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**E. L. DOCTOROW**  
Essays and Conversations

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*edited by*  
Richard Trenner

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# The Reds and *Ragtime*: The Soviet Reception of E. L. Doctorow

Ellen Chances

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APPROXIMATELY THREE YEARS elapsed between the original publication date of E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) and the introduction of the novel to the Soviet reading public. *Règtaim*—the Russian title is a direct transliteration of the English—appeared in 1978 in *Foreign Literature*,<sup>1</sup> a popular Soviet magazine whose purpose is to translate current literature from around the world. (In fact, a chapter from Joseph Heller's *Something Happened* had been published in the same magazine not too long before.) Vasily Aksenov, one of the Soviet Union's most distinguished writers of contemporary prose,<sup>2</sup> translated Doctorow's novel into Russian; it was his translation that graced the pages of *Foreign Literature*.

One would have expected the publication of *Ragtime*, in Aksenov's translation, to receive attention and discussion in the Soviet press. This, however, was not the case. A search of journal and newspaper articles of the period unearthed very little relevant material. The reason for this state of affairs probably had less to do with any lack of interest in the Doctorow novel than with Vasily Aksenov's personal fate. It is important to recall that it was at about this time that Aksenov fell out of favor with Soviet authorities because of his role in the *Metropol* affair. On January 18, 1979, twenty-three Soviet writers, feeling that greater freedom of expression was now possible in the USSR, asked the Writers' Union to publish an anthology which would include works that had been rejected for publication by the censors. Both well-known establishment figures such as Aksenov (one of *Metropol*'s five editors) and the poet Andrey Voznesensky, as well as young authors just embarking on their careers, joined the group of twenty-three. The Writers' Union rejected their plea, and the "literary almanac," called *Metropol*, was printed in the West.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the *Metropol* contributors, including Voznesensky, have, after a short period of official disgrace, once again found their works in print in the Soviet Union. Aksenov, like certain other writers in the *Metropol* almanac, has not yet been allowed to resume publication of his works in Russia. During the autumn of 1980, Aksenov emigrated to the United States. He now resides in Washington, D.C. We can surmise, therefore, that it was

Aksenov's problems with the authorities that account for the silence of Soviet literary critics on the subject of *Ragtime*.

Silence was certainly not observed when the Doctorow novel first appeared in *Foreign Literature*, nor was there lack of enthusiasm before the Russian version came on the scene. The July, 1977 issue of *Questions of Literature*, a highly respected scholarly journal of literary criticism, contained a discussion of *Ragtime* and other noteworthy foreign novels of the 1970's.<sup>4</sup> The author of the essay, N. A. Anastas'ev, a young literary critic whose accomplishments include a book on Faulkner and articles on twentieth-century American literature, focuses primarily on narrative technique in *Ragtime*. He first points out the wide acclaim enjoyed by Doctorow's book. The accolade, he continues, is deserved. Rarely does one find such command of two artistic forms, literature and music, writes Anastas'ev. The rhythm of Doctorow's words and phrases duplicates the syncopation of ragtime music of the early twentieth century.

Anastas'ev spends a great deal of time on questions of narrative voice in *Ragtime*. Citing Doctorow, he explains that the author wanted to avoid the fetters of the traditional novel in its lack of distance from its characters. History and journalism impart movement and energy to the narration.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet scholar speaks about the tension generated by the dispassionate, "objective" form—one event rapidly follows another with no one character occupying center stage—that alternates with the intrusive single viewpoint of "the little boy." The independence of the events "objectively" described is destroyed. The reader does not merely read about a car coming up the avenue; the little boy sees a car and hears its motor. Thus, there is the sensation of direct personal observation. Events are filtered through the boy's consciousness. Later, Henry Ford is introduced into the novel. His entrance, though, has been foreshadowed in the boy's consciousness, explains Anastas'ev. The young boy serves the function of the traditional simpleton who can see things and people directly, who can "scrape away the husk of words and pretensions and see the kernel of the nut."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to material on narrative voice, the *Questions of Literature* article on *Ragtime* includes a detailed discussion of the role of the document, of fact, in the novel. Anastas'ev begins by sketching in the background. He talks about the increased tendency toward the merging of fact and fiction. He points out this structure in *Ragtime*, where historical figures (such as

Stanford White, Harry Houdini, Emma Goldman, and Pierpont Morgan) stand alongside the fictional characters conjured up by Doctorow's vivid imagination. The Soviet literary critic explains that there is a close connection between the historical figures and the words, actions, and inner world of the boy. In this way, the principle of "movement and energy" reigns. However, Anastas'ev comments, when he looks at the novel as a *whole*, he does not see the emergence of internal harmony or have the sense of an *artistic whole*.

The sense of lack of wholeness is not a negative feature, in Anastas'ev's eyes. He contrasts it to Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy. There the "chronicle of events" sections on history also alternate with episodes sketching in the fates of fictional characters. The Soviet scholar sees a difference in the overall effect in Doctorow and Dos Passos. In *U.S.A.*, the "camera eye" device, the pure-fact sections, are part of a consecutively ordered epic narration. In *Ragtime*, though, Anastas'ev suggests, the documentary devices make themselves felt as the attempt to "bridle personal experience."<sup>7</sup> The use of fact in fiction can serve to demythologize the past, writes Anastas'ev. Although the Soviet expert on American literature appreciates the contributions made by documentary devices in fiction, he does not go into more detail than this.

Another Soviet perspective on Doctorow's novel emerges from "A Popular Novel and the Music of History," the article that accompanied the Russian translation of *Ragtime* in the magazine *Foreign Literature*.<sup>8</sup> Its author, Yassen Zasursky, whose specialty is the American novel, is professor and Dean of Journalism at Moscow University. Zasursky explains that when the novel first came out, it quickly made the bestseller lists. According to the Soviet critic, some Americans regarded it as a popular book with no redeeming literary qualities, while others claimed for it a permanent place in the history of the American novel. Whatever the critical position, Zasursky continues, *Ragtime* made a big splash. It was read with great interest, and people were forced to rethink problems of America's past and present that have defied resolution.

Throughout his analysis of Doctorow's novel, Zasursky places the work in an historical context. Bound up with the musical motif of the book, claims Zasursky, is the canvas of historical events of the epoch of American history from the Spanish-American War to World War I—the mounting power of monopolies; the transformation of the United States into an "imperialist

state"; the growth of the workers' movement and antitrust sentiment; the Lawrence and Paterson strikes; the rise of technology as signaled by the introduction of the telephone, the streetcar, the automobile, the airplane, the first skyscrapers; the insufferable poverty of New York City's Bowery, Harlem and Lower East Side; the terrorist acts of the anarchists; and the initial American forays into cinematography.

Doctorow, remarks Zasursky, is not the first American prose writer to invest an historical age with musical resonances. The Soviet scholar cites F. Scott Fitzgerald, who christened his own era of the 1920's the "Jazz Age." For Doctorow, however, writes Zasursky, ragtime is a symbol of the *past*, an attribute of history. In this respect, then, Doctorow bears little resemblance to his predecessor.

The author of *Ragtime*, Zasursky asserts, does find literary kinship with American writers of his own time. In the words of Zasursky, American literature of the 1970's was marked by a return to the country's past. He explains that the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations encouraged Americans' interest in history and led to a stocktaking of the American people's experience in the last two centuries. Hence, the increase in the number of historical novels written in this period. Furthermore, Zasursky suggests, dissatisfaction with the America of today has forced thoughtful artists to seek—within the mysteries of the country's past—clues to explain the "spiritual, moral, and political crisis which has hit the greatest capitalist country in the world."

Tracing recent trends of American literature, Zasursky offers a brief analysis of prose of the 1950's and 1960's. He emphasizes the frequent presence of far-fetched subject matter not dealing with the realities of life, and the later reaction to this trend in the form of documentary prose. He mentions representatives of the latter tendency, including Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and the "new journalists" Tom Wolfe and Jimmy Breslin. In this fashion, says Zasursky, the historical novel of contemporary American literature came to be. Zasursky then goes on to point out that America's present-day historical novel is a "symptom . . . of the profound ideational searches" that mark the writing of prose in the United States today.

What concerns Zasursky the most is the way in which Doctorow's examination of the past sheds light on present conditions in the United States. For instance, the scene in *Ragtime* where the reader escorts the characters on their streetcar ride out into the countryside serves, for Zasu-

sky, as a commentary on the pitiful plight of mass transportation now. Zasursky states that while reading that passage, the American reader no doubt thinks nostalgically about the cheap and good mass transport of a bygone era. Such details, found in abundance in Doctorow's novel, claims Zasursky, demonstrate the "diseases of contemporary America."

Coalhouse Walker, too, from Zasursky's perspective, is seen as playing an ideological role in the novel, reminding the reading audience of the great difficulties black Americans face in the present era. In general, Zasursky proclaims, Doctorow accurately portrays the various shapes taken by the struggle against social inequality.

Like Anastas'ev, Zasursky speaks of the relationship binding *Ragtime* to Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*<sup>9</sup> Here, too, he emphasizes the political implications, for he centers on Doctorow's narrow social outlook as opposed to Dos Passos' broader vision.

Finally, Zasursky turns to the ironic mode that he observes in *Ragtime*. Again, he relates irony here, as well as the irony in other modern American works (in black-humor literature, for example), to the political and social structure of the country. "Irony," declares Zasursky, "exposes the spiritual bankruptcy . . . of the bourgeois world . . . and of its authors." He is a bit distressed by the occasional tasteless "sexual coloring," such as Evelyn Nesbit's behavior. Nevertheless, he believes that the novel makes an important contribution by conveying the "music of history." Zasursky praises Doctorow as one of America's most skillful writers.

The Soviet literary scholar concludes his piece on *Ragtime* with the following remarks: "The title of the novel . . . expresses alarm about the contemporary development of American society, about that blind alley into which society has gotten itself, in its spiritual, ethical, political, and in recent years, economic crisis. Doctorow's historical narrative, *Ragtime*, retrospectively develops this thought: already at the beginning of the century, something was happening in America, and the country cannot to this day free itself. . . . There is one substantial difference, though, and that is that the make-up of America today, with its rock-opera and pop music, is even farther away from its ideal than was the ragtime epoch."

As can be seen from the Anastas'ev and Zasursky approaches to *Ragtime*, Soviet literary scholars have not spoken in one voice about the book. This phenomenon is typical of Soviet literary criticism of the recent past. One

line, represented here by Zaslursky, continues the tradition of viewing literature as a reflection of social and political realities. Literature is closely connected to ideological concerns. At the same time, another line, represented here by Anastas'ev, analyzes literature according to purely literary criteria. These two general approaches to literature coexist today in the Soviet Union. It is now possible, as Anastas'ev demonstrates, to talk about literature in exclusively aesthetic terms. This would have been unthinkable a few years ago. Thus, there is no monolithic system of literary criticism to which all critics must adhere. Although the ideological perspective is still very much in evidence in the Soviet Union, it is not the only show in town.

### Notes

1. *Inostrannaia literatura*, -9, 1978, pp. 32-90; -10, 1978, pp. 119-181.

2. In a book on modern Soviet literature, American scholar Deming Brown has stated, "No contemporary Soviet writer . . . surpasses him [Aksenov] in terms of formal inventiveness and exploratory daring." *Soviet Literature Since Stalin* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, England, 1978), p. 197. For more on Aksenov, see Priscilla Meyer, "Aksenov and Soviet Literature of the 1960's," *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, No. 6, Spring, 1973, pp. 447-460; P. Dalgaard, *The Function of the Grotesque in Vasilij Aksenov*, n.p., 1981.

3. *Metropol*, facsim. ed. (Ardis Publishers: Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979). An English translation of *Metropol* is scheduled for publication by W.W. Norton and Company in October, 1982. For more on the fate of *Metropol*, see Kevin Klose, "Moscow Journal Challenges Tight Control of Arts," *Washington Post*, January 24, 1979, pp. A1, A18; Craig R. Whitney, "Soviet Rebuffs Top Authors Seeking to Get Censored Works Printed," *New York Times*, January 28, 1979, p. 14; Kevin Klose, "Moscow Harasses Top Writers Over Unofficial Journal," *Washington Post*, February 4, 1979, p. A25; "U.S. Authors Protest Suppression of Soviet Authors," *New York Times*, August 12, 1979, p. 5; Feliks Kuznetsov, "A Soviet Reply to 5 U.S. Authors," *New York Times*, September 8, 1979, p. 21; Feliks Kuznetsov, "O chem shum?" ("Why the Uproar?"), *Literaturnaia gazeta*, September 19, 1979, p. 9; Craig R. Whitney, "Writers Say Soviet Yields in a Dispute," *New York Times*, October 24, 1979, p. 9; and Anthony Austin, "Letter from Moscow: The Metropol Affair," *New York Times Book Review*, March 2, 1980, pp. 3, 19.

4. N.A. Anastas'ev, "Ot pervogo litsa (Zametki o zarubezhnoi proze 70-kh godov)," ("In the First Person (Remarks on Foreign Prose of the '70's)'), *Voprosy literatury*, No. 7, 1977, pp. 82-118. Especially relevant are pages 110-115.

5. "Sovremennaia khudozhestvennaia literatura za rubezhom," ("Contemporary Literature Abroad"), No. 3, 1976, p. 76, as quoted in Anastas'ev, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

8. Ia. Zaslurskii, "Populiarnyi roman i muzyka istorii," ("A Popular Novel and the

Music of History"), *Inostrannaia literatura (Foreign Literature)*, No. 10, 1978, pp. 182-185.

9. For a more extensive treatment of Zaslursky's approach to Dos Passos, see Yassen Zaslursky, "Dos Passos' Experimental Novel" in *Twentieth-Century American Literature: A Soviet View*, tr. Ronald Vroon (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), pp. 331-350.