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Psycho-Spiritual Debt and Dante

I am not afraid to owe someone something. It does not make me weak in my eyes nor theirs, it feels like another layer of the relationship we share. When I owe something to someone, I am giving myself the opportunity to either forge a relationship or to strengthen one because to owe is to be codependent. We have discussed in class the idea of a “Declaration of Interdependence” which, though it poses its own challenges with the pre-existing power dynamics we have in place now, offers the possibility to a more community-oriented future (Mr. Christian). If owing people things means that we become more tangled up with each other and somehow more considerate as a by product, then I hesitate to call it detrimental. This idea reminds me of a theory we discussed in US History last year promoted by Alexander Hamilton. The basic premise was that because of our lack of money and credit in the early days of the United States, we should borrow money from other countries (owe them money in other words) so that they have a vested interest in our success. While this example does not have ring with the same sense of reciprocity as I hope some acts of owing do, it offers us an example that extends beyond an individual’s relationship. There is still, though, a heavily negative connotation with owing. I am trying to distinguish what I believe the value is of it from the value (or lack thereof) that the American mindset places on it. We are always told to be independent is to have achieved the highest state of being, and I think this attitude shapes our interactions with ourselves and other people. If this really is the case, owing people things limits us from reaching our highest potential, which contradicts the way that I view owing.

These doubts, though, were quite present in my mind during our discussion about Statius owing Virgil something. How does this (any credit or debt) carry on in death? Statius refers to the *Aeneid*, and by extension Virgil, as his, “mother as well as [his] nurse,” and then continues on to say that he would spend another year on Purgatory to meet Virgil just once (*Purgatorio*, Canto XXI, 98). When I read this passage for the first time, I was struck by Statius’ deep admiration for Virgil and left it as such. In class, however, I was introduced to the idea that Statius was in a state of owing Virgil something- a direction? A purpose? Regardless of what it was, what does it mean to owe someone something in Purgatory and does anything change because Virgil, too, is dead but in Hell? I had assumed that upon entering Purgatory all of our relationships in life were erased. They were not erased from our memories evidently as some of the shades remember Dante, but any sense of dependence is dissolved. Purgatory is about purging sins in a manner that leads us to recognize our place in a community and therefore develop ourselves better as individuals. To do this, I think it is critical to disassociate from the emotional relationships we had during life, as exemplified by all the shades who warn against falling under the illusion of nostalgia’s grace. If this is what I believe to be the purpose of Purgatory, I think I need to reevaluate what it means to owe someone. I think currently I visualize the idea as some sort of credit system, but maybe this method is too literal of an approach and ignores in owing other people things, we also offer opportunities for ourselves to grow. Statius seems to be a prime example of the goodness and greatness that can come from owing. The roots of my acceptance and eagerness to be in such a relationship also comes from the idea of growing as a result of such a relationship. Owing, then, is something like fertilizer for ourselves and for our relationships.

One of the ways in which we acknowledge that we owe someone something is by expressing our gratitude for their giving. We had an intersecting collection of viewpoints on the topic of expressions of gratitude in class with Mace saying that it was important for us to be sure of what we said before we said it. Upon hearing this, I was a little skeptical because I am an avid card writer and find a lot of joy in finding the words to express my gratitude. It was not until I was in a situation last weekend in which I tried to pay someone a compliment that I reevaluated my initial thoughts. Where do you draw the line between flattery and gratitude? I think the answer to this is relatively straightforward: flattery is a tool we use to get something else that we want, an idea well expressed by the phrase, “flattery is the prostitution of language” (Dorothy Sayers). Though we may procure something out of gratitude, the intent is not necessarily to do so as it is with flattery. I realized in this scenario, however, that I was unsure as to whether my comment about how delicious the cake was would be taken as flattery or as gratitude for baking such a wonderful cake. Perhaps it is clear when we are being told either one, but I began to wonder if maybe I was trying to flatter the recipient of my compliment. I would like to think that my actions were altruistic, but were they? We often discuss the idea of self-advancement as a defining trait of human nature, and if this is the case, then it seems like flattery is just another tool to better ourselves and is the default of our language. I am still, though, more inclined to believe in flattery as “prostitution” perhaps because it makes me feel less crooked about myself and others, which means that to an extent it is a choice. As is everything in Dante’s world, the difference between a “good” action and a “bad” action is choice. While that leaves a lot up to us, I think that it is an optimistic view of the world because we have control (even if that is also an illusion because we are never truly isolated from one another and cannot control other people). I think the ideas of owing and of gratitude will become increasingly relevant in my life as I move

away from my parents and require the assistance of more people. This also brings to question what I owe my parents, which is a question I will probably never find a complete answer to but will have to be processing now. When I am faced with these ideas in the future, I hope to be as conscious of where the feelings I have are coming from and who or what, like Dante, can help me understand them better.

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *Purgatorio*. Trans. by Stanley Lombardo. Hackett Publishing, 2016.