

## DETRITUS AND LITERATURE

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### Introduction

'Detritus' is a term which refers not only to rubbish or waste: it has a further and chequered history. 'Detritus' also suggests something manufactured which is thrown away. Like 'waste', 'detritus' may refer to anything marginal, dysfunctional or silly ('silly' both in the older meaning of 'useless' and the present sense of 'foolish'). 'Detritus' is of course a rather posh word, the more usual terms, used as expletives, are 'rubbish' and 'junk'. Other terms are rather less polite, and may be used when one wants to signal strong disagreement. 'Rubbish!' is also a one-word sentence: it says that an opinion is inappropriate or downright wrong. If an object is badly made or of poor quality, we might call it 'trashy' or 'rubbishy'. Both 'trash' and 'rubbish' in the sense of 'worthless stuff' appeared in the English language early in the 17th century, whereas 'detritus' is a late 18th century coinage based on Latin or perhaps French; it refers to something rubbed off or left over and fit to be thrown away. The use of 'rubbish' as an introjection is even later, namely Victorian. In contemporary British English it is also used as a verb and means 'to criticize severely': a critic may 'rubbish' an argument. 'Rubbish', then, is a term that serves as a noun, a verb, an adjective and an expletive. Although it seems to be a colloquial rather than a literary word like 'detritus', it deserves attention because it also has poetic and social functions.

'Rubbish' can refer to something simply out of place, like the noun 'dirt'. Thus in the rose garden your rich black earth mixed with leaves and twigs is a precious commodity, but just a few feet away on the drawing room rug it is unwanted dirt. In other words, we class something as 'dirt' or 'rubbish' or 'detritus' because we find it undesirable where it happens to be at the

moment. Mary Douglas has put the matter more forcefully: "there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder." (1970: 3) Rubbish, for instance, can bring a gleam to the eye of the archaeologist, who would be lost without rubbish. For much of what we know about earlier civilisations is gleaned from a careful examination of the detritus they had left.

Rubbish, then, has come to receive an ever-wider application: Pyjamas are not thought to look decorative on the harpsichord (your wife might ask, "what's this rubbish doing here?"), and your flute is out of place if you leave it in the shower stall. One does not do one's drawing in the drawing room - it might make a mess. A sonnet cannot finish with a line in limerick metre, a tragedy is not permitted to end by having the heroine thumb her nose at the audience. The choice and placement of objects, gestures, actions and words, in other words, are subject to what the Romans called the principle of 'aptum' (we have our word 'apt' from 'aptum' - a word or an action is apt if it suitable, if it fits). 'Inept' belongs to the same family, meaning 'unsuitable' or 'not fitting, rather like the German terms 'ungeschickt' or 'unangemessen'. To say 'rubbish!' may be taken as a judgment of ineptitude, as a mild insult, or even as a criminal offence.

### **Detritus and literature**

Gestures and statements, then, like objects, derive their value from concepts of value as opposed to rubbish - in other words, from assumptions about rubbish. The very idea of literary form is based on the assumption that language can be relatively formless, inept and uncouth as well as felicitous and elegant, clumsy as well as polished, barbaric as well as civilised. Without quotidian and unimaginative uses of language, poetry could not be.

This principle of contrast applies to our political world as well: form and discipline become more acceptable under the threat of disorder. The very

idea of literariness, too, depends on our awareness of the less orderly kinds of writing which we choose not to regard as literature. Thus the modern craze for bringing everything into the category of the literary, from a child's earliest scrawling to the morning newspaper, has its downside: as the concept of literature is diluted it comes to be seen as a container for rubbish as well as art: the essence of the literary, namely its literariness, is deposed from the throne that it had long enjoyed. To call the script of a soap opera 'literature' clouds our perception of literary values: polished prose, inspired imagery, perhaps the expectation of transcendence. Such values as these are made recognizable by the ubiquity of rubbishy prose, awkward expressions and outright solecisms. Unfortunately, then, we need and batten on written rubbish; it is essential to the educational enterprise, just as we need evil so as to identify good. Abolish all contrast, 'untune that string' (Ulysses' words in *Troilus and Cressida*), and you cancel the concept of 'literature' in its more usual - perhaps exalted - forms.

Detritus has the function, then, of what has been called 'parergonality' in deconstructivist theory: without the marginal, there is no centre. Without 'ergon' (the Greek word for work) we could not identify - indeed, would be incapable of identifying - the parergonal concept of 'leisure', just as without war 'peace' would be a word without meaning. Right requires left, up makes no sense without down. Our literary terms also tend to come in complementary pairs: they lean on one another, like verse and prose, short story and novel, comedy and tragedy, pot-boiler and masterpiece. Thus written rubbish has an essential poetic function: without it, 'literature' is no longer a standard by which to measure the swelling flood of written production.

But these are not universal truths. In German, for instance, 'Literatur' often as not includes anything written, as the derivation from the Latin, 'litteratura', might suggest (although that term has also carried the connotation of learnedness, literature not as something merely written, but writ-

ten to the highest stylistic/artistic standards). It is significant that in English we have no true equivalents of such German terms as 'Dichtung' or 'Hochliteratur'. These terms seem to be needed because the German term 'Literatur' includes the written rubbish which the English term 'literature' tends to exclude. It is true that according to *Skeat's Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (SOED), 'literature' could also be used, although only colloquially, for 'any printed matter.' A scholar may also speak of 'the literature on Joseph Conrad,' meaning comment and criticism. But these are special uses that carry a degree of contextual markedness; they do not damage the primacy of 'literature' as a verbal art of lasting value.

So poetics needs the concept of rubbish to help us recognize non-rubbish. A culture, says Jonathan Culler, is hardly thinkable without rubbish (Culler 1985). We might say that culture defines its very nature by its peculiar standards of what is *not* wanted, what can be thrown out - whatever cries out to be in a pigeon hole other than the one that it is in. A frying pan is all right in the kitchen - it can positively glow with beauty there. But left on the bed it turns into a sign of slovenliness, a piece of rubbish. There it represents a letting down of our sacred standards of order. It can lead to divorce or even manslaughter.

### **Detritus: From rubble to gift**

Detritus and rubbish can be many things, according to context and the language we are using. The word 'rubbish' comes (according to the SOED) from the Anglo-French term, 'robeux' or 'robeaux'. This is rubble, that is, broken stones no longer fit for building purposes - in other words 'detritus', an amorphous and left-over substance that is useful no longer. Nowadays we have related terms such as 'garbage', 'waste' and 'junk': the first of these tends to refer to kitchen detritus, whereas 'junk' is presumably something manufactured that no longer serves its original purposes, because it no longer looks very good or fails to work and can now be con-

sidered scrap - a sense which the word did not receive until the time of World War I. A similar contradiction of meanings inheres in 'waste': this term is still used in poetic contexts as referring to a desert, a primordial scene, a place not yet organized and enriched into an integral part of civilized space. But it can also mean the very opposite: 'waste' (as in Shakespeare's sonnet 129, "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame") is the detritus that is left over in the process of producing or refining something else.

One might well speculate on possible translations of the terms 'clutter', 'debris', 'dregs', 'detritus', 'dust' (British), 'garbage', 'junk', 'litter', 'offal', 'orts' (British), 'rubbish', 'rubble', 'rummage', 'scrap', and 'waste' into other languages. But a number of these terms seem to reflect the particular assumptions of the cultures that spawned them. Thus, to do them any kind of justice represents a challenge that could be met only by a cross-cultural study - perhaps a dissertation - of its own, which would need to look at regional as well as at transatlantic and Australian variations.

In the world of literature, as in the world of behaviour and sartorial style, the concept of *aptum* is ubiquitous, if not always clearly expressed, indeed, a subterranean presence: obviously a sonnet eschews the limerick foot (the amphibrach), the dirge prefers the spondee to the tripping rhythms of a comic ballad, which is not *apt* in a more serious text. Thus circumstances alter values. And that is a basic belief in detritus theory: there are no principles without their counterparts. Our standards of behaviour would cease to exist if there were no 'misbehaviour; beautiful musical chords are identifiable because of music's potential for discords, if not downright cacophony.

It follows, then, that our sense of order is a matter of the appurtenances of the culture in which we live. There are places in the world where a decent dwelling has a floor of pounded earth, and in our own Western world it was not so long ago that a pub was clean and decent only when it

had sawdust under foot. In some parts of the Orient one sees in many a household a display of little gifts that friends and guests have brought a along, in other parts of the world such gifts are jettisoned or immediately handed on to the charwoman. Here it would be thought rather gauche to ask your acquaintance on next meeting, 'are you using that terra cotta vase that I gave you last year?' So gifts are seen in some cultures as what in Britain are called 'collectibles'; these are bits of detritus thought to have some potential value. In other cultures the mutual giving of presents is an essential cement of the social order (an essential tenet of the Marcel Mauss classic *Essai sur le don* of 1925, translated into English as *The Gift*), and in Eastern Europe gifts are relished, remembered and retained more conscientiously than in the West. In others yet the gift (disparagingly called a 'Mitbringsel' in Germany and Austria) is almost by definition detritus 'in spe'. In some cultures it is a matter of proper behaviour to offer gifts which have an inherent self-destructive quality, consumables like a bunch of flowers, a bottle of wine or a box of chocolates, since these do not encumber the donee with an item which is not suitable for eternal presentation in one's drawing room.

Here there are interesting differences between Western and Eastern Europe as well, differences not explained in the guide books. As Marcel Mauss taught us in his 'Essai', the exchange of gifts is a universal cement of intercultural relations, but the nature of an appropriate gift varies from place to place. It might well be that in areas of plenty, the useless and consumable gift is favoured, like a box of biscuits or a bottle of wine, which, if it is not to the taste of the recipient, can be eaten or drunk and thus eradicated from the household, whereas in a poorer country, something solid, like a tool or picture to be hung on the wall is the gift of choice, the donor thus increasing the visible wealth of the donee.

What Mauss would have thought of gifts as detritus we do not know. For factors such as culture and geography, social class and relative afflu-

ence, affect our sense of what constitutes detritus as opposed to a sensible gift, as anyone working in an international society soon discovers. Americans in Europe, what with their supposed concentration on things, have often been apostrophised as materialists. On the other hand, many an American has been put off by the materialism of 'the' European. This is seen to be the sort of person who honours hand-me-down knickknacks and, from the American point of view, is subject to drawn-out agonies when it comes to throwing out old rubbish - who knows, it might come in handy again one day. One housewife's heirloom is another housewife's rubbish. To keep an old wobbly chair just because grandfather sat in it - what attitude could be more materialistic?

The very concept of culture varies from one country to another: over much of Europe, culture has been seen as a collection of the hand-me-downs which we come to museums to inspect, whereas the tourist from the new world may see them as quaint - or as mere rubbish. The American assumption seems to be that culture is defined by the rate at which the old is supplemented by the new, the innovative, the not-yet-known. Understandably enough, the American, what with a higher standard of living, lives in a throw-away society. By its own lights, this society is not materialist at all: the attachment to 'things' is fleeting. Rubbish is seen as an expendable commodity, and houses, like cars, can be abandoned with a lack of regret that astonishes the European observer. So our views of detritus vary with the nature of our materialism: some of us value the hand-me-down simply because it is old, whereas others consider the hand-me-down chair as a piece of junk, hiding it away in the attic so as better to enjoy the look and the feel of a spanking new plastic-covered chair. Which of these can be classed as the materialist?

Living standards and behaviour are not only defined for us simply in contrasts between our culture as opposed to somebody else's in the Near East or in the Allegheny Mountains. There are generational differences as

well, which are just as likely to lead to misunderstanding or conflict, simply in the attitude to things. Consider the standards of our grandparents as opposed to our own, ours as opposed to those of our children. What was once called a decent upbringing can boil down to a simple set of do's and don'ts that reflect a modern concept of material culture and its associated sense of *aptum*: do put your dirty socks in the hamper, don't leave my compact disks on the floor of the veranda. If I give you a brass pot, I will not expect to see it on your mantel when I next visit you, for it is not a collectible but proto-detritus. In other cultures, the giver of the brass pot may well look for it the moment he sets foot in your house again. For the recipient careless of such gifts, this can be embarrassing.

Some of the modern rules of deportment can be justified on the grounds of thrift and efficiency: compact disks can get stepped on more easily out there on the veranda than in the rack on the shelf; throwing out the knick-knack or brass pot streamlines the household, makes it easier to do without a maid and a butler. In other cultures, however, as Marcel Mauss has shown, the gift can be an essential symbol of friendship and guarantee of peace between neighbouring tribes. Indeed, the function of what in our day is accomplished by carefully worded written treaties was once effected by a ceremonial exchange of gifts.

The generational and cultural differences in attitudes to material objects are emphasized in many of the 'post-colonial' novels of our time, where the one generation is not only older but also Indian or Chinese (the former in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), the latter in Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991)), in both of which the alternative views of what is valuable and what is rubbish are topicalized with comical effect.

### **From rubbish to riches**

Another oddity of detritus is that under some circumstances, it can become valuable - indeed, a form of art. Probably you would be ill-advised

to take an old hay-fork out of the barn and hang it on the wall over the fireplace. That would be inept, not apt. On the other hand, in some cultures, for instance in Britain, you could get away with it. For you can buy such a fork at an antique shop that sells 'bye-gones' - a peculiarly British institution for the commodification of detritus. Bye-gones are artefacts that were once of use in a branch of commerce or farming, but are now replaced by a mass-produced implement. In other words, in Britain you can buy an old hay-rake or a butter-churn and make it out to be a work of art. This is done by calling it a 'collectible,' a term that is hard to translate into French or German. As Michael Thompson has argued 'in extenso', much of what now passes as art has gone a 'progress' via the attic or the barn, then on to the rubbish heap and the junk collector, next to a backyard auction or country house, advertising bye-gones. The next step is a proper auction house such as Christie's in Old Bond Street, and in some cases ultimately the final resting place, a proper museum (see Thompson 1970). As a result it is socially acceptable nowadays to place an eighteenth century navigator's sextant on the hall table, or display an old teddy bear behind glass in a lighted showcase and consider your house to be sufficiently beautified with art. Your second-hand car, too, is no longer simply an old car but an 'old-timer', greatly enhanced in value. Of course some items of detritus remain worthless, but others grow in value and may even become works of art. How can we explain these anomalies?

The rules governing the status of artefacts which become collectible seem to involve the following: you cannot take a can opener or an old plastic bacon turner off the kitchen shelf and proclaim it to be a work of art. The unspoken regulation has it that the object has to be thrown out first, jettisoned as ugly and of no earthly use. A generation or so later, however, your grandson can bring it out, clean it up a little and put it on sale at a flea market. In the meantime, of course, vintage bacon turners have become rare: most people are short-sighted in this regard. Ignorant

of detritus theory, they have thrown their old bacon turners and washboards out. Worse yet, they have taken the rusty car to the dump, forgetting that a few years later, the worthless old car turns into a valuable old-timer; the difference between the former and the latter is due to nothing more than a modicum of foresight and patience as well as space to store what others have thoughtlessly relegated to the scrap heap. What once was assumed to be detritus grows back into respectability: first a left-over, then a collectible, in some cases even a work of art. That goes for 1930s kitchen crockery as for oil lamps and cracked wine jugs excavated from what were the kitchens and outhouses of imperial Roman country houses. Indeed, the archaeologist is often as not a collector of what was thrown into the well or the dung-pit in ages past. Many an ancient civilisation is represented to modern man by nothing but the detritus that has survived in the form of discarded utensils and bits of broken pottery which were preserved because a hapless kitchen maid allowed them to fall into the well.

We have had a similar experience with 'graffiti': first they represented an outrageous intrusion sprayed onto the façade of the public building or the side of the underground train. Then they were recognized as political statements ('we do not accept your narrow-track concept of what constitutes public order'). Finally they became collectibles (consider the rage to get hold of graffito-covered fragments of the Berlin wall). Thus selected graffiti are first of all detritus, then mere mementos of history, subsequently taken to be works of art and thus 'collectible', finally (in some cases) as a form of art which is to be encouraged and worthy of display in a museum. Public money is used to buy cans of spray paint and offer them to the 'illuminati' of graffiti, be they school children or adults, social misfits or recognized artists. What used to be a form of vandalism which rubbished whole tenements and railway bridges, is now elevated, usually

jumping the phase of the 'collectible' or bye-gone, into the realms of civic art.

The question of detritus boils down to a decision about what is merely of marginal use in our society, and therefore expendable, and what is either useful or so thoroughly useless that it becomes art. The useless object becomes useful to its owner once more because its marginality helps define that owner (to 'define' is literally: to make clear, to set the bounds). The object gives its owner status if it represents a specimen of a series not generally available, be it a weathered cartwheel or a dented brass pot.

This shift of focus is related to the principle of 'parergonality' in deconstructive criticism. The parergon (this is a term from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant - we could call it the 'marginal' - what is often overlooked, whereas it has a function 'in potentia', like rubbish) to help us define order, without which art cannot be, or at least will not be recognized as such. Often it is the marginal qualities of a work of art that are of the essence: what we would miss if it were missing, rather as a religion is sometimes characterized by what it condemns: eating pork for the Jew, showing a married woman's face in some Muslim sects, contraception for the Catholic, graven images for the Puritan. The parergon is sometimes more characteristic than the ergon, the thing itself.

### **Conclusion: literature again**

The same may be said of literary works. For instance, it is not the topic of discourse that defines the poem but rather rhyme and rhythm and image and rhetorical high-jinks. It is the marginal characters in the detective story that help define its continuing appeal. It is not the detective himself that gives the work its special quality so much as all those other conventions of the various subgenres of crime-writing: the detective's long-suffering wife, the indispensable 'Watson' or bumbling side-kick, and the impatient district attorney dissatisfied with the speed with which

the police pursue their investigation. Then there is the gun moll, a blowzy blonde, and the obvious corruption of the bourgeoisie, the dumb policeman as opposed to the brilliant amateur, the junior assistant who gets it all wrong, and the hard-boiled detective who rejects all reward because of his heart of gold, etc.

In other words, what might at first seem the incidental detritus in the yard of the detective story, is a set of what in linguistics have come to be called 'recurring partials', like -ing forms and split infinitives; these are seen as repeated elements which may be disregarded or rewarded with intensive study. Recurring partials in detective fiction, for instance, are the evergreen elements, the parergonality of which helps create the aura we enjoy in this particular genre. It is quite possible that we enjoy human beings on something like the same principle. Maybe we can love someone who is downright bad, even despicable, looked at head-on and by the light of day. Nevertheless, we find fetching all those marginal quirks and mannerisms and gestures that a Polaroid snapshot will simply miss. Often as not, it is the parergonality that gets to us, we know not how.

The principle of the parergon has it, then, that the marginal attributes of a thing may be more essential and interesting than its supposed essences - the parergon defines the ergon. In linguistics it is often enough the detritus of language that interests us, like the old plural forms left over in words such as *oxen* and *kine*, or the ghost of "God be with you!" in its present form, "good by!" And in Gothic literature it is the mysterious monk, the ugly Alps the heroine has to get over, the execrable weather, the inexplicable noise outside the window - these together help to create the ambience of the genre, not the silly actions, the black villain and the spotless heroine.

Something of the sort holds for tragedy as well. Often it is said that the essence of tragedy is simply the sad ending. But that is only part of the whole, 'the last straw' which is essential to the genre but also, seen in a

different light, the result of a happenstance, the momentary flash of anger that overcomes King Lear or the touch of poison on the tip of Laertes' rapier, to whose nature such treachery hardly belongs. One parergon of tragedy is the societal ambience (the court and the battle field); another is the frequent failure of communication and knowledge (Hamlet is uncertain whether the ghost is 'real,' Claudius does not know what Hamlet knows, Polonius does not know that Hamlet is failing to pull up his socks because he is pining for his murdered father - not because of his penchant for the fair Ophelia) - as well as elements of pure chance. Also marginal but essential to tragedy is the insensitivity of the hangers-on. The tragedy needs these marginal elements. They create the backdrop and context against which the hero's oh-so-delicate antennae come to be visible, visible to a whole set of parergata of the events on stage, and of the stage appurtenances, including costumes, jewellery and make-up. One such parergon is the spectator who has no part in the action, others include the usher and the girl who sells cardboard tubs of chocolate ice cream in the intermission. We may think of the actors speaking their lines on the stage as the essence of the thing, but the experience of theatre depends on the marginal elements too. These include, of course, ourselves, dressed in dark blue jackets and foulard ties or sitting in silk gowns on upholstered and velvet-covered seats.

If literature itself is an ergon elevated by means of a parergon related to it, then the critic might stumble upon a shocking discovery: secondary literature, otherwise known as explication, critical essay and scholarship, is also a form of detritus. Our commentaries represent the leeches sucking on the juices of poetry, the necessary parasites which feed on primary literature, the parergata which are unthinkable without the ergon itself, the work of literary art. The world of teachers and scholars, then, is responsible for producing the rubbish without which the great plays, poems and novels of the world would not be taught to the next generation. Thus both

the animal and the parasites which feed on it seem to be necessary complements to one another: neither would thrive as they do without their counterparts.

Such considerations as these help to highlight the elements and attractions of detritus theory. Central, perhaps, is the factor of surprise: the theory invites us to take seriously what is normally thought of as foreign to serious discussion, foreign to the study and the lecture hall. Then too, we come to see what is part of the post-structuralist enterprise: again and again we look at something which seemed to be a value 'sui generis' which turns out on a second look to be no such thing: there is no centre without periphery, no defining and central element without the complement of the marginal. The work of art is rather an entity which we would fail to recognise without the penumbra of parergonality, without the margin created by the detritus of the rest of the universe.

We might wish to tidy up the world, to imprison the world of literature between the covers of a single encompassing anthology and 'rubbish' the rest. But the loss of detritus would threaten us with the loss of art itself. Detritus is essential to the circumscription of a civilised and literate society.

#### Note

1. See also the special issue (1994) of the *American Journal of Semiotics* XI # 1/2, devoted to the semiotics of trash.

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