Mourning and Melancholia in E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*

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Abstract
The Book of Daniel is a fictionalized version of the case of the Rosenbergs, Jewish-American Communists electrocuted by the American government as atomic spies in 1953. It is told by Daniel Isaacson, child of executed spies, in the form of his doctoral dissertation, but the structure of the narrative reflects Daniel's self-therapy. It mimics a psychoanalytic session, in which the analysand may relate family history, recent events, and dreams, all kinds of material in no apparent order, sometimes with radical shifts in tone, including laughter, anger, and tears. The patient may go off on tangents and free-associate to the material he brings up. In that case, the reader plays the role of the listening analyst, and Daniel's occasional aggression against the reader can be considered a form of transference. What takes place in the narrative is the long-delayed process of Daniel's mourning. Like a Holocaust survivor, Daniel is consumed by survivor guilt. Daniel's self-reproaches and his making the reader complicit are part of his unfinished mourning; they are disguised reproaches against his parents, whom he cannot forgive for abandoning him and his sister Susan.

Keywords
Mourning, melancholia, Freud, Doctorow, The Book of Daniel. Julius Rosenberg

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E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) was inspired by the case of the married couple Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Jewish-American Communists who were electrocuted in 1953 for allegedly passing atomic bomb secrets to

Soviet Russia. The Rosenberg case was an international cause célèbre, the most famous American political trial of the Cold War. The controversy over the case continues to this day. The Rosenbergs are remembered in many works of American literature, such as "For Ethel Rosenberg," a poem by Adrienne Rich; *Angels in America: Perestroika*, a play by Tony Kushner; and in three novels: *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath; *The Public Burning* by Robert Coover; and Doctorow's book.

The Book of Daniel is a work of therapy trying to heal some Cold War trauma. It attempts that therapy through Daniel's self-analysis as he works to understand the history and politics that destroyed his parents when he was a child and to overcome his mourning for them. Doctorow's narrator, Daniel Isaacson Lewin, a graduate student of history at Columbia University in New York City in 1967, writes his dissertation about the trial and execution as atomic spies in the early 1950s of his parents, Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, and the continuing traumatic effects of these events on Daniel, his younger sister Susan, Daniel's wife Phyllis and their infant son Paul, and Daniel and Susan's adoptive parents the Lewins. As we follow Daniel's progress, Doctorow contrasts two tempestuous and politically charged eras in American history--the 1950s and the 1960s--showing both continuity and change in America during the Cold War. Doctorow told an interviewer, "The specific dramatic interest I had was solely in terms of what happens when all the antagonistic force of a society is brought to bear and focused on one or possibly two individuals. What kind of anthropological ritual is that?" (Levine 61).

Daniel's book combines elements of many literary genres: it is purportedly a doctoral dissertation about the Cold War, but it is also a personal family history, a confessional autobiography, and a novel, for Daniel takes many of the liberties of a novelist. Daniel attempts to "write a dissertation and a novel as the same text" (Detweiler 69). In the course of composing his narrative, Daniel questions and analyzes everything, including America, the American Communist party, the New Left, his family, and himself. As an artist, he educates and begins to heal himself. Doctorow said that "Daniel gives himself to the act of perception and opens himself to it—much as all writers must--and he survives that way" (McCaffery 47).

The structure of the narrative reflects Daniel's self-therapy. It mimics a psychoanalytic session, in which the analysand may relate family history, recent events, and dreams, all kinds of material in no apparent order, sometimes with radical shifts in tone, including laughter, anger, and tears. The patient may go off on tangents and free-associate to the material he brings up. In that case, the reader plays the role of the listening analyst, and Daniel's occasional aggression against the reader can be considered a form of transference.

The work opens and closes in the Columbia University library, where Daniel begins and ends writing his dissertation. Nevertheless, "the education

Daniel requires cannot be gained at Columbia. . . . Daniel requires lessons not of the mind but of the power of love"(Girgus 85).

A bit of historical background: In 1949, Russia tested its first nuclear bomb. In 1950, David Greenglass, a soldier machinist who had worked on the top-secret Manhattan project to build an atomic bomb at Los Alamos, New Mexico during the war, was among those arrested for nuclear espionage. He testified that his sister and brother-in-law, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, American Communist Party members, had passed atomic secrets to the Russians. In return for testifying against the Rosenbergs, Greenglass got a 15-year sentence; he was released after nine and half years. After numerous appeals, the Rosenbergs died in the electric chair in 1953, leaving behind two young sons ("Execution of the Rosenbergs"). In 1996, David Greenglass admitted that he and his wife gave false testimony against Ethel to protect themselves (David Greenglass). Regardless of their guilt or innocence, the Rosenbergs could not obtain a fair trial in the hysterical political climate of the time.

Doctorow's novel does not attempt to resolve the issue of the guilt or innocence of the characters but to analyze the destruction of a family, Jews and Communists, who are chosen as political scapegoats by the state, and the continuing traumatic effects on the survivors, the children. Doctorow uses the facts of the Rosenberg case as a springboard for his fictional meditation on the Cold War, but he reshapes reality for dramatic effect, changing the two sons into a son and a daughter, making both children extremely alienated and disturbed, to the point that the daughter attempts suicide, and changing Ethel's brother into a fellow Communist and family friend.

Doctorow uses a variety of postmodern techniques. The novel is metafictional, frequently commenting on its own construction. Daniel aggressively questions everything, especially the meaning of the peculiar American psychodrama which was their trial. He also aggressively questions the construction of his narrative, his own identity, and even assaults the reader.

The shifts between first and third-person narrative combine subjective and objective stances toward painful personal material which might otherwise be intolerable; they also suggest Daniel's self-alienation. The shuttling between time lines creates parallel actions, allowing for a comparison between two politically turbulent times in twentieth-century American history, the early 50s and the late 60s, also letting us see the continued effect of the past upon the present. The present of the novel goes from May 1967 to April 1968, beginning with the suicide attempt of Daniel's sister Susan on Memorial Day at the end of May 1967, followed by her retreat into catatonia and her funeral the following spring. The past narrative goes from the 1940s, when Daniel and Susan are very young children, through the early fifties, when their parents are arrested, tried, and executed. Susan's decline in the present spurs Daniel to investigate his parents' case by interviewing anyone involved in it willing to speak with him. Susan's crisis also spurs him, despite the psychological and physical risk, to become politically active by participating in the anti-Vietnam

War March on the Pentagon in October 1967. The novel closes as Daniel is forced out of the library by the student takeover of Columbia University in April 1968. The mix of fact and fiction suggests the fictionality of history, the sense in which history is stories we tell ourselves. The radical shifts in tone—sometimes Daniel lapses into black dialect or assaults readers about our prurient interest in his awful family history--provide occasional comic relief. Doctorow says the fragmentary narrative, with its quick changes in focus, was inspired by the sketch comedy of the TV show *Laugh-In*, popular when he was writing the novel. The insertion of non-fictional material is allowed by the premise that Daniel is writing his dissertation about his family, which permits him to digress freely on disparate historical topics.

What takes place in the narrative is the long-delayed process of Daniel's mourning. Like a Holocaust survivor, Daniel is consumed by survivor guilt (Parks 43;Tokarczyk). Susan's suicide attempt and her slow death through catatonia re-opens all the old wounds, and Daniel resumes his unfinished mourning over the loss of his parents. As he writes: "Reader, this is a note to you. . . . If it is elementary and seems to you at this late date to be pathetically elementary, like picking up some torn bits of cloth and tearing them again. . . . If it is that elementary, then reader, I am reading you. And together we may rend our clothes in mourning" (*Daniel* 54). Rending one's garments is part of the traditional Jewish process of mourning.

Daniel's self-reproaches and his making the reader complicit are part of his unfinished mourning; they are disguised reproaches against his parents, whom he cannot forgive for abandoning him and Susan. While their parents are on trial for their lives, Daniel and his sister Susan become wards of the state and suffer a trial of their own. Daniel is a "lost child" seeking his parents (Estrin 197). Caught between survivor guilt and anger at his parents for putting him and his sister in peril and for abandoning them, he cannot overcome his mourning.

After her suicide attempt, his sister in the mental hospital tells Daniel, "They're still fucking us. . . Goodbye, Daniel. You get the picture" (*Daniel* 9). Much later, we realize that these cryptic words were Susan's farewell, her last words to Daniel, and throughout the narrative he tries to puzzle them out. Soon after she says "They're still fucking us," he flashes back to a rally in support of their parents when they were children, but all he and Susan felt was terror at the crowd. The two were caught up in a political process they didn't understand, turned into pawns and symbols, the children of the famous (or infamous) couple. The process robbed them of their parents and of their childhoods.

Daniel then suddenly bursts into invective in black dialect: "Oh, baby, you know it now. We done played enough games for you, ain't we. You a smart lil fucker. You know where it's at now, don' you big daddy? You got the picture. This is the story of a fucking, right? You pullin' out yo lit-er-ary map, mutha? You know where we goin', right muthafuck?" (*Book of Daniel* 22-23).

Whether we consider this sudden, angry, sarcastic outburst as directed at the reader, at Daniel himself, or at both simultaneously, the obscenity and dialect are necessary for him to discharge the intense, overwhelming anger he is feeling about his dead "mutha" and "big daddy." Daniel is not just playing "lit-er-ary" games; this is his life and his pain and anger, his and Susan's. As to who is being fucked and by whom, that is the central question of the novel: Is it his parents by the government? By the Communist Party, which abandoned his parents? Or is it Daniel and Susan, who were deprived of their parents? In that case, who is still fucking them: The U.S. government? The New Left? Or their own parents, who abandoned them?

He calls his wife Phyllis "a sex martyr. I think that's why I married her." He describes "soft Phyllis from Brooklyn suffering yet another penetration from her tormentor Daniel" as he labors to bring her to "a very cruel come." This is indeed a "fucking," both a sexual and a political one, for he describes her genitalia as having "gland formations, Stalinites and Trotskyites. . ." (6). The Isaacsons too were both political and sex martyrs: he says sarcastically, "When the call came they answered. They offered up those genitals, didn't they, Dandan? Yes, they did" (32). So if his parents were "fucked" by the government, then Daniel suggests that they may have been willing participants in a sadomasochistic ritual.

Daniel often lashes out in ager. He is very hard on others but hardest on himself. He accuses himself: "You are a betrayer.There is no cheap use to which you would not put your patrimony. You're the kind of betrayer who betrays for no reason" (*Daniel* 16). He calls himself and Susan "cruel." "And we are really terrible low down people. I mean really low down" (14).

As Freud writes in "Mourning and Melancholia," "The patient [the melancholic] represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. He abases himself before everyone..." (*Freud* 584). The melancholic also lacks normal feelings of shame but instead "finds satisfaction in self-exposure" (585). According to Freud, in melancholia, "we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego. . . . They are not ashamed and do not hide themselves, since everything derogatory that they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone else" (586). So Daniel's self-reproaches are part of his incomplete mourning; they are disguised reproaches against his parents, whom he cannot forgive for abandoning him and Susan.

For the same reason, he acts out recklessly, abusing his wife and child the way he was abused as a child. The persecution and destruction of the Isaacsons was presaged by a traumatic event which occurred when Daniel was seven and his parents took him to hear the African-American entertainer Paul Robeson, a Communist, sing in an outdoor concert at Peekskill (an actual historical event in September 1949) (Peekskill Riots). They knew there might be danger, and,

in fact, on their way home, a mob attacked the bus, hurling stones through the windows. The police stood by and let it happen. Daniel's mother Rochelle crouched on the floor of the bus and protected her son with her body. But his father Paul, showing a naïve faith in the system, tried to get the police to intervene and for his efforts was badly beaten by the mob and had his arm broken—a foretaste of his eventual martyrdom at the hands of American justice. Daniel replays that incident when he drives his car recklessly in the rain, endangering not only himself but also his wife and baby son. Phyllis clutches the baby to protect him, just as Rochelle Isaacson had attempted to shelter Daniel during the assault on the bus. He bullies Phyllis to take off her pants in the car and even considers burning her with the car's electric cigarette lighter—an echo of his parents' electrocution.

Granted, Daniel is hard on himself and others, nasty and abusive to his family. Yet we sympathize with him because he is such a tormented soul, because of his wretched childhood, and because his parents were killed by the state, leaving him and his sister orphans at an early age. Despite his cruelty to his adoptive parents the Lewins and his wife and child, Daniel is capable of love. He tried to protect his little sister Susan during their parents' ordeal. And, despite his rage against them, he deeply loves and misses his parents. Now he must deal with Susan's suicide attempt and her slow decline into death. The sole survivor of the destruction of his family, he wants to live a decent and meaningful life and to reconcile with his wife and child. So he must come to terms with the past if he is to have a future.

When Daniel goes on the March on the Pentagon against the Vietnam War in October 1967, he re-enters the dangerous terrain of political protest which killed his parents. It was an arena he had until then avoided, yet he chooses to participate consciously and deliberately. When he turns in his draft card in protest, he does so not as "Daniel Lewin," his adoptive name, but as "Daniel Iasaacson," reclaiming the infamous family name. But he will no longer simply replay his parents' mistakes in the sort of repetition compulsion which had governed him before, as in the speeding car. Knowing the danger, he refuses to let Phyllis and the baby accompany him. And he is beaten and arrested, but he is happy, bloody but unbowed. It is his initiation into radical politics. When Phyllis sees his battered face, he jokes, "'There was nothing to it. It is a lot easier to be a revolutionary nowadays than it used to be'"(*Daniel* 257).

Nevetheless. to have a future, Daniel must still come to terms with the past. He starts to investigate his parents' case, seeking out the remaining witnesses, trying to determine the truth and whether the Isaacsons were innocent or guilty. His investigation ends at Christmastime 1967, when he finally tracks down the principal witness for the prosecution, a member of his parents' Communist party cell, a Polish immigrant, dentist, and former family friend named Selig Mindish. Mindish was first to be arrested; he denounced the Isaacsons as the ringleaders and testified against them so he could receive a lighter sentence. Daniel has good reason to hate Mindish as a betrayer who destroyed his family.

He confronts the Mindish family, ironically in Disneyland in California, which Daniel satirizes as a capitalist shrine, a totalitarian fantasyland located in Anaheim, “a town somewhere between Buchenwald and Belsen” (285), again evoking the Holocaust. This is the end of the line. But Mindish, the last surviving witness, has nothing to tell Daniel about the case, for Mindish is senile. In a tremendously moving scene, the destroyed Mindish begins to cry when he recognizes Daniel, and in a remarkable gesture, bestows on the young man his blessing: “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” (*Daniel* 293). This is another replay of a past scene, but of a good memory, not a traumatic one: Daniel’s grandmother used to kiss Daniel this way. Daniel’s grandmother died and his parents were executed when he was a child, so Mindish in a way is family. Mindish is not a monster but a suffering soul capable of love; who behaves in a grandfatherly way toward Daniel, making a gesture which transcends all Daniel’s pain and anger. This is a moment of catharsis for Daniel, when he is able to break free of his trauma and begin to complete his mourning.

Mindish cannot tell Daniel the truth. Perhaps the truth is irrecoverable, or perhaps each participant in the case has only his or her personal truth or family story. But Mindish gives Daniel something far more important: a new heart. Daniel may never know if his parents were guilty or innocent, but he knows that they loved him and that he must let go of his anger and forgive them and forgive himself. Thus, immediately after Mindish kisses him, Daniel begins to talk about the dangers of rejection in cases of heart transplants. “The body attacks its own new heart as it would any foreign object. . . . Doctors still have a lot to learn about why we reject our hearts” (293). In writing his story, Daniel is finally able to stop attacking the world, his family, and himself, and to learn the lessons of the heart.

In the cemetery for Susan’s funeral, he refuses the prayers of the rabbi but still has the kaddish recited for his sister and his parents. He hires a minyan of little old men: “But I encourage the prayermakers, and when one is through I tell him again, this time for my mother and father. Isaacson. Pinchas. Rachele. Susele. For all of them. I hold my wife’s hand. And I think I am going to be able to cry” (302). Although he is not yet crying, he has regained the capacity to feel, and he is holding his wife’s hand, as he held Susan’s hand when they were children. The prayer and the Hebrew names reconnect him and his family to their Jewish heritage. His mother wanted their execution to mark his bar mitzvah, but it is only at Susan’s funeral that Daniel finally becomes a mensch.

The novel ends where it began, with Daniel in the Columbia library, now not starting but finishing his dissertation. And the moment beautifully coincides with the historic student takeover of the University in April 1968. A student striker tells Daniel, “’Time to leave, man, they’re closing the school down. . . . Close the book, man, what’s the matter with you, don’t you know

you've been liberated?'" (303). And Daniel has been liberated, in more than one sense. He closes the book and goes outside to continue his life. His book and his mourning is over; his education is complete.

Daniel says that Susan "died of a failure of analysis" (301), suggesting a failure of both political analysis and psychoanalysis. In psychoanalytic terms, Daniel must also re-educate, analyze, critique, and heal himself, and this involves learning the lessons of the heart. Early in the narrative, Daniel questions himself in capital letters: "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). This is a problem not of political analysis but of the spirit. Daniel writes his book to get the matter troubling him out of his heart so that he can go on with his life and not continue down the self-destructive path of the rest of his family.

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