

**EXECUTION REFASHIONING:
APPROPRIATIVE IMPROVISATION IN E. L. DOCTOROW'S
*THE BOOK OF DANIEL***

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Abstract: *Daniel Isaacson, the narrator in E. L. Doctorow's The Book of Daniel (1971), recounts the story of the life and execution of his parents, in the form of a doctoral dissertation. As a vehicle of textual politics, Daniel's narration, however, transcends a mere historical retelling of the past and fashions a personal synthesis of the ideological conflicts that have irreversibly damaged him and his family. The present article proposes to argue that Daniel's refashioning of the lives of the Isaacsons is an instance of Stephen Greenblatt's notion of "improvisation". Daniel manipulates familiar history and improvises the past into his own version of fiction, while maintaining sufficient distance. By exposing the conflicting positions in the narrative as deeply flawed ideological constructs, Daniel's appropriative improvisation gestures toward an ultimate synthesis, which, far from endorsing the Old or New Left, de-glorifies radical subversion and limns it as inefficacious.*

Keywords: *E. L. Doctorow, improvisation, Stephen Greenblatt, subversion, textual politics, The Book of Daniel*

1. Introduction

"I suppose you think I can't do the electrocution. I know there is a you. There has always been a you. You: I will show you that I can do the electrocution."
(Daniel Isaacson in Doctorow 1971: 359)

E. L. Doctorow's masterful tour de force *The Book of Daniel* (1971) loosely reenacts the life and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the couple who were convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage for the Soviet Union in 1951. The story is narrated by Daniel Isaacson, son of the Rosenbergs' fictional counterparts, Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, in the form of a doctoral dissertation. Daniel, however, eschews ordinary narration in favour of a calculated meta-narrative that weaves political rhetoric into the warp and woof of its self-reflexive texture. Although some studies have analysed the historiographic quality of Doctorow's novels or his use of fiction in narrating or, more accurately, inventing history in a subversive postmodern armature, a concentrated new historical reading of his *The Book of Daniel* in light of Stephen Greenblatt's (1980) notion of "improvisation" has not been conducted. For instance, in "Narrating History: E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*", Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua (1987) explores historical narration in the novel and the difficulties of recasting history in narrative form. Susan E. Lorsch's (1982) "Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* as *Kunstlerroman*: The Politics of Art"

and James R. Thompson's (1996) "The Artist as 'Criminal of Perception': E. L. Doctorow and the Politics of the Imagination" are studies that probe into the fictionality of history and the role of the protagonist in historical reconstruction in the novel. Also, in "Genealogy/Narrative/Power: Questions of Postmodernity in Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*", T. V. Reed (1992) examines the postmodern conceptions of the above mentioned notions, embedded in the novel. The current paper, however, tackles the subject of historical narration from a fresh perspective, by running athwart the frequently held view that Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* is disruptively polyphonic. For example, Bernice Schrank (1993) and John G. Parks (1991) both posit the strong possibility of radical political views being consistently voiced in the novel.

Another study arguing for the sustained presence of subversive polyphony in the novel is by Bimbisar Irom (2012), who maintains that *The Book of Daniel* occupies a liminal space between retreat and engagement, critiquing both the Old and the New Left. This paper proposes to argue, instead, that the prospect of radical subversion is ultimately limned as hopeless in the foregoing novel, as the opposing voices are eventually contained in the protagonist's narrative refashioning. Accordingly, focusing on a character rather than on Doctorow himself, the present study posits that Daniel's refashioning of the lives of the Isaacsons into a story as a postgraduate dissertation is an instance of Greenblatt's notion of "improvisation", with significant political implications. As a vehicle of textual politics, Daniel's narrative improvisation is not intended to impact on the other characters in the story, but, rather, on the reader, whom Daniel occasionally addresses directly. Thus, Daniel's appropriative improvisation of the story of his family's life transcends a mere historical narrative of the past, seeking, instead, to provide a personal synthesis of the ideological conflicts that have irrevocably damaged him and his family. However, it will be argued that the synthesis is an improvisatory refashioning that de-glorifies radical subversion and portrays it as ineffectual, thereby dramatically undermining ostensible polyphony in favour of an acquiescent compromise verging on political quietism.

2. Improvisation and narrative self-fashioning

In his influential essay "The Improvisation of Power", Greenblatt (2005: 165) defines improvisation as "the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" or as "the opportunistic grasp of what seems fixed and established"; as a product of "careful preparation," the improvisatory visage of this ability is actually "a calculated mask" that involves the manipulation of received materials into "a novel shape". The process also entails "displacement" and "absorption," the accomplishment of which requires the improviser to lend himself to "role-playing" (idem: 167, 171). Insinuating himself into the preexisting political, religious, and even psychic structures of his milieu, he turns those structures to his advantage and recasts them into a new shape, detached from their original truth-packed position. In other words, the improviser must fictionalise given materials in order to produce his own interpretation. Furthermore, Greenblatt (idem: 166) adds, "improvisation is made possible by the subversive perception of another's truth as an ideological construct" that is concurrently distant and familiar. This apperception of others' truths as malleable ideological constructs contributes to the improviser's scope of displacement and appropriation.

Similarly, Daniel rewrites familiar history and improvises the past into his own version of fiction, while maintaining sufficient distance. He possesses a talent for entering into the consciousness of another, discerning its most deeply rooted structures as manipulable fiction or, in Greenblatt's (idem: 170) terms, "flexible construct[s]", and refashioning them into his own narrative form. His act of story-making uncovers a belief in the fictionality of the past. Daniel's heightened self-consciousness, coupled with an acute empathetic disposition, makes him what he calls a "criminal of perception" (Doktorow 2006: 37). According to Greenblatt (2005: 171), a successful improvisation depends on "role-playing, which is, in turn, allied to the capacity, as Professor Lerner defines empathy, to see oneself in the other fellow's situation". Analogously, Daniel's narration is filtered through a third-person Daniel, a first-person Daniel, and even Paul and Rochelle, which signifies Daniel's empathetic self-cancellation as the writer of the dissertation. Just like Greenblatt's improviser, the author of the dissertation can "exist for a moment in another and as another" (idem: 172). This self-cancellation helps to efface the traces of the "power" and "possession" that the improviser holds over others (idem: 170). In fact, the calculated diffusion of the foregoing psychic mobility lends credence to the accounts of the dialectical voices presented in the narrative, a rhetorical technique calibrated to obscure the subjective lineaments of the narrator's political analysis as well as the signs of his appropriative power. On the one hand, Daniel the writer fashions Daniel the character(s) assuming multiple points of view in such a way that the fragmentation and heterogeneity of the self contribute to the interplay between the multiple voices of history, prior to the fabrication of his personal synthesis. On the other hand, Daniel's occasional self-effacement in his narrative refashioning is, in effect, a displacement and absorption of the other masquerading under the guise of empathy, whereas such empathy entails the draining of the object of its substance, in order for it to serve as "an appropriate vessel" for the improviser (Greenblatt 2005: 172).

Daniel also seems to be well aware of what Greenblatt describes as "the dependence of even the innermost self upon a language that is always necessarily given from without and upon representation before an audience" (idem: 179). Nonetheless, his act of story-making transcends a mere attempt to evoke pity for himself by becoming a tale of himself. Daniel's concerns initially seem more in line with Frank Lentricchia's (1980: xiv) concern with "the multiplicity of histories", history as characterised by "forces of heterogeneity, contradiction, fragmentation, and difference". Daniel's fictionalisation of the past registers a potential shift from "History" to histories, which would encompass, at first blush, a subversive and polyphonic perception of the past. However, the multiplicity of voices that initially carries a patina of polyphony in the representation of the "forces of heterogeneity" (ibid.) does not hold out in Daniel's appropriative narrative. This restriction demarcates the point at which the current study departs from and disarticulates the claim to disruptive polyphony in the novel proposed in a number of the studies mentioned above.

3. "[A] portrait of electric current, normally invisible, moving through a field of resistance"

Despite his uncomfortable oscillations between three different standpoints, that is to say, Old Left, New Left, and, to a much lesser degree, a right-wing stance, Daniel's improvisation eventually manipulates all three ideological constructs in

his own personal narrative in such a way as to reach a compromise that may, in fact, prove conducive to the status quo. His use of textual politics in narrative form strongly recalls Terry Eagleton's (2008: 123) reading of deconstructive texts: "Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible instead to subvert the structures of language. Nobody, at least, was likely to beat you over the head for doing so". Eagleton (1996: 4) traces the postmodern proclivity for textualisation to the epochal shift from revolutionary transformation to textual subversion that transpired in the late '60s and '70s. In other words, textual politics could serve as a means of compensating for an undermined capacity for action or "political powerlessness" (Montrose 1989: 26). In a similar fashion, Daniel opts for writing as the proper outlet for his ostensible dissent. This has the potential to become an expedient proxy for political action. Nevertheless, far from a mere ventilation of a dissenting voice, Daniel's capitalisation on textual improvisation is a way of negotiating and reconciling the past, the present, and the future, but, as Greenblatt (2005: 186) also points out, "even a hostile improvisation reproduces the relations of power that it hopes to displace and absorb".

Ultimately, none of the opposing positions proves effective or worthwhile in Daniel's narrative refashioning. The Isaacsons meant nothing to the impetuous New Left and received virtually no support from the conservative Old Left. In respect of the Old Left, Daniel contemptuously remarks, "Communists have no respect for people, only for positions ... you blind them with your ideals and while they are looking up you stab them in the belly for the sake of your ideals" (Doktorow 2006: 248). In one of the instances in which the reaction of the Old Left to the incarceration of Mr. and Mrs. Isaacson is revealed, Robert Lewin, Daniel's foster father, notes: "Of course the Party made no effort to help them" (idem: 268). As a matter of fact, at another point, Daniel states that within twenty-four hours of his parents' arrest, they were both "written out of the Party. They were erased from the records. The party did not want to be associated with anyone up on an espionage rap. Quickly and quietly erased out of existence." (idem: 151).

As for the attitude of the New Left toward the Isaacsons, the part in Book Two, Halloween, where Daniel meets Artie Sternlicht, a guru of the New Left, contains revelatory observations. The anarchistic and impudent Artie observes, "You want to know what was wrong with the old American Communists? They were into the system. They wore ties. They held down jobs. They put people up for president. They thought politics is something you do at a meeting. When they got busted they called it tyranny" (idem: 186). Artie's hectoring diatribes betoken a radical departure from the founding ethos of the republic toward an actively sustained anarchistic dissidence. Redirecting his attention to the Isaacsons, he remarks,

Your folks didn't know shit. The way they handled themselves at their trial was pathetic. I mean they played by *their* rules. The government's rules. You know what I mean? ... they made motions, they pleaded innocent, they spoke only when spoken to, they played the game ... the whole frame of reference brought them down because they acted like defendants at a trial. (Doktorow 2006: 186)

Unlike the Isaacsons, who, in Artie's words, played by the government's rules, Artie asserts that if he is put on trial and found guilty, he will "find them guilty. And I won't come on except as a judge of them, a new man, like a new nation with new laws of life" (idem: 187). In other words, he would be assuming a

position of authority as a new man following the laws and principles of his own making, not as a victim still clutching at a covert belief in the system. Revolution for the New Left, in contradistinction to the Old Left, consists in action-packed insurgency and destructive anarchy, both of which ultimately prove ineffectual and abortive in Daniel's narrative refashioning.

Moreover, finding the senile Mindish immersed in the quintessential capitalist temple, Disneyland, while riding an Autopia, which "offers only the illusion of steering to the person behind the wheel" (idem: 353), registers the upshot of the old Communist ideals, that is to say, a demeaning assimilation into the cretinising and etherising world of consumerism. Daniel's part in establishing the foundation dedicated to his parents seems little more than a kind and compensatory gesture for his dying sister, Susan, with whose radical impulses Daniel hardly ever agreed, and who, he concludes, "died of a failure of analysis" (idem: 365). Daniel's sharp pen cuts in both directions. In fact, his own temporary involvement in New Left radicalism only serves to contribute to the purposeful impression of a polyphonic dialogue that consists in the appraisal of the opposing voices, which ultimately terminates with further skepticism and discontent. Daniel's brooding about his part in revolutionary protests during the one night he spent in jail reflects his increasing unease and all too familiar disillusion:

I will tell now how one boy in the big cell, in this grand community of brotherhood bust, how this one boy is unable to share the bruised cheery fellowship of his companions or care for gossip that Artie Sternlicht has topped everyone by landing in the hospital . . . but sits in the corner, unable to stretch out full length, a spasm of *wariness* bowing his spine, knotting his fingers to his palms, his knees to his chest, his head to his knees. He cannot enjoy such places. They are too *familiar*. He knows how far they are from home. (Doktorow 2006: 313; italics added)

The devastating impacts of his childhood trauma caused by the draconian punishment of his parents reverberate through his reflection, as he intimates that he is too "familiar" with these situations to labour under the illusion of effecting a dramatic change in the status quo through radical political action. He is too "sensitive" to survive such places and has been through too much to be able to unswervingly advocate such mentality, which, in his experience, always lands one in the all "too familiar" place, namely, prison.

Daniel's casual indifference to the outbreak of student protests at Columbia University at the very end of the novel is another testament to his ultimate disavowal and distrust of radical activism. When someone comes into the library asking Daniel to leave, as they are shutting down the university, he reluctantly replies, "You mean I have to get out?" in answer to which the protestor grumbles, "Close the book, man, what's the matter with you, don't you know you're liberated?" (Doktorow 2006: 367). Daniel's nonchalant indifference gives away his misgivings about radical subversion, initially obfuscated in his rhetorical mobility. In fact, Daniel's narrative accommodates "the multiplicity of histories" and "forces of heterogeneity," bearing a veneer of subversive polyphony, only to contain the disruptive forces in a tacit reconciliation with the established power. By exposing the disparate positions in the narrative as deeply flawed ideological constructs, Daniel turns the past to his own advantage in a way that renders any future evidence of his parents' guilt or innocence futile and irrelevant, as he reflects, "perhaps they are neither guilty nor innocent" (idem: 159-160).

Daniel's fictionalisation of the catastrophic ramifications of radical subversion marks a recourse to the safer and less destructive territory of narrative and its cathartic promise, by which a nonviolent compromise can be orchestrated. Daniel's improvisatory refashioning of the life and execution of his parents effectively constitutes what is akin to an invisible electric current that passes through the potentially subversive field of resistance, arresting the flow of polyphony along the way by the portrayal of radical politics as hopelessly dysfunctional. Daniel concocts a rhetorical antidote to the noxious ideological constructs that have ruined his family, in a bid to put to the test and call into question the ideological ideals and values that recede infinitely out of reach and never seem to materialise in practice. Pushing opposing ideological structures to the background, Daniel endeavours to keep the politics of dominance and subversion at a distance in and through his narrative refashioning, while covertly conducting to the status quo by containing virtually all attempts at far-reaching disruption. Consequently, Daniel's improvisation is intended to operate on the readers, who might be wavering between ideals promoted by the Old Left and the New Left, in such a way as to disabuse them of fancy notions like radical subversion and revolution.

4. Conclusion

The synthesis formulated by Daniel's narrative improvisation exceeds the status of a mere cathartic ventilation of radical impulses by means of textual politics, hinting instead at a rhetorically framed resignation to the status quo, which could also be seen as the unacknowledged complicity of Daniel's narrative refashioning with established power. In other words, the final product of Daniel's improvisation disapproves of radical subversion and, by extension, of strict adherence to both left- and right-wing politics and, instead, promotes a compromise that, *ipso facto*, borders on quietism. As a result, despite its misleading first impression, Daniel's narrative improvisation cunningly employs the veneer of polyphony only to contain its constituent voices at the end by portraying all subversive acts as ineffectual and futile.

Having learned from experience, Daniel has ultimately come to the conclusion that, in the capitalist system of the U.S., radical subversion is doomed to disastrous failure with dire consequences, and the closest one can get to a subversive gesture is by appropriative improvisation in writing. Nonetheless, while improvising and fashioning stories within the confines of the system may theoretically compensate for political quiescence, rhetorical narratives such as Daniel's concurrently betray a tacit concession to the system by manipulating the reader into eschewing radical political action, thereby subserving the containment of radically subversive forces.

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