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Letters

Trash the tally?

In "Tallying Orbital Trash" (SN: 7/14/90, p.29), Jonathan Eberhart says there are presently at least 7,000 pieces of debris in space. If that much has accumulated in the few years of space exploration, it is logical to assume it will continue to accumulate.

He says NASA is planning to spend \$30 million to take "a detailed census of our planet's blanket of orbiting debris" and "to assess the perils posed by space junk and the need for equipping the space station with protection systems."

Since we already know the debris is there, why aren't those millions spent for developing a machine to collect it and bring it back to Earth? Just tabulating the amount and size will not keep space from becoming even more of a junkyard, increasing the dangers of traveling and working there.

A.F. Martin
Gourie, Iowa

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Cover: Ravaged by an era of overhunting, predator introduction and habitat destruction, some islands that once cradled huge colonies of nesting seabirds now sit practically empty. Scientists seeking to restore avian diversity are using decoys and recorded greetings to entice homeless young seabirds back to their ancestral homes. Shown here is an Atlantic puffin consorting with two wooden colony-mates on Eastern Egg Rock, an island off the coast of Maine. (Photo by Stephen W. Kress)

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It seems ridiculous to tabulate our garbage in space — and at a cost of \$30 million. An alternative might be a space vacuum cleaner, possibly working on the principle of magnetism, with a disposable "bag" that could be dropped on command in some remote area of Earth. At least this might clear the space lanes of metallic trash. To help pay for the cleanup, we might also impose a littering fine on future space orbiters.

Elizabeth Morrison
Holliston, Mass.

18th-century Tourette

Although Georges Gilles de la Tourette in 1885 described the syndrome now named for him ("The Ticcing Link," SN: 7/21/90, p.42), a quite detailed clinical description was provided by James Boswell in his *Life of Dr. Johnson*, published in 1791. To anyone familiar with that work, Bruce Bower's description of mild cases of Tourette's syndrome immediately recalls Samuel Johnson.

Johnson (1709-1784) displayed such regular and repetitive grunts, mutters and gesticulations as to render him, as his good friend Mrs. Thrale put it, "a sad man in a public place," where people stared in a very disagreeable manner. Johnson was obsessive-compulsive, counting his steps so that his left (or perhaps right; no one dared ask) foot struck the threshold, and he clearly suffered from deep depression and anxiety. At the table he attacked his meal with such singleminded ferocity as to be, as Boswell put it, disgusting to those whose sensations were delicate. Although he could be abstemious, he was never temperate in eating or drinking.

Bower's description of the "rapid and tensely connected stream of ideas . . . at times expressed in creative and amusing ways" is a fair summary of the wit for which Johnson was famous. Mrs. Thrale mentions his extraordi-

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