A PARABLE OF TALENT

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Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.
—The Merchant of Venice

The fact that talent, in the sense of an innate but cultivable ability, derives from Matthew's parable of the talents (25:14-30), makes this parable a privileged text for the study of religion and the arts. There is no doubt that the parable itself, unlike the single talent on which it focuses, has been put to "use," inspiring works that allude to it, and influencing, in a broad sense, how we regard energetic, artistic individuality. There is doubt, however, about what history of thought concerning individual talent lies behind the parable—whether an ur-text referred to a more general question of individual ability or simply to a different, but still communal question of "use." To honor the priority of importance that the parable itself gives to interest over principal, I propose to give priority of place to a contemporary poem that makes fine use of the parable. We can then turn back to Matthew and to the vexed question of the way he turned back to, or just turned (skewed), what Jesus threw on the table.

JOHN HOLLANDER'S PARABLE

One of the features of Gospel parables sometimes relevant to texts that allude to them is the sense of uncertainty we have about the rules of the game. Should we bring to a particular parable our ordinary moral disapproval of thieves, burglars, employee inequity, hardheartedness—or should we remember how our expectations were overturned in other parables, and, fearing the "hard" taskmaster who makes something out of an unlikely comparison, cautiously bury our judgmental capital? Do we risk reproof (at least the implicit reproof of discovered misreading) in hazarding, while reading, various associations with financial undertakings? The reader new to the following text, or generous in reimagining a first reading, may want to make the experiment of pausing before the introduction of the first person (a fourth "servant"!) to question what assump-
tions, from the parables generally or the parable of the talents in particular, the poem has already overturned:

One evening in early spring Father gave us dimes:
George planted his in the hard and sour ground of the yard,
Hannah pasted hers to a card and drew crayoned wings
About it, little Willie lent his to a playground
Friend who never paid him back, and I—I took the dime
And let it lie among other coins in my pocket,
Hearing it jingle, safely hidden away among
The ringing gathering of its own kind, like itself
All unspent and all quite blind to just what being saved
Had meant—loss of glitter in the places of exchange,
Of all the energies of getting and expense. Yet
It could sing out: my dime could rhyme with its own echoes,
Down inside a buried sound it was no death to hide.

(Powers of Thirteen, Number 9, “Hidden Rhymes”)

“One evening” may soften the work ethos that “one morning” might have implied, but “early spring” can still suggest the respectable, georgic value that “George,” in planting his, upholds for a fraction of one poetic furrow: we recognize that a child’s illusion in “planting” money represents a gentle dalliance with what, if called burial of the dime, would be (by association with the parable) condemned. Hannah, whose name suggests favor, may lighten the burden of recognition that there is something of the parable of the talents in the distribution of goods here. If it would be overreading to hear behind “drew ... wings” a secondary meaning of draw as “drew down from the sky, calling upon one of the thousands that ‘at His bidding speed,’” it is nonetheless appropriate to dismiss her crayoned efforts as the second in a series of mistaken uses for the father’s gifts. To be sure, these gifts are small change, not the huge sums represented by Matthew’s talents; but we no sooner recognize both the dimes and the familiar, inclusive language of “Father gave us” as a lightening of the mode of a parable about God’s gifts than we recognize too that the crayoning lightens too much, missing the “true child” response that must lie somewhere in the sequence.

No one reading Hollander’s poem, even for the first time, will mistake its reference to Matthew for the more muddled version in Luke 19. Not expecting the equivalent of Luke’s ten servants, we may expect that the