

Passive Resistance in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* and Knut Hamsun's *Sult*

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Abstract

Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) and Hamsun's *Sult* (1890) depict distinctive voices of outcast young artists suffering from urban poverty, displacement and isolation, and reveal a deeper insight into wider questions on urban modernity, passive resistance and a fragmented identity. The plots and semi-autobiographical accounts of these texts locate them specifically in late-nineteenth century Kristiania (Oslo) and London by focusing on changing standards of literary culture in the 1880s and 1890s. Hamsun's emphasis on the subjective individual and Gissing's emphasis on representing realist social groupings offer us complementary accounts of the experience of rootlessness, the self-division of outcast emigrant writers and the difficulty of survival by sticking to their own terms in creating and presenting their works of art in the capital. A comparative reading of these texts helps us to see not only their city-specific contexts, but also a transnational understanding of the commercialisation of art and the passive resistance of the artists that spanned the national borders of England and Norway. These urban novels, I suggest, perform a critical resistance to the assimilating forces of late-nineteenth-century modernity and changing economic conditions with the aim of preserving artistic integrity and freedom.

Keywords: passive resistance; commodification of art and literature; urban poverty; George Gissing; Knut Hamsun

Introduction

London is a city of transitions. It is a city of a million houses—and no homes; of millions upon millions of inhabitants—and no natives [...] It is consistent only in its inconsistencies. (Edwin Pugh, *The City of the World* (1912))

George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) introduces the distinctive voices of outcast intellectuals suffering from urban poverty, displacement and estrangement in London, the city of "transitions" and "inconsistencies". In the novel, Edwin Reardon's life is gradually ruined through his passive resistance to changing commercial demands in the publishing world and his inability to write popular novels to further his

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literary career. His struggle to adapt to writing one-volume instead of three-volume novels, his hard work and continuous anxiety about an uncertain future substantially damage his physical and mental well-being. Similarly, Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun's most celebrated novel *Sult* (*Hunger*, 1890) draws upon the inescapable and degrading influence of the city of Kristiania (now Oslo) on an aspiring young artist who arrives in the capital to make a living from writing. Despite being an ambitious and confident writer with a zest for life, the unnamed hero experiences abject poverty and hunger. The physical and psychological effects of impoverishment of the artists in both novels reveal a deeper insight into wider questions about the representation of passive resistance, alienation and a fragmented identity in the modern city: what is the role of changing economic, historical and socio-cultural conditions in the passive resistance of artists? How does commodification of art and literature influence the estrangement of writers from their work and society? How do the particular narrative strategies of the two texts reflect their distinctive portrayal of resistance toward urban modernity at the turn of the century?

Although *New Grub Street* and *Sult* are well known for their distinctive portrayal of alienated young artists, previous scholarship has curiously neglected to discuss them together, possibly due to their formal differences as realist and/or modernist texts.¹ Unlike earlier novels of the nineteenth century, the two texts have significant thematic and ideological focal points on the commercialisation of art, whilst preserving a distinctive modernist approach to literature with their specific linguistic styles and literary methods. Both novels feature writer characters as modern exiles in an unfriendly world and present their passive resistance in the city as a consciously adopted stance and an active mode of struggle against the paradoxical forces of economic modernisation. *New Grub Street* departs from earlier works on the condition of authors and art, such as Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850), Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1850) and Henry James's *The Tragic Muse* (1890), through its direct engagement with the position of writing and the writer as a member of a professional group in the social context of the late-Victorian era. In the novel, Gissing presents writing "as a real material activity" within the

¹ A brief analysis of the two novels exists in John Vernon's *Money and Fiction* (1984), which explicates on the relationship between money and literary realism.

social condition of the literary culture of its time by using a naturalist and realist method (Goode 1993: vii). *Sult*, in contrast, keeps the social context of literary circles in Norway at bay with its extremely individualistic and psychological approach to “the hunger artist” in urban modernity. What distinguishes *Sult* from the novels that precede it is its highly modernist approach to subjectivity and first-person narrative, which delves into the human soul and portrays the outcast hero’s sufferings.

The plots and semi-autobiographical accounts of the two novels locate them specifically in late-nineteenth century Kristiania and London respectively by focusing on changing standards of literary culture in the 1880s and 1890s. The socio-spatial contexts of the two cities set the conditions for the commercialisation of art and had a negative influence on the passive resistance of the artists by increasing their isolation in society. In this regard, spatialities function as representatives of literary marketplaces and the capitalisation of labour in the metropolis. Despite the distinctive literary histories and socio-economic conditions of England and Norway, the demands of the readership and publishers in the two countries remained a significant factor in the career development of authors. Whilst *Sult* explores a single individual’s experience, offering a subjective account of the starvation and estrangement of an eccentric journalist in Kristiania, *New Grub Street* presents the hardships encountered by a network of young writers, emphasising the wider, extended implications of the social context of Victorian London. Hamsun’s emphasis on the subjective individual and Gissing’s emphasis on representing realist social groupings offer us complementary accounts of the experience of rootlessness, the self-division of modern exiles and the difficulty for them to survive by sticking to their own terms in creating and presenting their works of art in the city. At first glance, the protagonists seem unable to alter their conditions or become a part of the new world order, yet they represent a mutual challenge to capitalist ideologies in the world economy and in fact exercise substantial power by refusing to comply with the harsh demands of the publishing world. At the same time, their determination not to accept “structures imposed upon them by a modernising world” increases their isolation and gradually leads to a fatal end (Desmarais 2001: 4).

Passive resistance has frequently been used as a type of nonviolent action or resistance to authority and it has indeed been widely used by

groups who lack power or position. Although the term is usually associated with a political stance, it has gained diverse meanings in the course of history and in critical literary works. Some of these works include Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Herman Melville's short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853), and Emile Zola's *The Belly of Paris* (1873), which serves as an antithesis to *Hunger* with its descriptions of food abundance and a sense of fullness. *New Grub Street* and *Sult* complement this picture by describing passive resistance not as mere passivity, but as an active mode of struggle by the alienated artist in the face of imposed poverty and hunger. Passive resistance is presented as a perspective consciously adopted by the protagonists in order to preserve their identities and artistic integrity in the city. It is accompanied by a strong repulsion for social life and a deep sense of alienation from the public. Their self-starvation, isolation and gradual degradation, thereby, are both the symptoms and causes of their passive resistance in the metropolis.

Analysing these two seminal works also revises our understanding of George Gissing as a late-Victorian author, since his novel demonstrates significant characteristics of modernist texts, presenting a new understanding of the commercialisation of art and an innovative approach to the naturalist representation of the city. Beside their city-specific contexts, a transnational understanding of commercialisation of art and the passive resistance of the artists also come to the forefront out of this comparison, due to the novels' representation of the increase in mobility, trade relations, migration, transportation and communication between Norway and Britain in the period. A reading of the two texts together helps us to see the widening problem of commercialisation of art and literature that spanned the national borders, and, in some way, transcended these nations while the countries themselves remained a part of the world economy. In this regard, this study discusses three interlinked ways in which the passive resistance of the modern artist is portrayed in the novels. In the first section, the historical conditions that led to the commodification of art and literature in England and Norway, which influenced the production of these novels, are considered; in the second section, the role of urban modernity and city in the sufferings of the artists and the spatial representations of a capitalist mode of literary production through naturalist and modernist techniques are discussed; and in the final section, the symptoms of physical (and moral)

degradation, the ways in which the young artists resist and react to urban poverty and the pressures imposed upon them as writers are elaborated on.

The Position of Writing and Artists in the City

The economic, socio-cultural and historical conditions in which *New Grub Street* and *Sult* were written are notable since these novels deal directly with the position of writing at the time. Through the figure of the young artist from the provinces trying to make his literary fortune in the capital, they represent the responses of literary intellectuals to the shift in literary production in England and Scandinavian countries. The two novels reveal the contradiction between the achievement of commercial success and the maintenance of artistic standards, and an antagonism between the starving artist and the middle-class reader and publishers amidst the new phenomenon of mass culture. Although England and Norway had fundamentally distinctive literary, social and economic histories, they contributed to the expansion of a transnational literary field in Europe through the translation of novels such as Gissing's *New Grub Street* and Hamsun's *Sult* into other languages and the migration of young intellectuals from suburban areas to cultural centres like London and Copenhagen.

In the 1880s and 1890s in England, there was a dramatic increase in the publication of novels, periodicals and newspapers, as well as in the readership (especially after the *Forster Act of 1870*), which led to a corresponding emergence of writers and journalists who were gradually classified as "workers" in the literary circles of London. With the increasing number of publications in the country, "a new class of professional writers" emerged who had to sign financial contracts with publishers and editors to get their work published, although they often received wages insufficient to support themselves (Severn 2010: 169). The dominant form of publication was the "three-decker" or "three-volume" novel, which increased the cost of books and restricted their sale to subscriptions or "circulating libraries" (Goode 1993: xiv). Since remuneration was not profitable either, some authors sold the rights to their books, and thereby, were unable to benefit from the sale of new editions. Some were expected to serialise their stories or to get a cheap one-volume edition after the initial book publication. Gissing, for

instance, sold the rights to *Demos* and *New Grub Street* due to financial concerns and although the latter was originally written as a three-volume novel, it was later revised as a one-volume novel due to publishers' demands. Published books in late-Victorian England were divided into two categories: there were "lists" of valuable and qualified books, and "entrepreneurial" best-seller books, sold at a cheaper price and consumed in a shorter time. Also, the coming of the *Net Book Agreement* in the 1890s, the popularity of serial fiction, and shifts in the readership and publishers' demands drove these changes in format and signalled a structured capitalist mode of production (Feltes 1993: 4). The classification of British writers as workers in the literary market gradually increased their alienation from their works of art and from the society they were writing for.

Since the socio-economic and historical conditions of Norway were dramatically different from those of England in the late nineteenth century, its literary history took a different route, too. For about three centuries, Norway had been under the influence of Danish literature and culture; however, after its independence in 1814, the country witnessed a gradual yet promising progress in the fields of music, literature and art with the works of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Henrik Ibsen and Edvard Munch (Naess 1975: xiv). Up to the late 1860s, Norwegian literature was essentially (national) romantic and the dominant forms were poems, folk tales and history books. From the 1870s, however, *Det Moderne Gennembrud* (Modern Breakthrough), encouraged by the Danish critic Georg Brandes, marked a sudden and clean break in literary history with romanticism being substituted by realism (Downs 1966: 10-11). In the 1890s, Norwegian literature broadened its horizons, as represented by the works of poets, playwrights and writers such as Arne Garborg (1851-1924), Knut Hamsun (1859-1952) and Hans Kink (1865-1926), who were "concerned with the evocation of moods, reveries, and the soul life of the individual" (11).

Norway's literary culture was significantly influenced by the increase in printed materials, as well as in literacy and popular genres, "followed by the decline of 'poetic' language" (Rossi 2010: 421). Whilst in England London was the centre of the literary market and books were published in the English language, the most influential Norwegian writers of the *Modern Breakthrough*, Ibsen, Bjørnson, Kielland and Lie wrote in Danish rather than in *Landsmål* (country language, *Nynorsk*) and they

defended a Dano-Norwegian continuum. Copenhagen was still a cultural capital for both countries and the Danish firm, Gyldendal, published their works (Ferguson 1987: 33). Hamsun arrived in Copenhagen in July 1888 and his first aim was to gain acceptance into the literary circles of this cultural centre by making contact with the literary elite and getting his manuscripts published (Kolloen 2009: 34). Unlike in England, there was no pressure to produce three-volume novels in Norway (and in Denmark) and there were very few examples of trilogies at all before the interwar period. The original fragment of Hamsun's novel first appeared in Denmark in the Danish review "Ny Jord" in 1888. It was found "too long to be printed in two parts and too short to be serialised" and therefore published as a one-volume novel in 1890 (Kolloen 2009: 39; Ruud 1916: 243). Just like his unnamed protagonist in *Sult*, Hamsun received a tenkroner bill for the publication of his book from Edvard Brandes, an editor of the Copenhagen daily "Politiken" (Larsen 1922: 32-33). Reminded by Philipsen (his publisher) of the need to write for the largest readership, Hamsun admitted that he did not intend to produce for the masses when he wrote *Sult*. That is, despite fundamental differences in their literary history of publishing, the same pressures that Gissing experienced to write fiction for a mass audience also held true for Hamsun in Denmark and Norway.

The works of Hamsun and Gissing were shaped and influenced by different movements and authors of the time and the translations of their novels suggested a transnational literary field undergoing a process of dramatic change. *Hunger* was first translated into English in 1899 by George Egerton (later in 1967 by Robert Bly and in 1996 by Sverre Lynstad). Hamsun acknowledged the influence of Dostoevsky, Stringberg and Nietzsche on his writing and gave lectures on French writers including Emile Zola, despite the fact that he explicitly rejected the latter's naturalist method of portraying characters with a dominant trait. Strongly influenced by Dostoevsky, Hamsun preferred creating flexible and unpredictable characters that would bewilder the reader. One year before *Sult*'s translation into English, an abridged version of *New Grub Street* was translated into French in 1898 and Gissing made further extensive cuts for the French edition of 1901. Gissing was also "influenced by Dostoevsky, whose *Crime and Punishment* he declared 'magnificent'" (Waller 2006: 95). Zola's experimental methods and the characteristics of French naturalism had an influence on Gissing, and he

emphasised the impact of the environment on the workings of characters in his novels. The translations of Gissing and Hamsun's works into English, German and French meant that their ideas were not bound within national borders and the influence of French and Russian literature on their works presented a broader picture of the transnational literary field.

Moreover, a comparison of the two texts unveils an increasing mobility from rural/suburban areas to cities, as well as to other countries for career purposes or international trading, with the development of technology, transportation and communication in a wider world economy. Both Gissing and Hamsun had been to America for a short period of time as young artists. Gissing's visits to Italy later in his life, and Hamsun's stay in Denmark in order to pursue a literary career, reflect an increasing mobility of young artists transgressing national boundaries. While in *New Grub Street* the distinction between rural and urban spaces is emphasized as a comparison between preserved aesthetic/cultural values and corrupted mass culture in England, *Sult* draws attention to migration to overseas for a better life and the proliferation of commercial relations between Norway and England with its particular reference to the "ships" in the port of Kristiania. To begin with, in Gissing's novel, for those who live in the country and wish to gain respect through a career and literary achievement, London is a promising place that draws young intellectuals into its literary circle. However, as Reardon experiences after his temporary success, London is also a place where young intellectuals who try to defend art against mass culture suffer the most and are pushed into poverty and spiritual conflict. Reardon believes that London is no longer the centre of intellectual life and many emigrants coming here experience disappointment, degradation and wretchedness. The city becomes the locus of a greedy and unjust modern culture whilst it disregards the intellectual and artistic capacity of humanitarian artists like Reardon, whose position changes along with his failure. When Reardon decides to work as a clerk at a hospital in north London and finds lodging in Croydon, his wife Amy refuses to move with him due to the perceived degradation of such a move. From a middle-class perspective, this spatial movement implies a destructive crossing of class divisions and does not allow any further hope for a better future or upward movement for economic reasons.

Hamsun's hero, on the other hand, represents one of the economically displaced populations in Norway, possibly one of those who left the

countryside for a better life in the capital and faced the collapse of economic networks in the city. This mobility was partly due to the gradual development of Norway on a global stage, as it was considered one of the least developed European countries until the late-nineteenth century. Norway declared its independence from Denmark with a new Constitution on May 17, 1814. More than half a century later, Norwegian agricultural and shipping industries underwent enormous transformation, which required large-scale capital investment in the 1880s (Wientzen 2015: 211): “Old labour intensive production techniques” used by the Norwegian peasantry had to be “replaced by much more capital intensive ones” (Moe 1977: 143). These changes led to the peasants being pushed off their lands and a huge stream of emigration to the United States consequently took place. Despite a steady increase in urban population and industrialisation in the country, a slow rate of economic growth occurred due to its insufficient internal market. Nevertheless, in the 1890s, business relations between England and Norway gradually progressed with Norway’s import of the textile machinery equipments from Great Britain in 1849, further commercial relations (trading timber), the completion of the telegraph network and the extension of the coastal steamer services in the 1870s. In the following decades, the migrants in the United States contributed to Norway’s economy considerably with capital sent to their family members and relatives. Hamsun had himself been to the United States twice, but he returned to Denmark and Norway to advance his literary career as an author.

Representations of Literary Production and the City

Regarding the criticism of literary production, *New Grub Street* and *Sult* present fundamental differences as well as similarities in the representation of the outcast artist, literary networks, and the distinction between rural and urban spaces, marked by Gissing’s naturalist approach and Hamsun’s modernist technique. While Gissing’s novel describes the artist as a member of literary groups in which s/he tries to maintain artistic integrity, Hamsun’s narrator does not belong to any social or professional network and is completely alone in his struggles. The formal differences in the novels become even more apparent in their representation of real and symbolic spaces in the city and their approaches to modernism. The naturalist and modernist representations of

the depersonalised modern city suggest an increasing experience of displacement, estrangement and passive resistance by the artists. In this sense, *New Grub Street* is both a late Victorian novel, with its naturalist technique, and at the same time modern, with its exiled characters that carry a modernist artist's awareness of alienation and estrangement in urban modernity. In *Sult*, on the other hand, the starvation and resistance of the outcast artist leads to a more subjective experience of urban space, while the city shapes, restricts and sometimes controls his mobility, morality, social and financial experiences. The novels' literary techniques greatly influence the representations of the city in relation to the intellectual outcasts whose senses of time and place alter dramatically.

Gissing's naturalist method in *New Grub Street* is combined with his criticism of a capitalist, bourgeois ideology since it portrays the adverse impact of capitalist modes of literary production and the division of labour on writers (Diaz Lage 2002: 73). In the novel, hunger and poverty become a pathological problem that drains the material and mental energies of the heroes/heroines. For those that are unable or refuse to adapt to the new modes of literary production (one-volume novel), failure is presented as a natural consequence. Characters such as Reardon, Milvain and Biffen are not "larger than life", which affirms Gissing's project to report what he sees rather than to create a sensational story. His naturalist approach also "leads to the impression that he is writing strict autobiography in the guise of fiction" (Toynton 1990: 126). This method, however, itself reveals a conflict between practising art for aestheticism/pleasure and for money, which inevitably generates a categorisation of characters as "old and new, passive and active, idealists and pragmatists" (Diaz Lage 2002: 77). To illustrate, while Reardon symbolises the traditional, passive and idealist writer who is unable to change his style and produce one-volume novels despite the threat of poverty and hunger, Jasper Milvain (introduced as "A Man of His Day") is depicted as a modern and cynical young journalist driven purely by financial ambitions and disregarding the value of literature. He describes Reardon as "the old type of the unpractical artist" and literature as "a trade" (Gissing 1998: 8-9). Milvain is the antithesis of Reardon, yet he ultimately becomes a success and marries Reardon's former wife. The success of Milvain, as P.J. Keating notes, "entails the annihilation of Reardon" (1968: 11). The literary network in the novel is mainly divided

into three male-dominated groups: “the tradesmen (Milvain and Whelpdale), the artists (Reardon and Biffen) and the men of letters, represented by Alfred Yule” (1968: 10). Gissing’s novel allows success for Milvain and Whelpdale, while it confirms the ultimate failure of artists and men of letters (Reardon, Biffen and Yule) affected by the forces of commercialism and urban alienation. The novel represents a widening gulf between artists and tradesmen in the Victorian literary market, which simultaneously complicates the idea of the value of artistic labour in the metropolis.

Late-Victorian London was not an “accidental meeting place and crossing point”; instead, it was a “generative environment of the new arts, [a] focal point of intellectual community, indeed of intellectual conflict and tension” (Bradbury 1991: 96). The city revealed the complexity of “modern metropolitan life, which so deeply underlie[d] modern consciousness and modern writing” in a network of relationships connected to urbanism (1991: 96). In this sense, *New Grub Street* may be considered a novel that “belongs as much to the modernist period as it does to the Victorian” since it uses a symbolic spatial unit to address the corruption of mass culture and literary production in the metropolis (Goode 1993: xix). This strategy allows Gissing to establish the setting of the novel in a more manageable way, by fragmenting the city and conveying his aesthetic and political views within the plot. The transformation of Grub Street into “New” Grub Street signifies changing standards in the publishing world and presents a more challenging space for authorship and literary achievement for emigrants moving to London. The title of the novel refers to a real place: Grub Street in London, a street that had become synonymous with hack literature. By Gissing’s time, however, Grub Street (later renamed Milton Street) no longer existed: “Our Grub Street of today is quite a different place: it is supplied with telegraphic communication, it knows what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world, its inhabitants are men of business” (Gissing 1998: 9). Gissing uses the historic and symbolic power of this street to convey his ideas about the hardships confronted by young intellectuals and authors like him. He uses plain and powerful language, which distinguishes the novel from his earlier works. He re-imagines Grub Street in the last decades of the century as a locus of failure of literary ideals and artistic labour for the emigrant intellectuals.

The British Museum reading room in the novel functions as a symbolic space where authorship and literary interests are corrupted through commercialisation, competition and greed. The room represents the isolation of literary men from the rest of society. Milvain and others describe the room as “the valley of the shadow of books” and for Marian Yule it resembles “a prison of lost souls” because readers are confined in a space where they are surrounded by “an invisible wall of silence” and left in complete “mental and spiritual isolation” (Gissing 1998: 107-8). The young woman loathes the reading room because she feels “an instinctive revolt against the mechanization of intellect” (Poole 1975: 143). As Richard Dennis argues, Gissing uses real spaces in his novels as “a stage in determining their [the characters’] status, their moral stance, how they might behave” (Dennis 2009: 5). Although this is more apparent in his earlier slum novels, *New Grub Street* reveals a different aspect of literary circles. The writers in the novel are “poised between labour aristocracy and the lower-middle class”, yet, they live in a middle-class style “within the reach of the British Museum” (Goode 1993: 112-13). Although London promises hope to young emigrants such as Reardon and Milvain, only the most adaptive one manages to fulfill his/her goals in the city.

Marian Yule’s above-mentioned analysis provides not only an important perspective on the alienation of artists and commercialisation of art but also a gendered approach to authorship and resistance against printing materials with short-term literary values. As Severn notes, Marian “toils in selfless obscurity for years as a researcher and ghostwriter” for her father, Alfred Yule, an editor who does not “let [her] sign [the] compositions” since he finds it disadvantageous as “a matter of business” (2010: 157; Gissing 1998: 80). The character of Marian in the novel brings gender inequity and male dominance in the literary market into question and reveals the difficulty of becoming financially independent as a female author. In public and private life, she is subject to the effects of her fluctuating socio-economic condition and male authority. Her relationship with Milvain ends when he finds out that she will not get her inheritance due to the creditor’s faults. After Alfred goes blind, the Yules are forced to move from London to a provincial town where Marian works as a librarian. In terms of the gender history of nineteenth-century Britain, she represents a female intellectual who is

unable to take control of her life or challenge her exclusion in a patriarchal society.

Hamsun's *Sult* is distinguished from Gissing's *New Grub Street* as a new form of modernist text with its extremely individualistic approach, first-person narrative and powerful linguistic style used to portray the inner struggle and contradictions of the character's mind. The minute details of the character's feelings and unstable state of mind, the use of a first-person narrator and stream of consciousness are significant elements of this modernist text. In this respect, Hamsun's literary method differs from Gissing's naturalist approach as *Sult* can be considered a psychological novel that is extremely subjective and told by a first-person narrator. Hamsun insisted to Georg Brandes that his book must "not be regarded as a novel", there were enough authors who wrote novels from Zola to Kielland, and that he had intently avoided "monotonous" topics such as "weddings, trips to country" (qtd. in Ferguson 1987: 115). Hamsun portrayed the isolation of the man of letters in the city and subverted any visions of his era as coherent or harmonious in the same way as Gissing; however, his primary concern was to describe "the delicate vibrations of a sensitive human soul, the strange and peculiar life of the mind, the mysteries of the nerves in a starving body" (Naess 1975). His book was a new type of modernist novel in its originality and pure impressionism as well as its symbolic and psychological depth, as contemporary critics Peter Kirkegaard and Atle Kittang have also noted. Kirkegaard's study is essentially sociological in its approach to the "modernism system" concept, which provides us with a "profile of the artist in industrialized, capitalist society", a similar message to that delivered by Gissing in *New Grub Street* (Schiff 1981: 360). Kirkegaard refers to the intellectual aristocrat who develops a gulf between himself and his bourgeois public. The artist has a contradictory personality, "divided between a private, introspective, isolated self and a public, entrepreneurial, exhibitionist one" (1981: 360). He deals with his alienation and society by creating art "which deals essentially with its own creation" (1981: 360). Whilst these critics mainly focus on urban alienation, personality split, anxiety and modernity in the novel, Martin Humpál provides significant arguments on the linguistic presentation of this modernist text as "a strictly figural first-person narrative with an extensive employment of free indirect discourse for presenting consciousness" (1998: 72). Using this method, the character's

subjectivity is freed from the authoritative power of the narrator, and at the same time alters the representation and experience of the city.

The modern urban novel, Raymond Williams suggests, brings about an awareness that is “intense and fragmentary, subjective only, yet in the very form of its subjectivity including others, who are now with the buildings, the noises, the sights and smells of the city parts of this single and racing consciousness” (1970: 20). Modernism, in this sense, becomes “the environment of personal consciousness, flickering impressions”, just as Hamsun’s hero narrates his intense yet fragmentary subjectivity with a personal consciousness of the things around him in the city (100). In *Sult*, it is starvation which reflects the hero’s weaknesses and strengths, and which increases his sensitivity towards his surroundings, blurring the boundaries between the past and present as well as his sense of place. Starvation also reveals his fragmented character, addressing the uncertain and disintegrated human nature from a modernist view, “in a period of transition more feverishly hysterical than its predecessor” (McFarlane 1991: 81). Lucid explanations of time and place in the novel enable the readers to follow his movements in the city with scrupulous descriptions of his fluctuating mood, his hunger and his internal monologues. The minute details provide a realistic sense of the temporal experience of hunger and his nervous breakdown. Starvation increases his sensory awareness regarding his surroundings and opens up a new world that he was unaware of before: “Intet undgik min Opmærksomhed, jeg var klar og aandsnærværende, alle Ting strømmed ind paa mig med en skinnende Tydelighed, som om der pludselig var bleven et stærkt Lys omkring mig” (Hamsun 1890: 19).² This sensitivity turns out to be an advantage for him for he becomes a better observer than the rich around him. However, it also becomes a source of distraction, since he has to put more effort into producing an article. His perception of time dramatically changes as the distance between past and present dissolves due to the effects of starvation. With the interruption of an old man, for instance, a wind

² “Nothing escaped my attention, I was lucid and self-possessed, and everything rushed in upon me with a brilliant distinctness as if an intense light had suddenly sprung up around me” (Hamsun 2011: 14). For translations into English, I have used the translation by Lynstad because he provides a clear and contemporary interpretation of the text. See Knut Hamsun. 2011 [1890]. *Hunger*. Trans. Sverre Lyngstad. Edinburgh: Canongate Books.

sweeps through his mind and he returns to the present with a strange sense: “og det forekom mig alle rede, at den forvirrede Sindsstemning, jeg just havde oplevet, skrev sig fra en længst svunden Tid, kanske et Aar eller to tilbage, og var saa smaat i Færd med at udviskes af min Erindring” (32).³ He even loses his sense of place as he walks away and experiences “lidt efter lidt fik jeg en forunderlig Fornemmelse af at være langt borte, andre Steder henne, jeg havde en halvt ubestemt Følelse af, at det ikke var mig, som gik der paa Stenfliserne og dukked mig ned” (17-8).⁴

Physical boundaries in and outside of Kristiania both shape and restrict Hamsun’s protagonist’s morality as well as his financial and social experiences, just as London determines Reardon and Biffen’s bitter experiences in *New Grub Street*, both works’ treatment of urbanism connecting them to modernism. *Sult* begins with a statement about the effects of a “strange city” on emigrants like Hamsun’s hero: “Det var i den Tid, jeg gik omkring og sulted i Kristiania, denne forunderlige By, som ingen forlader, før han har fået Mærker af den” (Hamsun 1890: 1).⁵ As Lyngstad notes, *Sult* is “an urban novel, whose action takes place within a distinctive setting of streets, squares and residential areas familiar to Kristiania residents” (2011: 223). This reveals the importance of “literary geography”, in Franco Moretti’s terms, elaborating on the ways in which “geography shapes the narrative structure” of the novel (Moretti 1998: 8). In this sense, space is considered an internal force that shapes narrative from within and “what happens depends a lot on where it happens” (Lyngstad 2011: 70-100). This factor helps us to discover themes and arguments the author never made explicit in the novel. Hamsun’s hero walks through “the grey streets of an impersonal big city, utterly alone in his struggle to survive, both physically and spiritually”, and informs the reader of his immediate sensations as his attention is directed to himself rather than his environment (Buttry 1988: 27). He

³ “It now seemed to me that the confused state of mind I had just experienced belonged to a time long past, perhaps a year or two ago, and was slowly getting erased from my memory” (Hamsun 2011: 23).

⁴ “An odd sensation of being far away, in some other place; and vaguely feel that it isn’t me who is walking there on the flagstones with bowed head” (Hamsun 2011: 13).

⁵ “It was in those days when I wandered about hungry in Kristiania, that strange city which no one leaves before it has set mark upon him” (Hamsun 2011: 3).

chooses cemeteries and Palace Park to write his articles, and not simply to attract attention; yet he cannot get rid of “ de forskelligste Tingunderlige Paafund, Luner, Indfald af min urolige Hjerne” as he works trying to find inspiration: “Jeg stod tilsidst saa besynderlig blottet for alt muligt” (Hamsun 1890: 4-5).⁶ He is aware of being “rootless, without friends, denuded of objects” that would connect him with the outside world (Auster 2011: 254).

More significantly, the wanderings of the journalist are frequently interrupted by the presence of policemen monitoring him and stopping him from sleeping in public spaces at night. This practice refers to an “administratively controlled” space, which acts to reconfirm the dominant social-spatial hierarchical organization, to ensure that everyone is in their place (Wright 1997: 47). The hero is always forced to keep moving because his presence arouses suspicion and a kind of deviance. For this reason, one of Hamsun’s hero’s continuous concerns in the city is finding shelter but he is bewildered by the difficulty of finding such a place in the vast city and asks: “Hvor skulde jeg dog gøre af mig? Et Sted maatte jeg jo være” (Hamsun 1890: 64).⁷ Although the city does not inhabit or embrace him and he frequently loses his hope of survival, he resists and revolts again: “Jeg agted ikke at synke, sammen, jeg vilde dø staaende” (1890: 315).⁸ His existential crisis, therefore, is closely linked with spaces and places in which he can locate himself and survive on his own terms. The city acts as a hostile environment, like a labyrinth he is caught in, but he doesn’t want to go home either, because he no longer has a home or a place he feels he belongs to. The detrimental impact of the capitalist mode of literary production in the city, thereby, gradually leads to the characters’ both gradual degradation (physical and moral) and their passive resistance against it, as elaborated in the following section.

⁶ “strange whimsies, moods, caprices of my restless brain [...] In the end, strange to say, I was stripped of everything under the sun” (Hamsun 2011: 5).

⁷ “Where was I to go? I had to be somewhere, after all” (Hamsun 2011: 43).

⁸ “I had no intention of collapsing, I would die on my feet!” (Hamsun 2011: 207).

Gradual Degradation and Passive Resistance

In Gissing's *New Grub Street*, the gradual degradation of Reardon is marked by his continuous anxiety and disillusionment with his life while in Hamsun's *Sult* starvation takes a more central role to describe the modern condition of the artist. In the novels, the passive resistance of Reardon, Biffen and Hamsun's hero against the demands of the literary market turns into a self-defeating process that gradually rips them off their hopes for a better future. For instance, the exhausting work of writing three-volume novels in a limited time drains Reardon's energy and hopes, while in *Sult* starvation is central to the journalist's sufferings and hastens his physical and moral degradation. Reardon's talent as a man of letters is wasted by the harsh demands of the publishing world in London because he fails to provide a sensational and interesting story after his third novel, *On Neutral Ground*, and he is far from meeting the "New" Grub Street standards. His artistic integrity is shattered by "the demands of popular taste" and producing such a novel turns out to be "a torturing experience" while he tries to keep his family together (Korg 1950: 198). Reardon rationally explains the conflict between his financial needs and the division of labour as follows:

For anyone in my position [...] how is it possible to abandon the three volumes? It is a question of payment. An author of moderate repute may live on a yearly three-volume novel—I mean the man who is obliged to sell his book out and out, and who gets from one to two hundred pounds for it. But he would have to produce four one-volume novels to obtain the same income; and I doubt whether he could get so many published within the twelve months (Gissing 1998: 329)

Time pressure is one source of Reardon's anxiety and disillusionment with his inability to write a popular novel. Nevertheless, as Gillian Tindall observes, he is not simply a victim of "a mechanical society, but of an inappropriate education that has ill-equipped [him] for the altered conditions of the new age" (1974: 92-3). That is, his attachment to classicism and literature contradicts the requirements of the commercial market. He is gradually estranged from his work and it becomes a source of tyranny for him. His desperation increases his sensitivity towards sounds and clocks around him, in turn increasing his anxiety. The clock in the novel represents capitalist ideologies that require long working hours as the artist counts each hour and the number of pages he writes. The profession of writing turns into a "dreaded task" and blank paper

becomes “horrible slips [...] of paper that have to be filled” (Gissing 1998: 121-22). The restfulness of his sleep lasts only for a short period of time and the workhouse bell signals a new day of toil. This reflects “the degrading effect of mechanical labour”, in Gissing’s terms (qtd. in Grylls 1986: 101). Reardon’s anxiety and continuous labour due to his financial concerns thereby severely distort his productivity and artistic creativity.

Besides their estrangement from their works of art and society, the passivity of Reardon and Biffen turns into a concealed form of protest, as a way in which the disillusioned artists can take out their frustration and hastens their degradation over time. Reardon’s alienation from his work of art is followed by his estrangement from the society he writes for. He is gradually impoverished as his money dwindles and he becomes a “recluse in the midst of millions, and view[s] with dread the necessity of going forth to fight for daily food” in London (Gissing 1998: 60). When he later loses his family he is filled with mixed feelings: “An extraordinary arrogance now and then possessed him; he stood amid his poor surroundings with the sensations of an outraged exile, and laughed aloud in furious contempt of all who censured or pitied him” (1998: 336). As an artist in financial difficulties, he is overwhelmed by the necessity of finding an ordinary job in the city he no longer feels he belongs to. Reardon seems to be generally more imaginative than passionate in his revolt against his fate and suffering, particularly compared to Hamsun’s hero. The outcast artist in *Sult* is depicted as a protagonist with a higher level of self-esteem and a better sense of humour; he is proud and stubborn, which makes him an ambitious but less tolerant man. Reardon, in comparison, seems to be a more passive character with his timid nature, yet he finds accepting failure as difficult as Hamsun’s hero.

Biffen, on the other hand, is described as a more optimistic and patient character than Reardon and works slowly for many months “patiently, affectionately, scrupulously”; yet his only novel *Mr. Bailey: Grocer* does not receive the critical attention and commercial profit that he expects (Gissing 1998: 426). After Reardon’s death, Biffen becomes more discontent with his life due to his attraction to Amy, but he is unable to impress her by any means. He feels completely rejected and isolated and although he is equal in intellect to his fellows he can find no way out. He finds being a member of the lower class humiliating and discouraging, and finally commits suicide. At this point, class humiliation comes to the forefront since Biffen is not a member of the upper classes

despite his intellectual capacity; and his lower social-class status and poverty prevent him from attaining the attention he desperately needs. Gissing further hints at why the reader might not understand or sympathise with Biffen and Reardon. He draws our attention to these sensitive and imaginative souls unfit for “the rough and tumble of the world’s labour-market”, a state that condemns the outcast and the weak (1998: 426). Gissing claims that they are “richly endowed with the kindly and imaginative virtues” and it is their fate to be blamed for their “endowment of less value” (1998: 427). He praises their passivity, considering it “their nature and merit to be passive” (1998: 427). He suggests that if they were given better conditions and full independence in using their literary gift, the readers’ perception of these authors would definitely change. Recognising their fault as “their inability to earn money” in London, Gissing offers understanding and tolerance instead of contempt and disdain (1998: 427).

Whereas in *New Grub Street* the fear of poverty is intimately linked with financial concerns and the loss of self-respect, in *Sult* the effects of impoverishment and estrangement from society are directly associated with physiological hunger, which degrades the body and identity of Hamsun’s hero. “Hunger is not a metaphor” in the novel, as Paul Auster writes, “it is the very crux of the problem itself” (2011: 258). More significantly, it is not “the lack of food but [his] inability to purchase it”, which addresses the link between lack of money and hunger (2011: 5). The starvation cycle repeats itself every two to three weeks when the outcast hero is again penniless. He loses physical strength and weight as he periodically suffers from hunger before his health is restored. In one incident when a young girl is terrified by his look he realises how his body must have changed: “Jeg maatte være ganske ubegribelig mager. Og Øjnene var paa Vej ind gennem Hovedet. Hvordan saa jeg egentlig ud? [...] mel, og sulted mig vanskabt midt i Kristiania By!” (Hamsun 1890: 145-46).⁹ At this point, he associates his poor health and physical degradation with the difficulty of living in urban poverty and alienation, and his starvation in the city signals a self-defeating process since it might even lead to his death. The outcast hero is gradually estranged from

⁹ “I must be incredibly thin. My eyes were sinking deep into my skull. What, exactly, did I look like? [...] I was turning into a freak from hunger, right here in the city of Kristiania!” (Hamsun 2011: 97).

his body due to acute starvation and is faced with “the savage loneliness of bodily experience” (Ellmann 1993: 6). His starving body resembles “a business capitalizing its assets when revenues fail” which inevitably results in organ failure and death (Tallis 2008: 27).

In *The Hunger Artists*, Maud Ellmann notes that distinctive meanings of starvation in different social contexts show us how “the body is determined by its culture” (1993: 4). Although Hamsun’s hero seems to fast because he has nothing to eat, not for a political/social reason or because he is anorexic, his relationship with food gradually changes and takes on a new form of passive resistance against the economic and socio-cultural problems of his era, allowing him to exercise authority over his body. Harald Naess argues that *Sult* “involves both a revolt against bourgeois society [...] and a lack of interest in its improvement through social reform. It demonstrates a total subjectivity” (1975: 309). In the novel, Hamsun gives a consciously male twist to the starving body, a trope in literature that has usually been associated with anorexic women. The starvation of the male hero is accompanied with “a touch of erotic sadism” and “the attempt to make contact with others is intensified in the attitude toward the opposite sex” (Buttry 1988: 232-33). Although lack of money and physical degradation decrease the possibility of attracting any woman, it also opens a captivating venue for the outcast artist who fantasises about a young girl called Ylajali as the sultan’s daughter awaiting him in a palace. With *Sult*, Hamsun provides a masculinised perspective to the starving body of the intellectual and an unconventional outlook on sexuality as a way of coping with the imposed poverty and lack of communication with society.

Starvation frequently manipulates the outcast hero’s thoughts and causes fluctuations in his mood to such a devastating degree that he becomes estranged from himself and his acts. Taking a morning walk on a clear day in autumn, for instance, he is seized by a desire to frighten two ladies he sees at Palace Hill. Although he is aware of the absurdity of his action, he is devoid of the power or restraint to control his behavior. Later, he even commits petty theft and pockets the remainder of 5-krone cash paid by another customer at a shop. Yet, he soon becomes highly displeased with his moral decline. He offers money to an old man he thinks resembles an insect by selling his waistcoat and he then becomes irritated when the old man rejects his help: “Overhovedet frygtes jeg ikke

for Fremtiden, jeg havde mange Jærn i Ilden” (Hamsun 1890: 11).¹⁰ This excessive capacity for self-persuasion rather than feelings of compassion reflects his ambitious and hopeful nature with regard to his resistance. Another example of this is when he thinks that his room is not suitable for an intellectual like him and he does not wish to keep it any longer. This disdainful approach refers to his “feeling of not being one of the poor, of having found himself outside of his class”; he frequently “dissociates himself in his capacity as creative artist” (Buttry 1988: 228-29). Class alienation, at this point, increases his estrangement and loneliness as an artist who does not have any intellectual friends around him and an audience he could associate himself with. He believes that he does not belong to the masses and he “is simply a victim of fate”; therefore, he is unwilling to share his misery with the people he communicates with (1988: 228). Yet this causes another problem: as he is detached from society, he cannot find anyone who understands or appreciates his suffering. His extreme individuality and pride draws him into the world of subjectivity and “the terrors of eternal solitude” (Ellmann 1993: 94).

Reardon, Biffen and Hamsun’s hero are driven by a desire to use their artistic and creative skills despite all the hardships they encounter. Hamsun’s hero is a confident writer, but his survival depends solely on writing articles and editors do not always agree to publish his work. In order to satiate his hunger he must write; however, his extreme poverty and hunger constantly distort his concentration and motivation. In this vicious cycle, after long periods of starvation he manages to receive some money, which revives his hope and enables him to write another article. In *The Art of Hunger* (2011 [1970]), Auster argues that Hamsun’s novel cannot claim to carry a “redeeming social value” and “although [it] puts us in the jaws of misery, it offers no analysis of that misery, contains no call to political action” (251). The novel appears to be very far from a political conscience on the surface, but it should be considered an expression of an artist’s further alienation by starvation, a direct result of urban poverty influenced by the changing world economy. The representation of the hungry artist, therefore, passively resists the assimilating forces of the modern city, the publishing world and the

¹⁰ “On the whole, I had no apprehensions about the future, I had many irons in the fire” (Lynstand 2011: 9-10).

idealism of profit and fame. Hamsun's hero faces illness and death from starvation and cold many times, yet he never gives up writing. He puts up with these difficulties not only because he has nothing else to do, but also because he wants to survive on his own terms. In *Enigma* (1987), Robert Ferguson calls attention to this:

As the hero's vivid torments continue, we begin gradually to suspect something that Hamsun undoubtedly wanted us to suspect; namely that what looks at first like a dogged inability to do anything about his plight is in reality a dogged refusal to act [...] We get the curious feeling that the whole thing is willed; a life-game that the hero is playing, to see how far it can go, how far he can let it go, how low he can sink, how long suffer. (111)

At the same time, the outcast hero refuses assistance from other people as he considers himself superior to ordinary folk. His pride and his consciousness of his fluctuating mood and poverty produce a contradictory effect on him, as he oscillates between pride and humility, reality and illusion, meaningfulness and absurdity in solitude, and finds himself exploring "metamorphoses of hunger" that "drive, inspire, elevate, destroy, humiliate and glorify" his humanity (Tallis 2008: 2). This is also emphasised by Rossi, who argues that the novel "involves a fundamental contradiction": "While the narrator constantly laments his hunger and regrets his vain efforts to find food, he, at the same time, refuses to eat, vomits the food and even rejects social assistance" (2010: 422). In fact, his self-conscious resistance and pride reduces him to a dangerous, vulnerable state in which he starts to lose self-control, performs spontaneous roles in public, easily tells lies, and becomes erratic and rude at times. His hunger ultimately becomes "a self-defeating protest" since it is he who becomes "the victim of [his] own revolt" (Ellmann 1993: 2). However, his starving body does not only symbolise a physiological lack, but also a lack of meaning in an irrational, modern world order.

Conclusion

Representations of passive resistance in *New Grub Street* and *Sult* take a different direction in terms of the choices the central characters ultimately make. In *Sult*, the unnamed outcast becomes the subject and object of his own experiment of endurance and starvation in the city. His journey in

Kristiania begins in summer; his sufferings increase and worsen in autumn and winter signals his final struggle to survive and his closeness to death. Yet, in the third part of the novel, he begins to consider an alternative: “the ships to return to” (Hamsun 2011: 109). He makes this choice to survive by leaving the city; yet, he does not consider this a victory, feeling defeated and humiliated despite all his efforts. Reardon and Biffen’s passive resistance, on the other hand, appears to be derived from a sense of disillusionment with themselves, hopelessness as emigrant young intellectuals with literary ideals. When Reardon becomes ill, he does not want to recover, and Biffen commits suicide at the end of the novel. Their deaths symbolise their final act of power and free will to leave the forces of the modern city that alienated them and the transnational world they did not find economic safety in. By leaving the city or choosing death, the protagonists choose to maintain their identities, resisting conformity to the changing demands of their era.

In essence, despite the distinctive economic, socio-cultural conditions and literary history in London and Kristiania, the detrimental effects of the capitalist mode of literary production and urban alienation reveal fundamental similarities in *New Grub Street* and *Sult*: the increasing financial concerns, fear of poverty, degradation and starvation of the artists emphasise the wider context of a changing literary world. Gissing and Hamsun’s distinctive representations of urban space and spatial units that estranged artists from their works of art and society can be considered as authentic sites of critical resistance with their redemptive function. The characters all have methods by which they attempt to use their free will and perform a passive resistance in both England and Norway. By choosing to endure hard work, anxiety and impoverishment for their literary ideals, they resist conforming to commercial market demand. Their self-defeating passive resistance confronts capitalist ideologies in the literary market and the division of labour among outcast emigrant authors in city-specific contexts, which address the wider problem of preserving artistic freedom and integrity in urban modernity.

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