The Waterworks: A Parallax View of a Modern Gothic Tale

THEODORA TSIMPOUKI
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, GR

MARIA PIRGEROU
Deree College: The American College of Greece, GR

ABSTRACT | In his 1994 novel *The Waterworks*, E. L. Doctorow constructs a modern Gothic tale of horror in the heart of New York City at the end of the nineteenth century. Adopting Slavoj Žižek's "parallax view," this article contends that Dr. Sartorius's gory, antagonistic obsession to defeat death constructs a nightmarish network of undead spectral "life" that escapes the ontological horizon delineated by the Symbolic and, at the same time, disrupts its social inscription, rendering visible *fin de siècle* societal antagonisms. The undead non-subjects whose materialization is contingent upon the blood and bone marrow of the children upon which they prey are used in this modern Gothic text as an exemplification of the unspeakable Real that is inscribed into the very fabric of capitalism.

KEYWORDS | class antagonism, *fin de siècle* science, Gothic aesthetics, Industrial Revolution, Lacan, Marxism, New York City, Slavoj Žižek, surplus value, vampiric capitalism, undead life

Published in 1994, *The Waterworks* "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" (Schwab 211). Blending the Gothic genre with detective fiction, the novel narrates a nightmarish story set in 1871 New York City in which "hints and glints of Poe are embedded in its twinned

American Gothic Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2025
Copyright © 2025 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
https://doi.org/10.5325/ags.1.1.0081

interests in mystery and science, its detective story format, its necrological overlay, its protagonist—a brilliant noir disinherited journalist . . . even a mansion called Ravenwood" (Solotaroff 137). The novel's affiliation with the American Gothic tradition, however, also expresses "an ironic rupture with the past parodying both the Gothic myths of Dracula and Frankenstein and the myth of the Fountain of Youth," while, paradoxically, affirming its connection with that period as it refers back to common and continuous anxieties of "the monstrous and uncontrollable tendencies of the modern world" (Tsimpouki 178–79). Taking into account that this novel, written in the last decade of the twentieth century, thrives on Gothic aesthetics and conventions, this essay performs two tasks. On the one hand, a political deployment of Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts is undertaken in order to contend that, in *The Waterworks*, the depiction of industrialist-capitalist expansion with its constant, unrelenting, and brutally antagonistic pursuit of wealth, social status, and progress at all costs—culminating in the ruthless, amoral quest for eternal life—is consistent with the Lacanian register of the Real, understood here as that which negates the social order and escapes subjection to the Symbolic register. The Real stands in excess of the Symbolic, defying signification and representation. On the other hand, this reading of Doctorow's novel associates the representation of capitalist anxieties at the end of the nineteenth century with Slavoj Žižek's theory of the "parallax view," showing that the author's portrayal of New York City can be construed in a parallax manner both as a nightmarish reflection of the social and individual antagonisms taking place in the context of the Industrial Revolution and as an ominous (parallax) representation of the modern human condition as shaped by the social and economic forces of late capitalism.

Set in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a period marked by a booming industrial development that radically transformed and redefined both the individual and the collective register in the United States, the novel narrates the story of a freelance reporter, Martin Pemberton, disinherited by his wealthy and esteemed father Augustus Pemberton, who apparently has recently died of an indeterminate blood affliction—"some form of irreversible . . . virulent anemia" (178). However, roaming the streets of New York in search of a story, penniless Martin twice witnesses his father, along with a number of other elderly men, very much alive,

riding through the city in a municipal coach. Shocked by this revelation, Martin confides in his newspaper editor, McIlvaine. Shortly afterward, Martin himself disappears and McIlvaine, somehow associating Martin's absence with his musings about seeing his dead father in the flesh, embarks on a quest to unravel the mystery of the young man's disappearance. Pursuing a rigorous investigation in the heart of the city, McIlvaine, aided by Police Commissioner Edmund Donne, unravels a network of homeless children being kidnapped to serve as guinea pigs in the blood transfusion experiments conducted by ex-army surgeon Dr. Wrede Sartorius and funded by the city's elite. This vampiric appropriation of fresh blood aims to procure the gift of life for the surgeon's near-dead wealthy patients, one of whom is Martin's father. The dissolution of the tale comes with the commitment of Dr. Sartorius to an insanity asylum and the inevitably precarious restoration of the public order and the private lives of the main characters exemplified in the marriages of Martin Pemberton and the Police Commissioner to their respective fiancées.

The tale is narrated in retrospect by McIlvaine, editor of the *New York Telegraph*. His eyewitness reports, reminiscences, and accounts of others are coupled with his vibrant descriptions, which provide glimpses of both the city and its vagrant inhabitants.[1] Interestingly, the central locus of the narration is the Croton Reservoir, a massive granite construction of Egyptian Revival style that dominated the city and supplied water to it from the Croton River in Westchester County.[2] Sharing its name with the Old Croton Dam and Aqueduct and a more extensive four-hundred-acre reservoir located in the northern part of the city, the Croton Holding Reservoir becomes a Gothic site par excellence in the narrative, as it is marked by horror, mystery, and violence, as well as the evil and sinister deeds performed there.

However, beyond the nefarious acts associated with the reservoir and their significance, depictions of post–Civil War New York City writ large reflect the grotesque because, besides "its horse-drawn traffic jams, its humming industrialized waterfronts, its real estate boom north of 42nd Street, it is also a city of homeless, brutally maimed veterans, ruined children, a cynical younger generation, a massively extortionate politics, a screaming press, a humming stock exchange, a plague of fires" (Solotaroff 138). As with older novels, it is precisely through this

fear-inspiring depiction of the metropolis that *The Waterworks* establishes itself as a Gothic narrative. In the *fin de siècle* gothic novel, explains Kelly Hurley in relation to nineteenth-century works, "it is the entire metropolis itself, not just its delimited slum neighborhoods, that is figured as . . . an uncharted wasteland" seething with images of abjection (162). This is certainly made the case in *The Waterworks* through the narrator's descriptions of the soldiers roaming the streets of New York with their amputated limbs, images of the urban poor (especially the homeless children), the corrupt administration personified in Boss Tweed, and images of incessant, overwhelming industrial activity, wildfires that ravish the city, and hideous urban squalor. *The Waterworks* is, as Solotaroff argues, "a tale of the excess" (139). In fact, the narrator himself admits as much: "As a people we practiced excess. Excess in everything—pleasure, gaudy display, endless toil, and death" (20–21). It is this excessive or surplus characteristic, what Žižek calls the "accumulation drive" (*Ticklish Subject* 293), that underscores the effect of the industrialist-capitalist struggle for survival engrained in the representations of class exploitation, amoral science, and their effects on the human: all of which are associated with the Gothic elements in the novel.

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic are the stages of subjectivation that are closely associated with identification and socio-symbolic representation in and through language. The subject is interpellated by discourse, assigned an identity, and positioned socially in and by language. In contrast, the third register of Lacanian theory, the register of the Real, is that which functions as the excess of the Imaginary and the Symbolic; it is that which resists signification and representation—it is the surplus element that cannot be contained in the Symbolic and, therefore, remains unsignified and unrepresentable (Lacan, *Écrits* 71–78). In his discussion of the excesses of capitalism and in his own rendition of Lacanian theory, Žižek developed the concept of the "parallax view" with the aim of a rehabilitation of dialectical materialism. The "parallax view" can be defined as the apparent displacement of an object caused by a change in observational position. It is "the illusion of being able to use the same language for phenomena which are mutually untranslatable and can be grasped only in a kind of . . . constantly shifting perspective between two points, between which no synthesis or mediation

is possible" (*Parallax View* 3). This "no synthesis," in turn, creates a parallax gap or "a confrontation between two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible" (3). This gap designates, according to Žižek, "the death-drive, the 'inhuman' core of the human, which reach[es] over the horizon of the collective *praxis* of humanity; the gap is thus asserted as inherent to humanity itself, as the gap between humanity and its *own* inhuman excess" (5).

Following this theoretical approach, Dr. Sartorius's antagonistic obsession with defeating death seems firmly embedded within the concept of the never-ending capitalist search for the impossible limit experience, which is manifested in the novel as the scientific quest for eternal life. This quest, in turn, becomes Dr. Sartorius's "jouissance."[3] In Lacanian psychoanalysis, jouissance is differentiated from pleasure (the term is left untranslated for that specific reason) and is defined as the excess of life commensurate with going beyond the pleasure principle (see Lacan, *Seminar* 200). Žižek's Lacanian conceptualization of jouissance is "'pleasure in pain,' that is, a perverted pleasure provided by the painful experience of repeatedly missing one's goal" (*Ticklish Subject* 297). Following this logic, Dr. Sartorius's endless scientific pursuit, his encounter with jouissance, results in the formation of a nightmarish, abhuman network of undead spectral life. Suspended in a parallax gap between progress and barbarity, reason and madness, civilization and degeneration, this undead life is a-subjective; it eludes that which constitutes the subject and therefore escapes the ontological horizon of the Symbolic order. As such, the undead non-subjects whose materialization in the narrative is directly contingent upon the blood and bone marrow of the homeless, working-class children on which they prey are used in this modern Gothic text as an exemplification of the unspeakable and unrepresentable Real inscribed in the very fabric of capitalism. At the same time, these undead plutocrats are characterized by the "death-drive" that, according to Žižek, "must be grasped as a type of *life in excess of life*" (Hook 230). Having consigned their wealth to Dr. Sartorius in exchange for eternal life, they create a parallactic view of the nightmares inherent in the uncontrollable, unrestrained, and unchecked excess practiced by humans who aspire to "transcend the domain of the natural-animal" and exceed the limitations of ontological existence (Hook 225).

In addition, the Gothic images of chaos engrained in the capitalist progress in the novel are parallactic of modern-day capitalism in its ruthless global dimension. In Žižek's interpretation of globalization, he writes that "if, in the old days of traditional capitalism, the appearance of Order, of a central controlling agency, masked the underlying chaos, today the appearance of chaos in all its dimensions, up to the celebration of 'postmodern' capitalism . . . is the ideological mask of the unprecedented growth of state apparatuses and other forms of social and economic control and regulation" (*Parallax View* 375). From a parallactic point of view, then, the workings of capitalism translated in the novel in the form of urban and social chaos can be seen as reflected in a similar chaotic reality that masks the modern and postmodern workings of globalization as the aftereffects of modern-day capitalism. To be more precise, contemporary global inequality and climate change due to the acquisitive impulse have become even more acute. Tensions and ethical challenges concerning access to biomedical and technological innovations are even more pronounced in our contemporary society, which makes this interpretation of the novel more pertinent and timely.

As mentioned, it is through the descriptions of the newspaper editor, McIlvaine, that the reader is able to get a glimpse of the *fin de siècle* New York city of a hundred fifty years ago undergoing a radical capitalist transformation. According to the narrator, in the industrial-capitalist process of unrelenting urbanization, the city was constantly "expanding, pulsating, . . . pumping its energies outward furiously in every direction" (93). Importantly, the ever-changing urban fabric is made possible through the image of frequent fires that destroy the old parts of the city in order to allow for the new to emerge: "We had fires all the time, we burned as a matter of habit" (22). Schwab is right to conclude that "[d]estruction . . . 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" (214). Thus, the image of rapid progress becomes a dystopian nightmare. The parallax gap is created precisely in the difference in perspective that the two points of view project: The ever-expanding city is inextricably entwined with the purgatorial process that this expansion involves. In Žižek's description of the parallax view, "what we encounter . . . is the 'truth' of both of them, the traumatic core around which they circulate;

there is no way to resolve the tension, to find a 'proper' solution" (*Parallax View* 19). This is reflected in McIlvaine's grim account of the city: "on a winter morning without wind black plumes rose from the chimneys in orderly rows, like the shimmering citizens of a necropolis" (22). No solution to the horrendous depiction of the city is offered or even proposed in the novel because there can be no solution.

And yet, this necropolis accommodates a people of excess waking up to the "pungent" smell with a new "churning ambition. . . . Nowhere else in the world was there such an acceleration of energies" (22, 23). This social antagonism, which is reinforced by the absolute, "[m]anifestly murderous" reign of Boss Tweed, the "legendary scoundrel of old New York" (19), can result only in "diminish[ing] the role played by the individual in the process of production and his capacity to meaningfully relate to the city" (Schwab 214). Besides creating two opposing social classes, one of extreme poverty and the other of accumulated wealth, as is the case in the narrative, this social antagonism negates for the subject its access to the Symbolic order. After making the distinction between antagonistic fight in reality and what he has called "pure," "radical" antagonism, Žižek writes,

> We must then distinguish the experience of antagonism in its radical form, as a limit of the social, as the impossibility around which the social field is structured, from antagonism as the relation between antagonistic subject-positions: in Lacanian terms, we must distinguish antagonism as *Real* from the social *reality* of the antagonistic fight. And the Lacanian notion of the subject aims precisely at the experience of "pure" antagonism as self-hindering, self-blockage, this internal limit preventing the symbolic field from realizing its full identity. (*Interrogating the Real* 253–54)

In the narrative, the fallout of human materials from the unceasing machine of capitalist progress, the vagrant children, rag-pickers, beggars, and other victims of urban poverty who constitute "the soul of the city" (*Waterworks* 11) are always already involved in an asymmetrical relationship with their externalized, antagonistic adversary, as well as marked by the internal impossibility of subjectivation. And while pure antagonism

is "the unsymbolised traumatic impossibility around which the social is structured" (Stavrakakis), and it therefore forestalls the radical impossibility of a harmonious social order, it is also a fact that class antagonism favors those who "are saying what counts as true," as Foucault put it (73)—those who have the power to decide "whose elimination would enable [them] to restore order, stability and identity" (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 127). Expelled as they are from the social fabric, these outcasts of societal and market antagonism occupy what Žižek defines as the Imaginary Real, the traumatic reality defined by the excess of radical antagonism beyond the level of the phenomenology of the social. And yet, in the novel, these peripheral and marginal entities make up the very backbone of the capitalist agenda. Sante writes, "In that booming period, accounts of ragpickers and nomadic children and anonymous murder victims could serve a perverse civic pride" (148). As the periphery that sustains the center, these exiled features of capitalist expansion serve as the traumatic, yet unavoidable, part of antagonistic struggle—that Thing which, in Lacanian terms, escapes the process of subjectivation and remains outside the Symbolic. They refuse to be incorporated into the Symbolic network (Koshal 211) but, in a paradoxical way, also serve as its own negative print (Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* 254). Moreover, their exclusion from the social fabric is spatially underlined by their geographic isolation: "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). In other words, the peripheral figures of capitalist antagonism paradoxically become the very elements that sustain it as the negative print of a Symbolic order into which they do not fit.

Hurley notes that "the gothic has been theorized as an instrumental genre, reemerging cyclically, at periods of cultural stress to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises" (5). In Doctorow's novel, set in a historical period characterized by an unprecedented and violent transformative dynamic, the Gothic imagery serves to underline the impossibility of symbolization and the limit of representation. Adding to this mode of the Gothic, Benjamin Noys argues

that Gothic conventions aim to accentuate the distorting effects of societal antagonism within capitalism. Glossing Žižek's use of Gothic texts, Noys contends that "it is the Gothic text itself that offers sophisticated resources and narrative strategies for holding together the parallax view of the Real." Indeed, it is the "topological twist" in perspective (Žižek and Daly 78) that understands the Gothic both as "a mode of indirect allusion, as a kind of stop-gap measure, in the exemplification the 'unspeakable' Real" outside the order of law and language and as the locus of monstrous "distortions and curvatures of capitalist space" (Noys).

In terms of architectural style, it is the Gothic pumping station for the city's water supply, the Croton Holding Reservoir, that dominates the city and serves as a symbol of its relentless growth. Built between 1837 and 1842, the reservoir was "an engineering marvel" (*Waterworks* 90) that attests to the technological advancement of the era. At the same time, it was an "unnatural thing," towering over the city with its "massive ivy-covered walls" (86). Its function was primarily to provide fresh water to the inhabitants of the city and combat disease, but also to extinguish fires. A perspectival view of the reservoir suggests both its benign function as a symbol of life, as well as the ambiguity and terror evoked by its Gothic architecture. To be sure, the reservoir itself, as Schwab writes, "is on the one hand, a symbol of power which transcends the human, in tone with the inhuman character of the industrial age itself, [while] on the other hand it is literally a tomb, a hidden sacrificial place which hides the murderous acts" (230). From the parapet, the Croton Holding Reservoir offered panoramic views to the city, allowing New Yorkers to enjoy a refreshing cool breeze and the children to "launch their toy sloops" (87). Not surprisingly, observed from a different point of view, a parallactic gap occurs to this idyllic scene: from "the closest we could come to the pastoral," according to McIlvaine (86), to the dark reflection of the rising city at the reservoir's perfectly still body of water, "a squared expanse of black water that was in fact the geometrical absence of the city" (87). As Žižek writes, "There is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist. We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective" (*Parallax View* 29).

What also eludes the perspective underscoring the parallactic gap of the metropolis is yet another part of the Croton Waterworks visible "on a high, flattened hill in Westchester, twenty miles north of the city" (289). "The massive granite waterworks, with its crenellated turrets at the corners and cathedral entrance doors" (289), its "bull's-eyes windows" (290), and "cavernous chamber[s]" (291) serves as the locus of Dr. Sartorius's grotesque experiments involving blood transfusions and bone marrow transplants taken from the homeless children who are abducted for this reason by a corrupt network of city officials. These experiments aim to secure eternal life for those who can afford it, and it is revealed that Augustus Pemberton, the journalist's father, had already consigned his ethically questionable fortune to Dr. Sartorius in exchange for the surgeon's innovative treatment.[4] With the Police Commissioner's help, McIlvaine reaches this eerie Gothic building and, as if to highlight the parallactic shift in his perspective, his narration is characterized by the sudden passage from concrete realistic depiction of the building to hyperrealist sensory and emotive representation ("the ground . . . pulsed like a heartbeat," "I could not trust my senses" [290], "I felt the chill of an entombed air" [291]). To quote Žižek once more, "[I]t is as if the confused intensity of nonrepresentative shapes is the last remainder of reality, so that when we pass from it to clearly identifiable representation, we enter the aesthetic fantasy space in which reality is irretrievably lost. The shift is purely parallactic: not so much a shift in the object as a shift in our attitude toward the viewed object" (*Parallax View* 152). In this parallactic shift of perspective, the reservoir becomes the container of death rather than life. The reservoir, then, according to Schwab, becomes "[a] dark double that accompanies diurnal New York, in keeping with the idea of the dissolution of civilization which Doctorow develops along the novel" (216). In short, instead of being a site of progress, life, and development, the Croton Reservoir in the narrative stands in parallactic opposition to civilization because it represents death, decay, and degeneration as the outcomes of the excesses capitalism inevitably engages in.

Vowing his allegiance to the progress of science, Dr. Sartorius in his laboratory ruthlessly pursues scientific progress at the expense of morality. His army of clients, all suffering from terminal afflictions, sucking the blood of unaware, homeless children themselves victims of the brutal

capitalist transformation of the city, is the ultimate manifestation of evil in the narrative. His obsession with knowledge at the expense of humanity goes beyond any register of need; it "touches on an area of excess (it is 'too much')," as Jacqueline Rose would have it in her own account of Lacanian psychoanalysis (57). Seen from a Lacanian perspective, Dr. Sartorius's drive becomes the source of his jouissance. As Hook explains of the Lacanian concept, "Jouissance is thus a form of enjoyment that is willing to exceed the parameters of life" (232). Hook continues, "This means that the symbolic order is always minimally off-balance, destabilized and threatened by the prospect of traumatic jouissance that cannot be integrated into the symbolic itself" (238). Furthermore, Lacan clearly states in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* that "jouissance is evil because it is located outside the Law" (*Seminar* 184). Following the Lacanian interpretation, then, Dr. Sartorius's "inevitable disease of knowledge" (*Waterworks* 266)—the ultimate jouissance—not only threatens to destroy his symbolic positioning but makes him transgress all existing moral and legal laws.

If in Lacanian terms Dr. Sartorius is defined by an insatiable, law-defying jouissance, then his undead plutocrats are in turn characterized by the "death-drive." In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek contends that we have to understand the "death-drive" not as a biological fact but, rather, as "a notion indicating that the human psychic apparatus is subordinated to a blind automatism of repetition beyond pleasure-seeking, self-preservation, accordance between man and his milieu" (xxvii). Not surprisingly, in this uncanny place, the elderly, wealthy men are depicted as functioning beyond the natural; they are instead presented as automata who are forever trapped in a compulsive repetition of mechanistic life. The immortality granted to them by Dr. Sartorius in exchange for the generous contributions to his scientific projects has turned the wealthy men "into a vegetative existence, [as] these formerly powerful men have in effect become automatons" (Sante 147). This ontological non-status, as Žižek explains, "undermines the underlying distinction: the 'undead' are neither alive nor dead, they are precisely the monstrous 'living dead'" (*Parallax View* 22). Nature is thus denaturalized, and with it, social and cultural inscription is derailed, constituting a gap in the Symbolic register. As Žižek points out, "the death-drive is the possibility of the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which the so-called

reality is constituted" and "the death-drive designates the possibility of its own radical erasure" (*Most Sublime Hysteric* 74). It can be argued that the withered old men "exist at a point beyond identification, in an ambiguous state, simultaneously monstrous and yet nevertheless somehow sublime" (Hook 231) and are caught in what Lacan might describe as a zone "between two deaths" (Hook 236; Lacan, *Seminar* 270–87)—that is, between biological and symbolic death. In the case of Dr. Sartorius's undead patients, their symbolic death precedes their physical demise since they have been removed from all social life, released from all symbolic ties and obligations.

It is important to note that even though as automatons in the experiments of Dr. Sartorius the old men are deprived of agency, both they and the doctor who orchestrates the gory procedure are engaged in a kind of vampiric exchange with the children-victims they pick up from the streets through the blood transfusions that will secure for the old men eternal life and for Dr. Sartorius scientific renown and immortality of a different kind. Equally of note is that the signing over of the plutocrats' assets to Dr. Sartorius is always already implicated in their admission and treatment in his sanatorium and is illegally managed by the Tweed gang. The capital obtained to fund the surgeon's experiments, channeled as it is to subsidize the illicit procedures of Dr. Sartorius, generates what in Marxist terms can be defined as the "surplus value" procured by the working force in capitalism. As has often been noted, the vampire motif runs through Marx's *Capital* and other works. "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks," Marx famously claims (342). The capital-as-vampire drains the surplus value of the worker's labor toward "the lusty production and vastly unequal accumulation of wealth" (Haraway 215).[5] Even more significant to our reading of *The Waterworks* is that Marx repeatedly alludes to the appropriation of child labor by the capitalists as "blood-sucking" that, as he puts it, "only slightly quenches the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour" (367). Doctorow, however, moves one step further, invoking capitalism not simply as a form of economic vampirism through the description of "Tweed's effect on the city" as being "like a vampire's arterial suck" (213), but literally as well by having his plutocrats, with the medical assistance of Dr. Sartorius, suck blood from juvenile victims in order to remain alive,

while "one, then another, of the orphan children beg[a]n to age, like leaves turning yellow" (274).

In light of Marxian discourse, Žižek's psychoanalytical intervention provides an insightful frame to understand Marx's concepts of the production of surplus labor and the accumulation of capital through the appropriation of surplus value. As Žižek explains, quoting from Marx's *Capital*, surplus value is contingent upon the real value assigned to a commodity but with a twist: It is, rather, "a value which through its circulation, . . . generates more value . . . [until] the means turns into an end in themselves . . . [that is] the endless repeating of the circulation as such" (*Parallax View* 59–60). Put differently, for Žižek, if Lacan's surplus jouissance is "the object-cause of desire," then surplus value is "the cause which sets in motion the capitalist mode of production" (*Sublime Object* 53). In *The Waterworks*, this circulation of surplus jouissance is manifested in Dr. Sartorius's atavistic appropriation of surplus value, produced by the surplus labor of the homeless children, the working force whose blood he, as a real-life vampire, literally sucks in order to divert its circulation to the upper class that subsidizes the procedure. Caught as he is in this repetitive compulsion to procure eternal life as the ultimate end in itself, Dr. Sartorius exemplifies what Žižek calls the "capitalist unconscious fantasy" that parasitizes upon the proletariat as the "pure substance-less subjectivity" (*Parallax View* 60). In this sense, the homeless children become substance-less because their substance, their subjectivity, ultimately their life, is of no consequence to the capitalist process that is determined to feed upon them in order to extract the surplus value it needs to sustain itself. As Chris Baldick notes, referring to vampiric representations of capitalist exploitation during the Industrial Age, "[i]n such processes of extracting surplus value, the world of capitalism is revealed as a profound distortion of human life" (130). Blurring the lines between life and death, natural and unnatural, Dr. Sartorius and his "clientele" (*Waterworks* 259) function as metaphors that neither the social nor the scientific can contain—as an uncanny excess that cannot be mirrored in the Imaginary and is excluded from the ontological horizon delineated by the Symbolic.

Taking his cue from Stephen Mulhall, who interprets Gothic creatures as "the nightmare embodiment of our natural realm" (19), thereby investing with Gothic qualities our natural everyday lives, Žižek offers a psychoanalytic/

political reading of the Gothic genre, arguing that Gothic texts provide a "parallax view" of our reality—they designate the unsymbolized that remains undissolvable in empirical reality, which inherently persists beyond the Symbolic order; in short, they demarcate the Real in the real. As Richard Hardack explains, Gothic narratives "dramatize the premise that the new/technology has exacerbated (or highlighted) our alienation from reality (and "human" identity). . . . [C]ybernetics, cryogenics, AI . . . alter human consciousness or life." This comment offers a parallactic view of Doctorow's tale consistent with Žižek's account of capitalism: "In capitalism the Drive [as the desire to desire ever new objects and forms of pleasure] inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental systemic level: drive is what propels the whole capitalist machinery" (*Parallax View* 61). It is, therefore, the incessant desire for consumption at all costs that sustains the capitalist fabric—in fact, it is inherent to it. This incessant—indeed, relentless—movement is captured in Doctorow's Gothic novel and best exemplified in Dr. Sartorius's deeds as an ominous projection of the modern world. As Žižek writes of the drive in a different context, it accounts "for all the excesses for which the Real disturbs the homeostasis of life, from excessive . . . jouissance up to the scientific Real which generates artificial monsters" (*Parallax View* 182). Against this backdrop, the Gothic conventions that characterize Doctorow's text offer an outlet for the anxieties of the *fin de siècle radical* transformations brought about by the capitalist agenda and the disruptive forces it unleashed on all aspects of social and individual life. Hurley argues that the late nineteenth-century Gothic "explored the parameters of abhuman—rather 'post-human' in terms surprisingly compatible with many of the theories closer to our own *fin-de-siècle* rather than the last" (11). Doctorow's late twentieth-century tale functions similarly, offering a "parallax view" of the anxieties that demarcate our own era and often threaten to destabilize our everyday, rational apprehension of reality.

In the end of *The Waterworks*, all tensions are purportedly resolved with an uncertain restoration of the established order and, therefore, of the Symbolic status of the world of the narrative. Martin Pemberton marries his fiancée, and so does the Police Chief Commissioner who assisted McIlvaine with his investigation and the dismantling of Dr. Sartorius's enterprise. Sante remarks that Doctorow closes his novel with his narrator's self-constructed illusion, "as if the entire city of New York would

be forever encased and frozen, aglitter and God-stunned" (*Waterworks* 349).[6] In fact, according to Sante, the novel ends "on a mirage: an empty, icy city on a winter Sunday" because it "is only in that city—the one in the snow-globe—that immortality can be achieved" (149). In other words, even if the end of the tale can ostensibly be conceived as moving toward an assimilation of the pathological to the normal and the restoration of all things to their proper order, it rather stands as the parallactic gap of the excess that cannot be represented and a reminder that what is human cannot exist outside its own limit—an ominous and foreboding vision, indeed.

THEODORA TSIMPOUKI is Professor of American literature at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She is the author of many articles on American literature and its correlation with psychoanalysis, feminism, and literary theory. Her work has appeared in the *Henry James Review*, the *Journal of Posthuman Studies*, the *European Journal of American Studies*, *Cercles*, and *GRAMMA*, as well as in numerous other academic journals and anthologies. She has also co-edited four books on American studies, the most recent of which is *American Studies After Postmodernism* (2024). She is currently completing a book project on transculturality and American literature and is also one of the chief editors of the open-access journal *Ex-Centric Narratives: Journal of Literature, Culture, and Media*.

MARIA PIRGEROU holds a PhD in Anglophone literature, culture, and ideology from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Her research focuses on gender construction and representation during the Victorian age, and her theoretical background is Judith Butler's gender theory and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic account of subjectivation. She has published one book, titled *The Vicissitudes of Victorian Masculinity: The Case of the Bachelor* (2014), in which she traces the construction and representation of bachelor figures in major works of Victorian fiction. Her current research revolves around representations of femininity at the *fin de siècle* in the works of Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde.

NOTES

1. Filtered through McIlvaine's consciousness and voice, the narrative acquires a sense of authenticity and credibility, while at the same time it underlines its own constructedness acknowledging the narrator's (and by extension the

reader's) participation in the making of meaning. "It is my own mind's experience that I report" (96), McIlvaine admits, warning us that "what you remember as having happened and what truly did happen are no less and no more than . . . visions" (89) and adding that "knowing in advance the whole conclusive order [of things] makes narration suspect" (177). In *Enduring Words*, Michael Wutz also focuses on McIlvaine, calling him a "decentered narrator" whose "unstable and inconclusive" (174) and "literally elliptical" (175) narrative has the "quality of a ruminating and reconstructive retrospectivity" (172). According to Wutz, Doctorow empowers his narrator's mind to collect, organize, evaluate, interpret, and reflect on information in order to recount his story. Though the working of his brain resembles a model of computational processing, its "cognitive brilliance," with its reflective and contemplative power, exposes the "inadequacy of the informational discourse of journalism" (177). Similarly, in the context of Wutz's overarching argument, literature's distinctive and enduring informational character and "its semantic density and temporal elasticity make it an ideal vehicle for the infinitude of thought that resists reduction into flattening ones and zeroes" (45).

2. See "Old Croton Dam & Aqueduct."

3. Dr. Sartorius makes his first appearance in E. L. Doctorow's novel *The March* (2005). Though written eleven years after *The Waterworks*, *The March* serves as a prequel to it. In *The March*, the doctor is represented as a brilliant scientist who saves the lives of soldiers in the Civil War using innovative methods of treatment. However, one could argue that even in *The March*, Dr. Sartorius is driven by a similar kind of "jouissance" as his groundbreaking techniques focus on securing some kind of scientific immortality for himself rather than on saving the lives of the soldiers he treats. As a matter of fact, in *The Waterworks*, his colleague Dr. Hamilton describes his medical achievement as going "beyond sanity . . . or morality . . . but in perfect line with everything he had done before" (320).

4. Interestingly, as it is clearly stated in the novel, Augustus Pemberton had accumulated his vast fortune by engaging, among other things, in an illicit slave trade ratified at the time by the political and administrative authorities of the city (12, 107). His unscrupulous profiteering activities from such a shady business echo our contemporary nefarious acts of a similar nature (sweatshops and maquiladoras).

5. Neocleous, Moretti, Carver, and Baldick provide succinct interpretations of Marx's use of the vampire metaphor.

6. That McIlvaine is aware of the illusion of a happy ending is evident from his observation that even the stories told in goodwill "must go spiraling off in the resolution of things" (345).

WORKS CITED

Baldick, Chris. *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing*. Oxford University Press, 1987.

Carver, Terrell. *The Postmodern Marx*. Manchester University Press, 1998.

Doctorow, E. L. *The March: A Novel*. Random House, 2005.

———. *The Waterworks*. Signet, 1994.

Foucault, Michel. *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow, Penguin, 1984.

Haraway, Donna. *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*. Routledge, 2018.

Hardack, Richard. "Amnesia of Death: The Unsettled Endings of the Dead Who Don't Know They're Dead." *Sillages Critiques*, vol. 24, 2018. https://doi.org/10.4000/sillagescritiques.6053.

Hook, Derek. "Of Symbolic Mortification and 'Undead Life': Slavoj Žižek on the Death Drive." *Psychoanalysis and History*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2016, pp. 221-256.

Hurley, Kelly. *The Gothic Body*: *Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin-de-Siècle*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Koshal, Vikram Krishan. "The 'Thing': Interpreting the Vampire through Žižekian Paradigms." *Quest Journals. Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 10, no. 12, 2022, pp. 210–15.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by A. Sheridan, Norton, 1977.

———. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 7: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*. Translated by Dennis Porter, Norton, 1992.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy.* 1867. Translated by Ben Fowkes, Penguin, 1976. 3 vols.

Moretti, Franco. *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Verso, 1983.

Mulhall, Stephen. *On Film*. Routledge, 2001.

Neocleous, Mark. "The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx's Vampires." *History of Political Thought*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2003, pp. 668–84.

Noys, Benjamin. "The Horror of the Real: Žižek's Modern Gothic." *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2010. http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/issue/view/19.

"Old Croton Dam & Aqueduct." *Clio*, n.d. https://theclio.com/entry/104401. Accessed 5 Mar. 2025.

Rose, Jacqueline. *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*. Verso, 1986.

Sante, Lucy. "The Cabinet of Dr. Sartorius." Rev. of *The Waterworks* in *Critical Essays on E. L. Doctorow*, edited by Ben Siegel, G. K. Hall, 2000, pp. 144–49.

Schwab, Anamaria. "Self-Destructive Manhattan in E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks.*" *Transylvanian Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2017, pp. 211–26.

Solotaroff, Ted. “Of Melville, Poe and Doctorow.” *Critical Essays on E. L. Doctorow*, edited by Ben Siegel, G. K. Hall, 2000, pp. 137–43.

Stavrakakis, Yannis. “Ambiguous Ideology and the Lacanian Twist.” *Journal of the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research*, vols. 8–9, 1997. https://jcfar.org.uk/jcfar-bookshop/paperbacks/jcfar-issue-8-and-9/.

Tsimpouki, Theodora. “Millennial Maladies in E. L. Doctorow’s *The Waterworks.*” *East Central European Traumas and a Millennial Condition*, edited by Wieslaw Krajka and Zbigniew Białas, Eastern European Monographs, 1999, pp. 177–89.

Wutz, Michael. *Enduring Words: Literary Narrative in a Changing Media Ecology.* University of Alabama Press, 2009.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Interrogating the Real*. Continuum, 2006.

———. *Looking Awry*. MIT Press, 1991.

———. *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan.* Wiley, 2014.

———. *The Parallax View*. MIT Press, 2006.

———. *The Sublime Object of Ideology.* Verso, 1989.

———. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. Verso, 1999.

Žižek, Slavoj, and Glyn Daly. *Conversations with Žižek*. Polity, 2004.