

INTERPRETATION

A Journal of Political Philosophy

Volume 7/1

January, 1978

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QUEENS COLLEGE PRESS

INTERPRETATION

A Journal of Political Philosophy

Volume 7

Issue 1

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INTERPRETATION is a journal devoted to the study of Political Philosophy.

It appears three times a year.

Its editors welcome contributions from all those who take a serious interest in Political Philosophy regardless of their orientation.

All manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be addressed to the Editor-in-Chief.

INTERPRETATION

Building G 101 - Queens College - Flushing, N.Y. 11367 - U.S.A.

Subscription Price

For institutions and libraries \$12 - For individuals \$10.

Subscriptions and correspondence in connection therewith should be sent to:

INTERPRETATION, G 101, Queens College, Flushing, New York 11367

QUEENS COLLEGE PRESS, FLUSHING, N.Y. 11367

NOTES FROM CHARLES DICKENS'S *CHRISTMAS CAROL**

GEORGE ANASTAPLO

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Macbeth: One cried "God bless us!" and "Amen!" the other,
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands,
List'ning their fear. I could not say "Amen!"
When they did say "God bless us!"

Lady Macbeth: Consider it not so deeply.

Macbeth: But wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen"?
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"
Stuck in my throat.

Shakespeare, *Macbeth* II, ii

I

A classical scholar, in assessing the Greek dramatists, has remarked on the "extraordinary creative power that [Aeschylus] shares with Shakespeare and Dickens." An *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article observes that Charles Dickens stands second only to Shakespeare in English literature, that he is "[g]enerally regarded as the greatest English novelist." Thus, one finds again and again, in critical discussions, elevations of Dickens to the most exalted heights.¹

Whatever reservations one may have about the ultimate soundness of these assessments, no English author ever enjoyed during his lifetime the popular acclaim which came to Charles Dickens. Only Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll created so many characters who (either in their names or in now familiar quotations) have taken on a life of their own.

*This essay was prepared originally for the Works of the Mind Lecture Series, The Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults, The University of Chicago. (It was dedicated on that occasion, December 12, 1976, to the memory of a colleague who had died that week, Professor Arthur Heiserman of The University of Chicago.) It will be included in Anastaplo, *The Artist as Thinker* (to be published by Swallow Press of Chicago).

The reader is urged, as with my other publications, to begin by reading the text without reference to the notes.

Among Dickens' memorable characters is, of course, Ebenezer Scrooge, the hero of that 1843 tale, *A Christmas Carol*, one of the author's best known books. No Christmas among us is complete without its representation on stage, radio and television, as well as in the home. Indeed, for many people, there are only two Christmas stories of note, that of the New Testament and that written by the 31-year-old Charles Dickens. It has even been said that Dickens has made the modern Christmas what it is, a time for feasting and good cheer, "a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time." (C.C., p. 49)²

The story of the conversion of Scrooge is familiar. It is the story of the instructive "haunt[ing] by Three Spirits" of "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner," a man who was "[h]ard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster." (C.C., pp. 63, 46) We first see our hero (on Christmas Eve) disparaging the Christmas spirit in the approaches to him (in turn) of his lively nephew, of two gentlemen soliciting for the poor, of a little boy who tries to sing him a Christmas carol, and of Bob Cratchit (his clerk) whom he reluctantly gives the next day as a holiday with pay (but not without the parting injunction, "Be here all the earlier next morning!" [C.C., p. 53]).

Within a few pages, one has a lively (and permanent) awareness of the kind of man Scrooge is. One is not yet aware, however, of anything in him which could lead to his famous conversion, a conversion which follows upon the visitation to Scrooge of the ghost of his deceased partner, Jacob Marley, and thereupon of Three Spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

Marley's Ghost (who is almost as chilling as the sombre Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come) is anticipated for Scrooge by what he experiences when he returns home after "his melancholy dinner", an experience which so startles him "that his blood was . . . conscious of a terrible sensation to which it had been a stranger from infancy." (C.C., pp. 53, 55) Since it is this "rejuvenating" experience which proves to be the threshold for Scrooge to everything else of note in the remainder of the story, it would be useful to recall the narrator's account of it (C.C., pp. 54-55):

Now, it is a fact, that there was nothing at all particular about the knocker on

the door, except that it was very large. It is also a fact, that Scrooge had seen it night and morning during his whole residence in that place; also that Scrooge had as little of what is called fancy about him as any man in the City of London. . . . Let it also be borne in mind that Scrooge had not bestowed one thought on Marley, since his last mention of his seven-years' dead partner that afternoon. And then let any man explain to me, if he can, how it happened that Scrooge, having his key in the lock of the door, saw in the knocker, without its undergoing any intermediate process of change: not a knocker, but Marley's face.

Marley's face. It was not in impenetrable shadow as the other objects in the yard were, but had a dismal light about it, like a bad lobster in a dark cellar. It was not angry or ferocious, but looked at Scrooge as Marley used to look: with ghostly spectacles turned up upon its ghostly forehead. The hair was curiously stirred, as if by breath of hot-air; and though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly motionless. That, and its livid colour, made it horrible; but its horror seemed to be, in spite of the face and beyond its control, rather than a part of its own expression.

Dickens, in this passage, lays down for us an instructive challenge when he says, "And then let any man explain to me, if he can, how it happened that Scrooge . . . saw in the knocker . . . not a knocker, but Marley's face." (C.C., p. 54) This challenge—how it happened that Scrooge saw not only Marley's face but also, if I may expand it, Marley's ghost and thereafter three more ghosts—this challenge is what provides us, on this occasion, an opportunity to discuss a great novelist and his art by examining one of that artist's favorite stories. An opportunity is also provided thereby to develop further what we may know about how to read a book.³

A simple explanation of the extraordinary manifestations in *A Christmas Carol* is, it can be said, implied by Dickens himself in the way he presents this story. Cannot everything that happens after Scrooge "took his melancholy dinner in his usual tavern" (C.C., pp. 53-54) be understood as an extended dream by Scrooge? (This understanding may not be essential to my interpretation of the book—but it does add at least a diverting, and perhaps instructive, grace note to my composition.)

An early hint of a dream may be provided us in the observation that Scrooge, after "having read all the newspapers [in his tavern] and beguiled the rest of the evening with his banker's-book, went home to bed." (C.C., p. 54) It is only after this is reported by the narrator—only after Scrooge is said to have gone "home to

bed"—that Scrooge is described as "actually" walking up to his door, encountering the transformed knocker and then other strange sights and noises as he ascends to and settles into his chambers.

But to suggest that all this is essentially a remarkably productive dream is only a preliminary explanation in response to Dickens' challenge. We have still to consider how this dream "works" and what it says about Scrooge and, indeed, about human beings generally. How did it happen that Scrooge had this revolutionary experience, whether or not in the form of a dream? After all, this Christmas Eve *was* spent in his usual melancholy manner. Why was this night different from all other nights?⁴

II

A Christmas Carol begins with the stark observation, "Marley was dead." (C.C., p. 45) And a few paragraphs further on, the narrator emphasizes this by saying, "There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate." (C.C., p. 45) Scrooge's counting-house, we are told, still bears the sign, "Scrooge and Marley" (C.C., p. 46):

Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley. The firm was known as Scrooge and Marley. Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but he answered to both names: it was all the same to him.

Death looms large throughout *A Christmas Carol*, and not only emphatically in its very beginning. All of the Third Spirit's visitation, for example, turns around two future deaths, that of Tiny Tim and that of Scrooge himself, a death (in the latter case) which is grim, lonely and an occasion for jesting if not even "serious delight" on the part of others. (C.C., pp. 119-20) But, in a manner of speaking, Scrooge had already died—at least insofar as he is interchangeable with Marley (in whose chambers he now lives [C.C., p. 54]). Scrooge has seen someone very much like himself, with his own interests and resources, come to die. He was reminded of Marley's death, when he was obliged to inform the charitable gentlemen, "Mr. Marley has been dead these seven years. He died seven years ago, this very night." (C.C., p. 50)

A few minutes earlier, Scrooge had had an encounter with his well-wishing nephew—in the course of which the nephew had defended Christmas as

the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. [C.C., p. 49.]

Scrooge does seem to consider himself one of those “creatures bound on other journeys”—one of those who have somehow transcended their mortality. *His* journey is in a substantial chariot fashioned of silver and gold—but the recollection of Marley, who had died this very night, can be said to have reminded him that the rich man’s journey is at best but a slight detour on the route to the grave.

Perhaps Scrooge also senses—and this the nephew’s liveliness may have impressed upon him—that there is something deadly about his own way of life. He may sense, that is, that he has cut himself off from genuine human contact, from a life of breadth and meaning. He may even sense, especially at a season of the year when so much is made of a Birth and of rebirth, that he has somehow hastened for himself the death which (it is evident throughout the book) he dreads. In short, he has, in his desperate efforts to preserve himself, made himself more vulnerable.

III

To speak of vulnerability and of preservation is to direct our attention (if only briefly) to what it is that really moves a miser such as Scrooge. After all, what do the avaricious seek?

Avarice is an attempt to fence oneself off from death and from any lesser, related vulnerability. It is an attempt to save one’s life by providing oneself the means to deal with whatever may threaten one. It is an attempt to be self-sufficient rather than to have to rely upon someone else in a critical moment.

The helplessness which the miserly Scrooge is determined to avoid lies just below his veneer of worldly wisdom and everyday competence. The first episode that Scrooge recollects, under the aegis of the Ghost of Christmas Past, is of himself as a schoolboy

who is abandoned at Christmas time, left alone in his miserable boarding school, when all the other boys have gone home. (C.C., pp. 70-73) Is there not about this experience something traumatic, so much so that it is only natural that the scarred adult might make every effort not to permit himself ever to become helpless again? (The plight of a vulnerable child means a great deal to Dickens also, as is evident in the first [and best] part [which is autobiographical] of *David Copperfield*.)

Scrooge as a child (again, it seems, like Dickens before him) suffered from the callousness of his father. The second episode shown to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Past once again displays a child abandoned at Christmastime—but, on that occasion, he is rescued from his loneliness by his sister, who had interceded with their father. (C.C., pp. 73-75) Scrooge repeats before us, in a more dramatic form, the conversion evidently experienced by his father, who (for an unstated reason) changed suddenly from a harsh parent to a kind one. Indeed, Scrooge can be thought of, at the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, as subject still to the harsh father in himself. His rescue on the reader's Christmas Eve is again contributed to (in effect) by his now-dead sister. She acts this time through her son, the nephew who had insisted upon bringing Christmas cheer to his formidable uncle.

The nephew's unwelcome visit on Christmas Eve to Scrooge's counting-house begins a series of recollections which can be said to have naturally brought to the surface of Scrooge's consciousness a reexamination of the kind of life he had resorted to.

IV

The problem with Scrooge's kind of life is pointed up in one critical exchange he has with his nephew. Scrooge responds to his nephew's opening greeting, "A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!", with his now notorious, "Bah! Humbug!" The disgruntled uncle goes on to say, "Merry Christmas! What right have you to be merry? what reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough." To which the nephew replied gaily, "Come, then. What right have you to be dismal? what reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough." And, the narrator adds, "Scrooge having no better answer ready on

the spur of the moment, said, 'Bah!' again; and followed it up with 'Humbug' " (C.C., pp. 47-48).

It is significant that Scrooge does *not* have here a ready answer (something which he does have in dealing immediately thereafter with the two solicitors and with Bob Cratchit). He had himself invoked right and reason in challenging the appropriateness of merriment in his poor nephew: he had thereby indicated the standards by which he judged others and was prepared to be judged himself. He evidently cannot deny that he is dismal and morose—and this despite his wealth. That is, he tacitly concedes, when it is implicitly pointed out to him, that his wealth has not insulated him from childlike misery, from that vulnerability of which death is the most dramatic form. Scrooge is practically dead in the way he lives—and this the nephew's argument brings home to his not unperceptive uncle.

This may be brought home as well by the aborted Christmas carol sung to Scrooge through his keyhole by the little boy whom he drives off (C.C., p. 53):

God bless you merry gentlemen!
May nothing you dismay!

This has been said by the editor of the *Oxford Book of Carols* to be "the most popular of Christmas carols." The version usually sung in London streets in the time of Dickens has been changed in this story from "God rest you" to "God bless you". "Rest", which means (in this context) "keep," would be inappropriate for Scrooge. He cannot be *kept* merry. "Bless", however, has the connotation of being made something, of being changed into something, of having something done for one. The boy can be considered providential in making this vital change (as well as other appropriate changes) in what he sings. Perhaps he senses what Scrooge is in need of.

"May nothing you dismay!" It is dismay—or dismalness or moroseness (to use the nephew's language)—which Scrooge has somehow accumulated *with* (not necessarily *because of*) his wealth. And, being an eminently practical man of considerable intelligence, he is aware that his state of affairs really does not make sense. This awareness is put together, in an imaginative and hence instructive manner, by the visitations he conjures up this Christmas Eve.⁵

V

Critical to one's understanding of what does happen to Scrooge is how the nephew regards his Christmas Eve encounter with his uncle. The nephew's opinion is shown to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Present, when he hears the nephew explain to his Christmas Day guests what had happened the evening before upon visiting his uncle's counting-house (C.C., pp. 103-104):

[T]he consequence of his taking a dislike to us, and not making merry with us [today], is, as I think, that he loses some pleasant moments, which could do him no harm. I am sure he loses pleasanter companions than he can find in his own thoughts, either in his mouldy old office, or his dusty chambers. I mean to give him the same chance every year, whether he likes it or not, for I pity him. He may rail at Christmas till he dies, but he can't help thinking better of it—I defy him—if he finds me going there, in good temper, year after year, and saying Uncle Scrooge, how are you? If it only puts him in the vein to leave his poor clerk fifty pounds, *that's* something; and I think I shook him, yesterday.

The narrator then adds (C.C., p. 104),

It was their turn to laugh now, at the notion of his shaking Scrooge. But being thoroughly good-natured, and not much caring what they laughed at, so that they laughed at any rate, he [Scrooge's nephew] encouraged them in their merriment, and passed the bottle, joyously.

Such willingness to be laughed at anticipates (in the nephew) that which happens (at the very end of the story) to Scrooge himself (C.C., p. 134):

... Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

Thus, both uncle and nephew are revealed to be more perceptive, more discerning, and hence perhaps even wiser than most of their associates. Is the nephew correct in believing that Scrooge "can't help thinking better" of Christmas if he finds the nephew visiting

him, "in good temper, year after year"? How often has the nephew gone there before? We are not told. Even so, the nephew does stand for the gentlemanly proposition that one should persist in doing what one believes to be right, without being much concerned about the likely futility of one's efforts.

The central question in our analysis of this story may well relate to the observation by the nephew which had moved the guests to laugh, "I think I shook him, yesterday." I have already suggested what it was that may have shaken Scrooge, the nephew's meeting him on his own ground with respect to the supposed correlation of poverty to misery and of wealth to happiness. We have noticed that Scrooge had been at a loss for words in response to his nephew's deadly query, "What right have you to be dismal? what reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough." (C.C., p. 48)

More significant, perhaps, than the nephew's effectiveness in checking Scrooge's attack on Christmas merriment is that the nephew *noticed* that Scrooge had indeed been checked, that he had been shaken. But even more significant, however, is that Scrooge himself may have noticed that the nephew noticed that Scrooge had been shaken. For, it has been suggested, this narrative may best be understood as Scrooge's dream—an introspective reverie in which Scrooge is able to step back and see what he has really been up to all his life.

The central question in our analysis of the story is, then, What is there about Scrooge in his circumstances which accounts for, perhaps even justifies, his conversion? Critical to his salvation, it has also been suggested, was his perceptiveness, his awareness of what his life past and present meant and what that life was tending to. It was no accident nor simply due to the ministrations of Jacob Marley (for what, after all, moved or permitted Marley to intervene?) that salvation came to Scrooge, but rather as the result of efforts on the part of others (such as his nephew). These efforts prompted Scrooge to face up to what had become of the vulnerable child abandoned decades before in a lonely schoolroom.

There is about this view of the matter something hopeful and reassuring, for it rests on the proposition (does it not?) that virtue is somehow dependent upon wisdom, that one can somehow learn to be good. Thus, cause and effect can be discerned and relied upon in the moral as in the physical universe: the conversion and salvation of

Scrooge are, therefore, not mere happenstance. But, one might wonder, was Scrooge really capable of the kind of perceptive soul-searching I have conjured up here?

It is said by the narrator, in his account of the transformation of the knocker into Marley's face, that "Scrooge had as little of what is called fancy about him as any man in the City of London." (C.C., p. 54) Does not "fancy" refer, as in the words of one dictionary, to a capricious or delusive sort of imagination? Such imagination is one thing—and Scrooge is *not* subject to that. But an imagination informed by an awareness of things, and of the implications or tendency of one's life, is quite another matter. (C.C., pp. 117, 124, 126)

That Scrooge is not simply *unimaginative* by nature is attested to in the course of the first episode presented in Christmas Past. As real in Scrooge's recollection as his former schoolmates are the images of characters in books he read as a neglected child, characters who came to him *then* (for his solace) as Marley and the other ghosts come to him *now* (for his "reclamation" [C.C., p. 69]). Notice how Scrooge recalls those storybook characters of Christmas Past (C.C., pp. 72-73):

The Spirit touched him on the arm, and pointed to his younger self, intent upon his reading. Suddenly a man, in foreign garments: wonderfully real and distinct to look at: stood outside the window, with an axe stuck in his belt, and leading an ass laden with wood by the bridle.

"Why, it's Ali Baba!" Scrooge exclaimed in ecstasy. "It's dear old honest Ali Baba! Yes, yes, I know! One Christmas time, when yonder solitary child was left here all alone, he *did* come, for the first time, just like that. Poor boy! And Valentine," said Scrooge, "and his wild brother, Orson; there they go! And what's his name, who was put down in his drawers, asleep, at the Gate of Damascus; don't you see him! And the Sultan's Groom turned upside-down by the Genii; there he is upon his head! Serve him right. I'm glad of it. What business had *he* to be married to the Princess!"

To hear Scrooge expending all the earnestness of his nature on such subjects, in a most extraordinary voice between laughing and crying; and to see his heightened and excited face; would have been a surprise to his business friends in the city, indeed.

"There's the Parrot!" cried Scrooge. "Green body and yellow tail, with a thing like a lettuce growing out of the top of his head; there he is! Poor Robin Crusoe, he called him, when he came home again after sailing around the island. 'Poor

Robin Crusoe, where have you been, Robin Crusoe?’ The man thought he was dreaming, but he wasn’t. It was the Parrot, you know. There goes Friday, running for his life to the little creek! Halloo! Hoop! Halloo!”

Then, with a rapidity of transition very foreign to his usual character, [Scrooge] said, in pity for his former self, “Poor boy!” and cried again.

Scrooge is much moved by “yonder solitary child . . . left here all alone”: twice in the course of this recollection of storybook characters, he says, “in pity for his former self, ‘Poor boy!’ ” This recollection, which has the effect of reviving that “former self” buried deep within the singleminded businessman, moves Scrooge to tears (C.C., p. 73):

“I wish,” Scrooge muttered, putting his hand in his pocket, and looking about him, after drying his eyes with his cuff: “but it’s too late now.”

“What is the matter?” asked the Spirit.

“Nothing,” said Scrooge. “Nothing. There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something: that’s all.”

This is, in the book, Scrooge’s first articulation of a desire to reform his former way of life. It is his first explicit repudiation of past conduct—and it consists in the identification by him of one boy with another, the identification of the abandoned child in the schoolroom at Christmas time many years before with the chased-off singer of a Christmas carol the evening before. Scrooge expresses the wish to act more kindly to such a child as the caroller. Should he not be taken as now wanting to reenact toward that child (and to other children) the role long ago of the converted father toward the youthful Scrooge himself? (The first act of generosity on Scrooge’s part, the Christmas morning after his fateful night, is toward still another little boy, the youngster whom he rewards liberally for serving as a messenger to the Poulterer’s from whom the turkey will be purchased for the Cratchit family.)

The importance of the revived child in Scrooge, a battered child so to speak, is attested to by the emphasis given in the book to Tiny Tim. I dare say that Scrooge feels more deeply about that rather trying youngster than many readers—but then, Scrooge may see in the crippled child something of himself. We return to Scrooge’s relation to his mysterious father when we notice the report that

Scrooge became "a second father" to Tiny Tim (*C.C.*, p. 134), a child saved thereby from impending death of the body just as Scrooge himself is saved from impending death of the spirit.

I return for a moment to Scrooge's first expression of repentance, the desire to have given something to his Christmas Eve caroller. The narrator then adds, "The Ghost smiled thoughtfully, and waved its hand: saying as it did so, 'Let us see another Christmas!'" (*C.C.*, p. 73)

This is the episode already referred to, of an older (but still youthful) Scrooge again abandoned at school. Things are even worse than the time before. "He was not reading now, but walking up and down despairingly." (*C.C.*, p. 73) Scrooge watches the scene "with a mournful shaking of his head, glanc[ing] anxiously towards the door." (*C.C.*, p. 73) Scrooge knows whence his deliverance will come, even as he feels deeply for the despairing boy, the schoolboy so burdened by dismay that he no longer takes refuge in imaginative reading. In this way, too, the Scrooge of the reader's Christmas Eve has within him both the moroseness noted by his nephew and the deliverance begun by his nephew—thereby repeating the pattern of that Christmas episode when the nephew's mother (Scrooge's sister) came to release her despairing brother from his holiday bondage.

There are prefigured, then, in these two schoolroom scenes, essentially what happens to the "mature" Scrooge we come to know. When he is moved to repent for his treatment of the youthful caroller, his redemption is decisively on its way.

VI

The first steps in Scrooge's conversion are the hardest, just as they might be in any sincere repentance. Indeed, Scrooge's night of intense soul-searching can be considered equivalent to a program of thoroughgoing therapy, all compressed in one long session. He is obliged to unearth, put together and face up to diverse elements of his life, an enterprise initiated by the self-realization pressed upon his consciousness by his Christmas Eve conversations.

Scrooge, in going back to childhood, becomes again as a child—in order to be "born again," an appropriate enough motif at Christmas time (*C.C.*, pp. 55, 128). He has to become helpless again, in order to see whether he can adopt a course different from that adopted by

him the first time around. That course is suggested to him by the third episode presented by the Ghost of Christmas Past, the episode with Mr. Fezziwig, an employer of Scrooge's youth who does well by his associates, especially at Christmas (*C.C.*, pp. 75-77). Mr. Fezziwig's course is the one Scrooge does pursue upon his conversion: he throws himself into his nephew's party (as old Fezziwig had done); he becomes a generous employer of Bob Cratchit.

But Scrooge had not taken Fezziwig's generous route the first time around—and the reason is given in the next episode, that in which the parting of the ways is shown between Scrooge and his fiancée, Belle. The narrator reports of Scrooge (*C.C.*, p. 79):

He was older now; a man in the prime of life. His face had not the harsh and rigid lines of later years; but it had begun to wear the signs of care and avarice. There was an eager, greedy, restless motion in the eye, which showed the passion that had taken root, and where the shadow of the growing tree would fall.

Belle tells him that a golden idol had displaced her. And, she says to him in a benevolent spirit, "if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come, as I would have tried to do, I have no just cause to grieve" (*C.C.*, p. 79). Scrooge justifies his acquisitiveness in this fashion: "This is the even-handed dealing of the world! There is nothing on which it is so hard as poverty; and there is nothing it professes to condemn with such severity as the pursuit of wealth!" Her reply is (*C.C.*, p. 79),

You fear the world too much. All your other hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of its sordid reproach. I have seen your nobler aspirations fall off one by one, until the master-passion, Gain, engrosses you. Have I not?

That which the girl had tried to tell him in her gentle way, experience has moved Scrooge to learn the hard way, the fruitlessness of the approach he had taken out of fear of the world and in his effort to avoid the helplessness of poverty. At this point in his recollections, there is an exchange between Scrooge and the Ghost (*C.C.*, 81):

"Spirit!" said Scrooge, "show me no more! Conduct me home. Why do you delight to torture me?"

"One shadow more!" exclaimed the Ghost.

"No more!" cried Scrooge. "No more. I don't wish to see it. Show me no more!"

But the relentless Ghost pinioned him in both his arms, and forced him to observe what happened next.

What he is shown next is an episode of seven years before, the night Jacob Marley died. Marley had, in effect, replaced Belle for Scrooge—and Scrooge sat alone in his office as his partner died. (*C.C.*, p. 83) But the episode shown to him is neither about himself nor about Marley's death but (for the first time) about something Scrooge had never previously witnessed but which (it would seem) he had come to sense that he could not bear to contemplate—the happy, fruitful life enjoyed by Belle and the man fortunate enough to marry her. The narrator reports (*C.C.*, p. 82),

And now Scrooge looked on more attentively than ever, when the master of the house, having his daughter leaning fondly on him, sat down with her and her mother at his own fireside; and when he thought that such another creature, quite as graceful and full of promise, might have called him father, and been a spring-time in the haggard winter of his life, his sight grew very dim indeed.

Had not Scrooge, a man not without an ability to calculate, come to the realization that he had gotten the worst of the bargain in his effort to protect himself against the vagaries of life? Already, seven years before, he was (as he has Belle's husband report to her), "[q]uite alone in the world." (*C.C.*, p. 83) It is at this point that Scrooge insists to the Ghost, "Remove me! I cannot bear it!" And, as is usually true of dreamers, he controls the duration of his dream—this part of his dream—as he seizes an extinguisher-cap and presses it down upon the head of the Ghost of Christmas Past in an effort to hide the light which had illuminated a past which he had come to see the misery of.

Once Scrooge has come to terms with his past, by recognizing it for what it is, he can then bear to consider the present and, even more formidable, the future. He can, among other things, face up to the death—the death of himself and the death of others—which his present course of life tends to. Having so faced up to death (that death which he dreads as the extreme of helplessness), he is prepared for a radical reclamation. The most difficult thing Scrooge has to do, when he returns to the world of the living, is to go to his nephew's

house on Christmas Day: "He passed the door a dozen times, before he had the courage to go up and knock. But he made a dash, and did it . . ." (C.C., p. 131). It had proved far easier to be generous to the messenger-boy sent to the Poulterer's and to make amends to the gentlemen who had solicited money for the poor the evening before; and it was to prove far easier (the following morning) to reform his relations with Bob Cratchit.

Perhaps Scrooge's marked hesitation before the visit to his nephew's house confirms what I have suggested about the importance of his encounter with his nephew in the counting-house the evening before. It had been in that encounter, more than anywhere else, that Scrooge had had to face up to the fact that his way of life, of which he had been so confident, had not produced for him the results he had bargained for. It had been the nephew, in his comment on Scrooge (as presented by the Ghost of Christmas Present), who had made the decisive assessment of Scrooge's way of life (C.C., p. 102):

He's a comical old fellow, that's the truth: and not so pleasant as he might be. However, his offences carry their own punishment, and I have nothing to say against him.

And, the nephew goes on to say (echoing his decisive exchange with his uncle the evening before), "His wealth is of no use to him. He don't do any good with it. He don't make himself comfortable with it. He hasn't the satisfaction of thinking—ha, ha, ha!—that he is ever going to benefit Us with it" (C.C., pp. 102-103).

To speak thus is to account not only for Scrooge's deliverance but also for the form it takes. Otherwise, that deliverance may seem mysterious, perhaps even unjust (in that he is permitted to escape the misery he deserves). This, then, is not a miraculous deliverance but one rooted in Scrooge's character, in his understanding of the world and in calculations having to do with what he fears and with how to achieve that which he longs for. No doubt, the appearance of a miraculous story contributes to the engaging character of this story with the multitudes who have enjoyed it for more than a century. But even more interesting, it seems to me, has been to see how the dramatic miracle works—and this has shown us as well how an artist of genius works and what he understands about the movements of the human soul, waking and dreaming alike. Indeed, it is because the

artist senses what souls are like, thereby striking a responsive chord in soulful readers, that works such as this have an enduring effect.⁶

VII

But to say that an artist has an enduring effect is not to say, of course, that what he does should never be questioned.

It may be somewhat a matter of chance whether a presentation such as Dickens' becomes rather sentimental. At times, some will think—particularly in the treatment of the Cratchit family, especially of Tiny Tim—Dickens goes too far. But the unduly pathetic is corrected, or at least moderated, by the humor employed, much of it exaggerated, some of it fairly subtle, all of it good-natured. It is corrected as well by the reader's tendency to regard Scrooge as more memorable as a rogue than as a saint. We are given very little of the converted Scrooge—just a few pages. After all, what is there to say about him then? There is not much variety, and hence poetic interest, in thoroughgoing goodness.

A question should be raised, if only in passing, about the status of death in the stories of Dickens. Is not Scrooge's terror of death made too much of and in effect legitimated by this story? Does not this reflect the modern attitude—an attitude of deep-rooted anxiety in the face of death, of that death which threatens the continuation of the self, of the individuality, we make so much of today? This considerable concern about death, which Dickens repeatedly puts to dramatic use, may be seen as well in the remarkable role assigned to food and drink in this and other Christmas-season tales by Dickens. The virtue of liberality is endorsed—but at the cost of at least the virtue of temperance—so much so that Dickens' accounts do remain the most exuberant accounts of what Christmas feasting should be like.

Does not glorying in food and drink assert, in a way, that one is really alive? May it not be for many, and perhaps even for Dickens himself, an effort to repress the terrors of death?

There may be, in short, something corrosive and perhaps even corrupting in Dickens' attitude toward death.⁷

VIII

I have been touching upon the question of what Dickens considers a truly good man. Virtues such as temperance sometimes seem to be sacrificed by him to the fellow feeling evident in an enthusiastic liberality.

One should pose the question of the status for Dickens of still another virtue, that of justice—and this naturally leads, in turn, to the question of what Dickens considers a good community, another question which we can do no more than touch upon.

One effect of Scrooge's self-centered avarice, it can be argued, is that he does accumulate the wealth required for effective charity. It can also be argued that the thriftiness practiced by Scrooge is desirable, if not even necessary, if there is to be available as well the capital required for steady industrial development and thereby a systematic alleviation of old-fashioned poverty.

Scrooge does have (before his conversion) that ability which many of the poor, it seems, simply do not have, the ability to defer gratification of ordinary desires. "[D]arkness is cheap, and Scrooge liked it" (*C.C.*, p. 55). "External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge" (*C.C.*, p. 46). He can live a simple life and be satisfied with it—or, at least, be reconciled to it. He can be depended upon to live up to his bargains, to deliver what he promises to deliver, to pay what he promises to pay (*C.C.*, pp. 45, 133). He believes in minding his own business—and, it turns out, is open to reconsideration of what is truly one's business (*C.C.*, pp. 51, 62, 115).

Scrooge is, in his way, a reliable man—and we depend on the likes of him for the remarkably high standard of living to which we are accustomed. The unconverted Scrooge places an emphasis upon social reforms, upon political efforts, to deal (as efficiently as a sound economy permits) with the inevitable ills of modern industrial life (*C.C.*, pp. 51, 108-109). Dickens himself, if not also Scrooge after his conversion, seems to have been skeptical about the value of political endeavor. He may have come to political endeavor from too low a level to appreciate its genuine scope (*C.C.*, p. 49). He much preferred, in dealing with problems of the day, to rely upon personal influence. (This may help account for the dependence of Dickens' stories upon remarkable coincidences to make things work out right.)

To say as we often do that commercial industrialization may be

the most efficient way to organize the economic exploitation of natural and human resources is not to say that the character of many of the people caught up in such an impersonal enterprise may not be stunted. Such a life easily degenerates into a frantic pursuit of private pleasures, into a more and more desperate concern about one's self. Dickens' remarkably popular melodrama about Ebenezer Scrooge, a modern-day Faust of the marketplace, can provide a salutary corrective.

Among the salutary efforts made by Dickens are his repeated endorsements of festivals, particularly Christmas, which prompt men to commune from time to time with their "fellow-passengers to the grave," to establish a humanizing contact with others in a highly mobile society which ordinarily tends toward anonymous isolation. Dickens made a great deal of festivals associated with family life, however, perhaps inadvertently reinforcing thereby the tendency of modern life to make too much of our private lives (and hence of death?). That is, the festivals he promotes are not primarily patriotic occasions.

Even so, Dickens does condemn self-centeredness. The self-centered are characterized by a lack of grace and of graciousness. They are too much concerned with themselves, especially with what they take to be their preservation, to be really open to or to care for others. *A Christmas Carol* should promote among a commercial people good-natured compassion and a useful cheerfulness—and may help guard against that patriotism which degenerates into a ruthless, death-defying nationalism.

IX

Its graphic descriptions of London and of English life in the middle of the nineteenth century no doubt contribute to the enduring charm of *A Christmas Carol*. So does the simple fact that Dickens *can* write. Besides, his heart is, as we say, in the right place as he appeals to children and to the childlike in us.

That Dickens can really write is suggested, as we saw at the outset of these remarks, by the high praise he has again and again received during the past century. I return to the comparison of Dickens with Aeschylus and Shakespeare provided us (providentially enough) by a classical scholar.

The best known stories of redemption and rehabilitation by Aeschylus and Shakespeare may well be *The Oresteia* and *The Tempest*. In both of these tales redemption can be understood to depend ultimately upon political (including divine) rearrangements, not upon family circumstances or personal inclinations. In Dickens' stories, on the other hand, virtues, misconduct and remedies are of a tamer, or more domestic, variety.

The move, then, from Aeschylus and Shakespeare to authors such as Dickens may reflect a shift from political concerns to private, from a concern with justice to a concern with personal salvation. One finds that the petty and the common often do interest moderns more than the grandiose and the noble.

Are we to understand that the deep-rooted concerns of, say, *The Oresteia* have been taken care of, once and for all, so much so that we can safely devote ourselves to promoting benevolence and charity? Or have those once all-consuming concerns merely been concealed from view, only to erupt in ever more destructive forms from time to time because they have not been properly tended to by moderns dedicated to a determined pursuit of private happiness?

Dickens is more sentimental, and otherwise more limited, than Aeschylus and Shakespeare were—or were permitted by their more discerning publics to become. Yet, cannot much be said *among us* for the generous festival of Christmas as Dickens fostered it? If that is the case, we should not permit “unhallowed hands” (C.C., p. 45) to mishandle the salutary parable he has endowed us with.

¹See Eric T. Owen, *The Harmony of Aeschylus* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1952), p. 102; *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia* (15th ed.), vol. 5, p. 706.

See, also, Edmund Wilson, “Dickens: The Two Scrooges,” in *The Wound and the Bow* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1941); George Orwell, “Charles Dickens,” in *Inside the Whale, a Book of Essays* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1940).

²Citations to *A Christmas Carol* are designated “C.C.” and are keyed to Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Books* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), vol. I.

There has become available to me, since this essay was prepared, *The Annotated Christmas Carol*, edited by Michael Patrick Hearn (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1976), a useful reference work for readers of *A Christmas Carol*. See e.g. p. 64, on the number seven.

³See, on how to read a book, Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (New York: Free

Press of Glencoe, 1963); Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1965). See note 7, below. An entertaining, as well as instructive, application of this approach to "literary" texts may be seen in Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

See, for citations to readings of literary texts by various scholars influenced by Mr. Strauss, *A Contemporary Bibliography in Political Philosophy and in Other Areas* (1976), ed Harvey Lomax (4215 Glenaire Drive, Dallas, Texas 75229).

⁴A more obvious use by Dickens of a dream may be seen in his next story of the Christmas Season, *The Chimes*. *The Christmas Books*, vol. I, p. 149. (One can be reminded by the way "went to bed" may have been used in *A Christmas Carol*, of the two accounts of Creation in *Genesis*. See also, Hilail Gildin, "Revolution and the Formation of Political Society in the *Social Contract*," *5 Interpretation* 247 at 248 [1976].)

See, for suggestions about how dreams "work" in the Lewis Carroll stories, Anastaplo, "On Art, Calculation and Dreams: Lewis Carroll, C. L. Dodgson and their Alices," 68 *University of Chicago Magazine* (Winter 1975), p. 26. It is instructive to notice how solidly grounded *A Christmas Carol* is in nature—in the nature of dreams or at least a dreamlike recollection, in the nature of certain vices, and perhaps even in the "nature" of Providence. This grounding assures us that the story is deeply realistic, not mere "fancy," and hence something worthy of serious study. Thus, Scrooge can sense ("I know it, but I know not how.") when the final episode with the Ghosts is drawing to a close. (C.C., p. 123) That is, what happens to him is not arbitrary but rather complete and purposeful. (Scrooge had heard stories about the ways of ghosts. [C.C., p. 57])

See, for indicated interpretations of various literary texts which provide a background for my reading of *A Christmas Carol*, Anastaplo, *The Constitutionalist: Notes on the First Amendment* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1971), pp. 651, 798-99 (*Antigone*), 30-32, 436-38, 651, 687, 725, 772 (*Hamlet*), 278-81, 552-53, 690, 791-92, 807-08 (*Iliad*), 790-91 (*King Lear*), 581, 707-08, 817 (item 1) (*Little Orphan Annie et al.*), 439, 503, 793 (*Nathan the Wise*), 278-81, 546, 552-53, 612, 690, 719-20, 791-92, 797 (*Odyssey*), 642, 783, 798-99 (*Oedipus*), 510, 779, 787 (*Remembrance of Things Past*). (Corrections for *The Constitutionalist* may be found in L.P. deAlvarez, ed., *Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address and American Constitutionalism* [Irving, Texas: University of Dallas Press, 1976], pp. 130-32. In *The Constitutionalist*, as in my other publications, "cf." means "compare" and points to a qualification of or something different from what has just been said or cited.)

⁵Scrooge had been told by Marley (*Prodomos?*) that he would be subjected to three nights of visitations. (C.C., p. 63) But all three visits were accomplished in one night. (C.C., p. 128) This can be considered a Trinitarian element in a Christmas story in which explicit religious references are (in a rationalistic age) prudently muted (as can be seen even in how far the boy is permitted to go in singing his carol [C.C., p. 53]). See C.C., pp. 49, 56, 65, 87, 91, 94, 104, 120, 131. See, for the Trinity in still another form, Harry V. Jaffa, *The Conditions of*

Freedom: Essays in Political Philosophy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1975), p. 153.

Scrooge, as he looks ahead, carries the carol sung by the boy through to its "logical" conclusion: When he dies in Christmas Yet to Come, it is said by one of his business acquaintances, "Old Scratch [i.e., Satan] has got his own at last, hey?" (C.C., p. 112) This tends to confirm the grim alternative indicated in the lines subsequent to those sung by the boy:

Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born on Christmas Day,
To save poor souls from Satan's power
Which had long time gone astray . . .

Oxford Book of Carols (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 25.

Be that as it may, fragments of the Christmas Eve conversations in Scrooge's counting-house are worked into his nightlong recapitulation of his life. Various episodes in that recapitulation either challenge positions Scrooge has taken or illustrate what has been said to him by others. Scrooge himself comes to realize that even seemingly trivial details serve his Ghosts' purpose. (C.C., p. 113)

Consider the use of "blessing" in the epigraph to this essay taken from *Macbeth*. (Also muted, if readers are not to be permanently put "out of humour" with their comic hero, is the ugly evil that an unrepentant Scrooge was capable of. [C.C., pp. 41, 110-20])

⁶Had the inspired Dickens realized the extent to which Scrooge's experiences took the form of a dream, he might have left us more clues toward the solution of such puzzles as how Scrooge knew (if merely dreaming) about Topper and "the plump sister in the lace tucker" at his nephew's house on Christmas Day. (C.C., pp. 103, 105) See Plato, *Apology* 22B-C.

It should be noticed, in considering this and other anomalies, that the printed editions (as well as Dickens' original manuscript) do happen to show an extra space before the final two paragraphs of *A Christmas Carol* (and nowhere else in the book). (C.C., p. 133) Perhaps we should entertain the possibility that the dream continues almost to the very end of the book. (It is not unusual to have a dreamer dream that he wakes up.) Thus, the ingenious Scrooge *can* be understood to have extended his dream to include his immediate acts of reformation, permitting him to provide the Cratchits a huge turkey for their Christmas dinner, to run into the charitable solicitor, to visit his nephew (where he can meet the guests earlier conjured up by him), and to "have" Cratchit come in eighteen and a half minutes late to work (something highly unlikely for the clerk to do?) on the day after the Christmas holiday.

However all this may be, the final two paragraphs of the book do assure us that Scrooge has been permanently reformed by his experience of this fateful Christmas Eve. What more should be expected? That the nephew's prospective child, if a boy, should be named Ebenezer? And that Scrooge will have "the satisfaction of thinking . . . that he [will] benefit [his nephew's family] with

[his wealth]”? (C.C., pp. 49, 102-03, 112. See, also, Plato, *Republic* 328C-D, 331D.)

Is not the reformation of Scrooge effected more by his pained realization of what is happening to him than by a selfless dedication to virtue for its own sake? Compare Plato, *Republic* 588E-589C, 591A-E, 619B-D. Does not death remain for Scrooge, as for Dickens himself, too great a concern? See note 7, below.

⁷Modern men have allowed themselves to act as if they have discovered death. One need only compare the attitude toward the prospect of death in Tolstoy's popular *Ivan Ilytch* to that in Homer's *Iliad* or to that in Plutarch's *Lives* (to say nothing of that in Plato's *Phaedo*) to realize our decline. Compare Plato, *Republic* 386C, 516D-C; *The Constitutionalist*, pp. 278-81.

Or is it that we are to believe that we have somehow become more sensitive than our predecessors to the “situation” of man in the universe? What we certainly do have, I am afraid, is considerably more anxiety than they—as well as considerable hostility toward those who are not anxious or who are otherwise superior. See, on Martin Heidegger, *ibid.*, p. 815. “Anxiety” reflects and reinforces self-centeredness. (Self-centeredness [with its relativistic tendencies] can be seen in the contemporary preference for “authentic” over the old-fashioned “good” or “substance” or “true.”)

See, on death, the funeral talk (for Jason Aronson) by Leo Strauss, reproduced in Anastaplo, “On Leo Strauss: A Yearzeit Remembrance,” 67 *University of Chicago Magazine* (Winter 1974), pp. 30, 38. See, also, the essays on death, on the *Apology*, on natural right, on the *Crito* and on Mr. Klein's *Meno* in Anastaplo, *Human Being and Citizen: Essays on Virtue, Freedom and the Common Good* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975). See, as well, the discussion of Edwin Muir's “The Animals” in Anastaplo, “The Public Interest in Privacy: On Becoming and Being Human,” 26 *DePaul Law Review*, No. 4 (Summer 1977); W.B. Yeats's “Death,” On Mr. Klein's *Meno*, see note 3, above.

See, on avarice, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, p. 1122; Plato, *Phaedo* 66C-D, 68B-C. Compare the *Andy Capp* comic strip for June 15, 1977: the importunate hero observes, in response to his long-suffering wife's reminder that “money can't buy 'appinness,” “True, pet, true—but it 'elps you to look for it in a lot more places.” Compare, also, Plato *Republic* 591E. (One is reminded of the role assigned by Aristotle to “equipment” in the happy life.)

One is induced to wonder whether any villain in a Dickens story eats well. (C.C., pp. 86, 90, 93, 94-96) In any event, Scrooge is shown that he will die *thoroughly* if he continues to pursue the course he has chosen. (C.C., pp. 111, 115, 126) “Good deeds,” on the other hand, imply “life immortal”? (C.C., p. 118)