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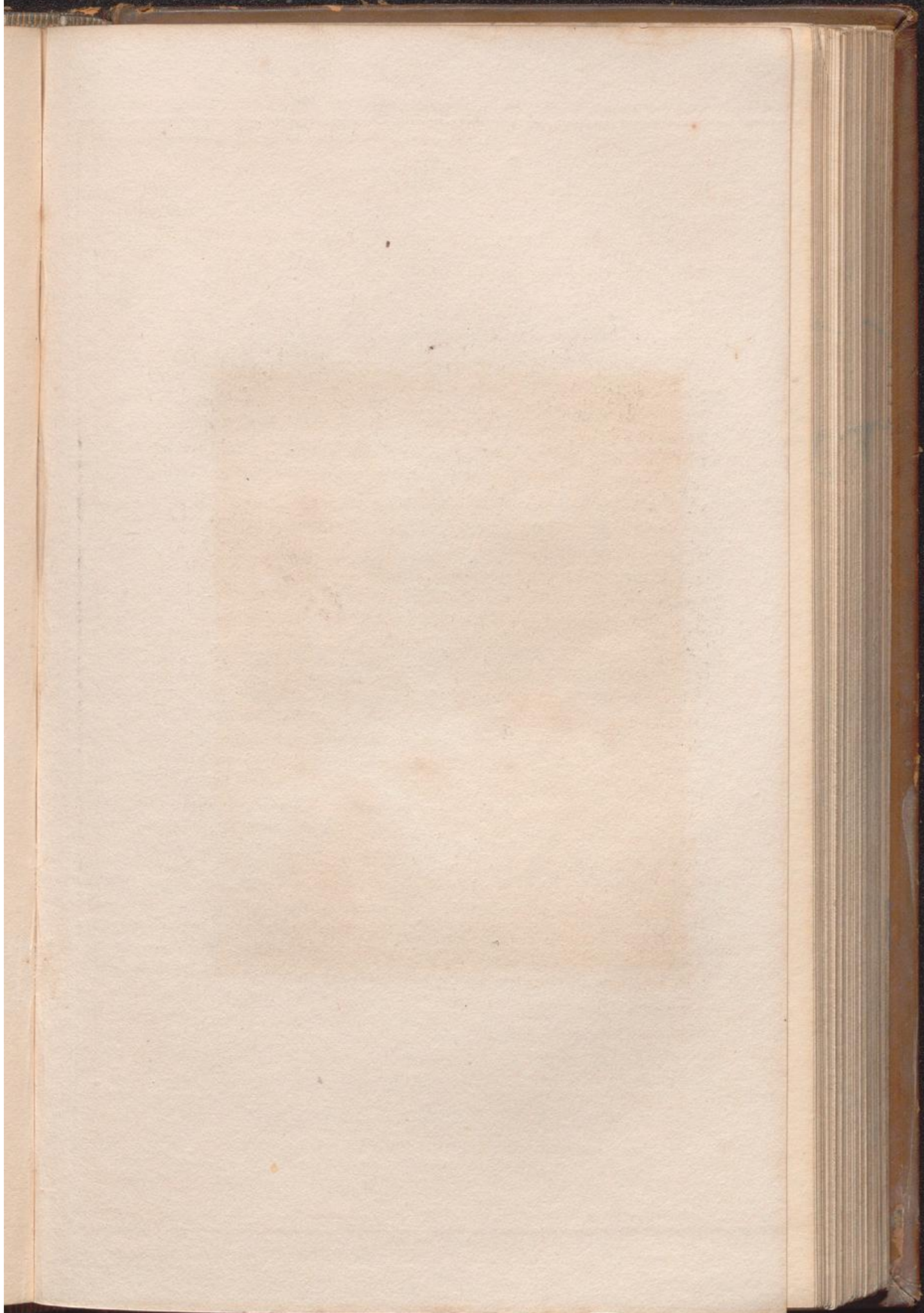
Hogarth moralized

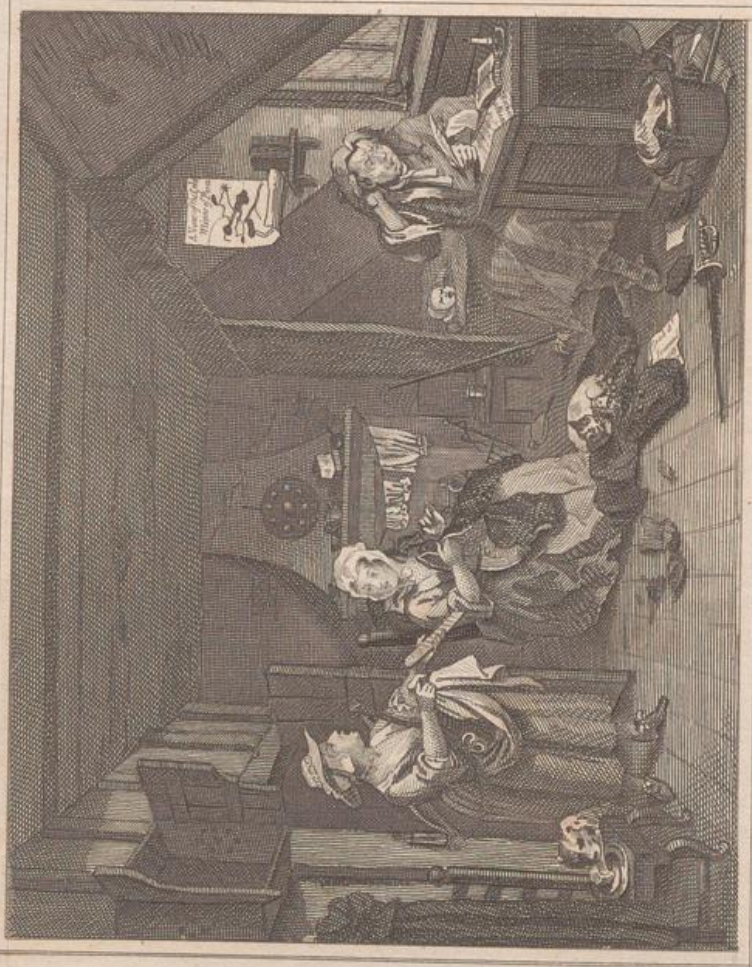
Hogarth, William

London, 1831

The Distressed Poet.

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W. H. WOOD, sc.

THE DISTRESSED POET.

Published by John Major, 50, Fleet Street, March, 31, 1833.

THE DISTRESSED POET.

NOTWITHSTANDING it has ever been the universal opinion that the encouragement of literature would be productive of the greatest advantages to a nation, yet such is the general dissipation of mankind, that we cannot be prevailed on to stand forth in its cause. A man may rack his brains for years together in search of truth, and when found it shall be totally disregarded. Business and pleasure so engage the people, that learning is no other than a drug, and an author the greatest object of contempt. The uncommon scarcity indeed of men of sound learning, and the multitude of scribblers that at present infest the age, have given sufficient cause for this general contempt; but yet it must be acknowledged as very extraordinary, that distress should ever attend a writer, and poverty be as it were entailed upon him. To represent then on the one hand the low ebb to which literature is arrived, and on the other to expose the vanity and folly of such men as undertake to write upon subjects they are wholly unacquainted with, and to give us an insight of the distress they, by this means, bring upon themselves, was the design of Mr. Hogarth in the piece before us: how far or how well he has succeeded, I shall leave the spectator to determine.

This plate then in the first place describes in the strongest colours the distress of an author, without friends to push him forward in the world. His living in one room, and that room a garret, and appropriated to all the common offices

of life, is a convincing argument of his extreme penury. His being reduced to the necessity of sitting without his breeches while they are mending ; without a shirt, till that he wears be dry ; his want of a night-cap, evident by his covering his head with the only wig he is master of, a tye ; and above all the empty safe, are confirmations of the fact. The confusion and litter of the place tells us, that to maintain a decent appearance without doors, engages the whole attention of his wife. This is more manifest by his shirt and shams hanging to dry, which she is supposed to have washed over night ; and her mending his breeches, paying no regard to her crying infant. A melancholy proof of the lordly ascendancy of some husbands, who imagine their wives attention should be turned to them only ; and of the ridiculous fondness of some wives, in studying to adorn the object of their affections at the expence of the quiet and reputation of their families ! The other ornaments of his person, viz. the tye-wig, the sword, and full-trimm'd coat, plainly denote how anxious a man, who rises above the generality of his fellow-creatures on account of some liberal endowment, is of appearing above them with respect to dress, absurd to the greatest degree ; for among the judicious part of mankind, he who attempts to pass upon the world as greater than he is, will be constantly the butt of ridicule, and will meet with the derision of all who know him. The long cloak hung against the wainscot, is to shew us that the wife, often spending her time in working for her husband, and adjusting the *minutix* of her family, is obliged to neglect her own person, and cover her rags as the philosopher did his coals, (when he fetched them himself,) with his cloak. But on the other hand we are taught, by the same means, how essential it is that a man of this profession

should keep up appearances, as his success in life in a great measure depends upon the favours of the great, he can have no hopes of that favour but from personal attendance, and that attendance supported by a gentleman-like appearance. This often puts him to the sad necessity of laying out the major part of his substance on his back, while his wife and children are perhaps pinched with cold and perishing with hunger. The scene here is supposed to be in the morning : the entrance of the milk-girl, with open mouth, and her presenting the tally, chalked with long arrears, heighten the distress, for though they supported nature in the most sparing manner, yet so low is the author's pocket, that he is not able to wipe off the old score. But while we admire the connection of the piece, we must not omit observing the countenance of the wife (a fine contrast to that of the girl's) whom we are to imagine struck almost speechless at the thoughts of so large a debt to pay, and not a farthing to discharge it. The abusive language of the wench, and the crying of the child, confuse the father's brain, who has risen early, in order to finish a poem "on the comfortable enjoyment of riches," (a subject he can have but small ideas of) which a hungry belly urges him to get done by dinner time.—Though we may gather from this print what little regard is paid to men of merit, and at how low an ebb literature is, yet in the second place we may learn, (which indeed Mr. Hogarth more particularly alluded to) by the author's face, declaring him on a knotty point; by Bysshe's Art of Poetry laying open before him, denoting his capacity but shallow; by his small collection of books, the Sketch of the Gold Mines, the Grub-street Journal, and the beggary that surrounds him, how apt men are to mistake their talents, to set genius and nature at nought, fancy them-

selves master of every subject, and thus through confidence, conceit, or self-opinion, waste that precious time in fruitless attempts which, if well employed, would enable them to pass through life with ease and comfort, and procure them a decent provision. For as Swift says, it is an uncontroled truth, that no man ever made an ill figure who understood his own talents, nor a good one who mistook them. The greatest inattention to material things, (owing to the unexpected entrance of the girl, which has put all into confusion) is seen, by the cat's being suffered to suckle her kittens on our hero's best and only coat, and the dog to carry away the provision of the day.—How strangely mistaken are the notions of some men! how great and palpable the folly of the world!*

[* It seems to be inherent in our very natures to enjoy the miseries of the proud and petulant—it is this feeling alone that gives a *zest* to the contemplation of such subjects as the foregoing. Let us hope however, that the very reverse is the case with respect to the woes of the meek and lowly. Who but would wish to rush into the bard's desolate apartment, to relieve, at least the placidly amiable wife, whose countenance exhibits all but *contentment itself* even in so pitiable a condition? “If this was a Portrait,” as Walpole says on a far different occasion —“it is the most speaking that ever was drawn; if it was not, it is still finer.”]

The original picture is in the Collection of Lord Grosvenor.