

A BUDDHIST HISTORY  
OF THE WEST

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STUDIES IN LACK

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## THE RENAISSANCE OF LACK

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If history is a nightmare from which we are trying to awaken, as James Joyce's Daedalus put it, what gives that nightmare its power over us? Perhaps it began as a daydream more attractive than the pain of being human—until the dream took on a life of its own and we became trapped in our own objectifications. Then the key to this puzzle is why we prefer daydreaming to waking up, and that brings us back to lack. If the autonomy of *self*-consciousness is a delusion that can never quite shake off its shadow feeling that “something is wrong with me,” it will need to rationalize that sense of inadequacy somehow. Without a religious means of absolution, today we usually experience our lack as “I don't yet have enough of . . .” Most of us have lost faith in collective solutions, so we are more in the grip of individualistic ones, such as the craving for fame, the love of romantic love, and of course an obsession with money.

This chapter challenges the supposed secularity of modern individualism by arguing that these three may be understood as historically conditioned forms of delusive craving that gained their power over us because today they have become our main attempts to resolve such lack. These inclinations are not limited to any particular time or place, of course, but they began to gain special importance when Christianity began to decline in the late Middle Ages.

As long as there was a truly catholic church providing a socially agreed upon means to cope with lack, such projects did not

seem spiritually necessary. Jacob Burckhardt, Johann Huizinga, and Philippe Aries all noticed a striking increase in preoccupation with death at the end of the medieval era. In psychotherapeutic terms, such an increase in death anxiety requires stronger psychic devices to cope with it. In lack terms, the greater sense-of-self that began to develop then must have been shadowed by a greater sense of lack, leading to greater individual need to realize this self and more radical attempts to do so. If we do not presuppose the usual distinction between secular and sacred, we can see the same drive operating in each case: the conscious or unconscious urge to resolve our sense of lack, by becoming *real*. To the extent that these three are motivated by such a spiritual need, they may be considered something like secular heresies. Since they cannot fulfill that need, they tend to spin out of control and become demonic.

The secular/sacred dualism seems important to us because we are wary of materialistic and psychologistic reductionism, yet there is another way to understand their nonduality. Rather than reducing the sacred to a function of the material, this chapter turns that idea on its head by suggesting that our modern worldly values (desire for fame, money, etc.) acquire their compulsiveness from a misdirected spiritual drive.

#### THE FEVER OF RENOWN<sup>1</sup>

Because the public image comes to stand as the only valid certification of being, the celebrity clings to his image as the rich man clings to his money—that is, as if to life itself. (Lapham 230)

“How can he be dead, who lives immortal in the hearts of men?” mused Longfellow, bestowing on Michelangelo our highest possible praise. “If his inmost heart could have been lain open,” wrote Hawthorne of a character in *Fanshawe*, “there would have been discovered the dream of undying fame; which, dream as it is, is more powerful than a thousand realities.” More powerful, because of such a dream is our reality woven, and the nature of this dream ensures that there is no lack of historical testimony to its power. Unfortunately, seeing through one aspect of this delusion does not immunize us against others. Horace warned that the race for public honors traps men, for the urge to glory and praise ruins both wellborn and lowly: “those who seek much, lack much.” But this did not stop him from crowing at the end of his third ode: “I have wrought a monument more enduring than bronze, and

loftier than the royal accumulation of the pyramids. Neither corrosive rain nor raging wind can destroy it, nor the innumerable sequence of years nor the flight of time. I shall not altogether die." Was Horace more vain than we are, or just more frank about his own motivations?

According to Alan Harrington, the urge for fame has only one purpose: "to achieve an imitation of divinity before witnesses." The gods are immortal, he says, but the rest of us will have to settle for a symbolic substitute, which requires witnesses. "Being recognized before many witnesses strengthens our claim to membership in the immortal company" (112). Yet Marcus Aurelius already saw the problem with witnesses (*Meditations* VIII 44): "Those that yearn for after-fame do not realize that their successors are sure to be very much the same as the contemporaries whom they find such a burden, and no less mortal. What is it anyway to you if there be this or that far-off echo in their voices, or if they have this or that opinion about you?" What is the advantage of having one's own name on the lips of future generations, when their overriding concern will be the same as ours: not to preserve anyone else's name, but to have their own name on the lips of *their* successors . . . How does that confer any reality on us? The second-century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna demonstrated the futility of such infinite regresses with his argument against dependent being: If there is no self-being there can be no dependent being either, inasmuch as dependent being acquires its being from the self-being of another.<sup>2</sup> Yet we strive to become real through (in) the eyes of others who strive to become real through the eyes of others who will strive . . .

Nonetheless, in Western secular societies such a craving for fame and the approval of posterity has largely replaced the afterlife as the way to fill up our lack. Physical death may come, but such symbolic life can continue forever. Reputation, primarily through public deeds, was also paramount for the Greeks and Romans: "a culture whose afterlife offered so little comfort to the soul was obsessed with preserving the fame of the dead on the lips of the living" (Murray 656). Like Derrida's elusive trace, however, genuine heroism is always receding if *true* greatness means achieving a sense of being without a sense of lack. A few generations ago, madhouses were said to be full of Napoleons, yet Napoleon was inspired by the example of Caesar, while Caesar lamented that he hadn't accomplished as much as Alexander, even as Alexander the Great modeled himself on Achilles . . . When lack is "the origin of the origin," such traces become unavoidable. "If he was real, I can become real by imitating him"—but not if his reality is a past that

has never been present, in which case trying to recover the past in the future merely loses the present.

What little remains today of our discomfort with fame is a residue of the Judeo-Christian critique of Roman standards of public glory, for "in the wake of Jesus, public men of all sorts develop a kind of guilty conscience about their desire for achievement in front of an audience" (Braudy 56, 160). Christianity offered a different project to overcome lack. The success of this project accounts for the Middle Ages as we remember them; or, more precisely, that we remember so little about them. If history is a record of how humankind runs away from death, a society less preoccupied with death will make less history. Then it is no coincidence that at the end of the Middle Ages (when according to Burckhardt, Huizinga, and Aries man became more obsessed with death) man became more obsessed with symbolic immortality: "from the Renaissance until today men have been filled with a burning ambition for fame, while this striving that seems so natural today was unknown to medieval man." (Burckhardt 139). The crisis in Europe's collective religious project to cope with lack opened the door to a proliferation of more individualistic projects, both secular and sacred (e.g., personal mysticism). The Reformation worked to deinstitutionalize religion by shifting from a corporate orientation toward salvation (the Church as the body of Christ) to a more private relationship with God. If God is first and foremost the guarantor that our lack will be resolved, we can understand how God may be sought symbolically on earth—perhaps must be, if we no longer seek him in heaven.

In his comprehensive study *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*, Leo Braudy traces the modern history of fame from late medieval glorification of the saint (e.g., St. Francis and Jeanne d'Arc) through the creative artist of the Renaissance (Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci) and the writer of the nineteenth century (Byron, Dickens, Victor Hugo) to today's performer (Madonna, Michael Jackson). It seems to be a gradual descent from sacred to secular: saints were believed to gain greater being from more direct contact with God; later Dante and John Milton strove to be worthy of fame; today we have celebrities whose only claim to fame is that they are famous. Fame has become self-justifying as an end to be sought for itself.

According to Braudy, the eighteenth century (also singled out by Aries for its death preoccupation) was a turning point in the development of our modern preoccupation with fame:

[I]t is difficult not to characterize the latter part of the eighteenth century as a world in which the waning of belief in an afterlife has bred a twin obsession with posterity and death. . . . In a culture where talk of the afterlife was becoming less and less important to theology, let alone the ordinary believer, the hope of fame on earth was part of the expectation that one might be fulfilled, that is, recognized in one's lifetime. Hope of heaven, hope of immediate fame, and hope of fame in posterity were becoming difficult to distinguish. (Braudy 378)

This became tied up with earlier beliefs in progress (and, later, evolution): "The cult of progress, of growth, of achievement—the image of new dawns, new tomorrows, and a new sense of time so prominent in both the American and French revolutions—turned all eyes to the future, where perfection and understanding would be achieved on earth" (Braudy 429). The decline in a sacred afterlife was accompanied by a rise in the importance of secular afterlife, for need to project a lack-free time somewhere in the future remained. Diderot argued that in posterity fame will redeem one's work from the envy of the present, much as the Christian afterlife redeems the reputation of the virtuous from the persecutions of the wicked.

Gradually, however, this secularization of fame led to a decline of belief even in a secular afterlife. William Hazlitt noticed that the young value posthumous fame because they do not yet believe in their own deaths, while the aged would rather have their celebrity on earth. Nowadays it is becoming more difficult to believe in any future, so we prefer our fame on the installment plan. This profanation of salvation has eroded the distinction between good and bad fame. "How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?" wrote a murderer to the Wichita police.<sup>3</sup> Only with his sixth killing, he complained, had he begun to get the publicity he deserved. When it is believed that recognition by others is what leads to self-fulfillment, "fame promises acceptability, even if one commits the most heinous crime, because thereby people will finally know who you are, and you will be saved from the living death of being unknown" (Braudy 562).

*The living death of being unknown.* When the real world becomes what's in the newspapers or on television, to be unknown is to be nothing. Since my sense-of-self is internalized through social conditioning—since others

teach me that I am real—the natural tendency is to cope with my shadow sense of unreality by continually reassuring myself with the attention of other people. However, if my sense of reality is dependent on others' perceptions of me, then, no matter how appreciative that attention may be, I am constrained by those perceptions. "The difficulty arises when to be free is defined by being known to be free, because then one might be more known than free." This applies to anything that constitutes one's claim to fame: you can't use fame without being used by it. Part of this problem is the fan, who seeks to bask in the glory—to share in the *being*—radiated by his or her heroes. "The audience . . . is less interested in what they [celebrities] think they 'really' are than what role they play in the audience's continuing drama of the meaning of human nature" (Braudy 589, 592, 590). That drama may be dangerous, as John Lennon and many others have discovered.

"[T]he essential lure of the famous is that they are somehow more real than we and that our insubstantial physical reality needs that immortal substance for support . . . because it is the best, perhaps the only, way to *be*." De Tocqueville, visiting America in the 1830s, noticed how democratic societies aggravate this tendency. Aristocracies fix one's social position so everyone knows who and where one is, while democracy engenders a need to stand out from the crowd. As de Tocqueville put it, democratic man usually has no lofty ambition; he just wants to be first at anything. (Braudy 6, 461–62). "And hence this tremendous struggle to singularize ourselves, to survive in some way in the memory of others and of posterity. It is this struggle, a thousand times more terrible than the struggle for life, that gives its tone, colour, and character to our society" (Unamuno 52).

The importance of fame as a secular salvation has become so pervasive today that we no longer notice it, any more than a fish sees the water it swims in. It has infiltrated all the corners of contemporary culture, even Christmas carols ("Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer") and spaghetti sauce bottles (see the label on Newman's Own Spaghetti Sauce). The Guinness Book of World Records has become one of our most important cultural icons.

From a Buddhist perspective the struggle between fame and anonymity is another self-defeating version of dualistic thinking. We differentiate success from failure yet we cannot have one without the other because they are conceptually and psychologically interdependent: grasping one half also maintains the other. So our hope for success is equal

to our fear of failure. And whether we win or lose the struggle for fame, we internalize the dialectic between fame and anonymity.

Just as the titles of winners are worthless unless they are visible to others, there is a kind of antititle that attaches to invisibility. To the degree that we are invisible we have a past that has condemned us to oblivion. It is as though we have somehow been overlooked, even forgotten, by our chosen audience. If it is the winners who are presently visible, it is the losers who are invisibly past.

As we enter into finite play—not playfully, but seriously—we come before an audience conscious that we bear the antititles of invisibility. We feel the need, therefore, to prove to them that we are not what we think they think we are . . .

As with all finite play, an acute contradiction quickly develops at the heart of this attempt. As finite players we will not enter the game with sufficient desire to win unless we are ourselves convinced by the very audience we intend to convince. That is, *unless we believe we actually are the losers the audience sees us to be, we will not have the necessary desire to win.* The more negatively we assess ourselves, the more we strive to reverse the negative judgment of others. The outcome brings the contradiction to perfection: by proving to the audience they were wrong, we prove to ourselves the audience was right.

The more we are recognized to be winners, the more we know ourselves to be losers. . . . No one is ever wealthy enough, honored enough, applauded enough. (Carse 72–73, his italics)

The more we are applauded, the more we feel our lack: If what I have sought for so long does not make me real, what can? “Many seek fame because they believe it confers a reality that they lack. Unfortunately, when they become famous themselves, they usually discover that their sense of unreality has only increased.” Why? “The reception of the great work by the world can never satisfy the expectations its creator had for its own fame and his own” (Braudy 589). When fame symbolizes my need to end my lack and become real, such a disappointment is inevitable: No



amount of fame can satisfy me if there is really something else I seek from it. From here there are two ways to go. One is concluding that I am not yet famous *enough*. Then each achievement has to top the last one, for if you're not going up you're headed down. The other danger with becoming famous is that one might accomplish one's project for overcoming lack without overcoming lack, with the effect of increasing one's anxiety about being unreal. From a Buddhist standpoint, however, this second problem is also a great opportunity since it opens up the possibility of confronting one's sense of lack more directly. The issue becomes how one deals with that heightened sense of pure lack.

#### ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

Few people would fall in love had they never heard of love.  
(La Rochefoucauld)

A preliminary caution: the English word *love* means too much and therefore too little. This section addresses only that historically conditioned form of attraction between the sexes called romantic love ("self-love *a deux*" according to Madame de Stael). For some this type of love verges on the ridiculous, rather like someone dying of starvation because he could not find any Brussels sprouts. Then why does it so seldom seem ridiculous to us? Is it because romance has become one of the most widely accepted ways to overcome lack?

Our eagerness for both novels and films with their identical type of plot; the idealized eroticism that pervades our culture and upbringing and provides the pictures that fill the background of our lives; our desire for "escape," which a mechanical boredom exacerbates—everything within and about us glorifies passion. Hence the prospect of a passionate experience has come to seem the promise that we are about to live more fully and more intensely. We look upon passion as a transfiguring force, something beyond pain and delight, an ardent beatitude. (de Rougemont 15–16)

A beatitude that transcends lack? Such beatitude may transfigure pain yet it remains dependent on it, since as we know there is nothing more fatal to passion than the completion that brings lovers down to earth. The course of true love must be hindered. Romance thrives on diffi-

culties, misunderstandings, and forced separations, which postpone the complacency inherent in familiarity, when housekeeping emotions take over. Such a dismal encore to ecstasy being unendurable, suffering—the literal meaning of *passion*—comes to the rescue. The enmity between the families of Romeo and Juliet is necessary to challenge their attraction. Without it there would be no story to tell and (we have good reason to suspect) no such grand passion to begin with.

As Diotima taught Socrates in the *Symposium*, love thrives on lack, but the reverse is also true: our lack thrives on such love. We are not unaware that passion means suffering, yet we imagine that such passion is nonetheless exciting and vital in a way ordinary life is not. Therefore we revel in the pain, for all pain is endurable when we can see a reason for it and an end to it. Our formless sense of lack objectifies itself into an object lacked, which grants the possibility of a project to gain the lacked thing.

The Greeks and Romans were not unfamiliar with romantic love, yet for them it was the exception rather than the rule and they looked upon it more as an illness. Plutarch called such love a frenzy: “Some have believed it was a madness. . . . Those who are in love must be forgiven as though ill.” Then how we have come to cherish this frenzy so highly? If salvation through romantic passion is an historically conditioned myth, where and why did it arise at the time it did?

Some of the answers are found in Denis de Rougemont’s classic study *Love in the Western World*. It traces the myth back to the legend of Tristan and Iseult, a tale of unknown origins that became widespread in the twelfth century, about that time of the late Middle Ages singled out by Burckhardt and Aries as the turning point in our increasing awareness of death (and increasing awareness of lack). De Rougemont’s analysis of the legend demonstrates:

Tristan and Iseult do not love one another. They say they don’t, and everything goes to prove it. *What they love is love and being in love.* . . . Their need of one another is in order to be aflame, and they do not need one another as they are. What they need is not one another’s presence, but one another’s absence (43, his italics).<sup>4</sup>

If absence gives us a project to overcome lack, presence must disappoint because it accomplishes one’s goal without ending one’s lack. Therefore each loves the other “*from the standpoint of self and not from the other’s*

*standpoint*. Their unhappiness thus originates in a false reciprocity, which disguises a twin narcissism." Narcissism, because the other is experienced not as he or she is, but as the opportunity to fill up one's own lack.<sup>5</sup>

Of course that is not the way Tristan and Iseult understand it. Like all great lovers, they imagine that they have been transported "into a kind of transcendental state outside ordinary human experience, into an ineffable absolute irreconcilable with the world, but that they feel to be *more real than the world*." De Rougemont concludes that, unaware and in spite of themselves, the desire of Tristan and Iseult is for nothing but death. The approach of death acts as a goad to sensuality, aggravating their desire. *Love in the Western World* begins by quoting Bedier's version of the legend: "My lords, if you would hear a high tale of love and death . . ." We could listen to nothing more delightful, of course, for that is the fateful equation: "a myth is needed to express the dark and unmentionable fact that passion is linked with death, and involves the destruction of any one yielding himself up to it with all his strength" (55, 40–41, 15, 21–22). De Rougemont dismisses this as antilife but that misses the point: Death is linked with love because death, like love, symbolizes our fear of letting go of ourselves as well as our desire to let go of ourselves—which is the only way to overcome lack, according to Buddhism.

From a lack perspective, the most important aspect of de Rougemont's analysis is that he sees the "spiritual" character of romantic love: "the passionate love which the myth celebrates actually became in the twelfth century—the moment when first it began to be cultivated—a religion in the full sense of the word, and in particular a Christian heresy historically determined" (145). Again, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that the myth of salvation through romance arose just as the prevalent Christian myth began to decline, which cleared the way for more individualistic alternatives to develop, for more personal myths to overcome lack. De Rougemont relates the rise of the romantic heresy to the troubadours, who were probably under the influence of the Cathar heresy, itself likely to have been influenced by Manichaeism from Eastern Europe. He thereby marginalizes the infecting virus into an external "other" invading pure Christianity, which perhaps reveals as much about de Rougemont's anti-pagan bias as about the origin of the Cathars.

A famous twelfth-century judgment by a "court of love" in the house of the Countess of Champagne declared that love and marriage were incompatible, since the first is by choice and the second by duty.

But their judgment was also opposed to any physical "satisfaction" of love: "Of *donnoi* [courtly love] he knows truly nothing who wants fully to possess his lady. *Whatever turns into a reality is no longer love.*" Because whenever love is consummated we can no longer have the illusion that it is a way to become real? So the troubadours adored inaccessible ladies without hope of requital. The history of passionate love since then is the devolution of this courtly myth—still with strong spiritual overtones—into more "profane" love, "the account of the more and more desperate attempts of Eros to take the place of mystical transcendence by means of emotional intensity. But magniloquent or plaintive, the tropes of its passionate discourse and the hues of its rhetoric can never attain to more than the glow of a resurgent twilight and the promise of a phantom bliss" (de Rougemont 35–36, 179).<sup>6</sup>

From spiritual transcendence through emotional intensity to . . . our present preoccupation with sexual satisfaction—why has sex become so important to us? If we do not dualize secular from sacred, we can see the same urge functioning in each: today we unconsciously seek a spiritual fulfillment from sex. *Spiritual* because we want sex to fulfill us and heal us—that is, to resolve our lack—yet that is to expect something it cannot provide except for the briefest of moments. "It is once more the aspiration towards the life sublime," says Huizinga, "but this time viewed from the animal side. It is an ideal all the same, even though it be that of unchastity." And if we do not dualize the animal from the sublime, perhaps the main difference between troubadours and one-night stands is that the myth of sexual salvation is easier to see through. It is as easy as giving up smoking, which some people can do twenty times a day. Then the logical and demonic culmination of this myth is Don Juan, who turns out to be motivated by the same project as the troubadours. Not lust but the inadequacy of sex as a religion—its obvious inability to satisfy lack for very long—is what drives him from one woman to another.

De Rougemont contrasts passion-love with life. The first "is an impoverishment of one's being, an *askesis* without sequel, an inability to enjoy the present without imagining it as absent, a never-ending flight from possession" (300). Instead, he says, happiness depends on acceptance and is lost as soon as we try to gain it, since it pertains not to having but to being. "Every wish to experience happiness, to have it at one's beck and call—instead of *being* in a *state* of happiness, as though by grace—must instantly produce an intolerable sense of want" (294). Again, one can appreciate the wisdom in this without being

satisfied with de Rougemont's solution, which is a simple return to more traditional Christian values, including a decision to keep truth. Religious faith and marital fidelity do not necessarily resolve the problem of lack, for that may simply replace one myth with another. Romantic passion is antilife, insists de Rougemont, yet he does not see what impels the widespread fascination with antilife: the lack dissatisfaction built into life as we ordinarily experience it, a frustration that must be addressed one way or another.

None of the above is a critique of love in its spiritual, emotional, or physical aspects; it is rather an attempt to explain the widespread inability to find happiness in such relationships. Of course, the Western tradition has other and older myths about love. One profound example is the story of Psyche and Cupid; another is found in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. In these dialogues Plato mentions a frenzied type of love that spreads from the body to infect the spirit with malignant humours, and contrasts that with a different kind of delirium conceived in one's soul by the inspiration of heaven (therefore to be called *enthusiasm*, "possessed by a god"). In the *Symposium* Diotima teaches Socrates that erotic passion at its best is transformed into a love delighting in beauty of every kind. The lover who has ascended high enough will therefore experience the perfect form of beauty, which is the reality and substance of everything we perceive as beautiful (211a-b).

This Platonic account of pure love and everlasting beauty does not survive Nietzsche's scathing attack on all such Real worlds, yet it touches on something that does: the ability of love to transform our way of experiencing everything. We smile on the man for whom the whole world has suddenly become inexpressibly beautiful, simply because his beloved reciprocates. But who, he or we, experiences the world more truly? Love shakes us out of the utilitarian, everything-for-the-sake-of-something-else way of seeing things and therefore it opens up the possibility of an even deeper transformation. Ernest Becker wonders if "the reason that love is one of the principle sources of anguish in the higher primates is because it stands at the threshold of a this-worldly liberation" (1964, 246).

A wonderful example of such liberation is Etty Hillesum's love for Julius Speier, as recorded in her wartime diaries. Soon after she met him in early 1941, the older Speier became the focus of her life and they became lovers, although he was more important as a "guru" figure for her. By the time that "dear spoilt man" died a year and a half later, however, her love had grown far beyond him, and during the Dutch

Holocaust she devoted herself wholeheartedly to helping all those who were suffering. Survivors from Auschwitz confirmed that she was “luminous” to the last, doing everything she could to comfort others. Such love has nothing to do with narcissism. Such inspiring examples imply that, instead of using the other to try to fill one’s lack, one may participate in a deeper love that consumes self-love and self-preoccupation, and therefore their lack-shadow as well. Perhaps Etty realized, like Buddhist bodhisattvas, that when there is no self there is no other.

#### THE MIDAS TOUCH

If there is to be a psychoanalysis of money it must start from the hypothesis that the money complex has the essential structure of religion—or, if you will, the negation of religion, the demonic. The psychoanalytic theory of money must start by establishing the proposition that money is, in Shakespeare’s words, the “visible god”; in Luther’s words, “the God of this world” (Norman Brown 240–41).

What I want to see above all is that this remains a country where someone can always get rich. (Ronald Reagan, quoted in Lapham 8)

One of Schopenhauer’s aphorisms says that money is human happiness *in abstracto*, consequently he who is no longer capable of happiness *in concreto* sets his whole heart on money. The difficulty is not with money as a convenient medium of exchange but with the money complex that arises when money becomes desirable in itself. That desire is readily understandable when money truly improves the quality of one’s life, yet what about those many situations when pursuing money impairs it? How does this happen? Given our sense of lack, how could this not happen?

Money is the “purest” symbol “because there is nothing in reality that corresponds to it” (Norman Brown 271). The coins and paper bills we pass around are in themselves worthless, just as Midas discovered about gold in itself. You can’t eat or drink them, plant them or sleep under them. At the same time, money has more value than anything else because it *is* value. It can transform into everything because it is how we define value. The psychological problem occurs when we become preoccupied with the desire for such pure value. To the extent

that life becomes focused around the desire for money, an ironic reversal takes place between means and ends: everything else is devalued in order to maximize a worthless-in-itself goal, because our desires have become fetishized into that symbol. "The crux of the matter is the general fact that money is everywhere conceived as purpose, and countless things that are really ends in themselves are thereby degraded to mere means. But since money itself is an omnipresent means, the various elements of our existence are thus placed in an all-embracing teleological nexus in which no element is either the first or the last" (Simmel 1907, 431).

When everything has its price and everyone his price, the numerical representation of the symbol system becomes more important—more *real*—than the things represented. We end up enjoying not a worthwhile job well done, or meeting a friend, or hearing a bird, but a bigger number on a bank statement. To find the method in this madness we must relate it to the sense-of-self's sense of lack, whose festering keeps us from being able to fully enjoy that birdsong (just *this!*), etc. Since we no longer believe in any original sin that could be expiated, what can it be that is wrong with us and how can we hope to get over it? Today the most popular explanation—our contemporary original sin—is that we don't have enough money.

The origin of money is puzzling: How did the transition from barter ever occur? How were human cravings fetishized into pieces of metal? The answer that Norman Brown provides is elegant because it reveals as much about the character of money now: money was and still is literally *sacred*. "It has long been known that the first markets were sacred markets, the first banks were temples, the first to issue money were priests or priest-kings" (Norman Brown 246). Simmel also noticed that Greek money was originally sacred, because it emanated from the priesthood (Simmel 1907, 187). The English word derives from the first Roman mint, in 269 B.C., in the temple of Juno Moneta, whose coins carried her effigy. The first coins were minted and distributed by temples because they were medallions inscribed with the god's image and embodying the god's protective power. Containing such *mana*, they were naturally in demand, not because you could buy things with them but vice versa: since they were popular you could exchange them for other things.

The consequence of this was that (as Becker puts it) "now the cosmic powers could be the property of everyman, without even the need to visit temples: you could now traffic in immortality in the marketplace." This eventually led to the emergence of a new kind of

people who based the value of their lives—and their hope of ending their lack—on a new cosmology focused on coins. In this way a new meaning system evolved, which our present economic system continues to make more and more *the* meaning system. “Money becomes the distilled value of all existence . . . a single immortality symbol, a ready way of relating the increase of oneself to all the important objects and events of one’s world” (1975, 76, 80–81). In Buddhist terms: Beyond its usefulness as a medium of exchange, money has become our most popular way of accumulating Being, to cope with our gnawing intuition that we do not really exist. Suspecting that the sense-of-self is groundless, we used to go to temples and churches to ground ourselves in God; now we work to secure ourselves financially.

Because the true meaning of this meaning system is unconscious, we end up, as usual, paying a heavy price for our ignorance. The value we place on money rebounds back against us: the more we value it, the more we find it used (and use it ourselves) to evaluate us. In *The Hour of Our Death* Aries turns our usual critique upside down. The modern world is not really materialistic, for “things have become means of production, or objects to be consumed or devoured. They no longer constitute a ‘treasure.’ . . . Scientists and philosophers may lay claim to an understanding of matter, but the ordinary man in his daily life no more believes in matter than he believes in God. The man of the Middle Ages believed in matter and in God, in life and in death, in the enjoyment of things and their renunciation” (136–37).

Then our problem is that we no longer believe in things but in symbols, hence our life has passed over into these symbols and their manipulation—only to find ourselves manipulated by the symbols we take so seriously, objectified in our objectifications. We are preoccupied not so much with what money can buy as with its power and status—not with the materiality of an expensive car, but with what owning a Lexus says about us. Modern man would not be able to endure real economic equality, says Becker, “because he has no faith in self-transcendent, otherworldly immortality symbols; visible physical worth is the only thing he has to give him eternal life.” Or to give us real Being that can maybe fill up our sense of lack. In such fashion our spiritual hunger to become real, or at least to occupy a special place in the cosmos, has been reduced to having a bigger car than our neighbors. We can’t get rid of the sacred, because we can’t get rid of our ultimate concerns, except by repressing them, whereupon we become even more compulsively driven by them (Becker 85).



This lends psychological support to Weber's theory about the influence of the Protestant ethic on the rise of capitalism. You and I shall die, our children will die, but there is something else to invest in, which can take on a life of its own. "Death is overcome on condition that the real actuality of life pass into these immortal and dead things. Money is the man; the immortality of an estate or a corporation resides in the dead things which alone endure" (Brown 279). Instead of erecting time-defying monuments like the pyramids, now we find solace in the numbers sent to us by banks. "By continually taking and piling and accumulating interest and leaving to one's heirs, man contrives the illusion that he is in complete control of his destiny. After all, accumulated things are a visible testimonial to power, to the fact that one is not limited or dependent. Man imagines that the *causa sui* project is firmly in his hands, that he is the heroic doer and maker who takes what he creates, what is rightfully his" (Becker 89).

We tend to view the profit motive as natural and rational, but Brown's and Becker's summaries of the anthropological literature remind us that it is not traditional to most nonmodern societies and in fact has usually been viewed with some anxiety. For us the desire for profit defines economic activity, yet in premodern societies there was no clear division between the economic sphere and others. "Man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end. . . . The economic system will be run on noneconomic motives" (Polanyi, in Norman Brown 262). Premodern peoples had no need for a financial solution to lack, for they had other ways to cope with it. R. H. Tawney brings this home to us by discovering the same truth in the history of the West:

There is no place in medieval theory for economic activity which is not related to a moral end, and to found a science of society upon the assumption that the appetite for economic gain is a constant and measurable force, to be accepted like other natural forces, as an inevitable and self-evident datum, would have appeared to the medieval thinker as hardly less irrational and less immoral than to make the premise of social philosophy the unrestrained operation of such necessary human attributes as pugnacity and the sexual instinct (31).

We are not surprised to learn that the crucial transformation evidently began at the end of the Middle Ages. Once profit became the engine of the economic process, the tendency was for gradual reorganization of the entire social system and not just of the economic element, since, as Karl Polanyi implies, there is no natural distinction between them. "Capital had ceased to be a servant and had become a master. Assuming a separate and independent vitality it claimed the right of a predominant partner to dictate economic organization in accordance with its own exacting requirements" (Tawney 86). The economic globalization occurring now reminds us that this process of reorganization is still happening, indeed accelerating, as the individual money complex continues to supplant other personal meaning systems.

"Happiness is the deferred fulfillment of a prehistoric wish," said Freud. "That is why wealth brings so little happiness: money is not an infantile wish" (1964, 244). Then what kind of wish is money? "Money is condensed wealth; condensed wealth is condensed guilt" (Norman Brown 266). "Filthy Lucre," the most brilliant chapter of Brown's *Life Against Death*, develops this link between money and guilt. "Whatever the ultimate explanation of guilt may be, we put forward the hypothesis that the whole money complex is rooted in the psychology of guilt." The psychological advantage of archaic societies is that they knew what their problem was and therefore how to overcome it, according to Brown. Belief in sin allowed the possibility of expiation, which occurred in seasonal rituals and sacrifices. "The gods exist to receive gifts, that is to say sacrifices; the gods exist in order to structure the human need for self-sacrifice" (Norman Brown 265). For Christianity that sacrifice is incarnated in Christ, who "takes our sins upon him." Religion provides the opportunity to expiate our sense of lack by means of symbols—the Crucifix, the Eucharist, the Mass—whose validity is socially maintained. In such a context we do feel purified and closer to God after taking Holy Communion.

But what of the modern "neurotic type" who "feels a sinner without the religious belief in sin, for which he therefore needs a new rational explanation" (Rank 194)? How do you expiate your sense of lack when there is no religious explanation for it? As we have seen, the main secular alternative today is to experience our lack as "not yet enough." This converts cyclic time (maintained by seasonal rituals of atonement) into future-oriented and therefore linear time (in which atonement of lack is reached for but perpetually postponed, because never achieved). While the sense of lack remains a constant, our collective

reaction to it has become the need for growth: an ever higher "standard of living" (but lack means the consumer never has enough) and the gospel of sustained economic "development" (because corporations and the GNP are never big enough). The heart or rather blood of both is the money complex. "A dollar is . . . a codified psychosis normal in one subspecies of this animal, an institutionalized dream that everyone is having at once" (LaBarre 173). Norman Brown is almost as damning:

If the money complex is constructed out of an unconscious sense of guilt, it is a neurosis. . . . The dialectic of neurosis contains its own "attempts at explanation and cure," energized by the ceaseless upward pressure of the repressed unconscious and producing the return of the repressed to consciousness, although in an increasingly distorted form, as long as the basic repression (denial) is maintained and the neurosis endures. The modern economy is characterized by an aggravation of the neurosis, which is at the same time a fuller delineation of the nature of the neurosis, a fuller return of the repressed. In the archaic consciousness the sense of indebtedness exists together with the illusion that the debt is payable; the gods exist to make the debt payable. Hence the archaic economy is embedded in religion, limited by the religious framework, and mitigated by the consolations of religion—above all, removal of indebtedness and guilt. The modern consciousness represents an increased sense of guilt, more specifically a breakthrough from the unconscious of the truth that the burden of guilt is unpayable. (270–71)

The result of this is "an economy driven by a pure sense of guilt, unmitigated by any sense of redemption," which is "the more uncontrollably driven by the sense of guilt because the problem of guilt is repressed by denial into the unconscious" (Norman Brown 272). Nietzsche says somewhere that it is not only the reason of millennia but their insanity too that breaks out in us. Today our collective version of that insanity is the cult of perpetual economic growth, a faith that is difficult to see through because it has become, in effect, our religious myth. "We no longer give our surplus to God; the process of producing an ever-expanding surplus is in itself our God. . . . Schumpeter agrees: 'Capitalist rationality does not do away with sub- or super-rational impulses. It merely makes them get out

of hand by removing the restraint of sacred or semi-sacred tradition” (Norman Brown 261).

If so, we can see what the problem is: Money and economic growth constitute a defective myth because they can provide no expiation of guilt—in my Buddhist terms, no resolution of lack. Our new *sanctum sanctorum*, the true temple of modern man is the stock market, and our rite of worship communing with the Dow Jones average. In return we receive the kiss of profits and the promise of more to come, yet there is no real atonement in this. Of course, insofar as we have lost belief in sin we no longer see anything to atone for, which means we end up unconsciously atoning in the only way we know, working hard to acquire all those things that society tells us are important because they will make us happy; and then not understanding why they do not make us happy, why they do not resolve our sense that something is lacking. The reason must be that we don't yet have *enough* . . . “But the fact is that the human animal is distinctively characterized, as a species and from the start, by the drive to produce a surplus . . . There is something in the human psyche which commits man to nonenjoyment, to work” (Norman Brown 256).

It is a cruel parody of Heidegger's resolute preoccupation with the future. Where are we all going so quickly? “Having no real aim, acquisitiveness, as Aristotle correctly said, has no limit.” Not going *to* anywhere but running *from* something, which is why there can be no end to it as long as that something is our own lack-shadow. “Economies, archaic and civilized, are ultimately driven by that flight from death which turns life into death-in-life” (Brown 258, 285). Or by that flight from emptiness that makes life empty. If money, the purest symbol, symbolizes becoming real, the fact that we never quite become real means we end up with . . . pure deferral. Those chips we have accumulated can never be cashed in, since doing so would dispel the illusion that money can resolve lack, leaving us more empty and lack-ridden than before, because deprived of our fantasy for escaping lack. We unconsciously suspect and fear this; the usual response is to flee faster into the future.

I think all this points to the fundamental defect of our economic system, and any other system that requires continual growth if it is not to collapse: What motivates it is not need but fear, for it feeds on and feeds our sense of lack. In sum, our preoccupation with manipulating the purest symbol, which we suppose to be the means of solving the problem of life, turns out to be one of the most pernicious symptoms of the problem.

Curiously, the best analogy for money may be *sunyata*, the "emptiness" that characterizes all phenomena according to Mahayana Buddhism. Nagarjuna warns that there is no such thing as *sunyata*. The term is a heuristic device to describe the interdependence of things, that nothing self-exists, but if we misunderstand this the cure is more dangerous than the disease. Also nothing in itself, also merely a symbol, money is indispensable because of its unique ability to convert anything into something else; but woe to those who grab this snake by the wrong end.

#### FROM SACRED TO SECULAR

It is more than curious that the same karmic-like problem with objectification infects all these projects to resolve lack. One cannot use fame without being used by it. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre argues that in order to win and keep the love of the other, I must present myself as a fascinating object. Pursuing the purest and most important symbol of all, we become preoccupied with what it symbolizes about us. And insofar as the sense-of-self uses these projects to fill up its sense of lack, each tends to become demonic, since none can grant the reality we seek. No one is ever rich or famous enough to fill up the sense of emptiness at one's core, and for us the myth of romance ends in Don Juan's joyless quest for sexual fulfillment.

Rather than being natural, as we tend to think, the contemporary importance of these three projects has been historically conditioned. Of course there have been people in most times and places who were greedy for money, fell in love with love, and sought glory. Yet the decline in collective faith at the end of the Middle Ages cleared the soil for these to take root and grow into "heresies" that have assumed a more central role in our psychic struggle against death anxiety and dread of groundlessness.

Another remarkable similarity among these three is that the modern history of each is a gradual devolution from (what might be called) sacred to secular. In the late Middle Ages saints were the most respected people. St. Francis did not seek fame; it was a by-product of what was believed to be his more immediate relationship with God. Dante and Milton strove to be worthy of fame but today fame is sought for its own sake and we celebrate celebrities. The troubadours adored noble ladies without hope of physical satisfaction or even the desire for it; later this became an emphasis on emotional intensity; today's version is

sexual fulfillment. In exchanging the fruit of their labor for medallions with the god's image, early Greeks and Romans used the god to protect themselves by participating symbolically in the god's reality; later such cosmic powers were haggled over in the marketplace and now in the equities and foreign exchange markets.

These conclusions give us a new perspective on the Mahayana denial of any bifurcation between sacred and secular: "There is no specifiable difference whatever between *nirvana* and the everyday world; there is no specifiable difference whatever between the everyday world and *nirvana*" (*Mulamadhyamikakarika* 25:19). Without that dualism, how can Buddhism describe these three developments? The pattern translates into a devolution from nondual participation in something greater than the sense-of-self (and therefore greater than the sense of lack) to a more dualistic relation in which the reified sense-of-self uses objects in its Oedipal project to fill up its sense of lack. The historical tendency is toward greater objectification, which is also subjectification, since the sense-of-self is the first thing to be objectified. For Buddhism, however, "greater than sense-of-self" refers not to something transcending this world but to our interdependence. There is no need to appeal to another reality, just the need to come out from our own private and delusive hiding places—our sense-of-self—in order to realize *this* reality, in order to experience the full implications of our interdependence with everything else.