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Imprisonment and False Liberation in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*

Though more than three decades have passed since the publication of E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* and tons of paper have been used for admiring reviews and substantial critical response, the book has lost nothing of its initial appeal thanks to the carefully constructed artistry and masterly precision. It was described by critics as having

> a form that is experimental and accomplished enough to appeal to critics who demand innovation and yet familiar enough to attract the common reader, and a content that grapples with the fundamental issues confronting the contemporary fictionist yet never ceases to entertain and engage (Rodgers 1976: 139)

and as being "a bag of riches, totally lucid and accessible, full of surprises, epiphanies, little time bombs that alter one's view on things and enormous fun to read" (Fremont-Smith 1975: 41). Its colourful mosaic of themes, shifting narration, repetitions, circularity, illusions of demystification and idiosyncratic blending of facts and fiction, as well as the syncopated rhythm of ragtime imitate the inexhaustible energy, but also the complexities and paradoxes of America in the 1900s.

Ragtime recounts three main stories interwoven with each other. Three main stories of people who could not have been more different from one another. An upper-middle class WASP family, consisting of the characters simply named "Father," "Mother," "Mother's Younger Brother" and the "Little Boy"; an immigrant Jewish family of "Tateh," "Mameh" and the "Little Girl," who is at one point referred to as "Sha;" and a black family of Coalhouse Walker, the ragtime musician, his fiance Sarah, and their baby son, Coalhouse Walker III.

The members of each family try to discover their identities and achieve coherence by escaping their dull lives and routines, searching for answers and

solutions. Doctorow creates a world, where almost everyone is lost; a world of emotional immigrants overtaken by history, "arriving eternally on the shores of [their] Selves" (Doctorow 1975: 368). The characters' eternal search and inner discrepancies depicted in the novel are best put into words by one of the narrators, the Little Boy, staring at his reflection in a mirror:

> . . . 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 had a dizzying feeling of separating from himself endlessly. (Doctorow 1975: 134)

Trying to track the motifs of imprisonment, entanglement and false liberation as presented by Doctorow in his novel, I will argue that there is only one person among these characters who almost reaches freedom, namely Tateh. Although at first sight he is the most unlikely to attain liberation, it seems that Tateh is chosen by Doctorow to become his main protagonist by the novel's end and it is his marriage that gives the reader a glimpse of happinness and consollation. To achieve this, Tateh has to disguise himself, sacrifice his old life and face memories which come back to haunt him. It seems that in *Ragtime,* Doctorow's aim was to emphasise the elusiveness and uncertainty of his characters' goals, endeavours, explorations and escapes.

Doctorow's hero is an embodiment of both the modern and the early twentieth-century man's struggle with reality. The author creates characters who either lack names, or are historical figures whose lives were "developed" creatively. The purpose behind such a presentation is to make their lives and dilemmas more universal and more suitable to the vast historical context of the story. In this way, they also represent specific attitudes of people of that time rather than just their own behaviours, they are "primarily interpretations, not historical recapitulations" (Harter and Thompson 1990: 59). Because the characters are types-like, not much psychological analysis is provided and the notions of their search for identity, integrity and fulfilment seem sometimes to be incoherent. Yet, these are the ingredients of satisfaction for which Doctorow's heroes are searching. Burdened with feeling of lostness, their struggle is also one in which the tensions between imprisonment and liberation are incorporated. The idea of imprisonment permulates the novel and manisfests itself in many various ways, including physical, emotional, political and economic. The hero struggles for liberation chosing paths of escapism, assimilation, rebellion or resignation.

Doctorow does not provide many examples of imprisonment in its least complex, physical sense – incarceration. It is the ordeal of only one and a rather

minor character in the story, Harry K. Thaw, a historical figure, whose life gets "fabulised"[1] by Doctorow. He stays behind bars awaiting the trail for Stanford White's murder he committed jealous of his wife, Evelyn Nesbit. To emphasise the character's imprisonment, Doctorow refers to the jail where Thaw is kept using its colloquial name "the Tombs," meaning the Bernard B. Kerik Complex in Lower Manhattan. As a public figure and a millionaire, Thaw is treated in a special way, having meals delivered from his favourite posh restaurant. Yet, a jail is a jail and Thaw has to face its discomforts.

Though not much elaborated on, Thaw's imprisonment relates to a much more important character and his endeavours, namely Harry Houdini. They meet in prison, when Houdini performs one of his tricks. Their encounter is rather bizarre and unsettling, as Thaw masturbates while Houdini makes his escape. These two characters' relation is also based on paradox: Thaw, though incarcerated, enjoys many privileges in the Tombs and is certain he would get out unpunished sooner or later; Houdini, free at first sight, suffers from mental imprisonment from which he probably would never break free. The illusionist is a true specialist in the field of escapism, the "escapologist" and another of the factual figures in the plot. He perfectly fits the image of Doctorow's characters seeking to escape from reality. His life is characterised in the following way:

> Absurd. He went all over the world accepting all kinds of bondage and escaping . . . He escaped from bank vaults, nailed-up barrels, sewn mailbags . . . His escapes were mystifying because he never damaged or appeared to unlock what he escaped from. (Doctorow 1975: 7–8)

It is worth mentioning that, similarly to Tateh, whose case will be described later, Houdini disguises himself using a pseudonym, the fact of which might be seen as an attempted escape from his real identity. His real name was Erich Weiss and he was, like Tateh, a Jew. Both characters are also frustrated with their lives and try to liberate themselves.

The illusionist's frustration is multifaceted, yet consists of two major factors. Firstly, it derives from the fact that the most exciting "magical tricks" happen in the real world of science and technological advances, leaving him behind. He considers himself "a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician" (Doctorow 1975: 112). Entrapped in bitter dissatisfaction with himself, frustration, feeling of being misunderstood by his audiences, Houdini tries harder and harder to escape from his inner conflicts seeking psychological and emotional liberation in physical escapes. Secondly, he is haunted with the need to

[1] According to Julian Barnes, "fabulation" occurs when "you make up a story to cover the facts you don't know or can't accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story" (1989: 109).

understand what is incomprehensible, namely roots and "tricks of the trade" of death. As it is beyond his comprehension, desperate to defy mortality, he starts performing more daring escapist tricks, none of which bring him consolation. After escaping from vaults and milk cans, Houdini asks to be buried alive, but discovers a limit to his escapes – he nearly suffocates and needs to be rescued from under the ground. Although he should draw some conclusions from this experience, Houdini cannot reach demystification of his life's purpose and sense. To liberate himself, the illusionist must come into terms with the fact that death is neither what one can escape from, nor a challenge, and his efforts to understand it are doomed with futility. Also, he must acknowledge that art has its limitations and cannot serve the purpose of defying death, as it cannot be tricked by artifices. Yet, he still pursues answers, staying deluded with the false promise of escape and the confidence that it is enough for a human being to try hard in order to reach some correct understanding of death.

False liberation and solace dawn on Houdini, when he discovers the scientific achievement of an aeroplane and gets fascinated with flying. He momentarily forgets his life's disappointments: "He thought he was dreaming . . . He was flying! . . . He felt the wind in his face and discovered he was shouting . . . And when the machine rolled to a stop he wanted only to be airborne again" (Doctorow 1975: 116–7). Inner peace and liberation are only temporary, though. Houdini's desperation and recklessness reappear when he encounters the unexpected demise of his beloved and cherished mother. As he loves her very much, the news devastates him and makes his existence seem even more futile than before – he starts risking his life with more intensity and frightening desperation:

> Every feat enacted Houdini's desire for his dead mother. He was buried and reborn, buried and reborn . . . his wish for his own death was so apparent that people began to scream and a local clergyman stood up and shouted Houdini, you are experimenting with damnation! . . . Perhaps it is true that he could no longer distinguish his life from his tricks. (Doctorow 1975: 234)

This shows that the illusionist is unable to throw off the shackles of his own misconceptions and shortcomings, he gets lost in the labyrinth of his own life, he cannot also understand the purpose of art as such. Though Houdini spends all his life mastering tricks and enchanting audiences, he never grasps the idea that it is not death which would set him free, but it is what he uses on everyday basis as a tool in his work – art. The art of illusion, deception, amazement and awe he creates for his audiences around the world. Houdini cannot use

art as a key to open the fetters of his obsessions because he does not even see it as meaningful. What he does is described by Doctorow as "tricks":

> 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 . . . The real-world act was what got into history books. (Doctorow 1975: 112)

In the author's presentation, the power of art is limited and shows its limitations most when it fails test cases of the real world and especially that of death. Harter and Thompson point out that Houdini is

> in some sense, Doctorow's Hunger Artist.[2] [His] frustration with his audience . . . suggests strong parallels with Kafka's famous story. He is the creator never satisfied with his own creative achievement, the writer always aware of the gap between the enormity of experience in all its often ineffable forms and the finished story. (1990: 67)

His obsessions with his own mother, self-perfection and resisting death prevent him from true emotional and psychological liberation. And it is the inescapable death that proves to be both the origin and the end of his quest for answers and identity.

False liberation combined with physical, economic and psychological imprisonment is also a tribulation of another character, Tateh. He is a peddler, immigrant Jewish socialist from Latvia, who lives in extreme poverty with his family: Mameh and the Little Girl "struggl[ing] in the fish-smelling Lower East Side just to survive" (Doctorow 1975: 67). Tateh is a man of stern morals and pride, which he proves telling his wife to pack her belongings and leave upon discovering that she has sold her body to her employer to earn a couple of dollars to help the family survive. Unable to earn enough, lonely and in despair, knowing that he cannot secure a decent home and life for his daughter, Tateh fights an inner struggle of what to do with his life to free himself from the prison of poverty. He decides to leave New York, "the city that had ruined his life" (Doctorow 1975: 103). Using his last savings, he and the Little Girl set for a journey to Lawrence, Massachusetts, a journey of spiritual and physical

[2] The notion of the Hunger Artist was developed by Franz Kafka in his short story of the same title published in 1992. According to W.C. Rubinstein "the hunger artist is the painter, musician, poet or what you will, who devotes himself ascetically to his art. The nature of this art is expressed symbolically in the fact that it is an entertainment furnished by a man fasting, but, paradoxically, those who observe the artist most closely are rewarded with a meal at the artist's expense, a meal of which the artist does not partake" (Rubinstein 1952: 13–4).

liberation. But the life they find in Lawrence is not liberating at all, it is full of disappointment and, again, poverty. "We were going to starve to death or freeze to death. Now we'll be shot to death" (Doctorow 1975: 138), says Tateh to the Little Girl upon his breakdown when a strike begins in the mills where he works. But this disillusionment leads to another attempt at achieving freedom. Tateh volunteers for designing posters, which makes him regain his inspiration and creativity. In this case, art once again functions as a tool helping the character liberate himself but, contrary to Houdini's situation, it seems to serve its purpose. Tateh's life finds a different trajectory and, at the end, art secures him a good living as he becomes a famous film director.

While he loses his faith in revolution and collective change, he decides to relay on the individual – himself only. Doing so, Tateh takes another step in the direction of liberation – he reenacts the American myth of the self-made man. But in this case the efforts go further than just hard work and a good idea for business and Tateh creates himself anew. He symbolically changes his name to Ashkenazy, he dyes his hair and beard to the original black, and invents a baronry for himself. "It got him around in the Christian world. Instead of having to erase his thick Jewish accent he needed only roll it off his tongue with a flourish" (Doctorow 1975: 139).

Though his new identity – a combination of Jewishness and American entrepreneurialship – serves Tateh well, allowing him to leave poverty behind and achieve physical liberation, his psychological freedom remains a mere mirage. Doctorow seems to support the character's struggle in reaching the profound understanding of how to succeed in the new, capitalist America. He seems to be a really successful man, who reaches his goals of wealth and happiness, at the same time discovering his true self. As other characters of *Ragtime* run away from the changes that occur in America, Tateh is adaptable. He finds mutual love in Mother from the WASP family and the story ends with their marriage.

Their example suggests the novelist's belief that sometimes individuals may achieve inner balance, yet it seems as if Tateh's success in this respect was tainted with defeat – it results from deception and, as such, seems to be false. First, Tateh/Baron Ashkenazy deceives others pretending to be someone else. Later, he deceives himself believing that wealth and new identity can free his mind and soul. He achieves physical and economic liberation, probably also the emotional one, marrying Mother and ascertaining that his daughter is safe and secured. But does he grasp psychological liberation? The ghosts of his past: disavowing socialism and renouncing his wife, abandoning Evelyn Nesbit who took good care of his daughter, constant escape and poverty will probably

haunt Tateh throughout his glossed-over-brand-new life. Doctorow is pointing at such situation, when he writes:

> Every morning Tateh worked on the scenario of his fifteen-chapter photoplay, dictating his ideas to the hotel stenographer and reading the typewritten pages of the previous day's work. When he was alone he reflected on his audacity. Sometimes he suffered periods of trembling in which he sat alone in his room smoking his cigarettes without a holder, slumped and bent over in defeat like the old Tateh. (Doctorow 1975: 299)

Though making himself anew to be baron Ashkenazy, earning a fortune in film business and leading happy life with his daughter, Tateh still remains a suffering-ridden Jew inside, a Doctorow's hero who, though closest to libration, is still one step before its threshold. There are also some critics sharing this view. Christopher D. Morris writes that Tateh's "life may be regarded as a series of false demystifications, the shift from one illusion to another" each placing Tateh "in a new mirage world" (Morris 1991: 101, 104).

The abovementioned Evelyn Nesbit, is a link between Tateh and another fictitious character in the story, Mother's Younger Brother. The member of the WASP family in search for his identity is an idealist "with little direction in his life." This "lonely, withdrawn young man with blond moustaches" (Doctorow 1975: 4) is drifting purposelessly in life looking for emotional liberation – love. When he encounters the woman of his dreams, Evelyn Nesbit, a beautiful actress and femme fatal whose picture he cherished, he falls desperately and passionately in love. But Evelyn is unable to soothe him, as Mother's Younger Brother looks for deeper and more committed love than the one she can offer. Therefore his pain deepens and chances for achieving freedom diminish: "He didn't know the meaning of comfort" (Doctorow 1975: 100). After Evelyn abandons Mother's Younger Brother, he moves far away from solace, immersing himself in sorrow, "becom[ing] a kind of prey, possessed by self-destructive delusions," (Morris 1991: 100) restless, embittered, depressed and on the verge of a nervous collapse.

A glimmer of hope appears, when Mother's Younger Brother meets Emma Goldman, who changes his life and gives it a new direction. She introduces him to a new belief system – anarchism – with the aid of which "he recovers from mystification" and through adopting it he "demystifie[s] the American political system" (Morris 1991: 100). But, again, these are mere delusions and the resulting conviction of (however false) liberation, leads Mother's Younger Brother to join the notorious Coalhouse Walker and his group of revolutionaries in their fight for social justice. As a member of the group of rebels, he feels

that life has a purpose and gets closer to discovering his true identity. This change is parallel to the change of his appearance aimed at resembling blacks:

> He blackened his face and hands with burned cork, outlined exaggerated lips, put on a derby and rolled his eyes. Having in this way suggested his good faith to Coalhouse's other young followers by appealing to their sense of irony, he went out with them and threw the bombs into Municipal Firehouse No. 2, thereby proving himself to everyone including himself. (Doctorow 1975: 282)

As Doctorow quite often applies repetition and circularity in *Ragtime,* once more the change of physical appearance serves the purpose of character's deception of himself and others, acquiring new identity along with new looks. But Mother's Younger Brother's solemn joy gets shattered and his liberation proves to be false. Coalhouse Walker decides to surrender which terrifies the young man as he sees that his life will again become purposeless. Feeling betrayed by false hope for answers, unity and common purpose, "Younger Brother had withdrawn in silent bitterness . . . He was wiping the burnt cork from his face" (Doctorow 1975: 342).

Unable to cope with defeat but still having some hope for emotional and psychological freedom, he once again sets off on a journey in search for life purpose and his true self, joining Emilio Zapata's troops in Mexico. He finds his aim in revolutionary campaigns, but his actions seem to be suicidal. Though respected by *zapatistas*, he is perceived as a reckless daredevil. Mother's Younger Brother's desperate attempts at finding ultimate answers and solace verging on madness and death are analogous to Harry Houdini's. Both characters are drifting unable to reach understanding of life and they both ultimately turn to death to get it. Mother's Younger Brother never attains a profound self-knowledge, nor any kind of liberation. Though it seems to him a few times in the course of the story as if he found freedom, he remains imprisoned and perpetually lost in his inability to found love and real aim of life – he is simply a plaything of events. Because the fates of Doctorow's characters are interrelated, another member of the WASP family experiences utter emotional and psychological imprisonment. Father, the head of the family, is an allegorical representation of the traditional norms and values of late 19th-century America: patriotism, industriousness, but also xenophobia and conventional prejudice towards other races and immigrants. As the embodiment of such attitudes, he cannot come into terms with the turmoil and changes of the Progressive Era. Emotionally, he is lost in his attempts to adjust to changing environment because he lacks the reception of these changes. His isolation

and bewilderment, resentment of new reality knocking on his doors result in nostalgia and anger.

To escape this topsy-turvy world, as well as mundane family and everyday life obligations, "his internal conflicts and contradictions" (Parks 1991: 66), Father chooses escape in physical sense, he travels with Peary's expedition to the end of the world, the North Pole. Being an amateur explorer he wants to "avoid what the great Dr. James[3] had called the habit of inferiority to the full self" (Doctorow 1975: 248). At first excited by the adventure and the opportunity to leave his world behind, to liberate himself in full, he gets lost in new circumstances and cannot adjust to pitch darkness and piercing cold. Doctorow writes that "pieces of Father froze very casually" (Doctorow 1975: 89), so when the Arctic proves to be too great of a challenge for him, both psychologically and physically, Father is sent back to America.

Upon his return, Father discovers that his liberation was false and he is still stuck and imprisoned. When he had travelled to the end of the world in search for his identity, escaping ordinary life, everything he left behind evolved and, ironically, it was he, who was left behind. He feels alienated from his family and environment:

> He wandered through the house finding everywhere signs of his own exclusion. His son now had a desk, as befitted all young students. He thought he heard an arctic wind but it was the housemaid Brigit pushing an electric cleaner across the rug in the parlor. What was strangest of all was the mirror in his bath: it gave back the gaunt, bearded face of a derelict, a man who lacked home . . .
>
> At night in bed Mother held him and tried to warm the small of his back, curled him into her as she lay against his back cradling his strange coldness. It was apparent that this time he'd stayed away too long. (Doctorow 1975: 123–5)

Another instance of false liberation of this character comes when riots start in New York and feeling that his family's lives are no longer safe, Father picks up a gun and decides to co-operate with police in their manhunt for Coalhouse Walker and his urban guerillas. He finds temporary solace in this new role of the society's defender. The sense of being needed substitutes close family relations and serves the purpose of a smokescreen to hide from Father the fact that he is lost emotionally and cannot discover his true identity.

The problems are still present and his liberation is false. The world around him changes, his family dissolves and, without any anchor, Father is overtaken

[3] William James was a pioneering American psychologist and philosopher at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. He dealt with psychology, educational psychology, psychology of religious experience and mysticism. In *Ragtime* Father attended his lectures in college.

by the currents of history. His imprisonment within his own limitations and attempts at liberation which always turn out to be futile are observed by his son and the narrator, who defines Father as the perpetually lost emotional immigrant:

> 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. (Doctorow 1975: 368)

So, although in economic and social terms he is far away from the majority of immigrants, Father's emotional state resembles theirs.

There is a thread running through lives of all the discussed characters – identity never becomes fully grasped and liberation never reached. They struggle chosing physical, emotional and psychological escapism, sometimes reaching temporary consolation and some hazy answers, but never can they make out the whole truth. Though sometimes they are already on the verge of liberation, the cage of their imprisonment and fate remains sealed. Harry Houdini, Tateh, Mother's Younger Brother and Father – all of them remain lost in the modern world, where full liberation and solace cannot be found. They adapt better or worse to their new surroundings, but the world, especially the American world, is changing like a kaleidoscope and answers are hard to obtain. Also, some of these answers just simpy cannot be granted to human beings, as they probably would not be able to deal with them. Following Christopher D. Morris: "If escape from delusion is impossible, the events of human history become repetitions, duplications of attempted escaped and failures" (Morris 1991: 103). False liberation then seems to be the only thing Doctorow's hero can cling on to when "forever arriving, never fully able to grasp his true self . . . an escapist who never undergoes a real transformation" (Morris 1991: 100).

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