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Source: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Apr., 1995), pp. 368-398

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179286>

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The Sun Gives Without Receiving: An Old Story

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Even though as a child I used to watch my mother in the 1940s sewing up, with the skill of a jeweller, gifts of food parcels to send from sunny Australia to her mother, who stayed behind in war-torn Vienna, parcels that always contained, as I remember, several pounds of butter, and even though I marvelled at how thickly she spread her toast, let alone at her cheerfully acknowledging such unhealthy excess, it was not until I settled down in a hot sugar plantation town in western Colombia in 1970, a town without drinking water or adequate sewage, that it was borne upon me what butter could mean as a privileged sign of affluence, golden and creamy, suspended between solid and liquid, dependent on refrigeration no less than on good milk cows, a dairy industry, a nice temperate climate, "alpine" comes to mind, indeed "alpina" was the brand name of Colombian butter, fresh cuttable bread to be buttered . . . indeed, a whole other world, an inconceivably different clean and creamy *European* world transplanted and superimposed, if only for a gratifying instant by the mere thought, let alone taste and incorporation, of butter.

And having made his contract with the devil, he earns much more money but can only spend it on luxuries; on butter, sunglasses, a fancy shirt, liquor . . . If you buy or rent a farm, the trees stop bearing. If you buy a pig to fatten up, it gets thin and dies. Secar, was the word they used. To dry, to dry up like a green tree drying out through lack of water, drying to a crisp in the relentless sun. And the same word applied to livestock, the pig getting thinner and thinner, wasting away to skin and bone. Secar. To dry up. Too much sun.

Why can only luxuries be bought and consumed with the devil pact? Butter, sunglasses, a fancy shirt, liquor . . . a strange list, I thought, being thrown by the butter, a new sign precariously signalling to me both the difference of my new, third world, existence, and the way in which that existence connected

This essay was first written in March 1993, as a contribution to the weekly seminar on "Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective" organized by Victoria de Grazia in the Center For Historical Analysis at Rutgers University of which I was a Fellow for one semester. Without her intellectual sympathy and the Center's support, this essay would not have been written. I am grateful to all the members of the seminar, mainly historians, who infused the seminar with life and grace, and especially to the genius of Jim Livingstone and of Elin Diamond for their commentaries and interest.

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with another movement through time and memory, a history of flight from Europe about which my parents never said anything. It was as if it had never happened and that Europe had never existed. "And so it is with our own past," writes Proust. "It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. As for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die." Well, here certainly was chance, my stumbling onto the devil's list, its highlighting the luxuriousness of butter. But what, to pursue Proust's logic, would this chance encounter trigger into remembrance? The remembrance of non-remembrance, of an unknown European history sealed shut by parental censorship? Here the memory of those substantial blocks of butter being carefully, mysteriously, stitched into their cloth package, readied for mailing to someone I had never seen, and never would see, come to mind as the residue of that never spoken history, so unbelievably different, I now see, decades later, to what one could ever know in sensible, comfortable, predictable, ever so safe Australia, truly a country out of history as far as its white population was concerned.

But is it just chance as to whether one encounters the right object at the right time? Walter Benjamin says no. That is the wrong way to put it. The times are against it ever happening. History itself has taken the turn whereby people are increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around by way of experience. The capacity to remember is under siege because, in a shell-shocked world, the capacity to experience has had to atrophy. The enormity of Proust's eight-volume work was testimony, Benjamin argued, to the effort it took to restore experience, in the figure of the storyteller, to modernity; and even so, it was a unique triumph. As for the claims of what Proust called "involuntary memory," triggered by an object, perhaps by preference an object of gastronomic delight, if not excess, then that object's triggering capacity was, too, a product of history's effect on the human capacity to experience and, hence, to remember. Could it have been different, very different, once upon a time? Benjamin certainly thought so:

Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals (quite probably nowhere recalled in Proust's work), kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness.¹

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973), 107-54, at 113.

The festival is a time of licensed transgression involving excess consumption and excess giving, of squandering and letting go. If, therefore, we are to grant this Dionysian element of ritual, with its repetitions and renewals, its make-believe, divinity, sacrifice, exchanges, bestowal, violence, and pleasures, and if this transgression of the festival has a decisive role in amalgamating the two elements of memory, the involuntary no less than the voluntary, then what are we to make of the ritual with the devil? Is it the transgressive pact that in equal measure creates largesse, demands luxury consumption, and issues forth death and barrenness—a pact we can locate as at the threshold of modernity where Benjamin wants to draw a line distinguishing the capacity of objects to provoke memory? Is it the pact with the devil above all the rite that obliterates what Benjamin calls “experience in the strict sense of the word”? And if that is the case, then may not it also be the case that the story itself of the pact with the devil has a striking mnemonic function, the mnemonic of the evisceration of memory, or at least of memory geared to “experience in the strict sense of the word”? The world-wide ubiquity of the story of the devil-pact, let alone the intensity of its drama, would therefore speak incessantly, in repetition heaped on repetition, to the sense of losing, just as it speaks to the lust for gaining. Not losing something. Just losing. This would give death a special twist, that of perpetuity; and it is in this context that we might well place the modern consumer object.

This would take us also into the heart of George Bataille's strange contribution to twentieth-century thought, entwining excess with transgression so as to create a radically different history and science of political economy, capitalism and communism, focussed not on production but on spending, on what he called “unproductive expenditures: luxury, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity . . . ends in themselves,” but first, in this our age wherein the economy has achieved the status of the natural underpinning the science and metaphysics of scarcity and before I tell you some more about the devil, the Great Imitator, and his mighty contract, I need to tell you about his torrid zone of operations.²

SUN

Solar energy is the source of life's exuberant development. The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which, dispenses energy—wealth—without return. The sun gives without receiving.

—Georges Bataille³

² Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Alan Stoekel, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 116–29, at 118 (first published in *La Critique Sociale* 7, [January 1933]).

³ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Zone Books, 1988; first published, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1967).

It was from a group of women friends of mine, cooks in the sugar plantations at the southern end of the Cauca valley of western Colombia, in 1970, to be exact, that I first heard of this devil pact. With the money from the University of London, I was studying the abolition of slavery in the area and was living in a small, predominantly Black, town of about 11,000 people, a town without sewage or drinking water at the very south end of the 125-mile-long valley, pressed between two chains of the Andes. At that time three large plantations of many thousands of hectares were being rapidly developed by single owners, three white families—one from the days of the Spanish colony, one descended from the German consul who came to Colombia in the late nineteenth century and made a bundle, and the third, recent immigrants of Russian-Jewish extraction. These three families exerted a mighty impact, consuming many of the plots of the surrounding peasant farmers, descendants of African slaves freed in 1851 who held, usually without title, maybe as much as a quarter of the flat valley land in that area. Consequently, through necessity or choice, peasant farmers were finding work as wage-workers on the plantations. A huge influx of Black women and men from the forests of the isolated and far-off Pacific coast, hungry for money and adventure, also found work as wage-workers in the canefields. All this was new. Very new. The area was, to coin a favored phrase, yet one sounding a little too like some sort of skin disease, becoming rapidly proletarianized, albeit in an uneven and unplanned manner, creating a multitude of heterogenous class forms and overlapping occupational niches in the cash economy. This is one time-scale of history, one way of talking history.⁴

Situated almost on the equator, this valley was stupendously fertile and flat, with many feet of black topsoil subsequent to lacustrine sediment and volcanic ash raining down for millenia from the mountains onto what had been, in prehistoric time, a vast lake. Later in that same time the lake had drained into what is today the Cauca River, which runs the length of this narrow valley. This is another time scale of history, embodied in the thickness of the good soil itself upon which agribusiness today draws its account.

And what a history it must have been, this pre-history of the warring elements. The hot earth expended itself, erupting onto the plains below, the cool water wearing its way through rock, drop by millennial drop: "That yielding water in motion, gets the better in the end of granite and porphyry" (Brecht's image of revolutionary change, drawn from the Taoist, Lao Tzu)—two very different rhythms, two histories in concert. "The *correspondances*," writes Benjamin, "are the data of remembrance—not historical data, but data

⁴ A more detailed description with requisite bibliographic information can be found in M. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

of prehistory. What makes festive days great and significant is the encounter with an earlier life."⁵ And elsewhere he peruses a note by his friend, T. W. Adorno, concerning Benjamin's elusive notion of the *dialectical image*: "For nature doesn't prevail as eternally alive and present in the dialectic. The dialectic inhabits the image and at the end of history cites myth as long gone: nature as pre-history. That is why images . . . really are 'ante-diluvian fossils.'"⁶ We might want to ask to what rhythm does Benjamin see this festival corresponding—to the horrific splendor of the earth's self-evisceration or to the steady wearing down by the yielding water?

The answer is bewildering and quite marvellous, a twofold rhythm of expenditure and cessation of happening, such as Benjamin's prophecy, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," that modern memory and social revolutionary tension would act in concert to explode the continuum of history. Yet it is by no means guaranteed that the necessary *correspondances* articulating the past through a dialectical image will coalesce.⁷ Such is the character of modern culture. "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at an instant when it is recognized and is never seen again."⁸

And this is also a rhythm of an awesome standstill, "the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."⁹ Therefore, if the accent is on the side of the volcanic rupture, what Benjamin elsewhere called the *Jetztzeit*, the presence-filled now-time—not homogenous, empty, evolutionary time—it must be appreciated that this rhythm is in the midst of its violence also a time of enormous stillness, as perhaps befits the shifting and re juxtaposition of the earth's plates, no less than the plates of modern memory in search of *correspondance* in a festival-less world. This is the stillness of shock, suspended out of time. This is the work of the negative, as in Bataille's notion of sovereignty, in which the limit is transgressed.

And high above, the sun, without which nothing can grow, is too hot to stand under, too strong to look at. Soaring clouds clinging to the mountain tops surmount the blues and greens of the valley floor, shimmering with heat

⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 141.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Theoretics of Knowledge, Theory of Progress," in *The Philosophical Forum*, XV (Fall-Winter, 1983-84), 1-40, at 6 (Konvolut N in *Das Passagen-Werk*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982, Band 2, 571-611).

⁷ Compare with Jeffrey Mehlman's recent work, *Walter Benjamin for Children: An Essay on His Radio Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 28-30, in which Mehlman draws attention to Benjamin's radio story for children concerning the 1755 earthquake of Lisbon—Benjamin's point being that he disputed the older theory that earthquakes are due to pressure from the earth's fiery core and favored the theory that the earth's surface is constantly shifting, the result of tension from the permanently unstable tectonic plates.

⁸ Benjamin, "Theses On The Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253-64, at 255.

⁹ Benjamin, "Theses," 262-3.

at midday, sleepwalking into the long hot afternoons. You quickly learn to seek shade. There are two summers and two rainy seasons of unequal duration. Plants grow in wild abundance. "I will begin with a basic fact," writes Bataille in the opening pages of *The Accursed Share*. "The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life."¹⁰ When a peasant planted corn in the 1970s, which was not all that common because tree crops were preferred, she or he would walk in a straight line over the soil with a sharp stick and an apron full of corn seed. Jabbing the stick into the earth, a couple of seeds would be tossed in, and the hole covered with a movement of the foot, often shoeless. No plow. No chemicals. No improved seed à la Rockefeller. No watering. And if you wanted, you could get two crops a year: *choclo* or soft sweetish corn after four months or dry corn after six. Few places in the world could match this one for fertility or for the contrast between that fertility and the poverty of the mass of the people.

In the 1970s you could see groves of trees in clumps and straggling ribbons, the sign of peasant farms, cocoa trees, coffee trees, large-leaved, almost luminous green plantain trees, all sheltered by the giant red flowering *Cachimbo* trees ensuring shade. And all around lay the endless stands of plantation sugar cane, shadeless under the fierce sun.

At least a third of the peasant farms were owned and run by women. Capital input was negligible, and little work was required to maintain and harvest the tree crops, which bore fruit on a pretty steady basis throughout the length of the year, ensuring a constant trickle of income. Denied the full force of the sun, weeds barely grew. When the rains poured, the trees soaked up the water. When the sun bore down, the trees slowly released moisture. The forest floor was inches deep in leaf mould that would slowly enter the soil to fertilize it. This peasant ecology replicated rain forest and as such was, point for point, opposed to the principles of farming imported first from Spain and, in our time of John Deere and American foreign aid, from the great plains of the United States, where once Indian and bison had roamed. On the plantations and on those peasant plots succumbing to the axe and bulldozer to make way for the new commercial crops, with their Euroamerican style of open-field agriculture, sun and rain made weed growth a primary problem requiring much labor and, later on, from the mid-1970s, chemicals of dubious safety.

By means of a dramatic cross-section the photograph shows you a traditional peasant farm in back of an open field. You can see the broad-leaved plantain trees down at the bottom, interspersed by some coffee and cocoa

¹⁰ G. Bataille, *Consumption*, vol. 1 of *The Accursed Share*, 21.

trees. Above them are fruit trees, and dwarfing the grove stands a Cachimbo tree.

The irony is that the destruction by the new mode of production, in which trees are felled for the open-field system, allows this traditional farm to be seen in its glory and grandeur, no less than its intricacy. The old ways become exposed at the moment of their demise, reaching for the sky. This photograph



captures not only a cross section through the peasant farm. It also holds still a cross section through time, a history of domination.

Increasingly, as the spread of the new agriculture leveled peasant farms, one saw a new feature: neatly stacked trunks of trees and piles of firewood. As the trees were cut down, their roots were not present to absorb the water of the heavy rains twice a year, so the land flooded. And where the shade of the green leaves of the groves of trees allowed the peasant farms to remain cool, now the summer sun burnt the denuded land to crisp tawny hues.

The young peasant men (gamblers) pleaded with their mothers (stoic conservatives) to borrow from the banks and cut down the farms and plant new "green revolution" crops that would make a lot of money fast, crops like soya and other sorts of beans that would require fertilizer and pesticides and money to hire tractors and harvesters. The trees on many plots were felled, but the plans for quick profits nearly always seemed to go wrong, except for the richest peasants. Debts mounted. The old women tried not to give way to their sons' demands. "It gives me little, but it gives," they would say about their ailing plots.

As the plantations sprayed chemicals to kill bugs and weeds, the peasants' trees started to die. The area had been miraculously free of the severest plague to affect cocoa trees, the disease known as "witches broom," but by the 1980s there was scarcely a peasant farm not devastated by this. When ripe, cocoa pods are lustrous and purple and weigh several pounds, hanging like giant tears from the branches. When afflicted with the witches broom, however, something amazing would happen. Far more pods would develop, only they would grow into tiny, shrivelled, wispy husks, frayed and almost frantic-looking; galloping growth, twisted shapes of dying. So . . . more trees were cut down.

What happened to the trees? Some were taken to the sawmill while still green to be cut into thin strips to make boxes for tomatoes grown by peasants on their newly cleared fields. Others were sold as firewood for the brick ovens that were miraculously springing up everywhere as peasant farmers turned into brick- and tile-makers. Each of these two very material options for dealing with acute land scarcity, tomatoes and bricks, takes us further down the nightmare of history. The first option is the way of toxic chemicals, the second is that of amputation, a term that will become clear later.

Tomatoes were the first crops that smallholders sprayed with pesticide around 1970, and now in most, if not all, the country all crops are subject to massive application of such chemicals in a revolution encompassing rich and poor farmer alike. The innocent (and soon tasteless) tomato was the vehicle through which Ralston Purina spearheaded the peasants' use of chemicals in this area, along with the impact of that use on soil and the water.

Now when I walk my old haunts, I see the whiteness of the chemical burnt into the soil, and my throat catches on the smell. An agronomist specialising in toxins came through town in 1992 and declared in a public meeting that the soil has become so contaminated that food grown in it should not even be fed to animals. It is easy to be melodramatic in this situation, but one of the strengths of historiography is that it allows and perhaps makes you see the big picture.

Just as startling is the revolution that herbicides have so calmly effected in the past five years. One day we woke up, and from the centers of agribusiness to the furthest-flung corners of the republic, the peasantry had given up on manual weeding with *pala*, or machete, and instead were casting powders across the land, saying it was far cheaper that way. Even on the frontier in the Putumayo, for instance, the shamans, immersed in natural remedies and herbs, spray Paraquat to kill “weeds.”¹¹



In the photographs you can see young men at the sawmill cutting the trees to make tomato boxes. The man operating the saw lost his right forearm a while back. But he still does the job. With a shiny black leather sheath over his stump, studded with sawdust, he guides the trees into the singing blade, smiling self-consciously. For the moment the violence of the image stills the movement.

¹¹ A liter in 1992 there cost 5,000 pesos (around six United States dollars) and covered around one and a half acres in two days of labor costing around 6,000 pesos, whereas working the same land and area with a machete or *pala* could take 20 days of labor at cost of around 60,000 pesos—ten times as much!



As for the second option, that of amputation, the average farm has shrunk to such an extent, to a quarter-acre or less, that now only a desperate act of auto-mutilation is possible, a delirious last grasp at money by selling the good earth itself to make bricks. Some sell it to men who come in trucks from the massively expanding cocaine-funded city nearby. The going price at the moment is six United States dollars a truckload. Compare that with the daily wage of around three dollars. "*Se vendio para hueco*" (It was sold in exchange for a hole), they say more laconically than my translation conveys.

Others erect their own brick-making ovens on the farm and then excavate next to it. This, of course, requires large amounts of firewood, hence adding to the demand for cutting down traditional agriculture. A quarter-acre farm worked this way with a seven-meter deep hole of fine black soil dug all the way down by rented back-hoe will last about four years until there is nothing left. The farm will have gone, and in its place there will be just the hole. The earth here is famous for the bricks it makes. It does not require straw. Just the mud the volcanoes spewed as ash to settle on the lake squelched into a creamy consistency like potters' clay.

In not so many years there may be no land at all other than the cane fields of the plantations amid serpentine waterways of chemically polluted mini-lakes in which kids joyfully swim, stirring the water lilies no less than the earth's memories of the prehistoric lake that once was. Unless of course the latest mode of production takes hold, for now the peasants are being ap-

proached by men from the city carting toxic garbage with which to fill their holes—a truly diabolical, unimaginable, turn of events.



“Se vendio para hueco.”



DEVIL PACT

The cooks in the canefields in 1972 first told me about the devil pact, years before the startling turn of events I have just described. They were matter-of-fact about it, words flying in the bustle of pots and starting fires, their good humor dished out in measure equal to the food. Something—I cannot remember what—caught my ear, and I asked for clarification. Yes, there were these men, usually cane cutters, who had a pact with the devil that allowed them without added effort to cut much more cane than normal and therefore make much more money than normal. (Plantation workers were paid according to their production, and not by time spent.) Most everyone I questioned in the months thereafter was familiar with the phenomenon. It was uncommon, but not singular. Only once did I come across a person who actually knew, and in this case knew well, a person who had attempted to make a pact with the devil in the cane fields and, in this case, had panicked. He was a young man born and raised in the Chocó on the Pacific Coast on the other side of the mountains—a region notorious, from the point of view of the sugar cane area, for its magic. Relying on a book of magic printed in Mexico bought in the marketplace from the wandering Indian herbalists and healers from the Putumayo, he had secreted himself in a field of mature cane, well above head height, and eviscerated the heart of a black cat. As he tried to recite the prayers indicated in his book, a gale force wind whipped up out of nowhere, and the sky went dark. He lost his nerve, dropped everything and fled, crashing through the cane as the sky erupted.

But the usual story was of a person distant and anonymous, a shadow on the horizon of human possibility, a profiled caricature of a man engaged by destiny—the man like a zombie uttering strange, repetitive, cries as he cut his swathe through the forest of cane, the man with the figurine prepared by a sorcerer, the man instantly fired by the plantation overseer because he was cutting so much more than everyone else, the man teased by his co-workers, “My! What a long way you’ve come today with your figurine!” Most everyone had some such story to tell.

Years later when I brought up the subject with my old friend, Regina Carabali, a sister of one of the cooks who had taken me to the cane fields, she told me, “Well, they don’t use the devil anymore. They use marijuana.” This was a valuable lesson that by necessity I keep unlearning, that things change all the time at the drop of a hat and an awful lot depends on your perspective at any given time. But I can also discern continuity, a Baudelarian *correspondance* between the devil and hashish—and here Benjamin’s definition leaps to mind where he says that what Baudelaire meant by *correspondance* is something like sympathetic magic between things and “may be described as an experience which seeks to establish itself [against the shock-environment of



the modern] in crisis-proof form. This is only possible within the realm of ritual. . . . The *correspondances* are the data of remembrance—not historical data, but data of prehistory. What makes festive days great and significant is the encounter with an earlier life.”¹² This takes us back to Benjamin’s

¹² Walter Benjamin, “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 107–54, at 139–40.

discussion of how modernity erodes the capacity to experience and hence the functioning of involuntary memory—bearing in mind that it is involuntary memory which composes, no less than it is composed by, *correspondances*, and provides the home for aura—the mysterious sense of human connection between things, to the extent that they reciprocate and look back at humans in an object-defined world given over to immanence, a constant being-withinness of things and persons with things. There was no marijuana or any other drug use (other than liquor and cigarettes) in the sugar-cane towns until Rejina Carabali told me that; and marijuana, to the degree it was thought of, was considered weird and dangerous, something involving huge amounts of money and heavily armed convoys way up on the Guajira peninsula sticking out into the Caribbean, or was a drug indulged in by American hippies, mysterious, somewhat frightening, nomadic beings, unwashed, and long-haired, eating only fruit and vegetables and possessed by strange attitudes towards money and consumption. Obviously they had money; they were gringos after all. Yet, lost in clouds of marijuana, they lived like paupers. I am tempted to conclude, therefore, that immanent in the diabolic was the pre-history of modern drug usage, with its promise of a short cut to the rituals evoking the *correspondances* (with which both Baudelaire and Benjamin experimented).

It was also said that the field of cane worked by a man under the influence of a devil pact would be rendered barren. No more cane would sprout after cutting. Sugar cane is like giant grass. You cut it, and within a few weeks it comes up again, and in a year or slightly longer, depending on sun and rain, is ready for the next harvest. This continues for some five to seven harvests, until the sugar content falls below an economical level. Each lot or field of cane planted at the same time is called a *suerte*, and if some of the cane in a *suerte* has been cut under contract to the devil, then no more cane will come forth from the roots for the entire *suerte*. The whole lot has to be plowed in and replanted. I remember once walking past an open field in which nothing was growing and being told by my companion, who for years had been a ditch digger on the plantations, that it had been worked, according to people living in the vicinity, by someone with a devil pact. It was in clear sight of the smokestack of the sugar mill itself. After some months it was put to the plow and planted anew.

There were still other curious features about this when I enquired further. The details of the pact were obscure. Who had the expertise to make them and how they were made was open to conjecture, although the frequent mention of figurines suggested the influence of Indian magic from the Pacific coast, the origin of many Black labor migrants.

It was well worth noting, also, that two classes of people seemed exempt from making devil contracts, namely, women and peasant farmers, the latter being those who owned small farms *or* worked on them for wages. At that

time, in the early 1970s, there were large numbers of women working in the plantations, usually as weeders with the long sharp spade called a *pala*, also used by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slaves. When chemicals were introduced in the 1970s, these women and their children got jobs applying pesticides by hand. Certainly these women were as needy as any man, if not a good deal more so, and thus, on the face of it, should have been enticed by the apparent benefits of a devil pact. But, when questioned, some of my friends would point out that because women had the primary responsibility, either in fact or in principle, for raising children and sustaining the household, it was unlikely that wages from a devil pact would be useful. In fact they would probably be downright murderous, in just the same way as such wages were described as having to be spent only on luxury goods.

In other words this was inherently barren money. The cane field would yield no more harvests; land bought or rented would become barren; and livestock bought with such money would waste away. Hardly enough money to raise children! This was money that could not turn a profit. It could not serve as investment. Its negative quality here went further still. It was money that seemed *actively negative*—not just not able to function this way or that, but willfully sterilizing nature's proclivity to be fertile and to reproduce.

By the same token, so it was said, you would not expect such a pact from a peasant farmer, female or male, because no matter how much that person might desire to have a larger income, it would kill the crops. Not even wage workers on peasant plots were ever alleged to have made a devil pact. Such pacts were exclusively restricted to men selling their commodity—labor power—for wages in the sphere of the plantation.

Here one would do well to ponder the nature of evil in these (d)evil pacts—the *dangerous* feeling that these tales generated of weirdness, of thresholds transgressed, of depths unexplored and maybe unexplorable. Even to talk of such things seems to run the risk, no matter how slight, of becoming polluted by the powers in question; and it is thus to the coalescence of danger and immorality that I want to draw attention—to a specific focus of practical religion, namely the poorly understood commonplace of taboo, and hence transgression. It might be helpful, therefore, to extend the range to consider other places where the devil, to my recollection, has been active in recent economic history.

GOLD

Not so long ago on the Timbiqui River on the hot and humid Pacific coast of Colombia, the *boga* at the front of the canoe, pirouetting between rocks on our downward glide, pointed his paddle to where a man had recently drowned. His canoe had capsized in the flooding river. Although he could swim, he was encumbered by rubber boots. But, added the *boga* nonchalantly, his mind more on the rocks before us, the man died from choking on his false teeth.

The chain of mountains runs parallel and close to the coast. The rivers run fast and straight. When they flood, they can create a tidal wave called *la bomba*—a wall of water hurtling through dark walls of rock. Here and there spasms of luminous green of the forest appear through the rain in this, the rainiest area in the world.

But the drowned man must have been confident. People there grow up in canoes. Just a short hop, I can imagine him saying. Then, his boots begin filling with muddy water, getting harder and harder to kick. His teeth stick back in his throat. How many people there would have a set of false teeth anyway? You need money for that. The jumble of ramshackle buildings and the gaping mouth of the gold mine in the rock face speed past, rusty iron rails extruding from the mine. The buildings had been left behind in the Great Depression by the French mining company. There must have been quite a scramble to get a hold of them, let alone access to the mine. May the best man win.

And I guess he did. For the drowned man was the owner of the mine and, so it was said, in league with the devil. That was how he found gold. That is how anyone finds gold. It was all so momentous, yet ordinary. My thoughts went back to my previous visit, in 1975, when another man had died, clubbed to death one night with brandy bottles, his body tossed into the river. He had come back for Easter week from the plantations in the interior where he worked as a cane cutter or loader. He had made good money, was bedecked in fancy gear—sunglasses, fancy shirts (and butter? I do not know). If you leave the river for the interior, you have to come back a visible success. But if you come back a success, you create envy. And if you create envy. . . . There is a regionally self-conscious saying on the coast that puts the notion of reciprocity well: "Here on the coast, one hand washes the other."¹³

SPIRIT QUEEN

It was now pretty dark, and behind the shrine of the *Indio Macho* we could see the twinkling lights of a huge sugar mill with its immense chimney and ascending smoke. Years later it dawned on me that this looming complex of the sugar mill in central Venezuela was no less of a magic mountain than the mountain in whose shadow it nestled and to which pilgrims came in thousands from all over the country. There was a type of kinship between them. Both were shrouded in a mythic reality, although apparently poles apart. The mountain was all fable; the mill was harshly real, albeit with twinkling lights and incessant activity twenty-four hours a day. The workers worked even on Christmas day. They were burning canefields on Good Friday! They never let

¹³ Michael Taussig, "Coming Home: Ritual and Labor Migration in a Colombian Town" (Working Paper Series Number 30, Centre for Developing Area Studies, McGill University, Montreal, 1982).

up. Perhaps we could see one as fortuitously allegorical of the other, the interesting and perhaps important thing being that while the mountain leapt forth as the obvious work of the imagination, a spectacle and a work of art, the sugar mill at its base did not appear that way at all. Instead, it appeared as something natural, something to be taken for granted. While nature was celebrated on the mountain, as part of an enchanted domain of the spirit queen, herself the icon of the nation, the sugar mill was more truly natural in that it was routine and everyday. But when this contrast and kinship dawned on you, then the mill, too, started to appear as enchanted or at least malevolent and haunted and no longer so natural.¹⁴

Colombian cane cutters in Aguas Negras (about twenty-five miles from the mountain) and all the way from the Pacific coast of Colombia, one of the most remote regions of the world, told me that they would never work for this mill because the owner, a Cuban, had a contract with the spirit queen so he could maintain his business. The contract required the death of a worker every so often to acquire his soul. Luis Manuel Castillo, a seventy-four-year-old Venezuelan man, born in Coro, living alone as caretaker on a small farm in the hills about twenty miles from the mountain, told me that when he first heard about the spirit queen he was twenty-two years old and working for the town of Chivacoa's public works department. People said the spirit queen's contract with the Cuban required a dead worker per week! That was in 1940. He remembered that the sugar mill paid a great amount of money to a man to paint its smokestack. Day after day in the heat of the sun, the painter worked, inching his way upwards. When he reached the top, he swayed and toppled in, to be burnt alive in the furnace below. About ten years ago, however, went on Luis Carlos, a different story started to circulate. The spirit queen, it was said, did not want the souls of *the poor*, who were, after all, merely defending their families. Now she wants the owner himself.

LIFE

From the mid-1970s till 1990 I lived frequently with an old Indian healer by the name of Santiago Mutumbajoy.¹⁵ I was intrigued by the attribution of magical power to Indian healers by colonists in that area where the foothills of the Andes meet the clouds and rain forests of the upper Amazon. It was there that I learnt one of the most important things that my own upbringing had virtually concealed from me—namely, the singular and overwhelming force of envy. It was envy that the curer had to extract with song and medicine, envy as a substance and power impacted by sorcery into the body of the

¹⁴ Michael Taussig, "La magia del estado.: María Lionza y Simón Bolívar en la Venezuela contemporánea," in Maniolo Gutiérrez Estévez *et al.*, eds, *De palabra y obra en el nuevo mundo*, Vol 2: *encuentros interétnicos* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1992).

¹⁵ Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

envied, because just about all serious misfortune was attributed to being magically attacked by an envious other—even the poorest of the poor when they fell sick said it was because someone was envious of them—and envy could be aroused by anything. Now how would that go down in a world in which the economy increasingly demanded more and more individual consumption arousing envy—a world like ours today? And had not there been a time in European history, in Christian history, when envy was one of the seven great sins? What had (apparently) happened to circumvent that?

And what was it that provoked envy? Well, the fact that the envied other was seen as having more. More what? More cattle? Good looks? Helpful children? More health? More money? No common denominator held the list together, certainly not money, unless it was something to do with the exuberance of life itself. Here the envy of the living by the dead is salutary.

One day an old Ingano- and Spanish-speaking woman brought some children to be cured. They settled down to stay a few days. The children's father had died some months back. Then the mother died. The father had called her, it was explained to me, "from the other side." The dead do this. Now the children might be called too. The healer would find a tranquil moment during the day to sit with one of the children, sing softly and sweep over the child with his curing fan, blowing medicine and cigarette smoke.

Months later at night, drinking the strong medicine which makes your head swim, singing the while in ebbs and flows of pictures and wavering guttural sound, the topic of these kids came up. I strongly doubt that the healer and I would have talked about them, had we not been taking this medicine. The father, an Indian, had died because he had gotten involved with *Satanas*, the devil. He had recklessly bought a book of magic that traveling herbalists sell in the marketplaces and was studying its spells. One day, going out to fish at dawn, he met a stranger sitting in the mist by the river. When he came home, he fell sick with fever and bloody diarrhea. In a few days he died. Now he was calling his children. And the healer? He is calling too. This side. Two sides.

COCAINE

About the same time in another curer's house, but this time up in the mountains, I met a weather-beaten old colonist, a black man from the coast, who had migrated many years before to the Putumayo, where he now had a small farm. He smiled a lot. His son and he were illegally growing coca, the plant from which cocaine is derived, and were making money for the first time in their lives. He was on top of the world, and his eyes gleamed when he asked me, as though playing a game or rehearsing a lesson, if I knew how to smuggle cocaine past the police and army roadblocks? I shook my head. "Well, you get a dead baby and open up the abdomen, remove the intestines, pack cocaine paste in, sew up the abdomen and, with the baby at the breast the

good mother cuddles her precious cargo through the roadblocks and, who knows, perhaps to Miami and New York as well."

OIL

In the states of Morelos and Guerrero in Mexico in the mid-1970s, I heard stories of children's corpses found decapitated, sometimes under bridges. Entire villages were keeping their children at home and away from school. The mutilation of the corpse was described in roundabout ways, ways that clung to and illuminated detail as fragments of the holy. An uncle or a friend of one's uncle had attended a funeral for a child and surreptitiously viewed the corpse. Good God! Headless! And nobody saying anything! But we all know, now. In Guerrero a woman told me how a gang of men were digging a hole, looking for oil in southeastern Mexico. A voice spoke out of the hole. "If you want oil you must give me the heads of so many children!" The workers told the foreman. The foreman told the manager. The manager told the President of the Republic, and the President told the Federal Police. "If that's what's required, we'll oblige." This was when Mexico was buzzing with expectation at the bonanza of great oil discoveries.

MHUTI

In Soweto, South Africa, where I am writing,¹⁶ one finds in the newspapers and in almost everyday discussion concern with *mhuti* and its alleged increase. A week ago, so I am told, the mutilated corpse of a Sowetan man was found in a field close to one of the migrant workers' hostels. The heart, the genitals, and the tongue, had been removed for *mhuti*. There are accounts of large numbers of students in rural areas (such as Bushbuck Ridge) attacking supposedly successful businessmen, alleging their success is due to their using such *mhuti*—for example, burying the tongue under the doorway so as to call customers; the genitals, so as to promote growth of the business. Babies are said to be often used. "And women? Are their bodies used?" "No!" says my new acquaintance, a woman. "They just get raped."

THE ACCURSED SHARE

Theories of Consumption Say Nothing (Can You Believe it?) About The Meaning of Consumption

What might these stories teach us about the theme of this essay: placing consumption in historical perspective?¹⁷ Let me orient my discussion through Georges Bataille's lifelong philosophical project aimed at understanding transgression and expenditure—*dépense*, spending, especially excessiveness of spending, which, of course, is (strangely) identical with consumption. The

¹⁶ Thanks to the hospitality of the Mfete family and Adam Ashforth.

¹⁷ See the unnumbered footnote at the beginning of this article.

strange obviousness of this identity of taking in and giving out already alerts us to the fact that excessiveness crosses boundaries and connects opposites in bewildering and fascinating ways, in this instance through the human body as a socialized, non-animal body.

It is beyond both my competence and the bounds of this essay to dwell on Nietzsche's profound influence here. Suffice it to note Bataille's self-assessment. "I am the only one who thinks of himself," he wrote, "not as a commentator of Nietzsche, but as being the same as he." To this we might add from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols (or How to Philosophise with a Hammer)*, in which, in his dispute with Darwinist ideology of "the struggle for life," Nietzsche asserts that prodigality, not "the struggle for life," is the motor of life and human history and that where there is a struggle, the dissimulators, the great mimics, always win over the strong, a point we will have to return to when considering the power of the devil, the Great Imitator, and the problem of the gift.¹⁸ Similarly, where Nietzsche first introduces his notion of "the eternal return," an overflowing sense of limitless expenditure abounds as metaphysic no less than consuming desire. Addressing the sun in gratitude for receiving its surplus, Nietzsche wants to give away—not give away something but simply "give away"—an act which must take him *under*, like the sun descending at night into the underworld. "Bless the cup that wants to overflow in order that the water may flow from it golden and carry the reflection of your rapture everywhere. Behold this cup wants to become empty again."¹⁹

In his first formal statement of the problem at the age of thirty-six, in 1933, Bataille argued that human activity is not reducible to processes of production and conservation, that consumption must be divided into two parts: one part, which is reducible, is that "represented by the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life and the continuation of an individual's productive activity in a given society," but the other part (the accursed share, accursed also meaning sacred as in the Latin word, *sacer*) is consumption as "un-productive expenditure." Here followed the most amazingly heterogenous list of examples ranging through luxury, festival, war, cults, spectacles, games, art, revolution, death, and sex. Bataille insisted that expenditure, when defined as unproductive and non-utilitarian, clearly accents loss "that must be as great as possible for that activity to take on its true meaning."²⁰ On the whole,

¹⁸ Bataille, *Nietzsche and Communism, in Sovereignty*, vol. 3, 365–71, at 367, of *The Accursed Share. Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols (or How to Philosophise with a Hammer)*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (Middlesex: Penguin, 1990), 86.

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1974), 274. On the concept of "the eternal return," Bataille wrote early on in his life, in 1937: "Of all the dramatic representations that have given Nietzsche's life the character of a laceration and of the breathless combat of human existence, the idea of the eternal return is certainly the most inaccessible." This passage is in "Nietzsche and the Fascists," in *Visions of Excess*, Alan Stoekel, ed. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 182–96, at 191.

²⁰ G. Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," 118.

he asserted, "a society always produces more than is necessary for its survival; it has a surplus at its disposal. It is precisely the use it makes of this surplus that determines it." The surplus, he goes on to say, in a supremely important comment, "is the cause of the agitation, of the structural changes and of the entire history of society."²¹ But before getting to what makes Bataille so distinctive, namely his pinpointing of the implications of expenditure with regards to transgression, let me try the point negatively and ask bluntly in general terms what theories of consumption are current, other than the functionalist and utilitarian approach.

The functionalist approach sees consumption as both strategically essential for capitalist growth but also problematic to the degree that it interferes with investment of surplus. This contradiction virtually overwhelms as well as empowers the capitalist system, and a history of this system could well be written as so many revolutions seesawing across this vital tension (Weber's treatment of Calvin and the Protestant ethic being perhaps the best known). By and large, however, the place of consumption in the modern history of economics is seen as of secondary importance to investment and production.

In our time it has appeared as innovatory not to take consumer practice for granted as some quasi-mechanistic outcome of needs and use-values. Coupled to a discovery or rediscovery of the value of culture, consumer activity is now viewed as a vital aspect of identity formation and self-making, often according to so-called codes of meaning. Whether tipping the balance towards active or towards passive consumerism, this approach exposed the more or less sealed world of production, fearsomely masculinist in its poetics, to the shattering force of culture and all the problems, stimulating and confusing, of meaning and social knowledge. The reification of human practice known as "the economy" could never look the same, and indeed a profound challenge was presented to the study of history itself.

Yet, for all the talk of meaning and culture, has not the meaning of consumption itself been taken for granted? It is as if all the discussion has been external and transcendent to the phenomenon itself, not merely taking it for granted, in that sense, but unwilling and unable to address the phenomenon internally, on its own terms which, as with any phenomenon, means engaging in some sort of particularistic reciprocity with it and which perforce extends into the verbal extension of the phenomenon itself. This is where Bataille's shockingly original "general economy" of consumption is so relevant, pitch-forking us out of the common-sense ideological grip of utility into the prodigal world of spending for the sake of spending.

"I did not consider the facts the way qualified economists do," wrote Bataille in the preface to the first volume of *The Accursed Share*, the volume subtitled *Consumption*. "I had a point of view from which a human sacrifice,

²¹ Bataille, in *Consumption*, vol. 1 of *The Accursed Share*, 106.

the construction of a church or the gift of a jewel were no less interesting than the sale of wheat. In short I had to try in vain to make clear the notion of a 'general economy' in which 'expenditure' (the 'consumption') of wealth, rather than production, was the primary object."²² The epigraph to this first volume came from William Blake: "Exuberance is beauty," and the subsequent chapters were so many case studies displaying the manner in which different schemes of life in world history had dealt with excess, the problem of surplus: the sacrifices and wars of the Aztecs, the gifts of rivalry of the Potlatch of the Kwakiutal and their neighbours (just north of what is today the fine city of Vancouver, Canada), Islam's wars, the religious (as opposed to the political) economy of the Tibetan state (in 1917 one monk for every three adult males, the Church budget twice as large as the state and eight times that of the army), the Calvinist use of exuberance to erase exuberance as the origin of capitalism and the bourgeois world, the suspension of luxury consumption for the sake of industrialization in the Soviet Union, and, finally, the Marshall plan. Preceding these case studies of expenditure, there was a remarkable theoretical introduction wherein both the sun and the great world wars of the twentieth century (very much including the Cold War) were dwelt upon as massive and massively different forms of spending. By such shock tactics, and many others, Bataille hoped to accomplish what he so often saw as impossible (*The Impossible* being the title of one of his works of what he called fiction)—the understanding and the pinning down of the useless and its entailments in human pleasure, cruelty, and subsistence. This concern with excessiveness led him, as I have stated, to a wonderfully diverse economic science conflating death, sex, laughter, violence, and the sacred (in the modern, no less than in the non-modern, world). What brings these things together is the mobile and passionate mix of pleasure and anguish, attraction and repulsion, entailed by the way in which expenditure mobilises prohibitions and transgressions in a ceaseless, twofold, instantaneous movement.²³

This, then, is quintessentially a theory of consumption if ever there was one. Indeed, theory here seems a somewhat limited term in that *general economy* cannot avoid applying its precepts to itself, especially its philosophy of expressability and representation, as befits a concern with excess and transgression when "the very heavens open." In its endless struggle with

²² Bataille, in *Consumption*, vol. 1 of *The Accursed Share*, 9.

²³ When I write "economic," I have, of course, in mind the way that with modern capitalism economic has come to stand not simply for goods and prices, production, distribution, and exchange but for a totalizing way of thinking *reasonably*, as Lionel Robbins put it, defining economics as the science of the logical apportioning of scarce means to alternate ends—hence a definition of reason, no less than of efficiency. Bataille is fascinating because he, too, creates a totalizing definition of economics as a logic, only in this case the logic—to employ the treacherous language of Lord Robbins *et al*—is of ends, not means, and is therefore drastically opposed to the economic reason of capitalist schemata of means and ends. Here one sees, therefore, the radical possibilities opened up by a science of consumption that is true to consumption proper.

servility—meaning utilitarianism, meaning servility of persons to things and the subjugation of ends to means—general economy points not to yet another set of black boxes of explanation, not to the further consumption of theory, but to the open skies of sovereignty, the mastery of non-mastery, such that Bataille speaks of “the apex of a thought whose end jumps the rails on which it is travelling.”²⁴

THE GIFT

What then of my stories? What then of criticism? The important thing is to stay within the compass of their force and imagination. We must not commit them to the servile operation of getting them to say something that could be said otherwise—for example, to see them instrumentally, as things to achieve some other thing, such as equality, limits to individualism, morality tales against greed, prodigality, and capitalist logic. I have myself previously suggested how the devil pact, as I heard about it in the sugar plantations of western Colombia, *constellated*—I use the word advisedly—with amazing precision the argument set forth by Karl Marx in the first section of *Capital* concerning the complex movement of use-value and exchange-value in the constitution not only of the commodity-form but of what Marx called “the fetishism of commodities” as well.²⁵ A good deal of the power, not to mention the mysteries for further interpretation, created by this suggestion, lay additionally in the tension I perceived between the gift-economy features (as laid out by Marcel Mauss) of peasant farming in that region, on one side, and the commodity-form of the recently created plantation sphere destroying peasant agriculture, on the other.²⁶ The devil pact could further be seen as a moral indictment of the new mode of production, a mode understood not as natural, not as a reified sphere of “the economic,” disembodied, remote, and forever beyond the puny affairs of man but as a mode accessible to the wily activist, to mediation by the devil such that illicit magical means exchanged the production of barrenness for monetary gain restricted to luxury consumption.

What saves such an analysis from the all too common servility of functionalist method as cultural critique is the exoticism of its reference and, hence, its power to estrange familiar ways of relating to market exchange,

²⁴ Bataille, in *Sovereignty*, vol. 3 of *The Accursed Share*, 209.

²⁵ First in this very journal! See M. Taussig, “The Genesis of Capitalism Amongst A South American Peasantry,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 19:2 (1977), 130–55. See also the wonderful essay by Marc Edelman, “Landlords and the Devil: Class, Ethnic, and Gender Dimensions of Central American Peasant Narratives,” in *Cultural Anthropology*, 9:1 (1994), 58–93, and also M. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. The terminology of use value and exchange value hearkens back to Aristotle’s discussion of *oeconomia* in *The Politics*. In building on this, Marx couples it to the very basis of Hegel’s philosophy, the logical and historical problem of how the concrete particular can be coordinated with the universal (as with money and the modern state).

²⁶ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967; first published as *Essai sur le don, forme archaïque de l'échange*, Paris, 1925).

production, and consumption. But estrangement is not necessarily guaranteed by the exotic, and here I want to return to Marcel Mauss's influential essay on the gift which, thanks to Bataille, becomes open to new interpretations that, if observed, would have radically altered the history of anthropology in this century. For Mauss's gift has by and large been understood as emblematic of (balanced) exchange, constituting therewith "the total social fact" that is, in Claude Lévi-Strauss' paraphrase, "an event which has a significance that is at once social and religious, magic and economic, utilitarian and sentimental, juridical and moral" and entails the famous casting of the economic in pre-capitalist societies as the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to pay back.²⁷

The very word, obligation, as in the obligation to give, sets up the question that assails Bataille (and, for that matter, Mauss) because of the singular and supreme contradiction within the gift as something spontaneous and generous, on one side, and calculated and self-interested on the other.²⁸ Mauss establishes this on the first page of his text, where he writes, "We intend in this book to isolate one important set of phenomena: namely prestations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested."²⁹

Now although this conflict (between "in theory" and "in fact") is brought up towards the end of Mauss's essay, it is not, by Bataillian terms, dealt with intensively, which is to say dialectically, in terms of how Kojève taught Hegel in Paris to Bataille and his friends—the unremitting stress on the work of the negative.³⁰

Bataille's decisive move is to intervene at the point of "the obligation to give." He bends every rhetorical trick he knows, and then some, to get the reader to break out of customary thinking so as to be able to acknowledge the excruciating quality of the fathomless contradiction implicated in the obligation to give, with its "mixture" of generosity and self-interest; and he tries even harder still to get the reader to appreciate what he would call the "quality of sovereignty" implicated in the gift as profitless expenditure ("The sun gives without receiving").

Contrary to this, Mauss puts the stress on the obligatory nature of giving, in a way that makes it seem more like obeying a rule than giving *per se*. But of course the whole problem raised is what is giving *per se*? Bataille admits to the mixture of generosity and self-interest in giving, as in Potlatch, but argues on logical and sociological grounds that "we cannot give precedence to the

²⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon, 1969).

²⁸ Derrida has recently expounded on this with great verve and insight. See Jacques Derrida, *Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁹ Mauss, *The Gift*, 1.

³⁰ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit Assembled by Raymond Queneau* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

principle of rivalry over the sovereign generosity that is at the origin of gift-giving; to do so would be to reverse the terms of the discussion”:

Calculation would be on the side of the giver . . . The game would end if this were the case. Even if the giver feigns it, at bottom it is still generosity that overwhelms. And doubtless it was a rule, in these archaic forms, that the giver should feign, but his generosity would still not have taken effect without excessiveness. Ultimately it was the one who overdid it who prevailed and whose sovereign character compelled respect.³¹

This is not to contradict the existence of exchange or even balanced exchange. Rather, it is a matter of where the focus of analysis lies and what the implications are of that angle of vision. A utilitarian reading focusses on the gift as a mutually beneficial exchange, in which I get some thing out of this, and so do you—Adam Smith’s truck, barter, and exchange, writ into the deceptive ideology of the gift no less than a universal law. Against this vision of society as a clockwork of calculated mutual advantageousness, a Bataillian reading posits an additional and ineradicably subversive feature—namely, the trauma given to the coherence and equilibrium of the social world by giving and spending for the hell of it—and asserts this, together with taboos against expenditure, as indispensable to what makes for human culture and what makes human beings human. In the mysterious space between this sort of spending and the taboos prohibiting it, lies a whole world, an amazing world, one we seem to know a great deal about but cannot quite get our tongues around, partly for metaphysical reasons, partly because of the fierce pressure of organized religions or the moral systems they have left in their wakes, and partly because of political forces of cultural and psychic repression.³² Bataille’s work is dedicated to the impossible task of delineating this world:

³¹ *Bataille, Sovereignty*, vol. 3 of *The Accursed Share*, 347. Towards the end of his essay on the gift, Mauss makes two interesting moves in this respect. One is to point out that, except for the European middle ages, all his examples of the gift come from societies structured into symmetrical “segments” in which “individuals, even the most influential, were less serious, avaricious and selfish than we are; externally at least they were and are generous and more ready to give” (p. 79). The next move is to relate the “exaggerated generosity” to the fragility of peace in such societies, to see, in other words, the gift as that which is composed by a peace forever fragile in the shadow of imminent violence. From this Mauss draws the lesson for the naturalness, if not the need, for socialism in modern Europe: the socialism of a gift being “wealth amassed and redistributed in the mutual respect and reciprocal generosity that education can impart” (p. 81). Karl Polanyi’s anthropologically informed distinction between reciprocity, redistribution, and markets as the three basic forms of economy comes to mind, especially since it regards Polanyi’s equation of socialism with redistribution (the model for which are Trobriand chiefdoms!). See for example Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), ch. 4, and also Marshal Sahlins on the gift and war in *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1972). Like Mauss and Polanyi, Bataille saw the solution to the crucial problems of the world economic order as requiring the capitalist states to consider “the gift in a rational manner” (in *Sovereignty*, vol. 3 of *Accursed Share*, 429).

³² The political repressions involved come across strongly in Bataille’s articles in the late 1930s on Nietzsche reprinted in *Visions of Excess* (see note 19).

Humanity is faced with a double perspective: in one direction, violent pleasure, horror, death—precisely the perspective of poetry—and in the opposite direction, that of science or the real world of utility. Only the useful, the real, have a serious character. We are never within our rights in preferring seduction: truth has rights over us. Indeed, it has every right. And yet we can, and indeed we must, respond to something which, not being God, is stronger than every right, that *impossible* to which we *accede only by forgetting the truth of all these rights, only by accepting disappearance*.³³

Now the Marxist interpretation I made years ago of the devil pact in the cane fields was that it was an exquisitely precise expression in the realm of popular culture of the commodity-form from a “gift point of view.” And while the devil contract can be seen as a striking, if morbid, confirmation of the gift principle as balanced exchange, the gift of largesse being paid for by the dissemination of barrenness and death, what I now see as special to it and deserving emphasis is its sheer excessiveness—the plethora of its interpretive possibilities such that its analysis is interminable, the overflowing “too-muchness” of its key terms, the violent movement between those terms, and the dreadful proximity here of the gift to death, of creation to destruction.³⁴ An old and ubiquitous tale, the devil pact seems to be trying to tell us something important about the gift, about the ways it articulates investment versus spending as life and death issues around the pivot of transgression.

At this point Bataille’s rendering of the gift makes a lot of sense. First, he allows, indeed forces, me to dwell on the existence of the devil and ask bigger and better questions about the face of evil in history. Second, he makes me ask why do all my stories entail such gross transgression of prohibitions, beginning with the illicit magical pacts themselves, and then the dissemination of sterility in the cane fields, murder of children or illicit use of their cadavers, as with the oil and cocaine, and the body parts in the mhuti used by successful businessmen? Third, what is one to make of the restriction of the wages of the devil to the purchase of luxury goods by men, of the actively negative, deathly, effect of such wages as investment? *Secar* was the word used. The land and the animals of the man making the pact dry up and die. Women do not make the pact because that would prevent growth of children. The money is quintessentially infertile. It is blatantly not capital. It cannot reproduce.

The infertility of this money as non-capital, as something that can only be used to spend, is particularly relevant to an analysis of the meaning of consumption and coincides with Bataille’s definition of his major subject matter, *dépense*, expenditure, as profitless spending, as loss. Furthermore, immersing the properties of money and of capital in the womb, in the world of biology, of

³³ Georges Bataille, *The Impossible* (1962, first published as *The Hatred of Poetry*).

³⁴ “Too-muchness” is a term I take from Norman O. Brown’s essay, “Dionysus in 1990,” in his *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphoses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 179–200, at 183.

animals, human bodies, and the soil, especially the female property of reproduction, should remind us of medieval and Aristotelian economic science no less than the imagery of capitalism itself (in which stocks soar, bull markets chase bear markets, factories are plants, investments grow, bank balances have health, and so forth). But for Aristotle and for the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages the proper and natural use of money was, precisely, to be infertile, to be non-capital, to serve merely as a medium facilitating exchange. It was improper and unnatural for money to mimic the womb, to multiply like a bitch giving birth to pups, as Aristotle puts it.³⁵

On the other hand, Benjamin Franklin in his 1748 advice to a young tradesman warned against spending and not using money as capital. "Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on . . . the profits rise quicker and quicker. He that kills a breeding-sow, destroys all her offspring to the thousandth generation."³⁶ Here capital is both natural and proper in a nice Bataillian image of capital as hoggish accumulation, an ambiguous image that has been polished to perfection with the passing of time in the testimony of president Ronald Reagan's budget director, David Stockman, when he referred to the United States economy in the 1980s as—"The hogs were really feeding"³⁷—a reminder, as if it were needed, that capitalism is a lot more than Calvin's and Max Weber's Protestant ethic. Is not the adventurous, aggressive, risk-taking, high-roller element, minimized if not flatly denied by Weber with his emphasis on prudence, equally, if not more important, as we discern in our age of neo-liberalism?

And it is, of course, this love-hate affair with "pigging out" that scars our being as we face in this history of economic thought radically opposite sanctions, one against capital and one for it. Could the devil pact be thus seen as a Franklin-like moral tale warning about profligacy, or, to the contrary, is it the marshalling of anonymous folkloric resentment against the world domination by capital-creating luxuries of butter, sunglasses, liquor, and fancy shirts at the price of death and sterility? That this is no idle question can be seen in the longevity and ubiquity of the figure of the devil, no less than in the readiness to invoke the Faustian contract as the drama appropriate to the inescapable unity of creation and destruction in modernity, as in Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*.³⁸

One could analyse and refine arguments for either side, sifting evidence through ever finer meshes of dialectic, but this would be to ignore the possibility that the profound ambiguity of negation is in itself the message, that the socially relevant meaning lies not in one version or another nor, in some

³⁵ Aristotle, *The Politics*.

³⁶ Benjamin Franklin, *Advice to a Young Tradesman*, cited in Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's, 1958), 49.

³⁷ *Financial Times Weekend*, May 29/May 30, 1993.

³⁸ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

magnanimous liberal gesture, in paradox and the multiplicity of interpretations but lies instead in the extremity of transgressions circulating in exchange. One reaches no closure in this labyrinth. The rhythm is rather that of savage impulses and bewildering reaction. These stories are wounds, signs of rupture accessing the marvellous in the fullness of its sovereignty.

These extremes of wealth and death, of disfigured corpses, of the use of the cadavers of babies and children, of luxury and barrenness, speak to the unspeakable mystique of the excessive, the abrogation of the useful, and the sensuous no less than logical intimacy binding overabundance to transgression in a forwards and backwards movement of attraction and repulsion that is difficult to put in words—of “thrust and counterthrust, ebb and flow of a twofold movement, the unity in the violent agitation of prohibition and transgression.”³⁹

In the diversity of his metamorphosing forms, his secrecy, incongruities, and fiery splendor, the devil is the arch-figure of such a twofold movement of attraction and repulsion. As the figure of the impure sacred, he irradiates the wild energy of this vortex. As the Great Imitator he opposes not only God but the possibility of ontological anchoring of steadfast meaning that he constantly dangles before us. As the paramount sign of evil, he was always a little too interesting and a little too seductive to be trapped by Christian *ressentiment* into a simple dialectic of Otherness. There was always this overflowing surplus of resolute irresolution, for he is the salutary figure of transgression—so now we might better follow Hegel’s moving statement of the negative in which, in the famous Preface to the *Phenomenology of Mind*, he says (and Bataille, influenced by Kojève, uses this quote):

But the life of mind is not one that shuns death, and keeps clear of destruction; it endures death and in death maintains its being. It only wins to its truth when it finds itself utterly torn asunder. It is this mighty power, not by being a positive which turns away from the negative, as when we say of anything it is nothing or it is false, and, being then done with it, pass off to something else: on the contrary, mind is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and dwelling with it. This dwelling beside it is the magic power that converts the negative into being.⁴⁰

THE NEGATION OF THE NEGATION

Arguing that what expenditure gives rise to, as with the festival with its transgression of taboo, is not a return to some hypothetical pre-cultured state, that what the festival liberates is not animality but the divine, Bataille draws our attention to the curious dynamic of transgression, to the prohibition of prohibition, to what he called “the negation of the negation”—a movement in which repression increases “tenfold,” projecting life into a richer world. As an

³⁹ Bataille, *The History of Eroticism*, vol. 2 of *The Accursed Share*, 94.

⁴⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

exemplary account of the negation of the negation, the pact with the enemy of God, the devil, gives expression to this richer world, raising the specter of Bataille's "sovereignty"—that "void in the face of which our being is a plenum, threatened with losing its plenitude, both desiring and fearing to lose it . . . demanding uncertainty, suspension."⁴¹

"Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?"⁴² What happens when the sun overflowing in its diurnal passage goes down into the underworld where the devil is, taking Nietzsche along for the ride? For Nietzsche wants to give without receiving, like the sun itself. Or rather he receives from the sun and then wants to give away, following the sun, without any expectation of return.⁴³ He simply wants to give away—a phrasing that in its cliff-hanging suspension should remind us of that disturbing statement of Bataille's comrade-in-arms, Roger Caillois, in his 1935 essay on mimicry, in which he writes of wanting to be similar, not similar to some thing, "just similar."⁴⁴ Might we then want to reformulate this "giving without receiving?" Might there be a return after all, the return associated with a devastating release of the gift (as we say) of the mimetic faculty such that in its excessiveness the invention of the social world is returned to man? In current jargon this would mean something a good deal more than simply being "aware" of the cultural construction of reality—because the task is neither that of demystification nor the equally massive problem of truly out-constructing construction but, instead, that of finding the capacity to understand the social world as both real and really made-up. This is the sense of Nietzsche's desire to reclaim the sublimity that society has bestowed upon real and imaginary things, not for himself, but as the property and product of mankind. Might the gift of mimicry, then, provide insight into the puzzle of the gift?

For Nietzsche argued that "giving without receiving" (and here we make the truly radical, the truly marvellous leap that the gift can entail) implied a particular theory of representation encompassing both the joy of becoming and of destruction, namely, the discharge of "all powers of representation, imitation, transfiguration, transmutation, every kind of mimicry and play-acting, conjointly. The essential thing remains the facility of the metamorphosis, the incapacity *not* to react." Such a person "enters into every skin."⁴⁵ That is the Dionysian impulse.

⁴¹ Bataille, *The History of Eroticism*, vol. 2 of *Accursed Share*, 101.

⁴² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, no. 125, "The Madman," 181.

⁴³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, no. 342, "Incipit Tragoedia," 275 (end of Book Four, introduction to the concept of "the eternal return").

⁴⁴ Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October*, 31 (Winter 1984), 17–32, at 30 (originally published in Paris as "Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire," in *Minotaure* 7 [1935]). For a wide-ranging discussion of this, see Taussig, *Mimesis and Alerity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 84.

But the devil, the Great Imitator, most emphatically does not "give without receiving." He strikes a deal and exacts a price. The devil must be that principle of unbridled cleverness, the victor throughout history, who appropriates the Dionysian gift of giving without receiving and the power of mimicry therein.⁴⁶ That is quite another impulse, equally extreme—its ultimate and satanic deception being, of course, the illusion that real transgression has been achieved. But that "tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men."⁴⁷

AFTEREFFECT

If my stories have the function of making us consider *consumption* as something a good deal more than the effect of need—basic or culturally promoted, if indeed there is any difference—and indicate that consumption skirts and at times partakes of a mysterious, even sacred, power, it behooves us to return to what is, doubtlessly, the act consumed by my analysis—the type of reading and creation of the texts involved.

The stories' relation in time to the events they depict is reminiscent of Bataille's pointedly antiutilitarian interpretation of the paintings of animals and hunting in the Lascaux caves not as images the magical power of which shall ensure the success of the hunt and the satisfaction of need, but as images demanded by the opening to the sacred consequent to the violence of violating the prohibition against killing. This leaves the status of the image, no less than the devil stories, in a strange vacuum of testimony, sanctity, and obligation—not unlike the gift itself, reminiscent of Benjamin's evocation of the way experience ("in the true sense of the word") was facilitated by collective ritual and festival, amalgamating the voluntary with the involuntary elements of memory. Thus, the stories speak to God, to the world, we might say, not so much to have a social function, satisfy a need, or even betray a cause. They come after the event. As gifts about the gift, they come through me along a long chain of anonymous storytellers to you so as to function in a sovereign, not a useful, way—to be consumed, in other words, inside themselves as ritual art expended in a storm of negation. And this is, after all, the lot of our disciplines of History and Anthropology, their fundamental power lying in

⁴⁶ Nietzsche argues in *Twilight of the Idols*, 87, and throughout his works, that mimicry is no less the essential weapon of power throughout history than it is of thinking and the cultural construction of reality itself. Moreover, he sets up two kinds of mimicry: on the one hand, the Dionysian and, on the other, that of calculation, dissimulation, self-control, and lying. Thus is raised the fascinating problem: How do these two forms interrelate through history and what are the implications thereof for understanding the gift in relation to capitalism? This question can now be seen as what guides one of the most significant contributions to social theory in the twentieth century, namely *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno (New York: Continuum, 1987). As to the identity of the devil, Nietzsche had a swift response: that Christianity distilled the Evil One out of Dionysus—a point explored in *The Anti-Christ*, 123–99, at 129, in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1990).

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, "The Madman," in *The Gay Science*, 181–2.

their stockpiling the excess without which meaning and representation could not exist, namely, the belief in the literal basis to metaphor—that once upon a time, or in distant places, human sacrifice and spirit possession, ghosts and spirits, sorcerers and witches, miracles and gods and people making devil pacts did walk the face of the earth. History and anthropology become, together with the folk tale and a certain type of popular wisdom, the depositories and proof of those unbelievable acts required now by language to carry off its tricks of reference, its tropes and figures, and if the play of expenditure, of *dépense*, has moved from the sacred nature of the person to the fetish power of things in a universe bound to the appearance of the useful, we stand all the more in debt to the wild exuberance of these devil stories, like the sun, instances of giving without receiving, endorsement of sheer expenditure—as when, before the “efficiencies of scale” in the factory system of the sugar plantation and the poverty no less than destruction it has wrought, the earth emptied itself out and ash floated onto the still lake.