

## E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks*: A Polyphonic Novel

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### ABSTRACT

The present article sets to examine the applicability of Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony and heteroglossia to E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks*. Doctorow, by deploying postmodern historiography and blurring the line between the real and the marvelous, portrays nineteenth century New York revisionistically and likewise, depicts how the amalgamation of the monologic, authoritarian power of the imperious capitalism as Augustus Pemberton or the real historical figure William Magear Tweed with the 'excentrics' gives rise to a dialogic, polyphonic quality within the novel. Also, discussed is the centrality of the narrator, McIlvaine that boosts the dialogized ambience and stimulate the effort to decrown the 'regime of power.'

**Keywords:** E. L. Doctorow; *The Waterworks*; Mikhail Bakhtin; Polyphony; Heteroglossia; Excentric

### 1. INTRODUCTION

E. L. Doctorow's fiction by looking backwards towards the past examines the history, American history in particular, and attempts to rewrite it in his own way that results in the fact that the line between the real and the fiction becomes blurred and opaque. This is analogous with what Linda Hutcheon proposes as postmodern historiography, a postmodern paradox that "our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middleclass, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed" or in other words, there is no longer the dominance of the monolithic, authoritarian power as the only discourse over the history, yet the "excentrics" – the Black, women, Jews, and so on – by and large, the ordinary people, are the voices and the narrators of the history "not of centralized sameness, but of decentralized community" (*Poetics of Postmodernism* 12) and it aims to make a new attitude towards the past critically, not nostalgically. In *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow reconstructs the Cold War ambience deploying the Rosenberg case as fact, changing them to Isaacson and gives voice to their fictional son, Daniel. Hence, this is Daniel who writes the history, the book, in his own way that heretofore the monologic or despotic voice of capitalism or bourgeoisie is preponderant. Furthermore, in *Ragtime*, the voice or discourse of Morgan and Ford has been mingled with the voice of the Subaltern, Coalhouse Walker, the Black musician and the immigrants are no more silent but make attempt to express themselves.

Likewise, *The Waterworks*, as Doctorow himself states in an interview with Richard Marranca in 1994 "Maybe... the most profoundly political thing I've written," portrays 'the nineteenth century? New York' which has the amalgamation of a range of voices and languages such as no longer the domineering Augustus Pemberton plus somewhat the priest Dr. Charles Grimshaw or the historical real figures such as William Magear Tweed, known as Boss Tweed, Walt Whitman, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Pierce Graham and what's more the overriding voices or marginal, eccentric ones including the artist, the freelance, the journalist, war veteran, women – as wives or prostitutes –, children and the newsboys, "urchins," criminals, and so on. Nevertheless, unlike the other novels published previously, there is an auspicious occasion in *The Waterworks* in that the despotic and authoritarian voice, Tweed Ring, is destroyed near the closure and it gives rise to some hope for future that is scarce in Doctorow's fiction.

The so-called issue pertaining to the different voices present in Doctorow's fiction much more merges with the theory of dialogized heteroglossia, pluralistic or multivoiced quality of speech formulated by Bakhtin. It says that Dialogic speech is the opposite of monologic speech, and at times Bakhtin identifies the latter with the speech of authority – the church, for example, in the Middle Ages. But to some extent this is a fiction that allows him to argue the virtues of the dialogic over the monologic; technically, speech can never actually be monologic. For Bakhtin the fullest demonstration of dialogism at work is in the prose fiction or particularly in the novel. As one of the great contrarians of literary theory, he points out that genres like the epic, tragedy or lyric as 'canonized' ones with roots in ancient traditions tend towards monologism, the dominance of a single voice and the inability to render influentially an interaction of voices. Bakhtin delineates the features of dialogism in three different ways: (1) Interaction between the "authorial language" (generally that of the narrator) and the language of the protagonist; (2) interaction between the protagonist's language and that of other characters in the text; (3) interaction between the language of a text or a protagonist taken as a whole and the language of other texts to which explicit or implicit allusion is made. John. G. Parks suggests that the hegemony of institutionalized discourses and authoritarians, or "regimes of power" in Foucault's terms, are challenged in Doctorow's fiction borrowing Bakhtin's culture of polyphony or "multicenterdness of human life" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* xviii).

## 2. DISCUSSION

Embarking upon Doctorow as a theoretician and based upon his idea in an essay in 1977 called "False Documents," two kinds of powers come into view. One is "the power of the regime" and the other is "the power of freedom." The former puts forward the widespread power within the capitalist industrial societies that are based on "the primacy of fact-reality" and the latter is linked with the fictitious gap in literature that "[a]lone among the arts...confuses fact and fiction" (*Essays* 152-54). Likewise, Geoffrey Galt Harpham maintains Doctorow refers to two types of languages in his essay. One is "'regime language" and a language of Freedom...he also discusses literature as a necessary mingling of two types of linguistic powers" (81). Doctorow observes the same in his fiction in that in *The Waterworks* the 'power of regime' with its own language is Boss William M. Tweed a real historical person and on the other side McIlvaine, Martin Pemberton, Emily Tisdale, Sarah Pemberton and his son who are fictitious and possess the language of freedom. Hence, the unification of these two powers with their languages would be identical with Bakhtin's dialogic novel in that it is "like a new artistic model of the world, one in which many basic aspects of old artistic form were subjected to a radical restructuring" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 3).

The issue that is of paramount importance to be considered in *The Waterworks* is the coalition or the synthesis and the interaction of the orchestration of diverse genres or discourses within the novel. The most vivid one is the detective story in that the narrator along with Edmond Donne the captain in police station, deploying Brian Diemert's discussion, either go after the story of investigation or the story of crime. This is reminiscence of what Brian Diemert maintains: "Edmond Donne is the master sleuth, a sort of Sherlock Holmes, while McIlvaine is his less-able accomplice, the Watson who tells the tale" (353). Also, there is a Gothic romance or generally speaking the darkness present in the novel that is an evidence for Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne's impact upon Doctorow that is prevalent in his fiction. In fact, the very word 'dark' or 'darkness' is repeated a lot and is aligned with the places the narrator or the protagonist experiences within the novel as dark rooms, dark "prison basement," graveyards, particularly the one Martin and Harry Wheelright in the darkness of night attempted to seek for the grave of Augustus in Woodlawn and they exhumed the corpse from the ground not belonging to his own father, yet a boy, even the light, sky or the river (water) are dark. Additionally, one encounters the genre of science fiction due to the presence of the scientific genius, the Faust-like Dr. Sartorius who is reminiscence of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley or Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Rappacini* due to his "devilishness" whose occupation was to use the tissues and the blood of children, the orphans or the newsboys, to maintain the elderly men, especially the wealthy ones, alive or as a matter of fact a sort of life-in-death to comply their inheritances. Intriguingly, the whole process was corroborated by the corrupt system of New York including the municipal politicians such as William Tweed in one of the waterworks plants outside the city.

Reflecting upon the narrative of the novel, it is McIlvaine whose narration is almost identical with other works of Doctorow in first person. He works as an editor and journalist in "the Telegram," and attempts to put the image of Martin Pemberton's— the protagonist— life throughout the novel. Marshal Bruce Gentry, in regard with *The Waterworks* and its narrator asserts that "it is the Doctorow's most monological book... The dominant male voice in this novel is McIlvaine's, and much of what I am complaining about here is that McIlvaine nearly succeeds in making his novel what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a monologue, a text entirely controlled by the narrator." (71) But, the issue Gentry raises later is that "the peculiarity of McIlvaine's monologue is that it presents itself as unauthoritative," hence, the very word "unauthoritative" consolidates the Bakhtinian reading of the novel in that it is no more monologic, but in addition to different discourses and languages inside the novel, there is a dialogue between the narrator and the reader alike, since he is most of the time addressing the reader utilizing "you," demands him or her to grapple with the text, to draw on his or her imagination, "can you imagine what it is like to live in a city of thieves, raucous in its dissembling, a city falling into ruin, a society in name only?," (*The Waterworks* 10-11) or trust the narrator: "You will just have to trust that, this like everything I tell you, has a bearing on the story." (6) Plus, in some parts of the novel one encounters the technique of narration within narration. For example, in chapter twenty one when the narrator allows Martin Pemberton to tell the people surrounding him what befell him after his 'emancipation' from Dr. Sartorius and his apprentices, Martin just handles the narration and recollects Dr. Sartorius's dialogue with him: 'If you want to see your father, of course you may,' Sartorius said to Me," 'I doubt you will get satisfaction...But what will you say to this... papa... you thought was a dead?' "of course that was a question I had never permitted myself to ask.'" (185).

Moreover, the idea that is of paramount importance is the resistance of the narration that is vivid in his delineation and portrayal of the city, in his illustration of the corruption of the governing 'Boss' up to the criminals.

I remind you of William Marcy Tweed ran the city as no one had before him. He was the messiah of the ward politicians, the fulfillment of everything about democracy they believed in. he had his own judges in the state courts, his own mayor,...his own governor. (10)

He attempts to talk to the reader of that "chronotope," in Bakhtin's terms, critically and blames and critiques this monolithic, monologic voice of capitalism due to his purveyance of industrialization, since it eliminated the "the old life, the past." He assures the reader that there was nothing "modern" in those days and there was only "the illusion" of living in modern times.

This is Martin Pemberton deemed to be as the main concern of the narration in the novel and the one whose aim is likewise to 'resist' his father "notorious Augustus Pemberton", as a corrupted one who:

having made his fortune in the war supplying the Army of the North with boots that fell apart, blankets that dissolved in rain, tents that tore at the grommets, and uniform cloth that bled dye... he had made an even bigger fortune running slavers. You would think the slave trade was exclusive to the southern ports, but Augustus ran it from New York - even after the war had begun. (5)

Thus, the extract demonstrates the monopolizing position of Augustus in New York accompanied with "Boss Tweed" Martin detests and opts to be disinherited. Despite the fact that post-war America in 1865 converted to a free state for the slaves, Augustus's occupation was still running slavery. Besides, in regard with Pemberton's business, in chapter five the narrator calls upon an occurrence transpired in the office of the Port Wardens on South Street and Eustace Simmons, Pemberton's secretary accompanied with two Portuguese were arrested due to the "violation of the slave laws."(29) But after six months, in spite of the prohibition of running slavery, they became released, for, as they claimed, the evidence was insufficient. Thus, the narrator, by reporting this fact would like to critique the monologic voices ruling the city.

In another part in the novel, the narrator pictures an event or a scandal, a kind of allusion to a historical fact yet described in a fictional way, when someone named James O'Brien, a former apprentice to Tweed, requires him to publish in the *Telegram* the documents in order to blackmail 'Boss Tweed' and to "challenge his power in the Democratic party" (147) that other papers refused to publish since "either the publishers needed Tweed, or they counted themselves his friends. Others were afraid of what he would do to them—there were all sorts of reasons " (150) But the power or "Tweed's effect on the city [which] had been like vampire's arterial suck" (151) and here defeated McIlvaine and he faced his failure and could not publish them in his paper, consequently, he was dismissed. This insistence, at least though unsuccessful, demonstrates the narrator's attempt to resist the "regime of power." Additionally, McIlvaine alludes to another historical fact by the time Thomas Nast, a political cartoonist, drew the caricature of William Tweed in *Harper's Weekly* and angered him a great deal in that the narrator explicates like this: "Most of his constituents couldn't read and so he didn't care what was written about him. But a caricature of him as a fat moneybagger with his foot on the neck of Liberty had a kind of... illumination to it."(147-148)

The narrator, after introducing Pemberton and his family or friends in the beginning chapters, makes an attempt to have an interview with all of them or to establish a dialogue with them to further dismiss the authority of his narration in that he is not alone in almost every

chapter. Therefore, the concept of heteroglossia is consolidated conspicuously and the reader faces other people's words.

Doctorow, through the narrator, adroitly pictures the ambience of nineteenth century in regard with religion. As Brian Diemert Maintains Doctorow situated his "tale in 1871, a time when spiritualism and the revival of occultism were particularly strong." (358) In chapter seven of the novel, as the pastor's narration claims within McIlvaine's narration, Martin Pemberton asks the pastor "I do beg your pardon, Reverend, you are not the fool that most of your calling are. I had you worried you might be one of those pastors who secretly attend séances. You don't, do you?" (44) Hence, by this question posed, the authority of the clergymen is utterly challenged, his sermons or "callings" are addressed as being foolish and are degraded, and consequently, the dominant, overriding discourse, in effect, turns out to be mingled with the occult. Moreover, the other allusion found in the novel is that which emanates from the fact that in nineteenth century there was a belief launched by Matthew Arnold to say that poetry can be virtually a substitute for religion which is analogous with what Dr Sartorius believes in the novel narrated by Martin: "Once I inquired of his religion. He was raised a Lutheran, but Christianity he regards as no more than a poetic conceit." (185)

Furthermore, McIlvaine in chapter seven of the novel in his dialogue or interview with Dr. Grimshaw, the clergymen of the story, illustrates that he is no more the powerful person of the city, as one could remember Nathaniel Hawthorne's powerful clergymen, since "every wall of St. James has been buttressed by Pemberton money" (45) shows the priest has to respect Pemberton due to his domineering position over the church and Grimshaw would eschew the corruption of the system to describe him as "people who didn't know him are surprised to hear of his humility;" (48) or as in another part "he [Grimshaw] had worn away,...., and his religion no longer had any authority.. other than as organizer of his daily life and conduct and as filing system for his perception." (46)

Marshal Bruce Gentry in his article suggests that Doctorow, in his fiction generally and this novel, *The Waterworks*, particularly, aims to silence the women and they "act as a sort of declaration of defeat." (64) Nevertheless, through perusing the novel as the reader goes further, one feels the presence of the women in the novel, since Doctorow by the use of the narrator in some chapter are portrayed through the conversation with Emily Tisdale and Sarah Pemberton, and they also occupied themselves with Martin's concurrence of his father in the street. They tell their stories alongside with the other characters who tell their own stories. In chapter eight, one finds out more about Emily, the fiancée to Martin, who tells about her relationship with him from their childhood up to the present and in addition lets the reader make out that she has enrolled in "the Female Normal College with the purpose of becoming a teacher of public school of children" (52) that lays bare her active social role in the patriarchal, capitalist society of Nineteenth Century New York. Sarah Pemberton's speech, though a passive one in contrast to Emily Tisdale, is distinguished in chapter ten in that she tells McIlvaine about her deed in Augustus's house that at least she attempted to resist his husband and send his money for the disinherited son:

I deceived my husband and sent sums from my own allowance so that Martin could complete his studies ... and when he began to write for the papers he sent e his published pieces from time to time, also secretly. I was very proud of him." (73)

### 3. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the present paper came to terms with, in Said's words, a kind of "contrapuntal reading." By "contrapuntal reading," he specifically means "an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented" (Said 1993 78) . E. L. Doctorow, a postmodern novelist, in his fiction pays heed to the voices of the marginal or "eccentric" strata who previously had an unheard presence in the society and create a sort of dialogism or heteroglossia in that all the voices from different groups of people are heard and there is no longer the dominance of the monolithic, monologic voice. His *The Waterworks*, examined here, deemed to be an illustration of the characters real and marvelous and by and large a polyphonic novel.

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