Grub Street Revisited

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ABSTRACT

This essay traces the origin and polemics connected with Robert Darnton's thesis about the importance of Grub Street and hack writers under the Ancien Régime and during the French Revolution. As an exercise in self-criticism, Darnton modifies his original version of the thesis and relates it to the understanding of Jacobinism.

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I would like to thank the Institut d'études avancées for inviting me to spend a month at the hôtel de Lauzun on an intriguing assignment: to look back over my early work and to reconsider some arguments that have become absorbed in the current understanding of eighteenth-century French history.

I chose an article published in 1971, "The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France" (Darnton, 1971). It provoked considerable debate when it first appeared. Since then it has been accepted, even by its critics, as a work that occupies a central place in debates about the origins of the French Revolution (Chartier, 1991; Maza, 1992; Mason, 1998; McMahon, 2002; Turnovsky, 2010). Now, more than fifty years later, it needs to be revised.

In the article, I argued that historians and literary scholars had failed to take account of an important sector of the literary world, which I called "Grub Street", drawing on a parallel with London, where hack writers lived down and out in a street of that name during the seventeenth century. They scattered to garrets in other locations throughout the city in the eighteenth century. But a periodical, The Grub Street Journal (1730-1738), made the name stick as a pejorative for hacks, and Alexander Pope, who contributed to the journal, pilloried them in The Dunciad (three versions, 1728 to 1743). No such street existed in Paris, but scribblers proliferated there, too, churning out hack work and living miserably in garrets.

Having studied the career of one of them, Jacques-Pierre Brissot, a future leader of the Girondists during the French Revolution, and run across many others in the archives of the police, I became convinced that they constituted a distinct milieu with a sub-culture of its own. As many identified with Rousseau, they eventually came to be known as "les Rousseau du ruisseau" (Rousseaus of the gutter). Yet, they admired Voltaire, and aspired to win fame as philosophes by following his example. When they knocked on the door of his "church," however, it remained closed. Paris was flooded with aspiring writers in the 1770s and 1780s, and there was no room for them in the system of patronage and clientelism, which formed the basis of most literary careers.

To be sure, a few made it to the top, but they belonged to the second generation of philosophes, men like Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard and Jean-François Marmontel, who, unlike their predecessors, did not face serious persecution and settled comfortably into the salons and academies, where the plumbs were passed around. By the beginning of the reign of Louis XVI in 1774, the state permitted most philosophical works to circulate freely, unlike the 1750s, when the Encyclopédie was banned and most Encyclopedists

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