

## **(Im)Possibility of Reciprocation: Gift Economy in “Letter from an Unknown Woman”**

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### **Abstract**

This paper uses theories of gift economy to examine gift relationship in the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig's novella "Letter from an Unknown Woman." Based upon the gift relationship, this paper further interprets love relationship between the hero and the heroine. Marcel Mauss observes that gift-giving, dictated by social rules, requires reciprocation. But Georges Bataille considers that this reciprocity inherent in gift relationship is not different from transaction. Instead, he uses the conception of expenditure to explain the behavior of gift-giving. Gift, in Bataille's view, should not be interpreted as exchange but as loss free from calculation. Jacques Derrida, in line with Bataille, regards the gift as impossible because the gift, once recognized as reciprocal by obligation, is not gift any more. According to Mauss', Bataille's and Derrida's theories of gift, reciprocity becomes the key factor for analyzing gift relationship.

Highlighting gift relationship, "Letter from an Unknown Woman" dramatizes a first-person female narrator's deathbed confession, which contains her lifelong unrequited love for the addressee. Going against the grain with conventional reading, this paper argues that the heroine is not totally satisfied with such an unreciprocated relationship. She still demands return, even though it is nothing but the hero's memory of her. The heroine's contradictory attitude indeed reflects the contradiction of Bataille's theory:

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no gift giving can be wholly disinterested and no gift relationship can be sustained without reciprocation.

Keywords: gift studies, Georges Bataille, expenditure, reciprocity

Social relations are largely built upon exchange. With the emergence of market economy, commodity exchange dominantly and extensively influenced various social relations. Commodity exchange not only changes how social relations are constructed but also how social relations are perceived. Accompanied with the overwhelming power of market economy is the sense that the traditional social relations built upon affection and intimacy are considerably threatened. Under the logic of commodity exchange, can love, kindness, friendship, devotion, generosity, hospitality and loyalty be quantifiable and even exchangeable? Confronted with such a question, one usually says no to it without hesitation. The conventional view holds that these sentiments are characterized by immeasurability and unselfishness. In other words, love is supposed to be exempt from utilitarian calculation. Unlike commodity exchange, an emotional commitment by no means demands a repayment or intends to weigh gain and loss.

But the challenge brought by commodity exchange is to lay bare the repressed wish for a balance, even in an intimate relationship. If a relationship is built on one side's unilateral commitment with meagre or even no response or return, is this relationship sustainable? To what extent can unrequited love be "unrequited"? To solve this difficulty, this paper considers that gift studies offer a very appropriate route, if not a direct answer, to clarify how intimate relationship is related to exchange. This study indeed aims to answer the questions by using gift theory, especially Georges Bataille's conception of gift as loss to read the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig's famous novella "Letter from an Unknown Woman" (1922). This essay will reveal how the heroine's unrequited love is interpreted as gift and how the hero and heroine's relationship is established by gift. Moreover, as Bataille extends the conception of gift to expenditure and loss, the heroine's love and her relationship with the hero should also be analyzed in light of the conception of expenditure.

Gift studies, initiated by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss at the beginning of the twentieth century, arose exactly in response to the crisis in which traditional social relations were jeopardized by mercantile relations. Commodity exchange exposes the core value of intimate

relationship—selflessness—is indeed self-deception. The intimate relationship presupposes that love should be gratuitous and disinterested and that any reciprocation should never be mandatory but voluntary. When one gives his/her care to someone, the one who receives his/her care will also automatically reciprocate even though the giver does not expect as such. However, if the giver does not receive any affection in return, he/she will still feel hurt and stop giving his/her care. A mercantile relationship, in contrast, is totally built upon the immediate exchange of equal values recognized by the market. To the mercantile relationship, reciprocation is never a problem. The gift relationship serves to be a bridge between the spiritual intimate relationship and the materialistic mercantile relationship. As conventions require that the gift taker “repays” the gift taker, superficially, commodity exchange is hardly distinctive from gift exchange. But as Jacques T. Godbout proposes, unlike exchange value produced from the process of commodity exchange, what the gift achieves is the “bonding-value,” which “is not determined by comparison with other things but primarily in relation to people” (173-72). In contrast with the commodity in exchange, the gift is “anti-utilitarian, anti-accumulative, and anti-equivalence” (129). Even though it is a tangible object, the gift, more importantly, symbolizes non-materialistic interpersonal connectedness. In other words, the gift features both the spiritual dimension and the material dimension. That is why all gift studies inevitably reveal the conflicting nature of the gift. On the one hand, to give a gift should be disinterested and unrequited; on the other hand, social rules stipulate the gift-taker to reciprocate and the giver indeed expects the taker to do so. If we substitute the gift for love, devotion or any other sentiment, we will find out that this is exactly the paradox involved in the intimate relationship.

It is also this paradox that inspires this essay to use the gift theory, especially Bataille’s general economy to read the love relationship in “Letter from an Unknown Woman.” This novella, written in an epistolary form, dramatizes the female addressor’s lifelong ardent passion for the male addressee. For him, she leaves home, delivers a child, and even becomes a prostitute and finally dies with her child. But he remains ignorant of her even

until he reads the letter, which she writes on the verge of death. Even though to read a love story in economic terms seems to be incongruous, this daring attempt should be justified by its common though unconscious practice by readers and critics.

When reading the story, the readers inevitably feel divided. On the one hand, readers are moved by the greatness of the heroine's love. On the other hand, readers feel puzzled about her unappreciated devotion and sacrifice and even find them ludicrous. This ambivalence for the heroine corresponds to our similar attitude toward the gift. On one hand, we perceive the gift as unrequited generosity; on the other hand, we consider reciprocation obligatory.

Specialists of gift studies including Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille and Pierre Bourdieu all revolve around the contradiction inherent in gift relations. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, written by the socialist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss in the twenties, is a landmark which initiated gift studies.<sup>1</sup> The rise of gift studies in an age when capitalism encountered an unprecedented crisis is never accidental. It indicates that the overdevelopment of capitalism and its subsequent problems stimulated the disciplines of politics, economics and sociology to undergo strong self-reflection and self-criticism. Mauss' gift theory proves that the mercantile relationship is not the sole force which sustains human economy and human relations.

### **Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida: from gift as reciprocal, gift as lost, to gift as impossible**

Mauss' *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* delineates a pre-capitalist economic model practiced by primitive tribes. This model is very divergent from commodity exchange in the modern

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<sup>1</sup> This book, published in French in 1950, is based upon Mauss' essay written in 1925, "Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques" (An essay on the gift: the form and reason of exchange in archaic societies).

society: gift economy. Mauss proposes that ancient social web between individuals and nations is operated and maintained by the giving and taking of gift. Mauss' analysis of the gift phenomenon reveals that the gift giving involves complexities more than just generosity. According to evidence collected from long-term field studies, Mauss observes that gift giving is governed by a system of social norms and customs instead of by an individual's volition. These social norms regulate how gift giving should be proceeded and how the gift taker should respond to the giver. For example, when one gives a gift to another one, the taker is obliged to return another gift to the giver. Also, gift giving is not only out of generosity or benevolence but due to diverse motives such as to establish alliances, to show off one's fortune or status, or to insult the gift takers. In response to the gift, the taker also needs to develop different kinds of defensive strategies. Mauss' famous example is the potlatch, a radical gift-giving feast commonly practiced by Indians of the Pacific Northwest. In a potlatch, the host prodigally gives out his fortune to win a superior status and reputation. When receiving lavish gifts from the host, the gift taker, to overpower the host, needs to give more extravagant goods to the host. Otherwise, the gift taker will feel ashamed. To prevent the gift taker from having the chance to return gifts, to overpower him, the host even takes an extreme approach: to destroy goods. Participants in a potlatch compete to distribute more resources in reward of higher status, reputation and respect. The exacerbated competition often leads to mass destruction of fortune:

Consumption and destruction of goods really go beyond all bounds. In certain kinds of potlatch one must expend all that one has, keeping nothing back. It is a competition to see who is the richest and also the most madly extravagant. Everything is based upon the principles of antagonism and rivalry. The political status of individuals in the brotherhoods and clans, and ranks of all kinds, are gained in a "war of property," . . . In a certain number of cases, it is not even a question of giving and returning gifts, but of destroying, so as not to give the slightest hint of desiring

your gift to be reciprocated. (47)

Thus in Mauss' description, the potlatch proves that the gift functions to form not only alliance but also rivalry, and that its nature is not only pacific but also agonistic. Gift giving and taking, in Mauss' view, contains a dynamic interactive mechanism. Bruce Allan Thompson points out that despite Mauss' inheritance from Durkheim, Mauss diverges from Durkheim's emphasis on social solidarity and harmony by manifesting other dissonant elements during social integration including competition and rivalry (42).

Mauss' gift theory, though widely influential, still entails much criticism. Two most influential critics are George Bataille and Jacques Derrida. Before introducing them, this paper first wants to address an important question came up with by Rodolphe Gasché. Why does the giver give? As Mauss is concerned with the obligatory reciprocity of gift, his focus is the taker's response to giving. The inadequacy of Mauss' theory, as Rodolphe Gasché reveals, is that he never inquires what initiates the giver to give (Gasché 111). Gasché answers for Mauss by arguing that no original giver can be identified in gift economy. The gift giver, instead of being outside the circulation of gift exchange, is already involved in it. Any gift-giving in fact is counter-gift. Gasché's question is important, but his answer evades the question by denying the existence of the original giver and in fact does not answer the question at all. In the view of this paper, Bataille's gift theory, which characterize humankind's inner drive for unproductive expenditure, effectively answers Gasché question.

Even though Mauss primarily focuses on the social rules which govern gift economy, he does reveal the irrational, anomalous and transgressive factors of gift economy. These factors inspired Georges Bataille's more radical reinterpretation: gift as loss. His idea first appeared in the essay "The Notion of Expenditure" written in 1933. He repudiates material utility as the major principle for the survival of human society. Material utility, according to his explanation, is "limited to acquisition (in practice, to production) and to the conservation of goods" and also "to reproduction and to the conservation of human life" (1997: 167). In other words, owing to the

scarcity of resources, how to acquire, produce and conserve them is the primary concern for human survival. However, Bataille points out the blindness behind this focus on material principle. When human beings strive to acquire and produce more resources, they are unaware that to expend resources is also necessary to the operation of society and human survival:

[A] human society can have, just as he does, an interest in considerable losses, in catastrophes that, while conforming to well-defined needs, provoke tumultuous depressions, crises of dread and, in the final analysis, a certain orgiastic state. (1997: 168)

This principle, entirely opposite to material utility, is called the “principle of loss” by Bataille. Human history has continually witnessed the principle of loss that has been ignored. It is always subordinate to material utility. Expenditure is regarded only as the minimum cost of productive activities. Expenditure is only means of achieving productive gains. The unproductive expenditure, whose purpose is itself, is depreciated, dismissed, and even repressed. Thus Bataille writes:

[A]ny general judgment of social activity implies the principle that all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation . . . . humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle *non-productive expenditure*. (1997: 168)

But this material utility has not always dominated human history. Bataille borrows Mauss’ example of potlatch to prove that in archaic society, unproductive expenditure as the need of individuals and the whole human society was present and fulfilled. Also, primitive exchanges satisfied “the need to destroy and to lose” rather than the need to acquire today. Since the rise of market economy, this principle of loss has been erased. But its



vestiges still remain in modern daily life such as luxurious jewelries, gambling, horse racing and art. Bataille attributes injustice derived from class distinction to the dismissal of the principle of loss and blames the bourgeoisie as the culprit. Unlike members of the upper class in ancient society who distributed their fortune during the spectacular expenditure, the bourgeoisie, the modern rich men, are only concerned about the acquisition of fortune and tend to conceal their expenditure. The modern bourgeoisie “distinguished itself from the aristocracy through the fact that it has consented only to spend for itself, and within itself—in other words, by hiding its expenditures as much as possible from the eyes of the other classes” (Bataille 1997: 176). Bataille predicts that the excessive fortune accumulated by the bourgeoisie will eventually be destroyed by the proletarian revolution. According to Jürgen Habermas, unproductive expenditure, observed by Bataille, can “make possible and confirm the sovereignty of human beings their authentic existence” (Habermas 89). Unproductive expenditure indeed promises liberation from the infinite circuit of production.

Later in *The Accursed Share*, Bataille developed his conception of expenditure into a more comprehensive as well as more ambitious theoretical enterprise: general economy, which, according to Bataille’s claim, is to achieve “a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking—and of ethics” (1988a: 25). Bataille vehemently attacks what is antithetical to general economy: restricted economy. Restricted economy, whose core value is acquisition and production, prevails the capitalist society. In Bataille’s view, the phenomenon of restricted economy is due to the restricted mode of thinking. He criticizes economists, who not only disconnect production and consumption but also exclude seemingly noneconomic factors, which in fact influence human economy overall. This narrow approach leads to the fact that “the economy taken as a whole is usually studied as if it were a matter of an isolatable system of operation” (Bataille 1988a: 19).

Bataille broadens the conception of economy to incorporate the factors of biological intuition, ecological balance, and even cosmic operation. From the cosmological perspective, the sun gives the earth much more energy than needed. Thus the energy which organisms on the earth absorb is excessive.

From the biological perspective, living beings intuitively absorb more resources than required to sustain their lives. Excessive resources are converted into extra energy, which is used for the living organism's growth and reproduction. Once these living organisms, limited by their environment, are no longer able to grow and reproduce, the excessive energy "must necessarily be lost without profit," and "must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically" (1988a: 21). Bataille conceives of human economic behavior as a microcosm of the cosmic movement. Thus restricted economy, featuring accumulation and production of resources, indeed counters the natural law. Bataille writes: "Beyond our immediate ends, man's activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfillment of the universe" (1988a: 21). The spectacular rituals or architectural construction occurring in human civilization are all, as Bataille observes, expenditure of excessive energy and resources. The pattern of history shows that the overly accumulated resources by human society will eventually explode and be destroyed by wars.

In the second volume of *The Accursed Share*, while continuing the discussion of expenditure, Bataille turns his attention to "a kind of consumption of energy generally considered base": eroticism (16). He distinguishes eroticism from sexuality: "Sexuality at least is good for something; but eroticism . . . cannot serve any purpose" (16). Sexuality is productive, whose purpose is to reproduce, to continue the offspring of species, but eroticism is an unproductive expenditure of energy, whose purpose is no other than pleasure. Therefore, eroticism is essentially consistent to the theoretical framework of general economy. As Bataille's general economy significantly adopts the biological perspective to rethink economy in the first volume of *The Accursed Share*, in the second volume, his discussion of unproductive expenditure extends from the expenditure of materials and luxuries to that of libido. Bataille's general economy seems also to incorporate libido economy.

The other important challenger to Mauss' gift theory is Jacques Derrida. He explicitly criticizes Mauss' study on gift, whose research object is, in Derrida's view, anything but gift: "It deals with economy, exchange, contract

(do et des), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift and counter-gift—in short, everything that in the thing itself impels the gift and the annulment of the gift” (138). For Derrida, Mauss’ gift theory, which emphasizes the gift’s obligatory nature of reciprocation, makes gift indistinguishable from commodity exchange. Much like Bataille, Derrida conceives gift as unreciprocated and unilateral as he states: “For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt” (Derrida 12). But for Derrida the conditions for the Derridean gift are even stricter than Bataille’s. To be valid, the Derridean gift requires the giver and the taker to “not perceive or receive the gift as such, have no consciousness of it, no memory, no recognition” and the giver and the taker “must also forget it right away [à l’instant] and moreover this forgetting must be so radical that it exceeds even the psychoanalytic categoriality of forgetting” (16). In other words, the gift can only be gift on the condition that both the giver and the taker never identify this gift as gift. The former does not have any slightest expectation to be repaid and the latter not feel any obligation to repay. As long as any side recognizes it as gift (in Mauss’ sense), this gift fails to be gift (in Derrida’s sense). The awareness that gift should be reciprocated only equates gift-giving as exchange and annuls the meaning of gift. Thus the gift annuls itself in the circulation of time as in the circulation of economy. The gift does not exist in time. Or to put it more correctly, the gift exists beyond time. According to Derrida, the condition of the gift is only valid when “the paradoxical instant tears time apart” (Derrida 9). The gift “never comes ‘to be’, remaining always ‘to come’,” explains Niall Lucy (43). As Carl Olson points out, Derrida agrees with Bataille concerning the excessive aspect of the gift (Olson 360). Describing the nature of the gift as “excessive in advance, a priori exaggerated,” Derrida stresses that “[t]o give and thus do something other than calculate its return in exchange, the most modest gift must pass beyond measure” (Derrida 38). For both Bataille and Derrida, the motive behind giving, unlike the one behind exchange, is not explainable by rationality.

Bataille’s and Derrida’s expansion and elaboration of Mauss’ theory provides a ground for the reading of “Letter from an Unknown Woman.”

### **Gift economy in “Letter from an Unknown Woman”**

Critics, though with different approaches, endeavor to explain the heroine’s unregretful unilateral devotion in “Letter from an Unknown Woman.”<sup>2</sup> George Wilson describes the heroine’s love as “the result of a partially willed obsession with an object of love who is largely the product of a passionate imagination” (1122). In other words, Wilson argues that the heroine in fact falls in love with her own fantastical projection, an invented image which is distinct from the actual hero. Gaylyn Studlar ascribes the heroine’s love to psychological masochism, which can be traced back to the pre-Oedipal stage. Masochism, according to Studlar, enables the heroine to fall in love with the hero “without the necessity of ever having laid eyes on him” because the hero “merely fills already created internalized object relations” (43). Interpreting this love relationship as the heroine’s one-person play, critics seem to entirely erase the hero’s involvement. It seems that the heroine can project such emotions to anyone who happens to be in the scene. The hero only fills the position of the heroine’s fantasy scenario. The overtone of such an interpretation cannot be missed that the hero in the novella, an unfaithful profligate, is not worthy of the heroine’s lifelong commitment. It is only the heroine’s imagination that idealizes the hero and eulogizes this relationship. This kind of interpretation also emphasizes the blindness of the heroine’s obsession with the hero.

However, what this paper wants to argue is that it is the hero’s negative character which directly attracts the heroine without requiring idealization. Despite their apparent divergent attitude toward relations (one is faithful but the other is promiscuous) the hero and the heroine share some characteristics

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<sup>2</sup> As I proceed literature review, it is necessary to explain first almost all the critiques in English about “Letter from an Unknown Women” write about the Hollywood adapted film directed by Max Ophüls in 1948 instead of the original novella written by the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig. It is possible that critiques about the original text are mostly written in German, which is the language of the original. Since in the view of this essay the film, integrating the original novella’s spirit with the director’s reinterpretation, exhibits artistic value no inferior to that of the original text, this essay lays balanced emphases on both. Also, the comparison between the two can further help us understand “Letter from an Unknown Woman” in light of Bataille’s theory.

which connect them together. In the perspective of Bataille's expenditure, the heroine's unrequited love resembles the generous giving which does not require reciprocation shown in a potlatch. This kind of giving is, according to Bataille, due to the human inner drive to expend without purpose and this kind of expenditure is often destructive. This kind of destructiveness of expenditure also implies the inevitable fate in which the heroine ends with death. The hero is also characterized by his unrestrained expenditure on commodities and sex. He frequents luxurious occasions, purchases rare and valuable antiques, and philanders with numerous women. He leads a dissolutely playful life. In the movie version, in the end he even wastes his talents (in the movie he is a prodigiously gifted pianist rather than a novelist in the original text). Both characters embody Bataille's theory on unproductive expenditure. In observing the movie version of "Letter from an Unknown Woman," Lester H. Hunt indeed identifies an affinity between the hero (named as Stefan Brand) and the heroine (named as Lisa): "Like Lisa, he is in a way (or at least once was intensely committed to values). They differ in what those values are. Stefan's values are both artistic and erotic, while Lisa is virtually all eros" (59). Hunt does not clarify what kind value it is. It is expenditure which connects the hero and the heroine. Their expenditures, however, still differ. While the heroine's expenditure totally aims to the hero, the hero's expenditure, whose object changes from one to another, is aimless. The heroine does not worship the hero as an avatar like what previous critics say. In fact, she identifies his characteristic of expenditure, which corresponds to hers. Her love for the hero also fulfills her repressed longing for expenditure.

According to the heroine's description, her lifelong love for the hero traces back to her adolescence when the hero moves into her neighborhood. Before she meets the hero, the teenager heroine lived very unhappily. Her father, an accountant, dies early and her mother can hardly remove herself from the mourning state. The mother and the daughter live a sparing and secluded life, seldom having any interaction with her surrounding lower-class neighbors: ". . . we had no nameplate on our door and no one came to visit us, no one inquired after us" (184). The adolescent heroine and

her mother, suffering from destitute bourgeois life, are “immersed in our petty-bourgeois poverty” (184).

Before the hero moves into his apartment, it was rented to an “odious, nasty, quarrelsome” laboring class family. The heroine’s mother rarely interacts with these lower-class neighbors. Undoubtedly, the heroine’s family is a typical middle-class one. As her father is an accountant, a calculating bourgeois image has already been configured. After her father’s death, her mother inherits this calculating spirit as she always “worries about her pension” (188). “[W]ith her everlasting, wretched depression,” the adolescent heroine suffers from not only material but even spiritual destitution. Even though their sparing is distinct from what Bataille describes rich but stingy bourgeoisie, it echoes Bataille’s criticism of bourgeoisie’s characteristics including deletions of expenditure, repression of consumption desire, and selfish concern with only themselves: “The hatred of expenditure is the *raison d’être* of and the justification for the bourgeoisie; it is at the same time the principle of its horrifying hypocrisy” (1997: 176).

Therefore, the heroine’s strong and lasting passion for the hero has been long repressed and accumulated to be consumed. Her frugal, isolated and austere life finds no object for investing her emotion. She describes her love as “the outburst, of longing accumulated over a thousand lonely days” (197). This passion indeed originates from her desire for consumption. The hero’s arrival unleashes such a desire. The poor and vulgar lower-class tenant has already constituted a striking contrast for him. Also, the furnishing of the hero’s apartment, which prepares his debut, forecasts his profligate character: “After a few days painters and decorators, cleaners and carpet layers came to renovate after the mess left by the former tenants. There was much hammering, banging, plastering and scraping . . .” (185). With the respectable and mannered butler John who directs all the arrangements, before the hero’s formal appearance, “an aura of opulence” has already preluded it (185). When the heroine witnessed the removal men move the hero’s various possessions into the house, she is immediately attracted by them: “I stood at the door to marvel at everything, for all your things were so different from anything I had ever seen. There were Indian idols; pieces of

Italian sculpture; large pictures in dazzling colours” (185). She is especially awed by the large collection of books: “and then, finally came the books, so many and so beautiful, I wouldn’t have believed it possible” (185). Even books, symbolic of spiritual fortune, are emphasized its materialistic value. The heroine even longs to “to handle the soft leather of some of them” (185). These new and beautiful books are in sharp contrast with her “cheap tattered books with cardboard covers” (186). Through the upcoming hero, though still absent, an extravagant world inaccessible but alluring to the young heroine is depicted.

When the heroine first sees the hero, he impresses her with not only his youth and handsomeness but also his “fashionable, light-brown country clothes” (186). Her obsession with the hero makes her feel ashamed of her shabby school clothes:

I thought it terrible that my school overall (it was made out of one of my mother’s dresses) had a square patch inserted on the left-hand side. I was afraid that you might notice it and despise me. So I always covered it with my satchel when I ran up the stairs, trembling with fear in case you saw it. (189)

She kisses the door handle he touches, picks the cigarette butt he deserts. By giving a hand to the servant who pulls the carpet, she sees his apartment and furniture: “I saw your world, the writing-table at which you were accustomed to sit, with a blue crystal vase on it containing a few flowers, your bookcases, your pictures, your books” (190). This “fleeting, surreptitious glance” suffices to nourish and sustain the heroine’s imagination and enthusiasm (190). What the hero incarnates is lavish expenditure which the heroine’s thrifty bourgeois growing environment forbids. The hero’s luxurious commodities serve the vicarious function for the heroine. Through the hero’s monetary expenditure on them, the heroine exercises her emotional expenditure on him.

The two dimensions of production and consumption are also reflected by the heroine’s adoration for the hero’s two different kinds of images. The

heroine describes the hero as “two people in one” (186). On the one hand, he is a “passionate, happy-go-lucky young man given over to pleasure and adventure” (186). On the other hand, he is cultivated and mature as his writing is “concerned a relentless, serious, responsible, extremely well-read and educated man” (186). The hero, according to the heroine’s understanding, leads a “double life,” oscillating between “a life which presented to the world a light-hearted, open face” and “an obscure life known only to yourself” (186). The duality of the hero’s character can be explained from the production/consumption approach. The happy-go-lucky one exposed to the world indicates his expenditure dimension: the hero is a profligate squandering his fortune for unrestrained embrace of sensual pleasure and materialism. The mysterious one only known to himself reveals the production dimension: the hero is an artist accumulating his intellectual resources and devoted to artistic creations. A common misrecognition often happens when readers conceive the heroine’s love is due to her privileged knowledge of the idealistic and profound part of the hero’s personality. The Hollywood adaptation indeed emphasizes the heroine’s access to the hero’s artistic idealism unknown to others. However, as the previous textual analysis demonstrates, this paper wants to show that the heroine is attracted by his dissolute expenditure part.

This conception of expenditure is also shown by the economic terms which the heroine borrows to express her emotions. She describes her falling in love with the hero as “heart was lost to you” (187). Her heart devoted to the hero, just like what Bataille says about the gift given without reciprocation or fortune wasted without return, is “lost.” The heroine repeated emphasizes “I was yours” (187). She is objectified, becoming one of the hero’s possessions with his commodities. Her love for him is portrayed as “extravagant overenthusiasm” and “childish excesses” (189). As the heroine uses the analogy of expenditure to describe her passion, the way she “expends” her passion exemplifies the vision Bataille provides: humankind should lavishly wastes their materialistic and biological excesses.

After the hero’s luxuries arouse the heroine’s repressed desire for expenditure and the hero becomes the object in which the heroine invests her



passion, any luxuries, as long as they are unrelated to the hero, mean nothing to her. She is unconcerned with the fact that her mother goes to theatre with her new pursuer. When her mother decides to get remarried and to move into the new home, the heroine, provided with better living environment, grieves because she cannot see the hero anymore. The heroine cannot help but move with her mother to another place. With improved economic condition, the heroine instead becomes totally ascetic:

I didn't want to be happy, to be content away from you; I buried myself in a dark world of self-torment and loneliness. I did not wear the pretty clothes they bought me. I refused to go to concerts or the theatre, or to join in companionable excursions. I rarely left the house . . . I wallowed in every deprivation I inflicted on myself while I thought about you. (193)

Her initially repressed desire for material consumption, after stimulated by the hero's profligate character, is totally transformed into desire for erotic consumption. This desire for erotic consumption, overly concentrated on the hero, makes her initial desire for material consumption forsaken.

The heroine's association with consumption is also reflected by her professions. Having moved away from Vienna with her family, she returns to Vienna to see the hero and works as "an employee in a large, ready-to-wear dress business" (194). A shop selling women's apparel, a place displaying fashion and luxury, often titillates female customers' desire for consumption. The author of the original does not say much about the heroin's job in the shop of women's clothes. But in the adapted film, the heroine is modified to work as a model in a fancy boutique selling haute couture rather than as a shop. Her distinctive beauty often attracts many male customers. Once a male costumer inquires the shop owner if there is some possibility about the heroine. But before he finishes his inquiry, the shop owner immediately denies because the heroine is different from other models. This curious dialogue indicates the costumer's intention perhaps to court the heroine or to involve her into prostitution. The film does not clarify it. However, this

episode proves that in a shop of women's clothes, desire for commodity consumption is often intertwined with erotic desire. It also forecasts the heroine's reliance on commodity consumption to connect with the hero and to fulfill erotic consumption. In fact, in the previous pages, commodity, especially women's apparel, has already been related to eroticism. Women sexually involved with the hero includes "ladies who drove up in cars," "young girls still attending commercial school," "a heavily-veiled lady" (187). When the young heroine is forced to leave Vienna, she awaits outside the hero's apartment all night for him to come back. But when he finally comes back, his voice is accompanied with another woman's voice, whose presence is shown by "a rustling of silk" (192). All these women erotically engaged with the hero are stressed by their commodities and they are also "consumed" like commodities by the hero.

The heroine's most objectification and commodification happens when she degenerates into a high-class prostitute after she delivers the hero's child. When referring to the connection of expenditure with eroticism, Bataille views the prostitute as a significant figure. For Bataille, the prostitute does not only represent eroticism but more importantly, symbolizes unproductive expenditure: "... the prostitute forms a definite figure whose meaning is that of loss. In fact, she is not just eroticism but also loss having taken the form of an object" (141). The prostitute decorates themselves by using various luxurious commodities to arouse men's sexual desire. Through these useless objects they also become the object of desire. Through commodity consumption they attract men's erotic consumption of them:

That sparkling finery and that make-up, those jewels and those perfumes, those faces and those bodies dripping with wealth, becoming the objects, the focal points of luxury and lust, though they present themselves as goods and as values, dissipate a part of human labor in a *useless* splendor. (141)

For Bataille, the prostitute is subversive to labor relations. Instead of presenting productivity, she presents an unprofitable temptation. Her relation

with male clients is a special gift relation. She attracts many expensive commodities as gifts but she herself also has to become a gift: “. . . prostitutes receive as a gift large amounts of money; they use this money for the sumptuary expenditures that make them more desirable and increase their power to attract gifts, a power they had from the start” (142). Unlike the traditional commercial exchange which mutually satisfies the exchangers’ inadequacies, their transaction is a flow of excess: “What is involved is not necessarily a sale subject only to the rule of self-interest. What circulates on both sides is surplus, that which generally does not represent, for either party, the possibility of a productive use” (142). As David Bennett observes, the nineteenth-century medical and sociological writings, when addressing the prostitution issue, characterizes the prostitute as “a figure in whom pleasure in sex and shopping—in libidinal and monetary spending—were causally combined” (99). Bataille’s theory on the prostitute’s link with luxury spending indeed corresponds to Bennett’s observation.

Obviously, the kind of prostitutes which Bataille discusses is not street girls but high-class escorts who appeal to the rich. The profession practiced by the heroine in “Letter from the Unknown Woman” applies to Bataille’s category. She distinguished herself from “what one calls a whore, a prostitute” (203). Expressing in an obscure way, she only says that she “sold” herself and that she “had rich friends, rich lovers” (203). She leads a spendthrift life, “dressed in expensive clothes” (204). Gift relations are also established among her and her clients. A client “showered” her and her child “with gifts” (205). Another client uses his influence to privilege her child to enter the prestigious private boarding school Theresianum. It is her prostitution which reunites her with the hero and engages her with him sexually for one night. Ironically, when spending one night with the hero, the heroine is unaware that she is treated as a prostitute by the hero. Their sex in his eye is no more than a transaction. Thus when paid by the hero the next morning, the heroine feels extremely humiliated and painful and thus leaves in a hurry. From the adolescent heroine’s love burgeoning from a desire for commodity consumption, her job as a shop girl or a fashion model in the adapted film, finally to her prostitution, the heroine all needs to play a role related to

commodity consumption in order to establish a relationship with the hero. But when she is conscious that she is viewed as a commodity, she finds it unacceptable.

If we read “Letter from an Unknown Woman” in light of Bataille’s general economy and interpret the heroine’s love as a kind of uninterested expenditure, can a relationship be sustained totally by only one party’s unreciprocated commitment? How long and to what extent can it be sustained? Indeed, even the use of Bataille’s conception of expenditure gives new possibility to the reading “Letter from an Unknown Woman,” this paper wants to further shows that the heroine, though seemingly claiming content with their unbalanced relationship, still longs for reciprocation. The contradiction inherent in the heroine’s attitude towards the hero indeed reflects the contradiction inherent in Bataille’s theory: no gift-giving can be totally uninterested. The heroine’s devotion also reveals the Derridian aporia of the impossible gift.

Bataille’s theory provokes much criticism. Michael Richardson finds the sun analogy invalid. If seen from the cosmic perspective, the sun’s radiation is not entirely purposeless. Its purpose is only unknown to human beings, who indirectly benefit from the sun. To use the sun to justify human beings’ need to expend and to give without return is inappropriate. Since the sun is essentially different from human beings, how can the sun be used to compare with human beings? Barbara Herrnstein Smith also points out Bataille’s fault of obscuring the definition of utility. Bataille comes up with general economy in order to criticize the utility-oriented thinking of capitalist society. But his examples of general economy, including luxurious jewelry, ritual sacrifice, gambling, and artistic activities are not free from “a cost-benefit analysis of the expenditure at issue” (136). Bataille’s theoretical weakness lies in the fact that “he cannot pointing out what is gained by the loss or what other value is, in his own words, ‘produced’ by the material expenditure or mortal risk involved” (136). In other words, by arguing against restricted economy, whose principle is utilitarian calculation and whose purpose is profitable reward, Bataille promotes general economy, whose principle is purposeless expenditure and loss. But Bataille contradicts

his own argument by saying that expenditure and loss are in fact profitable to human beings. In this way, general economy in fact cannot avoid still following the principle of utility.

Bataille's classical example of general economy is potlatch. In a potlatch, a chief lavishly gives away his fortune to exchange for reputation and to outdo his rivals. Viewing from this perspective, a potlatch, intended to exchange for something, is not so different from market economy, except that in market economy materialistic values are exchanged while in potlatch symbolic values are. Bataille's general economy, which seems to be purely theoretical, can hardly find examples in reality. No wonder Bataille needs to resort to the sun to exemplify this conception. Thus Smith concludes her criticism of Bataille: "The general principle here is that no valorization of anything, even of 'loss' itself, can escape the idea of some sort of positivity—that is, gain, benefit, or advantage—in relation to some economy" (137).

Richardson and Smith's criticisms highlight the contradiction inherent in Bataille's theory. The examples Bataille gives, such as potlatch, to support the conception of unproductive expenditure are in fact not entirely "unproductive." Since in a potlatch a chief lavishly expends his fortune to exchange for reputation and status or to outdo a rival, it is commonly interpreted that "loss already appears to exist within a dialectic of accumulation" (Noys 108).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Responding to this kind of criticism, Benjamin Noys defends for Bataille: "Bataille resists this reading by stressing that loss comes first and is primary to the process as its trigger. He also stresses that this social dominance based on loss, the giving away of wealth, resists the accumulation of absolute economic power over others and their destitution. Finally, Bataille is interested in how this process can always go out of control and lead to mass destruction, as when a tribe destroys its entire village to place its rival in an inescapable debt to it. No matter how much the potlatch can lead to the accumulation of status and wealth it is always inhabited by the ghost of absolute loss" (108). In other words, in Noys's view, even it is possible for a chief in some way to "exchange" for the gain of power and social status through loss of property, in a potlatch, what is gained from loss is far less certain than material exchange in market economy. In contrast with modern economy, in Bataille's view, the economy of the primitive society is established on the principle that accumulation is secondary to

In this paper's opinion, Bataille's idea of general economy considers the general operation of lives and communities. Therefore, in Bataille's view, the consumption of resources in human society is necessary to prevent the eruption of wars and the consumption of energy is also necessary for species to reproduce offspring. But Bataille's collective perspective ignores the emotional dimension of personal interrelations. Gift-giving, which conforms to social rules as Mauss observes, requires reciprocation. But why this seemingly exchange still differs from commodity transaction? It is because transaction ends after commodities and money are exchanged. The purpose of the transaction is transaction itself. On the contrary, the purpose of gift-giving is to continue the relationship between two parties. Gift economy does not end at the moment of exchange. It implies infinitely prolonged duration. As long as the relationship exists, gift exchange continues. As long as gift exchange continues, the relationship becomes more solid and intimate.

Therefore, in a gift relationship, if the giver always give without receiving gift from the taker, the relationship, being asymmetrical and precarious, usually cannot last for too long. Certainly in "Letter from an Unknown Woman," an exception is presented as the woman loves the hero without return for decades and gives the bouquet of white roses for gift anonymously every year. But is she entirely satisfied with such an unreciprocated relationship? The answer is no. Throughout the letter, she repeatedly indicates complaints about the hero's indifference and inaction. After they spend three nights, the hero goes on travel and promises the heroine that he will send mails to her. But she never receives his mails. Her tone indicates bitterness of receiving no message from him by saying "what's the point of describing to you the agony of waiting, of despair" (199). On the other hand, she denies the fact that she is complaining and emphasizes that she loves what the hero is even though he never pays back her love: "I'm not complaining. I love you as you are, passionate and forgetful, generous and unfaithful. I love you exactly as you have always been and as you still are" (199). But the heroine's insistence is soon betrayed by her sequential

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consumption, gain to loss.

accusation that she never receives his mail even though he comes back from his travel and she still waits for it when she is dying: “You didn’t write to me . . . not a line from you, to whom I gave my life” (199). This exchange between his line and her life is the key to understand the gift economy in this novella. Her life is given to him as the most valuable gift, but she cannot exchange it for his message. Throughout the letter, the heroine’s tone often oscillates between complaint and disavowal. Although she claims to be content to be a giver, she still aspires to reciprocation and balance of relationship.

The promised but unwritten mail symbolizes the hero’s memory of the heroine. But what the heroine demands from the hero is not only his memory of her, but also her memory of his. This unreciprocated gift relationship is more or less resolved by their child, who was born after the woman spends three days with the novelist. As an intermediary, the child reduces her pain entailed by her unrequited love for the man and also enables her to keep loving him with a distance without having to confront the danger of desire: “My longing for you became less painful. Indeed I think I loved you less ardently. At least I didn’t suffer so much from my love, once I had the gift of the child” (202). The child here is compared as a gift from the hero, though an unintended gift. As the replica of the man, he preserves the hero’s image: “He grew more and more like you. He soon also began noticeably to develop that double blend of seriousness and frivolity so characteristic of you. And the more he resembled you, the more I loved him” (203). The child as a gift reminding the heroine of the hero proves that she still wants to gain something in this unreciprocated gift relationship.

The hero’s memory of her is always what the heroine demands as the reciprocated gift in this relationship. This is why the heroine repeatedly laments on the hero’s ignorance of her. When she is pregnant, she never tells him because she does not want to cause any burden or obligation on his carefree life. She wants to impress him with only their happy moments and to be the only woman he “always think[s] of with affection and gratitude” (200). But she soon recognizes the cruel fact that he is never aware of her thoughtfulness because he has forgotten her. After becoming a prostitute, she

reencounters him in a party and has sex with him. She is mostly humiliated by his monetary payment to her, which means he fails to recognize her. The heroine reveals her most painful tones in her narrative when she mentions that the hero loses his memory of her. Her lifelong devotion to him only endeavors to exchange for his preserved memory of her. This memory as reciprocated gift is mostly evidently embodied by the bouquet of white roses. After the heroine spends her first night with the hero, the latter gives the former some white roses as memorials. Even after he departs from her, she sends a bouquet of white roses to him on his every birthday since then. The bouquet of white roses sent to the hero's birthday represents "the memory of that hour should be allowed to flower" (202) and functions to recall the heroine's image. But instead of asking who sends it, the hero only takes it for granted. Confronted with the hero's failure in remembering her, the heroine asks the accusing questions: "Have you ever asked yourself, in the last ten, eleven, years, who sent them? Have you remembered at all the girl to whom you once gave roses like those?" (202). When the hero fails to recognize her after their one-night sex, the heroine especially tries to remind him by inquiring who sends him the white roses. The hero's reply, indicating his ignorance, hurts her again: "I don't know. Someone gave them to me but I don't know who it was. That's why I like them so much" (209). The bouquet of white roses symbolizes memory of her, a gift in return she never receives alive. Therefore, her death wish revealed in the letter is to ask him every birthday to "buy some roses and put them in the vase" in order to "have a mass said once a year in memory of a dead loved one" (211). The heroine requests the hero to maintain the habit of having white roses on his birthday to keep memory of her. On this condition, the white roses, purchased as the ultimate gift not to the hero but to the heroine, finally make the unreciprocated gift relationship reciprocated. In this way, the heroine's long-unknown gift-acting act, which still intends to exchange for the hero's memory of her, falls into Derrida's aporia of gift. According to Derrida, a gift is only possible on the condition that it is never recognized as "gift" and thus prevents any possibility of reciprocation. Thus the heroine's gift, whether it is material or immaterial, is gift only as the hero does not recognize and even



remember it. So until he reads the letter, the hero has remained ignorant of who sends him a bouquet of white roses every year and has no intention to find it out. This condition, for Derrida, is the ideal one for the occurrence of gift. But as the heroine writes the letter before her death so that the hero can remember her, she intends to exchange her lifelong giving for the hero's preserved memory of her. According to Derrida, the heroine's gift again returns to the circuit of exchange and the gift is no gift anymore. Derrida's theory is certainly too harsh for the heroine since the heroine has kept this secret until her life ends. But the application of Derrida's theory to the reading of the story reveals that gift, in the heroine's view, still requires reciprocation in some forms, even though these forms are never conventional.

## Conclusion

Bataille's conception of expenditure indeed offers an insightful approach to analyze the unbalanced relationship in "Letter from an Unknown Woman." But a closer scrutiny reveals that even though the heroine claims to require no reciprocation from the hero, she, just like anyone involved in gift relationship, still aspires to some sort of reciprocation, the hero's preserved memory of her. This reciprocation is finally achieved in the form of the white roses. But this reciprocation, in Derrida's view, also annuls the gift. Finally, another interesting question arises: If the hero, informed of this confession, burdened by sense of guilt, really follows the heroine's request and purchases a bouquet of white roses every birthday to commemorate her, does this finally reciprocated and balanced gift relation still remain unreciprocated and unbalanced as the heroine dies and withdraws from this gift exchange? To solve this problem, the Hollywood film version offers a different end which makes this unreciprocated gift relation reciprocated. This end, in Slavoj Žižek's view, renders the adapted film superior to the original novella (155). After reading the letter, the hero goes to a duel which he previously dares not to accept and has no chances to win. Confronted with the unbearable gift of life from the heroine, the hero can only pay back by his life. By killing both

the heroine and the hero, the film's end returns their unbalanced gift relation to balance and closes the circuit of gift economy.

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