Letting Go of the Unrecyclable: Some closing remarks while we’re yet talking

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Letting Go of the Unrecyclable:
Some closing remarks while we’re yet talking

Every beginning
is only a sequel, after all,
and the book of events
is always open halfway through.

Witława Szymborska,
“Love at First Sight”

Like so many other things, much remains unsaid on the subject of the unrecyclable. Calling for papers on the topic we asked about the “guardians of garbage.” These will, for now, remain nameless and will continue to go under the sign and sigil of the biohazardous, as Joshua Schuster argues in this issue. We asked too about ecstatic plagiarists, so enrapt with wonder, joy, or utility on looking at a piece of work that they smuggle it under their own name, unrecycling in a profoundly selfless act. Brad Tabas briefly touches on this plagiarist’s ecstasy, discussing “that which can be exchanged but not used”—though he spins the unrecyclable as a purely toxic creation. Are there no words of kindness to those authors whose works have proved so singular as to be endlessly repeated? We can’t help but quote them endlessly after all: “river-run, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environments” (Joyce 3). (Ok, maybe some word strings truly are toxic). Other strings we assimilate wholeheartedly. These aren’t toxic; they’re tonics. Remember these short, sharp clauses? “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (Beckett 89). Don’t tell Sisyphus he’s recycling that rock he calls the world’s biggest piece of trash. He’ll wonder where the trucks went—are they over that hill? “Hey, Joe, I got this boulder I need taken care of...”

Reflections risk leading us into faint self-admonitions. Perhaps some topics we floated for consideration simply ran too esoteric: genres fallen out of favour lack the champions necessary to describe them for new audiences. Nonsensical tropes, like noisy children, are so quickly whisked to the wings. Out of sight, they’re out of mind. So too with

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methodologies we so quickly described as in “unremitting decline,” a judgement that now seems to me precipitous. Michel Foucault would quickly remind us that methodologies, like discourses, morph, change, and shift shapes. Suspicions take on other guises, ideologies, other names. What are we left with when we talk about the unrecyclable?

Here’s a question. It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a long time. Is a discussion unrecyclable? Some, we’d have to say, are not. Take Eugène Ionesco’s bold play The Bald Soprano. Here Ionesco subjects his audience to a gruelling discussion that could happen time and again, endless in its effortless banalities. Moreover! The play repeats itself! Or it threatens to anyway, which is close enough—and this is to say nothing of the play’s history-making run at La Huchette in Paris, where it celebrated its fiftieth year of uninterrupted showings in 2007. Horrified by the recursive concept of unrecycled repetition, didn’t Ionesco originally want to end the play with an actor who would jump from stage with a machine gun, saving the audience from unrecycled drama? I think so. But as ever, first as tragedy, then as farce: when Quentin Tarantino pays homage to this trick in Inglourious Basterds (2009) it seems less than spectacular, hollowed out and beside the point. Once in a while the unrecyclable is just boring.

Where was I?

Maybe we are missing something right in front of our noses: the unrecyclable, unutterable strangeness of our words themselves, provocative in their parade of nothingless scratches before our very eyes. Translator Gregory Rabassa puts it in the following way: “if you ponder a word, any word, long enough it will become something strange and meaningless and usually ludicrous. I suppose this is some kind of verbicide” (9). Paul de Man, for his part, is lapidary. “When you spell a word you say a certain number of meaningless letters” (89). True. This unrecyclable strangeness is something we habitually wish away. But it haunts us—in the ghost’s other role as phantasm of the present, in addition to being “history’s avatar[s]” for Jeremy Colangelo, justifying by side glance Mikhail Pozdniakov’s statement that “[t]he unrecyclable is a relationship to history”—whether we acknowledge it or no, in the very building blocks of our sentences and our words, our worst fears come true: words ever gnawed empty by an unrecyclable nothing. Words filled again by naïve good meaning. Back to Beckett, then: “All gnawing to be naught. Never to be naught” (115). Or here’s how Andrew Wenaus puts a similar sentiment: “no text is left unchanged and, yet, nothing changes.” Right on. Let’s dance.

In the end of it, speaking of the unrecyclable, I must concede however unwillingly to leave the matter as open as it was when the issue began. I mean no disregard of our contributors, whose salutary essays illuminate much for me. But to do elsewise and close the discussion would miss the point of a thing unrecyclable. I am left with Breyten Breytenbach, walking in “no man’s land,” which for him, an Afrikaner, South African, and African poet means a land halfway between the dream of an Africa he left.
behind and the face of an Africa that greets him as a visiting exile. It is, in other words, a place both home and foreign, a place whose unrecyclable topography lies under the lines of political geography even as these words playing at meaning continue to be formed from letters gnawed by nothingness when our backs are turned.

The point is to start anywhere. To continue then in the direction opened by that start. Whatever the way may be, wherever it may lead. Can you believe I don’t know where I’m going? But this I do know now: I cannot reach anywhere except by beginning here at this instant. It is important to begin. (215)

We have begun to speak of the unrecyclable, begun only, and already it’s time to go. So soon! No matter. Next time we see each other, there’ll be popcorn. I can’t wait.

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with
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Works Cited