From its beginning, George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891) seems to announce an interest in thinking about urban reality and how this messy thing is best represented. The novel opens as modern young man Jasper Milvain introduces the news that a ‘man being hanged in London at this moment’ into a pleasant country breakfast, with a view to the ‘certain satisfaction in reflecting that it is not oneself’, and over the protests of the female members of the scene, Jasper is quite ‘cheerful’. ‘Well’, he rejoins to his sisters’ and mother’s objections, seeing that the fact came into my head, what better use could I make of it [than to use it to feel glad by comparison]? I could curse the brutality of an age that sanctioned such things; or I could grow doleful over the misery of the poor – fellow. But those emotions would be as little profitable to others as to myself. It just happens I saw the thing in a light of consolation. Things are bad with me but not so bad as that … instead of that, I am eating a really fresh egg, and very excellent buttered toast, with coffee as good as can reasonably be expected in this part of the world. – (do try boiling the milk, mother). (35)

Jasper’s flippant, arch tone and words (‘do try boiling the milk, mother’) establish much in the book – his character’s outline, the author’s potential interest in exploring gender dynamics and divisions, and, above all, the novel’s bent towards satire. Think how different and how serious is the treatment of a man hanging when Bill Sykes is

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brought to justice in *Oliver Twist* (1838); consider how bleak the prospect of such an event in a work like Scott’s *The Heart of the Mid-Lothian* (1818). But his delivery also, and perhaps most importantly, establishes that grim urban realities – like a hanging man – will be permitted to penetrate spaces – like a country breakfast table – usually perceived as calm refuges from such things, and that the attitudes held towards this heightened permeability will say a good deal about their holders.

It suggests, further, that certain ways of confronting the city – reporting only facts as might a newspaper, or moralising about its experiences as do Jasper’s sisters and mother – might be inadequate modes of confrontation. As the book progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that they are modes that must be thoroughly interrogated. Pierre Coustillas, has suggested that *New Grub Street* ‘offers a complex image of realism’ – something he locates in ‘the characters’ psychology, in the subtle and unvarnished analysis of human motives’, and also ‘in the setting … and in the general atmosphere’.² In fact, ‘realism’, and specifically, realism as deployed in the service of urban representation, becomes an investigated topic of the book as much as it serves as aesthetic quality.

In this essay I will explore the enquiries into different styles of realism and methods of urban depiction that Gissing lodges at the heart of *New Grub Street*, and I will consider what these enquiries – whose objects of study often seem laced with cancellations and contradictions – might be said to amount to. As I proceed, I will be especially questioning two commonplaces generally adopted in considerations of Gissing, and in examinations of his cosmopolitanism. Firstly, I shall scrutinise the line of thought that has traditionally assumed that Gissing did all his theorising in his overtly theoretical writings, in non-fiction pieces such as the 1895 essay ‘The Place of Realism in Fiction’ and the important 1903 monograph, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*. Secondly, I shall re-evaluate the scholarly practice of presuming that the city was a prejudged entity by the time that it entered Gissing’s pages and that it was simply a place which represented, or was to be represented, rather than a space that prompted Gissing to reflect upon

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