

ECONOMY

OF THE

UNLOST



ANNE CARSON

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Economy of the Unlost

(READING SIMONIDES OF KEOS WITH PAUL CELAN)

Anne Carson

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carson, Anne, 1951-

Economy of the unlost : reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan / Anne Carson.

p. cm. — (Martin classical lectures. New series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-691-03677-2 (alk. paper)

1. Simonides, ca. 556–467 B.C.—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Celan, Paul—Criticism and interpretation. 3. Literature, Comparative—Greek and German. 4. Literature, Comparative—German and Greek. 5. Economics in literature.

Aesthetics. I. Title. II. Series: Martin classical lectures (Unnumbered). New series.

PA4411.C37 1999

884'.01—dc21 98-499

This book has been composed in Baskerville.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992

(Permanence of Paper).

<http://pup.princeton.edu>

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

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Note on Method

Nur hat ein jeder sein Maas.
(Hölderlin)

THERE IS too much self in my writing. Do you know the term Lukács uses to describe aesthetic structure? *Eine fensterlose Monade*.¹ I do not want to be a windowless monad—my training and trainers opposed subjectivity strongly, I have struggled since the beginning to drive my thought out into the landscape of science and fact where other people converse logically and exchange judgments—but I go blind out there. So writing involves some dashing back and forth between that darkening landscape where facticity is strewn and a windowless room cleared of everything I do not know. It is the clearing that takes time. It is the clearing that is a mystery.

Once cleared the room writes itself. I copy down the names of everything left in it and note their activity.

How does the clearing occur? Lukács says it begins with my intent to excise everything that is not accessible to the immediate experience (*Erlebbarkeit*) of the self as self. Were that possible, it would seal the room on its own boundaries like a cosmos. Lukács is prescribing a room for aesthetic work; it would be a gesture of false consciousness to say academic writing can take place there. And yet, you know as well as I, thought finds itself in this room in its best moments—

locked inside its own pressures, fishing up facts of the landscape from notes or memory as well as it may—vibrating (as Mallarmé would say) with their disappearance. People have different views on how to represent the vibration. “Names” and “activity” are euphemisms for the work. You may prefer different euphemisms; I guess the important thing is to copy down whatever vibration you see while your attention is strong.

Attention is a task we share, you and I. To keep attention strong means to keep it from settling. Partly for this reason I have chosen to talk about two men at once. They keep each other from settling. Moving and not settling, they are side by side in a conversation and yet no conversation takes place. Face to face, yet they do not know one another, did not live in the same era, never spoke the same language. With and against, aligned and adverse, each placed like a surface on which the other may come into focus. Sometimes you can see a celestial object better by looking at something else, with it, in the sky.

Think of the Greek preposition *πρός*. When used with the accusative case, this preposition means “toward, upon, against, with, ready for, face to face, engaging, concerning, touching, in reply to, in respect of, compared with, according to, as accompaniment for.” It is the preposition chosen by John the Evangelist to describe the relationship between God and The Word in the first verse of the first chapter of his Revelation:

“And The Word was with God” is how the usual translation goes. What kind of witness is it?

I am writing this on the train to Milan. We flash past towers and factories, stations, yards, then a field where a herd of black horses is just turning to race uphill. “Attempts at description are stupid,” George Eliot says, yet one may encounter a fragment of unexhausted time. Who can name its transactions, the sense that fell through us of untouchable win or unknown effort—one black mane?

¹ Lukács (1917), 19.

False Sail

HUMANS VALUE economy. Why? Whether we are commending a mathematician for her proof or a draughtsman for his use of line or a poet for furnishing us with nuggets of beauty and truth, economy is a trope of intellectual, aesthetic and moral value. How do we come to take comfort in this notion? It is arguable that the trope does not predate the invention of coinage. And certainly in a civilization so unconditionally committed to greed as ours is, no one asks questions any more the wisdom of saving money. But money is just a mediator for our greed. What does it mean to save time, or trouble, or face, or breath, or shoe leather? Or words? His biographers recount that when the poet Paul Celan was four years old, he took a notice to make up his own fairy tales. He went about telling these new versions to everyone in the house until his father advised him to cut it out. "If you need stories the Old Testament is full of them." To make up new stories, Celan's father thought, is a waste of words.¹ This father's sentiments are not unusual. My own father was inclined to make skeptical comments whenever he saw me hunched at the kitchen table covering pages with small print. Perhaps poets are ones who waste what their fathers would save. But the question remains, What exactly is lost to us when words are wasted? And where is the human store to which such goods are gathered?

There is a poem of Paul Celan that seems to be concerned with the gathering in of certain poetic goods to a store that he calls "you." Among these goods are the lyric traditions of the poetry of courtly love, of Christian mysticism, of Mallarmé, of Hölderlin, not to say Celan himself. Celan has chosen to contemplate these traditions through the focusing device of one brilliant and drastic moment from the romance of Tristan and Isolde: the moment of the false sail.²

MATIÈRE DE BRETAGNE

Ginsterlicht, gelb, die Hänge
eitern gen Himmel, der Dorn
wirbt um die Wunde, es läutet
darin, es ist Abend, das Nichts
rollt seine Meere zur Andacht,
das Blutsegel hält auf dich zu.

Trocken, verlandet
das Bett hinter dir, verschilft
seine Stunde, oben,
beim Stern, die milchigen
Priele schwatzen im Schlamm, Steindattel,

unten, gebuscht, klappt ins Gebläu, eine Staude

Vergänglichkeit, schön,
grüßt dein Gedächtnis.

(Kanntet ihr mich,
Hände? Ich ging
den gegabelten Weg, den ihr wiest, mein Mund
spie seinen Schotter, ich ging, meine Zeit,
wandernde Wächte, warf ihren Schatten—kanntet ihr mich?)

Hände, die dorn-
umworbene Wunde, es läutet,
Hände, das Nichts, seine Meere,
Hände, im Ginsterlicht, das
Blutsegel
hält auf dich zu.

Du
du lehrst
du lehrst deine Hände
du lehrst deine Hände du lehrst
du lehrst deine Hände
schlafen

[MATIÈRE DE BRETAGNE

Gorselight, yellow, the slopes
suppurate to heaven, the thorn
pays court to the wound, there is ringing
inside, it is evening, the nothing
rolls its seas toward devotion,
the bloodsail is heading for you.

Dry, run aground
is the bed behind you, caught in rushes
is its hour, above,
with the star, the milky
tideways jabber in mud, stonedate,
below, bunched up, gapes into blueness, a bush-worth
of transience, beautiful,

greet your memory.

(Did you know me,
hands? I went
the forked way you showed, my mouth
spat its gravel, I went, my time,
wandering watches, threw its shadow—did you know me?)

Hands, the thorn-
courted wound, there is ringing,
hands, the nothing, its seas,
hands, in the gorselight, the
bloodsail
is heading for you.

You
you teach
you teach your hands
you teach your hands you teach
you teach your hands
to sleep]

What is “gorselight”? Yellow broom flowers. To another poet they might be beautiful, for Celan they suppurate. Their phrasing recalls the first verse of Hölderlin’s poem “Hälfte des Lebens” (“Half of Life”): compare the sound of *Ginsterlicht, gelb, die Hänge* and *Mit gelben Birnen hängen*.³ But whereas Hölderlin’s yellow pears are steeped in beauty, Celan’s gorselight issues pus. The contrast suggests a mood. The mood continues quietly in Celan’s imagery of thorn and wound, as Christian and courtly conventions of love combine toward “devotion” (*Andacht*). But what sails toward devotion is “the Nothing” (*das Nichts*) and the mood swerves into negative theology. As any reader of Celan knows, he is at home in this mood. Here, however, it may be meant to evoke that other “poet of nothingness” whose verse is full of seas and sailing, Mallarmé.⁴ Remember the tenth double-page of *Un Coup de dés*, which begins with the word *RIEN* high on the left-hand side and is typeset so that the rest of the words roll themselves out across the page in waves to end in “the wave in which all reality dissolves” at the lower right.⁵ Finally, Celan’s sea is also a sea of romance bringing Isolt and Tristan on a ship that flies a “bloodsail.”

All these fluent traditions run aground in the second stanza, which is dry, stuck on land, lodged in rushes, bushed up, jabbering mud and which engenders the third stanza: five verses stalled in a bracket. The poet’s thought stops on itself. His path is forked and his utterance spat gravel. Celan has crafted these middle verses out of immobility to emphasize the movement of the rest. Seas and phenomena flow again in the fourth stanza and go rolling out the end of the page without a stop. The poem as a whole, recapitulating the first stanza, has the rhythmic

of a bloodsail, sailing forward in waves from gorselight to gorselight to you.

Celan's "you" is hard to fix, as his bloodsail is a difficult color. If he means a reference to the Tristan legend, the sail should be either white or black. Tristan had arranged this sign with the helmsman bringing Isolt to him by sea: a white sail for Isolt prospering, a black sail for her catastrophe. When Tristan's jealous wife reports to him that the sail is "blacker than mulberry," Tristan turns his face to the wall and dies.⁶ There is blood in the old French version but only dreamblood; as Tristan lies dying, Isolt out at sea recalls dreaming that she held in her lap the head of a boar that was staining her all over with its blood and making her robe red.

Blood of course might signify simply fatality. Sail that kills. But let us consider the matter historically. Our oldest literary example of the trope of the false sail comes from the ancient Greek poet Simonides (556–467 B.C.). Simonides mentions the sail and calls it red: φοινίκεον. Indeed he mentions it *in order to call it red*, in defiance of an existing tradition. For the false sail was already an old story by Simonides' time, part of the myth of Theseus, of which other versions existed. Simonides did not scruple to waste a few more words on the subject. The poem he composed is not extant, but we do have two fragmentary citations. From Plutarch we get news of the sail:

Then Theseus cheered his father by boasting that he would defeat the Minotaur. So his father gave the helmsman a second sail, white this time, telling him to hoist the white sail if he were returning with Theseus safe, otherwise to sail with the black and so signify catastrophe. But Simonides says that the sail given by Aigeus was "not white but a red sail (φοινίκεον ἰστίον) dyed with the wet flower of the blooming holm-oak" and that this was to be the sign of their salvation.⁷

And from a scholiast we have the words of the messenger sent by Theseus to his father on the day of his return. For according to legend, Theseus is sailing into harbor when he realizes that he forgot to hoist the white sail. A messenger is dispatched to bring the true story to the father, but Aigeus has already read the death-sail and accepted its version. He throws himself into the sea. The messenger is addressing the father's corpse when he says:

βιότου κέ σε μάλλον ὄνασα πρότερος ἐλθών.

[I would have given you a profit greater than life if I had come sooner.]⁸

Simonides' messenger states his case as economically as possible. His verb (ὄνασα, from ὀνίνημι "to profit") is drawn from the sphere of commercial gain. More important, his statement takes the form of a contrary-to-fact condition. Why must the economy of the false sail be contrafactual? Because it is an impossible idea conditioned by the negative event that already exists. Two realities for the price of one. No profit in fact changes hands—but the idea of it, added to the account contrafactually, multiplies pathos and learning. Aigeus' salvation is both adduced and canceled in the messenger's spare comment. You could have your sail and falsify it too, if words were true.

White, black, red, telling, lying, lied about, forgotten, fatal, all in all the falsity of the false

sail is a rich proposition. How such propositions extend themselves to form the interior of a poem like “*Matière de Bretagne*” is hard to say. Celan combines the local Bretagne stuff of courtly traditions and ancient sailing with the local Bretagne stuff of gravel, hours, beds and personal pronouns that fold over one another like hands. He transcribes a circle of gorselight, lyrical beauty, lit by gorselight, around Nothingness. *Das Nichts* occurs twice but this word does not stop the poem or spoil the light. It is simply part of the poet’s *matière*. So too Simonides constructs the truth about the false sail negatively. “Not white but red,” he insists and then goes on to matters of local color: “dyed with the wet flower of the blooming holm oak.” The redness of his red sail stains fact deeply with the fixative of counterfact. Redder than red, redder than the blood of a boar in a dream, is the φοινίκιον that rests on white nothing.

Negation links the mentalities of Simonides and Celan. Words for “no,” “not,” “never,” “nowhere,” “nobody,” “nothing” dominate their poems and create bottomless places for reading. Not white but red. Was it not Aristotle who said, “A mistake enriches the mere truth once you see it as that.” Both Simonides and Celan are poets who see it as that. And ask us to see it as that. Us in the gorselight.

That is why the whole of Celan’s poem gathers us into a movement—toward you—the sails to the end. But you, by the time we reach you, are just folding yourself away into a place we cannot go: sleep. Blank spaces instead of words fill out the verses around you as if to suggest your gradual recession down and away from our grasp. What could your hands teach us if you had not vanished? To stand at this border with whiteness exhausts our power of listening and makes us aware of a crisis in you. We travel toward your crisis, we arrive yet we cannot construe it—the terrible thing is, after all (and most economically!) we are the false sail for which you wait.

Fragments of Simonides are cited from the editions of Page (1962) = *PMG*; Page (1981) = *FGE*; and West (1971) = *W*. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹ Chalfen (1991), 41.

² Celan (1983), 1:171.

³ This connection was suggested by Stanley Corngold, whose conversation with me about Celan’s poem made this essay possible.

⁴ The label is Sartre’s, who also cites George Poulet: “From the outset Mallarmé’s poetry is like a mirage ... in which he recognized himself not by where or how he is but by where he is not and how he is not.” Sartre (1988), 112.

⁵ Mallarmé (1977), 290–191. There are not a few echoes of Mallarmé throughout the poem, especially in the ringing (cf. Mallarmé’s “*Le Sonneur*”) and the blueness (cf. “*L’Azur*”) not to say the arranged white space into which all disappears at the end.

⁶ Does the wife lie or is the ship flying the wrong sail? Throughout the old French *version commune* (which, I assume from the title of his poem, is the one Celan has in mind), the point remains unresolved. Spector (1973), 85.

⁷ Plutarch *Life of Theseus* 17.4; Simonides fr. 550 *PMG*.

Alienation

SIMONIDES

Simonides of Keos was the smartest person in the fifth century B.C., or so I have come to believe. History has it that he was also the stingiest. Fantastical in its anecdotes, undeniable in its implications, the stinginess of Simonides can tell us something about the moral life of a user of money and something about the poetic life of an economy of loss.

No one who uses money is unchanged by that.

No one who uses money can easily get a look at their own practice. *Ask eye to see its own eyelashes*, as the Chinese proverb says. Yet Simonides did so, not only because he was smart. History placed Simonides on the cusp of two economic systems. His life forms a kind of pointed projection arising at the place where coined money transected the premonetary culture of archaic Greece.

COIN

A coin is a flattened piece of metal of standardized weight with a design imprinted on one or both sides to indicate what individual or community issued it and will receive it again. The first true coinage, Herodotos tell us, was a Lydian invention and so datable to about 700 B.C. Lydian coins were originally of electrum, a natural alloy of gold and silver. On the Greek mainland the cities of Corinth and Athens began to strike coins of silver before 550 and by the end of the sixth century the use of coinage was widespread throughout the Greek world.

But the monetary system of the Greek world was anarchic in early times. Each city could enforce the circulation of its own currency internally but abroad coins were accepted only on the basis of weight. Moreover, their large denominations suggest that the earliest coins were struck not for commercial use in local markets but to facilitate government bureaucracy (e.g. for paying mercenaries, financing public works and cults, discharging harbor tolls or other taxes).² Private individuals surely found uses for currency, which increasingly came to dominate retail trade and personal order, but money did not simply *replace* the premonetary structures of economic life. Rather, it penetrated these gradually and unevenly over the course of several centuries, meanwhile enjoying a weird coexistence with anachronistic systems of exchange whose activity in fact contradicted the monetary rationale in important particulars.³

GIFT

Before there is money, many complex societies order their economic lives, to a significant

extent,⁴ by means of gifts and gift exchange. Historians have shown how an ideology of aristocratic gift exchange, conspicuous throughout the Homeric poems and also well evidenced in archaeological remains of the Homeric world, continued to inform the archaic and classical Greek societies of the eighth to the fourth centuries B.C., coexisting tenaciously with the spread of money and commodity exchange.⁵ Gift exchange forms part of what is called an “embedded economy,” that is, a sociocultural system in which the elements of economic life are embedded in noneconomic institutions like kinship, marriage, hospitality, artistic patronage and ritual friendship. These function through a maze of social, religious and symbolic interactions whose core is the exchange of gifts.⁶

Marcel Mauss initiated the study of gifts and gift economy in his celebrated *Essai sur le don*. Here he describes societies where gift-giving is a mechanism of exchange that is at once material and moral and knits the community together in a living fabric of value. Mauss cites a proverb from New Caledonia:

Our feasts are the movement of a needle which sews together the parts of our reed roof making of these a single roof, one word.⁷

Mauss emphasizes that such a “single roof” is continuously woven out of three interrelated obligations: to give, to receive, to repay. Considering these three requirements, we begin to see how the moral life established by such transactions differs from that of a money economy. A gift has both economic and spiritual content, is personal and reciprocal, and depends on a relationship that endures over time. Money is an abstraction that passes one way and impersonally between people whose relationship stops with the transfer of cash. To use Marx’s terms, a commodity is an alienable object exchanged between two transactors enjoying a state of mutual independence, while a gift is an inalienable object exchanged between two reciprocally dependent transactors.⁸ Gift and commodity represent two different notions of value, embodied in two different sets of social relations. The sets ought to be mutually exclusive. In fact, historically and psychologically, they overlap.

XENIA

Take for example the mode of gift exchange that the ancient Greeks call ξενία (*xenia*). Usually translated “hospitality” or “guest-friendship” or “ritualized friendship,” the institution of *xenia* pervades the socioeconomic interactions of the Homeric, archaic and classical periods. Gabriel Herman defines *xenia* as “a bond of solidarity manifesting itself in an exchange of goods and services between individuals originating from separate social units. The characteristic features of *xenia*, namely its basis in reciprocation and its assumption of perpetuity, seem to have woven a texture of personal alliances that held the ancient world together.

In spirit, *xenia* is emphatically nonmercantile: goods are not measured, profit is not the point.¹⁰ In fact, the point is to put yourself in debt:

The aim of the gift economy is accumulation for de-accumulation; the gift economy

above all a debt economy, where the actors strive to maximize outgoings. The system can be described as one of “alternating disequilibrium” where the aim is never to have debt “paid off” but to preserve a situation of personal indebtedness.¹¹

For whereas money is concerned to change the status quo, gifts aim to sustain it. The profound conservatism of a gift economy secures its own continuance and moral prestige in two ways. First, by derogation of all that is not gift. We can see a deep mistrust of money, trade, profit, commerce and commercial persons pervading Greek socioeconomic attitudes from Homer’s time through Aristotle’s. “Commodity exchange was not an acceptable activity for a Greek,” one historian concludes.¹² Wealth is a good thing to have but not a good thing to go *after*. At the same time, a gift economy likes to project its functions onto the cosmos. Mauss suggests, as if the rules of *xenia* represent simply *the way things are* for gods and men. Gift exchange endures by misrecognition of the fact that it is just one economic system among others.¹³ Solon, a politician who lived in a period of flourishing commerce and founded his career on the denunciation of money, speaks as a typical sixth-century aristocrat when he says:

Perfectly happy is the man who has lovely boys and horses with solid hooves
and hunting dogs and a *xenos* in foreign places.¹⁴

DELICATE SITUATION OF THE ANCIENT POET

Poets from ancient times participated in the gift economy of their communities as *xenoi* and the people who enjoyed their poetry. Homer shows us Demodokos and Phemios as permanent court singers who traded their songs for the hospitality of the house and Odysseus himself making ad hoc exchange of his story for food and shelter. At the moment when Odysseus, in the banquet hall of Alkinoos, carves out a hot chunk of pig meat from his own portion and proffers it in gratitude to the singer Demodokos “so that he may eat and so that he may fold him close to me,” we see the embedded economy in its ideal version.¹⁵ During the centuries that followed, poets like Stesichoros, Xenophanes, Ibykos, Anakreon, Simonides, Aiskhylos, Pindar and Bakkhylides traveled to the cities of their patrons and lived in their houses while producing poetry for them. Describing such a relationship between Polykrates, the tyrant and the poet Anakreon, Strabo says, “Anakreon the lyric poet lived with this man and all his poetry is full of his memory.” Herodotos gives a picture of Polykrates and Anakreon “conversing as they recline side by side in the dining hall.”¹⁶ We recognize the external structure of the relationship as one of aristocratic *xenia*, with gifts of poetry exchanged for gifts of livelihood by men who know a mutual and ritual connection. We can only imagine its delicate internal workings.

Money changed all this. “Money,” says Marx, “is the externalization of all the capacities of humanity.”¹⁷

CHANGE

Simonides was held responsible for the change. According to an ancient scholiast, “Simonides was the first poet who introduced meticulous calculation into songmaking and composed poems for a price.”¹⁸ From this fact depends an elaborate iconology that represents Simonides as a miser, curmudgeon and sordid money-grubber. “No one would deny that Simonides loved money,” is the bald assertion of his biographer Aelian. His contemporary, the poet Xenophanes, labels Simonides *kimbix* (κίμβιξ: “skinflint”). Within fifty years of his death Simonides appears as a stock type of avarice on the comic stage. One Aristophanic character comments, “That Simonides would put out to sea on a bathmat for profit!” Aristotle uses Simonides in much the same way, as a stock ethical exemplum of *aneleutheria* (ἀνελευθερία: “miserliness”).¹⁹ Other testimonia record that Simonides demanded enormous fees for his verse, hoarded money in jars in his house, journeyed around the world in search of rich patrons, denounced those who did not pay him enough and delivered homilies on the pleasures of profit. It would be plausible enough, especially in light of the characterological tendency of ancient biographers,²⁰ to dismiss these stories as a biographical trope for the simple fact of Simonides’ professionalization of poetry. But let us try to understand the simple fact more precisely.

That Simonides was the first to professionalize poetry is not unlikely. Somebody had to coin it and current beliefs about the date of the circulation of coinage coincide with his lifetime.²¹

That Simonides made lots of money is not impossible. We have some information about wages in the early fifth century that indicates the verbal arts were comparatively well paid. For example, Phidias the sculptor worked on the chryselephantine statue of Athena in Athens for 5,000 drachmas per year, out of which he had to pay himself, his workmen and his production costs.²² And Herodotos tells us of a successful doctor whose annual salary was 6,000 drachmas when he lived in Aegina, 12,000 drachmas when he lived on Samos, 10,000 drachmas when he lived in Athens. This same amount, 10,000 drachmas, was the fee commanded by Pindar for a single dithyramb composed in honor of the Athenian gods. Meanwhile Gorgias the sophist required his students to pay him 10,000 drachmas apiece for a single course in rhetoric and made enough money this way to erect a solid gold statue of himself in the precinct of Apollo at Delphi. Sokrates asserts that both Gorgias and Prodikos “earned more from his wisdom than any other craftsman from his art.”²³ It has been estimated that 10,000 drachmas would have been equivalent to about twenty-eight years of work for a laborer at one drachma *per diem*.²⁴

That Simonides devoted his life to avarice is hard to prove or disprove since, despite centuries of unanimous testimonial ranting about Simonidean greed, no source preserves a single account or real number to tell us how avid he was, how rich he became or what prices he actually charged. Evidently Simonidean greed was more resented in its essence than in its particulars. Its essence was the commodification of a previously reciprocal and ritual activity, the exchange of gifts between friends.

OBJECT

Commodification marks a radical moment in the history of human culture. People who use

money seem to form different relationships with one another and with objects than people who do not. Marx gave the name “alienation” to this difference.²⁵ Marx believed that money makes the objects we use into alien things and makes the people with whom we exchange them into alien people. “Money is the pimp between man’s need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates my life for me also mediates the existence of other people for me. Money becomes the *Other*.”²⁶ When Marx describes the complete process by which commodification changes people, he is talking about bourgeois society and modern capitalist economies, not about the fifth century B.C. But the terms of his description may help us see Simonides’ situation more clearly. For Marx is also, always, talking about the most fundamental ethics of exchange and its objects.

Let us take a moment to consider the life of objects. Within a gift economy, as we have seen, objects in exchange form a kind of connective tissue between giver and receiver. The reciprocal character of the connection is implied in its reversible terminology: in Greek the word *xenos* can mean either guest or host, *xenia* either gifts given or gifts received. “Considered as an act of communication,” says Pierre Bourdieu, “the gift is defined by the counter-gift in which it is completed and in which it realizes its full significance.”²⁷ Such an object carries the history of the giver into the life of the receiver and continues it there. Because they valued this continuity, the Greeks created a remarkably concrete token of it that was used as a sign of mutual obligation between friends, the object called a *symbolon* (σύμβολον):

People who entered into relationships of *xenia* used to cut a piece of bone in two and keep one half themselves and leave the other with their partners, so that if they or their friends or relatives should have occasion to visit them or *vice versa*, they might bring the half with them and renew the *xenia*.²⁸

Symbola were not a standard feature of every *xenia* relationship but their concept is suggestive of the nonobjective life of objects in these exchanges. A gift is not a piece broken off from the interior life of the giver and lost into the exchange, but rather an extension of the interior of the giver, both in space and in time, into the interior of the receiver. Money denies such extension, ruptures continuity and stalls objects at the borders of themselves. Abstracted from space and time as bits of saleable value, they become commodities and lose their life as objects.

For a commodity is not an object, it is a quantity of value that can be measured against other quantities and substituted for other such quantities. In commodification its natural properties are extinguished. Extinguished also is its power to connect the people who give and receive it. They become like commodities themselves, fragments of value waiting for price and sale. They take on “commodity form.”²⁹

GRACE AND HARE

Commodity form is not a simple state of mind. It fragments and dehumanizes human being. It causes a person to assume a “double character” wherein his natural properties are disjunct

from his economic value, his private from his public self.³⁰ These are the terms in which Marx described the effect of commodification on citizens of bourgeois Europe. I like to think Simonides represents an early, severe form of economic alienation and the “doubleness” that attends it. Finding himself born into a society where traditions of gift exchange coexisted with commodity trade and a flourishing money economy, balanced on a borderline between two economic systems and inserted into the disintegrating consciousness of that time, he took a naked view. He uncovered his eyes in both directions.

Plato tells us how it was that Simonides came to Athens:

Hipparchos, eldest and wisest of the sons of Peisistratos, arranged to have Simonides dine at Keos in continual attendance upon him by the inducement of *big wages and gifts*.³¹

Wages and gifts: the coin has two sides. Reality being twofold, Simonides insisted on pointing to both sides of it. Hence, for example, the story of his two boxes of grace.

They say that Simonides had two boxes, one for graces, the other for fees. So when someone came to him asking for a grace he had the boxes displayed and opened: the one was found to be empty of graces, the other full of money. And that's the way Simonides got rid of a person requesting a gift.³²

The two boxes stand side by side in Simonides' life as gifts and money coexist in his society. Their alignment sets up an economic thought-experiment. For the Greek word χάρις (*charis*, “grace”) that names the emptiness of the first box was a key term in the gift-exchange economy of the archaic and classical periods, designating “a willing and precious reciprocal exchange” between men who knew a mutual and ritual dependence.³³ Like *xenos* and *xenia*, the word *charis* is semantically reversible and includes in its lexical equivalents favor, gift, goodwill given or received, payment, repayment, gratification, pleasure afforded or pleasure returned, charity, grace, Grace. In other words, *charis* is the generic name for the whole texture of exchanges that constitutes a gift economy as well as for the piety that guarantees them. So Aristotle inserts into his analysis of money in the *Nicomachean Ethics* a rather wistful passing salute to the goddesses called the *Charites*:

That is why people build a temple to the *Charites* in a conspicuous place, so that there may be reciprocal giving. For this is the essence of *charis*: the necessity both to repay a grace done to oneself and also to initiate gracious action on one's own.³⁴

The idea of containing this living texture of actions, emotions, value, tradition and time in a box is more than cynical, it is surreal. The proposal to dip into this box and pull out a bit of grace to give to a total stranger belies the entire social and historical rationale of the word *charis*, its reciprocal and continuative essence. The notion that grace can live in a box is just about as crazy as the notion that little pieces of metal are equivalent to everything in the world, including a poem of Simonides. And yet, the reality is—there stands the other box, hard, cold shape of the future, full of cash. “Money can exchange any quality or object for any other, even contradictory qualities and objects,” says Marx.

It is the fraternization of incompatibles, it forces contraries to embrace. If you suppose man to be man and his relation to be a human one, then you can only exchange love for love, trust for trust, etc. ... But money is the enemy of man and social bonds. It changes fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, slave into master, master into slave, stupidity into wisdom, wisdom into stupidity. It is the universal confusion and exchange of all things, an inverted world.³⁵

Simonides is like someone trying to live upright in an inverted world. Various anecdotes in his traditional biography picture him off balance with his hosts or patrons, groping for the grace of the relationship. He visits these people's houses and sits at their tables, but the hospitality they offer him is oddly qualified. Take the matter of hare:

Chamaillon (speaking of hares) says that one day Simonides was feasting with Hieron when hare was served to the other guests. But none to Simonides. Later Hieron gave him a portion and he improvised this verse: "Wide it was but not wide enough to reach that far."³⁶

Simonides' improvisation is a parody of a verse in Homer: "Wide it was but not a wide enough shore to contain all the ships."³⁷ Likening skimpy hare to the beach at Troy is a witticism aimed at easing an awkward social moment. But it may also cast a wry side glance at an earlier age and other values. Homer's community would surely have guaranteed him not only a complete dinner but a full livelihood, "so that he might eat and so that he might be folded close," as Odysseus once said.³⁸ In his study of ritual friendship, Herman emphasizes that *xenia* is a relationship between people who feel responsible for one another's well-being in "a range of cooperative acts as wide as one could possibly find in any human society. . . . The reason for this was that ritualised friendship acted both as a substitute for and above all a complement to kinship roles." And therefore the transactions of *xenia* ought not to be mixed with those of commodity trade, which places different boundaries around the act of exchange. "Transactions of ritualised friendship were supposed to be carried out in a nonmercantile spirit," Herman maintains. "Excluded are relations between strangers that involve payments for goods and services. . . . People trading specific goods and services for payments would hardly classify their relationship as one of friendship."³⁹

Yet what if they did?

Herman does not mention the delicate situation of the ancient poet, who is both *xenos* and employee, both friend and hireling, of his patron. Let us imagine Simonides, who has just received cash payment from Hieron for a commissioned poem earlier in the day, seated beside the tyrant at dinner. What more does Hieron owe him? What are the rules for this? Money has quantified the moral tension between them and liquidated their mutual responsibility. Money has filled the box of grace with Syrakusan coin. Money has imploded the meaning of *xenos*. For alongside "guest" and "host," the Greek word *xenos* denoted "stranger," "outsider," "alien." At one time it made sense to blend these meanings in a single word because the reality was unitary. Stranded between "guest" and "alien," Simonides sits watching this rich and ancient reality fall apart like an overcooked hare.

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