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Bachelor's thesis

The Anxieties that Degrade

Poverty and Agency in George Gissing

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The 19th century's explosive industrialisation and subsequent urbanisation made the issue of urban poverty perhaps the most salient problem of the Victorian era (Altick 41). Overwhelming in scope and visceral by nature, it became a favourite topic for many a novelist. George Gissing, writing in the century's last quarter, was one such novelist. Gissing placed a particular emphasis on the mental toll of poverty, as evidenced by his novels *The Nether World* (1889) and *New Grub Street* (1891). In these novels, poverty is a constant presence in the minds of the characters, a spectre haunting them even when not aware of it. In turn, this makes poverty a self-perpetuating phenomenon. This depiction of poverty is consistent with modern cognitive research on the cognitive load of poverty, as carried out by Anandi Mani, Sendhil Mullainathan, Eldar Shafir and Jiaying Zhao. Through his acute awareness of the mental toll of poverty, Gissing demonstrates how wealth has a transformational power in a free market society, and how urban poverty in conjunction with capitalism as an ideology realises the characters as *subjects* in a dual sense, a process literary theorist Louis Montrose terms *subjectification*:

[the process that] shapes individuals as loci of consciousness and initiators of action, endowing them with *subjectivity* and with the capacity for agency; and, on the other hand, it positions, motivates and constrains them within – it *subjects them to* – social networks and cultural codes, forces of necessity and contingency, that ultimately exceed their comprehension or control. (Montrose 827)

This, the question of agency, the freedom of the subject in Victorian England's free market economy, is at the core of both novels. It was also an important social and political question at the time, as it was often held that poverty was inextricably linked to a poor moral character, laziness and/or lack of intelligence (Altick 171). In modern times, behavioural scientists Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir (121) have called this the "culture of poverty" view, the view the poor remain poor thanks to deviant values, misinformed decisions and impulsive behaviour. In *New Grub Street*, Edwin Reardon is one character accused of such shortcomings. The talented and artistically ambitious author struggles with a writer's block as he tries to produce a follow-up to his moderately successful debut, all the while staring poverty in the face as he has to support his wife and infant son. His foil, Jasper Milvain, enjoys a rise inversely proportional to Reardon's descent and ends up marrying

Reardon's widow, administering a posthumous dose of Darwinian humiliation to poor Edwin. Dubbed "Jasper of the facile pen" (*Grub Street* 403), a moniker that conveys both his high rate of production and the shallow nature of his work, Milvain represents a spirit of cynical opportunism, a caricature (or true-to-life portrait, depending on your view) of the industrious self-help ideal many Victorian subscribed to (Altick 170). Where Milvain sees opportunity, Reardon is mired in anxiety. Convinced that his poverty has in fact handicapped his creative faculties, Reardon calls for the field of medicine to offer an explanation, and says to his wife Amy:

A physiologist ought to be able to discover some curious distinction between the brain of a person who has never given a thought to the means of subsistence, and that of one who has never known a day free from such a cares. There must be some special cerebral development representing the mental anguish kept up by poverty. (*Grub Street* 177)

Reardon's talk of a "special cerebral development" is appropriate for an age that saw Darwin and the natural sciences redefine human nature as malleable and ruthlessly competitive (Altick 230). Both *New Grub Street* and *The Nether World*, of course, are novels with a brutal Darwinian streak. There is no need for a priest or a philosopher, but a physiologist; it is the brain, not the soul, that needs investigating. Here, the physiologist is the neutral arbiter, the blade of science personified that must, almost by necessity, arrive at a disinterested conclusion. The purpose seems clear, or rather: the purposes seem clear. Reardon's purpose is to explain his writer's block to his wife Amy, while Gissing's purpose is to show that poverty permanently damages the psyche, in ways yet unmapped. Both bids are rooted in the same contradiction: Reardon's subjectification on account of him being assigned the paradigmatic role of "the author", a role approximating what Montrose (825) calls the "freely self-creating and world-creating individual of so-called bourgeois humanism", while inevitably being subjected to market forces beyond his comprehension.

The investigation Reardon called for did, eventually, come about. In 2013, Anandi Mani, Sendhil Mullainathan, Eldar Shafir and Jiaying Zhao published a study on the effects of poverty on cognition. One of their discoveries was that pressing financial concerns significantly taxed the cognitive abilities of their respondents, even when they were not making financial decisions (Mani et al. 976). Their find was that, on average, poverty produces a cognitive deficit that is as taxing on the mind as it is to lose a full night's sleep or being an alcoholic (Mani et al. 980). What does this imply? First off, that irrational and self-destructive behavioural patterns observed in the poor, may be a result of poverty itself, and

that poverty is a phenomenon that reproduces itself. The second implication, and perhaps the more significant for reading a novel written in the 19th century, is that it challenges essentialist notions that links poverty to moral character. Instead, emphasis is put on the context of poverty (Mullainathan and Shafir 124-5), the power of seemingly trivial factors to influence behaviour and decision-making. For Gissing, this is often realised through writing of poverty with the language of illness. In Clara Hewett, poverty is a “disease”, a “deadly outcome of social tyranny which perverts the generous elements of youth into mere seeds of destruction” (*Nether World* 86). As in *New Grub Street*, Gissing turns to the language of medicine, and in a chapter named “Pathological”, at that.

When it comes to the matter of poverty in *The Nether World* and *New Grub Street*, there are differences that must be brought to light. As heralded by its ominous title, *The Nether World's* setting is among the lowest of the low: the world of destitute poverty. The plot is almost entirely confined to the claustrophobic lodgings and narrow streets of the Clerkenwell slums. *New Grub Street* concerns itself with a group of writers adapting and maladapting to a ruthless literary market. The denizens of *The Nether World* are worse off than those of *New Grub Street*, but that does not mean their psychological stress is incomparable. For the purposes of their cognitive study, Mani et al. (976) define poverty as “the gap between one’s needs and the resources available to fulfill them. [Poverty] encompasses low-income individuals (...) as well as those experiencing sharp transitory income shocks”. Reardon and his writer friend Harold Biffen definitely belong to the latter category, as their income follows the ebb and flow of their writing. Sue McPherson (503) has already remarked that *New Grub Street* is a novel that complicates moral judgment of the poor, in that Reardon and Biffen belong to an intellectual, yet “sinking” class of writers. If a common psychological response can be detected in the writers of *New Grub Street* and the proletariat of *The Nether World*, this further complicates such a judgment.

As *The Nether World* draws to a close, Sidney Kirkwood, once an aspiring artist, finds himself unable to read; it has become a “thing of the past”, and there is “never a moment when his mind was sufficiently at ease to refresh itself with other men’s thoughts or fancies.” (*Nether World* 374). Note that it is not time itself that is lacking, but a state of mental peace, of available cognitive resources. Sidney is something of a precursor to *New Grub Street's* Edwin Reardon, representing what Fredric Jameson (182) calls an “alienated intellectual”. Reardon, naturally, has his circle of writer friends, but in *The Nether World*, Kirkwood is alone in his artistic sensibilities and talents, perhaps barring the far less sympathetic Bob Hewett who turns to forgery. This spiritual solitude is underlined by Gissing’s styling of

ideas and stories as the possessive “other men’s thoughts or fancies”. There is good reason to believe that for Sidney Kirkwood, reading was a way to approximate an intellectual and artistic union with the kind of milieu found in *New Grub Street*. He is now married to the disfigured recluse Clara, and must support her siblings as well as her ageing father, John Hewett. He is surrounded by more people than ever, yet finds himself secluded intellectually and spiritually on account of his inability to read. He is, in fact, dealing with the attentional capture of poverty, dealing “not just with a shortfall of money, but also a concurrent shortfall of cognitive resources” (Mani et al. 980). A most depressing result for the man who is arguably *The Nether World’s* most likeable character, and yet another defeat for he who is subjectified as an artist.

That Kirkwood should face such an undeserving fate, should bear testimony as to why Gissing was considered a great realist in his time (Matz 217). Though we are certainly claiming that Gissing’s grasp of the psychology of poverty is realistic, one must be careful to read a “slum novel “such as *The Nether World* as a true-to-life documentary of Clerkenwell, as Fredric Jameson (173) points out. Gissing was dubbed an “imperfect realist” by Virginia Woolf, while others applied the label of “idealistic realism” to his writing (Matz 243). To learn about life in the Victorian slum, one can turn to Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, a proto-ethnographic collection of observation and oral stories gathered by the *Punch* founder in the middle of the 19th century. In this excerpt, Mayhew recalls talking with “mud-larks”, children who scavenged the riverbed for anything saleable:

There was a painful uniformity in the stories of all the children: they were either the children of the very poor, who, by their own improvidence or some overwhelming calamity, had been reduced to the extremity of distress, or else they were orphans, and compelled from utter destitution to seek for the means of appeasing their hunger in the mud of the river. (Mayhew 182)

The “painful uniformity” speaks to the brutal indifference and loss of individuality in the London slums, and poverty’s degrading influence on the children who are also described as “dull” and “stupid” (Mayhew 181). In *The Nether World* (194), the narrative voice interjects that no child can escape a childhood of poverty without “his moral nature uninjured”, and that the damage is irreparable to “certain characters”. Gissing’s view throughout both novels seems to be that even though poverty is degrading mentally and physically, some types will come out on top. Others will be damned and ridiculed for their failures, especially in the vicious literary milieu of *New Grub Street*. Gissing expounds on the matter in the two opening paragraphs of *New Grub Street’s* 31st chapter, “A Rescue and a Summons”, in which

the narrative voice seemingly justifies the very existence of his doomed writers Reardon and Biffen. Aaron Matz (233) calls this passage “a crucial moment in Gissing’s fiction” and a “sort of apologia”:

The chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen. They merely provoke you. (...) You are made angrily contemptuous by their failure to get on; why don't they bestir themselves, push and bustle, welcome kicks so long as halfpence follow, make place in the world's eye – in short, take a leaf from the book of Mr Jasper Milvain?

But try to imagine a personality wholly unfitted for the rough and tumble of the world's labour-market. From the familiar point of view these men were worthless; view them in possible relation to a humane order of society, and they are admirable citizens.

Here, Gissing clearly saw a need to pre-emptively defend Reardon and Biffen from a host of accusations. Amongst them, their “failure to get on”, or in other words, their failure to make money, their failure to realise themselves as agents in the market economy. Again, the logic is almost scientific, approaching that of animal taxonomy. the problem is not necessarily Reardon and Biffen, it is rather that they are borne into a situation to which they are maladapted from the get-go. What Gissing is really defending his poor writers from, is moral judgment by way of the fundamental misattribution error: our tendency to place an exaggerated emphasis on internal, personal factors, and undervalue the importance of constructed external factors (Mullainathan and Shafir 125). Once again, the question is fundamentally that of the subject's *agency* within Victorian capitalism, here explored through Reardon's overwhelmed mind.

Gissing makes no abstractions when it comes to the day-to-day struggle of being poor. It is about one thing: money, cold hard cash., there is always rent to be paid and always food to be put on the table. The amount currently being worried about tends to be specified, which would certainly convey the state of misery to the contemporary reader. Gissing accurately portrays the smaller margins of error the poor must take into consideration, as when Sidney Kirkwood worries about a broken windowpane: “These petty expenses, ever repeated, were just what made the difficulty in his budget; weekly income of which every penny was too little for serious needs of the family.” (*Nether World* 371). Seemingly minor setbacks mean a great deal more to the poor, which is another source of anxiety and worry (Mullainathan and Shafir 121). This, in turn, magnifies any perceived incompetence or carelessness. Simply put:

the poor cannot afford to make mistakes, neither fiscally nor socially. Kirkwood's window means less food on the table; Reardon's writer's block is an existential threat to his family, and it ends up emasculating him as his wife leaves him. The want of cash is relentless in *The Nether World* and *New Grub Street*, and Fredric Jameson notes money has replaced authentic desire in Gissing:

The exclusive preoccupation in Gissing with the anxieties of money, the misery of hand-to-mouth survival, the absence of independent means or a fixed income, is a way of short-circuiting this intolerable alternative [the displacement of authentic desire], for it positions the realization of genuine desire in the future, in that Utopian fantasy of a life situation in which one would finally have the leisure necessary to write. (Jameson 192)

With this displacement of desire, Gissing gives wealth a transformational power that goes far beyond material standards of living. Wealth, far from a corrupting force, becomes a potentiator that remains inaccessible to most of his cast. Gissing frequently reminds the reader of what could have been if only the characters had been born to different circumstances, as in the previously quoted "apologia". In another example, Bob Hewett turns to forging coin, though he is "[a man] vaguely aware of certain faculties in himself for which life affords no scope and encouraged in various kinds of conceit by the crass stupidity of all with whom he associates" (*Nether World* 217). Again, a man whose fate is dictated by his surroundings, whose agency as a subject he seems to have a faint idea of, yet he remains powerless to act upon.

This dual potentiality, the dichotomy of possible selves whose outcome is decided by wealth, is a recurring theme throughout these novels. Amy Reardon, for example, completely re-estimates her husband's "mental condition" the moment she learned that a "respectable post was within his reach" (*Grub Street* 314). His torments and shortcomings are now considered "peculiar features natural to a character such as his". All of a sudden, his quirks are excusable on account of his literary talent, they are no longer a handicap. With this, Gissing briefly resurrects Reardon as a valorous cliché: the tortured artist, a quintessential archetype if there ever was one. The banal character of this re-evaluation is testified by it coming from, of all people, the person who knows Reardon best, his wife Amy.

Another effect of poverty that Gissing accurately portrays is a certain kind of fatigue produced by prolonged exposure to poverty, one expressed through tone of voice and movements. Mayhew observes the same in a fish seller:

A little lower is the cry, in a woman's voice, "Fish, fried fish! Ha'penny, fish, fried fish!" and so monotonously and mechanically is it ejaculated that one might think the seller's life was passed in uttering these few words, even as a rook's is in crying "Caw, caw". (Mayhew 159)

Here, the indifference is palpable, and it is certainly the kind of aural backdrop one should keep in mind when reading of the never-ending strolls through Clerkenwell in *The Nether World*. The adjective "mechanical" is consistently used by Gissing, perhaps to indicate a certain kind of alienation from the flesh, or his characters being reduced to cogs in a machine. Clara Hewett eats "mechanically" and speaks with a tone of "weary indifference", whilst her widowed father John Hewett speaks with a "hollow voice" to his children *Nether World* (95, 244, 366). Reardon talks like an "automaton", and later on displays a "dulled doggedness" and speaks with an "unmodulated" voice to Milvain (*Grub Street* 134, 246). The reduction of people to automatons and machines indicates, once again, their loss of agency within capitalist ideology. It is ironic that Jasper Milvain, who operates much like a machine, ends up being the winner of *New Grub Street's* rat race. With no care for artistic integrity nor taste, Milvain not only writes whatever the market craves, he also engages his sisters to do the same, turning his family into a business. *The Nether World*, as noted, deals with a lower strata of society; it is filled with manual labourers, rather than writers and publishers. Gissing sometimes takes a harsher tone against the denizens of Clerkenwell, a tone that seems to communicate feelings of disgust as well as fascination: In this description of Jane Snowdon's abusive mistress, Clem Peckover, Gissing displays her near-bestial nature as she plots how to further degrade Jane:

Having on the spur of the moment devised this ingenious difficulty for the child [stealing the money Jane owes Clem's mother], who was sure to suffer in many ways from such a conflict of authority, Clem began to consider how she should spend her evening. After all, Jane was too poor-spirited to a victim to afford long entertainment. (...) She had in mind a really exquisite piece of cruelty, but it was a joy necessarily postponed to a late hour of the night. (*Nether World* 8-9)

This exquisite piece of cruelty? Nothing less than locking her servant up for the night in a cramped space that also happens to room a coffined corpse. To Clem, abusing her servant Jane is just one of the "necessaries of independent life, and it would have cost her much discomfort had she been required to live in a more civilised manner." (*Nether World* 259). Several characters in *The Nether World* have a slow descents into alcoholism, rage or depression that are neatly mapped out for the reader, allowing as McPherson (503) noted of

New Grub Street, a suspension of moral judgment. Clem Peckover, however, remains distinct in that her violence is blamed on her stock, not on her circumstances per se. She is the product of a family line to have undergone “brutalised serfdom”, and her position over Jane makes her a “thrall suddenly endowed with authority” (*Nether World* 6). It seems that in this scenario, the greatest sin was to give power to someone not bred for it. After all, we can detect an essentialist thinking in Gissing’s writing, as not all psychological defects can be blamed on lived poverty. Not that this would be realistic in the slightest, of course, but the irredeemable Clem’s existence among Clerkenwell’s poor is noteworthy, nonetheless. Fredric Jameson, too, notes the author’s seemingly contradictory attitudes to the lower classes, and offers a symptomatic reading:

This [middle-class moralizing] is why a book like *The Nether World*, (...), is best read not for its documentary information on the conditions of Victorian slum life, but as testimony about the narrative paradigms that organize middle-class fantasies about those slums and about “solutions” that might resolve, manage, or repress the evident class anxieties aroused by the existence of an industrial working class and an urban lumpenproletariat. (Jameson 173).

Jameson’s reading is chiefly based on Clara Hewett’s failed attempt to escape the slum via an acting career, only for her class-transgression to be punished when her rival disfigures her face with vitriol; Jameson (176) considers this an emphatic “class warning” to stay in one’s place. Clem, the thrall inappropriately turned taskmaster, is another character that is “out of order” in the scheme of things. If poverty is a cognitive background noise that ruins the lives of so many other characters, Clem, on the other hand, seems to feed of the chaos. Indeed, Clem can be said to impersonate the chaos. However, her out-and-out malignancy remains a rarity among Gissing’s characters, as not even Jasper Milvain, he of the facile pen, can be said to be a villain in the strictest sense. An opportunist and a schemer, yes, but not a malevolent force. The malevolent force in *The Nether World* and *New Grub Street* remains poverty and its psychological toll on the characters.

How, then, are the novels to be read? Jameson has already noted the seemingly contradictory views of the poor on display in *The Nether World*. Gissing is sometimes disgusted, sometimes charitable. Whatever contradiction this stems from, Gissing makes no attempt to resolve it within the novels, as most of his characters meet unhappy fates. Not even love can save his protagonists. In other words, there is no solution to the problem of poverty on the table: Gissing’s forte remains that of relaying, that conveying the lived experience of poverty as a one of continuous psychological pressure, paranoia, and anxiety. The mental

portraits he paints combine with a claustrophobic vision of London to form an impression of poverty that is at times harrowing and hopeless, but nonetheless humanising.

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