

Hungarian Narrato-Rhetorheme in an American Novel: Harry Houdini in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*¹

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ABSTRACT

The escape artist of Doctorow's *Ragtime* is in close relationship with each transposed and fictitious character through an aspectual transmission system of character-motivation. The variegated and diverging perceptual and cognitive processes of the numerous characters may reveal a centrifugal system of storyworlds, but the multiform manifestations of being shackled and the desire to escape do meet in the anchoring image of the shackled Harry Houdini and his escape bravura. So Doctorow's Houdini will be studied here as an aspectual coordinate of the novel.

On the other hand, the mentality emanating from the escape artist's narrative function of aspectual coordination and the other characters' positional predicaments and motivational concerns that reflect the same mentality, jointly perform the rhetorical role of suasion. Thus, *Ragtime*'s Houdini can be subjected to a narrato-rhetorical investigation. I propose that he is a hermeneutically coded cultural narrato-rhetorheme in the novel and the source of further narrato-rhetorhemes of storyworlds that come under his semantic sway. (I introduced the notion of the "cultural narrato-rhetorheme" in a former *HJEAS* issue [2014/1]). The book's transposed Houdini is both an overt cultural narrato-rhetorheme (he is present in the narratorial discourse: the narrator actually meets him) and a covert one (embedded in the storyworld). The notions of "repeating," "factoid," "contextual," "assimilative," and "enthymematic" narrato-rhetorheme will also be introduced as descriptive of Houdini's manifold narrato-rhetorical roles.

Ragtime's epistemological tandem (the narrator[s] and Houdini) makes it unequivocal that the modality of the narratorial domain is epistemic. This also sets the escape artist into the novel's focus; as does the book's lead (deontic) modality, through the African American ragtime pianist's defiance of racist cultural prohibition. (ZAN)

KEYWORDS: Doctorow, *Ragtime*, Houdini, cultural narratology, rhetorical narratology, narrato-rhetoreme, pseudohistorical novel, false document

Few readers of *Ragtime* (1975) would mention Harry Houdini as one of the main characters of Doctorow's novel, from the storyworld perspective at least. Still, the novel begins and ends with the repeatedly evoked figure of the legendary Hungarian-born magician,² sorcerer, magus, or—more in harmony with the cognitive force field of the novel—illusionist and escape artist, while the ragtime pianist, rightly felt to be the protagonist of the novel, appears only in the middle of the text (a chain of events full of dramatic twists foregrounds him immediately, though, true).

The broader aim of this paper is to show that Houdini's figure is a multifunctional agent in the narrative organization of the textual universe—in which the ragtime era springs to life (with a time span from 1906 to 1914)—through being, thematically, closely related to both the fictional and the fictionalized “transworld” characters.³ It is a relation established and sustained, most manifestly, through the motivational transradiation of character action. Thus, my specific aim is to trace this aspectual transradiation and its narrative functions: Houdini as an aspectual coordinate, Houdini as a narrato-rhetoreme, and the interrelatedness of these two functions. The main argument of this study is, then, that the novel, which has often been accused of, or praised for, being fragmentary and chaotic, does possess a unifying structure of ideas (though

this is nothing new), and that this structure is supported by Houdini's figure (a so far unexplored aspect of the issue). By bringing the escape artist within the scope of investigation in the latter context, I also hope to shed new light on the nexus between an ironically narrativized culture (ragtime America) and the narrative *Ragtime*.

Houdini as an aspectual coordinate

The role of the Houdini character in serving as an across-the-narrative cognitive basis organizing the narrative cannot be grasped in its entirety without understanding the motivational system of the storyworld. On the other hand, the motivational relatedness is not obvious in the case of every character relationship that indicates some parallelism with Houdini. Therefore, my claim must be precisely defined and documented. An exploration of motivational character-relationships must be more penetrating than the mere detection of interconnectedness between characters on the plot level in general. They are more specific and persistent determinants in their direct and (mostly) indirect but certainly manifold ways than what Douglas Fowler finds obvious: "the entire circuit of characters in the book is linked with major or minor—in many cases minute—connections" (66).

A somewhat more differentiated approach can take us beyond action motivation and reveal that certain character motivations, if viewed from the textual subjects' perspective, can be either externally or internally determined, and they may make up little systems of their own. It is true of characters in literary fiction in general. What concerns us in the case of the Doctorow novel specifically, though, is not the surface motivational system of character actions and reactions of the storyworld in the multidirectional individual motivational network of certain characters; rather, the discursive resultants of that network, which form the deep-motivational base of the totality of the system—a motivational base of which the narrator and the characters may or may not be aware, but which the receiver *can* infer from the characters or their actions.

It is the discursive meaning and the ontological justification of a given character's existence in the fictionalized actual world (that is, in the fictive "reality" in which the fictional character "lives").

The motivational base that *Ragtime* is built on is the urge or wish to escape. More is implied by this than the early twentieth-century immigrant masses escaping from poverty and persecution (the "ragships" [Doctorow, *Ragtime* 18]), and more than the tragedy of Coalhouse Walker, an abominably humiliated African American ragtime pianist trapped by vicious racism. These elements are basic tools of cultural criticism in the Doctorowian correction of the romanticized image of the ragtime era as idealized by retrospective public remembrance. So much so that the novel is generally regarded to be a satiric adjustment of perspective, in a text also displaying, as demonstrated by Enikő Bollobás in another context, "how the past and, more importantly, texts of the past are shaping the present and history" (620). That *Ragtime* is loaded with satiric intent is clear on the opening page: "There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants" (3-4). The point that the narrator makes reads profoundly ironic in retrospect (as we read on) if the reader does not understand the irony immediately, for it soon dawns upon the white upper-middle class family that both observations are false. The head of the family is shocked to behold an ocean-liner packed with immigrants: "Father, a normally resolute person, suddenly foundered in his soul. A weird despair seized him" (12). Soon an African American baby is found in his garden in a bundle, and a very real "Negro (problem)" enters the house in the figure of the baby's mother, the neighbor's Black laundress; then the Black pianist, the baby's father, shows up himself.

If we both extend and narrow Hayden White's theory of narrative as "a process of decodation and recodation," it can be argued that *Ragtime* is a "destruction" of the tropological mode in which the cultivated image of the ragtime period is set—a decodation. And the ragtime period as presented by the narrative is a restructuration in a different

tropological mode, a recodation. Meaning (in our case: irony) is generated by the contrast between the old and the new encodings, that is, tropological modes (White 96). Did perhaps Fredric Jameson, who missed history from the novel, fail to see this? That the latent irony of the opening paragraph—which is “a microcosm of the novel as a whole”—suggests that “the image of the past produced by nostalgia is a distorted one” (Savvas 140). Doctorow is a juggler of irony in this book because *Ragtime* can be conceived as “‘serious’ historical fiction and/or a parody of the historical novel” (Simmons 95). (About *Ragtime* as a historical novel and Jameson later below.)

The struggle to escape, then—which can be covered by the conceptual “umbrella” of Houdini’s performances—penetrates the novel even more than demonstrated in the foregoing examples. In a different context, Dianne Osland rightly claims that the “inability to breathe” is experienced not only by the escape artist, physically, when he has himself locked up, but by most of the characters—suffocation by mental and emotional isolation (265). One year after the novel’s publication Cobbet Steinberg gave voice to essentially the same view, but with a little difference: “Most of *Ragtime*’s characters are caught between imprisonment and desperate motion, between captivity and flight, between claustrophobia and agoraphobia. . . . [T]heir problem is finding a pattern, a meaning that does not imprison” (130). Though both critics point to a prevalent struggle to escape, neither Osland nor Steinberg provide a deeper analysis of the phenomenon, let alone in a broader context, and they also fail to recognize its function in organizing the narrative.

Let us take a more detailed look at this pattern. The members of the white family, named after their family functions, would all like to break free or are actually performing such a maneuver. They all flee from unhappiness—Father (a prisoner of conformity) escapes into work; Mother (the neglected/maltreated woman), after a slow process of transformation, breaks loose from marriage and flees into a new one; Mother’s Younger Brother into manufacturing

bombs (for Walker in the latter's fight, and finally for Emiliano Zapata's army in Mexico); Walker's African American lover, Sarah, escapes from hopelessness almost into a crime (she abandons her newborn baby, leaving it in the white man's garden). For Tateh, the Jewish silhouette artist, vegetating on the brink of poverty, the route of escape is the cinema, which leads to business success and a new marriage. Evelyn Nesbit is struggling desperately in the upper-class, psychopathic murderer, Harry K. Thaw's grasp. Thaw, in turn, bursts free, physically, when he escapes from the prison where he was incarcerated for the murder of the architect Stanford White. Anarchist Emma Goldman wishes to help an imprisoned Spanish anarchist, about to be executed, with her "radical idealism" (44), which ideology imprisons Goldman in turn, at least in socialist Tateh's view.⁴ Goldman is also a feminist, waging war against the "double subjection" of women ("I have never accepted servitude" [49]). She thinks it is capitalist society that forces Evelyn "to find her genius in her sexual attraction" (46). However, cultural programming binds the individual in those to-be-shaken-off chains imperceptibly. That is how, for instance, socialist Tateh becomes a male chauvinist, only to regard Nesbit a "whore"—"like a roach" to be stepped upon (47); in addition, he turns out his wife mercilessly although he could have treated her as a victim instead.

The idea of escape, emanating or to be inferred from these several stories, points in the direction of Houdini; or, reversely, it is radiating into the fates of the other actors from *him*, enabling the reader of the novel to realize the keynote of *Ragtime* (repeatedly pointed out about the novel) that the "good old" ragtime era was also the period of racism, male chauvinism, violence, anarchy, and misery for millions of people.⁵ A period of being shackled in many senses (racism, poverty, marital unhappiness), with differing relevance to masses of people (affecting individuals, families, discriminated ethnic groups, and women), to different degrees and in various forms: from the unconscious and patiently tolerated imprisonment inflicted upon Mother, through the ragtime pianist and his Black fellow-combatants, who are driven into a

militant demand for truth, to the immigrant masses, fleeing from persecution and poverty. How all this appears in the cognitive architecture of the characters, how it is represented internally, and determines the various narrative agents' intentionality, and, more importantly, how all this becomes an epistemological journey for "the little boy in the sailor suit" (6), the narrator, could be the subject of a separate paper.

In the present exercise our proposed subject limits us to Houdini only. It is part of his profession that he has himself locked, chained, tied-up, handcuffed in several ways, has himself hoisted upside down, buried in the ground or submerged in deep water only to mesmerize his breathless audience with his escape, even if once in a while it almost costs him his life. No wonder that Doctorow criticism has repeatedly pointed out the obvious: Houdini embodies the theme of escape in the novel (see, for example, Lubarksy 151), and that "Houdini is central to our understanding of the novel at its deepest thematic level" (Harter and Thompson 68). But it—especially its narratological significance—has not been elaborated yet. Doctorow criticism has failed to realize that the escape artist is placed in the focal point of what can be called the reflective cognitivity of a paralyzed and fettered world wishing to break free; a world composed of several divergent fates as it may be, yet bound in this common situation.

How can one describe Houdini's central role in *Ragtime* in this respect? Could he be a symbol? Not really, because he does not represent the abstraction of "captivity vs. escape" in a symbol's enigmatic way; instead, he *openly embodies* it: "I escape for a living, that's my profession" (81). What is more, he embodies this idea in a self-reflexive manner, as he is constantly preoccupied with the dilemma of his own existence as an escape artist, trying to determine whether it does or does not make sense. "He wondered why he had devoted his life to mindless entertainment" (84). Houdini's presence could be called "symbolic," but that would reveal nothing about the exceedingly complex role he plays in structuring the narrative. Nor would it help to categorize the celebrated Houdini of the age as a cultural icon. An admitting

mode could work perhaps; to argue that he was a cultural icon of the kind that differed from those of history (such as Benjamin Franklin, Washington, Lincoln, President Kennedy or Martin Luther King Jr.), from legendary actors and singers (Humphrey Bogart, Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Madonna), from cinematic characters (like Mickey Mouse, Superman, Batman, Spiderman), from the American pie or from the star-spangled banner manufactured by Father in the novel, for that matter. That would not uncover anything about the escape artist as a technical device in this narrative either. Accepting his own view of himself as someone who “reflected an American ideal” with his discipline, ambition, sober lifestyle, strength, energy, and courage (27), would hardly bring one closer to understanding his role in making sense of ragtime America. (Perhaps with the exception of energy, of which later.) Nevertheless, as will be shown, we cannot completely discard the concept of the “icon” either.

Combining the recurring motif of being fettered, the desire to liberate oneself, and the figure of the escape artist, only because Houdini appears in the novel, is not simply an evident interpretive stratagem. The escape artist does not merely “appear” in *Ragtime* but keeps resurfacing in it. Furthermore, he makes his appearance already in the first chapter, which concludes with him. His encounter with the little boy and his white family here will become “the one genuine mystical experience” (267) in the life of the escape artist, who always declaimed against necromancy and other mystical nonsense as fraud and fallacies to be persecuted, as his “private, unpublished papers” (267) testify.⁶

The opening and closing of any narrative are always examples of “privileged positions,” together with titles, descriptive subtitles, and epigraphs, Peter J. Rabinowitz argues in his book discussing the interrelatedness of narrative conventions and the politics of interpretation. Privileged placement gains better readerly attention, concentration, and recollection; its function is a more stable narrative “scaffolding.” Authors utter more emphatic interpretive

demand for privileged words, sentences, and passages as it were (Rabinowitz 58-60). Opening and closing *Ragtime* with Houdini serves the same purposes. (The significance of these two text segments will be discussed later.) The placement of these narrative sections and the way they highlight the other appearances of the escape artist focus attention on the question around which the narrative is based.

If the escape artist is foregrounded to such an extent on the one hand, but because of his central and complex role it would be somewhat reductive to label him simply as a “cultural icon” on the other hand, but he is not a symbol either, what are we talking about in his case?

Let us begin with something that follows from what has just been pointed out, with the narrative relationship of the narrator boy and Houdini, and the significance of the Houdini phenomenon for the little boy. Houdini is instrumental for the premature-child narrator as an epistemological system of reference. “System,” because Houdini is *a world* in himself, after all, in a narrative universe of many worlds. We find out a good deal about his personal life; his Freudian mother complex; his views on the world, especially the United States; his doubts concerning his own art; the shaped and unshaped uncertainties harassing his soul. The narrator “had conceived an enormous interest in the works and career of Harry Houdini, the escape artist” (6) though he had never been taken to his performances.⁷ This is the instance when the narrator’s own plight—his being confined within the bounds of restrained middle-class existence and his wish to escape—becomes overtly formulated. Not only was he not taken to Houdini’s shows, but the conformist and complacent “family’s life operated against his need to see things and to go to places” (6). This enables the narrator to make the leap of generalization, already on the next page, all the way to the outbreak of WWI, which concludes the storyline and even beyond Houdini’s 1926 death: “Today, nearly fifty years since his death, the audience for escapes is even larger” (7).⁸ Hence the narrator’s sensibility that enables him to identify bondage and the desire for freedom in the lives of fictional and transworld characters, to gather

them in a bundle and inject them into, or linking them up with, the Houdini phenomenon. This is going to be *his* escape stunt, his method of getting to know the world since it is in this way that—contemplating events from inside a self-complacent family as he is, and transcending them emotionally, mentally, and intellectually as he does—he can escape “to see things and to go places” (6).

This is how narratorial agency makes Houdini the coordinate of the novel’s aspectuality. The concept of aspectuality, based on John Searle’s observation (we are able to perceive and contemplate anything always from a certain aspect only), was introduced by Alan Palmer into narrative theory. The aspectuality of the storyworld in literary fiction means, according to Palmer, that “the storyworld . . . like the real world, . . . is different depending on the various aspects under which it is viewed. Its characters can only ever experience it from a particular perceptual and cognitive aspect at any one time” (Zunshine 182). As has already been shown, the narrative agents of *Ragtime*’s storyworld have their own (individual but also interrelated) storyworlds. In other words, the textual universe including Houdini (with his own world) is, again, of many worlds.

In the multitude of divergent storyworld characters we sense something common. Despite differences in manifestations, causalities, levels of consciousness, ethnic backgrounds (for example, Walker), female fate (for example, Mother, Sarah, Nesbit), class determinations (for example, Tateh), or epistemological desire (for example, the boy) we sense an interlocking motivational/cognitive base, which turns our attention (the characters’ and readers’ alike) to magic and escape art. The escape artist’s bravura performances are suggestive of the general existential state of affairs: enchained personal fate and the either conscious or unconscious class, gender, or ethnic fate. No wonder that Houdini’s self-liberating stunts resonate with an individual and communal wish to escape. The desire to escape and the illusion of its realization (escape itself) are set on a narrative stage here—even in cases where the mere thought of escape

never crosses a character's mind. It is all there, even if it is rather readerly inference than character cognitivity, which is directed towards this global interpretive direction by local narrative details.

On the other hand, the escape artist is also an illusionist. Thus, deception is a hidden but essential part of the show. Does it mean that escape is impossible after all? Does this aspect of the Houdini shows bear on character fates and, by extension, on ragtime American culture and society? Yes, deception, its variants, or its absence can be a relevant tool in accessing the motivational texture of characters. Some figures are subject to self-deceit in the novel, such as Father or the transworld figure of Booker T. Washington. But the adamant, intransigent ragtime pianist with his unbreakable sense of justice—to whom it never occurred “to ingratiate himself in the fashion of his race” (147)—is not a man of deception. He merely wants to get back his Model T Ford from racist white brigands, who held him up in the belief that a “Nigger” cannot own a car; he only wants an apology for abominable humiliations (his Model T was “thoroughly vandalized” and defiled with human feces [150]). The tragic irony lies in what is revealed in such an act: the fairer game you are trying to play, the more wanton desecration you suffer. Standing up for simple, honest truth costs him the life of Sarah, while he sentences himself to death purely because he demands justice. In some sense, he is also an “illusionist.” However, this “stunt” cannot work in a straightforward manner, only through terrorist and self-annihilating means. In an interview conducted by Larry McCaffery, Doctorow summarized the essence of the Coalhouse Walker phenomenon, in relation to Heinrich von Kleist's Michael Kohlhaas⁹ as a man “who cannot find justice from a society that claims to be just” (Trenner 44).

Thus it becomes understandable that, although divergent storyworlds are unfolding through the different perceptual and cognitive aspects of the several characters—worlds in which the ragtime era is teaming chaotically, stripped of nostalgia and idealization—the reader of the novel may sense an ordering principle. It is the narrative role of relational structuring

through the escape-artist figure of Houdini. The existential malaise emanating from Houdini's worldview and escape bravura is in agreement with the other characters' positional predicaments and motivational concerns—and vice versa. A narrative function that makes Houdini the aspectual coordinate in *Ragtime*.

Houdini in a narrato-rhetorical perspective

The aspectual anchoring image of a shackled Houdini with his (mostly successful and sometimes almost failing) attempts to escape also fulfills a narrato-rhetorical function in the narrative. That is, as an aspectual coordinate, he performs the rhetorical role of suasion. After all, *Ragtime*, a piece of cultural criticism, wants us to understand that a falsely adorned era, regarded as peaceful and happy, was, in fact, neither. So Houdini may also be the subject of a narrato-rhetorical discussion. "Narrato-rhetoric" as used here is neither narrated or interlaced rhetoric, nor the narrativity of rhetoric, but narrative *as* rhetoric, the suasive impulse inset in the narrative, the art of suasion—not the art of figurative and metaphorical language either (although the latter does belong to the toolkit of the former).¹⁰

I propose to scrutinize Houdini in a narrato-rhetorical perspective not simply because it is *possible* to perform such an academic exercise, but because it may reveal the singular richness of the roles the escape artist plays in organizing the narrative. I submit that Houdini is a cultural narrato-rhetorheme in Doctorow's novel, and at the same time—through his function as an aspectual coordinate—he is a source of further narrato-rhetorhemes in the storyworlds that fall within his semantic range.

The concept of "narrato-rhetorheme" was introduced in an earlier study. Its essence should be highlighted at this point, however, to show why and how it enters the Houdini-role interpretation.¹¹ Briefly, a narrato-rhetorheme is a narrative unit which fulfills a rhetorical purpose; a narrative element functioning as a rhetorical means of the discourse rendered by the

narrative. “Unit” marks its non-defined (not-to-be-fixed) nature as it is not a fixed concept; rather, narrato-rhetorheme can serve critical discussion as a theoretical *frame*, a rhetorical discursive formation with explicit or implicit (sub-discursive) suasive strategy¹²—no matter what its actual narrative manifestation is (a detail or a more complex unit, or some aspect of content, form, mode, or device). The concept can thus refer to an overt or covert rhetorical message (content, form, or function) transmitted by an infinitely simple or an immensely complex cultural sign appearing in a text of literary fiction. The term must encompass extraordinary variegation, then—the reason why, again, we should not delimit it any further. At best we can say, to be a little more detailed, that the narrato-rhetorheme is a rhetorically marked narrative unit, below or above the level of a sentence; it communicates new information (“rheme”), narrated in fiction (“narrato”), with the rhetorical purpose of suasion (“rheto”). The suasive sway it conveys can be overt or covert (manifest or latent) embedded in narratorial discourse or in the storyworld(s) or in both.

The narrato-rhetorhemes that *Ragtime*'s discursive suasion works with all originate in culture or reflect upon culture; thus, they are cultural narrato-rhetorhemes. It means that the rhetorical function of culture *generated* in narrative fiction (through a process we can call generative narrato-culturalization), together with actual culture (external culture brought to the narrative by the actual author and the actual reader as their cognitive architectures) and/or fictive possible-world culture, which *perform* the narrative (a process of performative narrato-culturalization) are manifested in cultural narrato-rhetorhemes. In other words, cultural narrato-rhetorhemes serve the rhetorical functions of a given culturalized narrative, *Ragtime* in this case.¹³

Returning to Houdini in the novel, it is easy to see that the escape artist's role in coordinating aspectuality serves a rhetorical function. In this narrative role he is a condensation of aspectual cognition in the novel for social, ethical, gender bondage of all kinds; of the

conscious or unconscious sense of being in fetters, together with the desire to escape at personal or community levels, and with a conscious or unconscious will to change. Such is the culture that turns to the escape artist, to the character who takes an anchoring position as the common denominator of all of these aspectualities. At this point the emerging pattern is refined enough for us to offer—with reference to the concept of the “icon” above—that *Ragtime*’s Houdini is an iconic representative of the socio-cultural spirit of the ragtime era, reflected in the mirror of cultural criticism.

Even the outlines of the classic “rhetorical situation” can be detected in the Houdini rhetorheme if classical definitions are somewhat relaxed, are interpreted more loosely, even allowing for greater divergences, like permitting the “orator” not to argue textually this time. This way the outlines of the rhetorical situation in the novel become visible: the need to speak out (the desire to escape); the “orator” wanting to mesmerize but not wishing to influence, having some kind of, albeit undefined, rhetorical interaction with his “audience” (Houdini); the audience (his spectators); obstacles and barriers, in as many shapes and forms as there are interpersonal or communal relationships in the novel. Although there exist legitimate arguments to claim that Houdini’s escape stunts foster the illusion that “human effort may produce some correct understanding of death” (Morris, *Models* 110) and that Houdini can “transcend mortal bounds” (Osland 266), it cannot be disregarded that agency needed for changing given situations is not missing from the work either. Character action may be conscious: the narrator boy governed by his reminiscing adult self; Walker’s principled strategy; and Thaw breaking out of jail. But not always. And not necessarily, or not at all prompted, however indirectly, by Houdini. Character action may be motivated by ideological conviction as in the case of Tateh and Goldman; or by a realization of the need for change through personal development as in the case of Mother; or by the injustice inflicted upon the ragtime pianist by white racism as in the case of Mother’s Younger Brother.¹⁴

Ragtime thus has a distinct rhetorical message that the recipient—the reader as Houdini’s external “spectator” or actual-world “audience”—realizes with the help of the escape artist’s narrative function, through narratorial transmission. This narrative mechanism makes the magician a cultural narrato-rhetorheme, one which is of the immediately embedded, overt kind because of its presence in the speaker’s direct narratorial domain (the narrator-boy meets Houdini, he is one of the artist’s admirers, and openly formulates the significance of the Houdini phenomenon). But the escape artist also functions as a rhetorheme of deep narrative transmission, or, simply, a deeply embedded or dramatized narrato-rhetorheme since it is embedded deeper, below the speaker’s direct narratorial domain, in the storyworld (where the Houdini-story unfolds in detail).¹⁵ But, on the whole, narrative technique treats the hermeneutically coded essence of the Houdini-rhetorheme—interpretation of culture through aspectual coordination—implicitly, leaving it to readerly global inferential skills to perceive it. In other words, our transworld Houdini functions also as a covert narrato-rhetorheme.

He is also what we can call a *contextual* narrato-rhetorheme. After all, the “escape expert” is not merely one of several characters. As has been seen, the prevalent desire to escape that looks to his escapes, mostly subconsciously, as desire-fulfillment, encompasses all the great contexts of American ragtime culture: racism, deprecation of women, deep poverty—that is, dramatized versions of racial, gender, and social discrimination, in various manifestations and dramatized forms, all organized around the “it-was-not-so-happy-and-peaceful-an-era-after-all” idea. It must be added that a world war is imminent. Houdini is thus not only a characteristic and, hence, indispensable figure of the period. The contextual narrato-rhetorheme of the escape artist organizes all the determining contexts of *Ragtime* (the main source of narrativity in the novel) and serves as an interpretive device to them all. The Houdini act can be conceived of, then, as a rhetorical sign, and the convergent force of the novel lies in the semantic network of the Houdini narrato-rhetorheme and in its contextual dynamism.

If this is so, Doctorow *was* bound to include Freud's contemptuous remark on America in his satiric view of nostalgia. But he does not agree with the fifty-three-year-old scientist, who "had had enough of America," and "sailed back to Germany" with his disciples (33). I therefore disagree with those who were left "irritated" by the way *Ragtime* represented Freud and Jung visiting Coney Island as "the detail serves no purpose, it provides no more than a spurious historicity" (Claridge 16). Nor can I go along with Christopher D. Morris, who speaks about the narrator's "inexplicable condemnation of Freud" (*Models* 100).

Ragtime's transworld Freud has several objections to the USA. He regarded America's "careless commingling of great wealth and great poverty" as "the chaos of an entropic European civilization" (33). Based on such manifestations of the sense of chaos—for instance, Mother "was frightened" that "[t]he Negro girl and her baby had carried into the house a sense of misfortune, of chaos" (60)—1975 *Ragtime* could be labeled as a novel influenced by the entropic fiction of the 1960s. It cannot be denied that the text foregrounds the contradictory, violent, and chaotic side of the nostalgically idealized ragtime era. However, it is not the entropic disintegration of energies and deadly balance that the novel unfolds; rather, it displays either positive or negative, but always *active* energies from which the America of the new (twentieth) century is born. The narrator is careful not to let the reader jump to erroneous conclusions. The following sentence is loaded with much more than a reference to Tateh's silhouette art: "Thus did the artist point his life along the lines of flow of American *energy*" (111, emphasis added). The sentence can be regarded as a moment of authorial metafictional self-portrait, but only in the sense that the author is trying to follow the sweeping energy of the US at the beginning of the twentieth century. Doctorow himself never went "with the flow of social energy," as he explained in an interview. His radicalism was never characterized by "moral ambiguity" like that of the otherwise very likeable Tateh, who, once he has become rich, distances himself from his socialist ideas, although he keeps voicing them; or that of the

intransigent ideologist Goldman, who “can really destroy the people around her without even knowing it” (Morris, “Fiction” 445-46).

That *Ragtime* is the novel of sweeping American energy needs to be complemented: it is the novel of *all kinds of* sweeping energies. From upper-class unscrupulousness (Thaw), mean racism (Fire Chief Conklin), the “classic American hero” (Morgan), and the craving for a special kind of “order” (Morgan’s idea of order as represented by Ford), through the innumerable, lived, personal variations (Eastern-European immigrant masses, the tribulations of white, African American and Jewish family members), to resistance against raging discriminatory violence (Walker, Mother’s Brother, and others), multi-ethnic America (the mixed-ethnic families at the end of the novel), and American film industry (Tateh became “an energetic man, full of the future” [217]).

Grandfather fostered the narrator’s “independent spirit,” and used Ovid’s “stories of transformation” to implant in him “that the forms of life were volatile and that everything in the world could as easily be something else” (97). “It was evident to him [the narrator little boy] that the world composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction” (99). All of it organized by energies of composition, re-composition, transformation. Susan Brienza focuses on the energies of ragtime music as a metaphor and its syncopated rhythm, to argue that the novel “shows the robust changes of post-Victorian America, and it does with character and plot structure what ragtime does with syncopation and polyrhythm. Syncopation is a shifting of accent so that the normally unaccented beats are stressed.” She calls it “narrative syncopation” (181).

Applying her point to the context of the present paper will make us realize that it is indeed American ethnic, class, and ideological polyrhythm which are highlighted in the novel, featuring white, Black, Jewish figures, besides millionaires and poverty-stricken, immigrant masses of people. What contemporary ideology treated as “unstressed rhythms” has been

mentioned (“nonexistent” Blacks and immigrants); *Ragtime*, however, using a syncopated rhythmic pattern, as it were, in stressing these elements, corrects the nostalgic concept of the ragtime period.

Joanna E. Rapf does not hesitate to call this “the transgressive energy” of the novel, whose “running metaphor” is Houdini, the escape artist, who was even metamorphosed in his name, changing Erich Weiss to Harry Houdini (17). Houdini’s narrative function as a cultural narrato-rhetorheme is significant in this respect as well. He is the American who keeps testing the limits of his energies, whose tricks are constantly changing, and who always returns to life from extreme danger, is always reborn and resurrected as it were. Cognitive narratology would object that the Houdini stunts have a script since we know what to expect from the magus. True. But fixed as his scripts may be (putting his life at risk; survival; return to life), they are also endlessly changing since specific elements of the show and the forms of execution are always different.

In a broader sense, the script is nothing else—as Manfred Jahn and Csaba Pléh defined the term in contexts different from ours here—than a “stereotyped series of actions” (Jahn 174), and what follows from this: “a conceptual system of expectations” (Pléh 230). What we notice about the narrator boy’s white family as we are making progress in the book are divergences from the script. Mother is beginning to see things differently (“she felt deserted by the race of males” [57]), and is beginning, very slowly, to maneuver out of the trap of the stereotypical script of her marriage. Albeit secretly, Mother’s Younger Brother quickly turns his back on white social expectations and sides with the Afro-American musician in his action demanding his truth. Father is a typical product of white America’s businessman manufacturing banners and pyrotechnics, who feels absolutely comfortable with the set of expectations prescribed by the script of his social status (he thinks “Coalhouse Walker Jr. didn’t know he was a Negro,” and he should act accordingly [134]). At first he himself is shocked to realize “that he took

satisfaction in going to the police. It was not an entirely righteous feeling” (182). But eventually, he also digresses from his script, bails out Walker and undertakes to negotiate between the musician and district attorney Whitman. His brother-in-law, who becomes a radical guerrilla fighter (an explosives expert, finally escaping to Mexico and joining the revolutionary armies of Francisco Villa and Emiliano Zapata Salazar) and is a good observer, pronounces a final, though perhaps a bit too extreme verdict on Father at their last meeting: “You are a complacent man with no thought of history. . . . You have traveled everywhere and learned nothing” (250). The changes that occur in the life of these narrative agents, effected through some compelling factor or just some realization, yield what can be called the eventfulness of the novel in a narratological sense. Not everything is an event that happens in a narrative. Wold Schmid modified Yuri Lotman’s concept of “event” by saying that an event is a change in a situation (Lotman had defined it as an illicit transgression of semantic fields) (231-33).

Then there are those unable to alter a position and step out of the script. Conklin is such a character. The fire chief is running two scripts at the same time. Wickedly manipulating what we can call the “fire brigade script,” he is actually staging the darkest and vilest racist scenario. Walker, allegedly, failed to pay the toll, and blocked the fire brigade station exit with his Model T Ford, which can create a dangerous problem in case of fire. In fact, “the toll” was only made up, and the Model T was stopped by the fire fighters in order to take a Black person to task for daring to “parade” with a car of his own. Such is the construction of the racist fabulation against Walker, behind the smokescreen of the “fire brigade script.” Ansgar Nünning is offering a theoretical toolbox that can help us understand the narrative constructed here—as a result of clever tinkering with cultural patterns (racist ones in this case¹⁶), the constructed story and its words attain a devastating effect, so much so that the manipulative narrative modifies “reality” even (that is, it modifies the possible actual world the ragtime pianist inhabits). In Nünning’s example, Othello and Desdemona’s world is shattered by Iago’s false, patchwork narrative

(194). Conklin's white racist narrative intrudes into the Afro-American Walker's world with such fatal intensity.

Ragtime is meditation. Its narrator is ruminating on what America of the ragtime era was really like. Using Uri Margolin's cognitive perception theory (290), we can say that the novel's cognitivity is centered upon "pattern recognition," together with the dilemmas of relating to the pattern. The narrator, engaged in mapping the pattern of ragtime-era America, is preoccupied with dilemmas concerning pattern-search (Morgan's) just as with quick-reaction pattern recognition (Walker does not only recognize the racist pattern, but is confident that he will be the victim, and the pattern will demand his head), or with pattern conformity (Tateh and Goldman, who are reading America with the sign systems of ideologies).

A pattern always means repetition as well. Discriminatory hatred and bullying violence are repeated in ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker's life, either as a reiteration of the history of slavery in America or of Kleist's European Michael Kohlhaas story. Morgan views Ford's assembly-line-produced Model T—indifferent to Morgan's philosophy as Ford is, though—as a brilliant manifestation of the principle of repeatability and substitutability. The point of Tateh's silhouette invention is precisely quick-flipping repetition. He also recognizes repetition in social injustice as does Goldman in gender discrimination, even if their ideological stances differ. The syncopated technique of ragtime music can also be discovered in this: repetition is the left hand's rhythm in the "ragtime" novel's "piano play"; the right hand's syncopated, improvised variations sound the individualized in the return.¹⁷

The theme of repetition can also be strung on the Houdini phenomenon. And this supplements Houdini's role with one more function: he is also a repeating narrato-rhetorheme. The daring performances of the escape artist gaped at by half of America are iterative displays of repeatability, with the big question marks of survivability and, eventually, always with the reassuring option that one would live. This is the rhetorical essence of the Houdini narrato-

rhetorheme's iterative function, the rhetoric of repetition. The point about the Houdini rhetorheme is not merely the circumstance that he keeps emerging in the novel, though this is part of it. Houdini is a rhetorical construction: he takes in and at the same time laterally radiates a cognitivity, which weaves variegated forms and aspects into harmony. Variety makes the idea more emphatic, more convincing, and more complex, and aspectual multiplication snowballs into a highly effective rhetoric. The kind of "lateral movement" Andrew Gibson talks about apropos of Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, which moves from one space to another (contiguous) space, ultimately producing "the virtual spaces of thought itself" (Gibson 227), can also be detected in this. Except that *Ragtime*, while not denying the world as homogenous space, conceives of its homogeneity through its heterogeneity. This is something else than a discordant assembly of options.

What makes the realization of the novel's rhetoric easier for *Ragtime*'s receiver is that this rhetorheme is also factual: Houdini is, fictionalized as he is, in fact a historical figure, a transworld character in the book—what is more, a sensation of the period, well-preserved (and still present) in cultural memory. Therefore, much of what is common knowledge about him can be left to the reader's knowledge, can be treated elliptically by the narrative. The narrator can rely on what is stored about the escape artist in the reader's mind enthymematically (*enthymo*) as implicit "real-world-knowledge," "very often applied by the understander," to use Robert Schank and Robert Abelson's phrase, illustrative of "the continuing consciousness frame" (qtd. in Palmer, "The Mind" 325). Enthymematic knowledge enables the reader to supply, understand, and infer much without textual assistance. In this regard, Houdini is an enthymematic rhetorheme as well. Added to our enthymematic knowledge is the Houdini-related contextual knowledge (also contextual knowledge related to other characters) accumulated with the help of the narrative text, that is, what Catherine Emmott's narrative

theory calls “text specific” readerly knowledge (7, 19). These together contribute to readerly inferences relating to local and global narrative coherence.¹⁸

The Houdini narrato-rhetorheme is factual-contextual, then. But it is also what can be called an assimilative one because of the many forms of subjectivization of what he aspectually represents (the several different individual stories of the various characters). It follows from his narrative role as an aspectual coordinate, from his being a common denominator for the desire to escape, dramatized in several individual manifestations.

But it is the *combined* effect of the various aspects of this narrato-rhetorheme that assists our understanding of Houdini’s role, our realization that he is an aspectual coordinate in the narrative structure and in narrative cohesion. It is in fact the subtextual doing of the dramatized rhetorhemic functions that keeps pushing the reader gently towards recognizing Houdini’s role as an aspectual coordinate in the first place. It is a functional configuration (the factual, contextual, assimilative rhetorhemic functions) and the enthymematic nature of the factual, which play a major role. The reader’s knowledge of the historical magus draws the receiver closer to the cognitive architecture of the escape artist (and of the narrator, and, to various degrees, of other characters); closer to what they experience and how they represent their general knowledge and specific experiences in their cognitive architecture. Readers then relate these representations to their own knowledge of their own actual world and representations as well as to the text-specific knowledge offered by, or to be inferred from, the narrative.

A comparison of the transworld magician of *Ragtime* with our knowledge as recipients with the real-world (historical) Houdini, together with our knowledge of the history and society of the period, shows that the narrator’s representation of Houdini is basically reliable. It is reliable even though this is a *pseudo*-historical novel, and one would assume that the word “factual” should be inserted in inverted commas when the magician is described as a “factual rhetorheme.” The assumption is logical, but does not hold self-evidently in the case of

Doctorow's work. The author's *ars poetica* hinges upon the conviction that a "false document" (his term for the "pseudohistorical novel") can treat historical facts liberally if thereby he can bring us closer to historical truth: "[t]here is no history except as it is composed" after all. A false document so composed can be "more valid, more real, more truthful than the 'true' documents of the politicians or the journalists or the psychologists" (Doctorow, "False" 24, 26). Consequently, "Doctorow's historical characters are primarily interpretations, not historical recapitulations" (Harter and Thompson 59). This is how false "facts" serve a more credible representation of the age in the case of other transworld characters too in the novel.

No wonder that some fictive details "made their way" into the basically faithfully represented factual rhetorheme, Houdini. Doctorow admittedly made up "a lot of tricks for Houdini" and "a series of meetings that never took place" (Gussow 6). The most extreme and best-known example is the conversation that takes place between Morgan and Ford in the novel. It is possible that these two crucial figures of the age never met after all. "If you ask me," Doctorow says, "whether some things in the book 'really' happened, . . . I can only say, 'They have now'" (Clemons qtd. in Levine, *E. L. Doctorow* 61). He maintained that his technique was an inverse of Truman Capote's style of writing and of New Journalism (Gussow 5). In other words, this technique does not represent events that really happened with fictional means like "non-fiction novel" or New Journalism does; but, by distorting some circumstances and details related to figures known from history, he tries to show a "more real" image of the historical period—his method of correcting false formulae with fictional "forgery." "I'm under the illusion," he affirmed, "that all my inventions are quite true. For instance, in *Ragtime*, I'm satisfied that everything I made up about Morgan and Ford is true, whether it happened or not. Perhaps truer because it didn't happen" (Levine, "Independent Witness" 69).

According to Cushing Strout, the encounter of the novel and history may result in "the historicizing of the novel" or in "a fictionalizing of history." He happens to choose works by

Doctorow to illustrate his point that while fiction is historicized in *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime* is an example of the fictionalization of history (424). Strout is one of those who accuse the author of committing conscious anachronism. Barbara Foley shares the same view, contending that an African American ragtime pianist is not a “typical” figure of pre-WWI times, adding, specifically that an African American man using terrorist means against whites is purely anachronistic: “Both the hero and the climactic event of the novel are, I think, outrageously and deliberately anachronistic” (96). For Jameson the novel is indicative of “[a] crisis in historicity,” “the disappearance of the historical referent” (22, 25).

There are simple and more sophisticated answers to the charge that Doctorow is irresponsible in handling history. The simple ones have to do with specific details, and the sophisticated ones with the fictional philosophy of pseudohistoricism. A simple yet complex answer is offered by Berndt Ostendorf to the problematized detail whether the revengeful figure of the African American ragtime pianist is an anachronism or not. The answer lies in ragtime itself: a music relying on classical traditions, *composed* by musically trained African Americans—a true sign of rebellion because it was a conscious attempt to break from “the tyranny of white expectation” (591). White taste of the time still preferred popular minstrel shows, comic-parodic blackface minstrelsy, embedded in folk culture and interspersed with racist elements, with dance, music and farce.¹⁹ Ragtime music offers another argument, through implication, against regarding Walker’s figure anachronistic: it is the indirect relevance of ragtime musician Scott Joplin’s frustrated and twisted fate: “[t]he novel merely translates Joplin’s anger and frustration as a creative African American of his time into action and plot” (Foley qtd. in Ostendorf 597). “[R]agtime, melting as it did European melodies with African rhythms, on American soil, produced the first genuine American musical grammar.” This is the reason why ragtime music is so important for Doctorow, Theophilus Savvas wittily argues in his chapter entitled “History as a Tune on a Player Piano: *Ragtime*” (141).

But we can move beyond the false-fact details and look into the fictional philosophy of pseudohistoricism to see if Doctorow's faithfulness to the spirit rather than to the facts of history (as expounded in his false-documents ars poetica) is merely an irresponsible free play with the fictionality of historical figures or not. Here is what he said about the fictionalized Morgan of the novel:

It is true that I reject information on the basis of my own judgement and have invented some things that have no historical verification. Nevertheless, I deal with truth. I will claim, for instance, that my portrait of J. P. Morgan in *Ragtime* is truer to that man's soul and the substance of his life than his authorized biography. If I didn't think I was telling the truth, I wouldn't write. So, idiosyncratic, yes, irresponsible, no. (Sanoff 74)

Barbara Cooper noticed that while the novel may strike one as disarrayed, the movie-like frame-sequence structure—instead of being organized into a unified plot or focalized through one or two characters—serves the aim of presenting history by transcending the limiting aspectual boundaries of specific figures. The narratives of individual characters “have to be decoded as fictions of their time” (583). “Thus, Doctorow transcends anthropocentrism and confronts the problem of recording history by arranging photographic descriptions and movie sequences” (37).

Nevertheless, as has been shown, the magician embedded in a series of fictionalized elements, basically corresponds to the biographical Houdini. It has to be so since he is the salient (orienting) point of the ragtime-period landscape and the conceptual supporting pillar of the narratorial cognitive architecture, thus of the period's cultural critique; the prism through which narratorial consciousness contemplates the world and himself, as well as the epistemological motivation of the narrator's self-knowledge and knowledge of the self in particular²⁰, and

thereby a determining factor generating narratorial knowledge. The prism function is pronounced in an episode, which is placed in a privileged narrative position twice—in the opening and closing chapters. After Houdini's unexpected visit, the boy in the sailor suit followed the magician to his automobile and was gazing at "the image of himself in the shiny brass fitting of the headlight." As Houdini was bidding farewell to him, the little boy said: "Warn the Duke" (9). Years later, when Houdini "was raised to his assigned height" upside down, in a straight jacket before the great Times Square show at the end of the novel, "the year was 1914, and the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was reported to have been assassinated. It was at this moment that an image composed itself in Houdini's mind. The image was of a small boy looking at himself in the shiny brass headlamp of an automobile" (267).

It is in the Houdini phenomenon's aspectual and contextual role that *Ragtime's* hermeneutic code can be discovered through a series of local and global narrative inferences. Houdini takes the center of the "galaxy of signifiers" (Barthes 5), and his role perfectly corresponds to Roland Barthes's definition of the hermeneutic code being a system of textual maneuvers with whose assistance "an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed" (19). Houdini is mystery incarnate after all, the enigma that fascinates the little boy; the enigma, whose unfolding is the novel itself, and which is, as we have seen, the key to the storyworld(s) several times over. Thus the Houdini narrato-rhetorheme is hermeneutically coded.

What should not escape our attention is that the narrator is driven toward the celebrated Houdini by an epistemological desire for knowledge, but the escape artist also serves as a model for the future artist in him. An artist is also a kind of a showman, a magician who does not only try to make sense of the world in order to understand it, but also delights it with enchanting tricks. The idea resurfaces in Doctorow's autobiographically-inspired *World's Fair*, where the high-wire act of the circus clown led Edgar and his family "through our laughter, our fear, to

simple awe”—something that will turn out to be a determining experience for little Edgar: “There was art in the thing, the power of illusion, the mightier power of reality behind it” (116). It is no accident that several critics have called attention to Houdini as “an image of the artist-as-illusionist, a dramatization of the relationship of the modern artist and his society” (Harter and Thompson 67).

In this regard, the episode framing *Ragtime* (the narrator boy gazing at his own image in the shiny brass fitting of Houdini’s headlight) is impregnated with a special meaning. It was pointed out above that Houdini is the prism through which narratorial consciousness contemplates the world and his own self, an epistemological motive that prompts the narrator to attain self-knowledge and knowledge of the self. Now that we have seen that he is the converging point of the narrative’s relational system and organizing force, it is clear how he becomes a guide and compass for the artist. Consequently, the narrator’s image in Houdini’s mirror is the portrait of the artist, too, a metafictional self-image constructed with indirect self-reflexivity. It is a hint of an act of engagement on the part of the would-be artist (the narrator boy) as the novel opens. At the end of the novel, when it re-emerges as an involuntary memory from Houdini’s unconscious, it is a symbolic reinforcement of the bond between the narrator and the escape artist. We are dealing with the self-portraits of two artists in fact: one is that of the narrator boy, who is being transformed into an artist before our eyes; the other is the adult actual author of the novel, whose flashback to his childhood years the novel is, and who can be regarded to be the implied narrator behind the boy.

This epistemological tandem (the narrator[s] and Houdini) makes it clear that the modality of the narrative is epistemic.²¹ Modality is one of the macro-operations (the formative one) that organizes fictional worlds of narratives, Doležel argues (113). In epistemic modalities “story-generating energy” revolves around knowledge (its acquisition, growth, denial, or quests for it), secrets, mysteries, deception (Doležel 126-28). Houdini is an epistemologically oriented

character, seeking knowledge, risking the narrow path between life and death, stunt after stunt; stricken by depression because of his mother's death; wanting to learn from the example of "the heroic sandhog" who survived a horrible explosion because his was "a kind of act that used the real world for its stage"; it was "a real-world act," not an illusion (82). Houdini always strives for the most *realistic* hazardous feat possible. He despises the exploiters of knowledge, upper-class people, the wealthy, who "looked on him as a child or a fool" (27), and also the swindlers of knowledge (the spiritualists). Hidden in these details is another modality, the axiological constraint—the passion for value, for telling good and evil apart. This goes hand in hand with the principal source of narrativity and narrato-rhetorical effectiveness: deontic modality (narrative action determined by prohibition, obligation, and permission). The ragtime pianist defies racist prohibitions and is determined in standing up for truth against hatred, even with terrorist methods, if necessary.

Ragtime is, then, a fictional world of major systems and subsystems of epistemic, axiological, and deontic modalities, dramatizing search for knowledge, the difference between good and evil, amidst prohibiting-prescriptive-permissive constraints. These modal systems and subsystems, controlling so many interpersonal and community relations in the novel, all tie into the narrato-rhetorical role of Houdini, into the escape artist's function as a narrato-rhetoreme.

Conclusion

In sum, the escape artist is an aspectual coordinate and a multifunctional, multimodal cultural narrato-rhetoreme in this key text of the Doctorow oeuvre.²² It makes him a source of narrative energy, a narrativity flowing in ripples through the novel. Houdini's activity, mentality, and epistemic bent thus provide a densification zone for the cognition that holds *Ragtime*'s fictional spaces together. This Houdini function directs readerly inference toward the narrato-rhetorical essence of *Ragtime*; an essence discernible in the situational discursiveness

and the cognitivity of the novel, through an indirect and transmissive interrelation of the two. It means that we are dealing with rhetoric unfolding through a network of narrative transmission systems originating in the cognitive force field of the novel and also generated by these narrative transmission systems themselves. Houdini's narrato-rhetoremic role means that this transmissive narrato-rhetorical suasive structure is at work in it. Its analysis reveals the personal, human, and cultural relational networks of the storyworld(s), the ways they penetrate racial, gender and social differences; it lays open the cognitive (cultural critical) fine-tuning of interrelationships, and the richness of narrative technique.

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Notes

¹ This essay—translated by Tamás Tukacs and the author—was originally published in Hungarian, in *Filológiai Közöny* [Journal of Philology] 64.4 (2018): 29-54.

² There has been some controversy around his birth in Hungary until an entry in a Budapest birth register seemed to decide the question. Since then, it has been widely accepted that Harry Houdini (born Erik Weisz/Ehrich Weiss/Harry Weiss) was born on 24 March 1874, in Budapest. Doctorow became aware of this in an interview conducted by me; he had believed Hungarian-American Houdini to have been American (see Abádi-Nagy, "E. L. Doctorow" 173-74). No wonder. Houdini himself autographed a sketch a few days before his death, which Samuel Smilovitz had drawn of him, as "Houdini/Born April 6—1874/Appleton. Wisc." (Silverman 407). The date of birth recorded by Houdini is impossible in the first place because, although they did settle down in Appleton, the family—Erik included—arrived in America more than four years later, on 3 July 1878, following in the rabbi father's track (Silverman 3-4). Sometimes Houdini referred to his mother as the source of 6 April 1874 as the date of his

birth and insisted on it too. To make authorities believe that Erik had been born in the US may have been a family trick to circumvent immigration policy. “But there is no record of his having been born in Wisconsin, and in the 1880 census Erik, then aged six is recorded as having been born in Hungary. . . . [T]here is a certificate attesting to his birth—or the birth of an Erik Weiss—in Budapest on 24 March 1874” (Brandon 13). Massimo Polidoro’s Houdini monograph contends that “a little boy was born in Budapest, Hungary, Rákosárok street 1, later to become known to the world by the stage-name Houdini. The child was named Erik Weisz; he was the fourth male child of Sámuel Weisz and Cecilia Steiner.” A footnote is attached to these sentences: “These data come from the 1872-74 birth register of the Budapest Jewish community, the Israelite Parish of Pest. But Houdini claimed all through his life that he had been born in America on April 6, 1874.” On how “Erik Weisz” became “Harry Houdini,” see also Polidoro (15). As no English translation of the Polidoro monograph exists, the quotation is rendered in English by Zoltán Abádi-Nagy from the Hungarian translation of the Italian book *Houdini: Mago dell'impossibile*. The page reference is also to the Hungarian edition.

³ A term introduced by Lubomír Doležel’s possible worlds theory for historical figures appearing in literary fiction (mostly in historical novels), like Napoleon in *War and Peace* (17); and, let us add, like architect Stanford White and his seduced lover Evelyn (Florence) Nesbit and her lunatic husband, H. K. Thaw (White’s murderer); financier and banker J. P. Morgan, industrialist and business magnate Henry Ford; or the anarchist Emma Goldman in *Ragtime*.

⁴ *Ragtime* offers a critical view on both anarchism of the age and socialist revolutionism. Radical Doctorow’s personal spiritual and ideological conviction was, in John Clayton’s words, “radical Jewish humanism” (Trenner 109-19).

⁵ One example: “the job of *Ragtime* is to undercut the vision of an innocent, turn-of-the-century America, an America without economic, social, and racial problems” (Clayton 115).

As it has been pointed out, the opening sequence of an idealized image of the ragtime era (for instance, “There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants” [3-4]) is definitely ironic.

⁶ On Houdini’s “anti-spiritualist crusade” see Silverman (Chapter Sixteen).

⁷ Houdini to the boy is like the brilliant star of the high-wire act disguised as “one wistful clown” in another Doctorow novel *World’s Fair* (115). More of the significance of this parallel later below.

⁸ *Ragtime* was published forty-eight years after Houdini’s death.

⁹ The Coalhouse–Kohlhaas intertextuality was often referred to by Doctorow himself (see Lubarsky 151; Mcaffery 44; Abádi-Nagy, “E. L. Doctorow” 170-72, and has been treated by criticism extensively. Amongst others, Lieselotte E. Kurt-Voight (1977), Robert E. Helbling (1980), John Ditsky (1983), Christian Moraru (1997), and Katalin Orbán (2003) dedicated entire studies to the question.

¹⁰ For a more extensive discussion of the problem, see Abádi-Nagy, “A kultúra” [Culture] (10-15); for an extended version in English, see Abádi-Nagy, “The Rhetorical” (31-35).

¹¹ For a more detailed version, see Abádi-Nagy, “A kultúra” 23-31; and the extended English version: Abádi-Nagy, “The Rhetorical” 35-45.

¹² The concept was introduced by Foucault in the relevant subchapter of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (31-39, especially 38).

¹³ For more on the culturalization of fictional narrative, see Abádi-Nagy, “A szépprózai . . . I.” [Narrative Fiction I]; “A szépprózai . . . II.” [Narrative Fiction II]; “A trópus” [Tropes]; or, the abridged English version: Abádi-Nagy, “Fabula.”

¹⁴ For concepts of rhetoric in a general sense I turned to Adamik, A. Jászó, and Aczél (269-70).

¹⁵ For types of narrato-rhetorhemes according to narrative embedding see Abádi-Nagy, “The Rhetorical” (41-43).

¹⁶ Nünning’s study examines the narratology of cultural “worldmaking” in literary fiction, revealing its modes and phases. The questions he poses to himself are: how an “event” is constructed from a happening (by selection, abstraction, and prioritization); how a story and a narrated world are constructed from an event by configurational and emplotting maneuvers; and how sense and significance are given to the latter by perspective (Nünning 196-208).

¹⁷ As John G. Parks opines, “the novel is a syncopation of a number of oppositions and tensions: degeneration and regeneration, static forms and volatile images, repetition and change, history and fantasy, self and other, rich and poor, white and black, WASP and immigrant, narcissism and self-divestment, journeys outward and journeys inward, departures and arrivals” (63).

¹⁸ On inferences related to local and global coherence in narrative, see the constructivist theory of Gaeser, Singer and Trabasso (especially 375-76).

¹⁹ On minstrel culture and its popularity, see Virágos and Varró (170-98).

²⁰ On the distinction between self-knowledge and knowledge of the self, see Köppe and Langkau (49-50).

²¹ On modalities, see Doležel (113-32).

²² See, for instance, James Wolcott, who, in his rather adverse review of *Lives of the Poets: Six Stories and a Novella*, asks: “What’s happened to E. L. Doctorow since *Ragtime*?” (34).

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