

SCOTT HALES

Marching Through Memory: Revising Memory in E. L. Doctorow's *The March*

N EAR THE END OF E. L. DOCTOROW'S *THE MARCH*, General William Tecumseh Sherman watches his army parade through Southern streets in the aftermath of a successful "March to the Sea." As he watches his men pass beneath him, "somewhat less proud than usual of their shabby grooming and dusty uniforms," Sherman longs to return to life on the march—"not for [the] blood and death" of the violent campaign, but for its "bestowal of meaning to the very ground trod upon." For Sherman, the march "made every field and swamp and river and road into something of moral consequence," giving him and his army a sense of purpose. With the march over and the war all but won, however, Sherman cannot help but feel this sense of purpose slipping. With the onset of peace, he realizes that his lifestyle and life's work have become fractured and morally unintelligible. What is more, he realizes that the once-morally-laden land has become "blank and also diffuse, and ineffable, a thing once again, and victoriously, without reason, [...] completely insensible and without any purpose of its own." In a sense, Sherman looks upon the reunification of the nation not with optimism, but with sadness for the end of an ordered, purpose-driven way-of-life. His nostalgia for the march distorts the reality of it; in his longing to recapture a life of moral purpose, Sherman forgets the disorder, lawlessness, and brutality that characterized much of his "March to the Sea." At the same time, he also speculates that the rest of "this unmeaning inhuman planet" will follow suit, looking to his

generation's "warring imprint" for some redemptive sense of value. In doing so, Sherman endows the nation's collective wartime experience with a moral message, thus memorializing it as *the* significant event in the history of the planet: "a war after a war, a war before a war."

In many ways, this fictional Sherman's "bestowal of meaning" on his wartime experience illustrates one of the major problems of Civil War historiography. The Civil War generation left behind a wealth of information about the war—letters, journals, memoirs, pension records, oral histories—which attempt, in some way, to interpret their individual and collective experience. The real, historical Sherman, himself, published his controversial *Memoirs* in 1875, which was "so opinionated," according to historian Michael Fellman, that it "aroused a swarm of criticism from traduced veterans" who took issue with Sherman's version of events.² Such controversy over the war and its legacy was perhaps inevitable. As Sherman reasoned, in defense of his account:

In this free country every man is at perfect liberty to publish his own thoughts and impressions, and any witness who may differ from me should publish his own version of facts in the truthful narration of which he is interested. I am publishing my own memoirs, not *theirs*, and we all know that no three host witnesses of a simple brawl can agree on all the details. How much more likely will be the difference in a great battle covering a vast space of broken ground, when each division, brigade, regiment, and even company naturally and honestly believes that it was the focus of the whole affair!³

For Sherman, it seems, the events of the Civil War are subject to the "thoughts and impressions" of their witnesses. Therefore, the task of setting down a "version of facts" in a "truthful narration" is subject to individual memory. Much of history, he seems to suggest, is relative—a construct of an "honestly [believing]" imagination. For this reason, perhaps, he felt that "no satisfactory history" of the war had been published in the years after Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House. For him, the prospect of a "satisfactory history" lay in "the abundant materials that are buried in the War Department at Washington" and the fresh perspective of a new generation of historians.⁴

Several generations of historians since then, however, have had no easy time sifting through the conflicting "[versions] of facts" that Sherman and his contemporaries left behind. Not surprisingly, rival interpretive schools of Civil

War historiography have emerged over the years. In *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War*, historian David W. Blight explores trends in recent Civil War historiography, specifically certain “attitudes” on the value of “memory” in serious historical studies. According to Blight, the meaning of the term “history” varies depending on the historiographical philosophy of the user. For professional historians in the academy, for example, “history” connotes “a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research” that “asserts the authority of academic training and recognizes canons of evidence.” As a field of study, it scrutinizes contexts and cause and effect relationships, interpreting the past both skeptically and secularly. What is more, it is revisionary; it views concepts like “change” and “progress” as relative notions that are “contingent upon place, chronology, and scale.” For both popular historians and the general public, however, the term “history” usually suggests something stronger, more sacred, and absolute—a conception of the past that Blight defines as “memory.” For him, “memory” is what inspires the need for monuments, site preservations, and historical reenactments. It is a retelling of the past that “is usually invoked in the name of nation, ethnicity, race, religion, or someone’s felt need for peoplehood.” Memory has the potential to gather individuals into communities, assert a society’s primacy or power, and create legends by “[thriving] on grievance and on the elaborate invention of traditions.”⁵ Predictably, historians who draw upon “memory” often have a popular appeal alien to most academic historians, whose work is often frustratingly overlooked by popular markets.⁶

In many ways, historical fiction complicates these conflicting conceptualizations of “history” even further. Avrom Fleishman, in his study of the English historical novel, argues that “[t]he historical novel is distinguished among novels by the presence of a specific link to history,” such as an actual historical figure who interacts “among the fictitious ones.”⁷ This “specific link,” however, harbors the potential to confuse inexperienced or naïve readers, who fail to discern fact from fiction. Consider, for instance, journalist Tony Horwitz’s account of readers of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* who decide to vacation in Georgia in order to seek out the graves of Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler and snap pictures of the “real” Tara.⁸ Such readers, in a sense, know that “historical fiction, like all art, tells some kind of truth,” yet they fail to realize that it “does not tell it straight.”⁹ Historical fiction, therefore, often works to strengthen its readers historical consciousness and memory through narratives of imagined history—at the expense, of course, of actual historical fact.

Like *Gone with the Wind*, E. L. Doctorow's *The March* blends fact with fiction for a disorienting effect. As with his earlier novels—*Ragtime* and *The Waterworks*, for example—Doctorow weaves historical figures and events seamlessly into the fictional narrative of the novel. He hardly feels bound by history, however; as critic Matthew A. Henry points out, Doctorow's "novels are filled with historical circumstances and personages fleshed out to meet the standards of his fiction and facilitate his interrogation, and subsequent rewriting, of the past." In a sense, he subordinates historical figures and events to fictional narrative, and manipulates them according to the demands of art.¹⁰ At one point in *The March*, for example, he depicts a bizarre assassination attempt on General William Tecumseh Sherman's life. While the incident seems historically plausible—assassinations are not unheard of in wartime—it is, nonetheless, entirely fictitious. In fact, the fictional assassination scene has very little to do with Sherman or any of its other actual historical elements. Rather, it is a climactic moment in the part of the narrative involving two secondary characters: Arly, an AWOL confederate soldier, and Calvin Harper, his hostage. While Sherman is important for the scene as a type of historical reference point, Doctorow's primary concern is with Arly and Calvin and their progress as characters within a fictional framework. In this regard, Doctorow merely exploits Sherman's place in American memory in order to ground the narrative in a recognizable past and lend added significance to his fictional characters' actions.

In many ways, such casual negotiation of fact and fiction places *The March* and other works of historical fiction in a unique position to comment on the history and memory of the war. Like his fictional Sherman, Doctorow remembers the Civil War as a defining moment in American history. In an interview with *Time* shortly after the publication of *The March*, Doctorow argues that the war has "an epic quality to it" that makes it impossible for one to "think seriously about [the United States] without pondering" it.¹¹ Indeed, the "epic quality" of the Civil War has inspired countless literary interpretation. In fact, in 2005, the same year *The March* was published, two other literary treatments of the war appeared to similarly popular and critical acclaim: Geraldine Brooks's *March* and Robert Hicks's *The Widow of the South*. Such works have always played an important part in negotiating Civil War history and memory. As David W. Blight points out, "literature was a powerful medium" immediately after the war "for reuniting the interests of Americans from both North and South."¹² Much of it, not surprisingly, was of the "sentimental reconciliationist" school, which pushed aside "the ideological character of the war"—particularly Emancipation—in favor of

fictions where every conflict was resolved, usually in intersectional marriages, and where life itself was portrayed in naïve terms. The reality of the war itself, much less its causes and consequences remained hidden away in packaged sentiment. Real hatred and real politics fell by the way, displaced in a flood of marriage metaphors that transformed them into romance.¹³

This “reconciliationist” push is still alive today, particularly in the Civil War novels of Jeff Shaara and other popular historical novelists. In many ways, their work is the continuation of a genre that has never really died out.

Unlike their predecessors, however, novelists like Shaara can partly attribute their success to Ken Burns’s popular nine-hour documentary *The Civil War*, which aired on public television in the early 1990s. Burns’s film was simultaneously influential and controversial. Predictably, its storyteller’s approach to the Civil War, along with Burns’s own unabashed antagonism toward academic historiography, irritated some professional Civil War historians, many of whom scoffed at Burns’s tidy narrative-driven film. What is more, they derided the fact that Burns’s principal authority on the war—Shelby Foote—was not a professional historian, but a novelist. In many ways, the notion that a filmmaker and novelist could “[reach] more people than any contemporary academic” of the Civil War—an assertion Jim Cullen makes in his book *Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past*—was particularly insulting to university-trained historians.¹⁴ No where is this more evident than in Robert Brent Toblin’s book *Ken Burns’s The Civil War: Historians Respond*, a collection of essays written about the film by academic historians. In his review of the collection, David W. Blight points out that much of the academy’s reaction to the film was perhaps too critical, particularly Reconstruction historian Leon Litwack’s “overzealous comparison” of Burns’ film to D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Blight cannot help agreeing with many of his colleagues. His critique suggests the overall academic dismay over Burns’s neo-reconciliationist interpretation of the war:

At heart, Burns loves the epic qualities in history; he embraces the heroic, both in individuals and in the sagas of nations [...] But this view of history has a name, and such an outlook lends itself to certain kinds of interpretations. As a historian, Burns [...] wants to be some combination of our Homer and Macauley, perhaps our Carl Sandburg with a camera. The stories he tells, therefore, are epic in form: they are going somewhere;

they are imbued with the doctrine of progress and they will reach resolution.¹⁶

Blight goes on to state that these “certain kinds of interpretations” of history lead to a “hackneyed, sentimental, and appealing theory” about the Civil War—one that suggests that “no matter how terrible our conflicts nor how profound our tragedies, Americans solve their problems and reconcile their differences like a troubled family destined for reunion.”¹⁷ The result of such an interpretation, according to Blight, is an incomplete story—essentially, a mythological retelling of the past—in which “something deep inside the horror and transformation in this *civil* war” is ignored “in order to sustain an ultimate story of [the nation’s] reconciliation.”¹⁸ In a sense, what Blight and much of the academy object to in Burns’s film is its irresponsible perpetuation of the same reconciliationist “history” first put forth by sentimental Reconstruction-era authors.

Despite his critics, Burns defends both his film and its interpretation of Civil War history. By his own admission, he does not ascribe to an academic view of history. Rather, he sees history as “a tonic, something that has a possibility of healing the great divisions that bedevil our country today.”¹⁹ What is more, he approaches history “primarily [as] an artist” who is simply “interested in telling stories [and] anecdotes.”²⁰ Consequently, his work reflects a belief that “the epic verses of our story” need to be “sung” in a “Homeric mode.”²¹

As already indicated, Burns’s storyteller’s approach to history has met with significant popular success. Nevertheless, the Homeric style of historiography has its limitations and consequences, especially when applied to the Civil War. As Blight again observes, the war

has been a defining event upon which we have often imposed unity and continuity. As a culture we have often preferred its music and pathos to its enduring challenges, the theme of reconciled conflict to resurgent, unresolved legacies. The greatest enthusiasts for Civil War history and memory often displace complicated consequences by endlessly focusing on the contest itself [...] It haunts us still; we feel it, [...] but often do not *face* it.²²

Clearly, Blight believes that there is danger in approaching historiography as one would approach literary storytelling. Responsible historiography, he suggests, is not constrained by literary conventions like “unity and continuity,” nor is it

always dependent on dramatic conflict. Rather, it is a studied look at the ongoing challenges of the past, which are often so disturbingly inconclusive or anticlimactic that enthusiasts must impose order and signification on them in order to arrive at some sort of satisfying resolution.

As a work of fiction, of course, *The March* is significantly different from a documentary film, like *The Civil War*, which ostensibly presents itself as historical truth. Nevertheless, as the Burns controversy demonstrates, the manner in which history is memorialized in a popular medium has lasting consequences. Not surprisingly, *The March*, like other novels about the Civil War, often focuses on the “music and pathos” surrounding the battlefield, even at the expense of weightier historical matters, like slavery or politics. Indeed, the novel contains many of the same features of sentimental reconciliationist literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century: dramatic action, suspense, intrigue, and especially romance. The central narrative of the novel, in fact, is a fairly typical Civil War love story. Like Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind* or Ada Monroe and W. P. Inman in *Cold Mountain*, Pearl Jameson, a former slave, and Stephen Walsh, a working-class New Yorker, are a dissimilar pair who find love in wartime. What is more, with its nonstop drama and cast of thousands, *The March* seems to embody the appealing “Homeric mode” of storytelling—although it reads more like one of Shakespeare’s histories than the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. The novel, in fact, reads much like a reworking of *Henry V*. Both works, after all, recount the history of an army on the march, slashing its way through enemy territory. Sherman, like King Henry, is as reflective and insecure as he is tenacious and unpredictable. Likewise, the bumbling Confederate deserters, Arly and Will, fill the comedic roles Bardolph, Pistol, and Nym occupy in *Henry V*. Indeed, *The March* often seems more tailor-made for Hollywood or Broadway than bookstore shelves.

Yet, despite its conventionalism and Hollywood pageantry, *The March* is not without a subtle critique of the kind of reconciliatory fictions and histories that have influenced American memory of the war. Throughout the text, for instance, Doctorow seems reluctant to emphasize national reunion or a swift resolution to the conflict. The novel, for one, places significant emphasis on the human cost of war, meditating at length on its consequences. Each of Doctorow’s major characters, for example, experiences some form of war-related loss. Human relationships, particularly, take the hardest hit. Pearl Jameson, the light-skinned former slave, loses her father, a white plantation master, in the chaos following the fall of Atlanta. Later, during a skirmish with Confederates, she loses a kind Union officer who watches over her after she leaves the plantation. Likewise, Emily

Thompson, a sheltered Southern woman, loses both her father and brother during the war: one from illness, the other from combat. Mattie Jameson, Pearl's step-mother, loses not only her husband, but also her eldest son, whom she finds among the Confederate dead after a nearby battle. Arly, the novel's comedic master-of-disguise and Sherman's would-be assassin, loses his sidekick, Will, when Will is shot in a scuffle over a horse. Calvin Harper, the photographer's assistant, loses his mentor, Josiah Culp, when Culp drops dead digging Will's grave. Even Stephen Walsh, an already isolated Union soldier, enters the novel on the brink of entirely removing himself from society. Estranged from his working-class New York family, Walsh fears becoming "lost on earth [...] as on an island of godless predation."²³ With these examples of loss in his novel, Doctorow desentimentalizes American memory of the war and reminds his readers that widespread violence shatters meaningful human connections, leaving in its wake a trail of alienation and pain that is not easily reconciled.

In order to further emphasize the devastating cost of war, Doctorow places these individuals within an increasingly fragmented world undergoing a similarly disorienting loss of social and political order. The frenzied language of the novel's opening paragraph—a description of the frantic Jameson household—introduces readers to Doctorow's chaotic vision of the past:

At five in the morning someone banging on the door and shouting, her husband, John, leaping out of bed, grabbing his rifle, and Roscoe at the same time roused from the backhouse, his bare feet pounding; Mattie hurriedly pulled on her robe, her mind prepared for the alarm of war, but the heart stricken that it would finally have come, and down the stairs she flew to see through the open door in the lamplight, at the steps of the portico, the two horses, steam rising from their flanks, their heads lifting, their eyes wild, the driver a young darkie with rounded shoulders, showing stolid patience even in this.²⁴

The pandemonium of the Jameson household is typical of the world Doctorow recreates for *The March*. Much of the novel is a montage of confused movement, seemingly unrelated narratives, and perplexing meditations on the meaning of existence. Like the world it depicts, Doctorow's novel is disjointed and imbalanced. While its language is never more jarring than in its initial paragraph, *The March* tells an unsettling story of a society where such things as love, friendship, and trust

have become incoherent ideals. In doing so, it further distances itself from many of its literary predecessors.

Relationships, however, are not entirely absent from the novel. Although meaningful personal relationships gradually disappear as losses accumulate, relationships based on necessity and convenience quickly become the norm. Arly and Calvin Harper, for example, begin traveling together after the respective deaths of their true friends. Calvin, of course, despises Arly, and considers him a “madman.” He also longs for an opportunity to turn Arly over to Union Army officials and rid himself of the annoyance. Nevertheless, he tolerates Arly as a traveling partner because he understands the gravity of his own situation as a black man in the South:

There were no horses left in Columbia, no mules, the army had taken everything these people owned, and Calvin was aware from the way folks looked up as he passed that it was the fact of a white man sitting beside him that kept them from appropriating Bert [Calvin’s mule]. Without Bert to pull the wagon, there would be no picture-taking. But a black man taking pictures would not have been tolerated in the first place. The pretense that he, Calvin, was only assisting the white man was necessary if there wasn’t to be trouble where folks were already in no mood.²⁵

For Calvin, the convenience of his relationship with Arly far out-weighs its myriad inconveniences. Part of Calvin, after all, feels duty-bound to preserve the history of the war photographically, which he is unable to do safely without Arly’s white skin to ward off suspicion. Similarly, Arly needs Calvin’s photography equipment—and his expert knowledge on how to use it—in order to execute his master plan: the assassination of General Sherman. Already a fugitive in both armies, Arly cannot get close to Sherman in a soldier’s uniform. However, driving a U.S. Photography wagon, and disguised in Calvin’s dead mentor’s coat and hat, Arly easily catches the vain general’s eye. While Calvin is in no way complicit with Arly’s plot, his presence lends Arly the authenticity he needs to play a photographer convincingly. Clearly, the relationship between these two men is based on distrust and self-serving desires. Nevertheless, they both realize that such a relationship is necessary—at least temporarily—in wartime.

In many ways, all relationships in the latter half of the novel are similar to that of Calvin and Arly. Complicating this assertion, however, is the relationship between Pearl and Stephen Walsh. Pearl often struggles with the nature of her

relationship with Walsh, whom she meets in the Army's mobile infirmary. In one sense, Pearl likes much about Walsh—his voice, his manner, his mouth—and feels significantly better in his presence. However, she has difficulty distinguishing Stephen's attraction to her from her father's sexual exploitation of her mother. She becomes irritated with Walsh, for example, when he takes the liberty of putting his arm around her as they sleep. Walsh's arm and the realization that all "she had done since leaving the plantation" was "attach herself to white men" causes Pearl to feel "owned" again and to speculate that the "arm of Pap's was as heavy around my mamma as Stephen's around me."²⁶ For much of the novel, consequently, Pearl keeps Walsh at a chaste distance as she attempts to determine his sincerity as a partner. While she feels she can trust him, she cannot help but feel that her attachment to him, like Calvin's attachment to Arly, is a survival tactic. War, in a sense, has removed certainty from the equation of life.

Such attention to loss and the breakdown of meaningful personal relationships is an attempt not only to place a human face on the disorder that characterizes Sherman's march, but also to critique both historical and fictional reconciliationist readings of the war. For Doctorow, understanding the chaos and disorder of the march is critical to interpreting the war responsibly. In his interview with *Time*, Doctorow describes Sherman's march as "a devastating military campaign" that "cut down and uprooted an entire culture" and resulted in the appearance of "thousands of refugees, black and white, who attached themselves to the march." What developed, according to Doctorow, was the creation of

another reality, another state of being. A floating world. Everything was reversed. The stability and security came to these people from movement rather than from ordinary life rooted on the land. Identities were transformed. Nothing like it had been seen before on the continent.²⁷

Doctorow's notion of "a floating world," in which everything is reversed and unstable, underscores the irony of the March to the Sea. While Sherman's army appears to be the epitome of order and organization, its brutality and unrestrained violence in combat leaves society in shambles, unanchored from its traditional landscape and place. Doctorow's depiction of violent disorder, therefore, shows individuals ripped from normality, stunned and maniacal—hardly in state conducive for reconciliation.

Nowhere in *The March* is this violent disorder more apparent than in passages where Sherman's troops take control of a city. In Savannah and Columbia, for

instance, Sherman's normally disciplined troops become arsonists, rapists, and patrons of gambling halls and whorehouses. At such times, Sherman and his officers become powerless to control their men, who undergo a careless "drip by drip depletion of their warblood" as they consume the cities "like some viscid pool of humanity."²⁸ Disorder particularly reaches a climax in Columbia, where the troops carouse against the backdrop of a city-wide fire:

[Sherman's] troops were everywhere drunk. Some stood in front of burning houses cheering, others lurched along, arms linked, looking [...] like a mockery of the soldierly bond. It was all in hideous accord, the urban inferno and the moral dismantlement of [the] army. These veterans of so many campaigns [...] were not soldiers now, they were demons laughing at the sight of entire families standing stunned in the street while their houses burned.²⁹

The anarchy that erupts in Columbia represents the most extreme moment of disorder in *The March*, when Sherman's well-trained and disciplined troops become a subhuman mob of pillaging demons. In a sense, they become their antithesis: rather than an army of liberators on a mission to restore peace to a chaotic region, they become "riotous, drunken arsonists, [...] rapers and looters" seeking vengeance on the state, South Carolina, "that had led the South to War." The extent of their senseless destructiveness underscores their motive: as one of Sherman's officer's observes, "[What] were they but men who needed a night of freedom from this South-made war that had disrupted their lives and threatened still to take them."³⁰ Ironically, the resentment the Union soldiers feel toward the "South-made war" drives them deeper into it, causing them to engage more fully in the war's destructiveness, even as they feel they are escaping it through an apparent "night of freedom." The result, of course, is further disorder, displacement, and division. By the end of the novel, any type of reconciliation that occurs after such violence comes about because the ruined societies have no other option.

Clearly, Doctorow's focus on the disorder of war overshadows any reconciliationist themes. Sherman, the novel's most powerful voice, continually draws the readers' attention back to the inhumanity of the Civil War and its fragmentation of society. At one point, for example, Sherman meditates on the act of large-scale slaughter. Soldiers and officers, he believes, "are not made to appreciate" death on the battlefield. "Each man," he reasons, "has a life and a spirit and the habits of thought and person that define him, but en masse he is uniformed over." In a sense,

Sherman realizes that the art of war—the strategies, battle plans, and objectives—requires an officer to eradicate in himself an appreciation of or reverence for human life. What is more, he understands that he must be fundamentally a reductionist:

As a general officer I consider the death of one of my soldiers, first and foremost, a numerical disadvantage, an entry in the liability column. That is my description of it. It is a utilitarian idea of death—that I am reduced by one in my ability to fight a war.³¹

For Sherman, the Civil War has warped his ability to comprehend the tragedy of widespread death and destruction. True, he sees their tactical disadvantages, yet only because of his inability to put human faces on the suffering around him. While he curses his “inverted time” that violates “God’s grand stratagem” and causes “the young [to be] unbodied of their souls before the old,” he does little to counteract the forces effecting the inversion. He merely looks forward to the end of war when “the natural order is restored and [...] generations die once again appropriate to their God-given ranks.”³² In doing so, Sherman seemingly delays efforts toward enduring reconciliation, hoping, perhaps, that the natural order will restore itself. Such a gesture, again, is toward memory and nostalgia. As he does later while reviewing his troops, Sherman looks for a restoration of the past rather than a reconciliation in the present and future. Like many memory-obsessed historians and novels, Sherman seems to believe that mere belief in reconciliation is an effective substitute for the actual action necessary to bring it to pass.

Interestingly, Doctorow ends his novel somewhat ambiguously on the issue of history and memory. The final scene of the novel has been appropriately labeled “highly sentimental,” “near-maudlin,” and “cinematic”—something that would make William Faulkner blush had he written it.³³ Indeed, its overabundance of foliage and dreamy dialogue cries out shamelessly for a Hollywood movie deal. What is more, some of the scene’s imagery appears to undermine the novel’s anti-reconciliationist currents. As the scene begins, for example, Doctorow’s integrated group of North-bound travelers—Pearl, Walsh, Calvin Harper, and David (an abandoned black child)—come across “a clear slow-moving stream, where the water divided on the rocks and boulders and met itself again in a determined way, like something with a mind.”³⁴ The symbol is almost too obvious: a divided stream that ultimately becomes reunified suggests the end of civil war and the reconciliation of the nation. Likewise, the travelers’ expressions of their hopes and dreams seem idealistic. Calvin Harper is sure he will be able to make a living “taking portraits

and carte de visites of the returning soldiers.³⁵ Walsh, on the other hand, intends to “read the law” while Pearl attends public school and, later, medical school.³⁶ In many ways, Doctorow seems to be suggesting that national reconciliation and reunification have initiated the dawn of a new age of liberalism, where hope and opportunity are available to all individuals regardless of class or color. Such a notion is reinforced through the final image of the novel:

And then there was a dark thick grove of pine where some of the war had passed through. A boot lay in the pine needles, and the shreds of a discolored uniform. Behind a fallen log, a small pile of cartridge shells. There was still a scent of gunfire in the trees, and they were glad to come out into the sun again.³⁷

Again, the image suggests a literal dawning of a brighter future. The artifacts of war—the boot, the uniform, the cartridge shells, the smell of gunpowder—have all been abandoned to the elements. The “discolored uniform” is especially suggestive of a new world that is neither blue nor gray, neither black nor white. The nation, the image suggests, has left behind its dark age in favor of a new day in “the sun again.”

While these images certainly suggest a reconciliationist reading of the end of the war, Doctorow subtly reiterates his critique of this type of memorializing. Interestingly, even as he recognizes the newly reunified America’s potential to achieve the type of solidarity and unity over which it fought the Civil War, he reminds his readers of the hard road ahead. Pearl, ever the realist, is reluctant to share in Walsh’s enthusiasm, reminding him of the guilt she will feel living “white” and the prejudice they will face as an openly biracial couple. Walsh’s response to Pearl’s misgivings is touched with irony. “You will have to let the world catch up to you,” he tells her, admitting that “[it] may take some time.”³⁸ The irony, of course, is that even 140 years after the Civil War, racial tensions continue to frustrate Walsh’s vision of the future. Significantly, *The March*’s September 2005 publication occurred less than a month after Hurricane Katrina hit Mississippi and Louisiana. So, as Doctorow fans read about the northern migration of Pearl and other recently freed slaves, thousands of African-American evacuees from the hurricane-wrecked Gulf were heading further north and west.³⁹ With Katrina, Americans were once again reminded of their disheartening lack of progress toward national unity.

Ultimately, Doctorow’s strongest criticism in *The March* is not so much against sentimental reconciliationist interpretations of the Civil War, but against the larger notion of America’s collective memory of the past. Doctorow, it seems,

worries about those, like his fictional Sherman, who look so nostalgically on the past that they forget its brutality and injustice. In a sense, he struggles with America's increasing tendency to be like Albion Simms, a Union corporal in *The March* who gets of a metal spike permanently lodged in his brain, resulting in an unstable memory. Under the observing eye of Wrede Sartorius, an unfeeling Army surgeon who also appears in *The Waterworks*, Simms is restrained within a box that keeps him from hurting himself, thus permitting the corporal to exist in oscillating states of vague self-awareness and complete forgetfulness where time is "always now."¹⁰ For this reason, in many ways, Simms seems to be a symbol of twenty-first century America and the historical amnesia it exhibited in the wake its own massive head-wound, the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Memory, Doctorow suggests, is useful when it helps us remember the consequences of past mistakes, such as destructive imperialist endeavors and flawed foreign policies. It becomes dangerous, however, when it remains "always now," blinding us from the cause-and-effect reality of the course of history, and leading us to make costly—even deadly—mistakes.

For this reason, perhaps, Doctorow emphasizes human loss and widespread disorder in *The March*, deliberately avoiding reconciliations and other misguided interpretations of the Civil War era. For Doctorow, the lessons of the brutality and prejudices of the past are still relevant to the present, insofar as they are responsibly and accurately memorialized. In memorializing the Civil War, Doctorow does not employ an altogether flattering or appealing narrative of America's past. Rather, he shows America at its worst. What is more, he speaks to his audience not with the dull drone of an academic historian, but as with a familiar voice—even a popular voice—that touches a chord within them. In doing so, he reminds his readers that history is not a healing tonic, as Ken Burns suggests, but an alarm clock—a reminder that the mistakes of the past should not be forgotten.

Notes

1. E. L. Doctorow, *The March* (New York: Random House, 2005), 358-59.
2. Michael Fellman, "Introduction," *Memoirs by William Tecumseh Sherman*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), vii-viii.
3. William Tecumseh Sherman, *Memoirs*, ed. Michael Fellman (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.
5. David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 1-2, 4.

6. For more on the distinction between history and memory, Blight recommends Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations*, 26 (1989): 7-25.
7. Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 4.
8. see Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 295.
9. Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel*, 4.
10. Matthew A. Henry, "Problematized Narratives: History as Fiction in E. L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate*," *Critique* 39, no. 1, (1997): 32-33.
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39. In his interview with *Time*, Doctorow draws the connection between Civil War refugees and Katrina evacuees; see Grossman, "10 Questions," 6.
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SCOTT HALES is a graduate student at the University of Cincinnati. He has research interests in historical fiction. He is currently working on a theoretical study of the Mormon historical novel.