

From Paris, where she had a show in 1939, she wrote in English to her lover Nickolas Muray in New York: "I rather sit on the floor in the market of Toluca and sell tortillas, than to have anything to do with these 'artistic' bitches of Paris. They sit for hours on the 'cafes' warming their precious behinds, and talk without stopping about 'culture' 'art' 'revolution' and so forth, thinking themselves the gods of the world. . . . Gee weez! It was worthwhile to come here only to see why Europe is rotting."

How important an artist was Frida

Kahlo? Although the strength of her work is undeniable, her paintings are small in size. Her output was limited. Her subject matter is personal. By the usual standards, she is not a major painter. But one exciting result of the new feminism, and particularly of feminist biography, has been to make us rethink questions about what is major and what is minor. As with Jean Strouse's biography of Alice James, there is nothing particularly feminist about Hayden Herrera's biography of Kahlo—except the fact that she wrote it. □

Consumers and Other Strangers

JACKSON LEARS

THE GIFT: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property. By Lewis Hyde. Random House. 327 pp. \$17.95. Paper \$7.95.

Those mass-marketed commodities—elegant peasant frocks, chocolate-covered cherries, lumbering recreational vehicles—do they really merit all the abuse that's been heaped on them? These days one wonders. It's harder than ever to write intelligent criticism of mass society and consumer culture, so much priggishness and paranoia has already been committed to paper. Anxious émigrés have railed against the totalitarian implications of jazz; well-heeled moralists have fretted about the wasteful habits of "the masses"; conspiracy theorists have seen a hidden persuader behind every Pac Man and Barbie doll. No wonder such critiques are no longer fashionable. Today, consumer culture is increasingly conceived to be a world of richness and variety, for all its faults immensely preferable to the only imagined alternatives: preindustrial poverty and Soviet totalitarianism.

This argument becomes all the more persuasive when it acquires a patina of scientific respectability from the work of anthropologists who link consumption and cultural meaning. Mary Douglas, in particular, has attacked left-wing critics for caricaturing consumers as irrational dupes of manipulative advertisers. From an "anthropological view," Douglas says, consumption is an

eminently rational quest for meaning, "a ritual process whose primary purpose is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events." In other words, "commodities are good for thinking." This view overlooks the role of advertising in muddling meaning for profit; it merges Kwakiutl Indians with K mart shoppers, collapsing them all in the "ethnographic present."

For the rest of us, doubts may not be so easily laid to rest. Granting all the qualifications, granting even the richness and variety, there is still (in me at least) a sense of revulsion at the shoddy and exploitive aspects of the merchandise mart. How does one translate visceral feelings into more than a cry of outrage? Most critical models are marred by shrill polemic, but there are others: the sociology of everyday life pioneered by Henri Lefebvre, the idiosyncratic semiology of his student Jean Baudrillard, the unclassifiable speculations of Walter Benjamin—and now this intriguing meditation by the poet Lewis Hyde.

The Gift moves beyond the worn categories of manipulation versus liberation and asceticism versus hedonism to offer an original and provocative critique of capitalist culture. Unlike many critics of consumerism, Hyde respects the material, sensuous aspects of the world. He focuses his ire not on commodities themselves but on the values and social relations fostered by commodity exchange. Hyde's argument is subtle, complex and impossible to summarize adequately in a review. He has written a remarkable book.

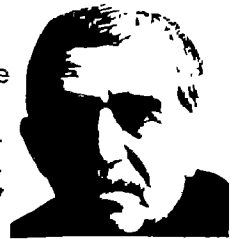
Hyde's poetic vocation shapes and informs his approach. What led him to the subject of gift exchange was his conviction that "the art that matters to us—

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Jackson Lears is the author of No Place of Grace: Anti-Modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (Pantheon).

which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living, however we choose to describe the experience—that work is received by us as a gift is received.” Not only is a work of art a gift, but it is the result of a talent, a genius or an inspiration that is experienced by the artist as a gift. It is no accident, says Hyde, that we speak of creative people as “gifted.” The problem for an artist who chooses to labor with a gift is how to survive in a society in which works of art are treated not as gifts but as commodities. Beginning with the basic question of how to put the macaroni and cheese on the table, Hyde finishes by illuminating the dilemmas of life in a market society.

The key to Hyde’s success is his ability to clarify the distinctions between gift exchange and commodity exchange. He draws on folk tales and anthropological literature to present various tribal cultures based on gift relationships. The ceremonial giving of Kula necklaces among Trobriand Islanders in the South Pacific; the extravagant distribution of shells, pelts, skins and blankets during the “potlatch” ritual of the Kwakiutl Indians in the Pacific Northwest—these practices embody the notion that the “big man” is the big giver, the generous dispenser of wealth. In market societies achievement lies not in giving but in getting; the “big man” is self-possessed, autonomous, “self-made.”

For Hyde, the distinction between giving and getting underlies a host of others. Gift exchange is animated by Eros, commodity exchange by Logos. Under the sign of Eros, the self flows outward, toward union with others and with all life—indestructible life, “the thread that . . . is not broken when the particular perishes.” Gift exchange locates the individual in a community and a cosmos, as Hyde demonstrates in his discussion of “threshold gifts” given at birth, marriage and death. And, as “an emanation of Eros,” the gift increases in worth as it changes hands;

this is the attitude of the Trobriand Islanders toward their Kula necklaces, of artists toward their creations and of lovers toward their love. “The more I give to thee,” said Juliet, “the more I have.” Given this erotic quality, it is not surprising that gift exchange has been associated with rituals to insure fecundity and abundance. It is of course silly to assume (as many Westerners do) that tribal folk lead more satisfying lives, Hyde admits; all the same, he insists that that assumption contains a kernel of truth because they have “more ready access to erotic forms of exchange that are neither exhausting nor exhaustible and whose use ensures their plenty.”

In Hyde’s view the contrast between those forms of exchange and commodity exchange is nearly total. While gift exchange creates a sense of abundance even amid poverty, commodity exchange reinforces a sense of scarcity even amid a cornucopia of goods. The prime motor of market society is the feeling that one has not accumulated enough. Restless striving for commodities promotes boundaries rather than bonds; if Eros unites, Logos divides.

Many of consumer society’s “big men” also lack bonds to a meaningful cosmos. Commodity exchange undermines the rituals of gift exchange that locate the individual in an orderly universe and that promise rebirth at the threshold of death. From the gift cultures’ point of view, death in market societies is “the death that goes nowhere.” As Hyde says, “The parking lots and aisles of discount stores may be where the restless dead of a commodity civilization will tread out their numberless days.”

This is a familiar attack on the anomie and spiritual sterility of life under Logos, but Hyde does more than rehash pop-sociological clichés about “commodity fetishism.” “Capitalism,” he writes, “is the ideology that asks that we remove surplus wealth from circulation and lay it aside to produce more wealth. To move away from capitalism is not to change the form of ownership from the few to the many, but to cease turning so much surplus into capital, that is, to treat most increase as a gift.” That can only be done within a small group, which is why the political economy of gift exchange is not communism but anarchism. A state-run economy can still strive to convert all wealth into capital goods, as Stalin and his successors have demonstrated. The

best hope for gift exchange lies in the decentralized communitarianism of Peter Kropotkin—perhaps a frail hope, given Kropotkin’s platitudinous view of human nature.

Like Kropotkin, Hyde sometimes slips into oracular obscurity. But in general he has a keen eye not only for the otherness of other cultures but also for the pastness of the past. His historical sense is strongest in the chapter on usury. Usury, he notes, is sister to commodity; it separates lender from borrower, landlord from tenant, stranger from kin. Mosaic law allowed Hebrews to charge interest to strangers but demanded gift exchange within the tribal circle; medieval Christian theology widened the circle by preaching universal brotherhood; Reformation doctrines contracted the circle into each individual soul, splitting moral from economic life and legitimizing the emergence of market society. For Hyde, the Middle Ages were the time when the man with a bleeding heart was recognized as the moral ideal. With the arrival of commodity exchange, he lost that stature, becoming a sentimental fool “with an embarrassing inability to limit his compassion.”

Summarized quickly, this view of history seems threadbare. It is a prelapsarian vision common to some Marxists, most romantics and all Christian traditionalists: once upon a time, people lived in harmony with their world and one another; then they fell from grace—prodded by capitalism, scientific rationality or original sin. The nostalgia pervading this view makes it an easy target for the slings and arrows of historians, but Hyde sidesteps the volleys. He is well aware of the corruption and cruelty of medieval Christianity, the vicious anti-Semitism that sometimes powered the opposition to usury, the oppressive restraints of tribal community. He is also quick to acknowledge “the well-advertised benefits of a market society—its particular freedoms, its particular kind of innovation, its individual and material variety, and so on.”

Hyde’s sense of balance is especially apparent in his chapter on the gift as “a female property.” In cultures where women are “given in marriage” they take on many functions of the gift, becoming the means of a community’s cohesion. Marriages, established through massive gift exchanges, are part of stable kinship systems that nurture the young and protect the old. Of course

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the very notion that a woman can be "given" violates our modern sense of justice, and Hyde is sensitive to the patriarchal oppression often inherent in this stability. Yet he celebrates the "feminine" character of gift exchange as an alternative to the maleness of the marketplace.

In contemporary American society the gift sphere encompasses not only domestic life but the "female professions" of teaching, nursing, social work, child care, the ministry and the arts. Even if these professions are male-dominated, for Hyde they can still embody "feminine" values that resist the market mentality. They are all undervalued by the commodity world, and all contain a large admixture of "gift labor." They cannot be performed in a "willed, time-conscious, quantitative style"; they often stem from service to an inner daemon or gift; they open the self outward toward others.

Hyde's preoccupation with the poet's problematic role leads to his reflections on Whitman and Pound. Whitman was a poet of the gifted state, a religious enthusiast fleeing abstraction and analysis for that moment of cosmic union when "the soggy clods shall become lovers and lamps." But in Hyde's account of Whitman's sad and unrequited love affairs, we lose sight of the gift and even of the poet as gifted.

The account of Pound is another matter, an artful resurrection which refuses to evade the poet's Fascism and anti-Semitism. Pound's political odyssey, Hyde argues, began in the Imagist recoil from the abstract, vaporous language of late Victorian poetry. Determined to reconnect word and thing, the Imagists faced a problem: by the early twentieth century, the commodity world was organized and omnipresent. As a result, Hyde writes, "the objects of the outer world can no longer carry the full range of emotional and spiritual life. Feeling and spirit mysteriously drain away when the imagination tries to embody them in commodities." This is a difficult point to prove, but it does cast new light on the melancholy of Eliot's poems, where coffee spoons and cigarettes surround characters who are unable to talk to one another. It also helps explain Pound's crusade against usury—his effort to restrict the domain of commodity. From anti-usury to anti-Semitism was a short step: the usurer and the Jew had long been twinned in Christian polemics. Yet Hyde believes that Pound's descent was rooted

in psychic as well as intellectual circumstances: he abhorred the commodity realm but lacked a counterweight to it. Something had made him ashamed of the erotic, fecund side of his talent, had made him associate it with "stupidity and laziness," and his imagination delivered itself to his will, just as he proudly presented his *Cantos* to Mussolini. His poetry slipped into arid stretches of rant.

Where does this leave the poet—and the rest of us? Shall we head for the hills, smear ourselves with buffalo butter and squat round the flaming carcasses of sewing machines and refrigerators? In his conclusion, Hyde backs away from the anarchistic implications of his argument. "One of the lessons of Pound's life," he announces, "is that there is little to be gained by a wholesale attack on the market." I am not sure what Hyde means by "a wholesale attack," but to me Pound's life shows the futility of embracing half-baked racial and economic theories. It does not necessarily discredit his antipathy toward the market. Hyde implies that we should try to resist commodity exchange and enlarge the circle of gift. He might have explored the areas of gift exchange that still exist in the interstices of the market—in raising children, in nurturing friendship, in preserving neighborhoods. How has the gift relationship survived? How could it be sustained and strengthened? Instead of posing those questions, Hyde concludes by offering some shopworn advice to artists: seek a middle ground between Logos and Eros; be in the market but not of it. Get an agent, get a grant, get a job that doesn't sap your libidinal energies. This is all a bit anticlimactic after so much eloquence in the service of gift.

Yet Hyde has not written a prescriptive book, and it is unfair to upbraid him for the unavoidable banality of his advice. What he *has* done is to freshen stale thinking about consumer culture by reminding us that the focus for criticism should not be material goods but the attitudes people bring to their exchange. He has returned us to some crucial Marxian insights into the character of commodity exchange—insights often forgotten amid ponderous discourse about modes of production—but he has done so in an idiom that is all his own. For this labor, Hyde has earned my gratitude. His book is more than a lucid reflection on how we live and how we might live. It is a gift. □

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