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Politics and Literature

While any piece of fiction might be realistically said to reflect the political climate of its period of conception, the role of politics in the contemporary novel seems to produce a much more overtly demanding and poignantly doctrinal sense of structure and underlying motivation. In one sense, the contemporary tendency toward the “political novel” might be regarded as an altogether obvious attempt on behalf of the author to espouse his own notion of governmental right. However, this form of self-expression seems shallow and somewhat limited in its attempt to justify the fictionalization of world politics. In Doctorow and DeLillo, for instance, one cannot mistake the radical views expressed in certain works for carbon copies of the authors’ own political motivations. This concept, to me, represents an area of contemporary literature pregnant with potentialities. Therefore, I hope through comparison of Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* and DeLillo’s *Libra* to develop some sense of the underlying historical and political themes which affect the literature of contemporary America.

In *The Modern American Novel*, Malcolm Bradbury remarks that “understanding American history . . . was clearly an approach that fitted the sobered, un-utopian political mood of the Seventies” (271). Likewise, he stresses Tom Wolfe’s vision of the “late twentieth century American writer as a secretary to the times and as a journalist, going out into life to observe manners, experience, and social processes” (272). This take on the omnipresence of the writer and his observance of the fluxuations and progresses of American society, I find particu-

larly applicable to Doctorow and DeLillo. Both authors create for themselves a kind of narrative obscurity through which they might express the truth of experience and the journalistic reality of modern American existence.

In regard to Doctorow's fiction and its consequent relation to American politics and contemporary society, I find John G. Parks's article "The Politics of Polyphony: The Fiction of E. L. Doctorow" especially insightful. Parks writes: "Doctorow seeks a fiction that is both politically relevant and aesthetically complex and interesting. By blurring the distinctions between fact and fiction, [Doctorow] seeks to disclose and to challenge the hegemony of enshrined or institutionalized discursive practices" (Parks 454-455). This, in essence, seems a relevant point of departure when evaluating the cultural implication of *The Book of Daniel*. Through this process of confrontation which manifests itself in Daniel, the reader is forced to regard these shrines and institutions of American society and decide whether or not to worship before them. In this sense, I believe Parks provides a necessary perspective on Doctorow's work and allows for a kind of introductory roadmap to the highways of Daniel's American experience.

In *The Book of Daniel*, E.L. Doctorow engages the political history of mid-twentieth century America in an otherwise traditionally constructed piece of fiction. While the views and opinions of the narrator undoubtedly color the novel with the abstract language of a political tract, the characters and events of the novel follow a pattern of rather non-radical behavior. With the exception of certain psychotic and self-destructive episodes, the main character Daniel Isaacson (Lewin) and his sister Susan experience life in a kind of idealistic fishbowl. The naïve expressions of a failing political history which Susan clings to and which Daniel seems willing to dissent from and dismantle provide a thematic background for the purposes and motivations of Doctorow's novel. Furthermore, the use of historical fact in the case of the Rosenberg trial and execution allows Doctorow further room to maneuver within the world of his fictionalized characters.

Though he strays considerably far from the actual history of the Rosenberg (here Isaacson) trial, Doctorow's use of the event as an elongated and exaggerated intertext presents the reader with a rather dualistic concept of the novel as a whole. The fictionalization of his-

tory, in this sense, becomes not a cumbersome burden which the reader carries unwillingly through the text, but a kind of template upon which to build his perception of the work. The Rosenberg trial remains historically separate from the work, but acquires through Doctorow's fictionalized references a specific place and connotation within the novel. While the trial and execution represent the gradual development of the historical "plot" of the work, the process of characterization and the progress of an overlying political ideology seem to take up the majority of the narrative. This element of the novel, I believe, represents the central theme and motive in Doctorow's piece, and represents the area most open to discussion and critical evaluation.

Daniel's politics in the novel stem from a seemingly overwhelming sense of inundation and condemnation on behalf of his parents and in regard to the structure and feigned morality of American society in general. Doctorow's use of historical examples as well as the seemingly endless strings of conspiratorial connections which Daniel constructs around his parents' politics, their trial, and eventual execution plunges the reader headlong into the radicalism and self-glorification of the communist American Left. The concept of political and societal justification which Daniel carries with him through the novel seems to reach a culmination in the Disneyland scene near the end of the work. While Daniel relates the notion of justice and political right only indirectly in this scene, Doctorow creates for his character an object of criticism upon which to exorcise the demons of his idealism.

The Disneyland portion of the novel brings together the disparate strands of Daniel's political philosophy and directs them in a concentrated thrust toward a single representation of the "mythic rituals of the culture" (Doctorow 286). Through Daniel's observations of the park and his criticism of its "reduction" of external reality, Doctorow allows the political leanings of the novel to finally exert themselves upon the outside, non-historical world of contemporary American society (288). The "abbreviated shorthand culture" (289) which Daniel sees proliferated through the bastardization of history and literature within the "womb" (285) of Disneyland seems to harbor a great deal of the philosophical guilt for the death of the Isaacsons. So too, the purification procedure and exclusivity which the park seems to pro-

mote in regard to its patrons, becomes a reflection of the political purges and witch hunts which claimed the life of Daniel's parents.

For the sake of brevity, I find this portion of Doctorow's novel particularly relevant in confronting the political and historical realities which provided if not promoted the impetus for the novel's construction. The sense of otherness and seclusion with which the Isaacsons conducted their lives seems magnified in the metaphorical reflection of American society which Disneyland seems to represent. It is for this reason, I believe, the confrontation of Mindish assumes a place of central importance within the novel. Daniel, through his acceptance and embrace of Mindish, becomes the heir not only to the upright radicalism of his parents but also the broken politics of the "palsied" Left (293). It is in this moment that the novel becomes justified in its portrayal of Daniel and his sister. Doctorow's delicate balance of radical politics and realistic human endeavor become crystallized in the duality of realism and ideology which Daniel comes to represent.

Like Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, Don DeLillo's *Libra* provides a fictionalized account of a rather infamous historical personality. DeLillo employs the factual history of Lee Harvey Oswald's life as well as various conspiracy motifs in order to create a novel which seems to hint at non-fictional approach to the Kennedy assassination. Like Doctorow, DeLillo expands and exaggerates many of the historical truths which contribute to the background and foreshadowing of his novel. The notion of uncertainty, in this sense, seems to dictate much of the novel's progress toward the historical event. While DeLillo provides somewhat rational and logically constructed explanations for Oswald's involvement in the Kennedy assassination, his work must ultimately be regarded as fiction. Therefore, by examining the politics behind DeLillo's work, I believe one might produce a necessarily less convoluted sense of conclusion.

In "The Ideological Effects of Actuarial Practices," Jonathan Simon comments on DeLillo's political motivation and the cultural implications of the author's rather overt criticism of American society. "The long term result for society," writes Simon, "is a reduction in the possibility of political change" (798). Thus, DeLillo's fiction renders the reader helpless to the recognition of political apathy and a widespread numbing of American cultural diversity. Therefore,

DeLillo's audience must confront and justify DeLillo's societal connotations, and endeavor to embrace the kind of cynicism which DeLillo presents. To the reader, then, DeLillo's novel becomes a kind of exercise in preconceptions.

While Doctorow's novel seeks not to patronize the Left but to illustrate both its strengths and its hypocrisies, DeLillo's work seems rather traditionally weighted toward the cause of its main character. This I find particularly interesting. DeLillo's Oswald becomes not just the historically bumbling "patsy" but a roundly constructed, justifiable character. Though the Rosenbergs inhabit an undoubtedly notorious place within American political history, Oswald might occupy the central position therein. Therefore, DeLillo's decision to employ Oswald and his politics in constructing a contemporary novel seems both commendable and frightening. This dichotomous relationship between Oswald the historical assassin and Oswald the fictionalized entity provides DeLillo, I believe, with his most poignant sense of purpose within the piece. DeLillo constructs around the historical conception of Oswald a kind of shell of humanitarianism which elicits in the reader a great deal of empathetic response.

Doctorow creates the Isaacsons in the flower of their political activism and provides only veiled glances at their life as pre-revolutionaries. This, I believe, requires that the reader interact with their plight in a somewhat exclusively political, philosophically informed sense. DeLillo, however, gives the reader his fictionalized Oswald as a young boy, allowing his audience to witness and participate in the development of a radical, anti-American political outlook. This element of DeLillo's prose, though different in form, represents the primary thematic similarity with that of Doctorow. DeLillo requires that his reader confront the human realities of political indoctrination. He requires that his audience understand the dangers and repercussions of radicalism and its purported charm upon the politically "repressed." By painting Oswald as a poor, disenfranchised, subjugated youth, DeLillo succeeds in binding his reader's sympathies to this historically objectionable character.

While Doctorow's novel functions largely upon the reader's subtle understanding of the Rosenberg trial and execution, DeLillo's work requires a definitive historical context. Doctorow's piece seems to rely

more heavily on the setting and general paranoia of mid-twentieth century American politics to frame his characters' actions. The actual historical events, while they undoubtedly play a role in the development of his fiction, seem less important to Doctorow than do the human elements of political inundation. Though DeLillo too seems fascinated with the tangible, human aspect of his theme, the political history thereof assumes an equally important role in shaping the development of the novel. Oswald's experience with radical communism as a child, essentially, provides the catalyst for both the novel's unfolding and the reader's consequent understanding of and sympathetic relationship with the character of Oswald.

I provide this somewhat lengthy introduction to the textual Oswald simply because it prefaces my perception of both DeLillo's literary and political motivations within the novel. Without a comparative understanding of DeLillo's process of characterization, the development of political philosophy throughout the work becomes less poignantly relevant to the reader's emotional investment in the fictional Oswald. Perhaps my evaluation of Oswald relies too strongly upon the somewhat fragmentary account of his childhood misfortunes; perhaps I should view him in less of a psychoanalytical light. If so my criticism of DeLillo's work might possess a more rigidly defined sense of historicity. However, in the spirit of both Doctorow's and DeLillo's prose, I hope to illuminate the definably realistic core of human endeavor within the somewhat abstract shell of political motivation.

While Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* finds its political culmination toward the end of the novel, DeLillo's *Libra*, I believe, operates within the context of its beginning episodes. DeLillo creates Oswald in the image of a confused, alienated, highly intelligent but ultimately misunderstood young boy. He provides an intimate glimpse at the physically constrictive relationship between Oswald and his mother as well as the emotionally detached relationship between Oswald and the external world. Into this somewhat pitiable picture of American youth DeLillo introduces the concept of Leftist politics, particularly Soviet communism. Oswald's early fascination with the subject, coupled with his eventual dedication to its philosophy, provides DeLillo with the textual motivation for the development of Oswald the radical. This development, however, takes place only after the adolescent Oswald

encounters the figures of communist politics and accepts them as his guiding force in the world.

In part one of *Libra*, DeLillo affords the reader a glimpse into the highly personal, seemingly reclusive life of the young Oswald as he encounters communist political philosophy for the first time. Like the Disneyland scene in Doctorow's novel, the public library scene in DeLillo's work signals perhaps the most concise and poignantly relevant example of Oswald's development anywhere in the piece. Oswald's "contained excitement" at encountering the heroes of Soviet communism seems to preclude any doubts about the later motivations and conspiratorial leanings of his adult life (DeLillo 34). Likewise, his humanization or communization of figures like Stalin provides the reader a telling portrait of Oswald's need to connect with and personify the glorified figures of history. While Oswald delves into the texts of *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto*, DeLillo employs a kind of preternatural perspective which allows the reader to construct the psychological or philosophical ties between the budding theorist and the active radical.

While DeLillo's narrator provides a third-person account of Oswald's inundation, the abstract reflections on history and its connotative significance in the world of political radicalism provides a powerful source of foreshadowing in regard to Oswald's eventual actions. "History," he writes, "was a force to these men, a presence in the room. They felt it and waited" (34). This phrase, coupled with the young Oswald's attempts to "see the capitalists," to "see the masses," presents the reader with a startling realization of the humanity of DeLillo's character (35). Within this process of humanization, the reader is required to cast aside the presuppositions of history and view Oswald through the lens of realistic human empathy.

Like Daniel, Oswald becomes a kind of transitional figure, trapped between the abstractions of political theory and the realities of societal existence. In this sense, the library and Disneyland ultimately achieve the same thematic objective. Whether through direct reflection or indirect foreboding, both authors confront their reader with the certainties and eventualities of radical political affiliation. The truth and essence of these novels, therefore, might be surmised from the fate of both the historical personages of the Rosenbergs and Lee

Harvey Oswald. Perhaps my own sympathetic tendencies color my understanding of both works, but the authors seem intent on illustrating not the historical significance of the radical Left, but the tangible human tragedy which results from overzealous and naïve attachment to any political doctrine. Historical truth, in this sense, becomes not the overwhelming focus of these works, but provides a canvas upon which Doctorow and DeLillo enact the realistic humanity of the condemned.

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