

The Two Cultures? : Reading Garbage

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The *American Heritage Dictionary* gives as one definition of “garbage”: “Inferior or offensive literary or artistic material.” When during his 1959 Rede Lecture, “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution,” the formidable literary critic F.R. Leavis combines his claim that he only reads “great” fiction with a venomous attack on C.P. Snow he is really condemning certain kinds of “literature” as unworthy of serious attention and as, therefore, “garbage.” Leavis’s supercilious attitude toward Snow, and by extension all those who write or read “inferior” fiction, mirrors a widespread way of thinking about garbage and those who work or live with it. This presentation will explore this hypothesis through an examination of two literary texts that deal explicitly with garbage: Paul Auster’s novel *City of Glass* and Mamdouh ‘Udwan’s one act play, *Reflections of a Garbage Collector*. Unlike the elitist Leavis who merely “talks trash,” the characters created by Auster and ‘Udwan are happy to get their hands dirty and spend their time reading garbage. In the texts under discussion, both the American and the Syrian writer present an intricate semiotics of garbage which raises questions the presentation will seek to answer. For example, as people come to think of themselves as garbage—unwanted, discarded, left over—is garbage a state of mind? And are garbage and peoples’ attitude toward it a universal phenomenon, the inevitable product of civilization and the movement from land to city as described by Oswald Spengler, or are garbage and people’s perspective on it always dependent on cultural context? To the extent that the latter is the case, the meditations on garbage presented by Auster and ‘Udwan may offer an opportunity for an encounter between two cultures: American and Middle Eastern.