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Living in an (Im)material World:
Consuming Exhausted Narratives in *New Grub Street*

By
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“We need a moratorium on essays about the death of literature,” said an LA Times columnist in spring 2015. An ambitious proposition, especially if that moratorium extended to all essays on death: the death of newspapers, of books, and even of iconographic Facebook, whose fall from popularity we declare semi-regularly. These deaths have yet to occur, but we live in their anticipation. We even rhetorically enact them, in deference to a tacit law which discards the past as a “useless encumbrance” of outmoded styles of consumption (Ulin, Lasch xviii).

But is that encumbrance necessarily useless? In this paper, I argue that George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891), which narrates the deaths of two realist novelists and has been called an “epitaph for Victorian fiction,” lives out its own virtual death to good purpose (Taft 379).¹ This work can convert its formal problems to critical utility because, though it is possible to locate a form’s “moment of inevitable decline” in popular usage, its absolute end is difficult and perhaps impossible to find (Ibid). In *New Grub Street*, Gissing uses this exhaustion to direct attention to an even more dead-end *social* form: consumer society. The realist novel’s transitional state, he alleges, conserves social possibilities that newer vehicles of consumption might discard.

This is not, then, just the realist novel rising up like Banquo’s ghost to point out its killer. It is an early manifestation of an ongoing issue, which novelist Tom McCarthy articulated recently to the ire of the LA Times writer. In a striking metaphor, he says that 21st century fiction speaks for the living dead—for zombies. Noting that it is now impossible for fiction to fully represent our global and digital society, he argues that fiction writers must critique the technology that would take over realism’s world-mapping project. This is the better of two choices that their outmoded position offers to them: an opportunity to reanimate bodies “already

¹ Taft’s article is a critique of genre theories of exhaustion: “[G]enre theory, indispensable though it may be, must account for the longevity of genres, their ability to thrive in new environments, as well as their disappearance.” (Taft 379) See also Matz, 2004, to which Taft responds, and Jameson on realism: “We find we are thinking, not about realism, but about its emergence; not about the thing itself, but about its dissolution.” (Jameson 1)

seized hold of and written” by corporate data and media, but that are nevertheless “carrier[s]” for “half-forgotten legends that have not yet been decoded.” (McCarthy) The other, more tempting choice—to jump the consumer society ship in “some naïve escapist fantasy (of individual self-expression...)”—must be resisted (Ibid). The socially meaningful novelist will consent to remain inside, speaking for the human remains that go unhappy, ungratified, or misunderstood in a world of high speed consumption.

Gissing faced an earlier form of this issue and the two choices it offers. He can appear like a proto-Jonathan Franzen, railing against commercial literature as Franzen now rails, more generally, against “the groupthink of the Internet” and pervasive “technoconsumerism... [which has] nothing to do with being a human being.” (Franzen in Fassler) Where Franzen advocates that writers literally retreat to WiFi-less cabins, Gissing took refuge from mass culture in resignation, “gradually ceasing to express indignation at anything and all” and giving up, over the course of the 1880s, on progressive “movements of the day” as anything but “artistic material.” (Letters II.254, IV.74) However, frustrated as he was, the disaffected artist wrote *New Grub Street* from the inside, some would say from as far inside as he could go, given the autobiographical elements present in this tale of writers who struggle to consume—to eat, to enjoy, to acquire—in a society that no longer finds them meaningful.² By showing the humanity in this desire to consume, despite consumerism’s palpable inhumanity, *New Grub Street* indicates the degree to which 19th century realism can help us reframe and thus reopen the assumed, the naturalized, and the seemingly finished. It rewrites “big society” in a manageable way by drawing attention to what McCarthy calls (adapting Michel de Certeau), the “cries

² Gissing wrote *New Grub Street* on the brink of starvation. He also gifted more specific details; e.g., when a minor character, Whelpdale, talks about itinerant years in America spent writing short fiction and surviving on peanuts.

breaking open the text,” the bodies that awaken zombie-like because they harbor a mysterious something that is untranslatable by consumerism (Gagnier, 2011; McCarthy).³

Gissing knew he could not hold the entire world in miniature—he critiqued realism’s alleged “objectivity” as “worse than meaningless”—yet he made this critique in an essay called “The Place of Realism in Fiction” (1895), where he also praises realism’s continued ability to show the world what it did not want to see and accordingly “kept out of sight.” (Gissing qtd. in Matz 222) In *New Grub Street*, Gissing not only unearths forgotten bodies, but also examines the system that keeps them hidden. McCarthy calls this system “automatic reading,” a term he uses in an anthropological sense (bestowing meaning on a situation) but which also addresses the literary. Just as consumerism supplies meaning to human activities via data-analyzing apparatuses and economic processes, consumerism itself can be read more or less discriminatingly by the individuals who experience its effects (McCarthy). This is where the novel intercedes. It provides itself as the point at which consumerism both reads and is read.

In this paper, I will use several analytic pairings to explore this dual reading: material and immaterial, narrative and non-narrative, technology and style. The broadest pair is material and immaterial, which distinguishes between the world as it objectively or physically “is” and the ideas used to describe this world. I will not go into materialism or Hegelianism as such. For me, “material” will apply to those formal features in *New Grub Street* that support and represent the current socioeconomic situation of consumer society. “Immaterial” will apply to residual forms that lack material support, or persist in opposition to consumer society as unrealized social possibilities.

³ Talking of the value of Victorian studies, Regenia Gagnier notes that where we wield “general, statistical” words, Victorians tried to live in the “good society” with narratives that linked the “individual” and “particular” to public questions.” (Gagnier, 2011)

By this definition, Gissing's narrative is material in that it follows the logic of consumerism: it determines which characters will live and which will die according to who consumes properly. Narrative is how consumerism "reads" the bodies of consumers. *New Grub Street's* supra-narrative is the commercial success of journalist Jasper Milvain and the commercial failure of novelist Edwin Reardon, a trajectory emplotted through two sub-narratives. In the first, Jasper forms and breaks an engagement with Marian Yule, a repressed literary woman and foil for Edwin. In the second, Edwin's marriage to the socially ambitious, Milvain-ish Amy dissolves in estrangement and separation. In both relationships, the commercially unviable partner must be eliminated for the other's success. Accordingly, Reardon dies, Marian self-exiles, and Amy and Jasper marry.

In contrast to this narrative law, *New Grub Street's* non-narrative features express ideas that question consumerism and enable ways of thinking that are materially "exhausted" to remain immaterially vital and critical. The love plot assists in the creation of these spaces by laying bare the gap between consumerism as a style of being experienced by individuals and consumerism as a material technology which reproduces itself throughout social structures. *New Grub Street's* women are essential in this regard, for—to adapt Havelock Ellis's observation of 1890—its "men are idealists, in search of wealth usually, sometimes of artistic visions" and as such have "little capacity for social organization." (Richardson xiii) Gissing marks Amy and Marian as social organizers by making them the chief beneficiaries of a will—that of their uncle, John Yule, who regards modern men as "weak, flabby creatures." (NGS 24)

Yule's skepticism gives a hint early in the novel as to where social power—by default—must now lie. It lies with the women who "read" or assess the potential of their male companions, in counterpoint to how consumerism reads the same figures. Marian and Amy

uncover within Jasper, Edwin, and their fellows immaterial “visions,” some of which lend themselves to reproducing consumerism’s material organization of society and some of which are totally incomprehensible through a consumerist lens. Jasper’s principles are the most reproducible, and Amy proves to be the best reproducer. In the pages that follow, I will analyze Amy as an automatic reader, or a reader who commodifies her reproductive function and becomes a part of consumerism’s reading technology. I will treat Marian as someone who suffers at the hands of this technology because she sympathizes with immaterial principles, or styles of being, that are incompatible with it. She reads with a kind of imaginative cynicism that acknowledges consumerism’s ascendancy but locates meaning in what it fails to describe: the other ways of being that persist in living people despite being culturally “dead.” Finally, I will argue that Gissing conceives of his novel in material and immaterial terms to offer his readers this choice between automatic and imaginative reading. The interplay between *New Grub Street*’s highly consumable consumerist narrative (a material, organizing technology), and the novel’s non-narrative and more speculative moments (an immaterial critical surplus), discourages intellectual complacency that would concede to consumerism or take refuge in exile.

I will begin by analyzing Jasper and Marian’s relationship, in order to establish how *New Grub Street* novelizes consumerism and converts its social system into a narrative instrument that excludes deviant characters. In doing so, I would like to establish that Gissing’s novel is valuable not because it is free from consumerism, but because it can harbor and criticize its discourse. The novel form is built to offer this dual coercion and resistance. Its realistic narrative constitutes an argument about the world as it is, but its volumes are also a repository for conflicting and residual ideas about that world. *New Grub Street* indicates how, as the realist novel’s ability to authoritatively represent the world declines, its repository function can lend

itself to protest against that universalizing narrative by keeping outdated figures visible. As a literary form that is always “dying,” it can resuscitate social forms thought to be left for dead.

Consumer Individuation as Character Exploitation: Jasper and Marian

For Gissing, writing was a cynical enterprise, one which required—as he advised his brother in 1884—that the novelist not “rail” against social iniquity in his work but rather “treat the situation with an assumption of calm curiosity, taking it as an outcome, which does not at all surprise you, of competitive industrialism.” (Letters II.254) In order to be credible, or present an “impression of knowledge of life,” he thought it necessary to “*take for granted* your reader’s knowledge” of certain social phenomena (Ibid). His particular phrasing—presenting not life, or even the knowledge of life, but the impression *of* knowledge *of* life—is an intellectual trick that appealed to capitalists as well as to novelists: it substitutes how something appears for how something is, in order to create a believable world-in-common.

Edward Filene (of the department store) used this trick in 1919, when he argued that “the masses must learn to behave like human beings in a mass production world.” (Filene qtd. in Lasch 71-72) One wonders: did he mean that the economy’s need for mass consumption actually changed humanity? Or just that to “pass” as human in the new economy, a new appearance was required? Today, we take for granted the “technology of the self” provided by consumer capitalism, in which happiness and self-esteem depend on the pursuit of new and newer commodities (Cremin 34). And yet this acquisitive humanness constituted, at one time, a significant change in thinking: one that “liberate[d]” individual desire, but “under conditions that define[d] and limit[ed] it.” (Deleuze and Guattari qtd. in Cremin 112)

New Grub Street testifies to this shift, in which a new appearance of humanity began to be taken as the human. In this section, I analyze Gissing's work as a socioformal experiment with political economy, which takes up consumer motives as a new style for representing the individual. I mean socioformal in the sense that Alex Woloch uses it in his work of novel theory, *The One vs. The Many*. Like him, I treat the novel system as being in negotiation with its contemporary social system, taking on but changing its material forms in the process of aestheticization. Specifically, I am interested in the consumer as a theory of behavior that, when pulled into the novel, became a new form of character individuation.⁴

At its most basic, this new form put the consumer in the place once occupied by the producer—at the center of the economy and thus the economic imagination. Once industrial production power had matured in America and Great Britain, the respective national economies became preoccupied with selling more rather than making more. In Gissing's country, the newly enriched middle class and the diversifying goods offered to them led to significant ideological changes in the very English discipline of political economy. It altered, in particular, how the individual economic actor and his motives were imagined. "Economic Man as producer (Smith, Ricardo, Mill, and Marx)" became "Economic Man as consumer," with objective "needs" deferring increasingly to subjective "tastes." (Gagnier, 2000: 2, 4)

Gissing's Jasper Milvain, an ambitious journalist, stands in well for this emergent individual, "whose advanced stage of development was signified by the boundlessness of his desires." (Gagnier, 1993: 126) Jasper does not yet have access to the upper class's symbolic

⁴ This focus on the consumer's representation distinguishes the "socioformal" approach from more materialist literary criticism that analyzes the commodity as an increasingly important representational unit in fiction; e.g., Christoph Lindner's *Fictions of Commodity Culture* (2003). It is more in line with Nancy Armstrong's thinking about the individual as "a cultural category and a bundle of rhetorical figures that were extremely fragile and always on the defensive yet notably flexible and every ready to adapt to new cultural-historical conditions." (Armstrong 3) The historical shift from production to consumption was also a shift from a productive to a consuming individual.

commodities, though he dreams of having “easy command of all the pleasures desired by a cultivated man.” (NGS 329) Instead, his self-worth depends upon aspirational speech-acts that align him aesthetically with the lifestyle he hopes to achieve materially. This is more than faking it till you make it. Gissing calls Jasper “the man of his day,” an epithet that resonates with political economy, but departs from it in its realist irony: there are many other men in *New Grub Street* who can attest to the climate of 1882. This is significant, because it means Jasper’s claim to embody his society is neither innate nor foregone. His ascension requires that his style of social engagement prove more useful than that of others.

I call Jasper’s aspirational attitude a “style” because its fluidity enables and shapes his membership in the novel’s larger world in contradistinction to other forms of membership. Jasper’s fiancée Marian, for example, does not attempt to individuate herself through perpetual acquisition. The daughter and researcher of a literary man, she seeks to gratify her desire in objectification rather than acquisition, in satiation rather than dissatisfied desire. She is an outmoded, productive individual trying to make it in a consumer’s world, and her relationship with Jasper is both a critique of consumerism and a test of its novelization. In other words, whether Jasper can make Marian happy is also a question of whether consumerism can replace productivity as an effective form of character individuation. Marian acts as a productive character type which has outlived the production-oriented novel and now gives insight into the new system by chafing against it.

Gissing’s favorite English writers—Dickens and Eliot—wrote in that old system, in which production was dominant in the economic imagination. In this period, contemporary political economy advocated for “productive desire,” which defers gratification, over “unproductive enjoyment,” which gratifies immediately, a distinction that set individual and

social needs at odds (Gallagher 50). As many a utilitarian calculus found, a wealthy society was made of people who labored more than they enjoyed, but a happy individual enjoyed more than he labored. Nancy Armstrong has described the effect of this paradox on characterization aptly: it made individuation contingent on the protagonist making a compromise, or learning to “displace what is a fundamentally asocial desire onto a socially appropriate object.” (Armstrong 79) Born into positions where they cannot realize their full potential, the productive character is first dislocated and then re-located in the novel’s coherent world, a process that requires that they forego easy pleasure destructive to society until they find a worthier (or the most worthy) outlet. For woman characters, the requisite form is often a choice amongst suitors.⁵

The fact that Marian has only one suitor—the “first man” to ever call forth her “womanhood”—indicates that her individuation occurs on different terrain (NGS 187). Marian has no opportunity for discrimination. Her individuality depends not upon *which* social object she chooses but upon the efficacy of objectification itself. After a youth of abstinence and abstention from desire, she faces two options: to continue as she is, immature and ungratified, or to marry Jasper, exit “pupilage,” and assert her “claims upon life.” (NGS 175, 314) The rhetoric of maturation through Marian’s sections presents her marriage to Jasper as a formal, psychological, and even social necessity. Her growth hinges on pursuing this union against her father’s wishes, and to this extent she adheres to the mid-century novel’s productive self-making.

But selecting an object is not enough when this object cannot offer the necessary resources for self-production. As a consumerist character, Jasper has no understanding of Marian’s desire. His own desire resembles that postulated by marginalist economists, whose work did much to remove the tension between individual and society that underwrote traditional

⁵ Armstrong’s key example of the bad suitors/good suitor approach to individuation is Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*. Hardy’s Bathsheba Everdene comes to mind as well.

utilitarian economics. The new school redefined desire as a pleasure in itself, rather than a means to pleasure, calling a “happy” man one who “however lowly his position and limited his possessions, can always hope for more than he has.” (Jevons qtd. in Gallagher 187).⁶ Rather than see the world as an earlier 19th century individualist might—as “an empty wilderness to be shaped by his own design,” or full of objects ready to be developed—Jasper sees the world as a mirror and, like Narcissus, appears happy because he and his surroundings are made in the same image (Lasch 10). Although achieving this symbiosis acquires some work, it is of a passive and immaterial kind. Jasper is willing to desire whatever is desirable, with no interest in the objects he consumes as particular in themselves.

In economic language, Marian and Jasper’s incompatibility arises from the consumer society’s reification of desire and increasingly immaterial understanding of consumption.⁷ Jasper appears “so human” to Marian because he desires pleasure, but she fails to see that her “joys of life” are not his market’s joys (NGS 187). This confusion arises from the difference between consumption, “primarily a trait and occupation of individual human beings,” and consumerism, an attribute of society that alienates desire from the consumer as much as earlier capitalism alienated labor from the worker (Bauman 28). For Marian, desire is a prelude to satisfaction; for Jasper, it is a sign of desirability. For Marian, the commodity is an object that should satisfy; for Jasper, it is a means of directing desire by not satisfying it.

⁶ As Catherine Gallagher observes in her study of political economy in Victorian novels, Milvain-ish theories can seem to anticipate the consumer society we live in today, in which pleasures, once achieved, are rarely satisfying. They whet the appetite and encourage a return to that happy state, “the pursuit of even imaginary conveniences,” that John McColloch claimed (in 1825) were “productive of an intensity of gratification unknown in the apathy of fixed or permanent situation.” (McColloch qtd. in Gallagher 56)

⁷ Though consumption is always based in material objects, at this time its symbolic or expressive value became more socially significant than its ability to gratify.

What is crucial to understand, before I go on and examine this incompatibility in more detail, is that Marian and Jasper are not two individualities in direct competition, for Jasper's model of existence has already triumphed representationally. Although the couple's contrasting desires tap into the literary-historical project of "competing notions of the subject" and the invalidation of certain individuals "as idiosyncratic, less than fully human, fantastic, or dangerous," their relationship is one of attraction rather than hostility (Armstrong 3). What is at stake is how effectively Marian can be integrated into this new system, which she implicitly accepts in agreeing to marry Jasper. It is his language that governs their relationship, illustrating how consumerism "colonizes...the space stretching between human individuals" in "endlessly repeated transactional encounters." (Bauman 7, 11) Just as Jasper values Marian for keeping him in sight of "better ideals" and chooses to "deliberately heighten" his attraction when it proves financially advantageous, Marian decides that she "could love him" the day they meet because his "frank energy" would give her access to a "delicious emotion" she has long desired (NGS 185, 305, 187, 331). Marian's understanding of their relationship as a transaction signifies that she is already imbricated in consumer society despite being characterized by productive self-making.

This discursively pervasive consumerism is an example of how the 19th century novel constructs its formal coherency through coercion, in what Kent Puckett calls "an alchemical process that turns social content into aesthetic form and aesthetic form into something that moves people and things as effectively as a good shove." (Puckett 9) The transactional "shove" received by Marian is gentle compared to the violent discipline that impoverishes, sickens, and kills her masculine foil, Edwin Reardon, when he refuses to commercialize his work. But as consumerism's instrument, Jasper punishes Marian for her inappropriately formed desire just as

effectively—by disappointing her. Stubbornly productive, Marian understands Jasper as an object to use rather than as a figure to emulate. The breakdown of their relationship emphasizes that consumerism is not a technology that can be employed by individuals. This materially interactive system offers only immaterial agency, in the form of a style that makes integration in the market machine more bearable for the Jasperite who adopts it.

Marian is evidently not a Jasperite and cannot fully assimilate into this system. Gissing describes her desire in hunger metaphors that emphasize her link to productive desire, which would use an object as a technology, in contrast to alienated, bodiless desire, which thrives on signs. Ruskin describes the object of productive desire as a coconut whose milk can only be got by determined cutting, a concrete example of how “few of the things we desire can be had without considerable labor.” (Ruskin 86) Like Ruskin’s individual, Marian approaches Jasper in a state of “fasting” and her love is “grown to a reality” by her efforts to “extract from the memory of [her lover’s] words, his looks, new sustenance for her hungry heart.” (Ruskin 87, NGS 187) Unfortunately, however, she can yield no “cream” from what turns out to be a very inferior coconut (Ruskin 87). She has deceived herself—or been deceived—as to what kind of imaginative resource Jasper can be. Though he can speak in romantic “dithyrambs”—for Marian, a “flash, a hint of possibilities”—for him they are disposable flourishes ultimately replaced by a return to “conversation on practical points.” (NGS 334) Marian’s pressure for more material relief from the stylized Jasper reveals him to be incapable of gratifying her appetite for love. Instead, he becomes “weary” whenever “something more—the indefinite something—was vaguely required of him.” (NGS 396)

This dual notion of poverty (Jasper’s) and excess (Marian’s) points to how acceptable desire and, by extension, acceptable humanity, comes down to filling a particular space. Though

Marian's presence urges Jasper to consider that there could be "the man apart from his necessities," his social success depends upon pursuing a limited identity, or desiring *only* what a cultivated man ought to desire (NGS 184). Jasper survives from the novel's first chapter to its last because he accepts that the consumerist system that employs him rather than he who employs consumerism. In contrast, Marian's attempt to use consumption to her own ends leads to failure: she does not make it to the end of *New Grub Street*. She has a nervous breakdown and moves to the country; events which are not enacted, but occur offstage as related by the narrator. Marian's disappearance is a kind of non-ending and in an older novel would have been shocking. In that case, her productive individuality would have ended in either a good object (a reward) or a bad object (a punishment). Here, she simply ceases, because her desire cannot be realized or even recognized in the situation as narrated. Marian is seduced by Jasper's description and embodiment of the happy consumer, but she cannot fit her desire into its dimensions.

This compression of human into character is an inescapable part of nineteenth century realist novels, which, as Alex Woloch has described, tried to depict diverse humanity but could not give equal attention and aesthetic resources to all characters. Instead, these novels reformulate the exploitative systems that exist outside them, showing in different ways how a major character's complete and individuating narrative requires that a host of minor characters be limited to a specialized helping function. Woloch's observation is powerful because he writes not just about minor characters, but about the process of becoming minor. In *New Grub Street*, this inequity is especially clear: in every character who does not succeed, "the actualization of a human being is denied." (Woloch 25)

From this point of view, Jasper and Marian's final scene is the novel's most provocative moment. In it, Marian achieves her greatest independence and yet sustains her greatest loss,

proving herself to be a major character in psychological power, but a minor character in *New Grub Street*'s distribution of narrative rewards. Although it is really Jasper who rejects her, because her inheritance has fallen through, Marian is the one who provides the novel's rhetorically significant rejection. This limited triumph is nothing less a revelatory exposure of exploitation. Jasper's narrative was predestined to be one of success, but its power as narrative—as something that “pays off” readers' investment and that individuates him as a protagonist—depends upon the presence of those more forceful characters who fall in order for him to rise.

Just as consumerism exploits the unhappy, the reading of this scene requires Marian's formal exploitation. Her loss has high affective value partly because its expression, from her lips, replaces Jasper's inadequate and emotionally flat effort. His attempt to construct an “it's not you, it's me” speech flounders because he cannot fully believe in his own unworthiness. Though he says “it is you who reject me” and asserts that he is “no fit husband” for her, he finally falls back on his old professional pitch: “It is men of my kind who succeed; the conscientious, and those who really have a high ideal, either perish or struggle on in neglect.” (NGS 503) Two-dimensional, unchanged, and frankly full of it, Jasper begs for the rebuke that Marian gives him. She sweeps his explanation aside, saying, “There is no need to disparage yourself... What can be simpler than the truth? You loved me, or thought you did, and now you love me no longer.” (NGS 504)

That Marian's “choice” generates immense narrative payoff is obvious. She makes a choice out of a non-choice, as did another female character in a Gissing novel raised in deprivation and moved to break an engagement: “You know how from a child I have suffered. What to others was pure and lawful joy became to me a temptation. But God was not unjust; if He so framed me, He gave me at the same time the power to understand and to choose.”

(Unclassed)⁸ Although Marian lacks religion, her grasping at truth suggests an attempt to find language outside that which Jasper provides to explain her situation. In that sense, she does triumph over him. She does not, however, triumph over consumerism. Her conspicuous absence after this chapter suggests that once Marian ceases to consume Jasper's style, she no longer belongs in Jasper's world, or the world whose laws are governed by Gissing's narrative.

The acceptability of Marian's exit is characteristic of both consumerism and, as Walter Benjamin understood it, the novel. In the consumer society, flawed consumers—those who are unwilling or unable to consume properly—are often criticized for making an “unsocial” choice: Because the system claims to empower people to choose ever new acquisitions, the state of not choosing is understood as a *de facto* choice, allowing the “unneeded, unwanted, forsaken” consumers to be blamed for their own marginalization (Bauman 99, 130). Marian's dissatisfaction is pleasurable to us through this fallacy, because giving her the power of choice imbues her exit with meaning: he does not reject her, *she rejects him*, as well as the role his self-identification would assign her. This ending is more satisfying than the limping postscript of an offstage breakdown, which reduces Marian to a silent and invisible figure. In fact, it betters gratifies our “consuming interest” in Marian as a character whose fate, “by virtue of the flames which consumes it, yields to us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate.” (Benjamin 156) Marian's re-description of her own position gives her local control over how her situation is read and momentarily completes the trajectory toward independence that began when she defied her father by becoming Jasper's friend. And yet, immediately afterward, it is reduced to being a prelude to that man's success, confirming his own statement that morally superior people

⁸ In Gissing novels, disappointed desire amounts to an “archetypal form of subjectivity.” (Harsh 32) Characters like Marian Yule imagine great pleasures (aesthetic, social, or sexual) but find their actual socioeconomic options limited.

“struggle on in neglect”—in Marian’s case, supporting her debilitated father in provincial obscurity.

To sum up, Marian’s end is highly consumable partly because it is subordinate to a narrative which continues without her, both literally and ideologically. (Jasper goes on to marry Amy and achieve an editorship, to his total satisfaction.) I would argue that this relationship, as I have just described it, constitutes the engine behind Jasper’s larger narrative of success. Because Jasper is not a productive individual, he does not offer Gissing much material to develop over the course of three volumes. As his final speech to Marian indicates, he sticks to his ideological guns, or to the mercenary principles articulated by him in *New Grub Street*’s first chapter, rising in the world not through his own improvement but by the gradual extinguishment of his competitors. Although this is true to the market competition implicitly being waged behind the novel’s scenes, I mean it here in a formal sense. Jasper’s success simply is not interesting or consumable as a narrative without the characters who are made minor over its course. Marian is only one example; literary men like her father, Edwin Reardon, and Harold Biffin, also supply meaningful extinguishments that “pay” for Jasper’s triumph. In this exploitative system, the consumerist character individuates himself not through his own labors, but through his ability to consume the thwarted desire of those around him—if not by intention, then thanks to the larger consumeristic system that claims him as a creature.

This structure, as I postulate it, raises two questions. To pursue the analogy I have loosely established between novel and society, it raises the question of how exactly these deviant, productive individuals are integrated into the larger system so as not to greatly destabilize it. In the Marian and Jasper narrative, I have attempted to represent a *fait accompli*, but novels are more than narrative. They cannot be entirely reduced to a structure, especially in their

heterogeneous, even ungainly Victorian condition. There is also the question of reading with which I began my paper. If the consumerist narrative, in a sense, “reads” Jasper and Marian’s relationship, why does this reading matter more than Marian’s local but still powerful oppositional reading? And how does this ability to read make Marian different from the male characters from whom Jasper also profits? I believe that Amy Reardon can help us answer the second set of questions. She, like Marian, selects Jasper, and in a sense reads him and the ideology behind him. Unlike Marian, she does so to the exclusion of all other reading styles, which leads to her absorption into the consumerist reading technology itself. This examination of selective reading will pave the way to how I want to think about and in a sense unmake the consumerist narrative structure discussed in this section. In *New Grub Street*, there is ammunition to contradict Jasper’s exploitative use of narrative, but to recover this resource one cannot read as Amy reads.

Consumerism and Reproductive Reading: Amy Reardon

Critics have read *New Grub Street* through its men, their different values, and the futures they symbolically represent.⁹ In order to fully understand the novel as an examination of social exclusion through formal exploitation, however, one must proceed according to the Havelock Ellis assertion with which I began my paper—on the assumption that men are only symbolic principles, which women organize systematically. In the previous section, I investigated how Marian fails to organize her life on Jasper’s principles, but successfully testifies against consumerism by rejecting its style of being. I will now turn my attention to Amy, who

⁹ For example: Taft (2011) argues that Jasper and Harold Biffin are critiqued to the elevation of Reardon as a true realist; Severn (2010) goes against the vein and claims that Gissing, as a conservative, presents Milvain as an ideal professional.

successfully reforms in order to perpetuate Jasper's ideas, but in doing so reveals that consumerism is not a style of being at all. It does socially organize, but its organization depends not upon empowering individuals (Jasper's conceit) but in affording a technology that disposes of superfluous people.

Amy is that instrument of exclusion: whereas Marian receives Jasper as her only possible object, Amy knows that there are at least two kinds of men around whom a woman can organize her life. In her pursuit of a "great man" for a husband, she first chose a novelist, Edwin Reardon, whose idealism fails on the market, and later chooses Jasper, whose professionalized pragmatism succeeds (NGS 65). Amy's process of separation and remarriage socializes Jasper's principles because it is the trajectory of a sexually mature woman, one who encounters the "discordance between a woman's individuality and her progenerative role." (Beer 199) As an individual, Amy is susceptible to Jasper's consumerist rhetoric, but her embrace of it involves a laborious repurposing of her reproductive function.¹⁰ This repurposing gives us an opportunity to examine how a broad system of automatic reading (a theory of society like consumerism) relates to and coopts individual readers.

In this section, I will describe how Amy's changing criteria for spousal choice leads her to shift away from sexual reproduction and toward the reproduction of ideas, a process that reflects the Victorian belief that sexual and intellectual functions competed for "limited energy resources" within the woman's "vital metabolic economy." (Flint 81)¹¹ From the moment when

¹⁰ Jasper's smooth consumeristic ascent depends on an individualism imagined by political economy that, as various writers in *Economic Women* (2013) show, "ignores women almost entirely." (Dalley and Rappaport 2) As a result, a woman character is ideally suited to break up economic theories of individuality that appear universal or innate.

¹¹ Gissing was in favor of women's education, if it was of the right sort: he was "driven frantic by the crass imbecility of the typical woman" and advocated "brain-development" (by way of education) as a desirable effect of the movement for women's equality (Letters IV.113). See the collection *George Gissing and the Woman Question: Convention and Dissent* (2013).

she begins to verbally reproduce Jasper's ideas in her first husband's home, Amy evolves from a progenitor of humans to a marketer of symbolic commodities. Her changing criteria for reproductive choice finally means her surrender to a situation of choicelessness, for in consumer society it is the market, rather than individual consumers, which controls the "selecting and setting apart the damned from the saved, the included from the excluded." (Bauman 65)¹²

Gissing renders this exclusionary system clear by layering it over an older system previously novelized: evolutionary theory's sexual selection. The effect is twofold. First, it reminds us of the humanity at stake, for, to quote Nancy Armstrong, "the imagined community produced by Victorian fiction is one that could only be defined in terms of its limits, or which elements of humanity it had to exclude in order to remain what it was." (Armstrong 103) Second, it shows that sexual selection, in emphasizing the material connection between choice and social effect, "invested agency, and agency for change, in individuals," in a way that the consumer choice cannot due its reification of desire (Richardson 52).

Gissing sublimates sexual selection in consumer choice in moments when Alfred Yule and Edwin Reardon consider Jasper's appeal for Marian and to Amy. Yule fears that his daughter will invest her future inheritance in Milvain because she finds his own work outdated, which "must needs be the result of frequent intercourse with such a man." (NGS 276) Even though he verbally abuses Marian for her disloyalty, Yule acknowledges in his own mind that Milvain is a superior product, much as Reardon does when he blames Jasper for his estrangement with

¹² In the hundred or so years since Gissing, we have persisted in imagining consumers as either "cultural dupes" or "heroes of modernity." (Bauman 11) At first glance, Marian resembles the dupe "hoodwinked by fraudulent promises," and Amy Reardon the latter, elevated by the appearance of "rationality, [and] robust autonomy," but Amy's influenced reading corrects for that interpretation (Ibid). They are both duped and yet both choose, attesting to the fact that Gissing does not merely condemn one sort of person and elevate another. All people are susceptible to consumerism's coercion, for consumption is an essentially human activity. What *can* be judged is the different strategies with which an Amy or a Marian deals with their coerced state.

Amy—“your word and your example have influenced my wife against me”—but subsequently attacks his wife for “act[ing] with independence...the result [of which] is that you have ruined my life.” (NGS 265-6, 358) Both Yule and Reardon know their commercial defeat and its interpersonal effects to be inevitable, but they still attack their female relations for not exercising any mitigating scruple, or for not reading against the market’s narrative.

Read in terms of sexual selection, this mitigation demand makes sense. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin theorized that women, naturally “passive,” interceded in the male struggle for existence when they chose their mates from among those who survive (Darwin 939). This intervention had corrective possibilities. Victorian writers like Grant Allen and Karl Pearson gave a woman’s choice of husband crucial to larger civilization: they had to be “coy and discriminating” because their replication of good or bad “stock” made “maternal activity of the highest social value.” (Richardson 52, xiii) Novelists likewise pursued this “strategy” of using women to correct for natural selection, with admirable female characters providing an “illusion of inclusiveness” and a “civilizing force” within the novel world when they chose honorable men over more violent, even savage ones who might have done well in a true Darwinian struggle (Armstrong 99).

Marian’s lost inheritance makes her capacity to exclude moot (indeed, she is the one excluded), but Amy’s ability to intercede in the male struggle for existence is a novel-length question—and a useful question to ask. To what degree did the market rob her of choice and to what degree did she knowingly choose? It comes down to a question of reading, for Amy as for us. Evolution runs through *New Grub Street* as a possible interpretive lens—for “the struggle for existence among books is nowadays as severe as among men”—but it is one that Amy casts

aside during her novel-length acculturation by the trials of poverty and then by the opportunity offered by her 20,000 pound inheritance (NGS 456).

Once “a woman in years...[who] had seen nothing of life,” she now experiences “the culture of circumstances,” thinking about her domestic situation as something she can discard and replace based on a better understanding of her consumer needs (NGS 360). Discovering that she wants a social position and becoming “more conscious...of this requirement,” Amy finds Reardon less and less acceptable as a husband (NGS 133). When he takes a job as clerk, she decides to return to her mother’s house: “I am certainly not the wife of a clerk...I can’t and won’t consent to that. The disgrace is yours; it’s fortunate for me that I have a decent home to go to.” (NGS 228-9) Amy adopts an individualistic rather than a social understanding of marriage, treating her spouse as a commodity that is deficient. It later pains her when her inheritance comes in and she feels compelled to save him (divorce being too scandalous): “I *ought* to have a choice,” she complains to her friend Mrs. Carter (NGS 358).

Amy may feel like her responsibility to Reardon is unreasonable, but her previous sexual selection of him remains an encumbrance: to her, because it reminds her of non-consumeristic social duties; and for us, because it is intellectual baggage that prevents easy acceptance of the consumeristic explanation. In a consumer spousal choice, it is a problem that “the wondrous joy-giving *qualities*” sought in a companion, “cannot be separated from the *persons* whose qualities they are,” leading to the chooser being “burdened with [the chosen’s] possibly clumsy and awkward effects.” (Bauman 19, 18) Amy cannot be relieved of her burden simply because she changes her beliefs. Reardon persists in the narrative—poor, dirty, and eventually sick—while she hesitates between reunion and divorce. Eventually it is too late, when, at the novel’s end,

Gissing indulges in Amy's desire for a new beginning by killing off her husband through a highly convenient attack of *consumption*.

In other words, Amy does not cease to be an instrument of male exclusion simply because she chooses an individualistic context in which to justify her decision to leave Reardon, and we cannot ignore her womanliness and the emphasis on reproduction that shadows her decision-making. Instead, what Amy offers is a way to connect a style of reading to a technology of reproduction—or rather, a way to think of reading as the point where style and technology, (principle and organization, man and woman,) meet with culturally reproductive results. For Jasper achieve a position where he can be recognized as a cultivated man, he needs Amy's money, an investment that is contingent on her alliance with him as a consumer. When Amy replicates Jasper's "style" of being through study, she activates its systematic potential and allows it to govern her interactions with other people. She surrenders her ability to read self-consciously, or with awareness of how her spousal choice operates and contributes to a larger system, and instead reads automatically, as a consumer cog in the consumerism machine. In effect, she reveals that Jasper's style is of a machine, rather than simply emanating from an idiosyncratic self-expression.

Gissing invites this understanding with observations about Amy's reading of literature that prove to be a preface to how she reads her marital situation. Early in her marriage, Amy would read a book "for its purely literary merits" and give Reardon a "thrill of exquisite pleasure" with her erudite observations (NGS 68). Under the pressure of her husband's failure and Jasper's apparent success, Amy's discriminatory standards change and in Reardon's opinion, depreciate: she begins to read in "a very practical spirit, commenting to Reardon on the features of the work which had made it popular" and becomes a "typical woman of the new time, the

woman who has developed concurrently with journalistic enterprise.” (NGS 361) Even before her remarriage, Amy reproduces with Jasper Milvain in mind, repeating his philosophy in her first husband’s hearing: “whenever a mention of Jasper came under her notice she read it out to her husband,” suggesting “if only you could do something of that kind!” (NGS 157, 158) Though this gesture is made ostensibly to help Reardon, it also inaugurates a different reproductive function for Amy. Having borne Edwin’s biological child, she wishes to be an incubator for Milvainish work.

Marisa Palacios Knox has recently discussed *New Grub Street* in terms of Victorians’ belief that an intellectual rather than emotional reading style in women was “symptomatic of mental and even physiological barrenness.” (Knox 94) Although she applies her analysis to Marian’s stunted sexuality, Amy also acquires a non-affective relationship to literature and, consequently, an implied barrenness. Although Jasper valorizes Amy as “a perfect woman” to Marian’s “clever school girl” at the novel’s end, Amy becomes her second husband’s ideal helpmeet at a cost (NGS 514). To be “a perfectly-built woman,” her reproductive ability must be gradually commodified, until it is no longer “fertile” in a sexual sense (NGS 511). This is made most clear when Amy’s child with Reardon, who functions peripherally as evidence of fertility, dies moments before Reardon does.

Consequently, when Amy marries Jasper, she does so totally unencumbered by reproduction’s material effects. Having adhered to consumerism’s system of exhaustible commodities, what she reproduces now is immaterial. The ideology carried by Jasper’s literary and rhetorical product is “not destroyed in the act of consumption, but rather enlarges, transforms, and creates the ‘ideological’ and cultural environment of the consumer”—in this case, of Amy (Lazzarato quoted in Rey 248). Whereas sexual reproduction relied on material

(because physiological) difference, this reproductive relationship depends upon intellectual similarity: Jasper once told Reardon that he and Amy would never marry—they “are rather too much alike”—but likeness is what ultimately unites Jasper and Amy in a “dreamy bliss.” (NGS 515).

It is ironic that Amy “could not undertake the volumes of Herbert Spencer” and had “never opened one of Darwin’s books,” understanding the “tenor” but not the substance of evolution, for her changed consumer behavior is the result of selective reading (NGS 361). Eschewing domestic duty, she ignores marriage’s social significance for the sake of individualistic pleasure in a way that we cannot. Not only is Amy’s sexual power kept before our eyes in various ways—for instance, after Reardon’s death, his friend Harold Biffin commits suicide partly due to Amy’s rejection of him—but her critical moment of choice manifests as blindness to her situation. When she leaves Reardon, she embraces “woman’s strange faculty of closing her eyes against facts that do not immediately concern her” and assumes that “somebody or other” will help her husband out of his difficulties (NGS 247). The immediate context for her elective blindness is a comfortable bedroom, whose attractive decoration restores to her the “self-respect” she lost in poverty and which allows her to sleep, happily content in “how good it was to be alone.” (NGS 246) Inured by material commodities, she embraces the immaterial, discriminatory standard they represent. If this is the only way to live, any way of thinking that would require her to surrender it is not worth consideration.

If we think of ideology as an immaterial commodity, then *New Grub Street* clearly purveys multiple principles in its symbolic men. But just as not all men succeed in finding a reproductive partner in this world, not all ideologies find equal material support. Consumerism requisitions not just the novel’s things (those “fine sheets” that inspire Amy’s complacent sleep)

but its narrative structure, which confers life and death on characters based upon their reconcilability with consumerism (Ibid). By exposing Amy's selective reading, however, Gissing suggests that the reader (of society, or of a novel) is not bound exclusively to internalize those immaterial concepts that have material support. Reardon, Biffen, and the values they represent persist, rejected by the narrative but sheltered by the novel and the different ways of reading it implies. In the next section, I will discuss how Gissing discourages *New Grub Street's* reader from reading selectively by emphasizing the difference between consumable narrative and the novel's less exhaustible, more virtual elements.

Material Narrative and Immaterial Revisionism: *New Grub Street's* Imaginative Cynicism

New Grub Street's interference with the reader is not an unusual critical gesture, though the work's separation of its material and immaterial properties is unusually apparent. The 19th century realist novel often provides "directions for its own consumption" through didactic narration and evidentiary asides, techniques that make some points of view easier to take toward the novel's events than others and some storylines easier to process (Gelley qtd. in Furst 13). For example, in this particular novel Marian and Jasper's relationship is easy to swallow as a representation of consumerism while Amy and Edwin's narrative challenges the consumerist style with other ways of reading. In this section, I argue that Gissing uses these interrelated plot lines to create a novel that resists consumerism while still remaining a consumable entity. This project offers a means to re-theorize (and thus to conserve) the increasingly antiquated novel

form in terms of its material and immaterial qualities, a distinction which relates to the difference between narrative and non-narrative, and consumable and unconsumable, forms.¹³

In earlier Victorian novels, material and immaterial aspects were not always clearly divided as consumable and unconsumable. George Eliot described the “too much” of literature as dangerously immaterial *because* it encouraged overconsumption: one can eventually eat too much food or have more fabric than is wearable, but with novels there can always be a cry for “More!” (Eliot qtd. in Gallagher 118, 119). But as an *n+1* editorial notes, consumer society’s accelerating fashions later led the novel to be replaced by shorter literary and non-literary forms as a site of rapid consumption: in the words of Alfred Yule, “the evil of the time is the multiplication of ephemerides...essays, descriptive articles, [and] fragments.” (“Too Fast, Too Furious,” quoting NGS 37)¹⁴ The novel became a “vehicle of contemplation, mediation, absorption” and today is even a decelerating agent, providing an escape from modernity’s increasing speed (“Too Fast”).

Gissing was not thinking in terms of simple escapism. He does, however, arrest narrative time in *New Grub Street* by various means in order to create contemplative space. In the pages that follow, I will argue, first, that this structural provision defers rather than prevents consumption. It employs consumable narrative as a preservative (rather than a destructive) agent for the novel’s surplus critical capacity. This surplus is spatial and to a significant degree

¹³ To briefly recap. Group one: material, narrative, consumable. Group two: immaterial, non-narrative, unconsumable. I do not mean to suggest that these terms are identical; in the case of *New Grub Street*, however, they meaningful interconnect. Group 1, for instance, collectively allows for the collapse between individual desire and societal needs that integrate Jasper and Amy into consumerism’s technology. Consuming received narratives, these characters achieve a position of material power in the social system their ideology supports.

¹⁴ For Gissing, this had to do both with new forms of journalism—quarter-length “bits” for the “quarter-educated”—as well as the compression of the novel from three volumes to one (not necessarily an all-around bad thing for novelists, as the new form was quicker to write), and diminishing utility of “realism” as a concept (NGS 460). Our context is different of course, but there is some basic resonance between the speed of changing media forms. There is also abundance evidence of Victorian high-low cultural debates being resuscitated.

characterological, as I began to suggest above in terms of Marian's resistively productive individuality, which generates much local effect despite having little narrative impact. I will next suggest that the non-narrative space Gissing frees from narrative enables a reanimation of that mid-century novelistic negotiation between individual and society pushed out by consumerism. Though *The New Grub Street*'s narratives ultimately exclude some characters, these figures' status as sites of resistance affords space for hypothetical revisionism, or a kind of cynical utopianism in which new life conditions can be produced.

To think of narrative as preservative, I lay aside certain understandings of narrative contingency. *New Grub Street* lends itself well to Fredric Jameson's two poles of realism, in which the emergent narrative impulse's fixative "past-present-future" structure interacts—within a work and over realism's evolution—with non-narrative elements which dissolve that impulse by attacking its chronology (Jameson 10).¹⁵ In this system, narrative (or *récit*) promotes choicelessness—"events are over and done with before the telling"—whereas the additions to the narrative made in a novel (*roman*) create space for "choice" in an "eternal" or "existential" present (Jameson 9, 25, 21). By interrupting narrative—sometimes with an alternate narrative, sometimes with the judgments, rhetorical asides, and affective description noted by Jameson—Gissing creates repeated spaces for choice in a situation of choicelessness.

Taken individually, Jasper and Marian's courtship and Edwin and Amy's estrangement both unfold as narratives with foregone outcomes—in fact, their "past-present-future" unfolding is built, like DNA, into their relationships' introductory scenes. When Jasper and Marian go on their first walk together, she quotes Tennyson on "delay," he is evasive, and a violent London

¹⁵ He calls the second aspect *affect*, but I would rather not deal with that freighted term, for which Jameson, in any case, supplies a "local" definition more about distinguishing feeling from emotion than addressing affect theory as such (Jameson 29). However, I will touch on some of the forms that he puts under this heading.

train reveals his attraction to and her horror of the city's industry (NGS 28). Similarly, the Reardon backstory told in "The Way Hither" chapter drops many foreboding hints that become themes in the couple's arguments, such as their different understandings of the concept "great man." (NGS 65) Gissing's deliverance on these promises can be (and has been) read as a naturalistic rhetorical approach, but detached from that pre-fabricated critical context, it considerably revises how storytelling works.¹⁶

As Paul Ricœur says, following a story ought to be "something completely different than following an argument whose conclusion is compelled to be what it is": a narrative conclusion should be "acceptable" rather than "predictable," or in other words narrative should make sense as a whole only in retrospect (Ricœur 150). Gissing's narratives are entirely predictable but totally unacceptable. The characters are all (though some more than others, and at different times) invested in rescuing these relationships, relationships which finally cease in the elimination of the more socially problematic partner rather than a resolution on its original terms. Instead of watching the narratives unfold as if "the future is open," each narrative indicates Jameson's "dead future." (Ricœur 147, Jameson 18) To pursue the metaphor, moments that offer opportunities for character growth or a plot "twist" arrive almost stillborn, such as when Edwin and Amy meet in her mother's house, ostensibly to reconcile, but take umbrage against each other before they even open their mouths. The three volume novel gets its three acts of rising action, but individual actions have no material effect.

The narratives, in fact, are exhaustible commodities that must eventually be laid aside for a more attractive one: Amy and Jasper's marriage, or a conventional happy ending that resolves the story even if it does not fully unwind the novel's ideological knots. Marian and Edwin partly

¹⁶ See Lage's "Naturalism and Modes of Literary Production in George Gissing's *New Grub Street*." (2002)

constitute this knottiness. So long as they are present, their original narratives cannot be completely consumed, which allows themes incompatible with the Jasperite worldview to persist. Each time Marian and Edwin successfully appeal to their romantic partners, they interrupt a chain of events leading to their rejection. The original relationships extend and the narratives of failure effectively “pause,” allowing Gissing to subordinate their commodified chronology to a more spatial demand. This space is what Jameson calls the eternal present, where choice is “in the process of being made or refused” and is not yet committed to a past-present-future causal chain (Jameson 25).

In practice, this shift from time to space prevents the reader from acting on Benjamin’s “consuming interest,” which I last mentioned in the Marian section (156). To be fully consumed, a character must die either literally or, by exiting the novel, figuratively. With regular switches between the Gissing’s two love plots, the reader must continually re-invest in Marian and Edwin’s struggles for life—or their struggles for union. When one relationship flags, hinting at the incipient Jasper-Amy alliance, the other one picks up, deferring its fulfillment.¹⁷ For example, during the chapters when Jasper avoids the attractive Marian because she has no money, the Reardons work to save their marriage; correspondingly, shortly after the Reardons separate, Marian discovers she is the beneficiary of a will and Jasper proposes. Though obstacles to success never totally go away, this “interruption of sequences... arrest[s] the action in its course, and thereby compels the listener to adopt an attitude” rather than to thoughtlessly consume (Benjamin 778).

Though Benjamin’s notion of interruption might relate to an idea of collective action that Gissing’s still sufficiently Victorian novel cannot support, the notion of reader-author

¹⁷ Gissing heightened this structure in his 1901 revision of the novel, cutting chapters about side characters and thereby strengthening the alternation’s clarity.

collaboration has some basis in the realist tradition, especially in England. Responding to Darwin's destruction of humanity's one "future plan," novelists frequently entertained "hypothesized futures" for the reader, to the point where a novel could be mostly "about that which does not occur." (Beer xx, 219)¹⁸ In *New Grub Street*, these hypothesized futures would be more aptly called 'hypothetical,' persisting in the narrator's rhetorical asides, implied by breaks between chapters the suspend the *coup de grace*, and lingered over in monologues by maligned characters. These moments lodge themselves in the fixed narratives, turning consumers briefly "into producers—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators." (Benjamin 777)

This collaboration, which I will go on to explore in more detail, arises from the separation of material use (narrative) and immaterial ideological work, which revises the idea of surplus associated with the novel.¹⁹ This surplus, instead of deriving from the indeterminate possibility of the present (as Bahktin suggested), exists by virtue of being totally separate from the world as it is. This is not so much—or not merely—the onset of modernism and a more radical subjectivity, but an effort to conserve the novel's original commitment to negotiating between the individual and their society. If consumerism precludes a material negotiation, the novel can offer an immaterial one—thought experiments and hypotheticals, not so much lacunae as vestigial organs.

For Gissing, novel and reality were threatened with closedendedness through the tyranny of one style, the style that generates dismal narratives for people like Marian, who demand of

¹⁸ There might be an analogy here between the shift from Darwinian hypothesized futures to hypothetical futures and the shift from sexual selection to consumer choice which I discussed in the Amy section. However, this would require a hefty intellectual history investigation that I cannot attempt here. For now, the concept of investing in futures that do not exist will suffice.

¹⁹ Bahktin ambitiously suggested that the novel comprehended the world's capaciousness and flexibility, for "only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process." (Bahktin 7) This novelistic "indeterminacy" arose from its living contact with unfinished, still-evolving present (Ibid).

consumerism (Jasper) that “something more—the indefinite something.” (NGS 396). But *New Grub Street*’s larger import is not the condemnation of Jasper, but the appropriate incorporation and limitation of what he represents. He is a mouthpiece for many things, but the one with the greatest structural potential—perhaps surprisingly—is his cynicism. Giving up on a better world, he attempts to make it this one, with an illusion of individual control.²⁰ I argue that *New Grub Street* offers its reader the opportunity to more effectively organize this cynicism, which, though freeing only in a limited way on the level of an individual life, has great social potential: in giving up on modifying or improving prevailing ideas and situations, it can critically resuscitate forgotten styles of being or even propose new ones.²¹

The loci for these efforts are the excluded and the marginalized, which, as either subjects or objects, speak to the “irreconcilable divorce between intelligibility and experience, between meaning and existence” which arises when “allegory and the body...repel one another and fail to mix.” (Jameson 37) Marian, before she commits to Jasper, uses cynicism to create her own allegories, rather than accept those afforded by consumerism. In the British Museum reading room, her personal despair produces (via free indirect discourse) a theoretical, systemic, and historicized take on the literary economy: “In pursuance of her grotesque humour, her mocking misery, she likened [one man] to a black, lost soul, doomed to wander in an eternity of vain research along endless shelves.” (NGS 107) As a model, Marian challenges the reader to see how all this “weighs” on the spirit, to use cynicism to further criticism rather than to justify

²⁰ Like Lasch’s narcissist, Jasper’s “pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, [and] nervous, self-deprecatory humor” allow him to employ ironic insights about life that give him an illusion of individual control (Lasch 33, 95).

²¹This may sound counterintuitive, given how cynicism supports Jasper’s self-serving presentism. “The narcissist has no interest in the future because, in part, he has so little interest in the past...Having trivialized the past by equating it with outmoded styles of consumption, discarded fashions and attitudes.” (Lasch xvii) But the point is to go beyond cynical resignation or reactionary nostalgia. To supersede rather than to eliminate Jasper who, let’s face it, is here to stay.

shortsightedness (Ibid). For her, the lost soul—a literary man doomed to fail—is not lost to meaning, but actually testifies best to his historical moment, here represented by a “huge library, growing into unwieldiness.” (Ibid)

This notion of the unread but still present and encumbering takes its most polemical shape late in *New Grub Street*, when the reader is asked to follow Marian’s example. At the start of the chapter “A Rescue and a Summons,” the narrator mounts a defense of idealistic novelists Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffin, assuming the reader to be a staunch Milvain supporter “made angrily contemptuous by their failure to get on” and “take a leaf from the book” of that other character (NGS 425). This passage is sort of an apotheosis of a running in-joke: that, “gifted with independent means,” the male characters would realize their potential for goodness and be “kinder,” “more generous,” and each “a better man in every way.” (NGS 426, 292, 269) It is an excuse that has to be read cynically because its repeated use has worn away its impact. How can we evaluate Reardon and Biffin more favorably than Milvain based on a construct first introduced by Milvain himself? We cannot, for the group is collectively depreciated by this explanation-in-common: Jasper begins “if I were rich,” Edwin Reardon speculates on “if one were as rich,” and an Alfred Yule apologist wonders what might happen “if he became rich.” (NGS 119, 199, 292) Thanks to this common syntax and the larger theme to which it belongs, the narrator’s rhetorical aside cannot be about which man is better, but rather what to do when confronted with such uncompromising figures. In other words, we are not being drawn into an argument with two sides, but being taught how to read.

I believe that the cynical view that these men will never reach their potential through their own efforts, thanks to unfavorable circumstances, is implicitly (and in the case of this passage, explicitly) an opportunity for outside intervention. These men may not be able to self-

realize, but women like Marian and Amy, or readers like *New Grub Street's*, can apply an organizing reading to them. To what degree this organization is productive (Marian) or merely reproductive (Amy) depends upon how completely the men are read and how well their symbolic value understood. Reardon and Biffin are in the throes of Jameson's *récit*, which threatens to render their personalities illegible and their lives unsustainable: here, narrative is truly "the marking of a body and the transformation of an individual into a character with a unique destiny... [which] becomes [his] scar, [his] sore or limp, [his] being-for-other-people." (Jameson 21) The narrator assumes that Reardon and Biffin exist "for us," the readers, as doomed *characters*, but argues that to understand them fully we must read them as *men*. That is to say, we must read outside the narrative. In this passage of "scenic" or "eternal" present, time "opens" for what that story cannot express, restoring legibility to Reardon and Biffin's values, which are unlivable in consumer society (Jameson 11, 25, 18).

This restoration requires moving beyond cynical analysis to speculative interpretation, as the narrator asks us to "imagine" a better society for Reardon and Biffin and thereby free them momentarily from their "incongruous circumstances" as characters in order to appreciate their "kindly" and "imaginative virtues" as people (NGS 425). In short, we must read meaning into beings who "no longer mean anything... [but] simply exist." (Jameson 32, 34) Where Amy closed her eyes, we are asked to open them:

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. ...Gifted with independent means, each of them would have taken quite a different aspect *in your eyes*. (Ibid, my emphasis)

The rhetoric of this passage is both a return to old school realism—narration that Liz Hedgecock believes is deliberately “interventionist, annoying omniscient... [and] outdated”—and a total revision of its use (Hedgecock 134). The narrator’s visual language appeals to classic realism’s reporting aspect, which urged the reader to not be merely “passive consumers” but active critics of the world in which they lived (Ibid). And yet here it is not so much about seeing what is there, but seeing what is not there, as the narrator’s didactic voice leads the reader away from the material, consumable, and received narrative and into an immaterial, productive, and speculative place. This repurposing corresponds to Gissing’s skepticism about realism’s objectivity but continued commitment to its revelatory qualities. Rejecting the social script that rejects these men, it moves from the men outward to some other society that is important not in its actuality, but in its superfluity. This potential future or unrealized alternative has been effectively concealed by the consumerist reading machine, but the novel restores its meaningfulness by putting the bodies of two doomed men before our eyes. Though they will die, the ideas they represent can be written and read into life due to an oppositional relationship between narrative and what lies beyond.

Conclusion: Life after Death

I have discussed various dying things in this paper—producer-centric capitalism, the novel, particular narratives, and particular characters. Of all these, only producer-centric capitalism is convincingly dead (at least in the West). It is debatable whether *literary* forms ever truly die, though, depending upon the prevailing social order, they become more or less legible. Illegibility, or the fate of ideas that are no longer relevant, is a kind of half-death. Edwin Reardon thinks so. He experiences his failure to sell manuscripts as “a sort of anticipation of death,”

because from readers' point of view "the man Edwin Reardon, whose name was sometimes spoken in a tone of interest, is really and actually dead. And what remains of me is resigned to that...it is as if only half of me had now to die." (NGS 437) In *New Grub Street*, Reardon functions exactly in this way: as the "remains" of an idea, or rather a set of ideas, about what a man ought to be.

I have focused on the half-life that goes along with this half-death, analyzing how *New Grub Street* reanimates old ideas through the literally and figuratively dying bodies of Reardon and Marian. In doing so, I have suggested that novels do more than universalize particular readings of the material world. That is the assertion Nancy Armstrong makes when she says that not only are the "history of the novel and the history of the modern subject...quite literally, one and the same," but that "new generations of novels in English produced in different countries are by definition reproducing modern individuals wherever novels are written and read." (Armstrong 10) Although a novel cannot avoid being a rhetorical assertion and an ideological project, it does not always lend itself to unified definitions. Gissing's novel resists its universalizing ability by fighting "realistic" narrative and the fates it doles out. He represents consumerism's definition of how the world is and how people are, but also writes characters and encourages a reading style that refuse to reproduce it. It is no wonder that there is a book called *The Paradox of Gissing* (1986), for the man pairs his deep cynicism with a surprising sympathy for idealists.

Of course, in this paper I have sought not to describe a paradox, but to interpret what I believe to be a generative division of functions in this novel's form. I have argued that Jasper and Marian's relationship allows Gissing to portray how consumeristic discourse rewrites human relationships and demands the ejection of certain individuals as "unreadable," juxtaposing this portrait of a limited reading system with that of a limited reader: Amy Reardon, who sublimates

consumer choice in spousal choice and inappropriately understands her desires as individualistic rather than social. I have argued that the educative effect of these alternating narratives is the conversion of the novel's own failure into evidence of a larger social failure. If this work seems closed to every outcome but Jasper's success, this is not because the novel is dead as a source of literary possibility, but because consumerism's organization of life is deeply limited. Its ascension depends upon partial reading, in which material commodities are consumed with little awareness of their immaterial cultural significance.

In enjoining his readers to focus on the immaterial and non-narrative, Gissing attacks intellectual complacency of a kind still popular today. We live in "a materially and ideologically exposed capitalism forever on the brink of collapse" and enact a deep "cynicism as to the possibility of doing anything about it." (Cremin 25) *New Grub Street* critiques cynicism that sanctions escapism or inaction. Instead, it suggests that we draw on the imaginative surplus offered to those who have given up the world as it is. It works from inside consumerism, accepting the novel as a commodity with material and immaterial components and relying on the fact that, though consumerism may requisition the material world for itself, it can only partly control the usage of consumable objects. As a result, it is no loss if we admit that the novel form is always in the process of being exhausted. The novel will remain critical because novelization remains a force that reanimates people and ways of life left for dead.

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