

Derek Mahon

**OLYMPIA  
AND THE  
INTERNET**



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## *Rubbish Theory*

We hear of a sea of rubbish, hundreds of miles wide, in the Pacific. Inquire further and you find this is only one of several in the oceans, albeit the largest, and is actually composed of two, the interacting East and West Pacific Gyres that combine to make up the Great Pacific Garbage Patch north of Hawaii. It sounds benign, like ‘cabbage patch’, but is quite the opposite. Rotating slowly in a clockwise direction, it draws in plastics since these aren’t biodegradable; the rest sinks to the sea floor to join an even bigger, underwater rubbish dump. Most of this debris comes from land-based activities, the rest from shipping and offshore oil rigs. Non-biodegradable but *photodegradable*, plastics are reduced by sunlight and gradually break down into tiny pieces resembling marine organisms, often mistaken for food by birds and fish. When they swallow these non-nutrients they swallow, too, toxic chemicals the plastic has absorbed, and these enter the food chain. The size of the zone is hard to determine since the plastic broth isn’t evident from the air, but estimates range from an area the size of Texas to ten percent of the entire Pacific Ocean, says the *National Geographic*; and drones have found there’s a hundred times more plastic by weight than previously realized. The Gyre is too large for scientists to ‘trawl’; and who’s going to clean it up? The US? Japan? The UN? Some other, dedicated international organization? ‘Scientists and explorers agree that limiting or eliminating the use of disposable plastics and increasing the use of biodegradable resources will be the best way to solve the problem.’ They also estimate it would take seventy ships a year to clean up one percent of the North Pacific, so we’re not going to see real results any time soon; though there’s a Dutch scheme at the development stage which may prove to be the answer.

Meanwhile the pictures tell the story: turtles and seals entangled in cast-off plastic nets; dead seabirds, their exposed stomachs choked with gas lighters and bottle caps.

The more stuff we produce the more rubbish there is to dispose of, from yoghurt cartons to nuclear waste. Some things — domestic kitsch, tourist tat — are rubbish from their point of manufacture, others victims of built-in obsolescence. The inhabited world is filled with junk, much of it for sale, even more of it for disposal; increasingly, junk orbits in space. These things are either tributes to recent ‘growth’, symptoms of self-defeating consumerist disregard, or both; but the litter mounts up, the skips are persistently full to overflowing. ‘In an ideal world,’ said Michael Thompson in his ground-breaking *Rubbish Theory* (Oxford, 1979), ‘an object would reach zero value and zero expected life-span at the same instant, and then . . . disappear into dust. But, in reality, it doesn’t do this; it just continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo where, at some later date (if it has not by that time turned, or been made, into dust) it has the chance of being discovered.’ *Rubbish Theory* has much to recommend it; but Thompson’s parameters derive from the world of market research (antiques etc) and he overlooks the significance of dust. He’s talking about old lamps and furniture, the things that can play a role in gentrification, not the household and industrial waste whose working lives are presumed to be at an end; whose limbo is the dump. So, is that the last of them? Do the scrap metal and broken glass disappear into earth and air, an irrelevant residue not to be seen again? No, they’ve an active future, and even used plastic can be moulded into bricks. Meanwhile the environmental degradation continues: naff advertising, daft architecture, wobbly bridges, ugly apartment houses barely fit for purpose, torture music, moronic interventions in public space — a bench with a plaque reading ‘Everybody needs a place to think’ (nobody sits there), another bench with a sculpture of two grannies in conversation and no room for real grannies; the crumpled cans, the styrofoam. On the home front, however, much improvement. New, smart bins, no longer inanimate objects, have joined the ‘internet of things’, report back to their owners when they’re full, and provide remote

monitoring systems for the waste and recycling industries.

I had it written out for me as if for an imbecile: clean paper, cardboard, plastic and tin cans to recycling; food waste to the compost heap; other waste to the incineration bin; ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The first category takes up most space since it includes newspapers and packaging. Recycling, in one form or another, has always been with us; traditional Hinduism even gives the individual soul a series of different lives. (Please, next time, can I be a maharajah?) Revolutions help; also wars, I'm afraid. Thomas Pynchon, writing of wartime England in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), a hard-to-read but sometimes startlingly poetic cult book in its day, imagines 'thousands of old used tooth-paste tubes in the pipefitters' sheds, heaped often to the ceilings', which are 'returned to the war, heaps of dimly fragrant metal, phantoms of peppermint in the winter shacks, each tube wrinkled by the unconscious hands of London, written over in interference patterns, hand against hand, waiting now . . . to be melted for solder, for plate, alloyed for castings, bearings, gasketry, hidden smoke-shriek linings the children of that other domestic incarnation will never see'. But children love rubbish, both for its own sake and even sometimes for profit: the stuff in their bags and pockets, the copper wire from clapped-out, dumped computers. Besides, living closer to ground level, they're more conscious of debris and rejectamenta, the scrunched tin-foil and the grapefruit rind. Amateurs, *cognoscenti* of rags, bones and discarded bubble wrap, they live in a world of secret expertise. All ladders start, for Yeats, in 'the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart'; and Brecht advised, 'Don't start with the good old things, start with the bad new ones.'

Whatever about the good old things there are certainly plenty of bad new ones: bad books, bad art, bad music in abundance, the lot validated by post-modern dumbing down — and let's not forget 'upcycled' Rubbish Art. There's rubbish and rubbish, the literal (dust and ashes, rags and bones) and the metaphorical: the bad books and art which become literal rubbish too as they crumble away in their black holes — though the abject object, if not destined for oblivion, can have a retro mystique and even an

artistic aura. I myself tried to capture this in 'A Garage in Co. Cork'. The poem, says Hugh Haughton, is 'about a site of exhausted modernity, though cluttered with "intact antiquities of the recent past" . . . not vestiges of traditional Ireland, but an obsolete filling station surrounded by a detritus of soft-drink ads and scrap iron. [The poem] reflects on it through the lens of Michael Thompson whose *Rubbish Theory* offered an account of the changing status of mass-produced goods as they moved from the retail catalogue to rubbish to being collectables, and from "transients" to "durables", in a cycle where they start and end as valuable aesthetic objects but pass through a stage of being junk.'

What concerns me here is the evidently *unsalvageable* junk, the forlorn things with no hope of ever being antiques or even relics of contemporary material culture: not the old toys and utensils but the organic stuff, the rags and bones destined for toxic incineration or for tips hazy with methane and loud with screaming gulls. The discarded stuff lives on though; there's a dark energy there in the dustbins of history, of potential use in some future ecological dispensation. Nothing is ever completely lost, energy can't be destroyed but only changed from one form to another: 'If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles' (Whitman, 'Song of Myself'). As we know, everything in nature goes round and round — including ourselves. We perpetuate ourselves in our children; and, buried or dispersed, mutate over time into vegetation like figures from Ovid. Can we read the *Metamorphoses* as an extended metaphor of species evolution? The most remarkable developments take place. As people in Ovid change into plants and birds, and ivory into human flesh, so too, perhaps over generations, the disadvantaged can often translate themselves into other, 'superior' life forms, to inherit the earth one day. *Nei rifiuti del mondo nasce un nuovo mondo*, says Pasolini: 'In the refuse of the world a new world is born.' His new world is not, in fact, a salubrious one, but the axiom is so perfect it can stand alone, even if the *rifiuti* are problematic. Does he mean things, people, or both? If people, the designation is harsh, like 'scum of the earth', though not quite so contemptuous. He himself, knifed to death on waste ground, finished up in the refuse (a bird-like sculpture marks the spot);

but the future hides in the dust and ashes, awaiting its moment.

James Cameron (*An Indian Summer*, 1974) describes a Madras room-sweeper going through the motions of cleaning a floor. He's not really cleaning the floor, but he has to show dedication for the sake of his job: 'He must be abased and silent, yet somehow evident, careful never to raise his eyes, squatting crabwise around the room among the dust which is his livelihood and which therefore must be identified with, stirred and agitated and shifted from one place to another . . . He fulfilled the role society required of him merely by associating himself as nearly as he could with the dirt in which he dealt; his efficiency was of minor importance. A vacuum cleaner would work better, but it would cost more.' This isn't really patronizing. The sweeper, perhaps a maharajah now, or an infotech tycoon, owing to his dutiful humility in that former life, can congratulate himself on the workings of *karma* — though he'd need to watch his step or he'll be back there in the dust the next time round. The *karma* principle, that of reincarnation, of existential recycling, works both ways. The bat may have been a politician once, the rat a banker, which it probably was. (Be afraid, be very afraid.) Conversely, a virtuous fly may take human form.

Grown-ups, except for those who have no choice, prefer to ignore rubbish or even deny its existence. Cameron again: 'Indians of all varieties . . . will promenade through streets of almost indescribable filth, littered with refuse and debris, gutters adrift with ordure, picking their way through the muck with a skilfully intuitive indifference, since *they do not see it*. Themselves in their persons they are clean; all else is *maya*, illusion.' A stray child though, in India or anywhere else, might loiter in a trance among the trash, intrigued by the environmental degradation, bewitched by a dead transistor in a ditch or an old bike in a stream, frozen for ten minutes in mute rapture before running home. This kind of fascination is shared by contemplative adults like David Gascoyne who, in his poem 'The Gravel-Pit Field' (1941), catches a glimpse of the field's philosophical and even religious implications. It's littered with all sorts of rubbish, but in a shaft of sun-

light, in 'a last lucidity of day', he sees its 'apotheosis':

*No-man's-land  
Between this world and the beyond,  
Remote from men and yet more real  
Than any human dwelling-place;  
A tabernacle where one stands  
As though within the empty space  
Round which revolves the Sage's Wheel.*

The apotheosis of rubbish! There's now an aesthetics of trash; thing theory posits 'soul' in inanimate matter; redemption of the disregarded and marginalized may yet extend to the waste paper and the banana skin. The *rifiuti*, in due course, will have their time in the sun.