Focus Questions, E. L. Doctorow, *Andrew's Brain* (2014)
Michael Wutz, MENG 6510, Weber State University

(1) POV, Trauma, and Reliability.
Both the reader and unknown interlocutor become aware early on that Andrew speaks, alternately, in the first and third person. These and other moments lay bare Andrew's quirky/schizophrenic (?) brain and, along with it, his dubious reliability; they perforate an otherwise often smooth narrative (and that does not, of course, mean that Andrew does not, on one level, speak "the truth.") The question: when does this oscillation of pov occur, and why? What are the particular junctures in Andrew's story when that double vision erupts and what might be the motivations, psychological and otherwise, for such a form of parallax?

(2) *Andrew's Brain*– Old Wine in New Bottles, or New Wine in Old Bottles?
Some reviewers have charged Doctorow with having written a novel in the self-examining and self-loathing tradition of, say, Phillip Roth's *Goodbye Columbus,* or similar narratives of introspection with a psychoanalytical twist. Many of these, incidentally, were authored by fellow Jewish writers in the 1950 and 60s, when Doctorow started his career as a writer. Do you find this to be "true," and if so, to what degree? If not, how is this novel different from its cerebrating precursors? How does *Andrew's Brain* relate to Marco Roth's observations in "The Rise of the Neurovel"? Does Doctorow's tale remind you of other stories (from any culture) you have read, perhaps (and to which the text may or may not, in fact, refer). — Reach into your cognitive databanks and try to remember your reading history☺.

(3) History, Allegory, Politics.
What are some of the historical and cultural markers that help the reader to reconstruct the both personal and political time frame of *Andrew's Brain*? Try to reconstruct the

novel's chronology and speculate on their importance, if any. What inferences, if any, can we (or may we be supposed to?) make about Andrew's state of mind, and/or perhaps the state of mind of the country? The correlations between the former roommates, Sir Andrew the Pretender and the presidential Pretender, are numerous and difficult to ignore. This is particularly the case in a novel that reflects self-consciously and repeatedly on the nature of doubling, mirror images, schizophrenia, and similar micro- and macro-cosmic binaries such as cloud thinking and communal brains.

(4) Andrew's Illusory Allusions.

Doctorow is not a writer prone to play "postmodern' tricks on the reader. Like many accomplished and widely read authors, his writings, such as *Andrew's Brain*, are infused with allusions to other writers and artists—in part, certainly, to acknowledge the various traditions with which he sees himself in conversation. What specific allusions do you recognize, and what purpose(s) do they serve? What kinds of allusions—both explicit and implicit, say—can you distinguish, and who is doing the alluding in the first place? (If you are familiar with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, please feel free to bring his notion of dialogism and/or heteroglossia into the conversation.) When do they appear in Andrew's narrative?

(5) The Narrative Rhizome—Meaning and Synaptic Synergy.

I want to invite you to think about allusions as a form of literary or artistic networking analogous to the synaptic rhizome of the brain. A network or a tapestry of allusions may, in that sense, be reflective of the associative workings of the brain itself—both of the brain of the author and of those of the character(s)/narrator invented by the author. Meaning—for the author, the character, and at the outer rim, for the reader—in such a model emerges in the oscillation within and between various fields of references, or what we could call associative matrices: that of the character, Andrew; that between Andrew and Doc, his otherwise unidentified interlocutor; within the matrix of the author's brain and his/her horizon of reading and experience, which is to say, what (s)he chooses to put into the text; and, finally, within the—infinitely vast—play of meaning between text and reader. (I hope I've got this all right! My brain may be failing me.) At each of those levels, we are not only dealing with intention and purpose, but also with the vast reservoir of pre- and unconscious associations our brains are capable of establishing or suggesting. —My question: Whaddaya think? Does *Andrew's Brain* probe such synaptic, not to say esoteric, dabblings and perhaps reflect on such cognitive processing, if that is the right term? Speculate and theorize, as Picard says to Data ☺.