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In the Giving Vein

Largesse

by Jean Starobinski,

Translated by Jane Marie Todd.

University of Chicago Press,

221 pp., \$75.00; \$29.95 (paper)

E. H. Gombrich

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The cover of this sumptuous publication is graced with the enlarged reproduction of a ravishing drawing by Correggio, representing the naked Eve holding an apple in her left hand and apparently looking seductively at the beholder. We are entitled to assume that the image was chosen to illustrate *Largesse* - the ostensible theme of the volume - a term which signifies generosity and, in a more technical context, the ceremonial scattering of gifts expected from a king or prince on festive occasions. Accordingly, the corresponding first illustration of the book carries the caption "Eve Offering the Apple." But if we refuse to be seduced we cannot help remembering that Eve was not particularly generous in offering the forbidden fruit to Adam, thus making him an accomplice to her crime.

Moreover, it so happens that Correggio did not even intend this figure of Eve to function in this narrative context. As we can read in the commentary to the illustration, the drawing relates to his fresco in the dome of Parma cathedral, which represents the Ascent of the Holy Virgin to Heaven; Eve is included in the welcoming throng, having been redeemed by the Saviour. The interpretation also put forward in the commentary - that Eve offers the fruit to the Virgin - is belied by the context because Correggio depicts Mary soaring heavenward, gazing into the radiance; it would surely be futile for Eve to try to detain her with her gift. The apple, in other words, is purely the emblem of Eve, who may be present because of theologians have described Mary as "the second Eve."

It is unlikely that the learned author can have been unaware of these objections. Instead we may take his interpretation as an example of his skill in deconstruction - quite in tune with a text in a series of which the first volume was inaugurated by Derrida himself. Indeed, the editors assert in the preface that "a reader is never neutral, that is, dead: never impartial ... Every gloss is also a projection." Whatever we may think of this assertion, it surely does not normally apply to catalogues, which should not give any latitude to the reader or the user. The volume under review originated as the record of an art exhibition in the Musée du Louvre, purporting to illustrate the theme of Giving, in selected prints, drawings, and photographs. Yet the librarian who looks for the slot to which to assign this volume should hesitate before he places it among exhibition catalogues. He will do well to heed the author's warning that, "in more than one case, drawings will be not the subject of my argument, but an extension of it ... They illuminate the texts I write; they

set thought or reverie back in motion."

Our librarian may find it far from easy to establish the exact topic of re-ranging reverie that takes the reader from Seneca's *Moral Epistles* to Marcel Mauss's famous *Essai sur le Don*, and from the banquet given for the shipwrecked Ulysses by the hospitable Phaeacians to *Babette's Feast*. M. Starobinski, the author of books on Rousseau and Montaigne, among others, is particularly well versed in the literature of declining Antiquity, and his ornate prose may sometimes remind us of the oratorical showpieces of that period, especially the genre of *ekphrasis*, describing real or imaginary works of the visual arts. Unlike these orators, however, the author is out less to praise than to unmask. Basically, he wants to reveal the human and all-too-human aspect of Largesse, in particular, and of giving, in general. It is this tendency that accounts for the formulation of the preface that the commentary is "a novel of sorts about an evil spell, that is, a maleficent gift."

Even this reading might easily be challenged by contrasting it with certain other pages of the book. In any case, it should be obvious that nothing could be less suitable as a commentary on a choice of images which includes Saint Martin clothing the Beggar, nursing mothers, Christ handing the keys to Saint Peter and the Holy Virgin distributing rosaries. In short, despite the appearance of a learned apparatus, with 235 footnotes, an appendix of texts, lists and a bibliography, this is definitely not a work intended as a contribution to what art historians call "iconography."

Maybe what the organisers of the exhibition originally had in mind was another approach to the history of art that has been slowly emerging, without having developed into an established genre. I refer to the study of emotionally charged types and formal motifs that function in the visual arts much as *topoi*, or formulaic commonplaces, function in literature. It was Aby Warburg who drew attention to what he called "pathos formulae," such as the figure of the *Nympha* - a beautiful girl, lightly clad, in rapid motion, that can stand in for an angel, a servant, or a messenger. Warburg's hints were developed by Kenneth Clark in *The Nude*, and recently in Carter Brown's catalogue for the Atlanta Olympics exhibition, *Five Rings*. Yet if the exhibition at the Louvre was intended to show the permanent features in the gesture of giving, one would surely not expect to find Millet's *Gleaners* or Corot's *Homer among the Shepherds* among the illustrations, while the scene of the Three Magi bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child is omitted - an archetypal event which lives on the custom of exchanging Christmas presents at the Feast of Epiphany and on Christmas Eve.

If the truth is to be told, the author is much more interested in the motifs and formulas of literature than in those of the visual arts. He states himself that "the present volume is an expanded and completely recast version of several earlier studies," one dealing with Rousseau, a second with Baudelaire, and a third with Huysmans (translations of all three texts are given in the Appendix).

The first is taken from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, and tells of a feast which he witnessed, during which one of the guests bought and scattered pieces of gingerbread among the populace, leading to a general brawl. Rousseau contrasts this event with the idyllic scene which followed, when, observing some little boys coveting a dozen sorry-looking apples offered for sale, he bought and distributed them among the children and was happy to witness their joy. As a direct counter to this, Starobinski presents the second test, from Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris*, entitled "Le Gâteau." The blissful experience of solitude in high mountains had all but reconciled the poet with life and he was even no longer inclined to dismiss the journalistic pretence that man is born good, when he found himself accosted by a little girl.

Taking the white bread he was eating for cake, she accepted a piece, but was so unwilling to share it with another child that the idyllic scene ended in a destructive fight. This experience once more confirmed him in his pessimism about the human race.

With his sharp eye for corresponding motifs Starobinski adds to these two accounts another, from the novel *A Rebours*, by Huysmans. This also turns on a small child eating a piece of bread, here spread with cream cheese and onions. The blasé hero of the story, finding his mouth watering, instructs his servant to bring him an analogous snack; but when it arrives on a plate of gilded silver, nausea overcomes him and he asks the servant to throw the snack to the children; they in their turn fight over it. In words of the author, laboriously translated from the French by Jane Marie Todd, Huysmans here "accentuates the egocentric attitude, the prideful revendication, whose presence could already be detected in Rousseau, rendering suspect the apparent disinterest he had already shown in relation to the beneficent gift."

None of these texts is illustrated, and it is doubtful whether they can be illustrated at all. The same applies to the pages in the chapter on "Poetry," where we are presented with no less than five examples of poets who describe how they failed to give alms to a beggar or hurdy-gurdy player. This recalls another account. When Giorgio Vasari, the court painter of the Medici, submitted a program for the decoration of the Great Hall of the Palazzo Vecchio, he proposed to the Duke that one fresco should celebrate the fact that Florence had never been conquered by an enemy, to which the Duke curtly replied that this fact could not be represented.

Actually, it would not be difficult to illustrate the theme of Giving and of Gifts in the visual arts - after all, a large part of museum exhibits all over the world were originally intended as gifts. In this volume's terminology they might be called "ostentatious gifts," though they are not the ones over which the mob used to fight: gifts from the mighty to the mightier given in homage by their pious donors, preserved in palaces and temples, shrines and churches. Admittedly, Starobinski may want to remind us that even in this practice there is a selfish element, for the giver hopes for something in return. The Buddhist monk who lives on alms must neither beg nor thank the giver, for it is the donor who should be grateful for having been given the opportunity to acquire merit in the very act of giving.

While Eastern cultures are outside the range of these reveries, the analogous faith in the Christian traditions is described by the author somewhat tortuously in these words: "The 'horizontal' gesture of charity toward the poor and humble is repaid through the 'vertical' outpouring of divine grace ...". He finds these outpourings frequently symbolised in the Old Testament by the image of water gushing forth to quench the people's thirst. He also quotes the Sermon on the Mount, where Christ asks us to lay up treasures in Heaven (Matthew 6: 19-21). "At first glance," he adds,

The image of the incorruptible treasure does not resemble that of the thirst-quenching spring. But springs and treasures have in common the characteristic of plenty. Both overflow. It is not simply a play on words to note that there is a (*unda*) wave in the endlessly repeated *abundantia*, in the verbs *abundare* and *superabundare*, which the Vulgate associates both with the perfect justice reigning among the disciples (Matthew 5:20) and with the gift of grace.

Such excursions into etymology are sometimes more impressive than convincing, for does not the term "redundant" derive from the same root, a synonym for "superfluous"? Moreover, here on Earth, at least, wells have been known to dry up, and treasures to be exhausted.

This is the only context in which Starobinski obliquely makes good another glaring omission in the choice of illustrations: he refers to the Last Supper (so frequently represented in Christian art), but does so only as an example of "horizontal giving." He fails to quote the words spoken by Christ: "Take, eat; this is my body," an event that is commemorated in the ritual sacrifice of the Mass, and interpreted by the Church as the Divine sacrifice for the salvation of mankind. What should we then make of the author's *cri de coeur*, a few pages later: "Must one despair of seeing the triumph of the pure gift, the gift without compensation, the gift given without consideration for one's own interest? Would it not be preferable to imitate the Stoic god by giving without expecting anything in return, either from men or from heaven?"

It might be argued that even the ritual of Largesse, the starting point of this book, partakes of the nature of sacrifice and need not be seen in a purely negative light. Whether or not we like the idea of a hierarchical society, this idea dominated our past. From time immemorial the sovereign was seen as the fount of honour, and honour was the cement that held such societies together. Here the limitations of the exhibition make themselves felt, since it confines itself to post-medieval prints and photographs. There is a relief from eighteenth-dynasty Egypt showing Amenophis IV (Akhenaten) dropping golden collars to one of his officials and his wife, with onlookers apparently dancing for joy; and if the Cabinet des Médailles had joined in the exhibition, they might have contributed a number of Roman coins with the inscription *liberalitas Augusti*, celebrating the sovereign's generosity in distributing bounty.

The practice was not merely for show or ostentation: it also symbolised the duty of the ruler to be a father to his people. In respect, the episode in Rousseau, chosen by Starobinski, in which a wealthy visitor buys gingerbread to throw among the peasants, is certainly beside the point. If the author wanted to unmask Largesse, he might have referred to its frequent affinity with bribery. Even in democracies governments have been known to bribe the electors by making tax concessions which proved subsequently disastrous.

The author, however, is rarely concerned with these economic aspects of giving. His outlook is deeply coloured by Freud's psychoanalysis, where money is equated with feces, although at least in one passage he openly disagrees with an interpretation offered by Freud. I am referring to a childhood memory in Goethe's autobiography: the poet recalls throwing plates and crockery out of the window - an act of vandalism which Freud plausibly interprets as a child's reaction to the birth of a young rival. Few are likely to agree with Starobinski, who prefers to see in this act a scattering of presents. Characteristically, he tracks down related motifs elsewhere in Goethe's works, and concludes that poetry itself is a form of Largesse.

There are indications, in the last line of his text, that Starobinski experiences the act of writing as a form of largesse, and his stream of consciousness, the wealth of his associations and learned allusions, give substance to this surmise. Yet his own logic will by now, have alerted us to the perils of uncritically accepting his all-too-generous gift.