

SPECTRALITY AND ABJECTION IN THE STORIES OF CHARLES DICKENS' THE SIGNAL-MAN AND HERMAN MELVILLE'S BARTLEBY¹

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Abstract: The stories of Charles Dickens and Herman Melville, *The Signal-Man* (1866) and *Bartleby* (1853) respectively, have received much critical attention more than one century to date. The settings and themes of the two stories suggest that they share a common understanding of mid-nineteenth century Britain and America in terms of urban alienation, industrialised landscape, and the division of labour. In this study, I argue that spectrality has been used as a narrative strategy to describe the experience of abjection, a psychoanalytical theory developed by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982), which refers to human reactions (such as horror or exclusion) to a breakdown of distinction between self and other or subject and object. Kristeva asserts that when an adult confronts the abject, s/he simultaneously identifies it and feels a sense of helplessness. Thus, an abject turns into a threat against the self and “it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border” (Creed, 1993, p. 65). Once the subject is driven into the world of the abject and imaginary borders are disintegrated, fear and horror become unavoidable. The occupations and eccentric characterizations of the signalman and Bartleby signify this fragile border between their selves and experiences of abjection through spectrality.

Key Words: Spectrality, Abjection, The Signal-Man, Bartleby, Urban space, Alienation, Industrialism, Wall-Street.

Charles Dickens'in *The Signal-Man* ve Herman Melville'in *Bartleby* Eserlerinde Hayalsellik ve Abjeksiyon

Özet: Charles Dickens'in *The Signal-Man* (1866) ve Herman Melville'in *Bartleby* (1853) adlı eserleri yüzyılı aşkın süredir farklı açılardan ele alınmıştır. İki öyküde olayın geçtiği çevre ve temalar göz önüne alındığında on dokuzuncu yüzyıl ortalarında İngiltere ve Amerika'daki kentsel yabancılaşma, endüstrileşen çevre ve işbölümü konularına benzer bir yaklaşım sergiledikleri anlaşılmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, hayalselliğin bir anlatı stratejisi olarak Julia Kristeva'nın *Korkunun Güçleri* (1982) adlı

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kitabında geliştirdiği bir psikoanalitik teori olan ve kişinin benlik duygusu sınırlarını koruma güdüsüyle ortaya çıkan dehşet ya da dışlama gibi tepkilerini açıklayan abjeksiyon deneyimini anlattığını öne sürmekteyim. Kristeva abjeksiyon nesnesi ile karşılaşan bir yetişkinin onu tanıyarak kendini savunmasız hissettiğini öne sürer. Bu nedenle, dışlanan nesne kişinin öz benliğine karşı bir tehdit olarak algılanır ve “bireyin yaşadığı alandan uzaklaştırılmalı, bedeninden atılmalı ve hayali sınırların ötesine itilmelidir” (Creed, 1993, p. 65). Birey abjeksiyon dünyasına çekildiğinde hayali sınırlar yıkılır ve yerini korku ile dehşet alır. İşaret memuru ile Bartleby’nin meslekleri ve eksantrik karakter tanımlamaları hayasellik stratejisi kullanılarak kişilerin benlikleri ile abjeksiyon deneyimi arasındaki kırılma sınırı işaret eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hayasellik, Abjeksiyon, The Signal-Man, Bartleby, Kentsel mekân, Yabancılaşma, Endüstrileşme, Wall-Street.

Charles Dickens’ *The Signal-Man* and Herman Melville’s *Bartleby* have received a great deal of critical attention and been subject to a number of different readings in the course of over a century. *The Signal-Man* was published in London in 1866, *Bartleby* in New York in 1853, and each story has been evaluated and critiqued separately. However, the settings and themes of the stories suggest that they share a common understanding of mid-nineteenth-century Britain and America. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror* furthermore provides an insight as to why these two stories tackle abjection similarly, as a psychological state, through the notion of spectrality and the influence of economic conditions. The disorientation and alienation that make the narratives distinctive and readable through their use of spectrality are empowered by urban alienation and estrangement of labour as a result of rapid industrialisation during the period. The signalman working at a solitary railway cutting becomes the victim of an unknown spectre, while Bartleby himself turns into a phantom for his colleagues and the people around him. The experience of abjection is successfully projected in these stories via spectrality, as well as the symbolic and gloomy setting, eccentric characterisation of the signalman and the scrivener, and finally their mechanical duties, each of which is narrated by a rational narrator.

Abjection, in Kristeva’s terms, originates in maternal rejection after the separation of the subject from the body of the mother (birth) to become a complete independent body and self. Abjection can be considered a lifelong process initiated with the subject’s exclusion of the maternal to construct an identity and maintained by separation of the self from the other within the semiotic and symbolic order. The abject also refers to “the reaction of the individual against a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other” (p. 9). The concept of the abject stands somewhere between the subject and the object and

affects the subject's psyche through different forms such as seeing a corpse, blood, food or faeces. In order to maintain proper boundaries between the self and other, the subject specifies and expunges "unclean, improper or impure things" (p. 9). While in *The Signal-Man* the distinction between reality and illusion is blurred by the appearance of a spectre haunting the signalman, in *Bartleby* the eccentric characterisation and passive resistance of the scrivener generate anxiety among his colleagues and affirm his ghostlike presence in the law office. Spectrality thus functions in these stories as an agent of abjection by generating a horror of the unknown and an ambiguity between humankind and phantom, natural and supernatural, reality and illusion.

In line with the flow of the narration in the two stories, the experience of abjection gradually unfolds through the settings of the stories and the narrators' first encounter with the protagonists. The tone of *The Signal-Man*, for instance, is described as "eerie" and the gloomy description of the landscape and the railway tunnel evokes a sense of disorientation and a divergence from the natural world toward a solitary industrial landscape (Thomas, 1982, n.p). At the start of the story, when an unnamed stranger calls to the signalman in a railway cutting, the latter looks down the line rather than at the visitor who cannot attribute any meaning to this action. The signalman's heavy movement and late reply indicate that something prevents him from responding straight away. After a train passes through the tunnel, he stands "between the rails [...] in an attitude as if he [is] waiting for [the narrator] to appear" (Dickens, 1866, p. 21). The visitor wonders at the reason for his attitude of "such expectation and watchfulness" since there is nobody else on the railway track (p. 21). Their first encounter, therefore, produces suspense and invokes tension at the outset of the story through the signalman's uncanny reaction and its influence on the visitor who cannot make sense out of it. Yet the signalman's unaccountable attitude and the verb "appear" address the appearance of a spectre that he later discloses. Interestingly, after the narrator comes down the path, he admits feeling terrified by the signalman's looks and attitudes, as if confronting something abject: "The monstrous thought came into my mind as I perused the fixed eyes and the saturnine face, that this was a spirit, not a man. I have speculated since, whether there may have been infection in his mind" (p. 21). Yet, once he notices the fear in the signalman's eyes this thought disappears and he is relieved. Hence, the visitor and the signalman go through a similar experience of seeing a spectre instead of a human being on their first encounter in the solitary and gloomy railway cutting.

The rapid movement of the train through the tunnel, which leaves vibration in the air, startles the stranger, suggesting a sudden disruption of silence in this isolated place. The railway cutting is described as "extremely deep and unusually precipitate" and the place as "solitary and dismal" as he has ever seen (p. 21):

On either side, a dripping wet wall of jagged stone, excluding all view but a strip of sky; the perspective one way, only a crooked prolongation of this great dungeon; the shorter perspective in the other direction, terminating in a red gloomy light, and the gloomier entrance to a black tunnel, in whose architecture there was a barbarous, depressing and forbidding air. So little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthy deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world. (p. 21)

The close description of the railway cutting and the tunnel evokes the idea of a limited and enclosed area that belongs to non-human rationality and an unnatural setting. The visitor is horrified by this unfamiliar and unfriendly space. It reminds him of death with its coldness, foul smell and darkness; he is unable to see anything further than the tunnel. The entrance to the tunnel is anthropomorphised as having a “mouth” that engulfs any object moving inside. As a product of industrialisation and a new transportation method in the nineteenth century, the railway cutting and the train symbolise part of a “machine city resist[ing] naturalisation” (Wolfreys, 2004, p. 15). Nature appears in the form of an altered material landscape with its innovative architecture and technology. However, with industrialisation, the relationship of the individual to space and time also changes as urban modernity creates a “surreal intensity” that produces “a strange and haunting passage between the internal and the external, between the inanimate and the living, between the individual and all of London” (p. 20). Thus, the spectrality of the station and the train represents the phantom aspect of the modern city, which intensifies the inner tension of the signalman in the story. Although the narrator is just a visitor to this place, as a rational modern individual he is also terrified by the odd materiality of the railway cutting.

From a Marxist perspective, the mechanical duty of the signalman in the isolated railway cutting signifies a threat against self in terms of the alienation of labour. His solitary job increases his estrangement, not only from his labour but also from himself as he gradually loses control over his body and mind. In “An Introduction to Marx’s Theory of Alienation” (1998), Judy Cox expounds on Marx’s claim that an increase in manufacturing and the number of factories creates mechanisation of labour, which in turn changes the relationship of labourers with machines and results in estrangement and alienation of labour. The object that the worker produces becomes a strange thing, a “power independent of the producer”, and this refers to “the objectification of labour” (n. p). Alienation occurs as the labour is separated from the labourer and it becomes something foreign to the worker. In this way, the products “of human ingenuity [become] a source of tyranny against the worker”, as Marx noted (cited in Cox, para. 17). This approach underlines the mechanisation of labour in the factories which requires new systems of discipline and in which workers

become part of a lifeless mechanism that devoid them of human creativity and ingenuity. Workmen are obliged to follow the movements of the machine rather than using it as a tool; therefore, they inevitably become independent of each other and lose control over the process of production. Furthermore, a large number of products require division of labour and thus the "subdivision of the individual", which, when it is "carried on without regard to human capabilities and needs, is a crime against the person and humanity". This kind of labour is "dead labour" and when it dominates living labour, it becomes "an autonomous power; [that] the life the labourer has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien", thereby becoming a threat against the self and mental health of the worker, as illustrated in *The Signal-Man*.

In *The Signal-Man*, for instance, the narrator describes the signalman as a man with a "lonesome post to occupy" and observes his limited duties: "Had he much to do there? [...] To change that signal, to trim those lights, and to turn this iron handle now and then, was all he had to do under that head" (p. 21). The signalman's few duties are highly repetitive and mechanical, requiring minimum manual labour and involving horrible loneliness at the signal-box, which leads to his estrangement from his work because it does not involve any creativity or ingenuity. The visitor thereafter finds out that the signalman is a well-educated man and "above the station" indeed. This information suggests that his responsibilities are lower than his human capabilities and needs; it also refers to the disorientating effects of labour through industrialisation and the growing railway system in England. His duty to signal to trains in order to prevent accidents is in fact one of the critical examples of division of labour in the story. He is obliged to stay there every day to carry on this duty outside the city, while isolation creates a tension and disorientation in his mental state. Moreover, as the narrator reflects, "being at all times liable to be called by his electric bell, and such times listening for it with a doubled anxiety, the relief was less than I would suppose" (p. 21). Therefore, despite the narrator's belief that the signalman is used to this monotonous job, his involvement in the spiritual world of a spectre justifies his broken imaginary border with abjection and the detrimental impact of his job as a threat against his self as a subject.

The signalman's trouble involves seeing a recurring spectre at the mouth of the tunnel signalling a forthcoming danger on the line; this blurs the imaginary border between reality and illusion, the natural and the supernatural, and leads to an experience of abjection through suspended anxiety and horror. Each spectral appearance precedes a tragic train accident that results in people's death. Even though the figure seems to warn him with its arm across its face, waving the other arm and shouting, "Below there! Look out!" and "For God's sake clear the way!", the signalman feels helpless as he knows that he cannot convince his colleagues about danger signalled by a phantom's words (pp. 22-5). In the age of industrialism and reason marked by the growth of the railway

system, the signalman is aware of the difficulty of making such a claim since scientific rationalism was steadily set against the supernatural and other superstitious beliefs in Victorian England. Yet, the possibility of a forthcoming danger continues to terrify him and he admits that he took the narrator for that spectre since he called to him with the same words: "Halloa! Below there!" (p. 22). Then, he reveals that the spectre appeared again recently, suggesting imminent danger on the line. During the conversation the phantom reappears twice and rings the bell, yet only the signalman sees and hears this. In response to the supernatural experience of the signalman, the rational narrator insists that it is just a deception and hallucination. He is terrified by this unnatural experience, yet in full confidence of his state of mind, he finds the signalman's "pain of mind [...] the most pitiable to see. It was the mental torture of a conscientious man, oppressed beyond endurance by an unintelligible responsibility involving life" (p. 24). The narrator interprets the signalman's experience as mental pain caused by his forbearance of his unproductive and mechanical duty at the solitary railway cutting. In contrast, the signalman is completely horrified by this sign and asks "What is the danger? Where is the danger? There is danger overhanging somewhere on the Line. [...] But surely this is a cruel haunting of me. What can I do?" (p. 24) The possibility of a forthcoming danger on the line as an experienced "reality" and the re-appearance of a spectre as "illusion", hence, produce a paradoxical effect on the signalman and the narrator who are unable to maintain a rational and consistent approach to the problem.

The increasing tension of the signalman due to the spectre signifies the power of horror and anxiety in his mind. He believes he is haunted and his identity is endangered by an appearance that he is unable to rationally explain or prove the existence of. This phantom is the most apparent agent of Kristeva's abjection in the story. Spectrality reveals the fear and horror in the signalman's mind, which is repressed by his dull and mechanical labour under the powerful effect of the industrialised landscape and urban modernity. The train accidents and casualties subconsciously remind him of the mortality of human beings. The true incessant message delivered by the spectre seems to be one of death. The train casualties imply the mortality of people as they "create" their own type of "accidents" through industrialisation, as witnessed by the signalman (Virilio, 1986). This occurs with the production of a new type of transportation, the train, and therefore, train accidents. That is, train accidents are inherent to the transportation technology through which they happen and humans' interaction with the railway system. In other words, accidents are not born of "chance" and are not "unexpected"; rather, they are "almost pre-programmed by everyday technology, always already in it" (Redhead, 2004, p. 79). The end of the signalman's story displays this situation well. The following day, when the narrator visits the railway he is shocked by a figure at the entrance to the tunnel

that resembles the spectre, yet it turns out to be a man. Afterwards, the narrator hears about the death of the signalman "cut down by an engine" on the same spot, which confirms his original fear manifested in spectrality (p. 25). The abject appearance the signalman had to confront is resolved by his own death; however, this further complicates the rational narrator's approach to reality and illusion in the story.

In *Bartleby* spectrality is instead represented in the form of a living man, the lawyer's copyist. Nonetheless, major characters confront an abject image upon the arrival of a new scrivener to the office of a rational, "eminently safe" lawyer, who is also the narrator of the story. From the reader's perspective, this means the apprehension of the abject from the narrator's point of view, not from that of the protagonist. The narrative begins with the lawyer's explanation that he is telling this story because he encountered "a scrivener the strangest [he] ever saw or heard of" and it would be "a loss to literature" not to mention this idiosyncratic man (p. 31). He uses the verb "appear" ("as he first appeared to me"), just as the narrator in *The Signal-Man* did, to describe his first encounter with Bartleby, which implies his spectral presence in the office. The use of "appear" in the two texts is closely associated with the appearance of a spectre rather than a living human, and calls into question the unclear distinction between the natural and the supernatural as well as the subject and object. The narrator makes further attributions to Bartleby's spectrality throughout the story: "Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation [...] he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage" (p. 59); "the apparition of Bartleby appeared" (p. 62); "What does conscience say I *should* do with this man, or rather ghost" (p. 90). This analogy highlights Bartleby's unclear status as an abject image, blurring the boundaries between human being and ghost. Just as the signalman believed he was haunted by a spectre, the lawyer is terrified by his uncanny employee who refuses to work, eat, or talk, and he ultimately tries to get rid of him: "Since he will not quit me, I must quit him" (p. 91); "I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of" (p. 92). Yet, Bartleby refuses to leave the lawyer, just like a haunting ghost, and his presence affects the lawyer even after he moves his office, as explained below in this paper.

At first glance, the narrative does not produce an impression of a horror story; it begins with a description of the lawyer's clerks, office and surroundings in Wall Street. The office is described as chambers at one end looking upon a "white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft" and at the other end "windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade", which suggests a place "deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'" (p. 34). Surrounded by high buildings and devoid of any natural beauty, the setting of the story is a modern city office in mid-nineteenth century America. In the chambers of Wall Street, a capitalist mode of working life in an industrialised society is maintained. With reference to

Bartleby's desk with no view and a little light behind a glass folding-door, the aforementioned brick wall, and the tomb wall at the end of the story, the image of the wall represents an impenetrable or prison-like space, a restriction to human freedom as well as a divergence from nature towards urban space. It is the impressions rather than the facts of the setting that produce an uncanny, impersonalised and alienating space inhabited by the copyists in the chambers. The limited view through walls in the story is resonant with the two-sided walls at the railway cutting in *The Signal-Man*, which isolate the signalman from the outside, as a solitary worker. Yet, while in *The Signal-Man* the setting allows for the possibility of the appearance of an apparition, in *Bartleby* the forlorn scrivener turns into a phantom and an abject image for his colleagues, threatening the authority of his employer and order in the office.

The enigmatic character and the passive resistance of Bartleby dramatically influence his reception and uncanny presence in the office. When he applies for the employment, he is described by the lawyer as a "motionless [...] pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, and incurably forlorn" young man (p. 45). Despite his uncanny looks and attitude, he works diligently and feverishly copies legal documents. The flow of the narrative alters when Bartleby declines the lawyer's order to check the accuracy of a copied document for the first time. He mildly resists and says "I would prefer not to" (p. 48). The narrator is shocked, yet he cannot decipher Bartleby's assertive manner. His odd response is repeated whenever the lawyer asks for Bartleby's help and the narrator's attempts to understand this obstinacy fails each time. He becomes more interested in this forlorn young man and finds out about his self-imposed diet of only ginger nuts. Furthermore, Bartleby never leaves the office and this incarceration worries the narrator, who cannot help him, but does not want to dismiss this hopeless clerk either. The enigmatic characterisation of this spectre-like scrivener and his rebellious manner endanger the authority of the lawyer as an employer and he is alarmed and disturbed by this despondent, uncanny employee. The other clerks detest this strange man, particularly as they have to check the copies he makes. He is an outsider in every sense in the office yet they still need his work. When he refuses to copy any longer and just stays persistently in the office doing nothing, and when even the lawyer's visitors are disturbed by the presence of Bartleby, the lawyer decides to move his office. The narrator knows nothing about this spectre man's past and he becomes a threat against everything as something unknown, but frightening and disturbing. Thus, he turns into an abject being for them and his immobility causes their movement.

Bartleby's uncommunicative attitude, isolation and despair refer to the adverse effects of capitalism and the systemic exploitation of labourers, which may result in disorientation, alienation and abjection as a psychological state in urban modernity. The subtitle, "A Story of Wall Street", addresses Melville's awareness and deliberate choice of political criticism of the capitalist mode of

production in the city. Although a Marxist criticism of the story may lead to a misreading of the text considering the humanistic approach of the lawyer and Bartleby's refusal of things other than work, the story maintains its significance in emphasising the ways in which passive resistance of a labourer may conflict with the demands of Wall Street. In this sense, Bartleby's calm determination and resignation at work stand for a response to "forced labour", a term coined by Marx in *Alienation of Labour* (1844). Since he acts only according to his will, Bartleby cannot comply with the demands of the office where everyone is expected to work and be content. While other copyists frequently use the phrase "with submission", Bartleby only "prefers" to do or not to do something (p. 38). Although the narrator acknowledges the collapse of humanity in the capital world in response to Bartleby's passive resistance and desperation, he fails to resist it like Bartleby; the lawyer dismisses Bartleby and moves his office. Bartleby transcends into a phantom by not eating, sleeping or going out. He seems to have lost his productivity and functionality in his daily mechanical duties. His allegedly previous job at the Dead Letter Office in Washington also points out Bartleby's detachment from his labour, which is adversely influenced by his unproductive style and the limitations of working life and transform his self into an abject image, although he is the real victim of the capitalist system. His duty as a subordinate clerk to handle undelivered letters that are annually burned reveals an intimate link between dead objects and dead men in the story. This analogy signifies the aggravating influence of the unproductive and mechanical work that "speed [Bartleby] to death" as the narrator implies. By the same token, his spectrality can be interpreted as a reaction, a consciousness of independence, his free will and power. He is devoid of the pleasures of everyday life and turned into an abject spectre for others through the paradoxical influences of urban modernity and alienation of labour. The fact that he "know[s] where [he] is" and dies near a tomb wall soon after he is imprisoned signifies his self-consciousness and free will to choose "death", which is hastened by his persistent refusals (p. 102).

Dickens' *The Signal-Man* and Melville's *Bartleby* corroborate the experience of abjection as a psychological state through spectrality and the detrimental influences of industrialisation and the alienation of labour in nineteenth-century England and America. Whilst in Dickens' story, the solitary signalman is haunted by a spectre that warns him about forthcoming train accidents and casualties and he cannot distinguish between reality and illusion, in Melville's parable, Bartleby transcends into a spectral man through his passive resistance, ghostlike presence and enigmatic behaviours. At the foreground of the two stories, the urban settings of the gloomy, dark and walled railway cutting and the lawyer's office in Wall Street evoke a feeling of an isolated and impersonalised place that lays out preconditions of an unnatural setting and disorientation. Urban space is used to convey a dreary impression of

spectrality through workers whose work and selves are slyly subdivided. Abjection manifests itself in the unproductive and solitary occupations of these two enigmatic characters and points out the fragile border between self and other, reality and illusion, nature and industrialised landscapes. In *The Signal-Man*, the image of the spectre he sees at the mouth of the tunnel confirms his original fear of death, whilst in *Bartleby*, the protagonist himself stands as a source of threat against capitalism, the authority of the lawyer and his colleagues. The image of walls and mechanical labour in these stories function as agents of abjection; they represent the vulnerability of the signalman and Bartleby in terms of their psychological health, unity of self, and the capacity for a coherent and meaningful life. Confronting an abject image and not being able to exclude it, the signalman experiences a dreadful helplessness and fear, whilst Bartleby displays an irreversible passive resistance to his responsibilities and chooses to live on his own terms. Yet, the ultimate death of the protagonists in both *The Signal-Man* and *Bartleby* points out the difficulty of expelling the abject and maintaining a coherent life on one's own terms in a capitalist system, representing urban alienation in New York and London.

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