

The Natural History of Grub Street in Augustan England

Poor starving Bard, how small thy Grains!
How unproportion'd to thy Plains!

(On Poetry: A Rhapsody, 59 – 60)¹

With characteristic economy, Swift here summarizes the complex state of affairs in which English letters found itself at the beginning of the eighteenth century. On one hand, he is describing an historical fact, while on the other, he is contributing to a myth with a clear social and professional function. The reality he is describing is Grub Street, the depressed area of London where hacks wrote for subsistence wages. The tone can be read as genuinely sympathetic toward the exploited poets and as indignant at the spectacle of ‘Nature’s chief Masterpiece’² being driven so low. If there is a guilty party to this crime then Swift would likely point the finger at the bookseller, who controlled nearly every aspect of the industry. There is another approach to these lines, just as there is another side to Swift’s response to Grub Street.

Himself a successful writer, Swift is evoking and contributing to the myth of Grub Street, which balloons the truth into apocalyptic proportions as a means of discrediting the majority of writers at the time as unlettered, uncouth and unstable. It is a strategic maneuver designed to usurp authority in the republic of letters. He shares this position with nearly all the canonical authors of his day. Swift is on one side attacking the booksellers, who purchase his work, and on the other resisting the claims of lesser authors to be legitimate competition. The creation of the reality as well as the myth of Grub Street is bound up in the changes being wrought within England’s mushrooming book trade.

The major critical inquiry into this area is Pat Rogers’s *Grub Street: Studies in Subculture*.³ It is an encyclopedic study of the world of Daniel Defoe, John Dunton, Charles Gildon and the infamous Edmund Curll, a world where politics and poetry mingle with poverty and piracy. Rogers is careful to point out that there is a myth of Grub Street and an underlying reality to be dealt with. Where Rogers falls short is in the lack of sufficient economic background which could have given his work a more useful structure and a more penetrating conclusion. This in fact comes as no surprise for, as Terry Belanger points out, there is as yet no comprehensive study of the English book trade

upon which a fuller account of Grub Street would have to be based.⁴ Some effort in this direction, on an obviously smaller scale, will be necessary before one can look specifically at the poet in Grub Street and the attacks of the great Augustan wits.

An indispensable guide in the effort to map out the forces at work in the author's environment is Geoffrey Holmes's illuminating study of the professions between 1680 and 1730 in *Augustan England: Professions, State, and Society*.⁵ According to Holmes, the rapid growth of the English economy in this period effectively invalidated many governmental and social institutions which from the Middle Ages had, with some revisions, been able to cope with the steady expansion of an agrarian based society without extensive diversification. Keeping the focus on the book trade whereas Holmes looks into professions such as medicine, one can see that this is what in fact happens. Under Henry VIII printing in England was small enough to be controlled by the self-interest of the Stationer's Company but, as the Interregnum demonstrated, the ability of the presses to produce large amounts of controversial material made tighter restrictions necessary. Charles II accordingly implemented a system of prepublication censorship under the Licensing Act of 1662.⁶ Between 1662 and 1695 the number of working presses in London tripled and it became clear to all but the most estranged Tory that, in John Feather's words, 'the technical capacity of the book producers had far out grown the ability of the state to restrain them.'⁷ In a similar way, news distribution before 1688 was considered the province of the Secretary of State who sanctioned only one newspaper, the *London Gazette*.⁸ The most visible result of the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 was a flood of newspapers.⁹

The late seventeenth century saw England's consistent agricultural and trade success culminate in what must be described as an explosion in the service industries. Given the rate of change, it is no surprise that James II's atavistic absolutism was quietly but quickly shuffled off stage. Holmes comments on the necessary process of diversification sweeping England:

The economy was growing in complexity and in the process requiring new services from contemporary society to match its developing needs.¹⁰

The availability of capital resources and the levels of disposable income soared and traditional institutions such as the guilds, the Stationer's company and the various Royal

Colleges all scrambled to keep pace. The professions were given the mixed blessings of a rapidly expanding domestic market. This naturally saw profitability rise but with that came increased competition as newcomers flocked to a widening opportunity. This resulted in both the legal and medical professions having to wage protracted wars against ‘unlicensed practisers’ right into the nineteenth century.¹¹ Richard Savage, in his poem ‘The Authors of the Town: A Satire’ (1725), captures the competitive nature of the early eighteenth century economy when professional and popular concerns struggled to carve up the pie advantageously:

Bright Arts, abus’d, like Gems, receive their Flaws;
Physick has Quacks, and Quirks obscure the Laws.
Fables to shade Historic Truths combine,
And the dark Sophists dims the Text Divine (1-4)¹²

It is interesting and important that Savage, himself of dubious background and narrow means, immediately adopts the high moral ground in supporting the bona fide professional approaches to Medicine, the Law, Education and the Church. Although in the end one concedes that it was with the professions that the future lay, at this time the distance between, say, Quack and Doctor, was not always very much. Roy Porter in fact defines quackery, and one can extend this to all unofficial competition, as ‘the entrepreneurial sector of medicine.’¹³ Surveying his own profession, that of letters, Savage asks:

But say, whence liberal Arts thus feel Decay?
Why melt their Charms, like Fairy Towers, away? (253-4)

He has no doubts about the answer. It is the greed and envy that propels scribblers to prostitute poetry for profit.

The growth in prosperity and leisure throughout English society fuelled the consumption of literature. Within a short space of time patronage was eclipsed by a far larger market in the reading public. The ancient model wherein a select few among the affluent would carefully nurture and protect the meritorious and gifted among the artists was simply too restrictive and too restricted to cope with these changes. Patronage did not die, as some believe it did in Johnson’s triumphant letter to Chesterfield, and indeed it still persists. D. H. Lawrence for one received no small amount of benign support in his

lifetime, as did Dylan Thomas. Patronage simply became less important in relative terms and so became less attractive to authors. It is helpful to note that Edward Young received £ 2000 from the Duke of Wharton to whom he had dedicated his *Universal Passion*.¹⁴ The alternative, the reading public, could not, however, be directly reached simply because the scale of production required resources well beyond the means of most, if not all, authors. The mediating factor was the publishing industry and this was dominated by the bookseller, the eighteenth century's combination of the modern publisher, wholesaler and retailer.

The actual divisions within the book trade came to be of pre-eminent importance to the author seeking publication. The collapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 was by far the most significant event in English publishing history and one that would put England years ahead of the rest of Europe with a large scale, self-regulating and essentially free press. At the time, the absence of a Licensing Act meant two things: firstly, the government lost direct control over what was published and, secondly, there was no effectual way of protecting the property of booksellers, known as copyright. In this vacuum, the upper echelons of the London booksellers united into Congers, or informal associations, the members of which agreeing to observe each other's rights and arranging to protect their interests by taking control of the wholesale, distribution and even print supplies production elements of the industry. The end result was the booksellers, whose strength lay in capital, displaced the printers and the Stationer's Company as the controllers of the trade.¹⁵ Due to the low cost of printing equipment and the simplicity of the techniques, the printers themselves were swamped with an excess of competition that seriously depressed their fortunes. This development will have major consequences for the creation and maintenance of Grub Street.¹⁶ As for the booksellers, their concern lay in defending their property and the key to their profitability.

Copyrights were investments and the unrestricted piracy which followed the lapse of the Licensing Act was a serious threat to bookseller's returns. As an author, Daniel Defoe also had a vested interest in seeing the pirates stopped and so he published his *Essay on The Regulation of the Press* (January, 1703/4). It is interesting that he wrote this document, which prefigures much in the eventual Copyright Act, just after Robert Harley had extricated him from the troubles that his own experiment with non-ironic irony, *The*

Shortest Way with the Dissenters, had caused. Nevertheless, he insisted that the author must have ‘an undoubted exclusive Right to the Property’ of his work and so must be able ‘to answer for it’ as well.¹⁷ He supports this law because it:

would also put a stop to a certain sort of Thieving which is now in full practice in England, and which no Law extends to punish, viz. some printers and Booksellers printing copies none of their own.

This ‘robs Men of the due Reward of Industry, the Prize of Learning, the Benefit of their Studies.’¹⁸ It was imperative, for the interests of booksellers and those authors whose copyright had value, that the holding of literary property be defended by statutory law. As the government also had an interest in a controlled press, it was only a matter of time before a solution of some sort was struck upon. The result was entitled:

An Act for the Encouragement of learning by vesting the copies of printed books in the authors, or purchasers of such copies, during the time therein mentioned.

This is the Copyright Act of 1710 and it was largely designed to protect the powerful London book trade who had lobbied tirelessly for just such a piece of legislation. Ownership was categorically situated with the author so that a purchaser of that copyright would be legally acquiring a piece of property which then could be readily protected.

Yet there is something about this act that is wholly new and, although the booksellers did not recognize it immediately, they had been, in effect, double-crossed by the members of parliament they had worked so hard to persuade. The act was intended for the ‘encouragement of learning,’ a phrase one finds in Locke and Defoe with respect to copyright limitation, and this is crucial. If progress is to be achieved by the industry of living authors then it was necessary to remove the disincentive of having to compete directly with the old masters for the attention and capital of booksellers and therefore the public. The solution lay in placing a limit on copyright possession. This created an entirely new kind of property, intellectual property. As of 10 April 1710, all existing copyrights were to continue for twenty-one years and new works would have an initial period of protection of fourteen years, after which the copyright would revert to the author whereupon a new arrangement for a further fourteen years could be made. This last point was evoked by the shrewd Alexander Pope when he sued Henry Lintot in order to reacquire the rights to the original *Dunciad* so that the enlarged version could be

published.¹⁹ Beyond these limits, copyrights lapsed and the texts became public property to be printed freely. This last point was so radical that it appeared ludicrous to the booksellers who insisted that under Common law property rights were inalienable and so copyrights were perpetual. It was against this notion of perpetual copyright that the ‘Act for the Encouragement of learning’ was originally composed but it was not until February 23, 1774, that the House of Lords enforced the full spirit of the law. Thus for the bulk of the eighteenth century, and in particular for the mean season of the Grub Street years, perpetual copyright was a fact of publishing life and it was, by tying up large sums of money in two hundred year old copyrights, yet one more nail in the struggling poet’s coffin.²⁰

Public taste in the eighteenth century, like public taste in the twentieth century, was largely unpredictable and booksellers, whose business it was to invest their resources wisely, looked for the safest returns. These were either proven winners, like Shakespeare, who could be counted upon for regular printings, or large publishing projects which were undertaken co-operatively by a group of booksellers to minimize risk; these too offered decades of solid sales. This latter procedure produced such genuinely laudable efforts as the *Cyclopaedia Britannica* (1728), *Biographia Britannia* (1747-66) and the *Universal History* (1747 – 66). Among the booksellers that ruled the London, and therefore English, book trade, auctions would be held to buy and sell copyrights or shares in copyrights. These commenced about 1718 and by the end of the century it is estimated that there had been some two hundred such auctions. At the famous Tonson sale of 1767 the copyright to Pope’s works sold for £ 5000, a staggering amount which attests to his popularity. At the same sale, a two-thirds share of Shakespeare netted £ 1200.²¹ An anonymous poem entitled ‘The Auction’ (1770) points out the obvious detrimental effects these practices were having upon the fortunes of all but the greatest moderns:

The Modern barde, as yet whose rhyme,
Is not with value stamp’d by time,
Were indiscriminately sold
For nothing, as they were not old

To the mind of the major booksellers, the efforts of most modern writers did not warrant a second glance.

When A. S. Collins enthuses over the Copyright Act as a major step forward for men of letters, it is an exaggeration.²² Authors whose quality had established a credit-worthy reputation were always in a strong bargaining position. Dryden, for example, earned the tidy sum of £ 1400, for his translation of Virgil,²³ from old Jacob Tonson to whom he then wrote: ‘Tell the dog that he who wrote these can write more.’²⁴ Pope is the key example however. After receiving only £ 7 for the original version of *The Rape of the Lock* and £ 15 for the revised poem, Pope saw his work sell 3000 copies in four days.²⁵ What was important was that his reputation was being established. When he came to undertake a translation of the *Iliad* he was in a position to drive a very hard bargain. Under this agreement, Bernard Lintot would pay Pope 200 guineas for each volume, and there were six, plus he would supply 750 specially crafted quartos (to Pope’s precise specifications) free for distribution to Pope’s subscribers. Lintot was also required to act as Pope’s agent in collecting subscriptions and delivering copies. For all this, Lintot received the Copyright.²⁶ Likewise when the notorious Tory Dean appeared in London with his last word on English affairs, no bookseller would have hesitated over his £ 200 asking price.²⁷ The first impression subsequently sold out in a week.²⁸ Fielding received £ 200 for *Joseph Andrews*, £ 600 for *Tom Jones* (with his bookseller adding £ 100 when sales took off) and 800 guineas for *Amelia*. Goldsmith also did well receiving 60 guineas for *The Vicar of Wakefield*, £ 150 with his play *The Good-Natured Man* and 100 guineas for *The Deserted Village*.²⁹ John Gay earned £ 43 for *Trivia*, £ 1000 for a subscription sale of his collected poems in 1720 and £ 788 for his smash hit *The Beggar’s Opera*.³⁰ On the latter success, Swift wrote to his less frugal companion:

I think that rich rogue Rich [the theatre manager] should in conscience make you a present of 2 or 3 hundred guineas. I am impatient that such a dog, by sitting still, should get five times more than the author³¹

Some authors could do well but these same authors would be aware that their booksellers were making the real profits. Because all new ventures carried an element of risk, ‘The Rules of Trade oblige him to buy as cheap and sell as dear as possible.’³² Windfall profits could offset the marginal losses often incurred in publishing unknown writers. William Taylor is said to have founded his publishing fortune on the success of *Robinson Crusoe* for which he paid Defoe next to nothing.³³ But by and large, an author of quality soon

gained recognition and could so expect at least decent payment for his work. The stories of authors asserting themselves against booksellers, such as David Hume brandishing a sword at Jacob Robinson or Johnson knocking Thomas Osborne to the ground, happily came to mind.³⁴ For many authors, however, things fell out differently.

Viewing the London book trade of the eighteenth century, one becomes aware that there is a clear two-tier organization. At the top are the main London booksellers who were infinitely secure within their tidy associations; it is here that virtually all the valuable copyrights were held. Furthermore even the major periodicals were owned by this group, less for their stable but uninspiring income than for control over the main means of advertising.³⁵ It is to this pole that the high prestige authors, those of polite or massive popular appeal, were attracted by respectable bargains. The spectacular success of a poet like Pope, an encyclopedist like Chambers, or a bookseller like Jacob Tonson, was enough to attract a multitude of ambitious entrepreneurs eager to drink from the same well. The results were predictable. A surplus of labour among authors, printers and upstart booksellers led to falling wages and profits. The major booksellers were, setting aside the injuries of piracy, the winners once again in being supplied with low cost writing and printing services. Although likely based on an over-simplification of the circumstances, A. S. Collins is correct to say:

The natural result of such power being concentrated in the hands of a few booksellers and of the number of writers being so great was the penury and squalor of Grub Street³⁶

Grub Street can be broadly used to describe the second and lowest tier in the publishing industry.

It was to this level that all participants in the publishing industry, writers, printers and booksellers, resorted when excluded from the tight circle of well-paid authors, specially protected printers and respectable booksellers. This underworld was, according to Michael Harris, 'inhabited by a cross-section of miscellaneous individuals most of whom were connected with the pirating trade.'³⁷ By its very nature, Grub Street was parasitic upon the mainstream book trade. As Defoe points out any publication that begins to sell is immediately the prey of pirates:

Thus as soon as a Book is publish'd by the Author, a raskally Fellow buys it, and immediately falls to work upon it, and it if was a Book of a Crown, he will contract it so as to sell it for two shillings³⁸

Abridgements, commentaries and rejoinders were the stock and trade for dissolute booksellers. Printers could support themselves producing ephemera for all manner of customers and by entering the clandestine trade in unstamped newspapers and periodicals. In 1712, a Stamp Act was passed which sought to squelch the level of publication in periodicals by leveling a prohibitive tax. By various means, Grub Street printers successfully avoided these restrictions until 1743 when controls were effectively imposed. By 1725, over a quarter of a million copies of unstamped newspapers were printed in London every year.³⁹ Some printers, like Nathaniel Mist, James Read and John Applebee, could actually achieve modest incomes by plying these various businesses.⁴⁰ Grub Street was the entrepreneurial sector of the book trade and there was always room for the inventive, industrious or unscrupulous.

There were success stories, of course. One son of a country cobbler came to London and set up a print shop at St. John's Gate where in 1731 he published *The Gentleman's Magazine*. It was originally a compendium of material gleaned from various sources including other newspapers. Out of the depths of Grub Street arose a new idea in periodical format and one which proved to be immediately popular. By 1732, the London booksellers had launched an imitation of this digest form with *The London Magazine*. When the young Sam Johnson was just a novice in Grub Street, he made his way to the headquarters of Edward Cave at St. John's Gate and 'beheld it with reverence.'⁴¹ As the magazine matured into a staple for the London readership, Cave was able to afford more and more original material and so Samuel Johnson embarked on his central employment as a hack, though one of exceptional quality.

There were also tales of infamy. Another provincial who came to the metropolis first to be a printer and then a bookseller was Edmund Curll. Like many others, he supplemented his income selling patent cures and engaging in the current controversies. But Curll found that exploiting the public's hunger for the sensational and the scandalous was his most lucrative endeavour. From then on he was a constant presence in London, always on the look out for private letters or wills absconded from some favorite person.

He was regularly called before the House of Lords on obscenity charges, libellous transgressions or for breaches of Parliamentary privilege. He became and remains a figure of legend who embodies the very spirit of Grub Street. In the *Weekly Journal*, or *Saturday Post* for April 5, 1718, there appears an attack on Curll, very possibly by Defoe, that names the general unscrupulousness of the gutter press in his honour:

There is indeed but one bookseller eminent among us for this abomination [indecent books], and from him the crime takes the just denomination of Curlicism⁴²

He appears in much the same guise in the anonymous satire, 'The State Dunces' (1733):

Go on my supple C- I, shut thine Eyes,
And to their Int'rest all Things sacrifice

Just so did Pope present Curll in the original *Dunciad* (1728) where Pope focuses upon Curll's prowess with filth and his lack of remorse:

Not so from shameless C- I: Impetuous spread
The stream, and smoaking, flourish'd o'er his head (161-2)⁴³

Added to all his faults, Curll obsequiously pursued Walpole for some paid employment, but for once there was a character so unsavoury that even the Whig propaganda machine turned up its nose.

In an ironic call to satire by the anonymous author of 'The Art of Poetry' (1741), the standing of authors within the book trade's crucible of entrepreneurial zeal is painfully clear:

Beneath the lowest of the Sons of Men,
Is he who starves, and yet can hold a Pen

There were no prerequisites for turning author, such as the initial capital and rudimentary skills required to be a printer or a bookseller, and no secondary sources of income beyond scribbling faster. Writing became a last resort for many and numbers made the situation worse. The urbane Matthew Prior, himself raised and polished by aristocratic patronage, saw that even in the late seventeenth century the poet's lot was without much dignity.

Were Shakespeare's self alive again, he'd never
Degenerate to a Poet from a Player (169-70)⁴⁴

It was left, however, to a survivor of Grub Street to take up the task of explaining the situation and so remove the blame which more established wits were heaping upon the hacks. This was James Ralph, a one time member of Pope's catalogue of dunces, and with *The Case of Authors by Profession or Trade* (1758) he sought to expose the ruthless exploitation implicit in the book trade. Authors could not be blamed for the state of letters because their state of helpless poverty gave them few options, all of them degrading.

The Writer has three Provinces. To write for Booksellers. To write for the State. To write for a faction in the Name of the Community.⁴⁵

All three demanded a type of artistic and moral prostitution, and hunger made any genuine scruples superfluous. Ralph's choice of analogy is arresting:

there is no Difference between the Writer in his Garret, and the Slave in the Mines; ... Both have their Tasks assigned them alike: Both must drudge and starve; and neither can hope for Deliverance.⁴⁶

The image is of a large downtrodden labouring class serving the likes of Curll.

The overtly pernicious effects of Curll, generalized by some to refer to the more lurid quarter of the gutter press, can be generalized to the entire industry. Dr. George Cheyne wrote to Samuel Richardson observing that 'all Booksellers, I fear, are Curlls by professions.'⁴⁷ Given the structure and purpose of the book trade, the exploitation in Grub Street and the creation of mountains of printed matter were only natural consequences. Micheal McKeon, pursuing a marxist interpretation of literary history, points out that 'the commodification of the book market as a mass-production industry' had to come to maturity.⁴⁸ Focusing upon Grub Street, John Feather reminds readers that it was these 'forgotten authors who were responsible for the great bulk of eighteenth century book production.'⁴⁹ Grub Street is not purely myth, and that great suffering accompanied this activity cannot be doubted.

One vivid example will serve to give this abstract account a human substance. In 1740, Johnson met Samuel Boyce, a fellow writer who wrote for bread. But unlike Johnson, Boyce was afflicted with a near pathological irresponsibility which would drive him to extreme responses when threatened by penury. One trick, when there was no money to be found, was to send his wife out with news of his approaching death; she would return with a collection to pay for his funeral. Another expedient was the pawning

of property. He would write a few sheets of verse, then pawn them for the food he needed to sustain him while he wrote the rest of the poem. On one occasion in 1740, he pawned all his clothes and retired to his bed where he cut a single hole in the blanket so that his writing hand could be free. Under these same circumstances, he hit upon the idea of making a paper collar and paper cuffs to wear with an overcoat so that, while he was still naked, he could stir abroad in tolerable fashion. Likely moved by this spectacle, his friends arranged for a donation which became a roast beef dinner complete with ketchup, truffles and mushrooms. This he ate, Johnson recalled, sitting naked in bed.⁵⁰ Needless to say Samuel Boyce did not last long. Yet even his lack of responsibility became a symptom of the struggling artist's desperate desire for success and a taste of the rich life however brief. This story brings to mind an image captured unforgettably by William Hogarth.

Hogarth's *The Distressed Poet* (1737) shows a scribbler who like Boyce has purchased the wit's uniform of a wig and a sword while his family lives around him cold, hungry and unable to pay the debts which will soon, if they have not already, made leaving the garret impossible.⁵¹ The pressure of poverty overturns the poet's ability to recognize his real priorities and forces him to retreat into a world of deluded hopes and strained literary ambitions. In the 1737 version, he sits at work by the window, composing a poem entitled 'Poverty A Poem' and this became in the 1740 variant 'Riches A Poem'. Hogarth realized that the scribbler's response to tightening poverty is to dream more intensely about wealth. It is not surprising that Hogarth could capture Grub Street so perfectly for he himself had emerged from that same world by sheer dint of industry. Hogarth's father, Richard had been imprisoned for debt when his plan for a Latin-speaking coffee house failed. Coincidentally, this coffee house was situated in the very same St. John's Gate that Johnson later beheld with reverence as Edward Cave's headquarters.⁵² Thus Hogarth's attack on the hack's delusion is quite different from Pope's. Hogarth understood the predicament, could see its vacuity and stressed the nature of the error over the ill-effects on literature. Industry and prudence were the only answers. Hogarth's attitude is typically that of one who had succeeded but who, like Dickens, had grown up near enough to poverty to be terrified by it.

Richard Savage was another who, as it were, attacked Grub Street from within. His *An Author to be Lett* is ostensibly written by Iscariot Hackney, a distillation of all hacks, with the intent of exposing their moral poverty:

My Pen, like the Sword of a Swiss, or the pleading of a Lawyer, is generally employed for pay⁵³

Part mercenary part prostitute, his origins lie in a mixture of poverty and pride:

I came young into the World with little Education, less Money, and no visible Way of living; However, I qualified myself (tho' of mean Birth) for a Gentleman of Wit and Humour about Town

Naturally Iscariot falls into the employ of Curll and is charged to 'write a merry Tale, the Wit of which was its Obsenity.'⁵⁴ Savage is attempting the kind of dissection Swift pursues in *A Tale of a Tub* but with the one major difference that Savage is attacking Grub Street, in a way similar to Hogarth, in order to transcend it. Savage always claimed to be of noble birth though this was little more than an attempt to give his aspirations some measure of satisfaction. At the end of the day, however, Savage is not as far removed from Iscariot Hackney as he would have hoped.

Another who could draw upon a personal knowledge of Grub Street was Oliver Goldsmith. For years he shuffled between medicine and literature and so tasted the world of would-be professionals. Goldsmith eventually won a measure of security, and was usually able to meet his debts, and from this position he could look back over Grub Street with both familiarity and detachment. Accordingly he can offer honest observations in a pleasing manner. In "Letter XXX" of *The Citizen of the World*, a poet 'in shabby finery' reads a poem about what he knows best:

There in a lonely room, from bailiffs snug,
The muse found Scrogger stretch'd beneath a rug,
A window patch'd with paper lent a ray,
That dimly shew'd the state in which he lay (5-8)⁵⁵

The details here and throughout the fragment attest to personal knowledge of garrets like this. The same letter includes a delightful take of an author in debt who is finally captured by the bailiffs when he emerges to meet a nobleman in a bogus interview. The lure of a patron is simply too strong to resist.

Goldsmith also gives Grub Street some serious thought and produces, much like Ralph does, a defence of the scribblers. One cannot, Goldsmith argues, ignore the role of the respectable bookseller in producing Grub Street's poverty and its power. His point is clear enough to catch up the wits like Pope in mid-reproach:

The poet's poverty is a standing topic of contempt. His writing for bread is an unpardonable offence. Perhaps, of all mankind, an author, in these terms, is used most hardly. We keep him poor, and yet revile his poverty. Like angry parents, who correct their children till they cry, and then correct them for crying, we reproach him for living by his wit, and yet allow him no other means to live.

His taking refuge in garrets and cellars, and living among vermin, have of late, been violently objected to him, and that by men, who I dare hope, are more apt to pity than insult his distress. Is poverty the writer's fault? ⁵⁶

This defense shifts the blame off the scribbler's themselves and onto the industry with its major booksellers and its reading public. It is a sophisticated recognition on Goldsmith's part, and one Ralph also touches on, to see that an industry as large and complex as the book trade will of its own accord create casualties and often unjustly.

Most of the denizens of Grub Street cannot come to terms with their predicament and nor do they take it as a subject for writing. Each works so hard to escape poverty that its effects are only unconsciously expressed. There is one glaring and fascinating exception, John Dunton. In his extensive autobiographical work, *The Life and Errors of John Dunton* (1705) 'written by Himself in SOLITUDE,' there occurs a passage that reveals at once the elements of a life in Grub Street and the irrepressible human buoyancy that refuses to surrender. Dunton turns his own problems into a subject for writing, which in turn is going to net him some income to relieve his immediate needs:

I must here (to my mortification) reckon my self among the number of scribblers, for my (present) income wou'd not support me, did I not stoop so low, as to turn Author, but (I find) 'twas what I was Born to, for I am a Willing and everlasting Drudge to the Quill, and am now writing A Farewell to Trade [*his career as a bookseller was collapsing*]. My constant Sickness and Debts have rather made me An Author (than Souldier) of Fortune, and therefore I'm very thankful to that kind Muse that assists the unfortunate: For cou'd I not compose a Few Sheets, for the Press, I might now Starve⁵⁷

Dunton here is a veritable incarnation of Swift's Hack in *A Tale of a Tub* and in fact Dunton is the most likely model for Swift's parody of Grub Street literature. Writing is something to be stooped to from trade and it is a life filled with torment.

When Swift and Pope turn their attention and a major work of art each to the study and destruction of dunces they do so for a number of reasons. Part of their provocation is defensive. The entrepreneurial world of Grub Street was a threatening source of competition. Piracy and libels injure their sales and reputation and these in turn adversely affect their standing with the readership and the booksellers. As seen earlier, even the major literary artists won only a fraction of the capital available to the major bookseller – they did not wish to lose more. Similarly the sheer mass of material pouring from the garrets was a threat because it saturated an already limited market. The precious money of England's book-buying class was always in danger of being diverted from literature by Curll's brand of sensationalism. Part of the response was the Grub Street myth that darkened an already lurid picture to make this type of literature less acceptable to the socially self-conscious consumers. For this reason, Swift and Pope, like Dryden before them, tar the competition with a brush dipped into the Fleet ditch.

The war on dunces was not merely a professional matter, however. The great wits are also so called for a good reason and both Swift and Pope are genuinely concerned about the cultural impact of an industry that spreads pulp literature, itself inspired by poverty and pride, through society like so much cheap gin. If one looks at Dunton one sees the spectacle of real talent breaking under the pressure of failure, and while it creates a fascinating style of writing it cannot be called art; it exudes deep psychological stress and all order and morality are perverted by its pressure. Swift of all the wits made this his particular concern. Thwarted pride, more than poverty, turns the mind back on itself producing a prolific form of madness which, as payment was made by the page, was a curiously appropriate response.

While Pope and Swift are justified in seeing a threat to civilized values in the productions of Grub Street, they are likely to exaggerate it for reasons of their own. What is needed is the balance of Grub Street's greatest son, Samuel Johnson who, at once, could see the successes and failures of the new book publishing industry, the suffering of the authors and the monumental achievements in learning that could now be

financed, and could sympathize with the idleness and delusion of the drudge even while he was applauding the new age of public learning which Grub Street was paradoxically ushering in. When he considered the meager remuneration he finally received for *The Dictionary*, Johnson would not be bitter, saying of his employers, the booksellers, that they are ‘generous liberal-minded men.’⁵⁸ While this baffles some, Johnson had survived, the booksellers had profited and the world had gained a little more knowledge.

Endnotes

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3. Pat Rogers, *Grub Street: Studies in a Subculture* (London: Methuen, 1972).
4. Terry Belanger, 'Publishers and Writers in Eighteenth Century England,' in *Books and their Readers*, ed. Isobel Rivers (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982) 7.
5. Geoffrey Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society, 1680-1730* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982).
6. See Graham Pollard, 'The English Market for Printed Books,' *Publishing History* 4 (1978) and John Feather, 'The English Book Trade and the Law 1695-1799,' *Publishing History* 12 (1982).
7. John Feather, 'The Commerce of Letters: The Study of the Eighteenth Century Book Trade,' *Eighteenth Century Studies* 17 (1984): 418-19.
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9. Raymond Astbury, 'The Renewal of the Licensing Act in 1693 and its Lapse in 1695,' *Library*, 5 ser. 33 (1978).
10. Holmes, 12.
11. Holmes, 8.
12. Richard Savage, *The Poetical Works of Richard Savage*, ed. Clarence Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).
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14. Holmes, 32. Also see Paul J. Korshin, 'Types of Eighteenth Century Literary Patronage,' *Eighteenth Century Studies* 7 (1974).
15. Belanger, 13-4.

16. Michael Harris, 'Periodicals and the Book Trade,' in *Development of the English Book Trade, 1700-1899*, eds. Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic Press, 1981) 77.
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18. Defoe, 25.
19. Ian Watt, 'Publishers and Sinners: The Augustan View,' *Studies in Bibliography* 12 (1959) 13.
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21. Belanger, 18.
22. A. S. Collins, *Authorship in the Days of Johnson* (London: Robert Holden, 1927) 9.
23. Michael Foss, *The Age of Patronage* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971) 180.
24. Watt, 10.
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26. Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985) 266-7.
27. Watt, 11.
28. Foss, 178.
29. Rogers, 'Introduction,' 54-55.
30. Foss, 179.
31. Jonathan Swift, *Correspondence*, ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963-5) III, 276.
32. James Ralph, *The Case of Authors by Profession or Trade* (Gainesville, Florida: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1966) 21.

33. Watt, 12.
34. Watt, 13.
35. Harris, 70, 77.
36. Collins, 23.
37. Harris, 83.
38. Defoe, 27.
39. Harris, 69, 89, 79.
40. Harris, 77.
41. W. Jackson Bate, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978) 170.
42. Quoted in Ralph Straus, *The Unspeakable Curll* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1927) 79.
43. Alexander Pope, *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, V, *The Dunciad*, ed. James Sutherland, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1963).
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45. Ralph, 19.
46. Ralph, 22.
47. Watt, 20.
48. Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987) 51.
49. Feather, 'Commerce of Letters,' 418.
50. Bate, 211-12.
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52. Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: His Life, Art, and Times*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971) I, 14, 30.

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54. Savage, *An Author to be Lett*, 3.
55. Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*, in *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966) II, 128.
56. Goldsmith, *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning*, Works, I, 314.
57. John Dunton, *The Life and Errors of John Dunton* (1705) 320.
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