

The Philistine Revolution: Ethel Mannin, Virginia Woolf and The Battle of the Brows

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Abstract The language of the Brows – highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow – has continued to shape how we think and talk about literature today, with middlebrow remaining the most contested and debated of the three. Notions of what should and should not be classified as high art were first determined by the innovators, the modernists themselves, including Virginia Woolf, whose letter to *The New Statesman*, “Middlebrow”, is considered one of the most definitive examples of how literature and readerships were categorised and critiqued. Middlebrow author Ethel Mannin, writing at the same time as Woolf, posed a significant challenge to the Battle of the Brows that has gone unrecognised in scholarship. In the 1930s, she and Woolf produced works, fiction and non-fiction, that appeared to speak directly to each other in a battle fought unknowingly between two authors who exemplify opposing sides of the cultural debate, and the zeitgeist of the period. When placed side-by-side with Woolf’s “Middlebrow”, her diary entries about literary form, and how she explored these ideas in her novel, *The Waves*, Mannin’s reframing of the Battle of the Brows as between “Philistines” and highbrows in *Confessions and Impressions* (1930), creatively illustrated by her critique of cultural hierarchies in her novel *Ragged Banners: A Novel with an Index* (1931), amount to new definitions of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow that redefine the Battle as a site of class conflict.

Keywords Virginia Woolf. Ethel Mannin. Middlebrow. Modernism. Interwar literature. Working Class.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Neither Highbrows nor Lowbrows. – 3 Highbrow Minds, Lowbrow Bodies. – 4 The Ultimate Unreality Made Absolute. – 5 The Philistine Revolution.



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1 Introduction

The interwar period in Britain is regarded as one of remarkable innovation and creativity in literary production. It was also a period of tense cultural debate known as the Battle of the Brows. The Battle has had far-reaching consequences. As Beth Driscoll explains, “the language of the brows - highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow - continues to influence the way we think about literary culture”, in turn influencing which works are considered worthy of study (2014, 5). The boundaries erected around what should and should not be classified as high art, and around the European canon in literary studies, were first determined by the modernists themselves. These boundaries have been maintained by generations of literary critics, amounting to widely held beliefs and misconceptions about the relationship between genres, reading, and the reading public. Of the three categories, ‘middlebrow’ has remained the most contentious.

Scholarship on the middlebrow is broad, and the definition of the term is constantly in flux. Faye Hammill’s useful summary of the two main debates in middlebrow studies illustrates the difficulties of identifying what it means to be middlebrow, and how the middlebrow is situated in literary culture and history:

First, is ‘middlebrow’ an aesthetic property of artworks or a set of cultural formations that circulate and interpret those artworks to broad audiences? Second, is the culture of the middlebrow a good thing because it improves literacy and public taste, or a bad thing because it has a standardising effect and tends to devalue intellectual culture and high art? The first debate is conducted principally among scholars in our own era, while the second has its origins in the interwar period, and is regularly re-ignited. (Hammill 2023, 98)

Scholars agree that the term was coined in the 1920s,¹ but the discovery of an article in the 23 March 1916 edition of *Bioscope* about “High-Brow, Middle-Brow, and Low-Brow” audiences has disproven this claim (*Bioscope* 1916, 1235; Timlin 2026, 259).² The term typically refers to “someone with high intellectual or aesthetic aspirations” who lacks “the cultural capital necessary to understand

¹ See Humble 2001; Driscoll 2014; Jaillant 2014; Chowrimootoo 2018.

² Scholars tend to cite the 23 December 1925 edition of *Punch, or the London Charivari*’s short note about “a new type, the ‘middlebrow’” (673), or “A Musical Renaissance”, which was published in the *Freeman’s Journal* on 3 May 1924 (*Freeman’s*, 6; Macdonald 2011, 7; Driscoll 2014, 7). *Bioscope* uses “middlebrow” without defining it, which implies that it was already familiar to their readers. It is therefore likely that there are earlier uses of the term.

high art” (Jaillant 2014, 5). In the literary sphere, the middlebrow is positioned between “‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures” (5). Finally, and consistently, work on the *Battle of the Brows* references Virginia Woolf’s “Middlebrow” (1932).

In her posthumously published letter to the editor of *The New Statesman*, she famously argues that middlebrows of “middlebred intelligence” are caught up in a middleclass preoccupation with fame, money, and upward mobility. Middlebrows, as their name suggests, occupy a middle ground: “Their brows are betwixt and between” (Woolf [1932] 1966, 198-9). According to Woolf, they lack the authenticity and vitality of the lowbrow, and the intellect and refinement of the highbrow. They are neither “highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows whose brows are low” (198).

The language of the *Brows* developed out of phrenology, a pseudoscience pioneered by Franz Joseph Gall in the nineteenth century. Gall’s work, coupled with Thomas Malthus’s theories on reproduction (*An Essay on the Principle of Population* 1798) and Francis Galton’s theories of inherited intelligence (*Hereditary Genius* 1869), were foundational to the eugenics movement’s resurgence in the 1930s.³ “Middlebrow” is written in the language of the *Brows*, but it is not a phrenological or eugenicist text. In her other works, Woolf often appropriated eugenicist language to challenge the idea that biological differences between men and women are grounds for social and political inequality. Anna Snaith (2002) argues that in *Flush* (1933) she rejects notions of good breeding and offers a critical response to eugenics in fascist ideology. Linden Peach demonstrates that Woolf uses eugenicist language playfully, citing “*Modern Fiction*” (1925) as an example:

Edwardian writers, whom she saw as outmoded materialists, constituted a kind of aesthetic degeneration, to be arrested by a different, stronger and more exciting literary heritage promised by her more experimental Georgian contemporaries, in particular James Joyce. (Peach 2012, 442)

“*Modern Fiction*”, which Woolf included in *The Common Reader: First Series* (1925), was originally published as “*Modern Novels*” in *The New Statesman* in 1919. Reading the original essay alongside the revised version is useful for tracing Woolf’s developing views on middlebrow fiction and literary form. In “*Modern Novels*”, she uses the examples of H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett to argue that:

3 The movement experienced a brief decline in popularity after the Eugenics Society’s campaign to sterilize the mentally disabled.

the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. (Woolf [1919] 1992, 285)

In “Modern Fiction”, she calls these authors “materialists” who “are concerned not with the spirit but with the body”. They “have disappointed us, and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul” (1925,1:60). She is more confident in the revised essay, and her stance is firmer. What began as a tentative exploration of her aversion to middlebrow fiction is consolidated - it is bland, conventional, and in her view, unable to produce an accurate account of reality. The author, she writes, is “constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability... The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn” (61).

Woolf’s determination to find an unconventional literary form capable of conveying the complexities of reality intensified between 1929 and 1931, while she was drafting her most experimental novel, *The Waves* (1931). The views she developed over this period found their way into “Middlebrow”, which she composed in 1932 in response to J.B. Priestley’s review of *The Common Reader: Second Series* (1932). He accuses her of “condemning other people - Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy, for example - for not writing novels like her own” (1932, 2:8). His accusation placed Woolf in conflict with the middlebrow authors (the “materialists”) whom she foregrounds in “Modern Fiction”. He concludes his review by suggesting her “new readers must be now so numerous that very soon the high priestess will be driven out of Bloomsbury as ‘a best-seller’” (8). Woolf did not appreciate being called the high priestess of Bloomsbury or having her work demoted to “best-seller” status (a term often used to describe popular middlebrow fiction).

Priestley was referring to a phenomenon in highbrow literary circles that others, including middlebrow author Ethel Mannin, had noticed. Mannin writes that among the literary elite there “seemed to be some virtue in obscurity; obscurity of style and in you yourself being obscure, religiously avoiding the vulgarity of success, or even of recognition outside of the immediate circle” (1939a,73). She listened to conversations “in bars and cafés, in little restaurants” (74) and recalls feeling “that such success as I had achieved was nothing ... but feeling, too, that however clever all this was, however much it might be the only authentic art, I must go on in my own way, putting things down as I felt them and saw them” (74).

In the early 1930s, when she decided that she was “finally ‘through’ with that phase of living”, when Priestley wrote his review, and when Woolf wrote “Middlebrow”, the Battle of the Brows was reaching a critical point (74). According to Christopher Chowrimootoo:

many saw the problem epitomized in modernism’s supposed rejection of its potential audience, as though the movement had elevated highbrow snobbery into an aesthetic principle. For modernism’s defenders, however, it was the public’s philistine hostility that begat modernism’s highbrow esotericism, not the other way around. (Chowrimootoo 2018, 4)

While highbrows like Woolf deployed the language of the Brows to fend off the anti-intellectualism they associated with mass popular culture, middlebrow authors like Mannin resisted attempts to control how literature and readerships were categorised and critiqued.

There is growing interest in Mannin’s life and literary activism, which until recently has received very little scholarly attention. Eve Patten considers *Comrade O Comrade, or, Low Down on the Left* (1945) and other late novels in relation to British modernism and international socialism in Ireland, *Revolution and the English Modernist Imagination* (2022). Nick Hubble has helped to reappraise her fiction in his work on the literary cultures of the 1920s and 1930s,⁴ and Lesley A. Hall includes Mannin in her discussion of the effects of genre, changing gender roles, self-image, and censorship on women authors’ careers (2025).

In his brief mention of Mannin in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Jonathan Rose calls her the “anti-Woolf” (2001, 445). Mannin was not entirely at odds with Woolf. Both were autodidacts with eclectic tastes in literature who wrote about gender inequality, women’s writing, British society, and politics from opposite ends of the literary spectrum. Mannin was a lifelong socialist and writer of middlebrow fiction. Woolf was a proud highbrow who oscillated between liberal and conservative positions. Her liberalism was grounded in her socialist leanings and hatred of patriarchy. Her conservatism was informed by her latent class prejudices.

Rose’s designation of Mannin proves fitting when applied to her and Woolf’s respective stances on the Battle of the Brows. In Mannin’s memoir *Confessions and Impressions* (1930), she advances a nuanced argument about the socio-political implications of the Battle and the language used to define readerships and their literary

⁴ See for example “‘You’re not in the Market at Shielding, Joe’: Beyond the Myth of the Thirties” (2021), and “Fairy Fruit and Creative Auto-Intoxication: The 1920s as a Decade of Fantastic Romance” (2025).

preferences. Woolf, an upper-middleclass author, frames the Battle of the Brows as a culture war. Mannin, who was raised in a working-class household to be “a socialist in the old William Morris, Keir Hardie tradition”, sees it as a reflection of broader inequalities in British society (1952, 101). But despite posing a significant challenge to the Brows, her transformative contribution to the debate has gone unnoticed because she is siloed by the very categories (middlebrow, romance author, best-seller) that she critiques.

Mannin spent time in highbrow literary circles, but there is no evidence to suggest that she and Woolf crossed paths. She purchased *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) “as befitted a serious young writer” in the 1920s, but was unable to muster “the proper intellectual excitement over this leading Bloomsbury literary light” (1971, 101). She read none of Woolf’s work to completion apart from *Orlando* (1928). “The rest”, she writes, “were just not for me, then or now. My tastes were and are more robust” (101). Mannin found Woolf “too intellectual, too subtle and complicated and remote from reality” (101). Considering Woolf’s views on popular fiction, and given the absence of any mention of Mannin in her detailed diaries and letters, it is unlikely that she met her or engaged seriously with her work.

And yet, between 1929 and 1932, Woolf and Mannin wrote commentary on the Brows and experimental novels that appear to be in dialogue. Their critical engagements with genre and form are creatively illustrated by their respective experimental *Bildungsromane*, *The Waves* and *Ragged Banners: A Novel with an Index* (1931). The definitions of highbrows, lowbrows, and middlebrows that Woolf provides in “Middlebrow” are unsettled by Mannin’s reinvention of the Battle as a site of class conflict in *Confessions*. This was a battle fought unknowingly between authors who exemplified opposing literary spheres. Taken together, their work captures the zeitgeist of the 1930s and the cultural debates raging in Britain.

2 Neither Highbrows nor Lowbrows

Mannin’s *Confessions and Impressions* is a memoir that maps her path to becoming an author and traces her developing philosophy of writing, literature, and readerships. In the first chapter, “Genesis”, she recasts middlebrows as “Philistines” (16). She makes the connection to the Battle of the Brows by positioning Philistines as “neither Highbrows nor Lowbrows” (16). By replacing “middlebrow” with “Philistine”, she initiates a process of “reclamation” which, in Mihaela Popa-Wyatt’s definition, is “a form of socio-political protest that seeks to re-shape oppressive social practices by controlling what can be done with words” (2018, 1). Whereas a speech act would typically involve reclaiming the offending term - in this case,

‘middlebrow’ – Mannin recognises that, even if reclaimed, the term would retain its origins in class-based discrimination and phrenology. For this reason, she does away with it entirely. She replaces it with, and then reclaims, another pejorative term with a similar meaning.

In her formulation, Philistines “do not fit into any of the class distinctions; they are the real people...their common denominator is their authenticity” (15). They are “not literary; they strike no mental attitudes. They do not say, ‘This is good; this is bad; this is right; this is wrong; this is beautiful; this is ugly.’ They say, ‘if you like that sort of thing, that’s the sort of thing you like’” (15). Unlike the middlebrow, they do not occupy a middle ground but a democratic common ground founded on a commonsense approach to reading.

She references her Philistine philosophy directly in her novel *Ragged Banners*, which was published in the same year as *Confessions*. The index (unusual in a novel) guides readers to creative illustrations of her argument about the Brows, class conflict, and the arts. Searching “Eliot, T. S.” leads to a conversation between Starridge and Lattimer after they leave Café Royal. Lattimer styles himself as a socialist and considers himself a Philistine, despite moving exclusively in highbrow circles. To distance himself from these circles, he describes them sardonically as:

a mutual appreciation society, with a fixation on succès d’estime ...
If you want to become popular with them you talk about the Bitch Goddess Success and the prostitution of art. Then you affect an intimate friendship with Aleister Crowley and a deep admiration of the genius of T. S. Eliot (Mannin [1931] 1940, 65-6)

Mannin emphasises the connection between literary elitism, class, and politics when Lattimer is revealed to be as disingenuous in his aversion to the “mutual appreciation society” as he is in his socialism. In a moment of drunken honesty, he tells Starridge:

‘when the revolution comes, if it comes in my time, I shall be the first to help smash the proletariat!...I don’t want to fight in a bloody revolution for the sake of the dirty little taxi-driver with the bunion on his neck who brought us here tonight – Damn the poor, drat the poor, blast the working classes’. (Mannin [1931] 1940, 64)

In the index, “Philistines, philosophy of” leads to Starridge’s estimation of Lattimer as a Philistine (96), then to Lattimer’s realisation that the author Mary Thane “was truly the Philistine who did not care, postulating no objective truths, not spelling lives in majuscules” (102), or, as Mannin writes in *Confessions*, not spelling “art with a capital A” and “beauty with a capital B” (15). In her notes on the reception of *Ragged Banners*, Mannin remarks that a “number

of people have conceived an affection, it seems, [for Mary] and find pleasure in identifying with the author” (1939a, 22). Put differently, they identified with the novel’s celebrated Philistine.

Her readers identified with Mary because they identified with the Philistine’s “autodidactic approach to reading, reading what [they] wanted to read, because [they] wanted to read it, without concern for intellectual distinction” (Timlin 2024, 203). In this sense, the Philistine reader is similar to Woolf’s common reader, who is “uncontaminated by literary prejudices” and “reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others” (1925, 1:1).⁵ But what appears to be, in the words of Winifred Holtby, “a democratic theory”, is weakened by Woolf’s firm ideas about what did and did not constitute worthwhile literature (1932,6).

Woolf carefully curated the essays that she included in the *Common Reader*. She omitted, for example, the more balanced “Hours in a Library” (1916), in which she celebrates unprejudiced reading habits and highlights the benefits of reading “bad books” ([1916] 2018). She made a similar argument in a scripted debate with her husband, Leonard Woolf, on a BBC radio programme in 1927. She promoted reading the “easy books and the flashy books and the books that ask no trouble in reading” because these could guide readers to “better books” ([1927] 2006, 242-3). In “How to Read a Book”, which she did include in the *Second Series*, she permits a degree of “rubbish reading”, but she is not referring to popular fiction. Instead, she uses the example of Tate Wilkinson’s four-volume *Memoirs of My Own Life* (1739-1803,263-4). Ultimately, the essays in both volumes are instructive. In “The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia”, for example, she models best reading practices by moving from:

the sensory joy that she experiences when first taking up Sir Philip Sidney’s prose pastoral romance, *Arcadia* (late sixteenth century), to her loss of interest, which she justifies with a more technical account of the deficits in the writing, plot, and characterisation. (Timlin 2026, 365)

By all accounts, Woolf’s intentions were good. She was committed to making complex literature accessible to a wider reading public. At the same time, she opposed public middlebrow lectures on highbrow fiction. In “Middlebrow”, she writes:

I often ask my friends the lowbrows... why is it that while we, the highbrows, never buy a middlebrow book, or go to a middlebrow

5 Woolf borrows from Samuel Johnson’s “Life of Gray” to make her argument (*Lives of the English Poets* 1925, 392).

lecture, or read, unless we are paid for doing so, a middlebrow review, they, on the contrary, take these middlebrow activities so seriously? (Woolf [1932] 1966, 200)

The activities that she refers to were educational efforts “forged in opposition to the perceived elitism or unintelligibility of modernism” that “involved representing and interpreting difficult works so that they became more accessible to the general public” (Hammill 2023, 99). Woolf’s and other highbrows’ distaste for these initiatives is steeped in what Erica Brown and Mary Grover identify as the “powerful anxieties about cultural authority and processes of cultural transmission” that informed the advent of middlebrow as a cultural category (2018, 1).

Mannin disagreed with middlebrow educational efforts, but for different reasons. Based on her experience, she did not believe that working men and women needed highbrows or middlebrows to teach them about art, music, and literature. Rose notes that for centuries working-class autodidacts strove:

to assume direction of their own intellectual lives, to become individual agents in framing an understanding of the world. They resisted ideologies imposed from above in order to discover for themselves the word of God, standards of beauty, philosophical truth, [and] the definition of a just society. (Rose 2001, 13-14)

Mannin claims that:

the majority of the middle and upper classes suffer from the delusion that they have the monopoly of intelligence, and that they alone can enjoy and appreciate the arts, regardless of the fact that there is a great deal of very real appreciation for the arts among the working classes. (Mannin 1939b, 263)

She writes that the authenticity of the Philistine, while not tied to any particular class, is most apparent among the “working men and women of the class from which I myself sprang and with which I am proud to identify myself, men and women in connection with whom the blessed word ‘comrade’ has real meaning” (1939a, 19).⁶ Mannin emphasises the class conflict central to the Battle of the Brows by identifying working-class men and women as the true Philistines and the true revolutionaries.

6 Mannin, a self-identified Philistine, was economically middleclass when she wrote *Confessions*.

3 Highbrow Minds, Lowbrow Bodies

Mannin foregrounds class in her Philistine philosophy. In “Middlebrow”, Woolf does not address class directly, but classist undertones shape the way she frames the Battle of the Brows. Her writing from that period (1929-31) suggests that her preoccupation with capturing the spirit and life of the mind in fiction, along with her aversion to conventional novelistic forms, influenced how she negotiated her own class position and how she represented the lower classes. The literary and the material became entangled in unprecedented ways, blurring the line between creative practice and social consciousness.

Her desire to privilege the spirit over the body in narrative form is echoed in the introductory letter she wrote for Margaret Llewelyn Davies’s edited essay collection *Life as We Have Known It, by Co-operative Working Women* (1931).⁷ In her notes on *The Waves*, Woolf writes that she wants to escape:

this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional... Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry - by which I mean saturated... The poets succeed by simplifying: practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything in; yet to saturate. (1981, 3: 209-10)

In the letter, she describes the Guildswomen as “thick-set and muscular”, with names “like the stones of fields - common, grey, worn, obscure, docked of all splendours of association and romance” ([1931] 1975, xxii). She dismisses their lowbrow life writing as lacking in “detachment and imaginative breadth”, just as the women themselves, she suggests, lack “variety and play of feature”. “Here are no reflections... no view of life, and no attempt to enter into the lives of other people. Poetry and fiction seem far beyond their horizon” (xxxvii). Charlotte Taylor Suppé explains that Woolf perceived “irreconcilable differences between herself and the Guildswomen; where they had motherhood and housework, she had a command of language and an active artist’s mind. These biases appear across Woolf’s work” (2024, 71).

Such biases surface in “Middlebrow” alongside gestures toward reconciliation. Woolf does not repeat her criticism of the Guildswomen’s literary voices. Instead, she encourages lowbrows “who write so

⁷ The letter is a recollection of the events of the Annual Congress of the Women’s Co-operative Guild in Newcastle which she attended on 10 and 11 June 1913. According to Alice Wood, the letter was not well-received by the Guildswomen (2014, 18).

beautifully when [they] write naturally” to compose their own stories instead of consuming the “middlebrow version of what they have the impudence to call real humanity” (200). She insists that “highbrows need lowbrows” and “lowbrows need highbrows”, because “one is the complement and other side of the other” (198). In her view, “it is one of the necessities of life to [lowbrows] – to be shown what life looks like. And the highbrows, of course, are the only people who can show them” (198). This, she claims, is because highbrows are “the only people who do not do things” and are therefore uniquely positioned to observe life as it unfolds (Woolf [1932] 1966, 198).

She dramatises this interdependence in *The Waves*. The upper-middleclass characters are able to narrate their sensations and reflections because domestic labour is performed in the background by workers who appear only when perceived. Bernard, who is widely regarded as Woolf’s artistic alter ego,⁸ records Mrs. Moffat’s “sayings” (58). After spilling cinders from the grate, he reassures himself that “Mrs Moffat will come and sweep it all up” (60). He repeats this phrase whenever he requires comfort. Mrs. Moffat is never given form outside of Bernard’s use of her: first as cleaner, then as a source of phrases. She is inscribed into his soliloquy as a *phrase* that signifies stability and security.

The lowbrow that Woolf describes is, in many respects, as much of a fantasy as the ever-comforting Mrs Moffat, whom Bernard records in his notebooks. By the time she wrote “Middlebrow”, Woolf was an established and privileged highbrow author. Nigel Nicolson notes in his introduction to *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* that she was not deeply concerned with those less fortunate than herself, regarding “the working class [as] pitiable but uninteresting” (1979, 5: xv). In *Mrs. Woolf and the Servants*, Alison Light argues that Woolf preferred to engage with class at a distance. She found extreme poverty and “the romantic figure of the old vagrant, belonging to the eternal caste of the poor” easier to “sympathise with than the housemaid... a poor person in the wrong place, who came much too close for comfort” (2007, 153). In “Middlebrow” her efforts to democratise the Brows by claiming to know “duchesses who were highbrows, also charwomen”, are undermined by her inability to reconcile the intellect (the artist’s mind) with the body (the merely conventional). The highbrow is of “thoroughbred intelligence”, riding “his *mind* at gallop across country in pursuit of an idea”. The lowbrow “rides his *body* in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life” (197; emphasis added). Thinking

⁸ See Cristina Fernández Lacueva’s “‘Here is the Central Rhythm; here the Common Mainspring’: The Device of Repetition in Woolf’s ‘the Waves’” (2021), Maria O’Neill’s “Virginia Woolf: The Architecture of Gender” (2004), and Evelyn Ender’s *ArchitEXTS of Memory* (2005).

highbrows are compared with unthinking lowbrow bodies destined for labour, like the Guildswomen who “gripped papers and pencils as if they were brooms”, with no lightness of literary touch ([1931] 1975, xxii).

By contrast, Mannin recognised the lowbrow as a highbrow invention. In *Confessions*, she dispenses with the category altogether, briefly defining the lowbrow as “merely a Highbrow gone wrong and become an intellectual pervert” (16). Woolf envisions the Battle of the Brows as a war in which “highbrows and lowbrows joined together in blood brotherhood” take a stand against the middlebrow (Woolf [1932] 1966, 202). Mannin reimagines the battle as a conflict between Philistines and highbrows. The category of “Philistine” becomes a site of emancipation which, in Jacques Rancière’s formulation, entails “the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body”, achieved by reconfiguring the “distribution of space and time, work, and leisure” (2009, 19). Such blurring disrupts the notion – which closely resembles Woolf’s characterisation of lowbrows – that “the members of a collective body do not have time to spend on the forms and insignia of individuality” (19).

For Mannin, “highbrow” encompasses the aspirational lower-middle-classes “who try so desperately hard to be what isn’t worth being”; the middle classes, a “semi-detached social strata” obsessively concerned with appearances; and the upper classes, who clutter “up their lives with a lot of ideas about themselves” and wallow in “the muck of idealism” ([1930] 1937, 15). They share a fixation on cultural capital or, in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, on “given cultural competence (e.g., being able to read in a world of illiterates)”, which “derives a scarcity value from its position in the distribution of cultural capital and yields profits of distinction for its owner” (1986, 18-19). According to Mannin, these groups believe that “a char-woman could never enjoy a Cézanne picture, a Bach fugue, a factory girl learn to appreciate opera and ballet, a washer-woman read poetry in her spare time”. Such assumptions are “merely the expression of innate bourgeois snobbery” (1939b, 263).

Mannin’s Philistine philosophy and Woolf’s views on literature and the middlebrow, and especially as they pertain to readerships and form, informed their respective creative works. *Ragged Banners* (published 1 January 1931) and *The Waves* (published 8 October 1931) were written over the same two-year period as *Confessions* and “Middlebrow”. In *Ragged Banners*, Mannin addresses the Battle of the Brows overtly through her guiding index, which calls on readers to make connections between her fiction and non-fiction. By structuring her novel as a juxtaposition of conventional and unconventional narrative forms, she unsettles the divide between high and low art. Woolf explored the challenges of disrupting convention by contrasting

Bernard's grappling with phrases, incomplete stories, and attempts to convey the fullness of his life with the silent Percival – a character devoid of an inner world, whose story is narrated by his friends. Although written from radically different perspectives and within opposing literary spheres, these novels share striking thematic similarities that move the Battle from the realm of non-fiction into experimental fictional landscapes.

4 The Ultimate Unreality Made Absolute

The Waves comprises the soliloquys of six characters – Bernard, Neville, Louis, Susan, Rhoda, and Jinny, and a silent seventh character, Percival. *The Lancashire Daily Post* aptly summarises Woolf's method: "the comings and goings, the use of arms and legs which are recorded so lengthily by the conventional novelist have for her little reality. It is life. The life of the mind, which is real" (1931, 4). In *Ragged Banners*, Mannin intertwines Starridge's thoughts, fantasies, and sensory experiences (the life of the mind) with the conventional comings and goings of Stephen Lattimer, Mary Thane, Maurice Volsted, Wanda, and Max.

The cast of characters in each novel are similar. "The thin flame that was Wanda" and "Jinny dancing like a flame" are both social, sexual and sensuous women (Mannin [1931] 1940, 213; Woolf [1931] 1992, 87). Lattimer and Bernard, both gregarious and rational, make constant reference to famous authors and express themselves using a curated collection of phrases. Susan's longing for rural life correlates with Mary's search for peace in the country. Volsted, a scholar, is in love with Starridge in the same unrequited way that the bookish poet Neville is in love with his "one god" Percival (37) whose "magnificence is that of some mediaeval commander" – an allusion to Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* (Woolf [1931] 1992, 37, 26). His unrequited love recalls the relationship between Starridge, a poet, and his god-like Max whom he imagines as Siegfried from Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.⁹ Woolf and Mannin treat music and life as indissoluble and use the ebb and flow of waves to illustrate this.

Allusions to Wagner's work play an important role in how Mannin and Woolf illustrate arguments about narrative form. Emma Sutton adds her analysis of *The Waves* to studies, beginning in the 1960s, that identify the novel as a Wagnerian work. Sutton convincingly argues that Woolf uses images from or alludes to the *Ring* parodically: "the ring which confers omnipotence becomes, for instance, a cupboard handle", as "one strategy by which she undercuts Wagner's project,

⁹ The full cycle was performed for the first time at the Bayreuth Festival in 1876.

adopting his leitmotivic technique for profoundly anti-Wagnerian purposes" (140). Woolf does this to undermine the "the homogenising effects of myth and symbolism" in favour of "the pluralist" (140). Using allusions to Wagner, she draws attention to her efforts to reject the ordering principle of literary convention in favour of the sensory and, in her opinion, more honest representation of reality. She achieves this by contrasting the commonplace mythology that the six characters construct around Percival against the "myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" that make up their soliloquys (1925, 1: 61).

Louis attempts to "fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel" his impressions of:

grass and trees, the travelling air blowing empty spaces in the blue which they then recover, shaking the leaves which then replace themselves, and our ring here, sitting, with our arms binding our knees, hint at some other order, and better, which makes a reason everlastingly. (Woolf [1931] 1992, 28)

Percival intervenes clumsily in his attempt when he "destroys it, as he blunders off, crushing the grasses" (28). The poetic descriptions of "air blowing empty spaces" and "shaking leaves" are disrupted by the mundane account of his blundering - the "appalling narrative business of the realist...merely conventional" (1981, 3: 209). Percival is described as "conventional" and a "hero" throughout the novel (Woolf [1931] 1992, 98). It is likely that Woolf's decision to name the hero Percival was informed by her estimation of Wagner's *Parsifal* as contained, complete, and "poured out in a smooth stream at white heat; its shape is solid and entire...It is the only work which has no incongruous associations" ([1909] 1986, 290).

Mannin similarly uses Wagnerian imagery to contrast conventional and experimental narratives. Starridge's "unreality" (the experimental plot) prevents him from fully engaging with the reality (the traditional plot) that the other characters navigate in the novel. He experiences the "thirteenth-century castle" that he and Max visit near the Rhine as a setting reminiscent of *Siegfried*. But the events that transpire there do not align with his imagination. The sleepy, "Junoesque" woman with "a kind of medieval splendour" is a perversion of Brünnhilde. She is "soft" and "white", with the "breath of decay upon her" (Mannin [1931] 1940, 226). When she mentions the beauty of the castle and landscape, Max replies, "in a theatrical fashion, yes. It is all a little too operatic to be taken seriously" (203). His frankness, coupled with his decision to seduce the woman, disrupts Starridge's fantasy that he is Siegfried: "Max was one of the lordly ones, and if he must lust it should be as a god...with a striding magnificence and lordly pride, an arrogant untouchedness

of stars and winds and mountain peaks...Max who should have known a woman no less than Brunhild" (207). When Max "became a young man who got into bed with women", he "ceased to be a shining, lordly figure remote from everydayness" and "died for him" (236).

The decision to mythologise Max and Percival as heroes is a calculated move on the part of both authors. Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen explains that over the centuries, the outward appearance, speech, and actions of the hero have changed, "but in their innermost core the characters remain essentially the same. The fundamental traits of human nature, transmitted by inheritance from generation to generation, seem capable of but a limited amount of variation" (1889, 594). Mannin and Woolf also invoke the hero's journey, a narrative archetype that has retained its basic structure for centuries. Precisely because it is one of the oldest and most recognisable stories in literary history - and one so closely associated with entertainment - it functions as an ideal stand-in for conventional narrative form. Both authors foreground the expectations of popular fiction even as they subtly rework them.

Starridge experiences the world and his travels with Max as "incandescent", a "pure fantasy" in its "quality of ecstatic unreality" (Mannin [1931] 1940, 194). But Max is not the hero Starridge believes him to be. Mannin intersperses scenes from Max's life outside of Starridge's imagination. He has thoughts and experiences of his own that can only be relayed through a realist narrative. Mannin integrates the hero trope into the unreality of the experimental narrative to show the limits of a literary form that privileges an individual's experiences and impressions over the world-building that realism allows.

It is precisely the "reality" of Max that initiates, in Roland Barthes' terms, a breakdown of the image-repertoire, which brings about an annihilation of both the loved object (Max) and the lover (Starridge). As Barthes describes it, the lover hears "a counter-rhythm" in his amorous discourse: "something like a syncope in the lovely phrase of the loved being, the noise of a rip in the smooth envelope of the image" (2002, 25). Starridge's fantasy unravels in an extended, cyclical mingling of repeated phrases and images, culminating in "Anger" mounting in him "wave upon wave...it mounted in him with the irresistible force of an orgasm, it reached its climax; the world went black...there was a crashing over of black waves, wave upon wave, blinding, drowning..." (Mannin [1931] 1940, 226). Max's metaphorical death secures Starridge's complete break from reality and fully severs his connection to the novel's conventional plot.

Starridge's death initiates a return to the conventional narrative which continues without him. In *The Waves* Percival's death initiates a break from convention. In the final section, Bernard takes his place as the protagonist, tasked with summing up the events of his life in

a soliloquy uninterrupted by the other speakers. He recalls Neville's claim that without Percival there is no solidity; more pointedly, he references a line spoken by Jinny: "Let us hold it for one moment... love, hatred, by whatever name we call it, this globe whose walls are made of Percival" (Woolf [1931] 1992, 109). Bernard rephrases the line as:

Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we turn about in our fingers. Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one matter is dispatched - love, for instance - we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next. (Woolf [1931] 1992, 193)

Bernard resists the idea that a plain and logical story (the story of heroes like Percival) is an adequate vehicle for the fullness of life. Instead, as he approaches death, he abandons conventional literary form, searching for a discourse that can give shape to his experiences. He says, I begin to doubt the fixity of tables, the reality of here and now, to tap my knuckles smartly upon the edges of apparently solid objects and say, 'are you hard?' I have seen so many different things, have made so many sentences. I have lost in the process of eating and drinking and rubbing my eyes along surfaces. (Woolf [1931] 1992, 221-2). He asks, "'Who am I?' I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct?" When asking "Who am I?" he does not list Percival among his constituents (222). Percival is mentioned but only as a "blow" to his "brow" when he died, and to restate that he "is dead" (222). Bernard dispenses entirely with "the pressure of the eye, the solicitation of the body, and all need of lies and phrases" valued by the realist, becoming a composite of all the speaking characters in the novel (226).

Starridge undergoes a similar process of self-reflection in *Ragged Banners*, but with a different outcome:

It was as though all these people were part of him, the hidden and denied parts of him. Volsted gave the warm, free friendship he could not give; Mary the peace he needed, but which realities were constantly destroying for him; Lattimer was a symbol of impersonality, intellect divorced from emotionalism; Wanda was all the repressed sexual instinct in himself; Max the gay, irresponsible being he would have liked to be. They had all been real for him only inasmuch as they were part of him, yet because he himself was not a real person, he must ultimately deny them all. (Mannin [1931] 1940, 236)

The other characters are all part of his story but they also represent a material world and alternative narrative that he cannot access.

His “ecstatic unreality” prevents him from becoming a fully rounded character in the story. He is not a “real person” capable of interacting substantially with those around him. Mannin foreshadows this in chapter one of the novel by calling Starridge “a lost person from the beginning” who “remained lost” (11).

In *The Waves*, Bernard’s narrative supplants Percival’s. He becomes a new type of hero different from the unchanged hero of literature past. He confronts death with his “spear crouched” and “hair flying back like a young man’s, like Percival’s” (228). Starridge meets death as a tragic figure who submits to the idea that he “had known the love that makes oblivious of life; there but remained death which obliterates love” (Mannin [1931] 1940, 273). He passes into “the empty dark of the ultimate unreality made absolute” (241). *The Waves* concludes with Bernard’s death. With the final italicised line – “The waves broke on the shore” – the narrative reaches a coda (Woolf [1931] 1992, 228).

The final chapters of *Ragged Banners* focus on Mary and Lattimer, who return to the lives they lived before meeting Starridge. They make love before attending a party. Mary “knew with the closing of his arms about her that it were better to drown...love that makes oblivious of life...and death that obliterates love...she was a ship that slid restlessly down the last slip into the impatient sea; dark waves engulfed her, closed over her” (250). Whereas Starridge slips into “the empty dark of the ultimate unreality made absolute” (241), through Mary the sensory and the physical coexist in harmony. The celebrated Philistine embodies both narrative forms without privileging one over the other. She is also the character who is “nearly as right as it is possible to be in defining the indefinable” when it comes to Starridge (11). Like Mannin’s Philistine readers she is capable of navigating and making sense of a conventional *and* experimental narrative.

5 The Philistine Revolution

In Woolf’s “Middlebrow” and Mannin’s *Confessions*, they reflect on readerships and how these factor into and inform the Battle of the Brows. *The Waves* and *Ragged Banners* are reflections on literary form. Mannin treats readership and form as interconnected. Her parallel conventional and unconventional narratives illustrate the freedom of the Philistine to read across genres without discrimination. She simultaneously challenges authors who profess to provide a more accurate version of reality than pass judgment on the literary tastes of the ordinary reader and middlebrow writers.

Woolf was more concerned with the authorial process. *The Waves* is the culmination of years of grappling with the author’s role in shaping fiction. In “Life and the Novelist”, she claims that the writer

“is at the mercy of the world and its meanings”. He writes “with a sense that he is being stimulated and played upon by the subject-matter of his art” ([1926] 1966, 2: 131). Mannin’s approach to writing is less romantic:

The artists job is to take some aspect of human life which strikes a spark in him and make something out of it; what he creates must speak for itself; the artist should not intrude his own views in many words, but allow the implications of his creation to seep into the consciousness of his audience...if he has anything of importance to say and has made a good job of saying it, implications will be apparent to those of sensibility. (Mannin 1939a, 28)

She de-centres the author and privileges readers and reader reception. She was opposed to what she called an “obscurity of style” and “language that burns black the tongue of one who speaks it and scars the one who listens”, favouring “language that will make meaning clear” (1939a, 72-3).

Woolf did consider reader reception when she published *The Waves*. She was anxious about the novel’s accessibility, and so were those who read the final drafts. Leonard Woolf was “doubtful how far any common reader will follow” (1982, 4: 36). Post-publication, reviews emphasised that it was intended for a sophisticated readership which reinforced the idea that it was written for highbrows:

her genius does not lie in entertainment - the easy entertainment we usually expect from a novel - but in the interpretation of a new vision of life. Her books are essentially for those readers who are sufficiently aware of themselves to be ready to say: “How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground.” Life is not like that. (*The Lancashire Daily Post* 1931, 4)

Reviews of *Ragged Banners* were similarly concerned with readerships. The writer of “Half-Hours with the Highbrows” in the 30 January 1931 edition of *The Liverpool Echo* bent to misconceptions about the intelligence of Mannin’s readers. He expresses relief that the “average citizens” who read the book are “completely ignorant” of the “literary quotations” included in the novel, and the “portion of life” (Bohemia) that she critiqued leaving them oblivious to the novel’s overarching social commentary (4). In the same edition of the weekly, a librarian took a different view: “It is a fact...that Miss Mannin has a very large public, and by no means an unintelligent one, who regard her as the apostle of modern thought and originality” (10).

Mannin continued to critique highbrow literary circles in her fiction and non-fiction, but her Philistine philosophy in *Confessions*

and *Ragged Banners* remains her most overt intervention into the Battle of the Brows. In her later work, she satirises highbrow poets and their acolytes in *Comrade O Comrade, Or Lowdown on the Left*. The protagonist in her newspaper serial “Nigel in Paris” is a caricature of a highbrow painter who realises that nobody is “at all impressed or even aware of the fact that here was Nigel Morton, English painter in revolt against English bourgeois life; he had no office and no home in which to air his views on life and art and indulge his egotism” (Mannin 1936, 20). “Nigel in Paris is the second in a series of interconnected stories, including “Revolt of Youth”, “Forbidden Love”, “Good Time Colin” and “Vangie and Bill” published in *The Daily Mirror* from 29 March to 2 April 1937.

“Middlebrow” did not appear in print until after Woolf’s death. It is speculated that she set the letter aside to rework it into an essay. Maroula Joannou surmises that her decision not to post it is “perhaps indicative of anxieties about its tone or else of a self-conscious awareness of the contradictions of her own position as an author reliant on her income from writing” (2013, 15). Considering Woolf’s extensive critical engagement with the effect of patriarchal social and political structures on writing as a career for women, Joannou’s suggestion is more plausible. There are traces of the anxiety she notes in “Middlebrow” in the semi-fictional account of Woolf’s conversation with the lowbrows who remind her that “middlebrows, like other people, have to make money...We all have to earn our livings nowadays” (201). It’s also worth considering Woolf’s professional activity post-publication of *The Waves* which indicates that she may have revised some of her opinions. Between December 1931 and December 1932, she published six articles in *Good Housekeeping*. She did not need the money and could have turned down the editor’s request, but actively chose to affiliate with the middlebrow magazine. Her late best-selling novel, *The Years* (1937) is in some regards a work of conventional realism, and her final posthumously published novel, *Between the Acts* (1941) resembles more closely the structure and lyricism of her earlier work.

Reading Mannin and Woolf together sheds new light on the different ways that literature and readerships were positioned in the cultural debates of the 1920s and 1930s – debates which, as Hammill shows, are ongoing. The difference is that the intellectual is no longer entirely at odds with the middlebrow. Beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, and continuing today, scholars like Hammill (“Modernism and the Middlebrow” 2023), Beth Driscoll (*The New Literary Middlebrow* 2014), Nicola Humble (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 2001), Janice Radway (*A Feeling for Books* 1991), and others have contributed to a process of reclamation that reframes the middlebrow as a positive category for literature and readerships.

Woolf's "Middlebrow" appears consistently in scholarship on the Brows because it is considered an exemplar of the highbrow position in the Battle. Mannin's Philistine philosophy constitutes a unique intervention in the discourse of the Brows. She refuses highbrow arguments about the alleged anti-intellectualism of the middlebrow and the precariousness of high culture. By moving the debate into its broader socio-political context, she reveals the class-based politics at its core. Placing Woolf's and Mannin's fiction and non-fiction in dialogue expands the fields of middlebrow and modernist studies to include new forms of resistance that reshape how we conceive of the Battle of the Brows. Culturally and politically, the interwar period in Britain stands apart in literary history as one in which middlebrow and lowbrow challenges to the highbrow were revolutionary acts.

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