

Ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*: A Japanese View

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My aim in this article is to examine *A Christmas Carol* from a Japanese point of view; first, very broadly in terms of its reception in Japan, and second, more specifically in terms of Dickens's presentation of the ghosts in the story. Since Scrooge's lesson in the *Carol* is initiated by his trip back to the past, it may be appropriate for us to start with a moment of retrospection into the Japan of approximately one hundred years ago. The scene we visit is a classroom in Tokyo University, which is, unlike that of the young Scrooge, packed with eager Japanese students. In front of them, at the lectern, stands Lafcadio Hearn, discoursing upon Dickens in his lecture series on the history of English literature. Defining Dickens as a gentle caricaturist, a painter of middle class life, Hearn says:

[N]o more healthy, joyous, good moral books, were ever contributed to the literature of fiction than the novels of Dickens. Nevertheless I must tell you that they are not to be recommended in a general way to Japanese students. On the contrary I should advise you to read very little of Dickens for the present. Dickens can only be properly understood by a person who has lived a long time in England, and lived there from childhood. . . . I doubt extremely whether you could find any charm in his whimsical English middle-class life. It was for some time a custom to read "The Cricket on the Hearth" in Japanese schools; but I doubt whether a worse choice could have been made for the sake of Japanese students. Simple as the story appears to an English mind, it is utterly impossible for a Japanese student to understand it. No matter how much it may be explained, every paragraph in that little story treats of matters which do not exist in this country; even the picture of an English kitchen cannot be understood unless you have seen the real thing.¹

Looking back at what he said, we cannot help feeling that circumstances have greatly changed since. (Hearn taught at Tokyo University between 1896 and 1903.) Things English are everywhere in Japan now. It is

not difficult to find Twining's tea and Wedgwood teacups in a Japanese kitchen! In some ways, the distance that separates Dickens from us Japanese seems to be a great deal shorter than it used to be.

A Christmas Carol (known in Japan as 'Kurisumasu Kyaroru' — we almost get it right, don't we?) is, to the Japanese, one of the most famous works of English literature, possibly in the same league with *Hamlet*, and its translation has a long and rich history. Roughly speaking, the translation of Western literature started one hundred and twenty years ago. Before that our country had been very much closed to the Western world. In Japanese history, there was what is called the Meiji Restoration in 1868, which marked the end of the feudal society, a structure dominated by Samurai lords, with the Shogun at the top of them. At the beginning of the Meiji period, they were eager to introduce what they thought were enlightened and advanced Western ideas. As part of this, a number of works of literature were translated, including some English novels, most notably those by Bulwer-Lytton (*Ernest Maltravers* and *Alice* in 1878, *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1879, *Rienzi* and *Kenelm Chillingly* in 1885), and by Disraeli (*Coningsby* in 1884, *Endymion* in 1886, *Vivian Grey* in 1887). It must be added, though, that some of these novels were drastically abbreviated.

In those days many of the translations appeared in journals and magazines. In the case of Dickens, they began with some of the papers from *Sketches by Boz*. 'The Contradictory Couple' in 1882, 'The Steam Excursion' in 1886, and 'The Black Veil' in 1893. Translations of the full-length novels started later, in the 1920s. As for *A Christmas Carol*, an adaptation set in contemporary Japan with characters' names changed to Japanese ones came out in book form in 1888. Later, in 1902, a complete translation appeared.² (This is roughly when Lafcadio Hearn was lecturing.) Up to the present, there have been approximately thirty translations, with four or five currently in print.³ Simply in terms of the number of translations done, in the entire range of foreign literature, the *Carol* must be very close to the top of our list. Quite why there have been so many translations I do not pretend to know. Surely it is not that improvement was necessary every time. Perhaps what happened was that the demand was always there, and that when one translation went out of print, another publisher stepped in with a new one. At any rate, this brief survey of the translations will testify to the *Carol*'s lasting popularity among the Japanese.

Leaving aside an embarrassing question — why is the *Carol* so popular with the Japanese? (to which I can only answer 'why not?') — I should like to

move on to my second main topic, a consideration of the *Carol* as a ghost story, in comparison with those of Japan.

I started with Lafcadio Hearn. An interesting thing about him is that he took a great interest in Japanese ghost stories. In 1904 he published a famous collection of his retellings of Japanese ghost stories called *Kwaidan*, which means 'weird story', or more broadly 'ghost story'. Curiously, however, in his lecture on Dickens there is no mention of the *Carol*, nor in any of his writing was I able to find a serious discussion of Dickens's use of ghosts. Equally curiously, rather than the *Cricket*, he recommends 'Mugby Junction' — 'the wonderful railroad stories' which 'could be tolerably well understood by any one familiar with railroad life'⁴ — but does not mention that haunting story, 'The Signalman'. Although Hearn's collection, *Kwaidan*, contains a variety of Japanese ghost stories, I believe he was most attracted by the powerful, passionate relationship that obtains between the haunter and the haunted, whether it be of hatred, love, or friendship. Perhaps it is because he could not find this that Hearn did not take much interest in Dickens's ghost stories.

Here is a very rough sketch of Japanese ghost stories. The typical Japanese ghost appears with the hands poised in the manner shown in the illustrations, saying 'Urameshiya', which means 'I bear a grudge against you'. This sounds rather matter-of-fact in English, but it is effective in Japanese. Ghosts are supposed to appear in this world because they want revenge. Of course there are exceptions, as in some of the famous *No* plays, where ghosts appear and solicit the attention of, for example, travelling Buddhist monks, and ask them to purify their souls so that they can go to heaven (or the equivalent). Notice, in this case, that it does not matter to whom ghosts appear. As long as their wish is granted, it does not make any difference. They usually appear at a certain place, and grab whoever is passing by, and if they are lucky, they come across a trained monk who can save them. Ghosts of this kind, however, are a minority; the majority are the ones who bear a specific grudge against specific people. A ghost who appears in order to save somebody, as Marley does, is rather unusual.

In Japanese studies of ghosts, a distinction is sometimes made between what we call 'Yu-rei' and 'Yo-kwai'. Let us adopt, for the occasion, the terms 'haunting humans' and 'strange creatures', to correspond to this distinction. 'Yu-rei' or 'haunting humans' are former human beings (and appear more or less as they used to be), whereas 'Yokwai' or 'strange creatures' are

not (though some of them might assume human-like forms). To apply this to the *Carol*, we have Marley on the one hand, and the three Spirits of Christmas on the other. The former, Marley, is in my terminology a 'haunting human', and the latter are strange creatures'. Although Dickens does not differentiate between them, using the words 'ghost' and 'spirit' interchangeably, he refers to Marley and the Christmas Spirits both as 'ghosts' and 'spirits' — I think it is useful to make a distinction, because it enables us to see more clearly the twofold structure of Scrooge's change of heart. The first stage is where Marley, the 'haunting human', appears, offering the chance of salvation. Scrooge, though strongly disturbed by it, does not fully grasp the importance of this event. The second stage is where we have the Spirits, the 'strange creatures', and this is where the conversion really starts.

I shall come back to this question of ghost-types later. First, I should like to examine certain aspects of the language of the *Carol*, which, as I hope to show, have an important bearing upon Dickens's idea of ghosts in this story.

The *Carol* opens with the narrator's humorous musing on the simile of 'dead as a doornail' (p. 45).⁵ Verbal jokes of this kind are found throughout the text, such as '[the rain and snow] often "came down" handsomely, and Scrooge never did' (p.46); 'Scrooge had often heard it said that Marley had no bowels, but he had never believed it until now' (p.57), and so on. I believe they are important: they are not just frivolous jokes. They reflect Dickens's sheer joy in handling words, but at the same time, I suggest, they derive from the author's deep and serious engagement with his medium. These jokes might be regarded as an expression of the studied care that Dickens has brought into the telling of this story. For example, throughout the story, Scrooge is carefully defined with the metaphors of 'hand'⁶: 'Oh! but he was a tight-fisted *hand* at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!' (p. 46). The Ghost of Christmas Past says to Scrooge, 'What!... would you so soon put out, with worldly *hands*, the light I give?' (p.69). Even at the very beginning, we are told that 'Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change for anything he chose to put his *hand* to' (p.45). (Italics are all mine.)

Discussing Dickens's use of 'moral double' in the change of heart in his novels, Barbara Hardy observes that the 'ghosts are not only aspects of Christmas, but in part at least aspects of Scrooge'.⁷ It is interesting to consider, in the light of this comment, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, whose black garment 'concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save

one outstretched *hand* (p.110: my italics). This ghost is nothing but a hand, as it were. This, then, is a reflection of the Scrooge Yet to Come, when only his covetous hand remains in existence. Hardy's point is important, and I should like to relate it to the examination of the twofold structure of Scrooge's change of heart.

Scrooge is not totally shaken by Marley, at the first stage of his conversion. He can crack a joke like 'There's more of gravy than of grave about you' (p.59). He can also make a rebuttal: 'Don't be flowery, Jacob' (p. 63). This kind of comic defiance is still maintained at the beginning of Stave II. I now quote the relevant passage at some length, inserting comments:

[Scrooge] then made bold to inquire what business brought him there. 'Your welfare!' said the Ghost. Scrooge expressed himself much obliged, but could not help thinking that a night of unbroken rest would have been more conducive to that end. [A kind of subtly comic defiance here.] The Spirit must have heard him thinking for it said immediately: 'Your reclamation, then. Take heed!' It put out its strong *hand* as it spoke, and clasped him gently by the arm. [Notice the reference to the 'hand'.] 'Rise and walk with me.' It would have been in vain for Scrooge to plead that the weather and the hour were not adapted to pedestrian purposes. [Another (indirect) suggestion of comic resistance.]. . . The grasp, though gentle as a woman's hand, was not to be resisted. He rose: but finding that the Spirit made towards the window, *clasped* its robe in supplication. 'I am a mortal' Scrooge remonstrated, 'and liable to fall.' [Still a joke is possible.] 'Bear but a touch of my *hand* there,' said the Spirit, laying it upon his heart, 'and you shall be upheld in more than this!' (pp. 69-70: my italics).

This is the crucial turning point in the story. With this, they move back into the past, and there's no defiance on Scrooge's part any longer. The Spirit lays its hand upon Scrooge's heart. In the light of Hardy's observation, this can be seen as Scrooge examining his own heart himself, and this is the precise beginning of the second stage of his change of heart.

And when does this process end? At the end of Stave IV, where Scrooge begs the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come to let him sponge away the

writing on his own gravestone:

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 a last prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost. (p.126: my italics).

Dickens thus rounds off Scrooge's change of heart, with various references to the 'hands'. Having now established the nature of the twofold structure and its verbal pattern, let us go back to the ghosts, the agents in the process of Scrooge's conversion, bearing in mind the distinction between 'Yu-rei' and 'Yo-kwai'.

Graham Holderness once complained that not much attention had been paid to the problem of 'ghosts' in *Carol* criticism.⁸ His own argument, however, only deals with the 'Spirits' of Christmas. He does not discuss the 'haunting human', Marley, at all. This, it seems to me, is a strange omission, but I think I can understand why it happens. As we have observed, Scrooge's conversion starts in earnest with the Christmas Spirits: the twofold structure of the story does seem to indicate that in Dickens's imagination the Spirits are more important than Marley in the process of Scrooge's change of heart. It is worth while considering this implied gradation, or distinction.

In Stave II, the narrator says, addressing the reader directly, that the Spirit of Christmas Past stands as close to Scrooge, 'as I am now to you, and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow' (p. 68). Holderness emphasises the importance of this identification of the narrative voice with the Spirit of Christmas, in relation to the saving power of Imagination. It is indeed important, I agree, but I also wish to draw attention to the fact that the identification is made at this particular juncture, with the Christmas Spirit in Stave II, and not with Marley's ghost in Stave I.

As I have said, Dickens seems to use the words 'ghosts' and 'spirits' interchangeably. And yet, consider the chapter headings: Stave I 'Marley's Ghost', Stave II 'The First of the Three Spirits', Stave III 'The Second of the Three Spirits', and Stave IV 'The Last of the Spirits'. It appears that Dickens does make a distinction of some sort, and I wonder if this may not be reflected

in the narrator's identification with the Spirit, rather than with Marley's ghost.

We have seen how Dickens carefully marks the beginning and the end of Scrooge's conversion with references to the 'hands' of the Christmas Spirits. I am now coming to the main point of this essay: compared with the kind of involvement observed in the presentation of the Christmas Spirits, I find Dickens's creative engagement with Marley rather feeble. True, Marley is in a way conceived as Scrooge's 'double': we are told that they are 'two kindred spirits' (p.50), and that the people new to the business call Scrooge Marley. But I do not think this is worked out as convincingly as Scrooge's encounter with the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come, with its hand. There is no comparable intensity.

Or consider this: in a remarkable scene, Marley shows Scrooge various ghosts who try unsuccessfully to help the people in this world. This is their punishment, Marley says. They want to help, but they can't. 'The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power for ever,' we are told (p. 65). A question, however, arises here: why, then, can Marley intervene in Scrooge's fate when others can't? Dickens does not explain. Marley just says to Scrooge, 'How it is that I appear before you in a shape that you can see, I may not tell' (p.63). I suspect that Dickens is fudging here, and it does seem to betray a somewhat weak imaginative hold on Dickens's part where Marley is concerned.

I may be being too scrupulous, and the reason for this is that I feel a little sorry for Marley. One assumes that, having saved Scrooge, Marley finally makes it to Heaven, but Dickens does not explicitly say so. In Japanese ghost stories, at the end, having achieved their purpose, ghosts are made to disappear from this world and rest in peace. It is true that this may not always be explicitly stated, but, as I have said, an instance like Marley, who tries to save someone, strikes us Japanese as unusual. This makes me pity him all the more, and at the same time makes me wonder why Dickens does not spare some more words for Marley at the end: a simple sentence, such as 'Later on, every Christmas Scrooge thought of Marley', or something of this nature. (Of course Dickens would have done better.) However, '[Scrooge] had no further intercourse with Spirits' (p.134) is all Dickens tells us. It might be argued that Dickens must include Marley as well when he talks about Spirits here. Half of me agrees with this view, but the other half keeps on wondering exactly where Marley stands in the picture evoked by this particular phrasing, given the

implied distinction I have pointed out between Marley's ghost and the Christmas Spirits. For there is something dubious, something uncertain about this closing joke of the 'Total Abstinence Principle' (p. 134). Although it is structurally coherent that the *Carol*, having started with one, should end with a verbal joke, Dickens is here actually recycling the same joke he used previously in the story about Gabriel Grub in *The Pickwick Papers* (ch. 29, 'The Story of the Goblins who stole a Sexton'): '[I]et the spirits be ever so good, or let them be even as many degrees beyond proof, as those which Gabriel Grub saw, in the goblin's cavern.'⁹ There it was a good joke, because Grub had a drinking problem, but here in the *Carol* it is rather off the mark, since Scrooge is no drinker. The feebleness of this joke is the more disappointing if one regards, as I do, jokes of this kind as crucial components of the story. Although Michael Slater, in a splendid piece on the humour of the *Carol*, has recently referred to this joke as a 'sublime pun',¹⁰ one might feel that it could have been better, if one looks at it from the angle suggested here. Perhaps I am asking too much, and yet this sense of Dickens's falling somewhat short of total creative engagement might be, I cannot help feeling, another symptom of his weaker conception of Marley, 'the haunting human'.

¹Lafcadio Hearn, *A History of English Literature*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1927), pp. 577-78.

²I am indebted to Masaie Matsumura's various studies of early Japanese translations of Dickens.

³There is even an inventive translation by Shigeo Koike in the style of 'Rakugo', traditional Japanese comic storytelling.

⁴Hearn, p. 578.

⁵All references to the *Carol*, appearing parenthetically, are to the Penguin edition (vol. 1 of *The Christmas Books*), edited by Michael Slater (Harmondsworth, 1971).

⁶Robert L. Patten also picks up some of the 'hand' references in the *Carol*. He considers them, however, mainly in the light of Dickens's concern with the Christian theology in this story, and does not make the connections I make here. Cf. his essay, 'Dickens Time and Again' in *Dickens Studies Annual* 2 (1972), pp. 163-96.

⁷Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (London: The Athlone Press,

1970), pp. 34-35.

⁸Graham Holderness, 'Imagination in *A Christmas Carol*', *Études Anglaises* 32 (1979), 32.

⁹*The Pickwick Papers*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 444.

¹⁰Michael Slater, 'The Triumph of Humour: The *Carol* Revisited', *The Dickensian* 89 (Winter 1993), 191.

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