



PROJECT MUSE®

The Waterworks : E. L. Doctorow's Gnostic Detective Story

Brian Diemert

Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Volume 45, Number 4, Winter 2003, pp. 352-374 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tsl.2003.0019>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/47923>

The Waterworks: E. L. Doctorow's Gnostic Detective Story

Brian Diemert

Readers of E. L. Doctorow's most recent novel *City of God* (2000) were often puzzled and perhaps disappointed to see that Doctorow, who has long been recognized as a political writer and historical novelist, extended his range of interest from politics and history to an overt investigation of religious questions.¹ Yet such a move was clearly signaled in his preceding novel, *The Waterworks* (1994), where he used the form of the metaphysical detective story to meditate upon the salient questions of humanity's relationship to the cosmos. What is particularly intriguing is that *The Waterworks* presents a vision that is heavily marked by gnostic thinking.² On one level, we might see this as reflecting a general American perspective; that is, Doctorow may be suggesting, as Harold Bloom does, that gnosticism has become the basic religion of twentieth-century America (Bloom, *Omens*, 27–28). On another level, however, the gnostic context reminds Americans that, even with the end of the Cold War, there is still no place of grace in the world. I don't propose to analyze *The Waterworks* as a post-Cold-War cautionary tale, though that may be possible, nor do I want to talk about the novel as an allegory of greed in the Reagan era (Tokarczyk, *Doctorow's*, 151).³ Rather, I want to investigate the ways in which Doctorow uses the genre of the detective story to explore metaphysical and spiritual issues, and as a by-product of this examination, I hope to stimulate discussion of this somewhat neglected novel.⁴

Doctorow described *The Waterworks* as "a dark tale that participates in nineteenth-century storytelling conventions staked out by Melville and Poe. It's a mystery of sorts, a scientific detective tale" (Wachtel, 187). His decision to structure the novel as a detective story is fortunate for us since the narrative possibilities of the form invite us to unpack some of the book's more esoteric concerns. For *The Waterworks* is, among other things, an ironic commentary on the American dream and a postmodern meditation on language, authorship, history, and epistemology—all within the form of the metaphysical detective story. And, as a detective story, *The Waterworks* is also a story of reading and of interpretation, but here emphasis on mystery and on uncovering what is hidden advances an occult narrative that, in McIlvaine's

ruminations and particularly in the figure of Donne, raises questions pertaining to the spiritual in human affairs. McIlvaine's narrative, we find, has an esoteric subtext that tells a "secret story"⁵ involving his failed quest for spiritual truth, personal revelation, and divine knowledge.

Having previously tried his hand at the western, the science fiction novel, and the gangster novel, Doctorow turned in *The Waterworks* to the detective story, and, indeed, in almost all respects the book represents his closest treatment of the genre. It hardly needs demonstrating that this is so: Edmond Donne is the master sleuth, a sort of Sherlock Holmes, while McIlvaine is his less-able accomplice, the Watson who tells the tale.⁶ Moreover, the book contains the two stories that Todorov, for one, sees as typical of detective fiction's narrative structure. We have both the story of the investigation, visible to the reader in the narrative present, and the story of the crime, hidden from the reader though intermittently revealed in the course of the story of the investigation. But *The Waterworks* is not quite a detective story in the tradition of Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, or even, despite Doctorow's mention of him, Edgar Allan Poe. In many ways it seems closer to the work of Wilkie Collins and other sensation novelists who filled the gap between Poe and Doyle when the form of the detective story had yet to be fully defined. Dickens, Collins, Le Fanu, and others, including Poe, drew on the heritage of the gothic and opened their work to the presence of the fantastic or the mysterious in ways that are seldom seen in texts from the later "golden age" of detective fiction.

Briefly, *The Waterworks* tells a story of multiple quests for missing persons. The book's narrator, McIlvaine, is a newspaper editor who begins looking for Martin Pemberton, one of his most able book reviewers. When McIlvaine had last seen Pemberton, the young man was distraught because he had just seen the figure of his supposedly dead father in a tram filled with elderly people. McIlvaine's search is unsuccessful, so he contacts the police, where a man named Edmund Donne, distinguished for being a rare honest officer, agrees to assist in the search. The two probe the depths of New York's underworld and discover links between missing street children and a philanthropic Home for Little Wanderers. Ultimately, what is discovered is that Pemberton's father and others have been kept alive in a sort of life-in-death state by an amoral scientific genius named Dr. Sartorius, who has vampirishly been using the tissues and blood of children to maintain the semblance of animation in elderly men who refuse not only to die, but also to pass on their inheritances. The whole operation is sustained by criminal activity and a network of corrupt municipal politicians who have allowed Sartorius to operate out of one New York City's waterworks plants.

Although such a summary hardly does justice to the book's intricacies, we can see that Donne is derived from any number of literary

detectives (he is “tiresomely . . . methodical” [87]), but he also represents the logical extension of “the irrational current of detective fiction” that Stefano Tani sees as a continuous presence in the genre (149). Surely, it is not much of a leap from the detective who appears to possess psychic abilities (for example, telepathic or clairvoyant sensitivity) to one who actually does possess such skills. Dupin, Holmes, and Poirot, for example, startle their companions and readers by seeing what is invisible to ordinary perception. Dupin’s telepathic intrusion into his companion’s thoughts in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (Poe, 120–21) or Holmes’s constructions of character on the basis of a shirt sleeve or a pant cuff surprise us,⁷ but they are always explained with reference to reason and logic. Consequently, the fantastic qualities of these stories are usually naturalized (Rabkin, 61). Poe and Doyle create worlds in which all things are discernible to the inquiring mind,⁸ but Doctorow’s postmodern framing of the genre offers quite a different world. Donne, for all intents and purposes, is seen by McIlvaine to possess “supernatural” powers: “Linear thinking [can] not find them” (115), we are told, but Donne can. The epistemological framework of the detective story is fundamentally altered in *The Waterworks* through a revisioning of the process of detection and through the book’s reinscription of mystery. Such a project falls well within the postmodern frame of reference. For Tani, the postmodern in detective fiction most clearly announces itself at the end of the text in the solution (41–42). But postmodernism involves much more than this. As Phillip Brian Harper reminds us, postmodernism tends towards a radical decentering, a fragmentation of the psyche, its language, its history, and its beliefs and ideologies (3–4). Postmodernism suspends judgment and refuses to locate authority (Hutcheon, 49). In this context, the solution of the detective story represents only one area of challenge, but as Harper and others suggest, there are many more, and Doctorow takes some of them up in *The Waterworks*. Indeed, the book’s gnostic content—its deep suspicion about earthly authority—complements postmodernism’s celebrated skepticism.

Often used in connection with, and sometimes as a synonym for, detective fiction, “mystery” has several connotations that directly illuminate Doctorow’s spiritual themes in *The Waterworks*. By the Renaissance, Edgar Wind finds, the word had acquired three senses which operated more or less simultaneously: the ritualistic, “exemplified by the festival of Eleusis . . . a popular ritual of initiation” in which “neophytes were purged of the fear of death and admitted into the company of the blessed, to which they were bound by a vow of silence” (Wind, 1); the figurative, found in the work of Plato, who saw philosophy as a form of mystical initiation “offering the cleansing of the soul, the welcoming of death, [and] the power to enter into communication with the Beyond,” (3); and the magical, derived from the work of Plotinus who, in systematizing the adoption of

ritual terminology to assist the exercise of intelligence and in emphasizing the role of tangible symbols, betrayed late Platonists into a revival of magic (5–6). Each of these meanings operates in *The Waterworks* to make it a mystery novel, but for our purposes the first two are perhaps most relevant, for they connote the obscure or occult nature of particular matters and they suggest the possibility of human contact with the divine through a process of initiation. Like other mystery stories, *The Waterworks* describes a world of secrets known to a select few, while the detective's powers allow him to probe what is largely invisible to the other characters.

On a mundane level, detective fiction can be seen to embody a kind of ritualistic initiation for both the characters and the reader into knowledge and higher wisdom. Consequently, every detective story has a "gnostic imperative . . . [the] journey from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge" (Eaton, 40–41). The detective leads us and his accomplice through an underworld of crime and depravity in order to find its source and to effect some sort of redemption. As David I. Grossvogel observes, the detective story allegorizes "the mystery of what lies beyond the reach of consciousness" (15) by establishing a "false boundary" that invites a "mock penetration of the unknown through an active participation (that of the initiate and the initiatory ritual) or a speculative one (through the 'rehearsive' nature of art or myth)" (13–14). This variant of the romance quest has become such an integral feature of the genre that it is often self-consciously remarked upon, as in some of Raymond Chandler's work,⁹ or else explicitly presented as the enactment of ritual or a game (itself a kind of ritual), as in P. D. James's first novel, *Cover Her Face* (1962), which opens with the following observation: "Memory, selective and perverse, invested what had been a perfectly ordinary dinner party with an aura of foreboding and unease. It became, in retrospect, a ritual gathering under one roof of victim and suspects, a staged preliminary to murder" (5). We might then find satisfaction in our imposing a religious frame upon *The Waterworks*. After all, since the publication of W. H. Auden's "The Guilty Vicarage" in 1938, one of the oldest ways of reading detective fiction is as a drama of salvation; however, considerations of genre should put us on our guard against seeing *The Waterworks* as a simple religious allegory. For one thing, Doctorow's narrator is far too self-conscious to allow any schematic reading to emerge unscathed, and, for another, the complexities of the book push one to less determined readings and to an awareness of its enigmatic content.

Doctorow and reviewers linked the novel to the work of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville,¹⁰ each of whom exploited the conventions of gothic romance in ways that have influenced Doctorow here. In discussing *The Waterworks*, Doctorow cited Melville as particularly important for

a book partially inspired by its author's uncanny experience of seeing into the past, of seeing New York City in the nineteenth century.¹¹ And in this most literary of books where so many characters have names derived from literary history (authors and characters),¹² even the name of McIlvaine may be derived from "Milvain," the surname of the ambitious young writer in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891). Ultimately, though, recognizing every allusion in Doctorow's text is not as important as recognizing its allusiveness. The narrative's gothic elements—evident in descriptions of the Home for Little Wanderers, the Waterworks, the "Italianate mansion" (223) at Ravenwood (recalling both Ann Radcliffe and Poe), the fog-wrapped exhumation of the child's body during the summer solstice, the bizarrely suspended, "unsouled" (193) existences of the old men—all link *The Waterworks* to any number of nineteenth-century gothic novels and stories. As reviewers easily saw (Schama, 31; Solotaroff, 788; Sante, 10), Dr. Sartorius, the mad genius, is a familiar character type whose literary antecedents include such figures as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Rappacini, Faust, and, further back, Simon Magus, and Prometheus.¹³ In the nineteenth century, increasing secularization within the culture diminished the authority of the clergyman (as spiritual guardian, as personal advisor) and promoted the authority of the doctor who, charged with one's physical well-being, came to assume the quasi-spiritual role of advisor and confidant (Knight, 113), and so became the perfect villain. In detective fiction, the doctor, Holmes tells us, is "the first of criminals" (Doyle, 270)—and so he is in *The Waterworks*. In Doctorow's text, the spiritual connotations accruing to the "doctor" are emphasized through the establishment of links between Sartorius and the demonic by both McIlvaine and Martin Pemberton: the former describes Sartorius as a shape-shifter (94) whose very name sends a shudder through his being (94), while the latter sees him as isolated and alone, restlessly searching for a "companionable soul" (186).

The gothic elements in *The Waterworks* help to account for our sense that the world of the narrative is one in which supernatural forces operate, for the gothic indulges in such things. But the fact that McIlvaine suggests the presence of the supernatural cannot be wholly attributed to the apparatus of the gothic, for he announces at the outset of his tale that "The soul of the city was always my subject, and it was a roiling soul, twisting and turning over on itself, forming and re-forming, gathering into itself and opening out again like blown cloud" (4–5). Coming as it does so early in the book, this metaphor of spiritual creation and recreation may initially be taken as a general expression for life in the city. The first paragraphs of the novel, however, raise questions about how one is to interpret language and whether a figurative reading, of the kind assumed by McIlvaine when Martin Pemberton first says his father is alive,

is not somehow inaccurate. That is, "People" (3) and McIlvaine do not accept the literal truth that Pemberton's father is alive, yet the point of the narrative is that the literal sense of Pemberton's claim is, in fact, the one that operates in the text. McIlvaine explicitly notes that as a newspaperman he is much interested in language (3), so we can't assume his discourse to contain carelessly used metaphor. Fundamentally, when he says the "soul" of the city is his subject, we have to credit the literal meaning of the words more than we might otherwise: his religious diction is charged with significance.

Indeed, McIlvaine expressly urges us to attend to his diction: "Here I will confess, if that's the appropriate word, I myself am a lapsed Presbyterian. It's the diction that did it, finally, the worn-thin, shabby, church-poor words, so overused they connote to me a poverty of spirit, not the richness of it" (34-35). It is precisely the point of his narrative to suggest through his diction something of "the richness" of spirit, though McIlvaine ultimately fails in his efforts to attain gnosis. As is quickly apparent, McIlvaine's language shows him to be deeply obsessed with matters of spiritual belief. Consequently, his pursuit of Martin Pemberton becomes the overt expression of a covert search for spiritual revelation: "This is not a ghost tale. In fact I'm wrong even to use the word *tale*. . . . If I had another word to connote not a composition of human origin but rather some awful Reading out of Heaven, I would use it here" (64). The narrative, then, becomes a metaphysical detective story that operates on exoteric and esoteric levels, for McIlvaine's account becomes much more than an attempt to explain Pemberton's bizarre claim that his dead father is alive. As a reporter, however, McIlvaine struggles to remain detached and skeptical about all things including the spiritual: the Rev. Grimshaw's religion, McIlvaine tells us, "no longer had any authority . . . other than as organizer of his daily life and conduct and as a filing system for his perceptions" (46). Late in the novel, though, McIlvaine, who had thought otherwise, imagines himself "in a world ruled by God after all" (192), which is his youthful desire, yet failing to find a spark of light within himself, he ultimately discounts the idea. Still, his religious longing is everywhere expressed; for instance, the romance Donne and Sarah "made for themselves out of this unholy matter . . . [had] an intrepid spirit in it [. . .] a human means of resistance to the darkest devilishness" (223), and Sartorius is incarcerated in "a cathedral of prayerful sound" (239). One could easily multiply these examples.

We might account for McIlvaine's religious language by remembering that in the nineteenth century "religious diction was assumed to be applicable to the public issues of the day" (143). (Readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [1852] will recall how Stowe frames the question of slavery in religious terms.) And, indeed, it is an indication of Doctorow's genius that in

evoking the discourse of nineteenth-century authors and narrators he necessarily incorporates the language, thought, and philosophical and moral attitudes of New York in the nineteenth century. Similarly, in setting his tale in 1871, a time when spiritualism and the revival of occultism were particularly strong,¹⁴ Doctorow allows himself to draw on the language of nineteenth-century occultism. As J. Gerald Kennedy reminds us in a paragraph of some relevance to Doctorow's text, developing medical knowledge had, by the nineteenth century, rendered "the venerable belief in a physical seat of the soul" untenable, but, at the same time, the emergence of Romanticism popularized the transcendentalist view that "man and nature . . . were suffused by an over-soul." The tension between these popular ideologies meant that "belief in an individuated soul persisted . . . [b]ut the apparent failure of religious dogmas channeled belief in the soul into secular occultism, both formal and informal" (57). McIlvaine's narrative reflects one sort of "secular occultism."

Like a belief in occult systems, narrating, as McIlvaine well knows, is a way of asserting mastery over events and over unseen forces, but it offers much more to McIlvaine than the "convenience of thought" that religion, phrenology, or astrology supply (46). Donne's report to Sarah Pemberton, Emily Tisdale, and Grimshaw, for instance, transforms the chaotic events of their lives into a meaningful pattern through the inscription of intentionality: "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 [. . .] by which we could recompose the world, comfortably, in categories of good and evil" (140–41). The detective's narration is comforting, but, as the newspaperman recognizes, it comes at a cost, for in making events intelligible, something is imposed upon them that may be falsifying: "I want to keep to the chronology of things but at the same time to make their pattern sensible, which means disrupting the chronology. After all, there is a difference between living in some kind of day-to-day crawl through chaos, where there is no hierarchy to your thoughts, [. . .] and knowing in advance the whole conclusive order . . . which makes narration . . . suspect" (123). Narrating, then, is a kind of fictionalizing, but not, as Doctorow argues in his well-known essay "False Documents," a falsification.¹⁵ Rather, fiction embodies "the larger truth . . . of metaphor, the envisioned truth of the moral character of society" (Wachtel, 190), and this truth, as McIlvaine makes clear, is not bound to verifiable facts: "We did not feel it so necessary to assume an objective tone in our reporting then. We were more honest and straightforward and did not make such a sanctimonious thing of objectivity" (29–30). In this context, he licenses himself to disrupt chronology (132), construct narratives of his own imagining (39–40, 81–83, 177), edit and compress events

(201), and incorporate dreams (163, 217) into his telling. Because plotting creates causal links that render the unintelligible intelligible, the one who plots controls meaning. Consequently, when McIlvaine asks Donne to investigate the matter, he not only surrenders himself to a higher power but he also feels that he is surrendering control of his discourse: "I felt I was giving up . . . my diction . . . for his" (95).

As is the case with so many detective stories, such as Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, in which Marlowe's search for Rusty Regan leads him into a world ruled by organized crime, or Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park*, where Arkady's search for a killer takes him into a labyrinth of government corruption and Cold War Soviet-American relations, the initial pursuit of a solution in *The Waterworks* moves beyond "one . . . Godless family" (142) into the society at large. (Given Doctorow's political concerns, it could hardly do otherwise.) In *The Waterworks* the search for Martin Pemberton leads to the discovery of Augustus Pemberton's treachery, Simmons's exploitation of children, Sartorius's unnatural experiments, and finally the Tweed Ring's corruption of municipal politics. But beyond this a darker shadow falls (238). It is no surprise, then, that when one level of criminality begins to be exposed, others also emerge; that is, Tweed's links to bribery, educational censorship (148–49), and the Home for Little Wanderers (153) begin to come out in the press (170).

Drawn into the case by his interest in Martin Pemberton, his admiration for Martin's skills as a writer, and his reporter's instinct ("I smelled a story" [27]), McIlvaine, like any detective, begins his investigation with a series of interviews—with Martin's landlady, Rev. Charles Grimshaw, Emily Tisdale (Martin's fiancé), and Sarah Pemberton (Martin's stepmother)—that leads him into further mysteries. These and subsequent interviews become columns in his newspaper world that form the basis of the story he later tells Donne: "I told him of the whole Pemberton matter—everything I knew, and also what I suspected" (86). Since McIlvaine has not yet revealed what he in fact suspected, his discourse here evinces a reticence which indicates the presence of a secret narrative that Todorov reminds us is a characteristic of the detective story. Every detail in the detective story is potentially significant because it is either a clue to the solution or a false clue meant to mislead the detective, the reader or both. In *The Waterworks*, McIlvaine asks that we "trust that [. . .] everything [. . .] has bearing on the story" (6; similarly 62). In the analytical detective story as exemplified by Christie, Sayers, Doyle, and Poe in his "tales of ratiocination," the detective's discernment of the true from the false clue is most expertly performed through a rational exercise. Consequently, in the analytical detective story, the detective's physical activity is limited.¹⁶ Dupin and Holmes, for example, generally attend to a

story with the utmost care, visit a site to verify their hypotheses (of which the reader is kept ignorant), and then reveal their solution in a second narrative told in the presence of witnesses, the accused, the guilty, the police, or any combination of these. Their activity is largely cerebral, relying on what Christie's Hercule Poirot repeatedly refers to as the "little gray cells" (e.g., Christie, 187). By contrast, in Doctorow's novel, fine reasoning and keen induction do not lead either us or Donne and McIlvaine to the solution. While the classical detective privileges reason as the means of unlocking the secrets of the universe or at least of the crime, Doctorow and other writers of postmodern detective stories lack this confidence. Even in American hard-boiled detective fiction, we find detectives such as the Continental Op, Sam Spade, or Philip Marlowe who, while recognizing that their solutions are "no more plausible and no less ambiguous than the stories [they meet] with at the outset" (Marcus, 202), primarily rely on intellect to solve the crime—although their solutions may not be entirely satisfying. The postmodern detective story, however, "frustrates the expectations of the reader, . . . and substitutes for the detective as central and ordering character the decentering and chaotic admission of mystery, of nonsolution" (Tani, 40). In *The Waterworks* this epistemology is mainly evinced through Donne, who relies on an understanding beyond reason, but also, as we will see, through McIlvaine's heightened sensitivity to irrational or intuitive impressions. As McIlvaine writes, "So in this news story, now, my, this . . . yesterday's news . . . I warn you, the sense is not in the linear column but in all of them together. [. . .] Linear thinking would not find them [Sartorius, Simmons, or Martin Pemberton]" (115). The causal chain celebrated by almost every fictional detective since Dupin is fundamentally dismissed as a means of discovery. "The means of human knowledge," McIlvaine writes, "are far from understood" (94).

Of course, in *The Waterworks* the usual investigative practices are still undertaken, but they tend to supplement, if not create the conditions for, flashes of knowledge. For Donne, whose position might be characterized as neo-platonic, the conventional practices are primarily used to confirm what he already knows (111). Knowledge is regarded, as it is in Plato, as a form of remembering and so detection participates in the uncanny, as Freud conceives of it, by recovering facts that are already known but perhaps not on a conscious level of thought.¹⁷ Martin Pemberton's initial story, McIlvaine tells us at the outset, works the same way: "In misunderstanding him, I found the greater truth, though I would not realize it until everything was over and done. It was one of those intuitive moments of revelation that suspend themselves in our minds until we come around to them by the ordinary means of knowing" (11).

To find the evidence of what he already knows, Donne must move "Systematically, step by step" (111), but the knowledge is already there and the means by which he acquires it leave McIlvaine bewildered: "This is the question that I will never be able to resolve to my satisfaction . . . the conjunctions of which Edmund Donne was capable. What information did he depend on? I can never know" (159). As several reviewers observed, the aptly named Donne is well equipped to unravel metaphysical mysteries (Schama, 31; Solotaroff, 788), and so, bluntly, in examining Donne we push beyond the cerebral powers of the master sleuth into the heart of the book's esoteric narrative of occult struggle and spiritual turmoil.¹⁸

McIlvaine sees Donne as crucially important to McIlvaine's spiritual destiny: "It is almost mysterious to me now that I sought him out [. . .]. I had other recourses in a city of almost a million souls. [However,] There was something else, something else . . . a look of recognition in the eye, as if he might have been waiting for this . . . waiting for me to arrive . . . with what he was expecting" (89). As an old man, McIlvaine may be retrospectively investing Donne with supernatural intensity, but McIlvaine's suggestion that Donne is "misplaced for life" and that his character is "an important piece of my story" (89) (as well as McIlvaine's various descriptions of Donne) all hint that McIlvaine sees his encounter with Donne as involving something that, because it seems to be occurring on a spiritual and the earthly plane, defies his understanding. Typically a few steps behind Donne in working towards the solution (e.g., 142 and 208), McIlvaine's efforts are complicated by the fact that he, like Harry Wheelwright, finds himself inexplicably enthralled by Donne:

I concurred with his plan of investigation and may have protested as I did because it was something he expected of me. I was saying what he thought a journalist would say. In Edmund Donne's thoughtful company you found yourself wanting to be what he expected you to be. Isn't that what happened to Harry Wheelwright? (112)

In Donne's company the "totally untrustworthy" (100) Wheelwright is completely forthcoming: "Donne sat [. . .] and asked a question or two, in a tone of voice that didn't exactly demand an answer but was irresistibly confident that he would receive one. I'm not sure that was all there was to it, but he got Harry talking" (100).¹⁹ The suggestion that Donne's voice is the source of his influence may have some basis in psychological theory, but because McIlvaine, too, is acting in a way that is unusual for him, Donne's technique smacks of mesmerism. Equally intriguing is the suggestion that Donne's "estrangement," his exile from some other place, may account for his abilities (118). To be sure, eccentricity is the calling

card of many fictional detectives, but Donne's alienation is puzzling. There are veiled hints about his past—which may have included Sarah Pemberton—but his origins remain mysterious, and, of course, as one of a very few policemen not to be obligated to the Tweed Ring, he is already unique, if not “misplaced” and “odd” (89).

Seeing the tale as more than a simple detective story, McIlvaine casts Donne and Sartorius in a gnostic drama of spiritual forces engaged in a contest of vital importance to his soul. Like Holmes and Moriarty or Dupin and Minister D_____, they embody a dualism that is typical in detective fiction (Tani, 4ff.) but here indicative of McIlvaine's gnosticism, which harkens back to an older dualistic spirituality supplanted by Christianity. Donne, a version of “the alien man” (Jonas, 75–80), is described as “priestly” (122), and after his triumph he receives “petitioners” (237); Sartorius is a “vaulting soul” (129), the Lucifer who, though a “holy man” in McIlvaine's gnostic formulation (179), is also tied to the “malignant” forces of the Croton Reservoir (57–58) and of the Waterworks. He is the “shadow” (94)—a man Martin Pemberton cannot represent, despite the time spent with him: “It's as if [he says, in language derived from Paracelsus, Mesmer, and others], . . . there's an alignment of historical energies magnetized on him which . . . for all I know, is probably all . . . that makes him visible” (183). That's a big “as if,” but the metaphor does tie Sartorius to the world of spiritual emanation. He is a seductive magus who casts a “spell” (187) on Martin Pemberton that renders him unconscious of his moral responsibilities (203). McIlvaine, too, is led to imitate Sartorius's ambition (113) and even to feel sympathy for him (236). Facing the prospect of death and the uncertainty of an afterlife, McIlvaine is captivated by Sartorius's investigations into the limits of life and death. At one point, McIlvaine says, he wants us to be “suspended” (123) just as he, Donne, Sarah, and the others were, yet “suspension” and its derivatives are loaded words in *The Waterworks*. Donne is suspended from his job, while we, as readers, are in suspense, but suspension also refers to the mesmeric state between life and death. Immediately after his rescue, Martin is said to hang between the two (166), and so do the old men animated but suspended by Sartorius, that most cold-blooded of artists. As a figure for the gnostic's creative demiurge, Sartorius prevents an awakening to divinity by imprisoning the spirit in matter (cf. Jonas, 44). McIlvaine seems to want the kind of power Sartorius has, and so it is no accident that McIlvaine later characterizes his experience as a “spiritual test” (192). Although he claims the thought is compensatory, there can be little doubt that the “secret story” he and Doctorow, of course, tell is one of spiritual initiation and testing.

Not only is the “soul of the city [. . .] always [his] subject” (4), but “soul” is one of McIlvaine's most frequent epithets for individuals and for

himself (e.g., 64, 89, 91, 166, 191, etc.). Like many fictional detectives who travel through the “underworld,” he characterizes himself as one who, having “descend[ed] upon the city” (59), has walked among the dead: New York is both a living organism, animated with its own spirit (67) and a “necropolis” (13), a city unawakened²⁰; elsewhere, he writes, “This is a story of invisible men, dead men or men indeterminately alive [Tweed’s nature is ‘essentially disembodied’ (146); Simmons is ‘a cadaverous man’ (181)]” (213). As one who tells of his passage through this underworld, McIlvaine aspires to “the glory of the Revelator” (149) as a prophet of the invisible: he adopts the voice of Job’s messengers (Job 1:14–19) and, incidentally, of Melville’s Ishmael (who quotes *Job* as an epigraph to *Moby Dick*’s epilogue): “in all of this [. . .] I represent matters which only I seem to have survived” (55). McIlvaine’s return, however, leaves him with the dreadful obligation to tell of the horror, “the depth of the conspiracy [. . .] a more fathomless threat there than to Christianity . . . that left [his] eyes blasted to peer into it” (238). What he documents is the revelation of one who has uncomprehendingly glimpsed an occult relation between the terrestrial and the spiritual. Consequently, McIlvaine’s narrative suggests a world in which events carried out on a spiritual plane react with fatal results upon the physical plane: all earthly actions, then, have moral and spiritual correspondences because they are connected: “the masts of the sailing ships in their berths on the river would look like a kind of stitching of heaven to earth” (82–83). Similarly, the street preachers who proclaim an imminent apocalypse are viewed as unusually important (34–35) and, like Lincoln’s funeral cortege (6), bizarrely credited with originary significance because they, like the funeral procession, possess eschatological importance that resonates on several levels: the character’s (McIlvaine is old and facing death); the narrative’s (events set in 1871 are recalled from the perspective of the nascent twentieth century), and the book’s (published in 1994, near the end of the century and, depending on your point of view, the millennium).

Determined to remain skeptical, however, McIlvaine is largely overwhelmed by the spiritual mysteries of the realm he inhabits. When he does employ conventional mysterious mythology, he is alternately nostalgic and ironic. For example, as a young man he saw the Croton Reservoir as potentially a source of “absolution” (61), but in the present it is perceived for several reasons as a malignant influence (57–58). Because it is a technological marvel, the reservoir’s apparent “malignity” points to the corrupting influences of heightened technology that are most obviously associated with Sartorius and his menagerie of old gentlemen. In their “obverse Eden” of “sulfurous mist” and the dynamo hum (188), they perform a mindless “ritual . . . [the] sacrament for a religion that did not yet exist” (200). The Reservoir’s pagan architectural design also suggests

associations with Egyptian and Mayan mythologies and rites that, as in McIlvaine's dream (217), connote human sacrifice as the price of communal immortality (Schama, 31). A place of vacancy, "the geometrical absence of a city" (*Waterworks*, 57), the Reservoir is the black heart of New York. Water, often identified with life and rebirth, is here then an oppressive force and, as Martin Pemberton's half-brother's name, Noah, reminds us, easily an instrument of destruction.²¹ Of course, the notion of sacrifice, particularly of children, is obvious in the novel both metaphorically as a societal practice and literally as the repeated story of the drowned child suggests.

Yet from another point of view the reservoir is rendered as a sacred center, the portal between two worlds. Mircea Eliade explains that "the centre of Rome was a hole, *mundus*, the point of communication between the terrestrial world and the lower regions" (22). Similarly, he continues, the Temple in Jerusalem "was situated exactly above the *tehon* . . . the primeval waters before creation [... which] symbolize the aquatic chaos, the preformal modality of cosmic matter, and, at the same time, the world of death, of all that precedes and follows life. The rock of Jerusalem thus designates the point of intersection and communication between the lower world and the earth" (27–28). In McIlvaine's discourse the Croton Reservoir retains these sacred associations, but they are ironically transformed. Literally, the Reservoir operates as a life-giving center, supplying New York with water and fire-fighting capabilities, and figuratively it functions as a fixed point "equivalent to the creation of the world" (Eliade, 22). But here the source of life, of creation, is tied to the *Waterworks* and Sartorius through a network of pipes and through McIlvaine's dream of the "bearded man," which is said to predate his knowledge of the man:

I began suffering this dream long ago, [. . .] before I knew there was a Sartorius . . . when . . . on the embankment of the Croton Reservoir . . . I think now . . . I imagine . . . I'm convinced—is it possible?—he rushed past me with the drowned boy in his arms. There are moments in our life that are something like breaks or tears in moral consciousness [. . .] and the eye sees through the breach to a companion life, a life in all its aspects the same, running along parallel in time, but within a universe even more confounding than our own. (219–20)

This essentially gnostic vision through the portal into the occult world, where events of terrestrial consequence are simultaneously occurring, effaces distinctions between memory and imagination, past and present to show all time co-existing in the moment and to reveal incomprehensible patterns of fate.²² From the perspective of the gnostics, the breach is the

space of illumination, the reminder of the spirit's presence and of its origins in the mysterium.

Not surprisingly, then, McIlvaine frequently muses on questions of destiny, fate, and the apparent simultaneity of time (e.g., 115, 132, 136). Just as a dream in the past might reveal its future in the present, so does the present contain signs of an unremembered life. For Doctorow, this is how the novel works. Past and present are bound; comments made about the end of one century are easily read as comments made about the end of another century: "You may think you are living in modern times, here and now, but that is the necessary illusion of every age. We did not conduct ourselves as if we were preparatory to your time. There was nothing quaint or colorful about us" (11). A sense of temporal continuity in human affairs is joined to the sense of connectedness among seemingly discreet events that is already present in the "inherently providential" design of not only detective fiction but of any narrative (Kayman, 33).

McIlvaine seeks spiritual understanding through his act of narration, so he fashions a world of spiritual immanence and his consequence. By its nature, however, writing obscures the spirit,²³ and so McIlvaine is caught in and by his fiction—able to hint and suggest but never to grasp, perhaps not even to admit, the occult knowledge he gropes for:

I was by this time thinking even more ambitiously of [. . .] telling the whole story within the pages of a book. [. . . of undertaking] the ritual by which we could . . . acknowledge ourselves . . . for what we were. [. . .] perhaps it is sentimentalism to think a society is capable of being spiritually chastened . . . in some self-educated way . . . of pulling itself up just one . . . rung . . . toward moral enlightenment. That we would, as a kind of municipal congregation, drop to our knees and gather our children to us. (236)

His narrative strives towards the revelation of gnosis, but circumstance (Sartorius never comes to trial), the limitations of language, and forgetfulness²⁴ itself distance events from truth and blur McIlvaine's visionary intent: "I'm an old man now and I have to acknowledge that reality slips [. . .] the street you live on, appears to you one sunny morning as the monumental intention of men who are no longer available to explain it."²⁵ [. . .] time estranges us from the belief we are all given—pious and the blasphemous alike—that we are born to live in pleasure or pain, happiness or despair, but always in great moral consequence" (236). Hence, his discourse is unavoidably fragmentary (clearly indicated by the heavy use of ellipses throughout the book) and incomplete because "there are limits to the use of words" (208). What evades language becomes the mysterious and the invisible that is so often thematically foregrounded in *The Waterworks*: "This is the story of

invisible men, dead men or men indeterminately alive [. . .] You have not seen them, except in the shadows, or heard them speak, except in the voices of others. . . . They've been hiding in my language" (213–14). In this respect, McIlvaine again finds kinship with Sartorius who also searches for a language with which to express the invisible:

The truth is so deep inside, so interior, it operates [. . .] in the total disregard of a recognizable world that would give us comfort, or in which we might find beauty or the hand of God [. . .] Philosophy poses the right questions. But it lacks the requisite diction for the answers. Only Science can find the diction for answers.

It is only a matter of the right diction?

Finally, yes, we will find the language, the formulae, or perhaps the numeration . . . to match God.

And God himself cannot be relied upon for the answers?

Not as God is now composed. (242–43)

Narration, creation, and divinity are all linked in the passage, and so the last sentence stays with McIlvaine: God, as some followers of the gnostic Valentinus believed, may indeed be the creation of humanity's language (Pagels, 148). While Donne's narration offered the means to "recompose the world comfortingly, in categories of good and evil" (141), Sartorius and McIlvaine more ambitiously seek a language that could theoretically reconfigure God and reveal all that is unseen. In keeping with the nineteenth-century drive to secularize mystery (Kayman, 7), Sartorius dreams that Science can provide this language, while McIlvaine looks instead to his own account as the means to "transcend reporting" (113) and communicate his "secret story" that is so crucial to his existence. "Finally you suffer the story you tell" (219), McIlvaine writes, and for him the result is "an uncanny feeling—when the story ends, I will end" (236), which is true, given his status as a narrator/character in the novel.²⁶

McIlvaine sees his text as enacting a "ritual" (236). Can his narrative provide "moral enlightenment" (236)? Surely, his desire that society be "spiritually chastened" (236) is consistent with his youthful sense that the Reservoir might have provided "the gigantic absolution we require as a people" (61), but, since the Reservoir itself is ambiguously rendered, it falls to words, *The Waterworks*, to supply the ritual and embody the confession/revelation that may, McIlvaine hopes (?), commit him to redemption (121). One set of signifiers (language) comes to supplant another (the baptismal font). As the author of the ritual, McIlvaine could be seen to serve a priestly role, but his dismissal of his desire as a sentimental emotion evinces his habitual detachment and, perhaps, indicates his having failed in his spiritual test: "lapsed" and limited in his metaphysics, he

is voluntarily exiled from the worlds of spiritual enlightenment and love, both of which he has glimpsed. On the level of the detective story, the mystery of *The Waterworks* is solved: Sartorius is captured and later killed, Simmons is dead by means of an accident whose allegorical import hardly needs explaining (he is crushed under the weight of his ill-gotten gains [226]), and the vampirish Tweed is in exile. Similarly, the romance plot is resolved in the double-marriage of Donne and Sarah, and of Martin and Emily. Yet the *sense* of mystery persists,²⁷ and McIlvaine stands “unassimilated” (DeKoven, 89): “In modern city life,” he writes, “you can conceivably experience revelation and in the next moment go on to something else. Christ could come to New York and I would still have a paper to get out” (25). He remains a bachelor, though plagued by erotic desire. Convinced of the world’s depravity, he is left, like Milton’s devils, to taste the ash in his mouth (251); like Dante, he conceives of his infernal city “burning in ice” (253), frozen in the forgetfulness of moral consequence. Yet to the secularist, these visions, like the one of God refracted through the windowpane (252), are considered illusions, fictions offered to satisfy his need for moral or poetic justice. As is the case with the detective’s solution, justice and authority are found in his narration, in his plot, yet language and memory, like life, shift “as desires are contained and released” (132). Ultimately *The Waterworks* is a metaphysical detective story in which the larger mystery prevails, as McIlvaine’s rhetoric struggles—“I ask you to believe—I will prove” (142)—but fails to contain its revelation or to overcome its indeterminacy. As his ellipses demonstrate, he reflects the postmodern condition in that he lacks the confidence to state that literature might be capable of a beneficent influence. Such a possibility is, of course, Doctorow’s own nostalgic yearning, but not one that, as *City of God* shows us, he has given up.

Brescia University College
London, Ontario, Canada

NOTES

1. Reviews of *City of God*, and of *The Waterworks* for that matter, have been mixed. Greg Langley, in *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge), wrote, “Doctorow’s legion of fans will be surprised by this book. [But] Its stay on the bestseller lists will probably be brief.” For Langley, “this book doesn’t seem to fit in with the style Doctorow has displayed in his other books.” A. O. Scott in the *New York Times* worried “that our pre-eminent historical novelist has succumbed to nostalgia” and seemingly lost track of his strengths as a novelist of New York. Similarly, Walter Kirn in *New York Magazine* complained that the book played “on the page like a world religions class.” Paul Gray, on the other hand, praised *City of God* in *Time Magazine*. I think it would be fair to say that one of the things reviewers

didn't like about *City of God*, and Kirn and Scott reflect this, is the novel's "indiscreet God-talk" (Scott).

2. Briefly, as Hans Jonas has made abundantly clear, gnosticism is a product of syncretism, a mixing of Eastern, Hellenic, and Jewish traditions of belief in a new stream (33). The term is "a collective heading for a manifoldness of sectarian doctrines appearing within and around Christianity during its critical first centuries, [and] derive[s] from *gnosis*, the Greek word for 'knowledge'" (Jonas, 32). For the Gnostics, "the knowing ones," knowledge of divine mysteries was obtained either by a personal experience of revelation or by initiation into a secret or esoteric tradition. Fundamentally, gnosticism is characterized by a radical dualism between God and creation, between humanity and the world. Within the gnostic cosmology, creation is the product of the demiurge, a lesser or perhaps co-eternal god who is sometimes given characteristics associated with the God of the Old Testament (Jonas, 42–44). This creator arises through a precosmic fall, a disruption within the Godhead itself, and so the creating demiurge becomes the inferior reflection of the essentially unknowable and alien god who remains identified with the realms of light, but is shrouded in mystery. The Demiurge no longer knows God and undertakes to create the world so as to imprison the fallen elements of divine light in the dark world of matter and ignorance. The individual person, then, is made up of the body, a soul, and the fallen sparks of divinity. This spirit or pneuma is the divine in each person, but it is doubly enclosed within both matter and the astral soul, and then lulled to sleep or forgetfulness by the artifice of creation (44). It has forgotten its origins and its purpose. Consequently, the world is a place of darkness, a prison for the pneuma which, if awakened from its torpor through revelation or initiation, longs to rejoin the godhead. In this context, all of creation is viewed as the product of god's adversary: it is fundamentally an error and our best evidence of separation from the alien god.

3. In his interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Doctorow notes that parallels between circumstances in *The Waterworks* and in America in the 1980s are "inevitable. Because whenever you write about the past you of course reflect the present" (188).

4. *The Waterworks* has still not elicited much critical commentary, but what has appeared characterizes it as Doctorow's "most intellectually designed" novel (Schama, 31) and as his "strangest and most problematic invention so far" (Gray). John Williams suggests that the book indicates Doctorow's desire "to salvage some mimesis for his fiction" after *World's Fair* (152), and he goes on to characterize *The Waterworks* as a historical novel with "elements of Victorian science fiction and horror" (153). Marianne DeKoven uses Linda Hutcheon's term "historiographic metafiction" to describe the book (75) and treats it as a postmodern novel. More recently, Marleen S. Barr considers the book, somewhat bizarrely, as a "Holocaust narrative": it is "his Holocaust novel which never mentions the Holocaust . . . *The Waterworks* grafts speech on to Holocaust silence—and calls attention to the silence" (221). No doubt she would qualify her opinion in light of *City of God's* appearance. The most detailed discussion of *The Waterworks* I have seen is in Michelle M. Tokarczyk's book, *E. L. Doctorow's Skeptical Commitment* (151–69), which examines *The Waterworks* as a sociopolitical novel.

5. E. L. Doctorow, *The Waterworks* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 67. Hereafter cited parenthetically. Since McIlvaine's narration is studded with ellipses, I have marked those omissions that are mine with square brackets: e.g., [. . .].

6. My parallel of Donne with Holmes is not accidental, for Donne is "exceptionally tall and thin [. . .] he [has] a long narrow face, gaunt cheeks, a pointed chin" (85), and he walks with a "stick-legged glide" (127). Such a description links him to Arthur Conan Doyle's depictions of Holmes, particularly when they are interpreted by Sidney Paget in his sketches, and to Wilkie Collins's description of Sgt. Cuff (133). As well, Donne, like Holmes, has a habit of making laconic ("It rules out nothing [. . .] But it rules out something" [86]) and troubling remarks ("Such dark matters as these," he said as if by pronouncing them he was investigating the words themselves" [93]).

7. Holmes also performs the mind-reading trick in "The Cardboard Box" and in "The Resident Patient."

8. Holmes's Book of Life reads: "From a drop of water . . . a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. . . . By a man's finger-nails, by his coat sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser-knees, . . . by each of these things a man's calling is plainly revealed" (Doyle, 23).

9. I am thinking here of Marlowe's reflections on the painting he views in General Sternwood's house in *The Big Sleep's* second paragraph, of his search for Velma (who, we find, has assumed the identity of Mrs. Grayle) in *Farewell My Lovely*, and of the title of his fourth novel, *The Lady in the Lake*. Any number of other items, including comments Chandler made in "The Simple Art of Murder" and elsewhere, might be cited to illustrate his self-conscious use of the romance paradigm.

10. See, for example, Ted Solotaroff's review.

11. Doctorow recounts this experience in "The Nineteenth New York" (145), which like his germinal short story "The Water Works," is incorporated into the novel, and in interviews with Eleanor Wachtel (189) and Michelle Tokarczyk: "My studio looks south over Soho to lower Manhattan. One night a heavy fog came down and covered the World Trade Center, covered the big glass, steel buildings of lower Manhattan, then the Woolworth Building of the 1920s. The entire twentieth century was erased until all I could see was the ground level city. It was the most uncanny experience; I was looking at the city that Melville walked in. I was looking at the nineteenth century" (Tokarczyk, "The City," 33–34). Doctorow's vision of the New York's past finds an analogy in McIlvaine's own recollections of the city he once knew (59). McIlvaine's ruminative intrusions into his narrative recall any number of Melville's narrators, but one need only think of the unnamed lawyer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" who finds himself drawn into a relationship with the enigmatic Bartleby to prove the point. The lawyer's bewilderment at Bartleby is clearly paralleled by McIlvaine's puzzled fascination for Martin Pemberton.

12. Schama (31) makes this point and notes that Sartorius's speech about the essence of life (242–43) contrasts Teufelsdröckh's remarks in Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (e.g., "For Matter . . . is Spirit, the manifestation of Spirit. . . . The thing Visible, nay the thing Imagined, the thing in any way conceived as Visible,

what is it but a Garment, a Clothing of the higher, celestial Invisible, 'unimaginable, formless, dark with excess of bright?'" [49]). The link to *Sartor Resartus* is also confirmed in McIlvaine's mention of the origin of Sartorius's name (128). Some examples of *The Waterworks's* many literary references follow: among the characters, Donne (John Donne), Wrede Sartorius (very nearly telling us to "read *Sartorus*," but perhaps also recalling Dr. Praetorius from James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein*), Augustus Pemberton (recalling a villain in the Holmes canon, Charles Augustus Milverton), Henry Wheelwright (John Wheelwright, a Boston poet, socialist and radical in the 1930s), and Emily Tisdale and Sarah Pemberton (Sara Teasdale, the poet). There are as well explicit references to Whitman, *Beowulf*, "Ozymandius," and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and more oblique references to Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, Emerson's work, and to Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Raven" in Ravenwood.

13. Sartorius's investigations into the essence of life also recall Poe's fiction, especially "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" in which M. Valdemar, on the edge of death, is placed in a hypnotic trance that suspends him between life and death for nine months. When the trance ends, unnaturally rapid and grotesque decomposition occurs.

14. Daniel Lawrence O'Keefe and Peter Washington both see the nineteenth century's revival in occultism beginning in 1848 with the activities of the Fox sisters in Hydesville, Rochester, N.Y., and cresting in 1888, at which time one of them, Maggie, confessed to fraud (O'Keefe, 528). And it is worth remembering that one of the most famous spiritual gurus of the late nineteenth century, Madame Blavatsky, moved to New York City in the summer of 1873 and shortly thereafter founded, with Henry Olcott, the Theosophical Society in 1875. Olcott's career prior to his meeting with Blavatsky is summarized in brief in Washington's book (26–29), but what is notable in the context of Doctorow's novel is that during the Civil War Olcott "became a Special Commissioner to the War Department with . . . the task of investigating profiteers. So successful were his investigations that when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, Olcott became a member of the three-man board appointed to look into the President's death" (Washington, 27). In *The Waterworks* Augustus Pemberton is a war profiteer linked to slave-trading, and McIlvaine suspects some "regnant purpose . . . enshrouded in Mr. Lincoln's death" (7).

15. "As a writer of fiction I could make the claim that a sentence spun from the imagination, i.e., a sentence composed as a lie, confers upon the writer a degree of perception or acuity or heightened awareness—some additional usefulness—that a sentence composed with the most strict reverence for the fact does not" (Doctorow, "False Documents," 152).

16. Rex Stout's corpulent Nero Wolfe is an extreme in this regard.

17. "The uncanny is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (123–24). "[T]he uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (148).

18. While no one to my knowledge has so baldly stated this to be a concern in the novel, it is interesting that at least one review, Sante's, should employ sympathetic language in describing the network of pipes, reservoirs, aqueducts, etc. as

“occult” and in describing the relationship of the impoverished to industrial capitalism as “alchemy” (Sante, 12).

19. I have already remarked on Donne’s literary ancestors, but it is perhaps worth noting here that Wilkie Collins describes his Sgt. Cuff in these terms: “His eyes . . . had a very disconcerting trick, when they encountered your eyes, of looking as if they expected something more from you than you were aware of yourself” (133).

20. “[I]n gnostic thought the world takes the place of the traditional underworld and is itself already the realm of the dead, that is, of those who have to be raised to life again” (Jonas, 68).

21. “Water,” Doctorow remarked, “is generally understood ritually as a cleansing element having to do with absolution and redemption, personal salvation. In this book it doesn’t work like that. On the contrary” (Wachtel, 187). Hans Jonas makes the point that “water is a standing gnostic symbol for the world of matter or of darkness into which the divine has sunk” (117). Towards the end of the novel when McIlvaine and Donne are searching the waterworks, McIlvaine remarks, “I felt the oppression of a universe of water, inside and out, over the dead and the living” (212).

22. While it is too cumbersome to quote in its entirety here, a passage in H. P. Blavaty’s essay, “Psychic and Noetic Action,” glosses McIlvaine’s comments well: “The ‘Higher Ego’ cannot act directly on the body, as its consciousness belongs to quite another plane . . . The ‘Higher Ego’, as part of the essence of the UNIVERSAL MIND, . . . is the vehicle of all knowledge of the past, the present, and the future, . . . it is from this fountainhead that its ‘double’ [the ‘Lower self’] catches occasional glimpses of that which is beyond the senses of man . . . thus making man a *Seer*, a soothsayer, and a prophet” (88).

23. Paul says, “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 *Corinthians* 3:6).

24. Earlier, McIlvaine reflects, “what you remember as having happened and what truly did happen are no less and no more than . . . visions. [. . .] memory cannot recover the moments after—what we did [. . .]” (59).

25. Doctorow is here echoing G. K. Chesterton’s comments on the city in “A Defence of Detective Stories”: “There is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol—a message from some man, as much as if it were a telegram or a post card. The narrowest street possesses, in every crook and twist of its intention, the soul of the man who built it, perhaps long in his grave. Every brick has as human a hieroglyph as if it were a graven brick of Babylon; every slate on the roof is as educational a document as if it were a slate covered with addition and subtraction sums” (*The Defendant*, 159). In this context, the detective is the one able to penetrate the mysteries of the modern city. Chesterton’s essay originally appeared in *The Defendant* in 1901. McIlvaine is writing in the early years of this century: his echo of Chesterton, then, reflects on one level his own reading and, on another, Doctorow’s careful attention to historical referencing.

26. From the perspective of post-structuralist theory, McIlvaine’s insight is equally true, for writers such as Barthes, Lacan, Benveniste, and Foucault all suggest that, as Barthes puts it, “the subject is merely an effect of language” (*Roland Barthes*, 79).

27. There is an obvious tension here, analogous to what we find in hard-boiled detective fiction, between the move towards determinacy in the novel's plot and themes, and the broader and pervasive indeterminacy, embodied in Doctorow's prose style, that we associate with the postmodern sensibility. Tokarczyk addresses this paradox in her discussion of *The Waterworks* with reference to Alan Wilde's conception of "midfiction," which offers affirmation in the face of the void. The assent, however, is "local, limited, and temporary" (as it often is in hard-boiled detective fiction). "It seeks positive knowledge . . . without ever losing sight of the fact that knowledge in any absolute sense . . . is completely out of reach" (Wilde qtd. in Tokarczyk, *Doctorow's*, 152).

WORKS CITED

- Auden, W. H. "The Guilty Vicarage." 1938. *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. London: Faber, 1963.
- Barr, Marlene S. *Genre(f)ission: A New Discourse for Cultural Studies*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000.
- Barthes, Roland. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. 1975. Trans. Richard Howard, 1977. New York: Hill and Wang, 1984.
- Blavatsky, H. P. "Psychic and Noetic Action." *Studies in Occultism*. London: Sphere Books, 1974.
- Bloom, Harold. *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*. New York: Riverhead, 1996.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus*. Everyman's Library. London: Dent, 1973.
- Chesteron, G. K. "A Defence of Detective Stories." *The Defendant*. London: Dent, 1901.
- Christie, Agatha. *Cards on the Table*. 1936. New York: Dell, 1974.
- Collins, Wilkie. *The Moonstone*. 1868. Ed. J. I. M. Stewart. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.
- DeKoven, Marianne. "Utopia Limited: Post-Sixties and Postmodern American Fiction." *MFS* 41.1 (Spring 1995): 75-97.
- Doctorow, E. L. "False Documents." 1977. *Jack London, Hemingway, and the Constitution: Selected Essays 1977-1992*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- . "The Nineteenth New York." 1992. *Jack London, Hemingway, and the Constitution: Selected Essays 1977-1992*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- . "The Water Works." *Lives of the Poets: A Novella and Six Stories*. New York: Random House, 1984.
- . *The Waterworks*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. 2 vols. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1930.
- Eaton, Michael. "Chinatown." BFI Film Classics. London: BFI Publishing, 1997.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion*. Selected with Introduction and Annotations by Benjamin Nelson. New York: Harper and Row, 1958.

- Gray, Paul. "City of the Living Dead." Rev. of *The Waterworks*. *Time* (Domestic ed.) 143.25 (June 20, 1994).
- . "Pursuing the Old One." Rev. of *City of God*. *Time* (Domestic ed.) 155.6 February 14, 2000). <http://www.time.com/timemagazine/article/0,9171,1101000214-38804,00.html>. Consulted May 28, 2001.
- Grossvogel, David I. *Mystery and Its Fictions: From Oedipus to Agatha Christie*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.
- Harper, Phillip Brian. *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Holy Bible*. King James Version. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1979.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- James, P. D. *Cover Her Face*. 1962. New York: Warner, 1987.
- Jonas, Hans. *The Gnostic Religions*. 1958. Boston: Beacon, 1963.
- Kayman, Martin A. *From Bow Street to Baker Street: Mystery, Detection, and Narration*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.
- Kennedy, J. Gerald. "Phantasms of Death in Poe's Fiction." *The Haunted Dusk: American Supernatural Fiction, 1820–1920*. Ed. Howard Kerr, John W. Crowley, and Charles L. Crow. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983.
- Kirn, Walter. "Heaven Can Wait." Review of *City of God*. *New York Magazine*. Feb. 14, 2000. http://www.newyorkmag.com/page.cfm?page_id=1928. Consulted May 28, 2001.
- Knight, Stephen. *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Langley, Greg. "City of God: E. L. Doctorow goes looking for God." Review of *City of God*. *The Advocate Online* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana). <http://www.theadvocate.com/enter/story.asp?StoryID=2580>. Consulted May 28, 2001.
- Marcus, Stephen. "Dashliell Hammett." *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*. Eds. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe. 197–209. San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983.
- O'Keefe, Daniel Lawrence. *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic*. 1982. New York: Vintage, 1983.
- Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. 1979. New York: Vintage, 1981.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Complete Tales and Poems*. Introduction by Wilber S. Scott. Secaucus, N.J.: Castle, 1985.
- Rabkin, Eric S. *The Fantastic in Literature*. 1976. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Sante, Luc. "The Cabinet of Dr. Sartorius." Rev. of *The Waterworks*. *New York Review of Books* 23 June 1994: 10–12.
- Schama, Simon. "New York, Gaslight Necropolis." Rev. of *The Waterworks*. *New York Times Book Review* June 19, 1994: 1, 31.
- Scott, A. O. "A Thinking Man's Miracle." Review of *City of God*. *The New York Times on the Web*. March 5, 2000. <http://partners.nytimes.com/books/00/03/05/reviews/000305.05scott.html>. Consulted May 28, 2001.
- Solotaroff, Ted. "Of Melville, Poe and Doctorow." Rev. of *The Waterworks*. *The Nation* June 6, 1994: 784–90.
- Tani, Stefano. *The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to*

- Postmodern American and Italian Fiction*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Typology of Detective Fiction." *The Poetics of Prose*. 1971. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Tokarczyk, Michelle M. "The City, *The Waterworks*, and Writing: An Interview with E. L. Doctorow." *Kenyon Review* 17.1 (Winter 1995): 32–37.
- . *E. L. Doctorow's Skeptical Commitment*. New York: Peter Lang, 2000.
- Wachtel, Eleanor. "E. L. Doctorow." *More Writers and Company: New Conversations with CBC Radio's Eleanor Wachtel*. Toronto: Knopf, 1996.
- Washington, Peter. *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America*. New York: Schocken Books, 1995.
- Williams, John. *Fiction as False Document: The Reception of E. L. Doctorow in the Postmodern Age*. Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1996.
- Wind, Edgar. *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*. 1958. Rev. and enlarged edition. New York: Norton, 1968.