

NATURALISM AND MODES OF LITERARY PRODUCTION IN GEORGE GISSING'S *NEW GRUB STREET*

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The present paper attempts to read Gissing's *New Grub Street* as the product of a crisis in the British literary system towards the end of the nineteenth century. This crisis is traced in both the storyline and the formal choices made by Gissing in order to convey it. In terms of the events in the narrative, the vital options and frequent failures of the characters are presented as inevitable given the circumstances. As regards formal aspects, the adoption of naturalism determines this inevitability, since it relies on reified worldviews which cannot offer a truly dynamic portrayal of society.

1. NATURALISM, FATE, AND THE SUPERSTRUCTURE

Gissing's 1891 novel *New Grub Street* deals with the literary careers of a set of characters. In keeping with the procedures of naturalism they are described in terms of their adopted mode of production. Naturalism relies for its portraits of society upon a 'map' which is in itself a naturalised (indirect) reflection of the division of labour. In doing so, it turns its back on the sum total of forces which shape society (its ideology, contradictions, and struggles), therefore jeopardising its possibility of achieving proper understanding of a given historical moment. Because of this ideological tendency, an author who may be a radical (e.g. Zola) produces works which are ultimately reactionary. Naturalism employs an anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois rhetoric, but its syntax relies on capitalist, bourgeois ideology.

This point has been analysed in depth by Georg Lukács, who in *The Historical Novel* (see particularly 171-250) argues that naturalism is caught in immediacy. The establishment of the bourgeoisie as the new hegemonic class implied the decay of the tradition of the realist novel. A new worldview set in, one of whose main characteristics was precisely mistrust of history as a process in which all classes participate. History becomes *private*. Consequently, the delicate balance which classic realism negotiated between individual characters and historical forces is lost.

Where history becomes an abstract entity with no direct connection to characters, their experience must necessarily become impenetrable. As the

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connections between historical events and professional life fade away, the latter becomes a blurred domain which cannot be comprehended, and congeals into inexplicability. Naturalism tends to present this area in the greatest possible descriptive detail, with careful choice of technical vocabulary. According to Lukács, this phenomenon attempts to compensate for the loss of perspective, and results in myopic attention to peculiarities to the detriment of wider issues. Hence the importance given to the environment of the characters: where real historical consciousness is absent, determinism offers an apparently coherent alternative.

Such a rejection of history is perhaps more noticeable in those naturalist novels focusing on the lives of workers, as this concern loses sight of other classes. If the narrative is only concerned with the lives of the working class, if these are treated as a self-sufficient sphere, minute description will take the place of a complete sociohistorical perspective, and these lives will become meaningless. They will be ruled by phenomena that will be incomprehensible because they originate outside the area of interest of the narrative, and therefore dehumanised. In other words, as Lukács points out (206), attempts to deal exclusively with the lives of the working class have reactionary results because they ignore the sphere where the impositions upon it are devised.

In *New Grub Street*, failure, when it arrives, is accepted and seen as unavoidable. Following Lukács, Fredric Jameson has argued that this sort of resignation is implied in the very idea of naturalism, and remarkably active in Gissing's novels:

Gissing's conception of a novel about "the people" [Jameson is referring primarily to *The Nether World* here] is a form of high naturalist specialization that seeks to pass itself off as a map of the social totality. In effect, the attempt to endow this ideological concept with literary representation systematically reveals its own inner contradictions: if the "people" functions successfully as a merely classificatory concept, the characters of the novel will be reduced to nothing more than illustrations of their preexistent essences, and the novel can at best merely repeat over and over again the class warnings described above— which, in the present context of the dynamics of narrative, can be rewritten as an actantial injunction: do not attempt to become another kind of character from the one you already are! (Jameson 1996: 190-91)

This view is particularly relevant to the odd passivity of the characters in *New Grub Street*: Reardon cannot and will not change his 'style', despite the threat of starvation, just like Biffen is happy to live in direst poverty for the sake of his novel. Fate or social relations have imposed upon these artists the burden of scarcity, and they acquiesce in it, as Reardon tells his wife:

'Society is as blind and brutal as fate. I have no right to complain of my own ill-fortune; it's my own fault (in a sense) that I can't continue as well as I began; if I could write books as good as the early ones I should earn

money. For all that, it's hard that I should be kicked aside as worthless just because I don't know a trade.' (Gissing 1891: 160)

Thus, it would seem that form (naturalism) influences content (the difficulties of struggling authors) to a larger extent than we usually acknowledge. We are used to the idea that a given topic determines a formal choice; but the reverse is also possible. In the present instance, then, an analysis of the ways in which naturalism determines the narrative is of the greatest importance.¹ However, naturalism seen in this way can only explain the attitude of the characters regarding failure, not failure itself. The latter stems from a –fictive and actual– crisis in the literary market which made it impossible for authors to earn a living by writing *unless* they surrendered to its demands. This theme, however, is itself not free from ideology.

2. THE LITERARY MARKET

Gissing's novel can be seen as both a symptom and a diagnosis of this crisis: the plot concerns a number of modes of literary production but, qua plot, it is part of a text which is equally caught in the same dynamics. This is because *New Grub Street* is largely the fictive articulation of an anxiety which loomed large over the literary world in Britain: the overt or covert impression that the 'tyranny' of the readership was strangling authors who were not commercial. This crisis is best understood as the combination of two factors. From the point of view of a novelist, these are the subjective and the objective. The former is fairly straightforward— the process of deification of art and the artist which had started in Romantic times was reaching its zenith with aesthetic tendencies of the *L'art pour l'art* persuasion. Thus, Huysmans's *À Rebours* dates from 1884, D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere* from 1889, Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* from 1891. These novels, and many others, are manifestations of completely autonomised art,² and contain more or less developed celebrations of the figure of the artist as a natural aristocrat.

The second, objective factor is specifically related to Britain: the emergence of the publishing industry as we understand it nowadays. This is the other side of autonomous art: as far as material conditions go, the late nineteenth century marks the clearest schism with the patronage system. Not because patronage is less and less frequent (this had also been the case for the High Victorians), but because the dramatic growth of reading public continues over this period, precipitating a new publishing establishment. While innovations such as the royalty system could provide authors with more profitable contracts, they also meant that, from this moment on, a writer needed also be aware of commercial aspects of his/her work. Aestheticism, the literary movement to try hardest to erase all traces of production from the text, coexisted with the open admission that literature is as subject to the laws of capitalism as cotton, ships, etcetera. Tensions between these two spheres had to arise sooner or later. *New Grub Street* can be seen as the expression of precisely one such tension.

¹ See Jameson 1996, and also Jameson 1974 for a more theoretical discussion of this matter.

² For the process of autonomisation of art, see Bürger 1984: 35-54.

Let us consider the transition from three- to one-volume novels. The three-decker was definitely abandoned around 1895, but the signs of its decline had been apparent for some years. In *The Haunted Study*, Peter Keating gives as one of the reasons for this change the artificially high price of three-deckers (1989: 9-87). This had as a consequence a lack of purchase by individual readers, and a dependence upon the designs of the circulating libraries. While this dependence made it possible for publishers to obtain a certain margin of benefit, it also meant that the three-decker would become economically unviable as soon as these conditions were modified. When this happened, and the single-volume novel became the norm, the change left a trail of discontentment among authors, something which Gissing narrativises in *New Grub Street* as Reardon's hopeless struggle with the new mode of literary production: "The one-volume story which he had calculated would take him four or five weeks was with difficulty finished in two months" (Gissing 1891: 154). Reardon explains the situation to Milvain in terms of needs to be met:

'For anyone in my position,' said Reardon, 'how is it possible to abandon the three volumes? It is a question of payment. An author of some repute may live on a yearly three-volume novel—I mean the man who is obliged to sell his book out and out, and who gets from one to two hundred pounds for it. But he would have to produce four one-volume novels to obtain the same income, and I doubt whether he could get so many published within the twelve months.' (Gissing 1891: 165)

The previous mode had been dominant for a long time, so that it had been shrouded in literary mystique, i.e. it had greater literary status despite the fact that it had been established—as, in turn, was the single-volume novel—with commercial concerns in mind. This is the obvious reason why in *New Grub Street* the sensitive artist, Reardon, writes three-volume novels and is unable to produce single-volume ones. This inability is also rationalised in terms of labour: the effort and pressure are presented as inhuman, the poverty brought by the ruthlessness of the industry as intolerable. A neat image of this is provided in the form of the clock of the Marylebone workhouse which Reardon hears with dread during his sterile toil. If we take that the writers in *New Grub Street* are the workers in the novel's schema, we realise that they have the same abstract attitude to history which Lukács describes in *The Historical Novel*, in that they live in a period of historical (socio-economic) change, but are unable to relate to it or understand how it affects their lives. But, even though literature is a form of labour in *New Grub Street*, it is an idiosyncratic form of intellectual labour: ultimately, the effort, pressure, poverty and ruthlessness are so many ways of referring to the tension between an ideology which sees artists as gifted creatures who need leisure and inspiration, and the emergence of the publishing industry.

3. THE ABSENT TERM

A striking fact about *New Grub Street* is that although the sympathies of the text lie with Reardon, and to a lesser extent with Biffen, their passivity and

resignation mean that they are not posited entirely as characters with whom the reader can empathise. The narratorial voice says as much:

The chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen. They merely provoke you. They seem to you inert, flabby, weakly envious, foolishly obstinate, impiously mutinous, and many other things. You are made angrily contemptuous by their inability to get on...

But try to imagine a personality wholly unfitted for the rough tumble of the world's labour-market.... Nothing is easier than to condemn a type of character which is unequal to the coarse demands of life as it suits the average man.... You scorn their passivity; but it was their nature and their merit to be passive. (Gissing 1891: 348)

The division of labour stamped upon the fictive universe makes it necessary that the artistic characters are presented as inherently predestined to failure, and are not only incapable of succeeding in the world of literature, but also of earning a living otherwise. This determinism makes it harder to grasp where the blame lies, and what the object of Gissing's critique is: if Biffen and Reardon are not to be scorned, then there must be someone or something causing their distress. But the passivity present in the novel means that this cause does not lie with characters such as Milvain or Whelpdale, not even with unscrupulous publishers, but with the gigantic abstractions of the masses and the trade.

This is one of the blind spots of the text: there is an absent centre in the schema traced by the characters' modes of literary production. If integrity is failure, and success equals cynicism, inauthenticity, and submission to the market, then the paradigm collapses because there are no other options. Reardon is *passé*, left behind; Biffen is consciously, impossibly dull; Milvain is a pawn in the literary game, and Whelpdale moves into the area of mass culture, and therefore out of the realm of Literature. This clear-cut division, which is in keeping with Lukács's characterisation of naturalism, has been perceptively described by Rachel Bowlby:

The relatively mechanical and monetary ordering of literature –in its values, its producers, its publication and consumption– is assumed or invoked throughout *New Grub Street*, and always implicitly by way of comparison with a different state of affairs which formerly existed. As Amy Reardon counsels her novel-writing husband: "Art must be practised as a trade, at all events in our time. This is the age of trade" (V, 91). Literature has lost its distinctness as an "art", and become absorbed into the general logic of "trade". The novel itself formally reproduces this dominant rationality of mechanical order in its grouping of characters around pairs of symmetrically opposite terms: old and new, passive and active, idealists and pragmatists. The same counterparts represent thematically the historical trajectory which the narrative, and its

characters, assume in the recent or ongoing takeover of art by commerce. (Bowly 1985: 102)

This is often held to be an aspect of Gissing's bleak worldview, but it can be seen as a general feature of naturalism. There is no symbolic reconciliation of contradictions or resolution of conflicts in *New Grub Street*. Instead, determinism is also apparent regarding those characters who succeed. Milvain's is as much an overdetermined choice as any other in the novel: if the only way to achieve his goals is, as the narrator puts it, to "welcome kicks so long as halfpence follow" (Gissing 1891: 348), that will be his lot. Accordingly, he is not judged too harshly and is allowed a happy ending. Much more interesting is the case of Whelpdale, the only character to take an active role in mass culture (Milvain merely participates in it), with his literary advice service first and *Chit-Chat* afterwards. Both ventures are allusions to contemporary instances: the proliferation of advice books for writers (Keating 1989: 71-74) and the apparition of *Tit Bits* and similar magazines (Keating 1989: 297; Williams 1985: 175-81). Whelpdale is not condemned, but his discourse provides a hint as to the nature of the problem: this is the presence of the 'quarter-educated'. The quarter-educated would be the increasingly large social group accessing literacy for the first time in history. Such group awoke the anxieties of the keepers of officially-sanctioned culture, who perceived it as a threat bound to level down standards.³ Whelpdale shares this prejudice, and benefits from it:

Let me explain my principle. I would have the paper address itself to the quarter-educated; that is to say, the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board schools, the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention. People of this kind want something to occupy them in trains and on buses and trams. As a rule they care for no newspapers except the Sunday ones; what they want is the lightest and frothiest of chit-chatty information— bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery. Am I not right? Everything must be very short, two inches at the utmost, their attention can't sustain itself beyond two inches. Even chat is too solid for them: they want chit-chat. (Gissing 1891: 376-77)

These masses, the quarter-educated, together with the industry or trade, are the semi-cosmic entities to be blamed, abstract and one-sided at the same time. Abstract, because 'the masses' or 'trade' cannot be made accountable, so that the problem of literary production remains immutable. One-sided, because these entities, as long as they are taken as phenomena inherent in literary production, are not related to the dynamics of capitalism. By this conundrum the actual entities behind masses and trade are concealed with only these two reified signifiers in their place.

4. RESENTIMENT AND LITERATURE

³ This topic is lucidly analysed in Carey 1992.

The question, however, is whether *New Grub Street* can be seen as an exploration of mass-cultural literary production as embodied by Milvain (light prose and adulation) and Whelpdale (broken-down bits of information), or a glorification of more primitive modes such as Reardon's or Biffen's. No doubt it is both these things, but the deeper dynamics of the novel points at what Jameson has analysed as *ressentiment*. Jameson argues that the problem of the alienated intellectual in Gissing is frequently related to inter-class marriage (a crucial topic in *New Grub Street*) and the question of earning a living. This trope functions in much the same way as the 'quarter-educated' did: a transmission of guilt from the individual into an external entity, be it trade or inter-class marriage, so that resentment takes the place of self-loathing. At the same time, Jameson's analysis of alienation can be useful for the present discussion:

Now we must specify this motif still further, for it is clear that the author of *New Grub Street* does not understand the "alienation" of such intellectuals in the Romantic sense of the *poète maudit* struggling against the philistine masters of a business society, nor even in the Mallarmean terms of the structural alienation inherent in writing and linguistic production. On the contrary, alienation here designates class alienation and the "objective treason" of intellectuals permanently suspended between two social worlds and two sets of values and obligations. (Jameson 1996: 200)

This definition of alienation is crucial in order to understand the nature of the conflict between modes of literary production in Gissing's novel. There is a complex relation between the chosen mode and marriage and class (Edwin and Amy Reardon, Milvain and Marian Yule, Milvain and Amy Reardon); additionally, from Gissing's earlier novels on, the identification with a collective has always been negative rather than positive. The changes in the literary mode of production, which are not explained, but only presented and resented, shape a collective of authors who are left behind. There is hardly anything, other than poverty, in common between Biffen and Reardon: the *déclassement* mentioned by Jameson acts as the cohesive factor.

We have seen that Milvain and Whelpdale, the two characters who manage to interact with the new mode of production, are not condemned to the extent that the reader could possibly expect. The main difference between what they represent and what Biffen and Reardon do is precisely *déclassement*: literary production as trade brings with it complicity with new rules (adulation of powerful figures, submission to the market) whose reward is financial comfort, and entry into the bourgeoisie. Failure to achieve this is equated with authenticity, but also with marginality. The Reardons counted upon such achievement of success to counteract Edwin's lower social origin, and it is his failure that breaks the marriage. The Yules act as a mirror image: Mr. Yule blames his lower-class wife for his own failure, and Milvain breaks his engagement to Marian for basically the same reason. This symmetry is, as Jameson points out, an important feature of Gissing's *modus operandi*:

One of the structures by which Gissing can seek at least partially to relativize the finality of individual destinies is a use of echoing subplots in which the protagonists of each offer a *combinatoire* of the objective variants still possible in this increasingly closed universe. But these possibilities are no longer related, as in the Balzacian system, by the investment of a single wish-fulfilling impulse. They are now, as it were, merely empirical variants, and their relationship is determined by Gissing's appropriation of the naturalist paradigm discussed earlier: a kind of specialized division of official "subjects", such as feminism or freelance journalism (in the two novels referred to above), which nonetheless here become a kind of lens or refracting medium through which a group of destinies is linked, whereas in French naturalism the organization by topics was a means of differentiating the content of various narratives. (Jameson 1996: 196)

This *combinatoire* of different possibilities regarding the same topic is a direct consequence of a tension in Gissing's management of characters: as Carey points out, his favoured devices when introducing a character contradict each other. Gissing tends to focus on either the physiognomy of the character or the contents of his/her library. This suggests a struggle between mutually exclusive approaches to the psychology of characters (Carey 1992: 94).

Biffen is one such case. By his physical appearance and bearing he is presented as an aristocratic figure, even though his chosen aesthetic forces him to live in the direst circumstances. As regards cultural standards, he is presented as a member of the aristocracy of the intellect, stoically enduring extreme poverty for the sake of his art.⁴ The cultural values he endorses correspond to those endorsed by Gissing. Yet, remarkably, there is no resentment in Biffen. He is presented as above material concerns, and experiences his own *déclassement* mainly as wretched loneliness: "Only he who belonged to no class, who was rejected alike by his fellows in privation and by his equals in intellect, must die without having known the touch of a loving woman's hand" (Gissing 1891: 402). His is also the case in which literature and life are shown to be closest: having published his *Mr Bailey, Grocer*, and having lost his best friend, his existence is aimless and he commits suicide. Among his last actions are turning an upside-down book on his shelf, and arranging his writing materials on the table. His mood is described as harking back to the lighter period when "as yet no mission of literary realism had been imposed upon him" (Gissing 1891: 404).

Thus these two confronted modes of literary production differ in the social implications of each of them. The older mode (represented by Biffen and Reardon) is best defined by an internal contradiction. On the one hand, the artist *must* devote him/herself to the practice of art, with no deviation from personal style and qualities. S/he is to be absolutely single-minded and, in that sense, professional: that is why it does not matter if Reardon's novels are *passé* or if Biffen's is dull. But on the other

⁴ Regarding the aristocracy of the intellect, see Carey 1992: 71-90 and 93-117.

hand, these artists must also be completely naïve regarding the economic and social aspects of their practice, i.e., they must also be dilettantes. This contradiction may be seen as a derivation of the belief that artistic values are atemporal, and therefore ahistorical. This is the interpretation proposed by Bowlby:

But whereas a Milvain will contrast "heroic" with "civilized" or "the man of business" with the "dreamy literary fellow" (XXXII, 503) to stress his own modernity, a Reardon helplessly asserts the higher reality of values expressible only in terms of difference from those of contemporary life. Thus artistic ideals necessarily take on a social meaning different from any they may have had in classical Greece or Shakespeare's England, if only because it derives from their opposition to particular modern forms of life which were not in existence then. This, in ideological terms, is the structural polarity experienced by working idealistic writers as an absolute contradiction between the two incompatible extremes of the art and the trade, the poet and the machine. (Bowlby 1985: 115)

As to the second mode, as seen in Milvain and Whelpdale, it lays all the stress on the social aspects of literary practice. In Milvain's case, the milieu is the clique which forms taste and can impose authors or develop a backlash against them. In Whelpdale's case, it is mass culture proper: this approach is defined by a blatant cynicism which aims at the lowest common denominator. This mode of production cannot grant the status of Artist to its practitioners, but it takes them from squalor to middle-class prosperity. Gissing never allows the presence of the bourgeois myth of the self-made man, unless in a negative light. Thus, if Milvain and Whelpdale prosper, it is at a high cost: the loss of any cultural validity. Yet the blame for this loss is not put on the characters themselves but on fate or trade. They have perceived –just as Amy Reardon did– that the *Zeitgeist* moves in a given direction, and they make haste to follow it. It is not Milvain or Whelpdale who are portrayed as ignoble, but the times.

In the scheme of things outlined in *New Grub Street*, the culture industry is seen as, in Bowlby's words "the production of trite popular magazines for (but not by) 'the quarter-educated'" (116). Although this configuration is not presented in the name of progressive values, it confronts us with the origin of an institution which is nowadays hegemonic. Thus, as soon as we forsake the abstract realm of the masses, the propriety of 'giving people what they want' is destabilised: who are 'the people' and what do they want? Even if no further reference is made to the readership of those products, the case of Whelpdale triggers in the reader issues of class perception and exploitation.

5. CONCLUSION

If we see the anxiety articulated in *New Grub Street* as provoked by a shift in the dominant mode of literary production, the peculiar attitudes with which this shift is met by characters standing for a previous mode become clearer. The new paradigm had as one of its consequences a heightened awareness of literature as a

form of trade, subject to the laws of capitalism. Some of the ideological effects of these laws make themselves felt on the novel. For instance, under capitalism the 'laws of the market' undergo a process of reification. Essentially, they are laws devised by human beings, and forced upon human beings. However, as they become hegemonic, they are naturalised and ideologised to the extent that they are seen as unchangeable, cosmic laws, merely *the way things work*. Under such conditions, reactions to capitalism often take the shape of false consciousness, displacing the blame from the mode of production to social groups or individuals. Similarly, Reardon and Biffen are left behind by these immutable laws, while Milvain and Whelpdale obey them and benefit from them. But no one questions these laws, because they are not seen as such but as fate, or else the sign of the times.

It is this reification that imposes the particular resignation of the characters in *New Grub Street*: the *ressentiment* present in the text does not come from its characters, but from the narratorial, perhaps we may even say authorial, voice. From this point of view, we may understand that the "alienated intellectual" which Jameson sees as crucial in Gissing's novels of maturity does not apply only to characters (Jameson 1996: 195). It is also a textual attitude which makes itself felt in the characteristic bleakness of the narrative. This bleakness was perceived when the novel was published, and attributed to Gissing's naturalist practice (Keating 1992: 31-32). Such a critical reaction was perhaps superficial, but it nonetheless was, in a way, right.

The three different modes of literary production or literary styles taken into account in this essay have in common that they impose certain ideological phenomena: Reardon's autonomous art relies upon a concept of the artist as a creature not of this world; the culture industry (for Whelpdale represents its genesis) implies a cynical conviction that the majority of the population is primary, uneducated and beyond redemption.⁵ These are part of the fiction; the third one, naturalism, is the style of the text itself, but that is not to say that it is free from ideology. On the contrary, as we have seen, it imposes a number of constrictions upon the narrative. These are not related to the choice of plot, but to the relation to totality, as Lukács would put it. Naturalism, because of its dependence on a taxonomy which is a consequence of the division of labour, deals with a reified worldview. Consequently, the possibility of understanding the forces of history in a given society is aborted, simply because it is a synecdochical configuration, whereby the parts (a social formation, or several) are taken for the whole (the totality of the social spectrum).

The division of labour implies that characters such as Reardon and Biffen cannot reinvent themselves as producers in a different mode, hence their fatalism and passivity. We may conclude that the portrayal of literary production in *New Grub Street* is mediated by the implications of naturalism. This literary world, therefore, needs to be related to history in two instances: first, in order to understand

⁵ This belief is mirrored by some of Gissing's opinions regarding the working class: see Carey 1992: 93-117; Jameson 1996: 189-96; and, particularly, Williams 1985: 175-81.

the origin of the anxieties which are articulated in the novel. And second, so as to gain a deeper insight into the ideological elements of this fiction, and the reasons for its ultimate pessimism.

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