice. When he meets Tateh's daughter on the beach, both are engaged in games that embody the process of composition and re-composition thereby feeling happy and relaxed. Under the changing sunlight, they build models of themselves and destroy them, bury and uncover themselves in the sand over and over again. Conversely, Houdini, who cannot understand this process, is hurriedly dug out of the grave. Drained of color, he coughs blood, his nails bleed and soil falls from him.

One source that inspires the Boy's conduct and thoughts is his mother, who manages to turn her vulnerability from an obstruction into a constructive factor, put Houdini's theory to the test and become a true embodiment of the goals of Wander's theory. Owing to her gender and social affiliation, she, like Evelyn, is regarded as a member of a class who has been historically deprived of human rights, and prejudiced against. Unlike Evelyn, however, she challenges her category as a weak, vulnerable third persona and insists on emancipating her human potential and letting her voice be publically heard. Moreover, she progresses toward the position of a first persona, a playwright capable of giving roles to a variety of actors without silencing their voices or treating them as non-persons or casting them in the role of vulnerable people. Her progress is clearly marked in several major arenas: marital, emotional or psychological, professional, sexual and social. After her husband's return from the Arctic, her relationship with him goes through a dramatic alteration. She is no longer the feeble side of the marital life, the fragile, vulnerable receiver of spousal treatment. Although she occasionally has affection for her husband, she loves him as a friend or a family member rather than as a lover whom she passionately adores. More important, she does not accept her position as a fragile, vulnerable housewife. She grows to look upon her husband as dull and static especially following her discovery that he keeps the family business simple and boring. She loses the respect she has had for his professional life and, in consequence, she develops the business during his absence and after his death. In fact, the business under her control thrives drastically. Her disappointment with her husband, paves the ground for her following combination with Tateh. Mother becomes captivated with the motion picture and grows conscious of its profound impact on people's daily life.

Besides, her sexuality does not cause her confusion and hence does not render her vulnerable. She witnesses a major transformation in her swelling awareness of her own sexuality. Unlike the Father, who is morally opposed to obtaining joy from sex, Mother is elated in her growing sexual consciousness. Moreover, on the social and public levels, Mother manages to achieve a prodigious progress by sheltering a blend of various neglected, mistreated, vulnerable ethnic groups offering an image of the future structure of the American culture. She initially hosts and cares for Sarah and her baby, then fosters the baby after Sarah's death. After her husband's death, Mother, an average white American, is married to Tateh, an immigrant, and moves to California with their three children: Tateh's little girl, Mother's Little Boy, and Coalhouse and Sarah's baby. The group set an example of how vulnerability can be turned into a positive tool that can advance their cause.

Like Houdini, Tateh or Baron Ashkenazy, whose life represents Goldwyn Meyer, the film magnate, rises from humble origins characterized by fragility, anxiety, displacement, poverty, weakness or vulnerability, to riches and tremendous power. Tateh becomes a pioneer of movie industry, a master of "the duplicable event" the value of which is "everywhere perceived" (111), just as Houdini is a superstar in his art. Rather than follow a calculated scheme, which directs their conduct and illustrates their goals in life and ascent to glory away from negligence and weakness, both Houdini and Tateh point their lives along the lines of flow of American

energy. Besides, both Tateh and Houdini are fake artists. Houdini lacks political consciousness and cannot combine his art with life. He remains confused, fragmented and weak, so to speak. Tateh, on the other hand, abandons his radical socialism, unties his alliance with the union movement and begins “to conceive of his life as separate from the fate of class” (108-109), the neglected third personas. Moreover, like a true playwright actor, he transforms his appearance and conduct and creates a new existence as Baron Ashkenazy, free from vulnerability: “But his new existence thrilled him. His whole personality had turned outward and he had become a voluble and energetic man full of the future. He felt he deserved his happiness. He’d constructed it without help” (217). But what differentiates Tateh from Houdini is his ability to compromise in ways that Houdini cannot. Like Houdini, Tateh has also developed a theory of acting but while the former fails to fathom his own theory, the latter benefits from it. Describing the essence of film trade, which has transformed him from a helpless immigrant to a Hollywood mogul, he says:

In the movie films, we only look at what is there already. Life shines on the shadow screen, as from the darkness of one’s mind. It is a big business. People want to know what is happening to them. For a few movement pennies they sit and see their selves in movement running, racing in motorcars, fighting and forgive me, embracing one another. This is most important today, in this country, where everybody is so new. There is such a need to understand. (215)

Tateh seems to assert that life is a kind of film, but by the same token, the film shows life its true image. When people go to the movies, they are urged by the need to understand the meaning of their real life; by seeing their lives happening, reflected and eventually repeated before their very eyes, they manage to stop their worries, fight their weakness, and be reassured of their existence. This process of reproducing on the screen “what is there already” represents the missing link needed to complete Houdini’s constant worry over the audience’s approval. While Houdini can’t see that this principle of volatility is a formula that can help him to connect his art with life, Tateh, on the other hand, does not worry about the audiences’ sense of displeasure and resentment because he believes that the act of seeing oneself in movement racing, fighting and embracing on the screen has a calming effect. It freezes vulnerability. The audiences are not supposed to experience painful and annoying situations since the actors take people away from the present by living it for them.

Yet, it must be pointed out that the situations experienced by the audiences whether agonizing or amusing, are fake and unreal and hence is a kind of deception that should disqualify an actor rather than provide him with a ticket to enter history with the title of a good actor, as Houdini’s theory suggests. Once again, Houdini’s theory is challenged. Tateh is an absolute first persona mastering a script where every movie watcher is a compliant third persona subject to his unconditional wish and desire. Aware of this fact, he appears at the end of the novel as one who has found in cinema the means to end fragility, discrepancy, weakness and instead assert the connectedness of his family as well as of American society. Looking down out of the window at his dark-haired daughter, his tow-headed stepson and the Schwartz child, he has an idea for a film or even more:

A bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds, mischievous little urchins who would have funny adventures in their own neighborhood a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again. Actually not one movie but several were made of this vision. (269-270)

Interestingly, now life inspires cinema because both depend on an endless process of composition and re-composition.

What intensifies the acting imagery and its connection with vulnerability is perhaps Doctorow's employment of cinematic techniques and unique manipulation of the narrative point of view.

A casual reader may deem Doctorow's book fragmented, structurally and thematically weak, and full of conditions that render vulnerable characters hindered by their social belonging, gender affiliation, ethnic links, age, physiological structure and membership in culturally underprivileged factions. However, deeper reading of the novel will assure how Doctorow manages to transform this seemingly vulnerability concerning his style and narrative point of view into a point of strength.

In the opening pages of the novel, we encounter the medium of exposition or "summary" (Brooks and Warren, 1959 684). Much of the novel's action and background information about characters and events existing before the story time begins are summarized in short, simple, darting and fragmented sentences that are comparable to the placards held up at the beginning of each scene in Brecht's plays (Gross, 1980 79). As an example, consider the following excerpt:

Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's. Teddy Roosevelt was President. The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theaters, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived.... (3)

In presenting these brief vignettes, Doctorow depends largely upon the montage-sequence technique (Metz, 1974 128-9 and Whitaker, 1970, 128-33). A few shots of a "frequentative" montage in film, as Metz says, can sum up "three years of the hero's life" or in our case can illustrate and state what the summed period is like (Metz, 18). The effect of this expository approach on the readers is enormous. It distances them from the presented events and forces them to think and get the message of Doctorow, whose historical generalizations are meant to mock our conventional view of the past as an age of innocence and harmony. What helps him achieve his goal is his adoption of a cool, distanced and slightly ironic voice so distinct from Daniel's intense and involving one (Trenner, 39).

After some similar paragraphs, the story time begins and we get a narrative. The narrator tells us:

The Little Boy stood at the end of the porch and fixed his gaze on a blue bottle fly traversing the screen in a way that made it appear to be coming up the hill from North Avenue. The fly flew off. An automobile was coming up the hill from North Avenue. As it drew closer he saw it was a black 45 – horsepower Pope - Toledo Runabout. He ran along the porch and stood at the top of the steps. The car came past his house, made a loud noise and swerved into the telephone pole.... (7)

The sentences are fragile, crude, simple and zooming but they do not expose lengthened events. Each statement constitutes a film image. Although there are almost no sentence connectors, these film-image statements are continuous and have a successive temporal relationship. Thus

when brought together (by the medium of montage) they comprise a unit that resembles a scene in the theater (Metz, 129).

By contrast with *The Book of Daniel* in which Doctorow adopts a kind of single-line narrational collage, the medium of montage sequence gets to the core of the narrative line of *Ragtime*, which tells the stories of several families proceeding at the same time, though at differed speeds. The events in the life of a certain family are intermittently disjointed and fragmented to be infiltrated by another family's events and so on. The time relationship between two or more events in the lives of these families, like montage in films, is often simultaneous. Let us consider Walker's explosion of the firehouse. When the blast occurs, the WASP family have been sleeping poorly and Houdini is in the midst of a theatrical performance. And when Father, to cite another example, leaves the port on his way to the North Pole, Tateh enters it on board an immigrant vessel.

On certain occasions, Doctorow uses temporal cutting or duplication as in cinema to join two distant moments together. An example of this is Houdini's recollection of the image of a small boy looking at himself in the shiny brass headlamp of an automobile eight years before. At the moment of his remembrance, Houdini is upside down over Broadway and the year is 1914. To make sense of this scene, Dawson maintains, the reader is invited to apprehend these two separate moments spatially in a single vision (1983 268), an act which demands the reader's constant attention.

But the events in the life of a certain family get their meaning only when juxtapositionally amassed. When the different stories are gathered, we get the content of the book as a whole and get an idea of Doctorow's treatment of time and notion of history. Time is cyclical and history is repetitive. The three main families are dissolved but are eventually recomposed in the form of one family that becomes a model for duplication and volatility.

The narrative point of view may also look weak, shifting and breakable i. e. suffer from vulnerability. The narrator's acquaintance with the Little Boy's various moods might suggest the Little Boy is the narrator—an opinion that is undermined by the constant third person's narrative voice. The frequent use of "we" throughout the novel reinforces the assumption that the Boy and the girl narrate the story together since Tateh, Mameh, Father, and Mother suit the little girl and the Little Boy. Nonetheless, the information given about the different characters, and the descriptions of situations and events in American history rule out this possibility. It is very likely therefore that the narrator is a silent director who has an absolute access to a number of cameras placed at different places during various periods. Thus, this all-seeing director created and controlled by Doctorow is indeed a first persona who moves occasionally from one scene in the life of a certain character to another and back again to describing events and situations in American society throughout history.

The manipulation of this first persona-director-narrator allows Doctorow to control his material while he is simultaneously outside the story achieving good acting. Doctorow does not have to adopt a coherent or linear sequence in writing down the characters' stories, beliefs and talks, or remarking about the early twentieth century American culture. Nor does he have to be accurate when giving facts about the American social life or history. His narration mixed with irony is somehow experimental because he presents fictional situations in a seemingly objective fashion as he invents stories about historical characters

In conclusion, in *Ragtime* Doctorow points out how the movie film industry has invaded people's life and shaped their behavior and thoughts in such a way that has helped them cope with the growing sense of vulnerability caused by the machine age and scientific process. According to Tateh, life is a kind of film and contrariwise the film holds up a mirror to life and replicates its true image. Thus, when people go to the movies, they are given the chance to see their life happening and volatilized before their very eyes. This process allows people to understand the meaning of their roles in life and halt the various types of vulnerability. Furthermore, the Little Boy maintains that both life and films assert that the essence of people's reality is an endless process of composition and re-composition. Just as films are dependent on the volatility of successive style images to produce the illusion of reality and to entertain the audience so life is a repetitive cycle of events. In order for people to embrace life with joy, ease and relaxation, they must either be playwrights in control of the actors, like Morgan and Ford or Tateh and the Boy or be content with the volatile principle according to which life functions. Put differently, they should be average people capable of coping with all types of weaknesses and vulnerability by forfeiting portions of themselves as actors do on the screen. This explains why Houdini, Nesbit, Walker, Father and Mother Younger Brother have failed. They have not been able to accept the volatility of the world and treat their lives as subject to invention and reinvention or be playwrights or great actors. Thus, they remain weak and fragile and, in consequence, they are victimized by the system. This denotes that the theory of the volatility of the world doesn't give man the full freedom to choose his roles. Worse, there is no guarantee that an individual can maintain his personal integrity and achieve individuation free of all forms of helplessness, for even Tateh, the master of the art of duplicity loses his dignity and becomes fake.

Yet in *Ragtime* Doctorow does not assert the vanity of man's struggle, the futility of his existence or his impairment and captivity within vulnerability. On the contrary, Tateh, Mother and their three children free themselves from the position of vulnerable third personas and achieve a happy culmination by controlling the process of replication, which connects acting with life. Therefore, the acting metaphor endows Doctorow's characters with the necessary tool to get rid of weakness, defenselessness and anxiety, to enter the realm of responsibility and truth and to understand the volatile process of history that constitutes their reality.

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