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MARGARET ATWOOD'S NON-FICTION ABOUT FICTION: *PAYBACK*

Abstract: *Margaret Atwood's provocative recent book of non-fiction contains many literary references, which help to effectively highlight her points about such a topical matter as debt, debt as a philosophical, politico-economic, religious, and historical issue over the centuries. In the central chapters of the book she looks at the Protestant Reformation and the introduction of interest on loans and in this light analyzes the novels by Dickens, Irving, Thackeray and G. Eliot. Her final statement in the book is, however, about the ecological debt we all have to pay to Earth in order to ensure our existence.*

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, Victorian literature, Charles Dickens, debt

Introduction

In her recent creative non-fiction work *Payback* the internationally renowned Canadian woman writer Margaret Atwood examines debt, balance and revenge in history, society and particularly in English literature, debt as a driving force in (Western) fiction. She wrote it for the 2008 Massey Lectures and each of the five chapters in the book was delivered as a one hour lecture in a different Canadian city, which were also broadcast on CBC Radio One in November 2008.

Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth (2008) is certainly a most provocative and thought-engaging book which addressed the topical matter of debt at the time of the world economic crisis. Debt is considered as a philosophical, historical, political, economic and religious issue over the centuries. In truth

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the author provides an intellectual history of debt. It is divided into five chapters titled »Ancient Balances«, »Debt and Sin«, »Debt as Plot«, »The Shadow Side« and »Payback«. In Chapter One she clearly defines the subject-matter of her book: »... it's about debt as a human construct – thus an imaginative construct – and how this construct mirrors and magnifies both voracious human desire and ferocious human fear« (*Payback* 2). The writer traces, from ancient history onwards, the feminine principle of balance/scale in the concept of justice (Iustitia) which includes Ma'at, Themis, Nemesis, Sekhmet, Astrea, and significantly asks herself why is it that »with the exception of the Christian and the Muslim ones, the supernatural justice figures ... are all female« (34). In relation to the ancient Egyptian goddess of Ma'at she writes that it meant truth, justice, balance, the governing principles of nature and the universe, the stately progression of time – days, months, seasons, years. ...Its opposite was physical chaos, selfishness, falsehood, evil behaviour – any sort of upset in the divinely ordained pattern of things (27).

She maintains that the female Justice figures have persisted until this day, because the period of the Great Goddess was followed by several thousand years of rigorous misogyny, during which goddesses were replaced by gods and women were downgraded. The ancient balance of the scales was thus broken.

In the second chapter Atwood dwells on debt and sin and says that the borrowing and lending process is something of a shadowland transaction, partly theft and partly trade, provided that a reasonable and not exaggerated interest is paid and the money eventually returned to the lender. She refers to Christianity in the Western world and claims that in this religious system Christ is called the redeemer, a term drawn directly from the language of debt and pawning or pledging, scapegoats, »sin-eaters« etc, because the Devil keeps his account books constantly in good order and payback time will surely arrive.

... the whole of Christianity rests on the notion of spiritual debts and what must be done to repay them, and how you might get out of paying by having someone else pay instead. And it rests, too, on a long pre-Christian history of scapegoat figures - including human sacrifices - who take your sins away for you (67).

»...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...« (The Holy Father Prayer, The Bible) In the Slovenian translation of the Bible, the noun »trespasses« is rendered as »debts« and consequently refers to debtors, which have to be forgiven. Is there, perhaps, in this Christian attitude, Margaret Atwood's underlying principle of a payback, bailout (especially as regards spiritual debts, of course) or payoff with a primarily generous leveling out of balances on either side in the long run?

From the point of view of literary allusiveness Chapter Three »Debt as Plot« is particularly relevant, where she looks at the Protestant Reformation and the introduction of interest on loans: When Henry the Eighth ascended the throne, interest-charging was legalized for Christians in England, which gave rise to the expansion of the market and in the nineteenth century the explosion of capitalism in the West. In this light, Atwood alludes to the work of Charles Dickens, Christopher Marlowe, Washington Irving, W. M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and even the novel *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. Atwood's debt-reading of the all-time classic *Wuthering Heights* (1847) is very much to the point here:

Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights* loves Cathy passionately and hates his rival, Linton, but the weapon with which he is able to act out his love and his hate is money, and the screw he twists is debt: he becomes the owner of the estate called *Wuthering Heights* by putting its owner in debt to him. (*Payback* 100)

The Victorian novel *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) is especially about goods, material and spiritual, and, as Atwood observes, we watch the grim business of Amelia Sedley's family bankruptcy, but

we also follow the brilliant but socially inferior gold-digger, Becky Sharp, climb her way up the social ladder. Everything that can be bought and sold, rent or lent is *vanitas*, Thackeray teaches us. Flaubert's bored provincial wife Emma Bovary, too, is eventually punished for her »shopaholicism« rather than extramarital sex, because her overspending and consequent debt catches up with her and exposes her secret life. Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's novel *House of Mirth* (1905) is not versed in debt-managing which brings her down and should have known better that »if a man lends you money and charges no interest, he's going to want payment of some other kind« (106).

Millers in folklore are often rendered as thieves and cheats who supposedly steal from peasants by shorting them on the weight and using flour to their own benefit, and if you are a miller's daughter like Maggie Tulliver from *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) you are likely to suffer the consequences of the miller's misdeeds. Mr. Tulliver, however, is an honest miller and finds himself in financial difficulties and, because of that, his adversary buys his mill, he loses his final lawsuit and he runs his family into debt. Margaret Atwood turns the established »proto-feminist« readings of the novel with Maggie as a clever independent but thwarted woman born before her time upside down and asks herself:

But what if we read it as the story of Mr. Tulliver's debt? For it's this debt that's the engine of the novel: it shoves the plot along, changes the mental states of the characters, and determines their scope of action. (116)

Tom and Maggie suffer greatly the consequences of their father's deeds and eventually drown in a flood, reconciled at the very end. Tulliver's adversary Wakem is saved in the end, which Atwood rightly sees as the turning-point and proof of the emerging Victorian materialism constituted in Law: »Power has moved from those who process material goods to those who process the contracts that govern them. Hermes – god of

commerce, thieves, lies, contrivances, tricks, and mechanisms – has switched allegiances« (119). And what is the situation like today? The question clearly remains rhetorical. The novels alluded to by Atwood are, thus, essentially about money, debt and payback, albeit not exclusively of course, with payback not always achieved in full. The allusions to 19th and early 20th century novels she draws upon lend a totally new dimension to the notion of debt Atwood deals with in *Payback*.

And then there is the question of gift-giving within the context of the »life games« people play. The constant give-and-take process, which is the essence of social life, cannot be aborted by either party: »/G/ifts are rendered, received and repaid (both obligatorily and in one's own interest), in magnanimity for repayment of services, or as challenges or pledges« (Mauss 27, qtd. in Zabus 123). In a post-colonial context, however, the concept of gift may just be the opposite of hospitality, help and generosity. It may have the meaning of »poison« (cf. the German *Gift*), for the debtor is expected to pay back with subordination. The main literary work of Atwood's allusions in *Payback* is Charles Dickens's extremely popular book *A Christmas Carol* (1843), which, in the 19th century, openly criticised the emerging Victorian materialistic self-satisfaction and containment, which helped to establish the Western non-religious concept of Christmas and the need for the transformation of the loan-sharking lender Ebenezer Scrooge into a beneficent forgiving character, who is taken directly from the London Stock Exchange and whose main concern and value in life is business. During Christmas, he is visited by a ghost and the three spirits and he is utterly changed thereafter. The tale is generally seen as an indictment of nineteenth century industrial capitalism and Dickens got the idea from his own humiliating experience of debt from his childhood; when his father John Dickens was arrested for debt and put in prison, he had to leave school, sell all of his books and take up a job in a blacking factory. At the beginning of the tale Ebenezer (cf. Squeezer) Scrooge's nephew reminds him that Merry Christmas-time has come, Scrooge is very cross:

'What else can I be,' returned the uncle, 'when I live in such a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What a Christmas-time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer, a time for balancing your books, and having every item in'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you?' (Dickens 19)

At the end of the book he is much changed, of course. He is not only ready to share money with others, especially on Christmas, but also to help people for a change. In Atwood's terms one could say that by writing off debts this only will make him happy and full of redemption. He shouts his newfound happiness from the rooftops:

'I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A Merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world! Hallo here!' (201)

Margaret Atwood claims that Dickens deliberately created a reverse Faustus from Christopher Marlowe's figure. Scrooge had symbolically made a pact with the devil, this malevolent creditor who tempts people with material benefits, in exchange for their spiritual health and moral integrity and Scrooge is a miser so extreme that he does not spend any money even on himself. When Scrooge, at the beginning, sees the ghost of his former business partner Marley, it warns him that his soul will be in fetters for eternity unless he changes his greedy behaviour and it announces that other ghosts shall visit him that very Christmas night. This symbolizes Scrooge's forced transformation that is ultimately seen, even today, as a blessing and more broadly the restoration of social harmony and Victorian order. Dickens's book both redefined and reintroduced the spirit of Christmas as a seasonal merriment after the Puritan authorities in the

seventeenth century England and America suppressed the pre-Christian rituals associated with it. The religious and social implications of the book significantly helped to reinvent Christmas with an emphasis on family, goodwill, and compassion. In her book, Atwood traces the roots of Dickens's Scrooge in Goethe's and Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, where Marlowe's character is a bonvivant, a big-spender, who shares his wealth around very much like the reformed Scrooge at the end of Dickens's book. Atwood likewise insightfully traces the Faustian figure who is prepared to do everything for money in Washington Irving's story »The Devil and Tom Walker«, where Walker represents utter stinginess, ruthlessly grinding the people in need to the ground. Scrooge in Dickens, however, after being visited by Marley's ghost and the three spirits of Christmas, is a changed man. He is set free from his own heavy chain of cash-boxes at the end of the book, when, instead of sitting on his pile of money, he begins to spend it. The post-ghost Scrooge, for instance, doesn't give up his business, though whether it remained in part a moneylending business we aren't told. No, it's what you do with your riches that really counts (98).

Atwood's latter-day literary character named Scrooge Nouveau appears in the fifth chapter of a modernized Dickens's book *A Christmas Carol* and, like humanity today, in a the time of global warming and ruthless depletion of natural resources, is faced with two options: an eco-friendly world or a typically Atwoodian dystopian future with all kinds of disasters befalling the natural environment. It is time for humanity to pay-up as a whole, Atwood warns us.

As always, the author knows just how to provide the right amount of humour on the most serious of issues such as debt, sin and payback, whether we see *Payback* as, »smart, funny and clever« (Liss) or »by no means the highlight of the book« (Ashenburg). John Gray in *The New York Review of Books*, who typically reads the book against the current US recession, writes that it »can be read as a defense of traditional beliefs about the hazards of debt« (Gray). He is right in surmising that in Atwood's

book there is an implicit notion that we may now have to return to older and simpler practices of thrift and saving. However, Atwood is no economist and the solution to the problem of debt is not given, and, when it is, it seems somewhat naive. Her vast knowledge and erudition is, however, always formidable: she convincingly shows in the best cultural materialist fashion how debt as leitmotiv and literary figures concerned with money predominate in Western fiction, »no matter how much the virtues of love may be waved idealistically aloft« (100) and how, in her youth, she thought the nineteenth-century novel was driven by love, but now that she is older she sees that it was essentially driven by money. Margaret Atwood clearly shows the perils of debt and hints at the (im)possibility of a utopian future without greed, demonstrating how debt has indeed been a driving force in Western/Anglo-American fiction. She is perhaps a more successful writer of fiction rather than non-fiction, as some reviewers suggest, but she is certainly always very timely in her views and greatly captures the esprit of the period. Louis Bayard, among others, complains in his review article of the book that

Atwood never really distinguishes between »bad debt« (credit cards) and »good debt« (college loans, mortgages). The niceties of Keynesian economics, of microfinancing ventures, of the ways in which financial entities act as both borrowers and lenders ... these are either beneath or beyond her« (Bayard, cf. also Massie).

Though the writer's conclusion is far from conclusive, she is nonetheless able to introduce the theme of eco-politics and global bailout, which can only ensure our physical survival on Earth, for, as Atwood declares, all wealth comes from Nature and the only »serious« debts are those that humanity owes to Mother Earth, i.e. ecological debts. Consequently, the planet Earth will reclaim the payback that humanity owes to it or else »Nature would be a lifeless desert... and the resulting debt to Nature would be infinite« (202). This urgent and most timely ecopolitical statement is Atwood's strongest *forte* in this creative

non-fiction work, where especially the multiple and well-chosen literary allusions are most engaging.

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