



Memory, Evil, and Transfiguration in a Neglected Work of Dickens

ROBERT J. GOESER

Professor Emeritus, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, California

The last of Charles Dickens's Christmas books, *The Haunted Man*, was not well received on publication and has never been popular.¹ Reviewers greeted it as "unintelligible" and "incoherent." One said it was a charming story surrounding a chapter of pure metaphysics. The story is not, however, pure metaphysics; it is a piece of fiction. It works as a story, and whatever is achieved, is achieved by the story, including its dialogue. The story is, however, developed, from some of Dickens's most profound theological insights.

I. THE PLACE OF MEMORY

The Haunted Man is a fictional study of memory or recollection. Early on, Dickens presents two men with radically differing memories—and the time is Christmas. The first, the protagonist, is a scientist named Redlaw. The story concentrates on him and the agony of his recollection. The story might be named Redlaw Agonistes. He has tortured himself, his whole being, remembering the ills of his past. They are brought on stage in dialogue between himself and his alter ego, Phantom, who recites the pains to which his life has been subjected: the early death of his father, an unloving stepfather, alienation from his mother's heart, and betrayal by his closest friend, who repudiates Redlaw's sister, wins Redlaw's

¹I have used the Penguin Edition (Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Books*, vol. 2 [Penguin Books, New York, 1981]), giving the page reference in parenthesis following quotation of more than two or three words.

beloved, and then abandons her and their child. This is narrated so we feel all the pain which wracked a sensitive, fair, compassionate young man. Where he has given trust and love they have been broken.

Redlaw says that he is doomed to remember all this only too well. In the words of the Phantom:

I bear within me a sorrow and a wrong. Thus I prey upon myself. Thus memory is my curse; and, if I could forget my sorrow and my wrong, I would. (268)

Redlaw fastens on the wrongs and sorrows of his past and begins to take his identity from them. He preys upon his past and lives from its gross unfairness. He cannot see beyond it. Life has been squeezed into this, so all of life is viewed through the lens of wrong and sorrow.

As a counterpoint to Redlaw, Dickens creates a much older man, eighty-seven years old. He, with his son and daughter-in-law, are servants, caretakers of Redlaw and the institution

where he teaches and does his research. The time is Christmas, and the old man, Mr. Swidger, wishes his superior a merry Christmas and happy new year. He chuckles as he takes this liberty, since he has witnessed so many Christmases. The scientist's response is to ask the son if his father's memory is impaired; he cannot imagine anyone recalling joyously such a number of Christmases. The son, William, responds that there "never was such a memory as my father's. He don't know what forgetting is" (257). The old man describes his first memory from childhood, which he recollects despite his eighty-seven years. He recounts other memories of school, of his wife and children. The memories are not of unalloyed happiness: his mother's death is associated with earliest childhood; his wife and some children are dead; his oldest son has led a wretched life; and he himself has been grossly and unfairly misused at a critical stage in his life. Sorrow and wrong seem to weigh as heavily for him as for Redlaw.

Swidger's response, however, is different. Christmas brings together the richness of all his memories.

[Christmas] freshens up my bare old brain. One year brings back another, and that year another, and those other numbers! At last it seems to me as if the birthday of our Lord was the birth-time of all that I have ever had affection for, or mourned for, or delighted in—and they're pretty many, for I'm eighty-seven. (259)

A struggle now ensues in Redlaw's soul, dramatized as conversation between himself and the Phantom, his alter ego. The constant whisper in his heart is: if I could only forget my sorrow and wrong. This is not selfish, he argues; others have the same wrongs and the same desire to be rid of their remembrance. The Phantom lures him by saying that he—as one highly cultivated and of profound thought—feels the wrongs more than those of ordinary clay. Then Redlaw excuses himself by saying that from long living alone he has dwelt too much on what has been and what might have been and too little on what is.

II. INFECTION AND EVIL

He is now ready for the Phantom's bargain or pact. He accepts the gift of wiping out the recollections of sorrow, wrong, and trouble (and the good that is intertwined with them). He thus cancels the memory of the past which is his heart's history. He is allowed to retain memory of facts, of things scientific, of his research and teaching. Memory of the heart (which always links happiness and pain) is erased, but memory of empirical knowledge and abstract truth is retained. There is a stipulation, however. He cannot regain his memory and he will pass this gift (infection) on to all with whom he is present.

Ironically, making the bargain is accompanied by the withering of the holly put up by Mr. Swidger to keep green the memory of one of the early benefactors of the school. With almost tragic irony Redlaw asks heaven to keep the Swidgers happy (whom he will soon infect). When he starts to leave his lodgings, he encounters a dirty ragged boy almost more animal than human—and recoils in disgust. More frightening is his fear of encountering anyone he values, lest the infection be transmitted; he realizes that he is indeed alone, alone.

The transmission of Redlaw's infection first occurs with the Tetterby family. Despite inclusion here of much caricature, the family serves as a kind of moral index. The family is large,

basically good natured, possessed of little, but despite unfairness, caring within their little space. As the mother returns from shopping, she is clearly out of sorts. The husband seeks to console her: hard times, work, weather, and thoughts of a better man to have married—these pull one down at times. Indeed, just these have been working on Mrs. Tetterby. Suddenly she recovers and says:

there was such a rush of recollection...that softened my hard heart and filled it up till it was bursting. All our struggles for a livelihood, all our cares and wants... all the times of sickness, all the hours of watching we have had seemed to speak to me, and say that they have made us one, and that I never might have been, or could have been, any other than the wife and mother I am. Then the cheap enjoyments that I could have trodden down so cruelly, got to be precious to me.
(290)

These simple words embody much of the book. It is the mixture of gifts and sorrows which has given the family community—made them one, made them human, joining the race, not isolated and eaten up with the feeling of unfairness. It is the capacity to participate in the moment (without regret over past ills or fantasizing about an unreal future). It is acceptance of the ordinary and entrance into creation. After this great speech, Redlaw appears and we discover that it was sight of him which had made Mrs. Tetterby so dissatisfied. His presence now brings the infection, and the family is reduced to being at vicious odds with one another. They remember nothing good from their past; their feelings are deadened, and only anger and resentment are left.

The doom falls on all those whom Redlaw touches. Ironically, he infects the Swidgers just when the oldest son, George, has returned, repentant of his past. Their rejoicing turns into angry recriminations. William berates his father: “We

could have a deal more pleasure without you.” He reduces his father to being “but a calendar of ever so many years of eating, and drinking, and making himself comfortable”(318). Yet earlier William had expressed such pride in his father’s age and memory. The father seeks to recall childhood memories, and fails. The older son repents of his repentance and would gladly return to his wasted, sinful life. Because of its contrast to the earlier scene, rejoicing at the father’s age and recollections, this scene becomes almost more pitiable than the one with the Tetterbys.

There is another infection, this time of a student at the college who has been cared for in illness by the Tetterbys and by Mr. Swidger’s daughter-in-law, Millie. Redlaw has come to help him, but again, ironically brings doom with him. When Millie comes again to aid the student, she meets hostility and resentment; he will accept no gratitude for her care but reduces it to something to be paid for. At first, not quite hearing him, Millie says she had seen on his face the realization that without “some trouble and sorrow, we should never know half the good there is about us” (303). With this great insight she becomes now the counterpoise to Redlaw. She maintains the truth which Redlaw would not see; she is the expression of selfless love which restores the infected ones to moral sanity.

Before this occurs, Redlaw must go further on his journey. Sensing that he cannot harm the animal-like boy, he walks along with him through a graveyard, seeing the moon suddenly

break through the clouds, and hearing music. These, however, do not bring him the usual sense of awe and mystery; the music seems but mechanical sounds bringing no whisper of past or future. He looks at the boy and is aware that “in spite of the vast intellectual distance between them...the expression on the boy’s face was the expression on his own” (310). With horror, he realizes that the boy (animal) is the only companion that he has left; he feels no pity for him, but only dread.

III. THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSFORMATION

This recognition is the nadir of his loss of humanness. It may also be the stimulus to the first sign of repentance. He cries out in agony asking that the glimmering of contrition in him remove the awful infection from others: “Leave me benighted, but restore the day to those whom I have cursed” (322). As music begins to move him a little, becomes no longer purely mechanical, he gives fervent thanks and says, “I do not ask for restoration for myself” (325). With great insight Dickens perceives that repentance does not spring from the desire to avoid punishment, but from the desire to mitigate the evils bestowed on others. In all this Redlaw’s concern is fixed on Millie. He senses a selfless goodness in her and is in mortal dread of infecting her.

Redlaw’s relations with the boy are further indication of change. He asks the Phantom why the boy has not been infected like the others. The reply is:

No softening memory of sorrow, wrong, or trouble enters here, because this wretched mortal from his birth has been abandoned to a worse condition than the beasts, and has, within his knowledge, no one contrast, no humanising touch to make a grain of such a memory spring up in his hardened breast. (327)

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Bitingly the Phantom says, “He is the growth of man’s indifference; you are the growth of man’s presumption” (328). Redlaw’s response is to stoop beside the sleeping boy and cover him compassionately. The same gesture is repeated a page later. At the end of the book, he assures the boy, “I am gentler than I was. Of all the world, to you, poor child” (345).

Now Redlaw’s slow recovery is interwoven with the rapid return of the others to their real selves, and this is accomplished through the gracious presence of Millie. Just the sight of her by the Tetterby children proves a gracious intervention into hostility and acrimony. Reconciliation is marked by husband and wife each confessing to be the cause of the quarreling. He says he had forgotten the precious children, the care his wife has taken for them all; he was exasperated that she was no longer slim and attractive. He reminded himself that many luckier and more successful men could have become her husband. She responds to his confession with gratitude because she had thought him common looking, but now she rejoices at his commonness; he is small, but she will make much of him because of his size; she had regretted that he had begun to stoop, but she will be there for him to lean on. With this gracious acceptance of the limitations and annoyances of existence they are transfigured, accepting the actual as it is and is remembered.

The recovery of the student takes a different form: his is repentance of ingratitude to Millie. He sees her in tears, but she assures him they are tears of joy. “It’s wonder that you should

think it necessary to ask me to forgive so little, and yet it's pleasure that you do" (340). What a gracious moment of tact from a person of no learning!

The presence of Millie brings the Swiggers, father and son, to their old concern for each other. This is evidenced most wonderfully in an exchange between the old man and Redlaw. The old man reminds him of a Christmas visit by his sister years before. Redlaw struggles to recall but can only say that he has no memory of wrong and sorrow and thus has lost all that a man would remember.

Then Dickens writes:

To see old Philip's pity for him, to see him wheel his own great chair for him to rest in and look down upon him with a solemn sense of bereavement, was to know in some degree, how precious to old age recollections are. (344)

Dickens has so constructed this moment that it becomes a moment (an event) of sacramental grace.

The last stage of Redlaw's recovery is a drawn out and most precisely delineated struggle in which at each moment everything seems to be in the balance. This is appropriate to Dickens's whole design, for the struggle involves the remembrance and recognition of Redlaw's friend who had so destructively betrayed him years before. This was the greatest wrong and sorrow of his past, that which he had most wished to wipe from his memory. It is fitting that its recall is the hardest. Almost in desperation Millie works to free his memory. With a Dantean touch, Redlaw looks into Millie's eyes again and again to bring himself to recognition. Then Millie names what is at stake: we need to remember past wrongs in order to forgive them.

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Redlaw's redemption is realized when he gives thanks, praying:

O Thou who, through the teaching of pure love, has graciously restored me to the memory which was the memory of Christ on the cross, and of all the good who perished in his cause, receive my thanks and bless her. (351)

Quite astonishingly, the memory of Christ here is the memory of the infinite wrong Christ has endured, remembered so that he might forgive. The suffering is the move from memory to forgiveness.

Millie has been the means of grace for she too has suffered in the death, at birth, of her only child. But she has remembered the child ever with joy; her suffering has made her one with those about her. By her memory, she embodies love so naturally and simply that Redlaw's infection cannot touch her. She withstands the infection and brings him to memory because what she knows, she knows with her whole being. As the author says, it is as if she, the uninstructed, knows everything and he, who understands all nature, knows nothing.

IV. CONSIDERING THE STORY

What makes this work so interesting is the depth of moral-theological insight which pervades the narrative and dialogue, and the subtlety with which narrative and insight are

inseparable. The central theme of memory is grounded in what we might call a nineteenth-century understanding of two ways of knowing. In the story, memory is divided between memory of scientific matters (facts and abstractions) and memory of suffering, evil, love, and goodness (experience); Millie obviously represents the latter. She knows she is unlearned, yet the wisdom upon which she acts constitutes her very being. She is related to the circus girl Sissy (in Dickens's *Hard Times*) who knows by way of imagination, love, and experience, in contrast to Gradgrind's statistical, factual utilitarianism which excludes much of what is human. The whole of *Hard Times* is built on this distinction. More philosophically, it is the contrast in Coleridge between the living organism and a mechanical juxtaposition of parts.²

Memory works in another significant way. Through memory, our vision can be changed so that our world is transfigured. One thinks of Willa Cather's creative process. Her best early stories were about Nebraska, a Nebraska, however, that was ugly and crude, with no culture, a Nebraska which she rejected. She came into her own as a writer, she says, "When she ceased to admire and began to remember," when she ceased imitating James and began to explore her memories, memories of growing up in Nebraska. Now she began to write out of her Nebraska past, because in memory, the memory of the heart, that land and that past were transfigured. Only when the memory begins to see clearly can the world be transfigured. Then it is no longer ugly, no longer to be rejected. Out of her memory, her greatest art developed: she was able to accept the land and the past for what it was.

For transfiguration to occur, the viewer must be transformed. The world is

²Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949) 30.

the same, the viewer is not. Two of the New Testament accounts of Jesus' transfiguration conclude with the statement: "They saw only Jesus." Jesus is the same, and the world is the same; but the disciples must be transformed to see Jesus and the world transfigured (which will finally occur only with the crucifixion and the resurrection).

Right next to this understanding of memory is the presentation of grace in *The Haunted Man*: grace comes through and to the ordinary. It comes through the ordinary Millie; it comes through the ordinary husband and wife, father and son. There is not a great blaze of glory. Grace does not consist primarily of the extraordinary, of miracles, even sacraments. It brings no change in outward fortune. The prime bringer, Millie, seems almost silly at times with her repeated, "Here's another who likes me." She has, however, an unselfconscious goodness, a sense of wonder, making no claims for herself which produces almost spontaneous response.

Grace makes possible the characters' acceptance of creation. Through memory, they are enabled to participate in their actual past, with all its relationships including its mixture of good and bad. They are enabled to enter the present without fantasizing a false past or wanting an unreal present that exists nowhere. They can accept creation for what it is: graced in its actuality. They need not wait for an ideal set of circumstances which can never be. This wife, this husband, these children, this father, this son—these are what are to be accepted ever anew.

This is not a sentimental, nostalgic Christmas story. The end of Redlaw's redemption has arrived when he vows to protect, teach, and reclaim the boy, to give him humanness, memory, participation in the race. Dickens sums it up remarkably by using *memory* powerfully again, but pointing to the future:

Christmas is a time in which, of all times in the year, the memory of every remedial sorrow, wrong, and trouble in the world around us, should be active with us, not less than our own experience, for all good. (351)

Thus Redlaw's story does not happen just once. It is not merely that once he made a pact; the struggle goes on: how in the face of the memory of evil, unfairness, and wrong, to accept the possibilities of redemptive renewal in the present. Redlaw's story is also that of the Swidgers and the Tetterbys; it is everyone's story. The last words of the book are: "Keep my memory green." These words were under the portrait of a donor to the college. Surely they were intended to bring about remembrance of the donor, but at the end of the book they must bring the reader into the story so that it becomes our story. Keep our memory alive to the evil and the good in order that life be transfigured.