

# INTRODUCTION

*The artist appeals to that part  
of our being . . . which is a gift and not  
an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring.*

JOSEPH CONRAD

At the corner drugstore my neighbors and I can now buy a line of romantic novels written according to a formula developed through market research. An advertising agency polled a group of women readers. What age should the heroine be? (She should be between nineteen and twenty-seven.) Should the man she meets be married or single? (Recently widowed is best.) The hero and heroine are not allowed in bed together until they are married. Each novel is a hundred and ninety-two pages long. Even the name of the series and the design of the cover have been tailored to the demands of the market. (The name Silhouette was preferred over Belladonna, Surrender, Tiffany, and Magnolia; gold curlicues were chosen to frame the cover.) Six new titles appear each month and two hundred thousand copies of each title are printed.

Why do we suspect that Silhouette Romances will not be enduring works of art? What is it about a work of art, even when it is bought and sold in the market, that makes us distinguish it from such pure commodities as these?

It is the assumption of this book that a work of art is a gift, not a commodity. Or, to state the modern case with more precision, that works of art exist simultaneously in two 'economies,' a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art.

There are several distinct senses of 'gift' that lie behind these ideas, but common to each of them is the notion that a gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us. Thus we rightly speak of 'talent' as a 'gift,' for although a talent can be perfected through an effort of the will, no effort in the world can cause its initial appearance. Mozart, composing on the harpsichord at the age of four, had a gift.

We also rightly speak of intuition or inspiration as a gift. As the artist works, some portion of his creation is bestowed upon him. An idea pops into his head, a tune begins to play, a phrase comes to mind, a color falls in place on the canvas. Usually, in fact, the artist does not find himself engaged or exhilarated by the work, nor does it seem authentic, until this gratuitous element has appeared, so that along with any true creation comes the uncanny sense that 'I,' the artist, did not make the work. 'Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me,' says D. H. Lawrence. Not all artists emphasize the 'gift' phase of their creations to the degree that Lawrence does, but all artists feel it.

These two senses of gift refer only to the creation of the work – what we might call the inner life of art; but it is my assumption that we should extend this way of speaking to its outer life as well, to the work after it has left its maker's hands. That art that matters to us – which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience – that work is received by us as a gift is received. Even if we have paid a fee at the door of the museum or concert hall, when we are touched by a work of art something comes to us which has nothing to do with the price. I went to see a landscape painter's works, and that evening, walking among pine trees near my home, I could see the shapes and colors I had not seen the day before. The spirit of an artist's gifts can wake our own. The work appeals, as Joseph Conrad says, to a part of our being which is itself a gift and not an acquisition. Our sense of harmony can hear the harmonies that Mozart heard. We may not have the power to profess our

gifts as the artist does, and yet we come to recognize, and in a sense to receive, the endowments of our being through the agency of his creation. We feel fortunate, even redeemed. The daily commerce of our lives – ‘sugar for sugar and salt for salt,’ as the blues singers say – proceeds at its own constant level, but a gift revives the soul. When we are moved by art we are grateful that the artist lived, grateful that he labored in the service of his gifts.

If a work of art is the emanation of its maker’s gift and if it is received by its audience as a gift, then is it, too, a gift? I have framed the question to imply an affirmative answer, but I doubt we can be so categorical. Any object, any item of commerce, becomes one kind of property or another depending on how we use it. Even if a work of art contains the spirit of the artist’s gift, it does not follow that the work itself is a gift. It is what we make of it.

And yet, that said, it must be added that the way we treat a thing can sometimes change its nature. For example, religions often prohibit the sale of sacred objects, the implication being that their sanctity is lost if they are bought and sold. A work of art seems to be a hardier breed; it can be sold in the market and still emerge a work of art. But if it is true that in the essential commerce of art a gift is carried by the work from the artist to his audience, if I am right to say that where there is no gift there is no art, then it may be possible to destroy a work of art by converting it into a pure commodity. Such, at any rate, is my position. I do not maintain that art cannot be bought and sold; I do maintain that the gift portion of the work places a constraint upon our merchandising.

The particular form that my elaboration of these ideas has taken may best be introduced through a description of how I came to my topic in the first place. For some years now I myself have tried to make my way as a poet, a translator, and a sort of ‘scholar without institution.’ Inevitably the money question comes up; labors such as mine are notoriously nonremunerative, and the landlord is not interested in your book of translations the day the rent falls due. A necessary corollary seems to follow the proposition that a work of art is a gift: there is nothing in the labor of art itself that will automatically make it pay. Quite the opposite, in fact. I develop this point at some length in the chapters that follow, so I shall not elaborate upon it here except to say that every modern artist who has chosen

to labor with a gift must sooner or later wonder how he or she is to survive in a society dominated by market exchange. And if the fruits of a gift are gifts themselves, how is the artist to nourish himself, spiritually as well as materially, in an age whose values are market values and whose commerce consists almost exclusively in the purchase and sale of commodities?

Every culture offers its citizens an image of what it is to be a man or woman of substance. There have been times and places in which a person came into his or her social being through the dispersal of his gifts, the 'big man' or 'big woman' being that one through whom the most gifts flowed. The mythology of a market society reverses the picture: getting rather than giving is the mark of a substantial person, and the hero is 'self-possessed,' 'self-made.' So long as these assumptions rule, a disquieting sense of triviality, of worthlessness even, will nag the man or woman who labors in the service of a gift and whose products are not adequately described as commodities. Where we reckon our substance by our acquisitions, the gifts of the gifted man are powerless to make him substantial.

Moreover, as I shall argue in my opening chapters, a gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation. If this is the case, then the gifts of the inner world must be accepted as gifts in the outer world if they are to retain their vitality. Where gifts have no public currency, therefore, where the gift as a form of property is neither recognized nor honored, our inner gifts will find themselves excluded from the very commerce which is their nourishment. Or, to say the same thing from a different angle, where commerce is exclusively a traffic in merchandise, the gifted cannot enter into the give-and-take that ensures the livelihood of their spirit.

These two lines of thought – the idea of art as a gift and the problem of the market – did not converge for me until I began to read through the work that has been done in anthropology on gifts as a kind of property and gift exchange as a kind of commerce. Many tribal groups circulate a large portion of their material wealth as gifts. Tribesmen are typically enjoined from buying and selling food, for example; even though there may be a strong sense of 'mine and thine,' food is always given as a gift and the transaction is governed by the ethics of gift exchange, not those of barter or cash purchase. Not surprisingly, people live differently who treat a portion of their wealth as a gift. To begin with, unlike the sale of a commodity, the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between

the parties involved.\* Furthermore, when gifts circulate within a group, their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake, and a kind of decentralized cohesiveness emerges. There are, as we shall see, five or six related observations of this kind that can be made about a commerce of gifts, and in reading through the anthropological literature I began to realize that a description of gift exchange might offer me the language, the way of speaking, through which I could address the situation of creative artists. And since anthropology tends not to concern itself so much with inner gifts, I soon widened my reading to include all the folk tales I could find involving gifts. Folk wisdom does not differ markedly from tribal wisdom in its sense of what a gift is and does, but folk tales are told in a more interior language: the gifts in fairy tales may, at one level, refer to real property, but at another they are images in the psyche and their story describes for us a spiritual or psychological commerce. In fact, although I offer many accounts of gift exchange in the real world, my hope is that these accounts, too, can be read at several levels, that the real commerce they tell about stands witness to the invisible commerce through which the gifted come to profess their gifts, and we to receive them.

The classic work on gift exchange is Marcel Mauss's 'Essai sur le don,' published in France in 1924. The nephew of Émile Durkheim, a Sanskrit scholar, a gifted linguist, and a historian of religions, Mauss belongs to that group of early sociologists whose work is firmly rooted in philosophy and history. His essay begins with the field reports of turn-of-the-century ethnographers (Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Elsdon Best, in particular), but goes on to cover the Roman laws of real estate, a Hindu epic, Germanic dowry customs, and much more. The essay has proved to hold several enduring insights. Mauss noticed, for one thing, that gift economies tend to be marked by three related obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to accept, and the obligation to reciprocate. He also pointed out that we should understand gift exchange to be a 'total social phenomenon' – one whose transactions are at once economic, juridical, moral, aesthetic, religious, and mythological, and whose meaning cannot, therefore, be adequately described from the point of view of any single discipline.

\* It is this element of relationship which leads me to speak of gift exchange as an 'erotic' commerce, opposing *eros* (the principle of attraction, union, involvement which binds together) to *logos* (reason and logic in general, the principle of differentiation in particular). A market economy is an emanation of *logos*.

Almost every anthropologist who has addressed himself to questions of exchange in the last half century has taken Mauss's essay as his point of departure. Many names come to mind, including Raymond Firth and Claude Lévi-Strauss, but in my estimation the most interesting recent work has been done by Marshall Sahlins, an economic anthropologist at the University of Chicago. Sahlins's 1972 *Stone Age Economics*, in particular, contains an excellent chapter on 'The Spirit of the Gift,' which applies a rigorous *explication de texte* to part of the source material upon which Mauss based his essay, and goes on to place Mauss's ideas in the history of political philosophy. It was through Sahlins's writings that I first began to see the possibility of my own work, and I am much indebted to him.

The primary work on gift exchange has been done in anthropology not, it seems to me, because gifts are a primitive or aboriginal form of property – they aren't – but because gift exchange tends to be an economy of small groups, of extended families, small villages, close-knit communities, brotherhoods and, of course, of tribes. During the last decade a second discipline has turned to the study of gifts, and for a second reason. Medical sociologists have been drawn to questions of gift exchange because they have come to understand that the ethics of gift giving make it a form of commerce appropriate to the transfer of what we might call 'sacred properties,' in this case parts of the human body. The earliest work in this field was done by Richard Titmuss, a British professor of social administration, who, in 1971, published *The Gift Relationship*, a study of how we handle the human blood that is to be used for transfusions. Titmuss compares the British system, which classifies all blood as a gift, with the American, a mixed economy in which some blood is donated and some is bought and sold. Since Titmuss's work appeared, our increasing ability to transplant actual body organs, kidneys in particular, has led to several books on the ethics and complexities of 'the gift of life.'

Even such a brief précis of the work that has been done on gift exchange should make it clear that we still lack a comprehensive theory of gifts. Mauss's work remains our only general statement, and even that, as its title tells us, is an essay, a collection of initial observations with proposals for further study. Most of the work since Mauss has concerned itself with specific topics – in anthropology, law, ethics, medicine, public policy, and so forth. My own work is no exception. The first half of this book is a theory of gift exchange and the second is an attempt to apply the language of that theory to the life of the artist. Clearly, the concerns of the second half were

the guide to my reading and theorizing in the first. I touch on many issues, but I pass over many others in silence. With two or three brief exceptions I do not, for example, take up the negative side of gift exchange – gifts that leave an oppressive sense of obligation, gifts that manipulate or humiliate, gifts that establish and maintain hierarchies, and so forth and so on.\* This is partly a matter of priority (it has seemed to me that a description of the value and power of gifts must precede an explication of their misuse), but it is mostly a matter of my subject. I have hoped to write an economy of the creative spirit: to speak of the inner gift that we accept as the object of our labor, and the outer gift that has become a vehicle of culture. I am not concerned with gifts given in spite or fear, nor those gifts we accept out of servility or obligation; my concern is the gift we long for, the gift that, when it comes, speaks commandingly to the soul and irresistibly moves us.

\* There are two authors whose work I would recommend as tonic to the optimistic cast that this omission sometimes lends my work: Millard Schumaker, who has written an excellent series of essays on the problem of gifts and obligation, and Garrett Hardin, whose 1968 essay in *Science*, 'The Tragedy of the Commons,' has been followed in recent years by a thoughtful discussion of the limits of altruism. The works of both of these men are listed in the bibliography.



*O wonderful! O wonderful! O wonderful!  
I am food! I am food! I am food!  
I eat food! I eat food! I eat food!  
My name never dies, never dies, never dies!  
I was born first in the first of the worlds,  
earlier than the gods, in the belly of what has no death!  
Whoever gives me away has helped me the most!  
I, who am food, eat the eater of food!  
I have overcome this world!*

*He who knows this shines like the sun.  
Such are the laws of the mystery!*

TAITTIŘĪYA UPANISHAD

*You received gifts from me; they were accepted.  
But you don't understand how to think about the dead.  
The smell of winter apples, of hoarfrost, and of linen.  
There are nothing but gifts on this poor, poor Earth.*

CZESLAW MILOSZ



PART I

# A THEORY OF GIFTS



## CHAPTER ONE

# SOME FOOD WE COULD NOT EAT

### *1 • The Motion*

When the Puritans first landed in Massachusetts, they discovered a thing so curious about the Indians' feelings for property that they felt called upon to give it a name. In 1764, when Thomas Hutchinson wrote his history of the colony, the term was already an old saying: 'An Indian gift,' he told his readers, 'is a proverbial expression signifying a present for which an equivalent return is expected.' We still use this, of course, and in an even broader sense, calling that friend an Indian giver who is so uncivilized as to ask us to return a gift he has given.

Imagine a scene. An Englishman comes into an Indian lodge, and his hosts, wishing to make their guest feel welcome, ask him to share a pipe of tobacco. Carved from a soft red stone, the pipe itself is a peace offering that has traditionally circulated among the local tribes, staying in each lodge for a time but always given away again sooner or later. And so the Indians, as is only polite among their people, give the pipe to their guest when he leaves. The Englishman is tickled pink. What a nice thing to send back to the British Museum! He takes it home and sets it on the mantelpiece. A time passes and the leaders of a neighboring tribe come

to visit the colonist's home. To his surprise he finds his guests have some expectation in regard to his pipe, and his translator finally explains to him that if he wishes to show his goodwill he should offer them a smoke and give them the pipe. In consternation the Englishman invents a phrase to describe these people with such a limited sense of private property. The opposite of 'Indian giver' would be something like 'white man keeper' (or maybe 'capitalist'), that is, a person whose instinct is to remove property from circulation, to put it in a warehouse or museum (or, more to the point for capitalism, to lay it aside to be used for production).

The Indian giver (or the original one, at any rate) understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead, the way a billiard ball may stop when it sends another scurrying across the felt, its momentum transferred. You may keep your Christmas present, but it ceases to be a gift in the true sense unless you have given something else away. As it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact, it is better if the gift is not returned but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: *the gift must always move*. There are other forms of property that stand still, that mark a boundary or resist momentum, but the gift keeps going.

Tribal peoples usually distinguish between gifts and capital. Commonly they have a law that repeats the sensibility implicit in the idea of an Indian gift. 'One man's gift,' they say, 'must not be another man's capital.' Wendy James, a British social anthropologist, tells us that among the Uduk in northeast Africa, 'any wealth transferred from one subclan to another, whether animals, grain or money, is in the nature of a gift, and should be consumed, and not invested for growth. If such transferred wealth is added to the subclan's capital [cattle in this case] and kept for growth and investment, the subclan is regarded as being in an immoral relation of debt to the donors of the original gift.' If a pair of goats received as a gift from another subclan is kept to breed or to buy cattle, 'there will be general complaint that the so-and-so's are getting rich at someone else's expense, behaving immorally by hoarding and investing gifts, and therefore being in a state of severe debt. It will be expected that they will soon suffer storm damage . . .'

The goats in this example move from one clan to another just as the

stone pipe moved from person to person in my imaginary scene. And what happens then? If the object is a gift, it keeps moving, which in this case means that the man who received the goats throws a big party and everyone gets fed. The goats needn't be given back, but they surely can't be set aside to produce milk or more goats. And a new note has been added: the feeling that if a gift is not treated as such, if one form of property is converted into another, something horrible will happen. In folk tales the person who tries to hold on to a gift usually dies; in this anecdote the risk is 'storm damage.' (What happens in fact to most tribal groups is worse than storm damage. Where someone manages to commercialize a tribe's gift relationships the social fabric of the group is invariably destroyed.)

If we turn now to a folk tale, we will be able to see all of this from a different angle. Folk tales are like collective dreams; they are told in the kind of voice we hear at the edge of sleep, mingling the facts of our lives with their images in the psyche. The first tale I have chosen was collected from a Scottish woman in the middle of the nineteenth century.

### *The Girl and the Dead Man*

Once upon a time there was an old woman and she had a leash of daughters. One day the eldest daughter said to her mother, 'It is time for me to go out into the world and seek my fortune.' 'I shall bake a loaf of bread for you to carry with you,' said the mother. When the bread came from the oven the mother asked her daughter, 'Would you rather have a small piece and my blessing or a large piece and my curse?' 'I would rather have the large piece and your curse,' replied the daughter.

Off she went down the road and when the night came wreathing around her she sat at the foot of a wall to eat her bread. A ground quail and her twelve puppies gathered near, and the little birds of the air. 'Wilt thou give us a part of thy bread,' they asked. 'I won't, you ugly brutes,' she replied. 'I haven't enough for myself.' 'My curse on thee,' said the quail, 'and the curse of my twelve birds, and thy mother's curse which is the worst of all.' The girl arose and went on her way, and the piece of bread had not been half enough.

She had not travelled far before she saw a little house, and though it seemed a long way off she soon found herself before its door. She knocked and heard a voice cry out, 'Who is there?' 'A good maid seeking a master.' 'We need that,' said the voice, and the door swung open.

The girl's task was to stay awake every night and watch over a dead man, the brother of the housewife, whose corpse was restless. As her reward she was to receive a peck of gold and a peck of silver. And while she stayed she was to have as many nuts as she broke, as many needles as she lost, as many thimbles as she pierced, as much thread as she used, as many candles as she burned, a bed of green silk over her and a bed of green silk under her, sleeping by day and watching by night.

On the very first night, however, she fell asleep in her chair. The housewife came in, struck her with a magic club, killed her dead, and threw her out back on the pile of kitchen garbage.

Soon thereafter the middle daughter said to her mother, 'It is time for me to follow my sister and seek my fortune.' Her mother baked her a loaf of bread and she too chose the larger piece and her mother's curse. And what had happened to her sister happened to her.

Soon thereafter the youngest daughter said to her mother, 'It is time for me to follow my sisters and seek my fortune.' 'I had better bake you a loaf of bread,' said her mother, 'and which would you rather have, a small piece and my blessing or a large piece and my curse?' 'I would rather,' said the daughter, 'have the smaller piece and your blessing.'

And so she set off down the road and when the night came wreathing around her she sat at the foot of a wall to eat her bread. The ground quail and her twelve puppies and the little birds of the air gathered about. 'Wilt thou give us some of that?' they asked. 'I will, you pretty creatures, if you will keep me company.' She shared her bread, all of them ate their fill, and the birds clapped their wings about her 'til she was snug with the warmth.

The next morning she saw a house a long way off . . . [here the task and the wages are repeated].

She sat up at night to watch the corpse, sewing to pass the time. About midnight the dead man sat up and screwed up a grin. 'If you

do not lie down properly I will give you one good leathering with a stick,' she cried. He lay down. After a while he rose up on one elbow and screwed up a grin; and a third time he sat and screwed up a grin.

When he rose the third time she walloped him with the stick. The stick stuck to the dead man and her hand stuck to the stick and off they went! He dragged her through the woods, and when it was high for him it was low for her, and when it was low for him it was high for her. The nuts were knocking at their eyes and the wild plums beat at their ears until they both got through the wood. Then they returned home.

The girl was given the peck of gold, the peck of silver, and a vessel of cordial. She found her two sisters and rubbed them with the cordial and brought them back to life. And they left me sitting here, and if they were well, 'tis well; if they were not, let them be.

There are at least four gifts in this story. The first, of course, is the bread, which the mother gives to her daughters as a going-away present. This becomes the second gift when the youngest daughter shares her bread with the birds. She keeps the gift in motion – the moral point of the tale. Several benefits, in addition to her survival, come to her as a result of treating the gift correctly. These are the fruits of the gift. First, she and the birds are relieved of their hunger; second, the birds befriend her; and third, she's able to stay awake all night and accomplish her task. (As we shall see, these results are not accidental, they are typical fruits of the gift.)

In the morning the third gift, the vessel of cordial, appears. 'Cordial' used to mean a liqueur taken to stimulate the heart. In the original Gaelic of this tale the phrase is *ballen iocshlaint*, which translates more literally as 'teat of ichor' or 'teat of health' ('ichor' being the fluid that flows instead of blood in the veins of the gods). So what the girl is given is a vial of healing liquid, not unlike the 'water of life,' which appears in folk tales from all over the world. It has power: with it she is able to revive her sisters.

This liquid is thrown in as a reward for the successful completion of her task. It's a gift, mentioned nowhere in the wonderful litany of wages offered to each daughter. We will leave for later the question of where it comes from; for now, we are looking at what happens to the gift after it is given, and again we find that this girl is no dummy – she moves it right along,

giving it to her sisters to bring them back to life. That is the fourth and final gift in the tale.\*

This story also gives us a chance to see what happens if the gift is not allowed to move on. A gift that cannot move loses its gift properties. Traditional belief in Wales holds that when the fairies give bread to the poor, the loaves must be eaten on the day they are given or they will turn to toadstools. If we think of the gift as a constantly flowing river, we may say that the girl in the tale who treats it correctly does so by allowing herself to become a channel for its current. When someone tries to dam up the river, one of two things will happen: either it will stagnate or it will fill the person up until he bursts. In this folk tale it is not just the mother's curse that gets the first two girls. The night birds give them a second chance, and one imagines the mother bird would not have repeated the curse had she met with generosity. But instead the girls try to dam the flow, thinking that what counts is ownership and size. The effect is clear: by keeping the gift they get no more. They are no longer channels for the stream and they no longer enjoy its fruits, one of which seems to be their own lives. Their mother's bread has turned to toadstools inside them.

Another way to describe the motion of the gift is to say that a gift must always be used up, consumed, eaten. *The gift is property that perishes*. It is no accident that the gifts in two of our stories so far have been food. Food

\* This story illustrates almost all the main characteristics of a gift, so I shall be referring back to it. As an aside, therefore, I want to take a stab at its meaning. It says, I think, that if a girl without a father is going to get along in the world, she'd better have a good connection to her mother. The birds are the mother's spirit, what we'd now call the girls' psychological mother. The girl who gives the gift back to the spirit-mother has, as a result, her mother-wits about her for the rest of the tale.

Nothing in the tale links the dead man with the girls' father, but the mother seems to be a widow, or at any rate the absence of a father at the start of the story is a hint that the problem may have to do with men. It's not clear, but when the first man she meets is not only dead but difficult, we are permitted to raise our eyebrows.

The man is dead, but not dead enough. When she hits him with the stick, we see that she is in fact attached to him. So here's the issue: when a fatherless woman leaves home, she'll have to deal with the fact that she's stuck on a dead man. It's a risky situation – the two elder daughters end up dead.

Not much happens in the wild run through the forest, except that both parties get bruised. The girl manages to stay awake the whole time, however. This is a power she probably got from the birds, for they are night birds. The connection to the mother cannot spare her the ordeal, but it allows her to survive. When it's all over she's unstuck, and we may assume that the problem won't arise again.

Though the dilemma of the story is not related to gift, all the psychological work is accomplished through gift exchange.

is one of the most common images for the gift because it is so obviously consumed. Even when the gift is not food, when it is something we would think of as a durable good, it is often referred to as a thing to be eaten. Shell necklaces and armbands are the ritual gifts in the Trobriand Islands, and when they are passed from one group to the next, protocol demands that the man who gives them away toss them on the ground and say, 'Here, some food we could not eat.' Or, again, a man in another tribe that Wendy James has studied says, in speaking of the money he was given at the marriage of his daughter, that he will pass it on rather than spend it on himself. Only, he puts it this way: 'If I receive money for the children God has given me, I cannot eat it. I must give it to others.'

Many of the most famous of the gift systems we know about center on food and treat durable goods as if they were food. The potlatch of the American Indians along the North Pacific coast was originally a 'big feed.' At its simplest a potlatch was a feast lasting several days given by a member of a tribe who wanted his rank in the group to be publicly recognized. Marcel Mauss translates the verb 'potlatch' as 'to nourish' or 'to consume.' Used as a noun, a 'potlatch' is a 'feeder' or 'place to be satiated.' Potlatches included durable goods, but the point of the festival was to have these perish as if they were food. Houses were burned; ceremonial objects were broken and thrown into the sea. One of the potlatch tribes, the Haida, called their feasting 'killing wealth.'

To say that the gift is used up, consumed and eaten sometimes means that it is truly destroyed as in these last examples, but more simply and accurately it means that the gift perishes *for the person who gives it away*. In gift exchange the transaction itself consumes the object. Now, it is true that something often comes back when a gift is given, but if this were made an explicit condition of the exchange, it wouldn't be a gift. If the girl in our story had offered to sell the bread to the birds, the whole tone would have been different. But instead she sacrifices it: her mother's gift is dead and gone when it leaves her hand. She no longer controls it, nor has she any contract about repayment. For her, the gift has perished. This, then, is how I use 'consume' to speak of a gift – a gift is consumed when it moves from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return. There is little difference, therefore, between its consumption and its movement. A market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis: you pay to balance the scale. But when you give a gift there is momentum, and the weight shifts from body to body.

I must add one more word on what it is to consume, because the Western industrial world is famous for its 'consumer goods' and they are not at all what I mean. Again, the difference is in the form of the exchange, a thing we can feel most concretely in the form of the goods themselves. I remember the time I went to my first rare-book fair and saw how the first editions of Thoreau and Whitman and Crane had been carefully packaged in heat-shrunk plastic with the price tags on the inside. Somehow the simple addition of air-tight plastic bags had transformed the books from vehicles of liveliness into commodities, like bread made with chemicals to keep it from perishing. In commodity exchange it's as if the buyer and the seller were both in plastic bags; there's none of the contact of a gift exchange. There is neither motion nor emotion because the whole point is to keep the balance, to make sure the exchange itself doesn't consume anything or involve one person with another. Consumer goods are consumed by their owners, not by their exchange.

The desire to consume is a kind of lust. We long to have the world flow through us like air or food. We are thirsty and hungry for something that can only be carried inside bodies. But consumer goods merely bait this lust, they do not satisfy it. The consumer of commodities is invited to a meal without passion, a consumption that leads to neither satiation nor fire. He is a stranger seduced into feeding on the drippings of someone else's capital without benefit of its inner nourishment, and he is hungry at the end of the meal, depressed and weary as we all feel when lust has dragged us from the house and led us to nothing.

Gift exchange has many fruits, as we shall see, and to the degree that the fruits of the gift can satisfy our needs there will always be pressure for property to be treated as a gift. This pressure, in a sense, is what keeps the gift in motion. When the Uduk warn that a storm will ruin the crops if someone tries to stop the gift from moving, it is really their desire for the gift that will bring the storm. A restless hunger springs up when the gift is not being eaten. The brothers Grimm found a folk tale they called "The Ungrateful Son":

Once a man and his wife were sitting outside the front door with a roast chicken before them which they were going to eat between them. Then the man saw his old father coming along and quickly took the chicken and hid it, for he begrudged him any of it. The old man came, had a drink, and went away.

Now the son was about to put the roast chicken back on the table,

but when he reached for it, it had turned into a big toad that jumped in his face and stayed there and didn't go away again.

And if anybody tried to take it away, it would give them a poisonous look, as if about to jump in their faces, so that no one dared touch it. And the ungrateful son had to feed the toad every day, otherwise it would eat part of his face. And thus he went ceaselessly hither and yon about in the world.

This toad is the hunger that appears when the gift stops moving, whenever one man's gift becomes another man's capital. To the degree that we desire the fruits of the gift, teeth appear when it is hidden away. When property is hoarded, thieves and beggars begin to be born to rich men's wives. A story like this says that there is a force seeking to keep the gift in motion. Some property must perish – its preservation is beyond us. We have no choice. Or rather, our choice is whether to keep the gift moving or to be eaten with it. We choose between the toad's dumb-lust and that other, more graceful perishing in which our hunger disappears as our gifts are consumed.

## II • *The Circle*

*The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him – it cannot fail . . .*

WALT WHITMAN

A bit of a mystery remains in the Scottish tale 'The Girl and the Dead Man': Where does the vessel of cordial come from? My guess is that it comes from the mother or, at least, from her spirit. The gift not only moves, it moves in a circle. The mother gives the bread and the girl gives it in turn to the birds whom I place in the realm of the mother, not only because it is a mother bird who addresses her, but also because of a verbal link (the mother has a 'leash of daughters,' the mother bird has her 'puppies'). The vessel of cordial is in the realm of the mother as well, for, remember, the phrase in Gaelic means 'teat of ichor' or 'teat of health.' The level changes, to be sure – it is a different sort of mother whose breasts hold the blood of the gods – but it is still in the maternal sphere. Structurally, then, the gift moves from mother to daughter to mother to daughter. In circling twice in this way the gift itself increases from bread to the water of life, from carnal food to spiritual food. At which point

the circle expands as the girl gives the gift to her sisters to bring them back to life.

The figure of the circle in which the gift moves can be seen more clearly in an example from ethnography. Gift institutions are universal among tribal peoples; the few we know the most about are those which Western ethnographers studied around the turn of the century. One of these is the Kula, the ceremonial exchange of the Massim peoples who occupy the South Sea islands near the eastern tip of New Guinea. Bronislaw Malinowski spent several years living on these islands during the First World War, staying primarily in the Trobriands, the northwesternmost group. In his subsequent book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski describes how, after he had returned to England, a visit to Edinburgh Castle to see the Scottish crown jewels reminded him of the Kula:

The keeper told many stories of how [the jewels] were worn by this or that king or queen on such and such an occasion, of how some of them had been taken over to London, to the great and just indignation of the whole Scottish nation, how they were restored, and how now everyone can be pleased, since they are safe under lock and key, and no one can touch them. As I was looking at them and thinking how ugly, useless, ungainly, even tawdry they were, I had the feeling that something similar had been told to me of late, and that I had seen many other objects of this sort, which made a similar impression on me.

And then there arose before me the vision of a native village on coral soil, and a small, rickety platform temporarily erected under a pandanus thatch, surrounded by a number of brown, naked men, and one of them showing me long, thin red strings, and big, white, worn-out objects, clumsy to sight and greasy to touch. With reverence he also would name them, and tell their history, and by whom and when they were worn, and how they changed hands, and how their temporary possession was a great sign of the importance and glory of the village.

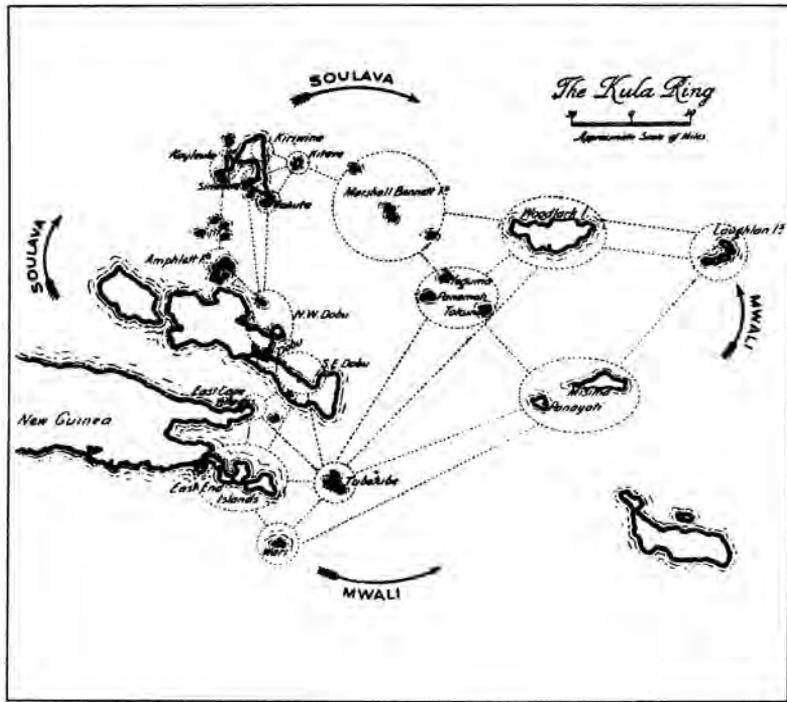
Two ceremonial gifts lie at the heart of the Kula exchange: armshells and necklaces. 'Armshells are obtained by breaking off the top and the narrow end of a big, cone-shaped shell, and then polishing up the remaining ring,' writes Malinowski. Necklaces are made with small flat disks of a red

shell strung into long chains. Both armshells and necklaces circulate throughout the islands, passing from household to household. The presence of one of these gifts in a man's house enables him 'to draw a great deal of renown, to exhibit the article, to tell how he obtained it, and to plan to whom he is going to give it. And all this forms one of the favorite subjects of tribal conversation and gossip . . .'

Malinowski calls the Kula articles 'ceremonial gifts' because their social use far exceeds their practical use. A friend of mine tells me that his group of friends in college continually passed around a deflated basketball. The joke was to get it mysteriously deposited in someone else's room. The clear uselessness of such objects seems to make it easier for them to become vehicles for the spirit of a group. Another man tells me that when he was young his parents and their best friends passed back and forth, again as a joke, a huge open-ended wrench that had apparently been custom-cast to repair a steam shovel. The two families had found it one day on a picnic, and for years thereafter it showed up first in one house, then in the other, under the Christmas tree or in the umbrella stand. If you have not yourself been a part of such an exchange, you will easily turn up a story like these by asking around, for such spontaneous exchanges of 'useless' gifts are fairly common, though hardly ever developed to the depth and elegance that Malinowski found among the Massim.

The Kula gifts, the armshells and necklaces, move continually around a wide ring of islands in the Massim archipelago. Each travels in a circle; the red shell necklaces (considered to be 'male' and worn by women) move clockwise and the armshells ('female' and worn by men) move counter-clockwise. A person who participates in the Kula has gift partners in neighboring tribes. If we imagine him facing the center of the circle with partners on his left and right, he will always be receiving armshells from his partner to the left and giving them to the man on his right. The necklaces flow the other way. Of course, these objects are not actually passed hand to hand; they are carried by canoe from island to island in journeys that require great preparation and cover hundreds of miles.

The two Kula gifts are exchanged for each other. If a man brings me a necklace, I will give him in return some armshells of equivalent value. I may do this right away, or I may wait as long as a year (though if I wait that long I will give him a few smaller gifts in the interim to show my good faith). As a rule it takes between two and ten years for each article in the Kula to make a full round of the islands.



THE KULA RING

*'Soulava' are necklaces and*

*'Mwali' are armshells.*

Because these gifts are exchanged for each other, the Kula seems to break the rule against equilibrium that I set out in the first section. But let us look more closely. We should first note that the Kula articles are kept in motion. Each gift stays with a man for a while, but if he keeps it too long he will begin to have a reputation for being 'slow' and 'hard' in the Kula. The gifts 'never stop,' writes Malinowski. 'It seems almost incredible at first . . . , but it is the fact, nevertheless, that no one ever keeps any of the Kula valuables for any length of time . . . "Ownership," therefore, in Kula, is quite a special economic relation. A man who is in the Kula never keeps any article for longer than, say, a year or two.' When Malinowski expands on this point, he finds he must abandon his analogy

to the crown jewels. The Trobriand Islanders know what it is to own property, but their sense of possession is wholly different from that of Europeans. The 'social code . . . lays down that to possess is to be great, and that wealth is the indispensable appanage of social rank and attribute of personal virtue. But the important point is that with them *to possess is to give* – and here the natives differ from us notably. A man who owns a thing is naturally expected to share it, to distribute it, to be its trustee and dispenser.'

The motion of the Kula gifts does not in itself ensure that there will be no equilibrium, for, as we have seen, they move but they are also exchanged. Two ethics, however, govern this exchange and both of them ensure that, while there may be a macroscopic equilibrium, at the level of each man there will be the sense of imbalance, of shifting weight, that always marks a gift exchange. The first of these ethics prohibits discussion: 'the Kula,' writes Malinowski, 'consists in the bestowing of a ceremonial gift, which has to be repaid by an equivalent counter-gift after a lapse of time . . . But [and this is the point] it can never be exchanged from hand to hand, with the equivalence between the two objects discussed, bargained about and computed.' A man may wonder what will come in return for his gift, but he is not supposed to bring it up. Gift exchange is not a form of barter. 'The decorum of the Kula transaction is strictly kept, and highly valued. The natives distinguish it from barter, which they practice extensively [and] of which they have a clear idea . . . Often, when criticising an incorrect, too hasty, or indecorous procedure of Kula, they will say: "He conducts his Kula as if it were [barter]."' Partners in barter talk and talk until they strike a balance, but the gift is given in silence.

A second important ethic, Malinowski tells us, 'is that the equivalence of the counter-gift is left to the giver, and it cannot be enforced by any kind of coercion.' If a man gives a second-rate necklace in return for a fine set of armshells, people may talk, but there is nothing anyone can do about it. When we barter we make deals, and if someone defaults we go after him, but the gift must be a gift. It is as if you give a part of your substance to your gift partner and then wait in silence until he gives you a part of his. You put your self in his hands. These rules – and they are typical of gift institutions – preserve the sense of motion despite the exchange involved. There is trade, but the objects traded are not commodities.

We commonly think of gifts as being exchanged between two people and of gratitude as being directed back to the actual donor. 'Reciprocity,' the standard social science term for returning a gift, has this sense of going to and fro between people (the roots are *re* and *pro*, back and forth, like a reciprocating engine). The gift in the Scottish tale is given reciprocally, going back and forth between the mother and her daughter (until the very end).

Reciprocal giving is a form of gift exchange, but it is the simplest. The gift moves in a circle, and two people do not make much of a circle. Two points establish a line, but a circle lies in a plane and needs at least three points. This is why, as we shall see, most of the stories of gift exchange have a minimum of three people. I have introduced the Kula circuit here because it is such a fine example. For the Kula gifts to move, each man must have at least two gift partners. In this case the circle is larger than that, of course, but three is its lower limit.

Circular giving differs from reciprocal giving in several ways. First, when the gift moves in a circle no one ever receives it from the same person he gives it to. I continually give armshells to my partner to the west, but unlike a two-person give-and-take, he never gives me armshells in return. The whole mood is different. The circle is the structural equivalent of the prohibition on discussion. When I give to someone from whom I do not receive (and yet I do receive elsewhere), it is as if the gift goes around a corner before it comes back. I have to give blindly. And I will feel a sort of blind gratitude as well. The smaller the circle is – and particularly if it involves just two people – the more a man can keep his eye on things and the more likely it is that he will start to think like a salesman. But so long as the gift passes out of sight it cannot be manipulated by one man or one pair of gift partners. When the gift moves in a circle its motion is beyond the control of the personal ego, and so each bearer must be a part of the group and each donation is an act of social faith.

What size is the circle? In addressing this question, I have come to think of the circle, the container in which the gift moves, as its 'body' or 'ego.' Psychologists sometimes speak of the ego as a complex like any other: the Mother, the Father, the Me – all of these are important places in the field of the psyche where images and energy cluster as we grow, like stars in a constellation. The ego complex takes on shape and size as the Me – that part of the psyche which takes everything personally – retains our private

history, that is, how others have treated us, how we look and feel, and so on.

I find it useful to think of the ego complex as a thing that keeps expanding, not as something to be overcome or done away with. An ego has formed and hardened by the time most of us reach adolescence, but it is small, an ego-of-one. Then, if we fall in love, for example, the constellation of identity expands and the ego-of-one becomes an ego-of-two. The young lover, often to his own amazement, finds himself saying 'we' instead of 'me.' Each of us identifies with a wider and wider community as we mature, coming eventually to think and act with a group-ego (or, in most of these gift stories, a tribal ego), which speaks with the 'we' of kings and wise old people. Of course the larger it becomes, the less it feels like what we usually mean by ego. Not entirely, though: whether an adolescent is thinking of himself or a nation of itself, it still feels like egotism to anyone who is not included. There is still a boundary.

If the ego widens still further, however, it really does change its nature and become something we would no longer call ego. There is a consciousness in which we act as part of things larger even than the race. When I picture this, I always think of the end of 'Song of Myself' where Whitman dissolves into the air:

I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

Now the part that says 'me' is scattered. There is no boundary to be outside of, unless the universe itself is bounded.

In all of this we could substitute 'body' for 'ego.' Aborigines commonly refer to their own clan as 'my body,' just as our marriage ceremony speaks of becoming 'one flesh.' Again, the body can be enlarged beyond the private skin, and in its final expansion there is no body at all. When we are in the spirit of the gift we love to feel the body open outward. The ego's firmness has its virtues, but at some point we seek the slow dilation, to use another term of Whitman's, in which the ego enjoys a widening give-and-take with the world and is finally abandoned in ripeness.

The gift can circulate at every level of the ego. In the ego-of-one we speak of self-gratification, and whether it's forced or chosen, a virtue or

a vice, the mark of self-gratification is its isolation. Reciprocal giving, the ego-of-two, is a little more social. We think mostly of lovers. Each of these circles is exhilarating as it expands, and the little gifts that pass between lovers touch us because each is stepping into a larger circuit. But again, if the exchange goes on and on to the exclusion of others, it soon goes stale. D. H. Lawrence spoke of the *égoïsme à deux* of so many married couples, people who get just so far in the expansion of the self and then close down for a lifetime, opening up for neither children, nor the group, nor the gods. A folk tale from Kashmir tells of two Brahmin women who tried to dispense with their almsgiving duties by simply giving alms back and forth to each other. They didn't quite have the spirit of the thing. When they died, they returned to earth as two wells so poisoned that no one could take water from them. No one else can drink from the ego-of-two. It has its moment in our maturation, but it is an infant form of the gift circle.

In the Kula we have already seen a fine example of the larger circle. The Maori, the native tribes of New Zealand, provide another, which is similar in some ways to the Kula but offers new detail and a hint of how gift exchange will feel if the circle expands beyond the body of the tribe. The Maori have a word, *hau*, which translates as 'spirit,' particularly the spirit of the gift and the spirit of the forest which gives food. In these tribes, when hunters return from the forest with birds they have killed, they give a portion of the kill to the priests, who, in turn, cook the birds at a sacred fire. The priests eat a few of them and then prepare a sort of talisman, the *mauri*, which is the physical embodiment of the forest *hau*. This *mauri* is a gift the priests give back to the forest, where, as a Maori sage once explained to an Englishman, it 'causes the birds to be abundant . . . , that they may be slain and taken by man.'

There are three gifts in this hunting ritual; the forest gives to the hunters, the hunters to the priests, and the priests to the forest. At the end, the gift moves from the third party back to the first. The ceremony that the priests perform is called *whangai hau*, which means 'nourishing *hau*,' feeding the spirit. To give such a name to the priests' activity says that the addition of the third party keeps the spirit of the gift alive. Put conversely, without the priests there is a danger that the motion of the gift will be lost. It seems to be too much to ask of the hunters to both kill the game and return a gift to the forest. As we said in speaking of the Kula, gift exchange is more likely to turn into barter when it falls into the ego-of-two. With a simple

give-and-take, the hunters may begin to think of the forest as a place to turn a profit. But with the priests involved, the gift must leave the hunters' sight before it returns to the woods. The priests take on or incarnate the position of the third thing to avoid the binary relation of the hunters and forest which by itself would not be abundant. The priests, by their presence alone, feed the spirit.

Every gift calls for a return gift, and so, by placing the gift back in the forest, the priests treat the birds as a gift of nature. We now understand this to be ecological. Ecology as a science began at the end of the nineteenth century, an offshoot of the rising interest in evolution. Originally the study of how animals survive in their environments, one of ecology's first lessons was that, beneath all the change in nature, there are steady states characterized by cycles. Every participant in the cycle literally lives off the others with only the ultimate energy source, the sun, being transcendent. Widening the study of ecology to include man means to look at ourselves as a part of nature again, not its lord. When we see that we are actors in natural cycles, we understand that what nature gives to us is influenced by what we give to nature. So the circle is a sign of an ecological insight as much as of gift exchange. We come to feel ourselves as one part of a large self-regulating system. The return gift, the 'nourishing *hau*,' is literally feedback, as they say in cybernetics. Without it, that is to say, with the exercise of any greed or arrogance of will, the cycle is broken. We all know that it isn't 'really' the *mauri* placed in the forest that 'causes' the birds to be abundant, and yet now we see that on a different level it is: the circle of gifts enters the cycles of nature and, in so doing, manages not to interrupt them and not to put man on the outside. The forest's abundance is in fact a consequence of man's treating its wealth as a gift.

The Maori hunting ritual enlarges the circle within which the gift moves in two ways. First, it includes nature. Second and more important, it includes the gods. The priests act out a gift relationship with the deities, giving thanks and sacrificing gifts to them in return for what they give the tribe. A story from the Old Testament will show us the same thing in a tradition with which we are more familiar. The structure is identical.

In the Pentateuch the first fruits always belong to the Lord. In Exodus the Lord tells Moses: 'Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.' The Lord gives the tribe its wealth, and the germ of that

wealth is then given back to the Lord. Fertility is a gift from God, and in order for it to continue, its first fruits are returned to him as a return gift. In pagan times this had apparently included sacrificing the firstborn son, but the Israelites had early been allowed to substitute an animal for the child, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Likewise a lamb was substituted for the firstborn of any unclean animal. The Lord says to Moses:

All that opens the womb is mine, all your male cattle, the firstlings of cow and sheep. The firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem.

Elsewhere the Lord explains to Aaron what is to be done with the firstborn. Aaron and his sons are responsible for the priesthood, and they minister at the altar. The lambs, calves, and kids are to be sacrificed: 'You shall sprinkle their blood upon the altar, and shall burn their fat as an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord; but their flesh shall be yours . . .' As in the Maori story, the priests eat a portion of the gift. But its essence is burned and returned to the Lord in smoke.

This gift cycle has three stations and more – the flocks, the tribe, the priests and the Lord. The inclusion of the Lord in the circle – and this is the point I began to make above – changes the ego in which the gift moves in a way unlike any other addition. It is enlarged beyond the tribal ego and beyond nature. Now, as I said when I first introduced the image, we would no longer call it an ego at all. The gift leaves all boundary and circles into mystery.

The passage into mystery always refreshes. If, when we work, we can look once a day upon the face of mystery, then our labor satisfies. We are lightened when our gifts rise from pools we cannot fathom. Then we know they are not a solitary egotism and they are inexhaustible. Anything contained within a boundary must contain as well its own exhaustion. The most perfectly balanced gyroscope slowly winds down. But when the gift passes out of sight and then returns, we are enlivened. Material goods pull us down into their bones unless their fat is singed occasionally. It is when the world flames a bit in our peripheral vision that it brings us jubilation and not depression. We stand before a bonfire or even a burning house and feel the odd release it brings, as if the trees could give the sun

return for what enters them through the leaf. when no property can move, then even Moses' Pharaoh is plagued with hungry toads. A sword appears to seek the firstborn son of that man who cannot be moved to move the gift. But Pharaoh himself was dead long before his firstborn was taken, for we are only alive to the degree that we can let ourselves be moved. And when the gift circles into mystery the liveliness stays, for it is 'a pleasing odor to the Lord' when the first fruits are effused in eddies and drifted in lacy jags above the flame.

I described the motion of the gift earlier in this chapter by saying that gifts are always used, consumed, or eaten. Now that we have seen the figure of the circle we can understand what seems at first to be a paradox of gift exchange: when the gift is used, it is not used up. Quite the opposite, in fact: the gift that is not used will be lost, while the one that is passed along remains abundant. In the Scottish tale the girls who hoard their bread are fed only while they eat. The meal finishes in hunger though they took the larger piece. The girl who shares her bread is satisfied. What is given away feeds again and again, while what is kept feeds only once and leaves us hungry.

The tale is a parable, but in the Kula ring we saw the same constancy as a social fact. The necklaces and armshells are not diminished by their use, but satisfy faithfully. Only when a foreigner steps in to buy some for his collection are they 'used up' by a transaction. And the Maori hunting tale showed us that not just food in parables but food in nature remains abundant when it is treated as gift, when we participate in the moving circle and do not stand aside as hunter or exploiter. Gifts are a class of property whose value lies only in their use and which literally cease to exist as gifts if they are not constantly consumed. When gifts are sold, they change their nature as much as water changes when it freezes, and no rationalist telling of the constant elemental structure can replace the feeling that is lost.

In E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, Dr Aziz, the Moslem, and Fielding, the Englishman, have a brief dialogue, a typical debate between gift and commodity. Fielding says:

'Your emotions never seem in proportion to their objects, Aziz.'

'Is emotion a sack of potatoes, so much to the pound, to be measured out? Am I a machine? I shall be told I can use up my emotions by using them, next.'

'I should have thought you would. It sounds common sense. You can't eat your cake and have it, even in the world of the spirit.'

'If you are right, there is no point in any friendship . . . , and we had better all leap over this parapet and kill ourselves.'

In the world of gift, as in the Scottish tale, you not only can have your cake and eat it too, you can't have your cake *unless* you eat it. Gift exchange and erotic life are connected in this regard. The gift is an emanation of Eros, and therefore to speak of gifts that survive their use is to describe a natural fact: libido is not lost when it is given away. Eros never wastes his lovers. When we give ourselves in the spirit of that god, he does not leave off his attentions; it is only when we fall to calculation that he remains hidden and no body will satisfy. Satisfaction derives not merely from being filled but from being filled with a current that will not cease. With the gift, as in love, our satisfaction sets us at ease because we know that somehow its use at once assures its plenty.

Scarcity and abundance have as much to do with the form of exchange as with how much material wealth is at hand. Scarcity appears when wealth cannot flow. Elsewhere in *A Passage to India*, Dr Aziz says, 'If money goes, money comes. If money stays, death comes. Did you ever hear that useful Urdu proverb?' and Fielding replies, 'My proverbs are: A penny saved is a penny earned; A stitch in time saves nine; Look before you leap; and the British Empire rests on them.' He's right. An empire needs its clerks with their ledgers and their clocks saving pennies in time. The problem is that wealth ceases to move freely when all things are counted and priced. It may accumulate in great heaps, but fewer and fewer people can afford to enjoy it. After the war in Bangladesh, thousands of tons of donated rice rotted in warehouses because the market was the only known mode of distribution, and the poor, naturally, couldn't afford to buy. Marshall Sahlins begins a comment on modern scarcity with the paradoxical contention that hunters and gatherers 'have affluent economies, their absolute poverty notwithstanding.' He writes:

Modern capitalist societies, however richly endowed, dedicate themselves to the proposition of scarcity. [Both Paul Samuelson and Milton Friedman begin their economies with "The Law of Scarcity"; it's all over by the end of Chapter One.] Inadequacy of economic means is the first principle of the world's wealthiest peoples. The apparent material status

of the economy seems to be no clue to its accomplishments; something has to be said for the mode of economic organization.

The market-industrial system institutes scarcity, in a manner completely unparalleled and to a degree nowhere else approximated. Where production and distribution are arranged through the behavior of prices, and all livelihoods depend on getting and spending, insufficiency of material means becomes the explicit, calculable starting point of all economic activity.

Given material abundance, scarcity must be a function of boundaries. If there is plenty of air in the world but something blocks its passage to the lungs, the lungs do well to complain of scarcity. The assumptions of market exchange may not necessarily lead to the emergence of boundaries, but they do in practice. When trade is 'clean' and leaves people unconnected, when the merchant is free to sell when and where he will, when the market moves mostly for profit and the dominant myth is not 'to possess is to give' but 'the fittest survive,' then wealth will lose its motion and gather in isolated pools. Under the assumptions of exchange trade, property is plagued by entropy and wealth can become scarce even as it increases.

A commodity is truly 'used up' when it is sold because nothing about the exchange assures its return. The visiting sea captain may pay handsomely for a Kula necklace, but because the sale removes it from the circle, it wastes it, no matter the price. Gifts that remain gifts can support an affluence of satisfaction, even without numerical abundance. The mythology of the rich in the overproducing nations that the poor are in on some secret about satisfaction – black 'soul,' gypsy *duende*, the noble savage, the simple farmer, the virile game keeper – obscures the harshness of modern capitalist poverty, but it does have a basis, for people who live in voluntary poverty or who are not capital-intensive do have more ready access to erotic forms of exchange that are neither exhausting nor exhaustible and whose use assures their plenty.

If the commodity moves to turn a profit, where does the gift move? The gift moves toward the empty place. As it turns in its circle it turns toward him who has been empty-handed the longest, and if someone appears elsewhere whose need is greater it leaves its old channel and moves toward him. Our generosity may leave us empty, but our emptiness then pulls gently at the whole until the thing in motion returns to replenish us. Social nature abhors a vacuum. Counsels Meister Eckhart, the mystic: 'Let us

borrow empty vessels.' The gift finds that man attractive who stands with an empty bowl he does not own.\*

The begging bowl of the Buddha, Thomas Merton has said, 'represents the ultimate theological root of the belief, not just in a right to beg, but in openness to the gifts of all beings as an expression of the interdependence of all beings . . . The whole idea of compassion, which is central to Mahayana Buddhism, is based on an awareness of the interdependence of all living beings . . . Thus when the monk begs from the layman and receives a gift from the layman, it is not as a selfish person getting something from somebody else. He is simply opening himself to this interdependence . . .' The wandering mendicant takes it as his task to carry what is empty from door to door. There is no profit; he merely stays alive if the gift moves toward him. He makes its spirit visible to us. His well-being, then, is a sign of its well-being, as his starvation would be a sign of its withdrawal. Our English word 'beggar' comes from the Beghards, a brotherhood of mendicant friars that grew up in the thirteenth century in Flanders. There are still some places in the East where wandering mendicants live from the begging bowl; in Europe they died out at the close of the Middle Ages.

As the bearer of the empty place, the religious mendicant has an active duty beyond his supplication. He is the vehicle of that fluidity which is abundance. The wealth of the group touches his bowl at all sides, as if it were the center of a wheel where the spokes meet. The gift gathers there, and the mendicant gives it away again when he meets someone who is empty. In European folk tales the beggar often turns out to be Wotan, the true 'owner' of the land, who asks for charity though it is his own wealth he moves within, and who then responds to neediness by filling it with gifts. He is godfather to the poor.

Folk tales commonly open with a beggar motif. In a tale from Bengal, a king has two queens, both of whom are childless. A faquir, a wandering mendicant, comes to the palace gate to ask for alms. One of the queens walks down to give him a handful of rice. When he finds that she is childless, however, he says that he cannot accept the rice but has a gift for her instead, a potion that will remove her barrenness. If she drinks his nostrum with the juice of the pomegranate flower, he tells her, in due time she will

\* Folk tales are the only proof I shall be able to offer for these assertions. The point is more spiritual than social: in the spiritual world, new life comes to those who give up.

bear a son whom she should then call the Pomegranate Boy. All this comes to pass and the tale proceeds.

Such stories declare that the gift does move from plenty to emptiness. It seeks the barren, the arid, the stuck, and the poor. The Lord says, 'All that opens the womb is mine,' for it is He who filled the empty womb, having earlier stood as a beggar by the sacrificial fire or at the gates of the palace.

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE BONES OF THE DEAD

The gift in the folk tale from Bengal which closes the last chapter – the gift that the beggar gives to the queen – brings the queen her fertility and she bears a child. Fertility and growth are common fruits of gift exchange, at least in these stories. In all we have seen so far – the Gaelic tale, the Kula ring, the rites of the first fruit, feeding the forest *hau*, and so on – fertility is often a concern, and invariably either the bearers of the gift or the gift itself grows as a result of its circulation.

Living things that we classify as gifts really grow, of course, but even inert gifts, such as the Kula articles, are *felt* to increase – in worth or in liveliness – as they move from hand to hand. The distinction – alive/inert – is not always useful, in fact, because even when a gift is not alive it is treated as if it were, and whatever we treat as living begins to take on life. Moreover, gifts that have taken on life can bestow it in return. The final gift in the Gaelic tale revives the dead sisters. Even if such miracles are rare, it is still true that lifelessness leaves the soul when a gift comes toward us, for gift property serves an upward force, the goodwill or *virtù* of nature, the soul, and the collective. (This is one of the senses in which I mean to say that a work of art is a gift. The gifted artist contains the vitality of his gift within the work, and thereby makes it available to others. Furthermore, works we

come to treasure are those which transmit that vitality and revive the soul. Such works circulate among us as reservoirs of available life, what Whitman calls 'the tasteless water of souls.')

Later in this chapter I shall describe a purely cultural artifact which is felt to increase in worth as it circulates, but to begin an analysis of the increase of gifts I want to turn to a gift institution which, like the story of the beggar and the queen, has as its setting a situation in which natural fertility and growth are at issue.

The American Indian tribes that have become famous for the potlatch – the Kwakiutl, Tlingit, Haida, and others – once occupied the Pacific coast of North America from Cape Mendocino in California to Prince William Sound in Alaska. All of these tribes depended upon the ocean to provide their primary sustenance – herring, eulachon (candlefish), whales, and, above all, the salmon that annually enter the coastal rivers to swim inland and spawn. Like the Maori or the Jews of the Old Testament, the North Pacific tribes developed a relationship to the natural abundance of their environment based upon a cycle of gifts. It was the Indian belief that all animals lived as they themselves lived – in tribes – and that the salmon, in particular, dwelt in a huge lodge beneath the sea. According to this mythology, the salmon go about in human form while they are at home in their lodge, but once a year they change their bodies into fish bodies, dress themselves in robes of salmon skin, swim to the mouths of the rivers, and voluntarily sacrifice themselves that their land brothers may have food for the winter.

The first salmon to appear in the rivers was always given an elaborate welcome. A priest or his assistant would catch the fish, parade it to an altar, and lay it out before the group (its head pointing inland to encourage the rest of the salmon to continue swimming upstream). The first fish was treated as if it were a high-ranking chief making a visit from a neighboring tribe. The priest sprinkled its body with eagle down or red ochre and made a formal speech of welcome, mentioning, as far as politeness permitted, how much the tribe hoped the run would continue and be bountiful. The celebrants then sang the songs that welcome an honored guest. After the ceremony the priest gave everyone present a piece of the fish to eat. Finally – and this is what makes it clearly a gift cycle – the bones of the first salmon were returned to the sea. The belief was that salmon bones placed back into the water would reassemble once they had washed out to sea; the fish would then revive, return to its home, and revert to its

human form. The skeleton of the first salmon had to be returned to the water intact; later fish could be cut apart, but all their bones were still put back into the water. If they were not, the salmon would be offended and might not return the following year with their gift of winter food.

The main elements of this ceremony are the same as those of the other first-fruits rites we have seen – part of the gift is eaten and part is returned – and once again the myth declares that the objects of the ritual will remain plentiful *because* they are treated as gifts. It would be difficult, I suppose, to make the case that to abandon the gift ceremony, to treat the salmon as a commodity, would truly ‘offend’ the fish and diminish their abundance. The point is perhaps best put in its positive form: the first salmon ceremony establishes a gift relationship with nature, a formal give-and-take that acknowledges our participation in, and dependence upon, natural increase. And where we have established such a relationship we tend to respond to nature as a part of ourselves, not as a stranger or alien available for exploitation. Gift exchange brings with it, therefore, a built-in check upon the destruction of its objects; with it we will not destroy nature’s renewable wealth except where we also consciously destroy ourselves. Where we wish to preserve natural increase, therefore, gift exchange is the commerce of choice, for it is a commerce that harmonizes with, or participates in, the process of that increase. And this is the first explanation I offer for the association our tales have made between gift exchange and increased worth, fertility, liveliness: where true, organic increase is at issue, gift exchange preserves that increase; the gift grows because living things grow.\*

\* In the fall of 1980 a group of Australian aborigines asked the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva to help them protect their lands from commercial exploitation. According to a wire service report, ‘one of the group’s major concerns is the violation of the sacred home of the aboriginal lizard god, Great Goanna, by Amax, an American petroleum company that is under contract to the state government of Western Australia to drill there. The Yungnara tribe on the Noonkanbah pastoral station believes that if Goanna is disturbed he will order the six-foot monitor lizards, which are a source of food for the aborigines, to stop mating and thus eventually cause a food shortage.’

There may be no necessary link between scarcity and exploitation, but the connection is not unknown, either. In the North Pacific, salmon stocks actually did decline as soon as European settlers began to treat the fish as a commodity to be sold for a profit. By the end of the nineteenth century a salmon cannery sat at the mouth of every major river on the Alaskan coast; many overfished the runs and drove themselves out of business. On the East Coast the salmon essentially disappeared, although they were once so plentiful as to have been the dietary staple of the textile workers in the mill towns along the Merrimac River. (In the summer of 1974 a salmon was found in the Connecticut River; it was dead, but it was the first to appear in those waters in a hundred and fifty years.)

Now let us see how far we may go toward widening the point to include the growth of gifts that are not in fact alive. Let us turn to a gift at the level of culture – something clearly inorganic and inedible – and try to explain its increase without recourse to any natural analogy.

The same North Pacific tribes that welcomed the first salmon circulated among themselves large decorated copper plaques as ceremonial gifts. As the illustration shows, the upper half of a copper plaque was typically engraved with a highly geometric portrait of an animal or spirit, while the lower portion was left unadorned except for two ridges in the shape of a T. Each copper bore a name, sometimes referring to the animal or spirit, sometimes to the great power of the gift (e.g., 'Drawing All Property from the House').

Coppers were always associated with the property given away at a potlatch. Marcel Mauss, as I indicated in the last chapter, translates 'potlatch' in terms of nourishment and satiation; more commonly the word is taken to mean 'gift,' 'giving,' or, when used as a verb, 'to give.' Potlatches were held to mark important events, such as a marriage or, most often, the assumption of rank by a member of a tribe. The oldest and most universal occasion for a potlatch was the death of a chief and the subsequent elevation of his successor to the vacant rank and title. Potlatches were almost always given by one tribe for another, the order and value of the gifts bestowed establishing the rank of each participant, guest and host alike. Status and generosity were always associated: no man could become a man of position without giving away property.

When American ethnographers first studied the potlatch at the end of the nineteenth century, over a hundred years of trading with the whites had changed it to its roots. We must therefore look upon the literature we have about the potlatch with a wary eye – what is truly aboriginal and what is an accommodation to the new economy? Before the Europeans appeared, for example, a chief was likely to give only one formal potlatch during his lifetime, the one at which he assumed his chieftainship. The tribe would labor a year or more to prepare the ceremony, if only to collect the treasure to be given away, not just coppers, but sea otter and marmot pelts, eulachon oil, tusk shells, skins of albino deer, and nobility blankets woven of mountain-goat wool and cords of yellow cedar bark. When Franz Boas, the first ethnographer to study the potlatch, stayed with the Kwakiutl in the 1890s, however, the gifts were trade items, easy to manufacture and cheap to acquire, and potlatches were held all the time.



*Kwakiutl copper*

It is worth going into the story of this change a little, for the subtleties of gift exchange always become more apparent when set alongside a market in commodities. The North Pacific coast of America was first opened to white traders by Captain Cook around the time of the American Revolution. Trade in animal pelts increased steadily in the following century. The Hudson's Bay Company established its first outposts in the area in the 1830s. Unlike the later missionaries, the company wanted furs, not souls, and left the Indians alone. But their passive presence had its effect, nonetheless, for with them came firearms, sails, and alcohol. The Indians began to winter near the company stores, crowding the land and depending more and more upon a market they did not control. The Hudson's Bay blanket, machine-made and selling for about a dollar, replaced the traditional nobility robe as an item of commerce. Where formerly a few carefully woven robes would grace a potlatch or feast, now literally thousands of trade blankets might be stacked along a beach to be given in return for a copper.

Toward the end of the century, whites began to commercialize the salmon fishing. No nation at that time recognized the Indians as full citizens and they were therefore unable to file land claims. But any white man could have 160 acres for the asking, and the entrepreneur who wanted a cannery would simply stake off 80 acres on either side of a river mouth, build his shop, and set to work. When he had more salmon than he needed, he might let the Indians come in and fish, or he might not. It's an old story: purchased foodstuffs became necessary to supplement the Indian diet, and to buy food they needed cash, and to acquire cash they had to work for wages in the factory. Indians were paid by the day to fish, bought food on credit at the store, became civilized debtors and returned to work another season.

As if these changes weren't enough, during the nineteenth century the Indian population was thinned out by war and disease, the system of land tenure was widely altered, and large tribal federations emerged in response to European hegemony, all of which led to endless complications in sorting out the hierarchy of each tribe, one of the original functions of the potlatch. Two of the better-known characteristics of potlatch in the popular literature – the usurious nature of loans and the rivalry or 'fighting with property' – while based on traceable aboriginal motifs, are actually post-European elaborations. It really wasn't possible for Boas to see this when he did his early work; he had the misfortune, in a sense, to work in the area near Fort Rupert (one of the first Hudson's Bay Company outposts) where the bitterness and antagonism of the 'rivalry potlatch' had reached its peak. When Mauss read through Boas's published field notes, he declared potlatch 'the monster child of the gift system.' So it was. As first studied, the potlatch was the progeny of a European capitalism mated to an aboriginal gift economy, and with freakish results: sewing machines thrown into the sea, people embarrassed into sitting in houses set afire with fish oil, Indians dancing with pink silk parasols or stooped under layer after layer of cheap wool blankets, and as the sun set the Canadian Royal Mounted Police riding off with coppers and other ritual property to suppress the potlatch, which their government had declared illegally wasteful.

With these words of warning, let us turn to one of Franz Boas's accounts of the ceremonial exchange of a copper, hoping to see in it the smudged image of earlier gift exchange. In Boas's report, one tribe of the Kwakiutl has a copper whose name is Maxtsolem, 'All Other

Coppers Are Ashamed to Look at It.' The tribe invites a second tribe to a feast and offers them the gift. The second tribe accepts, putting themselves under the obligation to make a return gift. The exchange takes place the next day on a beach. The first tribe brings the copper, and the leader of the second tribe lays down a thousand trade blankets as a return gift.

This is only the beginning, however, and in a sense the true gift has not yet appeared. The chiefs who are giving the copper away seem to feel that the return gift is not adequate, for instead of accepting it they slowly retell the entire history of this copper's previous passages, first one man recalling a time when two hundred more blankets had been given for it, then another man saying that an additional eight hundred would seem appropriate – and all the while the recipient of the copper responds to them, saying, 'Yes, it pleases my heart,' or else begging for mercy as he brings out more and more blankets. Five times the chiefs ask for more blankets and five times they are brought out until thirty-seven hundred are stacked in a row along the beach. At each stage the blankets are counted and both sides make elaborate speeches about their traditions and powers, their fathers, grandfathers and ancestors from the beginning of the world.

When the history has been told, the talk stops. Now the true return gift appears, these formalities having merely raised the exchange into the general area of this copper's worth. Now the receiving chief, on his own, announces he would like to 'adorn' his guests. He brings out two hundred more blankets and gives them individually to the visitors. Then he adds still another two hundred, saying, 'You must think poorly of me,' and telling of his forefathers.

These four hundred blankets are given without any of the dialogue that marked the first part of the ceremony. It is here that the recipient of the copper shows his generosity, and it is here that the copper increases in worth. The next time it is given away, people will remember how it grew by four hundred blankets in its last passage.

Before I comment on this exchange, I must describe a second situation in which coppers were felt to increase in value. Several occasions called for the actual destruction of a ceremonial copper. The Tsimshian tribes, for example, would break a copper when they held a potlatch to honor a dead chief and recognize his heir. During this 'feast for the dead,' a masked dancer would come forward with a copper and instruct the new chief to

break it into pieces and then give these pieces to his guests. The chief would take a chisel and cut the copper apart. Among the Kwakiutl when Boas studied them, a man would sometimes break a copper and give the pieces to a rival, who would then try to find a copper of equivalent value, break it, and give back the pieces of both. The man who had initiated the exchange was then obliged to hold a potlatch, distributing food and valuables at least equal to the new (and broken) copper he had received. Sometimes the initial recipient of a broken copper would find a second one, break it, and then throw them both into the sea, an action that brought him great prestige. Most coppers did not end up in the water, however; even when broken, the pieces were saved and continued to circulate. And if someone succeeded in gathering up the parts of a dismembered copper, Boas reports, they were 'riveted together, and the copper . . . attained an increased value.'

It is clear in the literature that coppers increased in worth as they were broken, but I'm not sure it is clear why. To suggest an explanation, I want to introduce an image of dismemberment and increase from a very different culture. There are several ancient gods whose stories involve being broken and then brought back to life – Osiris in Egypt, Dionysos in Crete and Greece, and Bacchus in Rome, to name a few. I shall take Dionysos as my example here.

Carl Kerényi, the Romanian historian of religion, introduces his book on Dionysos by saying that his first insight into the god of wine came to him in a vineyard – he was looking at the grapevine itself and what he saw was 'the image of indestructible life.' The temples are abandoned, but the vine still grows over the fallen walls. To explain the image, Kerényi distinguishes between two terms for 'life' in Greek, *bios* and *zoë*. *Bios* is limited life, characterized life, life that dies. *Zoë* is the life that endures; it is the thread that runs through *bios*-life and is not broken when the particular perishes. (In this century we call it 'the gene pool.') Dionysos is a god of *zoë*-life.

In his earliest Minoan forms, Dionysos is associated with honey and with honey beer or mead. Both honey and grape juice became images of this god because they ferment: 'A natural phenomenon inspired a myth of *zoë*,' writes Kerényi, 'a statement concerning life which shows its indestructibility . . . even in decay.' When honey ferments, what has rotted not only comes back to life – bubbles up – but its 'spirit' survives. Moreover, when the fermented liquid is drunk, the spirit comes to life

in a new body. Drinking the mead is the sacrament of reconstituting the god.

The association of Dionysos with honey came very early; wine soon replaced mead as the spirit drink, but the essentials of the image remained the same. In later centuries Greek celebrants of Dionysos would sing of the dismemberment of their god as they crushed the grapes through the winepresses.

Dionysos is a god who is broken into a higher life. He returns from his dismemberment as strong or stronger than before, the wine being the essence of the grapes and more powerful. The Tsimshian tribes called the fragments of a copper given away at a mortuary potlatch 'the bones of the dead.' They stand for what does not decay even though the body decays. To dismember the copper after the death of the chief and then to declare the pieces, or the reassembled copper, to be of increased value, is to declare that human life participates in *zoë*-life and that the spirit grows even though, or perhaps because, the body dies.\* In terms of the gift: the spirit of the gift increases because the body of the gift is consumed. When a copper is exchanged for blankets, the increase comes as a sort of investment, but when coppers are broken, it comes simply through consumption. People feel the gift is worth more just because it has been used up. Boas, when he discusses the potlatch, lumps feasting and the breaking of coppers together in the same paragraph; both are 'eating the gift' as much as the destruction of property.

But I should stop here, for I have already strayed back toward explaining the increase of gifts by way of natural metaphors. Not that it is incorrect to speak in this manner; inorganic gifts do become the vehicles of *zoë*-life when we choose to invest it in them.† But there is a

\*To say that coppers are images of *zoë*-life would explain why their exchange is accompanied by recitations of history and genealogy. Like the Kula articles, the passage of these gifts keeps history alive so that individuals may witness and affirm their participation in non-individual life.

Note as well the mortuary potlatch's connection to my opening story, the first salmon rite, which also has the bones of the dead, their imagined reassembly, and a sense of increase. † A confusion between organic liveliness and cultural or spiritual liveliness is inherent in a discussion of gift exchange. As Mauss first pointed out, in an exchange of gifts, 'things . . . are to some extent parts of persons, and persons . . . behave in some measure as if they were things.' In the case of the mortuary potlatch, a material thing symbolizes a biological fact, the survival of the group despite the death of the individual. But it may be that the group would not survive as a group (and individual life would not survive, then, either) if these 'biological' facts could not be expressed symbolically. We are social and spiritual beings; at some level biological, social, and spiritual life cannot be differentiated.

different sort of investment – one that can be described without invoking the gods of vegetable life – in the exchange of a copper as Boas has recorded it for us. To begin with, each time the copper passes from one group to another, more blankets are heaped into it, so to speak. The increase is not mysterious or metaphorical: each man really adds to the copper's worth as it comes toward him. But it is important to remember that the investment is itself a gift, so the increase is both concrete (blankets) and social or emotional (the spirit of generosity). At each transaction the concrete increase (the 'adornment') is a witness to the increase in feeling. In this way, though people may remember it in terms of blankets, the copper becomes enriched with social feeling, with generosity, liberality, goodwill.

Coppers make a good example here because there is concrete increase to manifest the feeling, but that is not necessary. The mere passage of the gift, the act of donation, contains the feeling, and therefore the passage alone is the investment. In folk tales the gift is often something seemingly worthless – ashes or coals or leaves or straw – but when the puzzled recipient carries it to his doorstep, he finds it has turned to gold. Such tales declare that the motion of the gift from the world of the donor to the door-sill of the recipient is sufficient to transmute it from dross to gold.\* Typically the increase inheres in the gift only so long as it is treated as such – as soon as the happy mortal starts to count it or grabs his wheelbarrow and heads back for more, the gold reverts to straw. The growth is in the sentiment; it can't be put on the scale.

One early commentator on North Pacific culture, H. G. Barnett, in struggling to understand the potlatch, concluded that the property given away was not economic in our usual sense (the investment is not capital investment), it wasn't pay for labor (though guests sometimes labor), and it wasn't a loan. In a description reminiscent of Malinowski, he concludes that it can only be described as a gift, 'in complete harmony with the emphasis upon liberality and generosity (or their simulation) in evidence throughout

\* In a typical example from a book of Russian folk tales, a woman walking in the woods found a baby wood-demon 'lying naked on the ground and crying bitterly. So she covered it up with her cloak, and after a time came her mother, a female wood-demon, and rewarded the woman with a potful of burning coals, which afterwards turned into bright golden ducats.'

The woman covers the baby because she's moved to do so, a gratuitous, social act. Then the gift comes to her. It increases solely by its passage from the realm of wood-demons to her cottage.

the area. Virtue rests in publicly disposing of wealth, not in its mere acquisition and accumulation. Accumulation in any quantity by borrowing or otherwise, in fact, is unthinkable unless it be for the purpose of an immediate redistribution.\*

The potlatch can rightly be spoken of as a goodwill ceremony. One of the men giving the feast in the potlatch Boas witnessed, says as the meal begins: 'This food is the good will of our forefathers. It is all given away.' The act of donation is an affirmation of goodwill. When someone in one of these tribes was mistakenly insulted, his response, rather than turning to a libel lawyer, was to give a gift to the man who had insulted him; if indeed the insult was mistaken, the man would make a return gift, adding a little extra to demonstrate his goodwill, a sequence that has the same structure (back and forth with increase) as the potlatch itself. When a gift passes from hand to hand in this spirit, it becomes the binder of many wills. What gathers in it is not only the sentiment of generosity but the affirmation of individual goodwill, making of those separate parts a *spiritus mundi*, a unanimous heart, a band whose wills are focused through the lens of the gift. Thus the gift becomes an agent of social cohesion, and this again leads to the feeling that its passage increases its worth, for in social life, at least, the whole really is greater than the sum of its parts. If it brings the group together, the gift increases in worth immediately upon its first circulation, and then, like a faithful lover, continues to grow through constancy.

I do not mean to imply by these explanations that the increase of coppers is simply metaphorical, or that the group projects its life onto them. For that would imply that the liveliness of the group can be separated from the gift, and it cannot. If the copper disappears, so does the life. When a song moves us, we don't say we've projected our feelings onto the melody, nor do we say our lover is a metaphor for the other sex. Likewise, the gift and the group are two separate things; neither stands for the other. We could say, however, that a copper is an image

\* Barnett's language, the language of gift exchange; has procreation at its root. Generosity comes from *genere* (Old Latin: beget, produce), and the generations are its consequence, as are the gens, the clans. At its source in both Greek and Sanskrit, liberality is desire; libido is its modern cousin. Virtue's root is a sex (*vir*, the man), and virility is its action. Virtue, like the gift, moves *through* a person, and has a procreative or healing power (as in the Bible story about the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment in the faith that it would heal her: 'And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned about in the press and said, "Who touched my clothes?")

for the life of the group, for a true image has a life of its own. Every mystery needs its image. It needs these two, the ear and the song, the he and the she, the soul and the word. The tribe and its gift are separate, but they are also the same – there is a little gap between them so they may breathe into each other, and yet there is no gap at all, for they share one breath, one meal for the two of them. People with a sense of the gift not only speak of it as food to eat but also feed it (the Maori ceremony ‘feeds’ the forest *hau*). The nourishment flows both ways. When we have fed the gift with our labor and generosity, it grows and feeds us in return. The gift and its bearers share a spirit which is kept alive by its motion among them, and which in turn keeps them both alive. When Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux holy man, told the history of the Sioux ‘sacred pipe’ to Joseph Epes Brown, he explained that at the time the pipe had first been given to him, his elders had told him that its history must always be passed down, ‘for as long as it is known, and for as long as the pipe is used, [the] people will live; but as soon as it has been forgotten, the people will be without a center and they will perish.’

The increase is the core of the gift, the kernel. In this book I speak of both the object and its increase as the gift, but at times it seems more accurate to say that the increase alone is the gift and to treat the object involved more modestly as its vehicle or vessel. A Kwakiutl copper is a gift, but the feeling involved – the goodwill of each transaction – is more clearly embodied in the excess, the extra blankets thrown in at the end by each new recipient. And certainly it makes sense to say that the increase is the real gift in those cases in which the gift-object is sacrificed, for the increase continues despite (even because of) that loss; it is the constant in the cycle, because it is not consumed in use. The Maori elder who told of the forest *hau* distinguished in this way between object and increase, the *mauri* set in the forest and its *hau* which causes the game to abound. In that cycle the *hau* is nourished and passed along, while the gift-objects (birds, *mauri*) disappear.

Marshall Sahlins, when he commented on the Maori gift stories, asked that we ‘observe just where the term *hau* enters into the discussion. Not with the initial transfer from the first to the second party, as well it could if [the *hau*] were the spirit in the gift, but upon the exchange between the second and third parties, as logically it would if it were the yield on the gift. The term “profit” is economically and historically inappropriate to

the Maori, but it would have been a better translation than “spirit” for the *hau* in question.’

Sahlins’s gloss highlights something that has been implicit in our discussion, though not yet stated directly – the increase comes to a gift as it moves from second to third party, not in the simpler passage from first to second. This increase begins when the gift has passed *through* someone, when the circle appears. But, as Sahlins senses, ‘profit’ is not the right word. Capital earns profit and the sale of a commodity turns a profit, but gifts that remain gifts do not *earn* profit, they *give* increase. The distinction lies in what we might call the vector of the increase: in gift exchange it, the increase, stays in motion and follows the object, while in commodity exchange it stays behind as profit. (These two alternatives are also known as positive and negative reciprocity.)

With this in mind, we may return to a dictum laid out in Chapter I – one man’s gift must not be another man’s capital – and develop from it a corollary, saying: the increase that comes of gift exchange must remain a gift and not be kept as if it were the return on private capital. Saint Ambrose of Milan states it directly in a commentary on Deuteronomy: ‘God has excluded in general all increase of capital.’ Such is the ethic of a gift society.\*

I have explained the increase of gifts in three ways in this chapter: as a natural fact (when gifts are actually alive); as a natural-spiritual fact (when gifts are the agents of a spirit that survives the consumption of its individual embodiments); and as a social fact (when a circulation of gifts creates community out of individual expressions of goodwill). In each of these cases the increase pertains to an ego or body larger than that of any individual participant. Thus to speak of the increase of gifts is to speak of something simultaneously material, social, and spiritual. Material wealth may be produced in the course of a commerce of gifts (in the cases at hand, for example, food is gathered and preserved for the winter, canoes are constructed, lodges are built, blankets are woven, banquets prepared, and so forth and so on). And yet no material good becomes an item of commerce

\* Capitalism is the ideology that asks that we remove surplus wealth from circulation and lay it aside to produce more wealth. To move away from capitalism is not to change the form of ownership from the few to the many, but to cease turning so much surplus into capital, that is, to treat most increase as a gift. It is quite possible to have the state own everything and still convert all gifts to capital, as Stalin demonstrated. When he decided in favor of the ‘production mode’ – an intensive investment in capital goods – he acted as a capitalist, the locus of ownership having nothing to do with it.

without simultaneously nourishing the spirit (of the salmon, of the tribe, of the race). To reverse the vector of the increase may not destroy its material portion (it may even augment it), but the social and spiritual portions drop away. Negative reciprocity does not feed the *hau*. To say, then, that the increase of a gift must itself be a gift is to ask that we not abandon the increase-of-the-whole in favor of a more individual and more plainly material growth.

To restate this choice in slightly different terms, a circulation of gifts nourishes those parts of our spirit that are not entirely personal, parts that derive from nature, the group, the race, or the gods. Furthermore, although these wider spirits are a part of us, they are not 'ours'; they are endowments bestowed upon us. To feed them by giving away the increase they have brought us is to accept that our participation in them brings with it an obligation to preserve their vitality. When, on the other hand, we reverse the direction of the increase – when we profit on exchange or convert 'one man's gift to another man's capital' – we nourish that part of our being (or our group) which is distinct and separate from others. Negative reciprocity strengthens the spirits – constructive or destructive – of individualism and clannishness.

In the present century the opposition between negative and positive reciprocity has taken the form of a debate between 'capitalist' and 'communist,' 'individualist' and 'socialist'; but the conflict is much older than that, because it is an essential polarity between the part and the whole, the one and the many. Every age must find its balance between the two, and in every age the domination of either one will bring with it the call for its opposite. For where, on the one hand, there is no way to assert identity against the mass, and no opportunity for private gain, we lose the well-advertised benefits of a market society – its particular freedoms, its particular kind of innovation, its individual and material variety, and so on. But where, on the other hand, the market alone rules, and particularly where its benefits derive from the conversion of gift property to commodities, the fruits of gift exchange are lost. At that point commerce becomes correctly associated with the fragmentation of community and the suppression of liveliness, fertility, and social feeling. For where we maintain no institutions of positive reciprocity, we find ourselves unable to participate in those 'wider spirits' I just spoke of – unable to enter gracefully into nature, unable to draw community out of the mass, and, finally, unable to receive, contribute toward, and pass along the collective treasures we refer to as

culture and tradition. Only when the increase of gifts moves with the gift may the accumulated wealth of our spirit continue to grow among us, so that each of us may enter, and be revived by, a vitality beyond his or her solitary powers.