

The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property. Lewis Hyde. New York: Random House, 1983. 346 pp. \$7.95.

EROS AND LOGOS

Gift exchange stands to market exchange as *eros* stands to *logos*, as *imagination* stands to *will*, as “*female*” stands to “*male*.” This, of course, does not exhaust the ramifications of these binary terms, for, as Marcel Mauss tells us in *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925), gift exchange is a total phenomenon, that is, inextricably part of the social and cultural fabric. For this reason it is also an admirable object of study for a sociologist who, like Mauss, is aware of contemporary society and wants to bring to it from the past some relevant moral conclusions (feedback). Mauss’ sociology is cultural criticism, and so is Lewis Hyde’s, whose book acknowledges Mauss in its title and its extension of Mauss’ classic work in its subtitle. It might even be said to be cultural criticism with a vengeance because, with Mauss’ work at hand, Hyde takes over the idea of gift exchange as one of the “opposed catchwords,” to use Van Wyck Brooks’ term for such pairs, and enjoys the excitement Brooks enjoyed when “fighting for . . . some clearly seen and deeply felt good against some greatly scorned evil.”

There is no question of where Hyde stands, any more than there is with Mauss. But neither, like Brooks, is combative or melodramatic, and in Hyde’s case the work itself bestows on him an ameliorative grace. What began as *either/or* becomes *both/and*, as assuredly it reasonably must when the central question addressed in the book is what can a young man do (the phrase belongs to Brooks’ time and recalls the expatriation of the artist) when he possesses gifts and bears gifts and finds no other exchange for them than that of the market. The impetus of Hyde’s book is personal: gift exchange vs market exchange is his way of telling us how it is with him—and with us—in the world. These remarkable terms are kindred to Brooks’ *creative life* and *acquisitive life*, and they resume the primary critical debate that Brooks began and deepen it because they ask us to consider not merely what Brooks thought was the contradiction

of American culture—the consequence of Puritanism (and the rise of capitalism)—but the very dilemma of civilization itself.

Gift exchange belongs to an economy and *ecos* of creativity and spirit, which is to say that it respects generativity and generosity and is a circular way that represents a reality that is circular, processual, interrelated—yes, natural and sacred. As Mauss' study tells us, it is notably the economy of archaic societies. Mauss studied it because his work, like Hyde's, was prompted by one of the central intellectual undertakings of our time, the search for the primitive, as Stanley Diamond calls it. For them, and for so many who take up the "primitive," its evocation is a way, according to Kenneth Burke, of "temporalizing the essence," that is, of making things of first importance first in time and thereby reminding us that we have lost something inalienable. At the end of his essay, Mauss asks us to "return to the old and elemental," to "motives of action" still within memory, to ways more generous and joyful, to find a place in our dehumanized economy for the eminently human gift of giving, for the *eros* without which exchange loses its highest value. Gift exchange—itself one of the definitions of love—is an *econ* become an *ecos* by virtue of *eros*; for the gift, identified with the person, is the person, and the exchange, as endless as the transferences of energy in nature, is of the very self, what Whitman called the *me myself*. The gift economy exists to exchange something besides commodities. As much as the round dance, another representation of reality that it recalls, it is a practice of love, as love may be practiced in a social form.

To point out that Hyde is more "at ease with emotion [with *eros*] as a social force" than Mauss and more concerned with the erotic life of property than with the obligations gift-giving imposes is to suggest, I think, how much Hyde's book owes to the cultural debate of the 60s—how much *The Gift* is a 60s' book. Indeed in reading it I was reminded of nothing so much as the legacy of that unusual time when "fundamental questions" were asked "as if the answers mattered . . . [and] as if the the nation's politics and ways of life were fluid enough to flow in new directions" (I quote from "The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, 1 August 1983). Hyde's book is a labor of gratitude for the thought and example of such writers as Paul Goodman, Erik Erikson, and Ivan Illich; it is a gift of the period when the Party of Eros flourished, and it continues its work, its concern with anarchist politics and small group life, which favor the gift economy. It is also a 60s' book in other ways: in its moral vocabulary, its unashamed didacticism and

homilectical urging. Its mode is vernacular and personal, though in some respects still academic, and the essential element is the anecdote—folk tale, myth, Emily Post directive—which secures the discussion, grounds it. Hyde's way of using "The Shoemaker and the Elves," for example, reminds me of Brother Blue, another storyteller in Boston; and perhaps by mentioning Brother Blue I can suggest the relation of teacher to child that Hyde so often assumes, as if he forgot that those who read his book will probably not need elementary instruction. Though less elegant than Paul Goodman's work, Hyde's is most like it in offering psychological explanations that address the discipline of the creative spirit—*Kafka's Prayer*, where we learn that we may eat of the tree of life, is a special instance of its kind because for Goodman it is so exclusively literary criticism. But so is the second half of Hyde's book, devoted as it is to Whitman and Pound, to case histories of the creative gift that again recall Van Wyck Brooks, our first psychologically-disposed critic and a writer, as Hyde is here, of exemplary (Whitman) and cautionary (Pound) tales.

In its use of anthropology, the most frequently adduced evidence of the first part of the book, *The Gift* is very much in keeping with recent literary studies. This is true as well of its Jungian psychology, which makes it easy to employ words such as *soul* ("A gift revives the soul"). This psychology mediates both parts of the book (i.e. the Jew is Pound's "shadow"), though the last chapter of the first part, a long history of usury, may be said to bridge them. Even so the coherence of the book derives from its pervasive concern with the binary oppositions mentioned at the outset, and these, especially *eros* vs *logos*, put it in the company of some of the most significant work of our time, work that in this instance, since Hyde himself is a poet, is curiously ignored. For what Hyde argues in behalf of gift exchange, another poet-pedagogue, Charles Olson, argued for in terms of a "human universe." No one was more relentlessly a critic of *logos* (which stands to *eros* as *mind* to *body*, *concept* to *image*, *universal* to *particular*) than Olson, nor so convinced that *myth*, which opposes *logos* as preliterate opposes literate culture, was concerned chiefly with *eros*. When considered in this light, Olson's insistence on an oral art answers to more than the fact, noted by Hyde, that "The oral tradition . . . keeps the gift of speech alive." It is a way of defending the kind of culture and cultural values that thrived in archaic societies, and it summons, as readers of Havelock's *Preface to Plato* know, the crisis of *paideia* that was concurrent in Greece with the rise

of civilization. It may even be said to be a way of defending an oral matrifocal culture, which values bestowing and nurturance, against an anal patriarchal culture, which hoards and possesses its “filthy lucre,” a defense, that is, of the gift economy. None of these concerns, of course, is unique with Olson; they characterize the intellectual climate of our time. But I cite Olson because he was involved with them as a poet and “scholar without institution,” just as Hyde is, and because in speaking of barter, voluntary poverty, and polis, he addressed the very things Hyde does—how artists survive in our culture. And besides, Olson, who knew Pound and generously sustained him at St. Elizabeth’s, indicted him, pretty much as Hyde does, by saying that Pound became a *jongleur* when he served the State instead of his art.

Gift exchange is the subject of this book for many of the reasons suggested above, but it is also the subject, I think, because as metaphor or conceit it enables the discussion of values that matter most to Hyde and because a culture acknowledging these values would be an optimum one for the artist, the man (or woman) of gifts. Like Brooks, Hyde reminds us that the artist’s vocation is spiritual—“the true commerce of art is a gift exchange” and commoditization jeopardizes it—and that the artist, the representative of the spirit, is the best measure of what is truly valuable in a culture. This may be put in binary terms: where “logic is the money of the mind” (as Marx said), imagination is its gift. Hyde also begins where Brooks began, with the fact that in our culture the (true) artist is a failure. He cites Bellows’ Charlie Citrine, “So poets are loved, but loved because they just can’t make it here.”

Now this is the real subject of the book, and explains why the transformation of opposites to contraries is interesting. Hyde not only speaks up for *eros* and imagination but seeks ways in which to accommodate his binary terms, ways in which to live in a market economy. If he begins with *either/or*, it is because that was the uncompromising way in which he considered his situation in the 60s. Now, however, he is less resistant and recalcitrant because he realizes—if I may borrow the title of a Goodman novel—that he must make do, that though elements of the gift economy survive, ours is not a gift economy.

This, the most important part of the book, is the least satisfactory because the treatment is skimpy, the solutions offered needlessly limited, and the conclusion acquiescent. Hyde suggests three solutions to the problem of livelihood: to take a second job, find a patron, or support oneself by marketing one’s work. All involve the double economy of

markets and gifts, and the only guide in this difficult public and private commerce is “the conversion of market wealth to gift wealth.” “Fidelity to one’s gift” is the requisite thing; integrity, we used to say. Then, voluntary poverty, which, protestation to the contrary, Hyde romanticizes—or maybe it’s only that his examples are of young artists committed to art but not yet encumbered by marriage and family. I find it strange that he does not consider the most frequent source of support, that of the universities. If he considers this patronage, it is patronage of a different kind and merits investigating. This is also true of governmental support, which he himself has had, and which, in Canada, to cite an example of generous subsidy, has contributed to vigorous cultural expression, a remarkable bestowing of gifts. And what of writers’ cooperatives and what might be called the double culture, the culture of the avant garde, of little magazines, small presses, marginal people, in many ways our most vital culture? Does he neglect this because it was the option of the 60s, and for the same reason give over what truly attracts him, the small group life that accords with gift exchange? Finally, since the market economy will not accommodate us (*us*, because in the course of the book we have given our allegiance to the economy of spirit and have identified with the artist), we must accommodate ourselves by realizing that our interior lives are more rewarding than our exterior lives, that the actual poverty of the latter does not limit the wealth of spirit of the former. Brooks believed this too, but did not practice what he preached. I don’t know many artists who gladly do, and not because they have been corrupted but because the binary terms *interior/exterior* and *spirit/wealth* belong to the philosophical idealism we owe to *logos* and foster the very aestheticizing of life that the *eros* of gift exchange denies. The solutions Hyde offers are private, acceptable to him because he assumes that gifts nurtured in this way still do the necessary spiritual work, as Brooks used to say, of leavening society. I do not deny this, but, having been given the gift of this imagination of the gift exchange and the accordant psychology of healing and wholing, I find such solutions unworthy of our gifts.