

Accompanying Exhibition Text for *Between the Gift and its Reprisal*

Julia Lomas

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.

1. Baggage.

In *Given Time: Counterfeit Money* (1992) Derrida interprets two sources, Marcel Mauss's ethnographic research, documented in his essay, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1925) and a short story by Charles Baudelaire, *Counterfeit Money* (1869).<sup>1</sup> *The Gift*, republished in France in a new edition in 1950, had introduced Mauss's study of the Potlatch ceremony - a gift-giving festival traditionally practiced in the Pacific North-West - to a French intellectual class grappling with questions of post-war capitalism.<sup>2</sup> What was seductive about this notion for these groups was that the logic of Potlatch was not about accumulation, but dissipation, with the ultimate consequence that in order to secure or maintain status, a leader may have to give until nothing more was left. Both the Lettrist International (an earlier manifestation of the Situationists) and the philosopher Georges Bataille valorised Potlatch as a model for an anti-capitalist economy.<sup>3</sup> The other source, Baudelaire's tale, tells the story of two friends who stop outside a tobacco shop. They are approached by a man who beseeches them for money. Remarking that his friend had been generous to give away a large sum, the narrator is surprised when his companion brushes this off with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). Baudelaire's short story is also reproduced in full within this book, see pp 31-33. For a copy of Mauss's text, see Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Jan Bryant, who generously shared this explanation of the significance of potlatch to the Situationists with me.

<sup>3</sup> Bataille used it to formulate his analysis of waste, See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share. An Essay on General Economy* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1988), 63.

explanation that the large silver franc he had gifted had in fact been counterfeit. He is then stunned to realise that his companion had felt that by giving a counterfeit coin to a 'beggar', he was, wholeheartedly and without any sense of inner compromise, doing both a good turn to a needy person, while also saving himself the disbursement of actually giving anything away.

Derrida turns to this story to first ask if the narrator was rebuking his friend for not knowing how to give.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the whole of Derrida's text is a foray into gifting as both poison and remedy.<sup>5</sup> For example, giving one's word, giving up and/or giving one up to the police, giving one's hand in marriage, to give birth, to give time; in all cases, "the gift that gives is not a given".<sup>6</sup> It is the giving of alms (giving of oneself?) that Derrida takes on with regard to the Baudelaire story. In this story, a hostile relation is introduced between the asker and the gifter, a relation that is underlined by the trick of the counterfeit coin. Staying with nineteenth-century French poets, Stéphane Mallarmé also wrote four drafts of a poem on the subject of giving alms, each of them establishing a combative position between donor and donee, and Derrida also uses Mallarmé's poem, *Aumône* (Alms) to further understand this relation.

But before he moves to the subject of Baudelaire's text, Derrida has already established the impracticality of the gift. Working through the 1925 study of the Potlatch ceremony by Marcel Mauss, he carries out a close analysis of a line running through Mauss's text: the 'impossible' nature of the gift. To illustrate this impossibility, Derrida's analysis begins with an anecdote relating to Louis XIV, the King who 'takes all time'.<sup>7</sup> Though the King takes all her time, his lover, Madame de Maintenon, gives the rest to Saint-Cyr, a charitable institution to whom she would like to 'give all.' Beginning with this logically unworkable statement, Derrida observes that 'giving time' is the only manner by which a gift could be possible, because as soon as a gift is given, it is recognised. In this cognition it then

---

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, *Counterfeit Money*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> For Derrida, as *pharmakon*, a concept he develops in Plato's Pharmacy. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 67-154.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, *Counterfeit Money*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

ceases to be a gift, and becomes an object that must be conceded to in some manner by its recipient. As such, the gift is thus dissolved. Derrida establishes a relationship between the gift and temporal suspension, or what he calls effraction. Gifts can only ever give time, a delay, in between the gift and its reprisal by the recipient. For once the gift is recognised, it is then placed back into the circuit of exchange, restitution, compensation, and is thereby annulled:

For there to be a gift then, not only must the donor or donee not perceive or receive the gift as such, have no consciousness of it, no memory, no recognition; [they] must also forget it right away (à la instant) and moreover this forgetting must be so radical that it exceeds even the psychoanalytic category of forgetting. [...] 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.<sup>8</sup>

This text is an attempt to work through some of the attendances of gifting. To undress gifts from their wrapping, to step through all the hostility of the gift, to unravel the tissue. And then to set them down like so much cumbersome baggage. Could the exhibition then stand free of it? This must be a hopeless wish, because the exhibition has itself been named for it.

But the command to forget, the command given to forget is a strange command, whose very structure remains as maddened as it is maddening:

Do not suppose that I am talking madness  
The earth opens up old to one dying of hunger  
I hate another alms and want you to forget me.  
And most of all, brother, do not go buy bread.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, Counterfeit Money, 56.

In the poem by Mallarmé that Derrida refers to, the narrator addresses the donee, entreating that they won't convert the gift of alms into the usefulness of bread, "it asks that the gift not be converted into its equivalent merchandise, into some useful goods."<sup>10</sup>

Let us then merely underscore the structure of an impossible command: "I want you to forget me".<sup>11</sup>

Between The Gift and its Reprisal.

\*

2. Rebuke.

Of course, also, we are in Aotearoa, where we know and understand koha and utu as differentiated concepts of offerings, reciprocity, balance and response. It is then almost too perfect to realise that in his path through Mauss's text, Derrida uncovers the following whakataukī;

Ko maru kai atu, ko maru kai mai, ka ngohengohe  
Give as well as take, and all is well.

But all is not well, because Mauss is an anthropologist, taking what is not his - traditions of reciprocity across cultures in both the north and south-west Pacific - and plying them into his own formulas for a moral economy. Sensing some of this perhaps, Derrida is scathing in his assessment of Mauss's concluding chapter. He begins by noting that Mauss concludes his study by excusing himself:

This may seem strange.  
But since he has a good excuse, he does not have to ask forgiveness.  
Without waiting for the reader's reply, he takes the liberty of excusing himself.

[...]

One first has the feeling that, in his view, a sociologist, a theoretician, a scholar guided by a principle of objectivity and neutrality should not take sides, should not be involved or committed [engage]. He should not give any token [gage] in the debate or in the problem. In this scene, he should not occupy a position (take a position, as one

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

says) in order to try to win, to win his case, as if the normative ideal for whoever would speak scientifically—for instance of the gift—were to neither give nor take, nor to make of one's scientific discourse a piece of the analysed structure [...].<sup>12</sup>

Because for all that obfuscation by Mauss the theoretician, the anthropologist, the finding of his 'Moral Economy' is to attempt to define the right rule, the good economy of "not too much", an economy that then allows the individual to work, and to, "to rely upon himself rather than upon others".<sup>13</sup> And this, this "new morality", "will surely consist of a good but moderate blend of reality and the ideal."<sup>14</sup>

It is thus because of his researches into the gift, supplies Derrida, that the anthropologist has learned of the "gift that is too good." And, it is the very excess of generosity in the gift - which is the only condition of a pure and good gift - that "turns into the bad; it is even the worst."<sup>15</sup>

Generosity could then almost be figured as a threatening and destabilising spectre, an element that may be encouraged, but must always be moderated. Where post-war French theorists later saw in *The Gift* the germ of a revolutionary possibility of excess, for festivals of destruction that might refute the oppression of commodity culture, Mauss seems to have advocated for a politics of moralism that will impart a civic sense of duty, of giving, "but not too much".

But we can now turn then, hopefully, away from Mauss and his proto-Thatcherist austerity politics. We can go instead back to Baudelaire, my favourite bad son, bad guest, bad actor.

\*

### 3. Spleen.

Whether or not he is being the painter of modern life or writing poetry and/or also offensively writing about - insert here: women, sex work, make-up, the city of Brussels, etc - objects he was in compelled and fixated

---

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *Counterfeit Money*, 60.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

obedience to, Baudelaire is also perhaps one of the greatest shit-posters of his time.

Counterfeit Money, is as Derrida observes over several pages, itself a counterfeit. One of the blinds of its fiction is that the reader will never indeed know if the coin was indeed a true fake; for what is there to positively prove that the narrator's companion indeed gave away a false coin? But leaving this matter aside, the story offers many opportunities for considering the relative ethics of giving, and of recognition and reprisal. What I want to attend to is the obscured ethics of self-knowledge. The narrator of Baudelaire's story is not repulsed by the deviousness of the counterfeit, in fact, he first assumes that his friend did so on purpose, perhaps even to give the man the chance to increase his fortune by way of speculation on the trick coin. If the false gift of counterfeit were a malicious act, the narrator is inclined to look over even that; at least perhaps, there would be the merit of knowing one's vices. The worst thing, the narrator concludes, is to do evil but to not even recognise it.

\*

#### 4. Disposal.

One last thing about Baudelaire. "To win paradise economically" would mean to have a surplus left over, to have more than is needed for what needs to be done. In our own systems of wealth, we tend to think of surplus as the enduring aspiration. To be economic is also a valued skill; think of the political capital won by governments who are seen to keep their spending in check. The word for economy comes from the Greek Oikonomia. Here is Derrida again:

What is economy? Among its irreducible predicates or semantic values, economy no doubt includes the values of law (nomos) and of home (oikos, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors). 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 implies 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 centre, if that can still be said of a circle. It stands at the centre 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, revenues, 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.<sup>16</sup>

In its circular structure of exchange, oikonomia is akin to a narrative, the circulation of exchange value is an operation with the same precision as the parts of a well written story. In fact, Aristotle used the term to do double duty, to be economic in the writing of a play for example, means to dispense with the story's resources effectively. He also uses Oikonomia to refer to the proper distribution of resources for best management of the household, and here Aristotle differentiates oikonomia from chrematistics to refer to natural and unnatural production. Chrematistics, or the art of wealth production, is unnatural, in that it is concerned with amassing money for its own sake, and thus has no direct utility to the tightly controlled and plotted structure of the oikos.

Here is where the gift poses itself as an interruption. Because the conditions of the gift as a true gift, if there is such a thing, mean it must go un-reciprocated, it cannot return to the gifter. The act of gifting then suspends the cycle of economic calculation, in that it no longer gives rise to exchange.<sup>17</sup>

\*

---

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Counterfeit Money*, 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *Counterfeit Money*, 7.

I have sought to unload some of the baggage attached to gifting by unpacking the suitcase, and letting its contents tumble out. Like so much splayed and disturbed goods, spilling out like useless baggage, I now ask that this text be forgotten.