TEXTUAL (DIS)CONNECTIONS: ELECTRIFICATION, NARRATIVE FAILURE, AND

THE *BILDUNGSROMAN* IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* AND E.L.

DOCTOROW'S *THE BOOK OF DANIEL*

by

EDWARD JOHN ARDENEAUX IV

(Under the Direction of Jed Rasula)

ABSTRACT

This thesis, (artificially) situated between two world's fairs, explores the problems of electricity and subjectivity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*. Specifically, it detangles the consequences that these problems provoke for narrative, examined through failures and layers of narrative creation. Beyond these specific novels, this thesis illuminates the *Bildungsroman* as a generic category in relation to these new generic variants. The failure of the *Bildungsroman* to evolve, as a category, in American spaces and alongside new youth identities forces a contrast between the way the world once worked and new models of coping and striving in chaotic, electrified landscapes. Through a study of these distinctly American voices and the narratives they create, this thesis examines the influence of electricity on novel form/content and narrative endings as moments of possible textual transcendence.

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EDWARD JOHN ARDENEAUX IV

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EDWARD JOHN ARDENEAUX IV

Major Professor: Jed Rasula

Committee: Susan Rosenbaum
Hugh Ruppersburg

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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Introduction: Electrification and the World's Fair

"Never before has a visitor to a fair been given such an opportunity to see and enjoy such a varied and extensive display of man's progress. Hundreds of concerns work to carry out the theme, the emphasis always being placed on ideas and what we may expect in a world of the future; a world lighted, protected, made happier, more comfortable by the efforts of science and industry. A world where these efforts are concentrated on man's enjoyment of the latest improvements; where all these benefits are available to all citizens, a world we all dream of – "The World of Tomorrow" (3)

- taken from the *1939 Pictorial Guide to the World's Fair*

- Figure 1 ("The Theme" 6)

An interesting and, it seems, culminating moment in the process of the electrification of America occurs at the end of the 1930s, when New York City hosted a world's fair. E. L. Doctorow, in his novel *World's Fair*, captures some of the essence of the experience of the New York World's Fair in 1939/40. In this novel, he provides a description of his protagonist's[1] first experience at the Fair. He revels in the General Motors Exhibit, called the Futurama:

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1 His protagonist shares his own name, Edgar, embedding this novel with the idea of autobiography. John Williams, in his critical review of Doctorow's books, *Fiction as False Document*, makes the following case for this novel:

The lights went down. Music played and the chairs lurched and began to move sideways. In front of us a whole world lit up, as if we were flying over it, the most fantastic sight I had ever seen, an entire city of the future, with skyscrapers and fourteen-lane highways, real little cars moving on them at different speeds, the center lanes for the higher speeds, the lanes on the edge for the lower. […] No one would get run over in this futuristic world. *It all made sense*. (252, *emphasis mine*)

Later in his description, he labels this miniature future "a model world" (253). Young Edgar, experiencing the promise and majesty of the Fair for the first time, "dazzled" by this experience of a "corner of the future" and clutching his "I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE" pin in hand, captures this moment of cultural wonder with his photo-quality explication (253). A utopian vision of the future has been constructed by the powers of industry that be, and they offer, in fully realized models, a taste of the 'inevitable' future, electrified and perfect, promised to America, if not humanity more generally.

The figures of the Trylon and the Perisphere[2] (Figure 1) stand as the symbols for this American cultural event – the New York World's Fair of 1939, or, as it was called, the "World of Tomorrow." These figures, the dominant symbols for an envisioned future, captured the essence of the Fair's theme and, as one fairgoer recounts them, "the blazing white Trylon and Perisphere - you had to squint at them, it hurt your eyes to look at them when you were up close on a bright day – against a brilliant cloudless sky" (Gelernter 16).These massive monuments represent an event that embodies a culmination point for the integration of electricity into the

many reviewers and critics alike placed Doctorow's next novel, *World's Fair* (1985), in a tradition that transcends nationality – the *Bildungsroman*, or novel depicting the education of a young man. The book, which Doctorow calls the "illusion of a memoir," features Edgar Altschuler narrating the first ten years of his life in New York City in the thirties. […] critics have seen the novel not just as the growth of any writer's mind, but of Doctorow's in particular. (130-131)

Thus, his fictionalized memoir gets parceled, by critics, as the *Bildungsroman* of Doctorow's own artistic maturation, which would make the World's Fair of 1939-40 crucial to his formation as a writer. Interestingly, Altschuler translates "old schooler," casting him back to a previous era.

2   These two figures, as the central theme exhibit, contain grandness and simplicity. John and Margaret Gold offer their specific parameters in *Cities of Culture*: "the Trylon, a 728-feet high, triangular tapering obelisk, provided the vertical frame. This was connected to the Perisphere, an eighteen-storey high globe with a 180-feet diameter" (98). See Figure 1 above for a visual representation.

American national consciousness, marking the end of a long process of electric socialization. The very idea of this event (as event), or grand spectacle[3] of electric power's power, conflates itself with the idea of the futuristic. The present, the now, gains momentum with such a dazzling display and, projecting forward, promises an engineered future wholly different from the 'dark' ages of the past (even if the new enlightenment offered proves false). In the wake of this event, America's image is cast in the glow of electric light, and moves into the unknowns of the future guided by such artificial light, which illuminates the road of progress.

The Fair of 1939, commingling both future and utopian progress, looks forward to the practical implementation of electrified perfection as a reality, for man and society. As John and Margaret Gold explain, the Fair sought "an attainable goal, presented on a grand scale in [a] tangible form," creating a moment where "the visitor to the Fair was thrust into the full-blown Age of Consumerism and the Age of the Machine" (*Cities* 95). Past ways of living, which had slowly been evolving through the Industrial Revolution and into the twentieth century, reached a climatic point at the Fair, ushering in these new "Ages." Beyond merely peering forward, the visionaries behind the Fair promise peace and brotherhood, the electric peace brought via progress to this harmonized humanity. As David Gelernter explains, in his attempt to convey the "new world view" the fair presented, "[t]he fair was the first ever 'to attempt building itself on a constructive world concept' – it had a coherent world view to put across" (14). In light of this

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3   In their study, entitled *Cities of Culture*, John and Margaret Gold specifically label "size, spectacle and grandeur" as keys to American Fair production, indicating that they are "firmly established as abiding elements" (84). These three ideas all stress an event that attempts to create an incomprehensible and awe-inspiring, almost sublime, moment for the individual patron, seeking to enchant with an experience beyond human comprehension. Morris Dickstein, in a separate study, "From the Thirties to the Sixties," has this to say about the nature of a world's fair:

> world's fairs are first of all happenings – social moments in the popular imagination.. […] As special events to be cherished and remembered, great fairs, like local ones, are pieces of popular culture, very much dependent on the excitement of the crowds, on color, scale, and spectacle; […] on evoking a sense of the unusual, the marvelous, the wonderful. (21)

The focus on fair as event, as spectacle moment in culture and history, takes root across most sources on the subject.

concept, realized through the technological innovations presented, the Fair projected utopia as practically achieved, an attitude Gelernter finds reflected in the recorded responses of fairgoers, who consistently "used superlatives for their appreciation" of the experience, stressing it as unique in history and offering "acute hope" (15-16).[4] This coherent, powerful vision reveals the pronounced influence and acceptance of electricity as a force that has not only altered the American mindset profoundly, but on which the hopes of the future are pinned. Though the utopian dreams of this event are obviously not made good in the coming history of America, they do illuminate the kind of vision that one possesses in looking into the future – a vision augmented by electric light.

Doctorow's narrator, at the Fair, encounters both "bolts of lightning shot thirty feet through the air" from a generator and the exposed body (complete with a full frontal vaginal glimpse through "scissor-kicking legs") of his friend's mother during her shift swimming with Oscar the Amorous Octopus (255, 268)[5] Even as these tawdry sights of the Midway and shocking moments capture Edgar's imagination, his terrifying trip up the Parachute Jump allows him a broader perspective, as the best view he gets over the Fair. During this trial of courage, and after offering his panoramic view of the Fair from above, young Edgar narrates his view from the top, writing "I saw out over the world now, over the Fair. I saw Manhattan, I saw clouds over the city lit from below by electric light" (266). From the pinnacle, Edgar sees a world lit up by electric power, the very primal (though artificial) force this Fair means to harness for the future.

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4   Gelernter's work, *1939: The Lost World of the Fair*, seeks to recreate the mystery and wonder this particular World's Fair exuded, both through primary sources and interviews with those who experienced the event. He seeks, through his history, a greater understanding of both why the Fair held such power, and why such an event is not likely to occur again in the same spirit anytime in the near future.
5   As Dickinson relates, most of young Edgar's excitement at the Fair occurs on the Midway, with its rampant commercialism, sexual secrets and freakish entertainment. I would argue, however, that he was equally influenced by the wonders of the Fair's major themes, including (obviously) electric power (Dickinson 23).

His New York, already an electrified city, merges in the bright lights of the Fair to offer the

"World of Tomorrow" as an achievable event, at least from within the midst of the spectacle.

David Nye, in his major work *Electrifying America*, imagines the Fair as an attempt to

transcend the current limits of a stifled, cultural depression, which had been the reality of the

1930s. In his recreation, "the fair as a whole presented a harmonious community, a world

apparently without inequality, in which farm, factory, and city fitted neatly together" (371). The

magic of electricity and technology allow dreams to *seem* realized, and to present the future as

already achieved. Nye finds, in this "unified vision of a future America," a trend towards "goods

[being] displayed as integrated parts of a larger historical process," and thus a shift from isolated

"objects" to the Fair as a totality (368, 375). With its "vision of limitless light and power," the

Fair acts as a cultural moment, the crest in the rise of electricity in America, and as wars loom

and atomic power becomes a reality, this moment captures the utopian dreams that electricity

held latent (380).[6] Gelernter, in his reading of Fair history, sees this utopian, historical moment

as providing just that:

> once upon a time we envisioned utopia and then, at length, we came to live there.
> And to understand why that is true, how it could possibly be, we need to study the
> fair – because it was the Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Revelations of the American
> religion. Not the basic meat-and-potatoes but the ecstatic closing vision. The fair
> laid out the end of days. (53)

Gelernter understands the utopia that the Fair promised in such prophetic terms as realized by the

1970s. His understanding leaves the America of (his) today "in a post-utopian twilight" – the

utopia this Fair promised (53). Even if his argument appears drastic, he does grant credence to

the singular importance of the '39 World's Fair as a locus of cultural power, and a reference

point to gaze back on nostalgically.

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6   Nye's book charts the rise of electricity in America from 1880-1940, finding the latter date as the endpoint for
    electricity's integration and acceptance. That Nye ends this larger work with the New York World's Fair speaks
    to its importance on the cusp of a new era as the fully realized representative of the passing phase in history.

In another explanation, Morris Dickinson positions the Fair as "a stunning piece of science fiction for an age poised on the brink of an economic and technological leap" (22). Dickinson lingers over details as he projects forward, and his specifics on New York as the City of Light bear repeating, as he relates that the diorama, "a full block long and three stories high," used "light, color, sound, and animation to play out a 24-hour day, including a thunderstorm, in just twelve minutes" (22).[7] Life, it seems, was captured here, made visible, and such a presentation could not help but contain the promise of future reality; the imagined dream's existence bridged the gap between whimsical visions and probable outcomes.

The Fair, then, acts as a full-blown cultural moment for the expansion of the American imagination. In this decidedly future-looking atmosphere, the goal was not to reveal existing possibilities, but instead to illuminate future paths and, in a visionary sense, probabilities. These fancies are not simply what could be; they are constructed as what *should* be in the evolution of citizens following out the directives of American promise.[8] In a democracy born of the citizens' choice of self-rule, in line with its drafter's wishes, what can exist as the ultimate utopia must exist for the country to fulfill its mission. What is dreamt at the Fair by engineers and scientists can happen, from a technological perspective, and in that light it must happen, as the continued realization of this best of all possible countries coming to be itself. As Nye states, "this 'strong, clear hope,' kept alive by modernist product design, technocratic predictions, government programs like the TVA, and the repetition of advertising parables of civilization redeemed, was embodied in the world's fairs of the 1930's" (367). The Fair, then, embodies the promise and

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7   Several sources actually quote Doctorow's account from *World's Fair* among their evidence, including this one. Dickinson's essay, "From the Thirties to the Sixties," compares the "World of Tomorrow" to the 1964 New York Fair. John and Margaret Gold, in *Cities of Culture*, also use Doctorow as a starting point for conceiving of the Fair.

8   Of course, the ideal America was only offered to ideal Americans. Marginal and minority groups were not extended the same promise. Robert Rydell, in his work on the Fair, focuses on African-American disillusionment and mistreatment at the Fair, in his chapter, "African-Americans in the World of Tomorrow" (157).

possibility of a different kind of world, a world of imagination and the ideal, and such a world is subsequently promised to the youth of America as the future reality (even if one mostly promised through commercial images).

Because Doctorow's narrator grows along with the Fair, he stands in a unique position not only to represent its hidden details, but to explore the Fair from the point of view of a young man or, more specifically, from that of youth. Edgar continually falls victim to the notion that he inhabits the future being realized around him, even as he sees the dingy edges and fading paint. His father, standing as a counterpoint perspective without naivety, sees through the more visionary aspects to underlying (economic) reality. For example, exiting the General Motors exhibit, his father remarks, even as he smiles, that "[w]hen the time comes, General Motors isn't going to build the highways, the federal government is. With money from us taxpayers. […] So General Motors is telling us what they expect from us: we must build them the highways so they can sell us the cars" (285). In Doctorow's account, then, the visions of youth and adulthood diverge when confronted with the enormity of the Fair. As the novel seeks to recount the visit to the Fair as a past occurrence, thus tempering the wonder of the text through a nostalgic lens, the narrator reimagines his father's tactic of acting "gentle" and saying "many things to show his appreciation and delight" (285). The father can understand the wonder of the son, and instead of derailing his excited hopes, he keeps his realistic commentary to a minimum; it is one thing for the older generation to see through the utopian veil, but quite another to crush the hopeful gaze of youth, or the generation set to inherit the future. As his narrator finishes recounting the experiences of his youth and the Fair, to which he gained admittance by entering and winning an essay writing contest, he looks back in a concluding moment:

> [p]erhaps my sense of accomplishment [at winning the contest] is what kept the
> World's Fair in my mind, a kind of dwelling in secret amazement at the boy I was

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> for having boldly done the job; or perhaps it was the recollection of those clean
> and painted streets, red and yellow and blue, and the flower gardens and the
> whiteness of the future as it expanded in my mind perispherically and thrust its
> needle into the sky. (287)

Thus, the Fair allows the future to enter the imagination of youth, and this youth to respond to its authority and responsibility,[9] merging its specific symbols into a moment where future meets present; when Edgar turns the symbols into descriptors, such as "perispherically," he presents one textual avenue where the Fair altered his worldview. At the least, his vision of the future contains the Fair as a building block in that direction, though his dreamy imagination seems to conflate the two, infecting this impressionable youth with a vision of social hope – one spoken of in the language of the Fair's symbolic centerpiece.

In his book-length study, *Teenage*, Jon Savage also sets the Fair of 1939 as a culmination point preceding World War II. Seeking to explain the energy of youth in the 30's, specifically in relation to dancing, Savage builds his chapter toward the Fair as a cultural moment, a climax of youthful energy and uncontainability. America has literally become the world of tomorrow, the site of promise for the fate of where the world is going, and the Fair truly does embody this feeling, the World of Tomorrow realized through industry and a mastery of the technical aspects of culture. Savage, for his part, brings the youths from the Jitterbug dancehalls to this energized place of future promise, specifically in the persons of a young Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney.[10] As the "freshly crowned royalty of new youth culture," these MGM stars become the

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9   These ideas also occur in Gelernter, especially authority, which he locates as one of the keys to its power. As he states, "the fair was above all *authoritative*," from its sprawling enormity to the "deep, portentous narrator's voice" at the Futurama, and this power to command furthered the susceptibility of patrons to the charms and visions of the Fair, especially youths (11). Of course, under the auspices of this more visionary aspect comes its counterpart, an almost imperialistic commercial drive, which both provides capital for the event and remains inextricable from this or any fair's very identity.

10 Savage names America as the world of tomorrow by quoting Walter Lippman from a 1939 essay in *Life* magazine. The self-awareness of this feeling and the Fair's name portray an America with a strong sense of itself as containing the seeds of the future. Garland and Rooney starred in a series of "backyard musicals" in the 30's, and Garland reached new levels of fame in the recently released *Wizard of Oz*, releasing the barely-contained

representation of the young who crowd the streets of New York in a frenzy to catch a glimpse of screen-stars made flesh (332). Having brought these representatives of youth to a representative event, the Fair itself, Garland gives the synopsis of the Fair that transcends even herself. Calling her experience there "the most wonderful night of my life," she both captures the surreal meeting of youthful and synthetic energy that surge together toward the promise of the future while nailing the Fair down in time; by limiting the Fair, temporally, to one night, she casts it as a moment that will not be repeated, will not transcend its time and place to be realized in the future, but a static event to recall nostalgically. Thus, even with all the players together, electrified, the Fair could only be a utopian dream never made good, and, in this respect, becomes the false promise that future generations (including and foremost these very youths in the process of aging) would have to work out in the temporality of everyday reality.

Before exiting the '39 World's Fair, a more comprehensive look at David Nye's argument in *Electrifying America* will be beneficial as a transition to the treatment of electricity in the specific novels of interest to follow. Nye makes an argument for looking at the advent and integration of electricity into American society as more than a commercial or external phenomenon; for him, electricity acts internally, as part of the social construction and identity of the nation as a whole. He considers scientific, commercial, and creative means of how thinking about electricity changes and gets adapted in culture. Through his focus on the individual, the particular, instead of on innovation and big business, Nye is able to chart how changes in electrical technology fundamentally altered the state of American consciousness. As he explains it, "'electrifying' was both a process and an attribute" (x).

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energy of his youthful dancers to a new frenzy. Bringing the actors, the energy, and the youths to the Fair, then, shows the power of this event as revelatory of a larger cultural pattern.

Nye concludes by focusing on how the results of electrification were not predetermined or externally forced on people, but "culturally determined" (384). The American system and mindset, specifically relating to individualism and capitalism, set the agenda for how electricity would be adapted for America's needs. While he focuses on the amassing of economic capital in the hands of the few, he also grants a space in this history to explore how the individual could be constructed in light of new technologies, even to the point where self-conception could not stand without that dependence. As Nye concludes, we have come to fear the dark, for we no longer understand what it is or what it used to be. Post-electricity as a new phenomenon, human conceptions of the world invariably factor in these perceptions, which change the nature of self and identity. In Nye's conception, "[p]eople do not merely use electricity. Rather, the self and the electrified world have intertwined" (390). As electricity, then, gets incorporated into America generally, literarily entering into physical bodies and psychic spaces, the country becomes the body electric.[11] Instead of Whitman's connections between individuals as one body, electricity at this point forges a new body politic along its wires of light and communication, shocking the body into a different kind of (subjective) existence. Thus, as the Fair stood as Nye's culmination point, it will serve as the point of departure for engaging both E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as both texts confront and construct electricity and subjectivity as merging factors of identity. As the utopian visions of an electrified future fall flat, novelists explore a working relationship between self and electricity, grappling with the problems and new possibilities this meeting spawns. Far from a unified vision for a collective

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11 Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric" focuses on individual bodies and the group Soul, but creates an early idea of the social body as connected through electricity. Emerson also discusses electricity in his essays, though his focus revolves around connection. For example, in "The Poet," he writes, "Stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that *dream-*power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limits and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity" (467). Thus, electricity long inhabited the American imagination, but clearly penetrates and inhabits mass culture by 1939.

future, both novels seek an understanding of how electricity has 'intertwined' with identity,

imagination, and maturation in the "brave new world" to come, especially for generations that

cannot conceive of their America without electricity, making the electrified the only known

reality (Rydell 132).[12]

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12 In *World of Fairs*, Robert Rydell examines the Fair's theme song, which includes the line "For a brave new world,/Tomorrow's world,/That we shall build today" (132). The Fair's interesting link to a brave new world in 1939, seven years after the publication of *Brave New World*, by Aldous Huxley, either seems a misstep or a direct challenge to his dystopian vision of the future. Of course, Huxley steals his title from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, when Miranda says "O wonder!/ How many goodly creatures are there here!/ How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world/ That has such people in't!" (V.1.180-184). The vision of this Fair, then, falls into the same trap as previous utopias, contrasting hopes and dreams with their inevitable failure.

CHAPTER 2

Electrification as Entry into the Novel(s) – A Charged Potential

Electricity, mid-century, provides access to innovations in the novel as content, as a way to grapple with formal aspects of narrative, and as an avenue to (re)conceptualize aspects of thinking about how novels work (connections, disconnections, switches, paths). *Invisible Man* and *The Book of Daniel* contain this struggle to integrate electricity into the novel, formally and as a subject. Through the treatment of these two novels, this thesis seeks an understanding of how these novels and novelists dealt with this challenge and, through successes and failures, where these novels leave the question of electricity as complete projects.

In a novel centrally concerned with electricity, Daniel, as the son of the Isaacsons (the stand-ins for the historical Rosenbergs), spends the bulk of his narrative avoiding a detailed account of the execution and death of his parents by the U.S. government for treason. Near the end, however, with his own quests and problems nearly completed, he decides to rise to the challenge. After a pause in his narrative, he opens by asking "what more is there to say," and answers with another characteristic dodge, "YOUR CAREER IN ELECTRICITY," which envisions the technical and consumer uses for electric power (295). After this brief scientific interlude, however, he attacks the reader as judge, voyeur, and companion on this journey to the (dark) heart of his narrative, when he challenges: "I suppose you think I can't do the electrocution. I know there is a you. There has always been a you. YOU: I will show you that I can do the electrocution" (295-296). He does not call the coming event an execution, but insists on the electrical medium which will end their lives, their final trial to face and, now, his

challenge to recreate. Daniel's awareness of the imagined reader, only connected on the written

page to his own project, makes up for the lack of expected communal support ("no cause had

rallied") needed to stop the electrocution (296). He knows he is alone, and only through his

written account will his readers reconnect with the event and keep the memory of their politically

motivated deaths alive.

His description, especially of his father's electrocution, lingers over the shabbiness of

the event and the brokenness of the man he so admired. Remaining detached as storyteller,

Daniel explains the process of strapping him in, very businesslike, right up to securing the

electrodes in place. Then he switches direction, back to the nature of electricity, writing

"electricity flows in circuits […] in electrocution, the circuit is closed or completed by the human

body" (297). Finally, all at the ready and the thumbs up given by prison authorities, Daniel does

the electrocution:

> The executioner threw the switch. My father smashed into his straps as if hit by a
> train. He snapped back and forth, cracking like a whip. The leather straps groaned
> and creaked. Smoke rose from my father's head. A hideous smell compounded of
> burning flesh, excrement and urine filled the death chamber. Most of the
> witnesses turned away. A pool of urine collected on the cement floor under the
> chair. (297-298)

His father could be a total stranger, for all the emotion in this passage, which reads like a

stereotypical description of a body electrocuted from a detached perspective; even the repetition

"my father," which should connect them, works objectively as a label, as in 'my father's body.'

In fact, Daniel explains what he actually presents when describing the electrocution, which is

less the death of a man, his father, than the "shuddering spasming movements" which lasted

"God knows how many seconds" and display "a portrait of electric current, normally invisible,

moving through a field of resistance" (298).[13] His mother, proud and defiant to the end, required

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13 Critical opinion, of course, varies on this point. Christopher Morris, in *Models of Misrepresentation*, finds death

two "[doses]" of current to die, surviving the first round of electrocution before her final exit in round two, and her death focuses on the executioner's error, not on the physical death of her body (299). Thus, the electricity which has haunted Daniel's narrative leads to this moment of electricity made visible, revealed through the human body as a mere resistor to complete the circuit, captured in the very violence enacted on that body.[14] The electric current and the human body have merged for one moment of completion and near-perfection, the invisible captured even as the body voids its contents, only to fade limply to death when the circuit cuts off.

As his parents become superconductors, Daniel becomes free to end his novel. Having reconstructed electricity in action, overlaying its spasmodic power on a scene he did not witness, Daniel seals off the connection to his past as a cauterized wound; having burned away the humanity and emotional pain of the event via electricity, he can move on to funerals and the self-conscious ending of his own project, the book itself. Electricity not only allows Daniel to plunge through the horror of his parents' deaths, but reveals the momentary merging of subject and object in a transformative action, the passage from life to death; as his father writhes on (become body-as-puppet to the current), his last dance focuses attention on the bodily animations that constitute life and self-directed movements. As the moment of death gets captured, with the body continuing on as a mere animated object, his narrative contrasts life with the body as a vessel for charged, volitionless movements. On the other hand, because electrocution results from treason, and is enforced as a punishment, Daniel creates another portrait behind the scenes, that of

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here "unrepresentable, undecidable," then goes on to explain the scene as "undermining representation-in-death" (84). As his reading remains focused on undermining Daniel's entire narration as an "eternal return, [or the] infinite reiteration of the same thing," and thus unable to represent anything, he seems to misread the narrative of electricity as agent in the moment of the electrocution, with death represented as a mere byproduct (95).

14 For several critical accounts of electricity as the binding theme and unifying narrative principle of *The Book of Daniel*, see T. V. Reed, "Genealogy/Narrative/Power: Questions of Postmodernity in Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*," Naomi Morgenstern, "The 'Primal Scene' in the Public Domain: E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*," Susan Lorsch, "Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* as *Künstlerroman*: The Politics of Art," and Geoffrey Harpham, "E. L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative," to name a handful of sources.

electricity as an agent of social control, enforced by those who harness non-electric, human power. Less practically and more insidiously, the same electricity that lights homes and streets, allows appliances to operate, and powers Disneyland, can be used by the government to terminate a human life. As T.V. Reed, in "Genealogy/Narrative/Power," argues, "electricity is at once the benign power that lights the library where Daniel writes and the terrible power that electrocutes his parents" (296). This experience, then, occurring when Daniel was young (around the age when he "was [first] growing hair on [his] penis"), leaves him wary of and opposed to homogenized power, instead standing as a leftwing rebel (Doctorow 295). Imagining, and now narrating, the frying bodies of his parents helps explain the prevalence of electricity in his novel, as well as his constant vigilance toward the seemingly harmless modes of culture that surround him.[15] As such, electricity does not become an accepted fact, but remains a Cold War tool, co-opted by business and the government as another technocratic means of social control.

David Nye explores how literary texts reveal the impact and embodiment of electricity into the American consciousness, because "electrification was part of the changes in values and self-perception that came with modernity" (284). As the world evolves rapidly in many directions and becomes "emptied of meaning," Nye sees "electric light [holding] back the void and [confirming] a temporary existence" (286). Electric light can reveal what exists within its scope, providing at least an illuminated space for "the existence of a world," even if such a world remains surrounded by darkness (286).[16] Nye, as a conclusion to these musings, ends the section

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15 Daniel himself, when concocting the plot against his parents, refers to their coming deaths as follows: "FRYING, a play in ten overt acts" (157). In naming their punishment as frying, Daniel trivializes the death of the body through his grotesque description, even if he is accurate. As narrator, he constantly uses phrases like this one, that both make his point and work on several levels (the play on acts).

16 Nye goes on to explain the situation approaching the mid-twentieth century by writing that "Electric light had entered a society with weakening religious convictions, a society in flux which needed to ward off the terrors of the night; a society where some […] could not sleep without a light in the room. Terror of darkness was nothing new, but the world of rapidly obsolescent commodities and electrified landscapes held a new terror: the absence of meaning" (286). Here, he posits both the positive uses of light, such as warding off the terror of darkness, but

with a consideration of Ralph Ellison's nameless narrator, commenting, "[l]ittle wonder that [he] makes his last attempt to become visible, to become real to himself, by stealing current from the power company and installing an immense number of electric light bulbs in his underground room" (286). Nye's observation requires some explanation, but can act as an entry point for considering why an invisible man would require light, specifically electric light, to cast his own form in relief. As a man not truly seen, can enough light make him visible to himself?

In his Prologue, the Narrator[17] explains the necessity of electric light right before revealing himself as a "thinker-tinker" in the American tradition of inventors, one with "a theory and a concept" (7). Discussing his need for light, he writes that "[p]erhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I *am* invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form" (6). Nye calls this moment a point from which "the unity of self and object could go little further," which necessitates the existence of physical form, cast in electric light, as an access point for seeing/understanding identity (286). Form here is crucial to the Narrator, since "to be unaware of one's form is to live a death," an inauthentic situation left to the blind up above (7). He confesses his social "act of sabotage" through his theft of power from "Monopolated Light & Power" and his ownership of "1,369 lights" on his ceiling, all of them "the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type" (7). Working toward his dream of wiring up the walls and floor, he makes his situation clear: "Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and

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also its equally dangerous counterpart, the illumination of a world which lacks meaning. He specifically addresses Hemingway's waiter from "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" who finds light as a cure for the *nada* he faces in the world.

[17] For the purposes of this thesis, Ellison's narrator will be granted a variety of titles to make up for his lack of a name. Notably, the 'Narrator' and 'IM' will both be utilized here. As an interesting side note, the critical proclivity to shorten Invisible Man to IM has the absurd side-effect of highlighting one of the character's own obsessions. Throughout the novel, seeking self, he follows various versions of "I am what I am" (266). His critically accepted designation, IM, could literally present "I am" as he who constructs this tale of invisibility. Thus the contradiction – I am, I exist, yet his existence remains invisible. (IM = I am)

brighter light. The truth is the light and light is the truth" (7). This combination of light and form, with brighter light casting the self in greater definition, enables the Narrator to see himself clearly and to write, in the hole (which is nothing if not a well-lighted social womb), "his memoirs," which express "both his state of consciousness and the state of society" ("The Art of Fiction" 178).

What kind of form does light offer? The physical form seems implicit here, his illuminated body, because light, especially "more and brighter," captures (and darkens) the bodily details which, taken together, comprise the composite self (7). To a greater degree, however, stolen light creates a connection to the social realm beyond the hole, allowing the Narrator a more metaphysical form through the electric current produced by power plants. Thus, in his place outside of history, he remains on the grid of people above ground, and through this connection his form becomes both personal (seeing himself) and social (seeing himself in the light produced by white centers of cultural power).[18] Thus, even "[plunging] outside of history," the Narrator remains, through his act of theft, tied to a broader historical reality, for he seeks to rejoin its discourse and to emerge back up to the surface, beginning with the writing of his memoir, an act that transcends the personal through his intent to connect at the social level (337). When he says "Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation," he posits his intention to reemerge from this stolen space beneath the city (6).

He elaborates this point when he offers "a definition: a hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (13). Through his belief in action, his hibernation in the warm

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18 Within the novel, his theft of power from the white plant echoes backwards and forwards to the twisted sermon of Reverend Homer A. Barbee, wherein he intones, "Ah! And the marvelous plant supplying power to an area larger than many towns – all operated by *black hands*. Thus, my young friends, does the light of the Founder still burn" (132-133). The college, clearly dominated by northern, white economic power, blindly accepts the illusion of powering itself, whereas an older Narrator can see where power resides, and has the wherewithal to steal some for himself, instead of taking what he is given at expensive rates.

illumination of stolen light becomes a point to stop running, to let his past experiences and the

"illusionment" he has been fleeing overtake him, and (re)form into a new whole before the

necessary return back to society (559). Falling into the hole which awaited him all along (and

that he helped 'dig'), he basks in the light and prepares for action, which begins with the writing

of his memoir and will end with his reentry, still invisible but having "[shook] off the old skin,"

as a mature, and possibly whole, human being (580). Beyond even this individual identity, the

Narrator retains his social ties within that self-definition, because of his notion of (social)

responsibility – "Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement"

(14).[19] His personal growth and the creation of his social text allow him to share this notion of

recognition, which is necessarily social, with others beyond himself, demanding that his society

grow with him in the pursuit of new forms of vision. Now *enlightened*, he wants to light the way

for a new social future, with his text as the first step.

Invisible Man and *The Book of Daniel* provide access to the form/content role that

electricity plays in these narratives charting encounters, by their writer/protagonists, with past

experiences of maturation leading to their present moments. Since both also seek an

understanding of American from minority perspectives, they face greater challenges. Ellison's

novel specifically highlights the move from South to North, from country to city, and from the

fire of the past to the electricity of the future, to the point where he *needs* electric light to

understand himself.[20] Lisa Yaszek, in her work on cyborg narratives, cites *Invisible Man* as a

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19 Ellison as an author, both of fiction and essays, seems invested in the idea of recognition, which for him seems to describe an individual's ability to pierce the invisibility of another. In a Hegelian sense, recognition of the Other is essential to realizing self-identity, and so the Narrator, as the American other of sorts, reveals both his need to recognize others and his need for recognition, even if this only happens through stolen light and reflection.

20 Alan Nadel, in his interesting reading of this episode offered in *Invisible Criticism*, raises the possibility that, following his attempted lobotomy,

> he will never return to the South again, that he is, for better or worse, a northern, urban black. I believe that this represents, in the structure of the book, not only the motion of American blacks from the South to the North and from the farm to the city, but also from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. (103)

postwar example of a narrative infused with technology and seeking "new forms of subjectivity

and narrative engagement," specifically in terms of representing identity and history (156). She

finds that the novel "proposes that subaltern historical models of bodies and technologies – such

as those found in African-American history – might provide templates for generating American

subject relations more appropriate to the contemporary moment" (157). More specifically, in her

discussion of his theft of power down in his cellar, she explores the idea that as a man excluded

by his racial identification from participating in "the realm of white authority," he finds a way

around this by "tapping into that realm to power a black voice" (32). As such, his ability to

"[make] connections between different cultural signifiers outside (or underneath) the official

public sphere" empowers him to mediate between the individual and mass culture (33).[21] In

other words, the Narrator becomes a 'resistor,' both to white cultural and political power and

also to electrical power (a more positive version of Daniel's father, perhaps), tapping into and

diverting it to feed his own need for light. Though he never specifically narrates his fate beyond

his cellar, this need for light concretely solidifies his self-conception as a man who is defined and

intertwined with electric light.

Several other critical opinions concerning electricity are useful to a consideration of how

electricity inspires Ellison's project. John S. Wright, in "Ellison's Experimental Attitude and the

Technologies of Illumination," ties the "new technology of *electrification*" to Ellison's technical

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Nadel sees, after this point, a decline in references and allusions to nineteenth century literature, which seems to
correlate the distance between a backwards looking South and a forwards looking North. From this moment, the
Narrator takes on a new set of problems, those of the urban black, even if one of those problems remains that he can
only be a figurehead of blackness, utilized as a tool by those around him.

21 Yaszek, in her book *The Self Wired*, charts the rise of the cyborg subject after WWII. As she explains, in reference
to Ellison, he "called for a new mode of humanism, his hope for a range of hybrid American subjects who might
strategically use the techniques of simulation and representation offered by advanced communications
technologies to re-present themselves and their histories [which] suggests a movement toward *post*human,
cybernetic understandings of subjectivity" (26). Her goal, however, of turning the Narrator into a happy cyborg
citizen subject forces her to read him optimistically. Her insistence on new methods of existence and agency (35)
predicts his future beyond the hole, a future his narrative never inhabits, leaving the reader to question how
effective his tactics have been.

ability as a writer, following the thread that "however dreamlike and surreal, the processes of living, through which technology acquires personal and social meaning, are what prevail in Ellison's 'experimental attitude'" (163). He seeks an explanation for its connection with "identity in the artificial illumination" it provides, though specifically with tracking down the broader cultural implications of Ellison's time (and the preceding Industrial Age) (164). Once the possibilities of electricity in culture are made visible, he goes on to seek "the combinatory energy of plural truths, to synthesize new thresholds of consciousness," even if such an answer sounds better than its practical implementation (168).

In the same vein, Douglas Ford, in his article "Crossroads and Cross-Currents in *Invisible Man*," focuses on "technological systems" and their "[signification of] the more subtle workings of social systems of domination and power, even as literal networks of electricity reinforce the social privileged white middle class" (888). He also wants to "[contextualize] the novel within the electronic revolution of the 1950s" (890). He, following electricity and sound, eventually brings his argument to Rinehart's church with the electric guitar, "where Ellison's characters adapt the currents of power normally used to shock and control black citizens into new ways of disseminating black codes of expression" (896). Overall, Ford's reading is a positive one, declaring that "no longer kept running within a closed network, he rechannels the lines of power to serve his own purposes," allowing the Narrator and his novel the power of "creating new subject positions from which one may disrupt established forms of power" (899-900, 896). In the novel itself, this optimistic reading *could* bear out such a potential, though it is never fully realized, especially because his form derives from their redirected light. Ford's vague discourse of power provides space for the Narrator to act, individually, to 'rechannel' lines of power, but his individual methods would not work for the whole social group (everyone cannot steal

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power), leaving the reader hopeful but unsure of what will happen when he reemerges into the (political) light of day and attempts to actively reinstate himself into the social ranks above.

Daniel, on the other hand and at least two decades later, grapples with electricity and resists its power to control and bring death. Linda Hutcheon, discussing Daniel's narrative as an intertextual product in her essay, "Historiographic Metafiction," draws out the connection to the biblical Daniel, commenting that "the king who sentenced the biblical Daniel's brothers to the furnace has become here the more impersonal state, which sentences this Daniel's parents to the electric chair," thus making the analogy between the fire of the past and the electricity of the present (23). While the Narrator embraces his light as necessary to self-conception, Daniel wants to understand electricity without giving himself up to its power, especially as vital to self-definition. Geoffrey Harpham, in "E.L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative," seeks a binding force for technique and thematic resolution in the novel. He takes electricity further as a narrative principle, specifically to "the biochemical basis of narrative" (86). Because the brain processes information through pulses, like flipped switches, Harpham envisions Daniel as playing with and on electricity at every level of his narrative, transforming it "from a figure of speech to a political and narratological force [as] these scattered electrical latencies, these dim signals, articulate the circuit of complicity" of the narrative and the political process (86). Electricity, in his opinion, acts as the master principle of the narrative, connecting events within the narrative at each level, then connecting reader and author on the same circuit and as figures of resistance: "Resistance is a way of thinking about oppositions that structure narrative," forcing electricity to work at multiple levels, even when it fails to truly achieve Daniel's purposes (88).

In terms of narrative, then, electricity begins to alter how texts function, how a text is written, and how mind and text relate. Because of the new avenues of subjectivity that are

constantly created, specifically (here) through the accretion of electricity in culture, textual

narrative becomes an electric grid, powered and organized through the use of electricity (as these

novels demonstrate). These selves, as writers, cannot conceive of or see themselves without the

physical presence of electricity; as a result, their narratives infuse this very model of self-

conception. If narratological issues, both successes and failures, involve missed circuits, linked

to misfired synapses, then the novel develops the physical/textual link between mind, character,

electricity, and the self that the text produces as a result of these structuring principles. For

Daniel to "do the electrocution" at the same moment he acknowledges the reader as voyeur, he

reveals his awareness of his situation and the limitations imposed on him by technology. Part of

his challenge is to expose the technology that kills his parents *in narrative form*, and the

electricity only acts as an almost insurmountable barrier between him and his parents, as they are

on the current and he does not have the luxury to be as viscerally plugged into the death throes

that the chair can produce. Because Daniel cannot bodily experience death by electrocution

before narrating it, he can only attack it from perspectives available to him and reimagine the

event from within this narrative framework. Even as he does the electrocution, he focuses more

on how electricity flows through his parents, its effect on them, than he does on it as an existent

force. By this point, Daniel has embodied the very electricity that he seeks to manipulate in a

textual form, and he moves past his own disconnection and embraces electricity into his narrative

front and center, hooking himself to the wire of his culture and following the endless cords and

wires to the ending of his novel. Plugged into history as a "resistor," he lets narrative flow

through him (less as action than passive resistance), and through his written account, like his

father's death, his cultural situation expresses itself through his language, much like the self-

generating narrative of Ellison's Narrator.

Electricity, then, has been accepted by Daniel and Ellison's invisible Narrator, both as a given in their social situation and as a violent and volatile force which must be reckoned with; in fact, these characters do not have a choice because of the more general socialization of electricity in America.[22] Since both novels detail the process of these young men coming to define their relationship with society, while in search of their own identities, electricity acts as an access point to culture (literarily and figuratively), but one approached warily as containing dangerous potential; electricity can grant form, as it does to Ellison's Narrator, but it can also take life, as it does to Daniel's parents. Thus, as these narrators progress through their own experiences and stories, they come to grips with how electricity works as a narrative principle and as a part of the larger social fabric. Because both are modern youth, maturing toward 'adulthood' (if/when they reach that state), they think in terms of electricity, define themselves on its current, and are cast in its relief. As a result, both novels delineate the social possibilities of electricity realistically; no longer in the utopian moment of the World's Fair, these characters have to deal with the actual dangers of becoming wired. Following a sense of progression, Ellison's Narrator has higher hopes for finding identity in electric light, while Daniel, infused as his narrative is with electricity as a trope, *resists* its pull more, and works to draw out the dangers this new power holds, especially in the hands of a government capable of eradicating its citizens, like his parents, with this new tool.

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22 Both novelists, in fact, explore their own obsessions as children with radios and radio parts, revealing their own technological/mechanical inclinations, and how these episodes were formative (as their own characters and texts are formed by electricity). In "That Same Pain, that Same Pleasure," Ellison explores an interracial moment brought about by mutual love of a radio (finding some hope in technology), while Doctorow's father characters in both novels discussed both sell radios, making them objects of awe and topics of discussion (4-5).

CHAPTER 3

Youth, Narrative Failure, and Novels as Written Documents

I. Youth, Youths, and History

As both the novels in question exist within the trajectory of *Bildungsroman* tradition, two

concepts deserve some treatment before a reengagement with the texts themselves. First, the idea

of youth in the twentieth century will assist in unveiling the starting point from which these two

male, minority protagonists begin their process of maturation. Second, narrative failure helps

explain how these characters, working from the marginal social stratum, reach the conclusions

they do, both in their individual adventures and in the narratives they construct. Taken together

and applied to (social) maturation, youth and failure stand as necessary components for making

sense of both the paths these novels take toward their endings and the actual endings themselves,

as culminating moments in these two novels exploring American identities.

Historically, youth as a category holds an odd and shifting position, especially in the

twentieth century. Prior to this, those designated as youths held more resemblance to a miniature

adulthood, with a stress more on vocation than on intrinsic individual growth.[23] Franco Moretti,

in his study *The Way of the World*, explores the rise of historical youth in the Classic

Bildungsroman tradition, and stresses that the category of youth comes into being

problematically. As the modern era creates instability, youth exists through its "hitherto

unknown *mobility*" and the "*interiority*" that the opening of new social position allows (4). What

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23 Within the German tradition of *Bildungsroman*, at its two poles, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1796) stresses his
     move within the existing system from apprenticeship to journeyman to master, whereas Thomas Mann's
     protagonist in *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Hans Castorp, shrugs off his vocational calling at the shipyard to
     meditate on the self, the universe, and love at a mountain sanatorium.

Moretti finds crucial, in his discussion of mobility and interiority, is that the youths represented are not real, but created by "abstracting from 'real' youth a 'symbolic' one" (5). The social changes that modernity brings cannot be explained through the mature or the old, but through the adventures of youth, symbolically taking on the world to reveal the new limits culture can be stretched to encompass. Following his distinction between real and symbolic youth, he argues that "[o]nly by curbing its intrinsically boundless dynamism, only by agreeing to betray to a certain extent its very essence, only thus, it seems, can modernity be *represented*" (6). Because Moretti locates youth as the group most representative of modernity, he signals the problems to come in the twentieth century, where the youth category has become less stable and more varied, as well as more existent as a delineated group with its own voice(s). Moretti, then, provides access to the distinction between the symbolic, or ideal youth, and the actual youths who make up the social category. While the former captures a nonexistent Youth (as both potential and problem for an adult-centered social order), the latter covers the individuals struggling as a real, emergent group to find voices and define the parameters of their situation(s) for themselves.

While several factors contributed to the rise of this new youth class in the twentieth century, mass education, increased scientific study of adolescence, the value of youth as a sector of consumer society, and, finally, youths coming to find their own voices provide several key avenues of insight into the new phenomenon. In *Teenage*[24], Jon Savage works through these factors and others, in both an American and European context, in his attempt to reveal "how youth struggled to make itself heard, if not totally on its own terms, then on terms it could recognize and accommodate itself to," a situation resulting in the "delicate balance" through

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24 Savage's study covers American, British, French, and German youths, seeking historical parallels and exchanges between these groups. Underlying his study general, he focuses on music as both a social platform and a place for innovation and difference for youth culture. As he disclaims, his study ends with WWII because, soon after, "the linear forward motion of the sixties was replaced by the loop," opening pop culture, in a temporal sense, as an all-inclusive moment, no longer a progression (xvi).

which youth emerged (xviii). Working with materials from 1875-1945, Savage charts the

creation of youth, through youths struggling to wrest control of their own definitions from adults,

to the coinage of "teenager" in 1944, followed by both the "Teen-age Bill of Rights" and the first

issue of *Seventeen* magazine (455, 448). As he works through this chain of historical examples,

from the relation of Freud and *The Wizard of Oz* to youth consumer culture at the turn of the

century (61), through the battles between academics and vocationalists for the soul of mass

education, as forming either individual learning or trained employees (96), to the death of a

generation in WWI (177), Savage constructs a social consciousness for youths as bequeathed by

adults working to guide them. Augmenting his reading, Paula Fass, in her essay "Creating New

Identities," argues that, though the goal of mass education was homogeneity, schools failed,

based on ethnic identity and geography, to fundamentally mold the hodgepodge of students into

a coherent whole. Fass instead sees the schools creating a space for "students [to refashion] their

immigrant traditions into American identities" (114-115). As a result, even within the

normalizing auspices of mass education, students were already forming their own groups and

identities within the social whole.

The ideal of youth and youth culture, however, come into their own (with a roar) during

the twenties. Savage specifically highlights *This Side of Paradise* and *Winesburg, Ohio* as

representative of new youth models of possibilities, as both protagonists push at the accepted

boundaries of thinking and move from country to city (198). He goes so far as to claim that, by

the end of the decade, youth "began to see itself not just as a market, but as a distinct class" (232-

233). Youth, then, takes on intrinsic value and the coming of age process becomes a staving off

of adult responsibility and vocation for the increasingly available pleasures of young life. The

poles become youth and old, with the positive focused on youth, as the energetic and emergent

generation of the future. Youth takes on, in Wyndham Lewis's opinion, "value," and what is more, the only kind of value worth having, as he disregards old as merely "Ex-Youth" (xx). Of course, for Lewis, this world of youthful value can only be "an interim world," with nothing intended to be more than "make-shift," because he sees youth as a category on the decline, specifically in the face of big business and the 'everyman' mentality which subsumes the individual, and any hint of genius, to the common whole (x).[25] With a slightly different agenda, Paula Fass argues for an emergent youth class after World War I, as "the war had proved to youth how unreliable, if not also culpable, their elders were, forcing them to live their lives on their own terms and by their own lights" (19). In her book, *The Damned and the Beautiful*, Fass argues that the twenties opened the doors to the "double-barreled threat of sexuality," which she understands as more than anything else at the heart of the old/young divide (21). This young generation, through panty raids and new clothing styles "demoralizing in the eyes of their elders," reclaimed sexuality as the purview of the young and, refusing domination here, refused other adult-centered social structures as a result (21). The now clearly existent youth, then, have not all-out rebelled, but are definitely forming against the social order that originally 'formed' them.

For an exemplification of youth in the 1930's, Doctorow, in *World's Fair*, presents young Edgar's older brother, Donald. He, especially in the big city, provides access to youth's stuggles and changes throughout the whole decade. Donald excels in school, smokes cigarettes to impress girls, spends a summer in the mountains playing music at a hotel with his band, and drops out of

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25 Lewis's book, *Doom of Youth*, first published in 1932, recounts in his quirky fashion the coming fate of Youth in America and Europe, along with the rest of society. In Lewis's view, factories seek healthy machines to work cheaply, thus undermining the aged workers, who become less and less necessary. As a result of this labor necessity, along with the democratic commonality of individuals, Lewis predicts the group mentality of the future pacifying youth and making 'youth-politics' as powerless as all others. Most interestingly, Lewis compiles what he calls the 'dossier' of headlines, on which he comments at great length, proving his own inquiry through the evidence around him.

City College to become a radio operator during World War II. Especially during his summer in the mountains, Donald highlights the shift from vocation to chasing hobbies and dreams, because even as he and his friends live in "shacks, with mattresses on the floor, like dirt farmers [with] no running water," he "of course […] is having the time of his life," especially because "all the girls adore him" (170). Far from a world of education toward vocation, Donald gets to make his own way, pursuing goals aligned with his needs and the opportunities his society offers him; he also clearly loses his virginity to a girl he has no intention of marrying, showing another side of the new power of youth. From this moment, the Fair itself and the World War that follows cement a promise to youth that will not be met, as postwar youth gets lost in its existence as a consumer category and as a more mystical ideal, succumbing to social reconciliation with the adult world. Ralph Ellison, by 1943, seeks the "profound political meaning" behind zoot suits and the Lindy Hop in African-American culture, but that mystery, like Rinehart in his novel, never gets solved, merely commercialized (136).[26]

Following World War II and moving toward mid-century youth identities, youth gets older as the college-aged claim the distinction of slowing the leap into adulthood. As Beth Bailey explains in "From Panty Raids to Revolution,"

> universities grew at an unprecedented rate and students were drawn from an increasingly broad swath of the American population. […] Universities (partly in appealing for funding) also rearticulated their sense of mission, claiming new importance in the postwar, cold war world. […] The new administrators of "student life" in the vastly enlarged universities of the 1950's and 1960's claimed the task of fostering "growth" and "maturity" in students. (189)

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26 Robin Kelley, in "The Riddle of the Zoot," discusses Ellison's question of the zoot suit in relation to Malcolm X, and finds that contemporary society asks similar questions from today's youth, but still fails to find consistent or concrete answers. As for Rinehart, the chaotic power center of Harlem, his position is ever a mystery. Along with other zoot suit garbed hipsters, he resists both identity and the limits identity imposes, leaving him floating through the social sphere, a powerful but uprooted position.

As, in her account, humanistic discourse helps mediate the young and the establishment, even talk about sex becomes more about "civility, responsibility, citizenship, and individual growth" (189). Youth, here, no longer merely exists for vocational agenda; growth and maturity become the keys to assessing the young (a group easily including those in their mid-twenties) and incorporating them individually and as a group into a place in the social structure. These young people must be dealt with, factored in and solved by society, to keep the young in line with America's social vision, though this project, in light of the late sixties, hippies, and the seventies, proved harder than administrators and politicians planned.[27]

To shift from historical to literary treatment of youth, the emphasis rests on representations of youth, which in modernity has always been a complex maneuver; as Moretti argues, the crucial difference between real and symbolic youth lies in the problem of representation. Two critics, Ihab Hassan and Marcus Klein, have studied literary representations of twentieth century youth, which help provide access to how fictional and real spaces interconnect and how the novel relates to the world it seeks to reveal (and that world to it). These specific critics provide useful studies, historically, because, writing in '61 and '62 respectively, they work on literature contemporary to their own situations, treating *Invisible Man* extensively at the moment when Doctorow just begins publishing novels, and a full decade before *The Book of Daniel*. Thus, through their conclusions, about Ellison and about the relation of the novelist to society, they offer more specific grounding for how they read literary youths reacting to cultural changes from their particular vantage point.

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27 Andy Bennett, in his book *Culture and Everyday Life*, specifically explores the idea that the counter-culture movements of the late 60's held an "ideology" whose central tenet focused on "a rejection of the technocratic principles of advanced western societies (162). His focus, here, regards counter-culture movements as opposed to technological (including electrical) advances and the power-structures concomitant with them. Thus, Daniel will not be alone when he seeks a rejection of electricity, because the failing accommodation of the 50's has devolved into rejection and defection (to drugs, Eastern thought, etc.).

In his study of the contemporary novel in his time, *Radical Innocence*, Hassan takes a position that the modern self is in "recoil," though its "*re-coil* is one of the resources of its awareness, a strategy of its *will*" (5). Hassan, from this assertion, draws out his vision of "radical innocence," which focuses on the place of the hero in fiction as fighting through the absurd for the meaning of human life (which he attributes as the function of novels); as Hassan states, "it is the innocence of a Self that refuses to accept the immitigable rule of reality, including death, an aboriginal Self the radical imperatives of whose freedom cannot be stifled" (6). Whether this Self is essential or not, Hassan reveals that Americans create such heroes and, through novelistic enterprise, attempts to grapple with the world as it exists in his moment. He seeks to explore how novels translate the angst and confusion of the world into strictly "*human* terms," even if schizophrenia emerges from this recoil into semi-madness (17). With the idea of recoil comes the anti-hero and the position of victim as place of understanding; the modern novel, through a focus on the heroics of victimhood, offers an explanation of the (new) place of the individual in the world.

In his second chapter, "The Dialectic of Initiation in America," Hassan expands the plight of the hero:

> Now initiation may be understood as a process leading through right action and consecrated knowledge to a *viable* mode of life *in the world*. Its end is *confirmation*. The result of victimization, however, is *renunciation*. Its characteristic mode is *estrangement from the world*, and its values are chiefly inward and transcendental. (35)

He does qualify this general dialectical outline by focusing on the "particular world" the hero finds himself in, but he sets this model up as the general process of individual and social growth (35). Following this schema, he argues that America exists between Edenic (pluperfect) and Utopian (future perfect) notions of how to escape the present, though he ultimately finds "a

persistent *escape toward freedom*" as the American mode of action (37). From this start, he goes

on to incorporate recoil into the rites of initiation, showing that in the act of backing away,

whether from "materialism" or from "homogeneity," the American hero defines himself (65).

Discussing *Invisible Man*, Hassan sees form as key to understanding how the novel

works; he finds the form as a new introversion, seeking deeper levels of locating the self. At the

same time, the form posits "the dialectic between how things are and how they could be,"

recognizing that Ellison acknowledges this dialectic without discovering how it translates

beyond its conception (178). In the end, he posits that the self can no longer mediate between the

world and identity, which necessitates the recoil from that world and its contradictions. At heart

in this initiation, then, is a denial instead of an acceptance, which helps to keep the narrative in a

state of "suspension" (175). Because the Narrator ultimately does not leave his cellar, because all

the action of ending in the beginning shows stalled progress, Hassan understands the Narrator as

in denial, but only because he understands, through his artistic endeavors, that things can (and

should) actually be better.

Klein attempts to capture a change in mid-century novels, in his book *After Alienation*, by

charting transition to a new way of interaction with social norms. He understands the prevalent

mood pre-WWII to be that of alienation (in a strict, critical sense); thus, particularly younger

writers and protagonists acted from a position *against* society as self-definition. In his eyes, the

postwar novels are novels of accommodation. In his thinking, accommodation

> [refers] to a mood in the best of our contemporary literature, the mood that
> occurred when rebellion had exhausted itself, when suddenly the manner in which
> the individual – the intellectual, the writer, any man – might meet society was no
> longer so certain, when there was no politics to speak of and when there were no
> orthodoxies to speak of to restrict one's freedom, and when all theories of society
> had been shattered. (29)

Klein sees the radical politics of the past at a turning point, and the novel seeking to bind the individual to society, even if this strategy fails in the end. He charts the movement of contemporary heroes as a move from self, to immersion in a community, only to discover that "he has sacrificed his identity, and his adventures begin all over again" (30). He sees these novelists reacting to new circumstances, and attempting to bridge the gap between the individual and group elements of society, instead of merely rebelling against the social (though this trope does not seem especially new, just reformulated).

In his long chapter on Ellison and *Invisible Man*, Klein finds more flaws in the novel than he does achievements. He finds that the boomerang structure, with the end in the beginning, rules out the novel's potential to achieve forward momentum. He characterizes the book as a series of negations, and though as a total set he hints that they could form a final "ascension," he is unclear of how it would work (reading the Epilogue instead as a series of platitudes where Ellison seeks to escape from the novel he has written) (142). Klein focuses on the refusal of self-definition that the Narrator has to face again and again, and finds Rinehart at the center of the novel, calling him "the underground, the secret of Harlem, the complicated city" (134). As the master of chaos, Klein feels that the novel actually ends with Rinehart as the best answer to a black position in a complex, white world. His general sense, however, shows the Narrator falling into "Negro-ness" throughout the book as the emergent identity, which is a social position, but not the personal identity that he seeks (131). Because invisibility is an inherently "negative" metaphor, Ellison's novel illuminates the problem (in terms of accommodation) without offering a solution (146). While this lack of a solution sounds like failure, Klein disregards the possibility that the very lack of a viable solution, or even of an acceptance of Rinehart as the answer, could

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be the Narrator's (and Ellison's) answer to his plight, and an opening of possibilities beyond the expected (and accommodating) solution.

Finally, of interest in Klein's reading of *Invisible Man*, is the schematic narrative approximation he offers of the hero's "four prominent adventures": the "initiation," his "knowledge of caste," his "sexuality," and his problematic "[ending] in failure […] in a condition prior to his initiation" (108). In Klein's model, Ellison's Narrator goes through the process of growth and development in the world only, in the end, to find himself right back at the beginning, with this specific difference – "that he has illuminated his underworld and he now knows where he is" (108). In a move that mirrors the return to a new womb, our hero has to go through the trials of maturation and acculturation only to begin afresh in the end, the difference being that he got to keep his acquired knowledge, his illumination. While Klein remains unclear about his potential, he omits mention of the novel the Narrator has (fictionally) written as the first step toward spreading his illumination forth from the hole as he says he will do, as a preliminary emergence. In a sense, and opposed to Klein, this written document could help him begin to reverse the power he has stored up in his cellar, and send his own message outward along the wires.

Beyond these critics, the latent potential they both ignore in their moment involves the potential of failure to accelerate growth in a world where straightforward maturation fails. If the old operating principles do not hold, then failure, change, and contingency will have to come in to assist in imposing sense on experience in a world lacking acceptable structures; more specifically, the imposition of narrative sense on the Narrator's chaotic situation creates meaning instead of the failure at face value that ending up underground would portend. Looking forward (in time) at Daniel, the innocence and accommodation of these critics has clearly fallen away

before a turbulent and radical politics of revolt, increased perception, and a strictly negative view of society. His clear mistrust of government and capitalism, but equally of leftist politics and the revolution, leave Daniel solitary and wise about survival; he never gets a chance to experience innocent existence, radical or otherwise. When searching the history of America for a traitor he can relate to, Daniel lands on "the master subversive Poe" as the archetype duplicitous villain, "who ruined us, that scream from the smiling face of America" (177). Poe, as a figure imagined burning holes in the Constitution and "[spilling] a few drops of whiskey just below the Preamble," as a man tied to Gothic images, incest, and alcoholism, reveals that under the veneer of American progress and civility lies a burning evil, bursting through the façade in a scream (177). As such, Poe falls outside the conversation of America because a scream is the absence of constructive dialogue; Daniel, following in his footsteps, embraces his role as a new screamer, as a new destroyer of American faux-innocence, both in his life and through the complexities and profane indignity of his own narrative.

II. Narrative Failure: a Method of Growth

The concept of narrative failure helps approach the true moments where growth and meaning reside. The (failed) experience acts as a kind of hieroglyph, standing in for meaning, but in a different kind of narrative language. In failure, of plans, paths, or stories, we can find a new meaning through leaving the known spaces usually traversed and entering new spaces not yet explainable or understood. Narrative failure describes the lack of current tools and thoughts to grasp an experience, to take away its magic, and so in this way the dreamers are propelled forward and have a chance to keep creating their towers of dream in a world that is apt to crush them. As Hassan argues, novelistic enterprise requires that dreamers keep dreaming and imagining.

Despite the negative implications inherently linked to failure, narrative failure describes the moment when the narrative itself fails to contain or represent its own meaning.[28] The moment transcends the narrative itself, into extra-narrative space, allowing extra-textual happenings to take place which cannot be (or are not) relayed within the confines of the novel itself. It offers both illumination (without explanation) and distance; the moment, which exits tangible narrative space, actually has an affect which can be traced as the narrative continues, but that does not enter the physicality of the narrative itself.

People learn through distance. Humans are not able to learn everything in one moment in time – everything does not fit nicely into the narrative itself – and so failure actually augments narrative to provide space for extra-narrative growth. As everything cannot be represented, as a matter of course, in some cases the attempt should not be made, because its *lack* is stronger than any attempted explanation (with probable failure). Failure as inspiration and impetus for change works within narratives as it works with literary forms. Moretti, discussing generic failures, explores the idea that "without failures […] we would have no literary evolution, because we would have no *need* for it" (243). In his conception, failure "occurs when a form deals with problems it is unable to solve," and as "symbolic forms are fundamentally problem-solving devices," a form becomes useless when it can no longer deal with problems it intends to solve, both "socially and aesthetically" (243-244).[29] Returning to narrative, and these novels

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28 Without belaboring the point, a discussion of narrative failures does not necessarily point toward the sublime, or experiences that are not representational. More specifically and practically, narrative failure remains interested in the function of the narrative itself, a more quotidian conception that does not deal with the limits of human knowledge as such. For a grounding in notions of the sublime, reaching even into postmodern cultural thinking, see Coale, in *Paradigms of Paranoia*, for his theoretical work on "the postmodern sublime," which encourages "exhilaration, a sense of wonder, the exaltation thrown back on itself" (7).

29 This discussion comes from the Appendix to *The Way of the World*, where Moretti discusses the virtual disintegration of the *Bildungsroman* form. His larger point includes the idea that "perhaps, then, we should stop pretending that failures are really masterpieces in disguise, and should learn to accept them as failures, appreciating their unique historical role" (243). He calls for functional literature, though it can solve problems while remaining "useful and sweet," but at heart he wants to create a space to deal with texts as they are, not as

specifically, failure works after a similar fashion, because failures of action and of representation prompt change and growth, or progress, to make up for their absence. Instead of a failure standing as an endpoint or an insurmountable wall, it forces both formal innovation and a larger trajectory (for content) to get beyond moments where the current ability of the character or author cannot bridge the gap between experience and its representation. To relate back to youth, the evolution of this 'class' during the twentieth century emerged dialectically as old practices failed to keep up with new possibilities. Part of an emergent new remains the ever-failing and fading old.[30]

The key, then, is not that a situation is nonrepresentational, but that there are either no explanations offered or too many. The acceptance of narrative existence seems to predicate a letting go of a right/true story, and its replacement with the missing/unexplained or with so many explanations and platitudes from different angles, offering differing conclusions, that nothing, in the end, can ever stick. Thus, failures herald inherent contradictions (at least in the *Bildungsroman* form, as Moretti argues) but the stakes and the possibilities have changed, have become more fluid, more inclusive (as in more groups can take and parcel out these tropes in different ways), and less likely to lead to a straightforward conclusion. Both of these novels conclude in failure, but also with the hope that, after failure, an emergent 'new' can and will come about. These characters do not die along with the others around them; when Daniel explains to his sister, who dies by morphing into a human Starfish, he details that "[s]he is washing up on the beach, and when the last moisture sinks below the sand, and the sand dries in the sun, she will be dead" (209).[31] Her failure, here, portrays her giving up on life, humanity, and

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unassailable masterpieces (244).

30 Walter Benjamin makes a similar argument for the replacement of the old by a (violently) destructive youth in his essay, "The Destructive Character."

31 The description of Susan's death coincides with the final image from *The Order of Things*, where Foucault posits

existence. Instead, Daniel and Ellison's Narrator push on through failure: they live, they write

and think and battle and seek knowledge, and they see their static positions (when in the act of

writing) as no longer tenable after the completion of these memoir-novels. They have to leave

their hibernations and move back out into the world, reconciled with the past (even possibly

redeemed) and ready to face the challenges they can clearly and obscurely see ahead of them.

Narrative failure, then, focuses on the (disordered) things left out of the text for various

reasons that seem necessary to the reader's understanding of its full implications. At another

level, it encompasses the overdone and multifarious explanations which, purporting to help the

reader, actually disallow the reader any access to final answers. These texts do not end in

ambivalence, per se, but instead end with a longing for something other than a repeat of the

haunting eternal return of the past. They do enter into new subject positions, generally through

the negation that remains connected to actual failures, but they remain loose and ill-fitting; the

new positions are simply not the old positions, not the old problems played out again. Each

narrative reaches a moment (through writing as separate from experiencing) that pushes through

the social and individual limits and finds a new space that gets beyond the troubles of the past to

embrace the (new) troubles of the future.

A telling moment to consider narrative failure, in tandem with Ellison drawing out the

connection between electricity and identity, follows the explosion at Liberty Paints, right after

the Narrator learned this secret - "[t]hey got all this machinery, but that ain't everything; *we the*

machines inside the machine" (217). After an explosion, he literally wakes in the machine, at the

factory hospital, where, like Trueblood before him, he becomes the guinea pig for white

experimentation. Through this scene of rebirth, man from machine, the Narrator gets plugged

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the fading of current conceptions of the human and humanity. He writes "one can certainly wager that man
would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea," which, at the individual level, is exactly
what Susan does: she loses her conception of existence and, as Starfish, fades into non-being (387).

into a visceral electric moment, attached to "a piece of cold metal like the iron cap worn by the occupant of an electric chair" (233). In the throes of this strange shock treatment, the desired conclusion of which "will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife," he performs the involuntary dance electric (236). As they surge the voltage, seeking to make society safer through science (control without physical castration), his body begins to jump and jolt "between the nodes," prompting the attendant to remark, "they really do have rhythm, don't they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!" (237). Harking back to the earlier electric rug episode, this torture produces pain, but also a feeling that "something had been disconnected" (237).

As a counterpoint to the lobotomy, the electric rug episode leaves the Narrator in an odd moment of insight before complete chaos, as he "[discovers] that [he] could contain the electricity – a contradiction, but it works" (27). Unfortunately, before he has time to truly understand this containment or to accept contradiction as necessary for survival (clarity that he will not be granted until his residence underground), a white man thrusts him onto the "charged rug" (27). As he recounts the episode:

> It was as though I had rolled through a bed of hot coals. It seemed a whole
> century would pass before I would roll free, a century in which I was seared
> through the deepest levels of my body to the fearful breath within me and the
> breath seared and heated to the point of explosion. It'll all be over in a flash, I
> thought as I rolled clear. It'll all be over in a flash […] [b]ut not yet." (28)

In this complex scene, the electric rug seems to provide a kind of historical baptism by shock, allowing the Narrator to briefly experience, on his own black body, the pain his people have lived with since their own freedom was 'granted.' He gains insight into that old, deep pain for himself, another moment that will not crystallize for him until he has stopped running along with history. The failure here manifests itself in the impossibility of the Narrator's description to

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coincide with the thoughts of his younger self *while being electrocuted.* Thus, as opposed to the later lobotomy, too much explanation gets offered, not too little, leaving this earlier episode less realistic than the later, more confused shock treatment.

Returning to the lobotomy episode, electricity distorts identity, leaving IM trapped in his metal cage to ponder over who he is, which raises interesting narrative issues: how can he recreate a moment where he has no sense of the action around him and cannot even feel his own body? As the doctors lure him back by querying his knowledge of African-American folklore, he suddenly gets released with no explanation; groggy from the electric current and feeling "that [he] was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within," he gets freed from the electrical umbilical cord and cast back out into the streets of New York as a failed experiment (249). His novel moves on, leaving this episode behind, its only residual affect being his meeting with Mary Rambo, who takes pity on his weak condition. The whole episode, however, foregrounds failure, from the doctor's failure to lobotomize the Narrator, to his failure to remain connected to his body, culminating in the failure of his narrative to both relay this episode coherently and incorporate it into the larger narrative. This narrative of his return to consciousness (even with a possible lobotomy) just reads like a failed section of the novel – there is never clarity, the whole cloudy episode remains seeped in ambiguity, but excessive explanation would also not serve the narrative. This failure does work because, in the larger accretive structure of this episodic novel, the Narrator does slowly learn from his mistakes, as from this stage he becomes more technologically plugged in (could this event even explain his need for light?). He gets shocked into a new life, a life that increasingly utilizes electricity in representations of identity.[32] Ellison plants the seed here, through a failure of clear narration, for

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32 For instance, during a speech for the Brotherhood, the Narrator enters "the spot of light that surrounded [him] like a seamless cage of stainless steel," which brings him back to "the hard, mechanical isolation of the hospital

readers to accept the Narrator as more electric, more plugged in, more socially bound (until his

fall back into fire and darkness, which starts the process of electrifying identity all over again,

forcing awareness on the reader of how intrinsic the link between electricity and identity has

become for a man who has burned his past and seeks form in electric light).

In *The Book of Daniel*, Daniel goes beyond disappointment into full-out judgment of his

readers in one of the biggest 'failures' in his novel. In his car, in the rain, with his child sleeping

in the backseat, Daniel forces his wife to undress and kneel on the seat opposite him. He heats up

the electric lighter, and against her pleas for mercy, he prepares to burn the "tender white

girlflesh of [his] wife's ass" (60). Instead of enacting or narrating the violence, however, he

leaves his hand "poised" and asks a series of questions: "Do you believe it? Shall I continue? [...]

Who are you anyway? Who told you you could read this? Is nothing sacred?" (60). He goes on,

with the help of cutting to (violent) surrealist film tactics (from *Un Chien Andalou* by Dali and

Buñuel) to conclude that "the only thing worse than telling what happened is to leave it to the

imagination," making his failure of narration here both willful and purposeful (60-61). His self-

referential narrative tactics allow Daniel to work out, in fits and starts, through failures and

(electric) connections, how his book gets read, even if, in the imagination, the reader has the

option to disregard him; his failure to control his own book, regardless of his tactics, creates

space for meaning beyond his own (failing) framework.

More generally, the centrality of narrative in the works of E. L. Doctorow is inescapable.

In his essay "False Documents," Doctorow himself explains why: "I am thus led to the

proposition that there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction:

there is only narrative" (26). As he explains the subject, Doctorow conceives narrative as the

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machine" (341). Thus, the experience has left an impression on his consciousness, and assists his self-conception
as his awareness of electricity solidifies.

ability to create a story, neither true nor false, as a means of explaining our worldly, mortal situation. In his essay, Doctorow goes on to reveal that his "novelist's proposition" is really an attempt to explore the 'fact' that "there is nothing between the given universe and our attempt to mediate it, *there is no real power, only some hope that we might deny our own contingency*" (26, *emphasis mine*). This acceptance of a contingency that must be contested, of humanity's powerlessness to do anything but construct a reality, gives primacy to narratives of explanation. The ability to explain experience allows people to gain some understanding of the past and, more importantly, to escape its hold by both engagement with and denial of the past for a present. In Linda Hutcheon's conception of Doctorow, his work embodies intertextuality because the novel, for him, "enacts the realization that what we 'know' of the past derives from the discourses of that past," creating a situation where "there is no neat dividing line between the texts of history and literature, and so he feels free to draw on both" (21). The narratives that Daniel constructs in his book serve as his attempted liberation from the history of his family and his country, allowing him, after his many explanations, to move beyond the latent chains that bind him to the past. Geoffrey Harpham offers a slightly more complex explanation of Daniel's situation:

> The search for a narrative mode that will secure the truth has led Daniel to investigate the problematics of meaning in narrative and has brought him to the brink of a disabling conclusion: that the poles of narrative are, respectively, monstrous and boring, meaningless and all too meaningful, and that narrative is only a crossing of two types of misrepresentation. The juridical question of whether the Issacsons were guilty or innocent has become tangled up with the technical question of whether there can be any reconciliation between sequence and repetition, temporality and structure, that will produce a genuine noncontradictory form of meaning. (*Technology* 85).

While Harpham, like many other critics, also locates electricity as the essential principle of narrative explanation and movement in *The Book of Daniel*, his view of Daniel's narrative as mere misrepresentation is skewed. Despite the resonance of electricity in the text, the fact that Daniel cannot find a comfortable narrative without contradiction exemplifies the essentially fluid

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situation of narrative itself. To create a story between the poles of "monstrous and boring" is to create a story in the middle of two extremes, functioning dialectically in the space where life is lived (85). To expect any resolution, to expect to escape from contradiction, is a yearning for stasis, where all questions have been answered; in Daniel's case, the realization that such a stasis is a mythical chimera, the sought-but-never-fully-achieved conclusion, is the final resolution his book must concede.

Hayden White, in his work on historiography, offers another perspective on failure: the failure of historical reality to hold real meaning.[33] In line with Doctorow's "False Documents" argument, White sees historical meaning as a byproduct of narratives about history. Because he conceives of narrative as the attempt to "impose upon [history] the form of a story," he first has to differentiate narrative from discourse, and then seek the function of narrative as a means of relating reality (6). While acknowledging that narrative is an artificial overlay on events, he feels that this near universal human impulse to organize events in this fashion, with a beginning, a middle, and, especially, an end, speaks to some larger cause. White finds this cause in history itself: "What will be revealed, I think, is that very distinction between real and imaginary events, basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which 'the true' is identified with 'the real' only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity" (10). As he fleshes out his argument, he finds that a growing social consciousness causes a shift between actions that "*happen* to people" and actions in which "people *do* things" (14). As social systems and identities grow more complex, the narrative takes root around the agents of this system carrying out actions that, through a process of time and accretion, come to

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33 White, in his essay "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," seeks to determine, based on a study of medieval historical apparatus (annals, the chronicle), how narrative works as history evolves to imbue historical action with meaning. White calls narrative a "metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted" (6).

create a larger story. The "impulse" to narrate events into a story grows along with the "notion of the legal subject" to act as "agent" (16). The key, for White, is a central "authority," a legal system held in common that narratives can center around (17). Once this legal authority becomes accepted, then narratives function to fulfill "the impulse to moralize reality," a situation that calls for a story to be created with a distinct and meaningful ending (18).

The crux of White's argument lies in humanity's collective creation of moral endings to narratives. As he writers, "common opinion has it that the plot of a narrative imposes a meaning on the events that comprise its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent in the events *all along*" (23) In the end, White asks a series of questions, endings with this one: "Could we ever narrativize without moralizing?" (27). Because history is a never-ending process, there are no definite endings; the human need for closure, as a result, attempts to place stops along the road of history, which divides history into mini-episodes or "*moral* [dramas]" (24). Thus, the human impulse to impose endings, to divide the stream of time into episodes and chapters, seems rooted in our attempt to provide meaning to those events, to provide a moral to the story that can transfer to future events. Narrative, it seems, works as a coping mechanism for organizing experience and, as White argues, as a means of providing morals to the plot of the stories we tell. White's argument will be helpful to consider in the next two sections, one about narrative and writing, and another about endings. Because his schema implies narrative as constructed from failures (or the construction of arbitrary data to make meaning), he foregrounds a move into the novels more directly, to access how these theoretical and thematic elements work themselves out in actual texts.

III. Voice, Narrative, and Novels as Written Documents

Both Ellison and Doctorow present complex narratives concerning the birth(s) of these two novels. Each novelist had a moment where the project they imagined and the novel they would eventually write intersected, before quickly diverging. At some micro-level, the projects of both authors mature and grow through the process of composition, even 'come-of-age,' mirroring the maturation of youths within these texts. Both of these moments involve failure; in each case, something unexpected happened to propel a novel into existence that was not originally planned, though this original plan necessitates the final result, which spins off of the action and energy required for the original formulation and attempt. Without the original plan and attempt, the final product would never have been able to become the existent novel; to open a space for (re)direction and discovery, a plan must be enacted, seemingly with genuine intentions for success, through which the eventual product of the novel will emerge. Thus, failures in the composition process can instantiate the failure of the novel project, forcing the novel to evolve to its final form to overcome such failures.

In his introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ellison gives two episodes relevant to the birth of his novel. First, explaining a story he previously published, he notes that his main character was "experiencing difficulty in seeing *himself*," a problem that involved "his conscious struggle for self-definition and for the invulnerable support for his individual dignity" (xiii-xiv). As he went on to write his first novel, Ellison found himself confronted with "a taunting, disembodied voice" which he could not escape, and which forced him, against his own will, to alter his plans for the novel to allow this voice to express itself (channeled through him) (xiv). He proceeds to relate that

> it now appeared that the voice of invisibility issued from deep within our complex
> American underground. So how crazy-logical that I should finally locate its owner living

– oh, so garrulously – in an abandoned cellar. Of course, the process was far more disjointed than I make it sound, but such was the inner-outer, subjective-objective process of the developing fiction, its pied rind and surreal heart… (xviii)

Having entered a state of "hyperreceptivity," Ellison hears this voice, rising from within himself and from the bowels of his own country, and seeks to understand how this invisible person fits into the broader scheme of his social vision (xviii).

This voice, which seems to represent a different sensitivity to his world, and who makes a space for laughter and the "[inclusion of] himself in his indictment of the human condition," forces itself into Ellison's mind and almost forcibly reshapes his vision for the novel (xviii). This nearly mythic birth of his invisible protagonist highlights the process of composition, where only through failure and (hyperreceptive) listening can the novel emerge. In enacting his plan for the novel, Ellison found that a voice not his own made a space for itself and forced his original endeavor to become something other, something more. In his essay "Seer and Seen," he argues that "a writer did not so much create the novel as he was created *by* the novel," which works both for Ellison and his Narrator, or at each layer of the composition process (162).

In a bizarrely similar fashion, Daniel forces himself into Doctorow's text, and his birth is marked by a complex moment of despair. Doctorow gives his own account, in an interview with Paul Levine, of the birth of Daniel:

> It's hard for me to isolate my own motives and feelings. I can tell you that I started to write the book in the third person, more or less as a standard, past tense, third person novel, very chronologically scrupulous. And after one hundred fifty pages I was terribly bored. That was a moment of great despair in my life, because I thought that if I could really destroy a momentous subject like this, then I had no right to be a writer. That moment, when I threw out those pages and hit bottom, was when I became reckless enough to find the voice of the book, which was Daniel. I sat down and put a piece of paper in the typewriter and started to write with a certain freedom and irresponsibility, and it turned out Daniel was talking, and he was sitting in the library at Columbia, and I had my book. I don't know why that happened or how that happened, but that is the experience I had in composing the book. I don't know if it's possible for a writer, really,

truthfully to describe as a conscious decision a process that is really mysterious to him and largely irrational. (62)

Thus, Daniel also emerges from the ashes of a failed project, failing to be realized as a character until his own voice can shine forth. Doctorow, in hitting bottom, fails to create the novel he intended, and through this failure manages to create something more. His explanation also calls into question *how* novels are written, and helps create a space for the kinds of leaps and bounds this project will later attempt to explore, because the mysterious battle of writing a novel seems to mirror the mysterious experience of maturation and understanding in youth's trajectory of growth as they 'come of age.' The voice of Daniel that does emerge, alternating as he does between first and third person narration, destroys the continuity of the original novel in his quest to express himself, to get to the bottom of his own life. As both novelists allow these voices to dominate, they get beyond the limits of a more traditional novel and, trusting to the voices whispering in their ears, seek to allow these particular voices to be heard in their own words.

Daniel refers to himself as a "criminal or perception," a state that mirrors Ellison's hyperreceptivity as an opening up of the self to process the world (34). The notion in both cases summons the idea of a novelist as one who *channels voices*. More importantly, both novelists have failed to complete their original novel conceptions, instead sacrificing their plans for these voices. At this point, the notion of the 'attempt' must be drawn out in more detail – to reach a point of failure, both had to write and pursue an original idea, only to watch/have it morph into something unexpected. The stress, at this point, connects failure to the result of an original plan that evolves as it progresses, exceeding and altering its attempted parameters. By definition, one cannot fail without having made the attempt, and so failure as a model of development almost necessitates trial and error, or, more specifically, beginning in a socially accepted fashion only to realize its limitations and be forced to 'create' a new paradigm or path. Adding layers to this

maze of composition, both Daniel and Ellison's Narrator, within the novels, refer to themselves

as the author of the texts we as readers have, and make meaning through the process of writing

the stories of their own lives. Neither novel presents the oral story of a character's struggles; both

novels remain palpably aware of themselves as written texts or, more clearly, as texts written by

their protagonists. This situation only strengthens the notion that these novels provide a space for

the characters themselves to tell/write their own narratives of growth, change, and understanding.

Thus, these individual voices within the larger social structure, after making themselves known,

have their own chance to speak, bringing them from the margins where they reside into the

consciousness of society generally.

Alessandro Portelli, in his article on the construction of distinctly American voices, uses

multiple examples from American literature in conversation to draw out the issues that have

always been prevalent, from the durability of textual documents (as dead or final products) to the

constant oral changes that keep things in motion and unsettled.[34] From Melville to DeLillo,

Portelli traces the American voice, or more distinctly those voices at the margin that speak, in the

end, for America.

Portelli concludes that the voices and dialects at the margin allow everyone else to speak;

through their creation of language and experience, they naturally push the limits of the American

voice. His concluding remarks seem relevant:

> And so, if we imagine, plausibly, that the "you" of the narrative beginnings is the
> ordinary reader of these novels, then DeLillo and Mark Twain are saying that those who
> have a voice in America are the proletarian children of the Bronx, the black kids in

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34 In his essay, "The Sound in the Voice," Portelli concocts a literary American *Bildungsroman*, made through the
mixing of marginal voices. What Portelli finds are ghosts and screams, extraordinary events that constantly
undermine the known, whether it be language or a conception of the past. Over time, the mystical creatures of
the past are replaced by 'others' within the populace, speakers of dialects who are also people and citizens. The
power of mere voices, of sound versus visual text, is a recurrent theme in the American novel as these voices
themselves must rise together to create meaning. We are always working out the boundaries of language, both in
dialogue and through sound itself, because the misunderstood aspects of the conversation propel us forward and
open new possibilities.

Harlem, and the fleeing adolescents of Missouri. Through them and thanks to them, everyone speaks, because just like the underground black man in *The Invisible Man* [sic] by Ralph Ellison, "on the lower frequencies, [they] speak for [us]." In times like these, maybe this is why this voice is "halfway hopeful." (552)

As Portelli includes and expands this invisible man to speak for everyone, he allows the potential that his words and experiences, along with those other maligned and disenfranchised groups (like Daniel), could and do change the 'face' and character of America by their utterances. The power given to speech, and to the novelist, does create hope that, in these separate fictional situations, a dialogue does form which allows America to grow and change over time, with a mechanism that would force this change to be encompassing and diverse, instead of uniform and stifling.

The Narrator writes his own episodic story from its ending, in his hole in the ground. Framed as the novel is, with Prologue and Epilogue, the guiding hand of the Narrator from the end of his struggles with invisibility guides the reader forward, showing how he became the voice that Ellison hears from underground. In the Epilogue, he asks the question, "so why do I write, torturing myself to put it down?" (579). His immediate answer, that "in spite of myself I've learned some things," relates his adventures to a self-composed *Bildungsroman* (579). This notion is complicated, however, by the fact that the writing, in and of itself, altered his view of his own life, leaving him to ponder that

now that I've tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I'm drawn upward again […] so that before I even finish I've failed. […] The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness. (579)

Through the very writing itself, he finds that he has failed, but, like his creator, he has only failed in his *original intent*. His failure registers as another stage of his growth and maturation, his self-education, and he finds that he "[approaches] it through division. So I denounce and defend and I hate and I love" (580). His unstable position within invisibility, which leaves him receptive to all

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sides, seeing everything that the blind around him miss, forces him to see past the simple to this complex vision, which "perhaps makes [him] a little bit as human as [his] grandfather" (580). The Narrator comes to know himself through the act of writing out his own experiences and adventures, which are complicated and multifaceted, and after living, then writing, he finally confronts himself and decides that the time for this underworld dweller to forgo hibernation for the world above has come. As Ellison explains in an interview, "The Art of Fiction," about his own novel, "[t]he hero comes up from underground because the act of writing and thinking necessitated it," a position enforcing writing as a step toward 'more overt action' (179). He discusses social action, and writing his own life becomes, at this point, social action reaching beyond the world of his fiction. This character, born of a voice, allows the novelist, through the novel itself, to reveal the social actions and understanding of this (invisible) man, which reach his audience through the novel itself. Thus, in a complex way, the Narrator's own story comes above ground as text and influences the society that has never been able to see him, forcing his own particular vision on them.

Because the Narrator's 'voice' is ascribed authorship within the text, its very complexities reveal his growth. Because of his pronounced position at the start and finish as an older self, the young Narrator throughout the text works on multiple levels. First, he acts as naïve (black) boy with little power and an inability to understand what hovers right under his nose. His older self as writer, however, brings the reader through the narrative, plainly showing with no apology the mistakes, stupidity, and wasted promise of his younger self (which, in a way, forces the text to act as a confessional). In narrating his past, he does not impose on the narrative, but instead stands back and lets a 'true' picture play out. He does have moments of intrusion, however, such as the end of the first chapter when he steps in (within parenthesis) to make a

larger point: "(It was a dream I was to remember and dream again for many years after. But at that time I had no insight into its meaning. First, I had to attend college)" (33). He presents his story as it (fictionally) happened, and allows his former self to experience increasingly complicated yet subtle growth through the course of the text. As Ellison explains, "[i]t is what the hero refuses to do in each section which leads to further action. He must assert and achieve his own humanity; he cannot run with the pack and do this – this is the reason for all the reversals" (179). His authorial hand reveals itself through allusions (to literature, culture, and bad jokes) and through textual complications (the abundant usage of "black" and "white" in the text, jazz motifs, and symbolism). As writer, he draws out the innocuous details his younger self does not understand, and imbues them with meaning for his audience, which stresses the written aspect of this text and how he makes his own story more than a mere retelling – he makes it a virtuoso textual performance.

Daniel's book, from a narrative standpoint, is even more self-aware as a written product. As a graduate student writing his dissertation, Daniel resides in the library (where Doctorow found him), and his text highlights his position as author. In the end, we learn that what he has been writing is his dissertation (or, to be more direct, the book he has decided to write instead of a straightforward academic study, thus his *desertion*):

> DANIEL'S BOOK: A Life Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Social Biology, Gross Entomology, Women's Anatomy, Children's Cacophony, Arch Demonology, Eschatology, and Thermal Pollution. (302)

Daniel decides, instead of his dissertation, to write his life in pursuit of knowledge and understanding about himself, his family, and his country. That he fails to complete his actual dissertation, and instead completes his personal book, marks a change in Daniel that emerges from the events he has been writing down; because his narrative ends with the closing of the

library, he is literally forced to stop writing (in a 'pencil's down' moment) by events beyond his control. Conveniently, he had just announced "[he] had hoped to discuss some of the questions posed by this narrative," pushing him away from his written artifact and his (scholarly) impulse to look to the past for answers (300).

The very written quality of Daniel's text as text shows forth, as he struggles to narrate his own history. Any discussion of his book, then, must include a discussion of narrative and narrative technique, especially concerning the varieties of narration included and the first- and third-person versions of Daniel. This problem becomes apparent on the first page, where after two sentences from a third-person viewpoint, Daniel explains, "the day was hot and overcast with the threat of rain, and the early morning traffic was wondering – I mean, the early morning traffic was light, but not many drivers could pass them without wondering who they were and where they were going" (3). This passage begins a trend that extends through the rest of the novel, with the narrative oscillating between an objective portrayal of Daniel as a character separate from the author and the first-person Daniel stepping in to explain events, make corrections, and move the story forward. In his specifically postmodernist reading of the text, T.V. Reed explores this issue as arising from the problems the novel confronts, saying, "it is tempting from my perspective to read the third- and first-person elements of the text as the realist (globalizing, totalizing) and postmodernist (localizing, disseminating) poles of the novel, but that would be to claim both too much and too little" (290). Reed complicates the stability that such a reading provides by discussing how the two positions inform and play off of each other. John Callahan comes to a similar conclusion in his explanation of the two Daniels, exploring the idea that "throughout the narrative, Daniel uses facts and imagination to resolve the conflict between two opposed versions of self and discourse" (*Citizen* 247). In seeking access to history/reality,

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Daniel seeks both an objective and subjective view of his own experience, even if this whole process occurs within Daniel as subject.[35] His inability to control his slippage between perspectives adds weight to the unsolvable nature of his life, in a project only finished on being abandoned. As his sister scornfully points out, Daniel has "the fucking family gift for self-objectification," making himself his own historical object (80).

Of the many positions Daniel occupies in his book, perhaps, again, the most interesting is Daniel as graduate student/scholar, and the blending of the critical and personal narrative which emerges. John Callahan also explores this situation, commenting that "mixing the voices, materials, and formal possibilities of fictional and scholarly discourse enables Daniel to face his own pathology of perception and behavior" (253). Because Daniel never settles on a voice, but constantly mixes them together, he escapes the limits imposed by a stable position. When his sister Susan challenges him, mocking his choices with her remark to "go back to the stacks, Daniel […] the world needs another graduate student," her voice helps to keep his position fluid; he is not allowed to settle into a professional, scholarly life (81). In its negative capacity, Daniel uses his scholarly position to secure himself from attempting any action in his own historical moment, which Susan would refer to as "[jerking] off behind a book" (81). After a long sequence about breaking the momentum of America and "[overthrowing] the United States with images," Daniel breaks his own momentum, switching to his scholarly tone – "I have an idea for an article. If I write it maybe I can sell it and see my name in print. The idea is the dynamics of radical thinking" (140). Far from making any active change, or even from any radical thinking, Daniel-as-scholar reacts to the world's problems by dreaming up articles, a position that becomes

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35 In a Hegelian sense, this idea could be represented as identity-difference, not reaching the objective world that a budding historian should shoot for, but remaining firmly within the bounds of individual subjectivity. In fact, the failure of the objective (or factual) allows Daniel to, through his narrative, access what can be known through language (as possibly the only way to know).

untenable the more his life crashes down around him. In the end, however, his scholarly impulse, corrupted by his personal suffering and anger, allows him to produce his book, a text that resists the (sometimes narrow) limits of genre. In Callahan's opinion, "without the paraphernalia of scholarship and the self-absorbed sensibility of the graduate student, it is doubtful that he would have discovered and told his story […] the techniques and even the hubris of the apprentice scholar serve him well in his narrative" (256). Thus, Daniel needed to both embrace and combine his multiple selves to create his narrative, which attempts to surpass those limited selves by creating new formal possibilities, both for the book itself, and for Daniel as a person evolving to survive his world.

With this perspective of Daniel as author, both the schizophrenic nature of his text and its very textuality force us to consider his book of failures and growth as his own (failed) effort. Thus, Ellison and Doctorow fail in their original intent and give over the voice of their novels to the characters themselves, who circumscribe the original efforts of these authors' at control by *writing their own lives* within novels (as novels). Both characters are situated, in the end, at a point of reflection, looking back over their own actions and mistakes, and both grow through the process of writing this growth. At each level, then, are failures that contain offshoots to new paths forward. Both Daniel and Ellison's Narrator feel that they have failed, in writing their narratives, to truly express their situation through text and narrative; just like their creators, they have to be satisfied with accepting what they have done, with chasing the threads of their own experiments, and, at close, both narrator/authors are in a position to abandon hibernation within the safety of their (subterranean) dwellings and reemerge into the open space of society as (more) mature individuals.

In the larger scheme, these narratives explore maturation as achieved by lived experience (even fictional), the act of writing as a vehicle of understanding, and through transcending the written account of the past with hope, or at least a willingness to confront, the future. For both novels, then, the process of individual evolution plays itself out through more complex layerings than past models, and seeks, in a fluid situation for individual and society, to create a narrative of explanation that will allow these characters to escape their struggles of growth and, emerging more mature, accept a relationship of 'accommodation' (as Klein earlier articulated) with the world while beginning to carve a new place in it. Both characters seem to negate their past selves through the course of the novels, and, having learned along the way, seek to begin anew post-narrative. This newfangled *Bildungsroman* has grown from a mere experiential story to a written text (albeit by a fictional character) which both grounds them in their own reflections of the past and forces them, at the conclusion of the book, to conclude, close the book, and emerge back into society. The position of the voice defines where the writing takes place; the failures along the way (complete but not satisfactory texts to their inhabitants) are the milestones of growth, forward motion, and change.

Since, in the case of both narrators, they seem blinded by their own position in the action of the narrative itself, only when they reach a point of writing about these experiences does everything come to make a kind of sense not available in the real life variants they experienced. These related experiences are not sensible/translatable in and of themselves; narrative sense must be imposed on the structure as a whole for the individual involved to get a sense of the grand and sweeping nature of their own (narrative) experiences. They have to develop their own methods of compromise and deceit, lose their naivety in the face of reality, and grow wise to the game played, accomplished through the creation of these texts, which is a subversive way to teach the

readers what to expect, so that their experiences can be related (in transcendent fashion) beyond the text to the world. By documenting their own failures, to some extent, they give others room, vicariously and through the textual experience of living/reading through their (revisited) lives with them, and to correct those mistakes. Their narratives enter the repertoire of possible narrative tools for the individual in society to see his own social growth, and, hopefully, to learn from the mistakes which have been so painstakingly recorded for this purpose. Even at the end, writing their own stories, there are limitations these narrators cannot overcome, as the telling cannot completely succeed in sharing everything that happened. Narration provides an order of things, helps shape meaning, but cannot ever cover or explain everything, and in this space of the non-narratable lies the potentialities for solutions born from narrative failures.

CHAPTER 4

Electricity and (Narrative) Endings: Final Answers

Throughout *Invisible Man*, the motifs of electricity and fire dance around each other, influencing and combating possible forward movement for the Narrator. Fire, the symbol of the past, whether in the limited world of Trueblood or as the purgative used by the men in Harlem to burn down their tenement, does not seem tied to a progressive future. Electricity, on the other hand, charging the Narrator and his narrative, allows the novel movement, as he increasingly inhabits (artificially) lit, urban spaces. Because electricity comes to dominate, captured earlier in the portrait of his electrified cellar, this thematic trope pushes his narrative forward. As he approaches the ending of his narrative, the Narrator follows the currents as he works out his own failures and the new, mature position he has created for himself; he accomplishes this move through a series of recognitions.

Most conspicuously, the Rinehart episode presents the Narrator's final temptation to utilize a rogue brand of electric savagery to carve himself a position of power. After stumbling upon several identities of Rinehart (explored as a series of mis-recognitions), who never enters the novel directly except as the shadowy personification of chaos, he passes a sign casting a "dark green" light (495). This church of Rinehart, spiritually enhanced by electric guitars, reveals the negative use of electricity to lure people to the false comfort of religion. Rinehart, a "*Spiritual Technologist*," acts as a double of the Narrator, working for obfuscation instead of seeking a more defined form, which grants him freedom through indefinability.[36] He cannot

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[36] As discussed previously, Marcus Klein sees Rinehart as the best possible option for an African-American, ignoring the Narrator's own ending as forced and artificial. Klein's reading, however, seeks to limit the visionary

accept freedom at the expense of his race's enslavement by its own members (a double bind), and contrasts chaos, about which he recommends "[asking] Rinehart – he's a master of it," with "imagination," or the ability to dream new possibilities (576). He banishes Rinehart's ghostly presence as mere "Rinehartism – cynicism," and works to transcend the limitations of chaos through imagination, including an attempt to employ electricity, not as social control, but for his own purposes of self-understanding in the cellar (504).

From the Rinehart position, the Narrator dives into the fiery riots of Harlem, partially a creation of his own failures, and there gets to peer below the surface of the (socially constructed) world, looking into actual chaos and finding his truths. The complex and provisional narratives on which society is predicated begin to unravel, giving him the purchase to accept the violent failures of oratory and platitudes. While he knows the riots developed as a byproduct of the Brotherhood's political vision, he can also see his own people asserting their will as they shake off repression and mistreatment during the brief window of time before the white police reinscribe order. Voices, however, make their way through the crowd and madness, including the quiet voices of other invisible people; in the midst of his adventures in Harlem, the Narrator hears the repetition "Lord, Lord, Lord," spoken by "a dark voice [calling] from the dark" (554). So many of these voices get drowned out in 'normal' socio-temporal space, including his own, a fact he will soon ruminate on in his solitude under society.

His true moment of recognition, however, does not involve a specific voice, but the perspective that this cacophony of insanity grants him at the moment where he embraces absurdity. What he finds in this recognition is

> the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I no longer had to run for or from the Jacks and

aspects of *Invisible Man*, staying grounded in the negative; imagination, for him, sounds like false hope.

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the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine. [...] And I knew that it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others. (559)

In the middle of fire and darkness, with everyone seeking the Narrator's death (by hanging) as the figurehead for every conceivable wrong, he catches a glimpse of his own ridiculous situation, which begins the recognitions and realizations of his narrative conclusions. He will have to stumble even deeper into darkness (physically and metaphorically), however, before he can stop running and take control of his own life, even if, at the start, his only control derives from narrative attempts at meaning making. Fleeing for his life, he tumbles down the manhole and into his underworld, after which one of his (accidentally) savvy pursuers mentions that "he sure is in the dark though. You can't even see his eyes," highlighting the dullness of his physical vision, lost in blackness (565). Down the hole, and slipping into a timeless state of invisibility, he gets cast away from the social problems to a reckoning with himself, all of which culminates in the dream vision that ends the narrative proper.

In the dream, the Narrator, surrounded by those who have been running him all along, decides that he is "*through with all [their] illusions and lies, and [he is] through running*" (569). In response, the representatives of social power and control castrate him and set his bloody testicles hanging on a bridge to show him the futility of abandoning their world. At this point, "*painful and empty*" at the loss of his illusions, he realizes that without the clouded vision illusion causes, he is allowed a new kind of dream-sight, fueled by imagination, that grants him access to the connectedness of all histories: "*there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water –*" (570). In this system of persecution and (racial) domination, he implicates all history and races/classes as inextricably tied together, bound to the same fate; he does not have to complete this thought for his meaning to translate, making this failure of articulation full of

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intended meaning. Even as he begins to recognize how small and troublesome human history really is, the Narrator watches the bridge, his testicles still attached, begin "*striding like a robot, an iron man, whose iron legs clanged doomfully as it moved*" (570). He sees the history these men blindly construct as a techno-monster, a danger to all, forcing him, before he even enters his hibernation, to shout that "*No, no, we must stop him!*," with an emphasis on "*we*" as *everyone* (570). Even after a lifetime of running, after the invisibility of being everyone's tool, and after his castration in this dreamscape, he still feels plugged into the collective fate and finds his identity as part of a larger humanity.

This creation of technical doom brings Ellison's novel to Kenneth Burke's reading of *Invisible Man* within the *Bildungsroman* tradition. For Burke, the problem of technology "transcends race," because technological inventions are "the human animal's greatest prowess" (103). His explanation goes as follows:

> Now, owing to technology's side effects (not only in the hellish possibilities it now contributes to the disastrousness of war but also to the kinds of pollution and desiccation that result from its gruesomely efficient resourcefulness in the expansion of purely peaceful enterprises) the whole of humankind has now one questionable purpose. We are all part of the same threat to our destiny. […] We must all conspire together, in a truly universal sibling-hood, to help us all help one another to get enough control over our invented technologic servants to keep them from controlling us. (103)

The Narrator views these ideas Burke draws out as a side-effect of everyone in society running around blind, and creating, through limited vision, a future destruction of humanity by the very technologies employed to advance society. Even with this vision before him, he retreats into his hibernation, to "think things out," a thinking which will become his preparation and (written) enactment of future action in the very face of the doom he imagined.

In his Epilogue, the Narrator illuminates his situation through writing – "the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me" (575). After finding that he has "boomeranged a long way from the point in society toward which [he] originally aspired," he finds himself at a new point of origin. He begins to define the American principle, bigger than any one person, which makes the social debacle worth reentering, though mostly through definitions of what he has learned he does not want – "the freedom of a Rinehart or the power of a Jack" (575). He does, however, continue to view everyone as part of the social whole, that system of power and identifications that each citizen remains responsible for (the 'we'); of course, his attachment to another we, African-Americans emerging from slavery and engaging in his larger conception, exists as a primary identity, even as it gets subsumed into the larger social totality. The Narrator discusses a list of societal ills caused by blindness and invisibility (a list which could encompass them all, actually), and includes "the trip to the chamber with the deadly gas that ends in the oven so hygienically clean," a small moment reinforcing what happens when the blind control technological advancements (575).

Finally, the Narrator imagines a new social model predicated on diversity and solidarity, on "infinite possibilities," where the power of imagination and new social models can and must emerge to dethrone subjugation by those who currently keep everyone running. As he explains, "our fate is to become one, and yet many – this is not prophecy, but description" (577). Assigning himself "no rank and no limit," he looks beyond compartmentalized misery and hate as the products of a simple truth: "None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going" (576-577). His final principles, love and the commonality of death, move beyond racial divisions and posit a humanity playing the same game, with the same limits, but one that could become, through possibility and imagination, more than the current world of willful blindness.

Before his final exit, the Narrator offers a new model for action in light of his new understanding; "Why should I be the one to dream this nightmare? Why should I be dedicated and set aside – yes, if not to at least *tell* a few people" (579). The telling through writing, as previously noted, leaves him feeling a failure, because he thinks no one will believe him, no one will listen, and no one will care. Action cripples all his theories, as the articulation never matches the conceptualization, and he shifts from the electricity lighting his underground world to radio waves as a means of spreading his message. Because, as a "disembodied voice,"[37] only words could count as action, he takes his first step in his "socially responsible role to play" by writing and sending his text out on the wires, like music (581). The action a voice can take is to speak, to spread as sound, and his "lower frequencies" grant his voice entrance into the consciousness of others, even as his written product infects its readers with this visionary, underground, hopeful American perspective (581).

Thus, while the many lights illuminating the hole give him form, his growing understanding of electricity, alongside his maturation, puts him in a position to foresee and foster this awareness in others. His ability to tinker with power, to redirect its flow for his own uses, allows the now mature Narrator to see that "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play," shifting gears from theft to action for the betterment of all (581). Of course, he dwells on failure in the end, with a half-hopeful air of success, but he cannot yet physically escape his own hole as he cannot physically overcome the limits of his narrative, or any narrative, to solve the problems of the world. The first precept of a voice, just like a written account, is that the audience must listen and be willing to learn. The Narrator, in his actions, can only offer his own

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37 Oddly, in a link to Ellison's namesake, Ralph Emerson, this disembodied voice recalls the transparent eyeball, calling forth a subject unseen who can see, who can imagine and create the very connections of "the pattern of [society's] certainties" in the hope of offering new ways of seeing, hearing, and imagining (581).

plight to public scrutiny, but can never guarantee the success of his own imperfect narrative to make a difference.

Because *The Book of Daniel* tries to be a personal and social history, an attempt to simultaneously explore one's own past in the context of a vast societal critique (in this case, the history of the American Left), the novel is doomed to become a confession. Because Daniel fails (as explored earlier) as a historian, since writing an objective personal history is an impossible task, his work emerges as a written memoir, as the struggle of a man with his own past for the sake of his present and future. Beneath and behind everything Daniel does and attempts to do, lurks the question of his heart; in a list of objectives he writes to himself, he finishes with the following near-scream: "IS IT SO TERRIBLE NOT TO KEEP THE MATTER IN MY HEART, TO GET THE MATTER OUT OF MY HEART, TO EMPTY MY HEART OF THIS MATTER? WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH MY HEART?" (17). The novel raises the question of how much Daniel succeeds in his quest to explain and escape the repetition and detachment inherent in all history, and obvious in his own. Abandoning notions of fact and fiction for the more fluid form of narrative, Doctorow's text dwells in the space of constructed realities, and can only be true to itself if contradiction and instability are embraced, especially if this combination can *shock* his heart to life. The novel thus explores the limits of narrative explanations to reach any final truth, as well as the unexpected truths which take place beyond narrative through absence or failure, exemplified here in a reading of Mindish's kiss. This narrative limit can best be observed through a discussion of endings, because, in a text that seeks closure in the face of history and reality, it is only at the end of the journey that any final evaluation can take place.

The final point of confusion in Daniel's book is its last section, "THREE ENDINGS," which bring the narrative that Daniel constructs to a 'close' (299). Numbered and separated, "1. The House," "2. The Funeral," and "3. The Library" bring together the final elements of Daniel's past, not as separate alternatives, but as three connected instances that carry Daniel to his present after the detailed portrayal of his parents' electrocutions in the past he seeks to escape. In "The House," Daniel returns to his old family home in the Bronx only to see "two black kids […] playing casino" (299). The house stands, but with new inhabitants. Instead of asking for entrance into his past residence, Daniel instead makes a different choice – "I will do nothing. It's their house now" (299). His childhood home holds only memories, and is abandoned to the lives it presently houses. Homeless, Daniel can move forward, or at least restart his life from a fresh point. In the second ending, "The Funeral," Daniel attends the funeral of Susan, his sister, who chose death by 'Starfish'/stasis, abdicating her life, her will to live, as her only release from the inescapable, oppressive systems she battled in life. Entering the cemetery on a day when "crocuses get fucked," Daniel mourns for these flowers along with his sister – "Crocus, first flower, dead flower, flower of revolutionaries" (300). His sister, Daniel notes, has "died of a failure of analysis," but whether this refers to her quack shrink, her inability to see the possibilities that can result from a thorough analysis of life, or the success of his own project with confronting the past, he never reveals (300). Daniel has discovered, in his book that fails to penetrate the secrets of death, that one possible option is to mourn, another to love, and that all the options somehow operate together, never singly. As he writes, "I think if I can only love my little sister for the rest of our lives that's all I will need" (300). Of course, while Daniel recognizes the possibility of love as an antidote for living, he continues to consider it a proposition not yet settled on, all the while perceiving the state of his family (both step- and

new), the concerns of the grave diggers, and the nature of the cemetery as "a city for the dead" (301). The funeral scene ends with two related instances. Daniel rounds up some "old Jewish men," the "little bearded men who make their livings in cemeteries" saying prayers for the dead, otherwise a crowd of misfits and "drunkards," and pays them to pray for his lost family, stirring up a "bonanza" in honor of the many deaths in his life (301-302). In the midst of this cacophony, where the artificially ridiculous meets the sacred, Daniel proposes his second possible proposition, "I think I am going to be able to cry," keeping his longing for feeling, for release, in the passive voice, and never relating if the tears fall (302). Both of these first two episodes leave Daniel safe in his detachment, and thoroughly disconnected from the past he leaves behind, whether home, family, or his Jewish heritage.

The final ending of the three, "The Library," is in my opinion the most important, and not just because it comes last. Daniel moves from his recollected and embittered past into the present, sitting at the library (in his own present) and writing the last page of his recreated past (the documentary text we as readers read). While he claims he "had hoped to discuss some of the questions posed by this narrative," he is conveniently exonerated from this responsibility by a *deus ex machina* of sorts. The revolutionaries of the New Left are closing the library. Daniel has an exchange with a revolutionary representative:

> "Time to leave, man, they're closing the school down. Kirk must go! We're doin' it, we're bringing the whole motherfucking university to its knees!"
> "You mean I have to get out?"
> "That's right, man, move your ass, this building is officially closed."
> "Wait –"
> "No wait, man, the time is now. The water's shut off. The lights are going out. Close the book, man, what's the matter with you, don't you know you're liberated?"
> I have to smile. It has not been unexpected. I will walk out to the Sundial and see what's going down. (302)

In this way, Daniel's narrative does not end, but is ended by forces beyond his control, a "not […] unexpected" action that allows him to break from endless examinations of the past with a "smile" (302). His narrative project, seeking control over his past and an understanding of history, finds him at the end swept up by another historical movement, "liberated" not by his own actions, his own book, but by the new radicals (302). What is most important is Daniel's final move to "see what's going down," as his penchant for seeing the past has been altered to a new vision, Daniel seeing the present *as informed by his past*, which does not exactly liberate him, but instead puts him into the position of an actor in the present historical moment, anticipating the future. While readers have to trust that he "will" follow through, the sense of this third ending demands that if Daniel is to survive his past, he must go and see, and this view, I think, is corroborated by the fact that he is forced out of the library (302). Leaving home behind, burying the remains of his blood family, and now closing his own book on the past all force Daniel to now confront his present, surely still with narratives, but with narratives less constructed, less contrived, as they will necessarily be creations of the moment. Finally, in going out to the sundial with these new revolutionaries, who have shut down the power and lights to his library/cave, Daniel seems inclined to abandon his artificial pursuits with the past (having seen at least the narrative limits of electricity) and engage with a simpler kind of light and relationship with the world. His move into the sunlight (a natural light), to stand as a part of something new and happening, grants some hope to his life, even if these hopes never get too high; he clearly has not given in to the death that has claimed the rest of his buried family.

Imperative to engaging these multiple endings is their open-endedness. The contingency of Daniel's passivity, his lack at this point of actually doing anything but closing his book, leave his ending(s) fragmentary and unclear. *The Book of Daniel* can only examine his past, not his

future; regarding what will come, he leaves his audience to speculate about his survival. What does occur however, in the final section of the book, is negation. Daniel, working through the death both of his family and his past, accomplishes this movement forward by negating both past narratives and past selves, through his "novel as a sequence of analyses" (281). It is only his experience of understanding gained in the course of his narrative progression, through both recognition and acceptance of the past, that Daniel can then negate that (electrified) past, a move that dissolves his fragmented selves into a new Daniel, one with a gaze redirected to his present. While this narrative move is not a guarantee, especially with Daniel's reluctance to accept his own potential actions, his deliberate strategy of exorcising the past and rejecting its hold over his life (while learning from its problems) is the only chance Daniel has for beginning life anew. Unlike the Crocuses, born to failure, or Susan, choosing to fade away, Daniel chronicles his own struggle and, in the process, finally comes to perceive himself as he does the world around him, which – while not a solution – at least keeps momentum against the stasis of death.

My understanding of this negation has everything to do with the actual ending of Daniel's quest, not with his constructed endings, but with a kiss. If there could be a moment in Daniel's ragged narrative that could be called something like an epiphany, or at the least a moment of inexplicable change, this moment is Daniel's confrontation with Dr. Mindish, his parents' betrayer. His change is inexplicable because at the moment of recognition, narrative truly fails Daniel; he offers none of the available explanations, but this moment allows his detection of the past to cease while his move toward an end, toward the present, pushes through his last crucial scenes to an ending. Before offering an explanation for the kiss, however, it is necessary to explore the crescendo which mounts toward such a climax.

The fourth and final section of the book, "Christmas," begins with Daniel traveling to California in search of Dr. Mindish, his final hope for answers. Arriving in California, Daniel finds himself feeling oddly at home in this place he has never been to before, which anticipates that change has already begun – "I don't know what to write to convey the temperature change of the book. Take off your coat, it's warm here. […] The sun has to be out in this part of the book. It is a chemical sun" (263). In what is both a moment of narrative breakdown and narrative freedom, Daniel simply tells the reader how things are, a note to self becoming a note to all. In a phone call to his wife, Daniel reveals his own feelings about his mission of parental exoneration:

> "Well it is. The whole trip is insane. I don't know if it can do any good even if I get what I'm after. But what else can I do? Can you tell me what else there is to do?"
> "I'm not criticizing, Daniel."
> "What did she [Mrs. Lewin] say?"
> "She said: 'Is the truth something you can give someone for pneumonia.'"
> "Oh shit. No. The answer is no. But what the fuck does she expect me to do – sit the deathwatch with her?"

Having fled Susan's abdication of life in a wild goose chase for answers about his parents, Daniel is powerless both in stasis awaiting death and in motion seeking unrealistic answers. Chasing answers, however, is all Daniel can do, and movement and change are inevitably what lead him, slipshod, to the answers he did not realize he was seeking; following a narrative failure trajectory, these unforeseen answers, however, become the most valuable.

The initial contact Daniel makes with his past in California is with Linda Mindish, the daughter of the man he seeks, and, interestingly, another survivor of his past. Linda has, by all outward indications, managed to move beyond the past, making a new life for herself; the issues Daniel faces in his confrontation with Linda are what propel him toward acceptance. While badgering Linda for access to her father, she explains that "he's an old man and he's sick. He wants to be left in peace," to which Daniel replies, "I'd like to come by and pay my respects"

(267). Daniel is a disturber of the peace, the intruder searching for answer to old questions and, as Linda accuses, "the one who's come here to dredge things up," dragging his old history of uncertainty to a place without memory (272). California, for Dr. Mindish, is the site of forgetfulness, which Daniel cannot allow – with his own parents dead, Daniel seeks either universal settlement or universal suffering, as he himself has suffered. Through his long conversation with Linda, Daniel both monstrously manipulates and experiences an honest crisis of life and identity. When he says "things change. What seems clear isn't so clear after a while," he seems both generally confused about where his history is taking him and about the possibility of finding an answer, just as he is using any tactic he can to get through Linda to her father (278). In Linda, however, Daniel meets with an alternative method to his own historical coping.

In this section, which Daniel describes as "the novel as private I," he presses Linda for access and answers, seeing her from all angles, taking her apart, all the while being taken apart by her (269). Even as Daniel decides that "people don't experience revelation," he pushes for it, exploring both his life and Linda's reciprocally, comparing her situation to his through a strange mixture of judgment and understanding. Whether reflecting on their shared past, considering the lifestyle she purchased for herself (complete with "dangerous wide-hipped whitey" husband), creating an internal monologue for Linda as she considers all the options, calculating how much he is a threat, or making a plea that it is the children of history that suffer "the brunt" of its miseries, Daniel cannot stop himself in his push for answers (272-274). While his perceptions are flying in every direction, Linda explains that she has had it harder, that there are painful paths to walk for people besides Daniel Isaacson Lewin, which finally prompts Daniel to consider the similarity of their positions:

> For one moment I experienced the truth of the situation as an equitability of evil. This is
> what happens to us, to the children of trials; our hearts run to cunning, our minds are

sharp as claws. Such shrewdness has to be burned into the eye's soul, it is only formed in fire. […] There was enough hard corruption in Linda Mindish and me, flawless forged criminals of perception, to exhaust the fires of the sun. (275)

It is this recognition of sameness, of finding another created by the same history, only from the other side of the witness stand, that allows Daniel better access to himself.

The question Daniel needs to understand is "why he confessed," why Dr. Mindish gave his parents to the FBI and, eventually, to death (276). In the midst of his own confession, the answer Daniel seeks is the rationale of another confessor. It could be a reflection of this dual confession that prompts Daniel to offer his big idea – "shit, I don't know. I wanted to tell your father I think he was innocent. I wanted to lay that on him" (276). If Mindish can be proved innocent, so can Daniel and Linda. His innocence would eliminate the taint of guilt left by the trial for treason. The question of innocence leads through Daniel's "Theory of the Other Couple" to the heart of the matter – "'I have to hear from Selig what you just told me. I want to know the guys he put the finger on were the guys who did it. I want to hear it from him, that's all" (284). Samuel Coale argues, on the subject of (literary) conspiracy theory, that "conspiracy, whether actual or theoretical, provides an antidote to postmodernism: everything becomes a sign, a clue, a piece of a larger puzzle. Signs, then, can lead to the general concept of conspiracy, or […] the idea of a transcendent design that seems to live or exist beyond them" (4).[38] Daniel's paranoia and truth-seeking, even when he doubts his acquisition of an answer, reveals his desperation for a solid self and graspable truth; the more he seeks truth, the less likely he stands to either find it or understand it. He offers many potential reasons Linda could have for finally giving in to his

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38 This argument comes from Coale's study, *Paradigms of Paranoia*, which connects conspiracy culture to literary conspiracies after meaning. He goes on to argue that "amid epistemological doubt and insoluble ambiguities, the mind driven back on itself persists in looking for signs of some mammoth cabal, convinced that the final missing piece will complete the puzzle and reveal the true conspirators" (9). His model works well with Daniel, for whom every happenstance or scrap of paper is a clue to solving the mystery of his past so that he can live. Coale, in line with Doctorow, also argues that ambiguity could be a position from which one could come closest to a sense of truth, arguing against absolutist positions (8).

demands, but as a "criminal of perception" he never specifically determines one as the actual reason, because at this point Daniel is seeing too much; he has lost the ability to differentiate, much less narrate, possibilities from actualities (34).

With Daniel, then, so near his goal, trying to prepare for what awaits him, he gets (care of Doctorow) a trip through Disneyland to find Selig Mindish. Daniel cannot see Disneyland without seeing how it works, seeing through its veneer of faux-happiness and wonder. In the midst of his observations, Daniel realizes that

> what Disneyland proposes is a technique of abbreviated shorthand culture for the masses, a mindless thrill, *like an electric shock*, that insists at the same time on the recipient's rich psychic relation to his country's history and language and literature. In a forthcoming time of highly governed masses in an overpopulated world, this technique may be extremely useful both as a substitute for education and, eventually, as a substitute for experience. One cannot tour Disneyland today without noticing its real achievement, which is the handling of crowds. (289, *emphasis mine*)

Selig is in Tomorrowland, the future-looking quadrant of Disneyland, riding the cars of the Autopia.[39] As T.V. Reed explains, "like Sternlicht's collage, Disneyland proclaims that 'everything that came before is all the same,' only here there is no redeeming anarchy; everything is white and clean and fun. In Disneyland even the future (Tomorrowland) is all the same; indeed, the future most of all" (300). Daniel locates Mindish's new home here, in a land with no past and no future, where everything is meaningless and embracing cultural amnesia creates 'happiness.' In line with Reed, Linda Hutcheon argues that Disneyland "becomes the incarnation of a debased intertextuality," a place that "tames the past into the present" (25). Daniel has come for a confrontation about the past to a location where the past, whether history or literature, gets effaced into a two-dimensional panorama; seeking his prey at the heart of the

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39 The very word Autopia, a negation of a negation, as this word encodes the meaning 'not no place' which should mean someplace, but instead merely describes the joy of self-driving electric cars, draws out the failure of past Utopian visions to reach fruition.

funhouse, Daniel hopes to solve his conspiracy at the heart of his own culture's maze of

misrepresented history, which seems a dangerous place to seek after truth.

Danger aside, Daniel enters and seeks out his nemesis, the man who ratted out his parents

to the FBI and, as a witness, spoke the words that heralded their deaths. Seeing Mindish at a

distance, old and palsied, Daniel actually has a physical reaction, explaining, "my heart was

beating wildly. I found myself needing more air than I had" (291). When Daniel and Mindish are

finally brought together, Daniel sees the old man up close, bearing all the marks of a decrepit,

aged body, from the discolored whites of his eyes to "his lips [making] the sound of a faucet

dripping as they met and fell apart" (292). Daniel's narration of the reunion scene goes as

follows:

> 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. I was sickened to see water well from
> the congested yellow corners of his eyes. Tears tracked down his face.
> "Denny?"
> "It's all right, Papa," Linda was saying. She patted his hand. She had begun to cry. "It's
> all right, Papa."
> "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 leaned toward me and touched the top of my head with his palsied lips.
> (293)

Thus, Daniel gets the encounter he has sought, but a different kind of truth emerges. Far from the

answers to questions of the past, this ruined man living in the land of fantasy emerges from his

slumber-toward-death for one moment, and gives Daniel the genuine blessing of a kiss. In

Eugenie Hamner's positive explanation of the kiss, he finds that "Daniel's quest ends here, for

this spontaneous act of affection shocks him into recognizing that human beings are not simple

entities and that the truth is not available to him" (*Burden* 163). Daniel's quest ends because he

has come to his last lead, the last hope for answers, and found instead the kiss of a dying man;

however, while his quest for answers ends here, his narrative of explanation continues. Daniel now has to prove to himself that he can finish this story of the past, and prove to his readers that he can achieve some closure. The ending he achieves is fragmented and negating, a wrapping up of loose ends, but after the kiss of Mindish, such an ending feels like a foregone conclusion.

The real ending of *The Book of Daniel*, in my own reading, occurs on his trip through Disneyland. His ability to see, to understand the world, denies Daniel access to the sweet anemia of this simulacrum outside of history and memory. Daniel, as a criminal of perception, is forced to confront the world without being blind to its dusty corners or mechanisms of control, and while Disney was the final event of Daniel's quest for answers, what he found facing the Monster Mindish was the not satisfaction of victory or even the horrible truth of his parents' guilt – what Daniel found instead was a (non)Monster that turned out to be a very old man, and affection instead of a battle. The life Daniel has to accept contains both history and suffering; he cannot escape the actual world as easily as this sad old man has. Daniel, who has hurt and alienated everyone in his life – "we blackmailed anyone who made the mistake of befriending us […] we were always a threat" – and who does not know honest affection, is shocked from discussing the kiss to the problem of heart transplants (294). As Daniel explains, "The body attacks its own new heart as it would any foreign body […] doctors still have a lot to learn about why we reject our hearts" (293). The implication, again never decidedly revealed, is that Daniel has discovered himself to be in possession of the heart he has been looking for; if he can keep his body from rejecting this new organ, a new heart could mean a new life. Beyond the individual heart, the implication of a heart found in a genuine moment amidst cultural superficiality, a moment present in its absence of explanation, casts the idea of a heart as Daniel, and his narrative, at the heart of society, offering redemption for self and, even if only as a theoretical

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hope, for society. If the genuine can happen at the heart of Disneyland, the potential for authenticity extends along lines of power to other American spaces. The idea of one new heart signifies the idea of one whole Daniel, negating the many Daniels of the narrative for the final Daniel, the writer, the complier, and man who can leave the library to go forth and see. *The Book of Daniel* can only end with one Daniel, the author himself, the man who writes, and closes, the book.

I lied earlier about the book ending with Daniel going forth to see what went down. In truth, the book ends with a fourth ending, a (mis)quote from the Biblical Daniel.[40] As Christopher Morris articulates, "the excerpt from the Bible *is and is not part of the ending*. The passage does appear separable from the promised three endings, but the quotation *is* the ending in that it "ends" the novel" (95). Morris's main concern is that Daniel (or Doctorow) has altered the Biblical passage to fit the ending, changing its meaning to highlight Daniel closing the book and moving on – "*Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end* " (303). Like the Jewish prophet of the Old Testament, Daniel has completed his book, and, besides death, his only option is to move beyond the text, living in a world now informed by his text. Having literally left childhood behind on a quest *through* Disneyland, Daniel leaves the library redeemed, it seems, of his past, exiting into a sunny present and the future veiled in mist beyond it. Daniel can no longer be his old self; through his experiences and narrative, he has become grown up, a person with a heart, and though the paradigm resists perfection, in his world, little else could be expected.

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40 Christopher Morris explores Daniel's misappropriation of both history and literary texts through *The Book of Daniel*. For a further discussion of Daniel's (mis)quotations, whether from Huckleberry Finn or the Bible, see Morris's chapter "Ellipses and Death in *The Book of Daniel*" (79-97). Morris also argues against hermeneutical criticism as a tool of exploration, showing how critics generally read Daniel wrong by reading him within a limited framework. For Morris on the critics, see pp. 80-81. Linda Hutcheon also discusses the two Daniels, focusing on their disparity and on how both "are works *about* the act of interpreting – and then judging" (23). Also, both works, finished and sealed up, are only "opened up by our act of reading" (24).

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion: World's Fair Reconsidered, *Bildungsroman*, and Electric Paradigms
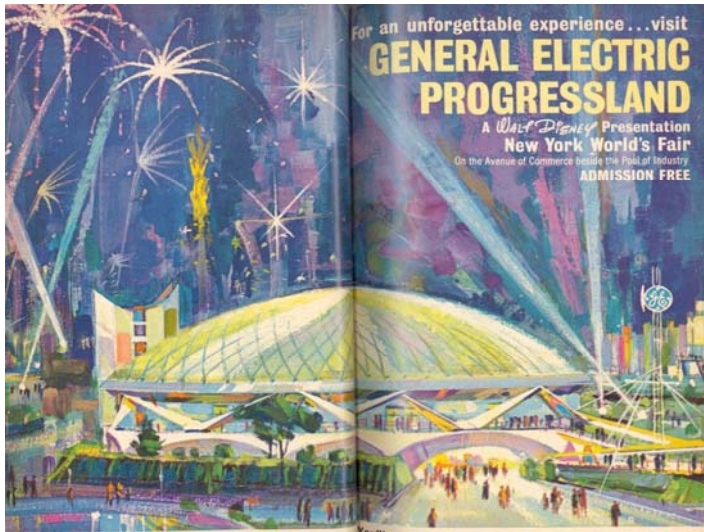
You'll love Walt Disney's magic touch in the delightful Carousel of Progress, the awe-inspiring Sky-Dome Spectacular. You'll see a demonstration of actual Atomic Fusion and wander through all-electric Medallion City. Bring the whole family!
- taken from the 1964/65 Guide: New York City World's Fair (Figure 2 "Advertisement" 30-31)

With narratives ended and varieties of maturity reached, even if nothing is resolved, a second look at a world's fair (as an artificially imposed narrative ending to my own project) will help shed light on the degradation and failure of Utopian visions as the twentieth century passes into the twenty-first. The World's Fair of 1964, again in New York (actually, in the same physical space as its 1939 predecessor), displays a consumer vision with all the trappings of gaudy bells and whistles. Morris Dickinson articulates the disparity between the two cultural events:

> The 1939 Fair sought a unified style and a streamlined modern look consistent with its futuristic theme. Many found the effect quite magical: a new world opened up for them. The 1964/65 Fair settled for diversity, kitsch, and contradiction. Many of its exhibits were actually backward-looking, a celebration of the progress already achieved. Few found the effect enchanting. Many found it vulgar. (38)

The notable addition to the '64 event was a heavy reliance on Walt Disney, both to supply technological advances and to apply his commercial vision to this national event. As the Disney

model overwhelms the visionary with its two-dimensional imagery, the national vision goes into a whirlpool, looking in all directions, unity abandoned.

The World of Tomorrow has become Mindish's Autopia, and what was Utopia at the World's Fair gets boiled down to Disney fodder for the masses, proving the original promises false. Disney perpetuates the idea that Utopia is possible, though as shorthand culture for the masses, which as Daniel opines, works "like an electric shock" (289). The aged Mindish floats awash on the sea of amnesia, the land of cultural forgetfulness, where the dreams of yesterday become the distraction from the reality of today, much less tomorrow. At the "Coca-Cola Tomorrowland Terrace," Daniel experiences the artifice of Disneyland's vision, and in this moment of corporate euphoria at forgetfulness, he gets the kiss of recognition that means the past is dead and buried, that forward movement (really, hurried flight from this place) is necessary. Corporate interests find expression in Disneyland, which regurgitates recycled ideas from the old Fair into the 'vision' of the '64 event, which the Golds refer to as one of "rampant and inescapable commercialism" (112).[41] Even as world's fairs are necessarily commercial ventures, the attempt, in '39, to provide a unified vision of future progress is nonexistent by '64. The Golds go on to critique a central difference – the fair theme – when they detail that

> [r]eplacing the 1939 fair's Theme Centre was the Unisphere, a 120-feet diameter model of the earth cast in stainless steel and set in a circular fountain lake. There was, however, more than a little symbolism in visitors now being presented with the spectacle of a hollow globe as a signature feature rather than, as in 1939, being invited into an imposing dome to witness a display depicting the potential of the city and technology in a progressive democracy. (111)

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41 The final quote comes from John and Margaret Gold's *Cities of Culture*, where they move from '39 to '64, offering only two negative paragraphs before moving on; for these authors, the '64 event only bears mention as a blight, and most other sources agree with their verdict.

Apparently, at least to exhibitionary historians,[42] the marriage of Disney and the '64 Fair only

keeled a death note already in the works, for as both *Invisible Man* and *The Book of Daniel* show,

electricity has always been problematic, and positive explanations of history always contain an

undercurrent of the realities brushed under history's (electrified) rug.

David Nye, in *Consuming Power*, also maligns the '64 Fair, mainly for its relation to

Disney's Tomorrowland. His commentary reads like Daniel's when he writes:

> When New York City decided to hold a world's fair in 1964, many of the
> exhibitors turned to Disney for assistance. Ford invited visitors on "a fun-filled
> ride on Walt Disney's Magic Skyway" into "the fabulous future." Other exhibitors
> asked Disney to develop animated figures, and his "imaginers" also gave advice
> on exhibit layout and crowd control. General Electric's Progressland was billed as
> "A Walt Disney Presentation" in "the delightful Carousel of Progress." The
> influence was reciprocal: after the fair, the GE exhibit reappeared at Disney
> World in Florida. (211-212)

Disparaging Disneyland as a "hermetically sealed universe," Nye sees only decline from this

Utopian heights of '39.[43] Through the Fair's emphasis "on progress, on subduing nature, and on

using energy to achieve both," energy becomes a tool of coercion, a useful power in controlling

culture, in all probability to provide more space for industry (212). Thus, as kitsch and industry

replace a sense of magical wonder at the future, Daniel's Disneyland nightmare makes more

sense, contextualized by history. His country lacks vision, electricity has become necessarily

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42 Tony Bennett, in his essay "The Exhibitionary Complex," argues that alongside Foucault's "carceral
archipelago" as a means of enforcing power there exists an "exhibitionary complex," and while the former
captures the closing and confining of spaces, the latter explores displays of cultural power to bring the people
into a state narrative of power/knowledge (123). If his argument can be applied to these two fairs, then the
narrative vision of the first, and its failure, preclude the slow disintegration of this narrative in the years between
these two parallel events. By '64, the narrative simply folds in on itself, exposing the wonder of the present
moment and basking in commercial stability.

43 Nye goes on to complain that "[i]n structure and function Disneyland closely resembled the world's fair, which
was also a closed space that celebrated technology and the future. Its immediate inspiration was the 1948
Chicago Railroad Fair, which Walt Disney attended. Disney also borrowed from the amusement zones of the
great expositions, redesigning the roller coaster, the fun house, the merry-go-round, and other rides. He
purposely designed his park as a representation of middle-class harmony and order that appealed to the eye, as
opposed to the more chaotic world of the older amusement parks. He abolished their kinetic rides, lewd dancers,
and carnival atmosphere, creating a clean, safe world that blended nostalgia with spectacular technological
display" (211).

insidious, and, unless one buys into industry and corporate interests, the back-to-nature movement seems the only option: his big plunge outside of history. The Utopian narrative has failed, and these novelists and their novels work (or fail) within the context of more totalizing failed narratives.

Another context where these novels create confusion is in relation to the *Bildungsroman* tradition, though here the problem involves (failed) generic labels, even if these labels contain a narrative of their own. Though both of these novels, in terms of plot, include young men who, through the course of their experiences, mature toward adult subjectivities, the paths they travel are by no means standard. In general terms, these two anomalous characters are distinctly American, and both deal with specifically American problems as they struggle to identify self with nation against the backdrop of history. The *Bildungsroman*, in its conception and through most of its tradition, was a form employed to deal with the development of white, European men in a homogeneous cultural setting. The stretch is palpable when a Jewish son of electrocuted traitors and a African-American southerner are the focus of a form that purports to connect the individual with the social whole in a narrative of progress; despite both the Narrator and Daniel's genders, neither would fit into a classic model of youth growing along with society, comfortable in the knowledge of a positive resolution. Franco Moretti considers part of this problem thus – "*Bildungsroman*. A certain magnetism hovers around the term. It stands out as the most obvious of the (few) reference points available in that irregular expanse we call the 'novel'" (15). Because of the critical impulse to utilize generic conventions to locate novels within the larger tradition of 'the novel,' whether as an access point or as a model for critical understanding, the adverse effect is a forcible manipulation of novel and genre to make the argument work. Just because these novels resemble the *Bildungsroman* (a young individual becomes a more mature

individual within the spacio-temporal bounds of the novel) does not mean that they automatically

exist within the generic category.

In fact, the *Bildungsroman* as a generic category, especially because of its use-value as a

reference point, remains clouded in confusion over exactly what the term signifies. Because the

novel as genre remains inherently adverse to specific definition, having a clear-cut category

would allow the reader and the critic to start pinning down aspects of the field; the trouble,

however, is that no one can agree on what *Bildungsroman* actually means. Before a more direct

encounter with Moretti then, laying out a few of the different definitions could help to illuminate

the problem. A brief look at Abrams definition shows the broad array of meanings that this term

contains:

> *Bildungsroman*, or *Erziehungsroman*, are German terms signifying 'novel of formation'
> or 'novel of education.' The subject of these novels is the development of the
> protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied
> experiences – and often through a spiritual crisis – into *maturity*, which usually involves
> *recognition* of one's identity and role in the world. (193, *emphasis mine*)

Holding to this definition, any novel that treats a young character growing older belongs in this

genre, leaving the term virtually meaningless. Scholarly attempts to provide more specific

evidence, such as splitting *Bildungsroman* from coming-of-age, tend to either remain vague or

prove a specific version of the term for a specific purpose.[44] Though part of the confusion

derives from the reappropriation of a European genre by non-Europeans, as mentioned

previously, the standardization of individual development within generic conventions adds more

strain to the original genre, as the definition becomes more and more vague.

Several other definitions are helpful in delving below the surface of the *Bildungsroman*.

From a wide array of scholarship in this area, certain definitions are useful in capturing the

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44 Thomas Jeffers, in *Apprenticeships*, argues that studies in the *Bildungsroman* have degraded into "occasionally
   heuristic though often overspecialized and hyphenated subsets," which leaves each study unrelated and
   disconnected from others that purport to examine the same genre (11).

generic confusions promulgated here. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his fragment on the *Bildungsroman*,

singles out this genre as capturing "*man in the process of becoming* in the novel" (19). He

explores this process by defining novels where "changes in the hero himself acquire *plot*

significance, and thus the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and reconstructed," a process

that, versus less mature novel forms, allows the hero to "*grow in national-historical time*" (21,

23). Because Bahktin's study focuses on the emergence of the genre, specifically with Goethe,

he defines the genre with Goethe in mind, but his emphasis on the process of becoming in

historical time is useful as a comparison to other generic traditions, even as its generality

includes other generic descriptions for contemporary novels. Moving to more recent critical

perspectives, Randolph Shaffner, in *The Apprenticeship Novel*, renames the *Bildungsroman* just

that, an "apprenticeship novel," though one that moves through a specific structure. In his

conception, based on British and American novels, the apprenticeship novel follows a three part

formula, moving from alienation (apprenticeship) to a "[reintegration] with the community" to

the metaphysical phase, which "resolves the tension between individual and community by

transcending its limits and power" (109). Unfortunately, while this formula works for the

specific novels in his study, which functions as a historical tracing of generic activity around the

site of the *Bildungsroman*, it does not transcend those specific novels as an all-encompassing

definition (as evidenced by *Invisible Man* and *The Book of Daniel*). Similarly, in a study that

includes English and German novels, Susan Gohlman comes to the conclusion that the

Bildungsroman captures "the individual in contact with the world whose meaning must be

actively shaped and reshaped from within up to the point when the hero is in a position to say, 'I

think I can live with it now'" (25). Aligned with Shaffner's transcendence, only more pragmatic

in her approach, Gohlman makes a case for individuals recreating their own worlds, including

actively shaping the world around them, until they reach a point of contentment. Again, neither

protagonist considered here ever reaches a point of contentment or transcendence, but instead let

go of past obsessions for future problems that neither can clearly see solutions to. Gohlman also

argues that, following World War II, the *Bildungsroman* focuses on the protagonists' experiences

of "[rejecting] everything they have learned and painstakingly [creating] a new or revised set of

values by which they could survive in the world" (ix). For Ellison's narrator and Daniel, each

spends the whole novel learning how to reject the past and neither creates a new set of values for

survival. Both novels end with protagonists confused about how to act after accepting that some

action is necessary.

In *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, Kenneth Millard also questions the

generic conventions of the form, though he settles on coming-of-age novel as the umbrella term

for all the variants of this tradition, even those surpassing adolescence. What he offers, however,

matches closely with the definition that Moretti thinks the novel has moved beyond: "[t]here is a

struggle here between self-fashioning on the one hand, and historical determination on the other,

and it is in this tension between the autonomy of the individual and the shaping pressure of

history that the political ideology of each novel lies" (10). Even in trying to explore the problems

of genre, Millard returns to this same formulation, which seems problematic in the twentieth

century. The question, at the end of parsing out this definition, remains a determination of the

mutations that the *Bildungsroman* form has traversed, and how the complications that mutation

allows change the fundamental structure of the genre itself. What, then, does survive the

decaying body of the *Bildungsroman* as it enters the twentieth century? For starters, it ceases to

be the traditional form that it was, and mutates into varieties of itself that begin to break down

along generic lines based on theme, class, race, etc. Thus, the *Bildungsroman* ceases to be a

cohesive form of a specific group (the upper-middle class) and becomes a form that is adopted and altered by many groups for many reasons. The key seems convenience; if one seeks a universal form that can be adapted to a slightly different purpose, the *Bildungsroman* is perfect. As a ready-made form for charting growth, the *Bildungsroman* is highly adaptable to varieties and subsets. All classes, races, and genders go through a period of 'natural' growth and change as they enter the phases of physical development which, at some level and in some variations, is the hallmark of the form. Of course, the natural gets twisted in culture itself, as it does not factor in electrocuted parents or the placement of social limits on young black men, regardless of 'natural' prowess.

This formal attribute, natural growth, causes a breakdown between *Bildungsroman* and coming-of-age, because while the latter is focused on the physical maturation process, plotted by youths to adults, the former develops the plot of the move beyond that (physically demanded) apprenticeship, the journeyman years. The maturation process, then, disconnects itself from sexual/bodily growth as such, and begins to focus on the inner (interiorization) of the self as a maturing being into adult. The gap created between the two forms, then, is one of the hallmarks of the twentieth century, as there opens a negative space between physical and personal maturation. This space, the distance that keeps growing, and that disconnects sex and growth, separates self from body; virginity lost and maturation achieved are severed, and a person, as Daniel does, can have a child before themselves maturing into the elusive category of adulthood. Childhood does not flow naturally into adulthood anymore along strictly physical lines (if it ever did, as growing into vocation or a marriageable situation used to matter more than a specific age limit), so that a middle space grows, disconnecting the two and becoming the new space of personal growth (or the new space for (Bakhtin's) *becoming*). In other words, the objective state

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of physical growth continues unabated, but this outer contingency no longer directly reflects on the process of maturation that goes on within the mind of the protagonist.

The critical consensus places both *Invisible Man* and *The Book of Daniel* within the *Bildungsroman* genre, though with specific reservations. Critics accept Ellison's novel as a *Bildungsroman*, but one complicated by certain factors in the narrative.[45] The work of two theorists, however, offers a more direct explanation for the confusion. First, Kenneth Burke, in a letter to Ellison entitled "Ralph Ellison's Trueblooded *Bildungsroman*," explores the connection between the Narrator's progression and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (94). Burke, understanding the *Bildungsroman* as a specific form in the German tradition, tracks the Narrator through his three stages of development, pointing out the similarities between his journey and that of his literary predecessor. Overall, Burke reads the "motivational design of the book […] thus: Though 'ideological' prejudices (and I would call the black-white issue a branch of such) make humans be 'apart from' one another, we are all, for better or worse, 'part of' one humankind" (98). To his credit, Burke goes on to detail the differences between the two novels, but overall he would include *Invisible Man* within that originating generic tradition.[46]

Useful for a fuller understanding of how closely the narrative adheres to the *Bildungsroman*, as well as for a more complete understanding of the genre itself, is Franco

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45 A number of critics weigh in on the *Bildungsroman* and its connection to *Invisible Man.* Edith Schor, in her study *Invisible Ellison*, calls the novel "the journey of this youth, who has no name" searching for identity through "a series of social roles deliberately designed for his defeat" (54). Earl Rovit, in "Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition," ties *Bildungsroman* to "the hero [having] created the features of his face from the malleable stuff of his experience" (58). He goes on, however, to argue that such a simple reading misses "the cream of the jest," which lies in the irony of questions, not answers (58). John Callahan echoes their thoughts in an article, titled simply "Ellison's *Invisible Man*," defining the activity of the novel as "the process of consciousness," and aligning the Narrator's "[recognition] that selfhood, like nationhood, is a continuing process" (295). Each of these critical position link *Invisible Man* to the *Bildungsroman* tradition, though always with some complicating twist.

46 Burke goes on to discuss the Trueblood Episode of the novel as containing the meaning, in a historical sense, of "part of" and "apart from," because in breaking the incest taboo, Trueblood "symbolizes the all-blackness of the identity that either the narrator or his author in childhood started from by way of experiences with the sense of family identity" (99). Thus, Trueblood works as a basic figure of black identity, one from the past which the narrator flees, even as an impression is left.

Moretti's study of that form, *The Way of the World*. In his conception, the *Bildungsroman* form was a specific European phenomenon beginning with Goethe and dying off before World War I, when modernism sought new ways to describe both culture and the individual. A form that sought to explore that "*interiorization of contradiction*" in modern subjectivity, Moretti charts its existence alongside the growth of Capitalism, which alters past social structures, making the world more fluid and chaotic (10). The novel form itself, with "its contradictory, hybrid, and compromising nature," allows this genre, which attempts to bridge the distance between the individual and society (as both evolve into something new), to explain how their growth is reciprocal (12). The *Bildungsroman* captures the dynamism of youth (generally white, well-to-do youth) as a catalyst for social and economic possibilities, allowing youth to create and drive social change. Unfortunately, Moretti also locates a clear death of the form prior to World War I, both because novelists started to seek new ways of depicting experience and because that war broke the steady chain of generational change, with the disappearance of Europe's dynamic youth in the trenches. He offers, as a radical break, a shift to "trauma" as the new organizing principle of narratives, balanced by a proportional interplay between "kernels" and "satellites," which break up the gradual progression the *Bildungsroman* offered (233-234).[47] As Moretti explains,

> The trauma introduced discontinuity within novelistic temporality, generating centrifugal tendencies toward the short story and the lyric; it disrupted the unity of the Ego, putting the language of self-consciousness out of work; it dismantled neutralized spaces, originating a regressive semiotic anxiety. In the end, nothing was left of the form of the *Bildungsroman*." (244)

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47 Moretti uses the terms kernel and satellite, borrowed from narratology, to explore the shift in modernism from a focus on the central concern of a society (the kernel) to what happens at the edges, the satellites who used to be lost in the background. Since *Invisible Man* is a work in the modernist tradition, the possibilities of blending some version of the *Bildungsroman* with a satellite character create some of the impetus for mixing them in this study. It should also be noted that Ellison looked to works like *Huck Finn* as seminal and inspirational.

Thus, Moretti's explanation of the failure of that form negates the potential for direct reemergence once its time had passed.

On the American stage, then, following the second great war of the twentieth century, Ellison offers a new model which revitalizes an older form, though with new twists. Contrary to older expectations, Ellison creates his Narrator, a black, poor, idealistic young man become, through his trials and revelations, the new voice of American culture. His tactic exposes the possibility that truth does not have to flow from the center of things, but can instead flow from any man who has achieved a vision of his own self and understands what lies at America's heart. Passing through many traumatic experiences, the Narrator finds his potential for connection in electricity, a still-young democratizing force. The *Invisible Man* contains within it the seeds for a new kind of *Bildungsroman*, one for the undefined American character,[48] where the activities of one seemingly lost and forgotten character threaten to charge the consciousness of the nation as a whole through his artistic endeavors. Tapped into their electrical current, he is stealing as much power as he can siphon off, both to give form to his own person and, less visibly, to remain connected to the culture as a whole. He is using their power to fuel himself, to become visible to himself, and in the process of hibernation and skin shedding, is moving himself (and potentially, everyone else) to a new skin, one that, through the black and white words on the page, has the potential to produce "an electric tingle along [the] spine" of the nation, and move the whole enterprise forward, individual and social alike (339). Though this vision he has to offer concerns "absurd" potentialities, his still encompasses something fuller than historical blindness, and, from his absurdist perspective, one can gain insight from new vantage points (such as from holes

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48 In his essay "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," Ellison explores the looseness of this term, explaining that "the 'American' himself has not (fortunately for the United States, its minorities, and perhaps the world) been finally defined" (26). This undefined nature allows the writer to keep this identity unstable while adding to this "ideal" figure "slowly being born" (26).

in the ground) (559). When the Narrator falls through the manhole into the coal cellar, and sets

up shop in the underground, he falls into a state of potential and of enhanced recognition, both to

stop his running and to rewire American power into allowing him to, "on the lower frequencies,"

connect with the consciousness of the nation (581).[49]

On *The Book of Daniel*, critical attention focuses on the possibility of offering a coherent

explanation of Daniel and his book. The first critical trend is to read the novel in a more

traditional sense, following the progression of Daniel's maturation toward closure. Both Susan

Lorsch, reading the book as a *Künstlerroman*, and Sam Girgus, reading it as a coming to voice,

with Daniel gaining both the "ultimate acquisition of his own voice and [the] achievement of his

identity," understand Daniel's truth and progression stemming from the artistic product he

creates (86).[50] Both these more linear readings of the novel find truth through art, with Daniel

triumphing over the past and emerging as a whole, complete person. In opposition to these

positive critical perspectives, others read Daniel's book as a hopeless endeavor doomed to

failure. Christopher Morris, in *Models of Misrepresentation*, argues that Daniel's attempt fails in

the narrative itself, where attempts at the presentation of facts and accurate literary borrowings

go awry. Daniel's novel remains as incomplete as any textual production, because even with "all

of Daniel's passion, his engagement, and his commitment, the failures of articulation are finally

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49 Any attempt to track down all the aspects of this novel would result in a rewriting of the book itself. As Leon
Forrest, in his article "Luminosity from the Lower Frequencies," points out, "mofits involving power, sex,
women, images of light and dark, broken taboos, Afro-American folklore, papers of importance, quests for
identity and responsibility, individualism, music, violence, and uses of eloquence all come in clusters and order
the improvisations of Ellison's orchestrated novel" (280-281). Thus, some seemingly obvious areas which could
influence *Bildungsroman* (such as positive and negative models of self and the details of his own self-
understanding) will be left implied, short shifted to focus on how electricity connects the Narrator to the larger
social body.

50 Lorsch comes to the conclusion that "in this book art presents the only viable response to alienation, a response
not futile but valuable as the sole means of fulfilling social responsibility while preserving the integrity of the
individual" (397). The novel itself presents the varied possibilities and then chooses artistic expression as the
answer, since "art urges both political skepticism and political commitment" (397). Girgus, finally finding the novel
signifying "a triumph of art over ideology," is a generous reader, both to Daniel's achievement at the end, including
his ability to love, and, through his artistic creation, to "art and character [merging] so that he finds his own voice
and can become a voice for the nation's moral and political conscience as well" (89).

[…] inescapable for him" (81).[51] In her "psychopolitical" reading of the novel, Susan Morgenstern describes Daniel as a site of trauma, defining trauma as "an event that can only happen again" (70). Daniel is a witness to events and perspectives he could not have experienced in reality, and this position both inside and outside his own history leaves him "a voyeur, a sadist, […] and a particular kind of prophet: he sees the past" (74). Enacting and embodying trauma, Daniel and his country "share an origin that is violent, unwitnessable, and repeated," a reality impossible to escape, through a personal narrative or otherwise (83). T. V. Reed, reading through the lens of postmodernism, decimates any progress for Daniel when, in the end, he explains that "'We' (Daniel, Doctorow, and other readers) are thrown back into necessity and contingency, into the necessity of believing and acting politically in the face of contingency" (302). He goes on to articulate the dilemma of postmodernity – "the discontinuous form of the text, resembling at times nothing so much as the collage on Sternlicht's wall, lets us know we can proceed only by giving up the illusion that we can get wholly outside the forms that narrate us" (302). While each of these less hopeful arguments are extremely compelling, the emphasis on liberation that "largely leaves things unchanged" seems an irrelevant liberation, mainly because it ignores Daniel's acceptance of his own contingency and of the options available to contend with his state of impermanence without one answer (Reed 302).

The key complication then, both for *Invisible Man* and *The Book of Daniel*, is not that they are unique sub-genre novels in the *Bildungsroman* tradition, but their subversion of generic categories. These novels resist generic definition because they fail, both to achieve their aims within the novel and as novels that provide a coherent ending that redefines the relationship

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[51] Morris extends this argument to the discovery that "the author becomes the last of many illusory signifieds of ellipses" (96). From Morris's view, Daniel himself is lost in inarticulate misrepresentations, which are the only available means of achieving a project (in this case, the novel as a means to truth) doomed to failure.

between the individual and society; there are no new social contracts offered. Ellison's Narrator and Daniel exit the cycle through their inaction and inability to form an applicable plan of action; as marginal American voices, they complicate and undermine the *Bildungsroman* genre by not achieving the specified requirements. Thus, the *Bildungsroman* category, useful as a reference to judge these novels against, fails to provide a narrative to coherently explain these novels, from their self-aware textuality to their failures at multiple levels. These characters are making their own way forward, free from all but the most tenuous trappings of genre, which they relate to by subverting and negating. Instead of moving America forward by action at the center, they work via a written medium from the edges and cul-de-sacs of the American landscape and, while connected through the electrical currents that dominate their lives and self-conceptions, they do not directly reach accommodation with their society. These peculiar works, in a *Bildungsroman* context, work as multiethnic and poly-vocal projects that help to reconceive Moretti's claims about the genre in an American context. Because marginal voices propel America to new possibilities, their striving and failure both illuminate how American novels provide skewed models for the process of growth and maturation which, undoubtedly, are more representative in an American context than the fairytale of coming to peace with society. Since neither character is ever in a position to hold real power, regardless of their constant questing after certainty and importance, they reveal both how the old models fail to explain their situations and how Americans, mid-century, *actually* grapple with the disparity between individual struggle and the myth of social equality and progress dreamed at the World's Fair.

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