Making Modernity Magical: Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and the Reenchanted Chronotope

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Abstract:

In his 1843 novella *A Christmas Carol* Dickens takes the sensations usually associated with alienation and disenchantment in the nineteenth century and reappropriates their language and energy to reenchantment. We can therefore read *A Christmas Carol* not only as the conversion narrative of Scrooge from bad capitalist to good capitalist, as has been done many times, but also Dickens' reckoning with the possibilities afforded by modern life and modernity as a narrative device in his turn to the biographical form. In essence, Dickens charts a move forward which allows the strangeness and uncanny sensations of modernity to explode out into webs of possibility made possible but not limited by the conventions of the realist novel.

Keywords: The novel, Dickens, A Christmas Carol, disenchantment, time, chronotope, Victorian literature

How many ghosts visit Ebeneezer Scrooge on the fateful Christmas Eve when he is forced to reckon with his misdeeds? Initially one might respond that there are three ghosts, but ultimately readers or viewers of the many adaptations of Dickens' 1843 novella *A Christmas Carol* land on the correct number, four, after accounting for Jacob Marley. A more open-ended question: how long do the events of the novella take? Literally, the afternoon of December 24th to the morning of the 25th: less than twenty-four hours. In another light, some seventy-five plus years, as Scrooge's entire life from boyhood to old age and beyond are presented to the reader. A third possibility: impossible timelines which contradict and intertwine render the question unanswerable, but suggest something truly aspirational and universal through the narratological schematics of Scrooge's Christmas Eve. Read as a direct response to the developing technology which opened up new relationships between time and space, Dickens' novella reorients the energies of modernity and the anxieties toward the pace of change in a web of reenchanted potentiality, borrowing the trappings of the realist biographical novel. Far from a simple conversion narrative from bad to good capitalist, Dickens' story features

a chronotopic arrangement which challenges the reader to reconsider literary representations of humanity in the modern world.

Max Weber famously argued that the "fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.' Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations" (Weber 1946, 155). The typical narrative of the British realist novel as a genre maps this disenchantment process, the "transition from ritual, feudal, agricultural, and cyclical time to modern, secular, historical time, when evolution itself becomes the dominant hermeneutic for plotting human social events" (Slaughter 2009, 109). The realist novel became the dominant narrative form through the nineteenth century, making sense of the rapidly changing and industrializing world by channeling modernity into characters who navigate their changing circumstances nimbly, typically undergoing a drawn-out process of integration into their vocation and into society. Readers for nearly two centuries have enjoyed the story of David Copperfield, the boy with a dead mother and a step-father who hates him, building his own extended family and achieving middle-class bliss while penning what amounts to a fictionalized guide on how to replicate his success. *David Copperfield* is very much the model British novel in the mid-century, loose and baggy but also circumscribed and tied together neatly, addressing various facets of potential social problems along the way. It is strange, then, that nonfiction writing, particularly essays relating to new technologies, became the unlikely home of decidedly atypical discourse which seems very magical, describing a world which doesn't seem disenchanted in the least. The social scientist Thomas Carlyle, for example, wrote that "Railways are shifting all Towns of Britain into new places: no Town will stand where it did, and nobody can tell for a long while yet where it will stand...I perceive, railways have set all the Towns of Britain a-dancing" (Carlyle 1870, VII).

Carlyle's dancing towns are by no means the only eccentric descriptions of life post-railway, nor are his–admittedly creative–descriptions of England's geography necessarily wrong. Heinrich Heine, a contemporary writer on the continent, exclaimed that he felt "as if the mountains and forests of all countries were advancing on Paris. Even now, I can smell the German linden trees; the North Sea's breakers are rolling against my door" (Heine 1853, 360, translation Schivelbusch). Travel by horse and coach in England, according to Dionysius Lardner, "before the establishment of railways, did not average eight miles an hour" (Lardner 1850, 36). Even the early trains of the 1840s were calculated by H. G. Lewin to travel "between 20 and 30 miles per hour" (Lewin 1968, 95). Travel by coach, with horses which needed to rest, was utterly incomparable to the trains which could travel three or more times faster. Wolfgang Schivelbusch summarizes the warped geographic perspective: "A given spatial distance, traditionally covered in a fixed amount of travel time, could suddenly be dealt with in a fraction of that time; to put it another way, the same amount of time permitted one to cover the old spatial distance many times over" (Schivelbusch 2014, 33). To some, who had become familiar

with the space around them and their place in it, this was an "[a]nnihilation of time and space" (Schivelbusch 2014, 33). The apparent contraction of space caused a twin phenomenon: on the one hand, areas once considered too far for travel became accessible; on the other hand, Schivelbusch cites William Wordsworth's petition to keep vacationers away from the Lake District, as the remotest places became dots on a railway line. The imaginary cartography working in the mental landscapes of the earliest railway patrons, with the map of available places growing while space was also shrinking, is obviously impossible, but not at all untrue.

As with space, Victorians also felt a fierce protectiveness over what they saw as the conventions of time which were being threatened by the railways and modern clocks. An 1851 article published in *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* claimed, "Time, our best and dearest possession, is in danger. [Inhabitants were] now obliged, in many of our British towns and villages, to bend before the will of a vapour, and to hasten on his pace in obedience to the laws of a railway company! Was ever tyranny more monstrous or more unbearable than this?" (Garfield 2016, 5). An 1868 London study by Alfred Haviland suggested, on shoddy science, that people running on railway time aged faster and died sooner than those on 'natural' time (Haviland 1868, 10-15). The authors of these and the above essays and treatises borrow language as much from fairy tales as they do science and technology. Dancing towns, rapid aging, and the hijacking of time and space are presented adjacent to plain language describing the late era of the industrial revolution in England and Europe more broadly. In facing the unknown, the Victorian essayists revert to superstitious and supposedly outmoded linguistic modes.

Modernity is experienced paradoxically: space in England expands and contracts, more Sinbad's sleeping whale than a fixed island, and time passes at different speeds which run in cycles both mechanical and naturally occurring. Novelists reckon with this in familiar ways which are almost too obvious to state, as entire ocean voyages can span either a sentence or several hundred pages, and years of time can breeze by in less prose than is used describing a sip of coffee. *A Christmas Carol* is remarkable because, decades before the great modernist novels which gleefully play with readerly expectations regarding the arrangement of space and time in the story world, Dickens conspicuously draws attention to the artifice in his chronotope. Rather than smooth over the rough edges, Dickens' narrator–and the characters in the novella– point to the incongruencies and strange happenings, acknowledge their impossibility, and continue along anyway. This tenuous and experimental framework is made possible because Dickens, like most novelists of his era, turns to the biographical form in his attempts to represent modern life holistically, which grants "the discretely heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events...a unified articulation by the relating of each separate element to the central character and the problem symbolised by the story of his life" (Lukácz 1988, 81). In the explosion of space and time which humbles Scrooge and chips away at his superlative egoism, he is therefore both central and actively decentered by the structure of the novella. Subject to the tumultuous winds of modernity in a non-realist mode,

Scrooge is also the purchase for the narrative, as without his fictional life at its center the form of the novella would crumble into meaningless fragments.

The novel genre itself is of course vital. What Bakhtin called the "peculiar structure" of the novel generally is perfect for the purpose of explicitly achronological storytelling (Bakhtin 1982, 5). The ghosts encourage Scrooge to, arguably, recognize the heteroglossia inherent to the novel, its calling card; we might imagine the ghosts as voices which threaten Scrooge's absolute autonomy who also demand that he allow other voices and perspectives into the narrative beyond his own. As a protagonist, Scrooge has long undergone scrutiny on account of what Elliot Gilbert termed "The Scrooge problem," namely that Scrooge's snap transformation, the entire undoing and rewriting of his ethics and morals, occurs literally overnight (Gilbert 1975, 22). He remarks that "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'" (Gilbert 1975, 22). Only in the world of the novel, as opposed to actual reality, can Scrooge "elude the control of fixed moral convention and religious orthodoxy, which Dickens perceives as insufficient unto his world" (Polhemus 1980, 91). What Dickens conjures to address the sudden character turn Scrooge makes is in fact "a particular narrative form" which emerges through the form of the story itself rather than "a concept, theory, or disposition" of didactic morality (Miller 2008, 3).

It is worth outlining the timeline which caused Scrooge, as early as the Second Stave of the novella, to declare that "it isn't possible" (Dickens 2003, 53). The novella begins "Once upon a time–of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve" (35). Scrooge goes to bed after Marley visits "past two" (53). He eventually awakes on Christmas morning. Marley tells Scrooge to "Expect the first [spirit] to-morrow, when the bell tolls One…Expect the second on the next night at the same hour. The third upon the next night when the last stroke of Twelve has ceased to vibrate" (50). The Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge on a journey to his childhood, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come fast forwards past Scrooge's death. The narrative spans, in the course of one single night, four nights and an entire life from cradle to grave. It is only slightly facetious to consider that, in his back and forth motion through time, Scrooge likely would have landed on himself in bed several times as he returned to it; if the first spirit visits at midnight, but Scrooge fell asleep at two, negative two hours had passed. Marley speaks of future visits on subsequent nights, while the following ghosts seem to be operating in their own temporal states regardless of what Scrooge's clock, or Big Ben, might read. Therefore, it is prudent to abandon any pretense that Dickens is attempting to keep realist time, and take him up on imagining the possibilities that open up when it is left aside.

Scrooge, however, does not at first abandon this realist mode of timekeeping. Before the arrival of the first spirit, Scrooge finds the possibility that he has lost track of time, that time can no longer be kept track of, "an alarming one" (53). The reason is "because 'three days after sight

of this First of Exchange pay to Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge or his order,' and so forth, would have become a mere United States' security if there were no days to count by" (53). Scrooge meticulously keeping track of time allows him control over his finances, and thereby over his life. Money is power, and money allows Scrooge to keep time, his own and others'. What is at stake here is Scrooge's ability to impose his will upon others, to consummate the fantasy he imagines earlier which is predicated upon his conditional "If I could work my will" (36). When Scrooge can rely on time to be linear, orderly, partitioned cleanly, he can expect when his debtors will owe him money, when his investments will yield dividends, etc. To Scrooge, the entirety of interpersonal relationships, of time itself, is "Cash payment as the sole nexus between man and man," as Thomas Carlyle described (Carlyle 1870, 66). Scrooge listens to the clock approach one:

> "Ding, dong!'"
> "A quarter past," said Scrooge, counting.
> "Ding, dong!"
> "Half past!" said Scrooge.
> "Ding, dong!"
> "A quarter to it," said Scrooge.
> "Ding, dong!"
> "The hour itself," said Scrooge, triumphantly, "and nothing else!" (54).

Scrooge's counting depends on the continuing cooperation of time in ticking forward in predictable, measured, modern ways. Modern clock time is meted out in equal and perfect intervals. To abandon this premise would be to abandon the systems through which Scrooge has amassed and continues to hoard his money. It is therefore in the frustration of the fantasy of order and power that Scrooge converts from miser to saint.

The Ghost of Christmas Past is fittingly "a strange figure—like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man" (54-5). The ghost is old and young simultaneously, impossible but indicative of its purpose, as it will take Scrooge from youth to age. As the spirit leaps through time with Scrooge in tow, the original pretense of a single night becomes meaningless. Alternatives to clock time are offered in overt and covert forms. The spirit is a candle, a white figure with white hair, a white tunic, and a flame above its head, representing an older form of timekeeping (53-4). Likewise Fezziwig 'keeps time' in leading the dance (63). The temporal journey Scrooge undergoes causes Scrooge to remark that "an icicle must have got into the works" of the clock; the physical journey, to his boyhood schoolhouse, takes place in a pair of short sentences, "they passed through the wall [of Scrooge's house] and stood upon an open country road, with fields on either hand. The city had entirely vanished" (56). The ghosts function as temporal trains, shuttling Scrooge to and fro across time and space in relatively little space on the page, as easily as a digressive passage into a character's memory. What makes these

forays striking in a way that 'mere' literary representations of memory are not is the physical dislocation and chronological whiplash which accompany them.

The Ghost of Christmas Present pushes the chronotope of the novel into particularly unique territory, as it shows Scrooge events which are, in theory, going to happen within the next hours, but which will never actually happen. Scrooge, still in his miserly mode, demands of the spirit, "To-night, if you have aught to teach me, let me profit by it" (74). Scrooge takes the position of student, but the language of exchange remains. The sky lightens and darkens several times, while still ostensibly remaining within the period of Christmas Day. Scrooge broadens his spatial horizons, down into mines and out into the open ocean, while also peeking in at dinner parties which either are happening or will happen shortly. The dinner party at his nephew's house, for example, is the very same party which Scrooge was invited to attend in the First Stave, and which he *will* attend, despite his present absence, in the final section of the text. Dickens creates forked timelines, "diverse kinds of time that narrative structures have the potential to perform" (Matz 2018, 26). In his narrative, Dickens manifests "a belief that the landscape of time thrives by narrative cultivation"; Scrooge must be redeemed not only in the present moment in his bed, but across a much broader span of time and swath of space through the conspicuous cultivation by the narrative structure, by the spirits within the story world and by Dickens' hand outside it (Matz 2018, 26).

The final spirit demands of Scrooge something existentially terrifying and very apropos in the Victorian moment, imagining something beyond the scope of his own life and context, and indeed something outside of time itself, death. Rather than showing events which have happened or are happening, the final ghost evokes the possibility of, essentially, infinite possibility. Scrooge is old, and already an unlikely hero in Victorian fiction. Rather than leave Scrooge as an aged, minor figure in a larger work, Dickens centers him. His perception that "Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead...But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change" is a utopian vision of the future which follows from the bizarre chronotopic journeys Scrooge has undertaken, but which diverts from the fear and disorientation typical when facing the unknown future in the period, best demonstrated in the aforementioned essays of contemporary thinkers (Dickens 2003, 108). Scrooge is able to think beyond the single, linear timeline of his life to imagine something beyond "that dark chamber" in which his body laid, not "ever present" but malleable and changeable (104). He has recodified his perception of time, and his place in it. Dickens, as he often does, asserts life: Tiny Tim "did NOT die," creating a new vision for what might be (116, emphasis Dickens). Only through the extensive making and unmaking of various potential timelines within the narrative can this possibility, or possibilities, emerge.

Scrooge ends up back in bed on Christmas morning, back in the time and place associated with the realist novel. He hasn't come back alone, however: twice Scrooge repeats "I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me" (110). The 'I

will live' suggests that Scrooge will be rejecting the linear time and way of life he had been preoccupied with his entire life, not only for a brief visit, but permanently. Upon waking, he seems to be living up to his promise: "I don't know what day of the month it is!...I don't know how long I've been among the Spirits. I don't know anything. I'm quite a baby. Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby. Hallo! Whoop! Hallo here!" (112). Old and young, lost in time and hysterical, Scrooge is reformed. In a final test, the bells ring out in a symbolic attempt to reassert the prominence of linear time, but they make only noise: "Clash, clang, hammer; ding, dong, bell. Bell, dong, ding; hammer, clang, clash! Oh, glorious, glorious!" (112). Instead of looking to meticulous timekeeping for a source of order and an affirmation of his power, Scrooge revels in the possibility which opens when he simply enjoys the music of the bells without concern for their function. The impossible resolution to live in three times at once, for three times at once, thereby trumps the steady ticking of linear time. By the end of the novella, Scrooge has recognized that he exists in a "character system" as a node in a network far greater than himself, but which he must still participate in (Woloch 2006, 302). Scrooge's egoism has been eroded, but he is left better for it. In a move only possible in Dickensian thermodynamics, something has been created from a net loss: rather than overwhelming others with his ego, Scrooge becomes the guardian and benefactor of the health and survival of many others in the next generations.

Scrooge's narrative is on the one hand evergreen, as the countless reimaginings of the story attest, but on the other precisely what Erich Auerbach argued about the French novels of the early nineteenth century, wherein "the gen-eral historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux" (Auerbach 2013, 473). Nothing of Scrooge's conversion narrative, in other words, could have come from a pen a moment before it did so from Dickens', in the precise time and place that it did. This is something that has perhaps been lost in the films, stage plays, and television specials which reimagine the novella: Dickens' story emerged from a very specific environment which was disorienting, new, and in a heavy state of flux, and Dickens' blend of narrative enchantment in a disenchanted world was a conscious choice that worked against the grain of the prose narratives of the era. Writing about death in the story world but applicable to this manifestation of a non-realist narrative mode in the face of disenchantment, Walter Benjamin explains that the novel "is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about" (Benjamin 2006, 373). Scrooge undergoes a reenchanting of his world which is counterfactual to the very real disenchanting of the world outside the story, but which was certainly alive in the language and thoughts of contemporary essayists and philosophers. Readers of Dickens can straddle the line between the familiar and the uncanny which pivots on Scrooge's conversion narrative, which ends precisely when the forces within the story world threaten to

break the container and render it mere noise rather than the careful experimentation with and exploration of possibility.

Dickens' charm, as it so often does, comes from the choice to reorient disorientation and fear by converting them to laughter and utopian possibility. Even as the world becomes alienating and harder to know, Dickens, via the ghosts and through Scrooge, offers readers a lifeline in the storm of modernity that might yet endure. Dickens would return to his more familiarly realist novels throughout the rest of his career, but this relatively early foray into the headwind of encroaching modernity stands out amidst his oeuvre as perhaps his most compelling laboratory for making sense of changes in the real world which have come and will inevitably continue throughout the lives of his Victorian contemporaries and beyond.

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