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Swallowed futures, indigestible pasts

Post-apocalyptic narratives of rights in Kleist and Doctorow

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Abstract Previous analyses of the intertextual relations between Heinrich von Kleist's 'Michael Kohlhaas' (1810–11) and E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1976[1975]) have focused on adaptation, assessing the changes made to the original. By contrast, this article focuses on what motivates the choice of Kleist's novella as an intertext in the first place and argues for a different, narrative logic binding the two. Both texts fixate with great ambivalence on the potential for transcending pervasive difference in the general and common, and they are both post-apocalyptic responses, alternately tragic and ironic visions of transcended difference. Together, the two tell a story of the discursive formation and deformation of the idea of universal human rights – a story that suspends the discourse of human rights between two traumatic moments of articulation and violence (in the late 18th century and the mid-20th century, respectively) that animate, yet remain inaccessible to each text.

Keywords E.L. Doctorow ● Heinrich von Kleist ● human rights ● intertextuality ● memory ● narrative ● trauma

At the time when the extended intertextual connection between Heinrich von Kleist's 'Michael Kohlhaas' (1810–11) and E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1976[1975]) was being most discussed, it was examined primarily as a case of adaptation. In fact, *Ragtime*'s resurrection of Kohlhaas, the horse-dealer, as Coalhouse Walker Jr, a ragtime player, became the occasion for the first extended academic discussion of Doctorow's status as a serious

writer.¹ This debate was largely devoted to the explication of detailed correspondences between the Michael Kohlhaas plot set in Brandenburg and Saxony as narrated in Kleist's eponymous novella written in the early 1800s and its version in the parallel extended subplot of Doctorow's novel (where the black Ford Model T takes the place of Kohlhaas' beautiful black horses or Booker T. Washington plays the role of Martin Luther) and to analyzing the transformation of the original, where, particularly for the Kleist specialists involved, the German writer served as a standard of mastery that Doctorow's appropriation of the plotline was supposed to match. The question of the two texts' relation can be posed, however, with a reverse chronology: of all world literature, what makes Kleist's novella such an attractive intertext for *Ragtime*? Doctorow himself has offered various stylistic reasons for this, casting his recycling of the Kleist story essentially as a generic-stylistic homage, but – departing at least partially from the analyses of adaptation – I would like to argue for a different, slightly more *narrative* logic for this connection, one that is perhaps more apparent today than it could have been at the time *Ragtime* came out or when most of the scholarly debate about its relation to Kleist took place.

The parallel plotlines, which are emphatically *stories of rights* in both texts, evoke two important points in the discursive formation of rights (and humanity) as conceivably universal; their intertextuality is a shadow narrative suspending the discourse of human rights between two traumatic moments of articulation and violence, which one might abbreviate with the titles *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, while turning these moments into impossible, inaccessible times within the storytelling. Both Kleist's and Doctorow's texts focus, with great ambivalence, on the potential for transcending pervasive difference, for the dissolving of borders and the merging of divisions – and they are both post-apocalyptic responses, alternately tragic and ironic visions of transcended difference. In 'Michael Kohlhaas' this idea of transcended difference is suspended in a state of ominous, dynamic formation; we will never have narrative access to its arrival and explosive articulation (that transformative moment, let us call it the French revolution, haunts the text, but never arrives); *Ragtime*'s concluding vision of familial integration of difference and the gang of 'white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds' (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 369) is constructed as ironically anachronistic, though the future moment that will have thoroughly ironized such visions of transcended difference never comes into view in the narrative.

'Nothing is not a telephone number or any number including zero. It's not science and in particular it's not black-hole physics, which is not nothing but physics,' says Donald Barthelme, and explicating absences is indeed a difficult, shadowy business that requires one to view texts from odd vantage points (Barthelme, 1982: 246). Unlike in Kleist's other stories that *treat* the traumatic memory of the French Revolution as a memory that can be – what's more, *ought to be* – narrated, in 'Michael Kohlhaas'

both the French Revolution and the birth of human rights are at work only as a species of counter-memory, as terminally unnarratable concepts and events. Doctorow's *Ragtime* continues this story in a similarly elliptical fashion, at a point when the idea of universal humanity is not in a state of perpetual becoming as it is in Kleist, but rather under the pressure of disintegration. Both texts are written from the perspective of 'an ominous and symptomatic aftermath' (Berger, 1999: 21), and as each lives in breathless anticipation of 'the future' that is already past – it is, in fact, each text's very own vanished, forgotten past – what is at stake is history and historical memory itself. It is this relentless, forward-looking yet amnesiac perspective that connects the two stories very closely. In both, in true post-apocalyptic fashion, the projected, spectral future is already past, though it is yet to happen: a forgotten past that haunts the narratives as a future that is always on the brink of arrival and dawning on a diegetic world to be 'changed, changed utterly'. In the former case this approaching apocalyptic transformation would *bring* universal humanity; in the latter case it would *take* it – were it ever to arrive.

'Michael Kohlhaas', for the most part, recounts the fight of a horse-dealer for justice, a fight that rapidly escalates in the course of the text to conclude with the restitution of the horses and the execution of their wronged owner. The conflict starts from a groundless claim that Kohlhaas needs to have a permit to cross the Brandenburg-Saxony border and that he needs to leave his two valuable black horses as security. From this border-crossing conflict the narrative, like a compressed spring, releases itself into the intricate legal affairs and increasingly violent struggle that earn Kohlhaas the characterization offered in the very first paragraph: 'one of the most honourable [or, in other translations: righteous] as well as one of the most terrible men of his age' (Kleist, 1978: 114). A storyline, introduced about four-fifths of the way into the story, concerns a significant and to us never revealed prediction written on a piece of paper that Kohlhaas swallows on the gallows a split second before his beheading. The madness of the plotline involving this piece of paper – as a conclusion that emerges from thin air and takes over the narrative, it can hardly be called a *subplot* – is due not only to the employment of a prediction-prone mysterious gypsy woman, the reliance on ridiculous coincidence and magnificent heights of imperial hysterics, but to the extravagant disruption of the ostensible narrative logic that seemed to hold the excessive, barely containable details of the chronicle together. The content and function of this emphatic swallowing of the text of the diegetic future – and the text of the past, as far as Kleist's writing is concerned – is related to the idea of universal humanity I referred to above, and more specifically, to the role the traumatic historical memory of the French revolution plays in the text. In order to address the question of the emphatically secret text of the future, swallowed in the concluding death scene, I first need to examine the relations between the opaque, proliferating and indistinct legal *state* and its disappearance in a less fragmented *world* in the text.

From the very first border-crossing that prompts Kohlhaas' harassment by the Junker von Tronka, the narrative unfolds through an array of conflicts that result from the 'indeterminate allegiances' and 'jurisdictional perplexity' of a post-medieval early modern society (Sussman, 1997: 128, 117), the continuum of which extends from the complete opacity of detail in multiple borders, authorities, jurisdictions, and affiliations to the violently insane clarity of transcending these. Kohlhaas undergoes a twofold development, while attempting to pursue his 'claim against Junker Wenzel von Tronka' and to get redress for 'the abominable injustice committed against him at Tronka Castle' (Kleist, 1978: 133, 129): the cycle of retelling and rewriting his struggle for justice becomes increasingly violent as he moves through a legal maze constituted by a bewildering array of proceedings, texts and relations, and he progressively uproots himself to act on behalf of a larger and eventually universal constituency. The basic setting that emerges from and is embodied in Kleist's overburdened, elaborate sentences – sentences stretched and split to a breaking-point of syntactic coherence – is a fractured, multi-centered, morphing field, where distinctions keep intruding in the form of interpolated minute details and qualifications, to the point where knowledge necessarily dissolves into a microscopic vision of nonsensical factuality.

The chronicle's history is, in this respect, an incomprehensible legal text with inscrutable technicalities that constitute rather than hide reality. I will quote a characteristic, brief example of such factual detail, taken from the description of events following Kohlhaas' arrival in Dresden, after he had been granted safe conduct to that city by the Elector of Saxony on Luther's recommendation (Kleist, 1978: 160), when the horse-dealer is in the process of finding out that he is in fact taken prisoner there in violation of the amnesty provisionally promised to him, just at the point he is claimed as a subject of Brandenburg by the helpful Elector of that state (p. 185). (This summary is a mercifully restrained introduction to the packed details that fill the 24 pages of this episode.) Kohlhaas, who for some unstated reason – unstated in a tortuous 12-line sentence to be sure – wishes to leave Dresden, at least in part to test if he is allowed free passage at all, learns from the Grand Chancellor that in his current circumstances the necessary procedure for travel is procuring a passport from the Prince of Meissen:

Kohlhaas, who could read the Grand Chancellor's face well, was only strengthened in his resolve, and sitting down immediately he wrote to the Prince of Meissen, as chief government administrator, requesting a passport to Kohlhaasenbrück for one week, without giving any reason. In reply to this letter, he received an official communication, signed by the commandant Baron Siegfried von Wenk, to the effect that his application for a passport to Kohlhaasenbrück would be submitted to His Serene Highness the Elector, and that as soon as the gracious consent were forthcoming the passport would be sent to him. When Kohlhaas inquired of his lawyer why this governmental

communication was signed by a Baron Siegfried von Wenk and not by Prince Christien von Meissen to whom he had applied, he was told that the Prince had gone to his estates three days ago and in his absence government business had been transferred to the commandant Baron Siegfried von Wenk, a cousin of the gentleman of the same name we mentioned earlier. Kohlhaas, whose heart began to beat uneasily at all these complications, waited for several days for a decision on his request which had been submitted with such surprising circumstantiality to the person of the sovereign. (Kleist, 1978: 178)

The circumstantiality of negotiating and constantly renegotiating free passage, a recurring example within a broad range of procedural detail, appears simultaneously in the process and its description (syntactically simplified in the English translation). It is in this context of negotiable, difficult passage that Kohlhaas' mobility and deracination need to be read.

From the earliest stage of his struggle, Kohlhaas' approach to the world wavers between one of worldly experience that is anchored in an imperfect, particular reality and a notion of the world substantially relieved of such particularity. The more his mobility increases, the more powerful the latter attitude becomes. Kohlhaas' worldly experience is itself associated with a degree of mobility – the extensive movements of a well-traveled man (for instance, he suspects the request for a permit at the beginning of the story is a fraud, because 'he had crossed the border seventeen times in his life without such a document; [and] he was accurately informed about all the state regulations affecting his trade' (Kleist, 1978: 115). As this basic mobility grows through successive stages of being uprooted from 'house and land', Kohlhaas' ties to his own experience of the imperfect world increasingly come under pressure and become tenuous, while the latter notion of a world at large begins to 'take ever deeper root' in him (pp. 131, 121).

[D]espite the insults he had suffered, experience had already given him a realistic sense of the imperfection inherent in the order of the world, and this feeling inclined him to accept the loss of the horses as a just consequence, should the groom be in some part guilty as the castle warden had claimed. At the same time another equally praiseworthy feeling began to take ever deeper root in him as he rode along and heard, wherever he stopped, of the daily injustices committed at Tronka Castle against travellers: a feeling that if the whole affair had been deliberately preconceived, as it certainly appeared to have been, it was now his duty to the world at large to exert all his powers in securing redress for the wrongs already perpetrated and protection for his fellow citizens against such wrongs in the future. (Kleist, 1978: 121)

Such a transfer of 'roots' marks a competition for physically embodied natural allegiances – soon Kohlhaas could 'take no further pleasure in breeding horses, or in his home and farm, or scarcely even in his wife and children' (p. 130) – posed by a more general and abstract idea of what is

natural, or monstrous, as the case may be. What is significant in the passage quoted above, in addition to the fact that Kohlhaas keeps riding hither and thither while embracing his duty to the world at large, is that his potential allegiance to the universal constituency rarely reaches the limit point of being completely disconnected from some non-universal constituency. The duty is to the 'world at large', but it is also a duty to redress wrongs against Kohlhaas' fellow citizens (*Mitbürger*). Although Kohlhaas moves from writing petitions to writing edicts based on 'the authority inborn in him' claimed without any qualifications or restrictions (p. 137), by his second writ he becomes 'a freeman of *the Empire and the world*, subject to God alone' (p. 143, emphasis added).

This limit to decoupling an abstract sense of rights and duties to the world at large from physical embodiments of wrongs and redress appears tellingly in Kohlhaas' worry that his horses might be returned, though his claim might not be recognized. 'Well schooled in the world's ways though he was, this would have been the one eventuality to which his feelings could have found no fitting response'. When he finds out the horses are not being returned, however, 'in the midst of his grief at *seeing the world in such monstrous disorder*, an inward sense of contentment now flooded over him as he found harmony within his own heart' (p. 131). While this could certainly imply that the sense of universal injustice is more important than the horses themselves, it means more than that; it also shows that for Kohlhaas, at least at this stage of the narrative, there is a limit to abstracting claims and decoupling them from corresponding physical embodiments of wrongs and redress, a limit that deprives Kohlhaas of an adequate response should his claim be relieved of the horses and float *in abstracto*. An analogous reluctance often appears in analyses of Kleist's more general predisposition 'continually to hypostasize, i.e. to make substantial and to reify, that is to endow with thing character, what is living and mutable', the defensive strategy of someone with a 'deep ontological insecurity, born of a defective sense of identity' who therefore cannot safely afford to indulge in giving up solid objects for radical abstraction (Graham, 1980: 13).

This clinging to embodiment, to the thingliness of things, effectively ensures in 'Michael Kohlhaas' that any consolidated, fully formed idea of natural, universal 'rights of man' is inaccessible beyond the vanishing points of vague, unidentifiable feelings, moments of bewilderment, and literal disappearance (the swallowed prophecy). Correspondingly, rights of a universal constituency, as narrated in the text, are suspended in a state of dynamic formation moving to some never-reached moment of violent, perfect articulation. This never-reached moment coincides, as it were, with the virtual position of the French Revolution in this memorial optics; it is exactly where and when the French Revolution would be, were it able to appear in this text. Beatrice Guenther convincingly argues that the character of Martin Luther, mirroring Kohlhaas' in the duality of

insurrectionism and authority, invokes a resting-point for the endless substitutions that result from the disconnection of the written word from a 'stable or just source' in 'Michael Kohlhaas'. Guenther points out that the 'uneasy, endless series of substitutions that seem to characterize Kleist's narratives' are not unlike the 'faulty, valueless exchanges that Luther had outlined in his critique of papal Rome' (Guenther, 1996: 38, 41), which would suggest that Luther delineates a figure not only in the sense of a character, but in the sense of figuration too: the unattainable limit to endless substitution and ungrounded textuality, an instability Guenther, like many other critics, finds 'evident in the proliferation of the Kohlhaas Mandates', the horse-dealer's proclamations (p. 41).

Without discounting the significance of this play of substitution for an overall skepticism about the written word and the legal word in particular or discounting the role of Luther as a figure for its unattainable limit, I would like to underscore the *temporal* limits imposed on this play and emphasize the significance of another 'unattainable limit': the memory of an emblematic violent articulation of the rights of man. The fact that the drama of the law is encapsulated in Kohlhaas' life – as if the text opened and then shut the old chronicle identified in the subtitle as the source of the story – allows the future of diegetic time to become the great unsaid of the text. The 'uneasy, endless series of substitutions', in fact, come to a spectacular close in the gallows scene, where the concurrent deaths of text and human being are enacted in the final scene of the force of law exercised on and by Kohlhaas. (Kohlhaas is given legal 'satisfaction', swallows the prophetic text of the future, and by his immediate death 'makes satisfaction'. One might argue, only half-facetiously, that this procedure ensures that this future, literally undigested, can never turn into an integrated past.) Consequently, the 'series of substitution' is endless only to the extent that the *whole* of the narrative comes to figure something absent from it: the crystallization of the very rights discourse which in its monstrous formation makes the text's protagonist both the most righteous and the most dreadful person, and which the text, 'Michael Kohlhaas' omits by referring back to an antecedent, disconnected and self-enclosed past. Consequently, unlike Kleist's other stories that construct reflections of revolution (often in peripheral, colonial settings), treating 'Michael Kohlhaas' as such a reflection is impossible on the narrative's own terms, despite any correspondences. Unlike 'The Earthquake in Chile' or 'The Betrothal in Santo Domingo', this novella resolutely represses its future as a possible memory.

At a particularly complicated stage in the legal proceedings interwoven with the escalating warfare, Luther's letter on behalf of Kohlhaas provokes some brainstorming in the palace as to the best strategy for dealing with the horse-dealer. Before the discussion once again moves in the direction of legal sophistry in the interest of 'political expediency', a telling comment is made by one of the participants.

After an embarrassed silence on all sides, Count Kallheim remarked that by such means they would never break out of the charmed circle in which they were caught. On such grounds it would be equally justifiable to put the Prince's nephew Friedrich on trial, for during the special expedition that he had led against Kohlhaas he had exceeded his instructions in a number of ways; thus, if there was to be a reckoning with all those who had caused the present embarrassment, Prince Friedrich would also have to be included among them and called upon by the sovereign to answer for what had happened at Mühlberg. At this point, as the Elector crossed to his desk with a look of perplexity the Cupbearer Hinz von Tronka spoke in his turn (Kleist, 1978: 159)

In *The Aesthetic Contract*, Henry Sussman discusses this scene at length as one of the two exemplary, detail-filled painterly scenes of the text that illustrate 'the demonic textual web of conflicting authorities in which Kohlhaas has gotten caught and in which his quest for justice has embroiled a vast host of others' (Sussman, 1997: 124), identifying in this scene four different, potentially competing levels of authority.

Sussman devotes his attention particularly *to* the charmed circle itself in which the officials are caught:

The substantive points – who is right, to whom the horses belong, what retributions or compensations must be made – are far less significant than the fact that conflict, proliferation, and displacement have evolved into a counter-system of their own, a system that is counter to the logic, determination, and felicity with which human affairs in this society (or these societies) are ordinarily governed. (Sussman, 1997: 125)

Not accidentally, Sussman's lengthy quotation stops exactly where mine starts above: the phrase 'they would never break out of the charmed circle in which they were caught'. For what I find exemplary in this scene is not only the construction of what Sussman calls a 'decadent Gothic architecture', with too many strains of competing authorities to avoid the eruption of conflict, but also the impossibility that lies beyond that circle: in the rhetorical use of the necessary impossible consequence by which the premise can be proved false, that impossibility is the equal extension of the legal process to all participants, regardless of their place in the feudal/imperial hierarchy ('On such grounds it would be *equally justifiable* to put the Prince's nephew Friedrich on trial' and 'if there was to be a *reckoning with all* those who had caused the present embarrassment, Prince Friedrich would also have to be included among them'). While the Elector's reaction of 'perplexity' is interpretable within the field of conflicts within the circle and his crossing to his desk as a step in the refined and excessively polite choreography of this dance of power (as in Sussman's reading), it also ought to be recognized as a variant of Kohlhaas' perplexity when he faces the possibility of thinking the idea of the 'rights of man' as separable from his embodied claims (the horses): it is an unease

so quickly subsumed in the continuing advance of the events (the discussion results in the short-lived amnesty to Kohlhaas) that it does not even amount to an irony of anachronistic premonition.

It is an important feature of Kleist's novella that the logical *conclusion* to be drawn from those fragments of the idea of human rights that surface during Kohlhaas' progress to the gallows ultimately remains obscure. Being at best liminal, this conclusion can furnish no historical continuity between the chronicle's time and that of the novella's writing. Therefore it is a hazardous procedure to postulate some sort of continuity in an analysis of the novella, since this will be based upon the fact that *we readers* happen to know – as the writer of the text of course must have known – that the French Revolution happened and Kohlhaas' proclaimed rights are not unrelated to this. In a study of 'the motif of rebellion in Kleist's work in the force field of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars', Gonthier-Louis Fink, for example, considers revolution as manifest in Kohlhaas' rebellion against the state – albeit manifest in a tendentially depraved version of revolution. Comparing the novella to others where the motif of rebellion is prominent ('The Earthquake in Chile' and 'The Betrothal in Santo Domingo'), Fink identifies the distinctness of 'Michael Kohlhaas' as residing in the attempt to invest the historical legal state (of Brandenburg) with a utopian alternative to revolution (which, let me add, would retroactively erase the need for the revolution, which consequently would never have happened) and with the redeeming righteousness and high-mindedness of Kohlhaas, which possibly elevates his revolt above the brutal mob scenes of Kleist's other relevant stories. The text's ambivalence about the righteous terror or terrible righteousness represented by Kohlhaas – an ambivalence Fink describes as a tension between a conservative critique of revolution and the satirical representation of the status quo (Fink, 1988–9: 80) – is beyond doubt. However, the correspondences assumed in this argument between rebellion, revolt and revolution seem dubious, insofar as they are based on a hindsight the novella consistently blocks.

Fink argues that the horse-dealer's non-materialistic motivations and goals raise him – and thus arguably his rebellion – above the deeply compromised brutal violence and purely material motivation of rebellion as represented by his plunder-hungry followers (p. 76) and consequently make him a partial exception to the recurrent representation of revolution as anarchic revolt in Kleist's stories. The claim that Kohlhaas' investment in a legal discourse of rights and his commitment to a large, occasionally universal constituency complicate the critique of revolution is questionable not only because it establishes a false contrast between the law and violence (the two of which are, in fact, intimately connected in the text), but also because Kohlhaas' revolt cannot be identified with revolution on the novella's own narrative terms. Unlike 'The Betrothal in Santo Domingo', which narrates the emblematic story of revolution, characteristically in the form of the retelling of a character's traumatic memory,

'Michael Kohlhaas' refers to revolution as a counter-memory: not a dark, skeptical, partial vision of revolution-as-anarchy, but the unnarratable collapse of the distinctions that constitute the ambivalently represented, fully narrated mess of Kohlhaas's rebellion, 'the order of the state . . . disrupted on account of this man' (Kleist, 1978: 158).

Both in 'The Betrothal' and in 'The Earthquake', scenes of mourning and lapses of memory are narrated in marked contrast to the structurally, temporally traumatic narrative of 'Michael Kohlhaas'. After the gallows scene of 'The Earthquake', the execution having been interrupted by natural disaster, the protagonists doubt their grasp of the past in the wake of the earthquake: 'they did not know what to think of the recent past: of the place of execution, the prison and the bells; or had all these been merely a dream? It seemed that in everyone's mind, after the terrible blow that had so shaken them all, there was a spirit of reconciliation. Their memories seemed not to reach back beyond the disaster' (Kleist, 1978: 59). In 'The Betrothal', the emblematic guillotine scene is constructed as a scene of memory and mourning, in which the protagonist shares the narrative of the loss of his fiancée at the hands of the 'impatient butchers' of the newly established French Revolutionary Tribunal: 'The terrible and moving circumstances in which I lost her come back so vividly to my mind and fill me with such sorrow that I cannot restrain my tears' (Kleist, 1978: 245). The scene, with its emphasis on articulation – ineffectual at the scene of trauma, but effectual in the scene of memory and mourning – stands in marked contrast to the non-utterance of the Kohlhaas execution. Whereas the Kohlhaas execution is dominated by withheld information, the protagonist of 'The Betrothal' remembers the corresponding scene as follows:

I emerged from the hiding-place into which I had fled, and hastened, pushing my way through the crowd, to the place of execution, where I shouted at the top of my voice: 'Here I am, you inhuman monsters!' But she, already standing on the platform beside the guillotine, on being questioned by some of the judges who as ill-fortune would have it did not know me by sight, gave me one look which is indelibly imprinted on my soul, and then turned away, saying: 'I have no idea who that man is!' (Kleist, 1978: 246)

Beside narrating memory and its failures, another common feature of the execution scenes in the two other stories is a full-blown, unencumbered universality – once again in stark contrast to 'Michael Kohlhaas'. Universality appears in both other texts as a demonic version of utter interchangeability: the 'here I am' of the quotation above is an ineffectual denial of the idea that any human being serves equally well as a substitute for the intended victim of pseudo-legal persecution. Those seeking the storyteller's arrest insist 'on some victim or other', dragging his fiancée instead of him to the scaffold.

This choreography of mistaken identity that quickly reveals the irrelevance of identity as such is even more prominent and detailed in the mob

scene of 'The Earthquake', where the 'surging mass' of the enraged congregation kills several people they mistake for the lovers and their illegitimate child who had allegedly brought the retribution of natural disaster on the city:

... a voice from among the frenzied mob that had pursued them cried out: 'Citizens, this is Jerónimo Rugera, for I am his own father!' And the speaker, raising a cudgel, struck Jerónimo a colossal blow that felled him to the ground at Doña Constanza's side. 'Jesus! Holy Mother of God!' screamed Doña Constanza, fleeing to her brother-in-law's side; but immediately there was a cry of 'Convent whore!' and a second blow from another direction struck her lifeless beside Jerónimo. 'Monsters!' cried an unidentified bystander, 'that was Doña Constanza Xares!' 'Why did they lie to us?' retorted the cobbler. 'Find the right one and kill her!' (Kleist, 1978: 66)

Such narratives of trauma and memory are thus very different from the traumatic narrative of 'Michael Kohlhaas'.

The matching gallows scene in 'Michael Kohlhaas' stops short of the others' demonic universality or their attempts to remember and articulate. Instead of the pseudo-legal random interchangeability of victims, a specific legal exchange occurs in the double sentence: the restoration of property and a death sentence. Identities are left securely in place: Kohlhaas is called by his own name and he recognizes even the elaborately disguised Elector of Saxony, who plans to steal a prophecy concerning his descendants' future from Kohlhaas' dead body. Whereas identity is confirmed despite any attempt to hide it, the future contained in the prophecy is revealed only to be hidden forever. The scene revolves around dramatic silence: nothing is shared or articulated.

'So, Kohlhaas the horse-dealer, you have thus been given satisfaction; prepare now to make satisfaction in your turn to His Imperial Majesty, whose representative stands there, for your violation of His Majesty's public peace!' ... [Kohlhaas] caught sight, only a short distance away, of a figure he knew well: a man standing between two noblemen whose bodies half concealed him, and wearing a hat with blue and white plumes. ... Kohlhaas strode up close to him, took the locket from round his neck, took out the piece of paper, unsealed it and read it; then, fixing his gaze steadily on the man with the blue and white plumes who was already beginning to harbour sweet hopes, he stuck it in his mouth and swallowed it. At this sight the man with the blue and white plumes swooned and collapsed in convulsions. (Kleist, 1978: 212-13)

Kohlhaas' sole reported statement (he 'said that he was prepared') is outweighed by a long series of mute gestures – throwing his hat to the ground, embracing his children, opening his tunic – leading up to the final triumphant denial of utterance.

If, after this dramatic finale, the concluding few lines of the novella appear to open up the Kohlhaas story 'to history' – 'Soon after this the

Electors of Saxony returned to Dresden physically and mentally a broken man, and for the sequel we refer our readers to history' (Kleist, 1978: 213) – this gesture cannot succeed in situating the narrative in historical continuity: its final historical future is still envisioned as safely in the distant past – the concluding words of the text are: 'But in Mecklenburg some hale and hearty descendants of Kohlhaas were still living *in the century before this*' (p. 213, emphasis added) – and its effect is insufficient to counteract the isolation of the disconnected past from the present marked by the swallowed prophecy. What exactly is obliterated when Kohlhaas literally takes this text with himself to the grave is another question. If one focuses on the content of the revealed prophecy (good prospects for the Elector of Brandenburg, as read from his palm by the mysterious gypsy woman whose corresponding prophecy for Saxony is given to Kohlhaas on the piece of paper he eventually swallows), it is possible to see an attempt in the text to invest the legal state of Brandenburg with the utopian associations that are contained in the isolated, personal idylls in the other two stories that directly reflect on the traumatic memory of revolution. Fink, for instance, argues along these lines, maintaining that whereas in 'The Betrothal' and in 'The Earthquake' a temporary resolution is represented in self-contained idylls removed from the chaos of the world at large, 'Michael Kohlhaas' offers a resolution in terms meant to be real: the representation of an idealized Brandenburg state, which can cleanse and correct itself through reform and thus offer a 'true solution to the conflict' (Fink, 1988–9: 84), without necessitating the explosive transformations of revolution.

Against this early proclamation of the known, happy future – a prophylactic treatment of the state lest it succumbs to revolutionary malaise – there is, however, the conclusive obliteration of the future in a more general sense, the obliteration of the future that will not or cannot be revealed in the text. The final gallows scene and the swallowing of a secret prophetic text go beyond the prospects for Saxony: swallowed in this climactic scene, the ingested, contentless text is a future unmade in a more general narrative sense; an absence that unmoors the text from the absent, unremembered recent past of its writing – from the time when the rights of man bloom into proliferating 'Provisional World Government[s]' (Kleist, 1978: 148), as the ideas that perplex both Kohlhaas and his sovereign in the novella are taken to an unprecedented extreme in other memorable guillotine finales.

The change these ideas undergo as they reappear in Doctorow's *Ragtime* are complex, for *Ragtime's* attitude to the idea of a universal horizon and more specifically the idea of a universal constituency, is as ambivalent and ambiguous as that of Kleist's 'Michael Kohlhaas'. While critics have sometimes too easily conflated or polarized the two texts on the issues of universality and transcendence, they are neither as close nor as distant as such analyses suggest. It seems more appropriate to say that if there is a shift between the two texts, it is a shift within the dynamic of an ambivalence they share.

Ragtime is the story of the dissolution and merged reconfiguration of three families – the WASP family of Father, Mother, the boy, and Mother’s Younger Brother, and the families of Jewish immigrant Tateh, his wife and daughter, and of the black musician Coalhouse Walker Jr, his fiancée and their illegitimate child – intersecting and colliding with various stories of celebrities and historical figures of the period (Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, Sigmund Freud, Emma Goldman and countless others), merging historical fact with fiction. Embedded in this overall plot is the somewhat self-standing Coalhouse Walker Jr subplot of *Ragtime*, based on the Kleist intertext: ‘the coming of the colored man’ to the house of the WASP family – the house in New Rochelle that founds the American 20th century in the first sentence of the novel – and the subsequent efforts of the black musician to get justice in the form of legal compensation and an apology for the damage done to his beautiful, customized ‘motorcar’ by some local racist firemen. His fiancée Sarah, who comes to live with this New Rochelle family after an attempt to kill her and Coalhouse’s infant child, is eventually killed herself while intervening on Coalhouse’s behalf. When, through terrorist warfare, the musician finally brings about the restoration of his property, he is shot by a firing squad.

The novel does exhibit a genuine concern with the question whether there is a valid universal horizon for thinking about humanity and ‘the world’, within which historical changes of the nation or its smaller communities can be meaningfully embedded. *Ragtime* offers numerous versions of being uprooted and mobile – à la Michael Kohlhaas – with some characters’ uprootedness invested with a world-changing impetus, and the novel’s main ostensible narrative project is to construct an image of the harmonious integration of difference in the common, embodied most conspicuously in the shiny new prototype of the American family produced by the end of the text out of the other families, each having gradually disintegrated in the narrative, a process dependent on the very uprootedness and mobility that provides for the families’ encounters. As the narrative, and the Coalhouse Walker subplot in particular, re-engages with the idea of humanity as a universal constituency, there is an important change, however: while in its formative stage this idea remains liminal and virtually unnarratable in ‘Michael Kohlhaas’, it presents itself with great ease in *Ragtime*, as the novel engages with the possible final disintegration of such an idea, although – for various reasons, including but not limited to the novel’s pervasive irony – this presentation is destabilized. Thus, in *Ragtime*, it is the meaningfulness of the idea of humanity as a universal constituency that is in question, and the novel offers too many incompatible answers to this question for critical comfort.

This presents an analytical challenge slightly different from those posed by Kleist’s novella, in that *Ragtime* offers sufficient material for arguing several positions: that the text endorses the idea of a universal constituency and bases a progressive revision of history upon it; that it

presents this idea as one belonging to a nostalgic past contemplated for purposes of elegiac reminiscence; or that it fully dismantles this idea by dissolving it in a completely dehumanized process of empty repetition and coincidence. These incompatible alternatives coexist in *Ragtime*, never at rest and always in competition with each other. In *Ragtime*'s representation of 'the world' in its universal, borderless totality, the endorsement of a universal constituency is not readily apparent. If the broader ontological vision of the novel consistently returns to the idea that 'the world' in its entirety is undergoing a ceaseless process of transformation, the frequent representations of change as neutral and abstract fragmentation and reconfiguration seem to create a vision where the appearance of the universal is no longer a demonic absolute interchangeability, but rather an absolute interconnectivity drained of all Kleistian horror and significance. The sense of neutrality is achieved by the adoption of 'chronicle' narration that keeps a distance from the interiority of characters and emphasizes action, not nearly as much as Kleist, but still significantly relative to contemporary conventions of narration; it also renders events unmotivated and empty by its emphasis on the bare fact that they happened:

Coincidentally this was the time in our history when the morose novelist Theodore Dreiser was suffering terribly from the bad reviews and negligible sales of his first book, *Sister Carrie*. . . . He took to sitting on a wooden chair in the middle of the room. One day he decided his chair was facing in the wrong direction. Raising his weight from the chair, he lifted it with his two hands and turned it to the right, to align it properly. For a moment he thought the chair was aligned, but then he decided it was not. He moved it another turn to the right. . . . Through the night Dreiser turned his chair in circles seeking the proper alignment. (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 30)

The whole notion of making claims or acting out of responsibility to any constituency is alien from such a representation of action stripped to bare, unmotivated facticity.

However, the array of coincidences, redundant connections, duplications and repetitions that constitute transformation – and which serve both as subject matter and method for the narrative – occasionally hold out a tenuous promise that this process has a meaning anchored in some vision of human inequity and need. The boy's fascination with the trance of solipsism and the disembodied image – 'the dizzying feeling of separating from himself endlessly' while looking in the mirror – is linked to the idea that 'the world composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction' (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 135). Transformation appears as directional, meaningful change in the unrealized expectations of poor immigrant families frozen in the photographs of the 'tireless newspaper reporter and reformer', Jacob Riis:

Children died of mild colds or slight rashes. Children died on beds made from two kitchen chairs pushed together. They died on floors. Many people

believed that filth and starvation and disease were what the immigrant got for his moral degeneracy. But Riis believed in air shafts. Air shafts, light and air, would bring health. He went around climbing dark stairs and knocking on doors and taking flash photos of indigent families in their dwellings. He held up the flash pan and put his head under the hood and the picture exploded. After he left, the family, not daring to move, remained in the position in which they had been photographed. They waited for life to change. They waited for transformation. (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 20)

Thus the status of transformation as a state of the world shifts back and forth throughout the text between change as a cold ontological process of pure coincidence and repetition drained of meaning and change as invested with a meaning generated by inequity and dissatisfaction. The partial affirmations of a meaningful universal humanity are therefore at least potentially left in place – in competition with but not quite erased by the notion of the infinite but empty interconnectivity of all things, animate or inanimate.

The most important complication to this already somewhat contradictory treatment of the world as an ‘endless process of dissatisfaction’ is the result of the single most important change Doctorow makes in adopting Kleist’s chronicle fiction. Over decades of interviews, Doctorow consistently identifies the action-fueled narrative advance as the great attraction and inspiration in Kleist, returning to the word ‘relentless’ nearly every time: ‘[I]ts the idea of writing relentless narrative that I learned from Kleist. The rate of narrative advance in his work is incredible’ (Doctorow, quoted in Morris, 1999: 139).² However, while the rush to futurity is temporally neutral in Kleist at any given moment, *Ragtime* sets up a powerful perspective of foreshadowing, frequently gesturing towards an unspecified future to come. As a result, *Ragtime* is not only set in a world on the verge of a cataclysm that has paradoxically already happened (like Kleist’s), but this world is one of ironic anachronism (unlike Kleist’s), and the novel’s ostensible main narrative project of joyfully unifying difference (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 368) is not immune to the effects of this irony.

The whole opening is devoted to establishing this ironic anachronism by blocking the past and indicating some future to come. The initial descriptive sentences can hardly be anything but temporally neutral, being atomic in a way that cannot indicate complex temporal relations: ‘Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900s. Teddy Roosevelt was president’. Or even more minimalistically: ‘His life was absurd.’ ‘His nails bled.’ ‘There were screams. Evelyn fainted.’ Yet, this ostensibly neutral description is sprinkled with enough comparative, contrastive phrases and explicit signals of anteriority that the description as a whole gestures powerfully towards the future to come: ‘That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were *stouter then*. . . This was the time in our history when Winslow Homer was doing his painting. A certain light was *still* available along the eastern seaboard’. There is nothing that has already happened,

as the *ex nihilo* founding gesture of the first sentence cuts off the timeline in the direction of the past: 'In 1902 Father built a house at the crest of the Broadview Avenue hill in New Rochelle, New York' – futurity starts here (all quotes from Doctorow, 1976: 3–8).

The future, insofar as it is the fictional present of the narratorial perspective, itself identical with the time of publication in the mid-1970s (made explicit in the tenuous single reference to the time passed since the historical Houdini's death in 1926: 'Today, nearly fifty years since his death, the audience for escapes is even larger' [Doctorow, 1976(1975): 8]) is a constant present of enunciation; yet, in some more inclusive, though less specific way, the ironic anteriority of described events indicates changes that will have occurred: 'And though the newspapers called the shooting the Crime of the Century, Goldman knew it was only 1906 and there were ninety-four years to go' (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 6).

In this rhetoric of anteriority, the ostensibly neutral chronicle time always turns out to be still one way or not yet another, and there is nothing that has *already* happened. Or rather, it is paradoxically the *future* – and the future alone – that has already happened, so it will never come. (This looming future is even harder to concretize than in 'Michael Kohlhaas': if the French Revolution was already an emblematic image rather than actual historical specificity, in *Ragtime* this becomes an even more diffuse anticipation. The text does not even settle which horizon we should look toward for this transformative event – say, the national 'sixties' or the more international 'holocaust'. Its irony invites such questions, but does not answer them.)

In addition to the ironic foreshadowing set up in the opening, the conclusion also adds to the sense that whatever has been narrated has not led to reflective understanding. While in a sense *Ragtime* establishes a more plural vision through the revelation of obliterated stories of exploitation, racism and sexism ('Apparently there were Negroes. There were immigrants' [Doctorow, 1976(1975): 5]), opening up dominant linear historical narratives to inquiry and revision, this fictional fluidity of competing and incompatible narratives does not necessarily become a reflective distance, from which the events of the plot and the time of writing could align themselves and merge in a historical continuum. In fact, the closure of *Ragtime* is one of extreme containment. As Fredric Jameson points out in his influential analysis of *Ragtime* as a postmodern hologram of elegiac historicism (an unconvincing overall assessment, which I think underestimates the complexity of *Ragtime's* self-contradictions), the house built in 1902 originally served as a site and sign of continuity between the narrative act and the narrated, but in the course of his revisions to the novel Doctorow abandoned this classic way of establishing continuity between the past and the present (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 21–2). The house that could have been the material sign of continuity to the narrative present in the manner of, say, the 'Custom House' section of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, with its 'sort of home-feeling with the

past' (Hawthorne, 1981: 9) generated by an identity of place and object, becomes rather a sign and site of a 'sort of' homelessness. Towards the conclusion of the novel, visions of the future invariably run up against a wall of closure and compulsive repetition. For example, Father's 'final exploration' – his death by drowning – is a repetitive revelation in stasis ('He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb . . . 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, 1976(1975): 368]).

Whatever is planned or anticipated turns into instant fulfillment: when the new family – composed of Mother, the boy, the Jewish immigrant Tateh, his daughter, and Coalhouse and Sarah's son – inspires plans for a sentimental movie series replicating such a vision of familial integration of difference, by the next sentence all those movies have already been made – 'the era of Ragtime had run out' (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 369), time is emptied out of forwardness. Ending is repetition compulsion. The sense of anachronism combined with this complete detachment from the narratorial present results in a narration where the ironic lack of foreknowledge is complemented by an equal lack of subsequent understanding, in other words, a narration that can never be the final word on what it states and in which there is always a possibility that 'narrating is misrepresenting, learning is illusory, and the circularity of error is inescapable' (Morris, 1991: 102). More specifically, the ironic perspective on a self-contained past results in an acutely ambiguous attitude to the revisionist history that slowly shapes the new family ('their union was joyful though without issue' [Doctorow, 1976(1975): 368]), our gang of 'all kinds' (p. 369) in an 'image of perfectly achieved social harmony' (Berger, 1999: 145).

In such narrative conditions the full endorsement of transcending divisions and differences in perfect social harmony to eliminate injustice and inequity can only be read into the novel if one eliminates the effects of irony and restores the connection between the past and present in a way the text itself does not do. Writing the connection between the past and the present back into the text is not unlike the attempt to move the French Revolution from a liminal position to full narrative visibility in Kleist's narrative and is just as tempting. Repairing a break in historical memory and correcting the non-appearance of transformative events that the whole narrative 'anticipates' with bated breath, such analyses retroactively consolidate a severely disjointed history.

That Walker responds to racism with terrorist acts is jarring not only because his actions are violent, but also as critics have noted, because they are anachronistic, characteristic of the period when the novel was written rather than the one in which it is set. They might be viewed as a warning for the age reading the novel that if races are not treated equally and fairly eventually there will be violence (Tokarczyk, 2000: 102).

On the novel's own terms, however, the violence that is only anticipated (hence the warning) has probably already occurred (hence the warning is pointless), not that the narrative seems to be able to impart any concrete knowledge of it beyond an ironic awareness of paradox. These critical reinsertions of the absent future/past – for instance, the black radical groups of the 1960s and 'marches protesting America's participation in the war in Vietnam' restored by Laura Barrett in her analysis of photography and history in *Ragtime* – are often coupled with an analogy with Hawthornian romance ('connect[ing] a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us'). However, what is at stake is precisely the applicability of such a model. Barrett is obviously right in a sense to maintain that '[t]hrough the past may have little objective truth to reveal for Doctorow, its power to provide broader truths is essential for human survival' (Barrett, 2001: 809), since clearly, a notion such as *human* survival cannot but depend on broader truths, but the *validation* of such broader truths is an open question in *Ragtime*.

If one examines the Coalhouse Walker story itself relative to the ambivalent treatment of visions of inequity which would provide the 'universal urge' for transcending difference, instead of settling the question through the novel's most specific treatment of injustice and human dignity, it leaves the question perhaps even more unresolved by introducing further contradictions. First, the universal aspirations in this narrative for obtaining justice are not quite immune to the effects of irony; second, they are to some extent detached from Michael Kohlhaas' successor and reassigned to others, particularly his fiancée, in a way that embeds them in racist and sexist histories that the novel has been discrediting as false and in need of revision. In other words, insofar as the overarching ironic perspective affects the Coalhouse story to some degree, it cannot be taken at face value. Its highlighting of the question of human dignity and rights is subject to double-voicing like all other affirmations in *Ragtime*. On the other hand, insofar as the Coalhouse story is somewhat *protected* from the sense of ironic anachronism pervading *Ragtime*, due to its relative autonomy, the peculiar way in which Sarah is made an exoticized feminine repository of such concepts makes the affirmation of these ideas suspect yet again.

Even before the interlude of Coalhouse Walker's attempt to seek legal recourse – briefly and unsuccessfully, of course – the description of intimate familial events is strangely infused with the language of law. Irritated and threatened by the musician's assertions of dignity when the latter comes to visit Sarah at their house in New Rochelle, Father expresses his opposition to Coalhouse and Sarah's courtship in legally resonant terms: 'Perhaps we shouldn't encourage his *suit*, he [Father] said to mother. There is something reckless about him'. 'I think what we are *witnessing* is, in fact, a courtship of the most stubborn Christian kind' is Mother's more supportive statement (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 186, 181, emphases added). In such a context, even 'courtship', especially when

coupled with ‘witnessing’, takes on pseudo-legal connotations, as does Sarah’s ‘proprietary competence’ (in cleaning the house) or her sudden willingness to ‘claim her child’ (p. 185). Soon enough, the suit, the witnessing, and the claim return in their proper legal context – ‘Walker’s “case”, that constitutes the rest of his story until the “coordinated volley of a firing squad”’ (p. 350).

This ‘case’ study has a less ironized mimetic solidity than many other parts of the text, at least partly due to its late introduction and its consequent distance from the formative announcements of ironic anachronism in the opening chapters. *Ragtime*’s narrative of rights, based on ‘Michael Kohlhaas’, is a later insert – an integrated, yet somewhat self-contained subplot appearing exactly halfway into the text, reasonably far from the initial establishing of an ironic perspective and somewhat removed from the effects of this ironic vision. In his *Models of Misrepresentation*, Christopher D. Morris maintains, in this spirit, that Coalhouse Walker is the novel’s most plausible candidate for ‘authentic demystification’ (Morris, 1991: 105) in a text emphasizing irony and the radical indeterminacy of meaning and so reveling in transient, illusory demystification and false escapes. Morris suggests that Doctorow’s radically anti-hermeneutic texts should not be read as referring to representable truths, ideas or themes – although this will inevitably happen – and argues instead that they only offer ‘seeming’ demystification (p. 102).

The concluding vision of the text, he says, is a ‘gross misrepresentation of the bulk of the action of *Ragtime*, which tells of violent, incurable racial and ethnic conflict’, revealing in the narrator(s) ‘a blindness to the events of their own completed narration’. While ‘there is no retrospective denunciation of this irony’ and therefore ‘narrating is misrepresenting’ (p. 102), Morris concedes that the Coalhouse Walker story is an exception, though a short-lived one. ‘As long as readers concentrate on the Coalhouse plot by itself’, that is insofar as the subplot can be treated as autonomous and self-contained, ‘the novel provides a seeming anchor by which to judge the circularity of its other characters’ behavior: . . . it is a response that at least confronts a world that other characters avoid or flee’ (p. 166). This, he claims, is instantly undone by any revelation of the intertextual link to Kleist’s novella, which turns mimetic truth into the infinite circulation of signs referring to other signs. ‘As a sign his putative referent – racial or human justice, the dignity of man – is replaced by another sign, Kleist’s “Michael Kohlhaas”’ (p. 106). This line of argument has the great disadvantage, however, of erasing any specific historical significance the intertextual connection might have; indeed the same argument could be based on *any* randomly chosen intertext. If intertextuality as an abstract idea of the infinite interconnectibility of texts and signs may seem to support Morris’ argument, the connection to ‘Michael Kohlhaas’ in all its concreteness does far more to establish a historical context for universal notions of human dignity and justice – and thus to reinforce these ‘putative referent[s]’ – than to dissolve their meaning in a regression of empty signs.³

The notions of human dignity that punctuate the Coalhouse Walker narrative of rights thus may be seen as bolstered by engaging with an intertext fascinated with the formation of such an idea of rights and by the relative autonomy of the subplot: 'It occurred to Father one day that Coalhouse Walker Jr didn't know he was a Negro. . . . He seemed to be able to transform the customary deferences practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's' (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 185–6). Nevertheless, this subplot is integrated into the novel just enough – despite its late appearance, its characters interact with those of the other plotlines and the Coalhouse subplot alternates with the others in the narrative sequence – that it is not perfectly immune to the effects of ironic double-voicing. The resulting delicate balance of just how skeptically one should read human dignity and a universal constituency of rights in this text is perhaps tipped in the direction of skepticism, once we consider the reassignment of the most explicit expressions of an absolute and universal notion of principle and human dignity to the character of Sarah.

Sarah is constructed as a repository of the most unambiguous expressions of a commitment to a universal constituency. In fact, Coalhouse Walker's own self-representations and his self-conferred title, 'President, Provisional American Government' (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 255) are just pale, local, circumscribed reflections beside Sarah's convictions. (Kohlhaas' wife in Kleist's novella plays no comparable role.) While Walker's notions of dignity are represented as universally human, his escalating war against injustice is more often cast as total on the national scale – a counterpoint to the ironized process of fusing differences in a picture-perfect 'American family'. It is Sarah who is connected to more universal visions of inequity and violence (stark unlocalized abstractions of principles, human conduct, murder and life). However, the very characters that attribute such convictions and commitment to her constantly recast her as the unthinking innocence of a mindless repository of morality, who has no access to the very ideas she acts out. 'Where had she been born, and where had she lived, this impoverished, uneducated black girl with such *absolute* conviction of the way *human beings* ought to conduct their lives?' (Doctorow, 1976[1975]: 215, emphasis added). To Mother, Sarah's maternal role appears as yet another way of being subsumed in self-expression as pure physicality and emotion: 'She was, Mother realized, the kind of moral being who understood nothing but goodness. She had no guile and could act only in total and helpless response to what she felt. If she loved she acted in love, if she was betrayed she was destroyed. These were the shining and dangerous facts of the life of an innocent' (p. 216). She is a 'displaced African queen' in the thoughts of Younger Brother, from whose perspective we learn that Sarah once again didn't know, but 'she had perhaps detected the violence underlying all principle' (pp. 187, 216). Sarah's 'frightened and desperate act[s] provoked from her innocence' are tied to a character lacking

self-expression (almost taken for a deaf-mute when held in prison for what the authorities thought was an attempted assassination of the Vice-President) and helplessly enacting and embodying notions of human dignity unavailable to her except on the racist and sexist terms her 'ideas' ought to revise. Indeed, they ought to serve as the ultimate frame for such revisionist histories.

How does all this add up to a redrawing of Kleist's narrative of humanity and its rights in 'Michael Kohlhaas'? The terrifying, liminal approach of a universal constituency has given way to regression and disintegration, but the shift is not as dramatic as it is sometimes represented in comparative analyses. Suggesting that there is an extreme opposition between the two texts on the question of universality and transcendence is not warranted, though this approach is especially common in conjunction with an accompanying preference for Kleist as a genius, a preference for the 'masterpiece' and the 'tragic', set beside a lack of appreciation for merely 'stylish' low irony. A typical formulation – 'Doctorow reduces the universality of the tale and, despite retaining an aura of coincidence in plot details, fails to impart Kleist's sense of transcendental impingement on human activity' (Williams, 1996: 30) – tends retroactively to attribute to 'Michael Kohlhaas' a more or less unproblematic attitude to transcending the specificities of proliferating difference, an attribution that is based more on a critical idea of great masterpieces than on the actual novella. To be fair, Marion Faber, whom John Williams is paraphrasing in the previous quote, does not claim Doctorow's enterprise to be a complete failure on its own terms, although she does consider *Ragtime* a simplification precisely to the extent that it reduces the alleged universality of Kleist to 'one modern instance' (Faber, 1980: 153). In such analyses, universality and transcendence are attributed unambiguously to the former text in order to elevate it, while their lack impairs *Ragtime's* adaptation, at least in comparison. This is how it is possible in Faber's analysis, for example, that the coincidences and superstitions relating to the gypsy fortuneteller in 'Michael Kohlhaas' are considered to give 'an otherworldly, transcending dimension to the otherwise politically explicable events' and 'the universality of Kleist's novella . . . is deepened by this use of supernatural coincidence', whereas apparently no number of mysterious forewarnings by the boy or references to transmigration and the 'transcendentally gifted' can persuade her that any 'otherworldly dimension confounds events' in *Ragtime* or that its universality is thereby 'deepened' (pp. 154–5).

The arguments that *Ragtime* has lost any sense of the universal horizon for thinking about the 'broader truths' pertaining to a universal constituency invariably turn out to be far more nostalgic than the novel itself is in its self-contradictory, ironic, unsettled state:

Instead of indignation about social injustice, what is created in the reader is rather a feeling of ironic bemusement about human follies and a nostalgic

regret about a bygone age throbbing with scandal and excitement. . . . No doubt, the Coalhouse tale in Doctorow's novel is itself a skilful variation on the theme of Kleist's 'Michael Kohlhaas', a jazzed-up version, to be sure. But, then, jazzed-up Bach is not Bach and Kleist in ragtime is not Kleist. If the *genius* of another era cannot be duplicated, like a melody on the Victrola, with skill and proper imagination it can at least be deftly imitated. Assuredly, *Ragtime* is a stylish novel, full of ingenious and intelligent entertainment, while 'Michael Kohlhaas' remains a work of dramatic power with few equals in world literature. (Helbling, 1980: 165, 166, emphasis added)

This, I would argue, is a truly nostalgic vision, one that outdoes by far whatever nostalgic regret it attributes to *Ragtime*: the past for Helbling is a storehouse of masterpieces that can only be bastardized and diluted by unworthy successors – imitators of the geniuses that used to populate a once pristine landscape of literary and art history.

Such a nostalgic vision that finds 'indignation about social injustice' declining into 'bemusement' – just as it inevitably finds Bach *deteriorated* into jazzed-up Bach – is not simply a preference for indignation; it is a preference that also fossilizes its preferred objects (indignation is what masters like Kleist used to express) and consequently a refusal to *rethink* what 'indignation about social injustice' might mean with the demise of humanism. 'Kleist knew that it is not far from a sense of setting things aright to messianic pretense [and] Doctorow obviously perceives that this all too human tendency is one of the hallmarks of our own age', observes the same Kleist scholar (Helbling, 1980: 160) – yet, the intertextual relation of the two texts encourages one to keep in mind that something irreversibly happened to phrases like 'this all too human tendency', both at the moment of crisis haunting Kleist's post-apocalyptic narrative and the one haunting Doctorow's, and that using phrases of this kind interchangeably is impossible. These two related narratives written in the aftermath of historical crises do not map perfectly onto each other and their ambivalences do not cancel each other out, because it is the meaning of the most universal and abstract terms – which ought to anchor them in the same terrain despite differences in time and space – that has shifted. This shift itself becomes one of their most interesting mutual contributions, where the blindness of each – the inherent blindness of post-apocalyptic narrative to its crisis – sheds light on the other, since, fortunately, even apocalypse isn't what it used to be.

Notes

- 1 John Williams devotes a whole chapter entitled 'The Making of a Reputation 1975–1980' to the early reception of *Ragtime* in his book-length reception study of E. L. Doctorow, arguing that the Heinrich von Kleist source shifted the heated debate amongst reviewers, provoked by a combination of left-leaning revisionist history and commercial success, onto a more academic terrain (Williams, 1996: 19–36).

2 One of the astonishing things about Kleist, Doctorow says elsewhere, is

... the rate of narrative advance. ... The relentless almost predatory movement from one sentence to another. Nothing is still, in Kleist. Nothing is commentary. Characterization is never indulged for its own sake – it is rather a circumstance of plot. The action is headlong – and generative. I wanted, for example, to write something that was absolutely relentless.

The Kohlhaas plot is intriguing to him, because ‘once it began, it seemed inevitable, there was no way to stop it’ (Doctorow, quoted in Morris, 1999: 125, 38, 139).

3 Emphasizing the *fact* of internal and external intertextual links in Doctorow’s texts over the specificity of connections, Morris also refers to the use of the Kohlhaas intertext as just a ‘more conspicuous instance of the permeability of Doctorow’s works to many others: Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* in *The Book of Daniel*; Thoreau’s *Walden* in *Loon Lake*; Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* in *World’s Fair*’, itself a more conspicuous example of how any interpretable text is intertextual by virtue of the nature of interpretation (Morris, 1991: 12).

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