

# THE UNSUNG HEROES OF HOLY GARBAGE: AN ANALYSIS OF WASTE IN A.R. AMMONS'S *GARBAGE*\*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes A.R. Ammons *Garbage* (1993) through the lens of Waste Studies by focusing on the interactions between the material and metaphorical uses of waste, scrutinizing the complex trope of the dump-ziggurat, and paying special attention to the neglected figure of the waste collector or garbage worker. In the 1990s, when Ammons published his long poem, waste and garbage were becoming pivotal tropes in American poetry. While Ammons deals with the inescapable presence of garbage in his homonymous poem, he also goes beyond the materiality of waste in order to incorporate more metaphorical resonances. Arguably, the most valuable insights that *Garbage* has to offer derive precisely from its striking juxtaposition of the material and the immaterial, the scatological and the eschatological. Most importantly, Ammons not only sings a hymn to the huge garbage dump and its implications, but also to the “unsung heroes” of modernity (Bauman 2004): the anonymous workers who collect the garbage and maintain the landfill.

KEYWORDS: A.R. Ammons, *Garbage*, Waste Theory, Waste Studies, garbage dump, waste collectors, “Garbage Poetry.”

LOS HÉROES OLVIDADOS DE LA “BASURA SAGRADA”:  
UN ANÁLISIS DE *GARBAGE*, DE A.R. AMMONS, DESDE LOS *WASTE STUDIES*

## RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el poema de A.R. Ammons *Garbage* (1993) desde la perspectiva de los Waste Studies, prestando especial atención a la interacción entre los usos literales y metafóricos de la basura, escudriñando el tropo del vertedero-zigurat y deteniéndose en la figura olvidada del trabajador de la basura. En la década de los noventa, cuando Ammons publicó su libro, la basura y los desechos se estaban convirtiendo en imágenes recurrentes en la poesía estadounidense. Si bien Ammons se ocupa de la presencia ineludible de la basura en su poema homónimo, también sabe ir más allá de la materialidad del residuo para incorporar resonancias metafóricas. Podría decirse que las ideas más valiosas que *Garbage* tiene que ofrecer derivan precisamente de su sorprendente yuxtaposición de lo material y lo inmaterial, combinando los dos sentidos del término escatológico. Lo que es más importante, Ammons no sólo canta un himno al enorme vertedero de basura y sus implicaciones, sino también a los “héroes anónimos” de la modernidad (Bauman 2004): los trabajadores que recogen la basura y mantienen el vertedero.

PALABRAS CLAVE: A.R. Ammons, *Garbage*, *Waste Theory*, *Waste Studies*, vertedero, trabajadores de la basura, “Garbage Poetry.”



“Garbage,” A.R. Ammons announces in his homonymous book, “has to be the poem of our time” (18). By 1993, when *Garbage* was published, waste and garbage were indeed becoming pivotal tropes in American poetry. In his excellent survey of what he calls “garbage poetry,” Christopher Todd Anderson notes that by the end of the twentieth century the productive and liminal nature of garbage had turned it into a recurrent image in American poetry, where it worked “as a mirror of culture” (2010, 37). Although at first sight *garbage*, *trash*, *rubbish* and *waste*<sup>1</sup> conjure up a certain type of residual matter and its environmental effects, they also emerge as protean, multifaceted tropes. To start with, the concept of waste is rather relative and, as we shall later discuss, it is mediated by both time and space. “Nothing is inherently trash,” Susan Strasser reminds us in *Waste and Want* (1999, 5; see Bauman 2004, 22). Similarly, Greg Kennedy remarks that, despite its “proximity and familiarity,” we cannot reach a “clear understanding of what trash truly is” (2007, ix). In his recent analysis of ecopoetry, Simon Estok also emphasizes the slippery nature of waste, which he sees as “both productive and dangerous, spent but agential, rejected but inescapable” (2017, 123). Beyond its material aspects, the presence of waste can also raise more abstract or philosophical questions, like the ones Kennedy addresses in *Ontology of Trash* (2007). This is why literary authors are especially prone to complement their interest in the “materiality of waste,” as Susan Signe Morrison puts it (2015, 11), with more conceptual and metaphorical approaches to the matter.<sup>2</sup> In *Garbage*, Ammons deals with both aspects: he addresses the presence of waste in postindustrial America and, at the same time, he goes beyond the materiality of waste in order to incorporate more metaphorical resonances. In fact, as I will try to show in my analysis, the most interesting insights that the poem has to offer derive precisely from its striking juxtaposition of the material and the spiritual, the scatological and the eschatological. The poet not only sings a hymn to the rubbish dump, but also to the anonymous workers who collect the garbage and tend the tip. As we shall see, the critical reception of the poem focused on the powerful image of the garbage mound, which partially eclipsed these “unsung heroes” (Bauman 2004, 28), even though they are central figures in the first cantos of the book.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of my analysis, I will be using these words as equivalent, even though they are not exactly coterminous: “Trash refers specifically to discards that are at least theoretically dry—newspapers, boxes, cans and so on. Garbage technically refers to ‘wet’ discards— food remains, yard waste, and offal. Refuse is a more inclusive term for both the wet discards and the dry. Rubbish is even more inclusive: It refers to all refuse plus construction and demolition debris” (Rathje and Murphy 2001, 9). Kennedy (2007) distinguishes waste from trash, the latter being the result of technological processes. For Anderson, garbage is a human category, in contrast to waste, which is found in nonhuman nature (2010, 35).

<sup>2</sup> See Morrison’s *The Literature of Waste* (2015) for a comprehensive study of the different literary uses that waste has been put to.



## SITUATING AND CURATING AMMONS'S *GARBAGE*

Arguably, one of the reasons why *Garbage* was a poem of its time was the inescapable presence of waste—as both the rationale behind and the byproduct of consumerism—by the end of the last century: Ammons wrote after the advent of the “Empire of the Ephemeral,” when the new “ethos of disposability,” to use Strasser’s apt phrases (1999, 187, 173), had already set in. At the turn of the twenty-first century, scholars working in Social History and Cultural Studies, like Susan Strasser (1999) or Heather Rogers (2005), examined the emergence of consumer culture—synonymous with American culture since at least the 1950s—and concluded that, in its most rampant form, consumerism had become the source of this unmanageable production of waste.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, the logic of waste, rather than necessity, seemed to shape our lives in a society that, as Zygmunt Bauman rightly notes (2004, 39), interpellates us as consumers, not as citizens.

*Garbage* has become the most visible reminder of the way we structure our lives: we consume not merely because we need to, but because we can. Our desires must be satisfied, because it is in this (preferably instant) gratification that we find fulfillment as consumers-citizens. Even those commodities that were perceived as permanent and used to be cherished have now become disposable. “Our trash,” as Bill Rathje eloquently put it, “is the unvarnished imprint of our lifestyles” (quoted in Voros 2000, 161)<sup>4</sup> and the current economy of waste is sadly reflected in our rubbish dumps. It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that it was precisely an epiphanic encounter with a huge garbage dump that inspired Ammons to write his book.<sup>5</sup> While modernist poets like T.S. Eliot favored “images of physical and spiritual barrenness,” Ammons, writing in a postmodern world, “depicts a world cluttered with mounds of garbage” and imagines “the poet as archeological garbologist” (DiCicco 1996, 166). If Eliot’s “waste land” and his “heap of broken images” (1922, l.22) have been read as a summation of modernity and the pinnacle of modernism, Ammons’s heap of trash can be read as a summation—and “consummation” (Ammons 1993, 28)—of postmodern consumerism.

Ammons may be writing in specific historical circumstances that he does not fail to address in *Garbage*, but he also takes part in a centuries-old tradition of Anglo-American poetry that cannot be ignored. There is critical consensus on

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<sup>3</sup> If not before, the crisis of waste management in late twentieth century America, painstakingly described by Rogers in *Gone Tomorrow* (2005), had laid bare the impending dangers of the economy of waste, sparking both pragmatic concerns and environmental awareness.

<sup>4</sup> “Archeologists study ancient garbage to learn about past civilizations,” Rathje explains, “We look at our own refuse to learn about our own civilization, in terms of behaviors that produce the things we throw away. Our trash is the unvarnished imprint of our lifestyles” (quoted in Voros 2000, 161).

<sup>5</sup> As Ammons himself acknowledges in an interview, it was the sight of an enormous garbage tip that became the seed for the entire poem: “I had this basic image of the garbage mound, which looked like a ziggurat for me and became the controlling symbol” (Schneider 1999, 325).



the fact that his work was influenced by nineteenth century writers, among them American Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, filtered through Whitman's expansive, democratic vistas.<sup>6</sup> Ammons's poetry has also been compared to that of high modernists like the aforementioned Eliot (DiCicco 1996; Vendler 1999), Williams Carlos Williams (Schneider 1995; Stefans 2014) and, more specifically, Wallace Stevens and his poem "The Man on the Dump" (Vendler 1999; Voros 2000; Anderson 2010). While scholars like Wilkinson argue that "it is difficult to conceive any attitude to the relation between language and reality more inimical than [Ammons's] to Modernist aesthetics" (2012, 38), other critics claim that Ammons's poetry serves as a bridge between "high modernism from the first part of the century and the more personal, confessional verse that developed at an accelerating rate after the War" (Ward 2002, 67).

More recently, Anderson has placed Ammons among the group of eco-poets whose "garbage poetry" keeps "certain attitudes associated with Romanticism, pastoralism, and the sublime," while also "depart[ing] from these traditions in ways that reflect the particular significance of garbage in contemporary culture" (2010, 38). Although Ammons does play with certain pastoral conventions, he does so only to show they are no longer viable. The pastoral mode is no longer useful for Ammons because "nature," as Wilkinson cogently argues, is now "thoroughly penetrated" and contaminated by human activity, and because "everything is thoroughly used, and no amount of sentimentalizing can reverse that process" (2012, 47). In fact, if we had to find one single label for *Garbage*, that would be "post-pastoral"—in Clifford's sense of the term—, for in this poem the "postmodern detritus" has replaced nature as the new form of the sublime (Yaeger 2008, 327).<sup>7</sup>

To the list of movements and writers that I have just sketched out I would add a less obvious antecedent for *Garbage*: the old school of "graveyard poetry." As contemporary as Ammons's diction may be, in its juxtaposition of the philosophical, the coarse, and the banal, I would proclaim that his junkyard poetry is a direct heir to the graveyard poets of the late eighteenth century. While their setting and central images may differ, both the graveyard and the garbage dump function as sites for contemplation and as stark reminders of ephemerality and death. At the same time, though, Ammons's chosen symbol reformulates the topos, and garbage becomes a different type of *memento mori* (Vendler 1999, 23). It may be true that, as Kennedy claims, "the *memento mori* of the Middle Ages, that skeletal guest at every banquet, can never appear on the shelves of consumer society" (2007, 140),

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<sup>6</sup> See Spiegelman 1999; Voros 2000; Killingsworth 2004, 19-24; Anderson 2010, 38-39. In turn, Ammons has become a notorious influence among contemporary poets focusing on garbage, junk and waste. Even Tommy Pico, who addresses different issues in *Junk*, pays homage to *Garbage* by deliberately echoing Ammons's key line: "Junk has to be the /poem of our time" (2017).

<sup>7</sup> In 2008, Patricia Yaeger announced that the "postmodern detritus" had already and "unexpectedly taken on the sublimity that was once associated with nature" (327). Bauman also describes waste as the new "sublime": "a unique blend of attraction and repulsion arousing an equally unique mixture of awe and fear" (2004, 22).

but the dumpsite and its (decomposing) garbage can rear their heads just as we, like Ammons, drive on a highway. If the graveyard poetry of yore revisited the classical topos of death as a leveler,<sup>8</sup> Ammons's junkyard poetry raises trash to the status of the great leveler in consumerist capitalism: everyone's detritus ends up there, even though not everyone is equally affected by garbage disposal.<sup>9</sup>

Having placed Ammons's *Garbage* both in its sociohistorical context and within the larger Anglo-American literary tradition, we can now ponder what new ingredients recent scholarship on waste may add to the (already full) pot of critical studies on his 1993 poem. Although I have already discussed the main interests and concerns of waste scholars like Morrison or Kennedy, in what follows I will attempt to outline the genealogy of and main trends within the large field of Waste Studies.

## WASTE, SPACE, AND TIME

In 2004 Zygmunt Bauman published *Wasted Lives*, an essay describing the process whereby certain human beings have become residual in contemporary societies—or, in his preferred phrase, in “liquid modernity.” What is more relevant for Waste Studies, Bauman links the phenomenon of (post)modern consumerist waste with the process of human wastification.<sup>10</sup> These “wasted” human beings, he asserted, are not only figuratively but also literally associated with garbage and waste, so that we come to witness “the meeting of human rejects with the rejects of consumer feasts” (2004, 59). Although Bauman's book is probably the best-known example of Waste Studies scholarship, this field has a longer history, which I will try and summarize in just a few paragraphs.

The concept of waste has been explored in terms of both space and time. Early contributions to Waste Studies emphasized the spatial approach, invoking Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, where she posited that “dirt” was “matter out of place” (quoted in Strasser 1999, 5). Less attention was paid to another pioneer of sorts, Michael Thompson, for whom “Rubbish” was nothing but matter out of time. In *Rubbish Theory*, first published in 1979, and reprinted, with a new preface, in 2017, Thompson starts by establishing two main categories of objects, those that he calls “Transient” and whose value decreases over time, and those “Durable” items whose value increases with time:

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<sup>8</sup> Note that Ammons also resorts to the *ubi sunt* topos in *Garbage* (see pp. 22-23).

<sup>9</sup> See Rogers 165-66. This “garbage inequality” was already denounced by the NIMBY and the environmental justice movements in the twentieth century. On the specific relationship between waste and class, see Strasser 1999, 136-40. For a global approach to environmental injustice, as developed in Waste Theory, see Bell 2019, Simal 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Bauman's social-ecological approach both harked back to the environmental justice movement of the late twentieth century and heralded recent developments like Waste Theory.



the two cultural categories—the Transient and the Durable—are “socially imposed” on the world of objects. If these two categories exhausted the material world then the transfer of an object from one to the other would not be possible because of the mutual contradiction of the categories’ defining criteria: those in the Transient category have decreasing value and finite expected lifespans; those in the Durable category have increasing value and infinite expected lifespans. But of course they are not exhaustive, they encompass only those objects that have value, leaving a vast and disregarded realm—Rubbish—that, it turns out, provides the one-way route from Transient to Durable. (10)

Here, contrary to Douglas’s theory, it is time, not (dis)order, that turns objects and matter into rubbish, and allows them to be rescued at a later point. While Thompson was the first scholar to focus on the temporal dimensions of waste, he was certainly not the last one. In the particular context of the US, social historians like Strasser (1999) or Rogers (2005) explored the changing perceptions as regards garbage—what constituted useless trash and what was valuable and could be recycled—and the behavioral patterns associated with those perceptions. According to Rogers, historians find in waste the privileged site to “read the logic of industrial society’s relationship to nature and human labor,” including both “the past and the future” (2005, 3). Thus, the emphasis on change over time is conspicuous both in the broad historical development of societies and within the intrahistory of each object. After all, the very term “was-te,” I would argue, conjures up temporality, since it necessarily points at a moment in the past where the object/thing was (used, visible, valuable) even if it is no longer so.

A similarly time-focused approach can be found in *Waste: A Philosophy of Things*, published by William Viney in 2014. Viney understands waste as moving in a temporal axis, adopting a position that echoes Thompson’s Rubbish Theory: those things we consider “waste” are just “matter for whom time has run out or has become precluded” (2014, 2). In his own words, waste is not just “matter out of place,” but “matter out of time,” so scholars should bring the temporal dimension into our examinations of waste.

How do the different theories I have just outlined impinge on Ammons’s *Garbage*? In what follows I will try and read the poem through the lens of Waste Studies, focusing on the interactions between the material and metaphorical uses of waste, using (and adapting) Thompson’s Rubbish Theory, scrutinizing the complex trope of the dump-ziggurat, and paying special attention to the neglected figure of the garbage worker.

## GARBAGE: FROM SCATOLOGY TO ESCATHOLOGY

*Garbage* has been fittingly described as “logorrheic” (Unger 2019, 135): the poem is structured around eighteen cantos, each made up of a river of free-verse couplets that flow, unimpeded, for more than 100 pages. Ammons opens the piece by presenting the poetic voice—his alter ego—in a self-deprecatory manner: he is allegedly “wasting” his time teaching poetry and composing “sober little organic,



meaningful pictures,” shunning the great work of recovering “values thought lost,” now in ruins, “demolished,” and lying at his feet (1993, 13). Just a few lines into the poem, however, the dump materializes and looms as a powerful image.<sup>11</sup>

In its inevitability, material waste confronts us sensorially, “offending” our senses (both smell and sight) and shocking us out of stupor and into reflection. Just as American consumers saw themselves reflected in the garbage trucks that the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles named *The Social Mirror* (see Freilich 2020), visible landfills and dumping grounds, like the one that sparked the poem, tell on us and our actions.<sup>12</sup> Ammons concludes that garbage is the “poem of our time” because, in his words, it is

[...] believable enough

to get our attention, *getting in the way*, piling  
up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and

creamy white: what else deflects us from the  
errors of our illusionary ways... (1993, 18; my italics)

At first, the poet’s insistence that omnipresent garbage is now able “to get our attention” because it takes up space—“getting in the way” (18)—seems to contradict Thompson’s thesis: Rubbish is an invisible category, outside space and time. I tend to agree with Thompson in that the standard attitude towards rubbish or garbage in consumerist societies is “out of sight, out of mind”—we might even add, out of smell, out of mind (see Rogers 2005, 1). In fact, it is only through long-lasting strikes in garbage collecting or artistic interventions like the aforementioned *Social Mirror*, by Ukeles, that rubbish is rendered visible again. Paradoxically, then, waste is at the same time “a most harrowing problem and a most closely guarded secret of our times,” since contemporary societies—at least in the Global North—have managed to “dispose of leftovers in the most radical and effective way: we make them invisible by not looking and unthinkable by not thinking” (Bauman 2004, 27).

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<sup>11</sup> The prominence of the dump fades away as the poem progresses, a fact that, for Ammons, this is by no means a flaw, but a feature that he intended for his poem. The dump works as an initial “anchor” that allows for freedom of movement later: “With that anchor as the central concern in the first part of the poem, presenting it in the first part of the poem and watching it go away in the rest, you couldn’t get lost so you feel free. You just keep on writing because the poem has centered” (Schneider 1999, 325).

<sup>12</sup> For Ammons the materiality of waste prompts metaphysical ruminations, but it also has a practical impact on our social attitudes and political decisions, as hinted in *Garbage*. The third canto, which opens with the phrase “toxic waste,” suggests that the global crisis may be a blessing in disguise: the accumulation of garbage and the degradation of the environment at a planetary level will finally compel the different countries to act together in order to find a solution: “toxic waste, poison air, beach goo, eroded / roads *draw nations together...*” (24; my italics).





We may wonder whether Thompson's theory can even be applied to Ammons's *Garbage*. As summarized above, Thompson (1979, 10) claims that the only possible way in which a Transient object can become Durable is by going through the limbo stage, Rubbish, outside time and value. This often takes the form of discarded objects that may be later rescued and endowed with an economic value, either as revamped useful objects or as status symbols. Although garbage is not explicitly recovered for further specific use in Ammons's poem, it does become a different, higher form of Durable, the energy of composting and re-generation. One could argue that he articulates what Estok describes as "a semiotics of hope, of re-making" (2017, 122). To bring home that sense of remaking and recombination, Ammons goes back to the composting metaphor that Whitman had already used in his "Compost" poem: "anything / thrown out to the chickens will be ground fine // in gizzards or taken under-ground by beetles and / ants: this will be transmuted into the filigree // of ant feelers' energy vaporizations" (1993, 85).

Even the cover of the book emphasizes this composting, this transformation of matter into matter. The power of waste lies precisely in this capacity for transmutation, although not necessarily—as Bauman would have it—an alchemy-like transformation "of base, paltry and menial stuff into a noble, beautiful and precious object" (2004, 22). The flowers on the front cover of Ammons's book (mis)lead us to contemplate beauty, however ephemeral—and the *carpe diem* associated with such ephemerality, as in *collige, virgo, rosas*. And yet, if we follow the orchid's stem, it will literally lead us to the back cover; there, we shall discover its origin (its roots) in a flower pot that has been discarded as trash, but which also insinuates the perennial composting process that keeps life alive and permits "our ongoing" (Ammons 1993, 26).<sup>13</sup> This would explain why the voice in *Garbage* announces the visualization of that Durable "spindle of energy" (24) as the main purpose of the text:

this is just a poem with a job to do: and that  
 is to declare, however roundabout, sideways,  
 or meanderingly (or in those ways) the perfect  
 scientific and *materialistic* notion of the  
 spindle of energy... (24-25; my italics)

More often than not, this effortless transition from the material to the immaterial—in an avowedly "materialistic" poem—takes the specific rhetorical form of

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<sup>13</sup> This is reminiscent of the example that the monk Thich Nhat Hanh gives to underscore the Buddhist continuity of matter, as related by Anderson: the monk "has noted the continuity between the pure beauty of a rose and the rot of garbage... The rose and the garbage are equal. The garbage is just as precious as the rose" (2010, 36).





a sacralization of waste.<sup>14</sup> In fact, I would argue that Ammons is at his most effective when he chooses to juxtapose matter (waste) and spirit (energy) in a poem ostensibly about garbage. It is in this context that the apparently jarring, incongruous statement that “garbage has to be the poem of our time because // garbage is spiritual” (18) loses its rough edges and becomes acceptable.

The use of garbage and scatological language side by side with religious discourse is by no means an isolated incident in Ammons’s long poem but permeates the entire text. *Garbage* moves swiftly from scatology to eschatology, so much so that “birdshit” [*sic*] becomes the “gateway” to an eternal cycle of renewal: “the portal / of renewing change,” “a loam for the roots / of placenta” (28). As stinking garbage and objects that have become useless junk converge in the dumpsite, they become sacralized and, fittingly enough, the rubbish dump itself becomes a temple:

[...] down by I-95 in

Florida where flatland’s ocean- and gulf-flat,  
mounds of disposal rise ...

the garbage trucks crawl as if in *obeisance*,  
as if up *ziggurats* toward the high places gulls

and garbage keep alive, *offerings to the gods*  
of garbage, of retribution ... (18; my italics)

It is no wonder, therefore, that the first critical studies on *Garbage* focused on the ziggurat metaphor as a key to deciphering the poem. Already in 1996, Lorraine DiCicco stressed the awe-inducing monumentality of garbage dumps, which literally turned them into one of America’s largest Monstrous Visual Symbols.<sup>15</sup> In 1998, Leonard Scigaj described *Garbage* as an “ecopoem” inspired by “the huge I-95 landfill outside Miami, which Ammons presents as a ziggurat, a religious edifice of American culture” (249). In his more recent survey of garbage poetry, Anderson contends that Ammons uses this “huge mound of rubbish as a late-twentieth-century American equivalent to premodern temples” like the Babylonian ziggurats (2010, 39).<sup>16</sup> Important as this trope may be, it is now high time that the critical focus shifted from the ziggurat-like dump to the humans that tend it.

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<sup>14</sup> As Voros had already remarked in his comparative study of Stevens’ “The Man on the Dump” and Ammons’s *Garbage*, both poems opt “for resacrilizing trash as the necessary prelude to rebirth and regeneration” (2000, 174).

<sup>15</sup> She relates the dump-ziggurat to the Monstrous Visual Symbols, as do Rathje and Murphy, who maintain that “the largest MVSEs in American society today are its garbage repositories” (1996, 82). See also Tobin 1999, DiCicco 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson (2010) reminds us that Wilbur also refers to premodern religious metaphors, this time “Anglo-Saxon religious and cultural rites” (41).



## GARBAGE WORKERS: “THE UNSUNG HEROES OF MODERNITY”

While most scholars in Waste Studies have focused on the liminal position of the category of garbage and/or the social-environmental consequences of our economy of waste, until the advent of Waste Theory very few had paid attention to the scavengers and the garbage workers, the people that collect our rubbish, take it to the dumping ground and maintain that dumpsite.<sup>17</sup> As Bauman cogently argues, these workers play an essential role in our economy of consumption and waste:

Consumers in a consumer society need rubbish collectors, and many of them, and of the sort who will not shun touching and handling what has already been confined to the rubbish heap—but the consumers are not willing to do the rubbish collectors’ jobs themselves. After all, they have been groomed to enjoy things, not to suffer them. (2004, 59)

Despite the relevance of their work, however, they are not just socially ostracized but also culturally neglected. Bauman goes as far as to claim that the “rubbish collectors” are “the unsung heroes of modernity” (2004, 28). I would argue that Ammons’s book is an exception to this rule, for the garbage-truck driver emerges as the most significant human figure in the first cantos of the poem. And yet only a few critics (Voros 2000, 174; Morrison 2015, 197) have paid attention to this character. Most have ignored this figure or they have read it in a parodic or mock-heroic way (Wilkinson 2012, 42), with the drivers comically metamorphosing into some sort of “new Charon” (Vendler 1999, 27) or becoming “high priests” (Scigaj 1998, 249; Buell 1999, 226) on their way up the pyramid-ziggurat.

Even in a quick perusal of the poem, readers can see explicit references to the clerical-priestly duties of both ancient and modern religions. Garbage trucks—personified but also metonymically pointing at their drivers—are depicted as “crawling” up the temple-mound, bringing “offerings” such as “a crippled plastic chair” or “a played-out sports outfit” (Ammons 1993, 18-19). Presiding over this “sacrificial bounty” (19) is the “priestly director,” in his “black-chuffing dozer,” trying to “read” and decipher the birds (20), much like the artists of divination in premodern times.

The religious allegory is not restricted to the initial presentation of the dump or the truck drivers reproduced in previous pages, but reappears in subsequent sections of the poem, especially those dealing with the landfill and with garbage itself. The “small smoke” that wafts from the waste dump in the second canto, suggesting a ritual “everlasting flame” (19), reappears in the fourth section as a

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<sup>17</sup> These workers not only drive garbage-trucks but also garbage spreaders, like the bulldozer mentioned later in the poem. Morrison is an exception, as she devotes a section in her 2015 book to these figures and she does in fact mention the driver in Ammons’s *Garbage* (197), albeit briefly.

“priestly plume” that “rises” from the mound as a “signal” (30). In the third canto, we once more see the dump:

with a high whine the garbage trucks slowly  
circling the pyramid rising *intone* the morning

and atop the mound’s plateau birds circling  
[...]

denser than windy forest shelves: and meanwhile  
a truck already arrived spills its goods from

the back hatch and the birds as in a single computer-  
formed net plunge in *celebration, hallelujahs*

of rejoicing (27-28; my italics)<sup>18</sup>

Here, it is not just the garbage trucks that sing their matins, but the carrion birds themselves join in with their “hallelujahs” (28), in one more prosopopoeia. Just as the dump becomes a temple, the garbage birds and trucks break out in unexpected hymns, and the smoke created by the combustion of organic refuse/rubbish signals at something ethereal emerging from solid matter, we become more ready to encounter the truck driver under a different light:

the driver gets out of his truck  
and wanders over to the cliff on the spill and

looks off from the high point into the rosy-fine  
rising of day, the air pure, the wings of the

birds white and clean as angel-food cake: *holy, holy,*  
*holy, the driver cries* and flicks his cigarette

in a *spiritual* swoop that floats and floats before  
it touches ground (28; my italics)

A mock-epic atmosphere seems to envelop the scene and the driver. However, I claim that this mock-heroic, mock-religious reading does not exhaust the interpretative possibilities of this scene.<sup>19</sup> The garbage man embodies this contradiction: he apparently waxes eschatological in his shouting “holy, holy, holy,”

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<sup>18</sup> Notice the striking (because unnecessary) use of a colon, a choice that is far from exceptional in *Garbage*. As befits a waste-excremental poem, the colon is the most pervasive punctuation sign.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson is one of the few critics to acknowledge the fact that not all these spiritual metaphors are to be dismissed as parodic in nature: “Heavy doses of humor and postmodern irony



an exclamation which is also reminiscent of a common scatological idiom. Even trivial actions like flicking a cigarette from the edge of the dump-cliff seem to acquire transcendental qualities, as the arc the butt traces is described as a “spiritual swoop” (28). Though the aforementioned “spiritual swoop,” or references to the angelic white purity of the garbage gulls or the “pure,” clean air around the landfill cannot but elicit a smirk, I would argue that the garbage man himself ultimately emerges as a grave, if not heroic figure. In fact, his apparently humble *métier* acquires a more serious import, as he presides not only over the rubbish dump, but also over its ethical implications. By the end of this third canto, the driver’s role has become that of a garbage-philosopher: he both intuits the generative powers of waste and becomes aware of the impossibility of getting away from the consequences of our “toxic past,” from the numerous ecological “sins” that we have accumulated and take material form here, in the dump, “heaped” (29) in visible mounds. If only he could imagine a less toxic, “fusion-lit” future:

[...] here, the driver knows,

where the consummations gather, where the disposal  
flows out of form, where the last translations

cast away their immutable bits and scraps,  
flits of steel, shivers of bottle and tumbler,

here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal  
of renewing change, the birdshit, even, melding

enrichingly in with debris, a loam for the roots  
of placenta: oh, nature, the man on the edge

of the cardboard-laced cliff exclaims, that there  
could be a straightaway from the toxic past into

the fusion-lit reaches of a coming time! [...] (28-29)

I want to conclude my analysis by paying attention to one last scene, narrated in the fourth canto, where the “garbage spreader gets off his bulldozer and / approaches the fire” (Ammons 1993, 32) created by the waste combustion—a flame that Wilkinson dismisses as “the debased kin to Promethean fire” (2012, 43). Once the driver reaches the summit of the garbage mound, he “survey[s] a kingdom awash in transcendence” (Voros 2000, 174):

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flavor Ammons’s depiction of the landfill as a symbol of the nation and as a spiritual icon, but the admiration for ecological processes is genuine” (2010, 39).



[...] he stares into  
it as into eternity, the burning edge of beginning and

ending, the catalyst of going and becoming,  
and all thoughts of his paycheck and beerbelly,

..., fall away, and he stands in the presence  
of the *momentarily everlasting*, the air about

him *sacrosanct* [...] (Ammons 1993, 32-33; my italics)

For Frederik Buell, these lines enact a humorous transformation of “the dozer man from redneck to high priest of the Delphic oracle of the landfill (at the landfill’s peak, a transfiguring fire burns) and a hero of Homeric ancestry”<sup>20</sup> (1999, 226). Some class bias may be at work in these dismissals of the driver as a merely parodic character. Interestingly, the few critics that ‘rescue’ the garbage worker as a relevant figure do so by likening him to the poet (Voros 2000, 174; Morrison 2015, 197).

Contrary to what Buell argues, however, I would claim that no trace of mockery is left at this point in the poem. Even though, initially, it was hard to imagine how the putrid air emanating from the garbage dump could be perceived as “sacrosanct,” nothing remains now of the mock-heroic tone that seemed to herald the presence of the truck drivers. The garbage worker, very much “like the poet,” Morrison contends, has become a visionary who “sees the truth and has a deep insight into human nature” (2015, 197). If the graveyard poets looked for a deserted or secluded churchyard, and the religious contemplatives needed a cave or a barren wasteland, the truck driver finds that waste-land in a garbage dump. The grave-digger turned philosopher is here replaced by the “bulldozer man,” and the following bottle scene seems to confirm this impression:

the bulldozer man picks up a red bottle that  
turns purple and green in the light and pours

out a few drops of stale wine, and yellowjackets  
burr in the bottle, sung drunk, the singing

note even puzzled when he tosses the bottle way  
down the slopes, the still air being flown in

in the bottle even as the bottle dives through  
the air! the bulldozer man thinks about that

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<sup>20</sup> Buell interprets Ammons’s move as an attempt to criticize “the pieties of the day” by opting for an “antithetical figure (Southern, white, male, beerbelly) as a representative icon for the contemporary age” (1999, 226).



and concludes that everything is marvelous, what  
he should conclude and what everything is: on

the deepdown slopes, he realizes, the light  
inside the bottle will, over the weeks, change

the yellowjackets, unharmed, having left lost,  
not an aromatic vapor of wine left, the air

percolating into and out of the neck as the sun's  
heat rises and falls: *all is one, one all*:

*hallelujah*: he gets back up on his bulldozer  
and shaking his locks backs the bulldozer up  
(32-33; my italics)

The last couplet seems to highlight the apparent incongruity of juxtaposing a metaphysical, almost religious, epiphany with the matter-of-fact driving of the garbage bulldozer. Although incongruity generally causes a comic effect, this is not the case here: those conversant with Ammons's work know that "all is one, one all" is a direct reference to the one-many paradox that has been one of the poet's philosophical concerns throughout his career.<sup>21</sup> Seen in this light, the juxtaposition of the garbage-scatological smells with the metaphysical-eschatological incense becomes much more than an occasion for humor. Ammons's predilection for the coarse and the "quotidian" banal, as Francisco Unger maintains, "does not altogether banish [...] the heights of grace or the passions of conversion" from his poetry, partly a result from his hymn-suffused youth (2019, 138). "Beneath the pragmatist in him," Unger continues, you can sometimes make out the figure of a redirected divine" (2019, 138). It is no coincidence that Bauman (2004, 22) also resorts to a religious lexicon when he describes the ambivalence of waste as both generative and destructive, "simultaneously divine and satanic."

## CONCLUSIONS

In *Garbage*, as I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding pages, the rubbish dump emerges as the site for the convergence of the scatological and the eschatological. Similarly, the garbage man in Ammons's poem, both coarse and priestly, interbreeds eschatological and scatological senses (and scents). If eschatology

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<sup>21</sup> On the influence of philosophy and science on Ammons's work, see Tobin 1999, Anderson 2010, Massengill 2011, and Unger 2019. As Wilkinson (2012, 38) notes, there are echoes of Anaximenes's "doctrine of material monism" in *Garbage*. In the poem itself, Ammons acknowledges that his book revolves around "the pre-socratic idea of the // dispositional axis from stone to wind, wind / to stone" (1993, 25).



tends to focus on the afterlife of humans, the “garbology” of this unconventional priest focuses on the afterlife of things, when Transient objects enter the category of Rubbish. However, things and objects being part (and parcel) of our planet, their afterlife impinges on our very life, and their often unbiodegradable excess conditions our earthly survival. Anderson is right when he argues that the dump, the central image in contemporary garbage poetry, functions in those poems as “a quasi-mystical territory in which the poet can enact a fantasy of regeneration, expressing hope that nature’s sacred processes of ecological renewal can overcome the physical reality of the garbage that is a fact of life in modern culture: a hope that nature has the power to redeem even our grossest examples of wastefulness and neglect” (2010, 54). This is the same hopeful approach that Kennedy takes in his philosophical exploration of trash: “the mirror in which we perceive our own sickly aspect,” which “can help us resolve ourselves to better living” (2007, 182). Likewise, DiCicco sees *Garbage* as an optimistic poem, since Ammons had at the time been confident “that, standing before the ‘ziggurat’ of our waste,” we would acquire an “ecological awareness” that would demand reparation and would impel us to mend our ways (2005, 192).

At the same time, however, the fact that Ammons couches our wastefulness in theological terms as “sins” “heaped” in the garbage dump (1993, 29) may point at a less optimistic conclusion. Not only that but his “genial skepticism,” which became all the more visible in his last years, led him to mistrust the actual impact of poetry (Schneider 1999). It must be admitted that there remains an inescapable ambiguity regarding the ultimate object of the driver’s contemplation, or the nature of his epiphany, described via the oxymoron “*momentarily / everlasting*” (Ammons 1993, 32).<sup>22</sup> And yet, despite the horror resulting from the realization that we are trashing our planet, I would argue that the driver’s trance-like invocation of the “holy” waste has a hopeful undercurrent. Like the eighteenth and nineteenth century poets who visited tombstones and ruins, and pondered on the ephemerality of life and objects, *Garbage* sings to the end of things, but does so from a position of serenity. If nothing else, we all take part in a process of never-ending composting, the everlasting “spindle of energy” (1993, 24) that Ammons spoke of. After all, as the poem reminds us, it is only “in the very asshole of comedown” that we may finally find “redemption” (21).

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<sup>22</sup> Arguably, the circularity of energy can be read as purely physical, immanent in its materiality, or as suggesting some form of metaphysical transcendence. According to Kennedy, trash apparently allows us to dispense with the transcendental premise of classical metaphysics: “The old metaphysical quest for transcendence, when technologically pursued, descends into trash” (2007, xviii). However, the opposite may be true; one “can see hope and beauty in waste,” although this requires embracing “faith and careful thought” (2007, 184).





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