

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 07 | Autumn 2008

Title	Dicken's Haunted Christmas: The Ethics of the Spectral Text
Author	Brad Fruhauff
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	07
Issue Date	Autumn 2008
Publication Date	12/12/2008
Editors	Jack Burton & Jana Funke

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Dickens's Haunted Christmas: The Ethics of the Spectral Text

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Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail. (*Carol* 9)

The famous beginning to perhaps the most famous ghost story in the Anglophone world insists first upon the distinct line between life and death.¹ Marley was dead, and his death had been witnessed by representatives of the religious, legal, social and business worlds—especially the business world, for the almost absolute authority conferred on Scrooge by his economic status (his choice, his hand) is especially emphasized. The categorical and metaphysical differentiation of life and death defines the field in which the following story will unfold. That Marley was dead, we are told, “must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate” (9). There is nothing surprising in a ghost story wishing to establish clear delineations between the worlds of the living and the dead; in fact, the genre requires it and we, as readers, presuppose it. This particular introduction, then, initiates and invites us into the tale's ghostly world, prepares us for its hauntings.

Of course, the question of haunting itself has its own interest, but one might also wonder why a *Christmas* story should be at all haunted. While some connection between Christmas, winter and the supernatural can be traced back through Shakespeare and no doubt beyond, Dickens seems especially interested in the manifestation of ghosts and phantoms at Christmas-time. Indeed, by publishing his own and many others' seasonal ghost stories in his magazines, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, he can be attributed with making the ghost story a sort of Victorian Christmas tradition (Cox xiii). Moreover, in his Christmas tales, Dickens saw no contradiction in combining the Gothic effects of ghost stories with sentimental scenes to present his religio-social message of charity, compassion and communal affection.

What motivates our continued interest in this moral Christmas ghost story? Something about this ghostly narrative haunts us beyond its overt lessons, some force that precisely by exceeding the intelligible moral enables and refreshes it, something that compels us to repeat the

tale in movies, stage productions and public readings. This essay will investigate this haunting force by considering *A Christmas Carol* in light of both Julian Wolfreys's (Derridean) 'hauntology' and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the other. By resituating Derridean specters with respect to the Levinasian other, I will argue that the other can become a kind of Gothic specter who haunts the modern self, creating not only a metaphysical disturbance but an ethical one. Within this ethical dis-ease, the sentimental becomes for Dickens the other side of the Gothic, an ethical responsiveness to the other rather than fear.

The ghostly or spectral haunts thought. That is, if thought consists in the correspondence of idea to referent, then the ghost is that idea which exceeds or escapes the complacency of such a knowledge. Julian Wolfreys explains that the ghostly, the "spectral," is a "concept without a concept," neither alive nor dead but holding a position between those ontological categories by its negation of both (x). As the between or beyond of the concept, Wolfreys suggests that it operates in the same way as iterability, meaning that, as Derrida puts it, the spectral "marks both the possibility and the limit of all idealization and hence of all conceptualization" (*Limited* 118). Ghosts and hauntings indicate an unseen realm beyond our knowledge, which we sense our knowledge can never discover in part because our systems of reasoning inevitably create it—a realm which, as only ever quasi-conceptual, exceeds even our theorization of it.

As such, we could seek out the spectral in any field of inquiry, but our interest is of course in the spectral quality of texts. Wolfreys draws attention to the way in which reading activates or invigorates the text; calling up voices of the past, reading wakes the dead, as it were. Texts mediate past and present, present and absent, and material and ideal, in uncertain ways that disturb the repose of the self-identical modern subject. That is, the ego of the cogito may be defined (at least potentially) by its ability to appropriate the world through thought, understanding—what Emmanuel Levinas calls the "identification of the Same" (Peperzak 92). Reading is one manner in which something other breaks in on this sameness. Wolfreys explains that "what reading does in effect is to bear witness to the existence of something other, which is neither 'read into' the text nor of the text itself in any simple fashion" (xiii). Reading establishes a relationship between the material and the ideal that opens me to something that is both me and not me. It is so familiar a process that we overlook its strangeness, but all texts, in this sense, are haunted, because all reading opens the self to the disturbance of the other.

But can we not, in this sense, also say that all texts are *ethical*? For Levinas, the ethical,

like the spectral, indicates a relation with an other for whom we have no adequate concept. Rather than a quasi-concept, however, it is a quasi-phenomenon. That is, the ethical describes the encounter of one-before-the-other through the obligating expression of the other's face. Expression "consists, prior to any participation in a common content through understanding, in instituting sociality through a relationship that is, consequently, irreducible to understanding" – that is, it exceeds knowledge and founds sociality (*Entre* 7). To an ego jealous of its self-sufficiency, i.e. the modern ego, a phenomenon that resists understanding (and is therefore no proper phenomenon) might very well be haunting or terrifying. The face resists understanding because expression "opens the very dimension of the infinite"—another concept without a concept; the face exposes me to what is absolutely exterior and other, to what puts my freedom into question even as it relates me to another in language (Peperzak 110; 115). It puts my freedom into question because this language, this sociality, is not the reciprocal affection established among friends or a contract formed among colleagues, but the response to a facing that "summons me, demands me, claims me: as if the invisible death faced by the face of the other...were 'my business'" (*Entre* 145). The "invisible death" of the other haunts the expression of the face, and this is as much an ethical event as a metaphysical or phenomenological one; the 'logos'—name, or word—for this event is "You shall not kill" (Peperzak 109).

A text is not another person, but a text's spectrality means it is not quite *not* a person. To recall Wolfreys, in reading a text we 'bear witness' to something other, to a presence that marks an absence that we constantly invoke and reanimate—as when we speak of the text in terms of its author. But the textual other is uniquely situated. Again, we experience textuality as more than the particular material publication we are reading and yet as inextricable from it, an interchange and a blurring of the psychical and the material (Wolfreys xi, xiii). In reading, I think thoughts that are not my own, or another thinks them through my beckoning—my consciousness "behaves as though it were the consciousness of another" (Poulet 1322). Within me, (re)animated by me, the text takes on an infinite character, as we recognize when we speak of the ways texts, as Shoshana Felman puts it, "exceed the knowledge of their speaking (writing) subjects" (Felman 21).

The textual other, neither myself nor fully exterior to me, neither fully a person nor fully impersonal, haunts the distance between material and thought and generates the ethical force of narrative itself—it calls me out of myself and opens me to the identifications and sympathies

with the other that the text invites and requires. But it is at the same time nearly as haunted by its own death, its erasure or defacement, as the face of the other,² and there is a similar call to responsibility for it—not to any naïve ‘letting it speak for itself’ but to an address or attention that seeks understanding prior to any judgments regarding it. Our fidelity to this responsibility unfolds precisely from the text’s spectrality, from the excess that the textual other offers us as an inheritance which at the same time claims us (cf. Castricano 10). The profound weight of this responsibility is a sort of curse familiar to anyone who has ever ventured, for example, to write a dissertation—he anxiety to become expert in everything before claiming anything.

I invoke the curse to bring us back to the Gothic and to Dickens’s logic of haunting. Haunting, as we have seen, concerns the unsettling of a self by an other exceeding conceptualization, and the Gothic can be read as preeminently concerned with this spectral disturbance and variously committed to containing, disciplining or playing with it. Dickens, especially in his Christmas stories, deploys the Gothic to trouble selves otherwise closed off from others; he thus subjects his characters to hauntings that divide them from themselves not in favor of an ultimate unity of self but for an orientation of care for the other, of a responsibility that carries the weight of the whole world (joyfully!) in its fathomless desire to bless others.

Christmas, the celebration of the Christian event of incarnation, is in fact an ideal ‘holy day’ for Dickens’s ethical hauntings. Christmas marks the entry of the infinite into the finite, the paradoxical humbling or humiliation of the Almighty in the form of a baby, boundless love expressed in exquisite particularity. It invokes the metaphysical presence of the divine within the human, an unthinkable union that we nonetheless enjoin one another to recognize, for a few weeks each year, by shows of affection and generosity—i.e. by ethical responses. Levinas, though not a Christian thinker himself, acknowledges this meeting of the divine in the worldly from the ‘other side’ of the relation. “In the other”, he claims, “there is a real presence of God. In my relation to the other, I hear the Word of God” (*Entre* 110). Dickens’s observance of Christianity emphasizes this practical and social obligation. He ends *The Life of Our Lord*, a paraphrase of the life of Jesus written for his children, with the admonition: “Remember!—It is Christianity TO DO GOOD, always—even to those who do evil to us. It is Christianity to love our neighbors as ourself [*sic*], and to do to all men as we would have them do to us. It is Christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving” (*Life* 122). In his Christmas ghost stories, Dickens capitalizes on this element of Christian doctrine in which a mysterious metaphysical event is

inextricably entwined with the profound ethical responsibility captured in Christ's admonition to 'love thy neighbor'.

This responsibility underlies the sentimental impulse that works hand-in-glove with the Gothic throughout *A Christmas Carol*. As theorized in the eighteenth century, the sentimental subject was at home with himself as a Cartesian self-sufficient ego, but oriented toward society through his capacity for sympathy. Dickens, ever the impetuous critic of institutions and systems, understood that sympathy, rooted in the individual, is in danger of being obscured or oppressed by the generalizing forces of the 'rational' modern world. Scrooge represents the misanthropic results of devotion to one such rational system: capitalist profit-mongering. Subjected to an evening of hauntings, the terrorized Scrooge, split or fragmented from himself, witnesses scenes of love and tenderness and finds that peace and at-homeness do not reside in a self-sufficient isolation but in a kind of active, almost anxious, responsibility. Sentimental sympathy here leads not to a mawkish purity but to a childlike fullness and generosity of spirit—a return to what Elliot L. Gilbert calls a "metaphysical innocence", Dickens's belief in a positive, stable, "substantial presence", a kind of grace that permanently marks our humanity and that, unlike the innocence of ignorance or inexperience, cannot be lost (24).

Ghosts and doubles and other Gothic devices invoke and initiate a kind of fragmentation of the reader, too, through their spectral anarchy. In the nineteenth century, the Gothic often manifests in fiction as

a somewhat unpredictable tropological play; or [...] an irreversible displacement from the tropological [...] to the performative, a disturbing iterability the singular events of which announce a somewhat lawless relation so the laws of a system which they exceed. (Wolfreys 7)

We can find this anarchy in Dickens's ghosts, whose appearance is never fully explained and follows no pattern and thus 'mocks' the organizing process of reading. The Ghost of Christmas Past is both old and young, fades in and out, and bears symbols of both summer and winter; it appears as an allegory of Christmas, surely, but more specifically, of the *memory* of Christmas, and it shows Scrooge only his own memories, his own past. The Ghost of Christmas Present, by contrast, is all jollity and plenty and stands in for Christmas itself, with no relationship to Scrooge at all—Scrooge even admits that he had never seen its like before (*Carol* 44). It shows Scrooge a great many scenes that have nothing to do with him, but which he is to understand have very much to do with him. Finally, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come betokens nothing

to do with Christmas or the future as a phenomenological experience but represents very specifically Scrooge's future—at least, we don't believe that Dickens imagined *our* future Christmases shrouded in a black cloak and filling us with dread. So, though all three be the spirits of Christmas, none are related to each other by any principle beyond their mission to Scrooge, and yet they are simultaneously independent of him even as they are intimately bound to him. If these spirits come from the same spirit world (the same as Marley's ghost's, too?), then the spirit world is a far stranger place than the stories of angels and demons would have it. But, then, this is not a story *about* the spirit world in any (supernaturally) mimetic sense; the spirits serve to disturb, both within and without the text, the physical world's presumptions to an intelligibility that would confer power—an intelligibility that Scrooge believes capital gives him, and that we often believe reading gives us.³

This is the basic structure of *A Christmas Carol*. The spirits alienate Scrooge from his existential moorings in space and time so they might show him both himself and others in a sentimental light. The mechanism, as Audrey Jaffe points out, is one of "spectatorship" (Jaffe 327). Spectatorship is fundamental to the sentimental structure as developed by philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith; for instance, to sympathize with, pity or share in the joy of another, says Smith, requires that one be an "attentive spectator" (13). By an act of imagination, one can "enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them" (12). Though he eventually goes on to posit other faculties in the mind that mediate this sympathetic exchange by the impersonal light of reason (cf. Armstrong 13ff.), it is worth noting that his first discussion of imaginative sympathy involves a kind of possession of the other which is ambiguous; should we understand 'to become the same person' with the other as to lose one's selfhood to the other's, or to take the other's into oneself, or to form some sort of plural subject within a single body? The path the emotions travel on the imagination is always potentially disruptive and disturbing; this is why Scrooge tries at first to attribute Marley's appearance to indigestion (*Carol* 21). But in Dickens, spectacle often overcomes any impersonal, rational adjudication of the emotions—in response to Scrooge's argumentativeness, Marley's ghost "raised a frightful cry, and shook its chains with such a dismal and appalling noise, that Scrooge held on tight to his chair, to save himself from falling in a swoon" (22).

Scrooge's status as spectator to himself also literalizes (within the spectral economy of the text) the fragmentation of himself that his utilitarian, anti-Christmas logic obscures. In his exchanges with his nephew, Fred, his own logic is easily turned back upon him:

“What reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough.”

“Come, then,” returned the nephew gaily...“What reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough.” (11)

But despite this defeat of his own irrationality, he does not budge from the convictions with which he begins. To this extent he appears at home with, or at least committed to, himself and his 'philosophy', however miserable it makes him. It is the task of the spirits to invade this at-homeness and turn it outward, to awaken Scrooge to the claims of sympathy and responsibility. The Ghost of Christmas Past, for instance, reconnects him with a history he has neglected in his devotion to his business. Through the spirit's agency Scrooge is transported out of his own home and to the place and time of his childhood. In no time at all the sights and smells of the old village and his old school grounds and of his young self, left alone over the holiday, “fell upon the heart of Scrooge with a softening influence, and gave a freer passage to his tears” (31). By physically inhabiting his memories from a position of one removed, Scrooge experiences an emotional release not unlike a regression back to his childish self. The process continues with his sister, his old boss, his fellow clerk and at last his fiancée. The act of imagination required to sympathize with himself is not nearly so great as that required to sympathize with another, for, of course, he is aided precisely by his memories. But his 'reclamation' requires not only that he recover these memories but that they come to productively haunt his psyche.⁴ In his role as spectator, Scrooge experiences a vivid repetition and re-narration of both past troubles and joys. That he already begins to learn what is necessary is evident in the way he defends Fezziwig against the spirit's ironically proffered complaints of waste and excess, or the way he begins to think of people he has wronged and to wish he had acted more charitably toward them.

Through the vehicle of spectatorship, Scrooge also mediates the reader's response to the same spectacles. As spectator, Scrooge replicates within the text a position the reader experiences but never actually has with respect to it. That is, when we read we seem in our imaginations to be viewing a scene, but in fact we are forming the scene via the oftentimes minimal guidance of the text. Dickens uses spectatorship here to offer a position of identification within the text that is somewhere between agent and observer, a textual agent whose relation to the spectacle fruitfully interacts with our own position.⁵ Hence, in Scrooge's

case, his response helps us understand the memories and thus to respond ourselves, which in turn allows us to adjudge the adequacy of Scrooge's response.

Of course, even without Scrooge's presence, Dickens represents these characters as sympathetic and likable in themselves, so that we increasingly find ourselves in a position to approve of Scrooge's softening demeanor with respect not only to itself but to its causes. This duality of response in the reader corresponds to yet another feature of textual spectrality which spectatorship uniquely amplifies. Derrida says of this dimension, "when the very *first* perception of an image is linked to a structure of reproduction, then we are dealing with the realm of phantoms" ("Ghost Dance" 61). As reproductions, texts displace their origins so that our 'original' experience or our experience of the material book as origin of the spectral text is never original (Wolfreys 2). So, too, we encounter Scrooge's memories for the first time *as* memories, as original images that refer to an original past to which we have no access but that structures the possibility of the representation we witness. Again, Dickens's Gothic structure of spectatorship doubles up the spectrality of the text; we as readers are left at best with the desire for a return like Scrooge's which we also know we can never have.

This desire, significantly, is a desire for the other—in this case a textual other, but through the text's spectrality that blurs boundaries we might trace a path that would extend this, back through this essay's opening discussion, to an ethical desire to serve another person. In reading we bear witness to something other. The other, if it is truly other, is exteriority, beyond the grasp of our thought or will, like the spectral text between our minds and the material book. The other, in the realm of the infinite, is that onto which the face of the other opens us. Christmas, furthermore, celebrates an event of the infinite entering the finite, an event that culminates in a new relation to the other. Levinas describes such an event as intrinsically ethical:

The infinite in the finite, the more in the less, which is accomplished by the idea of Infinity, is produced as Desire—not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies. A Desire perfectly disinterested—goodness. (*Totality* 50)

The text as a spectral infinite is always near the other who bears the idea of Infinity and thus to this Desire for the other and for goodness. And for Dickens, a Christmas text is especially close to this Desire. Through doubling Scrooge upon himself, and doubling the reader's identifications with a character as agent and observer, and through the spectral reproduction of images whose origins are uncannily displaced, Dickens's text maintains a continual state of splitting and

slipping away that is not an infinite regression but a tension that repeatedly makes itself felt, that stirs within us the desire precisely for this tension, this orientation toward the other that connects through a care and responsibility that is never fulfilled. Hauntings allow Dickens to push the commandment to love one's neighbor beyond duty to a positive motivation.

The scenes shown to Scrooge contain the seeds for cultivating this care. The sentimentalism of the scenes measures Scrooge's past behavior and present reactions and guides our own judgments. Scrooge's response to Christmas in the Cratchits' home, in the company of the Ghost of Christmas Present, demonstrates this well. Having replayed, through sympathetic spectacle, the memories of his past and thus having rediscovered his own affective life, i.e. a life responsive to others, Scrooge finds himself concerned with the humble celebration of his clerk's family, and especially with the fate of Tiny Tim. "If he be like to die", the spirit tells him, resurrecting Scrooge's own poisonous words, "he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population". The spirit expounds further on this theme: "forbear that wicked cant until you have discovered What the surplus is, and Where it is" (52). Through sympathy (rather than an immediate face to face encounter) Scrooge discovers that an abstraction, 'the population,' consists of irreducible others whose lives—and *deaths*—concern him. This is the beginning of *love* in the sense Levinas gives it when he says,

it is not my nonbeing that causes anxiety, but that of the loved one or of the other, more beloved than my being. What we call, by a somewhat corrupted term, love, is *par excellence* the fact that the death of the other affects me more than my own. (*God* 105)

Love is an ethical-metaphysical relation following upon infinite Desire—a response to and that assumes responsibility for, the other. Tiny Tim focuses this desire poignantly for Scrooge, so that at the book's end, he not only sees to the child's survival but continues to invest in him, becoming "a second father" to him (*Carol* 83).

In this context, the terror Scrooge experiences over discovering his tombstone is not that of his own death—it should be no great surprise to him that, in some distant future to which a gloomy spirit might take him, he should be dead—but that his death should be in such isolation from human society and sympathy. Scrooge witnesses a dead man's servants and undertaker cynically selling off goods stolen from the house and from the man's body, hears fellow businessmen speak cynically and unfeelingly about his passing, and after his previous two visitations feels these scenes deeply. "Spirit," he says, "I see, I see. The case of this unhappy

man might be my own. My life tends that way, now,” and he asks to be shown “any person in this town, who feels *emotion* caused by this man’s death” (69, 71; emphasis added).

Levinas, commenting on Ernst Bloch, notes that the fear of death, as the death of the other, “is the fear of leaving a work unfinished, and thus of not having lived”—this work being that of responsibility itself (*God* 100). Scrooge’s fear is not of death, exactly, but of dying without having the redemptive opportunity to turn his life outward toward the other as the spirits have taught him. Ethically, the scene recalls the encounter with Marley’s ghost in which Scrooge sees the city streets “filled with phantoms” moaning and wailing. “The misery with them all was”, Dickens writes, “that they sought to intervene for good, in human matters, and had lost the power for ever” (26). This early scene casts death as non-life, i.e. the radical frustration of ethical Desire, of goodness, of what makes life *human*, just as the later scene figures that death as Scrooge’s own. What haunts Christmas most of all in the *Carol* is the individual’s failure to live the Christmas ‘message’ of kindness, love and generosity toward the other—the fragility of the ethical, which remains absolute.

The Ghost’s profound silence, its dreadfully minimal gestures and its rebuff of Scrooge’s prayer that there is hope, amplify the haunting quality of the narrative for the reader as well. The scenes, disturbing in themselves, make Scrooge desperate as his anxious desire to find some positive or tender emotion connected to the man’s death is frustrated and even mocked. Through Scrooge’s increasing affective responsiveness we perceive the kernel of his remaining humanity and, over the course of the narrative, develop a sympathetic identification with him that makes us invested in his salvation, which is always in question upon each reading as Scrooge himself always desperately prays that it may be possible.

Of course, that he may be saved is precisely the point of the spirits’ haunting, and the fact that they accomplish their work in the space of a single evening reassures Scrooge, who receives that time back as a second chance—not a chance to re-live the previous day’s moments differently, but to amend and heal the wounds that decades of miserable miserliness have created. The book then becomes a series of comic effusions as Scrooge, having recovered his metaphysical innocence, systematically encounters his nephew, the charity gentlemen, and his clerk, and invites them into a circle of affection of which he has discovered himself necessarily the center. He does not demand affection from others, but takes it upon himself to give it freely. The sentimental excesses counteract the Gothic terrors even as they share a common source and

purpose.

It is important, here, not to reflexively reduce the sentimental to domestication or complacency—such things exert no ethical power and cannot explain the persistent intrigue of this particular narrative over time for diverse audiences. Sentimental excess here motivates and is motivated by *hope*—a utopian hope insofar as it is a hope in a future that is not determined by death but by our unfinished projects of care (cf. *God* 98ff). Hope, we might even say, ‘haunts’ the sentimental emotion that exceeds the narrative closure of the *Carol*’s ‘happily ever after’ ending, for hope is the condition for a response to the other that is neither coercion nor begrudging and yet is an ineluctable duty that is never fulfilled. It is the anxiety of a work we undertake while knowing that it is “not proportionate to utopia” (*Carol* 100).

From the non-concept that haunts thought to the other that haunts the self, the spectral confronts us with what is other. In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens employs a spectral logic of Gothic disturbance and sentimental excess that directs the reader toward sympathy and responsibility for the other. The Gothic, in his hands, becomes the terror of the infinite breaking open the ego in its illusion of self-sufficiency, and then the terror of recognizing the other too late, of losing the capacity to respond to the other. The excess of sentimental emotion, on the other hand, overflows the ego’s instinctual guardedness and binds it to the other in a Desire for the infinite, in a love for goodness, a concern for the other’s death. Christmas is haunted for Dickens because the Christian event of the unintelligible infinite manifesting itself within the finite disturbs us out of our ego-enclosure. Christmas, for Dickens, guides us to discover the presence of God in the face of the other, to “hear the Word of God” (Levinas) that, haunting the face, calls us each in our particularity into a society of ethical responsibility that continues to be haunted by the other’s death as the death of something infinite and divine.

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- ¹ I hope it is not false modesty to include this 'perhaps', nor otherwise presumptuous to make this claim. In fact, I can think of no other ghosts as famous as the *Carol's*, save perhaps Hamlet's, which, indeed, Dickens explicitly refers to in the fifth paragraph both to anticipate Marley's ghost and to lend literary weight and precedence to the narrative.
- ² The distinction, for Levinas, between a text and a person cannot, perhaps, be overstated, if only because of the way the Holocaust haunts his thought on ethics and responsibility. The ethical relationship to a text is at least analogous to, but at best derivative of, the face to face ethical encounter with another person.
- ³ Cf. Levinas: "Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power" (*Totality* 46).
- ⁴ The spirit says its business is Scrooge's "welfare", but acknowledging Scrooge's doubts whether "a night of unbroken rest would have been more conducive to that end", the spirit substitutes "reclamation" (29).
- ⁵ Dickens, like Shakespeare, often employs spectators and eavesdroppers, and, in each case, their presence complicates the affective response to the usually highly-emotional scene overlooked.