



Jetsam on Flotsam: Notes on Material and other Remnants and Residues

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ABSTRACT: In an attempt to open a conversation on the remnant, this essay proceeds as a collection of notes on the following topics:

- 1) Definitions of flotsam and jetsam
- 2) Some famous figures of waste: Defoe, Melville, Twain, myth of Hercules, A.C. Bradley, Trotsky, Walter Benjamin
- 3) Waste in contemporary fiction and media, with readings of some touchstone passages
- 4) Found materials and residues as subjects in the visual arts
- 5) Two final images of flotsam

Underlying the discussion of these particulars are three themes based on common reactions to remnants, waste, trash, flotsam and jetsam: devastation, abjection, and *bricolage*.

KEY WORDS: waste; flotsam; jetsam; devastation; abjection; bricolage



This essay began life as an address to a conference on “the remnant,” or “flotsam.” In a gesture that I hope is in keeping with that topic, what follows offers not a single, unified argument, but rather a collection of brief commentaries on a number of texts and material things related to that topic. Underlying these notes are three themes: devastation of various sorts, physical and emotional; abjection, defined as the casting out of that which is disgusting and the disgust with which we react to the cast out; and *bricolage*, or the use of materials at hand to make something or fulfill some need.

The word “flotsam” most often appears in tandem with “jetsam,” though there is a distinction between them. “Flotsam,” in a literal sense, is (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), “such part of the wreckage of a ship or its cargo as is found floating on the surface of the sea,” (or, some definitions and usages would add, later washed up on shore); or it is “timber, etc., accidentally carried down a river by a flood” (“Flotsam” *OED* 1031). Figuratively, it is also (this time according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*), “anything or anyone that is not considered to be important or useful” (“Flotsam” *Cambridge*): that is, waste, garbage, trash, detritus, effluvia, that which is thrown away, either casually or out of disgust. Jetsam, too, is something thrown away, but in its literal, nautical sense it is thrown away for a very specific purpose. Jetsam, according to the *OED*, is “Goods thrown overboard from a ship in distress in order to lighten the vessel (and afterwards washed ashore)” (1507). It is interesting, given this definition, to think of how many texts—imaginative, scholarly, or otherwise—might qualify as jetsam, thrown out into the world to lighten the load of the author ship.

The more literal, nautical definition of these terms bring to mind three very prominent appearances of literal flotsam in classic literature in English—all of them fitting into the theme of *bricolage*, and all connected with famous narrators. The first is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, whose story pays tribute to the Englishman’s pluck and resilience, as he manages, with the remains of his shipwreck on a desert isle, to construct a world whose values precisely mirror those of the bourgeois, Puritan, imperial world-on-the-rise from which he has been separated. It is the mirroring of those attributes, the capacity to turn a great change into the reiteration of the oppressive same, that makes *Crusoe* to me the least interesting of the three *bricoleurs*. It is also the case that, among those who survive by the remnants of a shipwreck, he is oddly a symbol of privilege: the debris he finds is not random pieces, but the entire ship, wrecked but with much of its contents intact.

My first US literature example involves a more immediately desperate case and features one of the most crucial pieces of floating material in the entire literary corpus. Without it, one of the greatest of American tales might not have been told, for it would have had no fictional teller. Herman Melville’s *Ishmael* is there to introduce himself in the first line of *Moby Dick* only because, as we learn in the book’s last paragraph, he was saved by the sole piece of flotsam that escaped the *Pequod*’s vortex: Queequeg’s coffin (Melville 427). Queequeg, who is *Ishmael*’s best friend (and likely more than that) decides he is going to die, so he orders the making of the coffin; prepares it; inscribes it with the text of his life copied from the tattoos on his flesh; and even sleeps in it. Then, however, he decides not to die of his illness. Once he gets up and casts off



the coffin, it is re-purposed as a replacement for the ship's lost life-buoy. Then Ishmael, the friend, is saved by it. I am intrigued by this object's (accidental) transfer from friend to friend; by its repurposing from vault of death to vessel of life; and also by its inscribed text. That text of one man's life, transferred to another man's, remains unreadable, yet it is indelibly part of the material that maintains the second man's life. One may well be reminded here of Walt Whitman's promise at the end of "Song of Myself," as he departs from the poem, and from us: "You will hardly know who I am or what I mean / But I shall be good health to you nevertheless" (68). This passage, like Queequeg's coffin, signifies the value of another's friendship in spite of the other's unknowability, and both assert or imply the friendship specifically of writer and reader, as well as the healthiness—the life sustaining power—of a text, even despite meaning's inexhaustible obscurity. Here, then, the flotsam is buoyant indeed.

If Ishmael is one of the very greatest first-person narrators in US fiction another, clearly, is Mark Twain's Huck Finn, whose journey on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers is profoundly shaped by the opportunities, and at times the dangers, of flotsam. In chapter seven, while Huck is still his father's prisoner, the river has risen and Huck goes to its edge "with one eye out for pap and t'other one out for what the rise might fetch along" (Twain 37). This divided glance prefigures Huck and Jim's whole voyage, with one eye over their shoulder as they flee dangerous authority, and the other, the eye of the *bricoleur*, out for opportunities improvised from what society has cast off or been unable to contain. Their raft, their true home, comes to them as a precise example of the river version of flotsam ("timber, etc., accidentally carried down a river by a flood" ["Flotsam" *OED* 1031]). Moreover, Huck and Jim—and for that matter Ishmael, and Robison Crusoe as well—are themselves flotsam and jetsam. Ishmael and Huck and Jim are cast-offs or detritus from the wreckage of an imperial self (Captain Ahab) or that of an imperial culture: the society of slavery. If, in these two great works of US fiction, flotsam and jetsam are the salvation of lives on the margin, those lives themselves are the flotsam and jetsam that constitute the American hero and that define his function as witness to devastation.

A fourth, somewhat less obvious invocation of flotsam, again in its river version, takes us back to the earliest narrative I can think of that invokes such matter, this time in a more grossly abject version. I speak of the tale of the fifth labor of Heracles or, in Latin, Hercules: the cleaning of the Augean stables (see "The Augean Stables"). Having completed four tasks worthy of a hero—mainly slaying fierce wild animals—Hercules is assigned a demeaning job of waste management. He is given one day to clean stables that house thousands of cattle and other animals, and that have not been cleaned for 30 years. He solves this Herculean problem by diverting two rivers through the stables, turning cow flop to flotsam, and washing it away. It's an oddly modern tale, in three ways: first, it solves the problem by a large-scale change to the landscape accomplished by human agency; nature's power is technologically harnessed to solve a problem that was itself caused by human activity—by large-scale agriculture. Second, implied by the tale but left untold—as so often consequences of such actions are left untold—is a potential environmental disaster. Think of what this course of events means for everyone and everything that is suddenly downstream of this effluvium. The demi-god hero cleans the stables of the king—but "cleaning" simply means *displacing* the toxic waste, onto land presumably occupied by mere faceless



mortals. From this earliest moment, waste is a problem that can only be managed, not eliminated. Moreover, from this moment on, freedom from waste, a clean or at least less devastated environment, is a class privilege, as it is to this day, and will be even more so in the coming decades.

Finally, in another turn that seems especially timely today, the tale of the Augean stables ends not in a heroic success, but in a contract dispute. When Augeas finds out that Hercules was assigned the task by another king (Eurystheus), Augeas refuses to pay the fee of 10% of his cattle that Hercules had negotiated. Hercules takes Augeas to court and wins, but then when he gets the cattle, Eurystheus refuses to count the task as one of the ten Hercules was bound to complete. Hence in Hercules we get the hero not only as waste manager, but as litigator, suing over the sewer he creates, and as fraud, a double-dipper trying to get paid twice for one job. Moreover, in some versions he actually kills Augeas. Waste manager, polluter, cheat, murderer, this is the Olympian immortal as an earlier incarnation of—Tony Soprano. (Perhaps the livestock involved are actually *Jersey* cows.)

Turning from images of literal flotsam to concepts and metaphors of waste, we may consider three examples from the modern period, each of which invokes or implies the condition of waste as the endpoint of a temporal or historical process. The great Shakespearean critic, A. C. Bradley, more than a century ago identified “the centre of the tragic impression,” its “central feeling” as “the impression of waste” (23). Specifically, he says, tragedy “makes us realise so vividly the worth of that which is wasted” (23). “‘What a piece of work is man,’ we cry; ‘so much more beautiful and so much more terrible than we knew! Why should he be so if this beauty and greatness only tortures itself and throws itself away?’” (23). Here tragedy is the measure of the gap between the intrinsic value of “a piece of work”—that is, “man” (with my apologies for Bradley’s and Shakespeare’s anachronistic sexist language)—between the value of a piece of work and the zero point of that value when the work is thrown away. Perhaps this is why the view of the rubbish pile so often invokes—if not necessarily the tragic combination of pity and fear—then at least the combination of sadness and disgust. Tragedy is concerned specifically with the waste of humanity, but in Bradley’s and Shakespeare’s language it is also a reminder of the loss that is in waste in general—the loss of resources and human intentionality and labor and life that had all gone into the production and use of what is now a mere residue of former vitality. Everything at the dump is a mark of, and an elegy to, some human intention and some human’s labor.

Sadness does *not* seem at play in the trope of “the dustbin of history” to which, Marxist ideology asserts, so much of the past will be assigned by the revolutionary future. The expression was popularized by its use as a taunt, hurled by Leon Trotsky at the Mensheviks as they walked out of the 1917 All-Russian Congress of Soviets: “Go where you belong from now on,” he shouted, “—into the dustbin of history” (qtd. in Healy 225). Since then, the dustbin or ash heap of history has been a place to which those who see themselves as the future—particularly the economic future—have rhetorically consigned their enemies. Doing so, of course, they also implicitly label those enemies and their ideas “rubbish.”



Certainly, this trope expresses what may be a devout wish for history—one would like to see Fascism, for instance, safely relegated to a dump for hazardous waste. One would also like to believe, with Trotsky, that history progresses by throwing off and throwing away that which is superfluous as it builds on that which is necessary or good. Sadly, however, history does not seem to be such a narrative of linear progress. Its dumps all too often become landfills, on which new edifices of horror are built. These days they might be called Trump Towers.

A related, but to my mind more nuanced, Marxist metaphor is found in Walter Benjamin's famous figure of the "angel of history." "His eyes are staring," says Benjamin,

his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 257–58)

The wreckage and debris here invoke the inexorable passage of time, during which whatever was once new decays, leaving only remnants that may recall but cannot renew its use value. In this sense the devastation is simply a *memento mori*. But it is also something much more: wreckage and debris are not just the product of aging. They are, as the passage has it, "what has been smashed," the product of active processes of destruction such as, for instance, shelling and bombing in war. Benjamin himself would become such wreckage: shortly after he completed the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in 1940, he fled from Vichy France to Franco's Spain where, "[i]nformed by the chief of police at the town of Port-Bou on the Franco-Spanish border that he would be turned over to the Gestapo, Benjamin committed suicide" (Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Nonetheless, the passage on the angel of history is not simply born of its immediate circumstances. For a Marxist, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels 14). It seems likely that this is why the angel sees all the wreckage together as the product of "one single catastrophe."

The parable of the angel of history is of a piece with the observation earlier in the *Theses* that

without exception the cultural treasures [. . . that the historian] surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. (Benjamin 256)

History, viewed from the present, is debris or wreckage not only because it is *residual*, as opposed to the dominant present and the emergent future (this well-known pattern of residual, dominant, and emergent is adapted from Raymond Williams 121–27), but also because the residue is the trash of the daily material



exploitation of the masses and their labor. For instance, from the Pyramids onward, all the great buildings that hold the wealth of the king or the church or the state, or of the arts, were built by people who did not share in that wealth to a just degree, and whose lives were supported by those who, more often than not, got even less (think of the pyramid laborer's or cathedral artisan's wife, for example—a figure even more anonymous than Shakespeare's putative sister). In sum, the great pile of debris that is history is the product not merely of time's passage, but of war on the oppressed. The angel of history sees history not in or as its cultural treasures, but in and as its barbaric wreckage.

Postmodern fiction, especially in the US, has made eloquent and significant use of imagery of waste as cultural commentary, as exemplified in, for instance, Thomas Pynchon's classic example of 60s pomo, *The Crying of Lot 49*, where the wreckage of history is made concrete and brought down to its cost for and symbolic value related to individual people. Early in the book, protagonist Oedipa Mass ruminates on her husband Mucho's desperately depressing experience as a used-car salesman,

seeing people poorer than him come in, Negro, Mexican, cracker, a parade seven days a week, bringing the most godawful of trade-ins: motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like [. . .] frame cockeyed, rusty underneath, fender repainted in a shade just off enough to depress the value [. . .] and when the cars were swept out you had to look at the actual residue of these lives, and there was no way of telling what things had been truly refused (when so little he supposed came by that out of fear most of it had to be taken and kept) and what had simply (perhaps tragically) been lost: clipped coupons promising savings of 5 or 10¢, trading stamps, pink flyers advertising specials at the markets, butts, tooth-shy combs, help-wanted ads, Yellow Pages torn from the phone book, rags of old underwear or dresses that already were period costumes, for wiping your own breath off the inside of a windshield [. . .] all the bits and pieces coated uniformly, like a salad of despair, in a gray dressing of ash, condensed exhaust, dust, body wastes—it made him sick to look, but he had to look. (Pynchon 13–14)

Mucho Mass is of course Spanish for “Much More,” and in the last line of the quoted passage, I would suggest, we are the “much more” for whom he stands. Residues, waste, garbage, ashes, dumps in postmodern fiction as in contemporary life are something at which we have to look, even though it may, or should, sicken us to do so.

The detritus here is that of the poor, and of racial (“Negro”) and ethnic (Mexican) minorities. Interestingly, five of the eight items swept out of the car are written texts, and these have in common that they imply a hope for or an effort at economic activity and betterment—sometimes through thrift (clipped coupons, trading stamps, advertisement of sales)—in other instances through job-seeking (the want-ads and perhaps the Yellow Pages). Two of the other items, the comb and the rags of clothing, may perhaps signify lost hopes and plans for seeking erotic connection, or at least for making the publicly presented self more desirable.

If in this passage information becomes detritus, in another, even sadder one in *Lot 49*, detritus becomes information. Middle-class Oedipa Mass, wandering the streets of mid-sixties San Francisco, eventually comes to a slum area where she has an encounter with an old, derelict sailor, and asks herself



what rich soils had he turned, what concentric planets uncovered? What voices overheard, flinders of luminescent gods glimpsed among the wallpaper's stained foliage, candlestubs lit to rotate in the air above him, prefiguring the cigarette he or a friend must fall asleep someday smoking, thus to end among the flaming, secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that could keep vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, like the memory bank to a computer of the lost? (126)

When she helps him to his flophouse bedroom, she actually sees the mattress, and further contemplates

massive destructions of information. So when this mattress flared up around the sailor, in his Viking's funeral: the stored, coded years of uselessness, early death, self-harrowing, the sure decay of hope, the set of all men who had slept on it, whatever their lives had been, would truly cease to be, forever, when the mattress burned. She stared at it in wonder. (128)

This mattress is abject in the extreme, stained as it is with the gross bodily secretions of men who are themselves abject figures. Yet even this object is, as all detritus is, a storehouse of information. Residues are traces; privies and dumps, as any archeologist will tell you, are archives. They store stories.

If the stories told by the residues of the marginal in *Lot 49* are tales of loss—including the loss of those very tales—the middle-class garbage of Jack Gladney's trash compactor bag in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* has something different to say. Preparing to search the bag for pills to relieve his fear of death, Jack finds

an oozing cube of semi-mangled cans, clothes hangers, animal bones and other refuse. The bottles were broken, the cartons flat. Product colors [presumably on the bottles and cartons] were undiminished in brightness and intensity. Fats, juices, and heavy sludges seeped through layers of pressed vegetable matter. (DeLillo 258).

It is as though fossil fuels are being produced right in his home kitchen. Seeing all of this, he "felt like an archaeologist about to sift through a finding of tool fragments and assorted cave trash" (259).

One effect here is to suggest how quickly the domestic trash of consumer culture becomes ancient residues. Before a week's trash is even emptied, it becomes, effectively, pre-historic in all but its gaudy color. So when Jack opens the bag, he reports that "[t]he full stench hit me with shocking force." He goes on to say, "I took the bag out to the garage and emptied it. The compressed bulk sat there like an ironic modern sculpture, massive, squat, mocking" (259). As he picks through it, "item by item, mass by shapeless mass," he feels

guilty, a violator of privacy, uncovering intimate and perhaps shameful secrets. [. . .] like a household spy [. . .] Is garbage so private? Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioral ruts? I found crayon drawings of a figure with full breasts and male genitals. There was a long piece of twine that contained a series of knots and loops [. . .] Some kind of occult geometry or symbolic festoon of obsessions. I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? I came across a horrible clotted mass of hair, soap, ear swabs, crushed roaches, flip-top rings, sterile pads smeared with pus and bacon fat, strands of frayed



dental floss, fragments of ballpoint refills, toothpicks still displaying bits of impaled food. (259)

And to top it all off, “There was a pair of shredded undershorts with lipstick markings, perhaps a memento of the Grayview Motel” (259), and hence of Jack’s wife’s desperate and sordid affair with the man who created the pills that purportedly (though not really) relieve the fear of death.

Unlike the signs of lost hope in Pynchon’s used car, the traces here are puzzling remnants of eruptions from the unconscious, expressions of what Linda Zwinger has called “the messiness of desire” (134), compounded with the waste of “sanitary” products and the abject residues of the body. All of these are things that must be discarded to preserve the illusions of simple, “healthy” heteronormativity and fidelity, and bourgeois tidiness. All are part of what John Frow calls “the heart of domesticity” (190). Jack’s garbage marks the return of the repressed, the privy as the end of privacy, and the re-injection of abjection. It reminds us not only of the mythic nature of bourgeois values, but of their real imposition on the environment, and even their potential toxicity.

Richard Powers mines a related seam in *Gain*, his excellent novel about the history and the current state—or universe—of capitalism. Towards the end of it, he pauses for a three-page catalogue and description of the elements and processes that together constitute a disposable camera and its packaging. Conveniently for our purposes today, at the end of the passage the whole thing is thrown away, [f]or,” we are told,

the entire engineering magnificence was *designed* to be pitched. Labor, materials, assembly, shipping, sales, markups and overheads, insurance, international tariffs—the whole prodigious creation costs less than ten dollars [. . .] Such a wonder has to be cheap enough to jettison [. . .] Buy it; shoot it; toss it (348, emphasis added).

One specific paragraph of this catalogue adds significantly to our understanding of waste in the age of global capitalism:

The camera jacket says: “Made In China With Film From Italy Or Germany.” The film itself accretes from more places on the map than emulsion can cover. Silver halide, metal salts, dye couplers, bleach fixatives, ingredients gathered from Russia, Arizona, Brazil, and underwater seabeds, before being decanted in the former DDR. Camera in a pouch, the true multinational: trees from the Pacific Northwest and the southeastern coastal plain. Straw and recovered wood scrap from Canada. Synthetic adhesive from Korea. Bauxite from Australia, Jamaica, Guinea. Oil from the Gulf of Mexico or North Sea Brent Blend, turned to plastic in the Republic of China before being shipped to its mortal enemies on the Mainland for molding. Cinnabar from Spain. Nickel and titanium from South Africa. Flash elements stamped in Malaysia, electronics in Singapore. Design and color transfers drawn up in New York. Assembled and shipped from that address in California by a merchant fleet beyond description, completing the most heavily choreographed conference in existence. (347–48)

The use of the word “conference” in the last line invokes word’s Latin root, “conferre,” which means “bring together.” This astonishingly complex bringing together immediately suggests all of the following:



- 1) the truly *global* nature of the global capitalism that this product symbolizes;
- 2) the complexity—and the astonishingly low cost—of international and intercontinental and even interhemispheric shipping, which makes this globalism possible in manufacturing;
- 3) the global exploitation of labor and the inequity of wages—so great as to make all that shipping cost-effective;
- 4) the history of colonialism, as most of the raw materials come from post-colonial sites, and most of the most potentially toxic labor—mining, heavy chemical processes—takes place there.
- 5) the implicit but constantly suppressed environmental costs of such complex production and its division of labor across oceans.

Gain is, in its entirety, a novel of eco-criticism. One of the points it makes here is that capitalism finds ways to neutralize the effects on its bottom line of the waste both inherent in its activity and generated as its end product—including the waste that the product itself is intentionally designed to become. The bottom line is that, under capitalism, the destruction of the environment is part of the system, and it will be so unless or until a) it can be made unprofitable or b) that system comes to an end, either through a political change on a scale currently hard to imagine, or through ecological apocalypse. Reflecting on these possibilities, the powerfully political British novelist, China Miéville points out that “It’s a left cliché to pronounce that these days it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Miéville, “Limits”).

As the ecological apocalypse becomes a less and less irrational fear, we might note, as Miéville does, “the deluge of films of deluge, the piling up, like debris under Benjamin’s angel of history, of texts about the piling up of debris” (Miéville, “Limits”). For a few examples: Miéville’s own novel *Perdido Street Station* makes use of a dump as a setting. In the television serial *The Walking Dead*, the fear of the zombies, themselves a form of ambulatory detritus, leads one survivor group, the Scavengers (introduced in season seven), to live in the dump for protection. In David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, a whole region of the US—beautiful northern New England and upstate New York and adjacent Southern Canada—has become “the Great Concavity,” a waste dump so toxic that the two countries are in conflict as to which of them must accept it as their possession (see David Foster Wallace 402–07 and *passim*). In Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and in the film based on it, the landscape is so wasted that apparently nothing grows any more—there is no *produce*—so the few human survivors live by scavenging the ever-diminishing stock of what can be salvaged from the wreck of the planet. All of these are projections of an apocalyptic but all-too-possible future, in which we may all undergo what Walter Moser calls “the transition from Homo Sapiens into Homo Detritus, a human and social refuse living in a world of refuse created by him” (Moser). But these are also, for more of our fellow human beings than we care to imagine, images of their present, material lives. For a powerful literary representation of such lives, lives literally in the dump, see Michelle Cliff’s description of life in “the Dungle,” “the dung-heap jungle where people squirmed across mountains of garbage” (32) in her brilliant, depressing novel *No Telephone to Heaven*. See especially the description of children with ringworm and hookworm (32), and the account of the mother’s scavenging in the “trash behind the big hotels [... for] a slice of fruit from someone’s



planter's punch. Pieces of green banana or chocho, cut into scalloped or zigzagged edges, a garnish from a stranger's lobster," or a turkey carcass or "the splintered bones of curried goat, sucked clean" (23). The only difference between this "human and social refuse" and Moser's *homo detritus* is that these people did not create the world, or the system, the law, of the Dungle. Rather, we who do not (yet) live there created it for them.

The denizens of the Dungle are *bricoleurs* as a matter of survival. Their shelters are made

from bits and pieces, findings. Structures crowned with sheets of zinc, the places where the zinc rusted filled with cardboard or newspaper or left to gape. Structures made from lengths of corrugated paper, sheets of corrugated metal. Some enhanced by colored metal signs in places, used as patches, advertising Dragon Stout, Four Aces Cigarettes, Golden Guinea Soap, the People's National Party. But most were not so picturesque[.] (Cliff 31–32)

This improvisation with found materials has a much different connotation when attention shifts from the underclass to the creative class. A literary character who represents the category of *bricoleur* artists is Rubin in William Gibson's futuristic story, "The Winter Market": "Rubin," says Gibson's narrator,

in some way that no one quite understands, is a master, a teacher, what the Japanese call a *sensei*. What he's the master of, really, is garbage, Kipple, refuse, the sea of cast-off goods our century floats on. *Gomi no sensei*. Master of junk. [...] He's like a child, Rubin; he's also worth a lot of money in galleries in Tokyo and Paris. (Gibson 125–26)

From the flood of cast-off goods Rubin produces mechatronically animated sculptures/creatures; at one point we see him in his studio,

wading through ragged cardboard boxes to find the light switch. The boxes are filled with carefully sorted *gomi*: lithium batteries, tantalum capacitors, RF connectors, breadboards, barrier strips, ferroresonant transformers, spools of bus bar wire.... One box is filled with the severed heads of hundreds of Barbie dolls, another with armored industrial safety gauntlets that look like spacesuit gloves. Light floods the room and a sort of Kandinski mantis in snipped and painted tin swings its golfball-size head toward the bright bulb. (Gibson 134, ellipsis in original)

Gomi is Rubin's "medium," and not only for art: it is "the air he breathes, something he's swum in all his life" (127).

Rubin's creatures are the fictional descendants of the work of many artists, among them some of the very greatest of the modern and postmodern periods. Consider, among the most famous examples, the art-history-making readymades of Marcel Duchamp and combines of Robert Rauschenberg; the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock that have nails, cigarette butts, buttons, keys, and other debris worked into their thick impasto; the often grandly scaled sculptures of Louise Nevelson (made from found wooden architectural details and other debris), or of John Chamberlain (made from car parts and other salvaged metals), or of Arman (made from all kinds of "stuff"). An example from a younger generation is Tracy Emin's *My Bed* (1998) which, in Ian Wallace's description, "consists of the artist's freshly slept-in bed, with crumpled



pillows, disheveled sheets, and dirty tissues and other junk (including sanitary items, prophylactics, and liquor bottles) strewn around the footboard" (Ian Wallace).

The work of *bricoleur* artists suggests a range of aesthetic ideas. At one end, perhaps, is Nevelson, whose career was made from elevating discarded but often shapely remnants into ordered and beautiful patterns. Her work carries traces of a High Modernist aesthetic, in which the artist's task is to bring form and order to the chaos of modern life. At another extreme we might place the photographs of cigarette butts and other refuse on the street by the great US photographer Walker Evans. In these pictures the eye is turned to detritus *in situ*, unformed by anything but the camera itself. The photographs express a sort of radically democratic idea of what is worthy of attention—an aesthetic in which, as Kelly Everding, poet and Art Director of *Rain Taxi*, has written: "everything was fair game, everything treated with a fierce equality" (Everding). Somewhere in between we might place Irving Penn's much more highly aestheticized photographs of arranged and staged cigarette butts, or the work of Rauschenberg and John Chamberlain, where detritus continues to show its derelict quality yet is also transformed into energetic, often colorful and joyous abstractions. For more than a century the attention to and use of such materials has played a major role in the efforts of artists to break down the boundaries between high art and popular material culture, and between art and life. In sum, the history of modern and postmodern art is deeply imbricated with the history of waste and trash.

By way of concluding, however, I turn back to flotsam that marks not creativity, but devastation and abjection, for two more images that may serve to invoke two of the greatest issues of our time: the crises of the environment and of the human other (the migrants). The first is from Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, an example of the projections of apocalyptic futures that are becoming more and more prevalent. The book's sole survivor from a world like ours is the central character and protagonist, Snowman, who looks, and to some extent lives, like Robinson Crusoe. There is also a group of innocents (known as the children of Crake), who live on the beach and somewhat revere Snowman. In chapter two, called "flotsam," they collect flotsam from the beach and bring it to Snowman to ask him to explain it:

Opening up their sack, the children chorus, "Oh Snowman, what have we found?" They lift out the objects, hold them up as if offering them for sale: a hubcap, a piano key, a chunk of pale-green pop bottle smoothed by the ocean. A plastic BlyssPlus container, empty; a ChickieNobs Bucket O'Nubbins, ditto. A computer mouse, or the busted remains of one, with a long wiry tail. Snowman feels like weeping. What can he tell them? There's no way of explaining to them what these curious items are, or were. But surely they've guessed what he'll say, because it's always the same. "These are things from before." (6–7)

Here, in an exceptionally sad and disturbing passage, Atwood imagines a future so apocalyptically different and technologically diminished "from before" that the detritus of a world of uses has, for all but Snowman, lost its link to its own past. It marks not the specific pasts of the objects' intentions and functions and meanings, but only a time when such things *had* those attributes. This is absolute waste—except for Snowman, who must be there as the registrant of loss. Imagine how it would feel to be the last one alive who knew what *things meant*.



My ultimate example of flotsam is not literary or fictional, but photographic and documentary—one of those pictures that are worth a thousand words of grief and rage. It represents what English-speakers call “the elephant in the room”—the huge presence of which we are all aware, yet which we ignore as best we can in our daily lives, as this text too has done, until now. It is this photo by Nilüfer Demir:



Fig.1 Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Kurdish refugee from Syria, dead on a Turkish beach. Source: <http://www.patrickcomerford.com/2015/12/2015-year-symbolised-by-tragic-death-of.html>

Aylan (or Alan) Kurdi drowned, along with his mother, his older brother, and five others, including two Iraqi children, when their raft capsized in the Mediterranean.

I have only two observations to make regarding this image. First: it is clear that we live in an age, the Anthropocene (or should we call it the anthropo-obscene?), that has produced an enormous ecological crisis. One of the changes to which this crisis implores us, and should impel us, is the repudiation of anthropocentrism. That impulse has led to a great deal of interesting and valuable work oriented not only toward other sentient creatures, but toward objects. That said, however, I find myself resistant to any theory that would claim a fundamental ontological equivalence, or an equivalence of value between, on the one hand, the object in the above photo and, on the other, the subject of this one (uploaded online by his aunt, Tima Kurdi):



Fig. 2 Aylan Kurdi. 3 years old. Kurdish child from Kobani Syria (2015). Source: <http://limphoto.weebly.com/photo-of-the-day.html>

My second point goes back to the distinction between flotsam and jetsam. In a literal sense, the child's corpse washed up on the beach is simply flotsam. But in a figurative one, the boy himself is jetsam—something thrown off the possibly sinking ship of the “first world” to lighten our load. As such, he stands for all the subjects around the world whom we are willing, for our own survival and comfort and wealth, to jettison, to discard, to commit to the wreckage, or the trash compactor, of our moment in history. It is to the memory of the particular, living boy Alan Kurdi, and to the devastating meaning of his body as a signifier, that I dedicate this essay.

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