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Millennial Maladies  
in E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks*

What Fredric Jameson has called an "inverted millenarianism" (Jameson, 1) - apocalyptic premonitions of the future replaced by an immortality of endings receding into infinity - and Jean Baudrillard's concept of "Pataphysics of the year 2000" single out the maddening urge of the millenarians to achieve immediate realization of immortality at any cost (Baudrillard, 90). E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks* articulates the above millennial issues by attempting a novelistic amendment of Susan Sontag's "metaphoricity of diseases" combined with a reworking of both the medieval myth of the Fountain of Youth and the gothic myths of Dracula and Frankenstein.

The timing and the setting of *The Waterworks* make it specifically suitable to an analysis through the metaphors of disease, monstrosity and pataphysical/inverted millenarianism. Written in the mode of "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon) and structured in the fashion of a Gothic tale, the novel registers the *fin de siècle* maladies, when Western positivistic science was preoccupied with evolution and galvanism, but also, by oblique extension, when disease metaphors became "more virulent, preposterous and demagogic" (Sontag, 78). New York is at the time ruled by the "murderous" Tweed Ring and, as a consequence, it is presented as a carcinogenic environment, a habitat of abnormality and social disequilibrium, a city "of sulfurous and pungent air" and "of cheerful degeneracy" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 15). But it is not the image of a single master disease that Doctorow purveys to express his concern with the state of the society. Though standard master diseases are mentioned in the text, the major metaphor is, more

generally, that of a geriatric condition which entails the (perverted) treatment of old age and, by extension, of every aging organism. If, as Sontag claims, the TB metaphor connotes deprivation of strength, and the cancer metaphor, deprivation of flexibility (Sontag, 78-9), in Doctorow's novel the geriatric condition should rather be interpreted as "virulent" anemia – "a blood ailment" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 75) – to be treated accordingly. (Note that both Doctorow and Sontag use the term *virulent* to describe disease.)

The plot is sustained through the simulacrum of the nineteenth century genre of the science-detection mystery. A young free-lance writer, Martin Pemberton, is in quest of his father, who, although reported dead, has made his appearance riding twice through New York in a municipal coach, in company of elderly gentlemen. As the narrative unfolds, the reader learns from the mouth of the narrator, Martin's boss at the newspaper, that these old men have conceded their fabulous fortunes to a medical scientist, in exchange for the promise of eternal life. McIlvaine, the narrator, remarks that the league of old gentlemen was so "unsatisfied with the ways of their God as to take their immortal souls into their own hands" (191) and commit themselves to Dr. Sartorius who aspires to usurp divine powers. By pumping the fresh blood of juvenile victims into his old and wealthy patients, he seeks to reconstitute them "metaphysically as endless beings" (200). Characteristically, the doctor's conservatory is described as an industrialized Fountain of Youth, "a bathing pool with water, ochre in color and overhung with sulfurous mist" (188) and is hidden, appropriately, among the waterworks of the Croton Reservoir in Westchester. Thus, Doctorow's novelistic rendering of the combined mythemes of the Fountain of Youth and Dracula/Frankenstein is textually achieved by transcendence from an innocent dream of perpetual rejuvenation to that of interminable circulation, restricted though to the prosperous patriarchal legislators.

As a postmodern literary work, *The Waterworks* plunges into the history of the late nineteenth century in order to express an ironic rupture with the past parodying both the Gothic myths of

Dracula and Frankenstein and the myth of the Fountain of Youth, but also, paradoxically, in order to affirm its connection with that period referring back to common and continuous anxieties in the monstrous and uncontrollable tendencies of the modern world. As Linda Hutcheon reminds us, in texts like *The Waterworks* in which a revision of history is attempted, "there is no pretense of simplistic mimesis. Instead, fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our version of reality" (Hutcheon, 40). Thus, Doctorow's text proves how these myths of vampirism/reanimation and rejuvenation are still susceptible to endless experimentation and revision. Having gone through a variety of interpretations, these intricately connected myths have gained a flexibility which renders them applicable to articulate alarming questions of our culture as it approaches the third millennium. Speaking of Gothic fiction, David Punter has pointed out that, though "the legendary is age-old" it was revived in England in early nineteenth century because it expressed the problems, social and metaphysical, of the dominant class, the bourgeoisie, which had to come "into grips with the problems of its conception and its emergence into the world." This is not really surprising as Gothic fiction, after all, has always functioned as "a process of cultural self-analysis" and the images which it produces become "the dream-figures" of a troubled social group (Punter, 425). American Gothic, on the other hand, seems to be "a refraction" of English Gothic, to quote Punter again, in that "it can only attempt to transplant the English themes into American soil" (212) while at the same time it struggles to disentangle the Gothic myth from its Old World conventions and readdress it into its new cultural context. Edgar Allan Poe, in particular, whose influence pervades *The Waterworks*, is a remarkable example of an American Gothic storyteller in that he combines the European with the American tradition while at the same time evading any easy typological classifications.<sup>1</sup> Doctorow appropriates the form of the detective thriller as well as the theme of the premature burial as it was developed by Poe in the homonymous tale and in "The Cask of Amontillado," and even names the mansion of one of his heroes,

Ravenwood. But Doctorow's main tribute to the author of "The Raven" is that he engages himself in Poe's internal war between fact and fancy, science and art without, however, reaching the same ambivalent conclusions. Contrary to Gerald Weissman's claim that, like his literary predecessor, Doctorow is also "haunted by science" and that, like Poe, the author of *The Waterworks* feels disenchanting with the progressivist idea of history, we witness an authorial attempt to go beyond those schematic dualities by simply suggesting possible alternatives (social, technological or individual) without trying to impose a didactic message or a prescribed end.

While there has been almost an endless adaptability of myths during the nineteenth and twentieth century both in Europe and America, it was the Frankensteinian scientist that gained popularity throughout our century, giving priority to the technological interpretation of this myth. Thinking along the same lines, the Dracula myth derives its power from its apotheosis of blood. For the vampire thrives on the blood of others and, therefore, blood is life, immortal life. Viewed from this perspective the true significance of *Frankenstein* was seen to be its foreshadowing of robots, "test-tube" babies, and the fetishism of mechanical power, while *Dracula's* importance was found in the scientific transgression of the line between man and God in its daring to partake of immortal life.

The Fountain of Youth, on the other hand, has been associated with America since the continent's discovery. America was believed to be the land where lost youth could be regained. Thus, Ponce de Leon's expedition of 1513 in search of the miraculous waters of the magic fountain led him straight to Florida. This literal search was later replaced by a metaphorical discourse that emphasized the perception of the New World as a place of renewal and youthfulness. Robertson's rhetoric is characteristic of this influential dream myth so prevalent, even nowadays, in American culture: "We are young, vigorous, unique; on the cutting edge of history".... All people, everywhere, value youth...but America is the 'fountain of youth'" (348). Doctorow's bath for the withered old men, like the reservoir

which constitutes the novel's major symbol, suggests a mechanistic version of the myth. "I could feel through the floor vibrations of the dynamo," says the narrator of this vaulted place that he later calls "a Creation," "an obverse Eden" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 188). But then, the Fountain of Youth, even though traditionally presented as Edenic, is necessarily mechanistic, as a fountain - despite the decorum of beautiful figures and flowers - is only an apparatus of pipes (re)producing carefully channeled streams of water. In spite of his refusal to abandon the notion of the complex relation of art and culture, Doctorow sets his novel at the threshold of modernity, implicating it thus in the technological advancement and rapid industrialization of late nineteenth century America and the social upheaval those changes entail.

If the novelistic application of these combined mythemes in *The Waterworks* disrupts the historical fiction framework, it is not because the experiments negate or even invert Christianity but because they cause, what Baudrillard calls, "an anthropological deregulation." When the demarcation line of the human becomes elusive with the intervention of science, what follows is an anthropological deregulation which in its turn leads to "simultaneous deregulation of ethics, of all the moral, juridical and symbolic rules" (Baudrillard, 97). To be sure, Dr. Sartorius is presented as the well-established cliché of the mad scientist. Though he is not "an aspiring young medical student," like Frankenstein, but a mature and professional scientist, Sartorius does develop a "misanthropic, or at best insensitive, disregard for his social bonds and duties" as the clichéd portrait would have him (Baldick, 142). Like Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Wells's Dr. Moreau, he is also depicted as a transgressor who aspires to usurp divine powers in his effort to perpetuate life eternally. Frankenstein refers to himself as the man who wants to look upon nature's face "unveiled" (Shelley, 25), who wants to "step within the threshold of real knowledge" (31) and let a "torrent of light into our dark world" (39); Jekyll claims that it is "the exacting nature of [his] aspirations" (Stevenson, 65) which render him liable to psychic fragmentation; and Moreau is

reported to be practising the "humanizing" process of transforming beasts into men. But unlike his novelistic predecessors whose intentions are depicted as noble, Sartorius shows a cruel indifference to ethical scientific conduct. He is an overreacher who seeks the immortality of his patients at the exemption from moral responsibilities of his actions. He is a Faustian seeker who is "not weakened with a conscience" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 185). As one character remarks, "He was the kind of doctor who didn't care what he treated, a man or a cow, and hadn't a trace of the gift for the soothing word, the comforting assurance, that patients need" (127). Sartorius himself admits that he kept his patients

not as a physician but as a natural scientist. Whatever their own desires, or grandiose intentions, I told each of them exactly what I would endeavor to do...that might, incidentally, be to his advantage...and that is just what I have done.... Whether this one hoped for a normal recovery, or that one for an extended life, or another cherished a vision of eternal life, that was their business. (229)

Still, Sartorius's thirst for knowledge generates more disease as it contaminates life with uncontrollable desires that seek to disrupt the entire social order. "Life seemed to be an inevitable disease of knowledge...a plague that infected all who came in contact with it," Martin Pemberton deplures (192).

Despite his "arrogant expectations" (124), Sartorius exercises an enormous power over his fellow men: "So I was...available...to his influence," Martin Pemberton admits. "It was like coming ashore on the freshened winds of a newfound land" (198). Not only Martin's but also the narrator's objections to Sartorius's experimental work are vitiated by their admiration for the man himself. The doctor is described as having an exceptional, almost god-like serenity and an aristocratic demeanor. "He is quiet, almost ascetic in his habits, courteous, unprepossessing" (183). Following the Gothic pattern, according to which forbidden knowledge is both condemned and aspired to, Sartorius's scientific procedure is at once abhorred and admired. Thus, like its novelistic predecessors, *The Water-*

*works* seems to be another fable about the dangers of scientific progress unrestrained by moral compunction.

If *Frankenstein* symbolically opens nineteenth-century fantastic Gothicism, *Dracula* seems to be the articulation of its final expression. For Neil Cornwell, the central mythic image of *Frankenstein* is that of a figure imparting the spark of life into an inanimate body, whereas *Dracula*'s is of a man bending over a woman to suck out her blood. Both are, however, intricately connected through a "gruesome Resurrection myth" (Cornwell, 106). For David Punter, the *Dracula* myth derives its power from its dealings with taboo (Punter, 262). A locus classicus of the Gothic, this preoccupation with metaphorical boundaries reveals a fear of physical violation, a transgression against the body, evoking what Lévy calls "anxieties of the threshold" (Lévy, 405). *Dracula* blurs the line between man and beast, echoing the fears of degeneracy in Stevenson and Wells and he blurs the boundary between man and God by daring to partake of immortal life. Unlike *Dracula*, though, who drains vital fluids in order to achieve personal longevity, Sartorius experiments with children because he craves supreme knowledge. As D. H. Lawrence argued, speaking of Poe's doomed heroes, "You have to kill a thing to know it satisfactorily. For this reason, the desirous consciousness...is a vampire" (Lawrence, 75). Unknowingly imitating Count *Dracula*, Sartorius seeks to produce a new order of beings by means not directly sexual: the dying body is penetrated by the needle which pumps blood into it that has been drawn out of young children. Thus, Sartorius's promise, very much like Count *Dracula*'s, is for eternal life at the expense of life itself. Though he assumes no responsibility for the murder of innocent children, it is in his "Noble Isle," to recall Moreau's place of experimentation, that the orphans are subjected to surgery in order to extract their blood or their bone marrow. As a result, the children begin to age, "like leaves turning yellow" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 198) while, on the other hand, the old men remain "indeterminately alive" (213), "shrunken, unnaturally darkened and sunken in on themselves, like vegetable banks" (212). With the kind of immortality achieved in *The*

*Waterworks*, we are repeatedly reminded of Baudrillard who argues that the individual is threatened "by the evaporation of the limits of the human, which is no longer an evaporation into the divine, but into the inhuman and, indeed, not even into the inhuman but into something falling short both of the human and the inhuman – the genetic simulation of living beings" (Baudrillard, 97). Pursuing the motif further – we end not with innovation but with the perpetuation of the antiquated, in the sense that the vampiric appropriation of fresh blood renders succession through insemination and rebirth unnecessary and impossible.

As a consequence, the basic issue underlying the novel is not that of the dangers of unrestrained scientific progress but that of the "de-differentiation of the human and the inhuman" (95), of the erosion of the notion of Enlightened humanism, of the destabilization of the definition of man who can no longer be defined in terms of freedom and transcendence. Can those old men who are barricaded in their own "quiet industrial paradise" be considered actually alive? Living "in a kind of dumb, mindless happiness" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 233), can it be qualified as real life or its simulation? If immortality is reduced to a technical operation without taking into consideration man's fundamental qualities, his right to freedom and to the exercise of that freedom, doesn't this destroy all signs distinctive of humanity? "How much can one lose" – the novel asks – "and still remain a man?" (Punter, 240). Obviously, Sartorius is not experimenting with freedom from conditioning or with retaining the very characteristics of the human species, but rather with the creation of "indestructible life-processes" with which, to paraphrase Baudrillard, he attempts to capture functional immortality (Baudrillard, 98).

Ironically, the name of this "rational if bloodless savant" (Sante, 10), is full of interpretative implications. Latinating German names for tradespeople in order to elevate their social position is a tradition going back to the Middle Ages: "the miller became Molitor, the pastor became Pastorius and the tailor became Sartorius" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 128). Retaining the name "Sartorius" is an instance of Europe-ache

(Barthes, 57-8), probably a wish not to be associated with America but with Europe, instead. On the other hand, the name alludes to Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* but, unlike Professor Teufelsdröckh who argues that the tailored garment is but a fabric for our divine spark, Sartorius insists that we are nothing but biological matter. Sartor Resartus translates as Tailor Re-patched and that already institutes a reference to making newness out of the old. The human body is seen as something composed of detachable and reattachable organs. Doctorow's Dr. Sartorius built his reputation as an eminent doctor during the Civil War by sewing soldiers and amputating human members, in other words re-patching them. Thus, Carlyle's philosophy of clothing is reinvented into the philosophy of dressing, of dressing wounds. Sartorius's scientific aim was to recompose human life "piece by piece," schooling the old men "in an assemblage of life's cycles" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 200). Later on in the novel, when the doctor's laboratory is discovered, his colleagues are surprised to find apparatuses that correspond to different organs, as if the human body is an assemblage of ill-fitting fragments. This mechanistic attitude toward the body which is, incidentally, diametrically opposed to Professor Teufelsdröckh's belief in the sanctity of the body, is amplified by the novel's basic imagery, the waterworks. "The reservoir was in fact an engineering marvel," (60) says the narrator of the Croton Holding Reservoir, the city's circulatory system, this vast project of aqueducts, tunnels, and pipes that linked upstate reservoirs to Manhattan. The Croton Waterworks in Westchester are identified as the central organ, around which, "the ground...pulsed like a heartbeat" while the holding reservoir in the center of Manhattan is "a squared expanse of black water that was in fact the geometrical absence of a city" (57). Egyptian architectural design of the reservoir makes it a powerful symbol for the novel's preoccupation with eternal life since it was in Egypt that the original mythic connections between sacrifice and immortality, blood and water were first made (Schama, 31). The metaphorical implication of the city's circulatory system can be further appreciated by the reservoir's

depiction as "a baptismal font for the gigantic absolution we require as a people" (61). Like the Fountain of Youth whose waters are destined to rejuvenate, the reservoir's waters are supposed to purify and absolve.

Interestingly enough, the Croton reservoir was used as the principal metaphorical device in Caleb Carr's detective novel, *The Alienist*, published in the same season as *The Waterworks*. In that book, the water system finds its bloody correlative within the symbolic order in the mind of a nineteenth century serial killer. A number of murders of young male prostitutes which always take place near water culminate at the great holding reservoir, the ultimate symbol of a man-made receptacle for purification. However, as Sante points out in his review of Doctorow's novel, the reservoir's anatomical significance is different in *The Alienist*: it is "the heart of the city's water system, the center to which all aqueducts fed and from which all mains and arteries drew their supply" (Sante, 12). Moreover, while in both novels the architectural design of the reservoir as the repository and the embodiment of mystery is a dominant presence, in Doctorow's novel it is identified with the machinery of civilization. Designed to ameliorate the conditions of living, the reservoir instead becomes the locus of nefarious deeds. Bad and twisted treatment of social functions and abuse of political and scientific power are the characteristics of the whole societal pyramid, a deplorable situation that is castigated by most of the participating characters in the novel. At the same time, any belief in "ritual edification" is undermined since the cause of evil is seen as the result of innate depravity rather than social conditioning: "[p]erhaps it is sentimentalism to think a society is capable of being spiritually chastened...in some self-educative way...of pulling itself up just one...rung...toward moral enlightenment" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 236).

This rather pessimistic opinion seems to come closer to Doctorow's more recent vision of the world. Whereas in his previous work individual and social behavior was socially conditioned and this very social conditioning forms the basis of eventual retribution, with *The Waterworks* Doctorow seems to

have abandoned his belief in social responsibility for the evils perpetrated by individuals. *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960) reads as a parable of good and evil but Doctorow shows capitalistic exploitation to be at the core of the myth of the frontier; in *The Book of Daniel* (1971) the Issacsos - fictional representations of the Rosenbergs - are portrayed as victims of their socially conditioned ideology as the book attempts to capture "the historic and psychic currents" of the period (Kauffmann, 25); in *Ragtime* (1975) Doctorow criticizes American democratic ideals through a presentation of class and ethnic conflict rooted in capitalist property, moneyed power and notions of racial supremacy; in its depiction of the depression era, *Loon Lake* (1980) is an obvious critique of capitalism and the capitalist ethos which is adopted by the main character as the monological power of the regime (Williams, 124); *World's Fair* (1985) is a critique of the "false optimism" of American capitalism and its conservative politics (Parks, 103); with *Billy Bathgate* (1989) Doctorow explores America's fascination with gangsters but the book is also a political critique - gangsterism viewed as a form of corporate capitalism. Unlike in those novels, in *The Waterworks* it is innate depravity rather than social conditioning that is considered the cause of evil and here there can be no final retribution. Individual or social degeneration, imitating the evolutionary process of natural phenomena, reaches its climax and then gradually declines. Before committing himself to Sartorius's hands, Augustus Pemberton had accumulated his fortune from trading slaves to the Union Army. Sartorius's sinister also selling shoddy goods to the Union Army. Sartorius's sinister activities are, in his eyes, fully justified since he believes that morality is atavistic and are almost condoned by his fellowmen through the claims of pure disinterested science. Finally, though he loses his power, Tweed is depicted fleeing to Cuba unpunished. In the end, there is no cathartic solution, no cure offered. The narration does not bring any moral revelation, since the enunciation is empty of therapeutic power. The ending becomes an indifferent locus and the novel ends arbitrarily. The narrator, McIlvaine can neither imagine nor enforce any changes: "it is

really an uncanny feeling," he admits helplessly, "when the story ends, I will end" (Doctorow, *The Waterworks*, 236). In a way, this end does not matter any longer, since a successfully executed blood transfusion will bring continuation of a simulated life, a life that will reproduce itself indefinitely, a life that negates its finality.

With *The Waterworks*, Doctorow has attempted to find a bridge between a nineteenth century sensibility and contemporary issues and he has expressed an interest in the symbolic relationship that exists between traditional textual forms and the present. Doubtless, the outcome is a pessimistic affirmation of the connection between the monstrous and the uncontrollable tendencies of the modern world and those of the past. At the same time – testing the power and the limitations of the mythical tradition for a contemporary writer is, how aptly, in itself both a Frankensteinian and Draculian narrative device. After all, maybe every age is doomed to (em)body the decadence of its inspiration, or, put more radically, decadence becomes its own inspiration.

## NOTES

1. In his interview to Laurel Graeber (*The New York Times Book Review*, 19 June 1994, Sec. 7), Doctorow revealed that with *The Waterworks* he may be fulfilling his birthright. "I was named for Edgar Allan Poe," said the author. "My father particularly, was an admirer of Poe's work. This book, in many senses a 19th century tale... may be my finally coming around to do Poe honor." (31)

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