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(ART, MYTH, TECHNOLOGY)**

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THE ‘SILLY’ AND THE ‘PROPER STUFF OF FICTION’ – FROM THE POPULAR TO THE MODERN(IST) NOVEL

Adina Ciugureanu¹

Abstract: Defined as a public space in culture, the novel has always faced the controversial competition between its high-brow and low-brow productions, that is between the immediate success of rather short-lived works of fiction and the formal unpopularity of long-standing novelistic endeavours that have managed to pass the test of time. Starting from two well-known articles on the popular novel types, by George Eliot (1856) and Henry Mansel (1863), who coin them ‘silly’ and ‘sensation,’ respectively, the essay analyses the popular fiction at the turn of the century as a mainstream phenomenon embraced by the reading public at large and opposed by the rise of the modernist novel apparently concerned with, what Woolf calls in 1919, ‘the proper stuff of fiction.’ As a central institution of the public sphere, novel reading was more than a pastime activity, it divided the public into like-minded high-class, middle class, and working class readers. What was then “the proper stuff of fiction” when the novel, as a public space, attained ideological force and political power? And how did the modernist novel manage to turn the private into the public? Or did it? Contrary to the modernists’ desire to do away with ‘realism’ and ‘conventionality’ in fiction (in other words to shun the public), I will argue that history and popular events can still be traced in their work, in more or less open forms, from direct or ironical hints to obsessive references.

Keywords: popular fiction, (high-brow) novel, modernism

In her 1856 article published in the *Westminster Review*, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” George Eliot fiercely attacks the “species” of novels written by a series of lady writers who became very popular for works that, according to her, did not have any real artistic value. She describes their work as “a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them – the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic.”² Eliot’s critical attitude towards her fellow-writers is also generated by her disappointment to see that popularity is not obtained on merit and that the public taste does not care for refinement of techniques and style, but rather for the opposite. On the other hand, Eliot’s article is among the first to analyze a new fictional genre that was growing at the time: the popular novel by lady novelists.

A few years later, in April 1863, the *Quarterly Review* published an article by Henry Longville Mansel, one of its editors, who launched an attack on what he labeled “the sensation novels,” a new species that was conquering the market and had recently become extremely popular. As he points out,

A class of literature has grown up around us, usurping in many respects, intentionally or unintentionally, a portion of the preacher’s office, playing

¹ Ovidius University, Constanța.

² George Eliot, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” *Westminster Review*, London. 1856, vol. 66: 442.

no inconsiderable part in moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation.³

Mansel is even more outraged than Eliot in his description of the new genre which he calls “morbid,” meant to “supply the cravings of a diseased appetite” of the reading public, ready to create a new unorthodox religion. Although Mansel’s article has generated more critical debates since its publication about the existence and importance of sensationalism in the Victorian novel than Eliot’s article, both signal the rise of a marginalized, yet highly popular kind of fiction that ignored scholarly criticism in pursuing fleeting popularity: the ‘silly’ and the sensation novel.

Why are the two so much against the rising genre and who is to blame for its unexpected success? And, secondly, is the sensation novel only the creation of lady writers as the case seems to be when reading Eliot’s article? And what happened to the nineteenth century sensation novel? Did it fall through completely?

A brief survey of novel writing and producing, which means returning to the eighteenth century, reveals that the most popular fiction writers at that time in England were women, with probably the exception of Daniel Defoe. According to recent scholarship, it is because lady writers’ published works that were not only highly readable, but also disposable texts of easy entertainment that they are not included in the canon of the English novel today.⁴ Though some of these ladies imitated or adapted the French *nouvelle* and the Spanish *novelas*, others (like Jane Barker, Penelope Aubin, Eliza Haywood, Mary Davys) were more original and invented scandalous or sensational, pornographic or merely sentimental topics, which turned their works into extremely popular, though ephemeral, reading texts. They appealed to a concealed public taste of the time, and also to a particular and targeted audience (mostly female), whose needs the publishers catered for and hoped to gain a profit from.⁵

Terry Lovell, for instance, draws a whole theory on novel production and consumption on the crucial role that women played in the eighteenth century in this respect, contrary to the general critical opinion that ladies’ fiction was ‘trash’.⁶ Women’s contribution to the rise of fiction was indeed frowned upon rather than duly appreciated. Lovell refers to an article published in *The Monthly* in 1773 which states that fiction, the new “branch of the literary trade appears [...] to be entirely engrossed by the Ladies.”⁷ The claim was meant to diminish the importance of fiction (it was a trade) and to reveal its worthlessness since it had become a lady’s field of action. The tension concerning the role of women in fiction production and consumption as opposed to the role of men in the creation of

³ H.L. Mansel. “Sensation Novels,” *Quarterly Review*, April 1863. vol. 113: 495.

⁴ Paula R. Backscheider and John J. Richetti, “Introduction,” eds. Paula R. Backscheider, John J. Richetti, *Popular Fiction by Women 1660-1730 (An Anthology)*, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. xi.

⁵ See Paula R. Backscheider, John J. Richetti, *op.cit.*, for a detailed analysis of these texts.

⁶ Terry Lovell, *Consuming Fiction*, London: Verso, 1987, p. 9.

⁷ Quoted by Terry Lovell, *Id.*

quality fiction in the eighteenth century continued through most of the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, many women took up the pen because they needed a means to support themselves, unless they became governesses or got married or moved out of their class which many of them resisted to do. Indeed, the large majority of lady writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were daughters of clergymen or middle-class tradesmen who were educated, but failed or refused to marry and who had to support themselves in some way or another. Becoming a writer for a lady in those times was a surviving option rather than a haunting talent decision. This may account for the large number of texts written by women who enjoyed sudden but transitory popularity and of whom little is known today.

In its early beginnings in the eighteenth century, fiction writing was seen as a “feminized occupation,” meaning “low pay, low status,” considered in the periodical articles of the time to have poor form and even be morally dangerous (Lovell 42). Also described as “a pastime to divert from toothache” (Lovell 9), fiction by ladies was claimed to unfit young women for their domestic lives as wives, mothers and servants. In other words, the novel was at odds with moral values and Protestant ethics. The novel was, therefore, a simple commodity which, besides bringing some profit to both publisher and writer, fortunately enabled a number of ladies to earn an honest living.

It is in the nineteenth century, especially in the Victorian period, that the novel regains respectability in both literary status and bourgeois values. Fiction writing and production is now associated with realism and, consequently, with bourgeois respectability (Lovell 11). Moreover, fiction writing is appropriated by gentlemen novelists and turns from a “feminized” into a “masculinized occupation,” though women obstinately resist it throughout the century. Pushed away by the new wave of talented gentlemen, publishers and critics alike, women had to enter the production of fiction in the nineteenth century on different terms. While in the eighteenth century men involved in writing fictional stories would opt to publish them under female names, in the nineteenth century, women had to shift gender and adopt pseudonyms, in order to be taken seriously. There was, however, another shift that took place in the nineteenth century as opposed to the eighteenth: the audience which the novel addressed. Thus, if the eighteenth-century novel by lady writers was generally a woman-to-woman address (hence its description as dangerous and worthless by the periodical articles written by men), the nineteenth century novel addressed a larger audience of both men and women, or “a woman-to-public” address (Lovell 161). Hence the high interest men took in writing fiction. According to most scholarly criticism the lady writers who managed to go through the filter of time and entered the canon, or “the great tradition,” were those who, like the gentlemen writers, crossed the boundaries of gender, class and age and addressed a larger audience.

Consequently, the novel became an established institutionalized literary form in the nineteenth century. By then, acquisition and possession of the latest fiction in the personal library at home had been seen as an embarrassment rather than as pride. As Terry Lovell points out, “novel readers in the last quarter of the

eighteenth century did not wish to be novel owners” (Lovell 50). As the novel was not an object to display in a respectable bourgeois house, even in the nineteenth century George Herbert Lewes, George Eliot’s partner, looked askance at Charles Dickens’s library which contained little else besides fiction (Lovell 50).

Commodities for consumption not for possession, novels acquired a special status in the nineteenth century when they became an institutionalized form. They were published to be purchased by circulation libraries rather than by individuals, who would consume them in periodical format or would borrow them from the public library. Dickens’s description of the Lowell Library in his *American Notes* (1842) does not come as a surprise under the circumstances. He is deeply impressed not only by the very existence of the library, but, moreover, by the active part that the working girls (employed by the Mills) took in writing fictional stories and publishing them in the local periodical. Their activity is not out of the ordinary, it is actually quite common among young ladies in the nineteenth century. Though Dickens refrains from evaluating the girls’ work as being good or bad, he finds it praiseworthy that young working ladies have indulged themselves in this “most humanizing and laudable” occupation, which fiction writing was.⁸ Being himself a popular writer, with prominent sensational tones and consumerist interests, Dickens sided with the working ladies who were eagerly writing fiction after work hours. On the other side of the ocean, circulation libraries also grew in number and space throughout the nineteenth century, while literacy and the taste for reading fiction caught on the rising working class.

Doubts about the novel as an established literary form were expressed by those who still feared that its major characteristics in the previous century (commercialism, feminization, dominance of non-realist, ‘escapist’ forms) would continue to prevail in the nineteenth century. It is under these circumstances that George Eliot attacks the popular novel by lady novelists and that Mansel criticizes the growing drive towards sensationalism with both female and male writers whose principal interest was to make profit rather than to produce long-lasting valuable fictional works. In identifying the most hateful species of the novel (“the mind and millinery,” “the white neck cloth,” and “the modern antique”),⁹ George Eliot raises the questions of technique and purpose in novel writing. Rising against “unfaithful” reproduction of reality, gross exaggeration, domineering Evangelical tone and wayward imagination, as the three indentified species reveal, Eliot distinguishes what the ingredients of a good novel should be: “genuine observation, humor, and passion”.¹⁰ The question of ‘faithful’ representation of reality and the extent to which subjectivity may modify ‘faithfulness’, the writer as “a witness in a witness box,” and the technicality of unveiling the characters’ thoughts are, as it is known, touched upon in the much acclaimed novels *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*.

⁸ Charles Dickens, *American Notes (A Journey)*, (1842), New York: Fromm International, 1985, pp. 67-68.

⁹ George Eliot, *op.cit.*, pp. 444-456.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

With the rise in, and extension of, readership (the new class counted educated artisans and servants), the novel came to a crossroads in the 1860s. If it were to be taken seriously, then it should be a reflection of the society, as domestic realism would have it, with high didactic and moral purposes. Having proved itself a powerful medium for social criticism and reform, the novel should show strong traits of realism, if it were to be labeled as ‘respectable’. However, ‘respectability’ was not enough to ensure the success of the novel. Sensationalism could not be done away with and, as Raymond Chapman notes, “driven out of the door, [it] flew back through the window, as it has a habit of doing in all ages.”¹¹ Thus, if it were to be popular, the novel should be spread with sensationalist ingredients.

Confronted with the dilemma between “material reward” and “literary standing,” that is looking for instant popularity instead of hoping for belated fame, many late Victorian and early modern writers of both sexes succumbed to sensationalist strategies now and then. Families who hide dark secrets, adulterous relationships, tangled and intricate intrigue, lost fathers and unknown mothers, illegitimate children, melodramatic confrontations, murder, may be found with the high Victorian novelists such as George Eliot, Anthony Trollope and Thomas Hardy. Thus, Hardy himself described his first novel, *Desperate Remedies* (1871) as “a long and intricately inwrought chain of circumstance,” involving “murder, blackmail, illegitimacy, impersonation, eavesdropping, multiple secrets, a suggestion of bigamy, amateur and professional detectives.”¹²

Moreover, the detective novel, the science and occult species (such as *Dracula* and *The Time Machine*), the survival adventure story (such as *The Coral Island*), and, obviously, the romance paved the way for various subgenres of the popular novel in the twentieth century.

Sensationalism did not escape fierce criticism by high Victorian writers and critics alike. Mansel, for instance, describes the addictive drug of sensationalism as an ingredient which, market dependent and supplied, is consumed in “the gross mass entertainment of a newly-literate working class audience.”¹³ Produced to be consumed, sensationalism means “the subordination of character motivation to fluidity of plotting which is calculated to excite overwrought feelings” (Radford, 10). Mocked at by George Eliot, G. H. Lewes, and Margaret Oliphant, in addition to Mansel, sensationalism is actually a middle-class high-brow reaction against working-class taste. An example to support this view is the description of the invented journal called *The Sensation Times*, by *Punch* in one of its articles. The imaginary new journal is advertised as “devoted to Harrowing the Mind, making the Flesh Creep [...] Giving Shocks to the Nervous System, Destroying

¹¹ Raymond Chapman, *The Victorian Debate (English Literature and Society 1832-1901)*, Worcester and London: The Trinity Press, 1968, p. 173.

¹² Quoted in Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel (from The Woman in White to The Moonstone)*, London: Northcote House, 1994, p. 70.

¹³ See Andrew Radford, *Victorian Sensation Fiction*, London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2009, p. 10

Conventional Moralities, and generally Unfitting the Public for the Prosaic Avocations of Life.”¹⁴

Contrary to the standing criticism of this new genre that assails “the nerves” of the public (as Mansel describes it) and acts like an “electrical stimulus” (as Oliphant puts it), sensation fiction became highly popular in the 1860s and 1870s with both male and female writers: Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne*, for example, are labeled as sensation novels by Margaret Oliphant in her review articles published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1862. Representatives of female sensationalism, according to Margaret Oliphant, are Charlotte Brontë, Mary E. Braddon, Rhoda Broughton and Ellen Wood. Moreover, it seems that Dickens himself encouraged this kind of fiction both by writing it and by publishing it in his periodical *All the Year Round*, in which sensation novels by Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade appeared (Radford, 13).

Leaving Dickens, who was a special case, aside, the sensation novels, like the ‘silly novels,’ became popular forms of entertainment with working- and lower middle classes not only because they were affordable circulating texts, but also because many of them were turned into stage spectacles. Mary Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* became stage productions, highly appreciated by an audience who adored scandalous behavior, bigamous relationships, mystery and murder as forms of subverting high Victorian domesticity. Though popular entertainment also counted plays based on “silver-fork” novels (or “white-neck” in Eliot’s pronouncement) that duly described life with the upper class people, as Catherine Gore’s productions did, the large Victorian public preferred sensationalism, melodrama, mystery, and crime to products of more sophisticated aesthetic value. The boundaries between high and low culture were blurred as were those of class, gender and sexuality. Thus, for example, Katherine Newey describes, in her chapter on popular culture in the Victorian Age, how the already famous stage adaptations of Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* and Wood’s *East Lynne* competed, in 1863, with the enthusiastically commented off-stage event which was the wedding of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra of Denmark.

Braddon’s and Wood’s imagined sensations were supplanted by the real sensation of a royal wedding, which was managed by the court to enhance coverage in the popular press and increase the popularity of the royal family [...] and staged as spectacle of ‘popular constitutionalism.’¹⁵

The media was thus playing a growing role in enhancing popular culture and the press was saturated with words and pictures that illustrated both events as theatrical representation on- and off-stage. Such manifestations in which reality and fiction

¹⁴Quoted by Andrew, Radford, *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁵ Katherine Newey, “Popular Culture,” ed. Joanne Shattock, *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1830-1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 154.

mixed to the almost dissolution of the boundary between them led to the birth and rise of the middlebrow, a consumer of sensationalism, a wanderer between real and fictional worlds, yet a contributor to the financial rewards of the actual producer of culture.

Fiction by women in general and sensation fiction in particular offered more imaginative freedom which also provoked deep anxiety about transgressions of boundaries and cross-genres. Hence the fierce criticism by both Eliot and Mansel who were supporting the writing of a fiction whose realism and aesthetic value would prevail over intricate plot and sensational happenings.

Towards the end of the century the novel seemed to take two opposite directions again to cater for the tastes of the working- and lower-middle class people on the one hand and for those of the middle and upper-middle classes on the other. While the former category was happy with popular forms of literature and showed preference for sensation, the latter swerved to aestheticism, symbolism, and experimentalism in fiction and art to shun popularity and ordinariness. This was, according to Andreas Huyssen, the “great divide,” that is an ever growing distinction between high art and mass culture, which ends in placing the two in opposition. Like in any oppositional pair, the left-hand term has the weight of primacy and is therefore seen as more important or superior to the right-hand term. Considering “high art” to be superior to “mass culture” has obviously led to the disregard, even demise, of the latter. In Huyssen’s words this is the effect of “the symptom of the anxiety of contamination,”¹⁶ meaning that high art purposefully detached itself from mass culture from fear of being contaminated by it. Yet, contrary to Huyssen’s view, high culture did not manage to consume and engulf its popular forms entirely; they have survived to reclaim their lost position in late twentieth-century when the boundaries between high and low have been once more erased.

Huyssen’s example of a famous modern character whose reading tastes do not equal her class aspirations is Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. Like any lower class nineteenth-century woman, who had some decent education, Emma Bovary reads novels

full of love and lovers, persecuted damsels swooning in deserted pavilions, postillions slaughtered at every turn, horses ridden to death on every page, gloomy forests, romantic intrigue, vows, sobs, embraces and tears, moonlit crossings, nightingales in woodland groves, noblemen brave as lions, gentle as lambs, impossibly virtuous, always well dressed.¹⁷

It is fascinating to observe how Emma Bovary, the exemplary protagonist of one of the first modern novels, is engrossed so deeply in popular taste. Madame Bovary represents, as Huyssen puts it, “the female reader caught between delusions of the

¹⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide (Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism)*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986: ix.

¹⁷ Quoted by Huyssen, *ibid.* p. 44.

trivial romantic narrative and the realities of French provincial life” (Huyssen 45). Trying to live a life of illusion, she is brutally thrown back to the ordinariness of provincialism to which she cannot adapt and from which she cannot escape in any other way except through death. Flaubert, her creator, on the other hand, is the aesthete who, writing about her in a semi-detached, ironical way, lays the basis of the modern, realist novel. While the protagonist represents the illusions offered from trying to turn popular novels into real life experiences, her creator successfully manages to unveil the perfections of a masterfully written modern fictional text.

Emma Bovary may be seen as an early embodiment of “middlebrow” culture, in the sense in which the word is used by Virginia Woolf in 1932. The term “middlebrow” had been coined earlier (in 1925) by *Punch*, the magazine with the largest middle-class audience. “Middlebrow” was used by *Punch* to refer to those who “are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like.”¹⁸ In other words, the “middlebrows” were the people who had been less fortunate to get a solid education, but who were willing to learn as they were advancing through their career.

Virginia Woolf, however, looks upon “middlebrow” from the advantageous point of the highbrow lady. In her essay “Middlebrow,” written in 1932, but published posthumously, she distinguishes between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” as between producers and consumers of culture or between minds and bodies. Thus, the “highbrow” is the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across the country in pursuit of an idea,” while the “lowbrow” is “a man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life.”¹⁹ Woolf’s distinction between highbrow and lowbrow is actually the distinction between minds and bodies. The more man is driven by his body in his life and actions, the lower he is on Woolf’s scheme. Moreover, her list of example does not group the ‘lowbrow’ in any distinct social class: he could be a stoke broker, an admiral, a duchess as well as a prostitute, a bank clerk and a dressmaker. While the highbrows are contemplative, the lowbrows lead an active life, being so busy “riding full tilt” that they fail to see “what their lives look like” (*Collected Essays*, 197). They do need the highbrows to represent life to them.

The middlebrow is caught between the two sides; too willing to consume whatever is offered on the market, middlebrows are described as “bloodless,” “a mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calves-foot jelly” (200). Ideally, Woolf dreams of a union between the highbrows and the lowbrows against the “bloodless” middlebrow.

Woolf opposes the view mitigated by *Punch* that a middlebrow is a lowbrow who aspires to highbrow culture. In its pronouncement, *Punch* looks favorably upon middlebrows, identifying them with middle class people in search of improving themselves, bettering their background through both reading and

¹⁸ *Punch*, 169 (23 Dec. 1925), p. 673.

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf, London: Hogarth, 1966-1967, pp. 196-197.

experiencing culture. Conversely, Woolf's attitude towards middlebrows is disparaging. She describes them as "betwixt and between" the two sides, currying "favor with both sides equally" (*Collected Essays*, 200), undecided upon which side to stick to properly. Doesn't this attitude remind us of Madame Bovary's?

There is little distinction, I think, between Woolf's "middlebrow" and the "common reader." Published in 1925, the collection of essays *The Common Reader* contains the stock portrait of the ordinary reader, who is neither scholar, nor critic, but who, nevertheless is the consumer of the artistic product. Gendering the reader as masculine, Woolf describes him as "worse educated" and not gifted generously by nature. He reads, she says,

for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others. Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole — a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing. Hasty, inaccurate, and superficial, snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or of what nature it may be so long as it serves his purpose and rounds his structure, his deficiencies as a critic are too obvious to be pointed out.²⁰

He is, in other words, the "middlebrow" reader who would obviously appreciate a work of fiction, not for its artistic value, but for what he may get out of it or for "rounding his structure," as Woolf ironically puts it. Yet, caught "betwixt and between" highbrow and lowbrow, he cannot help favoring both parts and tries hard to create by instinct a portrait, a sketch, a theory or to snatch "now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture" to serve his purpose. This bric-a-brac attitude fits the "middlebrow" to perfection.

Middlebrow people consume middlebrow products. One of them is, according to Woolf, literary journalism. No wonder she found it repellent. Not only did she avoid any interview motivating that she does not want her privacy invaded, but she also considered that journalism was not 'hard work', it was not a legitimate literary or artistic activity,²¹ therefore was more oriented towards mass culture. Her distrust in the world of journalism is rooted in the high Victorian belief that it was not too deep or too intellectual and should be disregarded by a talented person who wanted to enter the high literary world. This was also the view held by her father, Leslie Stephen, a famous journalist, actually, and by her aunt, who frowned upon her early intention of entering the world of literature through literary journalism. In her *Diary*, Virginia Woolf comments upon journalism, describing it as a parasite on the body of fiction, just as a bug, also gendered as masculine (J.B. = James Bug),

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, (1925) eBooks@Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia: The University of Adelaide Library.

²¹Leila Brosnan, "'Monarch of the Drab World': Woolf's Figuring of Journalism as Abject," in ed. Kate Campbell, *Journalism. Literature and Modernity (from Hazlitt to Modernism)*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 197.

may become a parasite on the body of “a private lady.”²² The association is obvious: while James Bug, the representative of the newspaper and monarch of the “drab world” stands for mass culture, the lady, whose life-blood is leached away, represents high culture. J.B.’s productions suck away the energy which real culture emanates. The distinction between high and mass culture, like the distinction between quality fiction and literary journalism is described by Woolf as an opposition between ‘mind’ and ‘body,’ that is between thought, ideas, on the one side, and food, material things, on the other.²³

Such a distinction is to be found with one of Woolf’s minor characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), who may rightfully claim to be labeled as a “middlebrow.” Miss Kilman, Elizabeth Dalloway’s private teacher, is portrayed with obvious inclinations towards material things, including consuming food (she sits “at the marble table among the éclairs”²⁴) and seems to live on Elizabeth Dalloway’s refined tastes and aristocratic behavior. She has displayed a significant influence upon Elizabeth by determining her to show an interest in lower class experiences, such as riding the omnibus and rubbing shoulders with common people. Clarissa Dalloway, on the other hand, reveals repressed feelings of hatred towards Miss Kilman; she is trying hard and not very successfully to hide them. Miss Kilman, to her is like James Bug. A parallel between the protagonist and the author might lead to the conclusion that Clarissa Dalloway expresses Virginia Woolf’s condescending attitude towards the much despised middlebrow, the bloodless creature sucking the blood of the highbrows away.

Contrary to Andreas Huyssen’s view, modernist texts do not reject popular culture and sensation literature. There are more links than divides between the European avant-garde and manifestations of mass culture such as cinema, jazz, vaudevilles, and popular music. Most modernist writers were fascinated with working-class amusements which may be traced in the most complex, experimental works. Thus, T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* is suffused with jazz-like verse and popular-song allusions; Joyce’s *Ulysses* is known for its cinematic references; Gertrude Stein used detective fiction in her prose. What the modernists fiercely rejected were the products of the so-called middlebrow culture: best-selling novels and literary journalism. Both Woolf and T.S. Eliot amply showed their scorn towards them.²⁵

Why did the modernists disregard popular novels and journalism? Was their scornful attitude a way of exposing their superior mind vis-à-vis the common reader’s or was it generated by the fear that they would not be able to create a new niche in the literature market?

²² Quoted by Brosnan in *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²³ Brosnan, *id.*, p. 201

²⁴ Virginia Woolf, (1925) *Mrs. Dalloway*, San Diego, New York, London: A Harvest Book, 1981, p. 133.

²⁵ See Tim Armstrong, *Modernism (A Cultural History)*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005, pp. 47-48 for an analysis of the phenomenon.

Originating in a period of instability in literary production, modernist writers, according to Lawrence Rainey, attempted to create a niche in the already established market for an 'advanced' literature, experimental in its form, opposing abundance of plot and style, and disinterested in instant fame.²⁶ On the other hand, Mark Morrison notes that the modernists' claim that they were in search of a 'counter-public sphere' is questioned by their open engagement with the public sphere and their fascination with the techniques of advertising.²⁷ The autonomy of the modernist text is often only a strategic illusion or an advertising point on the market. Yet, as Tim Armstrong suggests, if modernism led to the split of art and literature into high and mass forms and modernists writers sided with the 'high' and rejected the 'low', audiences could not be so neatly separated.²⁸ The 'middlebrow' reader makes his appearance again. With him, there comes the 'middlebrow' writer.

If we were to believe in their existence, the best example of what can be understood by the 'middlebrow' writer is Dame Rebecca West (1892-1983). A prolific author and literary critic, considered by *Time* in 1947 as "indisputably, the world's number one woman writer," Rebecca West was highly appreciated by G.B. Shaw and H.G. Wells, among others, yet she was placed outside of modernism, even outside of literature by Ezra Pound. She enjoyed early success, writing earned her money and fame throughout her whole life. Her books sold so well that she literally became rich. However, she was not recognized as one of the chosen or belonging to the modernist elite. Pound described her as "a journalist, a clever journalist, but not 'of us'. She belongs to Wells and that lot."²⁹ Pound's scorn placed her in the group of Wells, Stevenson, Stoker and Kipling, who constituted what could be called "popular modernism." Like the other popular modernists, she has largely been excluded from histories of modernism. Therefore, she seems to fit the portrait of the middlebrow writer and critic who addressed the middlebrow public, continuing the Victorian tradition of sensationalism and didacticism to which she added feminist and liberal views.

In search of a wider audience, West moved from publishing in a small journal with feminist tones, *The Freewoman*, to journals of larger interest and circulation in America and the UK (*The Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *The New Yorker*, *The Daily Telegraph*). Her involvement in the growing market for middlebrow and popular journalism linked her more closely to modern mass culture and placed her on the other side of "the great divide." Yet, reading her work as a journalist, critic, and writer, it becomes obvious that her placing on the weaker side of the high-low opposition was less due to her views and style and more to her

²⁶ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture*, 1998, New Haven: Yale University Press.

²⁷ Mark Morrison, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception 1905-1920*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

²⁸ Tim Armstrong, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

²⁹ Ezra Pound, quoted by Lyn Pykett, "The Making of a Modern Woman Writer: Rebecca West's Journalism, 1911-1930," in ed. Kate Cambell, *Journalism, Literature and Modernity (from Hazlitt to Modernism)*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p.187.

gender. In Huyssen's words, mass culture was generally associated with women, while "real authentic culture remained the prerogative of men."³⁰ Rebecca West just missed to be called a modernist.

Rebecca West is famous for having condemned experimental fiction: she claims that Joyce is as an important writer, but an incompetent one, *Ulysses* being a work of genius written in gibberish;³¹ she describes Eliot's *Wasteland* as "utterly sterile and utterly complacent"³² and Dorothy Richardson's experimental method as "the meticulous method of the secondary stream of consciousness,"³³ she prefers D.H. Lawrence's poetry to his fiction, considering that "it is difficult for him to express himself in prose."³⁴ Yet, she praises Virginia Woolf's experimental writing. Whether she does it from conviction or as a form of camaraderie, it is hard to say. In her comments on *Orlando*, West asserts that the work is "a poetic masterpiece of the first rank," combining "the frankest contempt for realism" with "the profoundest reality."³⁵ She was equally impressed by Woolf's use of experimental subject-matter and admired her ability to transcend traditional topics.

So what is the "proper stuff of fiction" at the turn of the century and the dawn of modernism? According to Woolf, "the proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss."³⁶ She truly believes in "the infinite possibilities of the art," in a limitless horizon, she encourages any method or experiment, even the wildest, but she bans "falsity and pretence."³⁷ By "falsity and pretence," she most probably refers to the works of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy who have shown what they "might have done but have not done," leaving the modernist writers to realize what they "could do, but as certainly, [...] do not wish to do."³⁸ Their work, especially Arnold Bennett's, is lifeless or "bloodless" which will obviously send us to middlebrow fiction and its limited quality.

Novel writing and production at the turn of the century was actually a site of negotiations between three conflicting requirements: the novel as commodity, as literature and as ideology. It was also a new space in which mediators, agents, publishers, readers and book reviewers contributed to regularize the literary process and the reading habits of the general public. Such developments intrinsic to modernity had, on the one hand, created the middlebrow reader and producer of fiction and, on the other, the modernist writer who, disregarding public acclaim,

³⁰ Andreas Huyssen, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

³¹ Rebecca West, *The Strange Necessity*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1928, p. 37.

³² Rebecca West, "A Last London Letter," *The Bookman*, Aug. 1930, 513-22, 520.

³³ Rebecca West, "Notes on Novels," *New Statesman*, 16 Oct. 1920, p. 50.

³⁴ Rebecca West, *ibid.*, 8 July, 1922, p. 388.

³⁵ Rebecca West, "The High Fountain of Genius," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 21 Oct. 1928, pp. 1, 6.

³⁶ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction" in ed. David Bradshaw, *Virginia Woolf, Selected Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 12.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7

borrowed from the former the fascination with the shock effect. In Woolf's view, *Ulysses* shows "indifference to public opinion – desire to shock," which obviously makes it a modernist text, yet, the shock effect sends us back to sensationalism. It is definitely not the Victorian kind of the sensation novel, but the sensations created by it may well be rooted in the 'great tradition.'

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