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“Give Me a Break!” Emerson on Fruit and Flowers

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“Give me a break!” This expression appears to be an imperative or a request. In colloquial English, it can be either, or it can be uttered with various degrees of irony as a complaint, an objection, or a reproof. I want to begin by considering it in a relatively serious way, by asking what it means to ask someone to give, and to give a break. According to some analyses in a certain discourse on the gift (for example, in Nietzsche, Bataille, Levinas, and Derrida), the gift is always a break of some sort. It is an interruption, an excess, an incalculable intervention. It breaks with a circle or cycle of economic exchange, of debt and credit. A *true gift* (to borrow one of Emerson’s terms) cannot be one that was anticipated or one for which return is expected. In one sense, then, reading very literally, “give me a break” is a tautology, for it says “give me a gift,” where the gift is understood as rupture and disruption. Or perhaps the break requested is for *me*, for the speaker of the phrase, who asks for special consideration; while it may be recognized that there are a set of laws or rules in place that all are expected to follow, the speaker appeals to his or her special circumstances, including perhaps a relation to the one addressed. So it can become a demand for justice, for that absolutely unique justice that escapes rule and law. More specifically, in terms of common usage, the expression is frequently a request for time, for freedom from some constraints or expectations, possibly a petition to be released from a deadline, or from some constrictive schedule. It asks for a break *in* time, a break from or interruption in a rigorous agenda; it asks for something like an intercalary day, as in the time given at New Year’s in Babylon when there was a festive day that did not appear on the calendar, but that was understood to be available for carnivalesque reversals of and variations on normative social codes. The gift and time—these two themes come together in recent texts such as Derrida’s *Given Time* (1992), but also in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Gifts” (see Emerson 1990), which I propose to read.

“Give me a break,” then, seems to encapsulate much of what current thought has to say about the gift. And yet, if we now attend to the phrase as request or demand, rather than to its presumed object, the break, it begins to seem not tautologous, but self-contradictory, for surely there is something deeply prob-

lematic about asking for or demanding a gift. If the gift, including the gift of time, is something that I have come to expect, to see as my due, then it cannot be the gift as such, it cannot be a break with the economic norm. At the extreme, "Give me what you owe me (and you owe me a break)" would seem to involve a sense of *give* that has very little to do with the gift as unmotivated excess. Yet the usage of the phrase can sometimes encompass this analysis in ironic fashion. It asks, speaking from weariness and frustration, Why should I have to *ask* you for a break? Why should it be my responsibility to articulate that which you should have come to by yourself? Why must we now be talking of the gift and giving, when such talk must necessarily involve a lapse from the level of the gift to that of the conventional economy? The gift cannot be anticipated discursively. It might be saying something to this effect: If what we are doing, exchanging services, paying debts, making sure that everything circulates smoothly, is giving, then I don't want anything. Give me nothing! And yet, giving me nothing, letting me off, giving me time just might be the real gift.

Emerson's "Gifts" is a short essay that might seem to be quite innocent of the sort of analysis to which I have been alluding. A recent and celebrated intellectual biography of Emerson describes it as one of several "light, short pieces" (Richardson 1995, 400). Yet Emerson placed it in the center of his *Essays: Second Series* (1990). Debts to Emerson and to this essay in particular are acknowledged by Nietzsche¹ and Marcel Mauss (1990, 65). To the extent that Emerson has an image in poststructuralist thought, it is probably not as a radical thinker, but as an idiosyncratic and eclectic American with a homiletic style and an aversion to asking the most penetrating questions; Emerson might be perceived as a kindly sage, revered for a wisdom that will never cause great discomfort. However, I want to suggest that Nietzsche and Mauss were right in honoring Emerson and that a reading of "Gifts" will confirm the validity of their designating him as their predecessor, for Emerson thinks the break.

Emerson articulates what later appears as a crucial theme in Heidegger, Bataille, Levinas, and Derrida: the gift, or the *true gift*, as he calls it, is excessive and perhaps transgressive with respect to the law. The gift, I will argue, emerges as that which marks a rupture with the law, and this rupture is sufficient to displace and unsettle a number of assumptions concerning community, communication, friendship, and what might be called (in several senses) the hermeneutics of the present. If Emerson is not the first in whom we might find such a view, we will find it developed in "Gifts," an essay that seems at first to deal only with the commonplaces of manners and etiquette, with what might be called a remarkable economy. If Emerson can sound like Miss Manners when he writes that "Flowers and fruits are always fit presents," the insight takes on another cast when we read it, as we should, against the background of Kantian aesthetics.

I would like to begin with the first sentence of "Gifts," which is not strictly speaking the essay's first sentence, for like so many of Emerson's essays this

one is preceded or framed by one of his poems, and the poem is clearly concerned with the gift both as a sign or form of friendship and as the excess that can signal friendship's end.

Gifts of one who loved me—
 'T was high time they came;
 When he ceased to love me,
 Time they stopped for shame.
 (1990, 303)

The time of the gift is announced here, and questions of time and history will haunt this essay as will the complex of the gift, love, and the cessation of love. The poem sounds like a personal statement; it seems to tell a little story, in which the speaker says that his gifts from the other, the former friend or lover, never came quite at the right time, but were too late or too early. How does one time a gift; how can we be sure that the gift arrives at the right moment? Already in this poem we can see a double reading of "give me a break!" or of the gift as break. The gift is to be a sheer interruption, an intervention; it is also to be what is fully and continuously present, which marks a break with sequential, linear time.

As Emerson will observe later, "The only gift is a portion of thyself," and his first example will be "Therefore the poet brings his poem." So does the essayist bring his essay, and "Gifts" is a brief interruption that is placed squarely in the middle of the second series of essays; it names those essays and itself while meditating on the very possibility of the gift. Such gifts, "portions," or sacrifices of the donor, if there are any, would restore society "to the primary basis, when a man's biography is conveyed in his gift." But the gift that the poet (Emerson) brings here is one that tells us precisely of the failure of the gift (that is, the gift given to the speaker) to arrive on time or at the right time. The poem is a gift that hints at the impossibility of the gift by its story of disappointment and its elegiac tone.²

What I would like to call the first sentence of the essay, as well as what follows, seems to refer us to other issues about time. Emerson begins, after the framing poem, by recounting something that is said, but without attributing the source: "It is said that the world is in a state of bankruptcy; that the world owes the world more than the world can pay, and ought to go into chancery and be sold." We will want to ask who makes this claim that the world is broke, that it teeters on the edge of a catastrophic run on the bank. And does Emerson endorse this? Certainly, it is commonplace in any society that operates on credit, and we can think here of the arguments concerning the state of the debt, the balancing of the budget, or the future of social security in any advanced capitalist society

such as the United States. The sentence also conjures up the paradox of the world being sold at auction, an impossible sale because there are no buyers outside the world who might bid on it. Where are the limits of the economy? What is the law of debt and repayment here? And who might have said such a thing? Let me suggest that we can read this "it is said" as an allusion to the putative first sentence of Western philosophy, a sentence that, by coming at the beginning, helps to constitute the structure within which all thinking about economy takes place. It is the sentence attributed to Anaximander, which in its typical translation reads something like this: "Whence things have their origin, there they must also pass away according to necessity; for they must pay penalty and be judged for their injustice, according to the ordinance of time" (see Heidegger 1984, 13; see also Kirk and Raven 1962, 117–18).³ In this usual reading, Anaximander would be expounding a law of universal indebtedness, a law that would be the law of time itself. Everything that comes to be would from the very start owe a debt simply for having come into being, a debt that could be repaid only by its ceasing to be. To use up time, to linger, to *verweilen* (or to while away time) is to exist on credit; however, all debts will eventually fall due. Nietzsche sees this principle as foundational for Western philosophy, when in his essay on *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, he claims that Schopenhauer, his immediate predecessor, has said essentially the same thing and attempts to establish that philosophy has said the same thing from Anaximander to Schopenhauer (1962, 45). While Nietzsche will call this idea madness in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1985), Emerson will simply leave it as something that is said, without endorsing or rejecting it.

After what I read as an allusion to the madness or, in any case, the beginning of philosophy, Emerson passes on, in his apparently blithe way, to the most immediate questions of gift-giving in its everydayness; he reminds us of the difficulty we might feel, for example, in finding an appropriate gift for the holidays or to bring home from our travels: "I do not think this general insolvency, which involves in some sort all the population, to be the reason of the difficulty experienced at Christmas and New Year and other times in bestowing gifts; since it is always so pleasant to be generous, though very vexatious to pay debts" (1990, 305). The question of universal debt is bracketed. Or at least it seems to be, for if something like Anaximander's principle obtains, then the world is not arranged so as to promote generosity. The point had been made earlier, in "Compensation" (see Emerson 1990). The laws of the world are said always to require that any natural gift be compensated for by a corresponding defect. After pages of examples drawn from folk wisdom, observations of the animal kingdom, legend, and literature, Emerson formulates the position rather generally: "There is a crack in everything God has made. It would seem, there is always this vindictive circumstance stealing in at unawares, even into the wild poesy in

which the human fancy attempted to make bold holiday, and to shake itself free of the old laws,—this back-stroke, this kick of the gun, certifying that the law is fatal: that in nature nothing can be given, all things are sold” (62). “The law is fatal.” I take that to mean, first, that the law of compensation is fated; there is no escape from Nemesis and the Furies, as Emerson will say in the next lines. Second, it is fatal in the sense of death-dealing, for that is the ultimate end to which these various forms of recompense and retribution tend. Even “wild poesy”—Emerson has just cited the fates of Prometheus, Achilles, Siegfried, and others—must come back to the themes of mortality and punishment when dealing with heroes and gods whom we thoughtlessly imagine to be beyond reach of the law. If the gods do not suffer death, they can be sentenced to its closest approximation, eternal punishment.

If this is what nature imposes, we may be left wondering whether individual gift-giving can be comprehended independently of the general economy. Our attention is directed to the ordinary, even banal, occasions of giving and the difficulties they entail. While generosity *ought* to be pleasant, “the impediment lies in the choosing,” in our own failure to find just the right thing and our hesitation, indecision, or anguish over that. Indeed, Emerson here writes in the first person, confessing that he is “puzzled what to give, until the opportunity is gone.” It’s not just the gift but the timing of the gift that is crucial. An opportunity appears, because of the fatality of the calendar, or for some unusual occasion, or because it just seems like the right thing to do at the time. It is at this point that Emerson begins to muse on various alternatives and offers, it seems, a bit of advice to the shopper—or is it a meditation informed by Kantian aesthetics?—“Flowers and fruits are always fit presents; flowers, because they are a proud assertion that a ray of beauty outvalues all the values of the world . . . they are like music out of a workhouse” (1990, 305). Kant was fond of the flower as an exemplar of natural beauty; we also know, as did Emerson, that he was outraged by the song that issued from the local workhouse and that he wrote letters to put an end to it. Emerson’s taste is more tolerant; he finds the idea of music coming from a workhouse to illustrate something very much like Kant’s conception of beauty as emerging from a world of necessity while remaining enigmatically consistent with it.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant’s lists of things that we find beautiful invariably begin with flowers. There are at least seven such lists of objects that please us without our having to ask for anything.⁴ Flowers—at least some that we are expected to call to mind—are incontestable examples of natural beauty. Thus, they give a rhetorical weight to these lists, which sometimes move from the natural to the artistic, including landscape gardening and carpets with arabesque patterns; note that many of these are variations on floral patterns. (It might be interesting to know something about the state of horticulture in

Königsberg, and whether Kant ever saw any wildflowers—are there such?—as opposed to illustrations of them.) The flower is always at the head of the list because it is meaningless; it breaks with sense. As Kant says, “Flowers, free designs, lines aimlessly intertwined and called foliage: these have no significance, depend on no determinate concept, and yet we like them” (Kant A 207; 1987, 49). Flowers are fit gifts because they are already natural gifts; insofar as they transcend mere law, they are excessive and supplementary, thereby marking a break with what would otherwise be the uninterrupted reign of mechanism. What we want in a gift, both as givers and as receivers, is a break from the law, so what better gift than that which is already a break? Always at the beginning of the Kantian list, the flower is that uncanny thing that suggests meaning while denying it. For a flower to be beautiful, it must be singular and it must be given. To explain why “All tulips are beautiful” is not to give a judgment of taste; Kant contrasts it with another judgment “by which I find a singular given (*gegeben*) tulip beautiful” (A 285; 1987, 148). Should we hear the *es gibt* in this *gegeben*? Is it only the singular, that which exceeds or teeters on the verge of sense, that can be given?

Flowers also mark a break, as Kant emphasizes, with significance. We find them beautiful only upon reflection, independently of any given concept. Emerson notes the departure from natural law when he writes, “Nature does not cocker us; we are children, not pets; she is not fond; everything is dealt to us without fear or favor, after severe universal laws. Yet these delicate flowers look like the frolic and interference of love and beauty” (1990, 305). “Nature does not cocker us”: we are not pampered spaniels. Nevertheless we sometimes have experiences that give the appearance of “the frolic and interference of love and beauty”; and this may be one of the senses of the longing that can be expressed by “give me a break!” which begs for “interference” and interruption. At least this is what we want in a *true gift*, a term that Emerson will introduce later to designate the gift as such, as opposed to the profane or banal gift that answers merely to necessity or, worse, to prevailing social expectations. I read “frolic” as Emerson’s version of Kant’s “free play,” with a bit of joy or *Lust* added in that might have caught Nietzsche’s attention. Elsewhere (in the essay “Politics”) Emerson describes the presence of the wise man as a present of flowers: “His relation to men is angelic; his memory is myrrh to them; his presence, frankincense and flowers” (338). As angelic, he is a message without a meaning, and so we can rejoice and frolic in and with him.

What would the world be like without a break from nature’s “severe universal laws”? It would be a place, as Kant tells us, where there was no difference between human action and feeling and the coldest mechanism. Kant’s first qualification to this picture of the world is, of course, his idea that our moral autonomy helps us escape from these external strictures; yet the moral law im-

poses an imperative that is even more powerful because it is our own and comes from the depths of our being. That there should be natural gifts, that is, such things as beauty and sublimity is both a wonder in itself and a sign that the two realms of law are not simply opposed to one another. Yet when it comes to the question of the gifts that we give and receive among ourselves, Emerson seems to think that here, too, there are traces of the moral law that render the activity problematic. I take him to be following Kant in suggesting that the existence of the moral law is not a sufficient counterweight, for he says that we need some relief from “the law of benefits,” the law that makes giving and receiving difficult. A preliminary statement of that law is “The law of benefits is a difficult channel, which requires careful sailing, or rude boats. It is not the office of a man to receive gifts. How dare you give them? We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten” (306). My autonomy seems to require that I be “self-sustained”; so I will tend to be suspicious of gifts, that is, of services or favors that are not required by the moral law. If they come from nature, like flowers, or from art, which offers its simulacra of the floral to everyone, I can muse upon them as the symbols of a deeper unity in things than is evident from the two domains of theoretical and practical reason.

Flowers might be exemplary, then, not only because they are nature’s original gift, an excess in relation to her (always “her”) laws, but also because they suggest a certain way in which a recipient can understand himself or herself, a kind of “careful sailing” through that channel of the law of benefits. If you give me flowers, you may remind me of the gift that is given to all of us, rather than forcing me to think of your motive in choosing this or that object and to ask myself what you want of me. It is not that such concerns will necessarily be totally absent in the case of the gift of flowers; but this present offers one possibility of our engaging in an activity of exchange that, like all exchange, must come under the authority of the moral law, and our sometimes jealous concern for our own autonomy, *as if* it were really in the domain of the aesthetic. At least that is what I take Emerson to be hinting in this passage that speaks of the hints of nature: “Men use to tell us that we love flattery even though we are not deceived by it, because it shows that we are important enough to be courted. Something like that pleasure the flowers give us: what am I to whom these sweet hints are addressed?” (305). There is in the case of flowers a possibility of evading the calculation that always threatens to subordinate the gift to an economy of exchange. As natural gift, flowers are already given and so are eminently giftable. Insofar as we are addressed by them, they flatter us without deceiving, or, as Kant said, they exhibit purposiveness without purpose. They are “sweet hints,” aspects of a flirtation that seems to be going on between us and nature. The one who gives us flowers may indeed be courting us, but it is also possible that we

will be provoked to wonder about the much larger question of why nature courts us. We know that flowers are the product of "severe universal laws," yet they flatter us by suggesting that we have a higher destination than merely enacting those laws ourselves. We (should we read this as "we men"?) are "important enough to be courted" (could this mean that even we men are courtable, as if it went without saying that women are?). As Emerson later begins to spell out the difficulties of the "law of benefits," one of the major problems is that of address. I may feel as if a gift fails to take account of who I am; or I may recoil by being given something that shows that the sender has read me all too well. Gift-giving risks undermining the masks that are necessary for our self-protection. The gift of flowers raises a question: "What am I to whom these sweet hints are addressed?" The gift is a break that puts us into question; when flowers are addressed to me, I ask not just *who* I am, but *what* I am. *Who* is relevant in the calculating law of benefits. What does it mean to receive a gift of rollerblading equipment or Judith Krantz's latest novel or handcuffs or a Mont Blanc pen? This question initiates a hermeneutics of the gift: What could he or she have been thinking of? Am I known not at all or all too well? *Who* am I that you have characterized by your gift? *What* am I, such that I can appreciate the excessive, supplementary beauty of the flower? The recipient of this gift is a being for whom its being is a question, a question that ideally should take us beyond the more mundane casuistry of the law of benefits.

Fruits are treated as slightly less exemplary of the gift than flowers: "Fruits are acceptable gifts, because they are the flower of commodities, and admit of fantastic values being attached to them" (Emerson 1990, 305). They are "acceptable," I take it, in a double sense: there is nothing objectionable about giving them (as there is about jewelry, for example) and they are worthy of acceptance by the one to whom they are given. The second sense is perhaps the root of the first, for only that which I can accept without reservations can be an acceptable present for you to give. As a commodity, fruit is useful, it can satisfy that most primitive desire of hunger. And yet it exhibits those colors, shapes, tastes, and textures in their natural state (or in the cultivated state we call natural in distinction to more mechanical modes of production) that make them appeal to the senses. (If we were to follow the dialogue with Kant here more closely, we would have to interrogate his traditional distinction between the theoretical senses and others that would exclude even the fragrance of flowers from the aesthetic realm.) We might think of the European still life, especially those great Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century that glory in the spectacle of radiant fruit, with their partially peeled lemons. So far Emerson continues to work within the framework of a generalized Kantian aesthetics. The gift is the beautiful: unsought, purely emergent, and adventitious with respect to all necessities. But, as with Kant, especially the Kant who emerges in Jean-François Lyotard's reading, these

gifts of flowers and fruit are to be seen as provocations, as breaks, events, or phrases that call for further phrases from us—not counter-gifts, but explorations of what we are (Lyotard 1994).

What Emerson does not say specifically about flowers and fruit is that they are ephemeral gifts; they will last only a few days. Flowers and fruit are *present*, presents that remind us of the vanishing quality of the present. They celebrate the time of blossoming, flourishing, and ripeness. They are a gift of time precisely because they evoke an awareness of their own brevity. Thus, the flower especially becomes a privileged poetic figure because it ties together beauty, the gift, temporality, and hints of mortality. And just because of their fleeting character, flowers and fruit have an advantage over more lasting gifts, such as those of jewels and precious metals, which Emerson will soon discuss. Since they disappear naturally, the recipient has no responsibility to preserve them past their wilting or overripeness; the recipient cannot be expected to display them indefinitely or to pass them on to another. While it is possible to keep pressed flowers, there is also the sense that there is something excessive about this practice. Flowers are not like those hideous presents from your relatives that you must store away in the attic and bring out, dust off, and put up on the shelf when they come to visit. The other side to the transitory character of flowers and fruit is that they must be cut, picked, or plucked; like their painted counterparts in still lifes, they are not presented in their presumed natural state. They are given as broken, their giving is marked by a break; they can be present only in their enforced transience.

Emerson distinguishes fruit and flowers from “common gifts.” The latter are not to be despised; they are least taxing when they indeed answer to a specific lack: “For common gifts, necessity makes pertinences and beauty every day, and one is glad when an imperative leaves him no option; since if the man at the door have no shoes, you have not to consider whether you could procure him a paint-box” (1990, 305). Here we are in the realm of the ethical. The other stands before us in need and an “imperative” dictates that we fill that need. Posing the alternative as shoes versus a paint-box deftly emphasizes the contrast between two kinds of gifts, the utilitarian and the aesthetic. Here “Necessity does everything well,” the necessity that flows from the ethical imperative, an imperative that goes beyond Kant in a Levinasian direction: “In our condition of universal dependence it seems heroic to let the petitioner be the judge of his necessity, and to give all that is asked, though at great inconvenience. If it be a fantastic desire, it is better to leave to others the office of punishing him” (306). To be in the position of receiving is once more marked as dangerous. “Common gifts,” then, are not *true gifts*, insofar as they respond to a specifically ethical imperative and may put the recipient at risk.

Is any gift other than flowers and fruit possible? (And let us not forget that even these must be given in a certain spirit.) Again, Emerson provisionally introduces a rule or principle by attributing it to another: "Next to things of necessity, the rule for a gift, which one of my friends prescribed, is that we might convey to some person that which properly belonged to his character, and was easily associated with him in thought" (306). This is, perhaps, the norm, the goal we have in mind when we prowl through the mall or the department store. But it is also the situation arousing that abyss of indecision that Emerson had begun by evoking: "The impediment lies in the choosing." What will she really think of this scarf? Is it too tame, too flashy, too expensive? Is a book too impersonal? Sometimes we arrive at the right thing by some inspiration. But it's at this point that we may be tempted to fall back upon the lowest common denominator: jewelry, that which might seem to be rather like flowers, insofar as it appears destined to be a gift. What else can it be for, other than presentation and display?

Like flowers, gold seems to be self-giving; it radiates. But Emerson rejects such an account of the general suitability of precious metals or jewels:

[O]ur tokens of compliment and love are for the most part barbarous. Rings and other jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts . . . it is a cold lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something which does not represent your life and talents, but a goldsmith's. This is fit for kings, and rich men who represent kings, and a false state of property, to make presents of gold and silver stuffs, as a kind of symbolical sin-offering, or payment of blackmail. (306)

In rejecting conventional gifts of "gold and silver stuffs," Emerson formulates the principle cited earlier: "The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me" (306). And this bleeding contrasts with the "symbolical sin-offering" constituted by the jewels bestowed by the rich.⁵ There is a disjunction between the organic and the inorganic, one that was heralded by the introduction of flowers and fruit. The theme of bodily sacrifice emerges, the idea that a "true gift" would be the result of a wound, a sacrifice of love. And by the end of the essay, we will apparently be told that gifts are possible only through love. But what has happened, then, to the rule prescribed by the unknown friend, according to which the gift must match the recipient? Does this mean that the gift must show that there is an attunement, an affinity, a merger between what is given and the recipient—in other words, that there is no break between them? Let us call the suggestion that one must give something authentically one's own the biographical principle. This principle in turn can be seen as one constituent of a natural economy, which Emerson describes in this way:

[T]he poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing. This is right and pleasing, for it restores society in so far to the primary basis, when a man's biography is conveyed in his gift, and every man's wealth is an index of his merit. (1990, 306)

In this sense, Emerson, the poet and essayist, offers gifts by means of "Gifts." Or is it too easy to give of oneself in this sense? Shouldn't the genuine gift be one that, as the friend suggests, is appropriate for the recipient? Is the "primary basis" sketched here perhaps not so much a context for the gift, the excessive, supplementary gift, as it is the outline of an economy of exchange, an aesthetic socialism of the sort that attracted so many nineteenth-century thinkers, in which there would be a seamless and spontaneous system of productivity and circulation? Ideally, giving of oneself would coincide with giving the other what is best for her or what pleases her. From each according to her ability to each according to her desire. James Joyce, during the period of his own aesthetic socialism, writes to Nora Barnacle of the necklace he's had made for her; there is an inscribed pendant that reads on one side "Love is unhappy" and on the other "When love is away" (1975, 167–68). It is a line from one of his poems, so he combines the poet's art with the giving of gold or silver. As Emerson defines the *true gift*, "The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me, correspondent to my flowing unto him" (1990, 307). This flowing, this correspondence would seem to eliminate any gap or discontinuity. To give a break would then be to efface or eliminate any break. Does this risk reducing the gift to an economy of presence, as Derrida suggests of Heidegger's meditation on Anaximander (1994, 27)? Or does Emerson's appeal to a natural, archaic economy function ironically in order to suggest the impossibility of the gift, given the mythical and idealized character of the archaic? We might think of this flowing and corresponding in connection with the bleeding already invoked when Emerson says to the giver, "Thou must bleed for me." Flowing and corresponding would eliminate all breaks; what's yours is mine, and the examples of flagons of oil or other liquids to which Emerson appeals are significant insofar as they come from the realm of that which does not come in discretely measured units, but which can be poured out and distributed continuously. However, to bleed for another is to suffer a wound or a break. It is even said that those who share the same blood, the members of a family, cannot strictly give to one another because they are already one in some sense. Furthermore, there is much anthropological testimony that gift exchange is often seen as the literal or metaphorical transmission of bodily fluids; we might wonder what happens to the idea of the gift in a culture that sets itself the goal of prohibiting or radically restricting such transmission.

“Gifts,” then, can be read as a meditation on the impossibility of the gift. It’s all downhill from fruit and flowers. Mauss observes in his citation of Emerson that “[t]he unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior. . . . We are still in the field of Germanic morality when we recall the curious essay by Emerson entitled ‘Gifts’” (1990, 65). Nietzsche excavates that world of Germanic morality in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1989), where debt and credit rule and there are terrible penalties for refusing to pay. Was it that world of Germanic morality that Heidegger was attempting to erase with all of his readings of *es gibt*? The structure of Emerson’s essay might indicate this. After allowing for the possibility of gifts of fruit and flowers, Emerson proceeds, as we have seen, to evoke the idea of a primary economy; however, he does this only to contrast it with the actual world in which false gifts of gold and silver misrepresent both giver and recipient. He continues by exploring the difficulty of receiving in a passage already quoted, where he says that “[i]t is not the office of a man to receive gifts.”

Emerson sometimes appears to be a cheery sage, a Taoist touched by classical American optimism. When he writes “He is a good man who can receive a gift well,” we may be tempted to suppose that there are such good men—and it is overwhelmingly “men” not “women” or even “people” that appear in this essay—and that we could be among them. But the sentences that follow make this reading very doubtful:

We are either glad or sorry at a gift, and both emotions are unbecoming. Some violence I think is done, some degradation borne, when I rejoice or grieve at a gift. I am sorry when my independence is invaded, or when a gift comes from such as do not know my spirit, and so the act is not supported; and if the gift pleases me overmuch, then I should be ashamed that the donor should read my heart, and see that I love his commodity, and not him. (307)

So it is not only the donor who must have no expectations with regard to the gift, who must withdraw from all hopes and anticipations of effects and return; the recipient is in an equally difficult situation, for what was supposed to be a break with the usual economy renders him more vulnerable than before. Now the recipient must guard against his heart being read. “Give me a break” can sometimes mean “don’t give me any gifts.” Give me a break from the cycle of expectations; give me some time; let me be the one to offer, provoke, tease, or change the rules of the game.

You cannot give me anything from friendship, Emerson says, because friends have everything in common: “How can you give me this pot of oil or this flagon of wine when all your oil and wine is mine, which belief of mine this gift seems to deny?” (307). To think of it as a gift is to bring into question a relation in

which we are gifts for one another. “This giving is flat usurpation,” Emerson remarks, noting its turn into its apparent opposite.

In the last two paragraphs of “Gifts,” Emerson sums up the analyses that we have been following. He writes: “The reason of these discords I conceive to be that there is no commensurability between a man and any gift” (307). The law of the gift, then, is discord and incommensurability. And yet, if there were a gift that did not involve discord and incommensurability, would it be a *true gift*? Without such breaks, the gift would seem to amount to giving what is due, not with the supplementary and excessive. Emerson seems to say as much when he concludes the penultimate paragraph by suggesting that his critique of the gift so far applies only to planned, deliberate, calculative giving, a giving that must be undermined by the failure of all commensurability. We can at best give indirectly, perhaps unconsciously, by what he calls an “oblique” stroke: “[W]e seldom have the satisfaction of yielding a direct benefit which is directly received. But rectitude scatters favors on every side without knowing it, and receives with wonder the thanks of all people” (308). While Emerson at first calls this possibility or condition of the gift *rectitude*, a word that sounds odd here, as if there were some right standard to meet, his last paragraph calls the gift-giving virtue “the majesty of love, which is the genius and god of gifts, and to whom we must not affect to prescribe.” How are we to understand love here? Let us read the concluding lines of “Gifts” in which, not so surprisingly, love and its absence are described in terms of how they deal with flowers and fruit. Speaking of love, he writes:

Let him give kingdoms of flowerleaves indifferently. There are persons from whom we always expect fairy-tokens; let us not cease to expect them. This is prerogative, and not to be limited by our municipal rules. For the rest I like to see that we cannot be bought and sold. The best of hospitality and of generosity is also not in the will, but in fate. I find that I am not much to you; you do not need me; you do not feel me; then am I thrust out of doors, though you proffer me house and lands. No services are of any value, but only likeness. When I have attempted to join myself to others by services, it proved an intellectual trick—no more. They eat your service like apples, and leave you out. But love them, and they feel you and delight in you all the time. (308)

It seems that Emerson has retracted everything he has said earlier; the gift is made possible through love. If love obtains, then “kingdoms of flowerleaves” may be given indifferently; they are “fairy-tokens” because of their magical, ephemeral beauty, giving time and marking its breaks. Deliberate, calculated gifts are, like apples, devoured without thought of the giver. Love gives fruit and flowers as *true gifts*. It gives a break, but a break that is the effacement of any break. Love gives a break that is also a seamless, infinite whole. It offers an

endless “present,” in the double sense of a gift and of a release from time, a break in time. The heightened language of this passage, in which love is personified as a god and his gifts are “fairy-tokens,” suggests the fantastic dimension of all of this, the way in which the “present” in all of its senses is imaginary (if not impossible). If thinking the gift is in some sense thinking the impossible, that is marked by the way in which it leads us to think another form of the impossible, love. The essay “Love” begins by distinguishing actual and ideal love. If we want to “attain to that inward view of the law” of love “the first condition is, that we must leave a too close and lingering adherence to facts, and study the sentiment as it appeared in hope and not in history. For each man sees his own life defaced and disfigured, as the life of man is not, in his imagination” (98). If all things are possible with love, they are so only through the idealized love that is understood to surpass all of our experience. Emerson describes the memory of our loves as ineluctably painful:

[E]ach man sees his own life defaced and disfigured, as the life of man is not, to his imagination. Each man sees over his own experience a certain stain of error, whilst that of other men looks fair and ideal. Let any man go back to those delicious relations which make the beauty of his life, which have given him sincerest instruction and nourishment, he will shrink and moan. . . . Every thing is beautiful seen from the point of the intellect, or as truth. But all is sour, if seen as experience. (98)

In “Gifts,” true gifts are shown to be impossible, unless they are given out of love. But a reading of the earlier essay “Love” demonstrates a difference between true love and our experiences of love that is analogous to that between true gifts and those sorry substitutes for them that make us uneasy at the holidays. Here it seems that the Platonic and Neoplatonic strain in Emerson’s thought is at work in order to cast doubt on the value of the ordinary; the more glowing his description of the universal love of imagination becomes, the more limited and impotent the love of our experience and memory appears.

This Platonizing tendency manifests itself in another floral discourse, one in which flowers again hint of another world. In “Gifts,” they intimate the possibility of a genuine gift; in this context, they suggest the possibility of a true love (perhaps another form of natural gift):

The ancients called beauty the flowering of virtue. Who can analyze the nameless charm which glances from one and another face and form? . . . It is destroyed for the imagination by any attempt to refer it to organization. Nor does it point to any relations of friendship or love known and described in society, but, as it seems to me, to a quite other and unattainable sphere, to relations of

transcendent delicacy and sweetness, to what roses and violets hint and fore-show. (102)

Here a Kantian conception of the beauty of flowers is wedded to a Platonic notion of love as the quest for beauty itself. Yet if “the ancients” spoke of “the flowering of virtue,” they did not dwell, as do Kant and Emerson, on flowers themselves (indeed, at the analogous point in Socrates’ discourse on love in the *Symposium*, he turns to discuss the beautiful faces and bodies of young men, something that might have been difficult for Emerson to speak of explicitly). It seems that the gift is not possible in the ordinary course of things; if there is to be a gift, it will arise from love. Yet love as we know it is a pale shadow of the true love that would make gifts possible. Without that love, we have flowers to remind us of its absence.

Notes

1. Nietzsche paraphrases Emerson’s “Gifts” in *The Gay Science* when he writes, “*Franklin-cense*.—Buddha says ‘Do not flatter your benefactors.’ Repeat this saying in a Christian church; right away it clears the air of everything Christian” (1974, §142).

2. Commenting on Mauss, Derrida asks, “Why must one begin with a poem when one speaks of the gift? And why does the gift always appear to be the *gift of the poem*, the *don du poeme* as Mallarmé says?” (1992, 40).

3. Nietzsche, at least in some writings, distances himself from the idea that we must always be paying our debts, that the world owes more than it can pay. He not only suspends it by means of the “it is said,” but also has Zarathustra say in the chapter “Of Redemption” that it is madness that preaches such things. I am tempted to say that he attributes this madness to the Western philosophical tradition from Anaximander to Schopenhauer. And Heidegger, who takes issue with Nietzsche’s translation of Anaximander’s saying, does so in order to open up a possibility for thinking that the tradition has been cast into oblivion. In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Derrida suggests, in effect, that just as *Hamlet* is a revision of the revenge tragedy, a rewriting according to which there is something other than a simple cycle of injury, debt, and vengeance, so Heidegger’s reinscription of the Anaximander saying is an attempt to read the history of thought as something other than a revenge tragedy, a story of how whatever emerges must perish in order to pay a debt. Hamlet, Heidegger, and Emerson are all concerned with the ontology of the gift; they ask, in one of Derrida’s formulations, “How does the concern with *what there is to be* intersect, in order perhaps to exceed it, with the logic of vengeance or right?” (1994, 23). The questions posed by Heidegger and Derrida might be paraphrased as, “Can we get a break from the cycle of debt and revenge?”

4. See the *Akademie* edition of Kant’s works, pp. 207, 282, 291, 299, 323, 347, 349; the *Akademie* pagination is given in Pluhar’s translation of *Critique of Judgment* (1987), which I have followed.

5. Here Emerson’s thought stands in contrast with Nietzsche and Bataille. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra, upon receiving a staff with a golden handle, praises gold as symbolic of all gift-giving (see Nietzsche 1985, part 1, “On the Gift-Giving Virtue”). Bataille finds jewelry to be excessive and wasteful in a fashion that makes it an exemplary gift (1985, 119).

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