

A Victorian Christmas in Hell: Yuletide Ghosts and Necessary Pleasures in the Age of Capital

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A VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS IN HELL:
YULETIDE GHOSTS AND NECESSARY PLEASURES IN THE AGE OF CAPITAL

by

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ABSTRACT
A VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS IN HELL:
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Brandon Chitwood

Marquette University, 2012

This dissertation explores how the cultural and literary development – one might argue, creation – of a specifically Victorian Christmas arose in response to social anxieties related to the expansion of industrial capitalism, Darwinian theories of evolution, and the increasingly problematic definition of the family during the nineteenth century in Britain. Using a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, the dissertation explores how the liminal figure of the ghost pervades the literary narrativization of the Christmas holiday, and how such ghosts provided uncanny comforts to a reading public increasingly horrified by social, economic, and natural forces seemingly beyond their control. The dissertation argues that the success of the literary institution of Christmas as a necessary assurance of cultural pleasure in the face of social anxiety has made it perhaps the most long-lived of Victorian artifacts. Indeed, the importance of Christmas to our late capitalist present suggests post-modernity is not so far removed from Victorian sensibilities as we might suspect.

The first chapter of *A Victorian Christmas in Hell* examines the seminal role of Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol* in constructing the Victorian Christmas narrative, and its astonishing longevity as a living cultural touchstone to the present day. The chapter argues that *A Christmas Carol's* success is due in large part to its construction of a seductive injunction to enjoy that deflects and transcends social anxiety. The second chapter examines the role of mourning and grief that pervades Victorian Christmas texts, and how this focus on melancholy paradoxically underwrites the command to enjoy Christmas. The third chapter focuses on how the uncertainty of the role of women in Victorian culture helped lend a volatility, urgency, and horror to the genre of the Christmas ghost story – a genre developed in large part by women writers. The fourth chapter explores the role of children in Christmas ghost stories, and argues that the social guilt of child abuse gave rise to the figure of the child ghost: a transcendent figure with the power to believe in the fantastic and phantasmic aspects of Christmas for an increasingly skeptical, and guilt-ridden adult population. A brief postscript considers the possible evolution of the Christmas narrative beyond its capitalist trappings. What would a post-Victorian Christmas look like after capitalism? Is it even possible, or desirable, to exorcise our Victorian Christmas ghosts?

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Brandon Chitwood

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**Introduction:
Ghosts of Christmas Past**

*Christmas hath a darkness
Brighter than the blazing noon,
Christmas hath a chillness
Warmer than the heat of June*
-- Christina Rossetti, "Christmas Eve"

*Phantasms, ghosts, in this midnight hour, hold jubilee, and screech and jabber;
and the question rather were, What high Reality anywhere is yet awake? [...] Is
our poor English Existence wholly becoming a nightmare; full of mere
Phantasms?*
--Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*

I

The 1890's in Britain were, in terms of literature at least, fantastic. This was the decade that saw the birth of Dracula, Mowgli, Svengali, Dorian Gray, The Invisible Man, and a full-blown invasion from Mars. Add to this the studied decadence and fetishized cigarettes of Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons and J. M. Barrie (before Peter Pan definitively made him a children's writer in the mind of posterity), the Celtic wonderlands of the young Yeats, and one comes away with a sense that this was a period of febrile young minds in revolt, devising abundant phantasmagoria as if in neurotic expectation of replacing the prim bourgeois naturalistic world presided over by their waning bourgeois queen. The revolt seems abortive, however, when we remember that the Queen herself was an eager devourer of these fantasies. And no one's fantasies were more appealing to her than those of Marie Corelli, the best-selling writer of the decade. Whether one views the literature of this period approvingly as an imaginative hotbed of Hazlittian gusto, or

more soberly as a wasteland of excess and purple prose, critical judgment must at least pause to awe at the deliria of Ms. Corelli, who, whatever her failings, was certainly the most fantastic of the fantasists. What may be most fantastic of all is that such writing was so popular; that such strangeness -- digested by so much of the public and indeed earning the imprimatur of the decidedly pedestrian taste of Victoria Regina -- was, in effect, *normal*.

Consider “The Devil’s Motor: A Fantasy,” a brief tale from 1896, which, while representative of Ms. Corelli’s style and content, has a power of compression and cohesion lacking in some of her more rhapsodic novels. As a narrative, this story details the first joy ride of the Prince of Darkness in what was then a real novelty: an automobile. From the opening lines, though, it is clear Corelli has something much more cosmic in mind than relating a curious anecdote:

In the dead midnight, at that supreme moment when the Hours that are past slip away from the grasp of the Hours yet to be, there came rushing between Earth and Heaven the sound of giant wheels, -- the glare of great lights, -- the stench and the muffled roar of a huge Car, tearing at full speed along the pale line dividing the Darkness from the Dawn. And he who stood within the Car, steering it straight onward, was clothed in black and crowned with fire; large bat-like wings flared out on either side of him in woven webs of smoke and flame, and his face was as white as bleached bone. Like glowing embers his eyes burned in their cavernous sockets, shedding terrific glances through the star-strewn space, -- and on his thin lips there was a frozen shadow of a smile more cruel than hate, -- more deadly than despair. (141)

Just as Corelli’s style finds a happy medium between biblical cadence and the more pictorial descriptiveness of a comic book, her subject is painted with a Miltonic sense of opposition and paradox. Time and space exist in a contradictory twilight of *in-betweenness*. We are thrust into an infinite now poised between past and future, that “supreme moment” of an ungraspable present, and into an impossible space between

Heaven and Earth, seemingly neither material nor metaphysical. Corelli's Satan is a similarly contradictory whole: he is clothed in black but white as bleached bone, he is made of fire and smoke, yet curiously frozen; he is elemental and immaterial, yet cartoonishly "bat-like" and almost comfortingly clichéd in his aspect.

Corelli's Devil is less compelling when he speaks.

'...Follow me, all ye Forces which are destined to work the ruin of Mankind, -- follow! On, on, over all beauty, all tenderness, all truth I ride, -- I, the Avenger, the Destroyer, the Torturer of Souls, the Arch-Enemy of God! The Kingdom of Hell grows wide and deep, -- praise be to Man who makes it!' (142)

All this is rather one-sided and obvious, and one wonders when any of the irony, wit, and deceit we associate with Satan will show up. Indeed, it is kind of hard to see how the Devil finds so many followers when he gives the game away like this, but he apparently has no problem raising a host of damned souls to ride with him to the Apocalypse:

The great Car flashed along with grinding, thunderous wheels, and as it flew, vast Phantom-forms followed it, like rolling clouds jagged with the lightning, -- the fairness of the world grew black, and the sulphurous fumes quenched all sweetness from the air. The forests dropped like broken reeds, -- the mountains crumbled into pits and quarries, the seas and rivers, the lakes and waterfalls dried up into black and muddy waters, and all the land was bereft of beauty. In the place of wholesome green fields and leafy woods, there rose up gigantic cities, built in on every side, and bristling with thousands of chimneys belching forth sickening smoke into the overhanging gloom which hid the skies; and the cities were full of a deafening noise and crashing confusion as of ten million million hammers beating incessantly -- beating away all peace, all solitude, all health, all rest. On, -- on, and into these countless prisons of stone and mortar the Demon of the Car swept vast and ever-hurrying crowds of human beings, with the furious force of a mighty whirlwind sweeping dead leaves into the sea. (142-3)

This is the verbal equivalent of a John Martin canvas: apocalypse porn as popular with the masses as it was distasteful to the critical elite, but unerring in its power to provoke. Corelli's slips of the pen -- the feverish consonance, the tortured sentence structure -- all seem to add to the effect of rushing, escalating disaster, just as the occasional crudities of

Martin's brush gave paintings like *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1851-3) the aura of a Turner on steroids [Figure 1]. It is hard to sustain one's snickering at Corelli in the face of sentences like these:

Still faster and more furiously flew the Car, -- red meteors flashed in its course -- and the Phantom shapes which followed its flight crowded together in an ever-thickening, ever-darkening multitude, while bright stars were shaken down from heaven like snowflakes whirling in a winter blast. (155)

This is wonderfully awful stuff, in every sense of the word.

Corelli's Devil does a competent job of broadcasting the theme of the piece:

"Progress and Speed!" (146) he yells, will lead us straight to Hell. This was already a fairly tired theme by the time Corelli's Satan got his new motor-car, but I like to think there's something deeper going on here. Indeed, the very banality of Corelli's theme, tethered as it is to such over-heated prose and incredible imagery, seems to demand we look closer at what this "progress" is. In light of the fact that Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens were saying much the same thing in the 1830's and 40's (and Carlyle's prose, it must be admitted, is at least as peculiar as Corelli's), we might charitably look on Corelli's take on "progress" as less a clumsy reiteration of old themes than a pastiche of it: the breadth of Corelli's canvas does invite an equally broad consideration of what she means by progress as such. Corelli's images: teeming cities, armies of smokestacks, and those "ten million million hammers" of industry, suggest nothing less than a panorama of sixty years of Victorian nightmare -- clichés not of her making, but of her era. In this sense, we can see "The Devil's Motor" less as a kitschy warning on the evils of automobiles, but as a valediction to an age that had always been devising bigger and better infernal machines. This may seem an apology for bad writing, but that is not my intent, and in any case, to certain discerning tastes, bad writing of Ms. Corelli's caliber



Figure 1: John Martin, *The Great Day of His Wrath*, 1851-3.

hardly requires an apology. Rather, I mean it as a way to understand how such writing could be so popular to so many people who presumably had no inordinate fear of automobiles or an abstract hatred of progress as such. To return to the question of how such strange writing could have been so normal, as its popularity would by definition make it: perhaps because Ms. Corelli's Satan was already very well known to her audience.

The strangest aspect of "The Devil's Motor," which goes furthest to suggest its *lack* of strangeness to Victorian audiences, is the fact that this apocalyptic hellscape was included as one of the holiday stories in Corelli's *Christmas Greeting* of 1901. But then, Corelli's introduction to that book goes a ways toward explaining the inclusion of "The Devil's Motor." She begins:

It is an old, very old, time-worn greeting, this of the friendly "Merry Christmas to you!" and there are some folks among us in these days who profess to hate the very word of it. It came into use when England was known as "Merrie England," an appellation which seems more than singular to us who have to endure the inane dullness and melancholy stupidity of "society" as it exists in this present gloriously progressive Motor-Era. Looking round on the tired, worn, nervous, querulous faces in the crowds that fill the streets and shops at Christmas-time, -- hearing the endless complaints, the new diseases, the troubles, real and fancied, of each person who can manage to detain a friend for five minutes' hurried and morbid conversation, -- reading the delectable details of suicide, murder, mania and misadventure preciously garnered up as gems of literature for the million by the halfpenny press -- one may reasonably wonder whether England was ever in truth really "merrie," as recorded. (3-4)

One does begin to wonder. And while it may be easiest to wonder at the mental health of Ms. Corelli herself -- this is certainly the oddest, most down-beat Christmas greeting one is likely to receive -- it is more interesting, I think, to wonder at the culture that produced, sustained, and lionized Marie Corelli.

Again, the surface singularity of the prose hides certain clichés that may more fruitfully be termed cultural norms. Just as “The Devil’s Motor” treats in apocalyptic imagery familiar to any Victorian, the introduction to the *Christmas Greeting* plays on ideas about Christmas that would have been quite familiar to Ms. Corelli’s audience. One would only need to glance at the most popular text of the era, Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*, to find one of those strange people who “profess to hate the very word” Christmas. And while Corelli does not offer a particularly clear definition of what “Merrie England” means (or “society” for that matter), it would have been clear to any reader of Washington Irving’s popular *Bracebridge Hall* stories what “Merrie England” meant, why it went away, and, as Corelli herself suggests, why it may never have existed in the first place. As to the seemingly gratuitous mentions of “suicide, murder, mania and misadventure,” these disagreeable topics would have been general subjects of the most popular genre of Christmas literature: the ghost story. Under closer scrutiny, Corelli’s eccentric approach to engaging her reader reveals a common language and cultural heritage. Indeed, this cultural heritage is ours as well. One might still ask: is there anything stranger than the normalization of something so strange as Christmas? Is there anything we take more for granted than the holiday which, by its very nature, bespeaks itself as an anomaly, a divergence from normality? Marie Corelli’s *Christmas Greeting* is, I submit, perhaps the most *normal* Christmas book ever written: it is so artless and unself-conscious in its use of cultural tropes that it inadvertently exposes the inherent strangeness, and darkness, of a holiday which has been bequeathed to us by the Victorians with hardly a second thought. It is that paradoxical “supreme moment” of Christmas, and its uncanny power of normalizing its own inherent strangeness, that this

study is concerned with. Like Marie Corelli, I hope to uncover some of that strangeness by engaging a bit with some of His darker materials.

II

If Marie Corelli was arguably the most popular writer of fiction in the English-speaking world, she was also probably the most critically reviled: her fantastically melodramatic plots and artlessly moralistic style, combined with a shamelessly inflated sense of literary worth won her few friends among the cultural cognoscenti. Today, her reputation has ironically reversed itself: unread by the general public, Corelli survives on the love of a number of literary critics who have forgiven her formal excesses, and see in her an impressive, if slightly ridiculous icon of feminine self-fashioning. Such forgiveness is undoubtedly aided by the natural love of the critic for the discarded antiquity, burnished rather than flawed by a kitsch factor that adds rather than detracts from its appeal over time. Irony, in other words, has come to the rescue of the over-earnest Ms. Corelli, and by some dialectical fluke, what we read as her cartoonish Victorianism seems to speak to our similarly cartoonish post-modernity. In Corelli, and other once-eminent Victorians, two ages, each obsessed with dubious surfaces and the nature of authenticity, meet, and recognize one another.

When we read the strange entertainments of Marie Corelli, or the countless, perhaps slightly less strange productions of her peers, we inevitably ask: who are the Victorians? Who are these people that seem so laughably foreign, yet uncannily familiar to us? We may be tempted to frame the question, ‘who *were* the Victorians,’ as they are

all dead now, and so their age may be safely periodized and reckoned with as an object of history. There are no Victorians now, their voices are silent – save for the millions and millions of words on the page, the legacy of the bureaucracy of empire and the entertainment machine of Mudie’s lending library. So we read them, and ask what all their words mean. Were they capitalists, or communists? We read Carlyle, and find the hero-worshipper railing against the captains of industry. We read Marx (who, it must be remembered, was as eminent a Victorian as Cardinal Manning or Florence Nightingale), and find that his *Capital* is not a handbook for revolution, but an epic of parliamentary blue books and the dark magic of money. Were they liberal, or conservative? We see the Tory Disraeli – the self-described ‘radical conservative’ -- extend the franchise to millions of working class men (women would have to wait), while the liberal Gladstone spends his evenings attempting to evangelize prostitutes on the streets of London. Were they paragons of moral rectitude, or repressed perverts? Depending how one reads the strange cases of Charles Dodgson and John Ruskin, the answer could be one or the other, both, or neither. It requires little reflection to conclude that the Victorians were contradictory. So is any age; so is anyone. What is interesting is how the Victorians are so popularly *read* as contradictory. It seems, in a way, one of their hallmarks.

The image of the Victorians as creatures of contradiction derives not only from the modernists who mocked them in order to sublimate them, but from the critical revival of the 1950’s, the centerpiece of which is Walter Houghton’s magisterial *Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*. In Houghton’s formulation, the Victorian Age can be fundamentally diagnosed as an age of doubt, which in turn creates a schizoid psychology of “two emotional attitudes” of “pleasure-pain responses” to which Victorians reacted

with “hope and dismay, optimism and anxiety” (23). For both the modernists and their heirs, the Victorian Age is if anything one of transition, an in-between period marked by problematical binaries. For the modernists, of course, this was read as the notorious Victorian penchant for “hypocrisy.” For Houghton, these binaries are the result of spiritual and philosophical doubt: the effect of the passing away of an age of consensus and belief. More recently, this conception has been challenged, if not altogether refuted, by critics who see the Victorian Age as more a period of rebuilding than decadence, of creation rather than destruction.¹

Are these convolutions of binaries, however, representative of the Victorian period itself, or simply the product of historical and critical reflection on the Victorian period by their successors? Whether one reads the Victorian Age as a period of belief or an “epoch of incredulity,” as Dickens puts it in his relentlessly dialectical opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*, we tend to view the Victorian Age as one which seeks a universal position through the juxtaposition of opposites. In other words, it is often characterized as a self-consciously historical age, seeking self-definition through its relation to the past and the future. Much of this characterization, however, may be due to the historical self-consciousness of those doing the characterizing. Do we not, in seeking to define the Victorians, also attempt to universalize by exception? What kind of Moebius strip do we construct when we self-consciously historicize the Victorians as self-conscious historians?

One of the stranger paradoxes of post-modernism is the way it has seemingly brought the Victorians closer to us than they have been since, let us say, that uncanny December in 1910 when, as Virginia Woolf laconically noted, “human character

changed.” The conservative Gertrude Himmelfarb may as well be speaking of the present when she notes that “so many crosscurrents between the traditional and popular culture,” existed in Victorian England, “between ‘high’ literature and ‘low,’ that neither can be entirely understood without the other” (407), while the Marxist Fredric Jameson could just as easily be describing Victorian England when he declares that “postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism” (125). After all, if post-modernism is a product of late capitalism, isn’t what we understand as Victorian a product of the same system, however earlier its emergence? If post-modernism destroys Lyotardian “meta-narratives,” and, as Jameson suggests, enacts a kind of schizophrenic breakdown of temporal continuity, an “undifferentiated vision of the world in the present” (120), could we not suggest that a properly post-modern perspective is not that we are the heirs of the Victorians, or “post-Victorian,” but in some fantasmic, Baudrillardian sense, Victorians ourselves?

How, after all, can a proper post-modernist otherwise engage the Victorians? As Simon Joyce correctly points out:

...we never really encounter ‘the Victorians’ themselves, but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving. The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what’s behind us, which is the opposite of what we do when we read history in order to figure out the future. It also suggests something of the inevitable distortion that accompanies any mirror image; thus, the warning that ‘objects in the mirror are closer than they appear’ nicely expresses a feeling we may have about the Victorians themselves, a recognition of a surprising (and perhaps frightening) closeness to our past that occurred at different times and to different people throughout the twentieth century. (3)

No, we can never know the Victorians themselves, but we may know them by the signs they have left us.

And those signs are as much our signs as theirs. Are the BBC's seemingly endless supply of televised adaptations of Dickens, Gaskell, the Brontës, and Trollope to be classified as Victorian or post-modern? What of Francis Coppolla's 1992 version of the perennially filmed quintessence of Victorianism, *Dracula*? Cleverly titled *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, the film strays as far from Stoker's text as any other adaptation, but drenches itself so thoroughly in Victorian clichés that its title takes on a new resonance: as pastiche, it both ironically winks at its claim to authenticity – it surely is *not* Bram Stoker's *Dracula* -- yet the very over-indulgence in lush stereotypes which we read as Victorian lends it a paradoxical aura of authenticity. It seems to constantly suggest that this is what Bram Stoker *would* have made of his material, had he been able to encode himself into his fiction: *Bram Stoker's Dracula* is, in a way, *more Dracula* than *Dracula*, by including its author within the title itself.² Such films illustrate a sense of culture which is simultaneously post-modern and Victorian: each representation of the Victorians makes our post-modern world more and more "Victorian," while making the Victorians more and more like us. As Nancy Armstrong suggests:

...postmodernism asks, what if the most oft-repeated and banal aspects of our culture – rather than the curious and inaccessible excavations of modernism – are the only basis for ourselves? What if in seeking access to some more primary world of subjects and objects we do not approach those subjects and objects in all their premediated purity, but encounter instead just another cultural formation that we happen to consider more primary and real? To encounter such a nostalgic formation is to encounter culture rather than anything like unmediated nature. In doing so, moreover, we inevitably convert that chunk of an earlier moment of cultural history into modern stereotypical form. In this respect, postmodernism is perhaps more Victorian than even the Victorians were... (319)

Postmodernism, in other words, accepts the signs of the Victorians at face value. If modernists like Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey seem somewhat parochial in their stance toward the Victorians, it is perhaps because we are more hostile to what we take to

be their smug “unveiling” of Victorian pretensions. The meta-historical historicizing of postmodernism, as critics of postmodernism inevitably point out, replaces grand narratives with the grand narrative of *narrative* as such: the “precession of simulacra” which gives us access to a past from which the rejection of *narratives* has alienated us.

Though much has been written about the strange kinship between the Victorians and postmodernism, few scholars have offered a theory that can explain why that curious dialectic between “us” and “them” is operative. While many recent post-structuralists have produced fruitful readings of Victorian texts, none of these studies have, to my knowledge, explored what, if anything, makes such readings compelling. In other words, while there is a growing body of scholarly work that deconstructs the Victorians, there is little deconstruction of why deconstructionists deconstruct them. What this study in part hopes to do is offer a theory of why the Victorians are so seductive to us Postmoderns: both the academics who continue to psychoanalyze and deconstruct them, and the broader culture which continues to absorb reproductions and adaptations of Victorian narratives. It will consider why the Victorians, in a very real sense, continue to *haunt* us.

For haunting has become the operative word for post-structural considerations of Victorian narrative. Since Jacques Derrida’s seminal 1993 reflection on the influence of Karl Marx in a post-communist world, *Specters of Marx*, cultural theorists and literary critics have become increasingly interested in the nature of haunting. Spurred in part by Derrida’s playful coinage “hauntology,” critics have made the study of ghosts one of the liveliest branches of post-structuralist theory. Existing in an in-between realm between death and life, being and nothingness, ghosts operate as perhaps the most tangible metaphors of Derridean discourse – apparitions of deconstruction as such. But ghosts

have also been the specialty of psychoanalysis, at least since Freud's 1919 essay, *The Uncanny*, and psychoanalytic theories of spectrality, particularly Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's – which deeply influenced Derrida's own engagement with ghosts – have provided support and counterpoint for Derridean models, such that “hauntology” can be considered a joint enterprise between psychoanalytic theory and deconstruction.

Julian Wolfreys' 2002 study *Victorian Hauntings* is the first and most thorough application of hauntology to Victorian studies. Through a series of compelling readings of major Victorian texts, Wolfreys attempts to answer the following questions:

What does it mean to speak of spectrality and of textual haunting? What does it mean to address the text as haunted? How do the ideas of haunting and spectrality change our understanding of particular texts and the notion of the text in general? (ix)

The difficulty in answering such questions satisfactorily is admitted at the outset.

Wolfreys succinctly characterizes spectrality as

...a gap between the limits of two ontological categories. The definition escapes any positivist or constructivist logic by emerging between, and yet not as part of, two negations: *neither, nor*. A third term, the spectral, speaks to the limits of determination, while arriving beyond the terminal both in and of identification in either case (alive/dead) and not as an oppositional or dialectical term itself defined as part of some logical economy. (x)

In terms of defining a ghost as existing *beyond* and *between* two categories while eschewing dialectical reasoning in positing that third category, Wolfreys' definition is clearly Derridean, and as such, quickly reaches a distinctly Derridean answer to the question of what spectrality means:

To speak of the spectral, the ghostly, of haunting in general is to come face to face with that which plays on the very question of interpretation and identification, which appears, as it were, at the very limit to which interpretation can go. (xi)

Those with a limited tolerance for Derrida can see where this is heading, and have already likely begun rolling their eyes. Even those with a taste for the Derridean may be asking themselves if it is entirely wise to begin a book at the very limits of interpretation itself.

Let me state at the outset that I object to neither Wolfrey's nor Derrida project. Any sympathetic reader of Derrida, and I count myself one of them, understands the merits of circling the "limits of interpretation." Clearly, much can and has been learned from such methods, and Wolfrey's excellent book is a fine example. I do, however, feel that the Derridean approach – with its endless second-guessing, its ontic instability and insecurity – is not the ideal position from which to *define* terms. As a method predicated on interrogating meaning as such, it strikes me as a self-defeating way to offer a concrete answer to the question of what spectrality *means* – in the sense in which meaning is commonly understood. Derrida's project could be viewed as the ultimate reproof to Wittgenstein's famous claim that "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (*Tractatus* 157): Derrida speaks only of that which, strictly speaking, cannot be spoken of, and at great length. Both Wittgenstein and Derrida, of course, work the liminal borderlands of language and its possibilities, but if we wish to know what a ghost is, and why it is there, to stop at the Derridean position – that it is indeterminate, and that it neither is nor isn't – is to not go far enough. Surely, between silence and abstraction, there is a concrete way to speak of the non-concrete. What we need, and what this study hopes to provide, is a non-Derridean hauntology.

While the specter of Derrida will certainly haunt these pages, it will not dominate them. I certainly do not reject deconstruction, or Derridean hauntology in this study, but

I will dispense with one of its central premises: that the ghost is not, as Wolfreys puts it, “an oppositional or dialectical term itself defined as part of some logical economy.” On the contrary, I argue that any definition of “spectrality” or “ghost” worthy of being called such *must* be dialectical in nature. For isn’t a ghost an essentially dialectical being/non-being, in that its congress with the non-spectral, the human, is the very ground by which we recognize them? In order to explain what a ghost is and what it is doing relative to that which is *not* ghostly – people, for example – they must be situated through their intersubjective relationship with that logical economy to which they are opposed.

My position is closely allied to that of the Lacanian philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, whose current popularity, I suspect, is largely due to his unapologetically Hegelian dialectical approach. Žižek’s entire critical enterprise can be neatly summed up by the manifesto/forward to his self-described “magnum opus” of 2006, *The Parallax View*:

A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network – faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network’s smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors of critical reading? [...] What such a reading achieves is not a simple ‘desublimation,’ a reduction of the higher intellectual content to its lower economic or libidinal cause; the aim of such an approach is, rather, the inherent decentering of the interpreted text, which brings to light its ‘unthought,’ its disavowed presuppositions and consequences. (ix)

Interrogating these “short circuits,” Žižek suggests, will not only create new knowledge, but will make such an ideal critical reader “aware of another – disturbing – side of something he or she knew all the time” (x). In *The Parallax View*, the ‘short circuit’ is ingeniously conceptualized as a “parallax gap” which “separates the One from itself” (7). In a move that politically pits Žižek against both postmodern liberal demands for plurality, tolerance and multiplicity, and conservative – which he routinely equates with

“fundamentalist” – demands for a univocal Truth, Žižek offers a theory that he takes through a dizzying array of multi-disciplinary paces (his examples of parallax in practice range from the philosophical to recent scientific debates about consciousness, to the political, spiced with his usual barrage of interpretive snap shots of popular culture), but at its essence, is seductively simple: that which we call Truth is not the product of some reconciliation or synthesis of Hegelian binaries, nor the universal sum total of multiplicities. Rather, it is the very subjective gap in our observation of what we perceive as these binaries that constitutes the One (whether we call it the Real, the Truth, or the Universal) as such. Žižek’s Hegelian Lacanianism receives its clearest exposition in this text, and as usual, it takes its cue from what Žižek regards as misreadings of both Lacan and Hegel. As regards the Lacanian Real:

[It] is not the inaccessible Thing, but the gap which prevents our access to it, the ‘rock’ of antagonism which distorts our view of the perceived object without perspectival distortion. The site of truth is not the way ‘things really are in themselves,’ beyond their perspectival distortions, but the very gap, passage, which separates one perspective from another, the gap [...] which makes the two perspectives radically incommensurable. (281)

Similarly, Žižek’s unique brand of Christianity is used to dispel the critique of Hegelian dialectic as an apology for questionable notions of political “progress:”

[...] opposites are not reconciled in a ‘higher synthesis’ – rather, *their difference is posited ‘as such.’* The example of St. Paul may help us to clarify this logic of Hegelian ‘reconciliation’: the radical gap that he posits between ‘life’ and ‘death,’ between life in Christ and life in sin, has no need of further ‘synthesis’; it is itself the resolution of the ‘absolute contradiction’ of Law and sin, of the vicious cycle of their mutual implication. (299)

To frame the question in a properly Žižekian manner: is not this “radical gap between life and death” another way of looking at Wolfrey’s spectrality, which “speaks to the limits of determination, while arriving beyond the terminal both in and of identification in either

case (alive/dead)” without resorting to claims of an indeterminate, non-dialectical dead – or rather, undead – end? In other words, does not Žižek’s conception of the parallax gap effectively define a ghost *within* the framework of human subjectivity, and thus offer a conception that does not lie achingly *outside* our hermeneutic range, but rather as an explicit marker of how we interpret *as such*?

While Žižek does not offer an explicit definition of spectrality, his psychoanalytic focus on the nature of fantasy and its reification in popular culture often brings him into close contact with considerations of ghosts, and their undead relatives, zombies and vampires. More importantly, his investigation of “the parallax gap,” which is his most theoretically concise and compelling attempt to resuscitate Hegelian dialectics to date, offers a fruitful alternative to Derridean models of what, precisely, is the nature of that which is neither live nor dead, that which is ghostly. What Žižek supplies, in short, is an implicit definition of ghosts that speaks directly to the culture that produces them: the ghost not only resides in the gap between subject and object which describes the limited whole that produces it, it *is* that gap. For Žižek, the parallax gap is not simply a void between object and subject, but a transcendentalised object itself. This object is Lacan’s famous *objet petit a*, the fetishized “Thing” which stands in as the object of desire. Throughout Žižek’s career, he has taken the *objet petit a* through its paces. Of all the Lacanian concepts he works with, it is this one he returns to most. In his first book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek anticipates the parallax gap in his reading of Lacan’s concept of “the two deaths” developed in his 1957 seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.³ The two deaths are, as Žižek puts it:

[...] the difference between real (biological) death and its symbolization, the ‘settling of accounts’, the accomplishment of symbolic destiny (deathbed

confession in Catholicism, for example). This gap [...] ‘between the two deaths’, a place of sublime beauty as well as terrifying monsters, is the site of *das Ding*, of the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of symbolic order. This place is opened by symbolization/historicization: the process of historicization implies an empty place, a non-historical kernel around which the symbolic network is articulated. (150)

This gap is a structural fiction: it is created by the very symbolic, historicizing process that defines the terms around it. What resides in the gap is the *objet petit a*, the excremental remainder of the symbolic order as well as the obscure object of desire. It is what I call the subjectivized object, which I would also call an operative definition for a ghost. Isn’t a ghost, the thing/not-thing between two deaths, an object that has been invested with some libidinal desire or anxiety (for Lacan, of course, the two are inseparable), and thus subjectivized? For Žižek, this subject/object not only fills the gap, it *is* the gap on account of the very agency it is invested with.

In this sense, the *objet petit a* is always a ghost. Consider the commodity fetishism of Marx which transforms his famous wooden table into “a thing which transcend sensuousness,” and “not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (*Capital* 163-4). This dancing table is, as Derrida points out, a thing that “becomes someone” (*Specters* 188), but it is also the unassuming object which underwrites the entire symbolic order of capitalism. The *objet petit a*, the subjectivized object, is, in more ways than one, the Ghost in the Machine.

To define the ghost as subjectivized object offers a succinct definition of a notoriously fluid concept, but it is admittedly general and abstract. It remains to specify and localize these ghosts. To return to the question which spurred this discussion: why

do the Victorians haunt us? If we seek to find out by examining particular ghosts, the body of choice is formidable. The Victorians, after all, arguably invented the modern ghost story, and most certainly developed it into an art. We will encounter a number of them in the pages that follow. But I would suggest a broader order of ghosts exist outside the more limited terrain of the fiction that brings them forth. After all, if a ghost is a subjectivized object, it is, disturbingly, an entity no longer subject to the parameters of fiction. Like Marx's dancing table, they are, in a sense, *real*.

I am speaking of cultural phenomena which, in their singular manner of framing the symbolic order that produces them, can offer a ghostly window into how those symbolic structures operate. Just as the dancing table offers a ghostly illustration of commodity fetishism, and by extension, capitalism itself, there are subjectivized objects which culture sets apart, exceptionalizes, in order to draw the universal figure of its symbolic order. *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, for example, could serve as a model of the ghostly thing which stands in for the Victorian as such (or, perhaps just as easily, postmodernity). On a broader level, one could argue that films as such occupy a similar position: cultural things that come to haunt the culture as a whole. In other words, we can conceive of ghosts as icons, cultural metonyms that possess a power to define and circumscribe the times they haunt. In this sense, Victoria herself can lay claim to be the ultimate Victorian ghost: omnipresent in commercial culture as the face of the first postage stamp, coinage, and later, as an advertising shill for numerous commodities (becoming, in her way, a variation of the dancing table), all the while diminishing the power of the monarchy to the vestigial state it enjoys today. *Objet petit a* indeed.

The purpose of investigating such phenomena in light of their spectrality should be obvious: if haunting is a performative manner of defining, then investigating ghosts becomes a matter of understanding our cultural definitions – most of which, as a rule, we take for granted. Who needs a dictionary once we presumably know what the word means? The cultural phenomenon this study will investigate is one that could fairly be described as the most pervasive and persistent of Victorian cultural icons: Christmas. Even more than Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, and Victoria herself, Christmas is the most enduring icon of the popular, if not the academic, conception of what the “Victorian” era is, or was. It is also the phenomenon that seems least likely in need of a definition, and therefore probably the most in need. There is probably no more adapted or well-known text in the English language than Charles Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*, which, in the popular *and* academic cultural consciousness is generally credited with *inventing* Christmas. While Christmas itself obviously precedes the nineteenth century, it seems impossible for the postmodern imagination to conceive of it without Victorian mediation. In fact, debate both political and critical swirls around the degree to which Christmas is something ancient, traditional, and by implication, *natural*; or something recent, ideological, and, troublingly, *invented*. The parameters of these debates have been largely defined by the recent “culture wars” staged for the outrage, or bemusement, of cable news viewers, but the essence of them filters into more arcane academic discussion of the relative influence of Charles Dickens. Of primary interest in this study is the fact that such a univocally joyous and festive holiday is nevertheless the focus of such debates. That there exists controversy surrounding something as seemingly innocuous as

Christmas is a clue that there is more to be discovered in exploring the phenomenon of Christmas than it has been previously afforded.

Consider, for example, a recent incident that was reported in December 2010, by mock pundit and culture warrior Stephen Colbert regarding a strange dialogue that emerged around New York City's Lincoln Tunnel. The society of American Atheists erected a billboard at the New Jersey entrance, proclaiming, "You KNOW it's a Myth – This Season, Celebrate Reason!" over an image of the nativity. In response, the Catholic League put up another billboard at the New York entrance, with the claim, "You Know it's Real. This Season, Celebrate Jesus." Colbert provided the requisite synthesis to these seeming antitheses with the punchline: "These billboards have prompted the Tunnel Authority to put up their own billboard: 'Jesus Christ! Watch Where You're Driving!'" [Figure 2]

Setting aside the fact that billboards have never been known as ideal vehicles of rational discourse, it is tempting to see in this exchange something elemental in our cultural experience of Christmas. At the very least, it raises some interesting questions. What would prompt a group like the American Atheists (who proudly note in their billboard a legacy of being "Reasonable since 1963") to instigate such a crudely aggressive assault in such a manner? What converts could such simple-minded sloganeering hope to gain? And what motive would compel the Catholic League to join battle in kind? Does anyone – Catholic or otherwise – really need reminding that Christmas is, as it were, "real"? What could this elephantine exercise in signification hope to accomplish?⁴

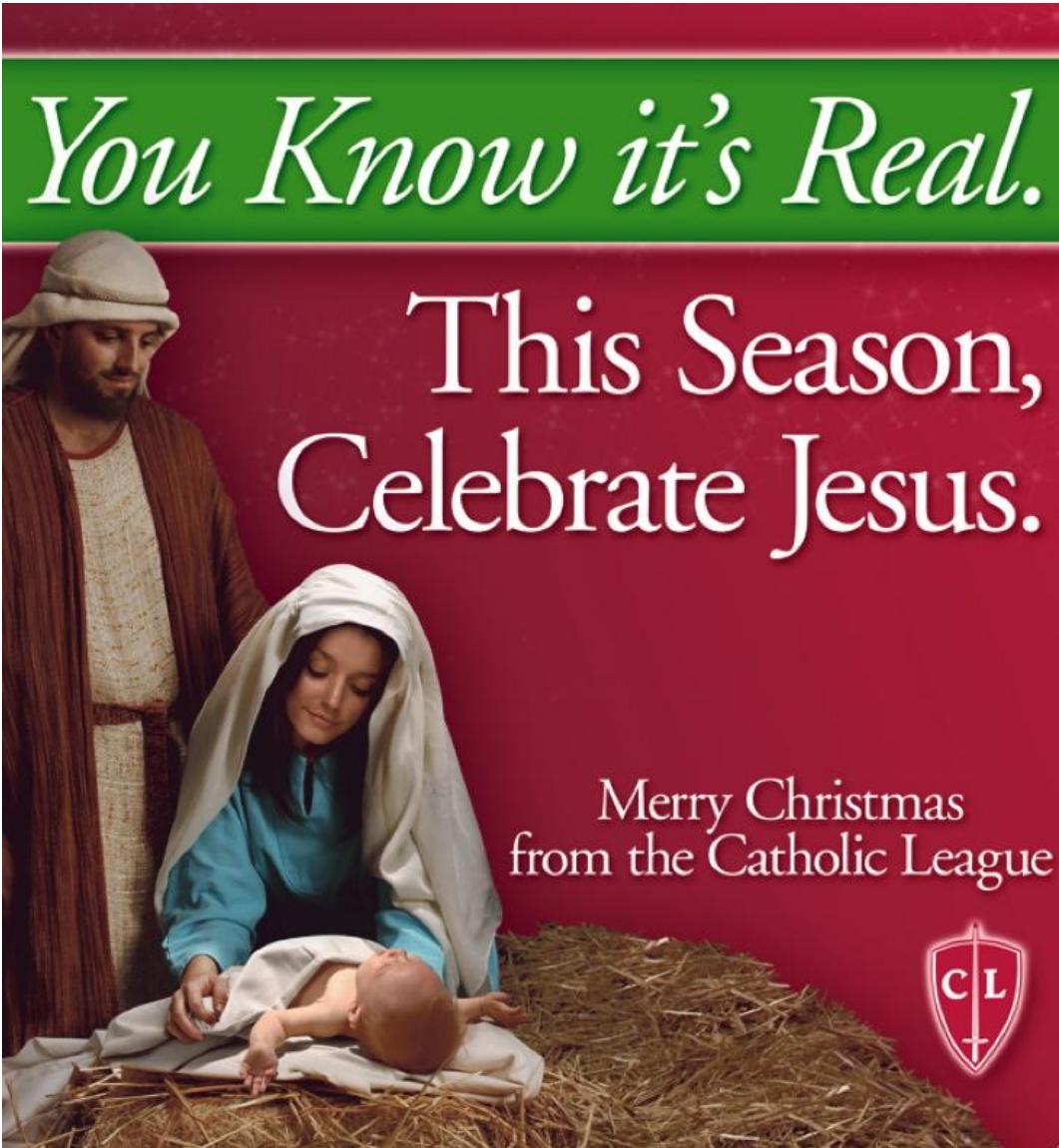


Figure 2: Christmas Billboards (2010)

The key to this exchange, I think, lies in Colbert's retort: "Jesus Christ, Watch Where You're Driving!" Isn't a statement of this kind demanded by the dueling billboards? There is an inevitability of progression in this accumulation of signs: just as something compels the reasonable atheists to hail us – "YOU know it's a myth": it is impossible to avoid this kind of direct address – the atheist's message cannot go unanswered. YOU know it's real. At this point, the emerging dialectic demands development. Isn't this, in a ludicrously simplified form, the Hegelian dialectic at work? The myth thesis is impossible without the antithetical idea that it is not myth but history we are dealing with: in order for Christmas to be a myth, it must be non-factual, and vice versa. But of course, these positions cannot rest by themselves. Their inherent contradictions must keep them moving, in this case, towards the rational avoidance of the conflict they enact: the answer to the challenge posed by these antithetical positions is to ignore them, and keep one's eyes on the road. In the process, presumably, the spirit of Christmas does its work, moving forward, perfecting itself, with and without our active acknowledgement.

In other words, it seems that, in a very Hegelian sense, the spirit, or *Geist*, of Christmas *itself* is erecting these billboards. What, after all, is the agenda of the atheists and Catholics? If not immediate conversion, the answer seems simply to raise a particular awareness of, and attitude toward, Christmas. Both signs use Christmas without making it the object of their respective arguments. In framing their plea, the atheists do not attack Christmas as such. They still urge "you" to celebrate your humanity this season. The Catholic sign uses almost the exact verbiage; it merely points out the spiritual "reality" of the "myth." On a purely grammatical level, the signs could

be read as saying almost the exact same thing. This seems to be inherent in Colbert's response: "Jesus Christ! Watch Where You're Driving!" authorizes its sensible advice with the name of the source of contention: the real-myth of the thesis/antithesis, Jesus Christ. It takes both the blasphemous stance of the first ad by using the name of Christ as an obscenity, and as the divine authority that backs up its command. The synthesis is also present in the phrase "Watch Where You're Driving!" The command asks that we pay closer attention, but by *ignoring* the claims of the previous billboards. The common element that drives the humor, intentional and unintentional, of this exchange is Christmas itself. What is interesting is that once we isolate Christmas as such from the arguments that swirl around it, the dialectical movement of the exchange suggests not that we pay closer attention to how we celebrate Christmas, but that we *take it as read*. In a way, Christmas problematizes itself in these billboards, only to reify itself as an object beyond the necessity of interpretation.

In other words, there seems to be a fundamental confusion between Christmas as *object*, and Christmas as *subject*. The ostensible object of these billboards is Christmas: *it* is what is either real or mythic, depending on the sign, and *you* are the subject hailed to read it. But at the same time, isn't Christmas the *speaking subject* of these signs? Notwithstanding the nominal sponsorship of the atheists and Catholics who paid for the ads, the subject addressing us is Christmas itself, asking us to read it alternatively as myth or reality, but in both cases, taking as read the demand that we celebrate it. Yes, the atheists and Catholics appropriate Christmas to deliver their message, but the message itself is neither atheism nor Catholicism as such – if it were, the arguments would presumably be less absurd. In fact, they aren't arguments at all: we are said in both cases

to *know* the truth, and the fundamental truth – Christmas as a season to be celebrated – is the same in both cases. The *ostensible object* which props up *either side* of each position is really a *universalized subject* which props up *both sides*.

This strikes me as a uniquely Žižekian moment of parallax. While each side talks past each other via inanities that can only exist because everyone supposedly takes them as granted, the real ideological drama occurs below the surface, as it were, in the disturbingly fundamental *agreement* of the two sides. An unseen univocity controls this debate. The Spirit of Christmas can be said to determine and overshadow the nominal “debate” that is the surface presentation of the hostility, anxiety, and absurdity that characterize the exchange. What is perhaps most interesting is that, given the desire to provoke, perhaps enrage, that these signs engage, no one could really claim to be shocked by them, even though they use Christmas as the occasion for such a confrontational exhibition. The banality of their message extends even to their sense of (and desire to?) outrage, making a satiric comedy program the only appropriate vehicle to deliver that message. In other words, isn’t this just another example of Christmas being used as the occasion for cultural frustration and discontent?

Couldn’t we look at this story as a metaphor, or even a real life example of all those Christmas movies that deal in neurotic suburban families engaged in ridiculous competition to “out-Christmas” each other for the sake of family respect, inevitably “ruining” the holiday in the process?⁵ It certainly raises the specter of the most reliable of Christmas narratives: what I would call the “Apocalyptic Christmas,” in which the holiday is so in danger of being corrupted or destroyed that the negative aspects of the narrative threaten to overwhelm the holiday cheer the narrative is nominally there to

dispense. Nearly every Rankin-Bass animated television special which ran from the mid-Sixties to early-Seventies followed this formula, from the existential despair of ‘Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer,’ to the cheerfully satanic ‘Year Without a Santa Claus’⁶ [Figures 3 and 4]. But one really need go no farther afield than Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* to see that the negative, the depressing, the horrific, never seem all that far from our most cherished Christmas stories.

In fact, the central question of this study is one that is rarely asked: why is Christmas, a season universally denoted as a time of joy and happiness, so often portrayed as a time of anxiety, dread, and even horror? Why do we always hear apocryphal reports of Christmas suicides? Why do Christmas movies so routinely tell the stories of people who are doing anything but enjoying themselves? Why is there a “War on Christmas?” Why is *A Christmas Carol*, that most beloved of Christmas narratives, a *ghost story*? Sociologists and anthropologists have supplied reasonable answers to many of these questions, but considering the narrative fecundity Christmas has occasioned since the publication of Dickens’ *Carol* in 1843, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to them by literary critics. If Christmas is, as I attest, a central – perhaps *the* central – cultural marker of not only Victorian hopes and joys, but their anxieties and fears, in short, the ultimate Victorian fantasy, and that fantasy has been passed down to this postmodern age undimmed and undiluted, making it the ultimate postmodern fantasy as well, and if that fantasy was created and perpetuated by the literary culture of the nineteenth century – if, in short, Christmas is, effectually, a literary creation – then, it seems to me the question of Christmas is one that needs to be addressed by literary criticism in a manner it has yet to do.



Figure 3: *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964)



Figure 4: *The Year Without a Santa Claus* (1974)

The remainder of this chapter will develop in more detail the background of the ideas and questions posed above. I will proceed with an examination of what Christmas is, or rather, *does*: how we experience Christmas, and how the historical development of Christmas as an idea shaped the Victorian conception – or re-conceptualization – of it. In the process, I will look at some key texts of pre-Victorian Christmas literature as a prelude to offering some provisional markers of what constitutes a specifically “Victorian” literary formulation of the holiday. I will examine some of the critical debate surrounding the renaissance of Christmas as a cultural object of interest around the turn of the nineteenth century, and consider the relations of that debate to the theoretical models that will frame my conception of the Victorian Christmas.

III

The first thing that Christmas does is precede us. It is, in that tired but inevitable phrase, always already there. This means that when we ask ‘what is Christmas?’ we are initially in a position to accept just about any answer we’re given. For example, I do not remember the first time I was told that Christmas was, effectively, “chestnuts roasting on an open fire,” but by the time I attained enough reason to understand what chestnuts and Christmas were, the answer was waiting for me. And that’s the second thing Christmas does: it provides answers to questions we have yet to ask. Christmas hails us. Before I ask myself what relationship between signifier and signified exists between chestnuts, open fires, and Christmas, Nat King Cole and company inform me that “everybody knows.” Everybody, myself included, *knows* what helps to make the season bright. It

requires only the Socratic recollection of a song, this song, “*The Christmas Song*,” to bring that knowledge forward. In fact, the entire structure of “*The Christmas Song*” is an exercise in Althusserian interpellation, from the comforting yet questioning two note fall with which it opens – two notes that, in their descent, sound the question the first line answers – to the lyrical progress from the “everybody knows” that opens the chorus to the “Merry Christmas to *you*,” which ends it. This seductive three minute invitation to pleasure is addressed directly to me, and places me within a universe in which chestnuts roasting on an open fire and Jack Frost nipping at my nose is self-evident reality.

Since “everybody knows,” I trust this song is known to you. Hasn’t every English speaking subject between one and ninety-two heard it many times, many ways? Because this is the third thing Christmas does: it repeats. As Christmas comes back the same time each year, so does “*The Christmas Song*.” The song, in fact, returns and repeats far more often than the day itself. Radio stations forgo their identifying formats and switch to playing only Christmas music, often in mid-November, a full month before the holiday. Public and private places and spaces trade in their usual sonic environments as well during this time, and similarly become arenas for Christmas music. As there is a limited repertoire of Christmas songs, and as primacy is given to the most popular tunes, there is a very good chance that one will hear “*The Christmas Song*,” arguably the most popular of modern Christmas songs, many times and many ways every day over a six week period. The reason this omnipresence is perceived as pleasure rather than torture is, of course, due to the fact that Christmas eventually goes away. Certainly there are those (perhaps you are one of them), who feel a vague oppression at being subjected to songs like “*The Christmas Song*” multiple times in a day (or in an hour, depending on

circumstances), yet resist the temptation to complain or resist, knowing that the season is short, and that this strange hegemony is fleeting and therefore special. Perhaps you actually breathe a sigh of relief when “The Christmas Song” begins again, its sophisticated opening notes a welcome respite from the more immediately, insistently irritating songs like “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” or “Here Comes Santa Claus,” which combine Gene Autry’s nasal drawl with simple repetitive structures to appeal to the equally simple and repetitive sensibilities of children, who, we are told, the holiday is really for. And, as you recollect your own childhood, and recognize “The Christmas Song”’s place within it – how *it* used to be irritating, because it was so *adult*, and you couldn’t wait to hear “Rudolph” again, one more time – you endure the repetition, because it is, after all, another recollection. This moment, were it to repeat forever, would, presumably, be a fair approximation of Hell. But by the very fact that it repeats – that in repeating, it goes away again, makes the moment not only tolerable, but strangely magical.

This is the fourth thing Christmas does, and is perhaps its most fascinating function: it contradicts. Always already there and always coming back, it is present yet absent. Completely self-evident yet utterly illogical, it is sublime nonsense. Composed of equal parts nostalgia and anticipation, Christmas is the example *par excellence* of Kierkegaard’s curious dialectic of recollection and repetition:

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, just in opposite directions, because what is recollected has already been and is thus repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards. Repetition, if it is possible, thus makes a person happy, while recollection makes him unhappy... (*Repetition* 3)

“Genuine repetition,” for Kierkegaard, is a moment where difference and similarity impossibly fuse, the search for which is a “dialectical battle through which the exception emerges from the universal” (77), and which is “as difficult as killing a man while letting him live” (78). Kierkegaard’s metaphor is striking in suggesting a simultaneity of violent event and merciful process, but perhaps more unnerving is the sense of agency it suggests: who or what is it that is doing the killing and pardoning? Isn’t this sense of agency an example of the en-ghosting parallax movement which subjectifies the object?

Freud appears to take up this issue of the agent of repetition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, while problematizing the distinction between happiness and unhappiness central to Kierkegaard’s conception. In this text, Freud witnesses his young grandson amusing himself by casting away a spool with thread tied around it and then pulling it back again repeatedly: the famous “fort/da” game (*fort* and *da* means “gone!” and “there!” in German). What fascinates Freud is the repetition involved, and the *lack* the action of casting the ball aside produces. On one level, the casting aside is obvious: it is the precondition of achieving the pleasure of getting the ball back. On another level, and this gets to the heart of Freud’s argument: why repeat the trauma of casting the ball aside in the first place? As Freud is always looking for first causes, he relates the game to a repetition of the trauma of losing direct access to the mother. The fort/da game, then, becomes an example of the “return of the repressed,” in which we take perverse pleasure in repeating something unpleasant. Previously, Freud had accounted for human behavior as the complex interaction of the pleasure principle and the reality principle: the pleasure principle is, in a way, life itself: it is the drive for pleasure, or happiness, which is

constantly running, and constitutes the main reason we operate in the world. Of course, in a world of others, one must modulate one's drive to pleasure, and so the reality principle intervenes, making sure we can follow our drive for pleasure in the most economically viable way by not getting in trouble by violating the pleasure of others (hence, "the law" as such). But since this basic dialectic does not account for taking pleasure in pain by perversely repeating trauma, there has to be something else at work. Derrida points out that in order for pleasure to be experienced as displeasure, and vice versa, a structuring agency, a subjectivity, has to be in place:

Science as objective knowledge, for example, cannot formulate the question of the quantitative evaluation of a qualitative – or to go quickly let us say ‘subjective’ – affect, one in which a subject is irreducibly engaged. As for the philosophical or usual concept of experience, one finds presupposed within it a knowledge or foreknowledge of what pleasure is, and of what ‘pleasure’ ‘means’; to use this concept implies that the ultimate criterion of something like pleasure or unpleasure, as well as their distinction, is conscious or perceptual experience, experience itself [...] (*Post Card* 287-8)

Someone or some subjectivized *thing*, in other words, has to exist and experience, in order for these concepts to make any sense.

This is where Freud introduces the idea of the death drive: a quasi-biological entropic force in which life seeks quiescence and inoperativity. The death drive is basically the dark matter of psychoanalysis -- a negative function that completes the tautology of the given discourse (just as dark matter and dark energy function in physics - - we don't see it, we only account for its presence/absence based on filling in the holes of what we think we see going on).

However hesitantly Freud introduces the concept in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), the death drive gradually takes center stage in Freud's work, until in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929), he essentially argues that society itself operates

with a massive death wish (not a surprising conclusion, seeing when he wrote the book). But even in this earlier text, Freud quickly becomes enamored with his idea: “The manifestations of a compulsion to repeat [...] plainly bear the stamp of drives, and wherever they are in opposition to the pleasure principle they equally plainly exhibit their *daemonic character*” (75, emphasis mine). Freud’s gift for mythmaking outpaces his nominally scientific goals here. While Freud admits his biological reasoning may “sound strange” (76), his personification of the death-drive as demonic requires no explanation. In exploring the dialectic tension between the life-drives and the death-drive which “presses [the human subject] ever onward, unbridled, untamed” (82), Freud quotes Mephisto in Goethe’s *Faust*, as if his death-drive were the Devil himself.⁷ This personification is the reconciliation of the contradictions of a drive which, operating under the injunction that “*the goal of all life is death*, or to express it retrospectively: *the inanimate existed before the animate*” (78), turns pleasure into displeasure, life into death. One could read the death-drive and its repetitions as an inverse form of Kierkegaard’s metaphor: “letting a man live, in order to kill him.” In this sense, happiness is intimately tied to destructive impulses, and perversely becomes a fundamental desire for *displeasure*. In order for this paradox to work, a psychologized version of Maxwell’s Demon comes into existence: a diabolic agency that necessarily arises in order to characterize and actualize otherwise unquantifiable drives and structures.

Is it too much of a leap to suggest that Christmas could just as easily fill the signficatory personification Freud assigns to Mephisto in characterizing his death-drive? Repetition, for both Freud and Kierkegaard, requires a leap. Christmas, which in recent

times has taken on some of the characteristics of a children's game, is an example of fort/da writ large. It certainly comes and goes, but underwriting the repetition is a fundamental principle: it has always been there.

Indeed, both mythically and institutionally, Christmas can be said to precede *itself*. The Gospel of St. Matthew, textually the first account of Christ's nativity, begins with a genealogy. Christmas, in this sense, begins by *following* Jesus's patrilineal forbears. The Gospel of St. John, of course, trumps this genealogy: "In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God" (1.1-2). Only later does the Word become flesh. The event of the nativity is preceded by its sign – the sign, in fact, is what *creates* the possibility of the event (1.3). The dialectical nature of Christ is further illustrated in this striking verse: "John testified to him by proclaiming: 'This is he of whom I said, "the one who comes after me ranks ahead of me, for he was before me.''" (1.15). The Russian-doll structure of this verse embodies the simultaneity of Christ's omnipresence and repeated coming: each quote, encapsulating the next, *leaps* toward the next idea while at the same time *containing* it. The oscillations between past tense and present, the movement of the subject "after, ahead, and before" create repetition while anchoring the contradictions within a single sentence.

The Gospels structurally situate Christmas as an event which, in preceding itself, can lay claim to being always already there. A similar phenomenon occurs in the formative institutionalization of Christmas as a holiday – an event to be recollected and repeated – in the mid fourth century. The first written record of Christmas that pins the birth of Jesus to December 25 is a Roman document from 354 called the Philocalian Calendar.⁸ The appearance of Christmas as a formal holiday in Roman records shortly

after the legalization of Christianity by the emperor Constantine is not in itself surprising. The adoption of December 25 to mark the date of the nativity is, however, an interesting development in the emerging dialectic of Christmas. In the first place, it is a clear example of the unusual way in which Christmas precedes us. There is, of course, no record that suggests that Christ was in fact born on December 25. And we have no record of the first year in which December 25 was recognized as the date (what was indeterminate for the fourth century Romans, is doubly indeterminate for us). For the authorities that first institutionalized the date, there must have been at least a vaguely blasphemous sense that, in decreeing a determinate number to reduce an indeterminate field of possibility, this – the first December 25 to carry this weight of theological meaning – was indeed the *first* Christmas. In simply assigning the number, Christmas emerges from its uncanny state as an ahistorical event lurking somewhere in the midst of history, to achieve an actual – if likely false – historicity. In becoming a fact, however fictional, Christmas finally can be celebrated, *for the first time*, three hundred plus years after it occurred.

However, as everybody knows, December 25 is not an arbitrary number. It marked the birthday of the pagan sun god, Sol Invictus. The assignation of the date to this god was no doubt inspired by the same convenience that attributed it to Christ, as December 25 was also the date of the winter solstice. Bookending the solstice were two pagan festivals: Saturnalia and Kalends, the latter a festival of the new year which involved the giving of presents, feasting, and heavy drinking; the former also involving feasting and even heavier drinking.

As Christmas was being institutionalized in the western empire, The Feast of the Epiphany was performing a similar function in the east. In a further dialecticization of Christmas, the Council of Tours in 567 officially joined the two holidays. The Twelve Days of Christmas run from December 25 to January 5, or from December 26 to January 6, depending on how it is counted, with Twelfth Night retaining the nickname “Old Christmas” well into the nineteenth century in Britain.

The necessary collaboration of the new state religion with older forms of religious celebration in order to ensure its own survival can probably be noted without further comment. What is of interest here is the further complication of the dialectic of Christmas that the institutionalization of December 25 adds to the nativity narrative. Christmas now not only precedes itself, it repeats, in conjunction with the very religion it replaces. This, as we will see, is not lost on the Puritans and their heirs, who find in Christmas something to be suspicious of, rather than an occasion to celebrate. When we see Christmas as the festival in which St. John’s *logos*, the universal Man-God, presides over the drunkest day of the Roman year, it is somewhat easier to grant the Puritans may have had a point.

The anxiety produced by the juxtaposition of the pagan and Christian, between solemnity and unfettered revelry, in the emerging holiday of Christmas explodes in an early example of Christmas literature in English, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. Christmas, of course, is a festive time in this most festive and delightful of plays, but that very festivity is the precondition of almost apocalyptic social chaos: women become men, servants become masters, the wise are shown to be fools and the sane are made to be mad. In one respect, this is the point of Saturnalia: the title makes clear that what we

will see is a feast of misrule. But in indulging so fluently the paradoxes of misrule, the play marks Christmas – as it is celebrated in the chaotic domestic space of Olivia’s house -- as a site of transgressive, potentially criminal behavior that makes dangerously fluid the demarcations between political, religious and cultural propriety.

Beyond the social chaos of *Twelfth Night*’s plot, there is a perhaps more fundamental dialectic at work. As Barbara Freedman notes in her Lacanian study of Shakespearean comedy, *Staging the Gaze*: “to read *Twelfth Night* is to take part in an intriguing game of lost and found” (192), a game that both diegetically, and in the reader’s interaction with the text, consists of multiple variations of *fort/da*. Separation and return make up the contrapuntal movement of the play’s various parts, a movement that seems to continue beyond the play’s ending. For all the apparent resolution of the marriages, there is a sense of irresolution and contingency to the nature of them: Olivia marries Sebastian thinking he is someone else, Orsino marries Viola in a spontaneous moment, eager to “have a share in this most happy wreck” (5.1. 259), and Sir Toby finally marries Maria in a pique of ennui following the torture of Malvolio. And these returns are all balanced by separations that further question the closure nominally provided by the marriages: Antonio, Sir Andrew, and Malvolio all leave Olivia’s house empty-handed, to the tune of Feste’s lament that “the rain it raineth every day.” Feste’s epilogue further complicates the sense of an ending in his final couplet: “But that’s all one, our play is done,/ And we’ll strive to please you every day” (5.1.394-5). The curious tense shift provides the parallaxic sense of finality and continuity, a movement from object (“our play”) to action (“we’ll strive”). As Feste’s final paradox, its *fort/da*

structure encapsulates in two lines the play's musical fugue of loss and return, highlighting the melancholy core that drives the desire for pleasure.

It is easy to read *Twelfth Night*'s melancholy as the key to its beauty, a delicate chiaroscuro that limns the play's nonsense with ultimate meaning. As with roses and women, that "die even when they to perfection grow" (2.4.40), so with *Twelfth Night*: sublimely tautological in its dialectic of death and life, loss and return. But what elevates the play above the status of an art object that offers a satisfyingly limited whole is its awareness of the *violence* that attends such beauty. Malvolio, of course, is the distasteful remainder which is expelled from the hermetic world of Illyria, and his abjectness, constituted by both his otherness and the cruelty his otherness occasions, comes to nauseate even the strong stomach of Sir Toby Belch. The true genius of *Twelfth Night* is not that it resolves its dialectical tensions through ultimate harmony, but that it attains an even greater sense of completion by including the discordant note that resides *outside* that harmony. It continues beyond itself, not only in Feste's epilogue, but in Malvolio's curse, which trumps the apparent universality of the revenges of "the whirligig of time" (5.1.364): 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you' (5.1.365). Malvolio's outrage lies outside everything, beyond "the whole," and as such, makes the whole that much larger. He is, as the excremental *objet petit a* of Illyria, *Twelfth Night*'s ghost. His pain is the libidinal occasion for everyone else's pleasure.

One is tempted to hear Malvolio's cry for revenge in Milton's "Nativity Ode" of 1629, in which an avenging newborn Christ consigns the "whole pack" of pagan gods to Hell. "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" begins, classically enough, with an invocation to the Muse, and proceeds to a vivid pastoral in which Nature and Heaven

“Move in melodious time” (129), the heavenly spheres in “ninefold harmony” (131), celebrating the Christ child who “lies yet in smiling infancy” (151). It is here that things get scary:

With such a horrid clang [...]
The aged earth aghast
With terror of that blast,
 Shall from the surface to the center shake;
When at the world’s last session,
The dreadful judge in middle air shall spread his throne. (157-164)

This leap from Christmas to the End of the World is justified because it is, in fact,

simultaneous:

And then at last our bliss
Full and perfect is,
 But now begins; for from this happy day
Th’ old Dragon under ground
In straiter limits bound,
 Not half so far casts his usurped sway,
And wroth to see his kingdom fail,
Swinges the scaly horror of his folded tail. (165-173)

This sense of the end present in the beginning, as well as a shift in viewpoint from the angelic to demonic, anticipates *Paradise Lost*, as does the strange ambivalence towards the satanic that accompanies the adoption of the perspective of the damned: we are made to hear the moans of the Roman household gods (191), the sullenness of Moloch (205), the frustration of the Egyptian gods (211-220), and the terror and confusion caused by “the dreaded infant’s hand” (222).

The apocalyptic fury of this poem is a mirror of the apocalyptic revelries of *Twelfth Night*. The Puritan poet finds his voice here, echoing the expansiveness of Shakespeare’s vision in creating a universe turned upside down. In both texts, “pleasure will be paid” (2.4.69), and the abject will be outcast. In the “Nativity Ode,” however, it

is the seemingly abject that casts aside the saturnalian universe itself. In both texts, Christmas is parallaxic: it is dialectically composed of simultaneously existing binaries: birth and death, pagan and Christian, happiness and terror. Both texts also recognize that the price of parallax is an indigestible, excremental remainder. As such, Christmas in these texts sublates the negative in order to more firmly establish it: in celebrating a whole, they also explicitly, paradoxically, take sides. The pleasure of Saturnalia requires the expulsion of the non-festive Malvolio; the glory of Christ requires the expulsion of the saturnalian. The parallax of Christmas in these texts is not the harmonic dialectic of either/or. It is the discordant dialectic of the harmonic *and* either/or.

This is the secret of Christmas: exceptional and universal, temporal and omnipresent, it cannot but be irreducibly *exclusive*. Like the Mephistophelian remainder that haunts Freud's *fort/da* universe, Christmas too, in its necessary creation of the abject remainder that parallaxically fills the gap between "gone!" and "there!," must be, to anyone celebrating it on either side of the parallax gap, intrinsically *satanic*. *Twelfth Night* and the "Nativity Ode" revel, in their separate ways, in this demonic quality. Christmas itself, from its institution in the fourth century, engages this dialectic: it is, for centuries, either a saturnalian harvest festival, or an embarrassingly pagan vestige which, in various times and places, is simply outlawed. If there is consistency in the history of Christmas, it is that its practice is inconsistent, vacillating through the centuries as a time for abandon, or, abandonment.

Until the nineteenth century.

IV

Besides Puritan attempts to outlaw the Christmas holiday during the Interregnum, and occasionally in the New England colonies, there is little mention of Christmas pro or con, literary or otherwise, until the nineteenth century⁹. The relative absence of Christmas during this period, and the subsequent explosion of Christmas texts that appear around the publication of Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol* in 1843, has led to perhaps the sole literary critical controversy currently surrounding the holiday: the claim that Dickens "invented" Christmas. David Parker, in his valuable study *Christmas and Charles Dickens*, notes:

‘The man who invented Christmas’ is a phrase coined by F. G. Kitton, just over a hundred years ago. It has rooted itself in Anglo-Saxon consciousness with all the uncompromising persistence of a computer virus. There is no getting it out, it seems, without extraordinary pains, and it is always likely to come back. (ix)

Parker himself nevertheless spends much of his book attempting to root it out, despite a sense that it may be “effort wasted anyway” (ix). Certainly Parker’s research, which catalogues nearly every mention of the holiday in literature from the medieval period to the Victorian era, is no wasted effort. However, the thesis his research is made to support, that “Dickens was inspired to write by Christmas, and that his writings inspired others to celebrate it” (14) does not seem to stray too far from the position he wishes to refute. Indeed, his claim that “many want to believe that Christmas, or ‘the modern Christmas,’ or ‘Christmas as we celebrate it today,’ was brought into being with little help, out of nothing or next to nothing, by texts Dickens wrote” (14), rather begs the question. Who are these fanatic Dickensians who claim he created the holiday *ex*

*nihilo?*¹⁰ Parker's stance seems more an attempt to open up a broader discussion of Christmas as such than a serious call to reign in idolatrous Dickensians.

Mark Connelly's *Christmas: A Social History* stakes similar ground, arguing against claims that Dickens, or the Victorians as such, 'invented' the holiday:

Invention just seems too strong a word, even reinvention doesn't quite fit the case. Perhaps rediscovery could be used, but even that fills me with reservations. It is the argument of this book that what Christmas became in the nineteenth century was an inflation, a beautifully augmented season, but it was not invented. (2)

Connelly goes on to make the valid point that the word "invention" is an inaccurate and reductive term that does a "huge disservice to the legion of antiquarians, folklorists and historians who delved through muniments, listened to tales of people across the length of the country, piecing the history of the English Christmas together. For them research and evidence were everything: is that invention?" (2) Connelly's question is of course rhetorical, but it is worth considering. If we leave aside the convenience of opposing such a reductive term as "invention," it remains to be asked – particularly in light of the vehemence leveled against the term by Connelly and Parker – to what degree is Christmas, particularly the Victorian Christmas (if we allow such a distinction) an invention?

I will make no claims in this study for Dickens as inventor, beyond the near-universal acceptance of his role as an inspirer, inflator, or embellisher of the season, but I am very interested in the "invention" of Christmas, not least because the idea is so repellent to so many experts of the holiday. We have seen the degree to which Christmas appears a *natural* phenomenon: it precedes and interpellates us in a way that we are, in a way, made to accept it. This may in part account for the resistance of some scholars to read the holiday as being crudely "invented." To place Dickens in the role of inventor –

even if only in a catchy nickname – is to place him uncomfortably *above* Christmas, to reduce Christmas in a way that makes a mockery of Connelly’s “legion” of scholars who attempt to make sense of Christmas. The binary in play here could be framed as that of *discovery* vs. invention. Surely on some level scholars “invent” in the activity of structuring their research and evidence, but only as a *discovery* of knowledge, of something that exists prior to the research and evidence can that invention be said to count. In other words, the object of inquiry needs to precede the subject – it must at least, on some level, *appear to be natural* – in order for it to be worth the attention of the subject investigating it. For Christmas scholars, Dickens must be de-emphasized. And for Dickensians (real or imagined), Christmas must be a creation of Dickens. That no one on either side of this argument believes in the final implication of their respective theses (Dickens invents Christmas *ex nihilo*; Christmas gains nothing from Dickens’ handling of it) is beside the point: there is something, somewhere, *threatening* Christmas in the term “invention.”

In describing the relative lack of reference to Christmas prior to Dickens, Parker interestingly characterizes the agents responsible for the holiday’s seeming decline:

For a century or so before 1812, many fashionable people had been behaving as if the more secular customs of the festival, if not the religious ones, were anachronisms, delighted in only by the vulgar, best forgotten, and soon to disappear. Christmas did all but disappear from the literary record during much of the eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth, some writers were beginning to lament its decline and predict its extinction. Others, however, continued to rejoice in the festival, but theirs are voices posterity has overlooked or neglected. They spoke for the unfashionable majority. Christmas had become a festival more plebian and bourgeois than patrician. It was looked forward to eagerly and celebrated ardently more by the have-nots than by the haves. (15)

There’s something a little Nixonian in this narrative of a silent majority of “just folks” quietly celebrating a traditional Christmas while “fashionable” elites sniffingly dismiss it

as a vulgar vestige. There are good guys and bad guys here, the former include “some writers” who “lament” the decline of Christmas and keep it alive. Characterized as such, Parker offers a holiday that exists outside of history – in a way, it fills the role *of* history – which is endangered by patricians who no longer have a taste for it, and is kept alive by the “unfashionable” (read: *real*) people. Christmas exists outside of the actors who celebrate or condemn it. It is *the thing*, a sign we read, rather than write. Parker admits that the evidence for this thumbnail sketch of the state of Christmas at the turn of the nineteenth century is “elusive and not always easy to interpret” (15), and indeed, there is quite another way to interpret this historical moment.

Stephen Nissenbaum’s seminal 1996 study, *The Battle for Christmas*, offers a different spin on the narrative. While the basic actors are the same, their various motives are read quite differently. Nissenbaum’s book largely focuses on the rise of Christmas in the United States (in the process largely avoiding the Dickens-as-inventor controversy), but his account of how different classes react to Christmas has interesting parallels to Parker’s narrative. Fashionable patricians, festive plebeians, and writers lamenting the absence of Christmas are all present. However, where Parker sees an elite that wishes to dispose of Christmas, Nissenbaum sees an elite that wishes to re-appropriate Christmas from an increasingly dangerous working class. In fact, Nissenbaum sees a nexus point between the creation of a working class as such, and the point at which feasts of misrule cease to be celebrations and become, in the eyes of the elite, threats:

...traditional Christmas misrule did not ordinarily pose a significant threat to the social order or to the authority of the gentry class. In fact, it actually served to reinforce the existing order of things by providing a sanctioned opportunity for the poor to let off steam; it was a safety valve that allowed them to express resentments in a fashion that was generally apolitical. Indeed, the form that misrule commonly took – that of inverting the ordinary social structure rather than

simply ignoring it – may have served to confirm the legitimacy of the status quo [...] But this would change as paternalism itself came to wither away as a dominant form of social relations [...] In this new setting, rituals of misrule began to assume a more clearly oppositional form [...] By the early nineteenth century, with the spread of wage labor and other modes of capitalist production in England and the United States, what I have chosen to call the ‘battle for Christmas’ entered an acute phase [...] The turn of the nineteenth century may have marked a historic low point in the celebration of Christmas among the elite. (51-52)

The decline of Christmas among the elite, for Nissenbaum, is not simply based on

distaste for vulgarity, but on *fear* of the vulgar classes. Nissenbaum goes on to note that:

By 1820 Christmas misrule had become such an acute social threat that respectable New Yorkers could no longer ignore it or take it lightly [...] By the 1820’s bands of roaming young street toughs, members of the emerging urban proletariat, were no longer restricting their street reveling to their own neighborhoods; they had begun to travel freely, and menacingly, wherever they pleased. Often carousing in disguise (a holdover from the old traditions of mumming), these street gangs marauded through the city’s wealthy neighborhoods [...] making] as much noise as they could, sometimes stopping deliberately at the houses of the rich and powerful. (54)

In both Nissenbaum’s and Parker’s accounts, there is a danger, a threat, surrounding Christmas. For Parker, the threat is *to* Christmas, in that it is in danger of becoming extinct. For Nissenbaum, the threat is *from* Christmas, as it is celebrated by a new, master-less working class. In both readings, the parallaxic object, Christmas, is the focal point for social and cultural confusion. In a sense, something that has not previously existed – an emerging urban, industrial proletariat, to use the Marxist definition – is being accounted for by something that is already there: Christmas.

This, I think, is the heart of the “invention” controversy. The question of what is being invented – capitalism, or Christmas? – is problematized by the parallaxic nature of the object, Christmas. Is capitalism being reified by the threat of Christmas, as Nissenbaum suggests? Or is Christmas an agent that will reify capitalism, as is implicit in Parker? The dialectical contradictions of Christmas begin to confuse the relationship

between subject and object: If, as in Parker's model, Christmas is something always already there, waiting to be *re-discovered*, then Christmas itself acquires an *ersatz* subjectivity in being the agent of social change. If, on the other hand, Christmas is the catalyst for working class mayhem, then it is, on some level, a tool, an *invention*, of the urban proletariat. Either model is unsatisfactory as a univocal statement on the nature of Christmas. If Christmas precedes and interpellates us: it cannot, strictly speaking, simply be an object of invention. If it can be invented, used, celebrated, then it is a *thing*, and not a subject. Parker and Nissenbaum's accounts on the state of Christmas at the turn of the nineteenth century illustrate the parallax gap that both splits and joins the dialectical subject/object that characterizes Christmas. Whether we use Christmas or it uses us, whether we invent it or discover it, we *encounter* it. It produces an uncanny intersubjectivity.

The strangeness of this encountering is aptly illustrated by Washington Irving's Christmas stories from *The Sketch Book* (1819). These vignettes describe the visit of the narrator to Yorkshire during the Christmas season, and his stay at Bracebridge Hall with a country squire who, contrary to other members of the gentry, is very enthusiastic in his celebration of Christmas, "provided every thing was done conformably to ancient usage" (927):

Here were kept up the old games of hoodman blind, shoe the wild mare, hot cockles, steal the white loaf, Bob apple, and snap dragon: the Yule log, and Christmas candle, were regularly burnt, and the mistletoe, with its white berries, hung up, to the imminent peril of all the pretty housemaids. (927)

Much of the tales are made up of detailed descriptions of these games and traditions, often with lengthy footnotes to describe their origins, and which emphasize that they are widely practiced in England at the present. The presence of these footnotes raises the

question: if these Christmas customs are so ancient and yet so widely and currently practiced, what need then is there for explanatory notes at all? One could, of course, argue their value to an American readership that is increasingly unfamiliar with its parent country. Or perhaps, as Nissenbaum claims, because those customs were *not* being widely and currently practiced:

It is, of course, an invention – ‘the invention of tradition,’ as the historian Eric Hobsbawm has dubbed this kind of self-conscious re-creation of old customs – and Irving knows that. In fact, he not only knows it, he even takes pains to let us in on the secret. The narrator’s description of the squire’s Christmas celebration is larded with such terms as ‘odd and obsolete,’ ‘quaint,’ ‘ancient,’ even ‘eccentric,’ and in a later edition of *The Sketch Book* Irving admitted that at the time he wrote the ‘Bracebridge Hall’ stories he had never actually seen the kind of Christmas he described in it. (58)

Irving actually seems to admit this in the opening of his first Christmas tale:

Nothing in England exercises a more delightful spell over my imagination, than the lingering of the holyday customs and rural games of former times. They recall the pictures my fancy used to draw in the May morning of life, when as yet I only knew the world through books, and believed it to be all the poets had painted it; and they bring with them the flavor of those honest days of yore, in which, perhaps with equal fallacy, I am apt to think the world was more homebred, social, and joyous, than at present. (911)

The holiday customs, which ignite his imagination, are themselves equated with his fancy, and seem complicit in perpetuating ideals he is aware are fallacious. The passage subtly suggests that the “honest days of yore” not only are no more, but never were. And yet, *something* in England is exercising a real spell over him. It is a fantastic recollection which stands in for a fallen present.

For Nissenbaum, Irving’s tales are in part an attempt to bring Christmas out of the streets – where the poor, the drunk, and the unruly encroach on middle-class decency – and into the home, a place, incidentally, where capitalism and the accumulation of consumer goods can thrive. The domestic idyll of Bracebridge Hall is a pastoral fantasy

that places the working poor – and the Christmas they celebrate – within a cozy domestic confinement that is safely contained by the genial surveillance of Squire Bracebridge.

If this is not yet the invention of a distinctly Victorian Christmas, it is certainly the beginnings of the discovery of it. The conversation between the past over the present, the creation of domestic space as a metonymic stand-in for the broader world, all will become hallmarks of Victorian Christmas literature. What is missing is an element that, if not unique to Victorian Christmas literature, is surely representative of it: the ghost.

To whatever degree we accept that Charles Dickens invents Christmas, that is to say, the Victorian Christmas, he does so via the introduction of two figures: the figure I call the “Christmas hater” and the ghost. These are figures, like chestnuts roasting on an open fire, which everybody knows. Because I will treat *A Christmas Carol* at greater length in the next chapter, and because *A Christmas Carol* is arguably the most well-known and oft-repeated story in the English language, I will gloss the central conceit of Dickens story: Ebenezer Scrooge, a man who hates Christmas, learns to love it through the redeeming powers of a quartet of ghosts. Scrooge, like Hamlet – another person made to spend time among ghosts – is difficult to see with fresh eyes: he allows even more improbable figures like the misanthropic grotesque, the Grinch, and the capitalist waterfowl Scrooge McDuck to enter our cultural consciousness without much notice. He also, I suspect, excuses those people we meet who casually refer to their own loathing of Christmas, and lets us read them as harmless cranks. We read the Christmas hater through Scrooge: we can’t take anyone’s claim that they hate Christmas seriously, because we have to assume that, like Scrooge, deep down, they really love it. This is in fact one of the defining characteristics of the Christmas hater: the nominal transgression

of hating Christmas is precisely that which places the Christmas hater in a privileged position. Paradoxically, the Christmas hater *really* loves Christmas more than the rest of us. The Christmas hater initially separates himself from Christmas only to more fully endorse it later. One can see a similar phenomenon in the comic book character Superman: his status as an extraterrestrial is precisely that which makes him *super*. He is the best of men because he is not, strictly speaking, a man at all. And he fights for “truth, justice, and the American Way” because he is the most illegal of possible aliens.

In this sense, Scrooge is not merely the descendent of *Twelfth Night*'s Malvolio. Malvolio certainly seems to hate Christmas (and we must assume he hates it even more by the end of the play), but his hatred does not constitute the ground of his love. The saturnalian Lords and Ladies of Misrule cast him out of Illyria, the play, and Christmas itself. Here is the crucial difference between the Victorian Christmas narrative and that which precedes it: rather than expunging the alien element of Christmas as Shakespeare and Milton do: Dickens *reincorporates* the alien, making him representative of that which he had previously opposed. Previously, the Christmas parallax is perceived from its various perspectives: Saturnalia rules the world of *Twelfth Night*; Christ rules that of the “Nativity Ode.” Both perspectives require an excremental remainder to be purged from the system, whether it be Malvolio, or the host of pagan gods Christ has come to replace. What distinguishes the Victorian Christmas is that the remainder is reabsorbed, because the Victorian Christmas does not view the parallaxic object from a relative stance. Rather, it creates a *parallaxic subject* which *de-relativizes* Christmas, making it truly universal. The parallaxic subject makes of the parallaxic object a limited whole, which, by collapsing the boundaries between dialectical opposites, makes the object –

Christmas – impossible to escape. The parallax subject here is the ghost: a figure that, like Christmas, operates within the parallax gap: neither dead nor alive, present nor absent, the ghost is a figure of transition which, in haunting its subject into an acceptance of its own in-betweenness, collapses the relative position of the subject it haunts. In other words, it makes Christmas haters like Scrooge into avatars of Christmas itself. The ghost universalizes the relative, and makes the contradictory coherent. It bridges the past and present, and nullifies the differentiating properties of time and space. If we conceive of the dialectic as process and evolutionary movement, the ghost – in spectrally embodying the dialectic itself – freezes that movement, and makes, for as long as it haunts, the immanent absolute.

The figure of the ghost can be said to be a personification of the dialectic. This can be seen not only in the title but the method of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where, insofar as the process of thought can be described, it takes on its own character, much as Kierkegaard and Freud invest it later. *Geist*, in the process of differentiation itself from pure being, becomes, as it were, a ghost. Marx, repudiating Hegelian idealism and philosophy as such for politics and economics, nevertheless does not give up the ghost. "A specter is haunting Europe," *The Communist Manifesto* famously begins, positioning a ghostly communism against the uncanny fetishism of commodity capitalism. The so-called "dialectical materialism" of Marxism cannot seem to avoid the metaphor of the ghost.

As I have already suggested, the spectral is neither idealist nor material, but parallaxic. This distinction will allow us to avoid some of the nebulosity that has characterized theoretical engagement with the spectral over the past two decades, a

period in which the term “hauntology” has gone from a Derridean joke to a lively branch of post-structuralist theory. Though Derrida coined the term “hauntology” in *Specters of Marx*, his interest in ghosts and haunting goes back to the mid-seventies, when he encountered the work of the psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, who developed a theory of trans-generational haunting in numerous essays. Abraham and Torok’s ghost is the product of unfinished business: it is created by the incorporation of the psychic trauma of the patient’s ancestors (Abraham and Torok’s approach is mainly clinical). Using *Hamlet* as an example, Abraham and Torok point out that Hamlet’s problems stem not from his own psychic trauma, but that of his parents. In this sense, the ghost complicates the Freudian notion of the return of the repressed: what is repressed is often not the subject’s own Oedipal trauma, but the “crypt” formed in the patient to make room for the trauma of ancestors. Abraham and Torok’s ghost both is and is not “real”:

It is a fact that the ‘phantom,’ whatever its form, is nothing but an invention of the living. Yes, an invention in the sense that the phantom is meant to objectify, even if under the guise of individual or collective hallucinations, the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object’s life. The phantom is therefore also a metapsychological fact: what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others. (*The Shell and the Kernel*, 171)

The phantom is a foreign body that fills a gap, forms a crypt within the subject, and “works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject’s own mental topography,” and, “by their gratuitousness in relation to the subject, they create the impression of surrealistic flights of fancy or of [...] verbal feats” (173).

It is the “verbal feats” of the phantom that capture Derrida’s imagination. In particular, Abraham and Torok’s *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, re-opens Freud’s famous case study of the polyglot fetishist Sergei Pankeiev by conducting a close reading of the multi-lingual suggestiveness of the Wolf Man’s language describing his fantasies and

nightmares. This excites Derrida's own penchant for multi-lingual word play. For Abraham and Torok, the "crypt" which houses the Wolf Man's ghosts holds the key to interpreting the gaps in meaning in the Wolf Man's utterances. For Derrida, this crypt takes on a much broader significance. In his foreword to *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, Derrida takes up the idea of the crypt, and expands it in his typically diffusive manner. If the crypt for Abraham and Torok is the fountain from which the Wolf Man's singular verbal play emerges, for Derrida, it becomes the locus for the problematization of language itself. In asking what the crypt *is*, Derrida suggests that if Abraham and Torok's conception allows us to "no longer consider the name 'crypt' as a metaphor in any ordinary sense, would perhaps to be to go on – starting with psychoanalysis and, within it, starting from a new cryptology – to an anasemic retranscription of all concepts [...]” (xiii). In other words, the crypt can not only help the psychoanalyst to interpret and, as it were, "decrypt" the Wolf Man's enigmatic words, but it can disrupt our sense of meaning for all words. Cryptology effectively becomes another word for deconstruction.

Indeed, this is how Derrida will approach the subject of ghosts in his later writings. In *The Post Card*, Derrida applies his conception of trans-generational haunting to Lacan's *Seminar on the Purloined Letter*, and its inspiring text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, meditating on them in various genres. The first half of the book is a mock-epistolary novel that obsessively ruminates on a post-card that pictures Socrates writing while Plato speaks. This disruption in chronological and philosophical order – Plato *before* Socrates??? -- provides the basis for his overarching critique of psychoanalysis, and what he sees as reductive in Lacan's famously gnomic claim that "a letter always reaches its destination." Here too, the ghost who haunts is a ghost who ultimately

subverts our sense of the order of things, problematizing textuality and language. Lacan's project could be reductively described as decentering the subject in showing the primacy of the structuring effects of language and signification, which, in effect call into question the very idea of the subject. In effect, the subject is negated in that it is always being constructed by an always moving (in Lacan's 1970 seminar *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, which explores the fluid position of the "master signifier," this movement is literally a *rotation*) process of subjectivity that constitutes the symbolic order. In short, there is no subject, but endless subjectivity. Derrida certainly sees this as reductive, and, in a sense, this is what gives birth to "hauntology." For Derrida, the ghost is a figure which moves *outside* of both subject and subjectivity.

In a way, Derrida's appropriation of Abraham and Torok becomes his means of dealing with Lacan. For Derrida, the Lacanian "letter" is the tyranny of the Big Other, and the crypt and its ghost are, in their "anasemic retranscription of all concepts" the antidote to this tyranny. As Ruth Parkin-Gounelas observes: "Non-present presence, pre-originary anteriority: in the spectre's defiance of space and time, Derrida finds the embodiment of his most consistent project, the deconstruction of the metaphysical desire for presence and origin" (*Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* 128). The Lacanian master signifier is the very presence of that desire which so disturbs Derrida, and constitutes the opposition he sets up between himself and Lacan throughout *The Post Card*.

So, if Derrida is the touchstone of hauntology, he himself, in defining his notions of spectrality around those of others, sets up other possible hauntologies. We have Derrida vs. Abraham and Torok, and, of course, Derrida vs. Lacan. Colin Davis, in his

study *Haunted Subjects: Deconstructions, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*, outlines the theoretical boundaries of hauntology, and clearly marks the distinction between Derridean spectrality, and that outlined by Abraham and Torok. For Abraham and Torok, and for psychoanalysis in general, ghosts are insidious *things*, which can and should be exorcised:

From its origins in the texts and the practice of Freud, psychoanalysis had been directly concerned with haunting and the uncanny, with the ways in which we continue to relate to the dead, and with our hidden endeavours, in love or in hate or both, to preserve or to kill off the traces of past generations. Abraham and Torok's distinctive contribution to the understanding of psychoanalytic haunting lies in their conception of the phantom as the traumatic remnant of an ancestor about whom we may know nothing, and who survives in us because of unatoned crimes which are not our own. It is not the repressed which returns to wreck our lives, but the shame of others. And Abraham and Torok also give back to psychoanalysis the positivist ambition which Freud entrusted to it from the beginning, but which his own case studies only indecisively justify: the truth can be known, and we will be better for knowing it; moreover it is possible to cast off the bitter legacy of the dead in order to learn to live with them in love rather than pain. (82-3)

But if Abraham and Torok's ghosts can be de-crypted and exorcised, Derrida is interested in doing neither. His aim "is not to reveal to the content of the ghost's secret; rather, he aspires to learn to attend to its mystery, to hear within it the rumbling of what has yet to be understood" (88). Instead of dismissing the ghost, Derrida

[...] wants to allow the ghost to return, both as a legacy from the past which has yet to be settled and as the promise of a future which remains to be conceived. Abraham and Torok's ghosts are liars to be denounced; Derrida's ghosts cannot lie because they cannot tell the truth, but they may be the mediators of new forms of knowledge. To put it schematically, deconstruction is about learning to live with ghosts, psychoanalysis is about learning to live without them. (88-9)

Hauntology, then, is split between two approaches, which, while intimately related, can also seem mutually exclusive.

As I suggested at the outset, Žižek's theory of the parallax gap offers a third way to theorize the spectral, which, while blending psychoanalytic and deconstructive approaches, avoids the limitations of both Abraham and Torok's clinical model, and Derrida's more abstract conception. If Abraham and Torok devise a theory largely motivated and structured around the individual, and Derrida's ghost operates as a kind of metaphysical universal, the parallaxic ghost inhabits a middle ground: neither universal nor individual, it is itself the exception of the universal that offers the very short circuit through which to read the universal. In short, the parallaxic ghost is a specifically cultural ghost, defined by the specific oppositions that create it, subjectivize it, and cause it to objectify the subjective perspectives that engendered it. It is as tautological as the Derridean ghost, yet it more directly reflects the environment that it haunts. More, the universal exceptionalism of the parallaxic ghost – the gap in the whole which, precisely because of its negative relation to the whole, is in a unique position to define it – helps to define the revolutionary shift in the meaning of Christmas in the nineteenth century. It is the Victorian Christmas Ghost who, through the literature it haunts, defines the Victorian Christmas we continue to celebrate today. If Christmas previously was a site that expelled the *objet petit a*, or, if you will, exorcized its ghosts, the Victorian Christmas incorporates the *objet petit a*, making the ghost the ideological *spokes-ding* of Christmas. It is a Christmas composed in equal measures of joy and dread, anxiety and comfort: a schizoid holiday which universalizes and univocalizes the revolutionary multiplicity of a culture confronted with the specters of industrial capitalism, Darwinian evolution, and innumerable social forces and fractures which repeat and resonate into our postmodern

present. Christmas, in its Victorian formulation, becomes an ideological cultural juggernaut: inescapable, and, in the Deleuzean sense, always reterritorializing.

In the chapters that follow, I will examine in more detail the cultural and ideological implications of Victorian Christmas narratives and their ghosts, and how they react to the social forces and pressures of the time, homogenizing them into something we might call coherently Victorian. Each chapter will focus on a specific social problem and its oblique refraction through the Christmas literature that addresses that issue. In Chapter One, I will focus on the “inventor” of the Victorian Christmas, Charles Dickens, and that inaugural, perennial text, *A Christmas Carol*. Here, I will explore how Dickens created a new type of ghost, one that, in using Christmas to reconcile the contradictions and horrors of industrial capitalism, revolutionized Christmas itself: transforming it from a localized seasonal holiday to a universal commandment to “Enjoy!”

In Chapter Two, I will examine some of the results of this commandment, and the price to be paid for living under a cultural injunction to be happy. The fluid dialectic between joy and mourning, and its ghostly character will be explored in Christmas literature that is suffused with uncertainty and anxiety both personal and social. Christmas, precisely because of its universalizing pressure to enjoy, becomes a site of mourning that makes the personal social and vice versa. It also becomes a site of dealing with the disturbing implications of Darwinian evolution. The psychological landscape of Christmas, in texts like Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, comes to mirror the anarchic flux of geological time.

In Chapter Three, I will explore the relationship between Christmas and one of the more ubiquitous social issues of the Victorian period: “the woman question.” I will show

how the universalizing tendencies of the Victorian Christmas collide with the universalizing abstractions of femininity. If narrativized Christmas is a site of parallax and spectrality, so is the narrativized woman: a ghostly exception with the uncanny power to become indeterminately universal.

Chapter Four will consider the primary beneficiaries and nominal *raison d'être* of Christmas: children. If the Victorian period can be said to have contributed to the invention of the idea of children, it also notoriously abused them. This distinction will be shown to be less oppositional than it seems: the sinister side of Christmas ghosts will be most evident in this chapter.

The reader will perhaps already discern an Oedipal frame determining these chapters. This is not an accident. In both the Freudian and Deleuzean sense, the Oedipal triad is the molecular structural unit of society. Even Margaret Thatcher's notorious claim that "there is no such thing as society" made due allowance for the existence of families. As Hegel points out in *The Philosophy of Objective Spirit*:

The proper beginning and original foundation of states has rightly been equated with the introduction of *agriculture* and of *marriage* [...] This is accompanied by the restriction of sexual love to marriage, and the marriage bond is in turn extended to become a lasting and inherently universal union, while need becomes *care for the family* and possession becomes *family property*. (203.a)

Leaving aside the contentious nature of Thatcher's position (to say nothing of Freud or Deleuze's), the idea that the Oedipal structuration of the family unit not only is the catalyst of civilization, and what we might go further to call culture and society, but the mechanism which keeps it in operation, is perhaps the most parallaxic, ghostly idea of all. The family, Freud and Deleuze might both claim, albeit from different positions, is where repetition starts. If anything can be said to be always already there, it is the family.

It's probably no accident that Freud is the primary theorist of both the family and the ghost, for from the psychoanalytic perspective, they operate along very similar lines. If generations of theorists keep returning to Freud – like Deleuze, promising nominal attempts to bury him – it is because he has become akin to that primordial murdered father from *Totem and Taboo*: an inescapable reference point whose fate is to haunt into perpetuity. Perhaps that's why, when we speak about Freud or ghosts, our initial impulse is to rid ourselves of them. Are there two words with more power to arouse skepticism when mentioned than “Freud” or “ghost”? As signifiers, they exist as spirits that, as we consistently claim to disbelieve them, attest to our need to be exorcized of them. Conversely, when we speak of family or Christmas, our impulse is hold onto them, to pretend they are forever. Are there two words with more power to make us forget about ideas like ‘structuration’ or ‘ideology’ than ‘family’ or ‘Christmas’? Yet is there a greater, more uncanny shame than the secret wish we sometimes have to be rid of them as well?

At its heart, it is our tendency to believe, and disbelieve, that is at issue here. More importantly, the question of what *makes us* believe and disbelieve, and what makes us desire to do so, is the fundamental impulse of this inquiry. The paradoxical sense that we may not want to believe in what we profess to believe, and vice versa, is a question that, I think, goes beyond purely ideological considerations and perhaps even psychoanalysis. It is a question of hauntology.

If “family” often seems to be the Lacanian “master signifier” – the transcendent sign which puts all others in their place, it is also, like Scrooge, decorated trees, carols, cards, and Santa Claus, one of a multitude of Christmas memes that, though only a part of

what we call Christmas, effectively define it. What is of interest here is how these singularities come to define the universal, and how literature played a part in creating that parallactic shift from exception to whole, from object to subject. If Christmas to date has received little attention of this kind, it is perhaps because its claims to universality have been appealingly cloaked in a charming package of exception, asking us only to enjoy it. But Christmas, like family, has become an elementary structure, one so constitutive of our reality that it seems hardly worth mentioning as an object of study. We already know it. It is the hope of this study that taking a closer look at the familiar ghosts of Christmas past will let us know differently, perhaps disturbingly, what we have for too long known all along.

¹ See in particular: Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*.

² The film is filled with silent-movie era in-camera special effects which, while not Victorian themselves, draw attention to the movie's manufactured 'old-fashionedness.' Much as many of the BBC adaptations of Jane Austen are often mistaken as "Victorian" – in part because they often knowingly replace Regency fashions with Victorian ones, postmodern visual culture seems to create a vortex of representation in which neighboring periods are sucked into a cultural imaginary which denominates the Romantics and Edwardians as generally "Victorian."

³ Lacan's reading of *Antigone* from *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* is among the most accessible and compelling in his body of work. Lacan anticipates not only hauntology, but Giorgio Agamben's related concept of *homo sacer*, and Alain Badiou's theory of Event in defining the axis point where Antigone's peculiar power resides: at the point that she removes herself from the symbolic order that Creon oversees, and symbolizes her own death. Antigone is actualized, becomes potent, at the moment of her greatest self-victimization:

[...] the moment she crosses the zone between life and death, that is to say, when what she has already affirmed herself to be takes outward form. She has been telling us for a long time that she is in the kingdom of the dead, but at this point the idea is consecrated. Her punishment will consist in her being shut up or suspended in the zone between life and death. Although she is not yet dead, she is eliminated from the world of the living. (280)

Antigone makes herself a ghost: first she makes herself a corpse, and then she invests that corpse with the meaning of her life. She turns herself into a subjectivized object in the space between two deaths.

⁴ It poses a real challenge to the imagination to visualize a hypothetical commuter emerging from either end of the tunnel transformed by these messages: is it even possible for a New Jersey Christian to enter Manhattan a liberated atheist, or vice versa? One is led to the disturbing prospect of a round-trip producing a harrowing existential whipsaw of Christian-atheist-Christian to the most susceptible motorists.

⁵ This dubious genre seems to have gained its legs in the mid-nineties, with movies like *Jingle All the Way*, and the more reputable *Home for the Holidays*. *Deck the Halls* and *Christmas with the Kranks* are more recent examples. These movies tend to ostensibly critique the consumer culture of the holiday, to the point of drawing the celebration of Christmas itself into question, but invariably retreat to a final position that reifies the "real" spirit of Christmas by the final reel. I am indebted to my colleague Eric Dunnum – who shamelessly expressed a real regard for *Christmas with the Kranks* – for this observation.

⁶ The sense of loneliness that pervades "Rudolph" struck me while watching it alone in a hotel in Bruges on Christmas Eve, after flipping away from a documentary on the suicide of Kurt Cobain. To be fair, such circumstances could suggest the downbeat in nearly any text. Still, the trauma of Rudolph's solitary *bildungsroman*, his encounter with the forsaken souls of the Island of Lost Toys, and the background of an ailing and ineffectual Santa Claus (a major theme in these Rankin Bass productions), validate, I think, my reading.

‘The Year Without a Santa Claus’ is less well known, but just as interesting. It involves a kind of cosmological battle that arises between two sinister forces of nature, the Heat Miser and his brother the Snow Miser, in the midst of a power vacuum left by the absence of Santa Claus. Santa, of course, eventually effects a compromise between the two parties, illustrating, as usual, the universalizing powers of Christmas.

The Cold War background of these programs is hard to miss, though it really comes to the fore in one of the bleakest, if not *the* bleakest, Christmas specials ever produced: 1964’s Rod Serling scripted ‘Carol for Another Christmas,’ an explicitly anti-war reading of *A Christmas Carol* that features a post-nuclear landscape as the setting for Christmas Future.

⁷ Derrida makes much of Freud’s devil in *The Post Card*. He rightfully sees this devil as akin to the sense of the diabolic which Freud theorizes in *Das Unheimliche*, and reads him as a kind of ghost:

[...] the devil comes back [*revient*] in a mode which is neither that of an imaginary representation (of an imaginary double), nor that of an apparition in person. His way of coming back [*revenance*] defies such a distinction or opposition. Everything occurs and proceeds as if the devil ‘in person’ came back [*revenait*] in order to double his double. So, as a doubling doubling his double, the devil overflows his double at the moment when he is nothing but his double, the double of his double that produces the ‘*unheimlich*’ effect. (270)

In spite of some of the near-self-parodying Derridese, there is an exhilarating sense of the indeterminate in these lines. However, since my purpose is to attempt a determination in spite of indeterminacy, I break with Derrida in his claim that this ‘revenance’ lies outside the opposition he poses: the numerous examples of Christmas ‘devils’ we will meet in these pages refutes, I think, the idea that this conceptual ghost receives no imaginary representation. Whether or not these representations appear ‘in person’ I leave to each reader’s discernment as to the ‘reality’ of literary characters.

⁸ Historical information on this period is drawn from Bruce David Forbes’ *Christmas: A Candid History*. Berkeley: UC Berkeley P, 2007.

⁹ Significant exceptions include Joseph Addison’s *Spectator* essay of 1712, “Christmas with Sir Roger,” and Sir Walter Scott’s 1808 poem *Marmion*, both of which highlight seasonal festivity.

¹⁰ Parker cites Peter Ackroyd’s 1990 biography as an offender. Ackroyd does use the phrase (34), but in the context of describing how Dickens celebrated the holiday as a youth, prior to writing the *Carol*. This in itself would seem to belie the extremism Parker accords him. Les Standiford’s 2008 book, *The Man Who Invented Christmas* also is clearly not shy of using the phrase, but his measured history is, despite a few understandable lapses into hyperbole, arguably less Dickens-centric in its examination of Christmas than Parker’s.

**Chapter One:
A Christmas Card Always Reaches Its Destination**

*But the flock sat on, divinely flustered,
Sniffing, methought, its dew of Hermon
With such content in every snuffle,
As the devil inside us loves to ruffle.*
--Robert Browning, *Christmas Eve*

I

In late 1843, during the period Charles Dickens composed his *Christmas Carol*, Sir Henry Cole, a successful businessman, inventor, and writer, was faced with a problem: too many people to send Christmas greetings to, and not enough time to do so. Cole was a man of unusual energy and accomplishment in a diverse field of endeavor, and in that respect, can be considered a typical Victorian gentleman. As well as writing a series of popular children's books, designing the first postage stamp, and founding what would become the Victoria and Albert Museum, Cole served as the first General Superintendent of the Department of Practical Art, a tentacle of the burgeoning Victorian bureaucracy Dickens would come to satirize in his later novels. Cole is most remembered, however, for the creation of one of the most successful examples of practical art, the Christmas card.

The creation of the Christmas card was occasioned by the same factors that have sustained its popularity to the present day: the lack of time to communicate with friends, family, and business associates during the holiday season. In order to keep up with his social obligations, Cole made the principals of Victorian industrial capitalism work for

him. He commissioned the London illustrator John Calcott Horsley to design and print one thousand lithographed cards,¹ enough to fill Cole's needs, and to sell a large quantity of remainders at one shilling each. Cole and Horsley's Christmas card illustrates how art and industry can work hand in hand: as both a cultural milestone and shrewd business move, the card immediately inscribed Cole's family, friends, and associates within a narrative of Christmas pleasure that interpreted and narrativized Cole's role as a capitalist, while simultaneously increasing his capital.² In this sense, the first Christmas card can be seen as both a cultural artifact and an economic engine – factory *and* fabric.

The card's compact yet complex visual field speaks to its recipients as both private citizens and social subjects. In the center of the card, a middle-class family presides over a table well stocked with food and drink. A formidable brood of children dig in -- oblivious to the audience they have been drawn for, while a genial, balding patriarch and his modest, smiling wife raise their glasses to the spectator. Their inviting gaze is corroborated by a sign beneath them, proclaiming, "A Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year to You." The family portrait is flanked by images of a young man bringing food to the poor, and a young woman clothing a destitute woman and her infant. The effect of the whole suggests a secularized mediaeval triptych, as well as a compact, yet broad visual call to enjoyment of the comforts of family, with an eye towards social justice. The visual field of the card achieves a kind of spectatorial suture within its text: present in the direct gaze of the father and mother, as well as in the specific-yet-generalized appeal to "You" in the verbal content, is an invitation to intimacy. This appeal is nevertheless belied by the blank lines after the words "To" and "From," in which the direct addressees of this mass produced artifact are, in effect, addressed as a

mass. The card is therefore both public and private, and acquires a curious power in its multivalent form of address. It seems likely – or at least, it is pleasant to imagine – that at least one person celebrating Christmas in London in 1843 was in possession of both Cole and Horsley’s Christmas card, and Charles Dickens’ newest literary production, *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens’ book went on sale for five shillings; add to that the shilling for the card, and the total cost would equate to roughly fifteen dollars today – certainly enough to merit some reflection on the nature and use of these new productions. Our hypothetical Victorian consumer might find in these texts occasion to muse on their novelty in a manner quite different from consumers of today, who are part of a culture that circulates 1.9 billion cards a year in the U.S. alone,³ and can expect new adaptations and permutations of Dickens’ *Carol* yearly.

One strange quality our Victorian consumer might note in contemplating the first Christmas card and the first edition of *A Christmas Carol* is the fact that both texts purport to be something they are *not*. A Christmas card is by its very nature a substitute for normal correspondence. It exists because it is not the *letter* it would have been had the sender the time to write it as such. It can be defined by the fact that it is different from a letter. It is tacitly understood today that the arrival of a Christmas card by a loved one, or by someone we do business with (or from someone who would like our business) is something that is simultaneously being received by someone else. Again, given the normative role Christmas cards play in current holiday discourse, this is a fact that is rarely elaborated upon. But for a recipient of the first Christmas card, one can imagine that in seeing their name written on a blank line, overshadowed by the official “To” of the printer’s ink, an uncanny sense of plurality, of multiplicity, descend upon her: this



Figure 5: The first Christmas Card. Sir Henry Cole and John Calcott Horsley

“letter” which speaks directly to me, which has been delivered to my home, is also speaking to someone else, perhaps many others. The Christmas card makes explicit what is implicit in the genre of the letter: this two-way circuit of communication between us, this private intercourse, is being monitored – it has an audience which we are a part of, but cannot see in its entirety, and do not, finally, *know*. As a letter that is also not a letter – the agent of an apparently dialogic communication that is in actuality a mass communication, the Christmas card occupies a cultural space that is both intimate and diffuse. In proliferating its message, the suggestion to “Have a Merry Christmas” becomes more of a command.

This is the conceit Dickens’ adopts in *A Christmas Carol*, both in its title, and in the rhetorical moves of its narrator. Dickens offers this song in prose, with chapters that call themselves staves, to an audience he seems to address personally. By the third paragraph of the first staff of the book, liberal use has been made of the first and second personal pronouns, a playful “To” and “From” that is unique to Dickens’ fiction, and, just as the Cole/Horsley Christmas card seems to expand the audience of the letter, the *Carol* seems to rhetorically contract the audience of the novel. The genre of the *Carol* is indeed unusual for Dickens. He had written five and a half novels and innumerable stories and sketches when he began the work, but the *Carol* itself was the first of what might unsatisfactorily be called a “novella,” and he would only use the form four more times in his career, all of which were Christmas books modeled to greater or lesser degrees on the *Carol*. In calling the book, as a whole and in its parts, something it was not, Dickens seems to be calling attention to the uniqueness – formally and stylistically – of its

production. Like the Christmas card, *A Christmas Carol* achieves a polyvocal effect that, in demanding intimacy and generality, makes of its appeal a kind of injunction.

If the structures of these texts seem to announce something strange and contradictory, something new in the history of literary production, their narratives seem also to advance meanings that are paradoxical and unsettling. If *A Christmas Carol* explicitly raises “the Ghost of an Idea,” as Dickens’ has it in his Preface, that ghost seems uncannily, simultaneously present in the first Christmas card as well. Let us consider again Horsley’s triptych, with its drowsily contented family seated at a table of plenty, so satiated they seem ready to burst out of a frame that surrounds them with images of poverty and want. The idea of feeding and clothing the poor, while not one that is mutually exclusive to a holiday family feast, does seem oddly juxtaposed here. The cramped, brimming frame which seats the family is visually at odds with the austere action transpiring about it. The family itself is oblivious to the good deeds going on around them, almost defiantly so, given the way the mother and father address the spectator. What is to be made of these seemingly contradictory messages? Are we to feast with our family, or help those in need? Are we to be grateful for the blessings of the season, or concerned with the suffering that blights it? The card does offer an answer to these questions: Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

It is difficult to define, given the nature of the card, *who* precisely is delivering this injunction to happiness. It might be Sir Henry Cole, though the fact that a number of the cards were sold to other senders makes this less than definitive. It could be Horsley, though his service at Cole’s behest makes his claim less than authoritative. We could go by whatever name is printed in the line following “From,” though for reasons explored

above, the sender, like the addressee, becomes less than fixed when multiplied. Perhaps the greatest claim to authorship of the command to have a Merry Christmas is the blank line itself. After all, if anyone can write one's name in the blank, isn't the blank itself the more authoritative statement – the one that universalizes and transcends the hypothetical, hand-written name it will couch? The line and the blank remain stable, while any name could potentially fill the blank. The authority resides in the possibility of writing, rather than the contingent writing that will ultimately fill the void. In this blank line we discover another paradox of narrative: an author who is not an author, a sender who is not a sender, a presence/absence. It is, in a Derridean sense, “not a living individual, not, as one says, a real subject, but a specter...” (Specters 146). A ghost, then, offering a “Ghost of an Idea.”

Readers of Lacan, particularly his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” will likely already have in mind a culprit for this ghost that marks its presence by way of absence; namely: the floating signifier that, like Poe's letter, hides in plain sight, and through its *potential* power (readers of the story, as well as Lacan's essay will be reminded that the use of the information in the letter would nullify its power as a tool for blackmail) works, as agent of the “symbolic order which is constitutive of the subject” (*Ecrits* 7) to inscribe the subject into its discourse. In hauntological terms, the signifier is the ghost that haunts the subject. As Lacan himself says, it “possesses” the subject.⁴ This possession is, paradoxically, due to the *lack* of the signifier: it is, like Bunuel's *Obscure Object of Desire*, shifting, protean, unattainable:

For the signifier is a unique unit of being which, by its very nature, is the symbol of but an absence. This is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be somewhere but rather that, unlike them, it will be *and* will not be where it is wherever it goes. (*Ecrits* 17)

Both there and not there, it is what you want, but cannot have: its movement, like Poe's letter, always announces its absence to those who seek it. This is the *objet petit a* that takes its subjects down an intersubjective train towards the transcendental signifier, The Real, the ultimate lack.⁵ Lacan tells us: "a letter always arrives at its destination" (30) – the symbolic always points to The Real: "the letter exists as a means of power only through the final summons of the pure signifier" (23). And just as repetition compulsion and the return of the repressed lead Freud to the death drive, so does Lacan's analysis – itself an attempt to visualize and narrativize Freud's theory from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It shows us that the contingencies of the signifier lead us to the necessity of the pure signifier, in other words, Death:

...my aim is not to confuse letter with spirit [esprit], even when we receive the former by pneumatic dispatch, and that I readily admit that one kills if the other gives life, insofar as the signifier – you are perhaps beginning to catch my drift – materializes the instance of death. (*Ecrits* 16)

Lacan's coyness hides in plain side the ominous (spooky?) message of the letter: it makes real the presence of Death.⁶ This is, I will argue, the rhetorical thrust of the ghosts in the chain of inter-spectral discourse in *A Christmas Carol*, and it underlies even the injunction to enjoy that constitutes the Christmas Card: hiding in plain sight around the table of plenty are the ragged and the poor, the figures of Ignorance and Want that spell, according to The Ghost of Christmas Present: Doom. As Lacan shows in the Seminar, the threat of death is part of what constitutes the power of the signifier. Lacan imagines a plaintive question asked directly to the signifier:

'What are you, figure of the dice I roll in your chance encounter (*tyche*) with my fortune? Nothing, if not the presence of death that makes human life into a reprieve obtained from morning to morning in the name of significations of which your sign is the shepherd's crook. Thus did Scheherazade for a thousand and one

nights, and thus have I done...experiencing the ascendancy of this sign at the cost of a dizzying series of loaded tosses in the game of even or odd.' (28-9)⁷

In the case of the purloined letter, the signifier has the power to blackmail those in its path. It becomes, as Lacan suggests, their *fate*. In the case of Christmas ghosts, their reminders of death – their very being as revenants *of* death – serve to reify Christmas itself, to make it the fate of those they haunt. They make, in other words, a necessity of Christmas. They make sure that we follow the command on the card: Have a Merry Christmas.

II

Jacques Derrida begins his appraisal of the legacy of Marxism, *Specters of Marx*, with another ghost of an idea: “Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: *I would like to learn to live finally*” (xvi). This hypothetical subject could well be Ebenezer Scrooge, chastened by his long dark night of the soul, exhorting the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come: “I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach” (117). Thus, the climax of *A Christmas Carol* centers around a man who has, finally, learned to live. But, as both Dickens and Derrida realize, the idea of “learning to live” is a problematic one:

But to learn to live, to learn it from oneself and by oneself, all alone, to teach oneself to live (‘I would like to learn to live finally’), is that not impossible for a living being? Is it not what logic itself forbids? To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life. At the internal border or the external border, it is a heterodidactics between life and death. (xvii)

In other words, the finality of living, or the notion of living as an event, is necessarily *absent* from the *process* of living. Within this dialectic resides the Derridean theory of the ghost, and with a similar sense of paradox does Dickens raise the narrative of the ghost in order to give a man the ability to “learn to live.” As Scrooge seems to recognize, such learning is impossible without ghosts: it is their lessons, and their ability to give Scrooge the semblance of a life lived multiply and simultaneously – “in the Past, the Present, and the Future” all in the same night – that allows Scrooge to learn the meaning of his life, and to *enjoy* it. Part of this paradox is that Scrooge will cease to be simply a man once he has learned the meaning of his life and of Christmas (one and the same thing, it turns out diegetically and heterodiegetically, in both the narrative of the Carol and in its cultural afterlife, Scrooge will become practically synonymous with Christmas itself): he will live with the Spirits striving within him; he will, in part, become a ghost. It is precisely when the Ghosts cease to haunt him that Scrooge “becomes” Christmas: the haunting really begins when the haunting ends. Dickens’ ghosts, like Derrida’s Specters of Marx, are ontologically figures of repetition. The Ghost “*begins by coming back*” (11).

This fundamental principle of “hauntology” is apparent in the first sentence of *A Christmas Carol*: “Marley was dead: to begin with” (39). In both narrative and grammatical senses, Dickens presents a man’s end as textual beginning: what begins is what has already happened, and what has already occurred is a death. And Dickens continues to press this point in the next three paragraphs of the text:

The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner...Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail...Mind! I don’t mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail...But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my

unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail...Scrooge knew he was dead? Of course he did...There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come from the story I am going to relate. (39)

Dickens' epistemological concerns in this passage, conveying a humorous obsession with relating the knowledge that Marley is indeed dead, and thus able to be a ghost, and therefore not, strictly speaking, dead, illustrates the paradoxical ontology of the ghost as both a liminal and repetitious figure. Syntactically and semantically, Derrida echoes Dickens' famous opening with his own account of the ontology of the ghost:

Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*. (10)

Repetition enacts a crisis between process and event which acts as an invitation to a haunting, an invocation of the ghost.

Both texts also begin by invoking the most prestigious of English literary ghosts: Hamlet's Father. "If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet's Father died before the play began," Dickens tells us:

...there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot – say St. Paul's Churchyard for instance – literally to astonish his son's weak mind (39-40).

This is a more conversational way of stating, as Derrida does, that "*Hamlet* already began with the expected return of the dead King. After the end of history, the spirit comes by coming back...it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again" (10). Dickens and Derrida are both, of course, using the ghost of Hamlet's Father to validate ghosts of their own. Derrida's post-

Communist specters of Marx, and Dickens' ghosts of Christmas, as disparate as they may seem, both suggest alternative ways of speaking, seeing and knowing within the triumphal discourse of capitalism. Dickens' statement, however joking, of the threat that "the Country's done," his image of St. Paul's Churchyard – a London cemetery that, given the iconography of St. Paul's to Dickens' London, could be read as London *as* Cemetery -- suggest an implicit fear of that capitalism, and its systematic destruction of the pre-industrial England that figures as an Eden in so much of his work. For characters like Scrooge to deal with, to *learn* from, the horrors of a capitalist present that has banished an edenic past and points to an uncertain future, Dickens must bring into play ghosts that can refigure space and time itself, that both repeat cyclically yet possess the singularity of a linear event. Like Hamlet's Father, the ghosts of Christmas return from an idealized past to make right a rotten state. Derrida's epigram from *Hamlet* that opens *Specters of Marx*: "The time is out of joint," could be equally applicable to *A Christmas Carol*. Like the ghost of Hamlet's Father, Dickens' Christmas ghosts complicate the linear experience of time to expose a fallen present, as well as point to an end, a *finality* of living.

Of course, the appearance of a ghost immediately constitutes a disruption in the linearity of time. The mere presence of the ghost as *revenant* announces a past that is not past, a past that exists uncannily, simultaneously alongside the present. A ghost existentially demonstrates William Faulkner's famous claim that "The past is never dead. It's not even past."⁸ Faulkner's statement is itself hauntological: the first sentence suggests an eternal past, the existence of which is positively enunciated by its transcendence of time itself, while the second sentence negates the idea of the past

entirely. The meaning of these contradictory statements, of course, lies in the spectral gap which occupies the space between the two: the past, as eternally present and non-existent is, then, present/absent, dead/alive – undead.⁹

The first of the ghosts to haunt Scrooge, that of the seven years dead Jacob Marley, is an embodiment of this spectral paradox. He appears to Scrooge as a fixed, even constrained being, composed of constrictive verbs and heavy nouns: tightly fitted in “his pig-tail, tights, and boots,” and wrapped in a chain “clasped” and “wound” about him, made of “cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel” (51). Yet he is also transparent (51), can fly (57), and can transpose his visage at will onto door knockers (48), and multiply it with ease onto every tile on Scrooge’s fireplace (50). He is both “captive, bound, and double-ironed” and “travelling all the time” (55). He is, one might say, the most stereotypically ghost-like of the spirits that haunt Scrooge. Indeed, before Marley introduces himself to Scrooge, Scrooge hears his chains rattling, and recalls that “ghosts in haunted houses were described as dragging chains” (50). This ghost, at least, is to Scrooge already present before his arrival as a cultural trope.

Marley is also quintessentially ghost-like in his role as a frightener, in adopting the most traditional job of the ghost as one that scares the living. Unlike the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present, Marley’s Ghost is a figure of fear and dread. While his immediate ghostly successors routinely deal in irony with the ironic Scrooge, Marley will have none of it. When Scrooge protests that Marley is merely a figment of his own distempered imagination, calling him – in Scrooge’s most famous repetition – a “humbug,” Marley raises “a frightful cry,” and shakes his chain “with such a dismal and

appalling noise,” that Scrooge cringes in terror (54). It is in this respect – as a Christmas spirit, sent literally to scare the Hell out of its haunted subject – that Marley suggests the most intriguing paradox of *A Christmas Carol*, indeed, of Christmas itself.

For Marley’s Ghost is both an emissary for Christmas, and from Hell. As Marley himself makes clear, his is a damned spirit: “doomed to wander through the world – oh, woe is me! – and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!” (54). Dickens’ cosmology here is an earthly one, as we will see, where the spiritual is largely adjunct to the material, but Marley’s condition is unmistakable, for he, like Milton’s Satan, brings Hell with him.¹⁰ As Marley departs, Scrooge is witness to a remarkable vision, often absent from most adaptations of the *Carol*:

The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Every one of them wore chains like Marley’s Ghost; some few (they might be guilty governments) were linked together; none were free. Many had been personally known to Scrooge in their lives. He had been quite familiar with one old ghost, in a white waistcoat, with a monstrous iron safe attached to its ankle, who cried piteously at being unable to assist a wretched woman with an infant, whom it saw below, upon a door-step. The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power forever. (57-9)

John Leech’s illustration of this scene, which accompanied the first edition, dramatically renders the phantoms in Gothic chiaroscuro. The spirits have contorted, grotesque faces, and are accompanied by a pointy-eared demon – not mentioned in the text – who laughs at the spirits’ misery. The poor woman and her infant crouch in the lower right corner of the illustration, completing the hell-scape, their pose an uncanny mirror of the woman and child from Horsley and Cole’s Christmas Card, though here unaided by friendly spirits. The message of Dickens’ and Leech’s earthly Inferno is clear: Hell is being unable to help others, specifically the poor.



Figure 6: John Leech Illustration from the 1st edition of *A Christmas Carol*.

And yet, like Horsley and Cole's Christmas Card, helping the poor is central to the meaning of Christmas. This Marley makes explicit:

'Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!'

It held up its chain at arm's length, as if that were the cause of all its unavailing grief, and flung it heavily upon the ground again.

'At this time of the rolling year,' the spectre said, 'I suffer most. Why did I walk through crowds of fellow-beings with my eyes turned down, and never raise them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode? Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted *me!*' (56)

Here, from the perspective of the damned, is the true meaning of Christmas. For as much as Marley is a representative of Hell, he is also a representative of Christmas as such.

Besides being the herald of the "official" Christmas Ghosts, he seems to have special ties to the holiday: he died on Christmas Eve, and suffers the most (and suffering is now his official business) during the Christmas season. Though lost, perhaps *because* he is lost, Marley's Ghost is nevertheless an authoritative spokesperson for the saving power of Christmas.

That Marley's primary method of communicating this message is through terror is not unique in Dickens. His first novel – or rather, his first extended piece of fiction -- *The Pickwick Papers*, includes an interpolated story that provides a prototype for the plot, characters, and milieu of *A Christmas Carol*. Chapters 28-30 relate Pickwick and company's famous Christmas visit to Dingley Dell. The episode has garnered much critical attention for the ghost story Mr. Wardle tells the children on a cold, windy night, "The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton." Like *A Christmas Carol*, the story offers a humorous tone to tell a harrowing tale. The sexton Gabriel Grubb is an ur-Scrooge: a misanthropic, asocial man whose principal pleasure is gainsaying the pleasure of others.

His alienated state is partly conveyed by a trope that appears in much of Dickens' fiction: a lonely walker who looks into lit windows at night, considering the multitude of separate lives in progress behind them:¹¹ "As he went his way, up the ancient street, he saw the cheerful light of the blazing fires gleam through the old casements, and heard the loud laugh and the cheerful shouts of those who were assembled around them" (396). This panorama of lives behind windows is one that Scrooge himself will penetrate in the *Carol*, supernaturally at first, and in reality at the end. For Grub, however, it simply lays out the social horizon of which he is not a part. The story seems less concerned with Grub's redemption (though similarly chastised by his supernatural experience, Grub never re-integrates into the social world) than in providing a blackly-comic phantasmagoria. The bulk of the tale relates the taunting and bullying of the sexton by a group of heckling, cavorting goblins. The playfulness of the goblins belies their practical intent: to reform Grub through images of people both happier and more despondent than himself.

The goblins play a role similar to Marley and his fellow doomed spirits in acting as demonic agents of heavenly advice, but unlike Marley's tactic of showing Scrooge an invisible hell on earth, the goblins literally drag Grub down to Hell itself:

The sexton's brain whirled around with the rapidity of the motion he beheld, and his legs reeled beneath him as the spirits flew before his eyes; when the goblin king, suddenly darting toward him, laid his hand upon his collar, and sunk with him through the earth.

When Gabriel Grub had had time to fetch his breath, which the rapidity of his descent had for the moment taken away, he found himself in what appeared to be a large cavern, surrounded on all sides by crowds of goblins, ugly and grim; in the centre of the room, on an elevated seat, was stationed his friend of the churchyard; and close beside him stood Gabriel Grub himself, without the power of motion. (401)

Dickens' pandemoniac scene illustrates a number of interesting paradoxes that will be developed in *A Christmas Carol*. Grub occupies a privileged, panoptic position in which he is as able to see everything, and through this seeing, learn; he is also, like the characters in so many of Samuel Beckett's hellscapes, severely restricted – he cannot move. He occupies, like Scrooge, the uncanny position of both prisoner and warden, or rather, he occupies the spectral gap between the two. This spectral gap is apparent in the role of his captors/liberators: devils engaged in moral reform. While it is easy to overlook the infernal aspects of these playful goblins, and read them as harmless sprites rather than evil spirits, consider how closely the goblins mirror one of Dickens' most relentlessly malignant, satanic, creations: the dwarf Quilp. Like Quilp, the goblins are constantly in motion, torture through humor, and even share the same taste in beverages:

‘Cold to-night,’ said the king of the goblins, ‘very cold. A glass of something warm, here!’

At this command, half-a-dozen officious goblins, with a perpetual smile upon their faces, whom Gabriel Grub imagined to be courtiers, on that account, hastily disappeared, and presently returned with a goblet of liquid fire, which they presented to the king.

‘Ah!’ cried the goblin, whose cheeks and throat were transparent, as he tossed down the flame, ‘this warms one, indeed!’ Bring a bumper of the same for Mr. Grub.’

It was in vain for the unfortunate sexton to protest that he was not in the habit of taking anything warm at night; one of the goblins held him while another poured the blazing liquid down his throat; the whole assembly screeched with laughter as he coughed and choked, and wiped away the tears which gushed plentifully from his eyes, after swallowing the burning draught. (401)

This scene is virtually repeated in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as Quilp forcibly shares his favorite drink, boiling grog, with his associate, Sampson Brass:

Mr. Quilp raised the hot saucepan to his lips, and deliberately drank off all the spirit it contained [...] Having swallowed this gentle stimulant [...] he bade Mr. Brass proceed.

‘But first,’ said Quilp, with his accustomed grin, ‘have a drop yourself – a nice drop – a good, warm, fiery drop.’

‘Why sir,’ replied Brass, ‘if there was such a thing as a mouthful of water that could be got without trouble –’

‘There’s no such thing to be had here,’ cried the dwarf. ‘Water for lawyers! Melted lead and brimstone, you mean, nice hot blistering pitch and tar – that’s the thing for them – eh, Brass, eh?’

‘Ha ha ha!’ laughed Mr. Brass. ‘Oh very biting! and yet it’s like being tickled – there’s a pleasure in it too, sir!’

‘Drink that,’ said the dwarf, who had by this time heated some more. ‘Toss it off, don’t leave any heeltap, scorch your throat and be happy!’

The wretched Sampson took a few short sips of the liquor, which immediately distilled itself into burning tears, and in that form came rolling down his cheeks into the pipkin again, turning the colour of his face and eyelids to a deep red, and giving rise to a violent fit of coughing, in the midst of which he was still heard to declare, with the constancy of a martyr, that it was ‘beautiful indeed!’ (463)

The sado-masochistic relish displayed by Quilp and his victim casts an interesting light not only the nature of Grub and his Goblins, but Scrooge and his ghosts, all of whom employ torture to bring about the well-being and happiness of their victim. The fierce ironies of the diction in this passage – the use of words like “nice,” “good,” “pleasure,” “beautiful” -- underline the cruelty of the scene, and if Scrooge’s ghosts do not resort to such crude methods as Quilp to gain assent from their victim, the gauntlet they prepare for Scrooge does in its own way seem to say “scorch your throat and be happy!” Suffer, and enjoy.

Quilp, the goblins, and Scrooge’s ghosts can all be included among the index of Dickens’ gallery of happily satanic torturers, which raises questions as to their function as reformers. After forcing Grub to drink liquid fire, they show him a happy domestic family scene, which, in a temporal shift that anticipates those of *A Christmas Carol*, cuts to the death of one of the children. Another jump forward in time shows the death of the father and mother. These grim tableaux are softened, however, by a rhetoric which stresses a social afterlife, both heavenly and sublunary. The death of the child is thus

rendered: “[...] sleeping in rest and peace as the beautiful child seemed to be, they saw that he was dead, and they knew that he was an Angel looking down upon, and blessing them from a bright and happy Heaven” (402). And the survivors of the family after the father and mother’s death are reported to leave their graves

sadly and mournfully, but not with bitter cries and despairing lamentations, for they knew that they should one day meet again; and once more they mixed with the busy world, and their content and cheerfulness were restored. The cloud settled upon the picture, and concealed it from the sexton’s view.

‘What do you think of *that?*’ said the goblin, turning his large face toward Gabriel Grub. (402-3)

These moral exhortations to both mourn and enjoy, to regard death, but to regard it as the necessary byproduct of a “bright and happy Heaven”; to be a part of “the busy world” which restores “content and cheerfulness; to regard the repetitions of history as both tragedy *and* farce – these appeals are clear antecedents of *A Christmas Carol*. But if the demonic goblins who revel in torture and terror are also antecedents of the *Carol*’s Christmas ghosts, and are likewise engaged in the business of moral redemption, the goblin’s question: “what do you think of *that?*” becomes interesting indeed. Why do these devils trumpet the ideology of angels?

The goblins’ crude vacillations between grotesqueries of humor and pathos nevertheless illustrate a complex, highly ambiguous sense of the ghost that will be refined in *A Christmas Carol*. Marley’s ghost introduces us to these ambiguities, but the appearance of The Ghost of Christmas Past seems to be a vision of ambiguity itself. Reminiscent of some of the impossible imagery of gods and spirits and ideas in Byron’s *Manfred* or Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, The Ghost of Christmas Past, in its very corporality, seems, like the paradoxical descriptions in Shelley’s poem, discontent to be a part of the whole, but rather, an image of totality itself.¹² In adaptations of *A Christmas*

Carol, The Ghost of Christmas Past is usually the least memorable of the spirits, and it is, interestingly, the most inconsistently portrayed. Adaptations take the most liberal deviations from Dickens' text in representing the Ghost of Christmas Past, most likely because the ghost as Dickens describes it is so difficult to visualize.¹³ Revealingly, this ghost is the only one *not* represented in Leech's original illustrations. Dickens' description is worth quoting at length, as it, like many other scenes in the *Carol*, tends to be forgotten in the flux of our shared memories of adaptations that elide it.

It was a strange figure – like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child's proportions. Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back, was white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle on it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin. The arms were very long and muscular; the hands the same, as if its hold were of uncommon strength. Its legs and feet, most delicately formed, were, like those upper members, bare. It wore a tunic of the purest white; and round its waist was bound a lustrous belt, the sheen of which was beautiful. It held a branch of green holly in its hand; and, in singular contradiction of that wintry emblem, had its dress trimmed with summer flowers. But the strangest thing about it was, that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light, by which all of this was visible; and which was doubtless the occasion of its using, in its duller moments, a great extinguisher for a cap, which it now held under its arm.

Even this, though, when Scrooge looked at it with increasing steadiness, was *not* its strangest quality. For as its belt sparkled and glittered now in part and now in another, and what was light one instant, at another time was dark, so the figure itself fluctuated in its distinctness; being now a thing with one arm, now with one leg, now with twenty legs, now a pair of legs without a head, now a head without a body: of which dissolving parts, no outline would be visible in the dense gloom wherein they melted away. And in the very wonder of this, it would be itself again; distinct and clear as ever. (61-2)

A thing, then, of contradiction: both light and dark, dull and distinct, young and old, wintry and summery. The narrator's diction is itself contradictory, as if in his excitement to describe the indescribable, his haste gets the better of him. At first, the ghost is described as masculine, but as feminine imagery comes into play (the ghost's long hair and delicate features, the dress adorned with summer flowers), the "he" becomes an "it."

The narrator attempts to cap his description with a superlative (“the strangest thing”), only to negate it in the following paragraph (“Even this, though... was *not* its strangest quality”). We are clearly supposed to regard the spirit as beautiful, but it is also a protean monster: a thing with twenty legs, a headless shape-shifter which in its multifarious nature recalls B-movie horror creatures as much as ineffable spirit.¹⁴

We tend to remember the Santa-like Ghost of Christmas Present for his verbal repartee with Scrooge, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come for his spooky silence. Both spirits are visually memorable as well, and thus consistently represented in adaptations. But the Ghost of Christmas Past is strangely forgettable, in spite of being, in its very failure at visualization, perhaps the most deliriously imaginative character sketch Dickens ever attempted. This is probably appropriate, as the ghost’s job is to show Scrooge the life he has himself forgotten. And in not only showing Scrooge his past, but effectively transporting him *into* it, the protean ghost makes of Scrooge another Proteus: a being that is multiple and simultaneous. Standing beside his younger self, Scrooge becomes, like the ghost, both young and old.

It is at this point that *A Christmas Carol* introduces a complication in the English ghost story that is, I believe, partly, if not largely responsible for the continued and unabated popularity of this text and its endless permutations and adaptations. Scrooge is not simply presented a historical tableau in order to learn a moral lesson; he is sutured into the history of his own life. This is one of the earliest, and certainly one of the uncanniest, appearances of one of Dickens’ central conceits: a man confronted with the specter of himself.¹⁵ While doppelgängers are not uncommon in fiction, the possibility of confronting one’s own, younger self is one that still has the capacity to disturb readers

and audiences used to what has become a subgenre of time travel narratives. The Christmas narrative which the ghost constructs for Scrooge out of his past certainly disturbs Scrooge, who alternates between nostalgic joy, meditative sadness, and outright rage in witnessing it.

With good reason. If we look at the narrative the ghost has designed, separate from Scrooge's insertion within it, we see a decidedly manic-depressive design at work. The whole vacillates (through fade outs and cuts that anticipate the cinema) between scenes of sorrow and happiness. In fact, the scenario that suggests the narrative of Scrooge's Past is explicitly designed to force the spectator to whipsaw between emotional extremes. After a spectralized Scrooge walks with the ghost through his wall and into his own past, he is immediately flooded with hyper-Proustian involuntary memories: "He was conscious of a thousand odours floating in the air, each one connected with a thousand thoughts, and hopes, and joys, and cares long, long, forgotten!" (63) The ensuing scenes will move Scrooge back and forth between these joys and cares.

His first sight upon entering this past world is a group of cheerful boys leaving school for Christmas break. The narrator asks, with exclamatory punctuation which destabilizes the interrogatory content: "Why was he rejoiced beyond all bounds to see them! Why did his cold eye glisten, and his heart leap up as they went past! Why was he filled with gladness when he heard them give each other Merry Christmas..." (64). Heading toward the school, where Scrooge anticipates seeing his lone, younger self, he sobs, and upon encountering himself, "wept to see his poor forgotten self as he used to be" (65). Scrooge's sadness lifts, however, when he sees out the school window living representations of the characters from his youthful reading. In fact, Scrooge goes into an

“ecstasy,” excitedly pointing out the beloved characters of his youth and crying incoherencies (“Halloa! Hoop! Halloo!”), until, “with a rapidity of transition very foreign to his usual character, he said, in pity for his former self, ‘Poor Boy!’ and cried again” (66). The ensuing scenes evoke more violently contrasting emotional responses from Scrooge, from the bittersweet reunion with his dead sister, to his return to Fezziwig’s Ball (a favorite scene in many adaptations), to the heart wrenching scene of his broken engagement to Belle, in which Scrooge renounces love for capital.

At this point, Scrooge reasonably asks the ghost, “Why do you delight to torture me?” (74), and asks to be brought home. In response, the ghost shows him one more scene, detailing the domestic bliss of Belle and her husband. The fact that this is the one scene in which Scrooge was never present, seems, by highlighting Scrooge’s absence, to bear out Scrooge’s accusation of torture. And like the torture of Gabriel Grub and Marley’s Ghost, it is a torture based on domestic happiness. Whatever moral redemption these ghosts have in mind, it is largely predicated on inflicting trauma on the redeemed subject. Edmund Wilson’s famous diagnosis of Scrooge as a bipolar personality¹⁶ can perhaps be attributed to the strange narrative therapy the Ghost of Christmas Past has prepared for him.

That Scrooge would be manic-depressive is not surprising considering the singular situation he is faced with. With the appearance of the Ghost of Christmas Past, Scrooge is engaged in a complex interspectral chain: he is in communication not just with the Christmas Ghost, but with the ghost of his former self, as well as a self that is spectralized (invisible, incorporeal, all-seeing). No wonder Scrooge’s encounter with the ghost is filled with such violence. Like Jacob and the angel, Scrooge’s instinctual

response to the spirit is to physically attack it: “He turned upon the Ghost, and seeing that it looked upon him with a face, in which in some strange way there were fragments of all the faces it had shown him, wrestled with it” (76). It is the multivalent aspect of the ghost, and his own experience with himself that drives Scrooge into a rage, yet, as Scrooge will continue to find in his spectral intercourse, rage is impotent:

In the struggle, if that can be called a struggle in which the Ghost with no visible resistance on its own part was undisturbed by any effort of its adversary, Scrooge observed that its light was burning high and bright; and dimly connecting that with its influence over him, he seized the extinguisher-cap, and by a sudden action pressed it down upon its head.

The Spirit dropped beneath it, so that the extinguisher covered its whole form; but though Scrooge pressed it down with all his force, he could not hide the light... (76)

Scrooge will increasingly learn deference toward his spiritual betters over the course of his long Christmas Eve, but then, the spirits that haunt him grow decreasingly protean as the night goes on, until the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come appears as a mute black cloak – an antithesis to the thousand faced Ghost of Christmas Past. It is interesting that Dickens places the avatar of possibility and multiplicity in the past, and the spirit of blank necessity in the future (supposedly the locale of a million Borgesian forking paths). Dickens the social progressive routinely funnels energy and movement backward into the past, and nowhere more visibly than in *A Christmas Carol*. Like many of his Victorian peers, who extolled the ambiguous virtues of medieval feudalism in anticipating progressive social change,¹⁷ Dickens fuels his brighter future with a surprising amount of nostalgia. This is, in part, the vexing paradox of hauntology, and the visions of Marx and Dickens: the future *as* future is, strictly speaking, impossible. For the future is already inhabited by the ghosts of the past.

This phenomenon can be readily seen with the appearance of Scrooge's next phantom visitant, The Ghost of Christmas Present. Given the fact that the three ghosts appear in one night, Christmas Eve, even the name of The Ghost of Christmas Present is problematic, since the time the spirit takes Scrooge to is Christmas Day, and therefore, the *future*. The Ghost himself seems aware of his precarious position as an agent of the fleeting present, as the first piece of information he offers Scrooge is that he is very young, and has been preceded by over eighteen hundred siblings (80). This clever personification of the artificial segmentation of time, and the resulting sense, or illusion, of a "present" highlights not only Dickens' famous inability to linger on a moment, his vast energy, but the incredible weight he lays on the past. The Ghost of Christmas Present will soon be but another dead number in an ever growing chronological family.

Dickens' oft noted propensity to offer encyclopedic, satiric attacks on the follies of the present, while offering few solutions for the future is on full display in this stave. While the heartwarming scenes of Fred's and Bob Cratchit's family Christmas parties are probably the most indelible images offered by The Ghost of Christmas Present, it is interesting how unsentimental the spirit actually is. In many scenes, the ghost acts less like a kindly projectionist, and more as a kind of panoptic policeman.¹⁸ In the midst of one of Dickens' most evocative scenes of London teeming with humanity, Scrooge notices the strange power of the ghost's torch:

And it was a very uncommon kind of torch, for once or twice when there were angry words between some dinner-carriers who had jostled with each other, he shed a few drops of water on them, and their good humour was restored directly. For they said, it was a shame to quarrel upon Christmas Day. And so it was! God love it, so it was! (84)

This passage captures the flavor of spirit of much Victorian writing on Christmas. There is a weary, almost desperate insistence of harmony here that makes all the more poignant and powerful the absence of it. While the scene is ostensibly comic, the narrator cannot help but sigh to Heaven over the necessity of the ghost to enforce good cheer. Here, as elsewhere, the spirits' demands for enjoyment and happiness serve to demonstrate its absence.

Scrooge himself seems to pick up on this problem when he accuses the ghost of supporting the Sunday Observance Bill, which placed many restrictions on the poor. The bill was nominally meant to instill piety in an unruly, uncertain working class, but, as critics like Dickens noted, seemed only to throw a damper on the poor's one day off. As Scrooge notes, the bill served to "cramp these people's opportunities of innocent enjoyment" and "would deprive them of their means of dining every seventh day, often the only day on which they can be said to dine at all" (84). The ghost refutes Scrooge's charge, reminding him that

'There are some upon this earth of yours...who lay claim to know us, and who do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name; who are as strange to us and all our kith and kin, as if they had never lived. Remember that, and charge their doings on themselves, not us.' (85)

Here again, the ghost reminds Scrooge of the difficult work of enforcing happiness, and in the process, evinces the ambiguous question of who is responsible for the enforcement. The pronouns the ghost employs heighten this ambiguity: "some," "they," "themselves," are the shady hypocrites who violate the spirit of Christmas, while the true spirit of Christmas is a shadowy, vaguely sinister (given the anger of the charge) "us." The ghost presents Christmas as a vast battleground,¹⁹ one in which the combatants are ill-defined.

The vastness of the ghost's surveillance of this battleground is wonderfully imagined in a whirlwind scene, rarely adapted, which moves the scope of the *Carol* well beyond the cozy domesticity it is famous for. Dickens' talent for atmospheric painting is on full display here, as the ghost whisks Scrooge to apocalyptic locales, barely lit and hardly salvaged by meager, lonely celebrations of the season. Scrooge is taken to a mine in Cornwall that seems like a landscape of Hieronymus Bosch:

And now, without a word of warning from the Ghost, they stood upon a bleak and desert moor, where monstrous masses of rude stone were cast about, as though it were the burial-place of giants; and water spread itself wheresoever it listed – or would have done so, but for the frost that held it prisoner; and nothing grew but moss and furze, and coarse, rank grass. Down in the west the setting sun had left a streak of fiery red, which glared upon the desolation for an instant, like a sullen eye, and frowning lower, lower, lower yet, was lost in the thick gloom of darkest night. (92)

The nightmare imagery continues, as the ghost takes Scrooge out to sea, where Scrooge, looking back, sees “the last of the land, a frightful range of rocks...his ears were deafened by the thundering of water, as it rolled, and roared, and raged among the dreadful caverns it had worn, and fiercely tried to undermine the earth” (92-3).

From the bowels of the earth to far out at sea, the ghost treats Scrooge to the these epic visions, where Christmas songs vie precariously with darker elements:

The old man, in a voice that seldom rose above the howling of the wind upon the barren waste, was singing them a Christmas song; it had been a very old song when he was a boy; and from time to time they all joined in the chorus. So surely as they raised their voices, the old man got quite blithe and loud; and so surely as they stopped, his vigour sank again. (92)

And:

Joining their horny hands over the rough table at which they sat, they wished each other Merry Christmas in their can of grog; and one of them: the elder, too, with his face all damaged and scarred with hard weather, as the figure-head of an old ship might be; struck up a sturdy song that was like a Gale in itself. (93)

Christmas here is no laughing matter, or rather, laughing is inextricably linked with a vast cosmic despair. “It was a great surprise to Scrooge,” the text tells us, and it is a surprise to us as well, readers used to adaptations and a cultural shorthand that reduces *A Christmas Carol* to domestic sentimentality, “what a solemn thing it was to move on through the lonely darkness over an unknown abyss, whose depths were secrets as profound as Death: it was a great surprise to Scrooge, while thus engaged, to hear a hearty laugh” (93). The laugh Scrooge hears is his nephew Fred’s, spliced into this dread vision by the cinematic sensibilities of his ghostly hosts. Scrooge and the ghost leap from a montage of barren landscapes to the parlor games of Fred’s Christmas Party, and back to territory more familiar to us, the heirs of the *Carol*’s cultural legacy. But it is worthwhile to linger on what unfamiliar aspects there are of this, one of the most familiar of tales. Perhaps nowhere is the link between cosmic terror and light comedy more jarringly joined in Dickens’ fiction than in this artful jump cut. It is this link that speaks darker truths about Dickens’ Victorian Christmas than Fred’s party alone can do. In these passages, which deftly juxtapose the sublime and the domestic, one can see that Dickens, as much as Tennyson, is an heir to the Romantic poets, and is haunted by their ghosts.

Not just the ghosts of the sublime haunt Dickens’ imagery, but, perhaps more familiarly, the gothic. Before the Ghost of Christmas Present leaves the stage to the last of the spirits, he shares with Scrooge a nightmarish vision: two allegorical children of poverty, akin to their fleshed out cousins Oliver Twist, Little Nell, Jo, and, of course, Tiny Tim, but presented as prodigies painted by Fucelli:

They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meager, ragged, scowling, wolfish, but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their

features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shriveled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread.
(101)

Here, on the edge of the frame, are the poor, lurking on the outskirts of the family feast. But unlike the first Christmas card, and unlike Dickens' gallery of poor orphans, these children are figures of horror, not pathos. They are meant to chill the blood, not warm the heart, and they remind us of the "hammer blow" Dickens' intended his Carol to be. But, as noted above, the present is not Dickens' preferred milieu. Nor is it the ghost's, who, like his creator, leaves the scene once he has had his say. There are no solutions to the problems the ghost raises, just portents of doom (101). The ghost's monstrous children offer no program for change. Their terrifying silence seems at cross purposes with the general message the ghosts are sent to enforce: Merry Christmas.

But such disturbing visuals are, in a sense, the message. The Ghost of Christmas Present is, despite his talent for invisibility, deeply concerned with *seeing*.²⁰ His first words to Scrooge are "Look upon me!" (80) He often exhorts Scrooge to "See!" (92), or: "Look here!" (99). These commands to witness are deeply tied to his ability to go unseen, to seem detached from the web of being which he nevertheless has power to monitor and control. He is, in a way, like Scrooge himself, divorced from humanity, yet inextricably tied to it. This may account for the ghost's rhetorical tendency to ironically spit Scrooge's words back at him (89-101): the verbal admonitions underline the existential reality that Scrooge, however much he would like to see himself as removed from the symbolic order, is essentially part of it, and therefore can – must – react and respond to its needs. Like the warden of Bentham's panopticon, one may have a vantage

point in seeing the prisoners, but one must be in the prison oneself in order to do so.²¹

The visits to the Cratchit home and Fred's party are not merely scenes of missed invitation; they are reminders that attendance, in a very real sense, is mandatory.

III

Of all the aspects of literary creation, character, of course, is the one for which Dickens is most celebrated. The *Dictionary of British Literary Characters* holds Dickens responsible for the creation of 989 of them (and these are just the ones with names!). Few, I imagine, would count *The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come* as central to that formidable menagerie. Possessing none of the comic fecundity of a Micawber or Sam Weller, the satiric venom of a Pecksniff or Skimpole, nor the psychological weight of a Paul Dombey, John Jasper, or, for that matter, an Ebenezer Scrooge (not even the bland decency of Nicholas Nickleby or David Copperfield), this ghost appears the least Dickensian of all Dickens' creations. Yet, as the silent catalyst of catharsis in this, Dickens' most popular work, *The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come* is surely one of the most recognizable and potent of his characters. I confess to holding a particularly high regard for this shadowy entity, as the ghost's terrifying aspect and vague authority held me spellbound as a young child, and led me on that first reading long ago to ask a question that is fundamental to this chapter, and this study as a whole: "Why does Dickens make Christmas so *scary*?"

There is a simple answer to that question, of course; one that is clear to any child who first encounters the work: Scrooge needs to be scared straight in order to properly

enjoy Christmas. All of Scrooge's ghosts evince a predilection for emotional torture as a mode of moral reclamation, but the combined narrative strategy of the ghosts seems to follow a staple theory of addiction: one needs to hit rock bottom before one can truly seek help. After the physical violence and verbal wrangling with the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present, respectively, Scrooge is ready to begin to help himself. The silence of The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come allows Scrooge to begin to take ownership of his own spiritual regeneration, and part of the narrative thrill of this stave is watching just how close Scrooge is to finally becoming the hero of his own life, at least within the Christmas-obsessed parameters of the narrative he inhabits.

But the absence of voice in the ghost is of interest in itself, particularly in relation to its predecessors. From the protean Ghost of Christmas Past, to the rhetorically dynamic Ghost of Christmas Present, we come to a remarkably withdrawn, visually monochrome figure that marks the end of an arc from the wild, and as noted above, paradoxical multivalency of the past, to the morbid necessity of the future. The ghost's silence forces Scrooge into an increasingly frantic interrogatory position, and his questions call into doubt the very possibility of choice his questions raise. When Scrooge famously asks the spirit, "Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they the shadows of the things that May be, only?" (115) we suspect, along with Scrooge, what it is he is about to see in the churchyard. When he finally sees his name on the headstone (one of the great reveals in narrative history – the twist that launched a thousand Twilight Zone episodes), Scrooge reasonably asks, "Why show me this, if I am past hope?" the narrator informs us that "For the first time the [ghost's] hand appeared to shake" (115).

It is interesting that here, with Scrooge's fundamental question, the ghost begins to show signs of character. Even more interesting is that Dickens, not one to shy away from revealing a character's motive, is unusually reticent here in explaining it. The vividness of this scene is heightened by the sense that it has run away from Dickens' own penchant for rhetorical containment of narrative. Like Bill Sykes' murder of Nancy and the death of Little Nell, this is a scene of pictorial violence that resists Dickens' usual analytic detachment from his own fiction.²² The rest of Scrooge's interaction with the ghost deserves to be quoted at length, as it supplies perhaps the most dramatic and psychologically revealing example of the desperation underlying Dickens' vision of Christmas:

‘Good spirit,’ he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: ‘Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!’

The kind hand trembled.

‘I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!’

In his agony, he caught the spectral hand. It sought to free itself, but he was strong in his entreaty, and detained it. The Spirit, stronger yet, repulsed him.

Holding up his hands in one last prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and swindled down into a bedpost. (116-7)

A great deal of Scrooge's desperation here lies in his attempt to define the nature of the inter-spectral relationship between himself and the ghost. He calls the spirit “good,” though the only evidence he has for this evaluation is a trembling in the ghost's hand. The narrator seems to check Scrooge's assessment in calling the ghost “kind,” but Scrooge is pleading with the spirit to *be* good as much as he is recognizing it as such. Scrooge's uncertainty of the ghost's nature is further displayed by his contradictory

actions toward it: he attempts to physically detain it, and then prays to it. Though Scrooge's last words to the ghost amount to a definitive pledge of allegiance to Christmas, his actions show that he is much more confused and terrified than his words suggest. His pledge to "live in the Past, the Present, and the Future" seems scripted, and given Scrooge's mental agitation, smells of the compulsory.

But perhaps this is precisely why the "kind" spirit's hand begins to shake: it is in as unpleasantly compulsory a position as Scrooge is in. Like a sympathetic bounty hunter, the spirit perhaps does take pity on Scrooge. But, given the fact that the spirit "repulses" him, and "collapses" the moment Scrooge prays to him, there is no sense here that Scrooge's attempt to bargain with the spirit has yielded any result. Scrooge has asked the spirit for hope, and the spirit has offered him none. No plea has been granted, no future, apparently, reversed. Scrooge, after this encounter, is simply back in his bed, where he started.

In order to make sense of Scrooge's stunning reversal in character, one that has led some critics – not to mention many of his fellow characters in the narrative – to judge Scrooge insane, it may be helpful to remember the proximity of the last and penultimate staves, to see the frightful encounter with the ghost and the hysterically happy ending as juxtaposed rather than opposed. In other words, we need to see Scrooge's ecstasy as a symptom of his terror, rather than the result of it. To return to Scrooge and his own headstone, to Scrooge's encounter with a Christmas Ghost who seems related to, if not an actual incarnation of, Death Itself, we may well ask what hope Scrooge has actually received from his encounter. Scrooge asks the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come (if somewhat indirectly) to sponge away the writing on his headstone. Yet surely no human

being who has reached the age of reason would consider this a realistic, or even fair, request. After all, what the ghost shows Scrooge is NOT what may be, but what indeed WILL be. The ghost, in this respect, does not offer Scrooge the chance to change. He does not offer Scrooge a choice between Christmas or Death; in every scene the ghost presents, in every action the ghost performs, the offer is clear: Christmas AND Death. When the narrator informs us that Scrooge “did it all, and infinitely more” and that Tiny Tim “did NOT die” (123), our narrative pleasure is necessarily mixed with a sense of being sold a false bill of goods. At best, the narrator’s claims can be considered a genial form of parepsis, for Tiny Tim, of course, WILL die; as will Scrooge, who, as a mortal being, is clearly, at his age, incapable of doing “it all,” much less “infinitely more.” But then, Death and Christmas are now to be lived as constants, ever present and always dictating the action of Scrooge and his social world. As Andrew H. Miller notes: “The elaborate machinery of *A Christmas Carol*, like that of séances, invites readers to experience death not as a final event, but as a condition tempering our everyday lives” (332).

The narrator appears to operate under the same happy delusion, or willful denial, that the reformed Scrooge adopts: Christmas conquers death, and allows those who live according to its precepts to live happily, and apparently, ever after. Theologically speaking, this makes perfect sense, but we must remember that Scrooge has been visited not by angels or saints, but by ghosts and damned souls. The narrator seems to share Scrooge’s sigh of relief to be rid of them, informing us that “He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards” (125). This is a telling statement, for it seems to compare Scrooge’s spiritual encounters

to a particularly nasty bender, the kind of Long Weekend rock-bottom experience that necessarily leads to sobriety. It is also an ambiguous and ambivalent assessment: the too-sober Scrooge now operates on a level of intensity that leads his clerk to think him fit for a straight-jacket, and Scrooge himself admits to feeling “as giddy as a drunken man” (118). The text is clearly sending mixed messages as to the nature of Scrooge’s reformation, and by association, the spirits who have helped bring it about. Scrooge is a better man, but also, in many respects, hardly a man at all. As Scrooge notes: “I’m quite a baby. Never mind. I don’t care. I’d rather be a baby. Hallo! Whoop!” (119). Every metaphor Scrooge chooses to describe himself indicates unsoundness of mind, or a complete abnegation of responsibility. We, along with Scrooge, are in no doubt that this is a “good” thing, but good in a purely ontological sense – *es muss sein*, the ghosts have informed Scrooge, and so, obediently, he is happy. Indeed, his happiness and fanatical love of Christmas appear to be the only guarantee that Scrooge will not be terrorized by spirits again. Enjoyment is the price of exorcism.

And what, besides Christmas, is it that Scrooge must enjoy? As we quickly learn, it’s money. Scrooge’s first act upon waking is to start spending the money he has been hoarding so long. In fact, Scrooge’s first post-spectral intercourse with another human is a crash course in *capitalism*:

‘Do you know the Poulterer’s in the next street but one, at the corner?’ Scrooge inquired.

‘I should hope I did,’ replied the lad.

‘An intelligent boy!’ said Scrooge. ‘A remarkable boy! Do you know whether they’ve sold the prize Turkey that was hanging up there? Not the little prize Turkey: the big one?’

‘What, the one as big as me?’ returned the boy.

‘Is it?’ said Scrooge. ‘Go and buy it [...] I am in earnest. Go and buy it, and tell ‘em to bring it here, that I may give them the direction where to take it.

Come back with the man, and I'll give you a shilling. Come back with him in less than five minutes, and I'll give you half-a-crown!' (119-20)

Like a catechism, Scrooge asks his pupil where to buy, what to buy, how to buy it, and even an injunction to "Go buy." Scrooge also stresses the importance of making money move quickly in order that more can be made. Scrooge's first real Christmas opens with a flurry of market activity.

The real beneficiaries of Scrooge's capitalist turn are, of course, the Cratchit family. From Tiny Tim's medical bills to Bob Cratchit's salary, Scrooge immediately sets to work in furthering the enfranchisement of the middle class. This result of Scrooge's spiritual transformation has not gone unnoticed by critics.²³ It is perhaps after all unsurprising that the hero of the most popular of all Victorian narratives should become a major champion of Victorian values. Of course Scrooge should be a good capitalist. To paraphrase Chesterton, one suspects he was one all along. What is of interest is why Christmas, and ghosts, are required to make Scrooge aware of this fact.

Here, we return to Derrida's question in *Spectres of Marx*, how do I learn to live? As Derrida points out, and as Scrooge demonstrates, not by living alone. Only a heterodidactics of death and life can teach such a lesson. It takes, in short, a ghost to learn to live. And death is the lesson Scrooge's ghosts have to offer, a death that is as necessary in its arrival as that of Christmas. And much of the strange power of *A Christmas Carol* resides in its unsettling, but oddly liberating, equation of Christmas and death. Scrooge seems to experience, in his spiritual rebirth, a kind of Nietzschean *amor fati*, however unconsciously. Once the ghosts have drilled into Scrooge the fact that celebrating Christmas is, after all, not a choice -- as, paradoxically, to deny Christmas is tantamount to denying death and therefore, to be, like Jacob Marley, infernally

unprepared for it – but a requirement for living properly, Scrooge can finally live like a proper Victorian: one who moves money. For *A Christmas Carol*, like Marx, proposes the inevitability, the necessity, of capitalism. It is as essential to the structure of the *Carol*'s narrative as Christmas. And in uniting Christmas and capitalism in such a way, Dickens makes Christmas as essential to the culture of his fellow Victorians as capitalism itself.

It would be a mistake, however, to view *A Christmas Carol* as a mere celebration of capitalism. Just as Christmas takes on a terrifying aspect in the *Carol*, so do the effects of industrial capitalism. There is, in the numerous hauntological paradoxes the narrative exposes, room to both celebrate and denounce capitalism, but that is not the real lesson of the spirits. What Dickens' narrative does is reify Christmas and capitalism – it shows them as essential and necessary aspects of culture. Christmas in the *Carol* is rather like capitalism as defined by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*:²⁴

Concerning capitalism, we maintain that it both does and does not have an exterior limit: it has an exterior limit that is schizophrenia, that is, the absolute decoding of flows, but it functions only by reproducing and widening these limits on an always vaster scale. The strength of capitalism indeed resides in the fact that its axiomatic is never saturated, that it is always capable of adding a new axiom to the previous ones. Capitalism defines a field of immanence and never ceases to fully occupy this field. (250)

In other words, capitalism not only writes the rules of the game, it is the only game that can be played. In Deleuzian terms, the only ones who seem to be able to not play the game are the schizophrenics – and even they are constantly re-appropriated and redefined *within* capitalism. The schizophrenic, the outsider – the manic-depressive Scrooge – can only deny Christmas, and capitalism, for so long. Ultimately, Scrooge must play the game. This may in part account for Chesterton's insistence that Scrooge was never

“really inhuman at the beginning any more than at the end. There is a heartiness in his inhospitable sentiments that is akin to humor and therefore to humanity” (*Charles Dickens* 130). Scrooge’s inhumanity is precisely what constitutes and defines his humanity: Scrooge *can’t really* hate Christmas at all.

There is little room for movement within a realm that constitutes the very acts that oppose it, and this Spinozistic aspect of Deleuze and Guatarri’s description of capitalism can be seen in Deridda’s reading of what constitutes “the ghost” in Marx’s *German Ideology*:

Gespenst No. 10: Everything. Marx will have succeeded in transmuting everything, the All itself, into a ghost (*‘Alles’ in ein Spuk zu verwandeln*). So we have to stop the counting. And the recounting. And the story, and the fable, and the gothic novel. And the numerological occultism that puts on airs of *Aufklärung*. One has to admit that, forthwith [séance tenante], ‘all enumeration ends’ (*alles Zählen aufhört*) once everything comes back to haunt everything, everything is in everything, that is, ‘in the class of specters’ (*in der Klasse Gespenster*). (*Specters of Marx* 183)

If this rather extreme reading of what constitute ghostliness does not adequately describe the specific and individuated nature of Scrooge’s ghosts (though it does suggest the spectral qualities of The Ghost of Christmas Past), it does anticipate their message: as Scrooge pledges, he will honor Christmas and “try to keep it all the year,” by living in the Past, Present, and Future (117). Scrooge tacitly acknowledges the universality of the spirits that haunt him, and the omnipresence of the Christmas they represent. For Scrooge, it will be all Christmas, all the time – and thus his “story, his fable, his gothic novel,” ends.

In Deleuzian terms, Dickens’ Christmas ghosts, and the outsiders they haunt, are the schizophrenic limit of the capitalist universe, constantly widening the scope of Deridda’s “everything”:

...capitalism, through its process of production, produces an awesome schizophrenic accumulation of energy or charge, against which it brings all its vast powers of repression to bear, but which nonetheless continues to act as capitalism's limit. For capitalism constantly counteracts, constantly inhibits this inherent tendency while at the same time allowing it free reign; it continually seeks to avoid reaching its limit while simultaneously tending toward that limit. Capitalism institutes or restores all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities, thereby attempting, as best it can, to recode, to rechannel persons who have been defined in terms of abstract quantities. Everything returns or recurs: States, nations, families. That is what makes the ideology of capitalism 'a motley painting of everything that has ever been believed.' (*Anti-Oedipus* 34)

Thus the tension between Scrooge and his ghosts, thus the increasingly narrow limits of possibility in the progression of spirits, from the miasmatic multiplicity of the Ghost of Christmas Past to the blunt necessity of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Scrooge and his ghosts work to recode and reify capitalism, and in the process of reterritorialization, recode Christmas as capitalism, and Christmas as everything. This is the achievement of "The Man Who Invented Christmas" and his creations: broadening the scope of Christmas from religious and social festival into cultural imperative.

Deleuze and Guattari's description of the schizo at work can be read as a summary of the activities of Scrooge and his ghosts:

The schizophrenic deliberately seeks out the very limit of capitalism: he is its inherent tendency brought to fulfillment, its surplus product, its proletariat, and its exterminating angel [...] In the schizo, the two aspects of *process* are conjoined: the metaphysical process that puts us in contact with the 'demoniacal' element in nature or within the heart of the earth, and the historical process of social production as the limit of social production. (35)

Scrooge's visit to the ends of the earth – the apocalyptic mine, and the ocean outposts – and his encounter with the children Want and Ignorance, on whose brow is written "Doom" (101) offer specific instances of this social and metaphysical production. In reterritorializing Christmas, Dickens' expands the horizons of capitalism itself, and its eternal returns can be seen in every retelling of *A Christmas Carol*.

That this endless reterritorializing is schizoid in nature can be seen in the questions which rise in the very appearance of Dickens' ghosts. They are never simply outer manifestations that engage in dialogue with a human subject, but rather partly interspectral monologues within the subject himself. The question of the "reality" of a ghost is intricately bound to its manifestation. As Michael Cox and Robert Gilbert note in their introduction to *The Oxford Book of Ghost Stories*, a ghost story should take place in a diegetic world where a ghost's intrusion would be, paradoxically, improbable: "We must feel this imagined world to be in its essentials a reflection of our own, making us anxious witnesses to a sudden and often fatal violation of everyday reality by the supernatural" (x). The central example of this is Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*, where the question of the actual existence, the "reality" of the ghosts is central to the interest of the text *qua* ghost story. There is a general tension between whether narrative specters are to be taken at face value; in other words, whether they are to be believed or not. One edition of the *Carol* rather bluntly states in a brief introduction that the ghosts are "dreams" (Rackham iii). Scrooge himself initially seems to subscribe to this view, chalking up Marley's ghost to "an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato" (52). Scrooge at first conceives of his ghost as very literally a part of himself, however poorly digested that part might be. When asked outright whether he believes in Marley's ghost, Scrooge answers simply, "I don't" (52). Scrooge's disbelief, and the skepticism that traditionally surrounds the appearances of ghosts in the very stories where they can be reasonably believed in stems in part from the fact that a very real part of the ghost stems from ourselves – a world "in essentials *our own*" – a schizoid division of ourselves that in its manifestation creates a new whole. In other words, the

relationship between our social selves and our ghosts is a spectral dialectic, a chain of signification that seeps out of ourselves into the symbolic order and ties us to it.

Nowhere in Dickens' fiction can this be seen more clearly than in his final Christmas Book, and, after the *Carol*, his most intriguing, *The Haunted Man*. In this tale, spectrality begins with a psychological split, and turns into a social epidemic. A melancholy chemist and professor named Redlaw winds down another depressing Christmas by wishing he could forget the painful memories of his life. A sinister doppelganger appears:

As the gloom and shadow thickened behind him, in that place where it had been gathering so darkly, it took [...] an awful likeness of himself. Ghastly and cold, colourless in its leaden face and hands, but with his features, and his bright eyes, and his grizzled hair, and dressed in the gloomy shadow of his dress, it came into his terrible appearance of existence, motionless, without a sound. As *he* leaned his arm upon the elbow of his chair, it leaned upon the chair-back, close above him, with its appalling copy of his face looking where his face looked, and bearing the expression his face bore. (341)

Redlaw's ghost is a mirror image of himself that seems to draw existence from the very darkness of his mood. It is another Christmas ghost who draws its energy not from the high spirits of the season, but from the morbid desire for oblivion of one who would be done with Christmas altogether.

Redlaw's phantom proceeds to grant his host's wish for forgetfulness, though the wish carries two horrific side-effects: in forgetting pain, Redlaw loses his capacity to feel, and becomes blankly apathetic, a kind of moral zombie. Worse, his condition is contagious, and everyone he comes in contact with begins to suffer the same effects. The effect is eventually reversed by the impossible goodness of one of Dickens' vast army of angelic doll-women,²⁵ but before it is, the reader is treated to rhetorically apocalyptic

fireworks between Redlaw and his ghost. Like Scrooge, Redlaw comes to accept the necessity of his conversion, or rather of his place in the symbolic order:

‘Phantoms! Punishers of impious thoughts!’ cried Redlaw, gazing around in anguish. ‘Look upon me! From the darkness of my mind, let the glimmering of contrition that I know is there, shine up, and show my misery! In the material world, as I have long taught, nothing can be spared; no step or atom in the wondrous structure could be lost, without a blank being made in the universe...’ (386)

Redlaw’s schizoid split, his infernal dialogue within himself, has led him to see how his role in the world – in the universe – is not one of his own volition, but one of physical and metaphysical necessity. Like Scrooge, his ghostly split with himself occasions his resuturing into the social world. After hearing the “melancholy strain” (387) of Christmas music, Redlaw pledges to his “Terrible instructor” that he will “obey without inquiry” (389). The book ends with a quotation from *Hamlet: Lord, keep my memory green*. As Dickens’ Christmas Books open with a nod to the most famous of literary ghosts, so they end,²⁶ circling back upon themselves with a strange prayer that effectively asks: may I always be haunted, because then I will know that I am alive.

IV

Christmas would indeed haunt Dickens’ writing until the end of his life.²⁷ After the Christmas Books, Dickens continued to produce Christmas related stories in his journals *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*. In his major fiction, Christmas rears its fearful head twice more: during Pip’s anxiety and guilt-ridden Christmas dinner in *Great Expectations*, and finally, it forms the unintentional center-piece of his unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood*. We are informed that the eponymous hero (victim?) has a

lonely, melancholy day of it, for “Something of deeper moment than he thought had gone out of his life; and in the silence of his own chamber he wept for it last night” (175). The only social intercourse we are made aware of is a meeting with a strange old woman, an opium-eater who forebodes ill. “This is not,” we are informed, “an inspiriting close to a dull day,” for Drood. “Alone, in a sequestered place, surrounded by vestiges of old time and decay, it rather has a tendency to call a shudder into being” (179). Not inspiriting, but ghostly nonetheless, particularly as this is the last time we will meet Edwin Drood, who disappears from his text only to become a ghost that will haunt literary speculators to this day. With this melancholy scene, Dickens says his last on Christmas. The melancholy solitude that haunts this passage is of a piece with all his major Christmas writing. For the disappearance of Drood suggests that, *contra* Redlaw’s epiphany, some things can be spared, some things can be lost. The lack readers of *Drood* feel – the lack of a complete text – is the lack that all of Dickens’ ghosts warn against, but ultimately, can only proclaim. The transcendence that Dickens’ Christmas ghosts signify, for all their solipsistic totalizing, is finally, in the Lacanian sense, the end of the line. Not Christmas *or* Death, but Christmas AND Death. In terrifying their subjects into wholeness, they highlight the most terrifying part of the whole: the blank line on the Christmas card, the *objet petit a* which will one day be a headstone with an inscription.

And yet with ghosts, who always begin by coming back, death is never the end.

The absence of Drood, Dickens, and all ghosts, comes to signify their presence. Andrew H. Miller reports that

During a séance in 1873, three years after Dickens died, the foreman of a Vermont printing office named Thomas P. James became conscious of a ghostly figure “seated beside him with a sad grave face, his head resting thoughtfully on his hand” (Doyle 723). Assuming the pose familiar from the various images of

the author during his life, this spirit was, we are told, that of Dickens himself. Pulled back even farther from his desk, his pen far from his hand, Dickens has risen to walk abroad among his fellow men and, more practically, to ask James to be the instrument for the completion of his earthly work, the unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood*. (334)

The ghost completes and then continues, the chain of signification goes on, the symbolic order holds. The message proliferates. A Christmas Card always and never arrives at its destination, again and again, year after year.

¹ Richard Kelly, ed. *A Christmas Carol*, Broadview, 2003. Inverloch Historical Society claims the number was closer to 2500, and that the date the card was issued was 1846.

² The most influential discussion of the intersection between art and industry remains, of course, Walter Benjamin's seminal 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which considers the social implications of mass-produced cultural texts, from lithographs and photographs to cinema. Mass-produced art, according to Benjamin, "changes the reaction of the masses toward art" (234), and therefore has and will be a powerful tool as an object of fascist manipulation or progressive socialism. If Benjamin's Fascism/Communism dualism has not aged particularly well, his insistence on the political power of mass-produced art has come to be taken as read by contemporary cultural critics. The interest to this study of Benjamin's essay lies less in his Messianic hopes for the potential of mass-produced art than with the fiercely dialectical approach with which he charts its development. Benjamin's notion of "aura": the quality of art "which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction" (221), yet can be sensed as a phantom outline or "shadow" (223) of that which recedes from us, suggests a proto-hauntological metaphor for the absence/presence of Derrida's concept of spectrality and Žižek's theory of parallax.

³ <http://www.greenyour.com/lifestyle/events/greeting-cards>

⁴ "While the letter may be en souffrance, they [the subjects] are the ones who shall suffer from it. By passing beneath its shadow, they become its reflection. By coming into the letter's possession – an admirably ambiguous bit of language – its meaning possesses them" (*Ecrits* 21).

⁵ Slavoj Žižek offers this visual metaphor to describe the *objet petit a*'s function within the fabric of the real:

...in order to appear as a consistent whole, external reality has to be 'sutured' by a subjective element, an artificial supplement that has to be added in order to generate the effect of reality, like the painted background that confers on a scene the illusion of 'reality.' And interface takes place at this level: it is the internal element that sustains the consistency of the 'external reality' itself, the artificial screen that confers the effect of reality on what we see. This is the *objet petit a* for Lacan: the subjective element constitutive of objective-external reality. (*The Fright of Real Tears* 55)

This revenant, outside of, yet endemic to reality, in dialogue with, yet inherent to, the subject itself, is as we will see, as good a definition of a ghost as any.

⁶ Žižek again:

... 'a letter always arrives at its destination' equals what 'meeting one's fate' means: 'we will all die.' A common pretheoretical sensitivity enables us to detect the ominous undertone that sticks to the proposition 'a letter always arrives at its destination': the only letter that nobody can evade, that sooner or later reaches us, i.e., the letter that has each of us as its addressee, is death. We can say that we live only in so far as a certain letter (the letter containing our death warrant) still wanders around, looking for us. (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 24-5)

Very like a ghost.

⁷ Lacan's invocation of Scheherazade and the 1001 Nights is of perhaps more than coincidental interest to this chapter. *The Arabian Nights* is, of course, Dickens' favorite

literary allusion, one he employs in *A Christmas Carol* to show Scrooge's lone childhood pleasure. The reminder of death implicit in Scheherazade's predicament is mirrored in Scrooge's own spirit-haunted nights.

⁸ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun. Novels 1942-1954* eds. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1994, 535.

⁹ An instance of parallax which Žižek himself uses as an example in *The Parallax View*: Kant introduced a key distinction between negative and indefinite judgment: the positive judgment 'the soul is mortal' can be negated in two ways: when a predicate is denied to the subject ('the soul is not mortal'), and when a non-predicate is affirmed ('the soul is non-mortal')—the difference is exactly the same as the one, known to every reader of Stephen King, between 'he is not dead' and 'he is un-dead.' The indefinite judgment opens up a third domain which undermines the underlying distinction: the 'undead' are neither alive nor dead, they are precisely the monstrous 'living dead.' (21-2)

¹⁰ *Paradise Lost*, 4.20-3:

The Hell within him, for within him Hell
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell
One step no more then from himself can fly
By change of place.

¹¹ Master Humphrey relates in the opening to *The Old Curiosity Shop* his reasons for taking up the habit of walking alone at night: "it affords me greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets. The glare and broad hurry of broad noon are not adapted to idle pursuits like mine; a glimpse of passing faces caught by the light of a street lamp, or a shop window, is often better for my purpose than their full revelation in the daylight" (1). In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the narrator similarly muses that "every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest to it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this" (10). The voyeurism of these passages, and the dark imagery that attends them, reflect the panoptic qualities of Scrooge and his ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*. As we will see, this kind of voyeurism leads to considerations of the "awfulness, even of Death itself" in that text as well.

¹² Consider Panthea's description of the sleeping spirit within the Earth in Act IV:

A sphere, which is as many thousand spheres,
Solid as crystal, yet through all its mass
Flow, as through empty space, music and light:
Ten thousand orbs involving and involved,
Purple and azure, and every space between
Peopled with unimaginable shapes
Such as ghosts dream dwell in the lampless deep
Yet each intertranscipient (238-46)

¹³ Paul Davis sees The Ghost of Christmas Past as an epistemological spirit, one that shows Scrooge a rational, rather than empirical reality:

The confrontation with Marley cracks Scrooge's icy empiricism and turns his attention away from external experience. In the darkness before the arrival of the Spirit of Christmas Past, Scrooge, without sensory input, is still actively conscious: "Scrooge went to bed again, and *thought*, and *thought*, and *thought* it over and over, and could make nothing of it. The more he *thought*, the more perplexed he was; and the more he endeavored to *think*, the more he *thought*" (p. 23, emphasis added). Consciousness of "nothing" is nonetheless preoccupying consciousness. The Spirit of Christmas Past will teach Scrooge how to increase his knowledge by adding the inward truths of memory, thought, and reflection to the fragmentary facts from external experience. (*The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge* 32)

¹⁴ I am reminded in particular of the hideously protean alien in John Carpenter's *The Thing*, whose shape-shifting ability causes panic among a group of people stationed at an Antarctic research post. The panoptic omnipresence of the alien, and the paranoia it arouses among the victims it haunts (and kills), offers a visceral (at times, sickening) variation on the theme of the ghost.

¹⁵ See Sydney Carton/Charles Darnay in *Tale of Two Cities*, and Barnaby/Hugo in *Barnaby Rudge* for two particularly memorable instances. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the supposedly dead John Harmon lives a double life as John Rokesmith, whose pacing in an upstairs apartment is described as "stumping overhead in the dark, like a Ghost" (208). He is also referred to as "the living-dead man" (373), an indicator that the double in Dickens is clearly to be regarded as a hauntological phenomenon.

¹⁶ From "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," in *The Wound and the Bow*:

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. (316)

¹⁷ The Pre-Raphaelites, the "Young England" movement of "radical conservatives," and the Oxford movement are famous examples of this trend. One even detects a note of wistfulness in Marx's depiction of the pre-alienated Medieval laborer in this passage from *The German Ideology*:

In the towns the division of labor between the various guilds was quite natural; in the guilds themselves it was not all carried out among the individual workers. Every worker had to be well versed in a whole round of tasks and had to be able to make all things that could be made with his tools [...] Every man who set out to become a master craftsman had to be proficient in the whole of his craft. The medieval craftsmen still exhibited an interest in their special work and their skill in it which could develop to a certain limited artistic extent. For that very reason, however, every medieval craftsman was completely absorbed in his work... (135)

Just a hint of nostalgia (Marx's general disdain for the Middle Ages equaled his contempt for industrial capitalism), but a difference in degree rather than kind to William Morris's vision of a communist utopia in *News From Nowhere* (1891), in which a future classless England looks a lot like an idealized medieval past.

¹⁸ D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* examines the role of the police in *Bleak House*, and its collaborative role with Chancery which drive the novel's plot. Miller notes that the police "not only repress but also, profoundly, satisfy the desire to which Chancery gives rise" (73). Chancery is, in part "an all-pervasive system of domination" (63) in which "the binarisms of inside/outside, here/elsewhere become meaningless and the ideological effects they ground impossible" (62). Such a conception seems to me applicable to the semiotic regime of Christmas in the *Carol*, in which the spectral dislocations of time, place, freedom and necessity both reify the ideology of capitalism while pointing out the unbearable side-effects it creates: poverty, alienation, and greed. In this analogy, all the Christmas spirits are cops of a kind, though the actions of the Ghost of Christmas Present most readily fit our associations. His magical torch manages to both repress and gratify the subjects it touches. In line with his role as an agent of binary-busting spectrality, the ghost, of course, is both "good cop" AND "bad cop" in his dealings with Scrooge.

¹⁹ *The Battle of Life* is the title of Dicken's penultimate Christmas Book. As Peter Ackroyd notes:

The Battle of Life was a phrase which meant a great deal to Mid-Victorian Englishmen: it was even something of a truism in a world for which struggle and domination were the twin commandments, where the worship of energy and the pursuit of power were the two single most important activities, where there was a constant belief in will, in collision, in progress. Darwin and Malthus both described "the great battle of life" and "the great battle for life"... (*Dickens* 514)

Darwin and Malthus's differing prepositions aside, the phrase suggests the grim intersection between biology and economics which would become more notoriously mixed as the century progressed. Dickens begins his book with a description of an idyllic countryside that was once a "fierce and bloody battle-ground, where thousands upon thousands had been killed in the great fight" (250). The battle Dickens so apocalyptically describes is unnamed, but like the darkness that suffuses all of the Christmas Books, the ghost of Malthus can be regarded as a source of it: all five of the books, haunted by the prospect of poverty and extinction, are unmistakable products of the Hungry '40's, when Malthus' theories seemed more like simple fact. The Ghost of Christmas Past, a hearty giant who appears to Scrooge surrounded by food, and yet whose wards are starving children, can be seen not only as a warning of Malthusian collapse, but as its very personification.

²⁰ Audrey Jaffe's "Spectacular Sympathy: Visuality and Ideology in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*" connects the text's preoccupation with seeing and visuality as an example of Althusserian interpellation into the capitalist discourse of the time:

In its detailed attention to and elaboration of surfaces, its reliance on contrasts between darkness and light, its construction as a series of scenes (a structure reproduced in the images the spirits exhibit to Scrooge) and particularly its engagement with a dynamic of spectatorial desire, the story is an artifact of, and an exemplary text for understanding, the commodity culture Guy Debord terms a 'society of the spectacle'; the mechanism of Scrooge's conversion is, after all, spectatorship. (254)

²¹ Like the Foucauldian panopticon, the Lacanian signifier is equally constrictive and constitutive. There is no vantage point outside the symbolic order.

²² Even the first-person narration of the autobiographical *David Copperfield* begins on a detached note. Copperfield himself is surprisingly non-committal as to whether he will even be the hero of his own book – delegating the burden of proof to the text itself.

²³ Referring to Edmund Wilson's claims that Scrooge suffers from bipolar disorder, Elliot Gilbert points out that "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"; i.e. the realism (or lack thereof) of Scrooge's conversion. Citing the reservations of Humphrey House, Edgar Johnson, and Joseph Gold, Gilbert analyzes the cognitive disconnect the text's denouement arouses in readers:

...there is a measure of discontent in even the most positive emotional response of the serious reader of the 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' ... (*Ceremony of Innocence* 22)

Gilbert's concern with the disparity between mimetic representation and reality can be partly assuaged by Lacanian theory: Scrooge's only reality is that constructed for him by the symbolic order. The only sign that points to the Real is Christmas.

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, the first, more polemical part of their two volume exploration of the constrictive structures of capitalist society: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, critiques the Oedipal straitjacket psychoanalysis forces on its analysands, and expands that critique to include the ever-expanding, yet-ever limiting, boundaries of capitalist ideology. Just as psychoanalysis forces the so-called mentally-ill to codify their madness within a tyrannical Father-Mother-Me triad, so does capitalism ceaselessly annex, or "re-territorialize," areas of freedom and creativity that lie on its boundaries in a similarly bourgeois, imperialist fashion. In both volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari employ a flamboyant style, a vast and eclectic range of literary, scientific and sociological references, and a studied disregard for the norms of philosophical discourse in an attempt to diagnose, and to whatever degree possible, circumvent, what they see as the fascistic structures that mark the limits of thought, expression, and freedom. In their attempts to disable the normative social centering of the subject – indeed, in their attempt to destroy the idea of the subject as such – and posit a world of multiplicity based on pure difference, Deleuze and Guattari speak directly (and entertainingly) to the dialectical representations and paradoxes that underlie the concept of spectrality, and their work will therefore be central to my own hauntological investigations.

²⁵ A line that proceeds from *Oliver Twist*'s Rose Mayley to Kate Nickleby and Little Nell, to Florence Dombey, Dora, and Little Dorrit. Generally read as ghosts of a kind proceeding from the traumatic death of Mary Hogarth, Dickens' teenage sister-in-law, they dominate the representations of femininity in Dickens' work until *A Tale of Two Cities*, where Dickens' women start to become unattainable, and, like *Great Expectations*' Stella, frigid rather than virginal. This shift is almost universally attributed to the appearance of Ellen Ternan in Dickens' life, and the subsequent dissolution of his marriage. While Dickens' representation of women and sexuality is, as suggested above,

certainly available to hauntological analysis, it lies outside the scope of this work. Interested readers will have no trouble finding critical work dealing with this topic; particularly perceptive and readable considerations can be found in John Carey's classic study *The Violent Effigy*, and Phyllis Rose's penetrating biographical study of Victorian marriage, *Parallel Lives*.

²⁶ This observation is noted in John Bowen's insightful essay, "Uncanny Gifts, Strange Contagion," from the book *Contemporary Dickens*.

²⁷ It is often pointed out that the public readings Dickens embarked upon in the final years of his life ruined his health and precipitated his end. As those readings were often headlined by readings of *A Christmas Carol*, it may not be too glib to suggest that the enactment and commodification of Christmas killed Charles Dickens.

**Chapter Two:
Mourning Becomes a Christmas Tree**

'...Though miserably weak and utterly shattered, my spirit rises when I think any wish or plan of his [Prince Albert's] is to be touched or changed, or I am made to do anything.'

She ended her letter in grief and affection. She was, she said, his 'ever wretched but devoted child, Victoria R.' And then she looked at the date: it was the 24th of December.

An agonizing pang assailed her. And she dashed down a postscript. – 'What a Xmas! I

won't think of it.'

--- Lytton Strachey, *Queen Victoria*

I

The Christmas tree is surely the strangest of cultural artifacts. It is both process and thing, multiplicity and unity, branching into countless directions, yet sitting blunt and slightly abject in the middle of our living rooms. Bright and ornamental, to all appearances full of life, the Christmas tree arrives in our homes already dead. Executed in its prime, it comes as a revenant, a simulacrum of life. Though dead, we decorate it with phantasmic lights and hanging totems, reminders of Christmases passed, investing it with an uncanny life built on our memories. Those who find Christmas trees beguiling and haunting, have good reason. They are, among other things, beautiful ghosts, standing silent sentinel to loss. A legend concerning the origins of the Christmas tree suggests that loss: in 723, Boniface, an English monk, was on a mission in pagan Germany. When Boniface stumbled upon a winter sacrifice taking place beneath a huge oak tree, he fell into a rage, grabbed an axe, and chopped down Thor's oak, reportedly with one blow.¹ The pagan Germans, expecting the disagreeable monk to be struck down by Thor's wrath at any moment, instead became increasingly impressed with the Englishman's God with

each moment Thor's wrath failed to materialize, and with each illustration the monk gave them of this strange religion. Boniface's signifier for Christianity was another tree: "a young fir tree growing at the roots of the fallen oak, with its branches pointing to heaven..." (45). Boniface further explained that the triangular shape of the tree could be read as a symbol of the Trinity – a "tree of the Christ child who brought eternal life" (45).² According to some accounts, the dead oak tree was chopped up and built into a church. Whatever became of the tree, the lesson to the pagans was clear: old trees must die in order for new ones to grow. To those grief-stricken pagans, waiting in vain for Thor's answer, one imagines it must have been a hard lesson indeed.

So goes the legend. Another Englishman in Germany, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, offers a more historically verifiable account of the Christmas tree. During a stay at a pastor's home in Ratzeburg, Coleridge witnessed one of the strange local customs, which he describes in an essay from *The Friend*, "Christmas Within Doors":

On the Evening before Christmas Day one of the parlours is lighted up by the Children, into which the parents must not go; a great yew-bough is fastened on the Table at a little distance from the wall, a multitude of little Tapers are fastened on the bough, but not so as to burn it until they are nearly burnt out -- & coloured paper etc hangs and flutters from the twigs. – Under this bough the Children lay out in great neatness the presents they mean for their parents. (300)

Coleridge's account of domestic anthropology achieves a sense of the uncanny in its reversal of the now traditional arrangement in which parents give gifts to children, rather than the other way around. His description heightens our sense of the Christmas tree as a site of inter-generational exchange:

Then the Parents are introduced – and each presents his little Gift – and then bring out the rest one by one from their pockets, and present them with kisses and embraces. -- Where I witnessed this scene, there were eight or nine children, and the eldest daughter and the mother wept aloud for joy and tenderness, and the tears ran down the face of the father, and he clasped his children so tight to his

breast – it seemed as if he did it to stifle the sob that was rising within him. – I was much affected. (300)

Like the pagans of the St. Boniface legend, the children prepare a sacrifice for the absent father, whose eventual appearance (if we allow that Boniface and his God are stand-ins for the missing Thor) marks a show of great emotion, and a lesson in the proper mode of exchange. Though the actors and signifiers change, both Boniface and the German pastor use the Christmas tree as a site of emotional catharsis and as a school for correct training in a new dispensation of social and cultural economy.

Coleridge's oft-cited encounter with the Christmas tree begins a forty year period of Christmas tree sightings among historians of the holiday,³ which reaches its apotheosis in 1840, the year Prince Albert brought the Christmas tree to Windsor Castle. Coming on the heels of his marriage to Victoria, an event which had a salutary effect on the new queen's sagging popularity, the institution of this ritual "turned the Royal Family's Christmases into semipublic events" (150).⁴ The association in the public mind of Albert as the Father of the Christmas tree was firmly set with the appearance of an iconic illustration of the royal family gathered around a tree in the December 23, 1848 edition of the *Illustrated London News*, variations of which appeared in British and American journals in the following years.⁵

While the patriarchal subtext of the Christmas tree during its reification under Albert can be easily seen, the ritual as emotional catharsis is less easily imagined. An uncrowned king in a strange land, Albert was a most ambivalent father figure to his adopted country, then and now. Strachey's portrait of him suggests an unlikely candidate as a Father Christmas:



Figure 7: The royal family's Christmas tree, *Illustrated London News* (1848)

For in spite of everything he had never reached to happiness. His work, for which at last he came to crave with an almost morbid appetite, was a solace and not a cure; the dragon of his dissatisfaction devoured with dark relish that ever-growing tribute of laborious days and nights; but it was hungry still. The causes of his melancholy were hidden, mysterious, unanalysable perhaps – too deeply rooted in the innermost recesses of his temperament for the eye of reason to apprehend. There were contradictions in his nature, which, to some of those who knew him best, made him seem an inexplicable enigma: he was severe and gentle; he was modest and scornful; he longed for affection and he was cold. (284)

Here is a sphinx-like Hamlet, a man whose country, whose closest friends, seem to be at a loss to categorize, much less idolize. But this is a portrait of the man as he lived.

Albert as icon, as father to the nation, would have to wait until he was dead.

Upon his death, due to a potent mix of typhoid fever and medical incompetence, the violently emotional component of Albert was duly supplied by his wife, who, among other accomplishments, became the most famous grieving widow in the world. As Stanley Weintraub reports, “Christmas, following so soon after the funeral in Wolsey’s Chapel, was darkened everywhere by official mourning” (306). It is in the absence of the father that emotion is finally unleashed. For the queen herself, her already fanatical devotion to Albert would take on a new cast. In a letter written on “the dreariest Christmas Eve of her life,” Victoria plans her future: “I am...anxious to repeat *one* thing, and that one is *my firm* resolve, *my irrevocable decision*,... that *his* wishes – *his* plans – about everything, *his* views about *every* thing are to be *my law!*” (307) In losing a husband, it would appear that the queen gained a god.

If Victoria’s grief immediately calls to mind the Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in its blunt anticipation of, and indeed willingness to indulge in, the phenomenon of repetition compulsion, it also suggests the Freud of *Totem and Taboo*, in which he outlines his alternative legend of original sin. As anthropology, Freud’s

account of the primal murder of the father, and its attendant guilt-ridden rise of law, religion, culture, and art still has the power to make readers scoff at his claims to science, but as myth-building, it remains a triumph of imagination. Like the legend of St. Boniface and the first Christmas tree, it presents a realistic, if factually suspect account of the evolutionary shift between social orders. In the former case, a swift act of arboreal violence constitutes the shift from pagan to Christian; in the latter, the boiling over of Oedipal violence marks the shift from pre-history to history, from animism to religion, from dead father to living God. Both accounts explain the rise of a totem out of taboo: in Freud, murder gives way to ritual sacrifice – later, ritual sacrifice itself will give way to Christmas trees. But from apemen to Albert, the absent father lies like a shadow behind all ritual. Thus we can understand how the German pastor's tears of joy in Coleridge's account may be mixed with something more ambivalent. For Freud, the totem is a projection of deep emotional ambivalence (63), arising as it does out of taboos that arise from cataclysmic social violence. The totem is a marker, a transitional form, which makes apparent the evolutionary structure of trauma upon which all culture is based.

The Christmas tree as cultural totem is a site, much like its cousin the crucifix, of mourning as much as joy. This can be seen in "A Christmas Tree," an essay by Dickens, written over ten years before the death of Albert, in which "a merry company of children assembled round that pretty German toy" becomes the occasion for one of his most elegiac and melancholy pieces. The narrator of the piece looks back with nostalgia upon the Christmas tree of his youth, decked in its ascending (or descending – the narrator, looking back, views his tree as growing "downward towards the earth" [169], a product of his memories reminding him of his own deathward descent) branches with various

toys. The essay takes an unusual turn, as the narrator's recollections turn to horror upon remembering a "ghastly" cardboard man, and a "dreadful" mask, which calls to his mind "some remote suggestion and dread of the universal change that is to come on every face, and make it still" (170). Just thinking of the mask, the narrator tells us, "the mere knowledge of its existence anywhere, was sufficient to wake me in the night all perspiration and horror, with, 'O I know it's coming! O the mask!'" (170). The higher the narrator's memory ascends the tree, the more his memories shift from terrible toys to his favorite stories, including Scheherazade's death-deferring 1001 tales, and numerous ghost stories which he relates at length. At the highest reaches of his tree, the narrator sees:

a prodigious nightmare [...] In connection with it I descry remembrances of winter nights incredibly long; of being sent early to bed, as a punishment for some small offence, and waking in two hours, with a sensation of having been asleep two nights; of the laden hopelessness of morning ever dawning; and the oppression of a weight of remorse. (174-5)

The breathless wistfulness with which the narrator climbs his tree is filled with impressions like these – shadows of forgotten punishments, guilt and mourning. The narrator praises the tree, which, he claims, casts "no gloomy shadow" (182). But this conclusion seems mitigated, if not outright contradicted, by the impressions and images he has shown us in his memory. The Christmas tree is a constant reminder of horrors, of punishments, of death. It points upward to a past that is lost, and downward to a future that is lost in shadow. The tree, for all its happy associations, finally justifies itself to the narrator echoing the words of Christ in the Last Supper: "as it sinks into the ground, I hear a whisper going through the leaves. 'This, in commemoration of the law of love and kindness, mercy and compassion. This, in remembrance of me!'" (182) Clotilde de

Stasio finds in this tree an especially “disquieting character” (7), “disturbing” in its “oscillation[s] between the festive and the depressive” (5). Citing the “uncanny metamorphic quality of the tree, its ghostliness and ghastliness,” de Stasio observes that “both the tree and the objects on it are continuously changing, from real to unreal, from distinct to indistinct: ‘Everything is capable of being changed into Anything’” (7). This Christmas tree, like others we will examine, exhibits a deeply disturbing evolutionary quality, and a schizoid nature that is pulled between an injunction to enjoy, and a command to mourn. Oscillating between these poles, ascending and descending, the tree ultimately can only find closure in an appeal to the ultimate law, the transcendental signifier. The Christmas tree becomes the crucifix.

Whether dispensing joy or terror, the Christmas tree is a sentinel of the symbolic order, an avatar of the law, and an invitation to remember and repeat. It issues a call to mourn that, if less loudly stated than Victoria’s, nevertheless makes of its branches a site of “extreme emotional ambivalence” and deep ambiguity. In reminding us of the law to love, it also reminds us of Freud’s dictum: “What no man’s soul desires calls for no prohibition, it automatically excludes itself. The very emphasis on the commandment: Thou shalt not kill, makes us certain that we are descended from an endless series of generations of murderers who had the lust to kill, as we perhaps do ourselves, in their blood” (190).⁶ In other words, having to be *made* to love, requiring a law to love, reminds us of how hard it is for us to do so. It may even suggest, as it does to Freud, that all our filial obedience, and totemic respect of the law constitute the social mask of humanity, and like Dickens’ mask, a reminder of death as well as a disguise for the murderous creatures to whom we owe a peculiar and unsettling debt of kinship.

Freud's account of the rise of civilization, despite his conclusion in *Totem and Taboo* that "In the beginning was the deed" (158), is by necessity a metaphor, a totem in itself. Freud's primal narrative, compelling as it is, is of course unprovable, and therefore, resides in a netherland between fiction and fact. It therefore takes on the character of a figure of speech, a signifier, an example of the very law it seeks to explain. Gillian Beer sees Freud's categorization of the "three blows" human narcissism has suffered at the hands of science as a "mythopoetic" (9) exercise. The decentering of the human subject, according to Freud, was wounded first by Copernican astronomy, second by Darwinian biology, and thirdly (and, presumably, lastly) by Freudian psychology. Beer argues that "Freud's assertion arrests history. The magical number three belies the possibility of a fourth great wound" (9), revealing a hidden teleology in Freud's assumptions. With Freud's "magic number," we arrive at a conclusion of sorts, a place to make the ceaseless chain of signification stop. As Beer suggests, human narcissism has not been completely destroyed, as there is enough left of Freud's to account for the loss of the rest. Even though Freud has helped to undermine the structural underpinnings of civilization's narcissistic assumptions, the hint of a *solution* inherent in his ordering and narrativizing of the destruction of those assumptions keeps the totemic chain going, despite the implications of an *end* to human innocence (and presumably, the start of a more enlightened road of human progress). Freud's use of the "magic number" three gives the game away: as a structuring device that has underpinned much of the structural narratives of western civilization from the taxonomies of Aristotle to the geometry of Christianity, the ordering of civilization's "wounds" -- the word itself a metaphoric structuring device -- (not to mention the ordering of as miasmatic a realm as the

unconscious into the neat triptych of id, ego, and superego,) is itself a teleological totem that seeks to limit the chaos of endless multiplicity.⁷

Freud gives partial credit for his metaphoric narrative in *Totem and Taboo* to the second great “wounder,” Charles Darwin, and his consideration of the role of patriarchal polygamy in the concluding chapters of *The Descent of Man*. But for Darwin, there is no magic number. If Freud smashes outdated teleological models to replace them with his own, Darwin’s project seems content to dispense with teleology as such. As Beer argues in *Darwin’s Plots*, “Darwinian theory will not resolve to a single significance nor yield a single pattern. It is essentially multivalent” (6). The difference between Freud and Darwin can be seen in the manner in which Freud himself takes up Darwinism. In attributing his theory of original sin to Darwin, Freud states in *Totem and Taboo* that “Darwin *concluded* from the habits of the higher primates that mankind, too, first lived in small hordes within which the jealousy of the oldest and strongest male prevented sexual promiscuity” (126; emphasis mine). But readers of *The Descent of Man* will note that one of the salient characteristics of the book is to avoid the appearance of conclusivity. Indeed, in the chapter to which Freud refers, Darwin offers the scenario of patriarchal polygamy as one of several possibilities; at one point it is considered as a conditional negative to a previous point in the same paragraph (“Or he may not have been a social animal...”) which itself begins with a qualification that the “most probable” state of aboriginal humanity was monogamous (659).⁸ Qualifying language abounds in Darwin; in part, perhaps because he is describing a system *without limits*: the very idea of natural selection is circumscribed by its capacity to describe continuous change. Therefore, despite the linguistic concessions to positive progress and hints of ontology in *The Origin*

of *Species*,⁹ Darwin's theory can only describe a state of being: the eschatology of extinction and the ontogeny of mutation are no more privileged positions within Darwinian discourse than any other point on what still is often considered a "chain" of being. But unlike Freud, Darwin is not tracing a chain of guilt, he is describing a tree of being.¹⁰

But if Darwin's tree frees us from the idea of progress, it still retains the chains of an order of signification that is always already present – perhaps more so, as there is no totemic prohibition to structure it. Darwin's theory is, after all, still based on a *law*. And while the laws of natural selection suggest the absence of a designer, a god, a father – the absence of that father paradoxically suggests the *non-presence* of the father even more than Freud's patricidal narrative does. It is, despite its lack of ontology – perhaps because of that lack, inevitably *hauntological*. The list of ghosts that haunt *The Origin of Species* is a long one, ranging from evolutionists like Darwin's grandfather Erasmus Darwin, through Lamarck, Malthus, Lyell, and Alfred Russell Wallace, whose concurrent discovery of natural selection was a direct prompt to Darwin to hurriedly compose *The Origin* in 1859. All were gentlemen naturalists whose increasingly close reading of the beauties of the natural world were paving the way for Darwin's great discovery, and setting the tone for a cultural and religious clash that is still being waged today. As J.W. Burrow memorably puts it: "Bug-hunting was the Trojan Horse of Victorian agnosticism" (19).

The most troublesome ghost was that of William Paley, whose *Natural Theology*, published in 1802, was studied by Darwin at Cambridge, and whose argument of creation by design still haunts those who find in Darwin an occasion to mourn. Paley's famous

argument of the watch which presupposes a watchmaker, and the stone, which, by analogy, presupposes a God, presented conclusions which were widely believed to be, in Paley's own words, "invincible." Any other conclusion would be atheism, a conclusion Paley equates with "absurdity" (43). In large part, Darwin's argument in *The Origin of Species* is an attempt to refute Paley's conclusions without resorting to absurdity.¹¹ From Paley's perspective, and for those who are sympathetic to Paley's conception of a creator, Darwin's theory is a direct attack on God. The success of that theory would mean the death of that God, and the absurd victory of atheism.

Here then, is the tension between the linear chain of causality, and the multiplying branches of the tree at its most blunt. That tension still frames the debate that doggedly clings to Darwin's theory, and to Darwin himself. As Gillian Beer notes: "there is still a sense in which we hold Darwin responsible for his history of the world, as though he had created rather than simply recorded the processes he describes" (95). This sense of responsibility seems to have been felt by Darwin himself. James Moore and Adrian Desmond note that, when *The Descent of Man* was about to be published, Darwin became increasingly nervous: "Darwin dreaded these times of publication. A stream of self-deprecating letters went off to disarm critics. It will 'disgust you,' he warned an old *Beagle* shipmate; while from Mivart [a colleague and Lecturer in Comparative Anatomy] 'execution' was the least he anticipated for such capital blasphemy" (1). He suffered from violent headaches, vomiting, "hysterical crying," and "dying sensations" (xl), that have often been attributed to a sense of guilt for the oblique metaphysical and cultural violence he was unintentionally committing.¹² Parts of *The Origin* read like a eulogy, an effort to console his audience:

All that we can do, is to keep steadily in mind that each organic being is striving to increase at a geometric ratio; that each at some period of its life, during some season of the year, during each generation or at intervals, has to struggle for life, and to suffer great destruction. When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply. (129)

One gets the sense in this passage that the clergy might not have been an entirely missed calling for Darwin. His diction, comprised of words like “striving,” “suffer,” “console,” and “belief,” sounds more redolent of the pulpit than the laboratory. He is not merely presenting a theory; he is teaching his readers how to cope with it.

This concern for the sensibilities of his readership can be seen in the structure – the *narrative* structure, to follow Beer – of *The Descent of Man* as well. While the thesis of Darwin’s long-delayed book argues for the evolution of humanity out of “lower” life forms, and thus, finally making explicit human’s troubling place within the evolutionary chain (which Darwin was purposely silent about in the *Origin*), it does so by the most roundabout of means. Sixty percent of the text does not speak of humans at all, but rather provides hundreds of pages of detail about the mating habits of animals, beginning with invertebrates, and proceeding “upwards” from insects to fish to birds to mammals. Each chapter is rigorously formulaic, treating each animal’s fighting habits, vocal talents, mating rituals, and ornamental displays in the same order, creating a sense of inexorable repetition that nevertheless creates an oddly compelling spiral effect as the order of animals treated becomes more and more complex. When Darwin does speak of humans in the final chapter, we arrive with a sense of *déjà vu*: The structure of the chapter is exactly the same as the preceding chapters, and the rhetorical impact of this final, structural repetition is perhaps greater than anything Darwin actually says: Darwin need

not explicitly call humans monkeys when the structure and diction of the chapter on humans essentially repeats that of the preceding chapter on apes. The structural tree Darwin has composed to ease his readers into the unsettling implications of his unsettling thesis is ultimately the most compelling aspect of his argument. Always concerned about the effect his argument will have on his audience, Darwin adopts a strategy of genteel anthropomorphism in his treatment of his animal's behavior.¹³ His description of the apparently monogamous loyalty of a pair of land-snails (303-4) is one of the more touching and comical examples of Darwin's approach: his snails, however clinically observed, would not seem out of place in one of Lewis Carroll's fantasies. When speaking of birds (his obvious favorites), Darwin cannot resist speaking of their mating habits in terms of "love," "charm," and "joy" (461-4). *The Descent of Man* is as much a cultural text as a scientific one, as creative in its depiction of evolution as it is compelling. The tree of descent which Darwin composes is one equally concerned with assuaging the sensibilities of his Victorian readership as it is with overturning them.

Darwin's tree, then, is not simply his theory of natural selection, but the cultural context that leads up to, and circumscribes, that theory. It is a progressive narrative of loss, and despite the "forms most beautiful and wondrous" being evolved, the interconnections it marks between man and nature also mark a severance of man from God. Darwin effectively kills the father years before Freud conducts the autopsy. In the evolutionary climate of the Victorian period, the tree of life itself becomes a site of mourning. For the hyper-fecundity of the evolutionary tree is built as much on death and extinction as much as it is on the ceaselessly ramifying force of life; indeed, the creative forces of life are impossible without the destructive mechanism of extinction. As the

stark mechanics of evolution became more and more apparent to Darwin and the culture that produced him, it became increasingly clear that God was no longer to be seen in the gears of Paley's waylaid watch. Over the course of the nineteenth century, gentleman naturalists content to find God in the static, beautiful artifacts of nature would be forced into a new profession: that of the scientist, ceaselessly mining new veins of specialization in the pursuit of extracting meaning from meaningless processes. It would be left to the poets to search for lost fathers flitting like a ghost between the branches of the Darwinian tree.

II

On the surface, it would seem there could be no one less fitting to conduct such a search than that most Eeyore-like of poets, Alfred Tennyson. In one of the more amusing instances of damning praise, W.H. Auden famously observed of Tennyson that "there was little about melancholia that he didn't know; there was little else that he did" (222). Modernist dismissals of Victoria's poet laureate as depressive bump on a log aside, there is much in Tennyson's music and imagery to suggest kinship with the stupidly granitic immobility that constitutes the poet's popular stereotype. In the early poems "The Kraken" and "Mariana," Tennyson paints striking pictures of stasis. In "The Kraken," an enormous beast rests at the bottom of the sea: "There hath he lain for ages and will lie / Battening upon huge seaworms in his sleep" (11-12). The leviathan eventually moves to the surface, but only to die. Tennyson's Mariana is similarly entombed in her "lonely moated grange" (8), indulging in a self-imposed exile punctuated by her repeated lament:

“I am weary, weary, / I would that I were dead!” (11-12). Auden’s description of the poet’s “large, loose-limbed body” with “huge bricklayer’s hands” (222), complemented by his “stupid” melancholy, itself seems a grotesque combination of the Kraken and Mariana. Much like the Victorian Age for which Tennyson was brought to account by his Modernist critics, he comes off in Auden’s sketch as a clumsy monster, faintly comical in his mourning, luxuriating in a premature *rigor mortis* brought on by mechanical repetition. Hardly a figure to give poetic voice to evolutionary change, much less to the great scientific and cultural metamorphoses of his age.

But it is precisely the immobilized half-lives Tennyson explores, as well as his obsessive repetitions, that constitute Tennyson’s ability to see his age as *process*, to seek faith in the very gaps that suggest its lack, and which makes his poetry so paradoxically dynamic. It is, after all, the cyclopean paralysis of the Kraken that makes its eventual movement so apocalyptic. And it is precisely in the repetitive interplay between the death-driven agoraphobia of Mariana and her claustrophobic environment that a dramatic dialectic occurs:¹⁴ where static isolation becomes, as Herbert F. Tucker puts it, a “virtually ritual movement of anagnorisis” (362), the very engine of discovery and epiphany. Repetition and paralysis, anxiety and melancholia, become poetic tools with which Tennyson seeks the contingent, the lost, and the impending. Tennyson’s poetry moves *through* stasis, reaching towards what Tucker calls “an epiphany of the inevitable, with a rhythm, at once cardiac and astral, to which the whole creation moves” (20). That inevitability, of course, suggests a looming presence in absence, the moving trace of the ghost.

If we accept Derrida's theory of spectrality, all of Tennyson's poems can be regarded as ghost stories of a kind: their dialectic of anxiety and melancholy, of subject turning into object (enacting Isabel Armstrong's conception of the "double poem") create a uniform atmosphere of haunting. But no poem in Tennyson's oeuvre, perhaps no work in English in the nineteenth century, is as haunted – by loss, by ghosts, by haunting itself – as that great accretive epic *malgré lui: In Memoriam, A.H.H.* On the surface a diary of grief and an intimate elegy to Tennyson's gifted college friend Arthur Hallam, who died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage in Vienna in 1833, *In Memoriam* became, through seventeen years of composition, more a study of mourning than an immediate expression of it. Indeed, in expanding the scope of his personal grief to encompass cosmic anxieties of evolution, ten years before Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, Tennyson captured the unease of a nation. The publication of *In Memoriam* made him poet laureate, and in later years, Victoria would return to the poem to assuage her own grief at the loss of Albert. Tennyson became Victoria's Virgil, and it may not be too much to suggest that *In Memoriam*, not least in its obsessive harrowing of the underworld in quest of the lost Hallam, became a Victorian *Aeneid*. It is, at the very least, among the strangest and most poignant of Victorian ghost stories.

Like any ghost story, *In Memoriam* thrives on contradictions as it conducts its impossible dialogue between the living and the dead, the self and other, faith and doubt, being and nothingness. In form, it presents a linear chain of interlocking stanzas consisting of a central couplet circumscribed by two rhyming lines, compressed into a self-limiting tetrameter. These stanzas coalesce into numbered clusters, inexorably counting upward from one to one hundred and thirty one, the cantos themselves enclosed

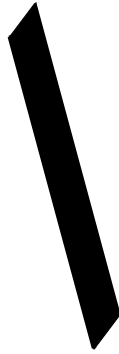
by a prologue and epilogue. But the circular and linear process described by the form is complicated by the thematic ramifications of the ceaselessly questioning speaker. On one level, the poem can be said to describe the speaker's ascent from despair and grief, on another it can be said to diagram the ebb and flow of emotional and intellectual turbulence the speaker undergoes. In other words, while the poem charts a Dantean rise from a spiritual hell to a hard-earned peace – a kind of truce with heaven – moving, as it does, from a funeral to a wedding, its singular power stems from its ability to represent mourning as a *process*: an unpredictable accrual of moments, images, and ideas that arise from particular circumstances within the poem, rather than from any determining structure. A late stanza, describing the nebular evolution of geologic time, could also serve as a description of the poem itself:

In tracts of fluent heat began,
 And grew to seeming-random forms,
 The seeming prey of cyclic storms,
 Till at the last arose the man (cxiii, 9-12)

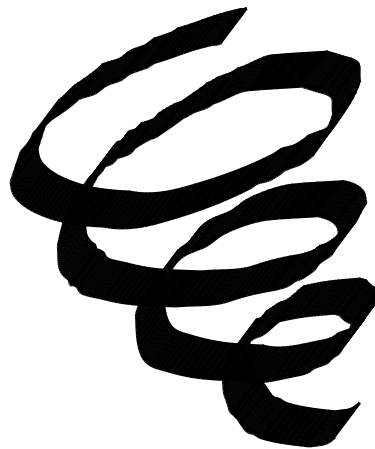
There is progress at work here: beginning with the “fluent heat” of grief, we eventually arrive at a risen man; but in between the bookending couplet is a vivid image of the arboreal labyrinth the poem as a whole becomes: a tangle of “random forms” which are the product of emotional “storms.” The adjectives work to undermine each other: the linear “began” and “last” are undercut by “random” and “cyclic”; pluralized “tracts” of heat become singular: “the man.” The uncertainties of these contradictions are further embellished by the repetitive use of the qualifier “seeming”: like Darwin, Tennyson’s vision of the natural world is highly conditional.

The struggle between contraries in *In Memoriam* is both characteristic of the poem’s content, and constitutive of the poem itself. Formally and thematically, the

poem presents a definite beginning and ending, a line segment that rises from a final point of death to a somewhat more ambiguous finality (however conclusive it is for to the poem as such) in the marriage of the epilogue. Visually, a simple line, pointing skyward:



The poem also, through its formal and thematic repetitions, describes a “circle moaning in the air” (xii, 15) the metaphoric “cyclic storms” which make up so much of its shape:



If we see this cyclonic form “rising,” moving toward “one far off event” horizon, we can invert it, and juxtapose it with our linear model:



It would not require a great imaginative leap to see in this diagram of formal contraries a structure; to make of this semiotic field a signifier. In the spectral gap between linear progression and cyclic repetition one can make out an arboreal ghost: a Christmas tree.

As glib or wayward as this diagram may appear, it reflects a common critical consensus that *In Memoriam* revolves around its three “Christmas sections.” A.C. Bradley’s *Commentary on Tennyson’s In Memoriam* cites no less an authority than Tennyson himself that “the divisions of the poem are made by the Christmas-tide sections,” and that the “most obvious sign of definite structure in *In Memoriam* consists in the internal chronology” (122), of which the Christmas poems are “the most prominent instance” (124). Bradley sets up a linear, chronological table illustrating the poem’s

progression (123) around which the thrice repeated comings of Christmas spiral. Sarah Gates, in analyzing Tennyson's unique *abba* stanza form, sees spirals as well:

The fourth line does gesture back to the first, but it does not enact a complete return, for it can only do so after the reader has passed through the two middle lines whose couplet form gives so much strength to their rhyme. Thus, the outer rhyme a a- -a is distanced; the second 'a' recollects only dimly the first 'a,' which by then has become a faint echo and seems, in spite of the rhyme, to have been something different from the 'a' we are now reading [...] The second 'a' 'returns,' but it also leads 'beyond' because it is different from the middle couplets and only faintly recollects its partner [...] Rather than characterize this movement as a circle, I would call it a spiral, a figure that includes the backward forward gesturing of vacillation, the repetition risking stasis (the central concentration), but also the outer diffusion, the movement beyond. (508-9)

Both the macrocosmic structure of the poem taken as a whole, and the microcosmic world of the stanza form a multi-cyclonic architectonic which is entangled with the more linear aspects of chronology (the seasons, anniversaries, Christmases) and numerology (the ascending numbers that form the various stanzas into individual "poems") that drive the poem forward, inexorably, to the proverbial "tree topper:"

That God, which ever lives and loves,
 One God, one law, one element,
 And one far-off divine event,
 To which the whole creation moves. (epilogue, 141-4)

Both line and spiral funnel upwards, towards a univocal signifier, the absence-presence of which has previously made up the body of the poem-tree, but now, in its ending, dissolves all questions of difference and repetition into one shining point.¹⁵

Like other Christmas trees, *In Memoriam* is arborescent, evolutionary; its flowering is dependent on the death of an other, and is haunted by the other's death. Every aspect of *In Memoriam*, its very existence, is predicated on the death of Hallam. Its growth is marked by the *revenant* of Hallam: as long as Hallam is remembered, and mourned – as long as he remains, and repeats, as a ghost, the branches of *In Memoriam*

continue to grow. It is only when Hallam is finally and definitively equated with “That God, which ever lives and loves” that the tree reaches a point, and the poem can stop. As in *A Christmas Carol*, it is only when death and life reach a univocal point, when the chain of signification reaches the terminal signifier, that “all is well, tho’ faith and form/ Be sunder’d in the night of fear” (cxxvii, 1-2). This is the apotheosis of the murdered father in *Totem and Taboo*, in which the fearful specter of the dead becomes the triumph of eternal law; this is the transformation of Prince Albert from German house-husband to a kingly sublime object of national mourning, a transformation Tennyson was often accused of abetting. The Poet Laureate’s willingness to indulge the queen’s grief is most notoriously on display in his *Idylls of the King*, which Swinburne dubbed “Le Morte D’Albert.” In his “Dedication” to the *Idylls*, Tennyson offers the mourning queen an Albert much like Hallam – transcendent, universal:

Break not, O woman’s-heart, but still endure;
Break not, for thou art Royal, but endure,
Remembering all the beauty of that star
Which shone so close beside Thee that ye made
One light together, but has past and leaves
The Crown a lonely splendor.
 May all love
His love, unseen but felt, o’ershadow Thee (43-9)

This benevolent shadow, which is, through metaphoric cross-connection simultaneously Albert, Arthur, and, finally, God, is also a return of the shadow of Hallam, who himself is absorbed into God in *In Memoriam*. Like the ghosts of *A Christmas Carol*, Tennyson’s ghosts are panoptic, omnipresent, and, spiraling as they do to “one far-off event,” inevitable.

This inevitability is not without its problems. The missing king, the dead father, are felt first as an almost unbearable lack. Tennyson first mourns the dead king Arthur

(though not yet Albert) in “The Epic,” a frame poem for the surviving fragment of his first attempt at a twelve book epic on Arthurian themes, “Morte D’Arthur.” The poem takes place

At Francis Allen’s on the Christmas-eve,--
The game of forfeits done – the girls all kissed
Beneath the sacred bush and passed away –
The parson Holmes, the poet Everard Hall,
The host, and I sat round the wassail-bowl,
Then half-way ebb’d: and there we had a talk,
How all the old honour had from Christmas gone,
Or gone, or dwindled down to some odd games
In some odd nooks like this [...] (1-9)

Even for Tennyson, this is a bleak opening. More than half of the first ten lines express loss of some kind. The verbs alone are relentless in their sense of abandonment: “done,” “passed,” “ebbed,” “gone,” “dwindled.” Everything about this Christmas has left before it has even started -- the holiday so torpid that the speaker’s first action is to fall asleep (13). He wakes to talk of the “decay of faith” (18) and varieties of extinction, natural and cultural: Everard has burned his draft of an epic of King Arthur because he “thought that nothing new was said, or else/ Something so said ‘twas nothing” (30-1) and asks “Why take the style of those heroic times?/ For nature brings not back the Mastodon,/ Nor we those times” (35-7). In “The Epic,” Tennyson provides a dry run for the structure of *In Memoriam*: a Christmas of loss, determined by the death of the king. The lack of this transcendent signifier casts a pall on everything, until, of course, Hall reads his poem of the death of Arthur, effectively raising him from the dead. The speaker imagines ““ Arthur has come again: he cannot die”” (296). The speaker describes a host of others calling for the return of the king, a repeating call that turns into the peal of church-bells on Christmas morning (297-303). It is this phantasmic appeal to a ghostly

dead/alive authority to make of a dismal, nihilistic Christmas a happy one that not only presages *In Memoriam*, but marks a central thematic trope in the Victorian Christmas narrative: it is the same command to enjoy in the face of non-existence, to celebrate in the midst of death, that defines the movement of *A Christmas Carol*, and underlies the myth of the Christmas tree.

In Memoriam illustrates, like “The Epic,” the command to enjoy in the wake of mourning that seems strangely constitutive of the Victorian Christmas, but its complex, repetitive structure continually, both explicitly and implicitly, raises the question: “What *is* the authority that commands?” We have seen in the last chapter how Christmas becomes a transcendental signifier, a focal point of social power that commands enjoyment. In this sense, and indeed, as Dickens makes explicit in his personifying spirits, Christmas is itself a “ghost of an idea” that through surveillance and intervention, operates as a normative site of power-knowledge, to use Michel Foucault’s term¹⁶. In *A Christmas Carol*, which ostensibly casts a critical eye on arch-capitalist Ebenezer Scrooge, we see how Christmas in fact reifies capitalism by making Scrooge a better capitalist. Four ghosts confront Scrooge with the emerging cultural discourse of Christmas, and Scrooge is transformed into a good man. What is fascinating is what does NOT change: Scrooge’s role as an economic power player. In fact, Scrooge’s first act upon his reformation is to hire a member of the working class to buy commodities for his lower-middle class employee, Bob Cratchitt. Scrooge’s heart may have changed, but his business acumen has not. In fact, what the invocation of Christmas has ultimately accomplished is a vindication, and normalization, of the discourse of capitalism it was originally employed to combat. As Margaret Atwood has wittily observed:¹⁷

Scrooge's big sin was to freeze his money; for money, as all students of it recognize, is of use only when it's moving (99) [...] Scrooge is set free from his own heavy chain of cashboxes at the end of the book, when, instead of sitting on his pile of money, he begins to spend it. (98)

The happy ending of Dickens' *Carol* involves upward economic mobility for all concerned, and solves the troubling problem of an unpleasant capitalist by triumphantly actualizing his capitalism.

In Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Christmas is once again put to seemingly paradoxical work, this time combating, and then co-opting, the violent and horrific implications of biological and geological evolution. As in "The Epic," Christmas is a site of mourning, but it is also a social discourse that *interferes* with the speaker's grief, forcing him to reconsider not only that grief, but the terrifying observations of the Darwinian natural world he often indulges as a result of it. Consider Poem 28, which describes Christmas not as a comforting psychological alternative to mourning, but as a powerful social prescriptive that commands his allegiance:

The time draws near the birth of Christ
 The moon is hid, the night is still;
 The Christmas bells from hill to hill
 Answer each other in the mist.

Four voices of four hamlets round,
 From far and near, on mead and moor
 Swell out and fail, as if a door
 Were shut between me and the sound;

Each voice four changes on the wind,
 That now dilate, and now decrease,
 Peace and goodwill, goodwill and peace,
 Peace and goodwill, to all mankind.

This year I slept and woke with pain,
 I almost wish'd no more to wake,
 And that my hold on life would break
 Before I heard those bells again;

But they my troubled spirits rule,
 For they controll'd me as a boy;
 They bring me sorrow touch'd with joy,
 The merry, merry bells of Yule. (xxviii, 1-20)

From “hill to hill” and through “four voices of four hamlets round,” Christmas surrounds the speaker, and the use of repetition in these stanzas suggests the oppressive weight of these bells, “merry, merry” though they might be. The speaker, wishing only to doze indefinitely in a fetal position, is recruited by the discursive force of Christmas, which controls him as much now as it did as a boy, though with a much more ambiguous power. Though on one hand, the bells pull the speaker out of a state of suicidal contemplation, the power of the Christmas bells is one that “brings sorrow,” and, rather than dispel troubled spirits, they “rule” them. Christmas here does not so much bring joy and rescue, but rather annexes and redefines feelings of dread. Christmas does not bring relief, but demands submission.

The sense of Christmas in these poems as a force that demands compliance is often suggested by the speaker’s feeling of being *watched* – of being, as it were, under surveillance. Note the panoptic gaze suggested in Poem 30, in which the speaker’s family undergoes Christmas rituals as if under armed guard:

With trembling fingers did we weave
 The holly round the Christmas hearth;
 A rainly cloud possess'd the earth,
 And sadly fell our Christmas-eve.

At our old pastimes in the hall
 We gamboll'd, making vain pretense
 Of gladness, with an awful sense
 Of one mute Shadow watching all. (1-8)

The imagery here suggests a family under siege. “Trembling,” the speaker submits to Christmas rituals, as a “rainy cloud” which “possess”-es the earth overshadows everything. The family pretends to have fun, as if in dread of offending the mute shadow that watches them. On one level, of course, the “Shadow” is A.H. Hallam, but the deification-by-capitalization of the word suggests a more powerful, even omnipotent force. As in *A Christmas Carol*, the holiday is personified not so much by the spirit of Christ, but by a ghostly force that operates with social purpose, here a panoptic shadow rather than the watchful committee of spirits in Dickens’ novella. In both cases, the power of Christmas – whether personified by agents who offer their own powers of surveillance to those in need of the Christmas spirit (as with the ghosts of *A Christmas Carol*), or by an omnipresent, all-seeing shadow – can be seen as something of a terrible gift given to those who, like Scrooge and the speaker of *In Memoriam*, have placed themselves on society’s margins. It is a gift that reintegrates these characters back into a social structure governed by the normative beneficence of Christmas itself. The agency of Christmas also forces these characters to *see* and *be seen*, to accept the social world and its terrors, and to mitigate those terrors through the rhetoric of Christmas cheer, and through voluntary self-surveillance. The world of Christmas in Victorian narrative can largely be seen as one in which everyone watches each other. More importantly, everyone must learn, no matter how unpleasant the lesson, to *enjoy* doing so.

If this reading seems something of a stretch for the elegiac *In Memoriam*, compare the speaker’s diction and tone with that of the more famously controversial speaker of *Maud*, a poem in which Tennyson gives us a speaker so inscribed in the

discursive practices of Victorian England that the only way he can voice his rebellion against them is to embrace them:

And it was but a dream, yet it lighten'd my despair
 When I thought that a war would arise in defense of the right,
 That an iron tyranny should now bend or cease...
 Nor Britain's one sole God be the millionaire.
 No more shall commerce be all in all, and Peace
 Pipe on her pastoral hillock in a languid note...
 And myself have awaked, as it seems, to the better mind.
 It is better to fight for the good than to rail at the ill;
 I have felt with my native land, I am one with my kind,
 I embrace the purpose of God, and the doom assign'd. (3.18-20, 22-24, 56-59.)

Here, the speaker differentiates between oppressive economic forces and the glories of military service. Tennyson sees the irony of that distinction by voicing it from the perspective of a manic-depressive recently discharged from a lunatic asylum, which is why the similarity between that poem and *In Memoriam* is striking: the latter poem's speaker makes the same rhetorical moves *Maud's* lunatic does, but without irony. Note the similar emphasis on waking and dreaming, the oppressive tone in describing the monotonous rhythms of "peace," the final ambiguous acceptance of "oneness." Critics have taken Tennyson, and *Maud*, to task for equating "the purpose of God" with a jingoistic defense of the Crimean War,¹⁸ but the speaker's resignation of God's will as a "doom assign'd" suggests a capitulation rather than an embrace, one that mirrors the speaker of *In Memoriam's* submission to Christmas. Both speakers seek to exorcise private ghosts, and both find it possible only by reluctantly joining the society they still seem in part to abhor.¹⁹

For it is not easy to catch the Christmas spirit. As it took four spirits to indoctrinate Scrooge in the necessities of Christmas cheer, the structure of *In Memoriam* requires the repetition of three Christmases to make the speaker come to terms with his

existential terror and dread. In the first Christmas, the speaker flatly asks: “How dare we keep our Christmas-eve [...] In dance and song and game and jest?” (xxix, 4, 8) Still, custom demands compliance:

Yet go, and while the holly boughs
 Entwine the cold baptismal font,
 Make one wreath more for Use and Wont,
 That guard the portals of the house,

Old sisters of a day gone by,
 Gray nurses, loving nothing new;
 Why should they miss their yearly due
 Before their time? They too will die. (xxix, 9-16)

The speaker’s cynicism towards the “old sisters,” “Use and Wont,” suggest a barely concealed rage: the traditions which seem to trap the speaker in “guarding the portals of the house” will get their due, if not his respect. But he dismisses them threateningly: “they too will die.”

The second Christmas shows softening in the speaker’s tone, and if he does not find joy in the Christmas ritual, he is more willing to accept them:

Again at Christmas did we weave
 The holly round the Christmas hearth;
 The silent snow possess’d the earth,
 And calmly fell our Christmas eve (lxxviii, 1-4)

While the speaker allows that this Christmas is calm (an advance, perhaps, upon the Christmas Eve that falls “sadly” in Poem 30), compliance is again the reigning tone here. The numerous repetitions of this stanza seem to supply the almost uttered “weary” in the stuttering repetition “we weave.” The word “Christmas” itself becomes leaden in its repetition, surrounded as it is by single syllabic words with smooth vowels. The speaker’s sarcasm in Poem 29 seems to linger here in the spitting consonance of “Christmas” which brings the poem to a crude stop each time it is spoken. In its vocal

effects, the spiral weaving of the holly becomes a Sisyphean chore, and though the “ancient games [and] dance and song and hoodman-blind” (lxxviii, 10,12) are ritually performed, grief and sorrow, though seemingly absent, remain “mixt with all this mystic frame” (lxxvii, 18): mourning is inextricably mixed with pleasure’s outward show. In fact, the connection between grief and enjoyment is metaphysically cemented: the “mystic frame,” an ambiguous referent which could mean the speaker, Christmas, or being itself, is suffused in “all” by distress, sorrow, and grief (lxxvii, 13-16). When the speaker asks if this grief can “be changed to less” (a prospect the speaker finds as horrific as the grief itself: “O last regret, regret can die!” (17), the answer is definitive: “No” (18).

The third Christmas again repeats the lines “The time draws near the birth of Christ” and the adverbial formula that ends with “falls our Christmas-eve” in Poems 104 and 105, but in the interim, the speaker has moved, and his father has died. “Our father’s dust is left alone/ And silent under other snows” (cv, 5-6), but this disruption, rather than add to the speaker’s grief, becomes an occasion to re-evaluate it. The speaker declares that this Christmas:

No more shall wayward grief abuse
 The genial hour with mask and mime;
 For change of place, like growth of time,
 Has broke the bond of dying use.

Let cares that petty shadows cast,
 By which our lives are chiefly proved,
 A little spare the night I loved,
 And hold it solemn to the past. (cv, 9-16)

In these two stanzas, it appears that the speaker is done with grief. He rather shockingly calls his cares “petty shadows,” which seems a repudiation of the primary metaphor the speaker has been using to indicate the ghostly presence of Hallam. Grief itself is

rendered an imposter that “abuses” Christmas by pretending to be absent. “Strangely” falls this Christmas Eve indeed (cv,4). Here, the differentiating adverb works against the call to the end of grief, and suggests the paradoxical contradictions at work in this poem.

For immediately after excoriating his grief, the speaker calls it back:

But let no footstep beat the floor,
 Nor bowl of wassail mantle warm;
 For who would keep an ancient form
 Thro’ which the spirit breathes no more? (cv, 17-20)

Though there will be no more pretence of joyful ritual sullied by hidden grief, there will also be no rituals at all – unless the “spirit” breathe through them. In other words, the shadow of Hallam is to be dispelled, but only if the spirit of Hallam remains. By this point, the speaker has clearly identified Hallam as “the Spirit himself” (xciii, 6), and has begun to make peace with his natural despair by substituting a ghostly plane in which “Spirit to Spirit, Ghost to Ghost” (xciii, 8), the speaker and Hallam can commune. The speaker has in fact summoned Hallam to

Descend, and touch, and enter; hear
 The wish too strong for words to name;
 That in this blindness of the frame
 My Ghost may feel that thine is near. (xciii, 13-16)²⁰

As the speaker increasingly seeks Hallam on this phantasmal level, the natural world becomes increasingly “strange,” resulting in the numerous contradictions of Poem 105. What begins as a plea to stop movement, a desire for stasis -- “To-night ungather’d let us leave/ This laurel, let this holly stand” (cv, 1-2) – ends in a call for the stars, the “rising worlds by yonder wood,” to “run out your measured arcs, and lead/ The closing cycle rich in good” (cv, 25-28). The speaker wishes simultaneously to exorcise and invoke his ghosts, to still them, and set them spinning.

This confusing metamorphosis in the speaker's reaction to Christmas can be further seen in Poem 106, in which the speaker once again engages the panoptic bells which brought him "sorrow touch'd with joy" in Poem 28:

Ring out the old, ring in the new,
 Ring, happy bells, across the snow;
 The year is going, let him go;
 Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out a slowly dying cause,
 And ancient forms of party strife;
 Ring in the nobler modes of life,
 With sweeter manners, purer laws.

The speaker approvingly anticipates new manners and new laws: the discourse of Christmas has apparently made such a revolution in power-knowledge possible. But what has changed? The bells are still ringing, echoing the forceful rhythms of the first Christmas the speaker is reluctantly confronted with. There has not been a repudiation of the evolutionary science which has tormented the speaker throughout the poem: nature is still "red in tooth and claw," only the speaker's attitude has changed:

...The fortress crashes from on high,
 The brute earth lightens to the sky,
 And the great Aeon sinks in blood,

And compass'd by the fires of Hell,
 While thou, dear spirit, happy star,
 O'erlook'st the tumult from afar,
 And smiling, knowing all is well. (Poem 127)

Indeed, here evolutionary forces are rendered more apocalyptic than ever, but those forces are outranked by an overseeing intelligence. This intelligence is nominally God (or Hallam - the speaker seems to conflate them at times), but it has been made operable, and the speaker has been inscribed into its discourse, by the social rhetoric of Christmas. Nothing has changed except the speaker's compliance – though that compliance, like

Scrooge's, makes all the difference. As surely as it removes the fangs from capitalism, Christmas removes the meaningless terror of evolutionary time and scientific discourse by absorbing those terrorized by them into its merry gaze.

III

In his 1884 post-apocalyptic novel, *After London*, Richard Jefferies imagines a world given back to nature after some half-remembered catastrophe:

The old men say their fathers told them that soon after the fields were left to themselves a change began to be visible. It became green everywhere in the first spring, after London ended, so that all the country looked alike [...] Hawthorn bushes sprang up [...] and, protected by the briars and thorns from grazing animals, the suckers of elm-trees rose and flourished. Sapling ashes, oaks, sycamores, and horse-chestnuts, lifted their heads. Of old time the cattle would have eaten off the seed leaves with the grass so soon as they were out of the ground, but now most of the acorns that were dropped by birds, and the keys that were wafted by the wind, twirling as they floated, took root and grew into trees. By this time the brambles and the briars had choked up and blocked the former roads, which were as impassable as the fields. (1-2)

Jefferies describes a world where evolution has gone out of control, where the hyperfecundity of vegetation has broken the superstructure of an industrial society that has retreated into myth. London itself has devolved into a stratified layer of toxic sludge, the very air surrounding it death to breathe (science fiction, to a point). Royalty as such is no more: with no central government, the small clusters of human habitation have self-styled, usually incompetent "kings" that ceaselessly war with each other. Literature from before "The Change" has been lost – at least that literature immediately preceding The Change; presumably, Victorian literature. The remnants of humanity prefer Sophocles, because his texts are short and to the point (102). The novel's hero, whose voyage to the

surreal hellscape of London makes up much of the narrative, seems to be on the verge of a strategic military breakthrough that could change the balance of power in the agrarian world, and bring a form of centralized government back to England, but he is plagued with a day-dreaming nature that luxuriates in his natural surroundings, a trait that is indulged by the narrator, whose lovingly exhaustive descriptions of the natural world make the novel a strange mix of *Mad Max* and *Walden*. The reader, like the protagonist, is unsure whether to make of this world a nightmare or an arcadia.

The world of *After London* could be accurately described as a post-Darwinian dystopia like those of H.G. Wells, but it could also be fairly characterized as a utopian model of the de-structured, rhizomatic world of strata Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The world of *After London* is fragmented, de-centered, forgetful of its past, endangered only by the encroachment of nature and roving packs of animals and nomads. The rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari is an “antigeneology. It is a short-term memory, or antimemory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” (21). It is “an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states. [It] is always in the middle, not at the beginning or end” (21). Jefferies’ world is in the middle, *after* the end, forgetful of its origins and unconcerned with its eventual fate, and thus, despite, its dangers, rather inviting. Nonsignifying and antimemory, it is a world that cannot mourn because it cannot remember what it has lost.

And yet there is something ominous in Jefferies description of the encroaching trees, and this may be simply *because* they are trees. In *After London*’s opening pages,

the proliferating trees offer a kind of judgment on the fallen civilization. If the narrator, stuck in a future present that can't make sense of the past, can view the trees dispassionately, even affectionately, the reader, situated *within* the past that the text has marked as dead, has little choice but to see in this hyper-fecund arboreality a meaning not present to the future describing it: the trees are our first visual marker in the text of the death of *our own* civilization. As such, we read the trees as markers of beginnings and endings, the agents of memory, and therefore, mourning and loss. In the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari find a suitable arch-enemy of trees, which have “dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology [...] theology, ontology, all of philosophy” (18). They trace “the structure of Power” (17). Regarding trees, Deleuze and Guattari warn: “Make rhizomes, not roots, never plant! [...] Don't be one or multiple, be multiplicities! Run lines, never plot a point!” (24) Such hostility to trees may not be the most constructive approach to dealing with their presence, but Deleuze and Guattari make a trenchant, if flamboyant, point about the nature of trees: they tend towards a point, and that point, as we have seen in the Christmas trees of this chapter, can be a singularity of pain. The unfettered, hippie-radical rhizome, can seem relatively comforting in comparison: an escape from the totalizing umbrella of the signifier, a line of flight from the monarchical, hierarchical tyranny of memory.

On this point, however, Victorian literature and post-structuralist pyrotechnics differ. In Darwin, Dickens, and Tennyson, evolution is always *threatening* to become rhizomatic, stratified, a multiplicity of plateaus. It is through trees, not rhizomes, that evolution is brought to heel, its implications of endless and meaningless ramification contained. In mourning, in remembering and repeating, the proliferating rhizome spirals

upward to a point, the “one far off event” of the transcendental signifier: the ghostly, ghostly last hope of the return of the lost. Indeed, the terrors of the age, even the “Dragons of the prime/ That tare each other in their slime” (lvi, 22-3) could themselves be structured, tapered, and trimmed; changing from arboreal threat to spiraling promise. *Everything*, in a manner of speaking, can fit under the tree. The theological evolutionist Teilhard de Chardin may well have been speaking for the striving, metaphysically apologetic Victorians when he observed:

Space-Time must be given whatever form is most appropriate. Caught within its curve, the layers of Matter (considered as separate elements no less than as a whole) tighten and converge in Thought, by synthesis. Therefore it is as a cone, in the form of a cone, that it can best be depicted. (81)

Everything that rises must converge: a cosmological cone; an eschatological Christmas tree. A curiously triumphant Whole, containing everything; yet somehow sadly constricted, in that there is nowhere to go but up.

¹ Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History*

² Much like the artificial Roman tree of Christ's adulthood. The Christmas tree is effectively the crucifix of the holiday. Both are master signifiers that encapsulate the faiths they signify.

³ Stephen Nissenbaum's *Battle for Christmas* provides the most thorough and theoretically interesting account of the rise of the Christmas tree in America.

⁴ Stanley Weintraub, *Victoria*.

⁵ Forbes, 64.

⁶ From "Timely Reflections on War and Death" in *Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. Freud's argument here is repeated from *Totem and Taboo*, which was itself derived from Frazer's *Golden Bough*.

⁷ The "magic number" is of course, at work in *A Christmas Carol*, as well: the univocity of time itself divided and represented by three anthropomorphic entities.

⁸ A recent book, *Sex at Dawn*, offers a spirited polemic against what the authors call "the standard narrative:" that humans are biologically monogamous. The authors argue that the rise of agriculture, and subsequently, private property, led to a social reification of monogamy that has been widely mistaken as biological, and that humans are naturally promiscuous. The authors claim that Darwin himself mistook humans as biologically monogamous, but again, the conclusions the authors reach regarding Darwin are not the conclusions Darwin draws himself. In fact, Darwin considers at length in *Descent of Man* the idea of promiscuous, or "communal" sexual practices without offering definitive judgment.

Edward Pusey, an Anglican cleric and member of the Oxford movement, was unimpressed with Darwin's penchant for qualification: "Never probably was any system built upon so many 'perhaps,' 'probably,' 'possibly,' 'it may be,' 'it seems to be' (*Darwin* 32)

⁹ The famous last paragraph of *The Origin of Species* offers a "happy ending" of sorts to what is essentially an impersonal, unending process:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (459-60)

There is a rhetorical tendency in this sentence to supply agency, ontological ground, and anthropomorphic meaning to the concepts under discussion: life was apparently "originally breathed into" "simple" forms that are "beautiful" and "wonderful." But it is life itself that is invested with *several* powers, the agency which originated life goes unnamed (indeed plays no grammatical role in the sentence), and is further hedged by the fact that the original breath of life may or may not have gone into a single, original form – it may well have been *a few*. The concessions Darwin makes here to an audience he is well aware may find his theory deeply disquieting are both strangely touching and deeply ambiguous. What, precisely, constitutes the "grandeur in this view of life?" In a view of life devoid of magic numbers, perhaps the grandeur arises from what in a way amounts to a repudiation of numeration itself.

¹⁰ As Gillian Beer notes in *Darwin's Plots*:

...Darwin fastens on the image of the *tree* to express evolutionary organization. In doing this he rebuts the Lamarckian idea of a chain of progression – and with it the older hierarchical organization of the ‘great chain of being,’ its ascending orders of existence each working like a substitute, a more earthbound version of its own platonic idea. The idea of the great chain places forms of life in fixed positions which are permanent and immobile. (33)

The degree to which notions of progress or completion *can* be ascribed to a tree, however metaphorical, will be considered at greater length in this chapter.

¹¹ J.W. Burrow argues that “It is because Darwin, in order to undermine the doctrine of special creation, had to provide another answer, that *The Origin* reads in places like an answer to Paley” (22).

¹² Particularly among creationists, who find in Darwin’s mystery illness a prelude to divine retribution:

Psychologically there can be little doubt that Charles Darwin suffered from feelings of guilt. These undoubtedly arose from his desire to escape from God and from the force of Paley's arguments about design in his *Natural Theology* [...] Darwin knew that this was an idea which could and would destroy the faith of millions of believers—and he was the one who was about to unleash it on an unsuspecting world. But what if he was wrong? How could he accept the responsibility for what it would do to others? It is little wonder that he ‘broke out in boils,’ referred to the *Origin* as ‘my accursed book’ and seems to have thought of himself as a ‘Devil’s Chaplain.’ (Grigg, *Creation* 17.4 (1995) 28-30)

The author is conspicuously un-Darwinian in his lack of conditional language in describing not only Darwin’s psychological states, but in his reliance on the “force” of Paley’s argument, which is apparently so compelling, one can only hope to “escape” from it.

¹³ See Beer 33-6, and 44-70: “The need to please his readers as well as to unsettle and disturb them is as vital to Darwin as it was to Dickens” (35).

¹⁴ See Isabel Armstrong’s *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*. Armstrong sees in “Mariana” a model of the Victorian “double poem,” a lyric constructed such that ...in a feat of recomposition and externalization the poem turns its expressive utterance around so that it becomes the opposite of itself, not only the subject’s utterance but the object of analysis and critique. It is, as it were, reclassified as drama in the act of being literal lyric expression. To re-order lyric expression as drama is to give it a new content and to introduce the possibility of interrogation and critique. (12)

¹⁵ My reading of *In Memoriam* revolves around the premise that the Christmas sections provide a unifying structure to what appears on the surface a collection of fragments. This kind of approach to the poem is not without its critics. Christopher Ricks, in particular, is memorably skeptical of readings he sees as overdetermined:

Literary criticism since Tennyson’s time has become more flexible in its ideas as to artistic unity [...] But it has also become more skilled at imagining some such unity where it may not exist, and [...] more skilled at exculpating works of art that deserve the higher compliment of not being whisked away into the irreproachable. Tennyson himself did not make large claims for *In Memoriam* as a unity; his

sense that the Christmases provided a serviceable division of the poem should not be taken as a warrant for believing that a poem on the scale of *In Memoriam*, and with such large concerns, could be adequately unified by such links and cross-connections as modern criticism rightly delights in and wrongly pretends can be structurally crucial. The Christmases, or the imagery of dark and light, of water and of the human hand: these do much in the way of ‘weaving them into a whole,’ but it remains weaving, not growing or building. (Tennyson 202)

This is a prudent warning against a certain kind of reading, but I do not see the same negative connotations in “imaginative” reading that Ricks does. On the contrary, what interests me most in this passage is the implied work as a whole that Ricks is defending: In arguing against attempts to see “unity where it may not exist,” which falsely “exculpate[e] works of art that deserve [a] higher compliment,” Ricks himself is appealing to an imaginary, ghostly construction – a suggestive “work” as a whole that stands as an evaluative counter-point to the imagined unities Ricks is wary of. One might ask what ghostly agency Ricks is appealing to that invests these poems with the right to a “higher compliment” in the first place. What constitutes an “adequate” unity, and at what point do “links and cross-connections” become “structurally crucial”? That Ricks resorts to a spurious hierarchy of metaphor (“weaving” vs. “growing” – why one and not the other?) in order to achieve his point underlines the imaginative “lack” that is perhaps ultimately constitutive of all readings of this or any other “work.” Its unity is by definition an imaginative, speculative, and spectral function. It is therefore only through metaphor that one can hope to access the unity which, in some respect, any reading already takes “as read.” It is from this angle that I am investigating the poem’s “tree-ness.”

¹⁶ From *Discipline and Punish*:

[...] power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, not any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. These ‘power-knowledge relations’ are to be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations. (27-8)

In this sense, Christmas is not a simply a reflection of or reaction to the dominant ideology of Victorian England, it *is* that ideology, in respect to the epistemological power it carries in diffusing the content of that ideology.

¹⁷ *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*. Toronto: Anansi, 2008.

¹⁸ Christopher Ricks provides a tidy rebuttal of these critics:

The poem ends, not with Maud’s embrace, but with God’s [...] It was therefore vengeful of G.W. Foote to insist that ‘the hero of Maud rants about himself until we begin to hope that the Crimea will really settle him.’ Similarly, it was hasty of Goldwin Smith not to distinguish at this point the poet and the character: ‘We do not, like the nations of antiquity to whom Tyrtæus sung, literally go to war. We send our hired soldiers to attack a nation which may not be in need of the same

regimen as ourselves. To most of us, the self-sacrifice involved in war with an enemy who cannot get at us consists in paying rather more taxes.’ A legitimate point against some of Tennyson’s patriotic poems, but not a legitimate point against *Maud*. (Tennyson 248-9)

¹⁹ Herbert F. Tucker, in *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, beautifully illustrates the ambiguity of the speaker’s capitulation: “the merciful ground of culture has opened to swallow the hero up. He has fallen into the bliss of the state” (428). Tucker’s ominous verbs and sweet adjectives aptly describe the paradoxical nature of the field of power-knowledge in which the speaker is inscribed.

²⁰ As Jeff Nunokawa points out, it is difficult to read these lines “without thinking that the wish too strong for words to name is the love that dare not speak its name” (427). Much has been written on the homoerotic content of *In Memoriam*, from Tennyson’s contemporaries to recent currents in queer theory, of which Nunokawa’s essay, “*In Memoriam* and the Extinction of the Homosexual” is a fine example.

**Chapter 3:
Wuthering Lights, or: Yes, Virginia, There Is Such a Thing as Woman**

Often rebuked, yet always back returning...

--Emily or/and Charlotte Brontë

Let thy courage be equal to thy love, and thy love shall be rewarded. On the night preceding Christmas, take a hatchet and saw; cut boldly into the body of the bronze rider who stands in the Corte, on the left side, near the waist. Saw open the body, and within it thou wilt find the silver effigy of a winged genius. Take it out, hack it into a hundred pieces, and fling them in all directions, so that the winds may sweep them away.

--Vernon Lee, "Amour Dure"

I

Perhaps the most beautiful of Christmas traditions is the display of holiday lights, a practice that has arisen in direct proportion to the domestication and proliferation of cheap electricity. Those rows of suburban houses and city streets, swaddled by thousands of multi-colored lights, bathing their neighborhoods in a sublunary galactic glow, are a distinctly twentieth-century phenomenon, but their roots, like so much of what we collectively call Christmas, lie in Victorian Britain. Prior to technological advances of the late nineteenth-century, the practice of ornamental lighting arose side by side with that of the Christmas tree. As the figure in the last chapter illustrates, these lights were no more than candles tied or glued precariously to dead and extremely combustible tree branches. The inevitable fires that resulted from this practice naturally helped lead by the

end of the century to the development of the strings of miniature electric bulbs we know today. If we grant Marshall McLuhan's claim that the electric light bulb is "pure information" (*Understanding Media* 8), we could say that to a great extent, the message of this medium is *containment*. If there is something comforting in the glassy glow of Christmas lights, it is that their form and function is defined by the fact that they reduce the risk of conflagration: their cozy hominess is a direct result of their intrinsic assurance that they will not burn the house down. If we further grant McLuhan's thesis that media – including the seemingly message-free light bulb -- are best understood as extensions of ourselves, the furthering of the human body and mind by technological means, we can begin to see the schizophrenic nature of the Christmas light: a device that, due to its ability to perfect and normalize a peculiarly domestic and interiorized form of entertainment – namely, specialized in-house lighting – capitalizes on its domestic utility by proliferating *outside the home*, replicating virus-like into the streets, and ultimately colonizing entire cities.

Reading the Christmas light as an extension of ourselves, which is another way of reading it *as* ourselves, we see an instance of the burrowing, necessarily internalizing process of domestication turning outward and expanding at the very moment it perfects its domestic function. In other words, much like literary representations of Christmas in the nineteenth century, the light bulb tells a schizoid story of simultaneous retraction and expansion: just as Ebenezer Scrooge's transformation into a universalizing icon of Christmas is effected through secretly peeping into the private domestic dramas that punctuate London like so many singularities, the Christmas light illuminates private space while making it unprecedentedly public. Isn't the Ghost of Christmas Past a kind

of spectral Christmas light that Scrooge attempts, but fails, to extinguish? On one level, the training that Scrooge's Christmas ghosts offer him is one in correct domestic deportment: the misanthropic bachelor who cannot heat his home or office properly learns not only the value of Christmas, but reasonable household economy. Tellingly, his last words of dialogue in the text are a request to put more coals on the fire (*A Christmas Carol* 123). And that request, like everything else about the newly domesticated Scrooge, is made at much greater volume. Nearly every sentence Scrooge utters in the last stave of the text is punctuated by exclamation points. Scrooge's entry into the properly domestic realm ends with him shouting in the street at everyone within ear shot (this may again be an appropriate place to remark on how Bob Cratchitt's initial reaction to his reformed boss is to think that he has gone insane). Scrooge, like the Christmas light, is a vessel whose destructive properties require containment, but the act of containing them results in greater conflagration. Scrooge's shifting attitudes toward light and heat seem to reflect McLuhan's diagnosis of the volatility of domestic media:

Clothing and housing, as extensions of skin and heat-control mechanism, are media of communication, first of all, in the sense that they shape and rearrange the patterns of human association and community. Varied techniques of lighting and heating would seem only to give new flexibility and scope to what is the basic principle of these media of clothing and housing; namely, their extension of our bodily heat-control mechanisms in a way that enables us to attain some degree of equilibrium in a changing environment. (*Understanding Media* 138)

The qualifiers "seem" and "some degree," with which McLuhan prefaces his claims to flexibility and equilibrium suggest the unsettled and unsettling behavior of the reformed Scrooge. After all, "seeming flexibility" and "some degree of equilibrium" could be read as polite ways of noting mental imbalance – which is how Scrooge is initially read by those who encounter him after his ghostly domestication. The price Scrooge pays for his

extension, for his adoption of the media of light and heat, is a certain degree of schizophrenia.

Perhaps a key to the schizoid evolution of the Christmas light lies in its oddly gender specific cultural development. As Graeme Gooday points out in *Domesticating Electricity*, the use of the miniature electric bulb was not only designed for safety in the home, but “as a form of ‘decoration’ to be worn specifically by women, either upper-class ladies or theatrical performers,” the purpose being to “yield some kind of aesthetic benefit, primarily, but not exclusively, for male observers” (106). This feminized light show had an auspicious premiere at the first Gilbert and Sullivan opera to open at Richard D’Oyly Carte’s new Savoy Theatre, *Iolanthe*. Audiences at that performance in November of 1882 were treated not only to a typically topsy-turvy and vaguely misogynistic W.S. Gilbert plot and another catchy Arthur Sullivan score, but to a startling advance in theatrical special effects. In the final scene, The Fairy Queen and her retinue were fantastically decked out with electric stars in their hair. The usual Savoyard collision between a world of women and a gang of institutionalized men, charged with absurdity through a strange combination of misrecognition and barely bottled sexual energy, received an additional shock through the introduction of controlled electricity. The lights, even more than the opera, were a hit. To this day, Christmas lights in Britain are known as “fairy lights,” after their adornment by the unpredictable, unreadable fairy-women of *Iolanthe*.

How are we to read this strange intersection of scientific advancement and gender construction? Physicists and feminists have certainly dissolved much of the mystery of their respective concerns: the twentieth-century scientist and cultural theorist have

provided answers to certain nagging questions. Is light a wave or particle? Is woman essential or constructed? Both, as it turns out. But it is perhaps easy to see how less heteronormative times could find it difficult to arrive at such a polyvalent answer. Here as elsewhere, nineteenth-century attempts to domesticate and extinguish the danger of conflagration – whether that danger resided in the scientific problems of electricity or the social role of women – led, paradoxically, to proliferation.

Miniature lights adorning the female body come to encircle houses, and wind up lighting a city. Similarly, the ideological attempt to stabilize and define the female only generates other definitions. The cosmic and the cultural agree in their physics: like light forced to a singular point, the normative female explodes in infinite directions, and like the quantum particle, if you do mark its place, you can't tell how fast it is going. The Victorian woman, both as scopophilic object of the male gaze and as the psychological subject of the female literary imagination, is ideologically marked as the Angel in the House, but operates much more like Gilbert's fairies:

Tripping hither, tripping thither,
 Nobody knows why or whither;
 We must dance and we must sing
 Round about our fairy ring! (*Iolanthe*, Act I)

There is a curious dialectic of freedom and containment in these lyrics, a mercuriality circumscribed by laws. The fairies dance hither and thither -- but in a circle, and because they *must*. Fairy lights have the curious effect of enlarging the woman they adorn as they simultaneously wrap her in an encircling web, just as Christmas lights magnify the attractions of a suburban home while marking it off as separate and contained from its neighbors. As the association of these fairy lights with Christmas suggests, the holiday

provides an axis wherein the contradictory forces of proliferation and containment intersect.

There is in the above a threat, perhaps already realized, of a certain paranoid associative mania at work: Christmas is woman is light is Scrooge is Gilbert is Sullivan (and so on). If there is a common denominator that can bring these connections down to earth, as it were, and avoid a sense of random coincidence rather than the more theoretically pleasing image of quantum entanglement I am aiming for, it is that the underlying aspect of all these varied phenomena is their quality as fiction. To understand the concept of a specifically “Christmas” light (let alone accept the idea that light as such is a medium with a message), and to equate such light with characters, men or women, real or fictional, is to narrativize them, and, on a structural level, fictionalize them. Perhaps the fundamental assumption of post-structuralism is its maddeningly attractive and/or repulsive claim (depending on one’s taste) that truth, insofar as it is constructed on a proliferating chain of signifiers, is itself fiction.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Lacan’s infamous claim that “There’s no such thing as Woman” (*Encore* 72). Once this gnomic little bomb of a sentence has done its work to provoke and assault, Lacan quickly makes clear that he is speaking of Woman with a capital W: woman as a universal concept. Impossible, says Lacan, as the very word *wo-man* suggests, “she is not-whole” (73):

A woman can but be excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words [...] if she is excluded by the nature of things, it is precisely in this respect: being not-whole, she has a supplementary jouissance compared to what the phallic function designates by way of jouissance.

You will notice that I said ‘supplementary.’ If I had said ‘complementary’ what a mess we’d be in! We would fall back into the whole. (73)¹

The nature of things, indistinguishable from the structure of words, relegates Woman to an uncanny realm outside of the whole. But Lacan's conception of the non-existence of women is not simply that they are not allowed in the boy's club of phallic jouissance. It is precisely their outsider status, their supplementary rather than complementary relationship to phallic normativity, their *non-existence*, that gives them power over the phallus: "It's not because she is not-wholly in the phallic function that she is not there at all. She is *not* not at all there. She is there in full. But there is something more" (74).

While Lacan is reluctant to describe this *not-not* thereness, this "something more" as the *objet petit a*, the otherness of woman, her non-phallic jouissance clearly exhibits the same spectral traits as that mysterious remainder lionized by Lacanians like Žižek. Like a ghost, she haunts. When he claims that women, however non-existent, "possess men" (73), the ever polysemic Lacan is surely invoking the spectral sense of the verb "to possess."

Lacan's enghosting of Woman is itself an example of fictionalizing her, an acrobatically theoretical way of wrapping her in fairy lights and making her dance. And, in a way, he makes of woman yet another form of McLuhanian "media": an extension of man that disrupts the equilibrium of his environment. The question is whether it is simply Lacan (or Gilbert and Sullivan, for that matter) that do the enghosting. In examining literature by and about women in the nineteenth-century, the answer would appear to be: no. I will argue in this chapter that between the universalizing fictionalization of women through the structuration of language, and the more localized fictionalization of them by individual artists and theorists, there is a distinctly *Victorian* fictionalization, and spectralization, of women. This spectralization is created in part by

the usual suspects: the male gaze can certainly be seen to do its scopophilic work in constructing the fictional woman of the nineteenth-century. But as literary criticism has increasingly come to realize, the real work of creating the spectral Victorian woman was done largely by women themselves. Confronted by the claustrophobic dictates of domestic ideology, female writers literally and figuratively wrote themselves as ghosts, allowing themselves a mobility denied by the rigidity of the ideology they inhabited. If marriage and domesticity pinned women down, the gothic fictionalization of women, particularly in Christmas ghost stories, allowed them a form of flight. As Vanessa D. Dickerson points out, “the supernaturalism of [the Victorian] period afforded women an unprecedented opportunity to explore for themselves the nature of the culturally granted spirituality that gave them a power or influence that was limited to the domestic sphere” (9). If woman is a fiction, she is certainly a self-fashioned one. The current culture of literary criticism has done quite a bit of admittedly deserved self-back-patting for “discovering” neglected women writers of the nineteenth-century. But the readership of many of these writers, and the fact that the sales of their books often far outstripped those of many of their male peers, suggests they were not so neglected in their time. And the proliferation of the writers and texts themselves, their very existence, are testament to their power to create and transform culture. If I contest that the nineteenth century’s greatest novelist and poet were women, and that the century’s greatest novel was written by a woman, such a truth, if not universally acknowledged, is hardly a minority position. And the interest of such a statement rests not in early twenty-first century critical (or personal) taste, but in the actual fact that such objects of critical fetishism existed as such, and in such profusion, in the nineteenth-century.

What, then, does all this have to do with Christmas? Firstly, Woman and Christmas are both, in their nineteenth-century literary permutations, constructed as *domestic fictions*. That is, the proper domain of both Woman and Christmas is, in both the most abstractly theoretical and diegetically specific senses, the home. Secondly, Woman and Christmas, as fictions, pursue a similarly spectral trajectory: as parallaxic subjects, they become universalized exceptions, which, as we have seen, is one of the defining characteristics of a ghost. As this chapter will show, the uncannily similar ghostliness of Christmas and the Victorian woman is not a random coincidence. On a practical level, the opportunities for publication afforded by the Christmas book market directly expanded the sphere in which women could find literary work. On a more spectral level, the subject matter expected by this market – namely, ghost stories – led to a thematic entanglement between the seemingly unrelated issues of “The Woman Question” and the phantasmic structure of Christmas itself. In a way, this chapter hopes to show that Christmas, however obliquely, helped to shape the “fiction of woman” in the nineteenth century. It is a fiction that, like Christmas, is one we still to a degree entertain. And the extent to which we have rejected such fictions – to which we have re-fictionalized Woman for a volatile post-feminist age – only speaks to their power to haunt us. Indeed, it is the *volatility* of the fiction of the domestic Victorian “Angel in the House” -- an angel with the potential to both light up a house or burn it down – that the fiction of Christmas so remarkably brings into focus.

II

We have seen that “The Christmas Spirit,” in its literary application, was no mere figure of speech to the Victorians. Dickens, in inventing that spirit, very literally reified Christmas as a ghostly affair. In both Dickens and Tennyson, the Christmas spirit is not a matter of whimsy: both poet and novelist provide ghostly policemen to insure that the spirit is enforced. The curious injunction to enjoy which is central to the Victorian conception of Christmas also suggests the deep ambiguity surrounding the holiday: in allying Christmas with the mythical taboo of the dead father, we see that the domestic bliss most commonly associated with the Victorian holiday should not be taken as read, as unalloyed bliss would not require a demand for compliance. In other words, the centrality – often, the *equation* – of Christmas with ghosts and haunting in Victorian literature suggests a site of disturbance rather than peace, a singularity of pain as well as pleasure. And Christmas is always a point, a singularity: it is both a real number that marks an X between the dying year and the one about to be born, and, as a crossroads between the two, a kind of algebraic variable – the imaginary x , the unknown, transcendental signifier. In this sense, Xmas can be read as both the apex of a zenith – the angel atop the Christmas tree, perhaps – and the vanishing point of a black hole. Such a liminal realm is a natural place for ghosts, and their authority resides in their ability to exist on either side of the singularity. In fact, their power arises in part because, like the Lacanian Woman, they don’t, strictly speaking, exist at all.

The domain of ghostly activity, the liminal realm most commonly attributed to contain their haunting, is also a place that can with some claim be said to possess a kind

of non-existence: the haunted house. Of course, on a superficial level, the haunted house -- as cultural trope and imaginary space -- can be called non-existent in that it is, *pace* certain occultists and television ghost-hunters, a fiction. But in a broader sense, the haunted house, as a construction of the Victorian imagination, can be read as a metaphor for the house as such. And in Victorian literature, particularly where Christmas is involved, the house, whether or not it is haunted in the traditional sense, is a site of flux, potentiality, and uncertainty. The Victorian Home, so often read (not least by the Victorians themselves) as the most sturdy and conservative edifice of Victorian belief, the “place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division,” the “shade as of the rock in a weary land, and light as of the Pharos in the stormy sea” (158-9) as John Ruskin would have it, is, as it is reflected in Christmas narratives, never quite so soundly constructed, and never so firmly attained. The Victorian home is never the secure keep it desires to be; indeed, desire is often the quality that makes the home, and domesticity, a spectral image rather than a concrete reality. Coventry Patmore’s *Angel in the House*, the *de facto* mascot of stereotypical notions of Victorian domesticity and femininity, devotes less than one hundred of its fourteen hundred plus lines to domestic bliss – the rest is a surprisingly anxious account of a courtship that is always haunted by a *possible*, though often doubtful, domestic future. Revealingly, the narrator, like the heroes of the Savoy operas, must pick his angel from a *plurality* of women.² Near the end of the poem, when the hero has finally married his beloved, he still asks:

Why, having won her, do I woo?
 Because her spirit’s vestal grace
 Provokes me always to pursue,
 But, spirit-like, eludes embrace;

...Because, though free of the outer court
 I am, this Temple keeps its shrine
 Sacred to Heaven; because, in short,
 She's not and never shall be mine. (Book II, 339-344, 351-4)

Possession, of the angel, and the house, is impossible for the male hero.³ He is, as Lacan suggests, possessed by *her*. The restlessness of the speaker, so eager to connect his angel to the house, to place her *in* it, comes instead to reveal the impossibility of his project. Such libidinal investment in the house only highlights the uncanny nature of it, the impossibility of home as such: the uncanny, after all, is both the *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich* – the home that is simultaneously *not* home. If *The Angel in the House* is indeed the quintessential expression of Victorian domesticity, if its home is truly the ideal of the age, then one could well argue that the only properly Victorian house is a haunted house.⁴

It is well-known that most of the successful practitioners of the Victorian ghost story were women. Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, Margaret Oliphant, Ellen Wood – all of them were bestselling authors of popular, and often subversive, domestic novels – and all are still to be found in nearly any anthology of nineteenth-century ghost stories. The editors of *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* claim: “the reasons why women took to the ghost story so successfully is one of the great unasked critical questions” (xiv). I agree, though the answer is not difficult to surmise: the women who haunted the Victorian home, particularly those that took up their pens within them, were, if one accepts the Victorian house as essentially haunted, inevitably ghosts.

This is not a new idea. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s seminal feminist examination of nineteenth century women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic*,

mythologizes the female writer, and her creations, in similar terms. The book is rife with metaphors for the claustrophobic and agoraphobic psychic states these authors explore as they navigate a world where textuality as such is by definition patriarchal, and many of Gilbert and Gubar's readings of the canonical texts of these authors are informed by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's litany of attributes for Aurora Leigh's dead mother: "Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite" (18-9). For Gilbert and Gubar, the monstrous female is a product of the constraints of domesticity: "In their attempts at the escape that the female pen offers from the prison of the male text, women [...] begin [...] by alternately defining themselves as angel-women or as monster-women" (44).

The attempt to pin Victorian femininity to an ideologically stable position creates, via an anxiety generated by the inherent impossibility of such a move, ghostly repetition. As Mary Poovey points out in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*, attempts to define the position of women inevitably resulted in bringing contradictions in such definitions to light. Unmarried women, for example, were dialectically constructed as a "social problem" in the 1851 Census because:

On the one hand, in designating an 'entire house' as the desire of 'every Englishman,' the Census simultaneously represented the middle-class domestic living arrangement as the norm and defined that norm as entailing both a particular [...] relation among the inmates of a house and a particular kind of house [...] On the other hand, however, in revealing that a proportion of women to men within the marriageable age-group of fifteen to forty-nine years was 107 percent, the Census demonstrated that this ideal was not even available to every woman. (14)

Such an idealized domestic construction of the female was, as a result, "both internally contradictory and unevenly deployed [...] open to a variety of readings that could be mobilized in contradictory practices" (15). In other words, the very attempt to define the domestic female led to multiple possible definitions of the role of women – not least of

which arose in the fictions of female authors in the period, whose “ghosts, fiends, and angels, fairies, witches, and sprites” haunt the landscape of Victorian literature. And isn’t that disturbingly redundant 7% that exceeds the normative whole of 100% a mathematical expression of a ghostly *objet petit a*: an uncanny *revenant*, or remainder?

It is perhaps inevitable that what Poovey calls the “ideological work” of gender construction should so often be paired with the ideological work of Christmas. We have seen how Christmas comes in the Victorian period to announce the re-territorializing forces of capitalism, as well as totemizing the law of the father. In both cases, such attempts at normalization produce unsettling and uncanny repetitions: proliferations and variations of the immediate message which subvert and problematize the enjoyment that Christmas comes to command. In the domestic fiction of the period, Christmas similarly occupies a place that both reifies and subverts ideological normalization.

What, then, constitutes Victorian domestic fiction? A serviceable definition would be any fiction of the period that addresses the ideological work of the “middle-class domestic living arrangement” and its legal guarantor, marriage. The fact that such a definition could be said to include nearly the entirety of Victorian fictional production should lead us to question less the fluidity of the genre than the insistence with which its concerns are posed. For Nancy Armstrong, the rise of the novel “hinged upon a struggle to say what made a woman desirable,” and that “the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies” (*Desire and Domestic Fiction* 4-5). In this sense, female sexuality not only determines the scope of domestic fiction, but the nineteenth-century novel as such. The question of marriage, and its prolonged absence or ghostly presence within the domestic novel, is one that

subsumes, and to a degree, generates, all others. Both within and without the narratives of the domestic novel, the definition of the female, and the limits demanded of such definitions, creates a dialectical movement which complicates and often contradicts the initial definition.

This dialectical tension can be seen even in the most rigidly conservative of domestic novels. Charlotte Yonge's 1853 novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe*, one of the best-selling novels of the century, and a veritable text-book of domestic propriety, nonetheless derives much of its narrative interest from uncertainty surrounding the female subject, rather than its normative declarations regarding her constancy. The plot revolves around the contest of wills between an orphan, Guy Morville, the titular heir of the gothic Redclyffe estate, and his cousin Philip, who for numerous reasons (including a historic feud between the two branches of the Morville family, and the nettling fact of Guy's more elevated social and financial status) develops a grudge against Guy. At the death of his grandfather, Guy is taken in by the kindly Edmonstone family, who live in Hollywell, a comfortable home that operates as a kind of anti-Redclyffe. It is a setting that supplies much of the charm of the novel, as do Guy's relations with the Edmonstone children, including Amy, whom he eventually falls in love with and marries. The narrative is mainly linear, moving steadily through the years, charting Guy's growth from a slightly Byronic and rebellious youth of seventeen, to an improbably wise and selfless young man in his early twenties. The only point in which the novel diverges from this steady forward movement in time is in its center, when the narrative reaches a dramatic turning point. Philip's rising jealousy and antagonism towards Guy reaches its apex with his propagation of false rumors and a misunderstanding that presents Guy as a dissipated

gambler. For a time, this shadow alienates Guy from the Hollywell household, and his engagement with Amy Edmonstone is cast into doubt.

Guy retreats to Redclyffe, a house we, and the Edmonstone children, have heard much about in the earlier chapters, in large part for its reputation for being haunted.⁵ Guy's exile to his nominally haunted house occurs at Christmas, and the holiday provides the narrative, and Guy, an extended opportunity to dwell on absence and loss. Guy spends his holiday alone, and dreads Christmas Day "as recalling so many contrasts both with those passed here and at Hollywell [...] there was a dreariness about everything; he was weary even while he undertook and planned energetically, each new project reminding him that there was no Amy to plan with him" (256). In fact, Guy spends most of his Christmas Eve vacillating between feeling worse over the absence of his dead mother and the loss of his erstwhile-fiancé. At one point, "the depression of his spirits inclined him to dwell at present more on the melancholy history of his parents than anything else" (256), causing him to seek company with a woman who can tell him stories about her. Once he does, the satisfaction of hearing stories about her turns into yearning for Amy:

...though he could still love the fair, sweet vision summoned by [his mother's] name, he was less disposed to feel that it had been hard upon him that she died. It was not Amy. In spite of his tender compassion and affection, he knew he had not lost a Verena in her. None could occupy that place save Amy... (259)

For Guy, Christmas is an occasion for brooding over the absent feminine, and the shifting movement of his thoughts between multiple women makes the particularity of any of them nebulous. Amy "occupies a place" in Guy's thoughts, but no longer in reality. She is transformed from an object fixed in space into a vision – a specter – who mixes into a

disturbingly amorphous feminine that transcends individuality: she joins Guy's mother as an emblem of lack and loss.

Guy's Christmas Eve is reminiscent of the melancholic affairs in Dickens and Tennyson, where empty ritual only serves to recall the absent one:

The late hours of Christmas Eve was the time when he had most to suffer. The day had been gloomy and snowy, and he had spent it almost entirely in solitude, with no companion or diversion to restore the tone of his mind [...] He [Guy] tried to read, but it would not do; and he was reduced to sitting looking at the fire recalling this time last year, when he had been cutting holly, helping the sisters to deck the house, and in the evening enjoying a merry Christmas party, full of blitheness and glee, where there were, of course, special recollections of Amabel. (260)

Here Christmas is again tied to mourning and absence, and the peculiar cruelty of the injunction to enjoy is present in the memories of past, happier Christmases which only serve to torment Guy. But there is an additional component to this miserable Christmas: the feminine absence which makes domestic comfort impossible.

This absence is made even more palpable in Yonge's handling of narrative at this point in the text: after moving Guy's story forward past Christmas, the narrative jerks back to autumn in order to observe Christmas at Hollywell. In effect, Yonge repeats the same Christmas within the text – an uncanny effect in a novel that otherwise proceeds with linear regularity. Guy's lonely Christmas becomes mirrored with Amy's; after a wearying Christmas party, we see Amy alone:

...she sat down in the dim light of the lamp, relieved by the stillness, only broken by now and then a louder note to the music downstairs. It was very comfortable, after all that buzz and talk, and the jokes that seemed so nonsensical and tiresome. There were but two people who could manage to make a party entertaining, and that was the reason it was so different last year. Then Amy wondered if she was the only person who felt sick at heart and dreary; but she only wondered for a moment – she murmured half aloud to herself, 'I said I never would think of him except at my prayers! Here I am doing it again, and on Christmas night! I won't hide my eyes and moan over my broken reed; for Christmas is come and the

circles of song are widening round! Glory; goodwill, peace on earth! How he sung it last year, the last thing, when the people were gone, before we went up to bed. But I am breaking my resolution again. I must do something.’

She took up a book of sacred poetry, and began to learn a piece which she nearly already knew; but the light was bad, and it was dreamy work; and probably she was half asleep, for her thoughts wandered off to Sintram and the castle on the Mondenfelsen, which seemed to her so like the picture of the Redclyffe crags, and the castle itself was connected in her imagination with the deep, echoing porch, while Guy’s own voice seemed to be chanting – (281)

Like Guy, Amy struggles to enjoy Christmas in light of the torment of memories of past happy Christmases. Both attempt to read, but fall into a reverie of the absent other. Both are stirred by far-off music (a group of carolers eventually breaks Guy’s reverie at Redclyffe). Both Amy and Guy call up spectral images of each other, and the doubling of the scene, both in incident, and in the temporal shift of the narrative, create what Žižek calls a “short-circuit,” and in film theory is called a “suture,” in which two opposing scenes are matching by cross-cutting, which creates the illusion of “self-enclosure with no need for an exterior, effacing the traces of its own production: traces of the production process, its gaps, its mechanisms, are obliterated, so that the product can appear as a naturalized, organic whole” (*Fright of Real Tears* 55).

In some instances of suture, the two crossing shots actually blend into one another through a cross-fade rather than a cut, creating a ghostly hybrid image that Žižek calls “interface.” Probably the most famous instance of this effect in cinema occurs in Jean Vigo’s poetic 1931 film, *L’Atalante*. This simple story of a newly married couple who embark on a life together aboard a river barge is complicated by a trivial fight that briefly separates them. In a famous scene, the parted couple dream of each other, and their individual fantasies and memories join into a single image on screen [Figure 8]. It is not difficult to see in Yonge’s unusual narrative roundabout a prototype of this interface: Guy



Figure 8: Stills from Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1931)

and Amy recall each other in separate, indeed, opposing places that yet blend together in similarity of incident and imaginative sympathy.⁶ The two scenes dialectically merge, and in drawing two separate scenes to a point, paradoxically create a field in which presence and absence combine. It is worth pointing out that this device was not the invention of cinema, but a borrowing of the late nineteenth-century craze for spirit photography, in which double-exposure produced a ghostly, seemingly unified image [Figure 9].

What is interesting in comparing the novel's method to the cinematic device of cross-fading is that the linear determinations of language reveal that such co-ordination produces *repetition*. Whereas the cinematic image can suture two images and create the illusion of unity, the verbal constraints of prose require the scene to be replicated: in order for Guy and Amy's Christmas loneliness to be made one, it must occur twice. What the ghostly complications of a cross-faded image suggest implicitly, the novel makes explicit: in order to suture Guy and Amy's Christmas, Christmas must be repeated. In doing so, the singular point of one lonely Christmas Eve becomes a field of multiplicity. In this most domestic of domestic novels, the implications of this uncanny field of reversals (the novel must double back on itself to present two Christmases) and repetitions, reverberate for the rest of the narrative: Guy and Amy's separation will ultimately lead to the separateness in unity of Philip and Laura Edmonstone's love plot. At the end of the novel, it is Philip who is the heir of Redclyffe, haunted by the narrative of Guy and Amy. Philip and Laura's union is described as a "harassed, anxious life, with little repose or relief [...] with little space for domestic pleasure and home comfort" (526). The novel ends leaving the haunted house of Redclyffe with even more ghosts.⁷



Figure 9: Photo by William Hope (1863-1933), paranormal investigator and spirit photographer. *“Man with the Spirit of his Deceased Second Wife.”* National Media Museum.

These ghostly repetitions, as well as the mildly gothic romance and tale-of-two-houses plot of *The Heir of Redclyffe* lend the novel to comparisons with Emily Brontë's masterpiece *Wuthering Heights*, published just six years earlier. While the later novel's cozy Toryism (Guy, like many a Young Englander, suffers from an almost visceral devotion to Charles I, a condition that had already been deftly satirized by Charles Dickens in 1849's *David Copperfield*, in the figure of the regicide-haunted Mr. Dick) is worlds away from the savage class-consciousness embodied by Brontë's Heathcliff (and by extension, the entire world of *Wuthering Heights*), the oneiric tension produced by the ghostly feminine in both novels create differences of degree rather than kind.⁸

Like any text that finds itself in the top tiers of the canonical pecking order of Great Works, *Wuthering Heights* is famous for its seemingly endless interpretability. This fecundity of the critical feast is the subject of J. Hillis Miller's take on the novel in his 1982 study, *Fiction and Repetition*. Miller accounts for this apparent interpretive overload by drawing attention to what he sees as an unusual proliferation of signs in the novel, or "materials inviting interpretation" that "present something evidently meaning more than what is simply present" (43). These signs seduce the reader into the act of interpretation in part because of their diegetic placement: "The reader is coaxed into taking the position of an interpreting spectator by the presentation in the novel of so many models of this activity" (43). Thus, the reader is led on by the outsider Lockwood to find out more by his attempts to find out more by reading Catherine's diary, which in turn is an act of interpreting a Biblical passage, and so on. Each of these signs are further complicated and divided by the numerous oppositions in the novel, which tantalizingly offer a dialectic of sameness and difference: Catherine/Heathcliff, *Wuthering*

Heights/Thrushcross Grange, etc. (60-1). Miller reads this proliferation of signs as indicative of a heterogeneous text that is structured to produce an incoherent multiplicity of interpretations. Miller's clinical diagnosis becomes rhapsodic in his final paragraph:

If in Lockwood's dream the air swarms with Catherines, so does this book swarm with ghosts who walk the Yorkshire moors inside the covers of any copy of *Wuthering Heights*, waiting to be brought back from the grave by anyone who chances to open the book and read. The most powerful form of repetition in fiction, it may be, is not the echoes of one part of the book by another, but the way even the simplest, most representational words in a novel ('1801 – I have just returned...') present themselves as already a murmuring repetition, something which has been repeating itself incessantly there in the words on the page waiting for me to bring it back to life as the meaning of the words forms itself in my mind. Fiction is possible only because of an intrinsic capacity possessed by ordinary words in grammatical order. (72)

I find this passage startling, and, in a sense, brave. Its Lacanian vision of a near infinite regress of signification is not in itself surprising, but Miller's willingness to single *Wuthering Heights* out as a peculiar instance of such a process is. The last sentence, read out of context, is, as I have suggested above, no more than a fundamental truism of post-structuralism. But in relation to Miller's reaction to Brontë's novel, it amounts to something of an abdication of the critical enterprise as such: is the appeal of this novel really just an accumulation of "words, words, words"? How do such prosaic and innocent signifiers as "ordinary words" transform themselves into the "swarm of ghosts" that glides straight out of the novel and into *any* reader's brain? In effect, Miller invests this novel with the abstract power of language itself, and in doing so suggests an almost erotic image of reader and text, a cross-faded interface, perhaps, that mirrors the interface that Catherine and Heathcliff repeatedly insist exists between them, despite the fact that they are almost always separated.

I think Miller's image of a swarm of ghosts is evocative and appropriate in describing both the impossibility of adequate interpretation, and the curious swooning effect this novel generates among both general and critical readers. It also suggests the strange way this novel seems representative of a genre it both transcends and to which it often only obliquely references: the Christmas ghost story. *Wuthering Heights* certainly represents the Christmas ghost story in its yearning for a univocity which both demands and repels a similarly univocal reading, and I think it stems, at least in part, from the volatility of the fictionalized Victorian woman discussed earlier. The key here is *volatility*: if *Wuthering Heights* resembles more gentle fare like *The Heir of Redclyffe* in its romantic and domestic entanglements, it distinguishes itself from such productions, as indeed it distinguishes itself from almost the entirety of Victorian literature, in the amount of potential *violence* it allows itself to actualize. As a novel of passion, and as something of a Victorian freak, *Wuthering Heights* is often labeled a vestige of the Romantic era. This is a mistake, I think. Such notions not only suggest a form of lazy periodization, but act as a veiled insult to Brontë herself: the implication being that such a sheltered regionalist so out of step with the social and cultural realities of her time should not even be properly regarded as *of* her time (a variation of sorts on "the man from Stratford," how-could-a-glovesmaker's-son-possibly-have-written-Shakespeare nonsense).⁹ *Wuthering Heights'* unique position in Victorian literature should not let us forget that it *is*, in fact, Victorian literature. In any event, the violence of *Wuthering Heights* is of a greater degree than almost anything to be found in English Romanticism. One would need to go back to Jacobean drama to find an English precedent of similarly concentrated and consistent *cruelty*. I would argue that *Wuthering Heights'* cruelty and

violence stems in part from a particularly gendered performance. *Wuthering Heights* is singular in its willingness to indulge in a kind of violence, both emotional and physical, that marks it as a text exhibiting what Diane Long Hoeveler has usefully called “hyperbolic femininity”: a kind of ratcheting up of the volume of the gothic register to a point of parody, in order to compete with the “naturally” hysterical mode of female writing presumed by a condescendingly patriarchal culture (*Gothic Feminism* 123-27). I’d like to explore the hyperbolic femininity of *Wuthering Heights* by considering it alongside what I can’t help but see as an unusually parallel text: Tobe Hooper’s 1974 film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, another hyperbolic gothic text which is curiously, and disturbingly, marked by extreme representations of femininity trapped within a patriarchal culture. Together, these texts suggest that horror itself arises from the uncertain place the feminine finds itself within a social field defined by phallic jouissance.

Perhaps it is the obvious differences between *Wuthering Heights* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* that make their similarities so compelling.¹⁰ If the former text holds a more elevated place in the critical literary consciousness than the notorious slasher film, both texts mine their shared gothic roots in strikingly related ways. In fact, the parallels between the two texts are legion. Both exhibit a pressure-cooked, hermetic regionalism in which the vast open spaces of their respective environments (the rain-swept Yorkshire moors and sun-baked mid-Texas plains) become increasingly and claustrophobically circumscribed by the dueling haunted houses that define their regional borders. While there is certainly room for the characters of both texts to roam, everyone seems gravitationally drawn to either *Wuthering Heights* or Thrushcross Grange in the novel, or

Sally and Franklin's childhood home or Leatherface's home/abbatoir in the film. Brontë and Hooper both seem to enact a knowing parody of regional stereotypes: the outsiders in both texts have no idea what they are in for at the outset. Lockwood's pleased assessment of remote Yorkshire as a "perfect misanthropists' heaven!" (3) comes to be both ironically apropos and something of an understatement, as the nature of his new neighbor becomes increasingly apparent. *Massacre's* group of young friends' initial encounters with the local grotesques conform to popular stereotypes of backwoods hillbillies, but as more is revealed about these people (the hypnotic power of both texts resides in how they slowly peel layers of local mystery away, while leaving so much of the actual history ambiguous), it becomes apparent that Leatherface and his family fulfill and transcend such stereotypes in unexpectedly terrifying ways. If one were to read these perverse texts perversely, say, as black comedies rather than horror stories, the joke in both cases would be one of domestic confinement, or, what goes wrong when families become a little *too* close and connected.

What is most compelling about these two texts is their similar commitment to assaulting the unsuspecting reader (in *WH*, the bland Lockwood, and in *TCM*, the equally bland group of friends stand in for the similarly clueless reader) with a relentlessly aggressive display of domestic violence. The horrific nature of the violence seems in both cases to stem from an ambiguous disorientation of gender roles. More specifically, this disorientation seems to reside in the fact that both the world of *Wuthering Heights* and that of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are scarred by the absence of the Lacanian Woman. Certainly, women are at the center of both texts, and are the occasion for the popular misreading of them. Catherine's famous insistence that "I *am* Heathcliff" (64) is

often read as grounds for the standard claim that *Wuthering Heights* is a – perhaps *the* – romance novel.¹¹ And the indelible scene in *Massacre*, in which the screaming Sally is chased back and forth between the two houses by Leatherface and his equally banshee-like chainsaw for what seems an eternity, has become emblematic of the defining principle of the slasher-film: young women in perpetual peril, chased by monsters beyond the borders of the film itself and into countless sequels.¹² But the standard gender-coding involved in placing these texts in their respective genres – which popularly defines the Heathcliff/Catherine romance as a story for sex-starved teenage girls, and the misogynist splatter-fest as a grotesque *liebestod* for equally sex-starved teenage boys – only hints at the sexuated, female *lack* these texts exhibit.

When Catherine proclaims her unity with Heathcliff, she is quick to point out that her relationship is not a “pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself – but, as my own being – so, don’t talk of our separation again – it is impracticable; and ---” (64). Catherine’s stridency and confidence (“I *am* Heathcliff!”) soon dissolves into a sputtering realization that there *is* a minimal difference between herself and Heathcliff, a vague denial of that difference, and then, silence. The missing completion to Catherine’s sentence is not a repudiation of her sense of unity with Heathcliff, but a sign of the complexity of that unity. We are left to ask, as we presume, the tongue-tied Catherine is, what the nature of their unity actually is.

One possibility has been famously proposed by Gilbert and Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic*. Catherine, and more surprisingly, Heathcliff, are both aspects of a single, and singular expression of female monstrosity and rage:

From the first, Heathcliff has had undeniable monster potential, as many readers have observed. Isabella’s questions to Nelly – ‘Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is

he mad? And if not is he a devil?’ (chap. 13) – indicate among other things Emily Brontë’s cool awareness of having created an anomalous being, a sort of ‘Ghoul’ or ‘Afreet,’ not (as her sister half hoped) ‘despite’ herself but for good reasons. Uniting human and animal traits, the skills of culture with the energies of nature, Heathcliff’s character tests the boundaries between human and animal, nature and culture, and in doing so proposes a new definition of the demonic. What is more important for our purposes here, however, is the fact that, despite his outward masculinity, Heathcliff is somehow female in his monstrosity. [...] on the level where younger sons and bastards and devils unite with women in rebelling against the tyranny of heaven, the level where orphans are female and heirs are male, where flesh is female and spirit is male, earth female, sky male, monsters female, angels male. (293-4)

On a mythic level, then, Heathcliff’s rebellious qualities, his outsider status, negate his masculine qualities, and render him a semiotic female. Interestingly, the unity between Catherine and Heathcliff renders the whole entirely female. Just as Lacan posits Woman as outside the order of phallic signification, Gilbert and Gubar’s ingenious reading of Heathcliff removes him from the symbolic order and places him firmly in the ‘non-existent’ realm of monsters, ghouls and ghosts. And women.¹³

The idea of Woman as essentially monstrous receives perhaps its most compelling theoretical expression in Julia Kristeva’s 1980 study, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*. In considering the function of disgust, and of the things that disgust us, Kristeva contends that the abject is primally feminine.¹⁴ The abject is memorably evoked by the author’s revulsion towards the “skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring” (2): milk being, of course, an exclusively female product. That which disgusts us also tends to make us afraid, and so, we cast aside the abject object. On a broader level, this fear and loathing of the female

[...] turns out to be essentially a fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing. It is thus not surprising to see pollution rituals proliferating in societies where patrilineal power is poorly secured, as if the latter sought, by means of purification, a support against excessive matrilineality. (77)

Among the “pollution rituals” psychically enacted to deal with the threat of the monstrous female is to turn this feminized phobic object into a “*hallucination of nothing*: a metaphor that is the anaphora of nothing” (42). In order to achieve this rhetorization of nothingness, disgust must find its expression in desire:

On the trail of my fear I meet again with my desire, and I bind myself to it, thus leaving stranded the concatenation of discourse with which I have built my hallucination, my weakness and my strength, my investment and my ruin. (42)

That “concatenation of discourse,” that gothic ruin of language, is one way of describing *Wuthering Heights*, or, indeed, any horror story. In casting aside that which horrifies us, we narrativize it, fictionalize it, and in the process make of it an obscene object of desire. Isn’t this what the horror genre (whether filmic or literary) is: the most reviled of genres, yet the most visceral and compelling? The endless repetitions which characterize horror fiction (and the proliferating repetitions of *Wuthering Heights* are perhaps the surest indication that this text has a place in that genre), of which the Christmas ghost story is, in some respects, an unusual yet typical example, speak to its endless capacity to enthrall us – in part because, as a hallucination of *nothing*, it is never really there, but rather, like anything that repeats, is always coming and going, leaving and coming back.

This is how Heathcliff can seem both hunky romantic anti-hero and a monster of female rage. Similarly, it explains how Leatherface (the Heathcliff of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, if you will) is both a hulking terrorizer of women, and, in his wig and housedress, the lady of the house. Heathcliff and Leatherface, who are always coming and going, are hallucinations of nothing: objects of dread that in their very representation are also obscene objects of desire. As figures of horror, they are de facto women.

Perhaps this accounts for the fact that the most horrific and violent scenes in both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are domestic scenes. There is a parallel sense of disquiet when Lockwood first encounters the not-quite-right domestic arrangements at *Wuthering Heights* (chapters I and II), and when each of the unlucky teenagers finds their way into Leatherface's house. The climactic scene of *Massacre*, a grotesque parody of the family dinner, achieves much of its *Grand Guignol* effect through a hallucinogenic distortion of gender roles. Specifically, the *lack* of female representation at the table paradoxically signifies an overabundance of it. In much of this scene, the camera places the viewer in Sally's (who has been tied to a chair and forced to partake in the family meal) point of view. The cannibal family is composed exclusively of males, but none of them are fit representatives of a phallic symbolic order. The patriarch "Grandpa" is a desiccated, vampiric creature (in an earlier appearance – a nod to the mummified mother in Hitchcock's *Psycho* – he appears to be simply a corpse) who barely has the strength to sit upright in his chair. The "father" – ostensibly the only member of the family capable of rational thought or coherent speech – is a mess of tics and equivocations, constantly berated by his troglodytic "son" for being "only a cook." And Leatherface, dressed in a wig and apron, dutifully sets the table while nervously emitting high pitched noises in a crude attempt to approximate a stereotypical housewife. Sally, the only female present, supplies the properly horrific *female gaze* of this scene of male degeneration. She is a Lacanian supplement, rather than complement to the scene – she sits at the table, but is certainly not part of it – but her outsider status is precisely the means by which the spectator is able to see the family as a whole. It is Sally's fish-eye lens POV, preceded by a reverse zoom that begins *inside* Sally's eye, which allows us to

see the family in all its horror. This spectacle of female lack is possible only through the disorienting presence of the female gaze: everything we see is the product of an ironically totalizing female vision, and it is only horrific because it has been feminized, since presumably there is no horror in the domestic ritual of the cannibal family *for* the cannibal family themselves. For Sally, and by extension, the viewer, the only escape from this family feast is to jump screaming out the window.

There is, I think, a curious symmetry between this scene and the Christmas dinner scene in Chapter VII of *Wuthering Heights*. Witnessed and reported by Nelly Dean, the long-serving retainer of the Earnshaw family, the scene serves to show both the apparent success of domesticating Catherine during her stay at Thrushcross Grange, and the futility of attempting the same with Heathcliff. At the opening of the chapter, Catherine has been five weeks at Thrushcross Grange, “her manners much improved” and looking very much the lady (41). The taming of Catherine provokes her into cruelly differentiating herself from Heathcliff when she sees him, as she remarks, “how very black and cross you look! and how – how funny and grim!” (42). Later, Nelly visits Heathcliff, who has been locked in the attic (like a similar garret inmate from the Brontë canon...), and finds he wishes to clean-up like Catherine, and vowing “to be good” (44). Nelly attempts to integrate Heathcliff into the family Christmas meal, but to disastrous result. After enduring an offhand rebuke from his step-brother Hindley, and a careless insult from Edgar Linton, Heathcliff explodes:

[...] Heathcliff’s violent nature was not prepared to endure the appearance of impertinence from one whom he seemed to hate, even then, as a rival. He seized a tureen of hot apple-sauce, the first thing that came under his gripe, and dashed it full against the speaker’s face and neck – who instantly commenced a lament that brought Isabella and Catherine hurrying to the place.

Mr. Earnshaw snatched up the culprit directly and conveyed him to his chamber, where, doubtless, he administered a rough remedy to cool the fit of passion, for he reappeared red and breathless. I got the dish-cloth, and, rather spitefully, scrubbed Edgar's nose and mouth, affirming it served him right for meddling. His sister began weeping to go home, and Cathy stood by, confounded, blushing for all. (46)

There is, as in the dinner scene of *Massacre*, a grotesque parody of domestic ritual here. Staging the scene at Christmas heightens the violence of Heathcliff's graphic outburst, and makes slightly surreal the violent aftershocks described in the next paragraph. Everyone involved becomes as unhinged as Heathcliff: Hindley "snatches" Heathcliff up in order to beat him (described by Nelly Dean with a dry euphemism – a Victorian specialty – that adds to the black comedy of the scene); Nelly roughly and vindictively attends to the stricken Edgar, while his sister raises the volume of the scene even more by crying. Catherine plays the straight man here, looking on in embarrassment. In tone, Christmas at Wuthering Heights becomes nearly as cacophonous and gruesome an experience as dining with Texas cannibals.

More interestingly, the scene shares a similarly uncanny sense of female authorship. Just as the horror of the dinner scene in *Massacre* is produced by the female gaze of Sally (in the sense of its transmission to the spectator, *not*, lest I be misunderstood, by her agency within the narrative), the horror here is produced by the presence of Nelly Dean, who provides Lockwood, and us, with access to it. As a servant, Nelly Dean is outside the narrative, but as an outsider, she is able to comprehend it, and see it as a whole. Indeed, Nelly's role as absent author can be seen clearly earlier in this chapter when she tries to lift Heathcliff's spirits:

'And now that we've done washing, and combing, and sulking – tell me whether you don't think yourself rather handsome? I'll tell you, I do. You're fit to be a prince in disguise. Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your

mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, with one week's income, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange together? And you were kidnapped by wicked sailors, and brought to England. Were I in your place, I would frame high notions of my birth; and the thoughts of what I was should give me courage and dignity to support the oppressions of a little farmer!' (45)

Not only does Nelly encourage Heathcliff to exploit his otherness by fictionalizing it to his advantage, she does it herself in imagining him the rightful heir of both India and China. More, Nelly is, in a way, writing *Wuthering Heights* herself here, not simply as narrator, but in predicting the trajectory of the plot: Heathcliff will not only overcome the oppressions of the little farmer Hindley, but will become the emperor of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange.

Nelly's advice to Heathcliff to, in effect, hyperbolize himself (or *herself*, if we read him, as Nelly does, as an imaginative construct – and, as a creation of both Emily Brontë, and in this scene, of Nelly Dean herself, he *is* the construction of female imagination), can be read as an analogue for Gilbert and Gubar's reading of *Wuthering Heights* as a hyperbolized extension of Emily Brontë herself: as an explosive, and often outrageous “Bible of Hell,” as Gilbert and Gubar put it, a satanically Miltonic text written by and for the rebellious other. To feminize Heathcliff in this manner – and to demonize, in a sense, the feminine cultural imaginary – is to abstract the text in a manner that can be critically uncomfortable: as J. Hillis Miller points out, there are an uncanny myriad of “incoherent” readings of this text. But as Miller also points out, such critical variance is also a mark of this text's peculiar greatness. Central to *Wuthering Heights*' greatness and polysemic fascination is its willingness to indulge in and release the violence that threatens on every page. It is a violence that seems strangely and particularly feminine, a femininity that, as Kristeva and others have argued, lies at the heart of horror itself. The

hyperbolic violence of *Wuthering Heights*, threatens a parody of the gothic that was often realized in other gothic productions of the period, particularly the Christmas ghost story.

The Christmas ghost story was the most explosive market for female writing of the Victorian age. The catalyst for this market, as in most things Christmas in this period, was Charles Dickens, and his periodical *Household Words*, which popularized both the annual Christmas number and the genre that characterized it: the frame-tale series of ghost stories.¹⁵ Numerous periodicals followed suit with their own Christmas numbers, providing work for most of the popular women writers of the period. That work was ideological as well as economic. The explosion of cozy and creepy ghost stories by women expanded not only the writer's purses, but the cultural narrative of domesticity as such. A particularly striking example of the concurrent narrativization of the Victorian woman with that of the Christmas ghost story can be found in the anonymously penned *Ghost's Wives: a String of Strange Stories Told Round a Christmas Fire, by Six Young Widows, and a Spinster Lady of a Certain Age*.¹⁶

The phenomenon of the Christmas annual was, by 1867, the year *Ghost's Wives* was published, a familiar one, and could be said to be entering a decadent period, judging by the winking, self-deprecating tone taken in the text. The near-parodic violence of *Wuthering Heights* gives way here to straight comedic parody. The setting of the frame-story is the wild and windy island of Pengullock, a hyper-gothic environment, where on

[...] Christmas Eve especially [...] misty shapes whirled and circled around the island to the wailing music of the stormy wind and the fierce chorus of the breaking waves. It was another world, that little island, a supernatural world, where beings neither men nor spirits laughed, danced, sorrowed, and mourned in the ocean spray and night mist. (6)

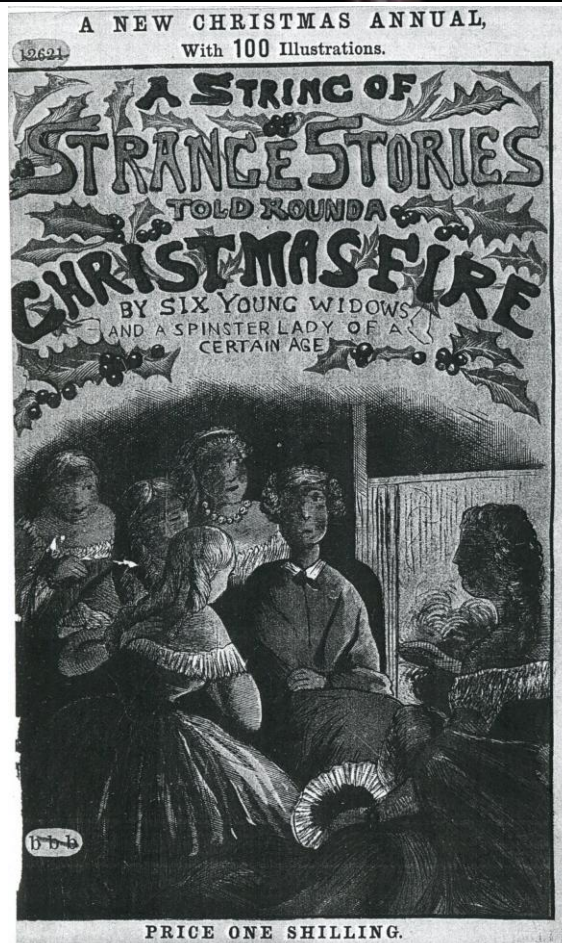


Figure 10: American and English Gothics. Masculine excess in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974); Surplus females tell *A String of Strange Stories Round a Christmas Fire* (1867).

The only living beings on this de-natured and de-gendered island are the women ensconced in haunted Raby House, who are spending a “dismal Christmas Eve” silently watching the clock on the mantel (7). Immediately, *Ghost's Wives* makes clear that the milieu of gothic horror is made possible by an overabundance of feminine energy: this explicitly male-less environment is the very condition of the ghostly. The titular “Spinster Lady of a Certain Age,” who, we are told, is “of a severe and depressing character [...] great on the proprieties [...] eloquent on women’s rights” (7) threatens to enliven the evening by reading a poem by a Doctor of Divinity, when she is interrupted by one of the widows, demanded a more entertaining pastime. When one of the widows suggests telling ghost stories, the others demur, arguing that “no one ever does that, except in Christmas Annuals” (7). This sly meta-commentary on the gothic stereotype these women find themselves in not only exposes the “invented tradition” of telling ghost stories (no one does it – except in, and as, fiction), but goes on to suggest the nature of such fictions: “But people always are snowed-up in Christmas books. They are snowed-up in country inns, or mail-coaches, or express trains; and then, instead of losing their tempers, as Englishmen would do under such circumstances, they tell long stories” (7). Christmas books (or ghost stories: given the list of clichéd ghost story settings the narrator provides, they are seen here as one and the same thing) are read here as essentially *claustrophobic*, and the telling of them, a therapeutic means of averting pent-up rage. Tellingly, it is *Englishmen* who lose their temper; the snowed-up inmates of the country-inns, mail-coaches and express-trains are implicitly gendered female here, and so the telling of ghost stories is rendered the equivalent of a feminine way of losing one’s temper.

This conception of the ghost story as a site of repressed female violence is effectively narrativized in one of the tales of the collection, cryptically titled “A Tale Without End or Beginning.” The narrator again opens her story with a parodic description of a haunted house: “Rumbold Abbey is one of those tumble-down dilapidated, dismal old houses which ought to be pulled down by Act of Parliament, or else left in charge of a deaf old woman to show inquisitive strangers and prying tourists round at sixpence a head” (90). This clichéd (and rather violently engendered) haunted house is owned by a similarly clichéd antiquary who would be at home in Irving’s Bracebridge Hall, and whose sole purpose in the narrative is to give a ball attended by the heroine Laura Furniss, who in her turn, later learns that the area has been plagued by a rash of robberies. After the ball, in the middle of the night, Laura thinks she hears robbers outside her window, but as “her chamber was at the end of a long corridor, all of the doors opening out of which led only into uninhabited rooms” (91) – the type of room a visitor inevitably finds oneself in in these stories – she makes to arm and defend herself:

She retreated into her room, locked the door, and piled against it such heavy furniture as she could lift, and then, preparing for the worst, looked round for some weapon with which to defend herself, in the event of the burglars forcing an entrance.

Opening an old cabinet, she found, to her surprise, a pistol-case, which held not only the firearms, but also powder and bullet. They were old-fashioned pistols, with flint locks – everything was old-fashioned at Rumbold Abbey – but they would serve to defend herself with, she thought, so she carefully and resolutely loaded them, looked to the priming, and then, making a rest of the back of a high carved chair, she waited, pointing the pistol at the door, ready to fire the instant any attempt was made to effect an entrance. (91)

Out of her own imagination, and the supplies at hand, Laura carefully constructs her nightmare. The “old-fashioned” gothic prop of the flint-locked pistols helps to generate

suspense, but Laura's awareness that she is now starring in her own gothic story make the tension unbearable:

By this time she was in so excited a state she hardly knew what she was doing or where she was. All the most terrible of the stories she had heard filled her mind, and the fate of one poor girl in particular produced so great an effect upon her that it was only by a great mental struggle she maintained her position of defence. (91)

The story does not elaborate on the particular "poor girl" or her fate, but then, it does not need to. Like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, it is clearly the generic effect of horror as such – the cliché of the gothic -- that makes Laura create her own horror. When Laura discharges the pistols, she hears an "unearthly scream" and finds a trail of blood outside the door (91). But as it turns out, she has only shot another cliché: "She had roused the whole house, she had made a hole through one of Sir Edward's doors, and she had killed Lady Saxon's favourite black cat! Yes, that was all. Poor puss was her victim" (92).¹⁷

The gothic comedy of this tale paints but a thin veneer over the female violence at its heart. Though the striking image of the phallic female brandishing loaded pistols [reinforced by an equally striking illustration in the text; see Figure 11] is defused by the fact that the phallic woman only succeeds in killing a cat, the graphic detail with which that murder is described tempers the joke with a grisly actuality. The self-reflexivity of this meta-gothic tale also makes the reader question the manner in which the narrative pulls its punches. If this narrative is an investigation, albeit a minor one, of the gothic, then the murder of an animal traditionally coded as female, *by* a female, suggests the same kind of internalized, yet externalized violence that suffuses the world of the sado-masochistic Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. In a mytho-cultural sense, "A Tale Without Beginning or End," is aptly named: for all its winking parody, the story



Figure 11: “Beseiged” in “A Tale Without End or Beginning” (1867).

shares the same concerns with claustrophobic domestic horror, and its ever-present threat to conflagrate outside the home, that marks the female gothic – a genre that, despite its relatively recent “invention,” stems from a fear and horror that seems to precede narrative or genre as such. Perhaps the most striking thing about the female gothic in the middle years of the nineteenth-century is that its fears and terrors were so commonly read as the essential components of the emerging genre of the Christmas story.

III

The use of Christmas as a site of uncanny domestic separation and union is equally dramatic in masculine, scopophilic fantasies of Victorian domesticity, particularly in that most lugubriously woman haunted of Victorian novelists, Thomas Hardy. Perhaps the most calamitous Christmas in English fiction occurs in idyllic Weatherby, one of Thomas Hardy’s real/fictional hamlets dotting his mythic, though geographically precise realm of Wessex/Dorset. The Christmas in question makes up the climax of Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*, a novel which charts the shifting amorous and domestic arrangements of Bathsheba Everdene and her three suitors. Bathsheba is not the first of Hardy’s *femmes fatale*, but the climax of her drama is most emblematic of Hardy’s representation of the essentially gothic fascination of the female, and the uncanny frequency of her Yuletide apotheoses. After rejecting marriage proposals from the solid farmer Gabriel Oak and the sexually repressed William Boldwood, Bathsheba stakes her independence and farm on the Freudian swordplay and rakish wit of the impetuous dragoon Francis Troy. Predictably, the marriage is not a happy one, and Sergeant Troy

takes the opportunity to capitalize on the death of his jilted fiancé Fanny to abandon Bathsheba. Through an improbable chain of events typical in Hardy's work, Troy's absence is mistaken as his likely death, and the increasingly desperate Farmer Boldwood re-emerges as a suitor, hoping to extract a promise of marriage at a Christmas party at his farm designed for that purpose.

When Boldwood presses Bathsheba for a promise, she blithely suggests Christmas as the date to give him her answer, but the arbitrary date quickly acquires gravity, and becomes a site of dread: as "the weeks intervening between the night of this conversation and Christmas day began perceptibly to diminish, her anxiety and perplexity increased" (406). Bathsheba's reticence is understandable. Not only does she have good reason to fear that, as she confides to Gabriel Oak: "if I don't give my word, he'll go out of his mind" (406), but – particularly as bigamy is never far from a Hardy plot – she does not feel certain that her husband is indeed dead.

It is in this mood that Hardy constructs his climactic Christmas chapters. The first, "Converging Courses," sets up the fateful evening in a manner that recalls some of his later poetry. The title echoes his famous lines on the sinking of the Titanic, "The Convergence of the Twain," as does the division of the chapter into scenes marked by Roman numerals. This portentous device of loudly dividing the action of the plot into disparate scenes also has the curiously cinematic effect of *joining* them, and creates considerable suspense. Structurally, these divisions create the very drama Hardy describes in the poem, preparing "a sinister mate/ For her – so gaily great --/A Shape of Ice, far and dissociate" (VII, 19-21): In the seven sections of the chapter, Hardy offers

close-ups of his four circling protagonists, each separately preparing for Boldwood's Christmas party.

In the second chapter, "Concurratur – Horae Momento," Hardy welds his disparate elements into a nexus of time and space, as his quotation from Horace suggests: "Battle is joined: in the space of an hour" (*Satires*, I.I). At the party, Bathsheba is further pressured by Boldwood to marry him, as farmers' gossip outside and villagers dance in the decorative hall. Boldwood finally extracts his promise, and Sergeant Troy arrives at the party in disguise to re-claim his wife. Hardy extracts as much irony out of this festive scene as he can, as Boldwood cheerfully invites his unrecognized rival into his home, charging him to "drain a Christmas beaker with us, stranger!" (431). The scene of Troy's recognition is worth quoting at length, as it illustrates Hardy's deft handling of a moment of tension, in which swift movement and paralyzed stasis are paradoxically joined:

She had sunk down on the lowest stair; and there she sat, her mouth blue and dry, and her dark eyes fixed vacantly upon him, as she wondered whether it were not all a terrible illusion.

Then Troy spoke. "Bathsheba, I come here for you!"

She made no reply.

"Come home with me: come!"

Troy went across to her.

"Come, madam, do you hear what I say?" he said, peremptorily.

A strange voice came from the fireplace – a voice sounding far off and confined, as if from a dungeon. Hardly a soul in the assembly recognized the thin tones to be those of Boldwood. Sudden despair had transformed him.

"Bathsheba, go with your husband!"

Nevertheless, she did not move. The truth was that Bathsheba was beyond the pale of activity – and yet not in a swoon. She was in a state of mental *gutta serena*; her mind was for the minute totally deprived of light at the same time that no obscuration was apparent from without. (433)

This ghostly scene, one of Hardy's many representations of the return from the (apparent) dead, is filled with the spectral motion of stasis: Bathsheba "sinks" and "sits," Boldwood is "confined," yet "transformed," and Troy, in his melodramatic moment of return, is

both alive and dead. The reader is in perhaps the most curiously parallaxic condition of all: we are stuck in a kind of hermeneutic stasis – are we to read Troy’s plea as an urgent, earnest appeal to domestic resolution, or as yet another example of the grotesque capering he has been recently indulging as a travelling actor? The dramatic uncertainty of Troy’s motives makes his appearance a ghostly variation on the demon lover trope so prevalent in gothic fiction.

Such dramatic confusion is perhaps one of the mitigating factors of Boldwood’s next move: shooting Troy point-blank with a gun hanging above the hearth. After being prevented from shooting himself afterwards, Boldwood is resigned to hang, but he is as surprised as we are to find that his sentence is reduced due to a generally agreed upon “condition of mental disease” (442).

Boldwood’s disastrous Christmas party is the ghostly singularity to which all of the novel’s sexual energy gravitates, and Christmas operates as the ironic parody of domestic finality, where Troy’s ambiguous holiday plea for Bathsheba to “come home” is transformed into sudden catastrophe. Hardy’s use of Christmas as the occasion of domestic apocalypse takes on even more metaphoric weight when these chapters are read beside “Convergence of the Twain,” in which the conjunction of iceberg and unsinkable ship takes on unmistakable matrimonial overtones:

Alien they seemed to be:
 No mortal eye could see
 The intimate welding of their later history,
 X
 Or sign that they were bent
 By paths coincident
 On being anon twin halves of one august event,
 XI
 Till the Spinner of Years
 Said “Now!” And each one hears,

And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

The pun of “welding” has a double operation: the substitution of an “l” for a “d” disfigures the alternative word “wedding”; and the consummation of that welding/wedding is, of course, a description of the apparently clumsy crash between a phallic iceberg and a feminized “gilded,” “cleaving” ship. Read this way, the tragic poem becomes domestic farce. Similarly, if inversely, Christmas, erstwhile site of “Boldwood’s merrymaking” (435), returns as tragedy: transforming the domestic intrigues of *Weatherby* -- seemingly trending towards the “august event” of marriage -- into an occasion for murder.

Hardy’s use of Christmas in *Far From the Madding Crowd* might seem merely a darkly ironic joke, were it not for the fact that he puts it to similar use in his first published novel, the studiously sensational *Desperate Remedies*. Read alongside each other, the Christmases of the former novel and the latter read less like singular events, and more like a cycle of repetition – a *tradition*, perhaps. The first sentence of *Desperate Remedies* seems to imply this:

In the long and intricately inwrought chain of circumstance which renders worthy of record some experiences of Cytheria Graye, Edward Springrove, and others, the first event directly influencing the issue was a Christmas visit. (7)

This direct, if not exactly poetic opening gives the reader fair notice of what is in store: a “chain of circumstances” masquerading as narrative, desperately searching for an ordering meaning, in other words, a ramshackle plot seeking a semblance of sense. The novel is a frankly ridiculous tale of thwarted love, illegitimate children, bigamy, murder, mistaken identity, and a touch of lesbianism. Hardy seems aware of this from the outset, and even before the first sentence, we are given hints that this work is not a model of

Aristotelian unites: a somewhat gratuitous epigram from Sir Walter Scott defending the “artificiality” of romance, and a list of chapters that are titled after the amount of time that transpires within them (“The Events of Thirty Years,” “The Events of Eighteen Hours,” etc.). On one level, this strategically deflects criticism of the melodrama about to unfold, but it also highlights the artificial structuration of spatio-temporal existence as such: The seemingly arbitrary ordering of events into temporal units is not, after all, confined to melodrama, but to any rational ordering of experience. Hardy’s chapter headings neutralize the feverish overplotting of the novel, and suggest the chaos and arbitrariness of reality. The first sentence, then, encapsulates the novel as a whole: a stream of seemingly circumstantial events given meaning and order by the structuring power of a temporal event – which, more than once in *Desperate Remedies*, is Christmas.

The importance of the first Christmas, to which the first sentence alludes, is only hinted at in the pages that immediately follow. It is revealed to be the point of meeting between Ambrose Graye and another Cytherea, to whom Graye proposes marriage. He is swiftly and regretfully rejected for mysterious reasons (Cytherea is pregnant). Graye eventually married another woman, but, as is standard with Hardy, cannot forget the other woman, and (rather tactlessly) names his daughter by the second woman after his intended first.

Later in the narrative, Cytherea Graye becomes a fixture in the household of Cytherea the elder, and is eventually maneuvered into marrying the elder Cytherea’s illegitimate son Aeneas, who, though himself married, is in love (or at least lust) with Cytherea the younger, and sees his chance once his first wife (apparently) dies in a fire. Aeneas’s difficulties, however, are nothing to Cytherea’s (the younger, if you are keeping

up). She does not love Aeneas, and would marry Edward Springrove if he were not betrothed to his cousin (whom he does not love). The intrigues of Aeneas and Cytherea the elder to secure Cytherea the younger prefigure the desperate remedies of Boldwood in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Like Bathsheba, Cytherea reluctantly picks Christmas as the date to declare herself. Trapped in gothic surroundings, Cytherea, however, finds a way to make Christmas less of a fixed point than Aeneas would like:

The church was nearly dark now, and melancholy in the extreme. She stood beside him while he locked the door, then took the arm he gave her, and wended her way out of the churchyard with him. Then they walked to the House together, but the great matter having been set at rest, she persisted in talking only on indifferent subjects.

‘Christmas-day, then,’ he said, as they were parting at the end of the shrubbery.

‘I meant Old Christmas-day,’ she said, evasively.

‘H’m, people do not usually attach that meaning to the words?’ (223)

Cytherea has located a technicality: January 6th, the Feast of the Epiphany, was sometimes called “Old Christmas Day,” and therefore, she has given herself almost a fortnight’s reprieve. But as Aeneas notes, she is also overturning the idea of Christmas as a fixed point, and epistemologically and linguistically undermining the meaning of Christmas itself. Already trapped in an oppressive domestic environment that threatens to be legally and sexually mandated by Christmas, Cytherea subverts the idea of Christmas as event, and highlights its variability, its function as a process.

This variability of Christmas comes to operate as a kind of literary variant of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in the narrative, after Aeneas and Cytherea II’s Christmas wedding. Cytherea’s brother Owen and her hapless suitor Edward Springrove, who have found out that Aeneas’s first wife is still alive, give chase to the couple after the wedding, hoping to find them before the marriage is consummated. Hardy creates

suspense here in a manner similar to his minute breakdown of time in the Christmas chapters of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, chronicling the chase with chapter breaks that mark intervals of the clock: “Half past two to five o’clock” reads one (241). Owen and Springrove’s attempts to track down Aeneas and Cytherea are convoluted and difficult to keep up with: the reader is as flummoxed as the characters, who repeatedly express their confusion in locating the couple and piecing together the plot in cosmic terms. Owen laments: “‘How unutterably mean must my intelligence have appeared to the eye of a foreseeing God,’ he frequently said in after time. ‘Columbus on the eve of his discovery of a world was not so contemptibly unaware’” (234). His exasperation is, of course, the result of his inability to pin-point with certainty when or whether his sister has consummated her possibly bigamous marriage: the “event about to transpire [which] was as portentous to the woman [...] as any, short of death itself, could possibly be” (243).

Ultimately, Cytherea’s strategic mis-reading of Christmas creates this matrix of uncertainty, locating sexual and domestic panic within cosmic questions of our ability to fix the domestic subject within a secure time and place. This flux is inherently spectral, and gives substance to what might otherwise be read as gratuitously “gothic” moves by Hardy within the text: the improbable doublings of Cythereas, and, of course the appearance of the actual ghost of Cytherea the elder to Cytherea the younger at the end of the novel, “wan and distinct” (374). Her appearance, as with so many ghosts, coincides with the exact moment of her death, which, in a novel obsessed with attempts to fix objects and subjects in time and space, is dutifully reported as occurring at “ten minutes past four” in the last sentence of the chapter. This approach to the feminine domestic subject is, of course, the product of a gothic sensibility that can be traced back from the

sensation novels *Desperate Remedies* is so clearly influenced by to the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley. But it also illustrates, and inaugurates, the protean adaptability of the Hardy heroine, and an emblematic representation of the female in Victorian literature: Obscure Object of Desire, impossible to pin down, paradoxically domestic and undomesticatable.

Hardy's remaining career as a novelist would be spent developing this protean female, a project that would lead critics from his day to our own to mark him as alternately a misogynist and a feminist, but no work encapsulates the meaning of this figure more starkly than his last novel, *The Well Beloved*.¹⁸ Perhaps Hardy's strangest fiction, the novel charts the erotic and artistic career of Jocelyn Pierston, who alternately loves three generations of women on Portland Island. In his shifting erotic attachments to a woman, her daughter, and her grand-daughter (all named Avice Caro), Pierston (whose name is Pearston in the earlier version of the novel) attests to an idealistic fidelity:

To his Well-Beloved he had always been faithful, but she had many embodiments. Each individuality known as Lucy, Jane, Flora, Evangeline, or what-not, had been merely a transient condition of her. He did not recognize this as an excuse or defense, but as a fact simply. Essentially she was perhaps of no tangible substance; a spirit, a dream, a frenzy, a conception, an aroma, an epitomized sex, a light of the eye, a parting of the lips. God only knew what she really was; Pierston did not. She was indescribable. (184)

The dialectic between Pierston's fixed image and the corporeal transience of his objects of desire produces a ghost-woman who alternately materializes and dematerializes under the male gaze. Hardy's chapter headings in the 1897 version illustrate this spectral flux: "The Old Phantom becomes Distinct," "She Becomes an Inaccessible Ghost," "She Threatens to resume Corporeal Substance," "The Past Shines in the Present," "Juxtapositions," and so on. The text, like Pierston, abstracts a phantom feminine from

the particular, and re-particularizes it, making the abstract idea a quasi-material ghost. This process, explicitly described in *The Well-Beloved*, marks the male-female relations of all of Hardy's novels (and many of his poems, particularly the poems of 1913 that follow the death of his first wife, in which she appears in many of them as a ghost), characterizes Bathsheba and Cytheria as well. That the crisis point of these characters' materializations and dematerializations occurs on Christmas – itself a point of flux in Cytheria's distinction between Christmas and “Old” Christmas – not only continues in another form the emerging tradition of Christmas as site of haunting, but illustrates the dialectical nature of Christmas, and therefore, its own intrinsic ghostliness.

While Hardy's novels are not generally considered to fall under the genre of domestic fiction, the recurring tropes he obsessively returns to do tend to define characteristics of the genre: 1) the conception of women as a frustratingly mercurial mix of ideological fixity and corporeal mobility, 2) domesticity and marriage as the sphere in which that mix can be pinned, or “tamed”, and 3) Christmas as a metaphorical device to fix not only the amorphous sphere of domesticity itself, but the protean female who makes that sphere so prone to flux. Indeed, though Thomas Hardy is often regarded as a singular case in the development in English fiction, both in his depiction of women, and in his status as a “regionalist,” his admittedly more overtly sexualized treatment of domesticity, and its troubled relationship to Christmas can be seen more generally in fiction of the period.

IV

For all the raw power of Emily Brontë and Thomas Hardy's domestic horror shows, it is Emily's sister, Charlotte, who seems to me, finally, the most haunting poet – indeed, visionary – of the Victorian woman and her domestic milieu. No one seems more preternaturally aware of the sense of *lack* that surrounds the idea of woman as such, and no one invests more meaning into the empty but pregnant spaces of female confinement than her. From her early juvenilia, in which she routinely sequestered the Byronic demi-gods of her brother Branwell's creations into country homes that also served as convenient prisons for the female characters Branwell neglected to write about, to the iconic images and representations of *Jane Eyre* that have become a mythos of sorts for feminist criticism, Charlotte Brontë's fiction abounds with female characters enveloped in a domestic space which both circumscribes them, and lends them an uncanny power. Perhaps nowhere is this more compellingly the case than in her masterpiece, *Villette*, a novel that could fairly be called the first modernist ghost story.

Villette is famous for its “unreliable” narrator Lucy Snowe, who consistently withholds information from the reader throughout the narrative. She is a narrator who fetishizes every corner of every room she enters, investing so much dead space with so much presence in an attempt to leave her own character a blank, that she makes of her novel a veritable haunted house in itself. Brontë seems to anticipate Samuel Beckett in giving us a narrator with an almost autistic obsession with describing the world of *things*: every room Lucy enters is meticulously described; every object she sees is mercilessly analyzed. As in Beckett, the net effect of such description is to hollow out the characters

that fill such clinically realized space, not least Lucy Snowe herself. We are never entirely certain who the characters Lucy interacts with really are (particularly as they often turn out to be someone else). And despite, or perhaps because of, the detail with which Lucy describes her surroundings, we are never really sure *why* she inhabits them. She is always curiously absent from her own narrative, shifting through various roles that seem to come to her as if by accident. From goddaughter to caretaker to traveler to English teacher (with stints as an actress and art critic), Lucy inhabits a diversity of roles that lurch the plot forward in unexpected directions, all the while calling into question the roles Lucy never does quite fully adopt: daughter, lover, wife. Lucy's reticent yet prolix style of narration is a kind of mirror of the life she leads, one that is claustrophobically constrained by a variety of domestic walls, but which, because of that variety, constantly expands in scope and range.

Christmas more than once marks the border of this expansion. Early in the novel, Lucy relates the tragic story of the spinster she is caring for, Miss Marchmont. As Miss Marchmont describes it:

‘...one happy Christmas Eve I dressed and decorated myself, expecting my lover, very soon to be my husband, would come that night to visit me. I sat down to wait. Once more I see the moment – I see the snow-twilight stealing through the window over which the curtain was not dropped, for I designed to watch him ride up the white walk [...]’ (40)

Already, Christmas is a site of portent and flux, as Miss Marchmont slips back and forth between the past and present tense; yet one of precision, as she marks the scene – like Hardy – with an exactitude that tells the tale of a moment. As it turns out, Miss Marchmont's wait is in vain, as her lover returns mortally injured, and

‘When the dawn of Christmas morning broke, my Frank was with God.’

‘And that,’ she went on, ‘happened thirty years ago. I have suffered since. I doubt if I have made the best use of all my calamities. Soft amiable natures they would have refined to saintliness; of strong, evil spirits they would have made demons; as for me, I have only been a woe-struck and selfish woman.’ (41)

Miss Marchmont herself dies the day after telling her story, freeing Lucy to pursue her own career in suffering. The spinster’s story acts as a kind of Campbellian call to the heroic quest. The story serves as a prophecy of sorts: it not only inscribes Lucy within the tale in its descriptive details (“the snow-twilight”), the tale itself is an uncanny doubling of the waiting and suffering Lucy will undergo at the end of her own narrative. As such, it also serves as a warning of the ways such suffering can result in multiple, possible outcomes: it can make a woman a saint or a demon. As Nina Auerbach notes, spinsters are uniquely qualified to issue such prophecies in Victorian fiction: “in the fervent vision of some less orthodox writers, she becomes a figure we do not expect: an authentic female hero, with angelic and demonic capacities shaping the proud uniqueness of her life” (*Woman and the Demon* 111). In Miss Marchmont’s tale, Christmas, combining the expectant joy of domesticity and the cruel reversal of those expectations, is the focal point that unleashes those capacities. Christmas is the point that sets Miss Marchmont off on her career of solitude and suffering, and in its repetition in her retelling, it plays a similar role in Lucy’s development. Indeed, as we shall see, Lucy’s suffering will make her into something more than a spinster.

Christmas, like the rest of the outside world that Lucy translates for us in her evolving consciousness, is a reflection of the inner world that ultimately dominates our entrance into her narrative. As Gilbert and Gubar note:

What makes the narrative seem authentically ‘preternatural’ or uncanny is Brontë’s representation of the psychic life of Lucy Snowe through a series of independent characters as well as her use of contiguous events to dramatize and

mythologize her imagery by demonstrating its psychosexual meaning.
(*Madwoman in the Attic* 408).

Miss Marchmont's relationship to Lucy, and more importantly, the strange weight that is placed on this minor character's story, carries an oblique significance for our reading of Lucy, and Lucy's writing of herself. In this sense, Christmas plays a role similar to the painting of Cleopatra that Lucy encounters mid-way through the novel. "That wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh [...] this huge, dark-complexioned gipsy-queen" (200), which so captivates and repulses Lucy, has had a similar effect on critics. Indeed, the aggressive attention to which this image is given in the text makes it impossible to ignore, and, in a way, draws attention to its very gratuitousness. Almost uncomfortably a "symbol," the Cleopatra *demand*s reading; its physicality, and Lucy's visceral reaction to it, transform it into a kind of image of the Lacanian Real: its crude, almost willful meaninglessness practically guarantees a hermeneutic response. On a smaller scale, this is the effect of all of the *things* Lucy sees, from the equally gratuitous McGuffin of the spectral nun, to the obsessive detail Lucy gives the reader of her various surroundings. None of these images and items contributes much weight to the "plot" as such, but they gather a considerable power of accrual: their contiguity comes to define the shifting horizons of Lucy's interior world. As such, we read Lucy by reading her negation of the fleshy giantess that revolts her.

In fact, most of Lucy's reaction to the world that surrounds her is one of negation and barely contained revulsion. Even the warm Vilette refuge of La Terrasse, where the Bretton family strangely reappear – literally, *re-materialize*, as their surroundings emerge out of Lucy's returning consciousness after collapsing outside the Catholic church – is subject to quiet criticism. Lucy coldly anatomizes the Brettons' Christmas celebrations

as “a mask of Old Christmas they now affected” (279). Lucy’s description, and reading, of this Christmas, can be traced to the Christmas she experiences in Miss Marchmont’s retelling, in which the patina of holiday joy, where “women and girls sit warm at snug fire-sides,” masks an internal suffering, where women’s

hearts and imaginations are doomed to divorce from the comfort surrounding their persons, forced out by night to wander through dark ways, to dare stress of weather, to contend with the snow-blast, to wait at lonely gates and stiles in wildest storms, watching and listening to see and hear the father, the son, the husband coming home. (279)

Here, as so often in the text, it is difficult to tell precisely where Lucy’s description of her external surroundings ends and that of her interior psyche begins. In describing Twelfth Night at La Terrace, Lucy virtually repeats Miss Marchmont’s tale, this time inscribing herself into her snow-blasted description, in which Christmas “dooms” hearts and imaginations, alienating them from their persons – yet in the process, freeing them to “wander,” “dare,” and “contend.”

Lucy’s interiorization of her external surroundings is ultimately an act of Hegelian sublation: her voice effectively negates her negations and transforms the surface world of things into a dialectical world of spirit. This is nowhere more apparent than in the novel’s remarkable ending, in which Lucy famously declines to definitively inform her readers of the fate of her beloved M. Paul. Is he lost at sea? Will they live “happily ever after?” In fashioning her own retelling of Miss Marchmont’s Christmas tragedy, Lucy refuses to say. Instead, either with bitter irony or coy satisfaction, or both, Lucy offers only spectral *possibility*:

Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. (496)

There is a quiet, mysterious triumphalism in the dialectical movement of this valediction. The return of M. Paul, which will finally pin Lucy to the elusive role of “wife” she has avoided throughout her narrative, is neither negated nor affirmed. What is negated, however, is the role of M. Paul in determining Lucy’s fate. In this final rejection of description, of the world of things, characters and environments that have previously defined Lucy for her readers, we see her, finally, as the *real* ghost of the text. As Diane Hoeveler puts it in her exploration of the gothic side of female literary self-fashioning, *Gothic Feminism*:

She is, quite simply, all mind. She embodies Charlotte Brontë’s ‘supreme psychological achievement’ because Lucy is finally pure psychic energy set free from the trammels of that most gothic of nightmares, the female body. (241)

Lucy’s emergence as “pure spirit” allows her to suspend the ending of her own story in a plane of uncertainty – as she spectralizes herself, she spectralizes her world. Her home at the end of the novel, Numero 7, Faubourg Clotilde, is truly “uncanny”: *Heimlich* and *unheimlich* both, a place concrete in its minute physical description, and yet, finally, completely indeterminate. It is yet another “tiny, but [...] very pretty” (485) space in which Lucy will dwell. But it is also a site of uncertainty and possibility: in disappearing from her narrative suspended between wife and spinster, she becomes both present and absent from her text, a specter haunting her own home, expanding its confining walls in our imagination into infinite possibility.

Dickens called Mrs. Gaskell his “dear Scheherezade” (Uglow 258), presumably referring to her storytelling skills, and her reliability in pumping out ghost stories for the Christmas market, rather than his *Household Words* role as her King Shahryar. Charlotte Brontë too, when considering the seemingly never-ending development of her juvenilia

(of which she herself played a role as Chief Genii), has claims to kinship with the infinite storyteller. Just as Scheherazade's stories drift into infinity (there is no true "final" story in most sources of the 1001 Nights), so does Brontë leave off her death-deferring tale-telling with stories in the air: *Villette* ends in possibility and ambiguity, leaving the entire enterprise of storytelling, Scheherazade-like, in a state of suspense. More importantly, Brontë's work (and sadly, life) illustrates, as Scheherazade does, the result of confinement and repression, whether patriarchal, or more generally ideological: proliferation and paradoxical expansion. As readers of Scheherazade come to know (or readers of de Sade, for that matter): that which is repressed, repeats. Lucy Snowe's narrative expands each time it is circumscribed: events accumulate, until representation itself disappears into pure possibility. Jocelyn Pierston's *Well-Beloved* proliferates into multiple individual human subjects each time it appears it is about to be pinned down.

The texts I have considered in this chapter all exhibit traits Nina Auerbach anatomizes in her panoramic study of representations of Victorian womanhood, *Woman and the Demon*, which seeks a dialectical solution to the tired clichés of the Angel in the House, the Fallen Woman, and, implicitly, the Madwoman in the Attic. What Auerbach sees in the various representations of the Victorian woman is not so much the rigid ideological domesticity that -- via the standard model of Walter Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind* -- stems from the waning belief in religion and a concurrent rise in a desperate secularism, but rather a new and flourishing *belief*. The rise, in other words, of a modern myth:

The impulse to erect neurasthenic prisoners of the home into goddesses of the hearth was not a special plot against women, but part of a larger, complex and transfigured perception of Victorian dailiness [...] a belief in the transcendent, transfigured life of characters of fiction. As an essentially metaphysical creature,

one whose very presence brings eternity into time, woman enlarged by myth has more in common with fictional creations than she does with living men; her fictionality is one source of the energy that aggrandizes her. (15)

As I have argued here, the fictionalization of women – whether through their electrical transformation into fairies, the cross-faded daydreams of separated lovers, or the obsessive sexual idealization of scopophilic men – is a phenomenon that can not but explode the boundaries of ideology, even as it nominally proclaims that ideology. This fictionalizing of women results in the spectralization of women. Just as the reification, or deification, of the dead father creates, in its repetition of the repressed, a ghostly return, the mythification of domesticity creates in its seeming repression of women, a complementary ghost. As we have seen, Christmas is often the site in which this spectralization occurs: the X which makes of woman the variable x which determines, problematizes, expands, and reterritorializes ideological discourse.

If Christmas plays a distinct, if often oblique, role in spectralizing men and women – forging the subject into a cultural ghost, as it were – its role in spiritualizing and spectralizing the third element of the Oedipal triad: children, is much more immediate and pronounced. In Chapter Four, we will examine how Christmas does this, in the process interrogating what Hegel calls in *The Philosophy of Right* “the immediate substantiality of spirit” (359): the family.

¹ Lacan, of course, is not saying *Woman*, but *la femme*. His point, however, is hardly lost in the translation into English.

² It is perhaps worth noting that the narrator's first encounter with the three sisters from whom he will pick his wife revolves around his witnessing them burning a dead Christmas tree.

³ This was, of course, also the case for John Ruskin, who, despite his rhetorical advocacy of Queen's Gardens, was more than willing to relinquish his legal possession of them.

⁴ And indeed, it is difficult for the cultural imaginary to picture a haunted house whose architecture and design are not Victorian.

⁵ Philip describes Redclyffe as "more like a scene in a romance than anything real – the fine old sandstone house crumbling away in the exposed parts; the arched gateway covered with ivy; the great quadrangle where the sun never shone, and full of echoes; the large hall and black wainscoted rooms, which the candles never would light up. It is a fit place to be haunted" (9).

⁶ This process, of course, is, in Lacanian terms, merely another example of the movement of the symbolic order. As Žižek points out in *Fright of Real Tears*:

This shift from standard suture to the interace effect can be perfectly rendered in Lacanian terms: suture follows the logic of signifying representation (the second shot represents the absent subject - \$ - for the first shot), while the interface effect occurs when this signifying representation fails. At this point, when the gap can no longer be filled by an additional signifier, it is filled by a spectral object, in a shot which, in the guise of the spectral screen, includes its own counter-shot. In other words, when, in the exchange of shots and counter-shots, a shot occurs to which there is no counter-shot, the only way to fill this gap is by producing a shot which contains its own counter-shot [...] it is only the objet petit a which can be directly included in the picture. Consequently, when a shot includes its own counter-shot, the two shots are no longer related as the two signifiers of a signifying dyad; the first shot now stands for the signifying chain as such, while the spectral counter-shot stures it, providing the fantasmic supplement that fills its hole. (54)

⁷ The ending of *The Heir of Redclyffe* was the most unpopular thing about it. In an insightful essay examining the novel's parable-like structure, Susan E. Colón notes that: "Aside from overall enjoyment of the novel and its characters, the affective reaction to *The Heir of Redclyffe* that has been most consistently expressed is a strong dislike of the novel's ending, in which Yonge prolongs the tale well beyond the death of the hero (Guy) to narrate the repentance of the anti-hero (Philip)" (32). Colón suggests this may be the case because of the "reversal of the reversal" of the Biblical parable of the Pharisee the novel adopts. The argument is compelling, though I would add that some of the discomfort of readers arises from the fact that these reversals and repetitions are marks of the ghost story as much as the parable.

⁸ Admittedly, "class *un-consciousness*" may be a more appropriate term for the ideological subtext of this most nominally apolitical of novels. In spite of *Wuthering Heights*' psychological hermeticism – though perhaps because of it – the novel has received a surprising share of compelling Marxist readings. One of the most intriguing,

and certainly one of the most entertaining, is Terry Eagleton's riff on Heathcliff's possible Irishness that opens his 1995 study, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*.

⁹ This is to assume that there is a difference large enough between the Romantic and the Victorian "ages"-- or, more pointedly, that such a difference exists as such -- that could allow such an offense to be credible. The question, I admit, is an open one.

¹⁰ The plot of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, such as it is, involves the arrival of a group of young friends at the abandoned home of two of the friends' (Sally and Frank, who are sister and brother) grandparents in the Texas countryside during a mysterious rash of grave-robbings. One by one, each of the friends wander onto the property, and into the house, of a family of apparently inbred former slaughterhouse workers who now have taken to torturing and murdering unwary strangers for various cannibalistic purposes. All of the murders are performed by a masked, hulking character (unnamed in the film, but known as Leatherface), who appears to fill the role of "housewife" in the all-male cannibal family. After dispatching the wheelchair-bound Frank with titular chainsaw, Leatherface spends a deal of time chasing Sally between the two houses, until she is finally captured and tortured at the cannibal family's dinner table. Sally ultimately escapes the house, and the film ends with the fate of the family, and Sally's mental state, in doubt.

¹¹ *Wuthering Heights* is indeed the template for the much-maligned genre of the "romance novel" or bodice-ripper, though its formal artistry and thematic complexity make their kinship seem slightly absurd. Similarly, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, while launching a thousand sword and sorcery doorstops, has a *sui generis* peculiarity of invention and commitment to its world-building which is sorely missing in all but a few of its underachieving brood. In both cases, it is tempting to blame the cultural afterlife of the texts, rather than the texts themselves, for their myriad illegitimate children.

¹² On my first viewing of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* – a viewing I put off for many years due to my fears (quickly realized) of its unpleasantness – this scene hypnotized me. It's absurd, almost abstract violence, like a Tom and Jerry cartoon drawn by de Sade, alerted me to a fundamental quality of violence as such: it is, in a way, *unreadable*. Watching the scene, I literally asked aloud: "what IS this?" and laughed uncomfortably (a reaction I often have in my readings of *Wuthering Heights* to its escalating non-stop violence). I think the genius of this film is that it treats violence in perhaps the only way it should be treated – as a horror in itself, rather than as something narratively coded to justify or repudiate (which, as an inversion of justification, comes to the same thing) a particular ideology. For example, the violence of a movie like Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* or *Saving Private Ryan* is made respectable enough to garner its director a number of Oscars, and create a sense of almost moral obligation in its audience to endure it, by being attached to seemingly inarguable ideological imperatives: ie, *the holocaust was wrong*, or *war is hell*. Such truisms, reinforced by the punitive assault of the violence illustrating them, tend to obscure more questionable aspects that are adjunct to them. The denouement of *Schindler's List*, for example, is a squirm-inducing scene of a group of Jews exonerating a "good" German for his complicity in the Nazi war machine (while they are still in his concentration camp, no less!). On paper, this seems a seriously questionable moral to anchor a movie that, through its thorough commitment to portray the violence of the holocaust, purports to be *the* Hollywood text on the holocaust as such.

If we read this as the definitive “story” of the holocaust, which the film’s violence invites us to do, then the nominal subject of Oscar Schindler would seem to be an inappropriate vehicle for such a story, at best. Yet the violence of the film also demands that we accept the spurious moral situation that the violence has itself created.

This is not to suggest that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is free of ideology, but rather that its willingness to, for lack of a better term, *wallow* in its violence, rather than tame it to a specific ideological context, allows its violence to be read more freely (even at the risk of making the text itself read as an immoral *celebration* of violence), and perhaps more honestly (in this sense, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* could be read as a more “moral” film than *Schindler’s List*). Consider as well the critical reception of Jonathan Demme’s 1991 film, *The Silence of the Lambs*, which was the Best Picture winner at the Oscars the following year. In comparison to *Massacre*, *Silence of the Lambs* is far more graphic in its depiction of violence, and just as relentless in depicting the torture of women. Certain ideological markers – a more or less explicit feminist subtext; a higher-class monster (the Bach-loving foodie Hannibal Lecter is a much more appealing cannibal than the redneck Leatherface) and victim (Jodie Foster’s Clarice Starling is an ambitious, educated woman trying to prove herself in a “man’s” profession, while Sally’s interior life is largely a blank, readable only in the embarrassingly bumpkin-like behavior of her brother Franklin) – force us to read *Silence of the Lambs* as a “quality” text: its violence becomes neutered by its own bourgeois pretensions. In this light, I think the strangely abstract indulgence in violence *as such* in *Wuthering Heights* in part accounts for J. Hillis Miller’s somewhat overawed appraisal of that novel’s unusual sense of polysemy.

¹³ Gilbert and Gubar are conscious of the critical leap they are making here, and I think it accounts for their brief flirtation with the intentional fallacy in their description of Brontë’s construction of character: “her cool awareness” in developing the character of Heathcliff, which slyly subverts her sister’s characterization of her as a wild child, is as much a fiction of Gilbert and Gubar’s as Charlotte’s is. In a way, Gilbert and Gubar’s reading of the world of *Wuthering Heights* as a stage for female monstrosity is largely contingent on their appropriation of Emily as almost a character in her own novel: just as Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* is built upon a fictionalization and masculinization of her sister, Gilbert and Gubar’s feminized Heathcliff is largely dependent upon the myth of an arguably masculinized Emily. In order for *Wuthering Heights* to be read as a particularly feminized world of claustrophobia and rage, the role of the author must also conform to the model, and so the author must be characterized as complicit with the critic, and, as such, fictionalized. In a way, this can be read as another example of the non-existence of women: in order to make sense of the real Emily Brontë, she must be imagined, and therefore made un-real.

¹⁴ An equally thought provoking consideration of the un-considerable is William Ian Miller’s wide ranging *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), which seems in part an attempt to broaden the discussion of the abject beyond its traditionally psychoanalytic arena.

¹⁵ Tara Moore provides an interesting history of the Christmas ghost story in her 2009 study *Victorian Christmas in Print*. In discussing the frame-tale device commonly used by the Christmas annuals, Moore notes that “a frame with a holiday setting leads into the

often Christmas-free embedded narrative” (86). One of the more interesting aspects of the Victorian Christmas ghost story was the fact that so many of them do not even mention Christmas. As Moore points out, “it is rather the genre of the ghost story that makes [such texts] occasional reading” (83). As many contemporary observers pointed out, ghosts as such became signifiers of Christmas.

¹⁶ The question of whether a woman or a man wrote this text is, perhaps, of some importance, though the ambiguity of authorship only enhances the ambiguity of femininity as such as it is presented within the text, in my admittedly convenient estimation.

¹⁷ The cat’s role as witch’s familiar is well known in western culture. The relationship between cats, women and the supernatural is even more prevalent in Japan, where the bakeneko, the “monster cat,” is a fixture of the Japanese ghost story and horror cinema. Shindo Kaneto’s atmospheric and furiously oedipal 1967 film, *Kuroneko* is an intriguing example of this genre.

¹⁸ *The Well-Beloved*’s status as Hardy’s final novel is contingent on reading it as a separate text from the novel it is a revision of, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, which appeared in serial form in 1892, between the publication of *Tess of the Durbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, more commonly regarded as Hardy’s fictional swan-song. Much of the critical discussion of the two guises of *The Well-Beloved* revolve around the repetitive process of revision, and its relation to the repetition compulsion of the hero of the novel. See especially, J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*, pp 147-75.

**Chapter Four:
A Ghost Is Being Beaten**

*And soon as the time wears round,
The good old carle we see,
Coming a-near; -- for a creditor
Less punctual is than he!*

*He comes with a cordial voice
That does one good to hear;
He shakes one heartily by the hand,
As he hath done many a year.*

*And after the little children
He asks in a cheerful tone,
Jake, Kate, and little Annie,--
He remembers them everyone!
-Mary Howitt, "Old Christmas"*

*Every child must be made aware
Every child must be made to care*
-Bing Crosby and David Bowie, "Peace on Earth/Little Drummer Boy"

I

The official website for the Coca-Cola Company features a page dedicated to "Coke Lore," much of which is given over to relating the role of Coca-Cola in promulgating the current standard model of Santa Claus. The image of Santa as "jolly, with a red suit and white beard," a description that, taken metaphorically, could just as easily describe the Coca-Cola logo itself, is credited with being introduced in a 1931 magazine advertisement. "Because magazines were so widely viewed, and because this image of Santa appeared for more than three decades," the website claims, "the image of Santa

most people have today is largely based on our advertising.” Tom Standage, in his lively *History of the World in Six Glasses*, contests this claim, citing a 1927 *New York Times* article that gives a detailed description of a “standardized Santa Claus” (246) with red hood and white beard. Much of this description can be credited in turn to the work of the nineteenth-century American cartoonist Thomas Nast, whose famous black and white illustration of Santa in the January 1, 1881 edition of *Harper’s Weekly* gives no evidence of red clothing, but does provide the requisite white whiskers, as well as cementing the iconography of Santa as (not-so) morbidly obese [Figure 12]. Nast’s cartoon can in turn be traced to influences like Clement Moore’s “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (1823), which introduced to the lore both reindeer and St. Nick’s preferred method of delivering toys through burglary. Moore most likely had Washington Irving’s pipe-smoking patron saint of Old New Amsterdam from *Knickerbocker’s History of New York* (1809) in mind while writing the poem. Prior to Irving, Santa Claus becomes a case for the cultural anthropologist, and he is seen with varying degrees of similitude in the actual St. Nicholas (a fourth-century Anatolian bishop), Father Christmas (a figure traceable to fifteenth-century English Christmas carols), and Martin Luther’s Protestant-friendly alternative to St. Nicholas, Christkindlein, or Kris Kringle.¹

Clearly, attempts to pin down an *ur-Santa* would require a cultural calculus outside the scope of this work, but even a superficial listing of iterations like the one above demonstrates the parallax quality of Santa: the perpetually re-inventing tradition. He seems a figure ever in motion as we watch him transform down the decades and into the centuries, the only constant image being the one that rests, invisibly, *outside* the iconography: a picture of our need to constantly reinvent a figure that in his very nature is



Figure 12: Thomas Nast's Santa Claus (1881).

static, unchangeable. Let us for a moment consider the current iteration: the American Santa Claus. He is, as already mentioned, an elderly, overweight, red-suited Coca-Cola enthusiast. He seems to exist on a fairly exact spatio-temporal plane: he lives at the North Pole, but enters the home of any domicile with a child on Christmas Eve. These co-ordinates would seem to make him easy to find – indeed, any adult with children need nominally only stay alert during the early hours of December 25th to find him in her *own home* – but even a cursory reflection of these coordinates renders them extremely problematic. It is, in fact, *impossible* for Santa to deliver toys (or coal) to every child-rearing home on Christmas Eve: if we made a rough estimate that Santa would have to visit, say, 500 million homes in the course of the evening, even at the rate of one visit per second, Santa could only enter 1,036,800 of them (and this only if we grant him a twelve hour window in each of 24 different time zones).² In the face of such facts, only two alternatives are possible: Santa Claus is: 1) a god-like figure who exists outside of time, and as such, is able to observe and judge the moral quality of every child on the planet while simultaneously producing and distributing commodities to those children based on his analysis outside the material restraints of the physical universe, or 2) he does not exist. While reason would suggest the latter option as most likely, American – indeed, global – culture has opted for the former. A vast majority of these people would argue, of course, that they do not “believe” in Santa Claus, but again, a cursory reflection of certain facts suggests they do. The Coca-Cola Company, which, in a feat to rival the magic of Santa Claus, *is* able to produce and distribute 1.7 billion servings of its product on a daily basis, became the target of controversy in 2011 when it released its holiday-themed cans. Traditionally red, and often emblazoned with Santa’s image, the 2011 cans

were white, causing confusion among consumers, and in some cases, outrage: a December 1 article in the *Wall Street Journal* suggested that the change in design “bordered on sacrilege.” Coca-Cola’s embarrassment over this incident must surely be tempered with a certain amount of pride: the chaos generated in part by *not* having Santa Claus on their cans suggests some truth to their claim that Santa is indeed another product of the Coca-Cola Company. The ubiquity of Santa’s image on Coke cans is only a small part of his pervasiveness in late-capitalist culture, however. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people every year enter the market as avatars of Santa himself, installed within and without commercial space as bell-ringers and short-term babysitters. The cultural interest of this admittedly limited market can be seen in a number of famous, even classic, texts: the perennial *Miracle on 34th Street* recursively asks if one of these ersatz Santas might not indeed be *the* Santa. The fantasy of the film’s premise is balanced by the seriousness with which that fantasy is accorded: the legal and cultural importance derived from the question within the plot as to whether or not this department store Santa is in fact Santa becomes, thematically, an injunction to believe. “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus” is, presumably, a statement to be taken literally. In the film, as in real life, the ubiquity and multiplicity of Santa Clauses – the commercial reproducibility of them, whether as Coke cans or simply human beings – which would nominally seem to discredit his existence (how could there be a *real* Santa in a sea of so many imposters?), serve instead to reinforce belief. We can say we don’t believe in Santa, but why then do we still write his name on the tags of our Christmas presents? Why do we so readily lie to our children that he does exist if we don’t believe it ourselves? Why do we allow him to occupy so much of our cultural space? Seen from the standpoint of a hypothetical Martian

observer,³ it would seem incredible that a culture so devoted to the idea of this jolly, toy-obsessed deity could deny its own investment in him.

The question, then, is not whether or not we believe in Santa Claus – his value as a currency of cultural exchange, however fantasmic, proves that on a practical level at least, we clearly do – but rather *how* and *why* we make that belief operative. Part of the *how* has already been answered: Santa Claus -- ceaseless producer, distributor and advertiser of commodities -- is literally the ghost in the machine of American capitalism. While his image has changed through the years, the *idea* of Santa Claus remains consistent: even if we allow that the Coca-Cola Company effectively invented him in 1931, he *has always already been there*. Reliably transcendent and eternal, he is the calm eye at the center of the capitalist hurricane: paternally panoptic and domestically ensconced at his North Pole address, he provides a ghostly focus to the endlessly shifting and multiplying process of consumer activity. Like Krishna to Arjuna, Santa puts a friendly face on a cosmic force, naturalizing the de-territorializing and re-territorializing maelstrom of capitalism in a manner that allows us to see a process that is fundamentally changing as something that has always been there. In short, he *traditionalizes* capitalism.

More interesting perhaps, is the question of *why* Santa enacts this remarkable procedure. The immediate answer would appear to be: for the children, of course. But the overwhelming energy invested by adults in promulgating the fantasy of Santa Claus makes this answer problematic. Setting aside the commercial element, the local dissemination of the Santa myth among individual families suggests something more is going on here than the simple desire to enchant one's children. While it is nominally the child that believes in Santa, it is the parents' job to instill this belief, and to conduct the

child's credibility, even after the child reaches the point of disbelief. Again, *Miracle on 34th Street* serves as a narrativization of this practice: even, perhaps especially, after a child professes incredulity toward the concept of Santa, it becomes incumbent upon unbelieving adults to keep belief alive. I found myself in precisely this situation during the last holiday season. I entered into a conversation at a Christmas party with my friend's nine year old son, who rather proudly exclaimed that he no longer believed in Santa Claus. The child wore a cryptic smile while offering this information, which gave me little clue as to how to proceed with the discussion. Should I simply tender a polite congratulation for his deductive prowess? Such a move would certainly serve as a helpfully conspiratorial recognition of a laudable, if bittersweet step into the world of adulthood (particularly as his three year old sister -- a far more orthodox, even evangelical, believer -- was in the room, though out of earshot). However, what if the child's statement was more a question than declaration? What if he were simply attempting to get confirmation for an idea he only half-suspected, half-dreaded were true? Either out of cowardice or some ill-defined compulsion, I opted to play devil's advocate. With a cryptic smile of my own, I playfully advocated Santa's existence. When the child proposed that Santa didn't exist in part because he hadn't come to his house this year, and he received no presents with his name on the label, I countered that his house had no chimney. When he retorted that Santa has no need of chimneys (with what level of irony I will never know), I lamely suggested that Santa surely had some valid reason for avoiding his house. Mercifully, the child's attention quickly wandered elsewhere, or I would surely have lost the argument. But what surprised me was that I made the argument at all. I have no particular fondness for Santa Claus, and see no valid reason

why children should either. In fact, I suspect that a great deal of children *do not* like Santa Claus. A photograph of my mother in childhood, seated on an unusually fake-looking department store Santa, screaming in terror with tears streaming down her face, was a perennial source of holiday humor during my childhood [Figure 13]. What was so funny about this obviously traumatic moment? I suspect it was less the oddity of a child afraid of Santa, than it was a recognition of a more general phenomenon. Who has not encountered the child who expresses only fear and loathing when presented with Santa's lap? The queasy horror of the department store Santa is something of a fixture in holiday films (Bob Clark's 1983 film *A Christmas Story* being the most memorable example), but I suspect the abjection children experience when confronted with this figure has as much to do with the terrible power of the 'real' Santa Claus as it does with whatever objectionable qualities any ersatz Santa possesses.

When presented baldly, Santa's qualities appear less like those of a jolly old man, and more those of a troublesome ghost. He breaks into people's houses. He is seemingly omnipresent, and apparently omniscient. He "knows when you've been sleeping, he knows when you're awake." Indeed, he "knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake." The chirpiness of the tune aside, such lyrical advice makes the proposition that "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" more a threat than a promise. Santa's role as Father Christmas makes his close ties to the holiday an often anxious proposition for children. A number of Christmas stories, notably the Rankin Bass productions *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964) and *The Year Without a Santa Claus* (1974), and the 1966 film *The Christmas That Almost Wasn't*, play with the idea that when Santa becomes incapacitated by illness or mishap, Christmas itself will be cancelled. The



Figure 13: The author's mother endures a visit with St. Nicholas.

happiness of children, on a global scale, rests in the precarious health of a dangerously overinvested icon. In this context, Santa's power becomes as much a liability as a blessing.

If there is something inherently terrifying about Santa Claus, it is not so much that he is an adult with supernatural powers, but that he is essentially a child with what a child might read as the powers of an adult. Like adults, Santa has the power of ethical judgment over children: commodities are granted or withheld on a calculus of moral behavior. Like adults, Santa has no legally mandated bedtime: he gets to work/play into the wee hours of Christmas morning. But what makes Santa uncanny, and possibly disturbing, is that Santa, finally, is *not* an adult: like a child, he has a fantasmic, personalized relationship with the animal world. Like a child, he is obsessed with toys. And perhaps most childlike of all, he lives in a neatly Manichean world where good and evil are plainly signified by toys and coal.

Perhaps, then, the current iteration of Santa Claus is less a reification of American capitalism, and more fundamentally a reification of the unstable boundary between the adult and the child. Santa -- the child-adult/adult-child -- performs, as it were, the difference between the two. Such a performance, by such a fantastic actor, seems increasingly necessary the more one considers the difficulty in theorizing the difference between adults and children as such. I imagine that many "adults," myself among them, have occasionally considered the fact that, on a purely temporal level, the only thing separating their adulthood from their childhood is a more or less lengthy procession of days and nights divided and demarked purely by the phenomenon of sleep. Without this unconscious punctuation of consciousness itself, one is presented with the striking notion

of an uninterrupted consciousness extending from infancy to death: a kind of endless day. In such a configuration, the ideas of “child” and “adult” seem suddenly artificial, like mile markers on a highway: they act as a structural fiction of progress, masking the perhaps greater structural fiction of a uniform existence. From this perspective, sleep itself seems a kind of anti-suture: while the blank space between frames of a motion picture create an illusion of animation, sleep provides us with an illusion of difference and event, allowing us to develop more complex, cultural milestones – like birthdays or Christmas – that sustain an otherwise volatile and unpredictable subjectivity. If sleep, by definition a lacuna in consciousness, a kind of phenomenological cessation of being as such, can be read as the thing that makes the idea of “a day” possible, it does so as a fundamental *lack*. It is, as we experience it, something *that is not there*, that does not, from the perspective of consciousness, exist. In this sense, it is apropos that Santa can only enter our homes when we are asleep: since he doesn’t really exist, he can only make himself present when, in a manner of speaking, we don’t either.

The question then arises: if one might just as easily abandon the distinction between adult and child as a structural fiction, if, as so much recent scholarship suggests, the idea of the child is indeed an “invention” of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, why make the distinction at all? More pertinently, what do we make of the rigid distinctions between childhood and adulthood that Christmas asks of us through agents like Santa Claus, a figure who simultaneously clouds those very distinctions? In other words, what makes Christmas such a site of contention between adults and children? A less abstract way of framing this question might be to ask how Christmas came to be so *child-centric*. For instance: the practice of gift-giving, a tradition that dates back to

before the celebration of Christmas itself in the Roman Saturnalia, has only recently become the cultural imperative to give to our children as many presents as economically feasible on December twenty-fifth. That imperative, underwritten by a narrative barrage in the form of Christmas carols, television specials and feature films, finds its apotheosis in the figure of Santa Claus. As I noted above, there is a complex calculus to finding the origin, or rather origins, of this strange, ancient, yet child-like demi-god. As much as Ebenezer Scrooge, it is Santa Claus – post-modern colonizer of Coca-Cola cans – who provides the face of our late-capitalist, Americanized Christmas. But, as I will show in the pages that follow, Santa, like Scrooge, finds, to a compelling degree, at least part of his mythic origin in the haunted houses and miasmic streets of nineteenth-century London. If Santa Claus, and our post-modern Christmas, ever had a childhood, it is to be found in the haunted, and haunting, ghost children of Victorian literature.

II

In December 2009, the satiric “newspaper” *The Onion* released its “Top 10 Stories of the Last 4.5 Billion Years.” At number eight was the story, “Industrial Revolution Provides Millions Of Out-Of-Work Children With Jobs.” The story dryly encapsulates, with impeccable journalese, what might be called the crime of the century:

According to records, the introduction of machine-based manufacturing provided a desperately needed solution to England’s toddler-unemployment epidemic. Out-of-work children, many of whom had struggled since birth to earn any kind of wage at all, were now afforded the chance to work seven days a week, up to 19 hours a day, in such competitive industries as iron-smelting and steel-tempering.

For those who prefer their comedy black, this story nicely digests the horror of reams of Parliamentary Blue Books and the careers of Charles Dickens and Karl Marx, a literature that has supplied us with perhaps the most iconic meme of Victorian capitalism: the exploited child laborer. If Oliver Twist and *Bleak House*'s tragically exhausted street-sweep Jo seem to us today mythic, perhaps stereotypical, examples of the Victorian proclivity to both fetishize and torture its children, they were no less so for their original audience. It is commonly understood that literature decrying the exploitation of child labor, from Dickens to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1842 poem "Cry of the Children," played a significant role in the stream of Parliamentary activity regulating child labor throughout the nineteenth century. The literature, agitation, and laws that speak to this issue suggest that Victorian society was broadly and consistently engaged in wrestling with the systematic economic destruction of its children even as it was occurring. Even so, it was not until 1881 that the Education Act of 1871, mandating that all children up to the age of ten attend school, was instituted nationwide, nearly eighty years after the first regulatory acts were passed.⁴

Perhaps the reason such a struggle with such an obvious moral imperative for resolution took so long to accomplish lies in a broader cultural context in which the social role of children was ambiguously formulated. Industrialism and capitalism as such were rarely the focused targets of Victorian rage at the treatment of its children. When one considers that the typical literary vehicle for considerations of child exploitation and abuse were *fantasy narratives*, this fact becomes hardly surprising. The young chimney sweep hero of Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) dies early in the narrative into a world of fantastic trials of a Darwinian rather than Marxist nature; Alice's

traumatic trips to Wonderland and Looking-Glass World provide hints of a political and economic “reality,” but they are subsumed by the overriding logic of nonsense; and the child victims of Dickens, while clearly products of social injustice, are ultimately either rescued or subsumed by the fairy-tale dictates of their narratives: Tiny Tim and Oliver Twist “do NOT die” because of ghostly or angelic intervention, while Little Nell does die in part because of a malignant dwarf, and Jo dies unheeded by a London wrapped up in a far more delicious case of family mystery and spontaneous combustion.

It is, in short, the Oedipal fairy-tale that determines the Victorian narrative of child abuse, and while this frame can illustrate the fabric of social relationships, it can just as easily serve to obfuscate them. Even social institutions removed from the fantasmic air of literature can be seen to be invested in this narrative. One of the primary campaigns of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in the 1890’s was against the practice of taking out life insurance policies on children, a phenomenon that, as early as 1843, was seen, by Thomas Carlyle in *Past and Present*, as a stain on the national character, an example of the problematic “condition of England.” As Monica Flegel points out, Carlyle’s reading of a notorious case of child murder in which a Stockport mother and father poisoned their children to collect on their insurance suggests “a kind of cannibalism, in which the child who cries for food is murdered so that others might be fed,” as well as “a gruesome form of commerce: a child is converted into funds that then become food; once that child is ‘eaten,’ the rest soon follow” (217). While this kind of imagery is taken up in the NSPCC’s literature forty years later, it differs from Carlyle in that it attempts to remove the onus of guilt of child murder from society to bad parenting. As Flegel argues, “the NSPCC, in an effort to maintain the Society’s classless

stance, sought to reframe the debate surrounding child-life insurance by conflating stories of poverty and starvation with horrific narratives of parental savagery” (218).

If the NSPCC’s tactic of negotiating thorny class issues in combating child murder by effectively avoiding them makes political sense -- appealing to a bourgeois plurality invested in a narrative of domestic universality requires an Oedipal, rather than a social villain -- it was not unique in doing so. Carlyle himself, in *Past and Present*, quickly moves from a generalized, essayistic condemnation of the condition of England to a narrative of medieval St. Edmundsbury. In exploring social and economic problems by narrativizing a localized hegemonic culture safely rooted in the past, Carlyle, like the NSPCC, moves from a social imaginary to a cultural one, where the family romance trumps political economy, and where the psychological explains the social. This is what makes Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* – itself deeply indebted to Carlyle’s *Past and Present* – operative as both social critique and fantasy: the reduction, or elevation, if you prefer, of issues of economic injustice to a psychological study of Ebenezer Scrooge. The issue of child neglect, child abuse, and child death is never far from *A Christmas Carol*’s narrative, whether it focuses on the precarious fate of Tiny Tim, The Ghost of Christmas Present’s twisted children, or Scrooge’s own lonely, neglected childhood [Figure 14]. But it is always filtered through Scrooge’s ghost-haunted consciousness, and distilled into Scrooge’s transformation at the end of his narrative into both father figure to Tiny Tim and a self-professed “school-boy” (118) and “baby” (119). At the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is a disturbing version of Carlyle’s Midas, and as such, dangerously readable by the charity workers who invoke his aid. When confronted with such pleas, Scrooge is deft at countering them. He demonstrates a coldly efficient



Figure 14: John Leech Illustration from first edition of *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

knowledge of the law in asking if the prisons and workhouses are in operation (44). But this is before we get to know Scrooge and his story. Scrooge's social position is effectively erased by his ghostly narrative, and he emerges at its end a cultural myth: like Santa Claus, he is an adult child/child adult, a second father to Tiny Tim, but also his *peer*. Both Tiny Tim and Scrooge, threatened throughout the *Carol* with a seemingly inevitable death, emerge at the end newborn, and culturally, immortal and perennial.

In ceasing to be an intersubjective social agent, one alive to the iniquities and injustices of his time (however coldly and ironically he engages and debates them), Scrooge becomes instead what Slavoj Žižek calls an *interpassive subject*, one who no longer is embedded in a social framework dictated by questions of *knowledge* (“Are there no prisons?”) but one who has found the answer of *belief*, provided by the big Other (“I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future! The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me.”). The big Other here is Christmas itself, personified by its trinity of ghosts, transcendental signifiers that guarantee Scrooge's belief is not misplaced. In fact, Scrooge need not believe at all: the spirits that “strive within” (118) him will do it *for* him. As Žižek points out, this is how belief operates:

In an uncanny way, belief always seems to function in the guise of such a ‘belief at a distance:’ in order for the belief to function, there has to be some ultimate guarantor of it, yet this guarantor is always deferred, displaced, never present in persona. (“The Interpassive Subject” p 5)

Scrooge can believe in Christmas because Christmas itself, through the agency of its spirits, is already clearly operative.

What is interesting here is how Scrooge's Christmas apotheosis keeps the Lacanian chain of signification going: once Scrooge becomes a stand-in for Christmas itself, so invested in the idea that its spirits literally strive within him, don't we, Scrooge's

readers, then become interpassive subjects ourselves? Doesn't Scrooge, like Santa Claus, now believe *for us*? We too can now believe in Christmas, because Scrooge has done the heavy lifting: his narrative allows us to believe through him.

In fact, it is probably necessary for Scrooge to provide this function. As I explored in Chapter 1, the narrative of *A Christmas Carol* not only stresses the injunction to enjoy Christmas, it stresses the necessity of death: in order for Scrooge to understand the importance of Christmas, he must know that he will die; he must, in fact, see his own grave. The narrative power of *A Christmas Carol* stems from the fact that its dual imperatives, Christmas and death, are intertwined. We know that Scrooge and Tiny Tim must die, but we know just as surely that Christmas cannot let that happen: Scrooge will be reborn, and Tiny Tim will NOT die. Only the fantasy of Christmas can portray this paradox: only the spirits of Christmas can allow Scrooge to witness his, and Tiny Tim's death while simultaneously avoiding them. Reading *A Christmas Carol*, we know that Scrooge and Tiny Tim are doomed, just as surely as we are. But thanks to Scrooge's ghostly encounter, we can believe they, and we, aren't.

How do we let others believe for us? Žižek provides some illuminating examples in his essay "The Interpassive Subject": the canned laughter of a television sitcom allows us to enjoy a comedy that might not be all that funny (p 7); a VCR can record, and effectively, "watch" all the movies a film buff doesn't have time to watch himself (p 12). Similarly, children can be read *A Christmas Carol* or become invested in the figure of Santa Claus so that we might believe in Christmas too. Conversely, it could be argued that children can be made to believe in Christmas *so that we don't have to*. As Žižek suggests, this practice is more widespread than we might think:

There are some beliefs, the most fundamental ones, which are from the very outset ‘decentered,’ beliefs of the Other; the phenomenon of the ‘subject supposed to believe,’ is thus universal and structurally necessary. From the very outset, the speaking subject displaces his belief onto the big Other qua the order of pure semblance, so that the subject never "really believed in it"; from the very beginning, the subject refers to some decentered other to whom he imputes this belief. All concrete versions of this ‘subject supposed to believe’ (from small children for whose sake parents pretend to believe in Santa Claus, to the ‘ordinary working people’ for whose sake Communist intellectuals pretend to believe in Socialism) are stand-ins for the big Other. So, what one should answer to the conservative platitude according to which every honest man has a profound need to believe in something, is that every honest man has a profound need to find another subject who would believe in his place... (p 2)

There is much in the Victorian relationship to its children to suggest a desire, a need, to invest in a *belief* in childhood to oppose, and in a way, redeem the unbelievable realities attendant upon such a childhood. In 1875, the infant mortality rate in England was 158 in every 1,000. The mean lifetime in England in 1851 was forty years.⁵ Setting aside the exploitation of child labor and the culture’s self-constructed image of “cannibalizing” its own children, it is not hard to imagine a widespread difficulty in believing that Tiny Tim did NOT die. Nor is it hard to understand how a culture conscious of the systematic abuse of its own children might prefer to invest in a libidinal *belief* in the transcendence of its children while haunted by knowledge of the inefficacy of curtailing the practical destruction of those children. In one sense, *A Christmas Carol* is about the appalling children hiding under the cloak of The Ghost of Christmas Present, decrying the social sins of Ignorance and Want (101). In another sense, Dickens’ fantasy is a means by which we can erase those children, and put in their place the delightful, transcendent children that Scrooge and Tiny Tim become: children we can believe in, or who can at least believe for us.

In one respect, *A Christmas Carol* is only the most famous example of a particularly English form of *Kindertotenlied*, the ghost-child story. Whether we read *A Christmas Carol* as a social protest or a kind of gospel, it is the inaugural canto in a genre which conflates the guilt, anxiety, and dread of the dead child, and its revenant, with the pleasure and comfort of Christmas. It is a genre marked by its determination to shake our incredulity in ghosts and other horrors by believing in them for us.

III

One of the first and most effective ghost-child stories is Elizabeth Gaskell's contribution to the 1852 *Household Words* Christmas number, "The Old Nurse's Story." It is one of the most famous and widely anthologized of Victorian ghost stories. Its wide appeal stems in part from the artfulness with which it balances the horrific and the sentimental, in its ambiguous presentation of the Victorian child as both tragic victim and terrifying nemesis.

The story takes place at the strange and creepy Furnivall Manor, where Hester, the titular nurse, and her five year old charge Rosamond come to stay with their elderly relation Grace Furnivall, after the death of the girl's parents. As winter draws near, Rosamond becomes drawn to the ghost of a child her age, and the nurse hears strange music from an organ in the east wing of the house. Fear builds in the house when the ghost-child lures Rosamond out into the freezing snow, and, after rescuing her, the nurse takes steps to protect the girl from the ghost's plaintive cries at the window. It eventually emerges that the ghost is the illegitimate daughter of the sister of Grace Furnivall, cast

out into the cold to freeze to death by the late cruel lord. At the end of the tale, Grace Furnivall falls dead after seeing the ghostly reenactment of her sister and niece's banishment, which she was, in part, responsible for.

Gaskell's story may at first seem something of a departure from the work that made her name, the celebrated "condition of England" novel of 1848, *Mary Barton*. While an argument could be made that Gaskell's depiction of the Manchester working-poor in that novel is often more horrific than anything in "The Old Nurse's Story," its explicit engagement with the burning social issues of working class poverty, labor relations, and Chartism makes it seem worlds away from the ultimately cozy domestic fantasy of "The Old Nurse's Story," which, after all, first appeared in a periodical titled *A Round of Stories by the Christmas Fire*. But the great novel of social protest and the great Christmas ghost story both owe their genesis, to a greater or lesser degree, to the tragedy of child mortality. In her Preface to *Mary Barton*, Gaskell comments: "Three years ago I became anxious (from circumstances that need not be more fully alluded to) to employ myself in writing a work of fiction" (5). The circumstance that Gaskell alludes to is the death of her ten month old son William in 1845, of scarlet fever. If Gaskell is reticent here to fully explain the personal influences that led to *Mary Barton*, she elsewhere allegedly invoked the same issue in more broadly social terms:

Elizabeth allegedly told Travers Madge of the moment which inspired *Mary Barton*. One day, visiting a poor family, she was trying, like Susanna Winkworth, to argue against their suspicions of the rich, 'when the head of the family took hold of her arm, and grasping it tightly said, with tears in his eyes, "Aye, ma'am, but have ye ever seen a child clemmed to death?"' This is the question which John Barton, the weaver-hero of her novel, hurls at the rich: have they ever seen their children starve? (Uglow 192-3)

“The Old Nurse’s Story” more or less answers this question in the affirmative, as it unveils the tragic story of Furnivall Manor. As in the above anecdote, “The Old Nurse’s Tale” addresses the class-inflected aspects of the issue of child death obliquely, couching its questions of how “the rich” deal with the tragedy of child mortality in the narrative voice of the working class, and as an appeal to the imagination: the class consciousness which Gaskell attempts to address in the anecdote is effectively stopped by the pathos and horror of the poor man’s question: “have ye ever seen a child clemmed to death?” Similarly, the class distinctions between Hester and her charge – a poor relation of Lord Furnivall – and the seemingly settled aristocratic residents of Furnivall Manor is subsumed within the more sensational goings-on of a ghostly pipe-organ and a dangerously seductive ghost child.

Or is it? If *Mary Barton* can be seen as a social rendering of personal tragedy – the working-through of the personal grief of the death of a child via a consideration of child-death on a mass scale in which the rich are taken to account for the death rates of the poor, “The Old Nurse’s Tale” can be read as its inverse: a rendering of the social as the psychological. In other words, instead of seeing “The Old Nurse’s Tale” as a *retreat* from social criticism into fantasy, we can read this story, like Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*, as a kind of *transcendence* of social criticism *via* fantasy: here, the child “clemmed to death” impossibly speaks for itself, and in doing so, works its vengeance on the aristocrats of Furnivall Manor in a way that would be impossible in a realist text like *Mary Barton*. If John Barton can only make an impotent plea for revolution, the child-ghost can actually enact it, if only on a domestic, and fantastic, level. In doing so, however, the child-ghost of “The Old Nurse’s Tale” does something the beleaguered

Chartist of *Mary Barton* cannot: it can bring the social and political implications of its own neglect and murder to the cozy hearth of the Christmas fire. Indeed, as the first sentence of the story makes clear, this is a tale of child abuse told directly *to* children (11).

As in *A Christmas Carol*, it is the interpassive subject that draws us into this arrangement. The nameless nurse, like Scrooge, and countless narrators of other Victorian ghost stories, is the subject who believes in ghosts for us. Gaskell is perhaps more artful in beginning her tale than the legion of Victorian ghost stories that begin with a promise to the reader of the credibility of the tale about to be told. Gaskell's narrator need not, as, say, Charlotte Riddell's narrators so often do, attest to her trustworthiness in relating the supernatural incidents of her story, nor does she appeal to the credulity of the reader. Her authority and reliability is suggested at the outset by clues to her longstanding domestic service and care for children:

You know, my dears, that your mother was an orphan, and an only child; and I daresay you have heard that your grandfather was a clergyman up in Westmoreland, where I come from. I was just a girl in the village school, when, one day, your grandmother came in to ask the mistress if there was any scholar there who would do for a nurse-maid; and mighty proud I was, I can tell ye, when the mistress called me up, and spoke to my being a good girl at my needle, and a steady honest girl, and one whose parents were very respectable, thought they might be poor. (11)

The nurse's diction accentuates the pride she has in her working class background, while her remembrances conveniently supply a three generation resume of service to this family. Her authority is most deftly articulated by the fact that she is addressing the next generation of this family here, rather than the reader herself. Compare Gaskell's opening with that of Riddell's "The Open Door," which winkingly plays with the convention – which Riddell was instrumental in codifying – of the narrator's appeal to credibility:

Some people do not believe in ghosts. For that matter, some people do not believe in anything. There are persons who even affect incredulity concerning that open door at Ladlow Hall. They say it did not stand wide open – that they could have shut it; that the whole affair was a delusion; that they are sure it must have been a conspiracy; that they are doubtful whether there is a such a place as Ladlow on the face of the earth; that the first time they are in Meadowshire they will look it up.

That is the manner in which this story, hitherto unpublished, has been greeted by my acquaintances. How it will be received by strangers is quite another matter. I am going to tell what happened to me exactly as it happened, and readers can credit or scoff at the tale as it pleases them. (39)

The defiant posture of Riddell's narrator slyly acknowledges the burden of the narrator of the ghost story to make his story as believable as possible.⁶ His offhand dismissal of the need for reader corroboration of his narrative also serves as a passive-aggressive condemnation of any unbelieving readers: the litany of excuses by those who disbelieve his story tends to highlight a foolish, if not desperate need to rationalize among his detractors, and his insinuation that people that don't believe in ghosts probably "do not believe in anything" suggests belief in ghosts is as important as belief as such. Riddell's narrator makes plain the position of the interpassive subject: you can believe in his story or not – it's enough that the narrator himself believes. Gaskell's nurse, on the other hand, works a much more subtle operation on her readers: since she's not even addressing a readership, but rather a group of children, she draws in reader complicity not only with her bona fides as a "steady honest girl," but by the fact that as a "subject supposed to believe," her position is enhanced even more by her interaction with a *group* of subjects supposed to believe: children. In beginning her tale with a conspiratorial "You know, my dears" Gaskell nicely places her readership in the position of the nurse's children. The nurse makes no statement as to the authenticity of her tale, or her own credibility as

witness, because she doesn't have to: her first words interpellate us within her narrative *as* credible children.

It is as such that we enter the nurse's, and Rosamond's, diegetic space. And as such, it is easy for the reader to miss the class divisions that mark Rosamond's progress to Furnivall Manor. Rosamond's mother was, as the nurse relates, "a real lady born" (11) who married a "curate, son to a shopkeeper," "a right-down hard worker" (11-12). The nurse, in addressing her young audience, does not dwell on the class problematic of this match, but its disastrous results are quickly hinted at:

When your mother, little Miss Rosamond, was about four or five years old, both her parents died in a fortnight – one after the other. Ah! That was a sad time. My pretty young mistress and me was looking for another baby, when my master came home from one of his long rides, wet and tired, and took the fever he died of; and then she never held up her head again, but just lived to see her dead baby, and have it laid on her breast, before she sighed away her life. (12)

The fairy-tale structure of this edited-for-children narrative suggests much that is not said: is it the curate's status as a "right-down hard worker" that precipitates his illness and death? What are the conditions of Rosamond's home that allow the curate's fever to kill his wife and newborn child? Economic hardship – a condition Gaskell explores in excruciating detail in *Mary Barton* is here only hinted at. For the sake of the children in the audience, explication and analysis do not go much further than "Ah! That was a sad time."

The nurse offers further hints of the economic and social backdrop of this tale, and their relative importance to it, when she describes the ride to Furnivall Manor:

And now it was long past noon on a September day, and we stopped to change horses for the last time at a little smoky town, all full of colliers and miners. Miss Rosamond had fallen asleep, but Mr. Henry told me to waken her, that she might see the park and the Manor house as we drove up. (13)

Once again, the nurse's child-like diction reduces an environment that, in another context, would require two novels, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, to adequately observe, to "a little smoky town, all full of colliers and miners." But the nurse needs no further description, as the heroine of her story is *fast asleep*. Her conscious attention to this quaint industrial smogscape is not required: she need only wake to see the impressive grounds of the Manor. And we, the ingeniously infantilized readers of Gaskell's story, need not pay any attention either (though I suspect Gaskell's attention to detail is as strategic here as her old nurse's). There is a striking double articulation in Gaskell's handling of this "throwaway" background. Though Rosamond, her children the nurse is addressing, and the stand-in reader need none of this information, it nevertheless colors our sense of the Manor and its twisted family history. It also lends greater authority to the nurse, who, awake to a social and economic history her readers are implicitly welcomed to sleep through, knows more than we do, and as the only adult in the room, so to speak, she is someone we can believe in. As David Ellison observes in his essay, "Glazed Expression: *Mary Gaskell*, Ghosts and Glass," Gaskell's art often describes

...a visual system that routinely fails to see the poor. In *Mary Barton*, this is identified as a central threat to political stability. But Gaskell complicates this problem, drawing connecting lines between the imperfectly glimpsed, if not spectral bodies of the poor, the emaciations of famine and the concurrent removal of labor-traces from the spectacular display of commodities set behind glass. (485)

These connecting lines can be seen in this story as well, in the offhand references to the unseen poor and the spectacular, and spectral, Furnivall Manor. If Hester encodes these connections in a language fit for children, she nevertheless is the one that is able to encode them. Perhaps more interesting, though, is the manner of *unseeing* the unconscious Rosamond enacts in the tale.

Hester, as narrator, plays the traditional role of interpassive mediary in her story's call to believe, but that role is also occupied by Rosamond. It is Rosamond who makes first contact with Furnivall Manor's ghosts, and it is her ambiguous relationship with the ghost-child that forms the dramatic and thematic core of the story. The interaction between Rosamond and the ghost-child create an atmosphere of moral ambiguity: the mystery of the ghost initially calls into question not only the motives of the ghost itself, but those of Rosamond. When Rosamond is brought back from the snowy Fells, her veracity is questioned when she claims she was called out by the ghost. When Hester investigates the child's story, and finds only one pair of footprints in the snow, she suspects the child is lying, calling her a "naughty little girl" and admonishing her for "telling stories" (22). Rosamond's excuse is equally morally inflected: she insists that she "could not choose but go" because the ghost-child was "so pretty and so sweet" (22). But Miss Furnivall's servant Mrs. Stark, aware of the ghost, quickly insists that the ghost is an "evil child," a "wicked, naughty child" that will "lure [Rosamond] to her death" (23). Both the mystery and *frissons* here center on the moral qualities of both the girl and the ghost-child. Is the ghost good or evil? Is Rosamond simply "telling stories"? The latter question is not a minor one, considering the weight the Victorian ghost story places on veracity: Hester's moral and narrative authority is of course predicated on the truth of her own story.

Interestingly, the resolution of this moral quandary is delayed by the fact that Rosamond is once again *asleep*. Her account of her ghostly rendezvous is compromised by the fact that the ghost-mother, upon seeing her, "hushed her weeping, and smiled very

proud and grand, and took me on her knee, and began to lull me to sleep” (23).

Information is delayed further when Rosamond returns to the Manor:

At last Dorothy knocked at the door with Miss Rosamond’s breakfast; and she told me the old ladies were down in the eating parlor, and that they wanted to speak to me. They had both been into the night-nursery the evening before, but it was after Miss Rosamond was asleep; so they had only looked at her – not asked me any questions. (23)

Rosamond’s ghostly interaction, then, is figured in large part on her being unconscious.

Her unconsciousness, in turn, puts her own veracity in question, and by extension, the moral atmosphere of the whole of Furnivall Manor – by now clearly recognizable as a haunted house with unspeakable secrets.

Is it too much to suggest here that Gaskell, arguably the most impassioned social realist and literary advocate of the working class, is drawing a parallel between a political and psychological unconscious in this tale? As a child, Rosamond is by necessity unconscious of the socio-economic environment which she inhabits. But her unconsciousness also brings to the fore the reality of the Furnivall ghosts: her very status as a child makes her the victim/confidant of the ghost-child, which in turn allows, in the climax of the story, the tale of injustice and tragedy of the ghost-child to emerge in full to the adults of the house. The climactic procession of the Oedipal triad of ghosts -- Miss Furnivall’s father, sister, and niece – is immediately preceded by yet another description of Rosamond sleeping (29), who awakes with an uncontrollable urge to join them: “Just at that moment my darling wakened with a sudden start: ‘My little girl is crying, oh how she is crying!’ and she tried to get up and go to her” (30). Rosamond’s struggle to join the ghosts is intercut, as it were, with the phantasmagoric repetition of the expulsion of Lord Furnivall’s daughter and grand-child:

All at once, the east door gave way with a thundering crash, as if torn open in a violent passion, and there came into that broad and mysterious light, the figure of a tall old man, with grey hair and gleaming eyes. He drove before him, with many a relentless gesture of abhorrence, a stern and beautiful woman, with a little child clinging to her dress [...] They passed along towards the great hall-door, where the winds howled and ravened for their prey; but before they reached that, the lady turned; and I could see that she defied the old man with a fierce and proud defiance; but then she quailed – and then she threw up her arms wildly and piteously to save her child – her little child – from a blow from his uplifted crutch. (30-1)

This scene, and the family plot of fallen women and illegitimacy that informs it, has been read as an echo or recapitulation of Gaskell's novel *Ruth*, written the same year and dealing with similar subject matter.⁷ However, in the scene's abstract, primal violence, I think one could just as easily read this as a child-eye view of injustice as such, an echo of the fundamental pain that served as the genesis of *Mary Barton*: the death of a child. Readers of *Ruth* will recognize that the topic of the fallen woman in that novel is itself a springboard for wide-ranging social interrogation, and Ruth's journey a kind of pilgrim's progress through the myriad inequities of the English class system. Here too, though in a much more compact, fantastic form, Gaskell offers a local incident to stand in as a ghostly indictment of social injustice. More importantly, it is the *subjectivity* constructing the incident that provides the indictment, both as a projection of the ghost-child's history of abuse, and Rosamond's affective investment as spectator of that projection – she literally wants to jump into the picture to quell its horror. In this primal fantasy, in which, to paraphrase Freud, a ghost is being beaten, that which was unseen is now seen, to the edification of adults as well as children. The potency of injustice on full display here is perhaps what led Dickens to plead with Gaskell to make this spectacle visible only to Rosamond.⁸ It is ultimately a more disturbing image of child abuse than the visions discretely afforded to Scrooge, in that the psychological horror has finally

become social: if Scrooge's private epiphanies lead to his reformation, the public unveiling of Miss Furnivall's past causes her to drop dead. "The Old Nurse's Tale" ends not with a conventionally cozy epilogue from the narrator, but with the anguished cries of Miss Furnivall. If most Victorian ghost stories end with a reassuring affirmation of exorcism, Gaskell's ends on a note of uncertainty. Hester, who opens her tale with a carefully modulated exposition crafted for the pleasure of children, lets the horror of her ghosts supply the ending. Her story is in part a tale of abuse that, willfully or not, goes unseen. Fittingly, it ends not with telling, but with an almost cinematic burst of *seeing*.

"The Old Nurse's Tale" is a seminal example of the increasing power of ghosts, particularly child-ghosts, in Victorian fiction. As Jennifer Bann observes in her essay "Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency: The Changing Figure of the Nineteenth-Century Specter," "In the supernatural fiction of the later nineteenth century, death began to bring freedom: shackles, silence, and regret were cast aside, and ghosts became active figures empowered rather than constrained by their deaths" (664). As she memorably puts it, "the powerless hand-wringing of Marley's ghost" gives way to "the controlling, guiding or demonstrative hands of later ghosts" (664). While this formulation is somewhat reductive – the three other ghosts of Dickens' *Carol* suffer no such constraints – it adequately describes the trajectory of the child-ghost over the Victorian period. The child-ghost of "The Old Nurse's Tale, like the silent, moping child-ghost of Charlotte Riddell's "Walnut-Tree House," act largely as mute signifiers, trapped within their respective environments. Increasingly, these ghosts will expand their territory, as well as their ability to move, and transform, those they haunt. This increase in the power of the child-ghost can be largely attributed to a shift in their affective, and moral, agency. If

earlier child ghosts, like Dickens', were objects of horror and disgust, or, like Gaskell's, ambiguous in motive and deadly in their power to shock, later ghosts increase the scope of their power to haunt largely by becoming pathetic, even friendly, rather than malevolent, spirits.

The child-ghost of Margaret Oliphant's 1885 story, "The Open Door" (a popular title and trope of the Victorian ghost story), provides a liminal example of this shift. The ghost here is the child of a housekeeper who died in a ruined building which once was servants' quarters. In repeating his cry "Oh, mother let me in!" night after night, he draws the attention of the wealthy new tenants of Brentwood House: Mortimer, a colonial bureaucrat (whose pride in his new estate is testified by nearly three pages of self-satisfied description at the opening of the story), his wife, and their "fragile" son Roland. Oliphant's story is more direct in its treatment of class issues than "The Old Nurse's Tale." As Melissa Edmundson notes, the ruined doorway the ghost haunts "immediately brings to mind a symbolic 'doorway' between two social classes," that also "comments on the transitory, uncertain lives of the servants, whose fortunes must rise and fall with the status of the house they work for" (59-60). Oliphant's "poor ghost," haunting the bureaucrat's property like a tape loop, forces a class confrontation reminiscent of Dickens' *Carol*: Mortimer, prone to extended visits to London to dine and drink with friends at his club (155-6), learns in confronting the child-ghost to be a more attentive father and husband.

As in "The Old Nurse's Story," it is a child who initially makes the most visceral contact with the ghost-child, a contact which threatens the safety of the living child. Roland, who has heard the ghost's cry, develops, like Rosamond in "The Old Nurse's

Story,” a dangerously sympathetic obsession with the ghost. Fearing his son will die, Mortimer, along with a skeptical doctor and a clergyman, attempts to lay the ghost in an effort to save his son. Roland’s illness is the occasion for redemption and understanding, between both the living family and the child-ghost and his mother. If the ghost is initially a figure of fear and dread, his true nature is divined by Roland: his injunction to his father to “go and help it” challenges, and allows, his father to conform to his son’s expectation that “Father will know” (172). It also allows us to read the ghost more sympathetically than the ambiguously threatening child-ghost in Gaskell’s story, in part because something can be done to free the ghost from its repetitive behavior.

What distinguishes Oliphant’s story from so many of its peers is its relatively overt religious sensibility. In laying the ghost, a minister earthily gives the ghost spiritual advice to ““Go home, ye wandering spirit! [...] Do ye think the Lord will close the door, ye faint-hearted creature? No!””, as well as imploring the Lord to ““take him into Thy everlasting habitations”” (198). In doing so, the minister not only exorcises the ghost, he effectively gives the ghost an agency quite different from that of Gaskell’s: the ghost is *not* trapped in a repetitive loop after all, but is free to go to Heaven, where it belongs.

In creating a ghost pathetic rather than frightening, one redeemable rather than repeating, Oliphant’s ghost-child blurs the line between ghost and angel, and opens up the figurative space in which the ghost-child can operate. If Gaskell and Riddell’s child-ghosts are housebound slaves of repetition, Oliphant’s *bursts* through its open door -- Mortimer feels a physical jolt from the ghost’s escape: “I sprang forward to catch something in my arms that flung itself wildly within the door” (198). The laying of the ghost increases, rather than decreases its potency: Roland becomes “strong and well”

(202) after the ghost departs, attaining a well-being he never possessed prior to his connection with the ghost. Mortimer becomes more attentive and thoughtful, and, perhaps most importantly, goes from being an unbeliever in ghosts to a reliable evangelist for them, boasting at the end of the tale at how he can make the skeptic town doctor doubt his own disbelief in ghosts: “I must add that when the doctor defies me, I can always bring back gravity to his countenance, and a pause in his railing, when I remind him of the juniper-bush [a piece of evidence suggesting the ghost was real]” (203). Oliphant’s combination of religious sensibility and class comment raise the stakes of belief in this story. The ghost, in moving from an earthbound revenant to an explicitly theological spirit, entwines the belief in ghosts with belief in God, and provides a convenient religious justification for perpetuating the class system. Mortimer becomes a reliable advocate for this ghost – a fitting subject supposed to believe – by transcending the class differences between his family and the ghost’s. The social and religious transcendence Mortimer brings about through his engagement with the ghost-child also serves to negate the troubling specter of class conflict: at story’s end, Mortimer has successfully evicted not only a ghost, but a threatening and irritating revenant of the suffering working class. Believing in ghosts – and their rightful place with God, rather than on Mortimer’s property – allows one not only to *get rid* of ghosts, but to believe in the class system as well.

The ghost of “The Open Door” is a transitional one. While it retains, to a lesser degree, some of the malignant ambiguity of the ghosts of “The Old Nurse’s Story” – the negative influence of the ghost on Roland’s mental and physical health; the gothic trappings of the ghost’s milieu – it also, through the mediation of those trying to lay it,

arguably generates more sympathy than Gaskell's ghosts. Its more pronounced role as a vehicle for the interpassive subject makes it ultimately a beneficial ghost. However repetitively and passively the ghost initially behaves, through the action of the subjects that try to exorcize it by believing in it, it acquires a second-hand power to change the lives of the living for the better. The ghost charts a trajectory over the course of the story, from being a figure of fear, to a figure of faith.

This transition finds its completion in "The Ghost-Child," a 1906 story by Bernard Capes. This well-crafted, if slightly bathetic, fairy-tale develops the figure of the ghost in surprising, transformative ways. The most fascinating novelty of the tale is that the ghost is seemingly generated by *belief itself* (or at least a kind of wish-fulfillment) rather than being a revenant of the dead.

It opens with the obligatory invocation to belief, conveyed with an inimitable *fin de siècle* purple prose that conflates the psychological and the moral, promising to be as forthcoming as possible in presenting the truth. As the narrator avows: "...to withhold from evidence, in these days of what one may call a zetetic psychology, anything which may appear elucidatory, however must be pronounced, I think, a sin against the Holy Ghost" (442). Interestingly, much of the elucidatory evidence the narrator presents, including the ghost-child itself, are not witnessed by the narrator, but related to him second-hand. The narrator's remove from the action of the tale nicely mirrors the circumstances of the arrival of the ghosts of the story. If he takes the story on faith, it can be said that the ghost-child itself is a *product* of faith.

The story is simple: Tryphena, a girl who lives by the sea in the "east of England" (442), is engaged to the restless Jason, who, in a fit of pride, breaks the engagement and

goes to sea. He swiftly repents his hastiness, and promises to return to the faithful Tryphena, but dies at sea en route home. Jason's ghost appears to Tryphena in a dream, and "all night he lay there, blest and forgiven, till in the morning he melted away with a sigh" (446). Nine months later, at Christmas, a child, "naked, and his pink, wet body glazed with ice" (447), arrives at her door. He looks remarkably like Jason, and when Tryphena asks him his name, she finds that Jason is the child's name as well. She asks the child:

‘And who am I? [...] If you are Jason, you must know what to call me.’
 ‘I know,’ he said; ‘but I mustn’t, unless you ask me.’
 ‘I won’t,’ she answered, with a burst of weeping. ‘It is Christmas Day, dearest, when a miracle of a little child was wrought. I will ask you nothing but to stay and bless our desolate home.’ (447)

The ghost stays, until Tryphena finally feels compelled to ask the ghost-child who he is. In a nicely rendered intersection of reader conjecture and narrative revelation, the ghost-child tells her "I was to call you 'mother'!" (448), before he disappears into the gathering snow. In a brief epilogue, the narrator informs us that "Tryphena made this confession, on a Christmas Eve night, to one who was a believer in dreams. The next morning she was seen to cross the causeway, and thereafter was never seen again" (448).

In this story, the ghost has almost completely shed its more disagreeable traits. The ghost-child here is neither threatening, nor particularly ambiguous: it offers straightforward answers to questions, even those it can't answer. The ghost is received instead as an unequivocal miracle and blessing, bearing comparisons to Christ Himself. It is rather the outside world that becomes malevolent, or at least depressingly indifferent. When the ghost-child reveals his nature, he dissolves into a bleak environment:

Even as he spoke, his pretty features wavered and vanished. The snow broke into him, or he became part with it. Where he had been, a gleam of iridescent dust

seemed to show one moment before it sank and was extinguished in the falling cloud. Then there was only the snow, heaping an eternal chaos with nothingness. (448)

This is a much gentler ghost than Gaskell's and Oliphant's, who engage the material world with aggressively repetitive behavior that create physical, as well as mental, effects on the people they haunt. The narrator describes his story as a "butterfly to be broken on a wheel" and a "delicacy" (442) that presents a danger of insensitivity even in its telling. The ghost-child's fragility becomes a mark of his peculiar power: he is a miracle and blessing ever threatening to merge into a chaotic nothingness. There is a sense that this ghost, the impossible child of a dream encounter with a dead man, is more real than the world he is born into. The oneiric, fairy-tale trappings of the story (the narrator compares Tryphena variously to a mermaid and an elf), in which dreams and ghosts are the vitalizing agents of procreation, make the ghost paradoxically more solid, in spite of his evanescence, than his surroundings.

Biographical material on Bernard Capes is scarce, but he was apparently a lapsed Catholic, which may account for the ease with which he mixes religious symbol (Tryphena shares her name with a Christian women in the The New Testament Book of Romans; the ghost-child is a stand in both for the baby Jesus and the Holy Ghost) and pagan myth and fantasy (Jason is clearly modeled on the Greek Argonaut and deserting husband).⁹ This self-conscious mixture of referents heightens the un-reality of his fairy-tale world, making its ghost-child a ground for meaning and faith to a narrator who is a "believer in dreams." In this world, the ghost-child becomes an acceptable stand in for the Son of God, appearing on Christmas to incarnate his parents' ghostly dream. If Gaskell and Oliphant suggest that ghosts can lead us to a higher social truth, Capes'

ghost-child becomes that Truth itself: he is precisely *something to believe in*, in that he was never anything else. He is also the ultimate reification of the dead child: this ghost-child circumvents death by having *never been alive*. Gaskell and Oliphant's ghosts suggest ideals that have been misplaced in their implicit ideological critique: both literally and figuratively stand at a doorway between class divisions. Capes' ghost-child makes no ideological critique, perhaps because it was never part of the material world in which such critiques make sense in the first place. He is rather a transcendent, implicitly religious figure, supplying the impossible third piece of a failed Oedipal triad.

Viewed this way, Capes' ghost-child, is, for all its fragility, the most powerful of Victorian ghost-children: sidestepping its own tragic failure to be born, it ceases to be even a reflection or revenant of child abuse. Instead, it is a purely benevolent force, and an avatar of benevolence itself in a world of "eternal chaos" and "nothingness." This child, who never had to be a child at all, is a child to believe in. It is, after all, its only function. It arrives neither to frighten nor edify, but to comfort and bear witness to its own impossible being. This perfectly *hypothetical* child can be seen as the ultimate alternative to the millions of *real* children that society, and culture, could not protect in the nineteenth-century. More real than real, the ghost-child possesses a power that mere mortal children, in their faceless numbers, do not. We can view Capes' ghost-child as the distilled essence of the century's other ghost-children: Oliphant and Gaskell's ghosts can create social awareness and change through an agency never possessed by their victimized living selves; and Tiny Tim, another child who never was, and can never die, lives in a way that millions of real children like him never could. The power, then, of ghost-children, and what makes them such an appealing alternative to real children, is

precisely the fact that *they do not exist*. Whatever terrors they evoke are nothing compared to the horrors of the plight of the real children that inspired them. Such terror, in fact, is what constitutes the pleasure they give. To idealize children in this manner, particularly as a means to assuage the fact of their systemic abuse, is, paradoxically, to invest them with an uncanny agency and power. But the investiture of such power, such agency, in children – the subjects supposed to believe – is not, as we shall see, without its problems.

IV

Henry James' 1898 "Christmas-tide toy,"¹⁰ *The Turn of the Screw*, is famously either the crown-jewel of Victorian ghost-stories, or a harrowing account of delusion and child-abuse. Or both. The story opens on Christmas Eve, with a round of ghost stories, "gruesome, as on Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should be" (1). James immediately sets his tale within a discussion of the *genre* of ghost stories centering on children: the group around the fire keep upping the ante on horrifying stories of ghosts possessing children. Through a convoluted chain of narrators, we finally hear the story of a governess and her (possibly) haunted charges, Miles and Flora, in her own words. The governess increasingly becomes convinced that the two children under her care have become corrupted by the ghostly influence of two dead former servants, Quint and Miss Jessel. The nature of their evil, and by association, the children's, is never made explicit, though the suspense of the tale is made palpable by the governess's rising sense of alarm. Flora is eventually removed from the house, and Miles, in the final scene, dies in the

governess's arms, of unknown causes. The minutely detailed frame of the tale serves as a more sophisticated form of the "call to believe" typical of the Victorian ghost tale. The governess's bona fides are given in the lead up to her narrative, lending her ambiguously suggestive story a sense of veracity. The frame and the governess's narrative work in tandem to set up a condition which has dominated critical discussion of *The Turn of the Screw* for decades: the "reliability" of the governess, and whether the ghosts she sees are "real."

Indeed, the critical debate surrounding *The Turn of the Screw* and its ghosts has become as famous as the novella itself. Since 1934, when Edmund Wilson first published "The Ambiguity of Henry James," in which he popularized the notion that the child-possessing ghosts Quint and Miss Jessel might be products of the governess's perverse imagination, critics have gone back and forth as to the existence of *The Turn of the Screw*'s ghosts. Shoshana Felman's *tour de force* 1977 reading, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," brilliantly reframes the question of whether or not the governess is mad by positing that the story's structure forces us into a dialectical position in which our suspicion of the governess puts us as readers in her exact place. Felman suggests the narrative enacts a Lacanian web of signification in which we become trapped:

The reader of *The Turn of the Screw* can choose either to believe the governess, and thus to behave like Mrs. Grose, or not to believe the governess, and thus to behave precisely *like the governess*. Since it is the governess who, within the text, plays the role of the suspicious reader, occupies the *place* of the interpreter, to suspect that place and that position is, thereby, *to take it*. To demystify the governess is only possible on one condition: the condition of repeating the governess's very gesture. The text thus constitutes a reading of its two possible readings, both of which, in the course of that reading, it deconstructs. James's trap is then the simplest and most sophisticated in the world: the trap is but a text, that is, an invitation to the reader, a simple invitation to undertake its reading. But in the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, the invitation to undertake a reading of the

text is perforce an invitation to *repeat* the text, to enter into its labyrinth of mirrors, from which it is henceforth impossible to escape. (215)

Felman's reading is compelling insofar as it delineates the mechanism of James's Christmas toy, but it leaves unanswered the question of why we would engage the trap in the first place. If the question of whether or not the ghosts are real, whether or not the governess is mad, and whether or not the children are innocents or damned, must remain unresolved in this textual labyrinth of mirrors, the question of why the questions are asked in the first place remains open. What, in other words, *occasions* the textual labyrinth of mirrors? What makes *The Turn of the Screw* an unresolvable text, an exercise in repetition?

I think the answer can be found in part in the masterpiece James published one year before *The Turn of the Screw*, a novel I can't help but read as its companion piece, *What Maisie Knew*. Here, child abuse is seen from the child's perspective, and the sinister, corrupting ghosts are replaced by the child's parents, seen more or less fleetingly and incompletely, depending on Maisie's age and ability to comprehend her world at various points in the novel. Here too, though in a manner obverse to *Turn of the Screw*, the central question is the epistemological sophistication of children. By the novel's end, after Maisie has been abandoned by each of her monstrous, divorced parents, and has, in her turn, abandoned her equally irresponsible step-parents, Maisie is able to sigh, "Oh, I know" in recognition of her situation. Her governess, Mrs. Wix, supplies the final observance of the novel, and, I think, the psychological engine behind both novels: "She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew" (266). What, precisely, Maisie knows is never divulged – the wonder, for Mrs. Wix and for the reader, whose interest is largely sustained by guessing Maisie's level of comprehension of the incidents that occur around

her, is *that* she knows. Mrs. Wix's wonder is something of a piece with the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*: while we may speculate as to the reality of the ghosts, the governess has no question as to their reality -- her issue is with what the children *know* regarding them. The very fact that the children know *something* is a cause of horror to the governess:

I got hold of Mrs Grose as soon [...] as I could; and I can give no intelligible account of how I fought out the interval. Yet I still hear myself cry as I fairly threw myself into her arms: 'They know -- it's too monstrous: they know, they know!'

'And what on earth--?' I felt her incredulity as she held me.

'Why all that we know -- and heaven knows what more besides!' (29)

Whatever horrors the governess imagines Flora and Miles have learned from Quint and Miss Jessel, it is clear that the fact that the children know "what we know" -- what adults know -- is the root cause of the horror. This is the same horror that lurks behind *What Maisie Knew*: that the child Maisie may be fully aware of the perversity of the adult world around her, an awareness Maisie's step-father Sir Claude hopes to circumvent, when, in the final scene, he asks (to whom, it is not clear): "Will you be so good as to allow these horrors to terminate?" (265).

What James presents as a horror in both novels is the spectacle of the child as the "subject supposed to know," the horror arising from the fact that children are, presumably, precisely the subjects supposed *not to know*: that is, the innocence of Miles and Flora, and of Maisie, is contingent upon them *not* knowing the corrupting knowledge of their elders. This, I think, accounts for the labyrinthine sense of *Turn of the Screw*: if the children *do* know what they are presumed to know, they will presumably withhold that knowledge from those that suppose they have it. If they *don't* know what they are presumed to know, those that presume they possess the knowledge can never know that

they do not know it. The paradox here being that knowledge as such, invested everywhere, is actually present nowhere.

James here seems to be presenting the dark side of the same libidinal economy – played for pathos in *Maisie*, and for horror in *Turn of the Screw* – that is operative in the ghost-child stories we have previously encountered. In both novels, children are spectralized into interpassive subjects: the governess’s ghostly fears are projected onto Miles and Flora, and the degree of their corruption is read by the governess as the degree to which they do not *share* her fear; the innocent Maisie is the subjectivized object of all of the adult corruption that pervades her novel. Like the ghost-children of Gaskell, Oliphant and Capes, James children become the ghostly representation of adult *lack*, both moral and epistemological.

What does Maisie know? Put more bluntly, what do children know? *Nothing*, but what we tell them. The horror of Henry James, and, I suspect, a large part of the horror – and the pleasure -- of Christmas, lies in the fantasy we make of our children, our *enghosting* of them, making of them both the stock holders of our sleepy Christmas dreams, and of our social nightmares. James’s children are unknown quantities – fantasies – and as such, their presumed innocence becomes paradoxically demonic. These children invested with meaning, meaning that arises from the very fact that they are not known, that they are, in effect, not really there, becomes an occasion of horror because they are *believed* in, rather than experienced: that is, they become occasions for belief in lieu of knowledge.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his 1952 essay “Father Christmas Executed,” argues that the gap between belief and knowledge becomes an occasion for cultural exchange

between adults and children. Children, the “uninitiated” (45), become the focus of religious ritual and spiritual belief because of their otherness, which, as Lévi-Strauss argues, makes them appropriate substitutes for the dead, who are not only the ultimate other, but who dwell purely within the spiritual. In exploring the question of why we invent figures like Santa Claus to placate our children, Lévi-Strauss argues that it is not simply to make sure they behave, but because they effectively *are* Santa, in that they most resemble his otherworldly qualities. He makes a striking comparison between the figure of Father Christmas and the katchina of the Hopi:

If children are kept in the dark about the human nature of the people incarnating the katchina, is this simply to get them to fear, respect, and behave well? Of course, but that is only a secondary effect of the ritual. There is another explanation which the myth of origin clarifies perfectly. The myth explains that the katchina are souls of the first native children who were dramatically drowned in a river at the time of the ancestral migrations. So the katchina are simultaneously proof of death and evidence of life after death. Moreover, when the Indians’ ancestors finally settled in their village, the myth relates how the katchina used to come every year to visit them, and, when they left, took away the children. The Indians, desperate at losing their offspring, made a deal with the katchina that they would stay in the other world in exchange for promising to honour them every year with masked dances. If the children are excluded from the secret of the katchina it is not primarily to intimidate them. I would say just the opposite: it’s because they *are* the katchina. They are kept out of the mystery because they represent the reality with which they mystery constitutes a kind of compromise. Their place is elsewhere – not with the masks and the living, but with the gods and the dead – with the gods who are the dead. And the dead are the children. (45)

The children, kept in the dark and ignorant of the mechanism of the rituals concerning them, are nevertheless in the privileged position of being the locus of belief, which, for the katchina as much as for the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, supersedes knowledge itself. Or rather, belief *becomes* knowledge, in the sense that what we believe children know existentially, spiritually, is greater than whatever knowledge we actually possess.

There is, in Lévi-Strauss's relation of the Hopi myth, a poignant corollary with the myth of the Victorian child. Aren't the Christmas ghost stories of ghost-children an analogue of the katchina ghost dance? Both arise from an unthinkable tragedy of child death. The katchina are spirits of children drowned during a time of social upheaval. So too are the ghost-children of Victorian Christmas narrative. One can see in the exchange the Hopi make with their dead the unconscious bargain the Victorians made with theirs: as if in apology for the millions of children worked or starved to death under social conditions too difficult to change in time, the adults would allow the dead children of England to rise again as ghosts to entertain, edify, and comfort, the living on Christmas Eve.¹¹

In this way, substitution and simulacra become the most cherished reality. It is the ghosts of the spirit world, the revenants that, strictly speaking, do not exist, that allow us to invest in our children a belief that makes of adults the ultimate beneficiary. As Lévi-Strauss remarks:

We should reflect on the tender care we take of Father Christmas, the precautions and sacrifices we make to keep his prestige intact for children. Is it not that, deep within us, there is a small desire to believe in boundless generosity, kindness without ulterior motives, a brief interlude during which all fear, envy, and bitterness are suspended? No doubt we cannot fully share the illusion, but sharing with others at least gives us a chance to warm our hearts by the flame that burns in young souls. The belief that we help to perpetuate in our children that their toys come from 'out there' gives us an alibi for our own secret desire to offer them to those 'out there' under the pretext of giving them to the children. In this way, Christmas presents remain a true sacrifice to the sweetness of life, which consists of not dying. (50)

As a child, our family had a ceramic statue of Santa Claus kneeling before the baby Jesus. I remember being somewhat put off by it (I like to think I had a precocious distaste for kitsch, but I'm sure I flatter myself): Santa, his hat removed out of respect, looked so

vulnerable and awkward with his bald head and serious expression. His bulk, distorted in his crouching position, made him look uncomfortable, and me as well [Figure 15]. With the strange literalism of a child, I felt a disturbingly uncanny sense of anachronism in the tableau: wasn't Jesus supposed to come *before* Santa Claus? If Jesus was the cause of Christmas, shouldn't Santa not even have been born at the time of Christ? But here he was, already old, kneeling incongruously to a *child*. I realized, of course, that the child was God, and that Santa could very well have been in business doing something else before meeting Christ, and that the *message* of the sculpture was the one every typically greedy and thoughtless child like myself always hated to hear: that Jesus was the "reason for the season." But I still didn't like it, particularly as I began to see it in my relative's homes as well: it had seemingly become a minor *cause célèbre* that Christmas (a quick Google search revealed to me that this statue is even today more popular than I had thought). To me, though, it just didn't seem *right* – it was too high-concept, too serious. The reason, I think, is because the statue wasn't for me, it was for the adults. Perhaps they found something refreshing in this mimetic representation of Santa, this Santa-supposed-to-believe, placidly removed from all the annoying cartoons and childrens' songs. Here at last, they had found an icon of Santa worthy of adults. Perhaps, as the inventors and disseminators of Santa, they had finally found the statue they deserved.



Figure 15: The Santa Supposed to Believe.

¹ I am indebted to Russell W. Belk's excellent article, "Materialism and the Making of the Modern American Christmas" (*Unwrapping Christmas*. Ed. Daniel Miller. Oxford: Oxford UP 1993) for its insightful and concise genealogy of Santa Claus.

² It was a rough calculation along these lines that led me to discard my belief in Santa Claus during the Christmas season of 1980. The fact that we lived in a chimney-less home certainly contributed to my apostasy.

³ A standpoint that is literally and uproariously realized in one of the best, and worst, holiday offerings ever filmed, the 1964 turkey, *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*.

⁴ Dates of legislation provided by www.victorianweb.com

⁵ Figures taken from: <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/childlit/banerjee1.html>

⁶ Sandy, the upwardly mobile narrator of "The Open Door," rises from put-upon clerk to gentleman farmer through a lucrative stint ghost-hunting in a Lord's estate, so he, at any rate, has reason enough to believe in ghosts.

⁷ See Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*.

⁸ Laura Kranzler, ed. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Gothic Tales*, p. 344

⁹ http://www.enotes.com/topic/Bernard_Capes

¹⁰ "Preface to the New York Edition," Norton, p. 124.

¹¹ An intriguingly blunt intersection between Santa Claus, belief, and death can be found in the insufferable 1979 novelty song by Elmo and Patsy, "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer." In the song, Santa's existence is verified by the fact that he has killed the narrator's grandmother in a hit and run accident. The point of the song is not the tragedy of death, but the occasion for belief. As the refrain continually stresses, "You may say there's no such thing as Santa, but as for me and Grandpa, we believe."

**Postscript:
Ghosts of Christmas Yet To Come**

*Sobs they sighdid at Fillagain's chrissormiss wake, all the hoolivans of the nation,
prostrated in their consternation and their duodisimally profusive plethora of ululation*

[...] *Agog and magog and the round of them agrog.*

--James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

I began this study with a consideration of a sub-literary Christmas story that takes the end of the world as an occasion for holiday reflection, so it may be fitting to end with another. Like Marie Corelli's "Devil's Motor," Adam Roberts' 2009 opus, *I Am Scrooge: a Zombie Story for Christmas* is a pastiche of the Victorian cultural imaginary as careening, self-devouring nightmare. Its groan-inducing, pun-filled prose suggests it is a self-aware attempt to cash in on two numbingly recursive sub-genres: the perennial stream of *Christmas Carol* adaptations/parodies, and the recent vogue for re-written nineteenth-century classics like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *Jane Slayre*, and *Android Karenina*, in which monsters are intercut with the canonical corsets and manners of our Victorian literary heritage. One might suppose that the titles of these books alone could suffice as the joke behind the mash-up of nineteenth-century Masterpiece Theater and Post-modern monster movies, but amazingly, books like *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* have actually been *written*. More, if sales are any indicator, they have been read. Presumably, there is a need for this strange collision between Victorian taste and Post-modern tastelessness beyond the desire for cheeky literary *non sequitur*.

If nothing else, *I Am Scrooge* addresses this need directly, and admirably attempts to justify its existence beyond simply replacing Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim with cannibalistic, undead revenants (though, as one would expect, it does that as well). The book begins with an awareness of its parent-text's dialectical engagement with death's inevitability and contingency: "Marley was dead, to begin with. Dead for about three minutes, that is: then he got up again" (3). From here, Roberts gleefully replaces Dickens' shackled, disembodied Jacob Marley with a rampaging, soul-less flesh-eater less concerned with Scrooge's moral regeneration than with feasting upon his brains. Interestingly, the Christmas ghosts who come to visit Scrooge inform him that zombie-Marley, and the hordes of ghouls multiplying on the streets of London, can eat not only flesh, but spirit as well. As The Ghost of Christmas Present explains:

Understand this about Zombies. They feed upon mind. They devour mentition itself. If they come upon you then they will break open your skull and slurp up your brains. With me, should they chance upon me, and because I am wholly ideational, they would devour me entire. And very unpleasant it would be. (37)

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the zombies' hunger for mentition extends beyond individual souls to cultural ideations, to the *zeitgeist* itself: the growing horde of undead anarchically, and anachronistically, come to devour Jack the Ripper, a feisty Queen Victoria, H.G. Wells, and Charles Dickens himself. As Scrooge moves through time with the Christmas ghosts to witness the exponential growth of the zombie plague, he learns that the outbreak is a man-made catastrophe set in motion to wipe out the Victorian world as such: in devouring everything, body and soul, the zombies "will devour the past, consume it whole," so that "Mankind will never have existed here" (129). In a way, Roberts casts his Christmas zombies as a scourge against his source material: their ultimate goal is to kill Scrooge, who, conveniently immune to the zombie

virus, is the only thing standing in the way of erasing Christmas, Victorian England, and humanity itself. Revealingly, Scrooge must kill Tiny Tim, who in a surprising turn, is revealed to be the zombie-mastermind, in order to save Christmas.

I Am Scrooge is intriguingly ambivalent toward the *Christmas Carol* that spawned it. One can see a kind of comic-book re-enactment of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* at work here. As an undead revenant of *A Christmas Carol* itself, *I Am Scrooge* invests an extraordinary agency in its parent-text: Scrooge himself is the key not only to the survival of the human race, but to its very being: the zombies threaten not only to end the world, but to erase its previous existence. Scrooge's position as the foil to this plan places his Victorian milieu as Ground Zero in the battle to decide if Christmas and humanity *ever were*. At the same time, the world of *A Christmas Carol* is the world that spawns the zombie threat in the first place: Tiny Tim, the boy who DID NOT die, *must* die, violently, to make things right. Scrooge and Tiny Tim, the un-killable icons of *A Christmas Carol*, become the existential poles of *I Am Scrooge*: one must survive to save humanity, and another must be destroyed to achieve the same. *I Am Scrooge*, then, presents the cultural artifact of *A Christmas Carol* as both essential to the survival of Christmas, and as a pernicious influence that, in spawning a zombie pandemic, must be defeated, or, at least, mutilated.

I Am Scrooge, punningly titled after Richard Matheson's seminal 1954 vampire/zombie novel *I Am Legend*, reveals itself to be a kind of zombie while offering a provisional definition of zombies as such. If a zombie differs from a ghost in its relentless materiality, if, in fact, a zombie can be defined as a kind of *anti-ghost* which must feed on spirit itself, couldn't we read *I Am Scrooge* as the textual *corpse* of *A*

Christmas Carol, recognizing the parent-text only as a grisly source of food, a spirit to be incorporated, and extinguished, to keep its own mindless materiality in motion? I don't ask this question to slight *I Am Scrooge*, but rather to point out its potentially revolutionary power: of the thousands of incarnations of *A Christmas Carol*, this is the only one to my mind that actually threatens, and obliquely questions, its source material. At least in part, it suggests that *A Christmas Carol* may no longer be a friendly ghost that haunts our culture, but a breeding ground for soul-less zombies that stalk it.

The question then becomes: if there is a substantial distinction to be made between ghosts and zombies, are zombies an evolutionary step forward in the cultural appreciation and appropriation of *A Christmas Carol's* afterlife? Are Christmas ghosts giving way to Christmas zombies? In other words, is our perennial Victorian Christmas becoming something *different*, something we could conceivably call a Post-modern Christmas?

As this study has hopefully shown, such questions, I think, are not as trivial as they might appear. In October 2011, Slavoj Žižek gave a speech at Liberty Plaza in New York City to a crowd of Occupy Wall Street protesters. In it, he made this observation: "It is easy to imagine the end of the world [...] But you cannot imagine the end of capitalism." "Capitalism" here is to be read as the current dispensation of the Symbolic Order as such, rather than the more localized "invisible hand" caressing the liberal economic order, as those that do not find "capitalism" a dirty word might call it. Either formulation, of course, is a structural fantasy used to interrogate or defend the social, cultural, and economic system we find ourselves in at the dawn of the third millennium, and it is a system that was codified, socially, culturally, and economically, by the

Victorians. Without engaging in a critique of capitalism as such, this study has assumed that the cultural codification of Christmas in the Victorian Age went hand in hand with codifying capitalism, and as such, one could just as easily call the Victorian Christmas explored in these pages the Capitalist Christmas, or at least the most magical and persistent of the cultural expressions of the capitalist age. In this light, Žižek's challenge to imagine the *end* of our own cultural and social moment can also be seen as a challenge for us to see if we can imagine the *end* of our Victorian Christmas, an ancient tradition that dates back to at least 1843. His challenge also asks the fundamental question: why do we *prefer* to imagine our own destruction than that of our cultural institutions? Why, as in *I Am Scrooge*, are we made to take delight in the cannibalistic overthrow of humanity, but feel dread and suspense at the threatened end of Christmas? Put another way, why do our cultural institutions so often ask us to take pleasure in imagining our own destruction: intimately and cozily, as in the Victorian Christmas ghost story, and apocalyptically, as in *I Am Scrooge* and "The Devil's Motor"?

Is it that we simply *cannot* imagine the end of Christmas? We certainly do not like to see it changed. As we have seen, the very formulation of the Victorian Christmas is in part predicated on the notion, or belief, that it has always already been there. And the engine driving so many Christmas narratives is the threat that Christmas will be ruined, cancelled, or extinguished, either by Christmas-haters like Scrooge, The Grinch, or secular liberals who want to replace "Merry Christmas" with "Happy Holidays." We could say that it is easy to imagine a threat to Christmas, but it is impossible to imagine that threat realized. Doesn't the so-called "War on Christmas," as reliable a narrative among the talking heads of cable news come Christmas-time as *Rudolf* and *A Charlie*

Brown Christmas, simply multiply Christmas narratives by reporting on each local Nativity scene under threat from civic atheists, and broadcasting them to television screens nation-wide? As long as we can imagine an insidious intent lurking behind the phrase “Happy Holidays,” the mantra of “Merry Christmas,” even if used only in spite, need never fear extinction.

In a way, Christmas – and capitalism – inoculate themselves from danger by posing the threat of their extinction as the surest safeguard against it. As we have seen, such an inoculation is effective because we have invested enough of ourselves into Christmas to make the threat against it frightening. Christmas, as we all know, is a time for family, that structural unit that offers the primal object in which the subject can invest itself. No more so than when the family is most phantasmic, that is, when it signifies *lack*. As we have seen, the dead, absent father is the father that matters most. Women take on their fullest reality when abstracted into mothers, wives, and ghosts. And children, invested with the power of belief, become immortal ghosts. Christmas, incorporating these Oedipal ghosts into its narrative, becomes the site where culture invests itself: where its ghosts go, as it were. If we can imagine our own deaths before we can imagine the death of Christmas, it is because Christmas has told us that Christmas is where we go when we die: our Christmas ghosts are ourselves, and our best part.

Here then, is what perhaps accounts for the fear the Christmas Ghosts have of zombies in *I Am Scrooge*: they threaten to devour the ghost entire. If the zombies’ flesh-eating is an occasion for gruesome comedy, their threat to “pure ideation” is not. While zombies are akin to ghosts in that they are undead, they are also their negative image: if the ghost is a spirit free of the body, the zombie is a body bereft of spirit. The ghost

safeguards our fantasies, and makes them immortal; the zombie, red in tooth and claw, dismembers our fantasies, limb from limb. Marina Warner, in her evocative, encyclopedic 2006 study of our varied cultural iterations of the spiritual,

Phantasmagoria, offers a compelling reading of the zombie:

Slave culture formed the concept, out of Africa and the Caribbean, to describe the way in which slavery stripped someone of personhood. The invention has since grown to describe individuals in a world of wealth and power that, to say the least, offers each of us a very different horizon of possibilities, yet for all its insistence on choice and access and enablement strategies and empowerment, manages to communicate to many of its members a feeling of numbing and volitionless vacancy. Zombies embody the principal ghostly condition of our time, the successor of waxworks, shades, ghosts, apparitions, and the host of paranormal spirits that have figured the dead in public since the eighteenth-century. (357)

Zombies, then, are the ghosts of late capitalism, perhaps nowhere more potently visualized than in the hordes of undead that haunt the Pittsburgh shopping mall in George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), material manifestations of our sense of agency lost to a "world of wealth and possibilities" that increasingly seems to cater to an ever removed elite. If the ghosts of the nineteenth-century preserved the hopes and fears of a culture at the mercy of industrial capitalism in the form of pleasurable Christmas *frissons*, the zombies of the twenty-first century threaten to literally devour those hopes and fears by their sheer numbers: unlike the eccentric ghost that haunts its house like a fixture or mascot, the zombie induces its shudders by replicating into countless hordes. The Victorian ghost is pure personality; the zombie is pure *meat*, recognizable precisely because it has no personality. As Chris Harmon suggests in his 2009 book, *Zombie Capitalism*, capitalism itself has, especially since the financial implosion of 2008, lost its personality:

[Capitalism has] turned into a machine that dominates the humans that undertake [labor], hurling the world in a direction that few people in their right mind would want. Faced with the financial crisis that began in 2007, some economic commentators did begin to talk of ‘zombie banks’ – financial institutions that were in the ‘undead state’ and incapable of fulfilling any positive function, but representing a threat to everything else. What they do not recognize is that 21st century capitalism as a whole is a zombie system, seemingly dead when it comes to achieving human goals and responding to human feelings, but capable of sudden spurts of activity that cause chaos all around. (11-12)

This hauntological metaphor of the economic as gothic is, I’m sure, not limited to Marxists. One might characterize the Occupy Wall Street’s figuration of the one percent versus the ninety-nine percent in spectral terms: the one percent being, of course, the house-proud ghost; and the faceless ninety-nine percent – represented by masses of unwashed, tent-dwelling protesters – the shiftless, volitionless zombies.

It is in this sense that *I Am Scrooge* represents something of a break with the tradition of *Christmas Carol* adaptations. Here, finally, the ghosts that make our place in the capitalist world endurable are, for all their seeming immortality – for seeming, as Scrooge does in *A Christmas Carol*, to have circumvented death itself – *vulnerable*. If they do not finally imagine the end of Christmas, they do suggest a possibly *different* Christmas. I do not suggest here a Manichean reading of ghosts = conservative capitalism = bad vs. zombies = Marxist proletariat = good. It should be clear that the very idea of zombies – an idea, after all, of a being completely bereft of ideas – is inherently troubling. If the future of Christmas and its ghosts is that of the pathetic, cannibalistic zombie, then – rather like Marxists who proclaim communism or barbarism – we have not imagined much of a future at all. But the fact that our ghosts can evolve, even into such horrific configurations, suggests a post-capitalist future, and a post-

capitalist culture, may be possible to imagine, even if we must wait until the future to be able to imagine it.

I have found in researching this project that it is something of a tradition for scholars investigating Christmas to offer a *mea culpa* for even presuming to interrogate the holiday at all, the presumption being that it is something of a desecration to question how Christmas operates. Having felt that strangely magnetic sense of taboo myself, I will follow tradition here and state that I have no animus against Christmas, nor do I, contrary to what the above might suggest, harbor any desire to *change* Christmas or see it disappear. As one might suppose, I am actually inordinately fond of the holiday – a quality that has made my consistent company with it over the past three years not only bearable, but a pleasure. What to my mind needs changing is not so much Christmas itself, but the very zombie-like way in which we tend to experience it, or rather, not experience it. As perhaps the most aggressively *present* form of localized cultural expression in the history of civilization, Christmas has, as I have argued in the Introduction, a way of making itself not only omnipresent, but seemingly inevitable. Such a sense of inevitability tends to hide its most striking characteristic: its protean expansiveness, its ability to cross cultural boundaries, and to, like capitalism itself, continuously re-territorialize cultural terrain. Christmas is, in short, a global phenomenon that not only affords us an opportunity to explore who we are as an unprecedentedly global culture, but to make contact with that apparently dead culture that helped create us, and continues to haunt us, the Victorians. It is a mistake to write Christmas off as a vulgar expression of capitalist marketing, just as it is a mistake to view it as an ahistorical

expression of divine goodwill. If these narratives inhabit the Christmas we all think we know all too well, they are only a part of a broader and more important narrative: that of a culture trying to come to terms with one of the greatest social, cultural, and intellectual upheavals in history. As industrial capitalism transformed the physical world in ways we are still trying to comprehend, it also produced transformations in our mental landscape we have also yet to come to terms with. Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, and Freud – Victorians all, in their various ways – still define the academic and popular discourse of our time; our attempts to surpass them or replace them only speak to the way they still inhabit and define the way we read our world. The Victorian Christmas, I have argued, is the fantastic narrative we have made for ourselves to deal with the even more fantastic Victorian narratives of capitalism, evolution, and the unconscious. The nineteenth-century, and its specters of Marx, Darwin, et al, foreclosed certain long-held religious and cultural verities. But Christmas, and its equally resilient ghosts, opened new avenues for our hopes and fears with new myths and new truths. If Christmas often seems to us a narrative of banality, full of crass commercialism and crude religiosity, it is only because we are not reading it properly. Rather, we are simply letting it be read *to* us.

I suggest we read Christmas again, and again and again, as it may be, at least until we come to a greater sense of why we need it, and why it haunts us so. We should read it like Scrooge, ghost-haunted and mad – who, if he cannot escape Christmas, can at least be disturbed by it. Christmas does not, in the end, normalize him, it disrupts him. Perhaps Scrooge, as his poor clerk Bob Cratchit suspects, has gone mad. So much the better for him. We are exhilarated by Scrooge for his manic-depressive reading of

Christmas. He reads it, as perhaps all texts should be read, in the crazed way Deleuze and Guattari recommend in their own Oedipal excursion into nuttiness:

For reading a text is never a scholarly exercise in search of what is signified, still less a highly textual exercise in search of a signifier. Rather it is a productive use of the literary machine, a montage of desiring-machines, a schizoid exercise that extracts from the text its revolutionary force. The exclamation 'So it's...!' [...] in an essential relationship with madness. (*Anti-Oedipus* 106)

Perhaps it doesn't matter if the revolution isn't an arrow of progress, but a recursive circle: something has happened to Scrooge, and to us, if we read him attentively.

Christmas has scarred Scrooge, because, appropriately, beneath its pleasing comforts, it has even more pleasingly horrified him. Scrooge's Victorian Christmas in Hell, is, ultimately, the most pleasing of fictions, if only because its fictionality, its textuality, so resolutely defies a "reality" that, as the Victorians discovered to their horror, and as we sometimes find to ours, seems to deny textuality, and demolish fictions. For the reality that opposes the fiction of Christmas is a reality that often seems to offer only a horror beyond the pleasure of horror: a zombified blank that is neither mad nor sane, that recognizes neither Heaven nor Hell.

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