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## THE PERSONAL CITY – ETHICAL RENEWAL IN E.L. DOCTOROW'S *CITY OF GOD*

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Doctorow entitles his novel *City of God* after Saint Augustine's philosophical work *The City of God against the Pagans* that brings forward the vision of a city for the chosen, which, however, implies the damnation of the rest. Doctorow's novel proposes a new dimension of this relation between the self and the other, which focuses on the ethical and positive coordinate of salvation discarding the vision of the inevitable damnation that awaits those who are not the chosen.

The text calls for an ethical stance and a spiritual grounding suitable for the postmodernist mindset that has seen evolutionary theory and for a media saturated world that has experienced the information overflow and the hyperreal dimension. How in the modern world of physics and relativity - the writer seems to ask- can people find grounding in religious belief?

*City of God* makes a spiritual assessment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a postmodern register, from the Big Bang to Einstein's and Wittgenstein's theories, to historical traumas such as the Holocaust, and the two world wars. It comes out as a collection of eclectic texts, in terms of voice and subject, even if the style is rather consistent in its poetical quality, resembling monologic ruminations and sometimes commentaries of an alienated self. The novel as we have it, is made up of the main character - Reverend Thomas Pemberton's musings on the nature of God and the role of religion nowadays, together with his faith related quandaries and his conversations with Everett, the narrator. A large portion of the novel is dedicated to a Lithuanian ghetto diary, during the Holocaust, which becomes the most engrossing narrative of the book.

All of these make up a discontinuous narrative, mostly with unrelated characters and multiply shifting perspectives. To the fragmentariness of the narrative contribute the monologues and thoughts attributed to Einstein, Wittgenstein and Sinatra, which are not introduced beforehand or explained in the configuration of the novel. As Michael Wutz notes in his essay on "Literary Narrative and Information Culture: Garbage, Waste, and residue in the Work of E.L. Doctorow", the mixture of "disreputable genres" –Doctorow's phrase in an interview with the above quoted critic- "suggests a deliberate interrogation of the traditional distinctions between high and low art, popular culture and elite practices, as they have been created and upheld by the culture industry.(...) Doctorow's narratives interrogate such mythic categories as good and evil, fact and fiction, as they have been used by the powers that be in the service of ideological control." (Wutz 2003, 521)

A fin de siècle novel, *City of God* attempts to encompass the various aspects of life in the metropolis and diverse points of view on the city, and produce a comprehensive account of the main trends of thought and spiritual issues as well as of the historical atrocities of the last century. While doing this, it emphasizes dislocation, unconnectedness, heterogeneity and uncertainty. Doctorow believes that the disjointed form of the novel is true to the fragmented character of present day realities and to the modern mental framework. In an interview, he remarked about the book's fragmented postmodernist style: "We don't think in a linear fashion like we did even 30 years ago. Our minds are like clusters of Web sites that we keep hopping between. We get meaning from discontinuity. We're the culture of the short take. I think the book is almost a template for this contemporary mind of ours." (Bemrose 2000, 57). Doctorow gives up the historical setting and the historian's preoccupation with events in American history of his previous novels, in order to address ethical and spiritual/religious questions.<sup>1</sup> Putting forward an assembly

of diverse possible manuscripts, the imagined monologues and considerations in *City of God* compose a polyphonic discourse on life, faith, solitude, love and human relationships in contemporary New York City. Attempting the rather impossible task, as Everett puts it, of reproducing “the actual texture of living life” the novel comes across as an account of alienation and unconnectedness on the one hand and on the other hand as a testimony to the hope for a humanistic attitude to life, religion and to the Other – be it a religious other, an ethnic other, an intellectual or spiritual other.

*The metropolis and urban subjectivities*

The metropolis is a metaphor for the complexities and hybridity of contemporary life, bearing the seeds for change and evolution – an opening to what the future has in store for humanity.

Talking about the importance and the meaning he associates with New York City, Doctorow states in an interview: “New York, like Toronto or any other major, global, multicultural city, carries a sense of the future. Whether we end up, as a result of planetary stress, in an apocalyptic mess, or whether we can make it all work, will be decided here, in streets like this.” (Bemrose 2000, 57).

Aside from its significance as a metaphor for the intricacies and heterogeneity of contemporary living, the city, with its peculiarities and concrete existence, has a central role in the novel. It is a presence that can be felt all throughout, in the characters’ walks as well as in their meditations. There are several passages that I would like to focus on, which speak to the diversity of people and their pursuits in New York.

First of all there is

“New York New York, capital of literature, the arts, social pretension, subway tunnel condos. Napoleonic real estate mongers, grandiose rag merchants. Self-important sports writers. (...) New York, the capital of people who make immense amounts of money without working. The capital of people who work all their lives and end up broke and gray New York is the capital of boroughs of vast neighborhoods of nameless drab apartment houses where genius is born every day. It is the capital of all music. It is the capital of exhausted trees.” ( Doctorow 2000, 11-12)

The passage, whose beginning reminds one of the city’s image as a popular culture icon – the inspiration for Frank Sinatra’s famous song- depicts the metropolis as a mosaic of ideals, practices, people, a melting pot whose hybridity is a mark of contemporary living. It is a space of high, and low, and of the in-between, a vast display of creative energy, bewilderment and joy of living, but also a place of inequality, affectation and vanity.

The above description speaks to the complexities of urban living in the present and to the swirl of contemporary culture.

Another description, foregrounding Whitman’s poetical recreation of the city, points out to New York’s image as a high culture emblem and at the same time links it to its past significance:

“Walt Whitman assures us of the transcendence of the bustle and din of New York, the sublimity, the exuberant arrogance, of the living moment. But do pictures lie? Those old silver gelatin prints... The drays and carriages, streetcars, els, and sailing vessels at their docks... (...) This is our constructed city, without question the geography of our souls, but these people are not us, they inhabit our city as if they belonged here, the presumption of their right to it is in every gesture, every glance, but they are not us, they’re strangers inhabiting our city, though vaguely familiar, like the strangers in our dreams. (...) I am looking at times when people had a story to enact and the streets they walked upon were narrative passages. What kind of word is *infrastructure*? It is a word that proves we have lost our city. Our streets are for transit. Our stories are disassembled, the skyscrapers crowding us scoff at the idea of a credible culture.” (Doctorow 2000, 52-53)

This nostalgia-ridden fragment traces New York’s change from a city of carriages and sailing ships and a time when people owned the city through their direct contact with the reality of the streets and their investing the latter with their personal story through their daily walks, to a city whose constitutive parts and features are not used for themselves, but are a means to another reality, a manufactured one. The city is thus not only the “geography of our souls”, but it has

become the history of our souls as well, bearing witness to the transformation in individual sensibility, to the change in modern subjectivity.

Despite the contemporary tendency towards personal insulation noticeable in the city, Doctorow reminds us of the ideal of peace and rationality that the city was supposed to embody:

“The racial fault line going through the heartland goes through our heart. We’re color-coded ethnic and social enclavists, multiculturally suspicious, and verbally aggressive, as if *the city as an idea* is too much to bear even by the people who live in it.” (Doctorow 2000, 12) (Italics mine)

The city *as an idea* incorporated the ideal of the peaceful living together of people from different cultural, social and religious backgrounds, it was originally the embodiment of the cosmopolitan ideal that could function in the given, limited space. Doctorow draws a parallel between the ideal of the city, whose existence in multiplicity is the triumph of peaceful living together, and the ideal of religion or spiritual practice, which should be the triumph of the ethical impulse, of doing good to the other, and of accepting other religious beliefs on the basis of their common ethical core.<sup>2</sup>

Above and beyond all the ritualistic activities of the everyday life and the peaceful routine of leisure time activities that people perform in their closed, self-sufficient microcosms, there is a certain nostalgia, that can be traced at a collective level, and that the spatial coordinate helps become manifest:

“All New York is out this afternoon. We stroll around, watch some softball, find a grassy spot for ourselves, unwrap the deli heroes, uncork the Snapples, and prepare to have one of those balmy, ritually relaxing Sundays when the sense of loss is in every heart and a nonspecific melancholy seems to permeate the air.” (Doctorow 2000, 269)

Like in Don DeLillo’s and Paul Auster’s novels, people in Doctorow’s *City of God* are described as islands of meaning, contributing their own solitude/individuality to the larger urban picture. However, Doctorow aims for more than that: he sees the necessity to walk among strangers, the ethical attitude for the Other.

According to Emmanuel Levinas’s ethically centered approach from *Entre nous: On Thinking of the Other*, the meaning of the self is brought to its fulfillment in the presence of the Other. The latter, by his/her very presence near me, in my world, demands a certain positive dedication from me, because I have to allow him a place in the universe and give him all that is necessary to live a human life. The very act of the other facing me forces me into a responsibility towards him/her that has no limits. The other’s existence reveals to me my ethical commitment and obligations and the needs of the Other disrupt my self-centered, egocentric consciousness, my being at home with myself. The encounter with the other forces me into an ethical stance and his existence makes me accountable for his life. I am drawn to the Other whom I cannot assimilate, I am independent and at the same I belong to the Other.

The tendency towards revaluing the relation with the other on ethical terms can be found in *City of God*, among and despite all the isolation, disconnectedness, and separation between individuals in the contemporary metropolis. There is an underlying cry and need for the other to complete the self, to contribute to a peaceful composition of the self, together with a subdued nostalgia that pervades the novel.

“For all the wariness or indifference with which we negotiate our public spaces, we rely on the masses around us to delineate ourselves. The city may begin from a marketplace, a trading post, the confluence of waters, but it secretly depends on the human need to walk among strangers.” (Doctorow 2000, 12)

Not only does our ethical sense come into being because of the other, but we also depend on the other to give us a sense of being in the world, since we are able to exist only “as subjects of the other’s consciousness” (Doctorow 2000, 144). Just as the world depends on our mind for existence, so we depend on the other, on the strangers we walk among, for achieving a sense of our distinct being.

The passages about Frank Sinatra’s story also present a personal view on the city that contributes to the overall perspective on New York in the novel.

“I wanted to hang my voice on the city of white stone, weave my voice line by line up and down back and forth, wrap the whole fucking city inside my voice. And now you know it, don’t you? The song is you, big town, you were always my song across the oily wide river, the gulls riding the wind (...) And the island of Manhattan rising up before

me as a human place, coming into focus: liners at the piers, smoke from stacks, smells of the West Side stockyards. Down the ramp and into the life. Horns, lights, streetcars, buses, trucks, police whistles, the flow of mayhem.” (Doctorow 2000, 261)

For Sinatra, Manhattan is a representation of his dreams as well as a space of seclusion that isolates him – “so insular, in [his] dreamt Manhattan” (Doctorow 2000, 262)- from the atrocities of the times. New York is, from this perspective, the muse city, the source of inspiration for his art. Doctorow seems to celebrate “the flow of mayhem”, and the novel can hence be read as an ode to the tumult of the contemporary city, to the urban pandemonium that New York has become.

The main character, Thomas Pemberton, is an Episcopalian priest in an East Village church whose parish is dwindling, a rather dilemmatic character who is undergoing a personal crisis in faith. He doesn't doubt the existence of God, his doubt is more the expression of his struggle to find an authentic way of being religious in today's world, of worshipping God according to present-day humanity's needs. Doctorow seems to call for an ethical humanism stance or, as Tom Deignan put it in his review of the novel, for some “new-age blending of traditional religions into an ultimately palatable and accessible, but bland and indistinguishable, belief system” (Deignan 2000, 260). From the spiritual point of view, Pem's union with Sarah, at the end of the novel, is also a metaphor for the union between very different religions, with a conflictual history behind.

Pem questions the validity of church doctrine, of the set of preestablished beliefs that he is supposed to teach, in an attempt to discard what is dead, lifeless, and solidified into rigid systems of belief and ideologies. He tries to get to the essence of spiritual worship, in the hope of finding life in faith, that part of faith that is valid in all religions and transcends them at the same time – the spirituality true to God in all his perceived forms and in all the rituals that worship him. It's the life in the religious impulse, the drive towards genuine, heart-felt spirituality that he looks for, aside from the dogma and the power structures that used religion for ideological and political purposes throughout history. It's the God of history that Pem is struggling with, in an attempt to find the “living God”, that is synchronous to today's world, one that can speak to the present human consciousness and to its evolution.

Pem's struggle can be put in terms of the clash between what Homi Bhabha calls the “pedagogical” and the “performative”.

In “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation.” Homi Bhabha describes the city as the space of a hybrid and heterogeneous culture, as a *performative* space of the bewilderment of living amidst the *pedagogic* discourses and representations of a homogenous world. Hybridity generates “the perplexity of the living”, which interrupts the holistic representation of the world. The city, Bhabha maintains, becomes thus the place in which new identities appear. From this perspective, Doctorow's *City of God* centers on the difference and the clash between *the pedagogical* – represented by the religious dogma- and *the performative* – the personal crisis and the reinterpretation of the dogma, which results in what Bhabha calls the “perplexity of the living”.

In a desperate summoning to God, this is what he says:

“Speak to me. Send me an E-mail.  
You were once heard to speak,  
You Yourself are a word, though deemed by some to be unutterable,  
You are said to be the Word, and I don't doubt  
You are the Last Word.  
You're the Lord our Narrator, who made a text  
from nothing, at least that is our story  
of You.” (Doctorow 2000, 47)

The idea of God as “our Narrator” and of the world overall as a text, is a recurring one in the novel, placing the latter into a metatextual awareness. The novel is a text about the world, which is a text made by an invisible Narrator. In another address to God, Pem says:

“Oh, Lord, our Narrator, who made a text from nothing, once more I dare speak to You and of You and inevitably from You in one of Your own inventions, one of Your intonative systems of clicks and grunts and glottal stops and trills.” (Doctorow 2000, 236)

Beset by doubt as to the nature of faith and relentlessly looking for a sign from divinity, Pem is a solitary man, who finds consolation for his constant anguish in walking the streets of the city. His thoughts are delivered in a rather self-ironical manner:

“True, my personal life is a shambles, my church is like a war ruin, and since I am not one to seek counsel or join support groups, and God, as usual has ignored my communications (no offense, Lord), I do feel somewhat isolated. I will even admit that for the past few years, no, the past several years, I have not found anything better to do for my chronic despair than walk the streets of Manhattan.” (Doctorow 2000, 47)

The city becomes witness to his solitude and confessor to his torment and spiritual dilemmas. A background to his mystical musing and contemplation, Pem finds the streets of the city as the only solace to his spiritual angst. The space as such becomes the relief of a tormented consciousness and the comforting companion of an introvert nature.

There is a certain feeling of going round in circle –that both Pem and Joshua confess to–without being able to evolve to a certain state of revelation that would ensure a peaceful living together in diversity. What Pem fights with is the ritualized faith, the prescriptive modes of relating to religion, and his revolt is against the historical development of Christianity - a “political creation with a political history” (Doctorow 2000, 81). It is the story of power in religion that he refutes and wants to transcend in his permanent metaphysical inquiry.

The heist that starts the novel is not solved and the characters involved don’t even try to pursue it further. The solution to the mystery is irrelevant; what matters is the spiritual quest which the heist initiates and stands for. Thus, Pem, in one of his addresses to God, says of himself: “He has failed his training as a detective, having solved nothing. May he nevertheless pursue You? God? The Mystery?” (Doctorow 2000, 48)

There is a certain poetic quality of the city streets, of walking the streets and tracing what Michel de Certeau calls the “rhetoric of pedestrian trajectories”. There is an openness to dialogue, a readiness to take in the mystery of the open space and lose himself in it. After having admitted that walking the streets of Manhattan represents a solace for his existential conundrums, later in the novel, he confesses: “My real home is the city streets. I walk them. There is something in the streets for me, some secret, not necessarily in the interest of my well-being...” (Doctorow 2000, 100). Pem lets himself be led by and drawn into the ambiguity of the space, and into the mystery of the city, to which he himself contributes.

Another aspect *City of God* – and many of the novels of the last few decades- tackles is the presence of the hyperreal in everyday life, testifying to one of the most important transformations of perceived reality and of the social imaginary<sup>3</sup> of the last few decades. It points to the self-generation by copies of a reality without referent, without any other origin than a simulated real, a replica – a phenomenon discussed in detail by Baudrillard, to which I referred in my earlier chapters as well. In Doctorow’s novel this appears in the sections that focus on the cinema industry – movies being made on the streets of New York and movies being imagined, the latter taking the form of fantasies spun by some pathologic and obsessive imagination. This brings about the discussion on the prevalence of the visual over the verbal in contemporary culture.

From a genre of visual culture that sought to imitate life, from a “scripted reality”, movies have evolved into a living species by itself, independent of life and “self-generating, like a specie with its own DNA” (Doctorow 2000, 124), a rapacious entity that is “using up the cities, the countrysides, the seas, and the mountains” in its booming expansion and its overreaching power to control human life. There is a passage in the novel when Everett describes a moviemaking scene that takes place on his block. The scene starts from the description of the actors and the machines from a purely outsider’s perspective, and then switches to a movie version of the scene - a *mise en abyme* of the passage described. The difference is that, in the second, the person who watches the moviemaking process gradually and naturally becomes part of the whole scene -an actor- and his existence is justified only in as much as it contributes to the making of the movie. At the end of the passage, the protagonist wonders:

“Am I the real person or the image? And you? I just don’t know. And even when I finish this monologue and the director calls, “Cut”, I still won’t know, because he too may be nothing than an image, a shadow, an arrangement of downloaded ones and zeroes.” (Doctorow 2000, 126)

The episode emphasizes the feeling of losing the human dimension, complexity and substance in front of the ecstasy of the hyperreal, of the mesmerizing power of the simulated reality and all the attractions it displays. The movies, and the whole industry of generated reality they stand for, have

evolved not only from the mere referential quality to one of self replication, but they prove to have taken over reality, making it aspire to the simulated dimension the culture of hyperreality has created. Movies have become “a form of life to which life must aspire” (Doctorow 2000, 268) and the city, with all its character and undeniable reality, has become part of this constructed reality as well.

There is a constant preoccupation with the nature of divinity and of faith in the novel. All the fragments randomly inserted, contribute, in one way or another to the main metaphysical discussion on the nature of the spiritual world and of religion in contemporary society. Both Wittgenstein’s and Einstein’s monologues are from time to time addressed to divinity, to what Einstein calls the “Old One”. At one point, Wittgenstein states that “even if all possible scientific questions are answered, *our problem is still not touched at all.*” (author’s italics) (Doctorow 2000, 99-100)

Parallel to the religious concern, there is hence a preoccupation with the history of humanity, with the relation between the world and the universe on the one hand and the self and human consciousness on the other, an unrelenting need to understand the essence of the universe and of the human being. All the considerations and musings on cosmology and the self attributed to Einstein and Wittgenstein tackle this matter, most of the times in a direct manner. This is one of Wittgenstein’s soliloquies:

“So, *bitte*, what is our problem? Not the nature of the universe, therefore, but... what? The mind in consideration of itself? The self that proposes the world is everything that is, but finds itself excluded from that proposition? The I or self that can theoretically ascertain everything about the world except who and what it itself is – as the subject of its own thinking? Where can it be found? Where is it located? (...) Yet at the same time there is no world apart from the I’s discernment, is there? (...) Consciousness is not in space, it does not exist in space (...). Yet everything that exists, exists through us in the formulations of our world-containing selves.” (Doctorow 2000, 143)

Wittgenstein’s solipsistic monologue throws a different light on the relation between the city and the self, making the latter, despite its incapacity to define its own identity, responsible for the existence of the outer world, for the space around it. Reminiscent of the Cartesian skepticism, Wittgenstein’s monologue suggests that there is nothing outside the conceptual realm of the individual consciousness, and hence, the external world has no independent existence from the self. Following these lines of thought, one can remark a different perspective on the city. As opposed to the concrete reality, to the concreteness of the urban experience, the city comes out in another light, as the representation of the self, its conceptual projection.

The book is essentially a record of various individual confessions, whose separate and fragmentary character further contributes to the overall impression of solitude and unconnectedness of the urban life described. It displays a very interesting and at the same time elusive mixture of images of loneliness and insulation on the one hand and images of togetherness, warmth and compassion on the other. From these images, emerges Doctorow’s account of New York, testifying to some of the major tendencies of contemporary life in the metropolis: individualism as well as the tendency towards communion and togetherness, pointing, beyond the egocentrism of everyday life, to the natural human need for the other. In the midst of the “urban nihilism” (Doctorow 2000, 37), the book proposes the multicultural, “multicellular” metropolis as the place for a humanistic, ethical revival.

“(…) while we are individually and privately dyssynchronous, moving in different ways, for different purposes, in different directions, we may at the same time comprise, however blindly, the pulsing communicating cells of an urban over-brain. (...) How much of our desire to use the park depends on the desires of others to do the same? (...) we can see more of who we are because of the open space accorded to us, and it is possible that it takes such open space to realize in simple form the ordinary identity we have as one multicellular culture of thought that is always there, even when, in the comparative blindness of our personal selfhood, we are flowing through the streets at night or riding under them, simultaneously, as synaptic impulses in the metropolitan brain.” (Doctorow 2000, 275)

It is in the internal configuration of the city, in its “over-brain” that people can find a bond with the Other, and form a pluralistic culture. The city gives the individual an identity that can

transcend the self-centered approach, without denying it. It's a space that, while preserving the individuality of its inhabitants, allows them to add it to that of the other urban actors, and play a part in its global existence. It allows its people to create it, to contribute to its continuous making without losing their identity, without blending them into an indistinct whole.

The contemporary city is a place without assurances or certainty, it allows for destructiveness and anarchy, but at the same time it allows for the possibility of evolution. Underneath the negative, selfish and aggressive impulses, there lies an optimistic, spiritual, caring and empathetic view on humanity.

In the musical performances inserted and in the song lyrics Doctorow transcribes -the "standards"- one can notice the same feeling of loneliness and nostalgia that comes out from the monologues of the characters: Pem, Everett, the scientists. The musings on the creation of the world and on God's role in the universe, the nature of the universe and of the self, all show the same secluded spirit and melancholic nature. The popular culture inserts address the same core issue of isolation in a world of disconnection and fragmentariness, while reasserting the human dimension. They are illustrations of the fact that truth, the quest for meaning, the desire for human connection are universal and are found everywhere, in all forms and means of expression available to people: "And when a song is good, a standard, we recognize it as expressing a truth. Like a formula, it can apply to everyone, not just the singer." (Doctorow 2000, 44) Even the existential horror fantasies inserted in the novel show lonesome individuals, who, out of "boredom and alienation and the absence of serious conviction" (Doctorow 2000, 40) devise horrendous plans which could give them thrills.

The novel depicts the present-day alienation in multiple forms and aspects of human life. All of these make up the story of the city of our times, at the crossroads between separation and union, alienation and alliance. The city is not divided between the two, but is both at the same time, just as the human propensity is for both self-centeredness and selflessness.

Despite the initial ideal of rationality and peaceful cohabitation, the urban space has also seen its days of intolerance and persecution in history. The passages from the Kovno ghetto diary, rescued with the help of a Catholic priest – a symbolic example of religious tolerance and harmony in the face of hardships- are an illustration of the trauma produced by the Holocaust in history. At the same time, the existence of the diary is testimony to the efforts of reaching to the other in history, trying to tell the story so that their suffering will be remembered and such atrocities will be prevented in the future. Telling the story means warning the future and, simultaneously, an act of resistance to evil, a symbolic defeat. The story of the tailor Srebnitsky, brings forward an act of self sacrifice, while it testifies for the courage of rejecting debasement and self-annihilation by a hostile other. After being scoffed at by the Nazi officer for expecting pay for the suit he made, Srebnitsky takes the scissors and tears it off instantly. As a consequence, he is soon sentenced to death. Sarah's father, who tells the story and who was a witness, recalls that Srebnitsky didn't kill the officer, although he could just as well have done it. The reason, he explains, is that the punishment for such a gesture would have been massive death within the whole community and, knowing this, the tailor decided to cut off the suit instead and pay for it with his own death. This is an example of self sacrificial impulse that is recorded in writing, together with the efforts of resistance and the struggle for survival and dignity in the face of atrocities in history.

The ghetto diary is an illustration of how people struggle ethically to preserve a sense of self and of God. Some expression of the cruel, violent and exploitative people symbolized by the Nazis in the ghetto passages is to be found in contemporary culture as well, in the movie fantasies that foreground aggressive, obsessive and abusive protagonists, whose imagination borders pathology. These disruptive and intrusive narratives are the product of violent subjectivities pointing to a dimension of the city which proves to be antihumanistic.

In spite of all these, there is a certain openness to the fragility of life and the book gives hope for a humanistic philosophy and shows the need for it, even if human morality and selflessness is difficult to sustain in the face of history.

In a speech Sarah Blumenthal delivers on a conference, towards the very end of the novel, she says:

"In the twentieth century about to end, the great civilizer on earth seems to have been doubt. (...) I ask if after the exclusionary, the sacramental, the ritualistic, and simply

fantastic elements of religion are abandoned, can a universalist ethics be maintained – *in its numinousness?* (...) Suppose then that in the context of a hallowed secularism, the idea of God could be recognized as Something Evolving, as civilization has evolved – that God can be redefined, and recast, as the human race trains itself to a greater degree of metaphysical and scientific sophistication. (...) In this view the supreme authority is not God, who is sacramentalized, prayed to, pleaded with, portrayed, textualized, or given voice, choir, or temple walls, but God who is imperceptible, ineffable, except... for our evolved moral sense of ourselves. (...) a daily indiscriminate and matter-of-fact reverence of human rights unself-conscious as a handshake.” (Doctorow 2000, 288-90)

In *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity* Taylor discusses the relevance of some traditional coordinates of the self and reinterprets them through the postmodern lenses. His theory comes very close to the humanistic philosophy that *City of God* seems to suggest. The Canadian philosopher focuses on the old concepts of *morality, authenticity, autonomy* and *responsibility*, the way they were regarded in the past and how they have been revalued in the present. According to Charles Taylor’s interpretation, the feeling of self-fulfillment represents the second axis of morality. This axis corresponds to modernity: morality is in the modern sense seen as the feeling that leads to self-fulfillment, according to the individual frameworks of appraisal, to a life that is worth living because the subject acts according to their wishes and desires of doing good. In Taylor’s view, this is the meaning of morality for the modern identity: not the obligation of respecting the other and doing good imposed by education but the internalized meaning of what a “rich, meaningful, life”, a “full life” is (Taylor 1989, 14). From this viewpoint, it is moral what it is good to be - a certain coherent framework “in virtue of which we make sense of our lives spiritually.” (Taylor 1989, 18)

In one of their conversations, Pem tells Everett: “We’re living in a postmodern democracy. You think God doesn’t know that?” The expected revelation of divinity, the religious agency for our days will not come in the manner it was described centuries ago, Doctorow seems to suggest, but it will be camouflaged in the city streets, in our everyday life. What we might call the religious revelation will be “ground level, on the street, it’ll be coming down the avenue in the traffic, hard to tell apart from anything else. It will be cryptic, disconnected over time, piecemeal (...)” (Doctorow 2000, 288)

Pem, Joshua and Sarah are looking for a way of escaping the time loop in religious practice that makes the latter ossified and inapplicable to modern sensibility. In a discussion with Pem, Joshua, the Evolutionary Judaism rabbi, makes a point of the fact that applying and resorting to the same religious imaginary and spiritual practices of the past means a regression and at the same time a choice to ignore all the discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which are also a result of God’s revelation. Thus, such a conservative approach to religion denies not only mankind’s evolution, but also God’s various forms of manifestation, throughout time, on earth.

The novel draws a picture of the hybrid culture of the modern world against which embattled subjectivities exist and try to find meaning and strategies of coping. The Hollywood-like movie version at the end of the book shows the city as a metaphor for all these layers of confusion and complexity and suggests that in the midst of chaos and of the perplexity of living, the only hope lies in a new God, in an early vision of the church, whose symbolical representation is Pem and Sarah’s marriage. As Laurence Wilde remarks in “The Search for Reconciliation in E. L. Doctorow’s *City of God*”, “what they are going to do with their lives is left open. Although this fragmented and irresolute narrative gives an appearance of contingency and relativism, beneath the surface there runs a strong sense of a search for unity through diversity” (Wilde 2006, 394). This picture counters the earlier intrusive and aggressive movie fantasies. Thus, an openness is affirmed at the end, in spite of all the loneliness of the human heart - the propensity for love, in spite of the exploitation, egotism and intolerance that human history witnessed. The city of God, Doctorow suggests, is a place that accommodates different individual worlds peacefully and is also a city that understands the evolution of humanity and caters to its needs for personal fulfillment, for moral and spiritual self-realization.

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<sup>1</sup> The interest in tackling religious aspects in writing can be noticed in some other novels in the American literature from relatively the same time period as *City of God*: Norman Mailer’s *The*

*Gospel According to the Son*, Russell Banks's *Cloudspitter*, and Robert Stone's *Damascus Gate*, to name some of the most well known.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to notice that Doctorow raises this particular discussion in *City of God*, which was published just one year before 9/11.

<sup>3</sup> I'm using Charles Taylor's definition of "social imaginary" as the way people imagine their social surroundings and their existence, their expectations and the images that underlie them – "that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy." (Taylor 23)

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