

MODERN and CONTEMPORARY POETRY and POETICS



A SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY OF
CONTEMPORARY INNOVATIVE
POETRY COMMUNITIES

The Gift, the Wager, and Poethics

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett



Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

Series editor
Rachel Blau DuPlessis
Temple University
Philadelphia
PA, USA

Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics promotes and pursues topics in the burgeoning field of 20th and 21st century poetics. Critical and scholarly work on poetry and poetics of interest to the series includes social location in its relationships to subjectivity, to the construction of authorship, to oeuvres, and to careers; poetic reception and dissemination (groups, movements, formations, institutions); the intersection of poetry and theory; questions about language, poetic authority, and the goals of writing; claims in poetics, impacts of social life, and the dynamics of the poetic career as these are staged and debated by poets and inside poems.

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Elizabeth-Jane Burnett

A Social Biography
of Contemporary
Innovative Poetry
Communities

The Gift, the Wager, and Poethics

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Elizabeth-Jane Burnett
Newman University Birmingham
Birmingham, UK

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Praise Poem

—for the Dogs of the Wild Poetry

You of the Inner Circle!

Emerge!

Let's bask in you.

Interviewees: Bob Holman, Alison Knowles, Kristin Prevallet, Lawrence Upton, Anne Waldman.

We bask with you.

Editor: Rachel Blau DuPlessis.

We bask with you.

Family: Donald, Polly, Sarah, Nick, Lucy, Wallace.

We've basked with you in the clouds.

Like the birds of the Arctic, the redpolls,
Whose red heads gather in Devon on the teal,
I can't praise you enough ~

Robert Hampson, for long support of this project.

Clive Adams, Richard Povall, and the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World.

Cynthia Hogue, Harriet Tarlo, Carol Watts, Peter Middleton.

Your good deeds have been performed.

Because you control the rain ~
Caroline Bergvall, Carla Harryman, Redell Olsen.
Because you control also the sun ~
Tara Betts, Ellison Glenn.

Your good deeds have been performed, you at the Study Abroad on the
Bowery, Summer 2005.

Your good deeds have been performed; David Launchbury, Michelle
Herbert, Jenny Myles, Mel Kozakiewicz, Marjorie Tesser, Shannon
Maguire, Hannah Moss, Sarah Stickland, Jason Keerpal, Rebecca Lyon,
Louise Hickman, Demi, Bear ~ in friendship.
They have been performed, my brother, Nick.

Thank you, dogs of the wild.
George Ttoouli, not for lions but wolves.
The causers of sudden surprise ~ Joan Retallack.
The performers of wonders: Allie Bochicchio, Emily Janakiram, Brigitte
Shull.
The ones who walk gently: Haldon Forest, Rocky Mountains.
The ones who swagger: New York, London.
Thank you, my lions.

Thank you for the ending and the still to come.
Thank you all those unnamed but felt.
We can't ask for more.
They have been performed, you, dogs of the wild poetry!¹

NOTE

1. The poem draws on lines from two traditional African praise poems: "The Shumba Murambwi" and "Praises of Sobhuza I".

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Gifts

When poetry is produced without hope of financial gain, as is the case in much recent experimental poetry, enormous commitments of time and resources are required from the participants. Yet the communities of poets, publishers, audiences and readers that exist largely outside commercial and institutional circuits somehow manage to sustain themselves and to perform the work required to engage with poetry. It is the premise of this book that such communities operate through gift exchanges and that a consideration of the nature of The Gift can therefore elucidate the work that goes on in these communities.

Ethnographic analyses of The Gift offer insights into the ways that individuals relate to each other and of how gifts can provide the tangible evidence of these relationships. In viewing poetry exchanges as gift exchanges connecting poets to readers and audiences, we learn about the social relations within poetry communities and how these might link, or choose not to link, to the wider society of which they are also a part. This, in turn, allows us to offer interpretations as to the motivation behind such ways of working (the ethical and psychological reasons behind the exchange), in addition to the methods of operation (the practical means by which the exchange takes place).

Much ethnographic research on The Gift draws its case studies from Pacific tribes where gifts have been proffered for status, allegiance and community building. While such precedents can be interestingly applied to contemporary poetry communities, there are clear differences in community to consider. As contemporary anthropologist Marilyn Strathern

warns: “the difference between Western and Melanesian (we/they) sociality means that one cannot simply extend Western ... insights to the Melanesian case” (Strathern 1988, p. 7). Strathern counters such obstacles by attempting to “show the contextualised nature of indigen-ous constructs by exposing the contextualized nature of analytical ones” (ibid., p. 8). In this book’s analysis, the case studies from North American and UK poetry communities are conceived of as metaphorical “tribes”, who, while sharing with Melanesian and Polynesian tribes some motivations for, and operations concerning, gift exchange, do so from their own specific positioning within an advanced global capitalist economy and prevailing Western conceptualisations of personhood.

The term “tribe” is today a somewhat contested one, given its former use by colonial ethnologists as a description of an evolutionary phase.¹ Yet the term is also used today without this evolutionary inflection, to denote the cohesive identity of a social group. Anthropologist Maurice Godelier stresses that the social cohesion of a tribe may differ from that of a society and uses the case study of the Baruya tribe in New Guinea to show how it is a society rather than a tribe in which “relations create an overarching shared identity to which individual Baruya feel they belong, a whole that enables them to exist and reproduce” (Godelier 2009, p. 138). Yet within this societal framework, the Baruya also have a tribal identity which is based on former or current shared territory, principles of social organisation, lineage and language.

In the case of the British and American poetry scenes discussed here, we might view “innovative poets” as a tribe, and poets more generally as a society.² Or we might see poets as a tribe within an artistic (denoting practitioners of any artistic discipline) society. Alternatively, both artists and poets can be viewed as tribes within the wider Western society they are also part of. In such poetry scenarios the aim is not to prove comprehensively that a particular poetic group is either its own tribe or society but to use the idea of poetry tribes more figuratively, drawing on ethnographical insights on the functioning of gift exchanges and identity formation within different social groups.

In the wider societies that these poetry gifts circulate in, though the dominance of capitalism means that gift exchange is secondary to contractual exchange, gifts do still occur. Not now necessarily seen as religious acts within these secular societies, acts of giving are nevertheless prominent and increasingly required as capitalism’s perpetual call to optimise productivity leads to the downsizing of firms and rising unemployment.

“Charity is back”, as Godelier states, since, although “the need had diminished when the number of socially excluded fell and social justice increased; it becomes necessary when the excluded populations increase and the state can no longer single handedly reduce the injustices, the isolation, and the neglect” (Godelier 1999, p. 3).

Different from the gift exchanges within kinship groups which bind people together, these acts produce more alienated gifts from donors to unknown recipients, given for “the greater good”. Charitable acts are bestowed by the state through welfare measures and state redistribution through taxes; and by individuals, increasingly lobbied by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). However, both sources struggle to meet the demands that high unemployment places on them. Strains on state redistribution persist, as the current vogue in UK documentary/reality television shows such as *Benefits Street* (2014), *Benefits Britain: Life on the Dole* (2015) and *Benefits by the Sea: Jaywick* (2015–2016), depicting those receiving state assistance voyeuristically, and frequently *uncharitably*, bears witness to.

While tribal societies operating through gift exchanges must do so to facilitate kinship alliances, which in turn contribute to their livelihoods, the same obligation does not exist in modern secular Western societies. Although gifts continue to be bestowed in these societies, there is not the same level of obligation among donors. To ensure that state redistribution persists, the protocol for this is often to be found in constitutions and policy documents, arising from deeply embedded philosophical tracts, which contain the underlying ethos for social behaviour. In this sense, the state preserves ideals that function as sacred objects for such societies. As much as there is a need to give in societies, there is also a need to retain; as Godelier concludes: “no society, no identity can survive over time and provide a foundation for the individuals and groups that make up a society if there are no fixed points, realities that are exempted ... from the exchange of gifts or from trade” (Godelier 1999, p. 8) and in secular societies, these fixed or “sacred” points feature as parliamentary acts or policy doctrines. While they themselves are exempted from gift exchange or trade, such documents feature the ideals which justify a society’s behaviour in these fields. However, since they may also shift their parameters according to those in power, they are not binding to the degree that gift exchanges between kinship groups may be.

The poetic tribes that operate within these modern Western secular societies do so more through kinship alliances and gift exchanges which

also serve to bind the groups together. Hyde's (1983) ethnographic analysis of artistic gift exchanges in a contemporary Western setting provides a valuable precursor to a study of contemporary poetic "tribes". He argues that "works of art exist simultaneously in two 'economies,' a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift there is no art" (Hyde 1983, p. xi). It is, therefore, imperative for artistic production to involve gift exchanges, he suggests, without which the artwork could not function. For Hyde, there is also a moral obligation attached to artistic exchanges; since the gift of artistic talent comes freely to the artist, it should also be passed on freely. He believes that "the spirit of the gift is kept alive by its constant donation" (*ibid.*, p. xiv) and that "so long as the gift is not withheld, the creative spirit will remain a stranger to the economics of scarcity" (*ibid.*, p. 146). This obligation is invariably one of kinship alliances since the artwork moves between recipients.

The importance of gift exchanges to an artwork accordingly means that "every modern artist who has chosen to labor with a gift must sooner or later wonder how he or she is to survive in a society dominated by market exchange" (*ibid.*, p. xiii). To free the artistic practice from the demands of commercial exchange, Hyde recommends the adoption of a second career or patron to meet one's material needs. The second career pathway is one many contemporary poets may follow, with jobs in teaching, arts administration or in unrelated fields, which supply or supplement the salaries that poetry making itself may not yield. Not many today benefit from patrons but viewing this kind of support in terms of contemporary poetry, one could place grant funders in this category, including crowdfunding enterprises such as Kickstarter, which have recently grown in popularity in the arts. However, to recommend such pathways is to gloss over the demands they place on time, energy and the relational networks involved (with additional spousal income also falling under this category of relational networks).

Grant applications require time spent on administration and networking, decreasing the time available to make the artwork. Both grants and crowdfunding involve selling the work to a consumer, which comes with the associated potential pressure to modify the work in order to make it marketable. While with crowdfunding the amount consumers pay is small, they still need to be persuaded to pay it, which may involve aesthetic compromise or put strain on relationships where there is a social

obligation to support projects. The highly competitive nature of grant applications and limited funds available from these sources, along with the difficulties in getting crowdfunding projects off the ground, also means these strategies involve a high risk of failure. Those undertaking this pathway give their time with no guarantee of success and can often only do so if funded by a second career.

Likewise, squeezing artistic practice into the space left over from another career may limit the quality of the artwork that the practitioner is able, under such constraints, to produce. There may also be repercussions for the practitioner's own relational networks in terms of family and friendship ties that suffer as a result of the decreased time available to nurture them; or from the pressure to fund or otherwise facilitate projects from those within the network. Both scenarios, as Hyde has observed with regard to artists, still involve the market. Either the artist engages with the market through a second career, or a patron does so on their behalf, offering money gained in the market as a gift to the artist.

The strain that such scenarios place on kinship relations is not, however, considered by Hyde, who concedes that "I do not ... take up the negative side of gift exchange—gifts that leave oppressive sense of obligation, gifts that manipulate or humiliate, gifts that establish and maintain hierarchies" (ibid., p. xvi). While examples of this kind of gift are also not the main focus of this study, they are considered in terms of motivations for exchange within poetic communities. To facilitate such poetic gifts there is an element of sacrifice involved both on behalf of the practitioner and those involved in their relational networks. The reasons behind such sacrifice may differ from person to person, though specific communities can cohere, to a degree, in their motivations. In this book, while a number of communities—all encouraging the cultural production of poetry—are explored, differing motivational orientations emerge between and within these communities.

Some, as we find with a number of spoken word artists, for example, may not be averse to selling their work, but, due to the limitations of the market may initially have to proceed without funding, therefore betting on future material returns. This is a careerist strategy which shares some objectives with ethnographic analyses of *The Gift* where gifts are proffered as bids on the future returns which increased status and alliances with powerful individuals might yield. The most well-known ethnographic example of gifts of this nature is the potlatch, which Mauss explains in his seminal 1924 "Essai sur le don" (Mauss 1969). He offers

two examples of potlatches: the Melanesian kula and the American Indian potlatch from the Northwest Pacific coast. In the potlatch, one gives in order to receive honour and prestige. Often considered an agonistic gift, the potlatch involves giving to excess and can be competitive in nature. In kula exchanges, bracelets are exchanged for necklaces in an ongoing circulation where items are not to be retained.

Nancy Munn's (1986) reappraisal of the kula (particularly building on Malinowski's research in Kiriwina) shows how the fame gained through kula exchanges is not representative of accumulative material wealth but rather of the building of relations between people who themselves come to be associated with the genealogical heritage and prestige of the exchanged gifts. Similarly, it is not financial returns alone which poets with a more careerist strategy seek but relational returns from recipients, as well as the cognitive and affective rewards of praxis. Thus, Alison Knowles observes that while she is "not averse to selling work" she also "distribute(s) ... work by gifts and donations", since, for her, "gifts ... are above all else a way to thank someone for something done for you: connections, love, admiration, a rich idea, lots of things but personal" (Burnett 2007).

For other poets and poetry recipients, there may be a more Marxist agenda, with the alternative economic and social structures which gifts operate through representing an alternative to capitalism. Yet these poetries do not in themselves enact a revolution but rather represent a working alongside the market economy. Although theirs is a social innovation carried out "in der Tat" (in action) as Marx would have it; it is a contained, practical and aesthetic response to the social exclusion that capitalism has rendered widespread, as opposed to full social revolution. The economic structures employed here often rely on a system of barter, through which poetry goods and services are exchanged, alongside other market interactions such as those gained through a second job, grants or patrons. This is also consistent with ethnographic analyses of *The Gift*, which show certain gift economies (the Indian Hindu *jamani* system, for example) to have co-existed with, and be interrelated with, barter or monetary economies (Bloch and Parry 1989, p. 7). Bloch and Parry have reinforced this interaction of economies, asserting that "the significance of money and market exchange has been ... under-estimated in the ethnographic description and analysis of pre-capitalist economies" (*ibid.*, p. 8).

Today's integration of economies is not, then, without precedent. However, it is now accelerated, with Godelier outlining how: "in a

world dominated by globalization, no society, large or small, can produce the material conditions it needs to exist unless it participates, more and more, in the world capitalist system” (Godelier 2009, p. 157). Such observations are magnified by the Baruya’s recent history; a tribal society who have seen a national currency based on the dollar (the Kina) replace their former salt money “and many social relations which once called for exchanges today call for exchanges of money” (ibid., p. 209).

The poetry scenes explored here operate from within the UK and USA; centres of the global capitalist system. Yet, while the Baruya seem to welcome their increasing participation in capitalism (Godelier describes how “many told me they wanted to become ‘modern’ ... to go into business”, ibid.), the poetry communities featured vary in their attitudes to commerce. Some are largely antagonistic to the market, and, though they must encounter it through one of the routes signalled by Hyde, offer their poetry as gifts whose end is not the accumulation of capital. Such gifts share qualities with kula exchanges which demand that they be continually circulated rather than accumulated; as with the early Fluxus practice of mail art moving from recipient to recipient, or small press publications where the readers of one issue become the writers of another. Other poetry scenes are not so averse to material gain, with slam poets, for example, often seeking (though not often receiving) financial returns.

These poets may welcome the rewards of cultural capital, as Bourdieu has defined them. He suggested that culture shares many of the properties of economic capital, describing cultural habits as a *resource* that could generate “profits” which in turn could potentially be subject to *monopolisation* by certain individuals and groups (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Yet, as Peter Middleton suggests, innovative poetry as yet generates limited cultural capital. He describes poetry readings as “the staging of these aspirational dramas of poetry’s potential ... (which rely on) ... the poets and audiences working within the material, economic constraints of an art that generates little income and only moderate cultural capital” (Middleton 2004, p. 32).

Hyde, moreover, is suspicious of artwork that seeks financial return, warning that “the exploitation of the arts” is currently “without precedent” (Hyde 1983, p. 158) and that “the more we allow ... commodity art ... (a more homogenised art form as dictated to by the demands of the mass market) ... to define and control our gifts, the less gifted we will become, as individuals and as a society” (ibid., p. 159). Here the

word “gifted” shifts in meaning from a method of circulation to a level of talent. For Hyde “the inner gift that we accept as the object of our labor” and “the outer gift that has become a vehicle of culture” (*ibid.*, p. xvii) have a symbiotic relationship whereby the circulation of the outer gift facilitates or “fertilize(s)” (*ibid.*, p. 148) the inner gift. The more this circulation becomes monetised, the less the inner gift is fertilised, resulting in more sterile, less “gifted” work.

While sympathetic with Hyde’s depiction of the need for exploratory work that does not pander to the demands and restrictions of the market, and the pressures that the practitioner making such work in a globalised advanced market economy will face; this book differs in its interpretation of the way that the gift’s circulation “feeds” the creative impetus. In the poetry scenes explored here, the focus is not purely on the returns of the outer gift but also on inalienable possessions: those aspects of poetry that cannot be given away to be redistributed but stay instead with the author.

Annette Weiner (1992) provides valuable ethnographic research on the importance of inalienable possessions as gifts which are not ceded. Weiner’s exploration builds on Mauss’s focus on return gifts, which Hyde takes as his precedent. Mauss focuses on gifts as reciprocal exchanges, operating through the three key obligations of giving, receiving and returning. Of these obligations, returning is the most widely explored, with the suggestion that there is a spirit in the gift (“hau”) which compels the recipient to return it. Weiner’s focus, however, is rather on what is retained in gift economies. She shows how in the case of Samoan fine mats, for example, some are given but others—highly valued ones—are often retained. In such scenarios it is as much about what is kept as given; as she states: “the elementary principle of keeping-while-giving rather than the norm of reciprocity takes us to the heart of the problem Mauss evoked in his discussion of the Maori hau” (Weiner 1992, p. 46).

There has long been a question mark over Mauss’s explanation of “hau” as something magical, with Lévi-Strauss denouncing such a reading as evidence of Mauss’s logic having been swayed by “a mystification, an effect quite often produced in the minds of ethnographers by indigenous people” (Lévi-Strauss (1950) 1987, p. 47). While Hyde also speaks of the spirit of the gift, his is a “creative spirit” rather than a magical one. He is also more circumspect as to where such a spirit originates, believing that “it might be hard to say with any certainty where we will

find the homeland of an inner gift ... (although) ... artists in every age have offered us myths to suggest where we should look” (Hyde 1983, p. 146). What Hyde is sure of, however, is that “the spirit of the gift is kept alive by its constant donation” (*ibid.*, p. xiv)—a different position from Weiner’s stance on inalienable possessions and from some poetry’s reliance on certain elements being left out of the exchange. Rather than the “outer” creative gift giving back to the inner gift through acts of tribute, as Hyde outlines, once inalienability enters (or resists) the exchange there is also an acceptance among recipients that they may not be able to either fully receive or return the gift.

In poetry terms, the inalienability of the gift can be linked to the unintelligibility of the poetic act. The reader or audience member may strive to return the gift by accessing its meaning but can, perhaps, never fully return it to the poet since they will bring different interpretations to the exchange, including the possibility of a failure to offer any interpretation, or to act, at all. In this sense the poetry act, particularly one that does not draw on established literary conventions to convey meaning, can perhaps never be fully given or returned.

Poets working with more inalienable meanings share certain qualities of Pacific language ideologies. Researching the distinct modes of communication between Westerners and the Urapmin people of Papua New Guinea, Robbins has found that “modern western language ideology places heavy emphasis on speech as a form of giving ... what speakers give in speech are their intentions and the meanings these intentions create” (Robbins 2012, p. 30). However, Pacific language ideologies do not share this focus on intentions, since there is recognition of, and tolerance for, the fact that what is in another’s mind cannot always be known. “As far as intentions or meanings are concerned words are empty boxes that recipients have to fill”, and therefore, “in many Pacific language ideologies listeners are defined as more important than speakers in the process of ‘giving’ meaning to what is said” (*ibid.*, pp. 31–32).

There is a difference in expectation in Western and Pacific language ideologies between how much meaning the speaker should convey and how much effort the listener should exert to find meaning. Similarly, the writers and readers of, or listeners to, innovative poetry have different expectations as to where the work of meaning-making takes place and by whom. The writer is not expected to fully disclose meaning; the reader is expected to make efforts to find it. This is, of course, also true of more “mainstream” poetry where the reader may also expect to work to find

meaning but it is in innovative poetry where the stakes are higher, since there is an increased possibility of it encountering alienated readers and listeners who are unable and/or unwilling to interpret its surprising and/or difficult form. Even those who do fully engage with such work can frequently find themselves, quite deliberately, left without a sense of closure or any light bulb moment of rewarding epiphany. Therefore, the innovative poetry exchange is more pressurised, with meaning functioning as the inalienable quality in the gift, remaining with the giver rather than eliciting a return.

However, it does not follow that nothing is given away in these exchanges. Poetry is not entirely retained by the poet but is partially given to its readership. Rather than sacred objects that must remain out of the exchange, today's poetry gifts, therefore, operate partway between inalienable possessions and reciprocal gifts which are offered in exchange for varied returns consistent with the practitioner's specific motivations. This book explores poetries with inalienable aesthetic qualities, though the extent of this inalienability varies between case studies. Some, like certain sound and visual poetries that break words down into incremental sounds and cyphers, are substantially inalienable poetic gifts that do not easily disclose meaning and instead rely heavily on readers and audiences to both participate in the meaning-making process and to accept that such a process may not yield tangible results.

Hyde shows awareness of such unintelligibility when he identifies the "suspension of disbelief by which we become receptive to a work of the imagination" (Hyde 1983, p. 151) but his is not as pressurised a state as that which recipients of innovative poetries may experience. Indeed, in Hyde's conception, it is a measure of the artist's success that such suspension will inevitably lead to "a moment of grace, a communion" (*ibid.*), whereas in innovative poetries engaging with unintelligibility, such moments may be harder to come by. Other poetries like spoken word may involve more straightforwardly legible writing yet their focus on increased audience participation, at times involving subversion of audience expectation, also introduces inalienability through the unpredictability of reception. While both kinds of practice operate as gifts, the demands placed on the audience differ, with poetry that is less easily legible making more interpretive demands of its recipients.

Conceiving of meaning as an inalienable possession that cannot be ceded in some poetries may also have moral implications, if we contend, as Hyde does, that the artist has a moral obligation to pass on the

creative spirit which they themselves have received freely. Yet Hyde, nevertheless, accommodates Gary Snyder's belief that there can be some capitalisation of this gift. Snyder states: "I always looked on the poems I wrote as gifts ... You get a good poem and you don't know where it came from ... and you feel gratitude. And you'd feel a little uncomfortable, I think, if you capitalized too much on that" (ibid., p. 149). To which Hyde responds: "we nourish the spirit by disbursing our gifts, not by capitalizing upon them (not capitalizing 'too much,' says Snyder—there seems to be a little leeway)" (ibid.). Hyde accepts that a certain amount of interaction with capital (thus obstructing the gift's free distribution) does not necessarily destroy the creative gift. Perhaps, therefore, the partial retention of the gift might be similarly tolerated.

Although Hyde may express misgivings about such retention, describing those who hold onto gifts as blocking "that empty place into which new energy may flow", resulting in "petrification, writer's block, 'the flow of life is backed up'" (ibid., p. 146); Weiner's work on inalienable possessions allows a more positive interpretation which does not brand such retention as immoral. Moreover, recent ethnographic research has also shown that it is not necessarily the property of market exchange to be morally corrupt and the gift to be morally sound, with neither gift exchange nor commodity exchange constituting morally homogeneous and undifferentiated categories. As Parry and Bloch note, "*our* ideology of the gift has been constructed in antithesis to market exchange. The idea of the purely altruistic gift is the other side of the coin from the idea of the purely interested utilitarian exchange" (Parry and Bloch 1989, p. 9). While in actual fact there are numerous examples, as Parry has shown, where "gift exchange ... represents a dire moral peril while commodity exchange is distinguished from it by its moral neutrality" (ibid.).

One such example is the *dana* (pure gift) of the Hindu pilgrims to Benares, offered in both cash and kind by way of atonement. The priests who receive these gifts "talk obsessively about the moral peril which their receipt of *dana* entails" (ibid., p. 67), since the gifts are thought to embody and transmit the sins of the donor to the recipient, who is "likened to a sewer through which the moral filth of his patrons is passed" (ibid., p. 68). Parry explains how in these scenarios, "from a moral point of view there is nothing to choose between gifts in cash and kind. In whichever form, the gift embodies evil and represents a peril" (ibid.).

Beneath such apparent cultural variation in the moral categorisation of market and gift exchange, however, Parry discerns some common

principles. In almost every society there are values which should not be exchanged at all, with moral peril accompanying attempts to make them objects of transaction; matters of generalised reciprocity should not be made into negative reciprocity (i.e. gifts given for the good of the community or for spiritual returns should not be used for egotistical calculation and short-term individual gain); and exchanges should be equitable, though there may be considerable cultural variation as to what constitutes equity. “Above all,” Parry concludes, “exchanges ... stand condemned on grounds of equity. The priest ... (who receives the *dana*) ... is tainted by the suspicion that in reality he is getting something for nothing ... the merchant by the suspicion that he created nothing and his profit was therefore fraudulent” (ibid., pp. 88–89). Moral condemnation comes from doubts as to whether “those who most demonstrably benefit by the exchange have actually contributed anything at all” (ibid., p. 88).

Hyde’s moral suspicion of artworks that operate in the market is, therefore, grounded in the premise that creative inspiration has been received freely by the artist and, thus, to capitalise on it is not an equitable exchange: by doing so, artists are receiving something for nothing. Though there is a labour involved in the conversion of inner creative gifts to outer cultural gifts, this work is not itself enough to outweigh the debt that the artist owes to the original gift of the creative spirit; in Hyde’s words, “these are secondary tasks” (Hyde 1983, p. 145).

However, such a conception removes the labour involved in artistic production from the parameters of the exchange, just as the capitalist exchange of labour power for money ultimately obscures this labour. There is, therefore, also a morality to be found in exchanges that make the labour involved more explicit; as with poetries where the work of aesthetic meaning is not completed by the poet, who rather invites the reader to participate in it. Both givers and receivers labour together in this poetic production where both parties benefit from, and contribute to, the exchange. By poets offering partial meanings, or gestures towards meaning, such poetry gives as well as keeps, following Weiner’s “elementary principle of keeping-while-giving”. Rather than such keeping being immoral, it highlights the labour involved in poetry by questioning the parameters of authorial-readerly contribution, while also encouraging behaviours of mental dexterity and tolerance of surprise and uncertainty in the recipient: further examples of the important cultural work that such poetry undertakes.

Both gifts partially retained, and those requiring ongoing circulation differ, however, from the common Western conception of the gift as

something that has no return. While it may be conceded, as Hyde does up to a point, that it is not immoral to retain elements of the creative gift, either through the accumulation of capital gain, or through inalienable meanings; such a concession does not altogether remove the dominant notion that gifts must be disinterested in order to be conceived of as gifts. Indeed, a common criticism of Mauss's idea of gift reciprocity has been its implications for the perceived altruistic nature of the gift; namely, if we give something only because we know that it will be returned, how can it qualify as a gift?³

The gift given with entirely no thought of return is considered by Derrida, who asks:

is not the gift ... that which interrupts economy? That which, in suspending economic circulation, no longer gives rise to exchange? ... That which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure, and ... so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return? (Derrida 1992, p. 7)

This is a very different conception of the gift from that offered by the poetry exchanges showcased here, which all rely, though to varying degrees, upon reciprocal returns. In Derrida's schema, the donor must not be aware that they are giving and the receiver must not acknowledge the gift. However, the conditions under which this kind of gift can actually occur are rare, with Derrida citing death as the true gift. Derrida's gift requires a complete distinction of duty from desire; a selflessness that is removed from the desire to give, or to do good.

Yet even when poetry is given away, receiving no material returns and limited relational ones, there is still a desire to give. There is also often a hope that this gift will have some positive effect, even if this remains unknown. It is essential for most poetry to have the chance of some return for it to fulfil its affective, cognitive and relational functions; though practitioners will vary in their biases towards each of these. Therefore, under Derrida's line of enquiry, poetry does not embody a gift at all. However, ethnographic analyses of *The Gift* offer many examples of gifts which require reciprocity, and what this book offers is, accordingly, an ethnographic-informed study of specific poetic communities where the cultural work of poetry is largely undertaken through gifts conceived of as reciprocal exchanges. This exchange is one where donors and recipients exchange affective, cognitive and relational returns that