

# This apple has expired: The poetry is in the trash

*More servants wait on man  
Than he'll take notice of*  
George Herbert

Living in the city requires most of what we use, what we consume, and what we eat be safely packaged, delicately transported and delivered to us. Entirely disconnected from this whole process, we have no qualms to open, use, discard. Our waste receptacles are given more power than most other things in our homes – somehow everything that we place in them is transformed from *thing* to *waste* no matter what it is. Most of us would have qualms with removing something from a trash can to eat it, no matter how long it has been in there. Children, astute as ever, have the *ten second rule*, where things only become uneatable after being in the garbage for over ten seconds.

We have become phenomenologically distanced from those things that we consume and, to a greater extent, to those that we throw out – we have created an existence where the very essence of the things which we interact with is concealed. Take, for example, an apple that is thrown out from a store shelf for having a small blemish. Treating the apple in this way, we go as far as removing from it its very essence, and challenging it to fit within our technological framework. This act disallows the earth from revealing, and concealing, itself. Hence, this is not an act of *dwelling* as Heidegger sees it. As such, the earth is not preserved.

However, there are a growing number of people who reclaim unwanted food and other goods from garbage cans, often under the cover of night before the garbage trucks cart it away to the landfill. These people, known as *freegans*, *dumpster-divers*, *binners* or *urban scavengers*, often do this as a form of political resistance. However, it is also a poetical act, and has the potential to re-instill the items that are found with their original essence, and provides us with a manner in which to be *in* the world (in the sense that someone is *in* love with someone else (Foltz, 157)). This paper explores what happens to an apple when we (unpoetically) destine it to the landfill, how this signifies its undoing, and how reclaiming it revives and re-instills it with life.

## Thing

An apple, like most worldly items, has multiple facets. It is at once a thing, a living thing, a gift, a possession. As an object of the earth, it is also, necessarily, part of the fourfold of earth, sky, gods and mortals: “Earth is the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal. When we say earth, we are already thinking of the other three along with it” (Heidegger, 2001, p.147). The apple is only an apple if its essence is revealed, which can only be done if the apple is used in a proper manner: “only proper use brings the thing to its essence and keeps it there.” (Foltz, p.161) The apple, through use, is no longer simply an object, nor simply a resource—it is a thing. Allowing the apple to thing is a conserving act, an act that is part of dwelling poetically: “Conserving is a looking after and a caring for that frees a thing into its essence and safeguards it there, precisely through a use that is in accord with its essence.” (Foltz, p.162). A jug's thingness “resides in its being *qua* vessel,” hence, an apple is a thing *qua* a tasty snack, *qua* seed bearer of the apple tree. Apple *qua* trash is not apple at all. Hence, putting the apple in the rubbish heap, piled alongside discarded fridges and cleaning products, the apple is a thing no longer.

Destining an apple to the landfill, is an enframing of the apple. This enframing stops the apple from being part of the fourfold since “...things themselves secure the fourfold *only when* they themselves as

things are let be in their presencing.” (Heidegger, 2001, p149) Treating the apple as garbage, challenges the apple out of its thingness, and draws out its very essence, its "whatness" (Foltz, p.128), removing from it any appleness, and instilling in it a complete uselessness. Through our action of discarding, we do not allow the apple to thing, and since "Thinging is the nearing of the world," (Heidegger, 2001, p.179) we put the apple at a distance, removing it from our world, contributing to the “worldlessness of [our] technological epoch.” (Foltz, p.118)

Dumpster-divers, however, bring the apple near again. Freeing the apple from the destiny of the landfill spares the apple and returns it to its own being: “To free really means to spare. The sparing itself consists not only in the fact that we do not harm the one whom we spare. Real sparing is something positive and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own nature, when we return it specifically to its being, when we “free” it in the real sense of the word into a preserve of peace.” (Heidegger, 2001, p.147) “The fundamental character of dwelling” is, according to Heidegger, this “sparing and preserving” (Heidegger, 2001, p.147). The reclaiming of the apple is thus poetic since, “to be a human being... means to dwell,” (Foltz, 2001, p.157) and “poetically man dwells upon the earth.” The fact that it was seen, and respected, for what it was, an apple, brings the apple back into appleness.

### **Living thing**

The apple, however, doesn't thing in the same way that a jug, a bench, a footbridge or a plough would thing. The apple, brought forth by nature is a living thing. While trying not to succumb to the post-Cartesian problem of “situating life either between or on one side of a dualism” (Foltz, p.132), we can certainly designate to the apple, or indeed, to any of the food which we eat, an intensified self-emergence—what the Greeks called *zôê*, life. Providing us with nutrients, the apple “enters into a relation” (Foltz, p.134) with us, and with other entities. Hence engaged, the apple is unfolded, self-drawn out into the open, into its “given set of surroundings” (Foltz, p.133). Alive.

Since we can “only say “the same” if we think difference,” (Heidegger, 2001, p.216) we can also only think of life if we think of its opposite. Unlike man, the apple is not a mortal. “[Man] can be called mortal because he can die.” (Heidegger, 2001, p.219). Non-mortal things, those that possess an intensified self-emergence are subject to perishing. Something perishable, the Oxford dictionary tells us, is something that is “naturally subject to rapid decay.” To us, this decay signals an end of the thing, whereas for the thing it is its act of self-concealing. We don't allow perished food, with all of its ugliness and stench, to unfold or go back into itself. Our trash receptacles provide a deathbed for those living things which we no longer wish to be near to us. For those things not far along the line of decay (every living thing being somewhere on the path to perishing anyway), being placed in the trash is a death sentence—no matter if the thing can still be treated as productive. Those discarded things become untouchable, once they have entered the black hole of the waste receptacle. There is an uncanny power that we give to any receptacle that accepts garbage—on those things that are placed inside them is placed the mark of non-being.

Divers are the resuscitators of these things that have not yet perished. Seeing past the veil that the technology of the trashcan places on these things, the freegan reveals the underlying nature of the thing, recognizing the life that still permeates many of those items that others deem waste. Reviving waste is a direct denial that the earth is a “stockpile or inventory that is constantly available”—gleaning resources from those things that no longer fit within our technological frameworks allows the nourishing character of the earth to reveal itself. This is in contrast to those things which technologically characterize nourishment: expiry dates, intactness and cleanliness—a bruised and dirty apple is still delicious.

By destining the apple to the landfill we are denying the apple the chance to conceal itself. *Phusis*, the circular continuum that nature inhabits, requires “just as much a self-withdrawal and self-closure.” (Foltz, p.135.) The apple is not simply a tasty snack, nor a cure for scurvy. It is also the seed of the tree which provided it to us. The decaying flesh of the apple provides nutrients for the soil. In shipping the intact apple to the landfill, where it is unable to come to any of these essences, is not returning the apple to the earth, despite the fact that an apple is “biodegradable”. “Nature as earth is not primarily that “from which” things are made but rather... “unto which” they recede.” (Foltz, p.136) The apple, prevented by us from going back to where it came is left in limbo—it is neither part of nature, nor is it removed from nature.

## Gift

The very fact that the apple serves multiple purposes is an indication of how nature offers itself to us. The apple is given by the apple tree as a gift. The word “gift”, Heidegger tells us, means “to offer in sacrifice” (Heidegger, 2001, p.170). This offering provides us with ongoing sustenance, which, “...to allow its supporting and nourishing character,” we must “...allow earth to *be* earth.” (Foltz, p.165) Our technological way of being has placed on our food the requirement that it be part of the standing reserve, that it be useful and productive to us. Today, en-framing the apple as 'food' further places on it the requirements that it not be blemished, bruised or show signs of its origin. “Man,” who “...exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth,” (Heidegger, 1977, p.27) no longer sees the gifting, the apple is a product of the irrigation canal, the fertilizer and the transportation system that brings it to your door. However, part of allowing the apple to *thing* as an apple, to come into its essence is to accept it as a gift. Heidegger explains how this is so when describing the gift that makes the jugness of a jug:

*“The spring stays on in the water of the gift. In the spring the rock dwells, and in the rock dwells the dark slumber of the earth, which receives the rain and dew of the sky. In the water of the spring dwells the marriage of sky and earth. It stays in the wine given by the fruit of the vine, the fruit in which the earth's nourishment and the sky's sun are betrothed to one another. In the gift of water, in the gift of wine, sky and earth dwell. But the gift of the outpouring is what makes the jug a jug. In the jugness of the jug, sky and earth dwell.”* (Heidegger, 2001, p170)

Seeing the food we eat as a gift, offered by the fourfold, rather than simply as a product of human endeavour, demands a certain respect and reciprocity. Mauss, after studying what he terms “archaic societies” suggests that there is no such thing as a free gift: “A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction.” (Mauss, p.vii) The gift from nature, therefore, exists precisely so that we engage with nature as it engages with us. Mauss shows this through a Maori proverb: “*Ko Maru kai atu/Ko maru kai mai/ka ngohe ngohe*. Give as much as you take, all shall be very well.” (Mauss, p. 71). This is not prescribing a preservation of nature, instead, it is rather, asking for a reflexive use, one which acknowledges the value of the things that are being offered. Reclaiming food before it is thrown out can acknowledge the nature of this gift. When obtaining food from the dumpster, it often isn't just finding an apple here, or a banana there. Oftentimes there might be hundreds of mangoes, or kilos of cheese. An unspoken rule is to never take more than you can use yourself, or that you will be able to give away, as other people may also collect food from the same place. Since food from a dumpster comes with no monetary exchange, it is easier to accept it as a gift. Dumpster divers treat it as such – often being in awe of the forces from where the gift originates. The gift is just as apparent when standing under a full apple tree – the tree is so excited to gift that the slightest touch makes ripe apples fall to the ground. The food we buy in the store has been gifted to the same extent, however, this gift is often veiled by its delivery.

A Vedic principle of sacrifice, also discussed by Mauss, suggests that gifts should be reciprocated.

“Sacrifice is a gift that compels the deity to make a return: Do ut des; I give so that you may give.” (Mauss, p.ix). Diving for food also fosters a culture of giving. Plocek recounts a conversation he has with some dumpster divers: “I was Dumpstering at this one place and there was this lady there who I've seen a lot throughout the years. And then this other guy who I've also seen over the years pulled up with his wife in his truck. We pretty much pulled everything usable out and divvied it up based on who needed what, we were all working together.” (Plocek) By necessity, dumpster divers recognize the nature of the gift.

The care that must go into cooking what has been found is also something that makes visible the sacrifice of nature. Looking at and feeling each apple that comes from a dumpster, checking for spots that we would not want to eat, we come to understand the shape and nature of the apple. Caring for each found bean separately makes us realize that each bean is unique, and yet comes from the same essence. Borgmann also recognized how caring for food in this way, and treating it as a focal practice helps us along the path to poetic dwelling. He contrasts a fast-food meal where there is an “inconsequential conflation of a sharply delimited human need with an equally contextless and closely fitting commodity” with a festive, focal meal, where “what seems to be a mere receiving and consuming of food is in fact the enactment of generosity and gratitude.” (Borgmann, p.205) The consuming of food when it has been cared for becomes an act of gratitude, a using of the earth, “allowing its supporting and nourishing character.” (Foltz, p.165).

### **The poetic is in the trash**

Our waste disappears from in front of our homes or behind our businesses twice a week, the objects in the trash becoming non-entities through our unthinking actions. Heidegger puts us to the task to dwell poetically—this is what constitutes saving the world. In our world filled with technology, dwelling poetically is extremely hard—technology is a concealer of the truth. Saving the earth, it seems, is all about the way in which we approach our everyday actions, how we wake up and interact with the world. One act that can be seen to be close to hearing the poetry that nature is reciting is dumpster diving. This action, which most people find revolting, demeaning and outrageous, breathes life back into those entities that were once deemed dead by most of society.

For entities to come into their own, Foltz tells us, they need to be used 'properly,' allowing their essence to show: “only proper use brings the thing to its essence and keeps it there.” Our technologically created disregard to the essence of most things reduces these things to standing reserve – only suitable for our use. Many acts of throwing things away are acts of removing the thingness out of the thing. Retrieving these things is an act of seeing the essence within them and hence constitutes a re-birth of the thing.

Much of the food which we throw away can be deemed to be living. Living things possess an intensified self emergence which is lost when the thing perishes. However, we have created a specific technology which disregards whether a thing is perished or not, and veils a thing's *zôê*, its life, from us. This technology is the waste basket. Just as when looking at things that were purely things, retrieving items from their place in the waste is equivalent to removing this veil, allowing the thing to both emerge and conceal itself of its own accord.

Nature provides all of this to us as a gift—a sacrifice. Gifts, according to Mauss, are never free, and require some reciprocation. A lot of the way we treat our food and other things of the earth disregards the nature of this gift. Diving reveals the gift, as the dumpster can act as a metaphor of the way the earth presents things to us. However, this recognition still requires further action—reciprocation and sharing.

In conclusion, go eat trash.

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