Yet die not; do thou
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow
Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,
Live, and take comfort. Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth and skies;
There’s not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man’s unconquerable mind.

William Wordsworth, To Toussaint L’Ouverture

In E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, the central character, a black musician named Coalhouse Walker, Jr., is driven to rebellion against white society by the actions of members of a volunteer fire brigade. Walker is a successful, self-respecting black man. He is driving his Model T Ford past the fire station when he is stopped and his car is dismantled as part of a racist practical joke. The firemen are saying, in effect, you may be successful but in America you are still black.

Receiving no satisfaction from the authorities, Walker takes the law into his own hands and carries out a reign of terror in New York, culminating in the takeover of J. Peirpont Morgan’s museum and Booker T. Washington’s unsuccessful intervention to placate the rebel and have him turn himself in. In effect, Walker’s predicament and his response to it represent a commentary on Washington’s accommodationist philosophy.

As many know, this Doctorow novel owes its origin to a short story written at the beginning of the nineteenth century by a young German novelist named Heinrich von Kleist. Kleist’s story, based on events that occurred in the sixteenth century, was named ‘Michael Kolhaas’ and was about a successful young horse-dealer who has two of his horses detained and ill-treated by the Junka von Tronka, whose land he happens to be traveling through. His horses are taken away from him in the most dishonorable fashion, and Kolhaas seeks retribution, sacrificing everything he has, family and property, for revenge against the Tronka and the society that elevated him. The story is set in the sixteenth century, and so we find Martin Luther attempting to
intervene. But Luther is concerned only for law and order, and is unreceptive to Kolhaas’s claim that he had to make this stand, he could do no other.

Almost two centuries divide these two authors, but the story seems to work in both instances. On the first occasion it is applied to the issues of class, the division between the aristocrats [of Germany] and a nascent bourgeois class; the author is a man looking back at these social developments through the events of the French Revolution. In the second instance, the same scenario is attached to the racial divide in the United States at the nadir of post-emancipation race relations; in this case Doctorow is surveying this nadir from a post-Civil Rights movement perspective.

But this equivalence is all too neat, and this is so in a way that I think tells us something about the dangers of bringing categories of class and race together. What do we miss if we make the jump from Kolhaas to Coalhouse reflexively? What we miss is the event that always seems to be missed – the Haitian revolution. A short story that might easily be paired with ‘Michael Kolhaas’ is Kleist’s ‘Betrothal in Santo Domingo’. In this story we see the world turned upside down. What we see is the Kolhaases of Saint Domingue determining that they too need to make their stand. Their butchery, however, is not looked on quite so favorably as Kolhaas’s. In Kolhaas’s case we are dealing with a victim, and his rebellion is justifiable. In the case of Congo Hoango and company, it seems to be evil and sheer savagery at work. While Martin Luther is to be ridiculed for intervening on the side of authority in the Kolhaas piece, one feels that there is a desperate need for some Luther figure in the second story. Only if we carry forward the story about Kolhaas to the era of ragtime without knowledge of Haiti do we feel comfortable with the transposition. With Haiti in place we feel some dissonance, that the narrative is doing work that it was not intended to do. Either it cannot be applied to race, or Coalhouse has in a way been deracinated, incorporated into a system where we are to feel sympathy with him as no different from one of ‘us’. But the questions that were evaded in the previous story – what of the peasants whom Luther also condemned and the other ‘walking fertilizer’, what of such people? – these things become clear when we know that some stands against oppression are to be valorized while others, however equivocal, however (non)-violent, are to be condemned.

But here we do an injustice to Heinrich von Kleist. For what arises from the juxtaposition of these two stories is the realization that it is