

Editor's Column: The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash; or, Rubbish Ecology

OVER THE SUMMER I STARTED TREKKING PAPERS—STACKS OF them (extra dissertation chapters, my own rough drafts, other people's manuscripts)—from my home to the University of Michigan's recycling bins. One day I brought a massive bag of these materials into the garage, put it on top of my car, and then went inside to do e-mail. Hours later, careening out of my street, I heard a strange noise overhead, as if the car were caught up in the beating of swans' wings. I looked back and saw filaments of papers flying over the car and along the road: missives to the dissertation gods, my own failed prose—now kites kicking in the wind. I pulled over and should have collapsed in despair, since each piece of paper had to be picked up and put away, but all I saw was an ecstasy of trash. A family of four stopped to help me collect the papers. They were so worried about gathering each one and about how I would reorder the sheets once they were collected that I didn't have the heart to say that this paper was useless to me, headed for recycling and not for endless collation in my office.

The artist Jeff Wall presents a scene in one of his light boxes so similar that one might think I'd staged its unconscious repetition—except that I'm known in my family for leaving items on top of my car, including wallets when I pull out of gas stations. Luckily, impossibly, the contents are almost always returned, usually the very same day, as if, thrilled by this vision of potlatch, by these bills and credit cards skating in the air or in the weeds, even the worst Samaritans feel the need to return them.

Wall's photograph, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (fig. 1), lacks its full luster in reproduction, but when lit up it is dazzling—so much so that Peter Galassi (who wrote the introduction to Wall's most recent book of photographs) says that he is “at a loss



FIG. 1

Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993. Transparency in light box, 229 × 377 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

to explain" this picture's beauty (43). Business papers erupt out of a well-dressed man's legal folder with an incomparable lightness of being. Reading the photograph from left to right, we see a distant fellow in a red cap toiling in muddy, orderly cranberry bogs (note the linear white stakes), with a monumental building behind him. A ventilated pipe anchors the foreground on the left. Read as the first figure in a series, this object appears to move through stages of disarray, as if shape-shifting into the line of men to its right. This cratelike object belongs to a landscape of order, of parallel lines vigilantly made, when all of a sudden—whoosh!—papers, neck scarf, coat, trees, leaves, all move from solid to gas, from dull being to effervescent becoming: from system to systemlessness, order to disorder, straight lines to lucent, scattered curves. The leaves shed by the spindly oaks mingle poetically with this rush of paper, while on the upper right a man's hat soars—an antidote to the marching, parallel stolidity of electric lines below. This landscape seems unappealing, and yet as the happy, hatless man looks up, as we see rectangular sheets turn into waste (or triangular paper airplanes: note the one at the horizon insistently white and diagonal against the landscape's horizontal brown), the scene jumps into a paean of joy.

The happy man's face may be especially unearthly because of the weird hybridity of the briefcase-carrying man on the left. Masked by his scarf, turned into a folder head, he becomes a paisley monster spilling the labor of countless hours into the skies. The alternation of business and working-class men who stray across the light box is equally strange, as if for the working classes this flight of papers offers no epiphany.

Wall's photograph is, of course, staged. A wind machine hums out of sight to the left of the camera, and the men who struggle against the wind are posed, poised, in imitation of a nineteenth-century woodcut by Katsushika Hokusai: *Ejiri in Sunshu*, from his famous

Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji (fig. 2). The mingling of papers and leaves, the four figures struggling, the smaller figures in the background, the two spindly trees, the mountain that Wall displaces with a high, fortresslike building: the Japanese image, too, is about the pleasures of loss and trashing—but this pleasure is reserved for the woodblock's audience and not for the figures who toil through this windscape. In contrast, in *A Sudden Gust of Wind* Wall asks one of his actors to share the wind's glee at this spinning and trashing of humanity's cellulose labors.

In this column I will focus on the ways in which an old opposition between nature and culture has been displaced in postmodern art by a preoccupation with trash: the result of weird and commodity-based intermingling. If nature once represented the before (creating culture as child, product, or second nature) and if detritus represented the after (that which was marginalized, repressed, or tossed away), these representations have lost their appeal. We are born into a detritus-strewn world, and the nature that buffets us is never culture's opposite. Instead, it is made by a wind machine—or compacted with refuse, ozone, and mercury: the molecular crush of already mingled matter.

We encounter this mingling in Vik Muniz's giant replica of Caravaggio's *Narcissus*. Muniz's installation, a detail of which appears on the cover, is made from industrial debris. Awash in car batteries, treadless tires, broken fans, rusty sinks—a welter of worthlessness—Narcissus stares into a fresh pool of trash. The texture of his skin and hair is mechanical; he is in love neither with himself nor with nature but with the dregs of consumer narcissism; he sees a reflected subjectivity made out of used stuff. In Caravaggio's painting, Narcissus is envired by earth and water, separated from nature's dark pool (fig. 3). But in Muniz's photograph *Narcissus is his environment*; he looks into and is made out of a junkworld puffed with poisonous particles.



FIG. 2

Katsushika Hokusai,
Ejiri in Sunshu, 1832
 or 1833. Woodcut,
 25.2 × 37.1 cm. Lib.
 of Cong.

Given this toxicity, how does the photograph gain such implausible beauty? Its echo of Caravaggio's composition offers one answer (as if, even in the dump, we can still hear the spurned nymph's lamentation). But the objects constructing this metallic Narcissus are a strong source of pleasure as well. When I visited Muniz's photo at the Museum of Modern Art, two young men standing beside me exclaimed, "There's a battery! There's a chassis!" and I joined in their glee. In *Narcissus, after Caravaggio* we find ourselves in the midst of a queer ecology where the distinction between organism and environment disappears.

In *Ecology without Nature* Timothy Morton insists that we stop romanticizing bios and dispense with nature altogether:

When I suggest that we drop the concept of nature, I am saying that we *really* drop it. . . . If we consider the nontheological sense of na-

ture, the term collapses into *impermanence* and *history*—two ways of saying the same thing. Life-forms are constantly coming and going, mutating and becoming extinct. Biospheres and ecosystems are subject to arising and cessation. Living beings do not form a solid prehistorical, or nonhistorical ground upon which human history plays. But nature is often wheeled out to adjudicate between what is fleeting and what is substantial and permanent. Nature smoothes over uneven history, making its struggles and sufferings illegible. (21)

This is certainly the case in Ovid's retelling of the Narcissus myth, where Narcissus's all-consuming love turns petal blue, while Echo's misery becomes a susurrus. A tradition of Nature's obliterating force runs deep in the Western canon. In contrast, contemporary artists like Muniz refuse to give nature its due. Instead, his Caravaggio represents "the secret of suffering curled up inside the very dimen-



FIG. 3

Caravaggio,
Narcissus, 1597–99?
Oil on canvas, 110 ×
92 cm. Galleria
Nazionale d'Arte
Antica, Rome.

sion of the object” (Morton 161).¹ As Marjorie Levinson comments, “Lacking an irreducible and, as it were, self-perpetuating otherness in nature, structurally guaranteeing the ongoing recognition of the human, our transformative encounters with the physical environment cannot do the subject-making work they once

did. They cannot yield the same dividends” (117). Displacing nature, waste and debris provide these dividends in postmodern art; rubbish becomes a strange vale of soul making and creativity.

The essays in this issue also challenge traditional ways of thinking about nature and

its others. In "Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone" M. Allewaert suggests that William Bartram's *Travels* subverts myths of white agency based on mastery over nature. Bartram's swamp writings summon vegetation-clad Maroons and slaves as militants; his wilderness of "interpenetrating forces" challenges an Enlightenment order and abolishes the divisions between vegetable, animal, and human. In "Those We Don't Speak Of: Indians in *The Village*" we tramp beyond Bartram's swamps to examine a Shaker-like community that retreats into a haunted woodland to escape the incursions of the United States military-industrial complex. The essay's co-authors, Lauren Coats, Matt Cohen, John David Miles, Kinohi Nishikawa, and Rebecca Walsh, argue that in building this false utopia the villagers construct a wilderness that is history euphemized.

FIG. 4

Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978. Transparency in light box, 159 × 234 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The next two essays rehistoricize the binaries subject/object, human/animal, and nature/culture. D. Christopher Gabbard examines the fate of the "natural fool" in "From Idiot Beast to Idiot Sublime: Mental Disability in John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*." Cleland's "simpleton," Good-natured Dick, gains the power to transcend all labels, since his sexuality makes him sublime and provides a route beyond the language of disability as well as the imagined rift between animal and human, able-bodied and disabled. In "Wordsworth and the Ethics of Things" Adam Potkay describes the changing etymology of *things* and locates a Wordsworthian ecosystem without subjects or objects. In "Tintern Abbey" human beings become "things among things" while nature, even as it thinks with or beside the human, is neither abstracted nor personified.

Jonathan Stone's and Michael Collins's essays open species bending into modern



scientism and the satire of modernity. In “Polyphony and the Atomic Age: Bakhtin’s Assimilation of an Einsteinian Universe” science and literary criticism mingle in Stone’s exploration of Bakhtin’s changed relation to Einsteinian physics. How can Dostoevsky, writing in the nineteenth century, already know what Einstein “discovers” in the twentieth? In “The Consent of the Governed in Ishmael Reed’s *The Freelance Pallbearers*” Collins analyzes an oblivious, baby-faced America. In Reed’s novel nature has disappeared, and civilization is made out of shit. HARRY SAM (a dictator who eats the nation’s children and whose resulting diarrhea clogs the nation’s pores) dispenses his wisdom as toy talk, another form of distracting, logorrhea-like waste, which becomes the lubricant of state ideology. We return, once more, to human waste and detritus.² Just as Bartram struggled in the morass of the Florida

wetlands in the eighteenth century, so Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries dwell among sewers and local dumps: the machine graveyards and toxic landfills that plump the heartland. This new swamp sublime suggests one of the reasons for the postmodern turn to a detritus aesthetic.

If waste or rubbish dominates postmodern art, it is not because an artistic preoccupation with detritus is new (see *Our Mutual Friend* or *The Waste Land*). But postmodern detritus has unexpectedly taken on the sublimity that was once associated with nature. Wall’s photographs brim with ne’er-do-wells, derelicts, trashed interiors, dirt, and junk (including the cache of Ralph Ellison’s “invisible man”). One of his first installations is *The Destroyed Room* (fig. 4), an elaborately staged cacophony of wrack and bedroom rubbish loosely modeled on Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus* (fig. 5). In Wall’s



FIG. 5

Eugène Delacroix,
*The Death of
Sardanapalus*, 1827.
Oil on canvas,
392 × 496 cm.
© Louvre, Paris,
France / Giraudon /
The Bridgeman
Art Library.

photograph Sardanapalus changes into a chest of drawers, the horse into a doorway, and the young women (surely they are about to be sacrificed) into slashes in the mattress cover, while one woman's breast becomes a persimmon-orange hat. The ruddiness of Sardanapalus's coverlet oscillates into paint and fiberglass in Wall's wall. The artist first installed this light box in the window of the Nova Gallery in Vancouver so that it looked like a department store window (with all the garish, neon promise of a commercial district) announcing that commodities always turn into trash or that the women who wear these commodities are made furious by (or have been raped because of) the gaze.

In *Diagonal Composition* Wall makes another luminous scene out of near detritus. Here wadded paper, dirty soap, and a scum-

covered counter shine (fig. 6). Looking at the light box itself (as opposed to its reproduction), we could draw an analogy to Vermeer or Velázquez. In Vermeer everything glows, but unlike Wall's concatenations of trash, Vermeer's interiors are bourgeois and very clean. In Wall's photos the patina that Vermeer invents for the bourgeois everyday adheres to dirt, slashed mattresses, and milk aggressively spat on the sidewalk. The liquid in his photograph *Milk* (fig. 7) gathers the same luminous quality as the pearl in Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (fig. 8).³

Briefly perusing the history of what shines, we can say that for the Romantic poets it is nature, or its poetic reincarnation in natural supernaturalism. For Baudelaire and the urbane nineteenth-century French it is the ev-



FIG. 6

Jeff Wall, *Diagonal Composition*, 1993.

Transparency in light box, 40 × 46 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 7

Jeff Wall, *Milk*, 1984. Transparency in light box, 187 × 228.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

eryday sublime. For the moderns it is the past; tradition becomes a source of gleams. But for contemporary writers and visual artists in the West what gleams is more shocking. It is debris, detritus: the mess and odor of trash.

Mark Doty is another practitioner of this waste-based art. In “Tunnel Music” he revisits the racket of nine “black guys” playing steel drums in Times Square: “metal ripped and mauled, / welded and oiled: scoured chemical drums, / torched rims, unnameable disks of chrome.” Are these drums “artifacts of wreck? The end of industry?” This music echoes

[a] century’s failures reworked, bent,
hammered out, struck till their shimmering
tumbles and ricochets from tile walls:
anything dinged, busted or dumped
can be beaten till it sings. (70)

The ruins of Fordism, the economic damage of lost jobs, old modes of production tossed away: this music spins out of the West’s polluting chemicals and a century’s industrial failures.⁴ Its sources are metal creatures that are “dinged, busted or dumped” and yet continue to sing.

If ecology has been defined as the study of organisms and their environments and has evolved to mean environmental preservation or conservation, then rubbish ecology can be defined as the act of saving and savoring debris. In Doty’s “Two Ruined Boats” the narrator describes the *Diane S.*, a wrecked boat covered with “crocus tones, layers and layers / the colors in the old Woolworth’s watercolor boxes” (89). Near the prow he pauses over a jonquil-lettered sign proposing the boat’s repair and a quick jaunt to China:



FIG. 8

Jan Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, c. 1665. Oil on canvas, 44.5 × 39 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague.

I would, myself,
avoid that passage: this decline's
too steep to fix, and my art
could only articulate the sheen,
or chronicle the fashion in which
The world gains luster as it falls apart. (89)

Once again the shattered object becomes luminous, epiphanic. If this seems odd now, it may seem normal in a hundred years. Did anyone ask the Romantics why they were interested in nature? Responding to an Enlightenment certainty about natural laws, their wavering obsessions moved the music of the spheres into the everyday. And yet this “Nature” was never about the thing itself but about the ability of the subject to be moved by what it sees. In the trashy post–World War II world

the artist has a similar response but is moved (sometimes to ecstasy) by serial commodification's throwaways—by trash or debris. The green ecology associated with nature remains fascinating, elusive, charged with metaphysical wonder and a new fragility brought on by global warming. But for a large group of writers and artists junk (and the rhapsode's work of transforming it into art) turns out to be more fascinating. As in Robert Smithson's spiral jetty, visual and verbal artists concoct a passion not just for mud and rock (“Rolled round in earth's diurnal course”) but also for things that have busted or rusted.

In T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* the detritus of industrialism clogs the Thames. Eliot shores up his aesthetic by using fragments from the poetic past, but the rags and soda bottles of his present seem like useless and degraded ephemera. In contrast, the American visual artist Mark Dion spent much of 1999 creating an installation focused on river detritus. He deployed a team of Londoners who

combed the foreshore of the Thames at low tide along two stretches of beach, one near what is now Tate Britain, and the other at the site that would become Tate Modern the following year. The team collected large quantities of items, including clay pipes, shards of delftware, oyster shells and plastic toys. In this display, Dion's findings are meticulously presented in an old-fashioned mahogany cabinet, alongside photographs of the beachcombers and tidal flow charts. Antique items sit together with contemporary ephemera, prompting the viewer to create their own narratives across time and to question assumptions about value and disposability. (“Tate Modern”)

This enshrining of rubbish in a huge curio cabinet, where the seventeenth or eighteenth century might have placed artifacts of what were, for them, raw or naturalistic cultures alongside curiosities of nature, echoes the hypothesis that trash has become a material for enacting the exultations of an older sublime.

The feelings of aesthetic election that used to come from excursions through the Simplon Pass now come from confronting residue.

Let me be particular. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth tramps through the Alps, takes a wrong turn, and learns from a passerby that he has already passed the summit and needs to go down, not up. Instead of reaching for a map, Wordsworth celebrates his paradoxical empowerment and releases himself to middle vision. In a much anthologized epiphany, "Imagination . . . like an unfathered vapour" rises before him and throws off streams of metaphor as if to enwrap "some lonely traveller" (6.592–96). Orphaned in nature, encountering the power of his own brand of longing, the poet discovers a vast oversoul in "the immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decayed, / The stationary blasts of waterfalls" (624–26). In *The Prelude* these oxymorons are emblems, emanations of a mind or a face, "blossoms upon one tree; / Characters of the great Apocalypse" (637–38). This is gorgeous, contradictory verse, in which Wordsworth declares the lineaments of his election as poet.

To discover a budding apocalypse in nature is one thing, but to find it blossoming in a landfill is quite another. In Don DeLillo's *Underworld* Brian Glassic, waste expert and baseball fan, takes a trip entirely unlike Wordsworth's, but he ends up in much the same place. After visiting a purveyor of baseball memorabilia (exhausted objects and ninth-inning pipe dreams), he drives through New Jersey looking for New York City. Everywhere he is assaulted by simulacra; cars, planes, cigarettes, even the people, are twinned by billboards and replicas that make the world seem tight, claustrophobic, autoreferential. And then Glassic repeats Wordsworth's story; he gets lost and stumbles into ecstasy. Missing a turnoff just before Newark Airport, he lands "on a two-lane blacktop that wended uncertainly through cattail mires. He felt a bitey edge of brine in the air and the road bent

and then ended in gravel and weeds." Like Wordsworth's halted traveler, Glassic feels swallowed up, albeit by a seedier nature, and then spit out again. Met with a "monumental, sunset burning in the heights," he "thought he was hallucinating an Arizona butte" (183). In this salty nature, an awkward amalgam of Marlboro country and Sierra Club kitsch, he stumbles upon the telos or endpoint of all simulacra, upon an apocalypse made out of thrown-away things. Instead of beholding an Arizona butte, the Simplon Pass, or Mont Blanc, Brian Glassic finds himself on Staten Island facing the Fresh Kills landfill.

Looking for Nature, Wordsworth finds the mind's grand uncertainties. Looking for New York City, Brian Glassic finds its demise. "It was science fiction and prehistory, garbage arriving twenty-four hours a day, hundreds of workers, vehicles with metal rollers compacting the trash, bucket augers digging vents for methane gas, the gulls diving and crying, a line of snouted trucks sucking in loose litter" (184). Here we have the twentieth century's version of the vast: pig trucks and bucket augers rooting for carbon.

Like Wordsworth in nature, Glassic recovers a sense of authority or election in this eroded and junk-filled environment. A waste consultant, "he saw himself for the first time as a member of an esoteric order, they were adepts and seers, crafting the future, the city planners, the waste managers, the compost technicians, the landscapers would build hanging gardens here, make a park one day out of every kind of used and lost and eroded object of desire" (185).

Not only is the power of waste at the center of contemporary literature, not only does detritus replace nature, but waste managers and garbage haulers are its poets and purveyors, its historians and makers. "We designed and managed landfills," Nick says in *Underworld*:

We were waste brokers. We arranged shipments of hazardous waste across the oceans

of the world. We were the Church Fathers of waste in all its transmutations. I almost mentioned my line of work to [the artist] Klara Sax when we had our talk in the desert. Her own career had been marked at times by her methods of transforming and absorbing junk. But something made me wary. I didn't want her to think I was implying some affinity of effort and perspective. (102)

DeLillo presses the similarity between rubbish collecting and aesthetics:

FIG. 9

Judy Garland, Jack Haley, and Ray Bolger in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

We were waste managers, waste giants, we processed universal waste. Waste has a solemn aura now, an aspect of untouchability. White containers of plutonium waste with



yellow caution tags. Handle carefully. Even the lowest household trash is closely observed. People look at their garbage differently now, seeing every bottle and crushed carton in a planetary context. (88)

Why might detritus replace nature as a means of exploring change, mutability, depth, and the thrill of metaphysical quest?

First, in a world where molecular garbage has infiltrated earth, water, and air, we cannot encounter the natural untouched or uncontaminated by human remains. Trash becomes nature, and nature becomes trash. In Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* entomologists search for a rare butterfly in a metal cemetery crowded with discarded machines from the 1950s and 1960s. F-4 Phantoms, Huey Cobras, Dodges, and Cadillacs crumble "into a fine rusty dust." The butterfly pupates in the vinyl seats of disintegrating Chevrolets, its delicate orange produced by "hydrated ferric oxide, or rusty water" (100). These insects have evolved to feed on metal detritus, as have families of mice with chartreuse coats. They devour chipping, lead-based paint, while new forms of epiphytes cling to disintegrating vehicles and feed on rare, ferrous insects.

Second, in the decades following World War II, the pedigree of rubbish changes as we enter an era where the new is almost instantly obsolete, and objects that would once have been kept and repaired—computers, shoes, toasters, TVs—are replaced as soon as they look old-fashioned or start to break down. If prewar culture celebrates the friendly preservation of mechanical characters like the damaged Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* (fig. 9), in late-twentieth-century films we witness the programmed death of cyborgs in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (fig. 10) or Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.* America shifts from a culture of maintenance to a culture of discards.⁵

For a culture of discards to displace a culture of maintenance in late capitalism is not so surprising. But in an economy where recycling



FIG. 10

Rutger Hauer in
Blade Runner (1982).



and the transformation of trash into raw materials is paramount, it does seem surprising that art takes such pleasure in unprocessed debris. As DeLillo says in *Underworld*, “[I]t looked as if something happened in the night to change the rules of what is thinkable” (599).

Given these changing rules, can we distinguish between trash, nature, and culture, which once seemed distinct? A commercial by Waste Management, Inc., shows a huge garbage truck following winding roads through greenery that looks like an old-growth forest; this scene appears both prehistoric and hypertouristic. The driver communes with a flying dove, which condenses the freedom of the forest, a sign of peace, and an echo of extinct passenger pigeons. A voiceover comforts us: “This lush, expansive green does more than

beautify our world. Trees help clean the air of carbon dioxide, a major greenhouse gas. As North America’s largest recycler, last year alone Waste Management recycled enough paper to save over forty-one million trees. . . . Think green. Think Waste Management” (fig. 11). Another Waste Management



FIG. 11

Frame from
a commercial
by Waste
Management, Inc.

commercial shows a landfill turned into a nature preserve with hollows and lakes offering habitat for happy ducks (“Advertisements”). Is this nature, or culture, or waste, or all three?

Earth artists like Smithson preserve the circulation of trash as the residue of culture and nature; for him the terms cease to be separate. As Michael Kimmelman says, *Spiral Jetty* functions like an outdoor sign pointing visitors toward the horizon, “where there is not just nature to look at but also rusting cars and a decrepit pier. An ancient sea and industrial ruin, ‘the site,’ as Smithson wrote, was ‘evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes.’ His fascination was with the grandeur of such industrial decay, from which he came.” James Corner adds that “Smithson was the one who worked with geological processes, crystallization processes, growth processes and also entropy. . . . He didn’t only think of processes as producing something but also as decaying and becoming something else. That’s a very significant insight” (qtd. in Lubow 52).

In *Minima Moralia* Theodor Adorno adds to this category confusion by insisting that nature exists only in the presence of debris. He refuses to be nostalgic about extinct woolly mammoths and other exotica that once stalked the earth. If we yearn for the power of these lost beasts, it is to access a vitality we have sapped from the earth (115–16). For Adorno nature is so striated and circumscribed that it only exists askance, in grubby urban corridors where decay suppurates the edges of the new. As Nick the waste manager says in *Underworld*, “I walk through the house and look at the things we own and feel the odd mortality that clings to every object. The finer and rarer the object, the more lonely it makes me feel, and I don’t know how to account for this” (804). Possessing a surplus that is empty, a plenitude that is already blank: this is the bare life of the commodity. Desire gives the unpurchased object a charge, but once purchased the object drains or

changes from durable to transient. No wonder Derrida’s “trace,” Adorno’s “remainder,” and Žižek’s “das Ding” suggest the leftover as both the undoing of dialectics and the very thing we must address.

Still, if Smithson finds the detritus of culture and decay of nature nearly synonymous and Adorno and Walter Benjamin announce the death of nature, how do we determine which nature has decayed or died? Is it a binary, metanarrative nature that opposes the artificial and depends on a forever metastasizing antagonism between a “natural” world and civilization? Is it the Puritan’s nature: a space inferior to spirit, the infernal wilderness that white Anglo settlers fled into and then fled from? Is it an Enlightenment nature promising an orderly universe, the mistress of laws and theorems and teacher of an ethical humanity? Or is it a post-Darwinian nature in which even the fittest can no longer survive? Have we killed not just nature as matter but also nature as myth or essence, as metaphysical fundament (“a motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things . . . And rolls through all things” [Wordsworth, “Lines,” lines 100–02]): the source of deeply held ideas about human nature? Or does “the death of nature” refer to a cataclysm, to the death of nature as environment and to earth’s sixth extinction?

Fredric Jameson argues that “nature has at last been effectively abolished” from “the wholly built and constructed universe of late capitalism.” Meanwhile, “human praxis—in the degraded form of information . . . —has penetrated older autonomous spheres of culture and even the Unconscious itself, the Utopia of a renewal of perception has no place to go” (121–22). The “whole” of Raymond Williams’s “a whole way of life” is out the door (xviii). Similarly, Adorno insists that “the more purely nature is preserved and transplanted by civilization, the more implacably it is dominated. We can now afford to encompass ever larger natural units, and leave them

apparently intact within our grasp, whereas previously the selecting and taming of particular items bore witness to the difficulty we still had in coping with nature. . . . Only in the irrationality of civilization itself, in the nooks and crannies of the cities . . . can nature be conserved" (115–16). Scientists also have their say: a 1998 survey by the American Museum of Natural History found that "70% of biologists view the present era as part of a mass extinction event," the Holocene extinction, perhaps the fastest such event to have ever occurred. The sociobiologist E. O. Wilson predicted that human destruction of the biosphere was likely to result in extinctions of "one-half of all species in the next 100 years" ("Extinction Event"). Jean-Bernard Ouedraogo adds that colonial predation is a mode of ecological predation. Africa, "which possessed the richest biotopes in the world, has undergone a form of genetic decay, while the West had developed [its own] gene banks from the precious wild varieties" (26).

And here we come to a paradox. Whichever nature is dying, the green world is a disappearing medium highly valued in the West, while debris and rubbish are at the opposite end of the spectrum, the dregs of value. We have learned to view biological ecosystems as scarcity, as environments lost to agricultural and industrial imperialism. Our society creates and then disavows rubbish in excess. Detritus is objects—both natural and artificial—that have reached the end of their life of value. Given this opposition, why should the dominant aesthetic response to trash suggest that we need to revalue it, to soak up its numina, its radioactive glow?

While rubbish ecology and the aestheticization of trash may seem counterintuitive (and at times unethical in a world where brownfields and colossal dumps swallow the poor), artists and architects have embraced the globe's junkyards as their own, often healing them in the process. Peter Latz, a German architect, creates parks celebrating industrial

debris. As Arthur Lubow reported in the *New York Times*, Latz "recognized that the genius loci of a postindustrial park can reside in blast furnaces and drainage ditches, just as for an 18th-century English garden it was found in wooded groves and cascading streams" (48). Latz built Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord in East Germany, inspired by the "industrial rubble of bombed-out Saarland"—first a war-torn and now a deindustrialized zone. This is an amusement park that uses World War II and the waste of industrialism as playing field. For Latz restoring a so-called natural order seemed ludicrous: "this situation is highly artificial. Everyone knows that the cherry trees are not woods, not natural. This place has nothing to do with untouched nature" (51).

Walking through the park with Latz, Lubow felt "a melting away in my mind of the distinction between what is natural and what is artificial. . . . The hills rising above the flat terrain were not volcanic deposits or sedimentary upthrusts: they were heaps of slag, the highly alkaline residue of the iron-making process, on which wild buddleias sprouted and pussy willows had been planted." Hawthorn hedges grow there "'naturally' . . . because they seemed to be resistant to the herbicides that were used for decades to suppress weeds along the railroad tracks" (52).

Why trash now? First, because residue is a way of haunting the commodity. Detritus is the opposite of the commodified object—new, sleek, just off the assembly line, already losing its value as we walk out the store. Trash has a history, about the object as it is individuated and the object as it decays or enters entropy.⁶ In Doty's "A Letter from the Coast" the poet watches Provincetown become a commodity paradise for gay men. In "a veritable cyclone / of gowns and wigs" and rooms full of glitter, everyone dreams of crossing over, accoutred with dresses, seed-pearl veils, and show-girl accessories. When a hurricane threatens, a man hauls a boat named *Desire* onto the shore. Afterward the narrator, snug and

philosophical, uses the storm's sediment to meditate on the desires of our era:

The law of the tide is accumulation, *More*,
and our days here are layered detail,
the shore's grand mosaic of detritus:

tumbled beach glass, endless bits
of broken china, as if whole nineteenth-
century kitchens
went down in the harbor and lie
scattered

at our feet, the tesserae of Byzantium.
Those syllables sounded all night,
their meaning neither completed nor
exhausted. (33–34)

Baudelaire's everyday comes back as remains, as trash: the sublime never-endingness of spent objects. If old modes of production can be recycled as steel drums, if a wrecked boat gleams as it falls apart, in Doty's "A Letter from the Coast" bits wasted by the Industrial Revolution, by Fordism and post-Fordism, wash up, as if these one-time products are filled with innumerable beauties that become more dazzling as they break apart. Doty envisions a world of bits—where everything made comes back to haunt us. Beyond this, he sees people with their loads of products as archaeological sites. "Our days here are layered detail," our seasons weighted with what we have bought. After World War II, after Vietnam, the speedup of serial commodification has built a world out of more.

Second, trash becomes attractive in rebellion against Enlightenment dialectics. ("Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence," say Adorno and Horkheimer. "It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities" [7].) An excessive interest in detritus corresponds to a refusal of the similar. Trash gains a fine particularity in an explosion of post-1945 literary texts. These visionary scenes of detritus range from the capricious or whimsical, as in Yamashita's evolving plants and animals that feed on the remains of the

military-industrial complex, to the political portrait of the invisible man in the subsub-basement of a New York tenement—his 1,369 lightbulbs strung together with wires culled from a local junk man. These proliferating fantasies may borrow the conventions of realism, as in DeLillo's portrait of the Fresh Kills landfill, or they may be sci-fi and countercultural, as in William Gibson's *Virtual Light*, where the earthquake-torn Bay Bridge becomes a favela of creativity littered with squatter businesses and pilfered lean-tos. In *Virtual Light* the good guys celebrate trash, squalor, and inventive recycling; they detest the bourgeois "upcycled" economy, where growing skyscrapers eat their own rubbish. For Gibson's bridge dwellers, trash space is sacred. The denizens of the destroyed Bay Bridge make do with mainstream culture's leftovers; electricity is pilfered from rich people's air streams. As rain silvers the "scavenged surfaces" of plywood sheets and "broken marble from the walls of forgotten banks," a Japanese anthropologist seats himself at a long counter and looks "toward Oakland, past the haunted island, the wingless carcass of a 747 [that] housed the kitchens of nine Thai restaurants" (70–71). The bridge, a vision of singing wires and ramshackle boxes, simmers with danger and camaraderie. It is light-filled, life-giving, carnivalesque.

Third, trash has a history of moving in and out of the circle of exchange—important to nineteenth-century rag pickers and vendors, hoarded but secretly cast away by the government (despite the war machine's emphasis on salvage) during World War II. As master circulators and connoisseurs of trashed objects, junk men are protagonists in numerous modern or postmodern texts, from Louise Erdrich's *Antelope Wife* to Chester Himes's *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, Julie Alvarez's *Dreaming Cuban*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Lesley Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, and Gibson's *Virtual Light*. Real trash collectors were heroes in the 1960s during the garbage strike that brought Martin Luther King, Jr., to



FIG. 12

National Guard soldiers watch as Memphis sanitation workers strike, Apr. 1968. © Bettmann/Corbis.

Memphis, where he was assassinated (fig. 12). In Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* the orphaned girls' hobo aunt, Sylvie, is a trash collector par excellence. Her parlor fills with empty cans and old bottles, with newspapers and magazines, with remnants of dead swallows and sparrows brought into the house by thirteen hungry cats. "Who would think of . . . sweeping the cobwebs down in a room used for storage of cans and newspapers, things utterly without value? Sylvie kept them . . . because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping" (180). Sylvie shops for entropy:

Sylvie never bought things of the best quality, not because she was close with money . . . but because only the five-and-dime catered to her taste for the fanciful. Lucille ground her teeth when Sylvie set out shopping.

. . . Ruffles wilted, sequins fell, satin was impossible to clean. None of the little el-

egances that Sylvie brought home for us was to be allowed its season. Sylvie, on her side, inhabited a millennial present. To her the deteriorations of things were always a fresh surprise, a disappointment not to be dwelt on. However a day's or week's use might have maimed the velvet bows and plastic belts, the atomizers and gilt dresser sets, the scalloped nylon gloves and angora-trimmed anklets, Sylvie always brought us treasures. (93–94)

In this struggle to maintain the beauty of uselessness, Sylvie and Ruthie try to burn down their house and run away from the disapproving fathers of Fingerbone. They want the domestic, detritus-filled world to collapse in flames, to be made, like the sled in *Citizen Kane*, into luminous trash.

Fourth and finally, scenes of waste and detritus dominate texts because our epistemologies are shifting. Morton plays with these epistemologies in *Ecology without Nature*. He

argues that fantasies of nature as “beautiful soul” must give way to an embrace of the toxic: “Instead of trying to pull the world out of the mud, we could jump down into the mud . . . ecological criticism must politicize the aesthetic. We choose this poisoned ground. We will be equal to this senseless actuality. Ecology may be without nature. But it is not without us” (205). I have been arguing that the binary trash/culture has become more ethically charged and aesthetically interesting than the binary nature/culture. In a world where nature is dominated, polluted, pocketed, ecotouristed, warming, melting, bleaching, dissipating, and fleeing toward the poles—detritus is both its curse and its alternative. Trash is the becoming natural of culture, what culture, eating nature, tries to cast away. In the midst of simulacra, it is also a substance in which we can encounter decay and mortality. In *Underworld* even the sublime recycling machines cannot discipline the dangerous, wavering beauty of our carbon footprints:

Brightness streams from skylights down to the floor of the shed, falling from the tall machines with a numinous flow. Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard, look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging. The windows yield a strong broad desert and enormous sky. The landfill across the road is closed now, jammed to capacity, but gas keeps rising from the great earthen berm, methane, and it produces a wavering across the land and sky that deepens the aura of sacred work. It is like a fable in the writhing air of some ghost civilization, a shimmer of desert ruin. (809–10)

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NOTES

1. Morton derides a “deep ecology” that “does not respect the natural world as actual contingent beings, but

as standing in for an idea of the natural. Deep ecology goes to extremes on this point, insisting that humans are a viral supplement to an organic whole.” Instead, he argues, we should join other “slimy things” and recognize that “we ourselves are ‘tackily’ made of bits and pieces of stuff. The most ethical act is to love the other precisely in their artificiality, rather than seeking to prove their naturalness and authenticity” (195–96).

2. Human waste and household and industrial rubbish have very different valences. But in a culture where human beings have become walking commodities, where costumes, sports gear, and transportation make people into mobile cyborg logos, I would argue that newspapers and magazines, toaster ovens and computers are shed from homes, bodies, or businesses like so much dandruff. We have become what we buy, and we shed commodity selves as easily (or as complexly) as we shed bits from our biomass.

3. Galassi comments at length on Wall’s homage to Velázquez, Vermeer, and other old masters (28–55).

4. This is reminiscent of the cracked lapis in William Butler Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli,” where imperfection results in a perfect work of art: “Every discoloration of the stone, / Every accidental crack or dent, / Seems a watercourse or an avalanche” (293). The difference is that for Yeats the crack is transformed into meaning, made part of the carving’s mimesis. In contrast, in “Two Ruined Boats” Doty describes a love of the ruined in and for itself.

5. In “What Else Is New” Steven Shapin describes a radically different dynamic in the developing world. He cites John Powell’s *The Survival of the Fitter: Lives of Some African Engineers* (1995), a study of vehicle-repair shops in Ghana, where, Powell explains, as a vehicle imported from the developed world starts to decay, it “is reworked in the local system” until “it reaches a state of apparent equilibrium in which it seems to be maintained indefinitely. . . . It is a condition of maintenance of constant repair.” Shapin adds that the developing world devotes massive energy to “creole” technologies, “an ingenuity that is largely invisible to us only because we happen to live in a low-maintenance, high-throwaway regime” (148).

6. Bill Brown notes in “How to Do Things with Things (a Toy Story),” “Misuse frees objects from the systems to which they’ve been beholden” (953). Objects may suddenly become visible in a trash heap or in trash art, because they have ceased (at least momentarily) to function within an economic apparatus.

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