

On Garbage

John Scanlan



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REAKTION BOOKS

To Rebekah Sterling
May your 'missing stuff' never become garbage.

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Garbage can overflowing with 'filth' (discarded pornographic literature), Las Vegas Strip, 2000.

Preface

'Why garbage?' is a question that is frequently asked when I mention this project to friends or colleagues. Just as common as this reaction is the assumption that I must be studying 'the garbage problem', perhaps as part of some greater ecological or environmental concern. Although the book presents a perspective on garbage that will be of interest to those concerned with environmental (and other) wastes, the origin of my interest in this area, and the subsequent development of the project, has a more unusual history. In 1999 I had been doing a lot of thinking about chance, and specifically about the experience of chance within the context of Reason or, even, what is taken to be *reasonable*. What I had come to realize was that reason (our intellectual means of organizing the world we experience) actually produced chance as the residue or 'uncombinable' aspect of its ceaseless drive to colonize the unknown and confusing.

I was at this time working on my doctoral thesis at the University of Glasgow, and had recently written a large piece on chance and disorder that attempted to pursue this theme in two quite separate areas: in the representation of gambling in literature and culture and in the modernism of Marcel Duchamp and Zürich Dada. Somewhere in these early attempts to understand chance I had used the expression 'chance is merely the rubbish of reason'. However, there was no indication yet that I was going to develop the interest in chance and disorder into a focus on rubbish, or as it would become, garbage. But that changed. One day I had a meeting with my academic supervisors, Harvie Ferguson and Gerda Reith, to explore how I might take my project further. It was felt that my work on chance and disorder up to this point had looked at ideal and aesthetic aspects of the theme of disorder, and that it should attempt to move into a new area that was still connected to the central focus of disorder but could direct the work towards materiality. It was shortly after this that Harvie Ferguson became quite animated and began throwing out these words 'scum',

'filth', 'flotsam', 'the stuff that floats on the top', 'garbage'. Gerda and I sat around and stared blankly for a minute or so, not knowing how to react to this. Almost as an aside to fill the void of silence she said 'there is a group called Garbage . . .' – and then something clicked. 'Trash', I said. 'Have you heard it? The song by the New York Dolls?' I had been listening to the appropriately trashy New York rock'n'rollers, and found myself unable to get the chorus of this song out of my head. Rather more unusually it became clear that this was because it also brought to mind the philosopher Immanuel Kant. The lyric of the song seemed to sum up my understanding of how Kant's notion of a universal and bounded Reason works, in that what Reason values rests squarely on the *disposal* of doubt, error, uselessness, and so on:

Trash, don't pick it up
Don't throw your life away

Or, at least this is what I thought the words were. The singer of the song, David Johansen, spewed out the word 'trash' in a gloriously unrestrained way. It actually sounded more like *traaaeeeuuyusshhhhh*, followed quickly by the rest of the line. But I had misheard it. So beguiled was I by his magnificent rendering of 'trash' that I never got the fact that it was followed by the words 'won't pick it up, don't try to throw my life away'. Was the song *urging* that we should all become trashier? Devote our lives to decadence – or perhaps that we might retreat from trash? This is something I still find perplexing today, but in the end it matters little. Perhaps, after all, it did not echo Kant in suggesting that it was from a kind of disposal that meaning, or value, emerged as that which is retained.

An idea was born, nevertheless (encouraged, no doubt, by something else Harvie Ferguson had reminded me on another occasion – 'Weird is good; as long as it's good weird and not bad weird'). In this book I take this idea of the fundamental importance of disposal and suggest that if we look for connections amongst the variety of hidden, forgotten, thrown away, and residual phenomena that attend life at all times (as the background against which we *make* the world) we might see this habit of separating the valuable from the worthless within a whole tradition of Western ways of thinking about the world, and that rather than providing simply the evidence for some kind of contemporary environmental problem, 'garbage' (in the metaphorical sense of the detached remainder of the things we value) is everywhere.

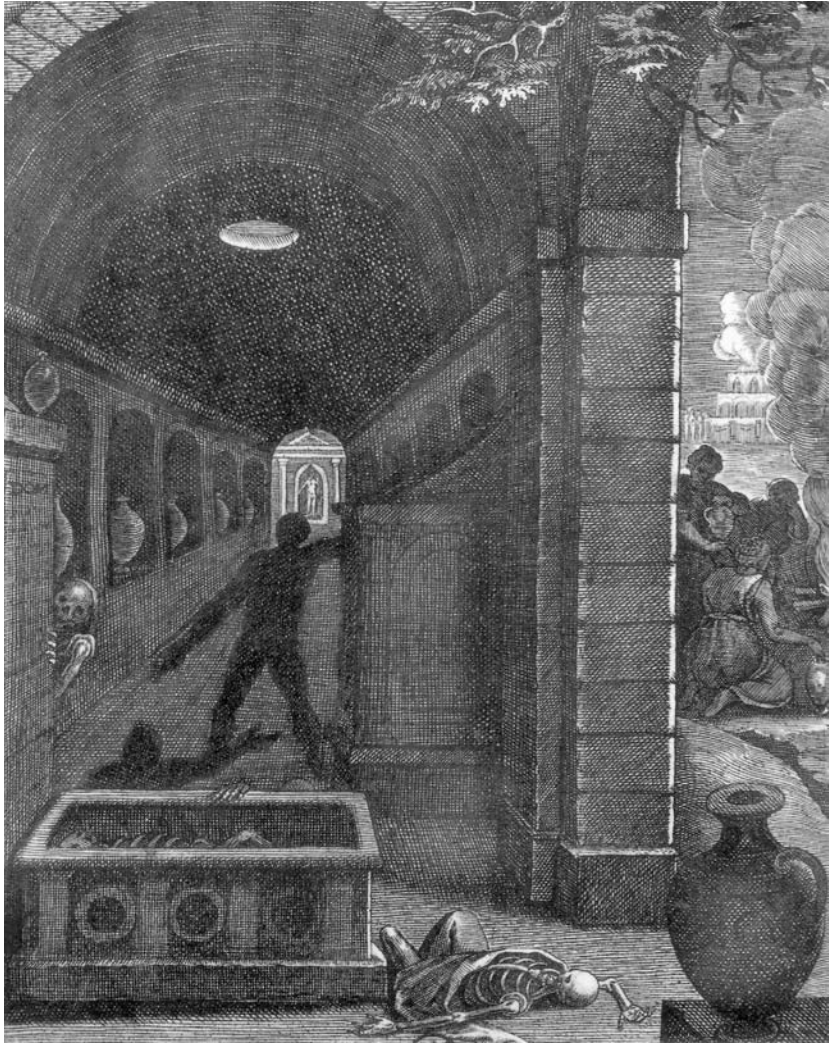
Indeed, our separation from it is the very thing that makes something like a culture possible.

It will also be seen that the creation of garbage results from a more or less imperceptible contest between life and death – because death constitutes the human return to matter, and is in a sense, the ‘garbaging’ of the body. Which is to say death is *that which has to be avoided to maintain life*. From this avoidance of death arise a number of paradoxes. Thus, we see on closer examination that when Western societies attempt to use the accumulated knowledge of the workings of nature to combat death and disease, and to improve health, the very thing that creates the spur to action (death) ends up a century or so later being seen as almost an affront to life, instead of the necessity that no one avoids. Likewise the ‘great cleanup’ of the nineteenth century, which eventually forced food retailers to save food from contaminants and premature wasting by utilizing newly developed packaging and means of storage, paradoxically creates more material garbage, which in turn constitutes part of the greater problem of environmental degradation that we are told threatens life on a far larger scale. What this book does, therefore, is ask us to consider the possibility that the surprising core of all we value results from (and creates ever more) garbage (both the material and the metaphorical). This book, then, might be read as a shadow history of Western culture as a history of disposal, of garbaging.

In chapter One an attempt is made to map the metaphorical terrain of garbage. The reader is warned that the chapter begins with a series of descriptive snapshots. At this stage we still do not see very clearly what garbage is; these snapshots could also be taken as examples of the ways in which we may unwittingly glimpse garbage, but without fully realizing its implications. The point is to show that garbage is everywhere but, curiously, is mostly overlooked in what we take to be valuable from our lived experiences, and crucially, in the ways we (or Reason, this dispersed will to order) organize the world. We then proceed by looking at garbage through a set of notions that symbolize the cut-off and detached remainders of living. It may be objected at times that the language of garbage (which includes commonly associated terms like ‘waste’, ‘rubbish’, ‘trash’, and so on) is sprinkled indiscriminately here and there without proper regard for historical context (or, indeed, for disciplinary subtleties). First of all this would be a false impression, as examples are always related to their context. What we are dealing here is the referential power – and

limitations – of language, of words. The language of garbage – the various terms that point to residues, remainders, and so on – is difficult to pin down. This is for the very good reason that its utterances refer to the excrement of meaning itself. For example, it is when something means nothing *to you* that it becomes ‘filth’, ‘shit’, ‘rubbish’, ‘garbage’, and so on. In any case, the most rudimentary philosophy would advise us that particular words refer to more general concepts, and this becomes clear when we see that whilst the uses of the word garbage have changed over time, all its instances nonetheless retain a general conceptual unity in referring to things, people, or activities that are separated, removed and devalued. The point is that the chiefly metaphorical use of garbage that is employed here is the only way to reveal the power of this word for organizing the other, shadowy, part of life we normally overlook. It is entirely unproductive to say that because ‘garbage’ means something quite different now from what it did in the fifteenth century (when it was imported into English) that to then speak of garbage in a general sense degrades its original meaning. Such an approach would surely entail that we have no legitimate right to depart from its Old French origins because, perhaps, its fifteenth-century English usage degrades *that*. Clearly, the reason why words change across contexts and move between languages is because of their connection to a more conceptual notion that supports the functioning of the word within many and varied contexts. Can one imagine any communication at all where language does not operate in such a fluid and metaphorical manner?

In what follows I attempt to track garbage along a number of thematic lines. Chapter Two, ‘Garbage and Knowledge’, looks at the work of knowledge in cleaning up the conceptual landscape, and here we see that Western metaphysics (which, broadly speaking, effects the separation of the human from the natural), is the great garbager that roots both the experience of the self with reality, and the development of the technological appropriation of nature. Chapter Three, ‘The Aesthetics of Garbage’, considers the variety of residues, rubbish and apparently senseless acts and meaningless language that informed the work of a number of twentieth-century artists. In chapter Four, ‘Garbage Matters’ (as the title implies) we encounter the actual material of physical garbage, and discover the reasons for some of the unusual uses it can be put to. The final chapter – ‘Garbage and the Uncanny’ – explores the experience of garbage in all its forms as illustrating the uncanny reality of an existence that, as history proceeds,



Pierre Daret, 'Man is Nothing But a Bit of Mud', engraving from Marin Le Roy de Gomberville, *La Doctrine des moeurs* (Paris, 1646).

seems to become further separated from its natural origin but that never really manages to fully detach itself, and as a consequence creates a present that is haunted by the spectre of garbage. As a result of such an understanding the environmental concerns that exercise the imagination of the present might be better understood within the context of this spectre of garbage when we can point to the fact that material garbage in contemporary society is the physical and objective counterpart of metaphorical garbage.

In other words, these spectres of garbage serve as a stark reminder of what we really are.