

# BEGGARS BANQUET: FOR A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SIGN IN BORGES

Bruno Bosteels

## THE EPIC PACT

Without generalized thought, and without art, man's life would be bare and beggarly. But that is just what the lives of millions of people are to an enormous extent at the present time. The cultural revolution must consist in opening up to them the possibility of real access to culture and not only to its wretched fag-ends. But this is impossible without creating great material preconditions.

That is why a machine that automatically manufactures bottles is at the present time a first-rate factor in the cultural revolution, while a heroic poem is only a tenth-rate factor.

— Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life*

In “The Telling of the Tale,” the third of his Norton Lectures presented in 1967-1968 at Harvard University under the general title *This Craft of Verse*, Jorge Luis Borges muses about the fate of the epic poem and its disappearance in modern times. Surprisingly, toward the end of this lecture, he voices the expectation or hope that one day, while “the novel is somehow breaking down,” (53) the epic singing of a heroic tale will once again become a real possibility for the poet: “I think the epic will come back to us. I believe that the poet shall once again be a maker. I mean, he will tell a story and he will also sing it. And we will not think of those two things as different, even as we do not think they are different in Homer or in Virgil” (55). Borges comes to these reflections fairly late in his life. His early writings dealing with epic poetry, such as his essays on Homer or on the Scandinavian *kenningar* in *His-*

*tory of Eternity*, only indirectly tackle the issue of the epic qua genre, being more concerned with subsidiary topics such as the role of translation, or the patterns of metaphor. It is not until he takes up the study of Old English and Old Norse that Borges consolidates his interest in the form of the epic, from the Icelandic Sagas to the Hollywood Western. We then come to see what may have been a subterranean current all along. Indeed, a good number of Borges's texts, especially short parables from his later work, seem to encapsulate a narrative investigation (*indagación*, the author might have said, with a poignant etymological reference to *daga* or "dagger") into the conditions of possibility and impossibility of what we might call the epic pact.

In this regard, very few texts possess a power of concision comparable to "The Mirror and the Mask" from *The Book of Sand*, a short story which with supreme verbal economy succeeds in recovering the elements of the epic pact that articulates politics and mimesis in a seemingly indissoluble bond. As if in a last gasp of epic grandeur before the entrance into modernity, the story is situated with subtle historical references as taking place neither in ancient Greece nor in imperial Rome but in the High Kingdom of Ireland at the time of its invasion, ten centuries ago, by Vikings coming from the North. At the outset of the parable, after a decisive but shortlived victory in the battle of Clontarf (1014 C.E.), the Irish King proposes to his bard the following plan, in which the craft of verse is meant to illustrate the heroism of warfare in a double quest for immortality: "Quiero que cantes mi victoria y mi loa. Yo seré Eneas; tú serás mi Virgilio. ¿Te crees capaz de acometer esa empresa, que nos hará inmortales a los dos?" (OC 3: 45). Everything thus seems set for a repetition of the ancient epic model, as if to confirm the now familiar insight which holds that everything in history happens not once but twice, if not three times, insofar as the King's bard is asked to repeat Virgil, just as Virgil already repeated the ever-elusive Homer—the immediate question being, of course, whether the result in this case will be epic, tragic, or rather only a farce.

Before returning to this question, which concerns the ominous nature of a cooperation in which the poet, instead of reaching immortal status, will be rumored eventually to have put himself to death, there is one aspect that should not go unnoticed, even though its implications may at first seem far from evident, that is, the way in which the otherwise traditional alliance of arms and letters in this text is expressed in terms of an economical activity. The use of the verb *amonedar* in the royal formula for the epic pact in this sense can be considered a symptom of the impeccable logic that will subsequently come to overdetermine almost every word of the parable. The

Irish King, to be precise, offers the following justification for his ill-fated demand: “Las proezas más claras pierden su lustre si no se las amoneda en palabras” (3: 45). According to this formula, which at first seems purely metaphorical but the logic of which in fact will immediately become literalized, it is an economical activity that provides the common ground, or the site of a fatal encounter, between military prowess and poetic craftsmanship—between the King’s *proezas* and the *palabras* sung by his courtly bard. As a matter of fact, in order further to articulate these forms of the visible and the sayable, the short parable elaborates a three-fold series of economical exchanges, which may even contain the modest kernel for a whole critique of the political economy of the sign in Borges. What is more, far from being restricted to a single story, no matter how masterful and unique, this working hypothesis allows for a critical reinterpretation of the links between literature, economy and politics in much of Borges’s œuvre (see also Bosteels, “Economía”).

#### DEATH AND EQUIVALENCE

It is the need (of the human subject) that defines the *economic* in economics. The *given* in the homogeneous field of economic phenomena is therefore given us as *economic* by this silent anthropology. But if we look closer we see that this “giving” anthropology is, in the strongest sense, the absolute given unless someone refers us to God as its founder, i.e., to the Given who himself gives himself, *causa sui*, God-Given. Let us leave this point in which we can see well enough that there can never be a given on the fore-stage of obviousnesses, except by means of a giving ideology which stays behind, with which we keep no accounts and which gives us what it wants. If we go and look behind the curtain we shall not see its act of “giving”: it disappears into the given as all workmanship does into its works. We are its spectators, i.e., its beggars.

— Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital* (translation corrected)

Strictly speaking, nothing remains for us to base anything on. All that remains for us is theoretical violence—speculation to the death, whose only method is the radicalization of hypotheses.

— Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*

The importance of (a critique of) the political economy of the sign in “The Mirror and the Mask” not only can be perceived in the initial metaphor of coining deeds into words; the whole story also develops a series of exchanges among two kinds of goods, with the bard’s literary works being

countered or rewarded by his sovereign with the gift of luxury items of variable worth. As the brief intrigue of their encounter unfolds, the Irish King specifically offers his poet three gifts or compensations, in what appear to be straightforward recognitions of the value of each of the three poems presented in honor of the Irish victory at Clontarf. The overall structure of the parable thus would seem to correspond to a barter of sorts between symbolical and material goods. Though obviously different in kind, signs and objects are somehow made to be equivalent and, by virtue of this equivalence, become exchangeable. The remarkable force of Borges's story indeed depends on the rigor with which a linguistic and aesthetic project is shown to be related, in an orderly succession of equations, to the barely hidden structure of political and economical interests that govern the social order at this particular juncture in the history of human exchange. This juncture, of course, is none other than the famous transition from the old feudal and hereditary order of society to early-modern forms of mercantile capitalism. More specifically, the story reenacts the moment when barter, as the supposed ordering principle or mythic origin behind every social bond, gives way to the money-form of value as the general equivalent of exchange. It is not just money, however, that thenceforth provides the so-called "base" from which to interpret language as a mere "superstructure" of the principle of general equivalence. What must be understood, rather, is the way in which this principle governs the use of both money and language so that these aspects, to use an appropriate metaphor, become two sides of the same coin, with the relation between language and economy, in a strange torsion, being itself in turn economical.

From the point of view of language and art in general, "The Mirror and the Mask" presents a simple parable of the search for the perfect sign. In this sense, the story is similar to other prose pieces or *prosas*, as Borges likes to call them, such as "Undr," also published in *The Book of Sand*, or "On Rigor in Science" and "Parable of the Palace," both in *Dreamtigers (El hacedor*, a book which incidentally opens with another homage to Homer as the archetypal "maker"). As in these other parables, so too in "The Mirror and the Mask" Borges tests the limits of representation by taking as his point of departure the age-old problematic of the relation between words and objects, or between sign and the thing signified—the same problematic which gained renewed interest in the twentieth century thanks to the various trends of the so-called linguistic turn. Less evident, however, is the manner in which the story at the same time compares this linguistic and aesthetic debate, regarding the nature and value of the sign or of

the work of art, to the question of how social relations are determined by the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth, that is, the question which since the late-eighteenth century forms the main object of study of classical political economy. The sheer encounter of the bard and his sovereign, in this sense, lays the ground for what will turn out to be an extremely short and dense inquiry into the political economy of the literary sign—even a critique thereof—situated at the crossroads that we could mark off retrospectively, following the work of Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Jacques Goux, among others, with the proper names of Karl Marx and Ferdinand de Saussure. “It is a question of decoding the birth of the sign in the same way that Marx was able to uncover the birth of the commodity form in the *Critique of Political Economy*,” Baudrillard writes, before insisting that this task was left unfinished by Marx himself: “In fact, strictly speaking, Marx offers only a critical theory of exchange value. The *critical* theory of use value, signifier, and signified remains to be developed” (*Critique*, 112 and 129).

At first, Borges’s story seems merely to present an allegorical summary of the principal aesthetic projects that can be said to characterize the main epochs in the history of art and literature. The prime impulse behind this history is a search for the perfect language, or for the absolute work of art, in a progressive shrinking of the distance that separates the sign or signifier from the thing signified. The bard is thus asked up to three times to (re)compose the perfect epic poem to illustrate and sing the glory of his sovereign. Upon the presentation of the first poem, the King finds many reasons to praise the craftsmanship of his servant, but the poem nevertheless remains afflicted by an obstinate difference between words and things: “Acepto tu labor,” the King tells his bard: “Es otra victoria” (3: 45). The result of the poet’s labor in this instance can be considered a strict imitation of the battle, following all the rules and conventions of classical mimetic art for which the poet went through intense academic training. The poem surely is a *victory*, inasmuch as it is beyond comparison both in its accuracy and in its technical mastery, but because it is still *another* victory, other than the battle itself, it is also a defeat. The reward for this first ode, judged insufficient by the King, is a silver mirror, symbol no doubt of the value of the panegyric as a simple reflection, or mimetic imitation, of the heroic realities of warfare. One of the problems with this classical type of mimesis, however, is the absence of any lasting effect upon the audience. The bard certainly invested all his knowledge in emulating the canon, but no catharsis took place among his listeners. His imitation of

what happened in the past makes nothing happen in the present; it is still only a poem about the events, not an event in and of itself. “*Todo está bien y sin embargo nada ha pasado,*” the King observes, before ordering his bard to leave the court and prepare a second composition for the following year: “*Las manos no han buscado los arcos. Nadie ha palidecido. Nadie profirió un grito de batalla, nadie opuso el pecho a los vikings*” (3: 46). And yet, as Roger Chartier has shown, everything in this story is aimed at the restitution of the poetic act as an event in its own right, over and above its role as a monument in commemoration of heroic events that happened outside of it.

In the second ode, which the bard presents to the King’s court and academy after a year’s interval, difference gives way to an apparent identity between words and things. This identity makes uttering the poem into a performative, rather than a merely descriptive or imitative, act. Put differently, if we adopt the point of view that this poetic trial presents us with a capsule history of aesthetic forms, then to an initial and perhaps superficial understanding of mimesis as representation or imitation this second poem adds the more originary and fundamental understanding of mimesis as the presentation or production of a truth, prior to this truth’s being imitated by its copy or double. “*La página era extraña,*” the anonymous narrator of the parable comments on this occasion: “*No era una descripción de la batalla, era la batalla*” (3: 46). A warlike disorder defines not only the content but also the expression of this second epic poem, which could even be considered the allegorical equivalent, no longer of classical art but of the radical experiments of the moderns, all the way to becoming a bold prefiguration of the happenings of the avant-garde: “*La forma no era menos curiosa. Un sustantivo singular podía regir un verbo plural. Las preposiciones eran ajenas a las normas comunes. La aspereza alternaba con la dulzura. Las metáforas eran arbitrarias o así lo parecían*” (3: 46). The reward in this case is a mask of gold, its value perhaps an index of the superiority of experimentation over and above mere imitation, just as the nature of the gift itself suggests a contiguity, rather than a mere similarity, between the mask and the face it represents. The same ascending scale of values, however, may very well announce the presence of a baleful logic behind the entire parable, especially if we consider the possibility that the gift which the poet receives on this second occasion may well be a death mask.

With the single verse of the third and final ode, indeed, it is death that awaits the poet, as if the violent content of his creation ultimately

had to strike back against its creator. This is the moment when the art of verse all of a sudden appears to be a supernatural gift, offering access to a magical or quasi-religious experience, instead of being the clever result of a worldly craft. The poem appears to be a gift of witchcraft, not the effect of human labor and toil. “¿Qué hechicería te lo dio?” the King asks in awe after hearing the poet’s unique line of marvel. This also is the moment when art commits the deadly sin of encroaching upon the realm of the sacred and the forbidden. “Sentí que había cometido un pecado, quizá el que no perdona el Espíritu,” the poet confesses with great anxiety. “El que ahora compartimos los dos,” the King adds: “El de haber conocido la Belleza, que es un don vedado a los hombres. Ahora nos toca expiarlo” (3: 47). Upon pronouncing this last verdict, the King offers his bard a third and final gift: a dagger, *una daga*, without mention of its worth or material—though we know from other texts that for Borges daggers and swords are usually said to be made of iron. Put in *la diestra* or “right hand” of the poet, this weapon fatally returns its bearer, who had once “skilled” himself, *adiestrado*, in the verbal arts, to his original condition as a warrior in the royal army, now led—or so we are told—to inflict death upon himself, or literally to give himself the gift of death. “Del poeta,” the story-teller concludes, “sabemos que se dio muerte al salir del palacio; del Rey, que es un mendigo que recorre los caminos de Irlanda, que fue su reino, y que no ha repetido nunca el poema” (3: 47).

With this enigmatic final gift of death and the simultaneous conversion of the sovereign into a wandering beggar, the parable ends in the domain of political economy where the royal metaphor of the coin had already situated the epic pact in the first place. It should not come as a surprise, then, if the entire series of exchanges that make up the bulk of the story follows one and the same underlying logic by elaborating a stubborn analogy between the circulation of commodities and of signs. What enables this analogy, beyond the obvious fact that language and economical exchange constitute different forms of human commerce, is the structuring principle that these two forms have in common. Borges in fact steeps much of his work precisely in questions such as these about the most elementary presuppositions behind the possibility of the human bond. These are also moments that allow a political reading of his work without our needing to have recourse to the common stock of provocative opinions and public statements made by the author throughout his life and profusely disseminated in the press. The answer to the question of what enables the social bond to begin with, in

this case, should be sought after in the principle of a balance or, more strictly speaking, an equivalence that would be common both to traditional mimetology and to classical political economy. In one case, this principle defines the relation between a sign and its object as a mimetic or reflective correspondence; in the other, the principle posits a harmonious balance between the value of a commodity and its price, between supply and demand, and, more generally, between the different aspects of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods of all kinds. Finally, any investigation into the political economy of the sign presupposes that between these two forms of the principle of general equivalence themselves, there exists in turn a relation of equivalence. Such is indeed, as we will see, the predicament of all studies into the nature of signs, goods, and the social bond under the rule of capital.

#### THE ACCURSED SHARE

Clearly, then, in any city where you see beggars,  
there are thieves, pickpockets, temple-robbers, and  
all such evildoers hidden.

— Plato, *Republic* 552d

No, they are like the ambiguities one is entertained with at banquets or like the children's riddle about the eunuch who threw something at a bat—the one about what he threw it at and what it was in, for they are ambiguous, and one cannot understand them as fixedly being or fixedly not being or as both or as neither.

— Plato, *Republic*, 479b (translation modified)

Contrary to the illusions of classical political economy and mimetology, however, “The Mirror and the Mask” is one among several parables that reveal the extent to which the principle of equivalence is merely a mask, or an ideological fantasy screen, hiding the violence of inequality, antagonism, and, ultimately, death. Borges's text thus debunks the underlying principle of both verbal and economical exchange. Firstly, in terms of linguistic and aesthetic ideals, it turns out to be a vain if not impossible enterprise to search for the perfect correspondence between the poem and the battle it represents. The perfection of language, based on the ideal of identity, ultimately leads to the poet's self-imposed death. And, secondly, the King's conversion into the figure of a beggar, roaming through his



own kingdom without even once repeating the blasphemous verse, also dramatically subverts the chain of equivalences that is presupposed to be universally operative in classical political economy, insofar as a beggar consumes goods without the counterpart of any so-called productive labor.

As Derrida writes in *Given Time*, his study of Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* and Charles Baudelaire's prose poem "Counterfeit Money":

The beggar occupies a determined place in a social, politico-economic, and symbolic topology. He does not work. *In principle*, begging produces nothing, no wealth, no surplus-value. The beggar represents a purely receptive, expending, and consuming agency, an *apparently* useless mouth. One must indeed say, as always, *apparently*, for in fact he can play a role of symbolic mediation in a sacrificial structure and thereby assure an indispensable efficacy. In any case, he has no role of productive work in the creation and circulation of wealth. He consumes and destroys surplus-values. (134)

The beggar, in other words, violently interrupts the circuits between production and consumption. Against the most basic presupposition of all classical political economy, he or she represents an unproductive expenditure of surplus values.

In Borges's case, I would go so far as to suggest that the beggar appears in the guise of what we might call, using a term first coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?*, a "conceptual persona" (61-83). The role of this character or persona is by no means restricted to a single story. In fact, the beggar traverses much of Borges's work—from the earliest essays all the way to the final poems, though not necessarily according to the same underlying logic. In at least one other parable, the mendicant figure interestingly enough appears once again at the paradoxical point where the logic of mimeticism, brought to absolute perfection, all of a sudden breaks down and is left to go to ruin. I am referring, of course, to "On Rigor in Science," the short prose piece from *Dreamtigers* which tells of the ambitious endeavor of drawing up a perfect map of some unnamed empire, only to bring the Emperor to the realization that such a map on a scale of 1:1, which would coincide point for point with its territory, is also utterly useless.

Here, as in most of his metalinguistic parables including "Parable of the Palace" and "The Mirror and the Mask," Borges refutes the principles

that support the order of language and representation by laying bare the sheer absurdity of their accomplished perfection. Rather than relying on some inviolable order of self-presence prior to the onset of representation, he exposes the inherent contradiction of the representational logic as such. In a striking inversion or flipover, the perfect functioning of the cartographic sign, which seems to project a scale of 1:1 as its ideal upper limit, thus uncovers its ridiculous underside in a sudden, almost pataphysical fashion. Behind every operation brought to its logical point of perfection, the story suggests, there lurks a sinister and monstrous aberration. “When the system says ‘A is A,’ or ‘two times two equals four,’ it approaches absolute power and total absurdity; that is, immediate and probable subversion,” as Baudrillard, an admirer of both Borges and the absurd pataphysical humor of Alfred Jarry, writes in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: “A gentle push in the right place is enough to bring it crashing down” (4). It is such a gentle push that brings the system of imperial cartography crashing down in Borges’s parable.

Many critics, to be sure, have studied the different uses to which Borgesian maps such as the one in “On Rigor of Science” are put in the work of Baudrillard and others (Bosteels, “Misreading”; Almeida, “Borges à la carte”). Less conspicuous, and to my knowledge hardly ever commented upon, are the figures of the animals and beggars that make a special appearance at this very point in “Del rigor en la ciencia”: “En los desiertos del Oeste perduran despedazadas Ruinas del Mapa, habitadas por Animales y por Mendigos; en todo el País no hay otra reliquia de las Disciplinas Geográficas” (OC 2: 225). Animals and beggars here appear as two forms of the return of the repressed. If beggars stand for an excessive demand or expenditure that no culture can harbor in its midst without some stratagem of internal exclusion, then animals reemerge, so to speak, from the rumble of the past, as reminders of that prior passage from nature to culture which usually involves some kind of sacrificial violence and echoes of which can be heard whenever we human beings somehow become animals again. “We think and write for animals themselves. We become animal so that the animal also becomes something else,” Deleuze and Guattari write. “The agony of a rat or the slaughter of a calf remains present in thought not through pity but as the zone of exchange between

man and animal in which something of one passes into the other” (*What is Philosophy?* 109).

Animals, but especially beggars, thus come to function in Borges’s writing as figures of the threshold. Keeping in mind a passage from “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” we might say that the beggar *is* quite literally “the man of the threshold,” at the limit of idealism and death: “Las cosas se duplican en Tlön; propenden asimismo a borrarse y a perder los detalles cuando los olvida la gente. Es clásico el ejemplo de un umbral que perduró mientras lo visitaba un mendigo y que se perdió de vista a su muerte” (OC 1: 440). In both “The Mirror and the Mask” and “On Rigor in Science,” on the other hand, the beggar appears as a liminal figure in the immanent critique of the ideal of equivalence, as both mimetic correspondence and economic balance. What this figure all of a sudden reveals is the fact that exchange functions only on the basis of a formal imbalance and a social inequality, which classical political economists prefer to ignore in the name of so-called market laws and the harmonization of interests by some invisible hand.

To give just one example of the classical view that is thereby upset, let us consider how Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*, just prior to his most frequently quoted passage defending the role of the invisible hand, mentions the figure of the beggar as a potential exception to his argument for the harmonization of private interests. The beggar would seem to contradict not only the most basic tenet of classical political economy, that is, our natural tendency to truck, barter and exchange, but insofar as he relies on the benevolence of others, and not on egotistical self-interests, the beggar also threatens to undermine, at least for a moment, the deep-seated anthropological assumptions behind Smith’s work. Speaking about “man” in general in relation to his brethren, Smith writes:

He will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favour, and shew them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this. Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to

their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens. Even a beggar does not depend upon it entirely. The charity of well-disposed people, indeed, supplies him with the whole fund of his subsistence. But though this principle ultimately provides him with all the necessaries of life which he has occasion for, it neither does nor can provide him with them as he has occasion for them. The greater part of his occasional wants are supplied in the same manner as those of other people, by treaty, by barter, by purchase. (15)

Even though the figure of mendicity is immediately forced to reenter the circuit of exchange and possessive individualism, we see how the well-nigh divine presence of the invisible hand threatens to be upset by the beggar's all too visible, stretched-out hand.

The fact that beggarly and unproductive expenditures of energy have accompanied the development of capitalism throughout its history is perhaps only a confirmation of the law according to which the true motor behind political economy, far from constituting a relation of harmonious balance or referring back to the reciprocal duty of some originary barter, is a violent non-equation. The lack of equivalence to which beggars bear witness, then, is not at all accidental or derivative, but rather constitutive of the political economy of capitalism as such. In fact, is not the mirroring relation between beggar and bourgeois—with the latter in a sense being no less conspicuously unproductive than the former—one of the motivating factors behind the bourgeoisie's often visceral rejection of these members of the lumpenproletariat? Is this tendency of consuming without producing not in part the reason why beggars (like the petty thieves, street-bums and prostitutes with whom they are often associated not only in the melodramatic imagination but also in much nineteenth-century poetry as studied by Anne-Emmanuelle Berger and Patrick Greaney, among others) are seen as so particularly threatening and offensive for the class of rentiers and other expropriators of surplus value? Regardless of its purely ideological, not to say imaginary nature, is this threat not due to the fact that beggars reflect the bourgeois entrepreneurs as if in an inverted mirror image?

Beggars, like madmen or the mentally insane for the philosophy of the modern cogito, are the limit-figures of classical political economy.

Descartes himself, in fact, draws this parallel in his *Meditations*, in the midst of his well-known exercise of hyperbolic self-doubt. Surely, he writes, even though the senses are often deceptive, there are certain matters that cannot be doubted, such as the fact “that I am sitting here next to the fire, wearing my winter dressing gown, that I am holding this sheet of paper in my hands, and the like,” unless—Descartes immediately adds—I were to liken myself to the insane, on the model of a pauper taking himself to be a king:

Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to the insane, whose brains are impaired by such an unrelenting vapor of black bile that they steadfastly insist that they are kings when they are utter paupers, or that they are arrayed in purple robes when they are naked, or that they have heads made of clay, or that they are gourds, or that they are made of glass. But such people are mad, and I would appear no less mad, were I to take their behavior as an example for myself. (60)

So too, then, must all beggars be excluded from the social order so as to assure its identity. As Derrida writes in *Given Time* with a clear allusion to Descartes:

Along with that of madmen and delinquents—criminals or thieves—with which it is not fortuitously associated, this social category, in its anthropology or history, delineates the pocket of an indispensable internal exclusion. According to a structure analogous to that of the *pharmakos*, of incorporation without introjection and without assimilation, the expulsion of the beggar keeps the outside within and assures an identity by exclusion, the exception made (*fors*) for an interior closure or cleft. (134-35)

Because their visibility would signal the end and the internal collapse of classical political economy, beggars are thus necessarily included and excluded at the same time from the latter’s domain, just as madmen are from the philosophy of consciousness. They are, as it were, included out. As a result, a political economist such as Smith simply cannot allow himself for very long even to *see* the beggar for what he or she is. This is because for classical political economy, only the worker exists—the worker as productivity, labor force, and capital. As Marx writes in his *Manuscripts of 1844*:

The worker exists as a worker only when he exists *for himself* as capital; and he exists as capital only when some *capital* exists *for him*. The existence of capital is *his* existence, his *life*; as it determines the tenor of his life in a

manner indifferent to him. Political economy, therefore, does not recognize the unoccupied worker, the workingman, in so far as he happens to be outside this labor relationship. The cheat-thief, swindler, beggar, and unemployed; the starving, wretched and criminal workingman—these are *figures* who do not exist for *political economy* but only for other eyes, those of the doctor, the judge, the grave digger, and bumbailiff, etc.; such figures are specters outside its domain. (120-21)

Borges's parables happen to bring this specter of internal exclusion into the field of visibility itself. What is more, by dint of a central analogy between mimeticism and capitalism, whether mercantile or imperialist, his texts reveal the extent to which language and representation, too, paradoxically function only when there is a distance, a gap, or a lack of correspondence between poem and battle, or between map and territory. In each case, the ideal of equivalence in fact serves merely as an alibi to justify, or at the very least to cover up, the continuation of imbalance and injustice. Borges's references to the beggar in these later texts from the period of *The Book of Sand* and *Dreamtigers*, in sum, mark a small step toward a critique of the political economy of the sign.

The significance of the figure of the beggar is certainly open to a wide range of readings, some of which point in the direction of complex moral and ethical issues. To mention only one aspect that seems to be at work in this case as well, the mendicant figure is often seen as an example of material poverty on the road toward, if not already in possession of, higher spiritual riches. This is why all religions reserve a privileged spot for the beggar and for the giver of alms in their moral and spiritual economy. As Walter Benjamin observes: "All religions have honored the beggar. For he proves that in a matter at the same time as prosaic and holy, banal and regenerating as the giving of alms, intellect and morality, consistency and principles are miserably inadequate" ("One Way Street" 92). Whether compassionate or hypocritical, this view in fact informs another description of the beggar by the founder of political economy, this time in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The providential effects of the invisible hand, then, actually lead to an expected balancing act between the rich and the poor. All that is needed is some higher moral ground, metaphorized by the sun in the heavenly sky, from where the beggar may appear to be equal to a king, if not richer than him, in terms of true happiness. Thus, Adam Smith writes:

The rich only select from the heap what is most precious and agreeable. They consume little more than the poor, and in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity, though they mean only their own conveniency, though the sole end which they propose from the labours of all the thousands whom they employ, be the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires, they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species. When Providence divided the earth among the few lordly masters, it neither forgot nor abandoned those who seemed to have been left out in the partition. These last too enjoy their share of all that it produces. In what constitutes the real happiness of human life, they are in no respect inferior to those who would seem so much above them. In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for. (184-85)

From a religious vantage point, in general, the excess of the beggar's unproductive expenditure of energy, as excessive and wasteful as the energy of the sun, can be recuperated and put to good use in the economy of morals—if for no other reason than for the good conscience that the giving of alms bestows, no matter how inadequately or hypocritically, on the giver. “History of Abdula, the Blind Beggar,” a story from *A Thousand and One Nights* included in the *Antología de la literatura fantástica* coedited by Borges, would confirm this mechanism of recuperation. Thus, the beggar in question tells one of his rich benefactors: “Haz buen uso de estas riquezas y recuerda que Dios, que te las ha dado, puede quitártelas si no socorres a los menesterosos, a quienes la misericordia divina deja en el desamparo para que los ricos ejerciten su caridad y merezcan, así, una recompensa mayor en el Paraíso” (274). Even in this case, however, there seems to be an effort on the part of the beggar to highlight the disproportion, rather than the harmony, between what the alms-giver has to offer and what he expects to receive in return: “Hermano, debes comprender que tu oferta no guarda proporción con la fineza que esperas de mí” (273). Abdula the blind beggar even goes so far as to demand quite literally to be slapped in the face every time he receives some alm, as if he wanted to take away the

moral good conscience that comes from handing out such a charitable gift in the first place. This would underscore the fact that no genuine or just gift, especially not a gift of charity, can bear the calculations of a return, or of some symbolic efficacy, in the form of worldly or otherworldly recognition. “One must be just without being noticed for it. To want to be noticed means wanting recognition and payment in the form of a calculable salary, in the form of thanks or recompense,” Derrida also concludes in *The Gift of Death*. “On the contrary, one must give, alms for example, without knowing, or at least by giving with one hand without the other hand knowing, that is to say without having it known, without having it known by the other men, in secret, without counting on recognition, reward, or remuneration. Without even having it known to oneself” (106-07).

For Borges himself, alms are different from other types of gift precisely insofar as they place an element of profound dissymmetry between the giving and the taking. As he writes in the “Inscription” with which he dedicates his penultimate collection of poems, *La cifra*, to María Kodama: “Salvo en el caso de la indiferente moneda que la caridad cristiana deja caer en la palma del pobre, todo regalo verdadero es recíproco. El que da no se priva de lo que da. Dar y recibir son lo mismo” (9). Even this dissymmetry by which the charitable gift escapes, at least apparently, the mercenary or mercantile means-ends calculations of a narrowly defined political economy, though, can in turn become the locus of inscription for an ethical and religious viewpoint. This is after all how Derrida, now taking a lead from Levinas, ends up reading the empty palm, the cap or the face of the beggar, namely, as the absolute demand of the other: “By reason of their very marginality, by reason of their exteriority in relation to the circulation of labor and to the productions of wealth, by reason of the disorder with which they seem to interrupt the economic circle of the same, beggars can signify the absolute demand of the other, the inextinguishable appeal, the unquenchable thirst for the gift” (*Given Time*, 137). The disorderly, asymmetrical, and most often silent request symbolized by the beggar’s face and hand, in this sense, speaks the destitute language of an originary responsibility toward the other, of an obligation to respond, without which there would be no reciprocity, no order, and no language.

As Emmanuel Levinas writes about the language of mendicity in *Totality and Infinity*:



Face, already language before words, original language of the human face stripped of the countenance that it gives itself—or that it withstands—under the proper names, titles and genres of the world. Original language, already demand, already, precisely as such, misery, for the in-itself of being, already mendicity, but also already imperative which makes me respond for the mortal, for the neighbour, despite my own death, message of difficult saintliness, of sacrifice; origin of value and of goodness, idea of human order in the order given to the human. (iii)

By breaking with the closed circle of means and ends, offer and demand, or the giving and the taking of money and goods, the beggar's face and hand in other words also transcend the narrow bounds of the politico-economical totality in the name of moral or ethical infinity, that is, an infinity which may very well have to be presupposed yet again as God-given—or as the giving God behind the merely given—of which we finite human beings would be the beggars, albeit without knowing it.

And yet, not even the process of a higher-level recuperative exchange between the monetary and the moral realms, whether through the idea of a providential balance or by way of an absolute transcendence, seems feasible without at the same time recalling the sense of a profound threat, commonly associated with the beggar, to the cohesiveness of the social bond as such. Thus, one of Smith's most prominent historical sources for his portrait of the beggar, David Hume, writes in his own *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*: "Giving alms to common beggars is naturally praised; because it seems to carry relief to the distressed and indigent; But when we observe the encouragement thence arising to idleness and debauchery, we regard that species of charity rather as a weakness than a virtue" (19). For Hume, some prior guarantee in the protection of private property is therefore required for the greater social good and security of humanity. This is because ultimately the ideal of benevolence for the sake of equality, while praiseworthy in abstract terms, for this empiricist appears to be wholly impracticable and perhaps it is even more pernicious than beneficial: "Render possessions ever so equal, men's different degrees of art, care, and industry will immediately break that equality. Or if you check these virtues, you reduce society to the most extreme indigence; and instead of preventing want and beggary in a few, render it unavoidable to the whole community" (28).

As a matter of fact, in much the same language, beggars seem to have represented a threat for the social order since at least Plato. In his proposal for the ideal city-polis in the *Republic*, Socrates thus warns his interlocutors:

This is how it is. If you can find a way of life that's better than ruling for the prospective rulers, your well-governed city will become a possibility, for only in it will the truly rich rule—not those who are rich in gold but those who are rich in the wealth that the happy must have, namely, a good and rational life. But if beggars hungry for private goods go into public life, thinking that the good is there for the seizing, then the well-governed city is impossible, for then ruling is something fought over, and this civil and domestic war destroys these people and the rest of the city as well. (520e-521a)

No sooner do beggars appear in the city, in other words, than the specter of chaos and disorder inevitably looms. And yet, Plato does not seem to lay the blame for this disorder at the doorstep of the beggars themselves, whether for being idle or unproductive; rather, he finds fault with the society at large in which greed seems to have become the dominant motive. Sure, there are those people who “sit idle in the city, I suppose, with their stings and weapons—some in debt, some disenfranchised, some both—hating those who've acquired their property, plotting against them and others, and longing for a revolution,” but potentially even more dangerous are the money-makers who are the ones who actually make beggars out of the idle: “The money-makers, on the other hand, with their eyes on the ground, pretend not to see these people, and by lending money they disable any of the remainder who resist, exact as interest many times the principal sum, and so create a considerable number of drones and beggars in the city” (*Republic* 555e).

If the issue is systemic in nature, then conversely this also means that the question of justice and injustice—which is none other than the question with which politics has always confronted the philosopher—must begin in the disorder caused by all those who have no share in the existing social order and who disrupt the dominant hierarchies and good manners with the noise and mixture of an unruly banquet. Fol-

lowing Jacques Rancière's reading of the *Republic* in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, we might even say more specifically that all politics begins in the confusion of a beggar's banquet:

The order established by the banquet is the order of mixture. If the city began with the clearcut distinction of useful workers, politics begins with the motley crowd of the unuseful who, coming together into a mass of "workers," cater to a new range of needs—from painters and musicians to tutors and chambermaids; from actors and rhapsodists to hairdressers and cooks; from the makers of luxury articles to swineherds and butchers. But in this mixed crowd of parasites don't we need to acknowledge that some workers really are as useful as those in the original group, so long as they, too, agree to do only one thing at a time? After all, the first workers themselves were obliged to mingle the superfluous with the necessary for the dishes, tables, and trimmings of the banquet. (9-10)

With regard to "The Mirror and the Mask," this would allow us to conclude that the threat that emanates from the poet's blasphemous act is not due simply to the appearance of a maker of luxury articles such as epic odes—even though in "The Concept of an Academy and the Celts," a lecture from the same period that is the perfect accompanying piece to the story in *The Book of Sand*, Borges is quick to point out how taxing the art of verse can be for the budget of a king whose power is in decline: "También es lícito recordar que los poetas constituían un pesado gravamen para los pobres y pequeños reinos de Irlanda, que debían mantenerlos en el ocio o en el goce creador" (93). The problem is rather that the poet is never *only* a poet but *first* a warrior and *then* a poet and *finally*, as we will see, a potential rival, or an invidious competitor, to use an expression from Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, either for the king's royal powers or for the divine powers of both their heavenly Creator.

The social order is being upset, in order words, because nobody sticks to doing what he or she is meant to do "by nature," namely, a unique task as indicated—according to the famous "useful lie" of the Phoenician "myth of the metals" invoked by Socrates and imposed, when necessary, through the chance arbitrariness of a proto-Borgesian "lottery"—by gold for the rulers, silver for the guardians or auxiliaries, and a mix of bronze and iron for the craftsmen and producers. Can we not hear a faint and slightly jumbled echo here of the gold mask, the silver mirror, and the iron dagger? The idolatrous "sin" of rivaling with the Holy Ghost in the

creation of Beauty thus would find an unspoken pendant, in social and political rather than strictly religious terms, in the threat of disturbing the order of the cosmos by “meddling” in affairs other than those that are “naturally” the soldier’s, the ruler’s, or the producer’s. As we will see below, the newly emergent figure of the poet, or the man of letters in general, is as unsettling as a beggar precisely because he sits uncomfortably astride this rigid hierarchy in the social differentiation of labor.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO A CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

What is the source of Marx’s conviction that Political Economy is unfounded? The contradictions it states and registers, or even accepts and traduces: and before all else, the major contradiction opposing the increasing *pauperization* of the workers and the remarkable *wealth* whose arrival in the modern world is celebrated by political economy. This is the crux, the stumbling-block of the optimistic science which is built upon this feeble argument, just as the wealth of the proprietors is on the poverty of the workers. This is also its disgrace, which Marx wants to suppress by giving economics the principle it lacks, the principle which will be its light and its verdict.

— Louis Althusser, *For Marx*

The poor—for the rich children of my age they existed only as beggars. And it was a great advance in my understanding when for the first time poverty dawned on me in the ignominy of poorly paid work.

— Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

The figures of the beggar and the coin in “The Mirror and the Mask,” in sum, emerge as symptoms of a sudden breakdown in the chain of equivalences of classical political economy, just as death is equally sudden to interrupt the bard’s search for the perfect poem in the realm of mimetology. The violence of inequality and death thus appears as the barely hidden truth behind the ideals of peaceful balance and reciprocal exchange. It is this truth, with all its obscure consequences, that leads precisely to a critique, and not just a classical repetition, of the political economy of the sign in Borges. This is not to say that the Argentine’s *Obras completas* or his *Textos recobrados* from now on ought to be catalogued and kept on the same shelf side by side with Marx’s *Capital* or his *Grundrisse*. However, what this reading does imply, even at the price of a violent radicalization

of all our theoretical hypotheses, is that it is only by bringing out the unexpected vicinity between such texts that a critique becomes possible of the politico-economical dimension in much of Borges's writing.

First, it is useful to recall some further aspects of the specific historical configuration behind Borges's short story. The invasion of Ireland by the Vikings and the ensuing wars of alliances among the Irish and the Norse such as the battle of Clontarf, in fact, mark the definitive onset of the transition from the social order of hereditary monarchy to the monetary economy of market capitalism. Regardless of whether this transition is also seen as part of our understanding of the closure of feudalism and the entrance into modernity, what should be clear is that the categories of value, money, labor, goods, and so on, are not eternal, as is supposed to be the case in classical political economy; instead, all such categories are themselves the effect of specific historical forces and social relations. As Marx never tired of insisting, it is this debunking of the illusion of eternity in the name of social concreteness and historical effectivity that constitutes the radical difference between classical, or bourgeois, political economy and its emancipatory critique. Borges, at least in this regard, would be on the side of history, rather than that of eternity. It will remain to be seen in the conclusion, though, whether the careful attention given in the story to the breakdown of the old feudal order really still entails a critique when considered from the point of view of capitalism today, or whether there is not a refunctionalization of older aristocratic ideals into the conspicuous expenditure and consumption of literature according to Borges.

In "The Mirror and the Mask," even before the spectral apparition of the king-beggar, the royal metaphor of the coinage of words for military feats had already anticipated the notion that classical political economy is based on a false presupposition. According to the critique of political economy, money is indeed never a neutral or ahistorical means of exchange, nor is it ever an innocent measure of value in the allegedly free exchange of commodities. To the contrary, as is eloquently summed up by Antonio Negri in his commentary on Marx's *Grundrisse*: "In the money form, the law of value presents itself (1) in crisis, (2) in an antagonistic way, and (3) with a social dimension," that is to say: "Money hides an eminent content of inequality, a content of exploitation" (25-26). Even more astonishing in terms of the concrete historical background of "The Mirror

and the Mask” is the fact that the Irish Kingdom for some time had lost the use of a money economy, precisely until the reintroduction of coins by the Vikings. It is only under the influence of this invasion that the Irish economy will enter into contact with the emerging city markets of the rest of Europe, opening up a space for modern-day capitalism, while from a political point of view the transition to the money-form of value coincides with a period of anarchic unrest and a steady weakening of the monarchy in Ireland.

The unwitting use of the metaphor of the coin with its fading luster or shine in the High King’s formula for the epic pact, in this sense, has the force of a violent intrusion, similar to the historical calamity brought on by the Vikings and their Irish allies after their temporary defeat at Clontarf. As the Irish King expresses his wish to repeat the fate of Achilles or Aeneas with the poet as his Homer or Virgil, little does he know how much the image of the coin resembles the cause of the downfall of some of his most illustrious ancestors. Like Achilles’ heel or the Trojan horse, the coinage of the epic pact indeed secretly introduces a weak spot or an unsolved contradiction in the noble quest for immortality. More specifically, the tendency toward unicity on behalf of the bard and his sovereign, in their shared search for the perfect poem, turns out to be radically incompatible with the social bond as instituted by the money-form of value.

To be sure, the central intrigue of “The Mirror and the Mask” does not correspond quite yet to a commercial exchange based on the general equivalent of money. Instead, the story seems to tell of a barter of sorts between concrete goods, in what at first sight remains a simple form of commodity exchange, as the artistic labor of a man of letters is given its due—or not—in material compensations by the King. And yet, between poet and sovereign, the exchange is not strictly economical, in the modern capitalist sense of the word, but also symbolical. Theirs is not a relation of barter or trade but one of ritual antagonism in a battle for prestige and social hierarchy. Therein consists the ambiguity of another formula used by the King, right before the poet’s pronunciation of the final poem: “Yo te doy el valor que te hace falta” (OC 3: 47), whereby *valor* can mean both courage or bravery, in the sense of a moral propensity for prowess, and value or worth in the more limited economical sense. These two mean-

ings in fact collide throughout the story's systematic chain of metaphors, all the way to the point where they begin to undermine each other.

Beyond the appearance of a simple exchange of luxury goods, the stakes involved include not only wealth but also honor and prestige. Thus, the three gifts awarded to the courtly bard perhaps function as countergifts more so than as straightforward compensations or rewards. They are meant not just to give the poet his due, calculated according to some implicit scale of literary worth, but to beat him, by outgiving his gift and outdoing his performance, in a gradual upping of the ante. No doubt the gifts somehow represent the value attributed to each of the three literary compositions, but they also express the sheer power—no matter how much it already may be on the wane—of the monarchic institution. As the King explains: “La recompensa, ya lo sabes, no será indigna de mi real costumbre ni de tus inspiradas vigiliass” (OC 3: 45). Yet the fact of the matter is that these two motivations in the exchange of gifts—the motives of royal custom and poetic inspiration—cannot be made equivalent by recoining the epic pact. Instead, they are at loggerheads with one another and eventually cannot but lead to death and humiliation—unless, of course, the heroic prowess of the feudal lord becomes aesthetically transfigured among members of the leisure class so as to open the road toward a paradigmatically modern definition of the very nature of the literary act.

Along these lines, could we not argue that the poet's suicide, far from signaling defeat, and a forced one to boot, represents the ultimate gift—that is, the gift of death? By dying, that is, not by *taking* so much as by *giving* himself death, the poet would have lived up, however misguidedly, to an impossible challenge. “If something radically impossible is to be conceived of—and everything derives its sense from this impossibility—it is indeed dying *for the other* in the sense of dying *in place of* the other,” Derrida writes in *The Gift of Death*. But from this it only follows that true responsibility is impossible without the always unique gift of my death:

The sense of responsibility is in all cases defined as a mode of “giving oneself death.” Once it is established that I cannot die *for* another (in his place) although I can die *for* him (by sacrificing myself for him or dying before his eyes), my own death becomes this irreplaceability that I must assume if I wish to arrive at what is absolutely mine. My first and last responsibility, my first and last desire, is the responsibility of responsibility that relates me to what no one else can do in my place. (44)

By contrast, confronted with the ultimate gift of self-death in the ritual exchange of gifts and counter-gifts that makes up “The Mirror and the Mask,” it is the king who in a sense loses face by becoming dependent on a minor form of potlatch—that is, the giving of alms, an allegedly free gift which always risks becoming just one more piece in the calculated economy of good moral conscience and the promise of divine reward.

Thus, the second reason why Borges’s text comes uncannily close to a critique of classical political economy is because the story uncovers the extreme degree of violence and antagonism that stirs up beneath the appearances of peaceful harmony and collaboration between poet and king. The epical pact never establishes a dutiful reciprocity between these two parties, but rather only a fatal rivalry. Instead of pledging fidelity to a human contract, modeled on the bartering of goods among individuals, both of them seem to respond to an impersonal law that crushes them, even pushing them to the brink of disaster. What is meant to enhance the custom and glory of sovereign power during times of peace in fact turns into a ritual of public humiliation and sacrifice. “The Mirror and the Mask,” in short, presents us with a struggle for recognition—not just in the tradition of the old Hegelian dialectic of master and slave or lord and bondsman but also, following the rituals of a potlatch of sorts, in the sense described by Marcel Mauss in his famous essay on *The Gift*—a study which incidentally opens with a series of epigraphs from the Scandinavian Edda, even though the main focus of attention are the tribes in the American Northwest: “Yet what is noteworthy about these tribes is the principle of rivalry and hostility that prevails in all these practices. They go as far as to wage battle and kill chiefs and nobles. Moreover, they even go as far as the purely sumptuary destruction of wealth that has been accumulated in order to outdo the rival chief as well as his associate” (6). To place the gift and not some mythical barter at the origin of political economy, however, also has profound consequences for our concepts of politics and sociability in general. As Bruno Karsenti concludes in his philosophical commentary on Mauss’s *The Gift*: “The exchange by way of gifts is not an exchange and it does not introduce any reciprocity without at the same time being a battle. It represents symbolically an endless struggle that perpetuates the social bond in the same movement that puts it at risk. To this extent, we can see that it is force, much more so than a law or a duty elaborated by



way of a contract, that circulates continuously in the social universe and gives it its cohesion” (34).

Society, when seen in light of the potlatch, is based not on a contract among equals but on a violent and always unequal power struggle. All the equations to which a classical politico-economical study could solemnly devote its energy cannot hide their abrupt inadequacy, the truth of which spells the reign of inequality and force. All ideological illusions notwithstanding, there obviously exists no equilibrium, nor can there exist any equilibrium, even much less so under capitalism, between labor and its compensation, between the value of a commodity and its price, or between the supply and the demand for goods. In all these domains, as a matter of fact, the very possibility of a capitalist regime relies in principle on a lack of equivalence, or a fundamental non-adequation, as its condition. Far from being some accidental shortcoming, this lack or excess is structural and as such constitutive of the modern capitalist social order.

Marx is one of the first, if not the first, to provide this insight into the internal limits of capitalism with a more analytical formulation. Talking about the relation between a commodity and its price, for instance, he writes in the *Grundrisse*: “The *market value* is always different, is always below or above this average value of a commodity. Market value equates itself with real value by means of its constant oscillations, never by means of an equation with real value as if the latter were a third party, but rather by means of a constant non-equation” (137). Likewise, with regard to the supposed balance between supply and demand, he writes in his *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts*: “When political economy claims that demand and supply always balance each other, it immediately forgets that according to its own claim (theory of population), the supply of *people* always exceeds the demand, and that, therefore, in the essential result of the whole production process—the existence of man—the disparity between demand and supply gets its most striking expression” (155). Borges, as we have seen above, proposes an interesting addendum to this Marxist insight from the critique of political economy, by suggesting that a lack of equivalence is also constitutive of the relationship between symbol and thing, or between signifier and signified.

Yet even Marx more often than not seems to assume that, as a radical alternative to the unequal extraction of surplus value under capitalism, a

future organization of society might be governed by a relation of purposeful adequation, or correspondence, between the productive forces and the social relations of production, as well as between the latter as a base, on one hand, and the political and ideological superstructure, on the other. In this regard, society would be no different from the individual: “Society likewise has to distribute its time in a purposeful way, in order to achieve a production adequate to its overall needs; just as the individual has to distribute his time correctly in order to achieve knowledge in proper proportions or in order to satisfy the various demands on his activity” (*Grundrisse*, 173). This is because even the Marxian critique of classical political economy remains at bottom a restricted one, modeled upon an interpretation of the link between nature and humanity as some kind of metabolism, and presupposing a logic of controlled productivity with the least possible expenditure:

Freedom, in this sphere, can only consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control, instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. (*Capital* 3: 959)

By contrast, the more radical question, raised in the wake of authors such as Mauss and his study of the gift economy, concerns this so-called true realm of freedom that would lie beyond the realm of necessity and, thus, beyond the laws of productivity—whether capitalist or socialist—with the least expenditure. Indeed, does not true freedom, in the way even Marx defines it in the passage just quoted, presuppose that we relinquish at the same time the silent anthropology that lurks behind the interpretation of society as a living organism or self-regulating metabolism? Is not the conclusion of the study of potlatch, as a violent struggle for recognition by way of the ritual exchange of gifts and, eventually, the destruction of wealth, the insight that the basis of our political economy is one of excess, even death, rather than one of scarcity and rational control?

Such an affirmation of structural excess, violence, and the utter non-adequation of all human development prepares the way for a third and final reason to give serious thought to a critique of the political economy of the sign in Borges. This requires that we look beyond even Marx's potentially still restricted view, based as it is on production rather than on consumption or destruction. As Baudrillard writes:

The act of consumption is never simply a purchase (reconversion of exchange value into use value); it is also an expenditure (an aspect as radically neglected by political economy as by Marx); that is to say, it is wealth manifested, and a manifest destruction of wealth. It is that value, deployed beyond exchange value and founded upon the latter's destruction, that invests the object purchased, acquired, appropriated, with its differential sign value. It is not the quantity of money that takes on value, as in the economic logic of equivalence, but rather money spent, sacrificed, eaten up according to a logic of difference and challenge. Every act of purchase is thus simultaneously an economic act and a transeconomic act of the production of differential sign value. (*Critique*, 112-13)

"The Mirror and the Mask" is geared toward precisely such a differential consumption of wealth, the expenditure of an unproductive or useless excess—useless or unproductive, that is to say, only from the point of view of an economy based on ideas such as equilibrium, calculation, and hoarding, which from a truly critical perspective appear to be mere alibis that hide the rule of inequality and dissymmetry.

Borges's story, in this sense, would confirm the principle of a so-called general economy first formulated by Georges Bataille in "The Notion of Expenditure" and subsequently developed within a bold historical framework, deeply inspired by Mauss, in *The Accursed Share*. According to this view, all the energy of life on earth revolves around the useless and infinite expenditure of excess, instead of being oriented toward the productive accumulation of wealth according to the exact calculations of modern utilitarian—even socialist—reason. In order to capture this law of loss and expenditure, Bataille proposes a "Copernican revolution" in political economy, a radical shift from a restricted (or classical) point of view to a general (or truly critical) one. "In principle," Bataille writes in *La part maudite*, "a particular existence runs the risk of falling prey to a scarcity of resources. To this is opposed a general existence, the resources of which are found in excess, and for which death makes no sense. From the *restricted*

point of view, the problems depend, in the first place, on the insufficiency of resources. The problems are formulated, above all, in function of the excess of resources when one keeps in mind the *general* point of view” (77-78). The question for our reading of Borges then becomes: What is the status of the literary act, modeled upon a distant tradition of epic poetry, that would follow from a general political economy? How, from within the logic of expenditure as accursed share, can we define the value of literature and the work of art in general?

#### THE WORK OF ART BEFORE THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

Before the invention of the art of printing, a scholar and a beggar seem to have been terms very nearly synonymous. The different governors of the universities before that time appear to have often granted licenses to their scholars to beg.

— Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

We must go to them cap in hand, like beggars, and ask them of their goodness to spare time to listen to our request that they shall practise the profession of reading and writing in the interests of culture and intellectual liberty.

— Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

In Borges’s retrieval of the antagonistic struggle for prestige between the King and his bard, in fact, art itself undergoes a profound and ominous transformation, as if the aim of their quest, described literally as seeking to retain the symbolic “luster” of great historical feats by “coining” them into words, also had to involve restituting the ritual value of art as a mystical, religious or quasi-shamanistic act. As I suggested earlier, this leads to an insuperable paradox insofar as everything in the logic of creating a poem in the way one reproduces and gives luster to a coin contradicts the tendency that seeks to restore the value of art as a unique act or fact of magic, as fetishistic sorcery or witchcraft—*hechicería* after all derives from the same Indo-European root as *fetish*, *fiction* and *hacedor* as well as the Germanic word for *witch*—rather than as a human craft; or as an excessive gift—with *Gift* in German, not unlike the double sense of *pharmakos* in Greek, uncannily meaning both gift or talent as well as poison—rather than as an example of humanity’s natural and harmonious tendency to

barter and exchange. Indeed, the structure of monetary exchange in principle implies the possibility of reproducing not only the coins and bills that serve as means and measures of exchange but also the goods themselves that are being exchanged. The identical reproduction of money, as the general equivalent in the logic of modern capitalist political economy, is precisely what guarantees the equivalence and exchangeability of all goods. The bard's three poems, however, tend progressively to abandon the idea of exchange through reproduction, so as to foster instead a return, through the illusion of an earlier barter-form of economy, to the mythic aura of a unique and unrepeatable one-liner.

In the case of the first ode, the unicity of the original is quickly allowed to give way to a series of multiple copies: "Si se perdiera toda la literatura de Irlanda—*omen absit*—podría reconstruirse sin pérdida con tu clásica oda. Treinta escribas la van a transcribir doce veces" promises the King (3: 46). The experiment of the second ode, to the contrary, no longer permits the reproduction of its only manuscript, which will remain accessible only to the select few: "No la merecerán los ignaros, pero sí los doctos, los menos. Un cofre de marfil será la custodia del único ejemplar" (3: 46). Indeed, as Carlos García Gual also writes about the rise of the lettered in twelfth-century Europe: "The intellectual is characterized by pride in the possession of a knowledge that gives him prestige and that he feels called to disseminate, even though this cultural wealth must not be spread out to the four winds by chance but it must be distributed to those who are deserving of it" (46-47). Finally, the force of the third poem is so absolutely singular that the poet does not even dare once to recite its unique line in front of the King's academy: "Sin animarse a pronunciarla en voz alta, el poeta y su Rey la paladearon, como si fuera una plegaria secreta o una blasfemia" (3: 47). Nor does the king himself ever repeat the blasphemous line, after turning into a wandering beggar roaming through his own kingdom.

The poetic quest thus progressively restitutes art to its primitive aura, giving an ever stronger ritual value to each of the three poems, until converting the last ode into an almost mystical or quasi-religious act. As Benjamin suggests in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," however, the cultic value of art is hardly compatible either with the practice of monetary exchange or with the ideal of reproduction—whether manual or mechanical. How, then, could the poet

possibly coin linguistic equivalents to give luster to his feudal lord's heroic feats, if at the same time he must respect their unique and incomparable prowess, that is, their singularity? The High King remains unaware of this paradox, typical of the transitory stage between feudalism and modern market capitalism. And yet, blinded by his search for luster and renown, it is the sovereign himself who in an uncanny choice of words introduced this impossibility at the very heart of the epic pact. Not only does the search for the perfect sign seem doomed to end in the death of the poet, a gift of self-sacrifice which it is obviously impossible for the king to top, but the appearance of a peaceful exchange of favors is also unable to keep in check the extreme violence underlying this struggle for recognition. In the end, it is the very structure of impossibility built into the logic of the general equivalent, an impossibility merely hinted at in the opening image of the coin, that intrudes upon the entire project and threatens it with collapse.

Borges thus seems to follow the characters of his parable in an obstinate desire to recuperate the work of art as it exists prior to, or on the outskirts of, the global victory of capital and its restricted economy of reproduction and exchange. This hypothesis could easily be tested against other poems and short stories, as is also suggested in separate readings by Gerardo Mario Goloboff, Raphaël Lellouche, Julio Ortega and Beatriz Sarlo; but already it should be clear that a formal study of the political economy of the sign, through a narrative inquiry into the limits of the epic pact, allows us to redefine the very status of literature and art in the modern era according to Borges. At issue is a kind of inverted trajectory, in which it becomes the mission of the modern poet to go against the grain of actual economical history so as to retrieve art's originary magic.

As Borges writes in the prologue to his collection of poems *La rosa profunda*: "La palabra habría sido en el principio un símbolo mágico, que la usura del tiempo desgastaría. La misión del poeta sería restituir a la palabra, siquiera de un modo parcial, su primitiva y ahora oculta virtud" (OC 3: 77). The aim would be to restore to art, and to poetry in particular, the occult, quasi-liturgical virtue that has been lost under the effects of commerce, exchange, and usury in modern times. "The mystical revelation gives way to domestic revelations; the incarnation of the promised word is replaced by the disincarnated truth of the melancholy word," as

Julio Ortega comments in his analysis of “El Aleph” (30); but in this space usurped by the law of general equivalence and interchangeability, literature ought at the very least to bear witness to the powers that it has long lost: “Between one language and another, the epiphanic instant has occurred like a brief mirage in the desert, without referentiality and without continuity, put into doubt in order to be given over to the reader and not as an act of faith but as a question for metaphysics” (32).

Borges’s return to the epic tradition, from Homer to the home-grown stories of Argentine gauchos and compadritos all the way to the study of the Scandinavian sagas, is certainly not foreign to his quest for the lost epiphanic virtue of literature. In fact, the epic materials seem to constitute an important reservoir, or a primitive soil, in which the power of the word appears as being not yet severed from the power of the sword. At least this is how Beatriz Sarlo, following Albert Hirschman’s seminal work *The Passions and the Interests*, interprets Borges’s retrieval of that whole passionate world of courage and violence evoked by the mention of the multitudinous Homer. “This classical scheme (which, of course, does not describe a historical process so much as an idea in movement) in some way allows one to organize a ‘story,’” Sarlo proposes. “The passions and the virtues related to them (bravery and courage, for example) belong, globally, to a modality from the past, in which war was the only form of organizing barbarism,” but literature can and must remember this past as its own inner motivation: “This closed off history, in which the passions were stirred up, traverses the work of the most modern writer as a reminiscence that does not cease to produce literature” (224). As a case in point, we could also consider the way in which the author muses about the gauchesque poetry of Hilario Ascasubi. “El ámbito de la poesía de Ascasubi se define por la felicidad y el coraje y por la convicción de que una batalla puede ser también una fiesta,” writes Borges in *Prólogos con un prólogo de prólogos*, before picking up on the economical metaphor: “Brillo de baraja nueva o moneda nueva siguen teniendo al cabo de un siglo los versos de Ascasubi, no desgastados o empañados por la usura del tiempo” (21).

However, if poetry’s aim is to retrieve its magic just as one restores the sheen of an old coin that resists the usury of time, should we not conclude that there is a continuous, though no doubt also

hidden or esoteric, line that runs from the passions to the disinterested interests in the aesthetic act? What is more, do we not witness here an almost alchemical transmutation of values, from the military into the aesthetic and from the economical into the literary—and back? This would contradict the postulation of a clear and distinct line of demarcation between the literary and the “merely” economical.

Stéphane Mallarmé could be said once and for all to have marked the fork in the road along this trajectory when he wrote in “Magie,” from *Divagations*:

Since there are only two pathways open to mental research, where our need bifurcates—aesthetics on one side and also political economy—it is principally of the latter that alchemy was the glorious, hasty, and dark precursor. Everything at eye-level, pure, as if lacking meaning, before the apparition of the masses, must be restored to the social domain. The nondescript stone, dreaming of gold, the philosophers’ stone: it presages, in finance, the future credit, preceding capital or reducing it to the humility of coins! How disorderly the search going on around us is, and how little understood! (264, translation modified)

Thus, there would also be two forms of language—one, called monetary or journalistic, aimed at communication, and the other, aimed at the poetic exhibition, against the backdrop of a pure void, of the essence of things. Mallarmé’s “bifurcation,” however, does not add up to a neat symmetry, even grammatically speaking. In fact, when he writes “aesthetics on one side and also political economy,” does he not leave open the possibility for a certain “continuity of parks” between the two, whereby the modern aesthetic act or fact, what Borges calls “el hecho estético,” would come to define itself from within a thoroughly refunctionalized political economy of luxury, conspicuous consumption, and the unproductive expenditure of energy? Is this not in fact still the dominant aesthetic of modern and perhaps even postmodern times, an aesthetic which moreover would be profoundly undemocratic, being rather the long-term result of a reappraisal of the older values of military prowess and heroism, transposed onto the leisurely distinction of art and higher learning, via the dexterous knowledge of a priestly craft from which poets, intellectuals and scholars begin to separate themselves in the Middle Ages?

In the words of Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*: “Learning, then, set out with being in some sense a by-product of the priestly vicarious



leisure class; and, at least until a recent date, the higher learning has since remained in some sense a by-product or by-occupation of the priestly classes” (367). While Borges disagrees with the ensuing argument that the success of the study of Greek or Latin—or Old Norse, one might add—in the modern era would be due to their uselessness, he is certainly well aware of the relevance of Veblen’s analysis for contemporary Argentina. “Entre nosotros, el fenómeno de la clase ociosa es más grave,” he writes in his prologue to Veblen’s book for his *Personal Library*: “Salvo los pobres de solemnidad, todo argentino finge pertenecer a esa clase. De chico, he conocido familias que durante los meses calurosos vivían escondidas en su casa, para que la gente creyera que veraneaban en una hipotética estancia o en la ciudad de Montevideo. Una señora me confió su intención de adornar el ‘hall’ con un cuadro firmado, ciertamente no por virtud de la caligrafía” (“Veblen” 64). And yet, to what extent is the aesthetic act sought after in Borges’s writing also an expression of a yearning for the invidious, ritualistic, honorific and/or humilific incidence of vicarious leisure? Is not the ideal literary act, allegorized in “The Mirror and the Mask,” one of those phenomena of near-predatory competition, dressed up in the now-familiar concepts of honor, worth, merit, character and the like, that would fit the bill of what Veblen in one chapter of his book calls “Modern Survivals of Prowess”? Finally, as for Veblen’s well-known aversion for the barbaric regressions of the leisure class and his socialist-inspired preference for the spirit of workmanship and industry, let us not forget—as Borges also reminds us—that Thorstein, the son of Norwegian immigrants, nevertheless always prided himself on being a descendant of the Vikings!

In sum, aesthetics would not be the *other* side of political economy—a side that would have nothing to do with the monetary exchange of words and commodities; rather, as even Mallarmé’s grammar seems to betray, it would *also* be a question of political economy—albeit a political economy of a peculiar, wasteful and unproductive kind. That is, not the other side but the same side, or its underside, pushed to the extreme of its own dark or accursed share. It is surely no coincidence that there exists such a close proximity between the Bohemian *poète maudit* and the role of the *part maudite* in Bataille’s general economy. “These considerations,” as Bataille also writes in *La littérature et le mal*, “place the economy at the base of morality, they place it at the base of poetry” (55).

Even more intriguing is the way in which Borges, in the aforementioned lecture on “The Concept of an Academy and the Celts,” devotes a brief proto-sociological analysis to the birth of the man of letters. For

Borges, this figure or type does not emerge, as Pierre Bourdieu was to suggest a few years later, in nineteenth-century France, but rather among the Celts and the broad range of cultures they influence in the Middle Ages, from Ireland to the Icelandic community. The eleventh and twelfth centuries mark a pivotal time in this regard: “In this era the figure of the intellectual arises, starting from the cleric who devotes himself to a literary task set apart from his ecclesiastical occupation” (García Gual, 47). In his lecture, Borges more specifically traces back the formation of the man of letters to the institutionalization of an academy or college of experts, whose wizardry with words would be derived from the mysterious older figures known as Druids:

En la Edad Media, la conversión de los celtas al cristianismo redujo a los druidas a la categoría de hechiceros. Uno de sus procedimientos era la sátira, a la cual se atribuía poderes mágicos, verbigracia la aparición de ronchas en la cara de las personas aludidas por el satírico. Así bajo el amparo de la superstición y del temor, se inició en Irlanda el predominio de los hombres de letras. Cada individuo, en las sociedades feudales, tiene un lugar preciso; incomparable ejemplo de esta ley fueron los literatos de Irlanda. Si el concepto de academia reside en la organización y dirección de la literatura, no se descubrirá en la historia país más académico, ni siquiera Francia o la China. (“Academia” 92)

In this context, we should recall that, just as “On Rigor in Science” talks of Colleges of Cartographers, so too in “The Mirror and the Mask” the jousting match between poet and King—until their final moment in private—is always mediated by a collective College of Bards.

Veblen also has recourse to the notion implied here regarding a rigorous and hierarchical differentiation of classes and occupations from which gradually the leisure class would have emerged. And he, too, alludes to Celtic influences, this time referring to Iceland:

The Icelandic community in the time of the Sagas also affords a fair instance. In such a community there is a rigorous distinction between classes and between the occupations peculiar to each class. Manual labour, industry, whatever has to do directly with the everyday work of getting a livelihood, is the exclusive occupation of the inferior class.... The men of the upper classes are not only exempt, but by prescriptive custom they are debarred, from all industrial occupations. The range of employments open to them is rigidly defined. As on the higher plane already spoken of, these employments are government, warfare, religious observances, and sports. These four lines of activity govern the scheme of life of the upper

classes, and for the highest rank—the kings or chieftains—these are the only kinds of activity that custom or the common sense of the community will allow. (3)

For Borges and Veblen, such a rigid hierarchy, with its underlying economic demarcation between the industrial and the non-industrial activities, would have been the remote origin of our modern-day academies and universities. And yet, from “The Mirror and the Mask” it would seem that a poet, even when protected by the expert training of an academy, sits uncomfortably in this classification of roles and honors. Further confirmation of this can be found precisely in the fact that scholars and literati in general, once they acquire autonomy with regard to the priestly classes and before their professionalization thanks to the printing press, possess a most ambivalent status that is often indistinguishable from that of beggars. After all, the cap and gown of modern-day graduates, which for Veblen mark a barbaric regression to the paraphernalia of a by-gone era of aristocratic honor, in actual fact are reminiscences of this zone of indistinction between the scholar and the beggar.

#### ZERO AND THE INFINITE

Oh man is a god when he dreams, a beggar when he thinks;  
and when inspiration is gone, he stands, like a worthless son  
whom his father has driven out of the house, and stares at  
the miserable pennies that pity has given him for the road.

— Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperton, or the Hermit in Greece*

... mis harapos son de púrpura.

— Rubén Darío, “El rey burgués,” *Azul...*

Fue un vagabundo que, antes de ser nadie en la muerte,  
recordaría haber sido un rey o haber fingido ser un rey.

— Jorge Luis Borges, “Abenjacán el Bojarí, muerto en su laberinto”

In “The Mirror and the Mask,” however, it is the King and not the poet who becomes a beggar. We could argue that this is because on a purely formal level such a conversion fits the pattern of what Borges, in another essay from the same period, “The Dialogues of Ascetic and King,” describes as the rare encounter between two logical extremes: “Un rey es una plenitud, un asceta es nada o quiere ser nada; a la gente le gusta imaginar el diálogo de esos dos arquetipos” (302). Borges then goes on to illustrate

such a dialogue with a series of examples from both Eastern and Western sources. Thus, there are the comparable cases of Heraclitus and Darius, or of Diogenes the Cynic and Alexander, whose face-off corresponds anecdotally to the snubbing of an all-powerful sovereign by an indigent and misanthropic street philosopher: “Bajo la superficie trivial late la oscura contraposición de los símbolos y la magia de que el cero, el asceta, puede igualar y superar de algún modo al infinito rey” (302). Even more to the point when considering “The Mirror and the Mask” is the third example, drawn from the *Milinda Pañho*:

Al vestir el hábito del asceta, el Rey, en esta tercera versión, parece confundirse con él y nos recuerda aquel otro rey de la epopeya sánscrita que deja su palacio y pide limosna por las calles y de quien son estas vertiginosas palabras: “Desde ahora no tengo reino o mi reino es ilimitado; desde ahora no me pertenece mi cuerpo o me pertenece toda la tierra.” (304)

Gradually, we move from a secret kinship between two diametrically opposed figures, via a mystical conversion experience, all the way to the point of fusion or flipover between zero and the infinite: “En las historias que he referido, un asceta y un rey simbolizan la nada y la plenitud, cero y el infinito; símbolos más extremos de ese contraste serían un dios y un muerto, y su fusión más económica, un dios que muere” (305). In a particularly violent speculative move, we thus obtain a most succinct formula if ever there was one for the logic of Christianity and the death of God:  $\infty = 0$ .

Now, interestingly enough, a very similar definition of God, this time drawn from the pataphysician Alfred Jarry, leads one of Bataille’s colleagues in the Collège de Sociologie to propose the following description of what we might call the experience of profane illuminations in everyday life. Thus, in “The Bullfight as Mirror,” Michel Leiris writes:

God—the coincidence of contraries, according to Nicholas of Cusa (which is to say: the point where two lines come together or one track bifurcates; turntable, or vacant lot where the paths of all and sundry cross—has been defined pataphysically as “the point of tangence of zero and infinity.” Likewise, there are among the countless elements composing our universe certain nodes or critical points that might be represented geometrically as *the places where one feels tangency to the world and to oneself*. Indeed, certain sites, events, objects, certain very rare circumstances give us the feeling that they are presenting themselves before us or that we have a stake in them, that their role in the general scheme of things is to put us in contact with the most deeply intimate elements that, on ordinary occasions, are the most murky if not totally obscured. It would seem that such

sites, events, objects, circumstances have the power to bring very briefly to the uniformly flat surface of the world where we normally find ourselves some of the elements that most properly belong to our deep inner life, before allowing them to sink back—subsiding along the other slope of the curve—toward the cloudy obscurity from which they arose. (21)

What we have here, I would argue, is a description not just of an experience of the sacred, but of the aesthetic fact in the strictly Borgesian sense. In “The Wall and the Books,” we are given the most famous account of such a fact or act:

La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo; esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético. (OC 2: 13)

Via the dialogues between the King and the ascetic beggar-philosopher-scholar, brought to the near-sacred point of conversion between the infinite and nothingness, the value of the aesthetic, and of poetry in particular, would thus be linked genealogically to a general political economy of expenditure and waste.

#### POTLATCH IN ARGENTINA

No se puede ser independiente en política  
y colono en literatura.

Esteban Echeverría in a polemic with Dionisio Alcalá Galiano

El precio interfiere en el acceso a “la belleza”: solo en el desvío de esta apropiación ilegal es posible *tener* un texto. En este sentido toda la situación puede ser leída como una crítica a la lectura liberal: no hay lugar donde el dinero no llegue para criticar el valor en el precio.

Ricardo Piglia, “Roberto Arlt: Una crítica de la economía literaria”

In fact, on this side of the abovementioned constellation of texts in French anthropology and sociology from the likes of Mauss and Bataille, authors whose ideas may well have traveled to Buenos Aires inside the suitcase of Roger Caillois, there is also a strong Argentine specificity to the discussion of the aesthetic fact in terms of potlatch, beggary, and expenditure. From

early on in his literary career, Borges himself begins by placing Argentine culture under the sign of a certain indigence or beggarly condition. Thus, in *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, he writes: “Nuestra realidad vital es grandiosa y nuestra realidad pensada es mendiga” (13). In other words, there still exists a disparity, a non-adequation, between the nation’s vital-political independence and its condition of dependency in the cultural-ideological realm. As Xul Solar, the illustrator of these early works by Borges, also observes in an article on Pettoruti: “Honremos a los que pugnan para que el alma de la patria sea más bella. Porque no terminaron aún para nuestra América las guerras de la Independencia” (quoted in Gradowczyk 235). The sizeable hope of Borges, who dedicated a copy of *El tamaño de mi esperanza* to his friend Xul Solar, “colaborador de estas esperanzas,” consisted therefore in providing the grandeur of the Argentine nation with a corresponding wealth in poetry, music, painting, and metaphysics. Hope and honor would belong to those capable of closing the gap between political grandeur and cultural indigence. In sum, the goal of these criollos was to overcome their nation’s postcolonial condition and stop being beggars of another country’s patrimony. This meant nothing less and nothing more than to fulfill the dream of older figures such as Esteban Echeverría, who in one of his letters to de Angelis had written: “Ser grande en política no es estar a la altura de la civilización del mundo sino a la altura de las necesidades de un país” (51). The war of independence still had to be won on the cultural front; the nation still needed a beautiful soul to match its political grandeur.

And yet, strangely enough, in order to overcome what several years later, in *Discusión*, he would still diagnose as “la condición indigente de nuestra letras” (OC 1: 202), Borges in his early writing proposes a notion of poetry based yet again on the metaphors of the beggar and the gift of alms. Thus, in “Palabrería para versos,” also from *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, it would seem that the beggarly condition of national culture can be remedied not by supplementing its poverty with the hope for vast cultural riches but only by accepting the essentially dependent and unproductive nature of all culture—or at least of poetry. “Sólo la poesía—arte manifiestamente verbal, arte de poner en juego la imaginación por medio de palabras, según Arturo Schopenhauer la definió—es limosnera del idioma de todos” (48). This vision of the poet as a beggar taking an alm from language

in general seriously compromises the common image of art as an activity that should be disinterested, autonomous, and uneconomical compared to the daily commerce and universal reportage of human life. According to this familiar image, which Derrida in “Economimesis” traces back, beyond Mallarmé, to Immanuel Kant, art is free or liberal: “Distinct from science, art in general (the question of the Fine Arts has not yet arisen) cannot be reduced to craft [*Handwerk*]. The latter exchanges the value of its work against a salary, it is mercenary art [*Lohnkunst*]. Art, strictly speaking, is liberal or free [*freie*]; its production must not enter into the economic circle of commerce, of offer and demand; it must not be exchanged” (5). For Borges, by contrast, art and poetry cannot and perhaps ought not escape the impasses of a literary economy in which they always appear, not as sovereign creators but as poor mortals, humble beggars dependent on the words of others. As we can also read at the end of “El inmortal,” a story which after all goes back to Homer as the quintessential epic poet: “Palabras, palabras desplazadas y mutiladas, palabras de otros, fue la pobre limosna que le dejaron las horas y los siglos” (OC 1: 544). All that poets can hope to accomplish is, as it were, a verbal refurbishing of the universe. By begging for an alm, they do not steal so much as subtract a small share from language in general, which they then proceed to enrich with the symbolic efficacy of an additional aesthetic or sign value. “Bienhechores furtivos, los poetas merodean por las ciudades y por los campos y entran en las casas, no para robar, sino para añadir, y son los espectadores benévolos del universo,” Borges writes in an essay on “Gongorismo”: “Pasan años y, un amanecer o una tarde, por obra de su colectiva refacción verbal de las cosas, los hombres caminan sobre una tierra ya poetizada, a lo largo de ríos cuyo latido es la eternidad de ningún verso. Los objetos y las palabras que los marcan, alcanzaron divinidad. La poesía ha recabado su fin” (327-28).

Xul Solar, for his part, is the author of a fascinating but little-known document, “Una vieja forma paranoica de publicidad, el ‘potlatch,’” published in 1958 in the Argentine advertising journal *Publicidad Argentina*. In this text Xul does not hesitate to tie the phenomenon of potlatch, defined as the ritual struggle for prestige among certain North American coastal tribes, with everyday customs in our modern world. “Hay muchos casos de costumbres censurables, que podrían llamarse publicidad, más o menos consciente, las que casi imponen que por ciertos even-

tos familiares se ‘tire la casa por la ventana,’ como se dice,” notes Xul, before describing the potlatch properly speaking: “Lo más original y oneroso de esta costumbre publicitaria, el *potlatch*, era la destrucción de bienes para humillar a la otra parte, la que debía hacer otro tanto, o más, para no quedar en la vergüenza; mientras que, si el huésped ganaba de mano al anfitrión que no podía ‘retrucar,’ era éste el que perdía rango, quedando como descalificado, tal que mejor era desaparecer o a veces suicidarse” (35). Aside from giving us a surprisingly accurate summary of the story told in “The Mirror and the Mask,” this approach seems to me unique in at least three ways: Xul translates the ritual practice of potlatch for a criollo audience in Argentina by relying on local expressions such as “retrucar” (Mauss, for his part, quotes the German-French hybrid expression *revanchieren*) or “tirar la casa por la ventana” (which has a more pan-Hispanic appeal); he modernizes the potlatch as a modern form of “publicity” or “advertising” by asking himself “si algo no queda todavía, o mucho, de allá”; and, finally, he problematizes the phenomenon’s “subversive” or “censurable” nature by comparing it to the conspicuous expenditure associated with “políticos, actores o atletas” (34-35). Xul thus questions the fundamental idea undergirding our notion of the social contract—that is, the idea of a harmonious balancing act among individual wills into a peaceful collective cooperation. If politicians, actors and athletes are censurable, he seems to suggest, it is because they are survivals of a more primitive economy based on wasteful expenditure and invidious competition.

Through the potlatch writers and artists such as Borges or Xul seem to search for an alternative to the dominant logic of modern political economy, which reveals its restricted character precisely in contrast with the unproductive expenditure of value, or even its destruction, that serves as the internal limit of such a logic. This is not to say that the gift economy represents an autonomous space of its own, much less that we would have to resurrect a remote past of pure enjoyment and festive destruction, foreign to the venality of modern everyday life. On the contrary, what this logic of the gift reveals is the extent to which this very notion of autonomy, particularly in the realm of art, remains



trapped in the framework of a liberal ideology in which freedom and creativity, ethics and aesthetics, have always defined themselves reciprocally as disinterested activities outside or beyond mere human commerce.

It should no come as a surprise, therefore, if Ricardo Piglia in his latest novel, *Plata quemada*, gives this antagonistic structure of potlatch an explicit, even didactic expression. Toward the end of the novel, the robbers of a bank, seeing how their safe house is surrounded by police, decide to burn their loot and throw the burning bills in the air. At this point, as if to close a cycle of inquiries into a general economy that would be radically different from the one that is now everywhere in crisis, there appears the figure of a professor of anthropology who describes the suicidal act of the robbers as “una especie de inocente *potlatch* realizado en una sociedad que ha olvidado ese rito, un acto absoluto y gratuito en sí, un gesto de puro gasto y de puro derroche que en otras sociedades ha sido considerado un sacrificio que se ofrece a los dioses porque sólo lo más valioso merece ser sacrificado y no hay nada más valioso entre nosotros que el dinero” (192-93). From this we could conclude that in a society in which there appears to be no emancipatory escape from the worldwide crisis of capitalism, all that remains open is some radical anarchistic gesture that inverts the logic of the market by reflecting back the mirror image of its own violence, in order to negate it. In fact, the violence of such a gesture, which is still minor in Borges’s figure of the beggar but which reaches a paroxystic form in Piglia’s bonfire of banknotes, only seems to intensify proportionately to the likelihood that a genuinely political alternative to the current economy can be found.

And yet, can we really argue that a return to the radical act of expenditure and pure unproductive waste represents an alternative to the ubiquitous political economy of capitalism? Is this not a romantic dream, filled with plenty of Bohemian memories yet forgetful of the communicating vessels that connect capitalism itself, today more than ever, to the logic of expenditure?

## BEGGING THE QUESTION

The quarrel between the political economists about luxury and thrift is, therefore, only the quarrel between that political economy which has achieved clarity about the nature of wealth, and that political economy which is still afflicted with romantic, anti-industrial memories.

— Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts*

As long as there is still one beggar around,  
there will still be myth.

— Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

Or can it simply be that you are pulling a long face and telling a tall story like the beggar at the street corner who has a stocking full of guineas safely hoarded under her bed at home?

— Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

And yet this does not touch the kernel of the problem. Human advancement is not a mere question of almsgiving, but rather of sympathy and coöperation among classes who would scorn charity.

— W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

There are at least two perspectives from which today the critical nature of the notion of the aesthetic act based upon potlatch as the model for a general economy of expenditure may be put into question. It is certainly not enough to conclude that in the potlatch we can decipher a mode of sociability that would be foreign to calculated self-interest, an economy of enjoyment and waste that would be incompatible with the cold monetary nexus, a radical breakaway from exchange and capitalist calculation. This interpretation, to be sure, remains fairly common among readers of both Mauss's essay on *The Gift* and its ambitious speculative continuation in Bataille's *The Accursed Share*. But there are other and more recent perspectives from which this interpretation appears to be if not outdated then at least one-sided.

Roland Barthes, for one, wonders out loud in *The Pleasure of the Text* for how much longer literature will continue to define itself in terms of luxury and loss:

Why, in a text, all this verbal display? Does luxury of language belong with excessive wealth, wasteful expenditure, total loss? Does a great work of pleasure (Proust's, for example) participate in the same economy as the pyramids of Egypt? Is today's writer the residual substitute for the beggar, the monk, the bonze: unproductive, but nevertheless provided for? Analogous to the Buddhist sangha, is the literary community, whatever alibi it uses, supported by a mercantile society, not for what the writer produces (he produces nothing), but for what he consumes? Superfluous, but certainly not useless? (23)

For Barthes, the problem with this interpretation has to do with the logic of recuperation. Every excess, every resistance, and every unproductive act, in this sense, is always already part of the restricted economy of exchange, as its constitutive outside:

Our modernity makes a constant effort to defeat the exchange: it tries to resist the market for works (by excluding itself from mass communication), the sign (by exemption from meaning, by madness), sanctioned sexuality (by perversion, which shields bliss from the finality of reproduction). And even so, modernity can do nothing: the exchange recuperates everything, acclimating what appears to deny it: it seizes upon the text, puts it in the circuit of useless but legal expenditures: and behold, the text is back in a collective economy (even if only psychological): it is the text's very uselessness that is useful, as a potlatch. In other words, society lives according to a cleavage: here a sublime, disinterested text, there a mercantile object, whose value is [...] the gratuitousness of this object. But society has no notion of this split: *it is ignorant of its own perversion*. "The two litigants take their share: impulse is entitled to its satisfaction, reality receives the respect which is its due. *But*," Freud adds, "*nothing is gratuitous except death, as everyone knows*." For the text, nothing is gratuitous except its own destruction; not to write, not to write again, except to be eternally recuperated. (23-24)

Only death, therefore, might eventually escape the logic of recuperation whereby the excessive act becomes part, as excess, of the closed circuit of production and consumption.

Jean-Joseph Goux, on the other hand, wonders to what extent interpretations of the potlatch as an alternative to capitalism are actually tied to an outdated image of capitalism, based on the Weberian model of the Protestant work ethic. From obeying the image of calculated reason with its ideals of productivity and austerity for which unproductive expendi-

ture and conspicuous waste would provide radical alternatives, what if capitalism itself were already a giant potlatch today? Goux specifically refers to the work of one of the ideological gurus of Reagonomics, George Gilder who in *Wealth and Poverty* completely inverts the picture of capitalism and potlatch that authors such as Bataille or Lévi-Strauss seem to have inherited from Mauss:

Contrary to the notions of Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, the giving impulse in modern capitalism is no less prevalent and important—no less central to all creative and productive activity, no less crucial to the mutuality of culture and trust—than in a primitive tribe. The unending offering of entrepreneurs, investing jobs, accumulating inventories—all long before any return is received, all without any assurance that the enterprise will not fail—constitute a pattern of giving that dwarfs in extent and in essential generosity any primitive rite of exchange. Giving is the vital impulse and moral center of capitalism. (Gilder quoted in Goux, 211-12)

Thus, not only is capitalism capable of recuperating the excess of an unproductive expenditure, for instance, by giving it a symbolic use—as we already saw in the case of the moral economy surrounding the giving of alms. But what Mauss or Bataille could not have foreseen is the extent to which capitalism itself, at least in its neoliberal or postindustrial stage, would be legitimized as a gift economy through and through. As Goux concludes:

Bataille does not seem to have foreseen this conflict born of abundance and the extraordinary sophistication of production. The Weberian image of capitalism that he maintains, the slightly obsolete conviction that Franklin's precepts of economy and sobriety represent capitalism's morals in its pure state, seem to indicate that Bataille did not imagine the paradoxical situation of postindustrial capitalism where only the appeal to compete infinitely in unproductive consumption (through comfort, luxury, technical refinement, the superfluous) allows for the development of production. (219)

However, this criticism in turn fails to see that the purpose of Mauss's or Bataille's investigations into the potlatch is never merely to celebrate a primitive act of almost Dionysiac expenditure in opposition to the capitalist work ethic. "Even pure destruction of wealth does not signify that complete detachment that one might believe to be found in it," Mauss warns us; instead, we would do better to redefine, in light of the gift economy

and its repercussions today, all our prevalent oppositions of waste and utility: “These concepts of law and economics that it pleases us to contrast: liberty and obligation; liberality, generosity, and luxury, as against savings, interest, and utility—it would be good to put them into the melting pot once more” (73-74). The analysis of the gift, in other words, has above all an heuristic or revelatory function for the present. The potlatch does not stand outside the conspiracy of capitalist exchange; rather, it renders visible its most intimate functioning. As Piglia also writes in “Teoría del complot”:

La economía entonces es vista como productora de síntomas y de desvíos. Ahí se define esa tensión entre la ilusión de un complot que se opone a la sociedad sin ser un complot político en el sentido explícito, y el funcionamiento de una sociedad que naturalmente genera un tipo de racionalidad económica que tiende a poner el beneficio, la circulación del dinero, la ganancia como formas visibles de su funcionamiento, pero que en realidad esconde una red hecha de adicciones y de ideas fijas y fetiches, de bienes sagrados y de carencias absolutas. Y esa tensión entre dos economías cruza todo el debate sobre el arte y el valor. (14)

This crossing between two economies, like those of the beggars and the money-makers, is the remote outcome of the persistence of the potlatch in the era of neoliberal capitalism. What the potlatch reveals in this context is the illusory nature of any contractual definition of society based on consensus or even, today, on the so-called democratic pact of concertation. This is also Piglia’s conclusion, which now reads as a perfect summary of the long trajectory behind a certain Argentine potlatch: “El modelo de la sociedad es la batalla, no el pacto, es el estado de excepción y no la ley” (“Teoría” 8).

Beyond the ethnological interest of the materials brought to bear on the question of the gift, therefore, we should begin to grasp the profound ambivalence of our current economical relations by underscoring how today a restricted economy, often through war and pillaging, is already functioning as a fragile smokescreen for a violently destructive general economy. Perhaps we mistakenly believe that we have understood the meaning of this famous “Copernican revolution” between a general and a restricted economy. Perhaps we still fail to understand how this revolution operates by way of a kind of anamorphosis, or shift in perspectives, the

effects of which never amount to an escape pure and simple from the present conjuncture. The antagonistic violence of the gift and the calculated austerity of exchange and commerce, then, are merely two sides of one and the same Möbius strip. At a far remove from the dominant surrealist or neoromantic readings of Mauss and Bataille, the problem becomes one of rational control, not anarchistic paroxysm. Ultimately this is the goal even for Bataille in *La part maudite*: “We can ignore or forget it: however this may well be, the bedrock on which we live is nothing but a field of multiplied destructions. Our ignorance only has the following undeniable effect: it makes us *suffer* that which we might also *control* in our own way, if we knew how” (62). Today there is perhaps less hope than ever for such control. At a time when capitalism itself is a gigantic potlatch unleashed in the form of war, crisis, and the worldwide pillage and destruction of both human and natural resources, what principle of hope could possibly remain, if furthermore the sleepless factories of the culture industry almost instantly manage to devour the slightest simulacrum of autonomy?

Bruno Bosteels  
Cornell University

## WORKS CITED

- Almeida, Iván. "La moneda de Borges: de la degradación al desgaste— Rudimentos de semiótica borgesiana." *Variaciones Borges* 13 (2002): 57-77.
- . "Borges à la carte (tres citas de Baudrillard)." *Variaciones Borges* 25 (2008): 25-51.
- Althusser, Louis. *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 1993.
- Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*. London: Verso, 1979.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975.
- Bataille, Georges. *La part maudite, précédé de La notion de dépense*. Paris: Minuit, 1967.
- . *La littérature et le mal*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Trans. Charles Levin. New York: Telos Press, 1981.
- . *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant. London: Sage, 1993.
- Benjamin, Walter. "One-Way Street." *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Peter Demetz. New York: Schocken Books, 1978.
- . *Illuminations: Essays ad Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- . *The Arcades Project*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.
- Berger, Anne-Emmanuelle. *Scènes d'aumône: Misère et poésie au XIXe siècle*. Paris: Champion, 2004.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "Diálogos del asceta y el rey." *Textos recobrados 1931-1955*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2001. 302-306.
- . "El concepto de una Academia y los celtas." *Textos recobrados 1956-1986*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2003. 89-97.
- . *El tamaño de mi esperanza*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1993.

- . "Gongorismo." *Textos recobrados 1919-1929*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1997. 327-329.
- . "Thorstein Veblen." *Biblioteca personal (prólogos)*. Madrid: Alianza, 1988. 64-65.
- . *La cifra*. Madrid: Alianza, 1981.
- . *Obras completas*. 4 vols. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1996.
- . *Prólogos con un prólogo de prólogos*. Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero, 1975.
- . *This Craft of Verse*. Ed. Calin-Andrei Mihailescu. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Borges, Jorge Luis, Ocampo, Silvina, and Bioy Casares, Adolfo, eds. *Antología de la literatura fantástica*. Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 1983.
- Bosteels, Bruno. "A Misreading of Maps: The Politics of Cartography in Marxism and Poststructuralism." *Signs of Change: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern*. Ed. Stephen Barker. Albany: U New York P, 1996. 109-38.
- . "Economía literaria y economía general." *Encuentro de la literatura argentina con el discurso crítico. XII Congreso Nacional de Literatura Argentina*. Ed. Marcela Arpes and Nora Ricaud. Río Gallegos: Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia Austral, 2005. 11-27.
- Chartier, Roger. "Le monument et l'événement. Parole poétique et figures de l'écriture dans 'El espejo y la máscara' de J. L. Borges." *Variaciones Borges* 3 (1997): 110-19.
- Darío, Rubén. *Azul... Cantos de vida y esperanza*. Ed. Álvaro Salvador. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1992.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1992.
- . "Economimesis." Trans. Richard Klein. *Diacritics* 11: 2 (1981): 2-25.
- . *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*. Trans. David Wills. Chicago: U Chicago P, 2008.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Trans. Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.



- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover, 1994.
- Echeverría, Esteban. *El matadero. La cautiva*. Ed. Leonor Fleming. Madrid: Cátedra, 1993.
- García Gual, Carlos. *Primeras novelas europeas*. Madrid: Istmo, 1988.
- Goloboff, Gerardo Mario. "Borges, chapitre sur l'argent." *Borges, l'autre. Colloque de Cerisy*. Ed. Gérard de Cortanze. Paris: Dominique Bedou/Antigramme, 1987. 32-42.
- Goux, Jean-Joseph. "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism." *On Bataille*. Special issue of *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 206-24.
- Gradowczyk, Mario H. *Alejandro Xul Solar*. Buenos Aires: ALBA, 1994.
- Greaney, Patrick. *Untimely Beggar: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2008.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich. *Hyperion and Selected Poems*. Ed. Eric L. Santner. London: Continuum, 2002.
- Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Ed. J. B. Schneewind. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.
- Karsenti, Bruno. *Marcel Mauss: Le fait total social*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994.
- Leiris, Michel. "The Bullfight as Mirror." *October* 63 (1993): 21-40.
- Lellouche, Raphaël. "L'infamie. L'épique chez Borges." *Borges ou l'hypothèse de l'auteur*. Paris: Balland, 1989. 29-60.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. Paris: Kluwer, 1971; Le Livre de Poche, 1990.
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. "Magic." *Divagations*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. 263-65.
- Marx, Karl. *The Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Ed. Dirk J. Struik. New York: International Publishers, 1988.
- . *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Martin Nicolaus. New York: Penguin, 1973.
- . *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. David Fernbach. Vol. 3. New York: Penguin, 1981.

- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. W. D. Halls. New York: W. W. Norton, 1990.
- Negri, Antonio. *Marx Beyond Marx*. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1984.
- Ortega, Julio. “El Aleph’ y el lenguaje epifánico.” *Borges: Desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos*. Ed. Rafael Olea Franco. Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1999. 21-34.
- Piglia, Ricardo. “Roberto Arlt: una crítica de la economía literaria.” *Los Libros: Para una crítica política de la cultura* 29 (1973): 22-27
- . *Plata quemada*. Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1997.
- . “Teoría del complot.” *Ramona* 23 (2002): 4-14.
- Plato. *Republic*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Philosopher and His Poor*. Ed. Andrew Parker. Trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parker. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. “Un mundo de pasiones.” *Borges: Desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos*. Ed. Rafael Olea Franco. Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1999. 207-24.
- Smith, Adam. *The Wealth of Nations*. Ed. Edwin Cannan. New York: Random House Modern Library, 2000.
- . *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1971.
- Trotsky, Leon. *Problems of Everyday Life*. New York: Pathfinder, 1973.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Penguin, 1967.
- Wolf, Virginia. *Three Guineas*. New York: Harcourt, 2006.
- Xul Solar, Alejandro. “Una vieja forma paranoica de publicidad, el ‘potlatch.’” *Publicidad argentina* 2 (1958): 34-36.