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The Ceremony of Innocence: Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty . . .
Hamlet 1.iv

I

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to get into a serious discussion of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* without sooner or later having to confront "the Scrooge problem." Edmund Wilson stated that problem succinctly and dramatically in his well-known essay "The Two Scrooges" when he wrote:

Shall we ask what Scrooge would actually be like if we were to follow him beyond the frame of the story? Unquestionably, he would relapse, when the merriment was over—if not while it was still going on—into moroseness, vindictiveness, suspicion. He would, that is to say, reveal himself as the victim of a manic-depressive cycle, and a very uncomfortable person.¹

Other critics have made much the same point about Scrooge. Humphry House, for example, remarked about the old man's conversion that it seems to be complete at a stroke, his actions after it uniform. There is no hint of his needing at intervals to recruit his strength for the new part he has to play; there are implied no periods of restlessness or dependency.²

Biographer Edgar Johnson, briefly summarizing this critical approach to *A Christmas Carol*, added his own speculation about how such an attitude might have developed. "There have been readers," Johnson wrote,

who objected to Scrooge's conversion as too sudden and radical to be psychologically convincing. But this is to mistake a semi-serious fantasy for a piece of prosaic realism.³

And as recently as 1972, Scrooge was still being discussed in the same terms. The personality transformation in *A Christmas Carol*, Joseph Gold remarks in *Charles Dickens: Radical Moralist*,

is not much more than magical or symbolic. Indeed, by writing a fairy or ghost story, Dickens deliberately avoids dealing with the question of psychological or spiritual growth.⁴

The Scrooge problem, as defined by these four statements, appears to be one of credibility. It is true that even the severest critic of *A Christmas Carol* is likely, thanks to Dickens' skill as a dramatist and manipulator of language, to find himself moved and almost convinced by Scrooge's change of heart.⁵ Speaking purely from the point of view of the laws of weights and measures that govern esthetics, sufficient emotional intensity is generated by the visits of the three Christmas Spirits to justify, at least within the terms of the work itself, the old man's conversion at the end, and to cause us temporarily to suspend our disbelief in the reality of that conversion. I say "almost convinced," however, because often there is a measure of discontent in even the most positive emotional response of the serious reader to this book. It is a discontent arising from the obvious disparity between the way in which moral and psychological mechanisms operate in the story and the way in which they seem to the reader to work in the "real world," a discontent focusing, as the quoted passages suggest, on the unconvincing ease and apparent permanence of Scrooge's reformation.

The critical reader knows, that is, that men who spend whole lifetimes in miserable offices and lonely rooms, bullying their clerks, grinding the faces of the poor, reveling in misanthropy, do not turn overnight into decent, generous people, touched only in their own best interests by the past, and dedicated to the good of their fellowmen. To admit the possibility of such a thing is to appear to deny all that life teaches in favor of sentimental wishful thinking. Thus, the more deeply a serious reader finds himself moved by *A Christmas Carol*, the more likely he is to feel afterward that

he has been betrayed both by the author and by his own worst instincts,⁶ and the more eager he will be, in the face of what seems to be Dickens' moral and/or psychological dishonesty, to seize upon the hardheaded Wilsonian prognosis in the Scrooge case as the real truth of the matter. Nor does calling the book a fantasy or a fairy tale, as Johnson and Gold do, solve the problem raised by these critical objections. For while it is true that an author may deliberately employ fairy-tale elements in an otherwise realistic fiction in order to take advantage of the mythic resonance of such material,⁷ Dickens' use of fantasy in *A Christmas Carol*, in the view of Johnson and Gold, renders the story not more intense and significant but less so; makes of it, to use a phrase F. R. Leavis once applied to Dickens' fictional achievement as a whole, the sort of work in which "the adult mind doesn't as a rule find . . . a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness."⁸

What such seriousness in literature amounts to may be gathered from another of the passages in Wilson's essay. In it, the critic writes that

the real beginnings of a psychological interest [in Dickens' books] may be said to appear in *Hard Times*, which, though parts of it have the crudity of a cartoon, is the first novel in which Dickens tries to trace, with any degree of plausibility, the processes by which people become what they are. (p. 54)

It is important to understand the ideas about life and fiction implicit in this statement. Among the key words in the passage are "plausibility" and "processes," both terms that suggest the intensely rationalistic bias of such criticism; suggest, that is, the critic's assumption that life consists, for the most part, of events serially and even causally linked; that human beings are products—accretions, really—of such events, developing inexorably toward ends ever more remote from their beginnings; and that fiction ought to be the more or less literal record of that development—social, moral, and psychological—through time and experience. If these "serious" ideas do indeed form the basis of Wilson's esthetic of fiction, it is no wonder that even *Hard Times*, singled out by him (as it also is by Leavis) for praise, is nevertheless conceded to display, in part, the crudity of a cartoon. For whatever Dickens' greatness may consist of, it is not principally a function of his "plausibility," at least in Wilson's sense of the term, or of any genius of his for making quasi-

scientific examinations of psychological processes.⁹

Naturally, social, moral, and psychological matters all play their parts—often brilliantly—in Dickens' stories, as they would have to do in the work of any first-rate novelist. But it is quite true that in such terms the story of Scrooge does not (and cannot) really satisfy. In the "real" world defined by these terms, men do not recover easily, if at all, from years of isolation, wickedness, and paranoia. Human beings are not infinitely resilient; flesh and spirit wear out; a point is inevitably reached where no restoration can be looked for. It is, then, by defying realistic, "adult" expectations, Wilson and the others would say, that Dickens damages the credibility of *A Christmas Carol*.

But to emphasize unduly the absence of such "realistic" elements from the story is to distort a work that is in fact constructed along very different lines. One clue to what those lines may be lies in the often repeated observation that Dickens' characters tend to define themselves, and to present themselves to the reader, not so much through their developing relationships with other characters as through their continually ramifying expositions of self. They are all, this argument goes, monologists in one way or another, and Dickens is therefore to be seen as an author much more interested in what his characters "are" than in what they are "in the process of becoming"; much more devoted, in other words, to the vivid presentation of their already accomplished selves than to analysis of their developing natures.¹⁰

The problem most readers have with the Dickens of *A Christmas Carol*, then, is that their rationalistic presuppositions about life and fiction are at odds with their own best insights into the author's actual antirationalistic accomplishment. Could these readers only trust their insights more, they would have less difficulty in accepting Scrooge's reformation as credible and as fully justifying the emotional response it evokes from them. For Dickens is concerned, in *A Christmas Carol*, not so much with those aspects of his protagonist that are subject to development, depletion, and decay—the proper concern, according to the critics I have quoted, of the serious novelist—as with those elements in Scrooge that are of the essence of a human being and that therefore do not change, elements that predate

all the moral, social, and psychological character mechanisms a man acquires through the process of living, and that are always there waiting to be rediscovered and reinvented when those mechanisms finally fail.

But if Dickens' interests in this book are not fundamentally moral or psychological, what are they? Albert Camus, writing about Dostoevsky, a novelist greatly influenced by Dickens, distinguished between two kinds of sensibilities in writers of fiction by suggesting that one sort of novelist thrives on "moral problems" and the other sort—like Dostoevsky—on "metaphysical problems."¹¹ And elsewhere, Frank Kermode has spoken of the "metaphysical despair"¹² that characterizes many of Dickens' stories. I would like to suggest that we adopt, for the time being, the notion of Dickens as primarily a metaphysical novelist, if only because this hypothesis will permit us to account for the extraordinary power of a tale like *A Christmas Carol* in the face of the story's obvious inadequacies when judged by the more traditional standards of plausibility and "realism." For if *A Christmas Carol* is at least a partial failure as the moral fable of a man expiating years of wickedness with a few hours of generosity, or as a social document about a world in which human obligations may be satisfactorily discharged with some random charitable gestures, or as a psychological case history of a "manic-depressive" temporarily reformed by Christmas sentimentality and self-pity, then it is most certainly a success as the metaphysical study of a human being's quest for, and rediscovery of, his own innocence.

This concept of metaphysical innocence in Dickens requires some explanation, for in his works the author also depicts many kinds of innocence that are not notably metaphysical: for example, the innocence, which is in fact a kind of stubborn and almost calculated naïveté, of Tom Pinch¹³ in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, or even of Mr. Pickwick; or the curious Victorian sexual innocence of Little Nell or Esther Summerson; or that most general and apparently self-evident of all innocence in fiction to which one critic alludes when he writes that "every central character must . . . be *relatively* innocent at the beginning of his book; that is, he must be more innocent early in the story than he is later."¹⁴ All these different innocences have, to make an obvious point, one

thing in common: they all can be lost; indeed, they all *ought* to be lost in a well-regulated life, and once they are lost they cannot be recovered. For they all represent the absence of something important and valuable—experience, maturity—and so cannot properly be recommended to us in and of themselves without an author running the risk of sentimentality. Moreover, they all exist within a framework of the everyday "real" world of observable phenomena in which human life is commonly experienced as a linear journey from youth to age and from innocence to experience, in which the world makes a progress through time in one direction only, without possibility of return, a progress through an essentially rational universe in which nothing is more unlikely than that, to use Keats's famous phrase, "a rose should shut, and be a bud again."

Metaphysical innocence is a very different matter. It is a positive, not a negative quality; a substantial presence rather than a mere vacancy. Moreover, it is a permanent characteristic of human life and so, unlike other kinds of innocence, can never be lost. To be sure, in many lives the gradual accumulation of worldly experience may have the effect of obscuring from a man his own metaphysical innocence, of making it appear to him that that innocence has vanished along with the more ephemeral innocences of which we have been speaking. But, in fact, metaphysical innocence is immutable, retaining its original strength behind the gathering clouds of experience;¹⁵ and it is therefore always potentially recoverable by the individual, always ready to be reintroduced by him into his consciousness of himself. From this definition of innocence comes a view of life as something other than a linear movement through events, a mechanical progress from blankness to surfeit in a world in which a man is invariably "more innocent early in his story than he is later in it." Instead, this definition urges us to see life as a cyclical journey, a journey setting out from the innocence that, paradoxically, is to be the goal, circling away from that innocence for the purpose of achieving, by way of contrast, a better view of it, and returning finally to the start, to where, as D. H. Lawrence puts it in his poem "Pomegranate," "the end cracks open with the beginning."

It is as difficult to define a concept like metaphysical innocence as it is to define the Christian concept of "grace," of which it is perhaps a

modern analogue. In both cases, one falls inevitably into the rhetoric of mysticism. Albert Camus, however, has succeeded admirably in putting the matter in relatively practical terms. Writing, again in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, about what he calls “absurd” man, Camus says:

At a certain point on his path the absurd man is tempted [to substitute faith for doubt]. History is not lacking either in religions or prophets, even without gods. He is asked to leap. All he can reply is that he doesn't fully understand, that it is not obvious. Indeed, he does not want to do anything but what he fully understands. He is assured that this is the sin of pride, but he does not understand that notion of sin; that perhaps hell is in store, but he has not enough imagination to visualize that strange future; that he is losing immortal life, but that seems to him an idle consideration. An attempt is made to get him to admit his guilt. *He feels innocent.* To tell the truth, that is all he feels—his irreparable innocence.¹⁶ (*italics mine*)

Readers will recognize in this passage a contemporary statement of the theme of the Book of Job, where also a man is urged, both by the horror of his condition and by the logic of his friends, to admit his guilt, but where, in spite of everything, he too insists upon his “irreparable innocence.” The key fact about all such protestations of innocence, it should be noted, is that they are profoundly antirational. In his book *Irrational Man*, William Barrett makes the point that whenever men insist on the limits of reason, they are taking an existentialist stand. But the reverse of this statement is also true. Wherever men are found taking an existentialist stand, asserting what Camus calls their “irreparable innocence,” they are insisting on the limits of reason. Interestingly, the Camus passage represents just such a quarrel between “reasonable man,” who believes in a world of causality where conclusions follow necessarily and logically from premises, and “absurd man,” who rejects such mechanical rationalism as a basis for human life. Job's comforters are also apostles of such a rationalism. Beginning with the premise that God is just, they conclude, logically, from the fact that Job is suffering, that he is guilty and deserves to suffer. Job, on the other hand, noting his own persistent sense of guiltlessness in the face of calamitous punishment, recognizes the radical discontinuity in the universe between a man's deeds and his fate. The moment he makes this discovery, the

moment he accepts the fact that he can suffer *as if he were guilty* and still be innocent, he is freed from the burdensome rationality of his friends, from their curiously corrupting sense of justice which omits a man's own experience of himself from its moral equation,¹⁷ freed to be the final judge of his own worthiness and so to come again into his old legacy of wholeness and health, that original innocence from which his cyclical journey began.

The extraordinary parallels between the Book of Job and *A Christmas Carol* make it tempting to cast all the readers who have ever deplored the unreasonableness of Scrooge's conversion in the roles of Job's comforters. For the restoration of Scrooge's innocence at the end of his story, like the restoration of Job's prosperity at the end of his ordeal, seems to declare that a rose can indeed shut and be a bud again, and this is an idea no rational critic can countenance. But it is precisely this subversive, antirational point that Dickens is determined to make in his story, a story whose success is attested to by the very uneasiness with which so many readers confront their favorable responses to it.

II

Though we never see Scrooge at the very beginning of his life, we may reasonably assume that, since he is a human being, he too, like all other human beings, experienced in his earliest days that infant sense, celebrated by Wordsworth in the “Immortality Ode,” of his absolute continuity with the rest of the universe, his identity with everything around him.¹⁸ Tennyson makes this same point when he writes, in *In Memoriam*, of how

The baby new to earth and sky
What time his tender palm is prest
Against the circle of the breast,
Has never thought that “this is I”

Tennyson, like Wordsworth, is speaking of that phenomenological sense of wholeness in the earliest moments of life, that inability to distinguish between what is the self and what is not the self which Freud calls the “oceanic” effect and which is implicit in nearly every “myth of the beginning,” not least in the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden.

In the beginning, Adam is *in* the Garden, but

just as important, he is *of* the Garden, literally of its clay, and figuratively of its essence. This is the crucial point. In the profoundest sense, Adam and the Garden are coextensive. The environment that sustains the man belongs to him in exactly the way in which his body belongs to him. He need not earn his living; he need take no action to prove that he is worthy of life. He is whole—that is, healthy—in his at-oneness, and indeed, Adam's innocence in the Garden may be seen principally as a function of that wholeness. It is a function, too, of the timelessness of the Garden; for there is no death in Eden, and without death there is no direction in which time can flow. Thus Adam's innocence, like the innocence of the infant described by Wordsworth—and by extension like the innocence of Scrooge in his infancy—is an innocence of eternity and omnipresence, an innocence of perfect metaphysical health.

It is Adam's fate—man's fate—to lose that health. Specifically, Adam's "sin" is to act upon his discovery that there is a difference between his own will and the will of everything that is not himself, this latter will being called "God" in the story. His punishment is to have to live for the rest of his life with the knowledge of that difference, and his famous fall is therefore a fall out of eternity into time and out of omnipresence into the limited confines of self. The moment time appears in the world, the possibility of endings—of death—also appears. From that moment, man is committed to the process that characterizes the world of reality, the irreversible journey from birth to death. He is also burdened, through becoming aware of the difference between himself and everything else, with the curse of self-consciousness which Matthew Arnold, for one, saw as the particular plague of the post-Renaissance world ("The dialogue of the soul with itself has begun"),¹⁹ but which Thomas Carlyle perhaps more aptly characterized as the congenital disease of men in all ages ("Here as before, the sign of health is Unconsciousness").²⁰

Thrust out of Eden, the symbol of his old innocence, Adam also falls from grace. He is no longer, as he was before, *entitled* to life. Everything that was once his through the mere fact of his existence he must now struggle to regain. His universe is now a universe of causality in which, if he does not labor, he does not eat; a universe in which everything once lovingly given must now

be meanly purchased. It is also, for the first time, a world of rationality and therefore of guilt, for there is no great difference between the idea that if Adam is hungry, it must be because he has not worked, and the idea that if Job is suffering, it must be because he has sinned.

When we first see Ebenezer Scrooge as a young man, he too has fallen from grace, his paradise already lost. (The story only hints at the occasion of the fall, though it does so in terms that emphasize the Edenic nature of the event. "Father is so much kinder than he used to be," says Scrooge's sister, urging the boy to return to the family, "that home's like heaven.") Under the aegis of the Spirit of Christmas Past, the old miser sees himself as a young boy seated alone in an empty school-room, rejected by his companions, reading stories about Ali Baba, and Robinson Crusoe, and the Sultan's Groom turned upside down by the Genii. The images all confirm the postlapsarian nature of the scene. The boy is alone, driven from his own world, shades of the prison house of self already falling about him.²¹ He sits in an empty school-room, empty not just because the others have left, but empty metaphorically as well, for it is not through any logic of the school that Scrooge's old health will be regained. Rather, that logic is itself the disease, though he does not yet know it.

In his loneliness, the young Scrooge tries to recapture, through the exercise of his imagination, which is a form of memory, the lost state of grace, his books the vehicles of that magical return. Ali Baba, the fabulous Arab who comes into his rich legacy through the mere pronouncement of a magic word, is a particularly poignant symbol of Scrooge's own desire. Robinson Crusoe, on the other hand, forecasts more realistically the young man's future, representing as he does the triumph of bourgeois enterprise, the achievement of material success after a lifetime of lonely labor on a desert island. And it is Scrooge himself, the old man, faithful Groom of his great Sultan, Money, who in the end will be turned upside down by the Genii of the Spirit of Christmas.

Soon enough, Scrooge decides that books are no answer to his problem; indeed, they only exacerbate it. When one has lost something precious, it seems clear to the young man, one must labor to get it back. Magic and nostalgia will not restore it, only hard work will even begin to recover the lost legacy, as Adam was the first to

find out. Scrooge, too, learns this lesson and plunges early into a life of acquisition, as if by accumulating one by one all the elements of his lost paradise, he could reconstruct it whole one day and live in it again. This is the rationale of his miserliness, a miserliness that we must therefore see not as a sign of his depravity but rather as an indication of how passionate is his desire to recover his lost innocence.

His commitment to a life of accumulation, to the typical Victorian metaphysic of rational materialism, becomes final in the scene in which a somewhat older Scrooge, still in the prime of life but with signs of "care and avarice" already in his face, breaks painfully with his fiancée. Actually, it is she who breaks with him, bringing out into the open a truth which for years both have recognized in silence: that any passion the young man may once have had for her has long since been supplanted by the passion for gain. Given Scrooge's fate, this is necessarily so. For having won the girl, he cannot be satisfied with her, since she represents only a part of what he lost when he lost his "oceanic" innocence, and he cannot rest until he has recovered it all. In "Ulysses," Tennyson seemingly makes a virtue of this insatiable longing for wholeness, but where Tennyson was writing, at least in part, about the triumph of post-Renaissance, Faustian man, Dickens was writing about his tragedy.

The girl tells Scrooge that he has changed ("When [our contract] was made," she says, "you were another man"). Her statement defines Scrooge's fallen condition. There is no change in Eden, but in the world men change day by day, all their days linked to one another logically and causally until they forge the heavy chain that weighs down the ghost of Jacob Marley—who continues to exist in time even after his death—and that in the end sinks everyone implicated in its logic. Scrooge acquiesces wholeheartedly in his enchainment, imagining, curiously, that with the addition of each new link he is moving closer to his old freedom and health. This belief is the clue to all his behavior: his miserliness, his insistence upon punctuality, his terror of losing even one day of work at Christmas, his treatment of the men who come to ask for charity. This latter scene is very important in any analysis of the story. Everyone recalls Scrooge's famous reply to the request for alms for the poor: "Are there no

prisons? Are there no workhouses?" For Scrooge, prisons and workhouses, the machinery that a rational society has constructed to deal with the problem of the poor, are consonant with his own rational commitment to life. Charity, on the other hand, is entirely subversive of that commitment, destroying the crucial connection between cause and effect, suggesting that a man has a right to live even if he has not earned that right and can offer no logical proof that he deserves it. To do him justice, Scrooge applies the same hard standards to himself. When it is he who is being offered the charity of his nephew's affection, he rejects such unearned love as peremptorily as he refuses to give it to others. For, monomaniacally, Scrooge keeps his eye always on his one great goal, to get back to his first home, a goal he long ago decided could be reached only as other, more worldly goals are reached—by logically calculating the shortest road to it and then by walking down that road one logical step at a time.

That this strategy is radically mistaken is the whole point of the story; that such a rational road as Scrooge travels leads only away from his old home and toward death is Dickens' Christmas lesson. It is a lesson that has been taught many times before—in the story of the Tower of Babel, for example. The men who attempted to build a tower to God were not guilty of that "sin of pride" of which Camus is so contemptuous. Their impulse was understandable and even legitimate, very much like Scrooge's. They sought only to get back home and recover lost innocence, which they quite properly associated with God. But their strategy was wrong. They supposed that they could get to heaven by putting one brick on top of another, that they could reach infinity through finite means, that they could communicate with eternity in the language of time. Thus, the confusion of tongues, which the Bible says *followed* the attempt to build the tower, in fact preceded it.

Scrooge's problem too is one of a confusion of tongues. He too tries to reach infinity through finite means, to recover wholeness by collecting parts, to arrive at eternity by moving through time. He believes that the world of material reality is the only reality there is, and therefore, along with so many of his fellow post-Renaissance men, supposes that if anything important is to be accomplished, it must be accomplished in terms of

that material reality—by manipulating it, cataloging it, buying and selling it—and by applying the rational laws which the study of that material reality discovers. And, significantly, no one is more thoroughly taken in by this idea than the reader of *A Christmas Carol*. For Dickens' great triumph as an artist in this tale is to get us to see Scrooge's mistake in the story by causing us first to *make* that mistake ourselves.

We mistakenly suppose, for example, that Scrooge is an old man. It is a natural enough mistake, one to which Hamlet, for example, calls attention when he tells Polonius of how

the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum.

When we see a man with such infirmities, slow of movement and set in his ways, we naturally call him old. He has lived many years since his birth, and the chance of his returning to the innocence of those old days seems remote indeed. Even more remote, we would suppose, is the chance of his changing his long-established ways. After the merriment of his nephew's house—even during it—Scrooge will surely sink back into “moroseness, vindictiveness, suspicion.” This is what can realistically be expected of such an old man.

But to analyze the story in these terms is to accept the very principles of rational materialism which it is the purpose of the story to undermine. For Scrooge is not in fact an old man; it is only a satirical rogue who would say so. With the exception of the events in the brief prologue and epilogue, the whole of his life is actually lived in the course of one night; if he is of any age at all, he is barely half-a-dozen hours old. Chronology, in short, is an illusion, the story tells us, one of the illusions man suffers from when he falls out of eternity into time. But time, which is therefore the enemy, can be defeated by a phenomenological insight into the simultaneity of all experience; defeated as Scrooge himself defeats it when, immediately upon awakening from his dream, he cries out, “I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future! The spirits of all Three shall strive within me.”²² In truth, of course, he has always lived simultaneously in the past, the present, and the future, as all men do. It is only the immediacy, the insistence of material reality, Dickens tells us, that distracts men from the greater reality of their

inner lives. Marley's chains, could he have but known it, were only “mind-forged manacles” after all.

That the past, present, and future exist in an eternal present is made clear in a number of other ways in the story. Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come, for example, exist simultaneously between the stroke of midnight and the stroke of one. Again, one of Dickens' favorite devices, appearing memorably, for example, in *Dombey and Son*, is the use of a child and an adult together in a story to represent the same character at different stages of his life, but with the two existing—as if to underscore the metaphysical point of the story—simultaneously. Tiny Tim and Scrooge have that kind of a relationship in *A Christmas Carol*, the rejected child of Scrooge's memory of himself being actualized in the crippled boy with whom, through Bob Cratchit, the old miser has an inescapable rapport. It is, for example, in the vision of the future in which Scrooge sees his own grave that Tiny Tim is also dead. In the alternate future, on the other hand, in which Scrooge reforms, Tiny Tim is cured and flourishes. The boy whom Scrooge sends for the turkey on Christmas morning participates in this same symbolism. The boy's nimbleness presages the coming nimbleness of Tiny Tim, and Scrooge's complimentary references to him as “a remarkable boy, a delightful boy,” apply at least as much to himself, in his new-found youthfulness, as to the young turkey-bearer. “I'm quite a baby,” Scrooge cries. “Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby.”²³

This is not mere giddiness on Scrooge's part, likely to vanish when the manic phase gives way to the depressive. It is, rather, a very precise statement of the man's most persistent ambition. His whole life has been a quest for the lost innocence, the lost wholeness of his infancy. He has always, in one sense, wanted to be a baby, but time has kept defeating him, bearing him further and further from his goal as long as he believed in its power. The moment, however, that Scrooge decides to live simultaneously in the past, present, and future, time loses all its terrors for him and all its power over him. He is no longer borne ruthlessly away by it in one direction only. As the master of time now, he can move freely through it in any direction. He can *be* a baby because he *is* a baby, as much as he is a man of any other age.

The experience, we know, is a common one; no one, whatever his years, ever quite loses a sense of himself as the child he once was. One recalls Rostov in *War and Peace* lying wounded on the battlefield, hearing the French soldiers approaching to finish him off, and finding it genuinely astonishing that they should be coming to kill him, the good child, whom his father and mother love.

It is from this universal sense of eternal childhood and "irreparable innocence" that Scrooge's change of heart derives its conviction. We must not let ourselves be embarrassed into questioning the durability of that change, on a metaphysical level, by psychoanalytic critics who are still trapped in a rationalism that both Scrooge and Dickens have been at such pains to overcome. The burden of the psychoanalytic argument is that Scrooge has been a hardened old man so long that no real change in him is possible. But if we agree with Wordsworth, as well as with Dickens, that "the Child is father of the Man," then in fact Scrooge has been a child much longer than he has been a person of any other age, and we can trust him not to ignore again his most venerable self.

That venerable child now shows Scrooge the way home he has been seeking. During the visit of the Spirit of Christmas Past, the old man is brought to recall a day when his life at school was interrupted by the sudden arrival of his sister.

A little girl, much younger than the boy, came darting in, and putting her arms about his neck, and often kissing him, addressed him as her "Dear, dear brother."

"I have come to bring you home, dear brother!" said the child, clapping her tiny hands, and bending down to laugh. "To bring you home, home, home!"

"Home, little Fan?" returned the boy.

"Yes," said the child, brimful of glee. "Home, for good and all. Home, forever and ever."

Years later the sister's son, Scrooge's nephew Fred, renews his mother's old offer of rescue. "Don't be angry, Uncle," the young man says, having dropped in on Scrooge at the office to wish him a Merry Christmas, and having received only grim lectures and repeated shouts of "Humbug!" in return. "Come, dine with us tomorrow."

As we have seen, it is impossible at this point for Scrooge to accept such a charitable invitation from his nephew. For to the old man, such unsolicited generosity, requiring nothing in return, is an anomaly in a material universe where every-

thing must be bought and paid for, and is thus a threat to the very order of his existence. That such an act of grace epitomizes the innocence whose loss Scrooge feels so keenly and toward the recovery of which his whole life of frenzied acquisitiveness has been directed is a fact he still has to learn; and had he been called upon, at this point, to define the home for which he was secretly yearning, he probably could have done no better than to reply, with Robert Frost's dour farmer in "The Death of the Hired Man," that

Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.

Only later, after the visits of the three Christmas Spirits, and after his literal rejuvenation, could Scrooge have understood the compassionate rejoinder of the farmer's wife:

I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve.

That very night, Scrooge appears hesitantly at the door of his nephew's house, still enough of a rationalist to wonder what he can expect at the hands of one from whom he deserves so little. Fred's gracious welcome dispels all doubt. The answer had been there for the taking all along, even as early as the sister's invitation to come "Home for good and all. Home, forever and ever," but it had been necessary for Scrooge to make his cyclical journey. Now, with time once more his servant rather than his master, and with everything of value already his without his asking, he returns to the state of metaphysical innocence from which he started, and his history comes to an end.

Robert Louis Stevenson, in his short story "Markheim," reproduces, without beginning to equal the power of *A Christmas Carol*, the basic philosophical structure of Dickens' tale.²⁴ Markheim, who, with the best intentions in the world, sinks lower and lower in life until he is reduced to murder, meets the devil, who offers to save him from the consequences of his act for the usual price of his soul. When Markheim hesitates, indicating that even at his lowest he still cherishes a hope of redemption, the devil mocks his faith. Man, the devil points out, like any other physical object in the universe, must follow natural laws, and since Markheim's course has always been downward, there is no rational basis for expecting a change. To this, Markheim replies with a fine

statement—later supported by a penitent act—of what I have been speaking of as that meta-physical innocence in man which can be obscured but never destroyed by the accumulation of worldly experience, and which is, as I have suggested, the theme of *A Christmas Carol*:

My life is but a travesty and slander on myself [says Markheim]. I have lived to belie my nature. All men do; all men are better than this disguise which grows about and stifles them. You see each dragged away by

life, like one whom bravos have seized and muffled in a cloak. If they had their own control—if you could see their faces—they would be altogether different, they would shine out for heroes and saints. I am worse than most; my self is more overlaid; my excuse is known to me and God. But had I the time, I could disclose myself.

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Notes

¹ *The Wound and the Bow* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 53.

² *The Dickens World* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1942), p. 53.

³ *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, 1 (New York: Little, Brown, 1952), 488.

⁴ *Charles Dickens: Radical Moralists* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1972), p. 147.

⁵ About Thomas Carlyle, e.g., it is reported that *A Christmas Carol* "so worked on [his] nervous organization that he has been seized with a perfect *convulsion* of hospitality, and has actually insisted on *improvising two* dinner parties with only a day between." Letter to Jeannie Welsh, 23 Dec. 1843, *Jane Welsh Carlyle: Letters to Her Family, 1839–1863* (London: J. Murray, 1924), p. 169.

⁶ John Lucas, in *The Melancholy Man* (London: Methuen, 1970), remarks that "we call [the Cratchit family scenes] sentimental because we do not like admitting how moved we are by the pressure of Dickens' writing" (p. 140).

⁷ A number of critics have suggested that Dickens does just this. See, e.g., Toby Olshin, "The Yellow Dwarf" and *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 25 (June 1970), 96–99; also Harry Stone, "Fire, Hand, and Gate: Dickens' *Great Expectations*," *Kenyon Review*, 24 (1962), 662–91.

⁸ *The Great Tradition* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 32. Leavis' almost Scrooge-like change of heart about Dickens is recorded in his *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970).

⁹ For further discussion of the idea of plausibility in Dickens' work, see George Ford's "The Poet and the Critics of Probability," in *Dickens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Price (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 58–67.

¹⁰ Barbara Hardy, e.g., writes that we can understand what happens to Dickens' characters "less by seeing what they have done than by seeing what they are." *The Moral Art of Dickens* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 55. And George Ford, distinguishing between "static" and "developing" characters and action in Dickens' fiction, observes that "foreground scenes, in which change occurs, are usually not so convincing as the more static background" (p. 64).

¹¹ *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays* (New York:

Knopf, 1955), p. 77.

¹² *Romantic Image* (New York: Random, 1964), p. 5.

¹³ Northrop Frye suggests that Dickens himself recognized Tom Pinch's innocence to be more "obsessive than genuine." See "Dickens and the Comedy of Humors," in *Experience in the Novel*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1968), p. 60.

¹⁴ Alan Friedman, *The Turn of the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 7.

¹⁵ D. H. Lawrence frequently makes this point, writing on one occasion that "while a man remains a man, a true human individual, there is at the core of him a certain innocence or naïveté which defies all analysis, and which you cannot bargain with, you can only deal with it in good faith from your own corresponding innocence or naïveté. This does not mean that the human being is nothing but naïve or innocent. He is Mr. Worldly-Wiseman also to his own degree. But in his essential core he is naïve, and money does not touch him" ("John Galsworthy," *Phoenix*, ed. Edward D. McDonald, London: Heinemann, 1936, pp. 540–41).

¹⁶ P. 39. In fact, Camus is here redefining, in phenomenological terms, something very like the Christian concept of grace, shifting the emphasis from God's initiation of the act to man's experience of it. Such a redefinition, Camus argues in effect, is necessary if the concept of grace is to continue to have meaning in an age that has rejected traditional theology. Dickens' position in *A Christmas Carol* is very much the same.

¹⁷ When Camus's absurd man, e.g., says that he "does not want to do anything but what he fully understands," he is assured by his logical tormentors that "this is the sin of pride."

¹⁸ Lionel Trilling, for one, discusses this matter at length in his essay "The Immortality Ode," collected in *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Doubleday, 1950).

¹⁹ "Preface to *Poems, 1853*." See also the self-consciousness that precipitated John Stuart Mill's soul crisis in Ch. v of the *Autobiography*.

²⁰ "Characteristics," *Critical & Miscellaneous Essays*, III (London: Chapman & Hall, 1899), p. 4.

²¹ In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens had already devoted a whole novel to a study of the vice of self. By the time of *A Christmas Carol*, however, the author's interest in this

subject had become much more clearly metaphysical than social or moral.

²² There has already been a foreshadowing of this solution earlier in the story. When Marley's ghost speaks of the three Spirits who will be appearing one after another, Scrooge replies, "Couldn't I take 'em all at once?"

²³ On this point Angus Wilson has written that "to be a child and to be a child again are not in Dickens' fiction quite the same thing—yet both, in their different ways, are the symbols of the spiritual life. . . . We may take St. Matthew's 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven' . . . and think of the saved Scrooge joining in the children's

games" ("Dickens on Children and Childhood," in *Dickens 1970*, ed. Michael Slater, New York: Stein & Day, 1970, p. 197).

²⁴ "I wonder if you have ever read Dickens' *Christmas Books*? . . . They are too much perhaps. I have only read two yet but I have cried my eyes out, and had a terrible fight not to sob. But oh, dear God, they are *good*—and I feel so good after them—I shall do good and lose no time—I want to go out and comfort someone—I shall give money. Oh, what a jolly thing it is for a man to have written books like these and just filled people's hearts with pity." Robert Louis Stevenson to an unidentified correspondent, quoted in the *Dickensian*, 16 (1920), 200.