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978-0-521-11728-9 - Blake's Gifts: Poetry and the Politics of Exchange

Sarah Haggarty

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*ARE NOT THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT  
EVERY-THING TO MAN?

Let us adopt as the principle of our life what has always been a principle of action and will always be so: to emerge from self, to give, freely and obligatorily. We run no risk of disappointment. (Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*<sup>1</sup>)

Giving gifts, in the right spirit, at the right time, and the relationships that this can foster, are integral to the way in which William Blake thinks about art, to the methods of production and dissemination he favors, and to the way in which he urges humanity to act. They are also essential to his conception of divinity, for the works that the artist “give[s]” or “present [s]”<sup>2</sup> to his “fit audience”<sup>3</sup> are themselves occasioned by “the gift of God, . . . inspiration and vision” (*DC*, E544).

Gifts, the exchange with which they are sometimes allied, and the obligations they can bring, focus our attention on Blake’s actual experience, as well as his representations of the gift of artistry, its fruits, and their reception (or not) by an audience. Although so few of his contemporaries elected to buy his books and designs, Blake deployed the tactics of the gift not to make a virtue of necessity, but more positively, to create enduring bonds between persons: treating sales like presents; transforming readers into members of a religious republic; crafting divinity into humanity.

Prompted by Blake’s own use of the word *gift* and its cognates, the chapters of this book investigate gift-giving as it is ramified in five discursive domains. Chapter 1 (“Economy”) considers the relation of Blake’s own economic activity to the broader economy of his day; Chapter 2 (“Patronage”) his attitudes towards the patronage system and his own tormented relations with patrons; Chapter 3 (“Charity”) his opinions of almsgiving and the “free” gift; Chapter 4 (“Inspiration”) his theories regarding the source of artistic genius and its relation to the artist’s work; and Chapter 5 (“Salvation”) his understanding of the

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significance of Christ's crucifixion and the doctrine of atonement. The book hopes to show how inextricable are the links between these domains: how gift-giving, for Blake, is a kind of total phenomenon, and how, too, it might bring together what he was doing in his art and how he acted in the world. For gift-giving is not merely a central theme in Blake's work, but a quasi-formal principle. How Blake dealt with his works in the world is very much a part of their narrative self-representation. The issues of patronage and inspiration, say, are not just ancillary, but absolutely central to the narrative unfolding of the two late prophetic books, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. More specifically, gift-giving shapes biographical and poetic transactions in a process that is both generative and reciprocal. For Blake, to put it most strongly and simply, is a poet-artist who, in his life and work, insists on having it both ways with the gift, on seeing it as functioning both gratis and under constraint. Thus, his relation to friends, patrons, and clients is in all cases marked by a mixture of business and donation; his sense of charity is involved in both generosity towards the unfortunate and a curious demand for a response to them that runs counter to pity; his sense of inspiration combines an insistence on its divine givenness with the necessity for its cultivation through human labor. This kind of mingling – rarely if ever balanced or harmonious, often faltering, fraught, or failing – is distinctive to Blake's gifts.

Gifts might be opposed to the largely pecuniary, less personal, and often shorter-lived obligations of contract. Explicitly linked in Blake's writings to "the labour ... above payment" (*VDA*, 5:8, E48), bread as "due & Right" (*AT*, E668), erotic "Joy" (*VDA*, 5:5–6), and a "salvation ... without money and without price" (*J*, 61:22, E212), they are a vital force in his radical critique of commerce, polite consensus, self-righteous morality, and Church doctrine. Yet Blake's radicalism did not provoke him entirely to withdraw from exchange, or from the conversation of culture. He embraced a gift given not voluntaristically, disinterestedly, or transcendently by an invisible God, but instead, to borrow from Marcel Mauss, given freely and obligatorily, without wishing to acquit the other from relation.

In saying this, I depart from an influential way of understanding both Blake and gifts. This alternative understanding would point us to works out of keeping with the world, and gifts "incompatible" with exchange. According to one exemplary reading, to which Chapter 1 will return, Blake's illuminated works "speak to beings and to a community based on joy and on giving and on love." As such, they are incommensurable with

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“the world we live in,” which is cast, here, as “the quantifiable world of exchange.” This reading of Blake is supported by another, of the gift, according to which “[w]hat is given is . . . something that cannot be compensated for in the act of giving; its premise is . . . donation, rather than return; sacrifice, rather than gain; loss, rather than compensation.”<sup>4</sup> There are, however, and were in Blake’s lifetime, more and other than quantifiable exchanges. Reciprocity, in both theory and practice, not least Blake’s practice, is more than a tit for tat. Indeed, reciprocity will emerge from this book as the gain of Blake’s gifts, even if this gain cannot be a foregone conclusion. Certain economic forms do prove in Blake’s works to be inimical to the gift, it is true. But if one of these forms is debt, another (as my final chapter will propose) is sacrifice, further unsettling the view of gift-giving as pure expenditure.

My design is not to submerge Blake’s gifts in the world. Yet it is vital to remember that gifts can be, in Blake’s idiom, “corporeal” as well as “spiritual.” *Both* are bound up with the desire for friendship, that is, for engagement, for reciprocity, even. This is the case for *Jerusalem’s* Los, at least:

I have tried to make friends by corporeal gifts but have only  
 Made enemies: I never made friends but by spiritual gifts;  
 By severe contentions of friendship & the burning fire of thought. (91:15–17, E251)

Giving, rightly conceived, is an exercise of co-operative antagonism that binds together the members of what Blake might call a divine humanity in mutual obligation. This view of gift-giving is at odds with any that would make gifts and exchange incompatible. But it sits uneasily, too, with the collapsing of gift-giving into gift-exchange, a term that might make gifts and exchange all too compatible, and so underplay or dismiss the hazards attendant on the performance of gift-giving, its continuous creativity on the level of practice. On the whole in this book I prefer the term *gift relationships*, by which I mean to designate a gift that is not incompatible with exchange, or, better, a reciprocity that is hoped for but cannot be counted on. Moreover, the contrary movements of the gift, either embracing or, in different contexts or circumstances, retreating from or turning its back on exchange, seem to me to call for a more dynamic triangulation of the ostensible choice I have been posing so far, between gifts and exchange. By the term *gift relationships*, then, I also mean to distinguish the experience of gift-giving, on the one hand from commercial transactions – involving an exchange of intermeasurable items, whose outcome is determined ahead of time – and on the other from the pure or free

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gift – involving (or not involving) a gift utterly incompatible with exchange.<sup>5</sup> Blake gives on the whole, I think, in the hope that his gifts will be countered. But his very delineation of “spiritual” or “mental” (*J*, pl. 77, E231) from “corporeal” gifts, allied to his fierce opposition to intermeasurability and especially to debt, always threatens to divorce a disinterested and unilateral giving from a vital involvement with mutual human obligation. All in all it is the complexity of Blake’s idea of the gift, more than its contradictions or his frequent compromises, that leads us beyond any simple opposition of gift and exchange, patronage and marketplace, sentiment and suffering, even God and man.

Blake’s gifts can be material: a book or a verse, an apothecary cabinet, or a chaldron of coal. They can be a gesture of solidarity or of mastery. They can be the grace of God. Yet even when a gift is “spiritual” or “mental”, when it escapes “weight & measure” (*MHH*, pl. 7, E36), to give it is no pure, no empty gesture. This is in part because giving for Blake is bound up with the possibility of giving in turn, and also because there is no giving or receiving without agon: the “severe contentions” of the spiritual gift (*M*, 41[48]:32, E143; *J*, 91:17, E251), and the “pernicious . . . Doubts” and “Nervous Fear” of the corporeal (E728; E708). It is also because, for Blake, what is given is as important as the way in which it is given. Just as there is no art without outline, no word without flesh, and no inspiration without labor, so his gifts are made, not made up. Gift-giving is real, in other words, and not a fantasy. This again has implications for the relationship between Blake’s works and the world – for instance, the fact that, as Chapter 1 will suggest, he really did give his books as gifts as well as speaking about gift-giving in their pages. But it also touches on the timing of the gift, its manifestation in the present. Gift-giving appears for Blake to be happening in the now rather than being deferred. It takes place in time (in *Milton’s* “Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find” [*M*, 35:42, E136]), not outside it, dilating and renovating rather than rupturing the “temporal synthesis.”<sup>6</sup> Gifts, moreover, have a presence that is tricky to define outside a Blakian idiom: they are not quite material inasmuch as they are living forms rather than inert objects (see *On Virgil*, E270); but they are at least something rather than nothing, cut according to these strokes rather than others. There is something stubborn, indelible, and inalienable in what Blake presents to us.

Gift relationships are absolutely fundamental to Blake’s experience as well as to our understanding of that experience. The question posed to the Christians on Plate 77 of *Jerusalem* – “Are not the Gifts of the Spirit Every-thing to Man?” – is no isolated rhetorical flourish. Indeed, because

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the forms and figures of the gift pervade Blake's works so totally, and also because this gift is not isolated from exchange, even to separate the aesthetic from the economic, say, or the religious from the political, seems wrongheaded. This inextricability, allied to a conviction that Blake can tell us as much about the gift as the gift can about Blake, has meant that in this book I have not felt confined in my choice of which discourses or disciplines to consult. I have not confined myself, either, to a study of Blake's sources or the writings of his contemporaries. Blake was a Christian thinker who reanimated fixed positions and oppositions, and pursued them to their roots. For this reason, I compare his ideas to sources far in advance of their historical expression. Hebrew prophecy, for instance, allows us better to appreciate why Blake objected to the Platonic conception of inspiration. Furthermore, in order to understand why the gift is not by rights incompatible with exchange, it is vital that we look back beyond the advent of capitalism, of industrialization and political economy, and indeed the Reformation.

Having said this, I do not want to lose sight of Blake as a historically and culturally locatable figure. However idiosyncratic his art, Blake's works are not *sui generis*, and his interests were shared by his age. Nor was his attachment to the gift simply nostalgic or utopian, for "gift-giving", according to Margot C. Finn's social history *The Character of Credit* (2003), "was, if not ubiquitous, widely pervasive in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century economy, where it worked at once to mark social distinctions and to maintain social solidarity."<sup>7</sup>

Whilst I am attentive to long eighteenth-century writings and practices, my aim is also to outline a far broader historical context, in the beginnings of an intellectual history of gift-giving that extends from archaic societies to the present day. In these respects, this book is committed to mapping historical change. But it is also strongly synchronic: in the freedom with which it juxtaposes Blake's ideas with those of modern philosophy or the early Christians; and also, especially, in its conviction that Blake's thought can be understood to be all of a piece. Rather than retreating from political engagement to quietism, Blake, I think, was interested in the same sorts of problems throughout his career, and it was the logic of these problems, or the demands of his addressees (of his patrons, for example), that led him to express them in new forms. Blake, it seems to me, was never straightforwardly politically engaged, so the notion of his retreat from politics is founded on an uncertain assumption.

Whilst there is a rich tradition in a variety of disciplines of writing about the gift, there exist but few primarily literary studies of its

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dynamics.<sup>8</sup> When scholars of Blake mention giving, they do so usually only in passing, despite Blake's insistent use of the word *gift* and its cognates.<sup>9</sup> But there is a wealth of critical writing in related areas. In the last decade, there has been a resurgence of socio-historical and literary interest in long-eighteenth-century economics.<sup>10</sup> Especially in the USA, there is a thriving interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century "thing theory" and "thing culture."<sup>11</sup> Several studies of Blake, moreover, talk about exchange in a way highly suggestive for thinking about the gift.<sup>12</sup> Likewise suggestive, and endlessly informative, is the vast amount of experiential and critical reflection on each of the discursive domains around which this book is organized: economics, patronage, charity, inspiration, and salvation.

Besides Blake, three writers in particular have shaped this book's enquiry into gift-giving. Marcel Mauss's genealogy of reciprocity in *The Gift* urges us to recognize that the gift need not be opposed to exchange. In archaic societies, says Mauss, giving was at once free and obligatory, and may be so again. Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the counterpoint between an "objectivist" and retrospective view of exchange, and a "subjectivist" and continuously creative view of gift-giving, paves the way for a phenomenology of the gift that might exceed his own, objective, conclusions. Jacques Derrida's insistence that the gift must be "familiarily foreign" to economics, exchange, and reciprocity provokes those of us who put faith in gift relationships to attempt to counter his views with a corresponding skepticism.

There are of course limitations to a study like mine that tends to speak of *the* gift as well as of gifts. As Nicholas Thomas writes in his critique of Mauss:

What animates [*The Gift*] is the scope for reducing various cases to the overall form that is focused upon. This is no doubt a necessary movement in any intellectual effort, but once the distinctiveness of a particular entity or process has been established, the general concept needs to be fractured; not split up, as a partitioned essence in a formalistic typology, but instead scattered through the nuances of practice and history.<sup>13</sup>

I am not sure, though, that we can abandon Mauss's central political point as if it had already been accepted, or realized, even in theory: "These contracts of law and economics that it pleases us to contrast," writes Mauss – liberty and obligation; liberality, generosity, and luxury, as against savings, interest, and utility – it would be good to put them into the melting pot once more" (p. 93). It also seems to me to be worth trying to make a unified but still nuanced case for "what Blake's works say about

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gifts," whilst also remaining attentive to the ways in which such a case, and the effort to make it, may be flawed.

The body of this book, as I have already indicated, is in five parts. Chapter 1, "Economy," assesses where the value of art resided for Blake, and the extent to which his works are committed to the possibility of gift-giving in the here and now. It is only an attenuated understanding of economy, I argue – an understanding resisted by Blake – that forces us to conclude that the books and prints he thought of as gifts were in reality commodities, or that the kind of giving figured by his works is by its nature incompatible with exchange. One of the purposes of this chapter is to outline my thesis in its most general terms: that the gift as it is presented by Blake can be exchanged, and was exchanged in his lifetime, materially and actually. I work out this thesis in relation to two examples of giving: first, the passage of the illuminated book from Blake's hands to those of his contemporaries, and second, the passage of treasures from earth to heaven, an instance of which, I propose, is to be found in the building of Golgonooza in *Jerusalem*. At the outset of the chapter, in particular, I suggest some of the ways in which my reading of Blake and the gift diverges from what has already been written on the subject.

Chapter 2, "Patronage," asks whether there was room for the gift in Blake's relationships with William Hayley, Thomas Butts, John Linnell, and Joseph Johnson. Patronage has been called a "gift-economy" which operates by transmuting utility, calculation, and coercion into disinterest, generosity, and amicability. The expressions of thanks that proliferate in Blake's letters would thus be reducible to part-payments of his debts. Paying particular attention to the tone and tempo of Blake's correspondence, this chapter shows him continuing to use the language of friendship and gratitude even as he unmasked the dissimulative deployment of this language by his patrons. Rather than breaking free from obligation in the pursuit of freedom, Blake persisted (for a time) in seeking his patrons' encouragement. Challenging them to recognize the corporeality of their previous exchanges, he hoped also to spur them on to a mutual, spiritual giving. The story about the gift told by this chapter is less than ideal. Despite Blake's efforts, gift-exchange within his patronage relationships remained largely "corporeal." Obligation, however multiform, always threatens to suppress the gift. But the ways in which Blake fitted himself to patronage, and his repeated contestations of it, show his hopeful involvement in a grubby world of mutual human obligation.

Chapter 3, "Charity," uncovers Blake's opposition, especially in his annotations to Robert John Thornton's *The Lord's Prayer, Newly*



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*Translated*, to voluntary almsgiving. Disallowing the gift from being in any way contaminated by exchange might turn giving into an empty gesture, and abandon us to the self-interest of a fallen world. Purification, intimates Blake, might thus go hand in hand with pecuniarism. Blake's parody in the Thornton marginalia of the almsgiver's divorce of religious duty from the laws of economics shows the political investment of his own thinking about the gift. Our daily bread, his annotations imply, is not a "free gift" but our "due & Right." Yet if charity should be a matter of not bounty but justice, then true gifts cannot be counted on in the same way. They are something to be hoped for, if also demanded by a humanity who is not a mere beggar in relation to God.

Chapter 4, "Inspiration," trains its gaze on a gift particularly difficult to credit: the divine gift of inspiration, which Blake insists is neither fantasy nor madness but communicated to him "Really & Truly" (AR, E658). Blake's allegiance to an immediate and irresistible inspiration, and his claim to write "without Labour or Study," suggests that inspiration's gift, if no other, might be pure (E729). As such, it would be beyond what the artist could know or say, and could never be made present in the work of art. Blake, though, was not one to abnegate human (or his own) capacity. Nor did he think inspiration required the sacrifice of his works, or his works the interruption of inspiration. The relationship of artist to divine donor was agonistic, to be sure, and the intermittent eruptions of inspiration might make a painting, plate, or book incoherent. But this incoherence was something Blake made manifest, something to which, in the dilatory moment of inspiration's inception, he gave lineament and form. The inspired artist is both mechanically and mentally active in composition.

Chapter 5, "Salvation," reflects on Christ's giving of his life "for" man in *Jerusalem*, and man's capacity originally to copy his example. Initially, the chapter enters into Blake's critique of sacrifice, both as it might perpetuate a sequence of bloody *quid pro quos*, and also as it might claim to transcend economy altogether. Blake preached neither anthropopathy nor aneconomy: God, for him, is neither an avenger nor, as *The [First] Book of Urizen* makes clear, a secret being wholly other. Rather, he is an expression of the highest human potential. In an extended reading of the full-page design of Christ's crucifixion on Plate 76 of *Jerusalem*, the chapter emphasizes the vitality of Albion's imitation of Christ's posture. So vivid are Albion's actions, indeed, that they might seem to displace Christ's, even as they follow them.



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Finally, the book's conclusion suggests that the possibility of refusal is integral to the Blakian gift. This is evident objectively, of course, not least since Blake's works were often in his lifetime, and until the late nineteenth century, misunderstood or passed over. But it is perhaps more important subjectively, as gift-giving is improvised – is now being improvised – in a dilatory and renovatory, *generous* present.

## Economy