Possessed

Falkoff, Rebecca R.

Published by Cornell University Press

Falkoff, Rebecca R.
Possessed: A Cultural History of Hoarding.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83340

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2843832
Since the dire warnings of Malthus, fears of global scarcity have been waxing, waning, and transforming. The great promise of modernity—that humanity would use inventive genius to triumph over scarce matter—began to look like a lie in the second half of the twentieth century when the irreversible damage caused by industrial capitalism and military technologies became apparent. Rather than population growth, scarcity is now better understood to result from the late capitalist mode of production that pollutes ocean, land, and atmosphere with microplastics, oil spills, municipal and industrial waste, and carbon dioxide emissions. Hoarding often obscures such considerations; no matter what waste is or how it could be avoided, the hoarder eschews collective action and takes it upon himself. Hoarding narratives make wastefulness seem like a personal failure rather than structural necessity and economic strategy of the capitalist mode of production.

The Hoarding Handbook: A Guide for Human Service Professionals (2011) contains an assessment interview that includes the following question: “Are you afraid of wasting a potentially useful object when you try to discard something? That is, are you concerned about being wasteful because the object could eventually be put to good use?” Interviewees are invited to respond with a number from...
zero, for “Never,” to eight, for “Nearly always.” A second iteration of the question reframes the aversion to wasting not as a reluctance to discard but as a propensity to acquire: “Do you acquire things because you are afraid of wasting a potentially useful object if you don’t get it?” Implicit in both questions is the idea that wasting can be avoided not only through use but also through the recognition of the possibility for use. To waste, the questions suggest, is to foreclose that potential. Whether by acquiring objects from dumping grounds or by refusing to throw out what appears to others to be void of use or exchange value, hoarding entails a rejection of the apparently definitive temporal endpoint marked by discarding an object—that is, by making waste. Hoarding imposes a different boundary—the property—creating a sanctuary space of protected disuse, where things can be, without being waste.

That spatial distribution of property and waste coincides with the way the former is conceived in the Roman origins. As the political philosopher Roberto Esposito articulates: “Property was always created by occupying an empty space or by taking possession of an object that had no owner.” That unoccupied space, that ownerless object is the definition of waste; in Latin, vastus refers to an area that is vacant, devastated, or immense. There is no a priori ontology of waste; it is made by an interpretive act. It is an effect that can be traced to its cause; its materiality cannot be separated from its history. Comprising sacred and profane, use and disuse, scarcity and abundance, waste can be counted among the “primal words” that combine antithetical meanings. Antithetically conjoined to wasting, hoarding encompasses an analogous semantic sweep.

Use and disuse, as well as scarcity and abundance, are also structuring binaries of economic inquiry, which is concerned with the allocation of limited resources to alternate ends. The binaries remain sturdy when the oikos—the Greek word for home and the root of the
prefix “eco”—is situated in the environment rather than the market, in ecology rather than economy. Though “ecology” first referred to the study of organisms in their physical surroundings, contemporary usage conveys the urgency of the scarcity of the planet’s resources and the aim of conservation, and as such invests both hoarding and wasting with new significance. Wastefulness, a misuse of limited resources, is both bad economy and bad ecology; it is irrational and immoral. Waste is as protean as the finitude that makes it possible; hoarding transforms the boundaries—spatial or temporal, physical or conceptual—that make waste. Hoarders are certainly not the only ones who are committed to avoiding waste, but whatever it means to avoid wasting, the hoarder, by definition, does it differently.

Implicit in any understanding of waste are claims about where scarcity is located, what causes it, and how it can be reduced. In one narrative, scarcity is situated in the past but remains vivid in the memory of those who have survived traumas like war, economic hardship, or forced migration. However economically irrelevant an attic full of dusty boxes or a staircase piled with books and papers may seem to overcoming scarcity, hoarding acquires a veneer of rationality through such narratives. Set against a here and now sustained by shared fantasies of plenty, the frugal resourcefulness of hoarders may appear inappropriate. Out of place or out of time—to evoke influential formulas for dirt—it is no wonder that the hoarder is often figured as a sort of “human detritus.” Another narrative, which situates scarcity in a future when fossil fuels and potable waters are depleted, imagines remedy in the resourceful avoidance of waste. The hoarder of this narrative may seem heroic, an embodiment of quiet dissent who resists the harrowing pace of planned obsolescence by refusing to waste.

The binaries of scarcity and abundance and use and disuse that structure economies and ecologies and that mark the spaces in
which hoarding and wasting are possible are also essential to the *oikos* of aesthetic objects. Literary and visual texts constitute their own economies and ecosystems within and beyond which use and disuse, scarcity and abundance take a range of forms. This chapter studies the antithetical relationships between hoarding and wasting as they reverse and refract in representative texts from Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (1842), which features one of the first and most memorable hoarders of modern literature, Stepan Pliushkin, to the first episode of A&E’s *Hoarders*.¹¹

Once a paragon of resourceful household management, the miserly landowner of Gogol’s novel withdraws from all social bonds and, rather than avoiding waste, he seems to become it. In a passage that makes the reception of writers a function of the loftiness of their subject matter, Gogol links the fate of his own work to the Pliushkin episode. I argue that a short story by Carlo Emilio Gadda, “L’Adalgisa” (1940), responds to Gogol’s desolation by developing the antithetical relationship between making art and making waste. Building on my discussion of these two texts, the chapter concludes by turning to twenty-first-century visual texts—an installation and a documentary film—that present the hoarder as a tragic hero and transform the objects amassed in the name of avoiding waste into art by arranging them in a gallery space or by documenting them in film. The hoarders in this chapter avoid waste not by making use of things, but by suspending them in a bounded space of potential. The property becomes a sanctuary of protected disuse, where matter awaits a redemptive moment of economic, epistemological, or aesthetic transformation (like a sale at the flea market, or narrative at the crime scene). The relationality that defines hoarding—a clash in perspectives about value—becomes the basis of the aesthetic transformation of waste within and between these texts.
A Lemon and a Pearl

The fame of the miserly landowner Pliushkin in Russia rivals that of the Collyer brothers in the United States, and “Pliushkin syndrome” is one of many popular synonyms of hoarding disorder. Gogol’s merciless comic description of Pliushkin’s village, manor, and person captures features of hoarding that are as relevant to postwar New York as to feudal Russia. Like the Collyer brothers, Pliushkin dresses in beggarly tatters despite his considerable wealth. He owns more than a thousand serfs and has more stored grain than any other landowner in the province. His warehouses are so full of baskets, buckets, jugs, bowls, barrels, and other household goods that they look like a Moscow market, albeit one without customers and with objects that see neither circulation nor use: “A whole lifetime would not suffice to use them, even given two estates the size of his.” He is the lord of a village that brims with ruination in glorious and grotesque detail, like a dried-up lemon “no bigger than a hazelnut” and a discolored toothpick that looks as if it had been used “perhaps before the French invaded Moscow.”

Like Langley Collyer and other notorious hoarders, Pliushkin goes out wandering every day, combing through the alleys in search of still more stuff. The role of chance is essential to such excursions; Pliushkin acquires whatever detritus he happens upon. The narrator quips that there is no need for street sweepers after Pliushkin passes through the village since he carries home any detritus whatsoever that catches his eye: “the sole of an old boot, a woman’s rag, an iron nail, a shard of pottery.” When peasants see the old miser in the village, they call out: “Look, the fisherman’s out fishing!” Pliushkin’s “fishing” expeditions consist of taking possession not of what has no exchange or use value, but of what
is un-owned or unused. The dilapidated plenitude of the village is the result not only of these fishing expeditions but also of his attempt to avoid wasting by repudiating use. Pliushkin’s thrifty household management once earned him the respect of friends and neighbors until a series of tragedies left him embittered and alone. His wife died, his older daughter eloped with a spendthrift military officer, his son entered civil service and took to gambling, his younger daughter died. Following these losses, the widower severed his remaining social bonds and became “locked in a maniacal relationship with objects.”

The behaviors that started as thrift when Pliushkin’s familial and social bonds extended into a future beyond his lifetime are now unattached to any idea of economy or rational utility. Every year more windows of his manor were boarded up; buyers stopped coming for the products of his estate, and the unused crops went to waste. The hay and corn rotted and turned into compost, the flour became as hard as a rock, and the canvas and cloth disintegrated into dust. Because Pliushkin was too miserly to use the products of his manor or to provide for his exploited serfs, everything around him turns to waste, and “the owner himself turned into human detritus.” It is not only disuse that ravages Pliushkin and all he owns; it is the modern conception of time as something irreversible and unrepeatable. The conflicting perspectives about value that define hoarding are, in the Pliushkin episode, rooted in the miserly landowner’s disavowal of this conception of time. The village is a sanctuary of disuse, a liminal space where objects and people await an endpoint defined by making waste, by making use, or by a different moment, the one that everyone else seems to think is already overdue: Pliushkin’s death. Only death could end such futile desuetude so that the humanity worn out and unrecognizable in his features of old age could at least be marked by
an epitaph. Gogol writes: “The grave is more merciful than old age, at least we have a grave that carries the inscription: HERE A HUMAN BEING IS BURIED, but there is nothing to read in the frigid, unfeeling features of inhuman old age.” Everything in Plushkin’s village, even the old miser himself, seems to have reached the end of its use-time, though it continues to exist.

Plushkin is the fifth landowner visited by the novel’s protagonist, Pavel Ivanovic Chichikov, a disgraced mid-level government official who attempts to reinvent himself in a provincial capital by claiming to be a landowner on private business. Chichikov gains acceptance among the local gentry and sets out to buy up serfs, or “souls,” (as they were recorded in official registers), who had died since the most recent census. Although dead serfs could not work the land, their names were indistinguishable, on paper, from those of the living. As Chichikov understands, the souls could therefore provide testament to private wealth sufficient to secure a loan, and landowners would be happy to sell the souls for trifling sums in order to be rid of the tax burden. Chichikov, then, traffics in immaterial signs, signifiers of wealth that are not subject to decay, though they can be transformed into material wealth. It is no coincidence that so notable a hoarder as Plushkin—like those who have become a cultural fixation in the twenty-first century—emerges at a crossroads between embodied forms of value and semiotic alchemy.

In two excurses that frame the episode of Chichikov’s visit to Plushkin’s village, Gogol shows that what is at stake in the contrast between the forms of value accumulated by each is the relationship between material reality and literary realism. In the first excursus, Gogol describes Plushkin’s village as an intrusive material reality that cannot but strike the visitor. The excursus begins as the narrator recalls the joy of youth when nothing escaped his
notice, and everything held fascination. To grow old, it seems, is to filter out the distractions of the material world, to abandon one’s sense of curiosity. As an adult, instead, the narrator is unmoved by the world he encounters: “What would in former years have aroused vivacious facial expressions, laughter and a torrent of words, now passes me by, and my immobile lips preserve a bored silence.” That indifference is shattered by the physical intrusion of Pliushkin’s village. Though he trades in immaterial signs, Chichikov is jolted out of his thoughts by the deteriorating road through the village. The reader is similarly struck with an analogously loud metaphor that has the rotting logs of the road moving up and down under Chichikov’s carriage like keys of a piano. The excursus establishes the village as a reality that disrupts not only the thoughts of the conman who traffics in signs (Chichikov), but also the narrator who works with linguistic signs, and even the irreversible progression of time. Just as Pliushkin fails to recognize the irremediable decay all around him—his own, that of the shrunken lemon, the rotting hay and corn, or the hardened flour—his village disrupts the disinterest that accompanies aging in Chichikov and the narrator.

A second excursus begins by contrasting the lucky traveler whose wife and children eagerly await his return with the poor bachelor who is weary and alone after a long voyage. Family man and bachelor are likened, respectively, to exalted and reviled writers. The difference between the two sorts of authors rests in the way each treats the world he encounters. Gogol explains: “Happy is the writer who transcends dreary, loathsome characters that strike one with their wretched reality.” Such a writer flatters his readers by concealing the miseries of life and devoting himself to “exalted images divorced from the earth.” Just as Chichikov hopes to do, these writers gain prominence and wealth by manipulating signs
without regard for reality. By contrast, the writer who resembles the bachelor is “without communion, response, or sympathy.” Like Gogol, the reviled writer takes up the base and the everyday, “everything that is constantly in front of our noses and which is invisible to indifferent eyes, all the frightful, shocking swamp of trivia that traps our lives, all the depths inhabited by frigid, fragmented, squalid creatures which swarm over our earth.” The unsuccessful writer uses “his great strength,” as well as “his intransigent sculptor’s tools,” to render his subject lifelike, in full relief. The realist writer does not indiscriminately appropriate all he encounters, as Pliushkin does, but uses art and science, chisel and magnifying glass to render the world vivid: “Today’s judges do not admit that the magnifying glasses which survey suns are equaled by those that show the movements of insects too small to see with the naked eye; they deny that a great spiritual depth is needed to illuminate a picture taken from base life and exalt it into a pearl of creation.”

The reviled realist writer neither adds to nor falsifies the world he encounters but renders it more vivid with tools of art and science. The work of exalted and reviled writers can be distinguished on the basis of how each confronts reality: the latter works directly on the material at hand, like Gogol’s narrator, and, as I will show, like Carlo, the collector and amateur entomologist of Gadda’s “L’Adalgisa.”

The Tools of Art and Science

Gogol’s excursus on the loneliness of the unappreciated writer who remakes even what is frightful and squalid functions as a call to future readers who may be more generous in their assessment of his work. Gadda answers that call with “L’Adalgisa.” The short story offers an indirect response to Gogol, redressing
the erroneous judgments of his contemporaries. The excursus on the loneliness of the bachelor and the mistreatment of the realist writer must have made an impression on Gadda; he includes Gogol in a list of genius bachelors, along with Catullus, Beethoven, Michelangelo, Tasso, Descartes, Leopardi, and implicitly, Gadda himself, or at least the bachelor character Angeloni. 24 Scholars have overlooked Gogol’s influence on Gadda, even though the personal library of the latter attests to the enduring interest amply borne out in “L’Adalgisa.” 25 “L’Adalgisa” takes up Gogol’s challenge to illuminate a picture taken from base life and exalt it into a pearl of creation, and in so doing seems a gesture of solidarity from a fellow bachelor and writer fearful of remaining without laurels. When it was published in 1940, Gadda wrote to his cousin Piero Gadda Conti, “I wrote a story, ‘L’Adalgisa,’ of twenty-five pages (or more) for Tesoretto. No one takes me seriously, though; I’m broke, I’m old—or rather, I’m in an advanced state of putrefaction.” 26

The story was published for the second time as the last of ten included in a volume, also titled L’Adalgisa, published in December 1943 (though it bore the date of 1944). 27 L’Adalgisa was “matter in the wrong time” not only because of this trifling bibliographical inaccuracy but because the historical satire seemed inappropriate in a time of war. 28 Claudio Vela calls the collection “an extraordinary fruit that ripened out of season,” and Gadda’s letters convey his shame at the inauspicious release. 29 The publication was delayed by the slowness of Gadda’s revisions, which included the addition of extensive footnotes—a sort of formal waste because of their relationship of extraneousness to the prose they gloss. Internal correspondence at Le Monnier describes the challenges of printing L’Adalgisa given the slowed pace of production as specialized workers were conscripted. When L’Adalgisa was republished
in 1945, the notes and three stories were left out because of a shortage of paper.\textsuperscript{30}

The story takes place in a public garden, where the widow Adalgisa is out for a stroll with her two rowdy sons—who run off to admire another boy’s toy gun—and her sister-in-law, to whom she recalls her career as an opera singer and her marriage to the accountant Carlo Biandronni, a character modeled after Gadda’s uncle and namesake.\textsuperscript{31} In a letter to his friend, the philologist Gianfranco Contini, Gadda writes, “This uncle of mine, named Carlo, is pretty much Carlo of ‘L’Adalgisa’—I altered his hair color and gave him the mustache that he never had.”\textsuperscript{32} He adds, using French to convey his uncle’s cosmopolitan pretensions: “A bit of a boozer, sure, but quite cultivated and alert \textit{dans le domaine de la littérature et de la science}.” The two Carlos also share a “collecting mania” (\textit{mania collezionistica}) rooted in a positivist worldview and a dilettantish interest in science (minerology, entomology), and history (philately).\textsuperscript{33}

In “L’Adalgisa,” stamps, insects, and minerals spilled through the house, filling its drawers, shelves, and closets. Adalgisa remembers: “With ‘just minerals alone,’ he had filled more than one closet in the home, an old credenza from the grandparents, and the drawers of a desk, and the mantle of a chimney-less fireplace, and the two side-tables in the ‘\textit{sala de ricéf}’ [front hall]—the big one and the small one.” The collections seem to have expanded through some agency that inverts functionality: “Paperweights (of calcite or sulfite) flowed through the house, and consequently, papers.” After Carlo’s death, the collections are unsentimentally removed and ungracefully discarded: “The tragic removal was a sort of cataclysm. The tornado of bad luck tore through the house, sweeping toward the dark, and forcing [Adalgisa] to dispose of four quintals of rocks, to say nothing of the reefs and seashells and the few long
pieces of calcium carbonate—stalks of stalagmite, like dripping candles. And for no profit, not even a cent! . . . It might as well been me paying them to take it away!”

Treasures to Carlo during his lifetime, the collections become waste after his death. Among Adalgisa’s fond memories of her learned husband is one that revolves around another sort of waste: a pellet of excrement pushed through the sands of Viareggio by a Scarabaeus sacer, a dung beetle. Adalgisa recalls her husband’s “famous capture” of the Atheucus (as they are also called), one of the most dramatic scenes in the story. She proudly introduces the capture as a triumph of modern scientific knowledge: “Even the kings of Egypt—think a bit about what a superstitious age it was then, compared to the science of today—worshipped [the Atheucus] like a sacred animal, like a peacock.”

Adalgisa’s awe of her husband’s scientific learning illustrates the ambivalent break that, for Bruno Latour, subtends the “constitution” of the moderns. Unlike the superstitious Egyptians of yore, who worshipped dung beetles, scientists like Carlo access truths about the natural world. Gadda ironizes Adalgisa’s confidence in the victory of modern knowledge over ancient belief when the widow compares the dung beetle to a peacock, reproducing the superstition of the Egyptians.

Adalgisa’s operatic account of the famous capture also confounds the distinction between art and science. Carlo’s scientific inquiry, in her telling, is a heroic tale that draws on religious and mythical themes. She describes how Carlo watched as the scarab rolled a perfectly spherical mass of dung across mountains and valleys of sand, attempting to reach the residence of his lady-beetle, “who waited, anxiously, on behalf of the little one, the imminent larva, for that providential nourishment.” The beetle undertakes the short journey with “the tenacity of Sisyphus,” crossing “the ridges of sand; to us nothing, enormous bastions to him.” With heart
pounding and tweezers poised, Carlo captures the scarab, ending its odyssey in the prison of a small jar. A boy—one of several gathered to watch the epic hero—grabs the treasure left behind on the sand, “eager to claim his share of the fortune.” When the round pellet squishes between the boy’s fingers, his friends screech, “It’s just a turd and you’re a moron!” Separated from the epic journey of the scarab, the pellet transforms from a home and feast for future pupae to a turd. Like Carlo’s collections after his death, it becomes waste.

As part of Carlo’s collection of insects, the beetle becomes illustrative of the marvels of the natural world. The narrator—who comes out in the course of the story as a participant in the setting of belle epoque Milan—recalls how Carlo would hold forth on philosophy and science, illustrating the marvels of the natural world with objects from his collections. With proud eloquence, surrounded by members of the Milanese bourgeoisie and by his insects, minerals, stamps, and “portraits of landscapes of Libya,” Carlo confirmed the extraordinary find: “It was indeed the Athecus Sacer Linnaei.” Had Carlo not put a premature end to the sandy journey, the scarab’s lady would have deposited her eggs in the perfect sphere made up of “the stuff that those kids called . . . by its name.” For Carlo, the saga is not abject but regal; the little larvae would have been born with a banquet before them and would have dined like princes on the dung. He concludes by offering his entranced audience a bit of schmaltzy wisdom: “Every generation paves the way for the next generation.”

Gadda creates a literary analogue to the realia of Carlo’s salons with a footnote—the longest in L’Adalgisa, itself the most extensively footnoted of Gadda’s works. The approximately 2,000-word note is offered as a gloss on the following sentence: “Because in short poor Carlo (8) was also an entomologist, which is why
certain ladies I knew—a among the most cultured of our coterie—called him a professor of etymology.” Placed mid-sentence and mid-clause, between the subject and the verb, the note comments on an epithet, “poor Carlo,” that has already appeared five times in the story. The note is itself a form of waste, out of place not only because it is excluded from the body of the text, but also because it is belated as a gloss on the epithet. The note begins, “‘Poor Carlo’ was rooted and raised in the ‘positivistic’ age” and concludes, “Every age has its wisdom.” The list sandwiched between, the bulk of the note, thus functions in toto as a sketch of the positivistic age. This portrait of the person, “poor Carlo,” takes the form of a catalog of the elements of age—one that is risibly replete. The list names libraries, insurance cooperatives, and credit unions; billiard rooms, public pools, and hiking clubs; geologists, crystallographers, and the minerals named after them (sellaite, dolomite); Austrian and German beers—light and dark, with corresponding connoisseurs—the first Italian beers (and related controversies), French liquors and wines; carriages, steam locomotives, and coal smoke; asparagus servers, citrus juicers, and spoons for scraping marrow from a bone; hats, hairstyles, shoes, and corsets; as well as standards of health and hygiene. This is a most positivistic presentation of the positivistic age: to understand “poor Carlo,” you need to know about his bathing suit, his facial hair, and the tubes that penetrate his intestinal depths, his “most remote bum bum.”

Gadda uses the rhetorical figure associated with uselessness to map civil society and explain the emergence of the Milanese bourgeoisie. A paragraph that begins by listing forms of transportation continues, asyndetically, to name derivative phenomena like the colloquialisms that result: “The presence and efficiency of horse-drawn carriages and horse-drawn carriers with little canopies (called ‘gardeners’).” He notes the changed streetscape engendered
by old and new forms of transportation: heaps of horse dung and puddles of urine that became part of everyday life. Without straying from the list form, Gadda includes a network of causal relations: “Locomotive smoke: relics of the aforementioned in auriculae, hair, eyebrows, and nostrils.” Trains belch out coal dust, which gets in everyone’s eyes, producing a new ailment, “carbon in the eye,” and a new praxis, that of removing coal dust from the eyes with the corner of a handkerchief. With fashions—lace-up booties, for example—come sexual and literary obsessions: “Psychopaths (two or three of them in Europe) enamored of used booties, or rather, used borzacchino (the ‘brodequin’ of Baudelaire): which became a bit of a fetish for everyone.” With new pastimes come new nuisances: “Picnics in the park, precautions against green grass stains on clothing (bum bums, skirts, knees).”

Although the property of the Scarabaeus sacer is its excrement, and the collections of Carlo become discards, neither the scarab nor Carlo resembles Pliushkin, since both use their treasures. The ball of dung may be a turd in the hands of the boy on the beach, but had the beetle completed his odyssey across the Viareggio sands, it would have become home and banquet for his pupa. Similarly, Carlo’s minerals, insects, and stamps are brought to life in his salons as illustrations of his philosophy and learning. It is only after Carlo’s death that the collections turn to waste, becoming as useless as hail cannons, and as extraneous to the bourgeois interior as the eighth footnote is to the story. With the scarab’s dung and the collections of Carlo, who delights in nature’s abject marvels, Gadda answers Gogol’s call to elevate base matter—the “squalid creatures which swarm over our earth,” into a pearl of creation. But Gadda’s reading of Gogol’s lament consists not only in making exalted images of squalid stuff but also in emplotting its transformations to reveal the instability of abjection, the
capriciousness of today’s judges—and those so unforgiving to Gogol’s reviled writer.

In *Dead Souls*, Pliushkin’s commitment to avoiding waste consists in salvaging objects that have been discarded or abandoned and in refusing to impose a temporal endpoint on what has already expired—such things as the dried-out lemon, an ancient toothpick, rotten grain, and hardened flour. In “L’Adalgisa,” Gadda relates a series of events of making waste through expropriation. Both writers draw more or less explicit parallels between acts of salvaging and keeping and their own aesthetic projects. Pliushkin’s hoarding is defined by acute attention to the material—to anything whatsoever that has been abandoned in the alleys of his village. That tendency to be struck by even what is squalid or trivial in the material world is contagious; Pliushkin’s dilapidated village seizes the attention of Chichikov and of the narrator and becomes a defining feature of works by reviled realist writers like Gogol. Gadda incorporates an overwhelming collection of obsolescence—objects, ideas, institutions—into a textual storehouse in the form of the eighth footnote of “L’Adalgisa.” Like the pellet of dung left behind on the sand after the scarab’s capture or the quintals of minerals removed from the Biandronni home after Carlo’s death, the footnote becomes waste; a lumber-room of the positivistic age and of the story from which it is excluded. The relationship developed in “L’Adalgisa” between making literature and making waste is apparent not only in Gadda’s lament of his own putrefying state but also in the advice Adalgisa delivers to her sister-in-law at the start of the story: “‘Be happy, enjoy life while you still have time. Don’t think about it, don’t be so sad. It’s all poetry, nothing but poetry, believe me.’ She said ‘poetry’ like she would have said feces or other putrefying matter.” Indeed, it is all poetry, in the hands of a Gadda or a Gogol, but it is a poetry...
that, each writer (mistakenly) feared, would remain unrecognized by contemporary arbiters of value, like pearls of dung and jars of dead bugs.

**Future Unused**

Similar poetry is captured in contemporary texts dedicated to hoarding: the television series, *Hoarders*; Song Dong’s installation, *Waste Not*; and Martin Hampton’s short documentary film, *The Collector*. These twenty-first-century visual texts thematize hoarding in its antithetical symbiosis with wasting, presenting clashing perspectives about value in dramas of making, refusing to make, or unmaking waste. *Hoarders* aired on August 17, 2009, to become A&E’s most popular series; it remains a central text in contemporary cultural studies of hoarding. Each of the more than one hundred episodes features two households whose inhabitants—hoarders and their exasperated families—face an imminent crisis like the intervention of governmental agencies like child protective services or public safety because of the condition of their home. Junk removal and cleaning services, professional organizers, social workers, and psychologists descend upon the hoards, laboring against indignant protests. The subjects of *Hoarders* keep all sorts of objects—old newspapers and magazines, expired food, tattered dolls and stuffed animals, rusted tools and auto parts are common examples. The dramatic conflict in each episode is built around clashing perspectives about value, as professionals urge hoarders to consign cherished possessions to the dumpster.

Jill, a sixty-year-old engineer and Milwaukee resident featured on the first episode of *Hoarders*, has become emblematic of the show, in part because her segment is discussed in several academic studies of hoarding in popular culture. Her episode—set during
the housing crisis in one of the country’s hardest-hit urban areas—deflects attention from infrastructure to make poverty and homelessness appear to result from poor housekeeping. The crisis that demands the speedy clean out funded by the television program is the threat of eviction, a particularly terrifying prospect for Jill, who had recently lost her job and been diagnosed with a serious health problem.

The segment is introduced with a montage calibrated to evoke disgust; the sequence includes the door of a brimming freezer slowly opening, fly-tape encrusted with death, and a rotting mush of pumpkin, images accompanied by a voice-over of the psychiatrist David Tolin: “The smell is the first thing that hits you when you walk in that house. It’s like a blast in your face.” Jill’s hoarding takes the form of a refusal to discard expired food items; by her account, however, she seems a righteous paladin opposing a culture of food waste. She describes her aversion to wasting food by evoking two familiar narratives about hoarding. One narrative is moral: “I feel guilty about wasting something that somebody could be using,” and one is personal: “I’ve had periods of poverty where I haven’t had a choice about what I could eat.” She disdains the bacteria-phobic consumers unwilling to trust their own senses over the hard law of sell-by dates. Mocking such credulity, she holds up a foreboding container of sour cream, and asks, “What’s gonna go wrong with that? What is it gonna go sour?” Unlike other consumers who place blind faith in sell-by dates, Jill describes the positivist principles that guide her choices about what to keep: “I look at things rather scientifically. I don’t intend to eat anything that is going to make me ill. I’m not going to dogmatically follow the dates that are on something. I’m going to use my mind. Because I’ve got a mind.” For Jill, to discard food in accordance with the mandates of sell-by dates amounts to
blind faith in the system of industrial food production. The squa-
lor of Jill’s kitchen is a testament to her campaign of resistance; it
is no wonder that viewers have recognized something heroic in
her plight.

The clean out process unfolds through a series of negotiations
between Jill and the professionals and family members who insist
that she discard food items. Remarkably, what they ask of her is
faith. She explains her rationale for keeping an aseptically sealed
box of broth: “It’s not puffy; it’s expensive; I don’t have the money
to replace it; and it is something that I can eat on my diet.” Tolin
counters these perfectly good reasons by insisting that she aban-
don her positivistic approach and believe—if not in the sell-by
dates—then in the medical expertise he offers: “My thought is
that you have a blind spot here. My thought is that you’re falling
into one of your hoarding habits.” Only by giving herself over to
a faith in expert knowledge at odds with her experience of the
world and her training as an engineer will she be cured. Tolin
insists: “You have to recognize that you are ill.”

The positivist principles Jill uses to justify keeping the broth are
set aside in other scenes of negotiation like the memorable pump-
kin scene, when Tolin attempts to appeal to her inductive reason-
ing: “You know sometimes when you get a strong smell and a lot of
flies buzzing around it means that there is something rotting.” Jill
swears that, though there are some rotting apples in the kitchen,
there is no rotten food in the living room. The camera follows Tol-
in’s conspicuous glance across the room and zooms in on a rotting
pumpkin. Jill concedes: “Oh, I’m sorry, the pumpkin! It was a very
nice pumpkin when it was fresh!” Jill’s attachment to the decaying
pumpkin despite its state flattens time. Where Tolin sees only the
abjection of the present, Jill remembers the time when the pump-
kin was nice and imagines a future that it potentially still holds; its
seeds could grow into more pumpkins, the overripe fruit could be used to make pie.\textsuperscript{49}

An update episode, which aired the following year, includes a follow-up visit to Jill’s still somewhat clean house. The tour culminates in a close-up of one gourd that survived the clean out nearly two years earlier and now occupies a regal position on her coffee table. “The remaining pumpkin is still here—the reigning pumpkin,” she says of the proud, faded squash. “I’m hoping that it’ll hold its color, and that it’ll look as pretty as it does now. I love the filigree pattern on it.” The professional organizer concedes, “You know, some people want two-year-old pumpkins in their houses, and some people don’t.” His assessment signals the success of the treatment: her housekeeping choices are no longer symptoms of mental illness but expressions of taste. Only once the pumpkin is transformed into an aesthetic object that can be enjoyed in the present does it stop being a symptom.\textsuperscript{50}

The hoarders of popular media keep things for the same reasons as everyone else: they find some sentimental, intrinsic, or instrumental value in them.\textsuperscript{51} Though it may entail a gross oversimplification, these can be aligned with distinct temporalities; the sentimental value is generally rooted in an object’s past, the aesthetic value in its present, the instrumental value in its future. Critical to distinguishing the hoarder’s forward-looking appreciation of instrumental value from the investor’s wager of space against time is that for the former, the redemptive moment when, for example, the seeds are planted does not arrive. Delay is dangerous. In his widely anthologized essay “On Dumpster Diving,” Lars Eighner issues a warning to that effect, imparting a fundamental rule for scavengers: take only what is of immediate use.\textsuperscript{52} To do otherwise is to be overwhelmed by the extraordinary plenitude of so many good things abandoned in dumpsters.
Marie Kondo’s trademarked Konmari Method is rooted in a similar injunction to the present tense: to get rid of any possessions that do not “spark joy.”

Like Jill, the hoarders of Song’s *Waste Not* and Hampton’s *The Collector* are defined by their unwavering commitment to avoiding waste. The television presentation of Jill’s expired food invites disgust, whereas the accumulations of *Waste Not* and *The Collector* inspire something more like awe. The hoarders in these texts are presented as tragic figures, bearing some resemblance to the “Assistants” Giorgio Agamben describes: “More intelligent and gifted than our other friends, always intent on notions and projects for which they seem to have all the necessary virtues, they still do not succeed in finishing anything and are generally idle [*senz’opera*].” Though they may not know it, their disavowal of death—or waste—holds open the door to the future, a gate through which the Messiah, or at least some artist who might transform their plight—might pass. These brilliant friends, helpless parents, and eccentric roommates are the ones we leave behind: “They give us help, even though we can’t quite tell what sort of help it is. It could consist precisely in the fact that they cannot be helped, or in their stubborn insistence that ‘there is nothing to be done for us.’ For that very reason, we know, in the end, that we have somehow betrayed them.” Presenting their subjects as such, Song and Hampton both deny and aver their own artistry.

Song’s 2005 *Waste Not* answers the call for future use issued by a hoard of instrumental value: the stuff accumulated by the artist’s mother, Zhao Xianguan, over the course of her lifetime. The installation consists of the contents of her modest home—more than 10,000 household objects amassed over decades of avoiding waste—which Song moves into the Beijing Tokyo Arts Projects (BTAP) Gallery in Beijing. The work contemplates the
The display of threadbare redundancy fills some 3,000 square feet of gallery space with domestic objects—apparel and accessories; furniture; kitchenware of every kind, food packaging, and other alimentary ephemera; dolls, plush animals, and other toys—all sorted and arranged around and within the bare wood frame of Zhao’s home. The orderly disposition of the objects and the skeletal remains of the humble dwelling invite viewers to marvel at the improbable geometry: all that was in there.

The magnitude of the display—the meticulous arrangement of so much postconsumer stuff—engenders awe, an emotion that psychologists describe as a combination of perceived vastness and accommodation; in other words, the adjustment of mental structures to assimilate what resists comprehension. Awe shares features with disgust; both fix boundaries between feeling subject and affecting object. The perception of immensity that distinguishes awe achieves a similar effect of distancing: “This object is different from me and greater than me,” thinks the subject-in-awe. *Waste Not* embodies immensity in the form of so much detritus; the viewer’s awe is directed at the magnitude of the display, and by implication, Zhao’s dogged—or even sacred—commitment to its preservation.

The installation remakes the hoarded objects as a monument to an ethic of conservation that is shared by a generation. Song writes: “‘*Wu jin qi yong*’ [‘waste not, want not’] is the guideline of my mother’s life, but it is also the portrayal of a whole generation of Chinese people,” the one that lived through the Cultural Revolution. In addition to the shared historical context of the refusal to discard, the catalog offers a different etiology of Zhao’s hoarding by presenting her biography as a series of sudden changes in fortune, lending her commitment to a familiar narrative. Zhao’s
formidable resolve is presented in *Waste Not* as a historical relic, now out of place in a time of plenty. Song explains: “In times when goods were abundant, the habit of ‘waste not’ became a burden.” The curator, Wu Hung, also emphasizes the presence of the past in the exhibition: “[*Waste Not*] does not *transform* the material world into a different representational medium, but only *transport* the past to the here and now.” The glosses of Wu and Song temporalize the chasm crossed by the affect of awe; awe-inspiring vastness takes the form of a pastness present in the objects and in Zhao’s custodianship.

Zhao was present for much of the BTAP installation, discussing the work with gallery patrons and rearranging the objects in the
collection. Wu explains: “Song Dong’s idea was to transform his mother into an artist—an active participant in the art project he was designing.” Zhao is credited as a coartist of the BTAP installation, and the catalog includes her writings—edited and arranged thematically by Song into sections—“Clothes,” “Eat,” “Live,” “Use.” Song describes the installation as a homage to his mother’s ethic and an answer to the call for future use issued implicitly by the stuff she so devoutly set aside, “the majority of which would be considered garbage in any other situation.” The transformation of objects, for Song, is a way to “[make] her collection finally ‘useful’” and thus to heed her adherence to the doctrine of “Waste not, want not.” The exhibition honors her resolve and treats her hoarding not by cleaning out her home and making waste of her possessions, but by realizing her dream of future use and turning the domestic objects into art. “In this way, he hoped, her pathological attachment to the past might be cured, and she would be free from the specter of memories to enjoy her life again.”

Despite the shared artist credit, Zhao’s contribution is framed as material to be transformed—or transported—and loss (of her husband) to be mourned, and madness to be cured.

The narrative of *Waste Not* affirms this is a time of plenty. Avoiding waste seems like an archaic practice of a past generation: “Now that the standard of living has improved, this particular way of thinking creates a generation gap—mother not only prevented herself from discarding this stuff, she also prevented us from doing so. As such, our living space was occupied by things waiting to be used and thus ‘not wasted.’” Transformed into intrinsic objects on display in a gallery space, Zhao’s household effects—like Jill’s coffee table pumpkin—are no longer caught in a time of suspense, awaiting some future use. Jill’s hoard was sacrificed to normative ideas of hygiene and economy; the choices she saw embodied in
expired food have all been made; what remains is the episode, a lot of waste, and one proud decorative gourd. Although Song’s mother is given credit as a coartist in the BTAP installation and figures prominently in the exhibit catalog, it is Song’s intervention that transforms the accumulated material into art. Zhao’s hoard, like Carlo’s collections in “L’Adalgisa,” “loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner”; however, as art, at BTAP, it gains value.61

The Collector also remakes a hoard as art, capturing the tireless labor of Christian Guienne, whose scavenging in the small French town of Buis-les-Baronnies earned him the nickname “the Diogenes of Baronnies.”62 Guienne sets out to counter the culture of waste by remaking the temporal boundaries that define waste as spatial ones. In place of objects that have outlasted their use-time, waste becomes, for Guienne, the space beyond his property: the vastus. The film’s title invites the viewer to interpret the awe-inspiring assortment of broken-down consumer goods that fill Guienne’s house and sprawl across his property as a purposeful—even artful—aggregation, though it is the result of decades of scavenging through the dumpsters:

There are certain people who say, there is enormous wastefulness. It’s terrible. For thirty or forty years I have watched people throwing stuff away. There is great wastefulness. They throw away millions and millions of clothes. They throw away millions and millions of things. They even throw away new things. They chuck out things that work! Radios that work! Coffee machines that work! Machines that still work. Even washing machines that still work. Fridges that work! I have a fridge that I found a year ago that still works.

Guienne conducts a tour of his home and property, proudly urging the camera operator to capture a room full of bread which, he insists, cannot go bad because it is dried out, and a stretch of lawn
covered with dozens of refrigerators that double as shoe-racks, and a heap of four or five hundred bicycle tires.

Like Jill and Zhao, who consider their possessions to have instrumental value and keep things with the idea of their potential use, Guienne imagines that his acres of junk will serve improbable “clients”—whoever might find himself in need of, for example, a broken refrigerator filled with shoes or, for that matter, ten. He explains that the people who sometimes come to rummage through his de facto junkyard are welcome to take anything; occasionally, he even makes sales. Guienne’s lifetime of salvage work creates a space where objects are suspended in time. Although he patiently awaits clients who would return objects to use; the period of suspense is closed by Hampton’s film, on the one hand, and by the clean out ordered by the town of Baronnies, on the other. In 2009, Hampton made a short epilogue, *The Collector, Part II*, which relates the unhappy final year of Guienne’s life after the town seized his possessions and placed him in an elder care facility. In *Part II*, all the enthusiasm Guienne displayed in *The Collector* is gone, his decades of rescuing waste from the dumpsters of Baronnies have become wasted time. Like so many other hoarders subjected to forced clean outs, Guienne falls into a deep depression and dies soon after, in the barren space of an elder care facility. The film transforms Guienne into a martyr to the resourceful avoidance of waste. Hampton describes his subject as an archivist and artist: “This enormous collection of fridges, televisions, toys, shoes, books etc. . . . represents a remarkable material history of the town’s consumer habits, and I consider it to be an outstanding artwork.” Though it may be transformed into an outstanding work of documentary film, or a monument to Guienne’s work, the sprawling, unfocused junkyard is unlikely to be useful as a material history of consumerism.
In a 2008 Editor’s Column in *PMLA*, Patricia Yaeger considers the emergence of a canon of contemporary art and literature dedicated to salvaging and savoring postconsumer debris. She argues that the schism between nature and culture that for Bruno Latour underpins the modern constitution is transformed, in this developing corpus, into a rift between waste and culture. The idea of nature as something external to culture and untouched by human intervention—something “considered from afar, through the shelter of bay windows”—now takes the form of what has been used up, worn out, or cast off, and carries the potential once associated with “Nature.” Though Yaeger does not address the reemergence of the hoarder, her survey of contemporary artists and writers who act as custodians of rubbish helps to explain the extent to which hoarders resemble artists or martyrs in contemporary works—at least for viewers more moved by Jill’s commitment to avoiding waste than repulsed by the waste that surrounds her.

Hoarders of modern literary and visual texts see the potential in waste, but they cannot manage to transform it through use or art, and stuff just piles up. Nonetheless, just as the aim of preservation is implicit in the term ecology, for Yaeger rubbish ecologies are marked by a commitment to the notion that there is something worth saving in postconsumer debris and other discards. But even as hoarders act as proprietors of a rubbish ecology, their stuff remains rubbish until it is transformed through use or art. Pliushkin’s accumulation—his failure of household management—becomes Gogol’s pearl of creation. Gadda’s “L’Adalgisa” subjects matter to further transformations. The mineralogical and entomological specimens that Carlo uses to illustrate platitudes for rapt audiences at his salons become junk after his death, only to be transformed again into art. It is no wonder that when she says, “it’s all poetry, nothing but poetry,” Adalgisa says “poetry” as she would
“feces” or other putrefying matter. In the junkyard of Guienne and the home of Zhao, the material accumulations are so great that they can only be used as art. If hoarders are tragic figures—failures in household management, positivistic inquiry, and artistic production—it is because they take on the impossible task of avoiding waste.