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“Talk of contracts”: Gift-giving vs. Reciprocity in James Joyce’s “A Mother”

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Abstract

This essay measures the extent to which gift-giving fails in an economy of reciprocity. Reading James Joyce’s story “A Mother” in terms of Derrida’s notion of the gift as “absolute loss,” I consider the implications of an economy of loss for Joyce’s notion of sacrifice. Thus, I argue that the absence of an economy of sacrifice integrating “absolute loss” engenders the zero-sum game at the heart of *Dubliners*. I depart from other readings of the short story in the context of an economy based on the ideal of balanced reciprocity, since these versions deny the pure gratuity of gift in its connotations of sacrifice and loss. While such theories form a good starting point for analyzing the “moral economy” of *Dubliners*, they tend to overlook the fact that the only means to counteract the paralysis resulting from reciprocity is through the suspension of the economy of exchange.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, exchange, reciprocity, paralysis, loss, profit, James Joyce, *Dubliners*, gift, class, usury

The intersection between economics and religion, class, nationalism, eroticism, and romance foregrounds the issue of exchange in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*. The social, the erotic and the sacred are measured by their cash exchange value and figure in terms of an obvious absence – that of the gift. Using Jacques Derrida’s concept of “absolute loss” as outlined in *The Gift of Death*, I propose a reading of Joyce’s story “A Mother” as the expression of a zero-sum game resulting from the act of exchange, once the illusion of reciprocity is stripped away.

Before we turn to Derrida's aporetic notion of the gift, let us first review briefly the plot of "A Mother." The overly-ambitious Mrs Kearney invests her considerable gifts of persuasion and organization in controlling the musical career of her daughter Kathleen in order to compensate for a marriage devoid of passion and romantic appeal. When Mr Holohan, the organizer of a series of concerts promoting the agenda of the Irish Revival movement (under the aegis of the Eire Abu Society) invites Kathleen to participate as a concert pianist, Mrs Kearney agrees on her daughter's behalf and engages in a verbal contract with the organizer, according to which her daughter is to be paid eight shillings for each concert performance running from Wednesday to Saturday. The first nights are financial failures, and the Eire Abu Society decides to recoup its losses through a special gala night reserved for Saturday. This plan entails the cancelation of one of the lesser concerts and therefore cuts into the payment promised to Kathleen during the initial stages of organization. During the intermission, Mrs Kearney engages in a heated dispute with the management demanding the full payment of the agreed-upon sum. The directors fail to comply with her demands, even though Mrs Kearney threatens to withdraw Kathleen from the stage. In the end, her strategies of negotiation under duress end in Mrs Kearney's humiliation and a substantial threat to Kathleen's future musical career in Dublin. The concert resumes without Kathleen, as she is readily substituted by a fellow performer.

Derrida's aporetic economy of the gift (or sacrifice) integrates loss as its necessary component. Drawing attention to the inevitable break with exchange demanded by an economy of "absolute loss," which also involves the break with "symmetry and reciprocity," Derrida's position turns from the parity of "an eye for an eye" to that of "turning the other cheek" (102). This new kind of reciprocity interrupts the parity and symmetry. Instead of paying back, one is to *offer* the other cheek. The distinction between "paying back" and "offering" is pivotal to Derrida's argument. Maintaining the "eye for an eye" exchange blocks the two economic parties in an endlessly repetitive cycle. The repetition, however, is a mere simulacrum of pure reciprocity, which proves practically impossible. Thus, argues Derrida, "[s]uch an economic calculation

integrates absolute loss. It breaks with exchange, symmetry, or reciprocity. It is true that absolute subjectivity has brought with it calculation and a limitless raising of the stakes within the terms of an economy of sacrifice, but this is sacrifice understood as commerce occurring within finite bounds" (102). Repetition is a type of reciprocity folding back upon itself, sterilely, rather than unfolding itself toward the other, making itself a gift. The fundamental aim of the economy of exchange is profit, not mere recirculation of capital in symmetrical exchange. Profit on one side, however, presupposes loss on the other. In a predictable sequence, pluses and minuses cancel each other out successively. The grid that structures the economic inner workings of Dublin keeps a type of regularity uninterrupted by that other type of *loss* incurred through *offering* – intentional, sacrificial loss that offers itself as gain to the other, and in turn, through a counter-intuitive form of symmetry, becomes gain for the offering party as well. The absence of the gift structures the gnomonic world of *Dubliners*. To decipher the missing part of this perfectly regulated grid one must interrupt the circular logic and mechanical function of the strict economy of exchange.

The tension between economies of exchange and economies of the gift structure the narrative tension in "A Mother." On the one hand, Mrs Kearney has the chance to engage in the redemptive economy of the gift in its multiple aspects of sacrifice – agape, work for pure enjoyment, "loss," and "absence" – thus negating paralysis and positing itself as a presence at the crossroads of sacrifice and loss. Given the impossibility of the pure gift (as well as pure exchange), one must consider the extent to which Mrs Kearney's giving can even begin to be termed a gift, given that her involvement in the artistic project is already posited as work in Derrida's theory of the gift, and thus already teleological, driven by a calculable goal. The final verbal duel between Mrs Kearney and Mr Holohan in which, as critic Brandon Kershner points out, the latter appropriates the former's words, while Mrs Kearney's last word becomes Mr Holohan's last word, signifies the perfect loss-loss closure of the reciprocity of exchange cycle (128).

Avoiding exchange in giving implies the understanding of the idea of sacrifice as work – a laboring type of agape. For Dennis Keenan, agape

is work for nothing, “work that unworks itself in the very performance of the work. It is work that interrupts itself in the very working of the work” (129). However, agape is also spontaneous enjoyment of the work without expectation of a reward (130). If spontaneous enjoyment is one of the prerequisites of the gift, Mrs Kearney’s positing the gift in contractual terms kills the enjoyment. Enjoyment, as well as gift and sacrifice, is a form of absence. Contract is a kind of presence – the illusion of a presence, in fact, given that return is not possible.

As Robert Bernasconi notes in *The Logic of the Gift*, for Derrida “what defines the gift is its difference from the object of exchange” (256), while for Levinas, gift is defined in terms of work, and work as “departure with no return” (258). In opposition to Derrida’s notion, “pure expenditure” or loss is not to be equated with gift as work, because the goal of good works is to acquire merit. Good works oriented toward a specific goal amount to work losing its absolute goodness. Gift, for Levinas and Derrida, is gift only insofar as it is an interruption of order. In this vein, Bernasconi talks about the “interruptive logic” of the gift: “Exchange, circulation and rationality are interrupted by the gift” (259). A gift without obligation or duty is differentiated from exchange – the pure morality that exceeds all calculation.

In reading “A Mother” as a break in the system of giving, one notes that Mrs Kearney’s giving is inscribed in a contractual, “restricted” economy, centered around scarcity, in Georges Bataille’s terms, in which lavish expenditure of time, energy and money is made with the expectation of symbolic profit in return. Thus, the utilitarian end becomes a mark of status, class and power, since “power is exercised by the classes that expend” (120). On a scale of nobility of spending, gift giving ranks high because it “seeks to name a certain transgression of the limits of economic reason itself” (Shershow 83).

As a means of pointing out the different forms of giving hypostasized by Mrs Kearney’s investment, it might help to read the story in four different stages. At only one of these stages does investment have the potential (though it remains a missed opportunity) to be sacrificial, and thus truly a gift. The first stage of the story focuses on the restricted economy of exchange in the name of profit. Although the story forms a

circle encompassing all three types of economy, in the end it closes, ironically, on an inverted circularity, when Mrs Kearney's mentality of exchange is met with the same treatment from Mr Holohan, thus receiving the exact retribution she was inadvertently looking for. Profit/exchange-related images abound, particularly as the narration seems to ventriloquize Mrs Kearney's own voice: she is determined to "take advantage of her daughter's name" (Joyce 137); she is involved "heart and soul" (Joyce 138) in the enterprise, but her subsequently drawing a contract ironically subverts the emotional dimension of the matter and designates it as a purely financial affair; she engages in an array of efforts barely masking their nature as investments. For example, Kathleen's dress that costs a pretty penny is the mark of an occasion "when a little expense is justifiable" (Joyce 138) in terms of the forecasted profit. Thus, this first stage ends with the narrator's voice in dialogical interplay with Mrs Kearney's voice, letting us know that "she forgot nothing and, thanks to her everything that was to be done was done" (Joyce 139).

The next stage, presented from outside Mrs Kearney's perspective and from within Mr Holohan's, seems dominated by a general economy of consumption and calculated loss. Profit is secondary to the enterprise as seen through the artistes' and the organizers' eyes, and the main motive seems to be artistic and nationalistic, as well as entertainment and art for art's sake, with reimbursement of cost sought for only in terms of covering expenses. Images and recurrent diction pointing to a lack of efficiency in terms of profit abound, as seen, again, from Mrs Kearney's profit-oriented point of view. As Kershner points out, "the woman's judgments and sensibilities have become unobtrusively involved in the narration" (128), which now bears the "unmistakable mark of her consciousness" (126). Amid the idle young men standing in the vestibule, to entertain and be entertained by the unfolding scandal, Mrs Kearney insists on perceiving the situation in terms of profit – hunting Mr Holohan down, reiterating the terms of the contract and setting herself completely at odds with the general "expenditure" of laughter, good will, and carelessness marking the assumption of deliberately, or indifferently, incurred loss. In this atmosphere of staged carelessness, Mrs Kearney strategically enacts the most pertinent economic move in her economical

mentality – that of restricted supply or resources, to increase their value and extract the guarantee of profit – i.e., by forbidding Kathleen to proceed with the plan to perform her part until her contract is fully carried out.

The next part moves into the domain of the economy of non-exchange and sacrifice, where the two types of economy – of scarcity or surplus, of profit or loss – are set against each other by an explicit antagonism manifested in the open hostilities between Mr Holohan and Mrs Kearney. The former has recourse to techniques of evasion (he pretends to be in a hurry [Joyce 141]) and Mrs Kearney is “now beginning to be alarmed” (Joyce 141) and to badger both Mr Holohan and Mr Fitzpatrick.

Finally, in the last part of the story, dissonant view points on the concert begin to converge and Mrs Kearney seems to be getting what she has been pursuing all along: complete circularity – as retribution, however, rather than reward. Once Mr O’Madden Burke states, “I agree with Miss Beirne. Pay her nothing” (Joyce 148), both parties converge into carrying out the inevitable consequences of exchange. Actions, gestures, and speech begin to mirror each other in a carefully calculated symmetry: “I never thought you would treat us this way,” says Mr Holohan to Mrs Kearney. “And what way did you treat me?” retorts Mrs Kearney. “I am not done with you yet,” Mrs Kearney says. “But I’m done with you,” Mr Holohan retorts. Kershner mentions that besides the mimicry of the linguistic *quid pro quo*, another type of retribution is at play in the dialogue between Mrs Kearney and Mr Holohan (127). Up to this point, running as an undercurrent in the narrative, social class as illustrated in a focus on accents and dictions has underscored a game of social power and powerlessness, in which Mrs Kearney seems to have maintained the upper hand through her claim to an upper-middle-class position displayed by the “proper” accent and manners – a position which displaced Mr Holohan and Mr Fitzpatrick on the equivalent grounds of lacking the aforementioned distinctions. During the final verbal exchange, however, Mrs Kearney commits a *faux pas* that reveals her upper-middle-class mannerism as a “disguise [for] a lower-middle-class soul,” as Kershner notes (127). Her blunder is to think in terms of profit and

contracts in the midst of what should have been a purely aesthetic endeavor; but also to "impersonate Holohan in a mockingly aggressive act of linguistic appropriation" (128). The blunder shifts the balance of power, and Holohan is emboldened to accuse Mrs Kearney of falling short of her status of a lady. The shift in power is finalized when the talk of contracts is relegated to the same plane as the socio-linguistic blunder, as if to say that the failure to be a lady and the profit-driven mentality both belong to a mercantile, anti-artistic, vulgar, lower-middle-class mind frame. Kershner points out an even more subtle and important distinction: the two economies at play have no choice but to come in conflict, because "the most serious contradiction, the one underlined by Mrs Kearney, is that between the concert seen as a profit-making endeavor . . . and the concert as a social ritual presenting art for art's sake, in which members of the privileged class mutually support and applaud one another's performances out of a disinterested appreciation of an aesthetic undertaking" (125). For in *Dubliners* we are presented primarily with the petty bourgeois, who function by the logic of capitalism and classism and who, in their acceptance of the ideology of British capitalism, are accomplices in their own domination and that of Ireland's lower classes. Keith Booker argues that the problem is in the "meanness" at the heart of the capitalistic exchange, and not in poverty and capitalistic oppression. Indeed, material poverty is diminished in contrast to spiritual poverty and "meanness" (142).

Joyce's world in both *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* rests on an "enormous system of reciprocal debts, as Mark Osteen notes (158). In an interesting biographical turn, Osteen links the economics of *Dubliners* to Joyce's purported desire to revive certain characters in *Ulysses* in order to pay "his grudge debts" (158). The critic seems to imply that these debts settle not merely literary, but also deeply personal accounts with Joyce's own Irish past. Thus, in an intertextual dialogue between "Grace" in *Dubliners* and the Hades episode in *Ulysses*, Joyce uses "literary metempsychosis to permit his characters to reenact or repay their moral and financial debts. Some are given (qualified) grace; others seem damned by an author who, like Shakespeare, carries a memory in his wallet and always pays his grudge debts" (158). The intertextual dialogue brings up an interesting

point regarding this literary economy of exchange: Is this economy driven by a principle of reciprocity, or charity and sacrifice? Is Joyce willing to forgive the pettiness of his misers, and thus absolve them once in a while of their sins, or does he feel compelled to reduce them to their lowest moral common denominator and, in so doing, to make himself complicit in their class domination struggle and food-chain politics? Or does he, in a more Derridean fashion, break the parity of exchange to offer grace? Does he integrate “absolute loss” in his economy of moral payback? This intertextual analysis not being the issue at hand, suffice it to emphasize for the sake of the present argument that the missing part of the characters’ lives (in “Grace,” but throughout *Dubliners*) is rendered visible in their economic problems. The root of their problems, however, is not merely economic. The acerbic *quid pro quo* that governs all human exchanges in *Dubliners* leads to bitterness, poverty, and meanness. Underlying the network of debts and grudges which structures this world is the inability, inherent in resentful human beings, to take the risk of throwing possessions, interests, and petty concerns to the wind, not because they can afford it, but precisely when they cannot – sacrificially, gratuitously, resulting in, and aiming for, absolute “loss” (as an instance of the gift). The inability to incur loss through the offering of the gift breeds resentment, which in turn, feeds, and is fed upon, by the economy of exchange.

Further probing into the economic conditions of Dublin reveals that exchange objectifies human interaction, but also becomes the angle from which we can best understand the social life of the city. If *Dubliners* represents Joyce’s attempt to write “a chapter in the moral history” of Ireland, to this end, in portraying the moral economy that shaped *Dubliners*, Joyce takes the role of a “moral arbiter,” a “Cosmic Economist” who administers a “moral economy of grace and redemption . . . completing his moral history by documenting the economic conditions of his city,” according to Osteen (157). Appropriating Osteen’s idea of a moral economy, I argue that the absence of an economy of sacrifice integrating “absolute loss” engenders the paralysis at the heart of Dublin. However, Osteen’s approach to economy and sacrifice turns contrary to the Derridean approach. The former critic’s position is based on the two

variants of the exchange continuum: the ideal of pure charity (which is, however, merely generalized reciprocity and gift exchange) and the pragmatic medium of balanced reciprocity, in which each party gets equal value from the other through the "negative extreme of economic exploitation" (158). Neither of these variants implies the pure gratuity of "gift" in its connotations of sacrifice or loss. Loss recalls the motif of absence or interruption of the geometrical regularity of the gnomon, indicating that the only means to counteract the paralysis resulting from reciprocity is through the suspension of the exchange economy.

The paralysis at the core of Dublin is tightly connected not only to a system of credit but to its inability to forego the strict equivalence of debt and payment and thus to incur conscious and intentional loss that breaks the equivalence. In "A Mother," not just Mrs Kearney, but everyone else functions by this strict equivalence of debt and payment that results in a zero-sum game, the trope of which is the contract. The written contract is an illusory attempt to contain the uncontrollable shiftiness of post-agreement negotiations inherent in oral contracts. Joyce condemns usury in *Dubliners* precisely because he is aware of the ills of a system of exchange based on debtorship. Financial creditorship is a form of "incubism," in Osteen's words, where "the oppressive conditions of debtorship" end in "obligation and poverty" (158).

In a Bakhtinian reading of the story, Kershner draws attention to Mrs Kearney's nominalism. For her, "the language of the contract must be the guarantor of its reality" (129). She adheres to the illusion that the reality outside her careful arrangements will be constrained by her staunch belief in "linguistic literalism" (129) and its magical power to contain the slipperiness of its own signifiers. (After all, the contract as we know it, not having access to its exact wording, stipulates that Kathleen must play the accompaniment for four concerts, and does not anticipate, through a special clause, the consequences of one of the four concerts' suspension.) When spoken contracts enter into conflict with unspoken assumptions, reciprocity results in the economic impossibility of a norm set up in order to be breached. Mrs Kearney's view of the explicit contract is not immediately obvious to everyone. For example, when presented with the case, Mr Fitzpatrick "did not catch the point at issue very quickly" (Joyce

141). However, the competing unspoken contract according to which Mrs Kearney must sustain a carefully balanced poise between enforcing a business agreement and behaving like a lady is tacitly enforced by all parties. Even Mrs Kearney has to concede, grudgingly, that social status takes precedence over money. Thus, “she knew it would not be ladylike to do that [namely, to play the wrong accent/class card against Mr Fitzpatrick]: so she was silent” (Joyce 141).

However, reciprocity is not in competition only with external forces, but also with itself, and in a losing game at that, judging by Mrs Kearney’s futile efforts. The first verb that introduces her in the story indicates her main preoccupation, namely, “to arrange,” to fit, to plan for all parts to match equally in a perfect, unbroken symmetry: “but in the end it was Mrs Kearney who *arranged* everything” (Joyce 136, italics mine). And so she strives to do: She arranges. She draws imaginary, “chilly” circles of “her accomplishments” (Joyce 136). She anticipates the reaction of her supposed audience and tries to outsmart it through timely liaisons, such as with Mr Kearney against Mr Holohan. She keeps the balance of her marriage as well, having married a husband who “would wear better than a romantic person” (Joyce 137). In her economy, people and events must be accounted for in terms of pluses and minuses, in a system in which nothing goes to waste: the vacation to Skerries is milked for all its social worth, one Irish picture postcard is matched with another, and Kathleen’s Irish name must be equally “[taken] advantage of” (Joyce 137).

The aim of Mrs Kearney’s existence is to draw up contracts and enforce them, whether through advising or dissuading. To say about Mrs Kearney that “She forgot nothing and, thanks to her, everything that was to be done was done” (Joyce 139) is to acknowledge something more than her ability as a skilled “arranger.” It is to recognize that she takes charge of a well-oiled machine of symmetries and balances of her own design, as impersonal and implacable in its work, once turned on, as Mr Fitzpatrick’s “white vacant face” (Joyce 139). Mrs Kearney’s frustration stems from the fact that everyone else functions by a similar economy as hers, in as perfectly drawn a grid. All sorts of plus/minus symmetries cancel themselves out. During the concert, the artists that sing badly are

countered by the ones that sing well, and in the end the audience is content. The verbal exchange between Mrs Kearney and Mr Holohan is perfectly symmetrical, and so is the outcome. The lady gets the exact payment for her daughter's efforts (the equivalent of the two concerts for which Kathleen played the accompaniment) and the gentleman gets public approval for the way he has handled the matter, along with the satisfaction of having won the case against an obstreperous woman. The rule governing this world is expressed by the baritone, who remarks that he can be "at peace with all men" once he "has been paid his money" (Joyce 147).

If in *Dubliners* all exchange depends on a "psychic balance sheet, the subject's constant negotiation between sacrifice and gain" (Mickalites 123), this same exchange also works out a simulacrum of community constructed on a system of mutual dependency. As previously shown, Mrs Kearney is not the only one who operates in contractual terms. The entire community is structured around the notion of perfect symmetrical exchange. However, a community structured on exchange propagates a model that legitimizes competition and, ultimately, domination. Therefore, domination, along with the impossibility of perfect reciprocity in exchange prevents the formation of a healthy community. And even though reciprocity dictates a balanced exchange according to which each party should receive an equal value, in practice this difficult ideal becomes a norm that puts a strain on social behavior. As a mother, then, Mrs Kearney's mission is to ensure a zero balance of her world, which rests upon respecting the letter of the contract. Ironically, of course, she does it at the expense of her daughter's musical career. That reciprocity does not fulfill its promise but, even worse, results in perpetual loss, frustration, and deprivation, is simply in accord with the human condition in a Dublin susceptible to decay, loss and deprivation.

Reciprocity as "norm" is reminiscent of Derrida's aversion toward a preconceived program or set of rules that undermine the unrequitability of the gift. Reciprocity as the aim of exchange, similarly, paralyzes the event of the gift, precisely because it tends to behave according to predetermined rules and expectations, leaving no room for the event to arrive, to come to pass: "The moment the gift, however generous it be, is

infected with the slightest hint of calculation, the moment it takes account of knowledge or recognition, it falls within the ambit of an economy: it exchanges, in short it gives counterfeit money, since it gives in exchange for payment" (112). This is yet another reason for which Mr Kearney, who has "abstract value as male" and is presented as an institution, "large, secure and fixed" (Joyce 141), is rendered absolutely ineffectual. Mrs Kearney attempts to totalize the unexpected, to leave no room for the event of the gift to take place. This constant need to institutionalize human connections by forcing them into a quid pro quo relationship results in the perverse characteristic of Joyce's Dublin: balanced reciprocity seldom occurs, and gift-giving itself is subject to distortions by inequalities of power. To break the paralyzing symmetry of exchange, the system must suspend the straight-jacket circularity "of payback, of giving and giving back, of 'the one lent for every one borrowed,' of that hateful form of circulation that involves reprisal, vengeance, returning blow for blow, settling scores" (Osteen 102). Derrida's economy of the gift that integrates absolute loss is the equivalent of Montaigne's economy of absolute friendship that "[loses] with truth," for it leaves nothing that is one's own, given that "economic bonds are undesirable in human interaction" (Montaigne qtd. in Epstein 252). In friendship, Montaigne argues, there is no exchange of currency or goods because true friends "cannot lend or give anything to one another" (Epstein 253). And if there is a kind of giving, it is a "giving that doesn't take away, but gives" (Epstein 253), so that it would be the giver who is obliged to the receiver for the gift of receiving.

If the object/gift is the trace of the benevolent intention behind the gift (the intention itself amounting to the gift), then Mrs Kearney is not making a gift of her services at all, because her intention is not to give, but to receive. In this case, the contract is, *in extremis*, undermined by the fact that she is offering an empty gift, emptied of its beneficent intention. She is offering a commodity in a competitive exchange game, in a "struggle between the defeated and the victorious" (150), so that she ends up being more a usurer than a donor, where the usurer is defined as "a false donor, a simulated benefactor, who acts as if he is giving, even though he calculates and anticipates a return" (149). As a false donor, Mrs Kearney

treads the fine line between donor and usurer. She pretends she sacrifices a little extra out of generosity, while all the time calculating, at the back of her mind, the extent to which her generosity will increase the return. Ultimately, there is no intentionality of pure giving – and more tragically even, there is no space for the concretization of that intentionality either. That intention never existed in the first place.¹

Mrs. Kearney's "innovation" (or rather, perversity) is to have made the intention itself into a commodity and to give it a computable, calculable value. Jean-Joseph Goux defines intention as good will, "an invisible meaning concerning the soul" (155). It is also interesting to note the way Mrs Kearney is caught up in the materiality of beneficence, in the fact that the gift represents the material sign of the intention. Trapped in the sign and unable to get to the signified she cannot reach beyond the material aspect of generosity. The material aspect of the intention, devoid of sacrifice, is mere commodity, perfectly fitted to be quantified into the logic of the market, or the usurer, and the exchange mechanism; the excess of the intention, the soul of the gift, the signified, would upset the reciprocity and would make return – perfect circularity and symmetry – impossible, because there would never be a perfect return for the bodiless, soul-like intention. The object-gift without the intention becomes, thus, computable, and perfectly fit for exchange. When Mrs Kearney invests in additional services and goods beyond the stipulation of the contract, apparently out of beneficence, she has already calculated both the value of the material gift/investment and that of her intention, of her volunteering to go beyond the contract. Thus she takes no chances, and she ensures the full length of her return. Having gone beyond the letter of the contract, having "sacrificed," she is going to get the return stipulated in the contract, at the least, along with the satisfaction of putting her contractor in debt; at the most, she will enjoy social recognition in addition to the financial rewards. If there is an incalculable for Mrs Kearney, it is not the incalculable that comes from the gift, loss, generosity, but from the potential surplus, the surprise return that might exceed the expected return and thus pleasantly thwart her initial calculations. In this case, Mrs Kearney turns the Derridean incalculable on its head. The surplus, unexpected gain becomes the site of perverse eventfulness of inverse

generosity. Mrs Kearney, however, has made the wrong bet, and she ends up incurring both spiritual and material loss from the symmetric exchange.

Finally, what she has completely missed is not her return, not even the satisfaction of having made a gift, incurred a loss, feeling beneficent or generous – but something much more extensive that goes beyond her and Kathleen and accounts for the paralysis: the encounter with the other. Essentially paradoxical, the gift's only *raison d'être* is its orientation toward the other. If gratitude mostly occurs "on the level of the good will (*bona voluntas*) as is generated from a well-disposed soul, then it is no longer possible to lose . . . in an exchange of gifts" (Goux 156). Giving that is expected to return upon itself and its donor, circumscribed into a mechanism of exchange, misses the relationship with the other and ultimately the encounter with the self, which is only possible through mediation. Moreover, Mrs Kearney is not paralyzed first and foremost in her relationship with the others, alienated from her daughter and husband as well as the rest of the artists – but in her relationship with, and understanding of, herself. Perhaps that accounts for her and her world's paralysis and inhibition: one can only give what one has – oneself – and yet one cannot acquire one's self without the intermediation of otherness. Because she does not have a self, Mrs Kearney is unable to give; because she is unable to give, Mrs Kearney does not have a self. The ability to give is thus akin to the desire for the other.

Note:

¹ In *Violence* Slavoj Žižek talks about the "catch of envy/resentment" that "not only endorses the zero-sum game principle where my victory equals the other's loss" (88-89) but it also implies a gap between the two, which is not a positive gap (we can all win with no losers at all), but a negative one. If one has to choose between one's gain and one's opponent's loss, one prefers the opponent's loss, even if the loss is universal. It is as if the opponent's eventual gain cancels out one's own success. Žižek's illustration of the Slovene peasant who chooses the option of resentment and personal loss, if it also involves the loss of his neighbor, resembles the resolution of the contractual exchange between Mrs Kearney and Mr Holohan, in which the former prefers to incur loss rather than allow for the inequality of gain. In a more radical sense, in *Violence* Žižek discusses the

phenomenon in which the loss is absolute both to others and to self. Referring to Higgs' field, Zizek explains:

There are, however, phenomena which compel us to posit the hypothesis that there has to be something (some substance) that *we cannot take away from a given system without RAISING that system's energy* – this "something" is called the Higgs field: once this field *appears* in a vessel that has been pumped empty and whose temperature has been lowered as much as possible, its energy will be further *lowered*. The "something" which thus appears is a something that contains *less* energy than nothing. In short, sometimes zero is not the "cheapest" state of a system, so that, paradoxically, "nothing" costs more than "something". (213)

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