

# Towards a Theoretical Approach to the Literature of Resilience

## E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* as a Case Study

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Recent scientific evidence suggests that, despite the pervasive influence of the disease paradigm, healthy reactions to trauma are the norm. Resilience is part of our DNA, since it accounts for our success to survive and thrive in adverse conditions during evolutionary times. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the theme of survival in extreme adversity has run through countless literary texts. Yet, discussions of resilience have tended to be shunned from the literary theorization of trauma. Given fiction's outstanding capacity to incorporate notions from diverse disciplines, it is not far-fetched to talk about fictional narratives of resilience. This article takes up E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) as a case study to test the hypothesis that literary texts may be profitably discussed from the perspective of resilience. In order to do so, it draws both on recent psychological theories of resilience and on the psychoanalytical concept of sublimation to provide some answers about the nature of *Ragtime*'s alternative approach to trauma response. Its main aim is to explore how resilience as a cultural notion may manifest itself at both a thematic and a formal level in literary texts. The ultimate goal is to argue for the existence of what may be termed "resilience narratives."<sup>1</sup>

*Keywords:* E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*, resilience, resilience narratives, sublimation, trauma theory.

Does everyone who suffers a traumatic experience develop a psychopathology? Is a chronic disease the most common response to extreme suffering, or do victims of trauma generally tend to recover over time? A number of researchers and medical professionals have started to ask themselves these questions in the last few years. They have realized that the standard disease model that has dominated the last two centuries<sup>2</sup> does not fit well, and cannot account for, recurrent

observations of resilient individual and communal responses to risk factors. These questions are also indirectly addressed by E. L. Doctorow in his fourth novel, *Ragtime* (1975). In it, the characters' resilience – their ability to bend without breaking under the heavy blows of life – is a central concern that, as it will be claimed, the novel explores in both thematic and formal terms.

This paper, which is rather theoretical in scope, focuses on the notion of resilience and the literary possibilities that it offers as an alternative to the ubiquity of the trauma paradigm in criticism and its pessimistic focus on “the wound” (Seltzer 1997, 3). The first section provides a conceptual overview which enumerates key theories and notions regarding the phenomenon of resilience and attempts to pin down the reasons why it has been generally disregarded by cultural and literary critics. The second and third sections take up E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* as a case study to exemplify how a novel might engage with the psychosocial phenomenon of resilience both thematically and formally. The ultimate goal is to argue for the existence of what may be termed “resilience narratives.”

### *I. The resilience paradigm*

It seems apt to begin this paper with an attempt to clarify the meaning of its key concept. In its widest definition, resilience is the ability of a system to cope with change. Within the field of materials science and engineering, resilience refers to the properties of a material by means of which it may absorb or avoid damage without suffering complete failure or permanent distortion. Given its definition, it is no wonder that the term has been successfully transposed to a wide number of disciplines. In the psychological sphere, resilience is concerned with “the positive pole of individual differences in people's response to stress and adversity” (Rutter 1987, 316). It is defined as “an outcome of successful adaptation to adversity. [...] People who are resilient display a greater capacity to quickly regain equilibrium physiologically, psychologically, and in social relations following stressful events” (Zautra et al. 2010, 4). Feder et al. further define resilience as “the ability of individuals to adapt successfully in the face of acute stress, trauma, or chronic adversity, maintaining or rapidly regaining psychological well-being and physiological homeostasis” (Feder et al. 2010, 35). More generally, resilience is part of our DNA,

since it accounts for our success to survive and thrive in utterly adverse conditions during evolutionary times (see Konner 2007, 305).

In recent years, dozens of studies and clinical tests have been carried out with the aim of shedding some light on the neurobiological, psychosocial, and cultural factors involved in the phenomenon of resilience (see for example Feder et al. 2010, 35; González Castro & Murray 2010, 375; Helgeson & Lopez 2010, 309; Lemery-Chalfant 2010, 55; Ungar 2010, 404). Research has also been conducted on cognitive, affective, and behavioral models of resilience, focusing on the role of emotions and affects, intelligence, personality traits, and even faith or spirituality in a person's capacity for resilience (see Boehnlein 2007, 266; Mayer & Faber 2010, 94; Ong et al. 2010, 81; Pargament & Cummings 2010, 193; Rafaeli & Hiller 2010, 171; Skodol 2010, 112). According to Zautra et al., this is finally producing a shift in the science paradigm, since the efforts of these and other researchers have led to the articulation of what has been termed "the resilience paradigm" (Zautra et al. 2010, xi-xii).

Medical evidence, thus, seems to suggest that while traumatic responses are a common reaction to situations of extreme stress, human beings have a "self-healing bias" (Konner 2007, 300, 309), and the percentage of people who develop a long-term or chronic psychopathology is, in fact, rather small (see Bonanno 2004, 20; Shalev 2007, 207; Zautra et al. 2010, 3). Indeed, basing their studies on scientific evidence that resilient reactions to trauma risk factors are the norm rather than the exception, an increasing number of researchers are beginning to conceptualize trauma as a process that triggers a transformation or metamorphosis which evokes both strengths and vulnerabilities (see Rousseau & Measham 2007, 279; Sigal 1998, 582). Advancing from foundational work on basic biological processes among children and developmental topics, these researchers have sought to identify the sources of resilience in adults in neurobiological as well as in broader societal community-level processes (see Zautra et al. 2010, xi).

The following factors have been identified as contributing to resilience: social and family supports, the experience of self-reliance and survival in challenging environments, cultural framing of stress and responses to stress, and the necessity to help dependants (Konner 2007, 322); a strong individual optimistic tendency to make the best out of life, active coping strategies, the capacity for cognitive reappraisal,

positive emotionality, an integrated sense of self, a sense of purpose in life, affiliative behavior, and spirituality (Feder et al. 2010, 36–37); social responsibility, adaptability, tolerance, achievement orientation, the presence of supportive caretakers and community resources (Mayer & Faber 2010, 98); self-confidence, positive future orientation, sublimation, affiliation, and empathy (Skodol 2010, 113), among others. To these, a number of neurochemical and genetic factors must be added, related to differences in the coordinated function of some hormones, neurotransmitters, and neuropeptides involved in our response to stressors (see for example Feder et al. 2010, 41).

Although research on resilience has received an important boost in the 2000s, as the above review of the literature suggests, scientists and medical professionals have been producing studies of which factors exacerbate the impact of trauma and which facilitate its healing and reduce its potential to become a long-term disorder for several decades. Freud was the first to draw attention to an “instinct for recovery” in his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933), identifying its phylogenic origins as a residue of the “power of regenerating lost organs” in some lower animals (Freud 2001b, 106). However, his increasing pessimism as he grew old and his growing interest in the repetition compulsion and the death drive led to an abandonment of further theorization of the self-healing capacity in human beings. Freud did introduce, however, the notion of sublimation – a process by which instinctual urges are transformed into non-instinctual behavior – providing psychiatrist George Vaillant with a basis to theorize a key human defense mechanism to extreme stress that he had identified as leading to resilience. Within contemporary science, Michael Rutter was among the first to use the term “resilience” to refer to protective factors in the face of stress and adversity in his influential paper “Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms” (1987). Without explicitly using the term in her seminal essay “Reconstructing the impact of trauma on personality,” psychologist Maria Root already added to the trauma equation some factors later identified as related to the phenomenon of resilience when she discussed the role of communal support and empathy in recovery after trauma, both in cases of person-perpetrated and accidental trauma (Root 1992, 243).

The work of these and other psychologists and medical researchers suggests that the phenomenon of resilience has been known to exist as a

psychosocial, neurobiological, and cultural process for almost as long as that of psychological trauma. Why, then, has resilience tended to be disregarded in cultural studies, drifting as it does from all kinds of academic and scientific waters? For one thing, despite the medical and scientific evidence quoted above, current manifestations of the scientifically and medically outdated “disease model” continue to be pervasive among professionals in a wide range of academic disciplines. Indeed, an important example of this enduring influence may be found in cultural representations of individual and collective responses to traumatic experiences. More specifically, in literature and theory a psychoanalytic and deconstructive model of psychological trauma that emphasizes the pathological and chronic nature of traumatic response has been privileged since the 1990s.

This model emerged in the United States at a time when, as Roger Luckhurst explains, “various lines of inquiry converged to make trauma a privileged critical category” (Luckhurst 2006, 497). What he refers to is the connection that scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman famously made between emerging medical notions of psychological trauma and deconstructionist discourse about reference and representation, and about the limits of language and knowledge. These critics emphasized the amnesic, unrepresentable, and belated effects of trauma on the individual, and highlighted the tight relationship that they perceived between the language of trauma and the language of literature. Their profound influence within literary and cultural criticism inspired the birth of a new framework of analysis, which thanks to the work of other key theorists such as Anne Whitehead, Laurie Vickroy, and Dominick LaCapra has achieved paradigmatic relevance for theory and criticism. This has led to the proliferation of publications dealing with the field of trauma studies, in which the discussion of trauma, both in its individual and collective/cultural dimensions and in terms of theme as well as form, notoriously constitutes a central topic.

In parallel to this, the last few decades have seen an outstanding proliferation of novels (and other cultural products) dealing with trauma and traumatic memories, as well as studies analyzing the formal representation of trauma and its symptoms – fragmentation, aporias, disrupted chronology, unreliability, and so on. Yet, another explanation might be possible: many theorists acknowledge that we live in what Farrell has termed “posttraumatic culture.” By this he refers to a mood

that is “belated, epiphenomenal, the outcome of cumulative stresses” and a “fairly straightforward response to the slings and arrows of recent history” which “reflects a disturbance in the ground of collective experience: a shock to people’s values, trust, and a sense of purpose; an obsessive awareness that nations, leaders, even we ourselves can die” (Farrell 1998, 3–5). Seltzer similarly speaks of ours as a “wound culture,” which he defines as “the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (Seltzer 1997, 3), a symptom of which is, in his view, the generalization of trauma (p. 15). Given all these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that discussions of resilience have tended to be shunned from the cultural and literary theorization of extreme individual and collective suffering.

However, in the last few years a definite trend to move “beyond trauma” or, at least, to find alternatives to a classical (i.e. deconstructive) understanding of trauma in critical theory and cultural studies has started to emerge. This might be the result of a superficial thirst to “seek out the Next Big Thing,” as Luckhurst puts it (Luckhurst 2010, 11). Yet, there is also the possibility that a genuine concern has begun to arise among critics to avoid the “rigidities and problematic occlusions [that] inevitably creep in” when a number of conceptual or theoretical formulations begin to ossify into a stable paradigm characterized by the assumption of a solid and stable sense of self and a dominant, prescriptive (aporetic, modernist) aesthetics, backed by a specific ethical imperative that defines the shape that cultural experiencing or representation of trauma should take (p. 11).

Some of the most relevant concerns that have emerged are the indifference towards cultural specificity and the excessive emphasis on trauma as an event-based phenomenon and as a pathology. Indeed, many dissenting voices have been raised in recent years that are critical of what is perceived as the first wave of trauma theory’s limited focus and scope. Some have called out the depoliticization implicit in trauma studies’ excessive tendency to pathologize and psychologize sociohistorical phenomena and their representation (Traverso & Broderick 2011, 9); others have attacked the classical model’s lack of self-reflexivity and its elevation of the concept of trauma into the status of a new master narrative (Kansteiner & Weinböck 2008, 229); others resent the exclusively Western

focus of the model in terms of both scope and critical methodologies, and warn of the risks of a simplistic transposition of the model to postcolonial and other non-Western contexts (Buelens & Craps 2008, 2; Craps 2013, 12; Radstone 2007, 24); many of these critics are also suspicious of classical trauma theory's exclusive focus on events (rather than systems) (Craps 2014, 49; Erikson 1995, 185). Other critics have questioned the emphasis on victims' widespread psychophysical incapability to remember the traumatic events and talk about them (Pederson 2014, 336); indeed, others point to the role played by other determining circumstances, such as the affects of shame and guilt to explain survivors' reluctance to talk about their trauma (Escudero 2014, 224; Roth 2012, xxii); others have called for the necessity of "de-provincializing trauma" (i.e. combining trauma studies with other fields and methodologies of inquiry; Rothberg 2014, xiv). The work of these and other critics has contributed to a shift in emphasis from the individual (usually Western) mind and its problems to work through trauma to an interest in the problematic nature of extreme human suffering and its social and political implications.

Drawing on this spirit to move beyond trauma in cultural studies, the psychosocial phenomenon of resilience is one of the notions that may have the potential to correct the perceived shortcomings of classical trauma theory. For one thing, it would undermine its ubiquitous emphasis on the negative (i.e. pathological) consequences of trauma (Root 1992, 248; Rousseau & Measham 2007, 278) and its overshadowing of the human capacity to self-heal (Konner 2007, 300) by looking at factors of resistance and recovery in literature. These have arguably been present in countless literary texts throughout the ages: survivors' capacity to rebuild their lives after a traumatic event is a central theme in (literary) texts from the Bible to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which have focused on the characters' ability to take the heavy blows of life and bend without breaking. However, there is to my knowledge no systematic attempt to provide a cultural framework for the study of the representation of resilience in literature. Although "resilience fiction" as a concept in literary criticism does not yet exist, the increasing influence of theories of resilience within the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry, pediatrics, and neurobiology are beginning to be felt in discussions and interpretations of contemporary literary texts, especially among postcolonial critics.<sup>3</sup>

Resilience criticism, once it is fully fleshed, might offer a more nuanced way of analyzing literary engagements with human suffering, where trauma theory, and more specifically LaCapra's borrowing of the Freudian notion of "working-through" to understand instances of recuperation after trauma, might be insufficient to account for countless literary examples of human capacity for resilience in the face of traumatic stress. Given literature's outstanding capacity to draw from multiple sources and fields and incorporate notions and themes from diverse disciplines, as the mere concept of the trauma novel shows, it does not seem far-fetched to argue the existence of fictional narratives of resilience.

In order to test the hypothesis that literary texts may be profitably discussed from the perspective of resilience, the rest of this paper takes up E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) as a case study. Without claiming a unified field theory to explain this sort of fiction, this paper draws both on recent psychological theories of resilience and on certain psychoanalytical concepts in order to provide some answers about the nature of *Ragtime*'s alternative approach to human suffering and trauma response. It is contended that *Ragtime* stages a subtle shift towards an emphasis on the characters' ability to absorb the damage produced by an oppressive and unjust society without suffering permanent damage.

## *II. Ragtime as a case study: Thematic level*

Published in 1975, *Ragtime* meant E. L. Doctorow's admittance into the North American contemporary literary canon, representing his greatest commercial and critical success so far. It was defined by critics as "one of those anomalies of American letters: a serious work of fiction which is greeted by both popular and critical acclaim" (Rodgers 1975, 138). At its simplest, the novel is a historical fiction set in New York that deals with the first years of the twentieth century, the so-called "Ragtime Era." It tells the story of the traumatic encounter of three families – one WASP, one Jewish immigrant, and one African American—that interact with a number of historical figures and participate in a number of key historical events of turn-of-the-century North America.

In *Ragtime*, a myriad of characters face traumatic stress owing to their condition as what Hutcheon has called "ex-centrics" (Hutcheon 1989, 61) – that is, because of their marginal race, ethnicity,

religion, gender, or social class. The novel is built around a pattern of repetition and variation, in that it presents multiple versions of the damaging consequences of insidious trauma and injustice. In Root's theorization, "insidious trauma" refers to the psychological impact of living in a society in which oppression, discrimination, and even violence are a normal part of everyday life for those whose identity is different from what is valued by those in power (Root 1992, 239–240). Characterization in the novel also echoes Lemelson et al.'s observation that for those who endure abusive contexts "there is layer upon layer of acute response to constantly changing threats" (Lemelson et al. 2007, 464). Interestingly for my purposes, the novel also depicts multiple ways of responding to these threats based on the characters' capacity for resilience or lack thereof. Indeed, the characters' resilience, their ability to bend without breaking, is a central thematic concern in the novel.

A key character in that sense is Sarah, an African-American washwoman who enters the narrative right after a newborn "brown" baby is found semi-buried and half-dead in Mother's garden (Doctorow 2006, 58).<sup>4</sup> Despite being described as an "impoverished uneducated black girl with such absolute conviction of the way human beings ought to conduct their lives" (p. 156), it becomes apparent that she has attempted to kill her child. Yet, we soon learn that the baby's cord has been bitten off and he is still bloody, which suggests that Sarah has not been attended by anyone during labor. At this point one begins to understand that she must have acted out of intense despair, since one might reasonably expect that only under extreme circumstances would a woman attempt to kill her own newborn baby. And this is precisely the case, since the narrative reveals that Sarah has been abandoned by the father of her baby, a rather well-off ragtime player named Coalhouse Walker. Indeed, the general lack of sympathy for her situation and her sense of helplessness seem to be precisely what have brought her to such a desperate state: it is readily apparent that she and her baby could hardly have survived on their own in the deeply unequal and racist society of turn-of-the-century New York that the novel depicts.

Mother's compassion saves Sarah and her baby, but the African-American girl pays a high psychological price for her suffering: as the narrator explains, "melancholy had taken the will out of her muscles. She did not have the strength to hold her baby" (Doctorow 2006, 91), and

she refuses to leave her room or tend to the child. Sarah's response resembles the common psychological aftermath of exposure to a traumatic blow. However, in contrast to the supposedly chronic nature of trauma that classical theory emphasizes, Sarah's imagined condition soon starts to improve when she recovers a sense of safety and normalcy thanks to the social and family support provided by Mother. Then, after Coalhouse Walker – the baby's father – reappears and seeks to atone for his earlier neglect, her ailment progressively improves to the point that she recovers completely. Sarah's capacity to heal, motivated by a sense of purpose in life (her responsibility towards her son) and the experience of survival in adverse circumstances, may be understood as the first suggestion of the novel's shift of emphasis towards resilience. It is also coherent with the medical evidence suggesting that, while traumatic responses are a common reaction in the aftermath of extreme stress, the human being has a "self-healing bias" (Konner 2007, 300, 309). Furthermore, when Sarah sees later on that the life her fiancé and she have been building starts to crumble because of the racist oppression to which they are subjected, she overcomes her previous immobilization and attempts to help her fiancé in his quest for justice.

This suggests that Sarah's earlier experience of survival has dramatically increased her resilience, transforming her into a self-reliant, determined, and empathetic woman who does not hesitate to take her future into her own hands and do what she can to help others. Thus, Sarah's transformation arguably exemplifies an alternative understanding of traumatic experiences as a catalyst in bringing about new individual strengths, a possibility that, as argued above, has become the focus of extended research by medical professionals in recent years. Indeed, Rousseau and Measham have contended that it might be more helpful to conceptualize trauma as a process that prompts a transformation which evokes not only vulnerabilities but also strengths (Rousseau & Measham 2007, 278).

Another character who stands out for her resilient personality is the fictionalized Evelyn Nesbit. Evelyn is first introduced as a celebrated beauty and artist's model who is married to the millionaire Harry K. Thaw, and was once mistress of the renowned architect Stanford White (Doctorow 2006, 4–5). She is described as a sexual goddess who "had caused the death of one man and wrecked the life of another" (p. 5), which leads one to perceive her as a sort of *femme fatale* who exerts her

power in order to manipulate men. However, the reader soon discovers that Evelyn is nothing but a broken toy in the hands of two abusive men, who take advantage of their superior economic position to victimize her. For instance, the narrative reveals that she was drugged and raped by White when she was only a 15-year-old chorus girl (p. 20). Later on we learn that Evelyn was taken on a trip to Europe by the violent and deranged Thaw, who paid her mother off and then took her to a castle in Germany to rape and torture her without interruption:

Their first night in the Schloss he pulled off her robe, threw her across the bed and applied a dog whip to her buttocks and the backs of her thighs. Her shrieks echoed down the corridors and stone stairwells. [...] Shocking red welts disfigured Evelyn's flesh. She cried and whimpered all night. In the morning Harry returned to her room, this time with a razor strop. She was bedridden for weeks. (p. 21)

We also learn that he further humiliates her by forcing her to perform oral sex while he is in jail, as “proof of her devotion” (p. 22).

Evelyn's history as victim of sexual and physical abuse since she was a young girl is shown to have affected her deeply. For instance, she decides to break off her affair with a tender and loving man, Mother's Younger Brother, because “she loved him but she wanted someone who would treat her badly and whom she could treat badly” (Doctorow 2006, 74). She further projects her distress onto Tatch's Little Girl, an outstandingly beautiful child who struggles to survive in the slums with her father. Indeed, Evelyn's abandonment by her mother at the hands of two abusive men and her identification with the tragedy of the little girl's prospective future as some man's sexual toy inspires in her a profound infatuation with the child, to a point that verges upon insanity: “She was so desperately in love that she could no longer see properly. [...] She saw everything through a film of salt tears, and her voice became husky because her throat was bathed in the irrepressible and continuous crying which her happiness caused her” (p. 43).

However, despite the obsessive nature of Evelyn's attachment to the Little Girl, taking care of her provides the young woman with a new sense of purpose and allows her to reintegrate her sense of self. Furthermore, her experience of self-reliance and survival in deeply challenging and adverse conditions has increased her adaptability and provided her with a strong sense of pride: “She had grown up playing in the streets of a

Pennsylvania coal town. She was the Gaudens statue Stanny White had put on the top of the tower of Madison Square Garden, a glorious bronze nude Diana” (Doctorow 2006, 23). Evelyn’s experience of living in the slums with the Little Girl also contributes to a new awareness of the needs of others and increases her empathy, inspiring her to use the money that she has received from her abusive husband after their divorce – her “hard-earned fortune” (p. 74) – to help the underprivileged.

It is worth adding that it is precisely through the female characters’ reliance on each other that they manage to develop coping mechanisms by means of which they are better suited to overcome the effects of exposure to traumatic or otherwise oppressive situations. The examples above underline Zautra et al.’s point that social ties and secure kin-kith relations are key resources for resilience (Zautra et al. 2010, 10). Indeed, most medical professionals insist on the importance of social support to promote successful adaptation to stress. Shalev, for instance, has claimed that “[l]ack of social support and continuous adversities increase the likelihood of developing PTSD after exposure to a traumatic event” (Shalev 2007, 208). Similarly, Silove has found that “[m]ost persons can be expected to recover spontaneously if the social and cultural environment is supportive” (Silove 2007, 255). In short, recovery and resilience are articulated in *Ragtime* as being enhanced by empathic cooperation in a network based on sisterhood, which attests to the key role of the wider social and interpersonal context in determining individual response to insidious trauma.

The understanding of trauma as a transformative force that may generate resilience is particularly relevant for the interpretation of Tateh. Tateh is a Jewish silhouette artist from Latvia who can barely earn a living with his labor in the East End. He and his family serve as the visible face for the immigrant working class in the novel, and their representation paints a picture of extreme suffering and sorrow. Their traumatic existence fictionally exemplifies J. D. Kinzie’s analysis, according to which many migrants and refugees suffer “massive, multiple, prolonged and unpredictable physical and psychological trauma” that results from the deplorable living conditions that they experience in their country of origin and which continue in countries of destination, frequently meeting economic problems, social discrimination, and ongoing violence (Kinzie 2007, 197).

Indeed, much the same as the characters analyzed so far, Tateh faces layer upon layer of insidious traumatic victimization as a result of perpetual social oppression, economic exploitation, and injustice. Thus, for instance, after a grievous existence in New York, Tateh and his daughter travel to Lawrence to work in the mills, where he “stood in front of a loom for fifty-six hours a week. His pay was just under six dollars” (Doctorow 2006, 100). They endure new hardships as a result of a strike in which Tateh plays an active role: “we were going to starve to death or freeze to death, he told his daughter. Now we’ll be shot to death” (p. 101). On top of that, they face the drama of the “Children’s Crusade,” perhaps one of the most traumatic events depicted in the novel: Tateh and the other workers take their children to the train to be sent to other cities to board with families in sympathy with the strike until the struggle ends; but the mill owners send the police:

They were dragging the mothers kicking and screaming to trucks at the end of the platform. [...] Children were being stepped on. They scattered in all directions. A woman ran by with blood coming from her mouth. [...] The policeman cracked [Tateh] on the shoulder and the head with his stick. What are you doing, Tateh cried. He didn’t know what the maniac wanted of him. He moved back into the crowd. He was followed and beaten. [...] In a few minutes the police had swept the platform clean, [...] and only a few sobbing battered adults and weeping children remained. (pp. 105–106)

Their survival to such traumatic events marks a turning point in their fate and, remarkably enough, fuels Tateh’s transformation: “from this moment, perhaps, Tateh began to conceive of his life as separate from the fate of the working class” (Doctorow 2006, 109). When they arrive in Philadelphia, Tateh sells the movie books that he has made for his daughter and a new life begins for them.

Despite his traumatic existence, Tateh constitutes the epitome of a resilient personality in the novel in that he succeeds in channeling the negative experiences that he has undergone into creative energy. His transformation brings to mind one of the most complex concepts of Freudian metapsychology – sublimation.<sup>5</sup> In its broadest psychoanalytical definition, sublimation would be the process by which instinctual urges are transformed into non-instinctual behavior. In “Civilization and its discontents” (1930), Freud further described it as “an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible

for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life” (Freud 2001a, 97). Drawing on this understanding, psychiatrist George Vaillant borrowed the term to refer to one of the human defense mechanisms to extreme stress that he had identified as leading to resilience. In his definition, sublimation is “the gratification of an impulse whose goal is retained, but whose goal is redirected from a socially unacceptable one to a socially valued one. Sublimation allows aggressive and sexual urges to be redirected, rather than neurotically dammed up or directed to socially unacceptable behaviors” (in Ginzburg 2012, 547).

The link between modern psychiatric understandings of sublimation as a coping mechanism and Freud’s references to artistic practice as a central dimension in his own understanding of sublimation appears particularly relevant for my purposes in the light of the recent emphasis on the sustaining role of creativity in resilience (see Mayer & Faber 2010, 98). Indeed, Tateh arguably represents the fictional embodiment of the sublimating power of creativity, which allows the individual to turn the traumatic forces of a miserable existence into creative energy by means of which he or she may cope with stress without being shattered or lapsing into antisocial behaviors. Finally, the novel’s emphasis on Tateh’s capacity to bend without breaking thanks to his creativity is also consistent with the contemporary call for a shift of emphasis, from the victim as passive object to the survivor as agent who strives to put into practice alternative survival strategies in the context of trauma (see Borzaga 2012, 74).

In short, *Ragtime* displays a significant shift of emphasis from vulnerability and victimization towards adaptability, agency, and resilience in the face of great stress. The focus is on survival and on the transformative power of trauma, which may yield not only weaknesses but also strengths.

### *III. Ragtime as a case study: Formal level*

Having confirmed *Ragtime*’s thematic engagement with the notion of resilience, this section sets out to assess the extent to which the novel’s narrative features suggest a similar concern with the representation of resilience at a formal level. In order to do so, it is worth considering the novel’s narrative style and the key formal strategies that it features.

To begin with, perhaps the most striking feature of the novel from a narratological perspective is its detached and apparently superficial narrative style: “one hundred Negroes a year were lynched [...]. There seemed to be quotas for these things” (Doctorow 2006, 34). As this quotation exemplifies, the plot unfolds in a chronicle-like, fast-paced narration that seems to deprive the events and characters of psychological depth and, in effect, sabotages reader identification. The use of free direct style further achieves the effect of diluting the rarely reported words of the characters into the fast flow of the narrative:

While Sarah served, Father told her that her fiancé would have done better after all to drive away his car when he could and forget the matter. Younger Brother bristled. You speak like a man who has never been tested in his principles, he said. Father was so outraged by this remark that he could find no words. (p. 155)

The novel’s quick pace and its apparent superficiality are further reinforced stylistically by the frequent deployment of focalization shifts, which bestow on the narration a seamless character:

They were immediately sensitive to the enormous power of the immigration officials. [...] Such power was dazzling. The immigrants were reminded of home. They went into the streets and were somehow absorbed in the tenements. They were despised by New Yorkers. They were filthy and illiterate. They stank of fish and garlic. They had running sores. They had no honor and worked for next to nothing. They stole. They drank. They raped their own daughters. (p. 13)

As this quotation shows, focalization shifts do not alter the flow of the narrative since, at times, statements narrated through the focalization of different characters melt into one another from one sentence to the next. In this case, the narrator’s apparently neutral, chronicle-like narration subtly melts into someone else’s parochial and racist focalization without notice.

Asked in an interview about his reasons for making such narratological choices, Doctorow explains that he liked the “kind of reality” that a rigorous narrative combined with a certain distance from the characters allowed him to produce and which exists “somewhere between fiction and modern journalism or history, sort of an in between region” (Yardley 1999, 9). However, the novel’s stylistic choices have a key ideological effect: dealing as it does with extreme human suffering –

as the previous section has made clear – *Ragtime*'s chronicle-like, distant narrative style allows Doctorow to depathologize conventional responses to trauma. As Craps has noted, the category of trauma risks pathologizing people – and even countries or cultures – presenting them as passive victims of an illness that deserves psychological treatment, without taking into consideration the fact that they suffer the effects of conditions which are essentially political, social, or economic and which could be changed (Craps 2013, 28). Borzaga similarly claims that “it is always reductive and stigmatizing (and potentially re-traumatizing) to speak about stories of trauma while drawing only on psychiatric vocabulary” (Borzaga 2012, 75). Echoing such views, the narrative style that *Ragtime* deploys contributes to emphasizing the regrettably ordinary character of extreme suffering as a result of oppression and injustice, underplaying its traditional pathological and exceptional overtones and its focus on the individual mind, and drawing attention to its everydayness for certain collectives.

On the other hand, the novel displays a number of narrative strategies that may be claimed to evoke the psychobiological phenomenon of resilience formally. Among them it is worth highlighting the use of irony. Narratologically speaking, irony is a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency in which an apparently straightforward statement is undermined by its context so as to bestow upon it a different meaning. In *Ragtime* the ironic tone is the most important formal tool to expose effectively certain views or ideologies: “A union was an affront to God. The laboring man would be protected and cared for not by the labor agitators, said one wealthy man, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom had given the control of property interests of this country” (Doctorow 2006, 34). Statements such as this one, which carry a capitalist, racist, or white supremacist focalization, beg for an ironic reading, since they are undermined by the context and contrasted with their own heartlessness. Interestingly for my purposes, the novel's ironic tone may be said to evoke the capacity for cognitive reappraisal, an ability that has been identified as a key factor of resilience among trauma survivors. As Feder et al. explain, cognitive reappraisal involves reframing a situation in order to alter its emotional impact (Feder et al. 2010, 36). In the context of traumatic stress, this may imply changing one's assessment to a more positive interpretation of the event. After all,

cognitive reappraisal is a coping and emotion regulation strategy that involves self-detachment and reinterpretation of the meaning of the stimulus. This is precisely what we do when we use irony: the intended meaning is conveyed through emphasis on the distance that exists between what one is saying and what one actually means, a capacity that requires abstraction and emotional detachment. It is worth adding that irony and cynicism are popularly and scientifically understood to be defense mechanisms to cope with stress (see for example Hutcheon 1992, 226; Blaser 1976, 80), since they serve the purpose of avoiding the negative affect of a situation by maintaining its opposite.

Another trait or strategy that has been identified as contributing to a resilient personality is an optimistic outlook on life. Positive emotions such as optimism, as Feder et al. suggest, provide a buffer against the adverse consequences of stress in that they decrease the autonomic arousal of negative emotions and increase flexibility of thinking (Feder et al. 2010, 36). This psychosocial factor of resilience is evoked formally in *Ragtime* through its humorous tone: interspersed in an otherwise extremely dramatic narrative at the level of plot, the novel includes a number of scenes and situations whose explicit humor provides comic relief. This is the case, for example, of the fictionalized encounter between J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford, when they decide to create a secret society based on the shared idea that they are reincarnated pharaohs. Their megalomania leads Morgan to spend a night inside a pyramid, where he expects to receive a sign from Osiris, but is only greeted by aggressive bedbugs (Doctorow 2006, 261). These characters represent the absolute disregard for the well-being of other human beings and are partly responsible for the traumatic experiences that the characters discussed in the previous section face. And for that they are subjected to the narrator's mockery. It is worth adding that recent scientific studies of resilience and positive emotions specifically point towards humor as a coping strategy in the face of traumatic situations, since it can contribute to the enhancement of positive life experiences and lead to greater positive affect and psychological well-being (Kuiper 2012, 486–467). This is precisely the kind of emotion that the novel's humorous tone evokes.

*Ragtime* is also characterized by its metafictionality. That is, the novel openly comments on its fictional status, self-consciously drawing attention to the act of composition involved in all acts of representation: “Our knowledge

of this clandestine history comes to us by Younger Brother's own hand" (Doctorow 2006, 205). This may also be perceived in the novel's parodic appropriation and repurposing of the genre of the historical chronicle, its intertextuality, the collective narrator's addresses to the reader, and the references to the act of writing. When it comes to the formal representation of resilience and its factors, metafictionality may be said to evoke both the sustaining role of creativity in resilience (see Mayer & Faber 2010, 98) and the phenomenon of sublimation, a key factor associated with a resilient personality (Skodol 2010, 113) which, as argued in the previous section, became a central concept in psychoanalytic theory. In that sense, it is important to keep in mind Freud's references to artistic practice as a central dimension in his understanding of sublimation. What we find in *Ragtime* is a narrator who channels his or her bitter indignation over injustice and its traumatic consequences for the individual and the community, transforming it into creative energy that allows for the (fictive) writing of a novel. Thus, the novel exemplifies the common knowledge that art, and more generally creative thinking, not only allows survivors to cope with traumatic experiences, as has been documented to be the case of countless artists and writers, but also enhances resilient response to negative stimuli.

The narrator's collective nature has already been mentioned in passing, but it deserves further analysis. At first sight, the heterodiegetic narrator appears to be a neutral, detached social chronicler who writes insipid staccato declarative sentences. These are, nevertheless, bristling with indignation and reproof: "One hundred miners were burned alive. One hundred children were mutilated. There seemed to be quotas for these things. There seemed to be quotas for death by starvation" (Doctorow 2006, 34). Towards the end of the novel, however, it is revealed that we are dealing with a first-person-plural collective narrator. A number of previous Doctorow critics have conjectured about the identity of the narrator. Some have argued that it is the Little Boy, the son in the WASP family, who retrospectively narrates the events (see Estrin 1975, 19; Harter & Thompson 1990, 65; Parks 1991, 60; Saltzman 1983, 95). Others have argued that the narrative voice might belong to the Little Boy and the Little Girl, Tateh's daughter, claiming that both characters hold an equivalent position in the narrative (see Morris 1991, 100–101). Interestingly, however, Geoffrey Harpham has claimed that the novel's narrative voice remains unplaceable (Harpham 1989, 89).

Following Harpham's lead, it is my contention that the narrator's (collective) identity is purposely never revealed, which creates the narrative effect of a Greek chorus that as a single voice denounces the injustice and oppression to which the characters in the margins of turn-of-the-century New York society are subjected. The collective narrator, therefore, evokes another key factor associated with resilience: the existence of social and family supports. Most researchers involved in the study of the psychobiological phenomenon of resilience coincide in linking the existence of communal ties and the sense of belonging with a resilient personality (see Konner 2007, 322; Mayer & Faber 2010, 98).

In short, in *Ragtime* E. L. Doctorow resorts to a number of narrative techniques that subtly evoke the phenomenon of resilience and some of its factors formally. More generally, the novel's narrative style depathologizes (insidious) trauma by putting forward an understanding of the characters' traumatic experiences as resulting from a wider context of discrimination and injustice that needs to be reformed at social, economic, and political levels, while emphasizing the power of resilience to overcome traumatic stress.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

In the light of what this paper has discussed, it can be concluded that *Ragtime* rejects an understanding of trauma as a long-term, disabling ailment from which it is almost impossible to recover. It has been argued that the novel's thematic and formal focus is, rather, on resilience and on the capacity to overcome immobilization, helplessness, and passivity in the face of insidious traumatization. In the novel, trauma is presented as a force that fuels a transformation in which not just negative symptoms but also positive survival strategies may be developed, sublimation and the creation of a supporting community based on empathy and cooperation being key ones. Resilience and its factors are further represented in the narrative through a number of strategies that evoke the phenomenon formally, such as the use of irony and humor, metafictionality, the creation of an unplaceable collective narrator, and the elaboration of a fast-paced, seamless, and apparently detached narrative style. More importantly, through the analysis of *Ragtime* as a case study this paper has argued for the existence of

resilience narratives, opening the door towards a new theoretical approach to what may be termed “the literature of resilience.”

The questions that literary and cultural critics might naturally ask next are whether there might be narratives that cannot be subjected to a thematic and formal reading from the perspective of resilience and even whether the notion of resilience may have the potential to become an alternative to trauma as a cultural metaphor for the times that we live in. The corollary to the latter question would be the following: Are we trapped in a “posttraumatic culture” characterized by fascination with the wound as Farrell, with others, claims (Farrell 1998, 3–5), or is there a way out? Answering these questions is well beyond the scope of this paper. One might venture to claim, however, that the paradigmatic dimensions that trauma criticism has reached, as well as the proliferation in the last few years of texts (literary and otherwise) dealing with the Holocaust, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and apocalyptic environmental disasters, among other issues, leaves rather little space for hope in that sense. Yet, the problem might be one of focus. As I claimed in the first section of this paper, survivors’ capacity to rebuild their lives after a traumatic event is a central theme in countless (literary) texts. It might well be that we need to turn our attention to the ways writers, filmmakers, and other producers of culture adopt and adapt in their works coping mechanisms and strategies – which may be culture-specific – that bring to the fore the phenomenon of resilience thematically and aesthetically before the paradigmatic change that is already occurring in the scientific and medical realms can reach the cultural sphere.

#### NOTES

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2. As Zautra et al. explain, beginning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as scholars, scientists, and medical practitioners came to deal with certain social and individual phenomena, their focus was on their pathological dimension, on the analysis and treatment of individual and social pathologies (Zautra et al. 2010, xi).
3. See for example Lawson (2006; 2010). Lawson is, to my knowledge, the first to speak about “resilience literature.”

4. Further references to the novel will be to the Penguin Modern Classics edition, published in 2006.
5. This testifies to the importance of Freudian theory for Doctorow. Indeed, Freud even appears briefly in the novel as a fictionalized character during his visit to the United States, where the implied author humorously has him ride the Tunnel of Love in Coney Island with Carl Jung.

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