

Afterword to the Canongate edition of *The Gift*

The Gift was written between 1977 and 1982 and published in 1983. It contains very little topical detail from those years, my hope at the time being to write what might be called a “prophetic essay,” a rather grand way of saying that I intended to describe something that was the case no matter the decade rather than something contingently true. Nor, therefore, is *The Gift* a very practical book. It describes a problem--the disconnect between the practice of art and common forms of earning a living--but it refrains from exploring a resolution. That restraint is of a piece with the ahistorical impulse, of course, for most solutions are of their time and will vary as the times vary.

All of this notwithstanding, since *The Gift* appeared I have sometimes been asked to speak to the puzzle of supporting creative work in the present moment. What may be the least obvious part of my current response to that question is this: I’ve come to believe that, when it comes to how we imagine and organize support for creative work, the pivotal event in my lifetime was the 1989 fall of the Soviet Union. To expand on that assertion, it will help to begin by restating two of *The Gift*’s motivating assumptions.

The first is simply that there are categories of human enterprise that are not well organized or supported by market forces. Family life, religious life, public service, pure science, and of course much artistic practice: none of these operates very well when framed simply in terms of exchange value. The second assumption follows: that any community that values these things will find non-market ways to organize them. It will develop gift-exchange institutions dedicated to their support.

Take the example of pure science, that is to say, science that puzzles over questions whose answers can have no obvious utility. What is the shape of the planetary orbits? What is the sequence of the inert parts of the human genome? The funding for pure science cannot come simply from those who hope for future income. Sir Isaac Newton answered the question about planetary orbits while supported by Trinity College, Cambridge. He was elected a Fellow there in 1667, a position that entitled him to wages, a room, and the use of the library. He later became the Lucasian Professor, a sinecure that remained intact even when he moved to London and ceased to teach and lecture. In London, the King eventually extended his patronage, making Newton Warden and then Master of the Mint, a lucrative appointment.

As for the sequencing of the human genome, commercial science played a role but its aims were quite particular. The genome is vast, and the profit-seeking wing of the sequencing enterprise balkanized the territory, looking only for the profitable

sites. The fullness of the genome was only described by the public Human Genome Project, and that was supported by philanthropic gifts (mostly from the Wellcome Trust in England) and by government funding (mostly the National Institutes of Health in the U.S.).

Not surprisingly, the institutions that support such noncommercial enterprises will change over time. If we tire of the focused patronage of an established church, we may separate church and state and give a tax exemption to all denominations. If we don't like royal patronage we may turn to private philanthropy. If the privately endowed colleges serve only the elite, we may turn to state and community colleges supported by the public purse. More broadly, where church or crown or private endowments do not meet our needs, we may turn to what might be called "democratic patronage." Public education, public hospitals, public libraries, pure science, the arts, and the humanities: in the last century, all of these have been underwritten by democratic communities that tax themselves to support things of value that would not otherwise thrive.

Which brings me back to the fall of the Soviet Union, for it was the Cold War that energized much of the public funding devoted to art and science in the decades after World War II. In my own country at least (and I must confine my remarks to the American case, that being the only one I know well), these were the years when our leaders felt called upon to show off the liberal, capitalist state, and contrast its vitality with the banality of the Eastern block. Neutral nations and Eastern-block dissidents were meant to see the remarkable energy and innovation that the West's freedoms produced. In the case of support for the arts, the organizing opposition was well expressed in a 1952 *New York Times Magazine* essay by the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr: "The modern artists' nonconformity and love of freedom cannot be tolerated within a monolithic tyranny and modern art is useless for the dictator's propaganda."

The history of this period of what I now think of as "democratic-propaganda patronage" falls into at least three phases, a series of responses to the question that Barr used as the title of his essay, "Is Modern Art Communistic?" Barr argued the negative, setting American freedom and nonconformity against the Soviet's totalizing impulse, but his position held no sway in the U.S. Congress. Elected officials in the United States regularly attacked the arts ("All modern art is Communistic," declared one Missouri congressman) and when the U.S. State Department tried to include artwork in its cultural diplomacy the Congress directly undercut the effort. The exemplary moment came in 1947 when an exhibition of modern painting called "Advancing American Art" (including work by Georgia O'Keeffe and Arshile Gorky) traveled to Europe, first to Paris and then to Prague, where the Russians felt called upon to mount a rival exhibition.

They needn't have bothered, for the exhibition was sufficiently opposed at home, described in Congress as having been assembled by "the Communists and their New Deal fellow travelers." The tour was canceled and the art work sold as surplus government property at five percent of its value.¹

Thus did Phase One of postwar cultural support really begin, the covert phase, for when Congress failed to support American cultural propaganda, the CIA stepped in. As the director of the CIA's International Organizations Division later remarked of one congressional opponent: "He made it very difficult to get Congress to go along with some of the things that we wanted to do—send art abroad, send symphonies abroad, publish magazines abroad, whatever. That's one of the reasons why it had to be done covertly.... In order to encourage openness we had to be secret."

What the CIA actually managed to do has been told in Frances Stonor Saunders's book, *The Cultural Cold War*, which describes at length the interlocking structures of cultural and political power found in the U.S. in the 1950s. Nelson Rockefeller was well connected to both worlds and so played a key role. He had been, for example, wartime head of the intelligence agency for Latin America, and that agency, in turn, had sponsored touring exhibitions of contemporary American painting, tours that were mostly organized by the Museum of Modern Art where Rockefeller also served variously as trustee, treasurer, president, and chairman of the board. The 1950s CIA was particularly keen on Abstract Expressionism, which Rockefeller himself famously described as "free enterprise painting." As one Agency staffer later reported, "we recognized that this was the kind of art that did not have anything to do with socialist realism, and made socialist realism look even more stylized and more rigid and confined...." Not that there was ever any direct support to artists like Jackson Pollock, or any formal agreements between the CIA and the museums. "For matters of this sort," the staffer goes on to say, it "could only have been done through the organizations or the operations of the CIA at two or three removes...."

As for "the organizations," the most famous was the Congress of Cultural Freedom which covertly sponsored a highbrow intellectual journal, *Encounter*, paid the expenses of American and European intellectuals to attend international conferences, and supported the foreign distribution of American literary and cultural journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Hudson Review*, and *Sewanee Review*. In the early 1960s when the *Kenyon Review* was edited by

¹ An amusing echo of this debacle was heard many years later: in 1948 one of the tour's "surplus" paintings, Stuart Davis's "Still Life With Flowers," was bought for a high school in Chicago by one of its art teachers. The price was \$62.50. In 2006 the school sold the painting at auction for \$3.1 million.

Robie Macauley its circulation jumped from 2,000 to 6,000. Macauley had actually worked for the CIA before he took over the *Review* from its founding editor, John Crowe Ransom, and was later to boast that he had “found ways of making money that Mr. Ransom had never thought of.”

This period of covert funding came to an end with the Soviet’s successful launch of the first earth-orbiting satellite, and with the election of John F. Kennedy as U.S. President. After Sputnik, the U.S. government poured public dollars into scientific research, and that eased the way for similar support to the arts and humanities. President Kennedy, in turn, was a politician disposed to support the kind of open cultural diplomacy that had disappeared a decade earlier. He invited Robert Frost to read at his inauguration and later, at the Frost Library in Amherst, defended American cultural freedoms in terms of the standard opposition to communist oppressions, extolling the artist as “last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state.” After Pablo Casals played his cello at the White House, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. declared the event “of obvious importance...in transforming the world’s impression of the United States as a nation of money-grubbing materialists.”

Such was the philosophy that guided the next quarter-century of public patronage, a period when Democrats and Republicans read from the same playbook. Lyndon Johnson, impressed with the goodwill Kennedy received for supporting the arts, signed the law that brought the National Endowment for the Arts into being. Richard Nixon doubled its budget. All deployed the rhetoric of the Cold War. Typical would be a remark by Gifford Phillips, trustee of the Phillips Collection in Washington: “The artist has a special need to live outside of society.... Whenever there is an official attempt to destroy this detachment, as there has been in the Soviet Union, for example, art is likely to suffer....”

Oddly, as the critic Michael Brenson has pointed out, it was always assumed that such detached and materially disinterested outsiders would never find themselves in conflict with America itself. It was as if the more “outside” the artist went, the more fully would he or she embody the transcendent values of capitalist democracy. The seemingly asocial eccentric in his cabin at the edge of town is not actually “outside” his country; quite the opposite: he inhabits the True America, the one the Soviets can never see if they focus only on the money-grubbing side of capitalism. “We are the last civilized nation on the earth to recognize that the arts and the humanities have a place in our national life,” declared a New Jersey congressman in 1965. Twenty years earlier, Georgia O’Keeffe’s work might have been sold as government surplus; now it could easily be the emblem of civilization itself, and her studio at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico its last outpost.

The ideological anomalies of this period aside, the institutions of overt democratic patronage arose from a wisdom worth preserving. In the U.S., the 1965 enabling legislation for the arts and humanities endowments articulated worthy goals: "While no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the federal government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent." This seems exactly right; the problem lies in the context of its expression, the long season of democratic-propaganda patronage during which, despite the well-put ideal, the arts and sciences were not supported as ends in themselves, but as players in a larger political drama.

Of that context one could say, to put it positively, that the Soviet Union turned out to provide a useful counterforce to the harsher realities of capitalism. It goaded the West into provisioning those parts of social life not well served by market forces. To put it negatively, however, if Cold War rhetoric lay at the foundation, then the entire edifice was historically vulnerable. Thus when the Soviet Union fell in 1989 so did the bulk of public patronage in the West. In the U.S., for example, we almost immediately got the attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts and the loss of nearly all funding to individual artists. A similar if less publicized story played out in basic science. In a 1998 interview Leon Lederman, Nobel laureate in physics, said: "We always thought, naïvely, that here we are working in abstract, absolutely useless research and once the cold war ended, we wouldn't have to fight for resources. Instead, we found, we *were* the cold war. We'd been getting all this money for quark research because our leaders decided that science, even useless science, was a component of the cold war. As soon as it was over, they didn't need science."

In short, around 1990 the third phase of this history began, an era of market triumphalism in which not only has public support of the arts and sciences begun to dry up but those who stilled their voices during the Cold War, those who have long believed in an unlimited market, have felt free to advance unselfconsciously.

In instance after instance, public institutions have been encouraged to think of themselves as private businesses. The universities have set up "technology transfer offices" and tried to fund themselves by selling knowledge rather than simply disseminating it, as their old mission statements once asked them to do. Grammar schools have learned that they can sell exclusive rights to soft drink vendors intent on creating brand loyalty in the very young. Public radio and television are now cluttered with advertising. Even commercial television has become more so: in the U.S., the networks once limited their ads to nine minutes an hour; they gave that up in the last decade and ads now run eighteen minutes in

prime time.

Natural abundance has been similarly commercialized, everywhere subject to the grid of artificial scarcity. Ancient aquifers, by rights belonging to all who live above them, are now pumped and packaged. Drinking water, once an essence of life, has become a resource to be sold in little plastic bottles. Broadcast spectrum, one of nature's richest gifts, has been parceled out to industry and then sold back to the public.

Our cultural abundance suffers the same fate. The ever-expanding reach of copyright has removed more and more art and ideas from the public domain. The Walt Disney Company happily built its film empire out of folk culture ("Snow White," "Pinocchio") but any folk who try to build on Disney can expect a "cease and desist" letter in the next mail. Patents are now used to create property rights in things once thought inalienable--seedlines, human genes, medicines long known to indigenous cultures. A company that makes jam recently got itself a patent on the crustless peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich.

This period of market triumphalism has, in sum, seen a successful move to commercialize a long list of things once thought to have no price, and to enclose common holdings, both natural and cultural, that we used to assume no one was allowed to take private. All of which seems quite grim, but only, I think, if we forget that history brought these changes and that history continues to unfold. As I said before, gift-institutions supporting the noncommercial portion of our lives will change as the times change. None of us wants to return to the days when a great scientist had to hope the King might make him Master of the Mint, nor--if we care for the arts and sciences as ends in themselves--should we pine for the days of patronage as propaganda. If we want our institutions to have the longevity they deserve, then the commercial side of our culture needs to be met with an indigenous counterforce, not a foreign one.

To close this excursion into matters topical and practical, then, let me point to a necessarily limited sample of places where the commercial and the noncommercial are found in better balance. A good number may be seen on the internet, itself a post-Soviet surprise of history if there ever was one. Numerous projects on the web have the structures and fertility of gift communities. There are many examples, from the open source software movement to the donated labor supporting political blogs to the "NASA Clickworkers," a set of over 85,000 anonymous, untrained volunteers who helped classify all the craters on NASA's maps of Mars.

Or take the Public Library of Science. This web-based publishing venture has

protocols reminiscent of the scientific community as described in Chapter V. There I write that papers published in scientific journals are called ‘contributions’ for good reason; “they are in fact, gifts,” as one theorist says, gifts to a community whose currency is the merit that a scientist acquires when her ideas are accepted and passed along.

This gift ethic never extended, however, to the actual printing and distribution of scientific journals. On the contrary, the cost of subscribing to these journals has been a growing problem for many libraries (the price of publications in science rose by about 260% during the 1990s). A one-year subscription to *The American Journal of Human Genetics* now costs over \$1,000, and a good science library needs scores of such subscriptions. At current rates, poorly endowed colleges and, more importantly, the poorer nations, literally cannot afford to enter the scientific community, no matter its internal ethic of generosity.

Internet publication has provided a solution. In 2000 a group of biomedical scientists, including Nobel laureate Harold E. Varmus, began urging scientific publishers to make all research available for free distribution online. When the publishers resisted, the group simply worked around them and in 2003 launched a nonprofit web publishing venture, the Public Library of Science. By now there are six on-line journals (*PLoS Biology*, *PLoS Medicine*, *PLoS Genetics*, and others). These are not web logs or chat rooms or sites where people may post whatever they wish; they are well-edited, peer-reviewed journals publishing original research, as with traditional journals. The difference is that PLoS journals are “open access,” meaning that the authors grant to all users “a free, irrevocable, worldwide, perpetual right of access” to their work. “Everything we publish is freely available online throughout the world,” say the editors, “for you to read, download, copy, distribute, and use (with attribution) any way you wish. No permission required.”

The Public Library of Science has added “publishing as gift-exchange” to the older idea of “research as gift-exchange.” Nor, I might add, is gift-exchange at odds with commerce in this case; the editors allow commercial reuse of their journals’ content. In the introduction to *The Gift* I say that art works exist in two economies, though one is primary; the same might be said of scientific knowledge in the Public Library model: commerce is not excluded, but it follows after contributions are made, it does not come first.

To present my second example of a new noncommercial institution I need to back up and describe a little-known piece of the history of support for the arts. In modern times, young artists in need of help have traditionally received support either from public coffers or from private fortunes. The question is, might there

be a third path? Might not the art world itself hold wealth sufficient to support emerging talents?

An interesting experiment in that line was initiated shortly after the Second World War when musicians in the United States began to worry that the popularity of long-playing records would cut into their performance income. What if every time the band goes to the recording studio all they are doing is playing themselves out of half of next year's jobs? Responsive to such concerns, the musicians union worked out an innovative agreement with the recording companies such that a small percentage of the sale of each recording would go into a trust fund, the fund then being used to augment the income of musicians playing live performances.

After half a century this institution, the Music Performance Fund, still exists. It distributes millions of dollars annually, and supports thousands of concerts in the United States and Canada. It's the largest sponsor of live, admission-free music in the world. In recent years it has also developed a Scholarship Fund to help pay for the training of young musicians.

What I like especially about the Music Performance Fund is its recycling feature, the wealth moving in a circle. That small percentage of the commerce that goes into the Performance Fund is a kind of self-tithing that the community has accepted so as to support its members, and to support musical culture in general (most of the performances are given for young people in schools). As a result, the recording industry is not purely extractive; the business side itself agrees to support the cultural ecology that nurtures musicians in the first place.

More to the point, I like the revealed fact that artists need not always go begging to taxpayers or private patrons; *the arts themselves produce wealth* and therefore, if we have the wit to organize the needed institutions, the arts ought to be able to support the arts.² In the United States, "The Arts Endowing the Arts Act" was, in fact, the name given to a legislative proposal that--had it been realized--would have nicely reproduced the structure of the Music Performance Fund.

In 1994, U.S. Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut proposed a cunning way to use the value of past intellectual property to support artists and scholars working in the present. Dodd's suggested legislation would have added twenty years to the term of copyright protection, and used the income from those extra years to underwrite current creative work. At the time, American copyright protected an individual's work for his or her lifetime, plus fifty years;

² Actually, wit may not be the key ingredient; power helps. It was the American Federation of Musicians that got the Music Performance Fund started as part of their collective bargaining with the recording industry. The loss of union power is another chapter of the recent saga of market triumphalism.

corporations with works "made for hire" (most films, for example) held rights for seventy-five years. Under the Dodd proposal, at the end of each of these terms, the rights to an additional twenty years would have been publicly auctioned, the proceeds going to build endowments for the arts and humanities.

Copyright has always had a double function. It encourages creativity and, because its term is limited, it brings creative work into the public domain. It treats such work as a private good for a term, and then as a public or common good in perpetuity. What the Dodd proposal would have done, in effect, is to add a middle term between the private and public, a transition period during which wealth generated by copyright would underwrite currently active creative talent. Or, to put it another way, for a limited period we would consider "the public" to be those men and women who are currently dedicating their lives to the arts and humanities, those who are most directly the aesthetic and intellectual heirs of the past, and who will most directly be the benefactors of any future cultural commons.

The logic of Senator Dodd's proposal, then, replicates the logic of creative life itself, in which the past feeds the present and the present will before long contribute to artists not yet born. It is all the more distressing then that in 1998, in another striking example of post-Cold War market triumphalism, the entertainment industry in the U.S. managed to outflank Dodd and his allies and persuade the U.S. Congress to substitute for "Arts Endowing the Arts" their own "Copyright Term Extension Act," one that has added twenty years (retroactively!) to all copyright terms without any provision for the public domain side of the old balance between private wealth and common wealth. The Walt Disney Corporation lobbied heavily for this law; their early Mickey Mouse cartoons would have entered the public domain in 2003. Thanks to "The Mickey Mouse Protection Act," as it is now known, they are safe until 2023.

This sorry bit of statutory theft notwithstanding, the art-wealth recycling feature of both the Music Trust Fund and the Dodd proposal has been on my mind for a long time, and I tend to mention it whenever I am asked to speak to the question of how we are to empower the gifted in a world dominated by market exchange. On one such occasion, a 1996 talk I gave in Providence, Rhode Island, Archibald Gillies and Brendan Gill happened to be in the audience. They were at the time the president and chairman, respectively, of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and it turned out that the Warhol Foundation was just then looking around for new funding models. I soon joined them in a more sustained conversation about what initiatives might be undertaken, especially given the post-Cold War loss of so much public funding for individuals in the visual arts. The result, after two years of brainstorming and fund raising, was a new nonprofit

granting agency, the Creative Capital Foundation that since 1999 has been giving direct support to individual artists in film, video, literature, and the performing and visual arts.

Creative Capital differs from other arts organizations in several respects. For one thing, we make a multiyear commitment to the artists we support, extending and renewing grants where we can, and providing advisory services and professional assistance along with financial support. We ask that artists make a budget for their projects, one that includes fair value for their time; we help them find and negotiate with galleries; we suggest they insure their studios, and so forth. One Creative Capital grantee, whose studio was destroyed during the 9/11 attack on New York, had insured her space only months before.

Secondly, in line with the hope that the arts might support the arts, Creative Capital grantees agree to share a small percentage of any net profits generated by their projects with Creative Capital, which then applies those funds toward new grants. In designing this give-back portion of the program we had in mind not only the models I have just described but also the ethic by which the producer and director Joseph Papp used to manage the Public Theater in New York.

Papp's habit was to underwrite a great many theater productions and take a small ownership stake in each. Those that succeeded helped pay for those that came later. In the most famous example, "A Chorus Line" began at the Public Theater and then went to Broadway, opening in the summer of 1975. It ran without interruption for fifteen years, a commercial success that allowed Papp to support the work of less-established playwrights and companies. David Mamet, Sam Shepard, Elizabeth Swados, the Mabou Mines theater group and dozens more received support during the years that Papp managed the Public.

Potential profitability is not a criterion for funding awards at Creative Capital; as with other arts funders, we ask our panels to look for originality, risk-taking, mastery, and so forth; we respond especially to projects that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. That said, the principle of sharing the wealth is essential to the Creative Capital model. It makes explicit the assumption that all who have succeeded as artists are indebted to those who came before, and it offers a concrete way for accomplished practitioners to give back to their communities, to assist others in attaining the success they themselves have achieved.

Creative Capital is a small experiment with much that we would like to improve. In our first eight years we awarded more than \$5 million to 242 artist projects, but we still lack an endowment that would make us self-sustaining (our seed money necessarily came from private philanthropy). We would dearly love to give larger

grants, and more of them; we may well find that the give-back provision works well with some disciplines and not with others; and even if it works in a few cases, we may never find our “Chorus Line.”

For now, however, the point is less about the particulars of this case than about the search for practical responses to the general problem posed by *The Gift*. Some responses will necessarily be fitted to their historical period; the Music Performance Trust belongs to a time of powerful trade unions, and the heyday of public support for art and science seems to belong to the Cold War.

But surely there could also be responses that transcend their time. The royal patronage that Sir Isaac Newton received may have fallen out of favor, but other innovations from his day have survived. The idea that colleges might have endowed professorships has not been lost. Newton was the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics; that position was created in 1663 by one Henry Lucas, and it endures to this day (the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking is its current occupant). The forums for scientific discourse that Newton knew have likewise endured. In 1672, Newton sent a long letter to Henry Oldenburg of the Royal Society in London, an outline of his theory of light and color. Oldenburg immediately printed the letter in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society. It was Newton’s first scientific publication. *Philosophical Transactions* is the oldest scientific journal in the English-speaking world, having now published for over 340 years. Oldenburg was its founding editor. When he started it, it wasn’t part of a scientific community, it *created* a scientific community, and that community has endured.

Lucas and Oldenburg: these are good ancestors for the community of science; their institutions survive and their names are remembered. As for the community of artists, those who can be clear about supporting the arts, not as means to some other end but as ends in themselves; those who can shape that support in response to the gift-economy that lies at the heart of the practice; those who have the wit and power and vision to build beyond their own day: for artists, those will be the good ancestors of the generations of practitioners that will follow when we are gone.

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