



The Writer and the City

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SOMETIME AROUND 1856 – he doesn't specify the exact year – Charles Dickens was having trouble sleeping. His self-imposed remedy was to go walking in London, and come home tired at sunrise. He did this for several nights and was cured of his insomnia. In his essay 'Night Walks', he charts his wanderings. The month is March, the weather damp and cold. His main object, he tells us, is to get through the night, a pursuit which brings him into sympathetic contact with people who have no other object every night in the year. As the clock strikes three, Dickens encounters a shivering young man, dressed in loose rags, on the steps of St Martin-in-the-Fields. When he puts his hand on the creature's shoulder, it twists out of its garment and flees, leaving Dickens holding a bundle of rags. His walk ends at Covent Garden market, where he finds coffee and toast — and the spectacle of a man who takes out of his hat a large, cold, meat pudding, which he proceeds to consume with his bare hands. Seventy-four years after Dickens' night-walk, in the year 1930, Virginia Woolf sets out from Bloomsbury to the Strand. Her object is not to get through the night but to purchase a pencil. Under cover of this excuse, she tells us in her essay 'Street Haunting', she can safely indulge in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter — rambling the streets of London. Woolf speculates about the people she encounters: a dwarf in a shoe shop; a stout lady tightly encased in shiny sealskin; an old man squatting on a doorstep. 'In what crevices and crannies do they lodge?' Woolf wonders. 'Perhaps in the top rooms between Holborn and Soho, where people have such queer names and pursue so many curious trades — gold beaters, accordion pleaters, cover buttons.' She then speculates that such a life, so fantastical, cannot



be altogether tragic. Ninety years after Virginia Woolf's walk, in January of 2020, I emerge from my flat in Fitzrovia. I live at the back of what was once a late-Victorian tenement, filled with Woolf's people of queer names – mostly Jewish – who covered buttons and pleated skirts for the grand emporiums in nearby Oxford Street. It is teatime and I am in search, not of a pencil, but a bag of satsumas and an *Evening Standard*. There is a man outside a fashionable coffee shop, consuming a large chocolate cookie while reading Nietzsche; a woman with hair like straw; a child riding a scooter kamikaze-style past shuffling pedestrians. Every few blocks there is a beggar stationed outside a supermarket. These unfortunates are more organised than the wretches whom Dickens encountered: they perch on suitcases, displaying cardboard signs testifying to their hunger, signs which I once witnessed a gang-master distributing in a deserted street near a tube station. I have yet to spot a man producing a cold meat pie from his hat but it's just gone 5 pm; I continue walking.