

**The Significant Gift:
Charity and Class in Eighteenth
Century English Literature and Society**

Having travelled far and seen much, Robinson Crusoe ends his adventures a changed man amid changed circumstances. To bring everything to a tidy conclusion he makes one last visit to his island to see for himself the fruits of his generosity. He brings to his 'new Collony' supplies which include 'two Workmen', 'seven Women, being such as I found proper for Service, or for Wives', 'five Cows, three of them being big with Calf, some Sheep, and some Hogs.'¹ His charity does not stop here:

Besides this, I shar'd the Island into Parts with 'em, reserv'd to my self the Property of the whole, but gave them such Parts respectively as they agreed on; and having settled all things with them, and engaged them not to leave the Place, I left them there²

In return, he has the satisfaction of seeing all his arrangements proceed happily as the plantation flourishes and is successfully defended against invading 'Caribbees'. It is an interesting conclusion to a tale which is initiated by Robinson's own refusal to accept restraint and which is dominated by his physical isolation and spiritual desolation. The force of the novel's conclusion rests upon Robinson's successful establishment of authority over a group of fellow human beings, an authority which providentially turns all things to good. He has welcomed various castaways and unfortunates onto his island, given them supplies, advice and property with the one injunction that they obey his wish that they will remain there, and be industrious. The latent meaning in this episode is scarcely avoidable but it can be more effectively broached by viewing the moment when Robinson's fortunes change.

Defoe's classic tales of a young man's trial and final success fits neatly into the religious pattern of sin, punishment and redemption. At the close of his own journey, Robinson can observe with some satisfaction that 'the latter End of Job was better than the Beginning.'³ Accordingly, 'the Providence of Heaven, which disposes all things' from the chastening abandonment to the distribution of financial wealth, rewards Robinson's submission with 'above 50001 Sterling in Money, and...an Estate, as I might well call it, in the Brasils, of above a thousand Pounds a Year.'⁴ To this act of supreme generosity on the part of God, Robinson reacts by recalling to his mind those instances

when other people have been charitable to him:

The first thing I did, was to recompense my original Benefactor, my good old Captain, who had been first charitable to me in my Distress, kind to me in my Beginning and honest to me at the End

This is a requirement that Robinson feels acutely as a form of imperative: 'it now lay on me to reward him.' He sets about concluding this business immediately as if it were a pressing debt to settle. He is relieved when it is done: 'I had rewarded the old Captain fully, and to his Satisfaction, who had been my former Benefactor'. For Robinson to say and Defoe to write 'who had been my former Benefactor' betrays a desperate need to escape the debt. The Captain is not only Robinson's 'former Benefactor' but was so somewhere in a more distant past. Robinson has moved far beyond this kind of indebtedness. As if it had not been said enough, Robinson reaffirms that he has 'requited my old Man.'⁵

This last stylistic slip is typical of Defoe's style. Contrary to recent attempts to paint Defoe as a master ironist, after the fashion of Swift, capable of sophisticated inquiries into the mechanisms of human action and thought, this kind of slippage speaks of the degree to which he joins his narrator in his movements. No stranger to real financial debt, Defoe understood that there are many other forms of debt which, though not enforced by bailiffs, are equally restricting. Given a new fortune which could make him independent, Robinson's first act is to break the bonds of gratitude incurred in his misfortune and so end any lingering obligations. Friendship can remain but Robinson is determined to be indebted to no-one.

His second thought after receiving his fortune follows the identical pattern: 'I began to think of my poor Widow, whose Husband had been my first Benefactor.'⁶ Then with his debts paid, he sets out to be a creditor. He dispatches funds to his two sisters in England, to 'the Prior of Augustine'⁷ and to the poor who live in the vicinity of his plantation, which he emphasizes is 'as sure as an Estate of London in England', that is, as secure.⁸ The friar will pray for him and the peasants will likely show more respect to his property. No longer in debt to others and in possession of valuable assets, Robinson sets out to establish obligations of gratitude with those beneath him. His treatment of the inhabitants of his island follows this line. Even the manner in which he dispatches

supplies and more people to the island leaves no doubt as to who is in charge. He displays the interest of one who delights in organizing the affairs of others as if they were children or even pets. He even selects what women would be most suitable for his colonists. All that he expects in return, as one expects from children, is gratitude, the interest one pays on charity.

It is somehow not surprising that charity for Daniel Defoe takes on this overtly mercenary role and nor is it surprising that this entire process is modelled on the movement of Providence. When Robinson errs, he does so by pursuing his own ends too single-mindedly. Shipwrecks and slavery are the results. He is punished, feels his guilt and submits to the will of God. Submission leads to reward and he is helped back on to his feet by others who, like the Portuguese Ship-captain, are instruments of divine providence. The debts of gratitude incurred in the process are then repaid as providence continues to reward submission, leaving Robinson with only one debt - to God. Within the scheme of things, however, most humans must live under a greater array of obligations. The entire fabric of society in Robinson Crusoe is knit together by debts in this fashion, with the great universal debt owed to God justifying everything. What is perhaps most surprising about this work is that the character who comes to play such a pivotal role in the social hierarchy was in fact one who refused to accept his 'middle state' and aspired selfishly to rise. It is the story of the prodigal son retold.

To move to the opposite end of the century, one finds a curiously similar process at work where one would least expect it. Robert Bage, by all accounts, was a radical in his day. His was among the voices of protest raised against the increasingly obsolete political and social institutions that could only retain authority by the often brutal exercise of force. The real nature and purpose of Bage's radicalism becomes clear during a riot scene in Hermsprong (1797-6) wherein the hero becomes embroiled and is subsequently charged, with treasonously participating, at the insistence of the cagey Lord Grondale. In Hermsprong's defense, a junior justice, who had been present and who had twice read the Riot Act in vain, describes what he saw of the foreigner's conduct. Upon encountering the trouble, Hermsprong had confronted the rioters, arguing against insurrection:

My Friends, perhaps it may be true that your wages are not adequate to the

furnishing you with all the superfluities of life which you may desire; but these are unhappy times, and require of you a greater degree of frugality and forbearance.

One must take a moment to remind oneself that this is Bage's hero, a supposed paragon of liberated man and a benign emblem of 'Man as he is not.' If these are words of a forward-looking liberal then England in the 1790's did indeed sink to the depths of totalitarianism. Hermsprong has more to say:

My Friends, we cannot all be rich: there is no possible equality of property which can last a day. If you were capable of desiring it, which I hope you are not, you must wade through such scenes of guilt and horror to obtain it as you would tremble to think of. You must finish the horrid conflict by destroying each other. And why should you desire it? The rich have luxurious tables and disease: if you have poverty you have health. Add but content, and you have all that is worth having here¹⁰

Raised by Indians in the brisk wilds of North America, Hermsprong has mysteriously come to possess a remarkably conservative political viewpoint. His arguments against the use of violence to achieve selfish ends, like wage increases, are important. According to Hermsprong, to pursue wealth is to indulge in a form of sin against nature; just as Robinson Crusoe's unbridled ambition led to transgression and punishment, so the rich pay for their opulence with disease and a sense of guilt. Naturally this would be doubly true if wealth was accumulated and not merely inherited like a mantle of responsibilities. The conclusion arrived at is that the discontented workers should be content with their lot in life.

Not surprisingly, the rioters take little of this wisdom to heart and one replies: 'Damn you, I believe you are one of King George's spies, and no better than your master.'¹¹ This sounds more like the voice of real dissent. There was, however, only one possible response:

Mr. Hermsprong, without reply, knocked him down

He then launches into yet another lecture:

to revile your King is to weaken the concord that ought to subsist betwixt him and all his subjects, and overthrows all civil order¹²

There is an order proper to society which, if disturbed on any level, can fall into anarchy. Hermsprong is warning against an imprudent political course by thrashing one

impertinent member of the labouring class. In miniature, he is demonstrating the ruling class's formidable powers of self-defense. Hermsprong, being either a kind man or a prudent man, and probably both, does not wish to allow the scene to end with so blatant an act of violence. He knows precisely how to perfect his position. To the injured man he says:

Pray accept this half-crown; I give it with all my heart

Finding a positive response, Hermsprong allows his generosity to work on the crowd:

I wish, my friends, I was able to supply all your wants, and give you all your reasonable desires. But I am a single individual, you are many. If, however, there are any amongst you who have large families, now wanting food, I have some silver, and to such I freely give it¹³

The crowd disperses to an alehouse and Hermsprong personally remains on the scene to encourage stragglers to return to their cottages. The justice observes that 'The next day, however, not a man was to be seen - all was peace and order.'¹⁴ The charge of sedition being pressed by Lord Grondale is immediately forgotten as absurd and the courtroom murmurs with strong approval. Every country could use a man like this.

The role of charity in this incident is of interest. Hermsprong's words serve little purpose beyond displaying that his beliefs are not only in order but exemplary. It is his gifts that win the day. Accepting charity, the workers see some of their immediate needs satisfied and, more importantly, they are made aware firstly of the moral superiority of a man who can give away, at an instant, more money than they will likely see again in their lifetime, and secondly of their newly formed bond of gratitude both to this individual and the class he somehow represents. Obedience, they learn, is rewarded.

Bage's Hermsprong is a lively, well-written book that perplexes the reader at a number of points. One wonders, for example, how it is that this peripatetic good Samaritan, raised by Indians, has so much ready money at his disposal. His generosity is his dominant characteristic and it seems to have no limits. It turns out that Hermsprong in fact holds estates in America and France, and has a bank balance that staggers the curious. Within the work, the beneficent hero, always ready to rush to a cottage with manual and monetary aid, is contrasted with the grasping Lord Grondale whose energies are consumed in either feeding his desires or abusing his authority. As it becomes

apparent, Lord Grondale does not conduct himself with the benevolence befitting his station because he is not Lord Grondale at all - Hermsprong is. The dispossessed grandson returns to right the wrongs committed by his uncle who had usurped the title from its rightful recipient. Hermsprong's unfathomable goodness, which for the bulk of the novel is attributed to his natural purity, is thus recognized as a manifestation of his true gentility.

A complex social ideology is at work in both Defoe and Bage whereby wealth is conceded to be an evil, after St. Paul's admonition, but the guilt of its possession can be ameliorated by generosity, by distributing gifts to relieve the hardships of the less tainted. Likewise, ambition is a sin until it succeeds. Even Hermsprong's methodical defeat of a pretender to his seat contains at least some acquisitiveness. It can only be justified by the good that Hermsprong habitually performs with his wealth. The sum total of Bage's radicalism amounts to a desire for a more effective aristocracy, more capable of quieting the discontentment of the rabble. As when handling a donkey, a carrot is better than a stick for long journeys. In both Defoe and Bage, charity is a necessary means of oiling the social machinery to ensure a smooth operation. It is a form of tax paid by the rich to silence critics, appease suppliants and win admirers. The bonds of gratitude can be relied upon to keep the peace.

It would be foolish to pretend, as too many critics naively do, that an ideology such as this is purely a repressive and coercive device. This platitude ignores a full half of the story. The moral condition of the wealthy is arrived at by the means noted in Robinson Crusoe of transgression, punishment and reward. The reward is the pleasure of doing good and seeing the fruits of stability grow. What must be recognized is that a large part of this process has been imposed on the aristocracy by the lower classes as a way of encouraging a redistribution of some wealth through donations. To some elements in society, this was the crucial source of income. It was a form of agreement or barter: obedience will be given in return for a gift. Furthermore, equally stringent requirements are placed on the poor for qualifying to receive charity. Running parallel to but beneath the higher process of transgression, punishment and reward is the lower equivalent of justification, consolation and gratification. But before proceeding to this fascinating charade, one should briefly view a few examples of how the conduct of the ruling class is

dictated in part by their inferiors.

An example suggests itself. Richardson's Pamela manages, with a curious feat of pliability, to experience both worlds. Upon marrying her erstwhile tormentor, she becomes a wealthy woman who receives a quarterly allowance of £50 for her 'private charity.'¹⁵ Finding her prison to be her palace, she is overjoyed by the chance to be charitable:

Great and good God! as thou has enlarged my opportunities enlarge also my will, and make me delight in dispensing to others a portion of that happiness which I have myself so plentifully received at the hands of thy gracious Providence! Then shall I not be useless in my generation!¹⁶

One assumes then that this rapture indicates that for Pamela there is only one kind of charity, the giving of money. Armed with £200 per annum she is ready to be charitable. It is reminiscent of medieval French Kings who had a train of miserable hermits regularly on hand for the exercising of their benevolent dispositions. Pamela's views, one recalls, have been formed in the lower classes, or at least in Richardson's own middle class. She has a very clear view of what gentility entails and the most annoying aspect of the novel is Pamela's way of reproaching her master for acting beneath his station.

As a brief sidelight, one notices that William Godwin's Caleb Williams also purports clear notions about a true gentleman's demeanour. In a way that utterly undermines the radical intention of his work, Godwin's portrayal of Mr. Falkland as a worthy estate-owner evokes the stock virtues of intelligence, wit, good humour, a slender form and an eloquent mode of speech. He is contrasted to the brutish Mr. Tyrrel whose education was the work of 'the groom and the gamekeeper'¹⁷ and who is disqualified as a gentleman due to his utter lack of generosity. When he is killed, no one mourns.

There is something wrong with Pamela's sense of charity and it is largely a lack of charitableness. Not only does she have clear ideas about the conduct of aristocrats, she has a bullet-proof contempt for her own class. After enthusing over the joys of being generous, she reflects:

This, as I conceive, is the indispensable duty of a high condition; and what must be the condemnation of poor creatures, at the great day of account, when they shall be asked what uses they have made of the opportunities put into their hands; and are able only to say - We lived but to ourselves: we circumscribed all the

powers thou gavest us, into one narrow, selfish compass: we heaped up treasures for those who came after us, though we knew not whether they would not make a still worse use of them than we ourselves had done¹⁸

Monetary charity is so important that the poor are condemned for having no money to give. This attitude is not a universal in the eighteenth century but nor is it uncommon. Still, Richardson's view is bankrupt, as Fielding was so quick to point out. But there are elements here that are widely held at the time, most notably the conditions under which someone qualifies for charity. If a gift is going to be ill-used it is better not given. A large part of Pamela's new responsibilities will be dedicated to discerning who deserves relief.

Though Henry Fielding was quick to home in on the mercenary hypocrisy that underlies Pamela's rather hard-hearted views, he certainly did not malign the virtues of charity and nor did he miss a chance to paint a sour picture of wealth where it was not redeemed by generosity:

Swelt'ring with Wealth, where Men unmov'd can hear
The Orphans sigh, and see the Widow's Tear:
Where griping Av'rice slights the Debtor's Pray'r,
And Wretches wanting bread deprives of Air (49-52)¹⁹

When one notes who exactly should be winning a charitable act, we see that there may be less separating Fielding and Richardson than would appear. The abandoned 'Orphans', a weeping 'Widow', the starving 'Wretches' and an imprisoned 'Debtor' all share a common inability to support themselves. However industrious they may be, they are all doomed unless a friendly hand offers aid. In fact, as one surveys some of the charities active in the eighteenth century one finds that Pamela, like Robinson Crusoe before her, represents much of her age.

The common theme in all charitable considerations was the conviction that poverty is an affliction caused and to be transcended by the individual. As Pamela suggests, poverty that arises from a lack of bourgeois working values is contemptible and a just punishment. The concrete response given this impetus was the Workhouse where the destitute were given support while they worked for their keep. A family, for example, would be taken in if the male agreed to work. This became in practice, and in law under the Knatchbull Act of 1723, a test for one's suitability for relief. If one accepted the offer of a place in a workhouse, one was obviously desperate and could be classed as

destitute.²⁰ The destitute, like the figures Fielding points to, cannot support themselves but will demonstrate the desire to work and so clear up the kind of moral scruples that Pamela feels. The labour was largely pointless, though some produced essential goods, as most of the inmates were incapable of much constructive effort.²¹ It was the effort that counted. Besides labouring, the inmates were trained in basic working skills and habits, and sound religious beliefs. The entire impetus is to cure the poor of their poverty. The closer one looks, the more Pamelas one finds.

Even private charity movements exhibited this attitude. Early in the eighteenth century there appeared a pamphlet calling the good citizens of London to arms in a war on suffering. The Charitable Society: Or, A Proposal for the More Easy and Effectual Relief of the Sick and Needy (1715) makes it absolutely clear who it is they are going to relieve and why:

A poor Man, who is in Health, may by his own Industry and Labour get his Living: and a Rich Man, who is in Sickness, may supply himself with Things necessary to relieve and cure him: But when the same Person is both Poor and Sick at the same time; when his sickness puts him out of a Condition of gaining a Subsistence, and his Poverty deprives him of those Things which are necessary to support and succour him in his Sickness, he may then be said to be superlatively miserable.

Simple alms giving should be directed at the destitute, the hopelessly poor, and, in a magnificent phrase, the ‘superlatively miserable.’ Those labourers whose wages were so low as to constitute abject poverty, and there were many, were a problem. They were not debilitated in any way and their poverty probably arose from a lack of ‘frugality and forbearance’ to quote Hermsprong.²² This was England's labour pool and below subsistence wages were part of the business.²³ For these people to receive anything more than the occasional parish donation something had to be given in return; their worthiness had to be demonstrated.

It is these paupers, in all but name, who were forced to find secondary means of provoking the sympathies and purse strings of the well-off. This is where the process of justification, consolation and gratification exerts itself. Justification comes as an attempt to dissolve one's responsibility for one's condition; consolation is derived from a sense that failure may be an indicator of moral rectitude in an immoral world or the product of selfless loyalty where disloyalty would have been more prudent; gratification is the

acceptance of these claims by someone in a position to add monetary relief. The most remarkable literary example of this process occurs in a short scene in Sterne's A Sentimental Journey where Yorick is caught in the predicament of being confronted by sixteen worthy beggars but having only eight sous in ready money. A performance begins wherein the destitute display the grounds for their claim to charity.

The first character to catch Yorick's eye is one who is quietly excluding himself from the competition:

A poor tatter'd soul without a shirt on instantly withdrew his claim, by retiring two steps out of the circle, and making a disqualifying bow on his part²⁴

This benevolent self-effacement immediately qualifies him for a sous. It is an important gesture. It is a form of surrender and sacrifice that is crucial in an obedient citizen. Then a 'poor little dwarfish brisk fellow' takes out his snuff-box to offer it to his fellow sufferers and to Yorick. Again a display of generosity wins a reward in kind:

so I put a couple of sous into it...- He felt the weight of the second obligation more that that of the first – 'twas doing him an honour - the other was only doing him a charity - and he made me a bow down to the ground for it²⁵

His goodness and suitability for charity are simultaneously acknowledged and in reply he gives a bow which embodies the bond of gratitude and the willing acceptance of subservience. A retired soldier 'worn out to death in the service' receives 'a couple of sous' automatically to which he replies 'Vive le Roi!'²⁶ His loyalty to the nation and its social order is unquestionable.

But the beggar who overpowers Yorick's reserve is a 'pauvre honteux', a man who has seen better days but whom fortune has maimed in some way. He is weeping and is obviously ashamed that events have driven him so low. Yorick gushes with generosity. In each case the charges of idleness or immorality are denied by some self-abnegating gesture, and an effort at displaying positive morals ensures that they are recognized as willing to accept the debt incurred in charity. Under these circumstances a gift is merited precisely because it is a positive contribution to the stability of society. Here both giver and receiver are satisfied.

In a century undergoing major economic changes, society with its clear class divisions was challenged to respond to the various social problems being created in such

a way as to neutralize their potentially destructive tendencies. It was apparent to many that the exercise of charitable acts could be a potent contribution to easing the pressure. Institutional charity was a growth industry in the eighteenth century but was rigid and crudely geared to social coercion. The charges of later critics like Robert Bage were designed to demonstrate the superior political efficacy of a broader approach to poor relief by the aristocracy. A large movement in intellectual and artistic fashion reflected this shift and is what is referred to as sensibility. What makes genuine gift giving so useful is the fact that it establishes strong bonds of gratitude which will be most likely to restrain anger or resentment. The final virtue of this approach is that if it is rejected by the lower echelons of society then the crime is not merely legal or even moral, it is personal. If generosity is repaid with ingratitude then there is nothing left to restrain the sword of retribution.

Notes

1. Daniel Defoe, The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner, ed. J. Donald Crowley (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) 305-6.
2. Defoe, 305-6.
3. Defoe, 284.
4. Defoe, 285.
5. Defoe, 285-6.
6. Defoe, 286.
7. Defoe, 287.
8. Defoe, 285.
9. Defoe, 4.
10. Robert Bage, Hermesprong, or Man As He Is Not, ed. Peter Faulkner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 225.
11. Bage, 225-6.
12. Bage, 226.
13. Bage, 226.
14. Bage, 226.
15. Samuel Richardson, Pamela; Or, Virtue Rewarded, ed. Peter Sabor (London: Penguin, 1980) 391.
16. Richardson, 388.
17. William Godwin, Caleb Williams, ed. David McCracken (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 17.
18. Richardson, 388.
19. Henry Fielding, 'OF GOOD-NATURE', Miscellanies of Henry Fielding, Esq. ed.

- Henry Knight Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) I.
20. Roy Porter, English Society in the Eighteenth Century (Penguin, 1982) 147-8.
 21. Ian Christie, Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth Century Britain, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 102.
 22. Bage, 225.
 23. Christopher Hill, Reformation to Industrial Revolution, 1530-1780 (Penguin, 1969).
 24. Laurence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy, ed. Gardner D. Stout Jr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) 132.
 25. Sterne, 133.
 26. Sterne, 133.

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