

# Given Time: The Time of the King

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Peggy Kamuf

## *Epigraph*

*The King takes all my time; I give the rest to Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give all.*

It is a woman who signs.

For this is a letter, and from a woman to a woman. Madame de Maintenon is writing to Madame Brinon. This woman says, in sum, that to the King she gives all. For in giving all one's time, one gives all or the all, if all one gives is in time and one gives all one's time.

It is true that she who is known to have been the influential mistress and even the morganatic wife of the Sun King<sup>1</sup> (the Sun and the King, the

*Given Time* [*Donner le temps*] was the general title of the series of the Frederick Ives Carpenter Lectures that Jacques Derrida gave at the University of Chicago in April 1991. What follows is a translation of the first lecture, which has been revised and augmented. It puts in place several of the works (Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* and Charles Baudelaire's "Counterfeit Money" among others) that will be the object of detailed readings in the subsequent lectures. The complete text of *Donner le temps* has just been published in French and is forthcoming in English translation.

1. Madame de Maintenon's sentence is remarkable enough to have attracted the attention of the editors of the *Littré*. It is their version that I cite. There are those who will be surprised, perhaps, to see me evoke the secret wife of a great king at the beginning of such a lecture. However, Madame de Maintenon seems to me to be exemplary not only because, from her position as woman and "grande dame," she poses the question of the gift, of time, and of the rest. She who played the role of Louis XIV's "sultan of conscience" was at the

Sun-King will be the subjects of these lectures), Madame de Maintenon, then, did not say, in her letter, literally, that she was *giving* all her time but rather that the King *was taking* it from her (“the King takes all my time”). Even if that means the same thing, in her mind, one word does not equal the other. What she *gives*, for her part, is not time but the *rest*, the rest of the time: “I give the rest to Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give all.” But as the King *takes* all her time, then the rest, by all good logic and good economics, is nothing. She can no longer *take* her time. She has no more time. And yet she gives it. Lacan says speaking of love: It gives what it does not have, a formula whose variations are ordered by the *Écrits* according to the final and transcendental modality of the woman inasmuch as she is, supposedly, deprived of the phallus.<sup>2</sup>

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same time—and this configuration is rarely fortuitous—an outlaw and the very figure of the law. Before she became, upon the death of the Queen, the morganatic wife of the King (and thus excluded from all noble titles and rights; the word *morganatic* says something of the gift and the gift of the origin: it is from low Latin *morganegiba*, gift of the morning), she had led the Sun King back to his duties as husband (by estranging him from Madame de Montespan whose protégée she had been) and as Catholic king (by restoring austerity to the court, by encouraging the persecution of the Protestants—even though she herself was raised a Calvinist—and by supporting the revocation of the Edict of Nantes). She who took so much trouble over what was to be given and taken, over the law, over the name of the King, over legitimacy in general was also the governess of the royal bastards, a promotion she no doubt owed to the protection of Madame de Montespan. Let us stop there where we should have begun: When she was a child, she experienced exile in Martinique and her father, Constant, was arrested as a counterfeiter. Everything in her life seems to bear the most austere, the most rigorous, and the most authentic stamp of counterfeit money.

2. “For if love is to give what one does not have . . .” (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* [Paris, 1966], p. 618); “What is thus given to the Other to fill and which is properly what he/she does not have, since for him/her as well Being is lacking, is what is called love, but it is also hatred and ignorance” (p. 627); “This privilege of the Other thus outlines the radical form of the gift of what he/she does not have, that is, what is called his/her love” (p. 691). The symmetry of these formulae, which seem to concern love *in general*, is interrupted when the truth of this “not-having-it” appears, namely, the woman *quoad matrem* and the man *quoad castrationem* (Lacan, *Encore*, vol. 20 of *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain

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Here Madame de Maintenon *is writing*, and she says *in writing*, that she gives the rest. What is the rest? *Is it, the rest?* She gives the rest which is nothing, since it is the rest of a time concerning which she has just informed her correspondent she has nothing of it left since the King takes it all from her. And yet, we must underscore this paradox, even though the King takes all *her* time, she seems to have some left, as if she could return the change. "The King takes all *my* time," she says, a time that belongs to her therefore. But how can a time belong? What is it *to have time?* If a time belongs, it is because the word *time* designates metonymically less time itself than the things with which one fills it, with which one fills the form of time, time *as form*. It is a matter, then, of the things one does *in the meantime* [cependant] or the things one has at one's disposal *during* [pendant] this time. Therefore, as time does not belong to anyone as such, one can no more *take* it, itself, than *give* it. Time already begins to appear as that which undoes this distinction between taking and giving, therefore also between receiving and giving, perhaps between receptivity and activity, or even between being-affected and the affecting of any affection. Apparently and according to common logic or economics, one can only exchange, by way of metonymy, one can only take or give what is *in* time. That is indeed what Madame de Maintenon seems to *want to say* on a certain surface of her letter. And yet, even though the King takes it all from her, altogether, this time or whatever fills up the time, she has some

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Miller [Paris, 1975], p. 36), to use a later formula but one which draws together very well this whole economy. Returning, then, to the *Écrits*:

If it is the case that man manages to satisfy his demand for love in his relationship to the woman to the extent that the signifier of the phallus constitutes her precisely as giving in love what she does not have—conversely, his own desire for the phallus will throw up its signifier in the form of a persistent divergence towards "another woman" who can signify this phallus on several counts, whether as a virgin or a prostitute. . . . We should not, however, think that the type of infidelity which then appears to be constitutive of the masculine function is exclusive to the man. For if one looks more closely, the same redoubling is to be found in the woman, the only difference being that in her case, the Other of Love as such, that is to say, the Other as deprived of that which it gives, is difficult to perceive in the withdrawal whereby it is substituted for the being of the same man whose attributes she cherishes.

The difference of "the only difference being" organizes all the dissymmetries analyzed on this page, which, let us remember, concludes as follows: "Correlatively, one can glimpse the reason for a feature which has never been elucidated and which again gives a measure of the depth of Freud's intuition: namely, why he advances the view that there is only one libido, his text clearly indicating that he conceives of it as masculine in nature" (Lacan and the *école freudienne*, "The Meaning of the Phallus," in *Feminine Sexuality*, trans. Jacqueline Rose, ed. Rose and Juliet Mitchell [New York, 1985], pp. 84–85).

The expression "to give what one does not have" is found in Heidegger (in particular in "The Anaximander Fragment" ["Der Spruch des Anaximander," in *Holzwege*] but also elsewhere). [This conjunction of Lacan and Heidegger is discussed more fully in a later chapter.—TRANS.]

left, a remainder that is not nothing since it is beyond everything, a remainder that is nothing but that *there is* since she *gives it*. And it is even essentially what she gives, *that very thing*. The King takes all, she gives the rest. The rest is not, there is the rest that is given or that gives itself. It does not give itself to someone, because, as everyone knows, Saint-Cyr is not her lover, and it is above all not masculine. Saint-Cyr is a—very feminine—place, a charity, an institution, more exactly a *foundation* of Madame de Maintenon's. Saint-Cyr is the name of a charity for the education of impoverished young ladies of good families. Its founder retired there and no doubt was able to devote all her time to it, in accordance with her declared wish, after the death of the King in 1715. Would we say, then, that the question of the rest, and of the rest of given time, is secretly linked to the death of some king?

Thus the rest, which *is* nothing but that *there is* nevertheless, does not give itself to someone but to a foundation of young virgins. *And it never gives itself enough, the rest*: "I give the rest to Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give it all." She never gets enough of giving this rest that she does not have. And when she writes, Madame de Maintenon, that she would like to give it all, one must pay attention to the *literal* writing of her *letter*, to the *letter of her letter*. This letter is almost untranslatable; it defies exchange from language to language. I insist on the fact that it is a question of a letter since things would not be said in the same way in a different context. So when she writes that she would like to give *all* [*elle voudrait le tout donner*], she allows two equivocations to be installed: *le* can be a personal pronoun (in an inverted position: *je voudrais tout le donner*, I would like to give it all), or it can be an *article* (before the word *tout*, which is thus nominalized: I would like to give *all*, that is everything). That would be the first equivocation. The second equivocation: *tout* or *le tout* can be understood to refer to *time* (all of which the King takes from her) as well as to the *rest* of time, of the time and of what presents itself there, occupying it thus, or of the rest and of what presents itself there, likewise occupying it. This phrase lets one hear the infinite sigh of unsatisfied desire. Madame de Maintenon says to her correspondent that everything leaves her something to be desired. Her wish is not fulfilled or attained either by what she allows herself to take from the King nor even by the rest that she gives—in order to *make a present* of it, if you will, to her young virgins.

Her desire would be there where she *would like*, in the conditional, to give what she cannot give, the all, that rest of the rest of which she cannot make a present. Nobody takes it all from her, neither the King nor Saint-Cyr. This rest of the rest of time of which she cannot make a present, that is what Madame de Maintenon (as I wish to call her) desires, that is in truth what she would desire, not for herself but to be able to give it [*pour le pouvoir donner*]. For the power of giving [*pour le pouvoir de donner*], perhaps, in order to give herself this power of giving. She lacks not lacking time, she lacks not giving enough. She lacks this leftover time that is left to

her and that she cannot give—that she doesn't know what to do with. But this rest of the rest of time, of a time that moreover is nothing and that belongs properly to no one, this rest of the rest of time, that is the whole of her desire. Desire and the desire to give would be the same thing, a sort of tautology. But maybe as well the tautological designation of the impossible. Maybe the impossible. The impossible may be—if giving and taking are also the same—the same, the same thing which would certainly not be a thing.

One could accuse me here of making a big deal and a whole *history* out of words and gestures that remain very clear. When Madame de Maintenon says that the King takes her time, it is because she is glad to give it to him and takes pleasure from it: the King takes nothing from her and gives her as much as he takes. And when she says, "I give the rest to Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give all," she is confiding in her correspondent about a *daily* economy concerning the leisures and charities, the works and days of a "grande dame" somewhat overwhelmed by her obligations. None of the words she writes has the sense of the unthinkable and the impossible toward which my reading would have pulled them, in the direction of giving-taking, of time and the rest. She did not mean to say that, you will say.

What if . . . yes she did [*Et si*].

And if what she wrote meant to say that, then what would that suppose? How, where, on the basis of what and when can we read this letter fragment as I have done? How could we even hijack it as I have done, while still respecting its literality and its language? End of the epigraph.

Let us begin by the impossible.

To join together, in a title, time and the gift may seem to be a laborious artifice. What can time have to do with the gift? We mean: What would there be to see in that? What would they have to do with each other, or more literally to see together; *qu'est-ce qu'ils auraient à voir ensemble*, one would say in French. Of course, they have nothing to *see* together and first of all because both of them have a singular relation to the visible. Time, in any case, gives nothing to see. It is at the very least the element of invisibility itself. It withdraws whatever could give itself to be seen. It itself withdraws itself from visibility. One can only be blind to time, to the essential *disappearance* of time even as, nevertheless, in a certain manner nothing *appears* that does not require and take time. Nothing sees the light of day, no phenomenon, which is not on the order of the day, in other words, of the *revolution* that is the rhythm of a sun's course. And that orients this course from its endpoint: from the rising in the east to the setting in the west. The works and days as we said a moment ago.

We will let ourselves be carried away by this word *revolution*. At stake is a certain *circle* whose figure precipitates both time and the gift toward the possibility of their impossibility.

To join together, in a title, both time and the gift may seem to be a laborious artifice, as if, in order to economize, one sought to treat two subjects at once. And that is in fact the case, for reasons of economy. But economy is here the subject. What is economy? Among its irreducible semantic predicates or values, economy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire within). *Nomos* does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (*nemein*), the law of sharing or partition [*partage*], the law as partition, *moira*, the given or assigned part, participation. Another sort of tautology already implicates the economic within the nomic as such. As soon as there is law, there is partition: as soon as there is *nomy*, there is economy. Besides the values of law and home, of distribution and partition, economy implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return. The figure of the circle is obviously *at the center*, if that can still be said of a circle. It stands at the center of any problematic of *oikonomia*, as it does of any economic field: circular exchange, circulation of goods, products, monetary signs or merchandise, amortization of expenditures, return on investment, substitution of use-values and exchange-values. This motif of circulation can lead one to think that the law of economy is the—circular—return to the point of departure, to the origin, also to the home. So one would have to follow the *odyssean* structure of the economic narrative. *Oikonomia* would always follow the path of Ulysses. The latter returns to the side of his loved ones and to himself, and he only goes away in view of *repatriating* himself, in order to return to the home from which [*à partir duquel*] the signal for departure is given and the part assigned, the side chosen [*le parti pris*], the lot divided, destiny commanded (*moira*). The being-next-to-self of the Idea in Absolute Knowledge would be odyssean in this sense, that of an *economy* and a *nostalgia*, a “homesickness,” a provisional exile longing for reappropriation.

Now the gift, *if there is any*, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift without treating this relation to economy, that goes without saying, even to the money economy. But is not the gift, if there is any, that which interrupts economy? That which, in suspending economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange? That which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure, and so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return? If there is gift, the *given* of the gift (*that which* one gives, *that which* is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor). It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure. If the figure of the circle is essential to

the economic, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible.

Not impossible but *the* impossible. The very figure of the impossible. It announces itself, gives itself to be thought as the impossible. It is proposed that we begin by this.

And we will do so. We will begin later. By the impossible.

The motif of the circle will obsess us throughout this cycle of lectures. Let us provisionally set aside the question of whether it is a matter of a geometric figure, a metaphorical representation or a great symbol, the symbol of the symbolic itself. We have learned from Hegel to treat this problem. Saying that the circle will obsess us is another manner of saying that it will encircle us. It will besiege us all the while that we will be regularly attempting to exit [*la sortie*]. But why exactly would one desire, along with the gift, if there is any, the exit? Why desire the gift and why desire to interrupt the circulation of the circle? Why wish to get out of it [*en sortir*]? Why wish to get through it [*s'en sortir*]?

The circle has already put us onto the trail of time and of that which, by way of the circle, circulates between the gift and time. One of the most powerful and ineluctable representations, at least in the history of metaphysics, is the representation of time as a circle. Time would always be a process or a movement in the form of the circle or the sphere. Of this privilege of the circular movement in the representation of time, let us take only one index for the moment. It is a note by Heidegger, the last and the longest one in *Sein und Zeit*. Some time ago I attempted a reading of it in "*Ousia and Grammê: Note on a Note from Being and Time.*"<sup>3</sup> Since this Note and this note on a note will be part of our premises, it will help to recall at least the part concerning the absolute insistence of this figure of the circle in the metaphysical interpretation of time. Heidegger writes:

The priority which Hegel has given to the 'now' which has been levelled off, makes it plain that in defining the concept of time he is under the sway of the manner in which time is *ordinarily* understood; and this means that he is likewise under the sway of the *traditional* conception of it. It can even be shown that his conception of time has been drawn *directly* from the 'physics' of Aristotle. . . . Aristotle sees the essence of time in the *nun*, Hegel in the 'now' (*jetzt*). Aristotle takes the *nun* as *oros*; Hegel takes the 'now' as 'boundary' (*Grenze*). Aristotle understands the *nun* as *stigmê*; Hegel interprets the 'now' as a point. Aristotle describes the *nun* as *tode ti*; Hegel calls the 'now' the 'absolute this' (*das 'absolute Dieses'*). Aristotle follows tradition in connecting *khronos* with *sphaira*; Hegel stresses the 'circular course'

3. See Jacques Derrida, "*Ousia and Grammê: Note on a Note from Being and Time,*" *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982), pp. 29–67.

(*Kreislauf*) of time. . . . In suggesting a direct connection between Hegel's conception of time and Aristotle's analysis, we are not accusing Hegel of any 'dependence' on Aristotle, but are calling attention to the *ontological import which this filiation has in principle for the Hegelian logic*.<sup>4</sup>

There would be more to say on the figure of the circle in Heidegger. His treatment is not simple. It also implies a certain assumed affirmation of the circle. One should not necessarily flee or condemn circularity as one would a bad repetition, a vicious circle, a regressive or sterile process. One must, in a *certain way* of course, inhabit the circle, turn around in it, live there a celebration of thinking, and the gift, the gift of thinking would not be a stranger there. That is what *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks* [*The Origin of the Work of Art*] suggests. But this motif, which is not a stranger to that of the hermeneutic circle either, coexists with what we might call a de-limitation of the circle: the latter is but a particular figure, the "particular case" of a structure of *nodal* coiling up or interlacing that Heidegger names the *Geflecht* in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*.

If one were to stop here with this first somewhat simplifying representation or with these hastily formulated premises, what could one already say? That wherever there is time, wherever time predominates or conditions experience in general, wherever *time as circle* (a "vulgar" concept, Heidegger would therefore say) is predominant, the gift is impossible. A gift could only be possible, there can only be a gift at the instant an effraction in the circle will have taken place, at the instant all circulation will have been interrupted and *on the condition* of this instant. Moreover, this instant of effraction (of the temporal circle) must no longer be part of time. That is why we said "on the condition of this instant." This condition concerns time but does not *pertain* to it, is not a *part* of it without being for all that more logical than chronological. There would be a gift only at the instant when the *paradoxical* instant (in the sense in which Kierkegaard says of the paradoxical instant of decision that it is madness) tears time apart. In this sense one would never have the time of a gift. In any case, time, the "present" of the gift, is no longer thinkable as a now, that is, as a present bound up in the temporal synthesis.

The relation of the gift to the "present," in all the senses of this term, also to the presence of the present, will form one of the essential knots in the interlace of this discourse, in its *Geflecht*, in the knot of that *Geflecht* of which Heidegger says precisely that the circle is perhaps only one figure or a particular case, an inscribed possibility. That a gift is called a present, that "to give" may also be said "to make a present," "to give a present" (in

4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), p. 500 n. 30; quoted in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 36–38.



French as well as in English, for example), this will not be for us just a verbal clue, a linguistic chance or *aléa*.

We said a moment ago: "Let us begin by the impossible." By the impossible, what ought one to have understood?

If we must speak of it, we will have to name something. Not to present the thing, here the impossible, but to try with its name, or with some name, to give an understanding of or to think this impossible thing, this impossible itself. To say we are going to "name" is perhaps already or still to say too much. For it is no doubt the name of name that is going to find itself put in question. If, for example, the gift were impossible, the name or noun "gift," what the linguist or the grammarian believes he recognizes to be a name, would not be a name. At least, it would not name what one thinks it names, to wit, the unity of a meaning that would be that of the gift. Unless the gift were the impossible but not the unnameable or the unthinkable, and unless in this gap between the impossible and the thinkable the dimension opens up where *there is* gift—and even where *there is* period, for example time, where *it gives* being and time (*es gibt das Sein* or *es gibt die Zeit*, to say it in a way that anticipates excessively what would be precisely a certain essential excess of the gift, indeed an excess of the gift beyond the essence itself).

Why and how *can I think that the gift is the impossible?* And why is it here a matter precisely of *thinking*, as if thinking, the word *thinking*, conformed itself only to this disproportion of the impossible, even as if it announced itself—as thought irreducible to intuition, irreducible also to perception, judgment, experience, science, faith—only on the basis of *this* figure of the impossible, on the basis of the impossible *in the figure of the gift?*

Let us suppose that someone wants or desires to give to someone. In our logic and our language we say it thus: someone wants or desires, someone *intends-to-give* something to someone. The complexity of the formula appears already formidable. It supposes a subject and a verb, a constituted subject, which can also be collective—for example, a group, a community, a nation, a clan, a tribe—in any case, a subject identical to itself and conscious of its identity, indeed seeking by the gesture of the gift to constitute its own unity and, precisely, to get its own identity recognized so that that identity comes back to it, so that it can reappropriate its identity: as its property.

Let us suppose, then, an intention-to-give: Some "one" wants or desires to give. Our common language or logic will cause us to hear the interlace of this already complex formula as incomplete. We would tend to complete it by saying "some 'one'" (A) intends-to-give B to C, some "one" intends to give or gives "something" to "someone other." This "something" may not be a thing in the common sense of the term but rather a symbolic object; the donee may be a collective subject, likewise the donor, but in any case A gives B to C. These three elements, identical to them-

selves or on the way to an identification with themselves, look like what is presupposed by every gift event. For the gift to be possible, for there to be gift event, it seems, according to our common language and logic, that this compound structure is indispensable. Notice that in order to say this, I must already suppose a certain precomprehension of what *gift* means. I suppose that I know and that you know what “to give,” “gift,” “donor,” “donee” mean in our common language. As well as “to want,” “to desire,” “to intend.” This is an unsigned but effective contract between us, indispensable to what is happening here, namely, that you accord, lend, or give some attention and some meaning to what I myself am doing by giving, for example, a lecture. This whole presupposition will remain indispensable at least for the *credit* that we accord each other, the faith or good faith that we lend each other, even if in a little while we were to argue and disagree about everything. It is by making this precomprehension (credit or faith) explicit that one can authorize oneself to state the following axiom: In order for there to be gift, gift event, some “one” has to give some “thing” to someone other, without which “giving” would mean nothing. In other words, if giving indeed means what, in speaking of it among ourselves, we think it means, then it is necessary, in a certain situation, that some “one” give some “thing” to some “one other,” and so forth. This appears tautological, it goes without saying and seems to imply the defined term in the definition, which is to say it defines nothing at all. Unless the discreet introduction of “one” and of “thing” and especially of “other” (“someone other”) does not portend some perturbation in the tautology of a gift that cannot be satisfied with giving or with giving (to) *itself* [se *donner*] without giving something (other) to someone (other).

For this is the impossible that seems to give itself to be thought here. It is that these conditions of possibility of the gift (that some “one” gives some “thing” to some “one other”) designate simultaneously the conditions of the impossibility of the gift. And already we could translate this in other terms: These conditions of possibility define or produce the annulment, the annihilation, the destruction of the gift.

Once again, let us set out in fact from what is the simplest level and let us still entrust ourselves to this semantic precomprehension of the word *gift* in our language or in a few familiar languages. For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or ought to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or, if you like, *differance*. This is all too obvious if the other, the donee, gives me back *immediately* the same thing. It may, moreover, be a matter of a good thing or a bad thing. Here we are anticipating another dimension of the problem, namely, that if giving is spontaneously evaluated as *good* (it is *well* and *good* to give and what one gives, the present, the *cadeau*, the gift, is a good), it remains the case that this “good” can

easily be reversed. We know that as good, it can also be bad, poisonous (*Gift, gift*), and this is true from the moment the gift puts the other in debt, so that giving comes down to hurting, to doing bad; here one need hardly mention the fact that in certain languages, for example in French, one may say as readily “to give a gift” as “to give a blow” [*donner un coup*], “to give life” as “to give death” [*donner la mort*], thereby either dissociating and opposing them or identifying them. So we were saying that, quite obviously, if the donee gives back the same thing, for example an invitation to lunch (and the example of food or of what are called consumer goods will never be just one example among others), the gift is annulled. It is annulled each time there is restitution or countergift. Each time, according to the same circular ring that leads to “giving back” [*rendre*], there is payment and discharge of a debt. In this logic of the debt, the circulation of a good or of goods is not only the circulation of the “things” that we will have offered to each other but even of the values or the symbols that are engaged there and the intentions to give, whether they are conscious or unconscious. Even though all the anthropologies, indeed the metaphysics of the gift have, *quite rightly and justifiably*, treated *together*, as a system, the gift and the debt, the gift and the cycle of restitution, the gift and the loan, the gift and credit, the gift and the countergift, we are here *departing*, in a peremptory and distinct fashion, from this tradition. That is to say, from tradition itself. We will take our point of departure in the dissociation, in the overwhelming evidence of this other axiom: There is gift, if there is any, only in what interrupts the system as well as the symbol, in a partition without return and without division [*répartition*], without being-with-self of the gift-countergift.

For there to be a gift, *it is necessary* [*il faut*] that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt. (This “it is necessary” is already the mark of a duty, of a debt owed, the duty-not-to-be [*le devoir de-ne-pas*]: The donee owes it *to himself* even not to give back; he has the *duty* not to *owe* [*il a le devoir de ne pas devoir*], and the donor not to count on restitution.) It is necessary, at the limit, that he not *recognize* the gift as 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 suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent. Here one cannot even say that the symbolic *re-constitutes* the exchange and annuls the gift in the debt. It does not reconstitute an exchange, which, because it no longer takes place as exchange of things or of goods, would be transfigured into a symbolic exchange. The symbolic opens and constitutes the order of exchange and of the debt, the law or the order of circulation in which the gift is annulled. It suffices therefore for the other to *perceive the gift*—not only to perceive it in the sense in which, as one says in French, *on perçoit*, that is, receives, for example, merchandise, payment, or compensation—but

to perceive its nature of gift, the meaning or intention, the *intentional meaning* of the gift, in order for this simple *recognition* of the gift *as gift*, *as such*, to annul the gift as gift even before *recognition* becomes *gratitude*. The simple identification of the gift seems to destroy it. The simple identification of the passage of a gift as such, that is of an identifiable thing among some identifiable “ones,” would be nothing other than the process of the destruction of the gift. It is as if, between the event or the institution of the gift *as such* and its destruction, the difference were destined to be constantly annulled. *At the limit, the gift as gift* should not *appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor*. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift. Neither to the “one” nor to the “other.” If the other perceives or receives it, if he or she keeps it as gift, the gift is annulled. But the one who gives it must not see it or know it either; otherwise he begins, at the threshold, as soon as he intends to give, to pay himself with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or of what he is preparing to give. The temporalization of time (memory, present, anticipation; retention, protention, imminence of the future; “ecstasies,” and so forth) always sets in motion the process of a destruction of the gift: through keeping, restitution, reproduction, the anticipatory expectation or apprehension that grasps or comprehends in advance.

In all these cases, the gift can certainly keep its phenomenality or, if one prefers, its appearance as gift. But its very appearance, the simple phenomenon of the gift annuls it as gift, transforming the apparition into a phantom and the operation into a simulacrum. It suffices that the other perceive and *keep*, not even the object of the gift, the object given, the thing, but the meaning or the quality, the gift property of the gift, its intentional meaning, for the gift to be annulled. We expressly say: It suffices that the gift *keep* its phenomenality. But *keeping* begins by *taking*. As soon as the other accepts, as soon as he or she takes, there is no more gift. For this destruction to occur, it suffices that the movement of acceptance (of prehension, of reception) last a little, however little that may be, more than an instant, an instant already caught up in the temporalizing synthesis, in the *syn* or the *cum* or the being-with-self of time. There is no more gift as soon as the other *receives*—and even if she refuses the gift that she has perceived or recognized as gift. As soon as she keeps for the gift the signification of gift, she loses it, there is no more *gift*. Consequently, if there is no gift, there is no gift, but if there is gift held or beheld *as gift* by the other, once again there is no gift; in any case the gift does not *exist* and does not *present* itself. If it presents itself, it no longer presents itself.

We can imagine a first objection. It concerns the at least implicit recourse that we have just had to the values of subject, self, consciousness, even intentional meaning and phenomenon, a little as if we were limiting ourselves to a phenomenology of the gift even as we declared the gift to be

irreducible to its phenomenon or to its meaning and said precisely that it was destroyed by its own meaning and its own phenomenality. The objection would concern the way in which we are describing the intentionality of the intention, the reception, the perception, the keeping, the recognition—in sum, everything by means of which one or the other, donee and donor, *take part* in the symbolic and thus annul the gift in the debt. It will be objected that this description is still given in terms of the self, of the subject that says I, *ego*, of intentional or intuitive perception-consciousness or even of the conscious or unconscious ego (for Freud the ego or a part of the ego can be unconscious). One may be tempted to oppose this description to another that would substitute for the economy of perception-consciousness an economy of the unconscious: Across the forgetting, the nonkeeping, and the nonconsciousness called up by the gift, the debt and the symbolic would reconstitute themselves for the subject of the Unconscious or the unconscious subject. As donee or donor, the Other would keep, bind himself, obligate himself, endebt himself according to the law and the order of the symbolic, according to the figure of circulation,<sup>5</sup> even as the conditions of the gift—forgetfulness, nonappearance, nonphenomenality, nonperception, nonkeeping—would have been fulfilled. Here we are pointing out only the principle of a problematic displacement that we would have to go into more carefully.

The necessity of such a displacement is of the greatest interest. It offers us new resources of analysis; it alerts us to the traps of the would-be *gift* without debt; it activates our critical or ethical vigilance. It permits us always to say: “Careful, you think there is gift, dissymmetry, generosity, expenditure or loss, but the circle of the debt, of exchange or of symbolic equilibrium reconstitutes itself according to the laws of the Unconscious; the ‘generous’ or ‘grateful’ consciousness is only the phenomenon of a calculation and the ruse of an economy. Calculation and ruse, in truth economy, would be the truth of these phenomena.”

But such a displacement does not affect the paradox with which we are struggling, namely, the impossibility or the double bind of the gift: For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift. For if we added “not even *taken* or *kept*,” it was precisely so that the generality of these notions (of *taking* and especially of *keeping*) could cover a wider reception, acceptance, and acceptance than that of consciousness or of the perception-consciousness system. We had in mind also the keeping in the Unconscious, memory, the putting into reserve or temporalization as effect of repression. For there to be gift, not only must the donor or donee not perceive the gift as such, have no

5. On this subject, see Lacan's “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” and the reading I proposed of it in “Le Facteur de la vérité,” *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Bass (Chicago, 1987), p. 436ff., especially around the circle of reappropriation of the gift in the debt.

consciousness of it, no memory, no recognition; he or she must also forget it right away [*à l'instant*], and moreover this forgetting must be so radical that it exceeds even the psychoanalytic categorality of forgetting. This forgetting of the gift must even no longer be forgetting in the sense of repression; it must not give rise to any of the repressions (originary or secondary) that reconstitute the debt and the exchange when they put in reserve, when they keep or save up what is forgotten, repressed, or censored. Repression does not destroy or annul anything; it keeps by displacing. Its operation is systemic or topological; it always consists of keeping by exchanging places. And, by keeping the meaning of the gift, repression annuls it in symbolic recognition. However unconscious this recognition may be, it is effective and can be verified in no better fashion than by its effects or by the symptoms it yields up [*qu'elle donne*] for decoding.

So we are speaking of an absolute forgetting—a forgetting that also absolves, that unbinds absolutely and infinitely more, therefore, than excuse, forgiveness, or acquittal. As condition of a gift event, condition for the advent of a gift, absolute forgetting should no longer have any relation with either the psycho-philosophical category of forgetting or even with the psychoanalytic category that links forgetting to meaning or to the logic of the signifier, to the economy of repression and to the symbolic order. The thought of this radical forgetting as thought of the gift should accord with a certain experience of the *trace* as *cinder* or *ashes* in the sense in which we have tried to approach it elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

And yet we say “forgetting” and not nothing. Even though it must leave nothing behind it, even though it must efface everything, including the traces of repression, this forgetting, this *forgetting of the gift* cannot be a simple nonexperience, a simple nonappearance, a self-effacement that is carried off with what it effaces. For there to be gift event (we say event and not act), something must come about or happen, in an instant, in an instant that no doubt does not belong to the economy of time, in a time without time, in such a way that the forgetting forgets, that it forgets *itself*, but also in such a way that this forgetting, without being something present, presentable, determinable, sensible, or meaningful, is not nothing. What this forgetting and this forgetting of forgetting would therefore give us to think is something other than a philosophical, psychological, or psychoanalytic category. It does not give us to think the possibility of the gift; on the contrary, it is on the basis of what takes shape in the name *gift* that one could *hope* thus to think forgetting. For there to be forgetting in this sense, there must be gift. The gift would be the *condition* of forgetting. By condition, let us not understand merely “condition of possibility,” system of premises or even of causes, but a set of traits defining a given

6. For example, in *Feu la cendre* (Paris, 1987) and the other texts intersecting with it at the point where, precisely, a certain “il y a là” [“there is there”] intersects with the giving of the gift (pp. 57, 60ff.).

situation in which something, or “that” [“ça”], is established (as one says “the human condition,” “the social condition,” and so forth). We are not talking therefore about conditions in the sense of conditions posed (since forgetting and gift, if there is any, are in this sense unconditional),<sup>7</sup> but in the sense in which forgetting would be in the *condition of the gift* and the gift in the *condition of forgetting*; one might say on the mode of being of forgetting, if “mode” and “mode of being” did not belong to an ontological grammar that is exceeded by what we are trying to talk about here, that is, the gift and forgetting. But such is the condition of all the words that we will be using here, of all the words given in our language—and this linguistic problem, let us say rather this problem of language before linguistics, will naturally be our obsession here.

Forgetting and the gift would therefore be each in the condition of the other. This already puts us on the path to be followed. Not a particular path leading here or there, but on *the path*, on the *Weg* or *Bewegen* (path, to move along a path, to cut a path) which, leading nowhere, marks the step that Heidegger does not distinguish from thought. The thought on whose path we are, the thought as path or as movement along a path is precisely what is related to that *forgetting* that Heidegger does not name as a psychological or psychoanalytic category but as the condition of Being and of the truth of Being. This truth of Being or of the meaning of Being was foreshadowed, for Heidegger, on the basis of a question of Being posed, beginning with the first part of *Sein und Zeit*, in the transcendental horizon of the question of time. The explicitation of time thus forms the horizon of the question of Being as question of presence. The first line of *Sein und Zeit* says of this question that it “has today fallen into oblivion [*in Vergessenheit*]. Even though in our time [*unsere Zeit*] we deem it progressive to give our approval to ‘metaphysics’ again. . . .”

Here we must be content with the most preliminary and minimal selection within the Heideggerian trajectory, and we will limit ourselves to

7. Of course, this unconditionality must be absolute and uncircumscribed. It must not be simply declared and in fact dependent in its turn on the condition of some context, or some proximity or family tie, be it general or specific (among human beings, for example, to the exclusion of, for example, “animals”). Can there be any gift *within the family*? But has the gift ever been thought *without the family*? As for the unconditionality evoked by Lewis Hyde, it is explicitly limited to gifts among close friends, relatives, and most often close relatives. Which is to say that it is not what it is or claims to be: unconditional. This is what the literature on “organ donation” brings out. One of these studies records that the son who donates a kidney to his mother does not want any gratitude from her because she had borne him in the first place. Another who donates to his brother insists that the latter should not feel either indebted or grateful: “those who prize their closeness to the recipient are careful to make it clear that the gift is not conditional.” Earlier, it had been pointed out that if, in fact, something comes back, after the gift, if a restitution takes place, the gift would nevertheless cease to be a gift from the moment this return would be its “explicit condition” (Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* [New York, 1983], pp. 69, 9; hereafter abbreviated TG).

situating that which links the question of time to the question of the gift, and then both of them to a singular thinking of forgetting. In fact, forgetting plays an essential role that aligns it with the very movement of history and of the truth of Being (*Sein*) which is nothing since it is not, since it is not being (*Seiendes*), that is, being present or present being. Metaphysics would have interpreted Being (*Sein*) as being present/present being only on the basis of, precisely, a preinterpretation of time, which preinterpretation grants an absolute privilege to the now-present, to the temporal ecstasy named present. That is why the transcendental question of time (and within it a new existential analysis of the temporality of *Dasein*) was the privileged horizon for a reelaboration of the question of Being. Now, as we know, this movement that consisted in interrogating the question of Being within the transcendental horizon of time was not interrupted (even though *Sein und Zeit* was halted after the first half and even though Heidegger attributed this interruption to certain difficulties linked to the language and the grammar of metaphysics), but led off toward another turn or turning (*Kehre*). After this turning, it will not be a matter of subordinating the question of Being to the question of the *Ereignis*, a difficult word to translate (event or appropriation that is inseparable from a movement of disappropriation, *Enteignen*). This word *Ereignis*, which commonly signifies event, signals toward a thinking of appropriation or of deappropriation that cannot be unrelated to that of the gift. So from now on it will not be a matter of subordinating, through a purely logical inversion, the question of Being to that of *Ereignis*, but of conditioning them otherwise one by the other, one with the other. Heidegger sometimes says that Being (*das Seyn* in an archaic spelling that attempts to recall the word to a more thinking—*denkerisch*—mode) is *Er-eignis*.<sup>8</sup> And it is in the course of this movement that Being (*Sein*)—which is not, which does not exist as being present, present being—is signalled on the basis of the gift.

This is played out around the German expression *es gibt*, which, moreover, in *Sein und Zeit* (1928) had made a first, discreet appearance that was already obeying the same necessity.<sup>9</sup> We translate the idiomatic locution *es gibt Sein* and *es gibt Zeit* by “il y a l’être” in French and in English “there is Being” (Being is not but there is Being), “il y a le temps,” “there is time” (time is not but there is time). Heidegger tries to get us to hear in this [*nous donner à y entendre*] the “it gives,” or as one might say in French, in a more

8. See for example Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, vol. 65 of *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main, 1989). A French translation of §267 has recently been proposed by Jean Greisch, in *Rue Descartes*, no. 1, an issue titled “Des Grecs” (Apr. 1991): 213ff. Beginning with the first pages of the *Vorblick*, a certain *Ereignis* is defined as the truth of Being [*die Wahrheit des Seyns*]: “L’être est l’*Ereignis* [*Das Seyn ist das Er-eignis*]” (§267; p. 470); or again: “L’être est (este, s’essencie) comme l’*Ereignis* [*Das Seyn west als Ereignis*]” (§10; p. 30).

9. We will come back to this point much later, in the second volume of *Donner le temps*, when we approach a reading of *Time and Being* and other related texts.



neutral but not negative fashion, “ça donne,” an “it gives” that would not form an utterance in the propositional structure of Greco-Latin grammar, that is, bearing on present being and in the subject-predicate relation (S/P). The enigma is concentrated both in the “it” or rather the “es,” the “ça” of “ça donne,” which is not a thing, and in this giving that gives but without giving anything and without anyone giving anything—nothing but Being and time (which are nothing). In *Zeit und Sein* (1952), Heidegger’s attention bears down on the giving (*Geben*) or the gift (*Gabe*) implied by the *es gibt*. From the beginning of the meditation, Heidegger recalls, if one can put it this way, that in itself time is nothing temporal, since it is nothing, since it is not a thing (*kein Ding*). The temporality of time is not temporal, no more than proximity is proximate or treeness is woody. He also recalls that Being is not (being present/present being), being that it is not something (*kein Ding*), and that therefore one cannot say either “time is” or “Being is,” but “es gibt Sein” and “es gibt Zeit.” It would thus be necessary to think a thing, something (*Sache* and not *Ding*, a *Sache* that would not be a *being*) that would be Being and time but would not be either a being or a temporal thing: “Sein—eine Sache, aber nichts Seiendes. Zeit—eine Sache, aber nichts Zeitliches” [“Being—a thing in question, but not a being. Time—a thing in question, but nothing temporal”]. He then adds this, which we read in translation for better or worse:

In order to get beyond the idiom and back to the matter [*Sache*], we must show how this “there is” [*es gibt*] can be experienced [*erfahren*] and seen [*erblicken*]. The appropriate way [*der geeignete Weg*] to get there is to explain [elucidate, localize: *erörtern*] what is given [*gegeben*] in the “It gives” [*Es gibt*], what “Being” means, which—It gives [*das—Es gibt*]; what “time” means, which—It gives [*das—Es gibt*]. Accordingly, we try to look ahead [*vorblicken*] to the It [*Es*] which—gives [*gibt*] Being [*Sein*] and time [*Zeit*]. Thus looking ahead, we become foresighted in still another sense. We try to bring the It [*Es*] and its giving [*Geben*] into view, and capitalize the “It” [*Es*].<sup>10</sup>

And after having thus written the “It gives Being” and “It gives time,” “there is Being” and “there is time,” Heidegger in a certain way asks the question of what it is in this gift or in this “there is” that relates time to Being, conditions them, we would now say, one to the other. And he writes:

First, we shall think [in the trace of: *nach*] Being in order to think It itself into its own element [*um es selbst in sein Eigenes zu denken*].

Then, we shall think [in the trace of: *nach*] time in order to think it itself into its own element.

In this way, the manner must become clear how there is, It gives [*Es gibt*] Being and how there is, It gives [*Es gibt*] time. In this giving

10. Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York, 1972), p. 5.

[*Geben*; in this “y avoir” *qui donne*, says the French translation; in this “there Being” that gives, one might say in English], it becomes apparent [*ersichtlich*] how that giving [*Geben*] is to be determined which, as a relation [*Verhältnis*], first holds [*hält*] the two toward each other and brings them into being [*und sie er-gibt*; by producing them or obtaining them as the result of a donation, in some sort: the *es* gives Being and gives time by giving them one to the other insofar as it holds (*hält*) them together in a relation (*Verhältnis*) one to the other].<sup>11</sup>

In the very position of this question, in the formulation of the project or the design of thinking, namely, the “in order to” (we think “in order to” [*um . . . zu*] think Being and time in their “own element” [*in sein Eigenes, in ihr Eigenes*]), the desire to accede to the proper is already, we could say, surreptitiously ordered by Heidegger according to the dimension of “giving.” And reciprocally. What would it mean to think the gift, Being, and time *properly* in that which is most proper to them or in that which is properly their own, that is, what they can give and give over to the movements of appropriation, expropriation, de-appropriation, or appropriation? Can one ask these questions without anticipating a thought, even a desire of the proper? A desire to accede to the property of the proper? Is this a circle? Is there any other definition of desire? In that case, how to enter into such a circle or how to get out of it? Are the entrance and the exit the only two modalities of our inscription in the circle? Is this circle itself inscribed in the interlacing of a *Geflecht* of which it forms but one figure? These are so many threads to be pursued.

The only thread that we will retain here, for the moment, is that of *play*. Whether it is a matter of Being, of time, or of their deployment in presence (*Anwesen*), the *es gibt* plays (*spielt*), says Heidegger, in the movement of the *Entbergen*, in that which frees from the withdrawal [*retrait*], the withdrawal of the withdrawal, when what is hidden shows itself or what is sheltered appears. The *play* (*Zuspiel*) also marks, works on, manifests the unity of the three dimensions of time, which is to say a fourth dimension: The “giving” of the *es gibt Zeit* belongs to the play of this “quadridimensionality,” to this *properness* of time that would thus be quadridimensional. “True time [authentic time: *die eigentliche Zeit*],” says Heidegger, “is four-dimensional [*vierdimensional*].” This fourth dimension, as Heidegger makes clear, is not a figure, it is not a manner of speaking or of counting; it is said of the thing itself, on the basis of the thing itself (*aus der Sache*) and not only “so to speak.” This thing itself of time implies the play of the four and the play of the gift.

Faced with this play of *fours*, of the four, as play of the gift, one thinks of the hand dealt by this game [*la donne de ce jeu*], of the locution “ça donne” (it gives), of the French imperative “donne” that, given by gram-

11. Ibid.

mar to be an imperative, perhaps says something other than an order, a desire, or a demand. And then one thinks of *la dona*, of the woman who has been soliciting us since the epigraph, of all the questions of language that are crossing, in German and in French, in the locutions *es gibt* and *ça donne*. Thinking of all that and the rest, we will also evoke a very fine book by Lucette Finas<sup>12</sup> which interlaces all these motifs: the *aléa*, the play of the four [*quatre*] and of cards [*cartes*], the verb *give*, the locution *ça donne* (for example, when it is said in French of a purulent body). All these motifs and a few others find themselves woven into a narration, into a narration of narration or into a passion of narration. Later, we will have to recognize that the question of *récit* and of literature is at the heart of all those we are talking about now. Finas's novel knots all these threads into the absolute idiom, the effect of the absolute idiom, which is a proper name (*Donne* is a proper name in the novel), a proper name without which perhaps there would never be either a narration effect or a gift effect. Even though we do not meet Heidegger in person in this novel, it is hard to resist the impression that he is hiding behind a series of men's proper names whose initial, with its German assonance, is H.

This detour was meant first of all to remind us that the forgetting we are talking about, if it is constitutive of the gift, is no longer a category of the *psyche*. It cannot be unrelated to the forgetting of Being, in the sense in which Blanchot also says, more or less, that forgetting is another name of Being.

As the condition for a gift to be given, this forgetting must be radical not only on the part of the donee but first of all, if one can say here first of all, on the part of the donor. It is also on the part of the donor "subject" that the gift not only must not be repaid but must not be kept in memory, retained as symbol of a sacrifice, as symbolic in general. For the symbol immediately engages one in restitution. To tell the truth, the gift must not even appear or signify, consciously or unconsciously, *as* gift for the donors, whether individual or collective subjects. From the moment the gift appeared as gift, as such, as what it is, in its phenomenon, its sense and its essence, it would be engaged in a symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure that would annul the gift in the ritual circle of the debt. The simple intention to give, insofar as it carries the intentional meaning of the gift, suffices to make a return payment to oneself. The simple consciousness of the gift right away sends itself back the gratifying image of goodness or generosity, of the giving-being who, knowing itself to be such, recognizes itself in a circular, specular fashion, in a sort of auto-recognition, self-approval, and narcissistic gratitude.

And this is produced as soon as there is a subject, as soon as donor and donee are constituted as identical, identifiable subjects, capable of identifying themselves by keeping and naming themselves. It is even a matter

12. See Lucette Finas, *Donne* (Paris, 1976).

there, in this circle, of the movement of subjectivization, of the constitutive retention of the subject that identifies with itself. The becoming subject then reckons with itself; it enters into the realm of the calculable as subject. That is why if there is gift, the gift cannot take place between two subjects exchanging objects, things, or symbols. The question of the gift should therefore seek its place before any relation to the subject, before any conscious or unconscious relation to self of the subject—and that is indeed what happens with Heidegger when he goes back before the determinations of Being as substantial being, subject or object. One would even be tempted to say that a subject as such never gives or receives a gift. It is constituted, on the contrary, in view of dominating, through calculation and exchange, the mastery of this *hubris* or of this impossibility that is announced in the promise of the gift. There where there is 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: arrests of the gift. At the zero or infinite speed of the circle.

If the gift is annulled in the economic odyssey of the circle as soon as it appears *as* gift or as soon as it signifies *itself as* gift, there is no longer any “logic of the gift,” and one may safely say that a consistent discourse on the gift becomes impossible: It misses its object and always speaks, finally, of something else. One could go so far as to say that a book as monumental as Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* speaks of everything but the gift: It deals with economy, exchange, contract (*do ut des*), of raising the stakes, of sacrifice, of gift *and* of countergift—in short, of everything that in the thing itself impels the gift *and* the annulment of the gift. All the gift supplements (potlatch, transgressions and excesses, surplus values, the necessity to give or give back more, returns with interest, in short, the whole sacrificial bidding war) are destined to bring about once again the circle in which they are annulled. Moreover, this figure of the circle is evoked *literally* by Mauss (literally in French since I am for the moment setting aside an essential problem of translation to which we will return). On the subject of the Kula, a kind of “great potlatch” practiced in the Trobriand Islands and the “vehicle of a great inter-tribal trade extending over all the Trobriands,” Mauss writes:

Malinowski does not give a translation of the word, which probably means “circle”; and in fact it seems as if all these tribes, these marine expeditions, these precious objects and objects of ordinary use, this food and these feasts, these services of all sorts, ritual and sexual, these men and women, were caught in a *circle\** around which they kept up a *regular movement* in time and space. \*Note: M. Malinowski has a fondness for the expression “*kula ring*.”<sup>13</sup>

13. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York, 1967), p. 20; italics added; hereafter abbreviated G. [As this

Let us take this first reference to Mauss as a pretext for indicating right away the two types of questions that will be guiding our reading.

1. The question of language or rather of languages. How is one to legitimate the translations thanks to which Mauss circulates and travels, identifying from one culture to another what he understands by gift, what he calls *gift*? He does this essentially on the basis of the Latin language and of Roman law. The latter plays a singular role throughout the essay, but Mauss also takes into account German law, which is the occasion for him to remark that the "serious study of the extensive German vocabulary of words derived from *geben* and *gaben* [has] yet to be undertaken" (*G*, p. 251). This question of the idiom, as we shall see, is in itself a question of gift in a rather unusual sense that amounts to neither the gift of languages nor the gift of language.

2. The second type of question cannot be separated from the first, in its widest generality. It would come down to asking oneself in effect: what and who Mauss is talking about in the end? What is the semantic horizon of anticipation that authorizes him to gather together or compare so many phenomena of diverse sorts, belonging to different cultures, manifesting themselves in heterogeneous languages, under the unique and supposedly identifiable category of gift, under the sign of "gift"? What remains problematic is not only the *unity* of this semantic horizon, that is, the presumed identity of a meaning that operates as general translator or equivalent, but the very existence of something like *the* gift, that is, the common referent of this sign, which is itself uncertain. If what Mauss demonstrates, one way or the other, is indeed that every gift is caught in the round or the contract of usury, then not only the unity of the meaning "gift" remains doubtful but, on the hypothesis that giving would have a *meaning* and *one* meaning, it is still the possibility of an effective existence, of an effectuation or an event of the gift that seems

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translation is throughout at best approximate and incomplete, I have modified it considerably.—TRANS.] This circle of the Kula Ring is evoked at length by Hyde at the beginning of a chapter that is itself titled "The Circle" and that opens with these words from Whitman: "The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him—it cannot fail" (quoted in *TG*, p. 11). In a later chapter, we will evoke once again the scene of the gift and the debt, not as it is studied scientifically, but rather as it is first of all lived, acted out, assumed, or denied by French sociologists. Let us note here, at the point of citing the work of Americans who are themselves "indebted" to Mauss, that they extend this chain of the debt in a manner that is just as necessary and as paradoxical. Hyde notes that Mauss's essay was the "point of departure" for all the research on exchange over the last half-century. Citing as well Raymond Firth and Claude Lévi-Strauss, he recognizes a particular debt to Marshall Sahlins, notably to the chapter titled "The Spirit of the Gift" in Sahlins's *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, 1972), which "applies a rigorous *explication de texte*" to Mauss's sources and situates "Mauss's ideas in the history of political philosophy. It was through Sahlins's writings that I first began to see the possibility of my own work, and I am much indebted to him" (*TG*, p. xv).

excluded. Now, this problematic of the difference (in the sense that we evoked earlier) between “the gift exists” and “there is gift” is never, as we know, deployed or even approached by Mauss, no more than it seems to be, at least to my knowledge, by the anthropologists who come after him or refer to him. Questions of this type should be articulated with other questions that concern the metalinguistic or meta-ethnological conceptuality orienting this discourse, the category of totality (“total social fact”), the political, economic, and juridical ideology organizing the classification and the evaluation, for example, the one that permits Mauss, at the end (it is especially at the end that these evaluations are openly declared) to say that “segmented” societies—Indo-European societies, Roman society before the Twelve Tables, Germanic societies up to the writing of the *Edda*, Irish society up to the writing of its “chief literature”—were ones in which individuals were “less morose, less serious, less avaricious and selfish than we are; externally at least they were or are more generous and more giving than we are” (*G*, p. 79).

Everything thus seems to lead us back toward the paradox or the aporia of a nuclear proposition in the form of the “if . . . then”: If the gift appears or signifies itself, if it exists or if it is presently *as gift*, as what it is, then it is not, it annuls itself. Let us go to the limit: The truth of the gift (its being or its appearing such, its *as such* insofar as it guides the intentional signification or the meaning) suffices to annul the gift. The truth of the gift is equivalent to the nongift or to the nontruth of the gift. This proposition obviously defies common sense. That is why it is caught in the impossible of a very singular double bind, the bond without bond of a bind and a nonbind. On the one hand, Mauss reminds us that there is no gift without bond, without bind, without border, without obligation or ligature; but, on the other hand, there is no gift that does not have to untie itself from obligation, from debt, contract, exchange, and thus from the bind.

But, after all, what would be a gift that fulfills the condition of the gift, namely, that it not appear as gift, that it not be, exist, signify, want-to-say as gift? A gift without wanting, without wanting-to-say, an insignificant gift, a gift without intention to give? Why would we still call that a gift? That, which is to say what?

In other words, what are we thinking when we require simultaneously of the gift that it appear and that it not appear in its essence, in what it has to be, in what it is to be, in what it will have had to be (in its *to ti en einai* or in its *quidditas*)? That it obligate and not obligate? That it be and not be that for which it is given? What does “to give” mean to say? And what does language give one to think with this word? And what does “to give” mean to say in *the case* of language, of thinking and of meaning-to-say?

It so happens (but this “it so happens” does not name the fortuitous) that the structure of this impossible of the *gift* is also that of Being—which gives itself to be thought on the condition of being nothing (no present

being, no being present)—and of time that, even in what is called its “vulgar” determination, from Aristotle to Heidegger, is always defined in the paradoxia or rather the aporia of what is without being, of what is never present or what is only scarcely and dimly. Once again let us refer to all the texts, notably those of Aristotle, that are cited in “*Ousia and Grammē*,” beginning with the Fourth Book of the *Physics* which says, in the exoteric phase of its discourse, *dia tōn exoterikōn logōn*, that time “is not at all or only scarcely and dimly is [*holōs ouk estin ē molis kai amudrōs*].” Such is the aporetic effect—the “what does not pass” or “what does not happen”—of time defined on the basis of the *nun*, of the now, as *peras*, limite, and as *stigmē*, the point of the instant. “Some of it has been and is not [*gegone kai ouk esti*], some of it is to be and is not yet [*mellei kai oupō estin*]. From these both infinite time [*apeiros*] and any arbitrary time [time in its incessant return; *aei lambanomenos*] are composed. But it would seem to be impossible that what is composed of things that are not should participate in being [*ousia*].”<sup>14</sup>

We will not analyze here the context and the situation of this proposition called exoteric. Let us take it simply as a marker in the history of an aporetic that will become law and tradition: From the moment time is apprehended on the basis of the *present* now as general form and only modifiable or modalizable in such a way that the past and the future are still presents-past and presents-to-come, this predetermination entails the aporetic of a time that is not, of a time that is what it is *without being (it)* [sans l’être], that is not what it is and that is what it is not: which is to be it *without being (it)*.

If it shares this aporetic paralysis with the gift, if neither the gift nor time exist as such, then the gift that *there can be* [*qu’il peut y avoir*] cannot in any case *give time*, since it is nothing. If there is something that can in no case be given, it is time, since it is nothing and since in any case it does not properly belong to anyone; if certain persons or certain social classes have more time than others—and this is finally the most serious stake of political economy—it is certainly not *time itself* that they possess. But inversely, if giving implies in all rigor that one gives nothing that is and that appears as such—determined thing, object, symbol—if the gift is the gift of the giving itself and nothing else, then how to give time? This idiomatic locution, “to give time,” seems to mean in common usage “leave time for something, leave time to do something, to fill time with this or that.” As usual, it intends less time itself and properly speaking than the temporal or what there is in time. “To give time” in this sense commonly means to give something other than time but something other that is measured by time as by its element. Beyond this historical hardening or sedimentation, perhaps the idiomatic locution “to give time” gives

14. Aristotle, *Physics* 4.10.217<sup>b</sup>–18<sup>a</sup>, in *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. J. L. Ackrill (Princeton, N.J., 1989), p. 122.

one at least to think—to think the singular or double condition both of the gift and of time.

*What there is to give, uniquely, would be called time.*

What there is *to give*, uniquely, would be called time.

What there is to give, uniquely, *would be called time.*

For finally, if the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it. We intend it. And this even if—or because or to the extent that—we *never* encounter it, we never know it, we never verify it, we never experience it in its present existence or in its phenomenon. The gift *itself*—we dare not say the gift *in itself*—will never be confused with the presence of its phenomenon. Perhaps there is nomination, language, thought, desire, or intention only there where there is this movement still for thinking, desiring, naming that which gives itself neither to be known, experienced, nor lived—in the sense in which presence, existence, determination regulate the economy of knowing, experiencing, and living. In this sense one can think, desire, and say only the impossible, according to the measureless measure of the impossible.<sup>15</sup> If one wants to recapture the proper element of thinking, naming, desiring, it is perhaps according to the measureless measure of this limit that it is possible, possible as relation without relation to the impossible. One can desire, name, think in the proper sense of these words, if there is one, *only* to the *immeasuring* extent [*dans la mesure démesurante*] that one desires, names, thinks *still* or *already*, that one still lets announce itself what nevertheless cannot *present itself* as such to experience, to knowing: in short, here *a gift that cannot make itself (a) present* [un don qui ne peut pas se faire présent]. This gap between, on the one hand, thought, language, and desire and, on the other hand, knowledge, philosophy, science, and the order of presence is also a gap between the gift and economy. This gap is not present anywhere; it resembles an empty word or a transcendental illusion. But it also gives to this structure or to this logic a form analogous to Kant's transcendental dialectic, as relation between thinking and knowing, the noumenal and the phenomenal. Perhaps this analogy will help us and perhaps it has an essential relation to the problem of "giving-time."

We are going to give ourselves over to and engage in the effort of thinking or rethinking a sort of transcendental illusion of the gift. For in order to think the gift, a *theory of the gift* is powerless by its very essence. One must engage oneself in this thinking, commit oneself to it, give it tokens of faith [*gages*], and with one's person, risk entering into the destructive circle. One must promise and swear. The effort of thinking or

15. On the singular modality, of this "impossible," permit me to refer to my *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris, 1987), pp. 26–59; *Mémoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, and Eduardo Cadava (New York, 1986), p. 35ff.; and *L'Autre Cap* (Paris, 1991), p. 46ff.



rethinking a sort of transcendental illusion of the gift should not be a simple reproduction of Kant's critical machinery (according to the opposition between thinking and knowing, and so forth). But neither is it a matter of rejecting that machinery as old-fashioned. In any case, we are implicated in it, in particular because of that which communicates, in this dialectic, with the problem of time on one side, that of the moral law and of practical reason on the other side. But the effort to think the groundless ground of this quasi-"transcendental illusion" should not be either—if it is going to be a matter of *thinking*—a sort of adoring and faithful abdication, a simple movement of faith in the face of that which exceeds the limits of experience, knowledge, science, economy—and even philosophy. On the contrary—desire beyond desire—it is a matter of responding faithfully but as rigorously as possible both to the injunction or the order of the *gift* ("give" ["*donne*"]) as well as to the injunction or the order of meaning (presence, science, knowledge): *Know* still what giving *wants to say*, *know how to give*, know what you want and want to say when you give, know what you intend to give, know how the gift annuls itself, commit yourself even if commitment is the destruction of the gift by the gift, give economy its chance.

For finally, the overrunning of the circle by the gift, if there is any, does not lead to a simple, ineffable exteriority that would be transcendent and without relation. It is this exteriority that sets the circle going; it is this exteriority that puts the economy in motion. It is this exteriority that *engages* in the circle and makes it turn. If one must *render an account* (to science, to reason, to philosophy, to the economy of meaning) of the circle effects in which a gift gets annulled, this account-rendering requires that one take into account that which, while not simply belonging to the circle, engages in it and sets off its motion. What is the gift as the first mover of the circle? And how does it contract itself into a circular contract? And from what place? Since when? From whom?

That is the contract, between us, for this cycle of lectures. (Recall that Mauss's *The Gift* has its premises in his work and that of Georges Davy on the contract and on sworn faith.)<sup>16</sup>

Even if the gift were never anything but a simulacrum, one must still *render an account* of the possibility of this simulacrum and of the desire that impels toward this simulacrum. And one must also render an account of the desire to render an account. This cannot be done against or without the *principle of reason* (*principium reddendae rationis*), even if the latter finds there its limit as well as its resource. Otherwise, why would I commit myself—making it an obligation for myself—to speak and to render an account? Whence comes the law that obligates one to give even as one ren-

16. See Georges Davy, *La Foi jurée: Étude sociologique du problème du contrat, la formation du lien contractuel* (Paris, 1922), and Mauss, "Une Forme ancienne de contrat chez les Thraces," *Revue des études grecques*, no. 24 (1921): 388–97.

ders an account of the gift? In other words, to *answer* [répondre] still for a gift that calls one beyond all responsibility? And that forbids one to forgive whoever *does not know how to give*?

"I will never forgive him the ineptitude of his calculation," concludes the narrator of "Counterfeit Money," the brief story by Baudelaire that we will read together. Was he reproaching his friend in sum for not having *known how to give*? That is one of the questions waiting for us. Here is "Counterfeit Money":

As we were leaving the tobacconist's, my friend carefully separated his change; in the left pocket of his waistcoat he slipped small gold pieces; in the right, small silver pieces; in his left trouser pocket, a handful of pennies and, finally, in the right he put a silver two-franc piece that he had scrutinized with particular care.

"What a singularly minute distribution!" I said to myself.

We encountered a poor man who held out his cap with a trembling hand.—I know nothing more disquieting than the mute eloquence of those supplicating eyes that contain at once, for the sensitive man who knows how to read them, so much humility and so much reproach. He finds there something close to the depth of complicated feeling one sees in the tear-filled eyes of a dog being beaten.

My friend's offering was considerably larger than mine, and I said to him: "You are right; next to the pleasure of feeling surprise, there is none greater than to cause a surprise." "It was the counterfeit coin," he calmly replied as though to justify himself for his prodigality.

But into my miserable brain, always concerned with looking for noon at two o'clock (what an exhausting faculty is nature's gift to me), there suddenly came the idea that such conduct on my friend's part was excusable only by the desire to create an event in this poor devil's life, perhaps even to learn the varied consequences, disastrous or otherwise, that a counterfeit coin in the hands of a beggar might engender. Might it not multiply into real coins? Could it not also lead him to prison? A tavern keeper, a baker, for example, was perhaps going to have him arrested as a counterfeiter or for passing counterfeit money. The counterfeit coin could just as well, perhaps, be the germ of several days' wealth for a poor little speculator. And so my fancy went its course, lending wings to my friend's mind and drawing all possible deductions from all possible hypotheses.

But the latter suddenly shattered my reverie by repeating my own words: "Yes, you are right; there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he hopes for."

I looked him squarely in the eyes and I was appalled to see that his eyes shone with unquestionable candor. I then saw clearly that his aim had been to do a good deed while at the same time making a good deal; to earn forty cents and the heart of God; to win paradise economically; in short, to pick up gratis the certificate of a charitable

man. I could have almost forgiven him the desire for the criminal enjoyment of which a moment before I assumed him capable; I would have found something bizarre, singular in his amusing himself by compromising the poor; but I will never forgive him the ineptitude of his calculation. To be mean is never excusable, but there is some merit in knowing that one is; the most irreparable of vices is to do evil out of stupidity.<sup>17</sup>

17. Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York, 1970), pp. 58–59; translation modified.