

E. L. Doctorow's Idea of Justice

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I

To the question "Although outwardly all of your novels seem different, do you see any connecting themes running through them," E.L. Doctorow answered, "One of my working principles is not to know too clearly or too objectively what I'm doing. The actual moment of composition is anything but cerebral or planned. I do have certain preoccupations, but I wouldn't call them anything more than preoccupations. For instance, I find myself extremely sensitive to the idea of injustice. The idea that something is not fair really gives me energy in writing. The idea of the imposition of people on each other—whether in their personal relationships or in large historical terms—seems to intrigue me."¹⁾ John Gardner also said, "E.L. Doctorow, in *Ragtime*, urges social justice in a more or less moving and persuasive way, but he is not concerned with true morality."²⁾ These two statements suggest that Doctorow's deep interest in novel writing is in the problem of justice in society.

Gardner's statement suggests that *Ragtime* (1975), in its main theme, deals with social justice which has no deep relation to morality. The purpose of this paper is not to refute his statement, but to attempt to clarify the fact that the idea of social justice implied in the novel is in truth equivalent to the following definition of John Gardner on morality: "Morality means nothing more than doing what is unselfish, helpful, kind, and noble-hearted, and doing it with at least a reasonable expectation that in the long run as well as the short we won't be sorry for what we've done, whether or not it was against some petty human law. Moral action is action which affirms life."³⁾ Just as Gardner's awareness that morality is defined by "aesthetic wholeness"⁴⁾ supports and improves life, so Doctorow's conception of justice as "the uniting function in the individual man and in

1) Hilary Mills, "Creators on Creating: E.L. Doctorow" [Interview], *Saturday Review*, October 1980, p. 44.

2) John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 78.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 23.

4) John Gardner, *The Resurrection* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), p. 202.

the social group"⁵⁾ vitalizes and heightens the human spirit.

Even though he contends that he is more concerned with justice than with any other matter, Doctorow does not define it in his novels. Nevertheless, the idea of justice implied in *Ragtime* is "that the principles of justice for the basic structure of society are the object of the original agreement[...] These principles are to regulate all further agreements; they specify the kinds of social cooperation that can be entered into and the forms of government that can be established."⁶⁾ Doctorow's conception of justice is the key to making people achieve communion among themselves. In order to understand more clearly the idea of justice on which he throws new light, it is necessary to examine the relationship between society and justice. John Rawls delineates this relationship in the following terms:

a society is a more or less self-sufficient association of persons who in their relations to one another recognize certain rules of conduct as binding and who for the most part act in accordance with them. Suppose further that these rules specify a system of cooperation designed to advance the good of those taking part in it. Then, although a society is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage, it is typically marked by a conflict as well as by an identity of interests. There is an identity of interests since social cooperation makes possible a better life for all than any would have if each were to live solely by his own efforts. There is a conflict of interests since persons are not indifferent as to how the greater benefits produced by their collaboration are distributed, for in order to pursue their ends they each prefer a larger to a lesser share. A set of principles is required for choosing among the various social arrangements which determine this division of advantages and for underwriting an agreement on the proper distributive shares. These principles are the principles of social Justice: they provide a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society and they define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation.

Now let us say that a society is well-ordered when it is not only designed to advance the good of its members but when it is also effectively regulated by a public conception of justice. That is, it is a society in which (1) everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice, and (2) the basic social institutions generally satisfy and are generally known to satisfy these principles. In this case while men may put forth excessive demands on one another, they nevertheless acknowledge a common point of view from which their claims may be adjudicated. If men's inclination to self-interest makes their vigilance against one another necessary, their public sense of justice makes their secure association together possible. *Among individuals with disparate aims and purposes a shared conception of justice establishes the bonds of civic friendship; the general desire for justice limits the pursuit of other ends. One may think*

5) Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 55.

6) John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 11.

*of a public conception of justice as constituting the fundamental charter of a well-ordered human association.*⁷⁾ (Italics mine)

In short, justice “may not be everything, but it is something. It is a virtue, an important virtue, one of the cardinal virtues; for it is the bond of peace, which enables the individual to identify with society, and brethren to dwell together in unity.”⁸⁾

Justice is “the uniting form of the individual and the social body.”⁹⁾ Over hundreds of years, many attempts to define the best concept of justice from philosophical, legal, and economic points of view have been tried, but to no avail. These trials have not been made from an ontological point of view, but from “different notions of society against the background of opposing views of the natural necessities and opportunities of human life.”¹⁰⁾ The various partial conceptions of justice have at times resulted in alienating man from his society. These conceptions have also divided human beings, and made them become not cooperators but antagonists in many human activities. Therefore, it is time to examine the idea of justice from an ontological standpoint: “Justice is not a social category far removed from ontological inquiries, but it is a category without which no ontology is possible.”¹¹⁾ J. R. Lucas says:

Justice is the bond of society, and without it, according to Hume, no association of human individuals could subsist. Most thinkers, however, have sought the key to the concept of justice elsewhere, and have construed it in terms of rules or utility or equality; or, more recently, have been concerned simply to observe and record the different usages of the word ‘just’, without attempting to articulate an account of why the same word should be used in so many different contexts. Justice has in consequence been much misunderstood, and in practice much neglected. This is why our society has become increasingly divided, and why its members have become more and more alienated from its authority. Authority now is seen as something external, a force to be reckoned with, not a guidance to be reasoned with and accepted. It is a pity. We have been pursuing the wrong political goals—productivity, efficiency, equality—and have neglected the cardinal political virtue of justice, which, together with liberty, is the condition under which I and every man can identify with society, feel at one with it, and accept its rulings as my own. It is therefore justice that we must seek.¹²⁾

7) *Ibid.*, pp. 4~5.

8) J. R. Lucas, *On Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 263.

9) Tillich, p. 22.

10) Rawls, p. 9.

11) Tillich, p. 55.

12) Lucas, p. 1.

II

Among his central concerns in *Ragtime*, Doctorow examines the idea of justice from this new philosophical point of view, and suggests that it is "the uniting function in the individual man and in the social group." His suggestion is the best way to escape from the distortion and destruction of life which originate from the absence of justice. The setting of his novel is American society in the early years of the twentieth century. That society is not regulated by principle but by individuality: "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 theatres, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains, steamers, and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the people lived."¹³⁾ This statement shows that on the surface the Americans are well united. But by the images suggesting that they are not self-reliant, Doctorow indicates that they do not have "the object of the original agreement" and are divided in their interest. They make severe conflicts between themselves which end in antagonism and destruction. However, two main characters, Tatch and Mother, identifying with one another on the basis of a common interest in justice which "like compassion and mercy, is an essentially other-regarding virtue,"¹⁴⁾ come to lead an ecstatic new life together: "They each relished the traits of character in the other. They were married in a civil ceremony in a judge's chambers in New York City. They felt blessed. Their union was joyful though without issue."¹⁵⁾ In short, it is Doctorow's idea that justice is achieved through the effort to identify with one another in the spirit of respecting and loving others.

The title and the narrator of the novel are both essential in representing the movement from division to unity. In ragtime music, as "the pianist opposes syncopations in his right hand against a precise and regularly accented bass, the delayed and misplaced accents and their conjunction with regular meters set up the complex polyrhythms of ragtime. These subtle conflicting rhythms with their own free 'inner voices' provide both the structural and metaphorical basis for E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime*."¹⁶⁾ As the novel keeps a

13) E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), pp. 3~4.

14) Lucas, p. 3.

15) Doctorow, p. 368.

syncopating ragtime beat, the left hand plays a tune of division, antagonism, sorrow, and despair. Meanwhile, the right hand produces a tone of unity, peace, joy, and hope. These harmonies project the image of union toward which Tateh and Mother move strenuously, even though it takes a lot of doing and a long time: "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. And by that time the era of Ragtime had run out, with the heavy breath of the machine, as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano."¹⁷⁾

The narrator of the novel is the Little Boy of the WASP family, who is expected to grow up to be a man identifying with society. He plays two important roles which elucidate the writer's idea of justice: one is that he opens the possibility of escaping from the false and immobile consciousness of division, and the other is that he foreshadows the union of Tateh and Mother. In spite of the fact that "the circumstances of his family's life operated against his need to see things and to go places," he grows up to live an entirely secret intellectual life, and to have knowledge and wisdom and direction. He is deeply interested in the works and career of Harry Houdini, the escape artist, whose "dedication to the perfection of what he did, reflected an American ideal." Houdini's exploits are as follows:

He went all over the world accepting all kinds of bondage and escaping. He was roped to a chair. He escaped. He was chained to a ladder. He escaped. He was handcuffed, his legs were put in irons, he was tied up in a strait jacket and put in a locked cabinet. He escaped. He escaped from bank vaults[...] he escaped from zinc-lined Knabe piano case[...] He escaped from a Siberian exile van. From a Chinese torture crucifix. From a Hamburg penitentiary. From an English prison ship. From a Boston jail. He was chained to automobile tires[...] and he escaped.¹⁸⁾

The boy also listens to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and conceives "that the forms of life were volatile and that everything in the world could as easily be something else." Therefore, as he joins the neighborhood children for a weekend of skating, his eyes see "only the tracks made by the skaters, traces quickly erased of moments past, journeys taken."

16) Josie P. Campbell, "Coalhouse Walker and the Model T Ford: Legerdemain in *Ragtime*," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 13: no. 2 (1979), p. 302.

17) Doctorow, p. 369.

18) *Ibid.*, pp. 7~8.

At the beach the narrator meets the little girl of an immigrant Jewish family. Every day they go together to the deserted stretches of beach where the dunes and grasses block the hotel from their sight. They swim together in the sea. They stand together looking into the lights of the mechanical fortune-teller's glass case and putting in a penny. The ticket, which says "I am the great He-She," comes out, and the entire apparatus lurches to a halt in mid-smile. Their desire for each other's company is intense and unyielding: "What bound them to each other was a fulfilled recognition which they lived and thought within so that their apprehension of each other could not be so distinct and separated as to include admiration for the other's fairness."¹⁹⁾ One day, as they play, a storm rises suddenly. The boy's mother and the girl's father look for the children together running down to the beach and calling and stumbling through the wet sand. In a moment when Mother and Tatch see the children in a heavy rain, the four are together hugging. Then they walk back "along the beach in this rain and light, happy, huddled all together, soaking wet."

As Sigmund Freud mentions after seeing "in our careless commingling of great wealth and great poverty the chaos of an entropic European civilization," American society at the turn of the century is "a mistake, a gigantic mistake." It does not have a shared conception of justice which "establishes the bonds of civic friendship." As a result, it is divided into two parts—wealth and poverty—which collide severely with each other. People of wealth stand in sharp contrast to those of poverty. The rich are extremely self-centered, and seek after self-satisfaction which comes from conspicuous consumption and ends in self-destruction, as represented in the following passage:

They were used to drinking great quantities of beer. They customarily devoured loaves of bread and ate prodigiously the sausage meats of poured offal that lay on the lunch counters of the saloons. The august Pierpont Morgan would routinely consume seven- and eight-course dinners. He ate breakfasts of steaks and chops, eggs, pancakes, broiled fish, rolls and butter, fresh fruit and cream. The consumption of food was a sacrament of success. A man who carried a great stomach before him was thought to be in his prime. Women went into hospitals to die of burst bladders, collapsed lungs, overtaxed hearts and meningitis of the spine. There was a heavy traffic to the spas and sulphur springs, where the purgative was valued as an inducement to the appetite.²⁰⁾

On the other hand, the poor led a very hard life and died of it: "In the coal fields a

19) *Ibid.*, p. 304.

20) *Ibid.*, pp. 93~94.

miner made a dollar sixty a day if he could dig three tons[...]. On the tobacco farms Negroes stripped tobacco leaves thirteen hours a day and earned six cents an hour, man, woman or child[...]. One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were burned alive. One hundred children were mutilated. There seemed to be quotas for these things. There seemed to be quotas for death by starvation.²¹⁾ They suffer from injustice.

In a society which has no public conception of justice and does not constitute "the fundamental charter of a well-ordered human association," most people do not dream of attaining justice but of being rich. They are too self-centered to keep the power of seeing and defining reality. A few cross an almost unbridgeable gap between experience and behavior. For example, Emma Goldman contends that she has been a real lover of freedom: "I have been free. I have fought all my life to be free. And I have never taken a man to bed without loving him, without taking him in love as a free human being, his equal, giving and taking in equal portions in love and freedom."²²⁾ Nevertheless, she has been an anarchist who mocks justice. No man thinks that "his condition is free if it is not at the same time just, nor just unless it is free. Freedom, precisely, cannot even be imagined without the power of saying clearly what is just and what is unjust."²³⁾

Ragtime is a story of three families reacting to a society which has no public conception of justice. They are the WASP family of Grandfather-Father-Mother-her Younger Brother-Son (the narrator of the novel), the immigrant Jewish family of Tateh-Mameh-Daughter, and the black family of Coalhouse Walker-Sarah-Baby.

One day Mother listens to a baby's cry which comes from the garden and discovers a newborn black infant buried in her flowerbed. Within an hour after the baby is exhumed, a black woman named Sarah is found in the cellar of a home on the next block. Announcing that she will take responsibility, Mother takes both the baby and Sarah into her home. One Sunday afternoon after the event takes place, a new Model T Ford stops at Mother's house. Its owner is Coalhouse Walker, Jr., a black ragtime pianist. "His car shone. The bright-work gleamed. There was a glass windshield and a custom pantasote top." Coalhouse, father of the baby and the man who abandoned Sarah, has come to pay delayed court to her. To Mother's regret, Sarah stubbornly refuses to meet him, but Coalhouse returns Sunday after Sunday until she finally relents and agrees to marry him.

21) *Ibid.*, pp. 45~46.

22) *Ibid.*, pp. 63~64.

23) Albert Camus, *The Essential Writings*, ed. Robert E. Meagher (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 206.

Coalhouse has "something disturbingly resolute and self-important" in his behavior. He does not "act or talk like a colored man," and seems "to be able to transform the customary deferences practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's." An incident in Father's parlor is enough to reveal his character:

And so it happened on the next Sunday that the Negro took tea. Father noted that he suffered no embarrassment by being in the parlor with a cup and saucer in his hand. On the contrary, he acted as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The surroundings did not awe him nor was his manner deferential. He was courteous and correct. He told them about himself. He was a professional pianist and was now more or less permanently located in New York, having secured a job with the Jim Europe Clef Club Orchestra, a well-known ensemble that gave regular concerts at the Manhattan Casino.²⁴⁾

At Mother's tea, Coalhouse plays two rags by the great Scott Joplin on a piano that is out of tune. He begins "to play. Ill-tuned or not, the Aeolian had never made such sounds. Small clear chords hung in the air like flowers. The melodies were like bouquets. There seemed to be no other possibilities for life than those delineated by the music." The narrator perceives the music "as light touching various places in space, accumulating in intricate patterns until the entire room was made to glow with its own being."²⁵⁾

One Sunday Coalhouse says goodbye to his fiancée and drives off to New York in his Ford. As he is about to pass the Emerald Isle Engine, a volunteer fire company whose chief is Willie Conklin, he is stopped by its members. He is aware that his dress and his ownership of the Ford are "a provocation to many white people. He had created himself in the teeth of such feelings." The fire company members block the road with a team of horses and a big steam pumper, and tell Coalhouse that he is on a private toll road. They advise him that he cannot proceed without payment of twenty-five dollars or presentation of a pass indicating that he is a resident of the city. He appeals to the Chief. "We need the money for a firetruck," Coalhouse is informed. "So we can drive to fires just like you drive to whorehouses." Apparently it does not occur to Coalhouse "to ingratiate himself in the fashion of his race."

The black pianist is a victim of racism. The person he wishes to be is overwhelmed and engulfed by his society, which does not allow him to become a self-reliant person, but forces him to remain a yes-sayer. It does not recognize or respect his effort at self

24) Doctorow, p. 182.

25) *Ibid.*, p. 183.

improvement, preferring to ridicule him until he revolts against this ignorance.

Coalhouse immediately calls two black boys to watch his car. Then he walks to the business district and finds a policeman to whom he makes a complaint. The officer, who should protect an individual from being a victim of any other person or institution and promote "the uniting function in the individual man and in the social group," refuses to assist him, saying that Conklin's boys "don't mean no harm." He does nothing but add, "I know them all. Go on back now, they're probably tired of the sport." Returning to his automobile, the black pianist finds it spattered with mud, and sees a six-inch tear in the custom pantasota top. A mound of fresh human excrement is deposited in the back seat. When he asserts that he wants his car cleaned and the damage paid for and an apology, he is arrested.

He sets out to seek justice before the law in his own "dramatic, exalted self-awareness." He consults three different attorneys recommended by Father, but none will represent him because he is black. He hopes for assistance from a black attorney in Harlem. However, the attorney knows well that Willie Conklin is a stepbrother of the City Court Judge and that to involve himself in a lawsuit against the Fire Chief and men of the Emerald Isle Engine Company would be disadvantageous to his career. As a result, he declines to take this case. He is a slave of self-interest, not an attorney who is willing to make an effort to maintain law and order. Therefore, Coalhouse makes a preliminary attempt to act as his own council, but to no avail. Yet later it is widely reported that he "had never exhausted the peaceful and legal means of redress before taking the law into his own hands."

The black pianist is too self-righteous to see through himself and become a man of sympathy. Now he is obsessed with the damage of his car, and is not at all willing to understand, protect, and satisfy his fiancée. He one-sidedly tells her that he cannot marry until he is "satisfied by the return of the Model T in exactly the same condition as when the firehorses had been driven across his path." Sarah is "the kind of moral being who understood nothing but goodness. She had no guile and could act only in total and helpless response to what she felt." Accepting Coalhouse's proposal, she escapes from the melancholy which has taken the will out of her muscles since she was abandoned. She feels blissful. Her happiness and hope "flowed in the milk of her breasts and her baby grew quickly." However, in a hostile "white" world she fears that her marriage will never happen because of her lover's obstinacy that his car should be returned "in

just the condition it was when his way was blocked." Conceiving the idea of petitioning the United States on her husband's behalf, she makes an attempt to get help from Jim Sherman, a vice-presidential nominee, who is in New York for a campaign speech. But she is fatally injured by a secret serviceman who mistakes her black hand as a gun, and dies. It is a big irony that the black pianist, who wishes to be independent and free, has been indifferent to his fiancée's desire and made her a victim.

Coalhouse pays for the funeral with the money he has saved for his wedding. Once Sarah is killed, his rage makes him irrational. He is eager to end his life, and militarizes his mourning: "His grief for Sarah and the life they might have had was hardened into a ceremony of vengeance in the manner of the ancient warrior." He gathers a band of followers, and embarks on a campaign of terror and revenge. They attack two firehouses with shotguns and rifles, destroying horses, demolishing buildings, and killing eight people, Willie Conklin, however, not among them, and terrorizing an entire city. Learning of his failure to gain complete revenge, the black pianist declares himself President of the Provisional American Government and publishes his manifesto with his demands: "One, that the white excrescence known as Willie Conklin be turned over to my justice. Two, that the Model T Ford with its custom pantasota top be returned in its original condition. Until these demands are satisfied, let the rules of war prevail."²⁶⁾

Later Coalhouse and his acolytes attempt to capture Pierpont Morgan as a hostage in his own home, for he has been "portrayed in cartoons and caricatures, with his cigar and his top hat, as the incarnation of power" of the white world. The black pianist's gang mistake Morgan's Library as his house, but Coalhouse concludes: "We wanted the man and so we have him since we have his property." The black pianist and his followers barricade themselves inside the Library and command the authorities to negotiate with them or threaten to bomb the Library from within. Coalhouse demands that Conklin restore his automobile in the street in full sight of everyone and bring it to the front of the Library.

His Model T is restored by Fire Chief Conklin under the direction of two mechanics. Confident that his followers will safely abscond with his restored car, Coalhouse walks down the stairs of the Library with his arms raised. The black pianist, who is "said by the police to have made a dash for freedom," is gunned down by a police firing squad.

26) *Ibid.*, p. 255.

His body jerks "about the street in a sequence of attitudes as if it were trying to mop up its own blood." He is a victim of his society which has no "object of the original agreement," and of his own identity that is too self-centered to see himself in others and love them. Worse, he is a victim who has brought ruin on both himself and others.

Mother's Younger Brother thinks that Father and Mother are "complacent, ordinary and inconsiderate." He has never confided in them or shared his feelings with them. He never makes friends. He is a lonely and withdrawn young man who does not find himself. He is in love with Evelyn Nesbit, "the first sex goddess in American history." He feels that there is "nothing in life worth having, worth wanting, but the embrace of her thin arms." However, the more desperate to have her he is, the more hostile to him she is. Later, as he sees in the way Coalhouse "acted upon his intentions more manhood than he himself possessed," he is totally integrated in to his gang. He is a member of the gang, and awakes every day into "a state of solemn joy." Believing that the black pianist is a victim of circumstances, he criticizes Father: "You are a complacent man with no thought of history. You pay your employees poorly and are insensitive to their needs." "The fact that you think of yourself as a gentleman in all your dealings," he continues, "is the simple self-delusion of all those who oppress humanity."²⁷ He dies young as an outlaw in Mexico.

Father is an owner of a manufacturing firm of "flags and buntings and other accouterments of patriotism, including fireworks." His past plays a crucial role in generating a totally self-centered character:

Father had been born and raised in White Plains, New York. He was an only child. He remembered moments of light and warmth in the days of summer at Saratoga Springs. There were gardens there with paths of washed gravel. He would stroll with his mama down the large painted porches of the great hotels. On the same day every year they went home. She was a frail woman who died when he was fourteen. Father attended Groton and then Harvard. He read German philosophy. In the winter of his sophomore year his studies ended. His father had made a fortune in the Civil War and had since used his time losing it in unwise speculations. It was now entirely gone. The old man was the sort who thrived on adversity. His confidence rose with every loss. In bankruptcy he was beaming and triumphant. He died suddenly, all his expectations intact. His flamboyance had produced in his lonely son a personality that was cautious, sober, industrious and chronically unhappy. Coming into his majority, the orphan took the few dollars left to him and invested it in a small fireworks business owned by an Italian. Eventually he took it over, expanded its sales, bought out a flag manufacturing firm

27) *Ibid.*, pp. 342-3.

and became quite comfortable. He had also found the time to secure an army commission in the Philippine campaigns. He was proud of his life but never forgot that before going into business he had been to Harvard. He had heard William James lecture on the principles of Modern Psychology. Exploration became his passion: he wanted to avoid what the great Dr. James had called the habit of inferiority to the full self.²⁸⁾

Father is the respected gentleman and businessman. He is Republican, self-confident, and complacent. However, toward his wife he feels "drastically slipped in her estimation, an explorer in body only, the spirit trapped in his own father's prejudices." As he does not try to understand and satisfy others, he is uneasy and unhappy in spite of the prosperity of his business. The more unhappy he feels in his human relation, the more avidly he throws himself into his work. Eventually he dies as a passenger on the *Lusitania*, torpedoed by a German U-boat off the coast of Ireland in 1915. The narrator eulogizes him: "Poor Father, I see his final exploration. He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb. His toe scuffs a soft storm of sand, he kneels and his arms spread in pantomimic celebration, the immigrant, as in every moment of his life, arriving eternally on the shore of his Self."²⁹⁾

On the other hand, Mother respects every man and is affectionate to him. She submits willingly to self-sacrifice for her mind. As Father is not at all enamored with Coalhouse's visits and questions the propriety of her decision to serve the black pianist tea in the parlor, she counters that he is "well-spoken and conducts himself as a gentleman." She also reminds Father that "when Mr. Roosevelt was in the White House he gave dinner to Booker T. Washington." Even though she knows well that she becomes an object of the hatred of her friends and other whites, she tries to keep Coalhouse and Sarah's baby.

Mother always wants to create a new future together with her husband. She considers the life which they have led as a kind of preparation which enables them to "lift themselves from their respectable existence and discover a life of genius." However, her dream is never realized. No longer expecting to be beautiful and touched with grace till the end of her days, she is coming to "the realization that whereas once, in his courtship, Father might have embodied the infinite possibilities of loving, he had aged and gone dull, made stupid, perhaps, by his travels and his work, so that more and more he only demonstrated his limits, that he had reached them, and that he would never move beyond them."³⁰⁾ One year after her husband dies, she remarries Tatch, "a flamboyant, excited

28) *Ibid.*, pp. 247-8.

29) *Ibid.*, p. 368.

person whose eyes darted here and there like a child's, afraid of what they might miss." She is sympathetic and fascinated with his ebullient self which is excited and alert to every moment in life.

Tateh, a Jewish immigrant and silhouette artist, rises from the poverty and filth of the slums into the heights of wealth and success by means of his talent and philosophy. He discovers the "proper alignment" of himself and his world. At first when he comes to the United States, he cannot speak English well. He makes his living as a peddler, a blue collar worker, or a silhouette artist. With his scissors he can suggest not only outlines but textures and moods. Nevertheless, he cannot support his family. Mameh and his daughter sew knee pants from the time they get up to the time they go to bed, and get a very small amount of money. His wife offers herself to prevent her husband and daughter from going hungry. Knowing this fact, he "has now driven her from his home and mourns her as we mourn the dead." He is outraged by a society which ignores or denies fair equality of opportunity and distributive justice. He cannot do for his daughter and others anything that is pleasant and beneficial to them, as he wishes. His main interest is not in himself but in others and society.

One day Tateh makes a hundred and twenty silhouettes on pages not bigger than his hand. He binds them with string. His daughter holds the little book and governs the pages with her thumb and watches herself skating away and skating back, gliding into a figure eight, returning, pirouetting and making a lovely bow to her audience. At last he succeeds in selling the book of the skater to the Franklin Novelty Company for twenty-five dollars, and further signs a letter of agreement making it four more books at twenty-five dollars each. Now he stops his poor life as a laborer and begins his affluent life as an artist.

Soon, because of his deep interest in "the object of the original agreement" which serves every man's need to be his own self, Tateh transmutes himself into a successful man called the Baron Ashkenazy who is in the moving-picture business. His new existence excites and thrills him. Now he is "a voluble and energetic man full of the future." "In the movie films," he states, "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 pennies they sit and see their selves in movement, running, racing in motor cars, fighting and forgive me, embracing one another.

30) *Ibid.*, p. 290.

This is most important today, in this country, where everybody is so new. There is such a need to understand."³¹⁾

After learning that his wife has died, Tateh remarries Mother. In order to start a new life and leave the nightmare of division behind, his family moves to California. There he devotes himself to making films—which sound remarkably like the “Our Gang” series—about three kids who achieve union among themselves: his own girl, Mother’s boy, and Coalhouse/Sarah’s baby. The union is made realizable by the new consciousness which tries to grasp the following human spirit: “My pain is your pain. My life is your life,” as Warren Penfield tells Joe in *Loon Lake*.³²⁾ This new consciousness is E.L. Doctorow’s idea of justice. It is in fact equivalent to Giorgio Del Vecchio’s statement about justice:

For our task this principle above all must be firmly held: that there is a specific form of consciousness which we may call *trans-subjective* consciousness, through which the subject posits himself as an object in relation to others and recognizes himself as an element in a net of interrelations between selves; that there is, in short, *an objective consciousness of self, whereby the subjective self becomes co-ordinated with other selves.*

This mode of consciousness corresponds to our deepest nature, to a true and necessary *vocation* of our being; it has not only a theoretical value as a form of the intellect but also a practical value, since it expresses an absolute requirement which lies at the base of one of the essential aspects of Ethics. Psychologically, it proclaims itself in us not only as an idea but as an imperious and irrepressible sentiment, but the idea and the sentiment both have the same root and they may with equal propriety be termed the idea and the sentiment “of justice,” for justice is the true and proper name of that fundamental mode of consciousness which we have been describing.³³⁾

In addition, Doctorow’s idea of justice—“the uniting function in the individual man and in the social group”—is also coincident with Bernard Malamud’s statement that the “basis of morality is recognizing one another’s needs and co-operating.”³⁴⁾ The idea affirms life as John Gardner’s definition of morality does.

III

Ragtime deals with the theme: “how injustice breeds polarity, so that the most ‘upright’

31) *Ibid.*, p. 297.

32) E. L. Doctorow, *Loon Lake* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 115.

33) Giorgio Del Vecchio, *Justice: An Historical and Philosophical Essay*, ed. A.H. Campbell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1956), pp. 80-1.

34) Bernard Malamud, *Pictures of Fidelman* (New York: Pocket Books, 1975), p. 107.

of men can at the same time be the 'most terrible.'³⁵⁾ Injustice frequently takes place because of a partial understanding of justice. The novel suggests that justice should be examined and comprehended from an ontological point of view. One conception of justice is "preferable to another when its broader consequences are more desirable."³⁶⁾ Doctorow emphasizes that "the proper understanding of justice might be not proprietarian, or utilitarian, or contractarian, but liberal: this, in the sense that the just society furthers people's resources, their control over their destinies, rather than satisfying their rights, maximizing their utilities, or meeting their utilities, or meeting their enlightened preferences."³⁷⁾

35) Campbell, p. 307.

36) Rawls, p. 6.

37) Philip Pettit, *Judging Justice: An Introduction to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 183.