

## De-facement of the Subject in the Mirror of Fiction: A de-Manian Reading of E.L. Doctorow's *World's Fair*

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### Abstract

Certain parallels between E.L. Doctorow's early years of adolescence and his novel *World's Fair* (1985) have given rise to a general reception of the novel as an instance of autobiography. The simultaneous merging of illusion and memoir, however, undermines all attempts at categorizing *World's Fair* generically insofar as any such categorization fails to capture the essence of the novel in the entirety of its dimensions. The reflection of reality through the fictional medium of the novel, through memory and language, challenges the assumption that autobiography is possible whatsoever. Arguing that it is problematic/ simplistic to recognize any text as either history or fiction, Paul de Man proposes a revolving-door model in which any autobiographical text is shown to feature fictionality while any fictional text might just as well exhibit traces of autobiographicality. In this line, the present undertaking targets the factual and fictional dimensions of *World's Fair* by exploring the ways that the text lends itself to a deconstructive reading. The starting point is a specular subject, inside and outside the text, who shows signs of retrospection and prescience. Further explorations of the protagonist in terms of artistic maturation, social development and communal consciousness unveil how aporic mechanisms disrupt the binary dynamics of traditional discourses.

**Keywords:** autobiography, fiction, specular subject, deconstruction

### 1. Introduction

"I had worried before, all the time in this enormous effort to catch up to life, to find it, to feel it, comprehend it." (Doctorow, 1994:443)

As early as its first publication in 1985, Doctorow's *World's Fair* has been received by readers and critics as an autobiographical novel. This is far from surprising as the book's ample concern with Doctorow's family life provides convenient justification for such reception. For one thing, the narrator is named after the writer. For another, both of them were born and raised during the Depression in 1930s New York City. Still adding to the parallelism, Doctorow stresses the factual nature of the novel by stating that his "father was a proprietor of a music shop. He was something of a musicologist" (Weinstein, 2008:2). However, there are significant reasons to read the book as a work of fiction. The novel, on one hand, stays tightly close to life as it is lived by Edgar and his family members and, on the other, it effects the sensations of fiction. Although *World's Fair* consists to a large degree of the author's childhood memories, it is difficult to distinguish between "the novel's material and [Doctorow's] own past experience" insofar as, according to the author himself, it is "virtually a memoir" (Harter & Thompson 1990:107). In a conversation with Bruce Weber, Doctorow draws attention to this double aspect of *World's Fair*:

"I grew up in the Bronx. It is true that I have an older brother Donald, a mother named Rose. We actual Doctorows, including my late father, lived on Eastburn Avenue. These are all true. But the book is an invention. It's the illusion of a memoir." (Weber, 1985)

Ultimately, in an attempt to reconcile the rigidly categorizing treatments of the novel, Doctorow informs us of his intention to “break down the distinction between formal fiction and the actual, palpable sense of life as it is lived” (Ibid.). A generic concern with the veracity or fictionality of autobiography is nowhere near an innovative question. Since the earliest distinctions made by Greeks, there still seems to be confusion in the meaning of the term *genre*. A serious impediment in the realm of literature is that genre is defined by heterogeneous criteria (form, mood and content) that may overlap and cause ambiguity. According to Northrop Frye, “the circulating-library distinction between fiction and non-fiction, between books which are about things admitted not to be true and books which are about everything else, is apparently exhaustive enough for critics” (1957:13–14). It was not surprising that, after the advent of modernism, writing and criticism had to break beyond the conventional confines of genre. The problem is how far we should read autobiography as a narrative of life and how far as a work of fiction. In what follows, I will discuss extra-textual references and intra-textual cues that may determine for us whether *World's Fair* is an autobiographical novel. Subsequently, I will discuss Paul de Man's ideas concerning the generic definition of autobiography, its fiction/ truth value and the specular notion of the writing/ written subject. Finally, I will explore the concept of the individual self in relation to a personal, immediate experience of life; the notion of the collective self with regard to a social, material experience of life; and, throughout this process, the formation of a specular subject in and out of Doctorow's narrative.

## **2. Text typology: The history-aesthetics operator**

In his interview with Doctorow, Weber points out that the novelist subordinates fact to invention in an autonomously imaginative way (Weber, 1985). In factual terms, Doctorow's protagonist is named after himself and the other characters of the novel correspond to his family members. The author insists that despite factual resemblance, which is only superficial, the protagonist's life is basically invented, rendering irrelevant the question of autobiography:

“I [...] have always been a writer who invents, and I think books are something you make. I make books for people to live in, as architects make houses. I lived in it by writing it. Now it's the reader's turn. When an architect does a house, do you say, ‘Is this house autobiographical?’” (Ibid.)

In this regard, the art of writing a novel is garnered by a double prowess with its extremes of imagination and intuition. Besides such generic labels as memoir, fictional autobiography and *Kunstler roman*, critics also argue that the novel may be read as *historical* fiction, although not in the conventional sense, since “readers [...] have come to relish the blending of fact and fiction that marks his odd scrutiny of the American past. [...] In [*World's Fair*], he turns his historically inventive method on himself, drawing heavily on material gleaned from his 1930's [sic] boyhood” (Ibid., 1).

Doctorow rejects any form of modification for the word novelist. Despite using his experience of growing up, Doctorow rejects the conventional label of historical novel in the case of *World's Fair*: For him, it is possible to “write about the past and use historically verifiable characters, and still it's not a historical novel. It finally [...] falls away like the author, and there's only the book's own time, its own internal time that matters” (Weinstein, 2008:7). Against all generic reductionism, *World's Fair* treats history as a shared register of experience, a common mediator of meaning between the author and the American society. The appropriation of historical facts for narratorial purposes led some critics to accuse Doctorow of manipulating and misinforming his readers. He points out in self-defense how “Kafka wrote a book called ‘Amerika’ without ever having left Prague” (Ibid., 6). Doctorow's insinuation is that writing forms a junction where aesthetics and history converge. While neither history nor historians are objective, fiction stakes no claim to being so whatsoever. Such methodology in treating the factual is reminiscent of

the Romantic negative capability, not reaching out for facts but remaining within an aura of indeterminacy and uncertainty (Li, 2009:ix).

The trap that awaits a novelist regarding historical veracity is composed of a conflict between two extremes: “to know as much as you can” and “not to know too much” (Weber, 1985). Very obviously, Doctorow’s concept of verification runs contrary to the clinical approach, being “idiosyncratic” and “accidental” to use his own adjectives. Verification, for Doctorow, is not to familiarize oneself copiously with contextual information for writing a novel, because the weight of factual knowledge is what “kills imagination”, but to “find something to confirm your hunch, and not to look for it until you need it” (Weinstein, 2008:15). When fiction “intrudes on history,” writing fiction becomes an organic process whereby the book “yields itself” to be written: “You start writing before you know what you want to write or what it is you’re doing” (Weber, 1985). Writing from imagination has its own effects. Imaginative writing “confers a degree of acuity or perception that writing [...] purely factual does not” (Weinstein, 2008:7). Doctorow’s notoriety among historians for his imaginative playfulness, particularly in *Ragtime* (1975), was countered later by a precise capturing of the grand spectacle of the 1939 World’s Fair. Michael Robertson claims, though arguably, that “all but one of his references to the Fair are historically verifiable” (Robertson, 1992:32). Doctorow’s self-conscious rejection of his novel as autobiography sets the ground for an automatic self-deconstruction of the text as fictional autobiography or autobiographical fiction, which I will pursue shortly.

Based on a number of cues in the text, *World’s Fair* lends itself to an autobiographical reading. The title page is followed immediately by an epigraph, a quotation from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1798) that reads: “A raree-show is here/ With children gathered round” (quoted by Doctorow, 1994:247). Both texts feature autobiographicality. Wordsworth subtitled his poem as *The Growth of a Poet’s Mind*—a title that would fit Doctorow’s literary autobiography with only a subtle modification. According to Douglas Fowler, three main types of “fascination” underlie any literary autobiography:

First, there is the play of memory on reality [...]. Secondly, there is the satisfaction of discovering the ‘original’ of things found in the mature fiction [...]. And thirdly [...] that delight peculiar to all biography and autobiography: the prophetic awareness that an ordinary childhood leads toward the extraordinary maturity about which the reader already knows.” (Fowler, 1992:129)

This view risks a reduction of the complexity inherent to all fiction and autobiography. Fowler’s conception of the play of memory proves in practice as not merely an illusion of a memoir but also an illusion of reality, which renders impossible not only the original of things but also autobiography as such. In rendering the illusion of life as it is lived, autobiography reproduces life as it is viewed from a limited—albeit special—perspective. Insofar as life is basically a personal experience, any one reproduction of life is subjective and any audience views such reproduction vicariously through his or her own lens of perception and cognition. This prism of perspectives obscures a single sense of reality and undercuts all foundation for the formation of the absolutely autobiographical. In this sense, any autobiographical text is reduced to an imprecise rendering of personal, subjective, perspective-bound life experience at best and a fictional, rhetorically manipulated memoir at worst—but at least different from the type of fiction that does not intend autobiographicality. By intention, I mean not the writer’s voiced insistence but what Umberto Eco terms as the “intention of the text”—that is, the scope of interpretation that a text allows for, not by imposition but by organic intra-textual references (Eco, 1994:58–59). This brings up the possibility that, as Doctorow himself once phrased, “people find meanings and things in your books that you did not specifically, consciously intend to put there but which are there” (Weinstein, 2008:8).

The difficulty that rests in approaching any instance of autobiography is the extent to which it follows the real and the degree to which it fabricates fiction. As Paul de Man argues in his influential essay “Autobiography as De-facement,” one of the problems is the attempt to define and

treat autobiography independently as a genre. In so doing, one elevates autobiography above the literary status of “mere reportage or memoir” by giving it an aesthetic charge besides its own historical aspect—since the concept of genre indicates “the possible convergence of aesthetics and of history”. But the embarrassment is that the aesthetic potential fails to live up to the literary value of “tragedy, or epic, or lyric poetry” (1979:919). For de Man, “autobiography [...] is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts.” And it is because a “specular subject”/ “moment” is formed as soon as a writer “declares himself the subject of his own understanding” (Ibid., 921-922). As a corollary, the self divides into two parts—a historical and a textual subject, the latter serving as a trope, a figure of speech. According to De Man, such a tropological structure underlies all cognition, including the knowledge of the self (Ibid., 922). Following Paul Smith,

[A]utobiographical texts, like all cognitive artefacts [sic], are of necessity submitted to a tropological runaround which precludes any certainty, any knowledge outside the structural constraints and limits that have made it appear possible. (1988:103)

In this sense, the autobiographical project enacts a certain kind of impossibility, a double displacement/ defacement of the author, always given over to uncertainty and undecidability. According to Janet Ng,

The subject that is projected to the readers is not even a representation of the original, but a re-presentation of this reflection. The figure of the author in an autobiography is, to use a cliché, always ‘already read.’ In other words, meaning is no longer located in and limited to the person of the author. The subject of autobiography is not the center of meaning but is discursively created in a speech act. He or she is a textual effect inscribed in the writing. (2003:11, emphasis in the original)

De Man deconstructs the assumption that life produces autobiography by suggesting on the contrary that it is autobiography (figure) that produces life (referent) insofar as the author is determined and governed in writing by the resources of his medium. He mentions as an example that Proust’s novel *Recherché*, according to Gerard Genette’s discussion of figuration in his study of Proust, can be simultaneously read as fiction and autobiography, as in being caught within a revolving door, a “whirligig” (quoted by de Man, 1979:921). De Man concludes that the distinction between autobiography and fiction is not an “either/or polarity” but rather an “undecidable situation” because they sometimes cut across one another. His alternative then is to treat autobiography as a “figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in almost all texts” (Ibid.). De Man proposes a model for deconstructing the generic conception of autobiography by positing that an escape from a specular model of cognition is a failed attempt, ending up necessarily in a coming-full-circle. For him, every text and no text is autobiographical because all texts are produced by a writing subject who becomes the object/ “subject of his [or her] own understanding” (Ibid.). In other words, autobiography, as the “specular moment” between the subject outside and the subject inside the text, is not the representation of an event or situation in actual reality or history but the manifestation of a linguistic, tropological or figurative structure that underlies all cognitions. Thus, the function of autobiography is not to reveal “reliable self-knowledge” but to show the “impossibility of closure and of totalization” of all tropological texts and systems because cognition, including self-knowledge, is bound by linguistic structure (Ibid., 922).

However impossible it may seem, “writers *of* autobiography as well as writers *on* autobiography” tend to escape from the coercions of the system by moving away from cognition, which is bound by linguistic structure, to action. For instance, Philip Lejeune insists that autobiography is not merely representational or cognitive since the proper name or signature gives it

contractual or legal authority and thus the reader becomes the judge for its authenticity (quoted by de Man, 922, emphasis in the original). However, de Man argues that this is also impossible because the very move is carried out within cognitive constraints as the specular subject is merely displaced, but not overcome, by another contractual subject. Thus we immediately reenter a tropological system as we claim to escape from it. The study of autobiography is then caught in this double motion just as any mode of writing is an equivocal self-representation that simultaneously reveals and conceals the specular subject. To differentiate the subjects inside and outside the text, Doctorow draws a parallel between the “characterization of a figure” and the painting of “a portrait on an easel”. As he states, “There’s a difference between that painting, which is interpretive and subjective and as much about the painter as it is about the subject. There’s a difference between the painting and the real thing” (Weinstein, 2008:15). Two points can be inferred from this statement in relation to autobiography: One implication is that the created subject inside and the creating subject outside are interdependent and ultimately inseparable but not identical. The other assumption is that no artistic representation or self-representation can be purely factual or devoid of fictive elements. As Edmund Wilson has pointed out,

The real elements [...] of any work of fiction are the elements of the author’s personality: his imagination embodies in the images of characters, situations, and scenes the fundamental conflicts of his nature or the cycle of phases through which it habitually passes. His personages are personifications of the author’s various impulses and emotions: and the relations between them in his stories are really the relations between these.” (quoted by Abrams, 1971:228)

Despite this interdependence, the most essential feature of autobiography is that it lacks retrospective knowledge; that is, the writing subject is naturally unaware of his or her own destiny. In this regard, an autobiography is invariably incomplete, if not arbitrary. In the case of Doctorow’s *World’s Fair*, the writer manages to effect an illusion of awareness in the infant Edgar of his own future accomplishment as a successful artist, which produces “a kind of two-voiced effect [...]: the man recalling, but in the boy’s higher pitch” (Plimpton, 2000). It is precisely for this reason that the presence of the prescient artist in the young Edgar is felt throughout the novel. At the same time as foreshadowing some form of climactic fulfillment, this two-voiced effect inexorably undermines the closeness of autobiography to actual life and reduces it to a merely relived fictional experience. Autobiography turns to fiction as the young Edgar’s prophetic awareness causes the specular subject to come to surface and remind the reader of the existence of an authorial self behind the text, conscious of where the text is going. In addition, the text makes no effort in hiding its narrative nature by adopting a straight story-telling gesture. Autobiographical narration, ultimately, deconstructs itself by contradicting its own incorporated sense of verisimilitude, in this case, by admitting that a young boy is not living but recounting his life story in a paradoxical forward-looking retrospect—that the adult subject outside the text looks back on his young self, musing about the artist who he would become in the future, which in turn constitutes the present reality of the writing subject. In what follows, I will discuss the presence of the adult artist in the young Edgar as the supposedly immature narrator of *World’s Fair*. The conflation of maturity and immaturity emerges through the different selves that Edgar portrays throughout the novel in relation to his artistic and social development.

### **3. Specular subject: The writing-written self-operator**

“At a certain point, I began to ask another question. The question—a child when reading says, ‘What’s gonna happen next?’ I found myself asking the question, ‘How is this done?’ And I think that’s the sort of question a writer—a kid who’s gonna be a writer would ask.” (Weinstein, 2008:2)

In his *Conversation with Weinstein*, Doctorow states that he “decided [he] was a writer about the age of nine”, the same age as the young narrator of the novel (Weinstein, 2008:2). Also, speaking of *World’s Fair*, he ironically retitles the book—after Joyce’s bildungsroman—“a portrait of the artist as a very young boy” (Weber, 1985). Taking this at face value, one can plausibly conclude that Doctorow perceived himself as an artist from a very young age. However, this is no more than just another narrative, confirming in this way the possible projection of the artist self into the young narrating subject. Only to undermine his own claim, Doctorow adds that his decision about being a writer was not accompanied by the feeling that “it was necessary to write anything [...] for some time” (Weinstein, 2008:2). The insinuation that the artist in him was not actualized at that early age divests the young narrator of the self-awareness of an artist of being an artist. Doctorow implicitly confirms the formation of a specular subject in the novel by answering the question whether “there is a signal authorial mark that links his books” (Weber, 1985). In response, he points out how in most cases “there is a storyteller within the story, the invention of an authority other than his own” (Ibid.). Naturally, the presence of such an authority invests the narrator with a kind of prophetic awareness that brings the texts to the point of self-deconstruction. However, the illusion of such an authority in the text guarantees independence neither for the writing subject nor for the represented subject.

The last and the simplest type of fascination that Fowler introduces—the simultaneously retrospective and teleological presence of the narrating artist—is evident at moments when Edgar realizes something about his artist self. One of these moments occurs when the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus enter Madison Square Garden for a performance. A “wistful clown” walks high on a tightrope and totters unsteadily, scaring the audience by pretending clumsiness and risking death. The performance leaves Edgar impressed when the clown steps out of his clownish costume only to reveal himself as the star of the high-wire act:

I took profound instruction from this hoary circus routine. It was not merely that I, the sniffer with the red nose, would someday in my good time reveal myself to be a superman among men. There was art in the thing, the power of illusion, the mightier power of the reality behind it. (Doctorow, 1994:330)

Doctorow uses the aerialist as a metaphor to foreshadow his own future artistry. The clown is an artist in disguise in the same way that Edgar would have to shed his outwardly immature skin so that the artist in him could be born. The narrator reveals the workings of art—and of narrative in particular—by tying up the two loose ends of reality and illusion together, by showing that there is reality behind every illusion. Doctorow’s attempt, then, is to “break down the distinction between formal fiction and the actual, palpable sense of life as it is lived” by playing down fiction and form, by doing the “high-wire act without the wire” (Weber, 1985).

Edgar’s concern with his artistic identity also can be found throughout the course of the novel. Early in his childhood, Edgar learns that his uncle is called two names, Billy and Willy, supposedly representing his artistic and private identities—“I found out my mother’s family’s name was Levinne. So Billy Wynne was Willy Levine” (279). Edgar opts for the private name, calling him Uncle Willy. Even Uncle Willy’s private self reveals signs of artistry—“Uncle Willy sometimes did tricks for us, and I remember one trick in particular that was my favorite and that he did very well” (Ibid.). Furthermore, Edgar’s description of the role-playing is acutely revealing of the way reality is effected by an act of illusion, an instance of trickery:

He’d stand in the doorway to my room and make it appear that a hand belonging to someone else just hidden from view was grabbing him by the throat and trying to drag him away. He would choke and gasp and his eyes would bulge and he’d try to tear at the clawlike hand; his head would disappear and reappear again in the struggle, and sometimes it was so realistic that I’d scream and rush to the door and beg him to stop, jumping up and swinging on the arm of the malign killer hand,

which, of course, was his own. It didn't matter that I knew how the trick was done, it was terrifying just the same. (279–80)

The presence of the real in the illusory, or the other way round, also appears in references to Ventriloquism in the novel. The first instance of such references is made, although very minimally, in the final paragraph of “Chapter Ten” where Edgar mentions the book *Ventriloquism Self-Taught* by title. The second time, Edgar associates his father with Hitler and Chaplin because all three of them had moustaches:

I dreamed one night that my father sat with Charlie on one knee and Hitler on the other; he held on them by the backs of their necks as if they were ventriloquist dummies... and then my father laughed. (343)

The significance of juxtaposing two well-known figures, one of art and the other of politics, in relation to Ventriloquism lies in the novel's subtly unstated criticism of the World's Fair. This constitutes a sharp-edged denunciation of the way politics aestheticizes itself by appropriating artistic principles and values to serve its own utilitarianist ends. Also elsewhere in the novel, Edgar voices his fascination toward Ventriloquism—“It was a powerful magic, throwing your voice and fooling people” (Ibid., 446). Whether intended or not, Doctorow's concern with ventriloquist tricks serves a double purpose here. On one hand, the outside subject throws his voice into the text as if it came from elsewhere—that is, from the inside subject—to lend the narrative a degree of verisimilitude. Much by the same token, the voice of the inside subject—that is, the protagonist—throws itself back at the actual as the narrator recalls his transition from infancy to youth, revealing the prescient artist's awareness. Thus, the author's attempt to attain real-lifeness by changing the diction and tone of narration proves nothing but a failure. The teleological awareness of the young Edgar results in regression and hinders the closing in of fiction on actuality at the expense of the latter.

In the last four chapters of the novel, Doctorow moves away from his role as a memoir writer and adopts a rather historiographical approach by scrupulously capturing images of the World's Fair. The narratorial clarity, the readerly character of the story underpins an exploration of the relationship between the self and the material culture. To be more precise, there are different subject positions for Edgar to adopt. There is the family where the narrator is the youngest member. There is the school where he is “a good ‘citizen’ and a good student” (Fowler, 1992:133). Still, another aspect of the individual self finds its definition in the discourse of the ruling ideology. In his subtextual analysis of the novel, Michael Robertson discards the question of genre as irrelevant by noting that *World's Fair* is an accurate, sharp-eyed rendering of people's reactions to the Fair—which in fact was a thoroughly thought-out make-believe for propagating certain modes of learned behavior and consumerist culture (Robertson, 1992:31-45, especially 32). Critics accuse Fair designers of intentionally shaping the visitors into passive consumers by actively developing a form of “environmental control” that led people through a pre-determined path. The whole scheme was carried out in an attempt to foster a consumer society in order to drive the country out of the Depression (Ibid., 35). For Robertson, the significance of the book lies in its offering of a counterview to the assumption that the designers of the 1939 New York's World's Fair succeeded in manipulating the fairgoers' reactions by psychologically conditioning their responses. He refutes the prevalent attitude about the monopolistic manipulation of public mentality by stating that Fair visitors, at least partially, “constructed its meaning for themselves” (Ibid., 33).

Examples of such early modes of crowd control and active resistance can be found in the novel as the chronicle of two consecutive visits to the Fair. Edgar shows signs of passivity following his first visit to the Trylon and the Perisphere—“After having seen pictures and posters and buttons of them for so long.... I thought of them as friends of mine” (428). In the same vein, watching the General Motor's diorama leaves Edgar “very impressed” (430). Apparently, the most intricate of exhibits to exert active influence on and draw involuntary response from the audience

was the General Motors's Futurama—"The buildings were models, it was a model world. It was filled with appropriate music, and an announcer was describing all these wonderful things as they went by, these raindrop cars, these air-conditioned cities" (Ibid.). Obviously, the exhibit was so intelligently thought-out as to "condition the air" of the Fair (Ibid.). However, Edgar's reception of the Fair turns out to be not a merely passive acceptance of its planners' intentions but a locus for his cognitive maturity. The Fair becomes the space of a ritual for Edgar's initiation into critical awareness by triggering a kind of resistance against absorbing and appropriating predetermined social constructs. The early passivity that Edgar shows in his first visit is countered by an active participation in his process of becoming mature because going to the Fair, in the first place, requires breaking free and asserting independence from his protective mother Rose. Taking refuge under the permissive figure of Norma and in Meg's company, Edgar experiences his first nauseating perceptions of adulthood.

The second fair-going is informed with a new sense of realization for Edgar which he, by extension, attributes to the Fair—"The Fair wasn't as clean-looking or as shiny; I could see everywhere signs of decay" (452). Edgar's disillusionment is strengthened by Dave's leftist criticisms of the Fair's ideological underpinnings. At the Time Capsule, a metal container of "articles of common use" supposed to be opened five thousand years from 1939, Dave asks Edgar and his brother if they wonder why "there [is] nothing in the Capsule about the great immigrations that had brought Jewish and Italian and Irish people to America or nothing to represent the point of view of the workingman". He, then, goes on to wonder aloud sarcastically why "there is no hint from the stuff they included that America has a serious intellectual life, or Indians on reservations or Negroes who suffer from race prejudice. Why is that?" (453). At the Futurama, Dave is critical also of the way General Motors encourages self-interested consumerism to lift up the regressive economy of the time, albeit in a broader scale of unstated intention. He comments that the fourteen-lane panoply of highways will have to be constructed with public money—"So General Motors is telling us what they expect from us: we must build them the highways so they can sell us the cars" (454). Although Rose is not as radical as Dave in her resistance, a similar aesthetics of suspicion is present in her reaction to the Fair. When going through the Town of Tomorrow, a scale model of modern houses with separated yards, Rose expresses her exasperation at the implausibility of such aspirational worlds of future—"What's the point of showing such houses [...] when they cost over ten thousand dollars and no one in the world has the money to buy them?" (453).

A clash between the forced ingestion of the Fair designers' ideology of consumption and the Fair-goers' refusal to give in to such ideology invests the novel with a sociocultural tone and turns it into the story of not just an individual artist but of a typical American, a group biography. Besides, the narrator's moving away from a mere personal account of transitional experiences to a group consciousness of multiple selves makes room for still another order by reshaping prefabricated values and taken-for-granted modes of thought. We can see, therefore, how the formulation of counter-suppositions can lead to the subversion of hierarchies, the reversion of paired-up concepts and the disruption of borderlines that used to demarcate stark black and white categorizations. In the case of E.L. Doctorow's *World's Fair*, the revolving-door effect works at two levels—the individual self in relation to life and the communal self in the context of material culture.

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