The (Im)possibility of Approaching the Other: Hospitality and Gift-Giving

Name: Ching-hsiang Lo

June 2010
英國國立語政文治學大系學博士班博士論文

接近他者（不）可能是：禮物與待客之道

羅香撰
The (Im)possibility of Approaching the Other:

Hospitality and Gift-Giving

A Dissertation
Presented to
Department of English,
National Chengchi University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Chloe Ching-hsiang Lo
June 2010
“Thou crownest the year with thy goodness; and thy paths drop fatness”

“你以恩典為年歲的冠冕; 你的路徑都滴下脂油” (詩 65:11)

To My Parents, Ching-yen, Howard, and Advisor

Prof. Shang-Kuan Chang

獻給我的爸媽，青燕，光皓

和

我的恩師張上冠教授
Acknowledgements

The early version of my dissertation was incubated at the annual (2001) graduate research seminar, National Chengchi University, in which I presented a paper on the gift and the absolute other. Prof. Shuan-hung Wu’s stimulating comments and advice on my work sparked my further interest in the topic. In addition, this dissertation was framed while I was in residence as a Fellow at the American University in Cairo for an M.A. in Middle East Studies (August 2006-December 2008), and it would have been a considerably different work without that experience.

Many people, especially the Ph.D. committee members, contributed valuable comments and suggestions to these chapters at various stages. Here, I express my cordial thanks to them collectively: readers do make a difference. My special thanks extend to the friends who helped me in the search for good wording; their generosity and patience sometimes far exceed the call of duty: Rev. Justin Daley, his wife Erica, and daughter Jessica, and Rev. Stephen Oliver. I have been fortunate in having the judicious and intelligent advice of Prof. Sun-chieh Liang, and I have been lucky enough to find critics who, while often quite disagreeing with my conclusions, have taken the trouble to say why. Among these critics are Prof. Gen-yuan Hu and Prof. Eric Heroux.

I would also like to thank Howard Fan, David Therizult, Steven Yen, Jacob Huang, and Naseema Noor for their meticulous editing; besides, I wish to thank Richie Lin, Linus Chang and his wife Sunny, for their belief in and support of me; and finally, I would like to thank the animals at home, which buoyed me through the tedious but necessary part in accomplishing a satisfactory dissertation.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements....................................................................................................iv
Chinese Abstract.........................................................................................................vi
English Abstract..........................................................................................................vii

Chapter

1. Introduction.......................................................................................................1

2. Background Theory..........................................................................................26

3. Facing the Other in the Bible..........................................................................68

4. King Lear and His Otherwise Being...............................................................98

5. Love and the Desire to Give: Tales in the *Arabian Nights*..............................127

6. Conclusion: The Ethical Distance in Hospitality and Gift-Giving.................. 160

Works Cited...............................................................................................................169

Biographical Sketch...............................................................................................178
論文名稱：接近他者之(不)可能：禮物與待客之道

指導教授：張上冠教授

研究生：羅青香

論文提要內容：本文試結合禮物致贈和待客之道，討論其在經典文學作品和人類學記錄中，隱含對文明發展及個人主體的省思。禮物實踐的弔詭和難題，自人類學家摩斯（Marcel Mauss）以來，到文學批評學者德希達（Jacques Derrida），屢在當代不同學科引發興趣。禮物的經濟效益似乎直接挑戰命題本身，搖擺於權宜交換的迷思和禮物的形上真諦。待客之道，則屬當代法國哲學家列維納斯（Emmanuel Levinas）的倫理思想中心。列維納斯認為待客之道隱喻無限可能的化身，能解套傳統主體為上的僵局，亦為主體對未知／上帝的責任。德希達將之援引，同視為(不)可能任務。在此脈絡下，本文試在不同文本／文明間對照，探究禮物和待客之道所指之善行本質，超越的欲望，及與他人／它者互動的界限辯證。所用方法主要為重新闡述西方文明重要來源之《聖經》，文藝復興時期莎士比亞四大悲劇中的《李爾王》，以及作為西方文明它者的泛伊斯蘭文學遺產《一千零一夜》。本文認為，以顯在(present/presence)為軸的人文精神，其先驗的暴力特質，一方面淋漓表現於禮物(gift/present)及待客之道；一方面是因這不可迴避的暴力和超越可能性(possibility)恒使文學作品以禮物和待客之道作為生命常軌之外的轉折點，彷彿是作家和學者對於智識外的不可計算(uncalculated economy)，以不可能(the impossibility, the absolute other)的踪跡(the trace)形式，留下對彼在(there is)／他者(the other)的悅納(welcome)。

關鍵詞：禮物，待客之道，德希達，列維納斯，暴力，倫理，未知，上帝，(不)可能，顯在，蹤跡
Abstract

The themes of hospitality and gift-giving in literature oftentimes pass unnoticed by literary critics because the themes seem to be so naturally embedded in literature that perhaps an event of murder might interest the critics more. But hospitality and gift-giving are important because, as part of our living experience and with the possibility of going beyond the logic of exchange and altruism, hospitality and gift-giving subtly reveal to us the eternal concerns of astonishment, death, God, violence, and human relations. In this respect, hospitality and gift-giving radically challenge our conception of subjectivity.

The following dissertation which consists of my collection of thoughts is therefore, metaphorically, a tangent touching, or better yet, approaching yet without appropriating the other in the postmodern philosophical context. My interpretation of “the absolute other” aims to make an argument that actions of hospitality and gift-giving, albeit without the acknowledgement of the subject, exhibit the desire of approaching “the absolute other” and simultaneously acknowledge the limit of subjectivity. In this attempt to lay open the interrelationships between hospitality and gift-giving by illustrating the “otherness” in subjectivity, responsibility, and God “the absolute other,” I draw from various sources in philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Through review of these multiple sources I contend that genuine hospitality and gift-giving can give rise to various levels of meanings to the absolute alterity of otherness. The selected literary texts under the discussion respectively are: the Bible, *King Lear*, and *the Arabian Nights*. The reasoning behind this choice is an intention to comprehend the otherness across cultural boundaries. I examine the Bible to contend for the Hebraic tradition and Pauline Christianity, *King Lear* the renaissance enlightenment, and *the Arabian Nights* the Western other.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor;
Then Cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.

William Blake, “Holy Thursday”¹

The following dissertation which consists of my collection of thoughts is, metaphorically, a tangent touching, or better yet, approaching yet without appropriating the other in the postmodern philosophical context. My interpretation of “the absolute other”² aims to make an argument that actions of hospitality and gift-giving, albeit without the acknowledgement of the subject, exhibit the desire of approaching “the absolute other” and simultaneously acknowledge the limit of subjectivity. In this attempt to lay open the interrelationships between hospitality and gift-giving by illustrating the “otherness” in subjectivity, responsibility, and God “the absolute other,” I draw from various sources in philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Through review of these multiple sources I contend that genuine hospitality and gift-giving can give rise to various levels of meanings to the


² I use the term “the absolute other” in a general sense according to my understanding of Emmanuel Levinas’s use. The “absolute other” can generally refer to any idea, person, race, or divine being which does not fit in with the dominant patterns of thought. In Levinas’s words, this “absolute other” is what is metaphysically desired and “it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it” (Levinas 1969: 34). This is a very broad and multifaceted concept in Levinas that is hard to describe in a simple way. The following study will endeavor to unfold its meaning through a discussion of hospitality and gift-giving.
subject’s approach to the other.\(^3\) This dissertation intertwined literary criticism and cultural studies and cultures can be principally though not comprehensively represented by religions. I felt it is just like the phrases from one of the stories from \textit{the Arabian Nights}, which says that:

After entering the palace alone, to his surprise, he found there an ensorcelled prince. There were also his ensorcelled citizens, who were transformed into fishes.] The four colors actually represented the different faiths: The Muslims were the white, the magicians/unbelievers (مجوس) red, the Christians blue and the Jews yellow.

The selected literary texts, therefore, under the discussion respectively are: the Bible, \textit{King Lear}, and \textit{the Arabian Nights}. The reasoning behind this choice is an intention to comprehend the otherness across cultural boundaries. I examine the Bible to contend for the Hebraic tradition and Pauline Christianity, \textit{King Lear} the renaissance enlightenment, and \textit{the Arabian Nights} the Western other.

\(^3\) What a motley crew, the reader might respond, and he or she could be right. But disparate partners may generate the most interesting conversations. Tina Chanter puts it this way: Levinas’s philosophy is just as concerned with the drama of psychoanalysis as Jacques Lacan describes, even Levinas is not talking about the same thing as psychoanalysis. See “Reading Hegel as a Mediating Master: Lacan and Levinas. \textit{Levinas and Lacan: The Missed Encounter}. Ed. Sarah Harasym. Albany: State U of New York P, 1998. 16.

\(^4\) Web. <http://ar.wikisource.org/wiki/%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD_%D9%84_%D9%84_%D9%84_%D8%A8_%D9%84_%D9%85_%D8%A7_%D9%84_%D8%A8_%D9%8A_%D9%85_%D8%A8_%D9%84_%D9%85_%D8%A8>
I. Three Considerations Regarding Hospitality and Gift-Giving

The themes of hospitality and gift-giving in literature oftentimes pass unnoticed by literary critics because the themes seem to be so naturally embedded in literature that perhaps an event of murder might interest the critics more. While the problematic of the gift and hospitality may not always have been at the center of critical attention, their appearances are not and have not been limited to the discourses of anthropologists. In fact, the paradoxical and problematic characters of the gift and hospitality have been apparent for quite a while. Therefore, hospitality and gift-giving are important in English literary criticism because, as part of our living experience and with the possibility of going beyond the logic of exchange and altruism, hospitality and gift-giving subtly reveal to us the eternal concerns of astonishment, death, God, violence, and human relations. In this respect, hospitality and gift-giving radically challenge our conception of subjectivity. In this sense of disturbing a comfortable complacency and assurance implied in subjectivity, I construe hospitality and gift-giving as the possibility of experiencing the impossible. There are three considerations involved in this experience: out of subjectivity, out of responsibility, and out of God after a thorough reading of Jacques Derrida’s and Emmanuel Levinas’s works on hospitality and the gift.

A. Out of Subjectivity: the Compulsion in Hospitality and Gift-Giving

It has been accepted that as common social activities, hospitality and gift-giving are decisions made by me or out of me as a subject responding to others in the world. But on further reflection we may offer different ideas: hospitality and gift-giving are gestures and decisions beyond the subject’s sovereignty because at times the subject has to give, to host, no matter he/she is willing or not, is capable or not. One example
is of Derrida’s analysis of Charles Baudelaire's "Counterfeit Money."5 The story says that there are two friends who are “disquieted” by the look of a poor man. The poor man’s mute yet imploring a look which demands one to give. “We encounter a poor man who held out his cap with a trembling hand. I know of nothing more disquieting than the mute eloquence of those supplicating eyes that contain at once, for the sensitive man somehow knows how to read them, so much humility and so much reproach.” Derrida argues that “[t]he demand is not only an entreaty, it is also the figure of the law…This story is thus a trial [process], the process of a trial” (Derrida 1992a: 144-45). These two friends are urged to give as if it is in a trial. Accordingly, a second meaning of this “out of” becomes possible, which points to what is beyond me as a subject. This theory thus turns from subjectivity to the welcome of another person. Two contemporary philosophers are most inspiring to this theory. One is Derrida, who argues for the dialectical aporias between possibility and impossibility; the other is Levinas, whose ethical philosophy emphasizes “the naked face of the other.”6 This “naked face” proposed by Levinas is an appealing and contesting movement instead of a gesture of turning physical face. It reminds any subject of the otherness that he or she must encounter.

These two contemporary thinkers—while challenging each other with questions and answers by responding to each other’s writings—mutually express admiration and affection for each other. In 1997, Derrida published a small book, Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas, to serve as his eulogy for Levinas and Levinas's philosophy of hospitality. There are only two chapters in this small book. The first chapter is “Adieu,” in which Derrida plays a word game on A (to) and Dieu (God) to express

---


6 Referring to the initial shock of the discovery of alterity, the “face” of the other is first named by Levinas in Totality and Infinity. See his illustration, p. 50 and p. 172.
Levinas’s lifelong ethical concern of “not an eternal return to self” (1997a: 2; cited from Levinas “Four Talmudic Readings” in *Nine Talmudic Readings* 48). Derrida explains that one should move in the direction of a transcendental kind and not return to one’s comfort zone of knowledge. The second chapter, entitled “A Word of Welcome,” is the major part of the book in which Derrida says that Levinas’s philosophy actually bequeaths us an immense treatise on hospitality (1997a: 21). For Levinas himself, hospitality, or the face-to-face relation, is a gift of human proximity (Levinas 1998a: 14). Therefore, it seems plausible that in dealing with their argument and interest in hospitality and gift-giving, we inherit *de facto* their idealist concern, which I opine fosters an effective critique of bourgeois humanism.7

Hospitality and gift-giving, as two of the oldest and continuous human activities, highlight Derrida and Levinas’s philosophical concerns: whatever we want to construe in the most abstract philosophical terms, terms like transcendence or encountering the absolute other, the speculation on hospitality and gift-giving addresses our most basic and common existence as a subject in the world and our relation with others in the global society. What is the I (Moi) and what is the other? How do writers present these concerns in literary works? How do readers understand these concerns? All of these are the starting points for us to approach the seemingly elusive ideas of hospitality and gift-giving.

This elusiveness derives from several factors. First is the ambiguous dialectic relationship between the subject and the other. We learn that existential experience is one of the most common topics in classic philosophy.8 However, Levinas is different from most other traditional philosophers because he argues that “I” (Moi) passively

---

7 It will not be necessary here to get into a debate about the meaning of humanism. Postmoderns write about the arrogance of humanism, and they are not all wrong.

substitutes for the other, and that the other could never be Moi.9 The substitution responds to the call of transcendence. This idea of transcendence, or transformation in a postmodern term, is fundamentally rooted in the world, for which Levinas has argued ever since his first major work published in French in 1961, *Totality and Infinity*. For him, the idea of transcendence implied in the word “beyond” is “not to describe in a purely negative fashion. It is reflected within the totality and history, within experience.”10 Levinas writes:

> It is not that the ‘beyond’ would be ‘further’ than everything that appears, or ‘present in absence,’ or ‘shown by a symbol’” because it is still subject to principles, and is to be given in consciousness. What remains at stake, therefore, is a refusal of allowing oneself to be tamed or domesticated by a theme. (Levinas 2006: 100)

In addition, Levinas’s dependence on “the zone or layer of traditional truth” admits the necessity of “lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality,” on which Derrida also insists.11 Simply put, transcendence is not an independent conception itself; there is no transcendence except what is imbued with worldly involvement. Levinas explains forcefully that “the other” does not matter; on the contrary, it is because of my responsibility for the other that there can be something new under the sun (1998a: 13).12 That is, human relatedness is the condition of the experience of the

---

9 C. Fred Alford argues that “the subject in Levinas’s work can have no real relationship except what Levinas calls substitution” (1).

10 *Totality and Infinity* 23. Although at the same time Levinas writes, “the relation with infinity cannot, to be sure, be stated in terms of [objective] experience, for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it” (25).


12 Alford argues that Levinas “‘infinitizes’ the other, rendering the other not just more but less than human” (9) because Levinas transforms “the encounter with another human being into an
infinite

Second, the elusiveness comes because even the most popular social activities could indicate ambiguous and sophisticated human intellectuality and ethical debates. In Levinas’s own words, “the contemporary world, scientific, technical, and sensualist sees itself without exit—that is without God—not because everything there is permitted and, by way of technology, possible, but because everything there is equal” (1998a: 12). Equality, in our discussion of Levinas here, means the result of a desolate ideology where everything is absorbed, sucked down, and walled up in a calculable system of appropriation. The intolerable Sameness simply erects a barricade against the experience of impossibilities in the logic of hospitality and gift-giving, appropriating and thus reducing these activities to an ostensible convenience of exchange and dissolving the concern for the unseeable into ontologically exhaustible pretense.13

B. Out of Responsibility: Annulling Hospitality and Gift-Giving

Conceptions of responsibility confront gift-giving and hospitality.14 Responsibility evolves with the idea of excessive assignation to the other in gift-giving (Derrida 2008: 27). In hospitality, my responsibility for the other man—to

---

13 See also Levinas’s comment on consciousness and its connection to the idea of equality. Note that for Levinas, consciousness is not related to Freud’s metapsychological theory; rather, it is of a more descriptive sense in general science. Consciousness is “a transient property which distinguishes external and internal perceptions from psychical phenomena as a whole.” See “Consciousness” The Language of Psychoanalysis by J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973. Levinas considers consciousness to be “in the relationship with beings… We identify beings across the dispersion of silhouettes in which they appear; in self-consciousness we identify ourselves across the multiplicity of temporal phrases…To become conscious of a being is then always for that being to be grasped across an identity and on the basis of a said.” See Otherwise than Being 99. Therefore, consciousness for Levinas is an ontological and chronological process of identification and appropriation. In this way, “consciousness is wholly equality” because everything, including responsibility, is well measured (Otherwise than Being 102.) In this article, all the references of consciousness are in Levinas’s context.

the point of being responsible for his responsibility—is an opening of self, a rupture of the essence of being (Levinas 1998a: 12-13). As the determinative structure of subjectivity and as the very form of resisting theoretical disciplines, responsibility responds to the imperative order from the other; in other words, genuine responsibility annuls the call to which it seeks to respond because any idea of genuine responsibility invites contradiction and equivocation—i.e., a contradictory, complicit impulsion tangled with singularity and generality simultaneously (Derrida 2008: 62; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1994: 19).

This view leads to the aporia of human subjects in hospitality and gift-giving, as both activities refer to choices of virtue and justice, comprehensive ponderings over different concerns ranging from moral reasons to political justification. A study of hospitality and gift-giving disconcerts our most traditional values of reciprocity revealed in homology, immanence, finite, and concord. There is an ethics of hospitality which challenges the idea of assurance because hospitality is about making decisions and taking responsibilities without the assurance of an ontological foundation (Derrida 1997a: 21). From this it follows, that the certainty of subjectivity makes banal the spiritual adventure of being. Levinas writes: “It is never dangerous; it is self-possession, sovereignty, αρχή [archí, meaning origin, principle, or authority]. Anything unknown that can occur to it is in advance disclosed, open, manifest, is cast in the mould of the known, and cannot be a complete surprise” (Levinas 2006: 99).

Under this circumstance, even intellectual judgment is impeded, if not void. For this reason, a judgment on hospitality and gift-giving is incomplete, if not

---

15 Here, I am developing the ideas of heterology, asymmetry and infinity from Derrida, “Politics of Friendship” 644.
16 This ontological foundation is inherited from western traditional philosophy which phrases an ontological being grasped on the basis of schematism and logos—a complacency in the humanity, in other words.
intentionally biased. The story of Plato’s *Gorgias* from Levinas’s reading aptly reveals this impossibility of judging appropriately hospitality and gift-giving:

In the myth of the *Gorgias* (523 c-d), with extreme precision, Zeus reproaches the “last judgment,” which he intends to reform in a spirit worthy of a god, for remaining a tribunal in which “fully dressed” men are judged by men, themselves also fully dressed and “having placed before their souls a screen which is made of eyes, ears, and bodies in its entirety.” A screen wholly made up of eyes and ears! The essential point: once thematized, an other [*autrui*] is without uniqueness. He is returned to the social community, to the community of dressed beings wherein the priorities of rank impede justice. The faculties of intuition, in which the entire body participates, are precisely what blocks the view, screens off the plasticity of the perceived, and absorbs the alterity of the other [*l’autre*] precisely by which he is not an object within our reach, but the neighbor. (Levinas 1998a: 10-11)

The above story expresses the impediment to any attempt of executing justice and responsibility. Levinas talks about the disillusions implied in any appeal to justice at the moment of its advent. For Levinas, judging rests in an established situation, “as though the justice of the living judging the living could not deprive the judged of the qualities of their natures (being equally fully dressed), which they always have in common with those that also cover the judges” (Levinas 1998a: 10). The genuineness of hospitality and gift-giving shares the same disillusion: hospitality and gift-giving...

---

17 For Levinas, justice is “comparison, coexistence, contemporaneity, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice” (2006: 157).
could not be judged because they do not really communicate with the receivers; theoretically, genuine hospitality and gift-giving do not offer what the receivers can recognize.

Nevertheless, offering what cannot be recognized does not exhaust the possibilities in aligning with hospitality and gift-giving. Though it is “an intolerable scandal” that justice commits an initial infidelity as early as it is enacted, still the imperfection of justice, or the impossibility of justice, “exceed[s] every regulated procedure in order to open itself to what always risks being perverted (the Good, Justice, Love, Faith—and perfectibility, etc.)” (Derrida 1997a: 34-35). That is, while it is impossible to discern between good and evil, love and hate, giving and taking without making a comparison, a weighing, a calculation, it is this impossibility of total controlling, deciding, or determining a limit paves the condition of the Good. Even though the justice of offering and receiving, of making a proper decision, seems elusive and unreliable, it is the delusion and the possibility it results or cleaves (and as the dual meanings the word “cleave” can suggest) that makes hospitality and gift-giving an eternal necessity for comprehending our existence and the others, the communities and the distances.

This stance of sustaining the threshold even in a most transgressive endeavor anchors our discussion of hospitality and gift-giving because if it is not about exchange, hospitality and gift-giving creates a simulacrum of going beyond as if it does not. Michel Foucault, another French philosopher on power and discourse, comments on Georges Bataille’s text on transgression by articulating a lyrical formulation: transgression crosses the limit “like a flash of lightning in the night,” giving “a dense and black intensity to the night it denies…the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent” (Foucault 1998: 28). In other
words, there is no essential difference between the so-called threshold and the possible alterity in going beyond. The absolute other on the other side of the threshold of possibility and impossibility is not a particular case, a species of alterity (Levinas 1998a: 12-13), unless we want to cover the otherness with an acknowledged category or species. The secrets of hospitality and gift-giving abide at a fundamental negation to a hope that only God\(^{18}\) knows where and what the threshold is.

C. Out of God, the Absolute Other

Postmodern thought brings into prominence reiterations of the solemn pronouncement of the “death of God” and dismantles the conceptual structure of a supernatural being. It surely would be presumptuous on my part to undertake the conclusion of postmodern thought on metaphysical knowledge about God. However, I do hold a modest intention to highlight some possibilities for a discourse that might enable one to talk about God in the aporias of hospitality and gift-giving. Even though the concept of hospitality and gift-giving is not a recent invention, the relatively “new” discourse I am proposing is to articulate God’s bearing upon the possible chances of genuine hospitality and gift-giving. In defining God as the “absolute other” who would affect but does not involve in our daily practices of hospitality and gift-giving, I argue that the absolute alterity of God can be captured via a broader context of considerations where entwined discourse and action make up the fabric of our communicative praxis. Simply speaking, although many acts of hospitality and gift-giving are no more than euphonic rhetoric of a practical exchange, there is genuine hospitality and gift-giving wherein subjectivity and ontological possibility are broken because hospitality and gift-giving involve an ethical lacuna or hiatus which presumably withdraws from countable, dialectical affiliation as if there is God, who

\(^{18}\) I refer to God as the other name of desire; God of indeterminate and undefined alterity. See Derrida, *On the Name* 36.
does not really explain nor justify in a manner of what people may have expected. God comes to mind in the visage of the other person, standing on the position of the third between the giver and the receiver. God is the third, the face of the neighbor, which is not “present” but “calls” for our responsibility. Viewing God as this third is in order to avoid designating God as an object and avoid effacing his divinity by a species of conceptual idolatry; on the other hand, when we become objects for God’s vision, his divinity is again threatened with a reduction to tyrannical control and our subjectivity is divested of all individual freedom, which is a condition for responsibility. In the new grammar provided by Levinas, the grammar of the trace, the trace becomes the true bearer of meaning (Levinas 1998a: 56). Accordingly, the concern of God must be lacunal or it will be well measured to the extent of an ideal fusion:

One thinks that my relationship with the other tends to identify me with him by immersing me in a collective representation, a common ideal or a common action. It is the collectivity which says “we” that feels the other to be alongside of oneself, and not facing one. And a collectivity is necessarily set up around a third term which serves as intermediary, which supplies what is common in the communion (Levinas 1978: 94).

By common and identifiable elements people manage to formulate a communion to be along with. That common element could be an intermediary person, a certain belief, a field of work, a profession, or a shared interest, dwelling, meal, a gift, or an act of welcoming hospitality. Therefore, if there is a relationship without searching for and enhancing similarities, it is genuine hospitality and gift-giving which matches the Levinasian fearful face to face relationship—fearful because this face to face is
beyond recognition in knowledge and hence too unique to be incorporated into the reservoir of intermediary. Truly the statement of searching for being’s other and beyond is a huge work, and it is the disparity in/of knowledge as a process always on proceeding which makes this statement more than noble rhetoric. What I can manage to do now, therefore, is to focus on the face-to-face relation in hospitality and gift-giving, and to radicalize the involved ethical concerns.\(^{19}\) As Levinas argues, this relation, unlike any other which stresses communion and proximity, manifests ineluctable distance even in a gesture of a proximity and inextricably isolated subjectivity (1998a: 73).\(^{20}\)

The distinct relationship in the face to face situation of hospitality and gift-giving is the heterogeneity which cannot be the intermediary in interpersonal relationship. The token, the material object in gift-giving is not a comprehensible exchange but merely a nexus that infers infinitely to the limit of the absolute other. The semantics of the gift makes it the transcendence par excellence in its unconditionality. Therefore, it is in this face to face we discern a third, an otherness. Genuine hospitality and gift-giving makes me face-to-face with someone who is what I am not—where Levinas occasions a confrontation with the philosophy of identity. And a third party is necessary there to make possible a dis-interested responsibility for another that

---

\(^{19}\) Levinas' ethical philosophy is not based on intersubjectivity, which allows persons perceived as an “I” and “thou” to share and affirm the world. On theory of ethical intersubjectivity, see Gabriel Marcel’s *The Mystery of Being*. Vol. 1, trans. G.S. Fraser, ed. Gateway Chicago: Regnery, 1960. 252. Furthermore, it is against Martin Buber’s I-you collectivity that Levinas proposes a face-to-face without any third term or intermediary (Levinas 1987b: 93-94). For further interest, see also Levinas, “Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge,” in *The Levinas Reader*. 60-74; “Dialogue avec Martin Buber,” in Levinas, *Norms Propre*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976. 51-55.

\(^{20}\) Cf. Levinas says that in Buber’s philosophy, “reciprocity remains the tie between two separated freedom, and the ineluctable character of isolated subjectivity is underestimated” (1989:50). Levinas agrees with Buber that the self is not a substance but a relation, existing only as an “I” addressing itself to a “Thou.” By having assimilated Buber’s thoughts to the problem of knowledge in contemporary philosophical thought, Levinas criticizes Buber’s concept of intersubjectivity in terms of its reciprocity, its formality and its exclusiveness. As Buber fails to show the act of separateness involved in the process of being-subjectivity, the rupture of the individual within the whole, it is Levinas's belief that Buber fails to account for philosophy itself (Levinas 1989: 60). Levinas: ”Buber, then , pursues his inquiry into ontological structures anterior to those which objectifying intellect” (63).
excludes reciprocity (Levinas, 1998a: 82). My relation with the neighbor (the third party) regards my relation with the absolute other—a possibility of transformation—even though my relation with the neighbor does not completely exclude rules of calculation and exchange.

God reveals himself in the face of the neighbor. “Face” and “neighbor” are terms to indicate a close but not totally presentable proximity. One is compelled to think of Him as the third who speaks in a language that the subject does not really understand; were it not the case, the subject Moi takes God as an assured respondent. And yet still the subject takes the responsibility for God, from God. The subject takes and makes a decision of gift-giving or hospitality out of the control of a rationale of rewarding or exchange. This said, any talk on hospitality and gift-giving must take into consideration the fact of my responsibility to the third:

[T]he critical exigencies of rational discourse, the resolve to think in response to what Being gives, are movements of responsibility. Every effort to deduce responsibility, justify or ground it, or even state it in a synthetic representation, is already an exercise of responsibility. Responsibility is a fact. It is a fact prior to the facts assembled by coherent, that is, responsible discourse. The theoretical attitude, the ontological logos which articulates Being, owes its energy to this given—or this imposed. (Levinas 2006. Translator A. Lingis’ Introduction xix)

Levinas’s concern regarding our interaction with other selves, the third, is obvious in one of Derrida’s comments on Levinas. Derrida says that Levinas introduces us to horizons that ethics should exceed because Levinas’s search or question of the third actually results in (or from, in Derridian deconstruction) a question of “justice, philosophical intelligibility, knowledge, and even, announcing itself gradually from
one person to the next, from neighbor to neighbor, the figure of the State” (Derrida 1997a: 31). In a nutshell, the entire intelligibility of Levinas’s discourse appeals to the third. Derrida further points out that since justice is responsibility for the other human being, it will always breach the promise of responsibility because no one can take responsibility without making choice and calculation (1997a: 34).

This appeal to the third, or God as a third, makes Levinas’s philosophy an ethical facade of moral grandeur. Nevertheless, “if ethics means rationalist self-legislation and freedom (deontology), the calculation of happiness (utilitarianism), or the cultivation of virtues (virtue ethics), then Levinas’s philosophy is not an ethics.”21 For Levinas, ethics is not a superimposed excuse for those who are incapable of looking at the real in the dis-interest encounter with the face of the other. That ethics realized in to give, to respond, is not ethics of intellectual satisfaction but of existential resolution for the very possibility of the beyond.22

It is the meaning of the beyond, of transcendence, and not of ethics that our study seeks. It finds this meaning in ethics. We write signification, because ethics is structured as one-for-the-other; a signification of the beyond being, because outside of all finality is a responsibility that always increases: dis-interestedness where being rids itself of its being. (Levinas 1998a: 23)

Ethical concerns of the third crowns the meaning of the beyond. Levinas’s philosophy,  

---

21 The definition on traditional ethical philosophy is from the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/#BeiThiParPol.
22 As we mentioned earlier, the desire for the absolute other is metaphysically desired and is a desire that can not be satisfied. In that sense, Levinas keeps on explaining that, “love itself is thus taken to be the satisfaction of a sublime hunger. If this language is possible it is because most of our desires and love too are not pure” (Levinas 1969: 34). By clarifying this imagination of a lightly spoken love, Levinas actually dismisses any moral or religious satisfaction in ethics as well.
therefore, is also named “ethics of alterity.” The alterity emerges in the face of the “absolute other”; that is, the unassimilated third being. In my research, I look for the desire and wishes generated from/for responding to the unseeable third, which makes hospitality and gift-giving distinguishable from the exchangeable “third term” of communion or communication. As we have discussed so far, in communion the ego loses nothing of its ipseity in the social life of the world. Therefore, hospitality and gift-giving accomplish no “third term,” unless we view the response to God or the concern for the other as one of the factors in creating a communion for hospitality and gift-giving. But anything involving God or the face of the other has a trait of betraying any significance. Signification, as the one-for-the-other, as ethics, and as the rupture of essence, nevertheless, is the end of the illusions of its appearing (Levinas 1998a:11).

By delving into the invisible elements in these two interpersonal activities and their afterward surprising effect or momentum, I propose that hospitality and gift-giving avoid an extreme subjectivity, a solipsistic life, by offering an open system of surprise and adventure in everyday life. My dissertation, therefore, is not the simple pairing of two scholars for comparison in order to demonstrate their thematic coincidences in hospitality and gift-giving. Instead, I intend to present a new conception of ethics in hospitality and gift-giving through close reading of the classics in which various motifs are presented.

II. Central Issues

The “methodology” in my dissertation for grappling with the problem of

---


24 Cf. “The welcoming of the infinity of the other…The Desire which does not arise from a lack or a limitation but from a surplus, from the idea of Infinity” (Levinas 2000b: 210).

25 See also Levinas, “The World,” Existence and Existents 41.
hospitality and gift-giving is aimed to answer the following question: Given the elusive relationship between genuine hospitality and give-giving, how can the interpretations presented here be legitimate? That is, how can the analysis go beyond the phenomenologically comprehensible if we acknowledge that gift-giving and hospitality is not explicable with phenomenology? This, I think, leads us to the very problem of the (im)possibility of writing on gift-giving and hospitality.26

Doubts about discussing gift-giving in literary criticism are rampant. Some may argue, citing Derrida’s critique in *Given Time*, 1992, that Derrida denies the existence of gifts; there is no genuine gift in Derridian deconstruction. For the sake of clarification, we should go back to his talk on gift in 1999: "I never said that there is no gift. No. I said exactly the opposite...I doubt that there is a possibility of a phenomenology of the gift" (Derrida 1999: 60). Clearly, Derrida emphasizes that, instead of being simply posited in the economic aspect and phenomenological significance, gift-giving is the possibility of human beings experiencing the impossible. Derrida writes:

What I am interested in is the experience of the desire for the impossible.

That is, the impossible as the condition of desire...I mean the desire we want

26 Both hospitality and gift-giving involve the conception of the asymmetry of the interpersonal. Levinas articulates that:

to hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to present an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as I consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated...These difference bet the Other and me do not depend on dif properties that would be inherent in the “I,”...in the Other...They are due to the I-Other conjuncture, to the inevitable orientation of being starting from oneself toward the Other. The priority of this orientation ...summarizes the...present work.

to give, even when we realize, when we agree...that the gift, that giving, is impossible...Nevertheless, we do not give up the dream of the pure gift, in the same way that we do not give up the idea of pure hospitality...We continue to desire, to dream, through the impossible. (72)

Accordingly, while the existence of pure gift remains arguable, the event of gift-giving could initiate a journey of experiencing the impossible via experiencing the other. For example, the offering of unconditional forgiveness to the other, for Derrida, is a supreme gift because this gift opens for and smiles to the other, to the infinity (Derrida 2002: 380). In other words, Derrida suggests that the impossible could be experienced by events or wishes of gift-giving. From Derrida’s works we find a dialectical tension that renders the problem of gift-giving indeterminate. It is the tension between the whole idea of gift-giving and of enacting it while simultaneously cancelling all claims to it.

Likewise, the theoretical aporias and tension characterize Derrida’s dealing with hospitality. According to him, genuine hospitality is an unsuccessful intention due to a double bind of asserting a master in order to welcome as well as annulling a master in order to recognize the ultimate welcome which is to make the guest free from subjective laws, discursive violence, and authority of ownership (Derrida 2008: 69-71; 1997a:50; 2000: 135; 2001: 16). Therefore, the possibility of hospitality is the aporias of time and order because it gives what one does not have—that is, analogically speaking, a Lacanian simulacrum of love (Lacan 1966: 618; 1997: 147).27

In my research, I emphasize Derrida’s criticism on the gifts. We know that in his text Given Time, Derrida says that, in phenomenology, the gift always already falls

---

Approaching the Other

Chloe Ching-hsiang Lo

19

into the circulation of economy and expectation. He contends that the genuine gift should reside beyond any mere self-interest or calculative reasoning (30). This statement raises one question: Derrida does not spell out to what extent the conception of “self-interest” or “calculative reasoning” is able to address or to consume the whole discourse on gift-giving. My question is: if a gift is something that cannot appear as such (29), how shall we define or recognize the “as such”? According to Derrida, the simple recognition of the gift as a gift annuls the gifts (13). The discursive difficulty we are to be facing is that on the one hand, Derrida does not clearly illustrate situations such as mis-recognition or half-recognition—that is, when the gift is not what the giver has planned or not what the receiver can understand. On the other hand, a Derridian counterfeit gift may appear because we are told that the gift has been recognized. Against the backdrop of such a scheme of the logic of the gift which catapults us back into an economy of exchange, Derrida raises this issue in a particular poignant manner when he alludes the “thought of the gift, which would not be exhausted by a phenomenological determination” and tries to account for the element of desire in scenarios of gift-giving.

It is the issues of the in-completeness and mis-recognition in gifts that make the genuine gift possible because people and the object gift do not correspond in a closed, completed fashion. Derrida may not explore completely the trick of the repayment of

28 In fact, the whole book of Giving Time arguably evolves with the issue of mis-recognition or half-recognition. Derrida says: “An affair of reason, the trap or deception is also an affair of gift, excuse, forgiveness, or non-forgiveness for a non-gift or rather for an always improbable gift…since counterfeit money is what it is only by not giving itself as such and by not appearing as such,…that is why there is a problematic of the gift only on the basis of a consistent problematic of the trace and the text” (97, 98, 100). However, we should inquire into the imperative tone implied in Derrida’s argument, such as “the gift should remain a stranger to the law” (156). What a law that “should” can suggest, evoke, or request!

29 In his discussion of John-Luc Marion in 1997, Derrida admits that there is gift and he tries to account for it in the context of “a movement, a motion, a desire—whatever the name—a thought of the gift, which would not be exhausted by a phenomenological determination, by a theoretical determination, by a scientific determination, by an economy,” especially in his book The Gift of Death on Abraham sacrificing Isaac (Derrida 1999: 60).
a gift in depth, but it is precisely this phenomenon of “being incommensurate” that escapes any possible decisiveness in phenomenology and hence the generation of the gift. No one can make a return gift of equal value as that of the gift received, just as no one—not even the shrewd Shylock—can identify what exactly his contract with Antonio has entitled him to receive and to require (William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* IV: 301-09). In a word, Derrida disapproves of gift-giving as soon as there is a return gift, or as long as a gift is recognized, but in this critique he also has to recognize that the mis-judgment, or mis-calculation, or even mis-recognition in gift-giving could be the condition of creating genuine gifts. When Derrida asserts that it is important for the naïve to believe that every sender knows and intends the destination of his post cards (1987: 249), he is also introducing the equally important question of destination and belief in gift-giving. When the economy of the gift is not consumed or exhausted as the subject has desired, the pronouncement of “not being a gift” may ignore Derridian deconstruction for pursuing “the impossible.”

Thus, I argue that gift-giving actually indicates the issue of the sublime; that is to say, sometimes a giver would rather risk being incorporated into the circle of exchange or economy than be restrained from giving. Sometimes people choose the form of gift-giving in order to communicate a code of affection that could not be expressed otherwise. We have heard of an innocent lady named Rosalind, who once took a chain from her neck and gave it to a stranger, saying, “Sir, wear this for me. I wish I could give you a more valuable present.” And we are told that there is a good old man named Adam who gave all he had saved to his abandoned young master, saying “take that, and may He that feeds the ravens be comfort to my age!” (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*). Therefore, to pay homage to Derrida, we discuss gifts even though there is no gift *as such*. I attempt to argue in the dissertation how and where there is a gift which exceeds the “as such.” I will show in the dissertation
where there is such a gift and how it exceeds the gift “as such.” Through close reading of stories of twists and surprise in fantasy literature and medieval romance, such as *the Arabian Nights*, and many others, I hope to shed light on the problem of gift-giving and hospitality.

**III. Chapters Arrangement**

In my reading of the works by Derrida and Levinas, I suggest three controversial characteristics attributed to hospitality and gift-giving which are helpful in facilitating our theoretical discussion: being out of calculation, being out of subjectivity, and the deconstruction of chronology and logic. I will elaborate on these characteristics in chapter two: Background Theory. Relevant arguments from Marcel Mauss, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Martin Heidegger, and Slavoj Zizek will also be briefly reviewed. After the theoretical clarification, chapter III to chapter V explore three different literary sources to see how the givers give more than what they can give in the forms of gifts or hospitality, and how gift-giving and hospitality transform, with both redemptive and destructive potential, the originally assumed routes of lives.

Chapter three examines the secrets of ethics by relating to the analysis of humans and the unseeable God in terms of hospitality and gift-giving. My context of discussions is from the Biblical stories of Abraham receiving God and sacrificing Isaac, and Lot exchanging daughters for foreigners. I draw on literary criticism from Derrida, especially from his opening chapter on Czech philosopher Patocka about a narration included in *The Gift of Death*. Derrida’s interpretation of Abraham sacrificing Isaac in that book shows an intriguing difference from what is written in the Qur’an. In view of this difference, I plan to explore what Derrida has said and what may develop his argument further had he presented his readers with the different sculptures. Simply speaking, I suggest that the difference in the two scriptures on the
event of Abraham and his beloved son posits the questions of “enclosure” and “perfection” in literature in general. The Bible’s resistance to enclosure and perfection on the narration of Abraham sacrificing Isaac alludes to Derrida’s argument that ethical justification in any choice of fulfilling responsibility is actually never justified because no one can respond to the call or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other(s). He writes, “I am responsible to anyone (that is to say, to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality” (Derrida 2008: 71). That statement finds echoes in stories of Abraham and Lot when they are challenged with a seeming discrepancy between human laws and God’s command.

Chapter IV focuses on hospitality and gift-giving in inter-human relations. It highlights Levinas’s estranged ethical concern and the Derridian term “a pure impossible gift” (as argued in Given Time: Counterfeit Money) in my interpretation of Shakespeare’s great tragedy King Lear. I suggest that by providing gifts for his three daughters in the starting scene in the form of sharing (giving away) his kingdom and power, King Lear (accidentally, unconsciously) gives himself a gift—a new-born—even if this comes in the form of disappointment and disaster. I employ Bataille’s theory of transgression and Levinas’s ideas of subjectivity and existence in the world to interpret this famous work of literature. Insanity, as shown in the famous scene of wondering in the heath, implies going beyond the mundane, common, safe world, and that also recalls the unavoidable route inscribed in the "price" or "value" of genuine gift-giving and hospitality.

Chapter V concerns the idea of giving what one does not have in gift-giving and hospitality. The text concerned is the Arabian Nights, which abounds with reference
to hospitality and gift-giving: the wonderful against the mundane as well as the imaginative against the prosaically and reductively rational. I select for discussion the famous starting scene in which the beautiful and erudite Shahrazad decides to tell stories to/for the much anguished king. I also discuss one of the most popular stories in *The Nights*, namely, “the Fisherman and the Jinni in the Jar” to reexamine the possibility of gift-giving in the hope of shedding new light on the problem in traditional module of giver-gift-receiver.

*IV. Expectation*

To discuss “the other” by describing an aporia which resists theoretical disciplines is perhaps already to betray the idea of other and aporia. As an academic, I am trained to present an argument with textual expositions, so that it is objective on its own terms as well as by the standards of impartial judgment. Nonetheless, thorny questions remain: How am I to describe the process of a subject approaching an “other” that is no longer *its* (always be careful of the possessive case) other in hospitality and gift-giving? Can I show the obliqueness in personal relations among my characters under discussion: Abraham, Lot, King Lear, Shahrazad, the Demon, or the Jinni? Will I be able to show what goes against the grain of the imperatives in common hospitality and gift-giving? There are no easy answers. I could but humbly expect to show how the other is approached in hospitality via face-to-face with the absolute other in literature. My theoretical support comes from Derrida’s argument that “there is no culture that is not also a culture of hospitality” (Derrida 2002: 361) because “hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home” (364), and that it is the process of a subject approaching “an other than itself that is no longer *its* other” (362).

---

on literary heritage. I do not intend to solve problems regarding different versions of *The Nights*. The different wording of the narration does not affect my following discussion because basically there are of stable and reliable frames.
The Derridian phrase “an other than itself that is no longer its other,” I believe, is the best annotation for the absolute other—i.e., an otherness that cannot be related within a possessive case; otherwise the other is not remote or alienated enough to be literally “other.”\(^{31}\) The Derridian arguments also lead us to Levinas’s claim that even if we can ascribe the other into relationship at all, “here is an obliqueness that goes higher than straight forwardness” in relations involving you, I, and he because this relation is asymmetry and un-in-ferable (Levinas 1998a: 178). Levinas has more to say on the third pronoun “he,” and will explain it later in the chapter exclusively on theory.

In addition, I want to show how the impossible is lived via giving an impossible gift. The idea of an impossible gift comes from Derrida, who says that "a gift is something you do without knowing what you do, without knowing who gives the gift, who receives the gift, and so on" (Derrida 1999: 60). This “do without knowing” pertains to a phenomenological impossibility of gift-giving. Put differently, we may say that full formalization in gift-giving is not the impossible; rather, it is the experience of the impossible, and it remains in a sort of intermediary stage.\(^{32}\) Therefore, to certain extent, this phenomenological impossibility is suspended. In some literary works, the phenomenological impossibility of gift-giving actually makes the face-to-face with the absolute other possible, given that gift-giving disturbs the immobile nothingness in a one-person isolation which generates possibilities or alterity in the daily lives of people. Last but not least, my speculation is that though he never formally wrote on gifts, Levinas would have stated firmly that there would be serious and genuine gifts had he been enquired.\(^{33}\)

\(^{31}\) If interested, cross-refer Levinas’s words on the absolute other at The Provocation of Levinas 88, 103, 109, 111, 144.


\(^{33}\) In his comments on his good friend Levinas, Maurice Blanchot notes that gift-giving means an alterity in Levinas’s context which suggests “the transcendence of another person, the infinite relation of the one person to another [that] obligates beyond any obligation” when it manifests a
"detachment, a disinterestedness which is suffered, patient responsibility [for the other] that endures all the way to ‘substitution,’ ‘one for the other’” (Blanchot, Writing of the Disaster 109). Levinas’s contends that the imperative of welcoming the other (l’autri) and being responsible for the approach of the neighbor is something “beyond a simple exchange of signs,” and interestingly, he terms it the “gift” (Levinas 1998a: 14).
CHAPTER 2
BACKROUND THEORY

I. Ethics of the Third in Hospitality and Gift-Giving

Gift-giving and hospitality are as old as history. People give gifts or offer hospitality as a symbolic action of love or an amiable pretext of practical exchange. In the context of Levinas’s theory, “love” is not an assumption and an investment in the “I”; it is rather Love without Eros. In other words, it is the sacredness of human relationships through which God may pass (Levinas 1998a: 68; Levinas 1987b: Richard A. Cohen, “Translator’s Introduction” 24). Whether it is inspired by affection or by careful calculation, gift-giving and hospitality open up an arena of the invisible, absent other. This conclusion is reached after a comparison between Jacques Derrida and Immanuel Levinas regarding their thoughts on hospitality and gift-giving. Therefore, I argue that the ethical concern of Derrida and Levinas, which I term “ethics of the third,” is indispensable to the understanding of their seemingly elusive argument on hospitality and gift-giving. The conception of “the third” challenges any convenient relationship between the first and second person voices. As Derrida observes in his reading of Levinas, the situation of the third person and of justice underlines our analysis of the question of existence, subjectivity, foreigner, host, giver, receiver, etc. (Derrida 2000: 5). Pointing out a third element in any comprehending I-thou relationship is critical (Levinas 1987b: 94), especially in the social activities of gift-giving and hospitality. The third element is critical because genuine hospitality and gift-giving activate imagination of an ethics other than sacrifice or exchange in order to eschew the pitfall of self-centered exchange or self-sacrificed altruism which

1 It has also been pointed that “love is the culmination of Levinas’s discourse with the Other.” Steven Gans, “Levinas and Pontalis,” The Provocation of Levinas 88.
is still appropriated in a self-centered subjectivity. By ushering in the “ethics of the third” implied in the amiable social activity of gift-giving or hospitality, we admit simultaneously the impasse in human relations and recognize its necessity to be realized in human communions. If human beings’ subjectivity is activated in their functions for each other, hospitality and gift-giving reveal a desire of intimacy which oscillates between a repudiating heterogeneity and an all-absorbing homogeneity. It is this desire for the impossibility in a commensurate relationship that Derrida wants to pursue, and it is this desire we want to illustrate via the angle of “the third” element in this paper. Genuine gifts or hospitality cannot be given unless it is for the sake of an invisible, the third, “the absolute other.” Insofar as the generosity is for the third, the absolute other, the fundamental gap between the ideals of genuine gift-giving and hospitality and the vagaries of practicing them can be sutured. The third must not be present, must not be visible, and must not converse with us, directly or plainly, with an all-comprehensible language, because that language would be “our” language. The third reveals the possibility of love in gift-giving and hospitality by exposing the illusion of reciprocity and, at the same time, allows for a genuine relationship outside the limits of contracts, laws, and yet it is still willing to give, to offer. Bearing within itself the trauma of existential impasse, gift-giving and hospitality, on the one hand, witness the aporia accompanying them, and on the other hand, make the impossible possible as long as they do not foster a visible, seeable, calculated, and possible relationship. It is this knowing the impossible yet refusing to endorse it makes genuine gift-giving and hospitality what they are.

I use God, or the “absolute other,” to import the illusiveness of what we are undertaking in the discussion. In the following discussion I will assess “the third”

---

2 The subject can never do enough, because doing enough would require that the subject knows the other’s needs as one knows one’s own, and it is precisely this reduction of the other to the same that Levinas would avoid.
with the conception of God as developed in Levinas’s prominent article: “God and Philosophy.” Sometimes, although the term does not appear in the literature discussed, it is the other selves who are actually involved even if they are not pointed to directly in any comprehensive I-Thou correspondence. For Levinas, the other selves remind the reader of an invisible face of the third, i.e., the face of God. God is an idea that needs definition, and for the time being we will take its ontological meaning tentatively. Levinas proclaims that the absolute other is beyond any direct approaching or indicating system (1986: 354); and he also implies that the absolute other is ethically experienceable via relations with the third because of love. The dialectics between love, sacredness, and other possible momentums will be articulated in details as we develop our discussion.

II. Literature Review

A. Hospitality

1. Derrida: absolute hospitality. Hospitality, as commonly expected, has no concern for “the third” because common hospitality is an issue of unwritten contract: a contract between guest and host, between foreigner and citizen. Not satisfied with the common hospitality of unwritten regulation, Derrida develops his contention for the aporia of hospitality first with the foreigner’s question—that is, the dialectics between the inside and the outside—and then with the absolute other in his later argument made in 1997. In the core of these arguments, a consideration of the genuineness is involved, which may be termed as the “radical,” the “pure,” or sometimes the “absolute.” It connects “the impossibility of the possible” as well as “the possible of the impossible” (Derrida 2002: 386) with hospitality.

---

Derrida contends that in many of Plato’s dialogues, it is often the foreigner who asks questions, to the extent of challenging the ruler’s legitimacy. The foreigner shakes up the authority of the paternal logos “as though the Foreigner had to begin by contesting the authority of the chief, the father, or the ‘master of the house’” (2000: 5). Derrida’s argument on hospitality focuses on the possibility of questioning the authority and of imagining beyond the expected, rather than referring to any altruist concept. For Derrida, the question of the foreigner, as a question of hospitality, intertwines with the question of being (2000: 21).

In Derrida’s discussion of hospitality, there are two different laws involved. One is the unwritten agreement of common hospitality, the other is Immanuel Kant’s idea of the sublime and unlimitedness, also called the Great Law of Hospitality, which is to subvert all the contract-based laws of hospitality. The Great Law of Hospitality is to welcome all, to welcome the other, and it rejects the common laws of hospitality, for the former is a Law pointing to an Other unknown. Kant expands the cosmopolitan law to encompass universal hospitality without limit—such is the condition of perpetual peace among all men (2001: 20). According to him, each man is in principle connected to another man when hospitality is performed or assumed. As Derrida points out, Kant has shifted stress of hospitality from the host’s right of residence to the guest’s right of visitation:

We are speaking here, as in the previous articles, not of philanthropy, but of right; and in this sphere hospitality signifies the claim of a stranger entering foreign territory to be treated by its owner without hostility. The latter may send him away again, if this can be done without causing his death; but, so

---

5 See also Kantian sublime and Lyotard’s discussion of the sublime in *The Analytic of the Sublime*.
long as he conducts himself peaceably, he must not be treated as an enemy. It is not a right to be treated as a guest to which the stranger can lay claim—a special friendly compact on his behalf would be required to make him for a given time an actual inmate—but he has a right of visitation. This right to present themselves to society belongs to all mankind in virtue of our common right of possession on the surface of the earth on which, as it is a globe, we cannot be infinitely scattered, and must in the end reconcile ourselves to existence side by side: at the same time, originally no one individual had more right than another to live in any one particular spot. (Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*, 1972. 137-38; Recited Derrida 2001: 21-22)

Kant’s argument contributes to shifting our attention to the right of the guest; that is, from the duty (*devoir*) of hospitality to the right (*droit*) to hospitality. Kant excluded hospitality as a *right of residence*; he limits it to the *right of visitation* (Derrida 2001: 21). Kant frames the problematic of hospitality more on the right of visitation (*Besuchsrecht*), rather than of residence (*Gastrecht*). Counting as progress at first sight, however, Derrida reveals the potential threat coming from a state sovereignty based on the law and the state police. For Derrida, there is an always possible perversion of the law of hospitality, which Kant seems to pledge unconditional, because obscure and difficult remain when this pledge depends on judging the public nature of the public space (22). All these questions undertaken become a dialectics between the master and the guest. As soon as a guest is granted a right of residence, the guest is taken a posit of the master, which will then start a new confrontation of his/her (unwelcomed) guest, the immigrant, the refugee, etc. Therefore, Kant’s ethical
philosophy also raises suspicions that it is simply idealism.\textsuperscript{6}

If it is only a traditionally judicial matter, hospitality is but a fixed provision waiting to be executed as if it is an obligation. In a nutshell, it is but a reciprocal covering—an action for the sake of “the same”: the host understands what he is ready to understand, and welcomes whom he is able to welcome. The host and the guest are so mutually acceptable and communicable that they cannot make the welcome “genuine” and thus there is “general problematic of relationships between parasitism and hospitality” (Derrida 2000: 59). A contracted, conditional hospitality is no more than a kind of parasitism in human relationship. Therefore, referring to Kant but not satisfied with Kant, Derrida tries to elaborate on the Hospitality which performs and transforms more than the existing laws can allow and control. No one can forever stay at home. No one can forever be at home physically as well as ontologically—in German the idea of \textit{Heimlich} ambiguously yet significantly means both at home and not at home.\textsuperscript{7} Everyone faces the possibility of being a foreigner, an anomo (out of law), and therefore we can assume that there is no eternal right on any given site. The host may reject the right of residence (or the right of hospitality) that the foreigner requests, given that the former is the “citizen” already, and thus, if he desires, has the right to dispel the visitor. “Man is especially a political being when facing the foreigners’ question” (Derrida, 2000: 66); “might is right” (Derrida, 2003: 127). If the foreigner is to cross the political frontiers and the identity threshold, then

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{6}] Referring to Levinas: “The Kantian notion of infinity figures as an ideal of reason, the projection of its exigencies in a beyond, the ideal completion of what is given incomplete but without the incomplete being confronted w a privileged experience of infinity, without it drawing the limits of its finitude from such a confrontation. The finite is here no longer conceived by relation to the infinite; quite the contrary, the infinite presupposes the finite, which it amplifies infinitely…The Kantian finitude is described positively by sensibility, as the Heideggerian finitude by the being for death.” Levinas 2000b: 196.
\item[\textsuperscript{7}] See Freud Uncanny and my M.A. thesis in 2000.
\end{itemize}
simultaneously there must be methods to impose and make the foreigner accommodated in the law that addresses the foreigner properly:

It is a question of knowing how to transform and improve the law, and of knowing if this improvement is possible within an historical space which takes place *between* the Law of an unconditional hospitality, offered *a priori* to every other, to all newcomers, *whoever they may be*, and the conditional laws of a right to hospitality, without which *The* unconditional Law of hospitality would be in danger of remaining a pious and irresponsible desire, without form and without potency, and of even being perverted at any moment.

Derrida 2001: 23

The deconstruction of hospitality and Derrida’s modification of Kant’s claim of the Great Law of Hospitality stand to reason when Derrida emphasizes that the unconditional law of absolute hospitality does not keep itself above the laws of common, contracted hospitality; on the contrary, it requires mundane laws. There must be laws for the unconditional law of hospitality to challenge, to threaten, and to deny (2000: 79). Derrida’s discussion of Oedipus in Greek tragedy is interesting in this aspect. He says that Oedipus the foreigner is troublesome, is a patricide, but Oedipus also brings news (or a possibility) because of his ominous traveling and visiting (2000: 78). He also uses the same deconstructionist strategy to read the biblical story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, which I will elaborate on later in chapter two.

In his further discussion of absolute hospitality, Derrida says that facing without

---

8 The text Derrida discussed came from Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, II.
figuring, welcoming without embracing, and fulfilling anticipation without waiting are “conditions” of the genuine, “unconditional” and absolute hospitality. By this unconditional hospitality he argues that hospitality is the culture itself. Derrida’s French word *hôte*, meaning both the one who gives and the one who receives hospitality, makes simultaneously the possibility and impossibility of the gift of hospitality.

If, in hospitality, one must say *yes*, welcome the coming [*accueillir la venue*], say the “welcome”; one must say *yes*, there where one does not wait, *yes*, there where one does not expect, nor await oneself to, the other [*là où l’on ne s’attend pas soi-même à l’autre*], to let oneself be swept by the coming of the wholly other, the absolutely unforeseeable [*inanticipable*] stranger, the uninvited visitor, the unexpected visitation beyond welcoming apparatuses. If I welcome only what I welcome, what I am ready to welcome, and that I recognized in advance because I expect the coming of the *hôte* as invited, there is no hospitality. (2002: 361-62)

He continues to argue how hospitality is extended to others. Hospitality is ready to serve, to host, to shelter the homeless, and since a host is never giving enough, he therefore is always ready to ask for forgiveness. The whole process and imperatives of welcoming, signs of anticipation, invitation, and even sacrifice, are the matters of our relationship with others. The question remains how unconditional, radical hospitality is realized—the hospitality “to an other who is beyond any ‘it’s other’” (2002: 364). For Derrida, the absolute, unknowable hospitality, although seemingly impossible, reveals its “first movement” in the concept of substitution (2002: 367) because in absolute hospitality the host is to substitute for the guest in a challenging dilemma.
such as Lot sacrifices his household for the guests. Derrida talks about the mystical substitution and forgiveness in Christianity and Islam. Jesus is an example of giving mystical substitution, voluntary “hostage,” as well as voluntarily being offered “as pledge in this foreign milieu” (2002: 367). And this “persecution” (2002: 379) makes the idea of forgiveness re-examined. In Levinas’s words, instead of being a mere exercise of sovereign power, responsibility for the other exposes me like a hostage to the other. Responsibility thus realizes the possibility of opening me to the absolute other (1998a: 10). 9 “Forgiveness must be infinite or it is nothing: it is excuse or exchange” (Derrida, 2002: 380). It is clear therefore that Derrida radicalizes the idea of hospitality in terms of substitution and forgiveness. To deploy the attributes of hospitality is to push the idea of genuine hospitality to be confronted by all limits while simultaneously keeping the common laws of hospitality accountable.

2. Levinas: welcoming the other. Levinas’s conception of hospitality alludes to the philosophical concern for welcoming the other: “To possess the idea of infinity is to have already welcomed the Other” (2000b: 93). He begins with criticizing Husserl’s transcendental idealism and Heidegger’s dialectics in being-in-time. He argues that patience and waiting in the manner of a question, a search, a demand and a prayer give us “thoughts more thoughtful than the positive ones” (1998a: 50). Patience and waiting for God manifest an existential passivity, which reverses into the proximity of the other and my responsibility as a hostage (1998a: 51). This passivity, also called a novel rationality by Levinas, is like a request addressed to another without response. The passivity is a waiting which responds to in-comprehension (the in- here suggesting both a simple negation and a reference to dwelling within time and

---

humanity). There is special philosophical meaning for this passivity in Levinas’s argument. He says that there is still searching and questioning in this passivity, which arguably is expressed admirably by the prophet Isaiah: “I am sought of them that asked not for me, I am found of them that sought me not” (Isaiah 65:1; recited in 1998a 51). Levinas’s idea of transcendence lies in this passive search and patience to the point of forgetting the host’s own demand.

Levinas’s hospitality, in the forms of attention and welcome, draws Derrida’s attention. Derrida writes that hospitality is

[t]ending toward the other, attentive intention, intentional attention, yes to the other. Intentionality, attention to speech, welcome of the face, hospitality…and since it [the welcoming of the other] opens itself to the infinity of the other, an infinity that, as other, in some sense precedes it, the welcoming of the other (objective genitive) will already be a response.

(1997a: 22-23)

Clearly, Derrida reverses the order of welcoming in hospitality: the welcoming of the other is actually already a response to the invitation of the other; the other welcomes me first. Regarding a personal relationship with the other and the egoism arising from the metaphysical heritage, Levinas argues that “it is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other” (1998b: 80). In other words, the idea of infinity in me, implies a content overflowing the container. Levinas stresses that this is an overflowing without breaking rationalism,

since the idea of infinity, far from violating the mind, conditions nonviolence itself, that is, establishes ethics. The other is not for reason a
scandal that puts it in dialectical movement, but the first teaching. A being receiving the idea of Infinity, receiving since it cannot derive it from itself, is a being…whose existing consists in this incessant reception of teaching, overflowing of self

2000b: 204

This overflowing of subjectivity reveals Levinas’s related interest in exploring the philosophical conception of the there is: a subjective experience of the loss of subjectivity. Levinas first sees an eternal vigilance in his phenomenological inquiry in his There is: Existence without Existents, which introduces the alterity and infinity that will structure his later framework of ethics. For him, the other calls into question my identity by the notification of something Levinas refers to as the “there is (il y a).” This there is refers to the fact of the nakedness of beings; by nakedness it means beings which are no longer counted as elements of a universal order or continuity.11 There is, in Levinas’s work, describes the experience of the subject being invaded, depersonalized and stifled by the rustling of horror. And horror is the fear of being, a fear which strips consciousness of its very subjectivity, and is nowise an anxiety about death (1978: 59-62). The Levinasian argument of there is means to see the problematic of traditional knowledge that shows concerns for the substantiality of the subject. “For identity is something…which has detached itself from the anonymous

---

10 See “Existence Without Existents.” Existence and Existents 57-64.
11 For the notion of the there is, see the following statement from Levinas: “Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness. One cannot put this return to nothingness outside of all events. But what of this nothingness itself? Something would happen, if only night and the silence of nothingness. The indeterminateness of this ‘something is happening’ is not the indeterminateness of a subject and does not refer to a substantive. Like the third person pronoun in the impersonal form of a verb, it designates not the uncertainly known author of the action, but the characteristic of this action itself which somehow has no author. This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term there is. The there is inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is ‘being in general.’” (Existence and Existents 57). See also Levinas 1985: 50; 1987b: 46.
rustling of the *there is*” (1978: 87). In hospitality and gift-giving, the identity of being a host or being a giver is shaken by the unnamable *there is* because there is unspeakable secret; there is unrecognized hope; there is violence in the welcoming; there is betrayed responsibility; there is resisting gift receiver; there is unregulated guest who represents in a relationship of proximity between the host and the guest, and the guest obsesses the host according to the absolute asymmetry of signification, the the-one-for-the-other;¹² and there is conception of time interval, etc. In other words, there are too many “third elements” which result in the incommensurability of hospitality and gift-giving, and thus the emotional and existential “value” of hospitality and gift-giving.

Derrida has a say on the shaken subjectivity. He argues that the host is in the preparation of asking forgiveness, not miserably but humbly and transcendentally. It is only in this sense that the host is a genuine host. For Derrida, conditioned hospitality is inscribed in the form of rights and appears only in the metaphor of “broad daylight”—that is, it is in a loving tone of claiming communication, enabling totalizing information and epistemologically violent, oppressive openness (Derrida 2000: 57). To avoid this classic sense of hospitality, Derrida has to point out that the host in this hospitality essentially corresponds with what the police and politics demand ((Derrida 2000: 57). By the same token, Levinas argues that it is indeed the master, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage in the house of God. Hospitality “ends up in substitution for another, in the condition—or the unconditionality—of being a hostage” (Levinas 1998a: 66). This conception of passivity refers to an epistemologically silent subject. The failed investment and the sense of responsibility beyond measure posit subjectivity to catch “sight of a passivity in it that is never passive enough” (1998a: 72). This notion of passivity is important in deciphering the

¹² Levinas, *OWTB* 158..
commonly-recognized phenomena of hospitality because if a host is always late in welcoming the visitor, or is never prepared well enough, the host is therefore always not positive enough; for the host, that will rid him/her of too much self-importance in the initiatives of hospitality and gift-giving.

Levinas uses the image of an internal hemorrhage to describe his idea of the subjectivity which is emptied even at home. He writes: “To revert to oneself is not to establish oneself at home, even if stripped of all one’s acquisitions. It is to be like a stranger, hunted down even in one’s home, contrasted in one’s identity…it is always to empty oneself anew of oneself, and to absolve oneself, like in a hemophiliac’s hemorrhage (Levinas 2006: 92; recited also by Llewelyn, 144). Being at home is a metaphor of being in control. Reflecting on our discussion of hospitality and gift-giving, we see that the confident position of being a host or a giver is reversed, is no longer “at home,” and is extremely challenged right at its most comfortable conceit. The dialects of being challenged at home as a host is illustrated at my chapter on King Lear.

In addition, this philosophy of passivity is closely connected to Levinas’s critique of the I-thou mode of human relations. Levinas argues instead for a one-way action, there is a “face-to-face” relationship, where the subject acts without entering the promised land(1986: 349). Accordingly, the face-to-face question is not an I-thou question in Levinas’s framework of ethics:

The personal order to which a face obliges us is beyond being. Beyond being is a third person, which is not definable by the oneself, by ipseity. It is the possibility of the third direction of radical unrightness which escapes the bipolar play of immanence and transcendence proper to being. Through a trace the irreversible past takes on the profile of a ‘He’. The beyond from
which a face comes is the third person. The pronoun *He* expresses exactly its inexpressible irreversibility, already escaping every relation as well as every dissimulation, and in this sense absolutely unencompassable or absolute, a transcendence in an ab-solute past. The *illeity* of the third person is the condition for the irreversibility. (1986: 356)

Levinas uses the profile of a “He” to introduce an open arena formed by uncertainty and producing uncertainty in the existential world and in this world of language. The third pronoun is a violence here because it breaks the world of the I-thou relation and of identities. The idea of the third is employed here because in our discussion framework, there is no exchange in the third (person) (Levinas 2006: 158). Exchange is between being and entities. Exchange exists only where there is countable, definable and predictable identity. Exchange is between the subject and its respondent, between partner and counter partner. By proposing a third which can leave a trace in our beings, Levinas explains that only a being that transcends the world can leave a trace. Seen in this light, the third is God, or is the face of the neighbor, or is the trace of the absolute other. “God” and “the neighbor” thus are two ideas that demand oblique thinking and groping metaphysical logic. The conception of “the neighbor” resists “families” of similitude, and is “determined by accidental contiguity, genealogical isolation, and ethical encounter (Reinhard 785). “God” and “the neighbor” represent a relationship both strange and proximate, a conjunction based on break, limit, or blind spot when a relation is generated between God and humans, or among humans. In the discussion above, Derrida’s and Levinas’s philosophical

---

13 The third is a violent action in the scene because it breaks the hustles of the original namable world of the I-thou relationship, and of the world of identities, which Levinas criticizes “always equals meaning to the manifestation of being and makes manifestation equivalent to being’s *essence*” (1998a: 78). The metaphor of He in You is to break up “the omnipotence of the logos, that of systems and simultaneity” (1998a: 78).
reflections do not argue for a “completely close” human relationship; if so, this relationship tends to be an overwhelmingly imposition of subjectivity, a product of “direct approaching.”

Accordingly, two connected issues, “the third” and “the trace,” express the oblique thinking. The third and the trace are two challenging ideas in Levinas’s work. Before we engage in any further discussion, it is important to understand what Levinas means by the word trace. It should not be forgotten that Levinas first introduces the trace in the two essays “The Trace of the Other,” published late in 1963, and “Signification and Meaning,” published in early 1964. For Levinas, “a trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past” (1978: 358). This passing means simultaneously a betrayal of my anarchic relation with illeity, as well as a new relationship with it, a process where the incomparable subject is reverting to a member of society (Levins 2006: 158).

For Derrida, the trace is of a text and not of the absolute Other (Bernasconi 1998b: 24). In a footnote at the end of the 1967 essay “Form and Meaning: A Note on the Phenomenology of Language,” Derrida writes that: “The trace would not be the mixture or passage between form and the amorphous, between presence and absence, etc., but that which, in escaping this opposition, renders it possible because of its irreducible excess” (Derrida 1973: n.14; 1982: 172n) The trace represents Levinas’s attempt to overcome the subject-object distinction in modern philosophy. Levinas views this distinction as a limitation because it remains within the totalizing tendencies of Western philosophy. The trace in Levinas’s program comes out of his discussion of the “anterior posterior,” a notion introduced as part of the discussion of the Heideggerian analyses of the world. The important point is the sight into the structure of the a priori that Levinas has learned from Martin Heidegger. Levinas argues that the constitution of the world is an a priori constitution, but insofar as the
subject who constitutes presupposes a world, the constitution is *a posteriori*. What is both anterior and posterior? The answer is an anteriority that is “‘older’ than the a priori”—the trace (Levinas 2006: 101).

Furthermore, the oblique thinking is expressed in the issue of meeting God. In the biblical context of God meeting Moses, an important question remains to be answered: where and what is the trace after God and Moses meet? This question is not about whether God was seen face to face by Moses, nor whether God has a face like human features, since that problem is still concluded under the indicating system.14 The experience itself is deemed as the third; it is connected with experiencing God. Levinas has described it as such:

> The God who passed is not the model of which the face would be an image. To be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God, but to find oneself in his trace…. He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in *Exodus* 33. To go toward Him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity.

Poor ethical subjectivity deprived of freedom! Unless this would be the trauma of a fission of the self that occurs in an adventure undergone with God or through God. But in fact this ambiguity also is necessary to transcendence. Transcendence owes it to itself to interrupt its own demonstration and monstration, its phenomenality. It requires the blinking and dia-chrony of enigma, which is not simply a precarious certainty, but breaks up the unity of transcendental apperception, in which immanence

---

14 The origins of “face” starts as early as in *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*. But it is not fully developed until *Totality and Infinity*. See *TI* 86, 87, 197, 203. *OP* 55. 孫向晨, <<面向他者>> 141-142.
always triumphs over transcendence. (1986: 359).

The above remarks reveal Levinas’s contention for transcendence whose ambiguity and unaccountability accounts for the transcendent (2006: 158). Transcendence is not out of the world. Transcendence is within the world either of ugly interruption or of triumphant immanence. Undergoing hospitality is undergoing transcendence. Although the subject seems deprived in the always being late and not well prepared face-to-face, yet Levinas tries to argue that it is a necessity for transcendence. The postmodern world is therefore not a chaotic, valueless world of illusions and codes; for Levinas and Derrida the value exists even though it is not constructed in a traditional way. The subject in Levinas and Derrida is no longer a poor being as in the Heideggerian time, which essentially refers to anxiety for life.15

The oblique thinking is expressed, finally, in the issue of the receiver: for whom do we provide our good will. Although Derrida asserts that ethics is hospitality, yet the question of Hospitality is not emergent in our daily language, even though the practice of hospitality is proceeding. Most of us realize it is a duty, but to whom this good manner is applied, we do not speculate much or often enough. Not quite intellectual forwardly?, this issue of receivers inevitably forces us to take up the issue of the donee in gift-giving.

B. Gift-Giving

Etymologically, the double meanings of “gift,” i.e., present and poison, come from the same German word *gibt.*16 Some hard evidence in literature and

anthropology studies also indicate that gift-giving is a multi-natured activity of competing power, of creating debt, and of transcending the world. In his book *The Gift* published in the early 1950s, Marcel Mauss states that gift-giving is at least a mild demonstration of power-wrestling in primordial society. Gift-giving, the linchpin of a loving relationship, remains for Mauss a practice with loosely defined principle of distribution and exchange. In Mauss’s context, the gift is an occasional matter, an exception reserved for holidays and special events rather than the very nerve of communal life. Sometimes it also leads into severe and malicious competition and even causes catastrophe.

Applied as an exception, gift-giving can disturb the subject’s balance of life by creating or causing an unknown figure in our book of balance even though the giver gives in order to start the circle of exchange, to have the other to respond. As Slavoj Zizek points out, gift-giving, especially sacrificial entreaties, is rather to ascertain that there is an Other who is able to relate to our request. The giver gives in order to make sure that the I is not totally lonely or alienated in the Cosmos; the subject gives in order to initiate an Other, instead of a static nothingness.

Even if the Other does not grant my wish, I can at least be assured that there is an Other who, maybe, next time will respond differently: the world out there, exclusive of all catastrophes that may befall me, is not a meaningless blind machinery, but a partner in a possible dialogue, so that even a catastrophic outcome is to be read as a meaningful response, not as a kingdom of blind chance…. (Zizek 69)

In other words, gift-giving is not interest pursuing in a crude form—i.e., not in a commercial way. It is “invisible capital” and “social alchemy” just like Pierre Bourdieu contends (Bourdieu 219). “In such a universe, there are only two ways of getting and keeping a lasting hold over someone: debts and gifts” (Bourdieu 217). The given gift sometimes means more to the subject itself than to the “someone held.”

It is George Bataille who in Volume One of *The Accused Share* overturns the economic principle of rational, utilitarian calculation, which he calls “restricted economy.” Instead, Bataille argues for an unproductive, squandering expense, which defines the workings of a “general economy.” Bataille’s conception on the general economy is especially related to the excessive enjoyment in large-scale gift-giving. We will come back to Bataille later in my discussion of *King Lear*; for the time being, let us give an explanation of Gift first, specifically that of Derrida’s argument.

1. Derrida and the gift

a. The Impossibility of Gifts and the Experience of the Impossible

Derrida picks up what Mauss has left by examining the etymology of “gift,” which originally connotes a dose of poison, and he suggests that there is no gift existing as such—that is, to be present or make an appearance as a gift (1999: 206). Derrida’s principal point is that “if A gives B to C, then C is grateful to A and owes A a debt of gratitude, with the result that C, instead of being given something, is now in debt” (1997c:141). Hence, gift-giving is impossible because when a gift is given, it succumbs to an interplay of exchange relations. In addition, since a genuine gift in its purity of being freely given without any expectations of return and would need to be forgotten in the very moment it is given and taken, the circle of economy in gift-giving is even more unbreakable by some heroic act of self-sacrifice (1997c:146).

Derrida, however, does not intend to argue for the annulment of gift-giving only.
Derrida emphasizes, instead, that gifts are the possibility for men in experiencing the impossible (1999:60). Gift-giving could initiate a journey of experiencing the impossible towards that which is beyond expectations. For example, unconditional forgiveness to the other is a supreme gift because this gift opens for and smiles to the Other, to the Infinity (2002: 380). Following Derrida’s logic of the gift, actually the impossible could be experienced by events or wishes of gift-giving.

b. The Gift that Is Not a Present and Abraham Sacrificing Isaac

In the context of Derrida’s argument, a gift is destined for non-recognition and that a gift would immediately annul itself as soon as it is recognized (1992a :13); a gift must involve the idea of the other, or the not-identifiable, otherwise it is not a genuine gift (1999: 211). The infinite Other, whose name is also God (2008: 59), is equal to an infinite goodness, and is one who “gives in an experience that amounts to a gift of death [donner la mort]” (2008: 4). It is in this context that gift-giving could be an experience of meeting the impossible or encountering the absolute other. Derrida says that gifts imply the mysterium tremendum: “the terrifying mystery, the dread, fear and trembling of the Christian in the experience of the sacrificial gift,” and it is significantly carried in the event of Abraham sacrificing Isaac (2008: 7). This uncomfortable disproportion that links me to the unseeable gaze of God “makes oblique reference to something that is not a thing but that is probably the very site of the most decisive paradox, namely, the gift that is not a present, the gift of something that remains inaccessible, unpresentable, and as a consequence secret” (2008: 30). All the generosity of a gift must hide its generosity in order to give, and this fact should not be confused with an economy of sacrifice, as long as there is a secret affinity, an unavoidable risk of contaminating genuine gift by economy of exchange (2008: 32).

Narratives of the gift help us find out that the notion of death pertains to the act
of gift-giving.17 In the gift of death, the gift transforms the philosophical Good into a love that renounces itself (2008: 41). The apprehension of death thus is a unique experience to every individual because nobody else can undergo or confront my place when death is given to me. For those who are “incapable of making a gift of death, incapable of sacrificing what he loved, hence incapable of loving and of hating,” they will not give anything anymore (Derrida 2008: 75). In other words, in Derrida’s argument, the ability to give—to the level of making a gift of death—is the ability to love—to the extent of sacrificing in secret what one loves, such as Abraham sacrificing Isaac—I will give a fuller account of this later in chapter three.

2. The common idea of hospitality and gift-giving in Derrida and Levinas.

Hospitality is a gift that is hard to give. Hospitality and gift-giving thus often times intertwine. In Derrida’s work, hospitality and gift-giving utter the same logic: they converge at the point where the intention of dwelling with the aporetic laws and approaching the impossible are the central concern. The consistency in Derrida’s argument on hospitality and gift-giving is unquestionable. In Derrida’s and Levinas’s work, hospitality challenges the idea of assurance because hospitality is about making decisions and taking responsibilities without the assurance of an ontological foundation (Derrida 1997a: 21).

The difficulty in addressing the problem of hospitality and gift-giving is generated when both are linked to virtue and justice, to moral and political considerations. And there are ethical concerns to be re-examined. Derrida and Levinas have a common strategy in their arguments: while a comprehensive study of these two

17 Gayatri C. Spivak points out that for Derrida, “Nietzsche remains a less dark figure because Nietzsche reckons with the living animality of the human.” As for Heidegger, Derrida asks: ‘What is being-for-death? What is death for a Dasein that is never defined essentially as a living thing? This is not a matter of opposing death to life, but of wondering what semantic content can be given to death in a discourse for which the relation to death, the experience of death, remains unrelated to the life of the living thing.’” (OS, 120). See G. C. Spivak “Responsibility” 32-33.
conceptions and activities ruptures our most traditional value of reciprocity, which is homological, immanent, finite and politically concord,\(^\text{18}\) much effort has to be made on the experience of faith, of believing, and of an ethical credit that is irreducible to knowledge. And this is why without first clarifying ideas like faith, substitution, responsibility, and the unseeable other, issues like hospitality and gift-giving seem so mundane yet elusive.

C. The Third and Otherness

Though Levinas intends to present a kind of ethics other than traditional Western moral philosophy, Derrida is not convinced by Levinas’s approach to the infinity. Since *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas had sought, in the name of ethics, to challenge the predominance accorded by the tradition to ontology. “We thus leave the philosophy of Parmenidean being,” claims Levinas in the book. In this context, the Parmenides of Plato represents the philosophy of the unity of being which suppresses what Levinas variously calls “the good,” the “beyond Being,” and “infinity” (Levinas 1989: 67). The general thrust of Derrida against Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics” is to insist on Levinas’s dependence on Western ontology, even in his attempt to break with it (Bernasconi 15). Levinas attempts to think of the other not as negation but as a positive plenitude; and yet, Derrida observes that Levinas is nevertheless obliged to use the negative term—“infinity”—to do it. The word “infinite” is, according to Derrida, a result of Hegelian dialectics and thus is relative to the finite. If we let the finite stand for the totalizing thought of the tradition of Western ontology, as the infinite stands for the attempt to surpass it, it is at once apparent that this argument draws the thought of the infinite back into the sphere of philosophy. Levinas’s infinity

thus bears the mark of the finite within it. For example, Derrida sought to expose how
the Other “must be other than myself,” and therefore cannot be infinitely, absolute
Other (Derrida 1978: 126). Derrida contends that Levinas attempts to go beyond
philosophical discourse without acknowledging the fact that it can only be done in a
language inherited from the tradition he seeks to surpass. This is why Derrida
announced, in his essay on Levinas “The Ends of Man” at the end of 1968, that
Levinas attempts an exit and a deconstruction without changing ground. Derrida
insists that Levinas retains his dependence on the tradition in his very attempt to put it
into question (Bernasconi 16).

Nevertheless, Derrida has deep sympat hy with Levinas’s philosophical program
despite his suspicion of Levinas’s idea of infinity. One of their common expressions is
the third in their elaboration on human relationship.

1. Derrida on the third
a. The Third and the Other in Me

Let’s begin with a quote in which Derrida explains what he means by the third [le
tires]. The third, Derrida writes, refers to the one

who is the birth of justice and finally of the state, already announces himself
in the duel of the face-to-face and the face, and therefore disjoints it,
dis-orient it, “destin-errs” it; that the beyond the state (the condition of
ethics) had to produce itself in the state—and that all the topological
invaginations, which made the outside produce an enclave in the inside of
the inside, were affecting the order of discourse, were producing
deconstructive ruptures in the discourse and the construction of concepts.

(2002: 364)
In addition to the concept of “inside” or “within” in the quotation above, we notice that the third and its effect are produced in the state, whereas the third is not in the state, the same, or the indicated. The third and its ethical effect are therefore reaffirmed in Levinas’s philosophy that the political is neither derived from the ethical, nor entirely independent of it (Bernasconi 1999: 160). In this context, Derrida formally raises the secular and mystical substitution of the other (and he terms it “the third”) in unconditional hospitality, which is to give without giving, and the impossible becomes possible via the form of being impossible. On the one hand, it is impossible when it is “for me, for an ‘I’, for what is ‘my own’ or is properly my own in general, which then is not worth being titled a host” (2002: 387). On the other hand, it could be possible as long/soon/far as “the other in me” does it. Henceforth, a concern for substitution occurs, and that concern cannot be done without going to ethics, responsibility, and to God.

b. Ethics, Responsibility, God and Abraham

God is the Other in Derrida’s and Levinas’s arguments. Derrida says that God has nothing to settle in our favor, does not explain, nor does He give reason to humans, even though God is with “good sense” in our living (Derrida 2008: 47).

God doesn’t give his reasons, he acts as he intends, [and] he doesn’t have to give his reasons or share anything with us: neither his motivations, if he has any, nor his deliberations, nor his decision. Otherwise he wouldn’t be God; we wouldn’t be dealing with the Other as God or with God as wholly other [tout autre]. If the other were to share his reasons with us by explaining them to us, if he were to speak to us all the time without any secrets, he wouldn’t be the other, we would share a type of homogeneity. (2008: 58)
Derrida argues that “by keeping the secret, Abraham betrays ethics” (2008: 60). For Derrida, Abraham is both a hateful murderer as well as a father of countless nations. “In order to assume his absolute responsibility with respect to absolute duty, to put his faith in God to work, or to the test, he must also in reality remain a hateful murderer, for he consents to put to death” (2008: 67). Passing without staying in this reasoning and articulation in human languages, Abraham becomes the father of nations. The mystery in this refusal of general ethical rules lies in a response to the absolute duty “without hoping for a reward, without knowing why yet keep it secret” (2008: 73).

To be sure, deep in the heart of Derrida’s argument of the third, which goes “beyond the state (the condition of ethics) had to produce itself in the state,” lies the logic of Abraham’s sacrificing Isaac. Its effect is produced in the state, but not in the state, the same, or the indicated. The conception of hospitality, therefore, is an antinomy.

2. Levinas on the third

In Levinas’s argument, an asymmetry seems to be in the self-other relation (Alford 9). Levinas uses the idea of the third against a collectivity of a side-by-side or “I-you” collectivity (Levinas 1987b: 93). Critics have noted that the idea of the other in Levinas via a third person pronoun seems to be overwhelmingly supreme over me (“Introduction,” by John Wild in Totality and Infinity 19; Levinas 2006: 92). This is because alterity comes only from the other; alterity cannot come from the “I”

---

19 Key terms like autrui and autre are translated in conventions as “Other” and “other” respectively. According to the translator Richard A. Cohen in Emmanuel Levinas: Time and the Other, “autrui refers to the personal other, the other person, and autre refers to otherness in general, to alterity. Still it must be pointed out that Levinas often used autre where he could very well have used autrui; one should avoid making a fetish of this distinction and pay attention to context” Emmanuel Levinas: Time and the Other “Translator’s Note,” viii. Emphasis mine. C.Fred Alford in Levinas, the Frankfurt School and Psychoanalysis points out that in Levinas’s texts “one moment the other is a person, the next a mirror whose face is infinity. Alphonso Lingis, translator of Totality and Infinity, says that with the author’s permission he capitalized the word ‘Other’ (autrui, in contrast to autre) when the word refers to another person, the “personal Other, the you”” (24).
This philosophical stance thus separates him from the other philosophers on the issue of beings. Levinas’s consideration for existence partly derives from his effort to clarify the “I” and the alterity in the other, that is to say, God. Accordingly, every human relationship is subjected to the standards of infinity. It is not that Levinas chooses infinity, instead of particularity, to be the answer to human relatedness. The reasons are discussed as following in terms of God, the Third, and ethics:

a. God and the Third

For Levinas, welcoming of the infinity of the other is a Desire which does not arise from a lack? or a limitation, but from a surplus, from the idea of Infinity (2000b: 210). Inferring from this proposition, we can argue that as the desire to experience the impossible or to come face to face with the absolute Other, hospitality and gift-giving could be the alternative expression of being vis-à-vis with God, given that the social bound implied in the asymmetry action of self-effaced hospitality and gift-giving accounts for Levinas’s call that “God is not involved as an alleged interlocutor: the reciprocal relationship binds me to the other man in the trace of transcendence, in illeity. The passing of God, of whom I can speak only by reference to this aid or this grace, is precisely the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society” (2006: 158). There is a human-God relation that we may name “to face with God.” The relation happens when the faithful one, who looks at the words that remind him of God’s commandments and his obligations, returns his gaze to God who watches him (Levinas 1998a: note 22). The Other, in the context of Levinasian thinking, means that which is infinite and inexhaustible, and it cannot be “reduced to commerce, exchange, quid pro quo manipulation or control” (Gans 88). Arguably, Levinas’s account of the idea of the other draws upon Descartes’ Infinite (Llewelyn 147). One of
Levinas’s most concise definitions of the Other is that the Other is what I myself am not (Levinas 1987b: 83). For Levinas, God is not simply the other par excellence but other than the other (Levinas 1998a: 69). The ethical order—if there is indeed an order—is an order of the third that is equal to intangibility, and it is an order of the other in the name of justice, of God, whose absolute remoteness turns into responsibility for the other (1998a: 69, 82). If there is an order, then the order demands that one transgress the common and general ethical order. In the very possibility of the beyond expressed in an ethical turnabout, there is a reference [renvoi] from what we desire to what we deem undesirable, and “in this strange mission commanding the approach to the other, God is pulled out of objectivity, out of presence and out of being. He is neither object nor interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility…for the other” (Levinas 1998a: 69). When he contends for the responsibility involved in ethical orders, Levinas argues further that “responsibility does not let me constitute myself into an I think,” and this responsibility makes me always late because before the neighbor “I am called to attend (compear) rather than appear” (1998a: 71). Therefore, Levinas’s philosophy puts the self into question, so that the subject can have access to the otherness.

In Levinas’s discussion, the immeasurability of God does not appear as a superlative way of existing; it is the idea of the third which appears as a necessary metaphor:

Intangible, the Desirable separates itself from the relationship with the Desire that it calls forth and, by this separation or holiness, remains a third person: He at the root of the You [Tu]. He is Good in this very precise, eminent sense: He does not fill me with goods, but compels me to goodness,
which is better than to receive goods. (1998a: 69)

Under this circumstance of applying a third as an inevitable personal pronoun for all the irreversibility of the trace signified by the visitation, Levinas writes: “Ethics is not a moment of being, it is otherwise and better than being; the very possibility of the beyond” (1998a: 69). An open arena formed by uncertainty, it is “in this world of languages where the ego [Moi] awakes and exposes to the others”(1998a: 73). Therefore, Levinas adds, “the Infinite has a meaning in the response to the summons that come to me from the face of the neighbor as a He” (1998a: 73). Infinity has a meaning only when it responds while it does not co-respond; the epiphany of infinity comes via responding to a deviation coming from the third person.

b. Ethics of the Third

Attempting to overcome the subject-object distinction, Levinas has sought to expose the limitations of modern philosophy ever since he wrote *Existence and Existents* in 1947. Levinas argues against the subordination of western philosophy of ethics to ontology and (with some notable exceptions of Plato and Descartes) its denial of transcendence (Bernasconi *The Provocation of Levinas* 22).

Both Derrida and Levinas use the idea of “the third” or “thirdness” to develop their argument. First, in “God and Philosophy,” Levinas says that God appears as the third. Second, Levinas uses the “illecity of the third” to represent the beginning of justice.20 Finally, Levinas states that traditional philosophy takes social relationships as an ideal of fusion, and this ideal of fusion calls for a “third term.”21 Yet we should be careful that the third term is not the third pronoun “he” or “He,” as we have

---

20 This appears in Levinas’s book *Totality and Infinity*, and is later supported by Derrida in “A Word of Welcome” from *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*.
21 See his “With Another and Facing Another” in *Existence and Existents*. 
explained. The “third term,” though distinguished from the third in “the ethics of the third,” relates to our discussion here because “the third term” functions in human relationship.

One thinks that my relationship with the other tends to identify me with him by immersing me in a collective representation, a common ideal or a common action. It is the collectivity which says “we” that feels the other to be alongside of oneself, and not facing one. And a collectivity is necessarily set up around a third term which serves as intermediary, which supplies what is common in the communion. (1978: 94)

In brief, Levinas shows that by common, identifiable attributes or elements, people manage to formulate a communion, a fusion. However, Levinas points out that not every relationship is a relationship of connecting the similar. For example, there is a fearful face-to-face relationship which is not a participation in a third term—intermediate person, truth, dogma, work, profession, interest, dwelling, or meal; that is, it is not a communion. It is the fearful face-to-face situation of a relationship without intermediary, without mediations. (1978: 95)

This face-to-face is fearful because it is beyond recognition in knowledge, and is not reducible to any personal communion based on the third term while Levinas introduces “the third party into the face of the Other to exempt the face to face from being a couple” (Bernasconi, “The Third Party” 47). To understand the idea of the third and its ethical meaning in Levinas, we need to look at another discussion by
Levinas:

I have tried to find the temporal transcendence of the present toward the mystery of the future. This is not a participation in a third term, whether this term be a person, a truth, a work, or a profession. It is a collectivity that is not a communion. It is the face-to-face without intermediary, and is furnished for us in the eros where, in the other’s proximity, distance is integrally maintained, and whose pathos is made of both this proximity and this duality. (1987b: 94, emphasis added)

So the third/(H)e/other is the idea which Levinas uses to express his ideal of a proximity between I and the other without being encompassed in the I-you communion, which is based on various third terms. Therefore, the distinct relationship in Levinas’s face-to-face situation is the heterogeneity which cannot be signified by the intermediary in interpersonal relationships. There is always a distance in the interaction pointing to the third, and the distance is inevitable for any genuine gift-giving and hospitality. The subject is face-to-face with someone outside the unity of coming-toward, having-been, and making-perfect allocated in the satisfaction of the intellect with its proper objects of knowledge and spatio-temporal coordination. There is no participation of a third term in this face-to-face relationship that characterizes Levinas’s idea of transcendence and the origin of ethics. Nevertheless, there is a special concern of ethics that makes genuine, unconditional, non-exchangeable hospitality and gift-giving possible. It is exactly in gift-giving and hospitality that the subjects feel the integrally maintained distance in the other’s proximity; and it is exactly the gift or the offer of hospitality which shall make the subjects face to face with a respondent without intermediary because we shall see how
that gift and that offer could be so elusive that it hardly acts as a presumed intermediary for any planned relationship. In other words, I contend that genuine hospitality and gift-giving share a third term—the ethics to an unseeable third.

My speculation about the ethics of the third may be justified with another discourse by Levinas on the quotation above. Fifteen years after the writing of *Existence and Existents*, Levinas was asked to provide a further terminological distinction between the relationship with the other and the relationship with the third party. He replied that “from this moment on, the third is represented in the other; that is, in the very appearance of the other the third already regards me” (1998a: 82. emphasis added). Even though the statement “the third is presented in the other” will obliterate a supposed line between God the non-being and the human neighbor, Derrida assesses the statement by arguing that Levinas’s search of the third actually results in a question of justice, philosophical intelligibility, knowledge, and even gradually in questions of neighbor, and the figure of the State. As a result, the entire intelligibility of Levinas’s discourse appeals to the third (1997a: 31).

When Derrida discusses Abraham’s choice in *The Gift of Death*, the ethics of the third, though not termed as such in Derrida and Levinas’s works, is the key concept. Derrida emphasizes the “radical singularity” of the demands imposed upon Abraham by God, who is not accountable in the public realm. Derrida also contends that by keeping the secret of God’s demand of Isaac’s life from his hand, Abraham betrays ethics; nevertheless, in order to be a true sacrifice, the ethical concern must retain all its value (2008: 60, 73). Abraham cannot justify his choice to the public, and he himself has to face the radical singularity of the demand of God to him. When Derrida obliquely says that in Levinas, the question of justice and the beginning of justice are

---

22 Cf. Bernasconi, “The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political” where he presents the three main accounts of the third party in Levinas’s works.
the illeity of the third, probably Derrida would agree that Levinasian responsibility excellently epitomizes Derrida’s and Levinas’s shared interest: The subject faces the illeity of the other as soon as the subject’s relation with the unique and the incomparable is weighed, calculated and thematized. In terms of the illeity of the third and Levinasian responsibility, Levinas criticizes omnipotent knowledge and Derrida denounces the easy justice resulting from calculation. The pivotal importance of their arguments is that as soon as the face is “present” with our notoriously totalizing habit of reasoning in our confident system of knowledge, we somehow recognize and thus makes invalid its otherness.

To shed light on the connection of ethics with transcendence and living the impossible, I will touch on the term “ethics” again by quoting one note in Levinas’s work:

It is the meaning of the beyond, of transcendence, and not of ethics that our study seeks. It finds this meaning in ethics. We write *significance*, because ethics is structured as one-for-the-other; a significance of the beyond being, because outside of all finality in a responsibility that always increase: dis-interestedness where being rids itself of its being (1998a: Note 23)

It is clear that because ethics is structured as one-for-the-other, the ethical concern of the third/God matters when we talk about hospitality and gift-giving. It is an ethics not being appropriated in the economy of reciprocity and not in agreements of expected, hospitable contracts.

**III. The Impossibility in Hospitality and Gift-Giving**

To further explore the theory of Derrida and Levinas from the above diverse
concerns and to pave the way for our further discussion on literature, it is important to clarify three theoretical characteristics that make hospitality and gift-giving theoretically aporetic:

A. Being out of Calculation

Anthropologist Marcel Mauss, observing Scandinavian and many other civilizations, concludes that, by means of gifts, contracts are fulfilled and exchanges of goods are made in human societies. In theory, such gifts are voluntary; in fact, they are given and repaid under obligation (1). This is the economic reality of gift-giving. But this is not what a gift should be. According to Derrida, when appreciation and return of value replace generosity and caring for the other and become the phenomenon of gifts, then the gift is not what it is entitled to be. (1997c: 147, 1992a: 11-12). I have to emphasize again that, quite contrary to what is mostly recognized, gift-giving is possible for Derrida. It is especially obvious in The Gift of Death, where he tries to show the economy at work in the gift which is not an economy of calculation, ontology, knowledge, or theoretical determination (1999: 59-60).

The reason for hospitality being out of calculation is clear in Derrida’s and Levinas’s work. “[The] absolute hospitality should break with the law of hospitality as a right or duty, with the ‘pact’ of hospitality…without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names” (Derrida 2000: 25). For Levinas, “the intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it” (Levinas 1985: 98). This statement leads us to the critique of gift economy.

Another angle to illustrate this “out of calculation” is that for Levinas, goodness, or a work, is neither a pure wish nor “an inadmissible weakness of the mind” (1986: 348). For him, the work is “a radical generosity” which “goes unto the other” and thus requires “an ingratitude of the other” because “gratitude would in fact be the return of
the movement to its origin” (1986: 349). Here we encounter the same consideration of
giving without return, which Derrida construes as the condition of a genuine
gift-giving. Encountering ingratitude of the other seems to be a loss. For this point,
Levinas clarifies that “it [goodness, or a work] is not realized in pure loss, and it is not
enough for it to affirm the same in its identity circumvented with nothingness” (1986:
349). Whether a work is invoked as “a pure acquiring of merits” or a “pure
nihilism,” it ineluctably becomes a certain “goal” (1986: 349). Consequently, Levinas
asserts that “a relationship with the other who is reached without showing himself
touched. It forms outside of the morose delectation of failure, and outside of the
consolations with which Nietzsche defines religion” (1986: 349).

B. Being out of Subjectivity

Derrida once argued that “Levinas is not content to distinguish hospitality from
thematization…he explicitly opposes them” (1997a: 22). As I have pointed out, this is
because Levinas “redefines intentional subjectivity, submitting subjection to the idea
of infinity in the finite.” It is also because the definition of hospitality for Derrida and
Levinas is “tending toward the other, attentive intention, intentional attention, yes to
the other” (1997a: 22). With these conditions in mind, we see the withdraw of
hospitality from thematization happening because

the welcoming of the other (objective genitive) will already be a response:
the yes to the other will already be responding to the welcoming of the other
(subjective genitive), to the yes of the other. This response is called for as
soon as the infinite—always of the other—is welcomed. (1997a: 23)

This is the way Derrida explains Levinas’s phrase that “It is not I, it is the other that
can say yes” in “Four Talmudic Readings” (Levinas 1990: 49). Derrida is in concord
with Levinas when saying that without exonerating myself in the least, decision and responsibility always “come back or come down to the other, from the other, even if it is the other in me” (1997a: 23). The thread connecting Derrida, Levinas, hospitality and the withdrawal of thematization reveals itself in the following statement by Derrida:

For, in the end, would an initiative that remained purely and simply “mine” still be a decision, in accordance with the most powerful tradition of ethics and philosophy, which requires that the decision always be “my” decision, the decision of one who can freely say “as for myself, I,” ipse, egomet ispe? Would that comes down to me in this way still be a decision? Do we have the right to give the name “decision” to a purely autonomous movement, even if it is one of welcoming or hospitality that would proceed only from me, by me, and would simply deploy the possibilities of a subjectivity that is mine? Would we not be justified in seeing here the unfolding of an egological immanence…, without the tearing rupture that should occur in every decision we call free? (1997a: 23-24)

Derrida argues that in Levinas’s discourse, especially in *Totality and Infinity*, the concept of “hospitality” operates everywhere in a quasi-transcendental way (1997a: 25). Derrida identifies the welcome in Levinas as the ethical relation: “The welcome determines the ‘receiving,’ the receptivity of receiving as the ethical relation” (1997a: 25). Thus, Derrida argues forcefully that to receive, as a synonym of to welcome, is to receive beyond the capacity of the subject, and this dissymmetrical disproportion marks the law of hospitality in Levinas (1997a: 26).

Earlier we discussed that the emphasis on “the other” manifests the so-called
deficiency in Levinas’s argument. People have expressed their suspicion of the asymmetry in the Levinasian self-other relation. For Levinas, the alterity comes only from the other; alterity cannot come from the subject (1978: 93). We have to understand that this stance comes within his philosophical frame of time and existence, which is totally unlike Heidegger’s framework on the same issue of time and being. In Levinas, the whole frame of existence comes from clarifying notions of Nothingness/Insomnia, Time and the “I,” and finally, the alterity in the other in *Existence and Existents*. It is a relation of one person to another that finally amounts to the substitution in hospitality and gift-giving. Indeed the logic of substitution runs the risk of re-introducing the logic of identity. This suspicion of re-introducing the logic of identity points to one of the primary effects with which the term ‘substitution’ needs to combat. People will argue against Levinas, complaining that the story that must be told is one of how an already formed subject turns toward the neighbor. As a result, the language of alterity falls under suspicion. But Levinas’s logic does not revert to that of identity (Robert Bernasconi, *Ethics as First Philosophy* 80-81). In fact, Levinas can avoid being reappropriated into the rigidity of identity because Levinas’s subjectivity is entangled, if not emptied.

Levinas’s subject is so responsible for/to the other without reintroducing or enforcing the identity dialectics. However the substitution is given, it is given as a gift from the agent to the other. Our classical understanding of gift-giving is based on an ideal of fusion; that is, to relate myself with the other in the ideal of reciprocity. Nevertheless, under this reciprocity of relationships, which is a characteristic of civilization, the asymmetry of the intersubjective relationship is ignored. Therefore, Levinas argues that even if it is similar to traditional gift-giving, it is not a gift in our habitually envisaged way.23

---

23 For the asymmetry of the intersubjective relationship between I and the other, see Levinas
The fact that hospitality is enveloped with exchange, substitution and forgiveness is obvious when we see in the Bible how Lot’s hostage interweaves with the theme of substitution (Genesis 19: 1-8). In Levinas’s argument of substitution, he begins by criticizing Husserl’s transcendental idealism and Heidegger’s dialectics in being-in-time. He avers that actually patience and waiting in the manner of a question, a search, a demand and a prayer give us “thoughts more thoughtful than the positive ones that one would nevertheless like to substitute for them” (1998a: 50). Because in this existential passivity, waiting for God reverses into “the proximity of the other, into my responsibility as a hostage; a reversion of this fear [a traumatism felt in advance in the pure length and the pure languor and the silence of time], as foreign to fright before the Sacred as it is to be anguish before Nothingness, into fear for the neighbor” (1998a: 26, 51). He also stresses that “the subject as a hostage has been neither the experience nor the proof of the Infinite, but a witness borne of the Infinite, a modality of the glory, a testimony that no disclosure has preceded” (1998a: 73).

C. Deconstruction of Chronology and Logic

Facing without figuring, welcoming without embracing, and fulfilling anticipation without waiting, the three characteristics that underscore Derrida’s genuine, unconditional and absolute hospitality, is, Derrida suggests, culture itself. In “Of Hostipitality” he argues that hospitality is a relation which extends to others. It is ready to serve, to host, to shelter the homeless, and since a host is never giving enough, he or she therefore is always ready to ask for forgiveness. Derrida contends that “there is no culture that is not also a culture of hospitality” (2002: 361). The whole process and imperatives of welcoming, signs of anticipation, invitation, and even sacrifice are a matter of our relationship with foreigners. Situated with the fermentative debate of postcolonial studies and discourses on nationalist identity

Existence and Existent, especially 92-96.
nowadays, we will be concerned that a foreigner who lacks support from his nation
calls on us to contemplate the origin of culture and civilization. As discussed
previously, the unconditional Hospitality, i.e., hospitality “to an other who is beyond
any ‘its other’” (2002: 364), is not its other. “An (unconditional) other” cannot be
involved with any ownership or possessionship. A conditional other may be witnessed
most clearly from what is demonstrated in the welcoming. Foreigners are given the
right to hospitality, which is also based on a form of contract (2000: 23-25). Therefore
foreigners are not that foreign to us. We have a contract with foreigners. In
contracting, only the listed, the present, and the binary appear and count. Thus, it is
basically an “I and conceivable Thou” relationship. Whenever there is a contract,
there is only an I-thou relationship, since the contract partner is always already
appropriated into a contractible order of list. That is the reason why Derrida says that
foreigners presuppose the social and familial status of the contracting parties. This
situation entails and presupposes the existence of proper names. On the one hand,
before the contracting ceremony, there are already proper names to legitimize the
ceremony; on the other hand, after the contracting event, all the names are guaranteed
A proper name is a social act. In this situation the foreigner is equipped with an
unseen but given name (for contact); therefore “the foreigner is not the absolute
other” (2000: 25).

There is something that challenges the postulate about time in hospitality and
gift-giving. Derrida emphasizes the importance of time reversal in our intention of
giving or welcoming the other: “there is no first yes, the yes is already a response”
(2000: 24). Elsewhere he says that “for the question of hospitality is also the question
of waiting, of the time of waiting and of waiting beyond time” (2002: 359). And
Levinas argues for the reversal of time in hospitality because responsibility makes me
always late and also because before the neighbor I am called to attend rather than appear (1998a: 71). In fact, another contemporary French philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard, has a similar discursive strategy on the reversal of time in his argument on gift-giving in *Inhuman*, where he defies chronology and logic. For him, the problematic of time in hospitality and gift-giving is that in the already absolute shining of the visitation, the awaiting one waits as if (s)he were absent from the waiting, as if (s)he is not waiting so that the hospitality is not with expectation and therefore the visitation absolute. Does the host give hospitality even before the visitor comes? The “two moments of time,” of giving and receiving hospitality as a gift, is treated as a reversion. For Lyotard, the sequence of these two moments is in an averted state: the anterior is the posterior.

What is already known cannot, in principle, be experienced as an event. Consequently, if one wants to control a process, the best way of so doing is to subordinate the present to what is (still) called the ‘future’ since in these conditions the ‘future’ will be completely predetermined and the present itself will cease opening onto an uncertain and contingent ‘afterwards’[…]. Now there is a model of such a temporal situation. It is offered by the daily practice of exchange. Someone (X) gives someone (Y) an object $a$ at time $t$. This giving has as its condition that Y will give X an object $b$ at time $t'$. […] What is not irrelevant to us here is the fact that the first phase of the exchange takes place if and only if the second is perfectly guaranteed, to the point that it can be considered to have already happened. (65-66)

Simply speaking, Lyotard argues that gift-giving is done if and only if the gift-returning custom (or pre-sumption) is assumed and therefore a counter-gift is
chronologically posited in the future. The counter-gift indeed comes before the first gift because the first-gift will not be given out without the already assumed coming of the counter-gift. Very similar to the logic of the common hospitality—hospitality of contracts—the host gives because the guest is anticipated and will behave under various yet consistent assumptions of regular laws in hospitality. The point Lyotard wants to express is that the wider the temporal gap between giving and repaying increases, the less the subject can dominate and thus the further away the subject is from the monad completed; therefore, the closer the subject is to the event itself. In other words, the subject is closer to humanity itself. In this formulation about humanity being formed, developed, effected, and completed, a further reading of Heidegger will be helpful. In his short lecture presented in 1924 (which was subsequently expanded and incorporated into his major work *Being and Time*), Heidegger proffered an argument on time, which Levinas severely criticized. Heidegger argues:

> Time is that within which events take place. This is what Aristotle has already seen, in the context of the fundamental kind of Being pertaining to natural being: change, change of place, locomotion (3E).

Then time would indeed be I myself, and every other person would be time. And in our being with one another we would be time—everyone and no one (5E).

Significance is formed, developed, effected and completed in Time and is Time. Dasein, conceived in its most extreme possibility of Being, *is time itself*, not *in* time (14E).
The issue of the time interval could be expanded into Ontology, which is definitely in the encompassment of Hospitality. It is because hospitality, as we have discussed, does not merely consist in welcoming a guest—in welcoming according to the invitation. Rather it welcomes the surprise of the visitor, unforeseen, unforeseeable \([\text{inprévu}, \text{imprévisible}]\), unpredictable, unexpected, unpredictable, and unawaited \([\text{inattendu}]\). Hospitality consists in welcoming the other who does not warn me of his coming in advance. With regard to this messianic surprise, to what must thus tear any horizon of expectation, the subject is always structurally lacking, at fault \([\text{en défaut, en faute}]\), and therefore condemned to be forgiven \([\text{voué à me faire pardonner}]\), or rather, to have to ask for forgiveness for one’s lack of preparation, for an irreducible and constitutive unpreparedness (Derrida 2002: 381).

This unpreparedness can be the orientation of the subject approaching the other who does not exchange looks with the subject even if it is in substitution: “the asymmetric gaze that gazes at the other without exchanging looks \([\text{sans croiser le regard}]\), of the face-to-face that does not exchange looks with, nor sees, the face of God—this is the orientation of subjectivity in substitution” (Derrida 2002: 388). On the one hand, the subject goes toward himself—he is on the process of the subjection (the others who stand in the trace of illeity); on the other hand, the subject simultaneously goes toward the other, which is not any sign or image to be explained away; what matters is the stepping across the threshold itself. In this aspect, Levinas argues that:

A trace qua trace does not simply lead to the past, but is the very \textit{passing} toward a past more remote than any past and any future which still are set in my time—the past of the other, in which eternity takes form, an absolute
past which unites all times.

The absoluteness of the presence of the other, which has justified our interpreting the exceptional uprightness of thou-saying as an epiphany of this absoluteness, is not the simple presence in which in the last analysis things are also present. Their presence belongs to the present of my life. Everything that constitutes my life with its past and its future is assembled in the present in which things come to me. But it is in the trace of the other that a face shines; what is presented there is absolving itself from my life and visits me as already ab-solute. (1997c: 358)

Once again the line of time in the philosopher’s argument is no longer lineal. It is reversible, abrupt, and the whole connecting thread is not on the time itself but on the event, which is no longer tagged by time precession, and thus counters Heidegger’s frame of subjects and time.

After the highlighting of these particularly poignant illustrations of the aporias in subjectivity and reversal in time and logic, my presentation of these theories here, however, is not to show off any of academic cleverness or theoretical adroitness. Though conceptual clarification is important, it is not an end in itself. My purpose is to delve into the human desire of approaching the other or even creating the impossible in the seemingly most pedestrian and humdrum acts of hospitality and gift-giving. Let us develop it in the following literary texts.
Chapter 3

FACING THE OTHER IN THE BIBLE

As ye are, so shall the stranger be before the LORD.

(Numbers 15:15.)

The ethical involves me in substitution, as does speaking.

(Derrida 2008: 62)

I. The Conceptual Genealogy of Hospitality in Judeo-Christian Tradition

The right of hospitality connects with conceptions of the laws, the violence, and the proximity of the other. What else could a culture be but one that is always appropriating and dis-recognizing and then appropriating again the laws and the conception of violence? We already introduced in Background Theory that Derrida emphasizes an unconditional law of absolute hospitality which challenges, threatens, and denies mundane, common, contracted laws (Derrida 2000: 79). This emphasis comes from deconstructing the assumption of the host. “So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage—and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host’s host” (Derrida 2000: 125). Accordingly, the alterity in Derridian hospitality refers to the uncertainty of the designated roles of host and guest and its confrontation with contracted laws. Therefore, the absolute hospitality challenges laws by going beyond common laws which are based on the designation of roles in social function and interpersonal relationship.

Nevertheless, whether it is the order of common laws or the challenge of unconditional laws, hospitality inevitably encounters the deployment of violence.
 Violence has a subtle and elusive nature, which I will develop in the following biblical stories of Lot and Abraham.¹

 Hospitality is a choice vacillating between friendship and violence. When recognized as such, hospitality means taking care of visitors, especially those who are foreign, and who are totally uprooted from what they are familiar with and accustomed to. Derrida argues in *The Apology of Socrates* (17d) that Socrates declares that he is “foreign” to the language of the courts, and that he is now under the surveillance of the court to defend his innocence by using an unfamiliar language. Similarly, the foreigner has to ask for hospitality in a language which is not his own. This is called “the first act of violence” (Derrida 2000: 15). The first act of violence performs like a natural law requiring the foreigner to speak in a language that is not his mother tongue. This kind of violence is discursively distinct from “the sacred violence” that Derrida talks about later on. Sacred violence is “an experience of the Good that elects me before I welcome it, in other words, of a Goodness, a good violence of the Other that precedes welcoming” (Derrida 2002: 364). In this definition, the subject as a host, or a vulnerable hostage under the mercy of trauma, persecution, and obsession is transformed by a sacred violence.² The quote raises a question: Does genuine

---

¹ French philosopher Michael Foucault, one of the thinkers who articulates the invisibility of violence, argues that even if anyone tries to grasp the law via punishment and assumes that by seeing its negativeness, the law can be formulated, “all it [transgression, punishment, an obstinate attempt to attract the law to itself] ends up doing is reinforcing the law in its weakness” (Foucault 1990:35). The attempt of dismissing the law falls flat as it only reinforces the law in its weakness. That is why Foucault asserts that “the law is the shadow toward which every gesture necessarily advances; it is itself the shadow of the advancing gesture” (Foucault 1990:35). Jacques Lacan and Saint Paul all mark the paradoxical function of the law, especially the moral law (Lacan 1997b: 189). Benjamin, Foucault, Lacan, and Saint Paul, all of them show concerns for the seeming justification of the law in respect of violence and paradox related to the complexities of hospitality and gift-giving under discussion here.

² Another different but related term is the divine violence in Walter Benjamin’s work. Benjamin’s divine violence is meant to criticize the differentiation between means and ends (Benjamin 278). He observes that natural Law justifies violence insofar as the violence leads to a justified end. Considering the question that “whether violence, as a principle, could be a moral means even to just end,” and that morality is an issue of concepts of law and justice, Benjamin asks what if a justified means does not lead to a justified end (277). He ignores the question of a criterion of justice; instead, he focuses on putting into the central place the question of “the justification of certain *means* that constitute violence” (279).
hospitality require, invite, or accept violence? In Lot’s and Abraham’s stories we see that violence comes with invitation, from the visit of God. The visitor in these biblical stories is an enemy and an angel. As a result, the host and the guest both take turns calling and permitting violence.

Lot: Violence and Hospitality

In Genesis 19:1-14, issues of hospitality, violence and laws are intertwined when Lot invites two angels from God:

19:1 And there came two angels to Sodom at even; and Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: and Lot seeing them rose up to meet them; and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground;
19:2 And he said, Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and ye shall rise up early, and go on your ways. And they said, Nay; but we will abide in the street all night.

He eagerly persuades them to stay in his house, be his guests, rather than staying in the street all night. Perhaps Lot knows that extreme violence will happen to these foreigners should they stay in the street at night. But does he know that with this persistent invitation, he is eventually to jeopardize the lives of his daughters because they will substitute for the visitors and become the victims of the citizens of Sodom? Lot has been living in Sodom for years, but he is, after all, a foreigner to Sodom, and he may or may not know that the citizens there will ruthlessly turn down his hospitality.

emphatic added). He takes a stance outside positive legal philosophy and also outside natural law, which eventually promises him a “neither lawmaking nor law-preserving” idea of divine violence (200-2).
And even if he can expect that result, is he justified not to host the visitors and so leave them at the mercy of the wicked citizens? This is the aporias of hospitality; it is not done out of calculation and exchange or contracts, and so theoretically, or ideally, even if Lot had imagined the result of sacrificing his daughters, for the sake of genuine hospitality, he would still fulfill his responsibility by caring the visitors. Serious responsibility recognizes itself as being responsible for the guests even if this responsibility goes beyond what the master of the house could have willed or what the host can manage or control, no matter how much violence that hospitality could bring. Thus, Lot’s hospitality is significant because it brings out the trespassing of the frontiers of responsibility in hospitality. Let us read on:

19:4 But before they lay down, the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter:  
19:5 And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them/ (or, in NIV’s version, so that we can have sex with them.)  
19:6 And Lot went out at the door unto them, and shut the door after him,  
19:7 And said, I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly.  
19:8 Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man (or, NIV: who have never slept with a man.); let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes (NIV: and you can do what you like with them.): only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.
Several points merit our attention in the story quoted above. First, this hospitality of sacrificing family members for the sake of foreign visitors is common in Semitic culture. Lot, even though a foreigner to the Sodomians, is of Semitic culture, which is arguably best kept by the Bedouins. We know that for the Bedouins, the host would rather give up his own son than a guest to whom he has promised his protection according to the Bedouin laws of hospitality. Second, different scenarios of violence and laws are revealed in the story: the iniquitous Sodomians violate the contract of hospitality because they want to violate the foreign visitors; Lot violates his family by proposing to sacrifice his daughters who were born under his protection; the angels bring violence to Lot’s family; the visitor brings violence to the visited host; the Sodomians try to violate God; and finally, God as the Supreme judge visits and destroys the whole city, etc.

The issue of violence is what I want to focus on here. Does God deliberately bring violence to the house of Lot? Why would God sacrifice (or select to visit) Lot’s family? Surely, God, the omniscient visitor, knows everything in advance and therefore the angels must have known that their visit would result in that terrible night to Lot and his family. Although we know that the angel-visitors in the end blind the mob so Lot is able to keep himself and his daughters safe, we cannot tell from the text whether Lot knows that his visitors will save him and his daughters when he proposes to give away his daughters. Does he welcome them because he has recognized the angelic nature of the foreigners? And do not forget that the mob is so angry and degenerate that they answer Lot’s proposal by saying:

---

3The 1868 record of German Rev. F.A. Klein during his tour of the Balga tribe located in nowadays Jordan may serve as an interesting anecdote. He described how a Shaykh (Elder, Chief) Fandi tried to protect a man the Turkish government troops were in search of by sacrificing his son. "Our work in Palestine: being an account of the different expeditions sent out to the Holy Land by the Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund since the establishment of the Fund in 1865" web. <http://www.archive.org/stream/ourworkinpalesti00paleuoft/ourworkinpalesti00paleuoft_djvu.txt>.
19:9 “Get out of our way,” they replied. And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We will treat you worse than them.” They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.

Lot is a foreigner to the native Sodomians. He has only a weak say in the court even if he resorts to the law for justice. After that night, Lot moves away with his family. I contend that, unfortunately, God has to visit Lot, even though He simultaneously brings violence to Lot. It seems, of course, Sodom has to be destroyed, and that is determined by God, who is omniscient and knows why Sodom deserves to be perished. But God the Almighty chooses to be offered a bitter and controversial hospitality from Lot in advance, and to be saved and substituted by two vulnerable human daughters. God wants to offer Sodomites grace even though they sin against Him. According to the Bible, God loves all humans. It is not just a coincidence that the fate of Sodom’s demise is inevitable because strangers are abused in Sodom. When God’s face is transformed into the visages of two angels and then visits Lot’s family, not only Lot is challenged with the aporias of hospitality by welcoming the “absolute Other” (both in its literal and symbolic meaning), but God is also challenged by responding to the aporias of hospitality—God becomes human beings so that God is to be threatened and rescued by humans. As an absolute Other, God participates in destroying Sodom when Sodom violates the laws of hospitality. We can also say that God destroys Sodom after exposing the struggle, contestation and dilemma between different rules and different violence via the genuine, or bitter in my term, hospitality given by Lot—bitter in the sense that Lot has been challenged and has made a decision which he cannot make. We
have introduced in chapter I that, in Levinas’s words, instead of being a mere exercise of sovereign power, responsibility for the other exposes me like a hostage to the other. It thus leads to the possibility of opening me to the absolute other (1998a: 10). Lot is the master of his house, but when he offers hospitality to the visitors and is forced to sacrifice his daughters, he becomes a hostage to the visitors. Interestingly enough, it is because of his hospitality that the possibility of meeting the absolute other is realized. He literally meets the absolute other, who act as visitors and who make him and his family the exceptional survivors from Sodom.

II. Civilization, Secrets, and Responsible Decision-Making

Derrida’s Of Hospitality argues that the process of culture or civilization appropriation is implied in absolute hospitality, under this framework, arguments such as “all history is colonial history” or “even in a more restricted political or cultural sense, colonialism is not just a modern phenomenon” would become too comprehensive to be accurate. From the sociological critique to our discussion of hospitality and ethics of responsibility here, we can say that one of the very problematic ideas of civilization is the mis-recognition of objectivity or omnipotence in knowledge, which is not hard to find in discourses like civilization of colonization, the end of history, or discussions on, for example, what is wrong with a certain culture. Czech philosopher Jan Patocka has argued that to subordinate responsibility to the objectivity of knowledge is equally to “discount” responsibility. Derrida subscribes, arguing for the

---

4 For example, Arif Dirlik contends that “the very idea of civilization is a colonial idea in its assumption that the norms associated with civilization provide a means for converting the others of civilization, the ‘barbarians,’ in the process erasing alternative norms and ways of living” (Dirlik 440-41).

5 Obviously, those much cited authors who are prestigious for providing paradigms on history, scholars like Samuel Philips Huntington, Benndict Anderson, Francis Fukuyama, and Bernard Lewis, are not to be my supporters. Immanuel Wallerstein’s definition of world-empire and world-economy, as well as the literature of World-Time, are not my allies, either. For Derrida’s contention, as well as Patocka’s, that history cannot be resolved in a totalizing closure, see The Gift of Death 6-8.
impossibility of responsibility (Derrida 2008: 25). That is, “if decision-making is relegated to a knowledge that it is content to follow or to develop, then it is no more a responsible decision, it is the technical development of a cognitive apparatus, the simple mechanistic deployment of a theorem” (Derrida 2008: 26). Through careful reading, we note that this quote is about decision-making and a demand of secrecy, be it ethical, philosophical, or ontological, and that calls for our attention. With this in mind, now let us look at the story of Abraham—the God-promised father of nations—via the comparison of another Biblical character, Zechariah, and with another holy book, the Qur’an, on the event of Abraham and the bond of Isaac.

A. Abraham and Rules.

Derrida elucidates the idea of responsibility by referring to Patocka’s work.⁶ Both of them contend that religion as a responsibility is a form of a free self, rather than a demonic form of sacredization or demonic affinity with mystery, the esoteric, and the secret or the sacred (Derrida 2008: 4). Derrida, after being inspired by Patocka, articulates how a seemingly religious event brings out the deepest human responsibility from a free self in the event of Abraham and Isaac. Human responsibility makes us understand the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac from an angle of secrecy and responsibility which is ultimately different from any simple religious piety, or obsession. It is in the content of responsibility that human beings try to caution themselves to respond to “the Other and answer for oneself before the other” (Derrida 2008: 5). This response means the subject who says “myself” is related as a being before the infinite other because of responding—which is insinuated in Czech where responsibility and responding share the same semiotic roots (Derrida 2008: 28). In other words,

---

responsibility connects myself with the (infinite) others by rupturing rules because responsibility

is one of those strange concepts that give food for thought without giving themselves over to thematization. It presents itself neither as a theme nor as a thesis, it gives without being seen [sans se donner à voir], without presenting itself in person by means of a “fact of being seen” that can be phenomenologically intuited. This paradoxical concept also has the structure of a type of secret—what is called, in the code of certain religious practices, mystery. The exercise of responsibility seems to leave no choice but this one, however uncomfortable it may be, of paradox, heresy, and secrecy. More serious still, it must always run the risk of conversion and apostasy: there is no responsibility without a dissident and inventive rupture with respect to tradition, authority, orthodoxy, rule, or doctrine.

(Derrida 2008: 29. emphasis added)

Imbued with disproportion, Derrida’s responsibility is a dissident and inventive rupture with tradition and authority.7 This responsibility links the subject to a godly gaze which “makes oblique reference to something that is not a thing but that is probably the very

7 Cf. Derrida:

If I obey in my duty toward God (which is my absolute duty) in terms of duty alone, I am not entering into a relation with God. In order to fulfill my duty toward God himself, I must not act out of duty, by means of that form of generality called duty, which can always be mediated and communicated... Kant explains that to act morally is to act ‘out of duty’ and not by ‘conforming to duty.’ Kierkegaard sees acting ‘out of duty,’ in the universalizable sense of the law, as a dereliction of one’s absolute duty. It is in this sense that absolute duty (toward God and in the singularity of faith) implies a sort of gift or sacrifice that reaches toward a faith beyond both debt and duty, beyond duty as a form of debt...But Abraham’s hatred for the ethical and thus for his own (family, friends, relatives, nation, but at the outside humanity as a whole, his own kind or species) must remain an absolute source of pain...I must hate them insofar as I love them...He hates them not out of hatred, of course, but out of love. (2008: 64-65).
site of the most decisive paradox, namely, *the gift that is not a present*, the gift of something that remains inaccessible, unpresentable, and as a consequence secret” (Derrida 2008: 31). From responsibility to gift, what we are contending for is ethics, not economics. That is how in his argument for *the Gift of Death*, Derrida employs a basic inferential framework of death: the generosity of a gift cannot be realized, unless the appreciation of death comes first. It is the subject who responds is considered as irreplaceable and as secret as one could be to the degree of being heretical. Death gives the irreplaceability of any subject. The subject experiences one’s irreplaceability in death, and it is in the finite of life that one can speak of a responsible subject.

This responsibility turns into a response to the gift of death from God. Since it is a form of attention and welcome, it bespeaks for Derrida’s understating of Levinas’s hospitality, which is

> [T]ending toward the other, attentive intention, intentional attention, *yes* to the other. Intentionality, attention to speech, welcome of the face, hospitality…and since it [the welcoming of the other] opens itself to the infinity of the other, an infinity that, as other, in some sense precedes it, the welcoming of the other (objective genitive) will already be a response.

(Derrida: 1997a: 23)

To generate a welcome, to test the sincerity of welcome, God gives a gift via a call of death. The gift of death in the story of Abraham responding to God’s demand especially expresses the breadth or abyss in this experience of responsibility. It is because this experience, or this encounter with the absolute other, in Derrida’s phrase, is the experience of *mysterium tremendum*: “I tremble before what exceeds my seeing and my
knowing [mon voir et mon savoir] although it concerns the inner most parts of me” (Derrida 2008: 55). Ethics is sacrificed to responsibility because the conception of subjectivity, calculation, presence, knowledge, etc, when congregated in the conception of ethics, has to be violated in front of responsibility (Derrida 2008: 56). Impetuous readers may rightly ask if there still could be responsibility after ethics is sacrificed. But this question tempts to raise a totalizing closure because the responsibility of Abraham to God ties him to singularity by Abraham’s keeping silence, by assuming his responsibility alone, and by not entering into any discourse. It is because in speaking, we are relieved into the general. “By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility” (Derrida 2008:61). The subject’s infinite responsibility binds one to silence and thus secrecy. In a nutshell, by entering into discourse, we enter into the realm of generality (Derrida 2008: 61; Kierkegaard 113; Horner 211). This secret/silence makes a moment of astonishment for humans because it suspends all forms of knowledge.

Therefore, Levinas says that the moment of astonishment is the moment of hope (Levinas 2000a: 101-02) because it is only when the terror of the secret from God exceeds and precedes the complacent subject, and when a subject is demanded responsibility without sufficiently conceptualizing and thematizing what responsibility means, the epiphany of hope appears in God as the form of the third (illéité). Hope, an awaiting and length of time, is “a welcoming of a surplus” because it is possible only through God. The subject, therefore, “behave[s] as if the soul were immortal and as if God existed” (Levinas 2000a: 65, 67). Hope renders the subject’s relationship with the future as a relationship with a possibility and not as a reality. It is through the angle of hope, especially when hope is realized in a death test, the subject sees an ever open possibility. God asks for the death of Isaac, compelling Abraham to face the elapsed
totality of knowledge and intelligibility.

B. Abraham and God.

The importance of discussing the conception of God in my dissertation of hospitality and gift-giving emerges when God is the absolute other and the unappropriated third. God has nothing to settle in our favor, does not explain, and nor does He give reason to humans. God is not our fellowman. Derrida redefines the source of this divine seer by denying that the biblical passage must be understood as an actual proposition concerning a subject, God, with all the traditional trappings and attributions, which he recognizes as "idolatrous stereotyping and representation" (Derrida 2008: 110). Instead, he proposes an understanding of God as "the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior" (Derrida 2008: 110).

According to Derrida, Patocka makes a good point because he deliberately keeps a distance from Heidegger by assigning a supreme being, an infinite other, who comes across the subject, and whose call falls upon the subject while remaining inaccessible to the subject because God is not an onto-theological one. It is, therefore, critical for us to understand this inaccessibility within acknowledgement because inaccessibility and secrecy spare us from a democratically-like totalitarian passage of our daily lives (Derrida 2008: 48).

And this brings us to the second characteristic of violence: the violence of Platonic unveiling which is rooted in modern Western individualism. Derrida argues, by following Patocka’s reading, that technological civilization produces boredom in its leveling of the mysterious uniqueness of responsibility. When “there is an affinity, or at least a synchrony, between a culture of boredom and an orgiastic one” (Derrida 2008:
38), the secret of Abraham in the Bible distinguishes by telling more than it seems to say. In short, while Patocka evokes the logic of secrecy as the logic of Edgar Allen Poe’s “Purloined Letter,” Derrida uses Abraham’s story to argue for the necessity of saying something otherwise than the totality of what-is. Abraham’s story resists the violence of unveiling, henceforth resists the designating of social roles. Let me quote a paragraph from Derrida’s reading of Patocka:

The individualism of technological civilization relies precisely on a misunderstanding of the unique self. It is the individualism of a role and not a person. In other words it might be called the individualism of a masque or persona, a character [personage] and not a person. …individualism becomes socialism or collectivism. (Derrida 2008: 37)

As stated, secret responsibility transgresses ethical order. Therefore, meditating on Kierkegaard’s book Fear and Trembling, and Repetition, Derrida argues that “by keeping the secret, Abraham betrays ethics” (Derrida 2008: 60) because the ethical is a temptation of being general, “a general answering-for-oneself with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution” (62). In the famous and controversial story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, Abraham in reality remains a murderer as well as a father of countless nations. “In order to assume his absolute responsibility with respect to absolute duty, to put his faith in God to work, or to the test, he must also in reality remain a hateful murderer, for he consents to put to death” (Derrida 2008: 68). The problem is that by keeping silent, Abraham betrays Isaac to God, to his absolute responsibility to the other. Under this seeming irresponsibility to family values and the father-son relationship, Abraham fulfills his faith to God, the
unseeable, even though he may or may not let the knife fall and kill the bound Isaac. Abraham does not really answer Isaac’s question: “Where is the lamb?” Abraham only says that God himself will provide a lamb for the burnt offering (Genesis 22:8). We know that God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering on “one of the mountains I will tell you about.” When facing his son’s question, Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went out together. In the end, Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son because, after Abraham talked face to face with God’s messenger, the angel told him not to lay a hand on the boy.

Interestingly, earlier in front of Isaac, Abraham did not identify him as the lamb, even though Abraham had heard from God to sacrifice this child. We have three personages from this short response: “God himself will provide the lamb, my son.” They are: God, the lamb, and you—my son. The father does not make any equation between the lamb and his son. He delivers the final answer to the unseeable God who does not justify nor explain. That is the mysterious blank and elusion of identification. It is arguably a deferment as the waiting time of hope, as well as a refusal “to present itself before the violence that consists of asking for accounts & justifications, summonses to appear before the law of men” (Derrida 2008: 62).

But why do we need a responsibility of transgressing our common and general ethical order? This question brings us to the significance of Derridian deconstruction on responsibility and ethics. For Derrida, there is a silence which deviates demands for

---

8 Derrida notes that “Still, Abraham doesn’t just speak in order not to say anything when he replies to Isaac. He says something that is not nothing and that is not false. He says something that is not a nontruth, something moreover that, although he does not know it yet, will turn out to be true” (Derrida 2008: 60).

9 In the viewpoint of the economy of violence, Prof. 賴俊雄 (Lai Chung Hsiung) on his “On Violence: Derrida, Levinas and Benjamin” has a good argument on the necessity of justice and ethics.
manifestation, disclose and unveiling (Derrida 2008: 65). Abraham loves his son absolutely, and so does God love Abraham. Derrida argues that “a gift of death” happened at that instant of sacrifice. One transgresses ethical duty, “although in betraying it one still belongs to it and at the same time recognizes it” (Derrida 2008: 66).

No betrayal can be sustained without recognizing the betrayed first. This is because without recognition a priori, there is no so-called transgression. And in this thrilling instant of sacrificing Isaac, we are witnessing a unique history of absolute responsibility happening: “Abraham must assume absolute responsibility for sacrificing his son by sacrificing ethics, but in order for there to be a sacrifice, the ethical must retain all its value10; the love for his son must remain intact, and the order of human duty must continue to insist on its rights” (Derrida 2008: 66-67). In these two contradictory orders and responsibilities, we face the gift of death from God. Passing this reasoning and articulation in human languages, Abraham becomes the father of nations even though he may have been a killer had not God’s angel stopped him. The mystery in this refusal of general ethical rules lies in a response to the absolute duty “without hoping for a reward, without knowing why yet keeping it secret” (Derrida 2008: 74). On the other hand, without discussing this issue in the human world, Abraham also gives God the gift of death because Abraham quietly submits to God’s seemingly mysterious command.

Levinas argues that death is not the teleology of being-in-the-world in issues of death and existence. For Levinas, time, as marked by death, is the possibility of fulfilling our subjectivity via the realization of responsibility: “What we have attempted

See A Century with Levinas or the Destiny of the Other (列維納斯的世紀或它者的命運：“杭州列維納斯國際學術研討會”論文集 楊大春等主編)北京: 中國人民大學出版社, 2008. My dissertation, however, assesses Derrida’s critique of ethics by Abraham’s transgression of ethics. We propose, therefore, different approaches illustrating a closely related theme of deconstruction and its violence.

10 This logic of deconstruction is also applied when Derrida argues for the debate between Oedipus and people in Theaetetus: “a foreigner [Oepidus] can be a patricide only when he is in some sense within the family” (Derrida 2000: 7).
to do is to …describe time independently of death of the nothingness of the end that
dead signifies. We have attempted to think death as a function of time, without seeing
in death the very project of time” (Levinas 2000a: 113). Reproaching Heidegger, whose
philosophy inscribes subjectivity in the being-toward-death, Levinas intends to remind
us that death is not to constitute a sameness of one’s self; rather, it is “by which [death]
one becomes oneself in reality: one becomes oneself through the untransferable,
undelegatable responsibility” (Levinas 2000a: 43). In Levinas’s discussion of death and
being we can see that the apprehension of death shares the same attribute as the
“secrecy.” It is because this apprehension signifies the experience of anticipation.
Waiting, in Derrida’s and Levinas’s idea of Time, is always a matter of welcoming what
one does not see at present, and of giving oneself a gift of death that one is not able to
give otherwise.

C. Abraham and the I-thou Relationship.

God as the absolute other is experienced in the radical change of the appellation of
the hôte, which Derrida illustrates via the event written in Genesis 17 and 18. He argues
that “Abraham receives the visitation of Yahweh, and this apparition…this nonawaited
irruption is, in itself, already a visitation.” He goes on to say that “this is indeed
hospitality par excellence in which the visitor radically overwhelms the self of the
‘visited’ and the chez-soi of the hôte (host)” (Derrida 2002: 372). In that event of
visitation, both the names of Abraham and Sarah his wife were changed by the guest—
God. With the change of their names, it is as if their worldly identities were also
changed. And this change is caused by an unexpected visitation, by an unexpected guest.
The covenant between God and Abraham is viewed as an “experience of sacred
hospitality” (Derrida 2002: 373-74). After the visitation (or rather the act of hospitality),
there is no longer Abram. Abram is dead. It is a one-way confrontation, but the alterity becomes revealed. Abraham, instead of heirless, becomes the father of nations.

This one-way action, this “to act without entering the promised land” (Derrida 2002: 349), entails the question of the third. As defined, the face-to-face is irreducible to the I-thou relationship. Levinas has argued that

The personal order to which a face obliges us is beyond being. Beyond being is a third person, which is not definable by the oneself, by ipseity. It is the possibility of the third direction of radical unrightness which escapes the bipolar play of immanence and transcendence proper to being. Through a trace the irreversible past takes on the profile of a ‘He.’ The beyond from which a face comes is the third person. The pronoun He expresses exactly its inexpressible irreversibility, already escaping every relation as well as every dissimulation, and in this sense absolutely unencompassable or absolute, a transcendence in an ab-solute past. The illeity of the third person is the condition for the irreversibility.” (1986: 356)

Once a third element is added, nothing can be predictable.11 The pronoun He in our narration sometimes appears in the personage of God, sometimes a call, sometimes a hope. This “third” vividly shows his trace in actions of prediction-consuming gift-giving and hospitality. Accordingly, an unseeable third that is irreducible to the I-Thou connection in Levinas’s argument, and the illusive idea of God jumps into our discussion context. Let us look at the Qur’an to see how the face to face with God is articulated:

---

11 We have to say that French mathematician, theoretical physicist, and a philosopher of science, Jules Henri Poincaré’s famous proposal of the “Three-body problem” connotes the seriousness of the third, even it is in a different discipline from ours.
III. The Test That the Qur’an Does Not Invoke

Many have argued that for a father to slaughter his son is an evil act that cannot be and is not from God. If we compare the story with the Qur’an’s version of the event, we will raise Derrida’s interpretation of the Biblical event of Abraham sacrificing Isaac to another level of exploring the issue of faith and the Levinasian concern of the saying and the said. Derrida thinks that the sacrifice of Isaac belongs to a kind of common treasury of all three so-called religions of the Book (2008: 65); nevertheless, the Qur’an never says that God told Abraham to kill (sacrifice) his son, which arguably makes the whole narration difference between the Bible and the Qur’an, at least in the record of this event. The Qur’an teaches us that Abraham had a dream in which he saw himself slaughtering his son, which many believe is coming from the fact that Abraham as a human being was susceptible to the tricks of Satan. Abraham believed the dream and thought that the dream was from God. As for the Qur’an, it never says that the dream is from God (Allah). Muslims believe that Islam does not advocate human sacrifice and therefore, even as a test, God would not contradict Himself by ordering Abraham to commit what he prohibits. Because Abraham thought the dream was from God, he proceeded to sacrifice his son. God sent him the lamb to be sacrificed instead, in order to save the son, and the sacred father-son relationship. Nowhere in the Qur’an does it say that God told Abraham to sacrifice his son. Nowhere in the Qur’an does God say that He gives Abraham that dream. And last but perhaps most importantly, there is

---

12 About the Levinasian phraseology “Saying (le Dire)” and “Said (le Dit),” please check Levinas Otherwise than Being 45-49. In short, “Saying” responds to the alterity of the “absolute other” with never-consuming meanings; “Said”, on the contrary, is language reified into thems, fixed statement. Nevertheless, Saying cannot entirely do without the Said.

13 There are some debates about the different narrations of the one to be sacrificed and its significance—be it Ismael, Abraham’s first son from his maid Hagar, or Isaac, Abraham’s first son from his wife Sarah. For the sake of highlighting discussion topics, I will skip these debates here.
no secret between Abraham and Ismael—Ismael knows of his father’s dream and agrees to be sacrificed. We shall see the following from the Qur’an's account:

100. He (Abraham) said: “Verily I am going to my Lord; He will guide me. “Lord! Grant me a righteous son.”

101. So we conveyed to him the glad tidings of a son extremely forbearing.

102. When he reached (the age of) working with him, he said, “O son! I truly saw in my vision that I sacrificed you; now what is your view?” He said: “O father! Do as you are bidden; you will find me by the Will of God steadfast.”

103. When they are both surrendered to the Will of God, and he threw him upon his forehead, (to sacrifice him).

104. We called out onto him: “O Abraham!

105. "Indeed you have fulfilled the dream; Verily thus do We recompense the doers of good deeds!

106. “Verily this is a manifest trial.”

107. And We ransomed him (Ismael) with a momentous sacrifice.

(Chapter 37 the Ranks. Emphasis added.)

The statement above actually refers to logic of the We/Allah who gives compensations for a service rendered or damaged incurred. It is a manifest scene of trial, and there is no secrecy. The “clarity” of this statement makes it commonly recognized in the Muslim community that for those who know God and appreciate Him, they should

---

know that God would not ask any of them to do evil. They will not commit the gross crime that is severely punishable by God and the human communities. In other words, Abraham intending to sacrifice Isaac secretly is understood as evil and atrocious, and there is no problem for Muslims to understand the Qur’an, because, above all, it is no more than a dream passing as God’s instruction. A well-balanced narration, the event of Abraham sacrificing his son in the Qur’an leaves no ambiguity and controversy.

However, there is a potential paradox: Abraham and Ismael believe in that dream. In other words, their understanding of God allows them to recognize and obey a God capable of demanding evil and gross. The association between God and his believers raises our further research interest and I will illustrate it as follows.

After a comparison between the Qur’an’s and the Bible’s version of this event, we find that God in the Bible takes a more active role. Perhaps this is why in the Bible Abraham acts as he does: avoiding the arrogance of so many “clean consciences” by looking without the-subject-who-says-I being able to hold the other within the subject’s gaze—the very essence of a responsible person in Derridian context. The topic of faith, which sets itself apart from what is publicly or commonly declared, makes the secret of Abraham a topic of controversy. Derrida says Abraham has the courage to behave like a murderer in the eyes of the world and of his loved ones, in the eyes of morality, politics, and of the generality of the general or of his kind [le générique]. Abraham has even renounced hope (Derrida 2008: 73). Yes, Abraham’s conception of and submission to absolute responsibility unquestionably makes Abraham the father of nations.

Nevertheless, I argue that Abraham has a special intimacy with God, an association, which is manifested most vividly at Abraham’s hospitality to God, and receiving gifts from God: God will make him father to nations and his offspring will be as numerous as the sands at sea. Therefore, arguing Abraham even had renounced hope
seems to be too convenient to be a full explanation of Abraham’s action of absolute responsibility. Perhaps we should assess this relation from a different angle: Abraham believes that God will not really command him to kill his son, and this hope comes from his earlier literal face-to-face experience with God. At first sight, it seems an improper argument here because if Abraham had acted as if he had known that God would not really demand Isaac’s life, then there is no space for absolute responsibility at all. But do we then question Abraham’s decision because he does not really believe that God will make him sacrifice his son? Does Abraham’s hope betray him as making a responsible decision because he is not entitled to be responsible at all? Not if we explore what faith or hope can mean. Blanchot says that hope is to be reinvented because hope is for what perhaps will never come and simultaneously recognizes the improbable:

Hope is most profound when it withdraws from and deprives itself of all manifest hope...Hoping not for the probable, which cannot be the measure of what there is to be hoped for, and hoping not for the fiction of the unreal, true hope—the unhoped for all hope—is an affirmation of the improbable and a wait for what is. (1993: 41)

Abraham waits for God to withdraw his word, even though he recognizes that it is improbable. And that is Abraham’s hope, or his faith in God. He believes, but he is not sure—it is the aporias of believing.

It is also exactly a responsibility reasoned in a very unreasonable way, a total speculation based on faith, which makes Abraham the bearer of absolute responsibility,
and that is why Abraham is the father of nations—it is not only because of his absolute submission and fear to God; to a certain level, it is also because he believes in God to a degree of not believing God. And God loves to be a God of “otherwise” for a believing Abraham. If we take a look of the Biblical delineation of their “friendship”—we find it full of affection in an unbroken distance between God and humans. Their “friendship” is not to say that God is associable and therefore the dissymmetry relation between the other and the subject falls back to the order of assimilation and the same; rather, it is Abraham who shows the otherness in his unreasonable secret of trying to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham realizes the proximity of God even in His otherness by correctly interpreting the absolute God as mercy, grace and the “third” in His otherness.

Abraham has an unusual relationship with God. Actually, their relationship has a long history. There is a strong foundation to their bond long before Abraham has a son, even long before there is “Abraham” this person. It is God who said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you (Genesis 12:1); it is the LORD who appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring [ Or seed ] I will give this land” at the great tree of Moreh at Shechem (12:7); there were serious diseases inflicted on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai, even though Abram did not seem to care for Sarai as a husband should have (12:17); again God announced to Abram for the second time his blessings after Lot had parted from him, saying that if anyone could count the dust, then Abram’s offspring could be counted (13:14-17); God promised him a son and blessed him again (15: 4-13); God proposed to change his name to Abraham and re-introduced His blessings (17:1-8); God proposed to change his wife’s name to Sarah. God visited Abraham face to face in the form of receiving hospitality from Abraham:
The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." (Genesis 18:1-5)

God later indeed identified himself and pointed out Sarah’s doubt when Sarah thought she was too old to have a promised child:

Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son (Genesis 18:13-14).

God continued his conversation with Abraham and Sarah as if He were a human being; God continued arguing with them:

Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh." (18:15)
God confessed to Abraham his plan: Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? (18:17). God defended Abraham again before Abraham sinned against God by giving his wife Sarah to Abimelech king of Gerar (20:1-18).

God took all the initiatives in His relation with Abraham. However, what was Abraham’s attitude to God when God promised to bless him from time to time? Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" (18:17). He even talked back to God: "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" (18:18). Perhaps the most famous conversation between God and Abraham is Abraham arguing with God for Sodom because there God bargains with a human:

Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" 26 The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." 27 Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, 28 what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." 29 Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." 30 Then he said,
"May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

Amazingly, Abraham did not stop at the number of thirty. He dared to keep on pleading from God:

31 Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?"

He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it."

32 Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?"

He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

33 When the LORD had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

So it is Abraham and God’s history of “association”—may I use the term tentatively. Probably, if we try to find the cause of something a mystery, we will argue that it is because of these special events in the past of their relationship, and because of the climax of God’s miracle happening to Sarah, that Abraham kept silent at his sacrificing of Isaac—he does not need to worry, but he does not perch in certainty, either. That is the aporia of giving the gift to the unseeable third, God.

5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.
6 Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." 7 And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (21:5-7)

It is not that I am biased to quote the Bible much longer than that of the Qur’an. It is simply because the Bible has a much longer description on Abraham. In fact, it is very important for us to notice that the Bible gives a lengthy description or preparation before Abraham’s action of sacrificing Isaac. Compared with the Qur’an Said, what the Bible records makes the event of Abraham and his son a Levinasian Saying, a refusal of the ethical demand for manifestation, disclosure, and unveiling. It “shows” that God and Abraham keep a special relationship, rather than directly gives a straight and clear stance on this event like the Qur’an does. In the Bible, on God and Abraham, God finds Abraham, reaches him, blesses him, and even defends him. God chats with him, and then God does a miracle to him. It should not surprise us that Abraham keeps a sense of “dis-belief,” an attitude of “wait and see” to his Lord, for that is his behavior to God and it did not seem to offend God—he builds up altars, prays, but he also talks back, chats, laughs, pleads and argues with God. Therefore, instead of telling Sarah or Isaac that God wants Isaac, he says to his son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering. And when he sees a ram caught by its horns, he takes the ram and sacrifices it as a burnt offering instead of his son, without being instructed so. That is Abraham, the future father of nations, 15 because he acts not “exactly” as God has commanded him. He does what God does not tell him, which genuinely shows God’s grace—yes, God does calculate, but God also offers “the otherwise.” By obeying God’s

---

15 “and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” Genesis 22:18.
seemingly gross command, Abraham fulfills God’s will of being acknowledged but without being ascribed into the system of knowledge.

IV. Conclusion

The message of this discourse of the gift as death/mute in the rough and tumble of human events is not an exclusive message in the Bible. Abraham’s dubious silence on this event has a counterpart in the Bible: In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke we find the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist:

Zechariah, a priest in the time of Herod king of Judea, though both he and his wife Elizabeth being righteous in the sight of God, has no children. One day, during the turn of his priestly course in the temple of the Lord, he is informed to have a much blessed son, John, by a surprising visitation of an Angel. When Zechariah saw the angel, “he was startled and was gripped with fear.”

16 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

19 The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

---

A miracle is revealed to Zechariah, but he cannot speak of it. He is forced to be silent because he asked for a reassurance.\textsuperscript{17} He is punished by Gabriel because he does not believe Gabriel, the messenger from God.\textsuperscript{18}

The biblical secrecy is reminiscent of the latter part of Derrida’s critique on the technological, modern age. God defined as first cause and infinite substance may not that easily translate into God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There may indeed be some question as to whether our discussion in this paper beckons us beyond the parameters of a philosophical inquiry \textit{per se}. For Derrida, far from becoming quantified or de-naturalized as we may have assumed in the twenty-first era, we have returned to the demonic and orgiastic which religion has tried to replace: “religion presumes access to the responsibility of a free self” (Derrida 2008: 4). And this critique should not be construed as a simple inversion of Derrida's "atheism" or perhaps non-theism. What Derrida contends here is that Modern man has fallen into inauthenticity, becoming not a self or person but assuming the mask of a "role" (2008: 37). Present-day democracy, in turn, is not about the equality of individuals but of publicly designated roles. For Derrida, discovering and accepting the gift of death determines human uniqueness, which can be illustrated as follows: the irreplaceability of human beings is distinguished when they encounter God in their faith or responsibility, which is realized in a very personally relationship, such as that between Abraham and God. Instead of acting as a role of father and what a father or a good citizen is expected to, Abraham is acting as a unique person with “the liberty of the soul” (2008: 22). It also needs to be emphasized that being a responsible father or a good citizen is unquestionably important, but we are not addressing this on the level of a simple and conclusive

\textsuperscript{17} According to Fitzmyer, Zechariah “asks exactly the same question that Abraham asked in Gen. 15: 8, and yet these two questions are not treated alike” because the angel charges unbelief against Zechariah (52-56).

\textsuperscript{18} In the Bible, it is not uncommon that the informed one asks for a sign from God; sometimes the signs are given unasked. Check Gen. xv. 8, Judg. vi. 36-39, 2 Kings xx. 8, Exod. Iv. 2-6.
statement, something like that Abraham tried to murder his own son because he heard voices. Remember that Derrida calls from the very beginning of the book *The Gift of Death* that many make mistakes not of knowing too little, but of too much—too much in the sense that their knowledge occludes, confines, or saturates questions or abysses. He contends that there is something of an abyss that resists totalizing summery or role playing (Derrida 2008: 6), and this is the Saying of the Bible. Some may want to criticize the link between Abraham keeping the sacrifice secret and our discussion of ethics in gift-giving. The critique is that today we know that this voice was not the voice of some god, that religious injunctions of sacrifice have always been part of the monotonous complacency of modern society, which allows many to die of violence, and those who have faith that it was the voice of God are called upon to have faith precisely against any understanding of responsibility and ethics. I will say Yes: their faith must defend its own irrational choice of violent sacrifice. In no place does Derrida deny that Abraham is a murderer: “Things are such that this man would surely be condemned by any civilized society” (Derrida 2008: 87). But he raises the problematic of that civilized society because it is exactly this same “society” *puts to death* or (but failing to help someone in distress accounts for only a minor difference) *allows to die* of hunger and disease tens of millions of children (those relatives or fellow humans that ethics or the discourse of the rights of man refer to) without any moral or legal tribunal ever being considered competent to judge such a sacrifice, the sacrifice of the other to avoid being sacrificed oneself….The smooth functioning of its economic, political, and legal order, the smooth functioning of its moral discourse and good conscience, presupposes the permanent operation of this
The contention at stake is not about how any religious fundamentalist is connected with “the voice.” Rather, the problem is, everyone is too well equipped with how and what the responsibility and ethics are supposed to express and circulate in a well-recognized communal sense of responsibility and ethics, to the point of being ready to take up the “role” anytime. We all know that sacrifice, and especially the sacrifice of the other, is not something that Derrida encourages. Like Kierkegaard, Derrida defines religion as an access to the responsibility of a free self, which in turn is defined as a relationship consciously and secretly experienced by the individual subject who paradoxically sees himself under the call of responding (yes, I am here), insomuch as a relationship with a more radical form of responsibility that exposes me the “dissident and inventive rapture with respect to tradition, authority, orthodoxy, rule, or doctrine” (Derrida 2008: 29). Uniqueness and irreplaceability are what Derrida envisions for us as readers when approaching the other in gift-giving, and in our discussion of the silence and responsibility above.

On man’s uniqueness and irreplacebility, Levinas says that man “is a being sui generis, and it is impossible for him to ignore or forget his avatar of subjectivity. He realizes his own separateness in a process of subjectification which is not explicable in terms of a recoil from the Thou” (Levinas 1989: 74). In the following chapter on King Lear we shall discuss how a subject in the renaissance enlightenment structures his/her identification with the category of distance and meeting.
Chapter 4

KING LEAR AND HIS OTHERWISE BEING

Goneril: ‘Tis his own blame; hath put himself from rest,
And must needs taste his folly. (King Lear II. iv. 288-89)

“I must know how to give what I possess.” (Levinas 2000b: 171)

King Lear, a Shakespearian drama being stated in every possible form, explores eternal themes of love, life and death. Scholars and critics have offered many ingenious and diverse interpretations of King Lear. But few paid attention to the nature and significance of Lear’s disillusion of (filial) love via the confrontation of hospitality after he gives his kingdom as a gift to the love-professing daughters. The scene of his madness in the heath certainly is one of the most dramatic events in the tragedy where King Lear is exposed to a general openness, to an alterity without name, without identity; nevertheless, this scene of the full-blown madness does not illuminate much the transformation of a strong ruler to an anguished mind. Reflecting on Levinas’s philosophy of existence, which argues for a refusal of complacent commitment to existence, we shall stop rebuking King Lear’s seeming irresponsibility and forge a new interpretation of King Lear’s life journey. In the tragedy, King Lear proposes to give his daughters the gift of his kingdom, authority, and kingship. Considering the fact that King Lear’s identity is related to his kingdom, authority, and kingship, I argue that he actually gives away a gift of his existence. He gives away what he has been identified with. In this strange refusal of living “properly” as he is accustomed to at the approaching of his aging and thus inevitable death, he actually
encounters a Levinasian transcendence of existence.\footnote{Cf. Levinas’s philosophy on existence at his first main work 
\textit{Existence and Existents}, especially chapter II: The Relationship with Existence and the Instant. For conventional interpretation of King Lear’s political irresponsibility, see Betty Kantor Stuart.} Death, for Levinas, realizes the possibility of life (2000a: 43, 113).\footnote{See also a good compiling effort by Sun Xiangchen on Levinas’s death. (孫向晨, <<面對他者—萊維納斯哲學思想研究>>, 上海: 上海三聯書店, 2008. 100.)} In what follows, I wish to tease out some of the issues thrown up by this arresting statement. While it is obvious that King Lear gives out of the pressure of time, of the approaching death,\footnote{Jeffrey Stern has a convincing article on the connection between King Lear’s aging and his plan for Cordelia. For his argument that King Lear’s plan is not only political but also imbued with psychological and individual motivations, see “King Lear: The Transference of the Kingdom” \textit{Shakespeare Quarterly}, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 299-308. JSTOR. Web. \url{http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870480}.} I intend to show the new form of life for King Lear when he perceives the coming of death and “unwisely” proposes to give and be hosted by the gift-receivers.

Resorting to Derrida’s critique of the gift, Levinas’s philosophy of subjectivity and existence in the world\footnote{Levinas argues for a stripping of subjectivity beyond nudity and forms. See Levinas, 2006:15.}, I will also illustrate viewpoints from Georges Bataille on general economy and add a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach, thinking that by combining these four analytic angles our discussion shall offer one of the best strategies in unraveling the dynamics and meaning of King Lear’s unusual initiative of life. Through the reading of \textit{King Lear}, therefore, the following discussion paves the way for presenting \textit{King Lear} by assessing the following phenomena first.

\textbf{I. The Conceptual Genealogy of Gift-giving in Anthropology and Philosophy}

It is true that gift-giving has a symbolic meaning, and sometimes it is an extemporaneous gesture to confirm the giver’s generosity. In the western society, the unreciprocated gift left the receiver felling inferior and vengeful at the intrusion on one’s independence and the incursion of the debt to repay. In the Middle East, the Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid II (r.1876-1909) in the late phase of his endangered
empire, which was then besieged by the Western powers in the nineteenth century, often staged gift-giving and other ceremonies to present himself as a caring father. Gift-giving is a symbol of the imperial paternalism to call forth the consolidation of the huge amount of Ottoman subjects scattered in the empire over vast territory and living under rules of different religious communities (Quataert 166).

Sometimes a gift represents a regrettable memory. When there is no way to claim superiority, one of the underdog’s excuses is that their opponent’s property was originally a gift given by them. Descendants of an old time gift-giver boost the grace and authority which their forefathers used to enjoy, and wonder if their ancestor had kept the given gift, they might have some chance to be the most prosperous generation now. While one’s identity is to be elaborated and the other’s is to be opposed, the difference between the gift-giver and the gift-receiver is magnified symbolically. For example, when asked about a tribal map of territorial contention, one of the interviewees claims that “The other tribes don’t have any land except what we granted them as a gift” (Shyrock 60). The gift given away in this historical context becomes a bitter memory of irrevocable loss and self-asserted complacence. It is a bitter memory because, as a result of the land-giving, the tribes which used to be the receiver of gift-land from the narrator’s tribe now are more thriving than the giver. It is a narration of self-asserted superiority because it is the narrator’s tribesmen who gave the gift.

**A. From Exchange to Gift-Giving**

The etymology of gift and its functions in human society are not a recent invention in philosophical and theological circles.⁵ The symbolic meaning of gift-giving is one of the more durable features of philosophical and sociological

---

⁵ See Marcel Mauss, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Pierre Bourdieu.
reflection in the history of contemporary thoughts. Anthropologists try to verify their research in societies of very different cultural backgrounds. Let me try to spell out further the radicality of this universal symbolism in different milieu. For example, an anthropological study in many Middle East societies found that a wedding without distributing and exchanging gifts is too lonely to be a legitimate social contract at all: In an Arab society, before the formal public request of the bride’s hand during a ceremony at her home, which in Arabic is called *khatab*, people publicly deliver a large gift of sugar to the bride’s household. The more well-off the brides are, the more people are involved in escorting the gift, from musicians to women from the neighborhood, and the more public the delivery of the gift is (Eickelman 161). To a certain degree, this gift-giving is related to the divorce rate there because the economic and social status of the woman implied in the gifts collected or received is the main factor influencing congeal happiness. Many are divorced because minimal bridewealth was paid (Maher 196-98). Some influential anthropologists also illustrate, through detailed examples drawn from their field studies, that marriages are matters as serious as waging wars or making big business deals, and are outcomes of strategies involving a wide range of symbolic and material interests. And any specific marriage ultimately relates to what is exchanged. These include the exchange of fertility, filiation, inheritance or anything related to productive resources, values of honor, and prestige. The exchange implies or manifests social status and sometimes ethnic identity. In the end, the very essence of Middle Eastern marriage system is part of an exchange system through the form of gift-giving (Bourdieu 43-52; Tapper 400-405; Eickelman 158-65).

The gift on the other times serves as a bribing material. This reality is illustrated in the tradition of Bedouins collecting *khawa*. It is a gift that must be given even against the will of the giver, and even if by giving it, the giver acknowledges one’s
tribal inferiority. What they call *khawa* is like a tax, though literally it means brotherhood. The *khawa* is the right of brotherhood between the people who become brothers. I give you the *khawa* so that I am protected by you. Peasants pay this kind of tax to tribesmen, and despite its brotherly term, no pretense of fraternal amity exists between the two parts. “The Bedouin tribes people will assert without slightest qualm that *khawa* was imposed on the weak (that is, the peasants) against their will.”6 In this social context of giving *khawa*, the gift-giving is to exchange security and there is a strong sense of class disparity.

Back to western society, because of the felicity of its rhetoric and the resourcefulness of its strategies, Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss have long acknowledged the phenomena of people managing exchange in order to demonstrate hierarchy or equality in tribal equality or political power. Their reflection in primordial societies focuses on observing the political agenda. Mauss is one of the earliest scholars who toned the system of exchange with rationality in gift-giving.

Barter arose from the system of gifts given and received on credit, simplified by drawing together the moments of time which had previously been distinct….There is nothing to suggest that any economic system which has passed through the phase we are describing was ignorant of the idea of credit, of which all archaic societies around us are aware. This is a simple and realistic manner of dealing with the problem… of the “two moments of time’ which the contract unites. (Mauss 1970: 35)

In other words, gift-giving and exchange are performed under rational calculation including the object given and the interest it will generate in time interval. Mauss and

---

6 Recited from Abu Jaber by Shryock 79.
Lévi-Strauss observe the social activities referring to gift exchanges or Potlatch in primitive or archaic types of society⁷. They say it is a phenomenon under spectrum of group activity rather than of individual choice. They conclude that gift-giving—or exchange in their studies—actually is a kind of political power-wrestling activity between at least two groups of tribal people in the same community. “In theory such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation” (Mauss 1970: 1). The commonly held activity of exchange, Mauss claims, is “essentially usurious and extravagant, and it is above all a struggle among nobles to determine their position in the hierarchy to the ultimate benefit, if they are successful, of their own clans” (Mauss 1970: 4-5). This agonistic type of total prestation he proposes to call “the potlatch.” It is this observation on economy of exchange, calculation, and requirement of obligation which makes gift-giving “undesirable” in Derrida’s contention on the gifts.

B. Gift-Giving as Unreasonable Expenditure

Gift-giving is thus a symbolic capital in a non-commercial way. Bataille, one of the major thinkers in sociology of the second half of the twentieth century and beyond, on the contrary, argues for an unproductive, consumptive, squandering expense which defines the workings of a “general economy.” The idea of general economy represents his point in the philosophy of transgression. Bataille’s observation that life exceeds calculation of necessity based on production and reproduction overturns the view of restrictive economy, which conceives economic activities in terms of particular operations with limited ends (Bataille 1988: 22, 25, 39). Bataille’s philosophy of squandering thus transforms our customary conception of value.

⁷ Since Mauss has a book dedicated to the gift, his phrases are quoted in the following discussion. For readers interested in Lévi-Strauss’ observation on social behavior of the exchange based on the principle of reciprocity, see The Elementary Structure of Kinship. Boston: Beacon, 1969. 55, 62.
Bataille thinks that there is another social totality of base matter which “is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines” aspiring for community in communism (Botting and Wilson 9). Aligning with Mauss and others discussing a primary notion of expenditure, Bataille presents a cosmic movement of energy that underlies production in order to have more to expend, and it is about the economy of gift-giving. Furthermore, Bataille’s description of expenditure underlies a secondary notion of expenditure which involves the language, the unconscious, and all productive activities and the detours and deferrals that they effect (without cause) in the continual movement of expenditure (Botting and Wilson 10). Disparate phenomena and unproductive expenditure originate or derive their meanings from the experience of loss on a grand scale. Opposing the principle of classical utility that human society is to acquire and preserve resources, Bataille argues for the more fundamental desire of squandering resources and energies. “Human life cannot in any way be limited to the closed system assigned to it by reasonable conceptions” and this life starts only “with the deficit of these systems through seemingly reckless and disordered economic activities” (Bataille 1985: 128). While many still believe that human nature expresses and fulfills itself in productive labor, Bataille contends that unproductive expenditure is the primary datum (Bataille 1985: 117). We may infer from this statement that, for Bataille, the goal of life is not fulfillment but transcendence of oneself—by transcendence I refer to a life which is not being characterized by economy but rather by excess and nonproductive expenditure. To put it in another fashion, while the praise of life is about everything admirable and positive, and is a systematic account of the realms of values, the ambivalence that one finds in life and the uncanny dimension of it could usher in Dionysian joy.

Bataille’s argument brings us to Freud’s theory on the death instincts (or death
drive) which contradicts the pleasure principle of living (or named as the life instincts, Eros) (Freud XVII 22, XXIII 149, 243; Lo 78). “We shall find courage to assume that there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle” (XVIII 22). The death instincts, briefly speaking, “are to begin with directed inwards and tend towards self-destruction, but they are subsequently turned towards the outside world in the form of the aggressive or destructive instinct” (Laplanche and Pontalis 97). It is the unreasonable waste, as an expression of destruction and its symbolization, links Bataille’s philosophy of transgression with Freud’s theory of self destructive instinct. While Bataille’s theory is relevant to economics, and Freud’s theory is connected to sociological and psychological phenomena, there is arguably a desire of sublimation involved (Lacan 1997: 203). In Levinas’s philosophy, in contrast to Hegelianism and Platonism, is not the accomplishment of subjectivity but its very inadequacy which exposes the restless desire for the absolute other (Kearney 117). Arguments of Freud, Bataille, and Levinas suggest that irrationality and waste can be a form of sublimation, an elevation to a transcendental meaning of life, or Being. This waste, or desire, here reveals itself not in “significance” (if significance is the word) of deficiency but as positivity when we interpret positivity to be an existence exceeded by a demented suffering of pure misery exactly as Levinas illustrated the Saying of existence in Otherwise than Being (153).9

---

8 According to Lacan, the death drive as a destruction drive is specifically developed by Bernfeld and Feitilberg. Freud himself stops at the point of Nirvana or annihilation principle. Nevertheless, it is no doubt that Freud is the one who discovered the beyond pleasure principle. See The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 211.

9 Cf Levinas’s section on “From Saying To The Said, Or The Wisdom Of Desire”: “Not includable in the present, refractory to thematization and representation, the alterity of the neighbor calls for the irreplaceable singularity that lies in me.....the uniqueness of oneself.....the deflection of identity is a for-the-other.....exposing what can be outlined] as essence. This iteration of exposure is expression, sincerity, saying. To not be reabsorbed into meaning, the patience of passivity must be always at the limit, exceeded by a demented suffering, “for nothing,” a suffering of pure misery. Saying prolongs this extreme passivity, despite its apparent activity (2006:153. emphasis added).
In Shakespeare’s tragedy, *King Lear*, King Lear gives away his kingdom to his least favorite heiresses, who humiliate him and destroy his pleasure and identity in the world after inheriting from him the territory and authority. Therefore, the first scene of *King Lear* has been described as improbable because Lear’s decision regarding distributing his land and authority proves to be dominated by a swift wrath.¹⁰ Lear invites his daughters’ declarations of love to be the entitlement of his kingdom. In this context, despite that King Lear used to have a complacent and complete life, he makes others the masters of his house and authority. In what follows, I wish to tease out some of the issues thrown up by the arresting statement of Levinasian subjectivity and Derridian the (impossible) gift: King Lear’s subjectivity is renounced via a denial of the ethics of hospitality and the turmoil initiated by a mis-given. *King Lear*, therefore, is about the process of a subjectivity being intruded and scattered by giving away the possessed as a gift to the other, resisting the temptation of reducing the alterity of every other to the rubric of every identifiable features of a stable being, of the very criteria whereby we distinguish and differentiate one kind of happiness in life from the other. Furthermore, as a family, the interactions among King Lear’s family members sometimes seem intimate; at very specific points of time, there seems to be a long, irremediably emotional alienation among them. The elder children who are given abundantly are not obligated to filial obligation or any other affection. In a word, the family members act more like neighbors, which assume a relationship of heterogeneity and infinite renunciation in our discussion. The transformation of their reaction to each other manifests the endless dialects of family and enemy, assimilation and asymmetry in classic contention on the Uncanny since Freud.

¹⁰ It has been a convention of criticism since Samuel Tailor Coleridge, who regarded King Lear’s division of his state as foolish, even absurd before he is too old to rule or die. However, Harry V. Jaffa has successfully demonstrated that Lear’s plan is a necessity in the realm of Realpolitik. See “The Limits of Politics: *King Lear*, Act I, scene i” in *Shakespeare’s Politics*, Allan Bloom with Harry Jaffa. New York: Basic Books, 1964. 113-45.
II. King Lear

What is more tranquil than a musk-rose blowing
In a green island, far from all men’s knowing?
More healthful than the leafiness of dales?
More secret than a nest of nightingales?
More serene than Cordelia’s countenance?

John Keats, “Sleep and Poetry,” lines 5-9

Some may argue that Lear’s intention of giving is not sincere enough because he simply abdicates the kingdom when he is tired: In Shakespeare’s drama, Lear, the aging king of Britain, decides to step down from the throne and announces his plan to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. First, however, he puts his daughters through a profession-of-love test, asking each to tell him how much she loves him. Goneril and Regan, Lear’s older daughters, give their father flattering answers. The climax of this famous Shakespeare tragedy appears when Cordelia, Lear’s youngest and favorite daughter, refuses to speak. “Love, and be silent,” she says to herself (I. i. 60). When pressed, she says that that she has no words to describe how much she loves her father. The following is the intriguing scene of Cordelia’s refusal to speak her love to the King her father.

Lear. To thee and thine, hereditary ever,

Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
No less in space, validity, and pleasure,

Than that conferr’d on Generil. Now, our joy,
Although our last, and least; to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest’d’ what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

Cor. Nothing, my lord.

Lear. Nothing?

Cor. Nothing.

Lear. Nothing will come of nothing; speak again. (I.i.V78-89)

Cordelia’s love of King Lear becomes nothing to him when she refuses to speak out. By keeping her love a secret from her father, Cordelia refuses to receive the gift reserved for her. To understand the connection between love and gift, first of all, I will suggest that this requires us to distinguish between two different ways of loving and desiring. In Shakespeare’s writing background the word “love” prefigures a whole legacy of materialism toward the desire for spiritual love and for material possession. Terry Hawkes points out that when Shakespeare was writing King Lear, there was a popular punning connection between love and value. Therefore, not surprisingly, Goneril and Regan choose to express their “love” in the manner of an estimate by playing equivocally the spiritual and the material (180). In addition, Cordelia’s love represents a divine love which creates and maintains the cosmic order. Erotic love contrasts with divine love, and the former generates chaos, disorder, and destruction (333, 340). Cordelia’s reluctance to verbalize love or value to her father at that moment echoes a universal phenomenon: it is often the most bona fide person who is least capable of speech. “So we falfe Fire with Art sometimes discover/And the true
Fire with the same Art do cover (sic).”¹¹ “Love’s triumph must be Honor’s funeral,” says the poet.¹² The poet is painfully, terrifyingly, aware of the difficulties of maneuvering the expression of love. The engagement of art often bothers actors true and honorable, especially in a noble scenario such as love expressing, or gifts receiving. Expression of love is always bound to a double injunction—to respond to the sincerity of love and to the economy of love: no more nor less. When King Lear presses Cordelia with the crucial question again, announcing that her words could merit the greatest inheritance, Cordelia answers:

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty
According to my bond; no more nor less. (I.i.90–92)

In response, Lear flies into a rage, disowns Cordelia, and divides her share of the kingdom between her two sisters. Cordelia’s justification for her reserved, simple response is that she cannot “heave her heart into her mouth,” that she loves him exactly as much as a daughter should love her father, and that her sisters wouldn’t have husbands if they love their father as much as they proclaim (I. i. 98–99). At its most sophisticated manner, the meaning of love is uttered. She actually says something without speaking it: that is, the sincerity of her love. She could not copy or duplicate her sisters’ language, not only because it would be flattering hypocrisy, but rather due to the nature of love as singularity. Love, like ethics, implies the order of and respect for absolute singularity, in addition to that of the generality or of the repetition of the same. She could copy neither the format, nor the content of her

¹¹ Sir John Suckling 7.
¹² Ibid.
sisters’ presentation, yet King Lear considers this a failure of loving him. Finally she
gives a discourse of love in a more properly organized form, but in it she says that she
loves him exactly as much as a daughter should love her father. “Exactly” is the word
she gives. Refusing to use any literary analogy like her sisters have done, she brings
into light the singularity of love again, but Lear does not recognize it. He is so mad
that she does not follow accepted common “rules” as her sisters do.

King Lear favors Cordelia. He values her more than her sisters. We know this
from Act one Scene one when King Lear’s faithful old Earl of Kent discusses with the
Earl of Glaucester the shares planned for the two married daughters. Kent says the
very first sentence: “I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than
Cornwall” (I. i. 1-2). And Glaucester responds: “It did always seem to us; but no, in
the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the Dukes he values most; for
equalities are so weigh’d that curiosity in neither can make choice of either’s moiety”
(I. i. 3-6). Thus far it can be speculated that the King has divided between the two
son-in-laws equally. Later, before he listens to Cordelia’s response after her two
sisters Goneril and Regan, King Lear encourages Cordelia: “what can you say to draw
a third more opulent than your sisters?” We shall comfortably conclude that King Lear
actually has designated the most ample third of his kingdom to his third daughter
Cordelia. Cordelia is already his favorite daughter at the beginning of the play
accordingly, and presumably he knows that she loves him the most. Nevertheless,
Lear values Goneril and Regan’s fawning over Cordelia’s sincere sense of filial duty
because that reluctance in expressing gratitude fails to meet the proper form/manner
of expressing love’s value as well as receiving an intended gift.

Lear quickly learns that he made a bad decision. Goneril and Regan swiftly begin
to undermine the little authority that Lear still holds. Unable to believe that his
daughters have betrayed him when they get the gift, Lear slowly descends into
madness. He flees his daughters’ inhospitable houses to wander on a heath during a great thunderstorm.

A. Hospitality and the Disavowed Gift in *King Lear*

According to the plots, Goneril and Regan manipulate skillfully the spirit of hospitality to demean their father the old king. They make him their guest, under the command of their authority. King Lear becomes the guest of his own house, his own land, and his own servants. By the maneuver of the rules of hospitality, which already suggest a hierarchy between master of inheritance and temporary visitors, the daughters and the father obey the rule of hospitality without questioning it. Rather than a king-father, he becomes the guest of his daughters: a father under the mercy of his daughters. A cruel demonstration of power demonstration becomes absolutely visible as the common, conditioned rules of hospitality are employed within the plots.

It all starts from calculating the number of Lear’s retinue. The tension of seeing how Goneril and Regan whittle down Lear’s retinue from a hundred knights to none is as impressive as seeing Abraham arguing with God about the critical number of righteous men that should be in Sodom for God to spare the city. The former is begging mercy for his existence; the later, for others. According to the drama, Lear spends the first portion of his retirement at Goneril’s castle. Goneril complains that Lear’s knights are becoming “riotous” and that Lear himself is an obnoxious guest (“His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us on every trifle.”(I.iii.6). Seeking to provoke a confrontation, she orders her servants to behave rudely toward Lear and his attendants. And then she demands the reduction of the number of Lear’s retinues. She claims that they are “men so disordered, so deboshed and bold” (I.iv.239). Lear tries to reason with Goneril: “My train are men of choice and rarest parts, That all particulars of duty know” (I.iv.261–262). Knights and servants are part of the pomp
that surrounds a powerful king, although the king has retired, and it goes without saying that decreasing the number of Lear’s retinues represents the intention of reducing Lear’s right as a father, a king, and as a guest. Therefore, later a deeply confused Lear begins to question his own identity. “Doth any here know me? This is not Lear… Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (i.iv. 223–227). He is completely under the mercy of the new master—his heiress—without even a right to keep what is preconditioned for giving the gift kingdom to his daughter. By this we see how a gift is given yet the receiver manages to transform the gift. I will illustrate this point by quoting Derrida: “The event called gift is totally heterogeneous to theoretical identification, to phenomenological identification” (Derrida 1999: 59). In Derrida’s framework, “the gift as such cannot be known, but it can be thought of” and there is always a gap between “knowing and doing” “knowing and an event” in gift-giving (1999: 60). Given the fact a gift is something the subject does without knowing what one does, without knowing who gives the gift and who receives the gift, King Lear’s gift of kingdom to the daughters runs into a problem of transformation exactly as a gift-giving event is supposed to do—that it would not be exhausted by determination, or even by an intention.

The following is the original condition in which Lear is to give:

Lear. Meantime, we shall express our darker purpose.

    Give me the map there. Know what we have divided
    In three our kingdom; and ‘tis our fast intent
    To shake all cares and business from our age,
    Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
    Unbruthen’d crawl toward death

                ……………………………

    Tell me, my daughters,
(Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state)
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge. (I.i.35-52)

Even with a specific feudal tradition, King Lear is not obliged to give his kingdom to
any of his daughters. Theoretically, he owns absolute power with which to decide
where and how to deal with his territory. That is why both Goneril and Regan feel
uneasy after they see what Lear has done—he gives away the best part of his gift to
both of them simply because Cordelia answers wrongly. They obey his authority, but
when they get the gift, they want more than what is given:

Reg. ’Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but
slenderly known himself. (I.i.292-293)
Gon. …Pray you, let us hit together;
if our father carry authority with such disposition
as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend
us. (I.i.302-305)

Goneril and Regan reasonably take King Lear’s disowning of Cordelia as evidence of
his dotage and as pretext of their “making invention thrive” at the expense of old
feudal loyalty hereinafter. After distributing his kingdom, King Lear realizes that his
gift is transformed and has disappeared; the gift is no longer under his control. When
Goneril refuses to host Lear’s retinue, he utters with tremendous sadness, which can
only be pacified by a hope—that he still has another gift-receiver, his second daughter
Regan, to go to:

*Lear*. I’ll tell thee. [*To Coneril.*] Life and death! I am
asham’d.

That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
Should make thee worth them. Blasts and fogs upon
Thee!

...........................................................

Ha! Let it be so: I have another daughter,
Who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable:

...........................................................

Thou shalt find
That I’ll resume the shape which thou dost think
I have cast off for ever. (I.iv.293-308)

He soon learns that Regan enjoys the gift-kingdom and the gift-authority no less, even
at the price of demeaning Lear’s royal status. As Goneril, Regan gets the gift and
refuses to return her gratitude to the giver. In this case, she is the receiver AND there
is no exchange.

When Lear meets Regan, she suggests that he should return to Goneril and beg
her forgiveness. She claims that she is not to host him because, according to the
unwritten contract, it is not her term yet. Her hospitality has terms and conditions. She
is not ready to host, and she is not to host someone not invited by her. The palace is
given by her father King Lear, yet it becomes now the stage for torturing the
ex-master. On his knees, Lear begs Regan to shelter him, but she refuses. Goneril
arrives to Regan’s palace after Lear and they proclaim that Lear is getting old and weak and that he must give up half of his men if he wants to stay with either of them. Lear, confused as I have described, says that he and his hundred men will stay with Regan. Regan, however, shows us that Lear is in no condition to bargain between her and Goneril. When one is cruel, the other is even more ruthless. Just like hyenas, they take turns gnawing off Lear’s spiritual flesh—that is, his affection and trust in them—and material flesh: the number of his attendants as well as his dignity. At first, Regan says she will allow him only twenty-five men. Lear turns back to Goneril, saying that he will be willing to come down to fifty men if he can stay with her. But Goneril is no longer willing to allow him. We can imagine the old man walking back and forth, facing the two new rulers of a kingdom he gave, and a moment later, both Goneril and Regan speak frankly that they refuse to allow him any knight. Regan and Goneril, by denying Lear his servants gradually, expose their ultimate malice to Lear. Now King Lear is not even a common human being because even a common human being deserves the right of hospitality without surrendering dignity. The last straw which completely destroys the laws of family and hospitality is that in the end, the outraged Lear curses his daughters and heads fore outside, where a wild storm is brewing. Someone from the old King begs Goneril and Regan to bring Lear back inside, but the daughters order the doors to be shut and locked, leaving their father outside in the storm.13

B. When a Gift Becomes a Poison

As far as the narrative is concerned, King Lear’s benign gift of kingdom and

13 Julian Markels argues that as one form of the confrontation between the old feudal loyalty and the new individualism, the sisters’ language is the result of modern philosophic naturalism, which is revealed in Regan's reasons for insisting that Lear be shut out in the storm to learn his lesson (14):

O! Sir, to wilful men,  
The injuries that they themselves procure  
Must be their schoolmasters. Shut up your doors; (II.iv.305-7)
power to his daughters is much less visible than the disastrous results it provokes. It is observed that the filial tragedy in *King Lear* indeed occasions violence involved in any property reshuffle, especially those property owned by the ruling class.\(^\text{14}\) King Lear’s kingdom, authority, and territory very possibly are violent appropriation from the people. Therefore, first, King Lear is not entitled to give at all. Second, due to the unjustified acquisition of earthly wealth and power of the father, the other members of the ruling family may secure their newly gained property even at the expense of filial attachment. Finally, the "gift" from King Lear may just be an enforced and inevitable transit of property in ruling class because Lear is getting old. The oddly arbitrary decision made by Lear merely spotlights either the nature of abused political power in the ruling class or his concession to an inevitable power transition and a war of succession. To sum up, there is no so-called gift from King Lear. There is only re-allocation of booty and loot.

Indeed, there could be many motivations behind gift-giving. Nevertheless, a selfish purpose, a forced giving, a questionable origin of gift (and who can trace the ultimate and real origin?) or even a halfhearted attempt to give does not cancel or annul the movement of gift-giving. When King Lear gives away what he believes to be his possession by a speechmaking contest as the means to reward his daughters with shares of land and power, he is making a pretext for a gift-giving intention:

> Which of you shall we say doth love us most? (I.i.50)

It is by virtue of this “voicing out” that *King Lear* connects us, in a very Derridian way, to themes of love, gifts, and hospitality. My shift from other prevailing readings of *King Lear* comes in arguing that common gift-giving has a tendency to function, ironically, as a counterpart of love which speaks of an unconditional

---

\(^{14}\) On the inevitable tragic transference of Lear’s kingdom, see Paul Delany, “*King Lear* and the Decline of Feudalism.” *PMLA*, Vol. 92, No.3 (May, 1977), 429-440.
openness regardless of a proper love-confession. Derrida tries to avoid discussing gifts in phenomenology because, while many people subscribe for the amenity-elements in gift-giving, in phenomenology gift-giving is a self-contradictory idea. One of the fairest way to summarize Derrida' *Given Time* is that “as soon as a gift is identified as a gift, with the meaning of a gift, then it is canceled as a gift” (1999: 59). All the gifts addressed in phenomenology are at the level of desire—the desire of our very existence living in the world. Therefore, Derrida has to point to the impossibility of Gift, and talks about the desire of giving gift simultaneously—the desire for the gift is and is not outside the circle of expressionism and phenomena. Derrida’s genuine gift pertains to the conception of Lacanian Love. King Lear’s tragedy is foreground by a reexamination of love and desire implied in gift-giving. Indeed, subscribing Derrida, we cannot describe “the phenomena” of gift-giving; nevertheless, we can explore “the desire” of giving gifts even though gifts dissociate the *as such* in phenomenology. When Derrida claims that “the desire—whatever the name—a thought of the gift, which would not be exhausted by a phenomenological determination,” it is the thoughts (desires, wishes) of gift-giving which he articulates (1999: 60). The double injunction of the ethical order of the gift and the phenomenal meaning of the gift allows the phenomena of the gift, if there is any, does not lead to a simple exteriority that would be transcendent and without abiding relation.

The intention of expressing love, of witnessing love, in gift-giving falls into the horizon of subjectivity in phenomenological epistemology because the giver gives, knows, and expects. In Derrida’s philosophy, this epistemology annuls the possibility of any genuine gifts; in Levinas’s argument, this subjectivity does not let “the face of the other” appear. Therefore, while a giver gives out of an expectation of returned-love or returned-gift, Lacanian psychoanalysis points out that most people can only manage to give out of desire because desire makes objects equivalent and
exchangeable. Lacanian theology converges with Levinas’s idea in this aspect where the former argues that Love tends to diminish the special significance of any one particular object (Evans, *An Introduction of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 38), whereas the latter contends that ethics starts outside the epistemology of differentiation (Levinas 2006: 4). With the suspension of difference, the gift-giver fails to recognize the different mentalities and reactions among different subjects. King Lear thought his daughters would behave as he had expected, ignoring that the understanding of what is given, how to receive, and what is repay could vary tremendously. Lear gives out of his love and his desire as well, and that ambiguity confuses him regarding what to expect from other subjects. That is why Lacan says *King Lear* shows that when man sets off on the path of his desire, he goes forth alone and betrayed (Schneiderman 17).

Another effective perspective to assess King Lear’s gifts is that King Lear has a desire for love.15 King Lear has a quest, a question to be answered, but he uses an arbitrary method. Gift-giving can not prove love because a genuine gift effaces itself as soon as it is given. As soon as it tries to prove something, the purpose of the gift is gone. Nevertheless, giving gifts could be a symbol of love—as least the giver may imagine so. The gift giver desires to give because he or she thinks it’s a symbol of love. And we know King Lear is ineligible in asking for a proof or even a representation of love by gift-giving. However, Love in Lacan, as well as gift-giving in Derrida, is not representable. They cancel themselves as soon as they are represented. Cordelia’s answer of “nothing” to King Lear’s question represents the unrepresentable element in any genuine scene of love and gift-giving.16 The giver

---

15 Developing from Stanley Cavell’s beautiful essay “The Avoidance of Love,” Jeffery Stern, in referring to King Lear’s selfish love in the transition of his kingdom, argues that “He [King Lear] will give his lands to their husbands after the daughters have sworn a husband’s prerogative to him” (300). For further study, please see Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear.*” In *Must We Mean What We Say?* New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969. 267-353, esp. 289.

may intend to show love and expect the love to be understood in the act of gift-giving, yet he can never “require” seeing love by gift-giving. By keeping silent Cordelia refuses to manifest her love as her sisters do. She refuses to follow a system of metaphors and manifestation. She refuses to get the gift from King Lear “as such.”

In this aspect, although in Lacanian Love there is no difference, the act of regular gift-giving raises difference so that there is the other to receive. In the gift, there is only difference because gift-giving evidently and inevitably indicates the otherness of the others, separating the giver from the receiver, and thus presuming an ontological gap in a radical sense. As a forerunner in the study of the phenomenon of gift-giving, Mauss has found “a common fund of ideas: the object received as a gift, the received object in general, engages, links magically, religiously, morally, juridically, the giver and the receiver” (Mauss 1970: 29). Mauss’ description of gift-giving manifests a basic principle: the existential difference between givers and receivers. We could thus argue that if there is no gap, why links? If there are no others, there is no gift, which makes a giver and a receiver (the other) possible. Indeed, in gift-giving, the existence of the other is reminded continuously and repeatedly. There must be gifts, but the gift must be cancelled; otherwise, the profits, the interests will be discredited, and the sense of the existential otherness will be enhanced and reminded until it becomes the poison. In our study of King Lear, Lear remembers the gift, and expects his daughters to treat him accordingly; nevertheless, the daughters do not want to remember the gift. If they remember, the shadow of King Lear the giver will linger in their new authority over the kingdom-gift. When Lear expects the interest of the gift to be repaid, the receiver-daughters hate him more because Lear’s expectation reminds them of their slyness and hypocrisy in getting the gift, and of the fact that their authority is a the result of that gift. King Lear and the two elder daughters thus inevitably become unreachable to each other.
in this gift-giving.

C. The Gift of Life in *King Lear*

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honor, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone, of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

George Herbert, “The Pulley,” 103

There is no gift of rest in human life, as the poet implies. Human life and experience, in Husserl’s phenomenological term “everydayness,” is a life of uncertainty. Husserl’s idea of life is a lived experience (*Erlebnesse*): “The world of thing is by definition…never completely visible at one given time. What defines the transcendent world is its indeterminateness in term of visibility” (cf. *Ideas I*, §44. recited in Alweiss 60). It is in this regard that gift-giving nourishes and trans-values life. As discussed above, gift-giving is a high level of peaceful exchange as well as a poisonous deferment—by poisonous we mean the giver cannot decide completely where the gift goes or how the gift-receiver will receive their gift. We also do not know whether the gift will be received as it is. Perhaps the gift will be taken not as it
is intended for. King Lear’s daughters take the gift from their father but discard their father, or the image of the father, and that clearly is not what Lear had planned or imagined when he gave. This deviation is just like the unbreakable gap between the signifier and the signified in semiology where the arbitrariness characterizes the nature of symbols and representations. Designated as a symbol of friendship and representation of affection, the gift is never accordingly present. There is always an assumed route for the gift, the role of the giver and the receiver, yet the gift and the receiver do not prove the assumption insomuch as a signifier is not accurately (or safely) sent to the receiver. Because of this deviation or misrecognition or mis-calculation, the transformation or transgression given by gift is the contestation of all limits in the affirmation of the limit of possibilities. That is, the subjectivity is challenged, questioned, and left ignorantly in a context of planning gift-giving.

Deriving from Husserl who valuates the significance of the invisibleness in our being-in-time, we can argue that King Lear is in search of the invisible love via his questionable method of giving away his kingdom as gifts to the daughters. But love cannot be testified unless through ordeals. So he invites, out of his own control, ordeals for love. The whole decision and process of his dividing his kingdom can be described as a Levinasian “a he in me to make decisions which I am not able to.” He truly makes a hard decision, a decision totally unimaginable by himself that he would abandon his most and only favorite daughter Cordelia, and gives her lion’s share to the other two sisters after “comparing” their confession of how much their love is to him.

For the above reason, I argue that King Lear not only gives gifts to his daughters, but he also gives himself one gift, even though he does not intend to. It is the gift of life—though Derrida would say that what comes down to the same thing of it is the gift of death. It is open to debate whether Lear is simply too confident, or whether he
is a self-centered old fool, or just a victim in the transition of ideological battleground from aristocratic feudalism to capitalism as argued in the backdrop of New Historicism, and yet I contend what Lear could be a self-content man of high achievement who had "put himself from rest" as Goneril accused (II.iv.288-89). By providing gifts for his three daughters at the starting scene in the form of sharing (giving away) his kingdom and power, King Lear accidentally gives himself a gift, a new-born—even though it is in the form of disappointment, strife and anguish. The famous scene in which he wanders in the heath and going insane implies going beyond the mundane, common, and safe world. This also fits the unavoidable route when we talk about the "price" or "value" of genuine gift-giving and hospitality. It conforms to Bataille’s waste by giving away all he has, without enough preparation (and the preparation is never enough in gift-giving): What if the daughters are not reliable? What if the gift-receiver does not repay? While most people are to secure and to consolidate their possession in the world, King Lear, as the most powerful man in his territory, creates new possibilities by canceling his gift to Cordelia, risking his authority, stepping out of his comfort zone (in ontological as well as geographical meanings), and putting himself at the mercy of his daughters, or rather, the mercy of the unseeable Will of God, even though he does not create these possibilities of life intentionally. He starts a completely different journey of life from what he used to enjoy and accustomed to. His new life is demonstrated by the vile hospitality he receives from his first two daughters (which causes Lear to lose his old identity), and by his youngest, beloved Cordelia, who first disillusion his plan of gift-giving, and

yet welcomes him by ordering her people to find Lear and host him. Doesn't this remind us of Derrida's proposition that a genuine gift cancels itself as soon as it is intended and a genuine hospitality welcomes that which is beyond expectation? King Lear’s foolishness generates a new meaning if we reassess Goneril's statement: ‘Tis his own blame; hath put himself from rest./And must needs taste his folly (II.iv.288-89). King Lear is as story about an old man who, in his perfect state of life, looks for experiencing the impossible, the out of calculation, searching for what he does not have in his seemingly perfect life! He desires to know the unknowable, the impossible, even though his desire is not revealed to him as such. And it is actually through King Lear’s search for an ethics—something more than filial love and not limited by imaginable expectation—that his later life is beyond his imagination when he proposes to give. Gift-giving is never as such because the desire in gift-giving is not as such. Even though King Lear does not search for it, the surprise coming along in the ethics of gift-giving and hospitality finds him. Nevertheless, the search cannot be experienced unless through ordeals, or through the contradicted dialogue implied in gift-giving and hospitality. Gift-giving and hospitality provide the whole search with a necessary measure, or a witness of transgression. So he invites, out of his own control, the unexpected (and thus disappointing) life-twist for living the impossible. That is why I say King Lear's seemingly foolish decision shows Levinas’s "a he in me to make decisions." King Lear sees, experiences, and grows to appreciate and understand what he could not otherwise—it is a gift amazingly precious for an old, accomplished man like King Lear to "grow" at this phase of his life.

III. Conclusion

Returning to our introductory citation from King Lear, we thus have two discoveries in the ethics of gift-giving. On the one hand, gift-giving calls for the other,
disturbing the immobile nothingness in a one-person isolation. Therefore, the gift is valued besides its seemingly non-beneficial position in a commercial society. In other words, it recognizes “the other” to give, and it also points to the uncertainty and the elusory destination of this action. I therefore argue that Death Instincts can be one of the causes behind gift-giving. In annulling itself, interestingly, gift-giving actually proceeds against the grain of existential annulment, the Freudian nirvana in the Death Instincts. It is because gift-giving, even in its attempt to annul, involves a desire of creating “the other” so that “I” as a subject can respond to. The response empties, evacuates the subject so that it seems that the subject has given out all one has. In the chapter of background theory, I have said that Levinas uses the image of an internal hemorrhage to describe his idea of the subjectivity. He says that “to revert to oneself is not to establish oneself at home, even if stripped of all one’s acquisitions. It is to be like a stranger, hunted down even in one’s home, contrasted in one’s identity…it is always to empty oneself anew of oneself, and to absolve oneself, like in a hemophiliac’s hemorrhage” (Levinas 2006: 92). In our reading of King Lear, being stripped of his own proper momentum of appropriation in his own house among his family, the King demonstrates a sorrowful and brave existence. King Lear is posited as one of the four great tragedies of Shakespearean studies because it describes the hope and the disillusion of existence via gift-giving and hospitality.18

The event of gift-giving results in a new life, regardless how short it may be and how destructive the form is. After the event, King Lear is able to imagine a fantasy of him and Cordelia living together like birds in a cage, learning about the outside world but observed by none of their enemies. He would rather live in a prison with someone truly in love with him than meet those who forsake his gifts and deprive his identity as

18 Well says F.L. Lucas that “the function of tragedy is simply and solely to give a certain sort of pleasure, to satisfy in certain ways our love both of beauty and of truth, of truth to life and about it” in Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle’s “Poetics” London, 1939. 53.
a royal father and gift-giver. This transformation of his “knowledge” about life is vividly expressed in the following scene when Cordelia and Lear become the sisters’ prisoners.

_Cor._ We are not the first

Who, with best meaning, have incur’d the worst.

For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down;

Myself could else out-frown false Fortune’s frown.

Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?

_Lear._ No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison;

We two alone will sing like birds i’th’cage:

When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down,

And ask of thee forgiveness; so we’ll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues

Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too,

Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out;

And take upon’s the mystery of things,

As if we were God’s spies; and we’ll wear out,

In a wall’d prison, packs and sects of great ones

That ebb and flow by th’moon. (V.iii.3-18)

The image of prison as a desirable abode amidst the hurly-burly suggests “man’s essentially psychological and mythopoetic nature, of his tendency to transcend his immediate circumstance” (Duncan 1247). I contend that King Lear’s immediate circumstance is more than the guilt of mistreating his faithful daughter and his
loathing toward the other two; his immediate circumstance, in brief, is what he has been identified with—a king of authority and power. He has neither access to the real world nor the way to God until he gives away his identity in the form of divesting himself of power. Taking upon the mystery of things and living as if they were God’s spies, King Lea finally comes to learn the ultimate secret of life.

Epilogue

We have looked at the crevice in Lear’s plan for gift-giving and the transition of his life journey from a ruler to a wanderer. French laureate Maurice Blanchot has one question expresses a similar concern which illuminates the troubling effect given by gift-giving and highlights its “value” in human society. It is: “why should not man, supposing that the discontinuous is proper to him and his work, reveal that the grounds of things—to which he must surely in some way belong—has as much to do with the demand of discontinuity as it does with that of unity?” (9)

The gift Cordelia refuses to take enlightens us another potential polemic in gift-giving: when there is no receiver, the classic circle of giver-gift-receiver becomes a malicious recall of the absence. We will talk about that in the following chapter on the Jinni’s tale from the Arabian Nights.
Chapter 5

LOVE AND THE DESIRE TO GIVE:

TALES IN THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

It can even be said that love kills desire, since love is based on a fantasy of oneness with the beloved, and this abolishes the difference which gives rise to desire.

(Jacques Lacan, the Seminar S20: 46)

The existent manages to accomplish all its solitude—that is, all the intensity of its tie with itself, all the finality of its identity—and at the same time it is that whereby the subject finds itself in relationship with the event that it does not assume, which is absolute other, and in regard to with it is a pure passivity and no longer able to be able.

(Levinas 1987b: 80)

Insomnia is the tearing of that resting within the identical.

(Levinas 2000a: 209)

In order to explore Lacan’s argument for the “indifference” in love, and Levinas’s unique viewpoint that an epistemological passivity foretells a relationship with the “absolute other,” this chapter argues two points from the reading of the popular stories in the Arabian Nights, acknowledging that these insomnious nights of story-telling are, philosophically, the time of motivating the illeity, the there is. First, gift-giving—a desire of approaching the other, sometimes in the form of hospitality—demonstrates the gap, the necessary distance in Levinas’s philosophy of
alterity which is revealed in asymmetrical reciprocity. Second, plots of gift-giving and hospitality often proceed beyond anticipation and projection, challenge the phenomenological “as such,” and therefore make the recognition of Gift impossible or incomplete. Therefore, instead of assessing Derrida’ contention on the gift as the impossible, I will address the impossibility inherited in the gift-giving realizes the gift.

I. Prologue

It is an arena of argument where scholars wrestle against each other, arguing whether gift-giving is a poison or a blessing. As I have discussed in Background Theory, Derrida proposes that Gift is the impossible, is poison, and cannot be re-appropriated (1997: 142). His argument is against a number of scholars such as Marcel Mauss, Friedrich Nietzsche, Pierre Bourdieu, and Slavoj Zizek, all of whom notice the positive and functional grain in gift-giving and exchange. Zizek, starting from his psychoanalysis background, contends that exchange is fundamentally to build and to ascertain the everlasting of the other in the lonely cosmos (70).

In Zizek’s contention, gift-giving has to presuppose a subject other than the giver. Gift-giving evidently and irresistibly indicates the other in order to be able to give. Gift-giving separates the giver and the receiver, presuming an irreducible gap in the subjectivity and its other. Even though gift-giving is physically amiable in a material and commercial society by connecting people more humanly (Hyde 158), this idea of “humanly” actually requires further exploration. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that this admitted humanitarian effect reconciles any of the alienation implied in the psychoanalytical I-Thou relation. This imagination of “connecting
people more humanly” denies a further and deeper imagination—the “object Petit a.”

In other words, gift-giving constitutes and reminds us of the very gap in each relationship, while this gap may not necessarily depress those who have faith in gift-giving. The very fact is that gift-giving is never completed, just as the Petit a is never satisfied. In gift-giving, people construct the assumed roles of givers or receivers, and each gift-giving constructs a never-satisfied desire (that is, the receiver repays and the giver is rightfully waiting, even though the giver can renounce this right voluntarily). Therefore, the desire and the momentum in gift-giving has always already implied the existence of the unreachable other, the Patit a, and is basically ambivalent with, if not totally contradictory to, the idea of Lacanian Love, which suggests a merge of subjectivities.

Levinas’s discourse as quoted at the outset of this chapter intriguingly illustrates this existential distance and intimacy. The subject, the existent, manages to accomplish its solitude while simultaneously discovering itself in relation with the absolute other. Realized in the context of gift-giving and hospitality, the giver gives but, to one’s surprise, also realizes the irresolvable gap, the distance of beings. Alternatively, the subject knows the solitude, yet the subject also accidentally connects with the other by an unexpected event of gift-giving and hospitality. I will return to this point in this following discussion on the Jinni’s tale in the Arabian Nights.

On the other hand, considering the ethics of responsibility which requires what is prior to the subject’s freedom, we find that responsibility challenges the naïve right of the subject’s freedom when the subject faces the eternal question from God: “Where is Abel thy brother?” Although it seems like servitude or heteronomy at first sight,

---

1 Literally in the object small a, the letter a stands for the initial letter of autre. See Lacan, “Television.” 25.

time of the other is never time of presence, because time of presence sinks into the past, is representable, and is the time of beginning or assumings (Levinas 1987b: 80). In lack of preparation, responsibility ends up in substitution for another in the other’s time, in the condition—or the unconditionality—of being a hostage. Such responsibility does not give one “time” (a present for recollection or coming back to oneself); instead, it makes one always late (Levinas 1998a: 180). It makes one always late because one is not prepared for it; one is not assuming before it is formulated. In this sense, it essentially deviates what Lyotard contends about the generally-circulated idea of gift-giving in time. Lyotard’s contention, as introduced in Background Theory, is that the giver gives because somehow the repayment of the gift is already recognized as a priori. But Levinas’s un-presumed gift-giving or hospitality is neither conditional, nor exchangeable. This time, the time of hospitality, the time of responsibility to an unknown God, the third outside the incorporating I-thou relation, becomes possible when it is conditioned as if there is no such conditionality. Henceforth, it locates outside regular rectilinear time. Being an unconditional hostage is tantamount to launching into an irreversible movement of taking responsibility. In our discussion of Arab hospitality and the Arabian Nights, we will see how people are hosted and become hostages even when they think they are the masters. As the hostages in the inappropriating time, these personages respond to the call of the third outside the presentable “I and Thou”—a response which “lacks” calculation or presentation to the call. Being “lack” and evoking desire, Lacan’s idea of the object a develops into a call of transgression in the respondent’s life when the object a is embodied in gift-giving and hospitality.

Before assessing some specific stories from the Arabian Nights, it is necessary

Peperzak, Adriaan T., Ed. Ethics as First Philosophy. New York: Routledge, 1995. See also Levinas, “Freedom is not bare.” and “Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.” Totality and Infinity 84.
for us to sketch briefly the historical and cultural significance of the term “hospitality” since it holds quite specific and in many ways unique implication for both contemporary Westerners and Arabs.

A. Politicizing Hospitality

In a nutshell, hospitality is the unavoidable question of identity: people provided conditioned hospitality based on their different recognition of identities, even though in God’s eye everyone is but a stranger in the world. In dealing with global hospitality and asylum, the state draws or delimits a proper context where the residents interact with each other in verbal or physical forms, whether the residents agree or disagree, even though sometimes the civilian community derives its own (justification of) existence from a particular reading of the state at moments of defiance of the state (Veena Das 231). The problems of strangers, of immigrants, and of hospitality between givers and receivers are also parts of (and results of) state governing. In this respect, we say that hospitality confronts a process of nationhood identification manifested in nation, state, tribe, and community. This need for identification and sedentarism in our daily language is defined by a basic wariness of foreigners. The classical assumption about a visiting foreigner or a refugee is that “politically uprooted, he [the refugee] may sink into the underworld of terrorism and political crime; and in any case he is suspected of political irresponsibility that endangers national security” (Simpson 9).

In earlier chapters we have discussed the idea of hospitality from two sides: one is the duty of hospitality, which is incumbent on the host; the other is the right to hospitality—for the host is given the right of hospitality as long as he does not perceive hospitality to be an obligation or duty, but rather a right which entertains him to “welcome” the other. The host may view the right of hospitality as a chance of his
approximation to the other. Nevertheless, it is by no means a natural and easy choice of welcoming and of hosting. Sometimes, it seems this welcome is contrary to mainstream political ideas nowadays. Therefore, in this era of global migration, issues of refugees and migrants are a complicated balance between the so-called native citizens and those who come to share and compete with resources. For example, we know that advocates of the Far and New Right in France insist that the different political identities between the native and the immigrants be maintained. Referring overtly or euphemistically to race, culture and national identity, people picture a scenario of “the demographic obsessions and fears concerning the decline of the French population and invasion by a foreign element” (Kofman 95). The claim that both French and immigrants have a right to difference was at first a discourse stemming from regionalists and feminists in the 1970s, yet the claim could also accommodate a fear that the host (the French) will no longer be the host and the guest (immigrants originally) will occupy the center of cultural and national identity, thus steering away from the so-called original (Catholic) French route. Multiculturalism is thus viewed as a threat to the survival of the nation-state. For some, immigration is to be resisted because it threatens both the identity of the host and of immigrants. Within this worry (or warning) of cultural decline, Derrida’s claim radically reshuffles our conception of culture, of host and immigrants: “Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic among others” (Derrida 2001:16). He is not saying that hospitality is a culture; rather, it is culture itself. The host is granted a sight of possibility in the site of hospitality and this welcoming of possibility and passion is culture itself.

Foreigners are not yet the absolute other. Not every foreigner is in the privileged category of “expatriate,” whose transplantation and uprootedness in a colonial or postcolonial scene imply an orderly manner of picking up one’s roots from the “mother country,” the cognitive culture-bed, and setting about one’s “acclimatization”
in the foreign environment or on foreign soil, and again, in an orderly manner (Malkki 31). And it is exactly in this sense that literature on refugees and immigrants accesses the images of broken and dangling roots which are threatening to wither along with the taken for granted and ordinary loyalties of citizenship in a homeland (Heller and Feher 89). Foreigners are not the absolute other, but, as Levinas’s central argument states, we meet the absolute other face-to-face through providing hospitality. Most of us, on the one hand, like the law expert in the Bible, often ask: “Who is my neighbor?” On the other hand, homelessness is viewed as a serious threat to moral behavior compared with rooted citizens, who feel themselves bound by ethical precepts or social responsibility (Cirtautas 70, 73). What is ignored is the dialects between the host and the hosted, the interlocution of territory versus the existence of exile and displacement, and that is as important as the so-called worry of the “moral issue.” The question and problem of foreigners and the goodness in hospitality, therefore, bring us to national as well as individual concerns in the Cosmo. By providing hospitality we re-examine our social and historical network in which our being is inscribed, if not structured.

With political sensitivity in mind, I provide in the second preparatory section the historical and cultural background of the Arab world where the Arabian Nights was first formulated and circulated for centuries.4

B. Arab Culture and Literature in Hospitality

3 See Luke 10: 25-37 for the Parable on the Good Samaritan. Dr. Feng Yin-kun (馮蔭坤) has an essay on it, where he provides a viewpoint aligning with mine contention, focusing on God’s concern of unconditional giving rather than situating in who my neighbor is: <http://www.christiansudy.com/data/nt/luke_c10_v25-37a.html>. R.C.H. Lenski also noticed that “Jesus purposely turns the question of the lawyer around. To ask only who my neighbor is tends to lead to theorizing and to seeking abstract answers.” See this in The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961. 608.

4 Though the tales trace their roots back to ancient and medieval Arabic, Indian, and Persian elements, they are compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age dated from the 9th to the 13th centuries.
The Bedouin lives in a house of hair [a tent]. Without doors. Without windows. The peasant lives in a house of stone. His doors are locked and his windows are closed. He hides from strangers and fear them.

Haj Salih (Shryock 50)

The Arab Bedouins are renowned for their hospitality, which presumably distinguishes them from the peasants or the sedentary. Bedouins consider peasants pathetic as much as a Marxist criticizes the petty bourgeoisie. The Bedouins are proud of their traditional prestige of hospitality although hospitality could cost the host drastically.

Religious teaching reinforces Arab traditions in hospitality. “Whoever,” said Muhammad the Prophet, “believe in God and the day of resurrection, must be generous to his guest; and the time of being kind to him is one day and one night; and the period of entertaining him is three days; and after that, if he does it longer, he benefits him more; but it is not right for a guest to stay in the house of the host so long as to incommode him.” According to some religious teachers, Muhammad even allowed “the right of a guest” to be taken by force from those who would not offer it. In the Arab society, it is commonly entertained that strangers are given the privilege of staying in the first tent that presents itself, whether the owner is at home or not. The wife or the daughter must instantly prepare the needed carpet and food. And the stay can last for three days and four hours after the arrival without being under any labor or obligation (or exchange). After that period of hosting, the stranger can choose to stay and pay some assistance in domestic matters or he can go to another tent and be

---

5 Hadith, Saheeh El-Bokhary.
6 Mishkat el-Masabeeh, ii. 329. Recited in Lane 1995: 143.
served for a new period of three days and four hours. This process can last until the stranger reaches his destination (Lane 1995: 143-44). According to Richard Burton, the prominent English translator of the Arabian Nights, this three-day rule of hospitality is especially recognized among Sunni Moslems (Burton 884).  

Orders from the Prophet Muhammad are one major source of Islamic law, Sharia. If it is only a traditional and judicial matter under the order of the Prophet Muhammad, then the issue of hospitality, this forced law, is arguably no more than a fixed provision waiting to be executed as if it is an obligation. In the end, it is but a mutual covering—an action for the same: the host understands what he is ready to understand, and welcomes whom he is able to welcome. A case in Islamic juristic history especially brings into light the issue here. Once there was a Christian, who converted to Islam and sought the protection of Muslims in Malibar. The Muslim public consulted their jury Ibn Hajar about what to do because if they accommodated him and refused to return him to the Christians, expectably, they would have to leave their homes in order to avoid the oppressive repercussions from ruling Christians. Ibn Hajar responded that if granting that convert entailed Muslims being forced to forsake their homes, then they should not offer him shelter. In this case, like most others, the hosts provide what they can manage; the hosts decide who they are to host. I shall not report the result of this case, but leave the reader to ponder on the limits of hospitality.

Another Arab anecdote may help us to understand the power of hospitality from another angle. We know that in Arab society there is a well-known obligation to eat the host’s salt to express hospitality and communion. There is an interesting story about Yaakoob Ibn El-Leyth Es-Saffar, a predator who lived a life of stealing. One

---

7 See his endnote 5 in the section of Story of King Shahryar and His Brother.
night he broke into the palace of Dirhem the Governor of Sijistan:

[The predator Yaakoob] made up a convenient bale of gold and jewels, and the most costly stuffs, was proceeding to carry it off, when he happened in the dark to strike his foot against something hard on the floor. Thinking it might be a jewel of some sort or other, a diamond perhaps, he picked it up and put it to his tongue, and, to his equal mortification and disappointment, found it to be a lump of rock-salt; for having thus tasted the salt of the owner, his avarice gave way to his respect for the laws of hospitality (italics mine). Throwing down his precious booty, he left it behind him, and withdrew empty-handed to his habitation. The treasurer of Dirhem repairing the next day, according to custom, to inspect his charge, was equally surprised and alarmed at observing that a great part of the treasure and other valuables had been removed. (Lane 1937:144-45)

Nevertheless, after examining the package which lay on the floor, to his equal astonishment, he found that not a single article had been taken away. The uniqueness of the circumstance induced him to report it immediately to his master. The master decided to proclaim throughout the city that whoever committed this transgression had his free pardon. He also further announced that the author of this proceeding would be distinguished by the most encouraging marks of favor in the palace. Yaakoob (meaning Jacob in English) benefited himself later by resorting to this promise, which was truly fulfilled to him; and since that time he gradually ascended to power until he became ruler of a new dynasty.⁹

This Arab popular tale of Yaakoob illustrates a philosophical concern, that is, the reversal of the priority in Moi versus the other. That is, a trespasser becomes an

abiding, domestic guest. When it comes to the rule (or the ethics) of genuine hospitality, even a thief should give up what he has taken and a host should honor a person who has broken into his abode.

Salt enriches the flavor of our food, and is an indispensable source of our body’s mineral balance. It is more than a coincidence that in this story of Yaakoob, hospitality evolved from a lump of salt. Metaphorically, no human culture can be sustained without hospitality insomuch as no human can survive without salt. Salt represents life. In addition, no hospitality is complete without providing the guest a bite of delicious food—and food cannot be satisfying with the seasoning of salt. Salt therefore represents, in Arab rules of hospitality, a semiotic replacement (metonym) and condensation (metaphor) of life: from the salt, a lost person like Yaakoob shall be reminded of the law of hospitality because in Arab tradition it is so connected. Whoever tastes the salt of the master is now the guest of the house; the salt, because of its special attribute in human health and vitality, also represents the importance of absolute hospitality, regardless whom the host is to welcome. A taste of the salt equalizes a taste of the host’s hospitality, as if the thief is a guest to the household. As a guest, it makes it extremely unbearable to steal from the host. In our story, Yaakoob received the invitation of the salt (or the invitation of the rules of hospitality). He could choose not to receive the invitation; he could choose to ignore the significance of tasting the salt from the house. After all, there was no one but him there that night. Had he chosen not to respect the law of hospitality, no one but God knew. But he chose to respect the law of hospitality and left behind all the treasures. He went away physically empty-handed. Even though both of them observed it without knowing who they were responding to, Yaakoob obeyed the law of hospitality and the master of the house obeyed it, too. Yaakoob did not know the master would pardon and even honor him; he might not even have known who the master of the house was but he
refused to steal from the host anymore; the master offered Yaakoob honor and
generosity as if Yaakoob was his visitor that night, rather than someone who intended
and actually had begun to move away his property. They did not know each other in
advance; they did not come face to face with each other in the event of hospitality that
night, yet they fulfilled the law of hospitality, even though their response may have
been merely out of a respect to or fear of an unseeable God. They came face to face
with God respectively in this event. No matter what the real motivation behind these
actions, indisputably a lump of salt became a Godly call of hospitality and then
prosperity—Yaakoob was made to ascend to high position afterwards due to the
master’s kindness and his own good will to the law of hospitality, or to the law of
God.

We remember another salt story. In the Bible, during Lot’s flight from Sodom,
his wife turned into a pillar of salt. Again this is a story of salt, life and hospitality.
That is, Lot’s hospitality to the angels from God saved his life and his family and they
could have lived a new life together at a new place had his wife not turned back to
look at what she had left behind. What Lot welcomed abandoned her; God abandoned
her by turning her into a pillar of salt. Sodom was destroyed, and the pillar of salt in a
deserted, desolate place was useless. Similar to the lump of salt in the story of
Yaakoob, the meaning of the salt in Lot’s story is multi-leveled. Lot welcomed the
angels (hospitality), and the angels gave him and his family a chance of a better and
new life (salt) away from a sinister city. His wife became a pillar of salt after she
looked back when the angles (guests) took a powerful initiation (a masterly direction)
by forbidding any of them to do so. Life—this must be the issue in her mind when she
turned her head back—she missed the life there. Or, she wondered what was going on
there. She disobeyed what life (God as the origin of life) meant. She lost her life by
being transformed into a useless pillar of salt.
C. Uncertainty and Hospitality

People do not always welcome the idea of opening one’s house to strangers. Hospitality could be a harbinger for coming disasters in literary pieces, because it could be dangerous by shrouding the host in uncertainty, sometimes to the extent of being unbearable. Though we have Orlando in *As You Like It*, who met his future father-in-law in the woods and was enthusiastically hosted by him (even though at first the extremely starving and thus half-mad Orlando threatened to take the food by force), most readers of Shakespeare remember how Macbeth murdered his guests, twice. First, he killed the king who came to visit him; the second time, it is Banquo the chief lord on his invitation list.

History witnesses the fatal disasters ushered in by hospitality. The Maya Empire of South America lost its culture to Spanish visitors, and it is said that the king of Berberia welcomed Phoenician refugees from Tyr, who then took away the Berbers’ land and established the city of Carthage. Until now, for many Berbers, hospitality and generosity is the fatal flaw that they have learnt from history. The famous Greek mythology of Cupid and Psyche gives another example of this fatal welcome: a disaster came to Psyche after Psyche provided hospitality to her two sisters. She showed them around her new palace, answered all their questions, and then the sisters confused her to disbelieve her own husband. This story resonates with King Hezekiah’s catastrophe in the Bible:

> At that time Marduk-Baladan son of Baladan king of Babylon sent Hezekiah [the king of Judah] letters and a gift, because he had heard of Hezekiah's illness. Hezekiah received the envoys and showed them all that was in his storehouses—the silver, the gold, the spices and the fine oil—his
armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them. Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah and asked, "What did those men say, and where did they come from?" "From a distant land," Hezekiah replied. "They came from Babylon." The prophet asked, "What did they see in your palace?" "They saw everything in my palace," Hezekiah said. "There is nothing among my treasures that I did not show them." Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD."

(2 Kings 20: 12-17)

Like Psyche in mythology, King Hezekiah opens his house completely to visitors. After the visit, in both stories the visitors conspire to replace the hosts and become the new masters of their possessions. Psyche is tested and seduced by her sisters and she agrees to test her husband Cupid. Cupid therefore leaves her. Nevertheless, unlike King Hezekiah, in the story of Cupid and Psyche, a series of adventures start when Psyche attempts to seek her husband back. They are lovely adventure-stories, and they account for my argument that hospitality diverts the orbit of life and colors life with surprises. It may not necessarily be the transcendence of life, but is certainly the transformation of it.

II. The Arabian Nights

Arguing the limits and twists in our ethical concern as they are realized in hospitality and gift-giving, this dissertation purports not only to understand some of
the most important works of Derrida and Levinas but also to understand certain literature better. From this perspective, many literary works with plots of hospitality and gift-giving merit our academic attention because they shed light on the ambiguity, dilemma, and wishes in human existence and relationship from a previously less employed angle. The following discussion is based on some of the most popular stories in the Arabian Nights in order to investigate how they reveal the most basic human desires.

A. The Opening Scenes of the Arabian Nights

1. Once upon a time, there was a gift. It draws our attention to see how a classic of marvels and adventures starts the narration. In a word, the stories to be discussed start by gift-giving and substitution—two pivotal ideas of our discussion in this dissertation—because it initiates by explaining how a gift-giver forgets his gift and how a woman volunteers to replace all the others to be the victim of a cruel marriage:

   In time long gone, there was a King of the Kings of the Banu Sasan. When he died, the doughtier and also the elder of his two sons succeeded to the empire. His name was King Shahryar, and he made his younger brother Shah Zaman, King of Samarcand. Each ruled his own kingdom “with equity and fair-dealing to his subjects, in extreme solace and enjoyment; and this condition continually endured for a score of years.” One day the elder King yearned to see his brother, but his Prime Minister advised him to invite his younger brother to visit him instead. Handsome gifts were prepared, and the King wrote a touching letter for the Prime Minister to take to Shah Zaman. After the younger King Shah Zaman received the Prime Minister, he agreed to visit his beloved brother. But on the first night of his journey he remembered that he had forgotten in his palace a gift (هدية), a string of jewel bead (الخرزة), which he should

---

have taken with him. He returned for it alone, entered his apartments privately, and found the Queen’s adultery. He then slaughtered the two, without letting anyone know of his pain.

As the story developed, even the elder brother King Shahryar was similarly betrayed by his queen—perhaps even worse and more humiliating than his young brother. So the elder King Shahryar decided to marry and slaughter one woman each day to relieve his hurt.

The volunteer visit of the Prime Minister’s daughter, Shahrazad, surprised not only her father, but also the King. The King might have guessed that all his brides from the past days were forced to be sacrificed, yet he definitely would not expect a beautiful bride-visitor (енная) like Shahrazad to come. Most importantly, Shahrazad asked the King to let her welcome her sister at the wedding night, which was beyond his expectation again. As soon as the sister, Dunyazad, arrived at the palace, Dunyazad made a request. She said that as a guest, she would like to listen to Shahrazad’s stories the whole night. It is because before leaving for the palace, our story teller had a plan for her life, though it required the compromise of the others: her sister and the king. Before she left for the palace, Shahrazad said to her younger sister, Dunyazad:

Note well what directions I entrust to thee! When I have gone into the king I will send for thee and when thou comes to me and sees that he has his carnal will of me, do thou say to me:--O my sister, an thou be not sleepy, relate to me some new story, delectable and delightful, the better to speed our waking hours; and I will tell thee a tale which shall be our deliverance,

if so Allah please, and which shall turn the King from his blood-thirsty

custom. (Burton 26)

If her sister had not dare to request, or the king had wanted not to be interrupted, then
the whole life course of these characters would be totally different, and surely we
would not have Shahrazad’s tales which have lived on, perhaps in different forms, in
many kinds of literature.

2. Welcoming and my relation with the other. That night should have been a
wedding night, not a night of story-telling and hospitality. The coming day break
should have been a slaughter, not the continuation of story-telling. Yet under the
circumstance of hospitality, the demand of hosting the guest outweighs the demand of
marriage. Henceforth, Shahrazad told her stories night after night, to the number of
one hundred and eighty stories over one thousand and one nights. She bore three
children to the King, and deferred the vengeful rule of the deeply hurt king, which is
beyond what the king could have imagined. The small gesture of hospitality launches
a new page of life. This is not an accustomed rule of hospitality; therefore, it is
genuine hospitality: the host does not expect the arrival of the guest and does not
know what a guest could bring to the host and the household (Derrida 2000: 5, 21).
Shahrazad plans and tells stories out of love—love for her life, for the other women,
and perhaps for the king. Her love is to take initiatives in the most passive form of
requiring hospitality from the king. Her love is self-conscious, as much as Aristotle
has argued that it is more worthwhile to love (philia) than to be loved. Regarding love,
we know that it is possible to be loved (passive voice) without knowing it, but it is
impossible to love (active voice) without knowing it (Derrida 1997b: 9). By giving
love a subject is assigned to a sentiment of which, precisely, one remains the subject.
By requesting the passive form of hospitality, the loving subject achieves a transformation of the host. Furthermore, this incommensurability between the lover and the beloved will unceasingly exceed all measurement and all moderation—that is, it will exceed the very principle of a calculation (1997b: 10). Shahrazad does not want more women to be killed by the king; she loves the women in the kingdom. In the Arabic text, she loves them to the level of substituting them as the scapegoat for them: 

she will be the scapegoat for Muslims girls and action may cause a salvation.12 This philia has several sides of effect: first, Shahrazad’s love to these women makes her the same as the other: they all share the same husband. Her sister, Dunyazad, also marries the king and bears children to him during those years. However, Shahrazad is also different from all the other women: the King marries none after her and her gift (Dunyazad). Lastly, in a sense, Shahrazad gives a gift to her sister as well as the king by matching them. We are not sure how these two women view the gift. Does Dunyazad desire the gift of marriage after all? Does Shahrazad regret inviting her sister? As for the king, does he marry Dunyazad out of obligation, out of desire, or out of love, and if so to whom? The answers to all of these questions are not revealed in the Arabian Nights. We can only conclude that Shahrazad takes action and tells of adventures to give her life as a gift to the king, even though she is not sure what will happen to her. All she can rely on is that the king grants her request of hospitality to her sister—allowing them to stay together and listen to Shahrazad’s stories. Furthermore, Shahrazad, as the queen, also hosts her sister to the degree of sharing her palace/husband with her.

Derrida, in interpreting Oedipus, says:

The stranger [Oedipus], here the awaited guest, is not only someone to

whom you say “come,” but “enter,” enter without waiting, make a pause in our home without waiting, hurry up and come in, “come inside,” “come within me,” not only toward me, but within me: occupy me, take place in me, which means, by the same token, also take my place, don’t content yourself with coming to meet me or “into my home.” Crossing the threshold is entering and not only approaching or coming. Strange logic but so enlightening for us, that of an impatient master awaiting his guest as a liberator, his emancipator… the guest becomes the host of the host. (Derrida 2000: 124-25.)

By listening to stories from his bride-visitor, the King is liberated from his trauma. As for the story-teller herself, we do not know whether Shahrazad is happy or not during those years, and how much “otherness” she has to confront: the palace life, the teaching of Islamic laws of polygamy and her personal values, and the nightly weaving of interesting adventures to her stories. As a guest to the king’s home, she liberates the king, but she also has her own Other to welcome, be it her sister, or the king, or her new form of existence in the world, which we cannot illustrate further here. According to the Arabian Nights, she seems to be content. What we can be sure is that in her case, the philia, a love to humans, comes to her mind before marital love, and she seems to end up having both kinds of love. And after she has love, she stops giving (stories)—or does she produce stories exactly out of a lack of love?

B. The First Story in the Arabian Nights

So, what is the story which Shahrazad tells on the first night? Similar to the structure of emboxment in a Russian box, where each box is within another box, Shahrazad’s tales are one within several others. The title of this collection is from
Arabic, *Alf (thousand) Layla (nights) wa (and) Layla (one night)*. Therefore, in her introduction to Sir Richard F. Burton’s (1821-1890) edition of *the Arabian Nights*, A.S. Byatt, an important contemporary English novelist and poet, claims that “the collection of stories known as *the Thousand and One Nights* is in itself a symbol for infinity” (“Introduction” xiii). Byatt’s genuine comment comes from the following observations: the addition of the extra “one” to the round thousand not only suggests a way to mathematical infinity—you can always add one more to any number—but also produces a circular, a mirrorlike figure, 1001.13 From this structure comes the first story, the stories of “the Merchants and the Demon,” which includes three sub-stories: the first Sheikh’s, the second Sheikh’s, and the third Sheikh’s. On the first night, Shahrazad told part of the first Sheikh’s story: a merchant traveled away and his mistress used black magic to turn his first wife and the son into a cow and a calf. When he returned home, the mistress forced him to kill the cow for a festival feast. After the cow was killed, then she wanted him to slaughter the calf, too. Fortunately, before the merchant was to repeat the same horrible mistake by putting his son into death with his own hands, a talented woman stranger visited and revealed the tricks which the mistress had played. She expelled the mistress’s black magic and transformed the calf back into the youth he originally was. (Very intriguingly, she applied the same magic on the evil mistress by turning her into a gazelle. It is intriguing because basically the visitor exerted on the mistress-hostess—supposedly also a stranger to the house at the beginning—the same logic and manner of cunning.) Many years later, when the Sheikh was aged and he wished to search for his traveling son, he took the gazelle with him and it was during this journey that he ran into the
demon in the desert. The demon was about to kill a passenger who happened to spit out a date nut and then accidentally murdered the demon’s son, who was passing by at that moment. Since the Sheikh was amazed at this cause of the accident, he pleaded with the demon to let him stay so that he could see what would happen later. The demon swore to kill the unfortunate passenger for revenge, but he also allowed the Sheikh to stay and to let him tell his own unbelievable tale, agreeing that if the tale was really as unbelievable as his son’s accident, he would spare one third of the passenger’s sin. Therefore, when the first Sheikh revealed the story of his gazelle, the demon said, “indeed it is unbelievable, so for your sake, I am forgiving him one third of his sin.”

The demon was not obligated to agree to the Sheikh’s request. But he agreed. We find that in sum, there are three Sheikhs who brought three different animals, each with his own story related to his animal, but each pleaded the same petition. Each wants to sit down, to share his unbelievable story, and hopefully to spare one third of the sin of that ill-lucked transgressor. Finally, when put together, the three saved the passenger’s life. Why should the demon approve such a request at all? He could have dismissed them, or required them to keep quiet. In fact, now the scene of the demon and the Sheikhs recalls the event between the king and Shahrazad’s request: the master simply allows the visitor to stay and tell stories. But this is enough for reversing the course of lives. Who is the beneficiary? Is it the innocent and ill-fated passenger who almost lost his life, yet was saved? Is it the three Sheikhs, who after all did something good and important to the other, and who also have learned about unbelievable tales from each other? Is it the demon, whose anger and revenge are consoled by knowing that misfortune happens when Allah seems to agree to it? In the

---

14 The word “demon” in the Arabian Nights refers more to a Jinni, and is thus different from its biblical association.
journey of life, who really owns mastery and who takes the initiative of knocking on
the door of so-called fate?

C. Gift-Giving and Its Problematic Model: The Jinni’s Tale

1. A gift not taken. Even though gift-giving could initiate a journey of
experiencing the impossible for both the giver and the receiver, not every one wants
to give or accept these kinds of gifts. The universally famed Jinni’s tale is a wonderful
example. Let us look at the Jinni’s famous confession in *the Arabian Nights* to his
savior the fisherman:

There I abode an hundred years, during which I said in my heart, “Whoso
shall release me, him will I enrich for ever and ever.” But the full century
went by and, when no one set me free, I entered upon the second five score
saying, “Whoso shall release me, for him I will open the hoards of the
earth.” Still no one set me free and thus four hundred years passed away.
Then quoth I, “Whoso shall release me, for him will I fulfill three wishes.”
Yet no one set me free. Thereupon I waxed wroth with exceeding wrath and
said to myself, “Whoso shall release me from this time forth, him will I slay
and I will give him choice of what death he will die; and now, as thou hast
released me, I give thee full choice of deaths.”

The Jinni was confined and thrown into the midst of the sea by King Solomon, the
son of David, for hundreds of years. During those long years of waiting, he kept on
changing the proposed content of the gift he planned to give to whoever released him.
At first he had hope, he had imagination of his savior, and he intended various,

---

amiable, precious gifts which were extremely attractive and materially abundant. As time went by, finally he became resentful to whoever answered his silent call to save him because he had waited too long: No one had answered his call, and therefore his gift could not be given at all. In other words, we have someone who wishes to give a gift, but there is not receiver. The Jinni’s gift turned into a poison: he promised himself that he would take his savior’s life instead. In this monologue of his lonely days preparing for the gift to whoever saved him, a specific situation which, as far as I know, no gift theories have seriously discussed: what if a gift-giving event cannot be realized as originally intended? What if the receiver is always absent and thus the module of giver-gift-receiver will not stand? Considering the same etymology of gift and poison, the indication of otherness, the time interval in gift-giving, we may understand why the Jinni’s wonderful gift towards his savior transforms to a gift of death.

First, the roles of Time and the gift object are evidently decisive. If a desire for gift-giving cannot be satisfied in (proper) time, then there is no longer a “gift” because the existence of the other will continuously be called into the giver’s mind, and finally there is only an alienated I-Thou relationship strengthened and outlined because of the unfulfilled wish of gift-giving. A seemingly eternal break, a crevice of ontology, becomes so strong that no consideration of reward is possible. On the contrary, “when one no longer has anything to give; well, one takes.”16 After offering all he had but still failed to get rescue, the Jinni turned to take instead. What at stake is a two-pronged question: to give and to take, of life and of death. To give is to take, and life is death. On the other end of give, it is to take. To take one’s life, is to give the gift of life. If we still remember in chapter two on theoretical background I have said that in Derrida’s discussion of the Gift of Death, the gift of life is the gift of death. I

16 The original term is from Alice Balint and is recited in Lacan 1975: 210.
quoted from Derrida that the infinite Other, whose name is also God (2008: 59), is equal to an infinite goodness, and is one who “gives in an experience that amounts to a gift of death [donner la mort]” (2008: 4). That is the core value of Christianity, as the story illustrated between Abraham and God, who gives a gift of death/life by asking for Isaac’s life. And which is a very familiar idea of most Christians that whoever wants his life, shall gives his life. From the Jinni’s tale, it is not only the infinite Other who is able to give a gift of death; in fact, a desperate gift-giver, like the Jinni, is able to give a gift of death.

In addition, annulling the fact of gift-giving right after it is given is always a necessity for nobility. Nietzsche comments that gift-giving virtue is the highest virtue even though the complexity of it does not promise the correlate of a purely disinterested act of bestowing (Shapiro 288; Nietzsche 1996: 281). For Nietzsche, human beings learn the glory of “mercy” because a confident creator appears as long as he can forget and forgive the debt owed without feeling sufferings or the compulsion to respond. This spirit of this new law, which replaces the old system of justice, is Mercy (Gnade). A gift can (only) be given because of “fullness” and “overflow.” The noble human being, too, helps the unfortunate not, almost not, from pity, but prompted more by an urge begotten by excess of power (Uberfluss von Macht) (Nietzsche 1996: 54). A noble human being needs to give. And we notice that even Nietzsche’s hermit Zarathustra has to cancel his love to men before he gives his gift to men.17 Zarathustra, a story which begins with an interesting conversation between two saints, describes Nietzsche’s idea of giving and forgetting. It says that on his way out from his cave to rejoin humanity, Zarathustra met the other saint. At first, Zarathustra answered to the saint: “I love mankind.” Yet after the saint challenged him,

---

Love and the Desire to Give       Chloe Ching-hsiang Lo 151

he replied: “Now I love God: mankind I do not love. Man is too imperfect a thing for me. Love of mankind would destroy me.” Thereafter, Zarathustra replaces love with gifts: “What did I say of love? I am bringing mankind a gift” (Nietzsche 1969: 40). Gift-giving, the lynchpin of a loving relationship, remains for Nietzsche a potential problem when he does not want the gift of love to remain within the economy of a virtue-based ethics. In Nietzsche’s narration, although he did not stress the momentum, we can sense this seemingly mutually-denied dialectics between gift and love in this short passage. Nietzsche eschews to present this discourse and actions within the production and exchange relations that govern the moral economy. This seemingly mutual exclusion propels the basic inquires about the relationship between love and gift-giving. I contend that the genuine gift-giving is so self-effaced that the expected phenomenon of love may not appear as such—a love that is supposed to infuse distance and unreachable gap between human beings. Zarathustra’s love to human beings remains self-effaced as much as a genuine gift because the saint laughed at Zarathustra for refusing to take his advice: “And if you want to give to them, give no more than an alms, and let them beg for that!” “‘No,’ answered Zarathustra, ‘I give no alms. I am not poor enough for that’” (41). We can see that, as a highly self-esteemed person, Zarathustra is not to descend his intention of gift-giving to the thirst for power and domination. He is rich and strong enough not to be paid off. It is, after all, a metaphysics of power expressed via the complexity of gift-giving. Nietzsche’s attempt, as else demonstrated, is to argue that the cancelling out of what should be paid or returned remains “the most fined luxury,” “prerogative of the most powerful man” in a society (1996: 54).

I have pointed out earlier in the prologue that gift-giving is amiable, but it also entrenches the fundamental difference between givers and receivers. Because there is a fundamental alienation in existence if one considers Levinas’s philosophy which
proposes to reach unconditionally for the others by recognizing the otherness of others. When a gift is designed to connect the two parties of subjects, it also confirms the distance which it desires to connect. Furthermore, with the uncertainty of the destination of a gift, a giver always is unsure of how and when the desire entrusted in the gift will be satisfied. Will the receiver get it in proper forms as the giver has expected? Will the receiver get it in time before it gets expired? Would the receiver get and understand the meaning of the gift properly and correctly as the giver has intended? “The gift [is] as throw of the dice,” says Derrida (1987: 149). Impromptu and unexpectedness are characteristics of gift-giving. Although there are designated roles in gift-giving, as claimed by Mauss: “The basis of a common fund of ideas: the object received as a gift, the received object in general, engages, links magically, religiously, morally, juridically, the giver and the receiver” (Mauss 1970: 29), a tone of uncertainty overflows even in Mauss’ anthropological diagnosis. It is exactly when the gift engages and links the giver and the receiver that the track of the dichotomy between givers and receivers is retrenched.

It cannot be emphasized more that, as mentioned in the prologue, this ontological gap and potential anxiety in gift-giving should not dismay us. The process of gift-giving is never completed any more than the object petit a is satisfied in Lacanian structure of psychoanalysis. Lacan says that “anxiety is an affect of the subject”—the subject that speaks and “is determined through an effect of the signifier” (Lacan 1987: 82). For Lacan, anxiety is with the object petit a, which he defines as “what falls from the subject in anxiety”; it is the same object that he delineates as the cause of desire (Lacan 1987: 82). The object petit a, sometimes in the cloak of being a gift, functions as the support of desire “in so far as desire is the most intense of what the subject can attain in his realization as subject at the level of consciousness” (Lacan 1987: 83). The crucial point is that the a, the object, falls (Lacan 1987: 85), and that falling is primal
deviance. Insomuch as in Lacanian algebra “object a” is a trace or remainder of desire, of that which is lacking, it expresses a never-consummated realization (by inserting the dash I intended to stress the fact of time interval in this action): “that can reflect but cannot see/ By your absence which makes them blind” (Lacan 1981: 17). In gift-giving, people construct identity as a primal and eternal call to a passed fellowship, to the otherness, and to God. Each gift-giving constructs a never satisfied other (the receiver to repay and the giver in waiting), finding satisfaction in circulating around the object (the petit a, the gift). In fact, gift-giving is an incomplete circuit; a circuit with fissures, and sometimes even the gift object is hard to define; that is, it falls outside the course of cognition. In gift-giving, there is a repeating re-structuring of the other, a never satisfied Desire, and thus the essence of gift-giving implies the existence of the other. Therefore, the Jinni in the bottle must change his proposal of gift every other time and the final one is to bring the gift of death to his savior. By proposing to give gifts in those long and lonely hundreds of years, the Jinni constantly faces the question of “the other.” He develops a new understanding of offering a gift: to give gifts to the other is to take life from the other. This is not to say that a gift, once turned into a poison, should never be given; neither that gift receivers should be prudent in what they are taking because the gift (potentially) is a poison. It is true that a subject with gift-poison may not benefit or attain much of an existence; nevertheless, we should all recognize that being gift-poison free, being accommodated in exchange, and/or being safe from the unknown and unidentifiable, is the same as being hypocritical to life.

The Jinni’s story is not finished yet. There is an epilogue of the Jinni’s tale in which the fisherman outwitted the Jinni by enticing him back into the cucurbit prison and threatened to throw the cucurbit back into the sea: “But the Ifrit [Jinni] cried aloud, “Set me free, this is a noble occasion for generosity and I make covenant with
thee and vow never to do thee hurt and harm; nay, I will help thee to what shall put thee out of want” (Burton 30). So the Jinni vowed that he would not hurt the fisherman anymore should the fisherman agree to release him. Nevertheless, the second-chance gift was still a gift-poison—at least from first sight. As the tale goes, the Jinni then guided the fisherman to have some unusual fishes and he suggested to the latter to give the fishes to the king as a tribute, so that the king would reward him abundantly for the sake of the unique fishes in return. Nevertheless (this adverb for twist and surprise always accompanies gift-giving), the king became harsh after receiving these fishes, and from this comes the next story, entitled “The Tale of the Ensorcelled Prince.” 18

2. Unexpected visitor: the tale of the ensorcelled prince. Later the Jinni guided the fisherman to a lake of colored fishes, white and red, blue and yellow. The fisherman cast his net and caught four fishes, one of each color. He carried the fish to the King’s palace, and “the King wondered with exceeding wonder at the sight, for never in his lifetime had he seen fishes like these in quality or in conformation” (Burton 37). However, whenever the cook tried to cook the fishes, a hideous creature appeared in the wall of the kitchen, saying, “O fish! O fish! Be ye constant to your covenant?” And the fishes raised their heads from the pan, and saying in articulate speech “Yes! Yes!” began with one voice to recite:--

Come back and so will I! Keep faith and so will I!
And if ye fain forsake, I’ll requite till quits we cry!

---

18 The story is the latter part of the famous tale of The Fisherman and the Jinni. See Burton, 29-54.
Because of the strangeness of the fishes, the King determined to unpuzzle the mystery himself. “Verily this is a matter whereanent silence cannot be kept, and as for the fishes, assuredly some marvelous adventure connects with them” (Burton 38-40). Therefore, he commanded the Fisherman to take him to where the fishes were netted, and the fisherman privately damned the Jinni. When they arrived, the King and his men marveled at the tarn and its fishes of four colors. Yet no one, the King’s troops and all present, including the oldest inhabitants they met, could tell the King how such a tarn appeared. The King determined to find out the answer by himself, and he found a great but abandoned palace not far from the tarn. After entering the palace alone, to his surprise, he found there an ensorcelled prince. There were also his ensorcelled citizens, who were transformed into fishes. The four colors actually represented their different faiths: The Muslims were the white, the magicians/unbelievers (مجوس) red, the Christians blue and the Jews yellow. When the King saved them from a sorceress and returned home with the prince, King of the Black Islands, he realized that when he came, it took him only one day, but when he returned, they traveled day and night for a full year because the sorcery was relieved. The end of the story especially described the reward of the fisherman, who was “the first cause of the city and the citizens being delivered from enchantment” and was bestowed with honor and wealth because his daughters married the Kings and his son became the head-treasurer of the King.19 Here, we are prompted to ask: Will he still privately damn the Jinni’s gift?

III. Conclusion: The Gift That Is Not a Present

I noted at the beginning of this chapter that scholars wrestle with each other regarding the nature, destination, and function of gift-giving: is it a poison or a blessing? Or may it be a blessing in disguise? Among them, Derrida distinguishes

---

himself by completely getting out of the debate, arguing instead that “there is no gift as such.” The nutshell of *Given Time* is that the gift is a limit that permits and annuls all recognizable human giving.20 Yet, do human receivers know what is given to them after all? (And that *all* is hard to define). If “A gift is something you do without knowing what you do, without knowing who gives the gift, who receives the gift, and so on” (Derrida 1999: 60), then perhaps the story of the fairy lady from *the Arabian Nights* is a good example of offering genuine gifts. Another good example is “the Story of the Second Sheykh and the Two Black Hounds.” It says one day a young man, on his way to go abroad with his two brothers, met a raggedly-dressed woman:

> And when we were about to set sail again, we found, on the shore of the sea, a maiden clad in tattered garments, who kissed my hand, and said to me, O, my master, are thou possessed of charity and kindness? If so, I will requite thee for them. I answered, yes, I have those qualities, though thou requite me not. Then said she, O my master, accept me as thy wife, and take me to thy country; for I give myself to thee: act kindly towards me; for I am one who requites to be treated with kindness and charity, and who will requite thee for so doing; and let not my present condition at all deceive thee. When I heard these words, my heart has moved with tenderness.  (Lane 1937: 22)

The woman was a fairy, who came to rescue him from the evil hand of his two greedy brothers because of his goodness. She turned his two brothers into hounds.

Nevertheless, I always wonder that if she had not come to present herself as a gift for accompanying and saving him, the naïve and happy man might have simply died with a contented heart of brotherhood; instead of living a sad life and caring for two

20 Derrida *Given Time*: 6-32.
hounds for the rest of his life. In this sense, the fairy’s tale is also a bad example of offering gifts, because the receiver is seduced (by the shabby appearance and fine words of the fairy—these can be, and always are, unconquerable weapons to a good heart) to receive, and is forced to lose (his brothers and his love—as an unworldly creature, the fairy later left him).

In other words, the aporias in gift-giving does not spell the end of gift narrations, because, first of all, it is impossible to define the phenomenological “as such,” which precisely distinguishes Derrida’s discourse on gifts. In his round-table discussion with Derrida, French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion proposes three reductions in the discourse of gifts:

(1) Reduction to the lived experience of the donor…. The donor gives a gift not by the simple transfer of an object or a being (the ring) but by regarding the object as “givable.”

(2) Reduction to the experience of the recipient. By an analogous structure, a recipient is not someone who merely receives a transfer of property but someone who agrees to sacrifice one’s autonomy, agrees to be put in debt by the gift, graciously to accept a debt of gratitude. Once again, this is decided not by the recipient but by the gift itself which “by its own allure and prestige decides the recipient to decide himself for it.”

(3) Reducing to the gift itself. Accordingly, the gift itself is not the “physical counterpart” of the gift, the token ring, e.g., nor is it the joint effect of a giver who decides to give and of a receiver to receive. Rather the gift itself prompts both donor and recipient to enter into the sphere of giving, to “give in” to the gift, to grow “addicted” to it. Giver and recipient are less the subjective agents of the gift than subjects subjected to, swept in and acted
Marion insists that the gift be reduced to the horizon of “givenness,” which brackets everything alien in order to think of it in proper terms. Nevertheless, that horizon is exactly what Derrida refers to as the “as such” when he defines the phenomenon of gift-giving in general. The gift, from a phenomenological point of view, represents a specific class of phenomena involving intentional notions like generosity and gratitude, and these notions are easily elusive outside any phenomenological description. Therefore, theories on gift-giving make an eminent phenomenologist like Marion not as conspicuous as he should have been in his programs.

Shortly speaking, Marion’s phenomenological reduction on Gift may help us understand these “as such” in gift-giving; nevertheless, for Derrida, it is these “as such” that annul the gift, making the gift impossible. I add that, the “as such” is itself hard to define or to classify, even within Marion’s reduction methodology. This is because many prerequisites are preconditioned in making a granted assumption and the intention of the agents involved in acts of gift-giving and hospitality often is much more complicated than what the subjects can recognize. The scope of delimiting the horizon, therefore, is the scope of hermeneutics. The interpretation of a gift-giving event requires unusual intelligence to see the subtle and ambiguous parts, and to account for the invisible stakeholders involved in the action. Even the omnipotent call of love fails to comprehend gift-giving, no matter how genuine it is, because no one is able to give without being concerned with the existence of the other, and this concern arguably brings into question the genuineness retrospectively. The difference, and henceforth the existential lack of being, the anxiety in giving and receiving properly, is never phenomenologically complete-able. Perhaps this is why when scholars argue.
over the nature of gift; no one can have the final say, for gift-giving is not subjected to
or designated under the power of human subjects and knowledge.
CONCLUSION
THE ETHICAL DISTANCE
IN HOSPITALITY AND GIFT-GIVING

What one presents as the failure of communication in love precisely constitutes the positivity of the relationship; this absence of the other is precisely its presence as other.

(Levinas 1987b: 94)

A genuine gift-giving and hospitality pose serious questions about right and responsibility. The legitimacy and superiority of the giver in a gift relationship and the host in hospitality are called to be justified. As the Introduction indicates, hospitality and gift-giving call for our attention because they incorporate, on a very daily foundation, the ultimate query of subjectivity, and simultaneously erase subjectivity. Our participation in these acts can inspire thoughts of astonishment, death, God, and even violence. Together, these two acts point to the goodness inherent in human relations, a goodness which resists the banality of egoism and economy. Hospitality and gift-giving enable us to articulate the limit of interpersonal relations, which involve approaching the other ethically and epistemologically. Ethics is a hard topic to talk about. In this exploration of the rugged terrain of ethics, I tried to avoid any suggestion of tutelage and authority of traditional ethical philosophers because their arguments, compared to Derrida and Levinas, account less on the erratic and unpredictable elements of ethics. Knowledge is another topic that is hard to assess. I have discussed the aporias of hospitality and gift-giving as well as how ethical concern has to situate itself on the aporias. I posit my argument in the clarification of human desire for approaching the other, experiencing the impossible or the improbable. As Derrida concludes in his reading of Levinas, it is the situation of the third person and of justice that underlines our analysis of subjectivity and responsibility (Derrida 2000: 5). In his
argument, the third person relates the subject and the “absolute other” while justice is embodied in the consideration of responsibility and substitution. Therefore, even if there is ethical care involved in this desire, it is the ethics of an in-appropriable third, an invisible He who stands between I and a visible, present, communicable, and responding Thou.

Starting from approaching the invisible, absolute other, and its relation to justice, I discussed several biblical stories about absolute gift in death and about violence in hospitality. They include the hospitality of Lot, Zechariah, King Hezekiah, and Abraham sacrificing Isaac. These stories illustrate, but are not limited to, Derrida and Levinas’s critique of subjectivity and agency, as well as their concern for the violence of law. Therefore, the decision of hospitality is a political decision, based on who the enemy, guest, or my neighbor is, even though hospitality per se should not be political; in a sense, hospitality is a choice of mission, rather than of benefit. When I finished writing this dissertation, a strong sympathy developed in me towards the Palestinians. Their circumstances remind me of the prevailing arguments on the issues of anti-Semitism, the notorious allegation of Israeli state terrorism, and the seemingly permanent conflicts in the land of Palestine: all start, mostly if not exclusively, from Leo Pinsker’s proposal back in the early twentieth century when the Jew intellectuals advocated building up their own homeland. He said: “No people, generally speaking, likes foreigners…The aversion which meets a foreigner in a strange land can be repaid in equal coin in his home country…The foreigner has a claim to hospitality, which he can repay in the same coin. The Jew can make no such return; consequently, he can make no claim to hospitality.”¹ It is partly out of this suffering, and this logic, consequently, that today the Palestinians are struggling to be liberated from all the malice of conditioned hospitality because the former strangers to the land, the Jews, have acquired the land and their entitled authority. No one wants to be a

foreigner—perhaps except in certain scenarios of colonialism. Foreigners are to be allocated, designated, so that at the opposite side of each foreigner, there is an intentional, active giver/subject/host with power.

I have cited Bedouin khawa and some Arab marriage customs to show that the common experience of hospitality and gift-giving presumes and requires one’s knowledge of “who is the friend.” In Derrida’s words, this knowledge is a practical identification: knowing here consists in knowing how to identity the friend and the enemy (Derrida 1997b: 116). This presupposition of practical identification always demands real possibility or eventuality to be present in a determined mode (Derrida 1997b: 125). It is at this level that Abraham’s choice to keep a secret in the Bible is meaningful insofar as it is compared with the “misunderstanding” recorded in the Qur’an. In the Qur’an, it is an ethical atrocity that Abraham thinks he is required to proceed with, and God therefore explains and confesses in order to cleanse his involvement in that dream-call of crime. I argue that Abraham in the Bible has (an aporia) of faith that he is not supposed to kill his son, even though God has required him to, and even though he behaves as such. He obeys because he knows without acknowledging it that God will not let him execute the order. By historicizing the encounter between God and Abraham, I try to explain the intrigue involved in the dialectics of faith. This faith, or the secret as Derrida illustrated, distinguishes the in-completeness inhabited in any intention of responsibility because no one can be completely responsible: the subject has to decide to whom one’s responsibility is going to be applied.

I also try to address the unexplainable absence of signifier in living experience to interpret King Lear and the Jinni’s story. One of the theories I resort to is the Levinasian there is. Levinas has argued since the very early stages of his philosophical writing that as a result of the experience of the there is, our subjectivity is not totally illuminated. Through Freud’s discussion on the German Heimlich, we come to understand Levinas’s argument that our subjectivity makes sense not only by measures of illumination but
also by “absence.” Unlike experiences of the there is, the illuminated space (or the things of the day world) is the source of this or that; is “something” that responds to us; is our being able to fix a substantive to it; is a subjective mind which finds itself faced with an apprehended exterior (Levinas 1978: 58). On the contrary, the rustling of the there is is a horror (Levinas 1978: 60). It is a horror that demands further definition. If I can compare, it is Kurt’s horror in Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. The horror of the night, or of the there is, reveals to us neither a danger of death, nor even a danger of pain, but provokes in us a watchfulness and alertness toward the suspicion of total comprehension. This alertness is the philosophical consideration lingering in Levinas’s concern of existence and subjectivity. And as realized in the idea of time, this suspicion develops into a concern of facing the other in hospitality. It is a philosophical development that moves from the horror of the night as an experience of the there is towards the welcome of the unknown. In other words, it is a turn away from viewing darkness as “the very play of existence which would play itself out” (Levinas 1978: 64). This there is warns people against a comprehensive confidence in knowing and giving. King Lear gives gifts to his daughters with hope of compensation, of re-pay, and fails to acknowledge the impossibility of relationship, which cannot be resolved by gift-giving. King Lear thus is a story that contains the trauma of this existential impasse.

In addition, the there is is a phenomenon expressed by the darkness of the night. The night stands out because at night there is no perspective, and subjects do not refer to each other as they do in illuminated space (Levinas 1978: 58). The metaphor of the night reminds us of the nights in the Arabian classic, the Arabian Nights. I, therefore, argue that the horror of the there is is dispelled by Shahrazad’s plots of gift-giving and hospitality on the wedding night—the night of consummation and under the shadow of slaughter. I also argue that Shahrazad’s nights are the nights of the there is because she does not know which night will be her last. For three years she witnesses the there is in reality and in her stories of uncertainty and transgression.

\footnote{In this regard, I refer the reader to my M.A. thesis The Uncanny in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness: Heimlich and Unheimlich in the Text and the Criticism. National Tsinghua U. 2000.}
We also need to read *the Arabian Nights* from the angle of time spans. As Levinas contrasts the difference between the journeys taken by Odysseus and Abraham, he avers that the latter is a departure without return. Abraham’s journey is a one-way movement, which is not subordinated to thoughts of presence, rationality, or calculations. A magnificent expression of patience, this one-way movement is disinterested in reciprocity, and this patience simultaneously indicates an agent who “act[s] without entering the promised land” (Levinas 1986: 349). To be patient means to enter into the time of the other, to go beyond one’s personal time, one’s personal capacity, and even one’s own possibilities. It is at this point that Levinas seems to agree with Lyotard, even though there are undeniable differences between their philosophies. For Levinas, future belongs to the other in a movement of “profitless investment” that occurs when the subject faces the other (Levinas 1986: 350). For Lyotard, the future is what makes the present possible, and thus reverses the *a posteriori* to the *a priori*. In gift-giving, Lyotard says that a person gives because he assumes he will receive a return gift in the future. The future, according to Lyotard, is influencing the subject’s current actions. If we apply Lyotard’s theory, we can argue that in hospitality, the hosts welcome even before they are visited. The subjectivity is opened to the other *a priori*: the other is visited even before he pays this visitation. The host is not late in welcoming; on the contrary, the subject welcomes in advance. But Derrida says otherwise. He argues instead that hospitality always makes the subject, the host, already late. It is because the host is never able to welcome enough and welcome in time. For Derrida, hospitality consists in welcoming the other who does not warn me of his coming. The host is stunned by his visit. The host is structurally “lacking” because s/he is not able to totally meet the guest’s horizon of expectation. The host has to ask for forgiveness for the lack of preparation, for an irreducible and constitutive unpreparedness (Derrida 1986: 381).

In the opening scene of *the Arabian Nights*, King Shahryar’s hospitality to Shahrazad’s

---

3 Levinas refers the word “thought” to the utility epistemology presented by classical philosophy.

4 Ibid. 349. See how Blanchot glosses the idea of being patient: “Patience has already withdrawn me...from my power to be patient: if I can be patient then patience has not worn out in me that me to which I cling for self-preservation.” Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. 13.)
visitor at that first night demonstrates how actions that should happen are eternally deferred. This particular night is not any regular night; it is a unique, individual (but chained) night because the night acts as a premonition of slaughter. It is a time when the King Shahryar kills whoever he marries after each wedding night. It is unique and chained because each night he marries a different woman, and each following morning he puts to death the woman of the same title—his queen. The first section of her stories in Shahrazad’s boxes of tales is not contingent. It is a story about how a revengeful demon, after his son was killed accidentally by a traveling Sheikh, learns to forgive by listening to others’ misfortune and welcoming the unexpected in life. I point out that the demon’s change (transformation) is closely connected with his hosting of the Sheikhs passing by, each of whom gives him either a story of gift-giving, or of hospitality. This scenario brings us to Levinas’s argument. In Levinas’s idea, the host is preparing to ask for forgiveness, not miserably, but humbly and transcendentally. It is only in this sense that the host is a genuine host. So it is indeed the master, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage in our exploration of subjectivity. In the moment of hospitality, “it ends up in substitution for another, in the condition—or the unconditionality—of being a hostage” (Levinas 1998a: 180). The demon, as well as the King Shahryar, becomes the hostage in the house of God after they host those whom they were not supposed to.

I also politicize hospitality so that any ethical discussion of hospitality is not merely filed away in an ivy tower. In our discussion, hospitality performs and transforms more than the existent laws themselves can allow, because it is hospitality extended to the third, to an invisible other, to God. No one can forever be at home. Once again, we think of Freud’s remarkable discovery of the ambivalent connotation of the German word das Heimlich. Heimlich means the familiar, friendly, cheerful, comfortable, intimate, and being at home. It can also refer to that which is hidden, secret, obscured and the unfamiliar. Is it not the case that in the biblical story of Abraham sacrificing his son, he speaks the language of heimlich or uncanniness? This is because

---

Abraham utters secrecy in the most conspicuous way by taking Isaac out with him and acting as if there is no need to hide.

By sketching the desire of approaching the other, I propose that what is implied in gift-giving and hospitality entails the proximity of the absolute other. The adventures, which offer itself as a horizon-shifting (or perhaps horizon-magnifying) perspective on living experience, underscore the tragedy of King Lear and tales from the Arabian Nights. In genuine hospitality and gift-giving, these adventures present the possibility of enlarging our living horizon (and to the extent of approaching the absolute other) in terms of genuineness.

This possibility of approaching the absolute other distinguishes gift-giving and hospitality when it reveals a different reflection on ethics. In chapter IV I discussed King Lear and its significance via Bataille’s philosophy of waste, Freud’s death instincts, and Levinas’s emphasis on the emptiness of subjectivity. In chapter V on the Arabian Nights I discussed the Jinni’s tale. I used this tale to argue that an alienated, almost broken, I-Thou relationship is eternally strengthened and stretched through the unfulfilled wish of gift-giving, and henceforth the absence of the receiver is constantly brought into the subject’s memory. A seemingly eternal break, a crevice of ontology, this absence becomes so strong that no altruistic consideration can provide a remedy. Truly, going-beyond or approaching the “absolute other” confronts bourgeois philosophy where “kindness and good deeds become a sin, domination and suppression virtue” (M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno 81). While Levinas’s philosophy is allegedly a fundamental intermingling of self and the other, the function of gift-giving as a signifier is also in the spotlight.

In this aspect, Levinas’s and Lacan’s arguments on ethics and inter-personal relations are two different yet significantly related projects. After I finished detailing

---


7 Kenneth Reinhard’s “Kant with Sade, Lacan with Levinas” shares our mutual concerns on this topic by pointing out that from now on our reading are not so much grouped into ‘families’ defined by similarity and difference, as into ‘neighborhoods’ determined by accidental continuity, genealogical
the beyond I-Thou relation at the level of Levinasian metaphysics and illustrated its connections with literature, I applied one typical Lacanian idea of the eternal lack, namely the object \( a \), and Freud’s death instincts in the discussion of the Jinni’s gift of death and King Lear’s destructive decision.

One question, however, remains after the completion of this dissertation. The question involves the choice we have to make when approaching the (absolute) other. It is also a question about God and the neighbor. As recognized by many, “love is the culmination of Levinas’s discourse with the Other” (Steven Gans, “Levinas and Pontalis” *The Provocation of Levinas* 88). Nevertheless, Derrida offers one important critique to Levinas’s “love” and “ethics.” Let me recap Levinas before discussing Derrida’s critique:

As stated in the chapter on background theory, for Levinas, the very possibility of the beyond is expressed in an ethical turnabout. It is a reference \([\text{renvoi}]\) from what we desire to what we deem undesirable, and “in this strange mission commanding the approach to the other, God is pulled out of objectivity, out of presence and out of being. He is neither object nor interlocutor. His absolute remuteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility…for the other” (Levinas 2008a: 69). God’s otherness turns into my responsibility for the other. God, as the wholly other, is to be found everywhere, in each other, because there is a possibility that my neighbor or my loved ones are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as God is. It is because I cannot completely comprehend God; therefore, I do not expect to completely comprehend my guest, my gift receiver, as well as the courses, trajectories of my host and gift-giving. The question Derrida asks is: How can Levinas’s Love become realized when “Levinas is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human: his [Levinas’s] ethics is already a religion” (Derrida 2008: 84)? Unlike Levinas, Derrida’s philosophy is an ethical philosophy that claims *Tout autre est tout autre*: every isolation, and ethical encounter” (785). He contends that “by in turn reading Lacan ‘with’ Levinas, as neighbors who, although coming from distinct traditions and aiming at different ends, together articulate the primacy of responsibility and *jouissance* to being and knowing, we can begin to imagine an ethics otherwise than sacrifice, to hear the call of a good after the dialectic of Good and Evil” (786).
other (one) is every (bit) other: “In one case God is defined as infinitely other, as the
wholly other. In the other case it is declared that every other one, each of the others, is
God inasmuch as he or she is, like God, wholly other” (Derrida 2008: 87). Levinas
objects to Derrida’s logic because it signifies an ethical generality. Levinas worries that
the singularity of the self would be lost in the ethical generality of Tout autre est tout
autre (Levinas 1996:76; Derrida 2008: 79). Derrida argues that Levinas’s critique
cannot help determine the boundary between absolute singularity on one hand, and a
claimed generality of ethics, on the other. He says Levinas “stays within the game—the
play of difference and analogy—between the face of God and the face of my neighbor,
between the infinitely other as God and the infinitely other as another human” (Derrida
2008: 86). Derrida’s critique of Levinas made me wonder how to describe the otherness
of God and the otherness of other human beings after I raised the idea of the ethics of
the third (God/the absolute other).

The concept of responsibility is aporia when my responsibility to my hosts may
damage my responsibility to my family. I try not to emphasize good conscience in my
discussion of hospitality and gift-giving, as I’ve drawn examples from the Bible, King
Lear, and the Arabian Nights, knowing that, on the one hand, as Derrida points out, the
resources of responsibility are inexhaustible; on the other hand, it is as Levinas’s call
that the subject has responsibility for the death of the Other because the subject’s
existence is never carefree, naïve perseverance (Levinas 1989: 86). This responsibility
is hospitality’s aporia, and its “value.” The concept of love is also a response to the
Other, and that is the aporia as well as its “value” in gift-giving. The value of gift-giving
and hospitality comes from their knowing the “otherwise,” and still are willing to say
Yes to all the unknowable and impossible; it is an inter-person commitment yet
simultaneously refusing to endorse an imaginary consolations, and that is how genuine
gift annuls itself and genuine hospitality welcomes without waiting.

My writing thus offers itself by welcoming the infinity of the there is the other,
that is, in the form of comments and critiques from my readers.
Works Cited:


101-112.
Annual Meeting American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division (Nov., 1988),
632-644.
Chicago P.
Cambridge: Blackwell.
Stanford: Stanford UP.
D. Caputo. New York: Fordham UP.
Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP.
New York: Routledge.
---. (2003). *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques

Dirlik, Arif. "Rethinking Colonialism: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and the

Duncan, Martha Grace. “Cradled on the Sea: Positive Images of Prison and Theories of


China), 2008.


Vita

NAME    Ching-hsiang Lo (b. 3/10/1971)

EDUCATION    Ph.D. in English Literature, June 2010
              National Chengchi University
              Taiwan, R. O. C.

WORK HISTORY

Sep. 2010:    Part-time English teacher in Language Center, National Tsing-hua
              University
              Taiwan, R. O. C.
              Subject: English Literature

2005-2006, 2009-2010: Part-time English teacher in General English Education
                       Curriculum, Taipei Medical University
                       Taiwan, R. O. C.
                       Subjects: English Reading, English Conversation

2009:        APEC WLN Taiwan delegation head interpreter.

2004-2006:   Part-time English teacher in General English Education
              Curriculum, National Taipei College of Business
              Taiwan, R. O. C.
              Subject: Business English