

PICTURES OF A BLEAK CITY:  
HISTORICIST INDETERMINACY  
AND SOCIAL CHAOS IN DOCTOROW'S  
*THE WATERWORKS*

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Linda Hutcheon's notion of «historiographic metafiction,» as she has sufficiently argued (1988, 1989), clearly applies to some of the narratives written by highly acclaimed novelists of postmodern America. Writers such as Pynchon, DeLillo, Coover, or Doctorow offer in their works valid exemplification of the contemporary mixture of historical with fictive representations, a characteristic that although not uncommon in older narratives –let us think of *The Scarlet Letter*, for instance–, is now presented, as Hutcheon put it in 1989, with a particular stress on «. . . the self-consciousness of the fictionality, the lack of familiar pretence of transparency, and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing.» (35)

In 1991 Hutcheon extended her views on historiographic metafiction virtually to all postmodern fiction while at the same time affirming that this type of narrative, by foregrounding the ideological component that always mediates human discursive practices, was in fact developing a critical attack on humanist values (106 *et seq.*). Hutcheon's stance at that moment was clearly coincidental with Hayden White's post-lacanian notions on the «narrativity» that conforms human perception and transcription of the world (1980, 1987) but what the latter critic was doing concerning historiography, Hutcheon was extending to the field of creative literature. In effect, readers of her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) and of her essay «Discourse, Power, Ideology: Humanism and Postmodernism» (1991) will discover a very perceptive approach to a contemporary type of historical fiction where poststructuralist notions seem to be always present: the dismantling of [aristotelian categories and] humanist values is already operative, according to Hutcheon's views, in contemporary fiction, with the postmodern

and the poststructuralist somehow blurring their frontiers in this paradoxical period of Western culture: in this way historiographic metafiction would be imposing on its readers values related to the notions of fragmentation, the instability of the subject, the rejection of totalizing discourse, or the undecidability of meaning. Some readers of Hutcheon's views may perhaps think that she is exaggerating the importance of derridean or foucaultian notions on contemporary fiction, and certainly some creative authors share this opinion. Along 1994 I had the opportunity to interview American novelists Ishmael Reed, Eric Kraft, Russell Banks, and Bharati Mukherjee and, with the exception of the first one—mind you, the most overtly metafictional of the four—the other writers denied the direct impact of poststructuralist interpretive theory on their works, even if the type of language being used by a writer like, let's say, Mukherjee frequently brings to mind echoes of deconstructivist notions. Hutcheon might perhaps be exaggerating when she asserts that postmodern creative fiction is or must be historiographic metafiction but I still believe that a substantial part of the most celebrated contemporary American writers show in their works values very close to the ones affirmed by the Canadian critic: we may perhaps, with the help of William Paulson (1991), refer here to the apparent interdisciplinary effect of culture, a characteristic that helps to explain coincidences among the different fields that conform the postmodern experience of life. And certainly, within the interdisciplinarity of contemporary culture the indeterminacy of historical truth also appears as one of the most extended motifs.

As readers of this paper may likely know, the term «indeterminacy» became widely accepted in poststructuralist jargon probably due to the impact caused by the spread of Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty that, in lay terms, affirms the ultimate impossibility to exactly measure the momentum and position of the quantum particle and the inevitable overlapping of the scientist with his or her experiment in the act of observation (Davies, *Cosmic Blueprint* 166-67). Although the uncertainty principle exclusively refers to the microatomic level and does not practically affect macroatomic experience (Solomon, chapter 7; Porush, end-note # 21), the notion itself has functioned as a metaphorical correlate of the derridean concept of the undecidability of meaning (Mehan 138 *et seq.*), an argument that also informs Hayden White's above mentioned notion of «narrativity.» Narratorial and historical indeterminacy is also one of the outstanding elements that, once again, conform the latest novel published by one of the most well-known practitioners of American historiographic metafiction: E. L. Doctorow.

However, *The Waterworks* (1994) also presents two other characteristics that are particularly appealing to the writer of these lines: it is a novel set in the distant American past and secondly, one of the protagonists in its story is the city of New York. The latter is nothing new in Doctorow's fiction. His readers may remember the important role played by the city in other highly acclaimed novels by the same author, such as *Ragtime* (1975) or *Billy Bathgate* (1989), but when this element combines with the first one—the novel's setting in the distant past—we come to more innovative grounds in the fiction written by the famous American author. By «distant past» I mean here some

months in the life of New York in 1871, when only a few years have elapsed since the end of the American Civil War, and I think I am not exaggerating when I refer to the last third of the nineteenth-century as being «distant» in time because, as I have argued elsewhere (Collado, *Actas*), American *canonized* writers of historiographic metafiction are frequently and almost exclusively interested in the analysis of twentieth-century historical forces, and it is only in rare occasions that they decide to go further back in time to provide a setting for their stories. In *The Waterworks* Doctorow dares to go back more than one-hundred-and-twenty years ago to «revisit» the city of New York by means of the narrative devised by a certain McIlvaine, an old newspaperman who, many years later, decides to report on the events that led himself and police captain Edmund Donne to clarify the criminal deeds being committed in the Croton Aqueduct waterworks of the city of New York. McIlvaine, as also happens in some of the other fictions constructed by Doctorow, will be the sole narrator of the whole story, in this way acting as the only and paradoxical «centered consciousness» of this postmodern novel, postmodern if its author really belongs in that group that Ickstadt denominated some years ago (1988) as «postmodern realists.» In fact, some readers might think that, due to the homodiegetic condition of its narrator and to the ideology he seems to transpire, *The Waterworks* is simply a realistic story contextualized in the last decades of the nineteenth-century. In this view, McIlvaine's report would unconsciously fall in the category of the «imaginary» that characterizes narrativity in traditional historiography. As Hayden White asserts,

What is «imaginary» about any narrative representation is *the illusion of a centered consciousness* capable of looking out on the world, apprehending its structure and processes, and representing them to itself as having all of the formal coherency of narrativity itself. But this is to mistake a «meaning» (which is always constituted rather than found) for «reality» (which is always found rather than constituted). (*Content* 36; my italics)

In other words, discursive totalization might be recognized as one of the main characteristics that conform McIlvaine's account, and *The Waterworks* could never qualify as one of those novels that, as Hutcheon puts it, «are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages» (*A Poetics* 5). Is *The Waterworks* representative of traditional historiographic beliefs or of postmodern historiographic metafiction? Some years ago in her influential book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh already qualified Doctorow's fiction as a new type of realism that manifested the symptoms of formal and ontological insecurity but she also maintained that his novels allowed «their deconstructions to be finally recontextualized or 'naturalized' and given a *total interpretation*» (18; my italics); now McIlvaine even provides his readers with a final epilogue in which he summarizes what is to happen to the lives of the other protagonists of the book once the main events are over.

In the novel the impression of totalizing closure may at times be more than obvious, however Doctorow is still the same author that some years ago insisted on the notion that there is no history except as it is composed. In a way that may remind the reader of the theories defended by Hayden White, the novelist has commented that «history shares with fiction a mode of mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning, and it is the cultural authority from which they both derive that illuminates those facts so that they can be perceived» («False Documents» 24). And this human introduction of meaning already presupposes, in my reading, the affirmation of the above-mentioned concept of historical indeterminacy: truth, as Arthur M. Saltzman says (29-51), is elusive in the face of History, McIlvaine's self-conscious report offering a good proof of this.

The narrator of *The Waterworks* frequently describes himself as a historical researcher and even if the reader may have the impression at times that McIlvaine is a parody of Dr. Watson –captain Donne being here Sherlock Holmes's double–, in his detective work he also establishes links with the figure of a historian who is not, however, the perfect prototype of a nineteenth-century historiographer (White, *Content* 28-30) because, in his frequent report on the importance of his narratorial activities, he shares a similar viewpoint with poststructuralist critics or even with writers like Doctorow himself. Soon McIlvaine discovers to his readers the necessity to report the truth; however, at the same time, he also introduces strange comments that seem to befit more in a postmodern context:

I am extending myself in a narrative here—it is my own mind's experience that I report, a true deposition of the events, and the statements, claims, protestations, and prayers of the souls whom I represent as seen or heard . . . so that *my life is wholly woven into the intentions of the narration*, with not a thread remaining for whatever other uses I might have found for it. (64; my italics)

As a former newspaperman McIlvaine the narrator is very much aware of the possible fictionality of textual reports: his is also a quest for accuracy where the social denounce that was to characterize the American muckrakers at the beginning of this century cannot escape his dubious thoughts on the notions of *how* to report his story. As I understand it, McIlvaine's ideology –the only one, let us remember, through which the whole story is focused– offers a curious and postmodern mixture of narrative self-consciousness together with a set of scientific and social values that are fitted for the turn of the century –that is to say, about the time in which he presents his narrative deposition. It is this mixture of values corresponding to different times that makes *The Waterworks*, in my reading, an example of postmodern historiographic metafiction but also an outstanding instance of irony as an effective literary weapon: in the reader's mind McIlvaine's report may also draw a cultural bridge between the political corruption predominant in American life after the Civil War and the similar political condition still

existing in the country after the Vietnam war: the old figure of the muckraker, even if now narratorially confused, reappears to force the reader to remember that creative literature is also a valid means to analyze the historical forces currently operating in our period.

As one of the most powerful examples of this temporal bridge stands the city of New York itself that, in clear agreement with McIlvaine's historical context, is presented imbued with a naturalistic bleak atmosphere where the notion of entropic dissolution appears linked to the city's consideration as a living organism. At the beginning of the 1870s New York is tightly controlled by William Marcy Tweed, a man who has his own judges in the state courts, his own mayor in City Hall and even his own governor in Albany (Doctorow, *The Waterworks* 10), a man who controls the police force with the exception of a few independent officers, captain Donne being one of this reduced group of nineteenth-century «untouchables.» Amidst these social conditions, New York stands as a clear naturalistic predecessor of those ruinous cities that infect the verses of Eliot's greatest poem. As McIlvaine soon asks in his narrative, «Can you imagine what it is like to live in a city of thieves, raucous in its dissembling, a city falling into ruin, a society in name only?» (10-11). His report is certainly very conscious of the historical or, shall we say, narrative forces operating in the time of the events; in his role as witness and reporter of those events he does not doubt to recognize the ideology that from scientific grounds is also being imposed on the interpretation of the roles of people and city, after having displaced more traditional religious values:

... For certain religious sensibilities such children fulfilled the ineffable aims of God. For the modern folk, Mr. Darwin was cited, and the design was Nature's. So the flower girl Mary, and the newsies and the rest of these child beggars who lived among us, were losses society could tolerate. Like 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. (67; my italics)

As this quotation shows, the characters in the narrator's story –that takes place early in the 1870s– are obviously rooted in Darwinian times; Dr. Sartorius, the scientist manipulator of life, is presented by other characters, such as Dr. S. Hamilton, as a true believer in Darwin's theories (228-30): the evolution and selection of the human species crystallizes in his attempt to extend the lives of the socially powerful by using up the bodies of indigent children, a medical practice that, however, also has its ironic criminal correlate in our contemporary society. Nevertheless, McIlvaine's is not simply a portrait of the *living* organism of New York in accordance with Darwinist theories still in vogue along the second half of the nineteenth-century. His picture is also informed

by other modern theories that, since the 1850s, were gradually effecting what in due time became a radical shift from the mechanistic and Darwinian interpretations of life evolution. The reader should not forget that McIlvane presents his deposition many years after the resolution of the criminal deeds that took place in the waterworks; therefore his ideology, especially in those aspects that concern the interpretation of evolution, does not exactly coincide with the one supported by the characters in a story that ended in 1871. «Almost a million people called New York home,» the narrator remembers from his temporal location at the turn of the century, «everyone securing his need in a state of cheerful degeneracy. Nowhere else in the world was there *such an acceleration of energies.*» (13; my italics) The last phrase in this quotation already presupposes a new understanding in the always changing interpretation of the book on nature: in part displacing Darwinism and optimistic mechanicism, a new understanding of energy, the notion of entropy, and a philosophy that may remind the reader of Henry Adams's theories have imposed on the bleak view that McIlvane the narrator sustains all along the pages of his textual confession.

Contrary to what some new acolytes of contemporary chaos theory may still believe, some of the ideas defended by scientists and natural philosophers in this postmodern branch of knowledge are not purely innovative but show coincidences not only with old Native American or Hindu religious concepts but also with the theories defended by thinkers who wrote them down not so many decades ago. One of those thinkers, and a very relevant one indeed, was Henry Adams, whose *Education* was to become a very influential work among postmodern American circles. In 1854 the German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz announced that the Universe was effectively doomed due to its transition towards a situation of thermodynamic equilibrium in which all sources of useful energy would be exhausted: thermodynamics and its terrifying second law –or law of entropy– had been born as the newest bleak scientific narrative that was to gradually displace Newtonian optimism (Davies, *Matter Myth* 118-19; cf. Eric C. White 104). By the first decade of the twentieth-century historian Henry Adams already maintained that the hypothesis of Darwinian evolution had been overthrown by the second law of thermodynamics and in «A Letter to American Teachers of History,» urged his colleagues to work out a formula to comprehend the course of history in terms of this law (in Blair 864): his essay «The Dynamo and the Virgin» is a well-known example of Adams's attempt to integrate social history within a scientific context rooted mainly in the concepts of force and energy but Chapter XXXIII of his *Education*, entitled «A Dynamic Theory of History» (1904), also offers new insights that anticipate later arguments defended by theorists of the science of chaos. Adams already comments on the interaction of many types of forces in life and on the incapacity of the human being to perceive all of them, reaching a conclusion that stands very close to contemporary beliefs: «In the earlier stages of progress, the forces to be assimilated were simple and easy to absorb, but, as the mind of man enlarged its range, *it enlarged the field of complexity*, and must continue to do so, even into chaos, *until the reservoirs*

*of sensuous or supersensuous energies are exhausted, or ceased to affect him, or until he succumbs to their excess»* (in Blair 874; my emphasis). In these lines, complexity and entropy are already two key notions to interpret the universe as both chaotic and structured, with the human being as instrument of this interpretation –by means of his or her own *complex* and progressive understanding– but also as the future victim of this complexity that leads to the ultimate rule of entropy (*cf.* Prigogine & Stengers; and Hayles): the «postmodern» notion that affirms that human narrativization is inherently united to the observed universe (White, *Content*) also conforms the ideology expressed in Adams's words; it should not then surprise us to see a similar interpretation of life also reflected in McIlvaine's arguments. The story in *The Waterworks* is also centered on a metaphorical water «reservoir» that stands for a reservoir of life for the powerful and wealthy who want to avoid the effects of entropy on their own bodies: old men who are invisible, walking absences whose non-presence is deconstructively traced down by detective Donne and historian McIlvaine; in the 1870s the city of New York is not yet the parodic «city of God» where, as the poor Cuban fisherman believes, «they have learned the secret of eternal life» (245). Even if at times he is a decontextualized deconstructivist looking for traces, narrator McIlvaine is still an Adamsian believer in chaos but also in narrativizing order; soon in his narrative he asserts that the task of the newspaperman is to «slug the chaos [of the universe] into sentences arranged in columns on a page of newsprint» (14). However, his continuous emphasis on imposing a narrative order into the chaos of life (see for instance pp. 115 and 123) may well lead the reader to also conclude the distrust of narrativity that McIlvaine shares with postmodern thinking; in effect in his bleak –naturalistic and Adamsian– presentation of the events the narrator neither affirms the Hegelian progress of knowledge nor the Marxist emancipation of humanity; McIlvaine does not seem to support either of these two grand-narratives that, according to Lyotard (1984), are also rejected in the postmodern ethos. On the contrary, as pertains a historiographic-metafictional construct, his naturalistic presentation of corrupted New York is progressively undermined by his own words. His is an ironic position epitomized in comments that, like the following one, tend to erase final confidence in human interpretation:

In this moment I understood, as they must have, that Donne's researchers had provided *an answer of a kind* ... that where, before, all had been chaos and bewilderment and hurt, now it was clear that something understandable ... an act ... had been committed ... a deliberate act or series of acts ... by which we could recompose the world, *comfortingly, in categories of good and evil*. (141; my italics)

McIlvaine is clearly conscious of the pragmatic necessity to resort to a given narrative frame –in the quotation above, a Christian moral one– so as to impose order on the chaotic universe of forces, his Adamsian beliefs drawing a bridge towards

postmodern times. However, his is not an optimistic understanding of life, as readers of postmodern chaos theories—such as Prigogine’s—might expect: for McIlvaine narrativity still seems to impose order on a society that is corrupted to the core, even if he has chosen to reject as «no longer tenable» the traditional opposition Nature vs. City (224). In the book, his report starts with some comments about «literal truth» and it ends up with an «illusion» that brings back to mind Hayden White’s notions on the imaginary quality of human narrativity: once the mystery has been successfully solved, McIlvaine reports of his illusion of the city of New York as being «frozen in time,» in this way—we might think—overcoming the terrible law of entropy...or perhaps, on the contrary, anticipating its «heat death» because the narrator has, even if briefly, recovered his confidence in the biblical God to dream that «New York would be forever encased and frozen, aglitter and God-stunned.» A factual report—whose own veracity has been frequently undermined by the words of McIlvaine himself—has finally given way to a dreaming illusion, once more calling the reader’s attention to a «centered consciousness» who, immersed in his own chaotic beliefs, cannot maintain a totalizing view of life any longer.

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