

New York Fiction

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1. Introduction

The approach to the literature of New York outlined in this chapter finds a pertinent point of departure in an emblematic Harlem Renaissance text. Rudolph Fisher's short story 'The City of Refuge' (1925) opens with King Solomon Gillis 'dazed and blinking' on a Harlem street. He has just arrived in New York City from North Carolina and experienced his first subway ride, which felt 'as if he had been caught up in the jaws of a steam-shovel, jammed together with other helpless lumps of dirt, swept blindly along for a time, and at last abruptly dumped' (Fisher, 2008: 35). Although the New York subway had long been running with electricity by this time, the steam shovel metaphor illustrates appropriately the newcomer's violent sensory perception. It reduces the human being into a particle in the entrails of great urban machinery. In this context, the 'abrupt dump[ing]' is readable as an image of a violent birth. The mechanistic metaphor also represents the very experience of modern life, Gillis' first glimpse into the 'maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal' that Marshall Berman introduces at the beginning of his wide-ranging analysis of modernity, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (15). This is the experience from which a modern consciousness is born.

The breathless grammatical fragments of Fisher's next two paragraphs evoke the same violence and rush, the multiple shocks of the crowd and the noise:

Shuffle of a thousand soles, clatter of a thousand heels, innumerable echoes.

Cracking rifle-shots—no, snapping turnstiles. 'Put a nickel in!' 'Harlem? Sure. This side—next train.' Distant thunder, nearing. The screeching onslaught of the fiery hosts of hell, headlong, breathtaking. Car doors rattling, sliding, banging open. 'Say, wha' d'ye think this is, a baggage car?' Heat, oppression, suffocation—eternity—'Hundred 'n turdy-fif' next!' More turnstiles. Jonah emerging from the whale.

Clean air, blue sky, bright sunlight. (2008: 35)

Given that Gillis has shot a white man before leaving the South, the subway ride is an extension of a long and tense journey that is loaded with sensations of fear and guilt. Without any finite clauses, the description relates a fast series of encounters with both people and mechanical entities, encounters that blend into a gamut of characteristically urban stimuli. The consequent release into the sunny street after the hellish journey then represents a relief of equally biblical proportions, a moment of rebirth from the belly of the city. The location of this rebirth is 135th Street, which another Fisher story, 'Blades of Steel,' identifies as 'the heart and soul of Black Harlem,' its essential contact zone (2008: 159). Thus Gillis emerges from underground at the precise epicentre of his dream city, ready to reinvent himself in the African-American capital. Maria Balshaw is right to argue that the naïve newcomer's urban destination is 'a utopian projection of his own psyche' rather than a city based on historical fact (2000: 16). More important, the nature of that projection—in Fisher's story and elsewhere—is that it keeps changing, dissolving and reappearing.

Although African-American migration to Harlem represents a distinct class of New York City arrivals, Gillis's experience exemplifies a much broader category in both historical and fictional terms: the classical topos of arrival in the city, which is remarkably prominent especially in the literature of traditional immigrant cities like New York. Texts of realist orientation, in particular, have often exploited this motif 'to submerge the audience in a highly charged and emotionally gripping situation' and fuelled 'a fascination for the Big Confrontation between individual and city' (Keunen, 1999: 359). Examples of literary texts that use that moment of confrontation in New York in a central narrative or dramatic function are numerous, ranging from the 'New York Revisited' chapter of Henry James's *The American Scene* (1907) to Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1899) or Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). Perhaps less obviously from the American perspective, they also include novels such as Kafka's *Amerika* (posthumous, 1927) and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996). As a rule, in these texts, it is some conspicuous aspect of urban modernity that captivates or shocks the character-observer arriving in the city with a mixture of regenerative promise and destructive force. James marvels at the appealing 'note of vehemence' and 'dauntless power' in New York's urban life (1993: 418), whereas Kafka's protagonist, impressed by the Statue of Liberty, nevertheless sees its arm reach up with a sword instead of a torch (2008: 3). Such shocks of promise and aggression exemplify the feeling—typical of New York's fictional newcomers such as Dreiser's Carrie Meeber or Dos Passos's Bud Korpenning—of being thrown into a violent, disconcerting environment. Out of this destructive experiential intensity, the modern urban subject is born in a psychological process that approximates the violence of a physical birth. The emphatic scene of arrival that keeps recurring in New York texts represents a significant initial component in, and a foreshadowing of, the total process of self-transformation that plays itself out in the city.

This chapter investigates the patterns of self-transformation and rebirth that are dominant in New York literature. In the next section, we will outline how the notion of creative destruction not only describes the operations of the market economy but can also be meaningfully transposed first to the realm of the built environment and secondly to that of individual lives. In subsequent sections this idea, also conceivable as the whirlpool of modernity at the individual level, will be applied to a number of New York texts, mostly from the twentieth century, which reveal that the tendency toward violent self-fashioning is remarkably consistent despite its different manifestations across literary paradigms. As the example of Fisher's *King Solomon Gillis* implies, the tendency is not restricted to mainstream 'white' urban mythologies but appears in African-American tradition with equal force. Our further examples testify to this consistency across different ethnic traditions.

2. Creative destruction and the experience of New York City

The promise of a radically new consciousness awakening in the metropolis, and the destructive processes that enable such a birth—these are well-established themes of city literature, with a broad range both in geographical and in historical terms. Marshall Berman notes their first appearance in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (*Julie, or the New Heloise*, 1761), in which Paris' 'agitated, tumultuous life' (quoted in Berman, 1988: 18) entails the dissolution of moral and societal demarcations, but also the promise of self-achievement, of social mobility, and of artistic accomplishments. In the twentieth-century literature of New York, these themes gain further depth by situating themselves, enriched by the American dream of democratic self-achievement, in the spatial embodiment of global capitalism. In Fisher's story, the protagonist's rebirth is described as if he were enmeshed in industrial machinery, and it remains somewhat unclear whether his birth is the

glorious product, or rather the dirty by-product, of the city. There is the intimation that the new arrival is the unclean residue, akin to fecal waste, of the urban system. The opening pages of John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, published in the same year as Fisher's story, present similar imagery, describing new arrivals in New York as being pressed 'through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferry house, crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press', and likening a newborn baby in a city hospital to urine, 'as if it were a bedpan' (1987: 15).

These texts posit arrival in the city as a promising but violent process with destructive, even dehumanizing undercurrents. The city appears in them as a continuously renewing force, which holds out the promise of self-invention and self-fulfillment—although there is always the possibility that one is merely feeding the machine, a city of refuse rather than refuge. This makes obvious a fundamental analogy between the city and the operations of capitalism as described by Joseph Schumpeter's thesis on creative destruction. According to Schumpeter, the capitalist system is locked in a state of constant change and movement; it is this 'mutation' that 'incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one' (1976: 83). What this account says about economic structure can, in the right conditions, easily be applied to similar incessant changes in the built environment or the individual urban subject. In Berman's words, in capitalist urbanity everything from people to neighborhoods and cities is 'made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so [it] can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again and again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms' (1988: 99).

The economic process tends to inscribe itself onto cityscape, and the minds of urban dwellers, whose identities are place-based. The prominent presence of the theme of creative destruction (as this chapter hopes to show) in the literature of New York is perhaps influenced by the fact that in America's financial capital, the urban fabric of the built environment has resonated with this economic principle for much of its history. Despite the great symbolic weight afforded to numerous landmarks of the city, in New York it would be very easy to see urban space itself as primarily a form of capital. In the large yet strictly limited area constituting the island of Manhattan, for example, the space-as-currency principle is particularly conspicuous because of the street grid that divides most of the island into rectangular, uniform spatial units accessible to finance-based consideration. Aware of these analogies between economic systems, urban form and socio-spatial processes, critics have used the notion of creative destruction rather freely to make sense of cultural phenomena. Schumpeter's very vocabulary resonates quite forcefully on the individual level as represented in New York's fictions: it is repeatedly the case that characters' personal pasts have to be discarded completely—at least seemingly or momentarily—for the transformative novelties of the city to take effect.

New York's striking collective preoccupation with the future and peculiar relation to its own past has been described in Michel de Certeau's celebrated essay 'Walking in the City,' which combines awareness of economics with a textual metaphor. The language in a particularly evocative passage is again that of simultaneous destruction and invention:

Unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that

is constantly exploding. [. . .] On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water, the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production. (1984: 91)

The initial comparison in this passage follows the conventional assumption regarding the distinctions between European and American attitudes to (urban) tradition, New York being commonly experienced as America's 'front portal' (Tuan 1977: 42). The 'paroxysmal places' of the city transform the collective 'explosion' of the urban universe into a constant series of private demolitions: violent recreations of society's productive machinery and urban space as well as of individual selves and their lives. The historical statuses of the city—a designated point of entry for immigrants, a business hub, and a dominant cultural center—both explain this destructive vitality and imply that these processes are more likely to take place in New York than anywhere else.

Echoing this perspective, Peter Brooker has described New York as 'a constellated symbol of the New' (1996: 1). In literature as well, in the words of Hana Wirth-Nesher, 'New York is never measured against its own past; it is defined against its possible future' (1996: 112). In the physical cityscape, this peculiar form of cultural orientation and amnesia has appeared as constant demolition and construction of the built environment, a cyclical development that assumes the guise of inevitability. In 1904, James saw after a long absence that speculation had 'ruthlessly' erased his childhood home and 'amputated' much of his personal history (1993: 131); everywhere he saw 'the new landmarks crushing the old quite as violent children stamp on snails and caterpillars' (1993: 123). Critical views of creative destruction often depend upon, and facilitate, a sense of nostalgia, and James's sentiment exemplifies this

intertwining. Indeed the notions of nostalgia and counter-nostalgia offer two alternative ways of conceptualizing creative destruction in the urban environment, each foregrounding one of the concept's two antithetical components. The nostalgic attitude, which tends to see all redevelopment as destructive, seeks to preserve the city's historical character, whereas the counter-nostalgic tendency recognizes the imperfections of the past and wishes to create something better. Both attitudes have manifested themselves in powerful strains in New York writing over the years (see Waterman, 2010).

As the example of James's lamentation shows, by the early twentieth century rebuilding had already come to resemble a law of nature in New York's urban environment. This naturalisation may be seen to obliterate the function of memory, as in James Merrill's poem 'An Urban Convalescence' (1962):

As usual in New York, everything is torn down
 Before you have time to care for it.
 Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me try to recall
 What building stood here. Was there a building at all?
 I have lived on this same street for a decade. (Merrill, 2008: 21)

Here the speaker, recovering from illness, draws explicit parallels between some urban buildings and selfhood: "The sickness of our time requires / That these as well be blasted in their prime" (2008: 22). This drive to destroy, rebuild, and forget seems connected to the ideal of the American dream: a certain amount of amnesia may have seemed a historical necessity, an inevitable by-product of future hope in America's 'front portal'. 'Believing it to be the price of progress,' explained Nathan Silver half a century ago, 'New Yorkers are remarkably

cheerful about destruction' (2000: 19). In a historical perspective, this is also one crushing irony buried inside the 9/11 tragedy. New York's sustained identity as a destination that promises to transform its new inhabitants' lives requires the constant presence of crises and destructive forces.

In the economy-based image of creative destruction, self-development is to be seen as return upon investment, achievable through risk and speculation rather than safe play. The individual narratives of those arriving at the 'stage' next to the 'American Ocean', in de Certeau's phrase, from all directions, present different versions of this risk-filled undertaking. In Fisher's 'City of Refuge', King Solomon Gillis, the 'baby jess in from the land o' cotton' (2008: 37), is deceived by his cold-blooded acquaintance Mouse Uggam and ultimately apprehended by the law even while his dream of regeneration persists. In addition to the subway, a key urban phenomenon for him seems to be the airshaft in his building, the description of which echoes the earlier subway passage in at least three ways: grammatically, in terms of its rushed intensity, and in its depiction of 'a common channel' of experience in the entrails of the city:

An airshaft: cabbage and chitterlings cooking; liver and onions sizzling, sputtering; three player-pianos out-plunking each other; a man and a woman calling each other vile things; a sick, neglected baby wailing; a phonograph broadcasting blues; dishes clacking; a girl crying heartbrokenly; waste noises, waste odors of a score of families, seeking issue through a common channel; pollution from bottom to top — a sewer of sounds and smells. (2008: 38)

This is still part of Gillis' arrival, his first moment of New York's lived domesticity, and the emphasis is decidedly on unpleasant auditory and olfactory experience and human unhappiness. A transformation is indeed implied, but instead of encouraging individual accomplishment, the urban system seems to consist of a noisy and foul-smelling collective organism. It is apparent that the dream city has a waste management problem of a specific kind. Here the cities of refuge and refuse come together in one of New York's thousands of metaphorical birth canals.

3. Modulations of character transformation

Descriptions of return to the city modulate the experience of literary arrival, with its implications of violent character transformation. Edith Wharton, whose New York fiction arguably revolves around the dynamics between the promise of personal self-fulfilment and the city's corrosive force, against the backdrop of the 'destructive element of twentieth-century urbanism' (Gelfant, 1954: 97), provides a telling example of such a modulation of arrival in her short story 'Autres temps...'. The story of Mrs. Lidcote, who returns to New York after a self-imposed refuge in Italy, spurred on by the news that her daughter has divorced her husband and has re-married, shows in its title its preoccupation with the possibilities wrought by new beginnings: at least in the proverb, new times tend to bring new mores and new social codes. Tellingly, the ship on which the protagonist travels to her former home city is the *Utopia*, and Mrs. Lidcote is drawn between the hope that in her absence a new and more tolerant era has arrived, and the fear that her daughter will face the same ostracizing she experienced once. In this text that draws on the conventions of the novel of manners (see Wilson, 2010), New York is the personification of the city's fashionable society, a 'huge menacing mass' that keeps Mrs. Lidcote in terror of its judgement (Wharton,

1991: 185). The city is described as a problem, as a ‘sphinx’ and a ‘riddle’ one must ‘read or perish’ (188). The riddle is the same for the reader as for Mrs. Lidcote: has the moral codebook changed, is a re-birth in the city possible? Within the rigid moral frame of Wharton’s fashionable New York society, a new beginning appears to be impossible. Mrs. Lidcote, too, is unable to leave the past and succumb to the future; in a sense, she has come to resemble her chosen home city Florence more than New York, and instead of being oriented towards a future ‘it was always the past that occupied her’ (185).

The literature of New York is rife with characters for whom the disconcerting confrontation with the city does not lead to a successful transformation, and who are unable to align their lives successfully with the process of erasure and rebirth at work in the city. The city is also the graveyard of the newcomer’s illusions—a theme that, from Balzac’s *Illusions perdues* (*Lost Illusions*, 1837–1843), has positioned artistic as well as social aspirations within the orbit of technological innovation and economic progress. In modernist literature, in particular, artistic emancipation becomes one of the key themes, so that ‘many ... [a] literary hero ... stand at the end of their novels on the edge of some urban redefinition of themselves—as if the quest for self and art alike can only be carried out in the glare and existential exposure of the city, where, as Julius Hart puts in a compelling phrase in his poem *Journey to Berlin*, one is “born violently into the wild life’.’ (Bradbury, 1986: 101)

Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1971) can be read as the personal account of a failed rebirth and the loss of illusions of in the confrontation with the ‘hullabaloo’ of the city. The opening pages of the novel resemble those of Fisher’s ‘The City of Refuge’ in the way they describe arrival in a disconcerting urban environment that is in violent motion, promising the possibility of personal redefinition, while simultaneously stripping the character of personal

agency. In the first lines, premonitions of death, the tense national and international political context and personal experience are all fused in the first experience with the city:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs,
and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions.
[. . .] I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all
along your nerves.

I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.

New York was bad enough. By nine in the morning the fake, country-wet
freshness that somehow seeped in overnight evaporated like the tail end of a
sweet dream. Mirage-gray at the bottom of their granite canyons, the hot streets
wavered in the sun, the car tops sizzled and glittered, and the dry, cindery dust
blew into my eyes and down my throat. (Plath 1988: 1)

To the protagonist Esther Greenwood, the city's promising 'freshness' has evaporated by the first morning. She imagines other people's commenting on her transformation from provincial girl to a confident woman able to be 'steering New York like her private car' (1988: 2). In reality, the experience is the very opposite of such omnipotent agency: 'I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolleybus'. Rather than being in charge, she has lost all sense of independent movement: 'I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo' (1988: 2). The city holds out the specter of an alternative kind of life, but it does

not facilitate the protagonist's escape from under the 'bell jar' of her troubled mind. If anything, it is suggested that as long as the protagonist is confined within the city, New York acts as a container for the tensions produced by the contact between Esther's personal hopes and provincial illusions, and the disconcerting stimuli of the city. Elsewhere Plath points out that it is only when Esther leaves the city to her suburb of Boston, that, 'the cracks in her nature which had been held together as it were by the surrounding pressures of New York widen and gape alarmingly' (quoted in Ames 1988: 208). Gradual mental implosion follows after her return home.

Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, King Solomon Gillis in 'The City of Refuge' and Bud Korpenning in *Manhattan Transfer* are, like other classical arrivals such as the protagonists of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Thomas Wolfe's *The Web and the Rock* (1939), all Americans arriving in New York, regardless of their diverse ethnic, social and gendered outlook. The relation with the city which these characters share is that of a 'tragic tension between [the protagonist's] conception of the city as releasing, exciting, freeing and the city as a place which crushes creativeness and purpose', to extrapolate Anselm Strauss's analysis of the hero in *The Web and the Rock* (2009: 11). Similar tensions, further exacerbated by cultural, geographical and linguistic distance, inform the trajectory of the successive waves of migrants from the old world arriving in New York. For the newly arrived European dreaming of self-fulfilment in America, the experience of New York City is profoundly informed by the city's association with all things juvenile, new and potent.

Amongst American immigration novels, Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1934) takes a special place, for its innovative modernism as well as for the way in which it explicitly aims to paint a representative narrative of American migration. The narrator posits the story in 'the year

1907, the year that was destined to bring the greatest number of immigrants to the shores of the United States' (Roth 1977: 9). From the opening pages onward, identities have to be literally recast: for the protagonist, David, arriving in Ellis Island with his mother, the first contact both with his father and with his new home country involves letting go of a blue straw hat, which singles him out as outlandish, and which is discarded into the water unceremoniously. Expectations are put into perspective with equal swiftness. David's mother Genya proclaims, in Yiddish, that 'this is the Golden Land' (1977: 11); when she asks the father whether they will live in New York City, he corrects her with a curt 'Nein. Bronzeville' (1977: 16). Mispronounced, Brownsville appears as the distinctly more prosaic, real-life counterpart to the 'Golden Land' of dreams (Wirth-Nesher 1996: 144).

David's trajectory, however specific to Roth's own background and to the conditions of Jewish immigrants in early-twentieth-century New York, is also representative of that of the successive waves of immigrants to New York up to our present days. Having left the old world, David embarks upon a process of self-transformation which entails tearing off past identities—the novel can be read as a drawn-out patricide—while forging a new kind of ethnic and linguistic identity out of the shreds. His development means growing into a new language, or more specifically, into two languages simultaneously (English and Hebrew), and a sense of destruction is integral to this experience. David literally almost explodes in the culminating event in the novel, a scene of near-electrocution described in a style that has been referred to as a 'celebrated modernist explosion' (Sollors 1996: 154). Language, the city, and the self momentarily dissolve, only to be reborn.

In Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000), the reader follows the transformation of Sammy Clay, a Jewish boy who, like David, takes his first steps

in New York City in Brownsville/Brooklyn, and that of Sammy's cousin Joseph. Beginning on the eve of the Second World War, Chabon's novel carries the theme of urban transformation and personal refashioning one important step forward in the history of American urbanization, leading the characters out of the city into the suburbs. Radical transformation and self-invention are emphatically linked to the motifs of metamorphosis and escape. Sammy Clay, who in the novel becomes the creator of the great American comic hero 'The Escapist', and who is a vehement adorer of Houdini, looks back on his childhood environment as that 'airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York', within which he felt to be 'sealed and hog-tied' (Chabon 2000: 3). As a kid, he dreamed the 'usual Brooklyn dreams of flight and transformation and escape' (2000: 6). The city in the novel appears as a trap in a manner familiar from naturalistic novels, but also as a refuge and a capitalist dream factory. For Sammy's cousin, Joseph Kavalier from Prague (Chabon does not conceal the novel's indebtedness to Kafka), the city offers a sanctuary from the atrocities of the Nazi Reich, and the city's market for popular comics enables the cousin's entry into the creative (and moneyed) class.

New York enables transformation, but there is, throughout the novel, the intimation that the city could be discarded like an empty shell upon successful refashioning—it appears as an elaborate kind of cocoon where young Sammy is trapped, like a pupa 'struggling [...], mad for a taste of light and air' (2000: 3). Breaking out from this cocoon in the process of violent metamorphosis is not without its dangers, which include the possibility of suffocation or drowning, as Salvador Dalí finds out in the novel, when, in one of the many variations on the escape act, he almost dies performing his diving-suit act in New York. Light and air, as the metaphors of the cocoon and the air-tight vessel suggest, are more freely available outside of the city. When Kavalier and Clay have performed their first successful transformation, from

teenage boys to successful artists, it takes them to the commercial heart of the city. Their second transformation leads out of it. Joseph, in an elaborate escape act, disappears in the mist of the Second World War. Sammy, performing a more prosaic act of self-sacrifice, moves into the new suburbs of Long Island, together with Joseph's pregnant fiancée. Sammy, who is fascinated with the New York World Fair's (1939–1940) vision of future garden cities, has little nostalgia for life in the ethnic inner city:

He had grown up in an area of great hopelessness, and to him and millions of his fellow city boys, the Fair and the world it foretold had possessed the force of a covenant, a promise of a better world to come, that he would later attempt to redeem in the potato fields of Long Island. (Chabon 2000: 375)

Moving into the suburbs appears as a trajectory into adulthood, and into the future, a move as inevitable as it is boring and, eventually, also thoroughly American. As Philip Fisher points out, for members of newly arrived ethnic groups, to 'move even once was to enter the general American condition. For New York Jews the move from the Lower East Side or from Brooklyn to the Long Island suburbs was their entry into the general American condition.' (Fisher 181). The drudgery of suburban family life, however, turns out to be just another form of prison. The ultimate escape is provided in the novel, as so often, by the American west, for which Sam departs at the very end of the novel.

4. Wall Street & 9/11

Nowhere else does the connection between the city's economic and financial creative destruction resonate so clearly with that of literary characters as in the literature of Wall

Street. Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' (1853), originally subtitled 'A Story of Wall Street', lays some philosophical foundations for much of subsequent fiction set in—or otherwise focusing on—the Financial District. In more precise phrasing, it 'engages in both direct and oblique ways the psychological and social consequences of modern capitalism' (Augst 2010: 60). The title character's peculiar brand of urban anomie invites a number of interpretative contexts, but his troubles' root cause in the economic and legal operations taking place in Wall Street seems evident. The main conflict, perhaps, is between human aspirations in general and what the 'snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds' demands from Bartleby and the narrator's other copyists (Melville 1990: 3–4). If, as Thomas Augst argues, 'Melville's New York' dramatizes the capacity of 'economic cycles in the United States to dissolve the social ties in which individuals normally understand and locate their identities' (2010: 60), 'Bartleby' does this by its very choice of setting.

Except for 'one little item of rumor' concerning his former job (Melville 1990: 33), Bartleby's past has been completely erased from view, and so in principle he would be an ideal *tabula rasa* for recreated individuality. However, he is nothing of the kind. Academic scholarship has often characterized Bartleby as 'the victim or product of systemic social arrangements [including the city itself] that either ignore or destroy selfhood' (Weinstein 1993: 29). Whether seen as an antithesis or as a parody of the erased and reinvented individual, in recent years this pale and passive figure has also become an emblem in a specific struggle against creative destruction: the Occupy Wall Street movement. Melville's story has provided this anti-globalization effort both a certain amount of ambiguity and a predictable slogan in Bartleby's famous line 'I would prefer not to'; the character 'literally does occupy Wall Street' (Greenberg 2012). He is the original, fictitious squatter in protest of

capitalist bureaucracy and the soul-killing work it seems to require, staging his blunt refusal to function for the benefit of business at the epicentre of what was already the money capital of America. In Jonathan Greenberg's phrase, 'By refusing to articulate specific demands, Bartleby defies the very terms on which Wall Street does business' (2012). Those terms, of course, are supply, demand, and property.

The remarkably modern feature in *Bartleby* is that he does *not* represent a receptacle for all the urban stimuli that may drive transformations. Instead, he resembles a mirror on which readers can project their chosen personal or social traumas caused by work or life within the urban system. As Weinstein notes, the story 'has challenged the critics [. . .] to explain why a man becomes anonymous and unreachable; and the array of answers suggested over the years constitutes virtually a discourse on self and identity as seen through the lenses of psychology and the social sciences' (1993: 29). The character also thoroughly belies the American myths of self-reliance and individualism. If the ideal is to 'insist on yourself [and] never imitate', as Emerson had it (2010: 36), *Bartleby's* occupation alone seems to question the possibility of such autonomy. He does not create anything original; he merely copies by hand and compares. His urban individuality is that of a shadow, or a specter; and indeed the narrator mentions his ghostly demeanor several times. *Bartleby* thus exists at a distance from the life of the city, the built environment, and the rest of the material world. His enigmatic statement, 'I know where I am', is perhaps applicable to the prison where he ends up, to Wall Street, and to the entire city—the scenes of his erasure. The main material embodiments of the sense of isolation are the walls that play such prominent roles in the story: the brick wall he faces in the narrator's Wall Street office, and the prison wall at the end, which instigate *Bartleby's* repeated 'dead-wall reveries'.

Although late-twentieth-century Wall Street fictions represents very different ideas of work and the urban self when compared with Melville, arguably the specter of Bartleby still haunts them as an image of a reduced human being. In novels such as Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991), and Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), or in Oliver Stone's influential film *Wall Street* (1987), the city of finance comes across as a separate microcosm in which, nevertheless, New York's perceived collective characteristics and values are concentrated and exaggerated. The destructiveness of that system for healthy selfhood, and for the well-being of those outside the microcosm, is never in question. A peculiar kind of predatoriness is necessary for outward success in these texts, even if this can be a mere mask worn to achieve a kind of simulated individuality.

In the fiction of Wall Street, images of concrete violence regularly function as analogies for the violence of the market, often against the background of chaotic urbanity. Wolfe's character Sherman McCoy, one of Wall Street's 'Masters of the Universe', encounters a series of predators outside the world of finance but experiences a kind of ironic rebirth through violent, archaic masculinity at the end. Wolfe's representation of the racialized city has encouraged repeated comparison with the urban spectacles of literary naturalism. Ellis' Patrick Bateman reduces people to commodities in an extreme version of vicious capitalist consumption, whereas DeLillo's futuristic billionaire Eric Packer's search for a corporeal kind of creative destruction and a sense of regeneration in physical violence leads to an evident demise, which appears to be the logical conclusion to his career path. Finally, Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street* embodies a similar kind of perverted individuality, speaking in emphatic terms for the positive human value of greed, with no regard for its destructive consequences. All these characters represent different mutations of the chameleon-like type

of Wall Street Man, whose idea of achievement in the city exists at a great distance from the ambitions of New York's other urban classes.

The wave-length processes of market cycles and the spasmodic successions of urban redevelopment suggest a cyclical, repetitive temporal framework. Personal life, however, tends to feel more linear: experiencing New York at the age of 71 is not a replay of how it felt at 60 or at 21. And even in a cyclical view of history, some events stand out with a distinctive singularity. Several New York novels that appeared after 9/11 have wed these two preoccupations. Can the process of creative renewal be repeated indefinitely? Is it possible to make a new start in the scarcely recognizable landscape of one's youth? Both Paul Auster's *Brooklyn Follies* (2005) and, more expressly, Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* (2008) address these questions, asking not only whether it is possible to become young again in New York, but also whether New York can be re-born again from the ashes of the World Trade Centre. In *The Brooklyn Follies*, an elderly man returns to his native Brooklyn, after more than half a century with the express intention to die—but also to come to terms with his past, and conspicuously open for the possibility of reinvention. In *Exit Ghost*, Roth's farewell to the Zuckerberg series, Nathan Zuckerberg returns to New York after 11 years in the Berkshires, hoping for a cure for this incontinence and at first much more reluctant than Auster's Nathan Glass to be enthralled by the city. Despite his good intentions to the contrary, he falls in love and finds again some measure of hope for himself as well as for the city. It seems as if Nathan Zuckerberg and New York alike cannot help their true nature—to be reborn against all odds and intentions:

In the country there was nothing tempting my hope. I had made peace with my hope. But when I came to New York, in only hours New York did what it does to people—awakened the possibilities. Hope breaks out. (Roth 2008: 16–17)

The protagonist feels he is gripped by a ‘razed hope of rejuvenation that was affecting all [his] actions’, and realizes he is ‘yielding to the illusion of starting again’ (Roth 2008: 31). Having deliberately stepped out of time and out of the ‘present moment’ (1) when deserting the city, the return to New York puts him squarely back in life: ‘Back in the drama, back in the moment, back into the turmoil of events!’ (103)

The re-birth of Roth’s and Auster’s protagonists in a post-9/11 New York offers the image of resilient individuals coming to grips with their past and taking charge of their present against the backdrop of a New York that learns to live, perhaps for the first time with such forcefulness, with the presence of an erased past that is actively and institutionally remembered. In speaking of the lost twin towers, the term ‘present absence’ has become so recurrent that it has become already almost platitudinal (see e.g. Rounds 2015). In Ben Lerner’s *10:04*, the ‘present absence’ (2014: 108) of the towers, however, seems to have already lost its singularity. What defines the experience of Lerner’s New York is the normality of the abnormal, in particular when set against the threat of ecological crises. The protagonist is struck by the continuous unseasonable weather (e.g. 2014: 3) and the sense that once-in-a-life-time crises have become yearly events. In this novel, the experience of the city’s time is again geared towards the future—albeit an apocalyptic one—as the protagonist reads into his environment continuously the coming flood he fears to be an inevitable part of the future.

Like several other post-9/11 novels, *10:04* does not revisit the sites of the attacks per se, but considers other moments of crisis to investigate individual and communal resilience. Garth Risk Hallberg's *City on Fire* (2015) revisits the 25-hour power blackout of 1977; Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (2008), hailed as the 'first great 9/11 novel' (Junod 2009) deals similarly with the critical conditions of New York City in the 1970s, using Philippe Petit's tight-rope walk between the towers to fix a variety of perspectives. Disconcerting and harrowing though the epochal crises described in these novels are, literature shows that they can be performative of a renewed sense of community. In a polyphonic text such as *Let the Great World Spin*, in particular, the city novel exhibits its ability to project a unifying vision amongst the myriad narratives of the city, a kaleidoscopic panorama that restores a sense of meaning and compassion to the city's relentless cycles of erasure and renewal.

5. Conclusion

When the eponymous character of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* first begins realizing her acting ambitions, two Chicago theatre managers give her almost identical answers: 'Chicago is no place to get a start [. . .]. You ought to be in New York' (2005: 206). The notion that New York is the place for radical personal or career transformation, and for testing the limits of such reinventions of the self, is neither a recent one nor restricted to show business. As this chapter has demonstrated with only a tiny fraction of all the literary material that would readily lend itself to such use, the city's literary tradition has frequently returned to the identity-shaping experience of urban shock and adaptation, with significant undercurrents of both self-destruction and positive self-discovery. The brief examples from Rudolph Fisher's, Henry Roth's, Sylvia Plath's, Michael Chabon's, Herman Melville's, and other authors' texts

prove the consistency of these concerns in New York fictions, though mapping out the paradigmatic manifestations of these patterns in different genres and literary-historical contexts in any detail would require a much more extensive essay.

The whirlpool of modernity, stirred and accelerated by societal and economic forces of creative destruction, is the typical catalyst for the strong reactions that New York as a city provokes in literary characters. The fact that this metropolis has so repeatedly been depicted in literature ‘as a chaos of values and possibilities’ (Fisher 1999: 243), or defined through violently disconcerting experience, speaks for the continuous intertwining between literary and other—political, economic, architectural—discourses of the city. In a recent study of Joyce and urban planning, Liam Lanigan summarizes Schumpeter’s argument and notes: ‘More than any other field of study, theories of the city and urban planning have been heavily inflected by this understanding of modernity as a continuous process of destruction’ (2014: 31). In New York, fiction itself has become such a ‘field of study’, and modernity at large has often found its spatial equivalent in the image of the city. Since 2001, reminiscence has been a more central component of life in New York than before. The next few decades will show whether the established cycles of erasure and reinvention in both cityscape and textuality are open to permanent alteration by the changing urban discourses of the twenty-first century.

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