

Introduction

The topic of this issue is inspired first of all by T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, an iconic poem published in 1922, and by a 20th-century literary and cultural tradition in English dealing with apocalyptic landscapes, dystopian nightmares, chronicles of a present/future world in disarray. Recently the waste land theme has been developed by Zygmunt Bauman in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2003). *Waste Land* is also the name of a 2010 social documentary based on the lives of garbage pickers in Rio de Janeiro, where Vik Muniz creates art out of recycled materials, and of a science fiction video game, set in a post-apocalyptic America.

Although this is a very contemporary cultural question, one should remember that the British colonial past was strengthened by removal of human waste. For instance, the dumping of convicts first in the American colonies and later, after their independence, to Australia, where about 140,000 criminals were literally dumped to an antipodean world in the first half of the 19th century.

In the new millennium, man-made waste pollutes Planet Earth in a number of dangerous ways, suffice it to mention the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, or The Trash Vortex, an "island" of trash built by the waste of the great urban spaces of the world. Located near the Midway Atoll, the size of Texas, and progressively expanding, the tonnes of marine debris, containing non-biodegradable plastic, are contaminating the waters, endangering marine life and birds, and thus human life.

Nowadays, waste plays an intriguing role in the contemporary Western consciousness in an age in which eco-narratives increasingly denounce the collapse of the natural order and engage with a sustainable response to the wasting of human beings and of natural resources. Waste generates an ethics of responsibility based on the probing of the evil deeds of industrial and technological civilizations.

In the age of consumerism, descriptions of the environment littered by human activities and man-made objects keep reappearing throughout literature. One of the most emblematic examples of a yard transformed into a dump can be found in a collection of short stories by Alice Munro entitled *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*:

She looked out from the shade at all the things that were around the yard.

A dented delivery truck with both headlights gone and the name on the side painted out. A baby's stroller that the dogs had chewed the seat out of, a load of firewood dumped but not stacked, a pile of huge tires, a great number

of plastic jugs and some oil cans and pieces of old lumber and a couple of orange plastic tarpaulins crumpled up by the wall of the shed. In the shed itself there was a heavy GM truck and a small beat-up Mazda truck and a garden tractor, as well as implements whole or broken and loose wheels, handles, rods that would be useful or not useful depending on the uses you could imagine. What a lot of things people could find themselves in charge of. As she had been in charge of all those photographs, official letters, minutes of meetings, newspaper clippings, a thousand categories that she had devised and was putting on disk when she had to go into chemo and everything got taken away. It might end up being thrown out. As all this might, if Matt died.¹

¹ Alice Munro, "Floating Bridge", in *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001), 70-71.

To evoke all the junk that sits in backyards and constitute so many domestic wastelands, Munro resorts to a paradox that is worth pondering because of its ethical ramifications. She suggests that we are in charge of discards. She simultaneously highlights the opposite acts of getting rid of objects and of collecting them: those that spill out of indoor domestic enclosures are strewn outdoors around the house for there is no way of discarding the discarded. It keeps popping up again around, outside, beyond the safety of our domestic haunts.

To name discards, Munro resorts to the art of the catalogue based on list making, an art generally considered to belong to the traditional rhetorical devices directly inherited from Antiquity. In epic poetry, the most famous epic catalogue is to be found in Book Two of Homer's *Iliad* with the catalogue of ships about to depart for the city of Troy. One can also think of the list made up of the names of high ranking individuals such as the famous list of the Nereids equally to be found in the *Iliad* (XVII, 29-49).

The poetics of Modernism in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) emphasises the fragmentation and loss of a universal meaning eroding the experience of everyday life. Otherwise, as Virginia Woolf repeats more than once in *Between the Acts* (1941), "scraps, orts and fragments".²

² Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1992), 169, 170, 173, 194.

Instead of providing a mythographic enumeration of characters, or of the boats which transport them, Munro juxtaposes abject objects, the lowest of the low, domestic discards, and she endows them with a mock epic dimension. She transforms the detritus, the waste from our consumer society into the material of her stories and she collects them in a time-honoured poetic form. By so doing, she transforms herself into the figure of the ragman or ragwoman collecting the detritus of society and salvaging what has been spurned.

The figure of the ragman has been the object of a romantic interest which started with Baudelaire writing poems to pay homage to the garbage collectors in Paris in the 19th century. "Le vin des chiffonniers" (The wine of Ragmen) for example is a moving rehabilitation of the down trodden and the outcast who spend their days rummaging through the stench and decomposition of what

nobody wants to pay attention to. In the book he dedicated to the poet, Walter Benjamin highlighted the visionary role played by the humble ragman in terms of his salvaging of the past to provide an understanding of the present. Of the ragman, as Baudelaire described him, Benjamin said:

‘This is a man in charge of picking up the litter of a day in the capital. Everything the big city rejected, everything it lost, everything it spurned, everything it broke, he lists, he collects. He peruses the archives of debauchery, the shambles of discards. He sorts out and his choice is intelligent; he picks up, the way a miser gathers his treasure, the garbage which chewed again by the divinity of Industry will become useful objects or desirable objects.’ This description is nothing but a long metaphor of the poet’s behaviour as Baudelaire’s contemplates it. Whether ragman or poet, discards are dear to their hearts.³

³ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: Un poète lyrique à l’apogée du capitalisme* (Paris: Payot, 2002), 126 [translation ours].

Of course, also 19th-century fiction exploits the figure of the ragman, or the Golden Dustman (Nicodemus Boffin) in Charles Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), in which Victorian culture is plagued, along the banks of the Thames, by huge heaps of trash and worthless objects. Another great writer, Margaret Laurence, re-located the Golden Dustman to the Canadian prairies by creating the humble, but providential character of Christie Logan in *The Diviners* (1975). The scavenger and the foster father of the protagonist, Christie explores the “Nuisance Grounds” in search of individual and family secrets. This garbage collector is endowed with “the gift of the garbage-telling”.⁴

⁴ Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (London: Virago Press, 1989), 61.

Anyhow, we should also bear in mind that in the postmodern novel the figure of the garbage collector can be updated to a waste management executive, as happens with the protagonist Nick Shay in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), a novel centred upon the key issue of garbage in its many forms – consumer waste, nuclear waste, human waste – in an American society busy discarding waste deep in the ground.

Waste deserves not to be discarded but probed into as meticulously as possible. According to Benjamin, discards are the traces through which the metaphysical ragman recomposes the past and glimpses at what has not yet happened. In that sense the ragman is very much akin to the poet: this is a metaphorical equation upon which Baudelaire’s work is grounded.

It is also a metaphorical equation we mean to suggest for this volume which provides an investigation of wastelands across the world from methodological perspectives ranging from eco-linguistics, eco-feminism, ecocriticism, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, visual arts and media studies.

Inspired by Benjamin who elevated the ragman’s gesture to the rank of a sociological methodology, we have searched the rags and detritus from five

continents and provided a wide panorama of wastelands with contributions from Canadian, French and Italian scholars.

The articles here collected are put together following three interrelated key issues: “Human Waste”, “Dumping Grounds” and “Re-habilitation”, which analyse the existence of real and the creation of fictional contemporary wastelands, establishing a debate on possible solutions. They give an account of the loss of humanity and the human waste that is to be found in such diverse places as the megalopolis of the United States (Elena Lamberti), the fictional slums of Carpentaria in Australia, and the real ones in Mumbai in India (Carmen Concilio), or the Olympic Waste in London (Catherine Lanone), or in the backwoods of Canada (Oriana Palusci, Eleonora Sasso), or next to schoolyards in Ontario (Héliane Ventura), or else in the African deforested jungle (Françoise Besson).

These articles bring to the fore the environmental exploitation of nature in connection to the exploitation of racial others such as the poor, robots, and women on far away dystopian planets (Vanessa Leonardi) or they focus on the violence of heteronormativity perpetrated on queer bodies in Jamaica (Emilio Amideo).

They address the environmental question and more specifically the question of the possible creation of waste worlds after such a catastrophe as the 1984 Bhopal disaster (Esterino Adami) as represented in Indian short stories.

These articles investigate geographical waste worlds in literature but also in the visual arts and architecture, focusing on “an ecology of heritage” (Shelley Hornstein). They also question language and perform ecocritical discourse analysis (Mirko Casagrande) or examine the environmental discourse of the UK government (Stefania D’Avanzo).

To the wasting of natural resources and of human/non-human beings, this volume means to oppose the irreducible power of words and of writing back. To waste, it opposes salvaging and the continuance of life: it asserts the necessity to live in order to tell the tale and to transform a dystopian landscape into a new verdant utopia.