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John Scanlan. *On Garbage.* London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2005. 207 pp. $27.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-86189-222-5.

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Waste goes by many names--debris, garbage, trash, refuse, junk, clutter, offal, rubbish, litter. Yet these terms only apply to human experiences with matter. In the natural world, the idea of waste does not really exist. Instead, all substances are part of the life cycle, ultimately returning to the physical environment in a different form. Although humans are not the only living things to generate waste, they are the only ones to pass judgment on it. In his book, ***Rubbish Theory***, Michael Thompson identifies three categories of objects: the "durable"--an object that increases in value over time; the "transient"--an object that decreases in value and has a finite lifespan; and "rubbish"-- that which has "zero and unchanging value" and usually does not disappear but "continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo."[1] The categories, of course, are somewhat arbitrary, depending on who is making the judgment.

John Scanlan's ***On Garbage*** complements Thompson's work by focusing on the idea of garbage in a similarly esoteric manner. His study is not about the contemporary garbage problem, the inundation of the earth with the rapidly accumulating discards resulting from monumental, albeit not uniform, human consumption. (Americans sadly generate more garbage and refuse than many developing countries combined.) He is interested in perceptions more than landfills, ideas more than trash cans.

Scanlan, a researcher at the AHRB Research Centre for Environmental History at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, tells us that he developed an interest in waste because of some unusual circumstances. (I wonder if anyone turns to the study of waste because of "usual" circumstances?) While working on a doctoral thesis at the University of Glasgow, he had done considerable writing on the issues of chance and disorder, and asserted that "chance is merely the rubbish of reason." Having given substantial attention to the concept of "disorder" within its ideal and aesthetic aspects, his advisors moved him to start thinking about "disorder" in a more material sense. From this point he began to explore the idea of "disposing" or "garbaging," both in material and metaphorical terms.

The chapters in the book suggest an intellectual journey that begins with garbage metaphorics, considers the relationship between garbage and knowledge, shifts to the aesthetics of garbage, then looks at garbage in a material way, and finally collects these ideas altogether into some tentative conclusions. In attempting to "map the metaphorical terrain of garbage," Scanlan admits that the language of garbage is hard to pin down. As leftover matter, garbage is not difficult to understand, but in a more cosmic sense it cannot be regarded as "nothing." Different vantage points produce differing perspectives. Waste can mean improper use; it can be linked to idleness and imperfection. It can also exist between being something and being nothing.

In raising questions about the imprecision of the word "garbage" and the concepts that loiter behind it, Scanlan is raising many intriguing questions about how we identify not only objects but behaviors as well. And by extension, he raises some promising speculation in chapter 2 when he states that "the ways of thinking of the human relation to the world that have been common to Western philosophy, especially in modernity, encourage a blindness to that which doesn't fit" (p. 80). Certitude, therefore, helps in "cleaning up the conceptual landscape," but does little to confront those things that are not so certain. "[N]otions of ambiguity and confusion," he notes, "inform a symbolism of garbage because they actually signal a split in understanding, or a disconnection that leaves us unsure about what things are, or where they belong. It is this that marks them out as garbage" (p. 56).

Chapter 3 turns from language to the visual arts, and is particularly valuable in placing modern art within a context where we can understand its value in the "reassessment of the status of objects" by moving away from representational works to a variety of new forms. That which is so frustrating to the casual museum-goer--"blurring the distinction between artistic materials and object world"--graphically demonstrates the transient status of objects or how objects are transformed by differing perspectives. In this way, chapter 3 is a good complement to chapter 2.

Scanlan is more conventional--at least from a historian's perspective--in chapter 4. Here he focuses on the actual material of physical garbage and the uses to which it is put. He gives attention to William Rathje's Garbage project in Arizona, where students plowed through landfills and household discards as modern Indiana Joneses, not seeking treasure in trash, but attempting to glean social and cultural evidence from the things we consume and the things we throw away. Scanlan makes a point that others have made, that "our identity is so inseparable from what we consume," but adds that what we consume never disappears but "returns eternally, in new forms" (p. 153). This chapter could have been much more powerful with greater attention to key works written by environmental historians and allusions to scholarship focusing on acquisition and consumption, such as David Potter's ***People of Plenty***.[2] Chapter 4, unfortunately, is the weakest chapter of the book and the least original.

Scanlan's intellectual journey turns in chapter 5 to issues of order and disorder, certainty and uncertainty, in cities. Cities can represent life, and the topography of cities can represent an ideal of order. But there is much to life--and to cities--that is variable and uncertain. "Materially, garbage represents the shadow ***object*** world, the left-over of a life, a world, or a dream, created by the voracious speculations of commodity production and consumption. It is thereafter impossible to conceptualize the city without the ghostly presence of ***the something that becomes nothing***--the litter, the droppings" (p. 164, emphasis in original). In the afterword, he reprises this idea by asserting that "[g]arbage is civilization's double--or shadow--from which we flee in order to find the space to live" (p. 179).

These are thoughtful observations, and like so many other ideas in this book, they open us up to reconsidering what garbage represents metaphorically. Yet, ***On Garbage*** seems to do a better job in suggesting the metaphorical power of garbage than connecting the material and the metaphorical in some lucid way. Scanlan gives the impression of having thought through the abstractions represented by the concept of garbage much more thoroughly than its material impact. The bibliography is quite lean on historical and social studies that confront garbage as an environmental issue, a societal problem, or a tangible by-product of consumption. The intimacy between habits of consumption and the practice of rejecting the leftover remnants varies as greatly worldwide as do ideas and perceptions about waste, but the treatment of garbage as material is much more static and less nuanced than his examination of the concept of garbage. The social significance of waste--alluded to but not developed in ***On Garbage***--also is not deeply explored. For example, works such as Donald Reid's ***Paris Sewers and Sewermen*** go to the heart of the social role and circumstance of the waste collector in modern society.[3]

In essence, Scanlan sets out an array of intriguing philosophical issues, but does not successfully connect them to the historical or contemporary world in a tangible way. His curiosity about chance, order, disorder, and garbage result in adding to the discourse begun by Michael Thompson and others, but the research for the book limits its ultimate potential.

Notes

[1]. Michael Thompson, ***Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 7, 9, 45.

[2]. David Morris Potter, ***People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

[3]. Donald Reid, ***Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations*** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).