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Material Excess and Deadly Dwelling in E.L. Doctorow's *Homer and Langley*

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Abstract
In *Homer and Langley*, E.L. Doctorow's 2009 novel of New York City, the author focuses on past Manhattan, which he sees as the epitome of his own self-destructive modern and contemporary society. I would argue that Doctorow acts here mainly to denounce excessive material culture in the context of egotistic, upper-class Manhattan dwelling at the end of the nineteenth century. I would also like to show that the novelist criticizes the idea of material progress along more than a hundred years, from the end of the nineteenth century, when the plot starts, to the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the novel was written. The self-contained, isolated world in the novel is the result of our society's propensity for excessive production and consumption. At the same time, *Homer and Langley* brings to mind ideas of exhaustion of the human, who agrees to be literally replaced by objects. The fact that such a phenomenon occurs already at the end of the nineteenth century suggests that there might have never been a plenary moment of being human, as we have long entertained the closest possible relationship and even synthesis with the non-human world of objects and tools.

Keywords: E.L. Doctorow, *Homer and Langley*, material culture, self-reliance, excess, regress, nineteenth century, twentieth century.

Homer and Langley is a dark, dismal rendering of New York City, even darker than *The Waterworks* (1994), another one of E.L. Doctorow's novels that deals closely with Manhattan. If in his 1994 novel the author attempted to restore some trust in the idea of reason, which strove to counterbalance the city's tendency towards megalomaniac excess and

madness, in *Homer and Langley* reason is thoroughly dismantled, while bleakness prevails.

The novel tells the story of two reclusive brothers, the Collyer brothers, who lived in Manhattan at the *fin de siècle* and later. Homer and Langley Collyer were historical characters who lived in Harlem, Manhattan between the end of the nineteenth century till their death in 1947. The sons of a prosperous upper-class Victorian family, they later became reclusive hoarders who lived in poverty and squalor. Details of their death were published on the front page of New York journals, as they were discovered buried under colossal amounts of debris in their Fifth Avenue brownstone, after years of isolation in their home. In his trademark merging of historical fact and fiction, which he experimented in *Ragtime*, *The Book of Daniel*, and *The Waterworks*, Doctorow starts from this kind of spectacular occurrence but goes beyond it. His main preoccupation is not so much the two brothers' publicised death, but their less-known life which he fictionally recomposes as it might have unfolded in their city and inside their house. The novel's implications are in fact larger and more dramatic than the linear plot might suggest. Fictionally prolonging the Collyer brothers' life span into the 1980s, Doctorow questions no less than the teleological progression of modernity over a whole century. The writer's purpose is that of exploring the modern phenomenon of consumption in what proves to be a veritable parable of our times.

Despite several contacts with the world outside, which reflect the major historical occurrences of the decades they traverse, the Collyer brothers have a tendency to isolate themselves in their mansion. Even so, they are aware especially of the technological innovations and of the fast succeeding historical events of their age. Fascinated by the objects that people discard on a daily basis in Manhattan, especially Langley Collyer starts amassing them in their house. Thus, their Fifth Avenue brownstone slowly transforms into a kind of derelict warehouse. According to Langley's explanations, the items hoarded are going to serve as proof of his sceptical view of the idea of progress. To him, everything that is fits some pre-existing categories, which he calls the "slots," whose scenarios repeat themselves invariably (Doctorow 14), rendering the idea of

newness impossible. His explanatory discourse, which echoes the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes in its refusal of newness as well as Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence, becomes in time pure mania, devoid of any rationality. Also, the so-called proofs that he collects in time to support his theory – debris of the most diverse kind – pile up uncontrollably in the two brothers' mansion.

From the beginning, Langley attempts no less than to design a universal, dateless newspaper that would represent an absolute synthesis of their time and simultaneously capture the very essence of truth. It would be, in Langley's own words, "the only newspaper anyone would ever need" (49). The enterprise leads nowhere in the end, while the Collyers' lives degrade, becoming increasingly impoverished and miserable. The generations of decaying newspapers and other commodities, hoarded in large quantities in their brownstone, lead to the brothers' final death as their house collapses, killing them inside. As in Edgar Allan Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*, the idea of Victorian self-sufficiency is considered in connection with a regressive rather than progressive trajectory of history, which renders the novel a counternarrative of progress. The Collyer brothers' story reiterates not the traditional rags-to-riches American pattern of success, but a reverse pattern which could be designated from-riches- to-rags. It discloses the megalomaniac dimensions of the (upper-class) ego in Manhattan during the *fin de siècle* as well as much later into the twentieth century.

In his exclusive Amazon.com interview about the novel, Doctorow explains that he considers the two Collyer brothers "curators of their life and times, and their house as a museum of all our lives. ... I make them to be two brothers who opted out of civilization and pulled the world in after them." Despite the novel's tone, which is apparently sympathetic with the characters, the plot reads a lot more pessimistic than the author affirms in his Amazon presentation. His "curators" soon reveal their obsessive side, while "the museum of our lives" established in their claustrophobic house bespeaks more than a century of suffocating commodity culture. In other words, although the author is here a compassionate chronicler indeed, he remains the same "critic of America's failures to fulfil its dreams and founding convictions" (Wutz 514) that he has always been.

Author Peter Brooker employs the metaphor of the looking glass to talk about Doctorow's more general "recovery and reconstruction of past eras ... always in some way, in a double function mirroring their own postmodern times in the decades of modernity" (105), a process which also occurs in the novel under discussion here. As one of the novel's *New York Times* reviewers states, "the brothers' experiences are obviously made to hold up a mirror to the twentieth century. Some might call it a distorting mirror, since they find the world to be largely depressing, horrific and constantly invasive" (Dirda 1). Rather than "distorting," the mirror might be seen as realistic and critical, as the present study attempts to show.

Joyce Carol Oates' affirmation that, in *Homer and Langley*, "virtually nothing happens to the protagonists except that, with the passing of years …, Homer grows harder of hearing and succumbs ever more passively to his older brother Langley's paranoia and predilection for compulsive hoarding" (80) is a rather simplistic rendering of the plot, which I would like to contradict. What Oates tends to ignore is the whole context of the two brothers' irrational behavior, namely the self-sufficient universe of their house and the larger social connotations of their fascinations with objects. I would also like to show that Doctorow's novel is only deceivingly "gentle," as another *New York Times* reviewer calls it (Schillinger), being instead "a broader" and, I would add, harsh, "critique of the successes and failures of 20th-century America" (Secher).

Dealing with the past, *Homer and Langley* initiates a critical dialogue between two ages, addressing the issue of the nineteenth century's relevance for the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the novel was written. As such, it phrases possible accusations of early industrialism against late industrialism's failure to fulfil expectations of durable plenty and a brighter future. Simultaneously, it stages our late industrialism's distrust of the idea of progress characteristic of the end of the nineteenth century, which the novelist shows to have already comprised an essential element of excess, consumerism and waste.

Although this is not one of Doctorow's prize-winning volumes, it provides a highly challenging view of the backstage of history. As such, it contests one of the key *grands récits* of the previous centuries, that of a

progressive, continuous trajectory of history, that implies both the notion of triumphant reason and the discourse of a unitary self. This occurs significantly in the context of Manhattan dwelling at the turn of the twentieth century. Implicit contestation occurs at the level of Manhattan's own most intimate urban structure, owing to its famed City Grid. Despite the Grid's rational and unifying pattern, which has divided city space into similarly shaped, rectangular blocks ever since 1811, a compensatory, excessive and often irrational dimension defines each of the blocks that the grid delimits. Thus, theorists speak of "three-dimensional anarchy" resulting from "the Grid's two-dimensional discipline" in Manhattan (Koolhaas 20). The Collyer house consequently becomes a synecdoche for Manhattan itself, in the context of excessive commodification.

Homer and Langley performs a critique of historical progress, of the fetish-commodity and of the consumerist society, seen as materially excessive and wasteful. What it attacks is no less than the metanarrative of progress, as well as reason and the notion of a non-historical, transcendental self. In the novel material progress stands proof of the modern ego's extreme attachment to everyday objects and implicitly to processes of production and consumption in the last two centuries. Such progress is shown to lead to an impasse resulting from the amounts of waste that it generates. It shows mainly how such a material context, taken to extremes which are inherent in the very processes of production, can trigger the subject's alienation, leading to his/her isolation and symbolic death.

Given the limited amount of physical space in Manhattan, a structure such as the Grid imposes a maximum saturation of each of its cells. The result is a form of habitation defined by congested self-containment and implicit solitude, which came to be New York City's characteristics in time. This suffocating self-sufficiency is precisely what *Homer and Langley* stages, as their house represents, literally, "a maximum unit of urbanistic Ego" (Koolhaas 20).

During the Gilded Age, New York became "its own empire" (Reitano 84) owing to new industrial techniques and inventions which, coupled with unequalled population growth, led to phenomenal economic might and ensuing prosperity. New York City aspired to the status of a

new *umbilicus mundi* of the modern world, thus supplanting other prestigious, European metropolises such as Paris, for example. Manhattan's own centre of fame and wealth was Fifth Avenue. This is where "Old New York" was located between 1870 and the First World War, at the time where *Homer and Langley* mainly unfolds. "Old New York," as Edith Wharton designated the New York City of the upper class during the late nineteenth century in her 1924 collection of novellas, represented the exclusive world of the upper classes, of the great clans of Vanderbilt, Carnegie, Astor, Morgan, Pulitzer, as well as Collyer, amongst many others. "At the top end of the social scale were the great families and their conspicuous consumption of leisure as well as commodities" (Tallack).

The Collyer House as "A Space Divorced from the Outside" and the Universal Newspaper

As Manhattan was "the place to display wealth" (Tallack), status was associated with the mansions on Fifth Avenue starting mid nineteenth century. These solid, heavy and compact buildings, some of them sheathed in brownstone, represented the visible signs of their owners' prosperity. In antithesis to the Grid, which is based on principles of rationality, implying transparency and openness, the houses were defined by closure, opacity and excess (Tallack).

The Collyer house, where Homer and his brother Langley lived uninterruptedly since their childhood, is a typical, comfortable, aristocratic abode. A "monumental tribute to late Victorian design that would be bypassed by modernity" (Doctorow 6), its sheltered, protective interiors reflect the emphasis on privacy and domestic values characterizing the Victorian age. To blind Homer, the house was a true interior sea, as he could

> navigate every room and up and down the stairs without hesitation …. I knew the drawing room, our father's study, our mother's sitting room, the dining room with its eighteen chairs and the walnut long table, the butler's pantry and the kitchens, the parlor, the bedrooms, I remembered how

> many of the carpeted steps there were between the floors, I didn't even have to hold on to the railing. (4)

Walter Benjamin defined the whole of society at the end of the nineteenth century in connection to the idea of residence, as one "addicted to dwelling, [that] conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, encase[ing] him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling's interior, that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case" (qtd. in Miller 256). From the beginning, the Collyer brownstone is precisely such a comfortable, self-contained place, dominated by a great number of possessions.

Reminiscent of a cocoon or the maternal womb, the brothers' childhood home was "comfortable, solid, dependable" with its "big upholstered pieces, or tufted Empire side chairs, or heavy drapes over the curtains on the ceiling-to-floor windows, or medieval tapestries hung from gilt poles, and bow-windowed bookcases, thick Persian rugs, and standing lamps with tasselled shades and matching chinois amphora that you could almost step into" (Doctorow 6). Such protective, plush interiors deny the aggressive industrialization and modernisation outside and project instead a self-sufficient world of stability suggestive of power and prestige. Theorists speak about a "geography of safety," as the Industrial Revolution generated the "need for secular sanctuary," for "a space divorced from the outside," "a cave to sensuality" (Sennett 23-24).

The oversized furniture items in the mansion are replete with imperial undertones that the house itself echoes. They allude to various historical ages and exotic places such as the First French Empire ("the tufted Empire chairs"), the Middle-Ages ("medieval tapestries"), Persia (the "thick Persian rugs") (Doctorow 6), typical of the age's eclecticism. This way, we are given the full measure of the palpable density of wealth at a moment when Manhattan was seen as the centre of the modern world, randomly buying and reassembling European historical artefacts at its own discretion. Benjamin famously designates such heavily ornamented interiors characteristic of industrialized modernity as "phantasmagorias of the interior" (Cohen 208).

Following their parents' death and then Langley's return from the First World War, the house becomes the two brothers' protective, self-

sufficient universe, even if their family life is irremediably altered. What Langley dreams to do is attempting to give some meaning to what he sees as the dispersed world of his age. This is the moment when he starts gathering various items – especially daily newspapers but also pianos, as well as other random things ("a toaster, a Chinese bronze horse, a set of encyclopaedias," etc.) (37). He collects some of these items in several versions, as what he seeks is an object's "ultimate expression" (37), its highest representation.

Gathering discarded everyday objects, Langley tries to read and distil the spirit of his age in its quotidian manifestations. He is especially passionate about newspapers, which he buys daily in several editions. In fact, Langley collects journals with the explicit purpose of creating a unique newspaper of his own design, which would be a timeless, absolute source of information accessible to everyone in exchange for only five cents (cf. 49). Such a newspaper would serve Langley's "Theory of Replacements" (13), according to which "[e]verything in life gets replaced. We are our parents' replacements just as they were replacements of the previous generation" (13). As he further explains, his theory is not a denial of progress as it might seem: "I'm not saying there's no progress. There is progress while at the same time nothing changes" (14).

The resulting paper "could be read forevermore as sufficient to any day thereof" (48) and will act "as prophecy" (136). It is to this purpose that Langley aims to extract and categorise each event in the quotidian press – in his view, such a Platonic enterprise would render the world a simplified place of meaningful forms. The resulting paper would comprise all temporal dimensions and information covering all geographical areas, which resembles an Enlightenment type of encyclopaedia. As a commodity, the newspaper is shown to compress time and space with the purpose of marketing them to the public: "[f]or five cents, Langley said, the reader will have a portrait in newsprint of our life on earth" (49). As such, the newspaper becomes an icon of Manhattan's own identity as a place that thrives on time compression as instantaneity, with the Grid as a mechanism of space compression.

In order to accomplish his project, Langley employs a whole economy and architecture of information. In his brother's account of

things, he "would ... run further statistical comparisons until his order of templates was fixed so that he would know which stories should go on the front page, which on the second page, and so on" (48-49). Yet, the suggestion is that in modern times the amount of daily information in the press is so massive that it proves ultimately impossible to contain. Thus, in order to gather one day's worth of facts, Langley has to "run out for all the morning papers, and in the afternoon for the evening papers, and then there were the business papers, the sex gazettes, the freak sheets, the vaudeville papers, and so on" (49). His desired outcome is that of fixing "American life finally in one edition, what he called Collyer's eternally current dateless newspaper, the only newspaper anyone would ever need" (49). Such a journal would focus especially on American life as the supreme source of information and inspiration, which would thus be rendered universal. Simultaneously, it hints at the fascination for grandiosity that characterizes the American spirit itself. Considering its ample proportions, the journal would make all other sources of information redundant. A typical example of a Lyotardean metanarrative (Lyotard 21), it is a generalising, all-levelling attempt that pays little attention to the idea of otherness. In Langley's own words, "the stories will not have overly particular details as you find in ordinary daily rags, because the real news here is of the Universal Forms of which any particular detail would only be an example. The reader will always be up to date, and au courant with what is going on" (Doctorow 49).

Gradually but inevitably, Langley's project will conclude in chaos, revealing its obsessive and absurd dimensions. In the end, the only trace left of the whole undertaking is even more amassed waste, "newspaper bales and boxes of clippings" that "rose from floor to ceiling in every room of [the] house" (48) as some domestic skyscrapers that stand proof of Langley's megalomaniac pursuit. His ideal journal omits the contradictions resulting from the specific historical paradigm that he belongs to, the age's surplus of knowledge and information, the epic influx of data that characterises modernity. Or, modernity's excess, ephemeral nature and incoherence render all synthesis futile. Such an enterprise discloses the profoundly irrational dimension of his efforts together with the size of the ego at that time.

Thus, Langley's apparent progress towards an orderly and essentialised form of knowledge comes to nothing. Rather than belonging to the domain of universals, knowledge is shown to be historical and contingent. What is equally dismantled in the novel is the ideal of a self that evolves towards spiritual self-awareness as freedom from one's immediate historical circumstances and from materiality. In the typically coming-of-age, realist novel, the self finally reaches a more evolved, plenary state that helps him/her go beyond his/her mundane conditions. Instead, *Homer and Langley* contradicts the idea of existential progress and speaks about the suffocating weight of history seen in its exclusively material dimensions, as an infinite collection of debris.

Progress and Excess

The affluent American society after the Civil War was oriented towards the future and highly trustful of progress. Progress described a trajectory that America easily identified with, as it seemed to reflect its own ethos of the New Adam who denied the past and fused with the future, eager to start anew. In general, there was a "profound faith in the future. ... [I]t is the common religion of modern times, a fertile cult" (qtd. in Buck-Morss 262), whose object of veneration was the commodity.

The main coordinates of the late nineteenth century cities were giant size, affluence and expansion, all of which were linked to the belief in reason and the trust in the individual. Seen in its exclusively male, white hypostasis, the individual was invested with almost divine powers to continue its civilisation of the world. The individual was seen as a solitary presence of gigantic proportions, a universe in itself whose own interests had priority in an equation that excluded the idea of community. *Homer and Langley* is an ironic consideration of such a perspective, as we shall further see.

To be better understood, the aggrandising modern self needs to be placed in the context of massive economic growth starting with the end of the nineteenth century. The desire to possess played a crucial role, as the main social mechanism of development. On the one hand, it was fed by the "phantasmagoria" of the city as a dazzling, kaleidoscopic spectacle

and a fast changing optical mirage. In a society based on the fascinating spectacle of objects, a whole cult of the commodity developed, which led to its fetishization. On the other hand, the phenomenon can be correlated with an older Victorian characteristic, the age's passion for collecting.

Concerning this latter aspect, there is in *Homer and Langley* a whole tradition of gathering items which the brothers inherit from their parents who were also passionate collectors. Collecting added a layer of protection against aggressive industrialism in late Victorian times, when it acted as a comfortable, homely means of activating the past or exotic realms. The Collyer parents were avid travellers who journeyed abroad every year on ocean liners whose half-forgotten names Homer strives to recall: "the Carmania? the Mauretania? the Neuresthania?" (Doctorow 7). The last name ironically alludes to neurasthenia, a form of depression and chronic fatigue typical of the upper-classes and which the narrator implies might have been the reason behind his parents' trips abroad. What his father and mother bring home from their distant voyages are mostly exotica which they seemingly turn either into study specimens or into decorative items: "ancient Islamic tiles, or rare books, or a marble water fountain, or busts of Romans with no noses or missing ears, or antique armoires with their fecal smell" (7). The various mirabilia that late nineteenth century urbanites enjoyed gathering in their homes attested to their owners' delight in controlling the past. They also indicate the desire to appropriate distant cultures and the attempt to become familiar with new domains of scientific interest in a world obsessed with evolutionary ideas. The oddity of such disparate items as those that the Collyers bring home underlies what will later be seen as their surrealism. The "antique toy train that was too delicate to play with" and the "gold-plated hairbrush" (7) that young Homer and his brother receive as gifts reinforce the fetishistic and useless dimension of objects. Eclectically relocated in a new environment oblivious of their initial, practical purpose, such objects stand proof of an intense process of reification and material alienation already at work in the nineteenth century city. Doctorow thus shows how the living dimension of the Victorian house was constantly doubled by a dense universe of objects attesting to the age's excessive materialism. As Homer adds, fully aware of continuing his family inheritance, "[o]ur

father collected things as well, for along with the many shelves of medical volumes in his study are stoppered glass jars of foetuses, brains, gonads, and various other organs preserved in formaldehyde – all apropos of his professional interests, of course" (37). The quote illustrates a process of fragmentation and objectification of the human body itself, to the benefit of the impersonal gaze of science at the *fin de siècle*.

Along the entire novel the author reinforces an excessive material dimension of the Victorian domestic space which attests to the time's obsession for possessions: "[c]luttered [the house] might have seemed to outsiders but it seemed normal and right to us and it was our legacy, Langley's and mine, this sense of living with things *assertively inanimate*" (7, my emphasis). Homer's words reflect the degree of reification of their domestic universe and the brothers' near identification with the objects in their house. Their world is the result of a paradoxical combination of self-reliance and greed, encouraged by the very ethos of the time. It is this tension between self-containment as a leading principle of the Victorian domestic space and material excess that will render their house implosive in the end.

"The Pile of Debris Before Him Grows Toward the Sky"

Even though the Collyer brothers generally prefer the isolation of their house to any kind of social interaction, they are partially receptive to the succession of historical paradigms, especially due to Langley's newspapers and to the ever-changing items that he collects. Langley regularly brings home artefacts that reflect recent technical discoveries or mark historical events. What he mostly gathers are already discarded items, waste, whose degradation will continue inside their house through lack of use and chaotic accumulation. On the one hand, this reflects late nineteenth century Manhattan's permanent craving for novelty, its fascination for the endless string of industrial innovations and inventions. On the other hand, it shows the intensity of the process of consumption and the ephemerality of desire, which result in the transience of the object itself along the entire twentieth century. As a result, Langley's efforts to neatly categorise the information circulating in the press of his time is

shown to be fast exceeded by material as well and informational superabundance that lasted for more than a century, resulting in entropy and chaos.

Together with the trust in advancement, the pervading semantics of the merchandise contaminated the whole of reality: "everything desirable, from sex to social status, could be transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display that held the crowd enthralled" (Buck-Morss 258). Owing to industrial production, artefacts were available in greater and greater numbers until their practical uses were soon transcended, which resulted in "the demented production of useless Victorian items" (Koolhaas 25).

Thus, even before mass production took full swing later in the twentieth century, material profusion coupled with the infinite thirst for novelty led to substantial consumption. Expenditure entails the object's fast obsolescence, especially in the context of *fin de siècle* ennui. There was always a next generation of products, the result of unrelenting technical progress, that lured consumers, pressuring them to purchase even more. The uncontrollable multiplication of things led to their fast transformation into waste at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as during the entire twentieth century. It is the object's innate debris dimension and the underlying irrationality of the whole process that *Homer and Langley* mainly discusses. In Baudrillard's words, the object's "condemnation to transience ... would be sufficient to throw into question the 'rationalistic' postulates of the whole of economic science on utility, needs, etc." (47).

In the novel, material things fast reveal not only their bulkiness but also their essential immobility and uselessness, which will gradually devour all space in the Collyer house. Their debris side is the direct result of excessive production, which leads to their dispensable character in contrast with their initial appeal. Despite the practical purposes that they sometimes serve in the novel, obsolescence dramatically shortens their life-span. The list of items that the two brothers hoard is too long to be exhausted here. It would be sufficient to mention only the most significant item that it comprises: the newspaper.

The primary example would be that of Langley's life-long passion for collecting newspapers which serve his (utopian) purpose of designing the ultimate journal, the "Collyer's One Edition for All Time" (Doctorow 99). Such a never-ending project that aims to thoroughly categorise the daily events in the press necessitates larger and larger quantities of papers. In time, the journals start gathering everywhere in the brownstone that they seem to flood: "like some slow flow of lava, [they] brimmed out of [Langley's] study to the landing on the second floor" (76). As they start deteriorating, they emanate "a musty smell that would be especially noticeable on days of rain or dampness" (76). Stacks of them are mentioned all through the novel. Their cumbersome presence accompanies the main episodes in the brothers' life, ironic ballast of an enterprise that started as a process of ordering information. Unavoidably, the bales that the newspapers are arranged into start redesigning the Collyers' living space that they minimise, turning the house into a labyrinthine mine (which the name Collyer might allude to), or into a walled city within the city.

The most significant item of the Collyer collections remains the old Model T Ford automobile that Langley decides to bring home in pieces one day. Immobile therefore useless, a surrealist object in the context of their Fifth Avenue mansion, the automobile becomes the Collyer's "family totem" (81), as Langley justly designates it. Once a symbol of speed and efficiency and a fetish of the whole of America, the Model T Ford is perceived here exclusively in its refuse dimension, although its fetish connotations persist. It is a view that comes close to Baudrillard's definition of the car as "one of the main foci of daily and long-term waste" (48) in our society. Later, Langley will decide to employ the automobile as an improvised electricity generator to furnish power to their residence. This way he reinforces his principles of obstinate self-sufficiency and independence from the larger city structures, which is yet another of his obsessions, thus underlining the increasingly insular character of their house.

An overwhelming feeling of boredom quickly pervades all of Langley's actions. The things that he abandons soon after bringing them home invade the brothers' living space, constantly diminishing it. A

possible reutilization of the found items is always a postponed thought. Their colourful, never ending junk collection suggests an atomised world that comprises, amongst other things, "an old refrigerator, boxes of plumbing joints and pipes, milk-bottle crates, bedsprings, headboards, a baby carriage with missing wheels, several broken umbrellas, a worn-out chaise longue, a real fire hydrant, automobile tires ..., and so on" (95). They are the worthless props of our daily lives, the carcasses of excessive consumption, signalling "the kind of dehumanizing that Marx had already seen as the final goal of capitalist alienation" (Herbrechter 35). At the same time, the fragmentary, entropic character of artefacts might stand for the discontinuous trajectory of historical progress itself.

Moreover, Langley's accumulative view of artefacts strips them of all individuality, denying their use value and thus undermining their links with the human. Objects in the novel might be said to self-replicate and thus acquire an existence of their own, at the expense of human existence. Gradually replacing the subject, they become what theorist Bruno Latour designated "quasi-subjects," while the two passive and increasingly immobile brothers turn into "quasi-objects" (qtd. in Clarke 201). The object thus proves to be "more shrewd, more cynical, more brilliant than the subject" (Baudrillard qtd. in Kellner).

Dwelling space in the novel is itself reconceptualised. Gradually, the Collyer home becomes a perfect example of the uncanny, a true interior city jungle or a city within the city, as mysterious, meandering and dark as the urban geography outside. It has gradually turned into an *unheimlich* "labyrinth of hazardous pathways, full of obstructions and many dead ends. With enough light someone could make his way through the zigzagging corridors of newspaper bales, or find passage by slipping sideways between piles of equipment of one kind or another ...." (Doctorow 158). The initially familiar place thus reflects "the transformation of something that once seemed homely into something decidedly not so," which defines the uncanny in architecture (cf. Sharpe 251).

At a certain point in the plot, Langley decides to bolt and brace the mansion door and close the custom fitted shutters, which leaves them in darkness. Gradually, with their disconnection from the gas, water and

electricity supplies, the brothers' self-reliance becomes complete. So does their wreckage, as their living conditions start deteriorating more and more. Their relationship with the world outside also worsens, as the Collyers are derided and attacked by everybody, from the press, to their creditors and their neighbours. They respond with equal aggressiveness, buying some old pistols, reinforcing the bolts on their entrance door and setting up traps against possible intruders. Ironically, the entire house turns into a gigantic trap that, rather than capturing any intruders, will irremediably confine its owners inside.

The Collyers' self-sufficiency is shown to become literally self-destructive – the living resources that their house could provide are nearly exhausted. Finally, the mansion floors collapse under the weight of their accumulated items, killing the two emaciated inhabitants. This last episode of the novel symbolically illustrates the extraordinary volume that the inanimate world of objects has come to attain in the last two centuries. The resulting pressure is what Doctorow investigates in the test tube which the Collyer house represents.

The Collyer house stands in a synecdochic relationship with congested Manhattan but also with the limited space of modern urban dwelling itself. Gathered in large quantities, the very items that marked the nineteenth and twentieth century idea of progress, especially the newspaper but equally the phonograph, the automobile, the typewriter, the computer, etc., are the ones that trigger the house's final implosion. Thus, the plot deals with the fundamental contradiction that progress implies: in a plentiful society such as that of America during industrialism and later, the wasteful remains of overproduction and excessive consumption act against modernity's forward march. The result is a reverse trajectory that denies the very substance of progress, transforming it into regress. The density of waste, its immediacy and its fundamental, heavy *presence* are suggested by the fast way in which it accumulates in Homer and Langley's house.

The fact that material progress is fundamentally regressive is also suggested by the descending line of the plot. The story narrates simultaneously the decline of the house as a physical entity, and the Collyer family's gradual disappearance, while also describing their social

downfall. The trajectory thus traces a move from *riches-to-rags* rather than from rags-to-riches, which repudiates the utopia of the American Dream.

The novel represents a dismissal of the so-called forward march of history and of its continuity, in favour of a look that focuses *backwards* instead, at the material destruction that progress leaves in its trail. Debris is commonly forgotten, hidden, and repressed. Gathering the discarded items that Manhattan has disposed of, Langley temporarily brings them to light. He thus brings to light the indissoluble traces of the city's previous existences, which the metropolis strives to ignore. The novel provides a radical criticism of history and of the idea of progress, which it prefers to see with a backward look.

Views on the Self and on Historicity in the Novel

The Collyer house also stands for the narrow geography of the modern, nineteen and twenty century self, who enjoys possessions and who, in his splendour and singularity, rejects the idea of otherness. "Self-reliance, Langley said, quoting the great American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. We don't need help from anyone. We will keep our own counsel. And defend ourselves. We've got to stand up to the world" (Doctorow 127). What is ironised here are the American pragmatist ideas of self-reliance, trust in the future and optimism, which are shown to have resulted in fierce individualism and isolation in the novel. It was Emerson who argued that "strong individuals can partake of a process of continual renewal and redefinition through 'self-reliance'" (Giles 35), a perspective that *Homer and Langley* implicitly ironizes. The brothers are incapable of "continual renewal and redefinition," although Langley regularly updates his collections of items. The fast succession of commodities in the market is designed with a view to triggering the illusion of perpetual renewal in the buyer. Yet, no such redefinition occurs in the novel, which demonstrates the insubstantial nature of material progress as well as the failure of the metanarrative of the strong individual in the late postmodern paradigm.

What Doctorow equally unmasks here is reason itself: Langley's apparently rational project of neatly classifying quotidian information proves to be just another megalomaniac enterprise similar to many others during the late nineteenth century (the world fairs, winter-gardens, museums, department stores as well as Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris, etc.). The multiplication of objects is grotesque and absurd, leading to entropy, even as production is based on notions of technology and science that implicitly eulogise reason which they see as triumphant. The same contradiction defines the Manhattan Grid itself, whose strictly rational structure often gives birth to spaces that defy reason through saturation, disorder and chaos, spaces where "the fantastic supplants the utilitarian" (Koolhaas 104), such as the Collyer house.

Homer and Langley sets self-reliance and isolation in dialectical contrast to insatiability. It is the tension between stubborn, individualistic autonomy and the ever-aggrandising egos of the industrial and post-industrial societies that leads to gradual self-destruction in the novel. The late Victorian self, proudly self-reliant, enjoying its comfortable domestic privacy, is at the same time fundamentally gluttonous, the latter phenomenon being encouraged by his excessive century itself. In such a context, the self is destined to fast reach self-exhaustion since its auto-sufficient universe becomes asphyxiating and implosive.

What propels the self forward, into a supposedly bright future, is a view of historical progress as innate, coupled with the subject's endless greed. This is what generated the late nineteenth-century optimistic view of universal prosperity, which in fact resulted in colonialism and class disparities, amongst other things. Such a perspective is particularly significant in America, which "has always been a future-oriented country, a country which delights in the fact that it invented itself in the relatively recent past," and where "the distinction between the past and the future can substitute for all the old philosophical distinctions" (Rorty 24). It is the idea of the future that *Homer and Langley* dismisses by its backward look that reveals the destruction left in the path of progress. It is a look that connects material advancement with the cult of the commodity and ultimately with stagnation and decline.

Conclusion

In the novel, the Collyers' amassing of new and discarded objects suggests the presence of a material surplus already surpassing individual needs at the turn of the twentieth century. As Langley quickly loses interest in the items that he acquires, another generation of discarded items rapidly adds to the previous generation, aiming to replace it. It is a fast process of accumulation that refers not only to early capitalism but also to the consumerism characterizing late capitalism. Such an uninterrupted sequence of production and consumption renders objects redundant, altering their use function and instantaneously transforming them into waste. In fact, ephemerality is proved to be a key feature of the modern experience on the whole, when "the most solid objects are made to be broken tomorrow, smashed or shredded or pulverized or dissolved, so they can be recycled or replaced next week, and the whole process can go on again, hopefully forever, in ever more profitable forms" (Berman 99).

Thus, it is the modern process of atomisation that Doctorow reveals in the novel. His analysis contrasts the relatively limited amount of dwelling space in the Collyer house and the accumulation of a material culture that seems to be self-generating, overflowing the individual. Such a "convulsive craving for objects at the level of the private individual" (Baudrillard 48), which strongly connects consumption and waste, is shown to be a major phenomenon both of the nineteenth century and of more recent times. The implication is that progress is slowed down, even denied by the very debris that it generates. Waste counterbalances the material civilization, annihilating its benefits and questioning its forward trajectory.

Together with industrial technology and in connection with it, what comes under attack in the novel is equally the modern individual. Insatiable, endlessly possessive and arrogantly rational, the individual is the key instigator of both unlimited production and consumption. Both these phenomena are the direct consequence of the self's ceaseless desire and greed. The corresponding symbol in the novel is the barricaded Collyer house as a limited type of space which the aggrandising ego fills

beyond the limits of the abode. Confident self-reliance characterizes Manhattan itself. It is Manhattan's dividing Grid structure that encourages the formation of cell-like dwelling units suggestive of seclusion and egotism. In the novel, self-reliance is represented through the metaphorical darkness of Homer's blindness and of the barricaded house whose shutters are locked and then blackened. The autonomous subject becomes self-destructive, asphyxiated as it is by its own world of endless possessions that turn deadly. Auto-sufficiency, which by definition fails to offer any significant place to otherness, is connected to America itself through the direct evocation of Emerson's thought. While being also an implicit criticism of Manhattan seen as a proud and selfish type of space, *Homer and Langley* is simultaneously a larger, corrosive attack on the excessive capitalist subject and its universe.

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