

SCROOGE'S HUMBUG DISSECTED

ROBERT F. FLEISSNER
Wilberforce, Ohio

*To Richard Armour (d. 1989), humorist par excellence
"Scrooge thinks of himself as a man singularly lacking in what
he terms 'humbug' (fraud, sham, deceit, and delusion) but what
we readers see as sensitivity and compassion"*

--Philip Allingham

Because Charles Dickens's figures so often have derisive tags associated with them from the time of their first emergence, Ebenezer Scrooge's initial entrée is "Humbug!" (strictly, "Bah, humbug!" as given on p. 6 in Dickens [2]). Popularly known as the typical old curmudgeon rather than an eventual proselyte to the true Christian spirit, he utters a word of terse disapprobation which befits his reactionary personality. Yet readers have thus far insufficiently plumbed the allusive depths of his shibboleth. With recourse now to well-known reference works like Shipley [7] and Radford [6], we may reconsider some plausible resonances in the celebrated malediction. Some six workable meanings manifest themselves at least.

1. Is humbug nonsense? Already every schoolboy has been cognizant of this, but the original wit behind it has gone by the board. As Shipley has alerted us, "in several tongues, the idea of humming (an imitative word) is linked with jesting". He cited pertinent Spanish and French examples along with English. Such a trilingual nexus, being in accompaniment with the love song of the drone bee, is easily reminiscent of an onomatopoeitic touchstone from Tennyson, "the murmuring of innumerable bees". Because bees (and their associated birds) have been so often linked with the sweet nothings of sentimental courtship, the humming sound of the bee can easily be said to buzz with the nonsense of lovers. In any event, insofar as Scrooge played the role of the non-lover, shunned the temptations of the soft, fair sex, presumably on puritanical grounds befitting his personality, he initially permitted no such nonsense, finding it all humbug.

2. Is then a humbug a new specimen of humming bug? Admittedly, such a correlation may seem like an uninvited or too obvious "echo" but Shipley gave it serious treatment. Thus humbug can be taken as a collapsed form of not only the expression "humming bug" but analogously of the German city of Hamburg. It can be construed as a shortened or Anglicized variant. Such a derivation would then tie in with any German-Jewish roots Scrooge might have. His first name, Ebenezer, contains Hebraic overtones, at any rate, suggesting stone (as in 1 Samuel 7:12). Literally, it means "the stone of help," whereupon, curiously enough, the name had come to be used contemptuously as a synonym for "dissenting chapel,"

as OED has it (under Ebenezer). The Jewish people have often derived their names from the locales and countries from which their families initially came, notably in Germany. For example, **Hamburg-er** is a standard Jewish surname; hence **Scrooge** is onomastically identifiable in some ways with **humbug** and thereby with **Hamburg**. Comparable enough is **Shylock**, whose first syllable recalls the German-Jewish adjective *scheu* (shy) and to whose character and tradition Dickens was in part indebted (and not only with regard to his shyster Fagin, whose cockney-sounding name also connotes a German word, *Feigen*, as discussed in Fleissner [4] and Parois-sien [5]). Allingham [1], moreover, compares Scrooge and Shylock, the former being "a man of good business who, like Shakespeare's Shylock, stands for judgment and the law". It seems that Scrooge, too, "demands his pound of flesh from all who fall into his power". In any event, even as Scrooge cites **Humbug** (Hamburg), Shylock cites **Frankfurt** (The Merchant of Venice, 3.1.75). Yet it may not be required to make a literary double-decker sandwich on this critical level by combining a frankfurter with a hamburger.

The point is that evidently because Puritans had the custom of bestowing Old Testament names on their children, we have no assurance that Ebenezer Scrooge was of Jewish stock. For "Scrooge's law is not even that of the Mosaic Code, but that of the Reverend Malthus. He advocates the principles behind Malthus's Essay on the Principle of Population (1803)," as Allingham shows. In this respect, we might likewise consider whether at the back of Dickens's mind in having Scrooge comfort himself with the idea of decreasing the surplus population was Swift's A Modest Proposal with its similar prescription for the ailments of Ireland. Nonetheless, Scrooge clearly epitomizes some traditionally Old Testament values in contradistinction to ones in the New, as Vogel [8] has repeatedly emphasized, pointing thereby to the need for his eventual conversion—even as in the complementary case of Shylock. So Scrooge's "Humbug!" might still revert to the German city of Hamburg—albeit not in terms of the late nineteenth century when, according to Shipley, such a verbal correlation was linked to Hamburg as the center of German propaganda during the Franco-Prussian War.

3. Did humbug mean worthless money? Shipley's next etymological hint makes for some good Scroogian sense, notoriously covetous as this counting house proprietor is. The suggestion is that his scornful term may originate in the Irish expression *uim bog*, which designated a spurious coin. Because nonsense has so often been taken as Irish blarney, a folklorish connection with the Emerald Isle (the title of which also suggested value in something precious) is plausible. Literally, *uim bog* stood for "soft copper," the worthless money with which King James II of England "flooded the land, from the Dublin mint". For Ebenezer would have been all too aware of how to distinguish between genuine and worthless coinage—even before anything else. In terms of the Scrooge-Fagin connection again, it is curious that a common Irish name is Fagan. But the Irish connection seems forced...

4. Does humbug convey the sense of being stung by a bug, hence

cheated? Could be. Ebenezer would be accommodating such a resonance in several ways: with regard to his own greedy retention of funds (whereby he cheats others, "bugs" them that way); hence Bob Cratchit is the one stung. This sense is ironic, because it suggests that Scrooge himself is what he castigates in others. He remains a curmudgeon for so long because of his fear that others will, in turn, "bug" money from him. Surely the annoyance of the insect pest relates to the humbug meaning in Scrooge's context. Analogous is Caliban in The Tempest, who calls upon the "plague" (also linked with the word pest then as by way of the French for the Black Death); the pestilent meaning was then also applied (as related to the insect) to human beings (as by James I, whom the OED quotes "They that persuade them the contrary, are vipers and pests"). Hence the titular meaning of the romance has, for one of its connotative resonances, "the tempering of the pest", as discussed in Fleissner [3]. And Caliban, too, will "seek for grace" at the end and presumably convert.

5. Was humbug a sort of Victorian senior citizen's warcry? As Shipley again clarified it, the first syllable of the epithet ostensibly derived from the Old Teutonic um-, thereby of course calling to mind the latent effect of incoherent murmuring or rambling; hence Scrooge's obvious predicament as a senile, old dotard is scored. Still, he is finally not as decrepit as he appears in that he is capable of throwing off the shackles of reactionary or ultra-conservative politics in favor finally of a gratifyingly young-at-heart spirit. The puns sounds horrible, but it is fair to say that although his name is Scrooge he does not finally put on the screws, although onomastically he calls forth a screwed-up meaning. Allingham clarifies the point by allowing for the miser's name as suggesting a "screw," hence labeling him a "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner", associations commonly related to the effects of a screw. At any rate, at the end he can be thought of as properly screwed in place. These resonances are laughable, but the Dickens name simply invites them. He finally deserves to be called a senior citizen.

6. Did humbug have a specifically Christian meaning? Pressed, old Scrooge knows that what he pompously debases as pure humbug is, in point of miserable fact to him, nothing other than the season of Yuletide itself. In this respect, he is paradoxically on the right track. The point is that the way Christmas was coming to be so commercialized is and was, to a considerable extent, sham. It is worth remembering that Yuletide had originally nothing to do with the birth of the Saviour, having been accommodated from pagan festivities, of course, by early missionaries for reasons of convenience, the end justifying the means as it were, to allow for the supernatural to build more upon the natural. The gaudy way the Holy Season is so often promoted hardly would reflect its founder's endorsement. In this way modern intellectuals often admit a certain sympathy, if not quite empathy, for old Ebenezer as a cold realist. It is thus amusing to observe how the old reactionary's very term of denigration for the Christmas season of giving ironically looks ahead to his true acceptance of the seasonal message

at the end. No wonder restaurants during the Christmas season display caricatures of Scrooge.

7. Does humbug suggest something ghostly? As Shipley has remarked, whereas the term **bug** is itself of unknown origin, the analogous word **bwg** (Welsh for "ghost") provides a beautiful glossary: "the **bug** in bugbear, bugaboo (Boo!); also the hobgoblin variously spelled boggy, bogie, bogey, and (North Eng.) bogle". Compare the borrowed American term bogus. The meaning is that what Scrooge would downgrade as mere Yuletide humbug turns out to be a ghostly visitation for him, one paradoxically investing an accepted sanctified time with pagan reminiscences of ghost stories being traded in a hush around a blazing Yule log.

So let us finally incorporate these resonances. The "humbug" which Ebenezer finds a bug-like nuisance or redolent of undue commercialization and fuzzy-liberal gift-giving, and thereby a cheat to his reactionary old soul, is, when all is added up, proleptic of his conversion. To grasp fully the true Christmas spirit, he has to make acquaintance then with three Yuletide "bugs" or ghosts, namely those of Past, Present, and Yet-to-Come. His early and disdainful use of **humbug** duly haunts him when he grimly encounters the disembodied soul of his partner Marley, but he is "hummed" out of that at the end.

As a final coda, we might recall how, in Pickwick Papers, **humbug**, which Mr. Blotton had applied rather impetuously to Mr. Pickwick, was then taken in its "usual" sense. Mr. Blotton's retort was that he had scrupulously applied the term only in its "Pickwickian sense". Good for him. In a similar manner, this same term has now yielded its "Scroogian sense". If we have finally more than one Scrooge, why not (as Wilson [9] suggests) more than one humbug? For "**bug** is of greater antiquity than the compound word" according to Radford, and the OED (under **humbug**) asserts that "the facts as to its origin appear to have been lost, even before the word became common enough to excite attention". Does **hum** basically mean **hoax**, **bug** a **false alarm**? Let us prefer this OED meaning of humbug because it relates essentially to what is traded on Christmas: "A kind of sweetmeat" (see, e.g., Mrs. Gaskell's reference to "humbugs for the child"). In any event, to write on **humbug** in the Dickensian sense is hardly to indulge in the modern-day meaning of the expression itself.

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OBoy!

Morice

