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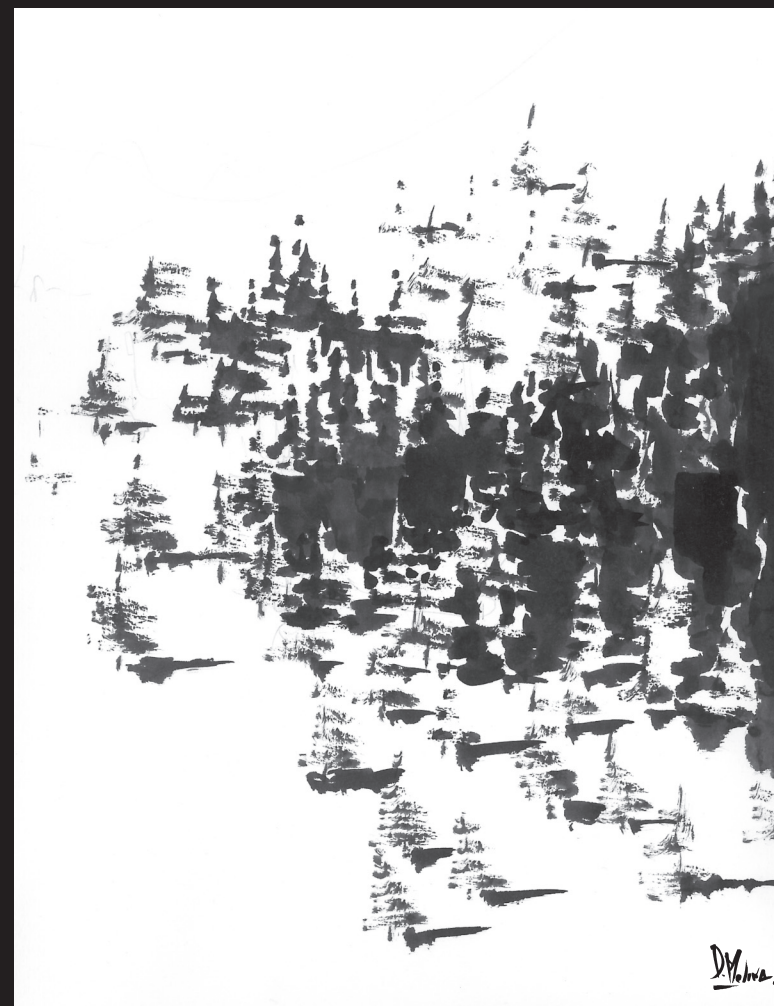
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## HISTORY ON TRIAL: THE ROSENBERG CASE IN E.L. DOCTOROW'S *THE BOOK OF DANIEL*

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### **Abstract**

*In The Book of Daniel (1972), E.L. Doctorow explores one of the darkest periods of US political history: Cold War anticommunist hysteria during the nineteen fifties. The trial and execution of the Rosenbergs (the Isaacsons in the novel) is reconstructed amid the ideological turmoil of the late nineteen sixties by Daniel, one of their children. While writing his Ph.D. dissertation, Daniel seeks to explain the mystery surrounding his parents' trial. Daniel's book-both his dissertation and the novel we are reading-reaches beyond the character's biographical reconstruction and examines the limitations of language and memory in the representation of historical reality. As in many of his other novels, Doctorow reflects on the intellectual's ethical commitment within a climate of political change and epistemological skepticism.*

All of Doctorow's novels revolve around important sociopolitical moments in US history. Historical motifs in *The Book of Daniel* encompass the four decades that extend from the Great Depression to the student uprisings of the late sixties. The novel's ultimate goal is to meditate on the evolution of the US left and to examine its impact on the nation at large. According to Doctorow, the contemporary United States owes a debt to its radical past, as of yet insufficiently recognized (Levine 1983:67-68). From a historiographic perspective, *The Book of*

*Daniel* deals principally with the hysteria of the Cold War period, at its apex during the Rosenberg case.

*The Book of Daniel* describes the process of its own writing through its fictional author, Daniel. Among the stacks of Columbia's Butler Library, during the turmoil of the student revolts of 1967-68, Daniel recreates the story of his parents, the Isaacsons (clearly the Rosenbergs): two young lower-middle class communists condemned and executed for conspiring to steal and convey the secret of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. Although the book he is writing is apparently a history dissertation on the Cold War, it is also a memoir about his childhood, an anthropological treatise concerning power and violence, a psychological study of the personality of US radicals, a meditation on the Old Left from the perspective of the New, and a journalistic report covering the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and US counterculture.<sup>1</sup> Above all, Doctorow's work seeks to present itself as a "false document," a crossing point for different discursive modes.<sup>2</sup>

Following revisionist historian William Appleman Williams, Daniel portrays the Cold War not as an attempt to avoid a nuclear catastrophe, but as one more episode in the economic expansion of the United States.<sup>3</sup> US government and corporations sought to secure international markets to maintain and expand the country's prosperity and in this way overcome the fear of a new economic depression. The formation of military blocs in

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<sup>1</sup> Critics differ when describing the specific field of Daniel's dissertation. While most consider it to be historical, Jerry O. Powell (1981:208) places it in political science, and T.V. Reed (1992: 291) suggests it is literary. The intentional ambiguity of this core fact stresses the recurrent intermingling of history, social science, and fiction in *The Book of Daniel*.

<sup>2</sup> Because of its diverse and all-encompassing nature, *The Book of Daniel* exemplifies Doctorow's concept of ideal fiction: "... fiction is the discipline that includes all the others. Its language is indiscriminate, it accepts the diction of science, theology, journalism, poetry, myth, history, everything" (Morris 1991:446).

<sup>3</sup> As Daniel himself acknowledges, William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of the American Diplomacy* (1959) is his major source about the period. Williams's basic assumption is that the Cold War was not merely an incident between the two superpowers that emerged after World War II, but "only the most recent phase of a more general conflict between the established system of Western capitalism and its internal and external opponents" (10). Nearly all documents quoted in Daniel's discussion of the Cold War come from Williams's book.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel portrays Henry Stimson, senior member of the cabinet, as the only sensible voice in the Truman Administration. The novel reproduces his letter to president Truman (September 11, 1945), asking him to reopen negotiations with the Soviet Union (*BD*, 284; see also Williams (1959:276). However, Truman ignored Stimson's advice and leaned more and more toward the aggressive position held by the new conservative Secretary of State James F. Byrnes.

Potsdam is described as the result of schemes plotted by the most reactionary sectors of US diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> The Soviets had asked for help to reconstruct their country, completely devastated after World War II, but were offered instead “free hands” in their area of influence. In this way, the novel blames the uncompromising attitude of the Truman Administration for the expansionist politics of the post-war USSR.

According to Daniel’s analysis, anti-Soviet propaganda led to a methodical falsification of reality aimed at masquerading instances of sheer imperialism as humanitarian assistance. Thus, the Truman Doctrine, and especially the Marshall Plan, were two-faced: although apparently dedicated to protecting “free” nations from communism, in reality they sought to give military assistance in exchange for economic favors. The reconstruction of Western Europe served to secure US investments abroad (290). Daniel’s arguments are again in Williams’s Marxist line of analysis, which tends to stress the economic aspect of US foreign policy and warns about the “firm conviction, even dogmatic belief, that America’s domestic well-being depends upon such sustained, ever-increasing overseas economic expansion” (1959:15).

Throughout his digressions on the Cold War, Daniel utilizes the conventions of analytic historiography. He establishes a hypothesis that is supported by evidence, compared data, and cited authorities.<sup>5</sup> Only at the end of this analysis is Daniel’s voice finally heard. In the midst of a minute deconstruction of the official justification of anticommunist repression as a way to guarantee the existence of the so-called “free world,” Daniel remarks: “A MESSAGE OF CONSOLATION TO GREEK BROTHERS IN THEIR PRISON CAMPS AND TO MY HAITIAN BROTHERS AND NICARAGUAN BROTHERS AND DOMINICAN BROTHERS AND SOUTH AFRICAN BROTHERS AND TO MY BROTHERS IN SOUTH VIETNAM, ALL IN THEIR PRISON CAMPS: YOU ARE IN THE FREE WORLD!” (289). Daniel is obviously alluding to the Truman Doctrine, by which the United States granted military and economic support to democratic nations. Nevertheless, Daniel’s list of countries tellingly maintained, in spite of their repressive regimes, excellent relations with the United States.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel’s parodic intentions frequently become evident by his abuse of academic formulae such as the expression “many historians have noted this phenomenon” (*BD*, 28-29), repeated excessively throughout certain historiographic discussions.

These brief commentaries, the selection of documentary sources, and Daniel's own personal conclusion regarding the Cold War seek to undermine the political rhetoric used by both sides to justify their positions. By Daniel's account, the US government is not the arbiter of international peace and democracy it purports to be, but is rather the agent responsible for the arms race and, indirectly, a contributor to political repression in the Eastern bloc. Likewise, Daniel depicts Soviet international politics as another form of imperialism that replicates the expansionist strategies of Western capitalism. The repressive technologies of both blocs are described in a similar manner. The eradication and manipulation of the past by methodical falsification of the archive, the humiliation of political activists by public admittance of "personal errors," the fostering of a general paranoia regarding an omnipresent foe, are only some of the strategies shared by US and Soviet intelligence services during the Cold War period.<sup>6</sup> On both sides the threat of a foreign enemy served as a powerful weapon to repress all forms of dissent and challenge to authority.

To the seeming objectivity of the *grand récit* concerning the economic motivations of the Cold War, the novel adds the emotional microhistory of its victims. Through his novel/dissertation, Daniel seeks to examine the impact that "great politics" exerts on the individual—even on the physical level. To that effect, he abandons the stiffness of academic historiography and often adopts the private tone of the personal memoir and the psychological novel. The novel's shifts toward more subjective perspectives result in an increase in the number of poetic images. Unlike canonical historiography, where the author's voice remains hidden,

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<sup>6</sup> The parallel between the repressive practices of the two great superpowers is reinforced by continuous allusions to the Bukharin trials (*BD*, 18-19, 65-67), which strongly evoke those of the Isaacsons's. Like the Isaacsons of the novel, Bukharin was accused of espionage, convicted through false proofs, and finally executed. Political dissidence in the two cases was interpreted as a conspiracy against state interests. Furthermore, Daniel's discussion of the Bukharin trials follows the same formal pattern as his analysis of the Truman Administration. Written in the conventional style of a dissertation and citing authorities like George Kennan and E. H. Carr, Daniel's discussion moves from the specifics of the case to generalizations that try to explain the rationale of the Soviet betrayal of international radicalism. On two occasions the digression is violently interrupted by Daniel's subjective voice in one case to present a list of "subjects to be taken up" later in his book, in another to insert "A NOTE TO THE READER" (*BD*, 67) protesting against the reductionism of historiographic analysis.

Daniel's voice frequently emerges to interpret the facts or to establish a moral judgment.

Through an intimate portrayal of his parents, Daniel reconstructs the personality of the radical militants of the time. For the Isaacsons, politics is a means of recuperating their self-esteem, a justification of their present suffering and a promise of a better future. Educated during a period of economic hardship and personal sacrifice, they fight for the establishment of an ideal society in an indefinite future. Unlike Daniel's younger generation of radicals, his parents blindly believe in the insignificance of the individual in the face of the transcendental value of collective destiny. In spite of the obvious discrepancies in method and mentality, Daniel's portrayal of his parents does not lack a certain continuity. Paul's obsession with making everything connect, his pathological search for evidence which is always insufficient, serves as a precedent for Daniel's hermeneutic struggle. At the end of his life, Paul seeks in the writing of letters and memoirs a way of giving his complex reality coherence. But, like Daniel, he is unable to make the final connection.

Rochelle, on the other hand, represents the pragmatic current among the radical militancy, having entered the Communist Party not because of ideological sympathies but as a consequence of her poverty ("the politics of want" [40]). Unlike Paul, who believes in the honesty of certain US institutions, Rochelle radically distrusts the system. It is precisely the intuitive nature of her ideas that strengthens her political commitment to the Party: "She was truer to the idea, in her way she was the more committed radical" (49). Her eschatological interpretation of history is not very different from that of the Judeo-Christian tradition: "some purchase on the future against the terrible life of the present" (51). Like Paul, Rochelle begins to write in prison, her testimony becoming a new documentary source for Daniel.

From their dialogues we re-discover important historical moments and crucial figures of the US radical past, especially as it relates to the history of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). Paul and Rochelle first meet in the nineteen thirties, when the CP was enjoying its highest popularity. It was a moment when Communist organizations



around the world were making alliances with other progressive forces against the emergence of fascism, giving rise to the so-called “Popular Front.” Roosevelt’s triumphant reelection in 1936 inaugurated a period of political reform (“a Second New Deal”) in US society. In fact, Roosevelt’s campaign was the first occasion in which a US Communist organization gave its support to a non-Marxist political candidate. The CP publications reflected this reorientation toward social-democratic positions. Periodicals such as the *New Masses*, the *Daily Worker*, and the *Communist* were influential among the liberal middle class who harbored leftist sympathies (Buhle 1989:179)

The period of 1936-39 also coincided with the apogee of the nativist current of the CP as represented by Earl Browder. Elected as a General Secretary in 1934, Browder connected the organization to the US revolutionary and abolitionist traditions, conferring a genuinely American face upon it. His public appearances were often graced with portraits of Jefferson and Lincoln alongside those of Marx and Lenin, and in his speeches he tended to associate his political opponents with “Tories,” “Know-Nothings,” and confederate racists (Johnpoll and Klehr 1986:51). It was Browder himself who popularized the slogan mentioned in *The Book of Daniel*: “COMMUNISM IS THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICANISM” (236-37). Under Browder’s direction the CP reached its zenith of influence upon US society, expanding to include 100,000 members. His reform effort represented an alternative to the traditional dependency of the party on the Comintern, as well as an attempt to resolve the CP’s lack of relationship to US radical history.<sup>7</sup>

The Popular Front era ended worldwide with the German-Soviet pact of 1939. This event, along with a series of new Soviet measures, marked the party’s return to Moscow’s leadership and its loss of popularity in the United States. Until the German invasion of the USSR, World War II was not contemplated as a fight against fascism and was treated by the CP as an imperialist affair. That attitude set the basis for

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<sup>7</sup> The influence of Browder’s ideas on the party’s militancy is reflected in Daniel’s indoctrination by his father: “He told me about using imported Chinese labor like cattle to build the West and of breeding Negroes and working them to death in the South. Of their torture. Of John Brown and Nat Turner. Of Thomas Paine, whose atheism made him an embarrassment to the leaders of the American Revolution” (43).

the future image of the CP as a conspiratorial movement. The leadership of the CPUSA put an end to Browder's reforms in June 1945 with the election of Robert Thomson as the new general secretary and with the expulsion of Browder himself from the party in February 1946. The new policy of the CP was directed toward bolstering its relationship with Moscow, hence their total support for Soviet repressive politics both nationally (Stalin's purges) and internationally (the occupation of Eastern Europe).

Unlike other militants, the Isaacsons remain faithful to the CP's governing board. According to Robert Cottrell, Doctorow's novel is "the first extended portrayal, both critical and sympathetic, of the Communist who remained true to the party as it moved further and further outside the political pale." (1984-1986:63). Although the depiction of US communists has precedents in literary history (Cottrell mentions Dos Passos's *USA* and Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*), these were limited to a period easy to idealize: the years of the Popular Front, before the Stalinist purges ruined the international reputation of Communist parties.

The historical climax of the novel takes place during the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs in the nineteen fifties (1950-53). In his book, Daniel criticizes the myopia of Party members in their analysis of the consequences of the Cold War. While conversing with Paul, one of the Communist leaders suggests that in the long run the repressive politics of the Cold War were going to consolidate the CPUSA (106). Although this repression was used politically by other communist parties (especially in the Soviet Union), it meant the total disintegration of the CP in the United States. The Rosenberg trial is thus contextually placed within the larger general strategy of the fight against Communism in the nation and abroad. Three historical events of great importance occurred in 1949, laying the groundwork for the trial: the triumph of a Communist revolution in China over the nationalist forces supported by the United States, the invasion of South Korea by the communist North, and the successful explosion of a nuclear device by the Soviet Union. As these events took place, rumors about international espionage networks began to spread through the media, culminating in the Rosenberg case. In February 1950, the British physician Klaus Fusch,

who was involved in atomic research for the Manhattan Project, confessed to having engaged in espionage for the Soviet Union since the early nineteen forties. In July of that year Julius Rosenberg was arrested for “conspiring to commit espionage,” as was his wife Ethel shortly thereafter. However, the trial went beyond prosecuting an isolated case of espionage, and soon became a trial against political dissidence supported by political institutions in a period of panic and international instability. In his well-known essay “Afterthoughts on the Rosenbergs” Leslie Fiedler suggests the existence of two Rosenberg trials: the literal one in which the US justice system tried a case of espionage; and a symbolic one quickly transformed into Cold-War propaganda by both sides. Communist movements portrayed the Rosenbergs as victims of capitalism, while at home, they were presented as a clear example of an international conspiracy against Western democracies.

Many details in the novel’s plot were taken from the historical trial. For example, all the protagonists (the Isaacsons, the judge, the prosecutors, the main witnesses for the prosecution, and the defense) are Jewish. Judge Hirsch, like the historical Kaufman, also seeks a promotion through the case (Kaufman was in fact appointed to the Supreme Court shortly afterwards). As in the actual trial, the Isaacsons are accused, not of committing espionage, but of conspiring to commit it (in which case the testimony of a single accomplice is considered sufficient evidence). The irregularities of the legal process and the attitudes of the participants are substantially the same. Similar as well is the portrayal of the devoted, compassionate lawyer who defends the Isaacsons in court while looking after their children.

Doctorow’s fictional version of the trial, however, introduces changes of varying magnitude. In *The Book of Daniel* Julius and Ethel Rosenberg become Paul and Rochelle Isaacson; their two sons, Michael and Robert, become Daniel and his sister Susan; the main witness for the prosecution is not a relative of the defendants (David Greenglass, Ethel’s bother), but a family friend (Selig Mindish); the judge’s name is not Kaufman, but Hirsch; the defender is not a leftist but a conservative lawyer; and the name of the adoptive parents is not Meeropol, but Lewin. While these are clearly minor changes, other elements of the novel deviate substantially from the historical trial. In the real case, Julius Rosenberg

was not just the unskilled electrician Doctorow presents in his novel, but an engineer who had worked for the US Army Signal Corps. Moreover, the decisive testimony against the Rosenbergs was not given by a dentist (as in *The Book of Daniel*), but by a machinist (Greenglass) who had been part of the ultrasecret Manhattan Project. These two significant changes from the professional status of two key players in the real drama to their mundane status in the “fiction” contribute in highlighting the injustice of the case, which is interpreted as a hoax resulting from the conspiratorial climate of the Cold War United States. Although the novel never openly declares the Isaacsons’s innocent or guilty, Paul’s connection with a powerful spy ring is presented by his son as a delirious fantasy. Even when contemplating the possibility of espionage, he suggests that such an eventuality could never have had the importance attributed to it by the FBI.<sup>8</sup>

The Rosenberg case holds a twofold appeal for Doctorow: its inherent ambiguity and its symbolic transcendence. First, it is an historical event of tremendous opacity that has provoked the most disparate reactions among historians and political analysts. From the moment the trial began until now, an endless stream of books and articles have been published on the topic. Although the media unanimously promulgated the official version at the very beginning, in August 1951 the *National Guardian* published a series of articles in which the legitimacy of the trial began to be questioned. Since then, whenever an essay has been declared definitive, it has immediately been refuted by another one from the opposite perspective. The polemic has not waned even though part of the FBI archives were released to the public. A relatively recent essay—Ronald Radosh’s and Joyce Milton’s *The Rosenberg File: A Search for*

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<sup>8</sup> A minor character in the novel, journalist Jack Fein, provides an explanation that has been popular among some historians: “Your folks were framed but that doesn’t mean they were innocent babes. I don’t believe they were a dangerous conspiracy to pass defense secrets, but I don’t believe either that the US Attorney, and the Judge, and the Justice Department, and the President of the United States conspired against them . . . In this country people don’t get picked out of a hat to be put on trial for their lives . . . They were little neighborhood commies probably with some kind of third-rate operation that wasn’t of use to anyone except maybe it made them feel important” (*BD*, 260). In *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), historian David Cauter quotes this passage from *The Book of Daniel* as a very suggestive explanation of the mystery surrounding the Rosenberg case. However, this is just one among many of the versions collected by Daniel, which also include dissenting views provided by Robert Lewin, Fanny Ascher, Artie Sternlicht, and Linda Mindish.

*the Truth* (1983)— attempted to establish the guilt of Julius Rosenberg and was hailed by the media as the final word on the case; it quickly became the target of scathing attacks by academic historians who pointed out the inconsistencies of the main argument, the lack of proof, and the authors' manipulation of data.<sup>9</sup>

Examples from this interpretative corpus are incorporated into Daniel's book. In his notes, Daniel alludes to six books written on the case, two which support the verdict and the sentence, two which support the verdict but not the sentence, and two in which the legitimacy of the case is categorically denied. Moreover, Daniel incorporates and comments on the apocryphal works of Sidney P. Margolis and Max Krieger, which represent two antithetical positions. Margolis's *Spies on Trial* reproduces the perspective of ultraconservative historians: "For all the hysteria drummed up by the commies, their fellow travelers, and their dupes, the Isaacsons received a fair trial . . . Who but the very ideologues committed to overthrowing our democratic way of life can dare claim in view of the defendants' use of every legal dodge available under due process, that justice was not done?" (277). The other fictional interpretation, Krieger's *The Isaacson Tragedy*, presents the point of view of leftist sympathizers: "History records with shame the persecution and infamous putting to death in the United States of America of two American citizens, husband and wife, the father and mother of two young children, who were guilty of not so much as jaywalking, for their proudly held left-wing views" (277). This imaginary polemic allows Daniel to stress once again the determinant role played the prejudices of the historian. History can no longer be considered an objective retelling of the past, but rather a vehicle through which historians legitimize their own ideas and views. As Doctorow points out in "False Documents:" "the most important trials in our history, those which reverberate in our lives and have most meaning for our future, are those in which the judgment is called into question:

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<sup>9</sup> In his review Gerald Markowitz (1984) dismantles the theses presented by Radosh and Milton. As an example of the favorable media coverage of *The Rosenberg File*, see Alan Dershowitz's review (1983:1). For works arguing the innocence of the Rosenbergs, the most convincing continues to be Walter and Miriam Schneir's *Invitation to an Inquest* (1983). In addition to Doctorow's novel, the Rosenberg case has inspired two other literary works, Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1967) and Donald Freed's *Inquest: A Play* (1969), both of which portray them as victims of the hysterical political climate of the era.

Scopes, Sacco and Vanzetti, the Rosenbergs. Facts are buried, exhumed, deposed, contradicted, recanted . . . . And the trial shimmers forever with just that perplexing ambiguity characteristic of a true novel . . . .” (1983:23). It is this ambiguity that, in Doctorow’s opinion, makes the novel an ideal discourse for exploring the past.<sup>10</sup>

The hermeneutic method employed by Daniel in his reconstruction of the historical case is thus a reflection of the multiple perception championed by Doctorow in all of his works. On one level, he examines the socio-historical forces behind the conflicts that overcome the Truman administration, the interior and foreign policy of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of the United States, and US society at large. On another level, he recreates the psychology of the victims, their family and social relationships, their private motivations, their fears and hopes. On yet another level, the book discusses the symbolic dimensions of the case and their relationship to other similar events in US history. The final result is a multilayered work in which each level allows for multiple viewpoints, thus contesting the possibility of a definitive historical truth.

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<sup>10</sup> For historical examples of these confronting interpretations of the Rosenberg Case, see the books by Gardner (1954), Meeropol (1975), Nizer (1973), Pilat (1952), Pritt (1953), Reuben (1955), Root (1963), Sharp (1956), and Wexley (1955), as well as Goldstein’s PBS documentary (1974).

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