

M O R N Y   J O Y

## **Beyond the Given and the All-Giving:**

### **Extraneous Speculations on Women and the Gift**

As a philosopher of religion who also teaches courses in methodology in Religious Studies, I am distressed at certain of the trends I have observed to promote the study of religion(s) solely as a scientific project. This is to be regretted because it eliminates the diversity and richness of human experience in its many manifestations and, in its Eurocentrism, distorts the religious world views and various ways of being religious of non-Western peoples. My hermeneutic training and my pluralist disposition incline me towards a multidisciplinary and plurimethodological approach. This does not necessarily lead to a lack of stability or disintegration of the discipline of Religious Studies. Nor does it obviate the need for careful scrutiny of the theoretical presuppositions and methodological applications involved — perhaps under the guidance of a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Such an approach allows for the coexistence of both humanistic and social scientific modes, without implying that either of these disciplinary divisions, and its subsidiary fields of study, has the monopoly view or the most appropriate methods for studying the discipline. Perhaps a hermeneutics, in the style of Paul Ricoeur, with both its constructive and suspicious procedures could prove helpful. Ricoeur's delineation of hermeneutics encourages the interaction of explanation and understanding and thus permits the fruitful interplay of objective and subjective dispositions. It also has the advantage of admitting that facts are never simply facts — they are always already forms of interpretation. Thus, typologies and neutral analyses may often reveal more about the preoccupations of those who propose them than about the actual phenomena studied and discussed.

My paper is not a defence of this position nor a substantial contribution to the theoretical articulation of a hermeneutic approach,

instead it is an exercise in hermeneutics of a particular topic that has captured the interest of thinkers in diverse fields — including religious studies. It is an illustration of the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion — here with something of a feminist flavour — so that the biases and projections that inform much of scholarly theorizing can be discerned.

Contemporary discussions of the gift, be they in secular or religious settings, are entangled in an elaborate web of discourses, ranging from economical systems of finely calibrated reciprocity (Mauss 1967); to hallowed invocations of gratuitous expenditure (Bataille 1985; Cixous and Clément 1986); to rhetorical speculations regarding the conundrum of its definition (Derrida 1992); to the dynamics of a mutually affirming relationship (Irigaray 1996). Such discussions, with their obvious Western preoccupations, also entail a dubious agenda, inherited from earlier anthropological exercises, where other peoples' cultures provided the occasion for confirming theoretically biased preconceptions or musings about alternative utopian vistas.

In a post-modern, post-colonial setting, perhaps the only way to approach the topic of the gift is to examine some of the exegetical burdens it has borne and continues to bear. The figure of woman, maligned or idealized, has figured in many male analyses of the phenomenon of the gift. Her status in most of this work is an indicator of their own culture's received bias towards women. These theories reveal an assumed superiority that permitted Western men both to exercise dominance in their own culture and to exhibit an insensitivity to other cultures. As a result, they have often made pronouncements on the status of women in an unqualified universal fashion.

Thus, it is unfortunate that certain contemporary women scholars, in attempting to rebut this latter tendency and to provide alternative theories regarding women, also leave unexamined the colonizing mentality of the male scholars. Perhaps it could be said that any definition of the gift in the contemporary west reveals the predicament that continues to ensnare anyone, male or female, who approaches it — loaded as it is with over-determined cultural baggage that further embroils even those who attempt to disavow any influence.

## 1. Preoccupations with the Gift: That which is Given

Perhaps the seminal study this century, and the impetus of much recent theorizing, is Marcel Mauss' *The Gift* (1967), which was informed by his readings of Franz Boas' *On the North-Western Tribes of Canada* (1894) and *Kwakiutl Ethnography* (1966), as well as Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). In both the Kwakiutl potlatch and the Melanesian kula ring, Mauss detected a delicate balance of giving, receiving and repayment — with a broadly defined religious orientation sustaining the interacting social, political and economic aspects. Mauss' elaboration was directed to extolling communal values as opposed to contemporary Western nationalistic and acquisitive interests. In his "Moral Conclusions", Mauss ends with an endorsement of this "primitive" economy as inculcating a generous disposition that is "less serious, avaricious and selfish than we are" (1967: 79), and less predisposed to war.

It is by opposing reason to emotion and setting up the will for peace against rash follies of the kind that peoples succeed in substituting alliance, gift and commerce for war, isolation and stagnation. (1967: 80)

While superficially a generous endorsement, such a retrogressive projection reflected more Mauss' own preoccupations at the time of writing in post-World War I Europe. His recommendations are questionable today not just from the viewpoint of unwarranted deductions (however romantic), but from the findings resulting from a reexamination of the original material. Such reservations are expressed by the scholar of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith:

It is terribly complicated and not clear to me what belongs in and what belongs out of the category, and I really do not have it sorted out; and particularly now that Goldman and others have researched the Kwakiutl material, terribly important things are coming out. What's happened is that the opportunity to go back to Boas' notes at Columbia and see what he wrote, as opposed to what he thought he wrote twenty years later, has had the result that the Kwakiutl turn out no longer to have a potlatch. How then is potlatch to be related to exchange and exchange to potlatch? (Burkert, Girard and Smith 1987: 214–5; see Goldman 1975)

Apart from registering this sobering reflection, it is beyond the scope of this presentation to undertake a thorough investigation of the exact reliability of the base data concerned with potlatch itself.

But it does indicate that a close scrutiny of all such imposed categories is imperative and a beginning has been made in an important study by Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History* (1997). The concomitant problem that I wish to focus on in this paper is of equal moment with regard to unwarranted assumptions — it is the refusal to acknowledge women as full participants or agents in these procedures concerned with the gift.

Mauss is culpable in this regard. He is content to replicate material regarding women's role from Boas and Malinowski:

All these institutions reveal the same kind of social and psychological pattern. Food, women, children, possessions, charms, land, labour, services, religious offices, rank — everything is stuff to be given away and repaid. (Mauss 1967: 11–12)

Mauss is not alone in this devaluation of women. His position can be compared to that of Lévi-Strauss who also generalized from his own observations and from Mauss' as well as Malinowski's Trobriand work:

The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister or daughter to be given to others. It is the supreme rule of the gift, and it is clearly in this aspect, too often unrecognized, which allows its nature to be understood. (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 481)

The sad fact is that Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, following Malinowski, as did others who were influenced by Durkheim's sacred and profane dichotomy, did not deem that the realm of women merited serious study.<sup>1</sup> They were viewed as the property of men, without significant rituals or property of their own.

While Luce Irigaray, a contemporary women critic, does not refer to Mauss specifically, she does cite Lévi-Strauss in her essay "Women on the Market" (1985b), where she criticizes the accepted generalization of trafficking in women as well as its rationalizations.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropologist Diane Bell in her work, *Daughters of the Dreaming* (1994: 36, 242–248), has illustrated how Australian aboriginal women have suffered from the limitations of many Western men's circumscribed view of the women of their own society (particularly with reference to Durkheim's categories of sacred and profane). For example, Bell's work relates how Australian aboriginal women were judged profane according to the Durkheimian structure, thus lacking the necessary attributes for sacred rituals and myths, and therefore not even worth being studied.

Why exchange women? Because they are “scarce [commodities] ... essential to the life of the group,” the anthropologist tells us. Why this characteristic of scarcity, given the biological equilibrium between male and female births? Because the “deep polygamous tendency, which exists among all men, always makes the number of available women seem insufficient.” (Irigaray 1985b: 170)

Besides ironically questioning the implicit assumptions that all men are intrinsically desirable to women and that women could not possibly have polygamous inclinations, Irigaray makes the sweeping observation that women’s only value appears to be that of an exchange commodity.

All the social regimes of “History” are based upon the exploitation of one “class” of producers, namely women. Whose reproductive use value (reproductive of children and of the labour force) and whose constitution as exchange value underwrite the symbolic order as such, without any compensation in kind going to them for that “work”. (Irigaray 1985b: 173)

Irigaray expands on this remark, by emphasizing women’s contribution as providing the unacknowledged infrastructure of the entire socio-economic apparatus that goes by the name of patriarchy. In Irigaray’s view, this repressed role has never been acknowledged, let alone deemed worthy of consideration for its indispensable contribution. Irigaray’s early work is dedicated to exposing and rectifying this oversight, which she views as ubiquitous.

## 2. The Ultimate Gift — Sacrifice

There is a denser and more extreme aspect of the gift — the notion of sacrifice — which was also broached by Mauss and Hubert (1964). This dimension has been elaborated at great extent in the work of René Girard. Mauss had set the scene by stating:

The connection of exchange contracts among men with those between men and gods explains a whole aspect of the theory of sacrifice. It is best seen in those societies where contractual and economic ritual is practised by men. (Mauss 1967: 13)

He had then associated this sacrificial dimension with a religious impulse that he posited at the heart of potlatch:

Sacrificial destruction implies giving something that is to be repaid ... It is not simply to show power and wealth and unselfishness that a man puts his slaves to death, burns his precious oil, throws coppers into the sea, and sets his house on fire. In doing this he is also sacrificing to the gods and spirits, who appear incarnate in the men who are at once their namesakes and ritual allies. (Mauss 1967: 14)

Mauss did not elaborate in detail on the spiritual underpinnings of this sacrificial impulse — but he located them within a “*do ut des*” dynamic of an anticipated abundant divine recompense, with the added underlying incentive of an insurance policy against covetous evil spirits.

Girard’s work, while it acknowledges this human propensity to ward off potential malevolence of deistic figures, expands the basic gestures of placation to include actual human sacrifice. For Girard, the origin of religion can be located in the complex motivations that instigate such sacrificial activity. He would claim: “All religious rituals spring from the surrogate victim (scapegoat), and all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, spring from this [sacrificial] ritual” (Girard 1991: 306). In Girard’s reading of a primal act of violence, it is not protection, nor appeasement for the murder of the father (as in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*), that instigates this immemorial compensatory gesture. Instead, Girard cites a form of guilt that arises in response to arbitrarily motivated designs on another’s property (which he terms as a form of mimesis) as responsible. Such cupidity of another’s goods can escalate out of proportion, unless it is contained by the sacrifice of a substitute figure that defuses the situation. (Again, as with Freud, this archaic mythic projection would seem implausible on many counts; Frear 1992).

In Girard’s script, however, in contrast to Freud’s conclusions regarding the endless repetition compulsion of religion rituals, there is the intervention of the Christ figure, the ultimate innocent victim. Christ inverts the established order by revealing the mercenary machinations involved in former sacrifices, and thus, by his own sacrifice, overturns and renders as henceforth inappropriate, the violent origins of religion.

Girard’s theories, however, as those of the previously mentioned male anthropologists, exhibit a distinct bias in favour of the male of the species. Not once does he refer to women’s participation (or lack of it) in this ritual of immolation — except for a casual, even dismissive reference to Dionysian maenads. This is also in line with

Girard's disapproval of all pagan precedents, for Girard's work, as it progresses, becomes an earnest vindication of Christianity.

Luce Irigaray, in *Women, the Sacred and Money* (1993), castigates Girard's religious polemic for its neglect of women. In the context of sacrifice, however, Irigaray is especially concerned to stress that beneath Girard's speculations regarding the scapegoat figure — the sacrifice of whom restores equilibrium — there is another unacknowledged victim — woman. This female figure does not feature as an overt offering on an altar, but as a victim of covert deprivation and denial. On this reading, women's flesh, her integrity, her special place in the social order are all effaced by a man's emphasis on his gender's role not just as primordial in the religious, but also in the social scheme of things. It is here that Irigaray forges a link between her earlier indictment of woman as acknowledged infrastructure in an economy of goods and services, and women as the repressed source of life in a psychoanalytically ordered economy of desire.

At the same time, Irigaray makes another observation of profound significance with regard to the institution of sacrifice — This is the fact that women have rarely, if ever, been involved not just in the preliminary protocols of sacrifice, but of its public rituals.

One thing is obvious: in the religions of sacrifice, religious and social ceremonies are almost universally performed by men. Men alone perform the rite, not women or children (though male children can sometimes act as acolytes). Women have no right to officiate in public worship in most traditions, even though that worship serves as the basis and structure for the society. (Irigaray 1993: 78)

A similar encompassing judgment has also been made by Nancy Jay in her detailed study of numerous sacrificially-oriented societies: *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (1992). Jay's conclusions are a complement to Irigaray's, as she argues for sacrifice as the legitimation of patrilineal line of descent as opposed to the matrilineal.<sup>2</sup>

Sacrifice may be performed for many reasons. But it is beautifully adapted for integrating patrilineal descent groups, a goal that can only be accomplished by differentiation from all other lines of descent. Sacrifice can both expiate descent from women

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware of the possibility of ahistorical theoretical and empirical generalization made by Jay. There are critiques of Jay's treatment of sacrifice. See Raab 1997 and Strenski 1996.

(along with other dangers) and integrate the “pure and eternal patrilineage. (1985: 296–297)

Whether such all-inclusive diagnoses as those of Irigaray and Jay stand the test of further enquiry, particularly with regard to non-Western cultures, the disregard of women they observe is nonetheless a corollary of customs concerned with sacrifice in Western religions that place women as external to the exercise of power, rather than as a partner or participant. They are symptomatic of a much more deep-rooted and pervasive value system that has inculcated the bifurcation of purity and danger, sacred and profane, nature and culture. In most theoretical variants of this binarism, as promulgated by Western scholars, women have been generally associated with the less valued side of the pair.<sup>3</sup>

As an alternate scenario, Irigaray would envision a social and religious dimension where sacrifice, whether social or psychic, is no longer needed and where a just and mutually confirming mode of exchange operates.

### 3. The All-Giving

There is a third fascinating elaboration of women’s situation, also prompted by Mauss’s reflections on the gift, that needs to be noted. In Mauss’s account of the gift there was an ambivalent relation between a system of economic and social checks and balances governing the gift, and a moral impulse, sustaining a purely disinterested offering that is free of any qualifications. It is this latter extravagant gesture that has been embellished, most particularly in the work of George Bataille, who proposes an alternative model of dispensation that, in its unconstrained largesse, is characteristic of women: “To give is the fundamental feminine attitude” (1987: 127). This unconditional abundance as *dépense* (expenditure) was Bataille’s modification of (in his view) Mauss’ domestication of the profligate waste evident in Boas’ description of potlatch celebrations. In such a transgressive (or general) economy, it is not simply the civilized (i.e., bourgeois) utilitarian exchange of objects that Bataille wished to counter. In addition, he wanted to (re-)introduce a world view, untarnished by profane, rational calculations, where an economy of superabundance — be it in rituals of sacrifice, in squandering of riches, or in dissolution of assets — witnesses to a sacred universe.

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<sup>3</sup> Genevieve Lloyd documents this in Lloyd 1993.

This sacral reality has nothing to do with the orthodoxies of organized religion. For Bataille religion, specifically Christianity, has eradicated the innate human propensity for sacrality by the imposition of moral categories which deny the superabundant energy that Bataille considered the essence of life. Instead, eroticism and the role of women became central motifs in Bataille's exposition of transgression. The essential link, however, that conjoins eroticism and woman is sacrifice — a phenomenon which Bataille invested with the most intense release of both violence and dread, yet which affirmed the essential sacred nature of life. As Bataille asserts in his essay "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,"

It must be said too that sacrifice, like tragedy, was an element that of a celebration; it bespoke a blind, pernicious joy and all the danger of that joy, and yet this is precisely the principle of human joy; it wears out and threatens with death all who get caught up in its movement. (Bataille 1982: 23)

Bataille's model fashions woman as the exemplar par excellence of this gesture of the requisite abandon and degradation.

[I]n the sacrificial act of sexuality, it is the woman who has the dubious honour of being the victim par excellence: The lover strips bare the beloved of her identity no less than the blood-stained priest his human or animal victim. The woman in the hands of her assailant is despoiled of her being. (Bataille 1987: 90)

Michele Richman illustrates the difficulty of this position when she reflects on the role of woman in the context of Bataille's elaboration of Mauss' *The Gift*. "The possible relation of their [women's] transgressive sexuality to the position ascribed them in the exchange system of patriarchal society is never explicitly considered" (1982: 81).

Perhaps for Bataille, as for Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, the blind-spot in the old dream of symmetry, the fantasy/fetishization of women, distorts not just men's attempts to control the operations of a society, but also their experiments exploring a divergent order. As is obvious, their observations on the gift have very little relation either to the primary anthropological data or to the lives of actual women. Yet it is this trajectory of the gift and its connection to women that still continues to exercise a fascination for many Western thinkers.

#### 4. Beyond the Token of the Gift

The reaction of women theorists to this phenomenon has not been without its problems. The early work of Luce Irigaray with her use of the term *jouissance*, and of Hélène Cixous with her deployment of the term *l'écriture féminine*, demonstrate that both these French women theorists were disposed to the notion of woman as a term that eluded, in its expansiveness, "phallogocentric" confinement/repression. Both waxed lyrical, in a quasi-deconstructive style (and here the influence of Derrida is evident), about the possibilities of female recalcitrance to control and the exorbitance of female sexuality. Cixous contrasted the debased form of exchange economy that has been exploited by men in the past, with that of women (such in the figure of Ariadne) who lives "without calculating, without hesitating, but believing, taking everything as far as it goes, giving everything, renouncing all security" (Cixous and Clément 1986: 75). Cixous obviously believes that there is a inordinate mode of "feminine" economy, that can be distinguished from that of the manipulative and calculating "masculine" formula.<sup>4</sup> In this capacity Cixous observes it is possible for a woman to give of herself without reserve, but, in this proposed model, she is never taken advantage of, never despoiled.

If there is a self proper to women, paradoxically, it is her capacity to deappropriate herself without self-interest: endless body, without 'end,' without Principal 'parts'; if she is a whole, it is a whole made up of parts that are whole, not simple, partial objects but varied entirety, moving and boundless change, a cosmos where eros never stops travelling, vast astral space. (1986: 87)

Cixous' vocabulary of immoderation, however, is reminiscent of the prodigality endorsed by Bataille, where woman offers herself as a gift which is not in need of recompense. I think such utopian alternatives require extremely careful contextual scrutiny by women before they are unhesitatingly adopted (even as a disruptive strategy), or women will only too easily still find themselves at the mercy of a system, that while paying lip-service to a nomenclature of freedom from constraint, simply conducts business as usual.

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<sup>4</sup> Cixous does allow, however, that it is possible for men to have "feminine" as well as "masculine" attributes, just as women may have "masculine" as well as "feminine" ones.

Irigaray, influenced by Lacan as well as Derrida, sought initially to affirm jouissance both as a mode of excess sexual pleasure and also as a tactic of textual sedition, disruptive of the patriarchal symbolic system:

Turn everything upside down, inside out, back to front. Rack it with radical convulsions, carry back, reimport, those crises that her "body" suffers in her impotence to say what disturbs her... Not by means of a growing complexity of the same, of course, but by the irruption of other circuits, by the intervention at times of short-circuits that will disperse, diffract, deflect endlessly, making energy explode sometimes, with no possibility of returning to one single origin. (1985a: 142)

Though these various images of refractory women are galvanized in the service of dismantling the foundations of both the philosophical and social order, something could easily go awry in these programmes. Irigaray's endless diffusions initially seemed to run a similar risk as Cixous' of playing into the hands of entrenched structures. The question needs to be asked to whom, and for what purpose, does woman give (of) herself without reserve? Is it for subversion, for self-affirmation, or in the service of others? Unless women are clear about their motivation, it is too easy for women's munificence, viewed as a reckless abandonment, to be rendered ineffective by a system finely tuned to neutralize any wayward impulses. Still trapped by the ubiquitous binary structures, which remain unaffected by magnanimity, women may continue to represent an excessiveness which is the obverse of a capitalistic accumulation and exploitation. I believe that this aspect of both Cixous' and Irigaray's work, though reformatory in its motives, flirts with the danger of simply reinforcing women's eccentricity and incapability of challenging in any practical way the sacrificial nature of women's situation.

There is, however, a change in the direction of Irigaray's work from approximately the late 1980s, when she began to reflect on the work of Hegel and Levinas. Aware that deconstructive excesses were not sufficient for a new order, she began to seek a position that would not simply be a reactive move within a restrictive dialectic formula:

If neither absolute spirit nor the traditional Western monotheistic God seem to be the paths of a becoming, how can we ensure that the negative does not entail martyrdom? (1996: 13)

This search marks a rejection of the previous rules of exchange, whether of a binary or dialectical mode, where "the sacrifice of sexed

identity to a universal [was] defined by man with death as its master" (1996: 26). This introduces a further exploration by Irigaray of the possibility of a non-coercive, non-retributive exchange. In the social domain, Irigaray's utopian vision of a new order is based on a new mode of relationship

beyond the enslavement to property, beyond the subjects' submission to the object...[it seeks] a new economy of existence or being which is neither that of mastery nor that of slavery but rather of exchange with no preconstituted object — vital exchange...an exchange able to communicate, at times commune, beyond an exchange of objects. (1996: 45)

Though these exhortations of Irigaray are extraordinarily powerful, and her assertions regarding women's suppression by religion and its substitutes in the West are valid, they are perhaps in need of some cautionary restraints. Just as the male theorists have made false universalizations regarding women and the gift, I believe it is incorrect to assume, as Irigaray does, that such restrictions have been ubiquitously imposed on women throughout all histories and cultures.

While I believe Irigaray's work has been helpful in indicating the compromised stereotypical sexual constructions that have reverberated in Eurocentric deliberations on the gift, her own solutions do not entirely escape their beguiling seductions, specifically on questions of race, class and ethnicity. Irigaray does not criticize Lévi-Strauss or Girard on any other grounds than their biased and inappropriate treatment of women. There is no awareness that not just their analysis, but that the actual anthropological data may be flawed by the imposition of ethnocentric categories. Specifically, Irigaray does not realize that her work may also be imposing inappropriate generalizations on women in non-Western societies. Fortunately, in recent years, there have been women anthropologists who have since taken the male thinkers' classificatory systems to task, and their criticisms could also be a warning for Western women who are not sufficiently sensitive to issues of appropriation.

#### **4. Alternate Scenarios**

Annette Weiner, in her own study of Trobriand society has demonstrated that not all women have been powerless:

Beyond the ethnographic data, however, the "discovery" that Trobriand women have power and that women enact roles which are symbolically, structurally, and functionally significant to the ordering of Trobriand society, and to the roles that men play, should give us, as anthropologists, cause for concern... we have accepted almost without question the nineteenth century Western legacy that had effectively segregated women from positions of power. (Weiner 1976: 228)

In a similar vein, Eleanor Leacock criticizes Lévi-Strauss for erroneous assertions and for the deliberate omission of such egalitarian people as the Iroquois who would have challenged his theories:

The stubborn fact remains that even in its own terms Levi-Strauss entire scheme founders on those societies that are matrilineal...and matrilocal...It is therefore not surprising that in the space of a page and a half in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, there are four (incorrect) statements about such forms as extremely rare and transitory (116-117). Although he dedicates his book to Lewis Henry Morgan, Levi-Strauss does not include the matrilineal-matrilocal Iroquois described by Morgan among his "rare" examples. (Leacock 1981: 235)

The fact that there have been matrilineal and matrilocal peoples where the gift of women was never the basis of the social or religious economy, questions the ubiquitous assumptions of women's lower status and lack of power. As Weiner describes it, women were not the pawns in the pervasive patriarchal exchange system that Malinowski and Mauss described:

Throughout the Pacific and other societies of similar political scale, women as sisters and spouses gain their own domains of power through controlling economic resources and protecting inalienable possessions and the various cosmological phenomena that provide authentication of historical, ancestral linkages. (Weiner 1992: 152)

Weiner's and Leacock's portraits of societies where women exert control over a sphere, both material and spiritual, upon which no man may encroach, and where "the female domain, the regeneration of human life, is accorded primary value" (Weiner 1989: 234), makes the automatic assignation of women to secondary status appear simplistic and insensitive. Perhaps a more thorough questioning of the implicit Western orientation involved would have revealed a far more complex set of structures to emerge not just in Melanesian society, but in those of other peoples where women both have and ne-

gotiate social positions in ways that could inform Eurocentric blind-spots (Etienne and Leacock 1980). It could also point to models of exchange that would help Irigaray in her deliberations regarding a non-restrictive mode of exchange. However, this should not lead to unwarranted extrapolations of such examples as ideals for Western women, any more than to distortions by the imposition of artificial Western categories. As Marilyn Strathern warns:

The difference between Western and Melanesian (we/they) sociality means that one cannot simply extend Western feminist insights to the Melanesian case;...the difference between gift/commodity is expanded as a metaphorical base on which difference itself may be apprehended and put to use for both anthropologist and feminist purposes, yet remains rooted in Western metaphysics. (1988: 7)

Strathern's comments are indicative of the fact that the whole notion of difference needs to be faced squarely so that it can be recognized as that which provokes both idealizations and defence mechanisms, particularly on the part of a Western assimilative mindset. Difference, as it has functioned within a dialectic or binary format, is often disclosive of ingrained biases rather than an indicator of the need for a radical self-reflexive questioning of the actual system itself. Weiner's comments in his regard are salutary:

In weaving the "gift" myth, is not the anthropologist hiding a reality that concerns his or her role in his or her society? Is he or she not perpetuating and creating an image of "the primitive" as a person, or "primitive society" as a way of life, that has survived on some fundamental principle other than self-interest? (Weiner 1976: 221)

By simply embroidering such a fabrication, instead of questioning its basis and motivations (conscious or otherwise), Western scholarship continues to perpetuate the world in its own image. This tendency is strongly evident in the work of many theorists who, while they ostensibly display their distaste for the absolutes of Western metaphysics, also play fast and loose with questionable source material to support their disruptive models. In the same way, both Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, though they are critical of the male-centred Western adaptations, also seem circumscribed by the same Western parameters to which they are reacting. Thus, a discriminating cultural critique as well as a judicious self-reflexion would seem then to be a needed ingredient in any further discussion of the gift.

## Conclusion

But perhaps these examples of selective reading of questionable data and utopian improvisations highlight a common predicament as the Eurocentric mindset is confronted by otherness — be it its former colonized peoples or its own internalized forms of exclusion. There needs to be a recognition that the phenomenon of the gift and the fascination it exerts for contemporary thinkers is a measure of dissatisfaction with prevailing norms. As a test case, the phenomenon of the gift needs to be perceived as an instance of heterogeneity in a culture that, despite its convoluted escape mechanisms, cannot honestly confront its repressive controlling impulses. The gift is thus a symptom par excellence of Western tendencies to distort for its own purposes (whether benign, malevolent or simply ignorant) whatever is viewed as alien, exotic or excluded. This has largely been (non-Western) cultures, women and those of other racial, class or ethnic varieties. Such behaviour is evident not just in anthropology and literature, but in philosophy, and especially in religious studies where the prevailing norm has been the cliché of the neutral male scholar. Insofar as this propensity is unacknowledged, the gift will remain an enigma to a society such as ours that refuses to admit not just its blind-spots (whether cultural, racial or sexual), but the mechanisms that continue to produce them. It will thus compensate by demonizing or idealizing uncritically, the *other* as bearer of those repressions that make its continued flourishing possible.

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