CHAPTER EIGHT

The Commerce of the Creative Spirit

See how Thy beggar works in Thee
By art.
GEORGE HERBERT

In the second half of this book we shall be turning to two quite different poets, Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound, to examine their work and their lives in the language of gift exchange. Before taking up these specific cases, however, I feel I should establish my terms in this new context. With only a few exceptions, it has been my hope from the outset that the ethnography, fairy tales, and anecdotes of the first half of this book could be read as parables or Just So stories of the creative spirit; before we set out to apply the language of those parables to particular poets, I want to offer some samples of how they may be read.

Let us begin at the beginning, with the question of the sources of an artist's work.

An essential portion of any artist's labor is not creation so much as invocation. Part of the work cannot be made, it must be received; and we cannot have this gift except, perhaps, by supplication, by courting, by creating within ourselves that "begging bowl" to which the gift is drawn. Remember Meister Eckhart: "It were a very grave defect in God if, finding thee so empty and so bare, he wrought no excellent work in thee nor primed thee with glorious gifts." It is the artist's hope that we may say the same of the creative spirit. In an autobiographical essay the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz speaks of his "inner certainty" as a young writer "that a shining point exists where all lines intersect . . . This certainty also involved my relationship to that point," he tells us. "I felt very strongly that nothing depended on my will, that everything I might accomplish in life would not be won by my own efforts but given as a gift."

Not all artists use these very words, but there are few artists who have not had this sense that some element of their work comes to them from a source they do not control.

Harold Pinter in a letter to the director of his play *The Birthday Party*:

> The thing germinated and bred itself. It proceeded according to its own logic. What did I do? I followed the indications, I kept a sharp eye on the clues I found myself dropping. The writing arranged itself with no trouble into dramatic terms. The characters sounded in my ears—it was apparent to me what one would say and what would be the other's response, at any given point. It was apparent to me what they would not, could not, ever, say, whatever one might wish . . .
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> When the thing was well cooked I began to form certain conclusions. The point is, however, that by that time

the play was now its own world. It was determined by its own engendering image.

Theodore Roethke in a lecture:

> I was in that particular hell of the poet: a longish dry period. It was 1952, I was 44, and I thought I was done. I was living alone in a biggish house in Edmonds, Washington. I had been reading—and re-reading—not Yeats, but Raleigh and Sir John Davies. I had been teaching the five-beat line for weeks—I knew quite a bit about it, but write it myself?—*no*; so I felt myself a fraud.
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> Suddenly, in the early evening, the poem "The Dance" started, and finished itself in a very short time—say thirty minutes, maybe in the greater part of an hour, it was all done. I felt, I knew, I had hit it. I walked around, and I wept; and I knelt down—I always do after I've written what I know is a good piece. But at the same time I had, as God is my witness, the actual sense of a Presence—as if Yeats himself were in that room. The experience was in a way terrifying, for it lasted at least half an hour. That house, I repeat, was charged with a psychic presence: the very walls seemed to shimmer. I wept for joy . . . He, they—the poets dead—were with me.

Such moments of unwilled reception are not all there is to the creation of a work of art, of course. Notice Roethke: "I had been teaching the five-beat line for weeks." Or Pinter: "I kept a sharp eye." All artists work to acquire and perfect the tools of their craft, and all art involves evaluation, clarification, and revision. But these are secondary tasks. They cannot begin (sometimes they must not begin) until the *materia*, the body of the work, is on the page or on the canvas. The Kula

prohibition on speaking of the value of the gift has its equivalent in the creative spirit. Premature evaluation cuts off the flow. The imagination does not barter its "engendering images." In the beginning we have no choice but to accept what has come to us, hoping that the cinders some forest spirit saw fit to bestow may turn to gold when we have carried them back to the hearth. Allen Ginsberg has been our consistent spokesman for that phase of the work in which the artist lays evaluation aside so that the gift may come forward:

> The parts that embarrass you the most are usually the most interesting poetically, are usually the most naked of all, the rawest, the goofiest, the strangest and most eccentric and at the same time, most representative, most universal . . . That was something I learned from Kerouac, which was that spontaneous writing could be embarrassing . . . The cure for that is to write things down which you will not publish and which you won't show people. To write secretly . . . so you can actually be free to say anything you want . . .
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> It means abandoning being a poet, abandoning your careerism, abandoning even the idea of writing any poetry, really abandoning, giving up as hopeless—abandoning the possibility of really expressing yourself to the nations of the world. Abandoning the idea of being a prophet with honor and dignity, and abandoning the glory of poetry and just settling down in the muck of your own mind . . . You really have to make a resolution just to write for yourself . . . , in the sense of not writing to impress yourself, but just writing what your self is saying.

Having accepted what has been given to him—either in the sense of inspiration or in the sense of talent—the artist often feels compelled, feels the *desire*, to make the work and offer it

to an audience. The gift must stay in motion. "Publish or perish" is an internal demand of the creative spirit, one that we learn from the gift itself, not from any school or church. In her *Journal of a Solitude* the poet and novelist May Sarton writes: "There is only one real deprivation, I decided this morning, and that is not to be able to give one's gift to those one loves most . . . The gift turned inward, unable to be given, becomes a heavy burden, even sometimes a kind of poison. It is as though the flow of life were backed up."

So long as the gift is not withheld, the creative spirit will remain a stranger to the economics of scarcity. Salmon, forest birds, poetry, symphonies, or Kula shells, the gift is not used up in use. To have painted a painting does not empty the vessel out of which the paintings come. On the contrary, it is the talent which is not in use that is lost or atrophies, and to bestow one of our creations is the surest way to invoke the next. There is an instructive series of gifts in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. Hermes invents the first musical instrument, the lyre, and gives it to his brother, Apollo, whereupon he is immediately inspired to invent a second musical instrument, the pipes. The implication is that giving the first creation away makes the second one possible. Bestowal creates that empty place into which new energy may flow. The alternative is petrifaction, writer's block, "the flow of life backed up."

To whom does the artist address the work? Long ago we said that a gift eventually circles back toward its source. Marcel Mauss put the same idea in slightly different terms: every gift, he wrote, "strives to bring to its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place." And though it might be hard to say with any certainty where we will find the homeland of an inner gift, artists in every age have offered us myths to suggest where we should look. Some take their gifts to be