

# Introduction

Marlowe's *Faustus* makes a reciprocal exchange the basis of its plot but also presents exchange as the diabolical opposite of saving grace. In our own time, by contrast, few things attract suspicion as reliably as generosity, which we dismiss almost reflexively as some sort of ruse. Adriaan Peperzak observes that "some postmodern authors, very much impressed by critical analyses of abnormal and normal behavior, social structures, economic mechanisms, linguistic and ideological patterns, have dogmatically affirmed that all human actions, even those that seem most generous, are selfish, egotistic, narcissistic."<sup>1</sup> Those authors, in other words, seem to filter the world through the mind of Faustus, incredulous toward generosity, credulous toward exchange, and damned.

Such a dogmatic belief in the ubiquity of exchange blinds us to the belief in the gift that was central to early modern drama and to the culture in which it arose. The belief in ubiquitous exchange nevertheless commands importance in criticism of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, though as Peperzak observes, it arises from the social sciences. Specifically, the notion that every gift anticipates recompense achieves theoretical expression in the ethnology of Marcel Mauss. Within criticism of early modern drama, this assumption finds its strongest expression in the work of Stephen Greenblatt and the school he founds, New Historicism.

Rather than tracing how Greenblatt comes to be influenced by Mauss, by way of Clifford Geertz and Greenblatt's interest in cultural anthropology,<sup>2</sup> I am content to show that Mauss and Greenblatt share similar ideas. Where Greenblatt finds "a network of trades and trade-offs"<sup>3</sup> in the early modern world and its drama, Mauss finds networks of exchange in every society he considers. The 1924 publication of Mauss's *The Gift* as an extended essay in *l'Année Sociologique* marks a watershed in theoretical consideration of gift-giving practices. Mary Douglas credits this text with providing ethnology "a new criterion of sound analysis"<sup>4</sup> and it certainly influenced many disciplines in the humanities as well as in the social sciences. Mauss's essay, moreover, gives overt form to the assumptions that inform much criticism of early modern drama and therefore opens these assumptions to criticism.

When we assume that self-interest motivates characters in works of drama, we employ a set of ideas enunciated by ethnography to describe societies. Our critical understanding of fictive worlds therefore betrays the influence of ideas about the world itself. Conversely, however, the readings we make of fictive worlds and characters influence our understanding of our own being-in-the-world. If we come to view Faustus as a self-interested agent or the product of a society that gives itself to be exhaustively described as a series of exchanges, we endorse a particular worldview. While the social sciences clearly contribute to the study of literature, literary criticism also influences our understanding of the world. In this sense, literary criticism is always philosophical.

Emmanuel Levinas suggests in *Time and the Other* that "the whole of philosophy is only a meditation of Shakespeare."<sup>5</sup> Richard A. Cohen suggests that the phrasing calls to mind the title of René Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* and, as a result, "carries enormous philosophical weight, even more than might be imagined at first glance." In the original French, "de Shakespeare" has the force of a possessive, causing Cohen

to comment: "What this means is not that all of philosophy is a meditation about Shakespeare, which by itself would already be a remarkable and thoughtworthy possibility, but rather that the whole of philosophy is a meditation by Shakespeare, Shakespeare's meditation."<sup>6</sup> Levinas refers to Shakespeare frequently throughout *Time and the Other*; moreover, he places references to Shakespeare in parallel with references to philosophers. After listing "Pascalian, Kierkegaardian, Nietzschean, and Heideggerian anxieties," he argues that the "the fool of the Shakespearean tragedy" offers an alternate response to the terror of solitude. Earlier in the same book, sandwiched between Albert Camus's and Martin Heidegger's definitions of absurdity, he discusses the attitudes of Hamlet, Macbeth, and Juliet toward suicide. Particularly in this early work but also throughout his career, Levinas does not treat Shakespeare's plays as mere illustrations but as philosophical meditations, on par with those of Heidegger. This is not to say that Levinas defers to Shakespeare's authority any more than he defers to Heidegger's or Descartes's. In fact, Levinas occasionally introduces Shakespeare's works in order to disagree with them, as if with an interlocutor. In *Time and the Other*, he quotes Hamlet's "To be or not to be" in the original English, finding in Shakespeare's most famous soliloquy a consideration of "the impossibility of annihilating oneself."<sup>7</sup> Hamlet's words echo through Levinas's career. In an essay first published in 1981 he anticipates this question with his own answer: "To be or not to be: the question *par excellence* probably does not lie therein."<sup>8</sup> He concludes a 1984 essay by asking rhetorically, "To be or not to be—is that the question? Is it the first and final question?"<sup>9</sup> At Levinas's funeral, Jacques Derrida quoted Maurice Blanchot as crediting Levinas with questioning "our facile reverence for ontology."<sup>10</sup> Cohen argues that Levinas praises Shakespeare because literature, for which "Shakespeare" stands as a metonym, "is closer to the humanity of the human, to the transcendence constitutive of the ethical category of the human, than are the abstract reflections of philosophy."<sup>11</sup> In any

case, Levinas respects Shakespeare's plays as addressing the same issues to which Levinas directs phenomenology.

Levinas does not extend his use of Shakespeare to a discussion of gifts on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, but it seems legitimate to draw Levinas's philosophy back into dialogue with the texts he so much respects, albeit on a different topic. In particular, Levinas's emphasis upon the radically nonreciprocal opposes Mauss's axiom that there is no free gift and therefore allows new readings of early drama. If one were to nominate any particular donation as a pure gift, a doctrinaire follower of Mauss could simply declare the motives of the participants to be misunderstood, unconscious, socially conditioned, or otherwise marking these participants as the dupes of exchange. Mauss presents an *a priori* assertion that is impossible to disprove; moreover, he is inconsistent in simultaneously praising generosity and dismissing its very possibility. His praise of generosity presupposes a possible gift and therefore actually requires a Levinasian understanding of generosity.

Ironically, as Derrida points out, Mauss's book seems to be about "everything but the gift," because he dismisses the possibility of a true gift, one given without thought of recompense.<sup>12</sup> Exchanges of services, Mauss argues, "Almost always...have taken the form of the gift, the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest."<sup>13</sup> Mauss's essay ranges across cultures, from the coast of British Columbia to ancient and contemporary Europe, by way of Polynesia and India, discovering in every culture it examines evidence for a relentless thesis, that gifts are not really generous but obligatory and even aggressive. Ilana F. Silber comments on the "essentializing and homogenising thrust of his argument."<sup>14</sup> Mauss argues, for instance, that while potlatches held by members of First Nations in British Columbia stage exchanges of service, such "'service' on the part of the chief takes on an extremely marked agonistic

character. It is essentially usurious and sumptuary." Mauss even marks the word "service" as ironic with single quotation marks. Later, he italicizes an entire sentence: "*The obligation to give is the essence of the potlatch.*"<sup>15</sup> In reference to the practice of *kula* in the Trobriand Islands, he declares, "The aim of all this is to display generosity, freedom, and autonomous action, as well as greatness. Yet, all in all, it is mechanisms of obligation, and even of obligation through things, that are called into play." Mauss uses the term *gift* narrowly, to designate an exchange that imposes an obligation. Where Bronislaw Malinowski finds non-reciprocal donation in a customary payment of a husband to his wife, Mauss finds nothing but what Douglas calls "a kind of salary for sexual services rendered" transforming a conjugal ceremony into a prostitute's wage, as Jonathan Parry also notes.<sup>16</sup> In this instance, Mauss exposes an apparent exception as one might expose an imposter. His suspicion of gift exchange extends from the cultures he studies to that in which he lives: "Yet are we sure that it is any different in our own society, and that even with us riches are not above all a means of lording it over our fellow men?"<sup>17</sup> His denunciation of the possibility of a truly generous gift becomes explicit at discrete points but remains implicit throughout.

Though insistent, Mauss's dismissal of generosity is also inconsistent. He is touched that "Our much regretted friend [Robert] Hertz" made a note to pass on some research to him, for instance, rather than rejecting Hertz's intellectual generosity as a threat. More generally, his essay crescendos into a call for social solidarity, through a rediscovery in the archaic past of "the joy of public giving; the pleasure in generous expenditure on the arts, in hospitality, and in the private and public festival." Shortly before this, however, he claims that contemporary practices of charity as well as of potlatch reveal what he follows William James in calling the "fundamental motives for human activity: emulation between individuals of the same sex, that 'basic imperialism' of human beings."<sup>18</sup> Mauss seems intent on denouncing the gift as both impossible and insidious, a contradiction to which Simon

Jarvis draws attention;<sup>19</sup> moreover, he praises the gift as a source of social solidarity that anticipates the welfare state, while also denouncing it as a means of aggression that renders itself more dangerous by adopting a pretense of disinterestedness. So great is the apparent incoherence of Mauss's position that Parry observes, "it is claimed as the *fons et origo* of quite divergent theoretical positions." Parry derives a very sophisticated reading and claims that the belief that "the notion of a 'pure gift' is mere ideological obfuscation which masks the supposedly *non*-ideological verity that nobody does anything for nothing...has distorted our reading of Mauss's essay." Even he, however, complains that Mauss's writing is excessively "elliptical."<sup>20</sup> The association of Mauss's name with the notion Parry describes is Mauss's own fault; moreover, it undermines his own goals.

Mauss attempts to overcome the contradiction between his praise and denial of generosity by avoiding the binary of generosity and interest altogether. "These concepts of law and economics that it pleases us to contrast" he writes, "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." Mauss certainly questions the distinction between gift and commerce. In his only allusion to Shakespeare, he claims, "The life of a monk and the life of a Shylock are both equally to be shunned" in favor of a "new morality" described as a "good but moderate blend of reality and the ideal." The new moralist, he continues, "must have a keen sense of awareness of himself, but also of others, and of social reality," asking rhetorically in parentheses, "in moral matters is there even any other kind of reality?"<sup>21</sup> A countercultural moral act seems not to occur to Mauss, even as a possibility. Instead, he treats generosity as part of a socially mandated moral system.

Having questioned the independence of gift from exchange, Mauss conversely questions the independence of economics as a discipline and view of the world, insisting that it incorporates the practices of what we might otherwise be tempted to call

pre-economic cultures. "In these societies," he declares, "we shall see the market as it existed before the institution of traders and before their main invention—money proper." In a long note, he argues in favor of retaining the term "primitive money" to describe the "other things, stones, shells and precious metals in particular, that have been used and have served as a means of exchange and payment." They still, he argues, "discharge debts." He later describes how "[t]hrough gifts made and reciprocated" Melanesians "have robustly replaced a system of buying and selling." Though potlatch may demand the destruction rather than accumulation of wealth, it nevertheless qualifies as "a system of law and economics."<sup>22</sup> The gift, in Mauss's understanding, does not stand over and against economics or law, with the reciprocity of exchanges they imply, but explains both economics and law as a cause explains an effect. He insists that trade does not account for all exchanges, even in our own society: "We possess more than a tradesman morality. There still remain people and classes that keep to the morality of former times, and we all observe it, at least at certain times of the year or on certain occasions." He opposes "the so-called natural economy, that of utilitarianism" by arguing that "this whole economy of the exchange-through-gift lay outside the bounds" of it.<sup>23</sup> Mauss attacks utilitarianism, but not by questioning its premises and by arguing that individuals are fundamentally generous or denouncing human happiness as irrelevant. Instead, he claims to reveal a deeper structure. Douglas places Mauss's work within a polemical context where "the real enemy, the open enemy of French political philosophy was Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism," but even she concedes, "The gift cycle echoes Adam Smith's invisible hand: gift complements market in so far as it operates where the latter is absent."<sup>24</sup> Each serves as a means for the distribution of goods. Mauss can therefore compare his exemplary participants in gift exchange to investors: "One might really say that the Trobriand or Tsimshian, although far removed from him, proceeds like the capitalist who knows how to dispose of his ready cash at the right time, in

order to reconstitute at a later date this mobile form of capital."<sup>25</sup> While he posits a broader, gift-based economics underlining a narrowly utilitarian economics, Mauss nevertheless describes an economic system.

Mauss enables comparison between widely divergent cultures not by universalizing a "primitive economy" based on utilitarian assumptions, but by universalizing gift exchange. "This morality," of gift exchange, he declares, "is eternal; it is common to the most advanced societies, to those of the immediate future, and to the lowest imaginable forms of society. We touch upon fundamentals. No longer are we talking in legal terms: we are speaking of men and groups of men, because it is they, it is society, it is the feelings of men, in their minds and in flesh and blood that at all times spring into action and that have acted everywhere." For Mauss, gift exchange is doubly universal, explaining not only every society but also everything about every society. "In these 'total' social phenomena," he argues, "all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time—religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise economic ones, which suppose special forms of production and consumption, or rather, of performing total services and of distribution."<sup>26</sup> Though Mauss denies the universality of trade, he falls into universalizing his own construct of gift as exchange. There is something almost painfully ironic in how his efforts to avoid the excessive claims of an economic theory lead him to propose what he italicizes as the "*system of total services*," and later as "*total social facts*."<sup>27</sup> While his universalizing assumption allows Mauss to describe society as a whole and, as Douglas credits him, to vastly advance ethnology from an earlier, empirically descriptive form,<sup>28</sup> it also effectively abolishes other possibilities for being in the world.

Mauss ends his book with a call to action: "Thus, from one extreme of evolution to the other, there are no two kinds of wisdom. Therefore 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."<sup>29</sup> One might accuse Mauss of confusing an ethnographic observation with an ethical imperative. Indeed, Christian Arnsperger argues that "any serious reader of Mauss" must ask whether Mauss promotes an ideal of generosity or provides "a phenomenology of unveiling which describes the way our society *in fact operates* without our being aware of it." Arnsperger observes that Mauss slips from descriptive observation to normative prescription when he calls nostalgically for a return to a more authentic human community. "[W]ith alarming lightheadedness," Arnsperger continues, Mauss "amalgamates the idea of 'generosity' with practices which, personally, I would certainly never want to see generalized in society."<sup>30</sup> It is hard to understand why what Mauss describes as "a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit"<sup>31</sup> should function as any kind of moral imperative at all.

Mauss's universalizing of gift giving into a total system has other disturbing consequences. For one thing, this totality conflates the human and inhuman: "Everything holds together, everything is mixed up together.... The circulation of goods follows that of men, women, and children, of feasts, rituals, ceremonies, and dances, and even that of jokes and insults." For Mauss, exchange unites the human and the inhuman and thereby implicitly denies the strong ethical claim of human beings against treatment as things. He insists that gift exchange predates our modern and "strict distinction... between real rights and personal rights, things and persons."<sup>32</sup> In fact, his argument explaining the return of gifts requires such a conflation, so that, as Parry writes, "The gift contains some part of the spiritual essence of the donor."<sup>33</sup> In praising systems of gift exchange that include exchanges of people, Mauss seems to justify or at least naturalize the slavery practiced by the societies he studies. His intentions obviously lie elsewhere, but Mauss's exaggeration of the importance of exchange nevertheless generates disturbing corollaries.

Mauss denies not only the extraordinary status of the human but also the independence of the individual, and he insists that "it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations

of exchange and contract upon each other." Though he later concedes that some exchanges might involve barter between individuals, wider social obligations always already imbricate these individuals: "barter is hardly carried on except between relatives, allies or partners in the *kula* and the *wasi*."<sup>34</sup> Mauss demotes the individual in favor of "*persons* who enter into the exchanges... as incumbents of status positions and [who] do not act on their own behalf."<sup>35</sup> Marin Terpstra argues that Mauss makes it a central thesis that "human relations cannot hold if people are only motivated by self-interest."<sup>36</sup> Like interest and profit, Mauss argues, the individual represents a relatively new idea: "The victory of rationalism and mercantilism was needed before the notions of profit and the individual, raised to the level of principles, were introduced." He therefore continues to universalize exchange, while denouncing what he terms "The brutish pursuit of individual ends...harmful to the ends and the peace of all, to the rhythm of their work and joys."<sup>37</sup> Mauss's ethnology becomes all-embracing by raising the social to a position both prior to and superior to the individual; the study of society thereby becomes the study of everything by excluding the individual who would stand over and against society.

While Mauss seeks to combat "the brutish pursuit of individual ends," his blanket dismissal of the individual would also disqualify a possible recipient of charity. In fact, Mauss cites Ralph Waldo Emerson on the injuriousness of charity,<sup>38</sup> a point amplified by Douglas's introduction, which opens by trenchantly declaring, "Though we laud charity as a Christian virtue we know that it wounds."<sup>39</sup> Mauss describes a world in which other people appear either as the apparent agents of exchanges truly commanded by social convention or as the objects exchanged, like slaves.

Mauss excludes other people with their ethical claims upon us but also and more radically refuses to allow the gods to stand over and against the all-embracing logic of exchange. He refuses to understand sacrifices, for instance, as violations of self-interest and therefore pure giving, instead labeling them as the most

reciprocal of exchanges: "The purpose of destruction by sacrifice is precisely that it is an act of giving that is necessarily reciprocated." Such reciprocation provides the gods with their very reason to be; they "are there to give a considerable thing in the place of a small one."<sup>40</sup> Parry argues that Mauss completely misunderstands gift giving to temples and Brahmins in the Hindu tradition, where a "pure asymmetry must obtain," and that "much the same theme recurs in Theravada Buddhism, where indeed we find the gift without a recipient at all."<sup>41</sup> More relevant to early modern drama, the contrast with the theology of grace that forms the background to *Faustus* is considerable, and sufficient to call into doubt the applicability of Mauss's ideas to the entire period. Camille Tarot notes, "Christian grace contradicts the very foundations of the Maussian gift, and vice versa, even more by the fact that the obligation to give does not apply to God, than by the impossibility of reciprocity and reversibility, which obviously do not apply to the relation between God and man."<sup>42</sup> For all Mauss's efforts to explain religion, he succeeds only in explaining away the generosity central to many of its expressions. Mauss's argument is not only universalizing but also secularizing.

Parry interprets Mauss as not conflating the gift and economics but merely restoring their original unity. Parry can therefore dismiss the pure gift as a recent construct, deeming it an ideology produced by a commitment to the capitalist market: "The ideology of a disinterested gift emerges in parallel with an ideology of a purely interested exchange." He insists that "while Mauss is generally represented as telling us how *in fact* the gift is *never* free, what I think he is really telling us is how *we* have acquired a *theory* that it should be." Our society makes a radical distinction between interested exchanges and disinterested gifts, in order to produce a market ideology in which transactions are self-cancelling, according to Parry, because the object received is paid for and there is no surplus of indebtedness. The free gift enslaves, Parry argues, because it "denies obligation and replaces the reciprocal interdependence on which society is founded with

an asymmetrical dependence." Parry's reading still relies on the assumption that gifts impose obligations, only adding that these obligations do not normally cancel themselves out in the manner of commercial transactions. He claims that Mauss's "moral conclusion" was "that the combination of interest and disinterest in exchange is preferable to their separation."<sup>43</sup> However, such a combination still threatens the gift with annihilation, because interested gifts are easily and almost reflexively assimilated into commercial exchange, as Parry himself shows in his summary of the reception of Mauss, as Mauss shows in his choice of metaphors, and as Peperzak complains in his description of postmodern thinkers. Parry claims that the market generates the gift as its necessary corollary in "state societies with an advanced division of labour and a significant commercial sector,"<sup>44</sup> but the logic of the market seems more likely to assimilate and thereby extinguish the gift. Mauss's conflation of gift and economics threatens to obscure any vision of generosity at all, as every imaginable donation is categorized as an exchange. In order to comprehend ourselves as anything but participants in reciprocal trades, we must allow for the possibility of a pure gift, if only as a trace in quotidian exchanges. Otherwise, Mauss's call to generosity would enunciate nothing more than a desire to delude ourselves, obfuscating our own aggression, the better to indulge it.

### *The Claim of the Other in Continental Philosophy*

Mauss's efforts to defend generosity by extending it into an all-powerful and ubiquitous social phenomenon has a perverse effect, because it incorporates and ultimately disqualifies the other person who might serve as the recipient of a gift. Specifically, what is required is a break with the all-encompassing social, so that one can imagine facing another person as a true interlocutor, not as a fellow subject of a sovereign system of exchange. Both Arnsperger and Paul Ricoeur attempt to salvage Mauss's theory of the gift from becoming merely another economy, one whose veiling

compounds with bad faith all the evils of greed. Both do so by reference to the work of Levinas, the continental philosopher most closely associated with ethics and alterity.

Mauss's world has no true Other, in the sense used by Levinas, standing over and against me and demanding my aid by her or his very helplessness. Mauss argues that potlatch establishes and can destroy "face": "It is in fact the 'face', the dancing mask, the right to incarnate a spirit, to wear a coat of arms, a totem, it is really the *persona*—that are called into question... and that are lost at the potlatch, at the game of gifts, just as they can be lost in war, or through a mistake in ritual."<sup>45</sup> Where "face" for Mauss measures social respect won by exchanges, Levinas opposes face to social identity: "Ordinarily one is a 'character': a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice, son of so-and-so, everything that is in one's passport, the manner of dressing, of presenting oneself. And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context: the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself."<sup>46</sup> Levinas treats the phenomenon of the face as the irreducible basis of all social relationships: "Like a shunt every social relation leads back to the presentation of the other to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face."<sup>47</sup> Specifically, the face makes an ethical summons, which Levinas reads through his Jewish heritage: "the relation to the face is straightaway ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: 'thou shalt not kill.'" The face functions as a summons but achieves this summons in language: "The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse."<sup>48</sup> Levinas refuses to reconcile self and Other within a language. On the contrary, he insists, "Language is a relation between separated terms."<sup>49</sup> He designates by the term "language," neither an impersonal structure standing over and above its speakers, as structuralism has taught literary critics to do, nor the apparent contrary of this structure, an authentic and independent expression by the

individual. Instead, he takes language to mean the appeal of the Other, relationship and the interpersonal. Nor does Levinas consider self and Other to be united by society. Instead, their separation constitutes the social: "The idea of infinity is produced in the opposition of conversation, in sociology."<sup>50</sup> Where Mauss places individuals within systems of exchange to be described with the tools of ethnology, Levinas defines sociology by the confrontation between self and Other, who remain radically distinct.

Generosity characterizes the relationship with the Other, according to Levinas. To separate oneself from unconscious absorption in the elemental world, he claims, "I must know how to give what I possess. Only thus could I situate myself absolutely above my engagement in the non-I. But for this I must encounter the indiscreet face of the Other that calls me into question." One does not give to the Other to assert oneself; on the contrary, the Other's call to generosity allows the self to achieve self-awareness initially. The relationship with the Other does not take place outside economic life, however. There is no outside the economy, not because it already accounts for everything imaginable, but because "no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home." The self welcomes the Other "with all the resources of its egoism: economically." The encounter with the Other, and therefore generosity, calls us to participate in a material economy, rather than the exigencies of a material economy demanding gift exchange. For this reason, "No human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy."<sup>51</sup> Where Mauss describes social relations transcending and constructing the individual, Levinas places the ethical encounter of self and Other prior to an economy, even the gift economy that Mauss turns into a description of all societies. He therefore precisely opposes Mauss's views.

Levinas's understanding of economics as arising from the encounter with an Other becomes most overt in an essay titled "Meaning and Sense," which incorporates an earlier paper, "The

Trace of the Other." Levinas distinguishes his views from both phenomenology and ethnography. "Every human need is from the first already interpreted culturally," Levinas writes, which frustrates efforts to ground thought in a material economy. Ethnography, however, also fails to provide meaning. "The most recent, boldest, and most influential ethnography maintains the multiple cultures on the same plane," he declares. Such diversity produces not a welcome pluralism but a failure of meaning itself: "Absurdity consists not in non-sense but in the isolation of innumerable meanings, in the absence of a sense that orients them."<sup>52</sup> Rather than finding such an orienting sense in the superiority of one culture, the universality of economics, or the authority of a god, Levinas finds it in an orientation toward the Other, which he names "Work": "An orientation which goes *freely* from the Same to the Other is a Work."<sup>53</sup> Where work usually means submitting oneself to an economic system out of self-interest (say, in order to buy food), Levinas uses the same term for a generosity that violates self-interest. In fact, he insists upon asymmetrical generosity: "Now *the Work conceived radically is a movement of the Same toward the Other which never returns to the Same*. The Work thought through all the way requires a radical generosity of the movement which in the Same goes toward the Other. It consequently requires an *ingratitude* of the Other; gratitude would be the *return* of the movement to its origin."<sup>54</sup> Levinas rules out gratitude in order to preserve the generosity of Work, which would otherwise become self-serving. In so doing, he makes a claim for a generosity so radically removed from exchange that it does not even find a recompense in thanks.

Peperzak declares that Levinas's statement "must be understood as an exaggerated expression of the radical independence that separates an authentic gift from the thanks it might yield." Peperzak proceeds to argue against the inverse claim by "some post-Levinasian philosophers" that "donation is inevitably trapped in the economy of mutually useful exchanges." Against such suspicion, he notes that absolute generosity need not occur

in a pure state but instead might be found in “only contaminated or mixed realizations.” While he insists that gratitude does not destroy generosity, he also insists that it cannot be necessary to any true gift: “If the expectation of gratitude motivates the ‘giving,’ this is indeed a veiled barter.” Nevertheless, he dismisses with a rhetorical question the notion that the only true generosity would have to be so completely unselfish that the donor would not experience joy in giving: “What sort of puritanism or morbidity lurks here?”<sup>55</sup> While arguing in favor of the possibility of generosity, Peperzak also argues against the tendency to reduce the distinction between true generosity and barter to an absolute dichotomy.

If Levinas exaggerates, as Peperzak claims and as Levinas himself seems later to indicate, he nevertheless makes a valuable contribution by reversing the tendency of western thought to begin always with the self and its interests, which Peperzak recognizes.<sup>56</sup> In the original context of “Meaning and Sense,” he also and more specifically breaks with the tendency of ethnography to understand all gifts as demanding repayment. Though this tendency finds strong expression in the works of Mauss, it also finds weak expression as a mere habit of thought, which reflexively assumes that all gifts seek recompense. This tendency manifests itself not only in the social sciences but also in the humanities and specifically criticism of early modern drama.

Derrida brings together Levinas’s and Mauss’s divergent views in his *Given Time*. Mauss’s rejection of the gift as ever truly generous justifies Derrida’s observation that Mauss’s essay “speaks of everything but the gift.” In contrast, Derrida claims to depart from a traditional anthropology in which, starting from Mauss, all gifts are returned. In fact, he treats Mauss’s study as an example of how any “consistent discussion of the gift becomes impossible: It misses its object and always speaks, finally, of something else.”<sup>57</sup> In conscious opposition to Mauss, Derrida defines the gift as an extreme instance of nonreciprocity. Derrida seems to assume, along with the “postmodern authors” whom Peperzak



censures, that “appreciation, as such, destroys the very essence or structure of the appreciable. Even simple awareness—if one perceives the generosity of giving—would annul its existence.”<sup>58</sup> In keeping with Derrida’s definition, to repay or even owe a gift annuls it. Mere recognition, Derrida argues, provides a symbolic equivalent to the gift as payment in exchange and therefore has the same effect. Acceptance already repays, he argues, at least to a sufficient extent as to annul the gift: “As soon as the other accepts, as soon as he or she takes, there is no more gift.” If one allows for unconscious recognition or response, then every gift can become merely “the phenomenon of a calculation and the ruse of an economy.” Pure gifts seem, under Derrida’s rigorously suspicious gaze, to melt into impossibility. In fact, Derrida declares the gift to be not only impossible in practice but “*the impossible*. The very figure of the impossible. It announces itself, gives itself to be thought as the impossible.” Derrida would seem to agree with Mauss in rejecting pure generosity. Derrida adds, however, that “we do not mean to say that *there is no* exchanged gift. One cannot deny the *phenomenon*.”<sup>59</sup> The gift is and moreover remains in the presence of exchange, regardless of what its definition would seem to permit.

If the gift proves recalcitrant to thought, this may simply indicate the limits of thought itself, or at least of a way of thinking. Robert Bernasconi reads Derrida as presenting “the aporia of the gift,” and argues that Derrida only expresses in more dramatic terms a notion he derives from Levinas’s “The Trace of the Other”: “the gift is impossible within the order of being and occurs only as an ‘interruption’ of that order.”<sup>60</sup> Derrida concludes a dense passage, which begins with his observation that a description of the gift seems to violate language, by turning language itself into a gift, the origin of which must be investigated: “What is given by the language or the language as given, as a given language, in other words, two ways of determining the gift of the language said to be maternal or natural.” Rather than submitting the possibility of a gift to the judgment of language, which seems

to collapse into madness in contemplating it, Derrida suggests that one might view language itself as reliant upon the figure of the gift, "as if thinking, the word *thinking*, found its fit only in this disproportion of the impossible, even announcing itself—as thought irreducible to intuition, irreducible also to perception, judgement, experience, science, faith only on the basis of *this* figure of the impossible, on the basis of the impossible *in the figure of the gift!*" In the previous paragraph, he relates the possibility of thinking the gift to "a dimension . . . wherein *there is* gift—and even where *there is* period, for example time, where *it gives* being and time."<sup>61</sup> Rather than submitting the gift to examination by an economic reason governed by reciprocal exchanges, Derrida implies that the language in which we think the problem should itself be understood as a gift.

Explaining what he means by economy, Derrida emphasizes the importance of circulation. "The figure of the circle," he declares sweepingly, "stands at the center of any problematic of *oikonomia*, as it does of any economic field: circular exchange, circulation of goods, products, monetary signs or merchandise, amortization of expenditures, revenues, substitution of use values and exchange values."<sup>62</sup> This might recall the confidence with which Mauss declares that the word *kula* translates as "circle," which Derrida indeed cites, albeit later. Derrida's immediate metaphor is, however, quite different. "*Oikonomia*," he declares, "would always follow the path of Ulysses."<sup>63</sup> Derrida borrows this image of circular motion from Levinas, who uses it to contrast with a movement to the Other: "To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servants to even bring back his son to the point of departure."<sup>64</sup> This metaphor appears near the description of Work as a movement to the Other, a movement which is not, Levinas insists, circular. Rather than maintaining the circulation of *oikonomia*, the Other interrupts it. In thinking about the gift, therefore, Derrida essays the possibility or impossibility of a Levinasian relationship with alterity.

By bringing Mauss and Levinas into contact, Derrida places two radically different understandings of the gift into debate.

Ricoeur and Arnsperger, on the other hand, combine the two views of the gift. In their argument, the gift remains, as Mauss sought, a basis of social solidarity but only because they insistently replace his economic view of the gift with an understanding of the gift as an ethical act. In one of his last public presentations, delivered by webcam less than half a year before his death, Ricoeur argues that in social contract theory, “[t]he myth of the state of nature accords to competition, to defiance, to the arrogant affirmation of solitary glory, the role of foundation and of origin. In this war of all against all, the fear of violent death would reign supreme.” Against such a theory of society founded upon fear and violence, Ricoeur proposes, “we experience actual recognition in a peaceful mode. The model is found in the ceremonial exchange of gifts in traditional societies.” Briefly touching upon explanations offered by “sociologists,” Ricoeur favors those who find “in the exchange of gifts a recognition of each by the other, a recognition unaware of itself as such, and symbolized in the thing exchanged which becomes its pledge. This indirect recognition would be the peaceful counterpart to the struggle for recognition. In it, the mutuality of the social bond would find its expression. Not that the obligation to give back creates a dependence of the receiver with regard to the giver, but the gesture of giving would be the invitation to a similar generosity.”<sup>65</sup> Ricoeur seeks to understand the desire to reciprocate a gift not as a gesture in a power struggle—as it is in much of *The Merchant of Venice*—but as itself an act of generosity. His alteration of Mauss’s theory of the gift is subtle but absolute. Rather than conflating the socially productive ceremonies of generosity with the bad faith of aggressive gift exchange practices, Ricoeur separates them.

Ricoeur explicates his reading of gift exchange at greater length in *The Course of Recognition*, published in the same year that his webcast appeared. Ricoeur notes, “Mauss places the gift within the general category of exchanges, on the same level as commercial

exchange, of which he takes it to be the archaic form." Here, as in many of his books, Ricoeur generously acknowledges the ideas of others. Specifically, he summarizes the work of Marcel Hénaff as a challenge to the equivalence of gift and commerce: "The ceremonial reciprocal gift is neither an ancestor nor a competitor of—nor a substitute for—such commercial exchanges. It is situated on another plane, that precisely of what is without price." Denying that the gift forms a more or less covert exchange, Ricoeur finds in it a moment of recognition. In the words of Claude Lefort, whom Ricoeur also follows, "Human beings...confirm to one another that they are not things." The historiography of Natalie Zemon Davis directs Ricoeur to the early modern world and to the question of how gifts "can go wrong," decaying into mere exchanges. In response to this challenge, Ricoeur overcomes the seeming inevitability of reciprocal exchange by reference to the first gift, that which starts the cycle and is not offered in response to anything else. Such a gift, he argues, does not call for "restitution, which would, properly speaking, mean annulling the first gift, but for something like a response to the offer." He concludes by dismissing "the obligation to give in return" as "largely a weak construction when considered phenomenologically." "Instead of the obligation to give in return," he proceeds, "it would be better...to speak of a response to a call coming from the generosity of the first gift." Gratitude, he concludes, stands as the mark that distinguishes between gifts, which need recognition, and items exchanged in commerce: "A *good receiving* depends on gratitude, which is the soul of the division between good and bad reciprocity." The gift never becomes, for Ricoeur, an impersonal social structure commanding the actions of individual agents. On the contrary, as Ricoeur writes with elegant concision, "The one is not the other. We exchange gifts, but not places." Generosity remains always interpersonal. The obligation to return, he insists, does not take place "at a transcendent level in relation to the transactions between those who give and those who receive."<sup>66</sup> Gift exchange does not stand over and above its participants or

render them interchangeable. The participants in gift exchange acknowledge each other as interlocutors, rather than merely submitting to social or cultural structure or practice. A gift elicits a response, according to Ricoeur, but because it makes an ethical appeal, rather than a social demand.

By referring to the appeal of an Other, Ricoeur recalls the work of Levinas, whom he discusses<sup>67</sup> and who insists that the face of the Other imposes an ethical obligation, prior and foundational to social norms. Arnsperger also draws upon Levinas in order to explore, as he emphasizes, "*the conditions under which the practice of gift-giving can be seen as foundational for the social link.*" He presents his reading of Levinas in the context of an effort to redeem Mauss from serving as "the apostle of the purely agonistic gift (as he presents himself at various points in the *Essai*)." On the contrary, Arnsperger declares, Mauss's call for social solidarity "means much more than giving in order to affirm one's superiority to others—and Mauss himself shows at various points that he intuits precisely this, but he fails to make it nearly explicit enough."<sup>68</sup> Elsewhere, Arnsperger argues that Mauss "has uncovered nothing but another version of the Hobbesian-Lockean vision of society as a mutually beneficial social construct,"<sup>69</sup> albeit a more sophisticated version. In Levinas's claim that "pure altruism" precedes "any moment where, precisely, reciprocity comes in," Arnsperger finds an alternative social foundation to self-interest.<sup>70</sup> A theory of the gift that refuses to reduce it to an obtuse form of aggression not only better describes human life and experience but also rescues Mauss's own vision of the gift as the basis of solidarity from incoherence.

### *Levinas and Literature*

Jill Robbins and Robert Eaglestone, the foremost theorists of Levinas and the literary in the Anglophone world, both construct their readings against the background of embarrassment in the face of Levinas's overt dismissal of the aesthetic in general and

the literary in particular. In "Reality and Its Shadow," an essay published in the 1948 volume of *Les Temps Modernes*, Levinas sharply distinguishes between the relationship of a viewer toward a work of art and of the self toward an appellat Other. The artwork remains in an eternal present, whereas in *Time and the Other*, published the previous year, Levinas claims, "The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time."<sup>71</sup> Where the Other confronts, face-to-face, the artwork possesses only an "aspiration to life." Levinas refers to Pygmalion, though he might refer to any number of the Ovidian transformations to which Shakespeare alludes in *Titus Andronicus*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Venus and Adonis*, and elsewhere. This "aspiration to life," always fails, however, because "the life of an artwork does not go beyond the limit of an instant." Not only does the artwork take the paradigmatic form of a statue, frozen into timelessness, but also threatens to bewitch the appreciative viewer in an irresponsible participation. With implicit reference to Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy, Levinas claims that the artwork possesses a "rhythm," which he defines as "a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away with it." For Levinas, aesthetics therefore resembles a surrender to myth. "This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation," he declares, "but of irresponsibility." He even goes so far as to declare: "There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague."<sup>72</sup> Robbins concludes that Levinas "is a philosopher who is at pains to exclude the aesthetic,"<sup>73</sup> while Eaglestone asserts, "The essay begs the question of why anybody should be concerned with art at all. The first ethical duty of the critic would appear to be to exile art altogether, thus depriving him or herself of a profession."<sup>74</sup> Eaglestone exaggerates. Levinas does not declare that one should be always and everywhere ashamed of art, only that it should not be identified with "the spiritual life." Only a few sentences later, he claims

that “one cannot contest” artistic pleasure “without being ridiculous.”<sup>75</sup> In any case, both critics find themselves confronting the embarrassing fact that Levinas’s explicit views toward literature and aesthetic objects in general are, at best, ambivalent.

In response to this challenge, both critics build an ethics of critical interruption. Robbins argues that while a text does not interrupt like a person interrupts, reading can interrupt the economy of the same.<sup>76</sup> Eaglestone makes a similar argument, quoting Terence Hawkes’s call for “hooligan criticism,” meaning criticism that frequently indulges in interruption. Such interruption, he argues, reveals the “Saying” that Levinas describes as an address prior to linguistic systems. Eaglestone places great importance on Levinas’s claim in *Otherwise than Being* that books “are interrupted, and call for other books and in the end are interpreted in a saying distinct from the said.” Eaglestone finds in such interpretive interruption a constitutive element of contemporary literary theory as a whole: “currently, the various different strands of ‘theory’ are perhaps the clearest examples of the saying in criticism.”<sup>77</sup> Eaglestone published his work in 1997, only a year after Graham Good dismissed Theory as a new orthodoxy, indeed a “hegemony” boasting “cardinal doctrines.”<sup>78</sup> The mere practice of seeking fissures, gaps, interrogations, moments of undecidability, or Derridean *aporiai* does not save Theory from becoming its own belief system. More seriously, while Eaglestone entertains to dismiss the possibility that interruption might open not to the face of the Other but to the night of anonymous Being—prior to both the self and ethical responsibility that Levinas describes in his early works<sup>79</sup>—he does not consider that interruptions might open to nothingness itself or simply to nothing in particular.

Levinas does consider these things in a response to Derrida. After an appreciative summation of “the primordial importance of the questions raised by Derrida,” Levinas poses a rhetorical question that he proceeds to answer: “Whence the sign from which the presence that is lacking to itself is made, or the inassemblable diachrony from which creatureliness is made? It does not begin

(if it does begin, if it is not anarchy through and through) as a Said." This allows him to argue that deconstruction should not be seen as opening only to "*surplus*" but potentially to "the ethics of before being or the Good beyond Being."<sup>80</sup> However, Levinas suggests a contrary possibility in his parenthetical addition: the play of signs might not open to anything. He expands on this possibility in a paper presented at the University of Ottawa, at a conference in honor of Ricoeur. Here, Levinas demonstrates how interruption fails to threaten a philosophy that reduces all Other to the Same and moreover, how the recourse of thought to linguistic signs does not break this pattern. On the contrary, "That one cannot have thought without language, without recourse to verbal signs, would not then attest to any definitive rupture in the egological order of presence. . . . Finite thought is split in order to interrogate and answer itself, but the thread is retied. Thought reflects on itself in interrupting its continuity of synthetic apperception, but still proceeds from the same 'I think' and returns to it." Within a few pages, Levinas identifies the Said with "all that can be written." Levinas's friendship with Derrida notwithstanding, the mere fact that language is made of signs, or even that signs can be deconstructed, need not produce the sort of interruption that opens to the face of the Other. Over and against the Said, Levinas places "the sociality of the *saying*, in responsibility to the Other who commands the questions and the answers of the saying." Levinas overtly links this responsibility with gratuity: "*From the first*, that is, the ego answers 'gratuitously,' without worrying about reciprocity."<sup>81</sup> Elsewhere, and in another nod to *Macbeth*, he contrasts language as response with the anti-language of "those derisive beings communicating across a labyrinth of innuendos which Shakespeare and Goethe have appear in their scenes of sorcerers."<sup>82</sup> One might contrast the understanding of language as a semiotic system, a social convention, an economy and even a source of critical ambiguity, with language defined by sociality. The former would correspond to the Said and the latter to the Saying. That both can be referred to as *language* is not



merely a source of confusion—though it certainly is that—but an indication that they occur simultaneously. In a conversation with Philippe Nemo, Levinas describes the Saying by observing, “It is difficult to be silent in someone’s presence; this difficulty has its ultimate foundation in this signification proper to the saying, whatever is the said. It is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him.”<sup>83</sup> Of course, one can understand that recourse to the weather as a neutral subject of discussion is a social convention, just as one can analyze or even deconstruct the precise wording of the conversation. None of this, however, would explain the ethical imperative to speak at all, to treat the other person as an interlocutor. Saying explains why there is something and not nothing linguistic. One might draw a parallel between this initial call to language and Ricoeur’s “first gift,” which starts the pattern of exchanges and cannot be understood as a repayment. The generosity at the heart of language, understood as Saying, is not reducible to the social conventions and semiotic structures that constitute the Said.<sup>84</sup>

Robbins makes the relationship of Saying and the gift particularly clear. She explains: “Generosity and language are the only *nontotalizing* modes of relating to the other that are suggested in *Totality and Infinity*.” On the next page, she argues that Levinas conceives of language itself as a gift. Specifically, what characterizes both language and gift is non-reciprocity. “Generosity preserves, for Levinas, the radical and absolute asymmetry between myself and another.” This primary discourse would be pre-semiotic, “prior to language conceived of as a system of signs.”<sup>85</sup> Robbins rightly and even eloquently argues that language in the sense of Saying shares with the gift a primary importance in Levinas’s work. As early as her introduction, Robbins argues that the interruption of the totality should be understood as a gift, coming from without.<sup>86</sup>

I would quibble with both Robbins and Eaglestone, however, by noting that not every interruption can be identified with

an ethical response to the Other. Some might even silence the Other, as would interrupting someone begging for mercy by killing him. Chiron's interruption of Lavinia's curse toward him in *Titus Andronicus* furnishes a Shakespearean example.<sup>87</sup> Lavinia's father and uncle seek in vain to find her meaning in her silence, facing a sheer demand. Chiron, by contrast, attempts to silence Lavinia's appeal. One occasionally finds a similar, if considerably less violent, effort at silencing in postmodern theory, driven by a hermeneutic of suspicion to ignore the interlocutor in favor of the subconscious or ideological or bad faith motives ascribed to her or him. The postmodern suspicion of the gift, about which Peperzak complains, is also a suspicion of the Saying. The interruption of the Said is not generous in itself but only when it opens to Saying.

Like Eaglestone, Robbins attempts to discover the ethical in literature and its criticism, though she acknowledges that, as she describes, "it is no more clear that one can ever claim to be exemplifying this ethical language than that one can be in the presence of the saying."<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, she asks how, for instance, Levinas's own language can achieve what he claims ought to be done by language, when he describes language as originating in responsibility and response to the Other.<sup>89</sup> Levinas never, however, claims that his books constitute pure Saying. On the contrary, Saying always surrenders itself to the Said in order to achieve manifestation. In "Diachrony and Representation," he identifies the Said not only with "all that can be written," but with "the presence of a book—something between bindings—or the presence of a library united between bookshelves."<sup>90</sup> In asking that Levinas's books rise to the achievements he ascribes to language, Robbins seems to confuse language as necessarily relational (the Saying), with language as what can be rendered a written text (the Said). Levinas's hostility toward artwork can be explained by considering that a work of art as such, an aesthetic object, is, like the book, a Said. This does not mean, of course, that it cannot also be a Saying, offered generously to another. One might, for instance,

give a book as a gift. For that matter, one might use a quotation from Shakespeare or Marlowe in conversation or even offer it to a lover as a verbal caress. Moreover, the status of artwork as Said in no way contradicts the claim that the language in which the book is written or the aesthetic language in which a painting is executed ultimately derives from the primordial sociality of the face-to-face relation. It merely indicates that the Saying and the Said, though simultaneous, are nevertheless distinguishable. As long as an address takes the form of words, it constitutes both. The difference is not between classes of objects, gestures, words or sentiments, some Saying and some Said, but between the same objects, gestures, words or sentiments, whether understood as addresses by an Other or as impersonal social or linguistic artifacts. Reference to literary theory is liable to confuse the issue, in fact. Since structuralism, theory has usually labeled a text as "language" in its impersonal aspect, whereas since romanticism, we have thought of art as expressive. Levinas uses these terms in almost the precise reverse of what literary criticism has made customary. In "Reality and Its Shadow," he describes the work of art not as an authentic product of the self or even of the Other but by reference to the idolatry denounced in the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>91</sup> By "language," on the other hand, he usually means the interpersonal, as in the examples offered previously. The aesthetic relationship is with an object, whereas the ethical relationship is with an Other, and Levinas's apparent dismissal of aesthetic objects insists upon the distinction.

While both Robbins and Eaglestone eloquently distinguish between Saying and Said, they seem to wish to blur this distinction, as when Eaglestone appears to argue that interruption turns aesthetic objects into ethical relationships, or when Robbins argues that a mask and a face can be confused and that there is "a certain intercontamination of the governing oppositions in Levinas's discourse."<sup>92</sup> Here, Robbins comes dangerously close to deconstructing or at least denying the distinction of Saying and Said, thereby evading an important part of Levinas's argument.

An attempt to justify criticism leads both Robbins and Eaglestone to take serious risks.

This is not to rule out the possibility of either the literary text or the stage functioning as a Saying, appealing to us directly. The character's gaze toward the audience is simultaneously the actor's, and we remain aware of both. If one does wish to seek interruptions, one might note that dramatic literature is always made up of dialogue between characters, so the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator never simply bewitches the reader of early modern drama. I am principally concerned, however, with how the ethical emerges between the characters for the characters themselves. As readers or audience members, we observe it secondhand and therefore already in the Said. For instance, while Cornwall is threatened by the appeal of Gloucester's defenseless eyes and responds by tearing them out, we feel no such violent anxiety. We might feel something of the appeal, which calls Cornwall's servant to turn upon and indeed slay his master, but we do not lend our hands to their mutual slaughter.<sup>93</sup>

Our judgment and analysis of Gloucester's desperate appeal, Cornwall's cold rage, and the servant's courageous defiance, however, will be colored inevitably by our view of our own world, which is in turn informed by the play. When Levinas declares that "the whole of philosophy is only a meditation of Shakespeare," he does not say that philosophy consists in an experience of Shakespeare, a manner of reading Shakespeare, or an interruption of Shakespeare. On the contrary, in the paragraph in which Levinas's extraordinary statement occurs, he turns to a highly original reading of *Macbeth* to understand the tragedy of existence.<sup>94</sup> Cohen explains the extraordinary importance Levinas ascribes to Shakespeare by arguing that Levinas finds that literature "is thicker, closer, 'truer,' to the ethical exigencies, to the obligations and responsibilities, the imperatives of social life, than is philosophy." In literature, rather than philosophy, one finds "that fundamental moral exigency that constitutes the very humanity of the human."<sup>95</sup> Shakespeare's plays and other literary

texts from throughout the Western tradition offer Levinas models for seeing the world and our place in it that are in some ways superior to those offered by philosophy. Where literature informs Levinas's philosophy, Levinas's philosophy offers new readings of literature.

Rather than running the risk of idolatry by trying to turn the relationship with either the plays as performed or their scripts as texts into an ethical relationship, I am content to show how the texts themselves meditate on ethical relationships by presenting ethical relationships between the characters on stage. Of course, early modern plays neither are reducible to morals nor depict only ethical acts. Literature, as Cohen and Levinas recognize, depicts a world, like our own, characterized by ethical exigency. For the most part, our relationship with literature and even theater remains in the Said; it is an intellectual relationship with an object that can be studied. Moreover, an intellectual engagement with the work of literature is not merely a matter of pleasure. It moves us, as Levinas desires, into "full self-possession, . . . through concepts, which are like the muscles of the mind."<sup>96</sup> My goal (and perhaps that of criticism in general) is not to transform plays or their scripts from Sais to Sayings but to treat them as objects of thought. "Nothing can be seen without thematization," Levinas observes in his appreciation of Derrida, "or without the oblique rays reflected by it, even in the case of the non-thematizable."<sup>97</sup> The plays remain in the Said but in a Said that can thematize and be cognizant of love, ethics, generosity and the Saying.

We need not experience or receive the plays as gifts any more than we need take Levinas's own work as a gift. Nevertheless, our understanding of both Levinas's works and those of Shakespeare and Marlowe, and indeed our understanding of our world itself, will be strengthened if we can overcome our suspicion and accept the reality of gifts. For one thing, such a process would allow us to recognize that the suspicion and anxiety various characters exhibit toward the gift reveals a weakness in themselves and in their fictive societies. We can also better understand the action

of *Edward II* by acknowledging the possibility of generous love or that of *The Tempest* by recognizing forgiveness. To instead indulge our suspicion of the gift, denying or merely ignoring generous acts and gestures, renders the plays truly mysterious to us. Worse, it renders us mysterious to ourselves, unable to acknowledge our own acts of generosity or those of our neighbors.

### *New Historicism and Circulation*

Mauss's *a priori* assumption dominates criticism of early modern drama. Alan Jacobs parenthetically notes, "The prominence of the terms *exchange* and *negotiation* in the vocabulary of the New Historicism, especially in Stephen Greenblatt's work, is an inheritance from Mauss."<sup>98</sup> Greenblatt's reading of circulation goes well beyond a naive fascination with the circulation of material goods. Whereas Mauss extends "the circulation of goods" to "men, women, and children, ... feasts, rituals, ceremonies," Greenblatt extends the objects of his study even further. "What then is the social energy being circulated?" he asks. "Power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, wonder, desire, anxiety, religious awe, free-floating intensities of experience: in a sense the question is absurd, for everything produced by the society can circulate unless it is deliberately excluded from circulation."<sup>99</sup> Greenblatt does not reduce circulation to goods, but he does reduce social life to circulation, albeit of a broadly defined "social energy." Ricoeur insists that "it is the spirit of the gift that provokes a rupture within the category of goods, consistent with an overall interpretation of sociability as one vast system of distribution."<sup>100</sup> Mauss treats gifts as part of an economic order, but Ricoeur treats the gift as an exception to the economic, which allows an understanding of the social beyond Mauss's treatment of all societies as networks of exchange. While avoiding a crass materialism, Greenblatt nevertheless refuses "a rupture within the category of goods," instead extending the category of goods to

cover the most abstract things, in keeping with his understanding of society as a circulation.

While Greenblatt's assumptions handicap criticism, they have enabled brilliant readings of a wide range of texts, not only by Greenblatt himself, but indeed by an entire generation of critics. Greenblatt's abjuration, as he puts it in the first pages of *Shakespearean Negotiations*, of even the possibility of "spontaneous generation of social energy"<sup>101</sup> leads him to discover fascinating lines of influence between far-removed aspects of Renaissance culture, achieving original descriptions not only of Renaissance drama or even literature but of the period as a whole. Douglas confidently declares that in anthropology, "Nothing has been the same since" Mauss's ground-breaking publication,<sup>102</sup> and Greenblatt's work marks a similar watershed in the criticism of early modern drama. We should not, however, consider either Mauss's or Greenblatt's premises binding outside the fields that they serve to create. Mauss defines ethnology, not life itself, and Greenblatt defines his own method of New Historicism rather than drawing impassable frontiers around literary criticism.

Specifically, Greenblatt's methodology seems to share the limit of King Lear's mind. "I believe that nothing comes of nothing," writes Greenblatt in the introduction to *Hamlet in Purgatory*, "even in Shakespeare."<sup>103</sup> With these words, he echoes Lear's "nothing will come of nothing" and "nothing can be made out of nothing."<sup>104</sup> Lear's unwillingness to accept something coming from nothing forces him to understand love as an exchange, thereby bringing about his tragedy. Ironically, Greenblatt's declaration follows closely on his complaint that "my profession has become so oddly diffident and even phobic about literary power, so suspicious and so tense."<sup>105</sup> In his insistence that literary power always has a knowable source, he seems to indulge in the very suspicion of literary power that he claims to diagnose. His assumption allows him to understand early modern drama as a sort of vast recycling depot crammed with the obsolete but

still potent anxieties and social energies of its age. He follows John Foxe, for instance, in showing how doctrines of Purgatory become available for fiction by being impugned.<sup>106</sup> The self-imposed limitations on Greenblatt's reading are, however productive, limitations nevertheless.

In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Greenblatt claims he finds, in place of "an originary moment," only "a subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a negotiation between joint-stock companies."<sup>107</sup> By *Hamlet in Purgatory*, however, he finds himself arguing that the exchanges that he describes should be understood as individual ones, or at least ones that are motivated by individual concerns. Describing one of the earliest artistic representations of Purgatory, Greenblatt points out that the donor wishes masses to be sung for himself and his family, "for their individual benefit and not for a general communal purpose."<sup>108</sup> If doctrines of Purgatory express a desire to succor the dead, Greenblatt explains this not in terms of how, according to Levinas, one can orient oneself to "a time without me, . . . in an eschatology without hope for oneself,"<sup>109</sup> but in terms of self-interest. Greenblatt considers a foundation in fear, borrowing from Giambattista Vico, and also the mercenary motive that Protestants ascribed to Roman Catholicism, before reaching the more or less ethnological explanation that such doctrines build social solidarity.<sup>110</sup> In this case, he finds only self-interested or socially interested motives for a belief in Purgatory.

Greenblatt later acknowledges concern for an Other in summaries of the texts he analyses, but he gradually detracts from such concern in his expositions. For instance, in summarizing *The Gast of Gy*, he declares, "The loss of all [Gy's] worldly possessions, the crossing of the boundary between life and death, the encounter with vengeful fiends, the dismaying recognition of the sins of the flesh, the commencement of unspeakable torments—none of these ghastly experiences has severed his deepest mortal passion." The ghost returns not only in order to seek



prayers that might reduce his own torments but also and primarily in order to warn his wife of what might await her, urging her to seek forgiveness before death. Rather than acknowledging that the doctrine of Purgatory arises from a generous love, distinguishable from self-interest and surviving even death, however, Greenblatt carefully notes that the ghost also wishes to escape his own torments. Ultimately, he dissipates the sources of the doctrine of Purgatory into "a tangle of intense, intimate feelings in the wake of a loved one's death."<sup>111</sup> In his summary of Thomas More's *The Supplication of Souls*, Greenblatt begins by noting that the ghosts in whose voice More writes "do not speak about sin; they speak about connectedness," recalling relationships and promises made while living. His account of this connectedness, however, ends in reciprocity and therefore in self-interest on the part of the person being solicited for prayers: "Not only are the living helping their loved ones; they are also helping themselves."<sup>112</sup> Within a few pages, he describes the appeal of the souls in Purgatory "as if their supplication were an investment prospectus."<sup>113</sup> While Greenblatt acknowledges a charitable impulse underlying prayers for the dead, he tends to side with the Protestant polemicists whom he quotes in viewing the interest in Purgatory as a form of self-interest, fueled by fear of punishment. Like them, he focuses on the material cost of chantry masses and offerings. He quotes William Tyndale, for instance, denouncing the purchase of indulgences as a scam, not truly aiding anyone but the Pope.<sup>114</sup> Instead of recognizing generosity in the purchase of indulgences or the offering of prayers for others, Greenblatt roots such practices in fear for the self, fueled by highly theatrical images of torment. While Peperzak argues that generosity may only be found in "contaminated or mixed realizations,"<sup>115</sup> Greenblatt follows Mauss in minimizing the radical claims of generosity in favor of structures of exchange.

Greenblatt acknowledges that the doctrine of Purgatory relies upon generosity but then finds other explanations for its power. He also acknowledges but marginalizes how the Protestant

denunciation of the economy of salvation derives its force from a doctrine of salvation by grace. Catholic doctrines of Purgatory grow from a love for the dead; Protestant rejection of this doctrine grows from a belief in the gratuity of grace. Peperzak argues: "Together with generosity, gratuitous benevolence, goodness, love, and superabundance, giving has formed an all-encompassing horizon for Jewish and Christian theologians, from the time of Philo and Origen to today."<sup>116</sup> Both the contending parties in the great debates about the status of Purgatory derived their positions from a commitment to generosity, whether God's or man's,<sup>117</sup> whereas Greenblatt's criticism relies on an unending circulation of social energy.

A quarter century before writing *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt examined Tyndale and More's polemical duel in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. In Tyndale's "nothing bringeth the wrath of God so soon and so sore on a man, as the idolatry of his own imagination," Greenblatt reads a confession of the weakness of the entire doctrinal structure of Christianity, arguing, "To a reader who believes, as I do, that all religious practices and beliefs are the product of the human imagination, these charges have a melancholy and desperate sound. It is as if the great crisis in the Church had forced into the consciousness of Catholics and Protestants alike the wrenching possibility that their theological system was a fictional construction; that the whole, vast edifice of church and state rested on certain imaginary postulates; that social hierarchy, the distribution of property, sexual and political order bore no guaranteed correspondence to the actual structure of the cosmos."<sup>118</sup> This has obvious importance for Greenblatt's reading of religion in the early modern world. Denounced as imaginary, social energies hitherto associated with religion became liberated to play a role as overt imaginary constructs, converting their charisma into the power of Elizabethan and later Jacobean theatre and poetry. It is typical of Greenblatt that his strongest argument reduces the importance of religion to providing a metaphysical justification for social arrangements. More importantly

for his response to Tyndale, he also reduces religion to a product of the imagination. His argument treats religious belief as nothing but what comes from within. Religion and religious worship cease to be relationships with an Other in Greenblatt's description. In fact, later in the same paragraph, he reduces alterity to a product of the demonization of an opponent, in order to "assure the absolute reality and necessity of the order to which one has submitted oneself."<sup>119</sup> It is hardly surprising to find a secular thinker denying revelation, of course, but Greenblatt bases much of his criticism on this denial, extending it to an implicit denial of alterity as radically exterior to the self and society. This denial allows him to examine all of early modern society as a ceaseless web of circulations, exchanges, and negotiations, which seems profoundly at odds with the religious character of early modern thought.

Greenblatt's assumptions impose limits not only on readings of early modern drama, but also on our understanding of our own world.<sup>120</sup> The assumption that all gifts call for return, which Mauss enunciates in ethnology, leads critics to ignore or explain away acts of generosity. While Peperzak rightly notes that the gift might never exist in a pure state in nature, the hyperbolic claim of Levinas's ethics must nevertheless be heard, lest we forget that the gift exists at all. Only by recognizing a radical generosity can we avoid the tendency to think of dramatic characters as nothing but participants in exchanges. Questioning the assumptions of critics regarding the fictive worlds in which the characters of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama find themselves allows me to question our assumptions about our own world and about whether we are condemned to view each other exclusively or merely primarily as participants in exchanges.

The powerful utility of Mauss's belief in reciprocal exchange can be applied to *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's most extended meditation on debt and obligation. A charming but strictly internal generosity characterizes this fictive society at the cost of excluding aliens and denying the extraordinary claim of

the Other. The fictive Christian society of Venice also evades the possibility of gratuitous salvation, central to Protestant soteriology from Luther onward. This exclusion of grace and of the gift more generally dramatizes the difficulty of reconciling a culture understood in Maussian terms with a belief in true generosity. Early modern drama questions an absolute belief in exchange. In the characters of Lear and Faustus, such a belief in exchange approaches the fatality of a tragic flaw, and in *King Lear*, the tragedy proceeds from an unwillingness to make a gift as anything other than an exchange. Lear's moral transformation takes the form of a new openness toward generosity. The denial of the gift is tragic for characters and debilitating for critics.

As in *King Lear*, the effort in *Merchant* to speak love opens it to betrayal. Antonio's offer of "my purse, my person, my extremest means"<sup>121</sup> to Bassanio expresses his love but leads him into competition with Portia, transforming his failed attempt at self-sacrifice from an act of generosity to the imposition of an obligation. The king's love for Gaveston in Marlowe's *Edward II*, initially almost absurdly nonreciprocal, becomes assimilated into political structures, and the participants in those structures understand love as little more than another form of alliance. An initially generous and nonreciprocal love betrays itself by taking expression.

The movement from radical generosity to reciprocal exchange mimics the movement from the Saying to the Said in Levinas's theory of language. In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia initially appears as little more than an object exchanged between men: rape and mutilation brutally erase her value in exchange. Rather than being immediately rejected as worthless, however, she commands a new interest from Titus, Marcus, and the other men of her family. These men replace their view of Lavinia as a guarantor of dynastic alliances with a heartbreakingly unrealizable but nevertheless generous concern to hear her voice. Prospero in *The Tempest* shows a similar love for his daughter Miranda when he abandons absolute power on the island for death in Milan. Like Titus surrendering his hand for his sons, Prospero ransoms his own power

for Miranda's future. Like Edward II, he makes his sacrifice by entering into the political world. Unlike Antonio attempting to suffer death to express his love for Bassanio, moreover, he makes his sacrifice anonymously, because Miranda never learns what he has done. Political engagement, in this last play, realizes sacrifice rather than self-aggrandizement.

On the early modern stage, both language and politics arise from an originary generosity. Edward only wields political power for the sake of Gaveston, whom he loves; similarly, Prospero only returns to the dukedom of Milan for the sake of Miranda, whom he also loves. Antonio becomes indebted to Shylock and enters into the entire web of obligations and debts out of a love for Bassanio that initially seems barely to enter his consciousness, much less overtly drive his decisions. It is a habit of criticism to attempt to explain characters' actions in terms either of self-interest or manipulation (by others or by power or by society in general). However, in these plays, generosity does not reveal itself as a ruse of economics, a polite fiction driven by self-interest, or an instrument of social organization. Rather, a primary generosity inspires politics and even language.