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Garbage is Gold: A Cornucopian Analysis of Don Delillo's Underworld

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Abstract

This research paper analyses the notion of Cornucopia with reference to Don Delillo's novel Underworld. During the course of this study an attempt has been made to ascertain that Delillo takes up the eco-critical position of Cornucopia along with other positions while discussing the non-human environment in his novel. Moreover, the psychological study of the environment conscious characters has also been done. The study explores whether the environmentally cognizant people completely conform to the theory of cornucopia or not.

Keywords

Eco-criticism, Cornucopia, Environmentalism, Garbage, Waste

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Introduction:

Over the past decades, eco-criticism has evolved a critical apparatus that concentrates on the linkage between humankind and non-human locale. A piece of literature subjected to eco criticism, is analyzed in terms of setting, place and environment, which take on wealthier meaning. But the questions remain: What is nature? What is the environment? Why the denotations as well as connotations of the word "environment," which is drawn from the verb "to environ or surround," has changed its meaning to something that is nonhuman? Are humans not important and very much natural environment unto themselves? Peter Barry in his book Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory writes:

> "Perhaps the most fundamental point to make here is that eco-critics reject the notion that everything is socially and/or linguistically constructed. For the eco-critics, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it". (252)

Discussion:

Civilization did not rise and flourish as men hammered out hunting scenes on bronze gates and whispered philosophy under the stars, with garbage as a noisome offshoot, swept away and forgotten. No, garbage rose first, inciting people to build a civilization in response, in self-defense. We had to find ways to discard our waste, to use what we couldn't discard, to reprocess what we couldn't use. Garbage pushed back. It mounted and spread. And it forced us to develop the logic and rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, art, music, mathematics. (287)

The present study places Underworld by Don DeLillo under the panopticon of eco-criticism albeit at a slightly different angle. One of the positions eco-critics take is cornucopia. The critics who take the position of cornucopia hold the view, "More people on the planet means more resourceful brains, more productive hands, more consumption and therefore more economic growth" (Garrard 19).

The key positive claim put forward by cornucopians is that human welfare, as measured by statistics such as life expectancy or local pollution, has demonstrably increased along with population, economic growth and technological progress. They point out that, in the long run, the supposed scarcity of natural resources is belied by falling prices of food, minerals and commodities relative to wages; as a specific resource becomes harder to obtain, the price increases, leading capitalist entrepreneurs to search for substitute sources, processes or materials. (19)

The discovery of substitutes leads to a decrease in value of the original material, such as the fall in real copper prices was brought about by the extensive replacement of fibre-optic cables for copper wires. "Scarcity" is therefore an economic rather than an ecological phenomenon, and will be fixed by capitalist entrepreneurs, and not the cutbacks in consumption advised by environmentalists: "The fact is that the concept of resources itself is a dynamic one; many things become resources over time. Each century has seen new resources emerge" (Beckerman 60). Making claims of ceaseless cornucopia of growth, commodity and wealth production, Simon Beckerman critiques environmental 'scare-mongering' which is premised

upon inaccurate estimates of worldwide famine and global cooling prepared by the ecologists in 1970s (20). In his typical mock serious tone, DeLillo too in his narrative Underworld plays with the position held by cornucopians as he appears to be enamored of waste. The heaps of garbage in Underworld appear more as a mark than a menace of human progress.

Garrard also refers to the "sacredness" of waste in his book. He is intrigued by Max Oelschlaeger's idea of a new "Paleolithic consciousness" that will replace the mechanistic world view. Max Oelschlaeger is an American postmodern ecocritical philosopher who holds that a "wilderness theology – a profoundly insightful evolutionary pantheism – is a complementary development that revivifies an archaic sense of the sacrality of all being" (67). John Muir too, who is dubbed as a sardonic and incisive critic of anthropocentrism, has ridiculed the "numerous class of men" who "are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves" (qtd. in Gerrard 68). Muir contends that, lions, alligators, diseases and poisons are all sufficient proof that "Creation is not prefabricate for human use and comfort, and that every living thing down to the 'smallest transmicroscopic creature' has intrinsic value" (238). From the above discussion it can be deduced that if God is undistinguishable from the universe, this belief, certainly, abolishes the distinction, between the Creator and His all creation. A pantheistic theology is to worship not only the pure forms of nature but toxic waste dumps also (Garrard 68). A streak of obsession with refuse can be discerned in the complex psychology of Underworld's characters. For instance, the most frank revelation of Nick Shay's all consuming interest in debris comes when he describes an eidetic memory of visiting a garbage sight in Holland. Rank smell and all that squalor of city life stirs something vital deep down in his soul because he finds it oddly personal. He is, evidently, touched by the epiphany of detritus because it gives him a glimpse of his puss-infested soul. He is driven by the company manager to a place dumped with enormous heaps of refuse: "We make our way through the world and come upon a scene that is medieval – modern, a city of high-rise garbage, the hell reek of every perishable object ever thrown together, and it seems like something we've been carrying all our lives" (104).

Garbage is a heap of throwaways, a collection that is not a collection even. As a phenomenon, its emergence on the face of the globe is inextricably linked with growth of human population. Garbage sites, interestingly, demarcate the territory that bears claims of ownership, thus eerily resolving identity complex of the citizenry. These locations elicit ecological interest because of their margin line existence. Symbolically, they seem to draw a line between the hell created by modern culture and serenity that resides in wilderness, between the animal world and the panorama of human society, between the mundane obscenity and the beatific spirituality. Jesse Detwiler, the staunch advocate of the junk, asserts the relevance of garbage by making a general prescription for citizenry: "get to know your garbage. And the hot stuff, the chemical waste, the nuclear waste, this becomes a remote landscape of nostalgia" (286). At the same time, he brushes aside the danger of its toxicity with his trade mark theatricality. According to him, "the more dangerous the waste, the more heroic it will become" (289). But the dichotomy lies in the fact that garbage marks just a transitional stage. An interlude as it is, it is not a fixture upon the face of the earth, but a flux soon to be metamorphosed through the inexorable processes of nature. Therefore, even where garbage marks a boundary, it is a shifty boundary. Klara Sax, the artist, is alive to this intellectual build up of this modern sensibility about garbage when she chooses a part of the desert that is a dumping site for the US military. She recounts her reasons of choosing desert

as her art workshop in her interview to a French television network: “This is a landscape painting in which we use the landscape itself. The desert is central to this piece. It’s the surround. It’s the framing device. It’s the four-part horizon” (70). She further clarifies her choice by getting to the heart of the matter. She has chosen an unwelcome place which is “un-conducive to industry and progress and so forth” (71). The fact is that she has gravitated to this uninviting setting because here lay the most visible signs of a small scale cataclysm: “The desert bears the visible signs of all the detonation we set off. All the craters and warning signs and no-go areas and burial markers, the sites where debris is buried” (71).

Garbage is the central motif of the novel. It happens to be the major obsession with almost all the characters of the story but gradation of something as garbage depends upon the arbitrary application of the concepts of beauty and/or utility. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk and promulgator of Buddhist practices for Westerners, clears the anomaly between a thing of beauty and/ or utility and its rot by declaring essential sameness of the both. For him, “the rose and the garbage are equal. The garbage is just as precious as the rose” (97). Quite in the similar vein, different characters in Underworld get enamored of waste to a level that they tend to ignore the line dividing a thing of beauty and/or utility and its detritus. Sims complains that he has lost his power of judgment vis-à-vis waste since he joined the waste management firm.

> “From the first day I find that everything I see is garbage. I studied engineering. I didn’t study garbage. I thought I might go to Tunisia and build roads. I had a romantic idea; you know, wear a safari jacket and pave the world. Turns out I’m doing fine. I’m doing real work, important work. Landfills are important. Trouble is, the job follows me. The subject follows me. I went to a new restaurant last week, nice new place, you know, and I find myself looking at scraps of food on people’s plates. Leftovers. I see butts in ashtrays”. (283)

Sims’ is not an isolated case; the same thing happens with all the individuals connected with the business. This obsessive regard for disposal of waste permeates the whole life of the waste consultants. In fact, it becomes the fulcrum of their entire existence. Nick and his wife share Sims’ “hallucinations” because they also have similar approach to the issue of garbage. As Nick asserts, “Marian and I saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet un-bought” (Delillo 121). Instead of first consuming a product and then bothering about its refuse, the couple shows their sensitivity to the environmental concerns by pondering over the disposal of the garbage their consumption will create. Therefore, he confesses,

> “We didn't say, what kind of casserole will that make? We said, what kind of garbage will that make? Safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of? Can the package be recycled and come back as a tawny envelope that is difficult to lick closed? First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product as food or light bulbs or dandruff shampoo. How it measures up as waste, we asked. We asked whether it is responsible to eat a certain item if the package the item comes in will live a million years”. (121)

This happens to be an explicitly environmentalist position. However, apart from worth, context also determines characterization of anything as waste material. Ecological, metaphysical, spiritual, and materialistic concepts, as well, are involved in defining garbage. In fact, garbage provides existentialist ‘other’ to grant identity to human civilization. And

organizations make a point by indoctrinating their employees about identitarian value of garbage. Nick philosophizes, “You stand at the head of a corridor and by the time you walk to the far end you have adopted the comprehensive philosophy of the firm, the Weltanschauung. I use this grave and layered word because somewhere in its depths there is a whisper of mystical contemplation that seems totally appropriate to the subject of waste” (282). By acknowledging mystical overtones of “the subject of waste”, the protagonist subscribes to the cornucopian positioning on the issue. Waste management issue happens to be an obvious corollary of horrendous population growth and America occupies centre stage in this regard. Resultantly garbage assumes greater significance in modern day U.S.A. A great body of American intelligentsia is pre-eminently concerned with tackling of this nightmarish phenomenon, though it is the creative division that has been forthcoming in launching a totally novel approach. Instead of taking garbage as an issue to be coped with, DeLillo has come up with an optimistic vision that instead of viewing waste as an insoluble enigma, takes it as a part of solution. Jesse Detwiler, who can variously be described as a visionary of the dump as well as a garbage guerrilla, expounds the necessity of garbage for the growth of civilization in unambiguous terms. Detwiler comes up with a very novel approach. He sees garbage as an engine of growth.

Christopher Todd Anderson in “Sacred Waste: Ecology, Spirit, and the American Garbage Poem” identifies a strain of Garbage verse in American literature. He opines that writers of this genre “complicate our usual sense of garbage as repugnant by viewing it in spiritual terms and as a substance through which to examine human culture and its relationship to the natural world’’ (37). Quite in line with garbage verse, DeLillo’s fiction fully exhibits this novel trend in American literature. He also does not subscribe to the view that sees garbage as a thing to be shunned. His inferential logic dictates that the real knowledge comes by deciphering the enigma

bit by bit and we can reach the ultimate reality by moving from the bottom and by exploring our garbage bins. That’s why Jesse Detwiler suggests to the waste consultants that they ought to be a bit theatrical in discharging their duty of waste management as he feels that public can see its real face only by studying the thing it shuns. His oracular pronouncement goes: “Get to know your garbage” (286). And only by developing the cultural norms in relation to waste management, people can reach anywhere near their true selves. He is even optimistic about the conversion of garbage sites into “a remote landscape of nostalgia” which will be haunted by the people endeavoring to gather the crumbs of their past (286).

DeLillo’s perceptive vision seeks to explore regenerative value of garbage. In his quest for finding proper ambience for garbage imagery, DeLillo invokes elements of sublimity-pastoral and romantic, though at the same time he makes departure, in some important ways, from these trends. DeLillo makes a point by granting romantic aura to garbage sites. He mingles aesthetics of sublime with the ugly spectacles of modern civilization.

> “It's the kind of human junk that deepens the landscape, makes it sadder and lonelier and places a vague sad subjective regret at the edge of your response-not regret so much as a sense of time’s own esthetic, how strange and still and beautiful a chunk of concrete can be, lived in fleetingly and abandoned, the soul of wilderness signed by men and women passing through”. (460)

DeLillo appears to be making conscious efforts to assimilate different position on environmentalism into his narrative. His take on environmentalism epitomizse attitudes

ranging

from self righteous abhorrence at pollution through acceptance of its life-engendering quality to final assimilation of it into the category of the useful. In this way, he has wrought conciliation between otherwise mutually irreconcilable positions adopted by the environmentalists and the cornucopian philosophers.

DeLillo seeks to explore regenerative value of garbage. The most astonishing aspect of the text is the quasi-religious import of the concluding section. DeLillo celebrates the miracle of life force operating in a decaying mass of garbage. “The trash is bumping and mashing around and it has a life of its own, a kind of seething vegetable menace that pushes up out of the cans and boxes, it's noisy and restless, or maybe that's just the vermin moving around, on the verge of being carsick” (363). Writing in the similar vein, DeLillo exalts the abandoned mess, pays rich accolade to the biodiversity of the muck heap and vindicates transcendental equipage of garbage. Without prevaricating, he defends the usefulness of garbage. Exploring the multi-faceted phenomenon of garbage, the novelist grants both depth and breadth to the semantics of garbage by linking it up with scientific development. To his quasi-optimistic vision, garbage appears to be an “objective correlative” connoting the impetus of growth. Detwiler declares almost prophetically,

> “[C]ities rose on garbage, inch by inch, gaining elevation through the decades as buried debris increased. Garbage always got layered over or pushed to the edges, in a room or in a landscape. But it had its own momentum. It pushed back. It pushed into every space available, dictating construction patterns and altering systems of ritual. And it produced rats and paranoia. People were compelled to develop an organized response. This meant they had to come up with a resourceful means of disposal and build a social structure to carry it out—workers, managers, haulers, scavengers. Civilization is built, history is driven”—. (DeLillo 287)

Especially intriguing are the aesthetics of the sublime developed over time by the writers of garbage. These writers tend to apply romantic wonder and element of curiosity upon ugly spectacles, the result being a topsy-turvy change in vision. The attitudinal shift wrought by the writers of garbage bears utopian tinge because they seem to downplay the environmental hazards. That’s why stance of the garbage writers is entirely different from the take of environmentalists that conjure up apocalyptic images to denote conversion of the earth into one great pile of garbage. And this environmentalist version interspersed with notions of garbage poetry leads us to the heart of Don DeLillo’s futuristic vision in Underworld. He imagined he was watching the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza --only this was twenty-five times bigger, with tanker trucks spraying perfumed water on the approach roads. He found the sight inspiring. All this is ingenuity and labor, this delicate effort is to fit maximum waste into diminishing space. The towers of the World Trade Center were visible in the distance and he sensed a poetic balance between that idea and this one. Bridges, tunnels, scows, tug, graving docks, container ships, all the great works of transport, trade and linkage were directed in the end to this culminating structure. And the thing was organic, ever growing and shifting, its shape computer-plotted by the day and the hour. In a few years this would be the highest mountain on the Atlantic Coast between Boston and Miami. (184)

Poising World Trade Centre against the sky-rocketing heap of garbage, Brian brings topsy-turvy change in the mechanics of development. The focus is shifted from the twin towers to

the heap of detritus which is wreathed with aura of sublimity by juxtaposing it with the relics of Pharaoh's age. The drastic change in vision embodies the quintessence of the narrative. Brian's transcendent vision is comprehensive and all-encompassing vis-à-vis thematic concerns of the novel. Firstly, it is imbued with apocalyptic thinking because it pitches the rubble of modern civilization against its highlights. Secondly, the philosophy presented here is tinged with environmentalism as the waste management project is an obvious outgrowth of environmental thinking. Thirdly, there is an obvious streak of cornucopia because the vision appears to celebrate the idea of a garbage sky scrapper mocking at monuments of the past as well as of the present. Furthermore, by seeing the whole business of waste management in the larger perspective, Brian gets at his own reality and the reality of his people. The clumsy looking Brian draws confidence and inspiration from his work once he senses the actual worth of his work. Brian felt a sting of enlightenment. He looked at all that soaring garbage and knew for the first time what his job was all about. Not engineering or transportation or source reduction. He dealt in human behavior, people's habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulgences but their kindness too, their generosity, and the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us.(184) This specifically exaggerated point of view vis-à-vis waste management lies at the heart of DeLillo's iconoclast vision. Therefore, the same view is voiced by Brian, Detwiler and Nick on different occasions.

In Underworld, garbage seems to take on the divine attributes in a very bizarre manner. Ceremonial reverence and pontifical pomp that are proper to some religious function are accorded to the disposal of waste. Disposal of waste is made with utmost meticulousness. Nick Shay reminisces the days of his childhood when he used to participate in the family ritual of disposing off the household waste. There were no limits of fastidiousness that they would not cross for the proper management of the waste. They used to remove waxen labels from cereal containers before readying them for the disposal. Before they were put into bins, every bottle was rinsed properly to clear it of the remains. Tin was not put with aluminum and aluminum was not thrown alongside any other metal. On pickup days, each form of trash was placed in its separate receptacle and the receptacles were out on the sidewalk in front of the house.

> "We used a paper bag for the paper bags. We took a large paper bag and put all the smaller bags inside and then placed the large bag alongside all the other receptacles on the sidewalk. We ripped the wax paper from our boxes of shredded wheat. There is no language I might formulate that could overstate the diligence we brought to these tasks. We did the yard waste. We bundled the newspapers but did not tie them in twine". (102, 103)

This extreme version of the waste management is part of the sensibility of the central character and, therefore, it speaks volumes about the degree of its permeation in the novel. Then, during the course of the novel religious imagery is invoked to denote waste management. His profession assumes religious connotations for him but the kind of religiosity exhibited by him is as perplexed and the perplexing as is his attitude to all the major issues in his personal life ranging from his unexplained disappearance of his father through his baffling affair with Klara Sax to his ludicrous handling of his wife's affair with his friend. He calls for an unqualified reverence for the things willingly shunned by us. "Waste is a religious thing. We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread. It is necessary to respect what we discard." (88) The picture of garbage painted in religious

contours is, in fact, developed by religious clerics and that picture gets stuck in the perceptive mind of Nick. His obsession with waste can be traced back to his education at seminary. “The Jesuits taught me to examine things for second meanings and deeper connections.” (88)

This emphasis upon the ‘second meaning’ makes Nick probe deeper into the chemistry of everything and analyze facts from different angles. And this is what inspires him to go after the ball that sealed the fate of his favorite team. His Jesuit training teaches him that ultimately it is the ‘planetary context’ that determines the value of even the smallest object. (88) Resultantly, he tries to search the meanings of his job in its relevance to the global perspective. And towards the end of the novel, he comes to see waste management as a perfect capitalist tool to multiply gains. The radioactive waste, though detrimental for the local population, is profitable and its profitability renders all the questions of morality simply irrelevant.

The underside of cornucopia-its facile optimism, blind faith in capitalism, anthropocentrism and utilitarian attitude towards nature can also be skimmed from DeLillo’s version of the world. Different characters from Underworld are inclined to taking garbage as a visible mark of the industrial growth of their country and not as an environmental hazard. Detwiler, the waste archaeologist, considers garbage the tour de force of the engine of growth, and as an emblem of capitalistic energy. He does not see any point in throwing garbage out of sight because, according to him, ‘the scenery of the future’ is going to be dominated by it, which will be haunted by its own brand of pilgrims, and, ultimately, it will be the only scenery available to future generations. The mentor suggests to the waste consultants that they should encourage participation of the public in managing their waste and let them relish the experience. His complacency becomes more evident when he remarks, “The more dangerous the waste, the more heroic it will become.” (289) The views expressed by the self-righteous waste archaeologist are not an isolated sign of smugness of intelligentsia; instead these are part of the ethos-the spirit of the age-as reflected in the novel. A bit of conversation that takes place between the executives of the waste management firm testifies to the universal acceptance of cornucopian premise, at least

among them. Brian Glassic said, “I hear they finally stopped ocean dumping off the East Coast.” “Not while I’m eating,” I said. “I also hear the more they dumped in a particular area, the richer the sea life.” Sims looked at the English woman, who alone ate fish. “Hear that?” he said. “The sea life thrived.”’ (91) A more off hand expression of cornucopian philosophy in fiction can hardly be imagined. The executives are comfortably unaware of the perils of nuclear waste that is buried in ocean bed and the Englishwoman who is supposed to document the facts about waste management on the behalf of BBC has nothing to express whatsoever in favor of or against these views. Quite similar is the approach has been taken by different characters in the last section of the novel. In fact, the epilogue of the book ‘Das Kapital’ that describes transformed version of apocalypse can be read as a prolonged understatement. Soul-raking horrors are juxtaposed with understated response of different characters. Be it self-righteous Viktor, self-possessed Nick or disoriented Brian- no one is honestly concerned for the fate of the victims who themselves are totally blind to the consequences of dumping of radioactive waste in their locality. And complacency of the guests is in keeping with the sordid behavior of the host. All the concerning parties display an utter lack of concern except for their extremely narrow capitalistic domain. In fact, DeLillo’s anxiety over the seamy side of cornucopia surfaces in the last chapter of the book. Finally and irrevocably, the mask of smugness is torn asunder and the naked reality is made to speak for

its own self. “We stand in the cafeteria doorway watching a group of young people eat lunch. Their hair, nails and teeth have fallen out and they are here to be studied. I look around for Brian.” (801)

Conclusion: DeLillo appears to favor cornucopian perspective upon environmental issues in his ground-breaking work. Without mincing matters it can be averred that he projects ordinary waste as tour de force that propels the engine of growth. He betrays his concerns over rising level of pollutants in environment but, at the same time, he affirms his boundless optimism by presenting them as symbol of growth. Measured by this criterion, radioactive waste symbolizes the highest water mark of development of civilization. But the perceptive genius of DeLillo calls the cornucopian trend of his thoughts off before crossing the line.

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