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The Sense of Waste

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Abstract

This thesis begins with the observation that waste is to an outsized degree subject to the modal verbs; we might say that waste gives way to the sense of waste. As a result, waste appears as an unusually animate–and animating–actant, producing in those who apprehend it the impulse to put that which is wasted to use. The introductory chapter establishes this fact and provides a brief overview of scholarly approaches to the study of waste, asserting that in order to transcend mere description of the phenomenon it is necessary to establish how waste as an actant entered into its present relation with human actors. The second chapter establishes the historicity of the relation between waste and those who apprehend it. This chapter finds that waste took on agitating character following the enclosure of the common wastes, and the vanishing of the original, integral referent that was inclusive of both socially egalitarian and economic dimensions. I argue that waste has since became a dead metaphor latently active in the conceptual system enabling one to identify waste in only its economic dimension. The agitation about waste is thus the impulse to repeat the gesture of enclosure. The final chapter, by way of an analysis of Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, argues for the necessity of constructing a Benjaminian dialectical image of waste in order that a utopian dimension of waste might come into focus.

Keywords

Waste, Metaphor, Gleaners, Critical Theory, Benjamin, Marx, Varda, Political Economy

Summary for Lay Audience

This thesis begins with the observation that waste tends to produce in those who apprehend it the sense of waste. In this respect, waste is unusually animate and animating, producing in those who apprehend it the impulse to put that which is wasted to use. The introductory chapter provides an overview of approaches to the study waste. I argue that many of these approaches are only able to describe the phenomenon of the sense of waste and that in order to truly explain this sense it is necessary to establish how the sense of waste emerged. The second chapter provides a tentative history of the sense of waste. This chapter finds that the sense of waste emerged as a result of the enclosure of the common waste, the land on the feudal estate that the common folk freely made use of. Prior to enclosure, waste had both socially egalitarian and economic associations. After, only the economic sense of waste remained. I argue that with the vanishing of the original referent–that to which a word refers–waste took on a metaphorical character, with only the economic aspect of waste emphasized, eventually becoming a dead metaphor. This dead metaphor, I argue, still informs our sense of waste today. The sense of waste then, plays a decisive early role in facilitating economic thinking and in turn is reinforced by the ever-increasing demand to think in economic terms. The final chapter, by way of an analysis of Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, argues for the necessity of recapturing old senses of waste in order for egalitarian dimensions of waste might come into view. My claim is that learning methods by which to cultivate old understandings of waste might allow us to see clearly the conflict between economic and social values that play out materially.

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The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.

Walter Benjamin qtd. in Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

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Introduction: The Sense of Waste

At one point in Ben Lerner's novel *10:04,* the narrator receives an invitation from an artist friend, Alena, to be the first visitor to the Institute of Totalled Art. When he arrives at Alena's Manhattan apartment, he is asked to close his eyes. In response to the narrator's question as to what the institute is Alena tells him "You're in it" before disappearing into an adjacent room. When she returns, she drops what the narrator guesses might be "a series of porcelain balls or figurines" into his hands. Opening his eyes, the narrator observes: "what I was holding were the pieces of a shattered Jeff Koons balloon dog sculpture, an early red one" (131). The damaged artworks have been written off by the insurance company and now have, at least according to the adjuster's assessment, zero value. The Institute of Totalled Art is, then, less an institution than a conceit, a means by which Alena has convinced the insurance company to donate a number of the damaged art objects which would otherwise be stored under lock and key at a Long Island warehouse. It is agreed that someone ought to undertake study of these valueless objects which the head of the company–a peintre manqué–concurs are of "aesthetic and philosophical interest" (130).

Though the narrator of *10:04* is aware of the nature of the institute's contents before his visit, what this knowledge cannot prepare him for is the charge which the damaged art objects have about them. It is not only the Koons piece; around the institute/apartment there is a painting by Jim Dine, two panels of a triptych, pristine but absent their third, and others in evident states of disrepair (132). What the narrator is drawn to most of all are "not the slashed or burnt or stained artworks" but those which appear to be entirely without damage, as in the case of a Cartier-Bresson print which to

the naked eye “has no tears, scratches, fading, stains,” but which has nonetheless been deemed worthless (133). The narrator recounts:

> I sat on the makeshift daybed Alena had constructed for her studio out of cinder blocks and an old mattress—a mattress I’d checked more than once for the russet traces of bedbugs—and studied the Cartier-Bresson. It had transitioned from being a repository of immense financial value to being declared of zero value without undergoing what was to me any perceptible material transformation—it was the same, only totally different. (133)

What exactly is going on when the narrator speaks of this junked art as being “the same, yet totally different”? The proposition confounds the narrator as to speak of identity in such a way verges on the nonsensical. It would appear that that to which the narrator refers to is not identity. What is the same is the Cartier-Bresson’s materiality; the print is precisely as it was before being deemed worthless, materially speaking. At the level of the phenomenal the phrase rings true; what the narrator refers to–the experience of looking at a de-commodified art object–is less concerned with what the object is than what it does. It is the same, only now that the object no longer serves as a repository for value, what it does is totally different.

There is something revelatory about the experience of handling junked art for the narrator. The force of it is as a punch to the chest: when the narrator, stunned, at last looks up from the object at an expectant Alena he can only muster a monosyllabic “Wow” (134). When the narrator recalls his walk back to Brooklyn from Alena’s apartment across the Manhattan Bridge he notes: “everything my eye alighted on seemed totaled in the best sense: complete in extent or degree; absolute; unqualified; whole. It

was still fully afternoon, but it felt like magic hour, when light appears immanent to the lit" (134). The force of the revelatory experience is such that it persists as an afterimage as when the eye is exposed suddenly to a bright light: everything one sets one's eye upon is for a time perceived through the afterimage of what was seen. It is clear enough that the question of what junked art does can be answered in the negative by the formulation that it does not serve as a repository for value. But to approach an answer to the question of what junked art does in the positive sense quickens the pulse. One apprehends its opening onto something as yet unconsidered: a vast and beguiling something else.

Lerner's narrator muses that these totalled artworks could be "for or from a future where there was some other regime of value other than the tyranny of price" (133). What occurs in this scene is not simply an instance in which an object's becoming waste serves as a means by which the commodity fetish might be instructively demystified. Rather, the wasted object opens onto the image of a different regime of value than the one which dominates contemporary life.

0.1: *Approaching Waste*

This proposed intervention into the discussion of waste takes a different approach than what has been usual in the past several generations of scholarship on the subject. In 2003, Karen Barad expressed exasperation at a how "at every turn lately every 'thing'—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation" (801). The frenzy of thought in the 20th century which made up the linguistic and cultural turns may well have subsumed 'things' and materiality into their particular agendas. That waste refers as much to a practice as it does real stuff, that it

designates a category into which matter is sorted as opposed to a uniform type of matter, is almost enough to encourage one to declare the whole thing a matter of discourse. Waste is a word, we might say, and be done with the matter. Attending to waste as if it were simply matter does have its allure. In literary studies, scholars in the early 2000's like Bill Brown thought to orchestrate a reconnection with things as they are. As Brown writes, "we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things" (4). Brown's "Thing Theory" tracks objects as the contours of their objecthood fall apart, a process which he proposes as ending in thingness (4). This approach is not without its failings. As the anthropologist Severin Fowles points out, "thing theory's major blind spot is, quite literally, that which is unseen – or, rather, that which is absent but nevertheless experienced as a presence precisely because its absence is marked or emphatic" (25). Beyond the matter of absent presences, the fixation on the materiality of things deliberately ignores that about things which is immaterial, a move which unjustly elevates the former over the latter, tangible over the intangible. This thesis will pick up on what I term the modal intensities of waste—that array of agitating affects and injunctions toward use that waste tends to produce in those who apprehend it. These agitations are most easily expressed through the modal verbs: about waste is flurry of coulds, shoulds, woulds of a dizzying variety. This notion of modal intensities will be elaborated upon through this introduction and the two chapters that follow. It should be possible to historicize waste and through this process track how waste has come to be subject to modal intensities. In turn we might identify how it is that these modal

intensities might be disrupted and waste's peculiar place in political economy might be rerouted to different ends.

The etymology of the word "waste" provides some clues as to waste's historical development. John Scanlan writes that "The word 'waste' in Old and Middle English originally referred to a land or an environment that was unsuitable to sustain human habitation" but did not necessarily refer to land that was not fit for sustaining other forms of use, whether that be as a place to forage, hunt, gather timber, or put animals out to pasture (1). Fit for habitation, in pre-modern times, might be considered a near-synonym for the potential for agricultural activity. In the Yorkshire Domesday folios, for instance, it was not unusual that whole manorial landholdings would be given the status of wastes due to the lack of agricultural activity; in this context the designation of the land as waste was not a pronouncement on profitability, but was an assessment of the activity going on in such places (Whiteman 57). It is in this respect that the moor where one might cut peat or stalk deer is still accurately described as a waste. This understanding of waste has an economic element in that it describes a space outside the center of human life at the time, since in subsistence agriculture the farm retains its centrality, yet does not connote wrongdoing in any sense. This prior understanding of waste which arises from the environmental characteristics of a landscape does not preclude utility or the possibility that the land might yield products of value. Nor does it have at this prior stage an ethical element. Rather, waste was by no means an un-useful or hostile matter and was often integral to rural life in its manifestation as the village common, a reserve of matter to be made use of.

John Locke's provides us with a canonical assessment of waste in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Waste, which has hitherto acquired associations with land use and value, will additionally acquire an association with ethical injunctions. Locke, in his chapter on property in the *Second Treatise,* narrates the origin of waste such that the matter of waste is charged with the ethical failure that marks what is traditionally narrated as the passage of humans from a state of nature to civilization. In the state of nature, "which would keep without wasting or decay," Locke tells us, the difficulty of storing value meant that "though men had a right to appropriate by their labor, each one of himself, as much of the things of nature, as he could use; yet this could not be much, nor to the prejudice of others, where the same plenty was left to those who would use the same industry" (37). Foodstuffs, of course, tend toward quick spoilage, especially before the advent of grain-based agriculture. Money, which stores value, allows one to "heap up as much of…durable things as he pleased; the exceeding of the bounds of his property not lying in the largeness of his possessions, but the perishing of anything uselessly in it" (46). In Locke's account, this fall from Edenic pre-monetary forms of exchange is the origin of inequality. One might well conclude that in this tale of pre-monetary exchange, it is waste which is the mechanism staving off the money form which Locke considers to be inherently generative of inequality. Prior historical understandings of waste have dealt with it with in such a way that ethics are not at the forefront of the engagement with waste. But Locke's revisionist understanding of waste prior to the money form is intensely ethically engaged. In this narrative, waste was at one point virtuous, if not necessarily for what it did for its own time, then for its capacity to stave off the inequality of the world to come until the money form came about.

Once the money form becomes ubiquitous, however, Locke's orientation toward the ethics of waste changes. In its exploration of property, Locke's *Second Treatise* takes as its concern the natural right of individuals to appropriate waste: "land that is left wholly to nature, with no improvement through cultivation . . . is rightly called 'waste,' and we shall find the benefit of it amounts to little more than nothing" (42). While the common folk living contemporaneously to Locke who made use the waste–the uncultivated portion of the feudal estate–would surely dispute the description and judgement of waste that appears above, for Locke, what is extraordinary about waste is its potentiality as a site for the exercising of human virtue in the form of labour, which follows from the notion that "God, when he gave the world in common to all mankind, commanded man also to labour" (32). The argument goes that it is labour which brings value to land, and labour too which "remove[s] the item from the common state that nature has placed it in, and through this labour the item has had annexed to it something that excludes the common right of other men: for this labour is unquestionably the property of the labourer, so no other man can have a right to anything the labour is joined to" (27). What results, however, is a problem of a surplus of labour in need of a stuff upon which to exercise this virtuous human capacity. Land which is laboured upon is taken out of the common state of nature and annexed exclusively to the private property of the person who has worked the land—or the person employing the labourer to do so. This is a problem insofar as humans have received a command from God to labour. There is a certain social organization problem which follows. A logic about waste emerges in Locke's thought: "I ask whether in the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America, left to nature, without any improvement, tillage, or husbandry, a thousand acres yield the

needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land do in Devonshire, where they are well cultivated" (37). Here, the waste of land is representative of the failure of a society to organize itself such that one's labour capacities are discharged at the appropriate site. That people in the Americas live on largely uncultivated lands and enjoy less density of conveniences than in England is, for Locke, an objectionable mishandling of the God-given capacity to labour. While this formulation is grimly colonial, the same logic concerning waste applies equally well to commonly held lands in Britain as it does to the 'unenclosed commons' of the Americas.

The idea of waste as spoilage is succeeded, following the advent of money, by waste of virtue and in turn value in its unrealized capacity, most represented in uncultivated land. It follows that sites of waste, primarily in the form of uncultivated land, nearly synonymous with land not held privately (since if it is held privately it must have been worked into private property), become sites upon which to expend surplus labour and actualize the virtue that comes from following the commands of God. Waste is ethically elevated as before, but to a very different end. It is as if the problem of inequality has no hope of being resolved once it is unleashed alongside the money form. Rather, in this new formulation, waste has a charge about it precisely because it is the site upon which one ought to discharge one's capacity to labour. It is Locke's assertion then that labour brings value to that which is wasted by putting it to use. This is not so much to say that waste is the opposite of value as it is to posit waste as value's outer limit: "the degree zero of value" (Frow 25). After Locke, waste is a material marked out for appropriation.

The preoccupation surrounding waste in Locke's chapter on property primarily deals in the matter of what was considered wasted land. Nonetheless, waste's steadily growing association with value would eventually loosen the link between waste and land use. This process ought to be situated against its proper historical backdrop: the process of primitive accumulation and the proliferation of the commodity form. In Karl Marx's version of this narrative in *Capital*, as late as the middle of 18th century the common agricultural worker is still accustomed to a level of food security enabled by access to the means of subsistence such that "complaint is made if the cottage of the agricultural labourer does not possess an adjunct of one or two acres of land" (881). By the middle of the 19th century, the situation has altogether changed: "Nowadays," Marx writes, "the labourer is lucky if it is furnished with a small garden, or if he may rent a few roods of land at a great distance from his cottage" (881). As Marx writes,

> The spoliation of the Church's property, the fraudulent alienation of the state domains, the theft of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of ruthless terrorism, all these things were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation. They conquered the field for capitalist agriculture, incorporated the soil into capital, and created for the urban industries the necessary supplies of free and rightless proletarians. (895)

The separation of the mass of people from the lands meant the separation of these former workers of the land from their accustomed means of subsistence. The people would now have no other choice than to buy foodstuffs in the form of commodities sold at and on an increasingly national and–for commodities such as wheat–even global market. The fading

away of subsistence agriculture is part of the same process of primitive accumulation that causes the proliferation of the commodity form. The grain which once was harvested only so that the hand could feed the mouth of the peasant was now being brought to market, the same market from which the now agricultural wage-labourer was made to purchase the means of subsistence as commodity. As agriculture becomes less a means of subsistence than a means of producing commodities, so too does the concept of waste become less associated with the idea of agriculturally productive land than it does to the idea of productivity as such. Like the peasantry who would be turned out of their fields, so would waste be disconnected from the land with the rise of the commodity form as the wastes–the land on the feudal estate which was held in common and not under cultivation–were enclosed.

In response to this ethical injunction to enclose waste–which is to say put it to use–we ought to return to what is wonderous about waste. It will also be necessary to introduce another theoretical framework with which we might understand waste. Commodity culture invents a new kind of waste in the post-commodity, a typical form of contemporary waste. Some of these objects are the same, only totally different. Like the unenclosed common waste, dominant logics surrounding waste allow for its appropriation, since, belonging to no one and having been exorcised of value, it might belong to anyone and be put to use for some new purpose. In this respect, the allure of waste matter appears somehow agentic. It is as if waste wants us to put it to use somehow, or rather, it as if waste puts us to use so that it might once again be set in motion. Bruno Latour uses the term ‘actant’ to describe “any entity that modifies another entity in a trial,” the “competence” of which “is deduced from [its] performance" as

opposed to the presence or intensity of intentionality on the part of any actant (237). This is to declare a commitment to an animated and—even perhaps especially—self-animating matter, capable of acting upon what has traditionally been called the human. The term is of use to this thesis in that it allows us a language with which to speak of waste-human interactions. If the logics concerning waste are to be harnessed and rerouted, there is much to gain in attempting at an understanding of how it is that some types of actants have been animated to an outsized degree.

Maurizia Boscagli, a scholar who has written on materiality since the outset of her career, intervenes in questions of matter with an emphasis on subject-object relations and the place of objects amid discourse. Her particular interest is "stuff," which she defines as objects at the threshold of garbage (228). In his book *Roland Barthes*, Roland Barthes relates an amusing anecdote which describes exactly those objects to which Boscagli dedicates her study. In order to perform an operation on the author's lungs, the physicians had remove a piece of one of Barthes' ribs. In Barthes' own words, the piece of rib was given back to him "quite formally, wrapped up in a piece of medical gauze (the physicians, who were Swiss, as it happened, thereby professed that my body belongs to me, in whatever dismembered state they restored it to me: I am the owner of my bones, in life as in death)" (*Roland Barthes* 61). For a long time, Barthes kept the bone in a desk drawer, not knowing what to do with it (61). There it lay

> among such "precious" objects as old keys, a schoolboy report card, my grandmother B.'s mother-of-pearl dance program and pink taffeta card case. And then, one day, realizing that the function of any drawer is to ease, to acclimate the death of objects by causing them to pass through a sort of pious site, a dusty

> chapel where, in the guise of keeping them alive, we allow them a decent interval of dim agony, but not going so far as to dare cast this bit of myself into the common refuse bin of my building, I flung the rib chop and its gauze from my balcony, as if I were romantically scattering my own ashes, into the rue Servandoni, where some dog would come and sniff them out. (61)

The anecdote illustrates the power that stuff has to influence the behaviour of human actors. The same is true of all actants whether stuff or waste. For Barthes' the bone as an actant produces in him no sense of modal intensity, no desire to put it to use. Rather, he seems compelled to retain it, or retain his right to the stuff. here is no great impulse to put the stuff to use—it is not waste. The English language has blessed us with the term junk drawer to describe such an arrangement as is described in Barthes' anecdote. It may seem odd that the junk drawer may come before waste, but we might nonetheless admit that we often wish to retain our rights to things longer than the things themselves; a junk drawer is useful for such a purpose. Waste is what follows.

There is some continuity between my own conception of waste and Boscagli's. If I do not consider the contents of the junk drawer to be waste, it is for the reason that exclusive use-rights have not yet been cast away. Nevertheless, Boscagli's discussion of discarded objects does yield valuable insights into thinking about our interaction with these strange objects and how we might go about our inquiry of them. As Boscagli writes of the encounter with trash,

> the discarded object makes visible how much both subject and object are co-implicated in the networks that produce each of them. Reading the encounter allows one to think, in Deleuze's phrase, rhizomatically, in collective, political,

> and structural terms, not about who I am, and what the object is, but about our compromised position in the networks of reality and power to which we both belong. This allows me to interrogate how I am produced as part of materiality and vice versa, and thus to intervene differently in the conjunctures of subject and objects in which I participate. (229)

Boscagli makes a subject-object distinction but she still ascribes a marked agentic quality to matter. The emphasis is firmly on actants' performances rather than their essential makeup.

We ought not to think that what waste opens us onto is a connection with objects in themselves. For Boscagli, waste as an actant opens onto two affective pathways. The first of these pathways Boscagli declares a dead end. This would be the aesthetic treatment of waste. One such example of this affective pathway that Boscagli mobilizes is Gay Hawkins' reaction to Bill Keaggy's photographs of abandoned chairs in Saint Louis, Missouri in his book *50 Sad Chairs*. Hawkins writes:

> For me the most powerful effect [is] the way it captures the recalcitrance of trash, its lingering presence. Bill Brown describes this aspect of materiality as thingness . . . we glimpse thingness in irregularities in exchange circuits, in moments when objects stop working for us, and when we are not sure how to identify them. ("50 Sad Chairs" 50)

Boscagli has terse words for those who would imagine contact with waste as connecting to objects in some state of quiddity: "We should not be tempted to poetically imagine that the thing in all its reconquered thinginess inspires us to connect ethically or empathetically with the abandoned object's ontological essence or empirical existence"

(*Stuff Theory* 229). This is not to say that such an affective response does not exist; rather, Boscagli implies it is another one of those phenomenological influences of the commodity fetish refracting in the surface of its junked other; this aesthetic treatment results in a sense of having encountered a purification in waste "where the afterlife of the commodity is used to once again fetishize it" (229). There is, however, the other way: waste does have a recalcitrance about its matter. Should we, as Boscagli suggests, "foreground junk as a limit to categorizing," we might "thus focus on its capacity to signify the redundant, the wasted, the irredeemably out of place. This is a way of considering junk that disallows empathy, sadness, melancholy, or ecstasy to open a path to the more political affects of anger, passion, and disgust" (230).

Waste is a recalcitrant matter. Yet waste's alterity by no means precludes the impulse in the one who apprehends it to govern it, to put it to use. The opposite is true: it is waste's recalcitrance, its obstinant persistence in unproductivity, that appears to encourage those who apprehend waste to act upon it. In this respect, Boscagli's conclusions are less radical than they might appear: the political affects she invokes are reactions to waste's agitating dimensions that are reminiscent of classic responses to waste, only redeployed to different ends. Mary Douglas, for example, famously writes in *Purity and Danger* that dirt is "matter out of place" (44). But what seems to be simply a workable definition for dirt is far more expansive; it is to say, "Where there is dirt there is system" (35). Dirt, according to that text, is the material which is the repository for the values of purity and danger. A grain of sand, in this respect, can only be considered dirt in respect to the human beings who produce systems of values. A grain of sand is dirt only insofar as it sits atop floorboards. Much is the same for waste: where there is waste

there is a system which has need of it. In this sense, waste is an actant which tends to produce in humans the very affects which are constitutive of its being put to use.

I will readily admit that I chose to write on this subject because there is something about waste that attracts me. About waste there is some*thing*. This thing about waste is not waste itself: it is the agitating effect of its being subject to modal verbs—this thing about waste is its modal intensities. What might have been, could be, would be *if only*? Waste, then, appears to be forever under the sign of modal intensities. These modal intensities must themselves be conditional since dominant logics concerning waste vary from period to period, place to place. In the conditions of the present the modal intensities of waste attract those who apprehend it like a magnet: waste has a charge about it. We might conclude that what is extraordinary about the waste of the present is the degree to which it is charged with modal intensities which are out of all proportion. How can it be that waste in the contemporary moment is extraordinarily charged, more so than at other points in history? It is because the modal intensities of waste result from the intensity of the subordination of un-use to use–which today is expressed most often in the form of value–has reached an unprecedented degree.

That waste is unusually subject to modal verbs is the result of waste's peculiar place in political economy. Given that waste is suspended in the conditional by the making-use act which cleaves the used from the unused, under the conditions of the present, the imperative to make use of the unused is most often seen to be directed toward the extraction of value. Locke, for example, precedes both the invention of modern capitalism and the "perfect storm" which is the confluence of the imperative to make-use and the profit-motive — at Locke's time, the imperative to make-use might be most

rightly identified as being channeled into the British foray into the "unenclosed commons" of the Americas. The subordination of unuse to use, the unused to the in-use, then reaches its apotheosis in the feverishly accelerating extraction of value that characterizes the economic mode of the present.

I have claimed that waste as an actant induces humans to participate in certain performances such as putting waste to use in certain ways. When it comes to apprehending waste objects, this modal intensity is detectable at the level of the phenomenal. Hawkins, recall, apprehends among discarded chairs encountered roadside a certain "recalcitrance… its lingering," ("Sad Chairs," 54) while Boscagli reacts to these same discarded chairs with the political affects of "empathy, sadness, melancholy, or ecstasy" (230). This range of human reactions to waste matter might indicate a certain erratic valence appears about waste. If there are modal intensities about waste, there are also the thoughts and affects produced as second order reactions to these modal intensities—all these contribute to the appearance of an agitation about waste for those who apprehend it.

There is something else we might say about waste. It would not be accurate to say that waste's modal intensities are always present. We might look again to the episode in *10:04* in which the narrator of Lerner's novel experiences a revelation while handling totalled art. Totalled art does induce an intense reaction on the part of the character, but this reaction does not have anything to do with the application of modal verbs. There is no great agitation produced in the narrator to put this waste to use. Rather, it would seem that it would seem then, that there is a mode of apprehending waste that causes it to appear to behave differently. The usual relation between the waste actant and the one

who apprehends it has been altered. For Lerner's narrator, the force of different mode of apprehension is expressed bodily and intellectually: we can say that what he perceives at the waste object's opening onto a different world "some other regime of value other than the tyranny of price" (133). Casting his vision around the city, nothing has changed yet he seems to see it differently: "everything my eye alighted on seemed totaled in the best sense: complete in extent or degree; absolute; unqualified; whole. It was still fully afternoon, but it felt like magic hour, when light appears immanent to the lit" (134). What exactly has happened in this scene be explained in the final chapter of this thesis. Objects which open onto other regimes of value litter the streets though the eye tends to pass them over. This quotidian junk might be more representative of waste than its high art cousin in *10:04*. It is precisely that we encounter in everyday life objects that open onto the image of a life which is the same, yet totally different that we ought to study waste as a stuff vital to utopian thinking, a stuff that might circulate freely between people on some other basis than the tyranny of price and that which might constitute an as yet under-considered commons.

0.2: *Toward a Dialectical Image of Waste*

In this introduction I have sought to establish that there is in fact something about waste in the form of modal intensities. It is no easy thing to wander into the field of the study of things. From each corner issues the call for a singular approach to matter. The truth is that waste is not as thingly as one might be led to believe by proponents of such approaches. To overemphasize the thinglyness of things is to forget the perceptive and conceptual apparatuses that enable us to identify waste as such. It is not that waste cannot

exist without those who apprehend it; it is that waste's agitating field can only exist for those who apprehend it.

If we agree with Latour's conclusion that non-human actants can induce in human interlocutors' certain affects and experiences, then we can also get about to the meat of the matter with regard to the relation between waste and those who apprehend it: it the question of this relation's historicity. Rather than remaining stuck in mere description of waste, we can begin to put forth an explanation, which is to say theorize. Waste is not merely the *thing* it would appear to be since waste appears in both material and immaterial manifestations. We waste time, for instance, as easily as we waste plastic. Establishing historicity is important because to do so informs us not only how the conceptual system developed that allows us to identify waste as such but also how waste as an actant entered into its present relation with human actors.

My explanation in the chapter to come appears to take the form of something like genealogy of waste. This choice is informed by a Benjaminian approach to history, an attempt to articulate the relation between what has been and the now by constructing a dialectical image of waste, with waste's forgotten referent as one component of this stereoscopic image and waste as it is in the now as the other. In this chapter I posit that waste, a historical term for the uncultivated portion of the feudal estate upon which the common folk practiced access to make use of the land and its resources, would become a dead metaphor latently active in the conceptual system. The waste was at once the material expressions of a form of feudal agrarian egalitarianism based in custom and a parcel of land which in economic terms–by virtue of its status as a common–was not valueless but representative of value at the zero-degree, the extraction of which was

foreclosed. With the enclosure of the wastes, waste's original referent–a referent inclusive of waste's social *and* economic dimensions, each because of the other–vanished. With respect to this vanishing, I argue that a metaphorization of waste occurred. With the original referent gone, the use of the word waste became a metaphorical use, its egalitarian dimension gone. The vehicle of a metaphor only takes up but an aspect of itself to apply to the tenor. In the case of waste, that aspect would be the original referent's economic dimension as the zero-degree of value. Since the disappearance of the original referent over the course of enclosure is integral to the metaphorization of waste, I argue that waste in the contemporary sense became something of a dead metaphor—or rather, an undead metaphor latently active in the conceptual system enabling one to identify waste wherever one looks and to repeat the gesture of enclosure. Custom having been defeated, there is now little to foreclose waste's exploitation and much to encourage it, namely an economizing mode of thought that the undead metaphor of waste cultivates and reinforces. The modal intensities about waste are then the expression of the undead metaphor's latent presence in the conceptual system.

My final chapter takes the form of an examination of Agnès Varda's documentary *The Gleaners and I*. Waste is that which gleaners pick. An invocation of waste, I argue is always, even if imperceptibly, an invocation of utopia since the exclusive use-rights embedded in the commodity form are relinquished or staved off in waste and the object in question is subject to a system of property of both the distant past and far-off, imagined future: the commons. Waste in particular, then, I claim, is a vital subject matter to apprehend rightly in order that its utopic potential might be mobilized. I continue with

my argument concerning the undead metaphor of waste's contribution to enforcing economizing thought, framing this in terms of the "storm of progress" to which Benjamin refers in his essay "On the Concept of History." Following Benjamin, I argue that the dialectical image is a historiographic-pedagogic tool by which the one who apprehends these images may be jolted to historical awareness and perhaps even to action. In my analysis I find that *The Gleaners and I* posits a role for the artist in the construction of dialectical images. I analyze how the documentary at once constructs a dialectical image of the gleaner and provides a powerful counter-metaphor to the undead metaphor of waste in the artist-as-gleaner—waste not as that which ought to be enclosed but rather that from which a new world based upon different values may be constructed.

Chapter 1: The Metaphor of Waste

> "And birds and trees and flowers without a name
> All sighed when lawless law's enclosure came
> And dreams of plunder in such rebel schemes
> Have found too truly that they were but dreams."
> —John Clare, "The Mores"

We look into a municipal garbage can and we see waste. Also, at the same time, we see wrappers, cigarette butts, the remains of a lunch, and a plastic container that ought to be in the recycling. And beneath this, that layer of material we can see from our vantage point, we can be sure that there is more waste; the garbage can is waste all the way down. We can be absolutely certain of this fact. How is it that we can be so sure that the garbage, beneath that which we can see, contains only waste? When we speak of a thing that is waste, there is also that *thing*. There is a *thing* that is waste, or better, a thing *as* waste. How can it? Can it and discover how it becomes waste. Things are slipped into the garbage can and become waste as easily we slip 'a' into the place of 'i,' take as for is and cast the latter away. This slipping, this casting away, this twinned gesture seems to contain the whole truth of waste.

So the material in the municipal garbage can is not waste as such. Where can we find waste as such? We can find it in the garbage can, though not in the material the garbage can contains. Is it that we have a garbage can of language? How did we come to acquire such a thing?

In *Metaphors We Live By* George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write on how metaphor is pervasive our lives and within our conceptual system, most of which is at base "metaphorical in nature" (5). We cannot relegate the concepts we live by to "matters of the intellect," Lakoff and Johnson argue, since "They also govern our everyday

functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people" (4). Not a thing is waste, only a thing as waste. As–on display in the open mechanism of simile–is the invisible moving part in the metaphorical machine: this is (as) that, denoting the silent articulation of common ground that unites vehicle and tenor. As Lakoff and Johnson write "the essence of metaphor is under-standing and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (5). This object in the dark—have we have happened upon a corpse? Metaphors sustained lose their distinctions. Objects appear to be identical to themselves as the vehicle and the tenor merge as in the leg of a chair. The leg of a chair is a chair's leg. What is in the garbage can is waste.

Under the sign of the metaphor, it becomes clear that we must take 'a thing is waste' as a claim of affinity–a thing as waste–rather than a self-evident fact. We must superimpose the two phrases, then, as in a long exposure, since the former is always at once the latter. But this is wrong too insofar as metaphor suppresses and brings to light in the same motion. As Lakoff and Johnson write it is "the very systematicity [of metaphor] that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another …will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (e.g., the battling aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor" (13). The vehicle always leaves something of itself behind; this is why every metaphor, apt or otherwise, is always one part true and one part false. The metaphor's vehicle that does not leave something of itself behind would no longer be a metaphor; it would be a faulty truth claim concerning identity.

What is *as* waste (rather than what *is* waste) and how such a situation might have come about is the pertinent question to understanding waste's unique modal intensities as an actant and its special place in political economy. The writing in this chapter, then, might be considered as a long exposure, starting with the original referent of waste and continuing until the onset of waste in its contemporary form. Observed merely as material, waste appears a matter of things, the linguistic designation a distraction from whatever is essential about the object in itself. Likewise, observed merely as language, waste appears as such, a matter of metaphor, of rhetoric. But there are material stakes to language, especially language as relevant to political economy as the language of waste. This is not to say that there is not an undeniable coherence to the metaphorized waste; "structural metaphors are grounded in systematic correlations within our experience" (Lakoff and Johnson 62). As Lakoff and Johnson write, prominent structural metaphors such as 'labour is a resource' and 'time is a resource'–the expression of an economic sensibility to which metaphorized waste is intimately engaged in– "emerged naturally in our culture because of the way we view work, our passion for quantification, and our obsession with purposeful ends" (68). This chapter will discuss this development with attention to waste.

This thesis does not make a claim of waste's non-existence (there really is waste in the garbage can) but rather pursues the line thinking, as Heisenberg and Bohr claimed of particles, that the act of observing a thing as such–from such an angle, in such a place–is what makes it so. Having observed something as waste, a whole range of possibilities present themselves, registered as modal intensities about the object in question, whether that object is material or immaterial. This is because "Structural metaphors in our

conceptual system also induce similarities" (Lakoff and Johnson 148). The question is what to do with this understanding of waste, to assess how it has and might be mobilized according to various interests. This chapter, then, is a reconstruction of how waste might have become metaphorized during the onset of capitalism. To complete this task I will track the changing sense of waste from one based in custom that obligated landowners to the commonfolk to one to one based in property, which reversed this sense of obligation.

To begin with we will look to Marx's chapter on primitive accumulation in *Capital*. The transformation from the feudal land system to the tenant system separated labourers from their means of production and transformed them into wage labourers. Enclosure of the common waste–which is to say, the uncultivated lands on the feudal estate that the commonfolk made use of for purposes other than crop-growing–Marx argues, is the originary act of inequity. But lacking in *Capital* is an account of how the exclusive use-rights that enclosure was predicated upon came to be; this will be explored by way of a discussion of Ellen Wood's *Liberty and Property* which helps us to establish the particular conditions in England that lead to this situation. From there we will proceed to E.P. Thompson who argues in *Customs in Common* that it was the establishment and the progressive empowerment of exclusive rights of use that finally brought an end to the regime of custom that governed agrarian life, which as Ellen Wood argues was the setting from which capitalism emerges. Thompson will be thus read alongside Ellen Wood's "The Agrarian Origins of Capitalism." We will at times make mention of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina.* The choice may seem unintuitive, but the text was written and takes place during the years immediately following the abolition of serfdom and the arrival of the tenurial system and in the character of Levin provides a good realist account of a

landlord's managing of the new system in the countryside, something we don't precisely get in the fiction of 16th century England. Tolstoy's account of Levin's dealings with waste, operative in that text not as the common waste, but as dead metaphor of waste which is common in our language today, is of singular usefulness for its illustrations of a person caught in the rapture of the modal intensities of waste, as the zero-degree of value, serves as fodder for the imagination. We will end with a post-mortem of the dead metaphor of waste—and we will find it strangely animate.

1.1: "*So Called Primitive Accumulation"*

In the section of *Capital* called "So Called Primitive Accumulation" Marx remarks on a difficulty encountered by all traditional political economists. It is the difficulty of determining the origins of inequality:

> the accumulation of capital presupposes surplus-value; surplus-value presupposes capitalist production; capitalist production presupposes the availability of considerable masses of capital and labour-power in the hands of commodity producers. The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn around in a never-ending circle, which we can only get out of by assuming a primitive accumulation… not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure. (873)

In non-Marxist political economy, the narrative of primitive accumulation has a tendency to take the form of an apologia for inequality as much as an explanation, a tale of original sin in which it is the "lazy rascals, spending their substance" who are cast from the Eden that the "diligent, intelligent, and above all frugal elite" enjoy in continuity from those

times (873). In other words, the presence of capital reserves is a pre-condition for capitalism and therefore it is necessary that some event–a rupture–occurred that can explain such a presence. This rupture is that which tears the "the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his own labour; it is a process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-labourers" (874). The transformation of all labourers into wage-labourers marks the imposition of the market as the plane upon which life is reproduced.

Marx is correct to say that primitive accumulation occurred under the sign of "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force" in that primitive accumulation–much of it–took place via extra-economic coercion (874). We must also admit that such force has often been legally sanctioned, particularly when that force is used against the foreigner. If the law supported extra-economic coercion in feudal times, it also has developed to serve as the backbone of economic exploitation, namely in its capacity to enforce contracts and exclusive property rights. If we take as our subject the formation of capitalism then we must speak about England, where, as Marx says, expropriation–meaning 'the separation of the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his labour'–has the classic form (876). Simply, expropriation of the common wastes marks the originary act of capitalism.

From the earliest stages of the expropriation of the common wastes we encounter a disjuncture between the practices of expropriating the common waste and frameworks for enacting these practices. In part, it is a problem stemming from the manner in which certain features of English feudalism lingered into the ages of agrarian and even

industrial capitalism and were particularly pronounced in certain areas of rural life. If at later stages in the development of capitalism exclusive property rights enabled landowners to drive countryfolk from the land more or less at will, early expropriations did not necessarily have a proper legal basis for doing so. Instead, these expropriations occurred in a piecemeal fashion, each a little different from the next, the law only later catching up to facilitate expropriation at scale. If expropriation might not yet occur absolutely and at scale, it could still be executed by way of seemingly minor incursions into the wastes. Such early expropriations operated by way of negation: access to the common waste by the countryfolk was steadily cut off, leaving the greater–eventually the total–share to the landowner. These earliest expropriations did not necessarily involve the law, though as the centuries passed by the law increasingly became the favoured instrument of expropriation.

If Marx writes extensively on the British enclosures of the 16th through the 19th century in the first volume of *Capital*, it might be said that he somewhat neglects to give the reader an account of how the basis for such actions came to develop. In particular, in his chapter on primitive accumulation, Marx does not give an account of the development of exclusive property rights. To my thinking, it is exclusive property rights that are the determining factor in waste's exceptionality; it is this aspect that will allows us to propose forming a dialectical image of waste. It is my assessment that given the centrality of enclosure–and its twinned term improvement–in the development of thinking about waste it is also necessary to get at how the groundwork of enclosure came about where and when it did, and to ground these explorations in the legal and political developments proper to them. If the word 'waste' appears less in the next pages than it has in those

previous, this is because a detour must necessarily be made in order for the matter to be got at again.

1.2: *Living Off the Land*

While John Locke, as we have said, marks out waste for appropriation, Locke's account neither advents nor anticipates the modern conception of waste as a thing to be appropriated. If anything, Locke articulates a judicial and economic revolution already in the process of unfolding for a hundred odd years in the courts, countryside, and Parliament of England, not to mention in the least the extraordinary appropriation of lands in the Americas apprehended as waste by European colonizers. This chapter follows an enduring thread in the thought of Ellen Meiksins Wood, namely that capitalism is of agrarian origin in the England of the 16th century; it is here, as Wood writes in "The Agrarian Origins of Capitalism," that "producers and appropriators, and the relations between them [first] came to be so market dependent" (14). To be quite clear, "producers were exploited by appropriators in non-capitalist ways for millennia before the 'advent of capitalism'" (14). Insofar as there were markets, there had yet to emerge a united market based upon competition between sellers at the level of production cost (17). This would soon change.

The reader of Tolstoy will remember the situation of young Levin at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, ribbed by his friend Oblonsky for his temperamental opposition to taking up state office. The mention of Tolstoy's text in is apropos for the purposes of this section, which discusses the transition from feudalism to agrarian capitalism; such a transition was taking place at the time during which the novel was

written and set. A self-imposed exile to the country estate such as Levin's is not to be taken as a foolhardy, life or death economic undertaking, but it would nevertheless entail consigning oneself to relative obscurity from society life as well as the economic advantages of state office. No other character in the novel manages his estate so personally as Levin. This is not to say of course, that an appropriator of peasant agricultural labour alone could not make a living. If serfdom had been abolished in 1861 and extra-economic appropriation had seemingly ceased, nevertheless that which was rendered unto the proprietor was done so on the economic basis of a money rent paid by tenant farmers. But for an aristocrat to live off his ancestral holdings in the Imperial Russia of the 1870s would signify merely living, not thriving, to the culture of the day. There had been nothing in Russia like the culture of agricultural improvement which emerged in the countryside in the England of the 16th century; a country estate was no guarantee of an income of any great magnitude to its proprietor. (Of course, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the arrival of agrarian capitalism to the Russian countryside did mark the start of new possibilities of enrichment for the landowning classes, a phenomenon that the reader observes over the course of Levin's time at his estate.) In order to thrive, the popular sense among the nobility was that one needed to take up an office of some kind, in which extra-economic extraction continued in the form of taxes to be paid out as exorbitant state salaries. This is the case of Oblonsky, for instance, who, though a prince, can only to fulfil the promise of wealth and power that his noble position might imply through employment in the state apparatus. Whatever services these offices might provide did not necessarily pay out any great social dividends. As Koznyshev remarks to his brother Levin on the activities of the Zemtsvo, the local

governmental body, “We pay the money and it all goes in salaries, and there are no schools, no district nurses, no midwives, no dispensaries–nothing!” (Tolstoy 262). The image which Tolstoy gives us of the life of landowner-office-holders in 1870s Imperial Russia is to a large degree the same formation as was in France from the 16th-18th centuries; the emergence a class of landowner-office holders is also the story of the emergence of the large state bureaucracies that we continue to live alongside to this day. Even unto the 19th century, Marx would describe the state apparatus thusly: “the material interest of the French bourgeoisie is most intimately bound up in maintenance of just such a large and extensively ramified governmental machine. There the bourgeoisie provides for its own superfluous membership; and supplies, in the shape of government salaries, what it can not pocket in the form of profit, interest, rent, and fees” (*The 18th Brumaire* 30).

The situation was quite otherwise elsewhere in Europe. In the England of the 16th century landowners found themselves more able to extract sufficient wealth and wield significant power on the basis of their landholdings alone (Wood, *Liberty and Property* 212). If bureaucratic careers served to supplement rent incomes on the continent, such economic pressures were not present to the same degree in England. The agrarian countryside in England was already more productive than its continental counterpart, its landowner population more ensconced in the local terrain with no absolutist monarch to drag nobles to the court. Increasingly the English countryside was being oriented toward a kind of agricultural production that proved to be exceptionally profitable. Exceptional too was that this period of exceptional agricultural profit occurred in tandem with a mass exodus of peasant labourers from their former residences (213). The English landowners

had discovered sheep farming at scale to socially disastrous, if highly profitable, result. As Thomas More writes in *Utopia*:

> The increase of pasture . . . by which your sheep, which are naturally mild, and easily kept in order, may be said now to devour men, and unpeople, not only villages, but towns; for wherever it is found that the sheep of any soil yield a softer and richer wool than ordinary, there the nobility and gentry, and even those holy men the abbots, not contented with the old rents which their farms yielded, nor thinking it enough that they, living at their ease, do no good to the public, resolve to do it hurt instead of good. (19)

The dramatic changes in the countryside were a preoccupation of the Tudor period. Though the farmland, especially in the south of England, might have become relatively 'unpeopled,' these former peasant-labourers were by no means disappeared by the 'devouring' sheep. If some dispossessed peasants-labourers were dispersed to cities, many others remained as spectres haunting the site of their demise. These remained in the countryside as "a plague of vagrancy and vagabondage," not to mention banditry, giving rise to a kind of literature such as More's which appealed to the ruling classes to act in the face of social breakdown in the countryside and towns (Neal Wood 21). But if social commentators of the Tudor period saw sheep as trampling the countryside, they saw landowners as doing much the same. Nevertheless, Tudor commentors were keen to distinguish between the good landowner and the bad. If there was the country gentlemen who understood his conduct as a proprietor as being integral to the general social wellbeing of England, there were also the "ungentle gentlemen" who were "caterpillars

of the commonwealth;" it was these latter types who were to blame for the crisis of the countryside (Neal Wood 176).

If the famously lush English countryside was especially well suited to sheep-grazing, this fact alone would be insufficient to explain the encroachment of uniformly green sheep pastures into the variegated fields of crops that made up the traditional agricultural land-use pattern of the rural landscape. A single line of Marx explains the origins of the first wave of enclosures thusly: "The rapid expansion of wool manufacture in Flanders and the corresponding rise in the price of wool in England, provided the direct impulse for these evictions" (*Capital* 878-879). What Marx here references took place prior to the 16th century, but even so, this socially disastrous land-use change in England occurring as a result of market conditions gives us some clue as to the economic basis for the appropriation of common wastes by landowners. But what had begun playing out by the 16th century in the arena of countryside land use occurred in tandem with substantial developments in law. These developments themselves occurred against the backdrop of an English society and state which had been for some time developing according to different lines than those on the European continent. Whether or not it was any consequence that the 'ungentle gentlemen' were not in the good graces of Tudor social commentators was a moot point. It had become increasingly accepted that the English body politic was made up of free individuals acting in accordance with one another. As Wood writes, "the specific development of English society and the English state produced a tradition of political thought in which individuals, without mediation by corporate entities, were conceived as the basic constituents of the state" (*Liberty and Property* 216). This last point is very much in contrast to the French situation at the time.

Though absolutism may have been emerging in the 16th century, nevertheless France remained a domain in which the parcellized sovereignty that characterized Western European feudalism was still present. Wood describes this Western European feudal model of parcellized sovereignty as follows:

> The elaborate feudal network of competing jurisdictions, bound together – when not in open conflict – by a complex apparatus of legal and contractual relations…The main 'political' agent was not the individual citizen but the possessor of some kind of secular or ecclesiastical jurisdiction, or a corporate entity with its own legal rights, a degree of autonomy and often a charter defining its relation to other corporations and superior power. (19)

With this came an immensely complicated legal system, or more accurately, an expansive network of overlapping legal systems which one, by virtue of their position and association, would be required to navigate differently in various parts of the Kingdom. The situation was such that, although several centuries of absolutism "succeeded to a considerable degree in limiting seigneurial and local jurisdiction" it was the case that "on the eve of the Revolution there were still approximately 360 different law codes in France, with various seigneurial, local and corporate powers contesting jurisdiction with the monarchy, and customary law challenging the supremacy of state legislation" (15). Such problems were not present in England, where the landowning classes benefited from considerable centralization of law, and this without the complication of an absolutist monarch keen on using the courts as an instrument by which to wield power.

Contrary to the French case, the England of the 16th century was one of 'composite sovereignty' exemplified by the mixed constitution which has the Crown *in*

Parliament, as opposed to over it (Wood 225). English law had developed along a different path and by the 16th century was already far more centralized than the legal codes of France and other corners of Europe. Since "the evolution of a unified system of law on which the ruling class depended to sustain its property and power" political conflict between noble landowners and the monarch did not play out by way of an entrenchment in parcellized sovereignty (23). Rather, since legal rights were vested in individuals instead of corporate bodies, it was the nobles and the gentry who advocated for centralization rather than an absolutist monarch. The English nobles had disestablished their personal armies and adopted an economic mode of exploitation, meaning that economic exploitation could no longer occur but by the enforcement of law by the state. By the forfeiture of feudal independence, the nobility necessarily favoured a unitary state with an empowered Parliament and English law. In this respect, Wood explains that the tendency toward absolutism in the Stuart monarchs lacked a strong basis in the British context, where it was more a naked play at personal power; the King-over-Parliament, and an already–and for Europe, an unusually–centralized state at that. In this light, the markedly unstable, war-ridden 17th century can be read as a period of much importance to the development of capitalism. When in 1628 the Petition of Right was put forth by Parliament, it was a document that, in claiming special rights for Parliament, "represented itself not as an assertion of parliamentary sovereignty but as a statement about the 'rights and liberties of the subject'" (Wood 225). This cornerstone of English constitutionalism then took for granted the state as an already "unified jurisdiction" which the "rights of the citizen (or subject)" might be asserted against (225). In this respect, we can identify here the emergence of a kind of legal personhood altogether

different from the qualified and relativized legal rights of citizens of continental Europe, which at the time of the Petition was largely still operating along the lines of feudal codes. Something like the basis of a universal legal subject is laid out in this petition, which affirms the rights of individuals in the face of the state, particularly property rights (226).

Whatever the nominal nature of what the Tudor monarchs had done to curtail enclosure through legislation pertaining to rural land use (Marx, *Capital* 880-882), with the conclusion of the chaos of the 17th century and with a return to stable constitutional monarchism, the means by which the monarch might oppose enclosure had been all but abolished. The enshrinement of individual property rights as inviolable in turn empowered the landowning nobility and gentry to accumulate with the confidence that no amount of opposition from high or low would have the power to overturn their acquisitions. Extra-economic power would not be wielded against the landed, though they would be subject to market forces. But also, it incentivized the formalization of property in the mode that was both most suited to maximizing the economic exploitation of a given area and the most legally secure from the interference of the state. This was a fact that landowners would not need have needed explained to them; naturally, if one aims at making a profit in perpetuity, land which one is able to exploit without regard to others' needs from that land, and without the fear that the land might be removed from one's possession by the state, that is, expropriated for the common good, is the kind of land one wants to have. Only, there were many in Britain who enjoyed–required, even, in order to facilitate the reproduction of their individual living conditions and their communities–considerable access to lands not in their exclusive possession.

1.3: *Practices of Access*

For the most part, access to the common waste did not exist as a right in the sense we understand that term today, even if at points in history practices of access and the law intersected with one another directly in ways that might enshrine their practice as a legal right. Though the term 'right to commons,' 'common rights' or variations thereof are sometimes used–sometimes by authors that I quote–this language is by and large misrepresentative of how usage of the common waste was practiced and protected 'on the ground.' In fact, the arrival of the language of rights to the common waste is concurrent–not coincidentally, as I will show–with the vanishing of such agrarian practices. So in keeping with this, I will generally use the phrase 'practices of access,' and in doing so emphasize the actual acts of use which occurred rather than the legality of these acts during a particular period of the development of the law. As E.P. Thompson writes in *Customs in Common*, "At the interface between law and agrarian practice we find custom. Custom itself is the interface, since it may be considered both as praxis and as law" (97). This is to say that it was custom that dictated what could and could not be done in the arena of practice. Custom is at its roots common: construed out of commonly held apprehensions. Custom is also highly localized in that it pertains to a locality and with regard to practices of access it pertains as often to precise corners of local landscapes as it does to general rules of use:

> The land upon which custom lay might be a manor, a parish, a stretch of river, oyster beds in an estuary, a park, mountain grazing, or a larger administrative

> unity like a forest. At one extreme custom was sharply defined, enforceable at law, and (as at enclosure) was a property: this is the business of the court roll, the manorial courts, the recitations of customs, the survey and of village by-laws. In the middle custom was less exact: it depended on the continual renewal of oral traditions, as in the annual or regular perambulation of the bounds of the parish. (98)

At the opposite extreme to legally enforceable custom there are those customs that are least codified: "unwritten beliefs, sociological norms, and usages asserted in practice" (100). These are also the most easily contestable, most easily swept aside in courts, and not without coincidence, "it may be the area most significant for the livelihood of the poor and the marginal people in the village community" (101). This plurality of practices and rules pertaining to them, their varied expression and status, is difficult to imagine from the contemporary standpoint in which fixed and exclusive property right determine the way we understand how we might make use of land and resources.

Whatever associations the term might conjure up, it would be a mistake to believe that there was fixity to custom. Rather, there was a marked dynamism to the relations between different parties in the agrarian communities of the countryside. If custom cannot be imposed from above, since it is only the sum of principles pertaining practice that are held in common, custom is nonetheless subject to constant negotiation. This is because, as Thompson writes, "Agrarian custom was never fact. It was ambience. It may best be understood with the aid of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'…Within this habitus all parties strove to maximise their own advantages. Each encroached upon the usages of the others" (102). This meant for frequent disputes, only some of which might have

eligible to go before a court of law. As Thompson recounts, in 1724 Mr. Goode, a rector whose church enjoyed access, used a sermon to air grievances. Of the offending party, the local landowner, Goode proclaimed: "They do much provoke the wrath of God upon themselves, which use to grind up the doles and marks, which of ancient time were laid for the division of meers and balks in the fields, to bring the owners to their right. *They do wickedly, which do turn up the ancient terries of the fields, that old men beforetime' with great pains did tread out*" (100; my emphasis). The negotiation which is at the core of custom proper has everything to do with disputes over the practices of times past, but always remains in the territory of affirmations of memory–however they cleave to or from historical fact–but critically not in the disavowal of custom as a basis for practices of access as such.

Not only were so called common rights differentiated by the degree and type of their codification (in oral tradition, in by-laws, in written or oral contracts, etc.) but so to did they vary to a great degree in the type of access that were practiced. Popular conceptions of the common tend to a simplified spatialization: the common pasture. While this prototypical common certainly did exist and was every bit a feature of the open field system that characterized the agricultural landscape of much of Europe, it was complemented by an array of rules and accompanied by a wide variety of practices of access pertaining both to other types of landscape and to particular products or features thereof. For bogs and fens there was turbary; for woods there was estovers and pannage. The common pasture was itself subject to restrictions: cattle and sheep were permitted, while pigs were put out in woods on a seasonal basis. Norms were sometimes broken or customary practices deviated from in such a way that they caused damage to the

landscape and impeded other users' ability to practice access. Short of enclosure, a number of activities on the land might hamper or prevent customary practices of access altogether. In Essex in 1720, for instance, countryfolk complained that "the lord and lady were felling timber, selling logs, overstocking the forest with cattle, ploughing up the greensward, and setting coney warrens whose rabbits were 'eating up their green corn and poysoning their meadows'" (Thompson 101). These were of interest to the countryfolk insofar as practices of access extended beyond simply the extent of the common pasture. The right to graze one's animals on the waste is frequently recalled as the prototypical right to the commons, but the less recalled practices of access were equally if not more critical to daily and seasonal needs: turbary (extracting peat), estovers (cutting down small trees and shrubs), and pannage (taking pigs to forage in the autumn) all served to meet daily and seasonal needs. In this sense, practices of access were spatially and temporally more diverse than is often imagined, and waste more expansive.

What unites the diverse practices of access is their leverage of waste. If in the feudal system of extra-economic exploitation, a portion of the crop had to be rendered unto the lord, practices of access to waste ensured direct control of means of production often forgotten by Marxists when they speak of the feudal era. In those accounts, the peasantry's direct control of the fields that provided the crops necessary for them to survive is emphasised. But it was not only the fields that were the means of production but also the fens, meadows, streams, and woodlands in proximity to the fields they tended. The practices of access that occurred in these places were necessary supplements to the produce of the fields: the resources that these sites of waste contained were the materials that enabled the inhabitant of the countryside to engage in construction, heat

homes, to compliment the diet with meat and milk, to clothe the family in woolens in addition to flax; all this, potentially, without being forced to depend upon the market. In other words, if access to the means of production in the fields enabled the countryfolk the security that they might reproduce their conditions, it was access to the wastes which made it possible to live beyond mere scrounging, to approach something proximate to living well.

Custom also made dispensations for the poorest of the poor. The practice of gleaning is so ancient as to be described in the Old Testament: "And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger" (Leviticus 23:22). In this context the material which pertained to gleaning included not only that portion intentionally left behind (the corners at the edge of the field) but also those grains that fell to the ground during the reaping and–as a distinct category–whatever portion of the harvest that was forgotten in the field when the harvesters left to thresh the grain (Deuteronomy 24:19). If these distinctions did not necessarily survive intact across millennia and many thousands of miles, they nevertheless serve to illustrate neatly the way waste and mutual aid might be bound up with each other in the form of a reserved, commonly accessible bundle of resources. This particular reservation of waste, though often informal and sometimes outside the bounds of strict legality, has proved remarkably resilient as a practice**.**

Gleaning would be incorporated into the array of practices of access to waste in Europe that provided some stability and relief from poverty for the countryfolk. If the most insecure practices of access like gleaning provided the poorest with some scant

chance at reproducing their social condition, its continued–if contested–existence also underwrote the legitimacy of agrarian custom and of those fortunate enough to practice access under conditions of greater security. In the aforementioned dispute between the rector and the manor house, after the sermon condemning the greed of the lord and lady in question "all farmers were exhorted 'to leave behind some ears of corn for the poor gleaners'" (Thompson 100). As the most informal, most "asserted in practice" alone of the practices of access, gleaning underwrote the moral economy of agrarian custom (100).

1.4: *The Eve of Metaphorization*

The discussion should be brought back, briefly, to the idea of a metaphorized waste. We should paint a brief picture of what we have in waste before it is metaphorized. Waste has, at the high point of practices of access, a rather stable referent in the common waste, a pattern of land-use in which a quantity of uncultivated land is reserved as a place in which all might access resources freely. The common waste has particular economic and social aspects discussed above, namely that the appropriation of surplus value is disallowed on the waste, unlike in the fields, and that the use of waste is not restricted by virtue of relations of ownership to the waste. That the appropriation of surplus value from the waste is impossible, that anyone might make use of the waste, renders waste the zero degree of value in that waste's capacity for value is 'locked-away' to the extent that it is set aside as a site of production outside the market. But that waste is value's zero degree hardly means that waste might not have use-value or exchange value. What is different, however, with waste as opposed to other arrangements of property is that, regardless of the fact that the appropriation of surplus value is precluded on the

waste, the waste is a means by which to allocate use-values to whatever person might need them without regard for that person's ability to attain them on the market; the labourer is in direct contact with the means of production. This is also to say that waste is not at this time considered unproductive but rather unprofitable. Waste then is not unused but is rather a socially valuable reserve of use-values of certain kinds to be accessed according to the criterion of need as expressed through the labour of making-use of the common waste. We have in waste prior to metaphorization a referent of a complete economic and social dimension in which values of each kind are consciously related.

1.5: *Improvement, or Levin's Complaint*

As we have said, landowners in England were able extract great wealth on the basis of their landholdings alone. Along with early abolition of serfdom and the adoption of the tenurial system, there had developed in England a unique culture of agricultural improvement, perhaps best exemplified in the production of a significant literature on the subject and the activities of The Royal Society. In France, for instance, there was nothing like "the 'improvement' literature of seventeenth-century England" (Wood, *Liberty and Property*, 300). As Paul Slack writes in *The Invention of Improvement*, "For most of the sixteenth century to improve was to make a profit from land. The verb had its roots in an Anglo-Norman term 'emprower' and in the medieval Latin 'approare', with the consequence that in the fifteenth century 'enprowment' or 'emprowment', and 'approvement', were both nouns used about land and profit" (4). Generally speaking, the word was used to describe profitable innovations pertaining to agriculture and generally not of a technological variety. This is to say, prior to the mechanical and chemical

breakthroughs that mark industrialized agriculture, the economic productivity of the countryside was more a rearrangement of what was already present–namely land and labour–as opposed to the application of labour-saving or output-increasing devices or substances such as novel fertilizers to already existing processes. In other words, improvement–in rearranging the matter of land and labour power in order to orient toward profit–occurs primarily at the level of the concept. This last point will be elaborated upon in coming sections.

It is not difficult to imagine how improvement and waste become antonymic. Waste would not render a profit to the landowner. Not being a site of cultivation, no portion of the products of the waste collected were to be allocated to the landowner meaning that the use-values and exchange-values of the products of the waste stayed with the labourer. Insofar as waste *was* a common, the landowner had no viable claim to its products.

Slack credits Francis Bacon for popularizing the application of the word 'improvement' to subjects other than agriculture in his 1605 book *Advancement of Learning* (5). In this text Bacon "taught that learning might be improved, 'improved and converted by the industry of man' in order to 'correct ill husbandry'; and his essays and letters referred to the improvement of the king's lands and revenues and to 'improvements of things invented'" (5). The notion of improvement as being a generalizable concept has been naturalized by the passing of centuries, but Bacon's leap is nonetheless a radical and complicated one that we will have to disentangle. What we might say off the bat that Bacon's innovation is a linguistic one in that it supplies the basis for a novel metaphor. This metaphor was applied to a number of areas: "In the

1640s Baconian reformers of agriculture and education found it natural to transfer ideas of enclosing, nurturing, and improving from one sphere to the other, and once ‘what is good in children’ and their ‘intellectual abilities’ could be improved, so, by 1650, could the whole of nature and the whole nation” (5). What we are dealing with in this metaphorization cannot exactly be the assertion that we can and should innovate new methods to make a variety of aspects of life more profitable—for instance, to make children more profitable through education, though that is at least one function of education in that learning cultivates certain varieties of labour power. Rather, it would seem that this metaphorization of improvement shows a certain agitation around states of being, that the objects of our attention should somehow be more so than what they are in some respect. From this we might say the metaphorization of improvement indicates the cultivation of an imperative to make use beyond even the extent to which what of a thing is conceived of as being usable at any one time. The metaphor suggests a new framework of thinking about capacities for use in which there is assumed to be a boundlessness interior to the objects of our use whether they be material or immaterial, stuffs or processes.

What this entailed was that waste was the least profitable portion of the estate and at the same time was the portion of greatest potential for profit for precisely the same reason. For the proprietor in want of profit, to have a common waste on one’s estate was to be shut out not only from the value of the day but also from the value of tomorrow, which is to say from the ever-increasing capacity of the object to yield use-values that might be auctioned on the market. This conceptualization renders waste, for the capitalist, not as being of zero value but as being the zero-degree of value. Conceived thusly, the

borders of the waste, in parts all over England affirmed and described annually in festive parade by the commonfolk, expand past the horizon.

It is now time to return to travails of *Anna Karenina's* Levin. We have in his character a picture of a country landlord operating at the end of the 19th century in Imperial Russia in much the same way as English country landlords must have conducted their affairs during the transition from feudalism to capitalism several hundred years earlier. On his way to visit the country estate of a friend, Levin, troubled by the unprofitability of his own farm stops to take a meal at the house of a well-to-do peasant, a beneficiary of the transition to the tenurial system. The wealthy peasant Levin encounters is a farmer in the true sense of the word. He cultivates a mixture of owned and rented land, working it with hired labour, and rents out the lowest-quality acreages to tenant farmers (Tolstoy 348). Though the peasant performs the customary agrarian grumblings about bad weather and poor harvests, Levin can see that the farmer does well for himself and is in fact the very picture of a productive agrarian capitalist (Tolstoy 348). "Imagine," Levin thinks to himself, "that you have run your farm like that old man's; that you have discovered a method of interesting your labourers in the success of the work, and have hit upon the mean in the way of improvements that they are willing to recognize—then, without impoverishing the soil, you will get double and treble the crops you got before" (363). What Levin pictures here is precisely the picture of agrarian capitalism described by Ellen Wood, after Marx and others, as a situation composed of "the triad of landlords living on capitalist ground rent, capitalist tenants living on profit, and laborers living on wages," all of whom exist subject to competitive economic pressures ("The Agrarian Origins of Capitalism" 26). Having observed the wealthy peasant's farm and sought out

the details of his operation, “One small point particularly struck Levin: the old man used the thinnings from the rye as fodder for the horses. Many a time Levin had seen this valuable food wasted, and tried to have it gathered up, but had never succeeded. The peasant had got this done, and could not praise it enough as fodder” (Tolstoy 348-349). This small point is gigantic. Even after the enclosure of the wastes, waste’s having been unmoored from its referent allows the idea of waste to be sought out and captured, the zero-degree of value pushed to its full potential.

Today we are familiar with the term waste being used to refer to much more than that which is material, let alone that which pertains to the wastes of the agrarian land system of feudal times and before. This mode of thinking about waste is already evident by Tolstoy’s time. Levin thinks to himself:

> In reality what was the struggle about? He was fighting for every farthing of his share (and he could not do otherwise: he had only to relax his efforts and would have had the money to pay his labourers), whereas they were only anxious to be left to do their work lazily and comfortably, in other words, to work the way they always had done. It was to his interest that every man should work as hard as possible…what the labourer wanted was to take it easy as possible, with rests, and, especially, not to have the trouble of worrying and thinking. (344)

With the arrival of capitalism labour itself becomes subject to the logic of waste. Existing labour practices become subject to appraisal in terms of productivity. What was once conceived of as a fixed fact–the way labouring is done, *is to be done*–is reframed as being subject to the rigours of improvement. With such a framework it becomes possible to see certain labour practices as waste, value in the zero degree in terms of useful capacities

underutilized or even untapped. With new economic pressures, the proprietor is forced to be conceptually inventive: "[Levin] saw that his ship leaked, but did not look for the hole, perhaps purposely deceiving himself. But now he could deceive himself no longer" (345). This is to say that the imperatives of agrarian capitalism bring about an essentially economic attitude toward waste: the matter becomes compelling in a new way. In the context of commons, the social value of the redistribution of use-values of the waste are as if put to the side. Whatever the social ills that result in abolishing the common waste, as we have discussed in the Tudor case, economic imperatives transform both the capitalist proprietor and the object of his attentions: a reality of economic struggle emerges and the prudent proprietor understands that waste is the terrain upon which such battles are fought. It is right that the 'small point' which so strikes Levin is thinnings rye put to use as fodder: under capitalism, waste is fodder for the imagination in that it is highly modal.

We ought to consider how we have got here, from waste to waste. Clearly, Levin is not dealing with a matter of common land in the stuff of rye thinnings. But what is the nature of his complaint? It is that the economic imperatives of capitalism allow the proprietor to understand waste only in its economic dimension. This economic understanding of waste allows its smooth metaphorization, waste as that which is un-useful, in a primarily economic sense of the word. Metaphorized waste, then, is caught up in the very sort of agitations Weber describes and becomes fodder for these. In the opening to his chapter "The Spirit of Capitalism," Max Weber analyzes some famous words from Benjamin Franklin. It is by the metaphorization of waste that Benjamin Franklin reminds his reader, in another metaphor "Remember, that time is money…He

that wastes idly a groat's worth of his time per day, one day with another, wastes the privilege of using one hundred pounds each day" (qtd. in Weber, *The Protestant Ethic* 15-16). To this Weber pronounces "it is the spirit of capitalism which here speaks in characteristic fashion" (16). It is the agitation at the waste of time which is the waste of money, which may well set the frenetic pace of modernity. As with religiosity in Weber's account, in which "the intensity of the search for the Kingdom of God commenced gradually to pass over into sober economic virtue" and "the religious roots died out slowly, giving way to utilitarian worldliness," (119) means becoming ends, the common waste as locatable site disappears from the world and is forgotten with the crumpling of vehicle into tenor.

1.6: *Expropriating Waste*

In terms of property what was the common waste? The lord of the manor enjoyed only a partial dominion over the land itself. It ought be mentioned that "the oldest element in the [English field] system is in all probability the right of common grazing over pasture and waste. It is the residue of more extensive rights which were enjoyed from time immemorial, which the Anglo-Saxon and later Norman kings and manorial lords curtailed, but could not altogether deny" (Thirsk 4). In this respect, the lord of the manor was always the interloper in the land of the commonfolk, being inheritors of an already existing field system and agrarian custom, not founders (Thompson 133). (This is a key idea at play the notion of the 'Norman yoke,' a trope of popular democratic thought among the Diggers of the 17th century.) This extended also to the land of the estate itself, which was not passed on as a bundle of exclusive rights to a portion landscape and that which it contained but as a node in a network of continuously-existing relations of

reciprocal obligations; these were played out spatially in the fields and wastes of the estate. Describing this type of feudal land owning, Thompson writes: “One is reminded of the saying addressed by Russian serfs to their lords: ‘We are yours, but the land is ours’” (127). It is right that this sentiment comes expressed in the form of a saying in that it points to the marriage of what is commonly held and that which is held in common– these together, custom and the common–as the governing facts of how agrarian life was lived rather than the codifications of a centralized system of law that would increasingly set the terms for productive and reproductive labour.

A quirk of the common law: the precedence of precedent, the determining of the business of the day with that of yesterday. As Thompson writes “Perhaps no case was more often cited in its bearing upon the marginal use-rights of the villager than Gateward’s Case,” the 1607 case of a “gentleman interloper” who was brought to trial for grazing animals on the Stixwold common in Lincolnshire (130). The gentleman in question was at the time residing in a house somewhere proximate to the common. His practice of access was disallowed on the grounds that “the defendant was occupier of a house in which he had no interest, ‘No certain lime or estate, but during his inhabitancy, and such manner of interest the law will not suffer, for custom ought to extent to that which hath certainty and continuance’” (130). Here, we encounter the swiftness with which customs of access are swept aside by the law. It is a presumed custom that sweeps aside custom-as-practice, a custom neatly codified, fixed, and legible to the judiciary: it is no wonder that the judiciary cannot locate it.

This sweeping aside of custom is not the whole of it. As Thompson writes, the ruling found the defendant in the wrong “For none can have interest in a common in

respect of a house in which he hath no interest" (130). To make proper sense of this formulation of 'interest in a common in respect of a house' this case ought to be situated in its social dimension. This is a dispute not between the landlord class and the peasantry but one between the finer gradations of nobility or landed gentry and the lower gentry, expressed as in the economic relation between rentier and 'interloper gentlemen' tenant. It is tempting to imagine the rentier gazing at the grassy expanse of the common, seeing the familiar sight of a commoner taking cattle or sheep to pasture. Only this commoner is not what he at first seems. The landed rentier starts; it is Mr. Gateward in the pasture, an English Levin playing peasant. Here we may have a most useful image: practices of access disjointed from their proper practitioner. And how to put things back to their proper place? Law cannot restore custom since it speaks of social organization in another language. When law sets about to restore custom, it produces mimesis of custom through translation into its own language. We arrive at the conclusion of the court: 'interest in a common in respect of a house.' It is an unbeautiful translation, but it does do the job of getting Mr. Gateward off the Stixwold common. It is proper enough: appropriation of waste on the grounds of a person's property, not in the properties of the person as in the old feudal tradition. The jury fulfilled its parochial duties and in doing so pronounced a mournful expression of the transition from feudalism to liberalism: we are all equal, but for our things. It remains to these, things, to be the bearer of rights.

This ruling would provide the precedent for the judicial project of defining who might possess the rights to common; this legal status–borne 'in respect of a house'–rather than common practice would increasingly be required to in order to practice access free of harassment or prosecution. The implications of the dispute would be felt most keenly

by those lower on the class ladder and less formalized practices of access would steadily be marginalized into the terrain of illegality:

> In one single operation this restrained unlicensed large interlopers, graziers, and the like, in the interests of the landowners and customary tenants, and it altogether disqualified indistinct tenants categories of small users, who held neither land nor ancient cottage tenures. While this may not have affected actual village usages much it could leave the landless commoner stripped of any rights if a case came to the courts, or at the point of enclosure. (134)

Over the next several centuries cases concerning practices of access reliably refer back to the precedent setting Gateward's Case to justify their decision. In turn, with rights themselves residing in property, in things, these rights-bearing properties became commodified since they might provide valuable access to what was becoming not-so-common common land (133). We may think of it as a process by which the law is over the course of centuries brought to the attention of local customs relating to practices of access, at which point it again repeats its malformed translations. Much of this was done under the auspices of the need for clarity in an England steadily more administrated. In 1774 for instance, during a case concerning a waste in Norfolk the court concluded that "copyholders, occupiers of lands and occupiers of ancient houses might set up a custom to cut turfs or rushes, but 'inhabitants cannot, because inhabitancy is too vague a description'" (132). The end result of this process–kicked into highest gear by the various enclosure acts of the late 18th century through the middle of the 19th century–is our inheritance: a highly codified system of largely exclusive property rights in which the

possibility of our making use of matter lies not in our persons but with respect to our property.

Through the churning of access cases through the courts certain truths were fixed upon. By “the late seventeenth century and certainly in the eighteenth the courts increasingly defined (or assumed without argument) that the lord’s waste or soil was his personal property, albeit restrained or curtailed by the inconvenient usages of custom” (Thompson 134). This is to say that during the long transition from the feudal land system to the tenurial the increasing control the landlord exerted over the landscape, or what might amount to same thing, the fading away of his feudal obligations, converted the land under his feet to his own land, the use of which would be determined by him alone. It is a far cry from the Russian peasant saying. As the legal historian A.W.B. Simpson writes:

> The tenurial system converted the villagers into tenants, and the theory of the law placed the freehold of most of the lands of the manor in the lord. Some of his tenants, it is true, will be freeholders, but the majority hold unfreely in villeinage, and the pre-eminence of the lord makes it natural to treat him as the 'owner' of the waste lands. Thus a theory of individual ownership supplants earlier more egalitarian notions. (*A History of the Land Law* 108)

There is a certain retroactivity at play here. We should remember that those who ‘hold unfreely in villeinage’ under the tenurial system have had their practices of access steadily curtailed by law and made increasingly marginal. Insofar as these marginal practices of access continued, they did so more or less on the basis of noblesse oblige which on a whim could be retracted; this is the subtext of Simpson’s comment that it is

natural to treat the lord as the owner of the wastes. The codification of practices of access as rights tied to particular property relations on the lord's estate transforms use practices in effect. It is only after the fact of this transformation that exclusive property rights on the part of the rentier can be supposed to exist. This is to say that from the feudal system of land tenure, exclusive property rights are created as if ex-nihilo but for the retroactive supposition of their existence. This legal mechanism proved instrumental to the enclosure–or alternatively, annexation–of the wastes.

To conclude this section, we might say that during period roughly contiguous with that of early agrarian capitalism in England, landowners were developing a distinct intellectual approach to their business affairs. This approach departed from the old mercantile practice of shuffling goods to markets where they were in higher demand. Instead, new methods were derived to improve productivity (Wood, *Liberty and Property* 213). Wood sums it up like so:

> Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, in response to the imperatives of competition and 'improvement', there were mounting assaults on customary rights, assertions of exclusive private ownership against communal rights to common land, challenges to customary tenures and an assortment of use-rights to private land, together with various oppressive practices and extortionate rents, accompanied by legal and theoretical efforts to redefine the meaning of property. (212)

From this we can determine a number of conclusions about improvement. Firstly, we can say that agricultural improvement arrived at its profit-making ends by annexing waste. Secondly, we can say that the means by which the vicissitudes of improvement occurred

was at the level of the concept–which is to say new conceptualizations of the capacities of objects of use.

1.7: *An Undead Metaphor*

As we have said, Marx somewhat neglects to give the reader an account of the development of exclusive property rights. This makes for an account of primitive accumulation–Marx's explanation of the origins of inequity–that trades more in ends than means. As we have said, custom long formed a bulwark against the enclosure of the common wastes. The development of the law, in particular the development of exclusive property rights facilitated the transition from feudalism to capitalism in terms of the transition from a system in which networks of mutual obligation were embedded in common property arrangements and upheld by custom to one in which such obligations vanished. The basis for this disappearance was a transition in which exclusive property rights were asserted over the common waste. This was to assert the common waste as simply a traditional activity permitted for a time by the landowner. It was to transform the estate lands into a commodity. The commodity form is predicated on exclusive property rights. What is sold along with the commodity, as much as the object in question with its use-value and exchange value, is something else underexamined by Marx: use-rights, the most powerful of which, exclusive rights of use, are the most highly valued. Enclosure would end the common making-use of the common waste. It was to assert retroactively that exclusive use-rights could exist on the common waste, that the common waste was in fact the exclusive possession of the landowner–contrary to all custom–in the same way that one can own a cart or a horse and permit others to make use of these for a time only to later renounce this.

Primitive accumulation could only occur once. But if inequity has its origins in primitive accumulation, then the originary gesture of primitive accumulation would not cease even with the last enclosure of the common waste. With the metaphorization of waste the conceptual system was equipped with a structural metaphor fit for capitalism. It was possible to "induce similarities" (Lakoff and Johnson 148) in varied objects; waste could be found in all manner of sites material and immaterial, the gesture of enclosure repeated time and time again. Not only could the originary act of capitalist inequity be repeated, but in doing so inequity could be entrenched.

We might say one final thing on this notion of the development of waste in a metaphorical direction. Having said that improvement, which has for centuries dogged waste, begins in the realm of the economic and only later is used metaphorically, we can also re-iterate that waste's linguistic use takes on a metaphorical character following the onset of capitalism. These two go hand in hand, waste and improvement. If improvement dogs waste's dead metaphor (always looking for a bite of that carcass) we might also dare to ask precisely what has died, precisely what remains.

Firstly, we can say that waste today is not constrained to land as in the feudal days. Today's waste is not constrained to objects, even if waste still finds its classical expression in the form of worldly stuff; it is no challenge to locate waste in material and immaterial processes, in labour practices, and in whole portions of the clock. Less so in land, though who knows with the melting of ice caps and the warming climate at the polar extremes? Certainly, the destruction of Amazon could be cast as the enclosure of a common waste, for what greater common waste is there to enclose than the lungs of the Earth? What has become the common waste? That it has been all but forgotten is no

surprise since it hardly exists for us to be reminded of it. The old integral referent of waste is all but gone. Not gone but not forgotten, as the saying goes, rather forgotten but not gone, only marginally present.

But the word has peeled off from its old referent. That there is a new referent for waste is indicative that a great part of the referent has been split off, set aside. This part of the referent is not at all un-useful. As we have said, this new referent is that which is not used or put to use in some manner to the degree that it might and should, according to an economizing logic. The new referent is rather intangible referent; waste has become a concept, an abstract object as opposed to a concrete thing. The new referent is an abstraction, to be sure, but one derived from the place of the old referent in economics, in broadly conceived sense of that word. This economics need not be monetary, though often it is. What is being referred to then, when we–in the present moment of our language, one shaped by long epoch of capitalism–speak of waste in the context of objects it is not the concrete thing in itself which we refer to, but rather that concrete thing's place in a system of management in which use–above all, economic usefulness–is valorized and also in which the limit of the usefulness of objects is as if a forever receding horizon: a could be, a should be, of who knows what extent.

We should not, however, lose track of this dead metaphor that we are positing. We have two dynamics at play in the metaphorization of waste–the metaphor's death and the splitting of the referent: on the one hand, waste as an egalitarian feature of the agrarian landscape, a site in which egalitarian social values pool and are expressed materially as a repository of use-values with little constraint on use-rights and the other, the economic dimension of waste as non-productive land. These things cannot be

considered to happen concurrently since the latter (the splitting) is caught up in not the former (the death of the metaphor) but in the moment of metaphorization. We might, at first, venture to say that only the economic dimension of waste is taken up in the metaphor, that this economic dimension becomes the vehicle of the metaphor of waste, with the materiality of waste, until then, an ancient feature of land use, left behind. This would be a disastrous mistake: it would be to forget the essentially common character of waste. This would be to replicate the thinking of the proprietor, to forget, as Levin forgets–is compelled to set aside, by the market–the social dimension of waste which allows for the distribution of use-values without the real abstraction, without money or price or the vicissitudes of the market.

The metaphor's dying–not the metaphorization of waste–is the means by which waste's egalitarian dimension is plunged into forgetting. We might conclude that this dead metaphor is more accurately an undead metaphor, a latently active agent within our conceptual framework that enables and reinforces economizing modes of thinking thought to the detriment of all else. Even if we apprehend waste now as an actant with a modal intensity about it, there is also about waste the spectre of its egalitarian past—it haunts this dead metaphor that otherwise would be all but consigned to capital.

Chapter 2: Gleaners Before the Storm

Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000) concludes with a scene in which Edmond Hédouin's painting *Les glaneuses à Chambaudoin,* also called *Gleaners Fleeing Before the Storm,* is taken outside and held up by two women under the darkening skies of an oncoming storm. The first drops of rain begin to fall, thunder rolls, and so do the credits. The painting was first exhibited in 1857, the same year as Jean-Francois Millet's more famous *Des glaneuses*. The painting had long been off display, sitting unobserved for decades in the basement of a provincial gallery in the south of France until it was disinterred by Varda.

There are twelve figures in *Les glaneuses à Chambaudoin*, four children and eight women. The scene is at the edge of a grain field. Most break the horizon line; those that stoop beneath it only do so because they are in the midst of motion—here checking a bundle of grain on the back of another figure, there taking the hand of a young boy so that he does not fall behind. There is low greenery in the foreground on either side of what appears to be a beaten track. The gleaners are there on that track. The upper two thirds of the painting are filled with late summer storm clouds. It is always late summer in paintings of gleaners since it is only after the wheat harvest that they appear. Already, over the heaps of harvested grain, we can see streaks of rain, the storm breaking over the spoils of the harvest and threatening to spoil all that remains in the field.

If there is a mood of foreboding in those clouds there is also something else at play. Our gleaners are bathed in the last bits of light that have yet to be blocked by the oncoming storm. The destruction will not be total and the *Chambaudoin* gleaners have

had better pickings than Millet's since they have heaving bundles on their backs. These gleaners are at standstill in their moment of flight. There is something to their manner which, from their bending, tightening, heaving, and running, gives them the appearance of dancing with joy.

Why might we look to a painting of imminent destruction, or rather, an image in a film of the imminent destruction of that painting, for traces of the utopian world to come? An invocation of waste is always, however faintly, an invocation of utopia. When commodities become waste the exclusive use-rights embedded in the commodity form are relinquished and the object in question becomes subject to a system of property which belongs to the nearly forgotten memories of the pre-capitalist past and the dreams of a utopian future: that of the commons.

Where might we place ourselves relative to this storm which lays waste and progresses ineluctably? Walter Benjamin writes that "For the dialectician, what matters is having the wind of world history in one's sails. For him, thinking means setting the sails. What is important is how they are set. Words are for him merely the sails. The way they are set turns them into concepts" ("Central Park" 151). These words from "Central Park," written only a few years prior to Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" have an affinity with the latter text and invite a reading in concert. We might take these winds as the same winds which are those of world history, of progress caught in the wings of the angel of history: "a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The 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" ("On the Concept of History" 392). Our

angel and our dialectician are proximate figures, each a would-be navigator, only it is the earthly one who is the more capable of altering his course. How are we to consider history when "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'" (391)? One might sail with the winds of history, affirming progress, or attempt to sail directly against it; these amount to the same thing: to be carried forward anyhow.

Perhaps it is that a different kind of historical intervention is necessary. Such an intervention would have to–within the constraint of an empirical history which progresses ceaselessly–allow one, like the boat that can sail most every direction but right into the wind, to arrive–even while in motion, tacking to and fro–at a standstill relative to the direction the wind blows. If we do not necessarily arrest the wind's progress, we might as thinkers arrest our own and formulate an understanding of the relationship between what has been and the now. In such a tack we might arrest images from the past in the course of their being swept away, recognizing them as constitutive of the present, "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" ("On the Concept of History" 391).

If enclosure was a process that loosed waste from the land, transforming it into an undead metaphor in service of an economizing imagination, we have become habituated to a narrow notion of waste. The advantage of this is that received notions of waste have a certain fragility in the face of a waste that behaves other than expected. This behaviour makes one start: a flash illuminating the figure of the undead metaphor. There is a resonance here with Benjamin's elusive notion of the dialectical image. Counter-

metaphors such as waste as commons allow us to glean waste as something akin to this image of Benjamin's. As Benjamin writes,

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (*The Arcades Project* 462)

Shining the light on history at the angle such that a facet flashes just so, we might happen upon certain images that, in a single instant elucidate the connection between what has been and what is now. An understanding of contemporary waste by its old sense from before the word was taken up in the conceptual system as an undead metaphor performs such a function. The trouble is that one must make this apparent to people—a pedagogic tool is necessary in order to transform our angel into a navigator heading off to the shores of utopia.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of *Remediation* by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin; their discussion of remediation and hypermediation will provide the vocabulary to analyze the treatment of paintings in *The Gleaners and I*. This analysis begins by addressing the role of Millet's *Des glaneuses* in the film. I will proceed to discuss the painting alone and then explain how *The Gleaners and I* constructs a dialectical image of waste, with gleaner paintings such as *Des glaneuses* and Hédouin's *Les glaneuses à Chambaudoin* forming one part of this dialectical image. Throughout this analysis, I will incorporate Benjamin's thinking on the dialectical image, historiography,

and the relation of these to utopia. The Benjaminian aspect of my analysis also makes use of Susan Buck-Morss' *The Dialectics of Seeing.*

2.1: *The Remediation of Waste*

In *Remediation* Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin address "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms" (261). For Bolter and Grusin, remediation encapsulates the idea that new media seek to remediate older forms of media "by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium. Thus, immediacy leads to hypermediacy" (17). For Bolter and Grusin, the emphasis is firmly on seeking: the notion that media advances through a historical progression from lesser to ever-greater immediacy is devoted to the idea that media is somehow caught up in historical progress, even as successive new media undermine the veracity these claims. The authors use the term hypermediacy to describe "a style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium" (260). In contrast to the pursuit of transparency, or lack of awareness on the part of the viewer of being in the presence of a medium, hypermediacy attunes the viewer to the presence of the media in front of them. As Bolter and Grusin write, "In its epistemological sense, hypermediacy is opacity—the fact that knowledge of the world comes to us through media. The viewer acknowledges that she is in the presence of a medium and learns through acts of mediation or indeed learns about mediation itself" (70-71).

As I have stated elsewhere, waste is more concept, a conceit, than something concrete. Not a thing *is* waste, but many things material or immaterial might appear before us in the guise of waste. Because there is no criterion by which a thing becomes

waste other than its being cast aside, cast as such, we might think of the process by which a thing becomes waste as a kind of recontextualization that blasts the object in question from its usual place. To paraphrase Marx on the object that becomes a commodity, the material or immaterial object that becomes waste need not change a single fiber of its being, but a new social soul may nonetheless enter its body (*Capital* 909). The same holds true for the celebrated techniques of modernist art and present day hypermedia: "In collage and photomontage as in hypermedia, to create is to rearrange existing forms…In all cases, the artist is defining a space through the disposition and interplay of forms that have been detached from their original context and then recombined" (Bolter and Grusin 39). An essentially formal-contextual constitution is common to waste, the commodity, and art-objects constructed through collage, montage, or any of the techniques of art that leverage recontextualization. The objects in question might remain the same, utterly unaltered, but by their being cast into new networks of relation, these objects will appear to behave in radically different ways; each is to some extent a readymade.

If Benjamin does not actually aim at hypermediacy in his own body of work, he does nevertheless utilize many of the techniques that contribute to hypermediacy, in particular those from the modernist repertoire: a "montage of historical facts" (Buck-Morss 251) in the first Baudelaire essay, the juxtaposition of, as Buck-Morss writes, "the original, utopian potential of the modern (in which archaic, mythic elements have found nonmythical, historical content) and its catastrophic and barbaric present reality," (251) in the essay "Ur-history of the 19th Century." In "On the Concept of History" Benjamin writes that "whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to

traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession. They are called "cultural treasures,"" but it is the task of the historical materialist to “brush history against the grain” (391-392). It is with the help of these techniques that Benjamin works against the grain of empirical history.

The dialectical image itself functions by the same logic of the rearrangement of existing forms. In Buck-Morss’ analysis, the dialectical image “allowed the superimposition of fleeting images, present and past, that made both suddenly come alive in terms of revolutionary meaning” (220). By the juxtaposition of choice images from the past with images from the present, Benjamin hoped to induce a cognitive shock. As Buck-Morss reports, “Benjamin described the ‘pedagogic’ side of his work” in a conversation with Theodore Adorno as follows: “to educate the image-creating medium within us to see dimensionally, stereoscopically, into the depths of the historical shade” (292). Like the stereoscope, it is the juxtaposition of the dialectical image’s dual components that give it its depth. One image is that of the past, the other, that of the present; it is the perception of depth, the coming to awareness of a revolutionary now-time and empirical history superimposed that enables the viewer to apprehend, in a flash, the truth of her situation in history. It is as, Benjamin writes, “in reference to redemption” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 241) that the dialectical image floods with meaning its otherwise insignificant constitutive parts. This is why we can say there is no true dialectical image which does not point the way to utopia.

The utopian dimension of Varda’s subject matter is not exactly at the fore in *The Gleaners and I*. We see images of poverty and deprivation along with testaments to the glee of gleaning. There is not a gesture toward a project of realizing the utopian

dimension of waste—no Fourier here, just Varda at play. Even when Varda does not theorize before the camera, the camera itself makes up for this. What Buck-Morss writes of Benjamin's apparent lack of commentary in "Ur-history of the 19th Century" is equally true of *The Gleaners and I*: "it relies on the shock of these juxtaposed images to compel revolutionary awakening. Hence: 'I have nothing to say, only to show'" (Buck-Morss 251). What the dialectical image ought to do is let us see history at depth, to see past empirical history so that we might glimpse phalanstères in the junk-palaces and artist's workshops that furnish the film's frames.

2.2: Des glaneuses *and Its Limits*

Fig. 1: Jean-Francois Millet. *Des glaneuses*. 1857, Musée D'Orsay, Paris.

When we first encounter Millet's *Des glaneuses* in Varda's *The Gleaners and I* it is as a small black and white image in a Larousse dictionary beside the definition of

‘gleaning’—it is the documentary’s opening scene. It will not be the last time we see an image of this painting over the course of the documentary: we will see images of the original alone and surrounded by crowds, mounted on its wall at the Musée D’Orsay. We will see more images in which it is present in ghostly form as the chief influence behind dozens of rural genre paintings and in near-knockoffs encountered at a country junk-store. What is it to encounter a painting with the subject matter of *Des glaneuses* in a film with such concerns as has *The Gleaners and I*?

The painting itself deserves an exegesis not only as a demonstration of the necessity of a dialectical image. At some point during the weeks following the June Days, Millet departed to Barbizon, some thirty miles outside of Paris. It had been a decade of humiliation and poor-reception in the capital, a period during which he lived in a boarding house with his common-law wife and illegitimate children; before he left, he had been painting shop signs to make ends meet (Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois* 75). He had walked the distance, the price of a ticket on the newly built railway line being too dear for him (76). It was in Barbizon where he would live out the decade that would make his reputation, the scant years of the Second Republic and the opening ones of the Second Empire of Napoleon III, Barbizon, too, where he would paint *Des glaneuses* in 1857. These women at the center of the painting are but a painted few of the many that practiced the ancient practice in fields about the town. We should think there are more gleaners just behind the line of trees at the horizon. Situated in the forest of Fontainebleau, such gleaners belonged to, as Clark quotes Chevalier, “the ‘proletariat of the woods’” (79). Having no land, having difficulty finding any employment but for seasonal work and day-labour, the men of this proletariat lived to a great extent off the

backs of the women to whom they were tied: their mothers, wives, and sisters on whom they depended for "the faggots [the women] could gather from the forest, the pigs or cows they grazed on the commons at the forest edge, the gleaning rights their women got at harvest-time" (79). In this respect we ought to reconsider the gleaners of the painting: their brothers and husbands may well be labouring for a pittance of a wage in background mass while these women glean use-values from the land. At the time in question, "You could glean only if you had a certificate of indigence granted by the mayor of the commune, and most important, the communes could give no one but the poor of their own parish gleaning rights on their land" (79). Ancient practices had been curtailed, codified by law, made subject to the dictates of local authorities.

This "proletariat of the woods" was also one of the few classes that failed to benefit from the economic boom of the early Second Empire, having not enough capital to procure even a small plot of land for personal use in the manner that many peasants were able to during the time (80). The forest-dwellers lived a life, as Clark quotes from the historian Georges Dupeux, "both isolated and collective: isolated because they work in the woods, cut off from any contact with the population; and collective because they do the work in teams and eat their meals in common, and because the working group becomes a veritable community" (80). Hence, we have in the Fontainebleau forest-dwellers a group politicized by the upset of the Second Republic and in dark woods, an especially marginal, particularly class-conscious set. When the women of the forest receive permits and stoop to pick wasted grain they become *Des glaneuses*.

It is the closing of the hand into a fist that is the painting's centre of gravity—a fist because what the hand grasps at must be so small and many of these small things

must be picked. If it were one thing being grasped at, if it were not in the multiple, scattered right on the bare earth, it could be plucked between forefinger and thumb. The fist is closed, but the fingers do not dig in. The fingers scrape, they've pulled across and up, collecting something. What was once stalk is now stubble, that and earth, dark and trodden over.

It is the harvest season and the grain has just been reaped. Little mounds of it lie on the ground between the figures in foreground and those in the back. Can we call three figures standing together solitary? They are apart from the rest, they, who are together, are each working alone. Each woman holds in one hand a meagre sheaf of wheat. The other hand is left free to pick the grains that remain scattered on the ground, those that have been left behind by the main party. The leftmost and middle solitaries stoop to pick from the ground as if doubled over. It is a reminder of what is meant when labour is described as back-breaking. We look over their backs to find the main party of peasants at work.

The main party works together as one, a mass on the same horizontal plane as the fruits of their harvest; in the background mounds of cut wheat have been heaped as tall as small trees. A two-horse trap has been brought to cart off some of it; the grain is piled there almost twice as high as the man who loads it. The mounds dot the fields behind the three stooped figures in the foreground all the way back a low-built stone farmhouse and a distant line of trees. Of the mass, mainly washed-out figures, faintly distinguishable from one another, we can see that most wear pants. Presumably they are men. They work on their knees, trousers to the soil. A pair of women, long skirts, white blouses, carry heavy sheafs of wheat over their shoulders; they will add it to the great mounds. The

mass has finished harvesting the portion of the field that makes up the fore and middle stretch of the painting. The sky above this mass, a dusty late-summer sky, is just a shade lighter than the shirts of the pair of women who carry the huge sheafs over the shoulder, these shirts a shade lighter than the field.

Our three solitaries, each a woman, wears a bright kerchief around her head, each one uniquely coloured, the clothes simple and dull. The kerchiefs form peaks over the forehead that block the view of the women's eyes. Below are sun-baked necks and faces. The middle and rightmost figure have tied up their aprons such that they form sacks at the waist in which to carry their pickings about with them. They have this and a few sheafs of wheat just beside the rightmost figure. The mass work together, the harvest going into the great mounds that will be carted off to a nearby threshing floor. The solitaries will not contribute to the common harvest but neither will they be able to draw from it should it go into communal stores, nor be paid for it if the intention is to sell, which–given the period of the painting–is the more likely intent. These three solitaries must carry their pickings on their person.

In *Des glaneuses* we have a juxtaposition played out between foreground and background between two modes of production. In the background, our peasant-workers, paid a wage. In Marxist terms, they are divorced from the means of production. In the foreground, a holdover feature of previous economic modes, made marginal by bureaucracy (our glaneuse must receive a permit) and boxed in by legal codes. It would not be precisely correct to say that the glaneuse is in control of the means of production; she is not in control of it insofar as her practice occurs only by permission of the relevant local authorities. Nevertheless, no one takes a share of her harvest. Besides, the gleaner is

wily. And what, really, is to stop a woman walking at the periphery of some field in the open country from reaching down and picking up a few grains which would otherwise go to waste?

As T.J. Clark writes of Walter Benjamin's Paris in his article "Reservations of the Marvellous," the countryside surrounding Millet's Barbizon was both "up-to-date and old-fashioned." In the city one found "the two conditions coexisting street by street or shop by shop: you could take a detour through the 1860s each morning on your way to work." In the country one needn't detour at all: at harvest time the way to work was itself a phantasmagoric transport. The fields to either side of the country lane would be populated with figures acting out roles modern and out-dated. The figures in the foreground and back wear the same clothes, are of the same region, speak the same tongue, derive in all likelihood from the same class, even in those in the fore have suffered the greater misfortune. They are of the same world but totally different in the mode in which they labour, figures of at the opening and closing of the shutter in a long-exposure photograph, for a time co-existing until the image itself is lost. All of which is to say we should take care of this image, take care to see Millet's painting as being painted from the strange viewpoint which is proper to its historical situation.

The gleaners *are* solitaries; solitary from the main party, the party who are surely wage-labourers. Solitary too in that they are destitute in boom times, not swept up in progress since they are already not a part, already apart. The gleaners are left behind, picking up after the others have moved on; what was once a field of grain, the very stuff that would sustain those who reap and sow, is now–in the present mode of production

which extends from the moment of the painting to this contemporary moment–a wage to be earned.

This division between the figures in the foreground and back; what to make of it? We do not have opposing classes, though clearly one type of labourer is more destitute than the other. The outmoded figures of the gleaners have an exacting presence. And if the gleaners stoop, the wage-labourers are on their knees.

The gleaners themselves are saturated in colour and firm in form in a manner quite unlike their more modern contemporaries in the background, figures who are washed-out and undifferentiated in the mass. What are we to make of the exacting presence of these gleaners in the foreground, the dissipated presence of the mass of labourers in the back? Viewed in a gallery brochure, postcard, or an image on a computer screen, as when I first encountered the painting, one could even be forgiven for only seeing background where the massed figures are, for not recognizing the figures in the background as figures at all. In progressing from foreground to background, they have dissipated into the field, taking on the colour the grain, the sky, a part of the landscape of production. In the gleaners, the anachronistic figures are the more viscerally present element in the composition while the modern is diffuse and lacking coherence, labourer blending into labourer blending into production process as a whole. As Chaplin's character is sucked into the machine of *Modern Times*, the modern wage-labourers of the fields are practically pressed into the ground. There is a certain solidity to the labouring gleaners while the workers behind them all but melt into air.

The truth is that the painting appears to approach something proximate to the historiographic-pedagogic technique that Benjamin will explore in the latter years of his

life in the dialectical image but does not quite arrive. Millet is too early; gleaners are not properly historical images at the time of the painting. If there is a frisson of juxtaposition from the gleaner and the wage-labourers there is not that electricity-producing disjuncture of the dialectical image by which the past is ripped from its context and forced into the discourse of the new. For our purposes, then, we might glean more from *Des glaneuses* by apprehending it as a few frames flashing by.

2.3: *A Dialectical Image*

We have already said something of the contents of *Des glaneuses* and its relevancy to this discussion of waste. But that effort at putting forth a reading of the painting is the product of deep looking, the contemplation of the painting at duration in order to scrape from it the minor detail and hidden truth. What Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image teaches us is that insight might just as much come by way of a fleeting impression as from long hours before the canvas. As Buck-Morss writes: "The presentation of the historical object within a charged force field of past and present, which produces political electricity in a 'lightning flash' of truth, is the 'dialectical image'" (219). It may be that we have such an image in the images of *Des glaneuses* and other gleaner paintings in *The Gleaners and I.*

We might consider the painting itself again. In brief summation, we have a contrast between the gleaners at the fore of the painting and the wage-labourers behind them. Gleaners and wage-labourers alike toil over their respective tasks, but the gleaners, despite their lowly status, have a certain resilience and solidity that the wage-labourers who seem to melt into the air and the field about them lack altogether. What is missing, in viewing the *Des glaneuses* alone, is a stereoscopic construction that would allow the

viewer to apprehend with a depth that counterintuitively does not tend to result from the sort of deep viewing associated with the contemplation of paintings seen on the gallery wall, especially paintings such as *Des glaneuses* that do not actively draw attention to their status as a medium by their agreement with the norms of Cartesian perspectivalism, by which "the surface of the painting dissolve[s] and present[s] to the viewer the scene beyond" (Bolter and Grusin 25).

Fig. 2: Millet's *Des glaneuses* in Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000).

In showing the viewer *Des glaneuses* not merely as a transparent window onto a scene, but as filmable thing, solid and opaque, *The Gleaners and I* attunes the viewer to the painting as medium and object. The impulse to view the painting deeply, to view the painting for its content alone is disallowed. Rather, the painting flashes by, reappearing at various points to different effects. With respect to the visual style of hypermediacy Bolter and Grusin write: "[it] privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and…

emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object" (31). The comment might well apply to Varda's *The Gleaners and I*. This documentary itself takes the processes by which objects become waste and are recovered–remediated, even–as gleanings as its subject matter and enacts formally by the techniques of hypermediacy the same processes of recontextualization and rearrangement of existing forms that define the film's subject matter (not a thing *is* waste, we ought to remember, only a thing *as* waste). This subject matter is waste, that is, the gleaned object, as much as it is the gleaners of the film's title.

If this recontextualization is present in the film formally in the disjunctive montage inherent to the medium and in its techniques of hypermediacy, it is also present in the film's content, its many object lessons in playfully staged scenarios or interviews in which subjects appear outside of their usual contexts. One jurist explains gleaning laws as they pertain to trash (the abandonment of one's exclusive property rights to the material is to be assumed based the material's context curbside) as she stands in the street amidst the garbage out for collection. It is furniture which sits by the curb. Ripped from its context, inserted in a new one, the furniture now constitutes a brief commons in the open air (that is, until the garbage collectors come by). In another such scene, another jurist appears in full court garb in a country field among cabbages left there after the harvest: he bends down to pick, taking up the pose of one of Millet's gleaners, and then stands up, becoming one.

"I'm happy to put down an ear of wheat and pick up my digital camera," Varda says. "It's stroboscopic, narcissistic, hyperrealistic." Varda reports her decision to film much of the documentary personally with a then newly available hand-held digital

camera. On the hand, this appears to offer the viewer the immediacy of a first-person, cartesian viewpoint. But this doesn't exactly hold up: in one shot, for instance, Varda accidentally continues shooting; the camera points to the ground and the lens cap dangles loose from its thread and appears to dance. And Varda's continual commentary, the assertion of an authorial presence beyond the eye of the camera functions to caption whatever images the camera might capture, creating a disjuncture that produces hypermediation. That Varda is everywhere, behind the camera at times, at others before it, that she produces speech, commentary, and bodily noise (the huffing and puffing of exertion from marching through street and field, which is to say the work of the film being made) diegetic and otherwise, all inform the viewer as to the constructedness of the film, its composition from disparate media of disparate spatial and temporal origins and methods of production.

We should also juxtapose these remarks of Varda's with what we know of the dialectical image. Of these remarks of Varda's, perhaps it is the mention of the stroboscopic nature of the handheld digital camera that first directs us to a connection with the dialectical image—flash of cognition after flash cognition are produced as digital images of the present are overlayed with images of the past. By the superimposition of two media the viewer is made aware mediation as such: the result is hypermediation. This hypermediation cannot but make the viewer comprehend the painting as historical object wrenched from its place in the past and inserted into the present of the digital image. As Buck-Morss says of the hermeneutic method of the Kabbalah as Benjamin understood it so it is true of Varda's method of appropriating of historical objects in the form of paintings and inserting them into films: it satisfies the Benjaminian "mandate that in the

rescue of tradition, 'historical objects are to be ripped out of context' with 'a firm, apparently brutal grasp'" (249). The result of this is that a sense of historical depth appears out of the superimposition of the two images. It is not, however, that the "new is dragged back into the discourse of the old" but rather it is that the "true Messianic task is to resurrect the old within the discourse of the new" (244). With this understanding, we also ought to go back and consider the remark of Varda's that induces a similarity, to use a phrase of Lakoff and Johnson's, between gleaning and art-making; one is just as good as the other. If Varda induces this similarity less bluntly at other points throughout the film, this line represents the notion's clearest articulation: the structural metaphor is expressed not in image, as elsewhere in the film, but voiced clearly in language.

To induce an equivalency between the gleaner of waste and the gleaner of images with the digital camera is precisely right. *The Gleaners and I* remediates–in the present of the documentary film–images of the past in the form of the gleaner figure in just the same way that gleaners remediate waste, resurrecting the old and putting it to use in the new. "Structural metaphors in our conceptual system induce similarities," write Lakoff and Johnson (148). *The Gleaners and I* makes a case for the artist as gleaner as structural metaphor for the artist living through the "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet" (Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" 392). It is up to the artist to bend down, pick through this waste, and rise a gleaner. In this schema the artist is not simply another commodity-producing labourer in the same way that the gleaner is not simply another worker. In picking through waste each figure works a commons, works toward, maybe, remediating this marginal remnant of the pre-capitalist past into something like that which is glimpsed in dreams of a utopian future.

Part of this remediatory task of the artist, we might conclude, is to revive the old in the discourse new and in doing so equip the conceptual system with such metaphors that it might orient itself toward utopia. It is a battle, then, between spectres and the undead, with the artist as summoner of the former.

Fig. 3: Edmond Hédouin's *Les glaneuses à Chambaudoin*, also called *Gleaners Fleeing Before the Storm*, taken outside before a storm in the closing scene of Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000).

Concurrent to viewer's coming to awareness of painting as a medium, an object thing, is the apprehension that the object in question, the subject matter of the film, is not merely entangled in relations (in other words, contexts) but is in fact constituted by them. This formal insight is one and the same insight as is necessary to comprehend the essence of waste. With the aid of hypermediation, *The Gleaners and I* induces similarities between art and gleaned objects: once a painting, now–by the rearrangement of existing parts–an image in a film; once a commodity, now waste; once forgotten, now–in a flash–

recovered. The same, but totally different, as Lerner's narrator in *10:04* would say. The subject matter of *Des glaneuses* glimmers in the dirt at the gleaners' feet. We have considered *Des glaneuse* but less so that over which they toil: it is precisely the same stuff that gleaner and wage-labourer harvest. That grain which is picked in the background is in fact the same grain that earlier was toiled over by those same wage-labourers. It is not the object itself that necessarily changes, only the arrangement of social relations around that object: this is how the grain that is waste and the grain that is commodity appears to behave differently. The barely perceptible object at the heart of *Des glaneuses* is held up before the camera in the *Gleaners and I*'s closing scene: it is waste represented by the painting, *Les glaneuses à Chambaudoin,* also called Gleaners *Fleeing Before the Storm*. This painting, once waste, languishing unseen for decades in a basement, is remediated as art by its reconstitution as an image in the film. It has been absorbed into a commons on which I practice access also, streaming through an open window on my computer screen; it is waste redeemed, we might say, not for cash but for art.

Conclusion

We might say another thing: that to voice the word utopia seriously and to orient one's politics toward such a place, is to express the conviction that, in terms of political economy, the existing forms of our world might be rearranged such that they appear to behave entirely differently. The epigraph to Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* takes the form of a story which itself been passed along by many a storyteller–Benjamin included–before landing in that novel: "Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different" (1). It is by a formal flourish that objects material or immaterial appear to become waste. In waste, the exclusive use-rights embedded in the commodity form are relinquished or staved off. Lerner's narrator, we might recall from the introductory chapter of this thesis, muses that junked artworks could be "for or from a future where there was some other regime of value other than the tyranny of price" (133). As I have claimed throughout the preceding chapter, to invoke waste is to invoke–however faintly–the utopian promise entailed by the commons, the system of property that belongs as much to the pre-capitalist past as it does to fantasies of the utopian future. That Lerner's narrator experiences none of the agitations of the modal intensities of waste on apprehending it is indicative of a current at work in the character's apprehension of waste running counter that of economizing thought expressed in the undead metaphor of waste; rather, he is attuned to waste as the stuff of the commons.

By establishing the historicity of waste as a structuring metaphor of capitalism we can understand it for what it properly is: an undead metaphor, a latently active agent within our conceptual framework which reinforces economizing thought to the detriment of all else. The original object of enclosure was the physical expression of egalitarian social values in the form of common land. When we see waste today, we might also endeavor to think how this material or immaterial object which is the zero-degree of value might itself be caught up in the contest between value and values that plays out within our conceptual framework. Economizing thought is itself characteristic of an enclosed subjectivity, one which does not practice the access of other modes of thinking about use. A subjectivity like this operates according to a conceptual framework that is the product of enclosure and is itself productive of enclosure.

That sense of waste opposed to enclosure is one we might cultivate and attune ourselves to. By the time of Hédouin's painting, *Les glaneuses à Chambaudoin*, the egalitarian feature of feudal agrarian systems of property had been destroyed; there was no common waste. A storm of economizing thought had enclosed it. By reviving old senses of waste–an enterprise in which the figure of the gleaner plays is exemplary role–we might induce a similarity in the object of our attentions, those highly contested objects material or immaterial which we call waste, that runs counter to received notions operative in the dead metaphor of waste which serves to reinforce economizing thought. There is that waste, of course, which is irrecuperable, but a storm also lays waste of the kind we have been discussing; waste as an opening, an opportunity. Just as the serfs were loosed from the land so too was waste. The waste we find now is a scattered, dislocated stuff. The metaphorization of waste originated in the economizing mode of thought that

was cultivated in the days of early agrarian capitalism. This mode of thought has taught us to see waste everywhere, to induce similarity and in doing so prepare the object in question for enclosure. The obverse of this is that we have been equipped to see waste everywhere and in doing so apprehend, immanent to our own world, as I wrote at the beginning of this thesis, a vast and beguiling something else.

Throughout this thesis I have worked to present a dialectical image of waste by fashioning a stereoscope of the nearly forgotten notion of waste and the waste of the present. What we now call waste, that we now see waste everywhere, demonstrates the relation of what has been to the now. It also begs the question–practically demands an answer–of what is to come. But Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image, which seems to stop time in its tracks, is also meant to suspend the motion of thought just as it excites imagination of the one who apprehends it. The modal intensities about waste agitate the mind only to a single course of action. The force that compels us to take this action is the storm of progress. A dialectical image of waste disrupts these modal intensities. As Varda's *The Gleaners and I* instruct us, art's remediatory techniques make it uniquely suited to construct such disruptive devices. The point of constructing a dialectical image of waste is that such an apparatus will aid in the navigation out of this storm.

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