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Essay

Debtor's Prism

Since ancient times, the notion of debt has been deeply interwoven into our culture, literature and social structure. With the global markets in turmoil, Margaret Atwood looks at the history and meaning of being in hock.

By MARGARET ATWOOD

Without memory, there is no debt. Put another way: Without story, there is no debt.

The story of debt reached a historic moment this week. An outsized bubble of interlocking debt burst, leading to the downfalls of prominent companies. Loans by and to the government, financial institutions and consumers collided on an epic scale. Still, the idea of what we owe one another is an ancient theme, and this is just the latest chapter in a long cultural history.

A story is a string of actions occurring over time -- one damn thing after another, as we glibly say in creative writing classes -- and debt happens as a result of actions occurring over time. Therefore, any debt involves a plot line: how you got into debt, what you did, said and thought while you were in there, and then -- depending on whether the ending is to be happy or sad -- how you got out of debt, or else how you got further and further into it until you became overwhelmed by it, and sank from view.

The hidden metaphors are revealing: We get "into" debt, as if into a prison, swamp, or well, or possibly a bed; we get "out" of it, as if coming into the open air or climbing out of a hole. If we are "overwhelmed" by debt, the image is possibly that of a foundering ship, with the sea and the waves pouring inexorably in on top of us as we flail and choke. All of this sounds dramatic, with much physical activity: jumping in, leaping or clambering out, thrashing around, drowning. Metaphorically, the debt plot line is a far

cry from the glum actuality, in which the debtor sits at a desk fiddling around with numbers on a screen, or shuffles past-due bills in the hope that they will go away, or paces the room wondering how he can possibly extricate himself from the fiscal molasses.

In our minds -- as reflected in our language -- debt is a mental or spiritual non-place, like the Hell described by Christopher Marlowe's Mephistopheles when Faust asks him why he's not in Hell but right there in the same room as Faust. "Why, this is Hell, nor am I out of it," says Mephistopheles. He carries Hell around with him like a private climate: He's in it and it's in him. Substitute "debt" and you can see that, in the way we talk about it, debt is the same kind of placeless place. "Why, this is Debt, nor am I out of it," the beleaguered debtor might similarly declaim.

Which makes the whole idea of debt -- especially massive and hopeless debt -- sound brave and noble and interesting rather than merely squalid, and gives it a larger-than-life tragic air. Could it be that some people get into debt because, like speeding on a motorbike, it adds an adrenalin hit to their otherwise humdrum lives? When the bailiffs are knocking at the door and the lights go off because you didn't pay the water bill and the bank's threatening to foreclose, at least you can't complain of ennui.

Debt can constitute one such story-of-my-life. Eric Berne's 1964 bestselling book on transactional analysis, "Games People Play," lists five "life games" -- patterns of behavior that can occupy an individual's entire lifespan, often destructively, but with hidden psychological benefits or payoffs that keep the games going. Needless to say, each game requires more than one player -- some players being consciously complicit, others being unwitting dupes. "Alcoholic," "Now I've Got You, You Son of a Bitch," "Kick Me" and "See What You Made Me Do" are Berne's titles for four of these life games. The fifth one is called "Debtor."

Mr. Berne says, "'Debtor' is more than a game. In America it tends to become a script, a plan for a whole lifetime, just as it does in some of the jungles of Africa and New Guinea. There the relatives of a young man buy him a bride at an enormous price, putting him in their debt for years to come." In North America, says Mr. Berne, "the big expense is not a bride but a house, and the enormous debt is a mortgage; the role of the relatives is taken by the bank. Paying off the mortgage gives the individual a

purpose in life." Indeed, I can remember a time from my own childhood -- was it the 1940s? -- when it was considered cute to have a framed petit-point embroidered motto hanging in the bathroom that said *God Bless Our Mortgaged Home*. During this period, people would have mortgage-burning parties at which they would, in fact, burn the mortgage papers in the barbecue or fireplace once they'd paid the mortgage off.

I pause here to add that "mortgage" means "dead pledge" -- "mort" from the French for "dead," "gage" for "pledge," like the part in medieval romances where the knight throws down his glove, thus challenging another knight to a duel -- the glove or gage being the pledge that the guy will actually show up on time to get his head bashed in, and the accepting of the gage being a reciprocal pledge. Which should make you think twice about engagement rings, since they too are a gage or pledge -- what actually are you pledging when you present such a ring to your one true love?

So "paying off the mortgage" is what happens when people play the life game of "Debtor" nicely. But what if they don't play nicely? Not-nice play involves cheating, as every child knows. But it's not always true that cheaters never prosper, and every child knows that too: Sometimes they do prosper, in the playground and elsewhere.

Debt can have another kind of entertainment value when it becomes a motif, not in a real-life plot line, but in a fictional one. How this kind of debt plot unfolds and changes over time, as social conditions, class relations, financial climates and literary fashions change; but debts themselves have been present in stories for a very long time.

I'd like to begin by interrogating a familiar character -- a character so familiar that he's made it out of the fiction in which he stars into another kind of stardom: that of television and billboard advertising. That character is Ebenezer Scrooge, from Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol." Even if you haven't read the book or seen the play or the several movies made about Scrooge, you'd probably recognize him if you met him on the street. "Give like Santa, save like Scrooge," as some ads have said, and we then have a lovable, twinkly old codger telling us about some great penny-pinching bargain or other.

But, wanting to have it both ways, the ads conflate two Scrooges: the reformed Scrooge, who signals the advent of grace and the salvation of his soul by going on a giant spend-o-rama, and the Scrooge we see at the beginning of the book -- a miser

so extreme that he doesn't even spend any of his money-hoard on himself -- not on nice food, or heat, or warm outfits -- not anything. Scrooge's abstemious gruel-eating lifestyle might have been applauded as a sign of godliness back in the days of the early bread-and-water saintly ascetic hermits, who lived in caves and said *Bah! Humbug!* to all comers. But this is not the case with mean old Ebenezer Scrooge, whose first name chimes with "squeezer" as well as with "geezer," whose last name is a combination of "screw" and "gouge," and whose author disapproves mightily of his ways:

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice.

That Scrooge has -- consciously or not -- made a pact with the Devil is signaled to us more than once. Not only is he credited with the evil eye, that traditional mark of sold-to-the-Devil witches, but he's also accused of worshipping a golden idol; and when, during his night of visions, he skips forward to his own future, the only comment he can overhear being made about himself in his former place of business is "...old Scratch has got his own at last, hey?" Old Scratch is of course the Devil, and if Scrooge himself isn't fully aware of the pact he's made, his author most certainly is.

But it's an odd pact. The Devil may get Scrooge, but Scrooge himself gets nothing except money, and he does nothing with it except sit on it. Scrooge has some interesting literary ancestors. Pact-makers with the Devil didn't start out as misers -- quite the reverse. Christopher Marlowe's late-16th-century Doctor Faustus sells his body and soul to Mephistopheles with a loan document signed in blood, collection due in 24 years, but he doesn't do it cheaply. He has a magnificent wish list, which contains just about everything you can read about today in luxury magazines for gentlemen. Faust wants to travel; he wants to be very, very rich; he wants knowledge; he wants power; he wants to get back at his enemies; and he wants sex with a facsimile of Helen of Troy.

Marlowe's Doctor Faustus isn't mean and grasping and covetous. He doesn't want money just to have it -- he wants to dispense it on his other wishes. He's got friends who enjoy his company, he's a big spender who shares his wealth around, he likes food and drink and fun parties and playing practical jokes, and he uses his power to rescue at least one human being from death. In fact, he behaves like Scrooge, after Scrooge has been redeemed -- the Scrooge who buys huge turkeys, giggles a lot, plays practical jokes on his poor clerk, Bob Cratchit, goes to his nephew's Christmas party and joins in the parlor games, and saves Bob's crippled offspring, Tiny Tim, leading us to wonder if Scrooge didn't inherit a latent gene for bon-vivanterie from his distant ancestor Doctor Faustus -- a gene that was just waiting to be epigenetically switched on.

The ghost of Scrooge's former business partner, Marley, displaying the principles of post-mortem heart-weighing worthy of the Ancient Egyptians and also of medieval Christianity, has to pay after death for Marley's sins during life. None of these sins involved a dalliance with Helen of Troy; all of them came from the relentless business practices typical both of Scrooge and of unbridled 19th-century capitalism. Marley totes a long chain made of "cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel." He is fettered, he tells Scrooge, by the chain he forged in life -- yet another example of the imagery of bondage and slavery so often associated with debt, except that now the chain is worn by the creditor. Indulging in grinding, usurious financial practices is a spiritual sin as well as a material one, for it requires a cold indifference to the needs and sufferings of others, and imprisons the sinner within himself.

Scrooge 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. True, he spends it on others, thus displaying that most treasured of Dickensian body parts, an open heart; but the main point is that he does spend it. The saintly thing in earlier times would have been for him to have given the whole packet away, donned sackcloth, and taken up the begging bowl. But Dickens has nothing against Scrooge's being rich: in fact, there are quite a few delightful rich men in his work, beginning with Mr. Pickwick. It's not whether you have it; it's not even how you get it, exactly: 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.

Scrooge's big sin was to freeze his money; for money, as all students of it recognize, is of use only when it's moving, since it derives its value entirely from whatever it can translate itself into. Thus the Scrooges of this world who refuse to change their money into anything else are gumming up the works: currency is called "currency" because it must flow. Scrooge's happy ending is therefore entirely in keeping with the cherished core beliefs of capitalism. His life pattern is worthy of Andrew Carnegie -- make a bundle by squeezing and grinding, then go in for philanthropy. We love him in part because, true to the laws of wish-fulfillment, which always involve a free lunch or a get-out-of-jail card, he embodies both sides of the equation -- the greedy getting and the gleeful spending -- and comes out of it just fine.

But we don't have enough cash. Or so we keep telling ourselves. And that's why you lied to the charity worker at your door and said, "I gave at the office." You want it both ways. Just like Scrooge.

I began by talking about debt as a story-of-my-life plot line, which is the approach Eric Berne takes in describing the variants of the life game of "Debtor."

But debt also exists as a real game -- an old English parlor game. In fact, it's one of the games witnessed by the invisible Scrooge at his nephew's Christmas party. By no accident on the part of Dickens -- for everything Scrooge is shown by the spirits must have an application to his own wicked life -- this game is "Forfeits."

"Forfeits" has many variants, but here are the rules for perhaps the oldest and most complete form of it that we know about. The players sit in a circle, and one of them is selected to be the judge. Each player -- including the judge -- contributes a personal article. Behind the judge's back, one of these articles is selected and held up. The following verse is recited:

Heavy, heavy hangs over thy head.

What shall I do to redeem thee?

The judge -- not knowing whose article it is -- names some stunt or other that the owner of the article then has to perform. Much merriment is had at the absurdities that

follow.

There's nothing we human beings can imagine, including debt, that can't be turned into a game -- something done for entertainment. And, in reverse, there are no games, however frivolous, that cannot also be played very seriously, and sometimes very unpleasantly. You'll know this yourself if you've ever played social bridge with a gang of white-haired ruthless ace-trumpers or watched any news items about cheerleaders' mothers trying to assassinate their daughters' rivals. Halfway between tiddlywinks and the Battle of Waterloo -- between kids' games and war games -- fall hockey and football and their ilk, in which the fans shouting "Kill!" are only partly joking. But when the play turns nasty in dead earnest, the game becomes what Eric Berne calls a "hard game." In hard games the stakes are high, the play is dirty, and the outcome may well be a puddle of gore on the floor.

-- Adapted from "Payback" by Margaret Atwood. Published by House of Anansi Press.

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than 35 volumes of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. Her latest book, "Payback," will be published in October.

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