

Novel Aspirations:
Sophistication and Speech in British Middlebrow Fiction, 1929-1952

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Abstract

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Novel Aspirations: Sophistication and Speech in British Middlebrow Fiction, 1929-1952 uses cultural and literary sophistication to uncover the complexities of reading and writing the middlebrow in Britain after the Great War through the mid-century. This dissertation argued that two main modes of being sophisticated coexisted uneasily during modernism. Sophistication that pursued the fashionable new I term *popular sophistication*; it emerged in Britain after World War I in conjunction with the rapidly ascending middle class's fervent pursuit of social and cultural capital. This mode challenged the established category of sophistication as elite, discriminating taste, which I term *traditional sophistication*. Pursuing sophistication changed how people spoke and what they assumed the goal of speaking to be; informal speech in Britain changed radically, rapidly, and cyclically during this period. By reading select novels by Evelyn Waugh, Nancy Mitford, E.M. Delafield, and Barbara Pym, my dissertation chapters explore how British middlebrow novels various engaged popular and traditional sophistication. My

dissertation reads sophistication's upheavals, specifically in relation to character speech, in the context of readers' domestic concerns and social aspirations.

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DEDICATION

To my mom, for modeling wisdom and selflessness. John 12:24.

INTRODUCTION: POPULAR SOPHISTICATION

The generation of Oxford graduates that produced Evelyn Waugh and Harold Acton has affected a whole manner of speech which is precise and precious, yet has been employed by many strata of society. Even the Colonel Blimps adopted over-used, effete turns of phrase, together with such expressions as “madly” and “divine” and “too.” People often remarked, “How terribly unfunny!” or “How terribly exciting!” Ordinarily unpretentious men and women became very self-conscious about the use of language, of the play on words, and started to italicize certain phrases by their inflections. “Darling” became a commonplace and no longer a term of endearment.

—Cecil Beaton, *The Glass of Fashion: A Personal History of Fifty Years of Changing Tastes* (1954)¹

From the mid-1920s through the mid-century, informal speech in Britain changed radically, rapidly, and cyclically. Individuals, from the literary and cultural elite to the middle class, spoke differently with one another within the everyday. Elite young people, including the Bright Young Things, adopted jargon, new tones, and various styles in quick succession, and their verbal stylings were just as quickly imitated by the middle class. The exploits of various celebrity figures detailed in the newspapers also provided “talking points,” and these became stale almost as quickly as they rolled off the daily presses. Many discussion topics previously impermissible in polite bourgeois society—e.g. birth control and sex—were openly discussed.

These changes signaled a broader ideological shift from the pursuit of value to the pursuit of the new within everyday conversation. The old framework of verbal value, encapsulated in the phrase “the art of conversation” (a concept familiar to early twentieth-century writers but now largely forgotten), was a thing of the past, at least in theory. Practice, as I will demonstrate, was quite another matter. Instead of discussing esoteric ideas or practicing decorous wit in the pursuit of a fixed ideal as the art of conversation prescribed, speech now was about “being modern,” as Evelyn Waugh derisively terms it.² This pursuit of the new is captured by Beaton’s “manner of speech” that originates with the social elite and diffuses downwards socially. The Great War, rapid advances in technology, and shifting class and gender norms all contributed to this

transformation. More importantly, however, sophistication became a cultural good; it benefited its practitioners and circulated as a commodity. Sophistication, which was inseparable from the new, drove this pursuit of original speech, and thereby transformed how individuals, and especially the middle class, spoke in the everyday.

DEFINING SOPHISTICATED: A SHIFTING TASK

Sophistication defined by the new jostles with sophistication defined by social superiority. The OED defines the quality of being sophisticated as “worldly wisdom or experience; subtlety, discrimination, refinement”; the first two qualities in particular suggest knowledge of the past. Furthermore, the new manner of speech described by Beaton above is unrefined. But sophistication changes in concert with culture, as Mark Backman notes: “at any moment in time, the standards of sophistication can be fixed against the shifting background of social development. Thus, manners and attitudes considered sophisticated fifty years ago appear quaint and precious to us today. Sophistication as a state of being is always at war with sophistication as a process of becoming.”³ Consequently, as literary and cultural scholars have noted, defining sophistication is difficult. As Faye Hammill glosses in *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (2010), it “eludes definition” and the effect of such attempts is “further mystification,” and yet sophistication “provocatively invites us to pursue, capture, and possess it.”⁴ Making this task more complex, as Hammill also notes, the term itself was “contested...in the interwar years, though the competing meanings were different from those which prevailed in earlier eras, and more clearly incompatible.”⁵ Sophistication is in a constant state of flux and subject to variation. This flux is the definitive pursuit of the new that I claim is specific to sophistication within the first half of the twentieth century; my claim historicizes sophistication within the general modernist dictum to “make it new.”

POPULAR AND TRADITIONAL SOPHISTICATION

My broader point, and the main contribution I seek to make to scholarship on twentieth-century sophistication, is to posit two main modes that coexisted uneasily during cultural and literary modernism, and which allowed for various, contradictory versions of sophistication to emerge. Sophistication's pursuit of the new I term *popular sophistication*; it emerged in Britain after World War I in conjunction with the rapidly ascending middle class's fervent pursuit of social and cultural capital. This mode challenged the established category of sophistication, one stabilized by its aristocratic origins, which I term *traditional sophistication*. In short, these two main competing categories determined how sophistication was practiced by the social and literary elite and pursued by the middle class within British cultural modernism (1920s-1950s): traditional sophistication, which privileged elevated discriminating taste, and popular sophistication, which rapidly consumed the desirable new. Popular sophistication defined taste away from its elite and aristocratic purview—i.e. its discriminating distinction encapsulated by *je ne sais quoi* and about which I will say more below. Newness became its chief object of desire, though it retained traditional sophistication's knowingness; other elements central to traditional sophistication became secondary. These elements of sophistication, as Hammill notes, were variously called “subtlety,” “taste,” “refinement,” “distinction,” “chic,” “elegance,” “cosmopolitanism,” “wit,” “smartness,” “urbanity,” “irony,” “frivolity,” and “detachment.”⁶ Popular sophistication became an alternative way in which to distinguish oneself from everyone else. The key shift within taste, metaphorically speaking, was from savoring (traditional sophistication) to gulping (popular sophistication). My ahistorical definition which follows is this: sophistication in its broadest form is desirable knowledge or knowingness turned into a dazzling social performance. Popular sophistication ostensibly made sophistication knowable.

OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

The upheavals of behavioral and literary taste, particularly in regard to speech, intersect within the middlebrow and its pleasurable yet didactic reading practices. My dissertation chapters explore how British middlebrow novels engaged popular and traditional sophistication, specifically in how characters speak. These texts appealed to aspirational middle-class readers and imagined diverse versions of sophistication. This introduction will define these three capacious elements: twentieth-century sophistication, speech, and the British middlebrow. These are treated sequentially and ground the chapter arguments that follow. These chapters examine how sophistication informed ways of speaking in literary texts and how speech constructed various sophistications.

A QUESTION OF TASTE

My distinction between popular and traditional sophistication hinges on the issue of taste. “Taste” is frequently evoked in connection with sophistication and is central to sophistication’s practice. As Jessica Burstein summarizes in her review of Hammill’s monograph, “it may be more useful to think of sophistication and glamour as a constellation of terms, encompassing the civilized, snobbism, chic, irony and satire, camp, and cosmopolitanism, with the sophisticate in possession of its three most important characteristics: worldliness, taste, and distinction.”⁷ In my account, taste produces both worldliness and distinction, while worldliness and distinction describe the specific quality of sophistication’s taste. How critics have frequently approached taste places one at the center of traditional sophistication’s social mystification. Hammill notes that “taste” is one of the top ten most significant collocates of “sophistication” in modern-day English. Other keywords from the list that she cites in connection with her study are “subtlety,” “continental,” and “smart.”⁸ “Subtlety” and “smart” are expressions of taste, while “continental”

evokes the French origins of sophistication.⁹ This impeccable taste is suggested when Hammill proposes that sophistication “was certainly originated by the upper class, and has always been associated with breeding, elitism, and a disdain for the market economy.”¹⁰ While sophistication is transgressive in these accounts, it remains elite and discriminating. It is not uncommon for taste to be used interchangeably with sophistication. In a 1930 article for *The New Yorker*, James Thurber declares, “it takes that *je ne sais quoi* which we call sophistication for a woman to be magnificent in a drawing room when her faculties have departed but she herself has not yet gone home. [...] Sophistication might be described as the ability to cope gracefully with a situation involving the presence of a formidable menace to one’s poise and prestige.”¹¹ The same inscrutable superiority that characterizes sophistication characterizes its taste; this quality is best captured by *je ne sais quoi*. Denise Gigante describes of this phrase that “the French ‘I do not know’ implies that, in fact, I do: ‘I do not know *how* I know (e.g. that such an object is beautiful), but nor does it matter. I am not obliged to explain. If *you* do not know, there can be no instructing you, as you obviously have no taste.”¹² Leland Monk in his review of Joseph Litvak’s book *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory and the Novel* (1997) makes this point clear: “If you need the codes spelled out for you, you don’t know how the codes work. If you want to know how to do it, you obviously don’t understand the meaning of *savoir faire*. Any desire you evince to join...those-in-the-know automatically disqualifies you from admission.”¹³ Traditional sophistication’s elite and impeccable taste is the stable factor within sophistication’s variability. Taste is above all about discrimination and makes sophistication synonymous with aristocratic taste. Traditional sophistication, ostensibly, remains detached even as one’s surrounding culture varies. Taste is certainly subject to commodification and imitation, but the quality of taste itself remains undefined and impeccable.

My account, like popular sophistication itself, puts pressure on taste's implicit definition as discriminating, impeccable, and elite (i.e. *je ne sais quoi*) while insisting that worldliness and distinction do not disappear even as they too shift. Even though taste is at the center of sophistication, taste's mystification (i.e. definition by what it is not) leaves sophistication open to redefinition. The creative and productive results of making sophistication new I explore below.

UPHEAVALS IN TASTE

Popular sophistication emerges because sophistication's taste is interwoven with aesthetic taste and culture; it was affected by the upheavals of traditional taste in the 1920s and '30s in the aftermath of the Great War. As Robert Scholes sweepingly claims in *Paradoxy of Modernism* (2005), "the literary terminology that European culture derived from Aristotle linked social position with literary value. Critical terms like noble and base, High and Low, good and bad have ever since mixed social and aesthetic qualities, sometimes concealing the one behind the other."¹⁴ The social and the aesthetic have been intertwined since pre-modernity. Scholes extends this overlap to taste specifically, noting that "in eighteenth-century Britain the High/Low distinction became a function of a new discourse on Taste, in which the aesthetic and the social are wonderfully mixed."¹⁵ The intermingling of the aesthetic and the behavioral, specifically within the realm of taste continued into the twentieth century, and is seen in the overlapping mystification of aesthetic and behavioral taste as *je ne sais quoi* within traditional sophistication. The true sophisticate must possess impeccable social and literary taste. Popular sophistication emerged during the same period that aesthetic taste was contested in the "Battle of the Brows," in which, as Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch describe, "the rivalries among high, middle and lowbrows regarding cultural capital during the first half of the twentieth century in Britain and America were indeed the cause of great anxiety and confusion over taste, aesthetic production,

audience, race, class and gender, and are still open to much energetic debate in academia and the broader public sphere today.”¹⁶

TASTE AS AESTHETIC TROPE

Unlike most works of middlebrow criticism, my starting point for taste is not Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979)¹⁷—though sophistication as cultural capital comes up throughout my argument—but rather Denise Gigante’s definition in *Taste: A Literary History* (2005). Taste is a trope of both aesthetic and behavioral judgment. Gigante’s literary history of the aesthetics of taste, while it ends in the nineteenth century, usefully focuses on the British context and locates taste’s upheavals within the context of the *longue durée*. As Gigante suggests, “taste involves pleasure, and pleasure is its own way of knowing”¹⁸; pleasure connects both the aesthetic and the behavioral poles of taste. Reframing my definition of sophistication to encompass taste (and shift Gigante from an aesthetic to a behavioral register) illuminates this continuity: sophistication turns taste, i.e. as a pleasurable way of knowing, into its social performance.¹⁹ As Gigante describes, the economy of elite taste operates under “distinction through the exercise of discrimination.”²⁰ This discriminating power was rooted in the aristocratic French court and ostensibly unavailable to the middle class.²¹ In one sense, sophistication was another iteration in the cyclical battles of the aristocratic, social elite, and middle class over the cultural capital of *je ne sais quoi* rooted in French neoclassicism.

Sophisticated knowing is pleasure. The sophisticate fuses knowing and pleasure, for anything worth knowing is pleasurable (even if it requires labor), but there are pleasures not worth knowing (i.e. what pleases/pleasures everyone else). Of these, the sophisticate has no knowledge. For popular sophistication, pursued by and available to the middle class, knowledge

is focused on the new. The performance is primarily dazzling because it visibly (and often enthusiastically) embodies the ephemeral in the right moment; timeliness matters as much as content. The taste of popular sophistication is a new way of discriminating. It does not merely copy aristocratic or elite forms of sophistication and thus exceeds commodification. To appropriate Gigante's definition, rapid consumption of the new, like taste, "involves pleasure, and pleasure is its own way of knowing." Distinction, i.e. social superiority, is sought through getting there first, even though it never loses its taste for the aristocratic. Popular sophistication threatens traditional sophistication not because it derives from traditional sophistication, but rather because it imagines another way to be sophisticated and another approach to sophistication's worldliness and discrimination.

CRITICAL INTERVENTION INTO POPULAR SOPHISTICATED

In one sense, my distinction continues the work of Faye Hammill's study of sophistication, literature, and modernity, which "traces the history of sophistication over the period from the eighteenth century to the present" and considers a range of topics, including the "politics of sophistication, especially in relation to class, taste and cultural hierarchy."²² Her work provides the foundation for my articulation of popular sophistication, particularly in her chapter, "Melancholy, Modernity and the Middlebrow: the Twenties and Thirties." Hammill describes interwar British and American versions of "middlebrow sophistication"; these are examples of what I term popular sophistication. Her emphasis on commodification obscures the positive impulse towards the new: "the commodification of taste and sophistication is an important aspect of middlebrow culture, and indeed, it is in the realm of the middlebrow that sophistication is most insistently invoked and explored in early twentieth-century culture."²³ My

account acknowledges this commodification but does not make it central to popular sophistication.

SOPHISTICATED SPEECH

My argument focuses on one aspect through which popular sophistication pursues the new and social distinction and through which traditional sophistication has often asserted its superior taste: informal speech. Specifically, each of my dissertation chapters focuses on popular sophistication in relation to character speech within a middlebrow novel, or in the case of chapter two, an author's oeuvre. The versions of sophistication covered in each chapter have their attendant way of speaking. My chapters also illustrate how popular sophistication itself changed between the late-1920s and mid-1950s; Backman's claim holds true—sophistication is always in a state of becoming. But it is equally true that pursuing sophistication changed how people spoke and what they assumed the goal of speaking to be. Once popular sophistication became a widespread cultural good, individuals embraced fashions in everyday informal speech. They followed modernism's familiar injunction to "make it new." I will here provide a brief overview of the old framework of verbal value.

THE ART OF CONVERSATION

Previously, middle-class speech (and speech in general) was governed by the unchanging values of propriety, rationality, and wit. This is the old framework of verbal value I referenced above as the "art of conversation"; it made "rational discourse" good and "chatter" or "gossip" bad. The art of conversation dominated informal speech within the West since the Greco-Roman period. This framework of value has its own story to tell, one which impinges on modernism and speech as lived within the everyday. Therefore, I will give a brief summary of the art of conversation before returning to sophistication and speaking (i.e. fashionable speech).

While the “art of conversation” evokes the long eighteenth-century—and figures such as Samuel Johnson and Jane Austen—its roots are pre-modern and it extends into the twentieth century. Its key touchstones persisted from the foundations of Western conversation up through modernity and modernism. Conversation—an aristocratic leisured, and predominantly male pastime in which interpersonal speech is truthful, witty, and decorous—had been the verbal ideal since first articulated by Cicero, who was heavily influenced by the form of Plato’s dialogues. More elevated and remarkable than “polite conversation” yet still conforming to this decorous ideal, conversation had been developed as an “art” articulated and argued over by authors as diverse as Castiglione, Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Samuel Johnson, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Some thought truthfulness was the most important quality while others prized wit. This schema of value necessitated not-conversation, informal speech acts that did not hold up to the ideal. “Talk” usually refer to these denigrated oralities.

Even if “art of conversation” is no longer a widely used term, one of its most visible remainders is the various values assigned to types of speech, rather than to speech acts individually. These values have remained largely stable up through the late-nineteenth century and modernism. There are exceptions, of course. But generally speaking, within the cultural and literary tradition rational discourse, for example, has been elevated while gossip and chatter have been denigrated. Other relatively stable hierarchical variables included gender (male over female speech, though cf. Italian Renaissance court and the French salon), class (high over low, though the rise of the middle class complicated this), city over country-dwellers (though cf. the country house within the British traditional), and national identity (French over English).

This list follows the split between conversation (elevated forms of speech) and talk (traditionally denigrated forms of speech). Context matters, for the art of conversation was not a

stable system; it developed in contradictory ways over the centuries. But broadly speaking, positive cognates of conversation, i.e. ideal speech, include: “the verbal art,” “conversation,” “table talk,” “wit,” “sprezzatura,” “discourse,” “rational discourse,” “jest,” “banter,” “raillery,” and “seemliness.” Denigrated oralities—quite a number of them associated with women—include “chatter,” “buzz,” “Rumor/rumor,” “platitudes,” “twaddle,” “gossip,” “noise,” “chit-chat,” “flattery,” “babble,” “patter,” “prattle,” “gibing,” “absurd nonsense,” “floundering,” “gibbering,” “gurgle,” “babble,” “gabble,” “flippancy,” “drivel,” “jangle,” “jargon,” “slang,” and “obscenity.” Informal speakers likewise accrue a wide range of negative descriptors, as this list from a 1927 treatise on conversation illustrates: “there are also the interrupters and the uninterruptables, the prozers, the prattlers, the arch, the bright, the slow, the heavily facetious, the people who cannot see a joke, and the people who are at the mercy of a phrase.”²⁴ This list’s intelligibility demonstrates the continued influence of the art of conversation into the twenty-first century as a framework of verbal value.

CHANGES WITHIN CONVERSATION

The hierarchy of informal speech was destabilized during the nineteenth century, but sophistication changed informal speech’s trajectory within cultural modernism away from the framework. As the middle class turned towards sophistication, fads, and knowingness as good, speech turned towards the ephemeral. Informal speech, during modernism, shifted *away from* the traditional framework of value, while previously cultural changes, including of the nineteenth century, had merely served to disrupt the traditional hierarchy of conversation/talk from within this framework. Thus the rupture I describe, and which I’ve linked with the pursuit of sophistication, does not characterize high modernist novels, largely because of the insistence by its main authors on artistic autonomy against culture shifts. Furthermore, many modernist works

attempt to salvage the value of various forms of speech, to purify speech just as with writing, often through conversational excess within their works. In general, British high modernism merely disrupted the talk/conversation hierarchy—though radically and in creative ways—while the middlebrow disavowed it. This rupture was limited to cultural modernism and the middlebrow, insofar as the latter responded to and shaped middle-class culture. I have sought to illuminate just how radical incorporating speech wholesale into modernism was. It was about far more than leveraging a communication media that took place in time; speech followed the cycles of fashion rather than a pursuit for permanence, which was antithetical to the framework that had dominated since pre-modernity.

The sophisticate is not governed by the conventions of the art of conversation or its system of value. She speaks when and how she pleases but still demonstrates impeccably discriminating taste (the traditional sophisticate) or an unerring sense of the next trend (the popular sophisticate). The conversation/talk hierarchy is the backdrop against which both elite and popular sophistication play out rather than a framework to which either one is subject. The traditional sophisticate draws more frequently from the aristocratic conversational archive for her modes of speech (e.g. wit or the French salon), while the popular sophisticate thrives on various species of denigrated talk (e.g. slang). Elite and popular speakers thrive on gossip within their dazzling performances and both embody fantasies of social and behavioral autonomy.

CECIL BEATON'S EXEMPLARY SOPHISTICATED SPEECH

Cecil Beaton (1904–1980) offers a concrete example of traditional sophisticated speech. Beaton was a fashion photographer and author of *The Glass of Fashion: A Personal History of Fifty Years of Changing Tastes* (1954).²⁵ Beaton inhabited sophisticated circles both elite and popular, and his work describes “those people who have influenced the art of living in the half

century of my own lifetime.”²⁶ Traditional sophistication, for Beaton, is ultimately the art of living well, which includes being fashionable. While Beaton was cosmopolitan and *The Glass of Fashion* is aligned with a French aesthetic towards the fashion and the everyday, Beaton remained tied to Britain and that is an important part of his “personal history.”

Beaton’s text demonstrates how traditional sophistication converses; his scions of fashion discriminatingly drawing from both high (the art of conversation) and low (talk) within their dazzling performances. For Beaton, traditionally denigrated oralities—e.g. slang and gossip—are just as much a thriving part of the world of fashion as the traditionally elevated French salon. He is equally comfortable applauding the “brilliant and witty” Mrs. Rita de Acosta Lydig, who “graced the opening cycles of the twentieth century with a perfectionism that would have been rare in any period since the Renaissance,”²⁷ and Diana Vreeland, with her “astonishing slang,”²⁸ who “talk[s] as one would write a poem, allying her verbal brilliance with the novelist’s true gift of description and a tremendous sledge-hammer emphasis that takes the form of repeating phrases with a Claudel-like incantation.”²⁹ He takes particular pleasure in Vreeland, describing her

range of pimentoed expressions that are an integral part of her linguistic repertoire. Nor is her slang ever out of date. She will innovate expressions long before they have become popularly known. This gamey speech, combined with her personality, inevitably sends her friends off into gales of laughter at almost every sentence. “You’ve got to give it a lot of pezazz!” she will roar; and to an assistant who was working on a fashion article Mrs. Vreeland cried, “Tassels! Don’t forget tassels! Lots of tassels from Tasselville!”

Anecdotes are underlined with a terminal, “It was *but to die*, my dear!” Once, when the word “amortization” appeared in a fashion article Mrs. Vreeland was supplied with a

lengthy definition by the writer and finally commented, “Listen! Any word that's got *amor* in it is okay with me; let's use it!” On another occasion, when Mrs. Snow came back from Paris wearing a Dior suit with very sloping shoulders, Diana Vreeland observed, “Carmel, it's divine. It makes you look *drowned*.”³⁰

Vreeland's speech embodies both the eternal and the fleeting. It is speech raised to the level of art—both the poem and the novel are evoked. Beaton's praise is reserved for these centers; everything else within speech can be found in relation to the centers of fashion. Within the verbal realm, this broader simultaneity is achieved by mixing high and low within speech, drawing on both the vulgar and the elite within the same verbal encounter. Vreeland uses slang that characterizes popular sophistication but also allays this with “verbal brilliance.” When it comes to trends and fads, the traditional sophisticated speaker gets there first while simultaneously evoking other forms of art, thereby embodying traditional sophistication's discriminating taste. Both Diana Vreeland and Mrs. Rita de Acosta Lydig are artists within the realm of speech. Yet studied effortlessness characterizes the sophisticate. By linking Vreeland with “the novelist's true gift” Beaton accords sophisticated speech aesthetic value. Beaton levels the verbal playing field between forms of speech traditionally elevated and denigrated, similar to the revaluation of binaries such as the frivolous (fashion) and the serious (art). He finds value in speech's ephemeral qualities rather than its participation in the stable paradigm of value that is at the heart of the art of conversation, a framework that assumes the Platonic hierarchy of permanence over change.

As Beaton's exemplary women demonstrate, sophistication choosing ephemeral forms of beauty or newness over speech that embodies eternal truths or enduring wit. Sophistication's newness is spoken, for once speech becomes the written or recorded word, it can be repeated.

Within the economy of sophistication, uttering the right words, or the right juxtaposition, is performative. It establishes one's distinction. In that sense, sophisticated speech is akin to J.L. Austin's "performative utterance" in which the "issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action."³¹ Unlike the familiar marriage vow, however, it is not the traditional recognized spoken word using predetermined words and sequence. Rather, it is the strategic newness or transgressive wit of a sophisticate's words that makes her so. Timing matters just as much as content.

The true sophisticate is desirably singular because she speaks from outside the conversational framework of value; she is not bound by its conventions or expectations. Conversation and talk become an archive, types of speech from which she draws at will to performatively reinforce her sophistication. This is in sharp contrast with, for example, an Oscar Wilde play in which wit is a requirement. The framework becomes a space in which to play if one chooses and provides verbal tools to take up, discard, or combine in interesting ways, as Vreeland does. The sophisticate remains outside, rather than constrained by this system of value.

POPULAR SOPHISTICATION AND SPEECH

Traditional sophistication emphasized a speaker's artful, discriminating autonomy; popular sophistication, in contrast, heavily emphasized the new within speech. Within popular sophistication, culturally specific ways of speaking dominate for a season (I describe this fully in chapter three). New jargon, new topics, and new patterns helped mobilize sophistication for the middle class, even as they increased the rapidity of sophistication's re-definitions, and thus its exclusivity. Both disavowal and repetition characterize sophistication and fashionable speech. Popular sophistication's mutability required one to reinvent the topics, words, and style one used. Others' style pursued beauty and wit within speech, but only within the context of

sophistication's cycles. In short, informal speech, which demonstrates one's sophistication, relentlessly pursues the new, with the new defined as different from everyone else. This verbal ideal was pursued by the middle class but realized by the sophisticate. Speech was how individuals demonstrated a preemptive yet precarious knowingness.³²

A PARTIAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE SPOKEN WORD

Speech's transformation through sophistication was partial, rough, and only available to a few. Notions of how to speak properly yet pleasurably, both within the everyday and fiction, were fiercely contested. The ideals of the art of conversation—propriety, wit, seemliness, and rationality—still shaped everyday verbal communication. Middle-class women, in particular, were still constrained by gendered social expectations that accompanied the looming expectations of decorum (chapter three) or one's marginalized status (chapter four). Only those with startling verbal acuity could leverage the framework of talk/conversation to their own ends.

LITERARY SCOPE: THE MIDDLEBROW

Each of my dissertation chapters focuses on elite and popular sophistication in relation to character speech of a fictional text as well as the cultural context of the author or work (or in the case of chapter two, an author's oeuvre). I approach these texts as middlebrow, most of which are critically recognized as such with the exception of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930); my argument about Waugh's roman à clef focuses on how the work was received by middle-class audiences. As I noted above, the middlebrow was also the locus of significant upheavals in literary taste during the period.

MIDDLEBROW: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Linked with popular works and domestic fiction, the middlebrow has become increasingly important within Anglo-American modernist criticism in the last twenty years and

as a part of the “new modernist studies.”³³ The “middlebrow” is capacious, encompassing not only these works, but also its largely middle-class readers, their tastes, and institutions (e.g. Book-of-the-Month-Club).³⁴ Nicola Humble’s groundbreaking critical work, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (2001), describes the middlebrow as those books “the majority of people read” and which were “largely written and consumed by women,”³⁵ though later critical work has expanded the middlebrow canon to include, for example, periodicals and texts written by men.³⁶ Humble acknowledges that the “middlebrow” as a “form of disapprobation” does not describe any “intrinsic content,” but rather that a text was consumed widely by the middle-class public.³⁷ She offers a tentative formal definition for the middlebrow text, which

straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort. It is essentially parasitical form, dependent on the existence of both a high and a low brow for its identity, reworking their structures and aping their insights, while at the same time fastidiously holding its skirts away from lowbrow contamination, and gleefully mocking highbrow intellectual pretensions. It is also a predominantly middle-class form. In fact, as I will argue at length, its changing structures and preoccupations offer us a map of the shifting fortunes and identities of the middle classes throughout the period from the 1920s to the 1950s.³⁸

Faye Hammill also notes the middlebrow’s “witty, polished surfaces” and “unexpected depths and subtleties” that are “frequently conceal[ed].”³⁹ Other critics locate the middlebrow primarily in the cultural production of the term’s disapprobation, including Erica Brown and Mary

Grover's collection *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960* (2012). In their introduction, Brown and Grover describe the rise of the term "middlebrow," which was first used in the 1920s. The term "is the product of powerful anxieties about cultural authority and processes of cultural transmission. It is a nexus for prejudice towards the lower-middle classes, the feminine and domestic, and towards narrative modes regarded as outdated."⁴⁰ My account, in contrast with Brown and Grover, emphasizes middlebrow texts as a site of middle-class agency.

The middlebrow is closely intertwined with its readers. Humble also argues that the middlebrow, at its most basic, can ultimately be defined as a reading posture of pleasurable indulgence. While the highbrow reader can be found "sitting up" as he "engages with his reading from a bodily position of alertness, hostility, separateness from the text," the middlebrow reader "lolls, relaxing into his book and chair."⁴¹ I focus below on the middlebrow's didacticism in terms of sophistication, which encourages readers to alternative between sitting up and sitting back. Middlebrow texts teach their readers through pleasure.

This dissertation follows Humble's criticism as it defines the middlebrow novel against the much-mythologized high modernist novel. It contrasts the ostensible detachment and disinterest of the high modernist novel—a detachment from everyday life⁴²—with the middlebrow novel's determined engagement with the world, mirrored by readers' aspirational use of texts within their everyday lives, identification with characters, and general pleasure in reading. The middlebrow offered aspirational readers two modes of narrative for consumption. In the first mode, the narrative is a comforting fantasy, a seduction in story form; frequently this fantasy-fulfillment and seduction imparts the latest verbal or literary fashion. The second is truth-speaking: an indictment or accurate summation of readers' lived experiences, frequently satirical

and comedic. The middlebrow novel encapsulates James's description of popular fiction; it responds to readers who insist that literature "should be either instructive or amusing" and in whose "minds an impression that these artistic preoccupations, the search for form, contribute to neither end, [and] interfere indeed with both."⁴³ In one sense, the battle of the brows was a competition between different versions of sophistication within the novel—one detached from life, the other emphasizing an exclusive knowingness about it—and inculcating competing forms of sophistication in readers.⁴⁴

In this regard, the middlebrow performed the work of cultural mediation for the aspiring middle and upper-middle classes. John Guillory defines middlebrow culture as "the ambivalent mediation of high culture within the field of the mass cultural."⁴⁵ Critical works such as these attest to the complicated intersections of gender, class, taste, periodical culture, motherhood, parenting, celebrity and other topics that swirled around readers' tastes.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

"Chapter One: Celebrity, Gossip, and the Pursuit of Sophistication in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930)" argues for *Vile Bodies* as an aspirational middlebrow narrative that exemplifies popular sophistication, even as it sharply satirizes the Bright Young Things, the in-crowd of 1920s London. The roman à clef demonstrates how the group sustains popular sophistication and provided a handbook for aspirational middle-class readers eager to speak like the sophisticates. Waugh's novel exposes the tight link between celebrity culture and the Bright Young Things's sophistication; gossip, particularly through various media, circulates the information and jargon which keep the Bright Young Things "modern."

"Chapter Two: Nancy Mitford's *Je Ne Sais Quoi*: Sophistication beyond British Borders in the French Salon" models sophisticated speech that is very similar to Beaton's within the

world of Parisian fashion. Nancy Mitford's transnational middlebrow novels bring aristocratic experiences, international travel, romance, and the ideal dialogue of the salon to aspirational readers. Mitford appeals to the fantastical aspirations of the middlebrow consumer, who is interested in torrid love, forbidden romance, and exclusive locations. Sophistication is *real* for Mitford. It encapsulates the art of living well and provides an integrate philosophy of art and life.

In "Chapter Three: Cultivating Sophistication in E.M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1929-30)" I demonstrate how difficult realizing the radical promise of sophistication as a modernist good actually is according to Delafield, particularly for the middle-class and middlebrow readers. Some middlebrow authors advocated for the middlebrow reader, rather than beguiling them, by redefining sophistication. *Diary* portrays sophistication as a cultural good and an inescapable pursuit for the titular Provincial Lady, who embodies the modern, middle-class woman. The unnamed Provincial Lady is simultaneously repelled and enticed by elite, highbrow culture, which manifested in the text's sophisticate, Lady Boxe, and her fashionable dress and haughty, intellectual speech. The Provincial Lady never achieves the intellectual sophistication modeled by "Lady B.," as she is also referred to. Delafield's narrative imagines alternative sophistications for her protagonist rather than disavowing it entirely: sophisticated motherhood and writerly sophistication.

"Chapter 4: Ordinary Platitudes: Disavowing Popular Sophistication in Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952)" argues that Pym's novel, also narrated by a first-person female, eschews the typical middlebrow bildungsroman that ends in sophistication (of which Mitford's *Pursuit* novels are my exemplar). But uniquely, the protagonist of Pym's novel, Mildred Lathbury, remains as a whole stubbornly *unsophisticated* in dress, speech, manner, and occupation. The ordinary, which in *Excellent Women* is the quotidian, crafted around repetition

and habit, is the novel's dominant preoccupation. Through Mildred's unwavering ordinariness, *Excellent Women* chastises aspirational readers' formulaic reading practices i.e. reading middlebrow novels solely for the sophisticate's bildungsroman. It offers attentive readers an education in tasteful sophistication, a middle-class sophistication reinvested with traditional sophistication's discriminating taste.

¹ Cecil Beaton, *The Glass of Fashion: A Personal History of Fifty Years of Changing Tastes and the People Who Have Inspired Them* (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2014), loc. 2857, Kindle.

² Evelyn Waugh, "Let Us Return to the Nineties, But Not to Oscar Wilde" in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, edited by Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1983), 123. Originally published in *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1930.

³ Mark Backman, *Sophistication: Rhetoric and the Rise of Self-Consciousness* (Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1991), 5–6.

⁴ Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 2, 3.

⁵ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 128. Hammill also notes that "'sophistication' was not generally used as a term of praise until the early 1920s, although it had taken on some of its modern meanings before that point." *Sophistication*, 7.

⁶ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 7.

⁷ Jessica Burstein, "The In Crowd," *Modernism/modernity* 17, no. 4 (2010), 918. She also reviews Judith Brown's *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

⁸ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 9.

⁹ Cf. Joan DeJean, *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented High Fashion, Fine Food, Chic Cafés, Style, Sophistication, and Glamour* (New York: The Free Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 19.

¹¹ Wayne Van R Vermilye [James Thurber], "Answers-to-Hard-Questions Department," *New Yorker*, 2 August 1930, 17–18.

¹² Denise Gigante, "Milton's Spots: Addison on Paradise Lost," in *Milton in the Long Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 11. What Denise Gigante here describes of *je ne sais quoi* in an aesthetic context also describes the mystification of taste within traditional sophistication's behavioral register.

¹³ Leland Monk, "Glycerine. Yes, Hot, Excellent," review of *Strange Gourmets* by Joseph Litvak, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 31 no. 2 (Spring 1998): 257.

¹⁴ Robert Scholes, *Paradoxy of Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 26–27.

¹⁵ Scholes, *Paradoxy of Modernism*, 27.

¹⁶ Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch, "Introduction: The Middlebrow—Within or Without Modernism," *Modernist Cultures* 6 no. 1 (2011): 1.

¹⁷ Sophistication is how issues related to taste within the *longue durée* ultimately plays out uniquely within Anglo-American modernism and which why Bourdieu, whose theory while key is ultimately rooted in French culture, is muted in my account.

¹⁸ Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁹ As I will argue below, national difference is key for understanding how taste makes popular sophistication possible, in part because of the disruption to taste, encapsulated in the middlebrow. This did not, I believe, create the same disruptions to elite taste and sophistication in France as it did in England. French sophistication was far more stable during this period.

²⁰ Gigante, *Taste*, 3.

²¹ Gigante details this process in the nineteenth century in connection with the gourmand and the dandy:

The *ancien régime* of taste based on the aristocratic *je ne sais quoi* of French neoclassicism, and adapted to the British discourse of taste by way of the connoisseur, transforms into its antithetical horizon: the benighted don't-know-don't-care philistinism of Victorian England. In the nineteenth-century aesthetic of snobbery, in other words, the auratic *je ne sais quoi* of the aesthetic connoisseur yields to the truly befuddled condition of the middle-class snob. Gigante, *Taste*, 180.

As Sean Latham notes, sophistication and the snob interweave, but the terms have a different scope and tone during the period. “*Am I a Snob?*”: *Modernism and the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

²² Hammill, *Sophistication*, 4-5.

²³ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 119.

²⁴ Olive Heseltine, *Conversation* (London: Methuen, 1927), 18-19.

²⁵ See Hugo Vickers, “Beaton, Sir Cecil Walter Hardy (1904–1980), photographer and designer for screen and theatre,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004. Beaton was an exemplar of the ephemeral during historical modernism and beyond within a British context. He is best-known within the visual arts, especially within photography, fashion and the theatre. Creatively, Beaton is notable both for his longevity and multi-disciplinary output. A photographer of the aristocratic and social elite, including Queen Elizabeth and the royal family, he was also a designer for screen and theatre. Within the world of fashion, he worked for *Vogue* and photographed many within fashion’s domain, He possessed couture and gave a collection of the dresses he most admired to the Victoria and Albert Museum, and many of them were exhibited there in 1971. In 1968, an important exhibition of his photographs took place at the National Portrait Gallery, where many remain on deposit or on show. In 1950 he was awarded the Légion d'honneur. He was created CBE in 1957 and knighted in 1972. Beaton’s legacy continues to rise; an exhibit “Cecil Beaton’s Bright Young Things” at the National Portrait Gallery opened 12 March 2020.

²⁶ Beaton, *Glass*, loc. 185. This assertion, i.e. that what makes life worth living is to take it as an “art” in relation to speech, will come up in my second chapter on Nancy Mitford; she was photographed by Beaton during her 20s and his account echoes her fiction. For Mitford, art, specifically middlebrow fiction as a fantastic account, provides a model of the sophisticated life, and in particular, how one speaks. But for Beaton it is the non-fiction record, subjective though his personal history may be, of his life amongst the arbiters of fashion, taste, speech, and living that provides both his own experience and the ideal. Beaton is subtle, though not shy, about his role as mediator; in this regard, he takes on the same task as middlebrow authors such as Mitford, who through their account perform their own sophistication and superior taste.

²⁷ Beaton, *Glass*, loc. 185.

²⁸ Beaton, *Glass*, loc. 3751.

²⁹ Beaton, *Glass*, loc. 3802.

³⁰ Beaton, *Glass*, loc. 3751-68.

³¹ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 6.

³² Speech was in upheaval during this period; this dissertation could equally have considered attempted recovery projects to rehabilitate a verbal ideal—e.g. “good talk”—spearheaded by J.B. Priestley, which is not a break with the Platonic ideal but rather a return that also rebelled against contemporary standards—a recovery project set against modernity’s degrading effects on speech.

³³ Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 738.

³⁴ Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

³⁵ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

³⁶ Cf. Melissa Sullivan, “‘I return with immense relief to old friend *Time and Tide*:’ Middlebrow Expansions in E. M. Delafield’s Fiction and Journalism” *Modernist Cultures* 6, no. 1 (2011): 96-120; Catherine Clay, *Time and Tide: The Feminist and Cultural Politics of a Modern Magazine* (Edinburg, Edinburg University Press, 2018); Kate Macdonald, ed., *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

³⁷ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 12-13.

³⁸ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 11-12.

³⁹ Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: Texas University Press, 2007), 6.

⁴⁰ Erica Brown and Mary Grover, “Introduction: Middlebrow Matters,” in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*, ed. Erica Brown and Mary Grover (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

⁴¹ Nicola Humble, “Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading” *Modernist Cultures* 6 no. 1 (2011): 48.

⁴² This account has been challenged more recently, as I explore in chapter four, for example, by Liesl Olson in *Modernism and the Ordinary*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴³ James, Henry, “The Art of Fiction,” *Longman’s Magazine*, 4, no. 23 (1884): 505.

⁴⁴ But I would add to the discussions that emphasize the interdependence of highbrow and middlebrow modernism, and in doing so, claim for the high modernist novel a different version of sophistication and sophisticated readers. As an ostensibly autonomous art object, the high modernist novel stages its detachment, the characteristic detachment of the sophisticate (Hammill, *Sophistication*, 4), against life, particularly middle-class life. This is necessary, for the middlebrow is a non-sequitur without its context and origins within highbrow culture. But what remain implicit but not articulated in Brown and Grover is the symbiotic relationship between high modernism and the middlebrow. Thus while previous middlebrow critics have mentioned in passing highbrow culture’s relationship with middlebrow, as culture and novel, as Brown and Grover exemplify above, this relationship continues to be underexplored. Middlebrow fiction during the battle of the brows exist in a symbiotic relationship, gaining their definition and distinction through their opposition from each other⁴⁴. To theorize the middlebrow historically is to engage the other side of the binary—the high modernist novel—and exploring specific aspects of the middlebrow, one will inevitably meet its defining opposite, and vice versa.

⁴⁵ John Guillory, "The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture," review of *The Western Canon* by Harold Bloom, *Transition*, no. 67 (1995): 87.

CHAPTER ONE: Celebrity, Gossip, and the Pursuit of Sophistication in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930)

My key starting point for British popular sophistication as a post-war phenomenon is the Bright Young Things, the wildly popular yet equally reviled in-crowd of 1920s London. The Bright Young Things made sophistication, or “being modern,” into a cultural good for the middle class. Their popularity and sophistication were inextricably linked with their jargon. This much-discussed group dominated the post-war London cultural scene, especially within newspaper accounts of the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*. The Bright Young Things were the first sophisticates to be mediated to post-war middlebrow audiences, who were eager for stories of the social elite and desired to become sophisticated.

In this chapter, I analyze the Bright Young Things's popular sophistication through Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930). His roman à clef demonstrates how the group became desirably modern and provided a handbook for aspirational middle-class readers eager to speak like the sophisticates. Waugh's novel exposes the tight link between celebrity culture and the Bright Young Things's sophistication; gossip, particularly through various media, circulates the information and jargon which keep the Bright Young Things up-to-date and “modern.”

POPULAR SOPHISTICATED AND “BEING MODERN”

Popular sophistication encompasses the cultural capital of the indiscriminating Bright Young Things. It is encapsulated in what Waugh derisively terms “being modern,” which he details in a 1930 article for *Harper's Bazaar*, “Let Us Return to the Nineties, But Not to Oscar Wilde.” The essay uses the revived interest in aestheticism to reflect on “being modern” and the fashionable while denigrating both.¹ According to Waugh the “recurrent outbursts of enthusiasm for the fashions of bygone periods” occur because

it is a very arduous business to keep up with one's own period. People talk about 'being modern' as though it were simply a matter of buying a new dress, drinking some cocktails, putting on the most recent gramophone record, and letting a mysterious 'spirit of the age' do the rest. That way lies all the terrors of the pseudo. It takes as much serious effort to be sincerely and completely modern as to swim the Channel—and it is just about as profitable.²

Waugh's irony is clear; he claims later in the essay that being "sincerely and completely modern" only happens when one is old and has nothing to say. The description above is that of the pseudo-modern individual. But the qualities of "being modern" that Waugh satirizes concretize popular sophistication. "Being modern" requires that one try to "keep up with one's own period" through consuming—buying, drinking, and hearing—the desirably "new" and "recent." Through this performance of the fashionable, one ostensibly follows the "mysterious 'spirit of the age.'"³ Those who succeed in "being modern" possess the social cache of sophistication without the requisite taste of traditional sophistication. The pseudo-modern consumes the time and resources of *Bazaar's* readers, though they do not actually succeed in "keeping up." This is also true of middle-class consumers who similarly turn to the Bright Young Things for a model of "being modern."

The Bright Young Things determined "being modern," and thus sophistication, during the 1920s. Waugh acknowledges the group's cultural dominance even as he critiques their vulgarity in the decades after *Vile Bodies* was published. In a 1932 article, "Why Glorify Youth?" he declares that "it is now abundantly clear that the 'roaring twenties' are over. The chief figures of the time have settled down to marriage and children, and others have become submerged completely...[and] their successors have not the inclination to carry on the same

tradition.”⁴ Regardless of how Waugh or his readers viewed the Bright Young Things, they were still the “chief figures of the time.” Waugh describes the Bright Young Things’s legacy as similar to that of the 1890s, for

just as the ‘nineties,’ odious as they now seem to us with their ‘greenery-yallery’ artiness, did do a valuable social service in finally breaking up British insular, bourgeois materialism, so the ‘twenties’—futile, obstreperous, anarchic, vulgar, call what you will—broke up post-war Rupert Brooke magnificently-unprepared-for-the-long-bitterness-of-life sentimentality, and made Youth openly and ludicrously inglorious.⁵

The Bright Young Things defined the decade even if by 1932 public opinion had turned against them. In his 1964 preface to *Vile Bodies*’s reissue, Waugh notes the in-group’s singularity, for “they were totally unlike the various, publicized groups of modern youth, being mostly of good family and education and sharp intelligence, but they were equally anarchic and short-lived.”⁶

Popular sophistication perhaps benefits from controversy, but it must, as the Bright Young Things demonstrate, be widely visible and discussed. Their dominance and cultural role determined Waugh’s authorial intent: “in the last year of that decade I wrote *Vile Bodies*, in which I attempted to summarize the chief features of those topsy-turvy years in which the younger generation succeeded in knocking the nonsense out of the attempts to sentimentalize them.”⁷

THE BRIGHT YOUNG PEOPLE: “BEING MODERN” IN *VILE BODIES*

Vile Bodies was incredibly popular partly because it successfully depicts “being modern” during the 1920s; the Bright Young Things created the standard for the popular sophistication of the period. Historically, innovative parties defined the group’s popularity. Martin Stannard, Waugh’s biographer, describes the “*ancien régime* [who] maintained its stately gatherings in the

mansions of Mayfair and Belgravia” and “their children, in the guise of Bright Young Things, [who] racketed from party to party.”⁸ Cecil Beaton details Waugh, Nancy Mitford, and the “bevy of new personalities just down from Oxford” that “invented a whole new form of party at which friends gave imitations and impromptu cabarets; elaborate and ingenious treasure hunts were organized, and hoax exhibitions were arranged.”⁹ Beverley Nichols, who provides another first-hand account, describes the decade as “the age of parties”: “‘Mozart parties,’ midnight swimming parties in municipal pools under the press’ disapproving gaze, and ‘white parties’...in which we shot down to the country in fleets of cars, dressed in white from head to foot, and danced on a white floor laid in the orchard,” then “play[ed] races with champagne corks...on the stream” in a “pale pink dawn.”¹⁰ For Noël Coward, the definitive sophisticate on stage during the 1930s, this was “that much maligned period now glibly referred to as ‘The Hectic Twenties’ when upstart Michael Arlens and Noël Cowards flourished...in the frenzied atmosphere of cocktail parties, treasure hunts...dressing gowns, long cigarette holders and enthusiastically publicised decadence.”¹¹ The newspapers of the period also described these events. The *Daily Express* provided a detailed, visual description of the infamous “Bath and Bottle Party” which was the Bright Young People’s “apotheosis.”¹² According the eyewitness account of Tom Driberg, a young Oxford graduate,

great rubber horses and flowers floated about in the water, which was illuminated by colored spotlights. Many of those present brought two or three bathing costumes, which they changed in the course of the night’s festivities. Cocktails were served in the gallery, where the cocktail-mixers evidently found the heat intolerable, for they also donned bathing costumes at the earliest opportunity. A special cocktail, christened the Bathwater Cocktail, was invented for the occasion.¹³

Driberg gives a detailed visual account of the individuals, setting, props, and beverages that made this party, and its participants, modern.

Vile Bodies, like Driberg and subsequent commentators, caters to readers' desire for an insider account of the Bright Young Things's parties. It also leverages the generic affordances of the roman à clef. Gossip, in both verbal and written form, was an important means by which information and misinformation about the cultural and literary elite circulated among various segments of the popular marketplace, including the middlebrow. As Sean Latham demonstrates in *The Art of Scandal*, written gossip resurged during early modernism with the revival of the roman à clef, "an earlier and much more chaotic narrative form that sought to engage a collapsing public sphere by using 'gossip lit' to break down the separation between fact and fiction."¹⁴ The modernist roman à clef often exploited the "public's apparent appetite for scandal and its fascination with the lives of the wealthy in Mayfair and Manhattan bred."¹⁵ Given the potential legal repercussions of a libel suit, such works were "almost always published and marketed as works of pure fiction," but they "actually encoded salacious gossip about a particular clique or coterie."¹⁶ This form "provid[ed] passage beyond Victorian realism and into a far murkier field where fact and fiction pleurably—and sometimes dangerously—intertwine."¹⁷ Waugh provides an exaggerated list of the group's themed parties midway through the novel in a narratorial aside:

(...Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, parties where one had to dress as somebody else, almost naked parties in St. John's Wood, parties in flats and studios and houses and ships and hotels and night clubs, in windmills and swimming-baths, tea parties at school where one ate muffins and meringues and tinned crab, parties at Oxford where one drank brown

sherry and smoked Turkish cigarettes, dull dances in London and comic dances in Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris all that succession and repetition of massed humanity...Those vile bodies ..)¹⁸

The accumulating details of the description evoke the “succession and repetition of massed humanity”; they echo the exhaustion of attending copious parties and the numerous “vile bodies” of the participants. Waugh also asserts his insider knowledge through this exhaustive list. Describing and attending these parties signals that one is modern. But in contrast with this passage, only several parties actual occur within *Vile Bodies*.

Rather, the narrative’s newness, and thus Waugh’s own sophistication, are established by Waugh’s unique approach. The novel’s description exceeds the expected details. For example, the narrator points the reader away from the party to its mediations by technology, the sort of meta-reflection absent from Driberg’s account. Archie Schwert’s “Savage party” opens with Lord Vanburg and Lord Balcairne, Bright Young Things and gossip columnists, calling in their stories about the night because “you see, that was the kind of party Archie Schwert’s party was.”¹⁹ Photographers abound that evening and have a “disquieting effect.”²⁰ Attendees are self-conscious, either wanting to be photographed or nervous their presence will become front-page news. Waugh’s satire also exploits the roman à clef’s capacity to blend fact and fiction; it fixes on the fantasies of Mary Mouse, the wallflower who finances the evening. She “long[s] to tear down her dazzling frock to her hips and dance like a Bacchante before them all. One day she would surprise them all, thought Miss Mouse.”²¹ Rather than a description of her dress, the narrator describes her desire to take it off; she, like the middlebrow reader who buys Waugh’s book, sits back and imagines herself participating. This boredom with the party itself that the narrator’s focus implies is itself sophisticated, for it comes new to the reader. Newspaper

accounts lack this interiority and description of how the news about the Bright Young Things is gathered.

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But the satirical focus of the novel is primarily on the Bright Young Things's speech as a way of "being modern," which eclipses parties as the narrative's center. The novel opens with a stormy crossing of the English Channel; the first chapter is a montage of various British social classes and reoccurring characters. These include Adam, the unremarkable protagonist who "look[s] exactly as young men like him do look" and carries his recently completed memoir.²² Members of the Bright Young Things are also on board, including their scion, Agatha Runcible. Like all the other passengers, they use "civilized witchcraft" to "avert the terrors of seasickness." "The Younger Set," as the text designates them, try sticking plaster and, as Waugh chattily describes, they "had spent a jolly morning strapping each other's tummies...(how Miss Runcible had wriggled)."²³ They are persons the reader can identify with, for they too get sick on boats. Like the rest of the passengers, their ineffective home remedies are no match for the weather. Waugh's description is richly detailed and metaphoric:

sometimes the ship pitched and sometimes she rolled and sometimes she stood quite still and shivered all over, poised above an abyss of dark water; then she would go swooping down like a scenic railway train into a windless hollow and up again with a rush into the gale; sometimes she would burrow her path, with convulsive nosings and scramblings like a terrier in a rabbit hole; and sometimes she would drop dead like a lift. It was this last movement that caused the most havoc among the passengers.

"Oh," said the Bright Young People. "Oh, oh, oh."

“It’s just exactly like being inside a cocktail shaker,” said Miles Malpractice.

“Darling, your face—eau de Nil.”²⁴

The Bright Young People enter as a chorus, not with articulate dialogue but with a gasp. The jarring “Oh” contrasts sharply with the extended yet precise description of the rough crossing. Repetition becomes mechanical and the groans of sea-sickness; this emptiness is playfully repeated by the narrator with his later parenthetical assessment, “(Oh, Bright Young People!).”²⁵ With Miles’s comment, the satirist mocks the well-known intemperance of the group and narrows the frame of reference to the bartender’s tools of the trade. The simile is also metonymic and calls further attention to the speaker’s imprecision. By the grammatical logic of this “exact” comparison, Miles has firsthand knowledge of the inside of a shaker. His “eau de Nil” description of Agatha’s face continues the liquid theme and provides an unflattering first impression of the Bright Young People’s scion. Agatha Runcible responds “with one of her rare flashes of accuracy”; the Bright Young Things also find the crossing “Too, too sick-making.” Agatha’s last name evokes Lear’s madness; her words are surprisingly accurate, but the narrator’s commentary points to future nonsensical interlocutions. The effect of “too, too” distracts from the very ordinary experience of getting seasick. This passage tightly reinforces what Rebecca West identifies as the “overdrinking and underthinking” smart set stereotype and introduces the reader to their verbal tendencies.²⁶ This phrase is the text’s first instance of the Bright Young Things’s jargon, which occur throughout. The central thing that was “new” and notable about the Bright Young Things was how they spoke. *Vile Bodies* models their jargon, all performed tastelessly yet novel for the aspirational middlebrow reader.

This makes *Vile Bodies* what the gossip columns called the “ultra-modern novel”;²⁷ it was itself modern and could ostensibly inculcate sophistication. As Waugh describes in his 1964

preface, “the jargon most of us spoke came new to the novel reader and so captivated one prominent dramatic critic that for weeks he introduced into articles week after week: “‘Too sick-making,’ as Mr. Waugh would say.”²⁸ One hears Waugh’s irritation decades later over the repeated imitation. Waugh describes *Vile Bodies* as “totally unplanned”; he “set a few characters on the move, [wrote] 3,000 words a day, and note[d] with surprise what happened,” but Waugh hides the care he actually spent. As Martin Stannard describes, Waugh “took infinite pains to attain the *mots justes* in whatever slang he was imitating,” specifically the “‘sick-making,’ ‘unpolicemanlike’ vocabulary Waugh had picked up from the Guinness set.” Because of this, “many of his typescript corrections concerned this struggle to attain precisely the right ‘pitch.’”²⁹ Successfully captivating aspirational audiences required that he get their jargon just right. The drama critic was not the only individual who adopted to novel’s language, for the “public relished [*Vile Bodies*] and before long a whole list of similar compound adjectives had found their way into the language.”³⁰ Waugh closely interweaves inculcating this form of sophistication with the narrative.

PURSUING THE MODERN

The first section of my essay outlined the Bright Young Things’s popular sophistication in the novel and the successful reception of its jargon. Subsequent sections consider how *Vile Bodies* demystifies popular sophistication, which produces the “spirit of the age” but does not reflect superior culture. There is nothing exemplary, tasteful, or “civilized” about the Bright Young Things. Instead, their definitive *version* of “being modern” is perpetuated by 1920s celebrity culture. Gossip about the Bright Young Things circulates through technology and keeps their antics and jargon modern. The newspapers in particular keep the Bright Young Things in the public’s eye and makes their sophistication the desirable new. *Vile Bodies*, despite its anti-

modern sentiment, encapsulates popular sophistication's dependence on the circulation of gossip across various media. Waugh's novel is ultra-modern, but it also critiques the culture and the conditions that give rise to the Bright Young Things.

INSINCERE, INFORMATIONAL GOSSIP

A turn away from sincerity precedes celebrity culture and makes possible gossip's circulation. This, combined with the lack of taste Waugh diagnoses, is the prerequisite of the Bright Young Things's emergence as the spirit of their age. Taste concerns what one desires, while sincerity regards how one interacts with others in the pursuit. Lionel Trilling describes sincerity as "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling,"³¹ a concord between an interior self and one's exterior dealings with others.³² Truth in self-disclosure is both the guarantor and result of this sincerity, and this self-revelation is the apex of verbal interactions. Robert Louis Stevenson describes this ideal in his 1879 essay, "Truth in Intercourse." He writes that one aims to have the "heart...demonstrated in words" in intimate conversation.³³ This deeply personal and vulnerable form of discourse seeks to disclose the self's deepest truths and sentiments. It depends on a correspondence between what one says and who one is. The person who skillfully practices this art, according to Stevenson, can "open himself more clearly to his friends, and can enjoy more of what makes life truly valuable—intimacy with those he loves."³⁴

Sincerity is unattainable within the contemporary London social scene and the world of the novel, which forecloses corresponding forms of communication. Martin Stannard writes that the "overriding impression of the novel is of a comi-tragic failure of communication between all levels of society."³⁵ Sincerity's failure is forcefully staged within *Vile Bodies* as soon as the central characters enter England. Adam, arguably the narrative's most sincere character from the outset, learns this firsthand when he disembarks from the "bad crossing" with his recently

completed autobiography in hand. Autobiography and self-revelatory conversation arise from sincerity; Trilling describes autobiography's subject as a self that one must "must cherish for its own sake and show to the world for the sake of good faith"; this self is "bent on revealing himself in all his truth."³⁶ But good faith is in short supply in *Vile Bodies*. Adam's books, including his recently finished autobiography, are immediately seized by a suspicious customs official. The official becomes "engrossed," "giving vent at intervals to a sinister chuckling sound" and declaring the work is "just downright dirt" that "we burns straight away, see."³⁷ Adam protests vehemently with "good heavens, there isn't a word in the book—you must be misinterpreting it"³⁸ but is forced to leave his source of livelihood behind. Adam's sincerity avails nothing; it is impossible for the customs official to read the forbidden memoir as anything but veiled titillation and thus impermissible. The destruction of Adam's autobiography signals the failure of self-revelation, because listening means evaluating for hidden motives within the logic of the narrative.

RELATIONAL AND INFORMATIONAL GOSSIP

This same foreclosure of sincerity, necessary for the emergence celebrity culture, also configures gossip into the two modes depicted in Waugh's novel. This chapter posits modernism, particularly in its entanglements with celebrity culture, as the tension between *relational gossip* (anti-modern) and *informational gossip* (modern), categories which are distinguished from one another by a movement either away from or towards sincerity. Gossip, while traditionally associated with talk and thus denigrated within the conversational paradigm I described in the introduction, was invested with value outside of the home during the nineteenth century. Informational gossip commodifies this value. Relational gossip promises to create intimacy, the interpersonal connect that is the reward of revealing one's true self, through jointly constructing

a narrative about someone else. Informational gossip promises to construct its skillful practitioner as a connected insider i.e. a sophisticate, the sine qua non of success for the middle class within celebrity culture, who trades in information about the elite.

Patricia Spacks helps isolate the type of gossip useful to the sophisticate. Gossip, as Patricia Spacks argues, runs along a continuum, with various modes possessing differing, and even antithetical, investments. Informational gossip strongly resembles Spacks' "idle talk," which she dismisses. She describes idle talk thus:

It derives from unconsidered desire to say something without having to ponder too deeply. Without purposeful intent, gossipers bandy words and anecdotes about other people, thus protecting themselves from serious engagement with one another....The most "public" form of a private mode, such gossip takes place before and after...cocktail parties and dinner parties, around the office coffee machine. Who has been sleeping with whom, who is considering what job? It can slide in and out of the purposeful, involving deliberate circulation of information, deliberate testing of opinion, without necessary malice. Of course, it too damages reputations and hurts feelings, its consequences uncontrollable and incalculable. Like other forms of gossip, it can also solidify a group's sense of itself by heightening consciousness of "outside" (inhabited by those talked about) and "inside" (the temporarily secure territory of the talkers). Blunted awareness marks such gossip; involving little real consideration of the issues its discourse touches, it constitutes moral avoidance. Often it sounds competitive, measuring who's up, who's down. My examples of it all belong to Western middle-class life; it reveals complacencies of groups in power, groups whose members, when they gather, feel no need to question themselves or their assumptions.³⁹

Within modernism, gossip that prizes the correspondence between who one is and what one says and thus creates “serious engagement with one another” is no longer dominant.

RELATIONAL GOSSIP: ANTI-MODERN RETURN TO INTIMACY

But the longing for intimacy remains in the novel, and against the scene of the Bright Young Things Waugh depicts the ineffective turn back towards sincerity through gossip. The relational gossip of Agatha Runcible’s aunts encapsulates an anti-modern response to the loss of sincerity, and an attempt to salvage intimacy through gossiping together. Gossip is, according to Spacks, “a crucial means of self-expression” and “a crucial form of solidarity.”⁴⁰ While an isolated incident, the scene of Agatha’s gossiping aunts becomes the rubric for evaluating the text’s subsequent treatments of gossip, even while it distances this ideal from the celebrity culture that dominates the narrative and the modern.

Agatha is discussed by the old Dowagers sisters, Fanny Throbbing and Kitty Blackwater, “whose naughty names jar with their social status as Edwardian grandes dames.”⁴¹ They are also on board during the novel’s opening channel crossing. They observe from a distance as Agatha, who has been mistaken for a jewel-thief and strip-searched at Dover, emerges from Customs. They stage the face-to-face, intimacy-creating encounter that Spacks idealizes. The sisters’ mode of gossip prioritizes relationship over information and does not particularly care about celebrity status. The Dowager sisters’ gossip demonstrates the intimate connections that relational gossip promises to create. They comment:

“Fanny, surely that is Agatha Runcible, poor Viola Chasm’s daughter?”

“I wonder Viola allows her to go about like that. If she were my daughter...”

“*Your* daughter, Fanny...”

“Kitty, that was not kind.”

“My dear, I only meant...have you, by the way, heard of her lately?”

“The last we heard was worse than anything, Kitty. She has left Buenos Aires. I am afraid she has severed her connection with Lady Metroland altogether. They think that she is in some kind of touring company.”

“Darling, I’m so sorry. I should never have mentioned it, but whenever I see Agatha Runcible I can’t help thinking...girls seem to know so much nowadays. We had to learn everything for ourselves, didn’t we, Fanny, and it took so long. If I’d had Agatha Runcible’s chances.”⁴²

This is the traditional flow of aristocratic gossip; the sisters circulate information amongst themselves, not the middle class. The Dowagers are not intent on affirming their social status, but rather on the pleasure of their narrative and mutual sympathy shared over Fanny’s wayward daughter. There is a rather Austen-esque quality about this interaction, as the sisters verbally meander through others’ lives while remaining seemingly proper. The aunts are bound by decorum and “suggest by innuendo what social etiquette forbids them to utter directly” with the polite phrasing and veiled comments that “titillate the reader’s imagination.” They know what is impermissible socially, so “the crucial ideas underlying their disjointed banter need never be put into words.”⁴³ Despite the social and technological upheavals that attend 1920s London, gossip here continues at a leisurely and unperturbed pace. The sisters’ anti-modernity is communicated clearly to the reader; they quaintly are unaware of the double-entendre of their names and dialogue, despite their hints about Buenos Aires and prostitution. This innocence distances them from the reader and jars with the Bright Young People’s frenetic movement that dominates the rest of the novel. An oasis of leisure, intimacy, and knowing propriety in the midst of change and flux of celebrity culture, this scene is an anodyne intrusion into the bustling world of the Bright

Young People. Gossip here takes place off to the side and does not impinge on the narrative, thus demonstrating the ineffectiveness of even successful relational gossip to effect social norms.

While intimate details are excluded, it creates intimacy around shared “inquiry, assertion, speculation, and judgment.”⁴⁴ Gossip’s cohesiveness centers around shared, exclusive knowledge. Intimacy through gossip is what the other interpersonal connections in the novel fail to actualize. In this anachronistic depiction, the narrative captures a traditional, idealized type of gossip that creates intimate connectedness; it embodies gossip’s promise and fantasy for the anti-modern reader who disavows sophistication entirely.

But their relational gossip cannot cross the generational divide and instead magnifies it. When Kitty points out Miles at the end of the scene, Fanny responds, “Miles?” and Kitty reminds her “Your son, darling. My nephew, you know.” Ironically, Fanny, who is “in the know” in the social realm, does not “know” her own son, nor does she show intentions to seek him out. Instead, she quickly returns the discussion to observation: “*Miles*. Do you know, Kitty, I believe it is. He never comes to see me now, the naughty boy.”⁴⁵ While humorous, gossip passively responds to Miles’s failing and create alternative relationships. The aunt’s “choral commentaries” substitute parental intimacy for the sisterhood of relational gossip. The polis deteriorates around them, but they remain serene. And yet, this detached intimacy is the best option possible within the narrative for those who would resist sophistication’s pursuit within celebrity culture, even as Waugh demonstrates the irrelevance of those who adapt this stance. One may successfully carve out a space to be anti-modern, but to do so dooms one to irrelevance and ruthless carelessness towards those embroiled in celebrity culture.

BRIGHT YOUNG PEOPLE

The turn from sincerity makes celebrity culture possible. David Goldman, arguing for Oscar Wilde as the model of twentieth-century celebrity, writes that

Wilde conceived of a new kind of individual, one whose distinguishing attributes—trademarks—are worn on the body, rather than concealed within it. Wilde disdained the division of exterior and interior, preferring—in a gesture foreshadowing much of twentieth-century celebrity—to view the individual as a public image that circulates on the market. By turning his insides out and wearing his subjectivity on his lapel, as it were, Wilde turned himself into a commodity.⁴⁶

In its “relocation of self-creation from inside the body to its surface,”⁴⁷ celebrity culture turns away from interiority towards performing the modern. Even as the official interrogates Adam, “from the next room came the shrieks and yells of poor Miss Runcible, who had been mistaken for a well-known jewel smuggler, and was being stripped to the skin by two terrific wardresses.”⁴⁸ As Goldman describes, celebrity culture “turn[s] the individual into a stereotype, condemned to perform itself until death. This process, we might say turns the psychological subject into an object, something that lacks agency over itself...the celebrated person may become...something actually less than an individual.”⁴⁹ This scandalous strip search creates Agatha’s trademark and is the source material for the circulation of information about Agatha throughout the rest of the novel. But it also turns her into less than an individual. She is reduced to details through the circulation of this story; she is something to be discussed and on which to offer an opinion. Information, particularly about the celebrity, becomes the source by which communication can continue in an insincere world. A new valuation of the self requires a new way of communicating. Gossip, as *Vile Bodies* demonstrates, offers an alternative a way to communicate when the ethos of sincerity has collapsed.

The modern person trades in gossip. Like the Throbbing sisters, the Bright Young People demonstrate the shifting priorities of gossip within celebrity culture. The Bright Young People, reunited in the railway station after customs, “cheered up wonderfully when they heard about Miss Runcible’s outrageous treatment.”⁵⁰ “‘Well,’ they said. ‘Well! how too, too shaming, Agatha, darling,’ they said. ‘How devastating, how unpoliceman-like, how goat-like, how sick-making, how too, too awful.’ And then they began talking about Archie Schwert’s party that night.”⁵¹ Agatha’s strip search is greeted with a barrage of derivative commentary and jargon, which echoes Agatha’s vocabulary and tone. Popular sophistication’s characteristics first circulate among those closest to the celebrity figure.

The fundamental problem of the Bright Young Things for Waugh emerges. An inability to discriminate characterizes their post-war generation and makes traditional sophistication unattainable. Waugh describes this in “The War and the Younger Generation” (1929), written in the same year that *Vile Bodies* was composed. Waugh strikingly declares that “every accident of environment contributed to make of this latter generation the indiscriminating and ineffectual people we lament today.”⁵² He expands on the contributing factors for these failures, beginning with the war. He vividly describes the “circumstances which war-time children observed as universal and presumed to be normal,” including “darkened streets, food rations, the impending dread of the War Office telegram, hysterical outbursts of hate and sentiment, untrustworthy sources of information and the consequent rumours and scares.”⁵³ But according to Waugh, the real and lasting injury was caused, not by danger, but by the pervading sense of inadequacy. Everything was a “substitute” for something else, and there was barely enough even of that. The consequence is a generation for whom 950 in every thousand are totally lacking in any sense of qualitative value. It is absurd to blame them if, after

being nurtured on margarine and “honey sugar,” they turn instinctively to the second-rate in art and life.⁵⁴

Value becomes taste for Waugh; his generation cannot discriminate in the ways necessary for traditional sophistication and accurate judgments towards art and life. His generation was further determined by their inferior post-war education, for instead of “the standards of civilization ...[young schoolmasters] returned with a jolly tolerance of everything that seemed ‘modern.’” Because of the war and inadequate training, when Waugh’s generation came into their own, “there was nothing left for the younger generation to rebel against, except the widest conceptions of mere decency. Accordingly it was against these that it turned. The result in many cases is the perverse and aimless dissipation chronicled daily by the gossip-writer of the press.”⁵⁵ His generation, which produced the Bright Young Things, did not know the real from imitation—“honey sugar.” Because of this lack of discrimination, they could not produce anything worthwhile and are “this crazy and sterile generation.” Waugh’s rhetorical flourishes reflect his personal disappointment,⁵⁶ but the critical stance towards the faculty of judgment accords with *Vile Bodies*. For Waugh, the tastelessness of his generation manifests in their language and makes traditional sophistication impossible, dependent as it is on impeccable taste.

Instead, his generation has turned to popular sophistication. The result is informational gossip that circulates celebrity, and in which the self is commodified as a trademark. An unnamed member of the Bright Young People describes the party for the uninitiated Adam, giving in great detail Archie’s relationship with the elite. Archie is the “*most* bogus man” because of his social aspirations—“he’s been climbing and climbing and *climbing*, my dear...He’s rather sweet, really, only too terribly common, poor darling.”⁵⁷ His party will held at the house of Edward Throbbing, brother of one of the Bright Young People, and paid for by

another aspiration friend, Mary Mouse. The Bright Young People are also living in Throbbing's "perfectly sheepish house," having paid off the caretakers with "drinks and things, and now they're simply thrilled to the marrow about it and spend all their time cutting out 'bits,' my dear, from the papers about our goings on."⁵⁸ Details dominate their gossip, which is far more information-dense than that of the sisters and makes judgments according to social status. Unlike the sisters, they lack relationships and so need to contextualize the information for Adam.

Goldman writes that "celebrity makes the self contingent; identity depends on an audience for its continued existence."⁵⁹ The relay of informational gossip is a key aspect of how this audience is created throughout *Vile Bodies*, which enables Agatha's identity as a celebrity, rooted in the scene of the strip search. Agatha's eager audience bestows her status and identity as a scandalous celebrity figure. They are her constellations whose own, though lesser, celebrity status legitimates her identity as modern. Though their gossip is conducted tête-à-tête, it prioritizes information that manifests in celebrity culture and the voracious desire for the new. For the Bright Young People, the exchange of information via gossip becomes an end in itself, and an opportunity primarily for self-promotion, not intimacy.

INFORMATIONAL GOSSIP AND THE REGIME OF INFORMATION

This informational gossip also circulates celebrity, the Bright Young Things's version of "being modern," from the social elite to middle-class and middlebrow readers through mediating technologies. David Trotter describes modernism as the movement from an aesthetic of energy to one of information. He argues that during the mid-1920s, energy gave way to a "preoccupation with something else altogether: call it information, or connectivity."⁶⁰ This shift, according to Trotter, was partly motivated by the "mass media waves" that swept across the western world in

the early twentieth-century—the cheap rotary press, film, radio, phonography, and telephony⁶¹—each of which “organized data in the public in distinct ways.”⁶²

Gossip, defined in terms of the regime of information, is a set of flexible protocols for verbal communication that allow it to play in and outside media. Both accounts of modernism are useful when applied to Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*, in which gossip’s circulation creates a scene of the modern dominated by both celebrity culture and the regime of information. For the elite, gossip circulates information that comprises the self, the authorial imprimatur or personality. It is a medium, which if wielded wisely, can pay dividends on one’s previously established elite status. For members of the middle class, gossiping allows one to actively participate both in the flow of information and celebrity culture, to turn words into cultural capital and ostensibly create the self as insider. Relational, sincere gossip, in contrast, eschews the taint of the marketplace and finds technological mediation alienating.

CELEBRITY GOSSIP- SCANDAL AS SELF-PROMOTION

Agatha’s strip search is the raw data that circulates throughout the novel’s information economies as gossip. This circulation is how the Bright Young Things’s popular sophistication remains the fashionable version of being modern. Each retelling secures Agatha’s identity as modern while simultaneously hastening the end of the information’s use value, for it loses its power after the story has been told and consumed through gossip. Successful celebrity self-construction requires self-promotion. Agatha is masterful in this regard. She recognizes the power of information, even scandalous, to create an audience. She sees Adam immediately after being released from customs, exclaiming, “I can’t *tell* you the *things* that have been happening to me in there. The way they looked...too, too, shaming. Positively surgical, my dear, and *such* wicked old women, just like *Dowagers*, my dear. As soon as I get to London I shall ring up every

Cabinet Minister and *all* the newspapers and give them all the most shy-making details.”⁶³

Agatha’s circulation by telephone first matters. Avital Ronell describes the predicament of the telephone as one in which the device “destabilizes the identity of self and other, subject and thing.”⁶⁴ But Agatha circumvents this predicament. It remains true within Waugh’s text that, as Ronell describes, the “notion of a ‘phony’ originates in the phone’s call, designating the predicament of a suppositious subject, on both ends...So the voice that comes from me and from beyond me can be a phony one, it can miss the point, performing and inducing fraud, putting a metaphysics of identity on hold.”⁶⁵ But Agatha is already phony, even when she is the one still on the line. Who makes the call and what she communicates is “something less than an individual” as Goldman describes, for as celebrity, Agatha has been reduced to the “most shy-making details.” She further complicates the predicament of the telephone beyond the possibility of the phony on the other end of the line as someone who is or is not Agatha. Rather than performing a potentially useful disruption, the telephone in *Vile Bodies* merely disseminates celebrity’s diminished self. It furthers self-promotion and circulates her popular sophistication. The telephone does not create a “predicament” for Agatha. It is a tool for her; it allows her to quickly make use of the newspaper’s capacity to disseminate gossip.

Her strip search sets the scene for the novel—it portrays the workings of the commodification of the gossip economy within celebrity culture. There is a parasitic relationship between Agatha and the public, with the telephone and newspaper as the enabling media. The middle-class public need her to satisfy their insatiable desire for new news of celebrity and elite culture, and she requires the public to act as her audience on which the self is contingent. Agatha recognizes that what has happened to her is useful within the economics of celebrity culture, and that the newspaper is a medium of information circulation for readers desirous of the modern. An

ability to recognize and present information as gossip skillfully, to “*tell...the things* that have been happening to me in there,” can be exploited. Adam and the press both want the same information. Agatha masters the shape of verbal gossip and recognizes that these same protocols will entice newspaper editors and readers. Because the press deals in a specific type of information—salacious gossip—she communicates the incident with “the most shy-making details.” Information has the greatest purchasing power when its form resembles that of gossip and has its “special tone,” as Spacks describes.⁶⁶

Thus, she gives Adam tantalizing but jumbled bits of what happened. Phrases like “*things*” and “*such* wicked old women” and “looked” have extreme potential, especially in connection with the female body—Agatha is well aware of gossip’s penchant for sexual overtones. But Adam is denied the details required to construct the full story. Relating her experience as gossipy narrative would enable him to comment, judge, and respond. But she fails to give a full account. She recognizes that information is a limited commodity with a rapid expiration date—it is easy for news to go “stale” within celebrity culture if it is not exchanged quickly, with the right people, and through a powerful medium. Adam is not that person. Rather, she must control the spread of information until she can telephone it in—he might get the scoop if she tells now.⁶⁷ This moment alerts the reader to how information is leveraged; she desires the celebrity status that her experience, told properly, will confer within the realm of media, not interpersonal relations. Thus, she withholds her story, choosing mediated gossip over the potential for interpersonal connection. The details of her experience are ostensibly “too shaming” for conversation (though one is hardly inclined to believe her) but not too scandalous for written consumption in the service of her public image as popular sophisticate. She recognizes the power of the press to spread information, maintain her celebrity status, and sell papers. Instead, she

gives just enough information to titillate the reader and Adam, who later buys a paper immediately after hearing an old woman's gossiping monologue at the train station (even the Bright Young People do not get information for free in the novel).

CELEBRITY GOSSIP AND THE SCENE OF THE MODERN

Informational gossip is the means by which the fashionable version of being modern is distributed. Agatha's narrative circulates as information gossip which employs the Bright Young Things's jargon; it demonstrates how informational gossip can circulate an individual celebrity and perpetuate the Bright Young Things's popular sophistication. Furthermore, the novel makes the technology of the newspaper modern, rather than passé. In *Modernism on Fleet Street* (2006), Patrick Collier calls attention to the "cultural centrality of newspaper journalism," which as he notes, "rarely occupie[s] the critical foreground."⁶⁸ *Vile Bodies* affirms this centrality and how it intersects with critical modernism's interest in celebrity.

The role of the newspaper in the widespread circulation of celebrity gossip and self-promotion is not unique *Vile Bodies*. The newspaper enabled the creation and maintenance of celebrity, and the associated ways of being modern, in written form within the scene of the modern.⁶⁹ Studies of the intersection between literary and celebrity culture have focused on how visual culture served to circulate celebrity value and reputation.⁷⁰ This emphasis, however, has obscured the equal importance of the written word. Newspapers, journals, and magazines often intermingled written gossip about both popular and literary celebrities within the same issue, which were often referred to as "person of interest" or "personalities." The newspapers were important in establishing the reputations of celebrities at the very least because of their reach. As John Stevenson writes, "[b]y the 1930s the newspapers were easily the most important form of mass communication in Britain."⁷¹ Certain segments of mass culture were far more likely to

encounter a written account than solely a visual one. As Waugh notes in his 1964 preface to the novel, that “*Vile Bodies* caught the public fancy for extraneous reasons. ‘The Bright Young People’ with whom it deals...were one of the newspaper topics of the time.”⁷² As Stannard describes, “‘William Hickey’ and ‘Dragonman’ provided fantasies of opulence for the less fortunate enduring the timetabled lives of Metroland.”⁷³ The newspapers by the 1930s often featured photos of celebrities,⁷⁴ but these were accompanied by written accounts that perpetuated the Bright Young People as modern.

NEWSPAPER AS A TECHNOLOGY OF INFORMATIONAL GOSSIP

The role of the newspapers in mediating celebrity culture across the elite/popular divide, including middlebrow audiences, was made possible by the rise of the popular daily newspaper during the late-nineteenth century in Britain, which, as Waugh notes, was dependent during the 1920s and 1930s on getting readers to discuss what they had read. On 4 May 1896 Alfred Harmsworth’s *Daily Mail* was launched, which marked the inauguration of modern journalism as well as a large cultural shift within both print and verbal culture. As the historian Martin Conboy describes, Northcliffe’s newspaper

managed to draw a complex range of technical, commercial and textual features into one publication. An astute awareness of the requirements of advertisers, a recognition of the social aspirations of a class of new reader, an ability to produce economies of scale in production, and the organizational genius to be able to distribute this rapidly and effectively, enabled it to become the first truly mass circulation paper.⁷⁵

Lord Northcliffe contrasted his *Daily Mail* with the “unreadable” papers, such as the *Times*, in which “[t]he old type was convinced that anything which would be a subject of conversation ought to be kept out of the papers.”⁷⁶ But the popular dailies shifted from upper to middle class

as the target audience, and in doing so began including stories about “personalities”—elite social and literary figures. These stories were designed to build off readers’ curiosity about the elite and the accompanying desire to talk about them. Northcliffe’s newspaper targeted the aspirational middle class, particularly the lower-middle class. As Laurel Brake describes, “the transition from the wealthy, educated, leisured reader to the working, literate reader of the middle classes are inscribed in the changing cultural formations of the periodical and newspaper press throughout the period.”⁷⁷

This included an emphasis on personalities of the day, who were the precursors of the Bright Young Things as popular sophisticates. The newspaper was designed to distribute the gossip and information that already circulated amidst the upper class and social elite by traditional means.⁷⁸ Northcliffe recognized that celebrity gossip was one of the most effective means by which to sell newspapers, thus “he was exceptionally keen on what he called ‘personal stories,’ especially about people in high places.”⁷⁹ Tom Clarke, later editor of the *News Chronicle* (London), applauds Northcliffe for “identifying a need for escapism among the popular audience and his willingness to respond to this desire with more society news and celebrity gossip.”⁸⁰ Clark claims that Northcliffe told his journalists,

[g]et more names in the paper—the more aristocratic the better, if there is a news story round them. You know the public is more interested in duchesses than servant-girls.....the taxicab driver and the factory girl would rather read news about society folk and West End doings than sordid stories about low life. Everyone likes reading about people in better circumstances than his or her own. Keep that in mind. Write, and seek news with at least the £1,000 a year man in mind.⁸¹

A key part of the business model which made newspapers widely successful was peddling the image of the celebrity-sophisticate; thus the newspaper represented a key mediator between elite and the middle class. Celebrity exploits provide verbal fodder not only for the social elite, but also for the aspirational middle class, enabled by one of the one of the major media waves that Urrico details, the rotary printing press. Hamilton Fyfe, a longtime business associate who became editor of another Northcliffe newspaper, *The Daily Mirror*, declares, “[n]o one understood better than Northcliffe how large is the element of snobbery in the English character,” and Northcliffe’s success “played skillfully on the inbred snobbishness of English men and women” and desire to identify themselves with “the Best People.”⁸² The newspaper was an effective mediator of celebrity news, which satisfied both the producers and consumers of popular newspapers.

But beyond the turn towards celebrity and the everyday, the *Daily Mail* was successful under Lord Northcliffe because it was designed to appeal to the readers’ competencies in gossiping. According to Fyfe’s biography, “the art of making people talk” was more than just an element of what led to Northcliffe’s newspaper revolution, rather it was “the keystone of his success” and distinguished him from the competition, for “many rivals do appear, but they have no enduring strength in them. They lack the essential; they do not make people talk.”⁸³ Thus while newspapers such as *The Daily Mail* included images, particularly of celebrity figures, the purpose was verbal consumption, which was encouraged by the newspaper’s design. As Donald Matheson argues, between the 1880s and 1930s news style changed and a uniquely news discourse emerged. As he describes, the “journalist’s role changed from a gatherer and recorder of news to a storyteller; and the news story could abandon the existing social conventions of its source texts or of formal social intercourse. A particular news style was emerging that was able

to contain and communicate meaning in its own right.”⁸⁴ Northcliffe created “a paper for the lower-middle classes, the clerks and other City workers who needed something to read on their way to and from work.”⁸⁵ The news became stories that were meant to be talked about. These stories, according to Northcliffe, would be most effective if conceived of as “scraps,” which were the central component of the emerging newspaper discourse. This public, according to Northcliffe’s classist assessment, needed a different sort of newspaper because “[t]heir minds resembled Newnes’s mind; they like scraps, tit-bits.”⁸⁶ Northcliffe’s response, according to Fyfe, was to give the people what they ostensibly wanted: “[w]ell, why not give them scraps? News could be treated in a way that would please them; make them feel they knew all about everything, instead of suggesting to them, as existing newspapers did, that everything was very difficult to understand, that nothing could be discussed or reported except at very great length.”⁸⁷ These scraps included celebrity gossip, but extended to the shape of the news in general. The newspaper was designed to get readers to talk about what they read by putting news in the form of gossip. Northcliffe’s scraps are Spacks’s gossip as “odds and ends of knowledge” extended beyond the private realm.⁸⁸ Readers had already-established protocols for scraps: discuss them. Framing the newspaper as “talking-point” leverages an older and already-established information economy. Now the scraps, the information that gossip depends on, are provided in the newspaper, not through face-to-face contact. Gossip within the middle-class newspaper not only mediated celebrity culture but was the response elicited from readers of news in general. The newspaper as talking point extended into the 1920s and the Bright Young Things’s emergence as popular sophisticates.

Gossip is central to the production and consumption of news, specifically the commodification of elite culture across various media as celebrity gossip. *Vile Bodies* satirizes

newspaper newspaper-mediated gossip as a central mechanism of this consumption; characters frequently discuss the popular sophisticates covered in the news. This portrayal is at the heart of the novel's indictment of celebrity culture, as the media that helped to usher in the information regime make promises to create intimacy between insiders and outsiders that cannot be kept. Specifically, Waugh's novel satirizes middle- and lower-middle class consumption of the newspaper, which encompasses not only reading, but also gossiping about, its contents. Sean Latham describes this context as the

highly segmented marketplace where elite culture became a site of both production and mass consumption...The continuing expansion of the mass media in the twentieth century, however, and particularly the emergence of modern celebrity culture, meant that an ever-growing audience imagined they had access to even the most exclusive literary and cultural circles. Gossip columns...catered extensively to this fascination, making the private friendships of such figures as Lady Ottoline Morrell and Oscar Wilde into very public news.⁸⁹

While Latham focuses on the high modernist coteries that became the fodder of newspaper gossip, 1920s newspapers frequently reported on the social elite and celebrities of 1920s London as well. The Bright Young People provided the ideal material for newspaper copy and reader's gossip, combining upper class appeal, youth, and a penchant for petty crime, all of which fostered various combinations of curiosity, intimacy, and moral indignation in readers. Nor did this group find publicity particularly "shy-making." As one unsympathetic contemporary describes, "finding the gossip writers ready to paragraph their antics they called themselves 'Bright Young People,' popularised gate-crashing, took drugs, indulged or pretended to indulge in unnatural vices, and drove their cars about at high speed, when under the influence of drink, in

the hope, if there was a smash, that the case would be reported in the Sunday newspapers.”⁹⁰ Waugh had first-hand experience of the Bright Young People’s commercialized fame, though supposedly as “a member rather on the fringe than in the center.”⁹¹ His roman à clef pays satirical homage to how newspapers frequently featured this popular group of insiders. As was true to Waugh’s experience, newspapers within the novel allow characters to obtain information about the Bright Young People without requiring the intervening vile bodies of the title to bestow insider-status. Readers of these newspapers voraciously devour the information newspapers provided on these figures, information which is relayed extremely quickly through the mediating of technology of the telephone and newspaper. This pursuit of information happens at the behest of characters’ pursuit of intimacy within the wrong context. Their knowledge, the “access” Latham describes, creates a false sense of knowingness. This in turn produces feelings of intimacy and connection at a distance with the Bright Young People, while also providing social capital. Gossiping about celebrities mediates the transformation from passive reader to active judge for those within in the novel; it is also a performative speech act that legitimates a spurious intimacy. Informational gossip prioritizes speed over creativity or accuracy, for its purpose is to quickly externalize and makes tangible the speaker’s connection with celebrity. This type of gossip constructs the speaker as an insider by virtue of knowledge about the celebrity—which is based solely in information—rather than knowledge gained through direct and/or shared experience, including gossip. This ostensibly creates intimacy—a connection with the interlocutor with whom one gossips—that is a failed imitation of the intimacy created between the two Dowagers. Like their shared story, it is an ostensible intimacy mediated by shared knowledge. Thus reading practice and gossip are closely intertwined; characters in Waugh’s novel do not desire to just read about celebrities; the audience desires to

talk about the Bright Young People in order to create a sense intimacy with the social elite. This desire, pursuit, and consumption encompasses what I term “aspirational intimacy,” which mistakes knowing about for true intimacy. It is, to borrow Trotter’s phrase, “connecting at a distance,”⁹² but this connection crosses distance that is both physical and, more importantly, social. This mediated connectivity culminates in gossip and the interpersonal connection this entails. Aspirational intimacy relies on gossip to establish connectivity, not recognizing that it is Waugh’s “honey sugar.”

ASPIRATIONAL INTIMACY

Agatha’s strip search remains the through line for the circulation and consumption of celebrity throughout the novel, as the aspirational intimacy of the middle class and the gossip that it entails, is savaged by Waugh’s satire. As Adam travels into London, he is engulfed by those reading about Agatha’s misfortune, which is featured on the front page of the evening edition:

People had crowded into the Underground station for shelter from the rain, and were shaking their umbrellas and reading their evening papers. Adam could see the headlines over their shoulders.

PEER’S DAUGHTER’S DOVER ORDEAL

SERIOUS ALLEGATIONS BY

SOCIETY BEAUTY

HON. A. RUNCIBLE SAYS

“TOO SHAMING”⁹³

The newspaper account sensationalizes the incident for the reading public, who voraciously consumes it for leisure after the workday with the desire for access that characterizes aspirational

intimacy. They are driven by the voracious need for the new and to talk about the topics that drive the social and cultural elite. The description preceding the headline implies a repetitive quality to the crowd activity; while they may have taken shelter from the rain at different points, they now shake their umbrellas and read the daily as one. This image of the crowd uniformly reading anticipates Q.D. Leavis's scene of the "newspaper habit" that opens *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932); she imagines the pervasiveness of the Sunday newspaper as she describes various classes of readers in their respective locales, all consuming the newspaper within their class-determined domestic spaces.⁹⁴ But while her work critiques newspapers as the "middleman between author and reader" that determine their respective readers' tastes in fiction as highbrow, middlebrow or lowbrow,⁹⁵ Waugh's scene satirizes how the newspaper, particularly those aimed at the middle-class, shapes the gossip its readers participate in. Adam becomes an inadvertent listener to aspirational gossip when an "indignant old woman at his elbow" comments,

Poor pretty... Disgraceful, I calls it. And such a good sweet face. I see her picture in the papers only yesterday. Nasty prying minds. That's what they got. And her poor father and all. Look, Jane, there's a piece about him, too. "Interviewed at the Carlton Club this evening, Lord Chasm," that's her dad, "refused to make a definite statement. 'The matter shall not be allowed to rest here,' he said." And quite right, too, I says. You know I feels about that girl just as though it was me own daughter. Seeing her picture so often and our Sarah having done the back stairs, Tuesdays, at them flats where her aunt used to live—the one as had that 'orrible divorce last year.⁹⁶

Gossip about Agatha's situation has diffused outward and socially downward even as the mode of transmission has shifted, and each retelling within Waugh's narrative is increasingly at a

remove from the actual event. The eye-witness exchange of the lurking aunts is followed by the Agatha's first-hand retelling to the Bright Young Things, which is succeeded by the newspaper-mediated Cockney pronouncements of the unnamed old woman. Waugh's critique of gossip continues, extending to the technologically mediated gossip that depends on the medium of the newspaper, even as it is conducted tête-à-tête. The old woman's gossip within the informational regime substitutes aspirational intimacy for the interpersonal intimacy. Its end goal is not the shared verbal give-and-take and knowingness experienced by the Dowager but rather social status. Therefore, the woman insists that "You know I feels about that girl just as though it was me own daughter." She is hardly middle class, but her insistence mocks those readers who link themselves through fantasies with those who are modern. She, like Mary Mouse, imagines herself in relation to the social elite and thus in the know. Both women receive gratification through fantasy.

Her example therefore lays bare the con of the technologically mediated promise of information regime, which apes gossip's potential for intimacy. Informational gossip, particularly when it takes place at a distance, tempts one to *substitute* knowing information about someone with an experiential knowing of him or her. The old woman knows the story the newspaper presents about Agatha and the gossip related to her by Sarah. This knowledge about, gained through her eager participation in these information economies, is the basis for her deep sense of connection with the celebrity-sophisticate and her ensuing verbal judgments. This connection is a fantasy, but Waugh's satirical critique is less about the likelihood that her information is wrong than that the woman has sincerely embraced aspirational intimacy, that one can connect at a distance solely through the agency of information. This is the duplicitous promise of the regime of information. Her example is particularly foolish; the flow of

information only goes one way—Agatha knows nothing about the old woman. The intimacy claimed by the woman’s indignation is made further ridiculous by the corresponds between the headline and her response, for the old woman’s gossip is derived from what she reads and is neither witty nor memorable. The headlines language of “ORDEAL” and ‘SOCIETY BEAUTY’” constructs Agatha using the familiar trope of the damsel in distress; these phrases are reiterated by the old woman’s indignant description of Agatha as “[p]oor pretty.” Like the tastes of Leavis’s readers, her judgments are ultimately determined by what she reads. She becomes increasingly ridiculous as her gossip attempts to bridge the distance between textual and relational connection. “You know I feels about that girl just as though it was me own daughter,” she declares unironically. She justifies this connection with the information upon which gossip depends—she sees Agatha’s picture frequently, and “our Sarah having done the back stairs, Tuesdays, at them flats where her aunt used to live—” The latter is the ultimate coup of a truly insider connection, tenuous as it may be. It seemingly claims to be extra-diagetic to the newspaper, for it is information not just anyone can come by. The old woman has transformed herself into an informal gatekeeper, willing to allow others access to insider knowledge in a moment of generosity. Simultaneously, the insider knowledge of the aunt’s ““orrible divorce” is undercut by the grammatical impropriety of the last line—“Seeing her picture so often and our Sarah having done the back stairs, Tuesdays, at them flats where her aunt used to live—the one as had that ‘orrible divorce last year.’”⁹⁷ This fragment blurs the distinction between traditional and newspaper-mediated gossip, for it leaves it unclear if this juicy morsel about the divorce was overheard by Sarah on the back stairs or from the divorce proceedings detailed in the press. Here Waugh continues to critique the failure to make qualitative distinctions and to settle for the second-rate in art and life, a failing that is endemic to the post-war generation but is not,

apparently, limited to them. As one critic of Northcliffe describes, “[t]he *Daily Mail* reported the news – wars (an important selling point), the Empire, politics, crime, accidents, sport. But it was also full of chat and gossip, regaling readers with trivia about the great and famous and thereby creating a spurious sense of knowingness and shared intimacy.”⁹⁸ Newspapers, like middlebrow novels, ostensibly connected readers with celebrity through informational gossip, but readers such as the old woman mistake image for interiority. They fail to recognize the work of celebrity and the circulation of a commodified image which makes the Bright Young Things modern.

THE TELEPHONE AND MR. CHATTERBOX

But gossip, and sophistication, also allows the narrative to reflect on the task of writing, specifically that of middlebrow fiction as more than conduit for fantasies of sophistication, such as those of Mary Mouse and the old woman. Kate McLoughlin argues that the telephone offers “a form of vocation, as the phone calls the individual away from what he or she is engaged in, and to another activity.”⁹⁹ McLoughlin focuses here on the phone’s summoning ring, which “performs the technological equivalent of parenthesis, one of the tropes of interruption...If the answerer is interrupted in the course of an utterance, the call is also the analogue of apostrophe, a re-direction of speech from one audience to another.”¹⁰⁰ But in *Vile Bodies* using the telephone, i.e. placing oneself in a state of continuous interruption, becomes a vocation. The telephone is not just a useful device that one puts down at will, as Agatha is able to do. At the behest of the newspaper, the telephone creates a vocation of gossip mediator. Waugh’s characters intertwine with this device for transmitting information from high to middle and lower-middle class, which also troubles the identity of its practitioner. In other words, within Waugh’s celebrity-driven dystopia, the fiction writer, specifically the middlebrow writer, both dupes and serves the middle-class aspirations for stories of sophistication and celebrity.

Within the celebrity world of *Vile Bodies*, writing fiction is a creatively destructive calling. “Mr. Chatterbox” designates characters for whom the telephone provides a vocation; the device enables both of self-destruction and creativity. Mr. Chatterbox is the gossip columnist for the *Daily Excess* newspaper who collects information on celebrities and telephones in his stories. The vocation is taken on by four characters within Waugh’s text. Mr. Chatterbox first emerges in the text at Archie Schwert’s party first as the “eighth Earl of Balcairn, Viscount Erdinge, Baron Caim of Balcairn, Red Knight of Lancaster, Count of the Holy Roman Empire and Chenonceaux Herald to the Duchy of Aquitaine” who is only then designated a “gossip writer.”¹⁰¹ But his vocation, his use of the device which is supposed to be a parenthesis, increasingly overtakes his titled identity. It dominates his conversation at the party, which is with a fellow gossip columnist. Rather than pleasurable, their dialogue is transactional—“(It is so depressing to be in a profession in which literally all conversation is ‘shop.’)” voices the narrator.¹⁰² Vanburgh fishes for his rival’s story with “what are you going to say about [their party]?” Balcairn naively passes his information along, and he also identifies his mother, “Mrs. Panrast” whom the family “can’t bear” and has been divorced twice since Balcairn’s father. Vanburgh finds her presence “too shaming,” but five minutes later he is “busy at the telephone” dictating a story that details Mrs. Panrast’s “severely masculine chic, *italics*” style along, unsurprisingly, with the rest of Balcairn’s scoop. Informational, modern gossip exploits relationships, which the telephone enables. Balcairn’s physical appearance is overtaken by the vocation when he attends in disguise a party given by Lady Metroland, for which he begged Adam for an invitation. He unmasked before he can call in his story. As Balcairn demonstrates, Mr. Chatterbox is the text’s intermediary and celebrity broker, the figure whose job it is to shape narratives of the elite into a form desirable to middle-class audiences. In initial depictions, Chatterbox, like the telephone he

uses, lacks agency, and is a figure who passively transmits gossip from high to the aspirational. But Mr. Chatterbox becomes increasingly creative as the text progresses and moves from narrating to producing new. The desperate Balcairn calls in “front page...news” (not the gossip column) composed of lies about the party he just attended.¹⁰³ Then he commits suicide by putting his head in the gas oven, leaving the newspaper with dozens of libel suits. Individual, technique, and technology merge, leading to self-destruction. Slipping from human into his vocation, Mr. Chatterbox moves from confusion to self-destruction.

“Then Adam became Mr. Chatterbox.”¹⁰⁴ Mr. Chatterbox is interchangeable, and moves from using the telephone to embodying the connectivity of the telephone as medium. Mr. Chatterbox undergoes a profane resurrection; if Agatha is destroyed and recreated as celebrity, the individual as stereotype, then Adam is recreated as an information broker. Adam similarly experiences a cost. Like Balcairn, he becomes subject to the media forces he ostensibly uses, but which become increasingly out of his control. Adam’s title, “Mr. Chatterbox,” combines a synonym for gossip and the telephone box—he loses subjectivity and is reduced to a connective medium as liaison between information and its consumer.

He is more skilled than Balcairn at repurposing his creative talents, skillfully generating space for autonomy in this role as he makes up sophisticates for the newspaper. Because of the insatiable desire for the new that the newspaper produces, Mr. Chatterbox must continually furnish fresh figures for the public to discuss. Actual celebrities do not provide enough material. Imogen Quest is “Adam’s most important creation.”¹⁰⁵ Despite the danger of readers armed with Debrett’s, Adam

put Imogen Quest down one day, quietly and decisively, as the most lovely and popular of the younger married set. And from the first she exhibited signs of a marked

personality. Adam wisely eschewed any attempts at derivation, but his readers nodded to each other and speedily supplied her with an exalted if irregular origin. Everything else Adam showered upon her. She had slightly more than average height, and was very dark and slim, with large Laurencin eyes and the negligent grace of the trained athlete (she fenced with the saber for half an hour every morning before breakfast). Even Provna, who was notoriously indifferent to conventional beauty, described her as “justifying the century.”¹⁰⁶

Well-versed in the readers’ expectations, Adam constructs the ultimate fantasy object of desire and traditional sophistication. Adam demonstrates his creative potential; she is a combination of “marked” details and “slightly more.” Adam has constructed a sophisticat, using trademarks that he knows will appeal to his readers, but there is also a literary quality to his writing—the phrases would be recognizable within popular fiction. While Adam avoids derivation, readers still pretend that they know her and thus have access to insider information, casting themselves as sophisticates. Through Adam’s pen, Imogen Quest’s clothes become “incomparable,” her character “a lovely harmony of contending virtues,” and her set “a superb mean between those two poles of savagery Lady Circumference and Lady Metroland.” She is absorbed by the mass of newspaper readers, and “soon Imogen Quest became a byword for social inaccessibility—the final goal for all climbers.”¹⁰⁷ Aspiration readers of a variety of classes use this constructed figure to style themselves as sophisticates, and Adam

could hear her name spoken reverently in cocktail clubs, and casually let slip in such phrases as “My dear, I never see Peter now. He spends all his time with Imogen Quest,” or “As Imogen would say...” or “I think the Quests have got one like that. I must ask them where it came from.” And this knowledge on the intangible Quest set, moving

among them in uncontrollable dignity of life, seemed to leaven and sweeten the lives of Mr. Chatterbox's readers.¹⁰⁸

Adam's narrative shapes gossip encounters, which are less relational gossip than informational, as readers seek to demonstrate their insider status. The joke, of course, is that they are unable to recognize fiction when they see it and perpetuate the fiction of Imogen Heap. Adam has repurposed gossip to circulate fiction, a disguised collaboration between elite and middle-class desire. With Imogen, the regime of information demonstrates its further power. Creativity emerges in the text as Adam repurposes the telephone, from informational, celebrity liaison to creative tool, for as Ronell notes, the telephone "is itself unsure of its identity as object, thing, piece of equipment, perlocutionary intensity or artwork (the beginnings of telephony argue for its place as artwork)."¹⁰⁹ Adam takes advantage of that uncertainty. Within the celebrity culture of the novel, literature moves underground, and in doing so, troubles, like Latham's roman à clef, the line between fact and fiction. Creativity is indistinguishable from celebrity culture.

Literature, as the roman à clef demonstrates, cannot escape or be insulated from celebrity culture and the pursuit of sophistication. The stories about the celebrity image that circulate constrains creation.

Unfortunately, Adam is too successful at creating fictions that impinge on reality; celebrity culture does not want outright creativity. Ironically, his creativity creates his own rival for the affection of his fiancée, Nina; he "transfiguring [Ginger] with a blaze of notoriety."¹¹⁰ Nina ultimately marries Ginger because he has the money Adam does not. Adam moves from connecting the consumer to sophistication to the connective medium for his rival. Information and his vocation have invaded the private sphere of Adam's love life, bringing along with it the public concerns of money and fame. There is no separation within the regime of information,

which results in this type of undesirable connectivity, as connectivity overcomes attempts at intimacy. When Adam allows his creation and Nina to pen the gossip column in his absence, he is fired. His vocation eclipses his identity and relationships. This is the sort of relationship the creator wants to avoid in relation to middlebrow audiences and the popular elite, in which fiction serves aspirations of both towards sophistication.

WRITERLY SOPHISTICATION

Writerly sophistication, however, contrasts with Adam's failure. The sophisticated author of middlebrow texts uses gossip (e.g. the roman à clef) and mediating technologies (i.e. for self-promotion) to his or her desired ends. Unlike Adam, he is not bound by them. Recent modernist criticism is no stranger to literary self-promotion or its intersections with celebrity culture.

Works from Aaron Jaffe's *Modernism and the Literature of Celebrity* to Jonathan Goldman's *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity*, continue to make Lawrence Rainey's point that "the theme of authorial self-construction has been crucial to a great deal of recent scholarship,"¹¹¹ particularly in connection with modernism and the question of celebrity. How one constructs this authorial self-construction is important to Waugh. These critics have often focused on what Rainey describes as "new strategies for reputation building,"¹¹² or the implications of popular reputation, as in the case of Faye Hammill's *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture*. Critics have remained largely silent, however, about gossip's centrality to celebrity reputations and literary self-promotion. But the successful appeal of authors, particularly within the middlebrow, was predicated on a cultural marketplace very much interested in discussing sophistication.

While gossip was hardly a new strategy for reputation formation—not to mention its traditional role in reputation destruction—getting people to talk, as Waugh recognized, could be adapted to a modern context. Like the strategies Rainey details, gossip had the capacity to "respon[d] to

increasingly international cultural interchanges, the growing prominence of the early mass media, the rising pressure of advertising, the unprecedented fusion of information and entertainment, and the challenges presented by a dense, highly differentiated array of institutional arenas in which to speak to an increasingly fragmented public.”¹¹³ Gossip was instrumental in constructing and maintaining the reputations of literary celebrity within certain segments of modernism.

Sophistication for Waugh, however, nuances this relationship between authors and celebrity culture. Sophisticated authors leverage the competencies and desires of their readers for sophistication or use real-life gossip of the social elite within their own stories. Rather than subjecting themselves to readers’ desires as does Adam; sophisticated authors are able to use personal gossip and mass media technologies to their own ends, whether to boost their own reputation or sell more books. For a figure often characterized as anti-modern, Waugh was a savvy self-promoter from early in his career, as “Careers for Our Sons: Literature. The Way to Fame” demonstrates. After his first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928) made him the “talk of the town,”¹¹⁴ Waugh still needed money and was determined to keep his name in the public eye.¹¹⁵ Thanks to his editor and new-found reputation, he was soon penning articles for the popular dailies and periodicals; thanks to his newspaper friends,¹¹⁶ he was a regular feature in the popular gossip columns. Waugh ostensibly tips his hand in “Careers for Our Sons,” which was part of a series for the weekly humorous London journal, *Passing Show*, attests to Waugh’s keen awareness of the relationship between self-promotion and literary success, specifically the power of the popular press:

The reviews matter very little in the case of a novel. The important thing is to make people talk about it. You can do this by forcing your way into the newspapers in some

other way. Attempt to swim the Channel; get unjustly arrested in public park; disappear. There are innumerable means of attracting public notice. even a severe accident in a gale should be enough to secure you a commission for a series of articles on “the Church” or some such topic.

From then onwards your fame is secure. Your advice will be enlisted over the telephone upon questions of public moment; photographers will offer you complimentary sittings.¹¹⁷

But successful publicity, according to “Careers,” goes beyond appearing in print. The real coup for the aspiring author is circulation as a verbal commodity—one needs to get people talking. Then the sophisticated author can make the press do as he likes; they will come to him. Waugh’s roman à clef, like the newspaper and its producers, exploits readers’ desire for gossip; it is the product of the vocational call to gossip which Waugh has answered. But this is a call Waugh chooses to take, rather than being subject to the mediating instrument. Waugh himself makes for an effective Chatterbox like Adam, who creatively exploits his knowledge of and proximity to celebrity figures while retaining agency. Taking on the role of Mr. Chatterbox is also a lucrative act of self-promotion for Waugh. Stannard reads this as accidental: “in attempting to undermine the glamorous image of his young characters he had inadvertently enhanced their image as an object of fashionable imitation.” But Jaffe reading of this as deliberate self-promotion, describing it as the “disjuncture between Waugh the publicist and Waugh the narrator.”¹¹⁸ In contrast, I would argue that sophistication bridges Waugh as publicist and narrator, for in both capacities, Waugh acknowledges the value of traditional sophistication’s discrimination while acknowledging the wide-spread desire for the new.

CONCLUSION

Through its depiction of popular sophistication and “being modern,” *Vile Bodies*, perhaps surprisingly, makes traditional sophistication desirable by virtue of its discriminating qualities and popular sophistication advantageous to the emerging author as a space of agency. Waugh, while ruthlessly critical of celebrity culture the pseudo-modern, is in *Vile Bodies* neither anti-sophistication nor anti-modern. Rather, *Vile Bodies*, is stridently critical of celebrity and celebrity culture, which turns the individual into a commodity and initiates the fruitless pursuit of sophistication. The novel through contrast, calls for a reevaluation of traditional sophistication.

¹ Evelyn Waugh, “Let Us Return to the Nineties, But Not to Oscar Wilde” in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, edited by Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1983), 123. Originally published in *Harper’s Bazaar*, November 1930. Waugh continues, “it is no wonder that fashionable people in London look back wistfully to that happy decade. The word Art has the same glamour. They long ardently to be artistic, but all the arts have withdrawn themselves far beyond their comprehension. How they have hungered for a time when a reputation for wit might be achieved through paradox and epigram –those monkey-tricks of the intellect. The revival of interest in the nineties is another –possibly a last – attempt of the amateurs and dilettanti to persuade themselves that they are cultured.” “Let Us Return,” 124.

² Waugh, “Let Us Return,” 123.

³ These activities of the modern individual evoke glamour, but the implicit knowledge required by keeping up verbally requires an underlying sophistication. One’s speech demonstrates one’s knowingness or lack thereof; being modern is difficult because “by the time one has really become modern, there is almost nothing to be said about it.” The pseudo, who looks to bygone fashions as a substitute, is not speechless, for “if one had learned the jargon there was quite a lot one could say about the painting of ten years ago – ‘recession,’ ‘planes,’ ‘significance,’ etc.; but before a painting by M. Picasso in his latest manner, the most glib tongue is compelled to silence” (Waugh, “Let Us Return,” 123). For Waugh the popular pursuit of “being modern” is separate from exhibiting taste. It varies and follows the “spirit of the age” and the fashions of moment; it is determined, therefore, by the cultural arbiters of the era.

⁴ Evelyn Waugh, “Why Glorify Youth?” in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, edited by Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1983), 126. Originally published in *Women’s Journal*, March 1932.

⁵ Waugh, “Why Glorify Youth?” 126.

⁶ Evelyn Waugh, “Preface,” in *Vile Bodies* (New York: Back Bay Books), viii.

⁷ Waugh, “Why Glorify Youth?” 126.

⁸ Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903-1930* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1986), 177.

⁹ Cecil Beaton, *The Glass of Fashion: A Personal History of Fifty Years of Changing Tastes and the People Who Have Inspired Them* (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2014), loc. 3594, Kindle.

¹⁰ Beverley Nichols, *All I Could Never Be: Some Reflections* (London: Cape, 1949), Google Books, quoted in D.J. Taylor, *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 3.

¹¹ Noël Coward, "Introduction," in *The Penguin Complete Saki* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), xiv.

¹² Taylor, *Bright Young People*, 4.

¹³ Tom Driberg, *Daily Express*, 14 July 1928, quoted in Taylor, *Bright Young People*, 5.

¹⁴ Sean Latham, *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law, and the Roman à Clef* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁵ Latham, *Scandal*, 11. Latham also writes, "for the roman à clef, celebrity culture acts as a catalytic medium, activating the form's distinctive energies by transferring interpretive power to ever more widely dispersed audiences. Private lives quickly become public properties so that...the boundary between gossip and the novel begins to dissolve." *Scandal*, 43.

¹⁶ Latham, *Scandal*, 7.

¹⁷ Latham, *Scandal*, 7.

¹⁸ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 155.

¹⁹ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 61.

²⁰ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 62.

²¹ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 63.

²² Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 9.

²³ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 6. The "i" of her name and the verb poetically create the description here.

²⁴ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 10.

²⁵ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 31.

²⁶ Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh*, 196.

²⁷ Donat Gallagher, "Introduction," in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1983), 35.

²⁸ Waugh, "Preface," viii.

²⁹ Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh*, 203-04.

³⁰ Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh*, 204.

³¹ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 2.

³² According to Trilling, "true, which is to say loyal, never wavering in constancy. True, which is to say honest: there are to be no subterfuges in dealing with him. True...as carpenters and bricklayers use the word, precisely aligned with him." *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 4. But, it also assumes that this results in a sincere relationship with others. Trilling points to Polonius' speech in *Hamlet*, a play that is suffused with sincerity, as the pivotal event in this regards—"This above all: to thine own self be true / And it doth follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man," a transcendent moment of insight in which he "has conceived of sincerity as an essential condition of virtue and has discovered how it is to be attained." *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 3.

³³ Robert Louis Stevenson, "Truth of Intercourse" (1879), in *The Lost Art of Conversation: Selected Essays*, ed. Horatio S. Krans (New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1910), 319.

³⁴ Stevenson, "Truth of Intercourse," 318.

³⁵ Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh*, 198.

³⁶ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 25.

³⁷ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 26-27. Arguably, Adam's autobiography is very different from Trillings's; he is interested not in self-revelation but solely in profit, a fictional self constructed for public consumption. While Adam does protest that "my whole livelihood depends on this book," it is only after he's asserted the purity of the content—"But, good heavens, there isn't a word in the book—you must be misinterpreting it." Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 26. Adam begins the narrative as sincere, earnest, bewildered, and naïve. He willingly entrusts his thousand pounds to an unfamiliar Major and makes no attempts to conceal his financial situation from his on again/off again fiancé, Nina during the first part of the narrative. He sheds this transparency as a part of bildungsroman journey from innocence to experience, epitomized in his identity as Mr. Chatterbox.

³⁸ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 26.

³⁹ Patricia Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 5.

⁴⁰ Spacks, *Gossip*, 5.

⁴¹ Frederick Beaty, *The Ironic World of Evelyn Waugh: A Study of Eight Novels* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), 55.

⁴² Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 28.

⁴³ Beaty, *Ironic World*, 55.

⁴⁴ Spacks, *Gossip*, 48.

⁴⁵ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 29.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Goldman, *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 20-21.

⁴⁷ Goldman, *Celebrity*, 24.

⁴⁸ Goldman, *Celebrity*, 25.

⁴⁹ Goldman, *Celebrity*, 1-2.

⁵⁰ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 30.

⁵¹ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 30.

⁵² Evelyn Waugh, "The War and the Younger Generation," in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, edited by Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1983), 62. Originally published in *Spectator*, 13 April 1929.

⁵³ Waugh, "Younger Generation," 62.

⁵⁴ Waugh, "Younger Generation," 62.

⁵⁵ Waugh, "Younger Generation," 62.

⁵⁶ This quality was not what Waugh personally had expected. In 1921, he writes, "During the last few years, a new generation has grown up; between them and the young men of 1912 lies the great gulf of the war." The article inquires, "What will the young men of 1922 be?" With the hope and idealism of youth—Waugh would have just turned 18 when the article was published—Waugh predicts that his generation will be different. He declares, "They will be, above all things, clear-sighted, they will have no use for phrases or shadows... The youngest generation are going to be very hard and analytical and unsympathetic, but they are going to aim at things as they are and they will not call their aim 'Truth.'" They will, he imagines, embody a morally sound disavowal of the double-speak that had led to the war. Waugh's generation was to fill with moral clarity and thus make up for the failures of the previous generation. He continues, "there will be much that they will lose, but all that they have will be real." In short, Waugh expects the post-war youth will be "real." Evelyn Waugh, "The Youngest Generation," in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, edited by Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1983), 11. Originally published in *Lancing College Magazine*, December 1921.

⁵⁷ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 30.

⁵⁸ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 31.

⁵⁹ Goldman, *Celebrity*, 1.

⁶⁰ David Trotter, *Literature in the First Media Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London: Harvard University Press), 22-23.

⁶¹ Trotter uses “telephony” to encompass the telephone as “technology, system, household fixture, and bodily prosthesis.” *First Media Age*, 4.

⁶² William Uricchio, “Historicizing Media in Transition,” in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, ed. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 26.

⁶³ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 25-26.

⁶⁴ Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology—Schizophrenia—Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 9.

⁶⁵ Ronell, *Telephone*, 45.

⁶⁶ Spacks, *Gossip*, 3.

⁶⁷ She does tell the rest of the Bright Young People once she, Adam, and they are on the carriage—no chance of them telephoning it in. Presumably she telephones it in immediately after entering Victoria station, for it is in that evening’s papers and Nina exclaims she already knows about Agatha when Adam calls after seeing his publisher and attempts to share the news.

⁶⁸ Patrick Collier, *Modernism on Fleet Street* (Hampshire, United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishers, 2006), 2.

⁶⁹ The mediating force of gossip between elite and popular did not solely travel in one direction. According to Anita Loos, while in the midst of research about the discovery of radium by Marie and Pierre Curie for a film, Aldous Huxley discovered Marie’s extra-marital activities in the newspaper and based a play off of it: “Aldous sent for a complete file of French newspapers that covered the period of the discovery of radium. One day he phoned me excitedly from his office. ‘Come down here right away! I’ve got something amazing to show you.’ I enjoyed being amazing as much as he did and lost no time.

Spread out on Aldous’s desk were a number of newspaper clippings on an aspect of the Curie romance we’d never heard about. A certain journalistic sleuth had uncovered a ‘love next’ in a shoddy Paris hotel where Marie Curie held trysts with her husband’s young assistant. There was even a photograph of the room, bare of furniture except for a double bed. But over the headboard there hung a large framed portrait of, guess who? *Pierre Curie!*

Naturally MGM couldn’t use that episode in its film but later Aldous made it the basis for his most successful stage play, *The Genius and the Goddess*, for which I supplied him with a collaborator; my dear friend Beth Wendell.” *Kiss Hollywood Good-by* (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1974), 155.

⁷⁰ Faye Hammill’s study considers the “varying degrees of embodied visibility” of middlebrow women writers. *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 4. Goldman focuses on the visual circulation of celebrity as commodity: “Wilde wears his markers of subjectivity on his body as features of the visible object that circulates in the marketplace of images.” *Celebrity*, 29.

⁷¹ John Stevenson, *British Society 1914-45* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 405.

⁷² Waugh, “Preface,” vii.

⁷³ Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh*, 177.

⁷⁴ See Peter Twaites, “Circles of Confusion and Sharp Vision: British Press Photography, 1919–1939,” in Peter Caterall et al., eds., *Northcliffe's Legacy: Aspects of the British Popular Press, 1896–1996* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 108-109.

⁷⁵ Martin Conboy, *Journalism in Britain: A Historical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing Inc., 2011), 8. Mark Hampton notes that others assert a more gradual transformation, including Raymond Williams: “Historians as well as contemporaries have linked these changes with the increasing concentration of press ownership and, in some cases, with the 1870 Education Act.” Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 37.

⁷⁶ Hamilton Fyfe, *Northcliffe: An Intimate Biography* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), 82.

⁷⁷ Laurel Brake, *Subjugated Knowledges: Journalism, Gender, and Literature in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 91.

⁷⁸ Fyfe describes Northcliffe’s perspective, in which “[t]he old-established newspapers...had up to this time been published for a small number, and out of that small number a tiny class set the standard at which the newspapers should aim. The tiny class was the class which ruled the British Empire, and it was, in the jargon of the day, ‘highly educated’...For them the big things were politics and money. They did not expect to find newspapers anything much besides. They certainly did not look for light reading, entertaining scraps. If they had a taste for gossip, they got it at their clubs, at their dinner-tables. Their ‘talking-points’ were made for them in social intercourse. They did not read, though they always glanced at their newspapers (it seems unlikely that anyone really read them!); they were satisfied, they did not want anything different.” *Northcliffe*, 81.

⁷⁹ Tom Clarke, *My Northcliffe Diary* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book, 1931), 192.

⁸⁰ Clarke, *Northcliffe Diary*, 4.

⁸¹ Clarke, *Northcliffe Diary*, 191.

⁸² Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 25.

⁸³ Fyfe, *Northcliffe*, 37, 49.

⁸⁴ Donald Matheson, “The Birth of News Discourse: Changes in News Language in British Newspapers, 1880-1930,” *Media, Culture and Society* 22, no. 5 (2000): 570.

⁸⁵ D. George Boyce, “Harmsworth, Alfred Charles William, Viscount Northcliffe (1865–1922),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁸⁶ George Newnes was the newspaper proprietor who founded *Tit-Bits*, a weekly journal “made up entirely of entertaining and interesting anecdotes” which was a forerunner of Northcliffe’s *Daily Mail*. A. J. A. Morris, “Newnes, Sir George, first baronet,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁸⁷ Fyfe, *Northcliffe*, 12.

⁸⁸ Spacks, *Gossip*, 20.

⁸⁹ Latham, *Scandal*, 19.

⁹⁰ Douglas Goldring, *Odd Man Out: The Autobiography of a “Propaganda Novelist”* (Chapman and Hall, 1935), 267.

⁹¹ Waugh, “Preface,” vii.

⁹² Trotter, *Media Age*, 38.

⁹³ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 38.

⁹⁴ This scene fictionalizes the opening of Q.D. Leavis’s *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), “In twentieth-century England not only every one can read, but it is safe to add that every one

does read. Though the *Report on Public Libraries* (1927) states that not more than 11 per cent. of the population make use of the public library books, yet the number of Sunday newspapers sold will correct any false impression these figures give. On the day of leisure even the poorest households take a newspaper, though it may be of a different type from that favoured by the educated. A Sunday morning walk through any residential district will reveal the head of the family 'reading the paper' in each front window; in the poorest quarters the *News of the World* is read on the doorstep or in bed; the weekly perusal of the *Observer* or the *Sunday Times*, which give a large proportion of their contents to book-reviews and publishers' advertisements, is in many cases the only time that even the best-intentioned business man or schoolmaster can spare for his literary education." *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), 3.

⁹⁵ Leavis, *Fiction*, 19-20.

⁹⁶ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 38-39.

⁹⁷ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 38-39.

⁹⁸ Colin Seymour-Ure, "Northcliffe's Legacy" in *Northcliffe's Legacy: Aspects of the British Popular Press, 1896-1996*, ed. Peter Catterall, Colin Seymour-Ure, and Adrian Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 12. He continues, "[a] story in the first issue about 'our cycling MPs' gave a nudge that, in the saddle, 'public men' were plain folks like the rest of us. One headline, 'VERY ORDINARY PEOPLE OFTEN MISTAKEN FOR ROYALTY', took this idea to the extreme. Not only were royalty ordinary human beings: they were literally indistinguishable from the rest of us." "Legacy," 12.

⁹⁹ Kate McLoughlin, "Interruption Overload: Telephones in Ford Madox Ford's '4692 Padd,' *A Call and A Man Could Stand Up —*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 3 (2013): 52. She, admittedly, cites Avital Ronell.

¹⁰⁰ McLoughlin, "Interruption," 52.

¹⁰¹ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 59.

¹⁰² Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 104.

¹⁰³ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 129.

¹⁰⁴ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 135.

¹⁰⁵ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 142.

¹⁰⁶ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 143.

¹⁰⁷ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 143-44, 144.

¹⁰⁸ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 144.

¹⁰⁹ Ronell, *Telephone*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 146.

¹¹¹ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 4.

¹¹² Rainey, *Institutions*, 5.

¹¹³ Rainey, *Institutions*, 5.

¹¹⁴ Christopher Sykes' biography, which draws heavily on Sykes' friendship with Waugh, describes Waugh's success thus: "it would be wrong to say that Evelyn woke up to find himself famous, but it is correct to say that he woke up to find himself the talk of the town, meaning by 'town' those who knew something about public school and university life and fashionable society." *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), 127.

¹¹⁵ He wrote his literary agent, A.D. Peters multiple times on the subject; one letter ended with "please fix up anything that will earn me anything – even cricket criticism or mothers welfare

notes.” Another declares, “it would be so nice if we could persuade them [newspaper editors] that I personify the English youth movement.” *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. by Mark Amory (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 30.

¹¹⁶ “There was, in fact, small danger of Waugh’s being forgotten so long as [Tom] Driberg and [Patrick] Balfour were gossip columnists. They often referred to his social life, emphasizing his youth and intellectual versatility.” Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903-1930* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1986), 161. Waugh had attended school with both writers, Lancing College with Driberg and Oxford University with Balfour.

¹¹⁷ Evelyn Waugh, “Careers for Our Sons: Literature. The Way to Fame” in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1983), 50. Originally published in *Passing Show*, 2 February 1929.

¹¹⁸ Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 49. He continues, “one way to account for reading *Vile Bodies* as part roman-à-clef, part instruction book, is that it misses the joke. To imitate the novel’s exaggerated dialogue and fantastically profligate parties is to be captivated by the fashionable emptiness being exposed. How could one miss that *Vile Bodies*—with its bleak ending on the waste land of ‘the biggest battlefield in the history of the world’ – was intended as, in Stannard’s phrase, ‘a manifesto of disillusionment’? How could one miss this purpose given that the one substantial intrusion of the narrator’s voice in a novel composed mostly of dialogue is censorious?” *Culture of Celebrity*, 45.

CHAPTER TWO: Nancy Mitford's *Je Ne Sais Quoi*: Sophistication beyond British Borders in
the French Salon

A foundational claim of my introduction is that speech is how popular sophistication is displayed by the social elite and pursued within the middle class and middlebrow during historical modernism. In chapter one, I explored how sophistication manifested as a social good within late-1920s Britain, even as it is harshly satirized in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930). Waugh's exemplary Bright Young Thing, Agatha Runcible, is thoroughly modern, and is pursued by other characters, desirous to attain her status and sense of insider knowingness. Sophisticated speech signifies that one is in the know; it is a way of "being modern" within Waugh's text and the elite London society his roman à clef describes. The fantasy of *Vile Bodies* is that sophistication can be extracted from its usual trappings (wealth plus the right class, gender, and social power) and reduced to information transferrable to the middle-class hearer and the middlebrow reader. Yet popular sophistication is a shell game, constructed by those desirous for its cultural capital and perpetuated through the circulating power of gossip and jargon. Instead, it demonstrates the inferior tastes of its practitioners.

My next chapter considers Nancy Mitford, who was, as Beaton notes, also associated with the Bright Young Things. Her teasing essay on upper-class ("U") and non-upper-class ("non-U") language usage, "The English Aristocracy" (1956), successfully appealed to British class-conscious aspirations of verbal status markers and is still recognizable today. But instead of foregrounding her relationship with aspirational British publics, this chapter counters her snobbish infamy and claims Mitford as the epitome of traditional sophistication and its *je ne sais quoi*. Building on Hammill's criticism, it acknowledges traditional sophistication's connection with France, and emphasizes its roots in salon culture more specifically.

THESIS

Like Waugh, Mitford satirized British sophistication; she foregrounds its inferiority to French wit and fashion. Unlike sophistication in *Vile Bodies*, which is a sham perpetuated by celebrity culture, sophistication is *real* for Mitford. It encapsulates the art of living well and provides an integrated philosophy of art and life. Sophistication is an authentic subjective quality. This inner state, the *je ne sais quoi* specific to an individual, manifests in the possessor's social performance and aesthetic production (social and literary taste). Sophisticated art (popular or traditional) reflects the sophistication possessed by its creator. The creation of sophisticated art, including Mitford's own, must be rooted in a life itself sophisticated. My central claim about Mitford mature aesthetic is this: in traditional sophistication's dazzling performance of *je ne sais quoi*, creating and living merge; the sophisticate's life is transformed into art and becomes the basis for relational intimacy. Impeccable taste makes for good art and good relationships.

Mitford's literary career traces the path of her transformation into a traditional sophisticate, a state captured by Waugh in his article, "Nancy Mitford" (1951). Mitford's own life and art move away from her British origins and increasingly center around traditional French sophistication (Parisian fashion and the traditional French salon). This development is the source text for Mitford's middlebrow novels and non-fiction; her works are a sophisticate's romans à clef. In *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) and *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949), Mitford wrestles with creating women's agency in the relationships between popular and traditional sophistication, Britain and France, and gossip and the salon's wit. *The Blessing* (1951) and subsequent works focus on traditional, French sophistication, reflecting Mitford's own impeccable taste and French experiences. Her later biographical writings—I focus on *Madame de Pompadour* (1954)—demonstrate that only the sophisticate can uncover the sophisticated lives of historical and

literary figures, and like sartorial fashion, find bits of the past that can be resurrected as current forms of sophistication. Mitford's infamous U and non-U essay, "The English Aristocracy" (1956), disavows her native England and those who did not, despite their voracious pursuit of the new, take sophistication seriously enough. True sophistication must first be lived before it is written and mediated for middlebrow audiences. In short, various sophistications, which correspond to Mitford's life, are mediated by her creative output.

BEATON AND BAUDELAIRE

I turn to Charles Baudelaire to define how sophistication aestheticizes life in Mitford's mature aesthetic, transforming traditional sophistication into ephemeral beauty. Popular sophistication is a pursuit not just of the modernist new generally, but specifically of the new that does not last. Traditional sophistication, in contrast, epitomizes ephemeral beauty. Both popular and elite sophistication hold an obsession with the ephemeral; they exemplify Charles Baudelaire's description of "modernity" as "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent."¹ But they encode disparate aesthetic values.² Like Baudelaire's painter of modern life, the traditional sophisticate quests for the "ephemeral, the fleeting forms of beauty in the life of our day."³ For example, and apropos to Mitford, are Cecil Beaton's scions of fashion. As I described in the introduction, they discriminatingly draw from both high (the art of conversation) and low (species of talk) within their dazzling performances; speech creates the sophisticate's aesthetic value of ephemeral beauty. French sophistication, Mitford's ideal that I align with traditional sophistication, realizes these fleeting forms of beauty in addition to social distinction. As I will demonstrate below, Mitford herself and her protagonists metamorphize into sophisticates.

NANCY MITFORD: THE TRADITIONAL SOPHISTICATE

Before I consider Mitford's fiction, I will analyze Evelyn Waugh's 1951 article, "Nancy Mitford" in which her dazzling performance of *je ne sais quoi* is on display. Evelyn Waugh penned "Nancy Mitford" after visiting Mitford in Paris. The two of them corresponded regularly, and the article promoted Mitford's latest novel, *The Blessing* (1951), which was dedicated to Waugh. Waugh opens the article with Mitford's transformation into a sophisticate; he contrasts Mitford with the world around her: "in a world where almost everything becomes daily more uniform and more drab, it is a joy to contemplate the recent metamorphosis of Miss Nancy Mitford."⁴ Mitford, as Waugh details later, has remade her image as a French sophisticate with the novel, rather than an upper-class British author. Her transformation is akin to the metamorphoses Baudelaire associates with ephemeral modernity. Of the art the painter of modern life produces Baudelaire writes, "[y]ou have no right to despise this transitory fleeting element, the metamorphoses of which are so frequent."⁵

Waugh's ekphrasis captures Nancy's sophistication, her ephemeral beauty in person and work, at the height of her career. At her residence in the fashionable district of Paris,

She greets you in a Dior dress, her waist so small that one fears it may snap at any moment. This is the only waspish thing about her; all else is sweetness, happiness and inexpressible levity. She leads you to her salon, full of the exquisite *bibelots* she has amassed, and talks, prattles, giggles – of what? Gossip, outrageous, precise, discriminating; of France, with schoolgirlish enthusiasm. Miss Mitford has a crush on France and everything French.⁶

Sophistication's usual boredom is absent, but "outrageous," "discriminating," and a Dior-worthy waist counterbalance Mitford's levity. Despite the prattle and giggles this is an ideal, aestheticized image of aristocratic, elite sophistication. Her "enthusiasm" does not diminish her

unerring taste for the “exquisite” but rather emphasizes it. Sophistication here is both recognizable and unique to Mitford; though it is less variable than popular sophistication, traditional sophistication is inflected by the individual; her discriminating engagement is in tension with her crush rather than detachment. Mitford’s life has become art, and she epitomizes the sophisticate as Baudelaire’s ephemeral beauty of modernity. In this ephemeral moment, both gossip and the French salon are evoked. Mitford’s sophistication blends art and life, cementing her international reputation. Waugh presents a very un-middle-class object of desire, envy, and aspiration for readers. She the consummate performer of sophistication, and Waugh the perfect audience.⁷

Mitford’s salon establishes her as the exemplar French mediating hostess and thus of French sophistication. As Harold Acton describes in his memoir of Mitford, “her rooms in ‘Mr. Street’ were...a cultural annexe to the British Embassy, a congenial rendezvous of French and English letters.”⁸ As Waugh describes in “Nancy Mitford,” her salon’s attendees include both “formidable dowagers of the very *gratin* of French society” and “the most discredited Bohemians from across the Channel”; this ability to skillfully balance very different types of attendees evokes the sophisticate’s facility with erudite ideas, slang and everyday gossip alike, leveraged towards one’s self-construction as an object of modernity’s ephemeral beauty. Waugh emphasizes Mitford’s shrewd skills as a hostess, for “[o]n each she showers an equal, loving regard, but she does not mix them. She is too wise a bird for that.” The essay is on point with the signature detachment of the sophisticate. “[W]ise” discretely evokes the etymology of sophistication in “sophia” and “sophos” for those in the know,⁹ though “bird” has a certain acerbic bite (this is Evelyn Waugh after all).

Mitford is a sophisticated French mediator for popular audiences, even as her salon centers her love for France, gossip and witty conversation. Waugh deftly moves from Mitford herself to her recently published novel, *The Blessing* (1951). Mitford's art and life are contiguous; in leaving England she "broke from the chrysalis, took wing and settled lightly in the heart of Paris where we find her today. Her present, glittering book gives a picture of what she finds there."¹⁰ Upper-class Parisian life is the focus of *The Blessing*. Waugh claims the book is sophisticated and a mimetic representation of Nancy's experiences. The main characters in Mitford's novels, including Grace in *The Blessing*, move from naïveté towards sophistication through encounters with those more sophisticated than themselves. Mitford's reader should *not* associate her with naïve Grace of *The Blessing*, for she skillfully navigates the tricky French social world detailed in the book.

FANTASTIC DIALOGUE IN *THE PURSUIT OF LOVE* (1945)

Waugh's article constructs the arrival of Mitford as a traditional sophisticate. Now I turn to Mitford's transnational mediation prior to *The Blessing*. I trace her shifting relationship with various forms of sophistication as mediated by her art (her novels) and life experiences. In *The Pursuit of Love* (1945), Mitford provided readers with an education in sophistication, to which she also aspires. Sophistication is tied to her own authorial experiences and aspirations. *The Pursuit of Love* was her breakout success and the first to engage sophistication seriously beyond British borders. This traditional bildungsroman follows the escapades of the beautiful, spirited, and upper-class Linda Radlett, and traces her transformation from a naivety to sophistication. It is narrated by her shy cousin and best friend, Fanny Wincham. Fanny begins with her own childhood on the Alconleigh estate as a part of the unforgettable Radlett family. She then details Linda's bildungsroman: Linda's failed marriages and intense love affair with the irresistible—

though short, dark, and stocky—French duke, Fabrice Sauveterre. Their romance moves from Paris to London and ends tragically with Linda’s death in childbirth and Fabrice’s execution by the Nazis. The novel is in keeping with sophisticated texts described by Hammill that “addresses an ostensibly sophisticated audience—often by means of positioning the reader as much more knowing than the innocent protagonist—may, while dramatising that protagonist’s education, also present lessons in manners and models of successful and unsuccessful social behavior.”¹¹ The education is less in manners and British social behavior, than in an aestheticized way of life—elite French behavior, particularly speech—one unattainable for Linda.

The reader is primarily instructed in sophisticated speech by Fabrice, the character in whom art and life merge pleasurably and who is the epitome of traditional sophistication. The character of Fabrice—whose Frenchness infuses every inch of his characterization—is modeled on Mitford’s French lover, Gaston Palewski. He was a close associate and trusted advisor to Charles de Gaulle; Mitford fell in love with him in 1942 in London. Palewski, who had spent a year at Oxford, returned to England to work for the Free French as the de Gaulle’s directeur de cabinet. The couple’s proximity in London lasted only eight months—Palewski left with the General for Algiers in May 1943—but the relationship continued via frequent correspondence until Mitford moved to Paris after composing *The Pursuit of Love* in 1946.¹² As Selena Hastings describes,

[Mitford] fell deeply in love with [Palewski], and he quickly became the centre of her life and the most important source of inspiration for her writing. Although for his part he was never able to reciprocate her feelings, he remained fond of her as a friend and enormously entertained by her sense of humour and skill as a raconteur. Charming, sophisticated, a connoisseur of art and an incorrigible womanizer, Palewski provided not only the pattern

for the fascinating French heroes of her novels (Fabrice in *The Pursuit of Love*, Charles-Edouard in *The Blessing* and *Don't Tell Alfred*) but also in her biographies for the characters of Louis XIV, Louis XV, and (to a lesser extent) Voltaire.¹³

Hastings styles Palewski as the key inspiration for Mitford's writings. Indeed, *The Pursuit of Love*, of all of Mitford's novels, most closely resembles their relationship. But Mitford still took significant liberties, and the ending of the *Pursuit of Love* is pure fiction—"the Colonel" as Mitford called him—survived the war and the two continued their relationship until Mitford's death. The portrayal mediates a specific ideal of Frenchness, one which audiences found utterly compelling. The novel sold over a million copies.¹⁴ The transnational meditation of Frenchness and French conversation in *The Pursuit of Love*, the romance that spans both Paris and London, was an idealized one. Its mediation reflects Mitford's distance from Gaston Palewski.

Simultaneously, the novel also encodes Mitford's own coming of age; her childhood experiences provide much of the source material for the Radlett's chaotic yet diverting household, including Mitford's father, the second Baron Redesdale, as the blustering Uncle Matthew.¹⁵ This childhood provides an excellent foundation for Linda, and Mitford's, witty gossip, which is the basis for their respective popular sophistication.

The privileging of art over life, in which Mitford's experiences are blended with fantasies about how things could have been, would characterize her first two major novels. Life provides a basis for art, even as art is privileged over life. It is only in art, not life, that Mitford (and possibly her readers) finds sophistication and relational intimacy. This is not merely the mode of the roman à clef, i.e. the interweaving of fact and fiction for the sake of a good novel. Rather, it is Mitford's pursuit of a sophisticated life, the quest for "ephemeral, the fleeting forms of beauty in the life of our day." This is found in fashion, in sophisticated speech, and in art which does not

chastise life for being what it is not, but rather uses art to creatively reimagine it. One's own life, including sophisticated speech, is created by privileging life over art, including the forms of speech there to be found. This *mélange* of art and life is what Mitford mediates to her readers ostensibly to make them sophisticated. This sophistication is the basis for relational intimacy. She shows her readers what is possible beyond the narrow confines of British sophistication as the relentless pursuit of the new exemplified by gossip.

This traditional sophistication (a specific kind of life-in-art) is upper-class, elite, and above all, French. The conversation of Fabrice is apace with the characteristics Hastings ascribes to Palewski: “[c]harming, sophisticated, a connoisseur of art and an incorrigible womanizer.” Relational intimacy in the novel is conducted via traditional sophistication—Linda finds a sexually and verbally satisfying relationship with Fabrice, both of which are nationalized. Linda's true *bildungsroman* in sophistication—and the novel's witty dialogue—begins at this point of crisis when the wealthy Parisian duke enters the novel; just as his short, stocky frame makes him an antitype of the tall, dark, and handsome hero, so too Fabrice's modes of communication with Linda challenges conversational transparency that she has sought thus far. Their relationship shifts her underlying priorities from center to surface, from the heart to externals. In the sophisticated speech of their relationship, rather than ideas, the talk of the insignificant and ephemeral drives their relationship.

Sophisticated, suave banter is the basis for their intimacy and Linda's seduction. At their first meeting in Paris, she is penniless and sobbing, having just fled an unhappy marriage and refugee work. Fabrice refuses to discuss the refugee situation she has left but insists that she “go on telling me about your husbands.” He then responds by noting her clothing and appearance:

“Just as I guessed, your first is rich, your second is poor. I could see you once had a rich husband, the dressing-case and the fur coat, though it is a hideous colour, and no doubt, as far as one could see, with it bundled over your arm, a hideous shape. Still, mink usually betokens a rich husband somewhere. Then this dreadful linen suit you are wearing has ready-made written all over it.”

“You are rude, it’s a very pretty suit.”

“And last year’s. Jackets are getting longer you will find. I’ll get you some clothes—if you were well dressed you would be quite good-looking, though it’s true your eyes are small. Blue, a good colour, but small.”

“In England...I am considered a beauty.”

“Well, you have points.”¹⁶

Incisive, smart, and fashion-conscious, Fabrice’s conversation is equal parts traditional French sophistication and stereotype. Linda’s clothing, habits, and body are anatomized by Fabrice; he passes judgement in unmistakable cultural superiority. She, in turn, is naïve and sincere. The scene portrays French aristocratic superiority to middlebrow readers, while also depending on fantasies and stereotypical tropes. It models speech, even as it emphasizes traditional sophistication’s superiority. The sophisticate is not the character with whom the reader identifies; rather, Linda learns sophistication from Fabrice much as Mitford’s readers learn it from the author. But what is this sophistication and what lesson is she taught? Linda is not sophisticated; she does not embody ephemeral beauty but as the text tellingly describes merely “ha[s] points.” She embodies the raw material of life that must be raised to the level of art by sophistication, or, through a romantic encounter with a traditional sophisticate. This is how Mitford makes sophistication possible for those who are not French sophisticates, that is, both herself and her

readers—she brings it into her fiction, and thus the realm of fantasy. Through Linda’s interactions with Fabrice, she imagines sophistication that is not within the speaker herself, but rather comes to her, here by being swept up. Art and life intertwine, and art proves superior. Sophistication is made so by proximity to France; however, it comes at the cost of female agency.

Nationalized differences are aligned with the verbal. French incisive conversation is clearly superior, particularly in romance, but English gossip is a useful and entertaining diversion; Linda’s witty gossip is akin to popular forms of sophistication.¹⁷ Linda becomes Fabrice’s mistress, and he installs her in a Paris flat. Their romance is, as Linda is aware, “a very penny-novelettish seduction,” but it is also “the authentic face of love.”¹⁸ Throughout their relationship, Linda responds and entertains with stories of her family and upbringing—a nationalized stereotyping of British female gossip and naivety, an identity which Linda deploys with significant skill, thus maintaining his affection. Of her eccentric family “he could not hear enough, and egged her on to excesses of exaggeration about her family and all their various idiosyncrasies...she recounted, for hours.”¹⁹ It is information about her family, the trivial occurrences, that sustain intimacy between them. This stream is “silly conversation [that] went on and on, but it was only froth on the surface.”²⁰ Their relationship is built on trivial details, including those of gossip; Patricia Spacks describes how gossip “insists on its own frivolity” and “[t]o make something out of nothing is gossip’s special creativity.”²¹ Mitford’s wit maintains its barbed edge—Linda, and through her Mitford, demonstrate an ironic self-awareness of the middlebrow tropes in which the novel deals—including nationalized stereotypes. But *Pursuit* also does not veer from the sheer pleasure of a fantastical romance between archetypal French and English, modified with several imperfections that only makes them memorable—her small

eyes and his height and built. The predictability of the plotline continues, with relational tension and uncertainty resolved with the unexpected appearance of the lover. But in the skilled hands of Mitford the novelist, who brings in the outside French influence—Linda’s gossip becomes sophisticated. Fabrice thus performs the work of the true sophisticate, to aestheticize an unsophisticated life and thus bring it to the level of ephemeral beauty. But this sophistication is described rather than transcribed for the reader. As will also become important in my third chapter, the reader is not given the sophisticated dialogue. Instead, it is narrated: “Fabrice talked to her, at her, and for her only, it was absolutely personal talk, scattered with jokes and allusions private to them both.”²² Mitford does not let the reader in on the secret; this dialogue only remains as sophisticated as the reader’s own imagination.

This is Linda’s life and her sophistication—she never learns to speak like Fabrice, but their relationship, and his sophistication, elevates her. Through his superiority, paradoxically, her inferior gossip becomes sophisticated—i.e. desirable to Fabrice—and she enters the relationship she desperately desires. For the aspirational, British reader (and Mitford herself), Mitford creates art out of everyday life. The novel’s fantasy is that gossip can be transformed into elite sophistication, just as Linda experiences through the agency of Fabrice.

Mitford acknowledges the difficult logic of this claim; the sophisticate’s superiority, rather than communication, transparency, or fidelity, is the basis for a relationship and a life well lived. Furthermore, Linda has no agency in this process; she is swept up by the romance. Falling in love in Paris and being seduced by French phrases and amour is a very middlebrow fantasy. Its Frenchness is pleasurable for the reader because it is clichéd. Linda temporarily loses faith in their relationship, for she “realized how little she really knew of Fabrice, he had seldom talked seriously to her, their relationship having been primarily physical while their conversations and

chats had all been based on jokes. They had laughed and made love and laughed again...Enough to satisfy her, but what about him?"²³ She fears he has "forgotten that meal of whipped cream."²⁴ But her fears are unfounded; Fabrice appears on her doorstep to declare his love—"from the first moment I knew that this was as real as all the others were false."²⁵ Fabrice's sophisticated judgments and her gossipy responses are sufficient conditions for love. The movement across national borders of Linda and Fabrice and the frisson of their conversational differences makes for good sales, but the novel is hardly a nuanced mediation for middlebrow readers of French conversation and sophistication. Rather, it reinforces stereotypes of suave lovers and passionate dialogue. What has this to do with the life of her readers? Most readers are not found by a sophisticate who elevates their gossip. Mitford never answers this question for them. Instead, her own life is what preoccupies Mitford's career—how to elevate the everyday to the level of sophistication through art when her experiences are British, rather than French. This is her *bildungsroman* as a writer—a deepening experience of sophisticated life, through which she better mediates/raises everyday life to the level of sophistication. Mitford is in a symbiotic relationship with the middlebrow and its readership; she needs the middlebrow to elevate her own life to the level of art and sophistication—both are the medium of ephemeral beauty.²⁶

INTERLUDE: MITFORD, BOUSQUET, AND PARISIENNE SALONS

If Mitford's first foray in transnational mediation trades in clichés and stereotypes, then her next novel, *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949), reflects her intervening experiences of the French salon tradition. As a result of these experiences and her deepening knowledge of French sophistication, her novel shifts its mediation towards the salon. In this space, female agency and the practice of popular sophistication through gossip co-exist. Mitford blends popular sophistication with tropes of its elite form (i.e. the French salon). This beginner's course in the

salon is perhaps Mitford's attempts to elevate middlebrow and middle-class British readers' tastes towards discriminating (though it can be read merely as a Mitford tease). After publishing *The Pursuit of Love*, Mitford moved to Paris in April 1946, motivated by Palewski, as Hastings is ever eager to point out. But also she had the money to act as a liaison for the British Bookshop, Heywood Hill, for which she had worked during the war.²⁷ Her long-standing love of Paris, not merely Palewski, motivated her move; after moving there, she started plotting a sequel for *The Pursuit of Love*.²⁸ The novel, incorporating French tropes, reflects her own movement towards France and its national ideals of sophistication.

Despite being British, Mitford quickly gained entrance into Parisienne social life and salons,²⁹ possibly through her connection with Gaston, who had long-standing relationships with key salonnières and socialites.³⁰ These were not of course the familiar avant-garde modernist salons—such as Natalie Barney and Gertrude Stein hosted prior to World War II—but rather the French salons frequented by Parisienne elite society, French artists, and figures of fashion. Mitford experienced firsthand conversation within France; her previous experience was a finishing tour and French officers during the war. As she writes to Evelyn Waugh in 1946, “after four months of study...I will tell you now about the French...The French upper classes are very dull or indeed very vicious.” In contrast, “the middle class intellectuals are absolutely delightful & have no equivalent that I can see in England. I mean all the people on the fringes of literature, booksellers, translators, publishers & so on – I don't know any of the important writers – but I have great friends now among the ones I describe & absolutely *love* their company & have the greatest regard for them as human beings.”³¹ Mitford's experiences included conversational forms and situations that shaped her subsequent work. For example, she attended the salon of Marie-Louise Bousquet. Now forgotten, Bousquet was at the heart of French sophistication and

sartorial fashion, and she possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of Paris and its gossip. Cecil Beaton describes her as “the French editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, [who] is like that magic ingredient which the Chinese have used for centuries to flavour soups and sauces. Without her, the world of fashion would lose an integral part of its mind and heart.” But she also had what Beaton would describe as a “great literary sense.” He continues, “Marie-Louise Bousquet has never lost her sense of true human values nor her high aesthetic appreciation. She understands artists' problems and life's cruelties; she has a great literary sense, inherited, perhaps, from her husband and the literary salons they promoted together during his lifetime.”³² Mitford's literary relationship with Bousquet would continue intermittently.³³ These encounters deepened Mitford's understanding of French culture as the center of sophistication and the role of the salon.

FANNY'S SALON AND GOSSIP IN *LOVE IN A COLD CLIMATE* (1949)

The Pursuit of Love's sequel, *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949), subtly reflects Mitford's intervening experience of France, including the salon. It was written after Mitford had lived in Paris for two years. The novel skillfully mediates Frenchness, specifically the rich conversational tradition that Mitford now participated in. It draws subtly on Mitford's salon experiences, even as *Cold Climate* demonstrates her authorial maturation; the plot is far more complex and less penny novel than its predecessor. It furthers the relationship of art and gossip in connect with sophistication and examines the extent to which a salon of one's own can make one sophisticated. The key feminist insight from Mitford here is that sophistication, popular or traditional, is not available to women unless they have a space to preside over. The salon offers a space for agency which Linda lacks. As the novel demonstrates, sophistication rises to the level

of the salon's speakers, but the novel's focus shifts partly away from the question of sophistication to that of women's agency.

Love in a Cold Climate is once again narrated by Fanny Wincham, the orphan who is raised alongside her eccentric Radlett cousins in *The Pursuit of Love*, but Fanny comes into her own in *Cold Climate*. The plot shifts between Fanny's own romance and marriage to an Oxford academic and the intrigues of the local aristocratic Montdore family, social intimates of the Radletts whose members confide in Fanny throughout the novel. Polly Montdore, the sole daughter and heir, reluctantly moves towards marriage, only suddenly to disclose her love for a family friend twice her age, Boy Dougdale, who is also Lady Montdore's lover. Polly is disinherited upon her marriage to Dougdale. Enter Cedric Hampton, a distant cousin and Nova Scotia native turned cosmopolitan aesthete who charms Lord and Lady Montdore at their country house, Hampton. In the final chapter, Cedric deserts the Montdore. He leaves for Paris with Boy Dougdale after Polly, at his orchestration, drives off with an impoverished, though "nice," aristocrat.

The novel, as Humble points out, mocks those who use sophistication for personal gain and advancement, as well as those who are taken in by its performance. Like all sophisticates, Mitford sneers at the poser. Cedric is the novel's ostensibly cosmopolitan sophisticate, whose "power of fascination," according to Humble, "lies in his passionate appreciation of the beauty and luxury of Hampton, and his ability to transform the Moundores [sic] into creatures of cosmopolitan glamour." Humble notes that Mitford's novel is unusual in that the "toadies triumph."³⁴ Britain becomes something to eschew for "as in Mitford's other novels, the future for the remnants of the British aristocracy lies in self-imposed exile in France, not in their own country. Her aristocrats are clowns, their eccentricities played up for the delectation of the

middle-class reader, their snobberies—and those of their author—always carefully comic.”³⁵

And while this is certainly true, the novel gives its readers the pleasure of superiority towards Cedric, the novel provides a lesson in sophistication for its British readers. Fanny, as mediator, does not leave England, at least not yet.

But there is an alternative center of popular sophistication, one which is subtle, and almost middle class. The novel once again stages a mutually pleasurable encounter between the cosmopolitan and domestic naïveté while exploring the British fascination with domestic gossip. But if *The Pursuit of Love* fulfilled readers’ fantasies of Parisienne romance, Mitford’s participation in scintillating conversation in the French capital refines the transnational mediation of France that takes place in the novel. Mitford’s lived experience, both in France and England, became part of the background upon which she draws. *Love in a Cold Climate* depends far less for its plot points on Mitford’s life story than *The Pursuit of Love*. Rather, as Acton details, the novel draws on foibles of real-life figures who Mitford adapts into the original comedic plotline.³⁶ Mitford leverages her experiences of salon culture, which was central to her enjoyment of France. In doing so, she shifts gossip, and its popular sophistication, from its private, backstage location—the lover’s dialogue in *Pursuit*—to a semi-public space. She does so by tying gossip with the French salon ethos. Gossip is presided over by Fanny, the middle-class narrator. As art, the novel models for the aspirational reader, even those who are middle class like Fanny, what she needs in order to be sophisticated (at least in the popular, British sense). She requires a room truly her own and amusing guests to preside over. *Cold Climate* models the pleasure of speech, but more than that is required. As always for Mitford, traditional sophistication is impossible without a mediating French influence. But there is real pleasure and

community to be found in the salon of a middle-class British woman sophisticate and her provincially amusing, aspirational companions.

But rather than inserting a French salon or salonnière into the novel, Mitford subtly incorporates the salon's principles, specifically a woman's ability to control and define the semi-public space over which she presides. While the novel takes place in Oxford, England, *Love in a Cold Climate* is subtly tied to the French conversational salon tradition, which Mitford adapts into a British context and mediates for British publics. The salon gives shape to Fanny's exercise of female agency and power through gossip. Fanny, as a fictionalized version of Mitford herself,³⁷ draws on Mitford's own experiences in France, correcting the English misperception. France is no longer an unattainable ideal—it is still superior, but it can be transposed by Nancy Mitford via Fanny to the middlebrow reader. Fanny is a middlebrow figure who self-consciously mediates the sophistication of salon culture, refiguring it within an English context. Fanny goes from colorless outsider in *The Pursuit of Love* to gossip's "middleman," possessing agency in her mediation of gossip to other characters within her home. Through Fanny, Mitford imagines an inferior corollary for the French salon within an English context, where gossip and female oversight are practiced and welcomed. The transnational mediation of her novels, while still idealized and fictionalized, are less dependent on an imaginary France than Mitford's lived, transnational experience. This borrowing that allows for, increases, and reflects female agency, even as it humorously makes clear Mitford's disdain for British provincialism.

If gossip in the novel is still very much Anglicized by the provincialism of its focus, the physical space in which gossip takes place is where Mitford concentrates her experience in France and resulting agency for Fanny. As with Linda, the gossip is sophisticated and desirable. The home is where the imaginative change of the novel takes place. Incorporating the salon

allows Mitford to change how space and the role of women in conversational interactions are conceived of. The novel eschews the determined British domestic space on the one hand and the diminishing of gossip that social situations involve on the other. Nicola Humble declares, “the question of the ways in which the home is imagined is a crucial one for the [British] middlebrow women’s novel of this period... [The home]... is never a given; it requires imagining into being, and its creation is an index...of the characters of the women who create it.”³⁸ Part of how women are sequestered in the British tradition is through the tight link between self and home.³⁹ The work of self-creation, then, is accomplished primarily by transforming the built environment, decorations, and arrangements of the home. This process suggests a certain amount of empowering freedom for women, for one can potentially change how one interacts with others by changing the physical space in which one lives. Frequently, this connection limits the scope of female domestic creativity and thus being. The flux that Humble ascribes to the home within British modernism remains largely circumscribed by the “grammar of household objects.”⁴⁰ This often creates a sort of domestic determinism, in which women must do battle with the domestic space and the weight of behavioral expectations that are closely tethered to space in British modernist and middlebrow literature.

But *Love in a Cold Climate* subverts this model; female agency skillfully plays within the novel’s domestic space rather than being determined by it. The drawing room, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, must be revisited and redefined before British women can be truly sophisticated—here is where the work of art can be productively creative. Mitford’s fantasy, then, is that this space is so easily transformed. Fanny’s drawing room is the corollary of Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own” reserved for writing. Sophistication for the middle-class woman begins with reclaiming the domestic space. Mitford’s key insight is that one must create

space for the practice of sophistication before one can be sophisticated. Mitford transposes the ideals of the salon and its freedom which she had experienced first-hand into the domestic determinism of the British novel. Fanny's home—which encompasses both the domestic space and its uses—is subjected to her pleasures, rather than vice versa. As Fanny's younger cousin Jassy complains,

when you married we rather naturally expected that your home would open up all the delights of civilized society to us, and that sooner or later we should meet, in your salon, the brilliant wealthy titled men destined to become our husbands... Well, then, what happens? One of the richest parties in Western Europe becomes an *habitué de la maison* and are we thrown at his head by our cousin, naturally ambitious for our future? Does she move heaven and earth to further this splendid match? Not even asked to meet him. Spoil sport.⁴¹

This is a tease, however; the company in England is not good enough, for Cedric is a toady. Fanny's strategic orchestration of who enters her home, when, and to what ends—one does not host wealthy, cosmopolitan guests by accident—happens because she refuses to reduce shaping her home to manipulating a prescribed grammar of objects. Her home's desirability does not depend on Fanny's skillful homemaking or decorating, and thus her selfhood is unconstrained by the household objects she manipulates. Instead, Fanny ignores the social propriety expected within a married woman's home when she refuses to facilitate Jassy's marital aims. Fanny thus avoids turning her home into a domestic prison and rather creates a room of her own.

Jassy's speech here is revelatory protest, mixing her disappointment along with insights into what Mitford is accomplishing. Fanny's creativity is not original, for she calls into being a space that borrows from the French salon, as Jassy unwittingly discloses while complaining

about “your salon.” The novel’s point of reference for civilized society is the *maison* and the salon tradition.⁴² Mitford does not offer an unprecedented domestic space, but rather draws from a concept familiar to modernism.

Fanny’s home stages interesting interpersonal encounters. These scenes demonstrate the desired relation between a woman and the domestic space, one which borrows from the French salon and the freedom Mitford experienced in France. Her home eschews the traditional place of gossip within the British social sphere, which takes place behind the scenes or in the isolated comfort of one’s home.⁴³ The twentieth-century salon, as modernist critics have noted, follows in the tradition of the seventeenth-century French ideal of a “public space in private setting,” a social formation and site of sociability where conversation flourishes, and in which a woman, the *salonnière*, presides.⁴⁴ The historical salon ran counter to hegemonies of state and Church and “offered both social mobility and a degree of gender equality.”⁴⁵ As Janet Lyon describes, “historically, at least until the modernist period, the salon’s role in modernity has been that of a kind of workshop for the staging of Enlightenment scripts involving conversation, reasoned disagreement, individualism within collectivity, and political self-determination.”⁴⁶ This tradition, rather than the British country house, forms the French spatial conversational center. For Mitford, the *salonnière* is the ultimate sophisticate.

Mitford adopts aspects of the salon tradition—incorporating them into a middlebrow context and gleefully adapting them to her purposes—and discards others. This narrative control is the agency which art bestows, and which Fanny exercises in her home. While Fanny’s home is a “public space in a private setting” that revolves around personal interactions, this site of sociability is devoted to personal news, not radical ideas. But this becomes a form of pleasure, and thus an ephemeral art similar to that of the middlebrow.

Fanny's home creates a space of female agency within popular sophistication, an agency which echoes that of the middlebrow author. A measure of freedom goes hand in glove with circulating derivative stories, as does a measure of pleasure and social capital. Fanny may joke to her gossip-hungry guests that "you'd much better ask each other and do without the middleman,"⁴⁷ but she gleefully exercises the agency which gossip, taking place within her semi-public domestic space, allows her. This moment of disavowal also demonstrates Fanny's sophistication. But this is another instance of the text's revelatory protest. Despite Fanny's claim, unmediated access to the object of gossip interrupts pleasure, rather than intensifying it. "[M]iddleman" turns the focus to gender, toying with the stereotyping of the gossip as female. Such meetings, when they do happen, becomes a means to an end; they provide more stories to circulate and inevitably draw characters back to Fanny's home for gossip. Here the socially dubious nature of gossip plays to Fanny's advantage; it is preferable to conduct gossip from the domestic space of the gossip salon, so characters are drawn back into her home to share stories. Importing aspects of the French salon refigures how Fanny, as a female character, relates to her domestic space. Much like Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own," Fanny's drawing room allows for creative interactions which circulate desirable information. While the middleman does not have the same positive connotations, it still is a position of power.

Numerous characters stop by Fanny's home throughout *Love in a Cold Climate* for the exchange of gossip, the interesting "stories about other people" that appeal to one's curiosity. The rich European sophisticate whom Jassy, Fanny's protesting cousin, desires to meet is Cedric, the dazzling heir to the Montdore fortune. Mitford's barbed wit towards middlebrow aspirations is on display in his description. Cedric is a hodgepodge of international and transnational experiences and pretense; this, in turn, makes him the centerpiece of Fanny's home and those

who come to gossip. Even as Fanny refuses to introduce him to her cousin, she carefully ensures that Cedric frequently visits her home, drawing him in with her first-hand gossip about the absent Polly and Boy Dougdale, who cannot afford to live in England after her disinheritance until their return at the end of the novel. Taken up within the sophisticating art of the middlebrow novel, the “middleman” becomes the popular sophisticate. Fanny exemplifies British domestic sophistication. She turns stories into an elevated form by changing the circumstances in which she communicates; the home becomes a space of verbal pleasure. With Fanny’s gossip salon, Mitford almost articulates a popular sophistication that is truly middlebrow and possible for its readers and middle-class affirming, as I will claim for sophisticated motherhood and writerly sophistication in the next chapter. But Cedric remains the elite element in the text, which continues to make this sophistication fantastical, rather than attainable for middle-class readers. Fanny’s insider knowledge of gossip elevates her, and she is made sophisticated within the space of the novel, but only through the advent of a singular male (Cedric). Mitford is, unfortunately, unable to write her own personal dependence on a man (Gaston Palewski) out of her fiction.

Fanny’s middle-class superiority is authenticated by how her gossip appeals to other middle-class characters; it is in relation to them that she (and Cedric) are sophisticated. In Cedric’s absence, Fanny circulates desirable information about the Cedric across the divide between the elite and the novel’s middle-class characters, the Boreley clan, all from the vantage point of her domestic space. The numerous Boreleys live up to the quotidian suggestiveness of their name; they are the area’s “notable breeders...respected by their neighbors for their conformity to the fashion of the day, of their morals, for their wealth and for their excellence at all kinds of sport...they were the backbone of England.”⁴⁸ As Humble argues, they are quintessential upper-middle class and thus an image of the novel’s middlebrow consumers, eager

for stories not only of elite but of the cultural other. The Boreleys find the pseudo-cosmopolitan Cedric “awful” but they take a “morbid interest in every detail” which pertains to him, not the least because he is not English—Mitford satirizes middle-class fearful fascination with those who are from elsewhere.⁴⁹ Cedric’s unrecognizing encounter with Jock, a youthful Boresley, on the train demonstrates the pleasure of retelling: “you gave him hypnotic stares through your glasses” Fanny informs Cedric. Cedric’s protests that “I only remember a dreadful moustachio’d murderer sitting in a corner.”⁵⁰ Pleasure is ultimately found not in the direct encounter but in the retelling, in which the gossip can supply interesting embellishments and shape the incident along narrative lines.⁵¹ Gossip mirrors the role of art in relation to sophistication within the middlebrow for Mitford, which is like that of Fabrice to Linda; her retelling supplies embellishments and elevates unsophisticated characters. This is the sophisticating role of the middlebrow, one which contrasts with and magnifies Waugh’s mimesis of Mitford I described above.

The sociability that Mitford creates in Fanny’s home is different from that of the traditional salons and its historical form of sophistication. Speech in the traditional salon is the traditional art of conversation I described in the introduction, without any inferior talk. The salon is synonymous with the exchange of new ideas, political thinking, as well as the sort of original avant-garde artistic production, such as one associates with Gertrude Stein’s salon at 27 Rue de Fleurus. The traditional salon is fertile grounds for high modernism and original, artistic production; the salon spawns the creativity. But Fanny’s site of sociability is devoted to personal stories, not radical ideas; this uses the resources to which she has access. Much as *The Pursuit of Love* portrayed the union of French sophisticated conversation and English talent for gossip in the romance between Linda and Fabrice, so too its sequel Mitford once again makes the novel

the site of transnational exchange and combination. This sophistication, as I claimed in the introduction, combines high and low forms of speech. Mitford herself loved gossip and wit equally.

Fanny's home becomes, in short, an open space of cross-cultural intersection that is middlebrow, and thus popular sophistication at its best. Its transnational exchange and combination of traditions and what is, at least for Mitford, nationalized conversational strengths: the English penchant for domestic gossip, particularly concerning the home, country, and the French salon, with its relaxed gender and social norms that blur the distinction between public and private. Rather than gossip staged in secret or behind the scenes, Fanny's salon openly centers around gossip. Fanny's husband worries that Fanny's gossip "brings out the worst" in her visitors, who "know that general subjects do not amuse you, only personalities."⁵² Fanny reshapes her domestic space around her own amusement and pleasures.

The result is a space of sociability in which personal stories are exchanged as pleasurable cultural capital, but one which is markedly different from the French salon because it takes place within a British context. The pleasures of popular sophistication abound; true sophistication for Mitford is only possible in France.⁵³ From this space, Fanny leverages her past and present friendships with the aristocratic Montdores and the stories that this intimacy gives her access to. Just as skillfully propounding ideas gives one cultural capital that is recognized within the world beyond the traditional salon, so too Fanny's skillfully told stories retain their value to those outside of her domestic space. Within her gossip salon, the currency of personal information is circulated and exchanged. The stories and cultural capital are thus similar to the informational gossip of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* that I theorized in chapter one. But while Waugh emphasizes the media (e.g. telephone and newspaper) that facilitate the circulation of desirable

information about sophisticates, Mitford is more interested in creating gendered spaces that welcome gossip and exploring the resulting relationships. In contrast with Waugh's hopeless vision of gossip within the regime of information that circulates the substance-less popular sophistication, Nancy Mitford's interlocking narratives, *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, champion gossip as a part of its larger apology for sophistication. It imagines a British conversational renaissance through the agency of popular sophistication, which reverses the traditional hierarchy between decorous, idea-driven conversation and gossip, bringing the latter into the public or semi-public space of the salon, something around which publics can be formed. *Love in a Cold Climate* uses the French salon to imagine a hybrid, new situation for female dialogue in England. It departs from the conversational norms of social etiquette and gossip that are ever-familiar within the British comedic tradition and family gossip that takes place behind the scenes. This is British, middle-class appropriation of popular sophistication, which requires the skillful middlebrow author to make it sophisticated, i.e. middlebrow. Sophistication's appropriation of high and low speech can be feminist.

***THE BLESSING* (1951): MITFORD AS TOUR GUIDE TO THE FRENCH SNOBS**

This was the end of Mitford's fictional efforts at sophisticated characters within Britain; her subsequent work of mediating sophistication would take place in France, as that was the direction of audience's tastes and her own development. In 1950 she was hired to translate André Roussin's *The Little Hut* (*La petite hutte*), a bedroom farce in "three rollicking acts."⁵⁴ As she describes in a letter to her mother, "the reason I was asked to do it was that I'm supposed to be good at making outrageous situations seem all right,"⁵⁵ likely a nod to Cedric. Mitford found the play "terribly funny" but "never counted on it much" because though it had been a wild success in Paris and run for three years, there were doubts that the play could get past British

ensorship.⁵⁶ Through what her memoirist Acton calls the “tactful treatment of the dialogue”—Mitford “skated over the worst indecencies”—the play passed the censors and became a hit in England and New York. On March 1951 she wrote to Heywood Hill, “I’m offered every French play under the sun now! But never again until workhouse looms, because of that awful going on tour...”⁵⁷ Middlebrow publics on both sides of the Atlantic demonstrated that tastes in sophistication ran towards things French, rather than those, like *Love in a Cold Climate*, that drew on French tropes and devices. British popular taste in things French was not discriminating, as was to be expected. Narratives set in France, and Mitford’s ability to make scandalous topics palatable, were two things she could count on, as was the public’s taste for all things French. Discriminating, however, these tastes were not. This play was a turning point, for it clearly illustrated current desire.

For Mitford the author, here was the opportunity to introduce English readers to her beloved France while also elevating readers’ tastes and mediating French sophistication. She could inculcate more sophisticated tastes in her readers, while simultaneously taking advantage of the current fad in fiction. And so, Mitford followed middlebrow taste that had very clearly turned towards abroad, aiming to nuance her readers’ tastes for elite French culture. She fully took up the mantle of French mediator for English-speaking middlebrow publics. She recognized many middlebrow readers no longer wanted fictional accounts of upper-class Britain; they also were eager for stories of France. Setting her subsequent novels in France, Mitford no longer relied on subtlety as she had in *Love in Cold Climate*. Her next novel, *The Blessing* (1951), plays the transnational mediator to the hilt, even as it educates readers in the pleasures of elite French sophistication—the novel’s jacket is designed by Cecil Beaton.

For Mitford the sophisticate, the novel signified her transformation into an arbiter and possessor of impeccable taste. Acton declares it her “most accomplished novel, [which] is permeated with her joyous love of France and her vision of a sophisticated section of French society. Indeed it is the consummate product of Nancy’s liaison with contemporary France. She described it as ‘a roman de moeurs—and what moeurs—those I see around me.’”⁵⁸ Acton, like Waugh’s “Nancy Mitford” article is insightful here—the novel is both sophisticated and an overflow of her love for Paris. But furthermore, I argue, this liaison is a strategic, calculated one, made on behalf of readers, for whom she acts as a conduit to French elite culture. The novel is not merely composed of the social world with which she was surrounded in Paris; the novel is itself her traditional sophisticate’s dazzling performance of *je ne sais quoi*, in which creating and living merge.

The beautiful Grace Allingham marries the Marquis Charles-Edouard de Valhubert; once he returns from war service to wife and small son, Sigismond (the “blessing”), he transplants his family to France (first the ancestral estate in Provence and then to a Paris mansion). The plot is amusing and centers around how, “mischievous little Sigi contrives to keep his French father and English mother apart for his own material profit though both his parents are deeply attached to each other.”⁵⁹ But this plot, as Acton describes, merely “provides a loom for Nancy to weave her funniest jokes and human observations,”⁶⁰ and, above all, to exemplify French sophistication. Mitford makes readers’ aspirational identification quite easy. The novel’s protagonist, Grace, like Linda, is British, young, and naïve; her husband Charles Edouard, like both Palewski and Fabrice, is dreamy, sophisticated, and oh-so-French. But while the British Linda and the French Fabrice play into national stereotypes of romantic inexperience and experience, Mitford skillfully makes Grace the eyes and ears of the uninitiated English-speaking reader and her husband the

tour guide for elite French society, in which Mitford, as author-sophisticate, is the expert. Every time the subtleties of elite French life are illuminated for Grace—and there are quite a few—Mitford also does so for the aspirational reader, eager to assimilate knowingness about French culture. When a dinner party is given in her honor, Grace is “unprepared” for the “kaleidoscope of glitter” and impeccably dressed women. She is “so much fascinated by what she saw that the terrible up and down examination accorded to a newcomer to the herd went on without her even being aware of it, and it was a long time before she realized how underdressed, under-painted, and under-scented she must seem.”⁶¹ This society that she is part of has true verbal sophistication, which, notably, is described rather than narrated:

The affair was being discussed by the group round Grace, the rapid quality of whose talk, so precise, so funny, so accomplished, so frighteningly well-informed, positively paralysed her. Her own brain seemed to struggle along in the rear. Charles-Edouard, swimming in his native waters, was happy and animated as she had never seen him.⁶²

The repetition of “so” is exaggerated and in tension not with society’s taste, which is impeccable, but rather emphasizes Grace’s inexperience. Like Grace, the reader needs to be trained both in society’s intricacies and in the quality of discrimination itself.

The novel’s mediation is not about love, but about France, or at least its imaginary upper class. As Acton declares,

Grace is a more mature version of Linda, for whom “Charles Edouard was the forty kings of France rolled into one ‘the French race in person walking and breathing.’” She sees the French through rose-tinted spectacles—how unlike Uncle Matthew! “She even loved their snobbishness, it seemed to her such a tremendous joke, so particularly funny, somehow, nowadays. She was beginning to love the critical spirit of all and sundry. It

kept people up to the mark, no doubt, and had filled her with the desire to improve her mind and sharpen her wits.”⁶³

Through Grace, Nancy acts as chief interpreter and narrator of exclusivity, taking aspirational readers to inaccessible places even for those who can travel to France. This is literalized in the novel’s most amusing scene, which is also a witty meta-moment on the social and moral freedom allowed the truly sophisticated. Grace, on a whim, takes a paid house tour of her aristocratic mother-in-law’s mansion—it is given by “a certain guide” who “gets permission to visit anything that is ‘classé,’ and of course that means anything worth seeing.”⁶⁴ She discovers her French husband, Charles Edouard, bedding a sophisticated Parisienne beauty, in one of grand bedrooms of the house. The room, as the guide describes beforehand, features an “erotic ceiling” and “a Régence bed of wonderful quality, and *boiseries* by Robert de Cotte”;⁶⁵ tourists normally are not allowed to access to it.⁶⁶ But Mitford’s readers, like Grace, are made privy to the exclusive and scandalous secrets of the French elite. Cultural tourist, British naivety, French sexual mores, architecture, Restoration comedy and snobbery meet bedroom comedy in the novel. The commentary on the mediating work of the novel could not be clearer—Mitford is leading readers, much like a tour guide, through French upper-class life. Readers receive a lesson both in what it means to be sophisticated more broadly and in what it looks like within a specifically French context. This is real sophistication. And in doing so, Mitford does not just write the novel, but she performs her own sophistication. She has renounced her British identity and taken up a French one. The early foray into domesticating sophistication and making it accessible to middle-class readers disappears in this work. Mitford returns to the formula that worked in *Love in a Cold Climate*: elite French sophistication. Now, however, she is the expert, rather than the naïve protagonist.

MEDIATING THE SALON: *MADAME DE POMPADOUR* (1954) AS BIOGRAPHY AND SELF-HELP MANUAL

Waugh had crowned Mitford as sophisticate-salonnère for the British masses, and she took her role, and her subject matter, seriously. Her next target, both for personal delight and authorial image is historical, not fictional. Art includes non-fiction, through which life is elevated, for it encapsulates ephemeral forms of beauty. Established herself as a traditional sophisticate for her audience through *The Blessing*, she continues to elevate its value, as well as its historical connection with the salon. Sophistication is rooted in life, not in fantasy, for both the sophistication of Madame de Pompadour and Mitford as her biographer. Biography is not a departure from sophistication but rather gives it historical weight.

Mitford was also genuinely interested in constructing publics better-informed about France and its history. Turning to biography and Madame de Pompadour was an appropriate choice; she fascinated Mitford and there was, as Acton notes, no adequate biography in English in the 1950s. Penning the biography would thus help to counter English ignorance of eighteenth-century French culture and history. According to Acton, even among her literary friends, Mitford “considered...few of them...qualified to deal with French subjects.”⁶⁷ As she wrote to her frequent correspondent, Violet Hammersley, “the English ignorance on French matters never ceases to astound...when one has lived here a few years one sees that even the pundits like Harold Nicolson and Cyril [Connolly] don’t really know as much as they pretend to. Raymond [Mortimer] is another matter, he really does know.”⁶⁸ Thus motivated—though at first daunted by the amount of research—Mitford threw herself into the work during 1953, daily spending two or three hours in the library in Versailles and reading “until midnight in my bed, and most of the day’s seven or eight hours.”⁶⁹

Mitford reinforced her literary identity as French mediator *par excellence* of sophistication while also bolstering her non-fiction credentials, at least for the British middlebrow public. She further embraced the salon as her ultimate signifier and writes as one sophisticate detailing another. In mediating France and the salon, this time with the weight of research rather than personal experience at her behest, she balanced historical research and aspirational readers, while both furthering her image and informing her publics. Mitford details Pompadour's rise from bourgeois daughter to mistress of Louis XIV during the height of decadence before the French Revolution. The non-fiction work, as Amanda Foreman's introduction notes, "appealed to [Mitford's] twin loves of insider gossip and eighteenth-century French culture,"⁷⁰ and carefully appeals to the middlebrow fantasy of upward mobility.

The non-fiction work, like *Love in a Cold Climate*, also explores sophistication, specifically the relationship between the salon and gossip, though it also mediates French conversational practices at a temporal remove. *Pompadour* mediates the historical salon and explores a distinctly French form of gossip within pre-revolution France. In so doing, Mitford contrasts the bourgeois intellectual world of Pompadour's salon in Paris with the intrigues of court gossip in Versailles.

Mitford advocates for the salon's historical and personal relevance. Not only does she provide historical information about Pompadour's salon, but as with the middlebrow novel, it appeals to aspirational readers. The biography encourages readers to adopt the salon's principles into their everyday lives and social practice. Mitford's advocacy goes beyond historical mediation to personal practice. But, being Mitford, she ensured that pleasure still infused both writing and reading *Pompadour*, though the playful carelessness that pops up in her fiction is absent.

Mitford's informal commentary, anachronisms, and asides encourage readers to ignore period, nation, and genre and assimilate the content into their own aspirations, even as it gives readers historically accurate details:

The intellectual life of Paris centered round those writers, known as the *philosophes*, who were presently to compile a great encyclopedia of human knowledge; a spectacular occupation and one that continually got them into trouble with the Church and the Court... Their ideas produced the moral climate in which the French Revolution finally took place; but had they lived to witness the Revolution, it would have horrified them one and all. They were, for the most part, neither atheists nor anarchists; Voltaire believed in God and loved kings.⁷¹

The salon, as Mitford styles it in non-fiction, centers around its participants: the intellectual elite of the day, which are in turn situated within the salon and its relationship to Church, Court, and the French revolution, all three of which are easy touchstones for popular readers. Furthermore, the believer and the patriot can rest easy in Pompadour's company, who hosts neither atheists nor anarchists within her salon, at least "for the most part." But Mitford shifts without warning from eighteenth to twentieth century through analogy, thereby collapsing the two periods. She comments, "but [the *philosophes*] did want to prevent the dead hand of the Church from producing, in France, the intellectual paralysis which we see today in Spain. Where government was concerned they wanted more justice and less secrecy, a few mild reforms."⁷² The specificity of the historical period is set up through the *philosophes*'s description, only to be promptly undercut—the paralysis of today is the same one which threatened then. The "dead hand of the Church" becomes a commentary on the current political situation in Spain, followed by vague calls to action that become seamlessly applicable to both eighteenth-century France and the

reader's mid-twentieth-century world: "more justice and less secrecy, a few mild reforms." Collapsing historical specificity, the current intellectual paralysis of Spain and eighteenth-century France become synonymous. The final sentence of the paragraph explodes the separation between past and present, as Mitford writes, "[u]nfortunately the system left by Louis XIV was impervious to mild reforms; it had to be blown up by a bomb."⁷³ The phrase "blown up by a bomb" evokes "the bomb,"⁷⁴ and its "pregnant expression for the atomic or hydrogen bomb, and regarded as unique because of its utterly destructive effects" (OED), particularly within the context of the French Revolution. Rhetorical violence destroys the separation, creating a cultural wormhole between Pompadour's biography and what the readers have lived through. Taylor's unflattering review of *Madame de Pompadour* acknowledges how Mitford interweaves accessibility and being ahistorical:

Pursuit of Love characters...now claim to be leading figures in French literary history, revolving round Louis XV and his famous mistress, Madame de Pompadour. In reality they still belong to that wonderful never-never land of Miss Mitford's invention which can be called Versailles as easily as it used to be called Alconleigh... Once more we have the secret words, the ritual of society, and the blunders of the uninitiated... Certainly no historian could write a novel half as good as Miss Mitford's work of history. Of course he might not try.⁷⁵

Taylor highlight the fantastical and ahistorical within Mitford's biography. He remarks on violations of genre (fictional characters rather than historical), linear time (the characters inhabit never-never land), and space (the setting only masquerades as Paris). Acton describes this as "readability" and Mitford's "talent for simplification" and "schoolroom slang,"⁷⁶ but this is, I argue, closer to the aspirational appeals present in middlebrow texts. *Pompadour* intersperses

historical details with approachable, literary-equise characters, anachronism, and quotable, proverbial phrases, particularly within the section describing Pompadour's salon. By collapsing the historical and situational gap between subject and audience, Mitford's biography encourages readers to not only identify with but also emulate Pompadour, taking her as a model of the ideal hostess who stages spaces that allow for excellent, artful, and pleasurable conversation. But because Mitford was the ideal salonnière and sophisticate, with the advantages of her aristocratic background and training in France, readers are also encouraged to emulate Mitford herself. Mitford and Pompadour intersect closely in the textual space of the salon as sophisticates.⁷⁷ Sophistication, and its impeccable taste, crosses time more easily than space. France, specifically Versailles, is the spiritual home of sophistication. In writing the biography, Mitford performs Pompadour's sophistication through her careful historical research and by her own sophisticated production. This history is infused with Mitford's uniquely playful yet sophisticated aesthetic, and also mediates the history of the sophisticated Pompadour. The middlebrow is not itself a sophisticated form, but it is able to mediate the taste possessed by its creator, and, in this case, its subject. The middlebrow is raised from a vehicle of popular sophistication to the level of ephemeral art and traditional sophistication through Mitford.

The work encourages aspirational reading through its form. Like the middlebrow novel, it borrows from different forms;⁷⁸ the work straddles the gap between fiction, biography, and, intriguingly, self-help literature. Through its hybridity, and Mitford's name on the front cover, the biography thereby encourages its readers to adopt what Beth Blum entitles the "self-help hermeneutic," which "designates the cross-cultural reading practice of expropriating textual insights for the purposes of self-betterment. It refers to interpretive protocols whose apotheosis is the success manual but whose reach can extend to texts not strictly considered part of the self-

help canon, from the Bible to Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*).⁷⁹ While Blum focuses on how readers have applied the self-help hermeneutic to literary texts globally, Mitford's *Pompadour* demonstrates how biography potentially lends itself to self-help reading's "emulative methodology."⁸⁰ Biography has the advantage within the self-help hermeneutic of being based on true experiences of historical figures; generically, it carries the authority of lived, practical experience.⁸¹

By collapsing the historical description with the readers' historical moment, Mitford carefully stages Pompadour's salon, giving it the same centrality to her mediation as does Waugh, even as it deepens her own sophistication. She both educates readers on the historical moment and also enumerates the ideal qualities of the salonnière, which are framed as simultaneously historical and timeless. As Blum describes, the self-help hermeneutic acts as a "cultural wormhole," that "collaps[es]...period, nation, and genre."⁸² Mitford's succinct, proverbial phrases about Pompadour's salon practices most strongly evoke a self-help hermeneutic and furthers her reputation as an expert on the salon. The speech of the sophisticate is startlingly original, but everyone else can imitate the sophisticate's platitudes. These words of ostensibly timeless wisdom can be easily lifted out of the text and used towards self-betterment, particularly by those readers eager to improve their hostess abilities. Mitford writes, "but Madame d'Etioles had enough worldly wisdom to realize that it is never enough for a young woman to receive; she must also be received."⁸³ The sentence reads like the line of a conduct manual, as Mitford borrows first from the language of the plucky heroine and then the proverb. Formally, the pairing of generalization and instruction balance each other—"it is never enough" and "she much also"—are proverbial. Titbits of wisdom cascade as Pompadour's sophistication overtakes Mitford's own upper-class background and hostess expertise: "She knew, too, that

writers like meeting society people; a salon only frequented by the intellectual bourgeoisie lacks elegance.”⁸⁴ One can imagine the contemporary hostess refiguring her invitation list after reading this line, with its dual weight of Pompadour and Mitford. Pompadour also models “a highly desirable guest, with her looks and elegance,” who is “modern in her outlook...possessing as she did that intense love of life, and interest in human beings.” These qualities are desirable for women living in any age. The latter quality, Mitford glosses, is “perhaps the base of what we variously call charm, sex appeal, or fascination.”⁸⁵ Mitford here teasingly riffs off the “manic citational practice”⁸⁶ of self-help, inserting isolated, succinct phrases. Mitford’s target with this self-help advice was her female British middlebrow readers, intensely class conscious and intent on marking their class superiority.⁸⁷ Mitford provides them with knowledge of Pompadour’s salon and a tip on being a successful hostess. Portable phrases such as this encourage the reader to ingest the work and practice its wisdom outside of their reading experience. Middlebrow fantasy manifested in imagining oneself as such a hostess.

Mitford continues to impart not only specific details, but general principles through motivational phrases that may resonate with the reader’s everyday experiences, behaviors, and aspirational practices. Sliding into a contemporary context with her language, Mitford indexes qualities her readers ought to pursue if they want that Parisian, or Mitford, charm. The aspirational reader, eager to learn from the Parisian salons and inject culture into her own dinner conversations, finds an apt model in Mitford’s mediation of Pompadour, which almost becomes Mitford’s mediation of herself. Acton describes in the author a “tendency to identify herself with the characters she delineated” and thus she “put so much of herself into *Madame de Pompadour*.”⁸⁸

Mitford's non-fiction *Pompadour* is an historical exemplar of sophisticated behavior that is also contemporary to the reader. Mitford's description reads like a how-to of the exceptional hostess—genre, historical situation, and language are all pushed beyond what is historically appropriate. Mitford encourages her readers to identify with Pompadour and mine her upward movement to the Versailles for practical ways of self-betterment, specifically towards sophistication. Mitford leverages the middlebrow's generic affordances (biography, literature, and self-help), thereby cogently widening the appeal and scope of her work. The biography mediates France at distances comprised of language, time, and distance; paradoxical, this mediation depends on difference yet collapses it.

“THE ENGLISH ARISTOCRACY”: THE SALONNIÈRE’S MEDIATING ROLE FOR BRITAIN IS HAPPILY ABDICATED

It is with this foundation of sophistication, life, and art (the latter including non-fiction), that I return to Mitford's “The English Aristocrat” (1956), which details “U and non-U” language usage. The essay argues that one can distinguish the British upper and upper-middle classes from everyone else based on language; words like “looking-glass” are U (upper-class) while “mirror” is non-U (i.e. used by the lower-middle class). But what started out as tease, an amusing side project, would eclipse her self-appointed role as transnational mediator. The fierce and enduring response provoked by “The English Aristocrat” would ultimately define her reputation. I argue that the essay was a sophisticated act, designed to teasingly highlight the differences between British and French forms of distinction while also highlighting the British obsession with class and class-markers. Like *Love in a Cold Climate*, it modeled and mocked British aspirations to sophistication.

The furor started when Professor Alan Ross of Birmingham University produced an article on polite English usage in a scholarly Finnish journal, which drew on *The Pursuit of Love*. This proved an opportunity to write something which was too good to pass up.⁸⁹ Mitford wrote, “The English Aristocracy,” which was published in *Encounter*, in September 1955. With enthusiasm, Mitford took the essay as “a grand opportunity to tease as many people as possible”⁹⁰—Mitford saw the chance to distinguish her elite, French sophistication from the uneasy aspirations to popular sophistication of the British. She knew the essay would take off: “I lovingly cook away at it all day and I think it the best thing I’ve ever done,” she confided to Heywood. “It’s a sort of anthology of tease—something for everybody. I think it will be safer to be in Greece when it appears...”⁹¹

The essay, as the critic Nicola Humble points out, is carefully calibrated towards British middle-class desire and interests, particularly the obsession over issues of class distinction and thus teased aspirations within this moment. The middlebrow novel and its readers were “intensely class-conscious” and “peculiarly devoted to the anatomizing of middle-classness” with “middle-class identity and taste” as frequent concerns, particularly after World War II.⁹² The result was a mishmash of class-distinctions, signaled and ascertained by “codes of belonging that the usurpers could not crack.”⁹³ As a result, the “very act of discovering new class signifiers was often used to denote upper-middle-class insouciance, functioning as a sort of amusingly outré party game.”⁹⁴ For Humble, Mitford’s essay was timely and the “most successful extension of this game,” for a “lower-middle-class reader, made privy to the crucial ‘U’ signifiers, could then count herself among those in the inner circle. It is a form of snobbery that works to undo itself.”⁹⁵ Mitford had hit a cultural nerve, and the responses refused to stop. Even when Acton’s memoir was published, the “hare” that she “unwittingly” started was “still running, to judge by

recent letters in *The Spectator*.” Acton describes Mitford as turning with “relief” to biographies, publishing *Voltaire in Love* in 1957. Apparently even she could become sick of a successful tease. But the essay was Mitford’s final indictment of the British who could not distinguish from popular sophistication or treated sophistication as a game—i.e. the new epitomized by slang. For Mitford, for whom clothing was life, this was anathema. With this essay, she exposes British unknowingness of sophistication. She remained in France after this.

As Faye Hammill notes, one of sophistication’s troubling paradoxes is whether it is innate or can be learned.⁹⁶ Mitford demonstrates that there is a third alternative: sophistication, her life and oeuvre insist, can be developed through the discipline of writing. One comes to know by doing (writing) rather than aspiring and reading. Writerly sophistication presents its own paradox, then. All truly sophisticated writing is both performative and rooted in one’s experiences. Sophistication that comes out of writing is autobiographical, a roman à clef in some regard, and is an authentic expression of one’s own distinction and social superiority, or at least superior knowing. Only the discriminating author can cull and present textual details about sophistication; sophistication cannot be produced ex nihilo. Otherwise, the best one can hope for is envious pseudo-satire; a text seals its author’s sophistication. Simultaneously, one becomes sophisticated through the discipline writing.

Mitford encapsulates traditional sophistication most clearly within my dissertation as she and her fiction epitomize *je ne sais quoi* and unerring, impeccable French taste. Her brief foray into feminist popular sophistication with *Fanny* and *Love in a Cold Climate* provides the transition into my next chapter, which winds the clock back to 1930 and Britain, when the memory of the Bright Young Things was still the recent past. E.M. Delafield’s *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1929-1930) was a bestseller approximately two decades before Mitford’s *Love*

novels. Delafield's novel, in contrast with Mitford's disavowal, provides a robust, feminist apology for popular sophistication. Simultaneously, Delafield, like Mitford is invested in authorial sophistication. Delafield, like Mitford, imagines writerly sophistication that is developed through her narrative. Delafield, however, focuses on the difficulties that attend pursuing and developing sophistication.

¹ Charles Baudelaire "The Painter of Modern Life" in *Selected Writings of Art and Literature*, trans. and intro. P.R. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1992), 403.

² Popular sophistication embodies for Beaton not ephemeral forms of beauty, but an ephemeral "creativity," the newness specific to a period which has its own kind of value. Beaton describes thus of creativity and the 1920s specifically: "Tolerance and a sense of the comic as well as the tragic ought to make us see, in the fashions and frivolities of any given epoch, the wonderful creativity that finds expression, conscious and unconscious, in clothes, songs, slang, dances, art—in short, in all that becomes history." Cecil Beaton, *The Glass of Fashion: A Personal History of Fifty Years of Changing Tastes and the People Who Have Inspired Them* (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2014), loc. 1819, Kindle. Creativity is the common denominator that unites art with clothes, songs, slang, dances. It is the ephemeral, the popular sophistication produced within a specific period. Creativity encompasses art but does not partake of beauty—it is the productive ephemeral, elements both tragic and comic that brings one to common human experience. It is the "fashions and frivolities of any given epoch" that show up in the everyday as well as the artistic alike—"all that becomes history" (Beaton, *Glass*, loc. 1819.); the "creativity" of a decade is expressed in these aspects alike. Beaton is not just describing high fashion, but also the "frivolities," the seemingly ridiculous that still manages to be original.

³ Baudelaire, "Painter," 435.

⁴ Evelyn Waugh, "Nancy Mitford," in *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1983), 402.

⁵ Waugh, "Nancy Mitford," 403.

⁶ Waugh, "Nancy Mitford," 403.

⁷ Granted, Waugh, the savvy self-promotor I described in the previous chapter, recognizes the commodity value of sophistication and establishes this idiom for Mitford. It was not enough for her to write sophisticated novels; she needed to be the ultimate French icon herself, one who personified the desirable, aspirational qualities. The article ever so adroitly yet overtly establishes Mitford's authorial imprimatur as a talented comedic—one has to after all appeal to the popular middlebrow audiences—but first and foremost as the ultimate salonnière and sophisticate. But this article is not reducible to marketing or literary promotion.

⁸ Harold Acton, *Nancy Mitford: The Biography* (London: Gibson Square Books, 2010), loc. 1304, Kindle.

⁹ "Both the disparaged and the desirable aspects of sophistication may be traced back to the roots of the term in ancient Greek culture: like 'philosopher,' it derives from the words for wisdom and wise, 'sophia' and 'sophos.' 'Sophia' was at first a spiritual quality, a special kind of insight possessed by prophets or poets, but subsequently became associated more with knowledge and

learning.” Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁰ Waugh, “Nancy Mitford,” 404.

¹¹ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 3.

¹² Lisa Hilton, *The Horror of Love* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2011), 137.

¹³ Selina Hastings, “Mitford, Nancy Freeman- (1904–1973),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

¹⁴ Acton, *Nancy Mitford*, loc. 128. As Acton describes, “The novel was a best-seller, and Mitford’s fan response included a letter from “‘a woman saying she had seen a young girl sitting crying on a suitcase at Victoria, whereupon the passers-by began quoting to each other (all strangers) from Pursuit of Love.’ Another told her: ‘as soon as I’d read Pursuit of Love I rushed to Paris where I very soon married a Frenchman and we’ve got a daughter called, of course, Linda.’ Such letters were often exhilarating.” *Nancy Mitford*, loc. 2285.

¹⁵ Mitford’s father did in fact send hunting dogs after his children, to the delight of all involved. This is life before Child Protective Services.

¹⁶ Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love & Love in a Cold Climate* (New York, Vintage Books, 2001), 145.

¹⁷ Like Beaton’s “creativity,” Mitford does not dismiss English forms of speech. Linda’s gossip is the corollary of Beaton’s 1920s slang as “tonic.”

¹⁸ Mitford, *Love*, 147.

¹⁹ Mitford, *Love*, 148.

²⁰ Mitford, *Love*, 145.

²¹ Patricia Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 15.

²² Mitford, *Love*, 185.

²³ Mitford, *Love*, 181.

²⁴ Mitford, *Love*, 181.

²⁵ Mitford, *Love*, 183.

²⁶ She was also dependent on her novels for sophistication on the material level, even as those were what she had created. It was after the publication of *The Pursuit of Love* that

At last, very cautiously, she was able to indulge her flair for clothes and replenish her wardrobe. ‘Went yesterday to order a suit at Dior. £ 120. Evening dresses start at £ 342. Impossible to get inside the building. I had to use INFLUENCE to be allowed to order. Why is everybody so rolling—they can’t all have written Pursuit of Love.’ (19th February, 1947 to Heywood Hill.) Our friend Gillian Sutro reminds me that Nancy was ‘the first Englishwoman to catch on to Dior, and she bought clothes from him at the beginning when no one had heard of him in London. (Acton, *Nancy Mitford*, loc. 1291).

²⁷ Hastings, “Mitford.”

²⁸ Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh, *The Letters of Nancy Mitford and Evelyn Waugh*, ed. by Charlotte Mosley (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), September 9, 1947.

²⁹ As a 1958 *Town and Country* article notes tongue in cheek for its English-speaking audiences, “Don’t feel slighted if a Frenchman doesn’t ask you to his house, because only a handful of them ever receive foreigners. They don’t receive each other, either...It is perfectly possible for an American to live and work in Paris for twenty years and never once be invited home by a French friend or colleague.” Veronica English, “PARIS,” *Town & Country*, 11 (1958), 97.

³⁰ The fashion editor Bettina Ballard describes the immediate post-war social scene in Paris which Gaston was a part of: “As unenergetic as people were about getting back to work socially Paris was active. The hard core, the nugget of social life that summer was in the British Embassy over which Lulu de Vilmorin ruled while Alfred and Lady Diana Duff Cooper were ambassador and ambassadress. Here was to be found the “little group,” the type of inner exclusivity that Paris loved so dearly, the closed set where conversation was in a particular jargon, almost incomprehensible to the outsider. Marie-Louise Bousquet was part of this, Bébé Bérard, of course, and Georges Geoffroy, who was doing publisher something about redecorating the library. But it was always who opened and closed the doors socially.” *In My Fashion* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1960), 210.

³¹ Waugh and Mitford, *Letters*, 216-217.

³² Beaton, *Glass*, loc. 270.

³³ During the mid-50s, Mitford told Bousquet that her first biography, *Madame du Pompadour* (1954) was being pursued by numerous German publishers, to which Bousquet replied, “au fond c’est le seul peuple qui nous aime” (Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1667). To be identified with “us” by this French icon must have been gratifying indeed for Mitford. Bousquet was also, as Beaton notes, at the heart of the Parisienne world of fashion, which also was something Mitford had in common with Bousquet; “the haute couture...always fascinated Nancy” (loc. 2619). Though not responsible for getting Mitford into the House of Dior—that was Diana Cooper—Bousquet was close friends with Christian Dior and hosted the dinner party the night after his ultra-successful debut of the New Look in 1946. The Mitford and Bousquet connected over this as well, taking the salon atmosphere out into the café during the Parisian summer. And they discussed fashion. Carmel Snow, the editor of *Harper’s Bazaar*, describes that “in summer Marie Bousquet and I used to gather with friends on the sidewalk of the ‘Mont Blanc.’ And what fun we had at those dinners! In Paris everyone is interested in fashion—that’s one of the joys of working there. Jean Cocteau used to dine with us, the composers Auric and Poulenc, the ambassadrices Diana Duff Gordon and Evangeline Bruce, Nancy Mitford—I have forgotten all the names—all talking fashion.” Carmel Snow and Mary Louise Aswell, *The World of Carmel Snow* design by Alexey Brodovitch (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1962), 179.

³⁴ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67-68.

³⁵ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, 68.

³⁶ According to Action, “*Love in a Cold Climate* is far from dull—Nancy was exaggerating her modesty. Raymond Mortimer considers it the best of her novels. The conquest of tough Lady Montdore by Cedric Hampton, ‘a terrible creature from Sodom, from Gomorrah, from Paris,’ was what reviewers used to call audacious, but many dowagers whose names I could mention found youthful companions like Cedric who subjected them to a course of rejuvenation...The scene with Uncle Matthew when Cedric bought Vogue on the platform of Oxford station and was shaken like a rat; the alarm of hearty Jock who expected Cedric to pounce on him in the train when they were ‘quite alone together after Reading’ and maintained that he had been hypnotized into moving Cedric’s heavy suitcase off the rack—such incidents were based on real happenings.” Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1331.

³⁷ Selina Hastings, “The Pursuit of Nancy Mitford,” in *Essays by Divers Hands- Being the Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature*, ed. Richard Faber (Wolfeboro, NH: Boydell, 1988), 92.

³⁸ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, 109.

³⁹ Rebecca West describes this complicated, mutually determined relationship in a 1951 essay for *Harper's Bazaar*:

Our houses [in Britain] have done too much for us, we have done too much for them. They minister to our creature comforts, but like so many of those who love us, they follow their own ideas of what is best for us, and not ours; and of course there follows an argument. Just now my house is giving me hot bath water only in the middle of the day as obstinately as if it hoped to improve my character that way, and I am trying to turn it to my way of thinking by giving it a new furnace. No doubt that will settle the dispute, but it must leave a scar on our relationship, such as might be left on a marriage by a long wrangle about the proper school for the children. A web of care lies all about our houses and covers the gardens too. There can be no doubt that the cedar of Lebanon is the most beautiful of the conifers, with its layers of dark-bright branches, like spread arms with open hands, palms held downwards, and stretched fingers feeling the wind. The only one of them that does not give me unmitigated pleasure is that one that pleases me most, because it grows on the slope beneath my windows. I know how many branches, it has cast during the last few winters, and my heart contracts with anxiety when I see it at its best, with the wind tugging hard at all the stretched fingers. Then I suffer that most disagreeable of feelings, I feel I ought to do something about it. "Strangers' Houses," *Harper's Bazaar* May 1951, 117.

⁴⁰ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, 109. She continues, "both a woman's duty and her delicious indulgence to produce a continually evolving domestic sphere, and this endeavor is, notably, sold to her by the manipulation of an anxiety above to judgement of other women. The home is constructed in this period in a relation to the outside world that is simultaneously anxious and exhibitionist—a duality that will be explored further with reference to the subject of 'entertaining' so obsessively treated in the literature directed at the hostess." *Feminine Middlebrow*, 109-10.

⁴¹ Mitford, *Love*, 448.

⁴² One of Mitford's persistent narrative techniques is revelatory protest; she embeds textual insights within characters' emotional, and usually incorrect, declarations; the corollary I will explore in the chapter is the central character's questions. Narrative techniques such as these which repurpose moments of speech towards deeper narrative themes and tendencies is the sophistication of middlebrow texts, which is how speech becomes art in relation to the novel itself. As with sophisticated speech, speech cannot be reduced to the words themselves but rather their uses are important. This multi-layering is what Faye Hammill describes as the middlebrow's "witty, polished surfaces" and "unexpected depths and subtleties" that are "frequently conceal[ed]." Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: Texas University Press, 2007), 6.

⁴³ Cf. for example, the opening of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

⁴⁴ Melissa Boyde, "'You for Whom I Wrote': Renée Vivien, H.D. and the Roman à Clef," in *The Unsociable Sociability of Women's Lifewriting*, ed. by Anne Collett and Louise D'Arcens (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 148.

⁴⁵ Boyde, "Roman à Clef," 149.

⁴⁶ Janet Lyon, "Sociability in the Metropole: Modernism's Bohemian Salons," *ELH* 76, no. 3 (2009): 689.

⁴⁷ Mitford, *Love*, 426.

⁴⁸ Mitford, *Love*, 378.

⁴⁹ Mitford, *Love*, 421. Specifically, it is Norma, a fellow wife of an Oxford don who supplies her relatives with details about Cedric. She, as Fanny narrates, “got her facts, I am ashamed to say, from me. It tickled me so much to make Norma gasp and stretch her eyes with horror.” Mitford, *Love*, 421. The gossip salon is not entirely reputable, but Fanny is an experienced practitioner who decorously disavows her involvement while eagerly participating for her own pleasure. But this pleasure serves a double purpose, for stories of Norma’s horror can also be transformed into gossip’s social currency—Cedric enjoys stories of the Boreley’s moral outrage, which Fanny happily supplies.

⁵⁰ Mitford, *Love*, 427.

⁵¹ This same story illuminates gossip’s self-reflexivity—gossip is also driven by the desire to hear about oneself. Fanny, skillful middleman that she is, recognizes that Cedric wants details about the Boreleys, but is equally desirous to hear of reactions to himself. Fanny thus combines flattery and gossip in recounting Jock’s encounter with Cedric—“Norma was full of you just now” she confides. “What else do the Boreleys say about me?” He replies, the slip from the cosmopolitan “one” to “me” betraying his eagerness. Within pleasure’s rubric, one is much better off with an encounter mediated by the middleman, the person skilled in gathering and disseminating the details, than a first-hand experience. The account is more interesting and gratifying, and one can hear of others and of oneself, the latter providing the thrill of self-defamiliarization, or at the very least satisfying one’s curiosity. The delightful frisson of cross-cultural encounters provides rich comedic material. This is, for Mitford, the middlebrow at its best—it borrows and reshapes what it derives into a positive value that is something else altogether, producing for the reader unalloyed pleasure without guilt.

⁵² Mitford, *Love*, 445.

⁵³ This fact is arguably unfortunate, because Mitford is at her best when she writes in the vein of popular sophistication, not the dazzling elite in France of her later novels. Popular sophistication in Mitford is far more pleasurable.

⁵⁴ Acton relates how Mitford summarizes the play to her mother thus: “a terribly funny play about husband, lover and wife on a desert island-lover gets very low all alone in the little hut while the husband and wife sleep in the big one, insists on taking turns. Husband not absolutely delighted but sees the logic, that they have shared her for six years and might as well go on doing so. Then a handsome young negro appears ties up husband and lover by a trick and indicates that he will only let them go if Susan will go into the hut with him, which she’s only too pleased to do as he is very good looking.—Disgusting,—I hear you say. And so on—you see the form.” Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1402.

⁵⁵ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1399.

⁵⁶ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1399. Mitford describes that “everybody said the Lord Chamberlain wouldn’t pass it.”

⁵⁷ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1450.

⁵⁸ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1502.

⁵⁹ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1502.

⁶⁰ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1502.

⁶¹ Nancy Mitford, *The Blessing*, Vintage ebooks (New York: Vintage, 2010), 71.

⁶² Mitford, *Blessing*, 71.

⁶³ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1502.

⁶⁴ Mitford, *Blessing*, 124.

⁶⁵ Mitford, *Blessing* 126.

⁶⁶ The guide declares, “we are to be allowed the great privilege, hardly ever accorded to tourists, of seeing Madame de Hautesserre’s own bedroom. Madame la Duchesse has given me the key; she knows that we are all serious students of French art and not mere gaping sightseers.”

Mitford, *Blessing* 125. Grace, of course, has not entered the room before.

⁶⁷ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 2285.

⁶⁸ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 2294.

⁶⁹ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1616.

⁷⁰ Amanda Foreman, “Introduction,” *Madame de Pompadour* by Nancy Mitford (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), xv.

⁷¹ Mitford, *Pompadour*, 27.

⁷² Mitford, *Pompadour*, 27.

⁷³ Mitford, *Pompadour*, 27.

⁷⁴ According to John Ayto, “at the hinge of the decade the world was changed forever by the explosion of two atomic bombs over Japan in August 1945. The possibility of such weapons had been envisaged for some time, and indeed the term atomic bomb is first recorded in 1914, but their all too real existence opened the way for alternative formulations: A bomb (1945) for short, fission bomb (1941) for the technically minded, superbomb (1940) or simply the bomb (1945) for the apocalyptically minded. The world was having to get used quickly to the possibility of being atomized (1945) by nuclear (1945) weapons. And as if this were not enough, there was now talk of a hydrogen bomb (1947), exploded by nuclear fusion (1947) and perhaps delivered by a guided missile (1945). Ground zero (1946) was not the place to be.” “Words from the 1940s” *Oxford English Dictionary blog*, 19 December 2018.

⁷⁵ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 2267.

⁷⁶ Acton describes this as a talent for simplification and readability: “undoubtedly Nancy was biased in favour of Madame de Pompadour and Louis XV but this added vivacity to her narrative. She also had a talent for simplification: her language, sometimes verging on schoolroom slang, was far from that of the scholastic historian. The result was a gain in readability, though here and there we may smile at certain colloquialisms.” *Biography*, loc. 1651.

⁷⁷ Arguably, they align just as closely here as in Pompadour’s affair with the King, who, as Hastings notes, echoes Palewski; the salon is an intersection centered around creative identity, while the affair aligns with the Mitford-Palewski affair.

⁷⁸ Humble writes, “the broad working definition I employ throughout this book is that the middlebrow novel is one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort. It is essentially parasitical form, dependent on the existence of both a high and a low brow for its identity, reworking their structures and aping their insights, while at the same time fastidiously holding its skirts away from lowbrow contamination, and gleefully mocking highbrow intellectual pretensions. It is also a predominantly middle-class form. In fact, as I will argue at length, its changing structures and preoccupations offer us a map of the shifting fortunes and identities of the middle classes throughout the period from the 1920s to the 1950s.” *Feminine Middlebrow*, 11-12.

⁷⁹ Beth Blum, “The Self-Help Hermeneutic: Its Global History and Literary Future,” *PMLA* 133, no. 5 (2018): 1100. Blum focuses on readings of literary and the self-help genre, arguing that intersections between the two have been undervalued. She continues the counternarrative to modernism’s ostensible impersonality and autonomy: “while the beginning of the twentieth

century ushered in modernism's championing of impersonality and autonomy, the period also saw the escalation of a different sort of textual activity. In continents across the globe, early self-help and the didactic hermeneutic it advocates defined individuals' first experiences with literary works such that self-help acquired the status of a gateway to cultural literary around the world." "Self-Help Hermeneutic," 1100.

⁸⁰ Blum, "Self-Help Hermeneutic," 1099.

⁸¹ Indeed, in Blum's analysis of *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), the protagonist uses biography towards self-betterment, "scouring [a compilation biography called *Important Artists*] for advice on how to be great," pink and yellow highlighters in hand. After "[c]onverting the book's anecdotes into an algorithm of success, Sheila decides to enact the quintessential trajectory of cosmopolitan ambition: she decides to move to Manhattan." "Self-Help Hermeneutic," 1112.

⁸² Blum, "Self-Help Hermeneutic," 1106.

⁸³ Mitford, *Pompadour*, 28.

⁸⁴ Mitford, *Pompadour*, 28.

⁸⁵ Mitford, *Pompadour*, 29.

⁸⁶ Blum, "Self-Help Hermeneutic," 1100.

⁸⁷ As Humble describes, the feminine middlebrow was "intensely class-conscious," and middlebrow texts were "peculiarly devoted to the anatomizing of middle-classness... a fundamental concern with middle-class identity and taste is one of the key factors that defines the feminine middlebrow." Furthermore, "minute adjustments of class distinctions was still considered (as it had been throughout the eighteenth nineteenth centuries) to be a feminine activity... battle for social ascendancy that was waged on the level of manners, taste, and speech." Humble, *Middlebrow*, 59.

⁸⁸ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1651.

⁸⁹ Acton records that she wrote to Heywood Hill, the bookseller for whom she'd worked during World War II, on 1 May 1954:

"My crazy friend Prof. Ross has written such a lovely pamphlet for la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki, printed in Finland but written in English, on upper class usage in England. Entitled LINGUISTIC CLASS INDICATORS IN PRESENT DAY ENGLISH. It has sentences like "The ideal U-address (U stands for Upper Class) is P, Q, R, where P is a place-name, Q a describer (manor, court, house, etc) and R the name of a county... but today few gentlemen can maintain this standard and they often live in houses with non-U names such as *Fairmeads* or *El Nido*." (What will the Finns make of it?) Anyway it seems a natural for the Xmas market, illustrated by O. Lancaster and entitled *Are You U?* I've suggested this to the Prof (who may of course think it dreadfully infra dig) and I've told him, if the idea appeals to him to send you a copy and you would perhaps advise about a publisher. It is dreadfully funny throughout because written in a serious scientific style. I'm glad to say Pursuit of Love is one of his source books. He is a great new character in my life and a card if ever there was one—U himself, and in my expert opinion he has got everything right but one." Quoted in Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1726.

⁹⁰ Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1723.

⁹¹ But even she, skilled as she was with the shifting desires of her readers, perhaps did not anticipate the success her essay would achieve. Even Greece wasn't far enough away: "'Oh my post!' she exclaimed to Alvilde Lees-Milne [a frequent correspondent], 'Everybody now is

furious—Frogs, Greeks and English—and Geoffrey [Gilmour] says the only place left for me is America where they can't read.” But in the description that continues, one hears a note of cackling glee: “One man wrote (to *Encounter*) ‘I often go to the Guards’ Club and there they generally say cheers or something before drinking. Since the article they still say it, but with some reference to Miss M.’ Can’t you hear them: To hell with Miss M—!!” Acton, *Biography*, loc. 1746-47.

⁹² Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, 59.

⁹³ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, 82.

⁹⁴ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, 85.

⁹⁵ Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*, 87.

⁹⁶ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 14.

CHAPTER THREE: Cultivating Sophistication in E.M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady*
(1929-30)¹

Inculcating unattainable elite or traditional sophistication, specifically through educating readers on up-to-date jargon and gossip (Waugh) or modes of speech (Mitford), is one way in which middlebrow texts are modern. Sophisticated types, like Agatha Runcible, mediate singularity, knowingness, fashion, and remaining current as goods to be pursued but which are never realized by the middle class. Middlebrow texts, like *Vile Bodies*, encourage readers to aspirationally identify with characters or take up their sophisticated practices. For the middlebrow readers of works like these, sophistication is the siren's call. As the reception of *Vile Bodies* and popularity of Mitford's texts demonstrate, readers consumed texts with sophisticated characters and speakers in part out of a desire to be themselves sophisticated. Sophistication—an exemplar of the modernist imperative towards the new—beguiles characters within and readers outside of popular texts.

But as the second half of my dissertation demonstrates, the extratextual reality was more complicated, and indeed richer; there is more to be said about the middlebrow's relationship with sophistication and modernism. This chapter demonstrates the complex cultural negotiations of sophistication within "ordinary" middlebrow texts, complexities which Waugh's satire and Mitford's idealized fantasy obscures. Middlebrow readers, authors, and cultural producers—particularly those who problematize hierarchical gender relations or class stratifications—had a complicated relationship with sophistication as an elite form of performed cultural capital.² For example, sophistication assumes hierarchies of exclusivity and cultural capital; it reifies the gap between insiders and outsiders through its beguiling entanglements. Realizing the radical promise of sophistication as a modernist good, particularly for the middle-class and middlebrow

readers, then, was tenuous, and required popular modernist texts challenge its limits on how one could be an insider. In other words, some middlebrow authors advocated for the middlebrow reader, rather than beguiling them, by redefining sophistication.

To demonstrate this, I turn to E.M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, which was serialized (1929-30) in the political-feminist British weekly periodical, *Time and Tide*, and then published transnationally as a novel. Delafield exemplifies popular modernist newness, for she "wrote the instalments almost as they appeared, keeping just ahead of publication...partly...to ensure that any comments on public affairs should be reasonably up-to-date."³ The complexities of "being modern" are key to E.M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, which comes from the perspective of the "Everywoman," not the traditional, elite sophisticate.

THESIS

Diary portrays sophistication not only as a cultural good but also as an inescapable pursuit for the titular Provincial Lady, who embodies the modern, middle-class woman. The unnamed Provincial Lady is simultaneously repelled by and enticed by elite, highbrow culture, which manifested in the text's sophisticate, Lady Boxe, and her fashionable dress and haughty, intellectual speech. The Provincial Lady never achieves the intellectual sophistication modeled by "Lady B.," as she is also referred to. But rather than disavowing sophistication, Delafield's narrative imagines alternative sophistications for her protagonist: sophisticated motherhood and writerly sophistication. *Diary* disrupts sophisticated speech—within the novel's diary form, sophisticate's dialogue is described, not recorded. Delafield thus stages Lady Boxe as a compelling, even irresistible, social force, while divesting the sophisticate's powerful speech of its seductive affect. The text contravenes how the middle class pursued social distinction and knowingness through fashionable speech in order to realize the goal of sophistication.

Sophistication's practitioners retain agency within time in two ways within the novel. Sophisticated motherhood highlights sophistication's anticipations, as its practitioners retain agency within time. Writerly sophistication, as exemplified by the Provincial Lady, strategically employs engagement and detachment, which are the sophisticate's signature performative social interactions. In contrast with traditional, elite sophistication, these alternative forms are available to middle-class readers.

SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Diary of a Provincial Lady records entries penned throughout a year in the life of an upper-middle-class mother, the unnamed Provincial Lady. They provide a humorous account of her domestic disasters, visits with friends, trips to London and France, parties, encounters with the local aristocracy, interactions with other inhabitants, and perpetually overdrawn bank account.

SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

Critics of *Diary of a Provincial Lady* frequently cast Delafield as a middlebrow exemplar and advocate, disinclined towards a highbrow identity/aesthetic and elitist cultural aspirations. Melissa Sullivan declares Delafield "fought to maintain her middlebrow identity" and "Delafield's work with this weekly review helped her become a leader within middlebrow culture."⁴ Sullivan describes Delafield's commitment to the middlebrow as a firm rejection of highbrow culture:

Delafield's disregard for pursuing a highbrow identity in favour of her more satiric and realist aesthetic preferences and arguments on women's everyday life and literature show that she held an alternative value system of cultural capital than that of her more elite peers. She favoured enlarging and complicating an intellectual and comic middlebrow

culture that would grant writers greater freedom than a more controlled highbrow realm, much like Faye Hammill's understanding of the middlebrow as 'a productive and affirmative position for writers who were not wholly aligned with either high modernism or popular culture.' But Delafield also recognized the flexibility and power granted to her to do so because of her proximity to the highbrow sphere through her affiliation with *Time and Tide*.⁵

In this account, Delafield's engagement with elite culture is at best a necessary evil. Catherine Clay also casts Delafield as a middlebrow outsider in her 2018 monograph on *Time and Tide*. Clay builds on Sullivan's claim that Delafield expanded the middlebrow as "an alternative arena of 'legitimate culture.'"⁶ Delafield's novel was serialized within the "Miscellany" section of the journal, which was introduced to *Time and Tide* in January 1927. This column was placed between the periodical's political pages and expanding book reviews section, and, as Clay describes, it "typically comprised one or two 'light' contributions, usually in the form of short stories, sketches, or familiar essays."⁷ Clay argues that "in the space it created for contemporary women writers *Time and Tide*'s Miscellany negotiated a position for the 'feminine middlebrow.'" She concludes that this column concretized the separation between the journal's middlebrow and highbrow concerns: "at the very same time that the periodical was seeking access to the highbrow sphere (literary and political), and working to rebrand itself as a general-audience intellectual weekly, its Miscellany section defended and promoted middlebrow culture and operated to attract, and sustain its relationship with, its core female readership."⁸

But through the avenue of sophistication, my chapter complicates Delafield as exclusively middlebrow and also nuances the relationship between high and middlebrow she mediates for her readers.⁹ While Delafield champions the middlebrow through the Provincial

Lady, her heroine also ambivalently pursues elite culture. Sophistication illuminates the desirability of a highbrow identity, which Delafield is attuned to, even in her advocacy for the middlebrow. Sophistication's pull is in excess of Delafield's irony; the text cannot be entirely sophisticated about sophistication. Complete disregard for a highbrow identity, or elite, traditional sophistication, is a fantasy; disavowing sophistication entirely would be the most sophisticated act possible. As *Diary* demonstrates, Delafield's response to sophistication is not just resistance, but creative re-appropriation, for Delafield reimagines sophistication. But sophisticated speech remains an intractable problem for Delafield's text; with writing one can make headway.

Admittedly, my argument that Delafield carves out a space for a uniquely middlebrow practice of sophistication (motherhood and writing) in opposition to its traditional, elite form affirms Sullivan and Clay's claims that Delafield is a fierce middlebrow advocate. But the absolutist frame of both critics, in which Delafield rejects the highbrow wholesale, assumes a two sphere-model and neat lines dividing high/middle for Delafield. But this division is both literally and figurately a fiction—one which haunts much criticism of the middlebrow—and creates more problems than it solves. First, this move marginalizes the middlebrow, which is uniformly positioned outside high and highbrow modernism culturally and aesthetically. It artificially separates middlebrow authors, like Delafield, from highbrow literary and political concerns. Second, Sullivan, in particular, celebrates Delafield's oppositional—one might say sophisticated—stance towards highbrow aesthetic culture. But Delafield was keenly aware that actually achieving this utopic state—in which the middlebrow/middle class successfully disavows the highbrow/sophistication—is impossible. In short, locating Delafield and her text

within the middlebrow sphere, without acknowledging her incomplete disavowal, reifies an inaccurate modernist/middlebrow divide and returns the middlebrow to an unattainable pursuit.

Instead, the challenge for popular modernist fiction is how best to engage elite culture without selling out the middle class, to pen fiction that, unlike Waugh and Mitford's, does not present unattainable, fantastical sophistication. Delafield writes on behalf of the middlebrow while acknowledging "being modern" will always be entangled with elite forms of cultural capital. She—and here the diary form is particularly effective¹⁰—explores what it looks like to live in the middle. She aspires to middlebrow-affirming forms of engagement even as she humorously satirizes readers' aspirations. Delafield assumes her readers will always be drawn by Parisian couture and the cultural capital of Bloomsbury but imagines middlebrow forms of sophistication anyways. Delafield reformulates sophistication but also allows for fantasies (e.g. the Provincial Lady's trips to Paris and parties with aristocrats) that one may like to disavow in real life and will likely never be realized by her readers. The novel embraces the unreality of becoming sophisticated on middlebrow terms, the inability to completely disassociate from a highbrow aesthetic or system of cultural value, and the impossibility of achieving elite sophistication. This endless cycle is the space the novel carves out for its aspiration readers, not a middlebrow utopic. And thus the Provincial Lady's weakness is Delafield's strength.

DIARY'S ALLURING SOPHISTICATE

Lady Boxe is sophistication's dazzling center and thus synecdoche for highbrow cultural capital. She is the stable, unchanging center of the narrative itself, in relation to whom I will construct the Provincial Lady and the text's alternative sophistications. Lady Boxe is the exemplar traditional sophistication: titled, well-dressed, snobbish, and relentlessly obsessed with demonstrating her superior knowledge. Lady Boxe provides a rich image of sophistication and

“being modern” within the text. But her desirability, and through it the pull of sophistication, is not always evident to readers because they neither see nor hear her.

The Provincial Lady is seduced by the sophisticate’s language and appearance; she is both made inferior and entranced. Because of her desirable qualities, Lady B. is the central target of what Sullivan calls “the defining feature of [Delafield’s] Provincial Lady series”: a style which is “satirical, comic, and championing the everyday in print.”¹¹ Because of the diary form, Lady Boxe’s sophistication is mediated by the Provincial Lady’s wit, humor, envy, and general ambivalence towards her dazzling neighbor. This mediation partially disavows sophistication’s elitism. In other words, readers never fully experience Lady Boxe’s sophistication because its mesmerizing power is diffused throughout the course of the novel, rather than concentrated in the first encounter. The reader may choose, if she likes, to turn away from the sophisticate; this is the startling agency with which Delafield endows her narrator. This is done in two ways—*Diary* limits both visual and verbal encounters with the sophisticate. Delafield uses form, specifically the absence of dialogue, to enable the reader to resist (even when speech is recorded, it is very rarely contained in quotation marks). The Provincial Lady cannot resist sophistication, but the reader need not. Delafield does not allow her readers to be seduced by elite sophistication; this is a creatively destructive feminist act that simultaneously cements the author’s own sophistication.

But the reader does, however, get a visual of sophistication that escapes the Provincial Lady’s witty treatment one third of the way through *Diary*. The illustration of *Diary of a Provincial Lady’s* aristocratic and beautiful sophisticate, Lady Boxe, establishes the desirability of elite, traditional sophistication. (The illustrations first appeared in the published novel version of *Diary*, not in the text serialized for *Time and Tide*. Thus, while I do not expand on this point below, my argument about sophistication’s desirability—as distinct from its satire—is

sustainable only within the novel version illustrated by Arthur Watts.) Watts's illustrations bring a corrective, outside perspective, which challenges the self-detachment towards sophistication the Provincial Lady accords herself within the diary entries through her satire and witty asides. Apart from the image below, one does not experience sophistication's affect and its ability to simultaneously seduce and repel.

Arthur Watt's illustration of Lady Boxe magnifies her desirability visually while obscuring the text's satire (see fig. 1).¹² His depiction embodies sophistication as the pursuit of "being modern" and the new within the social realm. Her aristocratic, traditional sophistication is seemingly timeless and of its moment. It is both beautiful and a dazzling performance of general knowingness and 1930 fashion.

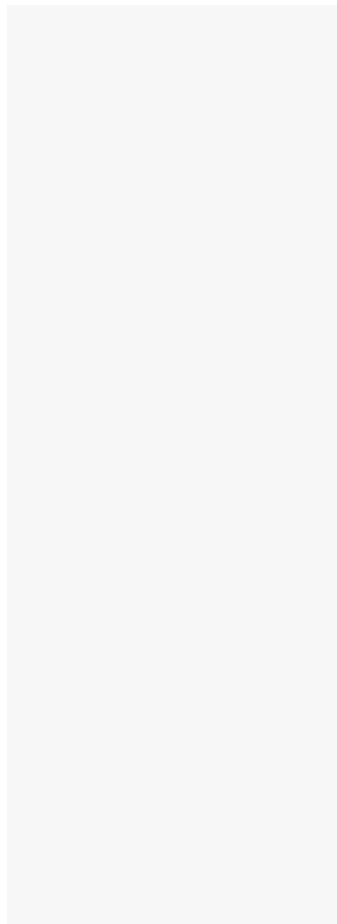


Fig. 1. Illustration by Andre Watts, “Lady B.” in *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930)

Watts captures Lady B.’s sophistication with her long, sinuous figure clad in full-length evening gown. It is lit by an unseen source, which creates a shimmering effect against the black and magnifies proportions seen only in a Parisian model or couturier’s sketch. Lady B. has mastered a careful and knowing poise, with her hand perched just so on her hip; she also evokes a celebrity ready to be photographed. Her coiffed hair, elegant jewelry, and kohl-rimmed eyes complete the stance, in which commercial and aesthetic intersect. Lady Boxe provides the exemplary of traditional sophistication—elite, snobbish, and enticing—without any mitigating satire. There is an serpentine quality to Lady Boxe’s in Watts’s shimmering, elongated illustration.¹³ Caricature, which characterizes most of the work’s other illustrations, is here muted. Watts adoringly portrays the sophisticate without irony.¹⁴

Watts’s illustration, and its tension with the narrative tone, are in concert with Delafield’s intentions. He worked closely with the author on the *Provincial Lady* illustrations. Delafield describes their tight collaboration:

I do not remember at exactly which moment of the Provincial Lady's career it was decided that her diary should be illustrated. The name of Arthur Watts was suggested by myself—not because he was a personal friend, but because he was such a brilliant and humorous draughtsman....As we knew a fair number of the same people, and as he often stayed at my own home, Arthur had a very accurate idea of the types that I had had in mind whilst writing the book. Sometimes his insight was almost equally disconcerting to us both. Once he took me up to the studio and showed me a drawing that afterwards became one of the very best things in the book. It was an admirable presentation of one

well known to both of us. “Tell me,” said Arthur, in a strange, strangled voice, “you wouldn't say that it was at all like anybody, would you?”¹⁵

In short, as Delafield also remarks, “[h]is illustrations caught the spirit of the text perfectly.”¹⁶ As a contributor to the *Tatler* and other periodicals concerned with the social elite, Watts was no stranger to sophistication or current fashions. He was a regular contributor of full-page cartoons to *Punch* between 1921 and 1935 and an acute observer of class distinction markers.¹⁷ His ability to satirize Lady B. is indubitable. Indeed, other figures in the text are caricatured types. But not so with Lady Boxe. Lady Boxe is both a character in the narrative and a specific type—the elegant sophisticate. As Hammill notes, “the delineation of social ‘types’ . . . was a staple of periodicals,” including *Time and Tide*.¹⁸ Watts illustration both depicts the sophisticate and demonstrates to the reader the seductiveness of Lady B. which, as I will demonstrate below, is hidden by the Provincial Lady’s ambivalent response to the aristocrat.

MIDDLEBROW RESPONSE TO SOPHISTICATION

I now move from the mediation of elite culture and sophistication, focalized in Watts’s illustration, to the middlebrow response to sophistication, embodied in the Provincial Lady as the “everywoman” with whom the reader identifies. In doing so, I complicate Sullivan’s claim that Delafield “disregard[ed] . . . pursuing a highbrow identity” and “held an alternative value system of cultural capital than that of her more elite peers.” While she advocates for middlebrow sophistication and satirizes elite pretensions, *Diary of a Provincial Lady* emphasizes, even magnifies, the pull of a social highbrow identity and its associated value system, which the Provincial Lady becomes entangled in from the opening scene. The Provincial Lady never fully rejects elite sophistication, even as she strives against it, leaving Delafield’s rejection ambiguous. The novel acknowledges the strong pull of sophistication as a cultural and social good through

the upper-middle-class narrator's ambivalent response. The Provincial Lady is intimidated and rages against Lady Boxe in private, but she cannot fully resist the pull of the sophisticate because there is, in fact, something there to desire. Lady B. is an exaggerated type, but she embodies the duality of the sophisticate as both desirable and ridiculous, an object of satire and envy. Despite and perhaps even because of her snobbishness, the Provincial Lady still finds her desirable.

SOPHISTICATE'S DESIREABILITY

Watts's stunning drawing appears a third of the way through the novel, by which time Lady Boxe's pugilistic character has been firmly established, and Lady B.'s seductive beauty comes as a shock to the reader. But the Provincial Lady does not have the reader's advantage. In the opening scene, the Provincial Lady is subject to sophistication's dazzling performance, both verbal and visual. This interaction incurs her reluctant yet willing acquiescence to sophistication's pursuit. It also dramatizes the cultural pursuit of sophistication by the middle class. The opening scene re-figures the biblical narrative of the Edenic fall within Delafield's own twentieth-century lapsed Catholicism and the Augustinian tradition of diary-writing as a spiritual discipline of self-examination and repentance.¹⁹ She had a complicated relationship with her Catholic background, for Delafield had entered a monastery but was unable to take the calling as a nun.²⁰ She subtly repurposes Catholic and biblical tropes throughout her writing. The opening scene is a satirical, revisionist allusion to the garden of Eden narrative in domestic terms, with the Provincial Lady and Lady Boxe as caricatures of tempted and tempter. The first entry opens with "plant the indoor bulbs"; then Provincial Lady unspools the encounter: "just as I am in the middle of them, Lady Boxe calls. I say, untruthfully, how nice to see her, and beg her to sit down while I just finish the bulbs. Lady B. makes determined attempt to sit down in armchair where I have already placed two bulb-bowls and the bag of charcoal, is headed off just

in time [i.e. do not dirty the dress], and takes the sofa.”²¹ The Provincial Lady claims “untruthfully,” but this is in tension with “beg,” particularly if one has Watts’s illustration of the sophisticate’s direct stare in mind. The Provincial Lady is a modernist, unreliable narrator here, who cloaks her susceptibility with satire. Lady Boxe enters as a satirized yet formidable exemplar of sophistication’s knowingness and timelessness, a master of time and space; she is unwelcome yet in control. Lady Boxe is the temptress who intrudes into the Provincial Lady’s idyllic scene of indoors gardening, in which the home is an ostensible paradise. While domestic disasters ensue throughout the text, the possibility of a second Eden within the home—the Provincial Lady’s domain—has not fallen. The disruption of female paradise happens repeatedly through the intrusion of the social, which disturbs this domestic paradise. Sophistication disrupts the cyclical; it is counterproductive to the generative. The Provincial Lady’s conflicting desire to imitate and avoid mediates the narrative. It also stages the impasse the reader finds herself in when encountering the elite sophisticate.

This experience ends domestic paradise; the Provincial Lady strives but fails to complete this generative task—i.e. successfully cultivating bulbs—throughout the novel. This moment determines the Provincial Lady as it divests her of cultivator agency. The Provincial Lady moves from productivity and bulb cultivation (which is associated with writing for her in the paratextual elements) to imitating the sophisticate. Her unwilling fall, or acquiescence, is not signaled in the text through action, but through the Provincial Lady’s aside within her diary. As in the biblical account, her fall takes the form of a question. The Provincial Lady pens her first aside in the midst of Lady B.’s incessant verbal assault: “(Query: Is it possible to cultivate the art of conversation when living in the country all the year round?)”²² Questions are not neutral for the Provincial Lady; the parentheses imply, however playfully, authenticity within the diary. “Art of

conversation,” as I described in the introduction, is a rich, historically sustained keyword for leisurely, pleasurable conversation linked, though uneasily at times, with sophistication. It has long-standing aristocratic associations, gendered overtones, and a very French chapter to its history. The archaic language deliberately evokes the previous uses of elevated speech and the position of women within them. Lady Boxe, however, performs this archaic form successfully because she is modern. She escapes temporal determinism, for she knows and is up-to-date before everyone else. The “art of conversation” serves as synecdoche for sophistication’s capacity to remake speech and oneself. The Provincial Lady’s desire in this scene shifts from the generative to the artificial, from gardening to envy of the sophisticate.

But whether voiced or silent, questions signal women’s desires more accurately than statements in middlebrow fiction. The Provincial Lady’s hope for sophistication begins with an unspoken question, rather than an answer. It highlights Provincial Lady’s longing for the sparkling wit and elite gossip that are the sophisticate’s signature mode of discourse and which is noticeably absent in her quiet submission. Sophistication, as Hammill notes, is cosmopolitan; it has an urban context.²³ The question also poses the foremost obstacle in her mind: “living in the country all the year round”; if an education in sophistication can be managed in the country, however, her hope may be realized.

Even as she satirizes Lady B.’s self-conscious snobbishness, sophistication becomes the provincial upper-middle-class narrator’s consuming preoccupation in the diary’s opening entry and continues throughout the narrative. The Provincial Lady critiques Lady Boxe and her snobbery incessantly. But she still attends Lady Boxe’s parties, and she expends time, money, and energy throughout the narrative on being in the sophisticate’s proximity and cultivating sophistication herself. In this regard, the Provincial Lady acts as the “Everywoman” for her

aspirational readers, mirroring their own desires. This weaving of the Provincial Lady's own satire and envy are present throughout even as she knowingly and wryly portrays sophistication's cost within her own experience, when both money and time are in short supply. Sophistication is equally desirability and debilitating. Through the Provincial Lady as type, middle-class's ability to resist its captivating force is put to the test.

SOPHISTICATION AS CULTIVATION: THE PROVINCIAL LADY'S INACCURATE METAPHOR

This scene is a failure of will to overcome mis-ordered desire—the Provincial Lady turns away from planting towards Lady Boxe. This misshapes her noetic abilities—she thinks she too can attain elite sophistication. Her fall leads to self-deception. Her question, which notably does not make it into the spoken dialogue of the novel, thus imagines conversation as an art that can be developed and learned; the controlling metaphor for conversation is one of husbandry—“cultivat[ing]” sophistication. This metaphor refigures how one becomes skilled in the art of conversation as well as the costs which it incurs. If cultivating one's flowers creates aesthetic satisfaction, then cultivating sophistication will create social and cultural capital. Or so the logic runs here. Cultivation requires sustained commitment and persistence, as well as the proper space in which to cultivate one's crop. Cultivating conversation and sophistication requires money, but the cost is primarily that of leisure time, consistent practice, and perseverance.²⁴ The art of conversation does not come naturally or easily with the country anymore than the Provincial Lady's garden blooms during winter; both require cultivation through the creation of artificial circumstances and conditions. But cultivating sophistication as a middle-class provincial woman is still possible. The cultivation of indoor bulbs becomes an apt illustration for the cultivation of the art of conversation and sophistication under circumstances which are

artificial in that they are no longer “provincial,” in the pejorative sense. Delafield is more subtle and sophisticated (i.e. knowing) here than Waugh or Mitford, and all the more convincing because her narrator too falls. This offers hope to the aspirational reader that is all the more tempting for its subtlety: you, the Everywoman, can cultivate sophisticated speech successfully, can gain knowingness and distinction, can control your social destiny. And so the fantasy continues.

But the Provincial Lady has the wrong metaphor. The art of conversation is not the practice of cultivation and husbandry, as her interchange with Lady Boxe has illustrated. Rather it is a combative sport, with winners and losers, in which the Provincial Lady comes out as a loser within the economy of sophistication. By virtue of her class and lack of wealth, she lacks the social and cultural capital to win, regardless of how hard she strives. The economy of sophistication requires that one exchange ploughshares and pruning hooks for swords, and the Provincial Lady is ill-equipped. The idea of cultivating sophistication is, in short, a fantasy. Within this economy, the first line of the novel, “Plant the indoor bulbs” embodies the reality that the Provincial Lady can cultivate flowers—and writing—even though it is late fall. But cultivation transposed into the conversational realm is a seductive but false metaphor. It concretizes the fantasy that cultivating sophistication throughout the space and time of the novel means that next November history will not repeat itself, the Provincial Lady will not “exchange with fellow-parents exactly the same remarks as last year,” and she will be able to converse with equal brilliance on novels she both has and has not read.²⁵ What she actually cultivates here is a fantasy and thus neglects the very real work she has in front of her: planting bulbs, raising children, and writing. Her cultivation moves from the real into the symbolic. Moments in which

sophistication like that of Lady Boxe can be cultivated are chimaeras within the text. Her desires to cultivate a Lady B.-esque sophistication will not be realized.

SOPHISTICATION'S COST AND COMBATIVE SPEECH

From the opening scene, Delafield satirizes elite, aristocratic sophistication as a cultural good and object of aspiration. Sophistication is a disruptive force rather than a positive force of rupture as it is experienced by the novel's narrator. Lady Boxe's name reflects her favorite pugilistic pastime to which is added a French, pretentious "e." The verbal is central to the seductive power of sophistication; it is how the novel's sophisticated Lady Boxe asserts her social dominance and makes herself desirable. But Delafield forecloses this desirability and thus the temptation—to also be swayed verbally like the Provincial Lady—for the reader.²⁶ Delafield satirizes Lady Boxe's haughty knowingness as pretentious without actually quoting it. This gives Lady Boxe the desirability of the unknown, but her speech is also only as good as the reader's imagination.

But if the Provincial Lady partially disguises the seductive quality of sophistication, her diary cannot obscure the costs of pursuing it. Conversations with sophisticates are combative, competitive, and hurt the loser. One cannot win at the art of conversation when one is not already sophisticated. The most sustained rhyme between talk and antagonistic sport is illustrated by Lady Boxe. In these combative moments, the sophisticate is almost voiced. For the reader, she sounds unbearable. The opening scene begins with a barrage from Lady B., as relayed by the Provincial Lady: "Do I know she asks how very late it is for indoor bulbs? Do I know that the only really reliable firm for hyacinths is Somebody of Haarlem?" Lady Boxe stays for tea and "We talk some more about bulbs, the Dutch School of Painting, our Vicar's wife, sciatica, and All Quiet on the Western Front." The aristocrat then offers advice on curing Vicky's cold. Only

after she drives away in her Bentley does the Provincial Lady “think of several rather tart and witty rejoinders.”²⁷ Lady B.’s knowingness concentrates on desirable forms of factual and practical knowledge, which are sneeringly imparted the reader is left to assume, with style and poise. While Lady B. is presented as snobbish rather than witty, that perspective is mediated by the Provincial Lady’s memory and self-interest. The narrative invites the reader to imagine for herself witty rejoinders.

The drawing-room, where their conversation takes place in the opening scene, is the recognizable stronghold of traditional forms of conversation, such as one encounters in the drawing-room comedy, where the sophisticate shines (e.g. Noël Coward’s drama). But Robert Louis Stevenson’s description of the drawing room of the nineteenth century still encapsulates the Provincial Lady’s home in the early twentieth:

The drawing-room is, indeed, an artificial place; it is so by our choice and for our sins.

The subjection of women; the ideal imposed upon them from the cradle, and worn, like a hair-shirt, with so much constancy; their motherly, superior tenderness to man's vanity and self-importance; their managing arts—the arts of a civilised slave among good-natured barbarians—are all painful ingredients and all help to falsify relations. It is not till we get clear of that amusing artificial scene that genuine relations are founded, or ideas honestly compared. In the garden, on the road or the hillside, or tête-à-tête and apart from interruptions, occasions arise when we may learn much from any single woman.²⁸

There is a rhyme here between how middle-class women are disempowered by men within the drawing room according to Stevenson and how the sophisticate strips other women of agency. Stevenson’s desire for authenticity jars with Lady B.’s sophisticated cynicism and worldly wisdom. But artificiality, which extinguishes authenticity and community (i.e. “genuine

relation”), is sophistication’s fertile soil. The sophisticate does not have to play by the gendered drawing room rules, but the Provincial Lady, as the rest of the novel demonstrates, is in fact bound by the rules of polite conversation practiced within this space and expected of middle-class women in general. She spends much of the novel unable to communicate what she truly thinks or feelings, even as she wittily pens her authentic responses into the diary. Sophistication participates in the subjugation of women within this context; Lady Boxe takes the room cum garden and enacts the strictures of the drawing room. What for the sophisticate is a space of freedom only further entangles the aspiring sophisticate in the “arts of a civilised slave.” Yet—and this is the text’s stunning insight—sophistication still remains desirable.

There are other examples of combative sophisticated conversation, in which the Provincial Lady’s attempts at husbandry are doomed to fail. The metaphors matter, as does the mismatch, for it demonstrates the Provincial Lady’s profound misunderstanding of sophistication as a good that can be learned. The Whites, her neighbors who are associated with a particularly combative form of conversation and tennis, exercise sophistication as knowingness in reference to current events. This exclusive knowingness within the information age is the other basis for fashionable speech, a vulgarized form of sophisticated speech that still effectively constructs one’s social superiority.²⁹

Conversation as competition is associated with tennis, traditionally speaking.³⁰ The metaphor, however, is anything but fun and games, and more accurately communicates the cost and competitiveness of pursuing sophisticated speech. A new Wimbledon stadium was built in the 1920s and the draw seeded; these changes, as Helen Walker notes, “marked a break with the pre-war, essentially English, vicarage tea-party atmosphere of the game.”³¹ Figured as tennis, conversation becomes an exclusive, competitive, and costly sport during the same decade

sophistication becomes positive as a term, associations which are antithetical to conversation as a widely available commodity. Walker affirms that “the cost of [tennis] equipment and the need for a court underpin[s] its social exclusivity but also ensur[es] its synonymy with class privilege.”³² The traditional homology between conversation and tennis is illustrated in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. White, whose competitive approach to tennis mirrors their cutthroat conversational encounter with the Provincial Lady and their equally aggressive attempts to be sophisticated (cf. chapter one for my cultural account of the newspaper’s role in this type of sophisticated speech). When the narrator “ask[s] if they play tennis, and politely suggest that both are probably brilliant performers,” the couple demurs but immediately recount “Tournaments in which they have, or have not, come out victors in the past.” This adversarial bent sets the tone for the conversational game that follows:

Later on talk about politicians. Mr. White says that in his opinion Lloyd George is clever, but Nothing Else. That's all, says Mr. White impressively. Just Clever. I refer to Coalition Government and Insurance Act, but Mr. White repeats firmly that both were brought about by mere Cleverness. He adds that Baldwin is a thoroughly honest man, and that Ramsay MacDonald is *weak*. Mrs. White supports him with an irrelevant statement to the effect that the Labour Party must be hand in glove with Russia, otherwise how would the Bolsheviks dare to go on like that?

She also suddenly adds that Prohibition and the Jews and Everything are really the thin end of the wedge, don't I think so?³³

The Provincial Lady is informed about current events, but Mr. And Mrs. White play an aggressive serve and volley style of speech; they aim to win each point emphatically. The Provincial Lady becomes a radio announcer for the reader, narrating the strokes and shots of this

verbal exchange. In response to Mrs. White's hard-hit, point blank question, she "say[s] Yes, I do, as the quickest way of ending the conversation." She lobs the ball in another conversational direction, "ask[ing] if she plays the piano, to which she says No, but the Ukelele a little bit, and [they] talk about local shops and the delivery of a Sunday paper." This is a game that is played competitively and aggressively everywhere. The best response to their onslaught is hardly pleasurable: safe yet very provincial topics. The narrator "resolve[s] never ask the Whites to play on our extremely inferior court" and "Hope[s] never to set eyes on either of them again."³⁴ For Delafield, sophisticated speech veers from leisured pastime into competitive play; its art becomes a masculinized discourse in which words become aggressive blows or competitive shots. This places within the realm of winners and losers and replaces speech's previous end within the art of conversation as pleasure.

SHIFT TOWARDS SOPHISTICATION AS A GOOD

But neither the Provincial Lady nor Delafield condemn sophistication's pursuit or reprimand the desires of the Provincial Lady. The verbal is central to the seductive power of sophistication; it is how the novel's sophisticate asserts her social dominance and makes herself desirable. Sophistication starts out as *the* original temptation and fall in the text, and the *Diary* is unerring, if witty, in demonstrating the costs associated with pursuing sophistication. Despite her fall, the Provincial Lady remains above all one with whom the reader can identify. As Delafield describes of the work's composition,

But the idea had come into my mind of writing, in the first person singular, a perfectly straightforward account of the many disconcerting facets presented by everyday life to the average woman. It was obvious that the theme could only succeed if it was neither

dramatized nor sentimentalized—and as I am good neither at drama nor at sentiment, it seemed reasonable to conclude that it would prove a formula after my own heart.³⁵

The Provincial Lady's pursuit of sophistication may be costly and disconcerting at times, but it is not sentimentalized, even as it remains engaged in other ways. Sophistication is just as desirable as the Provincial Lady is sympathetic.

But sophistication remains implicitly dangerous, or at least undesirable, for Delafield the author refuses to allow her readers to be seduced. She silences the text's sophisticate. She treats speech apart from dialogue, and so is able to explore sophistication within the verbal while also divesting its power. Through chastising the elite sophisticate's speech, and rebuking speech as a means to pursue sophistication, Delafield compromises sophistication's power.

Thus speech is the casualty here in the text. Speech, like writing, has to be purified. Because it is in diary form, the novel is about, rather than a record of, verbal encounters that take place with the daily and weekly cycle. This was not because Delafield could not write dialogue. Delafield details how her "perilous gift of facility" "has made for a certain effect of spontaneity, and—combined with the phenomenally good memory with which I was born—for good dialogue."³⁶ She later describes,

Long afterwards, when I wrote a series for *Punch* called "As Others Hear Us," I found that it was only necessary to listen carefully to almost any conversation, in almost any gathering, and quite a number of themes, and indeed pieces of actual dialogue, presented themselves. A kind of phonographic memory, for which I may claim no credit since it was born with me, usually reproduces in my mind's ear a whole conversation more or less word for word as soon as I have recalled the opening sentences. Some of these phonographic records date back to my early childhood, some to the week before last.³⁷

But the Provincial Lady has no such memory. By giving a daily summary, including its verbal encounters, the diary emphasizes the verbal as the reflection on a specific length of time. Speech is situated within cyclical time. The diary revels within cyclical time by avoiding the conversational quandary, in which conversation is overwritten, determined by gendered cyclical time, and only available to the sophisticate. Time puts pressure on sophisticated speech within modernism, for one ought to be original, singular, and brilliant within the moment. With writing, however, time provides an advantage rather than disadvantage (as Delafield demonstrates, even deadlines are generative). Delafield disavows speech within the texts. She defines herself against the tradition of witty novelists. Furthermore, her purpose is not to teach readers to speak with sophistication, even though it is a major theme of the work. It narrates sophistication without portraying it. Diary writing provides a different space than spoken sophistication, and writing has a different relationship with time and sophistication's seduction.

Delafield deftly creates a mismatch between the sophisticate's speech and her appearance, divesting it of power in this version of knowingness. Delafield takes a step back from speaking. The novel is a disavowal of speech and a recovery of the cyclical as generative. Speech is the weapon of intellectual sophistication, which marginalizes those without capital, knowledge, or access. In short, cultivation begins with pruning—a time to cut down—and dialogue is largely banished from the novel. But Delafield's task here is pruning, not destruction—her middlebrow novel remains a sophisticated and sophisticating object. She does not eviscerate sophistication within the novel.³⁸ In contrast with dialogue, Watts illustration still embodies unassailed sophistication, against which Delafield's written satire is powerless.

MULTIPLE FORMS OF SOPHISTICATION

Instead, Lady Boxe highlight sophistication's connection with what Jessica Burstein terms "the dynamic of fashion." In her article "A Few Words about Dubuque: Modernism, Sentimentalism, and the Blasé," Burstein argues that "like the dynamic of fashion, sophistication works by relentlessly defining itself against its immediate past, or immediate context."³⁹ She cites the example of Dorothy Parker, who "distinguishes herself as uncommon" and therefore sophisticated "by ironically parading her tendency to weep. This activity is distinctive precisely because of its context, the urbane and critical milieu of the Algonquin Round Table, amid readers of *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*."⁴⁰ Burstein's example here focuses on Parker's immediate context; the aspect of "the dynamic of fashion" that I will use to unpack Delafield focuses on sophistication's definition against its temporal contexts.

Sophistication is not only "like," but subject to, "the dynamic of fashion." Sophistication infuses the gendered time of the modern and the desire to know. The true sophisticate looks simultaneously backwards, sideways, and towards the future—sophistication's context also includes what comes next. But relentless reinvention also shapes sophistication's socio-historical development, thus making it subject to the "dynamic" Burstein describes. Culturally specific sophistications dominate for a season, only to provide the context for the next iteration. Sophistication takes multiple guises, but these sophistications are defined against one another through the disciplining work of fashion. To frame sophistication in terms of Burstein's "dynamic of fashion," sophistications follow each other and are defined against the previous version of sophistication, just as fashions in evening wear succeed one another. "The dynamic of fashion" also historicizes these conflicting sophistications, which overtake one another as do different iterations of sartorial fashion.

While Lady B. is a type, the image must still be up-to-date within the moment of publication to avoid being satirical. Sophistication is subject to “the dynamic of fashion” as iterative and cyclical—it too changes throughout time. This change, as I will argue for below, allows for Delafield’s middlebrow intervention. But it also cements Lady Boxe’s status and draw. Lady Boxe is a recognizable “type” of elegant, traditional sophisticate even for a twenty-first century reader, and therefore she is ostensibly timeless. But the timelessness inherent in a type is at odds with distinction. Hammill declares that “to conform to one of these types is to fail in the struggle for distinction.”⁴¹ It is a testament to Watts’s skill and intent, then, that Lady B. is an exemplary type who also exemplifies the sophistication of a specific time and place. Watts’s image historicizes Lady Boxe’s sophistication and sophistication more generally. This is the ephemeral beauty that Beaton reserves for Parisian fashion present within the middlebrow par excellence. Lady Boxe exemplifies the sophisticated ideal within the socio-cultural moment of Delafield’s writing and Watt’s illustrating, because she is absolutely up-to-date. The fashion, and the sophistication which this fashion sustains, are shifting and cyclical.

Lady Boxe’s dress, which points to a specific moment within fashion, signals that her sophistication is actual, not pseudo. The dress is temporally and fashionably accurate, and satire cannot change the sartorial extra-textual reality. Watt may have produced a type—an instantiation recognizable to the twenty-first century reader and seemingly timeless—but Lady Boxe is an up-to-date, Parisian image of sophistication. The exaggerated features, including the sinuous length, make her a type, but the outfit makes her utterly of the moment, utterly “modern,” both as a sophisticate and in terms of fashion. There is a rhyme between sophistication and sartorial fashion: both change in the pursuit of newness which succeed one another. Just as evening dresses go in and out of style, different sophistications cycle through.

Contrasting the image of Lady Boxe as an intellectual sophisticate with the sophistication of the Bright Young People which I detailed in chapter one, I will expand on the differences between Lady B.'s sophistication and that of the Bright Young People to demonstrate how "the dynamic of fashion" plays out within sophistication. There are multiple forms of sophistication within time, and the text's signature sophisticate, Lady Boxe, provides the exemplary of elite, snobbish, and enticing sophistication. Each version of sophistication is defined by and against its previous context.

But first, the dress. Watts's drawing illustrates Paris fashion contemporary to the first-edition reader, for Lady Boxe's dress exemplifies the simple elegance that marked French couture of the 1930s. The current-ness of Watt's sketch can be illustrated by a comparison with French couture evening gowns of the early 1930s: ensembles from the Houses of Chanel (1930), Patou (1931), and Lelong (early 1930s) (see fig. 2).⁴²

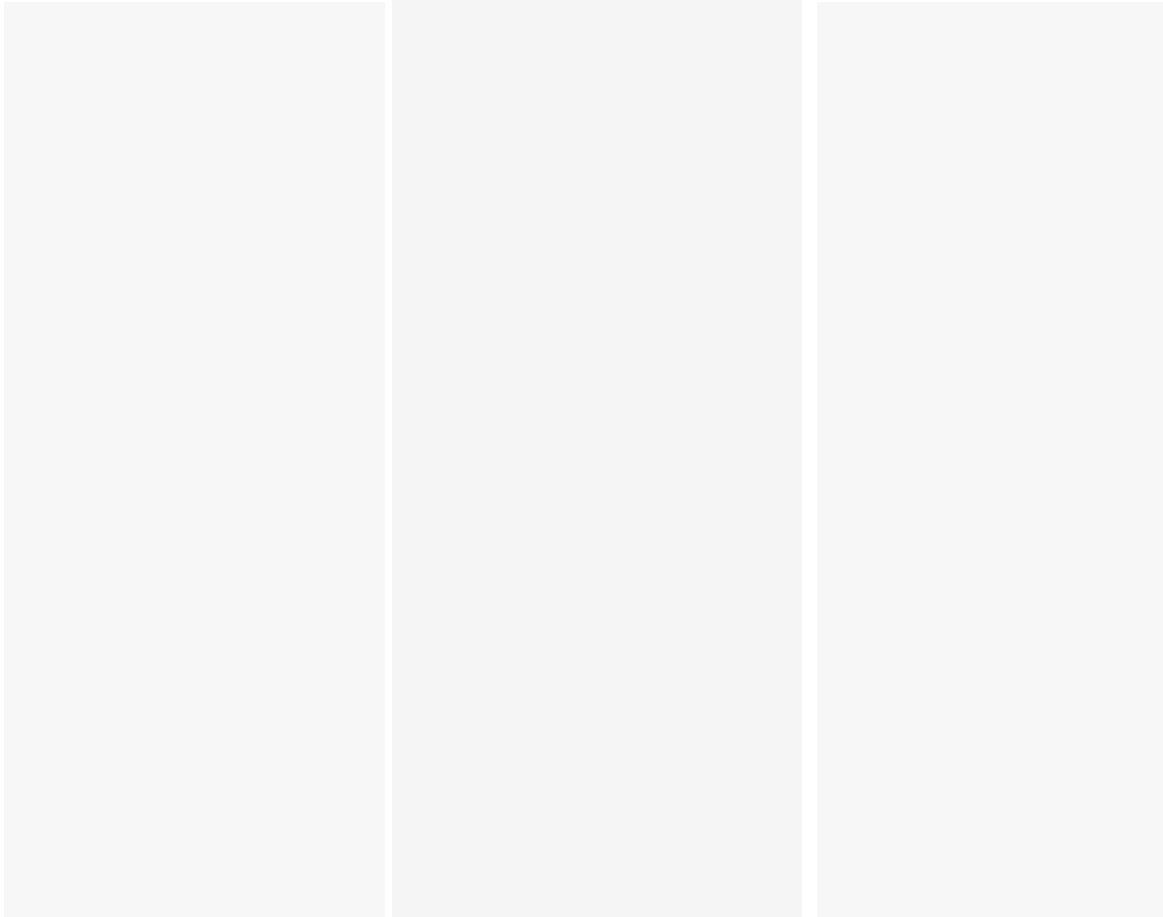


Fig. 2. Early 1930s French couture evening wear. *Left to right*: Gabrielle Chanel “Evening dress,” ca. 1930, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2009.300.3257a, b). Jean Patou, “Evening ensemble,” ca. 1931, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1972.30.17a, b). Lucien Lelong, “Evening dress” ca. early 1930s, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2004.213).

These were three of the principal Parisian fashion houses in 1925.⁴³ The Patou

ensemble is emblematic of the simple, refined Parisian cocktail silhouette of the 1930s.

The delicate drape of the dress, executed in a lavish hand-painted silk satin, was intended for evening wear, but the small, removable cape allowed for wear between six and eight.

This ensemble also demonstrates the difference between the Parisian and American aesthetics of the period: while Paris valued simplicity and modest elegance, American clients were instructed to take one silhouette and dress it for the various day and evening hours with an abundance of different accessory items.⁴⁴

The length and subtle high-low skirt of the Provincial Lady echoes the Chanel and Lelong dresses (see fig. 1), while the lines and reflective shimmer of the Patou gown can also be seen in Watts's illustration.

Lady B.'s dress as pictured by Watts is not identical to these pieces but echoes two key aspects of the 1930s evening-wear fashion: length and silhouette. All three reflect the move away from the tubular silhouette of the 1920s. This decade "marked the era of the flapper, who was known for her late nights on the town filled with dancing such dances as the Charleston and the Black Bottom. To accommodate this new lifestyle the fashions changed. A tubular silhouette became the mode as hemlines rose and waistlines dropped."⁴⁵ Evening dresses from this era of Chanel (1925) and Patou (1927) illustrate the point (see fig. 3),⁴⁶ as they contrast sharply with couture from 1930s above and Lady B.'s dress.

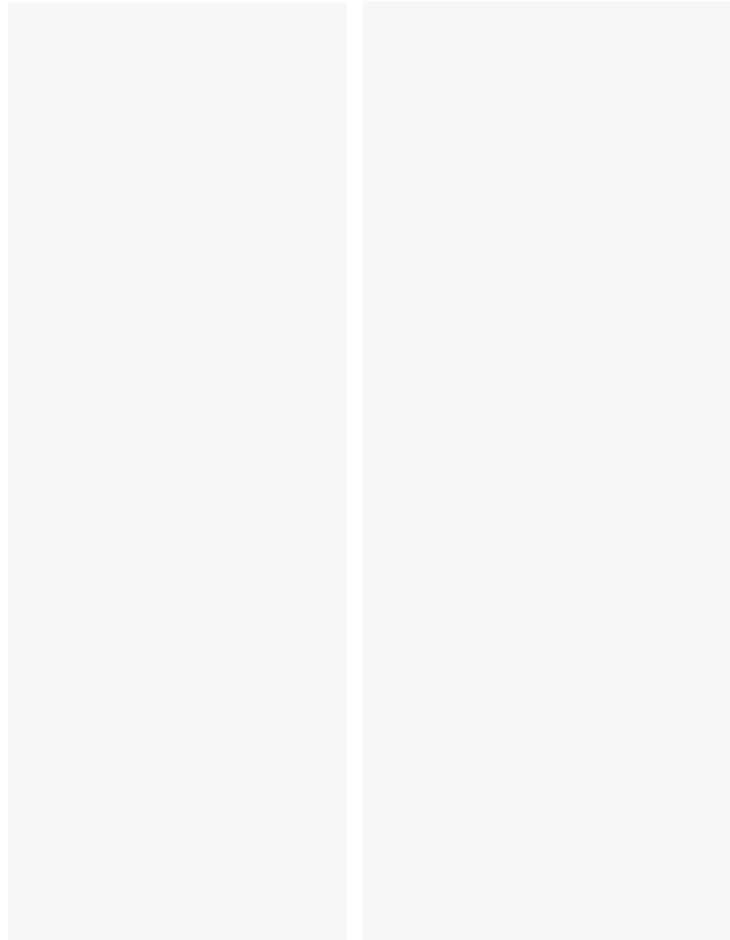


Fig. 3. Mid-1920s “flapper” French couture evening wear. *Left to right*: Gabrielle Chanel, “Evening dress” ca. 1925, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (C.I.44.64.7). Jean Patou, “Evening dress, House of Patou French” ca. 1927, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1977.210.16).

Both the full-length gowns and the flapper dresses are evening wear, but the contrast is striking.

This change I’ve detailed above reflects the broader shift. This is exemplified by the shift in Jean Patou’s designs, for example:

In the mid-1920s, Jean Patou was in constant demand by Parisian couture clients and the American leisure class that had infiltrated Parisian consumer culture after World War I. He was credited with pioneering the shortened skirt for both daytime and early evening, and was consistently celebrated alongside Chanel for innovations in sportswear fabrics and separates styling. By the latter part of the decade, Patou was pushed to adapt to a new

silhouette; the risqué skirts championed by the New York flapper fell out of fashion with international café society, who preferred the more romantic, whimsical full-length sheaths that dominated the early 1930s.⁴⁷

By garbing Lady B. in the full-length gown, Watts links Lady Boxe with the burgeoning shift in fashion that was simultaneous with the novel's publication.

Watts's attention to the sartorial, and to the evening dress in particular, is in keeping with the text, which is highly attuned to fashion generally. Delafield describes the innovation of Lady B.'s waistline during the novel's first evening party. The narrator describes her host's entrance: "Lady B. comes down wearing silver lace frock that nearly touches the floor all round, and has new waist-line. This may or not be becoming, but has the effect of making everybody else's frock look out-of-date."⁴⁸ While Delafield does not explicitly evoke flapper dresses as the "out-of-date" frocks, she marks two points of contrast with everyone else's "frocks"—length and waist-line. As I have demonstrated (see fig. 2 and fig. 3), both of these are key in the shift from 1920s flapper to 1930s full-length evening wear. Watts's depiction of Lady Boxe in full-length gown is prescient of this shift towards 1930s evening wear. If Lady B. was dressed in a flapper dress in the 1930 novel, either she or the illustrator are not actually sophisticated, but rather are working under a model that is passé and bears the dreaded label of "pseudo."

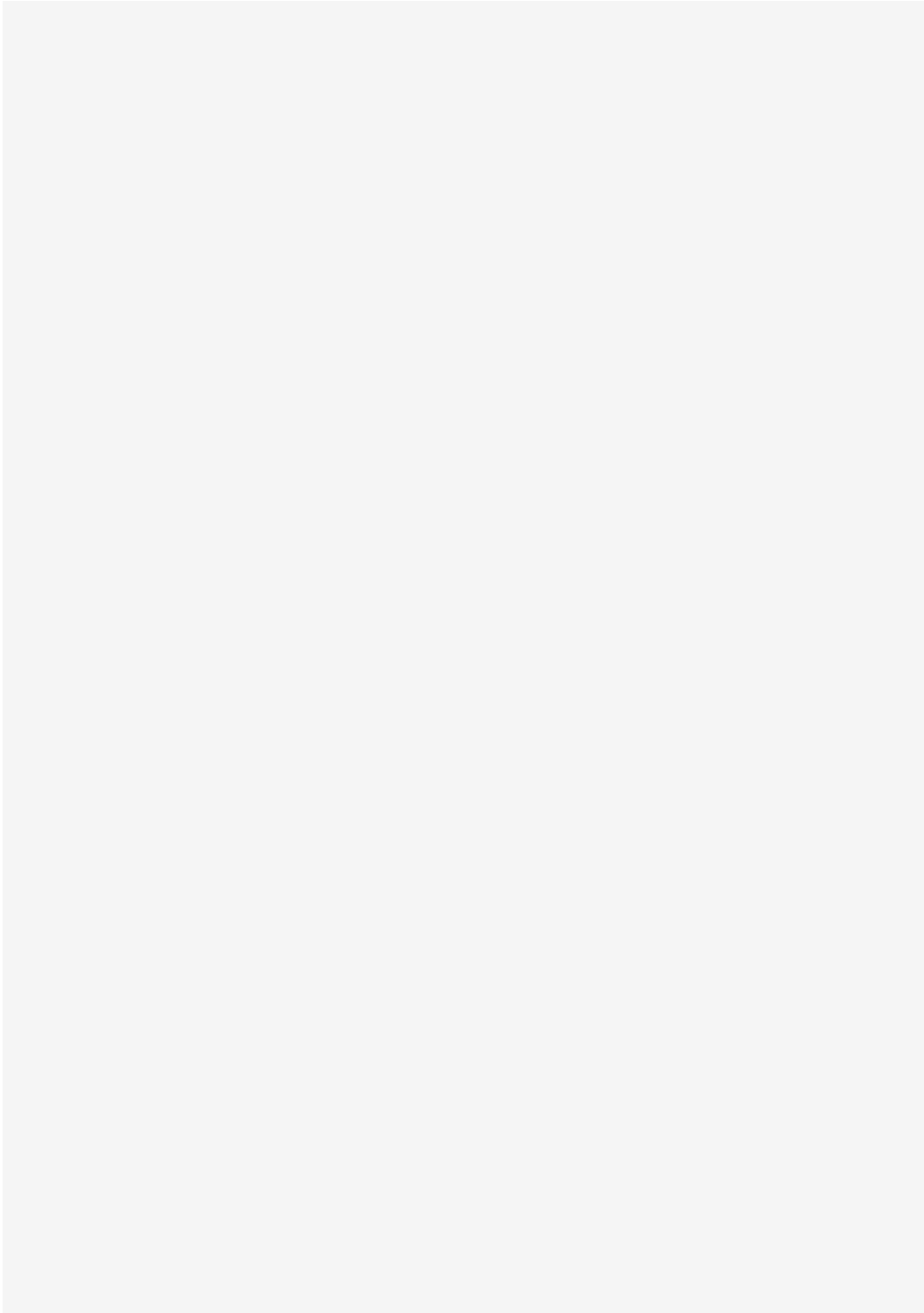
FROM SARTORIAL FASHION TO FASHIONS OF SOPHISTICATION

Thus fashion is also the visual marker of sophistication that Lady B. possesses; it is the means by which the Provincial Lady and the reader understand her to be modern in 1930. Specific sophistications follow each other and can be read in a similar manner to that of cycles in fashion. As I described in chapter one, the 1920s London scene was dominated by the Bright Young People, the city's celebrity in-crowd comprised of aristocrats, social climbers, and

authors at the heart of Mayfair. But by 1929, this exuberant sophistication was out of date; indeed, the publication of *Vile Bodies* I examined in chapter one continued to hasten its demise. Its youthfulness and exuberance had become immature, and it now provided the disciplining context against which sophisticated motherhood and intellectual sophistication are defined in Delafield's novel; a new form of sophistication was emerging to take its place. The shift in couture dress accompanied this change away from a sophistication that was tightly interlaced with raucous parties. Embracing new forms of sophistication required actively disavowing the previous form. This cycle between disavowal of a previous form of sophistication and the emergence of a new one is encapsulated in a 1929 Arthur Wallis Mills's *Punch* cartoon entitled "The Freak-Merchants or The Bright Young People," which images the shift from Bright Young sophistication to the intellectual sophistication displayed by Lady Boxe. It exemplifies how sophistication and fashion share a detachment from the past and pursuit of the new. To be modern is to reject what has come before.

Mills's cartoon has four panels that compare the previous (Bright Young People) and current version of sophistication (intellectual) (see fig. 4). The first three are of exuberant Bright Young People at different party scenes. The first bears the caption, "They used to think that the dear old bottle-and-pyjama party was quite original," and is followed by the image of an even more raucous party: "till they went one better with the bathing-suit party..."⁴⁹ The third panel pictures the Bright Young People dressed as babies and racing wildly through the park with the caption, "Then they hoped they had touched the high-water mark of originality when they held a 'baby' party in a public square."⁵⁰ Mills points to the strong tie between originality and sophistication; the Bright Young People attempted to remain sophisticated by escalating the

wildness of their parties. But, as Mills's jibes demonstrate, these attempts were unsuccessful, for one version of sophistication is always succeeded by another.



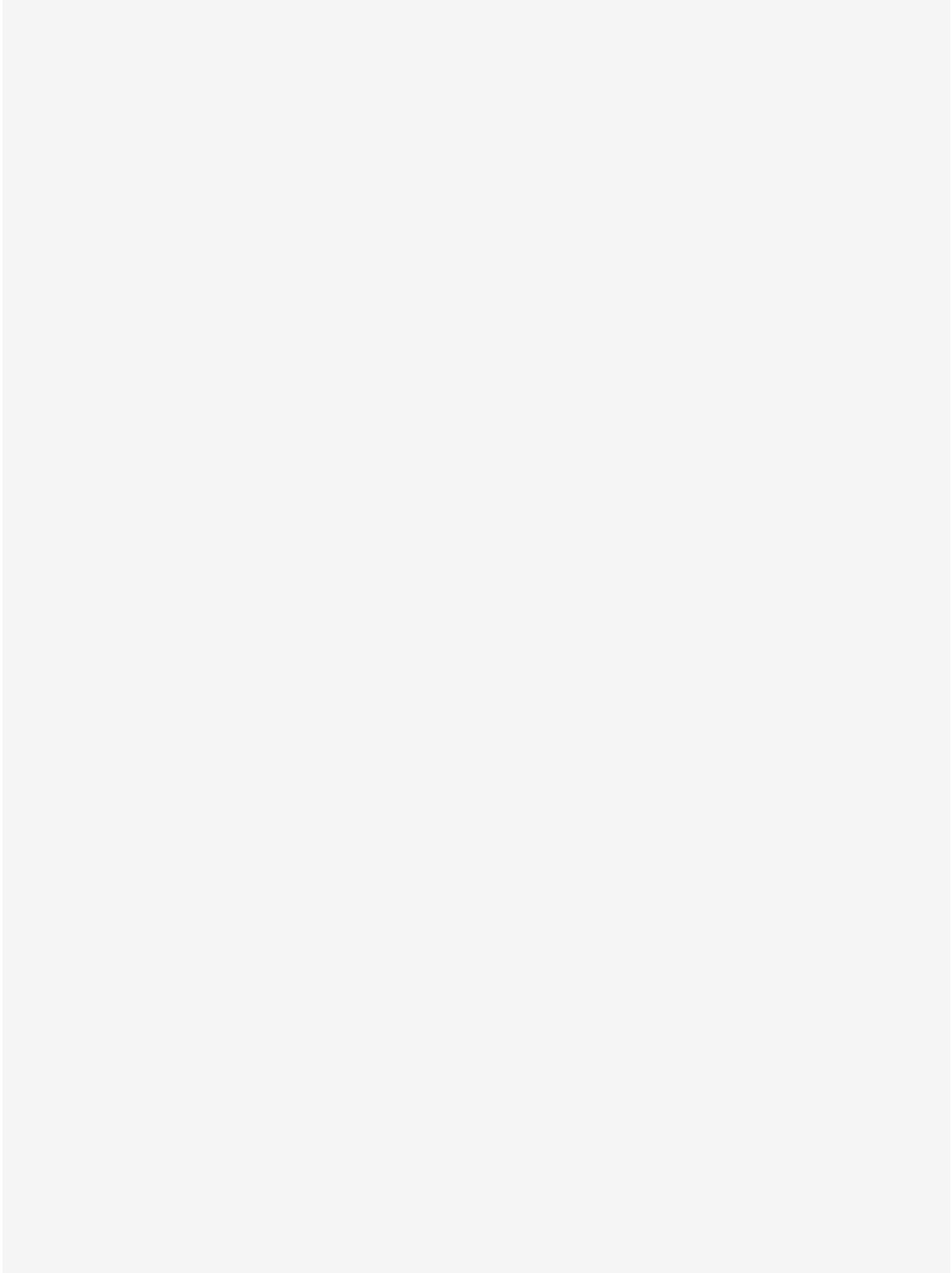


Fig. 4. Cartoon by Arthur Wallis Mills, "The Freak-Merchants or The Bright Young People," *Punch*, 1929.

The final panel gives the punch line and shifts to a contrasting version of sophistication: “only to find themselves completely eclipsed by the *Brighter* Young People.” This new form of sophistication is encapsulated by sedate, intellectual “young people” having conversations, discussing picture albums, and perusing sheet music. They contrast sharply with the raucous parties of the previous three panels. Originality cannot be sustained by the same group of sophisticates. The “*Brighter* Young People” are similarly dressed to Lady Boxe and are intellectual sophisticates. They appear sedate and mature, making the Bright Young People appear wild rather than desirable.

The Bright Young People’s mode of sophistication is exuberantly fast-paced and thoughtless within the 1920s. But as Burstein notes, it is not merely enough to provide a new version of sophistication; it must be knowingly defined against the previous context. Indeed, part of establishing current forms of sophistication is properly putting the previous iteration of sophistication in its place through satire. The Bright Young People are rebranded as “The Freak Merchants,” by Mills, and their “Fancy Dress” parties, specifically the “baby” party and the “bottle” party, are satirized. Specific versions of sophistication are original when in fashion—at their height the Bright Young People’s sophistication was desirably exuberant and, above-all, youthful. But by 1930, tearing through London on a scavenger hunt was no longer fashionable, and the Bright Young People were coming off as decidedly unsophisticated. In short, their specific idiom of sophistication was decidedly passé. In the retrospective gaze of Mills’s work, they are embarrassingly undisciplined and clearly rather ridiculous. The cartoon encapsulates sophistication as a relentless re-definition against context, specifically against previous iterations of sophistication. This shift between sophistications, from the previous iteration to that of Lady

Boxe, is thus captured. The sophistication of the Bright Young people is the past context for those depicted in *Diary of a Provincial Lady*.

SOPHISTICATION AS CYCLICAL

Pointing to the link between sophistication and fashion brings into relief another aspect of sophistication: despite its seeming newness, traditional sophistication is bound by the logic of fashion as cyclical. Sophistication draws on previous iterations. Its definition against the context is not unfettered, for it is bound to the logic of cyclical time. Illya Parkins describes “the *kinds* of change that modern fashion instituted – always cyclical, and so often oriented to the past.”⁵¹ She points to Caroline Evans description of sartorial fashion, but which also applies to the logic that governs the sophisticate: “the traces of the past surface in the present like the return of the repressed. Fashion designers call up these ghosts of modernity and offer us a paradigm that is different from the historian’s paradigm, remixing fragments of the past into something new and contemporary that will continue to resonate into the future.”⁵² The sophisticate may invent personal narratives of progress and originality but is equally shaped by what has come before. The sophisticate seemingly fulfills avant-garde modernism’s ideal in regards to the immediate past—i.e. rupture. But this disavowal coexists with a return to the past; sophistication repudiates what has come immediately before only to claim something else prior. This logic is what Hammill describes as sophistication’s nostalgia: “sophistication can operate through nostalgia (self-conscious reference to the styles of the past), but it cannot be old-fashioned. Therefore, sophisticated nostalgia is much more likely to focus on the unfamiliar glamour of a long-past era than on the merely outdated fashions of recent generations.”⁵³ And as she also brings attention to in her cultural and literary history, this nostalgia focuses on a longing for a lost aristocratic past.⁵⁴ Fashion manifests humans as bound to and by time. What Caroline Evans declares of

sartorial fashion is manifested in the sophisticate's nostalgia; in fiction stories of the sophisticate recycle old genres and forms.⁵⁵ Sophistication is not a complete break with the past, but an alternative form of temporal rupture. Its newness eschews a predictable telos but is also involved with the past. Sophistication creates its temporal newness not only through oppositional involvement with its context, but also through nostalgia. Sophistication, ideally, subsumes fashion's temporal cycle; it captures the past through nostalgia while also remaining new.

Sophistication as cyclical and yet defined against the immediate temporal and physical context is satirized in the novel's ending. Lady B.'s sophistication seems to be ending with the year's cycle, for it runs amok in the ending of the narrative. The Provincial Lady receives a "surprising invitation to evening party—Dancing, 9.30—at Lady B.'s" and proceeds to buy a "very attractive black taffeta, with little pink and blue posies."⁵⁶ She and her husband, Robert, enter into a discussion about how to determine sophistication's insiders and outsiders—"Robert rather shatteringly remarks that he believes the dancing is only for the *young* people, and I heatedly enquire how line of demarcation is to be laid down? Should certainly not dream of accepting ruling from Lady B. on any such delicate question."⁵⁷ Dancing is synecdoche for exclusivity here—this sort of thing is for sophisticates, while outsiders do not dance, at least not at Lady Boxe's party. But while the Provincial Lady is unawares, sophistication is no longer about being young or exuberance, as it was in the 1920s, but about insider knowingness. The Provincial Lady hears that "one or two people *have* had 'Fancy Dress' put on invitation cards, as Lady B.'s own house-party intends to dress up, but no such suggestion has been made to majority of guests."⁵⁸ Sophistication centered around knowingness rather than age is very much in keeping with the current iteration.

The cyclical nature of sophistication intervenes as the fancy dress of the intellectual sophisticates ironically absorbs the previous version of sophistication. And once again the Provincial Lady finds herself humorously outdated. Lady's Boxe's "line of demarcation" for the party is not to be age after all but rather receiving the right invitation. The intellectual sophisticates (i.e. Mills's' Brighter Young People and Delafield's Lady Boxe) take the idiom of the Bright Young People—fancy dress parties—and ironically appropriate it. Sophistication is a mixture of nostalgia and relentless redefinition. The Provincial Lady and the other neighbors are invited because they are necessary to make Fancy Dress an oppositional costume, not a sign of being behind the times. Fashion and sophistication come in cycles.

The transition from 1929-1930 was a cultural moment of sophistication's swift and visible redefinition. Hammill writes that "it is in the realm of the middlebrow that sophistication is most insistently invoked and explored in early twentieth-century culture."⁵⁹ Thus by 1930, the Bright Young People were painfully dated for those in the know, and they became both the immediate past and context against which 1930 sophistication needed to define itself. Various versions of sophistication jostled to fill this desirable cultural space in and around 1930. Noël Coward's "jagged" sophistication that is "far too knowing" came to dominate the British scene during the 1930s,⁶⁰ a version which continued to dominate the popular conceptions of sophistication during the early twentieth century.⁶¹ The timing of Delafield's novel matters, for a culturally dominant version of sophistication was unstable during 1929-30. As Burstein has noted, the irrational is "the first fact of fashion."⁶² Like fashion, sophistication's cycles are unpredictable and irrational. The anticipations of what comes next for sophistication within this uncertainty gave Delafield's imaginings power within the middle class and middlebrow.

DELAFIELD'S GENERATIVE TEXT

Delafield's novel is not only destructively satirical, like Waugh's text; it is also generative, taking the stuff of satire, and having divested it, makes something new yet similar. New versions of sophistication come out of the previous. She does not end or disavow sophistication; in order to offer her own version of sophistication, Delafield has to silence what is in vogue while allowing sophistication's integrity to remain. This is central to what Sullivan identifies as "Delafield's efforts to carve out a multifaceted, comic, and intellectual middlebrow arena."⁶³

Delafield imagines a sophistication that is generative and in which the cultivation metaphor is appropriate: sophisticated motherhood and writerly sophistication. In following "the dynamic of fashion," the text refashions, repurposes and redesigns sophistication. Delafield offers alternative versions of sophistication. The Provincial Lady's future—her children—her immediate context—her sophisticated neighbor, Lady Boxe—and the novel's cultural past—the 1920s Bright Young Things—discipline the Provincial Lady's practice. They are the standards against which her sophisticated motherhood defines itself, as it responds not only to previous and concurrent iterations of sophistication, but also to sophistications yet to come.

SOPHISTICATED MOTHERHOOD

Delafield offers a counternarrative of sophisticated motherhood for its aspirational middlebrow readers, in which sophistication's knowingness and detachment within time are prized. The Provincial Lady's diary is preoccupied with her parenting. Early in the narrative, she takes on the role of a modern parent with her daughter:

Interesting, but disconcerting, train of thought started by prolonged discussion with Vicky as to the existence or otherwise of a locality which she refers to throughout as H. E. L. Am determined to be a modern parent, and assure her that there is not, never has

been, and never could be, such a place. Vicky maintains that there *is*, and refers me to the Bible. I become more modern than ever, and tell her that theories of eternal punishment were invented to frighten people. Vicky replies indignantly that they don't frighten her in the least, she *likes* to think about H. E. L. Feel that deadlock has been reached, and can only leave her to her singular method of enjoying herself.⁶⁴

Vicky instigates an uncomfortable discussion, and the Provincial Lady responds, unsuccessfully, with current parenting wisdom. One can be “modern” in parenting just as in dress—waistlines are back in this year; eternal punishment is passé. But the Provincial Lady is outmoded and outwitted by Vicky's ruthless and precocious retort: her daughter answers with the sophisticate's shocking and worldly wisdom—if hell is just another unmodern invention, then no harm in a bit of devilish fantasizing. Vicky's fiendishly clever statement also recalls sophistication's earlier meaning; “sophistry,” as Hammill notes, is linked with the term's pejorative origins.⁶⁵ There are subtle hints in the text that Vicky echoes Lady Boxe; Vicky's image resonates with the one given of Lady Boxe, and Vicky possesses similar social poise: “the children from neighboring Rectory arrive too early and are shown into completely empty drawing-room. Entrance of Vicky, in new green party-frock, with four balloons, saves situation.”⁶⁶ Vicky is the next generation of sophisticates in the making.

The Provincial Lady's response, notably within her diary and not to her daughter directly, raises the stakes of this exchange: “(Query: Are modern children going to revolt against being modern, and if so, what form will reaction of modern parents take?).”⁶⁷ As Vicky's reply demonstrates, “are modern children going to revolt against being modern” is a rhetorical question. Fashion is at the core of the child/parent relationship, and the aspiration to “Be modern” i.e. sophisticated, governs the behavior of parent and child. In this textual moment, the

modern child, i.e. Vicky, is rebellious, mean-spirited, and selfish. But future children will “revolt” against these behavioral expectations; thinking about H.E.L won’t necessarily signal adolescent revolt in the future. But whatever form this future revolt takes, parents will have to react accordingly. “Being modern” is subject to “the dynamic of fashion” and requires constant redefinition against the current context, both for parent and child. Generational succession becomes the endless cycle of fashionable rebellion that reinvents itself with each subsequent generation. The parent, and female middlebrow readers with children, will also inevitably experience “deadlock” as they respond to children when style matters as much as content. The next fashion of adolescent behavior is unknown. Parenthood is ultimately reactionary. Even though parents know adolescents will revolt, the best parental intervention is, at least seemingly, inevitably a response rather than a preemptive intervention.

But sophisticated motherhood disrupts this cycle. The Provincial Lady’s silent departure and query enacts sophistication’s detachment and wisdom within a parental register. The entry opens a space for knowingness within motherhood, for sophisticated domesticity that recognizes parenting trends and children’s strategies. It does not, as her question and detachment suggest, succumb in the battle of wits but instead anticipates and muses preemptively. The Provincial Lady is superior to other mothers who fall prey to the revolt and sophistry of their children. She gains sophistication’s equilibrium through the discipline of diary writing, in which her ironic reflection borders on frivolous yet remains insightful. Delafield’s version of sophisticated motherhood imparts power, agency, and cultural capital to mothers, both within the discourses of parenting and sophistication.

CONTINUED ASPIRATIONS

But the Provincial Lady's disavowal of intellectual sophistication and the dazzling Lady Boxe is imperfect, and she still aspires, at times, to a performance like that of Lady B. Her sense and practice of sophistication as a writer and mother is precarious and often stumbles. She fails to write is anything or fails in the battle of wits with her daughter. *Diary of a Provincial Lady* is not a narrative of empowerment, temporal progress, or individual growth. Within a linear narrative of time and telos, she and the novel are a failure; the Provincial Lady never gives up her pursuit of intellectual sophistication. The Provincial Lady, acting as Everywoman for her readers, still mimics Lady Boxe and plays by the rules of her version of sophistication. When Lady Boxe invites her to dinner, she accepts. The Provincial Lady anxiously debates whether to wear her Blue or Black and Gold dress, both of which she has worn before. The children's governess—French and therefore an authority on all things dress—then offers to “make slight alterations” in order to “render it unrecognizable.”⁶⁸ She also purchases new evening stockings, gets her nails and hair done, and then re-does her own hair five times because the professional job was not good enough. Pursuing sophistication requires forms of capital—both money and leisure time—that the narrator can ill afford to part with.

The country house, as the traditional institution and space in which the art of conversation is cultivated and practiced within the country,⁶⁹ becomes the artificial environment in which the Provincial Lady ostensibly is able to take part in artful conversation and develop her own abilities. In contrast with the usual inhabitants of the country, she and Robert dine with Lady B.'s “distinguished literary friends,” including the author of the *Symphony in Three Sexes*.⁷⁰ This dinner is artificial in that it brings together conversationalists from outside the country who exhibit taste; they know what the appropriate topics are and are well-read enough to opine on them.

Conversation indeed blooms in this space. When the Provincial Lady enters Lady B.'s house, she is able to “[c]ount at least a dozen Roman hyacinths growing in bowls all over the drawing-room.”⁷¹ The bulbs speak the truth, and the art of conversation flourishes during the evening:

Everybody (except Robert) talks about books.... We all say (a) that we have read *The Good Companions*, (b) that it is a very long book, (c) that it was chosen by the Book of the Month Club in America and must be having immense sales, and (d) that American sales are What Really Count. We then turn to *High Wind in Jamaica* and say (a) that it is quite a short book, (b) that we hated— or, alternatively, adored— it, and (c) that it Really Is exactly Like Children. A small minority here surges into being, and maintains No, they Cannot Believe that any children in the World wouldn't ever have noticed that John wasn't there any more. They can swallow everything else, they say, but not that. Discussion very active indeed. I talk to pale young man with horn- rimmed glasses, sitting at my left- hand, about Jamaica, where neither of us has ever been. This leads— but cannot say how— to stag- hunting, and eventually to homeopathy. (Mem.: Interesting, if time permitted, to trace train of thought leading on from one topic to another. Second, and most disquieting idea: perhaps no such train of thought exists.).⁷²

Here the give and take of conversation takes places, with books serving as the fulcrum point. True discussion then takes place, with multiple opinions allowed and encouraged. There is pleasure in the free play of conversation, in which rigid constraints of logical progression—a “train of thought leading on from one topic to another”—is not the prime motivator, a freedom which the Provincial Lady finds disquieting because of its unfamiliarity. Cultivation has come to fruition.

The evening is pleasurable but the speech has not been sophisticated. Rather than sophistication in the form of daring, gender-bending, and somehow musically inclined conversation with the *Symphony in Three Sexes* crowd, her table talk is decidedly tame despite the “distinguished literary” guests. It focuses on a middlebrow text initially, J.B. Priestley’s 1929 bestseller *The Good Companion*, then moves to *High Wind in Jamaica*, another bestseller. What they discuss about the latter is anything but new. As faithful readers of *Time and Tide* would know “it Really Is exactly Like Children,” which sounds very much like points that had been made in multiple letters to the editor of *Time and Tide* about the realism of its portrayal.⁷³ Of this passage in its periodical form, Barbara Green finds that “Diary of a Provincial Lady”

displays an awareness of a modern crisis of attention fully understood in relation to both the periodical's distractions and the stresses of the modern media marketplace. Like social commentators of her day, Delafield draws attention to a distracted readership, one seemingly incapable of concentration. Social conversations, for example, closely resemble the collage of a mass circulating paper...Conversations proceed via loose associations and are reported in a telegraphed style so that verbal exchanges resemble unrelated headlines more than anything else.⁷⁴

In short, rather than the disciplined practice of sophistication, which is equally as difficult as it is unstudied, Delafield’s informal speech at the party, while pleasurable, encapsulates the “crisis of attention that characterized the modern period.”⁷⁵ Neither form nor content is original or exemplary. Insofar as the Provincial Lady’s speech is disjointed and follows the daily newspaper and periodical content, she speaks just like everyone else. One may enjoy the discussion, but the past intrudes on the present, much as the contents of the newspaper determined the shape of

conversation that takes place in *Vile Bodies*. Within the economy of sophistication, this is a failure.

The pleasure of their conversation is nullified, however, when the sophisticate intrudes later on in the evening. The Provincial Lady discovers that her seating partner was in fact the author of the avant-garde novel and must reply evasively when “Lady B. says, Did I get him on the subject of *perversion*, as he is always so amusing about it?”⁷⁶ Perversion, not homeopathy, is what true sophisticates discuss. But the evening does not deliver. Furthermore, the Provincial Lady’s dress is dated by Lady B.’s “silver lace frock that nearly touches the floor all round.” Her hair is cropped short, but gossip reveals that a shingled Head is nowhere to be found in London, Paris, or New York. Finally, the Provincial Lady’s performance of sophistication is imperfect and quite costly for her to sustain. Even as she is invited to Lady B.’s parties throughout the novel, she remains on the margins. The provincial Lady’s performance of traditional, elite sophistication is imperfect.

IMPERFECT—ATTEMPT AT FRENCH SOPHISTICATED

The Provincial Lady’s intermittent pursuit of traditional sophistication culminates in her Provincial Lady’s trip to France, the sophisticate’s spiritual home. She happily leaves for France, sans husband and children. The novel illustrates her seemingly sophisticated image on the journey over.

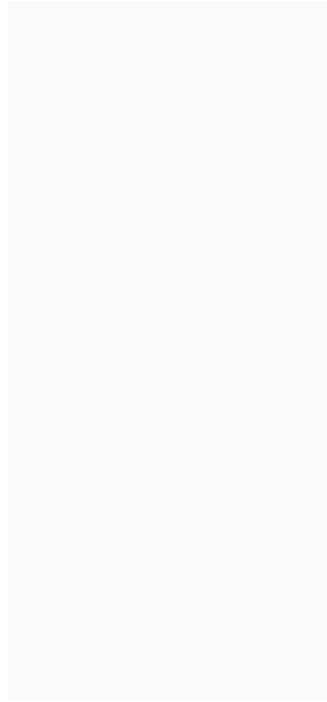


Fig. 5. Illustration by Andre Watts, “Schoolmaster and his wife...talk to one another across me,” *enlarged*, in *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930)

In Watts’s illustration of the Provincial Lady on the steamer over, which is the only image of her in the novel, a close-up of her face reveals the recognizable stance of sophisticated boredom (see fig. 5).⁷⁷ Her head is tilted at an angle and her eyes are focused beyond, a pose which is echoed by the volume of her fur-lined coat. Her sophistication is still maintained when one expands to her immediate surroundings. A headmaster and his wife talk across her, and she is clearly distinguished from the eager, chatting couple. Her hands, clasped tightly in her lap, visually reinforce her separation from the couple and their conversation; they are what she defines herself against.

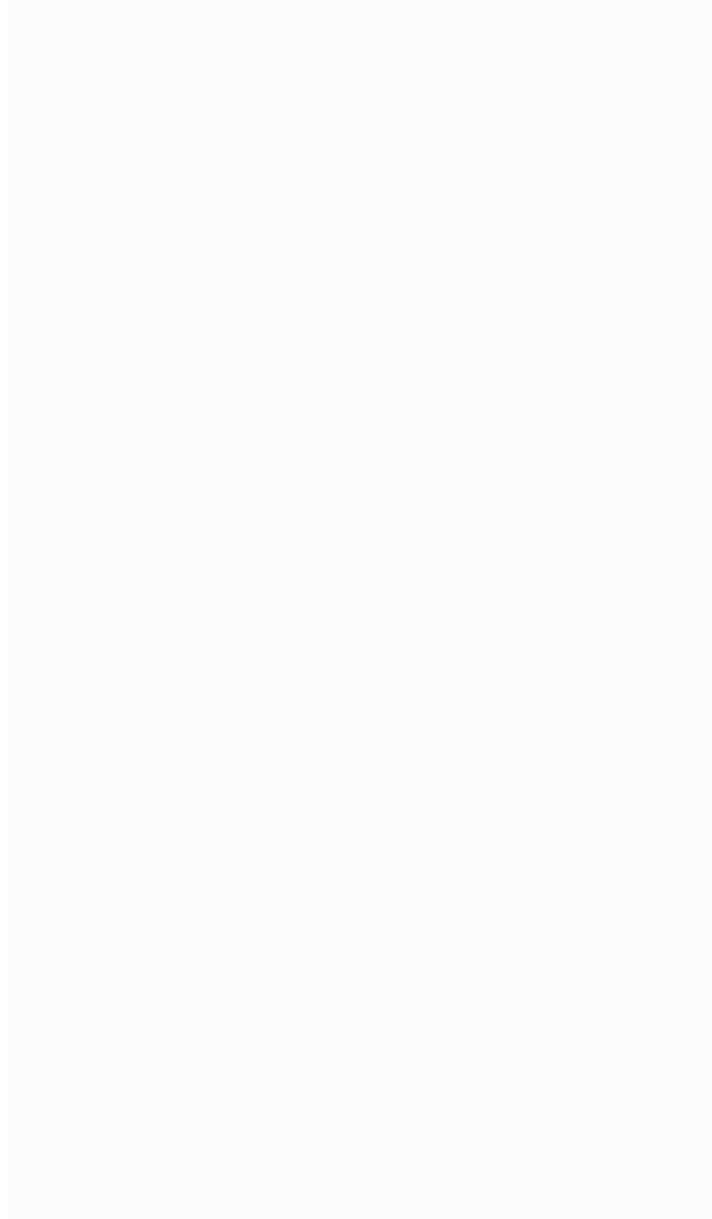


Fig. 6. Illustration by Andre Watts, “Schoolmaster and his wife...talk to one another across me,” *full-size*, in *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930)

But the luggage, crew, other passengers, and massive smokestack minimize the Provincial Lady while simultaneously heightening the contrast between her sophistication and the scene in which she is immersed (see fig. 6). Her seeming sophistication is dwarfed by her surroundings rather than defined against it. Her diary entries also humorously yet starkly reveal this intellectual sophistication is a performance and façade.⁷⁸ The trip itself is more of the same. The Provincial

Lady retreats back home in amused defeat. The diary, within traditional sophistication, is an irreversible mistake; the sophisticate remains so by being evacuated of interiority, and anything that is not the performance undermines the self as sophisticate.

SOPHISTICATED PERFORMANCE

Sophistication is knowledge turned into a dazzling performance that combines engagement and detachment. Traditionally, and with the Lady Boxe, this includes clothing, speech, and other forms of social performance. But in the case of the Provincial Lady, this transformation of knowledge into performance takes place in the diary. The performance turns from the social to the written, in which the Provincial Lady dramatizes her everyday experiences with satirical and knowing amusement. This version of sophistication that requires cultivation is writing, which is the knowing interplay of engagement and detachment familiar to the sophisticate, and which often emerges as playful disavowal.

This interplay occurs throughout but is exemplified in the novel's final party (i.e. the Fancy Dress party which I described above). The Provincial Lady experiences the cycle of victory and defeat as a sophisticate. The party becomes a space for the Provincial Lady to herself be oppositional. It exemplifies the partial victories and endless social jockeying that occur endlessly within the everyday, and in which she is both detached from and engaged in her social performance. Armed with the knowledge that the party is Fancy Dress, as is everyone else, the Provincial Lady decides to be uncommon; she wears her black taffeta and asserts in writing that it looks "charming and am not dissatisfied with general appearance, after extracting two quite unmistakable grey hairs."⁷⁹ Age and time are the enemy of everyone, including the sophisticate. Her shift from feeling sophisticated, which is quickly undone by the grey hairs, exemplifies the cycles of movement that characterize the final scene. Her daughter, sophisticate in the making,

“goes so far as to say that I look Lovely, but enquires shortly afterwards why old people so often wear black—which discourages me.” Sophistication plays like a dance here—step forward and step back, rather than a movement of progress and regression.

When the Provincial Lady arrives at the party, Lady B. is “in magnificent Eastern costume, with pearls dripping all over her” and treats her guests with recognizably sophisticated detachment while still physically present—she “smiles graciously and shakes hands without looking at any of us.” The Provincial Lady is not entranced, and a “strange fancy crosses my mind that it would be agreeable to bestow on her sudden sharp shaking, and thus compel her to recognise existence of at least one of guests invited to her house.”⁸⁰ As unexpected and even sophisticated as a well-timed violation of propriety of this magnitude might be, the Provincial Lady does not: “Am obliged, however, to curb this unhallowed impulse, and proceed quietly into vast drawing-room, at one end of which band is performing briskly on platform.”⁸¹ The novel again deftly veers towards religious imagery with “unhallowed,” but this is sophistication, and a party is a sacred event. Sophistication is hallowed here; “proceed quietly into vast drawing-room” fuses proper decorum within a religious space, which is reinforced by “vast.” The hallowed space for the sophisticate is the utterly artificial space of the drawing room, as the band loudly, or at least “briskly” reinforces, of performance. And a performance it is, featuring a cantankerous fellow guest dressed as Hamlet.

SOPHISTICATED DIARY WRITING

But the Provincial Lady turns this into writerly sophistication. The Hamlet reference above is not amiss, for like the titular character of Shakespeare’s play, the Provincial Lady stages the novel for her own and readers’ consumption. She channels the potentially striking performance—shaking Lady B.—into a performance for her readers. As the Provincial Lady

self-knowingly writes in the last paragraphs, Robert may describe diary-writing as a “Waste of Time,” but the Provincial Lady possesses the knowingness that she may have an audience. The final line of the novel is, “am confronted by Query: Can Robert be right? Can only leave reply to Posterity.”⁸² The sophisticate, as Lady B.’s pursuit of the Provincial Lady throughout the text makes clear, requires an audience for her performance. They may or may not find it dazzling, or at least entertaining, but the sophisticate’s status is precarious and depends on reception. In other words, sophistication merges with publication. Writing embodies the possibility of this performance, but only if it is read by others.

“Posterity” is significant. Sophistication seemingly offers agency within the determined situation of women within time. The sophisticate determines trends, including what others talk about and ruptures with the previous context of fashion. Through knowledge or knowingness, one escapes time’s determinism. But as *Time and Tide* demonstrates, the sophisticate is no help to those women who lack the power to create rupture within their everyday lives. This leaves sophistication and speech as problematic, especially for middle-class women, both for class, familial and social expectations.

Writing is a form of sophistication, in which speech is mediated through the Provincial Lady’s diary. This sort of cultivation provides an alternative to sophistication which signals itself within time as speech; diary writing operates with pauses for thought rather than instantaneous rupture. Writing allows the Provincial Lady to exhibit her knowingness for the reader without having to speak. In writing, she provides the wry commentary on her own life; it allows her to practice sophistication’s ironic distance through this commentary, in which even failures become the chance to practice the performance of cultural capital that is part of the sophisticate’s self-awareness. Detachment disavows what she has done as a writer.

Delafield herself exemplifies the sophisticate's stance to writing in her commentary on *Diary*. She writes,

the real indication of [*Diary of a Provincial Lady*'s] success, apart from the sales, was in the number of letters that I received from readers....To a large extent, almost all of them said in effect the same thing: This is an exact transcription of my own life. They said this even when the writers lived in such presumably unprovincial places as Tokio [sic], San Francisco, Patagonia, or New York. One could only conclude that the friend who had said to me, rather austere: "The only merit of the book lies in its universal appeal" had known what he was talking about.⁸³

Readers' identification was transnational and reflected the impulse to see the text's domestic disasters as one's own. Delafield is seemingly unsophisticated, unsure *why* the work is popularity. Her disavowal continues and the emphasis becomes comic—she writes in the tradition of Swift, and one must read below the surface:

Several people went so far as to say that it was much the best thing I'd ever done. This was strangely disconcerting when I remembered how easily and almost casually it had been written, compared with the amount of hard work put into some of the rest of my writing, about which nobody had ever made any fuss at all. Nothing, however, was as thoroughly baffling as the remark made long afterwards, by a woman to whom I was trying to explain why the *Diary* was not really my best piece of work. "Ah," she said, with a pitying smile, "I don't suppose you have the least idea of why it's good. You wouldn't understand." The more one thinks that over the more unanswerable it becomes.⁸⁴

The friend's comment encapsulates sophistication's knowingness, ambiguity, and multilayering. The work is so very sophisticated that even the author ostensibly is "baffl[ed]"; the woman's comment both elevates the work and comically denigrates the author. Disavowal is sophistication in writing; this nostalgia for authorial disavowal in prefaces, for example, shows how writers have comically obscured for the unwary reader a text's multiple layers. This points to a different kind of sophistication. It creates space for insiders as Delafield sophisticates herself and other writers. Delafield manifests her sophistication—a knowing performance which is Lorelei-Lee-esque in its disavowal of its own understanding and knowingness.

CONCLUSION

The novel dramatizes the middle class's fruitless pursuit of agency through social distinction and traditional sophistication. The impetus towards sophistication disciplines middle-class behavior and reinvigorates class hierarchies despite the cultural decline of the upper class and social elite after the Great War. But it also offers alternative types of sophistication: motherhood and writing.

For both these iterations of sophistication, Delafield's vision of sophistication is neither anarchic nor entirely fantastical; sophisticated motherhood and intellectual sophistication are not diametrically opposed. Delafield's *Provincial Lady* pursues both modes of sophistication, and her paradoxical, internal conflict is at the heart of the novel. "The dynamic of fashion" that governs sophistication is in tension with narratives of personal growth and the bildungsroman that is often used to categorize the middlebrow, for *Diary* is not a linear narrative. Instead, one continually struggles to live up to one's earlier realizations, in which cultivating of any sort of sophistication is an ever-present struggle.

Delafield's novel is not interested in sophistication's rupture, but in its adjustments, half-measures, and partial victories. The novel, in keeping with the cyclical repurposing of fashion, elects for derivative generation rather than creative destruction. The conservative sophistication of the middlebrow allows it to be generative even as it refuses destruction. Nothing truly dies; there are just cycles of fashion—bulbs will reemerge next year (but they must be planted). *Diary* emerges as a subversive, if not radical text. Ultimately, the everyday woman's relationship with sophistication *is* fashion—cyclical, irrational, changeable, and marked by starts and failures.

¹ This chapter is indebted to Jessica Burstein's discussion of "the dynamic of fashion" in her fashion seminar at the University of Washington, Seattle (Fall 2019), which I was fortunate enough to sit in on. I am equally grateful for Burstein's thorough feedback on the conference paper out of which this chapter bloomed. "Sophisticated Motherhood" (presentation, The Modernist Studies Association Annual Conference: Upheaval & Reconstruction, Toronto, Canada, 17-20 October 2019).

² I am grateful to Douglas Ishii for this insight.

³ E.M. Delafield, "The Diary of a Provincial Lady," in *Titles to Fame*, ed. Denys Kilham Roberts (London, New York: T. Nelson & Sons Limited, 1937), 126.

⁴ Melissa Sullivan, "'I return with immense relief to old friend *Time and Tide*:' Middlebrow Expansions in E. M. Delafield's Fiction and Journalism," *Modernist Cultures* 6, no. 1 (2011): 97.

⁵ Sullivan, "Middlebrow Expansions," 98.

⁶ Sullivan, "Middlebrow Expansions," 98.

⁷ Catherine Clay, *Time and Tide: The Feminist and Cultural Politics of a Modern Magazine* (Edinburg, Edinburg University Press, 2018), 179.

⁸ Clay, *Time and Tide*, 179

⁹ I focus on images composed for the published version of the novel, and thus absent from its initial publication in *Time and Tide*, but much of my argument can be torqued to the serialized version and the readers of *Time and Tide*.

¹⁰ Ergo Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925).

¹¹ Sullivan, "Middlebrow Expansions," 99.

¹² Arthur Watts, "Lady B.," in *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2002), 98.

¹³ Here Delafield anticipating C.S. Lewis' green serpent who disguises herself as the Lady of the Green Kirtle, in a "long, fluttering dress of dazzling green...lovelier still," in *The Silver Chair*. She, in turn, is based on the Arthurian seductress who tempts Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 73. A genealogy of pre-modern female sophisticate might begin with the Arthurian legends and the courtly love tradition. The Arthurian roots of the sophisticate also are apparent in Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat* (1924).

¹⁴ Clay declares of the second book in the Provincial Lady series, which focuses on elite writerly sophistication rather than social, that “the Provincial Lady, it is intimated, is knowing enough not to be fazed by Bloomsbury’s literary culture, and to maintain an ironic distance from its self-regarding aspects” (Clay, *Time and Tide*, 188-89). I would claim my argument applies to Bloomsbury sophistication as well—the Provincial Lady is unable to sustain a complete ironic distance from the literary elite.

¹⁵ Delafield, *Titles to Fame*, 129-30.

¹⁶ Delafield, *Titles to Fame*, 129.

¹⁷ Simon Watts, ed., *The Art of Arthur Watts* (Ottawa: Lee Valley, 2003), Google Books.

¹⁸ Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: Texas University Press, 2007), 8.

¹⁹ For Augustine, one journeys through the self in order to encounter God; for Delafield, self-examination is the cyclical loop present in the form of the text, leading inexorably back to the self.

²⁰ Nicola Beaman, “Dashwood, Edmée Elizabeth Monica [E. M. Delafield] (1890–1943)” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

²¹ E.M. Delafield, *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2002), 1.

²² Delafield, *Diary*, 2.

²³ Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 14, 16.

²⁴ The latter requirement is not necessary for the practice of conversation as an aggressive sport, as Lady B.’s aggressive dialogue demonstrates.

²⁵ Delafield, *Diary*, 4.

²⁶ Dorothy Sayers, in contrast, allows the sophisticated Peter Whimsey to speak and thus sways the susceptible reader.

²⁷ Delafield, *Diary*, 1-3.

²⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, “Talk and Talkers,” in *The Lost Art of Conversation: Selected Essays*, ed. Horatio S. Krans (New York: Sturgis and Walton Company, 1910), 365.

²⁹ This point is outside the scope of my dissertation, but *Time and Tide* foregrounds this in “The Weekly Crowd,” a regular column which relays the week’s news in poetic form.

³⁰ Olive Heseltine, *Conversation* (London: Methuen, 1927), 1.

³¹ Helen Walker, “Lawn Tennis,” in *Sports in Britain: A Social History*, ed. Tony Mason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 255.

³² Walker, “Lawn Tennis,” 251.

³³ Delafield, *Diary*, 143-44.

³⁴ Delafield, *Diary*, 144.

³⁵ Delafield, *Titles to Fame*, 125.

³⁶ Delafield, *Titles to Fame*, 123.

³⁷ Delafield, *Titles to Fame*, 132-33

³⁸ At least within the novel version of the text; in the initial serialized version for *Time and Tide*, Lady B.’s satirization, and thus her demise as desirable for the witty reader, is complete. If one mocks the sophisticate sufficiently, she will go away or lose her power. That, as I demonstrate below, is not true in the novel because of Delafield’s collaboration with Watts. The illustration retains its power after reading is complete.

³⁹ Jessica Burstein, “A Few Words About Dubuque: Modernism, Sentimentalism, and the Blasé,” *American Literary History* 14 no. 2 (2002): 234.

⁴⁰ Burstein, "Dubuque," 234.

⁴¹ Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture*, 8.

⁴² From left to right: Gabrielle Chanel "Evening dress, ca. 1930, House of Chanel French," Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009; Gift of Mrs. Richard Fox, 1964 (2009.300.3257a, b). Object description:

By the 1920s, Gabrielle Chanel had established a reputation as a designer of pared-down and functional clothing, often with a linear silhouette. In the 1930s, however, she frequently used lace or tulle to bring a softer look and romantic feeling to her evening wear, while still following her characteristic design principles. The curved piecing at the hipline mirrors the round neckline of this dress. The simple shield shape of the scarf allows for graceful draping in a variety of ways over the bodice. Black lace was a signature textile used by Chanel in the 1930s, yet this example stands out because of the bold pattern. Rather than a conventional delicate mesh ground, the strong floral motifs in the lace are joined with bars embroidered with black thread for additional texture. Tulle layers beneath the lace overlay in the skirt add to the overall dimensionality of the dress. It is this level of detail that sets a couture garment designed by Chanel apart from her many imitators.

Jean Patou, "Evening ensemble, ca. 1931, House of Patou," The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Gift of Madame Lilliana Teruzzi, 1972 (1972.30.17a, b); Lucien Lelong, "Evening dress, early 1930s, Lucien Lelong French," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Irene Lewisohn Bequest, 2004 (2004.213).

⁴³ Bonnie English, *A Cultural History of Fashion in the 20th and 21st Centuries: From Catwalk to Sidewalk* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 35.

⁴⁴ Object description, "Evening ensemble, ca. 1931, House of Patou," The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Gift of Madame Lilliana Teruzzi, 1972 (1972.30.17a, b), *The Met experience online*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/> Further object description:

Patou retained his popularity during the Depression by catering to the Paris and New York elite, and as cocktail gatherings became more exclusive, so too did Patou's creations. The designer became so enamored of private cocktail affairs that he created custom-made "Cocktail" perfumes that were sold in a "Bar" scent box to his couture clientele.

In contrast, this is the 1920s dress with the drop waist (see Figure 3), which Delafield mentions but which Watts updates by borrowing from 1930s French fashion.

⁴⁵ Object description, "Evening dress, 1925, French," Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Maxime L. Hermanos, 1961 (2009.300.1281).

⁴⁶ Gabrielle Chanel, "Evening dress, 1925, House of Chanel French" The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Miss Isabel Shults, 1944 (C.I.44.64.7); Jean Patou, "Evening dress, ca. 1927, House of Patou French," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. John A. van Beuren and Mrs. Samuel M. V. Hamilton, 1977 (1977.210.16).

⁴⁷ Object description, "Evening ensemble, ca. 1931, House of Patou."

⁴⁸ Delafield, *Diary*, 24.

⁴⁹ Arthur Wallis Mills, "The Freak-Merchants or The Bright Young People," *Punch*, 1929. <https://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I0000sBGxzl9R04c>

⁵⁰ Mills, "Freak-Merchants," <https://punch.photoshelter.com/image/I00009tAK2gAIUVE>

⁵¹ Ilya Parkins, "Fashion as Methodology: Rewriting the Time of Women's Modernity," *Time & Society*, 19, no. 1 (2010): 106.

⁵² Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 9.

⁵³ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 38.

⁵⁴ Hammill connects sophistication with a longing for a lost aristocratic past, describing the "postwar lament for the loss of aristocratic sensibilities, manners, entitlement and distinction...The early twentieth century was nostalgic for the eighteenth century; the 1950s and 1960s were nostalgic for both the 'peak' of aristocratic culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and for its last days in the interwar years." *Sophistication*, 165. I would place nostalgia more broadly within the sophisticate's mobilization of the past.

⁵⁵ Thus Michael Arlen's 1924 novel concludes with a postscript: "The End of the Romance Called *The Green Hat*." Romance has its roots in adventure and quest narratives that featured chivalry, knights, and the courtly love tradition; sophistication recycles old forms.

⁵⁶ Delafield, *Diary*, 377, 378.

⁵⁷ Delafield, *Diary*, 378.

⁵⁸ Delafield, *Diary*, 381.

⁵⁹ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 119.

⁶⁰ Hammill opens her chapter on sophistication and the middlebrow during the 1920s and 1930s with a quotation from Noël Coward's *Private Lives* (1930), in which Amanda describes herself as "jagged with sophistication. I've always been sophisticated, far too knowing." Hammill describes a photo of Coward and Gertrude Lawrence from *Private Lives* as "a defining image." *Sophistication*, 113.

⁶¹ This has, arguably, become the default version of sophistication when in daily parlance.

⁶² Jessica Burstein, "The Picture of Dorian Leigh" (presentation, The Modernist Studies Association Annual Conference: Upheaval & Reconstruction, Toronto, Canada, 17-20 October 2019).

⁶³ Sullivan, "Middlebrow Expansions," 98.

⁶⁴ Delafield, *Diary*, 8.

⁶⁵ Hammill writes, "The resulting term 'sophistry,' referring to disingenuous reasoning, has maintained a stable meaning from medieval through to modern English. Part of the anxiety surrounding 'sophistication' derives from its continuing association with 'sophistry.' Even in the twentieth century, traces of the older meanings of 'sophistication' persist in modern usage of the term." *Sophistication*, 6.

⁶⁶ Delafield, *Diary*, 66.

⁶⁷ Delafield, *Diary*, 8.

⁶⁸ Delafield, *Diary*, 21.

⁶⁹ A 1922 editorial from *The Times (London)*, describes this relationship: "In a well-composed house-party all should be regarded as 'good' guests, for they all contribute in their several ways to the common stock of enjoyment. This is especially true of the art of conversation, which is often said to be sadly neglected in the present day." This contribution to conversation is part of the "give-and-take of country house life," in which visiting is a "typically English and Scottish institution" that "cements the whole structure of society." Conversation is shot through with nationalistic and class values. In the face of the decline of the art of conversation, the country house is a space where this art can be practiced. Interestingly, the article also uses language of

cultivation. "Country House Visiting," *Times* (London, England), 16 Sept. 1922, *The Times Digital Archive*.

⁷⁰ Delafield, *Diary*, 20.

⁷¹ Delafield, *Diary*, 23.

⁷² Delafield, *Diary*, 25.

⁷³ Cf. Philip Jordan, "A High Wind in Jamaica," letter to the editor, *Time and Tide* (October 25, 1929): 1276; Ethel Smyth "A High Wind in Jamaica," letter to the editor, *Time and Tide* (Nov. 1 1929): 1305-06. The first entry of *Diary* was published in *Time and Tide* on December 6, 1929.

⁷⁴ Barbara Green, *Feminist Periodicals and Daily Life: Women and Modernity in British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 253.

⁷⁵ Green, *Daily Life*, 253.

⁷⁶ Delafield, *Diary*, 27.

⁷⁷ Watts, "Schoolmaster and his wife...talk to one another across me," in *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, 280.

⁷⁸ "I take out *Jane Eyre* from coat-pocket—partly in faint hope of impressing them, and partly to distract my mind." Delafield, *Diary*, 279.

⁷⁹ Delafield, *Diary*, 382.

⁸⁰ Delafield, *Diary*, 382.

⁸¹ Delafield, *Diary*, 383.

⁸² Delafield, *Diary*, 388.

⁸³ Delafield, *Titles to Fame*, 131.

⁸⁴ Delafield, *Titles to Fame*, 126-27.

CHAPTER FOUR: Ordinary Platitudes: Disavowing Popular Sophistication
in Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952)

Sophistication, as critics have noted, is both difficult to define and shifts according to cultural manners and mores. But its emphasis on elite culture and discriminating taste has remained an integral part of traditional sophistication; the traditional sophisticate is the man or woman of taste. Popular modernist sophistication within the middle class loses its emphasis on elite taste. The middlebrow unseats traditional sophistication by challenging discriminating taste, either by disregarding it in favor of the new or elevating traditionally denigrated forms of speech, such as slang and gossip.

In the previous chapter, I focused on versions of sophistication, those active within the middlebrow around 1930, that did *not* pass into wider popular culture—ephemeral versions of sophistication whose remains are buried in the middlebrow (i.e. sophisticated motherhood and writerly sophistication). I focused specifically on these clashing versions in E.M. Delafield's novel *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, which was serialized in Lady Rhondda's political-feminist magazine, *Time and Time*, and published in 1930. While Delafield's novel is an individual example, I argued for her work as an insightful snapshot into the pivot between 1920s and 1930s sophistication. Delafield interrogates traditional sophistication, epitomized by the memorable Lady B., and leverages sophistication's multiplicity to imagine her own sophistications. She thereby escapes the hegemony of traditional sophistication and reimages the everyday middlebrow as generative.

As I argued above, Delafield's novel pointedly addresses aspiring readers by providing a clear model of the sophisticate, as indeed have all of the novels considered in chapters one and two. Delafield partially disavows traditional sophistication, but Lady B. remains remarkable,

nonetheless. Delafield's work demonstrates the overarching cultural claim of my dissertation: that popular sophistication, despite its various forms, ultimately privileged knowingness and newness over discriminating taste during the early-to mid-twentieth century; this is how I distinguish popular sophistication from traditional sophistication, which finds distinction through the superior, elite taste of its practitioners.

EXCELLENT WOMEN, THE ORDINARY, AND SOPHISTICATION

I will return to sophistication and taste in relation to the middle class at the end of the chapter. But first, I will consider the apparent lack of sophistication within this chapter's novel. In contrast with my previous chapters, the novel on which this final chapter focuses, Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952), lacks a dazzling sophisticate. Like Delafield's text, the novel eschews the typical middlebrow bildungsroman that ends in sophistication (of which Mitford's *Pursuit* novels are my exemplar). But uniquely, the protagonist of Pym's novel, Mildred Lathbury, remains as a whole stubbornly *unsophisticated* in dress, speech, manner, and occupation.¹ The ordinary, which in *Excellent Women* is the quotidian daily crafted around repetition and habit, is the novel's dominant preoccupation. But even in its absence, popular sophistication, specifically readers' expectation that the novel will prove a sophisticated bildungsroman, still shapes Pym's text. The novel skillfully addresses this desire throughout.

TASTEFUL SOPHISTICATION

This chapter distinguishes between popular sophistication (knowingness and the new pursued by the middle class) and traditional sophistication (discriminating taste embraced by the social and cultural elite). Popular sophistication depends on a consciousness-transforming event that results in knowingness. Popular sophistication, because it requires a new and strikingly transformative event, remains in tension with the ordinary. Popular sophistication is noticeably

absent within the narrative plot. Simultaneously, *Excellent Women* deliberately shocks the willing reader out of her routinized reading for the sophisticate's bildungsroman and sophisticated aspirations. The text also allows the aspirant to look in the mirror and see herself through the eyes of the unsophisticated. My claim is twofold. First, through Mildred's unwavering ordinariness, *Excellent Women* chastises aspirational readers' formulaic reading practices. Second, it offers attentive readers an education in tasteful sophistication, a middle-class sophistication reinvested with traditional sophistication's telos (discriminating taste), a quality Mildred's "ordinary interiority" lacks.

THE FINAL ITERATION OF SOPHISTICATION AND SPEECH: PLATITUDES

This chapter concludes the central aim of my dissertation: to detail the relationship between speech and social distinction in the middlebrow. Like the previous chapters, chapter four also insists on the verbal's pivotal role in relation to traditional and popular sophistication as portrayed in middlebrow novel. As I first argued, sophistication, for Waugh, is reducible to a shell game of the fashionable verbal new: slang and gossip (chapter 1). In Mitford's texts, sophistication elevates traditionally denigrated gossip by pairing it with the French salon (chapter 2). Speech is a casualty in Delafield's reimaging of middle-class sophistications (chapter 3). This chapter turns to the unexpectedly ordinary i.e. the platitude. Pym's tasteful sophistication, purified by the humble platitude, is desirable, even necessary, within an ordinary life. In contrast with Delafield, Pym's middle-class sophistication retains speech, though still in muted form.

NO CENTER OF SOPHISTICATION

Excellent Women (1952), Pym's second novel, focuses on the local dealings in a London parish as told by Mildred Lathbury, an orphaned and unmarried 30-year-old woman. The largely episodic plot focuses on Mildred's interactions with her unchurched neighbor, the anthropologist

Helen Napier and her charming husband, Rockingham; the trivial drama of the local parish women; the engagement of the local curate, Julian Malory, to a stylish widow, Allegra Grey; and Mildred's tentative attraction to the somber Catholic, Everard Bone. The novel ends with the Napiers reunited yet moving to the country, Julian's engagement broken, and Mildred taking on a job as Everard's secretary. Thus, while published one year after Nancy Mitford's *The Blessing* (1951), the two texts make for a striking contrast. Pym's text occupies the liminal space of the 1950s and the quiet mid-century novel, even as it engages the pressing cultural modernist issues of sophistication and the middlebrow. The novel is, in a word, *ordinary*. It necessarily disavows popular sophistication.

THE SOPHISTICATE AS MIDDLEBROW'S MODERNIST PROVACATEUR

I will describe at length just what I mean by Pym's text as ordinary below; for this I will use Liesl Olson's work in *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009), which argues for the ordinary as a genre, i.e. "unheroic events," and a style, which "replicate[s] what is overlooked."² But first, I will detail how the literary sophisticate, insofar she is irresistible and exemplary, is the ordinary's antithesis. The sophisticate's speech, as I have argued throughout, is elevated above everyone else's. The sophisticate is known by her behavior; one cannot be sophisticated without acting like it. Simultaneously, as I argued at length within my second chapter, the sophisticate possesses a certain authenticity, an ineffable *je ne sais quoi*, which is alien to those who do not possess it. This property manifests in her outward behavior, or in the case of Mitford and Delafield in her writing, but this quality is not reducible to actions. Without this mystique, he or she is just a poser.

The sophisticate is often *not* the middlebrow text's protagonist but instead is the character who fundamentally changes the life of the central character.³ The sophisticate (both popular and

traditional) is not only distinguished from those around her but is also a catalyst for change. Linda and her gossip are transformed by Fabrice; after encountering Lady B., the Provincial Lady puts down gardening and takes up the parties, conversations, and attire that will transform her into a sophisticate as well. The sophisticate is therefore a useful narrative trope within the middlebrow author's repertoire for initiating change or parodically troubling individual transformation. In short, sophistication makes a work and its characters *un*-ordinary. She creates an event within a text which changes those around her. But this change is not merely external.

This change encompasses the outward appearance and behaviors, but it also includes characters' consciousness and ways of approaching the world. The sophisticate brings others to know and see themselves differently. She is a frequent fixture, particularly within the bildungsroman, in which an interior/exterior transformation includes both the character who comes of age and those around her. First-person accounts of the sophisticate, in particular, place the middlebrow both inside/outside of traditional accounts of literary modernism. Olsen describes the commonplace "aesthetic of self-conscious interiority" that her account of the ordinary in modernism disrupts. The traditional account is a

line of thinking [that] emphasizes how modernists sought to shed the heavy furniture of the realist and naturalist novel in order to render inner perception....On this account, the most famous moments of literary modernism are moments of transcendent understanding; most modernists describe something of this kind: Woolf's "moment of being," James Joyce's "epiphany," Ezra Pound's "magic moment," Walter Benjamin's "shock," T. S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world," or Marcel Proust's explosion of memory, triggered by such events as the taste of the madeleine. These extraordinary moments magnify an awareness of the self, a coming into being of the individual, and an opening

up of interior states of knowing. The modernist preoccupation with the extremities of self-consciousness, located most strikingly in such moments as these, has been praised and criticized but only rarely challenged.⁴

The coming of the sophisticate is a significant plot occurrence that changes the inner perceptions of those subject to her dazzling performance. Granted, the encounter with sophistication is quite different from the banal events that provoke the modernist epiphanies Olson lists above. In the middlebrow, the physical event itself, i.e. the sophisticate's creation or an encounter with her, is itself visibly extraordinary (e.g. Lady Boxe's image in chapter 3), but this event also creates an equally "extraordinary moment" internally. For characters within the texts of both high modernism and the middlebrow, to encounter the performing sophisticate is to know oneself differently. The irresistible sophisticate, who herself embodies desirable knowingness, changes how those around her view themselves. A sophisticate produces a memorable self-conscious interiority (i.e. transcendent knowingness) that lends itself to the bildungsroman narrative. Both an internal and external (i.e. behavioral) change ensues. This transformation is portrayed or parodied in middlebrow text, particularly the bildungsroman.

In short, the pursuit of sophistication is the pursuit of the *extra*-ordinary within middlebrow texts and by readers outside of the literary. The entrance of the dazzlingly exemplar is both an event and the fall of the ordinary; the disruption to the plot, situation, and/or character's interiority may be restored once the sophisticate leaves, but these disruptions always leave their mark. The ordinary is not powerless in such encounters. The sophisticate's inexorable drive towards distinction and newness means that repetition and the ordinary are her antithesis and nemesis; she must avoid being or appearing commonplace. To claim, as I do, that

sophistication characterizes an “ordinary” novel seems paradoxical at best, particularly given *Excellent Women*’s multifaceted ordinariness.

PYM’S ORDINARY NOVEL AND ORDINARY INTERIORITY

Pym’s text is an exemplary ordinary novel. As Olson suggests, the ordinary can “be considered as a *genre*: unheroic events and overlooked things, neither crucial moments of plot development nor temporal points that signify accomplishment.”⁵ Pym’s text is consumed with such events and things. As Louise Field Cooper declares in her review, “Barbara Pym knows everything there is to know about the quiet, very funny, small-eventful poignant lives of the people in her books, and when we have finished reading them so do we and are all the happier for it.”⁶ Tacitly, Cooper warns that any bookstore browser who purchases the work hoping for provincial “daring” or “startling” insights from the narrator will be disappointed.

Furthermore, Pym resists representing the mundane as remarkable. As Olson notes, “actually representing [the ordinary] in fiction is a tricky task. If the ordinary is the nonrepresented, the overlooked, then the writer’s objective is paradoxical: How does a writer replicate what is overlooked, if the nature of literary representation is to *look* closely at its subject?”⁷ Style is equally important in keeping the ordinary, ordinary. Olson describes how the ordinary “can be a mode of organizing life and representing it; it is a *style*, best represented by the routine, and aesthetic forms such as the list, or linguistic repetition, both of which attempt to embody the ordinary, to perform it.”⁸ The leveling of events in terms of narrative importance is another stylistic hallmark of the ordinary. As J. L. J. Kennedy provocatively claims, “it would not be unreasonable to call Pym the queerest of English novelists. Her novels allot the same weight to jumble sales and guest preachers as they do to births, marriages and deaths.”⁹ While the chronology of *Excellent Women* is linear like Delafield’s *Diary*, the novel also resists narrative

closure as it follows the cyclical rhythms of the church calendar. Pym's refusal to end the novel "satisfactorily" also evokes the ordinary (I will detail the accompanying disappointment below).

Notably, the text dispassionately catalogues the everyday through Mildred's point of view. With rare and deliberate exceptions, the narrative and its mediation by Mildred's perspective are both ordinary. That is, to borrow from Olson, Mildred's "experiences...are not heightened." Her mundane practices, even those that evoke transcendence through their rituals, never lose their mundaneness. As Olson describes, the ordinary is "never transcendent"; it is not "transformed into something else, into something beyond our everyday world; the ordinary indeed may endure in and of itself, as a 'final good.'"¹⁰

Mildred's unheightened consciousness, which is reinforced by the repetition of the novel, exemplifies an aesthetic of what I term "ordinary interiority," which is neither stream of consciousness nor eventful and extraordinary. This interiority is linked with, but separate from, the novel's mundane, repetitive events. Mildred's steady and mundane ordinary interiority is the counterweight to the sophisticate's interiority, which I have aligned with the traditionally modernist "aesthetic of self-conscious interiority" as a singular, extraordinary *moment of* transcendent understanding.

Ordinary interiority does not freeze self-consciousness; in fact, it too seeks "an awareness of the self, a coming into being of the individual, and an opening up of interior states of knowing" that is privileged by the modernist authors Olson details. But its becoming happens incrementally and slowly within this paradigm. Lasting transformation runs apace with the rhythms, repetitions, and habits of the everyday; it contrasts with the ephemeral achievements of the sophisticate or the tenuous moments of heightened awareness. Pym's ordinary interiority, which is both an aesthetic and model for readers' lived experience, is the tortoise of Aesop's

fable, while the sophisticate is the hare. For the reader willing to be catechized by Pym's text, including its disciplining of the sophisticate and purification/creation of tasteful sophistication, ordinary interiority is a way of life.

SOPHISTICATED EVOKED, BUT NEVER REALIZED

To affirm the novel's "small-eventful poignant lives" and insist on Mildred's fixed ordinary interiority, then, is to declare the novel resists sophistication as the new and strikingly transformative. Mildred's ordinary interiority is a rebuke to sophistication in and of itself. Furthermore, the text disavows the popular pursuit of the new for the sake of newness; as I demonstrate in chapter 2 with the success of Mitford's essay on U and non-U uses of language, fashionable speech was a current cultural preoccupation. But *Excellent Women* disciplines sophistication in other ways; the novel does not merely provide a model of the ordinary. Rather, the ordinary—plot, repetition, and Mildred's interiority—also actively resists and purifies sophistication. *Excellent Women* models an ordinary life and interiority (which is a "a full life" according to the novel's final sentence),¹¹ and it also demonstrates *how* to resist popular sophistication's perpetual discontent with the ordinary through platitudes. The novel actively engages sophistication, specifically its fascination for its readers and their expectations of a sophisticated bildungsroman, while remaining largely immune to sophistication's seductive powers.

Pym makes this difficult task seem effortless.¹² She evokes sophistication for her aspirational middlebrow readers despite the novel's everyday events and Mildred's ordinary interiority; her text remains stubbornly resistant to aesthetic modernism's extraordinary moments and the middlebrow's impulse towards sophistication. The work thus castigates popular sophistication and readerly desire for a sophisticated bildungsroman. I will outline three ways in

which *Excellent Women* evokes popular sophistication while still remaining ordinary. First, this desire is fomented by the first chapter, which caricatures the conventions of the sophisticated bildungsroman genre and suggests Mildred's sophistication will happen later in the narrative. The novel repeatedly creates this expectation—it summons sophistication's tropes and the conventions of the sophistication bildungsroman—only to squelch its fulfilment by the relentless ordinariness of the text. Sophistication's transformative event is comically evoked throughout for Mildred but never realized. The novel feints towards sophistication but remains ordinary. Through Mildred, the ordinary triumphs over the impulse towards sophistication. This creates affective disappointment, however, particularly for readers who cling to formulaic reading practices and only desire the sophisticate's bildungsroman.

But the middlebrow text often subtly invites, but does not force, readers into layered, complex, or even contradictory reading experiences. My second point is that for Pym's readers willing to adjust their expectations, the novel provides an alternative education. In a brief but startling moment, Pym constructs her middlebrow readers as the text's sophisticates. She assumes her readers knowledgeable about the multi-valent, insider allusions of the middlebrow genre and thereby entangles them in sophistication's sophistical logic.¹³ Finally, the reader is provided a metaphorical mirror to her pursuit of commodified sophistication, which Pym makes common. Simultaneously, Mildred's platitudes discipline aspirant readers and purify their desires from distinction to tasteful discrimination.

READER'S ASPIRATIONS FOR SOPHISTICATION

Pym evokes the familiar middlebrow coming-of-age plot to construct readers' expectations of Mildred's story as a sophisticate's bildungsroman, in which the stifling and boring ordinary is overcome by the exemplary. These are expectations the narrative magnifies

but refuses to fulfill. In this subset of the middlebrow genre, readers are encouraged to read the narrative according to the recognizable shape of the sophisticate's transformation, as epitomized by Mitford's Linda in her encounter of Fabrice (see chapter two). In the bildungsroman, particularly of the sophisticate, naïveté exists in order to be turned into knowingness, bad clothing is worn to be discarded for fashionable garb, and outmoded ideas about morality are to be eclipsed by ambiguity. As Hammill suggests, this narrative, in "dramatising [the] protagonist's education, also present[s] lessons in manners and models of successful and unsuccessful social behavior."¹⁴ Frequently, the middlebrow narrative of sophistication disrupts repetition within the domestic. This transformation is provoked by or constitutes an event i.e. the *un*-ordinary. Within the seemingly unassailable ordinariness of the domestic middlebrow, sophistication makes its presence known through the interruption of repetition and the everyday rituals. These domestic interruptions, like high modernism's apparent banalities that Olson describes, are not always catastrophic events. Rather, these moments transform a character's consciousness or way of being in the world, even within the seemingly mundane space of the home. Unsurprisingly, this type bildungsroman is predominated by female characters. In the case of Fanny in Mitford's *Love in a Cold Climate*, these events take place whenever Cedric, the Novia Scotian self-made sophisticate, enters into her drawing room. Even within Delafield's *Diary* apart from Lady Boxe, the home is constantly subject to "domestic disasters," which provoke the Provincial Lady's sophisticated motherhood as an anticipatory response to these disruptions, and writerly sophistication, in which she chronicles them afterwards. The "event" of Vicky's comments about hell, whom I describe as a sophisticate in training in the previous chapter, provokes the Provincial Lady's own transformation into a sophisticated mother through the act of writing. In her diary (itself a sophisticating space), the Provincial Lady renders her

inner perception and moment of transcendent understanding. Seemingly mundane situations can be transformed suddenly from the ordinary into the extraordinary in this bildungsroman. This is a part of sophistication's promise and the pleasure of reading the middlebrow. The domestic, its female inhabitants, and sophistication eventually run apace in this mode of the middlebrow bildungsroman; this moment signals the genre's comic triumph and creates narrative closure. This is what Pym goads her readers to expect, especially in the opening chapter.

Pym engages readers' generic familiarity (i.e. readerly knowingness) and summons expectations of "extraordinary [domestic] moments" in the novel's opening.¹⁵ The narrative first sets up, in subtle though formulaic terms, an opposition between the sophisticated new and the ordinary (i.e. repetitive, everyday domesticity) that is familiar to middlebrow readers. This opening frames Mildred in relation to the sophisticate's expected transformation:

"Ah, you ladies! Always on the spot when there's something happening!" The voice belonged to Mr. Mallett, one of our churchwardens, and its roguish tone made me start guiltily, almost as if I had no right to be discovered outside my own front door.

"New people moving in? The presence of a furniture van would seem to suggest it," he went on pompously. "I expect you know about it."

"Well, yes, one usually does," I said, feeling rather annoyed at his presumption.

"It is rather difficult not to know such things."¹⁶

For Mr. Mallett, Mildred performs a predictable social ritual: spying on one's neighbor. And yet the new is immanent. Character anticipation also creates readerly anticipation.

Through reflections of the ever-curious Mildred as she waits for the moving van, the opening scene constructs its naïve protagonist and magnifies her candidacy, indeed need, for transformation. Her ironic reflection distances through the use of the third person but includes a

hint of discontent: “I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people’s business, and if she is also a clergyman’s daughter then one might really say that there is no hope for her.”¹⁷ The reader is primed for her inner transformation by her description as an excellent woman on the first page, which also sets parameters for her external transformation. This moment highlights her unmarried state; Mildred is intensely curious yet simultaneously self-reflective and distancing, the contrary pull of which will characterize the text throughout. The third person also suggests Mildred’s potential for becoming sophisticated; she possesses what Hammill describes as “the characteristic detachment of the sophisticate.”¹⁸ Her romantic categories are “unmarried” and married as its preferable, unspoken opposite¹⁹; she is equally naïve, particularly as a clergyman’s daughter. This is just the sort of binary approach that someone exciting and new moving into the neighborhood can disrupt. As Hammill suggests, “in its relation to morality, sophistication is often associated with a degree of hedonism, an unshockable attitude in sexual matters, a distrust of bourgeois values, open-handedness shading into extravagance, and a focus on the pleasure of the moment. It is usually opposed to sexual continence, thrift, productiveness and the work ethic.”²⁰ Mildred may be unproductive in this moment, but she is hardly unshockable; she also imagines herself to be unchanging; thus her transformation will be exceptionally pleasurable for the knowing reader.²¹

ESTABLISHING NARRATIVE EXPECTATIONS OF SOPHISTICATION

The conventions of the sophistication bildungsroman also dominate her initial meeting with the new neighbor, Helena, later in the first chapter. The text magnifies Mildred’s need for sophistication by emphasizing her connection with the ordinary and making the rituals of the domestic ordinary distasteful. Mildred desires to make a good impression: “I had meant to ask

Mrs. Napier to coffee one evening. It was to have been a gracious, civilised occasion, with my best coffee cups and biscuits on little silver dishes.”²² Instead, the two meet unexpectedly by the “dustbins” as Mildred engages in the mundane task of organic waste disposal (potatoes and coffee grounds). One is reminded of the Provincial Lady’s disarray in her encounter with Lady Boxe in the opening of *Diary*, but instead of a generative task, Mildred deals in worthless remains.²³ Mildred’s aspires towards the civilized, but she is unsuccessful because of the relentlessness of the ordinary’s intrusion, the labor required (which the sophisticate can disavow), and the time essential to complete ordinary tasks. Taking out the rubbish is an example of the ordinary, which Olson describes as “temporal points” that do *not* “signify accomplishment.”²⁴ Pym’s text is consumed with such events and things, but the reader desirous of sophistication can effortlessly perceive the ordinary as negative here. Pym reinforces this impulse. Mildred is linked in this first encounter with the waste of which she disposes; there is an uncomfortable elision from disposing to being disposable.

Mildred’s contrast with Helena sharpens the denigration of the ordinary, and thus the apparent need for her sophistication. When Mildred tentatively “ventures” that “it will be nice to have somebody else in the house,” Helena quickly squelches the potential with poise, hinting at her own sophistication: ““Oh, well, I don’t suppose I shall be in very much,” said Mrs. Napier quickly”; she establishes that she is frequently “out.”²⁵ The reader may imagine parties or other fantasies for Helena as desired. But the textual reality is Mildred’s unsophistication, which her reply heightens: ““Oh, no,’ I said, drawing back; ‘neither shall I.’ In fact, I was very often in, but I understood her reluctance to pledge herself to anything that might become a nuisance or a tie.”²⁶ The ordinary too easily turns into social white lies that hide one’s low self-esteem; Mildred requires the confidence that sophistication confers through its interior transformation.

Finally, Mildred's need for sophisticating is made excruciatingly obvious by her appearance; as she reflects, "we were, superficially at any rate, a very unlikely pair to become friendly. She was fair-haired and pretty, gaily dressed in corduroy trousers and a bright jersey, while I, mousy and rather plain anyway, drew attention to these qualities with my shapeless overall and old fawn skirt."²⁷ "Superficially" and "unlikely" encourage one to read against the grain of Mildred's prediction—the unsophisticated are in desperate need of the "awareness of the self, a coming into being of the individual, and an opening up of interior states of knowing" that sophistication promises²⁸; unsophisticated Mildred is not entirely trustworthy in her self-assessment. Mildred simultaneously emphasizes the social distance between her and Helena in terms of ugly apparel. The two become opposed as types in this moment; shapeless is opposed to gaily dressed and the ordinary contrasted with the new. The effect, unlike any of the previous texts I have examined, is *not* to turn readers' attention onto the sophisticate (e.g. Agatha, Fabrice, and Lady Boxe dominate their scenes). Rather, the chapter focuses on Mildred's need for sophistication's transforming power, which could not be more apparent, but whether this will end in an aspirational marriage, an affair, or a makeover is unclear. This opening, to evoke Jane Austen as the middlebrow frequently does, is akin to *Emma* if it were told from Harriet Smith's perspective rather than Emma Woodhouse's. Pym's scene formulaically sets the stage for the sophisticate's coming-of-age story familiar to the middlebrow and exemplified in Mitford's *Pursuit* novels, though here probably at the hand of an unlikely friend rather than a lover. Furthermore, it sets up an opposition between sophistication and the everyday and constructs readers' desire for change. Mildred's routine and repetition exists to be broken. The ordinary has been sharply challenged in this scene.

While Helena's status as sophisticate akin to Fabrice or Lady Boxe is unlikely—Mildred has not registered that level of transformation in her narration—as a study in contrast this moment is unambiguous. Taken in terms of modernism, in which the effect is the measure, Helena needs not be as flashy as Lady Boxe; her sophistication could be manifested solely in the change she creates. Helena may turn out to be a sophisticate, but this will only be evidenced by Mildred's transformed interiority and behavior after this encounter. Helena as a sophisticate is therefore unknown. Regardless, Mildred's need has been overwhelmingly established; the reader can sit back and wait for change. But, as I will argue, Pym reflects what her readers expect only to disrupt it; the purpose of this scene is to flush out those desirous for sophistication in order to teach them differently. But only some readers will acquiesce to Pym's instruction.

NARRATIVE DISAPPOINTMENT

The opening has set the reader up to expect a sophisticated plot in which the ordinary narrative is transformed into the new. A break with Mildred's past self seems immanent. And yet, no fall from the ordinary occurs; instead, the reader is the one expected to change. The novel persists in the ordinary as occurrences remain small events. There are very obvious opportunities throughout for transformation that Mildred misses or avoids. Her consciousness remains unperturbed and decidedly unmodern through the novel's end; as a bildungsroman, *Excellent Women* is spectacularly unsuccessful.

Rocky, Helena's charming and handsome husband, presents another opportunity for Mildred's sophistication: the expectant reader can easily imagine her falling in love and having an affair. Their first encounter is promising. Mildred is rather prudish when discussing Aubrey Beardsley, who used to live in their mutual residence and is commemorated by a plaque. Rocky finds this detail "perfect," making the unfashionable district "rather better" because of "those

exquisite drawings,” but for Mildred: “Personally, I thought them disgusting, but made a non-committal reply.”²⁹ Mildred soon develops a crush on Rocky, however, and learns about his past—Rocky was a military playboy who spent the war running the Admiral’s social calendar in Italy and entertaining the Wren officers—and half-heartedly vows to stay away. An epiphany that follows the lines of the sophisticated bildungsroman seems immanent, and indeed, when Helena names her husband in chapter one, Mildred’s excitement is promisingly palatable: “Rockingham! I snatched at the name as if it had been a precious jewel in the dustbin. Mr. Napier was called Rockingham!”³⁰ She also stares at him rudely when they first meet.³¹ But Mildred’s dominant social performance is of stubborn un-sophistication; in her ordinary steadfastness, she resists any transforming impulse.

The narrative really sets Mildred up to fall when she stops by just after Helena leaves Rocky during an argument a third into the novel; Helena is in love with her colleague, Everard. Mildred becomes Rocky’s confidant and invites him up to her flat for lunch. This would be an apt moment to begin a relationship. But the scene upstairs is played for contrast both overtly and subtlety with readerly expectations of sophistication (or what remains of them), but it is more tame drawing-room comedy than titillating. The result is humorous but determinedly inconducive to a sexual awakening, even though, once again, the narrative hints at the possibility. Rocky arrives and begins pulling down Mildred’s drying garments and making jokes; “washing” as it is called here, in all other contexts in the novel is synecdoche for underwear. But Mildred, as the reader has already learned elsewhere, does not wear lingerie, but rather “[j]ust the kind of underclothes a person like me might wear...so there is no need to describe them.”³² Mildred also does not think this the moment for “coyness or embarrassment,”³³ so she ignores his antics.

Her fantasies are slightly more promising but follow the same pattern of expectation and deflection established early on. The lunch Mildred provides includes cheese, salad, and her carefully hoarded olive oil, which she reflects “seemed an idyllic sort of meal that ought to have been eaten in the open air, with a bottle of wine and what is known as ‘good’ conversation”³⁴; she drifts towards an Arcadian fantasy about what might have been. But Pym interrupts with a marvelous yet unromantic ordinary reflection. Mildred lacks wine, but “I had a bottle of brandy which I kept, according to old-fashioned custom, for ‘emergencies’ and I decided to bring it in with the coffee. I could see my mother, her lips slightly pursed, saying, ‘For medicinal purposes only, of course. . . .’”³⁴ Images of her chastising mother comedically oust the possibly suggestive idyllic meal. Rocky thanks her profusely—his good looks and charm means Mildred’s thoughts slip gently towards his separation and the illicit, only to turn away again:

And perhaps even a less attractive man than Rocky would have a devoted woman to prepare a meal for him on the day his wife left him. A mother, a sister, an aunt, even . . . I remembered an advertisement I had once seen in the *Church Times*—“Organist and aunt require unfurnished accommodation; East Sheen or Barnes preferred.” Rather fishy, I had thought it, probably not his aunt at all, though surely the kind of people who expressed a preference for East Sheen or Barnes could hardly be anything but highly respectable?³⁵

Mildred has an utter paucity of source material from which to mentally pursue the transgressive, but she also shows no desire to expand her knowledge-base. With the context of the church publication and blood relations (again), she but smiles. The scene continues, faintly echoing a dramatic ménage à trois comedy, such as Noël Coward’s *Design for Living*. The other man in her life who could perhaps provoke romantic interest, Julian O’Malley, knocks because he wants tea. Rocky imagines it might be Helena coming for comfort. and a slight tension ensues between

the two men: “the expressions of the two men when they saw each other was something that made me smile.”³⁶ But again, nothing actually happens. The men drink Mildred’s badly made tea as she washes up, musing about modernist technique and the ordinary:

No sink has ever been built high enough for a reasonably tall person and my back was soon aching with the effort of washing up...My thoughts went round and round and it occurred to me that if I ever wrote a novel it would be of the “stream of consciousness” type and deal with an hour in the life of a woman at the sink. I felt resentful and bitter towards Helena and Rocky and even towards Julian, though I had to admit that nobody had compelled me to wash these dishes or to tidy this kitchen. It was the fussy spinster in me, the Martha, who could not comfortably sit and make conversation when she knew that yesterday’s unwashed dishes were still in the sink. Martha’s back must have ached too, I thought grimly, noticing that the plate rack needed scrubbing and the tea-cloths boiling. At last everything was done except for the saucepan with the burnt potatoes.³⁷

The novel plays in the gap between readerly expectations and the ordinary. Mildred’s incisive comments about cultural expectations for women and how she is simultaneously complicit are very insightful, and the identification with Martha gives the reader food for thought. But this is not the bildungsroman the reader has been taught to expect by Pym or the middlebrow. This is one of the moments when the novel breaks with Mildred’s ordinary interiority in her reflection on stream of consciousness, though by the 1950s this is, of course, not novel. But her thoughts soon return to potatoes, which are the narrative trope for ordinary, wholesome, disposable existence. This too is wisdom. And yet, the reader must battle with her expectations for a light, sophisticated and sophisticating narrative.

Despite these moments and others like them—Rocky provocatively invites Mildred to visit him during his separation in the country; she refuses and the reader is only able to imagine what would have happened³⁸—Mildred continues to be ordinary. The Provincial Lady misses the opportunity to discuss perversion, but Mildred’s doggedly ordinary narrative disavows the sexual or erotic altogether.³⁹ The ordinary continues throughout the novel, ending with Mildred engaged as a typist for Everard Bone. In a conflation of the opening scene and the one just described, Mildred reflects in the final chapter, “And before long I should be certain to find myself at [Everard’s] sink peeling potatoes and washing up; that would be a nice change when both proof-reading and indexing began to pall.” She concludes, “Was any man worth this burden? Probably not, but one shouldered it bravely and cheerfully and in the end it might turn out to be not so heavy after all.”⁴⁰ Contrary to the opening expectations the narrative created for its readers, she remains largely unchanged and ensconced in her daily tasks. The ending is odd and unremarkable⁴¹ and thus is disappointment for the reader driven by narrative plot expectations of transformation as well as the feminist expecting a consciousness-raising transformation. The social and academic reader alike are turned away empty-handed if they ignore Pym’s wisdom in unexpected places.

MORE THAN DISAPPOINTMENT: PYM’S WILLING READERS

But the text rises or sinks to the level of the reader. It is deliberately, even perversely, disappointing for those who only read solely for what they expect to find, whether it be sexual or feminist liberation, that is, those who come to the text with a closed mind. These readers Pym teases with potential moments where it could have been otherwise. Mildred remains solidly “excellent” for these readers. But this type of reading practice misses much, for the text will only reveal what the reader allows. But there is much more available to readers than disappointment

for those willing to change expectations. Indeed, it is in reading the novel as disavowing sophistication that its subtle, rich humor emerges, as I have demonstrated above. Because Mildred is repeatedly and comedically unsophisticated, she cannot appreciate events replete with opportunities to become worldly wise. The contrast for the knowing, less naïve reader ought to be funny, such as Rocky's lunch in her flat. This is something else the close-minded reader misses—i.e. the narrative pleasure that is there, even if it is not what one expected.

Pym also is not passive towards her readers and their reading practices. As I have demonstrated, she—like all the authors I have considered—is very cognizant of middlebrow conventions and aspiring sophisticates. Pym's novel, even more than Delafield's text, is preoccupied with chastising and cultivating readers' relationship with sophistication, predominantly through the unsophisticated example of its protagonist.⁴² Pym's narrative gently moves willing readers, even those who are simultaneously discontented with the ordinary plot and the anti-climactic ending, beyond merely feeling disappointment to learning. For those willing to read beyond their pursuit and expectations,⁴³ the novel provides more than disappointment or head-scratching amusement. The narrative provides an alternative thread of reading beyond the sophisticate's bildungsroman narrative in its popular form. And indeed, as I will ultimately argue, the text suggests a possible return to purified sophistication i.e. tasteful sophistication, thus somewhat providing aspirational readers what they came searching for in the first place. But tasteful sophistication is rooted in discriminating taste rather than an eventful pursuit of the new. The shaping starts at the beginning of the narrative, though, not the ending.

THE FALL OF THE SOPHISTICATE AND NARRATIVE ENTANGLEMENT

In order to challenge the current formulation of sophistication, breakdown the opposition between sophistication and the everyday, and call readers to embrace taste within the ordinary

(in relation to the self rather than as exemplary), Pym must unseat the sophisticate's smug knowingness. It does no good to confront the reader with the purifying ordinary upfront if she is not willing to engage it. Pym must first trouble readers' expectations and sense of knowingness. Pym creates opportunities for the sophisticate's fall from knowledge throughout the text. But the clearest, and most striking opportunity is provided during Mildred's first encounter with Helena (this is the middlebrow, so one cannot assume a reader's repeated consumption of a text). This scene strongly agitates for the readers' fall from formulaic expectations, which happen immediately after Mildred describes her own clothes in contrast with Helena's. Mildred sharply pivots, addressing the reader: "Let me hasten to add that I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person, nor have I ever thought of myself as being like her."⁴⁴ The aspirational reader familiar with the middlebrow is addressed and cast in the role of sophisticate. This is the text's shocking moment in which sophistication enters, not within the plot, but through a sophisticated author addressing her aspirational (or sophisticated) readers.

But the meaning of this sentence is maddeningly difficult to parse, aside from the tortured syntax. I will spin out these possibilities, which demonstrate Pym's exemplary craftiness. The middlebrow is relentlessly allusive; as Humble notes: "feminine middlebrow fiction relies on its readers possessing a shared literary and cultural background. Continual reference to other books is...one of the key ways in which women's middlebrow novel establishes for itself a distinctive generic identity."⁴⁵ Pym addresses the reader as sophisticated, i.e. as a middlebrow reader who has an insider familiarity with the genre and its usual set of allusions. But different references code different meanings, which begins the pleasurable difficulty of the line. Of the middlebrow's reflexive intertextuality Humble also notes that "with different types of literature invoking

particular aspects of that identity. So Victorian novels (those of Dickens and Charlotte Brontë...) suggest an adherence to traditional narrative values."⁴⁶ Jane Eyre's most memorable line is arguably, "reader I married him," which fits rather well with Mildred's "plain women," who experience pleasurable and desperate hope through narratives in which excellent women in their 30s get married. However the sophisticated reader, expecting to read against Mildred's strident protest, may simultaneously and justifiably conclude that this text will end in a marriage. Or will it? Mildred insists firmly that what follows will not be like Jane Eyre, a protest which only serves to further ensconce readers' expectations. But her protest is to be expected, so ought one to read for the unexpected, i.e. that Mildred is correct, in whatever form that may be? Furthermore, is this Pym's voice breaking through Mildred voice? Pym does not reference marriage at all, but only plain women and hope; how detailed a knowledge of *Jane Eyre* is one expected to have? The sleuthing reader may even reach for her battered copy of Charlotte Brontë's text.

Pym's allusion also evokes the Brontë sisters for the knowledgeable reader of the middlebrow: "I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person, nor have I ever thought of myself as being like her." As Humble points out, the Brontës are frequently alluded to and have an important place in the middlebrow canon. The Brontës epitomize the family as a "profoundly eccentric organization,"⁴⁷ even as "familiarity with the Brontës's lives and works is used in a number of novels as a test of the personal, intellectual, and social worth of individual."⁴⁸ Of the family as a reference point Humble also notes that knowledge of the Brontës,

defines a certain sort of woman: middle-class, intellectually curious, intimately engaged with her reading. The Brontës *represent* reading in some iconic sense, denoting the pleasurable excess of the ideal middlebrow woman reader over-identifying with what she

reads ...whereby they establish themselves, through a web of cross-reference and echo, as a sort of sub-genre, and in so doing establish a distinct identity for their readers.⁴⁹

The Jane Eyre reference thus evokes the eccentric family trope. One cannot (or can one?) read for both the conventional marriage and the eccentric family in a conversation between Mildred and Helena. The reader experiences narrative ambiguity and confusion if she tries to leverage her knowingness in this moment. The more one knows the middlebrow, the more one has read of the genre, the more the contradictory possibilities multiply. This moment rebukes sophistication's knowingness by reveling in its folly, and one's susceptibility to think and claim that one already knows. Here is it impossible to actually know. This complexity and overwritten reading practices are how the text entangles the reader in her own knowingness. Mildred's confusion at the unexpected becomes the reader's own.

But what about pleasure? Nicola Humble describes the contemporary dismissal of the middlebrow: "[t]he term [middlebrow] was used throughout the period (and has been ever since) as a form of disapprobation, suggesting a smug 'easy' read, lacking significant intellectual challenges"⁵⁰; she also describes the "typical emphasis on pleasure in the middlebrow depiction of women and their reading."⁵¹ Humble argues a decade later that the middlebrow, at its most basic, can ultimately be defined as a reading posture of pleasurable indulgence. While the highbrow reader can be found "sitting up" as he "engages with his reading from a bodily position of alertness, hostility, separateness from the text," the middlebrow reader "lolls, relaxing into his book and chair."⁵² As Kate MacDonald suggests, a "passion for reading for pleasure is a marker of the middlebrow."⁵³ But my dissertation demonstrates that making the middlebrow just pleasurable is a half-truth;⁵⁴ it undercuts the serious feminist work in which the middlebrow engages, particularly in relation to its middle-class readers. As Delafield and Pym demonstrate,

the middlebrow is quite willing to chastise its readers; it is both didactic and delightful. In reading *Excellent Women*, the least effective reading posture is merely sitting back. The narrative wants to challenge its readers.

Having played upon the reader's narrative expectations in the opening scene (and in what follows for the formulaic reader), Pym encourages false knowingness in order to dislodge it. As Humble describes, "by paying attention to the representation of the act of reading in women's middlebrow fiction we can trace the ways in which this mode of writing both established itself as a distinctive literary form, and worked to remake its readers in its own terms."⁵⁵ The text eventually remakes those who are willing, but first it entangles the reader in her own fashionable knowingness of the middlebrow and its conventions. Sophistication in this moment becomes just a parlor trick of insider references, of knowingness without any narrative payoff beyond the moment. Pym calls her readers to better things. In Pym's knotted reference to *Jane Eyre*, generic knowledge confuses, and the greater the knowledge the greater potential for creative contradictions in relation to the actual text at hand. Pym entangles the reader in her own sophisticated knowingness. Those who desire more than games or pleasurable confusion (i.e. to expand their own consciousness) will shift their expectations. The reader is chastened and proceeds with readerly sophistication shaken. But this enables, ideally, an open mind for alternative ways of knowing. Pym's text invites the reader into the stance openness as Pym reimagines what the middlebrow ought to do and what sophistication ought to be. This creates space for a narrative which chastises and reimagines sophistication.

DEPICTION OF THE SOPHISTICATE AS COMSUMER

Pym forestalls pleasurable momentary knowledge in what follows, however. Pym not only entangles but also directly chastens the aspirational reader. She holds up a mirror to

sophistication's pursuit by the middle class at the text's midpoint. Pym castigates sophistication within everyday practice as a commercial pursuit. Pym emphasizes the commodification of distinction as a pursuit of sophistication through the perspective of her narrator. Mildred goes into a shop after a difficult conversation with Allegra Gray because

I had a feeling that I must escape and longed to be lost in a crowd of busy women shopping, which was why I followed blindly the crowd of busy women shopping, which was why I followed blindly the crowd that surged in through the swinging doors of a large store. Some were hurrying, making for this or that department or counter, but others like myself seemed bewildered and aimless, pushed and buffeted as we stood not knowing which way to turn.⁵⁶

The rhythmic cadence of repetition both lulls the reader into the department store and emphasizes that distinction pursued through consumption is utterly unoriginal and ordinary in the worst fashion. Mildred becomes the *flânerie* here, who goes from the street to the department store and its enticements; she cannot resist buying. In contrast with the rest of the provincialism (Mildred's parish is located in London), this is a familiar urban modernist scene. This is a scene of the debased ordinary, in which sophistication's pursuit is made common through its widespread repetition and commodification. The ordinary, and with it here the feminine, degenerates when repetition unthinkingly mingles with popular sophistication's pursuit of the fashionable new (whether or not it is becoming). This sophistication is repetitively tasteless. As Rita Felski describes:

women are identified with repetition via consumption. For Marxist scholars of the everyday, commodification is [repetition's] paramount feature, evident in ever greater standardization and sameness. As the primary symbols and victims of consumer culture,

women take on the repetitive features of the objects that they buy. Femininity is formed through mass production and mass reproduction, disseminated through endless images of female glamour and female domesticity. Women become the primary emblem of an inauthentic everyday life marked by the empty homogeneous time of mass consumption.⁵⁷

The image of female consumerism merges with commodified sophistication, which is a matter of buying the right product; this commodification is appropriated within the middlebrow as reading to appear sophisticated. Neither is efficacious for producing taste or distinction.

Pym connects consumer culture with the pursuit of sophistication, not beauty, and Mildred cannot help but be drawn in. Once inside, her desire is for another's face; she remembers "Allegra Gray's smooth apricot-coloured face rather too close to mine and wondered what it was that she used to get such a striking effect."⁵⁸ "Striking" is not beautiful; this is part of distinction's pursuit by the middle class. Allegra, like Helena, successfully mobilizes the characteristics of distinction even though she is not sophisticated as a type. Allegra lacks the totalizing power and domination of the sophisticate, but she is desirable and fools silly men like Julian, who are blinded to her character. This is type of distinction, but it is not a particularly desirable one in the text. Purchasing to look like her is the corollary of Mildred's reader buying *Vile Bodies* or Mitford's "The English Aristocracy" because she imagines fashionable speech will make her sophisticated. Mildred stumbles into the connection of sophistication with commodity culture; she is a type and stand-in for those who enter the department store. The end goal is not beauty in either case, but sophistication.

Mildred walks away with a purchase with which she is unsatisfied (of her indiscriminating purchasing, I will say more below). Through her failure, Mildred participates in the chastisement of popular sophistication and its pursuit of distinction; everyone is complicit. Mildred next views the final end of this pursuit. The powder room is the space where the modernist state of distraction becomes one of self-concentration, followed by exhaustion. Mildred continues to the top floor and the Ladies' Room:

Inside it was a sobering sight indeed and one to put us all in mind of the futility of material things and of our own mortality. *All flesh is but as grass* . . . I thought, watching the women working at their faces with savage concentration, opening their mouths wide, biting and licking their lips, stabbing at their noses and chins with powder-puffs. Some, who had abandoned the struggle to keep up, sat in chairs, their bodies slumped down, the hands resting on their parcels. One woman lay on her couch, her hat and shoes off, her eyes closed. I tiptoed past her with my penny in my hand.⁵⁹

This scene is atypical for its location, content, and style in *Excellent Women*, though it is hardly alien to modernism. Pym's chastisement of sophistication begins with the modernist technique of defamiliarization, which is in reality things as they are, not as they seem under the spell of sophistication. This is the correspondingly rare moment which Pym breaks with her ordinary style; Mildred's interiority is un-ordinary in this moment. Pym unflinchingly portrays commodified sophistication by the middle class; it is notable that there is no mirror described in the text, for that is Mildred's job as narrator. Like Delafield, she dramatizes the cost of sophistication by taking the reader behind the scenes. But if Delafield humorously dramatizes the cost in terms of time and money, for Pym it damages the human personality, A descent into grotesque savagery results; the verbs here are active yet jarring: "opening," "biting," "licking,"

and “stabbing” fiercely; the women contrast here is with those “who had abandoned the struggle to keep up.” These are the two camps of women; those who fight to “keep up” with fads and trends on one hand and those who resign to the deconditioning of the body on the other. The woman on the couch pre-figures the final end of them all—death. She is the memento mori of the text, reinforced by the penny in Mildred’s hand, which evokes those placed on the eyes of the dead.

PLATITUDES PURIFY SOPHISTICATED

But in this moment of death, Pym also instructs the reader in how to resist the sophisticate through means available in the ordinary, which I have argued is the text’s natural habitat. Mildred is clear-seeing about others, and she is the vehicle through which sophisticated readers are chastised. She models how to resist the impulse towards sophistication and the uncommon through the ordinary, specifically the platitude. Even in its defamiliarization (arguably ordinary given Pym writes in the 1950s and the middlebrow) the scene above is the apex of the platitude in relation to the sophisticate. Mildred reflects, “inside it was a sobering sight indeed and one to put us all in mind of the futility of material things and of our own mortality. *All flesh is but as grass . . .*” Everyone is common, everyone is mortal, and death is the final event for everyone. This is the reader, those aspiring and those who think they are sophisticated. The biblical phrase, “*All flesh is but as grass,*” is a platitude, but so is “our own mortality”; both statements seem trite or commonplace, but they are universally true.⁶⁰ This platitude may be trite—“sobering sight” and “one to put us all in mind of the futility of material things” is the tonally pedantic of the superior, moralizing preacher—but it is inexorably accurate. In short, this platitude rebukes sophistication’s ostensible distinction, for it equalizes all and applies to everyone.

Mildred, who speaks in platitudes, thereby chastises sophistication. The platitude is a ritualized way of life for Mildred. Pym, in incorporating the platitude into the ordinary, is in concert with Rita Felski's vision of everyday life. Felski explains thus: "the temporality of the everyday... is that of repetition, the spatial ordering of the everyday is anchored in a sense of home, and the characteristic mode of experiencing the everyday is that of habit."⁶¹ The platitude is ordinary and Mildred's everyday mode of speech.

This habituated repetition of stock phrases is part of Pym's ordinary and Mildred's everyday way of being in the world. I return again to the opening scene between Mildred and Helena. Mildred is unsophisticated when she speaks, for she embodies the style of the ordinary. Mildred speaks in platitudes, which are the antithesis of sophistication as the new, unique, and exemplar. She responds to Helena: "I do hope you're getting comfortably settled in. Moving is such a business, isn't it? It seems to take so long to get everything straight. Some essential thing like a teapot or a frying-pan is always lost. . . ."⁶² This encounter with the new is made mundane and commonplace in this moment by Mildred's use of platitudes. Mildred takes moving as a repeated event i.e. ordinary. The appropriate speech genre for engaging moving is the everyday platitude, with its limited set of already established phrases. The platitude constructs moving as a familiar event, not an extraordinary one. Helena is a new person, but this is an ordinary event. Delafield silences the sophisticate by excluding her dialogue from the text; this protects her readers from the irresistible sophisticate. Pym instead catechizes the reader in how to speak back to her. Platitudes are a clumsy tool for many forms of communication, but they forestall her dazzling performance and rebuke the distinctiveness on which sophistication depends.

Mildred gives the reader a lesson in platitudes in her first encounter with Helena, who as I noted above, may or may not be a sophisticate, for the sophisticate is known through her effect

on others. The text moves from transcribing Mildred's platitudes (she provides stock phrases for moving for the reader) to describing platitudes and how Mildred acquired them:

Platitudes flowed easily from me, perhaps because, with my parochial experience, I know myself to be capable of dealing with most of the stock situations or even the great moments of life—birth, marriage, death, the successful jumble sale, the garden fete spoiled by bad weather...“Mildred is such a help to her father,” people used to say after my mother died.⁶³

Platitudes address “most of the stock situations or even the great moments of life” i.e. the ordinary and extraordinary experienced as commonplace. Platitudes equalize the importance of various situations. “Dealing with” is labor, directed towards difficulties and complexities. In this regard, as with other work, Mildred is incredibly useful. What she describes—“birth, marriage, death”—are universal human experiences, and when others may stumble, she knows what to say. Congregants of her father, indeed, recognize that this “help[ed]” her father and those with whom she speaks. The situations Mildred lists may be familiar, but that does not mean easy, for they cover the gamut from major life changes to its successes and disappointments. Nor are these experiences only church-related. These are all repeated incidents and how individuals experience life as ordinary, even if the situations described are new to individuals. Olson's commentary on Stein is useful for taxonomizing Pym's ordinary style that purifies sophistication here: “in ‘Portraits and Repetitions’ (1934), Stein defends the innovative style of her portraits by explaining that her use of [linguistic] repetition is an attempt to get at ‘the rhythm of anybody’s personality.’...Rather than embrace a narrative structure of beginning, middle, and end—rather than tell a story—Stein's portraits re-create the ‘existence,’ as she calls it, of an individual. Routine and habit...become more important than heightened or chronologically ordered

events.”⁶⁴ Mildred is “anybody” rather than an exemplary individual because she speaks in commonplaces. For Mildred, platitudes and ritualized forms of interaction establish basic, common humanity through shared experiences. What makes platitudes trivial is also what makes them transferable to various people across different social boundaries and gives them staying power. Platitudes respond to shared humanity, the “stock” situations which are encountered and life’s great moments. It may be difficult to imagine the sophisticate within stock situations, but she encounters them nonetheless.

Mildred shines in stock church social functions because of her limited, parochial experience—there is a tension here between limited and experience alien to the sophisticate. There is merit to the narrowness of her experience; it limits the number of stock situations one must respond to, such as the moving truck. As Orna Raz observes, “the clergyman’s wife is not the only one of his family members to work as a ‘parochial assistant.’ Parish work comes naturally to Mildred Lathbury, who has grown up in her father’s country rectory.”⁶⁵ Mildred, particularly as a clergy daughter, epitomizes the excellent woman. If one takes her as paradigmatic, then her conversation style—platitudes, conciliatory, able to deal with any range of situations—is also that of the excellent woman. The excellent woman can resist the sophisticate. The polite conversational form is still habitable discourse for her. Ritualized communication is preferred to utter separation and silence. Just as performing rites together unifies a community, so too speaking in platitudes creates or reinforces interpersonal bonds. Excellent women are the connective tissue of the social. Platitudes transcend cultural silos and speak to common experiences. Like discussing the weather, they are situational and conditioned social commonplaces. Platitudes do: they reorient perspective towards the communal, and away from sophistication’s overweening individualism.

RITUAL: THE SACRED VALUE AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO SOPHISTICATION

The sophisticate brings thought to every aspect of her behavior within the everyday through incorporating distinction and creatively anticipating changes—the sophisticate’s good is distinction, agency, and self-determination. In contrast, as Felski notes, “repetition, understood as ritual, provides a connection to ancestry and tradition; it situates the individual in an imagined community that spans historical time. It is thus not opposed to transcendence, but [it is] the means of transcending one’s historically limited existence.”⁶⁶ Pym’s narrative invests repetition, the antithesis to sophistication epitomized in platitudes, with a sacred value rooted in the divinely appointed religious ritual of the church; repetition is reborn as ritual. For Pym, this is the rites of the Anglican sacramental service.

Pym replaces sophistication’s pursuit with an appreciation of the everyday platitude. Repetition understood as sacred ritual, rather than perpetuating an “entrenched perception” finds transcendent value in the ecclesiastic realm.⁶⁷ This counter-cultural value is found in the secular and within the church. The latter imparts value to ritualized acts outside of Anglicanism within Pym’s novel. This is the ritual quality of the ordinary, in which cyclical tasks encodes value by virtue of being repeated. Repetition has a place within the sacred but is also valuable in itself. Repetition as sacred is an alternative way of knowing and experiencing value. Rituals also connect individuals within the church; its calendar creates unity throughout time and space. Similarly, platitudes allow for connections across the ossified borders between cultures, to create the framework across which relationships can be formed.

Platitudes point beyond the rote truths they speak, though they may be a surprisingly timely reminder or reflect heart-felt emotions. Their repetition and practice also situate its speakers within their shared social performance. One is not, in fact, the first person to experience

this event, difficult or pleasurable as it may be. Platitudes remind the individual that one's misery or joy is common. Platitudes minimize the unique specificity of a situation. They rebuke to the sophisticated and aspiring reader, reminding her that everyone experiences the ordinary and everyday. Platitudes chastise sophisticated self-styling as exemplary. In "stock situations" sophistication, especially sophisticated speech, is reactionary, just like platitudes. One cannot make everything new. Platitudes reflect Mildred's own form of ordinary, habituated knowingness. The popular sophisticate is also unhelpful and self-absorbed, a symptom of cultural fragmentation in the quest to be exemplary. Platitudes chastise the sophisticate's self-styling as exemplary. This narrative purification of sophistication goes by way of the humble platitude. It disciplines sophisticated speech and every readers' pursuit of sophistication, not merely the middlebrow. In this way, the narrative is like Delafield's *Diary*.

How platitudes fail Mildred and in which interactions I will consider below. Platitudes, as both marking the temporality and experience of Pym's ordinary, rebuke sophistication and is something the reader can take up and, rather unlike Mildred, strategically mobilize. Pym's everyday life, especially her platitudes, chastises sophistication's pursuit of the unordinary and the exemplar. The platitude is irreducible to sophistication's antithesis. Its social role matters, even though it is likely underappreciated by those readers in constant pursuit of the new. Pym's text also chastises those who denigrate to ordinary or everyday modes within speech.

MILDRED'S LACK OF DISCRIMINATING KNOWLEDGE

Pym's vision of the ordinary and everyday purifies sophistication, for the self-knowledge that sophistication's discrimination towards oneself and one's body produces remains desirable. The text has a positive vision of sophistication's discriminating knowledge through Mildred's coming to knowledge of herself. Platitudes hurt and help Mildred individually, for she uses them

to help others but does not advocate for or protect herself. Platitudes within Pym's text, then, are synecdoche for Mildred's ways of relating with the world—bound with gendered expectations, social institutions and rituals, that follow a narrow and prescribed pattern and which can corner her into doing things she would actually rather not. The repetition of stock situations and responding platitudes, the bread and butter of the excellent woman, exemplify this. The excellent woman is ill-equipped to handle situations in which there is no stock response available or platitudes will not do. These situations require choice, discriminating judgments, or questions which challenge platitudes and social commonplaces.

These are, instead, arenas in which the traditional sophisticate, with her mastery of discrimination and worldly wisdom, shines. The OED, as Hammill notes, defines sophistication as worldly wisdom or experience, subtlety, discrimination, refinement. The traditional sophisticate possesses knowledge of self and the social, which she skillfully uses to navigate tricky situations with aplomb and thrives on situationally specific choices. Her specialty is discrimination in matters of taste and knowledge of the ephemeral, but both afford discriminatory skills without a crippling awareness of social mores or expectations. She knows how to live in the world.

Mildred's ordinary interiority is lacking in sophistication for both good and ill; this handicaps her ability to discriminate rightly. Limited forms of allowable knowledge and her lack of worldly wisdom is closely intertwined with limited forms of experience and relational categories. Mildred's inability to understand relationships outside of a church framework and rituals has negative consequences; she has no categories other than church categories. Helena, the anthropologist exposes Mildred's impoverished experiences and categories throughout the novel. In one instance, Helena's experiences of "real drama" in the cloakroom after a breakup

(“tears and whisky and then going out into that awful darkness”) is confusing for Mildred, who can only internally muse, “as I did not know I could only go on tidying my hair in sympathetic silence.”⁶⁸ Mildred’s ignorance means she does not make properly discriminating judgments about her own relationships, as their continued conversation reveals:

“Everard seems to like you,” [Helena] remarked carelessly.

“Oh, I’m sure he doesn’t. I can never think of anything to say to him.”

“You think Rocky is much more attractive, don't you?”

“Well, yes, I do think he is nicer,” I said confusedly, for I was not used to discussing people in such terms. And yet I supposed that if I was honest with myself I should have to admit that “attractive” was a better word than “nice,” and expressed my feeling about Rocky more accurately. But it was wrong to talk like this, and I wished Helena would stop or that I had gone home and left the three of them to have dinner together. “I suppose we'd better not keep them waiting too long,” I said, in an attempt to stop the conversation from going any further.⁶⁹

The phrase “honest with myself” reflects discriminating self-knowledge and interiority, but Mildred rejects this insight. She judges her internal states here and throughout using the universal logic of the platitude, i.e. it is “[always] wrong to talk like this,” and thus she believes it wrong to discern one’s internal states. But this moment requires sophistication’s situationally discriminating approach.

The reader gets Mildred’s resulting confusion scene and inexperience, but it is the final, stabbing line that communicates the cloistering effect:

“Oh, [waiting] won't do them any harm, but I could certainly do with a drink,”
said Helena. “Come along.”

“I followed her downstairs, feeling like a dog or some inferior class of person.”⁷⁰

Helena’s “come along” is dismissive but insufficient grounds for Mildred’s response. Instead, Mildred’s self-assessment, and Pym characterization, indicts women’s marginalization and disciplining. Mildred possesses self-knowledge but cannot discern when to use it. Mildred needs to learn discrimination.

SOPHISTICATION RENEWED: TASTEFUL SOPHISTICATION

Pym’s chastisement of popular and commodified sophistication purifies sophistication for the reader; the disavowal of sophistication enables tasteful sophistication to emerge. This can be practiced within the ordinary and the everyday, unlike popular sophistication, which needs the new and is defined by the event. As Delafield illustrates, the best antidote is not to disavow sophistication entirely, but rather turn the pursuit towards different ends and refine it. Pym does the same; she reinvests traditional sophistication and its discriminating taste with value.

The scene above in which Mildred sees clearly the end of all in death is simultaneously when the text chastises her utter lack of sophistication. This lack which I describe below takes place before the scene of the powder room and after she enters the department store; it is only through her own chastisement that Mildred can see clearly. She must have her own experience of seeing oneself dispassionately before she can turn a critical gaze on others. Mildred awakens to her own desire for distinction as she “found myself at a counter piled with jars of face-cream and lipsticks” and wonders about Allegra’s cream that creates its “striking effect.” If Mildred is the mirror for the women above, she must first to see herself clearly within the economy of sophistication: “there was a mirror on the counter and I caught sight of my own face, colourless and worried-looking, the eyes large and rather frightened, the lips too pale.” She does not think

she can “acquire” Allegra’s “smooth apricot complexion” but can “at least buy a new lipstick.”⁷¹

What follows is Mildred’s lack of discrimination, for after

consulting the shade-card. The colours had such peculiar names...I chose one that seemed right and began to turn over a pile of lipsticks in a bowl in an effort to find it. But the colour I had chosen was either very elusive or not there at all, and the girl behind the counter, who had been watching my scrabblings in a disinterested way, said at last, “What shade was it you wanted, dear?”

I was a little annoyed at being called “dear,” though it was perhaps more friendly than “madam,” suggesting as it did that I lacked the years and poise to merit the more dignified title.

“It’s called Hawaiian Fire,” I mumbled, feeling rather foolish, for it had not occurred to me that I should have to say it out loud.

“Oh, Hawaiian Fire. It’s rather an orange red, dear,” she said doubtfully, scrutinising my face. “I shouldn’t have thought it was quite your colour. Still, I think I’ve got one here.” She took a box from behind the counter and began to look in it.⁷²

Choosing and finding, both necessary skills for the sophisticate, elude Mildred, for she must consult a shade card because she does not know herself. She is able to choose, for example, to attend St. Mary’s over All Souls church. But within the secular everyday, she is at a loss. The result is “scrabblings” and a lack of “poise” apparent to the shop girl, which questions her choice and its appropriateness to her individuality. And this is where tasteful sophistication’s value begins, for it provides an education in self-knowledge and discrimination towards one’s body and oneself. Mildred’s inability to choose or know the right shade signals her lack of self-aware interiority and inability to discriminate. She is tentative when an appropriate shade is something

she ought to know. She is unprepared for life within the ephemeral. Thus she responds with confusion:

“Oh, it doesn’t matter really,” I said quickly. “Perhaps another colour would be better. What would you recommend?”

“Well, dear, I don’t know, really.” She looked at me blankly, as if no shade could really do anything for me. “Jungle Red is very popular—or Sea Coral, that’s a pretty shade, quite pale, you know.”

“Thank you, but I think I will have Hawaiian Fire,” I said obstinately, savouring the ludicrous words and the full depths of my shame.⁷³

This is the result of Mildred’s lack of self-knowledge within the ephemeral, which, ironically enough, is largely concerned with the ordinary and everyday. Her purchase is not agency, but rather arbitrary choice. She compares herself with those women who know themselves: “many had the satisfaction of having done a good day’s shopping and would have something to gloat over when they got home. I had only my Hawaiian Fire and something not very interesting for supper.”⁷⁴ The text repeatedly foregrounds Mildred’s lack of discrimination and caring about what she eats; she is, rather, excellent at ritual ways of consuming. She cannot discriminate between situations when it is caring to do the dishes and when she should leave Rocky to do his own washing up. Tasteful discrimination, practiced within the ephemeral in everything from lipstick choices and undergarments to choosing a job or furniture, is indispensable for a life well-lived within the ordinary, even as platitudes are necessary for those situations in which the best response is the commonplace one.

Sophistication, reimagined as tasteful discrimination, is Pym’s way of teaching women to grow in insight and understanding within the ordinary (especially discriminating self-

knowledge). Tasteful sophistication is an education in which the excellent woman, those who understand the value of the everyday, are particularly in need of. To know one's shade of lipstick is to know oneself as uniquely embodied within the shifting landscape of modernity. "All flesh is as grass" runs both ways. One's life is ephemeral, but such things are not worthless. Without tasteful discrimination, one will make arbitrary choices or remain solely within ritualized ways of behavior. Knowledge of self encompasses knowledge of one's color profile. There is a loss if one forgoes this, just as there is one for those who have no knowledge beyond the ephemeral.

Women like Mildred can ill-afford to live in a world purged of traditional sophistication and rather need to pursue its discriminating taste as *a* rather than *the* social good. Because the text is mediated by Mildred's well-meaning but undiscriminating ordinary interiority, the novel eschews easy answers. In doing so, it offers attentive readers a practical education in tasteful sophistication and a return to the reader's original aim. Readers can develop their perceptive and discriminatory abilities as they weigh Mildred's responses to the imperfect and patriarchal Anglican church, the Napier's relation quandary, the marital scheming of Allegra, and Everard Bone's job offer. The reader who practices tasteful discrimination within the safe space of the novel will both become more sophisticated (i.e. tastefully discriminating) in self-knowledge and better be prepared to make decisions for herself in the world outside of the text. This is an idealized account, of course, for there is no answer key for the decisions Mildred ought to make. In short, the novel is a space in which to practice judgment, with tastefulness as an admirable rubric, one underappreciated within the rabid pursuit of sophistication as the new.

Sophistication's pairing of discriminating judgment and strategic knowledge within the situations one finds in the ordinary can be turned outwards. Sophistication's discriminating impulse towards self and externals is the art of wisdom within modernity's understanding of

time; it is wisdom of and within the ephemeral. Practicing tasteful sophistication encourages flexible wisdom, in which one which can rise to the challenge of the new rather than be threatened by it. One cannot live by ritual alone; one must also cultivate tasteful sophistication for wisdom to live within the ephemeral and within one's moment.

¹ My caveat from the previous chapter, that the middlebrow as unable to fully disavow sophistication, holds true. Mildred herself briefly pursues behavioral and literary sophistication while shopping. I treat this scene at length.

² Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

³ There are exceptions; e.g. Flore Poste in Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*.

⁴ Olson, *Ordinary*, 3.

⁵ Olson, *Ordinary*, 7.

⁶ Louse Field Cooper, review blurb, in *Excellent Women*, Perennial Library (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), back cover.

⁷ Olson, *Ordinary*, 7.

⁸ Olson, *Ordinary*, 6.

⁹ J. L. J. Kennedy, "Something Unsatisfactory: Queer Desires in Barbara Pym," *Women: A Cultural Review*, 25, no. 4 (2014): 356–370, 357. He evokes Theresa de Lauretis's model of the queer text that represents the writer working against "the generic pressure of all narrative toward closure and the fulfillment of meaning." "Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of Future," *GLQ*, 17, no. 2–3 (2011): 244.

¹⁰ Olson, *Ordinary*, 6.

¹¹ Barbara Pym, *Excellent Women*, Perennial Library (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 256.

¹² This is, of course, an attribute of the sophisticate.

¹³ Pym's sophisticated move here is one the Provincial Lady can only imagine in relation to her daughter.

¹⁴ Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that I disproportionately focus on opening scenes because of the middlebrow's form of consumption; it is meant to be "gulped" rather than re-read.

¹⁶ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 5.

¹⁷ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 5.

¹⁸ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 4.

¹⁹ This is particularly true of 1950s Britain.

²⁰ Hammill, *Sophistication*, 5.

²¹ This sets up what follows primarily in terms of a moral coming of age, rather than class advancement; the latter I considered in more detail in chapter two.

²² Pym, *Excellent Women*, 6.

²³ Dustbins are the abject of one ritual within the ordinary; the shared bathroom Mildred immediately bemoans internally is another scene of the abject that insists she is ordinary, even inferior.

²⁴ Olson, *Ordinary*, 7.

²⁵ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 6.

²⁶ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 6-7.

²⁷ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 7.

²⁸ Olson, *Ordinary*, 3.

²⁹ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 31.

³⁰ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 7.

³¹ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 30.

³² Pym, *Excellent Women*, 85.

³³ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 156.

³⁴ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 156.

³⁵ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 157.

³⁶ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 158.

³⁷ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 161.

³⁸ The scene is one of the few un-ordinary moments in the novel for Mildred emotionally and thus is worth quoting.

“Goodbye, Mildred; we’ll meet again, of course,” he said casually. “You must come and stay at my cottage one week-end.”

“I should like to,” I began, wondering even as I said it if it would be quite proper. But obviously no such thought had occurred or would ever occur to Rocky. “You will remember which pieces of furniture are to come, won’t you?” were his last words to me.

After he had gone I stood looking out of the window until his taxi was out of sight.

The effects of shock and grief are too well known to need description and I stood at the window for a long time. At last I did make a cup of tea but I could not eat anything. There seemed to be a great weight inside me and after sitting down for a while I thought I would go into the church and try to find a little consolation there. (Pym, *Excellent Women*, 167)

She has also, the reader knows, loved and been dropped before—even this grief is a repetition. She persists in making love lost commonplace: “effects of shock and grief are too well known to need description.” Even grief is ordinary. My argument does not claim this is healthy or depicted as so within the narrative, but rather that Mildred’s example rebuke’s the relentless pursuit of the eventful new epitomized in the fantasy of the sophisticate’s bildungsroman. There are two errors here, but Mildred’s internal purification and sanctification is an essay in itself. Mildred does grow and encounter new things. But it is not through the modernist sophisticating mechanism of the event; the transformation within her interiority is gradual i.e. “ordinary interiority.”

³⁹ John Updike aptly declares “*Excellent Women*, arriving on these shores in a heyday of sexual hype, is a startling reminder that solitude may be chosen, and that a lively, full novel can be constructed entirely within the precincts of that regressive virtue, feminine patience.” Review blurb, in *Excellent Women*, Perennial Library (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), back cover. The novel does not shy away from double entendre.

⁴⁰ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 255.

⁴¹ This is true particularly in comparison with Mitford’s *Pursuit* novels—Linda dies in childbirth, but she experienced sophistication and love. The final scene of *Diary of a Provincial Lady* provides much greater satisfaction for the reader despite its open-endedness. Lady Boxe is a

snob, but it is both a party—and thus an excuse to dress up—and a fertile space for the Provincial Lady to train her discriminating, sophisticated writerly eye.

⁴² The middlebrow is didactic, but there is a lot of room for movement, and didacticism comes in all forms. Waugh does not much care, at least seemingly, what aspirational readers take from the text as long as they buy his book and increase his own distinction. Teasing Mitford combines bouts of fondness and disdain for her middlebrow, middle-class readers.

⁴³ This includes other expectations readers bring to the text—e.g. about religious or provincial narratives.

⁴⁴ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 7.

⁴⁵ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 54.

⁴⁶ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 54-55.

⁴⁷ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 149.

⁴⁸ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 178.

⁴⁹ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 178.

⁵⁰ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 12-13.

⁵¹ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 8.

⁵² Nicola Humble, “Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading” *Modernist Cultures* 6.1 (2011): 48.

⁵³ Kate Macdonald, “Introduction: Identifying the Middlebrow, the Masculine and Mr Miniver,” in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr. Miniver Read*, ed. Kate Macdonald (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 20.

⁵⁴ Humble’s definition of pleasure is equally insufficient. Mitford, especially in *Madame de Pompadour* gives a robust account of pleasure.

⁵⁵ Humble, *Middlebrow*, 9. Humble here references narrative depictions of reading, but this is equally true of paying attention to how it guides reading practices.

⁵⁶ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 129-30.

⁵⁷ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 82-83.

⁵⁸ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 130.

⁵⁹ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 131.

⁶⁰ A platitude is “A dull and commonplace or trivial remark or statement.” Platitudes are “trivial,” which according to the OED includes “Such as may be met with anywhere; common, commonplace, ordinary, everyday, familiar, trite.” Platitudes are thus both of seemingly little value and to be found everywhere; in short, they are everyday. From a different domain and useful point of comparison is the proverb; “proverbs typically encapsulate received wisdom through many centuries, and that the language of proverbs is often vividly archaic. Proverbs are also made memorable by devices such as alliteration and a balanced, rhythmical binary structure, commonly reinforced by rhyme.” Platitudes are akin to proverbs. “Proverbs are by their very nature overwhelmingly concerned with generalizations about all aspects of human life: there is a thin dividing line between the genuine proverb as an expression of folk wisdom and the mere cliché or platitude.” Emanuel Strauss, *Concise Dictionary of European Proverbs* (New York: Routledge, 2013), viii.

⁶¹ Felski *Doing Time*, 81.

⁶² Pym, *Excellent Women*, 6.

⁶³ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 6.

⁶⁴ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 6-7.

⁶⁵ Orna Raz, *Social Dimensions in the Novels of Barbara Pym, 1949-1963: The Writer As Hidden Observer* (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 13.

⁶⁶ Felski, *Doing Time*, 83.

⁶⁷ Felski, *Doing Time*, 83.

⁶⁸ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 95.

⁶⁹ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 95.

⁷⁰ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 96.

⁷¹ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 130.

⁷² Pym, *Excellent Women*, 130.

⁷³ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 130.

⁷⁴ Pym, *Excellent Women*, 131.