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THE GIFT

IMAGINATION AND THE EROTIC LIFE OF PROPERTY

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CHAPTER ONE

SOME FOOD WE COULD NOT EAT

I · 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 íocshlaint*, 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 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'

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 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

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.

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:

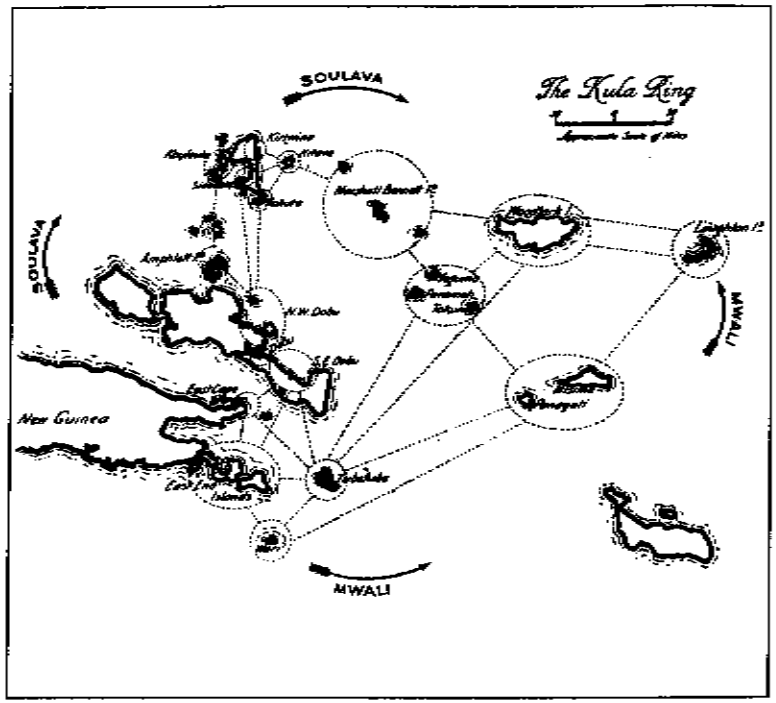
> The keeper told many stories of how [the jewels] were worn by this or that king or queen on such and such an occasion, of how some of them had been taken over to London, to the great and just indignation of the whole Scottish nation, how they were restored, and how now everyone can be pleased, since 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 counterclockwise. 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 *égoisme 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 alms-giving 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

* 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.

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 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

gender means not to introduce market value into these labors but to recognize that they are not "female" but human tasks. And to break the system that oppresses women, we need not convert all gift labor to cash work; we need, rather, to admit women to the "male," moneymaking jobs while at the same time including supposedly "female" tasks and forms of exchange in our sense of possible masculinity.

Let me close on a historical note. Ann Douglas has written an interesting book on the feminization of American culture during the nineteenth century. In 1838, she tells us, an American Unitarian minister, Charles Follen, had a vision in which he saw a band of singing Sunday School children enter his church and displace a group of stern Pilgrim Fathers. In the course of the nineteenth century, Douglas contends, an old association between masculinity and spiritual power was broken; spiritual life became the province of women, children, and an "unmanly" clergy, who, like the mothers of families, had essentially no social force beyond "influence."

The stern Pilgrim Fathers of Follen's vision founded the nation. Serious religious dissenters from Europe, these men felt no necessary disjunction between their sex and attention to spiritual life. An early diarist like Samuel Sewell worried daily about his relationship to God, never about his manliness. But the nineteenth century saw a decline in faith coincide with the remarkable success of a secular, mercantile, and entrepreneurial spirit. The story has been told many times. By the end of the century, to be "self-made" in the market, or to have successfully exploited the natural gifts of the New World, were the marks of a Big Man, while attention to inner life and the community (and to their subtle fluids—religion, art, and culture) was consigned to the female sphere. This division of commerce by gender still holds. As a character in Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift* remarks in regard to creative artists, "To be a poet is a school thing, a skirt thing, a church thing." In a modern, capitalist nation, to labor with gifts (and to treat them as gifts, rather than exploit them) remains a mark of the female gender.

CHAPTER SEVEN

USURY: A HISTORY OF GIFT EXCHANGE

Unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury, that the Lord thy god may bless thee in all that thou settest thine hand to.
DEUTERONOMY 23:20

What ye put out at usury to increase it with the substance of others, shall have no increase from God.
THE KORAN, SÛRA 30:38

I · THE LAW OF THE GATE

In an earlier chapter, speaking of gifts that must be refused, I suggested that a young person leaving home might well be wary of that parental largess which tends to reinforce the bond between parent and child. A look at the same situation in terms of money loans will illustrate what I take to be the ancient meaning of usury, as well as the connection between gift exchange and the old debate over the morality of charging interest on a loan. Wherever there is the potential for wealth to increase over time, an interest-free loan amounts to the gift of the increase. Imagine, then, a young woman recently out of college who approaches her parents for a loan. And

imagine these different responses: (1) the family immediately gives her $1,000, nobody says a thing about it, if she ever needs more she should just ask, and so on; (2) they loan her the money and they insist (or she does) on her signing a note promising to repay the loan at such and such a date, along with an interest payment at the prime rate.

The first response makes the woman part of the family, which may be good for her or it may be bad. (Maybe it's a large family where she will be able to give and get support all her life; or maybe if she takes the gift she'll have to go on being a child and never establish herself in the world. It depends.) Either way, the gift creates a psychic bond to the family and its specific structure, while the interest-bearing loan says to all concerned that though she may be on good terms, she is psychologically separated from the family. Usury and interest are sisters to commodity; they allow or encourage a separation.

Several senses of "usury" precede the modern one. The term took on its current meaning (an excessive or illegal rate of interest) during the Reformation. Before that it simply meant *any* interest charged on a loan, and its opposite was a form of gift, the gratuitous loan. A phrase of Marcel Mauss's first brought me to the connection between "ancient usury," as I shall call it, and gift exchange. Mauss speaks of how Maori tribesmen insist that the *hau* of a gift "constrains a series of users" to make a return gift, "some property or merchandise or labor, by means of feasts, entertainments or gifts of equivalent or superior value." The superior value that the "users" of a gift return or pass along is the "use-ance" or "use-ury" of the gift. In this sense, ancient usury is synonymous with the increase that comes to the gift when it is used up, eaten, and consumed, and by the ethics of a gift society this usance is neither reckoned nor charged, it is passed along as a gift.

The primitive connection between gift-increase and usury may also be seen in Roman law, where *usura* originally meant a charge for the loan of a fungible (i.e., any perishable and nonspecific good whose use consists of its consumption). The examples given of fungibles are almost always organic goods, such as grain, which, like gifts, increase through use: if a man borrows a bushel of seed grain, his use of the loan consumes the loan, but if he is prudent, his use will also increase it—the grain he harvests will be more than the grain he plants. And when he returns the bushel he borrowed, he includes with it the *usura*, the fruit of its use. If both

sides of the exchange are gifts, the *usura* is the expression of gratitude.

But I must stop here. This connection between usury and gifts is a fable I have invented to speak of ancient history. Perhaps I am right—the earliest senses of "usury" may well derive from the increase attendant upon gift exchange; but as we all know, the term does not in fact refer to that increase. When it first appears, "usury" is already distinct from gift-increase, for in pure gift exchange there is no need to speak of the increase in this intentional manner. The man who gives a gift drops the shells on the ground, saying, "Take this food I cannot eat," and keeping silent as to the matter of any return. He certainly does not say, "The *usura* will be ten percent per annum." To ask for interest on loaned wealth is to reckon, articulate, and charge its increase. The idea of usury therefore appears when spiritual, moral, and economic life begin to be separated from one another, probably at the time when foreign trade, exchange with strangers, begins.* As we saw in an earlier chapter, wherever property circulates as a gift, the increase that accompanies that circulation is simultaneously material, social, and spiritual; where wealth moves as a gift, any increase in material wealth is automatically accompanied by the increased conviviality of the group and the strengthening of the *hau*, the spirit of the gift. But when foreign trade begins, the tendency is to differentiate the material increase from the social and spiritual increase, and a commercial language appears to articulate the difference. When exchange no longer connects one person to another, when the spirit of the gift is absent, then increase does not appear between gift partners, usury appears between debtors and creditors.

Islamic laws concerning usury support the intuition that the idea of usury originally appeared in order to mark the distinction between gift giving and the market. I spoke earlier of increase as

* Philip Drucker provides an example from the tribes of the North Pacific coast. Loans were not uncommon there, but most were in the nature of a gift, returned with voluntary increase to indicate gratitude. "However," Drucker tells us, "loans at interest were strictly commercial transactions, the rate being agreed upon at the time of the loan. The ruinous 100 percent rate was usual for a long-term loan, that is, for several years. . . . There are no exact data on the origin of the custom, but there is reason to suspect that it may not be aboriginal in origin. . . . It is probably significant that loans at interest consisted of trade blankets or money, not of aboriginal value items." Here, as I surmise must be the general case, the appearance of interest on loans coincides with the introduction of market exchange with foreigners.

having a vector or direction: in a gift society, the increase follows the gift and is itself given away, while in a market society the increase (profit, rent, interest) returns to its "owner." The material quantity of the increase could be the same in both cases, but the social and spiritual increase cannot, for the feeling-bond—and all that is attendant upon it—does not appear when the increase does not circulate as a gift. The Koran distinguishes in essentially these terms between lawful increase, which comes of gift giving (gifts to the poor, in particular) and unlawful increase, usury (*riba*). "God shall blot out usury, but almsgiving shall bring increase," reads a verse in the second Sûra. "What ye put out at usury to increase it with the substance of others, shall have no increase from God," says a later verse. The Koran permits a man who has given a gift to receive a return gift of greater worth. But they must both be gifts: to loan a thing under condition that it be returned with increase is usury. Increase borne of a gift (from a friend or from the Lord) is lawful and sacred; increase that comes of capital loaned "at usury" is profane.

Aristotle is always mentioned in discussions of usury for having made a similar distinction, though the best-known part of his argument strikes me as a bit of a red herring. By the time Aristotle wrote his *Politics* (about 322 B.C.) people were charging usury on money loans. Money had been classified as a fungible like grain, for it was considered to be "consumed" when it was exchanged for goods. Aristotle objected.

> There are two sorts of wealth-getting . . . , one is a part of household management, the other is retail trade; the former necessary and honourable, while that which consists in exchange is justly censured; for it is unnatural, and a mode by which men gain from one another. The most hated sort, and with the greatest reason, is usury, which makes a gain out of money itself, and not from the natural object of it. For money was intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest. And this term interest [*tokos*, "offspring"], which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of money because the offspring resembles the parent. Wherefore of all modes of getting wealth this is the most unnatural.

Aristotle distinguishes here between a gift situation (the Greek household) and a commodity one (retail trade). To say that one is natural and the other not so is the red herring; the distinction between these forms of commerce holds up without recourse to organic analogies.* Natural or unnatural, in retail trade "men gain from one another" and not from their union. Usury and trade have their own sort of growth, but they bring neither the personal transformations nor the social and spiritual cohesion of gift exchange. As the industrialized nations have shown us, a people may grow richer and richer in commodities while becoming more and more isolated from one another. Cash exchange does not engender worth. If you care more about the unity and liveliness of the group than you do about material growth, therefore, usury becomes "the most hated" sort of gain.

The laws in the Old Testament which deal with usury have been a focal point for the usury debate over the centuries. The most important are two verses in the 23rd chapter of Deuteronomy:

> 19: Thou shalt not lend upon usury to thy brother; usury of money, usury of victuals, usury of anything that is lent upon usury:
> 20: Unto a stranger thou mayest lend upon usury: but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon usury, that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all that thou settest thine hand to in the land whither thou goest to possess it.

* I am not fond of arguments that depend upon declaring something "natural" or "unnatural"; they tend not only to cut off debate but to assume a division between man and nature. Usury may be justly hated, but since men invented it, we must either accept it as a part of nature or say that men are not.

To give Aristotle his due, however, we might change the terms to "organic" and "inorganic." Organic wealth was the original context for most of our economic language. In *The Origins of European Thought* Richard Onians makes an interesting observation in regard to the word "capital." For both the Greeks and the Romans, the human head was regarded not as the seat of consciousness but as the container of procreative powers, the seeds of life. A Roman metaphor for kissing was "to diminish the head," according to Onians; sexual intercourse also "diminished the head," the point being that erotic or generative activity draws the life-stuff out of its container. In this way it was understood that *caput* (head, but also capital) produced offspring. Onians tells of a Roman cult, the Templars, who worshiped a divine head "as the source of wealth, as making trees bloom and earth to germinate." Aboriginally "capital" was a strictly organic wealth that quite literally bore *tokos*, and in this context Aristotle is right: it is unnatural, it is not true to nature, to speak and act as if inorganic capital could possibly do the same.

This double law, both a prohibition and a permission, seeks to organize the double situation of being a brotherhood wandering among strangers. The Hebrews had gift exchange among themselves, but they also had contact with peoples who were not part of the gift cycle.*

In a gift cycle the gift is given without contract or agreement about return. And yet it does return; a circulation is set up and can be counted upon. Within this circle, things must be kept moving, and that is the intent of the first law: no one may ask usury on a loan to a brother, for this converts generosity into a market exchange. The prohibition means not that there should be no increase or usance, but that it must come to the tribe as a whole, not to individuals.

Thus also the law against usury requires that the self be submerged in the tribe. This is the "poverty" of the gift, in which each man, by his generosity, becomes "poor" so that the group may be wealthy. A needy person is not seen as having a separate and personal problem. His neediness is felt throughout the group, and its wealth flows toward the need and fills it without reflection or debate, just as water flows immediately to fill the lowest place. The law asks that no member of the tribe be either more or less in touch with the necessities of life.

Put another way, the law says there shall be no business in the tribe. Property circulates, but not through buying and selling. Among the Hebrews the contracting of debts and the alienation of movable goods was very difficult. Business, as the saying goes, was done with foreigners (Thomas Jefferson had a phrase: "The merchant has no homeland"). The law makes it almost a matter of definition: trade is what you do with strangers. When this law is observed, when wealth is not turned into private capital inside the tribe, then they say, "The Lord thy God may bless thee in all that thou settest thine hand to. . . ."

To speak of brotherhood as the first law does is to affirm a trust in the circulation of the gift. The second law deals with situations

* Such a double economy is hardly unique to the Jews; it occurs wherever there is a strong sense of an in-group. In fact, if ancient usury was not the exorbitant rate to which the term now refers but something closer to "rent" or "interest," then the Jewish law is comparatively mild. An ethnologist writes as follows of a Solomon Island society: "Native moralists assert that neighbors should be friendly and mutually trustful, whereas people from far-off are dangerous and unworthy of morally just consideration. For example, natives lay great stress on honesty involving neighbors while holding that trade with strangers may be guided by *caveat emptor*."

of doubt. Suppose a strange Egyptian comes by and asks for a few bushels of grain. You can't tell if you'll ever see the man again or if he understands how one bushel in the spring is several in the fall. He has a different god; he hasn't read the local Book. Grain, even what can be spared, is a wealth of the tribe; if it does not come back, the group will lose some of its vitality. Within the body of the tribe there is faith that the gift will return as blood comes back to the heart, but beyond the body there is risk. So, when the Egyptian comes by, you try to articulate what does not need to be said to a brother. Not only do you remind him that the gifts of nature grow with use and that he should return the usance, but you tell him you'd like it all on paper and could he leave his goats as collateral.

The God who permits usury is one who allows gift exchange to have a boundary. Though the weight of my attention in this book falls elsewhere, there is no need to pretend that such a boundary has nothing in its favor. It protects the interior of the circle and assures that the fluid property within will not be lost or spread too thin. The two Mosaic laws describe a community that is like a single-celled being. It was recently understood that some organic cells have a special kind of molecule forming their outer wall. These molecules repel water on one end and attract it on the other, a sort of double law for molecules. When such molecules are put into water, they will eventually group themselves in a circle with the water-repellent ends pointing away from the water, and toward the body of the cell. The cell becomes an organized and living structure by having molecules with two sets of laws, one for the outer edge and the other for the center.

Another image for a group of people governed by such laws is a walled city with a gate at the wall and an altar in the center. Then we may say, as the ancients did, that there is a law of the altar and a law of the gate. A person is treated differently depending on where he or she is. At the edge the law is harsher; at the altar there is more compassion.

To take a metaphor from the last chapter, we could say that the two laws in Deuteronomy are male and female with two kinds of judging for the two kinds of property. The first law says that female property must predominate within the group, while the second allows male exchange at the edge. The breakdown of these laws and the incautious mixing of the forms of property lead to the dissolution of the group. If there is no wall, then wealth flows out, like a manic person who discharges his energy with no means of getting it back. Conversely, if male property gets into the mid-

dle, then the group begins to fragment, as does any community whose gifts are placed in the market.

To summarize the Mosaic laws, one ensures the circulation of gift while the other rationalizes the structure of gift exchange in order to deal with strangers. The permission to charge usury allows some trade across the boundary, but while such trade may set up a flow between admitted aliens, it also carefully maintains them in their alien status. Foreign trade and the charging of rent on loans do not bring people together except materially. There is no felt bond, no group is formed. The rationalization of the gift abandons the spirit of the gift.

The double law worked well for a long time. It became a problem, however, in the centuries after Jesus, for his injunction that all men are brothers seemed to cancel the permission to practice usury. What form should economic life take if the tribe has no boundary at all? This question starts the real debate over usury which has run from the early Church Fathers into the present century. If we say that the double law of Moses describes a circle, with gift circulation inside and market exchange at the edge, then we may say that the history of the usury debate is the history of our attempts to fix the radius of the circle. The Christians extended the radius infinitely under the call for a universal brotherhood. For fifteen centuries people tried to work within that assumption. The Reformation reversed it and began to shorten the radius again, bringing it, by the time of Calvin, into the heart of each private soul.

II · A SCARCITY OF GRACE

The property consciousness of the New Testament is like that of Saint Gertrude, who said, "The commoner property is, the holier it is." When someone asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan. Compassion, not blood, makes one a brother. This spirit changes the boundary of the tribe. The house of Israel has no wall (except faith) after Jesus travels to Tyre and Sidon and is himself moved by the faith of the Canaanite woman.

Jesus continually separates the marketplace from the Kingdom. We all know the stories. He teaches that a person should "lend expecting nothing in return"; his prayer asks the Lord to "forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." He drove out all "who sold and bought in the temple and he overturned the

tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons." When Jesus is preparing himself for crucifixion and burial, a woman anoints his head with fine oil. This is the occasion upon which he says, "Ye have the poor always with you," in reply to a suggestion by the disciples that they take the ceremonial oil and sell it to get some money to give to the poor. As usual, they have been a little slow to catch on. They are thinking of the price of oil as they sit before a man preparing to treat his body as a gift of atonement. We might take Jesus' reply to mean that poverty (or scarcity) is alive and well inside their question, that rich and poor will be with them so long as they cannot feel the spirit when it is alive among them.

The Christians in the early Church lived in a kind of primitive communism, sharing their property. The problem of usury did not receive much attention until after the Church and the Empire had joined. Benjamin Nelson, in his book *The Idea of Usury*,* cites Saint Ambrose of Milan as one of the first of the Church Fathers to try to apply a Christian conscience to the Old Testament law. Ambrose addresses usury in his fourth-century *De Tobia;* he retains Moses' double standard but he changes the terms. The "brother" is now anyone in the Church. "For every people which, first, is in the faith, then under Roman law, is your brother." He is a brother who is "your sharer in nature and your co-heir in grace."

Saint Ambrose also has a feeling for the effect of the original permission to charge usury to a foreigner, however, and he allows that Christians may collect usury from enemies of the Church:

> Upon him whom you rightly desire to harm, against whom weapons are lawfully carried, upon him usury is legally imposed. On him whom you cannot easily conquer in war, you can quickly take vengeance with the hundredth. From him exact usury whom it would not be a crime to kill. He fights without a weapon who demands usury; without a sword he revenges himself upon an enemy, who is an interest collector from his foe. Therefore where there is the right of war, there is also the right of usury.

* This remarkable piece of scholarship first appeared in 1949 and has now been reprinted, with addenda, by the University of Chicago Press. Nelson was a historian of religion who, touched by Max Weber's similar work, fixed on the usury debate as a way to trace moral and economic conscience through the history of the Church. I am indebted to his guidance.

The charging of interest is an aggressive act whenever it goes beyond marking the boundary between peoples, and though in Deuteronomy this may not have been the intent of the permission to practice usury, it can clearly be the effect. Curiously enough, it does not seem to have occurred to Saint Ambrose that the stranger could be someone who is not in the group and yet also not an enemy. ("Who then was the stranger," he writes, "except Amalech, except the Amorite, except the enemy?") As soon as all men *ought* to be brothers, all aliens become enemies. Such aggressive faith leaves a blind spot in the spirit of universal brotherhood. A covert boundary lies in the shadow that falls behind an unbounded compassion, and much that unfolds during the Middle Ages, from a recurrent anti-Semitism to the Church's spiritual imperialism, seems to grow in that darkness.

If we make a list of the ways in which medieval churchmen sought to reconcile the Gospel with the old permission to usure, we will find that most resolve the apparent conflict by finding fault with the Jew; nowhere does there appear the idea of a wandering tribe protecting itself. To paraphrase a few examples:

- Peter Comestor, twelfth century: The Lord knew the Jews were a tricky people who might do worse if they were not permitted to charge usury.
- Thomas Aquinas, thirteenth century: The Jews needed an outlet for their avarice or they would have stolen from one another.
- William of Auxerre, thirteenth century: As the Lord could not bring the Jews to perfection all at once, he permitted them to sin in moderation.

Another explanation given for the permission to usure, one that runs from Saint Ambrose to Martin Luther, is that the Lord allowed usury against non-Jews in the Holy Land in order to punish them. Usury is a tool of war, and the Lord, by allowing the Jews to practice usury, authorized a holy war against His enemies. When medieval savants take up this line of analysis, it becomes difficult to distinguish the spirit of universal brotherhood from the hegemony of the Church. In the fifteenth century, for example, Bernardino of Siena could defend Christian usury as a species of brotherly love:

> Temporal goods are given to men for the worship of the true God and the Lord of the Universe. Where, therefore, the worship of God does not exist, as in the case of God's enemies, usury is lawfully exacted, because this is not done for the sake of the gain, but for the sake of the Faith; and the motive is brotherly love, namely that God's enemies may be weakened, and so return to him. . . .

The Crusades were organized under this shadow side of the spirit of brotherhood. And as Saint Ambrose's interpretation of the law would permit usury against the Moslem enemy in the Holy Land, the Church tolerated usury—clerical and secular, Christian and Jewish—for a time. But in fact the occasion to loan money to a declared enemy rarely arises; in financing the Crusades, the Church Fathers soon realized that Jewish moneylenders in Europe imposed more of a burden on the Church than Christian moneylenders could possibly impose on the Moslems. It is usury *at home* that breaks up the brotherhood and loses the war. The Church finally prohibited all usury in order to close its own ranks. A bull issued in 1145 by Pope Eugenius III clearly links a renewed prohibition on usury to the problem of funding the Crusades. As in Moses' time, interior unity demanded such an economic policy.

Clearly, then, usury was not unknown in the Middle Ages. But it must nonetheless be emphasized that despite divergent conclusions the common and unquestioned assumption of all Christians during this period was that usury and brotherhood were wholly antithetical. By the twelfth or thirteenth century the word "brother" is always used as a universal, and when the question is raised, the double standard of Moses (or of Saint Ambrose) is always resolved on the side of brotherhood. Here, for example, is Raymond of Pennaforte in the thirteenth century: "From him demand usury, O you, whoever you may be, whom you rightly desire to harm: but you ought rightly to harm no one; therefore, you ought to demand usury from no one." This is a typical medieval resolution. Here is another from Thomas Aquinas in the same century: "The Jews were forbidden to take usury from their brethren, i.e., from other Jews. By this we are given to understand that to take usury from any man is simply evil, because we ought to treat every man as our neighbor and brother, especially in the state of the Gospel, whereto all are called. . . ." Even in justifying the Crusades, medieval Christians never let go of the basic assumption that usury and brotherhood could not mix. That assumption is the pattern to which the different clothes were cut. Much may have happened in the shadow of universal brotherhood, but the universality itself

was never questioned. It is always the ideal: one does not take usury from a brother and all men should be brothers.

The Reformation changed this.

The central figure was Martin Luther. It is difficult to sum up Luther's views on usury, for he was constantly torn by the question. It is not difficult, however, to summarize the effect of his views. Luther and other leaders of the Reformation organized a division of moral and economic life. Faced with managing the break from Rome, the reformers turned to the alternative power with the most stability: the new merchant princes. There were some priests during the Reformation who called for a new Jerusalem and the abolition of private property, but they did not survive. Those who did survive supported the princes and even advised them on matters of monetary policy. To do this, they ceded power to the state by distinguishing between God's law and civil law. They said in effect that while it might be hoped that a prince would rule in the spirit of the Gospels, the world was such an evil place that a strong temporal order based on the sword, not on compassion, was necessary. Therefore Protestant churchmen did not in the end oppose civil usury nor any of the other changes in property rights that marked the sixteenth century (such as the charging of rents for what were formerly common lands). The leaders of the Reformation still spoke of brotherhood, but they had become convinced that brotherhood could not be the basis of civil society.

Luther's views on usury changed greatly during his lifetime. In the young Luther, one finds a traditional medieval condemnation of usury embellished with some attacks on Rome as the usurer. But in 1525 Luther came to a turning point. The Peasants' War broke out in Germany that year, an uprising whose story has been retold many times, for in it are all the elements of the struggle between spirit and property that marks the Reformation. Germany had seen over a hundred years of unrest among peasant farmers as feudalism faded and princes began to consolidate their power by territory. Roland Bainton, a historian of the Church, writes:

> The law was being unified by displacing the diverse local codes in favor of Roman law, whereby the peasant . . . suffered, since the Roman law knew only private property and therefore imperiled the commons—the woods, streams, and meadows shared by the community in old Germanic tradition. The Roman law knew also only free men, freedmen, and slaves; and did not have a category which quite fitted the medieval serf. Another change . . . was the substitution of exchange in coin for exchange in kind.

The Peasants' War was the same war that the American Indians had to fight with the Europeans, a war against the marketing of formerly inalienable properties. Whereas before a man could fish in any stream and hunt in any forest, now he found there were individuals who claimed to be the owners of these commons. The basis of land tenure had shifted. The medieval serf had been almost the opposite of a property owner: the land had owned *him*. He could not move freely from place to place, and yet he had inalienable rights to the piece of land to which he was attached. Now men claimed to own the land and offered to rent it out at a fee. While a serf could not be removed from his land, a tenant could be evicted not only through failure to pay the rent but merely at the whim of the landlord.

Some of the radical priests identified with the Reformation supported the peasants' opposition to these changes, and Luther was therefore pressed to clarify his position. In 1523–24, Luther preached on Deuteronomy (the sermons later being published as *Deuteronomy with Annotations*). In this book he refers to the Mosaic law that releases debtors from their debts every seventh year, calling it "a most beautiful and fair law."

> But [he says] what will you say to Christ who . . . forbids to demand repayment of a loan and commands to lend without the hope of receiving equal value in return? I answer: Christ is speaking to Christians, who are above every law and do more than the laws ordain; but Moses provides laws for people in civil society, who are subject to the government and the sword, so that evildoers are curbed and the public peace is preserved. Here, therefore, the law is to be so administered that he who has received a loan pays it back, although a Christian would bear it with equanimity if such a law did not come to his aid and a loan were not repaid. . . . The Christian endures it if he is harmed . . . although he does not forbid the strictness of the avenging sword.

Law and faith are already separated here. A second example from the same years will flesh out the tone of this division. In 1523 James Strauss, one of the more radical priests, suggested not only that no one should charge interest, but that debtors should resist

their creditors or themselves share in the sin of usury. The peasants were delighted, but the local clergy and landowners complained to the electoral government, which in turn asked Luther for his opinion. Luther opened his reply by saying that it would be "a noble, Christian accomplishment" if all usury was abolished. Then he gets practical. Strauss, he says, does not "sufficiently deal with the risk" that a businessman takes when he loans capital. Further, "by using high-sounding words, he makes bold the common man. . . . Perhaps he thinks the whole world is full of Christians. . . ." The reply is typical of Luther's approach: he opposes usury on moral grounds but distinguishes between civil authority and Christian ethics, and in the end cedes to the princes the right to decide economic questions.*

In these fights, Luther stands personally torn in the conflict that tore the Middle Ages apart, the fight between *sacerdotium* and *imperium*, between church and state. He resolves the opposition by authorizing it. For whatever reasons, by the sixteenth century power had come into the hands of the holders of private property. Those religious leaders who survived were the ecclesiastical statesmen willing to recognize the civil authority of princes, and even to serve them. Some in fact became the economists who helped the princes develop the details of a cash economy. The German theologian Philipp Melanchthon, for example, stepped into a dispute in Denmark in 1553 and helped King Christian III organize the structure of interest rates.

Those reformers and movements (such as the Anabaptists) that did not recognize the new sense of property did not survive. Thomas Müntzer, another radical priest, actively supported the peasants in Saxony and stood in clear opposition to Luther and his advice to statesmen:

> Luther says that the poor people have enough in their faith. Doesn't he see that usury and taxes impede the reception of the faith? He claims that the Word of God is sufficient. Doesn't he realize that men whose every moment is consumed in the making of a living have no time to learn to read the Word of God? The princes bleed the people with usury and count as their own the fish in the stream, the bird in the air,

* "The law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian."—Gal. 3:24–25. Luther reinstates the law in civil affairs where faith may not be assumed, but risk may. His is an Old Testament spirit.

> the grass of the field, and Dr. Liar says, "Amen!" What courage has he, Dr. Pussyfoot, the new pope of Wittenberg, Dr. Easychair, the basking sycophant?

What a clear voice! The authorities caught up with this man, tortured him and cut off his head.

By the end of the Reformation the power to judge the morality of property rights rested in the hands of secular rulers. There is a story about a group of ministers in Regensburg who, in 1587, questioned the validity of the 5 percent contract. They were dismissed from their posts and exiled from the town by the Protestant magistrates. Luther generally opposes usury on moral grounds, but at crucial moments he supports civil power, and as civil power in turn supported usury, the effect of his separation of church and state was to narrow the circle of gift.

The dissociation of civil and moral law brought with it the popularity of the distinction between "interest" and "usury" which we still have today. The two terms became widespread in the sixteenth century, though in fact they had been in use for some time. In Latin the verb *interesse* means "to make a difference, to concern, to matter, to be of importance." We still use it in this sense, as when we say a thing "interests" us or when we have an "interest" in a business. In medieval Latin the verbal noun *interesse* came to mean a compensatory payment for a loss: if someone loses something of mine, something I have an "interest" in, then he pays me my *interesse* to make good the loss (and he pays me nothing if I have no interest). The word then came to refer to what could be lost when capital was loaned, and a debtor who defaulted on a loan was obliged to pay the *interesse*, a fixed amount described in his contract. This payment supposedly differed from *usura*, a direct charge for the use of money, but the difference was not that great: creditors came to say that if they lost profits because they couldn't reinvest their money, this was also *interesse*, and rather than describe it as a fixed amount in the contract they came to charge a percentage reckoned periodically.

Even in the Middle Ages, then, *interesse* was, in practice, one of the shades of usury. By way of illustration we may take a dispute in the Church shortly before the Reformation that was resolved by distinguishing between usury and *interesse*. At issue had been Christian pawnshops, known in Italy then as now as *monti di pietà*, mounts of mercy. Here a Christian burdened with debt could come and borrow a little cash to begin another season. Benjamin Nelson describes their founding:

> The Brotherhood of Man was the banner under which anti-semitic friars . . . cloaked their demagogic appeals to expel the Jewish pawnbrokers, who had swarmed from Rome and Germany into the Italian towns in response to municipal invitations to set up shops, with licenses to take from 20 to 50 per cent on petty loans. . . . [They] regurgitated the oft-discredited charges of ritual murder, incited mobs to attacks on Jewish life and property, and harangued the people and their magistrates to destroy the Jews, and establish Christian pawnshops, the *monti di pietà*. By 1509, eighty-seven such banks had been set up in Italy with papal approval. . . .

The priests who defended the *monti* insisted that the money taken above the principal on a loan was not usury at all: it was a contribution to defray the cost of operating the pawnshops, including the salaries of the officials.

This, of course, is precisely why usury had been prohibited in the first place: the spirit of the gift demands that no one make a living off another man's need. A group of people comes to be called a brotherhood not only when the circulation of gifts assures that no one has lost touch with the sources of wealth, but also when no individuals in the group can make a private living by standing in the stream where surplus wealth flows toward need. If there are always enough needy people around to feed a group of pawnbrokers, then something is seriously wrong with the brotherhood.

Nonetheless, the *monti* were set up and Pope Leo X officially approved them in 1515. In a decree at the Fifth Lateran Council he ruled that they could charge interest. The money taken was not to be called *usura*, but compensation for *damna et interesse* (damages and losses). It was a fee to cover the risk involved in making a loan, the loss of what the money might have earned if it had not been loaned, and the salaries of the pawnbrokers. Even before the Reformation, "interest" was the term accepted to express the right of stranger-money to earn a moderate return.

Luther and other reformers, particularly Philipp Melanchthon, borrowed this page from their enemies. Around 1555 Melanchthon distinguished between two kinds of loan, one *officiosa* and the other *damnosa*. When a man loans his neighbor an amount he can easily spare for a short time, the loan is *officiosa* and should be free. A *damnosa* loan, on the other hand, is any forced loan, any loan with no fixed time for repayment, or "sums freely invested

with merchants in the form of a partnership." As the creditor risks a loss in all such contracts, Melanchton wrote, "the rule of equality demands that he receive a compensation, which is called *interesse*, amounting to no more than five percent." Luther himself made similar discriminations, condemning usuries of 60 percent, for example, but allowing an 8 percent return on annuities. By the end of the Reformation a new double language had been firmly established for the new double standard. In the eyes of the Lord, usury is still a sin and rightly condemned. But in the everyday world, interest is both necessary and just. Interest is civil usury; now we have capitalism.

There is a way in which these distinctions—between interest and usury, between moral and civil law—revive the dichotomy the Middle Ages had tried to lay aside. Moses, Saint Ambrose, and Luther all recognize two laws. However, though it is related to its predecessors, the distinction that Luther makes is radically different.

In the first place, it is a different thing that is divided in two. In the Old Testament, mankind as a whole is seen as either Brother or Other, and an Israelite conducts himself differently depending on whom he is with. Now each man is divided. The church and the state may be separate but each man partakes of both. When each man has a civil and a moral part, the brother and the stranger live side by side in his heart. Now when I meet someone on the street he is either alien or kin, depending on his business. As each man may participate in a universal brotherhood, so he may partake in an unlimited foreignness. He may be an alien anytime he chooses and without leaving home. He may justify the calculations of his heart as a necessary check to the calculations of others, just as Luther justifies the sword.

Luther's dichotomy differs from that of Moses in yet another way. When the stranger and the brother live side by side, it is not only each man's heart that is divided, but the local population as well. Rather than a new tribalism we find the seeds of social class in Luther's formula. Here is a passage from *Deuteronomy with Annotations* in which the stranger of old ends up as the poor man of today:

> Why is it that [Moses] permits repayment of a loan to be demanded from a stranger . . . but not from a brother . . . ? The answer is that this . . . is according to a just principle of public order, that by some privilege citizens are honored be-

> yond outsiders and strangers, lest everything be uniform and equal. . . . The world has need of these forms, even if they appear to have a show of inequality, like the status of servants and maids or workmen and laborers. For not all can be kings, princes, senators, rich men, and freemen in the same manner. . . . While before God there is no respect of persons, but all are equal, yet in the world respect of persons and inequality are necessary.

Luther is not just speaking of the ancient world here. When social policy is called into question, he does not feel it should be decided by "the common herd, which is insolent anyhow," but prefers to place his trust in the princes. To my knowledge, he does not develop the idea directly, but his tone certainly leads one to feel that Christians, though rare, are probably more numerous among the landowners and that the new aliens may well be the lower classes.

One could almost argue that the new formulations of the Reformation are an attempt to reclaim space for the spirit of the gift. Luther tried to free the Church of its empire. Even in his ceding of power to civil rulers there can be seen a desire to reclaim the proper sphere of the spirit in a neo-Mosaic fashion. But when we listen closely to Luther's tone, we do not hear the call for a new brotherhood. Other reformers exhort this, but not Luther. He goes out of his way to insist that the Christian spirit cannot be set loose in the world:

> I have already said that Christians are rare in the world; therefore the world needs a strict, hard temporal government that will compel and constrain the wicked not to steal and rob and to return what they borrow, even though a Christian ought not to demand it [the principal], or even hope to get it back. This is necessary in order that the world may not become a desert, peace may not perish, and trade and society may not be utterly destroyed: all which would happen if we were to rule the world according to the Gospel and not drive and compel the wicked, by laws and the use of force, to do and suffer what is right. We must, therefore, keep the roads open, preserve peace in towns, and enforce law in the land, and let the sword hew briskly and boldly against the transgressors. . . . Let no one think that the world can be ruled without blood; the sword of the ruler must be red and bloody; for the world will and must be evil, and the sword is God's rod and vengeance upon it.

Luther is hardly speaking up for brotherhood here, nor does he sanction civil law in order to affirm gift and grace. Moreover, his language is the one that has always been connected to the alienation of property, the language of separation and war. (Luther was the first since Saint Ambrose to feel aggression in the Old Testament permission: "The Jews do well obediently to yield themselves to God as instruments and to fulfill His wrath on the Gentiles through interest and usury.")

But more important than the bellicose tone, what Luther does here and elsewhere is to affirm a scarcity of grace and gift. We shall feel this more clearly if we pause and contrast the sense of scarcity in Luther with an earlier sense of bounty. Recall these lines from the fourteenth-century monk, Meister Eckhart:

> Know then that God is bound to act, to pour himself out into thee as soon as ever he shall find thee ready. . . . Finding thee ready he is obliged to act, to overflow into thee; just as the sun must needs burst forth when the air is bright and clear, and is unable to contain itself. Forsooth, it were a very grave defect in God if, finding thee so empty and so bare, he wrought no excellent work in thee nor primed thee with glorious gifts.
>
> Thou needest not seek him here or there, he is no further off than at the door of thy heart; there he stands lingering, awaiting whoever is ready to open and let him in. . . . He longs for thee a thousandfold more urgently than thou for him: one point the opening and the entering.

Such intense feeling of an attainable grace and the overwhelming confidence in its bounty seem to disappear sometime during the fifteenth century. Certainly they are not present in Luther. What Luther feels on all sides are dis-grace and scarcity. The spirit is no longer lingering by the door of the heart but set apart like the Protestant pulpit raised above the heads of the congregation. The laws of Moses are "most beautiful and fair" but hardly practical anymore, and the Gospels are utopian and not much good for ruling the world. Power has left the common assumption of generosity and lies with the legions of trade.

In postulating the scarcity of goodwill and in dissociating the Gospels from the everyday world, Luther sets both the Lord and the possibility of gift farther and farther away, a spiritual form of the scarcity economics that always accompanies private property. Now

Christians are rare, grace is unusual, and moral conscience is private and without worldly weight.

In one sense the reemergence of ancient usury bespeaks a decline in faith. Gift exchange is connected to faith because both are disinterested. Faith does not look out. No one by himself controls the cycle of gifts he participates in; each, instead, surrenders to the spirit of the gift in order for it to move. Therefore, the person who gives is a person willing to abandon control. If this were not so, if the donor calculated his return, the gift would be pulled out of the whole and into the personal ego, where it loses its power. We say that a man gives faithfully when he participates disinterestedly in a circulation he does not control but which nonetheless supports his life.

Bad faith is the opposite. It is the confidence that there is corruption, not just that the covenants of men may be severed, but that all things may be decomposed and broken into fragments (the old sense of "corruption"). Out of bad faith comes a longing for control, for the law and the police. Bad faith suspects that the gift will not come back, that things won't work out, that there is a scarcity so great in the world that it will devour whatever gifts appear. In bad faith the circle is broken.

Edmund Wilson once offered a felicitous phrase to describe the sense of faith in the Old Testament. It seems that no tense of the Hebrew verb conforms precisely to our active present. Instead there are two time senses, both of them eternal: things are either completed (the past perfect) or they are part of prophecies unfolding, a tense that Wilson calls the "'prophetic perfect,' that phase of the Hebrew verb which indicates that something is as good as accomplished." A people who live in a perpetual prophetic perfect feel neither risk nor the vicissitudes of time as we feel them. There is no emphasis on present and active risk among neighbors.

But the stranger, as I said at the outset, was a risk for the Hebrew. He was not of the same God. To charge him usury was a way of negotiating risk at the border of prophecy. In fact, risk is only an issue at the boundary of faith. Usury, written documents, notes signed and notarized, collateral, the law and the courts are all ways of stabilizing peoples who have no common God, who do not trust each other, who are all strangers and who live with an attenuated sense of time and risk. Gift increases inside the circle; capital bears interest at the boundary. These are all one and the same: faithlessness, usury, and the alienation of both property and persons.

Here is a comment of Luther's that cuts both ways on this. In

the Middle Ages as now, a "surety" was a person who made himself liable for another's debts, and friends would "stand surety" for each other. Luther condemns this as a usurpation of God's role: only the Lord assures things. In the sense of "faith" that I am using, Luther is right: surety of any kind, including contracts and collateral, shows a lack of confidence that what is given will return. But here are Luther's words:

> He has bidden us, in the Lord's Prayer, to pray for nothing more than our daily bread today, so that we may live and act in fear and know that at no hour are we sure of either life or property, but may await and receive everything from His hands. This is what true faith does.

Yes. And yet the word that leaps out of this passage is not "faith" but "fear." The Hebrew may have felt risk at the edge of the tribe, but when the radius of the circle of gift is pulled back from the brotherhood into the heart of each man, then each of us feels the risk. When all property is privatized, faith is privatized and all men feel fear at the boundary of the self. Thomas Müntzer, quoted above, was right to insist on the connection: "Luther says that the poor people have enough in their faith. Doesn't he see that usury and taxes impede the reception of the faith?"

Müntzer is addressing a faithlessness in the Reformation, and rightly so. But it would be wrong for us to leave that observation unqualified, nor is there any point in putting the weight of these changes on Luther's shoulders alone. In a sense he worked as a diligent and responsive reporter of the spiritual state of Europe in the sixteenth century. His new dictum does not bring the alien into each heart; it recognized that he is already there. It was a world of rising commerce and the privatization of property, a world where secular and spiritual were already divided and where the commons were no longer common. When Luther gave his first mass as a monk, his father, who had wanted him to become a lawyer because there was money in it, stood behind him in the church. The young priest was unable to feel the presence of the deity and almost fled the altar. He suffered profound depressions throughout his life. He was a man who sought to articulate a faith that would address his own experience.

Another way of describing what happened during this period, therefore, is to say that Luther brought the war home: he located the enemies of faith near at hand rather than seeing them in the alien Moslem or Jew. He reminded us of the dark side of the Lord,

his wrath. It seems as if the attempt to universalize the feeling of charity had only allowed mercenaries to grow up in the back room. In this odd way there is a connection between a universal brotherhood and universal alienation. Many people, when they try to love all mankind, feel a rising contempt for their neighbors. Toward the end of his book on usury, Benjamin Nelson has this pessimistic remark: "It is a tragedy of moral history that the expansion of the area of the moral community has ordinarily been gained through the sacrifice of the intensity of the moral bond." Luther tried to speak to this—to the looseness of that bond and the scarcity of grace that he felt all around him. He reported the situation, and, moreover, he tried to imagine the shape that faith must now take to survive. It was still his belief that brothers do not take usury from one another, but he found few brothers left for whom this was a concern.

III · RELATIVE STRANGERS

The final portion of our story narrows the circle of gift even further, for the dualities of Luther, who opposed usury in conscience though not in effect, were soon to be superseded by a universalization of usury (in both conscience and effect) worked out by churchmen such as John Calvin and philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham.

In 1545 a friend of John Calvin's asked him for his views on usury and Calvin replied in a letter. After briefly wishing "that all usury and even the name, were banished from the earth," Calvin gets down to brass tacks, saying that "since this is impossible, it is necessary to concede to the common good." This "common good" requires that interest not be taken from the poor, but beyond that Calvin can see no sense in restraining usury. In fact, "if all usury is condemned, tighter fetters are imposed on the conscience than the Lord himself would wish."

The first part of Calvin's letter applies common sense to the Scriptural prohibitions on usury and lays them all aside. When Christ says that one should lend hoping for nothing in return, for example, he is obviously referring to loans to the poor; "he does not mean at the same time to forbid loans being made to the rich with interest."

Calvin's analysis of the law of Moses is central to the letter. The law "was political," he says, and since the politics have changed, so have the rules:

> It is said that today . . . usury should be forbidden on the same grounds as among the Jews, since there is a bond of brotherhood among us. To this I reply, that in the civil state there is some difference; for the situation in which the Lord had placed the Jews . . . made it easy for them to engage in business among themselves without usury. Our relationship is not at all the same. Therefore I do not consider that usury is wholly forbidden among us, except in so far as it is opposed to equity or charity.

Calvin concludes "that usury must be judged, not by any particular passage of Scripture, but simply by the rules of equity."

The idea of equity is crucial to Calvin's approach, as one additional passage will show. In his commentaries on the laws of Moses, Calvin again maintains that the political situation has changed since ancient times; therefore

> usury is not now unlawful, except in so far as it contravenes equity and brotherly union. Let each one, then, place himself before God's judgment seat, and not do to his neighbor what he would not have done to himself, from whence a sure and infallible decision may be come to. . . . In what cases, and how far it may be lawful to receive usury upon loans, the law of equity will better prescribe than any lengthened discussions.

Moral law is atomized in this passage. Note the focus: "Let *each* one . . . place him*self* . . . ," and so on. This style or moral calculus brings new popularity to the old saws "Do unto others as you would do unto yourself" and "God helps those who help themselves," always sung to a tune whose accents fall on "self." With the moral community of old reduced to the heart of the landlord, both conscience and guilt are feelings that only individuals have. Ethical dilemmas are resolved either by comparing self to self or by having each self sit alone and imagine itself "before God's judgment seat."

If we assume the private ownership of property and then add to it this mode of judging moral questions, we will indeed find little reason to restrain usury. Little reason *among equals*, that is. Equity will still demand that the rich treat the poor differently, but when two businessmen meet, each will agree (even before the Lord) that capital should bear interest. And though Calvin himself does not pursue this line, equity itself may just as easily demand that the rich not deal with the poor at all, for though the Golden

Rule may begin with a simple postulate, it can end with as many conclusions as there are selves (e.g., "If I were poor, I wouldn't want a handout.")

We are now in the modern age. There are three ways to treat the double law of Moses, and with Calvin we come to the last. It can be kept as a double law (the Old Testament brother/stranger, Luther's church/state); it can be universalized on the side of charity (the Middle Ages); or, finally, it can be universalized on the side of usury. After the sixteenth century a brother is someone who will loan you money at the prime rate. Calvin concludes that usury is allowed so long as it is practiced among friends. Indeed a man would be parsimonious not to loan his capital, and interest is the new sign of brotherhood. This spiritual argument will emerge later in the economics of the "unseen hand" that molds the common good if each man will just determine and seek his own self-interest.*

But let us pause here for a moment and consider the pro-usury arguments, like those of Calvin, that sprang up after the Reforma-

* It may be time to add a note on the Islamic parallel to this story. As we noted at the outset, the Koran clearly forbids charging interest on a loan. The history of that prohibition is essentially the same as that of the Mosiac law, but without the back-and-forth dialectic, as Muhammad makes no distinction between brothers and others, faithful and infidel.

During and after the Middle Ages, Moslems accepted a practical modification of the Koranic prohibition by allowing a return on capital provided the creditor had taken a risk. A man was still forbidden to take interest in the sense of a guaranteed percentage return, but he could share in a profit if he had taken a risk. Nowadays some Moslems, like some Orthodox Jews, still refuse to charge interest on a loan, but most allow a reasonable rate of return.

The debate between these two factions was one of the minor dramas to be played out in Iran after the fall of the Shah in 1979. The stated intent of the followers of Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini was to organize an "Islamic republic" rooted in the precepts of the Koran. Even a man not closely aligned with the clergy, former President Abolhassen Bani-Sadr, reportedly maintained an elaborate microfilm library with Koranic codes cross-referenced to economic issues.

But, as Calvin told us, a modern state cannot operate on the ethics of an ancient tribe. Soon after the fall of the Shah, the new head of the state-owned oil company—a devout Moslem, a radical lawyer, an enemy of the Shah—declared himself perplexed as to how to proceed, finding it "neither possible nor beneficial . . . to put all political, economic and judicial problems into an Islamic mold." A state whose wealth derives from selling fossil fuel to foreigners cannot operate without interest on capital. When this drama is resolved, I imagine that, as was the case in Europe, the merchant princes will emerge with the power. And the clergy will have to produce a Luther or a Calvin if they wish to share that power.

tion. For a funny thing happens as you read through them—after the sixteenth century one begins to feel that the spirit of charity itself demands that capital be let out at interest.

Let us look first at the problem of how a society keeps its commerce lively, how it keeps the wealth in motion. As Calvin points out, men no longer live in tribes. Those who argue for usury insist that in a nontribal economy wealth will not increase unless capital circulates and it will not circulate unless it bears interest. Calvin dismisses Aristotle: "Certainly if money is shut up in a strong-box, it will be barren—a child can see that. But whoever asks a loan of me does not intend to keep this money idle and gain nothing. The profit is not in the money itself, but in the return that comes from its use."

A spokesman for the repeal of usury laws makes a similar point in the British Parliament in 1571: "Better may it be borne to permit a little [usury], than utterly to take away and prohibit traffick, which hardly may be maintained generally without this." Now the wealth of the group will not move, get used, nurture, and enliven unless it is allowed to bear interest. Usury among the Hebrews would hamper the circulation of wealth, but now the opposite seems to be true: a probhibition on usury would leave wealth static and barren.

And who suffers? Those who argue in favor of usury maintain that its restraint would hurt the poor as much as the rich. Locke argued that to lower interest rates by law would not only destroy trade but ruin "widows and orphans." In the past the widows and those who had once labored but could no longer do so were supported by their kin. How, they ask, does this differ in substance from living in old age on the fruits of invested capital? Surely charity demands that such persons not be cut off to a greater misery or forced to throw themselves on the mercy of the state.

The pro-usury argument goes even further. In 1867 Richard Henry Dana, Jr., the man who wrote *Two Years Before the Mast*, gave a speech in the Massachusetts House arguing against all laws restraining usury. He maintained that such laws do not help the poor. First of all, when interest rates are fixed by law, the poor cannot attract capital because they are forbidden to offer the higher interest that their weaker security would warrant.

> Take the case of the poor, honest debtor. Sickness or misfortune has left him in debt, and a hard creditor . . . is pressing him to an execution. If he could borrow a thousand dollars . . . he could pay the debt and have a little with

> which to begin again. But with his poor security, and the high state of the market, he cannot get the money at six percent. You prohibit him from giving seven, even he must sell the land under his feet, the house over the head of his wife and children . . . , and sell it all at a ruinous loss, as is always the case in forced sales,—a loss of at least twenty-five percent! The debtor might have saved this by a loan . . . at the market value of his security. What shall we say of such legislation? . . . Is it not a shame upon our intelligence, and public spirit, and humanity?

And who, he asks, are the debtors of the modern world? "It is mostly enterprise that borrows, and capital borrowing more capital." Who are the creditors? Ever since "a benign Providence put it into the heart and head of some person early in this century" to establish savings banks, it is the poor themselves who lend money, "the day-laborers, the seamstresses and household servants, the news-boys in the streets, have become capitalists and lend to the rich and great." If savings banks are inhibited from lending at the highest rate the market will bear, then it is these "poorer classes" who suffer.

Having laid aside the question of the poor, Dana sketches further reasons for lifting all restraint on usury. "The market of the world," he writes, "moves with the irresistible power of ocean tides. . . ." Moralists cannot fix the value of capital, and to pretend they can only cheapens moral discourse. Legislated interest rates violate the "immutable laws of trade." When the market rate falls below the legal rate, usury laws have no effect at all, and when it rises above that rate they dry up trade and drive the poor to loan sharks or make criminals out of honest creditors.

Finally, in the modern world, it seems that interest charged for the use of money no longer sets up a boundary between people. Even in tribal life, usury was a way of having some intercourse with strangers. Now the entrepreneur and the man with ready cash seek each other out. Interest is the sign of a lively community. "A live country calls for capital and can pay for it," Dana declares, "a dead country cannot."

So in this odd way almost all that was once said against usury may now be said in its favor. The gifts of nature and the wealth of society are now kept in motion and grow through usury; interest on capital feeds the widows and orphans, and allows the poor to start anew and share in the wealth. Prohibitions on usury deaden trade and force rich and poor alike to compromise themselves

ethically. And finally, interest on capital bears the same hallmarks as a commerce of gifts—it brings people together and ensures the liveliness of the group.

So reads the post-Reformation argument in favor of removing all restraint on usury.

To reply in favor of gift exchange we shall have to widen the frame of the argument. When Calvin speaks of judging each situation by its inherent equity, he is articulating an ethic of "balanced reciprocity," one in which trade is marked by neither exploitation nor gift, neither affection nor animosity. The debate over usury has usually assumed a world clearly divided into brothers and others, friends and enemies. But most social life is not so rigorously symmetrical. Even in tribal groups, but more so in state and urban societies, there is a middle ground—cordial strangers, trustworthy tradesmen, distant cousins, friends of friends, dubious relations, who are neither wholly alien nor a part of the inner circle of unconditional sharing. And as there are degrees of relatedness (and therefore degrees of strangeness), so there are degrees of reciprocity.

If we were to place these degrees of reciprocity on a scale, pure gift would lie at one end, theft at the other; at one pole would be the disinterested sharing that creates or maintains kinship and friendship, and at the other, chicanery, exploitation, and profiteering. Balanced reciprocity, Calvin's "equity," lies midway between these extremes. In equable dealings, neither side gains nor loses and there is no enduring social feeling, neither good nor bad will. To this end the ethics of equity permit the reckoning of time and value which the ethics of gift exchange restrain. If we want our trade to leave neither kinship nor anger, then we seek to balance real costs in present time. In the case of loans, as a free loan amounts to the gift of the interest, we make the relationship equable simply by reckoning and charging the interest. What I have called ancient usury refers to this "equity rate." Where gift exchange is the accepted and moral form of commerce, even an equity rate is an immoral usury, as it removes the spirit of the gift. Tribal groups that have categorically prohibited this simple usury must be those that have little need for the balanced reciprocities of an amoral stranger trade, while those that have allowed it admit some need for an ongoing, stable trade with outsiders, foreigners, aliens.

Some tribal groups have obviously had reason to develop an ethic of equable stranger trade, but on the whole those situations that call for balanced reciprocity are not as common in pre-state societies as they are now. The shift from pre-state to state, from

tribes or small towns to an urban, mass society brings with it a rise in stranger trade. The sphere of positive reciprocity has been shrinking for at least four centuries, until now the bulk of our dealings occur at that middle distance in which people are neither real friends nor real aliens but what I call cordial strangers.

Cordial strangers loan money to one another at the equity rate. It is a mutually agreed upon approximation of the real increase on wealth; it assures that the creditor-debtor relationship is a market relationship and no more; no one is connected, no one is hurt. In a society that recognizes the right to make a reasonable profit on capital, the equity rate is called the prime rate. Above the prime we have rates for speculators and suspicious strangers. Higher still, we have modern usury, loan sharking, theft by debenture. And below the prime we find various "friendship rates," which fall to different levels for different degrees of friendship, until we return to the interest-free loan, the pure gift case.

All societies, tribal or modern, have some such range of reciprocities to organize and express various degrees of relatedness or social distance. What is particular to a market society is the need to emphasize the balanced reciprocity that occupies the middle of the scale. With it the true citizens of a mass society—members of no community of common faith or purpose, and of no network of cooperating kin—are able to maintain an ongoing commerce with one another. Without it each citizen would be overwhelmed in two directions as all his dealings would lead him into either kinship or conflict. The ethic of equity which used to appear at the edge of the group now appears at the edge of the self, allowing essentially autonomous individuals to interact with one another. Moderate interest (on loans, but in the other sense as well) gives the modern self a semi-permeable skin so that we may express and deal with the relative strangeness of those with whom we eat our daily lunches. A market society cannot function without this interest, this ancient usury.

A reply to the pro-usury arguments that follow the Reformation has required that we back off in this way so that we might see the invisible assumptions upon which they lie. Their major points are true, *given* the rise of individualism and a decline of a common faith, an increased range of alienable property and the disappearance of the commons, the advent of widespread market exchange, and the emergence of the state. Where commerce feeds no common spirit and social life takes its style from the market, commodity exchange does seem to imitate the functions of gift exchange. Calvin is right, our relationship is not the same as that of

the ancient Jews. And he is right, capital will not increase unless it is used.

But market relationships and capital let out at interest do not bear the increase-of-the-whole that gift exchange will bear. Equable trade is not an agent of transformation, nor of spiritual and social cohesion. With the vector of increase reversed, interest is self-interest: it does not join man to man except in the paper connections of contract. And where the spirit of the gift has been suspended, legal contract replaces the felt bonds of gift exchange and a skeleton of law and police must appear to replace the natural structure and cohesion of faithfulness and gratitude (so that perfect law and order are perfect alienation). The liveliness that Dana speaks of is the bustle of trade, not the bustle of life. As we all know, it is possible to have a lively factory in which no one feels any personal energy. And as for Dana's "poor, honest debtor" who has no access to capital, the fact that the poor are trapped in a net of property rights that would have them suffer more deeply if they didn't participate is hardly an argument for that system to continue.

Nonetheless, it is true that once the premises of the post-Reformation argument in favor of usury are in place, commodity exchange can begin its alluring imitation of gift exchange. A still odder thing happens: with the rise of the commodity as a form of property, the giving of gifts starts to look suspiciously like the old way of dealing with strangers! Gentlemen, after all, loan money to each other, not to the truly needy. How is it that the needy poor survive? Here is the way the word "charity" comes to be used by William Paley in a book on morality dated 1825:

> I use the term Charity . . . to signify *the promoting the happiness of our inferiors*. Charity in this sense I take to be the principal province of virtue and religion: for, whilst worldly prudence will direct our behavior towards our superiors, and politeness towards our equals, there is little beside the consideration of duty, or an habitual humanity which comes into the place of consideration, to produce a proper conduct towards those who are beneath us, and dependent on us.

Such charity is not gift. The recipient of a gift should, sooner or later, be able to give it away again. If the gift does not really raise him to the level of the group, then it's just a decoy, providing him his daily bread while across town someone is buying up the bak-

ery. This "charity" is a way of negotiating the boundary of class. There may be gift circulation within each class, but between the classes there is a barrier. Charity treats the poor like the aliens of old; it is a form of foreign trade, a way of having some commerce without including the stranger in the group. At its worst, it is the "tyranny of gift," which uses the bonding power of generosity to manipulate people. As Huddie Ledbetter sang in his song "The Bourgeois Blues":

> The white folks in Washington, they know how
> To give a colored man a nickel just to see him bow.

To argue over usury after about 1800 misses the point. By then the usury question is a subtopic in the more central issues of individualism, the ownership of capital, and the centralization of power. All of the pro-usury arguments assume private property and exchange trade, and they must be answered in those terms, not in terms of the usury debate.

Almost all nations and states repealed their usury laws during the last half of the nineteenth century. England abolished hers in 1854, Germany in 1867, and so on. At the same time other religious groups joined the Protestants, who had long tolerated usury among friends. In 1806 Napoleon called upon French Jews to clarify their position on the brotherhood, and they replied that they were Frenchmen first and Jews second. Moreover, they explained that the Talmud made it clear that brothers could legitimately charge interest to one another. The Catholics also fell in line. Even as far back as 1745 the Pope had defended 4 percent interest on a state loan, and in the nineteenth century Rome continually authorized the faithful to lend money at moderate rates. At present the Holy See puts out its funds at interest and requires ecclesiastical administrators to do the same.

Perfect gift is like the blood pumped through its vessels by the heart. Our blood is a thing that distributes the breath throughout the body, a liquid that flows when it carries the inner air and hardens when it meets the outer air, a substance that moves freely to every part but is nonetheless contained, a healer that goes without restraint to any needy place in the body. It moves under pressure—the "obligation to return" that fascinated Marcel Mauss—and inside its vessels the blood, the gift, is neither bought nor sold and it comes back forever.

The history of usury is the history of this blood. As we have seen, there are two primary shades of property, gift and commodity. Neither is ever seen in its pure state, for each needs at least a touch of the other—commodity must somewhere be filled and gift somewhere must be encircled. Still, one usually dominates. The history of usury is a slow swing back and forth between the two sides. I have taken the double law of Moses as an image of the balance point, gift contained by a boundary like the blood moving everywhere within the limit of skin.

The image of the Christian era would be the bleeding heart. The Christian can feel the spirit move inside all property. Everything on earth is a gift and God is the vessel. Our small bodies may be expanded; we need not confine the blood. If we only open the heart with faith, we will be lifted to a greater circulation and the body that has been given up will be given back, reborn and freed from death. The boundaries of usury are to be broken wherever they are found so that the spirit may cover the world and vivify everything. The image of the Middle Ages is the expanding heart, and the deviant is the "hardhearted" man. He is usually taken to be a Jew, the only man in town who feels no self-consciousness in limiting his generosity.

The Reformation brought the hard heart back into the Church. In a sense, the swing from gift to commodity recrossed its midpoint during these years, the high liveliness of the Renaissance. The Church still affirmed the spirit of gift, but at the same time it made peace with the temporal world that limited that spirit as it grew in influence.

But the heart continued to harden. After the Reformation the empires of commodity expanded without limit until soon all things—from land and labor to erotic life, religion and culture—were bought and sold like shoes. It is now the age of the practical and self-made man, who, like the private eye in the movies, survives in the world by adopting the detached style of the alien; he lives in the spirit of usury, which is the spirit of boundaries and divisions.

The "bleeding heart" is now the man of dubious mettle with an embarrassing inability to limit his compassion. Among the British in the Empire it was a virtue not to feel touched by the natives, and a man who "went native" was quickly shipped home. (In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf lets us know with one sentence that Peter Walsh will never amount to much because he has fallen in love with an Indian woman.) Now the deviant is the heart that does not keep its own counsel and touches others with feeling, not reckoning. Gift exchange takes refuge in Sunday morning and the

family. The man who would charge interest to his wife would still be called hardhearted, but outside the family circle there is little to restrain the fences of usury.

In this century the man with the bleeding heart is a sentimental fool because he has a feeling that can no longer find its form. Still, his sentimentality is appealing. Everyone likes Peter Walsh, though no one would give him a good job. In the empires of usury the sentimentality of the man with the soft heart calls to us because it speaks of what has been lost.

PART II

TWO EXPERIMENTS IN GIFT AESTHETICS