

‘Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth’, by Margaret Attwood (2008), London: Bloomsbury Publishing. PBK, ISBN: 9780747598718, pp. 230. Price: £8.99.

Firstly, I need to acknowledge the debt I owe to Candace McCoy (Professor at the City University of New York) who gave me this book. It might be that a gift shouldn't create a debt, but I feel indebted anyway, because this is highly stimulating and profoundly useful book.

That said, I probably need to explain why I am reviewing it here in a special issue of the *European Journal of Probation* about community service. An explanation is due because this book is not about community sanctions, not about punishment, not really about criminal justice. And yet the title is bound to attract the attention particularly of any UK reader aware of the significance of ‘payback’ as a critically important concept within contemporary criminal justice discourses. Despite its somewhat tangential relevance – or perhaps because of it -- the scope of Attwood's analysis of themes of debt, indebtedness and redemption across many civilisations and through the course of history succeeds in providing us with an indispensable sourcebook for thinking creatively and critically about payback and reparation of any form and in any context.

Although she is best known as a critically acclaimed Canadian novelist, Attwood has also written many volumes of poetry and several works of non-fiction. This book is based on her delivery of the 2008 Massey Lectures which were broadcast on radio by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The Massey Lecture series was inaugurated in 1961 in honour of the Right Honourable Vincent Massey, former Governor General of Canada; it provides a forum for influential thinkers to address important contemporary issues. Attwood's interest in debt was prompted, or perhaps energised, by the global financial meltdown, but her consideration of debt extends into a much wider range of questions about the nature of human relationships, and indeed ultimately raises questions about humans' relationships with nature.

The first chapter, ‘Ancient Balances’, is an essay on justice in the broadest sense; it deals with the evolutionary origins of our sense of fairness, and argues that our many forms and systems of debt and credit reflect the extent to which human development has relied on cooperation and reciprocities within social groups. In ancient civilisations, Attwood argues, these evolutionary imperatives influenced belief systems as well as institutions; thus, for example, the Ancient Egyptians believed that the human heart was weighed after death and that, if it was found wanting, then it was eaten by a monster crocodile god. Here, the debts in question relate to deficits in the moral character of the departed. But as Attwood points out, in any such system of belief, it is not just debt and the status of the debtor that is of interest, rather: ‘the concept of balance is pivotal: debtor and creditor are two sides of a single entity, one

cannot exist without the other, and exchanges between them – in a healthy economy or society or ecosystem – tend towards equilibrium’ (p163).

In similar vein, the second chapter explores the relationships between ‘Debt and Sin’, pointing out that in many religious traditions being a creditor has been considered to be just as morally questionable as being a debtor; hence the proscription of usury within early and medieval Christianity. Attwood also connects this discussion to questions of memory, record-keeping and ultimately the creation of written contracts – exploring Faustian pacts with the Devil as one of the earliest versions of a buy-now, pay-later scheme. The discussion of exchanging some prized asset (an eternal soul, a reputation, a precious heirloom) for immediate access to other goods leads naturally to the question of redemption. Once indebted, and with prize assets ‘in hock’, can someone buy-back what is most cherished and, if so, how?

On this question, in the third chapter, ‘Debt as Plot’, Attwood explores the Faustian bargain in more detail by examining both Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus and Charles Dickens’s Ebenezer Scrooge. Her stroke of genius is to see the latter as a reverse image of the former. Whereas Faustus sells his soul for worldly pleasures, Scrooge has nothing but money – and needs to give it away to win back his soul. Faustus is (literally) torn apart by and for his greedy consumption; Scrooge’s redemption prompts and finds expression in his generous charity. While focusing on these two stories, chapter 3 also examines debt as a,

‘governing leitmotif of Western fiction, especially that of the nineteenth century – a century in which, capitalism having triumphed and money having become the measure of most things, debt played a significant role in the lives of actual people’ (p164).

Attwood draws ironic but ominous parallels between the dark satanic mills of industrialisation and the ancient Greek saying that ‘the mills of the gods grind slowly’; while the era of mass production has produced all sorts of ‘goods for us to consume’, the suggestion is that there will come a reckoning; there will be a price to pay. As we will see, this is a theme to which she returns in her final chapter.

The penultimate chapter examines ‘The Shadow Side’ – exploring the nastier side of debt and credit account balancing; including discussions of debtors’ prisons, criminal loan-shark collection tactics, eliminating one’s creditors, and rebelling against rulers who impose tax burdens deemed to be too heavy or unfair. Here, Attwood does touch directly on issues of crime and criminal justice, raising the question of what we mean by saying that people should ‘pay for their crimes’. Somewhat mischievously, she notes that a ‘crime supermarket’ did once exist; at least in the sense that the Catholic church once sold indulgences as a means of paying (after the fact) for bad acts. Musing briefly on punishment, she asks in what sense an imprisoned offender is ‘paying his debt to society’ when this form of payment yields no obvious return for (and indeed imposes fiscal burdens on) that society. As she notes: ‘Education is a better and cheaper deterrent, community service a better and cheaper moral improver’ (p125). She argues that ‘the kind of payment actually meant by “paying for your crimes” usually amounts to vengeance’ (p125), linking this not to monetary debts but to debts of honour. Intriguingly, she notices that the root of the Latin for revenge (‘revindicare’) is ‘vindicare’, which means to justify or rescue or liberate or emancipate. In this sense, she speculates that revenge is intended to free the person to whom wrong has been done from their hurt; to release their vengefulness and ‘settle the score’.

Attwood then moves into a discussion of the Jungian theory of the Shadow – meaning ‘our dark side, the repository of everything in us we’re ashamed of and would rather not acknowledge, and also of those qualities we profess to despise but would in fact like to possess’ (p150). She links this to the social process of ‘othering’, an analysis that she illustrates with a fascinating discussion of Shakespeare’s ‘The Merchant of Venice’. Here she notes the injustice of Portia’s appeal to Shylock which, as she suggests, amounts to a request that he show more mercy than has ever been shown to him (as the alien other). Nonetheless, Attwood does argue that forgiveness and not justice is the real antidote to revenge.

In the final chapter, ‘Payback’, Attwood summarises her main arguments and goes on to examine our indebtedness to the natural world, the gross imbalances in our exploitation of it, and the emerging costs of this exploitation. Her device in this discussion is a new version of Scrooge – not Dickens’s original miserly Scrooge, nor his reformed character, but rather her own creation – ‘Scrooge Nouveau’; a smooth but deeply cynical corporate executive, bent on accumulating wealth and lacking any social (or environmental) conscience. After his encounters with the Spirits of (not Christmas but) Earth Day past, present and future, he is, of course, a much-chastened and reformed character. The book ends with the words that reflect the awakening of his moral conscience and with it, his sense of indebtedness:

‘I don’t really own anything... Not even my body. Everything I have is only borrowed. I’m not really rich at all, I’m heavily in debt. How do I even begin to pay back what I owe? Where should I start?’ (p203).

Like all great books, this one raises so many questions that it is hard to know how to begin to respond. But it seems obvious to me that it is through engaging with this broader canvass – providing as it does a kind of cultural and literary history of payback – that criminal justice academics and practitioners might find new conceptual resources for thinking creatively about paying back to and making good with and for offenders, victims and communities. For that reason, this is a book that I could not recommend more strongly.

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