

Thinking the Excess: Derrida's General Economy

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ABSTRACT

Thinking the Excess: Derrida's General Economy

Kevin McCain

This thesis attempts to explicate the central role of general economy in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. At stake in this 'concept' is a double movement that is always at play in Derrida's work. This double movement results from the relation of general economy to the restricted economies that it makes possible. General economy represents both the irreducible movement of differentiation underlying all metaphysics, which both allows for metaphysics while exploding its perceived limits, as well as the strategy for thinking that this movement necessarily implies in the thinking of restricted economies.

Although Derrida explicitly discusses general economy only early in his work, I argue that this 'concept' remains active in all of his later thought. Thus the explication of general economy serves not only to elucidate his early deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, but also provides a better understanding of the importance of this earlier deconstruction to his later work, particularly his more explicitly ethical and political work. To show this, I examine two later moments in Derrida's work: his thinking of the gift and his work on Marx. The quasi-transcendental idea of the gift can be better understood as general economy, which then allows the strategy of general economy to elucidate the ethical implications that Derrida derives from the gift. Similarly, general economy helps clarify Derrida's radicalization of Marx by allowing for the double movement of a deconstruction of Marx's metaphysics that at the same time remains critical of the restricted logic of capitalism.

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Introduction

The concept of *economy* has taken on somewhat of a privileged status in the discourse of philosophy, and particularly with that philosophy that has come to be known, however problematically, as continental philosophy. This is evident beginning, at least, with Marx if not Hegel, whose work was largely devoted to what he himself called a critique of political economy. Similarly, in the wake of Nietzsche it is common to speak of economies of force, and, since Freud, it has become somewhat commonplace to speak of an economy of desire or the psyche. But, perhaps, it is the work of Georges Bataille that has done the most to open up the concept of economy. In his influential multi-volume work, *The Accursed Share*, Bataille speaks of a general economy, which he conceives of as a more fundamental movement of the expenditure of energy from which emerge given particular or restricted economies, such as political economy.

Bataille's thought has had a significant impact on, among others, Jacques Derrida, who has devoted to it a well-known essay in *Writing and Difference*, entitled "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve." The notion of economy, though, is operative throughout the work of Derrida, from his earliest writings on writing and the (non)concept of *différance*, to the more recent works on Marx, the gift, and friendship. Several questions could be asked concerning Derrida's insistence on the term economy: Why economy? What does it signify for Derrida? Does the notion of economy serve as some kind of *strategy* in Derrida's work? These questions, particularly the last, are what guides the work that follows. What I attempt to reveal is how Derrida's notion of general economy must be understood in a double sense: first, as the movement of force and differentiation that serves as a quasi-ground for what is thought of as

ontology in the metaphysics of presence; second, as a strategy, the thinking or writing of general economy, that allows for a critique of restricted economies, such as metaphysics, but also, and in the same sense, of the specific restricted economy of capitalism, which can be undermined or countered by that which exceeds it, what Derrida calls the pure gift. Furthermore, I suggest that Derrida's earlier work on general economy helps us to better understand his more recent work, particularly his book on Marx.

The word economy, in its Greek origins, refers to the management of a household. In its more common present usage, it refers to the production and consumption, the flow or trade of goods and services within a society. Though my intent is not to engage in etymology, it may be of use to keep both of these senses of the word economy in mind in order to understand Derrida's use of the term. Underlying the notion of economy, as we see from its common usage, is a fundamental *movement*, as opposed to a static, or fixed state of being, and this movement necessarily entails change, relationality, and exchange. Derrida, following but also going beyond Saussure, has consistently emphasized a movement of differentiation as constitutive of language and meaning: meaning is not the result of a stable signifier referring to a fixed object in the world, but rather it is the movement of differences that makes possible meaning, however minimal, as an effect. Similarly, and as an extension of this, it is movement that underlies Derrida's critique of what he has called the "metaphysics of presence." Derrida, here following and going beyond Heidegger, emphasizes the impossibility of pure presence, as presence is always contaminated by absence. It is movement, both temporal and spatial, between presence and absence, which underlies any 'ontology'. Furthermore, as will be emphasized throughout, the movement central to economy also implies an indeterminate,

unpredictable, and open future that calls for a re-thinking of calculation and justice.

Economy thus entails a thorough re-thinking of ethics or politics that Derrida attempts in his later work.

Of course, much can and has been said about these very fundamental aspects of Derrida's thought, yet it has not yet been thematized in relation to the concept of general economy. Even the work of Irene Harvey, in which economy is central, only rarely mentions general economy and Derrida's essay on Bataille. I attempt to do precisely this in the first chapter, through a reading of some of Derrida's earliest essays. The movement of force underlying all structure or form, as well as the movement of *différance*, which displaces any ground of metaphysics or language, constitutes the irreducible general economy underlying all ontology. It forces open any structure of being or meaning. As such, it has the characteristics of what has come to be called, both by Derrida and his interpreters, a quasi-transcendental. Put simply, the quasi-transcendental is that which serves at the same time as both condition of possibility and impossibility of a given phenomenon. It is the movement of general economy that serves as the (quasi-)ground, the condition of possibility of metaphysics. But, in its open-endedness, it is equally the condition of impossibility of metaphysics. Movement as (quasi-)ground destabilizes metaphysics, precluding its finality or conclusion. There is then, according to Derrida, a primordial play underlying all metaphysics. As a result, rather than speaking of an ontology or a structure of language, one must speak of this general economy.

As Derrida, following Bataille, points out, this movement or play always produces an excess, as exemplified by the 'unthought' of meaning. It is this excess that is lost in a

restricted economy, as is exemplified by the Hegelian dialectical *Aufhebung*. This loss, which is necessary and inevitable, is precisely what the notion of general economy is meant to recognize, it is what renders any restricted economy impossible. From this, the second sense of the concept of general economy, as a strategy for thinking, becomes apparent. General economy, as opposed to restricted economy, recognizes the unpredictability instituted by the movement of *différance*. However, the irreducibly excessive movement of general economy is always and necessarily being restricted: however minimal and incomplete, meaning does arise from difference, forms do appear from force, and beings emerge from Being. Without restriction of the general economy, there would be no beings and hence no thought. And so restricted economies are unavoidable. General economy, as a strategy for thinking, is an attempt to think restricted economy in relation to the excessive general economy, through affirming the impossibility of calculating the effects of return. In so doing, it re-thinks the concepts of restricted economy, opening them up as possibility rather than closed and determined concepts.

In the second chapter, I argue that this same movement is exhibited by what Derrida calls the pure gift, and that from the thinking of the gift an ethical injunction is derived. The same movement that we find in *différance* can be seen in Derrida's thinking of the notion of economy as such, in which he explicates the quasi-transcendental of the gift. Derrida attempts to think the (im)possibility of the pure gift. The pure gift operates at the level of general economy; it is what is given in the structure of Being and time, and thus the gift is always already there without ever being present as such. Being in general and time may be thought of as a gift that 'gives' any event, particular being, subject, or

meaning, the possibility of appearing as phenomena in the first place. This pure gift exceeds economy in its restricted sense; it gives without return. As such, it is precisely that which is restricted and lost in any given restricted economy, such as an economy of exchange. The gift is always already annulled in restricted economy and so it is never properly speaking 'present'; yet without the irreducible and primordial gift of Being, no restricted economy would ever be possible. This is because without the gift of Being, of *différance*, there would be no giving or calculating subject, no present or article of exchange, and no receiver. Exchange is dependent upon this originary gift. Yet, because the gift is always already there, the gift interrupts the circular closure of exchange. As a result, giving returns through a restricted economy by rendering any calculation of equivalences open to chance and unpredictability. This is the double movement inherent in the gift.

As a result of this double movement, any restricted economy must be thought in relation to the general economy of the quasi-transcendental pure gift. The importance of this strategy lies in the ethical and political injunction that Derrida derives from the gift. Through its opening of economy, both in the sense of making it possible and interrupting its circular closure, there is an injunction to give in the quasi-transcendental of the gift. Some of Derrida's commentators, such as Caputo and Gasché, have understood this injunction as precluding all calculation in favour of the pure gift. However, because restricted economy is inevitable, because already calculating subjects are always emerging however incomplete, this demand is already impossible. Of course, we can always aim for something that is nonetheless not attainable, and this is, in a sense, what the strategy of general economy attempts to articulate. The injunction of the gift must be

thought instead through the strategy of general economy that relates the inevitability of calculation in a restricted economy to the general economy of the gift: while the gift will always be subject to return, repetition, and thus the establishment of minimal identity, calculative exchange will be exploded by change, unpredictable values, and, more generally, the openness of the future that takes centre stage in Derrida's later writings.

Derrida's reading of Marx reveals a similar movement from which a critique of the specific restricted economy of capitalism is possible, which I discuss in the concluding chapter. According to Derrida, Marx's ontology is contaminated by the same quasi-transcendental movement of *différance* found in metaphysics, which Derrida here calls *hauntology*. Marx's analysis of capitalism, according to Derrida's reading, relies on an ontology of presence and is thus itself a restricted economy of metaphysics. This is evident in Marx's analysis of the commodity-form, in which he relies on an ontological notion of the use-value of a thing that precedes its existence as commodity. This use-value is, for Derrida, already contaminated by the hauntological that Marx seeks to exclude or exorcise.

Derrida's attempt to radicalize Marx's critique of capitalism can be located precisely in Derrida's removal of Marx's ontological foundation in favour of the ethical injunction derived from the gift. In the place of this ontology is the quasi-ground of the movement of general economy. The logic of capitalism necessarily restricts this irreducible general economy. But in order to understand the critical possibilities of this thinking of general economy, it is necessary to understand 'critique' as implying a double movement: first, a deconstructive questioning of the limits of the (ontological) concepts at stake in order to re-think those concepts, and, second, an interminable resistance to that

which imposes closure on the opening towards the future from which Derrida derives his notion of justice. Thus a ‘critique’ of capitalism in the spirit of Derrida is possible through the strategy of general economy that re-thinks restricted economy in relation to the hauntological and to the general economy of the pure gift, which Derrida here links to the possibility of justice as openness. Capitalism restricts the excess of *hauntology*, restricting the possibility of an opening that exceeds this economy. It institutes a restricted economy of calculation and circularity, and thus restricts the very possibility of justice. In opposition to Marx’s ontological critique, Derrida insists that it is what is lost in this restriction that must be recognized, and the excess of exchange that must be affirmed as an opening of possibility towards the future. Derrida’s notion of general economy, then, through its re-thinking of restricted economy in relation to general economy, allows for the recognition of the excess of the restricted capitalist economy in order to think the “*messianic*” opening found in the pure gift through which the possibility of justice is also opened, a justice that itself can be understood as opening towards possibility and the future. This messianic opening is also the emancipatory spirit that Derrida seeks to affirm and radicalize in Marx’s writings.

What I argue, then, is that through the double movement of the concept of general economy, Derrida develops a strategy for re-thinking language, metaphysics, ethics, and politics. This notion of general economy is an attempt to move beyond dialectical thinking, in its Platonic and, particularly, Hegelian implications. It also attempts to escape the logic of binary thinking that excludes the excess resulting from the movement of *différance*, while at the same time remaining open-ended and without finality or telos. It is an attempt to think movement itself. As such, the notion of general economy links

Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysics with his later, more explicitly political and ethical writings. Rather than providing an ontological ground for ethics and politics, a ground that will necessarily do violence to difference by excluding its excess of possibility, Derrida's quasi-transcendental notion of general economy provides a strategy for thinking ethics and politics through the general economy of the movement of differences. Through this strategy, the originary opening of experience is maintained, while at the same time allowing for a re-thinking of the necessity of calculation in relation to this openness. The strategy of the thinking of general economy, through the recognition of what exceeds and is lost in any restricted economy, interrupts that restricted economy by revealing its originary openness and in so doing re-affirms the promise of this openness towards the future and the possibility of justice.

What general economy defines first is the explosive character of this world, carried to the extreme degree of explosive tension in the present time. A curse obviously weighs on human life insofar as it does not have the strength to control a vertiginous movement.

-Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume I*

Chapter One: On General Economy

There is a strange, disconcerting movement in the history of philosophy. This movement, which might be thought of as de-ontological¹, challenges any progressive logic of history. Rather than coming to a more precise account of what is, the task of ontology becomes more and more impossible. How can one speak of ontology when, at least since Nietzsche, the recognition of the instability of the world, the volatility and multiplicity of life and the elusiveness of any experience of it, as well as the insanity of history, seem more and more given? This time, in the famous words of Hamlet, is out of joint. To demarcate firmly and clearly what 'is' is surely mad, and perhaps it is better to speak of madness if one is to speak at all. Yet we want to, and do, speak, and the explosive character of the world, which seems to drive or move this madness, still remains, as a force to be reckoned with, responded to, and even managed. It is precisely here that the thought of Jacques Derrida seems most appropriate. Derrida's work makes possible the thinking of this world not in terms of ontology, but rather as an economy of force and play.

Derrida's thought is neither neutral nor nihilistic. Rather, it is the history of metaphysics that is nihilistic² for Derrida, and as a result, at work in this thought is

¹ I use this term with intent to point to the move towards ethics as, as Levinas puts it, first philosophy. However, I am not referring to any of the work that has come to constitute the specific field of deontology.

² Gasché has made this point as well. He writes that one must recognize that "nihilism is the very essence of metaphysics and that consequently all the concepts of essence, ground, and unity as thought within onto-theology are nihilistic." Gasché, R. *The Tain*

always a critical affirmation. What is affirmed throughout Derrida's work is precisely this underlying economy, which is characterized by a movement of differences that has come to be called *différance*. This movement constitutes the very force that gives the world its explosive character. Derrida affirms this underlying movement because it is the condition for all that is conceived in ontological terms. It is, in fact, the very condition of conceiving of these terms in the first place. Yet, at the same time, the movement of *différance* is also the condition of impossibility of all ontology, because, as a movement, it does not allow any finality, closure, or certainty to that which is made possible by it. This double aspect to the movement of difference as both the condition of possibility and impossibility of any given ontological form has come to be understood by the term quasi-transcendental.³ The quasi-transcendentality of *différance* demands a re-thinking of philosophy. And it is this re-thinking that is attempted in the idea of general economy.

There is a double meaning to the notion of general economy. First, it signifies the general movement of force that underlies everything. Second, a general economy also constitutes a strategy for giving an account of things and concepts, as they appear, in a

of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 141.

³ Derrida himself has come to use this term. However, its formulation owes the most to the work of Gasché. He defines the quasi-transcendental as follows: "The quasitranscendentals – metaphoricity, for instance – upon which philosophy's universality is grounded are no longer simply transcendentals, for they represent neither a priori structures of the subjective cognition of objects nor the structures of understanding of Being by the *Dasein*. The quasitranscendentals are, on the contrary, conditions of possibility and impossibility concerning the very conceptual difference between subject and object and even between *Dasein* and Being." *The Tain of the Mirror*, 317. For more on this term, see Bennington, "Derridabase" in G. Bennington and J. Derrida. *Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, particularly pps. 267-84. My interpretation of Derrida's work owes an immense debt to these two in particular. In what follows, rather than attempting a critical analysis of their readings, will attempt to extend that analysis.

restricted economy that is always already in relation to that underlying movement.

General economy attempts to re-think the concepts of philosophy in relation to the quasi-transcendental principles on which they are founded, but attempt to exclude. These quasi-transcendentals do not exist ontologically, but rather operate infrastructurally within the ontological. Gasché has given a powerful account of this infrastructural movement of relation. He writes,

The infrastructures, which as we shall see are irremediably plural, represent the relation – connection, *ratio*, *rapport* – that organizes and thus accounts for the differences, contradictions, aporias, or inconsistencies between concepts, levels, argumentative and textual arrangements, and so on that characterize the discourse of metaphysics.⁴

General economy gives an account of this fundamental sense of relation, which is itself already founded in a movement of *différance*.

In order to reveal how the thinking of general economy provides a better account of the explosiveness of this world, three of Derrida's early essays will be closely analyzed. The first, "Force and Signification," reveals what is at stake in the critique of metaphysics. It reveals precisely the explosiveness of force that always threatens the stability of form or structure. It thus reveals the general economy underlying all ontology. The second, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," gives an account of how the thinking of general economy is to be conceived. It attempts to reveal how concepts can be reconceived *in* a general economy. Finally, the essay "Différance" will help elucidate how Derrida himself thinks the quasi-

⁴ *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 147.

transcendental movement of *différance* in both of these senses, *as* an underlying general economy and *in* a general economy.

1.1: The Economy of Force

Derrida's essay "Force and Signification"⁵ is devoted to an analysis of structuralist literary criticism, particularly the work of Rousset. However, as with all of Derrida's texts, there are multiple layers of activity within this essay, and the implications of Derrida's reading, as will be seen, exceed the limited domain of literary criticism. As Gasché has pointed out, Derrida's works "do not limit themselves to making a point, but also perform and enact it,"⁶ and so what is at stake in this text exceeds its object. "It is also readily demonstrable," writes Derrida, "that what is in question is the metaphysics implicit in all structuralism, or in every structuralist proposition." (WD 24) In this essay, Derrida addresses that metaphysics and attempts to account for the excess of force in form, from which it has been systematically excluded, in order to move beyond a purely structural analysis, and in so doing move toward a re-thinking of the idea of force itself in terms of an economy of difference. Structuralism, he writes, "will be interpreted, perhaps, as a relaxation, if not a lapse, of the attention given to *force*, which is the tension of force itself. *Form* fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself. That is, to create." (WD 4-5) As we will soon see, it is the idea, or thought, of force, as a tension of difference, that makes sense of the effectivity of language.

⁵ In Derrida, J. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Hereafter cited as WD followed by page number. All italics in original unless otherwise noted.

⁶ *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 1.

The thought of force, Derrida suggests, is excluded through the emphasis on structure, which violently closes the movement that underlies it.⁷ This exclusion is the attempt to neutralize the energy of force. Derrida writes:

Thus, the relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized. Somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city, reduced to its skeleton by some catastrophe of nature or art. A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture. This state of being haunted, which keeps the city from returning to nature, is perhaps the general mode of the presence or absence of the thing itself in pure language. (WD 5)

Despite its neutralization, force comes back to haunt structure. It returns, because, as the movement of repetition itself, it is the condition of possibility of structure. Just as an abandoned city remains haunted by the forces that produced it, so any structural analysis remains haunted by the force it seeks to exclude.

Force, for Derrida, is generated through the differences that exceed language. But it is this very excess, in its absence, which makes language possible. According to Derrida:

This universe articulates only that which is in excess of everything, the essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced within language; ...this excess is the very possibility of writing and of literary *inspiration* in general. Only *pure absence* – not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced – can *inspire*, in other words, can *work*, and then make one work. (WD 8)

⁷ See Gasché on this point as well. He writes, “What the notion of structure shares with all these concepts [*eidos*, essence, form, *Gestalt*, etc.] is closure, according to which the passage from one structure to another can be thought only in terms of chance, hazard, or catastrophe.” *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 144.

It is not presence that makes possible the effects of language, but pure absence. It is this absence, inscribed within presence and making it possible yet irreducibly open, which then can make possible the continuous production of meaning. To focus on this meaning as a fixed, closed thing, is to make the same mistake as privileging the purity and universality of the voice in opposition to the written text. This is because, as Derrida writes, “the thought of the thing as *what it is* has already been confused with the experience of pure speech; and this experience has been confused with experience *itself*.” (WD 9) Experience itself, as we will see, emerges from the movement of *différance*.

First, though, more must be said about this absence, or, rather, what is at stake here. Derrida writes, “to write is to know that what has not yet been produced within literality has no other dwelling place, does not await us as prescription in some *topos ouranios*, or some divine understanding. Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning.” (WD 11) The absence inscribed within presence makes possible the production of meaning, but no longer on the basis of a fully present ground. Rather, it is the play of difference that makes this production possible. The play of difference, though, means that there can be no static form or structure of meaning, and hence no a-historical structure or form. According to Derrida,

If writing is *inaugural* it is not so because it creates, but because of a certain absolute freedom of speech, because of the freedom to bring forth the already-there as a sign of the freedom to augur. A freedom of response which acknowledges as its only horizon the world as history and the speech which can only say: Being has always already begun. (WD 12)

There is an already-there that must be accounted for, from which the freedom to respond derives. Structuralism, according to Derrida, is “quite vulnerable” because of its exclusion of history. Precisely by failing to think history, it has closed off the play of difference in favour of full presence. Derrida writes, “this history of the work is not only its *past*, the eve or the sleep in which it precedes itself in an author’s intentions, but is also the impossibility of its ever being *present*, of its ever being summarized by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness.” (WD 14) The movement and play of difference entails the impossibility of full presence, because the ‘present’ will always be haunted by its past and its future, it will only ever be the ‘present’ as a result of its differing from its past and its future. The past and the future, then, return in the present, displacing it as pure presence. And, as a result, then, the ‘present’ will always necessarily be open, incomplete, moving.

There is a danger in privileging form, or structure, over force, as Derrida is quick to point out. It consists in the danger of covering up and excluding the already-there. He writes, “One risks being interested in the figure itself to the detriment of the play going on within it metaphorically.” (WD 16) It is precisely this play that is constitutive of the figure. Through its excess, the force of the play of difference makes possible form itself. Derrida’s point, though, is not to naively privilege force over form or structure, as this would constitute the same mistake he is attempting to correct. He denies the very possibility of the choice between force and structure, precisely because force and structure will always necessarily be in relation to each other. What is at stake, for Derrida, is not a choice between the two, but rather an economy. Derrida describes this economy as follows: “This economy would not be an energetics of pure, shapeless force.

The differences examined *simultaneously* would be differences of site and differences of force.” (WD 19-20) Here, already, is the general economy that underlies all form. This general economy is not an ontology of pure force or forces, rather it is the movement of differences that already underlies the ontological notion of force. It is the exceeding movement that makes ontology possible. It is not force in itself that Derrida seeks to return to form or structure, as there is no force in itself, but rather its economy. Force is irreducibly differential; it is the tension between differences. And so it is the tension between force and form, an irreducible economy of the movement of differences, that Derrida is attempting to affirm as constitutive of the effect of meaning itself.

It is not only form that is produced by force, but also meaning in the most general sense. Thus meaning is also always already involved in the irreducible general economy of the movement of differences. And so Derrida asks,

But is it by chance that the book is, first and foremost, volume? And that the meaning of meaning (in the general sense of meaning and not in the sense of signalization) is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier? And that its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages it in its own *economy* so that it always signifies again and differs? (WD 25)

In its irreducibility, this general economy is also interminable, always at stake, and always happening. It is precisely because meaning is produced differentially that necessitates that there will always be an economy of meaning. Meaning is economical because its differential production has no end. It is necessarily open, meaning is always being produced, but without completion. And so meaning, in itself, is never fully present, there is only ever an economy of meaning, and the economy of forces that

produces meaning as its condition of possibility is also already its condition of impossibility.

There is, then, a certain play of undecidability at stake in thinking force as the condition of possibility and impossibility of structure or form. Which is to say that structures are only possible on the basis of the irreducible general economy of the movement of differences. According to Derrida:

If there are structures, they are possible only on the basis of the fundamental structure which permits totality to open and overflow itself such that it *takes on meaning* by anticipating a *telos* which here must be understood in its most indeterminate form. This opening is certainly that which liberates time and genesis (even coincides with them), but it is also that which risks enclosing progression toward the future – becoming – by giving it form. That which risks stifling force under form. (WD 26)

Meaning is produced, is taken on, by the opening that the economic play of differences imposes on it. Force opens structure, making possible meaning as becoming. But this force is again covered up by the structure it produces. Force effaces itself in its own play. And this same play of presence and absence is at work in the becoming of meaning itself. And so, Derrida writes, “*To comprehend* the structure of a becoming, the form of a force, is to lose meaning by finding it. The meaning of becoming and of force, by virtue of their pure, intrinsic characteristics, is the repose of the beginning and the end, the peacefulness of a spectacle, horizon or face.” (WD 26) Force cannot be finally comprehended, precisely because to do so would be to lose it, to reify it as fixed and determined, as closed. This would negate the very play of force as that which renders experience continually open and indefinite. The underlying movement of force exceeds

the restricted forms it gives rise to, and as a result this excess is necessarily lost to the thinking of form or structure.

And so problems arise in attempting to speak of force. Derrida is, of course, well aware of these difficulties. He writes, “To say that force is the origin of the phenomenon is to say nothing. By its very articulation force becomes a phenomenon.” (WD 26-27) Force is no longer force as soon as it is formalized as a phenomenon. Yet this is not all that can be said. Derrida continues, “But in saying this, one must refer to language’s peculiar inability to emerge from itself in order to articulate its origin, and not to the *thought* of force. Force is the other of language without which language would not be what it is.” (WD 27) Force is what exceeds language in its more general economy; it is language’s other and so cannot be thought in itself. Force cannot be pinned down because of its irreducible movement; it always escapes being thought in-itself, in language, precisely because it is differential. But it is this very movement that makes language itself possible. Thus force, which cannot be thought in itself, nonetheless must be thought, precisely because without it there would be no language.

Force, then, is not a thing; it *is* not. It *is* movement itself, the difference between any given ontological entities. As such, it is irreducible to a binary opposition like that between presence and absence, inside and outside, structure and genesis. Force is not the opposite of form, but rather it inhabits form, working within it, moving it, and forcing it irreducibly open. According to Derrida, “Force cannot be conceived on the basis of an oppositional couple ... nor can it be conceived, from within phenomenology, as the *fact* opposed to *meaning*.” (WD 28) The movement of force as differential, or the trace of force, is not a fact or meaning, but the very condition for production of facts or meaning.

As movement, the very condition for the production of meaning is that which at the same time prevents any finality to meaning. It is the movement and play of difference itself.

But, as we have just seen, Derrida's analysis extends beyond structuralism alone, implicating the entirety of the history of metaphysics, and particularly phenomenology. And as a result it is not only meaning that is at stake here. As Derrida writes, "If this 'dialectic' of force and weakness is the finitude of thought itself in its relationship to Being, it can only be articulated in the language of form, through images of shadow and light." (WD 28) Being itself is at stake here. But there is no simple or final escape from metaphysics, as the movement of force will always take on form, however impure this form has become. The irreducible general economy of the movement of differences, as Derrida is here already hinting at, requires the thinking of general economy, which Derrida here denotes as 'dialectical'. And so any attempt to liberate force, or perhaps more importantly, experience, from metaphysics must be a 'dialectical' one that recognizes the interweaving of force in form or structure and being with language. But this dialectic must necessarily be without finality or closure, and this is precisely why Derrida, through his engagement with Bataille, will move to the notion of a general economy. Derrida recognizes the need to think the emancipation from metaphysics, and already at the end of "Force and Signification" he gives a hint of how to do this:

Emancipation from this language must be attempted. But not as an *attempt* at emancipation from it, for this is impossible unless we forget *our* history. Rather, as the dream of emancipation. Nor as emancipation from it, which would be meaningless and would deprive us of the light of meaning. Rather, as resistance to it, as far as is possible. (WD 28)

Any attempt to get outside metaphysics would be meaningless. But we can resist its limitations and its violence by thinking the more general movement and economy underlying and preceding metaphysics as both the condition of possibility and impossibility of it. We must recognize both the movement and the *force* of force, the responsibility⁸ that always accompanies emancipation and that this force entails, which can break open metaphysical thinking as well as our very structure of experience.

1.2: The Thinking *of* General Economy

But how can we think this movement of force, this economy, without falling into the same trap as structuralism, without doing violence to the movement of force that opens the very possibility of form while also making it impossible as the closure of thought?

Derrida gives us a way of thinking this movement as a general economy in another of his early articles.⁹ In “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,”¹⁰ Derrida attempts to analyze the possibility of thinking that which exceeds any restricted economy in a more primordial general economy. He does this through a reading of the works of Georges Bataille, from whom he takes the very term general economy, focusing on the (non)concept of sovereignty. It is through the analysis of the operation of sovereignty that general economy becomes apparent. Of crucial importance here is Bataille’s relation to Hegel, particularly through the dialectic of master and slave

⁸ I allude here to the ethical and political theme that will become explicit in the following chapters. However, as the passage just cited from Derrida suggest, this ethical and political theme is already implicit in his works on the metaphysics of presence.

⁹ Gasché has also related general economy to the infrastructural movement of force. He writes, “The infrastructures reveal this general economy as organizing the relations between heterogeneous possibilities, such that they constitute, in a sense still to be elaborated, the last instance.” *The Tain of the Mirror*, pps. 153-4. What follows will, perhaps, be an attempt to elaborate a sense of this last instance.

¹⁰ In Derrida, J. *Writing and Difference*. Again, hereafter cited as WD followed by page number.

and that most speculative, metaphysical concept of *Aufhebung*. As we will see, Bataille's thought, while being necessarily inter-woven with Hegelian dialectical thought, at the same time exceeds that dialectic, giving us the possibility of thinking the very excess and loss that displaces the violence of *Aufhebung*.

Derrida's essay begins by correctly pointing out the absolute importance of Hegel to Bataille's thought. Hegel, for Bataille, was both "self-evident" and "did not know to what extent he was right." (cited in WD 251) Yet the relation between Bataille and Hegel has all too often been ignored by those interested in Bataille, at the cost of failing to recognize the extent of Bataille's achievement. As Derrida writes, "to bear the self-evidence of Hegel, today, would mean this: one must, in every sense, go through the 'slumber of reason,' the slumber that engenders monsters and then puts them to sleep; this slumber must be effectively traversed so that awakening will not be a ruse of dream." (WD 252) Bataille's thought, precisely through its relation to Hegel, surpasses Hegel, awakening thought from the slumber of reason. This surpassing takes the form of laughter; it returns play to thinking. In so doing, it institutes and calls for a radically new approach to thinking. "To laugh at philosophy (at Hegelianism) – such, in effect, is the form of the awakening – henceforth calls for an entire 'discipline,' and entire 'method of meditation' that acknowledges the philosopher's byways, understands his techniques, makes use of his ruses, manipulates his cards, lets him deploy his strategy, appropriates his texts." (WD 252) This new approach, Bataille's 'method of meditation,' as we will see, is the thinking of the general economy. Though it surpasses Hegelianism through its laughter, it cannot be rigorously separated from it or opposed to it in a binary coupling. As Derrida writes, "Bataille doubtless put into question the idea or meaning of the chain

in Hegelian reason, but did so by thinking the chain as such, in its totality, without ignoring its internal rigor.” (WD 253) And so Bataille’s great credit is to have thought the totality, the general economy, of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic by thinking not only its internal rigor but also that which exceeds it as such, the movement of sovereignty.

What, then, is sovereignty? This question is, perhaps, impossible, but it points to what is at stake in sovereignty. To define sovereignty would be to sketch its limits, to close it, thereby rendering it non-sovereign. Like force, then, sovereignty itself *is* not, it eludes all finite and fixed being. Yet the traces of its movement, its operation, can be elaborated, and such is the task of general economy. According to Derrida, “Such an ‘operation’ ... thus amounts to risking, putting at stake (*mettre en jeu, wagen, daransetzen*; *mettre en jeu* is one of Bataille’s most fundamental and frequently used expressions) the entirety of one’s own life.” (WD 254) *Mettre en jeu*, here translated as ‘putting at stake’ though ‘putting in play’ would also be correct, signals the connection with the play of force central to Derrida. The sovereign operation, which traverses the entirety of one’s life, would occur then at the limit of reason where laughter interrupts reason, where life exceeds reason. This operation, then, as the common understanding of sovereignty would suggest, is the condition of freedom, as Derrida is quick to point out: “Freedom must go through the putting at stake of life.” (WD 254)

However, sovereignty is not simply identical with Hegelian lordship, the master who ultimately finds himself dependent upon the slave. Derrida writes,

And we are interested, first of all, in the difference between lordship and sovereignty. It cannot even be said that this difference has a sense: it is the *difference of sense*, the *unique* interval which separates meaning from a certain

non-meaning. Lordship has a meaning. The putting at stake of life is a moment in the constitution of meaning, in the presentation of essence and truth. (WD 254)

The putting at stake of life, the play of force or difference, is not a relapse into non-reason. It is not frivolity. Rather, it entails the difference inscribed within reason as well as non-reason. It takes place prior to meaning or reason, and so it is rooted in the constitution of meaning. The moment of sovereignty is lost to the dialectic of master and slave and is no longer there, no longer present in the *Aufhebung*. And it is this very loss that is central to a thinking of the general economy, a centrality that affects and traverses all meaning that is arrived at through dialectical thought. As Derrida writes, “one risks losing the effect and profit of meaning which were the very *stakes* one hoped *to win*.” (WD 255) Dialectical thought attempts to fix the game through its imposing of closure via *Aufhebung*; it thus attempts to settle the stakes, to determine and restrict the outcome prior to the playing of the game itself. Dialectical thought imposes rules on this game, those of progressive development and the movement towards an absolute, and these rules serve to close the game. It is a kind of cheating that ultimately aims at removing all possibility and openness from the movement of life.

Dialectics, then, is a form of conservative thought. It restricts itself, and ultimately renders itself comedic. According to Derrida,

Through this recourse to the *Aufhebung*, which conserves the stakes, remains in control of the play, limiting it and elaborating it by giving it form and meaning (*Die Arbeit ... bildet*), this economy of life restricts itself to conservation, to circulation and self-reproduction as the reproduction of meaning; henceforth, everything covered by the name lordship collapses into comedy. The independence of self-consciousness becomes laughable at the moment when it liberates itself by enslaving itself, when it starts to *work*, that is, when it enters

into dialectics. Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity. A negativity that never takes place, that never *presents* itself, because in doing so it would start to work again. (WD 255-6)

The conservative nature of dialectics is here already linked to an economy of exchange, a restricted economy of circulation and self-reproduction rather than creation and possibility. Yet this very restriction ultimately undermines itself, becoming laughable. The freedom of the Hegelian master is laughable precisely because this master is not free but rather enslaved by work, dependent upon the slave as such. The sovereign moment, because it is never properly present, resists its very enslavement to work. It cannot be subsumed, controlled, or put to work because it exposes from within the limits of that work.

What is laughable in Hegelianism lordship for both Bataille and Derrida, though this does not equal Hegel himself who is always right, is precisely this conservatism that amounts in the end to enslavement or submission to meaning. Derrida writes,

What is laughable is the *submission* to the self-evidence of meaning, to the force of this imperative: that there must be meaning, that nothing must be definitely lost in death, or further, that death should receive the signification of ‘abstract negativity,’ that a work must always be possible which, because it defers enjoyment, confers meaning, seriousness, and truth upon the ‘putting at stake.’ This submission is the essence and element of philosophy, of Hegelian ontologies. Absolute comicalness is the anguish experienced when confronted by expenditure on lost funds, by the absolute sacrifice of meaning: a sacrifice without return and without reserves. (WD 256-7)

The laughter of sovereignty is linked to anguish, to the experience of loss. Hegelian dialectics attempts to overcome and subsume this anguish through its very submission to meaning. It attempts to subsume negativity to its own work of meaning, to make it work and profit from it. But how could abstract negativity, necessarily absent, be subsumed by meaning? Whatever is not there cannot be capitalized on and so must be sacrificed. It is lost to the expenditure that produces meaning.

To think the sovereign moment is to attempt to think this loss, but not in order to put it to work, which would be to fall back into the discourse of Hegelian dialectics, of philosophy itself. As Derrida puts it, “the sovereign operation, the *point of nonreserve*, is neither positive nor negative. It cannot be inscribed in discourse, except by crossing out predicates or by practicing a contradictory superimposition that then exceeds the logic of philosophy.” (WD 259) The difficulty, even impossibility, of capturing the sovereign operation in discourse, much like the difficulty of thinking force, again requires a different approach, a different ‘logic.’ This ‘logic’ would be outside or beyond the simple opposition of positivity and negativity, recognizing the co-implication of the one in the other. Derrida writes,

To go ‘to the end’ both of ‘absolute rending’ and of the negative without ‘measure,’ without reserve, is not progressively to pursue *logic* to the point at which, *within discourse*, the *Aufhebung* (discourse itself) makes logic collaborate with the constitution and interiorizing memory of meaning, with *Erinnerung*. On the contrary, it is convulsively to tear apart the negative side, that which makes it the reassuring *other* surface of the positive; and it is to exhibit within the negative, in an instant, that which can no longer be called negative.” (WD 259)

This absolute rending is central to Derrida's other logic. It is that which interrupts the stifling restriction of meaning as longed for in the *Aufhebung* that seeks to settle all accounts and fix the game.

This interruption does not imply a radical separation of positive and negative, but rather a co-implication. This is the same co-implication witnessed in "Force and Signification" of force in form, of the general economy within and exceeding all ontology. The failure to recognize this co-implication constitutes Hegel's own failure. As Derrida puts it,

[Hegel] has blinded himself to the possibility of his own bet, to the fact that the conscientious suspension of play (for example, the passage through the certitude of oneself and through lordship as the independence of self-consciousness) was itself a phase of play; and to the fact that play *includes* the work of meaning or the meaning of work, and includes them not in terms of *knowledge*, but in terms of *inscription*: meaning is a *function* of play, is inscribed in a certain place in the configuration of a meaningless play. (WD 260)

It is play that is primary. Meaning is inscribed within and a function of meaningless play, and so is dependent upon that play: meaninglessness makes meaning possible. The independence of the master remains dependent upon the play that Hegel attempted to exclude from the work of meaning in the constitution of knowledge.

But this co-implication returns us to the importance of Hegel, who, again, "did not know to what extent he was right." The operation of sovereignty is not radically separate from dialectics, and so neither Bataille nor Derrida attempt to abandon dialectical thinking. The play of meaninglessness is inscribed within meaning. And so Derrida writes,

In *doubling* lordship, sovereignty does not *escape* dialectics. It could not be said that it extracts itself from dialectics like a morsel of dialectics which has suddenly become independent through a process of decision and tearing away. Cut off from dialectics in this way, sovereignty would be made into an abstract negation, and would consolidate ontologies. Far from interrupting dialectics, history, and the movement of meaning, sovereignty provides the economy of reason with its element, its milieu, its unlimiting boundaries of non-sense. Far from suppressing the dialectical synthesis, it inscribes this synthesis and makes it function within the sacrifice of meaning. (WD 260-1)

The relationship of sovereignty to lordship is not analogous to that of any being distinct from nothingness or abstract negativity. It would be more akin to the idea of nothingness within being, as the space from which being itself emerges. Dialectics thinks the restricted movement of meaning alone, while the operation of sovereignty reveals that movement along with what it must lose, which is precisely sovereignty, in order to be thought at all. Yet it is this very loss that is the condition for discourse to take place. And so, “In sacrificing meaning, sovereignty submerges the possibility of discourse: not simply by means of an interruption, a caesura, or an interior wounding of discourse (an abstract negativity), but, through such an opening, by means of an irruption suddenly uncovering the limit of discourse and the beyond of absolute knowledge.” (WD 261)

There is, then, a double play at stake in the operation of sovereignty. It both makes discourse and meaning possible by providing its element or milieu while, at the same time, exposing the limits of that discourse or meaning. The sovereign operation opens discourse, but by virtue of this very opening discourse is always open to the loss of meaning it seeks to establish. As a result, meaning always will, necessarily, be lost.

In order for discourse, meaning as such, to be established it must lose the sovereign, that is to say it must lose that which opens its very possibility. Meaning must expel that which has no sense, and this constitutes precisely the limit of meaning. As Derrida puts it, “As a manifestation of meaning, discourse is thus the loss of sovereignty itself.” (WD 262) The operation of sovereignty, then, erases itself from the unfolding of discourse. It is present only as the trace of its absence. Sovereignty moves through discourse, always eluding us, never quite being there, because being there would entail no longer being sovereign.

Absolute meaning, Hegelian lordship, then, is revealed as a farce. Yet to give up all discourse is itself unthinkable. The absence of discourse, silence, still speaks. There is a perverse paradox to silence as a result. Silence “*says* nonmeaning, it slides and it erases itself, does not maintain itself, silences *itself*, not as silence, but as speech.” (WD 262) Even without speaking, one still takes part in discourse. To say Hegel is always right is to realize that there is no escape from the play of meaning and nonmeaning. But to go beyond Hegel is to attempt to grasp the elusive sliding of this play. Which is once again to begin the game and to expose oneself to risk, to the putting at stake of everything. As Derrida writes, “This sliding is risky. ... In order to run this risk within language, in order to save that which does not want to be saved – the possibility of play and of absolute risk – we must redouble language and have recourse to ruses, to stratagems, to simulacra.” (WD 263) Bataille’s thought thus does not bring us to the point of nihilism or quietism, but rather something like the reverse; it redoubles the stakes of language, demanding different strategies of thought.

The theme of difference is vital, as it is what distinguishes Bataille from Hegel according to Derrida. As Derrida has revealed, for Bataille there is a kind of continuity to the operation of sovereignty. It is unavoidable, even in silence. Yet this continuity is not to be conceived as sameness, but rather as difference itself, the movement and play of difference. Thus Derrida writes,

Pushing itself toward the nonbasis of negativity and of expenditure, the experience of the *continuum* is also the experience of absolute difference, of a difference which would no longer be the one that Hegel had conceived more profoundly than anyone else: the difference in the service of presence, at work for (the) history (of meaning). The difference between Bataille and Hegel is the difference between these two differences. (WD 263)

Bataille's difference, the continuum of the sovereign operation, cannot be enclosed and put to work. It is an opening that takes place in an instant, or rather in every instant. The notion of the instant comprises the temporal element of the sovereign operation. But this very notion of the instant already dissociates itself from presence. An instant is not the present. Derrida writes,

And the *instant* – the temporal mode of the sovereign operation – is not a *point* of full and unpenetrated presence: it slides and *eludes* us between two presences; it is difference as the affirmative elusion of presence. It does not give itself but is *stolen*, carries itself off in a movement which is simultaneously one of violent effraction and of vanishing flight. (WD 263)

An instant is *in* the present, which is not the same as *being* present. The present is composed of instances, which are the ever-elusive spaces between presences. The present is here and now as a result of the instances that forever run away from us; it is the movement of instances that compose time. But, at the same time, the instant interrupts

time, fracturing the present in its elusiveness. The absence of the instant makes the present itself never fully present, preventing the here and now from being precisely that. An instant can never be pinned down or grasped; as soon as one thinks it or speaks it, it is already gone, already past. And this ever-elusive structure is shared by the sovereign operation. It is there in its absence, but to attempt to grasp or institute it would be to already lose it through the very effort to enslave it by putting it to work.

And so to speak of sovereignty would necessarily require a new strategy, a kind of double language or doubling of language. Derrida is insistent here:

A certain strategic twist must be imprinted upon language; and this strategic twist, with a violent and sliding, furtive, movement must inflect the old corpus in order to relate its syntax and its lexicon to major silence. And to the privileged moment of the sovereign *operation*, ‘even if it took place only once,’ rather than to the concept or meaning of sovereignty. (WD 264)

Language must be doubled in relation to the movement of the sovereign operation and its silence. This relation is a doubling of language in that “the old corpus,” the concepts and structure of language, including philosophical language such as that offered by Hegel, will remain. Yet it is a violent relation as those very concepts will necessarily be disrupted and displaced by the relation to the sovereign, not by the sovereign in itself, its definition, concept or meaning, which would no longer even be sovereign, but rather by its operation, its movement, its effects.

However, this strategic doubling of language risks returning us to Hegel’s logic of the master and the slave. To evade this danger the sovereign operation, and the other writing needed to express it, cannot be conceived of as master, because to do so would

entail once again losing sovereignty. Derrida is, of course, aware of this difficulty. He writes:

At stake in the operation, therefore, is not a self-consciousness, an ability to be near oneself, to maintain and to watch oneself. ... And this can be recognized in the primary characteristic – illegible within philosophical logic – that sovereignty *does not govern itself*. And does not govern in general: it governs neither others, nor things, nor discourses in order to produce meaning. (WD 264)

To understand the sovereign as an agent would be to lose the sovereign, which is precisely what happens to the master in Hegel's dialectic, whose mastery is ultimately subjected to the slave. But this then implies that both the master and the sovereign ultimately fail, at least insofar as the task is one of domination. But there is an important difference in the nature of these two failures, as Derrida recognizes.

Master and sovereign thus fail equally, and both succeed in their failure, the one by giving it meaning through subjugation to the mediation of the slave – which is also to fail for having lost failure – and the other by failing absolutely, which is simultaneously to lose the very meaning of failure by gaining nonservility. This almost imperceptible difference, which is not even the symmetry of an upper or lower side, should regulate all the 'slidings' of sovereign writing. It should *cut into* the *identity* of sovereignty which is *always in question*. (WD 265)

The master's failure is not absolute, as the master is still the master of the slave. The slave's servility mediates the master's mastery, and so without this the master would not be master. The master's identity as master therefore is ultimately itself servile, and so failed although still intact as an identity. But to gain nonservility requires the absolute failure of the sovereign. This absolute failure entails that the sovereign itself slides away, its identity shattered through this sliding. The sovereign "must expend itself without

reserve, lose itself, lose consciousness, lose all memory of itself and all the interiority of itself.” (WD 265) This absolute expenditure and loss prevents the sovereign from governing, and as a result it is not an identifiable thing or concept. But this expenditure does not prevent its operation, its movement and force; rather, it is its operation, and this operation allows for the failure of the master.

The question remains: how can this doubling of language that Derrida speaks of be characterized? What is this other writing, the sovereign writing? Once again, these questions are perhaps the wrong approach to coming to terms with sovereign writing. Rather than ask what it *is*, the question must be reformulated in the form of *how* it functions. And this functioning must still be thought in relation to the very concepts it displaces. Thus Derrida writes, “The sign ‘sovereignty’ itself, in its opposition to servility, was issued from the same stock as that of ‘lordship.’ Considered outside its functioning, nothing distinguishes it from ‘lordship.’” (WD 267) The operation of sovereignty, then, does not destroy all meaning. From outside, meaning appears intact, and it would be a mistake to overlook or ignore this apparent sameness or stability. The functioning of these concepts, however, will be different.

This difference in function will take the form of a mutation in the other writing. As Derrida writes,

This – major – writing will be called writing because it exceeds the logos (of meaning, lordship, presence, etc.). Within this writing – the one sought by Bataille – the same concepts, apparently unchanged in themselves, will be subject to a mutation of meaning, or rather will be struck by (even though they are apparently indifferent), the loss of sense toward which they slide, thereby ruining themselves immeasurably. (WD 267)

The mutation that Derrida speaks of is characterized by loss and sacrifice, the loss of that which necessarily exceeds and renders impossible absolute or pure metaphysical presence. The functioning of concepts, such as meaning, lordship, or presence, will always already be contaminated by that which they attempt to oppose, non-meaning, servitude, absence. Yet what Derrida speaks of here is more than a simple binary opposition, which would also be necessarily displaced by the movement, the sliding, that takes place within any metaphysical opposition. And there can be no dialectical overcoming of this loss, no *Aufhebung* that puts this sacrifice to work, precisely because the loss is immeasurable, and, as a result, pure presence, or absolute knowledge, will never arrive. The mutation is continual, as it is inscribed in the very possibility of the appearance of these concepts.

Inscribed within the ‘concept’ of sovereignty, then, is this necessary loss or sacrifice. And so the functioning of the sovereign operation must come to terms with this loss, it must relate the loss of sovereignty to the concept of sovereignty. Indeed, the notion of relation becomes central for Derrida here. He writes,

This writing ... folds itself in order to link up with classical concepts – insofar as they are inevitable ... in such a way that these concepts, through a certain twist, apparently obey their habitual laws; but they do so while relating themselves, at a certain point, to the moment of sovereignty, to the absolute loss of their meaning, to expenditure without reserve, to what can no longer even be called negativity or loss of meaning except on its philosophical side; thus, they relate themselves to a nonmeaning which is beyond absolute meaning, beyond the closure or the horizon of absolute knowledge. (WD 267-8)

The classical concepts of metaphysics, which inevitably recur, can only operate in relation to the sovereign moment in which their meaning is lost without reserve. The loss

is absolute, and even absolute meaning cannot subsume it within itself, as Hegel attempts to do with negativity. Sovereignty operates by relating this absolute loss, beyond the closure of the classical metaphysical concepts, within these concepts themselves. As a result, these concepts will never absolutely arrive as closed and final, but rather they remain always interrupted by play. Thus according to Derrida:

To relate the major form of writing to the sovereign operation is to institute a relation in the form of a nonrelation, to inscribe rupture in the text, to place the chain of discursive knowledge in relation to an unknowledge which is not a moment of knowledge: an absolute unknowledge from whose nonbasis is launched chance, or the wagers of meaning, history, and the horizons of absolute knowledge. (WD 268)

Because sovereignty *is not*, is never present as such, as a concept, but only exists in its operation, the notion of relation becomes somewhat paradoxical. But to stop at this apparent paradox in the notion of relation would be to remain enclosed within a concept of relation that Derrida would doubtless contest as itself metaphysical. It is “a relation in the form of a nonrelation” because sovereignty is not a thing or concept that can be related to. Yet it is there in its effects; it interrupts restricted metaphysical concepts, leaving them always already susceptible to chance and play. And this is precisely what Bataille sought in sovereignty, and what Derrida seeks as well, in that other writing.

This other writing, the writing of sovereignty, brings us to general economy. In describing general economy, Derrida reiterates much of what has just been discussed above. He writes,

Insofar as it is a scientific form of writing, general economy is certainly not sovereignty itself. Moreover, there is no sovereignty *itself*. Sovereignty dissolves the values of meaning, truth and a *grasp-of-the-thing-itself*. ... The writing of

sovereignty places discourse *in relation* to absolute non-discourse. Like general economy, it is not the loss of meaning, but, as we have just read, the ‘relation to this loss of meaning.’ It opens the question of meaning. It does not describe unknowledge, for this is impossible, but only the effect of unknowledge. (WD 270)

General economy is like the writing of sovereignty, which attempts to place discourse in relation to non-discourse, meaning in relation to non-meaning, so as to open the question of meaning in the first place. General economy does not reveal things in themselves; instead it traces the movement that gives rise to these things, while at the same time opening them as possibilities rather than closed actualities. The discourse of general economy is not a sovereign form of discourse, but rather a ‘discourse’ that places its concepts in relation to the sovereign moment that interrupts them.

General economy is scientific in its rigour, but it is not science. Science is a restricted economy, in that it gathers and collects knowledge in an attempt to theorize and explain the world. General economy, though, is more primordial. Sovereignty is not a thing in itself and so cannot be grasped or comprehended by science. Yet its operation opens the very question of meaning, making science possible. General economy makes apparent the loss of meaning within meaning; it relates meaning to the loss of meaning in the sovereign interruption. It is not the loss of meaning, nor is it sovereignty; rather it traces the effects of sovereignty in meaning itself. Science, then, as a discourse of restricted economy, is only opened as possibility through the space opened by general economy.

The same relation holds for Hegel’s dialectics. General economy comprehends phenomenology and Hegelian dialectics. The Hegelian Logos, absolute knowledge, is

inscribed “within the opening of general economy.” But the loss of the sovereign operation takes place beyond absolute knowledge, and so reveals the horizon of absolute knowledge. According to Derrida, “General economy folds these horizons and figures so that they will be related not to a basis, but to the nonbasis of expenditure, not to the *telos* of meaning, but to the *indefinite* destruction of all value.” (WD 271) Hegel’s phenomenology attempts to inscribe an end, a *telos*, to the movement of the mind. However, general economy undermines any *telos*; it is interminable and indefinite. The phenomena that Hegel attempts to trace in his phenomenology are always predetermined and anticipated by absolute knowledge. And it is because of this that Hegel’s phenomenology “corresponds to a restricted economy: restricted to commercial values, one might say, picking up on the terms of the definition ... limited to the meaning and the established value of objects, and to their *circulation*.” (WD 271) Because it is limited to circulation, Hegel’s phenomenology ultimately cannot come to terms with production, which is a moment in the movement of general economy.

This limitation of Hegel’s thought, then, mirrors that of structuralism, which cannot adequately comprehend force. The emphasis on structure, as Derrida has shown, “risks stifling force under form” (WD 26), and, as outlined above, Derrida calls for an emancipation of force. And there is a similar danger to the limitation of Hegel’s phenomenology. Derrida writes,

The *circularity* of absolute knowledge could dominate, could comprehend only this circulation, only the *circuit of reproductive consumption*. The absolute production and destruction of value, the exceeding energy as such, the energy which ‘can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without any meaning’ – all this escapes phenomenology as restricted economy. The latter can

determine difference and negativity only as facets, moments, or conditions of meaning: as work. (WD 271)

Hegel's philosophy, limited as it is to circulation, can only attempt to dominate the movement of general economy. That movement, which both ultimately produces and destroys value, necessarily escapes circulation. Like sovereignty, it is lost absolutely. The play of difference, as Derrida has already pointed out in "Force and Signification," can only be comprehended as a moment or condition in the constitution of meaning. It can only be comprehended insofar as it is put to work. This, of course, recalls the relation of the slave to the master in Hegel's dialectic. And, like the slave, the dialectic of Hegel's phenomenology can only attempt to enslave the movement of excess that produces value, precisely because it attempts to close that movement in a final *telos*; that is to say, it attempts to expel the destruction of value that necessarily comes with that production.

Of course, as both Derrida and Bataille understand, Hegel's will to closure is ultimately impossible, as general economy reveals. The task of any discourse on general economy must be to reveal this impossibility by making apparent the rupture that the moment of sovereignty inscribed within the Hegelian system. Thus Derrida points out,

Such a rupture of symmetry must propagate its effects throughout the entire chain of discourse. The concepts of general writing can be *read* only on the condition that they be deported, shifted outside the symmetrical alternatives from which, however, they seem to be taken, and in which, after a fashion, they must also remain. (WD 272)

If general economy makes apparent the effects of the operation of sovereignty, then those effects must alter the strategy of writing, of thinking, and ultimately of acting. But

because there is only discourse, because there is no end to metaphysics but only its interminable closure, the concepts of discourse, of metaphysics will remain. Yet they will remain differently. As an example, Derrida writes, “if one takes into account this *commentary on nonmeaning*, then that which *indicates itself* as nonvalue, within the closure of metaphysics, *refers* beyond the opposition of value and nonvalue, even beyond the concept of value, as it does beyond the concept of meaning.” (WD 272) In order for the concepts of general writing to be read, they must refer to sovereignty, beyond lordship and slavery, meaning and non-meaning. The danger of the Hegelian dialectic, the attempt to put sovereignty to work, must be avoided, but at the same time the reference or relation to the sovereign operation must remain. Though this might seem impossible, it is surely no more impossible than Hegel’s attempt to exclude or put to work non-meaning.

It is important here to avoid the mistake of thinking general economy in terms of a system, an error Derrida is well aware of. “However, the writing within which these stratagems operate does not consist in subordinating conceptual moments to the totality of a system in which these moments would finally take on meaning.” (WD 272) For the conceptual moments to take on meaning, finally, would entail the same shortcoming as Hegel. It would entail once again doing violence to the play of difference by putting it to work in the constitution of meaning. And so Derrida warns us one last time:

If the play of difference is indispensable for the correct reading of the general economy’s concepts, and if each notion must be reinscribed within the law of its own sliding and must be related to the sovereign operation, one must not make of these requirements the subordinate moment of a structure. (WD 272)

General economy relates the sliding of its concepts in relation to the sovereign operation, and any attempt to inscribe this sliding within a structure must be avoided if one is to do justice to the play of difference.

The writing of general economy thus demands resistance to any systematization. Yet this writing remains anything but neutral, much less nihilistic. And this holds despite the challenge to discourse and meaning that general economy relates. The writing of general economy is in fact affirmative, as Derrida stresses. He writes:

What has happened? In sum, nothing has been said. We have not stopped at any word; the chain rests on nothing; none of the concepts satisfies the demand, all are determined by each other and, at the same time, destroy or neutralize each other. But the rule of the game or, rather, the game as rule has been *affirmed*; as has been the necessity of transgressing both discourse and the negativity of the bothersomeness of using any word at all in reassuring identity of its meaning.
(WD 274)

General economy affirms the play of difference. It affirms play precisely because that play is the rule, it is the condition upon which any restricted economy of meaning or discourse must rest. Neutrality, as Derrida points out, is essentially negative, it neutralizes. And it is the classical discourse of metaphysics that actually neutralizes the very play of difference that the writing of general economy and Derrida seek to affirm.

It can perhaps be seen how Hegel, through his concept of the *Aufhebung*, is in fact guilty of this neutralization. And Derrida, here going beyond Bataille, himself recognizes this limit of Hegelian thought. Thus he writes:

The Hegelian *Aufhebung* is produced entirely from within discourse, from within the system or the work of signification. ... The *Aufhebung* is included *within* the circle of absolute knowledge, never exceeds its closure, never suspends the

totality of discourse, work, meaning, law, etc. ... The Hegelian *Aufhebung* thus belongs to restricted economy, and is the form of the passage from one prohibition to another, the *circulation* of prohibitions, history as the truth of the prohibition. (WD 275)

Hegel's *Aufhebung*, as restricted economy and through its inability to exceed its closure, remains trapped within the logic of prohibition. It amounts to a philosophy of enslavement, and so cannot but limit any attempt to think emancipation. But as Derrida has consistently pointed out, there is no escape from discourse or meaning, and therefore there is no escape from the *Aufhebung*. But even if there is no escape, this does not necessarily entail that there can be no displacement. This displacement of the *Aufhebung* is precisely what the writing of general economy must enact. Derrida writes, "this displacement is paradigmatic: within a form of writing, an intraphilosophical concept, the speculative concept par excellence, is forced to designate a movement which properly constitutes the excess of every possible philosopheme." (WD 275) Any failure to recognize this excess can only be seen as naïve. This naïveté is characterized by the inability to recognize the unknown, and as a result the imprisonment to what is only thought to be known. And so the consciousness that Hegel speaks of in his phenomenology remains a naïve consciousness according to Derrida:

The 'we' of the *Phenomenology of Mind* presents itself in vain as the knowledge of what the naïve consciousness, embedded in its history and in the determinations of its figures, does not yet know; the 'we' remains natural and vulgar because it conceives the *passage* from one figure to the next and the *truth* of this passage only as the circulation of meaning and value. (WD 275)

And so Hegel's logic of the *Aufhebung* remains naively imprisoned within its own circularity, within circulation itself. This logic, as well as the 'we' that results from it, as

Derrida suggests, “does not *see* the nonbasis of play upon which (the) history (of meaning) is launched.” (WD 276) It does not see the general economy.

1.3: General Economy of *Différance*

Force, Derrida has insisted, is differential; there is no force in itself but rather a difference of forces constituting a general economy of the movement and play of differences.

Bataille’s notion of sovereignty reveals the shortcomings of Hegelian dialectical thought in its ability to relate this general economy, failing to recognize its force of rupture. Yet Derrida has taken the writing of general economy further. Throughout his work, he has elaborated a series of quasi-transcendental concepts that exhibit infra-structural characteristics similar to Bataille’s notion of sovereignty, perhaps the most notable of these being *différance*. Derrida’s notion of *différance*, as is evident in the essay of the same name¹¹, is explicitly linked to economy. It extends general economy from language to the unconscious to ontology, eventually encompassing the entirety of experience. In an interview, Derrida speaks of the economic character of the (non)concept of *différance* as follows:

I would even say that it is *the* economical concept, and since there is no economy without *différance*, it is the most general structure of economy, given that one understands by economy something other than the classical economy of metaphysics, or the classical metaphysics of economy.¹²

¹¹ In *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. Hereafter cited as D followed by page number.

¹² Derrida, J., *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pps. 8-9.

As this statement suggests, *différance*, as the most general structure of economy, calls for a new understanding of economy. This understanding of economy is that of general economy.¹³

Derrida's neologism, *différance*, is elusive, composed as it is by "a kind of gross spelling mistake, a lapse in the discipline and law which regulate writing and keep it seemly." (D 3) This spelling mistake consists in inserting the letter *a* into the word *difference*, an inaudible mistake as the pronunciation of Derrida's neologism is identical to the pronunciation of the word *difference* in French. The resulting word or concept, which "is literally neither a word or concept," (D 3) because it erases itself in the movement from writing or reading to speech, calls into question the relation of writing to speech. As a mark that erases itself, *différance* can always be ignored, though its effects will leave their trace. What Derrida attempts to do is not to justify this neologism, but rather to trace these effects, through "a kind of insistent intensification of its play." (D 3)

To assemble these effects, Derrida insists on the metaphor of a sheaf. His insistence is founded on two reasons. The first of these is the economical characteristic of *différance*. "I will not be concerned," writes Derrida, "with describing a history and narrating its stages, text by text, context by context, demonstrating the economy that each

¹³ Gasché, for one, has pointed to the economic aspect of *différance*. He writes, "Like all other infrastructures, difference, in having to account for a variety of theoretical phenomena, is an economical, conceptual, formal structure to the extent that it draws together a configuration of signifying movements from a variety of heterogeneous resources; it is not a homogeneous unity of heterogeneous features, however, and is even "inconceivable as a mere *homogeneous* complication of a diagram or line of time" (SP, p. 88). As an infrastructure, difference, is a nonunitary synthesis of heterogeneous features." *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 195. For more on this economic character of *différance*, see also Irene Harvey's *Derrida and the Economy of Difference*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986, particularly pps. 209-215.

time imposed this graphic disorder; rather I will be concerned with the *general system of this economy*.” (D 3) Here already is the first reference to general economy, and to Derrida’s earlier essay on Bataille. The second of Derrida’s reasons reveals the infra-structural characteristic of *différance*. Derrida writes,

On the other hand, the word *sheaf* seems to mark more appropriately that the assemblage to be proposed has the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning – or of force – to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others. (D 3)

This second reason is already linked to the first in the same way that Derrida’s essay on force is linked to the essay on general economy.

The significance of the inaudibility of *différance* cannot be underestimated. It undermines the possibility of any pure metaphysical presence. An absent meaning or force is insinuated within what is present, just as death is insinuated in life. Derrida points to this via a cryptic reference to Hegel. He writes,

The *a* of *différance*, thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb: *oikesis*. And thereby let us anticipate the delineation of a site, the familial residence and tomb of the proper in which is produced, by *différance*, the *economy of death*. This stone – provided that one knows how to decipher its inscription – is not far from announcing the death of the tyrant. (D 4)

Here, Derrida alludes to what is at stake in the writing of *différance*. The Greek word for tomb, *oikesis*, brings to mind and is no doubt closely linked to the Greek word for home, *oikos*, the root of the word economy. The play of effects that the neologism *différance* attempts to describe refers to a more fundamental economy. It is an economy of death,

insofar as the necessity of death inscribed in life haunts life, undermining any lasting presence.

If *différance* is inaudible then it can only be approached through writing. “I can speak about this graphic difference only through a very indirect discourse on writing.” (D 4) But it very quickly becomes apparent that this discourse on writing extends far beyond the traditional or commonsense understanding of writing, or of the distinction between writing and speech. Derrida follows Saussure in recognizing that the play of difference marks every sign, graphic or phonetic. Any sign, in writing or in speech, can only ever come to meaning by distinguishing itself from what it is not. And this play of difference is necessarily inaudible in both writing, in the form of punctuation and grammar, as well as speech, in the absence of other signs present within any singular sign. As a result, the inaudibility of *différance* is fundamental. As Derrida suggests, “Inaudible is the difference between two phonemes which alone permits them to be and to operate as such. The inaudible opens up the apprehension of two present phonemes such as they present themselves.” (D 5) The phonetic, like the graphic, requires the inaudible space between signs in order to function. Thus this inaudible trace of *différance* is structurally necessary to both writing and speech.

However, this ‘structural necessity’ of this inaudible *différance* is better understood as an infra-structural necessity. This is because an infra-structure is precisely concerned with differences that make ‘structures’ possible in the first place.¹⁴ *Différance*,

¹⁴ See Gasché, who writes, “Infrastructures appear or manifest themselves only *as the difference* of, say, structure and genesis. ... Yet it is precisely this alterity, which prevents them from ever presenting themselves in person, that qualifies the infrastructures as an explicandum of the difference between the thing in general and its essence, and of the differences crucial to phenomenology, the differences of appearance

as Derrida is quick to point out, displaces the very distinction between writing and speech. Thus he writes,

Here, therefore, we must let ourselves refer to an order that resists the opposition, one of the founding oppositions of philosophy, between the sensible and the intelligible. The order which resists this opposition, and resists it because it transports it, is announced in a movement of *différance* (with an *a*) between two differences or two letters, a *différance* which belongs neither to the voice nor to writing in the usual sense, and which is located, as the strange space that will keep us together here for an hour, *between* speech and writing, and beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other, occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they are two. (D 5)

The inaudibility of *différance*, which entails that it is not locatable in the realm of the sensible, also resists the realm of intelligibility, and this is precisely because it moves between the two, as it moves between speech and writing. But this movement between the terms also moves the terms themselves. *Différance* thus displaces the distinction, contaminating it by bringing two seemingly opposed terms into a necessary relation with each other. And this relation ultimately reveals that the distinction is an illusion that cannot be rigorously maintained. The two terms are not really two, as the very unity of each term is itself already fragmented by its necessarily differential composition. Writing is writing because it is not speech, by virtue of its difference from speech, but this difference leaves writing contaminated by what it is not, speech.

and appearing, of perception and what is perceived (independently of the existence of the perceived), of the noetico-noematic difference, and so on.” *The Tain of the Mirror*, pps. 150-1.

This infra-structural movement of *différance* is also the reason that it cannot, strictly speaking, be conceived of as a concept. Neither can it be understood as an ontological entity. Derrida is insistent:

Already we have had to delineate *that différence is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and, consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. (D 6)

Différance is movement, and so even this 'is' must be crossed out due to the elusiveness of movement. This movement entails that it is never present in itself, but only in what its movement opens up. And so without this movement ontology itself would not be. The movement of *différance* opens the space for ontology. In Derrida's words, "*différance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology – philosophy – produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return." (D 6) As we see, *différance* not only opens the space of ontology, underlying or perhaps under-writing it, but it also exceeds ontology. The movement of *différance* does not stop once the ontological has arrived. It continues, without return. And because it continues, because it exceeds the ontotheological, the ontotheological will never, properly speaking, fully arrive. The excessive movement of *différance* precludes any final establishment of the ontological, it excludes any possible end that could be reached. The ontological, then, will never be complete. Under-written by *différance*, it is also ultimately undermined.

Otherwise than ontology, then, *différance* exhibits striking similarities to both force and Bataille's notion of sovereignty. And so again the question of how one can

Speak about what properly speaking *is not* becomes vital. At this point, it will perhaps be best to cite Derrida at length:

In the delineation of *différance* everything is strategic and adventurous. Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a *telos* or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the development of the field. Finally, a strategy without finality, what might be called a blind tactics, or empirical wandering if the value of empiricism did not itself acquire its entire meaning in its opposition to philosophical responsibility. If there is a certain wandering in the tracing of *différance*, it no more follows the lines of philosophical-logical discourse than that of its symmetrical and integral inverse, empirical-logical discourse. The concept of *play* keeps itself beyond this opposition, announcing, on the eve of philosophy and beyond it, the unity of chance and necessity in calculations without end. (D 7)

Like both force and sovereignty, *différance* must be thought according to a different logic. And this is the result of the peculiar status of *différance*. Present only in its absence, as trace, *différance* does not obey the traditional logic of a transcendental principle. It does not determine the ontological according to an end that it seeks to impose. It does not, like God, govern from outside. Nor is it simply the ground from which the ontological is established and then free to govern itself. Rather it plays within the ontological, thereby preventing the ontological from ever fully arriving. The ontological remains, but only in its open-endedness.

As a neologism, *différance* refers to two senses present in the Latin verb *differre*, but for which there are two different terms in English: to defer and to differ. Both of these senses can be implied in the word or concept of difference. This first sense already

returns us to the necessity of thinking economically. To defer entails “the action of putting off until later, of taking into account, of taking account of time and of the forces of an operation that implies an economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a relay, a reserve, a representation.” (D 8) To defer is to manage time, or to manage an operation in time. But this temporal element of difference as deferring also already implies a spatial element, present in the sense of to differ. To differ is to be distinct, to be different or other than something else. According to Derrida, “whether it is a question of dissimilar otherness or of allergic and polemical otherness, an interval, a distance, *spacing*, must be produced between the elements other, and be produced with a certain perseverance in repetition.” (D 8) To be different in this sense, as distinct from, is to be separated, and this separation can only be the result of a spatial difference.

These different senses, temporal and spatial, are ‘present’, even if only in their absence, as trace, in the word or concept of difference. Yet the very distinction between these senses implies a certain loss. Difference, at least according to classical logic, can only refer to either the temporal or spatial element. One is thought at the expense of the other, dependent upon the context in which it occurs. In weaving together all these elements that can be present in the word difference, *différance* is already an economic term. “Thus the word *différance* (with an *a*) is to compensate – economically – this loss of meaning, for *différance* can refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meanings.” (D 8) At stake in the concept of difference is a certain multiplicity; it is polysemic. But this polysemia is lost in thinking difference as either temporal or spatial. *Différance*, in its economy, restores this lost polysemia.

This polysemia is absolutely fundamental to *différance*. One can, as Derrida himself does, start with the linguistic function of *différance*. As Derrida asserts, “the sign, in this sense, is deferred presence.” (D 9) However, the effects of *différance* do not stop there, at the linguistic sign. Derrida writes,

Whether we are concerned with the verbal or the written sign, with the monetary sign, or with electoral delegation and political representation, the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence. (D 9)

The logic of the sign, as deferred presence, extends beyond traditional linguistic analysis. And so, despite its linguistic ‘basis’, as a neologism that economically weaves together polysemic meanings, the movement of *différance*, and also necessarily the analysis of its effects, also extends beyond linguistic analysis, inasmuch as this is possible, as we are always already *in* language. And this necessarily has important philosophical repercussions. Every philosophical concept is made to tremble by this movement, as Derrida suggests.

Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general. (D 11)

A concept, particularly as expressed *in* language, is subject to the same deferral of presence, and of meaning, as any sign. And so the very possibility of any given concept requires *différance*. It is *différance* that produces conceptuality.

But how does this production occur? To begin to answer this question, it is first necessary to remember that *différance* is not outside, but rather operates from within.

Thus, according to Derrida:

What is written as *différance*, then, will be the playing movement that ‘produces’ – by means of something that is not simply an activity – these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the *différance* that produces differences is somehow before them, in a simple and unmodified – in-different – present. *Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name ‘origin’ no longer suits it. (D 11)

Operating within what it produces, *différance* cannot be conceived of as an origin.

Certainly, the traditional notion of an origin would already imply presence. But *différance* is not. It was never present, as it displaces the very concept of presence through its temporizing effect. The production of *différance* will always already be inscribed within a context, and this context will certainly be a historical one. And so Derrida writes, “we will designate as *différance* the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted ‘historically’ as a weave of differences.” (D 12) However, as Derrida is quick to point out, the very concept of production or of the historical are also necessarily subject to the movement of *différance*. They “remain in complicity with what is at issue here,” and are thus used “only for their strategic convenience.” (D 12) These concepts remain, but only in the same sense that the concept of lordship in the Hegelian dialectic remains after being subjected to general economy.

To take this thought farther, it must be realized that *différance*, through both its spatial and temporal effects, also already displaces our understanding of time. It displaces the present. Derrida describes this displacement of the present as follows:

It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called 'present' element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present. (D 13)

The notion of time as simple linear progression is precluded by *différance*. Its movement marks the present with both the past and future, with what it is not, thereby disrupting its very sense of presence. And because of this interruption of the present, so also the past and the future are interrupted. The past can no longer be conceived as a present that was, nor the future as a present that will be. *Différance* opens the past and future just as it opens the present through its displacement of any finality.

And again the disruption of the temporal present also entails a disruption that extends beyond the temporal present in itself. It entails a disruption of everything that is conceived in relation to the present. The present is divided by the interval that separates it from the past and the future, "thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject." (D 13) Of course, any notion of the subject must at some point be concerned with the subject's relation to language, the

subject's very existence in language. And "certainly the subject becomes a *speaking* subject only in its commerce with the system of linguistic differences" (D 16)

But Derrida goes further. It is not only the subject that is divided and displaced by the movement of *différance*, but rather every being, and hence Being itself. Even if a being as consciousness is posited prior to the speaking subject, the notion of consciousness itself is still thought on the basis of presence. And so the subject, even as consciousness, remains an effect of *différance*. According to Derrida consciousness is:

A determination or an effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but of *différance*, a system that no longer tolerates the opposition of activity and passivity, nor that of cause and effect, or of indetermination and determination, etc., such that in designating consciousness as an effect or a determination, one continues – for strategic reasons that can be more or less lucidly deliberated and systematically calculated – to operate according to the lexicon of that which one is de-limiting. (D 16-17)

The notion of the subject, or of consciousness, is subject to the same trembling as everything else. But even if consciousness, and therefore the subject, is divided, it is not completely destroyed. There is a remainder of the subject as identity, or as sameness, so long as what is thought as sameness is once again thought differently. And Derrida, here following Nietzsche, points to how this can be done. "The same, precisely, is *différance* (with an *a*) as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other." (D 17) The same itself becomes a movement, a passage from one subject to another. Thus the same, or the subject, is always at stake. Displaced as movement, the subject becomes a continual task of becoming. To think the same as *différance* would require a thought that can think the economy of its movement.

If, as Derrida admits, “it is evident – and this is the evident itself – that the economical and the noneconomical, the same and the entirely other, etc., cannot be thought *together*” (D 19), then how is this thought to be accomplished? What must be understood from this sense of the economical here, is a restricted economy, of circulation and closure, as opposed to the more general and exceeding movement, which can never be enclosed or captured within such a restricted economy, precisely because it exceeds it. And so it can hardly be fortuitous that it is precisely at this point of apparent impossibility that Derrida refers to his essay on Bataille in a passage upon which the entire crux of what is being said in this chapter turns. He writes,

I have attempted to indicate what might come of a rigorous and, in a new sense, “scientific” *relating* of the “restricted economy” that takes no part in expenditure without reserve, death, opening itself to nonmeaning, etc, to a general economy that *takes into account* the nonreserve, that keeps in reserve the nonreserve, if it can be put thus. I am speaking of a relationship between a *différance* that can make a profit on its investment and a *différance* that misses its profit, the *investiture* of a presence that is pure and without loss here being confused with absolute loss, with death. Through such a relating of a restricted and a general economy the very project of philosophy, under the privileged heading of Hegelianism, is displaced and reinscribed. (D 19)

Here the double meaning of the notion of general economy can be seen. Any restricted economy, such as Hegel’s dialectics, is dependent upon a more irreducible general economy of “expenditure without reserve,” the irreducible movement and play of force that underlies form. The *relating* of a restricted economy to this more irreducible expenditure without reserve constitutes the thinking *of* general economy, a thinking necessitated by the irreducible general economy that makes possible thinking in the first

place. And it is in this relating that the concepts of restricted economy are able to be thought differently, they are displaced and reinscribed. They are opened up by the nonreserve, opened up, precisely, to possibility, interminably. And as Derrida here suggests, this is precisely what is at stake in the thinking of *différance*, which is thus economic in a double sense as well. It 'is' the general economy, the interminable play of differences that delays and defers meaning, as well as displacing the ontological itself. It is this sense in which *différance* misses its profit; this movement is always already lost. Yet the other sense of the economy of *différance* is that in which, in a 'word', it refers to this lost movement, and in so doing is able to profit from it. It is the sense in which *différance* allows for a thinking of general economy that refers to and relates any restricted economy, which has always already lost the nonreserve, to the irreducible general economy of expenditure without reserve.

All our concepts, of language, time, the subject, and even conceptuality itself, must be re-thought in relation to *différance*.¹⁵ They must be related to *différance*, precisely because they all are always already in relation with *différance*. And this relation constitutes the general economy of the movement of *différance*. There is a double movement at stake in this general economy, in which the same as *différance* makes its profit while at the same time losing itself in expenditure and deferral. And so the project of philosophy is both displaced and reinscribed.

The need for a general economy is itself necessitated by the economic character of *différance*. As a movement it defers the very possibility of a restricted economy. It is

¹⁵ Again, Gasché helps to clarify this point. He writes, "From the perspective of difference, spacing is the force of rupture by which concepts are separated from one another, the staging of concepts in an "arche-scene" at the origin of sense and, therefore, the condition of possibility of conceptual signification." *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 199.

the closure of its concepts, their being present, that is forever displaced. Thus Derrida writes,

For the economic character of *différance* in no way implies that the deferred presence can always be found again, that we have here only an investment that provisionally and calculatedly delays the perception of its profit or the profit of its perception. Contrary to the metaphysical, dialectical, 'Hegelian' interpretation of the economic movement of *différance*, we must conceive of a play in which whoever loses wins, and in which one loses and wins on every turn. (D 20)

The thinking of the general economy will provide the conception of play that Derrida here demands. And this thinking will still *resemble* dialectics. Hegel wins and is always right. But Hegel loses as well. The certainty of the *Aufhebung* is lost, and there will no longer be a dialectical closure of the movement of *différance*. There will still 'be' a 'subject,' even a 'present', but only on the basis of an economic movement that will alter its functioning.

Différance traverses the entirety of what has been covered under the field of metaphysics. It traverses and disturbs all of ontology. "It is the domination of beings that *différance* everywhere comes to solicit, in the sense that *sollicitare*, in old Latin, means to shake as a whole, to make tremble in entirety." (D 21) But this does not make *différance* into an ontological entity. As a movement, it is otherwise than ontology. And as a result, "It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. ... Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom." (D 22) Displaced and disturbed by *différance*, but not governed. This is precisely the opposite of a determination. Nothing is completed and so there will always remain more to be done. The general economy of *différance* leaves everything at

stake. And while it does not govern, *différance* can guide, if it is thought in a general economy. *Différance* guides by opening the space of the ontological, making it possible but incomplete, and therefore always at stake and to come.

The loss instituted by *différance* is not something to be mourned as a failure. Rather, the guidance given by the movement of *différance* must take the form of an affirmation that will bring with it an ethics.¹⁶ “On the contrary, we must *affirm* this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance.” (D 27) What is lost is not a past that was ever present, nor a future that will ever finally arrive. But this loss of absolute presence constitutes the condition of all possibility. As Derrida writes, “From the vantage of this laughter and this dance, from the vantage of this affirmation foreign to all dialectics, the other side of nostalgia, what I will call Heideggerian *hope*, comes into question.” (D 27) Hope comes from the opening instituted by loss. It is made possible by *différance*. It is founded in the fact, not that things ever will be what we want, necessarily, but rather that things always can be different, perhaps even better.

¹⁶ Gasché, as well, has linked the affirmative characteristic of Derrida’s work to the ethical. He writes, “deconstruction, far from being nihilistic, destructive, or negative, is, on the contrary, affirmative. ... deconstructive interpretation affirms the play of the positive *and* the negative, and thus it wards off the ethical temptation to liquidate negativity and difference.” *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 154.

Every undistorted relationship, perhaps indeed the conciliation that is part of organic life itself, is a gift. He who through consequential logic becomes incapable of it, makes himself a thing and freezes.

T. W. Adorno, *Minia Moralia: Reflections On a Damaged Life*

Chapter Two: General Economy and the Gift

From his earliest work on, it is clear that Derrida is an economic thinker. His work is always concerned with economy. This is nowhere more apparent than in the notion of *différance*. *Différance* is already economic in a double sense. First, it economizes in a restricted sense. It makes efficient use of language in order to save time and space. In a ‘word’ it refers to the quasi-transcendental play of difference(s) that underwrites and exceeds ontology and language. Yet in this very referral, within this restricted economy of language, it also represents that movement of excess, and in so doing reveals the necessity of a general economy that relates this excessive movement to a restricted economy that it makes possible but from which it is always lost. Perhaps then it is only appropriate that Derrida’s work has also given us the opportunity to re-think economy as such.

In his *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*,¹ Derrida continues his quasi-transcendental analysis of philosophical concepts. Through a discussion of a variety of texts by Mauss, Levi-Strauss, Heidegger, and, in particular, a short story by Baudelaire, he discloses the quasi-transcendental condition of economy: the gift. The gift, as event, as a movement of giving, exhibits the same characteristics as *différance*. The gift escapes the metaphysics of presence; properly speaking, it ‘is’ not. Perhaps contrary to popular logic, to truly give is impossible, as will become clear, yet Derrida affirms this

¹ Derrida, J. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Hereafter cited as GT. All italics in the original unless otherwise indicated.

impossibility. The gift exceeds any restricted economy of exchange. Yet it is only on the basis of giving that this restricted economy is possible. To think the gift, it will be necessary to think in terms of a general economy that relates the excessive movement of the gift to exchange economy. This general economy of the gift makes explicit an ethical injunction already implicit in the thought of *différance*.

In what follows, the quasi-transcendental status of the gift will first be interrogated, revealing precisely how the gift is the condition of possibility of economy. In so doing, the essential status of the gift *as* ethical injunction will already be revealed. The quasi-transcendental status will then be related to the notion of general economy with the aim of elaborating how it is possible to think economy differently, to think economy in terms of the injunction of the gift. The relation between general economy and restricted economy will be revealed as almost dialectical, as a kind of excessive dialectic or dialectic of excess. Finally, the ethical injunction inherent in the gift that is made necessary by the gift *as* ethical injunction, the ethical injunction *of* the gift, will be analyzed. This final section will attempt to elucidate what form of ethics is called for by a thinking of economy in terms of the gift.

2.1: The Gift as Quasi-Transcendental

The gift is the quasi-transcendental of economy as such. What distinguishes the quasi-transcendental from the transcendental, it will be recalled, is its status as both condition of possibility and impossibility. But in order to begin to describe the quasi-transcendental condition of economy, it is of course necessary to have a clear idea of what is signified by the word economy. Derrida attempts to provide this by giving a brief etymological analysis of the roots of the word economy. Thus he asks:

What is economy? Among its irreducible predicates or semantic values, economy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors). *Nomos* does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (*nemein*), the law of sharing or partition, the law as partition (*moira*), the given or assigned part, participation. (GT 6)

This etymological or semantic analysis already indicates that the word or concept of economy encompasses a more general field than what is commonly understood by this term in discourses about national or global economies. At stake in the concept of economy is the management of the home. Yet linked to this management is the law, which is perhaps most commonly thought to lie outside of the home. It is the law that manages the relation of one home to another; the law divides one home from another. This division then requires the distribution and partition of all those things that might become property for any single home. There is, then, a movement underlying the home, and in which the home participates. This movement, which constitutes the social world, exceeds the home. Economy, as law or management of the home, necessarily extends beyond any one home. There is, then, a general sense to the concept of economy, an excessive economy from which other economies can be derived.

This is of course not all that can be said about the concept of economy, and so Derrida continues his analysis. If the values of distribution, sharing, and participation are implicit in the concept of economy, if there is a movement underlying the home, then exchange must also be central to the meaning of economy. Derrida writes, “Besides the values of law and home, of distribution and partition, economy implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return. The figure of the circle is obviously *at the center*, if that can still be said of a circle.” (GT 6) Once there is a general economy, distributed

and partitioned, a more restricted economy of exchange becomes possible. This idea of exchange derives from the movement implicit in the concept of economy. Exchange determines this more general movement as a movement of circulation. The exchange of, say, goods, entails the movement of those goods from one home to another, as well as the return of an equal value of goods to the first home. Furthermore, the idea of exchange also necessarily implies the idea of calculation. There would be no need to exchange if the two parties engaging in it wanted to exchange identical things. Therefore, there must be a calculation of equivalence. One must calculate the value of a thing in order to ensure that an equal value is received in return. Calculation is thus central to circulation. This aspect of economy as calculation implies a certain restriction. To calculate the value of a thing is at the same time to restrict that value, to stifle the possible values in favour of one value. And, as will be seen, it is precisely this restricted sense of exchange economy, of calculation, that the irruptive force of the gift renders impossible.

The concept of economy is thus already split. It can be understood in a general sense, exemplified in the way that the singularity of the home is exceeded in a movement in which it participates. This excessive movement is then necessarily restricted by the calculation of exchange. The movement is restricted to circulation in the same way that the *Aufhebung* of Hegelian dialectics is restricted to circulation. In his earlier work, Derrida has already shown how force makes possible form, as well as how the differing-deferring movement of *différance* makes possible language. The general economy of the gift mirrors this movement. It is only on the condition of this more fundamental movement that the singular home is able to emerge. The home is derived from this movement that exceeds it.

It is this underlying excessive movement of economy that is represented by the figure of the gift. Derrida writes, “Now the gift, *if there is any*, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift, this goes without saying, without treating this relation to economy, even to the money economy.” (GT 7) We will return to this ‘if there is any,’ which already marks the peculiar status of the gift, its impossibility. The relation to economy that Derrida here speaks of is fundamental. The gift is in fact presupposed by economy, it is presupposed by the idea of exchange. One might be tempted to put it *too* simply, that in order to exchange, one must first be able to give. However, this temptation reveals the extent to which the gift, which is more primordial, operating at the level of quasi-ontology, disseminates within exchange economy. The gift exceeds exchange economy. Derrida writes,

But is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy? That which, in suspending economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange? That which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure, and so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return? If there is gift, the *given* of the gift (*that which* one gives, *that which* is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor). (GT 7)

The excessive movement of the gift opens the closed circle of exchange. It opens exchange as possibility by giving the quasi-ground from which exchange is possible. But it also opens exchange in the sense of interrupting it, instituting the indeterminate openness of that quasi-ground within that which comes to be exchanged. The gift must exceed exchange. As soon as the gift returns, it is no longer a gift but rather a moment in the circle of exchange. But this circle of exchange remains dependent upon the interruption that opens its very possibility. Derrida continues:

It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure. If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is impossible. (GT 7)

Here we see more clearly the relation of the gift to economy. The gift is necessarily implicated in economy, in exchange, through the dissemination of the gift. But this circle does not exhaust it; it exceeds the circle. The gift is that which makes this circle possible, it is not the given thing, which would already be tied up in the circle, but rather the movement of giving as such.

A quasi-transcendental is always both a condition of possibility and impossibility. This is precisely what necessitates the ‘quasi.’ The gift is no exception, and for this reason Derrida always qualifies the gift with the phrase ‘if there is any.’ The impossibility of the gift is explicitly linked to that which it makes possible, exchange economy. Derrida describes this relation as follows:

For this is the impossible that seems to give itself to be thought here: These conditions of possibility of the gift (that some “one” give some “thing” to some “one other”) designate simultaneously the conditions of the impossibility of the gift. And already we could translate this into other terms: these conditions of possibility define or produce the annulment, the annihilation, the destruction of the gift. (GT 12)

The gift annuls itself in the very economy of exchange that it makes possible. As soon as a gift, a thing, is given by one to an other, the very conditions of giving in its common understanding, it enters into an exchange relation, even if this is only a symbolic

exchange. In so doing, it loses its purity as gift. It becomes corruptible by calculation and circularity. And this is due precisely to the fact that, even prior to this common understanding of what it is to give, the gift has already been annulled. Within each of the conditions necessary to give, the one who gives, the thing given, and the other to whom the thing is given, there is already an annulled gift. To be one who gives is already a restriction of the possibility of Being, to be a thing or present given is an already necessary restriction in the very definition of the thing, and to be an other who receives a gift is likewise a restriction of that otherness. Each term is already a restricted effect of the irreducible general economy that underlies and gives it its possibility. As a result, the possibility of giving has itself always already been restricted and so the conditions of possibility of the gift become at the same time the conditions of impossibility of the gift.

The gift thus presents itself as a paradox. But to say that the gift is impossible is not to say that giving does not occur, at least in some sense. It is not to say that the gift is nothing. Derrida writes:

For there to be gift event (we say event and not act), something must come about or happen, in an instant, in an instant that no doubt does not belong to the economy of time, in a time without time, in such a way that the forgetting forgets, that it forgets *itself*, but also in such a way that this forgetting without being something present, presentable, determinable, sensible or meaningful, is not nothing. (GT 17)

In the very event of giving, the gift is forgotten; it erases itself. It does not present itself, except as the trace of its own erasure. Yet the giving still occurs, otherwise it could not function as a condition of possibility. It would not be effective. In this paradox of not being but not being nothing, something comes about, something happens. And this

something is that to which the effects of the gift, the giving subject, the thing given, and the other who receives, owe themselves. Only on the basis of the forgetting of the gift are its effects possible, and thus there is a debt inscribed within this forgetting. The forgetting, because of this debt, thus becomes a trial, but a trial necessarily without judge or jury because of the annulment of the gift. The gift, in giving possibility, has always already called this possibility into question.

This forgetting, the gift erasing itself in the event of giving, recalls Derrida's writings on the trace, as well as on *différance*. This is of course not by chance. The gift shares the same features as *différance*. In particular, like *différance*, the gift is beyond the opposition of presence and absence. And, again like *différance*, the gift is at stake in all of being. The forgetting of the gift is analogous to the Heideggerian forgetting of Being. Time and Being articulate themselves as a gift that 'gives' the possibility of an event, of a particular being, etc. According to Derrida:

It so happens (but this "it so happens" does not name the fortuitous) that the structure of this impossible *gift* is also that of Being – that gives itself to be thought on the condition of being nothing (no present-being, no being-present) – and of time which, even in what is called its "vulgar" determination, from Aristotle to Heidegger, is always defined in the paradoxia or rather the aporia of what is without being, of what is never present or what is only scarcely and dimly. (GT 27)

The gift makes possible economies of exchange precisely because it operates at the level of economy in the general sense outlined above. The gift is another name for this general economy of *différance*. Without the gift of Being, *différance*, there would be neither subjects to exchange nor any presents to exchange. As quasi-transcendental condition of this exchange economy, as the pre-archaic event of the gift of Being and time, the gift is

presupposed by it.² The gift is at work in Being, in the Being of beings. Being and time are given, and in this given-ness they give the possibility of presence. And just as Being, as well as time, is, properly speaking, never present, so the gift is never present. Yet it structures Being and time. The gift is effective even if it 'is' not.

It may be objected that the paradoxical structure of the gift, its impossibility, makes it undesirable if not useless as a category for philosophical thinking. Why bother with all this talk of quasi-transcendentals? To admit this, though, would risk losing a great deal of fundamental philosophical concepts. And this loss is always already taking place in the thought of the quasi-transcendental, which attempts to account for this loss while still accounting for the effectivity of these concepts. Certainly it would be difficult to conceive of abandoning the notion of time, however aporetic our concept of it might be. Furthermore, there is an ethical-political risk inherent to this objection, which risks excluding desire in the name of some practical reason. Derrida is well aware of this danger. He writes:

For finally, if the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it. We intend it. And this *even if* or *because* or *to the extent that* we *never* encounter it, we never know it, we never verify it, we never experience it in its present existence or in its phenomenon. The gift *itself* – we dare not say the gift *in itself* – will never be confused with the presence of its phenomenon.

Perhaps there is nomination, language, thought, desire, or intention only there

² Bennington helps to clarify this point, particularly concerning the displacement of time implicit here. In his essay "Derridabase," he writes, "What is commonly called a gift or present is therefore only the trace of a pre-archaic event of donation which can never have taken place as such. The gift has always already compromised itself with exchange, which, however, never manages to measure up to the gift which "precedes" it. There is a whole complication of temporality implied here: the gift is never (a) *present*; it is given in a past which has never been present and will be received in a future which will never be present either." G. Bennington, "Derridabase," in G. Bennington and Derrida, J. *Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. P. 190

where there is this movement still for thinking, desiring, naming that which gives itself neither to be known, experienced, nor lived – in the sense in which presence, existence, determination regulate the economy of knowing, experiencing, and living. In this sense one can think, desire, and say only the impossible, according to the measureless measure of the impossible. (GT 29)

It is the very impossibility of the gift that makes its thinking necessary. The paradoxical structure of the gift, its im-possibility, both possible as a necessarily already-there event of giving and impossible as a pure intentional act, makes the gift desirable, perhaps even constituting the very figure of desire. The opening instituted by the gift is precisely what gives us the possibility of thinking and desiring. As quasi-transcendental, it opens knowing and desiring as economy. It is only as a result of this opening that we are called to thinking, to knowing, and to philosophizing.

At the same time, though, the impossibility of the gift does not provide an excuse for sloppy thinking, nor does the gift simply take the place of a theological conception of God as first cause. As Derrida insists, “the effort to think the groundless ground of this quasi-“transcendental illusion” should not be either ... a sort of adoring and faithful abdication, a simple movement of faith in the face of that which exceeds the limits of experience, knowledge, science, economy – and even philosophy.” (GT 30) Quasi-transcendental thinking requires a new way of thinking, perhaps, but not one lacking in rigour. Thus Derrida continues:

On the contrary, it is a matter – desire beyond desire – of responding faithfully but also as rigorously as possible both to the injunction or the order of the *gift* (“give”) as well as to the injunction or the order of meaning (presence, science, knowledge): *Know* still what giving *wants to say*, *know how to give*, know what you want and want to say when you give, know what you intend to give, know

how the gift annuls itself, commit yourself even if commitment is the destruction of the gift by the gift, give economy its chance. (GT 30)

The gift not only gives the possibility of economy, it also gives an injunction. This injunction, this order, must be responded to in order for economy to have its chance, which is to say in order to properly, rigorously think economy. The injunction to this proper thinking of economy is at the same time an ethical injunction. This is the gift *as* ethical injunction, the necessity of thinking economy in terms of the gift. But there is also an ethical injunction *of* the gift, as will be further developed below, an injunction to give.

But what does the gift give? There is already a danger in posing the question in such a way, a danger of falling back into the circular logic of dialectical thinking.³ However, as quasi-transcendental, the gift ultimately gives possibility. It gives a chance. And so the given of the gift is necessarily linked to the injunction of the gift. Derrida writes:

To give time, the day, or life is to give nothing, nothing determinate, even if it is to give the giving of any possible giving, even if it gives the condition of giving. What distinguishes in principle this division from the transcendental division it resembles? One perceives there no longer the sharp line that separates the transcendental from the conditioned, the conditioning from the conditioned, but rather the fold of undecidability that allows all the values to be inverted. The gift of life amounts to the gift of death, the gift of day to the gift of night, and so on. (GT 54)

³ Gasché has written of this danger. “As soon as thinking *thinks* the gift – that is, as soon as it asks *what* the donation of the gift *is*, the energy of the gift has already yielded to the constraint of determining itself as for-itself, and has thus fallen prey to the first and elemental ruse of dialectical reason.” R. Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. P. 195

The quasi-transcendental status, as both condition of possibility and impossibility, of the gift institutes undecidability into what is given. The impossibility inscribed within possibility entails a continual inversion or reversal of condition and conditioned. There are two senses in which we can understand this undecidability, which necessarily implies a double movement. First, undecidability renders impossible calculation; the gift gives nothing determinate from which to calculate but rather an opening, though this is of course not to say that calculation does not take place. Calculation is inevitable precisely because of the opening of the gift. The irruptive force of the gift opens the space of economy in which calculation may take place. But this very opening, as interruption, entails that there can never be a final, assured calculation. Second, undecidability installs possibility, through the opening of the gift, into what is given, it “give(s) the giving of any possible giving.” Rather than a determined thing, the gift gives this possibility, which is to say it gives a chance and also a task. Thus the gift, at the same time that it interrupts calculation, also institutes it as a necessity.

The undecidability inherent in the giving of the gift thus institutes reversibility into the terms at stake. General economy makes possible restricted economy; the gift makes possible an exchange in which the gift is annulled. But in the calculation of a restricted economy, the possibility of giving is once again re-inscribed. From the excess of a calculation, giving can once again take place. This double movement inscribed within the gift is also precisely the ethical injunction of the gift. Were the gift a transcendental notion with a firm boundary between condition and conditioned, there would no longer be the possibility entailed by the undecidable. There would be determination. The movement of economy would already be stifled in a determined

programme. But the possibility given by the gift explodes those determinations, rendering them always already open to chance, and to the possibility of giving again in the very act of calculating. But in opening the possibility of calculation and exchange, the gift also opens the possibility of violent calculation. A certain violence remains irreducible for Derrida. However, this irreducible violence makes the task of avoiding unnecessary violence that much more vital. This unnecessary violence is the violence of a calculation that excludes the thinking of the gift.

2.2: The Gift and General Economy

If the gift constitutes the condition of possibility of economy, its groundless ground, then surely it is necessary to think economy in terms of the gift. The attempt to think a concept while excluding an essential element of its structure must surely be an error that can only result in a proliferation of errors. As quasi-transcendental, the gift has the status of a law.⁴ But even if this necessity is recognized, the question of how to think economy in terms of the gift remains. How does one think the impossible? How does one incorporate a quasi-transcendental analysis into a restricted economy of knowledge? This question has been central to all of Derrida's work. Readers of his essay on Bataille will have already recognized there his most sustained attempt at an answer to this question. Derrida's development of Bataille's notion of general economy constitutes a sort of 'quasi-methodology' for thinking the quasi-transcendental. It will be recalled that general economy attempts to relate the impossible, the quasi-transcendental, to the thinking of restricted economy, in order to think that restricted economy differently.

⁴ See Bennington on this point. He writes, "If one cannot receive this gift as such, no more can one refuse it ... Whence too its character as imperious law." "Derridabase," op cit., p. 191.

Restricted economy must be thought on the basis of general economy in order to give the gift a chance.

Derrida makes a number of indirect references to this idea of general economy in *Given Time*. We will restrict ourselves to one. He writes:

And let us recall here the principle guiding us in this reflection on the gift: To reduce the latter to exchange is quite simply to annul the very possibility of the gift. This annulment is perhaps inevitable or fatal. No doubt its possibility must always remain open. Still one has to deal with this annulment, still one has to render an account of the law of its possibility or its process, of what happens or can not happen in the form of the gift, to the gift and by way of the gift; still one must not treat the question of the thing, of the gift of the thing, and of the thing-gift as a false problem one need merely expose to the fresh air of reason for it to be snuffed out like a candle or, inversely, for it to dissolve in the transparent light of an *Aufklärung* of relational logic. (GT 76)

This principle guiding Derrida's reflection on the gift is precisely that of the writing of general economy. Because the gift necessarily exceeds that which it makes possible, exchange, it cannot be reduced to exchange without being annulled. But, for the same reason, the gift will always be engaged in exchange, and thus the destruction of the gift will always remain inevitable. But, as the writing of general economy demands, an account of this destruction must be given. And this is precisely because it is a structurally necessary part of exchange, because it is presupposed by exchange. The gift is at work in exchange, in its very annulment it is productive of exchange. The gift necessarily becomes exchange, but exchange will always be exceeded by the gift, and this is precisely the double movement inherent in the undecidability of the gift. As a

result, to properly speak of exchange it is necessary to give an account of what is inevitably lost in that exchange, the gift.

The reverse also holds. To speak of the gift it is also necessary to speak of economy. Derrida uncovers this in his reading of Mauss, and also criticizes Levi-Strauss for his criticisms of Mauss on this point in which he banishes the very logic of the gift that Mauss uncovers.⁵ For Derrida, Mauss' great discovery is precisely the incorporation of the gift in exchange. He writes:

Mauss is not at all bothered about speaking of exchanged gifts; he even thinks there is gift only in exchange. However the *syn-*, the *synthesis*, the *system*, or the *syntax* that joins together gift and exchange is temporal – or more precisely temporizing – difference, the delay of the term or the term of delay that dislocates any “at the same time.” The identity between gift and exchange would not be immediate and analytical. It would have in effect the form of an *a priori* synthesis: a synthesis because it requires temporization and *a priori* – in other words necessary - because it is required at the outset by *the thing itself*, namely by the very object of the gift, by the force or the virtue that would be inherent to it. (GT 39-40)

At work in the structure of exchange, infra-structurally, the gift interrupts the stability of that exchange, of the thing. Its force disrupts the presence of the thing. And this is a necessary disruption because the thing is only possible through its relation to the gift.⁶

The thing is an effect of the underlying movement that enables it, yet it is disrupted

⁵ For Derrida's criticisms of Levi-Strauss, see GT 73ff.

⁶ Gasché speaks of this relation in terms of constriction. He writes, “To think the “logic” of (con)striction, therefore, is to think the “logic” that causes any radical Other of the system to become tied up, in a strict movement, with the system. The “logic” of con(striction) itself, since it is responsible for opening the pure gift to the sphere of the circularity of the selfsame, is also the condition of possibility of the categorical or the transcendental.” *Inventions of Difference*, op cit., p. 197.

precisely because as thing it is a restriction of this underlying movement. Exchange restricts the underlying movement of the general economy of the gift.

Exchange economy is thus embedded within the general economy of the gift. But exchange economy then comes to restrict that general economy in a frame. According to Derrida, “Framed, embedded, bordered, de-bordered, overrun, the smaller becomes, metonymically, larger than the larger – that borders and frames it. Such a frame fixes the space and time given, that is, instituted by a convention, a convention which is, by convention, irremovable.” (GT 94) In a double movement, exchange comes to dominate the gift. While the gift will always be subject to return, repetition, and thus the establishment of some minimal identity, its calculated exchange will also always be exploded by change, unpredictable values, and, more generally, the openness of the undecidability inherent in the gift. Hence this domination is precarious, and this precarious nature is due precisely to the excessive nature of the gift that disrupts and destabilizes exchange. Thus Derrida writes:

But this structure is rather a movement that also overruns and de-borders the coded language of rhetoric, here of metonymy as identifiable figure. For the very identity of figures supposes stable relations between the part and the whole. This relative stabilization always appears possible, to be sure, and it allows for rhetoric and the discourse on rhetoric. But as no natural stability is ever given, as there is only *stabilization in process*, that is, essentially precarious, one must presuppose “older” structures, let us not say more originary structures, but more complicated and more unstable ones. (GT 94-5)

The figures at stake in the restricted economy of exchange, the things, are themselves unstable relations given by the general economy of the gift. Their apparent stability is given by the restriction of the underlying movement of the gift, that “older” structure

presupposed by the things themselves. One might already recognize here an echo of the mysterious nature of the commodity, the identity of which is always wrapped up in and destabilized by the process of exchange.⁷ The identity of a thing is thus always already wrapped up in and destabilized, made possible and impossible, by the movement in which it is based and upon which it places its restriction. Identity, then, is relational. It is given in the relation between the restricted and general economy.

It is of course not only the status of objects that is at stake in this movement, in the relation between restricted and general economy. The general movement of the gift touches things, of course, but it also touches everything. The effects of this can perhaps be discerned most clearly in the subject. The subject is also given in the movement of the gift, and its identity is formed in the restriction of that movement, in a necessary calculation. Thus Derrida writes:

But whereas only a problematic of the trace or dissemination can pose the question of the gift, and forgiveness, this does not imply that writing is *generous* or that the writing subject is a *giving subject*. As an identifiable, bordered, posed subject, the one who writes and his or her writing never give anything without calculating, consciously or unconsciously, its reappropriation, its exchange, or its circular return – and by definition this means reappropriation with surplus-value, a certain capitalization. We will even venture to say that this is the very definition of the *subject as such*. One cannot discern the subject except as the subject of this operation of capital. (GT 101)

It is not the subject that gives. Rather, the subject is given in the reappropriation of the general economy of the gift. It is an effect of the general economy of the gift. As an effect of the gift, the identity of the subject is already the destruction of the gift; it is the

⁷ I will take up this line of thought in the final chapter in a reading of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.

calculation of the general movement of the gift into a singular identity. In order for the subject to come into identity, to be given as a framed, bordered singularity, it must reappropriate the movement of the gift. It capitalizes on this movement, profiting from it in its very constitution as a subject, and thus the subject owes itself to this capitalization. The subject is made possible by the movement of the gift, but in becoming a subject this possibility is already restricted, limited to the very identity of the subject.⁸ And in this very restriction, there is no longer a truth to the subject, which is not to say the subject is false, but that the subject is without essential truth. In its emergence as subject it capitalizes on the openness of that which was given, yet a surplus is once again produced in this capitalization. The subject is the product of this capitalization, the reappropriation of the general economy that opens its possibility but once again exceeds it re-inscribing openness in the subject. As such, it takes on a certain counterfeit status implicit in the machinations of capitalization. As Derrida writes describing capital, “Is not the truth of capital, then, inasmuch as it produces interest without labor, by *working all by itself* as we say, counterfeit money? Is there a real difference here between real and counterfeit money once there is capital? And credit?” (GT 124) In its emergence through a capitalization on the general economy, the subject has always already been credited by that general economy. Yet it is produced in an excessive movement which once again re-inscribes future possibility, and hence a certain counterfeit status beyond the distinction of true/false, real/fake.

⁸ In another formulation of this thought, Derrida writes, “the subject and the object are arrested effects of the gift, arrests of the gift.” (GT 24) One might attempt a re-conception of the concept of alienation along similar lines.

This restricted movement of capitalization, but also calculation, is also that which is resisted by the interruption of the gift. As Gasché puts it, “The pure gift, the pure play of the all-burning, cannot not open up the system’s annulations.”⁹ The interruption of the cycle of exchange is precisely the re-emergence of the possibility of giving, the reversibility of condition and conditioned instituted by the undecidability of the gift.

Thus Derrida continues:

But throughout and despite this circulation and this production of surplus-value, despite this labor of the subject, there where there is trace and dissemination, if only there is any, a gift can take place, along with the excessive forgetting or the forgetful excess that, as we insisted earlier, is radically implicated in the gift. The death of the donor agency (and here we are calling death the fatality that destines a gift *not to return* to the donor agency) is not a natural accident external to the donor agency; it is only thinkable on the basis of, setting out from the gift. This does not mean simply that only death or the dead can give. No, only a “life” can give, but a life in which this economy of death presents itself and lets itself be exceeded. Neither death nor immortal life can ever give anything, only a singular *surviving* can give. (GT 101-2)

The gift takes place in the constitution of the subject, even as that constitution annuls the gift. And the general economy of the gift also exceeds the subject, with the result that the subject itself remains precarious, mortal, open to its inevitable death.¹⁰ The capitalization of the subject cannot fully capitalize on the excessive movement of the gift. The excess is always lost to this capitalization. Thus in the destruction of the gift, giving returns in the survival, the excessive essence of the gift. Again, the double movement of the gift is evident here. The surviving subject, then, can only respond to this gift. And while the

⁹ *Inventions of Difference*, p. 195.

¹⁰ For more on this economy, or gift, of death, see Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*. Here Derrida explicitly links the economy of the gift to responsibility.

response will necessarily take the form of a calculation, it is precisely in this very calculated response that a gift can once again take place or occur, beyond the subject, beyond the calculation of exchange.

It might be said that the relation between general and restricted economy almost takes the form of a dialectic. Yet this ‘almost’ is absolutely crucial here. Through its displacement of the opposition between presence and absence, the general economy of the gift has no independent ontological existence, and this despite the fact that it is presupposed by any restricted economy.¹¹ It ‘is’ only in its relation to restricted economy.¹² Yet its excessive essence necessarily interrupts and displaces that restricted economy as well as all the terms of that restricted economy. What remains of the dialectic, then, is its movement. Yet that very movement is extended by the excessive movement of general economy preventing any stable terms and denying any *Aufhebung*. The relation between general and restricted economy, then, annuls rather than provides a *telos* to the movement. It institutes an interminable and undecidable movement, an opening that provides an opportunity for thinking further and differently, and for acting responsibly.

¹¹ Bennington makes this point as well. He writes, “We cannot prevent dialectical thinking from drawing on this, but the fact remains that the dialectico-ontological circle must open onto this pre-ontological gift that it cannot receive as such but must constantly presuppose.” “Derridabase,” p. 191.

¹² Gasché finds a similar relation through a reading of Derrida’s *Glas*. He writes, “This movement is that of the pure gift, the sacrifice, or the putting in play or fire, as was seen with the all-burning. Yet, since this gift has always already opened the exchange – ineluctably, to give is to invite reciprocity – the general economy of the pure gift has always already been restricted “into a circulating economy. The contraction, the economic restriction forms the annulus of the selfsame, of the self-return, of reappropriation. The economy restricts itself; the sacrifice sacrifices itself” (G, p. 244).” *Inventions of Difference*, p. 197.

This movement of destabilization and displacement thus entails a kind of violence, a violence that Derrida considers irreducible. The gift institutes a kind of originary violence. Derrida writes:

Such violence may be considered the very condition of the gift, its constitutive impurity once the gift is engaged in a process of *circulation*, once it is promised to recognition, keeping, indebtedness, credit, but also once it *must be, owes itself to be* excessive and thereby surprising. *The violence appears irreducible, within the circle or outside it, whether it repeats the circle or interrupts it.* An expected, moderate, measured, or measurable gift, a gift proportionate to the benefit or to the effect one expects from it, a reasonable gift ... would no longer be a gift; at most it would be a repayment of credit, the restricted economy of a difference, a calculable temporization or deferral. If it remains pure and without possible reappropriation, the surprise names that instant of madness that tears time apart and interrupts every calculation. (GT 147)

There is a violence in the quasi-transcendental status of the gift, in the necessary destruction of the gift. Yet this very violence also interrupts the violence of calculation and circularity by opening the annulments of the system. The violent interruption institutes the 'instant of madness,' the moment of undecidability. But it is precisely this moment of madness that provides the ethical opportunity to reduce violence, to respond responsibly to the injunction of the gift. It is this violence that constitutes the gift *as* ethical injunction, which can be understood as the necessity of responding to this constitutive impurity. But it also makes possible the ethical injunction *of* the gift. It provides the opportunity to give.

2.3: The Ethical Injunction of the Gift

Through this understanding of the general economy of the gift and its relation to the restricted economy of exchange, it is possible to grasp the ethical injunction of the gift.

As that which opens economy, instituting the undecidable, the necessity of some form of ethics should be easily understood, as it is only on the basis of the necessity for choice inherent in the undecidable that ethics, as opposed to already programmed or determined action, becomes thinkable. But what form should this ethics take? What is the injunction of the gift, what does it not demand but rather call one to? This injunction is perhaps implicit throughout *Given Time*, but Derrida discusses it most directly through his reading of Baudelaire. Derrida's reading of Baudelaire does not provide a simple answer to the question of what is to be done, as this would necessarily run counter to the entirety of Derrida's project, in particular his critique of teleological reasoning. Nevertheless, it does give an indication as to how one might negotiate the demand of the gift, particularly if one keeps in mind the notion of general economy elaborated above.

To begin to proceed, it will be useful to first take a step back. This is because the ethical injunction of the gift is given in its quasi-ontological and quasi-transcendental status, which is to say that it is necessarily linked to the gift as ethical injunction. The gift, as outlined above, takes place between presence and absence. As Derrida writes:

So as not to take over the other, the overtaking by surprise of the pure gift should have the generosity to give nothing that surprises and appears *as gift, nothing that presents itself as present, nothing that is*; it should therefore be surprising enough and so thoroughly made up of a surprise that it is not even a question of getting over it, thus of a surprise surprising enough to let itself be forgotten without delay. (GT 147)

The gift is surprising insofar as it, necessarily, 'is' not, in its not being present. Which is also to say that it is not a determined gift, and thus not a demand for reciprocation. There is, as always in Derrida's thought, already at least the echo of an ethics here, in the very

structure of the gift, as it annuls itself. Just as *différance* does not govern, as gift the gift cannot “take over the other.” The gift does not determine the other. This is not simply fortuitous but structurally necessary, derived from its status as quasi-transcendental rather than transcendental, because to do so would once again entail no longer being a gift but rather a demand or burden. It would already be an exchange of obligations. But, at the same time, the very forgetting of the gift comes to constitute its force as law. Derrida thus continues:

And at stake in this forgetting that carries beyond any present is the gift as remaining without memory, without permanence and consistency, without substance or subsistence; at stake is this rest that is, without being (it), beyond Being, *epekeina tes ousias*. The secret of that about which one cannot speak, but which one can no longer silence. (GT 147)

At stake in the quasi-transcendental status of the gift, then, is precisely its status as law. It cannot be spoken of as pure gift, but this does not suffice to silence its call. The gift is already there in its absence, as condition of possibility of economy. The gift as law has thus always already been affirmed. And it is precisely here that the question of ethics necessarily arises.¹³ And if the gift cannot be spoken of without losing it once again to exchange, yet at the same time cannot be silenced, then a general economy that relates the gift to restricted exchange economy becomes necessary.

The status of the gift as law is confirmed in the ‘empirical’ example as Derrida’s analysis also reveals. Referring to Baudelaire’s story in which two friends are confronted by a poor man, Derrida writes:

¹³ See Bennington on this point. He writes, “And this is where we shall encounter the most serious (“ethical-and-political”) questions: for if the law, given, demands that one say “yes” to it, and if one say “yes” even when saying “no,” then how could one resist or rise up against an iniquitous law?” “Derridabase,” p. 194.

The demand is not only an entreaty; it is also the figure of the law. The two friends are sentenced to pay, they are indebted and guilty as soon as it looks at them, as soon as the thing, the poor thing looks at them without talking to them. They are summoned to pay and to acquit themselves. They must retribute and enter again into the symbolic circle. They are on trial, they appear before the donee's court as before the law. With the result that in the final accounting, at the end of this trial, it will be a question of their own *gratitude* with regard to whoever accepts their damage payment and acquits them of their initial guilt, the guilt of their *situation*, by permitting them to acquit themselves of their debt. (GT 144-5)

One might ask what the two friends are guilty of and indebted to. They have been given nothing, particularly by this poor man, yet they are on trial and summoned to acquit themselves nonetheless in their encounter with this poor man. Yet this is precisely the point. The gift gives nothing, nothing determinate, but it inaugurates an opening, a possibility. The two friends are given their situation, whatever that may be, and from that situation they are given the chance to act ethically. The friends have already said yes to their situation, they have already accepted and affirmed the gift's opening. And it is this affirmation that then summons the friends to trial. The gift gives the friends their situation, and the resulting trial gives them the opportunity to give their gratitude through giving, for example, their time or money.

As is perhaps already becoming clearer, the gift does not provide a simple answer to what is to be done, it does not tell one practically how to give gratitude. Even further, it does not align itself to the rules of reason. As Derrida writes:

The gift would be that which does not obey the principle of reason: It is, it ought to be, it owes itself to be without reason, without wherefore, and without foundation. The gift, if there is any, does not even belong to practical reason. It

should remain a stranger to morality, to the will, perhaps to freedom, at least to that freedom that is associated with the will of a subject. It should remain a stranger to the law or to the “il faut” (you must, you have to) of this practical reason. (GT 156)

The movement of the gift is more primordial than reason, morality, the will, or the subject, all of which remain within the realm of calculation, of restricted economy as could be shown, though this is beyond the present constraints. The gift thus surpasses reason, morality, the will, and the subject. And it is in this surpassing that the force of its ethical injunction arises. Were the gift capable of revealing how to give, it would no longer have the status of quasi-transcendental. It would no longer exhibit the double movement implicit in the undecidability of the gift. The openness instituted by the gift both precludes and demands a calculation, and only from this calculation can giving once again take place. Without this double movement, the gift would no longer institute an opening from which an ethical, as well as a political, response is possible.¹⁴ And through this opening, the injunction of the gift exceeds any demand issuing from calculated reasoning. Derrida writes:

It *should* surpass *duty* itself: duty beyond duty. If you give because you must give, then you no longer give. This does not necessarily mean that *every* law and *every* “you must” is thereby excluded from the gift (if there is any), but you must then think a law or a “you must” that are not determinable by some practical reason. A law or a “you must” without duty, in effect, if that is possible. If one pursues the consequences of these strange propositions, and if one holds that the

¹⁴ Once again, see Bennington on this point. “This “yes” is not simple, which will appear to make our case worse still: we cannot be content simply to note it down as the slightly bizarre name of some condition of possibility, then to forget it and begin just as simply to say “no.” We cannot be content with this on pain of making this thought once more into a banal transcendental philosophy, whereas it is at the price of not having this status that it can precisely lay claim to a political relevance.” “Derridabase,” p. 198-9.

gift shares with the event in general all these conditions (being outside-the-law, unforeseeability, “surprise,” the absence of anticipation or horizon, the excess with regard to all reason, either speculative or practical, and so forth), one would have to conclude that nothing ever happens by reason or by *practical* reason. (GT 156)

The fact that the gift does not give a definitive answer to what is to be done, that it fails to give a duty, does not constitute a failure of the gift. This fact is precisely what constitutes the gift as ‘duty beyond duty.’ The conditions of the gift, as excessive, unforeseeable and without anticipation or horizon, open the space of the ethical-political. This space is opened prior to presence, prior to the ontological subject, and so necessarily prior to any law or morality. The gift opens the absolute demand of the ethical-political, granting it a quasi-transcendental status. There is more than an echo of Levinas to be found here. But the fact that the ethical injunction of the gift takes place prior to the law does not mean that all law is then undermined by the gift. Derrida is insistent on this point. Rather, law must be re-thought in relation to the ‘logic’ of the gift, or rather in relation to the general economy of the gift. Which is to say that the law must be opened up by the excessive demand of the undecidability of the gift.

As Derrida suggests, “an interruption opens, in truth it recalls to its opening the space of an absolute heterogeneity and an infinite secret between the two, *between all the two’s of the world*.” (GT 156) The general economy of the gift, instituted by its interruption, extends the ethical into the political. It opens the face to face encounter, as Levinas would put it, extending it into the more general realm of political economy.

According to Derrida:

As soon as there is monetary sign – and first of all sign – that is, difference and credit, the *oikos* is opened and cannot dominate its limit. On the threshold of

itself, the family no longer knows its bounds. This is at the same time its originary ruin and the chance for any kind of hospitality. It is, like counterfeit money, the chance for the gift itself. The chance of the event. Nothing can happen without the family and without economy, to be sure, but neither can anything happen in the family: in the family, that is, in the sealed enclosure, which is moreover unimaginable, of the restricted, absolutely restricted economy, without the least chrematistic vertigo. (GT 158-9)

In making economy possible, the gift dissolves the limits of the family. It denies the possibility of a closed-off, bounded, self-sufficient family or subject. In so doing, it links the family, necessarily, to what is beyond the family, to the entirety of the social world. The restricted economy of exchange is opened and contaminated by the general economy of the gift. But this contamination, this ruining of the family through the dissolution of its limits, is also the very possibility of the family. Only through the opening of the gift, always already affirmed, can the family come to exist in the first place. Further, this contamination is precisely the condition for and injunction to ethical and political responsibility. It is the chance for hospitality. It is only because the home is not bounded that the other can be taken in and welcomed. It is the very condition for and possibility of responsibility, for the ethical injunction to give of the gift.¹⁵

¹⁵ Gasché sums all of this up well in a formulation that will guide what follows. He writes, “But what the yes-laughter of the light affirmation requests is a responsible response, a response that affirms the unconditionality of the gift, as well as the singularity of its occurring in a singular event. ... In short, the light affirmation of yes-laughter affirms infinite responsibility, one that remains suspended from the Other, and that does not suffer any terminal fulfillment. ... A response that truly addresses the Other cannot have the security, the certainty, of being an unconditional affirmation. ... The two yeses *must* contaminate themselves precisely because what seems to be a threat is also an opportunity, a chance, the only chance of a responsible response.” Gasché, *Inventions of Difference*, p. 248. For another useful account of the gift, see Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, pps. 140-51.

This possibility of responsibility is the crucial element at work in Derrida's analysis of Baudelaire. Baudelaire's story ends with the narrator condemning his friend for the "evil out of stupidity" of his calculation in giving a counterfeit coin to the poor man. As Derrida argues, the narrator's condemnation is founded in the originary debt and opportunity for responsibility to that debt instituted by the gift. The friend of the narrator, Derrida insists, is responsible for his debt to the gift. "This man would be *responsible* for his irresponsibility and for not yet being adult although he is or already can be adult." (GT 168) The opening instituted by the gift gives this responsibility. As undecidable, it is always possible to respond irresponsibly. But the obligation to the opportunity to respond responsibly remains. Given his situation, the friend could have responded responsibly. Derrida writes:

However cynical or calculating he might have been in seeking the economical compromise, however deceitful, tricky, or semi-clever, however reprehensible and criminal his calculation might have been, it would have been *almost* forgivable if the friend had at least done what he could, what he *ought to have been able to* or *could have ought to* in order to have an awareness and a comprehension of it: therefore, already the beginning of remorse. (GT 168)

Once again, there 'is' no pure gift. The gift is always already engaged in that which it opens up, in calculated exchange economy. Thus the ethical injunction of the gift cannot be naively conceived as the demand to give a pure gift, as this would be a necessarily impossible demand. Yet, the impossibility of the demand does not mean that it is no longer something to be striven for. And so, at the practical level, it remains possible and necessary to calculate in relation to the possibility of giving that is opened by the

excessive nature of the gift.¹⁶ The irresponsibility for which the friend is responsible is given by that which exceeds his calculation. It is given in his failure to do what he could have done, that which is made possible by his given situation.

That which is demanded by the ethical injunction of the gift is a general economy that relates the possibility opened by the gift to its necessary annulment in calculated exchange economy. If the gift remains desirable, as Derrida maintains, despite the act of giving being necessarily impure, then perhaps what is demanded by the gift is not necessarily to give, but rather to maintain that which is given in the gift. And the gift gives openness; it gives possibility. The injunction of the gift is to give what one can so as to keep the possibility of giving open. It is to calculate in the knowledge that the very possibility of calculation is given by the gift, in the excessive opening instituted by the gift. One must calculate in a way that is worthy of this originary gift of possibility. It is precisely this that is ignored in the reprehensible calculations of the friend in Baudelaire's story. Thus Derrida writes:

The stupid perversion of the friend, the "evil out of stupidity," did not consist in *doing evil* or in not understanding, but in doing evil while not doing all he ought to have been able to do in order to understand the evil he was doing, but that he was doing by not doing everything that he ought to have been able to do in order

¹⁶ It is at this point that my account differs from those offered by Gasché and Caputo. Gasché writes that the gift, "demands a response free of all calculation, one that lets go, absolutely, of all acts of reckoning and all desire for reappropriation." *Inventions of Difference*, p. 248. Similarly, Caputo writes, "let us be driven by, impelled by, set into motion by, impassioned by this impossible desire, this desire for the impossible gift, for the impossible." *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 145. While this interpretation remains tempting, it would seem to be precluded by Derrida's consistent insistence that we must calculate. Caputo, in particular, does recognize the necessity of this double movement, but gives little if any indication as to how this double movement is to be thought. What I have been arguing here throughout, is that the strategy of a general economy that relates calculation to the gift is better able to make sense of this double movement of gift and calculation by providing a way of thinking the double movement.

to understand the evil he was doing, but that he was doing by that very fact. In this circle ... it is finally for his failure to honor the contract that bound him to the gift of nature that the friend is accused. Nature made him the gift, as it does to everyone, in the present or on credit, of a present: the capital of a faculty of understanding. It thus put him in debt with true money, a natural and therefore non-monetary money which is absolutely originary and authentic. The friend's fault, his irreparable fault called "evil out of stupidity," is to have shown that he was not worthy of the gift that nature had given him: He has failed to honor the contract binding him naturally to nature; he has not acquitted himself of his debt – of a natural debt, thus a debt without debt or an infinite debt. (GT 169)

The friend, like everyone, is bound to the gift of life that he has been given.¹⁷ This is the originary gift to which we are all responsible and indebted. The debt is originary, as prior to our actions we are indebted to the gift that makes them possible. As a result, we are always already on trial, not for a crime that we have committed and are guilty of, but rather for a crime to which we owe ourselves and to which we always already respond. We are thus on trial for the way we respond to what we have been given: the ethical injunction to give of the gift consists in honouring this very possibility to respond responsibly.

¹⁷ This is, however, not a return to a metaphysical notion of nature, as for Derrida the concept of nature is also given by the quasi-transcendental movement of the gift. He writes, "There is no nature, only effects of nature: denaturation or naturalization. Nature, the meaning of nature, is reconstituted after the fact on the basis of a simulacrum (for example, literature) that it is thought to cause." (GT 170)

Here, however, in this book, a new beginning is posited, and the unlost heritage takes possession of itself; that glow deep inside, over there, is no cowardly “as if,” no pointless commentary; rather, what rises above all the masquerades and the expired civilizations is the one, the eternal goal, the one presentiment, the one conscience, the one salvation: rises from our hearts, unbroken in spite of everything, from the deepest part, that is, the realest part of our waking dreams: that is, from the last thing remaining to us, the only thing worthy to remain.

-Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*

Chapter 3: General Economy and the Hauntological Critique of Capitalism

As Hamlet says, the time is out of joint. This thought can no doubt be taken further, one can *make* a great deal of it, as Derrida himself does, revealing that the movement of *différance* leaves time always already out of joint. But to say this, the time is out of joint, is not necessarily to say that *this* time is any less out of joint, nor that nothing can be done or said about *this* time, that there is no longer any principle from which this time can be thought in order to change or even improve it. One could perhaps read the entirety of Derrida’s work with this purpose in mind. This reading, perhaps, would explain a comment by Derrida in his essay, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’” There he writes, “Nothing seems to me less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal.”¹ If this emancipatory ideal is anything but outdated for Derrida, then surely it is precisely because not only is time itself out of joint, but also *this* time is already out of joint. It is because there is something in *this* time, that is not irreducible, from which emancipation is possible.

But what is this emancipatory ideal according to Derrida? Or, perhaps more importantly, what must we be emancipated from? Is it possible to derive from Derrida’s work, in particular his reading of quasi-transcendental structures in a general economy, a

¹ J. Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’” In *Cardozo Law Review* 11:5-6, 1990. P. 971. Hereafter cited as FL. In all citations that follow, italics are in the original unless otherwise noted.

critique of capitalism? To answer these questions, an account of Derrida's relation to Marx is perhaps necessary, through a reading of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*,² a book long-awaited by many. This wait was disappointing for some due to the apparent absence of any explicit critique of capitalism. One might suggest that this is due to the fact that Derrida himself fails to provide this critique. Yet this runs counter to what Derrida has said. Elsewhere, speaking of his work on Marx, Derrida says, "Whatever questions I must continue to ask myself on this subject, my respect for the communist 'idea' is therefore intact (I indicate this respect in *Specters of Marx* with the necessity of an untiring deconstructive critique of capitalistic logic)."³ Thus, to already answer our question, Derrida's work does include a critique of capitalism, in fact an untiring one. However, if Derrida's respect for the communist 'idea', and the 'spirit of Marx', is obvious and without question, the untiring critique of capitalism is less clear, and so the objection to the lack of a critical analysis of capitalism can *almost* be leveled at Derrida. Perhaps this is because it is taken as a given. But this very gesture carries the danger of forgetting the critique, and, as a result, the very injunction to resist capitalism.⁴

² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kanuf. New York: Routledge, 1994. Hereafter cited as SM.

³ J. Derrida and Elisabeth Roudninesco, *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue*. Trans. Jeff Fort. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 83.

⁴ This point would constitute my primary objection to the otherwise admirable work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, a work to which Derrida himself refers for its deconstructive logic of hegemony. There they assert, "Every project for radical democracy necessarily includes, as we have said, the socialist dimension – that is to say, the abolition of capitalist relations of production; but it rejects the idea that from this abolition there necessarily follows the elimination of the other inequalities." [*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985, p. 192] Although I do not disagree with the second part of this claim, it is difficult to find any sustained justification in this text for their insistence on the necessity to abolish capitalist relations of production. Would not the

This forgetting must be avoided. It remains a necessary and vital task, then, to continue the untiring, which is to say interminable, “deconstructive critique of capitalistic logic” that Derrida insists on. Readers of Derrida might find “deconstructive critique” an odd phrase, yet it captures precisely the necessary double movement that Derrida has insisted on since his early work on Bataille and the writing of *general economy*. It implies the interminable deconstruction of the limits of concepts and the re-deployment of these concepts, thought differently, in a critical thought aimed at opening future possibility, towards the opening instituted by the general economy of the gift. This critical thought is necessarily ethical and political. The opening towards future possibility is surely at least part of what remains relevant to Derrida in the emancipatory ideal. The “critique” of capitalistic logic, which will be defined below, takes place within but also beyond, in the exceeding of, Derrida’s deconstruction of Marx. To do justice to this excess, one might once again apply Derrida’s earlier notion of general economy to the quasi-transcendental notion of hauntology developed in *Specters of Marx*, and towards the thinking of the gift that Derrida here explicitly links to the possibility of justice. This approach, as will be seen, is already called for and justified by Derrida himself. Derrida’s critique of the logic of capitalism, as developed in his deconstruction of Marx’s analysis of the commodity-form, consists precisely in the understanding of capitalism as a restricted economy, and as such dependent upon and opened up by the general economy of the gift, that profits from the closure of the opening instituted by the hauntological, and, in so doing, restricts the possibility of justice, which, to have any chance, demands resistance to and struggle against capitalism.

failure to provide this in relation to the new logic of hegemony they outline undermine the status of this ‘necessity’? Does it not lessen the urgency?

3.1: Hauntology

In his book on Marx, Derrida introduces the quasi-transcendental of hauntology in order to advance and, as he himself claims, radicalize Marx's critique. The status of the quasi-transcendental should, at this point, be well established. Nonetheless, it will be necessary to at least give a sketch of what Derrida calls hauntology, as the 'structure' of hauntology will be at stake in the critique that hauntology makes possible. The notion of hauntology is derived from Derrida's critique of Marx. It is the figure of the specter that haunts Marx's ontology, as its quasi-transcendental movement. Thus Derrida writes,

This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the "to be," assuming that it is a matter of Being in the "to be or not to be," but nothing is less certain). It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. It would *comprehend* them, but incomprehensibly. (SM 10)

The logic of haunting, of the ghost, the specter, is larger and more powerful than ontology, it exceeds it, just as *différance* exceeds ontology. It comprehends, in the sense of grasping and including, opening the space for eschatology and teleology. It grasps and includes teleology and eschatology, but it also exceeds both, comprehending them incomprehensibly. This logic, then, like that of *différance* and the gift, exceeds ontology in a movement that at the same time includes it.

If the logic of the specter comprehends ontology, it is because it precedes that ontology. The specter is primary. According to Derrida, "What manifests itself in the first place is a specter, this first paternal character, as powerful as it is unreal, a hallucination or simulacrum that is virtually more actual than what is so blithely called a

living presence.” (SM 12-13) Prior to any living presence, before any actual thing, there is the specter. Through its power and in its primacy, it blurs the lines between the virtual and the actual, the material and the ideal. These seemingly opposed terms are in fact entangled, one co-implicated in the other. Without this co-implication, or contamination, neither of the terms would be possible. But as a result of this contamination, these terms are also necessarily dis-jointed. The contamination of the ideal within the material prevents the material from ever being fully material, and the same holds for the ideal.

It is not, however, only a matter of primacy. The spectral is not simply an originary cause of what comes to constitute living presence. The specter is not the Holy Ghost. Rather, its movement traverses the living presence, always haunting it. As Derrida insists, it is “[a] question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*.” (SM11) The specter returns. It is always there, without ever being ‘present’, inhabiting and displacing the present. In its repetition, the specter marks the present with the past, but also with the future in which the specter will once again return.

It is this logic of the ghost that provides Derrida with the term hauntology. Hauntology is, like a ghost, beyond the opposition of presence and absence, and hence otherwise than ontology. The logic of the specter thus cannot be comprehended by any thinking that maintains ontological terms. Instead, for Derrida hauntology names the very medium of mediation. He writes:

And if this important frontier [between public and private] is being displaced, it is because the medium in which it is instituted, namely, the medium of the media themselves ... this element itself is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of

beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call, to save time and space rather than just to make up a word, *hauntology*. We will take this category to be irreducible, and first of all to everything it makes possible: ontology, theology, positive or negative onto-theology. (SM 50-1)

Hauntology mediates, to name a couple of examples, the public and private, the ideal and the material, bringing them into relation even prior to, as well as in order to, bringing them into being. It is, then, in its ‘essence’, relational, and it is this relational ‘essence’ that renders it otherwise than ontology. It is precisely through this status as otherwise than ontology that hauntology makes ontology possible. Beyond a simple opposition, not simply absent from what is present, hauntology traverses the ontological, opening it to unpredictability and interminability. It is the hauntological, then, that actually conditions the ontological. As Derrida here asserts, hauntology makes possible ontology. But as otherwise than ontology, hauntology necessarily escapes presence. Its movement thus operates at the level of a general economy that relates this movement to the ontological.

The logic of the ghost is, like the sovereignty lost to Hegelian lordship, beyond dialectical logic. It therefore gives an account of the movement of excess that dialectics loses in its circulation of sublated meanings. Derrida writes,

If we have been insisting so much since the beginning on the logic of the ghost, it is because it points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living – or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence). This logic of effectivity or actuality seems to be of a limited pertinence. The limit, to be sure, is not new; it has always been leaving its mark on anti-Marxist idealism as well as on “dialectical materialism.” (SM 63)

Hauntology provides a way of thinking that is able to see the movement of ideality within actuality. The limited pertinence of the logic of effectivity, which Derrida here seems to be equating to a kind of vulgar materialism that would give an account of everything in terms of actuality or presence, is a result of the exclusion of ideality from it, thus rendering it a restricted economy. The logic of the ghost exceeds this restriction, and therefore operates on the level of general economy. It is thus able to think the surplus of the material that nonetheless traverses the material. This movement is lost to dialectical logic, despite its marking and limiting of that very logic. And it is precisely this loss that is central to Derrida's critique of Hegel in the early essay on Bataille, in which he asserts that Hegel's dialectic is restricted to circulation. The same exceeding movement of the logic of the ghost, of hauntology, will once again provide Derrida with the means to critique the restricted economy of capitalism.

3.2: Hauntological Critique

The third chapter of *Specters of Marx*, "Wears and Tears (Tableau of an Ageless World)," is explicitly devoted to the dis-jointedness of *this* time, the time of neo-liberalism and free market capitalism. And the dis-jointedness of *this* time clearly calls for and demands both a critical account and an injunction to act, now, precisely. Derrida writes:

For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. ... [L]et us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many

men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth. (SM 85)⁵

One could easily multiply this discussion interminably. And while this discussion is of utter importance and so must be multiplied, it is at the same time vital to reply to the call to act, and so a double movement is necessary here. Thus in his most schematic moment, Derrida lists what he calls ten “plagues of the ‘new world order’.” (SM 81ff.) An orthodox Marxist would no doubt reduce all these plagues to one determinate cause, that of capitalism. Derrida would surely resist this restrictive move. But, nevertheless, general economy is certainly central to all of these plagues, and one could certainly illuminate them all in their singular relation to a certain excessive movement.⁶

Furthermore, Derrida himself admits a certain hegemony of capital. He writes,

One may still find inspiration in the Marxist “spirit” to criticize the presumed autonomy of the juridical and to denounce endlessly the *de facto* take-over of international authorities by powerful Nation-States, by concentrations of technological capital, symbolic capital, and financial capital, of State capital and private capital. (SM 85)

This *de facto* take-over is already sufficient to call for a critique of the irreducible antagonisms of capitalism. Even if a reductive economic determinism must be avoided,

⁵ Suffice it to say, this picture has not improved in the more than a decade since the publication of *Specters of Marx*.

⁶ Those more directly linked to capitalism, “unemployment,” “exclusion of [the] homeless,” “the ruthless economic war,” “the contradictions in the concept, norms, and reality of the free market,” “the foreign debt,” “the arms industry” and the “spread of nuclear weapons,” and “capitalist phantom-States that are the mafia and the drug cartels,” could certainly be linked to the capitalistic logic whose critique will be pursued here, though to do so explicitly would be to explode the limits of this chapter. The “inter-ethnic wars” would certainly be subject to Derrida’s deconstruction of identity and the subject. Finally, the “present state of international law” would require a consideration of Derrida’s thought on justice.

the ten plagues and the hegemony of capitalism still necessitate a critique of capitalism. And as Derrida's comment in *For What Tomorrow*, quoted above, indicates, this deconstructive critique is already to be found in Derrida's deconstruction of Marx.

Before unpacking what is entailed by a deconstructive critique, it is first necessary to attempt to understand what capitalism might mean for Derrida. Derrida insists on the plurality of capitalisms. He writes, "there is no longer, there never was just capital, nor capitalism in the singular, but capitalisms plural – whether State of private, real or symbolic, always linked to spectral forces – or rather *capitalizations* whose antagonisms are irreducible." (SM 59) This plurality of capitalisms, however, does not in any way prevent one from critiquing that which links these plural capitalisms. What links them, according to Derrida here, is their relation to spectrality. This can come as no surprise considering the primacy of the spectral. Capitalism is necessarily linked to this primal spectrality, as it is only possible as restricted economy on the basis of general economy. Capitalism is linked to and dependent upon a more primary capitalization, but capitalization is not capitalism.⁷ Capitalization is, instead, a more primary movement in which the underlying general economy is necessarily restricted. This necessary restriction does entail a certain irreducible antagonism, but, rather than justifying oppression, it institutes an opening into the very structure of that restriction. It is synonymous with what Derrida elsewhere calls *exappropriation*. Concerning this term, Derrida writes:

⁷ Derrida had already introduced this term in *Given Time*, (GT 101) in a passage concerning the subject analyzed in the last chapter. As we saw there, the subject is only possible on the basis of this irreducible capitalization. The term is thus broader than capitalism.

What we have said here or elsewhere about *exappropriation* (the radical contradiction of all “capital,” of all property or appropriation, as well as all the concepts that depend on it, beginning with that of free subjectivity, thus of emancipation as ordered by these concepts) does not justify any bondage. It is, if we may say so, exactly the opposite. Servitude binds (itself) to appropriation. (SM 90)

Here Derrida clearly distinguishes exappropriation from capital, as well as from property. This distinction, or rather as he puts it, “the radical contradiction” is given in the excessive movement of exappropriation, and it is precisely this excess that ultimately undermines capital and property. And exappropriation does not justify bondage. Rather, in its excessive movement, as was already evident in *Given Time* concerning capitalization, exappropriation produces a surplus that renders the subject open to possibility. If capital and property are the radical contradiction of exappropriation, it is precisely because capital and property seek to close, to restrict, this opening in its indefatigable quest for profit. Capitalism puts spectrality in the service of profit. In this lies the “capitalistic logic” that Derrida critiques, a logic that will be discussed further shortly, as it emerges through Derrida’s discussion of Marx’s analysis of the commodity form.

First, though, it will be necessary to further understand what a “deconstructive critique” might entail. In a move immediately reminiscent of his treatment of the writing of general economy in his essay on Bataille, Derrida insists on a “*double interpretation*” (SM 81) of the ten plagues of the new world order. The first, which he describes as both “classical and paradoxical,” is in relation to an ideal that regulates our judgment of empirical realities. This interpretation consists in an infinite process of reducing the gap

between the ideal and reality. As Derrida suggests, “the value and the obviousness of the ideal would not be compromised, intrinsically, by the historical inadequation of empirical realities.” (SM 86) The Marxist critique of capitalism in terms of the ideal principle of, for example, the classless society would, in this interpretation, remain of critical importance. Regardless of whether or not it actually exists empirically, it remains relevant as a force to change empirical reality.

The second interpretation, according to Derrida, would “obey another logic.” This other logic would serve to question the regulative ideal of the first interpretation. As Derrida puts it, “beyond the ‘facts,’ beyond the supposed ‘empirical evidence,’ beyond all that is inadequate to the ideal, it would be a question of putting into question again, in certain of its essential predicates, the very concept of the said ideal.” (SM 86-7) Thus the example of the Marxist concept of the classless society would be subjected to question, precisely in order to open it up, to de-limit it. The classless society, then, would ultimately be de-ontologized, the possibility of its ever coming into presence would be infinitely deferred. In so doing, the teleological structure of the regulative ideal would be broken open, and therefore the ethico-political injunction of the ideal would remain indefinitely.⁸

Derrida insists that these two interpretations, though seemingly in opposition to each other, must be thought together. They must be intertwined in and implicated with each other in a “re-evaluated strategy.” (SM 87) This strategy is similar to that already found in the writing of general economy, in which the old concepts of restricted

⁸ For a further discussion of Derrida’s critique of teleology and the double movement in Marx, see M. Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory. History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2005.

economies remain, but remain differently. And this strategy is necessary for political reasons. “Without this strategy, each of the two reasons could lead back to the worst ... to a sort of fatalist idealism or abstract and dogmatic eschatology in the face of the world’s evil.” (SM 87) This strategy is necessary to prevent the inherent danger in each of the interpretations considered on their own. It would prevent, in the first interpretation, the false security of proclaiming the end to history or politics and in so doing covering up atrocities, as well as preventing atrocities from being committed in the very name of the ideal itself, in the march towards the final, eschatological achievement of that ideal. Furthermore, it would undermine the metaphysical claims of the regulative ideal. But it would also prevent the danger inherent in the second interpretation, that of a kind of nihilism that ends in destroying the very possibility of the ethico-political.⁹ And so this strategy is necessary in order to radicalize Marx’s critique of capitalism, as Derrida attempts to do.

In order to begin to illustrate how the thinking of hauntology provides a more radical critique of capitalism, it will be helpful to look at Derrida’s discussion of the commodity-form,¹⁰ as presented by Marx in *Capital Volume I*. Marx’s discussion here

⁹ This strategy is thus similar to that discussed in the preceding chapter on the gift. It will be recalled, that the ethical injunction of the gift must be thought together with the necessity to calculate, and that this strategy of general economy does not necessitate that one give, but rather that one calculate in such a way as to maintain the possibility of giving, a point to which I will return at the end of this chapter.

¹⁰ What follows, then, will necessarily be a restricted account of Derrida’s work on Marx. For a useful collection of essays on *Specters of Marx*, including Derrida’s own response to these essays, see Sprinker, Michael (Ed.) *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*. London: Verso, 1999. For a discussion of Derrida’s relation to Marx written before *Specters of Marx*, see Ryan, M. *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. For a more recent discussion, see Fritsch, M. *The Promise of Memory*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2005.

actually shares a great deal with Derrida's work, perhaps even to the extent of being considered proto-deconstructive. As Derrida points out, Marx uncovers what is hidden in the commodity form, revealing that, "The commodity is even very complicated; it is blurred, tangled, paralyzing, aporetic, perhaps undecidable." (SM 150) Furthermore, in the commodity "One touches there on what one does not touch, one feels there where one does not feel, one even suffers there where suffering does not take place, when at least it does not take place where one suffers." (SM 151) Thus Marx is, at least to a certain extent, already aware of the spectral quality of the commodity-form. And, again like Marx, Derrida recognizes the importance of the social here. For Derrida, "the specter is social, it is even engaged in competition or in a war as soon as it makes its first apparition. Otherwise neither *socius*, nor conflict, nor desire, nor love, nor peace would be tenable." (SM 151) For Marx, the mystical nature of the commodity-form is located in its essence as social relation. And the same is the case for Derrida, though with certain qualifications that will be discussed shortly. The specter is social; its very 'essence' is relational.

Derrida departs from Marx, however, precisely where it is a question of the material thing, where Marx limits the extent of the social relation. He departs from Marx precisely at the point at which Marx relies on a pre-deconstructive ontology. For Marx, as evident in the well-known example of the table that Derrida analyses, the material thing becomes spectral only at the point at which it enters into exchange. But, for Derrida, as the notion of hauntology already suggests, this spectrality is always already present in the material thing. As Derrida writes, "The commodity thus haunts the thing, its specter is at work in use-value." (SM 151) Marx restricts his recognition of the

spectral quality of the commodity to its exchange-value. Yet the table, the material thing, is already haunted by its immateriality even before it is restricted within an exchange economy. Which it to say that the material thing is already relational, its meaning harbours within it relational possibility, as commodity in exchange, for example, but also just as possibly as a work of art or a piece of garbage.

Derrida thus departs from Marx precisely where Marx remains within the realm of ontology. According to Derrida, Marx seems to want to maintain a purity of use-value. It is this use-value in which the ‘truth’ of the ‘value’ of the thing lies for Marx. It is where the thing itself is present to itself. For Derrida, on the contrary, use-value is itself already spectral, which is to say, still a relational characteristic. The mystical nature of the commodity-form does not derive from the distortion retroactively perpetuated by exchange upon a given use-value. Derrida writes,

For if no use-value can *in itself* produce this mysticity or this spectral effect of the commodity, and if the secret is at the same time profound and superficial, opaque and transparent, a secret that is all the more secret in that no substantial essence hides behind it, it is because the effect is born of a *relation* (ference, difference, reference, and difference), as double relation, one should say as double social bond. (SM 154)

The use-value of a thing, even prior to taking on the commodity-form, is itself already a social relation, and hence, for Derrida, already constituted by the movement of *différance* or spectrality. Relation is always already a differential relation. There is, however, a double aspect of this social relation that is vital to Derrida’s analysis. A social relation, and hence spectrality, binds both men to each other, and men to themselves, in the sense of giving men their meaning as men. And this same double social bond is at work in the

commodity-form as well. As commodity it is a social relation, a relation between commodities, but also in its identity as a thing with a use it is already a relation, it is that thing only as a result of its being used, in relation to that use.

Derrida, of course, does not doubt the fact that an object can have a use, nor that a distinction between use-value and exchange-value can be a productive distinction, but only if it is re-thought through a strategy of general economy that, again in a necessarily double movement, opens the concepts to spectrality. The concept of use-value could then still serve as a kind of limit concept within a critical thought. There remains a functional use to use-value, so long as it is thought differently. But the purity of this concept of use-value is not guaranteed, precisely because the process of spectralization has always already begun. And thus Derrida writes,

If this purity is not guaranteed, then one would have to say that the phantasmagoria began before the said exchange-value, at the threshold of the value of value in general, or that the commodity-form began before the commodity-form, itself before itself. The said use-value of the said ordinary sensuous thing ... must indeed have at least promised it to iterability, to substitution, to exchange, to value; it must have made a start, however minimal it may have been, on an idealization that permits one to identify it as the same throughout possible repetitions, and so forth. Just as there is no pure use, there is no *use-value* which the possibility of exchange and commerce ... has not in advance inscribed in an *out-of-use* – an excessive signification that cannot be reduced to the useless. (SM 160)

The impurity of use-value, as an ontological concept, is already entailed by the primacy of spectrality. The phantasmagoria, which is to say capitalization or exappropriation, has always already begun. Use-value is inscribed within and exceeded by a spectrality that occludes the purity of that use-value, and hence its status as ontological essence. Its

meaning as use-value is dependent upon its being used, and hence always carries within it the possibility of not being used or used differently. Again, the double relation is at stake here. The use of a thing is found not in the thing itself, but rather in the relation of that thing to another thing that uses it. And so that use-value is not pure, not identical to itself, but is already relational and so necessarily spectral.

It is perhaps important to point out that Derrida is not here undermining Marx's critique, at least not all of it, and certainly not its spirit. Instead, he is extending it, precisely by locating its very possibility in the logic of spectrality. It is in fact spectrality, not an ontological essence, that allows for the corruption of capitalist exchange. Derrida writes,

In its originary iterability, a use-value is in advance promised, promised to exchange and beyond exchange. It is in advance thrown onto the market of equivalences. This is not simply a bad thing, even if the use-value is always *at risk* of losing its soul in the commodity. ... But one must say that if the commodity corrupts (art, philosophy, religion, morality, law, when their works become market values), it is because the becoming-commodity already attested to the value it puts in danger. (SM 162)

It is the hauntological that provides a quasi-grounding of a "critique" of capitalism, understood in terms of the double movement already discussed. The possibility of corruption¹¹, of the commodity and as commodity, is tied to spectrality. But if, in its

¹¹ It is no doubt always important to pay attention to Derrida's choice of words. The terms "corrupt," "at risk," and "danger" quite clearly imply a certain ethical if not moral element, and at least serve to call one to attention. Caputo makes a similar point when he writes, "One need not be a master hermeneut to have noticed the massively political tone of such vintage Derridean terms as 'exclusion,' 'marginalization,' 'disruption,' 'transgression,' 'outlaw,' 'reversal,' and 'displacement.' It takes no great insight to see in Derrida a non-Marxist or post-Marxist left intellectual who stayed clear of the dogmatism of the Church of Latter-Day Gallic Communists." *Deconstruction in a*

irreducible spectrality, a commodity has no essence, then perhaps corruption must here be understood differently as well. The corruption at stake here surely lies in the restriction inherent in capitalism, in its putting an irreducible opening in the service of profit. And so hauntology can be read in terms of an ethical injunction to responsibly avoid that corruption. It is the indeterminate nature of the social relation rather than an essence that makes possible exploitation in the first place. And it is precisely capitalism as a restricted economy that makes capitalism remain fundamentally exploitative, as it seeks to violently profit through a calculated restriction of a movement that is necessarily open.

This restriction can be seen more clearly in what Derrida says of the “capital contradiction.” This capital contradiction, furthermore, gives a clearer understanding of what Derrida might mean by capitalistic logic. He writes,

The capital contradiction does not have to do simply with the incredible conjunction of the sensuous and the supersensible in the same Thing; it is the contradiction of *automatic autonomy*, mechanical freedom, technical life. Like every thing, from the moment it comes onto the stage of a market, the table resembles a prosthesis of itself. Autonomy *and* automatism, *but* automatism of this wooden table that spontaneously puts itself into motion, to be sure, and seems thus to animate, animalize, spiritualize, *spiritize* itself, but while remaining an artifactual body, a sort of automaton, a puppet, a stiff and mechanical doll whose dance obeys the technical rigidity of a program. (SM 153)

What is at stake in the contradiction of capital, in the inherent antagonism of its logic, is not just the spectrality of the thing, the “conjunction of the sensuous and the supersensible.” Neither is it the autonomy of the thing. Instead, it is the way in which that autonomy becomes automatic, ultimately consisting in autonomism. The commodity

Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida, New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, p. 126.

becomes an automatic automaton. As automatic automaton, the undecidability of the spectrality of the thing, its potentiality or possibility, is lost. The very life of the thing, which is in fact derived from its spectrality, is sucked away by the restrictive system of exchange, within “the technical rigidity of a program.” Thus if Marx is ultimately guilty of wanting to do away with the spectral, as Derrida suggests, this is certainly also true of capitalism, which also ultimately chases away the spectral movement by restricting it within a rigid system of exchange. It might be objected that Derrida himself here seems to suggest that it is exchange that spiritizes and spectralizes. But this objection misses a crucial point, that Derrida here says that exchange “seems thus to animate.” This seeming spiritizing movement in market exchange is, as Derrida’s reading of the primacy of the spectral would suggest, just that: a seeming phenomenon. It is not exchange that is originary, but rather spectral, differential relation. The spectrality of the thing is prior to exchange, and it is capitalism that seeks to profit from this spectrality by closing it off within a market value.

Furthermore, the double movement of the “critique” of capitalism derived from hauntology is itself interminable and always at stake. As Derrida’s spectral logic suggests, “At bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back.” (SM 39) The spectral is at bottom the future; it is possibility. Specters return in the future, and this return increases the stakes of responsibility, giving more force to the injunction. The specter of communism, Derrida reminds us, is also always to come, in the future. And so those who want to bury Marx’s ghost assert, “In the future, we hear everywhere today, it must not re-incarnate itself; it must not be allowed to come back since it is past.” (SM 39) But the very logic of the

ghost entails that its coming cannot be controlled. The ghost(s) of the past *will* return. The violence of capitalist primitive accumulation remains within the current existing capitalist relations of production. And so the ethical injunction of the ‘now’ is magnified, as what happens now will also return, it will be transmitted into the future that is yet to come. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, the barbarism of the past taints the future through its transmission.¹² And so the ethical injunction of hauntology, to resist if not avoid this barbarism precisely because it will return, is intensified by the hauntological structure of iterability.

Derrida continuously insists that this critique is not a critique of what he calls the spirit of Marx, nor is it a critique of critique. Rather it is “a deconstruction of the critical limits, the reassuring limits that guarantee the necessary and legitimate exercise of critical questioning.” (SM 163) But this deconstruction of the critical limits of Marx’s concepts does not result in the impossibility of critical thought. Instead, it calls for vigilance and interminability to “critical” thought, the double movement of the strategy of general economy already discussed in terms of Derrida’s double interpretation of the ten plagues of the new world order. Derrida’s questioning of the ontological status of Marx’s critique of capitalism ...

... does not necessarily entail a general phantasmagorization in which everything would indifferently become commodity, in an equivalence of prices. All the more so in that, as we have suggested here and there, the concept of commodity-form or of exchange-value sees itself affected by the same overflowing contamination. If

¹² “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. Trans. H. Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968, p.256. With this thought in mind, one might re-read Marx’s chapter on primitive accumulation in *Capital*. For a discussion of this, as well as the relevance of Benjamin’s thought to Derrida’s critique of Marx, see M. Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory*.

capitalization has no rigorous limit, it is also because it comes itself to be exceeded. But once the limits of phantasmagorization can no longer be controlled or fixed by the simple opposition of presence and absence, actuality and inactuality, sensuous and supersensible, *another* approach to differences must structure (“conceptually” and “really”) the field that has thus been re-opened. (SM 163)

Derrida’s analysis, then, does not suggest simply an indifferent phantasmagorization, but rather attempts to relate spectrality to and against commodification and exchange.

Hauntology certainly does not mean that market capitalism is inevitable or irreducible.

The capitalistic logic, the very violence of capitalist accumulation and particularly the seemingly limitless nature of its quest to profit and capitalize through restriction, is linked explicitly to a movement that exceeds it. Capitalization, which, in its irreducibility, is broader than capitalism, is itself always exceeded, and thus always remains open to future possibility. It is that movement that produces ‘value’ and ‘meaning’ interminably.

Which is to say, that more general movement beyond what is classically covered by the term political economy. And this is precisely the movement that general economy seeks to relate. It is from the approach of the opening of possibility instituted by general economy that the “critique” of capitalism must be structured. It must be “founded” on the gift, in which, as argued in the previous chapter, an ethical and political injunction towards openness and possibility, as opposed to restricted value and profit, is given.

At this point, one might ask what regulative ideals in the spirit of Marx remain.

What, for example, might remain of the concept of alienation?¹³ Marx’s concept of alienation, at least in *Capital*, is linked precisely to his analysis of the commodity-form.

¹³ For a similar discussion concerning the concept of ‘class’, see Fredric Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” in *Ghostly Demarcations*, particularly pp. 46-9.

Yet the concept is, at least apparently, lacking in Derrida's book on Marx. This lack is no doubt a result of the same deconstructive critique of ontology that takes place throughout *Specters of Marx*, and that certainly complicates any simple discourse on the subject. Responding to an accusation by Antonio Negri concerning the absence of exploitation and alienation in Derrida's analysis¹⁴, Derrida writes:

I do not know if the word appears there, or, if so, how often, but I am sure the reference to the 'concept' and the 'thing' is recurrent in the book, and more or less central ... Doubtless the classic concept of exploitation is subjected to a certain degree of deconstructive turbulence (the question of ontology, again, and therefore that of the *proper*, of the appropriable, of proper or alienated subjectivity and what I call, everywhere, *ex-appropriation* – the logic of which singularly complicates the traditional discourse on exploitation and alienation).¹⁵

Derrida is no doubt correct to assert the centrality of the 'concept' of exploitation to his work on Marx, and also right to assert the complication to, though, importantly, not the utter negation of, the traditional discourse on alienation. It is perhaps still worthwhile to maintain the 'concept' of alienation as well, perhaps as a kind of "regulative ideal" in the sense that Derrida himself asserts as necessary to interpret the plagues of the new world order. Of course, to do so would require a different thinking of alienation that takes into account the deconstructive turbulence to which Derrida alludes.

This re-thinking of the 'concept' of alienation might be accomplished by supplementing Derrida's analysis with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. In his article, "The

¹⁴ "There's a word that rarely appears in Derrida's book: exploitation." Antonio Negri, "The Specter's Smile," in *Ghostly Demarcations*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Derrida, J. "Marx & Sons," in *Ghostly Demarcations*, p. 260.

Two Secrets of the Fetish,”¹⁶ he gives a powerful, if unfortunately all too brief, account of alienation in a deconstructive fashion. He writes, “Alienation is not measurable. It is at the same time the principle of the critique and its impasse from the moment that we would like to, and indeed that we should, oppose one measure to another: the critical measure of the fetish against the mercantile measure through the fetish.”¹⁷ As Nancy suggests here, alienation remains as a critical measure against mercantilism, against the restricted economy of capitalism. Without explicitly referring to Derrida here, Nancy has given an opportunity to re-inscribe the notion of alienation within Derrida’s critique of capitalism. As both the principle of the critique and its impasse, alienation is here linked precisely to the excessive movement of the spectral, as well as the double movement of the deconstructive “critique.” Furthermore, if alienation is not measurable, it also cannot be ontologized. Alienation is immeasurable precisely because it refers to an excessive movement that is lost to exchange, to the mercantile measure through the fetish against which it remains a critical measure of. The power of its critique does not rely on any essential feature of a subject fully present to itself. Instead, it refers to something other. Nancy continues, “Is there not another energy, and another enigma, slipped into the first, adding itself to the revelation of the secret, even exceeding this revelation and perhaps in this fashion displacing just a bit the secret itself (precisely because it is not measurable)?”¹⁸ As the principle of the critique, alienation can be seen as the result of the restriction of this energy, the arrest of an excessive movement of possibility, given by the general economy of the gift, in exchange economy. This other energy and enigma is

¹⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Two Secrets of the Fetish,” *Diacritics* 31.2: 3-8, Summer 2001.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁸ Ibid.

precisely Derrida's spectrality, particularly insofar as this spectrality can be related to Derrida's notion of the gift. It is the immeasurable and interminable desire for the gift, immeasurable and interminable precisely because never "present,"¹⁹ that becomes alienated in restricted economy. It is the desire for the possibility of the spectral, rather than an essence of the subject, that gives an immeasurable measure to the deconstructive "critique" of capitalism.

Let us return to Derrida by once again taking a step back, a move that will ultimately allow us to move forward to Derrida's notion of justice. The sense of capitalism as restricted economy can be taken further within Derrida's own logic. The production of "value", whether of exchange-value or use-value, Derrida writes,

is likewise inscribed and exceeded by a promise of gift beyond exchange. In a certain way, market equivalence arrests or mechanizes the dance that it seemed to initiate. Only beyond value itself, use-value and exchange-value, the value of technics and of the market, is grace promised, if not given, but never *rendered* or given back to the dance. (SM 160)

The production of value is imposed by market capitalism, and this imposition is itself an arrest or mechanization of the underlying play of movement, of differences. The logic of capitalist markets is itself infused with the metaphysics of presence, and can only tolerate that value from which it can make a profit. Capitalistic logic imposes that value, as a determined, actual and present form, on an underlying and irreducible dance. It puts that dance to work, at the service of market exchange, precisely through the restrictive imposition of value as a presence that can be profited from in a calculated and programmable system of market exchange. In order for capitalism to be possible, a

¹⁹ As discussed in the preceding chapter. See *Given Time*, p. 29.

determined system of market equivalences is needed, and thus must be imposed upon the underlying movement of differentiation, of *différance*. But value is itself given beyond exchange, and it is beyond this imposition of value, beyond the machinations of market capitalism that grace is promised. It is beyond capitalism that the possibility of justice arises. It comes from another, more “fundamental” approach to the economy of life; it comes from the general economy of the gift.

3.3: Justice, the Gift, and the Calculation of Resistance

Marx’s greatest error is to chase away the ghosts that haunt the commodity, to deny the spectral by insisting on the ultimate truth of reality, of the ontological. Because of this fear of ghosts, Marx misses the more fundamental, more radical, “critique” of capitalism that he comes so close to formulating. As Derrida’s analysis reveals, the spectral is primary, always already disrupting and dis-adjusting the ontological. Not only is *this* time, the time of capitalism, out of joint, but time itself is always already out of joint. But if time itself is always already out of joint, then what remains of critique? What possibility is there for justice in a dis-adjusted time? Derrida is, of course, very well aware of this problem; it is, perhaps, the central problem to the entirety of his work, and *Specters of Marx* is a work thoroughly concerned with the question of justice. One might formulate this question as dis-adjustment and the possibility of justice. This is clear in *Specters of Marx*, where he writes:

That is our problem: how to justify this passage from disadjustment (with its rather more technico-ontological value affecting a presence) to an injustice that would no longer be ontological? And what if disadjustment were on the contrary the condition of justice? And what if this double register condensed its enigma, precisely, and potentialized its superpower in that which gives its unheard-of force to Hamlet’s words: “This time is out of joint”? (SM 19-20)

What Derrida insists on, throughout *Specters of Marx* and elsewhere, is that the injustice of capitalism, which cannot be denied, is precisely not the result of a disadjusted ontology, but rather the specific form of the ontologization of this disadjustment, its determined closure. This must be the case because the ontological is always already dis-adjusted. But this dis-adjusted ontology does not constitute a problem for justice, or, put more precisely, this dis-adjustment is necessary for the possibility of justice. It is precisely the fact that time is out of joint which allows for the very possibility of justice. The very force of justice, its potential power, is linked to dis-adjustment. A time in joint, fully present to itself, would necessarily exclude the possibility of justice. Instead of justice, there would simply be the mechanical operation of a system of determination. This would consist in nothing other than the un-desirable state of law without justice. Thus Derrida's work, from beginning to end, is the attempt to think justice otherwise, in terms of dis-adjustment.

A different thinking of justice is thus called for. This different thinking of justice must be outside and beyond any restricted economy, including of course the restricted economy of capitalism and its laws of calculation of value and exchange. Outside and beyond exchange, exceeding it while making it possible, is the gift. And so Derrida writes, "The question of justice, the one that always carries beyond the law, is no longer separated, in its necessity or in its aporias, from that of the gift." (SM 26) The thinking of justice in terms of the gift institutes a paradox into the very question of justice, as the gift must be "without debt and without guilt." (SM 26)

It is precisely this paradox at the heart of justice that must be affirmed if justice is to have any chance. Thus, in "Force of Law," Derrida writes:

This “idea of justice” seems to me to be irreducible in its affirmative character, in its demand of gift without exchange, without circulation, without recognition or gratitude, without economic circularity, without calculation and without rules, without reason and without rationality. (FL 965)

Justice itself is never present, certainly not in law, which Derrida consistently distinguishes from justice. Law always consists in economic circularity, in calculation and rules based on reason. There certainly is no justice when, driving in a car late at night, I stop at a traffic light, even though I am the only driver on the road. In this example, there is only a restricted system of rules to which I am subjected, that I, perhaps, obey. Yet justice is not necessarily precluded by the law either. While never fully present, there is something of justice, something of grace, when, at the same traffic light during rush hour, I yield to the other, giving her the chance to proceed. But at the same time, justice often interrupts the law as a restricted system of rules. There is something of justice when, caught speeding down the road while driving a woman in labour to the hospital, I am not given a ticket for my offence, but rather am escorted by the police to the hospital. There is something of justice here, even though reason might suggest that the law should never be suspended, as this suspension carries the risk of chaos. Thus the paradox of justice consists in its exceeding of the law as restricted system of rules, as calculation.

These examples are perhaps banal. Hopefully, though, they serve to reinforce the force of the excessive ‘essence’ of justice. Because even the recognition of this force is not enough. There remains a risk, as Derrida points out. He writes:

Once one has recognized the force and necessity of thinking justice on the basis of the gift, that is, beyond right, calculation, and commerce, once one has recognized

therefore the necessity (*without force*, precisely, without necessity, perhaps, and without law) of thinking the gift to the other as gift of that which one does not have and which thus, paradoxically, can only *come back* or belong to the other, is there not a risk of inscribing this whole movement of justice under the sign of presence, be it of the presence to meaning of the *Anwesen*, of the event as coming into presence, of Being as presence joined to itself, of the proper of the other as presence? (SM 27)

This risk, of re-inscribing the movement of justice under the sign of presence, is precisely that which Marxism succumbs to by chasing away the spectral in the name of the actual, the proper essence of the commodity as use-value. It is the mistake of insisting on the ontological. In so doing, the possibility of justice, in its general economy of the gift, is once again restricted. Justice, then, is once again lost.

The possibility of justice is lost to Marxism at the exact point where it insists on actuality and necessity rather than the undecidable, at the moment when the inevitability of the coming of communism is considered a definite and predictable goal. The danger of this thought has already been experienced in history, in its use in the justification of atrocities that were anything but communist. This justification of atrocities is founded in a restriction of 'communism' to an idea of what it 'is', to presence. The very hope that 'communism' will one day fully arrive, giving us, finally, the chance to rest, is the very hope to put an end to the ethico-political and once again allow injustice to take over. It is to decide the end of politics. But this decision rests on the exclusion of the condition of politics, the undecidable, which, as will be recalled, is instituted by the general economy of the gift. The paradox of justice as gift without exchange necessarily inscribes the undecidable within the structure of justice, spectrally. According to Derrida,

The undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost – but an essential ghost – in every decision, in every event of decision. Its ghostliness deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criteriology that would assure us of the justice of a decision, in truth of the very event of a decision. (FL 965)

The specter is precisely the undecidable. The hauntological structure of the commodity reveals an undecidability between the material and ideal or spiritual. The hauntological dis-adjusts time, contaminating the present with the return of the past and thereby opening it to the future yet to come. Justice, as a result, must always navigate this undecidable. To do otherwise would amount to taking away the chance of justice.

Justice must be thought spectrally, from the very condition of dis-adjustment. It must traverse the undecidable. But to traverse the undecidable is not to stay within the undecidable, and so to never come to a decision. As Derrida writes, “justice, however unrepresentable it may be, doesn’t wait. It is that which must not wait. ... [A] just decision is always required immediately, ‘right away.’” (FL 967) To traverse the undecidable is to pass through, precisely in order for a decision to be possible. Without this passage through the undecidable, a decision would not be a decision. It would, again, simply be the mechanical operation of a system of determination. Thus the undecidable provides the opening from which a decision becomes possible in the first place.

The decision, in order to have any chance at justice, must be thought in a general economy that deconstructs the terms of the decision in the name of that which is not present, justice, while at the same time deciding. This is because, as the force of the critique of capitalism cries out, the need to decide is urgent. And so Derrida writes:

That justice exceeds law and calculation, that the unrepresentable exceeds the determinable cannot and should not serve as an alibi from staying out of juridico-political battles, within an institution or a state, or between one institution or state and others. ... And so incalculable justice requires us to calculate. (FL 971)

It is the urgency of the demand of justice for a decision, the fact that justice does not wait, that in turn demands that one engage in juridico-political battles. The injunction of the unrepresentable excess of justice means that one must enter into the present, restricted economy and calculate. The force of this necessity, this one must, is more than just moral, as the general economy of the gift institutes an opening that is always already being responded to, whether one affirms this responsibility of calculation or not. This calculation must necessarily be in the spirit of the incalculable, of the gift and of justice, and of the opening instituted by them, but it is a calculation nonetheless.

How is this calculation to be done? Is there an answer, in the spirit of Derrida, to this re-formulation of Lenin's question? This is perhaps one of the trickiest aporias in Derrida's thought. Perhaps necessarily, he offers little assistance. Perhaps, once again, it will be necessary to supplement Derrida's own thought with the thought of another who remains at least somewhat within his spirit. Yet another ghost, this time, again, that of Walter Benjamin, whose "dense, enigmatic, burning" pages Derrida himself suggests we should reread. (SM 181)

Benjamin's fourth Thesis on the Concept of History teaches us a great deal concerning calculation and justice, at least insofar as it concerns the question of capitalism. Benjamin writes:

The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual

things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. A historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.²⁰

Without doubt, there is a certain congruence here with Derrida's thought. It is in his spirit. Benjamin seems to be speaking of specters and their return, and of the past. The refined and spiritual things return from the past with retroactive force to call into question the past, once again, and the present. He also speaks of an excessive movement, and of the spectral, the hauntological. Those very spiritual things, courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude, though this list could no doubt be extended, manifest from out of the struggle for material things, they are given by that class struggle that can only be conceived as a calculated restricted fight for crude and material things. Benjamin's spiritual things are precisely the excess of the class struggle. They constitute a force, they make their presence felt, which is, of course, not the same thing as *being present*. And through their return as spectral presence that calls in question the present victors, they make possible the continuation of that struggle, their retroactive force calls in question again the victories of the rulers. He also speaks of an opening towards the future, as the past strives towards the rising sun, signifying the coming of a new day. And implicit in all of this is an ethico-political injunction, the class struggle against capitalism, the contestation of the victors in the name of those specters returning from the past.

²⁰ "Theses on the Philosophy of History," pps. 254-5.

If Derrida's hauntological "critique" is taken seriously, together with the demand of justice to calculate, then Benjamin's thesis, which remains in the spirit of Derrida, cries out for the need to struggle and resist capitalism. One might object here that Derrida would object to Benjamin's terms, particularly that of class struggle. It is undeniable that the concept of class can and must be deconstructed. But Benjamin does not speak here of the proletariat as the universal subject of emancipation. The class struggle is precisely the struggle *against* classes, those restrictions imposed upon spectral subjects by the history of capitalist accumulation. As such, the class struggle becomes a calculated resistance to capitalism in the spirit of an opening up of possibility, which is precisely what Derrida's idea of justice calls for. Furthermore, Benjamin does not suggest any kind of teleological finality to the class struggle.²¹ Instead, he calls for a calculated resistance that promises to exceed that calculation by giving spiritual things from the past that strive toward an open future. Through this restricted economy of resistance to capitalism, the possibility of the gift is once again promised and given its chance.

It is this promise that is central to Derrida's thought as a whole, as well as to the strategy of general economy that aims at giving it a chance of taking place. *Différance*, the gift, hauntology, and justice, in a messianic opening towards the future, all demand this promise, they demand this struggle through the injunction to resist the restricted economy of capitalism.²² The promise is necessarily without guarantee, given as it is by the undecidability of the gift, and so the possibility of despair will always remain. But

²¹ For a discussion of this point, see Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory*.

²² For a discussion of the messianic see Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, pps. 156-80, and Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory*.

from out of despair comes also the possibility of hope, for the future, precisely, whose promise is always already with us, here, now. Derrida reminds us of this, and so will be given the last words:

But without this latter despair and if one could *count* on what is coming, hope would be but the calculation of a program. One would have the prospect but one would no longer wait for anything or anyone. Law without justice. One would no longer invite, either body or soul, no longer receive any visits, no longer even think to see. (SM 169)

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for frequently cited texts by Derrida:

- D Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- FL Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority." Trans. Mary Quaintance. *Cardoza Law Review*, 11. 1990.
- GT Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- SM Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- WD Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

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