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STONES, SHADOWS, STRANGERS: OBJECT ORIENTED ONTOLOGY AND THE POSTHUMAN CITY IN DICKENS' "NIGHT WALKS"

ABSTRACT

This article re-reads Charles Dickens' "Night Walks" (1860) through the lens of object-oriented ontology, arguing that Dickens's nocturnal dérivés through Victorian London anticipate a posthuman sensitivity to objects, environments, and withdrawn forms of being. Although traditionally interpreted as a piece of urban social commentary or journalism, "Night Walks" also enacts an encounter with the city as a nonhuman agent, one that exerts affective, ethical, and ontological pressure on the wandering subject. Dickens' attention to streets, urban architecture, and bodily dispossession destabilizes anthropocentric hierarchies, presenting both people and things as part of a flat ontology in which no entity is ontologically privileged. This article explores how inanimate urban elements acquire narrative agency and how marginalized human figures are rendered as withdrawn objects, blurring the distinction between the sentient and the material. By foregrounding Dickens' epistemic humility, that is, his repeated acknowledgment of what he cannot know or fully perceive, the paper positions "Night Walks" as an early experiment in literary object-oriented thinking. Hence, it reveals how the essay foreshadows contemporary debates around subjectivity, visibility, and the ethical stakes of living among withdrawn and unknowable others.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, "Night Walks", Victorian London, Object-Oriented Ontology

TAŞLAR, GÖLGELER, YABANCILAR: DICKENS'İN "GECE YÜRÜYÜŞLERİ" İSİMLİ YAZISINDA NESNE YÖNELİMLİ ONTOLOJİ VE POSTHÜMAN ŞEHİR

ÖZET

Bu makale, Charles Dickens'in "Gece Yürüyüşleri" (1860) adlı yazısını nesne yönelimli ontoloji merceğinden yeniden okumakta ve Dickens'in Viktorya dönemi Londra'sında yaptığı gece yürüyüşlerinin nesnelere, çevrelere ve geri çekilmiş varlık biçimlerine yönelik posthüman bir duyarlılığı önceden sezindiğini savunmaktadır. Geleneksel olarak kent ve toplum hakkında bir yorum ya da gazetecilik olarak değerlendirilse de, "Gece Yürüyüşleri" aynı zamanda kenti insan-dışı bir fail olarak deneyimleyen, gezgin özne üzerinde duygulanımsal, etik ve ontolojik bir baskı oluşturan bir karşılaşmayı da sahneler. Dickens'in sokaklara, kentsel mimariye ve bedenin çözülmesine dikkat kesilmesi, antroposentrik hiyerarşileri sarsar; insanları ve şeyleri ontolojik açıdan ayrıcalıklı olmayan, düz bir ontolojinin parçası olarak sunar. Bu makale, cansız kentsel unsurların nasıl anlatsal bir fail haline geldiğini ve marjinalleşmiş insan figürlerinin geri çekilmiş, kendi gizini açmayan nesnelere halinde tasvir edilerek canlı ile maddi olan arasındaki ayrımın nasıl bulanıklaştığını inceler. Dickens'in epistemik alçakgönüllülüğünü, yani bilmediğini ya da tam olarak kavrayamadığını defaatle kabul edişini öne çıkaran bu çalışma, "Gece Yürüyüşleri"ni edebî anlamda nesne-odaklı düşüncenin erken bir deneyi olarak konumlandırır. Böylece, metnin öznellik, görünürlük ve geri çekilmiş, bilinemez ötekiler arasında yaşamının etik boyutlarına dair güncel tartışmalara nasıl öncülük ettiğini ortaya koyar.

Anahtar kelimeler: Charles Dickens, "Gece Yürüyüşleri", Viktorya Dönemi Londra'sı, Nesne Yönelimli Ontoloji

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Introduction

A “solitary wanderer in the city” (Marcus, 1965, p. 279), Charles Dickens, as a young newspaper reporter, walks through the city and outlines “the different neighbourhoods and their distinctive inhabitants” (Baumgarten, 2001, p. 108). He makes use of these nocturnal walks as the source of his articles published in such journals as *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* (Christensen, 2019, p. 56). One of those articles, “Night Walks”, published in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, is a socially critical piece in which Dickens (1860) recounts his experiences, walking the streets of London at night during a period of insomnia, “a temporary inability to sleep, referable to a distressing impression” (p. 149). Suffering from sleeplessness, Dickens, recognised as “a compulsive night walker” (Gordon, 2011), takes to walking the streets of London during the night (p. 1). Dickens attempts to defeat his “disorder” by “getting up directly after lying down, and going out, and coming home tired at sunrise” (1860, p. 149). These night walks educate Dickens “in a fair amateur experience of houselessness” (p. 149). His object is “to get through the night”, bringing him into “sympathetic relations with people who have no other object every night” (p. 149). He experiences houselessness as an amateur, literally a lover of the nocturnal city; the amateurish experience of houselessness turns into an embodied pursuit of the urban nightscape, with houselessness becoming integral to his descriptions of the houseless mind and the houseless body. Through these night walks, he confronts “the night perspective” and becomes an observer/participant in the lives of the city’s such marginalized figures as the homeless, the poor, the outcast, and the mentally ill (p. 149). This nocturnal perspective “conveys a sense of unreality” and draws “attention to the otherness of the [nocturnal] world” (Moore, 2016, p. 39). Dickens witnesses the eerie stillness of the city and the hidden suffering that contrasts with the daytime bustle. He describes encounters with tramps, vagrants, night watchmen, and others who inhabit the urban nightscape, painting them with both sympathy and vivid detail. He visits places like workhouses, casual wards, and paupers’ burial grounds, criticizing Victorian society’s failure to care for its vulnerable members. Dickens is immensely popular for his novels about Victorian London, yet his article about his night walks also demonstrates “how the sparks of that genius fly off him in the course of his ordinary journalistic observation” (Ackroyd, 1996, p. 630). Following such Dickensian sparks that transgress the boundary of journalistic writing, this article argues that Dickens’ “Night Walks” offers a profound object-oriented ontology, where the urban environment itself acts as a nonhuman agent and marginalised figures are presented as withdrawn objects, challenging anthropocentric perspectives, and revealing an early form of posthuman sensitivity.

Dickens’ engagement with the tradition of the ghost story is crucial because it enables an object-oriented mode of writing in which human subjectivity is decentred and the nocturnal city emerges as a network of withdrawn objects. Dickens utilises the gothic elements to write about his encounters with these objects and things in the “criminal underworld” of London (Parrinder, 2004, p. 409). His evocation of uncanny and underground London “derives in part from conventions on the gothic, from a fascination with the shrouded, the ghostly, the vampiric” (David, 2001, p. 9). His nocturnal London prefigures “the dark and gloomy, frequently sinister, London” of his later novels (Slater, 2009, p. 483). In Dickens’ ghost stories, set in the present day, the supernatural intrudes into the familiar world of everyday life. While Dickens himself does not explore why these stories held such fascination for nineteenth-century readers and writers, critics have suggested that the ghost story served a cultural and psychological function, compensating for the gap left by the rise of positivist science and the decline of religion’s supernatural and magical

dimensions in an increasingly secular society (Pykett, 2001, pp. 197–198). “Night Walks” partakes of this Dickensian tradition of ghost stories, although it is not viewed as a short story. However, Dickens makes use of gothic tropes as he speaks of the unseen forces of the nocturnal city and appears as a narrator haunted by objects, which also resonates with the object-oriented ontological approach that ascribes agency to objects and recognises their withdrawal in urban space. Gothic materialism of “Night Walks” evokes the materialism in object-oriented ontology. Disrobed of human supremacy, Dickens’ walking body becomes an object among objects in the material fabric of the cityscape. In this excursion into the nocturnal city, Dickens experiences the impenetrable aspect of the metropolis, besides many other aspects, in his perception of London at night (Beaumont, 2016). The unfathomable aspect of the city evokes the withdrawal of things in object-oriented ontology.

An essay that “concentrates his lifelong addiction to urban night-walking into a virtuoso account of one night between midnight and dawn” (Hartley, 2016, p. 70), “Night Walks” is both a personal meditation and a social critique, blending Dickens’ humanistic concerns with his flair for descriptive prose. Urban poverty is central to “Night Walks” as Dickens captures the invisibility of the city’s poorest inhabitants, whose struggles are relegated to the margins of urban life. The insomnia and mental unrest experienced by Dickens during his walks reflect his own disquiet and the psychological toll of living in a city that never sleeps, where anxiety and alienation pervade the night. “Night Walks” exposes the harsh realities of social injustice, revealing how the poor are abandoned by societal structures and left to endure suffering in the hidden corners of London. For Dickens, nocturnal rambling offers “appalling evidence of the social deprivation” (Waters, 2006, p. 155). Observation as a mode of ethical engagement in “Night Walks” allows Dickens to bear witness to the lives of the marginalized, proposing that responsibility lies in the act of seeing and acknowledging the other without judgment. The duality of London, represented by its contrasting experiences of day and night, wealth and poverty, underlines the city’s social and economic divides, revealing the fractured nature of urban life. The city becomes a vast organism whose darkness unveils what daylight often conceals. Hence, at the core of the essay is Dickens’s deep concern for those that society forgets. He focuses on the homeless sleeping in doorways or wandering endlessly, the institutional cruelty of workhouses, where people were treated as less than human. He demonstrates how poverty becomes more visible at night. Dickens presents himself as a wanderer without a home in the night, paralleling the true homelessness of those he meets. His insomnia becomes a metaphor for spiritual unrest or dislocation, shared, in more tragic ways, by the people he encounters. The nocturnal city is described with dread, revealing the underside of Victorian prosperity. In this respect, “Night Walks” is highly amenable to a Marxist reading as the text foregrounds material conditions shaping urban poverty, in line with the long-standing Marxist engagement with Dickens’ work by critics such as Georg Lukács, Raymond Williams, and Frederic Jameson. Nevertheless, this article explores “Night Walks” from a new materialist perspective, examining how Dickens’ essay challenges the anthropocentric assumptions embedded in Western capitalist modernity by emphasising the agency of nonhuman objects in the nocturnal city.

“Night Walks” can also be seen as an important precursor to modern urban writing, especially in how it navigates the relationship between the city, its margins, and the writer-observer. Modern urban writing often draws on the concept of the flaneur, the detached yet alert urban wanderer. Dickens, like a flaneur, walks the city with a purpose of observation and reflection

(Winter, 2018, p. 140). He maps emotional and social geographies, sensing how architecture, poverty, darkness, and movement shape urban experience. Modern urban writing often highlights the fringes of society, not the glamorous city, but its ruins, alleys, shelters, and hidden lives. Dickens' night walks uncover what daylight conceals, the truth of London as a city built on inequality. Modern urban writing often uses the city to launch critiques of capitalism. Dickens does this, too, in a nineteenth-century context. His focus on workhouses, vagrancy laws, and the criminalization of poverty has deep echoes in today's writing on homelessness, urban policing, and neoliberal cities.

Dickens is surely known as one of the greatest realist novelists of the nineteenth century. In his novels, Dickens envisions knowable, recognisable communities, yet there is also another network of interconnections, as Raymond Williams (1975) argues (pp. 191, 202). In his writings about his night walks, he moves beyond knowable communities and descends into another London that the night covers. Therefore, his essay about night walks extends his realism beyond the conventional description of social realism. Chesterton (2001) explains this very clearly as he views Dickens' walking the streets of London as a paradoxical reconceptualization of his realism: "Indeed, that degree of realism does not exist in reality; it is the unbearable realism of a dream. And this kind of realism can only be gained by walking dreamily in a place; it cannot be gained by walking observantly" (p. 21). I suggest that one could explore Dickens' experience of walking dreamily in London and the unbearable realism of this ambulatory method as object-oriented ontological realism. It is a compelling interdisciplinary move to bridge Victorian urban writing with contemporary posthuman philosophy. While Dickens would not have conceived his essay in object-oriented ontology terms, "Night Walks" is strikingly rich in material sensitivity, object presence, and ontological ambiguity, all central concerns within the framework of object-oriented ontology. Thus, the object-oriented perspective of this paper is expected to contribute to the posthuman studies on Dickens.

Victorian scholarship has surely explored Dickens' work from a posthuman lens. For instance, Clayton's *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace* (2003) views "the nineteenth century as an originary moment for the posthuman" (Smeele, 2022, p. 173). In "Prefiguring the Posthuman: Dickens and Prosthesis" (2004), Sussman and Joseph argue that Dickens' portrayals of prosthesis signal an emerging proto-posthuman mode of thought; focusing on Dickens' novels, they maintain that Dickens' work reflects "a Victorian discursive practice wherein the boundary between the machine and the human tends to dissolve" (p. 617). Similarly, Ketabgian (2011) explores the interplay between affective machinery and emotional labour in *Hard Times*. The exploration of the relationship between the human and the non-human is also discussed by Ledger (2011), who contends that references to animals in Dickens' work should be read in relation to the developments of natural history in the nineteenth century (p. 364). Likewise, McDonnell (2018) puts forward that Dickens' writing can be productively read in dialogue with that of his contemporary Charles Darwin, whose work foregrounds the fundamental continuity between human and animal species (p. 552). McDonnell also points out that "intersections between animal studies and the emerging field of 'thing theory' or 'object-oriented inquiry'" in Dickens' work may be explored in future research (p. 555). This suggestion evinces that posthumanist and new materialist theories offer a fertile avenue to study Dickens, who envisions "a richly populated object world" and whose "fiction, journalism, and non-fiction are crammed with all manner of stuff" (Wood, 2018, p. 452). Therefore, the present article, which undertakes an object-oriented

inquiry into “Night Walks”, seeks to interpret Dickens’ writing through a posthuman lens and to contribute to this expanding body of Dickens scholarship.

Before moving on to discuss Dickens’ walks in the posthuman city of London, it is essential to introduce object-oriented ontology. Object-oriented ontology, as developed by Graham Harman and popularized in literary studies partly through Timothy Morton, argues that all objects, animate or inanimate, human or nonhuman, have equal ontological status, that objects withdraw from total comprehension, and therefore humans can never fully access their essence. Emphasis is placed on inter-object relations rather than anthropocentric hierarchies. Objects exist in excess of their use-value or appearance to human perception. Morton particularly expands OOO in ecological and literary terms. He speaks of hyperobjects that exceed local understanding, and of strange strangers that are seen as entities that are familiar yet always withdrawing, unknowable. Similarly, Harman argues that objects cannot be reduced to a bundle of qualities, since they possess an irreducible essence (Harman, 2017). Drawing on Kant’s phenomenal–noumenal distinction, Harman notes that objects have an inward self beyond their external features.

Morton (2010) envisions object-oriented ontology as a dark entanglement where humans and nonhumans coexist in unsettling ways. Central to this is “the mesh” and “the strange stranger” (p. 8), concepts that frame existence as “a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite centre or edge” and “radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise” (p. 8). This interconnectedness, however, also implies separation: “There would be no mesh if there were no strange strangers. The mesh isn’t a background against which the strange stranger appears. It is the entanglement of all strangers” (p. 47). Strange strangers may be humans, nonhumans, or even imaginary figures like “ghosts, vampires, and giants,” entities that are “strange to herself, or himself, or itself” (pp. 66, 78). They exist on the same plane yet remain unknowable: “we must challenge our sense of what is real and what is unreal, what counts as existent and what counts as non-existent” (p. 10). Morton stresses their “subaesthetic level of being, beyond the cute and beyond the awesome” (p. 91), often marked as ugly, evil, or dangerous. This emphasis on the uncanny and spectral illustrates how our reality has become dark, horrifying, and radically other. Object-oriented ontology also frames ecology in terms of essence, which is much farther away than the humanly embodied or conceptualized presences (Morton, 2016). Rather than being reducible to nature, ecology is a holistic system in which entities interrelate through a mesh of nodes and imperceptible intersectional value clusters (Harman, 2017). These nodes are more characteristic, identical, and vital than what they connect, forming the basis of interconnectivity, while the conceptual spaces between them create a permeability ignored by human vision (Harman, 2018). Human cognition, limited by anthropocentrism, reduces this complexity, collapsing ecocentrism into nature-centrism. Humans tend to reify objects (Harman, 2017) by defining and classifying them through cognitive categories, reducing them to a bundle of qualities embodied between pre-defined borders. Such a reduction manipulates objects. Ignoring the interactive mesh structure further distorts their essence. Morton (2013) argues that defining objects without reducing their value makes them free, while Harman (2017) sees this as the first step toward interconnectivity. By granting entities autonomous qualities and treating them as equals (Morton, 2013), humans can move beyond self-superiority and shift from anthropocentrism or nature-based ecocentrism toward an interconnected vision of ecology. Hence, object-oriented ontology proposes that all objects share the same ontological standing. Elsaesser and Hagener (2015) characterize object-oriented ontology as a “return to things” and note that this school of

thought reconsiders “the objects, the matter, the entities that surround us in their diversity” (p. 210). Similarly, Cohen (2012) presents object-oriented ontology as a non-anthropocentric philosophy that claims that “things possess agency, autonomy, and ultimate mystery” (p. 407). Harman (2017) emphasizes that an object cannot be fully reduced either to its parts or to the effects it produces upon other entities (p. 43).

Object-oriented ontology grants one a useful theoretical device to explore Dickens' “Night Walks”. The nocturnal rambler's ambulatory method anticipates object-oriented thinking by destabilizing the human as the centre of perception, and rendering London as an agentive field of entangled, withdrawing objects, both material and human. To read “Night Walks” through object-oriented ontology allows us to discuss how Dickens frames London not as a backdrop, but as an ontologically active agent, and to explore in what ways inanimate urban elements such as benches, gas lamps, buildings, stones and walls exhibit agency or withdrawal in the object-oriented ontological sense. To examine “Night Walks” through this perspective is to question whether we can read the nocturnal city as a massive, immersive, and ultimately incomprehensible “hyperobject” in Morton's terms, whether we can apply Morton's concepts of withdrawal and strange strangers to Dickens' descriptions of objects. We can further investigate how Dickens interacts with the city, never fully knowing it but being shaped by it, and how Dickens's representation of the urban poor blurs the line between human subject and non-human object. Moreover, we can explore Morton's idea of the mesh, the entangled web of objects, including humans, where no entity is self-contained; we can ask whether Dickens exhibits ontological humility, in line with the object-oriented rejection of total human access to object-truths, and “Night Walks” stages the limits of human perception in a materially entangled world.

Read through the lens of object-oriented ontology, London in “Night Walks” appears as an animate city. Dickens describes the nocturnal city as the sleepless city that emerges as a non-human actor. Therefore, London is not just a backdrop but an agentive, affective, unknowable presence. This aligns with the object-oriented refusal to treat place or architecture as inert. The city breathes, perspires, haunts, moans, shifts, and withholds its essence. Streets, buildings, and night fog become quasi-characters, interacting with the narrator, Houselessness. He refers to nocturnal London as the sprawling creature, which is almost a hyperobject in Morton's terms, massive and locally intimate yet impossible to grasp wholly. This perspective de-centres the human. Dickens is dwarfed by the city's indifference and vast material complexity. Besides, Morton's concept of the strange stranger refers to the familiar that always escapes full knowledge. The fog, gaslight, and shadows complicate stable perception, which suggests the object-oriented approach that the essence of things always withdraws, and objects assert a subtle agency. Nonhuman objects are strange strangers. Dickens lingers on mundane or discarded urban objects: gas lamps, shutters, paving stones, doorways, imbuing them with eerie significance. These objects withdraw from full comprehension; they evoke mood but retain autonomy. The city's detritus and infrastructure possess a kind of ontological thickness; they shape experience and meaning, rather than simply serving it. The object-oriented ontology involves a non-hierarchical attention to the built world.

Houselessness and His Object-Oriented Approach

Dickens (1860) points out that the object of these nocturnal walks is “to get through the night” as these walks connect him with those who spend every night wandering for the same reason; he adds that he has gained a thorough education through his “experience of houselessness” (p. 149). This experience of houselessness is of great importance in this essay as it is repetitively employed to describe his experience through the posthuman city. The subject dissolves as Houselessness, capitalised, takes over his body, assumes his identity, and the parts of the body are modified through this defining adjective: houseless. As he confronts “the night perspective” and the “restlessness” of the city, he contemplates “houseless people,” including himself, in the streets of London, which tumbles and tosses before it gets to sleep (p. 149). The “houseless people” contemplate the restless city at night (p. 149). These people of the nocturnal city keep company with one another; this sense of “companionship” evinces that they are not homeless, for the cityscape is their home, where these companions share their bread with each other, as the French word *pain* for bread etymologically reminds us (p. 149). They are houseless in the sense that they are unhoused; their bodies and minds are unhoused, undomesticated, leave their houses and become the houseless eyes and ears of the nocturnal city that absorbs them. They are dispersed in the diaspora of the nocturnal nomads. The fragments of their bodies are scattered over the city; the organs of their bodies are diffused throughout the nightscape. When the pubs close for the night and the potmen force the remaining noisy drunkards out into the street, they are left with “stray vehicles and stray people” (p. 149). These wandering things and scattered people are the vagrants of the city. London has “expiring fits and starts of restlessness” as though it were imitating its individual citizens (p. 150). Drunkards are brawling, cabs are rattling by, and frays turn up. “Houselessness” observes that the drunkards seem to be naturally drawn to one another, as if by magnetic attraction (p. 150). This is the critical moment when the houseless subject disappears, and instead, Houselessness itself takes on the role of the subject. In other words, “Houselessness” assumes the subject position of the grammatical sentence, observes “intoxicated people” who are “magnetically attracted towards each other” (p. 150). Houselessness unifies these intoxicated people who are irresistibly pulled toward one another, as if by a magnetic force. The posthuman city becomes a massive magnet; people are naturally drawn to one another in this moment of chemical interaction; human beings morph into magnetic materials interacting with one another, like two currents flowing into each other, in a magnetic field created by the movement of electric charges. The emotional bonds between these intoxicated individuals manifest materially as physical forces of attraction. They are materially re-assembled; the posthuman city electrifies these intoxicated people. They are enraptured, transported, or displaced. The drunk subject vanishes, being replaced by drunken objects: “one drunken object” lurching unsteadily against the closed shopfront will fraternise or fight with “another drunken object” that is also tottering against the shop’s shutters (p. 150). Eventually, “these flickering sparks” die away and London sinks into rest (p. 150). From this point forward, Houselessness becomes fragmented and dispersed throughout the city. The “houseless mind” yearns for any hint of companionship and the “houseless eye” searches for the glow of lights in nearby windows (p. 150).

Wandering through London beneath the patter of rain, Houselessness sees “nothing but the interminable tangle of streets” (p. 150). Things and beings are entangled in this nocturnal web of streets and alleys. Then, Houselessness notices a furtive face peeking from a doorway a few yards ahead and approaches it, only to discover a man standing rigidly upright, concealed in the

doorway's shadow, clearly engaged in no lawful or useful purpose (pp. 150-151). The man strives to fit in the doorway's shadow, becoming the shadow itself, and thus disappearing, which is yet another example of a body becoming a thing. Fascinated and in an eerie silence befitting the hour, Houselessness and the man silently study each other from head to toe, and leave, suspicious of one another, "without exchange of speech" (p. 151). They are engrossed in a ghostly silence; they are like spectral beings, neither dead nor alive; these spectres do not speak with one another, for they are in the non-linguistic realm of the nocturnal city. They are not humans; rather, they are non-human things. Silence reigns supreme in this asymbolic nightscape; language does not signify anything for Houselessness and the houseless shadow. They eye one another, communicating through specular means; they become mirror images of one another. Shadows interpenetrate in this nocturnal hall of mirrors. Then comes the steady drip of water from ledges and roofs, splashing from pipes and spouts, until "the houseless shadow" stretches across the stones leading to Waterloo Bridge (p. 151). The houseless shadow drips from the ledges, splashes from pipes before it settles upon the stones; the houseless shadow becomes water, turns into water drops; the body morphs into a thing and the subject turns into an object. Water drops intermingle, so the distance between Houselessness and the houseless shadow is blurred; the houseless shadow melts into Houselessness. The houseless shadow is the shadow of Houselessness. After all, all houseless shadows are the same. The familiar grammar and punctuation of the sentence itself render the familiar unfamiliar.

The "houseless mind" then desires to greet the toll keeper at Waterloo Bridge and to catch sight of his fire (p. 151). A warm fire, a sturdy greatcoat, and a thick woollen neck-shawl are comforting sights, especially when seen alongside the toll keeper (p. 151). Besides, the toll keeper's "brisk wakefulness" makes for fine company as he rattles the halfpence onto his metal table, like someone who challenges the night, embracing its melancholy without concern for the approaching dawn (p. 151). Houselessness likes to confront the night perspective, to see things from the perspective of the night, to challenge the night and its melancholy, and to be indifferent to the approaching morning. Houselessness needs to be encouraged "on the threshold of the bridge" as the bridge feels bleak and desolate (p. 151). The river appears grim and haunting, with the buildings along its banks veiled in "black shrouds" (p. 151). The lights reflected in the water seem to rise from its depths, as though the ghosts of those who drowned were lifting them to reveal where they sank (p. 151). The restless moon and shifting clouds move like a guilty conscience tossing in a disordered bed and the vastness of the city casts a heavy, oppressive shadow over the river (p. 151). The immensity of London that casts a heavy, oppressive shadow over the river devours all houseless shadows that roam the streets of the nocturnal city.

Houselessness then comes upon the theatres. Within these theatres, it is grim and lonesome because the seats are empty, the lights are extinguished, and the rows of faces fade out (p. 151). Houselessness speaks of Yorick's skull as an object that represents death; nothing knows itself inside the theatres but Yorick's skull. Houselessness attributes self-knowledge or self-awareness to an object that embodies death (pp. 151-52). Houselessness reminisces that during one of his night walks he crossed the outer edge of one of these theatres, even as the church steeples quivered in the wind and stepped inside (p. 152). Holding a dim lantern, he made his way to the stage and stared into the emptiness beyond the orchestra, which resembled a vast grave dug for a time of plague (p. 152). Since the chandelier had gone dead, nothing was visible in the immense dismal cavern; he could only see tiers of winding-sheets through mist. The theatre was dehumanised and

looked like a desert. Looking at the floor, Houselessness remembers the drunk peasants of Naples dancing and singing among the vines without even caring about the burning volcano which was going to kill them; the floor where they were dancing was now possessed by “a strong serpent of engine-hose” which was “watchfully lying in wait for the Fire and ready to fly at it if it showed its forked tongue” (p. 152). The way Houselessness describes the serpentine hose makes one imagine that it has a life of its own; peasants are gone, and the hose reclaims the space for itself. He recalls that the upper gallery of the theatre was haunted by “[a] ghost of a watchman”, who was holding “a faint corpse candle”, appeared and flitted away (p. 152). Houselessness reduces the watchman to a spectral being, thereby de-humanising the scene, or stripping the space of its human occupants. The theatre was inhabited by the spectres. He looked up towards the rolled-up curtain, yet his sight lost itself in a dark vault rather than him losing his sight; his sight, acting of its own accord, showed some faint indications of “a shipwreck of canvas and cordage” in the gloomy vault; he felt as if he were a diver at the bottom of the sea (p. 152). The stage had lost its human elements; the setting shifted into an uninhabitable space where human beings could not exist.

Houselessness keeps on walking the streets where there is no movement, decides to walk towards Newgate, to touch its rough stones, to contemplate the inmates as they are sleeping and to cast a glance at the lodge over the spiked wicket to catch sight of the fire and light kept by the watchful turnkeys (p. 152). Feeling nostalgic for the past and complaining about the current times, Houselessness makes his “houseless circuit of the Bank” (p. 153). He crosses London bridge, goes down by the riverside among the buildings of the brewery; there he keeps company with the horses at their mangers. Mingling with this “good society” refreshes him, heartening him to make a new start. The King’s Bench prison appears as the object of his view; there he resolves to think of the Dry Rot in men, a “very curious disease” which was difficult to detect at the beginning (p. 153). He recollects Horace Kinch who died of this disease “like some fair-looking houses or fair-looking ships” that suffered from the same disease (p. 153). Those who suffer from the Dry Rot often loiter idly at street-corners with no apparent purpose; they seem to do nothing tangible or to intend to perform some intangible duties later (p. 153). Those who are afflicted with this malady rot like houses or ships, become unintelligible like the ambivalent corners of the streets, deteriorate like the stones of the city, smell like strong waters in the morning, and no longer respect money; their limbs tremble, crumble to pieces like wood and turn to dust the rotting buildings of the city (p. 154).

Houselessness then wanders by Bethlehem Hospital through “those houseless nights” because he has “a night fancy” in his mind that he feels could best be followed while within view of its walls and dome (p. 154). He imagines that the sane and the insane are alike at night, for the sane lie dreaming in their beds (p. 154). His nocturnal vision levels all. Dickens renders the homeless as part of the cityscape. This reflects the posthuman flattening of the ontological field. Object-oriented ontology complicates traditional humanitarian ethics by refusing to privilege the human subject. Therefore, the boundary between the sane and the insane, which is the foundation of the daily life, becomes blurred in his nocturnal vision. Those outside the hospital dream in the same way as those inside the hospital. He claims that the sane nightly persuade themselves that they are associated with kings and queens while the insane do so daily; he argues that the sane nightly jumble events, places, times and persons, while the insane do so daily. He further asserts that the sane are sometimes troubled and vexed by their inconsistencies, whilst the insane are

troubled and vexed by their "waking delusions" (pp. 154-55). The insane fly during the day, whereas the sane fly at night; the sane turn insane in their dreams.

Houselessness then entertains his "houseless eyes" with the Parliament; as he keeps on walking, the walls of the Courts of Law keep him company; those walls whisper to him about the wretched people they keep awake (p. 155). Westminster Abbey becomes his "fine gloomy society" for fifteen minutes, conjuring in his mind a magnificent procession of the dead moving through its shadowy arches and pillars (p. 155). Those "houseless night walks" even include cemeteries, the "enormous hosts of dead" of the old city (pp. 155-156). When the church clock strikes in the dead of the night, his "houseless ears" mistake it at first for company. When he perceives "the spreading circles of vibration" which open out and widen eternally, he then rectifies the mistake and feels "the sense of loneliness" more profoundly (p. 156). When the clock strikes three, he comes across "a thing that in a moment more I should have trodden upon without seeing, rose up at my feet with a cry of loneliness and houselessness, struck out of it by the bell" (p. 156). Houselessness and this thing study one another intently, "frightened by one another" (p. 156). Houselessness describes the thing: the creature resembled a beetle-browed, hair-lipped youth of about twenty, wrapped in a loose bundle of rags that it clutched with one hand; it trembled violently, teeth chattering, and as it stared at him, seeing him perhaps as persecutor, devil, or ghost, it opened its whining mouth as if snapping at him like an anxious dog. Hoping to give this pitiful figure some money, Houselessness reached out to calm it, but it recoiled, whining and snapping, and when Houselessness placed his hand on its shoulder, it instantly slipped out of its garment, leaving him alone holding only its rags (p. 156).

Towards the morning, he goes to Covent-garden to get coffee; as he sits over his "houseless cup", ruminating about where to go next, he encounters a "mysterious man" who takes "a large cold meat pudding" out of his hat, stabs it instead of cutting it when he is left alone in his box, and then takes the knife out, wipes it on his sleeve, tears "the pudding asunder with his fingers" and swallows all of it (pp. 157-158). He remembers him as "the most spectral person" that his "houselessness" has encountered as he looks like a cadaver (p. 158). Then he goes to the train station; he defines the engine of the locomotive as an animate being that blows, heaves, perspires and wipes its forehead. Just before the lamps are out, he feels he is "houseless and alone again" (p. 158). Finally, he watches the cattle driven along the main road, eager to push into narrow gaps between stone walls or squeeze through tight iron railings. They lower their heads, imagining attacks from non-existent dogs, and in doing so create an immense amount of needless trouble for themselves and everyone around them (Dickens, 1860, pp. 158-59). Now "the conscious gas" begins to grow pale with the knowledge that daylight is coming, and workers are already in the streets, and waking life is rekindled with the fires of the first street vendors; Houselessness is now tired and could go back home and sleep (p. 159). The essay ends with the houseless wanderer who is alone in the nocturnal desert. He is fully aware of where vice and misfortune lurk, yet they are kept out of view, leaving his houseless wanderings to roam freely and alone across miles of streets (p. 159). Houselessness shifts to the first singular pronoun "I" again at the end of the essay. In the morning, he is no longer a non-human dweller of the nocturnal city; he is re-humanised.

Conclusion

Human figures are objectified, and objects are animate in "Night Walks". Dickens' engagement with the urban poor, particularly the homeless, often involves an uncanny

objectification; he describes them as bundles of rags, huddled heaps, almost merging with the city's material refuse. Humans and objects merge in the nightscape. Dickens' gaze treats people as part of the urban ecology of objects. Simultaneously, Dickens frequently animates inanimate things, suggesting a fluid ontological boundary between subject and object. This reinforces the object-oriented idea that humans are not ontologically privileged; they are among objects, not above them. The boundary between humans and non-humans becomes porous.

Objects do not lend themselves to the penetrating gaze of humans. Houselessness sympathises with the houseless objects and does not try to reduce objects to entities that humans could fully grasp. Objects remain as withdrawn objects in the nightscape; the narrator acknowledges what he cannot know: the inner lives of the figures he observes, the full workings of the institutions he glimpses, and the soul of the city itself. This echoes Morton's assertion that all entities are ultimately withdrawing, mysterious, and resistant to total understanding, requiring epistemic humility. Houselessness is not a detached observer; he is embedded, vulnerable, insomniac. Suggestive of Morton's understanding of ecological entanglement, the walker is part of the object-network of the city. The walk becomes a mode of onto-epistemology, not just seeing, but being changed by, the world of things. He opens himself up to be changed by the things that he observes.

Reading "Night Walks" through object-oriented ontology shifts focus from social realism to material ontology, highlights the agency of the nonhuman world, encourages one to see Dickens' text as an early intuition of posthuman entanglement, where bodies, buildings, stones, walls, lamps, engines, horses, cattle and fog co-constitute urban experience in Victorian London. This approach dissolves the divide between subject and object, human and non-human, material and immaterial. Hence, "Night Walks" foreshadows a non-anthropocentric ontology, even if unconsciously. This reading complicates Dickens' legacy as a realist by emphasizing withdrawal, opacity, the autonomy of things, entanglement, and interconnectedness in a posthuman London imagined by a posthumanist Dickens.

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