

VIRGINIA WOOLF,
THE INTELLECTUAL,
AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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CHAPTER I

Democratic highbrow: Woolf and the classless intellectual

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

It is also that the variations and confusions of meaning are not just faults in a system, or errors of feedback, or deficiencies of education. They are in many cases, in my terms, historical and contemporary substance. Indeed they have often, as variations, to be insisted upon, just because they embody different experiences and readings of experience, and this will continue to be true, in active relationships and conflicts, over and above the clarifying exercises of scholars or committees. What can really be contributed is not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness.

Raymond Williams, *Keywords*¹

CULTURAL KEYWORDS

To write about Virginia Woolf as a democratic highbrow is to invoke controversy. My approach challenges the notion of the modernist writer as aloof from the public and the idea of intellectuals as an elite; it resists identifications of the popular exclusively with the world of commodities and entertainment; it rejects the notion that declining standards must inevitably follow from “the mass.” And, as I state in my introduction, my approach contests a number of prevailing constructions of “Virginia Woolf.” Much depends, however, on what we take “democratic highbrow” to mean, or what we understand to be the ideological inflections of these terms. Words derive their meanings from their location within cultural and textual systems, and the approach of this chapter is to pursue, in a way that is guided

by Raymond Williams's analysis of the "keywords" of culture and society, Virginia Woolf's words in relation to the systems of meaning being formed and contested in the interwar years. Inevitably, as my epigraphs imply, all words are subject to differing reception, depending on the ideological systems in which they are read. In the following discussion, I will try, like Humpty Dumpty, to make words fit my meaning; but my goal is also to show, like Williams, how certain terms in our vocabulary become, from time to time, sites of "different experiences and readings of experience" and how, in this very contestation over meaning, the crucial problems confronting a culture are revealed.

"Democratic" and "highbrow" are more revelatory here than Woolf's related words "common reader" precisely because the former are conspicuous sites of ideological debate. Their contested uses in the first part of the twentieth century highlight the formative processes of cultural definition; the words as they appear in Woolf's writing indicate how she herself understood the on-going controversies and confronted the issues that were being raised. The tensions surrounding "highbrow" and "democratic" furthermore extend to the complicated relations among "democratic," "popular," and "mass." The latter two words are often used interchangeably, with the result that modernism's opposition to mass culture is taken necessarily to mean hostility to popular literature and ordinary readers, leaving little possibility to consider modernist highbrowism as a democratic form. But much depends on how we use words and how we define our terms.

"Mass" and "popular" are most helpful when they signify different economies, as Michael Kammen argues in his analysis of American tastes. Quoting Richard Slotkin, Kammen draws attention to the distinction between works created for the purposes of *mass* consumption and the multiplicity of popular forms that are "produced by and for specific cultural communities like the ethnic group, the family-clan, a town, a neighborhood, or region, the workplace, or the street corner."² In similar fashion, W. Russell Neuman, focusing on the audience for contemporary mass media, distinguishes between homogenous mass audiences and complex communicative networks comprising many partially overlapping sub-groups of the whole people.³ Resisting the technological determinism that assumes mass media necessarily produce a uniform audience, Neuman points to the way the Internet has fostered the development of special-interest "narrow-casting" and the emergence of diversified "issue publics." Non-geographical communities of varying sizes form because like-minded people find each other by utilizing a format accessible to mass participation. An opposition to *mass culture* does not then automatically imply an opposition to *mass communication* or to *popular forms*.⁴

Whether highbrowism can be regarded as one of many popular “issue publics” depends on our understanding of “popular.” As Williams points out, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, “popular” signified large numbers – first referring to a political system that involved “the whole people” and later coming to mean anything that was “widely favoured” or “well-liked.”⁵ Subsequently, however, “popular” began to imply interests or activities that originate from the people, in the sense of grass-roots movements as opposed to culture or politics emanating from above. In this latter sense, “popular” moves away from an emphasis on large numbers to include forms that, while they may not appeal to the majority, are open to self-selected participation and generated from below. In relation to the law, for example, the *OED* defines “popular” as “affecting, concerning, or open to all or any of the people.”⁶ Highbrow, intellectual culture may never be popular in the sense of “widely favoured”; it requires, for one thing, a substantial commitment of time and energy. But intellectual culture might well be popular in the sense of being open to and generated by subgroups of the whole – a focused interest shared by a mixed group of professional and non-professional people, rather like baseball, or fiddle music, or Tai Chi.

The meaning of “popular” relates in turn to the larger question of what it means to be democratic – whether we mean the participation of all the people or the potential for any self-selecting individual to participate. The question is not just “academic” (another interesting word) but a fundamental question about the place of the intellectual, or intellectual interests, in our society today. Can highbrow culture be a border-crossing zone where “common” and “professional” intellectuals meet? Can “highbrow culture” be both consumed and produced in ways that cut across divisions of education, class, wealth, and occupation? Can highbrowism be considered democratic, even if it is not popular in the sense of attracting large numbers, as long as it is open and available to any self-identified individual? Is a democratic highbrowism conceptually possible, as a matter of belief even if not of achievement, and what would its achievement mean?

These are the broad questions underlying this study, and they are as crucial to face in our current social formations as they are in understanding the place and role of the intellectual Virginia Woolf. To engage the historical in this instance is also to explore questions about reading and culture still unresolved today. As Thomas Bender has argued, “historians turn to the study of intellectuals, ideas, and culture in periods defined by uncertainty about the role and power of ideas, about the agency of human thinkers.”⁷ If the twenty-first century is such a time of uncertainty, marked by an intense social scrutiny of our educational systems and a questioning of the role of

intellectuals, so too was the time of Virginia Woolf. Our starting place, then, is the cultural history of this chapter's two keywords.

THE "BROWS" IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

Virginia Woolf was a highbrow. Despite its frequently pejorative implications, it is a term that she once claimed, or perhaps reclaimed, for herself. Woolf knew only too well that language is never innocent or transparent and so, when calling herself a highbrow, she characteristically turned the word prismatically about to expose the cultural values encoded in its use. Literally, the word refers to the space between eyebrow and hairline, the height of the forehead, the signaling in physiognomy of the brain; metonymically, the high forehead signifies an intellectual – "a person of superior intellectual attainments or interests."⁸ But although "highbrow" can substitute for "intellectual," the former word is more emotionally fraught. "Highbrow" usually assumes an attitude held by intellectuals toward non-intellectuals and, used with this connotation, it generally betrays an attitude *toward* intellectuals on the part of the user. If highbrows are intellectually superior, the reasoning goes, they must assume they are superior people; if they think they are superior people, then others resent such assumed superiority. As a charged term, "highbrow" is less about attributes than attitudes.

It was indeed to answer such "charges" against highbrows that Woolf appropriated the term in a letter she wrote, but never sent, to the editor of the *New Statesman and Nation* in 1932. The specific occasion of Woolf's letter was a clash between J. B. Priestley and Harold Nicolson in a series of talks on the BBC under the general title, "To an Unnamed Listener": Priestley unwittingly launched the exchange with a talk "To a High-Brow," and Nicolson responded, in rebuttal, with "To a Low-Brow" the following week.⁹ The larger issue that Woolf addressed, however, was the growing cultural tension around the position of the intellectual in society – a tension she saw *both* Priestley and Nicolson exacerbating. The meaning of "Middlebrow" – both the word and the essay under which title her letter was posthumously published – is inseparable from its nature as a response to a heated public discussion taking place not only on the BBC, but in numerous newspapers, periodicals, and books. But to understand the furore, we need to know the history of the terms in which the controversy was being constructed at the time.

High, middle, and lowbrow are not included in Raymond Williams's 1976 list of keywords of British culture, since his study concerns words identifiably significant before the twentieth century begins. But two of his

keywords, “elite” and “masses,” are important forerunners of twentieth-century terminology, and significantly influence the meaning of the “brows.” As Williams shows, in the nineteenth century the word “elite” shifts from its earlier theological signification of God’s chosen, or “the elect,” to the politically inflected definition of those best fit to govern. Now entangled with the redistribution of governmental power, it acquires associations of “*class or ruling class*” (emphasis in original) and of hierarchical privilege in the political state.¹⁰ In a related definitional morphing, the word “masses,” which originally combined the attribute of low status with the idea of a multitude (the lowest being also the largest class), became entangled with a second meaning signifying a rudimentary lump of raw material or a body of physical objects grouped together for common properties. The conflation of the two meanings came to signify an aggregate of persons viewed as individually indistinguishable. Both conservative and revolutionary groups tended to construct the lower or working class as uniform and homogeneous, although with the antithetical implications of unthinking “mob” versus united “solidarity.”¹¹ This ideological inflection then colored modes of action: manipulation of the masses for the ends of electoral control or marketing consumerism, on the one hand, and for the purpose of organized collective action, on the other.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the terms “high” and “lowbrow” came into use, carrying over much of the baggage of the older constructions of “elites” and “masses.” Various assumptions – *not of necessity attached to the existence of different kinds of culture* – were imported into cultural debate. In the nineteenth century, the perceived division between elites and masses revolved around reformations in the distribution of governmental power, extending to questions of economic control. In the twentieth century, the clash over brows arose largely from changes in communication technology – in particular, the advent of broadcasting and the ever-increasing capabilities for cheap mass publication – and the attendant creation of new listening and reading audiences. But the new audiences generated by the new media became inflected with the inherited paradigms governing the distinctions between elites and masses. High became inseparable from upper and popular became synonymous with low, with the attendant respective assumptions of hierarchical privilege versus homogeneous mass.

The hostilities surrounding the debates about brows were thus derived in large part from the way traditional political and economic inequalities bled into and limited the possibilities for thinking about new cultural formations. The established oppositional relation between elites and masses

imported essentialist notions about cultural division into the realm of aesthetic and informational systems. It was widely assumed that intellectual culture was upper class and popular culture, low class; that these cultures were inevitably oppositional and would, with differing reasons, claim superiority over each other; and that intellectual culture would necessarily be a small group as opposed to the large group of popular culture, an assumption enabled by the categorization of all popular culture as one undifferentiated whole. I do not claim that Virginia Woolf was herself totally free of the entrenched constructions; I will try to demonstrate, however, that she was able to envision possibilities for moving beyond them in a way that most others involved in the cultural debates could not.

The “brow” words come into currency at the beginning of the twentieth century, moving quickly from innocent description to emotionally charged slogans of battle. In the mid-nineteenth century, the adjective “high-browed” could be used as a straightforward compliment, as in George Eliot’s description of “gentle maidens and high-browed brave men.”¹² However gendered her epithets, “high-browed” carries no implication of conflicts or opposition between intellectual and physical strengths. When “highbrow” appears just before the turn of the century and “lowbrow” shortly after, the polarities begin to form. The *OED*’s first recorded use of “highbrow,” in 1884, distinguishes the pleasures of the mind from those of the body, with a lightly humorous inflection about which might be more fun: “Mr. Hope had suggested that we would be at some highbrow part of the Exhibition – looking at pictures I think, but Jo had said firmly, ‘If I know the Troubridges they will be at the Chocolate Stall,’ and we were.”¹³ By the time we reach the pre-war fiction of H. G. Wells and Sinclair Lewis, “highbrow” and “highbrowed” have acquired the negative associations of asceticism, repression of the physical, and a pretentious, high moral stance.¹⁴

By the mid-1920s, the oppositional relation of the brows was established enough for the hostilities to become a target of fun in *Punch*. In 1922, the inauguration of the BBC helped to escalate the tensions, creating the airwaves as contested space; highbrow pleasures came to be protested as the imposition of the interests of a dominant minority upon the general public. In the pages of *Punch*, a fictional husband writes to an appropriately named lowbrow paper, *The Daily Scoop*, to complain, “The programmes are too highbrow... They are hopelessly beyond the intelligence of the mass, at any rate.”¹⁵ And the BBC was apparently the occasion for the facetious creation of a third term, descriptive of the new audience that the highbrow programmes were reputed to produce: “The B.B.C. claim[s] to have discovered a new type, the ‘middlebrow’. It consists of people who

are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like."¹⁶

Whereas *Punch* maintains its tone of light satirical banter, no such detachment is shown by most of the writers and journalists who take these issues up. By the 1930s, the terms have clearly become sites of cultural anxiety and, in the hands of the journalists, they become implements of war. For the most part, the viciously phrased attacks are aimed at the highbrow, although some self-identified highbrows return fire by constructing a despicable "lowbrowism" with equal zeal. Frank Swinnerton, writing as "Simon Pure" in the New York *Bookman*, condemns Woolf as a member of the small neo-Georgian "caste" of aesthetic "highbrows" who, in their rarefied self-enclosure, pose "a small menace to creative writing."¹⁷ In a 1928 review, Arnold Bennett labels *Orlando* a "high-brow lark," by which he means, however, not that it is full of witty fun, but that it is a mere collection of "oddities," so "tedious in their romp of fancy," that the book amounts to "[f]anciful embroidery, wordy, and naught else!"¹⁸ The next year, reviewing *A Room of One's Own*, Bennett calls Woolf the "queen of the high-brows," while positioning himself firmly as a "low-brow"; although suggesting the world needs a mixture of both, he nevertheless again declares her "the victim of her extraordinary gift of fancy" and disparagingly implies the irrelevancy and inconsequentiality of her work.¹⁹ By the early 1930s, Aldous Huxley, on the other side of the fence, was attacking the complacent superiority of those who adopted an exaggerated, self-satisfied lowbrowism as a deliberate anti-intellectual pose: "It is not at all uncommon now," he claims in "Foreheads Villainous Low," "to find intelligent and cultured people doing their best to feign stupidity and to conceal the fact that they have received an education." Somewhat facetiously, Huxley goes on to attribute this reverse snobbism to the ascendancy of "a society that measures success in economic terms"; in this ideology, "[h]appiness is a product of noise, company, motion, and the possession of objects" and, correspondingly, "highbrows, being poor consumers, are bad citizens."²⁰ Huxley's essay won supportive comments from Desmond MacCarthy, whose essay "Highbrows" similarly takes issue with "the new stupidity-snobbery and ignorance-snobbery." MacCarthy, however, also argues the need to counter the exclusionary tendencies of the highbrow; the highbrow journalist, he suggests, could usefully expose highbrow "shibboleths" with the reminder that "the [only] qualification for becoming a highbrow is to care for the things of the mind."²¹ But even MacCarthy's proposed border-raid reveals how the cultural debate had hardened into the form of antithetical camps, each "brow" convinced of the superiority of the self and the narrowness and limitation of the others.

There were other more reasoned arguments, although they too make us wonder what more was invested in these issues than simple divergence of taste. The title of Leonard Woolf's pamphlet *Hunting the Highbrow* suggests the violence of aggressive attack, implying that a great many were victimizing a few. Leonard's defense is to be supremely logical, trying to cut through misconceptions and misperceptions by breaking down highbrows into sub-species of legitimate and pseudo forms. Against the "real" forms of rational and aesthetic highbrows, Leonard opposes *Pseudaltifrons intellectualis* and *Pseudaltifrons aestheticus*, the first who likes "what nobody else can understand" and the second, "the thing which the majority dislikes."²² More interesting than these satiric categories, however, is Leonard's attempt to undercut the supposed oppositions between *real* highbrows and the general public, and between classics and best-sellers. The highbrow, he states, recognizes great works before the general public does but the public later recognizes them too. Shakespeare, as a writer, is both popular and highbrow, though these are different elements in his work. Quality and popularity need to be disentangled: highbrow work will by definition appeal to only a small percentage of people but this is different from saying that popular work cannot have artistic merit. In many ways, Leonard attempts to defuse the hostilities and break down barriers, yet his pessimism backs the highbrow into an oppositional corner. Intellect and reason, he concludes, have little chance against passion and prejudice, and the latter hold current sway. Although Leonard's approach to highbrow and popular is definitely a border-crossing one, he seems defeated by the growing irrationality of the mass. And the underlying anxiety is not about differences in interests but about differences in power.

For Leonard, the endangered highbrow stands for the threatened loss of intellectual influence, given his contemporary society's pervasive unresponsiveness to intellectual work. Beneath the literary discussion of tastes and the question of what characterizes highbrowism lies a deeper ground of investment – the contest for readership, for being read. For, as I discuss in the next chapter, the particular conjunction of cultural and economic pressures during this period caused long-standing concerns about audience to emerge as a source of anxiety for the highbrow press. The explosive rise of mass media and mass communication, coupled with the rapidly growing diversity in the reading and listening audiences, intensified concerns about capturing the reader's attention and raised questions about which kinds of publication were going to survive. These were the questions, too, at the heart of a ground-breaking study entitled *Fiction and the Reading*

Public – the Cambridge thesis written by Q. D. Leavis under the direction of I. A. Richards, and published in the spring of 1932.

Although it is customary now to place the Leavises in opposition to “Bloomsbury,” the fundamental ideas in *Fiction and the Reading Public* have a great deal in common with Leonard Woolf’s. Q. D. Leavis’s study is probably the first to undertake a serious categorization of brow levels but the more significant similarity to *Hunting the Highbrow* is the expressed fear about the survival of intellectual culture. Rather than the earlier nineteenth-century view of bridges between one reading level and another, Leavis posits an impassable gap – one so large that all Western intellectual culture could fall into it and disappear. The crucial problem, as Leavis presents it, is the damaging effect of new lowbrow entertainments on highbrow reading practices. And here, while Leonard attempts to separate mass psychology from popular culture, Leavis conflates the two by directing her critique at the debasement of language, the sentimentalization of feeling, the erosion of the powers of concentration, reconstruction, and self-examination – all occasioned by the lowbrow forms of radio, cinema, magazines, and best-sellers. Aside from her claim that best-sellers unfit the reader to think, Leavis argues that they rely for their appeal on reflecting what the reader is already predisposed to believe, further entrenching “social, national, and herd prejudices”; then, since one of the prejudices of the age is “a persistent hostility to the world of letters,” the best-sellers actually instill an attitude of disdain toward serious modern literature.²³ Leavis quotes a typical attitude, for example, from a novel by the popular Warren Deeping: “Well, a good novel is real, far more significant than most of the highbrow stuff – so called.”²⁴

The hostilities that arose when people wrote and talked about the brows were thus fueled by perceived or feared injustices in the distribution of power. For the defenders of “high culture,” the issue was the threatened loss of economic and communicative resources, since they were concerned that small volume publication was becoming less financially viable and that intellectual influence on general culture was rapidly diminishing in its effect. For those engaged in “middle or low culture,” the compelling issue was exclusion from cultural prestige – or cultural capital – especially since threatened highbrows frequently responded by disparaging the quality of non-highbrow work. People were arguing but not quite for the same thing: a fight for readership, on one side, and a fight for respect and legitimization, on the other. These problems were then compounded by the inherited opposition between elites and masses that I have discussed. The

nineteenth-century political construct, imported into twentieth-century cultural debates, imposed a binary model that took a complex interlocking network of numerous sub-groups and reduced them to two categories. A resulting misconception – one that we have seen that Leonard Woolf tried to dispel – was that if highbrow was quality, and highbrow was not popular, then popular could not be quality. But perhaps a more serious, because more hidden, misconception was that if intellectual was not popular, then intellectual was necessarily elite.

Again, some of the problems derive from the conflation of different terms, from the homogenization of common, popular, and mass. These terms, which may have had the same referent in nineteenth-century social groupings, become, as I have already suggested, problematic when applied to twentieth-century readerships. Once we open ourselves to possibilities for new configurations, various questions occur. Are intellectual readers necessarily elite readers if the required knowledge and skills can be made available to all? Is there any reason why intellectual reading cannot be popular, in the sense of arising from a grass-roots, common readers' need? Why should reading for entertainment and relaxation – the currently prevailing sense of popular – not be seen as complementary to reading for mental stimulation, allowing diverse kinds of reading practice peacefully to co-exist? What is at stake in the confrontations over these issues, and in what terms do these confrontations proceed? Questions such as these underlie Virginia Woolf's essay, "Middlebrow" and, as Woolf attempts to reconfigure the debate, another kind of reformulation takes place. Rather than mounting assertive arguments in defense of the highbrow writer, Woolf writes a multi-faceted, intertextual prose that in itself makes her most important point: highbrow writing, instead of subjecting the reader to a harangue, invites the reader to think.

"Middlebrow" (1932) and its cultural intertexts

In February 1932, after sounding off to Hugh Walpole about the pretentiousness of certain popular novels, Woolf then both admitted and parodied her own vulnerability to attack: "Anyhow, dont dismiss me as an etoliated, decadent, enervated, emasculated, priggish, blood-waterish, 'ighbrow: as Arnold Bennett used to say" (*L* v:25).²⁵ In August of the same year, Woolf complained to Ethel Smyth, "I get so much heckled by journalists for Bloomsbury Highbrowism" (*L* v:89). A few months later, in October, Woolf wrote her letter to the *New Statesman and Nation*, which was later posthumously published as the essay "Middlebrow."²⁶ And that same month, she

brought out her second collection of essays entitled *The Common Reader*. The title, as critics have noted, presents its author as writing both *for* the common reader and *as* a common reader, yet Woolf identifies herself, in her letter on middlebrows, as a “highbrow.” The conjunction of highbrow and common reading was no accident, however, as the full situation makes clear. The role of intellectuals was being hotly debated both on the radio and in print and these confrontations are embedded in the dense intertextuality of Woolf’s letter. Uncovering this public dimension helps us to see just why it was so important to Woolf to cross the highbrow/common divide.²⁷

October 1932 was, for Woolf, a particularly intense time. She herself recorded how, during this month, she became so “fire[d] up about Priestley and his priestliness” that she dashed off an “essay,” only to suffer a subsequent collapse with rapid heart-rate problems on October 31 (*D* iv: 129). The immediate stimulus for her anger was the BBC: J. B. Priestley’s talk “To a High-Brow,” on October 17, and Harold Nicolson’s rebuttal, “To a Low-Brow,” on October 24.²⁸ Since these broadcasts became a subject for subsequent comment in the *New Statesman and Nation* on October 29, and since Woolf cast her views as a letter “To the Editor of the *New Statesman*,” we can reasonably surmise that her letter was written sometime between the 29th and the 31st. And the month had been extremely busy. At the beginning of October, she traveled with Leonard to the Annual Conference of the Labour Party in Leicester, after which she returned to work on the final chapter of *Flush*. On the eleventh, she broke off to begin writing, at phenomenal speed, the essay-novel that she planned to call *The Pargiters*. October 13 saw the publication of *The Common Reader: Second Series* and, shortly after, the first reviews of it and of Winifred Holtby’s *Virginia Woolf* began to appear. Woolf was writing, according to her own description, in a state of “incandescence.” My argument here is that, in these intense and “incandescent” days, the BBC talks became a lightning rod for Woolf’s broader cultural concerns. Innumerable things coalesced in her mind: the critical reception of her work, the social regulation of women’s lives, cultural valuations of the intellectual, the prevailing controls and restrictions governing such public institutions as education and broadcasting – more precisely, the whole operation of public discourse in her time.

Such an amazing coalescence of concerns may help to explain why Woolf felt so compelled to respond to “Priestley and his priestliness” – to the extent of breaking off her writing of *The Pargiters* – when not only had Nicolson already done so but the *New Statesman* had celebrated Nicolson’s victory. Mr. Nicolson, the review states, “took up the cudgels against Mr. Priestley

and gave the low-brow a tremendous doing-down,” showing “apparent enjoyment in trouncing his victim.”²⁹ But this language also suggests the source of disturbance: the *New Statesman* picks up and recirculates the discourse of battle with its vocabulary of “cudgels,” “doing-down,” and “trouncing.” Addressing *both* talks, it appears, Woolf stated, “the Battle of the Brows troubles, I am told, the evening air” (*CE* II:196). The Battle of the Brows, her phrase implies, is one conducted by brow-beating.

Priestley’s script survives in the BBC archives. The style of his talk can be described as informal, matey, and pugilistic; the unnamed listener, addressed as “my dear fellow,” is constructed as male; and the gist of the message is to fight off the dangerous temptation to be a highbrow and join the speaker in going out for a drink. All the familiar clichés about highbrowism are rehearsed: that it sneers at popularity and can only admire what is liked by a small group; that it is divorced from ordinary life and characterized by affectation; that it is a product, just as much as low-browism, of fashion and the desire to move in herds. Priestley’s call to his listener is, “don’t be either a highbrow or a low-brow. Be a man. Be a broad-brow.”³⁰ It must have been particularly irksome for Woolf to hear Priestley reinforcing the stereotypes that Leonard had already demolished as pseudo-highbrow and citing MacCarthy and Huxley as perpetrators of highbrow “bunkum.”³¹ Another source of annoyance might have been the hint of personal insult. One breed of highbrow, Priestley asserted, consists of “authors entirely without feeling, who write about human life as an educated *wolf* might be expected to write about it” (emphasis added).³² But the discourse betrays a still more objectionable facet. The implicit message is that nothing here is worth the trouble of thinking about; we should have a good laugh over the matter and take comfort in sensible views.

Nicolson’s script has unfortunately been lost but his diary traces a fascinating history of its composition. Though his talk was initially written before he heard Priestley, Nicolson rewrote it immediately afterward in angry rebuttal, only to have second thoughts: “*Tuesday October 18*. Work all morning [*sic*] on my reply to Priestley. Abuse him bitterly. Take the talk off in my pocket to drop it at the B.B.C. but then think better of it. The wireless is not there for scoring off people one dislikes.” Nicolson rewrote the talk entirely, “toning down the attack,” but even the revised version did not suit the BBC: “*Thursday October 20* . . . Joe Ackerley has telephoned to the effect that my talk will not do. I rewrite the whole thing.” And still, the revised talk did not suit the listeners: “*Thursday, October 27* . . . I get a batch of insulting letters over my last broadcast [*sic*]. Evidently I have hit the British public on the raw.”³³

The excerpts from Nicolson's talk that I *have* been able to locate suggest that all his rewriting did produce a more reasoned tone.³⁴ The *Yorkshire Post* devoted a long column to Nicolson's "lively wireless talk" on Anglo-Saxon anti-intellectualism, noting his question, "Has it ever struck you . . . that there is no equivalent for the words 'low-brow' or 'high-brow' in any language other than the English language?" and his inference that "The Anglo-Saxon race is the only race in the world which openly distrusts the intellectual." But although Nicolson speaks up for the neglected potentials of the Anglo-Saxon brain, he manages to imply its inactivity in his designated listener. Driven by "herd instinct" and marked by "intolerance," the lowbrow, Nicolson warns, "will end by producing a race which, like the wasps, have no ideas at all."³⁵ It would seem that Nicholson, too, adopted an oppositional, assertive style pleasing only to listeners who agreed with his views. What runs through the whole story is the polarization into sides.

In contrast and characteristically, Woolf enters the fray at the foundational level, interrogating the discourse of the argument itself. Instead of defending the highbrow, she challenges her reader to scrutinize conventional thinking, beginning with the assumption that high, middle, and lowbrow correspond to high, middle, and low class. "I love lowbrows; I study them," Woolf writes, "I always sit next the conductor in an omnibus and try to get him to tell me what it is like – being a conductor" (*CE* II:197). Momentarily allowing the reader to conflate lowbrow with working class, Woolf then reverses direction by invoking a miscellany of occupations that make any social categorization of lowbrow impossible: "In whatever company I am I always try to know what it is like – being a conductor, being a woman with ten children and thirty-five shillings a week, being a stockbroker, being an admiral, being a bank clerk, being a dressmaker, being a duchess, being a miner, being a cook, being a prostitute. All that lowbrows do is of surpassing interest and wonder to me" (197–98). Having broadened the category of lowbrows to include both duchess and prostitute, Woolf then resituates the duchess and destabilizes *any* relation between brow and social position: "I myself have known duchesses who were highbrows," she continues, "also charwomen" (199). Interests are one thing; economics, another. We are warned not to confuse them.

Secondly, whereas the BBC represented voices in neat binaries, Woolf undercuts such simplicity of opposition. Whereas Priestley lumps highbrows and lowbrows together as equally moving in herds, Woolf recasts them as riders on galloping horses, each intent on a different goal: the highbrow in pursuit of ideas, the lowbrow in pursuit of a living. The brain and the body, hierarchically disposed in Western cultural thought, are, in

Woolf's typology, placed on equal footing as riders equally committed to their course. But, having suggested a division, however complementary, between body and brain, Woolf undercuts the viability of classification when it comes to what people do. The lowbrows, after their busy day of work, go eagerly to the movies to see what the highbrows – whose work is reflection – can reveal about life. Uniting creators and audience, cinema is a crossroads where highbrows and lowbrows meet. Then, later in the essay, when she tells us that lowbrows write and are desirous of education, she acknowledges a lowbrow production as well as consumption of art. And although she first defines lowbrows as pursuing a living, she notes later that highbrows have livings to earn as well. One distinction she does assert is that “when we [the highbrows] have earned enough to live on, then we live. When the middlebrows, on the contrary, have earned enough to live on, they go on earning enough to buy” (201). Remembering Woolf's attendance at the Annual Conference of the Labour Party at the beginning of the month, we might note her distinction between having to live and living to have – the difference perhaps between socialist and capitalist approaches to money.

Like Priestley, Woolf invokes a third brow. But whereas Priestley simplifies his opposition by making “broad-brow” the only group with real values, Woolf develops a more complex model of difference. Addressing the arena of what is not highbrow, Woolf distinguishes between lowbrow and middlebrow in a way that discriminates between popular and mass. Lowbrows, although they may lack education, nevertheless write “beautifully” when they write “naturally” – that is, when they are not seduced by middlebrow models (*CE* II:200). Middlebrow, in contrast, produces merely conventional work that asks its audience not to think but to agree. Again Woolf avoids collapsing non-highbrow writing into a unified group: she separates lowbrow writing that does not *require* you to think from middlebrow writing that fails to deliver its *promise* of thinking. Middlebrow masks its own discourse: duplicitously pretending to engage in intellectual debate, this brow in effect sells readers prepackaged views. By distinguishing between the two groups that are not her own, Woolf achieves a more penetrating critique.

Highbrow writing, for its part, strives to get its readers to think and Woolf challenges her own reader by writing a layered text. Her letter has not just one Priestlian intertext but at least three.³⁶ Going back years before the BBC talk – which she would only have heard once on the wireless – Woolf takes issue with Priestley's “High, Low, Broad,” another blatant entertainment for those who share his views. After a laughing admission of

the self-satisfaction in being like-minded people, Priestley is blunt about his aggressive intent. Admitting that the “brow’ business” is too entrenched to escape, he asserts that the one thing to do is “to see that the terms are used properly, that the pleasantest of them is appropriated for the use of our own party, and that the others, loaded with the worst possible meanings, are fastened upon people known to disagree with us.” Such outrageous humor might possibly be used to defuse hostilities; instead, Priestley indulges in a rather nasty form of fun. From their superior position as “Broadbrows,” he unites with his reader in disparaging both highbrow and lowbrow as sheep moving in herds led by whatever fashion prevails: “Just as Low, you might say, is the fat sheep with the cigar from the City of Surbiton, so High is the thin sheep with the spectacles and the squeak from Oxford or Bloomsbury.”³⁷ Broadbrow, he claims, is the only critical intelligence of the lot and the only one whose range of interest and experience takes in the whole of human life.

There are two hits in this passage that Woolf overturns: the identification of hightbrows with sheep and the objectification of Bloomsbury as representative of “High.” But instead of offering a counter-argument, Woolf writes a counter-discourse. Pugnacious prose that badgers the listener to agree is countered by an elastic, pluralistic prose that challenges the reader to think. Priestley’s insult, and of course also his humor, depends upon cliché and stereotype; Woolf responds to the abuse with a series of nimble-footed turns upon language that imply the more devastating criticism that middlebrow discourse displays a limited and reductive understanding of words. Woolf takes Priestley’s conventional metaphor – sheep are easily led and behave in the same way – and, through extended word play, turns it back against himself. First, countering Priestley’s typing of “Bloomsbury” with sheep-like behavior, Woolf introduces literal sheep to subvert his categorizing geographical trope: “The hungry sheep,” she writes, “did I remember to say that this part of the story takes place in the country?” (*CE* 11:200).³⁸ Next Woolf enacts a passage through the literal to re-turn the metaphorical, shifting the sheep from a fashion-following herd to an expectant but disappointed reading audience. As she tosses Middlebrow’s book out the window and “over the hedge into the field,” “the hungry sheep look up but are not fed” (200).

Woolf’s reinvigorated metaphorical is complex and layered, now introducing the further intertext of Milton’s “Lycidas.” In Milton’s poem this line occurs in a passage that suddenly digresses from the pastoral elegiac mode: the speaker’s lament and his questioning of the meanings of fame and of fate are broken by a diatribe delivered by St. Peter against the false

herdsman who fails to provide the necessary sustenance for his flock. In the political context of the poem, the digression, as Lawrence Lipking has shown, invokes a larger sense of religious purpose. St. Peter's words imply that the Irish – to whom the Lycidas of the poem, Edward King, was sailing when he drowned – are in need not simply of the consolation offered by poetry but of the salvatory promise of the Protestant faith.³⁹ As Lipking points out, such salvation might not be seen by the Irish as answering to their needs; nevertheless, in the context of the poem, the digression serves the function of conjoining the figure of the shepherd-poet with that of the herdsman-pastor, expanding and deepening the expectation that poet and poem must be judged according to the worth of the food provided for the flock.

The extraordinary layering of Woolf's allusion allows her text to be read at different levels. To begin, the sentence makes sense in its own context with no further explanation: Middlebrow's book does not feed its readers. But readers could also pick up the turn upon Priestley's use of sheep, or the countering of cliché with poetry, or the dislodgment of banter by dedication and serious purpose. The quotation from "Lycidas" was evidently a common expression in Woolf's time for an expectant but disappointed audience,⁴⁰ and the thoroughly literary might perceive that Priestley is being cast as false herdsman, as false priest. The quotation adds incredible density to Woolf's text; at the same time, it could be read with varying degrees of previous knowledge.

A similar layering emerges in the next turn that Woolf performs upon sheep. Having shifted from cliché to poetic allusiveness, Woolf shifts to freer and deeper kinds of thought, describing herself as "lapsing into that stream which people call, so oddly, consciousness, and gathering wool from the sheep that have been mentioned above" (*CE* 11:202). Woolf again employs an expression in common use, and again with a defamiliarizing shock. Wool-gathering originally referred to a process of roaming a countryside and picking up the bits of sheep's wool caught on bushes and hedges; as early as the sixteenth century, however, it had become a metaphor for wandering fancies or idle speculation. Among its numerous pejorative uses is yet another possible intertext, an essay by Desmond MacCarthy the previous year, about which Woolf wrote, "Oh I was annoyed with Desmond's usual sneer at Mrs. Dalloway – woolgathering" (*D* iv:42).⁴¹ In *Orlando*, Woolf had already had ironic fun with conventional notions of wool-gathering, parodying the biographer's horror when faced with the task of describing a woman's thinking: "this mere woolgathering; this sitting in a chair day

in, day out, with a cigarette and a sheet of paper and a pen and an ink pot" (O 241). In "Middlebrow," Woolf similarly challenges conventional associations, repossessing the sheep, and their wool, in her own terms. In the image of "gathering wool from the sheep mentioned above," language wobbles on the literal–metaphorical axis, with the radical implication that writing – the action of the roaming, scavenging brain – might just be practical, real work.

There is yet one further Priestlian intertext in "Middlebrow" – his column in the *Evening Standard* on October 13, in which he reviewed Harold Nicolson's *Public Faces*, Vita Sackville-West's *Family History*, Virginia Woolf's *Common Reader*, and Winifred Holtby's *Virginia Woolf*. The review, while favorable to Sackville-West and damning to Nicolson, is either fairly balanced or underhandedly two-faced – whichever way we choose to view it – about Woolf. Admitting that she is "a very good critic indeed," and claiming *To the Lighthouse* as "one of the most moving and beautiful pieces of fiction of our time," Priestley nevertheless undercuts his praise with unkind and personal remarks about Woolf's "deeply feminine" mode. Repeating Arnold Bennett's epithet describing Woolf as the "high priestess of Bloomsbury," Priestley recasts Holtby's evocation of the poetic qualities in Woolf's writing into a patronizing slur on novels "written by terrifically sensitive, cultured, invalidish ladies with private means" – a phrase that Woolf quotes with heavily underscored irony in her letter.⁴² Again inscribing the art/life binary, Priestley contrasts those novels, like hers, that "draw near to poetry" with those that "draw near to social history" and "cast a wider net."⁴³

In "Middlebrow," Woolf undoes this last binary by combining allusive poetic prose with the bite of social critique. The "wider net" of Woolf's essay goes beyond Priestley's insult to challenge the middlebrow discourse of the BBC – renamed the "Betwixt and Between Company" for the way it packages and polarizes controversy instead of promoting genuine dialogue (CE II:202). Unlike the thoroughbred commitment of highbrows and lowbrows, "middlebred" (199) middlebrow is a neutered, in-between creature, driven by neither bodily nor mental passions; "betwixt and between" (198) in another sense, it feeds on the rancor it stirs up between different groups in society, commodifying opposition for entertainment value and investing in showmanship rather than dialogue. Despite Joe Ackerley's attempts to tone down Nicolson's language, Woolf's objections to the BBC format resemble those now leveled against mass culture: it constructs its product in order to sell and constructs its audience for an easy sale.

Woolf furthermore implicates a second public institution in middlebrow discourse, although she draws it into her net more subtly than the BBC. One of the several examples she offers of middlebrow are “people who call both Shakespeare and Wordsworth equally ‘Bill’” (*CE* 11:199). The implied lack of discrimination among writers and the chummy slap-on-your-back heartiness in themselves suggest a reductive approach to literature, but there is yet another specific intertext here. In 1926, when Woolf reviewed Professor Walter Raleigh’s letters, she was irritated by his slangy talk about “Bill Blake or Bill Shakespeare or old Bill Wordsworth,” in which she heard the defensiveness of a man ashamed of his sentiments about English literature (*E* IV:343; *L* III:242) coupled with a desire to shock.⁴⁴ Raleigh was a prominent figure in the introduction of English into the university curriculum but, despite his appointment in 1904 as the Merton Chair of English Language and Literature at Oxford, Woolf’s quotation from his letters of the same year reveals his hostile denigration of literary criticism as a feminized soft option: “Bradley’s book on Shakespeare is good,” he wrote, but continued, “Even with it I can’t help feeling that critical admiration for what another man has written is an emotion for spinsters.”⁴⁵ And Woolf’s review refers to an earlier letter, written to his fiancée, in which Raleigh is even more derogatory in his association of “culture” with intellectual women:

Culture is what they [two female visitors] are after and there is an element of barbarity in my instincts that makes me ill contented in such company . . . I really believe, not in refinement and scholarly elegance, those are only a game; but in blood feuds, and the chase of wild beasts and marriage by capture. In carrying this last savage habit into effect there would be an irresistible dramatic temptation to select the bluest lady of them all.⁴⁶

Certainly Raleigh’s letters reveal a good deal of posturing, as he seeks to portray himself as a down-to-earth, virile male. But Raleigh, Woolf suggests, typifies a general turn against intellectual interests, denigrated as effete and feminine, in favor of an aggressive, masculinized ethic. As I show in the next chapter, Woolf was further disturbed by the tie between Raleigh’s code of virility and his increasing celebration of military patriotism. Behind Priestley’s jocular “don’t be a highbrow, be a man,” Woolf implies, lies a gendered discourse intimately connected with war.

The dense intertextuality of this essay thus becomes a web of searching cultural critique, exposing the complicity of unquestioning patriotism, capitalist values, media control of public discourse, and anti-intellectual complacency. Furthermore, the intricate play of Woolf’s language emerges

as a rhetorical technique for shifting positionality, destabilizing ideology, and putting the reader into active relation to the text. Woolf's poetic discourse – her wool-gathering – is an elastic, allusive prose that draws upon and stimulates the reader's mental perceptivity. In contrast, middlebrow's discourse – which she likens to worms in the cabbages, tarnish on the moon, red-brick villas infecting the countryside – is the insidious perpetrator of reductionism and discord.

In its elasticity, Woolf's supposedly difficult "highbrow" discourse functions as an activist response to a pressing social need: the need to reject clichés, to shake off the nation's "priestliness," and to learn to think in flexible, relational, intelligent ways. The lines from her essay "Middlebrow" lead out into the public arenas of writing, broadcasting, and education, grounding her essay in public debate and demonstrating why, for her, common reader and highbrow were not oppositional terms. Although Priestley may be the immediate target of her satire, the proliferating allusions and slip-pages reveal her true antagonist to be not a person, or a group of people, but a whole discursive system. Middlebrow is a product of a mass – not popular – culture and of a masculinized institutional discourse that dogmatically interpellates the reader/listener into its own ideology. In contrast, the letter-essay "Middlebrow" shares with *The Common Reader* a respect for the reader's intelligence and the reader's intellectual needs. Ultimately, Woolf both "draws near to social history" and "casts a wider net" by demonstrating how an education in wool-gathering is of more use to the brain of the common reader than the brow-beating of the educational system and the BBC.

I have, as no doubt some of my readers will have noticed, spent an unconscionably long time discussing a "Letter to the Editor" that Woolf never sent. However, we should also remember that Woolf intended not to abandon this letter but to "re-write it as an essay" (*D* IV:129).⁴⁷ Why Leonard advised against sending it, we can only guess, but it is obvious that, in scope and complexity, her letter had far outgrown her initial intent. We can also surmise something about both Leonard's advice and her planned revisions from an exchange she had with Ethel Smyth some eight months later, in June 1933. In suggesting revisions to the manuscript of *Female Pipings in Eden*, Woolf urged Smyth to focus on the impediments other women had faced in the field of music and to delete personal anecdotes and autobiographical tales. Using nonetheless a personal anecdote to reinforce her point, Woolf offered what we can now see as a disguised reference to the Middlebrow letter:

I was wound to a pitch of fury the other day by a reviewers attacks upon a friend of mine to do a thing I have never yet done – to write to the papers a long letter. “Yes” said L. when I showed it to him; but itll do more harm than good; its all about yourself. When a fortnight later in cold blood I read it, there was “I” as large, and ugly as could be; thanks to God, I didn’t send it . . . Well theyd have said; she has an axe to grind; and no one would have taken me seriously. (*L* v:194–95)

Warning Smyth about such hostile reading strategies most likely imitated her own warnings to herself. And her sensitivity to the issue was perhaps more keen because, reading Smyth’s prolific narratives, Woolf was conscious both of sympathizing with the response, “Oh the womans got a grievance about herself; Shes unable to think of any one else,” and of struggling with these voices herself: “how vain, how personal, so they will say, rubbing their hands with glee, women always are; I can hear them as I write” (*L* v:194; 195). And Woolf herself most likely recognized the irony that in challenging Middlebrow’s feminizing of intellectual discourse, she had left herself open to the charge that, like all women, she was being merely personal rather than engaging in public debate.

Despite its posthumous publication, “Middlebrow” is a highly significant document for understanding Woolf’s approach to the “brows.” It is a document, furthermore, that helps to historicize the debate. Whereas current discussions of the “brows” tend to focus on “lifestyle” and taste, for Woolf – witnessing, as she did, the emergence of strategies aimed at the mobilization of “the masses,” whether for war or for marketing – the key issue was the relation between writer and audience. This concern is definitively caught in one last context for the essay-letter “Middlebrow” in October 1932.

On October 17, Vita Sackville-West broadcast her review of Woolf’s *The Common Reader*, only a few hours before Priestley’s “To a High-brow” talk. Sackville-West gave a glowing recommendation to Woolf’s essays, offering her own brand of defense against highbrow attacks. She asserted that there was no art/life dichotomy in *The Common Reader*, since Woolf’s appreciations of literature were, at the same time, interpretations of life. Adopting the middlebrow usage of terms perhaps more than would have been to Woolf’s liking, Sackville-West proclaimed Woolf’s approach to be “not a bleak and so-called highbrow sort.” But for all its praise of Woolf’s essays, the talk gave even greater prominence to two books by D. H. Lawrence – *Etruscan Places* and the recently published *Letters*. After being told about Woolf’s “remarkably human mind,” listeners heard Lawrence exalted as a “truly great writer” with “a truly noble mind” of the type that “occurs once or twice in a century.”⁴⁸ Woolf wrote her “dearest Creature” a letter of