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A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books

圣诞颂歌

Charles Dickens [英国] 查尔斯·狄更斯 著



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A CHRISTMAS CAROL AND OTHER CHRISTMAS BOOKS

CHARLES DICKENS was born in 1812 at Landport near Portsmouth, where his father was a clerk in a navy pay office. The family removed to London in 1816, and in 1817 to Chatham. It was here that the happiest years of Dickens's childhood were spent. They returned to London in 1822, but their fortunes were severely impaired. Dickens was withdrawn from school, and in 1824, sent to work in a blacking warehouse managed by a relative when his father was imprisoned for debt. Both experiences deeply affected the future novelist. Once his father's financial position improved, however, Dickens returned to school, leaving at the age of 15 to become in turn a solicitor's clerk, a shorthand reporter in the law courts, and a parliamentary reporter. In 1833 he began contributing stories to newspapers and magazines, later reprinted as *Sketches by Boz*, and in 1836 started the serial publication of *Pickwick Papers*. Before *Pickwick* had completed its run, Dickens, as editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, had also begun the serialization of *Oliver Twist* (1837–8). In April 1836 he married Catherine Hogarth, who bore him ten children between 1837 and 1852. Finding serial publication both congenial and profitable, Dickens published *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9) in monthly parts, and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1) and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) in weekly instalments. He visited America in 1842, publishing his observations as *American Notes* on his return and including an extensive American episode in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842–4). The first of the five Christmas Books, *A Christmas Carol*, appeared in 1843 and the travel-book, *Pictures from Italy*, in 1846. The carefully planned *Dombey and Son* was serialized in 1846–8, to be followed in 1849–50 by Dickens's 'favourite child', the semi-autobiographical *David Copperfield*. Then came *Bleak House* (1852–3), *Hard Times* (1854), and *Little Dorrit* (1855–7). Dickens edited and regularly contributed to the journals *Household Words* (1850–9) and *All the Year Round* (1859–70). A number of essays from the journals were later collected as *Reprinted Pieces* (1858) and *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1861). Dickens had acquired a country house, Gad's Hill near Rochester, in 1855 and he was separated from his wife in 1858. He returned to historical fiction in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and to the use of a first-person narrator in *Great Expectations* (1860–1), both of which were serialized in *All the Year Round*. The last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, was published in 1864–5. *Edwin Drood* was left unfinished at Dickens's death on 9 June 1870.

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INTRODUCTION

ON 2 January 1840, Dickens wrote to his printers, Bradbury and Evans, to thank them for their annual Christmas gift of a turkey. He chose his words with care:

My Dear Sirs,

I determined not to thank you for the Turkey until it was quite gone, in order that you might have a becoming idea of its astonishing capabilities.

The last remnant of that blessed bird made its appearance at breakfast yesterday—I repeat it, yesterday—the other portions having furnished forth seven grills, one boil, and a cold lunch or two . . .¹

It is a generous letter, fully in keeping with the generosity of the people he is addressing. Still, like many people who write to express their thanks for unexpected or unwanted Christmas gifts, it seems that Dickens could not resist poking gentle fun at the purchasers' taste, not least by hinting that sending him a turkey the size of a small child was perhaps being generous to a fault. Is there a note of reproach in 'My Dear Sirs'? There is certainly more than one sense in which a turkey that hangs around for a week might be thought of as 'that blessed bird', as is clear from Dickens's decision to pump up 'turkey' into 'Turkey', the double insistence on its final reappearance 'yesterday—I repeat it, yesterday', and the drawn-out sentence that describes the many attempts made by the Dickens household to finish it off ('seven grills, one boil, and a cold lunch or two'), like a chorus of 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' in which partridges in pear trees and swans a-swimming have been usurped by this one 'blessed bird'. Even the reference to the turkey's 'astonishing capabilities' seems suspended between wonder and worry, as if a turkey that produced so many leftovers came close to being a real-life version of those enchanted objects and creatures—pots overflowing with porridge, or geese laying limitless supplies of golden eggs—that throng the pages of fairy-tales.

Four years later, Dickens had written something that possessed still more 'astonishing capabilities'. *A Christmas Carol in Prose: Being*

¹ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, Pilgrim Edition, ed. Madeline House *et al.*, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), i. 1.

a *Ghost Story of Christmas* was first published just before Christmas in 1843, and since then it has never been out of print. Originally written as a tract for the times, this cautionary tale about the ongoing tussle between greed and goodness has been thought of as timely whenever it has been read. Enjoyed by its first readers as a modern expression of the spirit of Christmas—as modern as Christmas cards, which were sent for the first time in the same year as the *Carol*'s publication—it has since become popular for quite different reasons: the sense of tradition it is thought to embody, a reminder of the simple pleasures that seem to have been lost sight of in the seasonal scrum of shoppers, an annual invitation to the pleasures of nostalgia.² Reproduced so often, and in so many different forms, it has become as much a part of Christmas as mince pies or turkey, with the key difference that, as Martin Heidegger argued was true of all classic works, it has never been 'used up'.³ There have been dozens of films, starring everyone from Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson to Mr Magoo and Mickey Mouse, operas and ballets, an all-black musical (*Comin' Uptown*, which opened on Broadway in 1979), Benjamin Britten's 1947 *Men of Goodwill: Variations on 'A Christmas Carol'*, even a BBC mime version in 1973 starring Marcel Marceau.⁴ So regular are the annual returns of the *Carol* to our stages and screens, in fact, that it has become something like a secular ritual, an alternative Christmas story to its more obviously religious rival, in which the three wise men are replaced by three instructive spirits, and the pilgrimage to a child in a manger is replaced by a visit to the house of Tiny Tim. Even people who have never read the *Carol* know the story of Scrooge, the miserable old skinflint who repents after being visited by the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. So widely and deeply has this story entered the popular

² A renewal of interest in Christmas during the first half of the nineteenth century is suggested by the number of books and essays published on the topic, including Robert Seymour, *The Book of Christmas* (1835) (Seymour had been Dickens's first illustrator for *The Pickwick Papers*), Thomas Kibble Hervey, *The Book of Christmas* (1836), William Sandys, *Christmastide: Its History, Festivities, and Carols* (1852), and a satirical essay that may have been a direct influence on Dickens's depiction of Scrooge, Douglas Jerrold's 'How Mr. Chokepear keeps a merry Christmas', *Punch* (December 1841).

³ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

⁴ See Fred Guilda, *A Christmas Carol and its Adaptations* (London: McFarland & Co., 2000).

imagination that phrases such as 'Bah! Humbug!' have floated free of their original context and acquired the force of common proverbs, while Scrooge himself has entered the language as a piece of cultural shorthand 'used allusively to designate a miserly, tight-fisted person or killjoy' (*OED*, 'Scrooge').

This can make it hard to read, even for the first time, without the uncanny feeling that it is both familiar and strange, ancient and modern. Like any story that has developed the power of a myth, as Virginia Woolf once observed,⁵ we tend to know the *Carol* even before we know how to read, and our knowledge comes from many different sources, with the result that any attempt to assess what Dickens actually wrote can be an experience as hazy and disorientating as Scrooge's first impressions of the Ghost of Christmas Past: 'what was light one instant, at another time was dark, so the figure itself fluctuated in its distinctness' (p. 28). And yet, to read his original story closely is to realize that, even though at first it may seem to lack the zip and glitz of later adaptations—there are no Cockney dance routines in the snow, no bustling crowd scenes full of cheeky urchins, no Muppets belting out big musical numbers—Dickens's plot cannot properly be separated from the strange and haunting power of his narrative style. In both the local details and overall shape of his writing, Dickens sets out to show his readers that what happens in the *Carol* is intimately bound up with how it is described as happening.

To take just one example, the story of Scrooge's mean-spirited solitude being replaced by open-hearted sociability is echoed in a style marked by narrative generosity. Repeatedly, the narrator lingers over examples of human activities that show companionability spreading from one person to another—Bob Cratchit joining some strangers for a slide on the ice, or Scrooge's nephew playing games with his friends and relatives—in a way that is as involuntary and catching as a cough. Even the natural world, far from being indifferent to these activities, seems to be working on a similar principle of benevolent overflow, with fog that busies itself 'pouring in at every chink and keyhole', or 'great, round, pot-bellied baskets of chest-nuts' that tumble out on to the street 'in their apoplectic opulence'—a cheering alternative to the water-plug, as solitary and frozen as

⁵ 'David Copperfield' (1925), repr. in Stephen Wall (ed.), *Charles Dickens: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 273.

Scrooge, with its 'overflowings sullenly congealed, and turned to misanthropic ice' (p. 15). Whether moving or static, animate or inanimate, everyone and everything appears to be spilling over, breaking out, extending beyond itself. Dickens's narrator, too, repeatedly sets out to convince us that the world we share is, or should be, one of liberality, plenitude, intimate connectedness. Whether he is describing Scrooge's character ('a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!'), or the weather ('cold, bleak, biting'), or the objects that make up Marley's chain ('cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel'), rarely is one detail given when three or four or more will do, as Dickens crams every sentence with alternatives and supplements, like a set of thesaurus entries spread out across the page (pp. 10, 19). Indeed, there are times when the *Carol* reads more like an extended shopping-list than a book, as when Dickens describes the throne of the Ghost of Christmas Present, made up of 'turkeys, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking-pigs, long wreaths of sausages, mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch' (p. 43). That's quite a mouthful, even for a reader, and one of the problems Dickens confronted when inserting such lists into the *Carol*, with all the wide-eyed enthusiasm of a small child leaving a note for Santa, is that they might not be properly absorbed into the story as a whole; however lip-smacking each item might be individually, put together like this they run the risk of producing a nasty case of narrative indigestion. Faced with the prize turkey Scrooge sends to the Cratchits, a suspicious reader might then wonder whether Dickens was winking at his readers about the nature of the story he had produced for them. 'He could never have stood upon his legs, that bird', we are told by the narrator, voicing Scrooge's gleeful thoughts, 'He would have snapped 'em short off in a minute, like sticks of sealing-wax' (p. 79). An oddly self-conscious thing to say at this stage of a story, perhaps, when the writer is close to wrapping up his manuscript and sending it off to the printers, especially given how spindly Dickens's plot is when compared to the top-heavy nature of his style, chiselled with italics and spattered with exclamation-marks ('It *was* a Turkey!'). But it takes a confident writer to joke about what he is up to, and a swaggeringly confident one to tease his readers

with the thought that he might not be up to it. And sure enough, the delighted lists that stretch across the *Carol*'s pages serve as a valuable reminder that, even when Dickens's prose risks sounding strained or anxious, he is fully in control.

Writing in an accretive style was nothing new for Dickens; from the start of his career, he had been alternately celebrated and condemned as a writer unusually fond of what George Orwell described as 'the *unnecessary detail*'.⁶ However, never before had he set out so deliberately to bring together his style and his narrative subject. As the *Carol* develops, even details that at first appear superfluous, narrative grace notes, are revealed to be part of a pattern, 'a genial shadowing forth', designed to alert the eyes and ears of Dickens's readers to the dangers of assuming that anything or anyone is as 'self-contained' as Scrooge supposes himself to be (pp. 47, 10). The light that spills out of the shop windows, for example, which 'made pale faces ruddy as they passed', sets the tone for light to become a central image of the different ways in which human beings, too, might reach out beyond the boundaries of the self: the 'positive light' that issues from Fezziwig's calves when he dances, which is echoed in his power 'to make our service light or burdensome'; the lighthouse, which offers a model of cheerful solidarity in the face of chilly adversity; the 'light hearts' of Scrooge's creditors when they think he is dead; the precious burden of Tiny Tim, willingly taken on by his father, for whom 'he was very light to carry'; finally, Scrooge signalling his redemption by whooping that he is 'as light as a feather' (p. 78). Gently but insistently, Dickens educates his readers into the need to make connections in a world that might otherwise shiver into isolated fragments. It is the same idea and the same technique he would later develop in novels such as *Bleak House*, where his listing of objects and urgent cross-referencing of ideas would again reflect his pleasure in the sprawling multitudinousness of the world and his anxious desire to keep that sprawl in check. At this stage in his career, however, writing the first narrative that he had planned as 'a little *whole*', Dickens seems more confident in his ability to keep his imagination from overspilling the boundaries of his plot, and less worried about his ability to find a style to match the dense weave of

⁶ 'The outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens's writing is the *unnecessary detail* ... His imagination overwhelms everything, like a kind of weed', George Orwell, 'Charles Dickens', *Inside the Whale* (1940), repr. *ibid.*, 308.

affection and obligation that should bind together the rich with the poor, the living with the dead. And the writer with his readers? Who better to remind us that other people are 'fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys' (p. 12), as Scrooge's nephew puts it, than a writer whose story has asked generations of readers to make the same journey, as each pair of eyes travels across the page to meet that clinching final sentence, at once conclusive and all-embracing, 'God bless Us, Every One'?

The hope that nobody is beyond the reach of this blessing is one that Dickens animates from the start. As Graham Holderness has observed, even when Scrooge is at his most crabbed and cussed, grimly fantasizing about Christmas revellers being buried with stakes of holly through their hearts, he is rendered largely harmless by the narrative in which he finds himself: 'The medium in which he exists—the prose of the tale—is so alive and crackling with the energy and vitality of imagination and humour that it gives us assurance that the menace of Scrooge can be dealt with.'⁷ In this generous atmosphere, even his encounter with his former business partner starts to sound less like a spine-tingling haunting than an old music-hall act, 'Scrooge and Marley', going through a creaky routine:

'You don't believe in me,' observed the Ghost.

'I don't,' said Scrooge.

'What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of your senses?'

'I don't know,' said Scrooge.

'Why do you doubt your senses?'

'Because,' said Scrooge, 'a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than the grave about you, whatever you are.' (p. 21)

Not a very good joke, perhaps, but clear evidence of the *Carol's* theatrical qualities, in which characters repeatedly seem to speak to each other with an ear cocked for the response of a larger audience, and the first hint that Scrooge is capable of being converted, with that playful shift from 'gravy' to 'grave' showing how easily one thing can be transformed into something quite different. (Dickens is already practising what he will go on to preach: Scrooge's joke owes

⁷ 'Imagination in *A Christmas Carol*, *Études Anglaises*, 32 (1979), 28–45 (39).

something to Falstaff's confession that his face reveals the effects not of gravity but of 'gravy, gravy, gravy'.⁸) 'Scrooge was not much in the habit of cracking jokes', the narrator goes on to explain, 'nor did he feel, in his heart, by any means waggish then. The truth is, that he tried to be smart, as a means of distracting his own attention, and keeping down his terror' (p. 21). One might make much the same claim about Dickens, who, like many of his contemporaries, routinely mocked the belief in ghosts as a lingering trace of the uncivilized past, but also found it impossible to shake more primitive feelings of dread out of his mind or voice. Dickens was not unusual in being unsure about how seriously to take such apparitions: the *Carol's* ghosts first materialized in the same decade as spiritualism, which divided audiences across Britain and America into those who eagerly attended séances to hear the voices of the dead, and those who questioned the spirits with much the same scepticism that Scrooge reveals in his interrogation of Marley. However, Dickens had especially good reasons for being troubled by the idea that the dead might refuse to stay dead. In April 1842, just over a year before he described Marley's ghost dragging his heavy chain across the floor, he had visited the shackled prisoners in the Western Penitentiary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and wrote to John Forster of being haunted by 'a horrible thought': '*What if ghosts be one of the terrors of these jails? . . . The utter solitude by day and night; the hours of darkness; the silence of death; the mind for ever brooding on melancholy themes, and having no relief . . . The more I think of it, the more certain I feel that not a few of these men . . . are nightly visited by spectres.*'⁹ Perhaps it is not surprising that Dickens was troubled by the idea that prisoners were haunted by the ghosts of the past. After all, having to face hours of solitary and silent brooding was also his chosen fate as a writer, and there are good reasons for thinking that some of the 'melancholy themes' that weave in and out of his fiction—the blighting wrongs done to children; the need for imaginative escape; the hope that the controlled world of fiction might redeem the more disorderly world of fact—were the unsettled ghosts of his own past. But like all good comedians, Dickens was adept at laughing at the ideas he found most troubling, and in the *Carol* he caught a tone perfectly suspended between humour and

⁸ *King Henry IV, Part II*, 1. ii. 161.

⁹ *Letters*, iii. 181.

horror, a comedy of terrors, that would allow him to contemplate the awfulness of dying unloved and alone while simultaneously distracting his attention with gags and bits of slapstick.

For the rest of his career, these tones would shift and swerve unpredictably against one another, like a narrative double-act of wise-cracking comedian and solemn sidekick, but at this stage they are carefully balanced. Only when Scrooge's character is no longer at odds with the generous tone of the story in which he finds himself will his conversion be complete, as he celebrates his return to the land of the living by launching himself into 'a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh. The father of a long, long line of brilliant laughs!'—a description that not only delightedly enacts the idea of echoing laughter in its self-generating repetitions, but also confirms that in the future Scrooge will be equally capable of laughing and making others laugh (p. 78). It is the final proof of an idea that Dickens has been investigating throughout the *Carol*. What does Scrooge learn about himself? Precisely what Dickens's readers are expected to learn about themselves, which is that even activities with the potential to isolate people from one another, including the act of reading, can be transformed into models of reciprocity and trust. Even if 'nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter at the outset' (p. 83), the possibility that laughter can divide people from one another does not cancel out the possibility that it can also bring them together, like the singing of a Christmas carol. Only by realizing that our actions are 'for good' in the twin sense of being both morally improving and permanent can we prevent ourselves from becoming like those pitiful ghosts that Scrooge sees whirling through the night air, like new Victorian arrivals in Dante's *Inferno*: 'The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power for ever' (p. 26).

We know that Dickens's ear was caught by one carol in particular, because in the opening pages a small boy, 'gnawed and mumbled by the hungry cold as bones are gnawed by dogs', stoops down at Scrooge's keyhole 'to regale him with a Christmas carol', and the one he chooses to try his luck is 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen' (p. 15). It is one of the shortest and strangest examples in Dickens's work of the adult novelist encountering his unhappy childhood self. It is also a curious example of Dickens's memory being overpowered

by his imagination. Even before he published his story, this was a Christmas carol that was in the air: in 1833, William Sandys noted that 'In the metropolis a solitary itinerant may be occasionally heard in the streets, croaking out "God rest you merry, gentlemen," or some other old carol.'¹⁰ One might then expect the ears of Dickens's readers to have been snagged by his misquotation, because what the small boy sings through Scrooge's keyhole is not 'God rest you merry, gentlemen' but 'God bless you merry gentleman! | May nothing you dismay!' Not a bad change if you're looking for some loose change, and if it is a mistake then it is a forgivable one, given that subsequent verses of the carol offer us a 'blessed babe', a 'blessed morn', and a 'blessed Angel', even if they do not go so far as a 'blessed bird'. But the slight shift in direction also quietly hints at the narrative trajectory of the *Carol* as a whole, in which Scrooge's new-found joy will spill over into cries of 'a merry Christmas' to strangers in the street, and the narrator's final words will expand the ideal family of the Cratchits to include his readers past, present, and yet to come: 'God bless Us, Every One!' (p. 83). At the same time, it offers the first clue that this is 'A Ghost Story of Christmas' in which nobody is expected to be seriously scared by Scrooge's spectral visitors, and certainly not in the way that Dickens imagined the nightmares of those Pennsylvanian prisoners. Like the flapping sheets and mechanical wails of a ghost-train, Scrooge's spirits haunt him in a sequence that is carefully plotted; the thrills are organized into an orderly sequence; the risks are stage-managed. Although the phrase 'God rest you' gains an edge of menace with the appearance of Marley's endlessly wandering ghost, in a scene that ripples uneasily with echoes of *Hamlet*, a pun such as 'gravey'/'grave' shows Dickens reassuring his readers that they need not be in any serious alarm that this story will veer away from a comic resolution: 'God rest you merry, gentlemen, | Let nothing you dismay.'

'The dire neglect of soul and body'

There was certainly plenty to cause Dickens dismay as he started to plan the *Carol* in 1843. He had recently visited a ragged school, established in a dilapidated house in the swarming slums of Saffron

¹⁰ William Sandys, *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern* (London: Richard Bentley, 1833), p. cxxv; 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen' is reproduced on pp. 102-4.

Hill (the precise location, he later claimed, of Fagin's den in *Oliver Twist*), and had been appalled by what he found: 'a sickening atmosphere, in the midst of taint and dirt and pestilence: with all the deadly sins let loose, howling and shrieking at the doors.' 'I have very seldom seen', Dickens told the philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts, 'in all the strange and dreadful things I have seen in London and elsewhere, anything so shocking as the dire neglect of soul and body exhibited in these children.' Many of them earned a living through thieving or prostitution; others crept away at night to shelter 'under the dry arches of bridges and viaducts; under porticoes; sheds and carts; to outhouses; in sawpits; on staircases'; all were steeped in misery and squalor.¹¹ But who or what could rescue these pitiful creatures from the 'profound ignorance and perfect barbarism' into which they had been born? And how could Dickens's middle-class readers be brought to realize that Ignorance and Want—the 'meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish' children who appear to Scrooge from beneath the robe of the Ghost of Christmas Present—were as much their responsibility as their own more pampered offspring? These were among the questions that Dickens returned to in a speech three weeks later at the Manchester Athenaeum, in which he again underlined the need for education to drive away ignorance, 'the most prolific parent of misery and crime', and ended with an appeal for workers and employers to come together in recognition of their 'mutual duty and responsibility'.¹² And so the public themes of *A Christmas Carol* started to fit together in Dickens's mind: education; charity; home.

There were also more private impulses at work. Sales of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the novel in which he had set out to explore 'the number and variety of humour and vices that have their roots in selfishness', had started to flag. Dickens's decision to send his 'hero', Martin Chuzzlewit, off to America half-way through the serialization had done little to increase his popularity, and Dickens's publishers had started murmuring about a contractual clause that permitted them to subtract money from his income if the novel's sales did not meet the expectations set up by his handsome advance. A career that had been flourishing a year or two previously was threatening to unravel

¹¹ *Letters*, iii. 562-4.

¹² See John Butt, 'Dickens's Christmas Books', in *Pope, Dickens and Others* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), 136.

before his eyes. Nor was his private life in much better shape. His wife Catherine was expecting another child, and although it would be unfair to think that she was solely responsible for this state of affairs, the prospect of another mouth to feed cast Dickens into a state of mind that alternated between gloom and fury, saddled with 'a Donkey' of a wife and a father who insisted on cadging money off anyone who wanted to keep on good terms with his famous son. At one point, Dickens confessed, he dreamed of a baby being skewered on a toasting-fork: hardly the dream of a man looking forward to an extra mouth to feed. (Not that it embarrassed Dickens into keeping it to himself: this was also the dream in which 'a private gentleman and a particular friend' is announced to be 'as dead Sir . . . as a door-nail', so providing him with one of the opening sentences of his new book: 'Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.') Even by his own standards he was restless and dissatisfied, involved in so many parallel careers—novelist, journalist, public speaker, social campaigner, and more—that his life seemed to be turning into a perpetual fidget. At the same time, his body had started to give out the first warning signals that it was not as keen as his mind to be involved in so much at once, with the appearance of intermittent facial spasms which he put down to 'rheumatism', but which seem just as likely to have been an angry nervous tic. And all the while there were the voices in his head: the characters who, he said, clustered around his desk as he wrote, clamouring for his attention, like ghosts who could only be laid to rest once they had been set down on the page. 'I seem to hear the people talking again', he told a French journalist at the time. By this he seems to have meant primarily that his head was still echoing with the voices of the people he had met on his recent trip to America, but it is hard to be sure, not least because Dickens himself did not always seem to know whether his characters were believable because they had been copied from life, or because the world was becoming as grotesque and fantastical as one of his stories. What does seem clear is that, given his recent sales figures, he would have been forgiven for wondering whether he had misheard what they had to say for themselves.

One word that looms up out of the first paragraph of the *Carol* is the capitalized 'Change': 'Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change for anything he chose to put his hand to.' Here 'Change' is shorthand for the Exchange, the centre of London's financial market in

which Scrooge makes his money, but if Scrooge is 'good' for anything he puts his hand to, then what of other professions that involve putting one's name to bits of paper? What are writers good for? What is their business in life? Not easy questions to answer, especially by a writer who seemed unsure where his career was heading. And so he went back. Back to the cheerful tone of his biggest commercial success, *The Pickwick Papers*, from which he borrowed the interpolated tale of the gravedigger Gabriel Grub, 'an ill-conditioned, cross-grained, surly fellow—a morose and lonely man, who consorted with nobody but himself', converted by some mischievous goblins who show him visions of the past and future. Back to the thundering voice of Carlyle, with Scrooge's thin-lipped response to the men collecting charitable donations ('Are there no prisons? . . . And the Union workhouses? . . . The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?') replaying and replying to Carlyle's sarcastic question in *Chartism* (1840): 'Are there not treadmills, gibbets; even hospitals, poor-rates, New-Poor Laws?' (pp. 13–14). Back to the world of the pantomime, Dickens's first and most lasting theatrical love, in which a Benevolent Spirit would magically transform the characters or their setting, creating a fairy-tale world in which, as Dickens recalled in 'A Christmas Tree' (1850), 'Everything is capable, with the greatest ease, of being changed into Anything, and "Nothing is, but thinking makes it so." ' Finally, back to the money-grubbing world of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which Dickens was completing at the same time he was working on the *Carol*, and which had made him realize that there were more subtle ways of sending people abroad than merely packing them off to America. As Marley explains, 'It is required of every man . . . that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide'—a form of self-projection one might expect writers to be especially skilled at, as the narrator of the *Carol* claims to be 'standing in the spirit at your elbow', but also one that Dickens wanted to show was at the heart of all the other ways in which one person might affect another 'for good' (pp. 22, 28). As he set to work on the *Carol*, Forster records with what 'a strange mastery it seized him',¹³ laughing and crying aloud as he wrote, sending himself abroad with each movement of his hand across the page. And then,

¹³ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872–4), ed. with notes by A. J. Hoppé, 2 vols. (London: Dent, 1966), i. 283.