Self-destructive Manhattan in E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks*

Anamaria Schwab

The Waterworks, published in 1994, is a darker, more pessimistic chronicle of New York City than all of E. L. Doctorow's former novels that concern the metropolis of the past. It provides a less detached, less playfully fictitious view of Manhattan than celebrated *Ragtime* (1975). Its linear, unitary plot does not project several meandering narratives in the manner of *Ragtime*, even if it is still preoccupied with conveying the general flavor of an epoch and a place. If it somehow reminds one of *Billy Bathgate* (1989), *The Waterworks* is a far more concentrated, obsession-bound type of narrative. As I would like to show, the novel's view of past New York City represents a type of interstitial history of the place that enriches real history and simultaneously performs an effective criticism of Manhattan's narcissism at the time. The result is a dystopian view of the city which became "its own empire" during the Gilded Age (Reitano 2006, 84). At the heart of dystopia, Doctorow places a certain type of middle-class, corrupt and egotistic mid-nineteenth century Manhattanite, who has the financial means to put into practice even his most extravagant fantasies, to the detriment of the city itself. Placing the plot in the past, Doctorow links *fin the siècle* and end of the twentieth century together, criticizing both past and the author's own present and implicitly warning us about our own future, as I attempt to demonstrate.

At a basic narrative level, the novel is a story of detection. Its detective plot advances progressively towards the finding of truth, the moment when the criminals are punished and order is re-established in the city. It is a linear itinerary that parallels New York's own ascendant, prosperous trajectory at a time of booming development and wealth, when exceptional industrial achievement increased the age's trust in progress and science. Although such a view seems to put Reason on a pedestal, seeing it as solid, coherent, central and immovable, at the same time an irrational, dark facet of New York City is equally revealed by detection. This other dimension of Manhattan is shown to exceed reason and frustrate its attempts at order and coherence, thus contrasting the first dimension of the plot. At this second level, the author discloses the idea of conflict and fracture at the very heart of the city, as well as the "barbarism" of the age (cf. Benjamin qtd. in Jameson 1981, 281), in a novel that is deeply philosophical in its questioning of reason and the irrational, progress and regress, nature and artificiality. The result is a profoundly dystopian projection of the place.

At the beginning of the novel, which is narrated in retrospect, the reader is presented with one of the main characters, Martin Pemberton, the son of a wealthy, corrupt Civil War profiteer, who is disowned as a result of his accusations concerning the dishonest source of his father's fortune. Although the father is dead when the novel starts, Martin has the impression that he briefly saw him alive several times in the city, in the company of other elderly people, all riding a municipal omnibus. This is the crisis that sets the plot to motion as Martin embarks on a frenetic quest in search of the truth behind such strange occurrences. At the moment when he suddenly, mysteriously disappears, another detective trajectory starts, namely that of the editor of the newspaper where Martin was working. The editor, McIlvaine, sets out on a journey of his own in an attempt to find Martin and bring some light into his disturbing story which had stirred his journalistic curiosity. Inquiring into the details of the young man's life and the circumstances of his disappearance, he finds out that Augustus Pemberton, the corrupt father, has long been suffering from a terminal blood disease and has more recently been hospitalized in a private clinic run by a Dr. Sartorius. It is at this same clinic that Augustus Pemberton is supposed to have died.

In his attempts to unveil the truth behind the whole story, McIlvaine's investigations lead him into the bowels of the city where he finds out more about the lives of the homeless, street children, the little peddlers of New York, themselves alerted by the recent disappearance of some of their peers. With the children's help, the existence of a private orphanage is discovered, as well as that of a secret sanatorium hidden in the upstate water pumping station of the city—the Waterworks in the novel's title. It is in this sanatorium that Augustus Pemberton continued to live, together with some of the city's other plutocrats who were all terminally ill but were artificially kept alive. Mysterious Dr. Sartorius, a brilliant ex-army surgeon who had served in the Civil War, was the one who extended their lives indefinitely with the help of his unique medical innovations. Martin understood that the sanatorium was funded with the complicity of top city politicians, all part of the corrupt Tammany Hall political machine that was leading New York at the time and which financially and legally supported Sartorius's eccentric experiments. Tammany Hall members were directly interested in aiding the surgeon as they dreamed about benefiting themselves one day from his scientific innovations. If deduction disclosed the secret of Augustus Pemberton's 'after-death' existence as well as the political connections of the affair, it also unveiled elements of the city that turn the notion of reason upside down as they verge on insanity. Reason proves to be no longer the ultimate organizing principle at work, even in a city like Manhattan, which was built on the strict Enlightenment principles of its famed urban Grid that divided space into perfectly equal rectangles. The element of excess and madness at the core of Manhattan is the desire to live indefinitely regardless of costs and consequences. This is suggested by Dr. Sartorius' experiments that involved street children who were sacrificed for blood transfusions and various other types of transplants in order to prolong the lives of the old plutocrats for as long as possible.

Although all the mysteries are unveiled, the murders punished and the conflicts resolved in the end, the dystopia of New York City endures, as *The Waterworks* is a Gothic tale in contrast with its nineteenth century, progressive *Zeitgeist* content, as I intend to show.

Reading Historical Time in City Space

THE NOVEL is primarily concerned with underlining New York's trajectory of becoming and transformation towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the city's face was changing from one day to the next under the influence of fierce industrialism and urbanization. Within this dynamics of becoming, which assimilates new historical time and space and which pertains both to the city and the plot, there lies a simultaneous, contrary movement of disintegration and degenerescence. This latter one contrasts with and dismantles the idea of progress in what might be designated an aesthetics of involution. Projecting a fundamentally dystopian view of Manhattan, *The Waterworks* is a Gothic novel that criticizes not only the New York City of 1870 but indirectly the late twentieth century metropolis, too.

Within a realistic plot, the novel develops a perspective that is skeptical of realism. It explodes the latter's conventions by means of its sensationalist plot, in a manner reminiscent of Poe or Hawthorne. In line with the Romantic tradition, whose inheritor end of the twentieth century postmodernism was to a large extent, *The Waterworks*' immediate concerns lie not so much with the idea of historical progress as with "a culture's officially sanctioned venues… the refuse and debris that has been overlooked, repressed or marginalized" (Richter 2004, 135).

Thus, a double dimension of New York is revealed: a trajectory of progress, on the one hand, that coexists with and triggers stasis, disintegration and involution, on the other hand. The author dismantles the realist narrative of the nineteenth-century city with the help of the Gothic plot.

McIlvaine, the narrator, is the one who witnesses the unrelenting progress defining the age after the War of Secession. In that specific historical context, past and history seemed easier to leave behind in a New York eager to start anew and still confident in its innocence, insisting on seeing itself as home to the "New Adam." The deification of progress was a general phenomenon both in America and in Europe at that time. In its inflated confidence, the age saw its future as "an era, the grandeur of which experts and philosophers are prophesizing, and the reality of which, without doubt, will surpass the dreams of our imagination."[1]

In *The Waterworks*' New York, the constant building of the city is an accelerated, instantaneous process that seems to defy duration, occurring in a compressed version of time and space which made a rural, pre-industrial past coexist with the industrial present. To quote from the novel:

> *A few Dutch farms were razed, villages melded into towns, towns burned into precincts, and all at once block and tackle were raising the marble and granite mansions of Fifth Avenue, and burly cops were wading through the stopped traffic on Broadway, slapping horses on the rumps, disengaging carriage wheels, and cursing the heedless entanglement of horsecars, stages, drays, and two-in-hands, by which we transported ourselves through the business day*. (1994, 21)

The process of urbanization is as fast as it is total, previously rural space being assimilated without a trace by the city's exploding population: "A mansion would appear in a field. The next day it stood on a city street with horse and carriage riding by" (23). It is an "expanding, pulsating city pumping its energies outward furiously in every direction" (93) that fast engulfed all the still available space of the Grid. Such centrifugal characteristics are counteracted in the novel by a centripetal bent that focuses exclusively on the egotistic individual, just as the Manhattan Grid itself comprises both expanding tendencies, as it replicates itself indefinitely in space, owing to its repetitive, rectangular structure, and compressing tendencies, as space was used to the maximum in each cell of the Grid.

Accelerated transformation and tremendous energy is rendered literal in the book through the image of frequent fires that destroyed whole parts of old New York, forcibly making place to the new. Fire becomes a metaphor of the transient nature of the past itself in that specific context of fast and radical dissolution of old values: "We had fires all the time, we burned as a matter of habit. [...] Naturally it was the old city that tended to go up [...]. The old life, the past" (22). The abundance, the speed but equally the violence of industrial progress in New York City themselves suggest a process of fast combustion: "At night the flaming stacks of foundries along the river cast torchlight like seed over the old wharves and packing sheds. Cinderous locomotives rode right down the streets. Coal stocked the steamships and the ferries. The cookstoves in our homes burned coal [...]" (22). The image of fire strongly reinforces the dystopia of Manhattan as a destructive, hellish place where people inhale the "sulfurous stuff" (23) resulting from the process of burning, a city of the dead: "[O]n a winter morning without wind, black plumes rose from the chimneys in orderly rows like the shimmering citizens of a necropolis" (22). In fact, two ideas that dominate the plot render Manhattan dystopian: the self-destructive character of the city, which will be elaborated upon later in the paper, and the phenomenon of consumption in the industrial age. Destruction thus accompanies development as two faces of the same coin, a main characteristic of New York City but also of the modern age in general in the novel. As the city grows, expanding in space, it is simultaneously, paradoxically, a city "disassembling," "falling into ruin" (23) from both a social and a moral point of view. This is the result of various forms of excess as well as prevailing corruption, which fracture society and lead to drastic social injustice. The narrator does not hesitate to declare his distrust of "our modern industrial civilization" (11), a disbelief which he will constantly reinforce throughout the text, openly associating New York with degeneracy (23).

The immensity of production during the industrial age underlies its dehumanized character suggested through mechanistic images that punctuate the plot. "Enormous steam engines" that "powered the mills and factories" (20), the "steam pistons and cog wheels and rotating belts of a million industrial purposes" (171) diminish the role played by the individual in the process of production and his capacity to meaningfully relate to the city. On the one hand, this generated forms of extreme poverty especially amongst immigrants and the working class individuals. On the other hand, industrialization generated an excess of wealth to the benefit of those who knew how to take advantage of it.

Unstoppable progress coupled with such an unequal distribution of wealth gave birth to a Victorian, middle class society of excessive egos whose defining characteristic was individual self-conceit. As Doctorow expresses it, "[a]s a people we practiced excess. Excess in everything—pleasure, gaudy display, endless toil and death. Vagrant children slept in the alleys. Ragpicking was a profession. A conspicuously self-satisfied class of new wealth and weak intellect was all aglitter in a setting of mass misery" (21). The class that the author discusses here is specifically that of the *nouveaux riches* emerging after the Civil War in America, war profiteers like Augustus Pemberton or graft politicians such as Boss Tweed.

In an age of social Darwinism, the centripetal force of progress pushes those who do not conform to the general standard of wealth, health or morality to the margins of the city, isolating them in a clearly demarcated geography of power: "Out on the edges of town, along the North River or in Washington Heights or on the East River Islands, behind stone walls and high hedges, were our institutions of charity, our orphanages, insane asylums, poorhouses, schools for the deaf and dumb and mission homes for magdalens. They made a sort of Ringstrasse for our venerable civilization" (21). So careful to exclude what it perceives as contaminating corruption—prostitution, poverty, madness—New York is far less astute in what concerns its own, inner corruption of fraud and illegal profiteering which it generously tolerates.

Although an old inhabitant of New York and familiar with all its nooks and crannies owing to his journalistic profession, McIlvaine, the journalist, is often rendered a stranger in his own city, as he himself admits. The cause of his estrangement is precisely the industrial transformation of New York, its becoming an undistinguishable part of the impersonal and all-crushing gear of industrialism that underlies the barbarian character of modernity. As he suggestively puts it, " I could not spend ten minutes [...] without feeling myself estranged too, as if this roaring, teeming city thrumming with the steam pistons and cog wheels and rotating belts of a million industrial purposes was an exotic and totally inexplicable culture" (171).

A key symbol in the transforming city and equally in the novel is the Croton water reservoir of New York, the pumping station for the city's water supply. The "waterworks" in the novel's title, built between 1837 and 1842, it was a sign of its times and a mark of progress in the City, "an engineering marvel" (90), serving mostly to extinguish fires. The water reservoir was a thoroughly "unnatural thing" (86) owing to its specific architectural structure that disconnected it from the body of the city and equally owing to the function attributed in the novel. With its design recalling a massive Egyptian temple that echoes imperial power and might, the waterworks becomes, paradoxically, the very symbol of human repression in the destructive city: it is precisely inside of it that the old plutocrats abuse the orphaned children of New York's streets. This reverses the building's initial function, turning it from a source of vitality and life into a fount of death. The reservoir's description addresses precisely the heavy, disproportionate building as well as its tomb-like character: "The bouldered retaining walls were twenty-five feet thick and rose forty-four feet in an inward-leaning slant. The design was Egyptian. The corners were relieved by trapezoidal turrets, and bisecting each long wall face were temple doors" (86). Reflected in the reservoir waters, New York appears as a negative, absent repre-

sentation of itself which, symbolically plunges the city into non-existence. A dark double thus accompanies diurnal New York, in keeping with the idea of the dissolution of civilization which Doctorow develops along the novel: "From this elevation the rising city seemed to fall back before something that wasn't a city, a squared expanse of black water that was in fact the geometrical absence of a city" (95). More than a mere reservoir, to the narrator the building represents a "baptismal font for the gigantic absolution we require as a people" (91), in keeping with the recurrent idea of a fallen humanity and the image of a new, necessary Flood that prevail in *The Waterworks*.

When stating his belief that "[architecture] can inadvertently express the monstrousness of culture" (87) which he illustrates mainly with the help of the two crucial buildings in the book, the sanatorium and the waterworks, the author brings into discussion precisely what Jameson himself, quoting Benjamin, designated "the barbarism" of culture in *The Political Unconscious* (1981). Such a character is here associated with New York's excessive industrial growth that generates forms of fierce egotism and repression of the poor and weak, in particular the defenseless street children of the city.

Reason in Manhattan: *The Waterworks* as a Detective Novel

The novel's detective plot is centered not on the mysterious disappearance of one of the characters, as it is usually the case in this type of fiction but, on the contrary, on the sudden, enigmatic *post-mortem* reappearance of Augustus Pemberton, one of the central figures in the book. Apart from details concerning Pemberton's corrupt rise to financial prosperity and political influence, the story focuses on the other characters' attempts to make sense of his eerie episodes of reappearance in the city. The novel's denouement—the discovery of the surviving old plutocrats in their special sanatorium which puts an end to the whole scheme—shows that what initially seemed to pertain to a ghost scenario was in fact more in line with a realist narrative: the mystery had plausible causes and an explainable outcome that abounds in scientific undertones. This reflects the nineteenth-century's efforts to confirm the natural cause of all so-called supernatural phenomena through scientific methods that attest to the world's ultimate plausibility.

Thus, essentially, the plot sets to work the smooth mechanism of analytical investigation that will expose in the end the truth behind all secrecy: what seemed to be closer to a resurrected ghost proves to be nothing more than a dying man kept alive through artificial but fully scientific, therefore credible, means. At the same time, the detective narrative links together, ordering and re-codifying the disparate elements of Martin's mysterious disappearance that forms the subplot of the novel. It is therefore impossible not to give vote of confidence to reason and its revelatory force that stands proof once again for the brilliance of the mind as a force conquering city darkness and chaos in a predominantly positivistic, empiricist context. After all, Manhattan was itself built on such orderly principles, considering its urban Grid's rationalizing structure. Thus, the novel seems to reinforce once again the continuing functionality of the Enlightenment well into the nineteenth century.

All details become part of a continuous chain of cause and effect, the story acting in line with the typical realistic scenario of detective fiction which stages the ultimate coherence of the world together with the mind's final triumph. Thus, McIlvaine's step by step, careful connecting of characters and events helps him disclose details about Augustus Pemberton's life of corruption and theft, his illegal trading, his political ascension and fake, his bought respectability as well as his tense relationship with his family. In the end, the process of detection proves successful: not only is Martin found and rescued but the other disparate elements of the plot are themselves further ordered. The details of the story are explained and the specter's apparition is incorporated into a logical continuum, in line with the ethos of science and progress of the industrial paradigm. In other words, the initially chaotic, fragmented, decoded plot is re-codified and the idea of order is reinstituted both at a narrative level and in the city. Yet, no utopia is instituted as a result of it. In fact, the novel demonstrates precisely the contrary: namely, the persistence of the irrational and its surplus over reason, which is what renders the dystopian character of the city.

As I would argue at this point, all along the narrative there occurs a process of attacking reason as well as notions of progress and order in Manhattan. Despite the success of the detective pursuit and the final institution of justice, in spite of the apparent triumph of the mind, the denouement as well as several other signs in the text indicate the domination of irrationality and existential disorder in New York. In fact, the revelation of the ghost's mystery does not position us outside of the Gothic plot, as it might seem, but still within it, as an even greater aberration is brought to light: that of a city which vampirizes its children. The dystopia resides primarily in the fact that New York proves to be self-destructive, as it symbolically annihilates its own future.

Counteracting the detective plot, which ends with the progressive move towards truth and the apparent instauration of justice in the city, the Gothic subplot shows the stagnation that the city faces from a moral and profoundly human point of view. Fed by an exclusive ethos of greed, progress is shown to occur strictly at a material level. New York's egotistic, corrupt plutocracy metaphorically despoils the city in a scenario where the killing of children becomes a trope for degeneracy and, in more general terms, for the impossibility of deep historical change.

Excess in New York City; the Irrational

THE DYSTOPIAN nature of Manhattan is mainly related to the idea of excess in the city. From the beginning, Doctorow designates New York as a place of excess which he connects to a whole barbaric spirit typical of the respective age. Even Manhattan's "obsessionally ruled" Grid (273) is excessive in its repetitiveness; through its specific design, it fuels the city's underlying logic of gluttony.[2]

Starting with the Industrial Revolution as a mechanism that aggressively transformed the world through disproportionate production ("[o]ur rotary presses put fifteen, twenty thousand newspapers on the street for a penny or two" (20), to blatant slave trading in a Northern city right at the time of fighting slavery, to war profiteering through

the sale of inferior military gear to the army[3] resulting in significant accumulation of capital, all bespeak excess as the transcending of moral law, disguised as the infinite desire for progress. In the narrator's own ironical words, "[w]hen [the War of Secession] was over there was nothing to stop progress—no classical ruin of ideas, no superstitions to retard civil republican ardor" (21).

Reason itself, despite its attempts at circumscribing things, is utterly exceeded and contradicted in the novel, which is the main element of Manhattan as dystopia. The linear, detective plot is surpassed by forms of irrationality, just as "the apparent rationalism of the City Machine and its triumphant technology concealed a variety of hidden worlds, desires and motivations" (Shane 2002, 225). Such an example is also provided by phantasmagoric forms of dwelling whose illustration is the hidden waterworks asylum. This renders New York City a place of utter corruption, unlimited fancy and, ultimately, death.

It is not by accident that the chosen literary genre is the Gothic as a "writing of excess" (Spooner 2010, 252). "Drawing on the wild reputation of the original Goths [...], Gothic literature pits the forces of unreason against those of civilization and Enlightenment" (252), which is precisely what *The Waterworks* does. What comes under attack is the modern, industrial age as well as vampiric capitalism seen as opposing the very idea of civilization and progress which they avidly promote: the age is perceived as monstrous and wild due to the destruction it caused by means of its insatiable and all leveling exploitation of the world in general. In Victorian New York, in particular, such exploitation leads to social inequality and waste, the latter receiving a disquieting human dimension all along the novel: "[a]s a people we practiced excess. Excess in everything—pleasure, gaudy display, endless toil and death," that generates "mass misery" in a city where "[v]agrant children slept in the alleys" and where "[r]agpicking was a profession" (21).

As a dystopia, Manhattan has at its center the Victorian egotistic, self-propelling individual illustrated in the novel by Augustus Pemberton. Pemberton is placed at the peak of his corrupt financial and political ascendancy to better reflect the self-centeredness of his kind. Thus, the white, urban *nouveau riche* man forms a "conspicuously self-satisfied class of new wealth and weak intellect," all "aglitter in a setting of mass misery" (21). Although his public image is that of a model patriot as well as *pater familias*, Pemberton secretly abandons his family, whom he also disinherits in order to provide funds for the clinic where he is kept alive. This reflects the inner contradictions of the Victorian family as "a site of radical instability, ideological conflict and inconsistency" (Kohlke, Gutleben 2011, 4). He is equally the proud embodiment of the rags-to-riches scenario and therefore of the American Dream, if only ironically so, as here the dream turns delirious in the end:

> *We celebrated the fact of [Augustus'] arrival in America as a penniless, unschooled Englishman who hired himself out as a house servant under a contract that required his labor for seven years. We admired him for never glossing over these humble beginnings. In his later years, as a member of the Surveyors Club, where he lunched frequently at the Long Table, a major conversational theme was the example of his life as a fulfilment of the American ideal*. (Doctorow 1994, 49)

In a novel abounding in Old Testament undertones (the city as Babylon and as Tower of Babel, the necessity of a new Flood, the idea of a humanity living "in the continuum of original sin" (43), the theme of self-idolatry dominates the narrative and casts a bleak light both upon American individualism and the American Dream whose unavoidable consequence it is. As the narrator ponders bitterly, "[b]ut where deism [...] was a scandal, self-idolatry, if it left an estate of several millions, was an example to us all" (50). Thus, the exclusively financial standards by which value was assessed in the age demonstrate the destructive dimension of the American Dream. As a popular scenario and an accessible aim in America, success coerced individuals into employing any means, often devious ones, in order to achieve prosperity. Such an individual is Augustus Pemberton himself, whose name carries visible imperial connotations and who can be seen as the embodiment of that New York City that became "its own empire" during the Gilded Age (Reitano 2006, 84). This bespeaks power and equally narcissism, egotism and the individualistic isolation of a city closed within itself, in a culture thoroughly defined by "self-praise" (Doctorow 119), where a true religion was devoted to the individual.

Citizens such as Augustus Pemberton are the main element of dystopia in the novel. Although the whole city praised the man as a true pillar of his nation and city, he in fact lacked all sense of community and cared strictly for his own wellbeing. As such he is the embodiment of the Emersonian doctrine of the American mythic self which Richard Rorty criticizes: "At bottom, however, Emerson, like his disciple Nietzsche, was not a philosopher of democracy but of private self-creation, of what he called 'the infinitude of the private man.' Godlike power was never far from Emerson's mind. His America was not so much a community of fellow citizens as a clearing in which Godlike heroes could act out self-written dramas." (Rorty 1999, 26). Christian Moraru defines this as "egology" (Moraru 2011, 8) in relationship not so much to the nineteenth century but to our present age. In fact, Doctorow himself makes several direct allusions to the "present" in the novel, as the past plot acts as a mirror that reflects the author's own time. He thus draws attention to a phenomenon that has persisted in time and which brings together nineteenth-century early capitalism and our late capitalism in disquieting ways. Such continuity between the two ages emphasizes our culture's persistent and intense preoccupation with the self rather than the other, a tendency which Doctorow proves suffocating and ultimately destructive in the novel.

Placing reason and unreason side by side, the novel reflects the paradoxical, discontinuous character of the nineteenth century itself. As McIlvaine, the narrator, states, the facts that he is exposing as a journalist in the "flat light of reality" (96), namely ordinary everyday occurrences, take place "simultaneously with this secret story" (97), which lays bare the contradictory nature of the city and its persisting dark side. The image is symbolized by that of New York's Croton reservoir itself, where the beneficial role of the waterworks is reversed and denied owing to its functioning as a murder chamber for the orphaned street children.

Also in line with the dystopian side of Manhattan and the impression of a "sickening descent into disintegration" that it conveys (Spooner 2010, 246) is the surplus of death over life in the city. Apart from the black smoke rising out of city's chimneys, which renders the place akin to a "necropolis" (Doctorow 1994, 22), Manhattan is described

with the help of organic metaphors as a "leper colony" (124), a "monstrous carcass," a "huge bloody being" (122). The Croton reservoir is itself a tomb-like architectural presence. Its structure is "Egyptian" (86) in that it is, on the one hand, a symbol of power that transcends the human, in tone with the inhuman character of the industrial age itself, on the other hand, it is literally a tomb, a secret sacrificial place which hides the murderous acts that occur in its underground.

A critical remark that addresses the novel affirms that "in *The Waterworks* it is innate depravity rather than social conditioning that is considered the source of evil" (Wutz 2003, 513). Although Augustus Pemberton is indeed one of the most depraved characters in the book, the causes of evil are in fact more general and have to do with an endless desire for development and wealth that often led to corruption in New York City in the nineteenth century. Such characteristics are embodied by individuals but are also the result of larger social structures of graft and political power such as Tammany Hall, as well as a whole society's mute acceptance of them.

"A story of invisible men, [...] hidden, barricaded, in their own created realm"

The self-idolizing Victorian middle-class parvenus designed their perfect cocoon-shelter in the waterworks of New York. This is what the subterranean asylum hidden in the Croton water reservoir represents, with the infinite pampering that it offers to those who have the financial means to extend their life indefinitely. It is a form of self-contained dwelling that symbolically echoes New York City's other wealthy residences, the famed brownstones, in the context of Manhattan's "self-idolatry" (Koolhaas 2004, 21).

The secret asylum institutes its own *illo tempore*, functioning mainly as a time capsule where dying people strive to live eternally in a self-contained environment. It represents a utopian type of space at the very heart of dystopia, and it is at the same time the central source of dystopia. A high realization of progress and of industrial technology, the sanatorium is shaped as a perfect haven, an "indoor park with gravel paths and plantings" (Doctorow 1994, 259). It is a simulacrum of Eden, a private paradise to the exclusive benefit of the very wealthy. In fact it represents a mere fallen realm (therefore, metaphorically, the Hell) as a mechanized, reconstructed, industrial replica, its energy provided by its dynamo, and echoing Jameson's "fallen world of capitalism" (Jameson 1981, 183). With its "tepid steam or diffusion of watered air" that "hissed out of ports or valves inset in the floor" and its central "sunken stone bath, a bathing pool with water" (Doctorow 1994, 260), the place also recalls a Roman spa or thermae (260). It thus metaphorically alludes to the Roman imperial idea of leisure that combined power and cruelty, which the name *Augustus* (Pemberton) equally makes reference to.

Such is the Heaven of the modern American Adam who no longer personifies innocence but corruption and sin, as illustrated by Pemberton and the other plutocrats who live in the Croton asylum in splendid isolation. Together they stand for America's refusal to come of age in the nineteenth century and admit its greed and neglect of the

other. The sanatorium is equally a space that seems to "pulse" (260) like a living womb but which only bears some old, terminally ill men who will be artificially 'born' into extended lives. Since the city favors such an indefinite extension of decaying old age while at the same time it destroys its children, the nineteenth-century Darwinist pattern of evolution is contradicted and replaced by a degenerative model in Manhattan.

Dehumanization as the central element of dystopian Manhattan marks Doctorow's pessimistic view of modern New York and is once again in keeping with the book's atmosphere of prevailing death. The main crisis in the novel, that of a "profound . . . derangement of the natural order of fathers and sons" (330) translates in a naturalistic key the idea of the disorder induced by modernity as an age of existential regress, in contrast to its material progress. The whole optimistic ethos of the respective age is thus denied from the inside and the very notion of future is annihilated in a city which kills its own children to employ them as fuel. This signals the symbolic death of New York as a self-sufficient system that, in its gluttony, has reached a state where it metaphorically feeds upon itself. In more general terms, such a degenerative process bespeaks the destructive character of egotistic, self-contained Sameness (individual and city) that violently represses the other to the benefit of the self. What is implicitly dismissed in the novel is thus the view of subjectivity as exemplary, complete and stable that the humanistic doctrine is based upon.

Nineteenth-Century Science and the Posthuman

The view of science that Doctorow deploys in the novel bitterly criticizes the dehumanized nineteenth century modernity. What he seems to denounce is science's presence of a special access to truth, its so called 'objectivity' and consequent impersonality. In *The Waterworks*, Doctorow sees such affectation as camouflaging science's disregard of humans and of morality, especially in what concerns instances of impoverished otherness in the city. The writer's hostility towards exacerbated modern scientific progress reflects one's typically late twentieth century disappointment with science's arrogance in the aftermath of the two world wars and during an age of excessive consumerism and waste.

Here again the narrator demonstrates how the other's exploitation is made possible with science's apparently disinterested contribution.[4] The genius physician Sartorius, the one having designed the blood transfusion system that keeps the old plutocrats alive, is said to be so absorbed by the medical act itself that he completely disregards the objects of his care, being unaware whether he treats "a man or a cow" (Doctorow 1994, 181). The significance of his name, 'Sartorius' ('tailor' in Latin) suggests a primitive dimension of the medical act, that of merely cutting limbs apart. Indeed, Sartorius had the reputation of a passionate, very successful surgeon during the American Civil War, someone who "could amputate a leg in nine seconds, an arm in six" and who "invented procedures—excisions, exsections, of the wrist, the ankle, the shoulder" (184), which hint at the idea of the dismemberment and thus objectification of people. An amoral person, he is immersed in the pure contemplation of what he sees as a scientific object, name-

ly that "continuously fascinating . . . wonderfully torn and broken and dying body . . . with endless things to be fixed" (295), suggestive of the more general detachment of modern medicine. An impersonation of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and in line with the novel's view of self-idolizing Victorian individuals, Sartorius speaks of his cases with godly indifference. He states that the old men were "self-submitted to [him] for [his] *use*" (297; italics mine) and that it was his own decision to keep them "biomotive, that is, where they did not stop breathing" (297). The detached arrogance of science and the total control of the individual that it supposes bespeak not so much the nineteenth century, when such technology was clearly unavailable, but the present.

Projecting into the past ideas of such advanced medical achievements which are the sign of our own age increases the dystopian nature of Manhattan. We recognize ourselves, as we are presently—with our life support systems, our sophisticated organ transplants and transfusions, our vanity in prolonging life indefinitely—in such a past. The two ages are implicitly compared in insidious ways that doubt the concept of substantial progress in time between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth century.

In the surgeon's institution, the human body is a mere "clockwork to be disassembled," "a machine's costume" (269) that he attempts to reanimate "with his emollients, and powders, and fluid injections from the children," "reconstituting [the dying men] metempsychotically as endless beings" (277). Eliminating the old men's "malignant organs and connect[ing] them to machines which performed the work of those organs" (322) echoes surgical procedures familiar to us, now, as do the "cosmetic therapies" (322) mentioned in the book. This seems to bespeak a view of things that goes beyond the notion of a human being as we know it, towards a type of radically altered person that signals the exhaustion of the human, namely a posthuman entity. It provides a critique of the subject as unitary, coherent, unique and perfectly autonomous, emphasizing "the changeability and relativity of human nature and individuality as well as the relativity of values" (Herbrechter 2013, 12). As a result of transfusions and changed, rejuvenated organs, the moribund plutocrats artificially survive with the help of advanced technology but they are seen as degenerate beings in the novel. Prolonging their lives beyond death, they are but specters of the past, mere zombies, having thus turned posthuman.

Even re-energized with the help of fresh blood transfusions, such 'zombies' are a devitalized species nearing extinction, physically and mentally inferior to the rest of humanity which they try to eliminate in order to make more room for themselves. Doctorow implicitly associates a truly durable alternative in the city with the youngsters there, which attacks Victorianism's view of street children as disposable at that time, despite the age's sentimental, hypocritical view of them as priceless beings.

Posthumanism is regarded as a phenomenon associated with our future, when the human would have reached such a stage of technological improvement as to transcend and contradict its actual definition, coming close to a constructed, artificial entity. Yet, in the novel, Doctorow places the posthuman already in the nineteenth century, thus designing a form of proto-posthumanism that alludes to a process of dehumanisation occurring much earlier than expected, a process that the novelist associates already with industrialism. Here, Doctorow refers simultaneously to our own times, when the

book was published. When the narrator suddenly addresses the reader, referring directly to our present, "now" ("You may think that you are living in modern times, here and now, but that is the necessary illusion of every age" (Doctorow 1994, 16), he draws attention precisely to the fact that "now" in New York is comparable to "then," to a past from which only material progress has been made. Thus, past and present are welded together considering both centuries' obsessive concern with the Self.

The high impact of technology which the author associates with the industrial age is equally an allusion to our present, when resorting to technological devices as substitutes of body parts has relativized and questioned the notion of 'human nature.' The individual's dependence upon various technical devices that extend his/her life represents an attack on humanist values which suggests the necessity of a fundamental revision of such 'values.'

The profound inhumanity of such a system as the one at work in New York City in 1871 is at the heart of dystopian Manhattan. What the novel underlines is precisely the need for a changed system that would ideally employ humanism not "only ... as its ideology" (8) but at a more substantial level that would necessarily include the other.

Concerning the idea of technology, Doctorow is highly skeptical of the latter, which he sees as humanism's direct product rather than an alternative to the strict confines of humanism. Technology appears here as the result of an "ideology of development" (Doctorow 1994, 8) and therefore progress, both of which are strongly related to humanism through their placing of reason centrally, for example. As such, technology does not represent an option that decenters the financially potent human. On the contrary, as the product of liberal ideology and of 'Man,' it is correlated with Man's class, social and financial positioning which make its utilization possible, as is the case with Augustus Pemberton and the other magnates in the asylum.

The accumulative, suffocating material dimension of science is equally highlighted in the description of Sartorius' laboratories that pile up "glass cabinets for instruments . . . stone-top cabinets inset with iron sinks . . . boxy machines on wheels with cables and gears and tubing" (Doctorow 1994, 257). Such props seem to possess a reality of their own that acts to the demise of the human rather than to his help. The surreal consistency of their presence seems to eliminate the human altogether, which underlines once again the posthuman dimension of the dystopian city. Amoral science thus proves to be posthuman because it is no longer in the service of human life, which the street children in New York represent. Instead, it is in the service of death which it gives substance to through the animation of the zombie-like old men and also through its own densely objectified dimension.

At the center of the dystopia are the orphaned street children who are sacrificed for the sake of the dying plutocrats. They stand for the idea of humans as dispensable that Doctorow implicitly criticizes in the book. Performing the work of adults in order to survive or to help their impoverished, migrant families, frequently abused in the vitiated environment of New York, devoid of individuality because of their great numbers, street children are "as common and unremarked as paving stones" (Doctorow 1994, 98), in a comparison that underlines the general tendency to objectify them. They represent "the surplus of a bustling democracy" (Doctorow 1994, 99), as the narrator ironically

puts it, as they seem impossible to contain in the charitable institutions of New York at the time. The word "surplus," bespeaks precisely the bureaucratic, abstract and ultimately inhuman terms that society employs to refer to them. In fact, Doctorow ironizes here the Victorian view upon children as the embodiment of purity and angelic innocence. The reason for this was the fact that Victorianism inherited the Romantic movement's "cult of innocence [that] promoted an idealized view of childhood and produced what has sometimes been referred to as 'the cult of the child': the child-centered home was developing" (Flanders 2003, 9). The idea of protected, adored children during the respective age is blatantly attacked in *The Waterworks* whose skeptical neo-Victorianism stresses once again the hypocrisy of nineteenth-century society. Thus, the narrator highlights a general perception that sees street children as society's waste, a view that he ironically expresses in the detached jargon of scientific Darwinism typical of the age. New York was perceived as defined by self-regulating, natural processes or as an entirely new biological species that could arrogantly deal away with such fragile humans as abandoned children, a view that the narrator distances himself from: "[l]ike Nature, our city was spendthrift and produced enough wealth for itself to take heavy losses without noticeable damage. It was all a cost of doing business while the selection of the species went relentlessly forward, and New York, like some unprecedented life form, blindly sought its perfection" (Doctorow 1994, 99-100). Children seem to matter little on the evolutionary path of that magnificent "organism" which was New York, in the world of avid capitalism; they represent mere commodities, "losses that society could tolerate" (99). Literally exploited to the benefit of the dying tycoons, the children are depersonalized and turned into waste.

Conclusion

The substantial dystopia of Manhattan that Doctorow constructs in the novel resides mainly in the fact that the emergence of a new world—that of industrialism out of partially rural pre-industrialism that still defined New York City towards the end of the nineteenth century—is not accompanied by the birth of a 'new man.' No New Adam confronts the city to ultimately adapt to a new life under changed conditions, as it was the case in the realist novel. Rather, the 'new man' is here (symbolically) a dying man, personified by Augustus Pemberton and the other tycoons whose 'birth' in the cocoon of the asylum is a false birth, a mere animation of decaying bodies. Moreover, Augustus, the prototype of this new, industrial age is a corrupt exploiter and slave trader, which suggests that the 'new' industrial structures in fact but prolong pre-industrial ideas of exploitation and abuse. The accumulation of energy in enthusiastic and trustful nineteenth-century New York does not propel children to the front as the sign of a new era. Instead, the city is symbolically a devitalized place owing to the destruction of its own offspring and the consequent annihilation of its future, which is what gives its dystopian character. Progress is thus put to the exclusive service of the Self who egotistically clings to his own class and financial status. Victorian New York seems to fully support the aggrandizing of such a Self's closed, suffocating and ultimately

self-exhausting world. Or, the "barbarism of culture" (Jameson 1981, 281), which the novel extends to the level of the whole modern civilization, resides precisely in the exaltation of such a self that strives to maintain its privileges intact in time, to the exclusion of the Other.

Notes

1. As stated in a publicity text for the 1900 Paris Universal Exposition (qtd. in Buck-Morss 2004, 262).
2. Not only is the Grid itself excessive as a type of self-reproducing, endless structure but it is also based on the idea of New York's infinite commercial efficiency. The 1811 Commissioners' main purpose for employing such a simplified structure in Manhattan was precisely that of generating greater profitability of real estate.
3. All of which constituted Augustus Pemberton's main sources of income before his hospitalization.
4. Science's contribution is only apparently disinterested in the novel as, in fact, the whole enterprise was directly financed by corrupt Tammany money. It was also Tammany Hall that provided tacit but consistent protection from the law.

Works Cited

Buck-Morss, Susan. 2004. "Mythic History." In *Urban Culture. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Chris Jenks, 255-287. London and New York: Routledge.

Doctorow, E. L. 1994. *The Waterworks.* New York: Signet, 1994.

Flanders, Judith. 2003. *Inside the Victorian Home*. New York, London: Norton.

Herbrechter, Stefan. 2013. *Posthumanism. A Critical Analysis*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Jameson, Fredric. 1981. *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Kohlke, Marie-Luise, Christian Gutleben. 2011. "Introducing Neo-Victorian Family Matters: Cultural Capital and Reproduction." In *Neo-Victorian Families. Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics,* ed. Marie-Luise Kohlke and C. Gutleben, 1-45. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi.

Koolhaas, Rem. 2004. *Delirious New York*. New York: The Monacelli Press.

Moraru, Christian.2011. *Cosmodernism. American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*. The University of Michigan Press.

Reitano, Joanne. 2006. *The Restless City. A Short History of New York From Colonial Times to the Present*. New York, London: Routledge.

Richter, Gerhard. 2004. "A Matter of Distance: Benjamin's One Way Street through The Arcades." In *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin,* ed. Davis S. Ferris, 132-157. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, Richard. 1999. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London, New York, Victoria: Penguin Books.

Shane, Grahame. 2002. "The Machine in the City. Phenomenology and Everyday Life in New York." In *The Urban Lifeworld. Formation, Perception, Representation*, ed. P. Madsen and R. Plunz, 218-237. London, NY: Routledge.

Spooner, Catherine. 2010. "Crime and the Gothic." In *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. C. Rzepka and L. Horsley, 245-258. Malden, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
Wutz, Michael. 2003. "Literary Narrative and Information Culture: Garbage, Waste, and Residue in the Work of E. L. Doctorow." *Contemporary Literature*, 44.3: 501-535.

Abstract

Self-destructive Manhattan in E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks*

The essay shows how E. L. Doctorow's novel *The Waterworks* (1994) acts to construct a convincing dystopia of Manhattan as fictionally recreated, alternative history. I argue that Doctorow's dystopia is based on a central, posthuman element, which is related not to our future, as one might expect, but to the nineteenth century.

Keywords

Manhattan, dystopia, excess, material culture, posthumanism, Industrial Revolution