

# **The Gift in Between: The Bataillean Gift that Defies Dichotomy and its Functions in the Biblical Salomé**

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## **Abstract**

Ever since Marcel Mauss' anthropological view first read into gifting as demonstration of power and coerced exchange, the negative nature of gifting has been widely noticed and convincingly influential. Pierre Bourdieu, following his footsteps, takes gifting one step further to the level of enacting covert violence. The bad name of gift has become its earmark. There is no free gift out of good will.

On the other hand, Emmanuel Levinas offers his gift of Other; Hélène Cixous suggests gift of birth; Lewis Hyde sees gift of art in the air. These later thinkers seem to perceive the positive side of gifting. For them, there are gifts without political intention or any other string attached...and then there is Georges Bataille breaks from both. It is a break from a clear-cut dichotomy and it is a break into the multiplicity of gifting.

By drawing attention to the Bataillean gift, this thesis does not suggest a comprehensive overview of all gift theories and to reach a conclusion. Instead, what makes the Bataillean gift noteworthy is that its complicity serves to reflect the multiplicity of gifting which makes for the whole spirit and significance of the social practice since ancient times.

Critical responses to the Bataillean gift have come into a discursive industry by themselves. From Bataille's constant focus on expenditure to erotic

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\* Received: February 16, 2012; Accepted: April 10, 2012.

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economy (as specified by Part III of *The Question of the Gift*) and to (not landing on) further multifarious extensions into modern thoughts, numerous modern minds have taken the Bataille gift for a catalyst that brings forth the gift of postmodernism (Carl Rashke, among others, so claims in publications like *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, explicitly *JCRT* 5.1. December 2003). This thesis, however, intends no assumption to tackle the challenge of clarifying all elaborations upon Bataille nor to deviate from its focus on how expenditure, as Bataille's point of departure, enriches the reading of the Biblical Salomé.

Bataille focuses on the notion of expenditure for his reasoning of gift. Any gift-giving must be somehow driven by ideas related to expenditure. A gift can therefore be negative, for it is something given purely out of economic reason; it is a mere disposal of expenditure; it is a form of dumping something undesired. A gift can hence be positive, exactly because it is a disposal of something superfluous, instead of an offer to demand something in return; it is a gift given for free which forms no *kula*, the imposed circle of gift-exchange. A gift can accordingly be vague/in-between (this is very much bordering on the Derridian gift), simply because it is something which first serves no purpose at one end (a waste) and, when it falls into another hand, functions as a favor (a value); it is a "true" gift given unknowingly (by Derrida's definition).

In applying the above understanding of Bataille's view of gifting, the gift of throne by Herod for Herodias, the gift of birth by Herodias for Salomé, the gift of death by John the Baptist for the rest of the biblical figures, all seem to give the anthropological discourse on gift an unearthing site in the biblical time.

**Key words:** Gift, Georges Bataille, expenditure, Salomé

# 交界的禮物： 違抗二分的巴岱依禮物與 莎樂美之贈禮解讀

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## 摘 要

自馬歇·牟斯 (Marcel Mauss) 以來，禮物莫不與權勢的展現及強制的交換經濟為伍。禮物的論述定位，於是往往著墨於其負面的特質。此種師承牟斯的禮物經濟觀點，不僅行之久矣，亦且影響深遠。皮耶·布迪厄 (Pierre Bourdieu) 亦在其列，且更進一步地將禮物的強制交換視為隱匿暴力 (“covert violence”) 的遂行。禮物的強制與暴力似乎成了禮物予人的第一印象，禮物的論述似乎印證了俗諺所反應的社會觀察——「無功不受祿」。

然而，見解迥異者，亦不乏其人：伊曼紐爾·列維納斯 (Emmanuel Levinas) 將禮物的重心置於他者，而非贈禮的權勢主體；艾蓮·西蘇 (Hélène Cixous) 提出生育贈禮的觀念，而不求／無法對等回贈的關係確立禮物的可能性；路易斯·海德 (Lewis Hyde) 探討稍縱即逝的音樂，進而詮釋禮物的藝術特質。他者禮物、生育禮物、藝術禮物…，這些禮物觀點，給予禮物經濟嶄新（相較與牟斯）的詮釋與正面的論述角度。而第三種聲音——非正非負，擺盪逸出——則是喬治·巴岱依 (Georges Bataille) 理解下更為複雜的多重禮物。

援引巴岱依，並非巴氏所言，得以總結禮物論述，而提供一無可非議的定見。反之，巴氏之言，倚重禮物面向之多元不定，而此多元不定，適足以反映禮物經濟本身之複雜特質。禮物經濟，古來有之，因脫穎自人性、自歷史、自社群，故單一面向的見解，必扼殺其多重面向，必不及巴岱依所顧及之多元。故巴氏禮物之多元，也由思考的複雜，成為論述的必要。「交界的

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\* 本文 2012 年 2 月 16 日收件；2012 年 4 月 10 日審查通過。

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禮物」，換言之，即為勝任論述的禮物。

巴岱依對禮物經濟的思考，多以「消耗」(“expenditure”)的觀點出發，認為贈禮行為，必多少攸關與消耗的概念。既為消耗，贈禮可為負面行為，因為端賴經濟考量而成，不啻為過剩 (“excess”) 之排出，盈餘不需之清除；既為消耗，贈禮可為正面行為，因為無心而贈，盈餘之出而非割愛之餽，非清除而不快，傾倒之物不求回籠，故無強加其上的回饋循環 (“kula”)；既為消耗，贈禮可為交界而曖昧 (此亦為德希達式禮物 (the Derridian gift) 的部份概念)，因始於丟棄之餘穢，而終為利他之恩惠，立意不在餽贈，故餽贈得以成，實至名歸之禮物竟而存在。

藉巴岱依對禮物的見解，本文試圖揭示聖經莎樂美文本中種種贈禮的意旨與關係：希律王 (Herod) 贈與所奪人妻 (Herodias) 之后位、生母 (Herodias) 贈與莎樂美 (Salomé) 之生育／生命之禮、約翰施洗者贈與眾人之殉道之禮…。原為發掘人類學的論述，亦在古老的聖經文學中，覓得一文化考古的遺址，擴張論述的版圖。

**關鍵詞：**禮物論述、喬治·巴岱依 (Georges Bataille)、消耗 (expenditure)、莎樂美 (Salomé)

The gift is oftentimes defined as a negative offer, as is by Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu among many others; the gift, however, can be a positive offer by definitions given by thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas, Lewis Hyde, or Hélène Cixous. For Georges Bataille, the gift is neither. There are good gifts; there are bad gifts. Yet a Bataillean gift does not belong. It simply does not fall into either category easily. It is a mutable gift given through the drive of expenditure. The mutable nature of the Bataillean gift is simply a reflection of the multi-form expenditure.

### **The Bataillean Gift as a Negative Offer**

Bataille bases his view of the gift on the idea of expenditure. His observation of the gift is conducted completely under the scope of general economy. Economy aims to encourage balanced exchange, of money, goods, among other things. For him, the gift demands equivalent return or reciprocity otherwise. The only gift that does not demand so is a gift similar to *potlatch*. Bataille's gift therefore reveals a very negative connotation in its competitive and threatening form. The reason to give, as understood by Bataille in this context, bears no mark of benevolence. He especially speaks of the reason why people offer lavish gifts. Throughout "The Notion of Expenditure," he believes the reason is that, since lavish gifts never demand reciprocity, they are given out of our primal need for ever-increasing expenditure. When Mark Singleton elaborates on this idea, he maintains that "only when the loss is so great that further returns are definitively forestalled can the rite come to an end" (304). Whether such gift-giving answers to the

unexplained primal need of expenditure or aims to shame the recipient, its either purpose is negatively intended.

Bataille also believes that gift-giving may serve the purpose of flaunting private wealth as one's worldly success. While considering gifts like *potlatch*, Bataille points out the lavishness of the gift, simply like the prodigality of the *potlatch*, becomes the gauge of transaction's success. In such competitive and power-demonstrating gift-giving, the giver places both himself and his wealth at the risk of an immeasurable loss. The negative nature of the Bataillean gift jeopardizes both the recipient and the giver, and in the meantime poisons the act of giving.

Also pointed out by Singleton is the fact that Bataille is the first inspirer to Derrida who gives him the idea of the impossibility of the gift when Bataille first associates the word "impossible" with an experience of a dissimilar nature:

A gift wholly given, one that escapes the economy of return, must therefore be regarded (in what is surely an allusion to Bataille by Derrida) as "[n]ot impossible, but the impossible. The very face/figure of the impossible" The "impossible," of course, is the term employed by Bataille to convey the essence of his own inner experience and to indicate the nature of all authentic sovereignty. (Singleton 310)

By being the prototype of the Derridian impossible gift, the negative nature of the Bataillean gift is again brought forth to side with the "bad gift." From

this perspective, its negative features as a bad gift appears convincing and feasible. Nevertheless, some may consider that Bataille is probably not the sole reason for Derrida to develop his idea of the impossibility of the gift, because Derrida was in part inspired by Marcel Mauss. When Derrida first induces his thought from Mauss, he has already suggested a viewpoint similar to the gift as the impossible by asking: If the gift is good, how can one possibly achieve and forget about it? How can one possibly desire not to keep (*Given Time* 36)? Still, this is not to rule out Bataille's influence on Derrida in terms of his idea of the link between the gift and the impossible.

Through our first contact with the Bataillean gift, we may well declare that it either demands a return as any transaction does in its economic logic, or denies a return because it poses a confrontational challenge of wealth or of authority. It is seemingly a bad gift, before we acquire a further understanding of it. However, a closer look at the Bataillean gift shall help unwrap the gift further and reveal another side of it which denies the simple dichotomy between benevolent and malevolent gifting.

### **The Bataillean Gift as an Obscure Offer**

How Bataille contributes to the gift discourse is by his approach of general economy; what Bataille contributes to the gift discourse is his idea of expenditure (sometimes interchangeable with "consumption" in the English translation of his discussions). For Bataille, all things have their connections with economy and the study of general economy is the key to all questions in diverse disciplines (*The Accursed Share* 10). He especially focuses on the

“unproductive expenditure of excess associated with gift cultures” (Mifsud 90). He once explains the importance of general economy in terms of how exchange cannot be studied in isolation as an independent act by using the amusing analogy of fixing a flat tire without the awareness of the existence of the car. For him, all things can find themselves located in a certain place in the world of economy, and this all-connecting economy must be taken into consideration.

What Bataille really offers us for the interpretation of the story of Salomé is his idea of expenditure derived from general economy. He relates this idea of expenditure to artistic creation, using poetry for example. It is in the sense of expenditure that we first understand the creation of poetry and then through this understanding we are led further into the interpretation of the biblical story of Salomé.

According to Bataille, human beings, contrary to common belief, are not creatures of production:

Humans are drawn to excessive expenditure rather than accumulation...They are creatures of consumption, not production, and they are enthralled by an ongoing desire for enchantment captured in the emotive, erotic, and exuberant forms that our existence sometimes takes. (*The Accursed Share* 19)<sup>1</sup>

It is thus believed by Bataille, from the basest creatures to human beings, that

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<sup>1</sup> Here the translation is by Dutton, taken intact from “Mango Mao,” pp. 177-178.

expenditure is not only a primitive drive but also a necessity in that when a system, either a corporeal body or a political body, acquires too much intake of energy, it must release the excess. When the system stops its development, the energy is no longer in demand. It must, therefore, seek to dispense it, to spend it, to rid itself of the excess. After Bataille lays down the idea of expenditure as a primal drive, he comes to explain how this drive is related to artistic creation like poetry, a creation by means of loss, namely, by expenditure.

That is to say, on the premise that all creatures, fully supplied and gratified, are capable of dispensation of excess, or in Bataille's wording, capable of expenditure. Since expenditure is a necessary reaction to excess, related to the primitive need to exhaust oneself of superfluous energy, the act of giving away what is excessive and unnecessary is not only possible, but also a rewarding relief that asks for no returned favor.

Now let's try to weigh over the obscurity of the Bataillean gift: on the one end of the scales we have the possibility to give, on the other end, we have the drive to dispense. The obscurity of the Bataillean gift results from the fact that an undemanding gift is possible but the gift-giving seems to be for one's own good. One must give away what is excessive and coercive of sharing. The gift is possible, but it has nothing to do with generosity. Unless, as in the later discussion of John the Baptist, what is excessive and coercive of sharing—the content of expenditure—is already good by nature or even good itself.

Although Bataille may be influential to Derrida in suggesting to him

the idea of the impossibility of the gift, the Batailllean gift is itself full of possibilities: the possibility of the gift, the possibility of the gift to be negative, the possibility of the gift to be obscure, and the possibility to be positive.

### **The Batailllean Gift as a Positive Offer**

As suggested above, Bataille's gift is full of possibilities and can thus promise positives under certain circumstances. In the following examples, the nature of expenditure renders the gift a positive offer. One is an example of artistic creation, poetry; the other is an example of religious impulses, namely charity or devotion.

The link between economy and poetry is a completely original perspective to the understanding of creation. It is also at the same time a proof to Bataille's statement that all things fall into the realm of economy. The full text which mentions such a link reads as follows:

The term poetry, applied to the least degraded and least intellectualized forms of the expression of a state of loss, can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss. ("The Notion of Expenditure" 120)

The creation by means of loss is an art form achieved through emotional loss—despair, bereavement, or other disadvantage experienced by the poet. It

is also a creation by mean of loss in the sense that it aims to lose the excess of emotional residue—"the vertigo," "the rage" as Bataille phrases them ("The Notion of Expenditure" 171). What differentiates it from the previous talk on expenditure is that it is here sublimated into a drive to rhyme other than an impulse to squander.

Also mentioned is the idea of expenditure to the specific time of the Middle Ages in terms of religion. In *The Accursed Share*, Bruce Holsinger points out that Bataille describes the Middle Ages as a period of "*limitless expenditure constantly in tension with the demands of religious asceticism and self-denial*" (44-45). This limitless expenditure is abundantly charged with impulses as those encouraged by capitalism for production (ibid). The religious observation is here likened to the economic activity.

The reasoning of creation as an act of expenditure (in both its senses) and the connection between the religious impulses and economic expenditure are our main recourse to Bataille for our reading of the story of Salomé. Again, the Bataillean gift is actually an ambiguous one by nature in that it avoids consideration of generosity and altruism and instead relies on economic dispensation of excess as a primitive drive to give. On the other hand, the Bataillean gift of expenditure the Bataillean gift goes far beyond the physical, monetary economy into the spiritual economy and emotional residue. One may find it applicable to our later discussion of John the Baptist's death as a gift. Batailles's gift is a gift of in-betweenness which trespasses on a territory of blurred distinction between a positive offer and a negative offer.

There is actually a certain similar streak between Bataille's idea of expenditure and Hyde's idea of consumption. In some discussions where Lewis Hyde comments on art as a transient gift, the idea of consumption is introduced to explain how the gift of art is presented, accepted, and consumed at the same time. This view on artistic creation provides us with one more perspective to look at Salomé's dance as a gift of art. In comparison, Bataille focuses on expenditure. His focus can at first appear as an opposite to Hyde's, yet these two are not at all contradictory. Bataille takes creation as an act of dispensing excess. This necessary expenditure must be enacted for the excess in one to be consumed by other. In Hyde's case, such consumption takes place when the gift-giving is intended; in Bataille's case, such consumption takes place when gift-giving is needed. The points of departure may differ, but the working of consumption is in both cases what contributes to creation.

This is only another supplementary note to the obscurity of Bataille's gift, since it is in part similar to Bourdieu's gift as a negative offer. In the realm of gift discourse, Bataille is one of those scholars who speak less directly and less frequently of the gift and yet brings forth preponderant influence that lasts and spreads.

### **Unwrapping Salomé's Gift**

How can the death of John the Baptist be understood as a Bataillean gift? Is it the kind of gift that falls into the general economy and demands a return or is it a gift that denies emulation and stops the exchange? It may take

no efforts for us to agree on the latter. The irrevocable, irrecoverable death does not and cannot in anyway reciprocated. The “giving up” or “giving out” of an individual’s life can not be compensated. Death is meant to be irreplaceable. For the person, who dies with his very life consumed, any later other lives given will never be able to bring back the life consumed. There is simply not a possible way to replace the original life in the original flesh with any other life.

What really interests us is the latter question, which brings out the gift quality in the death of John the Baptist. How, following Bataille’s concept of creation, can John’s death be read as an act of expenditure? The two questions are exactly the reason why we resort to the Bataillean gift for a thorough comprehension of the Salomé story.

As a lavish gift that cannot be reciprocated, John’s death can be examined in the following relationships respectively: as a gift for Herod, which enables consolidation of authority; as a gift for Salomé, as a reward for her dance; as a gift for Herodias, as a revenge offered by her daughter; as a gift for Jesus, as to protect Jesus by Herod’s fear of John. The presentation of the first three gifts, as a gift to Herod, Salomé, and Herodias, is actually carried out in a linear course. John’s head first comes off under the permission of Herod. It first stops at Herod as a gift first for himself. The death of John then is handed from Herod to Salomé, as a gift granted for her performance of the dance of death (or, dance that causes death), and finally as a gift from the daughter Salomé to the mother Herodias. The death of John is thus in a linear course of gift-giving takes on a three-fold meaning. When

the gift of death lands on each other, the significance alters and means in a different way. The last functioning of the death as a gift to Jesus is outside the linear structure of gift-giving and to be discussed in another context.

### **The Death of John, a Bataillean gift**

For the death of John to be a Bataille gift, we must first come to realize how it can be viewed as a presentation of expenditure. In the earlier discussion of the connection between expenditure and religious impulses, the quote of Holsinger tells of the “limitless expenditure” of religion that encourages sacrifice and self-denial. If this sacrifice and self-denial can be understood as the essence of charity or love (in a Christian sense), then John the Baptist’s dauntless confrontation and blame to the faces of Herod and Herodias might be enacted and driven along by his Christian sense of duty to right the wrong of incest. What functions as excess, as the religious impulses here is John’s Christian sense of righteousness, through which what went wrong can be set right again. When such a wrong is righted, the Christian love is served; so is righteousness.

If the title “Baptist” is to be taken literally to understand John, the title then points directly to the significance of his role as a cleansing agent, a washer of sin and crime. The drive that keeps him preaching the Christian teachings and serving righteousness then becomes his psychological excess or emotional residue. The sense of duty in John must find its way to fulfillment. While some may think that it is Salomé’s dance that causes the exchange of a dance for a head, a more considerate reflection can help reveal

that it is John's Christian sense of duty and righteousness that sends him into the hand of Herod. It is a corollary of John's expenditure of his love and justice. The Christian love must be spread out through the serving of justice. John the Baptist is to serve this purpose and to defy the authority of the worldly king and queen. This driving force of Christian's duty in him takes shape as the Bataillean expenditure. This expenditure fits the description of Holsinger's description and does transform itself into religious impulses that transcend the concern of death.

Besides its allusion to the religious impulses, the idea of expenditure is also related to the creation of poetry in our earlier discussion. Already mentioned is the idea that "the expression of a state of loss" is in its sense "synonymous with expenditure." The state of loss of righteousness in John is synonymous with expenditure both in theory and in practice. In theory, it follows Bataille's logic. In practice, it is expressed right to the source of iniquity (Herod and Herodias), to the marriage of incest. John performs a reproach against loss of shame and morality, and it is performed by means of his expenditure of the boundless Christian righteousness and charity. He spends himself to redeem.

As John is driven by such force of expenditure, so is the creation of poetry. Poetry is believed by Bataille to be the best example of such creation by means of loss ("The Notion of Expenditure" 120). In more than one book by him, he postulates the same idea:

The profound importance of poetry is of the sacrifice of words, of

images, and by virtue of the misery of this sacrifice..., it causes a slipping from impotent sacrifice of objects to that of the subject. (*Inner Experience* 208)

In this manner, a poet, through his employment of words and images, composes poetry. In the process of composition, these words and images are consumed, along with his emotional residue or spiritual excess. This state of loss (intended for creation) is described by Bataille as a state of misery, a state of sacrifice. This is actually a two-fold consumption: a consumption of the poet's output of poetic devices and a consumption of the poet's spirit, namely the poet himself. Hence it converts the reserved sacrifice of objects (here, poetic devices) to a generous sacrifice of the subject (the poet himself).

This understanding of the poet and poetic creation, when applied to John the Baptist and his preaching of righteousness, immediately speaks for itself. While the poet has a drive to voice the emotional residue and spiritual excess, the Baptist has a drive to serve righteousness and reproach iniquity. The fulfillment of the expression of the emotion and spirit of the poet is achieved through his sacrifice, in the form of poetic creation; the fulfillment of the expression of righteousness and the Christian duty is achieved through John's sacrifice, in the form of death. The expenditure force in the poet forces out creation of poetry; the expenditure force in the Baptist forces out dauntless assertion of righteousness. The former creation makes a poet; the latter creation defines the saint. This is a creation of unselfish devotion to the Christian duty and sense of righteousness.

John's irrecoverable death, beyond all compensation, is nothing short

of Bataille's reference to the "sacrificial expenditure," "absolute loss," a spiritual "squandering without reciprocity" in a righteous cause (*The Accursed Share* 38). John offers a Bataillean gift which is destined to be unrequited. The richness it poses exceeds that by a *potlatch*. The absolutely sacrificial nature of it denies all possibility of reciprocation. John's gift is a genuine gift that is composed of generosity and commands no return.

John's death is in theory and in practice a Bataillean gift.<sup>2</sup> How then is the gift significant in terms of different personae it is presented to?

### **The Death of John, a multifold gift**

The gift of the death of John first comes into King Herod's hand. It is a gift; yet, a gift of a very eccentric nature. It is a compulsory gift imposed on Herod, though it does not demand a returned favor. The gift of death actually denies reciprocation. It is a gift bestowed on Herod against his will, for Herod did not dare to kill John. On the contrary, he always attempted the opposite—to protect John from being killed at Herodias' will. The gift of death is forced on Herod.

The gift is a demand of John's death. When Herod finds himself on a point of no return because of the promise he makes to Salomé, he is forced to allow the execution of John. John's death could have been a mere loss to Herod since it happens against Herod's will. However, the death is allowed under the circumstances of Salomé's request and the courtiers' witness. The

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<sup>2</sup> It may also be a possible gift even to Derrida's standard.

circumstances make all the difference. They turn the original loss into a gain. Hence, it becomes a gift.

Under said circumstances, the death of John becomes a gift to Herod. First, the circumstances which involve the witness of the courtiers force Herod to keep his words as a king. When he does accordingly, his authority as the king is further consolidated, as we previously notice. In this manner, Herod fulfills his obligation to his courtiers. King Herod, as a result, benefits from his own promise to others. Second, to Salomé, this is a promise fulfilled by the promise-maker. This is a closure to Herod's promise to Salomé.

An accidental gain may also be incurred by this gift of death. From the biblical text, we learn that Herod may attempt John's death, but dares not: "when he [Herod] would have put him [John] to death, he [Herod] feared the multitude, because they counted him [John] as a prophet" (Matthew 14.5). For long, John has been the source of guilt for both Herodias and Herod. Herodias is obviously more aggressive in her attempt to kill, while Herod shows more concern about the consequences. This description in the Book of Matthew does tell us Herod's similar intention to Herodias'. The only difference is the intensity in between. Herodias' is desperately regardless of consequences; Herod's is biding the time. Salomé's request exactly contributes to the advent of such a time. By fulfilling his promise to Salomé, Herod rids himself of the source of guilt. Or, if guilt comes from oneself not from others, the guilt is at least successfully silenced.

The gift of death next finds its way into the hand of Salomé. For Salomé, this is something she earns with her dance. This gift, however, does

not seem to do her any good in the first place. It is a gift chosen by someone else instead of herself. Her preference for a gift is not in any way involved in this choice of gift. In a sense, the gift is also forced upon her.

According to the Book of Mark, the request of John's head is a decision made by Herodias, Salomé's mother, and obviously for Herodias herself: "And she [Salomé] went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she [Herodias] said, the head of John the Baptist" (Mark 6.24). This choice of gift is of no interest to the dancer Salomé. It is actually to Salomé more of a loss than a gain.

Herod's promise tells of the power, wealth, among many other benefits that "half a kingdom" may entail. Salomé loses all these for a dead head. The dead head helps to silence John's accusation of the incestuous relationship between Herodias and Herod, but it makes no difference to Salomé because the fact remains that she is at the mercy of someone who drives away her own father, usurps the kingdom, and marries her mother. What good is it to Salomé to ask for the dead head?

There is no other answer than to say the choice of gift answers her mother's need. Salomé's gift has only one purpose—to be handed to her mother for her mother's gift. The reason why Salomé let Herodias make the decision is of course to return the gift of birth, whose logic and reasoning has been formerly examined. This is a gift asked for on behalf of a mother. It is a daughter's gift. It is earned by the daughter, of no use to the daughter, at the cost of all other gains, in order to be presented to the mother. It is now a conspicuously generous, unselfish gift. The dancer presents a gift of dance

for nothing for herself. Her efforts are made on behalf of an other, to whom she feels responsible and necessary to return favor to.

The most climatic scene of the biblical story is also the weakest link of the story. As a story of gift economy, every link of the gift flow is significant and solid, except when the gift travels to the place where Salomé's dance is danced for the death John dies. The direct cause of this exchange will make this weakest link of the story even more startling.

The direct cause for John's death is his fulfillment of the Christian duty and sense of righteousness; the only reason for Salomé's choice of gift is her indebtedness to Herodias' gift of birth as her mother, her responsibilities as a daughter. The meeting of two good causes should cause death! John's cause costs his life; Salomé's cause costs her would-gain fortune, and also costs her integrity, because she helps with murder. John's principle of serving righteousness puts his life in danger and he dares to; Salomé's principle of serving her mother puts her gain in danger and she obeys so. These two originally least involved and hence innocent agents in the economy of *hau* suffer the greatest loss and contribute to the possible gift. John's will to give makes his gift-giving in a good cause; so does Salomé's. It is Herod's misuse of John's will to give, and Herodias' misuse of Salomé's will to give that cause evil out of their innocent gifts. The former abuses the sense of righteousness; the latter abuses the filial commitment.

Next, the gift travels from Salomé to Herodias. As the last paragraph concludes, Herodias abuses Salomé's filial commitment. According to textual evidence alone, the sense of indebtedness might be the only reason

for Salomé to ask for something on behalf of her mother. In the biblical story, in the gift economy between Salomé and Herod, Herod first offers Salomé survival at court and invitation to his birthday banquet; Salomé seizes the opportunity to show gratitude and to reciprocate with her gift of dance; Herod, as a king, offers another gift to reward her for the dance—his offer of “unto the half of my kingdom” for her gift keeps intact the nature of his gift as a lordly *potlatch* that demonstrates authority and denies return. What goes wrong is the insertion of Herodias’ will to kill.

The gift from Herod for Salomé immediately intercepted by Herodias’ will and directly turns into a gift for Herodias. While both John and Salomé suffer loss, Herodias claims her gain; so does Herod (he rids himself of the voice of guilt). The gift for Herodias is significant in the sense that it is actually a gift for two—a mutual gift shared between Herod and Herodias. When the text reads, “and the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath’s sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her” (Matt. 14.9), we doubt if he is sorry for he might anger the multitude he always fears.

If Herod had nothing against John and had from the very beginning faced his own sin and known his fault, he would not have John in prison. The imprisonment only tells of two things: Herod dislikes John as Herodias for the accusation of their incestuous marriage and his deep concerns about people’s reaction towards his behavior against John. Herod may now offer his gratitude to Herodias. Macbeth’s kill has been executed through Lady Macbeth’s words. The gift of death is thus a perfect gift for anniversary

shared between the royal husband and wife. In other words, if we further our observation of the traveling *hau* in this linear development of gift-giving, we can see the *hau* finally, as Mauss tells us, travels back to the primal giver. Herodias' gift may be taken as in the end a gift for her husband—a gift that finally settles the qualms between them for their unlawful marriage.

In the very beginning of the biblical text, both in the Book of Matthew and in the Book of Mark, there is a misidentity between John and Jesus. This yet forms another relationship of exchange. In the Bible, the whole story is a narrative that unfolds backwards. It starts with the present scenario where Herod mistakes Jesus for John. From the story of wonders that reach his ear, he infers that the practitioner of healing miracles must be John who comes back to life from death. This (mis)belief of Herod simply serves to protect Jesus and his disciples from threats or dangers caused by Herod. For Herod fears John, even after John's death. The fear and the guilt loom large enough to check Herod's sensibility and to cause his misunderstanding of two separate identities.

This grants an extra gift for Jesus. John the Baptist's death grants security for Jesus and his disciples. His assertion of the righteous cause offers to protect Jesus even after he is long gone. The gift of death for Jesus is a gift that travels across a temporal and spatial gap and reaches a remote third party who previously remained not at all involved in their gift economy—the third, total other. John's gift of death is in this case a perfect Levinasian gift for the *tout autre*, the total other.

In the reading of John's gift of death as a Batailleian gift, we not only

realize the possibilities of the gift but also realize the denial of such possibilities shall lose the multifold shades of meanings in the ancient biblical tale in a whole new light. Gift, or gifting, has in this reading of the biblical story, among its application to other texts and contexts, proved a dynamic way of observing the ever-complicating human condition rather than a theoretical hypothesis that invites mere discussion.

The Bataillean reading of the Biblical Salomé, all in all, has proved a theoretical significance in understanding of a classical text, literary or religious. Bataille's efforts to interpret the gift do not rest upon the gift for its end, but proceed to explore the gift economy in almost all fields of humanities. What was once taken for being limited in the realm of anthropology has now made clear by the far-flung territory of the gift discourse as a lineage of philosophy and cultural observation. It is both proper and pertinent to say that the gift economy, especially the one within the Bataillean framework under discussion, offers a way of keen observation of humanity and human culture which take their roots in the interaction and entanglement of give-and-take (im)balance. Its pivotal role as a reasoning logic and a way of understanding of humans and humanities has already ushered the gift discourse, out of a one-dimensional anthropological concern, into numerous studies in which it helps the re-reading of canonical works, including history itself.

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