

A CASE FOR HISTORY AND MYTH: E.L. DOCTOROW'S «THE BOOK OF DANIEL»

Morton P. LEVITT

Perhaps the most hallowed critical cliché of Modernism, going back to T.S. Eliot's famed essay «Ulysses, Order and Myth» in 1923, relates to the centrality of myth in Modernist fiction. Half a century later, it becomes increasingly clear that Eliot was speaking then not of *Ulysses* but of *The Waste Land* (also published in 1922) and that his strictures as applied to the novel are incomplete and perhaps incorrect: the mythic method is more than a means of «making the modern world possible for art», as Eliot puts it¹, of providing form to evident formlessness; the Modernist attitude toward myth is not so very different after all from Classical attitudes, for it too strives to attain what one scholar has termed a «retrospective vision»² as a means of understanding our present predicament. Yet Eliot is surely correct in his belief that the essential aim of the mythic method is moral -although Modernist fiction, as exemplified by *Ulysses*, may offer a vision radically different from the one that he would expound and we can begin to recognize today that the Modernists' perspective on myth, «their attempt to understand and to express our human situation by means of myth»³, is perhaps their major link to the humanist tradition. We can recognize as well that the use of myth is one of the few Modernist techniques to thrive in this period of post-Modernism, although again attitudes have changed: the contemporary American novelists John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover and E.L. Doctorow seem on the surface to be closer than Joyce ever was to the bleak moral vision of Eliot.

The Joyce of *Ulysses* offers a prospect of mythic potential that his contemporaries could not always recognize. C.G. Jung, for example, despised what he saw as the literary and moral morass of the novel -«a positively brilliant and hellish monster-birth», he called it⁴- although it is the Jungian approach to myth can most clearly reveal the ultimate fertility of Leopold Bloom and his ties to the humanist tradition⁵. Despite the di-

mination of each facet of his life, in the midst of the irony of Homeric myth which acts at times as counterpoint to his life, Bloom the Jew perseveres, and he does so accompanied by a complex of images from nature and fertility myths which provides a view more affirmative by far than those of Eliot or Jung. It may take the perspective of half a century for us to perceive it, but Bloom is a hero of sorts, and Joyce holds out through him the possibility of continuity at least, if not quite of renewal.

For the Americans Barth, Pynchon, Coover and Doctorow, however, myth is the primary sign in our times of discontinuity, of the disruption of tradition and of human values and life. The Modernist Joyce serves then as Homer once did for Joyce: as historical model and literary exemplar, as a mythic norm to expand upon and against which to react. Inverted, distorted, pushed to its logical conclusions and found inherently illogical, myth for these post-Modernist American novelists is (like the Joycean echoes which mark their novels) a sign of our age. It is an age, moreover, which they see as peculiarly America in its expectations and failures. And so, as spokesmen for an a-historical people who have never been very successful at creating viable myth (think of Dan'l Boone's b'ar or Parson Weems' George Washington, even John F. Kennedy's Camelot), they have turned to our history as a substitute for myth. Barth in *The sot-Weed Factor* and Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* speak of our early loss of innocence in Colonial Times; in *The Public Burning*, Coover, and in *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow deal with that later loss made manifest by the infamous Rosenberg Case.

There is a certain expansiveness and hyperbole in the Barth, Pynchon and Coover novels which mark them as peculiarly American and post-Modernist. (Compare to them the self-restrictive fictions of contemporary England or the theory-laden French novels of the 1970's). *The Public Burning*, in particular, because it is based so closely on the public record of the Rosenberg trial and aftermath and because it is willing to create within that history its own unique characters and events, off the record, as it were, seems prototypically a product of its place and time. In depicting the public burning of the Rosenbergs on Times Square on the eve of the summer solstice (a national festival presides over by Betty Crocker), in inventing a love affair between Ethel Rosenberg and a strangely sympathetic Richard Nixon (almost but not quite consummated on the electric chair at Sing Sing prison), in describing an extravagant, folk humor Uncle Sam as the ubiquitous spirit of a nation perpetually at war with itself, Coover creates a fictional America strangely in tune with the historical McCarthyite period, a time of national suspicion and fear. Doctorow's interests are different, his scale smaller, closer to lifesize, his events less rooted in historical fact and yet more clearly potential, his history closer in the end to the more fertile constructs of Joycean myth. With its quieter but still demanding technique, its metaphor of Jewish involvement and concern expanded from Bloom and allied to this vision of history and myth, *The Book of Daniel* is perhaps the most significant, surely the most involving and moving American novel of the post-Modernist period.

The Rosenbergs' children never appear in *The Public Burning*. In *The Book of Daniel*, they are at the center. Daniel Isaacson, whose parents have been executed as spies for the

Russians, is the narrator of this book about their lives and deaths, about his subsequent life and his younger sister's seemingly preordained death. As Daniel, he writes of a time of trouble for individuals and for the nation; the prophecy of a better future, however distant it may be, is at best implicit—and limited—in his narration. As Isaac's son, he is both Esau the outcast and Jacob, called Israel, who would some day father a new people; he is also, as Isaac's son, the child of one who is offered as sacrifice for the people. The implications of Doctorow's title and names are pervasive. On the immediate, personal level, problems of fathers and sons run throughout Daniel's narrative; more generally, the inter-connected issues of Jewishness, history and myth permeate his life and those of his other subjects; these themes, on a still broader level, speak again to the nature of the American character and of the modern experience, for Daniel Isaacson, as his multifaceted name suggests and despite his particular history, is spokesman for universal instincts and concerns.

Daniel's book is an account of a new Babylonian Exile: the rule of fear and conformity which held Americans captive throughout the 1950's (not a time about which to be nostalgic, after all). He is both participant in and objective viewer of these events which he describes. The Isaacsons's children had been used by the Communist Party in their parents' defense; his sister, years afterwards, would be destroyed by these events; and Daniel would be concerned to justify her life and their parents' and to prove them all worthy and innocent. But he is also an historian (a graduate student at Columbia University, ostensibly writing his dissertation)⁶, and he brings to these characters and events—as to his own character and acts—an admirable but passionate distance. His historiography is Revisionist but unresolved: his parents' innocence cannot be proven, his sister's agony not undone. He is no Daniel to save his people, but perhaps, he comes to realize, he can save himself and his wife and son.

Daniel writes, then, as an historian, but this past of his is not quite comprehensible, and he cannot quite limit himself to the past. Present and past, public and private co-exist in his narration: his problems with his father (well meaning, ineffectual, yet strangely brave) and with his own infant son (how will he react to his father's capriciousness?) and the nation's problems as well (demonstrations on behalf of the Isaacsons/Rosenbergs blur into the peace demonstrations of the late 1960's in which Susan, his sister, is actively involved). Past and present come together, finally, in two funerals, one his parents', in memory (standing at their graves, «I think if I can only love my little sister for the rest of our lives that's all I will need» p. 316)⁷, the other, this last day, his sister's («She died of a failure of analysis» -p. 317). The failure is not simply psychiatry's, he knows, but his as well. He has been too preoccupied with the past to live well in the present. Daniel writes, finally, as more than historian.

Writing in the first person, in his own voice, in the present, Daniel Isaacson, not unlike his predecessor the Prophet Daniel, speaks in fact in several voices. He has the ability to view himself both subjectively and objectively, both in the present (as husband and father, brother, historian) and in the past (as a child on the fringes of a major historical event) to see himself in both sequences as «I» and as «he». He can also endeavor to see

as others may have seen, to extend himself, for example, into the minds of his parents in prison —to speak for them too in the third person and as «I». He jokes in the intensity of his search about «The novel as private I» (p. 285), but he is capable of viewing even certain scenes in which he is an actor with near-total objectivity, as if he were merely a dispassionate eyewitness and not a participant with vital interests at stake. He shares, he admits, in «the fucking family gift for self-objectification» (p. 93), the ultimate historian's gift, it would seem. Yet we perceive beneath the objectification, in the midst of the most apparently neutral scenes, an intensely subjective, passionate involvement. He is self-consciously aware that he is writing both history (announcing his sources, documenting his research) and a novel, both for himself and for the world. «Who are you anyway?» he asks his audience. «Who told you you could read this? Is nothing sacred?» (p. 72). Yet like the Underground Man (the source of similar complaints) that he might have become, he is compelled to go on —to continue to feel, to endeavor to understand the source of his feelings and to share them with us. The death of his sister recalls their parents' deaths and brings to the surface emotions long unacknowledged. As a child, he had learned not to show his feelings to outsiders or even to admit them fully to himself; as an adult, although he may still not articulate them fully, he learns during the course of his writing at least to acknowledge his feelings and to begin to confront them. Daniel's most powerful gift, beneath the self-conscious objectification, is his ability to feel and to make his readers feel with him.

Daniel's difficulties as an adult and Susan's destruction arise directly from their being the children of figures of myth in what may be the most revealing of all modern American myths. His historical search is designed to uncover the truths underlying that myth, truths which neither the Government nor the Communist Party has seemed much concerned with: each has in the myth precisely what it requires (conspirators or martyrs), and each therefore ignores the humans Paul and Rochelle Isaacson (and, of course, their children). Daniel knows them as people, attempts to understand them as figures in myth, learns through his search for his parents to begin to articulate and perhaps to resolve some of his own human needs. But he can never determine with certainty their innocence or guilt. Knowing that the Government has treated them unjustly, knowing that the Party has similarly distorted the meaning of their lives, knowing now what the price of their loss has been for him and his sister —knowing all this, that they have been forced into pre-established mythic forms with no concern for deeper truths which are the heart and function of true myth, of abiding fertility— Daniel can still not reach the ostensible goal of his search: none of this speaks to the specific question of innocence or guilt. Even tracking down his parents' principal accuser does not help, for Selig Mindish, their former friend and mentor, a grasping, coarse man whom Daniel even as a child has distrusted, is now thoroughly senile.

«The whites of his eyes were discolored. He needed a shave... His jaw moved up and down, his lips made the sound of a faucet dripping as they met and fell apart. But there was still in him the remnant of rude strength I remembered.

«I said, 'Hello, Mr. Mindish. I'm Daniel Isaacson. I'm Paul and Rochelle's son. Danny?»

«... He struggled to understand me... He smiled and nodded. Then as he looked in my eyes he became gradually still, and even his facial palsy ceased, and he no longer smiled...

«Denny?... It's Denny?»

«For one moment of recognition he was restored to life. In wonder he raised his large, clumsy hand and touched the side of my face. He found the back of my neck and pulled me forward and toward me and leaned touched the top of my head with his palsied lips» (pp. 308-9). For Daniel, even hatred cannot hold. He must learn to live outside myth and with ambiguity.

In *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Public Burning*, the traditional functions of mythmaking are intentionally distorted. The preponderance of mythic forms in these works serves initially to mask but finally to accent the loss of true mythic substance: of those ties to natural process and to past human experience which are represented in myth and which have served throughout history (and probably pre-history as well) to denote continuity and affirm our humanity. By accenting the forms, and there by the absence of substance, Barth, Pynchon and, especially, Coover demonstrate the apparent failure in our time of the mythmaking process itself and the concomitant disruption of those universally shared values and norms which are traditionally associated with myth. By substituting the facts of American history—in particular, those of our recent history—for myth, they indicate in addition the narrowing expectations and goals, the lessening fulfillment of which we are capable today: our ties, such as they are, are to a most restricted past and to a straitened sense of historical process. There is something of this in *The Book of Daniel* as well: it is no coincidence that Daniel Isaacson's confrontation with Mindish takes place in Disneyland, «shaped like a womb», expressing «the collective unconsciousness of the American Naïve», where Americans are invited «not merely to experience the controlled thrills of a carny ride, but to participate in mythic rituals of the culture» (pp. 301-3). Doctorow's Disneyland would seem the perfect American symbol of our human and mythic loss.

But there is something more here, some surviving sense of human potential, a pervasive theme allied to myth that distinguishes *The Book of Daniel* from *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Gravity's Rainbow* and, especially, from *The Public Burning*. Richard Nixon's Rosenbergs are executed because they are Jews; Doctorow's Isaacsons/Rosenbergs, like the originals, are Jews victimized by other Jews serving as over-zealous prosecutor and hanging judge, Jews who have been foresworn by their compatriots in order to prove to the community at large that Jews are citizens as much trustworthy as potentially perfidious (as are all their fellow citizens). The child of a public sacrifice, Isaac's son, Daniel is a representative Jew (even if unobservant) in the same sense as the Prophet Daniel and that later prophet, Leopold Bloom: as aliens in their native lands, as threatening and threatened outsiders. Yet like his nemasake and Bloom confronting their nationalist lions, Daniel in a strange way is preserved, even dignified by his Jewishness. He speaks, as a Jew, for continuity; he speaks for the stranger in us all.

Jews have always served—even at the time of their ascendancy, one would think—a specialized function within the myths of others: they, in myth, have been the other, the frightening, if weak, persisting outsider. Greek and Turk, Spaniard and Moor, Irish and English, southerner and northerner may see one another as the enemy and thereby accord one another a certain limited mythic status. But Jews alone seem to serve as outsider for virtually all other peoples—even for those few with whom they have not come in contact: witness the recent United Nations action equating Zionism with racism. This is particularly true in the Christian west, with its literary «Hugh of Lincoln» and Blood Accusation (witness Stephen Dedalus and Bloom in «Ithaca»), its religious image of Jews as Christ-killers (fulfilling the ambiguous role of the Serpent/Lucifer/Prometheus in the Creation myth), its political fear of Jews as radicals challenging the established order.

The senior Isaacsons—those pre-eminent threats to order—are not very good Jews. But their political ideals somehow evolve from their Jewishness. Ascher, their lawyer, understands «how someone could forswear his Jewish heritage and take for his own the perfectionist dream of heaven on earth, and in spite of that, or perhaps because of it, still consider himself a Jew» (p. 134). Daniel's grandmother, a survivor of Cossack pogroms, is appalled at her daughter's Americanization—«the thankless child who... forsakes [the old] ways and blasphemes and violates the Sabbath to be a modern American» (p. 78), who even changes her name from Rachele to Rochelle. But Daniel himself easily equates his parents' idealistic politics with their religious heritage. As he remembers his grandmother praying over the Sabbath candles, «When she lowered her hands, her eyes... were filled with tears, and devastation was in her face. That was my mother's communism. It was something whose promise was so strong that you endured much for it» (p. 53). More significantly, perhaps, the radical Isaacsons must be seen as Jews because everyone assumes that they are: the attackers of the bus bearing them back from a Paul Robeson concert need ask no questions before yelling «Kikes!» (p. 61)—as if «radical» and «Jew» were necessarily synonymous. Their Jewishness, then, may have—must have perhaps—both positive and negative results.

As he watches over his dying sister, Daniel, with no preparation or apparent context, thinks suddenly of Bloom: «Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowl» (p. 224): the (slightly misquoted) introduction of Bloom into *Ulysses*. Homey, mundane, realistic, these words, like their subject, offer a sharp contrast to intellectual, impractical, aloof Stephen Dedalus. But they note similarities as well. They announce at the start, and with humor, Bloom's apparent alienation from his own, Jewish brethren (he eats pork kidneys for breakfast). Cut off from his heritage by distance and time, by imperfect knowledge and by lack of belief, Bloom nonetheless is viewed by all as a Jew («though in reality I'm not»)⁸. Why did Mr. Joyce make his hero a Jew? Not simply because he was, as Joyce has answered, but because in a world cut off from its roots—the obvious lesson of Homeric myth in *Ulysses*—Bloom's Jewishness provides virtually the sole surviving measure of continuity and human worth. This and not Homer is the central mythic and metaphoric pattern of *Ulysses*. Ignorant as he is of his tradition (each of the two hundred-odd Jewish references in the novel is marked by error or incompleteness

or both), alienated as he is by some of its precepts and customs⁹, Bloom still brings with him into the gentile world a sense of history, an affirmation within history of the individual's responsibility for his own acts and thereby of individual dignity and worth: tenets as central to Jewish history and life as the belief in the One God. This heritage of Bloom's, truncated as it may be in his life, serves in *Ulysses* as reminder of or supplement to or substitute for a humanistic tradition presumed otherwise dead. It is Bloom's major link to the mythic past and, through him, it may be ours, his readers', as well. Daniel's sudden reference to Bloom attests to the centrality within his world of a similar vision of Jewishness, of myth and of humanity.

In their «refusal to be victim» (p. 43) yet their impulse toward victimization; in the lifelong innocence of his father (p. 51) and sister (p. 291) —as contrasted to Linda Mindish's trendy «alienation» (p. 287) and his own too easily avowed «Hard corruption» (p. 291); in their concern for suffering humanity and in their own suffering, the Isaacsons act out the literary myth and metaphor of Jewishness as enunciated by Bloom. They never question their responsibility for their acts; they achieve dignity because they assume that they possess it as humans; they act out in their lives —idealistic and involved if perhaps misguided— the humanistic values of their people's ancient tradition. Searching through their lives for the meaning of his own, Daniel discovers the validity of two clichés of Bloom's: it is not merely history, «the irreparability of the past»¹⁰, which governs their lives —his parents', his sister's, his own; he can also find in them, in writing about them, «the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature»¹¹, a synthesis of history and myth.

History, for Daniel, is thus more than a means of observing the past and applying its lessons to a troublesome present. It is an active, pervasive force in his life, revealing, inexorable. («It is History», he thinks through his father's thoughts, «that pig, biting into the heart's secrets» p. 115). It is because he has thought of himself and his sister as characters in history that he has lost sight of her —as of himself— as people who must live in the present. His problem is that of the nation at large, as we struggle, too, to come to terms with our history: Daniel's concern with comprehending his past is not so very different from Pynchon's use of his Puritan heritage in *Gravity's Rainbow* or Barth's version of the foundation of his native Maryland in *The Sot-Weed Factor*. What is different is the intimacy and immediacy of these events —both for Daniel and for his readers. Here there are none of the distancing devices of Pynchon's or Barth's narratives; we are not merely allowed but consistently induced to react to Daniel as humans reacting to a fellow being. His use of myth, his Jewish heritage, his reaction to history all affirm his humanity and ours.

Doctorow's concern throughout his canon has been with the myths and alleged myths embedded in American history —in his own retrospective vision, that is: of the Settlement of the West in *Welcome to Hard Times*, of the start of the century in *Ragtime*, of the Great Depression in *Loon Lake* —and with the effects of these myths on the individuals caught up in them. Only in *The Book of Daniel* of all contemporary American novels, through the expanded Joycean metaphor of Jewishness, is myth made to serve as it has

throughout history to integrate the individual into his society and to give him, at the same time, a sense of personal stature, even to suggest a sense of wider, national purpose. For Daniel will not claim to believe, as does his Marxist father, «in the insignificance of personal experience within the pattern of history» (p. 43). His narrative proves –both his writing and our involvement– that the humanist impulse is alive still in Post-Modernist American fiction. The book of Daniel, as he comes at last to acknowledge, is his life.

1. Reprinted in GIVENS, Seon, ed., *James Joyce: Two Decades of Criticism* (New York, 1963), p. 202.
2. WILLCOCK, Malcolm M., *A Companion to the Iliad* (Chicago, 1976), p. 282.
3. BARNES, Hazel E., «Greek Mythical Figures as Contemporary Images», *The Key Reporter*, XLI (Summer 1976), p. 2.
4. JUNG, C. G., «Ulysses», *Europäische Revue*, IX (1932), pp. 547-68, as reprinted under the title «Ulysses -A Monologue», in *Nimbus*, II (1953), pp. 7-20.
5. See my article, «A Hero for our Time: Leopold Bloom and the Myth of Ulysses», *James Joyce Quarterly*, X (1972), pp. 132-146.
6. This situation would later be appropriated for William Goldman's popular thriller, *Marathon Man*.
7. All references are to DOCTOROW, E. L., *The Book of Daniel* (New York, 1979).
8. JOYCE, James, *Ulysses* (New York, 1946), p. 627.
9. «Why did Bloom experience a sentiment of remorse» at the memory of his long-dead father?
 «Because in immature impatience he had treated with disrespect certain beliefs and practices.
 «As?
 «The prohibition of the use of fleshmeat and milk at one meal, the hebdomadary, symposium of incoordinately abstract, perfervidly concrete mercantile coesreligionist excompatriots: the circumcision of male infants: the supernatural character of Judaic scriptures: the ineffability of the tetragrammaton: the sanctity of the sabbath.
 «How did these beliefs and practices now appear to him?
 «Not more rational than they had then appeared, not less rational than other beliefs and practices now appeared». (*Ulysses*, pp. 708-9).
10. *Ulysses*, p. 680.
11. *Ulysses*, p. 650.