

Visibility and Invisibility of the Gift

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1.

Introduction

During the century that has just concluded, the discourse on the concept of gift has followed a tortuous path: extremely diverse readings belonging to initially independent theoretical discourses ended up intersecting and dialoguing in an unexpected way. If we want to attempt to delineate a highly simplified total picture, we can individuate a main line of study that takes its origin from Marcel Mauss' essay on the gift,¹ written in 1924, and sees in this book an inaugural text with a wealth of consequences: its interpretation of the gift as «total social phenomenon» at once free and obligatory and characterized by the triple obligation of giving, receiving and reciprocating, has given rise to a series of comments, revisions and revivals. Some authors have seen in it the not-fully-developed germ of a structuralist anthropology project, while others have commented or criticized the ethnographic, historical and linguistic references that had led Mauss to bring a whole series of social phenomena of extremely diverse historical and geographical origin back to the category of the gift. From a radicalization of the theme of *potlatch*, the agonistic gift in its most paradoxical and destructive form, the idea of a *general economy of expenditure* developed by Bataille at the beginning of the Thirties was born, placing at the center of a reflection at once existential, anthropological and esthetic the concept of "dépense", that is, the phenomena of expenditure, dispersion and unproductive consumption.² In recent years, in an anthropological and sociological ambit, positions that tend to reinterpret the gift within a utilitarian outlook have been compared with positions that instead see in Mauss' essay the possible point of departure for a new paradigm of social sciences – called, precisely, the «paradigm of the gift» – capable of taking into account all those phenomena that seem to be animated first and foremost by the desire to give, transmit and give back.³

Parallel to and, at least at first, independently of this line of thought, in the philosophical tradition another story was being delineated, which has as its protagonist the Husserlian concept of *donation* (*Gegebenheit*), the key-concept of phenomenological investigation, inasmuch as only by starting with this can the natures of the phenomenon and of intuition – which offers the thing or the sense themselves, in their immediate presence – be clarified. The theme of donation then undergoes a torsion in Heideggerian thought: while already in the text *The Origin of the Work of Art* from 1935-36, the essence of art is described as «foundation» (*Stiftung*) of truth, and foundation as «donation and overflow,»⁴ in the last phase of Heideggerian reflection the outline of an alternative concept of being to that of metaphysics – according to which being is no longer understood according to the form of simple presence, but *gives itself* as an event – is articulated around a series of

terms that recall the semantics of giving and taking, of remittance, of appropriation and expropriation: *es gibt, Gabe, Schicken, Ereignis*.

For about the last twenty years, the lines of thought that derive from Mauss' essay, from the notion of expenditure developed by Bataille, from the phenomenological theme of donation or from the Heideggerian concept of *Ereignis* have begun to blend and to dialogue. Studies have been written in which the notion of gift moves from anthropology to sociology, from phenomenology to hermeneutics, from the theory of image to that of literature. Derrida proposes a reading of the gift that overturns Mauss' theses one by one and, questioning the relationship among gift, temporality and event, ⁵ ends up sustaining the radical thesis according to which, if there is gift, this gift must be absolutely invisible, unconscious, unexpected and not repayable. Marion, in turn, sees in the concept of gift and in its absolute gratuity and unconditionality the point of departure for clarifying the nature of *donation*, conceived as the first principle of phenomenology, inasmuch as with it we have the absolute and unconditional self-giving of appearance and of manifestation, the background from which the entity and the object are progressively constituted. ⁶ In recent years, finally, several authors have individuated in the theme of the gift the central junction of a whole series of questions regarding, in different cases, the presuppositions of phenomenological investigation, the ends of deconstruction, genre politics, the ethics of responsibility and care, the status of the image and of writing.

Before such a complex and tortuous history, our attempt to attribute to the concept of gift the role of guiding thread for a reflection on the relational nature of art is launched from the presupposition that the multi-voiced character this concept has assumed along the path we have described cannot be ignored or suspended, but rather must be maintained in all its fecundity. The interrogation about the nature of the gift in fact provokes responses so different as to seem almost contradictory and antinomical to one another, since they are based, as the case may be, on the spontaneity of giving or the obligation of reciprocity, generosity or destruction, the gift as symbolic manifestation or invisibility and obliviousness as conditions without which there can be no gift. What follows is a possible summary, according to our view, of the three great ambiguities a reflection on the gift must take into account:

-- the first proposes an opposition between the gift understood as spontaneity and liberty (generous offer, devoted homage, respectful and sincere dedication) and the gift as bond, obligation, establishment of a reciprocity in which hospitality and insidiousness, generosity and challenge co-exist in the same moment.

-- the second contrasts a reading which sees in the gift the emblem of joy and the fullness of giving, of generosity intended as generativity, capacity to generate, to give life; and a reading according to which this same giving is revealed as loss, unproductive expenditure, waste, destruction, glorious manifestation of a *power to lose* that bears with it self-affirmation and will for power.

-- the third form of ambiguity, finally, is that which subsists between an interpretation of the gift as *visible* symbol that sanctions and represents an alliance – symbol capable of constructing and solidifying the identities of the subjects who enter into a bond of reciprocity that calls for an exchange of gifts, alternated and deferred over time, but

nonetheless obligatory – and an interpretation according to which the gift is an event that, in order to remain such, must be absolutely gratuitous, unconditional and unilateral, *invisible* and *unrepresentable*, beyond any possibility of recognition and reciprocity on the part of a subject who perceives it as gift.

(...)

Gift and relationship

What part of our morality and customs is still linked to the dimension of the gift and its character at once free and obligatory? What social phenomena still recall the fascination of the unproductive expenditure? Still today, it seems, the reciprocity of the gift and of hospitality is in force: the gift and the invitation must be reciprocated, hospitality still has its rules, its timeline and its measures, emulation in giving and exaggerated restitution are still temptations, things that are given still possess a sort of *spirit* that confers upon them a particular status. At the same time, however, we perceive around us a tendency towards the progressive standardization and uniformity of the practices of gift-giving and hospitality: interpersonal relations tend to be homologated and impoverished, the rules of giving and receiving become too explicit and lose their symbolic value, gifts are purchased and offered according to pre-constituted, repetitive models of desire with strong mimetic potential.

While current forms of interpersonal interaction and communication tend to become uniform, explicit and repetitive, within contemporary artistic practice we see attempts to establish new forms of relationships among artist, work and viewer, which in our opinion can be read with more perspicacity through reference to the notion of gift: new ties, new bonds, new forms of generosity and seduction, new snares. In a context in which the gaze tends to become consumption and the image stimulus, the exchange among people a meaningless, repeatable and predictable transaction, it becomes ever more attractive to re-think of the artwork as a gift. In this perspective, the various forms taken by our relation to art – from the pleasures of seeing to the assumption of responsibility, from critical writing to the desire of sharing with others our judgement – can be interpreted as a response to the invitation addressed to us by the work of art, a counter-gift that we offer in order to give back and to free ourselves from a debt.

(...)

2.

Spontaneity and obligation

The interpretation of the gift as a gesture that is free and obligatory at the same time and as a moment in a complex system of relationships of reciprocity is at the center of Mauss' *Gift*, which is also a study geared toward clarifying the meaning of the gift in archaic society – taking in consideration a whole series of practices and customs including the *potlatch* and the *kula* – and an archeological investigation on the nature of human transactions before the institution of the juridical contract and the currency: a study of

both social history and theoretical sociology, and a text with a strong political and moral dimension, as testified to by the important «Moral conclusions» which conclude the essay. On the basis of references to numerous ethnographic studies, Mauss conducts an investigation on the gift in primitive and archaic societies and understands it as «total social phenomenon,» that is, as a form of «total service» that involves the entire life of the tribes studied, a broad network of exchanges and a circulation of symbols with multiple religious, juridical, moral, political, economic and esthetic implications, characterized by the co-presence of spontaneity and imposition, obligation of reciprocity and rituals of hospitality, homage and agonistic confrontation.¹⁶

In Mauss' conception of the gift, the opposition between liberty and obligation is thus radically brought back into discussion: gifts are «in theory voluntary, in reality made and reciprocated out of obligation»¹⁷ inasmuch as they are exchanged within a pact and an alliance. On this point, Mauss speaks of the «triple obligation of giving, receiving and reciprocating»: «Total service, in fact, implicates not only the obligation to reciprocate the gifts received, but also presupposes two others, no less important: the obligation to give presents, on the one hand, the obligation to receive them, on the other.»¹⁸ In other words, one is not free to choose whether to give or whether to refuse the homage and hospitality offered: the gift must be reciprocated, hospitality must be accepted, even though the rules of these exchanges may often remain hidden.

In underlining the triple obligation of giving, receiving and reciprocating, Mauss attributes a clear primacy to the phenomenon of the *potlatch* practiced by the Indians of the Northwest coast of North America, a phenomenon which he likens, at least in part, to the *kula* of the Trobriand islands.¹⁹ The *potlatch*, defined by Mauss as «total service of an agonistic type,» is an exchange of gifts characterized by a strong dimension of antagonism and challenge that consists of rivalry in generosity, exhibition and destruction of wealth: «In certain *potlatch* it is necessary to give everything one possesses, without holding anything back. Participants compete to demonstrate themselves the richest and most madly prodigious. All is based on the principle of antagonism and rivalry. The political status of the individuals in brotherhoods and clans, and ranks of every type, are obtained with the 'war of property,' just as they are through war, or thanks to luck, or by heredity, or with alliance and matrimony... In a certain number of cases it is not even a question of giving and reciprocating, but rather of destroying, in order to avoid giving the impression of desiring something in exchange.»²⁰

The *potlatch*, which Mauss does not hesitate to describe as «a sort of *monstrous product of the system of gifts*,»²¹ then, consists of attesting to one's own potency and wealth by dispersing it, in such a way that destruction and squandering become the vehicle for a gesture of humiliation and subjection; every gift is both an homage and a challenge, which can only be responded to by intensely augmenting the quantity and value of the wealth that is squandered.

Notwithstanding a few important differences, Mauss considers the *kula* as «a sort of great *potlatch*.»²² A great circle of intertribal exchange among the different populations of the

Trobian islands, the *kula* has in common with the *potlatch* the rigid respect for alternation – participants take turns at being givers and recipients, and between offering and restitution there is always an important temporal deferment – and the obligation to give back more than what one has received. What is characteristic of the *kula* is a principle of total circulation of wealth, homages and symbols: «The system of exchange of gifts involves the entire economic, tribal and moral life of the Trobrianders. It is ‘impregnated’ with this system, as Malinowski so rightly says; it is like a perpetual ‘give and take’; it is as if it were traversed by a current, uninterrupted and moving in all directions, of gifts offered, received, reciprocated, by obligation and for self-interest, to flaunt greatness and to compensate services, as challenge and as pledge.»²³

In Mauss’ conception, then, the gift is always both free and obligatory, and the triple obligation of giving, receiving and reciprocating gives rise to an ever-growing chain of gifts and counter-gifts, a chain that is not based on equivalency and immediate restitution, but on lack of equilibrium, on deferral, on alternation, on the fact that every gift given or received is in some way different from all the others and is positioned in a succession in time. Giving and receiving are strictly co-implicated,²⁴ and what determines the obligation of restitution is the fact that the thing given possesses a *mana*, a magical, religious, spiritual force due to which the thing given is never inert, but always remains symbolically linked to the giver.²⁵

Expenditure and the power of giving

The picture outlined by Mauss, and in particular his treatment of the *potlatch*, emphasizes how the gift is both the place of homage and of insidiousness, in which giver and recipient confront and challenge one another through a crescendo of gifts and counter-gifts. The very identity and social status, honor and prestige of the giver and the recipient depend on their capacity to give: as Mauss writes, «giving is equivalent to demonstrating one’s own superiority, to being worth more, to being raised up (*magister*); accepting without reciprocation or without excessive reciprocation is equivalent to self-subordination, to becoming client or servant, to making oneself smaller, to lowering (*minister*).»²⁶ This is a thesis which, fundamentally, even given the unbridgeable distance that separates us from these practices, is still valid today: a gift that is non-repayable – because it is excessive, immense, disproportionate with respect to the recipient’s possibility of restitution – is still viewed with embarrassment, and easily ends up being understood as an insult and an affront. The recipient who is unable to reciprocate is still today humiliated and bound by a debt from which he cannot free himself. This is how the gift is easily transformed from generous and affectionate homage into a snare: once again it is Mauss, in a text that precedes the publication of *Gift*, who underlines the ambiguity inherent in the word *gift*, which in Germanic languages ended up signifying both «gift» in the English meaning and «poison» in the German (*Gift*).²⁷ This ambiguity is related to the dangers and insidious nature of giving inherited from the Greek term *dosis*, which means both «gift» and «dose,» the latter of which can be a dose of medicine or a dose of poison.²⁸ We find this ambiguity again in the history reconstructed by Benveniste of the Latin term *hostis*, the original meaning of which was «foreigner with equal rights,» but which ends up

signifying «enemy,»²⁹, and in that of the Latin *daps* («gift,» «offering,» «tribute»), from which originates the term *damnum* («damage»)³⁰. Mauss' thesis is that while from an etymological point of view the double meaning of *gift/Gift* is almost unexplainable, things are different from the point of view of historical sociology: the Germanic tradition of gifts consisting of drinks and libations, and the fear that said drinks could be poisoned, would in fact have given rise to the ambiguity between gift-present and gift-poison.

The insidious character of the gift and its capacity to become the vehicle of insult and of a desire for affirmation are taken up again in the reading proposed by Bataille, which he develops from a radical accentuation of the agonistic dimension of the *potlatch*, an exchange of gifts which culminates in consumption and destruction. The dominant thesis of the essay «The Notion of Expenditure,» the first version of a project that would have its successive formulation in the texts entitled *The Limit of the Useful* and *The Accursed Share*,³¹ is a radical criticism of the principle of utility in the name of a *general economy of expenditure*. Against the principle of utility that upholds bourgeois rationality – according to which every activity is geared toward production, accumulation and conservation – Bataille affirms the primacy of *dépense* understood as unproductive expenditure, dispersion, waste, consumption in pure loss. The general economy proposed by Bataille must not limit itself to the study of productive processes, exchange and consumption under the aegis of the notion of utility, but must also take on the dark side of production, invisible but at the same time unavoidable: the *accursed share*, constituted by that excess and exuberance that prove to be refractory to every attempt to assign them a purpose and a function within the logic of the useful, devoted to conservation and accumulation. According to Bataille, it is a question of placing in opposition to capitalist economy that which can be called «festival economy»: «Either the greater part of the available resources (that is to say work) are put to use in fabricating new methods of production – and we have capitalist economy (accumulation, growth of wealth) – or the excess is wasted without seeking to augment the potential for production – and we have festival economy. In the first case, human value is a function of productivity; in the second, it is linked to the more beautiful outlets of art, poetry, to the full bloom of human life. In the first case, we care only about the time to come, subordinating the present time to the future; in the second, it is only the present instant that counts, and life, at least when and as much as possible, is freed from the servile considerations that dominate a world consecrated to the growth of production... The use of wealth, or more precisely its end, is essentially *waste*: its withdrawal from the circuit of production.»³²

Bataille re-conducts several phenomena to the domain of «unproductive expenditures,» including luxury, competitive games, festivals, sacrifice, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, perverse sexual activity, entertainment, the arts, writing. As Bataille writes, «Even though it is always possible to place in opposition to one another the diverse forms enumerated, they constitute a whole characterized by the fact that, in each case, the accent is placed on *loss*, which must be the greatest possible in order for the activity to acquire its true sense.»³³ In this affirmation of the primacy of the dimension of expenditure, Bataille assigns a fundamental role to the *potlatch* described by Mauss in *Gift*: in the *potlatch* and in the sumptuary destruction of the ceded objects which takes

place in it, he sees the clearest manifestation of the «need for destruction and loss» which would constitute the crux of every human activity. The *potlatch* is re-read and radicalized by Bataille as emblem of the pleasure of destruction and consumption, of that need for great loss to which, in the phenomena described by Mauss, all the actors in the social scene are exposed in a continuous succession of insults, challenges, provocations. The *potlatch* is thus a moment in which the exchange of gifts becomes a form of excessive and perverse generosity, a *giving* that entails the acquisition of a *power*, the *power to destroy and to lose*: «The problem posed is that of expenditure of excess: we must give, lose or destroy, but the gift would be foolish if it did not take on the sense of an acquisition. Thus it is necessary that *giving* becomes *acquisition of a power*. The gift has the virtue of a surpassing of the subject who gives but, in exchange for the given object, the subject appropriates the surpassing: he considers his own virtue, that which gives him his strength, as a wealth, as a *power* that now belongs to him. He is enriched by a contempt for riches, and he reveals himself avaricious with regard to the effect of his generosity. But he could not acquire alone a power created from an abandonment of power: if he destroyed the object in solitude, in silence, no power whatsoever would result from it, there would be nothing but detachment from power in the subject without a counter-party. But if he destroys the object before someone else, or if he gives it away, he who gives in effect takes in the eyes of the other the *power to give or to destroy*.»³⁴ Giving, losing, consuming, wasting are thus all synonyms of *power*: «The identity of potency and the power to lose is fundamental.»³⁵ From the analysis of the *potlatch*, a series of theses of existential and total cosmological importance emerge: existence is a continual expenditure and loss of self which implies the satisfaction of an always-reborn greed that is beyond any possible gratification, any equilibrium and any equivalence; the cosmos is pervaded by an excess energy that can only be wasted, lost without profit, spent «gladly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.»³⁶ The symbol of glorious and exuberant expenditure is the Sun, «the image of glory... luminous and radiant.»³⁷

Just as in the «Moral conclusions» of Mauss' essay, the reflection in Bataille's writings finally moves to the present: what is there, in current society, of glory and expenditure? Where are the residues of *dépense* that survive the all-encompassing logic of the useful? Beginning with the Protestant Reformation, according to Bataille, a morality and an economy that are anathema to waste and expenditure are affirmed, confining unproductive expenditure to the most private and individual forms, soon reintegrated into the same capitalist logic, which tends to absorb consumption and waste in its own devices. Even in the picture of a general weakening of the sense of expenditure, there still remain residual zones in which it is manifested: excitation (if viewed as a form of intoxication), laughter, smoking, states of exaltation, the creation of unproductive values, decadence, practices of personal or social loss. Writing itself, according to Bataille, is essentially expenditure, although symbolic and not real: «The term 'poetry,' which is applied to the least degraded, least intellectualized forms of expression of a state of loss, can be considered a synonym of *dépense*: it means, in fact, in the most precise way, *creation by means of loss*. Its sense is thus that of *sacrifice*.»³⁸ Undermining of the habitual meaning of words, place of slippage and instability, writing is communication inasmuch as it is loss of self, the moment in

which subject and object are revealed as «perspectives of being in the moment of inertia.»³⁹

The anonymous gift

In the «Moral conclusions» with which he closes *Gift*, Mauss expresses the need for a study geared toward understanding which part of our morality and customs is still traversed by the dimension of the gift and if there still exist, in our world largely populated by products and merchandise – that is by bought and sold objects – things that possess something that resembles a *mana*, the «spirit» that in archaic societies surrounded with authority the donated things that passed from hand to hand. Finally, Mauss proposes an appeal to leave space in our society for the recognition of the values of liberality, generosity, and the pleasure of giving in all its dimensions.⁴⁰

Some of the questions posed by Mauss in the conclusion of his essay were taken up by a line of contemporary anthropology and sociology that individuated in this text a fundamental point of reference for proposing to the social sciences an alternative paradigm to the dominant one based on the notion of rational behavior aimed at maximizing individual utility. This «third paradigm» or «paradigm of the gift» would be that which surpasses the primacy of rationally pursued individual interest to instead place the accent on the triple relationship of obligation to give, receive and reciprocate. According to authors like Caillé and Godbout, the stake is that of demonstrating the presence and relevance of the phenomenon of the gift, in its current meanings, in diverse regions of social action, contesting the utilitarian reading according to which behind the gift and behind gestures motivated by an apparent gratuity hides instead the usual pursuit of individual interests. The conception of gift developed by these authors rejects the strict opposition between gratuity and interest, maintaining that the gift is both *gratuitous and selfish*, inasmuch as it is through its very spontaneity that the social bond is enriched and solidified. This thesis is clearly expressed in the definition of gift proposed by Caillé and Godbout: «We define as a gift every lending of goods or services effected, without guarantee of restitution, towards the end of creating, nourishing or re-creating the social bond between the people involved,»⁴¹ a definition that insists on the fact that in the gift, the invitation to reciprocate is implicit, but so is the uncertainty about the possible restitution and the temporal deferment between giving and receiving. The gift does imply reciprocity, circulation, but in a sequential and alternated way, so that there is never direct equivalence or perfect reciprocity, but rather there is always risk, uncertainty, imbalance, expectation.

While by reading Mauss it would seem that in contemporary society there remain only two forms of gift (the obligation of giving and receiving on the occasion of holidays and birthdays, and social insurance as partial correction of the harshness of capitalist economy), the great variety of studies on the gift undertaken by the composite research group united under the acronym MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales) has had the merit of researching, with an ethical and political intent beyond a simply descriptive one, the forms of the gift in contemporary society, unveiling its latent

presence in such different phenomena as the multiple forms of interpersonal and intergenerational ties, volunteerism and solidarity, the ritual of the Christmas gift, the donation of blood, sperm and organs. In particular this last, completely absent in archaic societies, would present the clearest traits of that which has become, at least in part, the gift in current society: an gift *to strangers*, unilateral, spontaneous and without the possibility of reciprocation, in that we do not know the recipient nor the effects that our gift will have, especially since they often occur *post mortem*. The gift of blood, sperm and organs, like donations made to humanitarian organizations, are in most cases gifts that are received by the recipients as *anonymous* gifts, without any bond of intimacy or closeness with the giver: gifts that occur in the absence of any possibility of confrontation and response, and which seem to be born of an apparently unmotivated need to give, from the sensation of a debt with respect to which, albeit in an anonymous way, one wishes to exchange and give back. From here arises the thesis from which Godbout's work originates: «The drive to give is equally important to understanding the human species as that to receive. Giving, transmitting, giving back, compassion and generosity are equally as essential as taking, appropriating or conserving, as well as desire and egoism; the attraction of the gift is equally as strong or stronger than that of earning, and individuals continually attempt to seduce and tame one another by breaking and re-establishing bonds.»⁴²

Symbolic gift and invisible gift

Studies conducted by anthropologists and sociologists that make reference to Mauss' essay thus highlight three fundamental characteristics of the gift: a) the fact that the gift, at the same time spontaneous and obligatory, gratuitous and selfish, establishes a *tie*, a *relationship*, a *bond* between people, a link in which a new form of community is constituted between giver and recipient;⁴³ b) the fact that the gift is a *giving* that is aware that there will not necessarily be a restitution, which is clearly manifested in the case of gifts to strangers; c) finally, the fact that the gift, more than as a mere *thing*, can be considered as a *symbol*, in that it is what unites, what demonstrates the awareness of the others' desires, what sanctions and at the same time celebrates an alliance. And it is precisely from this reading of the gift as *relationship*, *link* and *symbol* that the suggestions most interesting in relation to art seem to arise. Artworks considered as gifts, and often as gifts of the self, are symbolic gestures of giving which occur in the uncertainty of any sure restitution. They are the moment in which the desire to give and the desire to receive suddenly meet, revealing, as underlined by Jean-Luc Marion, the possibility of a giving, a losing, an abandonment, and on the other hand the possibility of consciously accepting something as a gift, which implies the formation of a sense of indebtedness and the obligation to give back.⁴⁴

To conceive of the gift as symbol, or as perceptible manifestation that celebrates the establishment of a link, means to underline the *visibility* of the gift. At the extreme opposite of this interpretation, we find the reflection on the gift conducted by Jacques Derrida, which on the one hand is presented as antithetical to that proposed by Mauss, and on the other proposes some lines of continuity with that developed by Bataille. Also

according to Derrida, the gift belongs essentially to the dimension of *excess* and of *immoderation*: «The problem of the gift concerns the fact that it is *excessive in advance, exaggerated a priori*. An experience of gift that is not exposed *a priori* to some immoderation, a moderate, measured gift, would not be a gift.»⁴⁵ Said excessive and immoderate dimension of the gift can be grasped only through a progressive overturning of the theses on which Mauss' essay is based: his conception of the gift as *total service* founded on the triple obligation of giving, receiving and reciprocating gifts remains, according to Derrida, entirely within the picture of a system of *exchanges* and is dominated by a whole series of metaphysical categories like the primacy of presence and visibility and the principles of causality, sufficient reason and utility. Against this position, Derrida's intent is that of proposing an interpretation of the gift that considers it as radically non-present, invisible and unconscious.

Derrida conducts the deconstruction of Mauss' theses in the first part of *Given Time*, according to a cadenced progression that poses a counter-thesis to each of Mauss'. Above all, Derrida writes, «in order for there to be gift, there cannot be reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift or debt»⁴⁶: the gift cannot be interpreted in terms of exchange, circle, offering and restitution, gift and counter-gift, inasmuch as it is that which interrupts the economy and the circle of exchange, it is the irruption of an event which, in order to be such, must not entail expectation, nor demand for restitution. The second thesis affirms that there is gift only if there is not intention, awareness, will to give: «in order for there to be gift, *it is necessary* that the recipient not give back, not amortize, not reimburse, not relieve the debt, not enter into the contract, not have ever contracted a debt... It is necessary that, in the extreme hypothesis, he *does not recognize* the gift as a gift. If he recognizes it as a gift, if the gift *appears to him as such*, if the present is present to him as present, this simple recognition is sufficient to annul the gift.»⁴⁷ And further: «the gift, as event, must remain unpredictable... it must allow itself to be structured by chance; it must appear fortuitous, must be experienced in any case as such, including as the intentional correlate of a perception absolutely surprised by the encounter with that which perceives it, beyond its horizon of anticipation: and that already seems phenomenologically impossible... For this reason the common condition of the gift and the event is a certain non-conditionality... The event and the gift, event as gift, gift as event, must be abrupt, unmotivated – for example disinterested. Decisive, they must tear into the plot, interrupt the continuum of a story that they nonetheless require, must perturb the order of causality: in an instant. [...] The gift and the event obey nothing, if not principles of disorder, that is principles without principle.»⁴⁸ The condition of the gift is thus that of *oblivion* and of *event*, something that must be neither predictable, nor visible, nor presentable. A phenomenology of the gift is impossible, inasmuch as it, in order to be such, must not be visible or intentional, representable, conscious, must not appear as such to the donor nor to the recipient. What results is a radical incompatibility between gift and subjectivity: «If there is gift, the gift cannot take place between subjects who exchange objects, things or symbols. The problem of the gift must thus seek its own place before every relationship with the subject, before every relationship of the subject with itself, conscious or unconscious; and that is exactly what happens with Heidegger, when he goes beyond the understanding of being as substance, subject or object. One might even be tempted to say

that a subject as such never gives or receives a gift. It is constituted contrary to the purpose of dominating, through calculation and through exchange, the force of that *hybris* or that impossibility that announces itself in the promise of the gift. As long as there are subject and object, the gift would be excluded. A subject will never give an object to another subject. But the subject and the object are arrested effects of the gift: pauses of the gift. At zero or infinite velocity of the circle.»⁴⁹

In conclusion, according to Derrida, the gift must not be reciprocal, must not implicate recognition or gratitude, must not be visible or present: the conditions of possibility of the gift described by Mauss (circularity, exchange, intention, the establishment of the identities of the giver and of the receiver, etc.) produce «the annulment, the annihilation, the destruction of the gift.»⁵⁰ All of this naturally constitutes an inevitable provocation with regard to a project that proposes to find traces of the dynamic of the gift in artistic practice. Is it possible to speak of artwork as gift or of *representation* of the act of giving? Can we grasp in determined gestures or devices some *manifestations* or some *figures* of the gift relationship? Our thesis is that, although capable of concentrating itself in visible gestures and symbols, every gift maintains an *invisible* residue of gratuity and of absolute unconditionality that manifests itself only in the form of a need to respond felt by the recipient: a need to respond that determines our diverse modalities of viewing and that constitutes one of the motivations which compel us to write.

NOTES

¹ M. Mauss, *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, in *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, PUF, 1950, Eng. Trans. *Gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, New York, W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1990.

² See, in particular, the following essays by G. Bataille: *The Accursed Share*, New York, Zone Books, 1993; "The Notion of Expenditure" in *Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. by A. Stoekl, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp. 116-129; *La limite de l'utile*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. VII, ed. by Th. Klossowski, Paris, Gallimard, 1976.

³ See, in particular, J.T. Godbout (in collaboration with A. Caillé), *The World of the Gift*, Montreal-Ithaca, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998, and A. Caillé, *Anthropologie du don. Le tiers paradigme*, Desclée de Brouwer, 2000, Paris.

⁴ See M. Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," in Id., *Holzwege*, Frankfurt a.m., V. Klostermann, 1950 (Eng. trans. "The Origin of the work of art," in *Basic Writings*, Routledge, 1993).

⁵ See J. Derrida, *Donner le temps. I. La fausse monnaie*, Paris, Galilée, 1991 (Eng. trans. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁶ See J.-L. Marion, *Étant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris, PUF, 1997.

⁷ It is not difficult to recognize, at least partially, the identity of the voices to which these diverse interpretations of the gift lead back: they are those of Marcel Mauss and of a whole tradition of studies, like those of A. Caillé and T. Godbout, which refer to the theses

advanced by Mauss in *Gift*, and of Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, authors to whose positions we will return in the second part of this text.

⁸ On the ambiguous placement of the artwork and the artist's activity between gratuity and market, see the very interesting book by L. Hyde, *The Gift. Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979.

⁹ See, on this theme, the text by N. Bourriaud entitled *Esthétique relationnelle*, Paris, Les presses du réel, 1998.

¹⁰ See N. Bourriaud, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹¹ On the concept of grace, see R. Bayer, *Esthétique de la grâce*, Paris, Felix Alcan, 1933.

For a reflection on grace as capacity to grasp and give artistic form to the figures and modes of sentiment, see E. Franzini, *Le leggi del cielo*, Milano, Guerini e Associati, 1990.

On the theme of the Three Graces as allegory of the gift, finally, see D. Vidal, "Les trois Grâces ou l'allégorie du Don", *Gradhiva*, n.9, 1991, pp. 13-47.

¹² See Jean Starobinski, *Largesse*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ As Benveniste writes, "Mauss' great merit is that of having brought to light the functional relationship between gift and exchange, and in so doing of having defined a whole group of religious, economic and juridical phenomena belonging to archaic societies. Mauss demonstrated that the gift is nothing other than an element of a system of reciprocal services at once free and obligatory, in that the freedom of the gift obligates the recipient to give a counter-gift, which determines a continuous coming and going of offered gifts and compensatory gifts. It is the principle of an exchange that is generalized in that it is in force not only among individuals, but also among groups and classes, and provokes a circulation of wealth through the entire society. The game is determined by rules that are established in all kinds of institutions. A wide network of rites, festivals, contracts and rivalries organizes the modalities of these transactions." (our translation from Benveniste, "Don et échange dans le vocabulaire indo-européen", in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, I, Gallimard, Paris 1966, p. 315).

¹⁷ See M. Mauss, *Gift*, cit.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ On the theme of the *kula*, see the famous study published for the first time in 1922 by B. Malinowski: *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Prospect Heights (Illinois), Waveland Press, 1984. See also the interesting revision proposed by A. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions. The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, Berkeley - Los Angeles - Oxford, University of California Press, 1992.

²⁰ See M. Mauss, *Gift*, cit.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ On the co-implications of *giving* and *taking* it is important to remember Benveniste's oft-cited observation according to which in Indoeuropean languages there is a close proximity between the root of 'to give' (*do-) and that of 'to take' (hitt. da-), even if the

words later indicating the gift as pure loss, beyond the bonds of reciprocity, are all derived from the root *do- (see Benveniste, “Don et échange”, cit.).

²⁵ The same etymology of *res*, “thing,” is led back to the concept of gift by Mauss: “The *res*, then, must not have been, originally, the brute and only tangible thing, the simple and passive object of transaction that it later became. It seems that the best etymology is that which brings the Sanskrit term *rah*, *ratih* face to face with gift, present, welcome thing. The *res* must have been, first and foremost, that which brought pleasure to another” (our translation from *Essai sur le don*, cit.; see *Gift*, op. cit.). Also, earlier in the same essay: “In Maori law, the juridical bond, the bond through things, is a *link of souls*, because the thing itself has a soul, belongs to the soul. Whence we derive the idea that to give something to someone as a gift is equivalent to giving something to oneself. Secondly, we are better able to comprehend, in this way, the very nature of the exchange of gifts, of all that which we call total services and, among these last, the *potlatch*. We clearly and logically understand, in the frame of this system of ideas, that it is necessary to render to others that which in reality is only a particle of one’s nature and one’s substance; in fact, to accept something from someone is equivalent to accepting something from his spiritual essence, his soul; to keep this thing for oneself would be dangerous and fatal, not only because it would be illicit, but also because this thing that comes from a person, not only morally but also physically and spiritually, this essence, this nutrient, these goods, mobile or not, these women or these descendants, these rites or these communions, give a magical and religious hold over us. The thing given, finally, is not an inert thing. Animated, often individualized, it tends to fit into what Hertz called its ‘original hearth’ or to produce, for the clan and the soil from which it came, an equivalent that replaces it” (our italics).

²⁶ Our translation from M. Mauss, *Essai sur le don*, cit. (see *Gift*, cit.).

²⁷ See M. Mauss, “Gift, Gift”, in *Mélanges offerts à Charles Andlers par ses amis et ses élèves*, Strasbourg, Istra, 1924, later republished in M. Mauss, *Œuvres*, vol. 3, *Cohésion sociale et division de la sociologie*, Paris, Minuit, 1969.

²⁸ See E. Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, Coral Gables, Fla., University of Miami Press, 1973. On the theme of *pharmakon*, see J. Derrida, *La dissémination*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1973.

²⁹ See E. Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, cit..

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See G. Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure”, cit.; *The Accursed Share*, cit.; *La limite de l’utile*, cit.

³² G. Bataille, *Choix de lettres 1917-1962*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, pp. 377-79.

³³ G. Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure”, cit.

³⁴ G. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, cit.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ G. Bataille, *La limite de l’utile*, cit.

³⁸ G. Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure”, cit.

³⁹ See G. Bataille, *L’expérience intérieure*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969.

⁴⁰ See M. Mauss, *Gift*, cit.

⁴¹ See J.T. Godbout (in collaboration with A. Caillé), op. cit.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ On the relationship between gift and establishment of a form of tie and of community, see what Benveniste writes on the relationship between the terms *munus* and *communitas* in “Don et échange”, cit., p. 322.

⁴⁴ See J.-L. Marion, op. cit., pp. 152-161.

⁴⁵ See J. Derrida, *Given Time*, cit.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Derrida writes: "One could even arrive at saying that such a monumental book as Marcel Mauss' *Gift* speaks of everything but the gift: it speaks of economy, exchange, contract (*do ut des*), raising, sacrifice, gift and counter-gift; in short, of all that which, at the same time, provokes the gift *and* the annulment of the gift. All the supplements of gift (the *potlatch*, transgressions and excess, surplus, the need to give or give back more, restitution with usury, in short all sacrificial raising) are destined to re-introduce the circle in which they are annulled." (our translation from J. Derrida, *Donner le temps*, cit., p.39)

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