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# FROM DILLINGHAMS' GREATNESS TO THE FLAMES OF MOGADISHU: HOW PURE IS A PERFECT GIFT?

Rafael Marques

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## **From Dillinghams' Greatness to the Flames of Mogadishu: How Pure is a Perfect Gift?**

**Rafael Marques**

### **Abstract**

Reciprocity and gift-giving are recurrent themes in today's social sciences. Ever since Marcel Mauss (re)invented the subject in his "Essai sur le Don," the paradigm of reciprocity has been presented as a counterpoint to the economical standard models, entirely based on rational calculation, utility maximization, and opportunistic orientation. Many go as far as claiming that the world of gifts offers clever departures from the money economy and the "sins" of the capitalist order. This type of reasoning usually forgets that Marcel Mauss himself presented his formulation of the reciprocity thesis as a mix of freedom and obligation, introducing cautionary remarks in a realm where most only see purity and perfection. Using two literary examples separated in time and space – O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" and Nuruddin Farah's "Gifts" – as starting points, we will claim that purity and perfection associated with gift-giving generally lead to a situation dominated by romanticism, solidarity, and love, but also by social paralysis, isolation, and autarchic communities. In turn, money-mediated exchanges may create suspicion and anticipations of distrust but pave the way to the development of sophisticated contractual arrangements that are fundamental to the constitution of cosmopolitan and decontextualized social relations. Using these two ideal types (money exchange vs. gift exchange) as working tools, we will try to develop a comprehensive theory of reciprocity, considering its multidimensional aspects and its contradictions. Reciprocity will be presented as a way of building up paroxysmic and competitive social relations among peers (its potlatchian dimension) and establishing symbiotic relations among actors with different social standings (its stabilizing element).

Keywords: Reciprocity, gifts, market, literature

## Resumo

Reciprocidade e dádiva são temas recorrentes nas ciências sociais de hoje. Desde que Marcel Mauss (re)inventou o tema no seu "Essai sur le Don", o paradigma da reciprocidade tem sido apresentado como um contraponto ao modelo padrão económico, inteiramente baseado no cálculo racional, na maximização da utilidade e na orientação oportunista. Muitos vão ao ponto de afirmar que o mundo dos dons oferece saídas inteligentes da economia monetária e dos "pecados" da ordem capitalista. Este tipo de raciocínio geralmente esquece que o próprio Marcel Mauss apresentou a sua formulação da tese de reciprocidade como uma mistura de liberdade e obrigação, introduzindo observações cautelosas num reino onde a maioria só vê pureza e perfeição. Utilizando dois exemplos literários separados no tempo e no espaço – "O Presente dos Magos" de O. Henry e "Presentes" de Nuruddin Farah – como pontos de partida, vamos afirmar que a pureza e a perfeição associadas à dádiva geralmente conduzem a uma situação dominada pelo romantismo, solidariedade e amor, mas também pela paralisia social, o isolamento e as comunidades autárquicas. Por sua vez, as trocas mediadas pelo dinheiro podem criar suspeitas e antecipações de desconfiança, mas abrir caminho ao desenvolvimento de sofisticados acordos contratuais que são fundamentais para a constituição de relações sociais cosmopolitas e descontextualizadas. Utilizando estes dois tipos ideais (troca de dinheiro vs. troca de presentes) como ferramentas de trabalho, tentaremos desenvolver uma teoria abrangente de reciprocidade, considerando os seus aspetos multidimensionais e as suas contradições. A reciprocidade será apresentada como uma forma de construir relações sociais paroxísmicas e competitivas entre os pares (a sua dimensão potlatchiana) e estabelecer relações simbióticas entre atores com diferentes posições sociais (o seu elemento estabilizador).

Palavras-chave: Reciprocidade, dádivas, mercado, literatura.

## What is a Perfect Gift?

When we discuss the types of gifts that might qualify for the title of a perfect gift, we swiftly run into what is defined as the Mary Douglas paradox. This paradox states very simply that there can be no gratitude for gifts as then the gift is part of a social relationship, implying reciprocity and exchange. However, where nothing is offered in exchange for the gift, there can be no social relationship, and without any social relationship, there can be no gift. However, where there is an exchange, there also can be no gift because gratitude is lost forever, and only with gratitude can a gift be entitled to consideration as a perfect gift (cf. Godbout, 1992: 14). We are faced with a broadly unavoidable circularity problem if we limit our explanatory framework merely to the egoistic or altruistic motivations within any established social relationship. Only rejection of the motivational dimension enables us to sidestep such traps. In a certain sense, a gift is similar to power given how it places the onus of relationship on the subject, in this case, the recipient.

In a text that may be considered the canonical proclamation on what constitutes a perfect gift, Belk (1996) stated that any such gift is priceless, does not compel, and is intangible.<sup>1</sup>

Belk, however, defines the perfect present in opposition (and almost as an ideal construction) to the market world dominated by reciprocity. This opposition assumes a form that paralyzes the positions taken by those defending the importance of reciprocity ties to combat the market. That is, reciprocity as an ambiguous and trans-border concept may simultaneously represent the two opposing terms. In specific contexts, references to reciprocity relate to the market but, at other points, reciprocity is itself identified with the world of the gift and seen as a valid alternative to a world of market values. The angles of vision become an essential factor in the evaluation required to know what kind of territory we are moving in.

Given this, in the perfect present, we come across the old chestnut that it is the intention or thought that counts. In this particular field, symbolism exceeds utility should we begin to consider that the perfect present is a demonstration of a particular kind of love: nonerotic, nonegoistic, nonpossessive, and sacrificial. However, the presence of the perfect gift also reveals a religious dimension. In Christianity, this image is prevailing, especially when considering that

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Belk defines the perfect present in opposition (and almost as an ideal construction) to the market world dominated by reciprocity. This opposition is reached in a form that paralyzes the positions taken by those defending the importance of ties of reciprocity as a means of combating the market. That is, reciprocity as an ambiguous and trans-border concept may simultaneously represent the two opposing terms. In certain contexts, references to reciprocity relate to the market but, at other points, reciprocity is itself identified with the world of the gift and seen as a valid alternative to a world of market values. The angles of vision become an important factor in the evaluation required to know what kind of territory we are actually moving in.

God gave his son in the dual form of sacrifice and the perfect present, with the same having happened with Abraham and Isaac.<sup>2</sup>

At this level, a gift's perfection is established in a context where reciprocity is asymmetric on both levels. Firstly, divine sacrifice is not defined in the same terms as the sacrifice imposed on Abraham. They were in situations of awareness and manifestly diverse forms of power. Abraham's sacrifice resulted from an asymmetric test of his loyalty, while divine sacrifice generally engenders some redemptive reciprocity. Secondly, the human gift of a passive and impotent Isaac, following the will of his father, who is being tested, cannot be compared with Christ's sacrifice, given the absence of not only passiveness and ignorance but also the facet of impotence. In the case of Christ, there is dedicated participation in a process whose steps are known and consequences foreseeable.

Beyond sacrifice, spontaneity, affection, and celebration are the terms most commonly associated with the perfect present in contrast with prior calculation and the rational dimension to any gift. The perfect present is always unconditional. The perfect present falls beyond circuits of reciprocity to result in but a unilateral dimension. In the true sense of the word, it is a demonstration of passion or some vision that does not lose itself in details, in which everything is understood as perfect in itself. Passion dies in the discrimination of constituent elements. At that point, the object of passion becomes made up of parts, and when each might take on a dissonant nature that the passion-killing deconstruction process begins. This break down by discrimination causes horror, ignominy, and the sensation that we are all a little like Swann on learning that we have wasted the best years of our life chasing an Odette de Crécy who we no longer desire and consider merely a commoner. The deconstruction of passion rapidly turns into horror and an inability to tolerate neither the present nor the past. Perfect presents, like perfect passions, exist in a world where discrimination and any visualization of parts are both impossible and can only survive while no contrary image darkens the ideal prefiguration of the subject of adoration.

Belk (1996: 61) lists the six essential characteristics of the perfect present: extraordinary sacrifice by the donor, the donor wishes only to thank the recipient, the gift is a luxury, it is in some way uniquely appropriate to the recipient, the recipient is surprised by the present, and the recipient both wants the present and is overwhelmed in admiration of it. The surprise dimension is crucial here. As in all revelations and throughout the entire dimension of erotica, the surprise factor is

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<sup>2</sup> The parallelism between the sacrifices made by Isaac and Jesus Christ is rendered transparent in a text full of suggestions for a theory on the forms of reciprocity (cf. Robbins, 1991: 3).

critical. The perfect present involves the present, the giver, the recipient, the relationship established, and the rituals involved. Without suffering and sacrifice, there is no perfect present. Thus, the well-off cannot join the club just by purchasing a present, irrespective of its value. They have to be subject to some kind of ordeal, a decisive and definitive test of their character, demonstrating courage in the face of adversity. The material sacrifice that may result in miserableness is an opportunity that is only open to the poor. Even should a wealthy person convert all wealth into some unique, sumptuous, and overwhelming present, this ultimate sacrifice might be seen as nothing more than an extreme form of eccentricity or an attempt to conquer something or someone.

In the land of sacrifice, each can only sacrifice that which one has little or almost nothing of. The theory of sacrifices implies that everything that can be given out of excess can never be considered deserving of merit. Indeed, it may at best be seen as fulfilling some form of social obligation or as a due exercise of the rules of reciprocity, and never more so. True sacrifice, which corresponds to a perfect gift, is made without reflection and implies giving what one almost cannot give. An analogy with courage may be made. Courage is displayed when something highly appreciated and cherished is put at risk. Whoever risks something they dislike or do not value cannot be considered courageous. Up to a certain point, such sacrifice does not count as it is insufficient and irrelevant. From another point, it can no longer be seen as a true expression of love as it becomes pathological and deviant. In such cases, the noble sacrifice disappears to leave instead only masochism.

On another level, perfect presents involve luxury and should not be associated with day-to-day products. The mundane and daily are enemies of the perfect present as they trivialize it and shrink it to strict utilitarianism. The perfect present should be non-market tradable. Gifts should be tailored to the specific person who is to receive them, but where he/she does not request it. Requesting any present denies its value and smothers the very idea of perfection in the gift (Katz cit. Belk, 1996: 67).

Furthermore, the future desires of the recipient should be intuitively met by the giver through unconscious signs given out by he/her but with the critical reservation that total signposting or direct expression of desire are in themselves sufficient to destroy the entire architecture of the perfect present. Each perfect present has its perfect moment to be given. Time management is here just as important as the dynamics of reciprocity. To give too early suggests that the perfect present is seeking to force reciprocity, given that its value far outstrips the current level of emotional involvement, with the perception that the giver in some way advanced too early. In

turn, acting too late undermines the sacrificial dimension and may wreck the very social relationship.

Wrapping serves to heighten the relational intensity and pre-empt the moment of revelation, transforming it into something mystical and transcendent. The art of wrapping is an essential dimension to the exchange of gifts. The wrapper is a creative and magical operator: the small becomes big, the useless useful, and the trivial is rendered extraordinary. The wrapping creates the temporal hiatus necessary to developing the reciprocity process. It provides for a sequence of events, prepares for the appropriate emotional response, and represents the cloak for the façade that follows in case of disappointment (and is it not true that all gifts are, by definition, disillusion?). The spontaneity of opening presents should follow the same tacit social rules as led to its wrapping and with no sudden burst of tearing (Berking, 1999: 8). Curiosity and contentment are to be displayed simultaneously. These are mechanisms to transform mass-produced articles into presents that convey with them an attribution of symbolic values and subjective meanings. Gifts are organized around memories, giving expression to feeling and emitting signs of recognition and relationship, individualizing the articles (op. cit.: 9).

The stripping of paper may be seen as the undressing of the stripper, both corresponding to the same impulse to reveal and keep secret, deferring the moment of pleasure so that it may be extended. The dilation of pleasure is a more substantial source of pleasure than the revelation itself. However, this surprise effect, and consideration of its value, leads us into a paradox: understanding why people continue to give on dates established by the calendar and not opt for erratic and surprising patterns for gift giving? Why are there cycles of gift-giving maintained across space (and across time) with impressive regularity when we know that maximum effect would be obtained through recourse to erratic behavior? This pattern of stability appears because society acts against an irregularity in social behavior. Irregularities are only openly accepted within the framework of couples and not within the context of broader social groups.

On the other hand, exchanging the perfect present is dangerous and potentially disturbing to the social order. There is an orgiastic dimension to the perfect present that is incompatible with any regularity or the dictates of organized society managed under explicit norms. Patterns of social forecasting and creating a stable expectation system can only be maintained by regularity in festive activities. The barrier between festivity and the banal event is needed for the survival of a society that makes this borderline the basis for a search for deep social significance. If there were no separation, if every day could simultaneously be both one and the other, then there

would be no barriers, cuts, or interruptions, nor would there be differences between the holy and the profane or between work and leisure.

On the other hand, the strength of the festivity and the present derives from its extraordinary but regular characteristics. The irregularity of the periodic and the extraordinary is not a form of pleasure but rather a tragedy and a threat, a potential source of pollution and contamination. The episodic gift can only be maintained in as much as it helps to perpetuate the regularity of the cycles of giving and never as the institutionalization of an anarchic model of celebration.

In any final analysis, gifts should demonstrate good reasons for having been given even when perfect and emotional. The emotional reaction of the recipient may evaluate the perfection and fascination of the present: left speechless or in tears. If the six characteristics mentioned above defined by Belk are not present, then the present will not prove the perfect present, with such imperfection highlighting the difficulty for the recipient in achieving the category of excellence. In any case, an objectively imperfect present may well have been given as perfect and received or represented as perfect by both parties. Even where always objectively absent, the perfection of the gift is frequently subjectively and symbolically present through both the social representation of both parties (simultaneously or alternately) and through convincing that this present is effectively perfect. When everybody interprets a present as perfect, it is clear it becomes what it is meant to be. Given this level of perfection, it seems justified to expect that the recipient should come to feel what it is to derive enormous pleasure from whatever the gift represents. Many perfect presents are perfect against all expectations and can produce counterintuitive effects. Perfection should be seen as social and not derived from personal satisfaction or from giving free rein to hedonism.

A perfect or pure gift is not contaminated by any alien element and contained within the strict limits of a social relationship; it is a gift that is given totally and unconditionally and is completely targeted towards the other. The gift becomes pure because it is non-permeable to whatever the element beyond the presence of the other. Moreover, the gift achieves perfection because it reduces down to essentialism that drives away any motivation other than the act of giving itself. Thus, perfect and pure gifts emerge from the decentering of oneself and an annulment of the subject's presence. Everything is the other. Everything is the relationship. However, the talk of altruism in any discussion of the perfect or pure gift makes no sense as that involves the assumption of egoism, and the purest gift transcends any such dichotomy or any dual project. The perfect gift is a world closed in on itself and a world that closes around the figure of a friend or lover.

Similar to the relationship between Montaigne and La Boétie, the gift is justified by simple expressions: "because it was him" or "because it was me." The idea of purity and perfection erases the entire field of motivation. To give in a pure sense simultaneously means alienating (separating, losing, giving in, sacrificing) any autonomy and freedom of choice and abdicating from these forgetting or ignoring everything going on around (and not directly linked to the relationship) and sacrificing everything in the name of the other. The perfect gift cancels out any expectations of return, devolution, or response, merely implying the completion of meanings in a gesture closed within itself for the maximum revelatory power. The perfect gift discloses everything and leaves the giver ultimately revealed; this is a shameless act by the giver corresponding to unhesitant nudity. The giver of the perfect gift is placed entirely at the mercy of whoever receives, without expecting any response. There is no intention to harness the power deriving from magnanimity or prodigality, not even in its magnificence. The pure and perfect present increasingly becomes ever more so in the degree of deprivation and inability to give the giver. We are always willing to attribute greater importance to potential giver/gift relationships than the number of gifts. Perfection does not relate to quantity (or quality) but merely to the spirit and sincerity of the activities undertaken.

### **The Grey City of the Grandeur of the Dillingham**

Della and James (cf. Henry, 1992) are young and beautiful but poor. Not that they form part of any group of poor that struggles to survive, teetering on absolute poverty. No! They are part of a limited group – those who have seen better days in life but found themselves in a situation that is not theirs by nature or doing. Poor people who have always been poor hardly qualify for any such tragic theme. As Dante well knew, the most significant suffering comes in the memory of happy times in periods of misery. There is here no sudden descent, no apparatus sending them into distant exile, nor the martyrdom of Job losing everything. The Dillinghams' grandeur emerges out of stoicism and resisting adversity, continuing to love without a shadow of lament or blame of oneself or others for their fate. It was the salary of James that went. He was a mere pawn at an adverse conjuncture in the economy. There is in them a spirit of pain but an acceptance of the situation. The couple's dignity is maintained even when faced with a decaying house or one debt or another that cannot be covered because funds refuse to stretch that far.

Naturally, the letters on the door fade and slowly drop off as the couple's poverty is rendered evident in the very cleansing of their doorplate that goes on to lose its middle letters. Mr. James Dillingham Young gets reduced to one James Young, a familiar name on an ordinary house. The

personality of this man is extinguished by poverty. He has left no more than a shadow of the recognizable creature we suppose he once was. His economic becalming removes him of the name that identifies him, leaving him with only a vulgar and characterless designation. Passing from good times to a critical period did not destroy his excellent sense, nor did it ruin his capacity to work miracles with the meager household budget available. Dillingham survives and builds normality from scarcity.

Such shortages and real difficulties do not prevent the couple from saving. Nevertheless, such saving does not stem from any capitalistic spirit or intent of investment and does not obey any profit-seeking ethic. It is not the wisdom of the investor that we find in Della or James. The purpose of the saving is not to improve the house, blow out meals, or open up a bank account. The sacrificial act of saving leads Della into negotiating and renegotiating, sometimes to the limit of humiliation, prices with suppliers of the scant products they consume are not destined to obtain something of great value or embark on a spree of consumerism. The end of their attempts to save is to provide something unique to someone who deserves their every attention.

Furthermore, we are not dealing with any old time of the year – tomorrow is Christmas! This festive period, progressively reduced to a memory of its original intention, throws up the still surviving opportunity for a pure and disinterested meeting between two souls living for another. No external motivation can alter the direction of the wishes and aspirations of the Dillingham's. Their world is reduced to themselves. The perfection of their gestures and purity of intention is achieved at the cost of alienating all others. There are no references to friends or associates. The entire world beyond the couple is dominated by a spirit alien to such conviviality. Within the couple, everything is purity and love. Everything beyond suggests a strange world of the mercantile transaction governed by base metal. For the couple's Christmas, this year is redemption in a world in which Christmas is nothing more than a vague memory.

The emotions are restrained. Della cries tears of sadness but does not collapse into the convulsive crying of the defeated or the anger of one given over to rage. She is resigned but with the courage to return to the struggle and achieve her objective in a world reduced to the grey that engulfs her window in the dark grey cars crossing dark squares under laden clouds. Della composes herself and applies makeup without vanity. Her intention is another. She has designed an entire plan that may result in her acquiring the present worth of the honor of being used by Jim. It is not money that is in question, nor is it the value of the present. For Della, what is essential is the appropriateness of the gift to the quality of the recipient. Della peers into the small and improvised mirror, and her brilliant eyes blatantly defy her pale appearance. The cost

of sacrifice involved cannot be measured in the distaste felt for her loss. For her, the true cost resides in the vision of what Jim will do to her. Could it be that the disposal of that precious good to acquire the most perfect of presents will not result in her losing the love and attention of Jim? However, she gathers strength and does not even consider such an event coming to pass. She lets her hair fall freely, and the vision of her long and beautiful hair enables her to regain her poise and decisively set off in her search for the perfect gift.

It is here that the perfect symmetry of the couple is revealed in how they establish a world of value that transcends everything that we know and used to take into consideration as the basis for evaluation. Della and Jim have inalienable possessions with a value known only to them but become a source of envy for those they encounter. The wealthiest and most beautiful, the most powerful and most favored, the dominant and the rulers cannot hide their desire to possess what Della and Jim proudly display; this is perhaps their only abnegation to more commonly understood values. The couple gains genuine pleasure from the envy caused in others by the possession of these goods. The value that they hold is, however, different. Jim possesses an object that reflects his lineage. An article that in itself tells of the history of a family. Imbued with sentimental value, it is inalienable because it carries within it the image of identity and personality of its bearer. This object is not a watch but "the watch," a unique and perfect timepiece. If "hau" can exist in objects, then Jim's watch carries within it the confines of this world right through to the end of time. Its value is sentimental, genealogical and testimony of that which is fundamental to the inheritance passed down from generation to generation.

The watch can never be sold as it represents a box enclosing a history, a feeling, and a program for life. Without it, James Dillingham Young will always be one James Young that the wheel of fortune threw into poverty and difficulty surviving the daily grind. And Della? Della has no inherited object that eases identification as part of a group or community or reveals any personal history. Della has a gift of another type. Her hair, her lengthy hair, is the most precious item she possesses. It is a gift of nature or divine origin, depending on preferences, but reveals everything Della is. Her hair is a perfect substitute for everything Della might ever represent.

The symmetry of such possessions is simultaneously both natural and fictitious. It is natural because both are a source of envy and desire. King Solomon might pile up all his worldly riches and even contemplate them with satisfaction and pride but would have to admit that Jim's watch belonged to a different level – an object of objects, the most desired fruit, a masterpiece that would crown any collection, however sumptuous. Similarly, the queen of Sheba would color with envy when presented with Della's hair. The most incredible beauty in the world would give

everything up for Della's hair. Here lies the proper symmetry in the precious possessions of our couple; this is no apology for the happiness of the poor in contrast with the misery of the rich as described by O. Henry. Its purpose lies simply in highlighting that despite their apparent destitution, the Dillinghams possess goods valued on a scale that has to stretch into the lands of incomparability.

However, when we consider the two possessions closely, we can see that they signal two distinctly different types of alienation. Jim's selling of the watch could only be reversed by a stroke of fortune, by an about-turn in their tragic destiny, or whatever stroke of accident might put them back on the path to a more secure life. Thus, he would recover it similar to all whose fate leads them to the pawnshop to swap valuables in return for pittance. The recovery of the article pawned can only be carried out through recourse to the dominant circuits of the economic model. Sale engenders a future re-purchase at a price inflated by the very sentimental valuation that the pawnshop owner senses in whoever seeks to recover the item. However, were Della to dispose of her gift, it is renewed and becomes more robust with each disposal act. There is no definitive loss nor effort involved in recovering what Della has to cede. Her hair will grow back as, if not more so, attractive than previously. Even should the transaction be commercial, there is in Della's act something that leads us to the demiurgic gift of artists: the gift received can only take material shape with a new gift made public. Such sacrifices seek symmetry while never entirely achieving symmetry and are similarly not reversible in the same manner. The possessions of the Dillinghams cancel out or overshadow common or garden goods. What unites them is owning something that becomes perfect because it connects them uniquely.

The search for the perfect gift is a long, arduous, and costly task, but such efforts are more than rewarded. We know the paths taken by Della, and we feel Jim has walked the same routes. The demands of the perfect gift and the unique combination are more significant proof of the state of the social relationship than the monetary value of the donation. There is a contrast between the short time Della has available to discover the perfect present and the need to find whatever is most appropriate. Such demand does not bow to the facility. The entire search for perfection has to be worked at to the point of rigor and danger, demanding sacrifice, denial, and generalized suffering, in addition to forcing us to meet the challenge of mounting difficulties. The perfect present (like the Grail) can re-charm the world, seal a new pure and true alliance and revitalize a relationship. However, gaining it implies the tortured existence of a spirit permanently subject to questioning and a body mortified by exhaustion. Medieval tales tell how few were chosen for the demands of the holy chalice.

Similarly, only the purest and most driven may qualify as a giver of the perfect gift. Della went through her Calvary but within the compact space of two hours. She rushed to pick up the money gained from her sale to run to the stores to spend it, hunting and searching for the right strap. Della works the miracle of "stretching" the short time available and mastering her intentions. She discovers time in a day that has none. Just as the mercantile agreement previously agreed renders the amount necessary to acquire that perfect gift, so does Della discover time where it previously seemed not to exist. The drive and the frantic search by Della correspond to an image of Jim as more punctual and selective. He is never late and seems to have everything perfectly under control without the need for improvisation. In accompanying Della on her journey, we cannot leave out our picture of Jim as a man who can always work out what to do even in times of great hardship.

However, sacrifice and abnegation cannot destroy such images. It cannot annul the identity of whoever gives. That is the cause of Della's fear. Her hesitation and dread do not stem from any concern that Jim shall not like what he is to receive as Della is confident that she has found the platinum fob chain capable of ennobling The Watch. Her fear comes from the possibility that perhaps Jim will no longer like her without her lengthy hair, which is her soul. Perhaps Jim will not agree with the path taken, or Jim might refuse to see the Della he loves in the shaven boyish face. In these moments, the perfect gift becomes obscured by worry and the prospect of a loss. Jim, in turn, is the living picture of sacrifice. His threadbare overcoat full evidence of delaying any acquisitions of functional goods. The gloves that he does not have bear further witness to his priorities and intentions, and Jim, the author notes, is 22 years of age and with a familiar burden on his shoulders.

The perfect present is designed to be used or displayed by someone special and by that person alone. Once the correct chain was found, Della understood that it had been designed with the sole purpose of rendering adornment to Jim's watch. The leather strap Jim currently has is not only insufficiently dignified but cheapens the vision of this perfect means of counting the hours. The metallic chain would be an allure and perfect entrapment to indicate: "Here is the Watch." The perfection of this present results from its total functional futility. They are adornments or highlighting features of rarities that in themselves are partially or external to the economic circuit. The perfection of the watch and hair is enriched by the adornment supplied by the chain and the combs. These are gifts that draw attention to that with which they are contiguous. They are advertisements for more precious goods. Their transaction is valued by a particular economy that might be termed libidinal. Its worth rises associated with how the relationship between the couple has been established and evolved. Should the love between Della and Jim grow cold by

chance, the value of these objects of passion would drop as far as the crisis in their love. The relationship establishes the value in conventionality that reflects the current situation and works as a barometer of the social relationship. All mercantile economic value is subject to expectations and the dynamics of relational games.

The search for perfection comes at the cost of abdicating rationality. Considered reflection and gift perfection are not features that harmoniously blend. The cautious choice and weighing of pros and cons forever destroy the very feeling of generosity and focus on the other. The purity of Della's (and implicitly, the purity of Jim's gift) results from this overwhelming, this thundering intoxication felt on first seeing that which can never be exchanged or substituted. The denial of any possibility of rejection or return of the gift is sufficient evidence to understand that we are in the presence of the very picture of the perfect gift. The lengthy calculation, use of discriminatory criteria, and the prioritization of alternatives are exercises in economic rationality and may make sense in a logic of minimizing costs. However, they fall abandoned and useless in the face of a sacrificial logic out in search of the unique. The virtuous circuit of the gift feeds on non-confinable, excessive, and sumptuous emotions and not the cold, meticulous rationality of the accountant or treasurer. Nothing is saved, nothing is stored, and everything is consumed in a moment of total fruition. What does it matter about starting the next day with 87 centimes in one's pocket if today was given over to happiness and passion? Any calculation is left subject to the relationship and only makes sense in as much as it can supply that sumptuous moment resulting from the prodigality of the gift given to one's loved one.

Nevertheless, does the perfection of the gifts exchanged by the Dillinghams correspond to the presence of a pure present? In truth, perfection results from perfect symmetry and uncalculated reciprocity established between the pair and is not pure as it gives up on self-creation and does not exclude monetary intermediation. Purity in gifts does not allow for the involvement of money. For such gifts to be pure, they would have to be self-made in a sacrificial act and thereby involving the practice of a differing gift – the gift of constructive ability – making objects with one's own hands and without recourse to products made by others and which, therefore, probably follow the typical path of all goods created for the market. Christmas at Dillinghams provides us with the purity of the gift but extends only to its motivation and cannot drive out the destructive virus of the Christmas spirit.

The meeting of the two lovers is the clear expression of a time refound. The seconds-long freezing of Jim when faced with the thin, shorn profile Della serves but as the announcement of the magic moment to come. The wisdom of the Magi may be measured by the creation of this

expectation of enchantment. The suffering, double loss, and apparent lack of meaning are to be revealed as the most unmistakable evidence of proof of love. The presents given are entirely immaterial. They no longer make any sense, neither as adornment nor as functional. They are nothing but a signal of the spirit of giving, purity of intention, and the total orientation of each partner towards the other. The gift has reached complete fruition. Della and Jim abdicated everything to give the perfect present and rendered useless those very same reciprocal gifts, but in this uselessness lies the real sense of abnegation. Henceforth, they can lay any presents to one side to concentrate on the cutlets they eat at dinner. The desire to have, the anxiety for possession, and its glorification disappear in this pure reciprocity, where each alienates their most precious possession to obtain the perfect complement in the preciousness of the other. In perfect alchemy, each loses what they most value to gain a mere support feature for everything that represents their identity. Della and Jim establish supreme confidence and build a purer love in losing everything and sacrificing their image. The total reciprocity in total alienation engenders reciprocity in a pure and perfect gift. Henceforth, they may set aside the presents as they definitively transcend that which is the commercial transaction and rediscover the centrality of their relationship. This celebration glorifies their relationship but simultaneously separates it from the world. Purity and perfection are not achieved without loss. The Dillinghams root their love in withdrawal from the world.

### **Mogadishu in Flames**

The appropriation of ideas from Mauss and their deployment as criticism of the habits and practices of the great western powers is explicit in the novel "Gifts" by Somali writer Nuruddin Farah (1993). The author himself, in various interviews, expressed his debt to Mauss and highlighted how the concepts presented by the French anthropologist had indeed served as a guide in achieving his Romanesque style. In his book, the gift idea is explored through its constituent ambivalence with all its resulting moral and political implications through the presentation of gifts from developed countries as nothing more than a relational web destined to foster asymmetry between rich and poor. The gift is presented here as a deceitful scheme through which the powerful seek to perpetuate the power and mask the abyss in possessions under the cloak of a pure consciousness composed of humanitarian and development aid. The distrust expressed about the present received takes on the apparent form of denunciation. The gift guarantees the perpetuity of domination that would not be possible by direct means of coercion. However, the insidious effects of the gift run even more profound in that they shape

mentalities and forge new identities for recipients of such presents. Thus, the presents contain a triple working venom: the creation of dependence, widening of asymmetry, and destruction of identities.

The choice of aid gift is not carried out because of immediate needs or factors capable of working as leverages for development. The selected gift corresponds to the vision that the dominant power has regarding the needs of the dominated. A most exciting dimension to the gift in Farah's work is highlighted by the gift of love exchanged by the two main characters in the novel: Duniya and Bosaaso. Their lack of interest contrasts with the secrecy in mobility and wielding of power in the cause of the global superpowers and international aid agencies. The curiosity in the romance comes from the violent shock between the two levels that runs in parallel with a country slowly falling apart. The gifts, conceptualized as aid, assistance, support, relief, or salvation, maybe inversely understood as hostility, opposition, condescension, or paternalism. The humanitarian gift masks the extreme asymmetry of the relationships but does nothing to mitigate it. A reading of their romance draws forth a contrary vision: the international gift deepens dependence, worsens immobility, strips autonomy, and kills the capacity for initiative.

The "disinterested" is, after all, mere sales techniques in which the gift hides the need to buy the entire package that was not wanted. Gratitude and recognition are achieved, and this facilitates the creation of new markets, broadening the sphere of influence of the ideological line. The gifts hide their venom. Each sack of cereal does not come alone. It brings a seal of origin, the donors' label, and all the image of dependence. External aid may be seen as a struggle for prestige, a perverse potlatch, in which competition and rivalry among the powerful and wealthy, competing in circuits of social honor, strive to show the greatest prodigy and best intention. Within this field, the recipient is a mere pawn in a game not chosen and in which only those with a capacity for intervention in international business may compete effectively. Each gift awaits reciprocity from the recipient, the dependent debtor. In basket cases, where the recipient cannot proffer anything in exchange, compensation is handed out by admission to a world, by the purchase of a way of being and feeling, and the adoption of habits, styles of life, and rituals that are foreign to the group or society receiving such gifts.

In terms of external aid, the gift should be understood as a means of creating debt to be paid back at a time of the giver's choosing. The gift is a game of seduction in which those receiving help seek out the gains that might result from the agonistic and potlatchian competition between the major powers without understanding that they are being dragged into a world that they neither control nor will ever be fully able to escape from. Such gifts are dissimulated forms

of usury or symbolic taxes (in the manner of Bourdieu). However, from the recipient's perspective, there is also perversion in the gift of giving. The recipients of such gifts consume everything in an orgy of lavish expenditure that prevents the help received from producing its benefits. These governing figures who consume all forget that there are reciprocal obligations, and those unable to do so will end up being indebted forever. The international gift lacks, on all levels, the convivial dimension of joint solidarity that is supposed to be generated.

Farah presents the gift of blood as an act of contrition that saves or purifies all the perverseness of the abundance received. Thus, Nasiiba, the daughter of one of the characters, opts to give her blood (a rare blood group) to a friend (Fariida) experiencing profound anemia as her pregnancy draws to an end. The angel of life appears to revitalize the profoundness of gifts. The gift is, for a brief moment, unconditional and without opportunity for return. The virtuous circle initiated by this gift appears as a regenerative hope in the face of all the perverse reciprocal cycles engendering dependence and slavery. Compensation and restitution are not part of the vocabulary of this young donor who is motivated only by a disinterested spirit of friendship. However, even these pure and most profound gifts take place against a backdrop of prior expiation and the circuits of foreign debt. Before the love between Duniya and Bosaaso being consumed, she is forced into a marriage of convenience to pay her father's debt of gratitude towards a man she does not love and to whom she is tied in a merely contractual relationship. Only the death of her husband, Zubair, enables recovery of the sense of giving and the free and unconditional manner in which Duniya gives up her body to Bosaaso. This pure consent is achieved at the cost of breaking all the former ties that prevailed in her former position. Again here, the contract and obligation of the debt appear as a counterpoint to the true gifts that are always free, unrestrained, and without primary motive.

However, Duniya enters into a second marriage that, while not forced (the first dimension to perversion in the gift), demonstrates a different negative side to gifts. She decides to marry Taariq, apparently out of love, but in reality, to thank him for everything he did for her and her children. A strict obligation is substituted by a feeling of moral debt and the idea of recognition. She offers herself in restitution, or payment, for an already received gift. The reciprocity that emerges in the wedding represents the second way to pervert the gift, with the giver lowering him/herself in continuing the cycle and closing the ring or chain dimension to reciprocity. Correspondingly, in the relationship with Bosaaso, the true virtue of the gift is set out, highlighting the curious dimension of how this may come to involve systematic rejection (which Duniya makes a point of maintaining), here, a refusal to accept any present either for her or her children. This provides the most revelatory dimension to the entire book. The materialization of

the possibility of a gift necessarily implies the refusal of every type of present. The linkage, often established between donation and present, is wholly annulled, and Duniya emerges as the trustworthy source of its discovery. To keep a gift pure is necessary to fight against any present that requests a response or return. Unambiguously, reciprocity appears here as the most complete and perfect negation of the spirit of giving. Taking the present is a trap that perpetuates submission.

The novel questions the possibility of the existence of asymmetric gifts, thereby introducing a cynical dimension. Through this, we are led to believe that true abnegation hides a second or third intention and that no member of an affluent society can understand the reality of life in Africa, or specifically life in Mogadishu; this furthermore results in a divide between the world of gifts and the world of tradable goods. The gift becomes the organizing principle to society and in strict opposition to mercantilism and usury. However, as in the case of Della and Jim, we face a paradoxical situation, resulting from escaping a contaminated and perverted world of reciprocity and exchange of favors. The way such favors are established between nations and the predominance of schemes and mercantile games, abundantly clear in transactions between Somalis and beyond, only occur at the cost of a painful divide in the world. The purified and cleansed relationship between the two lovers is only achieved with their progressive withdrawal from and abandonment of humanity. Disillusionment and separation become the price to be paid to maintain principles and avoid a spiral dragging them into reciprocity. In this sense, love is the only sacrificial path, an abdication of each and everything. At its extremes, the only chance of preserving the purity of the gift is to kill the social tie. While Duniya might be motivated out of respect for tradition (in her first marriage), paying off a debt of gratitude (second marriage) is a free choice in her third partnership. The fact remains that this freedom of choice implies the conquest of isolated and fortified land, separate from conventions, habits, and practice, and the establishing of a radical individuality that withdraws from everything beyond. This topic is a theme underlying the most profound tradition in the roots of sociology: the cutting of traditional unifying bonds comes at the expense of a separation that is suffered by the cutter, and that results in a state generally deemed close to anomie. Should the couple escape the imperfect world of international aid and manage to escape the costs imposed by accepting that aid, perhaps they shall not prove able to free themselves totally of a new spirit of individualism that is in itself a germ in the ointment of that aid. Victory over reciprocity (which is nothing more than a metaphor for power) and closure around the gift is a Pyrrhic victory, sure not to last. Clearly, Farah understands this self-destructive dimension to their intentions, introducing a feeling of liberty that does not result in social isolation but rather a certain kind of universal

community and virtuous reciprocity with nature. When they make love, the two lovers imagine themselves pollinators, like butterflies, and thereby taking their place in a cosmic realm, abandoning the social world.

### **Forget Nothing, Forgive No One**

In his texts on giving (1992, 1995), Derrida provides us with an exciting perspective concerning the purity of gifts and the resulting absence of reciprocity incurred in such unconditional presents. The French philosopher approaches two of the most primordial questions to establish a general theory on forms of reciprocity. Firstly, he questions the possibility of a gift in a pure form, and secondly, he discusses the role played by time in the social processes of giving. Indeed, Derrida highlights in crystal clear fashion, and based on a text by Baudelaire, everything that would serve as a pre-reading in or an introductory course to the phenomena of reciprocity and gift.

Pretextually reading Derrida and considering his statements on time's role; we would suggest a core hypothesis on the concept of reciprocity. Thus, we consider the base model of reciprocity is built on a form of dual negation: forget nothing and forgive no one. Reciprocity is based on a dual negation: the refusal of a thankful memory or a retaliating remembrance. Thus defined, reciprocity is a memorial principle, a registry mechanism, and affirmation of a structure for the past. The double refusal to either forget or forgive means that social relationships shaped by reciprocity are bound by factors from which heritage and past appear as the fundamental variables to the detriment of the liberty of social actors. Anchoring reciprocity in the past and the almost total lack of autonomy among social actors ensures that reciprocity begins to take on tragic themes and closed narratives tracing a predetermined course of events. Where pardon and forgetting are not open hypotheses, each social actor in the proceeding, in the function of whichever decision is taken, is never neither totally free nor autonomous. The implementation of absolute liberty necessarily implies a cut with time and a cut with its social origins and inherited bonds.

If the rule of reciprocity is never to forgive or forget, the Judaic-Christian model of sacrifice and supreme gifts seems to come as the perfect negation of this mental framework. For Christian authors, the definition of reciprocity that is set out here is little more than a paganist and orgiastic expression of social life, strengthening the unconstrained and sumptuary nature of community living. For any follower of the dialogical conception of reciprocity, for an enthusiastic defender of moral models of responsibility, or any firm stalwart of ethical consequentialism, our

definition of reciprocity is morally condemnable, socially unfair, and logically inconsequential. Making reciprocity depend on the rule of memorial prohibition and raising insurmountable barriers to forgiveness transforms social life into an unending rosary of generalized conflict, competitive games of appearances, and endless vanity. For these authors, real-life needs a figure of remission from sin and, above all, opening the doors to a new start that is only rendered possible through forgiveness and forgetting. Overcoming dilemmas and barriers to constructing a good society depends on building communities able to erase memories and delude the weight of tradition and the games of repetition that infect society. The definition of the reciprocity of forgiving and forgetting would equal establishing an accurate analogy with the Hobbesian contract model. Forgiving and forgetting would never violate the rules of reciprocity, but the privileged means of reaching mutual disarmament can institutionalize and legitimize social life.

In this way, reciprocity would be annulled by a model that would operate based on formations lacking in memory or past and awake forgetting this same past. Forgetfulness would be transformed into a model of liberation and a means of ensuring the very life of social civilization without ceding to extreme state models and paroxysmal social relationships. Indeed, the Christian model is one of alliances and contracts, where the sin of man is saved by supreme sacrifice. It is a model where the exercise of sacrifice seems to have been the necessary consideration for the formalization of worlds that fall beyond reciprocity games. There was separation, and there is now unity, such unity as implying the proper constitution of the community. What sin, or war, separated, the supreme sacrifice (or the rational rejection of war) binds, enabling the constitution of a new unit operating beyond any remnants of the past. Injustice is left behind, aggression is ignored, and forgiveness transformed into the act of liberation of the world's passions or, from a rational approach, which guarantees survival in the face of lives otherwise nasty, brutish, and short.

The definition of reciprocity as a double negation thus requires some clarification. The definitional refusal of forgiveness and forgetting to which we subject our concept of reciprocity means that we consider this the only means of guaranteeing social relationships that perpetuate and develop. Authorizing rupture with the double prohibition means that the reciprocal relationship is carried onto an entirely new field. In truth, accepting forgetfulness and pardon would be the equivalent of refusing the primacy of debt in the sequential alternation of movements between giver and recipient (elements that are definitionally associated with reciprocity). Similarly, it would mean not accepting reciprocity as a mixture of social obligation and freedom of action in taking forgetting and forgiving as some unique ability to revive the autonomic dimension and character of responsibility of the social actors involved in the process

of reciprocation. The prohibition of forgetting strengthens the memorial nature of reciprocity and highlights that the giver cannot ignore what has been given to whoever received it. Whoever did receive that gift cannot avoid the fact of being in debt to a significant social actor concerning which he/she is forced to produce some payback even if within the terms he/she judges most convenient (a facet reinforcing the ambivalent character of the gift in its mixture of freedom and obligation). In turn, the prohibition of forgiveness is more complex and controversial. Refusing forgiveness simply means reinforcing the local component of reciprocal phenomena, thereby highlighting how relationships dominated by reciprocity fall beyond the norms and universal principles that regulate social relationships. Reciprocity is always guided by particular contexts and obeys neither generalized moral frameworks nor instances of justice. A dual refusal is predominant in cases in which reciprocity is established in symmetrical terms, or the relationship is between equals, that is, in social contexts entirely dominated by effects of competitive climbing, paroxysm, and imitation.

Breaking the chains of reciprocity and cutting the bonds of memory turn the social actor into a foreigner who, in true Simmelian fashion, is little more than a potential vagabond, a flâneur in perpetual movement, an errant being in a constant (re)beginning of his life, never establishing neither ties nor bonds nor ever attempting any significant social involvement. The refusal of reciprocity corresponds to a traumatic cut with the community and the social ties endowing feeling. Forgetfulness marks the ignorance of priorities and roots, challenging feelings of belonging and identity. Forgiveness kills any form of reciprocity as it denies the virtue in permanent gift creation. If so, forgiveness means breaking off the relationship, cutting the tie, denying virtue, and encouraging instability. Forgiving is to break the uninterrupted cycle of sumptuous spiral that defines true reciprocity. The forgiver eliminates that scale in accepting the fact that stopping does not have to be a mere halt or a simple pause propitious to a hiatus in the sense of giving. The forgiver is the valid symbol of death to cyclical time and the beginning of a non-reciprocal conception of social relations. In a counterintuitive fashion, forgiving, by breaking with reciprocity, represents a type of non-consideration for the other, of subtle humiliation in the sense that we are doing the forgiving. Forgiving and forgetting are two clear means of destroying reciprocal relations equal to establishing mere spot social markets, dominated by the immediate, concentrating on that which is transacted and ensuring a clean slate for all that represents memorial time and trace of past happenings. The cyclical character of reciprocity further renders an end to linear exchange by attributing non-restrictive liberty to the social actor. Seen this way, the theme of reciprocity is one more episode in the long series

of transformations that define the transition of social forms considered traditional into modern social forms.

A gift is not a singular act nor a unique moment. Even when associated with total gratefulness and pure intention, its particular dynamic involves repetition and ensuring the conditions for its return. The gift is a social mechanism in the form of a boomerang that has to return to whoever originally flung it forth, even if in an entirely different domain. The gift thus has this enormous capacity to seek out the sense and registry of time. Any gift is a historical marker and a creator of a specific timeframe that falls beyond the more common social times. The gift sets off a train of temporal repetitions and circularities, commemorations and celebrations, defining a social framework of improvement and community creation thanks to the created relational ties. The "time of the gift" is simultaneously a cyclical time entirely dominated by the incessant and regular repetitions of gift and counter-gift and a civilizing operator of social refinement. We are explained to ourselves! The world of the gift is the negation of the now and any logic of immediate payback. The rings of reciprocity live and prosper in the social frameworks that enable the suspension and creation of hiatus in the respective movements of the gifts. Without such hiatus, there would be no opportunity to engender socially refined social relationships without waiting. The immediateness of the response (be it retaliatory or benevolent) is a means of mitigating the civilizing power and capacity of the gift. Immediate retribution shows a lack of courtesy (and a sign of rejection of the gift) which probably results in graver and more serious social consequences than never responding. Nonretribution represents a break that signals incapacity or lack of power on behalf of the recipient. However, immediate retribution corresponds to a break that means humiliation and aggression to whomever the giver is. Only through well-worked and considered intervals can it prove possible to deepen the social relationship. The hiatus in the gift simultaneously creates a temporal flux that establishes a break between giving and receiving, thereby intensifying social relations to force the reconsideration and actual state and nature of this social bond.

The hiatus aspect to reciprocity represents the perfect instrument for the aestheticization and aristocratization of social relations. The lower the level of immediatism, the greater reciprocity escapes from simplistic schemes of improvement and reductive versions of whoever seeks out a perfect equivalent in exchanging goods. The hiatus inclusively strengthens the paroxysmal-sumptuous component in the world of reciprocity in terms of how reflection and preparation of response are rendered possible, enabling the search for more intelligent, sophisticated, and better-worked alternatives. Dilation in gift-giving creates expectations and intensifies the emotional charge for the recipient. Managing the time of reciprocation endows a powerful

weapon to the recipient bearing both status and social recognition. However, the preparation for retribution is a double-edged sword given that the emotional intensity created may result in situations that betray the expectations of whomever the recipient. An excessive period between receipt and counter gift may create expectations that cannot be met and can never have any direct counterpart in the gift subsequently offered. The retribution should be carefully managed from the timing point of view to avoid the discourtesy of immediatism and prevent the excessive expectations of infinite prolonging of the return gift.

### **Partridges in Sarcophagi: Money Re-charmed or Bataille in Amber Tones**

We now move onto an inverse perspective focusing on a work (Dinesen, 2004) in which money has the strange capacity to re-charm the world and establish new ties of social unity. Its structure reminds us of the formulations of Bataille (1975) on the sumptuary and paroxysm. The excesses of the feast created by Babette demonstrate satiation in what Bataille depicts as a libidinal type economy. The free reign of desire and unlimited aspirations transcending any level of need or care to preserve and enable the unleashing of a sumptuous, unrestricted, unconstrained and radiant logic. The metaphor of the sun, so characteristic of Bataille, is raised in Babette's Feast by placing fiery amber in place of the cold blues and greys of the Scandinavian winter landscape.

The sisters, who follow the fundamentalist doctrine of their pastor father renouncing their lives, loves, and passions of the young, first see the feast as a threat to the message from their father that they hold faithful and true. They note that Babette's very prodigality enables the conversion of the small community they are spiritual leaders. Babette is a powerful image of a total lack of restraint and the living symbol of reciprocity and pure and perfect gifts. Her Scandinavian exile, fleeing the Parisian persecution following the fall of the Commune, leads her into the demanding arms of two sisters who require a Spartan and emotionally restrained existence, which she pays back in total prodigality. The lottery ticket, the luck that held for the moment, furnishes maximum giving, total extravagance, along with a refusal of any functional acquisition. The lottery win will have to be spent all in one go in a wave of unrestrained consumption in the search for anything that might be the most luxurious, superfluous, and violently erotic. The dishes prepared by Babette are perfect replicas of those once dined upon at an elegant Parisian restaurant where she was the undisputed attraction. The gift opens an eternal return to a lost past and gives back in excess all that was kindly and friendly received from the two sisters. However, the memory of past actions is not forgotten, and a military officer, friend, and once impassioned suitor to one of the sisters, recognizes Babette's work in flavors echoing his past

youth and times in a Paris he so loved. Reciprocity always has this capacity to awake memories and avoid forgetfulness.

As the sumptuous dimension to awakening the senses, unrestrained pleasure and enjoyment enable the development of an exchange of excess and total freedom. The sisters fear that Babette will transform into Pandora, and just as she unconditionally gave everything so that she will undergo metamorphosis into the very means for the destruction of the small community so dedicated to their pastor's teachings. All Pandoras possess the gift of their boxes that, on opening, release all the world's evils in conjunction with the benefits conferred. The banquet is the greatest threat and an extreme source of disturbance, but how can this unconditional gift be turned down without violating the very rules of social decorum and restraint that prevail in this almost monastic community of believers? The answer is easy to discover and results from a change, also reciprocal, among all guest-participants at the dinner. The informally reached agreement, representing an implicit contract stipulating punishment for any infraction, is simple: everyone is to turn up at the banquet and recognize the host and the invitation. However, this respect for social convention, without which no society can function, does not involve an emotional experience of that moment. The small community promptly decides to derive no pleasure from the act of eating.

What this denial of pleasure means is the inversion of the sacrificial canons. Where sacrifice imposes abdication, suffering from want, the giving of something valued, or placing self (or whatever is most cherished) in an impoverished situation, at-risk or imminence of death, the test we encounter in Babette's feast corresponds to a denial of pleasure. The sacrifice involves placing our physical sensations directly in the way of all temptations thrown out by Escoffier's pleasures and still be able to resist, without hesitation or doubt. Whatever the delicacies served, the community remains impassive, showing no trace of desire or expression of emotion or whatever form of positive sensorial experience. The rule is not to look, not to feel, not to taste. However, such impassiveness proves a bridge far too far. Babette is not a chef; she is the chef. The repast she has prepared comes with the force of the horns of Joshua upon the indestructible walls of Jericho. Everyone is overcome in an instant. The fiery colors of the house shine brighter with the flash of taste created by the turtle soup or by the partridges in sarcophagi or the fine wines ordered direct from Paris. The community slowly converts to a new belief. The looks exchanged soften, past resentments fade until gradually, smiles cross guests' faces to become their new creed. Even the betrayals that would never be forgotten are now considered mere slights easily forgiven.

The reciprocity generated by the banquet put on by Babette canceled out the reciprocity of memorial rules handed down through time. The feast erases the past to create a new opportunity. Memory falls under threat. The alcohol-laden vapors disperse the memory of the founder's message or aggressions suffered and enable the community spirit to be transformed. Each draws closer to the other. Excess and warmth are the catalysts for revelation and exposure, overthrowing the conventions of secrecy to say nothing of ostracizing those from beyond. This transformational reciprocity is enabled by perverse monetary means that bear the capacity to be used in a virtuous manner. Babette's rejection of any saving, the willingness to spend everything, turns the base metal of money into a mechanism for unity and communion. Babette and the old officer are the strangers who cut all the seized web of social relationships paralyzing the group. The foreign unlocks festivity. The foreign (or exiled) to the community (to which he returns after a long absence) is the penetrative agent for the idea of pleasure. His role is pedagogical. In informing what to eat, he deciphers the value of food, revealing the hidden value. Babette, in giving, exhausts herself entirely and returns to her original position of dependence once again given over into the hands of two protectors. The symmetry is now perfect. A rich Babette could never continue to work for two poor older women in a fishing village lost to the mists. However, a poor Babette, without other resources, might continue the relationship in perfect reciprocity with them. Having nothing, she needs their hospitality. Having nothing to offer in return, apart from what they are, the two sisters may now continue to receive the services of Babette.

The complete dematerialization of reciprocal gifts introduces a virtue into the world of mutual assistance. The maximum disturbance caused by Babette degenerated into the means of restoring the bonds at the heart of the community. In its extreme, the message is ironic. While loyally sticking to the old pastor's creed, religiously following his teachings, the community closed in on itself, grew deaf, stratified, and turned bitter, conflictual, and petty. When the message is denied by an appeal to the pleasures anathematized by the pastor, a lost spirit returns, a reciprocal love that is more valid than any message left by the founding father ever was. Following tradition canceled it, rendering its outdated nature self-evident. Babette's feast thus becomes something of a philosopher's stone, a magical means of producing virtue and returning purity to the stones of vice and carnal pleasure. It reveals how far reciprocity serves to engender contraries just as excess, vice, violence, pomp, or extreme prodigality may also generate what is most admired and sought after at the center of a group or community. Cynics might state that we have not moved on from the Mandevillian interpretations of The Fable of the Bees or the Smithian observations of the Wealth of Nations. Irrespective, up to which point

the actions are on occasion, paraphrasing Schelling, caricatures of their original intentions, remains worthy of consideration.

## **Conclusion**

Considering reciprocity in the social sciences involves reflection on the statutes for a pure and perfect gift. In truth, these gifts represent a paradox or perhaps a social impossibility as, in order to exist without any ulterior motive, they smother or deny the social relationship. Where conditions are established, or there is the possibility of reciprocation, such gifts are no longer pure and perfect. The perfect gift is characterized by:

1. the sacrifice made by the giver (non-demanding any return),
2. the immaterial nature of the gift (or its dematerialization), and
3. the practical impossibility of its (re)conversion into a tradable product.

Perfect gifts derive from the inability to visualize the other as a whole and correspond to the hasty, affective impulses of passion, spontaneous and unconditional, particularly forthcoming at sacrilegious moments of celebration, commemoration, or inauguration. The perfection includes an unconsidered luxury and impulsiveness that flees the routine of daily reality to define a time of evocative commemorations and emotional intensity. Each perfect gift should be proffered at the socially most opportune moment to balance surprise with the maximum peak in desire. The rituals of a pure gift equal the eroticizing and languid denuding of the gift, with the giver undergoing a real sacrificial test if he or she wishes to qualify as the perfect giver. The sacrifice and the timing are the great definers of the perfect present, with both factors requiring careful management to ensure a gift can be defined as pure.

The perfect gift creates a social construction that is a mixture of curiosity and contention (the double *c* of perfection) on behalf of the recipient with the need to create a robust mechanism of temporal dilation (a hiatus in reciprocation) which intensifies the orgiastic dimension to the gift, especially when faced with a present that has to be unwrapped. Perfect gifts bear a strong potential for disturbing the social order and should, therefore, be contained within previously defined social frameworks for commemoration. This type of gift defines a mutually appropriate model and social adjustment to social integration within lower-level social circumstances. The perfect gift crosses the temptation of desire with the value of worthiness in an act that intensifies in strength the more significant the threat posed to social ties or the degree of social

isolation of its participants. The pure gift is an abdication of liberty and an annulment by the giver who ultimately projects him/herself onto the other as the very reason for their existence. The perfect gift is a total emptying of the self and an impudent revelation of what one truly is, canceling out any expectation of response and rejecting any desire for retribution.

Gifts are defined as perfect because they define a pure and re-charmed world but separated by defined and unbreakable borders from the world beyond where mercantile transaction and the profit regime prevails—the inner purity forces alienation from the world beyond. Perfect gifts are gifts of inalienability that represent total sacrifice by the giver, causing anxiety and fear of loss demanding resolution in long and arduous tests, heroic gestures, and acts of great charitable donation. The search for the perfect gift is a quest for a sacred and unique piece that perfectly matches the recipient. Thus, its search involves a thorough evaluation of the state of the ongoing social relationships between giver and recipient. These gifts are not a product of calculation or rational choice but rather the free choice of an intoxicating passion and relational drunkenness. The gifts are functionally futile or useless and represent an economy where the libidinal value resulting from the state of the social relationship prevails, rejecting any monetary intermediation. The social relationship determines value. Reciprocity in total alienation engenders a pure and perfect gift that is established at the cost of growing foreignness in the face of the world beyond. Purity generates social isolation.

In turn, unmotivated and humanitarian gifts (definitionally perfect) may be perpetuators of social asymmetry, creators of dependence, and destroyers of recipient identity or bearers of a true poison within the gift. Gifts of help that do not come with ties (or reciprocity) may mitigate autonomy and destroy recipient initiative while also forcing adopting practices and ways of being that destroys the essence of individuality. The perfect gift may correspond to an agonistic competition between givers that in itself results in reciprocity whose payee is the recipient with the creation of an orgy of consumption among recipients that they are left eternally in debt. The perfect gift is perverted by the presence of forced social relationships, of contracts and debts (whether material or moral), and is brought forth by liberty, by the absence of contention, and by disinterest. The gift may be rendered perfect; it has to exclude from the scene all those in attendance. Pure gift and present awareness cancel each other out. The refusal of reciprocity is the refusal of power games and the fleeing of lands contaminated and impure from all the exchanges and searching for equivalents. Donation in a framework of asymmetry generates reciprocities serving to perpetuate dependence in a manner in which each donation carries its damnation.

Reciprocity is a memorial start subject to a double rule of neither forgetting nor forgiving which defines a cyclical temporal period that the social actors are bound to. The double *f* emphasizes the primacy of the debt and the beginning of a sequential alternation of movements that are the basic features of reciprocity. Reciprocity models a tragic scenario in which a predetermined course of action drags its protagonists into a vortex of competitive climbing, of relational imitation rooted in prior events. The social actors in the present were frequently neither the initiators nor the responsible. The temporal structure of reciprocity, creating a hiatus between and against the gift, is a civilizational form of social refinement, aestheticizing the world and defining aristocratic social practices. Reciprocity corresponds to social relationships dominated by an eternal temporal cycle governed by a social logic of infinite and ever-renewing circulation. Each object is part of a chain and moved by the force of the boomerang, first sending it out before forcing its return. The management of time in reciprocation and the establishment of hiatuses in retribution are the essential means of evaluating the current state of social relations. Each knot of reciprocity corresponds to the momentary suspension of time and the inauguration of a parallel or alternative temporal circuit.

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