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Grub Street

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Abstract

Grub Street was originally a real place, an existing street in London in the Cripplegate area, that derived its name from the refuse ditch (grub) that ran alongside. It had a high concentration of taverns, dosshouses, coffeehouses, and brothels – as well as publishers, booksellers, and authors. This mixture of the socially low, the commercial and the literary made it appealing to use the street name as a shorthand for a specific kind of writer and writing. Though the actual street eventually disappeared in the restructuring of London and the social and economic conditions of authorship that the term implied evolved, the notion of Grub Street remained firmly entrenched in the British literary imagination and during the nineteenth century became part of the mythologizing of eighteenth-century literature.

The term 'Grub Street' is one of the most loaded in the eighteenth-century discourse around the [Republic of Letters](#) and, specifically, the emergence of a professional book market. The term 'Grub Street' first of all reflects contemporary fears about the changes that the commercialization of writing introduced to literature and publishing, but could occasionally also be expressive of the defiant attitude of those who were suspected or accused of belonging to that new class of mercenary 'writers for hire'.

Originally, Grub Street was a real place, an existing street in London in the Cripplegate area, that derived its name from the refuse ditch (grub) that ran alongside. This and the general location made it an undesirable area, unhealthy because of a much higher risk of disease outbreaks (Cripplegate had the highest death rate in London during the 1665 Plague). It also had a high concentration of taverns, dosshouses (one of the lowest forms of accommodation), coffeehouses, and brothels – as well as of publishers, booksellers, and authors. It is this mixture of the socially low, the commercial (all the way to actual prostitution) and the literary that made it appealing to use the street name as a shorthand for a specific kind of writer, one that was on the margins of society, desperately (and incompetently) trying to make some money from writing. Thus, while the street name does not exist anymore (the street was renamed Milton Street, and after heavy damage during the Second World War, most of it was swallowed by the Barbican Estate), the term has survived, because it quickly became a symbol as well as an address.

It was used as a reference to bad writing already in 1630 by the poet John Taylor, and gained traction throughout the English Civil War, which was fought in writing as well as with actual arms. The concerted efforts to discredit the other side in writing therefore produced the idea of a whole group of writers that worked for a cause that lay outside of purely literary ambitions, with the added – and important – suspicion that many of them might be less soldiers of faith and more mercenaries. And indeed, writers were being paid by both sides of the conflict to churn out pamphlets in quick succession. After the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, these factions were succeeded by the political parties that began to develop, and that continued to use – and pay – writers for propagandistic purposes. James Ralph, who was later to write one of the first accounts of the state of authorship under capitalist conditions,¹ can serve as an extreme example of how authors could indeed regard themselves as mercenaries. Ralph was a writer by trade, with a biography mirroring those of other miscellaneous authors of the period. From the early 1730s on, Ralph had concentrated on political journalism, mostly attacking Walpole and his government in numerous journals and newspapers. Then, in 1753, according to John Nichols's account from 1812, he made it abundantly clear that 'he was ready to be hired to any cause; [...] he actually put himself to auction to the two contending Parties [and], after several biddings, the honest Mr. Ralph was bought by the Pelhams.'² A pension of £300 secured that he would forthwith be silent.

Importantly, the type of writing that was in demand for such political purposes, the quick letter, newspaper article, or short pamphlet, was all considered ephemeral, not written with the purpose of permanence and therefore not art, but a mere commodity. A (negative) notion

associated with this kind of writing was that it was paid by the line, i.e. it was paid for the quantity of writing, not for its quality. This made the writer comparable to a craftsman or a merchant and strongly distanced him from the idea of the artist. The term that is most closely related to Grub Street is therefore that of the 'hack writer'. The word 'hack' derives from Hackney, which originally meant a horse for hire, and was soon broadened to other forms of services for hire. Significantly, its meanings later also included prostitutes,³ so that describing writing for hire as 'hack writing' strengthened the implication that such writers also exhibited a lack of moral standards. And indeed, writers and critics in the eighteenth century frequently compared writers to prostitutes, such as [Ned Ward](#) in 1698, who described the condition of an author as 'very much like that of a Strumpet [...] and if the reason be requir'd, why we betake our selves to be so Scandalous a Profession as Whoring or Pamphleteering, the same excusive Answer will serve us both, viz. that the unhappy circumstances of a Narrow Fortune, hath forced us to do that for our Subsistence.'⁴

Writing as a mercenary for a faction was one aspect of the negative connotations around the terms 'Grub Street' and 'hack writer', the other was trying to write something that sold as well as possible. There is a long tradition in British literature of 'true' or 'literary' authors looking down on all forms of publication, with all of its unwanted associations with commerce and public exposure. The aristocratic wits at the Restoration court did what they could to avoid the impression that they were interested in publishing their poetry beyond the fashionable circles through which they spread in handwritten copies. Publishing with a bookseller implied that the author needed the money that came out of such a transaction, or craved the attention and applause of a wide audience of lower social standing, which no gentleman would admit to.

The author that was maybe the most instrumental in immortalizing the negative notions of Grub Street was the poet [Alexander Pope](#). Through several satires, but most importantly through his monumental poem *The Dunciad* (1728-1743), he collected all the criticisms levelled against 'mercenary' and commercial authors and created vivid images for their abjection. At the heart of Pope's critique of the commercial writer one can detect an unresolved paradox: on the one hand, he condemns some of the most commercially successful writers of his time, like Eliza Haywood, for their very successes – implicitly assuming that they must cater to the lowest tastes possible in order to achieve such widespread appeal – on the other hand, he equally uses lack of success as an indication that a writer must be bad, as witnessed by his conjunction of the 'Cave of Poetry and Poverty' in the *Dunciad*.

Pope himself is, as a professional and successful author, both transitional for the development of a commercial literary market and highly ambivalent in how to evaluate this development. Through all of his career, Pope tried with exceptional success to be both: a respectable poet creating lasting art that was above petty criticism, and a commercially successful writer who expertly navigated the book market. He did not auction himself out for the highest bidder like James Ralph, but he was not beneath tricking an enemy bookseller into publishing his letters, thereby keeping the stigma of authorly vanity from himself. The publication of his translations of Homer through subscription made him one of the first authors to become

financially independent through his pen, albeit not yet by creating a popular success like the novels by Defoe or Richardson, which made their authors money without resorting to the residual patronage that is still contained in publishing by subscription.

Whether he liked it or not, Pope was a part of the literary world, and its economic affordances and demands did not always focus exclusively on questions of taste and aesthetics. His friend Swift, who had a much greater capacity for laughing at himself, consequently had fewer qualms about counting himself among the Grub Street writers that he was making fun of (for example in his poem 'Advice to the Grub Street Verse-writers'). In a letter dated 22 March 1708/1709 to Robert Hunter, for example, he writes that he is 'of late' a 'small Contributor' to the '*Republica Grubstreetaria*', and in 'PROMETHEUS' he invokes the 'Pow'rs of Grubstreet' to help him complete the poem.⁵ [Samuel Johnson](#) famously included himself among the Grub Street writers when he wrote the respective entry for his Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1755: 'The name of a street in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems; whence any mean production is called *grubstreet*.'

From the perspective of sociability, eighteenth-century discussions of Grub Street often implied that its members were in some ways socially organized. The all-encompassing nature of [Pope](#)'s attacks in the *Dunciad* that included a host of people all seemingly united in their worship of dullness strengthened this perspective, as did the polyphonic nature of the *Dunciad*'s paratexts, especially the footnotes, in which the critics constantly seem to enter into absurd discussions. This can also be understood as part of the Scriblerian satire that Pope developed together with his friends Jonathan Swift, John Arbuthnot, John Gay and Thomas Parnell (see [Scriblerus Club](#)), which also implied the social and intellectual coherence of pedants and other proponents of un-learning. The same notion about the existence of a '*Republica Grubstreetaria*' (Swift) underlies the earlier creation and publication of the 'Grub Street Journal' (1730-1738), which was edited by Richard Russell and the botanist John Martyn with a very likely input by Pope. Extracts from the journal's content were published in 1732 and 1737 as *Memoirs of the Grub Street Society*.

Though the actual street eventually disappeared in the restructuring of London and the underlying conditions evolved, the notion of Grub Street remained firmly entrenched in the British literary imagination and during the nineteenth century became part of the mythologizing of eighteenth-century literature. For Victorian writers, Grub Street came to signify the transitional nature of the eighteenth-century book market, which was not yet evolved enough to provide writers with a steady income, but which had already lost the traditional financial support through aristocratic patronage. As Thomas Macaulay writes about Samuel Johnson in 1831:

'Johnson came up to London precisely at the time when the condition of a man of letters was most miserable and degraded. It was a dark night between two sunny days. The age of patronage had passed away. The age of general

curiosity and intelligence had not arrived. The number of readers is at present so great that a popular author may subsist in comfort and opulence on the profits of his works.’⁶

Of course, the self-celebration of the ‘age of general curiosity and intelligence’ was not universal, and the suspicion that commercialization and literary merit did not always go hand in hand continued to exist (and does so until today), most famously expressed in the nineteenth century by George Gissing’s novel *New Grub Street*. In this novel, Grub Street has evolved into an industry with tight structures and entrenched hierarchies that are antithetical to the development of real art. This continues the mercenary or mercantile aspect of Grub Street satire, equating Grub Street with ‘the system’. An alternative strain of criticism had seen Grub Street on the opposite end, as outcasts from the polite society that made up the republic of letters. And indeed, a lot of the criticism of and debates around Grub Street came at least implicitly down to questions of control. For people like [Pope](#), Grub Street was dangerous because it could not be controlled – an anxiety that he expressed through his image of a literal deluge of authors and texts – and indeed the legal situation throughout the eighteenth-century made the publishing world very difficult to control, and therefore open for subversive publications, from political sedition to pornography.

This association of Grub Street with uncontrolled and potentially subversive writing had its own legacy, and it is interesting to see how the idea of ‘Grub Street’ as a social group of writers/artists that was on the margins of society – a notion that was clearly meant to stigmatize those authors as ‘not belonging’ – would be gradually re-evaluated and reinterpreted under the influence of Romanticism and its idea of the original genius as a social outsider ahead of his time, turning the under-belly into the avantgarde. The self-image and the public perception of writers like Byron, Shelley, or Keats promoted the idea of the artist as misfit, but crucially added a critique of society as conservative, old-fashioned, backward-looking, and therefore in dire need of being rejuvenated by the very art that they despised. With the emerging understanding of art as being subversive and revolutionary, the social neglect and marginalization of the author became a sign of his authenticity, originality, and incorruptibility. Thus, the poverty that had been a hallmark of Grub Street satire literally became romanticized into the notion of bohemia:

‘To-day, as of old, every man who enters on an artistic career, without any other means of livelihood than his art itself, will be forced to walk in the paths of Bohemia. [...] For the uneasy reader, for the timorous citizen, for all those for whom an “i” can never be too plainly dotted in definition, we repeat as an axiom: ‘Bohemia is a stage in artistic life; it is the preface to the Academy, the Hôtel Dieu, or the Morgue.’⁷

Like Grub Street, ‘Bohemia’ is at the same time a half-mythical place and a social group that stands in uneasy relation to society at large. Membership in these societies had evolved from

being a slur to a proudly defiant form of self-identification, though the sociable practices underneath remained surprisingly constant – all the way from the London coffee houses of the turn of the eighteenth-century to the Paris cafés at the turn of the twentieth century.

1. James Ralph, *The Case of Authors by Profession or Trade, Stated. With Regard to Booksellers, the Stage, and the Public. No Matter by Whom* (London: R. Griffiths, 1758).
 2. John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century. Comprizing Biographical Memoirs of William Bowyer and many of his Learned Friends*, 9 vols. (London: Nichols, 1812), p. 591.
 3. The 1699 *Dictionary of Cant* notes: 'Hacks or Hackneys, hirelings. Hackney-whores, Common Prostitutes. Hackney-Horses, to be let to any body. Hackney-Scriblers, Poor Hirelings Mercenary Writers' (B.E., *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew* (London: W. Hawes, 1699)).
 4. Quoted in Howard W. Troyer, *Ned Ward of Grub Street: A Study of Sub-Literary London in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 3.
 5. Jonathan Swift, *Correspondence*, ed. by Harold Williams, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963–65), vol. I, p. 132–33.
 6. Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The Works of Lord Macaulay*, 12 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1898), vol. 8, p. 85-90.
 7. Henri Murger, *The Bohemians of the Latin Quarter [Scènes de la vie de Bohème]* (London: Vizetelly, 1888), p. xxvii–xxxiv.
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[White Conduit House \(1760\)](#)