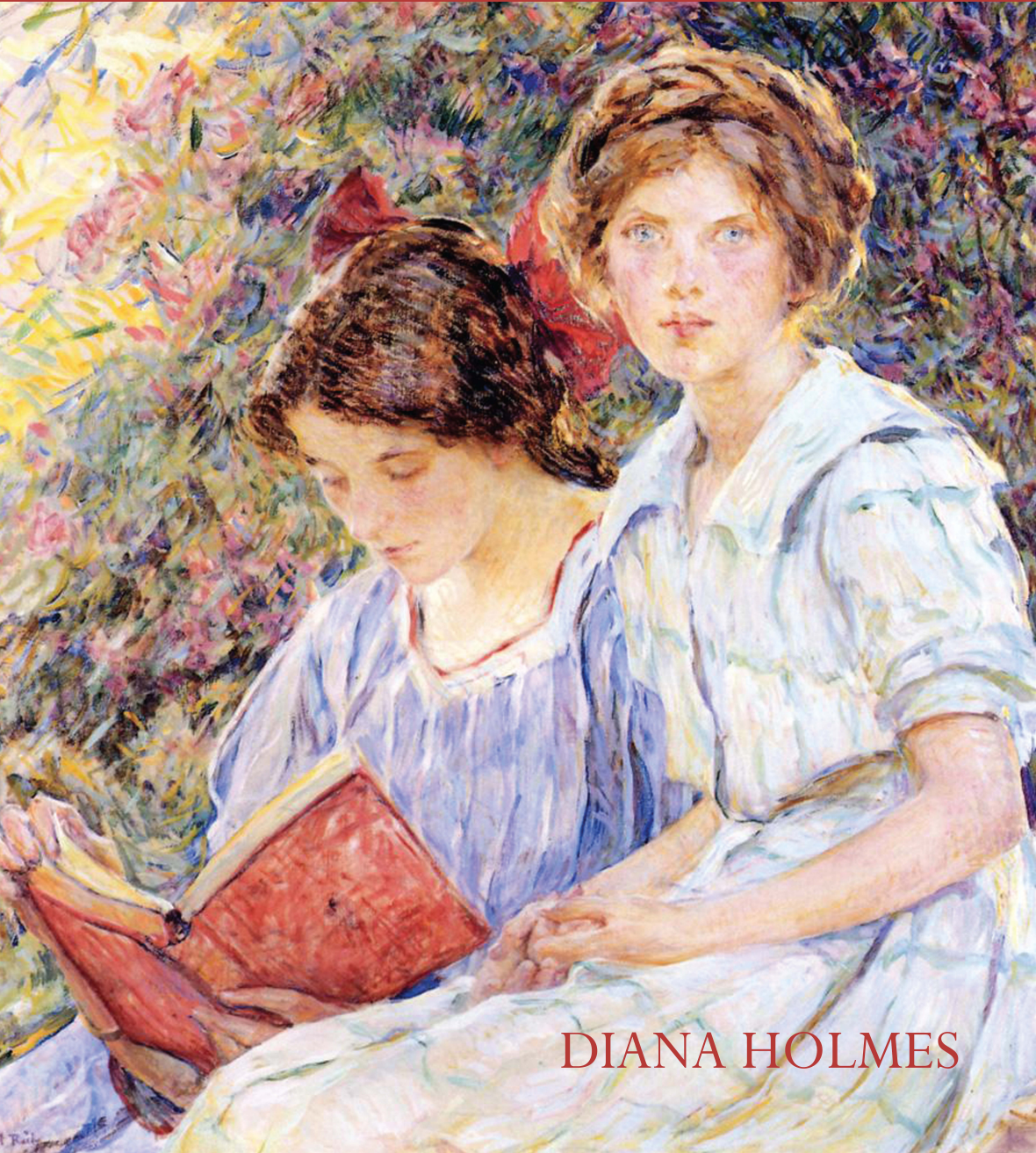


# *Middlebrow Matters*

Women's reading and the literary canon in France since the Belle Époque



DIANA HOLMES

# Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures

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# Introduction

Modern French literature is strongly identified with ‘high’ culture, with complex and challenging philosophies, experimental forms and sophisticated eloquence. France has celebrated somewhat less its rich seam of popular literature – from the late nineteenth-century *roman-feuilleton* to today’s Harlequin romance series – but this too has begun to be studied rather than simply deplored. However, between what Bourdieu termed the ‘restricted’ sphere of the literary field, in which the value of a literary work is essentially symbolic (‘high’ literature), and the commercial sphere of the mass market (‘low’), there lies a wide domain composed of all those hybrid novels read by most readers for a – usually unexamined – mix of reasons. These include the desire to be entertained, the wish to expand one’s own knowledge and understanding, the appeal of venturing, through simulated experience, beyond the confines of the self. The novels that satisfy this demand are beguiling but serious, pleasurable but instructive, singular – not formulaic – but accessible. They constitute the subfield of the middlebrow. So far, the question of what the average regular reader reads has scarcely figured in French literary criticism, despite a growing interest in cultural hierarchies. This book, then, represents the first extended study of the middlebrow French novel.

My focus is mainly on women writers and readers. Of course men also read and, as we shall see, write fiction that is classified as middlebrow, and men’s middlebrow would be a worthy subject in its own right.<sup>1</sup> But as I shall explain, since the beginnings of the middlebrow novel in Belle Époque France, women have formed a majority of the nation’s reading public, and this feminisation of reading has become more rather than less marked in the contemporary era. Once we define the literature of an

1 See Macdonald (2011).



age in terms of ‘what did most people choose to read?’, women as readers and as writers immediately assume a more central place. Moreover, if middlebrow as a cultural category is disdained by highbrow critics, this is partly because the ‘brows’ of culture have become implicitly gendered. Across Western cultures, and conspicuously in France, modernism has been the dominant aesthetic of high culture since (at least) the beginning of the twentieth century. This is still the case in the twenty-first, since postmodernism has inherited modernism’s mistrust of mimesis, realism and established (hence easily legible) artistic form. Modernism prizes the demanding, the unexpected and the difficult (on the *difficulty* of modernism see Diepeveen, 2003), aligning difficulty with seriousness and a heroic moral stance. Literature that is accessible, because it deploys techniques that have become familiar, is correspondingly downgraded. In the case of narrative fiction, this deprecation of established practice means a disregard for plot and character, and a sceptical view of the mainstream novel’s traditional concern with love, romance, family, the social filtered through domestic dramas. As Suzanne Clark shows, in liberating culture from ‘the banal, the old’, modernism cast an ironic light on emotion or pathos in the novel, and made ‘sentimentality’ a mark of shame (Clark, 1991, 2, 11). The sort of fiction associated with women readers – which, though often itself oppositional and ironic, tends to take seriously both domesticity and romance – became the antithesis of authentic high art, the middlebrow.

Middlebrow as a term has no direct equivalent in French, but the word’s dismissive charge is strongly present in the way that literature, and specifically the novel, is evaluated in France. To turn critical attention to the middlebrow constitutes a feminist gesture, for it questions the gendered nature of the assumptions that govern the literary field, whilst also resituating women-authored texts and women as readers in the literary foreground.

Chapter One provides a fuller introduction to my subject, examining and accounting for France’s privileging of modernism, and outlining anglophone scholarship on the phenomenon of the middlebrow. No text is essentially and forever middlebrow, any more than the categories of ‘high’ and ‘popular’ are fixed and definitive: novels may and do shift from one ‘brow’ to another at different periods and under different regimes of publishing and readership. I do, however, argue that certain textual qualities predispose a novel towards, or make it available for,

a middlebrow reading, and the definition of these qualities I propose as a ‘middlebrow poetics’. This first chapter mounts a defence of the (underrated) qualities of mimesis and immersivity. If the latter term, and its associated adjective ‘immersive’, recur rather frequently in this book, it is not for want of seeking synonyms (‘compelling’, ‘page-turning’, ‘entrancing’ appear too) but rather because no other metaphor captures quite as well that experience of fully entering an imaginary world. To explore the significance of immersive reading, and the techniques that produce it, I draw on a diverse range of theory, with the main emphasis on narratology and psychology.

Chapter Two locates the origins of the middlebrow novel in France in the decades surrounding 1900, known as the Belle Époque, when material and social advances produced both the necessary conditions and the motivation for large-scale publication of fiction aimed at the middle classes. It considers the principal male middlebrow novelists of those years, and detects distinct differences between their work and that of the period’s female-authored fiction. The latter is studied through the work of two high-profile, bestselling women writers of the era who have now more or less disappeared from history: Daniel Lesueur and Marcelle Tinayre.

Chapter Three focuses on the only one of that prolific generation of women authors to have achieved – belatedly – canonical status: Colette. Here then it is not a matter of rescuing middlebrow texts from semi-oblivion, but of re-reading a well-known and widely studied author from a new perspective, as one who succeeded in enchanting generations of (in particular women) readers with her stories of girlhood, the struggle for self-realisation, sex and romance, motherhood and ageing – and the fine texture of the everyday. My aim is to reclaim Colette as a middlebrow writer in the most positive sense of the word.

Chapter Four deals with what in anglophone literary/cultural studies is the heyday of the middlebrow – the inter-war period – and asks to what extent there was a French equivalent, given the similarities of sociopolitical context, publishing and readership on both sides of the Channel. I propose reasons for the relative dearth of women’s middlebrow fiction in France at this period, but also hypothesise what educated ‘ordinary’ readers might have read, devoting analysis in particular to the later work of Marcelle Tinayre, and to the recently revived inter-war fiction of *Suite française* author Irène Némirovsky.

Chapter Five is devoted to the major middlebrow female novelist of the 1950s and ’60s, Françoise Sagan. Sagan’s lucid, percipient prose and

elegantly intense storytelling captured the mood of the post-war, pre-68 era, representing and interrogating the experience of a generation, yet transcending mere topicality (she is still widely read today). Her ‘little Saganesque world’ is less superficial than its critics claimed, for it not only conjures up the specificity of a particular milieu and social moment, it also uses pleasurable narrative to raise questions that are both political, in the sense of gender politics, and ethical.

Chapter Six steps outside the loose chronology that frames the book to examine the issue of literary prizes and their relationship with the middlebrow from the founding of the Prix Goncourt in 1903 to the present day. If prizes are not always seen as a mark of true literary merit, this is because they tend to attract a large general (or middlebrow) readership to the winning text, and are thus seen as tainting symbolic value with market success. Through analysis of a number of award-winning novels, I argue nonetheless for the positive impact of literary prizes both on widening readership for what might appear ‘difficult’ novels and – at least in the case of those prizes established by women themselves – on the gender imbalance of the French literary field.

Chapter Seven uses the concept of the middlebrow to explore the twenty-first-century literary scene. I attempt to chart my way through the substantial annual output of fiction in France, including by women authors, to identify recurring patterns, both thematic and formal, in that ‘serious but popular’ category of novel that is here termed middlebrow. In this I am helped by the relatively recent rise of online book clubs and readers’ blogs, which make available – albeit in a fairly random way – something that has always been very difficult to research: that is, a novel’s reception by ordinary, non-professional readers.

Finally, this book closes not with a conventional conclusion, but with a double reading of a single text. It acknowledges what is, in a sense, the starting point for this book: my recognition that I have two modes of reading, that of an academic and a literary critic, and that of an ordinary reader who loves to be told a good story and to disappear into the enchanted space of a fiction. The two coexist quite harmoniously: if I separate them out here, it is to try and capture those elements of response that the analytical critic in me may overlook or repress but that are central to the text’s significance for the middlebrow reader I (thankfully) also remain.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Reclaiming the Middlebrow

### France and the modernist privilege

In March 2007, the manifesto ‘Pour une “littérature-monde” en français’, signed by 44 French-language novelists, appeared in *Le Monde*. Though its primary aim was to argue for a polycentric and ‘world’ vision of literature in French, rather than one that made ‘francophone’ writing subsidiary to that produced in metropolitan France, the manifesto also attacked what it claimed was the formalist creed that governed contemporary French literature: ‘Le monde, le sujet, le sens, l’histoire, le “réfèrent”: pendant des décennies, ils auront été mis “entre parenthèses” par les maîtres-penseurs, inventeurs d’une littérature sans autre objet qu’elle-même’ (Barbery et al., 2007; ‘The world, the subject, meaning, history, the ‘referent’: for decades, these have been set aside by the most influential thinkers, who have invented a literature concerned only with itself’).

In the same year Tzvetan Todorov, a prominent French intellectual who in the 1960s had played an important part in the introduction of formalist criticism to France, surprised the French literary world with a passionate essay, *La Littérature en péril*, in which he condemned the ‘formalism, solipsism and nihilism’ of not just much contemporary French writing, but also of the educational and critical discourse that shaped its reception and promoted a view of the authentic literary work as solely ‘un objet langagier clos, autosuffisant, absolu’ (Todorov, 2007, 31; ‘a linguistic object closed in on itself, self-sufficient and absolute’). Todorov defended the right of the ‘lecteur non professionnel’ (‘non-professional reader’) to find in the reading of stories a direct relationship with his or her own life, to believe that literature can ‘nous faire mieux comprendre le monde et nous aider à vivre’ (72; ‘make us understand the world better and help us to live’), endorsing this belief

unreservedly and applying it across the spectrum of fiction from the classics to *Harry Potter*. Those who dominate the cultural scene in France, he argued, have diverged so far from such a view that they can only interpret such readerly enthusiasm as ‘intolérablement naïse’ (68; ‘intolerably naïve’).

Manifestoes, and indeed deliberately provocative essays such as Todorov’s – *La Littérature en péril* came out in Flammarion’s Café Voltaire collection, designed, as the cover announces, to be ‘un lieu où les humeurs s’affichent, où les idées s’entrechoquent’ (‘a place where moods can be expressed and ideas can collide’) – are by nature polemical and given to demonising the opposition. Both texts were predictably attacked by other writers and critics. Todorov’s thesis was comprehensively critiqued, for example, in an issue of *Télérama* (no. 2976, 27 Janvier 2007), and his manifesto’s naïvete and ‘nostalgia for the real’ (Toledo, 2008, 41) extensively denounced by Camille de Toledo in a book-length essay. However, most readers familiar with the contemporary French literary scene could recognise the phenomenon to which these polemics refer. In France, more than in other European and certainly more than in anglophone cultures, the dominant critical and academic discourse since the early twentieth-century advent of modernism has been anti-mimetic, opposed to the narrative coherence and pleasure in illusion that characterise those fictions plebiscited by the majority. A principled suspicion of fictions that are easy and pleasurable to consume, a powerful belief in the salutary nature of forms that deconstruct habitual modes of perception and belief, these have underpinned literary theory, literary history and critical reviews in the ‘serious’ press for many decades. Particularly since the *nouveau roman* era (1950s and ’60s), formal experimentalism has tended to be equated with progressive ideology, traditional narrative form with docile acceptance of the social status quo: in 2016 novelist and critic Philippe Vilain’s *La Littérature sans idéal* reiterated the familiar distinction between, on the one hand, a degraded ‘mercantile’ literature that tells readers the stories they want to hear and, on the other, an authentic *écriture* concerned essentially with language itself. Vilain quoted approvingly Robbe-Grille’s dictum, ‘le véritable écrivain n’a rien à dire. Il a seulement une manière de le dire’ (‘the true writer has nothing to say. He has only a way of saying it’, 1963, 51; Vilain, 2016, 12). Meanwhile, the majority of readers have quietly maintained their allegiance to ‘immersive’ narrative forms that provide entry into imaginary worlds, and held on to the belief that it is not only ‘difficult’ literature that enlarges understanding of the self and others.



There are some good reasons for the peculiarly French emphasis on experimental literary form. The arts, and particularly literature, have been central to the construction of French national identity over a long period, surviving even the most radical of regime changes. The much-prized specificity of French culture includes a particular relationship to language; a generalised appreciation of eloquence, wit and linguistic invention; and a literary tradition that has had a disproportionate impact worldwide. Essential to the vibrancy of France's literary history have been a restless questioning of forms that have settled into norms, a cycle of Oedipal revolts by new avant-gardes and a frequently renewed search to find linguistic and generic shapes for a changing reality. Under the Third, Fourth and Fifth Republics, state cultural policy has largely interpreted the democratisation of culture as the extension to all citizens of a demanding but rewarding 'high' culture, whilst the centralised nature of the French education system makes state policy a powerful factor in the legitimisation and canonisation of literary texts, as in collective understandings of literary value. The novel, a hybrid genre that attracted a wide cross-class readership from the mid-nineteenth century, was always a suspect literary form, though in its realist guise it gained a degree of legitimacy, and some of its greatest practitioners (Hugo, Zola) were canonised by the Third Republic. From the early days of the new century, though, in a manner that intensified after the Second World War, modernism displaced realism as the mode of writing that signified 'high' culture. Modernism, with its emphasis on linguistic creativity and the autonomy of the text, was an international movement that 'took' with particular intensity in France: deeply suspicious of the capacity of language to adequately represent the real, modernism asserted the need for an experimental, self-reflexive approach to art that in the case of literature meant a constant questioning of the relationship between word and referent. Modernism taught educated readers to prize the difficult, the experimental, the self-aware and, on the whole, the pessimistic, relegating immersive fiction, especially of the sort that offered closure and resolution, to what Barthes memorably termed the (merely) 'readable' ('lisible') as opposed to the ecstatic pleasures offered by the more demandingly 'writable' ('scriptible') texts of the avant-garde (2002, 121–22 and *passim*). Generations of twentieth-century intellectuals and students have thrilled to modernism's heroic project of endless iconoclasm and invention, its contention that, as Rita Felski puts it, 'the value of literature lies in its stubborn resistance to paraphrase, fixed truths, and taken-for-granted orthodoxies' (2003, 148). Difficulty itself became 'the

default aesthetic of high culture' (Diepeveen, 2003, 223). The novel that told a story in relatively transparent language and conjured up a recognisably 'real' world might be read for leisure purposes, but was certainly not part of the category of authentic literature.

Feminism too had good cause to question the validity of established modes of representation, and to adopt a resolutely iconoclastic literary stance. French feminists have led the rejection of the claims to transparency of a language deeply ingrained with masculine values, and have also opposed the hegemony of genres such as the realist novel that in France have largely excluded women. Much of the most vibrant writing by women in the twentieth century sought to rework words, syntax and literary form so that they might give voice to a feminine perspective on the world, enacting Cixous's wonderful *double entendre* of the *vol* (in French both 'theft' and 'flight') of language: 'Voler, c'est le geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler. Du vol, nous avons toutes appris l'art aux maintes techniques, depuis des siècles que nous n'avons accès à l'avoir qu'en volant' (2010, 58; 'Flying/stealing is what women must do, flying/stealing in language and making language fly. We have all learned the many techniques of flying/stealing, since for so many centuries we have only been able to own anything through theft/flight'). Realism, mimetic narratives and the craft of thrilling storytelling have been as critically devalued in feminist literary theory and practice as elsewhere in France, and the gap between majority reading tastes and what is respected as 'literature' has become correspondingly wide.

To interrogate constantly the relationship between language and truth, to question the ideological implications of literary forms that have come to appear natural through familiarity, are surely laudable aims. But the triumph of modernism in French culture, with its attendant distrust of the sort of text that can be easily, pleasurably understood,<sup>2</sup> can also be interpreted in less benevolent ways. Pierre Bourdieu famously analysed cultural taste as a means whereby a social élite asserts and maintains its own supremacy: the dominant social group will attribute absolute aesthetic value to works whose interpretation in fact depends on a particular kind of education, thereby defending and naturalising their own distinction against the inferior tastes of the masses. Thus

2 In *The Difficulties of Modernism* (2003) Leonard Diepeveen traces how in anglophone cultures too the victory of modernism established 'easy' pleasures as aesthetically inferior, so that 'Difficulty [...] became – and continues to be – our central cultural gatekeeper' (224).

distinguished or 'high' taste disdains the accessible, the easy, whatever can be enjoyed by the public at large, because if a work of art can be appreciated by anyone, then it no longer confers value on the few who know how to 'read' it. Works that offer easy pleasures are 'a sort of insult to refinement, a slap in the face to a "demanding" audience which will not stand for "facile" offerings' (Bourdieu, 1984, 486). Art that pleases the majority, Bourdieu points out, 'annihilates the distancing power of representation' (489), whereas art coded as 'high' will (in the modernist fashion) draw attention to its own formal properties, demanding interpretative strategies that need to be learned through education, or through regular exposure to high cultural forms. In the gulf that separates 'literature' from what most people like to read, Bourdieu detects the anxiety of an élite to preserve their own superior social status.

Bourdieu is also alert to the gendered dimension of cultural hierarchies. He pinpoints the way in which common characterisations of 'high' and 'low' culture mirror those of masculinity and femininity, the 'high' being associated with the 'masculine' concepts of culture, intellect, emotional sobriety, whilst popular culture is frequently portrayed as instinctive, bodily, sentimental (2001, 138 n. 10). Rita Felski demonstrates how modernism established its credentials in the 1920s by characterising the discerningly modern reader capable of appreciating modernist texts as 'critical, judicious, and masculine', and the ordinary reader who failed to keep up with a changing world as 'susceptible, emotional and feminine' (2003, 33). The relegation of women's writing to lowbrow status on the grounds that it deals with the domestic and the emotional is so familiar a critical move as to scarcely need analysis here, and the rejection of immersive storytelling as a legitimate literary goal certainly plays on the negatively gendered connotations of 'being carried away by a story'. To get lost in a fictional world suggests a swooning passivity strongly associated with the feminine, whereas to get to grips with an unfamiliar form of textuality carries a sort of virile dignity.

In seeking to liberate literature (and culture more broadly) from the restrictive conventions of the old world, modernism gendered mass or mainstream culture feminine and claimed for itself the intellectual potency of the new. Emotional surrender to the text became a degraded readerly stance,<sup>3</sup> and the negative charge of 'sentimentality' came to

3 Nicola Humble employs the nice distinction between 'sitting forward and sitting back' to capture the different kinds of reading perceived as 'high' and

be taken for granted, ‘condens[ing] the way gender still operates as a political unconscious within criticism to trigger shame, embarrassment and disgust’ (Clark, 1991, 11). Suzanne Clark pithily writes of the effects of modernism’s ascendancy on literary culture in the USA that ‘Becoming an intellectual in America is sort of like [...] learning not to be a sissy’ (12), and the same could be said of France. The affective dimension of the reading experience must be carefully hedged around with claims of irony, self-reflexivity and cerebral engagement if it is to avoid ridicule. As we shall see in the course of this book, middlebrow women’s fiction does in fact have significant recourse to these key attributes of modernist (and postmodernist) sensibility, but it also tends to be characterised by an optimistic, everyday, domestic realism that invites a primarily affective response.

The low critical esteem accorded to those qualities that determine what Todorov’s non-professional reader might term a ‘good read’ (immersivity, emotion, page-turning plot, characters who provoke readerly identification) can thus also be interpreted, at least in part, as the consequences of social and gendered hierarchies of power, and the desire to sustain these. But although it undoubtedly carries a certain truth, this explanation sits awkwardly with the more affirmative view offered above, which sees in literary experimentation a laudable desire to seek out ways to articulate and explore an unconformable, constantly changing reality. The major problem with the consensual rejection of what we might broadly label ‘narrative realism’ lies perhaps elsewhere, in the assumption that the type of novel that depends on the reader’s suspension of disbelief in a compelling, coherent and absorbing fictional world – that is, the type of novel preferred by most ‘ordinary’ readers – is formally uninteresting and conceptually mundane. This view is regularly articulated in public discourse on culture in France, for example by the well-regarded contemporary writer Philippe Forrest in a 2011 article ‘La Fin du roman’, published in the serious weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Forrest, a practitioner of what is possibly now the dominant French literary genre of fictionalised autobiography, dismissed the novel in the sense of fictional story as a genre ‘in a comatose state’, as an affair of ‘vieilles formules avec lesquelles, sous couvert d’imagination, l’auteur

‘middle’ brow. The serious reader sits up to the task, for ‘Highbrow reading practices attempt to leave the body behind’ (Humble, 2011, 48); the middlebrow reader lounges comfortably, understanding ‘the intimate connection between bodily and readerly pleasures’ (50).

refourgue au lecteur de façon très peu imaginative les mêmes intrigues stéréotypées avec des personnages de papier-mâché dans des décors en trompe-l'œil' ('timeworn formulas that allow the author, under the guise of imagination, to fob the reader off with the same old stereotyped plots with cardboard characters in trompe-l'œil settings'). It is this reductive view of immersive, mimetic fiction as tired, outdated, hackneyed and fraudulent – a view heavily dependent on the New Novel theory of the 1950s – that needs examination if we are to take seriously the anxiety expressed by Todorov and the *Littérature-Monde* signatories about the yawning gap between critical esteem and public taste in France.

### The middlebrow in Britain, the USA and France

Dismissal of plot-based mimetic fiction in France extends well beyond the formulaic series that can be described unequivocally as popular: Harlequin romances, crime series (though we will return to the interesting status of crime fiction), the chart-topping mid-Atlantic fantasies of Marc Levy and Guillaume Musso, each of these interesting in their own right but unashamedly formulaic and aiming for maximum transparency of style. Critical suspicion of the kinds of stories that, as Janice Radway once put it, 'absorb readers totally into their felt worlds' (1997, 282) extends to novels clearly aimed at an educated, socially engaged readership, worthy of interest at both a thematic and a stylistic level, but nonetheless deploying the familiar techniques of narrative realism. Such novels, which for the first decade of the twenty-first century would include, for example, the bestsellers of Anna Gavalda, Muriel Barbery and Claudie Gallez, tend in France to be lumped together with the fully popular as part of 'mass culture' and, broadly speaking, deplored (see Chapter 7 below). But this simple binary – authentic literature on the one hand, merely popular on the other – fails to register the difference between novels such as these and genre series: a more useful category is that of the 'middlebrow'.

The term 'middlebrow' is richly meaningful in English but has no adequate French equivalent, 'culture moyenne' being about the closest. It is certainly not a complimentary adjective: first recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1925, it was coined with a sneer, to mean not just 'somewhere between highbrow and lowbrow', but rather a type of culture that had neither the dignity of the high nor the colourful if vulgar energy of the low. It suggests a failed aspiration to artistic value – a form of art that is second-rate, mediocre, middle-of-the-road, a literature



(since this is the subject here) that reaffirms commonsensical truths, that conforms and reassures rather than contesting or opening new horizons. Somewhere around 1940, Virginia Woolf wrote a letter to the *New Statesman* (never actually sent but later published) in which she asserted the mutual respect and need of highbrows for lowbrows, and vice versa, and called for them to ‘band together to exterminate a pest which is the bane of all thinking and living’ (1947, 118), namely the middlebrow. Comically hyperbolic in tone, but resonant with heartfelt dislike, Woolf’s letter characterises middlebrows as ‘betwixt and between’, as ‘bloodless and pernicious pests’. Woolf was a feminist and defender of women’s writing whose stance on the mainstream, mass-market novel of the day was complex and ambivalent. On the one hand, she found realist techniques outdated and ‘the wrong tools for (contemporary writers) to use’ (Woolf, 1966), on the other she partially admired the archetypally middlebrow novelist Hugh Walpole, and herself wrote some novels in realist mode (e.g. *Night and Day* [1919], *The Years* [1937]). Here, however, she colourfully articulates a modernist contempt for the aspiring bourgeoisie and by implication the types of narrative fiction they preferred, namely the transparently realist stories of English middle-class life that formed the backbone of inter-war publishing.<sup>4</sup>

It is this inter-war fiction that is most immediately evoked by the term ‘middlebrow’. Widely read if critically disparaged or ignored at the time of its publication, British middlebrow fiction of the 1920s and ’30s, in particular women’s fiction, has been substantially recovered and republished by feminist publishers, notably Virago and Persephone, and re-evaluated by feminist critics.<sup>5</sup> The novels in question are mainly by female, middle-class writers, aimed at and largely consumed by similarly middle-class women readers, many of them in the inter-war years subscribers to lending libraries such as the ubiquitous Boots, and – since paid employment for wives of their class was frowned upon – with enough leisure time to allow for extensive reading. Novelists such as Elizabeth Bowen, E. M. Delafeld, Winifred Holtby, Rosamond

4 See Nicola Wilson’s article on the ambivalent relationship between Woolf and Walpole (Wilson, 2012). Though mutually critical of each other’s very different approaches to representing reality, the two were friends: the publication of some of Walpole’s work by the Hogarth Press (owned and run by Woolf and her husband) exemplifies the complexity of what can seem a simple binary opposition between modernist and middlebrow.

5 See for example Beauman (1983), Humble (2001), Briganti and Mezei (2006), Hammill (2007), Brown and Grover (2012), Marshik (2017).

Lehmann, Rebecca West, Dorothy Whipple (and many more) published stories set in the domestic and social world of their readers, narratives of everyday lives, romantic and family relationships, novels that displayed ‘little action and less histrionics’ but ‘illuminate[d] female attitudes to experience’ and ‘thr[ew] light on the texture of women’s lives’ (Beauman, 1983, 7). Though, as Nicola Beauman nicely puts it, they were ‘clearly deficient in strong male thrust’ (7), these were skilfully plotted novels that wove their tales of ordinary aspirations and disappointments, desires and compromises with unobtrusive humour, quiet precision and a compelling sense of place and social context. They did not, on the whole, provide the blatant optimism of a happy ending, but by giving narrative form to the complexity of everyday experience, they did make provisional sense of their characters’ lives and thus, by extension, of those of their readers. Feminist critics have astutely analysed the historically specific structures of feeling articulated in these novels. Alison Light, for example, pinpoints the commonsensical anti-romanticism that characterised a widely shared sense of national identity in an inter-war Britain stripped of colonial bluster by the horrors of the First World War, and shows how this translates in the novels into a downplaying of drama and romantic passion in favour of reticence and quiet survival, and the sacrifice of ‘the romance of gender difference [...] to even-tempered common sense and competence’ (1993, 106), as for example in that supreme expression of inter-war Englishness, David Lean’s film *Brief Encounter* (1945). The emotional restraint of a shell-shocked era translates in formal terms into self-effacing narrative techniques and style.

Access to these stories also depended on the infrastructure of libraries and efficient mass publishing: middlebrow culture, like popular culture, is ‘both a material and an ideological form’ (Radway, 1997, 367). Joan Shelley Rubin (1992) and Janice Radway (1997) have historicised American middlebrow culture as emerging in the decades when modernism became the driving force behind high culture, namely the 1920s and ’30s. Both see the American Book of the Month Club (BOMC) as central to the development of the middlebrow,<sup>6</sup> Radway devoting her book wholly to the phenomenon of the BOMC which, from the 1920s

6 The BOMC was soon imitated in Britain by the Book Society (founded by Hugh Walpole and Arnold Bennett), which appeared in 1929 and performed a similar role for British readers. There followed the Book Guild (1930), the Left Book Club (1936) and the Readers’ Union (1937). See Wilson (2012).

until well after the Second World War, provided a new professional, managerial class with the serious but pleasurable reading material they sought in order to further their own education and upward mobility, make better sense of a rapidly changing social world, and enjoy that 'tactile, sensuous, profoundly emotional experience of being captured by a book' (13). Radway's project is driven in part by memory, the repressed but intense memory of her own middlebrow reading pleasures before she was trained, as a student then an academic, to despise the facile pleasures of 'the rush of a good plot and [...] the inspiration offered by an unforgettable character' (7) and learned instead to value literary form and an analytical approach to the text. Like the critics working on inter-war British fiction, Radway identifies the historically located specificity of certain forms of reading pleasure: books attract a large readership at a given moment because they articulate widely shared emotions, aspirations, anxieties, and the institution of the Book Club addressed a particular social category created by changes in the American economy, appealing to their desire for self-improvement, enhanced understanding of their age and entertainment. But she also defines middlebrow fiction in a less period-specific way by associating it with the pleasures of immersion. If Radway's Book Club editors and members shunned most modernist works, it was not only because these spoke less directly to their own lived experience, but also because the cerebral engagement they demanded meant a withholding of that emotional release, that 'sense of boundaries dissolved' (114) provided by a novel that fully absorbs the reader emotionally and cognitively into its 'felt world'.

In France there has been no such revival or revisionary reading of past middlebrows. No Persephone or Virago has sought what women best liked to read in the '20s, '30s or '40s and returned it to print; no feminist critics (to my knowledge) have studied what past generations of 'ordinary' women liked to read and thus engaged in an 'act of non-judgmental respect for our parents and grandparents' taste, choice of entertainment and self-education' (MacDonald, 2011, 11). Literary history continues to pay scant attention to market success as a criterion for inclusion, and many authors (particularly female ones) read by vast numbers of their contemporaries have disappeared so comprehensively from print that it is difficult to study them. If there has been a middlebrow tradition in France, it has been neither preserved nor cherished, and where 'literary' texts have made an unexpected transition to the middlebrow market, as happened for example with Simone de Beauvoir's novella *La Femme*

*rompue*, published in *Elle* magazine in 1967 to the general enthusiasm of readers, or Marguerite Duras's Goncourt-winning *L'Amant*, which became a massive bestseller in 1984, this tends to be a matter of mild embarrassment. Chris Bongie points out how even postcolonial French studies, the academic field closest to the *Littérature-Monde* manifesto, displays a distinctly 'elitist bias' in line with its 'modernist genealogy' (2008, 10), maintaining a sharp division between its own 'valuable objects of study' and 'the coarse world of mass consumption' (281).

However, a good starting point for an exploration of what might constitute *French* middlebrow will be a closer look at those qualities of narrative technique and structure that characterise mainstream bestselling fiction across the decades, and that so dismay contemporary incarnations of the modernist spirit, neatly represented by Philippe Forrest. What are these 'vieilles formules' with their 'intrigues stéréotypées', 'papier mâché' characters and 'trompe-l'œil' settings? Why do readers still cling on to them? A better definition of the middlebrow novel will provide a basis for seeking out what constituted middlebrow at particular moments of French cultural history, including the present. Thus whilst the narratological, textual approach more associated with the French critical tradition will help to produce a broad generic definition of what constitutes 'middlebrow', the belief that texts are always historically and ideologically situated – an approach closer to the Anglo-American 'cultural studies' tradition – will mean that rather than a single 'middlebrow', it will be a matter of 'middlebrows' that speak of and to particular configurations of culture and sensibility.

### For a poetics of the middlebrow

The type of fiction that appeals to a wide non-specialist readership – people who read for pleasure, in bed at night, on the beach, whilst travelling on trains and planes, in preparation for an informal book group meeting – tends strongly towards the mimetic, the immersive, the plot-driven. Bestselling novels, on the whole, create fictional worlds that can be believed in, into which the reader may disappear in imagination, dreading (in the case of the most effectively immersive examples) that final full stop that will mean the end of the fictional voyage. When I open Zola's *Germinal* (1885), and follow Etienne Lantier down that lonely nocturnal road towards the welcomingly human glow of a brazier, burning in the dark before the monstrous shadow of the pit towers, or

when on page one of Dorothy Whipple's *They Were Sisters* (1943) I find Lucy seated in a sunny dining room opposite her husband, beginning Sunday breakfast as she opens a letter that announces a visit from her sisters, my own lived time and location are suspended and I set off into that world imagined for me by the author. Unless I am reading as an academic or critic, trying to understand and explain exactly how such effects are achieved, I am unlikely to pause for long at the splendid precision of an adjective, or the bold hyperbole of Zola's imagery (though I might register this too, without disturbing my suspension of disbelief too much). For the illusion to work, the linguistic surface must retain a degree of transparency, and the physical and moral phenomena evoked – however exotic – must bear enough resemblance to what I already know to produce the sense of a multidimensional reality extending off-stage, beyond what is actually described. I know that the people and places represented here are fictional, but for the purposes of reading I am willing to grant them a whole pre-narrative biography and a geographical hinterland. I may like, sympathise with, detest, disapprove of these imaginary characters just as I might in the case of real people. For modernists, from Paul Valéry early in the twentieth century, with his famous interdiction on beginning a novel with a simple fictional event (Breton, 1979, 17),<sup>7</sup> to Robbe-Grillet and the other *nouveaux romanciers* in the 1950s and '60s, to twenty-first-century authors like Forrest or (to take another contemporary example), the prize-winning novelist Éric Chevillard, published by the revered Éditions de Minuit, the immersive text with its failure to remind the reader of the disjuncture between word and referent invites a lazy and complacent suspension of the critical faculties. Chevillard (2001) declared that 'le "bon vieux roman" défend et illustre l'ordre des choses qui est une tyrannie stupide et sanguinaire' ('the good old novel defends and illustrates a stupid, bloody established order'). For Robbe-Grillet, in the realist novel 'tout vis[e] à imposer l'image d'un univers stable, cohérent, continu, univoque, entièrement déchiffrable' (1963, 31; 'the whole aim is to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, univocal world, that can be fully interpreted'); 'l'intelligibilité du monde', he objected, 'n'est même pas mise en question' ('the intelligibility of the world is not even questioned'). As Christopher

7 Paul Valéry's declaration that no self-respecting twentieth-century novelist could write a 'Balzacian' sentence such as, 'La marquise sortit à cinq heures', has gone down in literary history, though its source can be traced only to André Breton's reporting of this view in the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto.



Prendergast put it, modern French critical thought largely agrees that ‘the “order” of mimesis is repressive and claustrophobic [...] part of the fabric of mystification and bad faith from which the dominant forms of our culture are woven’ (1986, 6).

Yet in both French and English critical writing, it is possible to find compelling arguments for the beneficial effects of vicarious living through fiction, most of these pitching themselves against what they take to be an opposing consensus. Narrative theorist Jean-Marie Schaeffer argues in *Pourquoi la fiction?* (1999) for mimetic fictions to be seen not as anaesthetising distractions from the hard matter of the real, but as an important mode of enriching cognitive and moral knowledge. It is not, he maintains, solely through conscious, reflective learning that we acquire understanding, but also through imitation, make-believe, acting out in imagination alternative forms of experience. Fiction has a ‘fonction modélisante’ (‘a modelling function’): ‘l’exemplification fictionnelle de situations et de séquences comportementales [...] met à notre disposition des schémas de situations, des scénarios d’action, des constellations émotives et éthiques [...] susceptibles d’être intériorisés par immersion’ (Schaeffer, 1999, 47) (‘the fictional exemplification of behavioural situations and behavioural sequences [...] puts at our disposition schemas of situations, scenarios of action, emotive and ethical constellations, etc. that are susceptible to be interiorized by immersion’, Schaeffer, 2010, 27). Rather than immersing its readers in a pre-packaged set of ideological assumptions, fiction extends their cognitive and emotional range beyond that of direct, lived experience, enabling an experimental assent to alternative ways of seeing and reacting to the world by providing a safe space in which these can have no practical consequences:

elle nous permet de réorganiser les affects fantasmatiques sur un terrain ludique, de les mettre en scène, ce qui nous donne la possibilité de les expérimenter sans être submergés par eux. (Schaeffer, 1999, 324)

(it allows us to reorganize the fantasmatic affections on a ludic terrain, to produce them, which gives us the possibility of experiencing them without being submerged by them [Schaeffer, 2010, 298])

Schaeffer’s closely argued defence of mimesis, and of fiction’s power ‘à enrichir, à remodeler, à réadapter tout au long de notre existence le socle cognitif et affectif originaire grâce auquel nous avons accédé à l’identité personnelle et à notre être-au-monde’ (1999, 327) (‘to enrich, to remodel, to readapt all along our existence the original cognitive and

affective base thanks to which we have acceded to person identity and to our being-in-the-world', Schaeffer, 2010, 300) seems applicable to any 'level' of narrative fiction that works through the provision of simulated experience. It also suggests one possible route for defining the specificity of the middlebrow through the nature of the 'constellations émotives et éthiques' that different types of fiction provide.

American theorist Lisa Zunshine adopts a 'cognitive-evolutionary' approach to the salutary effects of immersive fictions. Her *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2000) shows how reading fiction develops the very necessary human capacity to 'mind read', that is to interpret other peoples' thoughts and feelings on the basis of behavioural evidence. Fiction 'builds on and experiments with our cognitive propensities' (Zunshine, 2000, 36) by offering a sustained and varied exercise in interpretation, asking us to 'read' the inner worlds of characters from clues provided by expression, gesture, action, possibly deceptive speech, and in many instances to operate this interpretative process to the third or fourth degree ('I see that she thinks that he believes that they are feeling ...' and so on). Zunshine maintains convincingly that these complex mental operations form a significant part of the pleasure of reading fiction, that the 'mental work-out' they provide is a thoroughly enjoyable dimension of immersion in the imaginary world. And the concept of fiction as a pleasurable means to exercise the faculties of 'mind reading', like Schaeffer's image of fiction as the provider of new 'emotive constellations', invites the reflection that the most widely read and appreciated narratives may achieve their popularity precisely because they offer a satisfyingly arduous 'workout' that does not, however, exhaust or frustrate the reader to an extent that destroys the fictional illusion. Zunshine's emphasis on fiction as the deployment and refinement of empathy may also throw some light on the feminisation of reading over the past century: close attention to the feelings and thinking of others tends to be a skill more developed in dominated than in dominant groups, and under patriarchy women have had good reason to develop that cluster of attitudes known as 'soft' or 'feminine' skills.

Schaeffer and Zunshine both present the reader of fiction as an active figure, not – as the modernist argument tends to – as the deluded victim of fictional deceptions. For Schaeffer, the reader chooses to participate in a 'feintise ludique partagée' (1999, 148), a voluntarily shared, playful act of make-believe, a contract between author and reader rather than an imposture. Marie-Louise Ryan's splendid *Narrative as Virtual Reality*

(2001) also emphasises the reader's agency and celebrates immersion as, at its best, 'an adventurous and invigorating experience' (11). Here too, simulated or virtual experience is seen as a mode of learning, of expanding cognitive and emotional range, and Ryan affirms too the accentuated agency of the reader as opposed to, for example, the viewer of visual fictions: language cannot provide directly the sensory environment of the imagined world, but only 'coax the imagination into simulating sensory perception' (122), a process that requires considerable writerly skill and readerly engagement. So powerful can this simulation be that it is quite possible to react in a bodily manner (tears, laughter, sexual arousal, shivers of fear) physically indistinguishable from reactions to 'real' sensory triggers, but at the same time the knowledge of fictionality 'holds the dosage within the limits of pleasure' (157). Ryan explores the narrative strategies that the nineteenth-century novel developed to produce these 'reality effects' and procure the 'imaginative transportation of the readers' virtual body onto the scene of events' (133), from omniscient narration to free indirect style, to varied focalisation and use of a fictionalised first person, demonstrating that the 'disappearing act of the transparent medium' (175) is not a matter of facility but of extreme skill. Ryan characterises the reader's experience as composed of both immersion and interactivity, the negotiation between these being complex, since too much awareness of the medium undercuts the autonomy of the fictional world and thus reduces pleasure, whilst at the same time appreciation of the 'imaginative presence of a fictional world and [...] the virtuosity of the stylistic performance that produces it' (351) enhances the enjoyment of reading. She concludes that 'a subtle form of awareness of the medium [...] does not seem radically incompatible with immersion' (352), coining the neat image of reading as an 'amphibian' activity in which pleasurable immersion depends on the reader also 'taking oxygen from reality' (97).

Ryan's discussion of the variable ways in which 'entrancement' and awareness of the medium can interact suggests a spectrum of types of reading practice, from cerebral, non-immersive 'concentration' at one extreme to 'addiction' at the other in which, like Don Quixote, the reader confuses the fictional and the real. Most reading of fiction, though, belongs between these two points, mixing 'imaginative involvement' (absorbed in the virtual world yet aware of the writing itself) with 'entrancement' (where awareness of language disappears). The modernist text, then, with its self-reflexive emphasis on form, would sit towards the 'concentration' end of the spectrum, whilst fully 'popular' fictions lean

towards entrancement. Marina van Zuylen writes that ‘the difficult text denies itself the comforts of mimesis’ (1998, 46). The middlebrow text, I suggest – Woolf’s ‘betwixt and between’ – sits between the two middle stages, oscillating between imaginative involvement and entrancement.

For Ryan, a sense of immersion in a fiction depends not only on compelling narrative, or plot, but also on the depiction of place: indeed for some readers, she claims, ‘mental geographies’ may ‘steal the show from the narrative action’ (121). The verbal representation of place, as opposed to that of visual media, cannot ‘create an illusion of presence to the senses’ but only ‘evoke the thought of temporally or spatially distant objects’ (122); language can pull us into the imaginary world, but spatial immersion through the written word retains a particular emotional quality, for language ‘is the medium of absence’ (122). A plausible textual world demands a coherent and – in a variety of ways – an emotionally compelling geography and, as Lynne Pearce suggests in *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, it is also often place that provides the open canvas for the staging of the reader’s own fantasies and desires. The function of depicted place, Pearce suggests, may be compared to that of music in films (1997, 98) – at once contributing to plot and theme, and providing a setting to trigger the reader’s own biographically located dreams or fears. And a strong sense of place is a characteristic of mainstream middlebrow writing that distinguishes it from, for example, the fictional worlds of Harlequin, Levy or Musso, all of these set in a generic, minimally described modernity, predominantly North American with forays into lightly differentiated cities of Europe, and into wilder locations that function as shorthand signifiers for the return of elemental emotions. By contrast, if I briefly recall my readings of the inter-war British middlebrow novels mentioned above, or of their contemporary equivalents, or of many of the French novels to be discussed here as ‘middlebrow’ – it is often a vividly specific image of a setting that first appears: the wild flat plains and stuffy council chambers of south Yorkshire in Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding*, the claustrophobic comfort of a bourgeois household in Belle Époque provincial France followed by the harsh desolation of the trenches in Sebastian Faulk’s *Birdsong*, the storm- and wave-battered coast that feels like the edge of the human world in Claudie Gallyay’s *Les Déferlantes*.

In the section of *The Practice of Everyday Life* entitled ‘Practices of space’, Michel de Certeau argues for the primacy of the relationship to space in the subject’s emotional ‘take’ on the world: individuation, the development in infancy of a sense of self as separate from the mother’s

body, is lived as an 'arrachement' (1990, 163; translated as 'differentiation' but closer to a 'wrench') 'that is simultaneously perilous and satisfied' (1984, 109), anxious and pleasurable; our first perception of the space beyond ourselves is that of 'localisation and exteriority' but 'against the background of an absence'. At its most compelling, a reader's entry into an imaginary fictional world reactivates this primary ambivalence, combining as it does a sense of adventurous anticipation with the suspense of launching into the unknown, into a narrative that might take us anywhere. For stories, de Certeau continues, are above all 'parcours d'espace' (1990, 171) or 'spatial trajectories' (1984, 115), their narrative structures the equivalent of 'spatial syntax'. De Certeau distinguishes 'lieu' (place) from 'espace' (space): 'place' he characterises as a location viewed from an external vantage point, fixed, named, mapped, grasped as a whole, providing us with a functional representation of how the various parts fit together. 'Space', on the other hand, is what we experience as we walk, drive or otherwise move around: it is textured with the unforeseen and the contingent; changes according to speed, weather, time of day, may seem to contradict the totalised perspective of 'place' (1984, 117-18). Literary fiction moves between the two, usually within a single text, providing the reader with both panorama and lived trajectory. Place and space are always, of course, social: mapping the world is a political act; the experience of moving through space is shaped and coloured as much by social as by geographic relations. The emotional and social textures of place are the territory of fiction.

In *Moving Through Modernity*, Andrew Thacker demonstrates the centrality of place and space to modernist literature. Modernism as a literary movement addresses the new sensory and social relations produced by modernity, by the speed of motor cars, the spread and pull of cities, the impact of new forms of work and political organisation. For Thacker it is the modernist text that, through formal experimentation, seeks ways to render and explore the new, and to oppose to dominant orderings of 'place' the lived experience of 'space'. Where 'modernist narratives differ broadly from those of realism' is in their privileging of de Certeau's 'space' (or subjective spatial experience) over 'place', or the mapped, objective reality of the material world (Thacker, 2003, 32). This observation is entirely defensible, as Thacker demonstrates through a comparison of descriptive passages by Thomas Hardy (realist) and James Joyce (modernist), but I shall want to argue here for the equal significance of spatial representations in mainstream, middlebrow fictions, despite their use of realist techniques. In the high modernist

period, broadly 1890–1930,<sup>8</sup> many mainstream, middlebrow novels owed their success (in part) to representations of city and country that allowed their readers to navigate, in imagination, a changing material and social world. And the negotiation of the relationship between place and spatial experience, in a constantly shifting sensory and social world, remains a feature of the successful middlebrow novel. Immersion in an imaginary geography both plays on a fundamentally ambivalent relationship to the external world, by mobilising adventurous curiosity alongside fearful suspense, and provides a means to address the socially charged and unstable geography of the contemporary era.

The use of place and space must figure in any analysis of immersive fiction, and of the specificity of middlebrow forms. Still more central, though, to immersion and to modernist contempt for its ‘vieilles formules’ is plot, or the structuring of narrative to produce in the reader a desire to know: what happens next? It is plot, the sequencing of fictional events to produce the reader’s desire to *know*, that characterises the mainstream, immersive text but features only minimally in modernist genres such as the *nouveau roman* or contemporary auto-fiction. Plot, as Peter Brooks observed, is a fundamental human activity closely entwined with desire and with the knowledge of mortality, ‘the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality’ (1984, xi). Yet it is also ‘disdained as the element of narrative that least sets off and defines high art’, and is seen rather as ‘that which especially characterizes popular mass-consumption literature: plot is why we read *Jaws*, but not Henry James’ (4). Plot is certainly seen as why we read a *roman policier*, but not Proust.

A decade and a half before Brooks, in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) Frank Kermode had emphasised the centrality of narrative to making sense of life, both in literature and in the everyday shaping of experience in memory and in conversation. We are all born, Kermode writes, ‘*in medias res* and die there’, and in order to ‘make sense of [our] span [we] need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems’ (1967, 7). Kermode employs the distinction between *chronos*, or time simply passing (‘one damn thing after another’), and *kairos*, time ordered into significance, ‘charged

8 There is no absolute consensus on what constitutes ‘the modernist period’. The dates given here refer to Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane’s influential *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1976).

with a meaning derived from its relationship to the end' (47), to discuss the relationship between fiction's need to invest time with shape and meaning, and the contradictory imperative on any truthful literature to acknowledge the sheer, contingent chronicity of events. Fiction works by translating what Kermode nicely figures as the 'tick-tick-tick' of simple chronicity into the 'tick-tock' of a meaningful plot. Ian McEwan (whose novels are also characterised by tightly woven, absorbing plots) glosses this image well: 'By listening for the next tick as a tock, as the end of something that preceded it rather than the next in a meaningless and interminable succession, we invest time with shape and significance' (1999). And yet too coherent a patterning of time is unsatisfactory, for it fails to take account of the random awkwardness that characterises life as (most of us) know it: 'the contingency must be there, or our *as if* will be mere fantasy and unrelated to the basic human task of imaginative self-invention' (Kermode, 1967, 146). Middlebrow fictions beloved of the huge middle category of 'ordinary' readers seem to me to be engaged, at best, in just this negotiation between the satisfactions of coherence and pleasing design, and the acknowledgement of a 'chaotic, viscously contingent reality' (145), between redemption and realism. Kermode's powerful essay presents plot as a strategy for the salvaging of meaning from mere contingency, but one that can nonetheless accommodate 'the lingua franca of reality' (107). And in arguing this, he takes issue with his contemporaries the *nouveaux romanciers* – of whose literary daring he is nonetheless appreciative – for their 'deliberately limited, solipsistic realism' (131).

Kermode's eloquent meditation on narrative does recognise the sense in modernist objections to plot: it is precisely the too-neat patterning of the real into pre-fabricated, all-ends-tied stories that successive generations of modernists have condemned as more anaesthetic than truthful. But these critiques of pleasurably plotted narratives have often been caricatural and insensitive to the complex ways in which plotting works on and for the reader. Raphaël Baroni, building on the work of theorists such as Schaeffer, Ricœur, Brooks and Ryan, argues for the 'gratuitous but nonetheless salutary pleasure' (2007, 34) of the well-crafted plot, laying the emphasis on plot seen less from the retrospective angle of the critic or reviewer, for whom the teleological dynamic is paramount, than from that of the reader who does not know how each event will unfold or belong within the total pattern. Baroni's central line of argument is this: narrative that engages its readers cognitively and emotionally, through suspense, curiosity and surprise, does not simply distract them

from reality, but enables them to play out and thus get to grips with their own fears and desires, to explore unrealised potentialities, to disturb and question habit and routine. It is the living out in the mode of simulation of uncertainty, misapprehension, the contradictions between desire (I hope this will not happen) and the resistance of a world not subject to our will (but oh no! it is happening anyway), that makes fictional make-believe more powerful than mere rational understanding in modifying and expanding our mindset and emotional scope. A gripping plot is thus good for us, providing a safe space for the exploration of experiences that in 'real life' might be disastrous or unbearable: 'Dans l'espace du récit, les leçons que nous tirons habituellement des épreuves que nous réserve l'existence peuvent être enseignées sans danger: le vécu passionnel se convertit en *histoire passionnante*' (Baroni, 2007, 35; 'Within the space of the story, the lessons we usually take from experience can be taught without danger: the emotional intensity of lived experience is transformed into thrilling story'). From the point of view of a critic seeking the teleological pattern of a whole novel, the narrative may appear to be reassuringly coherent and thus to offer a worldview that is conservatively secure. But the reader lives through the uncertainty of the plot's unfolding, and the intense emotions that accompany this, in which it is doubt, apprehension, the shock of the unexpected or the relief of a happy outcome that predominate. Rather than a comforting sense of an ordered world, immersive narrative fictions propose 'la mise en scène, par le biais de la mise en intrigue, de la sous-détermination du devenir et du monde' (158; 'the staging, through plot, of the unforeseeable nature of experience'). Rather than only the 'colmatage des fissures qui lézardent nos certitudes rassurantes' (409; 'sealing-up of the cracks that undermine our reassuring certainties'), plot-based novels provide a simulation – experienced at once as safely 'pretend' and as emotionally intense – of radical uncertainty, and of necessary adaptation to what Kermode termed the 'chaos' of 'contingent reality':

Si notre conception de la réalité est une construction visant à rendre le monde habitable, il importe qu'elle soit en mesure d'évoluer quand elle révèle ses limites, de s'adapter aux heurts incessants que lui oppose un univers d'expériences concrètes irréductibles à nos schémas interprétatifs et comportementaux. (Baroni, 2007, 410)

(If our conception of reality is a construction whose aim is to make the world habitable, then it must be able to evolve when its limits are revealed, and to adapt to the endless collisions with a universe of concrete experience irreducible to our interpretative and behavioural blueprints)



Baroni also accounts for the curious but very real phenomenon whereby a story's suspense, apparently dependent on the reader/listener's ignorance of what happens next, can be re-experienced on a second or even on multiple readings. The pleasures of conjecture, foreboding and deferred revelation seem able to survive prior knowledge of what comes next, suggesting that suspense does not depend totally on ignorance of what follows, but can be triggered too by anticipation of a foreseen event, and by the repeated working through of the tension between desire for a particular outcome and its satisfaction or denial. And beyond this, there is another form of pleasure in repeated readings that co-exists with narrative's appeal to adventure and expansion of mental scope. To experience the same story again provides a reaffirmation that narrative form can shape and preserve experience against the passing of time – what Baroni calls the pleasure of the 'rappel' or the 'retour du Même' (2007, 292; 'return of the Same'). Time as we live it goes relentlessly forward. Through narratives we can repeat both the story and the emotional experience that it offers – albeit never without some slight variation since readers themselves bring to successive readings a configuration of experience and understanding modified, however minimally, by experience: 'ce retour s'oppose à l'irréversibilité de l'histoire collective aussi bien qu'individuelle' (Baroni, 2007, 292; 'this return opposes the irreversible nature of both collective and individual history'). The pleasure of coherent plots then may include, but are not reduced to, a sort of existential reassurance, but it is hard to see why this should be seen as a reprehensible feature of a narrative work.

Middlebrow novels, in the sense in which I am seeking to define the term, may offer thrilling, edge-of-the-seat plots full of violence and shock, or work through the quiet developments and reversals of relationships, or map individual stories onto the great dramas of collective history. They may tell their stories in linear fashion, begin at the end and recount the main plot in flashback, or move freely between different points on the narrative trajectory. But despite their diversity, the novels that please the majority of Todorov's 'non-professional readers' largely deploy some form of the concordance and sequencing of narrative events that produce Baroni's 'narrative tension'. Like Kermode, Baroni refutes the idea that plot only aims at coherence and the comforting harmonisation of all narrative elements: 'l'histoire n'est jamais parfaitement achevée' ('the story is never completely finished') as all the unrealised possibilities evoked by an engaged, suspenseful reading of a story make abundantly clear. Baroni cites that other great theorist of narrative Paul Ricœur

who, in *Temps et récit*, ‘n’oublie jamais de préciser que la synthèse de l’hétérogène réalisée par la mise en intrigue ne produit pas une pure concordance, mais une concordance “discordante” (Baroni, 2007, 313; Ricœur, 1983, 139; ‘always makes it clear that the synthesis of disparate elements produced by the plot does not lead to pure concordance, but to a “discordant concordance”’). Plot, so disparaged in the current critical climate, is central to middlebrow reading.

### The transitional space of fiction

The analysis of narrative, and particularly of why we spend so much of our time producing and consuming stories, often draws on psychoanalysis to explain both the desire for story and its therapeutic effects. Peter Brooks underlines the centrality of desire in narrative, both in the sense that protagonists’ desires – to stay alive, to satisfy appetites, to find love, to make sense of existence – drive the plots of the most compelling novels, and in the sense that working through a narrative mobilises the reader’s desire to find meaning and, vicariously, satisfaction. Brooks points out how the process of Freudian psychoanalysis resembles that of constructing a narrative, since it involves ‘the working-out of a coherent and interpretative relation between “events” (real or imagined) and their significant ordering’ (Brooks, 1984, 321). The analyst’s role resembles that of the storyteller or novelist, in that s/he helps the analysand to turn the inchoate matter of experience into a workable narrative pattern, or in the terminology of the Russian formalists, to turn the raw material of ‘fabula’ (‘story’) into the coherent structure of ‘syuzhet’ (‘narrative’). Part of the pleasure of reading a narrative that is at once emotionally compelling and well-crafted is that it provides a dynamic shape onto which the reader may map their own, complex mix of desires, perceptions and memories, thus achieving a sense of both enhanced understanding and emotional release. The dialogic relationship that Freud proposes between analyst and analysand resembles that between writer and reader in the most positive accounts of how narrative fiction works: the writer provides satisfying narrative form for at least some part of the powerful, often contradictory mesh of desire, knowledge and memory that makes up a subject’s inner life, but the writer’s construction can only be brought to life through the reader’s active deployment of imagination, interpretation and desire.

Freudian theory illuminates what is at stake in reading fiction, how the novels that affect us most engage our deepest desires and fears, and how the relationship between writer and reader may in some ways be compared to that between psychoanalyst and patient. But still more relevant for an understanding of how immersive reading works, and how it might be beneficial, is the work of another, later psychoanalyst: the British paediatrician Donald Winnicott, whose concept of the ‘transitional space’ – ‘the intermediate area of experience to which inner reality and external life both contribute’ (Winnicott, 1971, 3) – is eminently applicable to what we might term the ‘space’ of fiction. Winnicott represents infantile development as hinging on the baby’s successful coming to terms with the existence of an objectively real external world, one that is irreducible to her/his own psychic reality. At first the baby is pictured as enjoying a sense of omnipotence, as perceiving no distinction between their own inner world and what is objectively real. If s/he is to function in the social world, the existence of an external reality must be recognised and accommodated, and the sense of omnipotence relinquished. However, Winnicott considers it crucial for psychic health that this be accomplished without destroying the child’s belief in their own subjective agency: that sense of ‘creating’ the world must also be preserved. Play is essential to making this transition: through play, the external world can be at once confronted in its otherness, and brought into the child’s own inner reality. Objects are both out there, having a reality recognised by others, and can be appropriated for the child’s own subjective universe: as Winnicott puts it, ‘the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created’ (1974, 104). Those special talismanic objects, ‘transitional’ in Winnicott’s terminology, pieces of old blanket or stuffed toys, play a vital role in this process of negotiation: they are found, not made by the child; they belong to the shared material world, but they become vital signifiers in her or his unique inner drama; they are real and made up at the same time. Play is crucial to the development of a sense of agency, or of creative participation in external reality; a child who is denied play, or who is not played with, may grow into a functioning adult, but they will merely comply with the demands of the external world, rather than engage with it creatively. In Winnicott’s theory, a merely compliant stance on life leads to depressive disorders. What constitutes mental and emotional health is rather what he terms ‘creative living’, in which the irreducible nature of external reality is accepted, but the subject also retains a sense of mentally creating that reality for themselves.

Winnicott coins the word ‘apperception’ in preference to ‘perception’: where the latter suggests an inner image wholly determined by the external phenomenon, the former means ‘seeing everything afresh all the time’ (Winnicott, 1986, 41), creating the world for oneself as babies do provided they receive ‘good-enough’ care.

Winnicott himself draws a close connection between the transitional space of play, and the place of cultural experience in adult life: ‘For me, playing leads on naturally to cultural experience and indeed forms its foundation’ (1974, 124). Both play and engagement with adult forms of culture take place in the ‘transitional’ or ‘potential’ space where the subject’s own imagination interacts with objectively existing elements of ‘shared reality’. Effective playing, or cultural experience, means an interplay between separateness and union – the separateness of the individual with their own unique inner world, and the acknowledgement of belonging to a collective reality which provides objects, artefacts, myths, stories available to all. Cultural experience, Winnicott writes, is ‘located in the potential space between the individual and the environment’ (1974, 118); culture always plays on the tension between individual originality and inherited tradition, the latter defined as ‘something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw *if we have somewhere to put what we find*’ (1974, 116; emphasis original). This seems to have particular relevance for the kind of fiction reading I am trying to define. The pleasure of entering a compelling fictional world depends on its having been created by someone else, on its transcendence of my own horizons of make-believe, but it can only work if I bring it to life through my powers of interpretation and imagination. I do not merely comply with a readymade fictional world, but activate its potential through my own imagination. Reading fiction connects acknowledgement of a reality beyond my own individual experience with affirmation of my own creative agency.

Winnicott distinguishes between ‘fantasying’, which means the type of imagining that maintains a sense of omnipotence and finds external reality unsatisfactory by comparison with the fantasy, and playing or ‘creative living’, which involve imaginative exploration of the external world. This recalls Kermode’s distinction between works of fiction that ignore the awkward randomness of the contingent and thus become ‘mere fantasy’ on the one hand, and on the other, ‘good’ fictions devoted to ‘the basic human task of imaginative self-invention’ (1967, 146). It also evokes Ryan’s spectrum of different modes of engagement with the

fictional text, from detached ‘concentration’ to Quixotic ‘addiction’, passing through the often coexisting degrees of immersion which she terms ‘imaginative involvement’ and, closer to the ‘addiction’ end of the spectrum, ‘entrancement’. For fiction to become ‘transitional’ in Winnicott’s sense, it must neither keep shaking the reader out of their entrancement by demanding compliance with the rules of reality, and a cerebral ‘concentration’ on recognising the fictional illusion, nor plunge them so deeply into fantasy that the obstinate reality of the world vanishes. Middlebrow texts, situated ‘betwixt and between’, have the potential to offer a rich potential space, ‘at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control’ (Winnicott, 1974, 118).

### Conclusion

Middlebrow novels are characterised by mimesis, immersivity (albeit of the ‘amphibian’ kind) and plot. Against the current of critical opinion, particularly French, some theorists of narrative have seen in these characteristic strategies of narrative realism not a cosy reshaping of the world into implausible coherence, nor a reactionary rehashing of timeworn literary strategies, nor yet a form of facile escapism – but rather a salutary and creative confabulation between author, text and reader. To inhabit a fictional world by investing it with one’s own imagination represents what Winnicott calls apperception or creative living; simulated or virtual experience can expand cognitive and emotional horizons. Nancy Huston, signatory of the *Littérature-Monde* manifesto and herself a widely read author of compellingly plotted, mimetic novels in both French and English, argues explicitly for what seems to me to be implicit in much of the pro-mimetic theory discussed above: that immersive fiction is not only pleasurable and creative, but also positively ethical. Through empathetic identification with fictional characters, we learn to see the world from the perspective of the other: the novel’s ‘*manière d’encourager l’identification à des êtres qui ne nous ressemblent pas lui permet de jouer un rôle éthique*’ (Huston, 2008, 182–83; ‘way of encouraging identification with others who are not like ourselves allows it to play an ethical role’).

This ethical function can be claimed for most immersive fiction, from the earliest children’s stories which already invite the investment of the child’s imagination in a world and in perspectives different from

their own, to even the most formulaic of adult novels. Middlebrow fiction, though, the category most emphatically disdained by modernist orthodoxy (at least in France), can lay claim through its combination of ‘narrative hypnosis’ (Radway, 1997, 13) and serious themes to a particular deployment of empathy with an ethical charge. Middlebrow is of course far from being either watertight or eternal as a category. The frontiers between middlebrow and ‘high’ literature, or between middlebrow and ‘popular’, are at once permeable and subjective: they shift according to the reader/critic’s evaluation of the text’s internal properties, but they also shift at different historical moments, and with different modes of production and distribution, so that what at one time may be viewed as fully ‘literary’ or merely popular may at another be seen as middlebrow. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify the key characteristics of middlebrow fiction: the creation of a satisfyingly entrancing imaginary world, the geography of which is both emotionally compelling and addresses the spatial syntax of the readers’ own experience; effective plotting that provides a coherent patterning of experience whilst acknowledging the messiness of the contingent; compelling characters who invite at least partial empathy; some degree of thematic substance, often concerned with addressing implicitly or explicitly the changing sociocultural realities of readers’ lives. Middlebrow reading favours texts that offer ‘the rush of a good plot’ (Radway, 1997, 7), vibrant characterisation and the exploration of issues that matter.

In the chapters that follow, there is no attempt to provide a comprehensive history of the French literary middlebrow, but only to develop the concept of middlebrow as a positive term through analysis of selected texts, authors and moments in French cultural history. The in-between stratum of culture need not be defined as neither one thing nor the other, as disparagingly middle-of-the-road, but may instead be viewed as a transitional space that connects, bridges and unites. After all, the pleasures of the middlebrow – the easy read that allows exodus from the fast-paced, crowded existence of most inhabitants of modernity and postmodernity – form part of the cultural experience of the majority, including intellectuals. Re-evaluation of the middlebrow should be a productive way to think about narrative itself, and to interrogate the relationship between academic critic and ordinary reader.<sup>9</sup>

9 As Faye Hammill puts it, writing of American and British inter-war fiction, ‘The term “middlebrow,” in order to be an effective critical category [...], needs to

The emphasis here is heavily, though not exclusively, on women writers and readers. The middlebrow, as we have seen, has been denigrated in part precisely because associated with women, and characterised as feminine. And in France as elsewhere, the reading of fiction has indeed become steadily more feminised over the past half-century, as Olivier Donnat's series of surveys of French cultural practices for the French Ministry of Culture have demonstrated: by 2008, women made up an estimated 75% of novel readers. Despite this, women's public presence on the French literary scene has been and remains severely limited: a 2011 study by the Observatoire des Inégalités found that out of the 648 literary prizes awarded in France since the beginning of the twentieth century, only 104 (16%) had gone to women, whilst prize juries remain heavily male-dominated. The Académie Goncourt, responsible for the most high-profile of annual prizes, has included (up to 2017) just seven women for 60 men.<sup>10</sup> Although women writers appear to have gained much greater visibility over recent years, thanks in no small measure to the work of feminist critics, there is still good reason to highlight their importance for both the history and current situation of French literature. If the majority of 'ordinary' readers are women, then the middlebrow novel is a predominantly female phenomenon and for this reason too deserves to be taken seriously.<sup>11</sup> A strand of masculine middlebrow<sup>12</sup> is certainly also part of the whole map of French literature, but that would require another book.

be detached from [...] limiting definitions [...] and reconstituted as a productive, affirmative standpoint for writers who were not wholly aligned with either high modernism or popular culture' (2007, 6).

10 Women formed an even tinier minority until the recent appointments of Paule Constant (2013) and Virginie Despentes (2016).

11 Hammill also sees 'the reinscription of the middlebrow into literary history' as 'in part a feminist undertaking, since it involves attention to an undervalued literature which was, indeed, mainly produced by and for women' (2007, 6–7).

12 See Kate Macdonald's edited volume *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880–1950* (2011).

## CHAPTER TWO

# The Birth of French Middlebrow

It is during the period known retrospectively as the Belle Époque that the conditions emerged for the large-scale production of middlebrow fiction. In the decades between the establishment of the Third Republic (1871) and the outbreak of the First World War (1914), France saw the growth of a mass reading public with an apparently insatiable appetite for the printed word, and developed the technologies and commercial infrastructure to feed this demand. In an era of economic expansion and intense modernisation, the growing middle class sought reading material that would both help to explain their changing *habitus*, by recasting it in legible form, and provide that paradoxical combination of self-recognition and escape from the boundaries of the self that characterises immersive fiction.

### The literary market: lowbrow and highbrow

Literacy rates in France rose from 60 per cent in 1870 to 95 per cent in 1900,<sup>1</sup> in part thanks to the new Republic's introduction of free, mandatory, universal state education up to the age of 13 (1881–82). Progress in the technologies of paper and printing enabled a massive expansion of both the press and the publishing industry, and production both responded to and further swelled the market for news and stories. By the 1900s France had four popular dailies each selling close to a million copies a day: *Le Petit Parisien*, *Le Petit Journal*, *Le Matin* and *Le Journal*, and a plethora of smaller dailies, magazines and reviews. Virtually all of these carried at least one *feuilleton* or serialised novel, for the need to

1 See <http://science.jrank.org/pages/9080/Education-in-Europe-Nineteenth-Twentieth-Century-Education.html>.



know ‘what happens next’ ensured customer fidelity; some of the weekly magazines were largely composed of serialised fiction.<sup>2</sup> After publication in episode form, most of these novels were then repackaged in single volumes and marketed by one of the entrepreneurial publishers, such as Calmann-Lévy, Dentu, Fayard, Rouff or Tallandier, who flourished under the economic and social liberalism of the new Republic.

Decades previously, in 1847, writing in passionate defence of the then quite recent phenomenon of the *roman-feuilleton*, editor Louis Desnoyers had claimed, with perhaps more eloquence than accuracy, that novel reading overcame barriers of class and education, uniting the nation in the shared pleasure of a good story:

il n’y a plus qu’une seule classe de lecteurs [...] – vous trouverez partout, dans les mains du banquier comme dans celles de l’artisan, sous les yeux de l’érudit comme sous ceux du vulgaire, les mêmes histoires et les mêmes romans. (cited in Dumasy, 1999, 146)

(there is only one class of reader [...] – you will find the same stories and the same novels everywhere, in the hands of a banker and those of a workman, read equally by the scholar and the plebeian)

By the end of the century, the frontiers between categories or levels of literature were certainly porous, as the cross-class popularity of Zola, Jules Verne or, later, Allain and Souvestre’s *Fantômas* series (1911–13) demonstrated. But the market was also strongly differentiated, as publishers responded to readers’ diverse tastes and preferences for stories that affirmed them in their own sense of social and personal identity.

The novels that reached the largest audience were undoubtedly the popular *feuilletons* published in the major dailies or in wide-circulation story magazines such as *Les Veillées des chaumières*. Set mainly in contemporary France, but also in some instances in earlier periods or other countries (including, for example, the rugged landscapes and Gothic castles of a Walter Scott-inspired Scotland), these novels told stories of love, crime, murder, family break-up and reunion, structured to produce a series of cliff-hanging narrative moments that would leave the reader eager for the next episode. They employed the techniques of melodrama to produce a satisfying sense of a world full of meaning and emotion yet, in the end, morally coherent. Thus stories were peopled by strong, brave heroes and diabolical villains, by vile seducers and

2 For example *Les Veillées des chaumières*, founded in 1877, or the publisher Jules Rouff’s *Les Grands Romanciers*, *Journal Populaire Illustré*, from 1903.

virtuous virgins, by devoted mothers often cruelly parted from their angelic children; the pathetic fallacy was extensively deployed so that weather and landscape always held figurative meaning; emotional crises translated into physical symptoms as lovelorn heroines wasted away, whilst happiness took the visible form of rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes; coincidence moved the narrative on in ways that defied credulity yet affirmed some deeper pattern in the apparently random nature of experience. These fictional worlds in which every element is thick with meaning bespeak what Marc Angenot calls a ‘frénésie sémiologique sans retenue’ (1975, 65; ‘an uncontrolled semiological frenzy’). The narrative voice is normally omniscient and addresses the reader directly, though without disturbing the fictional illusion, evoking that complicity between narrator and listener reminiscent of oral storytelling: ‘Laissons le jeune homme en observation et retournons, rue de Seine, au *rendez-vous des Boulangers*’ (‘Let us leave this young man to his watching and return to the cafe on the rue de Seine’) exhorts the narrator, taking the reader by the hand, in Xavier de Montépin’s bestselling *La Porteuse de pain* (1885, 473).

Women feature strongly in the majority of plots, largely as lovers, wives, mothers and frequently victims, as they negotiate a difficult search for personal happiness through a world of predatory seducers, husbands legally empowered to exercise a more or less brutal authority, the shame of illegitimate pregnancy and the multiple threats to beloved children – towards (for the luckier heroines) domestic security and/or salvation in the arms of a good man. Women travel a lot in the popular *feuilleton*, carrying the reader to many exotic or familiar locations on the way, but their road follows a painful quest for survival or reunion with a lost child or lover, rather than a joyful quest for adventure. Nathan notes that ‘L’errance féminine est bien triste alors que l’errance masculine peut être plutôt gaie’ (1990, 127; ‘Female wandering is a sad affair whereas men’s wanderings can be quite merry’). The popular *feuilleton* was nonetheless characterised as a feminine genre, as the only part of the newspaper likely to appeal to the female members of the family.<sup>3</sup> It

3 In the early 1980s, Anne-Marie Thiesse interviewed survivors of the generation who remembered, as children, the part the newspaper played in working-class culture. The low cost of dailies meant that many *ouvrier* families bought them regularly; interviewees remembered clearly that the paper was a ‘sexually divided space’ (Thiesse, 1984, 20): news for the father, the *feuilleton* (normally separated by a line across the page so that it could also be cut out and collected) for the mother.

reflected the reality of readers' lives, in terms of power relations, fears and aspirations, but heightened and dramatised the ordinary to produce the pleasures of suspense, curiosity and cathartic resolution.

At the other end of the literary spectrum, the avant-garde was turning away from story and mimesis towards a purer focus on the aesthetic. Decadence, one major current of French artistic life at the *fin-de-siècle*, utterly opposed the worldview of the Third Republic with its belief in democracy and progress, and thus rejected the depiction of the social fabric as a valid aim for Art. Poetry rather than narrative enabled the invention of fantastical imaginary worlds, proudly autonomous rather than imitational. Where the Decadents did use the novel form – and apart from a desire to renew the genre, the need to survive financially in a fiction-driven market ensured that they did – their narratives favoured stasis over progression, spectacle over the drive towards closure. Huysmans's quintessentially Decadent *A Rebours* (1884) has its hero withdraw from a society that bores and disgusts him into a self-created, artificial world where narrative event is reduced to a series of sensory experiments. Rachilde, the only woman among the Decadents, follows her wildly transgressive heroine Raoule de Vénérande on a lengthy search for erotic and emotional fulfilment, but *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) is more a succession of shocking tableaux than a suspenseful story. The Symbolists, too, overlapping in both time and theme with the Decadents, prized the creative potency of language far more than its capacity to depict the texture of a changing social world, and with few exceptions preferred the less narrative genres of poetry and theatre to the novel.<sup>4</sup>

Suspicion of plot-driven narratives and of realism was shared by critics and writers who, without being fully identified with avant-garde groups or movements, saw themselves as the defenders of authentic, high-minded and challenging literature against the creeping mercantilism of the age. The novel's development into a form of mass entertainment was accompanied by a highly critical and very public discourse of condemnation, in which the desire to defend artistic freedom was entangled with a less disinterested desire to maintain the status of a highly educated and materially privileged élite. Typical of such discourse was an article by the author and critic Frédéric Loliée (1856–1915), published in *La Revue des revues* in 1899 under the title 'Les Industriels du roman populaire'.

4 Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* is one example of a symbolist novel that achieved a wide readership. See Hibbitt (2013).

Loliée roundly condemned the commercial nature of *feuilleton* fiction: paid by the line, its narrative techniques, structure and implied values were determined not by aesthetic motives but by the need to maximise length and to provide sufficient thrills to keep the readers hooked. ‘Que nous sommes loin,’ he exclaimed, ‘dans cette branche de commerce, de l’antique apostolat de lettres!’ (1899, 1261; ‘How far we are, in this branch of commerce, from the ancient apostolate of letters!’). Loliée here adopts a line of attack that had echoed through the century since Sainte-Beuve’s famous 1839 polemic against ‘la littérature industrielle’. But ‘the ancient apostolate of letters’ had depended, for writers, on freedom from the need to earn a living by the pen and, for readers, on a shared level of education and access to ‘authentic’ culture. The disassociation of legitimate from illegitimate literature was also a means, in an era of increased (if far from complete) democracy, to preserve the distinction between a cultured élite and a mass audience characterised as naively open to manipulation by profiteering publishers.

However, in between the hectic plots and shameless sentimentality of the *roman populaire* and the ornate, world-weary fantasies of the avant-garde lay a great swathe of fiction that deployed the techniques of mimetic realism, used well-crafted plots to compel the turning of the pages, took its own literary quality seriously and addressed matters that concerned an implicitly middle-class readership. Middlebrow fiction proliferated in Belle Époque France. When Lucien Mulhfeld, drama critic for the Decadent-leaning *La Revue blanche*, condemned the contemporary novel as a ‘genre fatigué, éculé par des milliers d’adultères’ (1891, quoted in Colette, 1984, xvii; ‘a tired old genre, hackneyed through its over-use of adultery’), it was to the middlebrow novel that he referred, for sexual morality and the institution of marriage were certainly among the recurring preoccupations of the ‘roman de mœurs’ or ‘roman à idées’ published by the canny new entrepreneurs of the book trade and consumed by an enthusiastic public.

### Middle-class, middlebrow

Between the establishment of the Third Republic and the outbreak of war in 1914, French society was undergoing a process of rapid change. Like other Western European countries, notably Britain, France was moving towards the sort of mobile, urbanised, consumption-driven world that would develop fully over the course of the twentieth century.

Industrial output tripled in these years, new industries grew out of developments in technology (over thirty thousand cars were produced in France in 1903); the mass production of domestic goods and clothing expanded and enhanced the retail trade (Williams, 1982), and the tertiary sector swelled, due in part to a growing civil service and the publishing trade. With these developments came the emergence of a new social stratum of managers, engineers, mid-ranking civil servants and professional men, educated, aspirational, enjoying a reasonable amount of disposable income and leisure – for the most part in the company of wives whose domestic and maternal roles were assumed to exclude them from paid employment.<sup>5</sup>

France was still a predominantly rural society, with only 35 per cent of the population living in towns of more than five thousand inhabitants in 1899 (Weber, 1986, 51), but cities were growing and becoming both more reachable (trains were laid on to bring visitors from the provinces to the World Fairs held in Paris in 1878, 1889 and 1900), and more visibly the sites of an ambitiously inventive modernity, with new, faster urban transport, the electrification of lighting and radical changes to the skyline (the Eiffel Tower was built in 1889), all altering the terms on which human beings negotiate space and time. Colonial expansion brought the world beyond Europe closer, making its exotic difference more perceptible whilst revealing the relativism of cultural assumptions. In a democracy, albeit one that limited citizenship to the male half of the population, the tension between the ideals of equality and fraternity and the empirical reality of social and economic hierarchy made itself felt more acutely through political conflicts, strikes and everyday issues of class etiquette. Opposition hardened too between the secular, liberal, democratic Republicans and the Catholic, conservative upper classes with their nostalgia for monarchy or empire, erupting in the violent rhetorical wars of the Dreyfus Affair in the years surrounding the turn of the century. In the torrents of fiction that poured off the presses, and especially in those ‘novels of ideas’ that addressed this protean environment from a perspective close to their own, the new bourgeoisie of the Republic sought an illuminating reflection of their own lives as well as the pleasure of imaginary adventures.

5 Anglophone scholarship on the middlebrow tends to focus primarily on the inter-war period, but also acknowledges the significance of the earlier, pre-First World War decades for the development of a middlebrow reading market. See for example Hammond (2006).

Many of the writers who responded to this demand soon became bestsellers, and earned the contempt of the literary *élite* not only for their unadventurous narrative techniques and the perceived banality of their worldview,<sup>6</sup> but also for the commercial success that made them purveyors of ‘littérature industrielle’. Some of the most successful, such as Georges Ohnet, Henry Bordeaux and Paul Bourget, managed to combine compelling narratives of modernity with moral reassurance for a middle class at once thrilled and disorientated by change. The popular *feuilleton*, with its wildly eventful plots and repeated deferral of a final resolution, spoke both to its readers’ sense of the present as confused and indeterminate, and to their desire for the world to *make sense*; the middlebrow novel used shorter, more restrained plots, but these generally concluded with an all-ends-tied *dénouement* that similarly suggested a teleological order beneath apparent flux. If these plots were frequently spiced up with exciting depictions of modern immorality, this was generally identified with a sophisticated Parisian milieu, often with the now-marginalised upper class of the landed aristocracy, and was ultimately shown to lead to unhappiness or ruin. What triumphed in the end were traditional values, neatly aligned with those of the Republican bourgeoisie: hard work, thrift, the patriarchal family, a hierarchical social model based now not on birth or land but on the moral authority of the new ruling class. Plot devices shared with its lowbrow cousin the *feuilleton* ensured that the *roman de mœurs* kept its readers captivated; the moral sobriety of an Ohnet, a Bordeaux or a Bourget reassured readers that they were part of a stable order that would survive material and social transformation.

Georges Ohnet (1848–1918) made a fortune from sales of his well-crafted novels, solidly grounded in the bourgeois virtues of industry, economy and family yet leavened by romance and melodrama, of which the most successful was *Le Maître de forges* (1882, and endlessly republished). In this story Suzanne de Beaulieu, the spoilt and selfish daughter of a ruined aristocratic family, grows to appreciate and love the virtues of a middle-class ‘travailleur intrépide’ (32): Philippe Derblay is a handsome engineer who belongs to the new technological age, a

6 Augustin Filon, writing in the *Revue bleue* (7 December 1889), typified this type of critical discourse: Ohnet was criticised for his ‘phrase lourde et incolore, sa morale prud’hommesque [...], sa psychologie banale jusqu’au ridicule’ (quoted in Todd, 1994, 22; ‘his heavy, colourless sentences, his pompous morality [...] and absurdly trite psychology’).

veteran of the Franco-Prussian war that led to the foundation of the Republic, and the tough but fair owner-manager of the family business, revered by his workforce. Plots, duels, natural disasters and near-mortal illnesses carry the story towards a romantic conclusion that confirms the moral victory of the industrious bourgeoisie. Ohnet's 'noisy and persistent success' (Todd, 1994, 22) was comprehensively despised by literary critics, so that he became what Christopher Todd describes as 'principal whipping-boy for the intelligentsia' (1994, 21) – a role in which he was succeeded by others, and perhaps most comparably by Henry Bordeaux (1870–1963). Bordeaux's greatest successes came just before the First World War: his bestselling *La Robe de laine* (1910) contrasts the artificial values of a sophisticated Parisian milieu that cherishes fashion, celebrity and the pursuit of pleasure with the authentic values of honesty, love and fidelity, represented though the idealised heroine Raymonde Cernay. Raymonde dies 'épuisée' ('worn out') by the 'douleur morale' ('moral pain') (Bordeaux, 1910, 276–77) caused by her husband's neglect: he is an aviator, a thoroughly modern man seduced by the worldly charm of his city friends, who comes too late to a recognition of where real happiness lies. Again there is a strong depiction of a social world in flux, and a final assertion of the validity of what purport to be timeless values, here strongly associated with a rural rather than urban setting. Like Ohnet (to whom he was frequently compared), Bordeaux pleased his readership by fusing sensitivity to topical moral debates with confirmation of the rightness of normative family structures, and judicious deployment of the strategies of melodrama and romance to procure the pleasures of a compelling read. Paul Bourget (1852–1935), who combined authorship of bestselling novels with a more 'highbrow' intellectual career, similarly appealed to a very wide readership through tales of love and seduction that always came down on the side of marital fidelity for women (adulterous heroines may be accorded some narrative sympathy, but they are always punished) and defence of the patriarchal family. Middlebrow authors of the Belle Époque deployed familiar realist techniques to produce stories that addressed readers' sense of a shifting social world; their appeal often lay in their capacity to balance acknowledgement of social change with affirmation of social and moral stability.

### Women and the middlebrow

The association of ‘middlebrow’ or ‘littérature moyenne’ with conservative values thus has some basis in truth: particularly in periods of intense change, mainstream audiences may be drawn to stories that contain an encounter with new ideas and experiences yet provide a comforting reaffirmation of the known and familiar. However, the broad intermediary layer of narrative fiction also encompasses novels that popularise the radical, applying the craft of enjoyable plotting and empathetic characterisation to the dissemination of contestatory ideas. In Belle Époque France, the middlebrow novel of *radical* ideas was particularly the province of women writers. Despite their limited numbers, for it was still difficult for a woman to make her way in any profession, female writers figured among the bestselling authors of the age – and the novel became a space in which the specific implications of modernity for women could be explored, and feminist ideas represented and tested in fictional mode.

Women were of course at a severe disadvantage in the literary world, since it was still widely assumed that they were inherently less clever or creative than men, and they were largely excluded from the networks of support and influence that could further male careers. Women were tolerated, if patronised, in the low-status sector of the popular novel,<sup>7</sup> which in any case tended to be characterised as a feminine domain (romantic, irrational, loquacious rather than eloquent), though even here they often felt constrained to employ male pen-names, so that Georges Maldague was really Joséphine, and the prolific *feuilletonnistes* Paul D’Aigremont and Pierre Ninous were both in fact *noms de plume* of Marie-Thérèse Lapeyrière. It was still harder to be accepted as a ‘serious’ writer, even in the relatively undistinguished sector of the middlebrow. However, as with the *feuilleton*, women made up a substantial proportion of the readership for *roman de mœurs* and *romans à idées*, and publishers recognised the advantage of offering a female perspective by including some women writers in their ‘stable’.

Middle-class women – many of them now well-educated yet still excluded from civil, legal and political rights, including the right to vote, and largely destined for a lifetime of domesticity – were particularly

7 Though even here in relatively small numbers: only 17 per cent of Anne-Marie Thiesse’s corpus of 100 popular Belle Époque novelists were women (Thiesse, 1984, 183).



attracted to stories that staged the potentially conflicted relationship between the aspiration to personal fulfilment and the social imperative of marriage and maternity. In the press, on the stage, from the end of the century sometimes too on the cinema screen, they encountered women who had jettisoned feminine submission to take on professional roles as actresses, dancers, writers, public feminists, even lawyers or doctors, yet the weight of social opinion and deeply internalised values continued to keep the majority of middle-class women firmly within the home. Divorce was re-legalised by the *Loi Naquet* in 1884, and the numbers of divorces pronounced rose steeply over the following decade (Adler, 1990, 198–200), yet the difficulty of living with the social opprobrium directed at divorced women remained a weighty disincentive to those tempted to flee an unhappy marriage. The topicality of the whole gender question was intensified by a ferocious male backlash against the limited gains that women had made (for example, in 1907 married women finally gained the right to dispose of their own earned income) and against the ‘New Woman’s’ perceived rejection of traditional female roles (Maugue, 2001; Rochefort, 1995). The whole question of gender roles and identities was polarised, inflammatory and no doubt for many a source of curiosity, excitement and anxiety. The novel was a genre well-suited to the modelling of alternative emotional scenarios, and to the representation of the shifting legal and social contexts that shaped relationships. It could provide a virtual forum in which to test out the solidity of old structures and the implications of the new; placing, in Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s formulation, ‘à notre disposition des schémas de situations, des scénarios d’action, des constellations émotives et éthiques’ (1999, 47; ‘at our disposition schemas of situations, scenarios of action, emotive and ethical constellations, that are susceptible to be interiorized by immersion’ [Schaeffer, 2010, 27]). Writers such as Gabrielle Reval, Camille Pert, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Colette Yver, Daniel Lesueur and Marcelle Tinayre<sup>8</sup> all used novels set firmly in contemporary France to address a similar set of highly topical questions: Could a woman combine professional activity with being a wife and mother? What did the legal ascription of authority to the husband in a marriage mean in terms of everyday life and intimate relationships? How do male and female desire differ, and should both sexes be subject to the same sexual morality? What is the relationship between gender and class solidarity? And, above all, how did education and social emancipation alter the

8 See for example Holmes (1996); Rogers (2007); Waelti-Walters (2000).

terms of romance? Though all long out of print, many of these novels were very widely read and remain highly readable.

Of this group of writers, the two who had the biggest impact on both market and literary scene were Daniel Lesueur (1860–1921) and Marcelle Tinayre (1872–1948). Both became minor celebrities thanks to the commercial success of their novels and media fascination with the figure of the woman author. They shared a belief in democratic republican values and a genteel yet passionate commitment to the cause of women's equality, both writing regularly for the feminist daily *La Fronde*, both founding members of the Prix Vie heureuse (later the Prix Femina), set up in 1904 in protest against the exclusively male nature of the Prix Goncourt. Lesueur, backed by *La Fronde*, became the first woman to be elected on to the executive committee of the writers' professional body, the Société des Gens de Lettres. Their work received some critical praise, even if this was often barbed by the implication that for a woman to write well meant to transcend her natural limitations. In 1911 Tinayre was included in the series *Les Célébrités d'Aujourd'hui*, which generally presented its 'celebrities' in a favourable light, but was praised above all for being less empty-headed and narcissistic than the rest of her sex:

Madame Tinayre a conquis une place tout à fait hors de pair dans la littérature contemporaine en mettant de la gravité et de la pensée là où ne se rencontre d'ordinaire que frivolité un peu vaine ou que subjectivité trop exclusive. (Martin-Mamy, 1909, 32)

(Madame Tinayre has achieved an exceptional place in contemporary literature by bringing gravity and thought to a domain where one normally finds only frivolity and excessive subjectivity)

The market appeal of their fiction, though, meant that they were courted by publishers and the press, and even recognised by the state: both were nominated for, and in Lesueur's case actually awarded, the prestigious Légion d'Honneur.<sup>9</sup> What Lesueur and Tinayre shared, and what made them significant players in a literary market heavily dominated

9 Lesueur became an Officier de la Légion d'Honneur in 1900 – only the fifth woman to have received this honour. Tinayre was due to receive the same honour in 1908, but was deemed to have shown insufficient respect for this mark of state approval in a letter to *Le Temps*, so the award was cancelled. A whole volume of the journal *Le Censeur politique et littéraire* (18 January 1908) was devoted to the affair.

by men, was a capacity to recognise and address the tension points in contemporary women's lives, and to do so through page-turning plots that blended melodrama with serious exposition of topical issues. They have both virtually disappeared from literary history, their work almost entirely out of print and their names unknown except to a tiny number of mainly anglophone feminist critics.<sup>10</sup> This is the first discussion of their work to situate them as important middlebrow novelists.

Daniel Lesueur (Jeanne Loiseau, 1860–1921)

Lesueur's career situates her squarely in the middle of the literary hierarchy in the sense that she published across the spectrum from highbrow to lowbrow. Born Jeanne Loiseau, the daughter of a cultured but impoverished family, she benefited from a good education for a girl of her generation, and was able to support herself by teaching (in England as well as France) until in the 1880s she began to make a living as a writer. Her first publication, a volume of poetry in 1882, won the French Academy's prestigious Grand Prix de Poésie, but it was the series of *romans de mœurs* and *romans à idées* begun in 1883 that made her name, albeit an assumed name since, on her editor's advice, Loiseau now adopted the male pseudonym by which she would be known for the rest of her career.<sup>11</sup> From 1900, the 'novels of ideas' were interspersed with equally successful *romans populaires*, first published in serialised form in the big popular dailies *Le Petit Parisien* and *Le Petit Journal*. Though Lesueur was well aware of her different readerships, and versatile in narrative style, there is in fact an interesting overlap between the novels addressed to a predominantly bourgeois readership and those aimed, through the pages of the mass-market dailies, at readers she once metonymically described as hackney cab drivers and errand girls.<sup>12</sup>

10 Tinayre has received some critical attention in the past 20 years or so. See notably Holmes (1996; 2006); Grenaudier-Klijn (2004); Rogers (2007). To the best of my knowledge, apart from Yves-Oliver Martin (cited below) I am the only critic to have written on Lesueur, whose work has been totally out of print since not long after her death in 1921. See Holmes (2005; 2006; 2011; 2012).

11 In a letter to Marguerite Durand (undated, dossier in the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand) Lesueur describes how her first publishers 'feared for the effect that a woman's name would have on sales'.

12 In her response to the 1899 survey conducted by Frédéric Loliée (1279), Lesueur differed from the majority of respondents in her positive view of the

Since both types of novel were published post-serialisation by the 'literary' editors Alphonse Lemerre (publisher of the Parnassian poets) and Plon (who also published Paul Bourget), it also seems likely that their readerships overlapped, or at least that middle-class readers also enjoyed the more colourful page-turners once these were presented in a well-bound volume.

For Yves Olivier-Martin, one of the very few critics to have taken Lesueur's contribution to the novel genre seriously, her achievement lay in a capacity to inject each of her favoured subgenres with the best qualities of the other, by bringing deft, lively plotting to the *roman à idées*, and stylistic elegance and psychological acuity to the *roman populaire* (Olivier-Martin, 1980, 219). Her insistence that the much-reviled *roman feuilleton* was a genre from which its more respectable counterparts had something to learn went radically against the tide of literary opinion: among the novelists surveyed by Frédéric Loliée in 1899 for their opinions on 'littérature industrielle', she was the only one to insist that writing a *feuilleton* required 'genius' (Loliée, 1899, 29); 'un bon roman populaire réclame autant de réflexions et d'observations que deux ou trois romans psychologiques ou sociaux' ('a good popular novel demands as much thought and observation as two or three psychological or social novels') she told Ernest Tissot in an interview published in 1911 (cited in Olivier-Martin, 1980, 221). Lesueur was 'middlebrow' both in the sense of appealing to a large middle layer of the population, and in the sense of deliberately bridging the 'brows'. To demonstrate this, given the size of the overall corpus (she published some 25 *romans de mœurs* and five double-volume *romans populaires*), I will focus on three novels published in the first decade of the twentieth century. *Le Cœur chemine* (1903) is a *roman de mœurs* published by Lemerre; *Nietzschéenne* (1907), as the title announces, is better described as a *roman à idées*, and was published by Plon after serialisation in the glossy, self-consciously 'modern' weekly *L'Illustration*. The third is a *roman populaire*, *Calvaire*

*roman-feuilleton*. She described the curiosity she felt at the sight of a 'cocher de fiacre lisant *Le Petit Journal* sur son siège, ou le trottin dévorant le feuilleton du *Petit Parisien* en croquant un pain d'un sou' ('a coach driver reading *Le Petit Journal* perched on his cab, or an errand girl devouring *Le Petit Parisien* as she eats her penny loaf'). How, she wondered, did one write stories that could captivate such an audience, and still remain true to one's aesthetic and moral standards as a writer? The following year, she launched her first attempt to do precisely this with *Lointaine Revanche* (1900).

*de femme* (also 1907), first published in daily episodes in *Le Petit Parisien* before Lemerre produced it as a novel in two volumes.

The two more obviously ‘middlebrow’ novels are set among the affluent bourgeoisie of Belle Époque France, their contemporary nature underlined by plots that hinge on new technologies, industrial relations (strikes for better working conditions or higher pay were a regular occurrence throughout the early 1900s), specific events such as the Exposition universelle of 1900, and the dramatisation of topical issues and ideas, including feminism. The heroine of *Le Cœur chemine*, Nicole Hardibert, is married to a factory owner whose rationalism, scientific credentials (he is an engineer by training) and paternalism towards both workers and women make him a model of Third Republic masculinity. What drives the plot is the conflict between Nicole’s dutiful affection for this dry but devoted husband, and her passion for Georget, a handsome poet, but her moral and emotional drama is inseparable from its sociopolitical context: Nicole’s unhappiness in her marriage is caused not so much by personal incompatibility as by social structures that exclude her from any useful activity and legitimise her husband’s assumption of his own superiority. *Nietzschéenne* also places modern industry at the centre of the plot: its hero Robert Clérieux is a young, married owner of a car-manufacturing firm, struggling to impose his authority on a militant workforce and to reconcile ethical values with commercial success. His finest ally and guide in this is a woman, the *Nietzschéenne* of the title: Jocelyne Monestier is a single woman socially ostracised because of her rejection of conventional sexual mores, who finds fulfilment in charitable social work, notably the organisation of good social housing for workers. Jocelyne also finds moral support for her own ethic of energy, will and self-determination in the fashionable philosophy of Nietzsche. Unable as a woman to intervene directly in public life, she inspires Robert with advice and transmits to him her Nietzschean values. Thus the novel popularises a philosophy that had a profound, if often contradictory impact on contemporary French intellectual life,<sup>13</sup> at the same time as it addresses

13 In *Zarathustra in Paris: The Nietzsche Vogue in France 1891–1918*, Christopher E. Forth recounts how, from the 1890s on, Nietzsche’s philosophy was widely reviewed and debated in France, albeit ‘reconfigured and reproduced in a range of very different and often mutually exclusive forms, appearing at once as a friend of anarchists and socialists, neoroyalists, and even feminists’ (6). Lesueur was not alone in seeing in Nietzschean thought a voluntarist doctrine that chimed with feminism: Gérard d’Houville’s *L’Inconstante* and Anna de Noailles’s *La Nouvelle*

topical social questions: What are the responsibilities of a republican employer to his workforce? What should be the ethics of entrepreneurial capitalism? What role can there be for a clever, energetic woman in a society that excludes her from political and economic life?

These are novels of ideas, but they are also very much novels, and it is their creation of an absorbing virtual world that keeps the pages turning and brings the social and philosophical debates to life. Each deploys the structure of romance, so that what is at stake in the narrative is above all the possibility of love. Both novels open with the meeting of hero and heroine, follow the development of an intense mutual passion, and close with the lovers' separation – for like most feminist *romans à idées* of the period, Lesueur's novels affirm the non-viability of happy heterosexual love in a society based on sexual inequality. The life-enhancing force of reciprocated love is vividly evoked: for Nicole, the recognition of a passionate affinity with Georget means 'la soudaine mise en mouvement de toutes les forces endormies: force de sentir, force d'imaginer, force de se prodiguer' (Lesueur, 1903, 134; 'the sudden quickening of all her dormant strength: of feeling, imagination and energy'), and a renewed awareness of 'la puissance de vivre et la saveur de la vie' (Lesueur, 1903, 134; 'the potency and flavour of life'); in love with each other, both Jocelyne and Robert feel themselves 'pénétrés par une exaltation de toutes leurs facultés actives, par un héroïsme sans but' (Lesueur, 1908, 173; 'intensely aware of all their active faculties, and suffused with a sense of aimless heroism'). This elated energy contrasts with the mere sense of duty fulfilled that characterises conventional marriage in Lesueur's work. In both novels, a marriage based on normative gender roles – an older, authoritative husband active in the public world and a docile, domesticated wife – acts as a negative foil to the central romantic relationship that combines intellectual affinity with intense and equal desire. Nicole is an 'irréprochable épouse et fière de l'être' (Lesueur, 1903, 17; 'irreproachable wife and proud to be so') but she feels herself patronised and belittled by her husband's belief in the inferiority of her sex, and isolated by her confinement to the private sphere. Robert is married to a sweet but empty-headed wife, Lucie, whose 'cervelle

*Espérance* (both 1903) also featured Nietzschean heroines, and contributed to the popularisation of his philosophy for a mass market that so dismayed the avant-garde. 'That the Nietzsche vogue was being propagated by so many women writers explains the reservations of many male critics, for whom best-selling novels were the stuff of effeminate and vulgar mass culture' (Forth, 2001, 135).

d'oiseau' (Lesueur, 1908, 211; 'bird-brain') and 'corps de poupée frêle' (Lesueur, 1908, 211; 'frail, doll-like body') caricature the contemporary ideal of passive, domesticated femininity, and with whom he can share nothing of his life beyond the home and family. It is the lovers' point of view that predominates, so that the reader's sympathies are wholly engaged with their desire to live out a more intense, fulfilling and egalitarian form of love – even as the narrative warns of the scandal and misery that would result from such defiance of social law.

The techniques that draw the reader into the fictional world include those of popular fiction. Though ideas and values are discussed directly, through dialogue and the narrator's commentary, they are also given more graphic form through characters and plot. In *Le Cœur chemine*, the brutal husband of Nicole's cousin Berthe serves to underline the latent violence in Hardibert's more restrained misogyny; the same character is also revealed to be an industrial spy, a treacherous friend and a ruthless agent provocateur, so that evil is neatly concentrated in a single protagonist. The same occurs in *Nietzschéenne*, where Sorbelin is at once Robert's perfidious colleague, a cynical manipulator of the workforce and the blackmailer who threatens to destroy Jocelyne's hard-won social standing for a second time. In secondary characters, psychological complexity is sacrificed to clear moral patterning and colourful, conflictual plotting. Ideas are also dramatised in action: thus the dénouement of *Nietzschéenne* has Jocelyne intercept Sorbelin's bullet intended for Robert, so that she dies bravely for love, at once resolving the impasse of the plot and reaffirming her values of courage and self-determination.

Place too functions immersively, drawing on the reader's existing bank of images to provide a compelling geography of the fictional world, and at the same time to intensify emotion. If the novels' contemporary realism sets the majority of the action in Paris and its suburbs, and in the everyday settings of homes and factories, each text also has its more affectively charged or poetic spaces. Central to the emotional geography of *Le Cœur chemine* is Bruges, a totemic city for the Symbolists and Decadents made famous by Georges Rodenbach's well-publicised 1892 novel *Bruges-la-Morte* (first serialised in *Le Figaro*) as a site of melancholy beauty associated with death and the denial of reality.<sup>14</sup> Near the start of

14 The Belgian Symbolist Georges Rodenbach published *Bruges-la-morte* in 1892, first in serialised form in *Le Figaro* and then in an edition illustrated by photographs with Flammarion. Its hero goes to Bruges after the death of his wife,

the novel, thanks to a fortuitous accident, Nicole and Georget come to spend a few days together in Bruges, characterised as a ‘cité nostalgique’ (Lesueur, 1903, 74) suffused with the past, and as a feminine space at the heart of which stands the Béguinage, traditionally a place of refuge for women who wished to escape the path of marriage and maternity. Here, outside the structures of both patriarchy and intensifying modernity, the two achieve mutual sincerity and a brief shared happiness. At the end of the novel, after their final separation, Nicole withdraws to Bruges as the scene of her past happiness, but now the extra-temporal dimension of the city comes to signify not a refuge, but a failure to find a place or role in modern life: ‘Et son âme se sent la sœur de cette ville, qui recèle tant de passé [...] Âme complexe et trop chargée de souvenirs séculaires, vainement elle se cherche en de subtiles brumes ...’ (Lesueur, 1903, 375; ‘And she felt her soul to be the sister of this city full of the past [...] A complex soul, laden with the memory of centuries, seeking its reflection in the subtle mists ...’). In *Nietzschéenne*, it is in the Swiss Alps that the lovers acknowledge both their love and its impossibility. The Matterhorn (in French ‘Le Cervin’), like Bruges, was a place that evoked readymade images for the reading public in the early 1900s: first climbed in 1865 at the cost of four deaths, it was frequently in the news as mountaineers attempted to conquer its different faces, and the railway link to Zermatt also made it a holiday destination popularised through press advertisements and posters. In the novel, the wild beauty of the snowy mountains corresponds to the lovers’ shared elation and sense of power; as the sun drops, the shadow of the imposing Mount Cervin blots out the light and gives sensory form to the premonition of inevitable separation: ‘L’ombre du Cervin s’étendait sur le plateau [...] devenu livide. Et elle était mortellement froide, cette ombre, projetée par le sépulcral écran de granit’ (Lesueur, 1908, 266; ‘The shadow of the mountain spread across the livid, darkening plain [...] And the shadow was deathly cold, projected by the sepulchral screen of granite’).

Lesueur’s fiction thus invites readers into a graphically imagined fictional world charged to some extent with the ‘semiological frenzy’

finding its ‘caractère mortuaire’ (‘funereal atmosphere’) suited to his mourning, and there seeks to relive his love for her through a woman he meets who closely resembles her, thus denying the reality of time and history. Both serialisation and the unusual device of the photographs made it one of the better-known Symbolist texts, and Bruges entered the collective imagination as a morbidly lovely city outside the normal course of modern life.



of the popular *feuilleton*, but also reflecting (and reflecting upon) the social tensions and ideological debates of its time. Unlike that of the equally middlebrow Bourget or Bordeaux, though, her depiction of social change celebrates the new and welcomes modernity, seeing in technological innovation and the challenge to 'natural' laws that this implies an emancipatory force that might translate into social freedoms. On class and labour relations, Lesueur is merely in tune with the liberal but paternalist values that dominated centre-left thinking under the Third Republic (her Nietzschean heroine seeks to mould Robert into a strong but fair capitalist employer, not to contest his right to ownership), but on the politics of gender she is quietly oppositional, and carries her readers with her. Modernity is celebrated on the premise that women must be an integral part of the emerging new social world. This in turn means a challenge to the hegemonic ideology of gender that saw masculinity and femininity as the natural expression of biological sex and as polarised, complementary opposites.

Both *Le Cœur chemine* and *Nietzschéenne* represent new technologies in terms of energy, mobility and progress. Unusually, for novels that conform to the conventions of romance, each gives industry a central place in the plot: in *Nietzschéenne* particularly, new car designs are described in appreciative detail, and the dénouement hinges on a complex financial speculation concerning the viability of manufacturing artificial rubber! Like the modernists, indeed anticipating their celebration of technology and speed (Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto was published in *Le Figaro* in 1909, Apollinaire's *Alcools Poèmes 1898–1913* in 1913), albeit in a more prosaic key, Lesueur attributes to machines an exhilarating force<sup>15</sup> and a sort of everyday poetry. In Robert's factory, 'L'air bourdonnait. Une vibration se propageait à travers les murs, les vitres, les planchers, tout frémissant d'une vie secrète' (Lesueur, 1908, 27; 'The air throbbed. The vibration of a secret life quivered through the walls, the windows, the floors'); cityscapes show a Paris lit up by electricity and by the animation of crowds – 'la vie nocturne et printanière de Paris [...] palpitait dans l'îlot d'aveuglante lumière que faisaient les globes électriques du café. Mille visages passaient, merveilleusement animés' (Lesueur, 1908, 274; 'the night life of Paris in the springtime [...] pulsed in the island of blinding light around the electric globes of the cafe. Thousands of faces passed by, wonderfully alive'); the Exposition universelle in *Le*

15 The attribution of a thrilling energy to new technologies also recalls Zola's hugely popular novel of the steam train, *La Bête humaine* (1890).

*Cœur chemine* transports Parisians through space and time, not just in imagination but by providing exotic sensory experience, ‘des lambeaux de musiques barbares’ (‘scraps of savage music’) mingle with ‘d’insolites parfums [qui] suggèrent des autrefois et des ailleurs’ (Lesueur, 1903, 211; ‘strange perfumes that evoke distant times and places’).

What is exceptional about Lesueur’s depiction of modernity, though, is that it quietly affirms, in different ways, that this exciting world must belong to women as well as men. Nicole’s story shows the negative consequences of women’s exclusion: resigned to her dominated role, she loses both husband and lover, and ends the novel in self-imposed exile in Bruges. Jocelyne exemplifies a positive view of women’s potential: her energetic grasp of economics, industrial production and management is depicted as far superior to that of the male characters, and if her death suggests that there is as yet no place for such a woman, the strong implication is that there ought to be. The characterisation of Jocelyne constitutes Lesueur’s most explicit denunciation of normative thinking on sex and gender, for what draws Robert to this woman is not so much her beauty as her ‘clarté intellectuelle’ ‘sûr jugement’ and ‘vaillance’ (1908, 313; ‘clarity of mind’, ‘sureness of judgement’, ‘courage’), all qualities strongly associated with masculinity, whereas he, the industrial leader, is ‘un peu féminin par des subtilités de sentiment, et aussi par des timidités de caractère’ (1908, 313; ‘a little feminine in his delicacy of feeling and his timid character’). Their mutual attraction, in fact, reverses the binary logic that governed hegemonic views of gender: ideal masculinity, in the deeply patriarchal culture of the Third Republic, was rational, authoritative and brave while femininity was emotional, submissive and in need of protection. *Nietzschéenne* suggests that the future might require a less rigid distribution of human qualities, and that romantic attraction may already tend to undermine normative gender roles.

In fact, Lesueur’s novels consistently question contemporary ideals of masculinity. Her plots stage successful patriarchs, but then expose not only their moral limitations but also their lack of sexual appeal for her heroines. Where the conjugal attentions of her handsome, forceful husband produce in Nicole only a mixture of revulsion and embarrassment – sex is ‘un devoir, en attendant que ce soit la corvée’ (Lesueur, 1903, 54; ‘a duty, that would soon become a mere chore’) – the younger, softer Georget (even his name is a diminutive) provokes the most intense desire. It is not Nanders, the mature, virile captain of industry with his leonine charm – ‘sa nuque, mouvante comme sous

l'arrogance d'une crinière, ignorait le poids des années' (Lesueur, 1908, 68; 'his neck moved as though beneath a lion's mane, and seemed to defy the weight of years') – who attracts Jocelyne – indeed, she recoils from his embrace with a 'sursaut farouche' (67; 'wild start') – but rather Robert, the tentative, self-doubting young man whose social place is not yet assured, and with whom a relationship of equality thus remains possible.

As Olivier-Martin puts it, 'le féminisme irrigue de son flot sûr et véhément les intrigues de Lesueur' (1980, 26; 'the forceful current of feminism nourishes Lesueur's plots') – and does so, he adds, in both of her 'manières' or types of novel. The more straightforwardly 'popular' novels share the values and to some extent the narrative techniques of the *romans à idées*, though the dosage of melodrama in proportion to realism is increased, and the *feuilletons* carry the reader further from the grind of the everyday to exotic places and a thrilling density of action.

The plot of *Calvaire* is more diffuse, heterogeneous and eventful than that of *Le Cœur chemine* or *Nietzschéenne*, its central thread not romance but, following what had become a familiar *feuilleton* trope, the search for a lost child. Solange de Herquancy is the wife of an eminent diplomat, the domineering and unfaithful Maxime; she has a daughter by him, but also a secret love child born of her relationship with the sculptor Pierre Bernal. The story's powerful opening has Solange alighting from a train at a deserted suburban station and walking alone through the twilight towards a rendezvous with her lover, tailed by three masked figures in a car who then set upon Bernal and knife him so that he dies before Solange's eyes. The novel then follows her quest both for vengeance and to find the little son, Etienne (known as Tiennot), confided by Pierre to the safekeeping of unknown friends. By the end of the novel, mother and son are reunited and justice has been done, but the journey to this ending has involved the following of mysterious clues, several more violent deaths, narrative shifts to the parallel adventures of Tiennot and the woman who is caring for him, a lengthy sojourn in Rome, and subplots both comic and tragic, all woven together with what Olivier-Martin calls Lesueur's 'habilité dans l'art de nouer une intrigue et de provoquer l'intérêt' (1980, 224; 'skill in the art of constructing a plot and keeping the reader absorbed').

A realist concern with modern technologies is less evident in *Calvaire*, but the setting is unmistakably contemporary and aspects of modernity play a vital role. Solange, reluctantly exiled to Rome when her husband becomes the French ambassador to Italy, appreciates the city's classical

beauty but is more at ease in the urban bustle of Paris, preferring ‘l’aspect des rues, le son des voix, le parfum de l’air parisien’ (‘the look of the streets, the sound of the voices, the smell of Parisian air’) to the ‘torpeur’ (1907, I, 172; ‘torpor’) of Rome. The speed and mobility of modern transport has crucial narrative functions: the car plays a more sinister role than in *Nietzschéenne*, being the instrument of two murders, but fast trains enable Solange to travel to rendezvous with her lover, as well as to criss-cross the country in the quest to find her son. Like Jocelyne, Solange is well adapted to a modern urban world, and though she is in some senses a more conventional heroine (as a wife and devoted mother), she also shares Jocelyne’s ‘New Woman’ qualities: both are intrepid, emotionally controlled and courageous. Both also suffer severely for their failure to abide by the normative codes of sexual behaviour. The single Jocelyne is socially ostracised because she is known to have willingly lost her virginity to a fiancé who subsequently cancelled the marriage; Solange’s adulterous affair and illegitimate maternity are idealised in *Calvaire* as the expressions of authentic love, but they render her legally helpless before a husband whose brutality and ruthlessness are empowered by the law. As Solange reflects, ‘Ne suis-je pas sa proie, sa chose? Il a la loi pour lui. Seul au monde, il avait le droit monstrueux de frapper Pierre’ (Lesueur, 1907, 20; ‘Am I not his prey, his thing? He has the law on his side. He alone had the monstrous right to strike Pierre down’). Through sympathetic characterisation, and by making transgressive heroines the principal focalisers of the action, both novels situate their readers on the side of feminist claims for equality in law, in access to public roles and in sexual morality.

As in the *romans à idées*, but more blatantly, secondary characters and subplots are deployed strategically to reinforce meanings. Solange’s plight finds an echo in that of the servant Adeline who, as Tiennot’s wet nurse, quite literally becomes her maternal double. Adeline has struggled to survive with her illegitimate daughter and has also been the victim of male violence: despite the difference in social class, the two women experience ‘une sourde sympathie’ (Lesueur, 1907, I, 127; ‘a strong, unspoken sympathy’) and form a staunch alliance. The friend to whom Pierre entrusted Tiennot before his death, and who cares for him throughout Solange’s lengthy search, is Fanny Cornet, a single woman in her late seventies. Fanny forms an interesting contrast to the often caricatural figure of the prim ageing spinster: she is a clever, courageous, kind woman, academically brilliant – ‘bachelière et licenciée ès sciences, la première de toutes les Françaises’ (Lesueur, 1907, I, 214; ‘the first

Frenchwoman to have gained a degree in science') – but like Jocelyne in *Nietzschéenne* she is excluded from those positions for which her abilities fit her ('les ronds-de-cuir du Ministère la réléguèrent pour toujours à la salle d'attente' [I, 214; 'the pen-pushers at the Education Ministry consigned her forever to the waiting room']) and reduced to giving ill-paid private lessons to support herself, her sister and Tiennot. Fanny is generous, spirited and certainly not militant, but when she discovers that her sex renders her ineligible to adopt the child for whom she is already in practice the sole carer, even she is incredulous and indignant: 'Alors moi qui ai nourri cet enfant pendant cinq ans, moi qui l'ai élevé, qui l'ai instruit, moi qui lui ai servi de mère [...] je ne puis pas être sa tutrice?' (Lesueur, 1907, II, 133; 'So even though I have fed this child for five years, brought him up and taught him, acted as his mother [...] I can't be his guardian?').

Strongly drawn secondary characters are equally important in the novel's critique of patriarchal masculinity. Solange's aristocratic husband Maxime has a more proletarian double: his loyal servant and accomplice, Gervais, is a rapist, wife-beater and murderer who acts out in more graphic form the latent violence of Maxime's marital power. Gervais's evil deeds eventually drive him mad with guilt and he dies dramatically, flinging himself from a high cliff, thus foreshadowing Maxime's own remorseful death by duel at the story's end. But the wider palette of the popular novel encompasses comedy, and *Calvaire de femme* also employs humorous caricature in its depiction of masculine authority. Otto Perkowicz is a lion tamer, a hyper-virile figure whose strength, courage and charisma leave the women in his audience weak with desire. Even his female lions are subdued by his powers of seduction, and the novel's *femme fatale*, the proud and ruthless Principesa di Trani, takes him for her lover. The novel's narrator, however, lays a trail of clues to suggest that Otto is a charlatan whose heroic masculinity is more performed than real, using bathos for example to describe his dressing room 'qui sentait le fauve, le chypre et l'odeur chaude des fers à friser' (Lesueur, 1907, II, 49; 'which smelt of wild animals, sandalwood and the warm odour of curling tongs'). In the end Otto the Polish aristocrat turns out, in a neat drawing together of diverse threads of plot, to be in fact Victor Grouille, the long-lost son of the kind if crusty concierge of the house where Fanny Cornet lodges: his entire persona was a performance. The broad-brush conventions of the *feuilleton* allow Lesueur to parody the virile hero, and thus to combine entertainment with mild but telling social critique.

Like her novels of manners, Lesueur's popular fictions are highly effective examples of the subgenre to which they primarily belong. Her two modes of writing share many themes, narrative devices and qualities, and enunciate in different but overlapping ways the same Lesueurian view of the world: open to modernity, feminist in her acute awareness of the damaging effects of sexual inequality, life-affirming in the energy and verve of her plots, and the space she offers for the reader's 'imaginative transportation' (Ryan, 2001, 133) to a fictional world. Brave and independent heroines act as avatars for the female reader's imaginary journeys through a varied geographic and social landscape and a diverse set of emotions, from passionate love to anger and resentment at their own subordinate status, to resignation, or an obstinate yet pragmatic determination to make the best of their situation. These are not radical novels, formally or politically, but their overall effect for readers surely mixed pleasure with what Schaeffer calls the 'modelling', through immersion, of a critical, engaged sense of their own agency as women in an age of developing modernity. Lesueur's own refusal to acknowledge any qualitative distinction between middlebrow and popular fiction was probably echoed in her middle-class readers' public consumption of the one, and more surreptitious devouring of the other.

#### Marcelle Tinayre (1871–1948)

Like Lesueur, Marcelle Tinayre's career as a writer was motivated by an inextricable mix of literary aspiration and financial need. The daughter of a female primary school teacher, she too benefited from an unusually good education for a girl of her times, passing the baccalaureate in 1888 when this remained a rare feat for women. The same year, aged 17, she married the engraver Julien Tinayre and gave birth to four children over the following decade. Engraving was a profession increasingly threatened by photography, and the family's finances were fragile. Tinayre began to earn money by writing articles, reviews and stories for the press, achieving her breakthrough success in 1897 when her novel *Avant l'amour*, published by the *Mercure de France*, achieved high sales and some critical acclaim. She went on to publish 22 books, mostly novels but also including essays and travel writing, whilst continuing her work as a journalist and columnist.

As an author, Tinayre can be compared to Lesueur in several ways. She too occupied the upper ranks of that army of writers who fed the public's

appetite for fiction in the Belle Époque: many of her books achieved bestseller status, and she was also reviewed and reported with some respect as a serious middlebrow writer. She shared Lesueur's moderate republican feminism, writing for the feminist daily *La Fronde* from its inception in 1897 and sitting on the all-women jury of the Femina book prize. Her fiction appealed to the same mainly female – and probably mainly middle-class<sup>16</sup> – readership, depicting the contemporary age from a female perspective, keeping the pages turning through the narrative tension of the love story, pursuing what Jennifer Waelti-Walters calls a 'systematic study of the psychology of love' (1994, 68). Her stories work mimetically and immersively: everyday life in Belle Époque France is the context; plots are patterned to alternate tension and release; though these are 'novels of ideas' in which characters verbalise and debate the issues at stake, they also dramatise their themes through event and colourful characterisation, with secondary characters more explicitly functional than the more nuanced principals (in *La Rebelle*, for example, the devout aunt is named Mlle Miracle, whilst the supportive older feminist is Mlle Bon).

The conflict at the heart of most Tinayre narratives is that between the heroine's desire for self-realisation through professional or creative achievement, and her desire for love. In several Tinayre novels, an honourable if unconventional young woman struggles to reconcile a sense of personal integrity with an intense romantic relationship with a man. The search for a suitable hero who can accommodate a woman's freedom combines with the question, How should a modern woman live? Thus Hellé, eponymous heroine of an 1898 novel, is brought up by an unconventional guardian to consider herself the intellectual equal of her male peers, and must then negotiate her (in the novel's terms) authentic values against the glittering pleasures of fashionable Parisian society, and confront the prevailing belief that cleverness in a woman is sexually and romantically unappealing. Hellé's dilemma is resolved in the arms of a strong, enlightened socialist man with whom she can combine egalitarian comradeship and conventional romance: in Tinayre's case, feminist romances do sometimes end happily.

The novel for which Tinayre is best known, and which probably had most impact at the time of its publication, is the 1905 *La Rebelle*.<sup>17</sup> Here

<sup>16</sup> Though see note 17.

<sup>17</sup> *La Maison du péché* (1902) is also often cited as Tinayre's *chef-d'œuvre*. In this novel a young hero brought up in the austere Jansenist current of Catholicism

Tinayre amplified the plot of *Hellé* with an older, more experienced and radical heroine and a broader social panorama. Josanne is unhappily married as the story begins to a sickly, irascible husband whom she treats with devoted care, but she has also taken refuge from this unsatisfying relationship in a romantic affair with Maurice who, unbeknownst to anyone but the couple, is actually the father of her son. However Maurice, despite his charm, is a selfish young man whose concern for his own future takes precedence over commitment to his lover. As the novel opens, Josanne is waiting in the rain for his delayed arrival at their rendezvous, tired after a long day at the women's magazine where she works as general factotum. As she waits outside a bookshop, she idly leafs through a book entitled *La Travailleuse*, an essay on women and work by one Noël Delysle, and finds that it articulates the dilemma of her own life with surprising eloquence. She soon writes to the author to express her appreciation, correspondence ensues then later, after her husband's death and the end of the affair with Maurice, a meeting: this is the beginning of the romance that will drive the plot. The couple must negotiate a difficult path through Noël's jealousy of Josanne's past and the complexities of reconciling freedom, motherhood and love, but they end the novel in each other's arms.

Like Lesueur's heroines, Josanne is characterised as a woman of her age whose situation in many ways typifies that of her readers. Josanne's ordinariness is emphasised: she is dark, slim and pretty, but pretty in an unexceptional way that makes her a woman of her times, with a 'visage de moderne Parisienne' (Tinayre, 1905, 39; 'the face of a modern Parisienne') and a talent for dressing stylishly on a very low budget; she is a good housewife who takes pleasure in her own domestic skills and enjoys the sociability of shopping at the market; she is a devoted mother. The marked normality of Tinayre's heroine positions the reader with her as she combines these conventional feminine virtues with more transgressive forms of behaviour. Josanne is the family breadwinner, still a relatively rare situation in the middle classes, and her work means that she travels independently around the city and meets a wide variety

is torn between loyalty to his religion and love for an emancipated young artist: the struggle kills him. The wide currency of *La Rebelle* is confirmed by one of Anne-Marie Thiesse's interviewees, born in 1899, who recalled reading this 'scandalous' novel as a teenage factory worker: 'Ce roman parlait de l'émancipation de la femme, et il m'avait beaucoup plu' (Thiesse, 1984, 66; 'It was about women's emancipation, and I loved it!').



of people in her own right rather than as a wife or mother. Moreover, as the novel soon reveals, she has a lover and a child conceived outside marriage, and the central plotline will see the development of a second extra-marital love affair. 'Rebellious' behaviour is normalised: readers would need no prior subscription to feminist values to sympathise with Josanne's search for love, security for her child and the satisfaction of engagement with the wider society.

For as in Lesueur's fiction, the France portrayed in *La Rebelle* is the secular, urbanising, proudly modern France of the Belle Époque Republic. Whereas male middlebrow writing tended to identify women with rural settings, to which male characters might retreat from the more frenetic life of the city (as in Ohnet's *Le Maître de Forges* or Henry Bordeaux's *La Robe de laine*), Tinayre's heroine belongs in the bustle of Paris. Josanne's stay in the quiet provincial town of Chartres, after her husband's death, soon provokes restlessness and the clear recognition that she prefers 'la lutte, les risques, les fièvres de Paris au doux enlèvement provincial' (Tinayre, 1905, 67; 'the struggle, the risks, the fever of Paris to the gentle stagnation of the provinces'). When, in Chartres, she accompanies her elderly aunt to church, Josanne's secular republican values recoil from the sermon's message of guilt and submission, particularly for her own sex. 'Dès l'enfance', she reflects,

l'Église avait enseigné à ces femmes qu'elles devaient porter, plus que l'homme, le poids de la réprobation première et du péché originel. Elles étaient les résignées, les servantes, les sujettes, subordonnées au père et à l'époux, nées pour prier, souffrir et servir ... (Tinayre, 1905, 213)

(From childhood on, the Church had taught women that they, more than men, must bear the weight of original sin and the first shame. They were to be the resigned servants, subject to the authority of father and husband, born to pray, suffer and serve ...)

These thoughts lead her on, however, to the recognition of how little ideologies of gender have in fact changed in the new secular age: the 'morality of reason' of the Republic, Josanne (and thus the novel) comments, 'reproduisait exactement la morale religieuse, et, pour la femme en particulier, le code des droits et des devoirs demeurerait le même' (Tinayre, 1905, 213; 'reproduced exactly the morality of religion, and for women in particular the code of rights and duties remained identical') – without even the ultimate reward of eternal salvation. In Noël, the prototype of liberal, progressive, republican man, she will encounter the extreme difficulty of eradicating deeply rooted beliefs about men's rights

over women. Tinayre's middlebrow fiction situates women as agents of and participants in modernity, but also underlines the extent to which the new era maintains the patriarchal values of the old.

*La Rebelle* foreshadows another widely read novel centred on a heroine's conflicting desires for love, with its tenacious implications of female submission, and freedom: Colette's 1910 *La Vagabonde*, first published in serial form in the fashionable weekly *La Vie parisienne*. Colette's heroine finally opts not for the stability of marriage but for solitary *vagabondage* – not without regret, but with a passionate conviction of the incompatibility between romantic love and female integrity:

Tu es bon, et tu prétendais, de la meilleure foi du monde, m'apporter le bonheur, car tu m'as vue dénuée et solitaire. Mais tu avais compté sans mon orgueil de pauvresse: les plus beaux pays de la terre, je refuse de les contempler, tout petits, au miroir amoureux de ton regard [...] Vagabonde, et libre, je souhaiterai parfois l'ombre de tes murs [...] Ah! tu seras longtemps un des soifs de ma route. (I, 1231–32)

(You are good and, with the best faith in the world, you meant to bring me happiness, since you saw me deprived and solitary. But you counted without my beggar-woman's pride: I refuse to see the most beautiful countries of the world microscopically reflected in the amorous mirror of your eyes [Colette, 1960, 191])

Tinayre's dénouement is in every sense more cautious and conventional. Love conquers all: 'La victoire restait à l'amour qui n'avait pas faibli, qui n'avait pas désespéré, – à l'amour fort comme la vie' (1905, 372; 'Victory remained with a love that had never faltered, never despaired – a love as strong as life itself'), and where Colette's heroine refuses the intermediary of a male gaze between herself and the world, Tinayre offers a more reassuring assertion that romance can resolve the tensions of sexual inequality. Focalised from Noël's point of view, the closing passage nonetheless implies – perhaps inadvertently – that same primacy of the male perspective from which Colette's vagabond heroine flees: 'Il s'enivra de baiser le beau front intelligent où la pensée se formait, pareille à sa pensée; les yeux fidèles qui reflétaient ses yeux dans leurs miroirs sombres' (371; 'He passionately kissed the intelligent, lovely forehead where her thoughts took form, so like his thoughts; the faithful eyes that reflected his eyes in their dark mirrors'). Tinayre's novel articulates the dilemma of the 'new' woman, caught between liberty and love, equality and emotional fulfilment, and does so through a fictional heroine whose

mix of conventionality and rebellion made her an effective avatar for many middlebrow readers.

### Conclusion

If 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’ (Humble, 2001, 11–12), then the Belle Époque was the founding age of the middlebrow. The close association of middlebrow – or the mildly despised ‘ordinary’ novel – with women<sup>18</sup> also seems to begin in France at this period. The new climate of semi-universal literacy, mass commercial publishing and a changing social panorama created a middle-class demand for an explanatory, interpretative, mimetic literature of the age that could also furnish the pleasures of suspense, immersion in a fictional world, the geographic and emotional diversification of experience. Women made up a substantial proportion of the reading market, and because women in France of the Third Republic found themselves solicited both to conform to traditionally domestic and maternal roles, and to believe in values of liberty and equality that in theory applied to both sexes, they sought maps to negotiate the modern world and define their role within it. The middlebrow novel supplied page-turning romances that were also – far more than their male equivalents – quietly subversive, and invited reflection on the gender politics of the age and the place of women within modernity. Both Lesueur and Marcelle Tinayre provided their readers with avatar heroines whose quests to reconcile love, truth and their own sense of personal integrity drove the narratives, and carried the readers on virtual journeys through contemporary land- and cityscapes, and through moral terrain that was at once familiar and heightened into greater intensity and coherence.

18 Or what George Orwell termed in an English context the ‘*average* novel – the ordinary, good-bad, Galsworthy-and-water stuff which is the norm of the English novel’ – which, he went on, ‘seems to exist only for women’ (1969 [1936], 244).

## CHAPTER THREE

# Colette

## The Middlebrow Modernist

In her lifetime, and for many decades after her death, Colette occupied a ‘median position’ (André, 2000, 15) in the French literary field: betwixt and between, in Woolf’s phrase, belonging neither to the high literary canon of her era nor to the ranks of the simply popular. Her brilliance and originality as a crafter of French prose were certainly recognised, and with the publication of one of her greatest novels, *Chéri* in 1920, she was even praised by the masters of French modernism, notably Proust and Gide, the latter declaring himself ‘tout étonné du si grand plaisir que j’ai pris à vous lire’ (Colette, 1986, 1547; ‘amazed by the great pleasure I have taken in reading you’) in a letter to Colette. If the book’s quality was, for Gide, unexpected, this was because of the yawning gap between himself, ‘maître à penser d’une revue d’avant-garde dont toute la démarche littéraire est inscrite dans une logique de prestige’ (‘the recognised intellectual authority of a highly prestigious avant-garde journal’) and a Colette ‘aux débuts passablement scandaleux’ (‘whose early days were fairly scandalous’) and whose ‘logique’ was decidedly more commercial (André, 2000, 30). Colette had few intellectual credentials, was perhaps best known for her colourful private life, and appealed to a large – and, worse still, female – popular readership. However well she wrote, she did not fit the image of a serious writer. Marie-Odile André<sup>1</sup> has shown how Colette was nonetheless legitimised from the later 1920s on by inclusion in the French school curriculum, but at the cost of being sanitised as essentially a writer on nature and animals, so that generations of French readers first encountered her as the source of tryingly difficult

1 See André’s scrupulously researched study of the reception of Colette’s work in France: *Les Mécanismes de classification d’un écrivain* (2000).

passages for dictation or stylistic analysis. Her image in France, and thus elsewhere, fluctuated between scandal and bowdlerised respectability, until second-wave feminist critics from the 1970s recognised in her a rare and radical feminine voice, though one who still fell awkwardly outside the master narrative of French literary history.

Since feminist work on Colette has been at pains to point out that she is as challengingly original in style and moral vision as her celebrated male contemporaries, it may seem perverse to wish to confirm her now as middlebrow. But my point is this: Colette managed the very unusual feat of writing as a modernist, in terms of challenging themes, experimental style and play with genre, whilst simultaneously remaining accessible to a very large, devoted and non-intellectual readership. She was middlebrow in the sense of bridging the *élite* and popular ends of the literary spectrum. None of her great contemporaries such as Proust, Gide or Valéry achieved this – or indeed even sought to do so. Nor of course did any of them lay down their pens to go and dance semi-naked on a music-hall stage, or write columns for the mainstream press that mixed handy recipes with exquisitely crafted stories.

### A middlebrow career begins: the Claudine cycle

Colette always insisted that she suffered from no burning ambition to be a writer, but fell into writing because she happened to marry Willy, that literary entrepreneur of the Belle Époque. The story is well known of how Willy belatedly recognised the marketable talents of his young wife, and set her to work on the assembly line of subcontracted authors published under his signature. The Claudine series was a success beyond his wildest dreams, spawning adaptations for the stage, spin-off commodities (perfume, ‘Claudine’ collars, cigarette holders ...) and welcome publicity for their supposed author. When the first, *Claudine à l’école* (1900) proved so profitable, Colette was immediately put to work on the sequel *Claudine à Paris* (1901), in which the heroine leaves her village schooldays behind for Paris and falls in love with the handsome Renaud, then *Claudine en ménage* (1902), dealing with her married life. In *Claudine s’en va* (1903), the narrative voice passes to a new character, Annie, and Claudine appears as a secondary protagonist. Claudine’s story concludes with *La Retraite sentimentale* in 1907, published under the name Colette Willy and coinciding with the end of her creator’s marriage. Sales of the Claudine books were phenomenal: according to

the scholarly Pléiade edition of Colette's work, their success 'au sens quantitatif et commercial du mot, l'un des plus grands, sinon le plus grand, de toute la littérature française' (I, lxvii; 'in the quantitative, commercial sense of the word, was one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, of the whole of French literature').<sup>2</sup> Thus it is safe to assume that beyond Willy's habitual target audience of male fans of erotica, the Claudine novels reached a wide cross-class readership of both sexes. The reasons for their success both connect Colette to her widely read female contemporaries and establish a relationship with readers that would underpin Colette's whole writing career.

With Claudine, Colette created a heroine to suit the age, a 'girl for today' as Roger Vadim would describe Brigitte Bardot in the 1950s (quoted in Bernert, 1991, 1086).<sup>3</sup> Claudine is the passionate, irreverent, self-willed product of the contradictions besetting the lives of Belle Époque women: she has precursors in Gyp's Chiffon (*Le Mariage de Chiffon*, 1894) and Tinayre's *Hellé* (1898), both outspoken *ingénues* who oppose dominant views of women's subaltern role with a firm belief in their own right to self-determination, yet for whom a happy ending is still synonymous with marriage. Claudine too combines contestation with romance, but in a manner that is at once more entertaining and more subversive. As a beneficiary of the free state schooling introduced for both sexes by the Third Republic (1881), Colette's heroine (unlike her predecessors) is representative of the more popular end of Belle Époque readership, the affluent bourgeoisie on the whole continuing to prefer a private, often Catholic education for their daughters. On the one hand, Claudine provides a caustically irreverent view of the *école républicaine*, with its solemn emphasis on patriotism, the work ethic and the ideal of the virtuous wife and mother: 'O Bérillon!' she apostrophises the author of one piously republican textbook on *La bonne ménagère agricole* (The Good Country Housewife), 'que tu as amusé ces sales petites filles, dont j'étais!' (*Claudine à l'école*, I, 265; 'how you made us laugh, all those rude little girls of whom I was one'). She depicts its agents with gleeful disrespect, from schoolmistresses to regional inspectors to the Minister

2 All references to Colette's work are to the Pléiade edition in four volumes – thus Roman numeral references are to the volume number.

3 Like Bardot's star persona, composed of both the actress and the roles she played on-screen, Claudine became a role model for young French women, who imitated her dress, short hair (Colette herself cut her long hair in 1902) and 'gamine' style.

of Education himself, described on his official visit to Claudine's school as a 'rogue petit monsieur à ventre de bouvreuil' (*Claudine à l'école*, I, 200; 'a cross little man with a stomach like a bullfinch'). Yet at the same time, as Patricia Tilburg (2009) has shown, like her creator, Claudine remains thoroughly imbued with the values that informed her education: she retains the active spirit of enquiry, the belief in the value of hard work and self-improvement, the pursuit of physical fitness (*in mens sana corpore sano*) that the school, for all her mockery, taught her. Thus, at a time when the avant-garde largely despised the republican discourse of democracy, scientific progress, shared endeavour and self-improvement, Claudine spoke to the generation that had benefited from these secular ideals. The post-school Claudine approaches life in Paris with an investigative energy and a secure sense of her own integrity (she responds to a casual grope from a male passer-by with a swift umbrella blow to the head) that correspond to the school's emphasis on mental enquiry and personal agency. In a sense, this is further confirmed by Claudine's characteristic tone of humorous scepticism: as Tilburg argues, republican schooling may have been intended to produce dutiful republican wives and mothers, but its emphasis on academic achievement, secular democracy and rational enquiry was helpfully at odds with its overt lessons on gender.

Claudine's confident sense of her own agency is rendered in part through her distinctive voice, for throughout the first three volumes, and in *La Retraite sentimentale*, she is the sole narrator of her own story. The narrative takes the form of Claudine's journal, the keeping of which also answers the imperative, learned at school, to interrogate, understand and record experience.<sup>4</sup> At the opening of *Claudine à Paris*, she explains, 'Il va falloir, pour l'honneur de mes cahiers, que je raconte pourquoi j'ai quitté Montigny' (I, 221; 'For the honour of this journal, I will have to recount why I left Montigny'), and *Claudine en ménage* begins with a critical review of the heroine's recent past: 'Tâchons de mettre un peu d'ordre dans cette salade de souvenirs' (I, 380; 'Let's try and put a bit of order into this muddle of memories'). Like many personal diaries, Claudine's assumes an undefined but significant

4 Working from contemporary documents such as the 1887 *Dictionnaire de pédagogie*, Tilburg shows how pupils of the republican school – including, quite explicitly, girls – were taught to combine observation with judgement and independent thought, and thus to develop into well-informed secular subjects equipped with 'refined, fortified individual judgment and will' (2009, 60).

addressee, who here corresponds to the reader of Colette's text, exhorted to 'Écoutez plutôt' (*Claudine à Paris*, I, 222; 'Now listen'). The imagined reader justifies the ordering of memories, the self-interrogation on the meaning of experience, the attempts to articulate and explain feelings and impressions. And Claudine is largely a reliable narrator: if she misreads a situation or misjudges a person (as in her failure to recognise Renaud's self-interested complicity in her lesbian affair with Rézi in *Claudine en ménage*), it is she who will discover and rectify this, rather than allow the reader to transcend her perspective.

Unlike Tinayre's *Hellé* or *Rebelle*, for example, the Claudine novels provide no wise heroes who can help to hone the heroine's moral judgement. Claudine's beloved father is an erudite malacologist, comically ill-equipped to deal with human life as opposed to that of the molluscs he studies. If Claudine herself recognises in her attraction to the older, sophisticated Renaud an element of desire for a substitute father – 'À cause de ce noble père, plutôt lunatique, qui est le mien, j'ai besoin d'un papa, d'un ami, d'un amant' (*Claudine à Paris*, I, 362; 'Because of this noble but somewhat mad father of mine, I need a papa, a friend, a lover') – she also soon recognises Renaud's limitations, notably his 'incurable et séduisante frivolité' (*Claudine en ménage*, I, 414; 'incurable and enchanting frivolity') that leaves her, morally, on her own. The sole moral compass in the Claudine novels is Claudine herself. And through the secondary characters of her schoolmates, Colette also sketches in the material realities of women's lives in the Belle Époque that make Claudine's indomitable conviction of her own agency both exceptional and salutary. Unlike most of the girls who attended local state schools, Claudine enjoys the privileges of money and class. For her friends, the daughters 'd'épiciers, de cultivateurs, de gendarmes et d'ouvriers' (*Claudine à l'école*, I, 10; 'of grocers, farmers, policemen and labourers'), the height of post-school ambition is to enter the École Normale and become primary teachers, a life that Colette's novels, like those of her contemporary Gabrielle Reval,<sup>5</sup> depict as underpaid and incompatible with marriage or family. Alternatively, like Claudine's classmate Luce, girls of slender means may escape domestic drudgery by selling their bodies. Luce's story acts as a grim doubling of Claudine's own: she too comes to Paris and embarks on a sexual relationship with a

5 Reval (1870–1938) was herself a teacher and the author of novels, such as *Sévriennes* (1900), which dramatised both the hardships and the satisfactions of training and working as a woman teacher under the Third Republic.



much older relative (Renaud is Claudine's uncle by marriage). In Luce's case, however, the uncle is a physically repellent man with an unsavoury taste for young girls, and she pays dearly for the creature comforts he provides. Claudine's romance is thus shadowed by a darker reminder of the real limitations on women's lives, and the difficulty of achieving the relative autonomy that Claudine represents. The story of Annie, imprisoned in her marriage to an affluent, respectable and domineering husband in *Claudine s'en va*, also confirms Claudine as a rebel against the normal female lot of her generation.

Like her near contemporaries Lesueur and Tinayre, Colette combines a critical view of her society's sexual politics with an upbeat portrayal of modernity focalised from a female perspective. Claudine takes full advantage of the relative freedom and mobility offered by the modern city, shocking her conservative aunt by travelling unchaperoned on foot or by public transport, attending theatres and concerts, and soon mingling – thanks to Renaud's connections – with the more bohemian end of fashionable society, where the sexes mix freely. Indeed, the sketches of many famous personalities of the day, writers, artists and eccentric socialites like Willy himself, lightly fictionalised as Renaud's friend Maugis, probably added the pleasures of the gossip magazine to the novels' many sources of appeal. The milieu which Colette depicts from *Claudine à Paris* onwards is a sophisticated and licentious one in which sexual liaisons, both hetero- and homosexual, are part of the social fabric, and courtesans mingle with artists, politicians and outwardly respectable couples. This undoubtedly provided a frisson for readers in an age when the normative model for women remained virginity till marriage and fidelity thereafter, and it also set the scene for Colette's radical treatment of love and sex.

The Claudine novels, like those of Lesueur and Tinayre, deploy the script of romance but do so critically, questioning the relationship between romantic love and female self-fulfilment. The differences are telling, however. Other Belle Époque women writers queried the possibility of authentic love in a society based on sexual inequality, but maintained the ideal of heterosexual union as the ultimate form of happiness. Colette questions the validity of that ideal. Despite her robust self-reliance, Claudine, a girl of her times, shares the dream of a strong, protective male lover, the Prince Charming who will be not only the provider of emotional and sexual fulfilment but also what Beauvoir would later call the 'sujet essentiel' (1949, 489), he who justifies and guarantees her existence. The potency of the myth is there in Claudine's

desire for ‘un papa, un ami, un amant’ united in one figure, and in her acknowledgement of a longing to experience submission to another will: ‘Obéir, obéir, humiliation que je n’ai jamais subie – j’allais écrire savourée’ (*Claudine à Paris*, I, 343; ‘To obey, to obey, a humiliation I have never suffered – I almost wrote savoured’). Renaud will reveal himself to be more trivial and less assured in his moral judgements than Claudine herself, however, and at the end of *Claudine en ménage*, as finally in *La Retraite sentimentale*, it is through a return to her own resources that she must find fulfilment. Beginning the cycle as a sociable but fundamentally solitary and self-reliant heroine, happiest in her beloved woods at Montigny, Claudine returns to this state towards the end of *Claudine en ménage*, encourages the escape of Annie from oppressive marriage to solitary *vagabondage*<sup>6</sup> in *Claudine s’en va*, and retreats again into solitary independence when Colette, her own marriage over, finally killed off the increasingly flimsy character of Renaud in *La Retraite sentimentale*.<sup>7</sup> The romance script loses out repeatedly in the struggle with an alternative narrative of female autonomy.

Even at those moments in the cycle when the classic script of romance is followed, it is lightly undermined by humour. Thus the ending of *Claudine à Paris*, the only one of the novel cycle to observe the structure of the love story – solitary heroine meets her man, falls in love, overcomes obstacles and ends the story in his arms – seems set for predictable closure with the couple, now engaged to be married, locked in an embrace:

Et nous retournons dans ma chambre, moi toute serrée dans ses bras, lui qui m’emporte comme s’il me volait, tous deux ailés et bêtes comme des amoureux de romance. (*Claudine à Paris*, I, 376)

(And we went back into my bedroom, me held tightly in his arms as if he were stealing me away, both of us walking on air and silly with happiness like lovers in a romance)

6 Annie is a precursor of Renée Néré, the heroine of Colette’s 1910 novel *La Vagabonde* – a title that Colette proposed for this novel, but which was ruled out by the commercial need to keep the Claudine brand going.

7 Colette confirmed the pleasure she took in getting rid of Renaud in *L’Étoile Vesper* (1947): ‘Ce séducteur mûr, sorti de l’imagination d’une jeune femme assez jeune fille pour croire aux séducteurs mûrs, je ne l’eus pas plut tôt créé que je le pris en grippe, et dès qu’il me prêta le flanc je le tuai’ (IV, 840; ‘This ripe seducer, born of the imagination of a young woman still girlish enough to believe in ripe seducers, I had no sooner created him than I took a dislike to him, and as soon as he gave me the chance I killed him off’ [Colette, 1987, 96]).

But the door then suddenly reopens to admit Mélie, Claudine's rustically epicurean maid (and former wet nurse), carrying before her that singularly unromantic object, the cat's litter tray. 'Non! La figure de Renaud!' ('No! The look on Renaud's face!'), exclaims Claudine. And delighted as she is by her charge's happiness, Mélie is no believer in the one true love, but referring to Renaud's gay son Marcel, whom she has previously assumed to be Claudine's suitor, reassures the bride-to-be that: 't'as bien raison de prendre le grand [...] pardi, il sera toujours bien temps, si la marchandise te plaît point, de t'appliquer le petit' (376; 'You're right to take the old one [...] of course, if you don't like the merchandise you can always go for the young one instead').<sup>8</sup>

Marcel's homosexuality is 'camped up' for humorous purposes in the Claudine novels, but it does not single him out as a deviant or outsider, since many other characters, including the heroine-narrator, experience same-sex desire. Most mainstream fiction of the day assumed heterosexuality as the norm, but Colette describes the body of Renaud and that of her female lover, Rézi, with equally sensual precision, and is puzzled by Renaud's conviction that 'l'adultère est une question de sexe' (*Claudine en ménage*, I, 468; 'adultery is a matter of sex'). This frank and unconventional depiction of sex was facilitated by the books' appearance under the signature of a man, and one known for his erotic publications moreover, and it creates another important difference between Colette and her contemporaries, who largely observed the proprieties of depicting sex only through coded allusion. Some of the erotic passages in the Claudine novels may well be embellishments by Willy, aimed at the reader as male voyeur, but others simply provide an unusually explicit female perspective on sex and are surely Colette's own. Thus Claudine, for all her initial status as a virginal *jeune fille*, simply takes her own sexual appetites for granted and finds a lack of desire unnerving: 'C'est curieux comme, depuis ma maladie, j'ai l'imagination et les nerfs chastes' (*Claudine à Paris*, I, 236; 'It's odd how chaste my imagination and my nerves are since I've been ill'). Claudine's attraction to Renaud has a strong sexual component, and once married she finds extreme pleasure in what she ironically calls her 'conjugal duty' – 'Sa peau foncée et lisse glisse contre la mienne [...] tout

8 This was the novel's original ending. In the Fleuron edition (1948), Colette cut the final passage and allowed the Renaud-Claudine romance to end more conventionally, albeit with a touch of self-reflexive irony, on 'comme des amoureux de romance' ('like lovers in a romance'). The Pléaïde edition reinstates the original version.

ce grand corps où je fis tant de découvertes passionnantes!’ (*Claudine en ménage*, I, 385; ‘His smooth, dark skin glides against mine [...] all of that big body where I made so many thrilling discoveries’) – but also, through an unmistakable analogy, alludes to the possible discomfort of penetrative sex: ‘Ce puissant Renaud me fait songer, par similitude, aux manies de la grande Anaïs qui voulait toujours gainer ses mains de gants trop étroits’ (*Claudine en ménage*, I, 385; ‘Renaud’s potency makes me think of [schoolfriend] Anaïs, who always tried to squeeze her big hands into gloves that were too small’). Decadent authors, writing for a smaller and more blasé readership, had been depicting diverse forms of sexuality since the 1880s, but in novels read by the general public it was unusual to find heterosexual relations at once relativised as one form of desire among others, and celebrated with such mimetic accuracy – particularly from a woman’s point of view.

Early twentieth-century critics were right in a sense to situate Colette as just one of a generation of women writers. The Claudine novels sold so well because they addressed a very contemporary agenda discernible too in the widely read fiction of Lesueur, Tinayre and others: where did women fit within the new landscape of modernity and the officially egalitarian ideology of the new Republic? How could romantic love be reconciled with the patriarchal institution of marriage? Colette’s stories addressed these questions with passion, humour and an appealing combination of mainstream values and subversive chutzpah. Claudine spoke to contemporary readers partly because she embodied values and aspirations taught to and shared by her generation: ‘Au fond, Claudine, tu n’ès qu’une vulgaire honnête fille’ (*Claudine à Paris*, I, 328–29; ‘At heart, Claudine, you’re just an ordinary honest girl’) she upbraids herself, and in her sense of integrity, concern with physical fitness, analytical attentiveness to nature, society and psychology, and her ideal of a romantic union, she is indeed an ‘honnête fille’ of the Third Republic. On the other hand, though, Claudine was also the ‘New Woman’ of modernity, and beneath the novels’ irreverent tone and sometimes salacious humour runs an attention to the gaps between supposedly universal ideals and real possibilities for women. The recurring narrative movement of the Claudine cycle, despite its heroine’s passionate love for Renaud, is one of retreat from the marriage bond: Claudine’s repeated returns to rural solitude are echoed more graphically in Annie’s reversal of the romance script, in which a conventionally unequal marriage is likened to imprisonment, and the happy ending takes the form of escape to open-ended, solitary adventure: ‘Qu’a-t-il fallu? simplement

que le geôlier distrait tournât les talons, pour que l'horreur de la prison apparût, pour que brillât la lumière aux fentes de la porte' (*Claudine s'en va*, I, 663; 'What had it taken? It only took the gaoler to turn his back for a moment for the horror of the prison to become apparent, and the light to shine through the cracks in the door').

'Une femme parmi les autres'

Claudine's final exit from conjugality in *La Retraite sentimentale* barely preceded Colette's own separation and divorce from Willy.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, it was with some relief that she jettisoned her fictional alter ego, addressing Claudine in a 1908 article, 'Le Miroir', as 'mon double orgueilleux!' ('My proud double!') and declaring, 'Je ne parlerai plus de ce qui est à vous' ('I will no longer speak of what belongs to you'); Claudine's retreat into rural solitude would not be Colette's: 'A vous encore, non pas à moi, cette forteresse de solitude où, lentement, vous vous consume'z' (I, 1031; 'This fortress of solitude where you are slowly wasting away – this is yours, not mine'). Alongside a new career as a music-hall mime and dancer, and a new relationship with Missy (the Marquise de Morny), she continued to publish, under the name 'Colette Willy'. Writing remained a means to make a living as much as a passion for, financially, Colette needed – and this would remain the case throughout most of her life – to publish regularly, rather than focus her energy solely on time-consuming books. She had already published articles in the feminist daily *La Fronde* under the pseudonym 'Eddy' (1899–90), and signed some pieces 'Claudine' for the review *Gil Blas*. From 1907, she began to sell articles regularly to *La Vie Parisienne*, a fashionable, somewhat risqué publication that nonetheless prided itself on coverage of the arts.<sup>10</sup> Many of these pieces were then collected to be published in a volume in 1908 as *Les Vrilles de la vigne*, inaugurating a pattern that predominated throughout Colette's career of combining journalism with literary publication, the topical and potentially ephemeral with texts that were both poetic and profound, material necessity with artistic inspiration.

9 The printing of *La Retraite* was completed on 10 February 1907 – on the 13th the separation between Willy and Colette became official (I, 1537).

10 In this, *La Vie parisienne* resembled the American magazine *Playboy* in its 1950s to '70s heyday.

Journalism would form a significant strand of Colette's writing throughout her career. Even as she moved upwards in the literary hierarchy, thanks to recognition by some of the period's most respected cultural gatekeepers – Proust, Gide and the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in the 1920s, the progressive if middlebrow *Nouvelles Littéraires*<sup>11</sup> which championed her throughout the same decade, and by the 1940s the Académie Goncourt, of which she became President in 1949 – she continued to publish regularly in the mass-market press. Drawing on her own everyday experience and often addressing her readers directly, she constructed a public self closely based on her own, real-life persona, and invented a new form of journalistic writing described by the critic André Billy in 1923 as 'un journalisme lyrique [...], fondé sur les rencontres quotidiennes d'une vie de femme, de mère, de voyageuse, d'artiste, avec les événements de l'histoire' (Colette, 1986, II, 1430; 'a lyrical form of journalism [...] grounded in everyday encounters in the life of a woman, a mother, a traveller, an artist and the events of history'). Her articles and regular columns appeared in publications that ranged across the political and the serious/popular spectrum, from high-quality papers like *Le Matin* (where she was also literary editor from 1918 to 1924) or *Le Figaro*, to popular dailies (*Paris-Soir*, where her column was entitled 'une femme parmi les femmes', *Le Petit Parisien*) and women's magazines (*Vogue*, *Marie-Claire*, and after the Second World War the new, proudly modern *Elle*). Her journalism addressed the everyday, the contingent and the topical alongside the weightily existential – life backstage in the vibrant entertainment industries of the Belle Époque, bereavement and disablement in the First World War, surviving shortages and national humiliation in the Second World War, fashion, love, memory and ageing as constant themes – with equal attention to the mimetic precision of a word, the verbal capture of fleeting sensation and impression, and the upsetting of normative 'truths' through unexpected angles (one of her exemplary figures of patriotic resistance under the Occupation is a stoical prostitute) or figures of speech such as paradox and oxymoron.

11 The *Nouvelles Littéraires* was the best-selling literary periodical of the 1920s. In its pages Willy and Colette conducted a public argument over their respective roles in the authorship of the Claudine novels, Colette presenting her case in an interview on 27 March 1926, and Willy replying the following week. It was also the *Nouvelles* that first began to make Colette's childhood and rural origins central to her characterisation as an author, for example with the article 'Au Pays de Colette' by Henry Dalby on 1 September 1928.

Situated firmly, often literally, ‘in the crowd’,<sup>12</sup> Colette’s journalism shaped her public image as an accessible writer, and one whose perspective was explicitly gendered female. She welcomed and took seriously popular everyday pastimes and pleasures, from music hall and cinema to fashion, sewing and cooking. Her public persona changed with the age and with her own ageing: she was the New Woman, attuned to mainstream republican values but implicitly refusing their assumption of male supremacy; she was a mature woman, a fond mother (more so on paper than in her personal life), nostalgic for a rural childhood but very much part of the urban; she was the nation’s ‘grande Colette’, something of a national treasure, though still with a wicked gleam in her eye, a sharp tongue and pen, and the capacity to suddenly illuminate an object, a moment, an issue through unexpected observations and analogies that punctured the complacency of the period’s ‘common sense’.

The journalism, though, much of it published in the popular press and women’s magazines, was more an impediment than a help to being taken seriously as a writer. What counted in terms of literary reputation, and what over time reached the widest readership, are the books. In terms of ‘brows’, Colette certainly moved up the perceived hierarchy of letters from the 1920s, when recognition from some of the great literary names of the day led to working with more ‘serious’ publishers such as Flammarion and Grasset, the latter consecrating her as a literary author in 1928 by bringing out a first ‘collected works’. Jean Larnac published the first book-length study of Colette’s work in 1927 (*Colette, sa vie, son œuvre*). Histories of French literature still presented her as just part of the collective phenomenon of Belle Époque ‘littérature féminine’ (the most-cited names were Tinayre, Anna de Noailles, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Gérard d’Houville – Lesueur had already disappeared from literary history), but they tended to distinguish her from the others particularly in terms of the quality of her style: she was beginning to be seen as a ‘trésor de la langue française’ (André, 2000, 212). An awkward mismatch nonetheless persisted between the hegemonic image of the great writer, and Colette the former music-hall dancer, popular journalist ... and woman. Novelist and critic Nicole Ward-Jouve, who

12 *Dans la foule* (*In the Crowd*) is the title of a volume that brings together many of Colette’s pieces for *Le Matin* published between 1911 and 1914. Colette reported from among the crowd on (for example) the police shoot-out with the violent ‘Bonnot gang’, elections, the visit to Paris of King George V, major criminal trials, the final race of the tour de France, new fashions and the circus.

came of age in the France of the 1950s, recalls first encountering Colette through the general perception of her as the author of ‘fanciful and shallow’ books. For an academically inclined girl, ‘taught to admire superior male topics’, the ‘immoral’, ‘frivolous and feminine’ writer of titles that sounded like ‘diminutives, endearments, baby talk’ (*Mitsou*, *Chéri*, *Gigi*) was surely of little interest; ‘Real literature was about mind and anguish and nothingness and night, white or black. It spoke of the absurd and of role-playing, class-warfare, neo-colonial guilt and existence and essence’ (Ward Jouve, 1987, 1–3). Ergo, Colette was not part of ‘real literature’.

Her ‘frivolous and feminine’ books nevertheless remained very much a part of the literature which people chose to read. There is no scope here to cover the range of Colette’s considerable output, and in any case detailed critical work has already been done on the fine gradations between her life writing and fiction, on her generic innovations and on the texts themselves.<sup>13</sup> This discussion of Colette’s post-Claudine literature will focus on a limited number of texts to illustrate three of the features that make her work at once profound and popular, formally innovative and immensely readable.

### (i) A situated writing

Colette was not in any obvious sense a committed writer – indeed she enjoyed countering interviewers who tried to elicit her opinion on ‘serious’ matters with tongue-in-cheek demurrals: ‘J’écris, Monsieur – faut-il aussi que je pense?’ (Goudekot, 1965, 157; ‘I write, Monsieur – do I have to think as well?’). Yet many of her narratives are very specifically located in history and cast a critically illuminating lens on their times. The pre-1914 novels that followed the Claudine cycle depict a rapidly changing social world from a woman’s point of view: Renée Néré, heroine of *La Vagabonde* and its sequel *L’Entrave* (1913), confronts the practical as well as emotional difficulties of living as a single woman after divorce, in a society where female careers were extremely limited – ‘Que veux-tu que je fasse?’ (‘What would you like me to do?’), Renée asks of the lover who considers her work as a dancer demeaning, ‘De la couture, de la dactylographie, ou le trottoir?’ [I, 1172; ‘Seamstress, shorthand typist, or streetwalker?’] – landlords were wary of renting

13 See for example Flieger (1992); Freedman (2012).



to unattached women, and divorce meant a sudden descent of the social ladder for a woman. These are also novels that depict, warmly but without sentimentality, strata of society rarely granted literary representation, particularly that of workers in the sizeable entertainment industries of the Belle Époque. Though Colette often returned to the period of her own youth in later fiction (for example in *Chéri*, written in 1920 but set in 1912–13, or *Gigi*, written in 1944 and set in 1898–1900), offering the reader fiction's magic carpet ride to a vividly depicted Belle Époque Paris, she still often dealt obliquely with issues contemporary at the time of writing. Thus the plot of *Gribiche*, published in 1936 as the Front Populaire came to power, hinges on a botched illegal abortion and the solidarity of underpaid music-hall workers. Pro-natalist laws that criminalised contraception and abortion were still active in France, and the election of a left-wing government produced the short-lived hope of a real attack on social (including gender) inequalities. The success of *Gigi* had much to do with the escape it offered from the traumatic period of the Occupation, but its drily affectionate treatment of a milieu in which prostitution is a respectable business with its own complex etiquette offered a nice riposte to Vichyite moralism, while the plot, at once romantic and hinging on Gigi's stubborn insistence on determining her own future, chimed with the renewed post-war emphasis on the couple, but also on female equality.<sup>14</sup>

The First World War, though, is perhaps the historical event of which Colette wrote most clearly for a contemporary public, in both journalism and fiction. *Mitsou, ou comment l'esprit vient aux filles* was first serialised in 1917 in *La Vie parisienne* then published as a book, revised and lengthened, in 1919. Colette uses a variety of narrative techniques – theatrical dialogue and stage directions, as in a play script, omniscient narration, letters – to tell a love story between a young music-hall dancer and a handsome young officer on leave from the front. Mitsou earns little from her dancing and is also, in a spirit of quiet pragmatism, the kept mistress of an industrialist, the acronymic title of whose companies forms the name she goes by (Minoteries Italo-Tarbaïses and Scieries Orléanaises Unifiées; II, 669). Both the omniscient narrator's commentary and Mitsou's own voice establish her as a young woman whose instinctive grace and intelligence override her lack of means or education: she is soberly attentive to her responsibilities as an employee

14 French women finally gained the right to vote, and theoretical equality as citizens, in the new post-war Constitution.

both of the music hall and of her semi-paternal lover, ‘L’Homme Bien’, as she discreetly refers to him, and her gradual discovery of love and desire with her ‘Lieutenant Bleu’, as she names Robert, intensifies Mitsou’s perceptiveness as well as her droll and moving eloquence.

The lovers first meet when Mitsou’s more worldly wise fellow dancer, Petite Chose – ‘Je ne suis pas une personne pour le tricot! [ni] pour les pansements [ni] le colis aux prisonniers. Je suis une personne pour la chose du machin, et qui ne se retournerait pas pour voir tomber le tonnerre quand elle a un beau gosse devant elle!’ [672; ‘I’m not one for knitting! [nor] for bandages or parcels for prisoners-of-war. I’m more one for you-know-what, and a bolt of lightning won’t distract me when there’s a handsome chap around!’) – decides to hide two young officers on an illicit visit backstage, one uniformed in blue and one in khaki, not in her own dressing room but in that of Mitsou, whose reputation as a serious girl will make their discovery less likely. The relationship begins properly with letters, like so many romances in the years when most young men were conscripted into the army. Mitsou’s limited education tells in her grammatical errors and spelling mistakes, but her sincerity and wit shine through and a growing mutual tenderness develops, apparent in, for example, Robert’s detailed recall of the colours of Mitsou’s body – ‘[le] rouge pétunia de vos joues [...] vos bras et le sillon de votre dos paraissaient verts, verts comme les lilas blancs qu’on oblige à fleurir en hiver’ [683; ‘the petunia red of your cheeks [...], your arms and the curve of your back looked green, the green of white lilacs forced to flower in winter’) – and Mitsou’s careful choice of gifts to send to the front, including a length of pink velvet the exact shade of the stockings she was wearing when they met, and her frankness about the future:

Il n’y a que trois grand événements de possible dans notre vie à nous autres: la mort, la célébrité théâtrale et l’amour. Mon cher Lieutenant Bleu, quel est celui des trois qui va me tombé [*sic*] sur la tête ou sur le cœur? J’attends. (II, 682)

(There are only three big events that can happen in lives like ours [i.e. music-hall performers]: death, fame and love. My dear Blue Lieutenant, which of these three is going to land on my head or in my heart? I’m waiting to see)

When they meet again at Robert’s next leave, their differences of class and education complicate the restaurant dinner and the night together in Mitsou’s apartment, and the horror of the trenches comes between Robert and any simple pleasure he might take in the occasion. But

focalisation of the encounter from each of their perspectives confirms its importance for both. For Mitsou it is the revelation of love, inseparable from the delight of a young male body that answers her own: ‘vous ne vous occupiez que de me prendre toute à la fois et tout uniment’ (II, 715; ‘you were only concerned to take me, all of me all at once’), she writes gratefully when Robert has returned to the front; for Robert, a sense that Mitsou is a presage of the woman he will love when age and the end of the war allow him to: ‘elle aura la douceur, et une certaine fierté, la tienne, à endurer discrètement le chagrin. J’aimerais qu’elle eût, par surcroît, un assez grand cœur sous de pareils petits seins’ (710; ‘She will have your gentleness, and a certain pride – your pride – in enduring sorrow quietly. Moreover I would like her to have a big heart beneath little breasts like yours’). The final letters leave open the possibility of a continuing love story: the barriers of social difference may not resist the force of their tenderness for each other, though the poignancy is heightened by the very strong chance that Robert will not survive the war. Proust wrote to Colette to tell her that after reading *Mitsou*, ‘I wept tonight, for the first time in a very long time’ (II, 1513).

The designation of the hero as ‘le Lieutenant Bleu’ has several functions: along with the other appellations by role (‘L’Homme bien’, Mitsou’s dresser is ‘La Vieille Dame’), it lends the story a fabular tone, as does the subtitle borrowed from *La Fontaine*;<sup>15</sup> it contributes to the characterisation of Mitsou, for her address to Robert as ‘mon Lieutenant Bleu’ neatly combines discreet distance with warmth; above all, it makes him not just an individual, but a representative of his generation of young men conscripted after 1915 when the sky-blue uniform was adopted by the French infantry. He is one of that class of soldiers whom the war ‘a pris à la porte du collège dont nous sortions’ (‘took at the school gate we were leaving through’), those who missed out on their youth and the years when they might have learned to ‘approcher, sans épouvante comme sans cannibalisme, des femmes qui ne songent pas tout le temps à notre désir ou à notre argent’ (II, 683; ‘approach, without fear and without cannibalism, women who are not thinking only of our desire or our money’). The narrative, like Mitsou herself, treats sympathetically his difficulty in negotiating what his class would assume to be a casual, throwaway relationship with a working-class girl, when

15 *La Fontaine*’s fable was a more conventionally salacious account of how girls acquire ‘esprit’ (wit, intelligence) through losing their virginity. Colette’s allusion to this reinforces her story’s refusal of its politics.

it turns out to be something much more profound. Interior monologues render Robert's youth, his exhaustion, his conflicting mix of simple pleasure in Mitsou's company and his sense of duty to behave as a lover: on the night at Mitsou's flat, he is torn between the desire to sink into the clean sheets and Mitsou's companionable body and simply sleep, and his sense of masculine duty to set about 'l'amour nécessaire, [...] l'étreinte inéluctable ... "Allons!" [...] La bouche d'abord, oui, la bouche. La gorge ensuite, n'oublions pas la gorge ...' (II, 704; 'necessary lovemaking, [...] the inevitable embrace ... "Here we go!" [...] The mouth first, yes, the mouth. Then the breasts, let's not forget them ...'). His physical beauty is lyrically focalised through Mitsou's dazzled eyes – for l'Homme Bien has left her appreciative of any man without a middle-aged paunch – and both of these devices contribute to the novel's lament for all those millions of young men lost in the mud of the trenches:

Dans la chambre de Mitsou, sur le mur tendu de dentelle au chevet du lit, il y a pour la première fois une image magnifique: l'ombre d'un torse de cavalier nu, mince à la ceinture, large aux épaules, courbé sur sa cavale invisible. (II, 704–05)

(In Mitsou's room, etched on the lace-covered wall at the head of the bed, for the first time there is a magnificent image: the shadow of a naked rider, slim waisted and broad shouldered, leaning over his invisible steed)

Much male-authored middlebrow fiction of the period took up the cause of this same generation of men: those who returned to the home front to find a world that seemed taken over by women, in which they felt marginalised and ill at ease. In the best-selling *La Guerre, Madame ...* (1916) by Paul Géraudy, or Henri Barbusse's Goncourt-crowned *Le Feu* (1916), for example, returning soldiers find themselves unable to cope with the gulf between their experience and that of the apparently emancipated women whose lives seem simply to exclude them.<sup>16</sup> Colette also depicts the impossibility of functioning normally in a civilian setting when accumulated fatigue and 'souvenirs du sang noir en flaques, de feu en jets' (II, 701; 'memories of pools of blackened blood, of spurting flames') deaden present perception, and the future is desperately fragile. But the war does not profit Mitsou or her friends, and even Petite-Chose, whose war effort takes the form of providing as many handsome soldiers as possible – 'beaux gosses [...] en plus, qui s'en [vont] peut-être mourir demain!' ('lovely looking boys [...] who may also die tomorrow') – with

16 See Fell (2005) and Gilbert (1983).

'la chose du machin' (II, 672; 'you know what') is a comically likeable character. Mitsou struggles to imagine her Blue Lieutenant's reality and to offer him her own.

With *La Fin de Chéri*, published first in 1925–26 in the literary magazine *La Revue de Paris*, then by Flammarion in 1926, Colette again addressed the topical theme of the soldier's return.<sup>17</sup> In *Chéri* (1920), set in 1912–13, the eponymous hero is the devastatingly handsome yet vulnerable gigolo-lover of Léa, an ageing courtesan whose well-managed career has provided her with both affluence and authority. Chéri's materially advantageous marriage to the teenage Edmée, like him the child of a high-class prostitute, leads at the novel's end to his separation from Léa, in a scene that is intensely painful for both (and for the reader), but seems to herald the opening out of a more independent future for Chéri. The sequel opens immediately after the war. Chéri has returned from the trauma of the trenches suffering from the neurasthenia common among war veterans, to find that the pastel-toned, submissive Edmée has metamorphosed into a brisk, elegant hospital manager, depicted all in terms of harsh whites – she first appears in a 'robe perlée de blanc' (III, 173; 'dress pearled in white') then in a 'vêtement d'intérieur, tout blanc' (III, 176; 'a house dress all in white') – and the colour persists throughout. Though legally the husband is head of the family, Edmée renders Chéri superfluous with her effective management of household, finances and the post-war world in general, seconded by his mother, Charlotte, so that between them they represent the masculine fear of a world taken over in their absence by self-important, insensitive women. The men who have adjusted to the new scene are no more inspiring: Chéri's one companion is Desmond, proprietor of a new jazz bar and a 'trafiquant en tangos' (III, 191; 'trafficker in tangos'). Chéri retreats into memories of Léa, the remembered warm blue of her eyes and the soft-pink light that pervaded her house contrasting in his dreams with the harsh colours of the new reality. But when he goes to see Léa he finds not the sensual womb-like warmth of her house and presence, but a fat, short-haired old woman apparently resigned to a sexless old age of gossip, good food and friendship. Blue and pink light plays through the windows of her modern, rationally designed apartment, as Léa recommends healthy eating and attention to regular bowel movements as remedies for his pain. The reader suffers with Chéri, through whose eyes and desperate sense of loss the whole scene, indeed most of

17 In Britain, Rebecca West had published *The Return of the Soldier* in 1918.

the novel, is focalised. As he sits ‘négligemment, les jambes croisées’ (‘casually, legs crossed’), listening to Léa’s attempts at common-sensical advice, ‘en lui-même il contemplait son double éperdu, agenouillé, les bras agités et la poitrine offerte, et criant des cris incohérents’ (III, 221; ‘inwardly he watched his distraught double, on his knees, arms waving and chest offered, screaming wordless cries of pain’).

But Colette is not simply joining in the anti-feminist backlash that followed women’s (very) limited gains in the First World War. Léa is not the heartless female pragmatist, insensitive to male grief, that she seems at first to a Chéri still emotionally marooned in the past. Léa’s own pain, concealed beneath her dignified bonhomie, becomes apparent even to Chéri himself: ‘Il soupçonna que Léa jouait la jovialité, l’épicurisme de même qu’un gros acteur, au théâtre, joue les “rondeurs” parce qu’il prend du ventre’ (III, 223; ‘He suspected that Léa was putting on an act of joviality and epicureanism, as a portly actor in the theatre might accept “plump” roles because he is developing a paunch’), and if she does not provide the refuge he needs it is because she cannot, time being irreversible for both. Nor is Edmée simply a selfish profiteer of war. Most readers will remember the callousness of Chéri’s treatment of a very young, vulnerable Edmée in the first novel, and this throws a more positive light on her new self-assertion. The energy and confidence with which she adapts to a changed reality are deadly to the damaged Chéri, but also reveal that ‘prodigieuse et femelle aptitude au bonheur’ (III, 259; ‘prodigious female aptitude for happiness’) that links her to Léa, and which Colette celebrates – even if, as here, she recognises its cost – throughout her work. Edmée’s new vitality simply cannot accommodate a Chéri so alienated from the present. He takes refuge in the shrine to Léa’s past beauty created by her once companion, La Copine, whose paste jewellery and wearing of Léa’s cast-offs makes her a sort of impoverished pastiche of Léa herself. The narrative leads inexorably to his quiet suicide surrounded by images of the Léa he has lost – these too now drained of affect by repeated viewings – for death is the only possible outcome of his loss of all appetite for life. Five years later, in *Le Feu follet* Drieu la Rochelle would end his war veteran’s story with the same fate, but in Colette’s case it is not the treachery of women or the sterility of a feminised world that makes her hero’s death inevitable. *La Fin de Chéri* speaks to its era as the story of a man for whom time has been interrupted by the inassimilable horror of the trenches, and for whom the demands of male adulthood – self-reliance, authority, what Desmond calls ‘managing people and things’ – have

become impossible. His sexual impotence – the female body arouses in him only a ‘répugnance précise’ (III, 201) – figures a total loss of desire for anything in the present or future. The novel provides a deft sketch of the era, with its frenetic nightlife, financial speculation, ostentatious but ineffective displays of concern for the returning soldiers and the weight of traumatised memory. Beneath this it also addresses a more fundamental human tension between the ruthless will to adapt and survive, a life instinct identified here as feminine, and an unanswerable yearning for the *jouissance* of pre-individuation, for nothingness and oblivion. The novel corresponds to my positive definition of ‘middlebrow’ in its immersivity achieved through a powerful sense of place, time and narrative momentum; in its vivid depiction and emotional mapping of its era; and in the sensory immediacy of the writing, which makes reading Colette an experience that is always more than cerebral.

### (ii) Writing through the senses

Edmée’s cool competence is felt in the ‘givre de sa robe’ (III, 173; ‘white frost of her dress’), the painful clash between Chéri’s nostalgic yearning and unstoppable time materialises as Léa’s familiar laugh ‘au son grave et rond’ (‘deep and rich’) emerges from a body now weighed down by ‘[d]’énormes seins et de la fesse écrasante’ (III, 220; ‘enormous breasts and a massive bottom’). The physical beauty of the Blue Lieutenant and Chéri, sensuously detailed, is central to their characterisation: Colette was perhaps the first woman writer to pay close attention to the physicality of the male as well as female body, as object of desire as well as signifier of psychology and emotion.<sup>18</sup> In Colette’s world, meaning is carried above all through the senses, and this too contributed to critics’ difficulty with defining her as a serious writer. André Rousseaux, for example, a critic in many ways sympathetic to Colette’s literary project, found her emphasis on the physical to be at odds with any proper concern for psychological and moral analysis, commenting that ‘Il y a, chez Colette, une âme assez démunie dans une nature très riche’, for her work displayed ‘cette espèce de conscience physique qui convient mieux à sa nature qu’une conscience psychologique ou morale’ (Rousseaux, 1937; quoted in Colette, III, 1828–29; ‘In Colette’s writing there is a rather

<sup>18</sup> Feminist critics have drawn attention to this aspect of Colette’s writing – see for example Biolley-Godino (1972); Resch (1973).

impoverished soul within a very rich nature [...] a consciousness that is more physical than psychological or moral'). Sensation was intuitive, material and feminine: 'real' literature was analytical, moral, masculine.

But there is no absence of psychology in Colette, nor indeed of an unconventional but consistent morality. It is rather that in her work, as in life, experience is always embodied. Her characters are rarely creatures of the word – they are not intellectuals, few of them are highly educated and few (Léa is one of the exceptions, at least in the first novel) articulate ideas or feelings with any special eloquence. They express or betray thought and emotion through bodily signs and behaviour. Thus 15-year-old Gigi receives with docility her training in the complex etiquette of the high-class prostitute, the profession for which she is destined, and scarcely articulates any resistance to her aunts' well-meant lessons in euphemism and mendacity – 'D'appeler les choses et les personnes par leur nom, ça n'a jamais avancé à rien' (IV, 448; 'Calling a spade a spade never got anyone anywhere') – but her body language tells another, unmistakable story: 'Mais, elle essayait machinalement de libérer son beau cou musclé, pris dans un col baleiné' (IV, 462; 'But she tried repeatedly to free her fine strong neck from its whalebone collar'). When the rich and fashionable Gaston, accepted by the aunts as Gigi's lover and protector, reacts to his rejection by Gigi by becoming sick – 'le teint bilieux et le blanc de l'œil trouble' (IV, 475; 'a bilious complexion and the whites of his eyes dull') – there is no need for the narrator to spell out that he is in love, any more than Gigi's own high temperature and 'cerne lilas des paupières' (IV, 474; 'mauve shadowed eyelids'), when she believes she has lost him, require interpretation. Gaston's revised offer of marriage produces the story's happy ending. If *Gribiche* manages to be at once a vivid portrait of behind-the-scenes music-hall life in the 1900s and a telling critique of the laws that criminalised abortion, this is less thanks to explicit dialogue or narrative commentary than to the story's graphic materiality. Unknown to the text's naive narrator – a 'Colette' near the start of her music-hall career, slow to grasp the realities of her colleagues' lives – and hence to the reader, Gribiche, a dancer in the chorus, has fallen pregnant and undergone an amateur abortion. The trail of 'petites étoiles de sang frais' (III, 1153; 'little stars of fresh blood') when Gribiche falls down the stairs is one of the few clues, correctly interpreted at once (we surmise) by her fellow dancers. Despite the other performers' own poverty, a collection is made and the money taken by three of them, Carmen, Lise and Colette, to the home Gribiche shares with her mother, a 'grande et grosse femme



[aux] yeux saillants' ('tall, broad woman with prominent eyes', 1164). The mother, it becomes wordlessly apparent, is the abortionist: when Gribiche faints, her mother plunges her hands beneath her to feel the sheets and withdraws them quickly to hide them in her apron. But as the visitors leave, she goes to usher them out and inadvertently reveals her hands: 'À leur vue, Carmen fit un écart comme un cheval effrayé, tandis que, pour éviter leur contact, je bousculais Lise' (III, 1170; 'Seeing them, Carmen gave a start like a frightened horse and as I tried to avoid touching them I bumped against Lise'). No conclusions are explicitly drawn but the bloody hands (though blood is never named), by association with the abortion itself, suggest that Carmen's later murmur of 'vieille assassine' (III, 1172) is justified. After the news of Gribiche's death, Colette finds Carmen in her dressing room, head back, catching her tears in a blotting-paper tube to avoid spoiling her stage make-up. The tears express relief; her delayed period has begun: 'J'avais peur ... de faire comme Gribiche, là-bas' (III, 1174; 'I was terrified that I was in the same mess as Gribiche'). Thus Gribiche's dilemma is generalised, and the music-hall ethic of off-stage emotional discretion (the show must go on) embodied in Carmen's careful weeping.

Colette's fictional worlds are compelling because they are so fully realised in sensory terms. Characterisation and plot depend more on colour, smell, texture, sound, tone of voice and on gesture, movement, action than they do on narrative commentary or on dialogue. Throughout her work the material universe is powerfully evoked, at one level to signify human emotion, like the house Chéri inhabits with Edmée, elegant, luxurious, 'vide et illuminée' (III, 173; 'empty and all lit up') as he lingers outside in the night, or the dawn that breaks as *La Naissance du jour* concludes, confirming the cyclical model of time that the book affirms:

L'aube vient, le vent tombe. De la pluie d'hier, dans l'ombre, un nouveau parfum est né, ou c'est moi qui vais encore une fois découvrir le monde et qui y applique des sens nouveaux? ... Ce n'est pas trop que de naître et de créer chaque jour. (III, 370)

(Dawn comes, the wind falls. From yesterday's rain, in the shade, a new perfume is born; or is it I who am once again going to discover the world and apply new senses to it? It's not too much to be born and to create each day [Colette, 1979, 141])

But the precise, sensuous descriptions of nature and of place are also gratuitous, there to celebrate the thereness of things, and to register the endless interest of being in the world.

## (iii) A female life course

The Blue Lieutenant and Chéri are among the few male characters whose point of view is central to Colette's narratives; others, from Renaud to Herbert d'Espivant in *Julie de Carneilhan* (1941 and Colette's last full-length novel), play important roles but are largely focalised from the perspective of female protagonists. Part of the reason for Colette's reception as not quite 'real literature' is surely that she mapped the human life course in the feminine, whereas the majority of French literature considered 'great' (with honourable exceptions)<sup>19</sup> assumes the human subject to be male. Colette's default human being is a woman. Whether through fictional characters or a *je* close to the author's biographical self, Colette explored each stage of the (female) life course across her *œuvre*. Childhood frequently appeared in the form of fictionalised memories of her happy early life in Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, or sketches of her daughter Bel-Gazou, highlighting among other aspects the tension between the child's desire for the warm, nurturing, maternal space of home and the desire for freedom and adventure. Adolescence was charted in the first *Claudine*, famously in *Le Blé en herbe* (1923) and later in novellas such as *Le Tendron* (1943) and *Gigi* (1945). Many of Colette's fictional heroines from *Claudine* on are young women at stages of their lives defined by love, the need to earn a living, friendship, maternity – and soon, too, ageing. *La Naissance du jour* is one of the rare literary texts to deal directly with the period of the menopause<sup>20</sup> and its reordering of life's rhythms and priorities. And Colette wrote extensively, in some of her most innovative and compelling texts, about ageing – about being an old woman.

Colette created a number of fictional characters who entered the collective imagination as incarnations of a type or a historical moment: *Claudine*, Chéri and *Gigi* are perhaps the most obvious examples of this. But through her regular press publications and the books (later, also, the radio) she also constructed the character 'Colette', whose life, appearance, voice and singular philosophy became part of the fabric of everyday life for many French readers of the 1920s to '40s. There was no

19 Some fully 'canonised' French authors have imagined the human condition from a female standpoint, perhaps most notably Racine (*Andromaque*, *Phèdre*), Stendhal (in each of his novels), Flaubert in *Madame Bovary*. The default human being nonetheless remains male.

20 See Holmes (1999).

autobiographical pact, no promise of absolute veracity, for Colette was explicit about the creative element in life writing – ‘Imaginez-vous, à me lire, que je fais mon portrait? Patience: c’est seulement mon modèle’ (epigraph to *La Naissance du jour*, III, 275; ‘Do you imagine, as you read me, that I’m portraying myself? Have patience: this is merely my model’) – and affirmed her right to discretion. Nor was there any overarching ‘story of my life’: though she made frequent use of the ‘I’ form, Colette never wrote an autobiography as such, ‘ni mémoires, ni journal’ (*Le Fanal bleu*, IV, 966). The nearest she came to this were texts like *La Maison de Claudine* (1922), *Sido* (1929), *Mes Apprentissages* (1935–36), but in each of these she places the focus more on relationships with significant others than on her own trajectory as a writer or as a woman. *Sido*, for example, is organised in three parts, the first devoted to her mother, Sido, the second to her father, Captain Colette, and the third (‘Les Sauvages’) to Sido’s four children, including but not foregrounding Colette herself. This focus on the self as defined by relationships seems to characterise female more than male writing. Certainly one forceful and pervasive trend in the predominantly male French canon is that of what Nancy Huston (2004) calls the ‘Professeurs de Désespoir’, those writers whose work is about ‘mind and anguish and nothingness and night’ (Ward-Jouve, 1987, 3), whose vision of life accentuates solitude, absurdity, the degrading materiality of the body, who reject family ties and parenthood as a drain on creativity, and romantic love as delusion. Huston’s case studies include Schopenhauer, a major influence on the French avant-garde of the Belle Époque, Samuel Beckett, Milan Kundera – and to these one might add the Decadents and Symbolists and most of twentieth-century modernism, much of the work of André Gide (‘Familles je vous hais!’), Sartre and existentialism – to go no further than Colette’s lifetime. If the male hero of so much critically fêted literature defines the everyday life of work, domesticity, material survival in terms of absurdity and banality, and seeks secular salvation through art by separating himself from the restrictive ties of heredity, family, emotional commitment,<sup>21</sup> Colette’s work, in complete contrast, celebrates the rich materiality of existence, the body, heredity,

21 Huston writes: ‘Pour livrer son grand combat artistique, le héros nihiliste [...] doit exclure de son existence tout ce qui pourrait l’affaiblir; il crache donc sur la famille, tant en amont qu’en aval, et tourne le dos à l’amour’ (2004, 351; ‘In order to wage his great artistic battle, the nihilist hero must exclude from his life all that weakens him; so he spits on family, both preceding and future generations, and turns his back on love’).

the individual as a link in life's chain, love, sex, friendship, food – all of this as the very stuff of writing. Since 'non-professional' readers read for pleasure and for a sense of life enriched, a degree of optimism tends to characterise both popular and middlebrow texts. Colette's casting of life in the feminine undoubtedly appealed and appeals to women readers; her unshakeable belief that 'la vie est digne d'intérêt' (Huston, 2004, 45; 'life is worthy of our interest') underpins her lasting appeal for a wide readership of both sexes.

Colette's account of the life course then is anything but linear. Scenes from her childhood are briefly evoked as early as 1908, for example in 'Jour gris' (*Les Vrilles de la Vigne*), where the words 'J'appartiens à un pays que j'ai quitté' (I, 974; 'I belong to a country I have left') introduce a lyrical passage on the Burgundy countryside. These are later developed in the form of a series of short texts and stories about Colette's mother, father and siblings, her village girlhood, the cats and dogs who lived with them, many of these published separately but then brought together in collections, notably *La Maison de Claudine* and *Sido*. No framing chronology is provided, but the episodes are located as the memories of a mature narrator who is identified as Colette herself. These texts, along with *La Naissance du jour* and much of the late work from the 1940s, are what Anne Freadman nicely terms Colette's 'livres-souvenirs'.<sup>22</sup> The structure of fragmented scenes and anecdotes scattered over time avoids any linear narrative leading from birth to death; rather, Colette's account of her own life course 'construes life as a source of memories rather than as a plot' (Freadman, 2012, 2). This produces an unusually positive view of ageing. Growing older does not mean only decline, though as a sufferer of crippling arthritis in her seventies, Colette never denies or conceals the physical impairments of old age. Rather, as the store of memories accumulates, it also means enrichment: 'the trope of the collection comes to counter the conventional view of ageing as loss' (Freadman, 2012, 112).

It is in two of her last books, *L'Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal bleu*, that Colette most directly addresses old age. Both take the loose form of a journal in that they are positioned in the present of writing and move between accounts of that present – Colette immobilised by arthritis in her 'divan-radeau' by the window of her apartment overlooking the Palais-Royal gardens, in dialogue with her 'best friend' and third

22 Freadman translates this as 'souvenir-books' or 'memory-books' (2012, passim).

husband, Maurice Goudekot, with Pauline her housekeeper and with visiting friends – and forays into the past of both distant and recent memory. There is no plot, no teleology or overarching shape to the text, and the abandonment of fiction, characters and narrative purpose is welcomed: ‘Je déchois de l’imposture’ (*L’Étoile Vesper*, IV, 859; ‘I abdicate from humbug’ [Colette, 1987, 119]). In Colette’s work, characterised as it is by sensual, passionate depictions of love, the script of romance had always battled with a different aim, that of full, attentive presence in the material world, and its translation into language. Already in *La Vagabonde*, Renée Néré had painfully renounced the offered future with Max in the name of the ‘soin [...] impérieux [...] de chercher des mots, des mots pour dire combien le soleil est jaune, et bleue la mer, et brillant le sel en frange de jais blanc’ (I, 1220; ‘the dominating anxiety [...] to seek for words, words to express how yellow the sun is, how blue the sea, and how brilliant the salt like a fringe of white jet’ [Colette, 1960, 176]), and in *La Naissance du jour* the fictional love story between the narrator and Vial had finally lost out against the narrative of writing itself. In the texts of old age, the adventure left to the narrator is this: perception of the present, memory of the wealth of past experience and the capturing of this in writing. Through this activity, in a final, life-affirming paradox, the immobilised old woman on her ‘divan-raft’ becomes a traveller in space and time, liberated by imprisonment.

There is a strong sense of continuity in Colette’s life writing: the elderly narrator is the same dryly irreverent, down-to-earth if often rhapsodic character developed across previous texts, and many features of these final books run throughout Colette’s work, both fictional and non-fictional. Though the point of view is located now not ‘in the crowd’ but above, looking down on the city from her window, these remain texts of their time, speaking explicitly to contemporary readers as well as those of posterity. *L’Étoile Vesper*, in particular, deals with the recent shared experience of the Occupation. Situating herself with the majority, neither heroic resisters nor active collaborators but bent on survival – ‘Je suis humblement parmi ceux qui ne firent qu’attendre’ (IV, 778; ‘Humbly, I am one of those who did nothing but wait’) – she recalls ‘le parfait et classique cauchemar’ (IV, 774; ‘the perfect and classical nightmare’) of hiding her Jewish husband, Goudekot, then of his arrest and internment in 1941. But both before and after his narrow escape from deportation, he was hidden by numerous neighbours and friends, and the overall image of Parisians faced with the Nazi presence is one of pragmatic discretion allied with passive resistance, solidarity, refusal to accord

the occupier deference or credence: ‘Imprudents à miracle, piailleurs, frondeurs, revendicateurs de leurs “droits” misérables, ils n’oubliaient pourtant ni la prudence, ni l’instinct de duper le vainqueur’ (IV, 782; ‘Marvellously imprudent, cheeky, irreverent, insistent on their miserable “rights”, they never forgot wisdom and the instinct for duping their conquerors’ [Colette, 1987, 30]). The portrayal of the French is flattering, designed to comfort a humiliated nation by emphasising those qualities Colette cherished most: irreverence, versatility, an irrepressible dignity. As elsewhere, human qualities are also, and markedly, depicted in the feminine: awaiting news of her husband’s fate, ‘je me serrais contre la foule de femmes qui ne firent qu’attendre [...] Le besoin de survivance est si vif chez nous, les femmes, et si féminin l’appétit de victoire physique’ (IV, 779, 802; ‘I took my place in the ranks of the women who waited [...] The will to survive is so alive in us women, and the lust for physical victory is so female!’ [Colette, 1987, 26, 53]). The prostitute of the Palais-Royal gardens reappears, having survived deportation to Germany as part of Vichy’s provision of free French labour to the Reich, aged but undaunted, still embroidering despite her hands ‘massacred’ by being forced to carry burning dishes when she was put to work in a German restaurant (IV, 785). In *Le Fanal bleu*, Colette links the two world wars by recalling in similar terms the female ‘phalanstère’ (‘phalanstery’)<sup>23</sup> of friends with whom she lived during the absence at the front of her second husband, Henry de Jouvenel, and how on those nights when cannon fire from the east could be heard in Paris, Marguerite Moreno would improvise a flamenco to its rhythm and make them all laugh, returning to them ‘la saine impertinence et la témérité des héroïnes’ (IV, 1034; ‘the healthy impertinence and courage of heroines’).

Both texts are also threaded through with references to contemporary fashions, to well-known celebrities of the period who formed part of Colette’s close circle of friends, such as Jean Cocteau and the screen idol Jean Marais (also, unknown to most of his fans, Cocteau’s lover), to the effects of the war years on children’s health and behaviour and the thrilling rediscovery of chocolate, cakes, non-rationed milk and electricity after the deprivations of 1940–44. Colette can justifiably assume a continuing relationship with a large number of readers whose reference points and

23 The ‘phalanstère’ was a utopian community conceived by the socialist thinker Charles Fourier (1772–1837), an important aspect of which, interestingly, was gender equality. The word connotes communal, mutually supportive living, outside the norms of the patriarchal family.

interests intersect her own, and who take pleasure in observing the next stages in a well-charted life. Readers also appear in the texts themselves, summarised or quoted, from the respectfully affectionate, like the village schoolmaster whose pedagogy is clearly inspired by Colette – ‘je leur enseigne à connaître, c’est-à-dire à aimer’ (*Le Fanal bleu*, IV, 994; ‘I teach them to know, in other words to love’) – to all those who send unsolicited manuscripts for her opinion or request her views on the most random of matters – ‘Je me permets de vous demander cela, madame Colette, parce qu’on sait bien que vous connaissez la vie’ (IV, 1015; ‘I take the liberty of asking you this, Madame Colette, because everyone knows that you know about life’). The humour that enlivens Colette’s writing adds to some less proper communications from an unknown public, including the anonymous phone caller who repeatedly rings in the middle of the night, checks that this really is Colette he is speaking to, then says, ‘Je vous emmerde’ (‘Screw you!’) and puts the phone down, and the man who sometimes begs her to ‘listen to a serenade’ that begins:

Poil au bec de gaz  
Mon cul sur le commode,  
Poil au chandelier,  
Mon cul sur l’escalier ... (IV, 818)

(Hair on the gas-lamp  
My arse on the commode,  
Hair on the chandelier,  
My arse on the stairs)

‘J’accorde que les paroles sont d’un mérite discutable’, she comments drily, ‘et qu’elles attribuent d’invraisemblables pilosités à des objets mobiliers. Mais quelle belle voix de baryton!’ (IV, 818; ‘I admit that the words are of dubious merit and that they attribute improbable hairiness to articles of furniture. But what a fine baritone!’ [Colette, 1987, 70]). Thus her public persona, by now well established as a national treasure, is both assumed and made fun of. She alludes wryly to her association with the themes of family and animals, recalling, as she begins a sentence, ‘Ma mère me contait ...’, the sighs of another female literary contemporary: ‘allons, bon, eût dit Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, voilà encore sa mère, sa chatte n’est pas loin!’ (*L’Étoile Vesper*, 846; “‘Off we go again”, as Lucie Delarue-Mardrus might have said. “We’re back to her mother already, her cat can’t be far away!” [Colette, 1987, 103]).

The texts of old age remain engaged with the present, addressed more directly to ‘ordinary’ readers than to literary peers, combative in their

refusal to accept the conventional identification of ageing with decline, and enlivened by a humour that refuses to take the writer or her work too seriously. But at the same time this is very serious writing, for it is about the end of the life course and the death that follows. It proposes, or confirms, an exceptionally positive philosophy that accords value to all of experience, from the ordinary and the trivial to the great events of a life or of history. If Colette finds herself incapable of writing a memoir that would set the whole trajectory of her life within that of the age, this is because ‘Choisir, noter ce qui fut marquant, garder l’insolite, éliminer le banal, ce n’est pas mon affaire, puisque, la plupart du temps, c’est l’ordinaire qui me pique et me vivifie’ (*Le Fanal bleu*, 966; ‘The art of selection, of noting things of mark, retaining the unusual while discarding the commonplace, has never been mine, since most of the time I am stimulated and quickened by the ordinary’ [Colette, 1963, 6–7]). Thus the near loss of Maurice, the birth of Colette’s daughter, the proximity of death take their place among the memories of forest walks near St-Sauveur, the magical paraphernalia of a hardware shop in Geneva, the games of the children in the garden outside. Writing, which in so much twentieth-century French literature transcends all other forms of human activity as a form of self-realisation and justification of a life, is only one form of human creativity that competes, at the end of *L’Étoile Vesper*, with embroidery: ‘Guidées par la même main, plume et aiguille, habitude du travail et sage envie d’y mettre fin lient amitié, se séparent, se réconcilient ...’ (IV, 881; ‘Guided by the same hand, pen and needle, the habit of work and the commonsense desire to bring it to an end become friends, separate, come together again ...’ [Colette, 1987, 144]). The individual subject, rather than heading tragically for extinction, continues to the end to amass ‘le chaud pêle-mêle de souvenirs froissés’ (IV, 813; ‘the cosy jumble of crumpled souvenirs’) and to journey among them, even pain adding to the accumulation of diverse experiences: ‘Surtout j’ai la douleur, cette douleur toujours jeune, active, inspiratrice d’étonnement, de colère, de rythme, de défi ...’ (IV, 968; ‘Chief among them is pain, pain ever young and active, instigator of astonishment, of anger, imposing its rhythm on me, provoking me to defy it’ [Colette, 1963, 9–10]). Death will not extinguish all traces of the subject for her legacy will remain in projects begun and still to come to fruition – like the orange tree planted in *La Naissance du jour*, whose fruit will be ready to harvest in ten years by ‘moi ou quelqu’un d’autre, ça n’a pas d’importance’ (III, 327; ‘myself or someone else, it doesn’t matter’) –, in those whose lives she has touched, just as Sido’s presence permeates



Colette's life and writing, and in the writing itself. In any case the self, strong, singular and avid for life as she may be, is conceived as part of a greater whole: life goes on. The prospect of the end of life takes on the affirmative image of the open sea:

Au lieu d'aborder des îles, je vogue donc vers ce large où ne parvient que le bruit solitaire du cœur, pareil à celui du ressac? Rien ne dépérit, c'est moi qui m'éloigne, rassurons-nous. Le large, mais pas le désert. Découvrir qu'il n'y pas de désert: c'est assez pour que je triomphe de ce qui m'assiège. (*Le Fanal bleu*, IV, 965)

(Instead, then, of landing on new islands of discovery, is my course set for the open sea where there is no sound other than that of the lonely heat-beat comparable to the pounding of the surf? Rest assured, nothing is decaying, it is I who am drifting. The open sea, but not the wilderness. The discovery that there is no wilderness! That in itself is enough to sustain me in triumphing over my afflictions [Colette, 1963, 5–6])

Against the grain of the century, Colette models the human life course in the feminine, in relationship with others, and as neither tragic nor absurd. Her fragmentary, cumulative narrative of life reached and still reaches a wide readership because it celebrates and thus enriches what Nancy Huston once summarised as 'la vie changeante, fluctuante, pleine de secrets et d'impalpable et de contradictions et de mystères' (2004, 34; 'life with all its changes and fluctuations, full of secrets, of the intangible, of contradictions and mysteries'). It is an account of a human life that corresponds to Huston's and Todorov's definitions of literature's real function: it 'helps us to live' (Todorov, 2007, 72).

### Conclusion

Colette achieved the unusual distinction of being at once a wise and profound commentator on the life of her times, and on life *tout court*, for whom formal experimentation was the necessary consequence of having original things to say, and a writer whose work entered the everyday reading practices of the majority. Julia Kristeva writes of her 'génie affirmatif dans ce qu'il apporte d'insolite au cœur de la tragédie humaine telle que l'a exhibée le XXe siècle' (2004, 19; 'affirmative genius that brings something new and out of the ordinary to the twentieth century's vision of the human tragedy'), and it is Colette's affirmative view of life, evident in her respect for the ordinary and the everyday, her

model of individual life as always in relation with others, her cyclical patterning of time, that have set her outside the dominant literary trends of her century and made her status 'middlebrow' in the pejorative sense. I place her instead in what may be termed a median position that bridges 'high literary' qualities – exquisite mastery of the semantic, rhythmic and aural possibilities of the French language, serene disruption of generic boundaries (notably that between fiction and autobiography), an undermining of entrenched 'commonsense' binaries through the use of oxymoron and paradox – and the 'low' qualities that generate pleasure for most readers: deeply immersive fictional worlds, humour, relevance to our own lives, wisdom and affirmation of life's interest and value.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Interwar France

## The Case of the Missing Middlebrow

If the concept of the middlebrow has recently gained some critical traction, this is largely due to work on women's writing and reading practices in interwar Britain and North America.<sup>1</sup> The word 'middlebrow' itself dates from the 1920s, when the growing middle classes created a new type of demand for cultural products that were both entertaining and serious, accessible and imbued with cultural value. In literature, this produced a flourishing of the novel that, as Nicola Humble puts it, 'straddles the divide between trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other' (2001, 11). Women made up the majority of the British reading public (Bloom, 2002, 51), and women writers found a ready market for novels that mirrored and anatomised their situation through compelling stories. In France, as we have seen, similar conditions had begun to appear before the First World War, and led to a vibrant market in middlebrow women's writing. Colette represents a bridge between the pre- and post-war feminine middlebrow, as a writer whose popularity with women readers begins at the Belle Époque and continues to address the changing configurations of social and emotional experience throughout the interwar years. Yet, beyond the case of Colette, it seems remarkably hard to find any French equivalent to the interwar women's novel in Britain.

1 The proliferation of this type of women's fiction in the 1920s and '30s has been studied by, among others, Nicola Beaman (2008), Rosa Maria Bracco (1993), Faye Hammill (2007; 2010), Nicola Humble (2001) and Kate MacDonald (2011). Critical work on the interwar middlebrow has been supported and disseminated by the Middlebrow Network (<http://www.middlebrow-network.com/>).

In this chapter I want to address more broadly the interwar middlebrow in France, starting with a comparative perspective that will seek to understand why there appears to be no phenomenon in France akin to the remarkable proliferation of female-authored, market pleasing, durably readable fiction that occurred in Britain at this time, and which has since been recuperated for a contemporary female public by the publishing imprints Virago and Persephone.<sup>2</sup> The situation of women in the neighbouring if culturally distinct nations of Britain and France was in many ways similar, as were developments in the British and French publishing industries. Yet the French interwar literary middlebrow is much harder to identify, and has certainly been far less – if at all – recognised and studied than its UK equivalent.

### Women's middlebrow in interwar Britain

In Britain, the interwar years witnessed the proliferation of a particular kind of novel that stood 'in the vast space between lowbrow fiction, designed merely to entertain, and highbrow works, increasingly alienated from a common reference of values' (Bracco, 1993, 12). The middlebrow novel was not an explicitly gendered phenomenon, but it certainly encompassed a considerable number of women writers, mainly middle-class women writing for an audience of their peers (Beauman, 2008, 4). The list of authors is far too long to attempt here but includes, for example, E.M. Delafield, Winifred Holtby, Molly Keane, Margaret Kennedy, Rosamond Lehmann, Rebecca West and Dorothy Whipple. Their novels dealt with the ordinary stuff of contemporary life from a largely female perspective: with growing up and finding a viable form of adult identity, with education and ambition, and with marriage and home and children and love. They were characterised by skilful plotting and characterisation, a precise sense of place and social context, and often a restrained, ironic sense of humour. A national network of lending libraries made access to fiction both easy and agreeable: libraries such as Boots (the largest, with more than 400 branches and half a million subscribers by the mid-1930s) offered reasonable subscription costs, a nicely furnished

2 Both Virago and Persephone also publish non-British fiction, Virago (founded 1973) including on their list a wide international range of authors, and Persephone (founded 1998) publishing US, Canadian and New Zealand texts as well as a small but growing number of translations.

space in which to choose books and well-trained librarians to advise on choices. Twenty-five million volumes were exchanged at Boots in 1925, 35 million by 1939 (Beauman, 2008, 14–15). The heroines of middlebrow novels are often themselves library members: reading literary fiction was a part of middle-class feminine life, and through their choices readers also informed publishers of their tastes. In 1920s and '30s Britain the feminine middlebrow 'established itself as a distinctive literary form' (Humble, 2001, 9).

The conditions that produced this flowering of middlebrow fiction were at once material (enterprising publishers, the library network) and ideological. If mainstream fiction serves in part to map, mirror and explore situations of rapid and disquieting social change, through the pleasurable form of story, then there was a particularly intense need for this kind of mediation in the years following the First World War. The war had dislocated personal, social and national identities in myriad ways, including that of gender. In the Victorian and Edwardian eras the dominant view of relations between the sexes had been one of neat complementarity, but as women moved, in the absence of so many men, into 'masculine' roles, and young men found themselves in situations of extreme terror, powerlessness and physical vulnerability that connoted 'feminine' dependence, the question of what it meant to be a man, and to be a woman, was posed with a new intensity. The figure of the damaged soldier, the puzzle of how to respond to him, figures extensively in this fiction, from Rebecca West's explicitly titled 1918 *The Return of the Soldier* to Winifred Holtby's 1927 *The Land of Green Ginger* in which the heroine Joanna struggles with the poverty and social isolation caused by her handsome young husband's return from war as a bitter invalid. Teddy is still in thrall to the pre-war ideal of man as breadwinner, protector and virile lover, and cannot accept the loss of his ability to perform these roles. Joanna must save her family from homelessness and starvation, but without causing further damage to Teddy's fragile self-esteem.

Divided notions of how to be a woman did not arise solely from the need to respond to male suffering. The war years had asked of many women that they move beyond the traditionally domestic domain of the feminine to work in the public sphere as factory hands, nurses, drivers for example, and to become heads of household. With the war's ending and male demobilisation came a campaign, perceptible in both policy decisions and cultural discourse, to re-establish a familiar sense of sexual difference and thus recreate the lost, safe order of the past. In post-war Britain, 'the perceived blurring of gender lines occasioned

by war's upheaval led many [...] to see in a re-establishment of gender difference the means to recreate a semblance of order' (Kent, 1993, 99). A 'vicious backlash' (Bruley, 1999, 61), supported by the 1919 Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act, threw women out of the workforce, so that by 1921 fewer women were gainfully employed than had been the case in 1911. Formal marriage bars were introduced in many middle-class professions such as teaching, nursing and the civil service, and in 1927 Oxford University set limits on the numbers of students permitted to attend women's colleges (Kent, 1993, 101). The press regularly featured articles and letters exhorting women to return to a proper practice of their feminine role.<sup>3</sup> The sudden turn from a heroic vision of women as capable of public *and* private contributions to the nation's welfare to a renewed insistence that their place was in the home produced a tension in female identity that found one form of expression in the novel.

Marriage, domesticity, the family are centre stage in the feminine middlebrow, as they were in most women's lives. The scene of the majority of novels is the home, everyday attempts to maintain order and harmony, relations with husbands, children, neighbours, and sometimes glimpsed alternatives of wilder, less mundane alternatives that are generally (though not always) closed off by the novel's end. The home is valued, as it no doubt was after the upheavals and grief of the war years, but there is also a pervading sense of disappointment that registers, with wry resignation rather than any more violent sense of revolt, 'the diminished stature of the feminine subject' and works to 'effect her reconciliation to the culturally ascribed and sanctioned vision of her lot, which her prior hopes, ideals, and expectations had exceeded' (Hinds, 2009, 314). Thus Laura, the 34-year-old heroine of E.M. Delafield's *The Way Things Are* (1927), closes the novel by renouncing the brief flare of romance that has lit up her passionless, humdrum married life, because maternal duty and the need for social belonging make this the only option. Laura reconciles herself to her lot by scaling down her own sense of identity: 'It dawned upon her dimly that only by envisaging and accepting her own limitations, could she endure the limitations of her surroundings' (336).

3 If the woman war worker had been a heroine when her labour was needed, she was now frequently characterised as having sought employment 'for the sake of love or flirtation and associated giddiness, which the freer and more licensed life has made it possible to indulge' (Letter to the *Saturday Review* in 1918, quoted in Kent, 1993, 100).

Domesticity and maternity are central to these novels, but their cost, in terms of the channelling and limitation of female ambition and energy, is also a constant if discreetly voiced theme. There is a pervasive sense that whilst remaining single means, with few exceptions, low social status often accompanied by a constrained and genteel poverty, marriage means accepting dependence, containment within a wholly domestic world and an increasing sense of superfluity. This world of blocked horizons is relieved, and shaped into narrative, in various ways. A small number of characters pursue careers, against all the odds, like Sarah Burton, the courageous head teacher in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936), even if they do so at the cost of love and children. Some heroines – Delafield's Laura, Margaret Kennedy's Florence in her 1925 bestseller *The Constant Nymph* – encounter and are briefly heartened by passionate love, however transitory. Some, notably Holtby's heroines, may even take a stand against compromise, like Joanna in *The Land of Green Ginger*, who closes the novel by leaving behind the site of her long domestic struggles and setting off with her children to join women friends for a new life in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Mostly, in a spirit that typified the disillusioned but resilient 'anti-romanticism which signified Englishness between the wars' (Light, 1993, 209), heroines just quietly accommodate 'the way things are' and make the best of them, this adjustment of aspiration to fit reality itself forming the narrative arc. Delafield's Laura returns to 'the children, her marriage vows, the house, the ordering of the meals, the servants, the making of a laundry list every Monday' (1927, 335–36) and Kennedy's sensible Florence, whom the novel both likes and loathes, fails in her attempt to domesticate the bohemian musician she loves, and finds herself alone in that 'world of necessity and compromise [...] with which [everyone] would ultimately have to reckon' (Kennedy, 1924, 280).

These novels had such huge appeal because they explored ordinary dilemmas through the creation of compelling fictional worlds. They share the qualities of skilful characterisation and plotting, and a vivid sense of place, from Delafield's complacently affluent rural villages to Holtby's bleak but exhilarating Yorkshire landscapes, Whipple's socially

4 In other novels, such as those of Dorothy Whipple, radical rejection of 'blocked horizons' is depicted through secondary female characters such as Laura in *Greenbanks* (1932), who leaves her stiflingly dull husband to follow the man she loves and bear his child, while the central protagonists oppose the limitations on their lives through the more moderate strategies of humour, female friendships and the valorisation of everyday pleasures.

stratified Lancashire towns and Lehmann's claustrophobic but elegant Oxford. They capture tellingly, in different ways, the aspirations of a female generation whose emancipation felt at once real and truncated, and their stoical desire to make the most of the reality they had. They put women's experience at the heart of the story, and their depiction of men is searching and irreverent, from empathetic depictions of returning soldiers that implicitly critique the ideal of warrior masculinity (Holtby), to comic portrayals of middle-class husbands who consider a taciturn indifference to all matters emotional and cultural to be a mark of proper (English) masculinity (Delafield, Whipple). In Britain, these novels circulated quickly among a vast middle-class female readership and 'thr[ew] light on the texture of women's lives' (Beauman, 2008, 7).

### Interwar France and the middlebrow

Across the Channel in France, the factors that produced the feminine middlebrow market were remarkably similar. There, too, there was both need for a literature that could combine pleasurable reading with the exploration of new and acute social tensions, particularly in relation to gender, and a commercial infrastructure that could respond to this demand.

The war had meant the departure of large numbers of French men, of whom an even larger proportion than in Britain were killed, or came back severely damaged,<sup>5</sup> and in turn this led to changes in women's employment and position in the family. By the time the war ended, many women had lived through turbulent years of fear and anxiety, bereavement and mourning, and an accumulation of responsibilities which at best opened up new vistas of possibility and at worst wore them out as they struggled to fulfil their traditionally nurturing roles whilst taking on those hitherto defined as male. The men who had survived returned in many cases profoundly changed, anxious to recreate remembered forms of adult manhood, yet in many cases so

5 Britain and its colonies lost approximately a million men, around 2% of the population, and suffered over 2 million wounded; France lost 1,700,000 men, over 4% of the population, with more than 4 million wounded. See <http://www.centre-robert-schuman.org/userfiles/files/REPERES%20%E2%80%93%20module%201-1-1%20-%20explanatory%20notes%20%E2%80%93%20World%20War%20I%20casualties%20%E2%80%93%20EN.pdf>



injured and dislocated that they struggled to do so. As in Britain, the perceived effacement of gendered difference was widely identified with a loss of civilisation, and the reaffirmation of separate roles and identities became 'a privileged site for a larger ideological project: how to come to terms with rapid social and cultural change' (Roberts, 1994, 5). In the desire to re-establish a social order based on traditional concepts of gender, those women who had entered new forms of work during the war years were rapidly despatched to make room for the returning breadwinners. In France women war workers were, as one contemporary commentator put it, 'jetées à la rue, presque immédiatement après l'Armistice (...) les unes avec quelques jours de paye, les autres sans rien' (Thaon, 1919, 212; 'thrown back onto the streets, almost immediately after the armistice [...], some with a few days' pay and the rest with nothing at all'). The percentage of the female population working outside the home was actually lower in 1926 (36.6 per cent) than in 1906 (39 per cent) (Thibert, 1933).

Practical measures to exclude women from employment were accompanied, as in Britain, by an ideological campaign that pervaded both the 'quality' and popular press. The esteemed and widely read *Figaro* published articles such as 'Les Conquêtes du féminisme' (16 March 1924) that warned:

Qu'elles se méfient. La femme à barbe et la femme-canon peuvent moins sur nous qu'une gamine de vingt ans qui sera frêle, fantasque et possédera la merveilleuse divination que ne conférera jamais un diplôme d'avocat ou de pharmacien.

(Women, take heed! Masculine [literally 'bearded'], aggressive women have far less effect on men than a slim, lovely 20-year-old whose wonderful sense of intuition no lawyer's or pharmacist's diploma can ever replace)

Some of the more conservative women's magazines joined in. On 1 January 1926, *Petit Echo de la mode* alerted readers to male anxieties: 'Mais la plante fragile a voulu ou a dû devenir l'arbuste solide, elle se suffit à elle-même, elle vit sa vie, et l'homme, au lieu d'être attendri par sa faiblesse, craint sa concurrence' ('But the fragile plant has chosen or been forced to become a solid shrub, self-sufficient, living her own life, and man, instead of being moved by her weakness, fears her as a competitor'). Women, advised the editorial, would be well advised to hide their newfound self-assurance and at least pretend to need male protection. As Irene Clephane put it in 1935, looking back: 'From being the saviours of the nation, women in employment were degraded in the

public press to a position of ruthless self seekers depriving men and their dependents of a livelihood' (200, quoted in Bruley 1999, 61).

The emphasis on home and family was supported materially by an increase in house building,<sup>6</sup> and by a renewed emphasis on the ideology of domesticity through promotional events such as the Salon des Arts Ménagers, first held in 1923. Marriage and home-making were presented as the only proper destiny for a middle-class girl, and despite the development, at least in more progressive circles, of an ideal of companionate coupledom (Prost, 1985 [1999], 75–76), the law still allocated marital and parental authority solely to the husband. More than in Britain, maternity was promoted as an essential part of womanhood, for the low birth rate was a source of anxiety and pro-natalist propaganda was backed by the repressive 1920 laws that criminalised the dissemination of literature on birth control.

The post-war backlash was countered by certain more emancipatory factors that made female identity a site of tension and conflict. Despite the resounding emphasis on women's duty to be wives and mothers, the fact remained that part of the war's legacy was a sizeable population of single women, estimated variously at figures between 1.5 and 3.5 million (Roberts, 1994, 154).<sup>7</sup> And however potent the force of nostalgic gender conservatism, the practical need to exploit this army of single women in a man-depleted world had its effect. There was some opening up of types of female – as well as male – employment in the interwar years, with (in both France and Britain) a shift away from privatised domestic labour into the expanding administrative, retail and leisure sectors. The reluctance of young women to enter domestic service in turn altered the lives of bourgeois women accustomed to find cheap and readily available servants and the 'servant problem' echoed through the interwar novel in France as well as Britain. The pull of white-collar employment also accelerated the gradual move away from the countryside to larger towns and cities. The lives of some bourgeois girls were changed, too, by the financial losses which many families suffered due to the war and, later, the Great Depression of the 1930s. Simone de Beauvoir (born 1908) and

6 Private initiatives in the early 1920s were overtaken in 1928 by a vast state-supported project (Loi Loucheur, 13 July 1928) to build some 260,000 houses and flats over five years, with a significant proportion at affordable rents (<http://www.unaf.fr/spip.php?article14718>). Parliamentary records show that a similar provision of housing for the growing middle classes was underway in Britain (<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/RP99-111>).

7 In the UK the 1931 census registered over 1.5 million unmarried women.

her sister Hélène were representative of this phenomenon: though they were educated at first to become good Catholic, bourgeois wives, their father's loss of his fortune obliged him to acknowledge that there were no dowries to facilitate suitable marriages, and thus to accede to their desire to pursue a university education and so achieve financial independence.

In all, then, the 1920s and '30s were years of acute change and tension not only at the level of international politics but also in terms of roles and identities. As the middle class expanded, with the growth of the administrative and retail sectors and an increase in numbers of salaried professionals, so the reading public grew and created a high level of demand for a literature that was well-crafted, entertaining and informative. Weekly magazines, in particular Maurice Martin du Gard's *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (founded in 1922), catered for this new mass yet educated readership with well-designed, readable and informative aids to understanding the cultural scene – 'un journal qu'on peut lire dans le métro comme n'importe quel quotidien' ('a journal you can read in the metro just like a daily paper'), ran the advertising. Publishers also responded: the 1920s saw the dawn of the blockbuster, as in France the average print run doubled from the pre-war 2,500 to 5,000 and bestsellers, defined by sales of over 100,000, became much more common (Brée, 1983, 43; Boschetti, 1986, 481). The publishing houses Flammarion and Grasset led the way, with Grasset in particular displaying a sharp eye for the kind of fiction that would 'concilier la légitimité littéraire et le succès commercial' (Boschetti, 1986, 492; 'reconcile literary legitimacy and commercial success'). Though clearly the market included readers of both sexes, it was acknowledged in France, as in Britain, that women constituted a majority: Jules Bertaut's study *La Littérature féminine d'aujourd'hui* (1909) was already stating this as an uncontentious fact<sup>8</sup> and cultural historian Mary-Louise Roberts confirms the importance of female readers in the interwar book boom (1994, 15). Before turning to the question of which types of novel met women readers' demands in France, I want to consider briefly those factors that differentiated the French reading context from what in most ways was a very similar situation in Britain.

8 Bertaut wrote: 'les personnes qui, à l'heure actuelle, constituent en France le vrai public littéraire, celui qui lit la littérature d'imagination, celui qui la juge en décrétant le succès ou l'insuccès d'un livre, ce sont les femmes' (1909, quoted in Sauvy, 1986, 243; 'those who, in the France of today, constitute the real reading public, the public that reads works of imagination and determines a book's success or failure, are women').

One significant difference occurs at the level of infrastructure: France simply did not have that network of libraries, catering mainly for a middle-class female readership, that disseminated middlebrow fiction in Britain and also provided publishers with reliable evidence of female taste. Despite promising developments in provision in the later nineteenth century, for French libraries the period 1900–45 was one of ‘immobilisme, déclin et indaptation aux besoins’ (Jolly, 1986, 543; ‘immobility, decline and failure to adapt to needs’). Budgets for French municipal libraries were only one twentieth of their British equivalents (Jolly, 1986, 547), and many cities (let alone smaller towns) had no lending library for general use: most libraries were concentrated in the capital, and were academic and research institutions rather than providing a service for non-specialist readers. Nor was there any equivalent to the private libraries such as Boots that were so successful in Britain. In Britain there seems to have been some sense of a community of female readers connected through the circulation of popular authors and novels across the library network, the trained librarians who advised and shared recommendations, the pleasant reading rooms in which women met. This in turn provided an encouraging context for women writers aiming at a readership of their peers, and gave publishers proof, through library loans, of the strength of demand for the middlebrow novel. Such a sense of a female reading community was notably absent in France.

Moreover, the divide between what Bourdieu terms ‘the sub-field of restricted production’, or highbrow culture aimed at peer esteem, and the ‘sub-field of mass production’, aimed at the market, maintained a stronger hold over the national imagination in France than in Britain. And highbrow or legitimate culture was strongly gendered masculine, so that women who as writers or as readers aspired to a serious engagement with ideas and an understanding of their era knew that this meant reading male authors. Literature that focused primarily on women’s lives, from a woman’s point of view, somehow lacked the virtue of universality. A sense that writing for the market, especially the female market, is incompatible with literary value is present, too, in British middlebrow fiction: ‘highbrow’ writers often appear in its pages, the object of mingled respect and irony.<sup>9</sup> But in France the conviction of a need to transcend

9 See for example *The Constant Nymph*, in which Margaret Kennedy plays out the ambivalent admiration and exasperation that characterises the middlebrow view of highbrow culture through her solidly middle-class heroine’s love-hate relationship with the Bohemian artistic Sanger family. Delafield too has her

femaleness in the pursuit of serious culture may well have contributed to the relative absence and low profile of women writers: among the many authors from the interwar period who were household names in their era and who have survived in literary history, only Colette represents women, and her status remained uncertain for decades.

The powerful identification of 'real' literature with male literature also accords with a wider cultural disparagement of the feminine in interwar France. The post-war backlash against limited female gains made on both sides of the Channel was arguably more ferocious and more lasting in France: where British women gained the vote in 1918, French women were repeatedly refused this basic citizen's right until after the Second World War; where contraceptive services began to be established in interwar Britain, pro-natalist, anti-contraceptive policies in France were implacable. Some of the period's most admired male novelists were viciously misogynist, Henri de Montherlant and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle being among the most prominent. The climate was inhospitable to a women-centred, market-pleasing literature that could use enjoyable fictions to explore the specificity of female lives in a period of tense and profoundly unequal gender relations.

Yet there they were, millions of more or less educated, more or less aspirational bourgeois French women, most with enough leisure time to read. Definitive evidence of what they chose to read is, of course, hard to find, but given that women formed more than half of the reading public, sales figures are one useful indicator, and we can also surmise some correspondence between the reading tastes of British and French women, whose situations had so much in common. It is possible to propose a reasoned – if not a definitive – answer to the question What did women read in interwar France?

### **Female middlebrow reading between the wars**

For French publishing the 1920s ushered in an era of 'overproduction' (Raimond, 1966, 106) and of blockbusters (Brée, 1983, 43). More than a thousand novels were published in France each year, and many sold in excess of 100,000 copies: reading fiction was a mainstream leisure activity.

heroines (who write stories to make money) oscillate between self-contempt and mockery when faced with fashionably modernist writers, who are usually male and of independent means, and thus above domestic or financial concerns.

Among this vast output, most of it male-authored, certain categories of novel corresponded to what I have been defining as middlebrow: compellingly told narratives in a broadly realist vein that addressed serious and topical issues. Of these, some offered at least a partial correspondence to what the British novel suggests was female middlebrow taste. Women readers surely played their part in the vogue for *romans-fleuve* (literally ‘river-novels’), multivolume sagas that used fictional families to explore recent French history through the intersections between great public events and private family life. Roger Martin du Gard’s *Les Thibault*, set between 1900 and the 1914–18 war, comprised eight novels published between 1920 and 1940; the ten volumes of George Duhamel’s *La Chronique des Pasquier*, set between 1889 and 1931, came out from 1933 to 1945, while Jules Romains’s 27-volume *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* (covering 1908 to 1933) appeared steadily across the years 1932 to 1946. Romain Rolland, already the author of the pre-war novel cycle *Jean Christophe*, published a second seven-volume saga, *L’Âme enchantée*, between 1922 and 1933. All of these vast fictionalised histories were commercially successful, and though they are largely male stories in which women play secondary roles (Rolland’s *L’Âme enchantée* is the exception to this, though written in a discernibly masculine narrative voice), their weaving of complex stories at the boundaries between public and private worlds, and their focus on family dynamics, made for both compelling reading and a certain relevance to women’s lives.

If the *romans-fleuves* sold steadily, the period’s massive literary successes, in commercial terms, came from individual novels that hit a nerve in the social body and thus became *succès de scandale*. The two major blockbusters of the early 1920s, Victor Margueritte’s *La Garçonne* (1922) and Raymond Radiguet’s *Le Diable au corps* (1923), both deal with the impact of the war on sexual identity and relationships, playing off a generalised anxiety about the perceived upheaval in gender roles. Both benefited from deliberately provocative advertising campaigns by canny publishers, Flammarion and Grasset respectively. ‘The most scandalous novel ever written!’ shouted the posters for *La Garçonne*, and a curious public responded by buying 10,000 copies per week until, by the end of the decade, the novel had been read by somewhere between 12 and 25 per cent of the entire French population (Ripa, 2013, 10–12; Sohn, 1972, 8). Margueritte was an established novelist long identified with progressive causes, but this – his thirty-seventh novel – was the first to achieve such public notoriety, and sales increased still further when the government withdrew his Légion d’Honneur decoration on the grounds

that he had harmed the ‘good name and influence of France abroad’. *La Garçonne* was widely translated, and in France saturated the media with 134 articles devoted to it in the first six months after publication, across the full spectrum of the French press (Ripa, 2013, 15). There were also several stage adaptations throughout the 1920s and ’30s, a heavily censored (hence little screened) 1923 film version, and a more successful 1936 film adaptation that included Arletty and Edith Piaf in its cast. The novel’s price positioned it above Bourdieu’s fully popular ‘sub-field of mass production’, for the seven francs it cost was the equivalent of two days’ pay for a (male) Parisian worker. It seems safe to assume that the majority of readers – at least those who purchased the book – belonged somewhere in the broad spectrum of the middle class, and that women made up at least their usual high percentage of the reading public.

Flammarion’s publicity did not lie: *La Garçonne* was a shocking novel. Its heroine Monique, the *garçonne* of the title, opens the novel as the strong-minded but conventionally romantic daughter of a rich industrialist, happily engaged to Lucien, a handsome and enterprising young man of her own class. But Monique discovers both Lucien’s socially condoned infidelity and the business agreement between father and future husband that makes of her marriage a commercial transaction: outraged, she leaves behind family and what she now perceives as a hypocritical respectability, and adopts the sort of bachelor lifestyle admired in affluent young men but deemed scandalous in women. Profiting from post-war fashion by opening an interior design business, Monique selects and drops sexual partners of both sexes according to the physical pleasure they can provide – like the nude dancer, Peer Rhys, ‘une belle machine à plaisir’ (Margueritte, 1922, 169; ‘a handsome pleasure machine’). Monique deftly avoids pregnancy, which itself was provocative in a pro-natalist climate, until she opts for single motherhood and tries out a series of potential ‘reproducers’ (178) whose paternal function she intends to limit to that of insemination.

Margueritte’s narrative techniques are anything but subtle: the omniscient narrative voice is often intrusive; heavy-handed coincidence drives the plot (Monique’s beloved Aunt Lucienne, the only responsible adult in her life, is knocked over and killed by a bus at the very moment of Monique’s life-shattering discoveries); characterisation is often stereotypical. But the novel very effectively plays on the post-war hopes and fears of different audiences. For readers with feminist sympathies, Monique is the young woman emancipated by the war years, during which she has pursued her education and worked as a wartime nurse, now in revolt

against sexual double standards and women's social inequality, and living out her angry rebellion with vicariously satisfying absolutism. For a more conservative readership, Monique is the embodiment of a collective nightmare of sexually adventurous, assertive women who threaten society's very foundations, and the novel's reassuring conclusion – Monique finally opts for marriage to a progressive, pro-feminist but authoritatively virile man – allays these fears in a most pleasurable way. For both, *La Garçonne* provided a public forum for the discussion of topical, contentious issues, not only through their dramatisation but also through lengthy sequences of dialogue in which characters debate the virtues of marriage as opposed to 'free union', Freudian psychoanalysis, the significance of cropped hair and jazz, the fashion for spiritism. Monique would live on in two sequel novels,<sup>10</sup> but neither quite reached the exceptional articulation of collective desires and anxieties achieved by *La Garçonne*.

The second novel to reach such public prominence also appealed to tensions around gender and sex in the post-war period, and was in some senses even more daring. Set in the war years, *Le Diable au corps* is a compelling story of illicit love between a 15-year-old schoolboy narrator and Marthe, the 19-year-old wife of a soldier fighting at the front. The potential to shock was heightened by the author's own extreme youth, which Bernard Grasset made much of in his innovative advertising campaign.<sup>11</sup> Raymond Radiguet was 20 when the novel came out, though Grasset described him in the publicity as 17, his age at the time of writing. His death from typhoid fever shortly after the novel's appearance also contributed to its fame. *Le Diable au corps* scandalised and fascinated readers for a number of reasons, the first of which was its

<sup>10</sup> *Le Compagnon* (1923) and *Le Couple* (1924) completed the *Femme en chemin* trilogy.

<sup>11</sup> France Culture's programme 'Histoire de l'amour' (12 February 2013), part of the series *La Fabrique de l'histoire*, presents a detailed account of Grasset's campaign and of the novel's reception. Bernard Grasset is described as the 'inventor of modern publishing', thanks in part to the advertising campaign that stimulated the public's curiosity through emphasis of the author's youth, and a cinema news clip showing Radiguet signing his contract: the author, rather than the text, was the first focus of interest. Grasset's aims were distinctly 'middlebrow': he aimed to reconcile literary quality and commercial success, and for this reason came up against the hostility of those critics who defended the disinterested status of authentic literature. The programme can be listened to at: <https://www.france-culture.fr/emissions/la-fabrique-de-lhistoire/histoire-de-lamour-24>.



irreverent reversal of patriotic narratives of war. The two main protagonists are of a generation for whom war represents a 'congé inattendu' (Radiguet, 1923, 163; 'unexpected vacation'), a suspension of normal routine and expectation that allows Marthe to see her conventional marriage to a suitable young man as not quite real, so that she marries Jacques and sets up home with him but meanwhile, in his absence, wholeheartedly explores sex and romance with her younger lover. From the young lovers' perspective – the only one granted in the book – war is essentially something that keeps Jacques out of the way, and when the armistice bells peal out they signify not national triumph but the threat of his return (Radiguet, 1923, 162). A more normative, disapproving view of their behaviour is scarcely present, for adults on the home front are represented as timid, vacillating, even vicariously finding pleasure in the young people's daring so that the narrator's father has moments of pride in his son's precocious virility, and Marthe's mother 'admirait Marthe de tromper son mari' (Radiguet, 1923, 146; 'admired Marthe for deceiving her husband') where she herself had never dared adultery. Neighbours mutter and gossip, but also pruriently listen to the sound of the young pair's lovemaking, Marthe's elderly landlords even invite friends round at the time this usually occurs, in the hope of providing a spectacle.

What is also both scandalous and interesting about the novel is the characterisation of Marthe, who is another fictional avatar of the *garçonnes* who emerged from the partial, provisional emancipation of the war years. Marthe in many ways resembles the narrator: she is artistic, adventurous, childishly egocentric, guiltlessly desiring. It is Marthe who insists on going to the modern, masculine space of the American bar, Marthe who initiates the first sexual encounter. But her options are much more limited: she has agreed to marriage to Jacques because this is the inevitable female route to adulthood, and she can see no way out of it; she finds herself pregnant (by the narrator, though Jacques assumes the child is his) and dies in premature childbirth, whereas the narrator's life goes on, enriched rather than destroyed by their love affair: 'je compris que l'ordre, à la longue, se met de lui-même autour des choses' (Radiguet, 1923, 174; 'I understood that in the long term order simply restores itself'). The novel rescripts the war as a period of freedom for the generation too young to fight, and for women, but it is the latter whose period of liberty closes as the armistice bells ring out. Like *La Garçonne*, *Le Diable* had a particular resonance for women readers.

Bernard Grasset was an astute judge of what would capture the national mood, and besides single bestsellers like *Le Diable au corps* he also built a 'stable' of authors whose work achieved both critical acclaim and steady sales throughout the interwar period. Jean Giraudoux, Henry de Montherlant, André Malraux, François Mauriac, André Maurois, Paul Morand all published with Grasset, and all were undoubtedly read by a middlebrow public as well as in more intellectual and avant-garde circles. Their worldviews were, unsurprisingly and no doubt unconsciously (since 'male' and 'human' were tacitly agreed to be synonymous) androcentric, but occasionally a central focus on a female protagonist resulted in a telling, empathetic narrative that captured the particular situation of women in interwar society. Such a novel was Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927), set in the *Landes* of south-western France, in the stiflingly oppressive world of provincial, Catholic and bourgeois conformity that came to be identified with his fiction. As the novel opens, the eponymous heroine is leaving the courtroom acquitted of the attempted murder of her husband. Narrative sympathy is immediately directed towards Thérèse, pictured between two men, her lawyer and her father, who unite to ignore and patronise her, addressing each other as though she were simply not present, 'gênés par ce corps de femme qui les séparait, ils le poussaient du coude' (Mauriac, 1927, 50; 'since this woman's body between them was in their way, they elbowed it aside'). The rest of the novel is largely an extended flashback, focalised by Thérèse, to her girlhood, her marriage to the complacent, small-minded Bernard, the birth of her child and, throughout, the intensifying desperation of an intelligent, sensitive woman condemned to the misogynistic contempt of her whole society – women, for her well-respected father, are 'toutes des hystériques quand elles ne sont pas des idiotes' (52; 'all hysterical when they're not just stupid') – to a marriage that is in fact a business deal and legally strips her of any right to her own property (117) and, on a more intimate level, to the 'patientes inventions de l'ombre' (69; 'patient inventions of the night') of a husband who repulses her.

In what is in intention a Catholic novel, the reader is strangely drawn to share in Thérèse's ardent desire to be rid of Bernard at any cost. Mauriac's imagery leaves little room for alternative readings: Thérèse, for Bernard and his family, has value only as 'le réceptacle de leur progéniture' (Mauriac, 1927, 100; 'the receptacle of their offspring'); deployed by them to ensnare Anne, her younger sister-in-law, away from a romantic attachment towards another materially advantageous,

loveless marriage, she is tacitly compared to the blinded doves whose cries the local hunters use to lure free birds to their deaths. Though Mauriac intermittently superimposes a more judgemental, religious discourse to define Thérèse as a ‘monster’ subject to the ‘puissance forcenée’ (‘frenzied power’) of evil (57; 119), the dominant logic of what is a compelling and moving novel is one of critique: critique of a class that dresses up the will to material gain as obedience to God’s will, critique of stultifying social conformity and, above all, critique of the cruel repression of human potential inherent in a misogynistic culture.

### Women authors and middlebrow fiction

There was no absence of women writers in interwar France: in her groundbreaking study of what she terms the ‘forgotten generation’, Jennifer Milligan cites both contemporary studies such as Jean Larnac’s 1929 *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France* and her own archival research to affirm the existence of ‘a very sizeable body of literature produced by professional French female writers’ (1996, 27). Milligan’s study also establishes the many obstacles to publishing and recognition that impeded women’s access to literary fame, and the effect of the gatekeepers (literary critics and historians) on retrospective views of an era’s literature.<sup>12</sup> Colette is one of the very few women authors to have survived this process and entered posterity – but in terms of widely read female novelists who, we can surmise, appealed particularly to women readers, she was by no means a lone voice.

Indeed one of the major bestsellers of the early 1920s was written by a woman, though it has since virtually disappeared from literary history. Germaine Acremant’s *Les Dames aux chapeaux verts* (1921) sold in numbers comparable to *La Garçonne* and *Le Diable au corps*, went through numerous reprintings and soon reached sales of 1.5 million in France, as well as being widely translated. It was equally successful when its author adapted it for the stage, and in 1929 it also became a film.<sup>13</sup> *Les Dames* was certainly not a *succès de scandale*: written in a milder

<sup>12</sup> Milligan, for example, provides a neat table detailing the semi-exclusion of women writers from the major histories of French literature published between 1932 and 1982 (Milligan, 1996, 52).

<sup>13</sup> One of the characteristics of middlebrow fiction is its suitability (strong plotlines, sense of place, empathetic characters) for adaptation into other media.

and more comic vein, it offended no one. Nonetheless it registers a strong sense of war-determined change in female identity, and in a light-hearted, romantic and optimistic mode Acremant deals with women's life choices in post-war France.

The novel's heroine is Arlette, a lively, 'modern' 18-year-old whose widowed father commits suicide when faced with the family's financial ruin, leaving his daughter no option but to go and live with relatives. Kind-hearted and optimistic, but still daunted at the prospect, Arlette leaves Paris to take up residence with her four middle-aged cousins, unmarried sisters who live in a quiet northern town in the Pas-de-Calais. Humour is generated by the culture clash between modernity, in the form of a sporty, assertive and enterprising young woman and pre-war traditional values embodied in the four provincial old maids, who are – not without affection – shown to be prissy, blinkered and left behind by history's progress. Their lives revolve around the Church, domestic routine and petty rivalries; the short trip to meet their niece from her train takes on the proportions of a major expedition. The presence of the more emancipated younger woman, and her cheerful attempts to expand their horizons, have some effect: Arlette discovers an anonymous diary, works out (after some comic misinterpretations) which sister was cruelly thwarted in her romantic plans by her mother's snobbish dismissal of the suitor, and engineers the reunion of the now middle-aged lovers. Their long-delayed marriage thus doubles Arlette's own, for her love story with the nobly born (if thoroughly democratic) Jacques de Fleurville gives the narrative shape, and concludes in a happy dénouement. Marriage is thus presented as the only non-ridiculous and truly happy female destiny; at the same time, female independence and agency are presented as positive achievements of the modern age.

One striking passage, slightly out of kilter with the overall tone, adds a note of anxiety to the general exuberance. Arlette is at a low point, having quarrelled with her oldest cousin and believing she has lost Jacques. Lying in her moonlit bedroom, feverish and despondent, she has a sort of hallucination: a 'cortège pailleté, capricieux, ondoyant' ('a spangled, whimsical parade') of female Parisian shop workers march past her, laughing, joking, revelling in their freedom and the 'trésors de tendresse qu'elles dilapident royalement' ('treasures of tenderness that they freely dispersed'). 'Pour les baisers', reflects Arlette, 'ne sont-elles pas toutes milliardaires? (Acremant, 1921, 262; 'Aren't they all millionaires where kisses are concerned?'). The young workers call out to her: 'viens avec nous, tu riras aussi. Tout être a le droit d'être libre' ('come with

us, you'll have fun too! Everyone has the right to be free'). 'Mes sœurs!' (263; 'My sisters') she cries. The vision fades and the streets of Paris shrink back to the domestic space that has predominated throughout the novel. Jacques duly returns, the wedding takes place and the lightly satirical treatment of outmoded, provincial conservatism is balanced by a fundamentally reassuring affirmation of love, romance and family. *Les Dames aux chapeaux verts* nonetheless registers a note of anxiety over what is lost, as well as gained, by transition to the status of wife.

Acremant (who only died in 1986) went on to be widely read and to write other novels in a similarly comic yet tellingly topical vein: *Gai ! Marions nous* for example in 1927, and *A l'Ombre des célibataires* in 1932. Among the other women novelists whose target readership was certainly both middlebrow and female was Marcelle Tinayre, now in her fifties (born 1870) and like Colette continuing a career begun in a pre-war period more favourable to the 'women's novel'. Tinayre remained a well-known name, regularly published and regularly featured in the press. Her interwar fiction differs markedly, however, from the optimistic 'new woman' novels of the Belle Époque. The fiction of the 1920s and '30s features no brave heroines intent on, and succeeding in, the reconciliation of love and freedom, romance and emancipation. If her later work continues to pose the same question of how to be a woman in a rapidly changing world, the answers it proposes are decidedly less sanguine.

Tinayre's interwar novels show some resemblance to the body of work produced by her British counterparts, of which she was almost certainly aware.<sup>14</sup> They make 'the woman [...] hero of the ordinary' (Clark, 1991, 185), illuminating 'the texture of women's lives' (Beauman, 2008, 7), which are largely hidden and unremarkable, and registering a sense of stifled aspirations; dreams of love and self-fulfilment are in constant tension with that 'world of necessity and compromise' (Kennedy, 1924, 280) so present in British women's middlebrow. Tinayre's stories, though, are bleaker, their resignation more desolate and more likely to end in despair or death. Whereas her Belle Époque novels were largely set in a Paris vibrant with hopeful modernity, the later work belongs in the provinces, in small towns and villages left behind by that febrile

<sup>14</sup> Tinayre was translated and known in British literary circles, touring England (as well as the USA) in 1937, and delivering talks in, among other cities, Leeds and Oxford. The preface to one edition of *L'Ombre de l'Amour* (by Marie-France Houdart) notes that she lunched with Rebecca West in London in 1934.

passion for novelty and change that has come to be associated with the 1920s. The split between the major cities, and particularly Paris, and the more quiescent, traditionalist culture of rural France is as evident in Tinayre as in Mauriac's interwar fiction. Villefarge, the main setting of *L'Ennemie intime* (1931), typifies this world, with its shuttered bourgeois houses filled with heavily ornate furniture, its dark arcades of shops dominated by a square-towered church and hideous war memorial (8), its exercise of social surveillance through gossip, and sparse bus service that limits intercourse with the world beyond. Signs of social change appear in the form of American films at the cinema, the café changing its name to adopt the more exotic sounding English term 'tea rooms', the shortage of domestic help as young women discover better options in the towns: 'il y avait pénurie de domestiques, comme il y avait pénurie de logements, et pénurie de jeunes hommes mariables' (25; 'there was a servant shortage, just as there was a housing shortage and a shortage of marriageable young men'). One affluent member of the local bourgeoisie holds a regular salon in an effort to keep Villefarge up to date with literary and artistic fashion – but gossip remains the chief form of local entertainment, and social attitudes show little change. The local doctor is writing a book on the 'depopulation of the provinces', and the gradual exodus towards urban centres is graphically dramatised as the novel returns repeatedly to Saint-Mars-de-la-Lande, a dying village now inhabited only by the very old, the casualties of progress symbolised by the filthy, ragged madwoman who haunts its streets (84). Old electoral posters promising 'Laïcité ... Démocratie ... Réformes sociales ... le pays confiant dans ses destinées' (83; 'Secularism ... Democracy ... Social reform ... a country confident of its future') peel off the walls of semi-derelict buildings.

Provincial France is represented as a place of stasis and decay, and Tinayre's heroines are the frustrated products of this society. They are what one of her books defines as 'lampes voilées', veiled lamps whose potential to radiate light has been dampened and obscured by a repressive education and the narrow constriction of their life choices. Laurence, heroine of one of the two stories published under the title *Les Lampes voilées* (1921), is a single, celibate woman in her thirties, devoted to the care of her cantankerous old mother and to charitable work in the local children's hospital. Her past contains one tentative, failed romance: the plot is shaped by the return of the man she almost loved, and the brief glimmer of a possible rekindling of their relationship. The dénouement sees his departure, and Laurence's return to a state of atony: 'résignation

sans douceur, détachement sans amertume, passions tombées comme le vent tombe; aucun élan vers la vie et pas même vers la mort' (35; 'resignation with no sense of relief, detachment with no bitterness, passions that fall as the wind falls; no zest for life or even for death'). Geneviève in *L'Ennemie intime* is also a daughter raised to a life of feminine decorum and submission to her tyrannical parent, in this case a blustering, egotistical old patriarch. Geneviève has partially escaped this life by marriage to a Parisian architect, an elegantly sceptical libertine for whose lifestyle and milieu she is singularly ill-suited, and with whom she manages to cohabit only by becoming an automaton version of the sophisticated wife. The novel sees Geneviève move between Villefarge, where she struggles to fulfil her sense of filial duty to a brutally ungrateful father, Paris and her joyless marriage, and La Sarrasine, the isolated home of her war veteran lover, Bertrand. In Bertrand's house is the 'chambre rouge', a bedroom magnificently furnished in deep-red silk, the antithesis both of the genteel stuffiness of Villefarge and the cold elegance of Paris. Here, in a room 'où les voix du dehors ne pénétraient pas' (Tinayre, 1931, 102; 'into which no voice from the outer world could penetrate'), Geneviève has discovered sexual passion and real if fleeting happiness. As with British middlebrow, the novels' immersive power and their thematic resonance owe much to the eloquent depiction of place.

Plots are driven by the tension between desire and force of circumstance, and carry a strong sense of fatalism as the latter inexorably wins.<sup>15</sup> *L'Ennemie intime* sees each of Geneviève's slender sources of identity destroyed: her filial role is gradually usurped by the woman she employs to look after her invalid father; her marriage offers neither motherhood nor companionship; Bertrand accepts a marriage of convenience to a competent, wealthy woman neighbour, ending Geneviève's experience of love. A sense that the post-war period has ushered in alternative modes of female identity is certainly present, but Tinayre's heroines are blocked from these by a learned docility and emotional diffidence. The repressed Laurence observes with passing envy the girls in the local seaside tavern, excited by the arrival of young sailors after a shipwreck, but sexuality is associated for her with social shame and a terrifying risk to the integrity of the self: 'Tantôt sa fierté se rebellait, tantôt, dans une honte brûlante, elle appelait, en dépit de tout, la tendresse et les caresses jadis méprisées'

15 In its haunting settings and strong sense of fatalism, Tinayre's fiction of the 1930s can be compared to the Poetic Realism strand in French cinema of the same period.

(Tinayre, 1921, 127; ‘At times her pride rebelled, at others, with burning shame, she longed for the tenderness and the embraces that she had once despised’). The central conflict that drives *L’Ennemie intime* is between Geneviève and the ruthless (and meaningfully named) Renaude Vipreux – ‘le renard et la vipère en une seule vieille fille’ (207; ‘the fox and the viper in a single old maid’) – the middle-aged woman taken on to look after the ailing patriarch, who gradually, ruthlessly turns him against his daughter and manipulates him into leaving his entire legacy to herself. Renaude deals with the social humiliation of the unmarried woman with uncompromising aggression, carving out a place for herself in the world by utter indifference to the well-being of others. The reader’s sympathies are with Geneviève, embodiment of the ‘feminine’ qualities of empathy, concern for others, self-sacrifice, but the novel shows the impotence of such goodness in a more competitive, harsher world that is also deeply misogynist. The woman for whom Bertrand leaves Geneviève is also better adapted to modernity: she is a young widow who ‘aime sa liberté et n’est pas sentimentale’ (Tinayre, 1931, 93; ‘likes her freedom and is not sentimental’), a ‘garçon manqué’ (‘tomboy’) who herself proposes the marriage on a business-like basis, with a confident, ‘Avec moi, que ne feriez-vous pas?’ (178; ‘With me, you could achieve anything’). In Tinayre’s pre-war fiction, conventionally feminine virtues could ally in new ways with strength and self-affirmation. Not so here: her sensitive, dutiful heroines are crushed by a society that offers no way of being other than utter submission, or imitation of a ‘masculine’ stance of ‘unsentimental’ egoism.

Though pessimistic, the interwar fiction remains compelling particularly in its figurative representation of the heroines’ quandaries, through images of stasis and sterile circularity. Narrative trajectories stall or replace progression with spiralling repetition. In both of the novels foregrounded here, heroines set out on journeys but fail to reach their destination. Laurence sets off early in *Les Lampes voilées* to make her way home from the children’s hospital where she does charitable work, but gets lost in the fading twilight and wanders, cold and helpless, till chance provides an exit. This journey is replicated in more dramatic form at the story’s end, when she decides at last to make her way to Dominique, the only chance of a relationship she has known, but is blocked by snow and the resulting cancellation of all modes of transport. Laurence sets off on foot through the blizzard, in a belated, reckless gesture of hope and self-determination, but she fails and is rescued half-frozen to suffer a long illness and recover to find her



dreary life unchanged. Dominique leaves France: the next news she has is that of his death. Geneviève (*L'Ennemie intime*) also makes a belated gesture of self-affirmation that ends in disaster. Defeated by the ruthless Renaude and abandoned by Bertrand, Geneviève takes her husband's sleek, state-of-the-art car, symbol of both modernity and virile power – 'C'était une automobile de tourisme, grise comme un torpilleur, très basse, longue de capot, avec des roues pareilles à des boucliers et des nickels étincelants' (Tinayre, 1931, 227; 'It was a touring car, torpedo grey, low to the ground with a long bonnet and wheel hubs like shiny metal shields') – and drives away from Villefarge into the night. At first the sensation is one of extreme exhilaration: 'Chaque rotation des roues, quadriges d'astres métalliques, accrochant des reflets errants, délivrait la fugitive, l'allégeait, la soulevait' (228; 'Each rotation of the wheels of this metal chariot glinted with the reflection of passing lights, freeing the runaway, lightening her load, raising her up'). But the roads are steep and potholed, the night dark and wet, and gradually Geneviève realises that she is driving in circles, returning repeatedly, as in a nightmare, to the ghost village of Saint-Mars-de-la-Lande. She crashes the car, and dies.

With its malevolent villain, fast cars and sense of fatality, *L'Ennemie intime* draws on the thriller genre as well as that of the (failed) romance. The thriller element is strengthened in a final plot twist, when revenge for Geneviève's suffering is exacted, not by herself, but by the brother whom she has missed and sought throughout the novel. Raymond left the hated paternal home as a very young man, fought in the war and is now a militant communist. All the revolt and agency of which Geneviève's 'feminine' conditioning have rendered her incapable are fully present in her brother who now, after her death, travels to Villefarge to confront and kill his sister's tormentor, Renaude Vipérin. Tinayre's sad, likeable heroines are unable to overcome their learned docility and decorum, yet are aware that these qualities have little currency in post-war society. In Tinayre's interwar fiction, the tension between female desire and 'the way things are' leads not just to wry resignation, but to utter desolation or to death.

Other women writers of the Belle Époque generation also continued to publish novels in the interwar period, though their appeal to a middlebrow market is less certain than that of Tinayre. Lucie Delarue-Mardrus (born 1874), friend of Colette and member of Natalie Clifford Barney's Sapphic set, wrote on into the 1920s and '30s, but her 'virilized heroines and emasculated heroes' (Milligan, 1996, 186), and her emphasis

on lesbian love, may well have been too radical for a mainstream audience. Rachilde (born 1860) also published novels more or less annually throughout the interwar years, but her sulphurous reputation and the eroticism and violence of her texts made her anything but middlebrow. Of a younger generation, Marguerite Yourcenar (born 1903) published her first novel *Alexis ou le traité de vain combat* in 1929, having begun her literary career as a poet, and published steadily throughout the 1930s. But Yourcenar's dense, erudite historical fiction is aimed at a 'highbrow' readership, as are the formally experimental fictions of Louise de Vilmorin (born 1902), of which *Saint Une-fois* (1934) is the most famous. Jeanne Galzy (born 1883), winner of the Prix Femina in 1923 for *Les Allongés*, attracted a fairly wide readership, though one that was possibly restricted by the lesbian nature of her love stories. Of the generation born around 1900, the female novelist who belongs most clearly to the category of 'feminine middlebrow' has recently returned to public prominence for quite different reasons, but her fiction appealed to a wide mainstream readership – and arguably a predominantly female one – from the end of the 1920s till her death, aged only 39, in 1942. She is Irène Némirovsky.

### Némirovsky and the feminine middlebrow

Irène Némirovsky reappeared on the national and international literary scene in 2004, when the manuscript of her last novel – or to be more precise, two novellas – *Suite française* was discovered, published and posthumously awarded the Prix Renaudot. Némirovsky died in Auschwitz, classified as a Jew under the racist laws of Vichy France and hence transported by the Nazis. *Suite française* became an international bestseller, and its out-of-print and largely forgotten author a household name, at least in France. However Némirovsky had in fact already been a well-known and successful novelist throughout the 1930s. On the interwar literary scene Némirovsky had situated herself as a serious but accessible mainstream writer, a type of authorship that was entirely consonant with her twin goals of assimilation into her adopted culture of France (her family emigrated from Russia in 1917) and secure commercial success. Angela Kershaw has shown how the mediation of Némirovsky's work through particular reviews (*Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, *Gringoire*) and the strategies of her publishers (especially Grasset) invited the attention of a middlebrow readership, and to this

readership she appealed with narratives that explicitly addressed the moods, styles and tensions of the contemporary age, in a form and style that were neither jarringly modernist nor tediously traditional, but quietly skilful within a broadly realist frame of reference. Kershaw summarises this as ‘clear composition, a strong narrative thread and convincing characterisation’ (2010, 38). Settings, characters and themes are strongly of their era: as Kershaw puts it, Némirovsky ‘writes into her readers’ situation’ (167).

Her fictional world foregrounds the restless spirit of what came to be known as ‘the roaring twenties’, and the fragility of the affluence (both inherited and earned) that for some social groups characterised those years. Drawing on her own background in a relatively wealthy Russian-Jewish immigrant family, she portrayed the cosmopolitanism of the times, and also the impact of the war on a young French generation: the men wounded, more psychologically than physically, by the experience of the trenches, the young women at once elated and destabilised by new social freedoms that were in part illusory. It is a world of music halls and jazz, fast cars and telephones, a yawning gap between generations separated by the cataclysm of war, a *mal-du-siècle* as manifest in the frenzied pursuit of pleasure as in the strained silences and mutual incomprehension of domestic relationships.

There is no evidence that Némirovsky’s imagined reader was any more a woman than a man, and certainly (as we have seen) the desire to succeed in both critical and market terms would militate against any self-presentation as a ‘woman’s writer’. Her novels are concerned with male as well as female subjectivity: *David Golder*, her breakthrough novel in 1929, focalises the majority of the action from the point of view of its eponymous hero, an ageing Ukrainian-Jewish merchant leading a wealthy but deeply unhappy life in his adopted France; *La Proie* (1938) is the story of the young Jean-Luc Daguerne as he struggles to find a place, both material and emotional, in a France knocked off its axis by the Depression. And yet it is the female life course that takes centre stage in Némirovsky’s fiction, and the themes she addresses – as well as her self-presentation as an ordinary wife and mother and the types of magazine in which she published – all suggest the probability of a large female readership. In interviews undertaken as part of the publicity campaign for her books, Némirovsky emphasised the conventional gender roles she shared with most of her contemporaries, playing down her exceptional status as a well-known writer – ‘Mon mari rentre. J’arrête mon travail, à partir de ce moment je suis l’épouse tout court’

(‘My husband comes home. I stop working, and from that moment I am simply a wife’) (d’Assac, undated) – and allowing photos of herself with her small daughters to feature in press articles. She published from the start in magazines such as *Les Œuvres Libres*, which specialised in ‘popular, accessible literature’ in reasonably priced volumes and ‘paid its authors well’ (Kershaw, 2010, 12), or *Gringoire*, later associated with anti-Semitism and far-right politics, but in the early 1930s at least a more eclectic publication and the best-selling literary and political weekly in France. Némirovsky was also (like Colette) a favourite of the eminently middlebrow *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*. It is interesting, too, that Persephone, the London publishing house devoted to the revival of a lost feminine middlebrow, should have chosen to re-edit Némirovsky’s stories in translation, their first volume to have been translated from the French (*Dimanche and Other Stories*, 2010).

Némirovsky’s young women, some of them in their teens as the war ends (the author herself was born in 1903), some a decade younger, most of them from families whose degree of wealth absolves its female members from any imperative to work for a living, enjoy a degree of social freedom that would have been unthinkable before the war. They are in that sense the *garçonnes* of the 1920s: they drive cars, stay out till the early hours in the company of young men, actively seek sexual pleasure – and the rarity of pregnancy suggests that they know about contraception.<sup>16</sup> Némirovsky attributes to very young women an exuberant sense of potentiality, of not yet being ‘un être achevé’ (*Deux*, 1939, 32; ‘a completed person’), and an intense sensuality shared with their male counterparts: Joyce and Alec in *David Golder* are described ‘mêlant leurs lèvres mouillées, poivrées, mais si jeunes que rien n’altérerait leur tendre goût de fruit’ (1929, 163; ‘kissing each other’s mouths, damp and peppery from their food but so young that nothing could change their tender taste of fruit’). As this last quote suggests, the narrative voice is generally older, suggesting and sharing a nostalgia for freedom and

16 In *Deux*, Marianne reflects that “Autrefois, quand on prenait une jeune fille pour maîtresse, du moins la crainte de lui avoir fait un enfant empêchait d’être trop muflé. Maintenant, il n’y a même plus cela.” Elle se rappela le sourire d’Antoine: “Vous savez trop de choses” (1939, 53; “In the past, when you took a [virgin] girl for your mistress at least the fear of getting her pregnant stopped you being too much of a cad. Now there isn’t even that”. She recalled Antoine’s smile, “You know too much”). Though another young female protagonist does get pregnant, the acknowledgement of a generalised practice of contraception is explicit, despite the pro-natalist, anti-birth control laws in force since 1920.

the fierce elation of a life still unshaped by time. For these are butterfly moments: adult life in Némirovsky's world brings with it a closing down of possibilities, for both sexes, but for her women the choices are particularly stark.

The future of these free, mobile girls with their wild avidity for pleasure is figured through two main models of adult femininity. On the one hand, there is the dull, self-effacing matron immured within domestic walls, accepting the infidelities of a husband like Guillaume in the story 'Dimanche', 'gras, bien portant et heureux' (2000, 14; 'plump, in good health and contented') as he escapes the family home to meet his mistress, or Henri in *La Comédie bourgeoise*, pictured asleep and snoring on his wedding night (1934a, 174) and repeatedly engaged in the seduction of his female workers. To Guillaume, his wife appears 'casanière, éteinte' (2000, 17; 'homely, faded'), like Madeleine in *La Comédie bourgeoise*, already at twenty-five showing 'un visage lassé [...] qui commence à se faner' (1934a, 179; 'a tired face that was beginning to fade'). This category of women, fully absorbed into their role as wife and mother, are characterised by verbs that suggest wilting, fading, a light extinguished.

The other model of female adulthood is not dull but monstrous: Némirovsky's fiction features the recurring figure of the ageing women who in her desperate attempts to deny advancing age turns herself into an abject masquerade of femininity. From Gloria in *David Golder* with her 'vieille figure fardée, émaillée comme une assiette peinte' (1929, 66; 'old face beneath the mask of make-up, enamelled like a painted plate'), to Bella in the semi-autobiographical *Le Vin de solitude*, her face 'peint, empâté, fardé, englué de poudre et de crème, mais il semblait que la chair cédât intérieurement et que la surface lisse, blanche et rose s'affaîsât lentement' (1935, 269; 'painted, puffy, made-up, thick with powder and cream, but beneath this the flesh was sagging and the smooth pink and white surface was slowly giving way'), Némirovsky's age-denying older women are vivid embodiments of Beauvoir's later analysis of female ageing in a patriarchal culture. With the menopause, Beauvoir writes in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, a woman:

perd l'attrait érotique et la fécondité d'où elle tirait, aux yeux de la société et à ses propres yeux, la justification de son existence et ses chances de bonheur [...] elle assiste impuissante à la dégradation de cet objet de chair avec lequel elle se confond; elle lutte; mais la teinture, peeling, opérations esthétiques ne feront jamais que prolonger sa jeunesse agonisante. (II, 456–57)

(loses the sexual appeal and the capacity to give birth which form, in society's eyes as well as her own, the justification of her existence and her sole chance of happiness [...] she watches helplessly as that flesh with which she has identified her very self starts to decay; she fights against it, but all that the hair dyes, the facelifts, the beauty treatments can do is to prolong the death throes of youth)

In Némirovsky's most extreme portrayal of this dilemma, *Jézabel* (1936), the identification of youthful beauty with identity itself leads Gladys not just to devote her life to concealing her real age, but actually to commit murder when she is threatened with its revelation. Seen from the perspective of their daughters, these women are physically repulsive and bitterly resented for their lack of maternal warmth: Hélène (*Le Vin de Solitude*) 'nourrissait dans son coeur envers sa mère une haine étrange qui semblait grandir avec elle' (1935, 58; 'felt in her heart a strange hatred for her mother that seemed to grow as she did'). But seen – as they also are, albeit briefly in some novels – from their own point of view, they invite empathy rather than horror: Gloria (*David Golder*) recognises her own role in her husband's life, not as object of love but as the public sign of his wealth: 'Il ne l'avait jamais aimée. S'il la couvrait de bijoux, c'était comme une enseigne vivante, un étalage' (1929, 96; 'He had never loved her. If he covered her with jewels, this was only so that she could be a living display cabinet for his riches'); Antoinette in *Le Bal* has moments of reluctant sympathy for her mother despite the latter's malice:

Et quand elle disait le mot 'attendre', il passait sur ses traits durs, tendus, maussades, une certaine expression pathétique, profonde, qui remuait Antoinette malgré elle et la faisait souvent, allonger, d'instinct, ses lèvres vers le visage maternel. (1930, 13)

(And when she said 'wait', her strained, hard, sullen features took on a deeper, sad expression that moved Antoinette despite herself and made her move instinctively to kiss her mother's face)

And through discreet but effective images Némirovsky makes clear that part of the daughters' horror comes from the fear of an underlying resemblance, fear that this may be the fate that awaits them too, which sets the monstrous mothers in a more forgiving light as victims of a constricted female destiny. In *Le Bal*, mother and daughter are connected by mirroring gestures:

Elle serrait violemment les mains en parlant, d'un geste tellement

identique à celle d'Antoinette que la petite [...] tressaillit brusquement comme quand on se trouve, à l'improviste, devant un miroir. (1930, 55)

(She clasped her hands violently as she spoke, in a gesture so exactly like Antoinette's own that the girl [...] shivered suddenly, as if she caught an unexpected glimpse of her own reflection in a mirror)

Gladys in *Jézabel* becomes that 'vieille poupée fardée' (1936, 53; 'painted old doll') she remembers with such horror as her mother.

Marriage, in the class in which these novels are set, is the only viable future for young women, and on the whole it is not presented as an institution that offers happiness to either partner. Though very young women enjoy new freedoms to explore, with their male peers, both sexual and romantic desires, marriage reimposes a strict division of roles that is fulfilling for neither. The men must find the means to support the family, a responsibility that is presented as desperately hard especially in the Depression years of the 1930s, but also provides a sense of agency and of being part of the public world. The women become, like the once-wild Madeleine of *Deux*, 'la parfaite épouse' (1939, 194; 'the perfect wife') and are consigned to the private, domestic sphere of motherhood. Without maternity, life is even more desolate: Solange, victim of a botched pre-marriage abortion in *Deux*, and left unable to bear children, becomes 'triste, aigrie, vieille avant l'âge' (193; 'sad, embittered, old before her time'). But becoming a wife and mother means a closing in of horizons, and a sense of gradual effacement as the next generation reduces the female parent to the status of insignificant shadow: in the eyes of Christiane, her daughter, Mme Boehmer in 'Les Rivages heureux' in *Dimanche* 'n'était qu'une ombre inconsistante et calme, entourée d'autres ombres' (2000, 38; 'was no more than a calm, insubstantial shadow, surrounded by other shadows').

Though Némirovsky certainly flags up no feminist agenda – any more than most English middlebrow – her fiction displays a world in which women's options are rigidly limited. An acceptable adult social identity, for her women, demands marriage, and marriage means either resignation to a quietly subordinate, marginalised place, or a desperate and undignified struggle to cling on to youth and the sense of identity conferred by male desire. Yet celibacy is no less desolate, given the low status of unmarried women. *Vieilles filles* in Némirovsky's fiction are insubstantial figures, 'pale, fragile, transparent' like the Illmanen sisters in the story *Les Fumées du vin* (1934b), or like Mlle Isabelle in *Le Bal*, envious and mean-spirited, eking out an impoverished life by

teaching piano in an apartment that her pupils see as ‘laid, misérable et sinistre’ (1930, 45; ‘ugly, miserable and sinister’). Unmarried women are ‘solitaires, vieillies avant l’âge [...] Tisanes, cataplasmes, potions, leur vie s’écoule ainsi’ (‘Aïno’ in *Dimanche*, 2000, 113; ‘lonely, old before their time [...] Weak tea, cataplasms, medicines, thus go their lives’). The imperative to marry is a powerful one, and a clear if unspoken taboo prevents women from taking the initiative in proposing marriage. So they wait, even in the hedonistic period of early youth: the activity most recurrently associated with women in Némirovsky is waiting, *attendre*. Young women wait long hours for lovers to come, in cafés like Christiane in ‘Les Rivages heureux’ or Nadine in ‘Dimanche’, wondering ‘Combien de femmes avaient attendu, comme elle, ravalé leurs larmes, comme elle’ (28; ‘How many women had waited, like her, and choked back their tears, like her’) on this same café bench, as the clock relentlessly chimes out one quarter hour after another; or they wait in parks like Marianne in *Deux*, walking round and round the snowy lawns as Antoine fails to arrive for their rendezvous: ‘Il ne venait pas. Elle tournait sans cesse autour de la pelouse, le front baissé, les dents serrées. Attendre encore ... Attendre ... Espérer ...’ (1939, 69; ‘And still he didn’t come. She walked round and round the lawn, head down, teeth clenched. Just wait a bit longer ... Wait ... And hope ...’). In each of the cases cited an older woman from a lower social class addresses the waiting girl with a word or look of sympathy that generalises their plight across the social hierarchy, and across generations. In *Deux*:

Une femme s’assit à côté d’elle, une petite bourgeoise, vêtue d’un manteau noir, avec un col de fourrure râpée, qui la regarda avec pitié, comme si elle songeait: Encore une ...’ (1939, 70)

(A woman sat down next to her, lower middle class, black coat with a threadbare fur collar. She looked at her pityingly as if she were thinking, ‘Here’s another one ...’)

The ardour and appetite for life of Némirovsky’s young girls is soon shadowed by recognition of the real limits on their futures, and the aura of resigned disappointment is one of the elements that connects her to her British contemporaries.

Némirovsky’s world is far from simply bleak, however. British middlebrow heroines on the whole get on with life, finding joys and pleasures (and humour) here and there in the lives they have, occasionally (as in the dénouement of Holtby’s *The Land of Green*



*Ginger*) transcending all constraints to affirm the survival of their youthful sense of entitlement to happiness. This beleaguered optimism is also present in Némirovsky. Hélène, the most autobiographical of her heroines, concludes *Le Vin de Solitude* with a sense of deliverance from her unhappy girlhood, a rejection of marriage and an assertion of hope in her independent future as a writer: ‘je suis libre. Je travaillerai [...] Je n’ai pas peur de la vie, songea-t-elle. [...] je suis seule, mais ma solitude est âpre et enivrante’ (1935, 309–11; ‘I am free. I shall work [...] “I’m not scared of life”, she thought, “I’m alone, but my solitude is bitter and intoxicating”). The final image of the book employs familiar and effective imagery to endorse Hélène’s optimism: ‘Elle se leva, et, à ce moment, les nuages s’écartèrent; entre les piliers de l’Arc de Triomphe le ciel bleu parut et éclaira son chemin’ (1935, 311; ‘She got up and at that moment the clouds parted; between the pillars of the Arc de Triomphe the blue sky appeared and lit up the road ahead’). And if Hélène’s independence and ambition are exceptional in Némirovsky’s world, those heroines who find themselves tied to a more conventional destiny may also affirm the survival of some core of selfhood. The later fiction in particular proposes a more nuanced and positive view of marriage. In *Deux* (1939), for example, Marianne finds in her marriage to Antoine not the passionate desire and fascination that first drew them together, but a sort of shared peace and mutual support grounded in ‘les précieuses banalités de chaque jour’ (140; ‘the precious banality of the everyday’). Without loving Antoine in the full romantic sense of the word, she identifies herself as ‘solidaire de sa joie et de sa souffrance’ (‘standing alongside him in both his joys and his suffering’) and puts this sense of solidarity into practice in their daily lives. Here too, the novel ends on a positive image of the couple, ‘leurs bras enlacés, leurs corps pressés l’un contre l’autre. Ils ne ressentaient pas le désir; ils étaient calmes, un peu ironiques et sans joie, mais, au bout d’un instant, il leur sembla que leur fatigue les quittait’ (261; ‘arm in arm, their bodies pressed close together. They felt no desire, they were calm, a little ironic and joyless, but after a moment they felt that their weariness had left them’). For her readers, Némirovsky maps the social and emotional landscape of a conflicted period, with the emphasis on a female life course, and a bleakness about women’s life chances that is offset by her vivid rendering of youth’s vitality and sense of open horizons, and of an attenuated, pragmatic and even serene acceptance of the realities of female adulthood.

## A middlebrow aesthetic

Némirovsky's fiction was positioned as middlebrow by her own needs as an author, by the mediation of publishers and press, and by the fact of her femaleness in a very male culture. But the textual qualities of her work were also central to her appeal to a mainstream, middle-class readership, and connect her to the other authors defined here as middlebrow. These are not fully popular novels as were, for example, those in the thriving romance series of the 1920s and '30s, forerunners of the Harlequin Press, or their crime or adventure equivalents. Nor are they formally demanding and self-reflexive in the manner of Proust, Gide and the Surrealists, or using the novel form to articulate a strongly ideological vision like, for example, Montherlant or the communist novelist Paul Nizan. They situate personal stories in a social context, and their narrative techniques are well-established and familiar since the late nineteenth-century heyday of the realist novel: through empathetic characterisation, a mixture of external and internal focalisation, coherent plotting with elements of suspense and themes relevant to their readers, they invite suspension of disbelief and that pleasurable state of 'narrative hypnosis' (Radway, 1997) that reading fiction can deliver. Némirovsky exemplifies in particular two characteristics of the middlebrow aesthetic: the signifying power of place and the use of a body of imagery that is familiar to the point of transparency, because integrated into the language and perceptual processes of the everyday.

First, the sense of place. Némirovsky often uses vividly evoked settings to give sensory reality to characters' mental or emotional landscapes. There are places that materialise utter desolation, such as the empty apartment to which David Golder returns after losing his fortune and his family, and which his wife has stripped of all their accumulated comforts: sounds echo through the vast deserted rooms, harsh external light and cold draughts enter freely through the 'vastes fenêtres nues' (1929, 168; 'vast, bare windows'). In *La Comédie bourgeoise* the narrator returns insistently to the long flat road, 'une route de France', that runs through the village where Madeleine, the heroine, lives out the dully conventional stages of her life:

De nouveau, la longue route plate qui semble s'allonger interminablement. Madeleine marche avec les enfants. [...] Ils s'éloignent. la route, luisante de pluie, semble monter vers le ciel bas et s'enfoncer dans l'horizon. (1934a, 193–94)

(And again the long flat road seems to stretch endlessly ahead. Madeleine walks along it with the children [...] receding into the distance. The road, shiny with rain, seems to rise towards the low sky and vanish into the horizon)

In *La Proie* it is the Daguerne family's house in the Paris suburbs that materialises, throughout much of the novel, the pinched misery of respectable poverty: 'ce pavillon de briques jaunes à l'aspect maussade, solide, laide, avare' (1938, 10; 'that yellow brick bungalow with its sullen, solid, ugly, miserly air') with its 'parcimonieuse lumière' indoors (10; 'sparse indoor light') and garden 'sans fleurs, sans grâce' (10; 'graceless and flowerless'). These spaces contrast with the cold but elegant white and abundance of light that characterise affluence, from Golder's villa on the Côte d'Azur to Jean-Luc Daguerne's *nouveau riche* apartment on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne, on the top floor of 'un immeuble neuf, blanc' (147; 'a brand new, white apartment block') and internally decorated entirely in white. The spaces of desolation also contrast dramatically with those of happiness and sensuality, which are usually temporary and provisional, as opposed to permanent and solidly predictable. Thus Jean-Luc Daguerne knows rare moments of peace and fulfilment with Édith, before their disastrous marriage, in a rented 'chambre chaude et sombre' (16; 'warm, dark bedroom') immured against the cold, dark city night, and later in a village café in which he and his second love, Marie Dourdan, take refuge from the rain, where a cat sleeps on a chair before the fire and 'cet aspect familial, doux s'alliait étrangement au décor du bar, et à l'odeur de vieux et excellents alcools qui imprégnaient les murs' (154; 'its homely, cosy look formed a strange contrast to the décor of a bar, and the smell of fine old alcohol that emanated from the walls'). *Deux* opens at dawn in a country hotel room, a fire warming the five young people gathered there while outside a dank white fog presses against the windows. The 1914–18 war has just ended; the five – two girls and three young men – have escaped family to celebrate Easter with a whole night together, 'un caprice, une escapade folle' (1939, 10; 'a whim, a mad escapade') in this ordinary room touched with magic in the firelight: 'la chambre, le vieux lit sombre, la courtoise à fleurs, froissée, jetée à terre, le petit canapé rose' (13; 'the room with its old dark wood bed, its flowered quilt crumpled on the floor and the small pink sofa'). The imagery of happiness – warmth that protects from a cold external world, firelight, the sensuality of colours (the pink of the furniture, the reflection of the flames in an amber necklace) – is

commonplace and transparent, as is that of cold, dark, flat uniformity that evokes misery.

The use of place to figure mood, and the specific images used (the long, flat road, the empty house, white as a signifier of cold beauty) are quietly effective precisely because they activate familiar associations, commonly used types of metaphor, analogies that pervade everyday modes of perception and narration as well as literary ones. They are relatively transparent images that serve the fictional illusion rather than drawing attention to the text itself. Place is just one example of this stylistic trait: an unostentatious poetry of the everyday runs through Némirovsky's narratives, part of her characteristically middlebrow discretion of style and tone, which Angela Kershaw sums up as 'formally accessible, contemporary in theme, and yet reassuringly familiar' (2010, 28). The opening sequence of *Deux* ends with a typically discreet yet telling image of this kind. Marianne, 20 years old, has spent the night as described above with her four friends who include Antoine, whom she finds intensely seductive and who will soon become her lover. As they leave the hotel room at dawn, she turns to take one last look at what will become the emblematic scene of their youthful freedom and sense of potential: 'Du grand feu qu'ils avaient allumé avec tant de joie, depuis longtemps il ne restait qu'une cendre ardente' (13; 'Of the great fire they had lit so joyfully, there remained only one cinder, live and burning'). The condensed image of transient yet consuming passion, of happiness that is at once fleeting and formative, scarcely needs interpretation. It simply contributes to the reader's imaginative immersion in a fictional world that is simultaneously sensory and charged with meaning, and thus to the everyday pleasure of reading.

### Conclusion

The high era of middlebrow, indeed the moment of the term's coinage, is the period between the two world wars, at least in Britain. Demand came from the growth of an aspirational middle-class public; in literature, this demand was met by entrepreneurial publishers, by new forms of marketing and dissemination through libraries. Post-war tensions around gender identity, and the fact that middle-class women were on the whole both educated and moderately leisured, created demand for a specifically women-oriented type of fiction that could reflect and reflect on female experience, and a cohort of talented women novelists

responded to this demand with a new kind of relevant, page-turning, often wise and witty fiction. In France the conditions for the production of a feminine middlebrow appear to have been equally present, yet no such phenomenon is visible in literary history, nor has a lost generation of interwar female novelists been identified and recuperated for contemporary readers as it has across the Channel.

I have suggested certain factors that help to explain this, from the absence of any equivalent of the large, popular network of libraries that flourished in Britain to the more extreme misogyny of the post-war backlash against women's limited gains in France and the more radical division between 'high' culture – esteemed, masculine and dismissive of the 'easy' pleasures of immersive fiction – and 'low' culture, a category into which tended to fall women's fiction, particularly if concerned with relationships, home or family. But there is no reason to suppose that French women lacked the desire to read compelling stories that mapped, dramatised and explored their own situation – indeed, the existence of a vibrant feminine middlebrow in the years preceding the First World War would suggest precisely the opposite. I have speculated on the types of male-authored fiction that partly filled this need, but also pointed to a number of women writers of what Jennifer Milligan has termed the 'forgotten generation' whose work certainly answered demand for a French middlebrow. Some, in particular Colette and Marcelle Tinayre, pursued literary careers begun in the more auspicious years (for women writers) of the Belle Époque. Some were themselves young women in the interwar period, and of these Irène Némirovsky comes closest to a French equivalent to the British middlebrow phenomenon, in the sense that her work too crafts compelling stories out of the tensions between women's dreams of self-fulfilment and new horizons, and the cramped reality of what Hilary Hinds sums up as their 'culturally ascribed and sanctioned lot' (2009, 314). Némirovsky, like her English counterparts, refuses simply to echo the deprecation of the 'feminine' sphere of home, family, personal emotions that is implicit in a 'virile' definition of literary authenticity, seeking too to acknowledge and valorise the undramatic joys of what she names, in *Deux*, 'les précieuses banalités de chaque jour' (1939, 140). Her writing style too bears comparison with the British middlebrow's unemphatic deployment of familiar imagery in the service of fictional illusion. Rediscovered and republished thanks to the dramatic rediscovery of her wartime writing, Némirovsky remains, with Colette, the chief survivor of France's smaller but nonetheless real interwar feminine middlebrow.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# The ‘little world’ of Françoise Sagan

The most successful middlebrow fiction captures, through compelling stories, some vital element of the mood, aspirations and anxieties of its era. In the 1950s and '60s, Françoise Sagan's concise, elegant tales of love and disillusion, set among an affluent yet bohemian section of the French middle class, attracted a readership of millions both at home and abroad. She was a highly mediatised star in France from her dramatic arrival on the literary scene in 1954, aged just 18, with the scandalous *Bonjour Tristesse*, and on through the following decades, remaining an instantly recognisable name and face up to and beyond her death in 2004. Her success was in part the product of a new type of commercial publishing, itself one aspect of the accelerating consumerism of the 1950s, and of the decade's appetite for youth and novelty in the aftermath of defeat and humiliation. Like her contemporary Brigitte Bardot (and like Colette's fictional Claudine), she was widely touted as a 'girl of today',<sup>1</sup> but her novels were read and enjoyed for reasons that went well beyond effective marketing and mediatisation.

Sagan's world is one of whisky-fuelled nights in smoky bars and nightclubs, of open-topped sports cars gliding through Paris at dawn or racing down open country roads, of white villas or beachfront hotels overlooking the blue Mediterranean, of lives sufficiently leisured to make relationships and the pursuit of pleasure their central focus. Protagonists work in journalism, the good ones for left-leaning journals, or in publishing, advertising, architecture, fashion or interior design – the cultural industries that burgeoned as France moved into a more American-style, consumerist stage of advanced capitalism. Affluence in this world is easy, a given rather than a goal. At one level, Sagan's fictions

1 Roger Vadim attributed Bardot's star quality to the fact that she had 'a "now" face, she was really a girl of today' (Bernert, 1991, 1086).

mirror the mythologies of *Paris Match* or *Elle*, two of the period's most popular and glossy weeklies which represented the French back to themselves as young, well-off and stylishly modern, reflecting the reality of increased material wealth – car ownership, for example, like that of radios, washing machines and refrigerators, rose exponentially between 1948 and 1968 (Gaffney and Holmes, 2007, 11) – but also giving visual and verbal form to less earthbound dreams of luxury, glamour and personal freedom. But Sagan's stories also register the dark shadows underlying the bright surface of 1950s and '60s France. These are also the decades of France's violent wars of decolonisation, of political instability (between 1947 and 1958 the Fourth Republic had 20 changes of government) and of an anxious sense of national identity threatened not just by the bloody end of empire but also by political and cultural dependence on a confidently aggressive Cold War USA. Sagan's success coincides with the prominence, popular as well as intellectual, of existentialism – an austere philosophy that defines the human condition as one of vertiginous freedom and total responsibility in a meaningless world. Though her narratives pay only scant attention to political events and avoid all explicit philosophising, Sagan's playboys and aimless pleasure-seekers also carry a sense of life's absurdity, and of their own mortality: 'Un jour il n'y aura plus rien. Le noir, L'absence. La mort' ('One day there will be nothing left. Blackness, Absence. Death'), as Alan puts it in *Les Merveilleux Nuages* (1961, 84). The *tristesse* that Sagan's first heroine greets with self-deprecating irony – for even sadness is softened by a privileged life free of material cares – also shadowed the 19 novels that followed, and lent Sagan's fiction its characteristic, oxymoronic tone of desultory *joie de vivre*.

It is hard to prove, but is almost certainly the case that Sagan was and is read mainly by women. Though she makes male protagonists the central agents and focalisers of several of her novels, what is at stake in her narratives is arguably of particular relevance to female readers, most acutely in the years between the early 1950s and the post-May '68 feminist movement, which is also the period of her greatest success. Those years were intensely contradictory for French women: on the one hand, the 'second sex' had finally been acknowledged as full citizens of the Republic, with the right to vote and stand for Parliament won at last in 1944; the equality of the sexes was formally enshrined in the new constitution of 1946, and though female employment rates declined over all, new demand for workers in the tertiary sector encouraged a gradual opening up of advanced education to both sexes. On the other hand, though, the 1950s and early '60s saw a strong reassertion of traditional gender roles:

pro-natalist policies meant that abortion remained a criminal offence and contraception was strictly controlled, whilst both state policies and publicity for the developing new retail industries (domestic appliances, food and cleaning products) glorified motherhood and domesticity as central to women's fulfilment. Through advertising campaigns for the expanding retail trade in fashion and beauty products, and through the plethora of colourful magazines aimed at a female public, women were also encouraged on a daily basis to think of themselves as objects of the male gaze, and of sexual appeal as essential to their identity. *Elle* magazine, read by at least one in six French women by 1955 (Weiner, 1999, 400), embodied this dichotomy in appealing images of the woman who could 'have it all', proposing a 'fantasised equilibrium between an Eternal Feminine and modern self-sufficiency' (Weiner, 1999, 403). The *Elle* woman was distinctly *modern*, busy and managerial, albeit chiefly on the domestic front, well-read, independent-minded and socially engaged, but at the same time committed to her 'couple',<sup>2</sup> the quality and survival of which was primarily her responsibility, as well as to high standards of elegance and personal beauty. Though a confident player in the new era of hi-tech pleasures and enlightened individualism, she was inalienably defined, and self-defined, in relational terms. Sagan's fictions mirror this duality. They represent girls and women to themselves as free, restless, individuals in a world without absolute values, sexually liberated and intellectually able, unconvinced by the mythology of romance and settling instead for ephemeral pleasures. Yet her plots depend on the countervailing force of another desire – disavowed, uncertain but real: for intense and durable relationships, for the warmth and generosity represented (at whatever cost to herself) by the traditionally maternal, other-directed woman. Sagan, like *Elle*, captured the tension in pre-Second Wave femininity and gave it vividly recognisable form. It was no wonder that *Elle* adopted her and amplified her fame, devoting a two-page article to the debut novelist on 26 July 1954 (10–11), and thereafter regularly featuring articles both about and by her.<sup>3</sup>

2 Kristin Ross shows how the couple in post-war French culture became the 'bearer of the totality of affective values' (1995, 133), with the high media presence of couples such as Simone Signoret and Yves Montand, Françoise Giroud and Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, Beauvoir and Sartre and regular features in the women's press (notably *Elle*), of features and quizzes such as 'Êtes-vous un couple idéal?' See Ross (1995), Chapter 3 'Couples', 123–56.

3 Sagan was first commissioned by *Elle* to write a series of travel articles on Italy, published in the autumn of 1954 (Grandpierre, 2012, 13–15).



*Bonjour Tristesse*

Sagan burst onto the French literary scene in 1954 with a novel that would form the blueprint for much – not all – of her subsequent fiction: the international bestseller *Bonjour Tristesse*. Middlebrow success, as earlier chapters have shown, is achieved by strategies of production and marketing as well as (though never to the exclusion of) qualities of theme and form, and the enterprising post-war publisher René Julliard showcased the 18-year-old Françoise Quoirez, as she then was, with an astute sense of the desires and anxieties that made up the contemporary *zeitgeist*. The marketing of Sagan played on the post-war era's fascination with youth and the mingled glamour and threat of modernity. Julliard had already used these tactics to sell the first novels of other young women: Françoise d'Eaubonne (later a prominent feminist activist) was 24 when Julliard published her *Le Cœur de Watteau* (1944) and Françoise Mallet (later Mallet-Joris) 21 when *Le Rempart des Béguines*, a lesbian love story with a teenage heroine, achieved a *succès de scandale* in 1951. With Sagan (the demand to replace Quoirez with a catchier pen name came from Julliard) he also appealed to the collective memory of an earlier case of literary notoriety, the teenage Radiguet's 1923 bestseller *Le Diable au corps*.<sup>4</sup> Copies of *Bonjour Tristesse* were embellished with a wrapper emblazoned with a photo of their young author, and the words *Le Diable au cœur*.

The novel appeared in March, and by October had sold 100,000 copies (Lloyd, 2007, 183–84). Critics were divided on the book's morality and depth, but broadly in agreement on its literary quality: in May *Bonjour Tristesse* won the Prix des Critiques, a prize previously awarded to Albert Camus's *La Peste* (1947) and New Novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* (1953). An article in *Le Figaro* by the eminent author François Mauriac further consecrated this slim novel as a fine piece of writing and a significant emblem of its era. Mauriac declared that Sagan's 'literary merit' was 'beyond dispute', though he deplored the novel's representation of post-war youth as casually immoral. Sagan was rapidly established as the charming if shocking personification of the 'new wave' generation, and firmly identified with the decor, lifestyle and (a)morality of her fictional world – a role that she was to embrace to the point of near self-destruction.<sup>5</sup> *Bonjour Tristesse*, its massive sales figures

4 See above, pp. 104–05.

5 Sagan's personal life rapidly transformed from that of an upper middle-class

sustained over the following year (by September 1955, Julliard claimed sales of 350,000), also placed her firmly on the middle ground of novels that are acclaimed for the quality of their writing (Sagan was compared to both Proust and Colette) and simultaneously read by a huge public for their compelling plots and characters, and accessible topicality.

The title of *Bonjour Tristesse*, simple as it is, already lays claim to literary credentials, for it is taken from a poem by one of the great French poets of the twentieth century, Paul Eluard, surrealist, communist and Resistance militant. Cécile, the novel's heroine, narrates the story of her seventeenth summer spent on the Côte d'Azur from the vantage point of the following winter in Paris, where she lives with her father Raymond. Her mother having died when Cécile was a small child, since leaving boarding school she has been assimilated into the carefree, pleasure-loving lifestyle of her father, 'un homme léger, habile en affaires, toujours curieux et vite lassé, et qui plaisait aux femmes' (Sagan, 1954, 10; 'a frivolous man, good at business, always curious but quickly bored, and very appealing to women'). It is with her father and his current, much younger mistress, Elsa, that Cécile shares a beachside villa for the summer. The holiday begins with sea, sun and a mood of light-hearted sensory pleasure, heightened further when Cécile begins to share swims, boating and kisses with a handsome student, Cyril. But what sets the plot in motion is the arrival of Anne Larsen, a woman of Raymond's own generation and a friend of his dead wife. Anne's work ethic – she is a successful fashion designer – and her sense of order and responsibility disturb the hedonistic peace of the villa's other inhabitants, but at the same time her elegance, kindness and air of moral certainty exercise a powerful appeal for both Cécile and her father. When Raymond and Anne decide to marry, and Anne in her new quasi-maternal role tries to impose some discipline on Cécile's free and easy life, Cécile reacts with an impulsive but clever plan of resistance. Her campaign makes use of Elsa and Cyril to tempt Raymond back to the promiscuous, heedless life they have shared, and thus dissuade Anne from marrying him. The plan succeeds to an extent she had not foreseen, and Anne dies in a car crash that remains ambivalently poised between accident and suicide. Cécile encounters sadness, an emotion both 'énervante et douce' (9, 'enervating and soft'), and not one that impedes in any way her return to a life of fleeting affairs and casual pleasure.

*jeune fille* to one of drink, fast cars and partying. In 1957 she almost died after crashing her Aston Martin.

'Ce fameux petit monde saganesque'

*Bonjour Tristesse* established the model for much of Sagan's subsequent fiction: her novels are not repetitive, but most bear a family resemblance that marks them unmistakably as what she herself ironically termed 'saganesque' (Sagan, 1972, 13). Their brief narratives – these are novels that slip easily into a pocket or handbag – centre primarily on affairs of the heart, and rarely venture beyond the milieu of a cultured, affluent elite. The voice that tells them is that of a narrator, sometimes intra- and sometimes extra-diegetic, whose coolly dispassionate tones are leavened by small, gratuitous blasts of existential joy. Cécile's 'goût du bonheur' (22; 'taste for happiness') echoes for example in Dominique's 'violent sentiment de bonheur' (1956, 13; 'violent feeling of happiness') in *Un certain sourire* and in Lucile's intense 'plaisir de vivre' (1965, 13; 'pleasure in being alive') in *La Chamade*. Sagan's fiction, in fact, exemplifies what we might call an ethic – and an aesthetic – of frivolity: as Alfred Cismaru detected in a perceptive 1993 re-evaluation of her work, her worldview is that of a universe without ultimate meaning, in which it behoves us to limit aspirations to profundity or absolutes, and to create instead 'what is within [our] reach: small, flimsy things' (Cismaru, 1993, 291). Cismaru connects the popularity of Sagan's 'frivolous' fiction to the mood of the post-war era, and the willed escapism of a population that had survived war and occupation, knowledge of the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear mass destruction. To this one might add that in these same decades a fragile refuge was offered in the new, ephemeral pleasures of an intensified consumer culture – also vividly present in the fictional world first mapped out in *Bonjour Tristesse*. For the first novel may be seen as the blueprint for Sagan's 'little world', its characters as the models for recurring, if far from identical, character types, notably the heroine (Cécile), the good woman (Anne), the mistress (Elsa) and the ladies' man (Raymond).

Cécile is the prototype of the Sagan heroine: eager to enjoy whatever pleasures life offers, but (in Cécile's case, precociously) self-aware, sceptical of emotion, determinedly unsentimental – 'pas de quoi faire des grimaces' (1956, 125; 'nothing to make a big deal about'), concludes Dominique, heroine of Sagan's second novel, when her passionate love affair with an older man comes to an end.<sup>6</sup> Sagan heroines share what in *Aimez-vous Brahms* is termed a 'pudeur honorable' (1959, 14; 'honourable

6 Nathalie Morello terms Sagan's novels 'anti-sentimental' (1998, 81).

modesty’): an emotional discretion that is at once self-protective (to invest in emotion means to risk pain) and cynically lucid about the role-playing and self-deception involved in the performance of emotion. Cécile mourns the loss of Anne, but is also uncomfortably aware that she half-enjoys weeping, that she and her father find pleasure in playing out their readymade roles of bereaved lover and would-be daughter, that they will recover all too quickly. If Dominique (*Un certain sourire*) falls for Luc, and he, more provisionally, for her, this is in part because they share an abhorrence of pretence and a preference for honesty, however brutal. The married, older Luc offers Dominique ‘une aventure sans lendemain et sans sentimentalité’ (1959, 79; ‘an affair with no future and no sentimentality’), and having accepted, she can claim neither betrayal nor tragic loss when he ends the affair. Her bleak but un-self-pitying realism echoes Cécile and typifies the Sagan ethic: ‘Seule. Seule. Mais enfin quoi? J’étais une femme qui avait aimé un homme’ (1959, 125; ‘Alone. Alone. But so what? I was just a woman who had loved a man’).

These unsentimental heroines recoil instinctively from any project that demands taking life too seriously through the investment of time, energy or desire. Cécile is horrified by Anne’s attempts to make her revise for important exams rather than spend her days on the beach; Dominique resists all attempts by her boyfriend, Bertrand, to establish a mutually committed ‘vie commune’ (1959, 13; ‘shared life’); Lucile in *La Chamade*, an older heroine in her thirties, makes a brief foray into paid employment and quasi-conjugal domesticity, giving up her passionate love for Antoine rather than accept a structured, purposeful existence, but finds both the ‘comédie humaine accélérée’ (‘speeded-up human comedy’) of the working world and the predictability of a long-term romance unbearable. Sagan’s determined hedonists embody at once a new consumerist ideology of immediate, gratuitous pleasure, an existentialist disbelief in absolute values and post-war youth’s dawning sense of dissatisfaction with traditional family structures. As female heroines for (mainly) women readers, they also formulate through practice claims that would find a collective political voice with Second Wave feminism, notably claims to sexual freedom and the right to live independently on the same terms as men.

And yet this nonchalance, this determined superficiality that characterises Cécile and her sisters is brittle: it is a ‘nonchalance *inquiète*’ (1959, 9, emphasis added; ‘an *anxious* nonchalance’) that leads, despite a predominant tone of willed and welcome frivolity, to desolate dénouements. Cécile’s resolute declaration of happiness – ‘Mais nous

sommes heureux' (1954, 127; 'But we are happy') – is undermined by her recognition that sadness, no matter how 'douce' ('gentle') and 'égoïste' ('selfish') (9), has entered her life; Dominique closes her story resisting any sense of self-aggrandising tragedy, but wounded nonetheless; Paule (*Aimez-vous Brahms*), after a brief attempt at a more wholehearted and committed model of love, resumes her agreeable but desultory relationship with Roger and finds herself 'sauvée. Et perdue' (1959, 123; 'saved. And lost'), and Lucile (*La Chamade*) returns from her attempt at sustained, reciprocal love to a life of selfish affluence, relieved but profoundly disenchanted: 'elle se savait à jamais rejetée de toute existence digne de ce terme et elle pensait qu'elle ne l'avait pas volé' (1965, 154; 'She knew that she had lost her right to any life worthy of the term, and she thought she deserved it').

Nonchalance then is the chosen stance but it carries an undercurrent of bleak dissatisfaction. This finds expression too in another recurring female figure, that of the good woman whose prototype is Anne Larsen, Cécile's would-be stepmother. Heroines display no real aspiration to become 'good women', but they see in them disquieting proof that authentic virtue can exist, and confirmation of their own sense of emptiness. Anne's emotional integrity and lucid kindness find an echo in Françoise, the wife of Dominique's older lover in *Un certain sourire*, who treats Dominique with tact and solicitude even when she learns of the affair; or Nathalie, central female protagonist of *Un peu de soleil dans l'eau froide*, whose love for the dissolute Gilles is no less absolute for being wholly without illusion. Each displays fidelity, a clear-sighted empathy and a purposeful competence that is very different from the drifting hedonism of the Sagan heroine. The good woman attracts the desiring admiration of men: Cecile's chronically promiscuous father wants to marry Anne, Luc's marriage remains solid despite his infidelities, both Gilles's depression and his impotence are cured by the seductive power of Nathalie's immense 'bonté' in *Un peu de soleil*. Though not literally mothers (running against the tide of a pro-natalist era, Sagan defines female identity almost without reference to motherhood), the good women clearly possess qualities identified with the maternal, and both Cecile and Dominique experience the desire to sink into the role of daughter and be nurtured and protected by strong older women: 'j'aurais aimé m'effondrer contre elle, ce grand corps généreux, lui expliquer que j'aurais voulu qu'elle soit ma mère' (1956, 123; 'I would have liked to fall into her arms, into that warm, generous body, and tell her that I wished she could have been my mother'). However this temptation is

to be avoided. Self-reliance and emotional autonomy are the rules of survival in the world Sagan depicts: her plots tend to show that the ideals represented by good women have little place there. Anne and Nathalie, loving men whose narcissism will always be stronger than their capacity to return that love, both commit suicide, maintaining a discreet goodness to the end by disguising this as accidental death. Françoise soldiers on, a steady rock in her husband's sea of existential doubt and ephemeral love affairs. The good woman is never the focaliser in Sagan's fiction: she is always viewed from the outside, from a perspective at once warmly admiring and determinedly separate.

Part of the appeal of Sagan's fiction, then, seems to lie in its articulation of a female subjectivity in tune with its era: newly tough and independent, pleasure-seeking, sceptical of romance, yet deeply unsatisfied and reluctantly nostalgic for the moral certainty and other-directed warmth of a more traditional femininity. Some feminist readings of Sagan (St-Onge, 1984; Miller, 1988; Morello, 1998; Holmes, 2006) have drawn on the work of psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow and psychologist Carol Gilligan to see in Sagan's bleak endings a distinctively feminine sense that the ideal of the autonomous self is inadequate for human fulfilment. Chodorow and Gilligan draw attention to the ways in which girls' development, at least within traditional Western models of childrearing, produces less individuated subjects whose primary sense of identity is that of the 'self-in-relation'. Both the difference in the Oedipal process between girls and boys and the social construction of gender lead to a masculine tendency to see the self as separate and distinct, and a feminine sense of self as 'including a fundamental definition of self [as] in relationship' (Chodorow, 1999, 169). Thus a deracinated, footloose mode of being typifies the Sagan heroine, but ultimately leaves a sense of hollowness, betraying an 'intuitive sense that autonomy' – or at least autonomy alone – 'is not the desired state' (St-Onge, 1984, 10).

To resituate this tension within women's history, Sagan's peak period as a middlebrow star coincided with an in-between stage of French feminism. Rejection of a passive, dependent model of feminine identity – enshrined till 1944 in women's exclusion from 'universal' suffrage – was evident in the 1950s and early '60s in widely publicised opinion surveys,<sup>7</sup> in the fashionable women's press, in the cinema of the *Nouvelle Vague* with its assertive, restive heroines played by new kinds of female

7 Most notably the 1958 survey by Françoise Giroud, entitled 'La Nouvelle Vague'. See Giroud (1958).

star (Jeanne Moreau, Anna Karina), and in more explicitly political initiatives, notably the movement for contraception and abortion rights established in 1956 under the title 'Maternité heureuse' ('Happy Motherhood', which became the Mouvement pour le Planning Familial in 1960). But it would be another decade before Second-Wave feminism, in France under the broad title of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, would signify women's collective mobilisation in opposition to their status as the 'second sex', and the reinterpretation of what had felt like solitary personal struggles as collective, political issues. Sagan's implicit claims for equal rights to individualism, hedonism and sexual freedom articulate a nascent spirit of female contestation. But the underlying sense of desolation, like her heroines' reluctant but intense desire to bond with the 'good woman', bespeak an as yet inchoate dissatisfaction with the alternative models of self-fulfilment on offer in an androcentric culture, and the absence, as yet, of any broader context of female solidarity.<sup>8</sup> Post-1968 feminism would lead to a more confident questioning of male-defined ideals of selfhood.

The ethical value of a purely self-centred lifestyle is nonetheless a question that haunts these 'frivolous' novels. Cécile in *Bonjour Tristesse* imagines herself and her father as members of 'la belle race pure des nomades' ('the pure, noble race of nomads'), but fears that a more honest description might be 'la race pauvre et desséchée des jouisseurs' (III; 'the poor, dried-out race of pleasure-seekers'). This fear is also embodied in a third category of female figure, the mistress, for whom Elsa (*Bonjour Tristesse*) is the prototype. Like the heroine, the mistress sets little store by economic independence and is happy to be wholly or partly kept by a lover; where she does have a job, this is an alternative way of marketing her physical assets. Elsa rather vaguely 'faisait de la figuration dans les studios et bars des Champs-Élysées' (10; 'hung out in the studios and bars of the Champs-Élysées'); Gilles's live-in girlfriend Éloïse in *Un peu de soleil*, and Matthieu's kept mistress Sonia in *Un Chagrin de passage*, are fashion models; Maisy in *Aimez-vous Brahms* is a 'starlette'. The mistress differs little from the heroine in

8 Sagan played her part in Second Wave of feminism, most notably by signing the famous 'Manifeste des Salopes' in which 343 well-known French women claimed to have undergone illegal abortions and challenged the law to prosecute them. But she was uncomfortable with the earnestness of militant politics, and her contribution to women's cause was chiefly through her fiction's effective articulation of what her huge readership suggests was a widespread state of mind and feeling.

terms of material self-interest – Sagan’s heroines accept the financial support of lovers without qualms – but has none of her redeeming lucidity. Elsa, Éloïse, Sonia and their kind are self-deluding, dressing up relationships that are by nature transitory and materialistic as romantic passions, employing a clichéd discourse of love to dignify passing affairs. As Matthieu (in *Un chagrin de passage*) reflects, faced with Sonia’s declarations of love: ‘Bref, elle n’aimait qu’elle. Elle, et depuis deux ans, Matthieu, parce que ça l’arrangeait de l’aimer’ (107; ‘In short, she only loved herself. Herself, and for the past two years Matthieu, because it suited her to love him’). The future of the mistress is glimpsed in older women like the widowed Claire Santré in *La Chamade*, one of ‘cette vaillante petite cohorte de femmes quinquagénaires qui, à Paris, se débrouillent, et pour vivre et pour rester à la mode’ (19; ‘that valiant little cohort of fifty-something Parisian women who somehow manage to stay alive and in fashion’): no longer desired by the rich men who have kept them, maintaining a role in fashionable circles as hostesses, go-betweens, confidantes, but lonely, manipulative, seen in their own circles as sometimes useful but a little ridiculous. In terms of Sagan’s ethics, the difference between the mistress figures and the heroine is central: they are self-deceiving where she is resolutely clear-sighted, sentimental where she refuses all romanticism, willing to play the ‘jeune femme soumise et désirable’ (1969, 160; ‘submissive, desirable girl’), where the heroine knows that she is men’s equal. But in terms of the milieu they frequent, their hedonistic lifestyle and inability to sustain relationships, mistresses and heroines are terribly similar, and these characters – present in most of the novels – dramatise the heroine’s fear of belonging, no matter how lucidly, to the ‘race pauvre et desséchée des jouisseurs’.

If Cécile is the prototype for the Sagan heroine, Anne for the good woman and Elsa for the mistress, Cécile’s father Raymond provides the blueprint for Sagan’s men. He is a selfish but charming ‘homme à femmes’ – an untranslatable French expression that designates without blame the ‘man who loves women’ or the Don Juan. Narcissistic, profoundly egocentric, Raymond is never unkind or exploitative by design, but simply assumes that others, and notably women, will accommodate his desires: he is (briefly) devastated by the realisation that Anne has been deeply (indeed mortally) wounded by his passing infidelity with Elsa. Thus too the Luc of *Un certain sourire* – handsome, eloquent, elegantly world-weary – embarks on a brief and passionate affair with the much younger Dominique, and leaves her, not without sympathy, to



face her solitude, returning to the reliable comfort of his wise and loving wife. Roger (*Aimez-vous Brahms*) is seductive in his restless energy and appetite for life, but these same attributes lead to his infidelity, his neglect of his long-term lover Paule and his complacency in assuming (rightly) that she will always take him back. It is their sense of freedom, self-belief and confident desire that makes these men so appealing to Sagan's women, and indeed it is that which the latter emulate in their own lives. Refusing to be victims, the heroines take full responsibility for the choices they have made and acknowledge their lovers' right to an emotional autonomy to which they also aspire: 'Mais enfin quoi? J'étais une femme qui avait aimé un homme'.

It is apparent, though, in Sagan's world that the dice are unevenly loaded in favour of male freedoms. Charismatic as they are, her male protagonists enjoy social privileges that support narcissism, facilitate self-belief and authorise an instrumental attitude to others. Unlike most of the women characters (though Anne is a fashion designer and Paule an interior designer), they have glamorous, well-paid and exciting careers which provide solid sources of self-esteem, as well as material security. Since their social status and power of seduction depends less on youthful beauty, the spectre of social redundancy – represented by the 'brave little cohort' of middle-aged women socialites – does not haunt them to the same extent, and the existential anxiety, the desire for something beyond frivolity that runs like a dark seam through Sagan's world is largely felt by women.

When the 'homme à femmes' becomes a novel's main focaliser, though, the reader is invited to empathise with a male subjectivity that shares, after all, that 'ethic of frivolity' prized by her heroines. *Un peu de soleil dans l'eau froide*, published in 1969, is one such male-centred narrative. Gilles, chief protagonist and focaliser throughout, is a successful 35-year-old journalist with a left-wing magazine, leading a fast-paced life of work, late-night debates with colleagues in bars and nightclubs, cohabitation with a glamorous model: 'bon physique, métier amusant, succès de toute espèce' (13; 'in good physical shape, interesting job, success on all fronts') as he sums it up to himself. But if he feels the need to spell out the advantages of his life, this is because its sweet taste has suddenly been soured by a bout of depression: he is both paralysed by misery and humiliated at finding himself subject to so common a complaint. Unable to function professionally or socially, Gilles seeks refuge at his sister's house in the countryside near Limoges, and there meets Nathalie, a married woman of his own age who falls rapidly and

irrevocably in love with him. Nathalie's beauty and her goodness – she is intelligent and cultured, and also astute, passionate and sincere – captivate him and cure his depression and the sexual impotence that has accompanied it. Nathalie is lucid about the man she has fallen in love with but chooses nonetheless to leave her husband and return with Gilles to Paris. What will she do? asks Gilles: 'Te suivre peut-être, le temps que tu m'aimes. Après, je verrai' (124; 'Follow you, perhaps, for as long as you are in love with me. After that, I'll see'). They are happy together for a time, until Gilles reverts to type, to resentment of the constraints of a committed relationship, and to infidelity as an assertion of his freedom.

What makes the narrative voice effective is Gilles's own clarity about his motives, which both sustains a degree of readerly empathy even as he behaves with brutal egoism and produces an acute critique of the sexual inequality underlying romantic relations. Using a mixture of inner monologue and free indirect style – the latter articulating Gilles's half-formed thoughts and sensations – Sagan narrates how his appreciation of Nathalie's intelligence and integrity turns to resentment and nostalgia for a simpler life where his male superiority was assured, where instead of Nathalie's eloquent contributions to conversation, he and his male friends could 'parl[er] pardessus la tête de jeunes filles soumises et désirables' (161; 'talk to each other over the heads of submissive, desirable girls'). The recognition that his lover is 'fondamentalement plus forte que lui' (178; 'fundamentally stronger than him') leads him to resort to cruel, resentful infidelities, and when Nathalie overhears him telling a friend that he often longs not to be judged, or forgiven, but to be 'seul et libre, comme avant' (189; 'single and free, like before'), she goes to a hotel and as discreetly as such an act permits, takes her own life. The moral victory is all Nathalie's, and she is a sympathetic character, but Sagan forces a shamefaced identification with Gilles's recoil from being judged and found wanting, with his desire for a selfish, simple, footloose life in tune with the febrile world that surrounds him. It is obvious too that this is a very male world, and that what he resists is also the threat to male self-confidence posed by a strong, articulate woman. It is perhaps pertinent that this novel appeared soon after May 1968, on the cusp of the new wave of feminist thinking and activism.

### Place and space

For if Sagan's 'little world' deals with the enduringly human questions of love, ethics and how to lead a fulfilled life, its charm for both contemporary and later readers depends too on its sharp evocation of a particular milieu and period. Central to this is a strong sense of place: 'fiction' in Marie-Laure Ryan's formulation, 'is a mode of travel into textual space' (1991, 5), and Sagan's texts carry the reader to a France of which the beating heart is Paris, and roads travel south through dull if pleasant provinces to the hot sun and blue sea of the Mediterranean coast. For most readers, then and now, French or foreign, there is an intrinsic pleasure in vicariously inhabiting a city so resonant with images of love, art, revolution and romance, gleaned more from films, songs, magazines and novels than from first-hand experience. Focalised by her protagonists, this Paris becomes the world of everyday living: rather than an external topography of the city that de Certeau terms 'place', Sagan depicts Paris from within, as the taken-for-granted space of quotidian experience. Protagonists live in apartments on streets in the Latin Quarter that can be located on any map of the city: rue de Tournon (*Dans un mois*), rue de Poitiers (*La Chamade*), rue Monsieur-le-Prince (*Un peu de soleil*). On their way to work or to a rendezvous they casually cross historic bridges over the Seine, or walk down the Champs-Élysées; they meet in cafés around the Boulevard St-Michel that stay open even in the small hours for lovers to sit and talk or gaze at each other. The sense of what Ryan calls 'entrancement' is heightened by the familiarity of these landmarks of Parisian life, and the glamour they connote.

Yet Paris is also more than this: its physical beauty and rich historical texture make the city a vivid correlative for emotional states. Sagan's depiction of Paris is suffused with her characteristic ethic of freedom and frivolity, and with the lucid acknowledgement of mortality that shadows it. Josée (*Les Merveilleux Nuages*), returning to Paris after a period abroad, rediscovers with joy 'ce petit monde pourri, factice et creux' ('this rotten, artificial, hollow little world') that is also 'le petit monde le plus vivant, le plus libre et le plus gai de toutes les capitales de la terre' (1961, 75; 'a little world that is also the most alive, the most free, the most joyful of all the capital cities in the world'), and this duality is present throughout the novels' representation of the capital. Characters who traverse the familiar city casually from day to day suddenly notice its loveliness or find their state of mind to be reflected in the atmosphere of the streets, or in a particular view. Wandering the Latin Quarter,

Dominique (*Un certain sourire*) finds a sense of moral freedom that matches her own: 'Paris m'appartenait. Paris appartenait aux sans scrupules, aux désinvoltes' (33; 'Paris belonged to me. Paris belonged to the unscrupulous, the reckless'), but as she watches the dawn break over the Seine with Luc, her older lover, the city connotes not joyful amorality but the painful effort to transcend the reality of death and transience: 'le ciel était blanc et gris aussi; il montait vers le jour, par-dessus les maisons mortes, les ponts et les ferrailles, lentement, obstinément, dans son effort de tous les matins' (29; 'the sky was white and grey too; the sun rose to meet the day, above the dead houses, the bridges and scrapyards, slowly, doggedly, with the same effort it made each morning'). Antoine (*La Chamade*), alone and fearing he has lost the woman he loves, experiences the city as painfully beautiful: 'Paris devenait d'une beauté déchirante, bleue, blonde, alanguie' (97; 'Paris became heartrendingly beautiful, blue, blonde, languid'), whilst Gilles (*Un peu de soleil*), in a state of depression, notes that 'Paris était ravissant, bleu à pleurer en ce début de printemps' (21; 'Paris was ravishingly lovely, so blue on this early spring day that it brought tears to the eyes'). The colour blue recurs again and again in Sagan's internally focalised portrayals of Paris, evoking poignancy, a beauty tinged with sadness, the fugitive nature of time as day drifts towards night and seasons change. In harmony with the mood of Sagan's world, the city figures the intense if fleeting joy of the lived moment, what in *Un Chagrin de passage* she terms the 'sompueuse précarité de la vie' (30; 'life's magnificent precariousness').

If Paris is Sagan's heartland, the primary locus of her plots, she also carries her readers beyond the capital and even, in some novels, beyond France, notably to the USA (for example in *Les Merveilleux Nuages*, where Josée, whose story began in *Dans un mois, dans un an*, now lives with her American husband). The key recurring locations, though, are the French provinces, what we might term 'middle France', and the Côte d'Azur. Provincial France figures as a place of retreat from existential and romantic dramas, and is often associated with the past and with childhood. Dominique (*Un certain sourire*) withdraws to her parents' house by the Yonne in central France to escape her boyfriend Bertrand and wait for Luc's next approach. Bernard (*Dans un mois, dans un an*) hides away in a charmless hotel in Poitiers ('la ville la plus morte qu'on pût imaginer' [76; 'the deadest town imaginable']) to escape the tensions of an unhappy marriage and his unrequited love for Josée. Gilles (*Un peu de soleil*), suffering from anxiety and depression, takes refuge with his sister at their childhood home in the Limousin. The provinces are

places of serene boredom, of restorative mildness and tedium: they offer a gentle landscape (1969, 122; 'paysage tendre') and in summer a milder heat than the searing sun of the Mediterranean (1969, 122), physical features reflected in the tempering of human relations by good manners and old-fashioned discretion. In plot terms, the provinces always represent an interlude, a pause in narrative rhythm. Dominique describes her few weeks at home in the Yonne, between her student life in Paris and the trip with Luc to the Mediterranean coast, as 'une énorme tache jaune et fade' (1956, 67; 'one great faded yellow blur'); Bernard and Gilles soon return from voluntary provincial exile to their lives in Paris, and when Nathalie (*Un peu de soleil*) brings her gentler, less ego-driven values to the capital, she is destroyed.

The Côte d'Azur has a quite different function. In terms of the quest for pleasure and the emotional conflicts that drive the plots, the Côte is an extension of Parisian life, though in material terms it is very different and brings intense colour and sensation into the text. The lasting appeal of *Bonjour Tristesse* lies in part in its vivid evocation of lazy days in the Mediterranean sun: Cécile muses that the most important thing about that summer was simply 'la présence de la mer, son rythme incessant, le soleil' (22; 'the presence of the sea, its ceaseless rhythm, the sun'), and in a sense this is equally true of the novel. The story's geography, as Heather Lloyd points out (1995, 46–49), has a theatrical simplicity, its key dramatic sites the white villa, with its stage-like terrace where vital confrontations occur, the pine forest that borders the villa and becomes the scene of sexual encounters and their discovery by others, and the beach – where the sun delights the senses and numbs the brain, and the sea offers an enchanting sensory contrast. The potency of sensation provides Sagan's characters with relief from thought and moral anxiety: in *La Chamade* it is to the Côte – 'la chaleur du soleil, la fraîcheur de l'eau, la douceur du sable' (88; 'the heat of the sun, the coolness of the water, the softness of the sand') – that Lucile flees when her love for Alain threatens her carefree life with responsibility for another's happiness, and Dominique spends her happiest period with Luc by the sea near Cannes, where the inebriation of the senses can dull any thought of the future. Dominique does not escape awareness of her ultimate solitude, but it is perceptible through the senses rather than as an articulated thought, and can be suspended when the sensation ends. Watched by Luc from the beach, Dominique stands poised to dive from a high board mounted on a raft, and sees 'la mer complaisante qui m'attendait. J'allais tomber en elle, m'y enfouir; j'allais tomber de très haut et je serais seule, mortellement

seule, durant ma chute' (82; 'the indulgent sea awaiting me. I would fall into it, dive into its depths; I was about to fall from a great height and I would be alone, mortally alone, as I fell'). The sea in Sagan's universe stands for what Lloyd calls 'the deepest and most lasting impulses in the human psyche' (1995, 49): the water offers the animal pleasure of sensation and a refuge from the tensions of relationship, but its depths also connote solitude, oblivion and death.

The geography of Sagan's world thus carries much of its particular mood and values. Her style is temperate, unostentatious. In line with her heroines' recoil from sentimentality or melodrama, she dissolves her philosophy into the fiction itself rather than expound it, and favours a transparent, low-key mode of narration: a sparing use of adjectives; short, clearly structured sentences; a predominance of internal focalisation that minimises the evidence of narratorial voice. The surface limpidity of the texts, the ease with which they can be read, help to explain their popularity. If an ethic can be identified in her work, it is one of valuing the transitory pleasures of an ultimately meaningless world, refusing to denigrate these in the name of more dignified but abstract values. The Sagan ethic also involves a facing up to mortality and the ultimate solitude of the self, yet at the same time an imperative – often attempted but rarely realised by her characters – to treat others with respect and warmth, and even love. Sagan's narratives communicate both the appeal and the inadequacy of a philosophy of individual autonomy, and imply a need to rethink a model of ruthless self-fulfilment that was particularly prominent in the post-war era of accelerating neoliberalism and complacent patriarchy. Her ethic of sceptical frivolity suffuses her fiction and helps to explain its success. It is there in the charge of elation felt by protagonist and reader when sunlight warms the skin – 'il me semblait qu'il faisait affleurer mes os sous la peau', says Cécile in *Bonjour Tristesse* (102; 'it seemed to bring my bones to the surface of my skin') – or lovers wake next to each other in *La Chamade*, aware of desire for the other's body before even reaching consciousness (110); it is also there in the felt certainty that these are moments 'd'un bonheur fragile, provisoire, jamais acquis' (110; 'of a fragile, provisional, happiness that cannot be taken for granted'), again in *La Chamade*. Indeed their intensity depends precisely on their ephemeral nature. The ending of love, or of life, like the sadness that Cécile encounters in Sagan's first novel, must be lucidly acknowledged without undue drama or the inelegance of self-pity.

### Beyond the little world

In 1972 Sagan published a strange little text, marketed as a novel but in fact a blend of autobiography, essay and fiction, under the revealing title *Des bleus à l'âme*, literally 'bruises' – but translated for the English edition as 'scars' – on the soul. Arguably, like France itself, Sagan seems to have emerged from the violent cultural conflict of May '68 changed and bruised: she pictures herself in retreat from her beloved Paris, holed up in her isolated, down-at-heel manor house in Normandy, struggling against ill health and depression to compose a new novel. This is to be the continued story of Sébastien and Éléonore, the aristocratic Swedish siblings who featured in her 1960 play *Château en Suède*, but her attempts to narrate their fortunes in contemporary Paris repeatedly stall, faced with the author's own physical and moral weariness, with the disabling awareness that her fictions are widely perceived as mere frivolous tales of the idle rich, and with a sense that fiction itself in the sense of empathetic investment in imagined lives is now devalued and considered irrelevant. The book is deeply self-reflexive: Sagan's protagonists seek to pursue their elegant, parasitical lives by charming or seducing rich acquaintances into paying for their pleasures, but their story is persistently interrupted – 'Mais voyons: voilà deux mois que je ne me suis pas occupée de Sébastien ni d'Éléonore' (26; 'Let's see: two months now since I paid any attention to Sébastien and Éléonore') – while their creator struggles to regain faith in her 'petit monde oisif et blasé' (13; 'idle, blasé little world') against the earnest commitment of the *soixante-huitards* whose values, broadly speaking, she nonetheless shares and whose cause she has publicly espoused. *Des bleus à l'âme* ultimately constitutes a defence of fiction, including Sagan's own 'milieu imaginaire et chimérique où l'argent ne compte pas' (34; 'imaginary, fanciful milieu where money is nothing'), on the grounds that a solemn focus only on the most politically deserving social groups is patronising and insulting (she fulminates against the leftists' reduction of distinct individuals to the collective noun 'le peuple' [7]), and that the careful narration of fictional lives that reflect and interpret readers' own provides not only a welcome form of escape, but also protection against those 'bruises to the soul' signalled by her book's title. The defence of fiction is also enacted through the dogged return from digression to story: despite repeated interruptions, Sagan pursues the adventures of her charming immoralists until the suicide of one of their benefactors suddenly darkens their nonchalant lives with a sense

of moral responsibility, and fiction and meta-fiction blend as the author herself invites her two protagonists to share her rural refuge.

*Des bleus à l'âme* is not a middlebrow novel: its generic hybridity, insistent self-reflexivity and tone of defensive anger almost certainly discouraged many habitual Sagan readers, although some no doubt followed her on to this new territory. But it demonstrates Sagan's awareness of her own critical reputation and her willingness to defend the value of immersively 'frivolous' fiction, as well as her recognition that the times had changed, and with them the ability of her 'petit monde saganesque' to capture the contemporary mood. In the latter decades of her career, Sagan returned to the affluent, mildly bohemian Parisian milieu with which her name has remained associated, but also demonstrated her literary talent and versatility by venturing into other genres, from the crime novel (the bleak *Le Chien couchant*, 1980, set in a grim northern mining town, has distinct echoes of Simenon), to historical fiction (*Un Orage immobile* [1983] is virtually a pastiche of a certain type of nineteenth-century novel), to three novels situated in the Second World War, under the German Occupation. *Un Sang d'aquarelle* (1987) is the highly original, often very funny story of a German film director, Constantin von Meck, returned from Hollywood to make a film in Nazi-controlled Paris. Von Meck's amorous adventures and incautious, volatile responses to Nazi oppression create a colourful plot, but the novel ends with his recognition of the true horror of Nazi brutality and a choice that leaves comedy far behind. *Les Faux-fuyants* (1991) also deploys humour in the story of a group of Parisian sophisticates fleeing Paris in the exodus of June 1940, only to find themselves stranded on a rustic farm in deepest France, struggling with the vast divide between two cultures. Prejudices on both sides create the comedy but are also partially confounded by experience, and again the novel ends on a more serious (and violent) note. Though Sagan's sales and readership never again matched those of the 1950s and '60s, these later novels maintained Sagan's presence on the literary scene and achieved substantial sales in French and in translation,<sup>9</sup> by carrying the narrative efficacy and page-turning quality of her earlier work into new spatial and temporal settings.

9 It is notoriously difficult to obtain sales figures, particularly for France, but the consensus is broadly that Sagan always sold well. Her obituary in the *Guardian* (29 September 2004) attributed to her sales of 'more than 30m in France, and millions more worldwide' (Corbett, 2004).



Of the three novels set in the Occupation years, *De guerre lasse* (1985) is the one that most clearly rearticulates Sagan's distinctive worldview, and best exemplifies the entertainingly serious category of the 'middlebrow'. That is, it is a novel that achieves fully the 'enchantment' of immersion in a fictional world, and deals with weighty issues lightly, by dissolving them into pleasurable story. It also views a dramatic period of national history predominantly from a woman's perspective. Resituated in a period that etched ethical choices more sharply and made them, at least in retrospect, unavoidable, *De guerre lasse* represents the underlying values of Sagan's world with particular clarity, through a narrative that is both sensual and compelling.

It is in keeping with Sagan's spare, non-expansive style that her plots should adopt a condensed time-frame, from the single summer of *Bonjour Tristesse* or *Un certain sourire* to the spring-to-autumn structure of *La Chamade* or, at the extreme, a single day, in *Un Chagrin de passage*. The main plot of *De guerre lasse* takes place in a single week in May, with the following five months – critical as they are to the novel's meaning – compressed into six pages. The story opens on a warm evening in May 1942, in the garden of a shabbily comfortable old house owned by Charles Sambrat, owner of a local shoe factory, a handsome 'homme à femmes' whose experience as a soldier in the weeks leading up to the Armistice has left him furiously determined never again to fight in any form of war. His guests are Jérôme, a childhood friend who has suddenly reappeared, and Alice, Jérôme's companion and lover. Thanks to Sagan's habitual technique of internal, shifting focalisation, the reader learns – but Charles does not – that Jérôme and Alice are active in the Resistance, and that the real goal of their visit is to use Charles's house, just 25 kilometres south of the *ligne de démarcation* (the frontier between occupied and 'free' France) as a base for their activities. The plot deftly merges love story and Resistance drama: Charles and Alice almost immediately experience an intense if unspoken mutual attraction, and when Alice must suddenly depart for Paris on an urgent Resistance mission, Charles volunteers to accompany her, providing her with the camouflage role of his pampered mistress. In Paris, Alice meets the Jewish escapees left in peril by the arrest of a Resistance comrade and organises their rescue; she and Charles also become lovers. They return to face Jérôme's anger and misery at the loss of Alice, and spend an idyllic few months together before news of Jérôme's arrest leads Alice to quietly depart to rejoin the struggle, and Charles, faced with the arrest and probable deportation of his Franco-Jewish foreman and his family,

also accepts the necessity of commitment. The novel ends with the words, 'De guerre lasse, Charles Sambrat s'engagea dans la Résistance' (220; 'Weary of war, Charles Sambrat joined the Resistance').

What happens in the course of the novel is that a strongly asserted ethic of frivolity reveals its unavoidable counterpart of responsibility to others. The defence of pleasure, the high value accorded to simple well-being and sensory enjoyment so evident in the earlier work, is particularly eloquent here. If Alice is so intensely attracted to Charles, this is because his body and his whole manner communicate a pleasure in living, an attentiveness to the immediate that contrasts vividly with the ugly austerity, the fear and anxiety that have filled her recent life. Seen through Alice's eyes, what arouses desire is not just that Charles is robustly handsome, that he has dark long-lashed eyes 'un peu fendus' and 'la bouche pleine' (12; 'slightly almond-shaped [...] a full mouth'), but that he radiates 'santé [...] plaisir à vivre' (12; 'health [...] vitality') and an uncomplicated kindness and appetite for life. His house and the land that surrounds it are extensions of himself, welcoming, dedicated to well-being rather than elegance and characterised (or so it seems to Alice) by the soft graceful lines of curves and circles rather than the sharp angles and linear purpose of a more austere and dutiful existence. Sagan discreetly but unmistakably references Colette, her precursor in the sensual description of male bodies and in the aesthetic and philosophical preference for the round over the straight, the cyclical over the linear, as Charles's 'cou si rond' makes Alice think of 'ces fameux cous décrits par une femme sensuelle dans des romans exquis' (16; 'his rounded neck makes her think of those famous necks described by a sensual woman in her exquisite novels'). The roundness of life chez Charles contrasts with the 'images toujours à angles aigus' of the dark, dreary streets, the drab hotels and station platforms of Alice's recent travels in occupied France. What ignites her desire – for Charles, but also for life – is the way he embodies the right to happiness, against the honourable austerity of the thinner, more angular and anxious Jérôme. And as Jérôme ruefully reflects, Alice is transformed by this love for Charles from a woman 'sensible, effrayée, secrète et douce' (103; 'sensitive, a little scared, secret and gentle') into one who is 'audacieuse, gaie, ironique et indépendante' (103; 'bold, gay, ironic and independent'). If she stays with Charles after the Paris episode, it is because after a long period of depression and anxious passivity she regains the sense of her own desires: 'pour la première fois, c'était parce qu'elle en avait envie qu'elle allait faire quelque chose' (177; 'for the first time, she was going to do something simply because she wanted to').

Charles's trajectory from determined neutrality to commitment is also the result of intensely felt desire and tenderness for another individual. Jérôme's love for Alice is at once selfless – he has cared for her through her separation from her Jewish husband and her ensuing depression – and possessive, but Charles's desire for Alice is a desire for happiness. As Alice perceives it, 'cet homme si plein, si délié, si achevé, si stable [...] avait besoin d'elle non pas pour vivre, mais pour être heureux' (217–18; 'this man who was so solid, so loose, so complete, so stable [...] needed her, not in order to stay alive but in order to be happy'). His immediate attraction to Alice leads to the Paris trip, where his feeling of protectiveness towards her widens into awareness of the inhumanity of the occupiers and their allies. His final choice is triggered by outrage at the fate of the Jewish family close to him, but also by the probable fate of his old friend Jérôme and the resulting loss of Alice. Living out the assertion and fulfilment of desire leads to defence of that right for others.

This sense of personal pleasure and happiness as expressive of life's value permeates the text of *De guerre lasse*. The material world is vividly evoked: if Alice rediscovers a lost certainty that life is worth living, it is through the sensory details not just of the man but of his house – the 'grosses fleurs roses, poussives et pâles' (19; 'the plump, lazy, faded roses') of the wallpaper in her bedroom, the 'grand feu violent brûlant dans la cheminée' (19; 'big fire roaring in the fireplace') – and the pleasures they provide, from plentiful food contrasting with the deprivation of the occupied zone, to cycle rides to the river, icy cold swims and sun on the skin, and the agreeable sight of Charles's body with its 'aisance physique' ('easy fluency') and 'souple et rapide mécanique' (88; 'supple way of moving'). Laughter, that most physical of mental responses, also plays an important role. If Alice's first bout of uncontrollable laughter, provoked by a clumsy remark by Charles, is so intense a discharge of accumulated tension that it ends in tears, in later episodes shared laughter reaffirms humanity and releases constraint. Thus during Alice's strained attempts to reassure the dozen Jewish people awaiting escape from their Parisian hideout, awkward words suddenly give way to a gale of slightly hysterical, but nonetheless welcome shared hilarity (130). Thus too the awkwardness of an uncontrollable erection when Charles dances with Alice in a Parisian nightclub is defused when she gets a fit of helpless and finally contagious giggles. Humour is an important element of the novel despite the grimness of its context and, in the end, of its plot: Charles's political naïveté and inability to conceal desire, Alice's

rediscovered pleasure in small absurdities texture the narrative with an affirmative sense of fun.

One key scene dramatises the novel's assertion of desire and pleasure as a form of resistance to inhumanity. Leaving the nightclub after curfew, Charles and Alice stroll arm-in-arm down the deserted Champs-Élysées towards their hotel. But at the Place de la Concorde they suddenly find themselves surrounded by German soldiers, headlights and machine guns, and witness the arrest and brutal treatment of a *résistant*. Suspected of being his accomplices, they are embarked in a lorry and taken to headquarters, where an officer interrogates them. When the officer makes insulting remarks to Alice about her Jewish ex-husband, Charles loses his temper and lunges for his throat – he is course beaten up by the guards. On the pretext of suspecting that Charles is Jewish, the officer tells the guards to remove his trousers and invites Alice to compare Charles with her husband. The two have not yet become lovers: Alice registers Charles's intense humiliation and finds a response. Calling his name 'avec, dans la voix, toute la séduction dont elle se sentait capable' (156; 'in the most seductive tone she could'), she catches his eye then looks down, deliberately and slowly, at his exposed body, before nodding approvingly and with 'un regard rempli de la considération la plus crue' ('a look of the crudest appreciation') she smiles, 'un sourire radieux, ravi, débordant des promesses les plus précises' (157; 'a radiant, delighted, smile, full of the most explicit promises of what was to come'), leaving Charles embarrassed and delighted and his captors shocked and uncertain how to proceed. Alice's expression of uninhibited desire becomes a gesture of resistance. The ethic of frivolity, in these extreme circumstances, is redeemed.

### Conclusion

Sagan's work exemplifies the literary middlebrow in its mingling of stylistic dexterity and serious themes with a popular verve that extended her readership far beyond a highly educated elite. She captured the particular sensibility of a historical moment, especially for women, and crafted its mood of frivolity shadowed by existential doubt into quickly read, seemingly flimsy tales of love and glamorous living, tales that also spoke of self-doubt, loneliness and death. The tone of her fiction is uniquely and unmistakably 'saganesque', but it also provides a clear example of what I have suggested is a middlebrow aesthetic. Its charm

depends on a vivid evocation of place, on slight yet compelling plots, a cast of credibly conflicted and imperfect characters, and a skilfully transparent narrative style. A sharply perceptive view of contemporary society and an affirmation of certain ethical values are strongly present but dissolved into the narrative. The ethic and aesthetic of 'anxious nonchalance' made Sagan the most successful female middlebrow writer of the 1950s and '60s; affirming the 'sompueuse précarité de la vie', her fiction acknowledged too both the dark undercurrents of that period and many women's dissatisfaction with the masculine models of self-fulfilment to which a qualified emancipation had granted them greater access. In her last works, and most notably *De guerre lasse*, a fictional return to a period defined (at least in retrospect) by clearer ethical and political choices, enabled Sagan to depict a causal connection between the intense appreciation of life's pleasures, however transient, and an ethical commitment to the right of others to enjoy the same 'splendid, precarious' privilege.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Literary Prizes, Women and the Middlebrow

Les prix sont des oxymores: à la fois valeur marchande et symbolique' (Ducas, 2013, 217)

(Prizes are oxymorons: their value is at once commercial and symbolic)

Literary prizes are a prime site of the middlebrow, for they occupy the space that connects literature defined as a high art form with literature as marketable product. Thus many of what are still the major literary awards were founded in the Belle Époque, when the expansion of publishing and literacy laid the ground for the development of middlebrow reading. If the Nobel Prize for outstanding contributions to literature was first awarded in 1901, the concept of an annual prize for a single novel began in France in 1903 with the Prix Goncourt, founded by the last will and testament of the writer and critic Edmond de Goncourt. Each December the Goncourt Academy, composed of ten respected figures from the literary world, meets to select the year's winning novel, which is then hugely publicised through the media and goes on to sell several hundred thousand copies. Since the Goncourt, literary prizes in France have proliferated to the point where one recent study estimates that over two thousand now exist (Ducas, 2013, 5–6), and the model of the annual book award has been adopted across the world, not least in the UK where the Booker Prize (1968, since 2002 the Man-Booker), and the Orange Prize (1996, since 2014 the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction) have become vital mechanisms of the book industry and significant markers and shapers of reading tastes.

Prizes belong in that middle ground where Bourdieu's field of restricted production and field of large-scale production intersect.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, they subscribe in principle to the ideal of a disinterested reward for pure literary quality, an annual identification and celebration of the very best writing; on the other, prizes are often founded and financed by publishers or other players in the book industry, and the judging process is frequently assumed to be skewed by commercial interests. From one perspective, prizes may be seen as devices that enable the dissemination of the finest writing to a wide public who, without the mediatisation of both author and text, might never consider themselves to be its audience, thus raising literary sensibility across the nation.<sup>2</sup> Yet the convergence of literary evaluation with the dynamic of the marketplace may also be seen as a degradation of real literary value, exerting a downward pull towards mediocrity.

Given French culture's historically rooted belief in an authentic art of the word that transcends both contingent concerns and the pleasure-seeking tastes of a mass public, prizes are particularly suspect in France. Long before the twentieth-century vogue for literary awards, Flaubert expressed his mistrust of even the most brilliant writers whose work managed to please a popular audience: 'Il y a des génies énormes qui n'ont qu'un défaut, qu'un vice, c'est d'être sentis surtout par les esprits vulgaires, par les cœurs à poésie facile' (1973, 363; 'There are great geniuses who suffer from a single vice, that of being appreciated above all by vulgar minds and sentimental hearts'), and his sentiments are echoed in the widespread belief that, as Sylvie Ducas puts it, prizes (in this case the Goncourt) represent 'une sorte de tribunal bienfaisant du lisible sanctionnant une littérature accessible pour le plus grand nombre' (2004, 181; 'a sort of well-meaning system of awards for literature that is easy-to-read, an endorsement of books accessible to the majority'). Thus if prizes have proliferated, it is partly because however oppositional and progressive its original goals, each prize rapidly becomes identified with aesthetic timidity and a desire to flatter the marketplace, so that another, alternative prize is founded to reward what its sponsors believe to be authentic, non-commercial literature. The Goncourt was founded in response to the perceived conservatism of the Académie Française, which in its panoply of awards ignored the novel as a genre 'considéré comme

1 See above, p. 100.

2 Richard Todd, in his study of the Booker Prize, defines the effect of prizes on book consumption and on readers as 'enrichment' (1996, 308–09).

populaire, hybride et mineur' (Ducas, 2004, 170; 'considered popular, hybrid and minor'). The Goncourt would reward and consecrate this maligned literary form and promote a more innovative, challenging aesthetic: its founder wished it to be a prize 'destiné aux tentatives hardies de la forme et de la pensée' (Goncourt's testament, quoted in Ashley, 2004, 24; 'that would reward formal and intellectual daring'). But soon the Goncourt itself came to be perceived as an institution dominated by the major publishing houses and tending towards safe, marketable choices: the Prix Renaudot was founded in 1926 by a group of journalists who generally disagreed with the Goncourt jury's choices, and the Prix Médicis in 1958, 'en réaction aux choix conformistes des autres grands jurys littéraires' ('as a reaction against the conformist choices of the other major literary juries') according to its official site. The chain production of anti-conformist alternatives to existing prizes continues, with the Prix novembre (1989, from 1999 renamed the Prix décembre) established with the explicit aim of rewarding formally radical writing as opposed to what its founders see as the staid, conservative choices of other juries.

From an author's point of view, winning a literary prize is thus something of a poisoned chalice. To win the Goncourt, for example, 'tient à la fois du banc d'infamie et de la légion d'Honneur' (Ducas, 2004, 183; 'is at the same time a mark of shame and a badge of honour'). On the positive side, a major prize means a huge increase in income, for sales of the winning novel soar, profits increase still further when it is republished in paperback, and any other publications by the winning author also benefit. The work also reaches a much wider readership, including, through translation, at the international level – and to become a recognisable public name guarantees further book contracts. But celebrity and material rewards are incompatible with the powerful image of the authentic writer as free spirit, rebel and gadfly committed only to the truth of his (or her) art: the successful author knows that they risk not only the loss of the privacy they need to write, but also that of peer esteem. Consecration by juries who are frequently cast as inherently conservative in taste or as puppets of the book industry, and by a mass audience assumed to lack discrimination, may damage rather than enhance an author's reputation. Literary prize winners thus often greet the news of their success with a discourse of indifference or downright displeasure, like Jacques Borel who won the 1965 Goncourt for *L'Adoration* and declared that as a result, his 'hostility to literary prizes ... had only grown': 'Il y a des gens qui, je



suppose, achètent chaque année les prix littéraires. Mais ça ce sont les gens qui n'entrent qu'une fois par an dans une librairie!' ('I suppose there are people who always buy the prize-winning novels. But they're the sort of people who only go into a bookshop once a year!' Heinich, 1999, 28). What Borel expresses is the fear of being associated with that middlebrow audience credulous enough to believe in prizes, whose reading of his novels will somehow debase them, reducing them to the status of a cultural duty or a merely pleasurable fiction. Even more positive responses to literary awards tend to stress not the honour conferred, but the unsophisticated nature of the readership that prizes bring. Thus Michel Houellebecq, winner of the 2010 Goncourt for *La Carte et le territoire* and previously a cynical critic of the prize system,<sup>3</sup> welcomed the larger public the award would provide but stressed the untutored nature of these readers:

Il y a des gens qui ne sont au courant de la littérature contemporaine que grâce au Goncourt, et la littérature n'est pas au centre des préoccupations des Français, donc c'est intéressant. ('Le Goncourt', 2010)

(There are people who are only aware of contemporary literature thanks to the Goncourt, and since literature does not count for much in most French people's lives, this means that it matters)

James F. English sees the 'antiprize rhetoric' that accompanies awards as a knowing 'part of the discursive apparatus of the prizes themselves' (2005, 212).

This ambivalence about the value of literary awards is less evident among women prize winners, who make up a small minority of the laureates. Women's legitimacy in the cultural field having been fragile and contested throughout history, female winners tend to welcome the recognition conferred by a prize both as individuals and as representatives of their sex. Simone de Beauvoir, winner of the 1954 Goncourt for *Les Mandarins*, shared in the resistance to media stardom of her male counterparts – 'à mon avis, les rapports que l'écrivain soutient avec la vérité lui interdisent de se plier à ce traitement' (1963, 338; 'in my view, a writer's relationship with truth means they should not give in to this sort of treatment') – but acknowledged her exhilaration at gaining a wide

3 In 2000 Houellebecq had declared in a televised interview (with Thierry Ardisson on France 2) that 'le Goncourt s'achète' ('the Goncourt can be bought'), attributing the failure (so far) of his own novels to win the prize to his publisher's lack of a 'special budget category for prizes – to pay the jury'.

and enthusiastic readership thanks to the publicity the prize afforded: ‘dans les moments où s’accomplit le rêve de mes vingt ans – me faire aimer à travers les livres – rien ne me gâche mon plaisir’ (338; ‘at times when the dreams I had as a twenty-year-old come true – to be loved for the books I have written – nothing can spoil my pleasure’). Annie Ernaux echoed this delight in being widely read when she won the Prix Renaudot for *La Place* in 1984. Interviewed by Nathalie Heinich for her study of the prize system, *L’Épreuve de la grandeur*, Ernaux acknowledged the material and symbolic importance of the prize for an author who, as a woman from a working-class family, had begun writing with a double lack of cultural legitimacy. The prize brought financial autonomy and popular success with readers from the milieu she had left behind: ‘C’est une victoire personnelle, mais ça a aussi été une revanche de type féministe pour moi, c’est sûr [...] une petite réparation, au moins dans l’ordre du symbolique, ou du littéraire’ (100; ‘It’s a personal victory, but it also felt like a feminist victory, no doubt about it [...] some small reparation, at least at a symbolic and literary level’). Marie NDiaye’s 2009 Goncourt for *Trois femmes puissantes* was also received with characteristic composure as a cause for happiness – she described herself as ‘très contente et très calme’ (‘very happy and very calm’) – and an ‘encouraging sign’ for women as a whole: yes, she replied to her interviewer on TV5’s news journal on 3 November 2009, it did matter that the prize had gone to a woman, ‘c’est très important, ce n’est pas insignifiant’ (it’s very important, it really matters’).

For the history of annual literary prizes in France has had a strongly gendered dimension from the start. It was the refusal of the all-male Goncourt jury to take seriously the sole female contender for the inaugural prize (Myriam Harry with *La Conquête de Jérusalem*) that led in 1904 to the founding of the Prix Femina. As we have seen (Chapter 2), Belle Époque France had a considerable number of widely read and moderately eminent women writers, who joined together to establish the new prize out of indignation at the Goncourt’s overt sexism and a shared desire to carve out a female space in the nation’s overwhelmingly male culture. The Femina jury would be entirely composed of women, its first incarnation comprising 22 writers and intellectuals, including Daniel Lesueur and Marcelle Tinayre. The inaugural prize went to Myriam Harry’s spurned contender for the Goncourt. With the single exception of Judith Gautier, jury member from 1910 to 1917, the Goncourt Academy continued to exclude women from both juries and prizes until the end of the Second World War, when Elsa Triolet became

the first Goncourt Laureate (*Le Premier Accroc coûte 200 francs*) in 1944 and Colette joined the Academy (1945).<sup>4</sup>

The Femina makes no distinction of sex in the writers it rewards, thus asserting the place of women in the whole national process of literary evaluation and canon formation; it nonetheless has a far more egalitarian record than other prizes in terms of the authors it has crowned. By 2016, 42 out of 105 Femina prizes, or over 40 per cent, had gone to women,<sup>5</sup> as opposed to 12 out of 113, or under 10 per cent, for the Goncourt. Unlike the Goncourt, established through the legacy of an esteemed literary figure, the Femina has its roots in middlebrow culture, for the prize was initially funded and promoted by two commercially successful women's magazines, both aimed squarely at an educated middle-class market, *Vie heureuse* and *Femina*. The association between 'feminine' prizes and women's magazines was echoed and amplified many decades later in 1969, when *Elle* magazine – also an upmarket, glossy women's journal – set up the Grand Prix des Lectrices de *Elle*, which has since become another significant annual event on the literary calendar. The involvement of women's magazines in the two major women-centred prizes both reinforces the suspicion of literary awards as market-led and demeaningly middlebrow and, within the more positive definition of the term adopted here, suggests that literary prizes represent a particularly valuable locus of the French feminine middlebrow.

This is the case in two slightly different senses, both of which I want to explore through the study of particular prize-winning texts. On the one hand, the major annual prizes may facilitate a different, middlebrow reading of a text initially conceived and received as literary in the more 'restricted' sense, as the cases of two female-authored Goncourt winners will show. On the other hand, it is also worth examining in more detail what kinds of text the female juries (*Femina* and *Elle*) reward, since their origins and close association with a wide female readership support the view that these will exemplify at least some aspects of female middlebrow taste.

4 Given the collaborationist record of several Goncourt jurors at the time – four out of ten were on the blacklist of the Resistance – the award of the prize to a strongly pro-Resistance text in 1944 might also be considered strategic. The sudden opening up to women can also be viewed cynically as an attempt to divert attention from the jury's political embarrassment (Ducas, 2013, 153).

5 The Femina was not awarded in the years 1914–16 or 1940–43.

Becoming middlebrow: the ‘Goncourtes’<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen, since its inception only 10 per cent of Goncourt-winning texts have been written by women. Of these, some of the most commercially successful have been by authors whose dominant image is distinctly more high- than middlebrow, but who have reached a wide ‘non-specialist’ public thanks to the publicity surrounding the prize. In this category one might include recent winners such as Lydie Salvayre, whose novel *Pas pleurer* won the Goncourt in 2014, or Marie NDiaye, who won in 2009 with *Trois femmes puissantes*. Historically, though, perhaps the most striking cases of ‘middlebrow-isation’ through the Goncourt have been Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les Mandarins* (Goncourt 1954), and Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amant* (1984). Both of these novels rapidly sold hundreds of thousands of copies and joined less highbrow contemporaries on the bestseller lists for the relevant year. Their sales continued into the millions in French alone, with total readership achieving dizzying numbers through extensive translation. Before the Goncourt, Beauvoir’s status as a philosopher and politically engaged intellectual, and Duras’s association with ‘difficult’ avant-garde style, had restricted their primary readership to a cultural elite. And indeed both *Les Mandarins* and *L’Amant* are complex in form, highly serious in theme and demand a lot of their readers. Both, however, also foreground themes of particular relevance to a female audience, and are open to that immersive, emotionally powerful, page-turning reading that characterises middlebrow fiction.

By 1954 Beauvoir had already published two novels, *L’Invitée* in 1943 and *Le Sang des autres* in 1945, and both had been – on the whole – critically well received. Her more public celebrity began with her powerful, groundbreaking feminist essay of 1949 *Le Deuxième Sexe*, and the polarised responses of acclaim and scandalised hostility that greeted it. Beauvoir herself recognised the gendered nature of this reception, and despite her initial intention to be, as the culture demanded, a ‘serious and therefore necessarily male-identified’ writer (Fallaise, 1995, 53), she now began to revise her view of the value of a primarily female readership. In her memoirs she records what Elizabeth Fallaise describes

6 Colette christened herself a ‘Goncourte’ when she joined the jury or ‘Goncourt ten’ in 1945 (Colette, 1973, 139). I borrow the term to mean (also) female Goncourt winners.

as the Damascene moment<sup>7</sup> when she recognised and challenged the hegemonic view that serious writing meant writing for men:

On m'aurait surprise et même irritée, à trente ans, si on m'avait dit que je m'occuperais des problèmes féminins et que mon public le plus sérieux, ce serait des femmes. Je ne le regrette pas. Divisées, déchirées, désavantagées, pour elles plus que pour les hommes il existe des enjeux, des victoires, des défaites. Elles m'intéressent; et j'aime mieux, à travers elles, avoir sur le monde une prise limitée mais solide, que de flotter dans l'universel. (Beauvoir, 1963, 211)

(At thirty, I would have been surprised and even irritated if anyone had told me that I would write about women's problems, and that my most important readership would be women. But I do not regret this at all. Women are divided, conflicted, disadvantaged, so that there is more at stake for them than for men and life means a series of victories and defeats. Women interest me, and I would rather, through them, have a defined but solid grasp on the world than float around in the universal)

It seems fair to assume both that a female readership was in Beauvoir's mind as she wrote *Les Mandarins* and that when the Goncourt brought the book to the attention of a wider public, and sales rose sharply from Gallimard's original print run of 11,000 to 200,000, a good proportion of these new readers were women. The text bears this out, for Beauvoir interweaves a highly topical plot of ideas and political activism in post-war France with a courageous tackling of the most intimate topics from a female point of view: sexuality, the ageing body, passionate love are all central to a novel that is also deeply engaged with the public politics of the post-Liberation years.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst many critics read *Les Mandarins* primarily as a *roman à clef*, or a lightly fictionalised version of Beauvoir's own life among the left-wing intelligentsia of post-war Paris, others such as the author Gérard d'Houville<sup>9</sup> found it above all 'passionnant' ('a compelling

7 Fallaize describes this passage as 'a real road to Damascus declaration for Beauvoir' (1995, 54).

8 After *Les Mandarins*, this holistic view of experience as inseparably public and private would continue to attract a large female readership through Beauvoir's multivolume memoirs, parts of which were pre-published in *Elle* magazine. Her last two fictions, *Les Belles Images* (1966) and *La Femme rompue* (1967 – also serialised in *Elle*), deal even more explicitly with both the social and personal dimensions of women's lives.

9 D'Houville was the pen-name of Marie de Régnier (1875–1963), poet and

read’): ‘Une fois que le lecteur a commencé la lecture du roman, il ne peut le quitter’ (Larsson, 1988, 147; ‘Once the reader has begun, he [*sic*] can’t put the novel down’). Beauvoir was undoubtedly committed to the concept of the novel as mimetic and immersive: in 1946, her article ‘Littérature et métaphysique’ (in *Les Temps modernes*) affirmed the view that good fiction should enable the reader to ‘effectuer des expériences imaginaires, aussi complètes, aussi inquiétantes que les expériences vécues’ (quoted in Dugast-Portes, 1992, 66; ‘have imaginary experiences that are as real and as disquieting as experience that is lived’), and she would later reject New Novelist Nathalie Sarraute’s advocacy of the delicate ‘tropisms’ of subjectivity as the most appropriate matter for narrative, with a vigorous defence of plot, character and the panoramic treatment of the historical and the social:

Les collectivités, les événements, les foules, les relations des hommes aux autres hommes, et aux choses, tous ces objets bien réels, et irréductibles à nos palpitations souterraines, méritent et exigent l’éclairage de l’art. (Beauvoir, 1963, 291)<sup>10</sup>

(Social groups, events, crowds, man’s relationships with others and with things, all of these realities that are irreducible to the inner flutterings of consciousness deserve and need illumination through art)

And the novel puts this credo into practice, constantly connecting the large-scale ‘social groups, events and crowds’ with personal relationships that are shown to be shaped and inflected by the specificity of the social moment, but are also portrayed in all their felt immediacy for the protagonists. The plot and the political and ethical debates in which the characters engage are narrated through the specific, embodied consciousness of fictional protagonists rather than from the ‘god’s eye’ view of an omniscient narrator: in alternating chapters, Beauvoir

novelist, one of the Belle Époque generation of well-known women writers and the first woman to win the Académie’s ‘prix de littérature’ in 1918. She reviewed *Les Mandarins* after the award of the Goncourt, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (November–December 1954).

10 Sarraute, one of the principal theorists and practitioners of the *nouveau roman*, attacked the mimetic, plot-driven, politically *engagé* type of fiction exemplified by Beauvoir’s novel as outmoded and untrue to the psychological complexity of real human experience, in her article ‘Conversation et sous-conversation’. This was first proposed to *Les Temps modernes*, and Beauvoir probably read it first in manuscript form. Rejected by Sartre’s journal, it was finally published in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in January and February of 1956 (Auclerc, 2006).

focalises her narrative from the points of view of Henri Perron and Anne Dubreuilh, the latter through a first-person narrative voice. The novel begins at Christmas 1944, shortly after the Liberation. Henri, writer and Resistance hero, sees the world through a strong sense of moral responsibility balanced with an ardent appetite for life's pleasures. Anne, psychoanalyst and married to an older, eminent intellectual (Robert), struggles for a sense of purpose and belonging in the face of the terrible human suffering that the Occupation has brought, the aftermath of which she now treats in her clinical practice. Through both characters, we face the complex moral issue of dealing with wartime collaborators, the erosion of any sense of the victors' moral superiority as the atom bomb is dropped on Hiroshima and the US backs despotic regimes in Europe, and the difficulty of defining a progressive left politics as the Cold War hardens and the truth of Stalin's regime is revealed. Through Henri, the reader is engaged in the difficult negotiation between personal integrity and strategic political choices, but also in the intimate ethics of love and desire as he tries to extricate himself from a once-passionate, now oppressive relationship with Paule, and pursues very different models of love with the beautiful but damaged Josette and sullen, forthright Nadine, Anne's daughter. Anne's narrative dramatises the war's legacy of pain, but also carries the story away from France and braids romance into the plot as she embarks on a study trip to the USA, falls passionately in love with an American writer, Lewis Brogan, and must weigh the welcome intensity of their reciprocal desire against the secure identity, professional satisfaction and responsibilities she has left behind in Paris.

At well over five hundred pages, and dealing with the intricate politics of post-war France, *Les Mandarins* contains a considerable amount of potentially dry dialogue and reported debate on political and ethical issues. If the novel can nonetheless be read in the mode of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls 'entrancement',<sup>11</sup> this is thanks to Beauvoir's capacity to shape ideas into dramatic event and to crystallise issues and conjunctures into resonant tableaux. Typical of the latter is the opening scene, where most of the main characters gather to celebrate a Christmas of joyful liberation deeply shadowed by the absence of all their dead. Abundant food, gifts, wine and dancing express a shared jubilation that has a bitter undertone of guilt and apprehension: 'Voici les bougies, le houx, le gui qu'ils ne voient pas; tout ce qui m'est donné,

11 See Chapter 1, pp. 19–20.

je le leur vole' (Beauvoir, 1954, 28; 'Here are the candles, the holly and mistletoe, none of which they can see; all that is given to me is stolen from them'). The novel's central tension is established here and must have resonated strongly with contemporary readers: the elation of personal life and happiness recovered, of new beginnings and the opening up of the future, held in painful balance by the war-bequeathed knowledge of human brutality and the gathering threat of the Cold War. On the cycling holiday in the Ardèche shared by Anne, Robert and Henri, the horror of war is written on the landscape in the burnt-out ruins of a village whose inhabitants have been massacred by the retreating Nazi forces, and news of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima casts a terrible shadow; yet all three protagonists also display a rediscovered, visceral capacity for pleasure in living that survives the pain, as they freewheel down mountains on rusty, war-weary bicycles, sleep in the open air, are transfixed by the colours of a waterfall – 'les détails de ces jeux de vapeur et d'écume, ces métamorphoses, ces évanescences, ces menus maelströms' (220; 'the details of this play of steam and foam, these metamorphoses, these tiny storms'). The plot is often played out through dramatic events, the moral question of whether and how to punish those who collaborated with the Nazis, for example, becoming intensely personal for Henri when he discovers the unsavoury wartime past of his lover Josette and her mother, leading to a dramatic showdown, a revenge killing and the urgent, furtive disposal of a corpse when one of the Resistance fraternity turns out to have betrayed the Jews he purported to save.

Narrative voice, pace and action open *Les Mandarins* to the 'page-turning' reading praised by d'Houville. The novel's success with women readers, though, was surely also due to its capturing of tensions in female experience that had a particular intensity in the post-war years, and to its unusually frank treatment of love and sexuality from a woman's perspective. The year 1944 at last saw French women gain the right to vote, and for the first time the new Republic enshrined the equality of the sexes in the nation's constitution. However, deeply embedded beliefs in women's secondary status retained their force, and policies aimed at regenerating a humiliated nation stressed the need for reproduction, reaffirmed the primacy of the couple<sup>12</sup> and maternity, and

12 Kristin Ross charts a 'massive post war French reaffirmation of the couple as standard-bearer of the state-led modernization effort and as bearer of all affective values as well' (1995, 126). This primacy of the couple, and the split reality of



glorified youth, particularly through cultural emphasis on the young and beautiful female body. Beauvoir creates a cast of minor characters who embody particular aspects of women's situation. Nadine, Anne's daughter, is a sullen, angry teenager of the generation whose adolescence was blighted by the war and Occupation. Sexually adventurous in a way that evokes both Némirovsky's heroines of the late 1930s and Sagan's contemporaneous *Bonjour Tristesse*, Nadine finds sex both pleasureless and meaningless, and searches restlessly for a possible future. Josette, one of Henri's lovers, is a starlet managed by an ambitious – and ex-collaborationist – mother, a vulnerable figure rewarded for her looks rather than her talent, as France moves into the age of the mediated femme-image: 'C'est humiliant d'être belle' (279; 'It's humiliating to be beautiful'), she replies to Henri's compliments on her laboriously maintained beauty.

The two principal female characters though are women who are leaving youth behind, and who confront the choice between that most traditional form of female fulfilment, passionate romantic love, and a harder, lonelier yet (in the novel's terms) more ethically sound alternative of assuming their own freedom. With Paule, Beauvoir tackles in fictional form the case of the 'woman-in-love' (*l'amoureuse*) that she had analysed in *Le Deuxième Sexe*:<sup>13</sup> Paule's inability to confront the loss of Henri, whose love has lent her life shape, purpose and vicarious glory for more than a decade is both moving and painful to read, and brings the philosophy of freedom and self-responsibility graphically to life. Through Henri's mix of sympathy and weary irritation, and through Anne's empathetic first-person narration, Paule is at once condemned and understood. 'Cured' of her obsessive love for Henri, Paule is unable to reinvent herself without the validation of his desiring gaze: 'elle serait comme moi', thinks Anne, 'comme des millions d'autres: une femme qui attend de mourir sans plus savoir pourquoi elle vit' (420; '[without Henri] 'she would be like me, like millions of others: a woman waiting to die without knowing any more what she is living for').

Anne herself ends the war frozen by grief, unable to feel or to envisage a future. It is in an attempt to re-connect with her own body and emotions

women's situation in post-war France, is equally relevant to the fiction of Françoise Sagan. See Chapter 5, p. 128, n. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Beauvoir analyses the woman who invests her life and identity in love as 'L'Amoureuse', and defines her dependence on the man she loves as a form of (socially encouraged) *mauvaise foi* ('bad faith').

that she accepts an invitation to go to bed with the cynical Scriassine, in a scene that stages with rare precision uncomfortable aspects of women's experience of sex. No other 'serious' writers of the period dealt, for example, with the discomfort of vaginal sex in the absence of desire – penetration for Anne produces a feeling like 'l'acier du dentiste dans une gencive engourdie' (74; 'the dentist's drill in a numbed gum') – nor the strategic dishonesty of an orgasm faked to bring an end to an awkward situation: 'Cependant j'étais vaincue: j'acceptai de soupirer, de geindre; pas très adroitement, j'imagine, puisqu'il me demanda: – Tu n'as pas joui? – Si, je t'assure' (75; 'But I was defeated. I gave in and sighed and moaned; not very convincingly, I imagine, because he asked: "Didn't you come?" "Yes, yes I did"'). The first encounters with Lewis Brogan, the question of whether or not to make the first move (conventionally the male prerogative) and the relief when reciprocity is confirmed, the sense of a body brought back to life by the other's desire,<sup>14</sup> these are preludes to the passionate love affair that Beauvoir also depicts with an explicit sensuality that earned her accusations of obscenity from conservative critics (Larsson, 1988, 138):<sup>15</sup> 'J'embrassai ses yeux, ses lèvres, ma bouche descendit le long de sa poitrine; elle effleura le nombril enfantin, la fourrure animale, le sexe où un cœur battait à petits coups' (327–28; 'I kissed his eyes, his lips, my mouth moved down his chest, brushing the childlike navel, the animal fur, his sex where I could feel the rapid beat of his heart'). The Anne-Lewis story is also the occasion for an unqualified valorisation of the experience of romantic love – 'Lewis était tout entier dans mes bras, moi dans les siens, nous ne désirions rien d'autre: nous possédions tout pour toujours' (328; 'Lewis was in my arms and I in his, we wanted nothing more: we had everything, for ever') – that earned Beauvoir the incredulous scorn of some feminist critics.<sup>16</sup> Anne

14 After their first kiss, Anne describes herself entering a bar 'en titubant comme dut tituber Lazare ressuscité' (317; 'reeling and staggering like Lazarus just brought back to life').

15 *Les Mandarins* was placed on the Catholic Church's index of prohibited books in 1956.

16 See for example Evans, who writes: 'Rather like the heroines of Barbara Cartland or Denise Robbins, Anne finds herself "transformed" by male sexual desire [...] Like lovers in romantic fiction, Lewis and, particularly, Anne, sink into a rosy haze of delight' (1985, 82–83). But Beauvoir seems to me to be doing something more interesting here, in acknowledging the extreme pleasure of reciprocal desire (also celebrated in romantic fiction) as one element in an existential and political drama.

finally renounces a love that would mean exchanging the professional, political and family life she has built in Paris for a life centred solely on her relationship with Lewis. The novel nonetheless explores with great sympathy the sensual and emotional intensity of romantic love, weaving the genre of romance into the novel of ideas, and representing ethical issues of freedom and responsibility in terms of the tension between old and new models of female fulfilment.

A 579-page novel about politically engaged intellectuals was not the most obvious candidate for popular success, but Goncourt publicity made *Les Mandarins* available for the immersive, identificatory, emotionally charged reading that its narrative also offers, particularly to women readers given its distinctive focusing of philosophical and political issues through female as well as male experience. The massive post-Goncourt readership achieved by *L'Amant*, some thirty years later, was surprising for different reasons: Duras was perceived as 'difficult' not because she was a heavyweight intellectual, but rather because she was associated with the formally rarefied avant-garde trend of the *nouveau roman*. Her sparsely poetic novel *Moderato Cantabile* had won the short-lived Prix de mai in 1958, with a jury chaired by the founder of the prize, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and including Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille and Nathalie Sarraute. Published by the Éditions de Minuit, whose elegant white volumes immediately connote demanding modernism rather than easy reading, *L'Amant* was not expected to appeal to a mass audience. However this semi-autobiographical tale of a passionate liaison between a teenage French girl and an older Chinese man, set in French colonial Indo-China of the 1930s, outstripped forecast sales even before its victory at the Goncourt, particularly after Bernard Pivot devoted an edition of his popular TV book programme *Apostrophes* to Duras and her novel in September 1984. The award of the Goncourt magnified sales beyond all expectation, and *L'Amant* has remained, as one critic put it, 'Duras's *Titanic*' (Garcia, 2005).

The reasons generally cited for this are the novel's apparently confessional nature and its deployment of the script of romance. Aged 70 when the novel came out, Duras was a well-known figure in France: a member of the wartime Resistance, a vocal supporter of the then President of the Republic, François Mitterrand, and a prolific if 'restricted field' author some of whose writing had already placed her own biography in the public arena. Though *L'Amant* makes no explicit promise of autobiographical sincerity, alternating between first- and third-person narration to designate its young protagonist and retaining her anonymity

throughout, the text certainly invites an autobiographical reading. The old narrator who looks back on her past is a writer whose appearance and life story exactly match those of the author, and who promises to reveal more than hitherto about her life: 'Ici je parle de périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse'(14; 'Here I speak of hidden periods of my youth'). Since what is revealed is a story of transgressive sex and familial violence threaded through with incestuous desire, the novel undoubtedly provoked a curiosity that was as prurient as it was strictly literary. Its depiction of interracial relationships during the colonial period, like its brief evocations of Occupied France, also chimed with extra-literary preoccupations in 1980s France. This was a decade that saw the beginning of a retrospective fascination with the colonial years, evidenced in the creation of museums and memorials as well as in literature and cinema, and a renewed interest in the Occupation period, triggered in part by high-profile trials of ageing war criminals. *L'Amant* resonates with national memory, both guilt-ridden and nostalgic.

It is also a novel that sets in play the familiar narrative pleasures of the romance. Already the title announces the centrality of love, and the key components of the classic love story structure the text: the first encounter, on the ferry across the Mekong; the realisation of mutual desire, in the lover's apartment deep in the city's native quarter; the separation, as the girl embarks on an ocean liner that will return her to France. A final scene set in the novel's present time echoes romantic belief in the life-changing, life-long nature of love. Years later, 'après la guerre, après les mariages, les divorces, les livres', the Chinese lover comes to Paris and calls the narrator: 'Il lui avait dit [...] qu'il l'aimait encore, qu'il ne pourrait jamais cesser de l'aimer, qu'il l'aimerait jusqu'à sa mort' (141-42; 'after the war, the marriages, the divorces, the books [...] He told her [...] that he still loved her, that he could never stop loving her, that he would love her till he died'). Valérie Baisnée's analysis of *L'Amant* attributes the novel's commercial success to the fact that 'in popular reading' it becomes 'no more than a romance in an exotic setting' (1994, 160).

It seems safe to say that the novel's compelling version of the love story plays a part in its mass appeal, as does the setting, exotically distant for most readers in both time and space. Other elements, though, contribute equally to the enchantment of reading *L'Amant*, and explain its median place on the boundary between canonical literature (it has inspired countless scholarly studies) and popular reading. For although in several respects *L'Amant* displays the formal features of a

challengingly experimental text, stretching language and genre beyond their familiar shapes, its specificity is that these features work towards, not against, the reader's engrossment in the story. Generic ambivalence, for example, is often a marker of the formally experimental text, and *L'Amant* hovers indeterminately between the categories of novel – the genre implied by the award of the Goncourt – and autobiography. But Duras's narrative framing of the story within what is recognisably her own life serves less to disrupt than to thicken the plot of what can easily be read as narrative fiction. As readers we are immediately absorbed into the mental world of a woman ageing and remembering: 'Un jour, j'étais âgée déjà, dans le hall d'un lieu public, un homme est venu vers moi' (9; 'One day, I was already old, in the foyer of a public building, a man came up to me'); with her, we then move in and out of the past. Normal practice in autobiography is to affirm the identity of present and past selves by sustained use of the first person, but Duras refers to her adolescent self as both 'je' and 'elle', or as 'la petite' ('the [female] child'), switching between these sometimes within a single passage. Because this corresponds to the structures of memory, in which the older self at once identifies with the younger and sees her as other, distanced by time, it can be assimilated into an immersive reading: the reader both enters the narrator's remembering consciousness and is transported as an observer onto the scene of events. The play of focalisation also actualises one of the book's persistent if unostentatious themes, namely the way in which identity is conferred by others as well as the self: 'la petite' signals focalisation of the principal protagonist from the perspective of the lover, the mother and at times the French colonial community – 'Chaque soir cette petite vicieuse va se faire caresser le corps par un sale Chinois millionnaire' (109–10; 'Every evening that little slut goes to have her body caressed by a dirty Chinese millionaire'). As readers for pleasure, rather than literary analysts, we can move seamlessly in and out of these shifting lenses of memory and identification.

Duras's elliptical, incantatory prose style also fuses highly 'literary' writing with the textual transparency that favours rapt engagement in the fictional world:

Que je vous dise encore, j'ai quinze ans et demi.  
C'est le passage d'un bac sur le Mékong.  
L'image dure pendant toute la traversée du fleuve.  
J'ai quinze ans et demi, il n'y a pas de saisons dans ce pays-là, nous sommes dans une saison unique, chaude, monotone, nous sommes dans la longue zone chaude de la terre, pas de printemps, pas de renouveau. (11)

(Let me say again, I'm fifteen and a half. It's on the ferry crossing the Mékong river. The image lasts throughout the whole river crossing. I'm fifteen and a half, there are no seasons in that country, we are in a single hot, monotonous season, in the earth's long hot zone, with no spring, no renewal)

Syntactically and lexically, the style could scarcely be simpler: the tense is the present, component units (clauses or phrases) are connected only by commas, words are familiar from everyday use. Reading flows, without textual asperities that demand attention. Yet multiple levels of emotion are communicated: the narrator's address to the reader ('que je vous dise encore') is at once urgent and intimate; the use of the simple verb 'C'est' ('it is') renders the potency of a remembered moment fixed in time ('C'est le passage ...'); the sense of an oppressive fixity of time and place weighing the girl down ('une saison unique', 'pas de renouveau') is countered by the signs that she is poised to cross literal and metaphorical boundaries ('quinze ans et demi', 'la traversée du fleuve'). The abandonment of causal or sequential relationships, normally designated by connecting or subordinating words ('and', 'but', 'so', 'then' and their equivalents) or by punctuation, conveys a refusal of standard logic and the sense of an emotional intensity irreducible to rational language. Ellipsis highlights all that remains outside discourse, 'as though syntax itself is on the point of giving way under the pressure of the task' as Leslie Hill puts it (1993, 120). The sense of being immersed in a dramatic fictional world is intensified rather than interrupted by a narrative voice that foregrounds the bare adequacy of language to render forceful emotion.

Raphaël Baroni describes the compelling appeal of immersive fiction as the 'conversion, through plotting, of existential tensions into narrative tensions' (2007, 408).<sup>17</sup> *L'Amant*, with its commanding, intimate narrative voice and illusory simplicity of style, carries the reader down the familiar path of the love story and interweaves this with the more disturbing, violent drama of the narrator's family: dead father; depressive, half-mad mother; one brother, 'the assassin', brutal and death-dealing; and the other, 'le petit frère', his gentle victim. It is through what Bachelard (1971) calls 'the material imagination' that these interlocking 'narrative tensions' are rendered sensuous and immediate for the reader. Rather than through dialogue or discursive narrative, emotion is frequently conveyed through physical imagery, as in the adolescent girl's wonderfully polysemic outfit at her first

17 See Chapter 1, pp. 23–25.

appearance in the text: a faded, hand-me-down silk dress of her mother held in at the waist by her brother's leather belt; a broad-brimmed man's hat; worn high-heeled gold lamé shoes; little-girl plaits but face powder and red lipstick. The girl is poised between childhood and womanhood, her identity entwined with that of her mother yet shifting determinedly towards separation, the androgyny of adolescence present in the eclectic mix of gender signs. The lovers' first meeting takes place during a river crossing, with all its signifying force of passage, transition, coming of age – and also classical echoes of crossing the Styx to the land of the dead. The river itself is a rich, multifaceted image of passion, the force of life that also flows irresistibly towards death, and perhaps too of writing (for the girl already knows she wants to write) that can capture and carry whatever reality it encounters:

j'ai peur que les câbles cèdent, que nous soyons emportés vers la mer.  
[...] Le courant est si fort, il emporterait tout, aussi bien des pierres,  
une cathédrale, une ville. Il y a une tempête qui souffle à l'intérieur du  
fleuve. (18)

(I am afraid that the cables will give way, that we'll be swept out to sea.  
[...] The current is so powerful, it could carry everything away, rocks, a  
cathedral, a whole town. Within this river, a storm is raging)

And water functions throughout the text as a profusely evocative image, until the remembered story ends with the girl crossing the ocean and leaving behind Indo-China, her family and her lover. Water represents the flow of desire, the lover expressing his erotic yet quasi-maternal tenderness for the girl by washing her gently after their first love-making; the narrator likening sexual pleasure to 'La mer, sans forme, simplement incomparable' (50; 'The sea, formless, simply incomparable'). It also marks the contrast between daughter and mother: for if the girl surrenders herself to the ebb and flow of river and ocean, to the flow of desire for the lover and the flow of language through writing, the aridity of the mother's life is figured in her despairing attempts to block the sea that invades the land she has been tricked into buying by corrupt officials: 'La mère n'a pas connu la jouissance' (50; 'The mother has never known sexual pleasure'). Yet the girl's determined separation from her mother is also countered by love – 'la saleté, ma mère, mon amour' (31; 'that bitch, my mother, my love') – and in one jubilant scene the mother is pictured washing the house in the dry season, scrubbing the floors and flooding the whole domestic space until water flows out over the lawns, and the mother laughs and dances and 'chacun

pense et elle aussi la mère que l'on peut être heureux dans cette maison défigurée qui devient soudain un étang ...' (77; 'everyone thinks and the mother thinks too that it is possible to be happy in this house suddenly transformed into a pond ...').

The mother-daughter plot, the tension between the daughter's needs to separate and to remain connected, represents a vital narrative thread of *L'Amant*, and with the theme of coming of age, and the tension between romantic love and independent self-realisation, marks this novel, like *Les Mandarins*, as one that plays out existential questions in the feminine. In terms of appeal to a female readership, this is also a novel that affirms female agency. The girl resists all pressures to conform to a passive, other-directed model of colonial womanhood: 'Elles attendent', she writes of the colonial wives: 'Elles s'habillent pour rien [...] Certaines deviennent folles' (27; 'They wait. They dress up for no purpose [...] Some of them go mad'). In some senses taking her mother as model, but also resisting her, she takes control of her life: knowingly assuming the role of prostitute in which the family have cast her to bring much-needed money from her Chinese lover into the household; at the same time, pursuing her own exploration of desire and love by transgressing her society's laws on race and gender; moving determinedly towards writing in the face of her mother's opposition. And the narrator too is a forceful female voice, her ambition to write fully realised, undaunted by age – the image of her 'devastated' face is 'celle qui me plaît de moi-même, celle où je me reconnais, où je m'enchante' (9; 'the image of my face that I like, the one in which I recognise myself, that delights me') – and able to transport her reader into a powerfully realised world in which emotion takes sensuous material form.

These two 'Goncourtes' are arguably the most striking examples of the way a major national prize can open up texts initially perceived as addressed to a 'restricted', highbrow market to middlebrow reading. If *Les Mandarins* and *L'Amant* were exceptionally successful in broadening their readership, this is because both novels – the one solidly realist, the other lyrically elliptical in form – possessed the qualities needed for a pleasurable immersive or 'entrancing' read: a compelling sense of place and time that anchors plot within a believable fictional world; characters who invite interest and empathy; a thematic density that resonates with readers' existential and topical concerns. Both stand out from the majority of Goncourt-winning texts in the sense that they focalise the world through the lens of female experience.



### The women's prizes: Femina and *Elle*

Set up in response to the male bias of French literary culture, the Femina prize was clearly if not explicitly designed to reward novels with appeal for a female readership. The title of the Grand Prix des Lectrices de *Elle* speaks for itself: there is something mildly provocative in making the readers of what is normally perceived as a fashion and beauty magazine<sup>18</sup> the judges of a literary 'Grand Prix', though this of course provided fuel for the negative view of prizes as market-led and encouraging a prosaically unadventurous type of literature. Sylvie Ducas, in her scholarly and largely sympathetic work on literary prizes in France, sees the tendency of juries to prefer a 'réalisme accessible au grand public' to what she calls a 'littérature formatrice, productrice de textes nouveaux susceptibles de déplacer les catégories du lisible' (2003, 72–73; 'widely accessible realism [...] transformative literature that produces texts capable of shifting the categories of what is considered readable') as particularly marked in the case of the 'feminine' prizes. Often, she says, content takes precedence over form so that books that feature strong heroines are favoured over those that seek to challenge the masculine bias of narrative form and language itself (Ducas, 2003, 74).

This claim is supported to some extent by the evidence of past decisions. Certainly, the most avant-garde or formally experimental women writers, such as Nathalie Sarraute, Hélène Cixous, Chantal Chawaf or Duras herself, have failed to figure in the prize lists. With hindsight, Françoise Mallet-Joris's sub-Balzacian *L'Empire céleste* seems an odd Femina choice for 1958, the year that saw the publication of Duras's *Moderato Cantabile* and of Christiane Rochefort's angry, deeply ambiguous take on the love story *Le Repos du guerrier*. Isabelle Hausser's *La Table des enfants* surely won the *Elle* prize in 2002 more for its subject matter – the story of a woman struggling to come to terms with the death of her daughter – than for its ploddingly omniscient narrative style. But counter-examples are more numerous: the Femina

18 In fact *Elle* has considered literature part of its agenda from the start, with a particular focus on women writers. The serialisation of Colette's *L'Étoile Vesper* began within weeks of the magazine's first appearance in November 1945; articles on women authors (Beauvoir, Sagan, Duras and many more) featured regularly throughout the 1950s and '60s and Beauvoir's *La Femme rompue* first appeared in its pages in 1968. *Elle* has maintained this literary dimension to its coverage of women's lives, though translations of English-language authors now occupy much of the space that earlier editions devoted to contemporary French women's writing.

has introduced to a wider public work by Claire Etcherelli (*Élise ou la vraie vie*, 1967), Marguerite Yourcenar (*L'Œuvre au noir*, 1968), Jorge Semprun (*La Deuxième Mort de Ramon Mercader*, 1969), Jocelyne François (*Joue-nous 'España'*, 1980), Anne Hébert (*Les Fous de Bassan*, 1982), Sylvie Germain (*Jours de colère*, 1989), Camille Laurens (*Dans ces bras-là*, 2000), Marie NDiaye (*Rosie Carpe*, 2001) and Nancy Huston (*Lignes de faille*, 2006), to pick out only a selection of novels that are (in most cases) highly readable, but are also thematically and formally challenging. The *Elle* prize includes translations and has rewarded a number of English-language middlebrow bestsellers such as William Boyd's compelling *Any Human Heart* (*A Livre ouvert*, 2003), Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (*Les Cerfs-volants de Kaboul*, 2006) and Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (*La Couleur des sentiments*, 2011). It has also promoted francophone writers such as Simone Schwarz-Bart (*Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*, 1973), Gisèle Pineau (*La Grande Drive des esprits*, 1994) and Nancy Huston (*L'Empreinte de l'ange*, 1999), all of whose novels deal with difficult themes of colonial oppression and its aftermath, violence both political and domestic, gendered power relations, and do so through innovative forms of narrative. The *Elle* prize in particular, thanks to its reader-based evaluation process and the huge female audience reached by the magazine,<sup>19</sup> has the capacity not only to respond to but also to widen the tastes of 'ordinary' readers.

It is thus hard to generalise about the type of novel promoted by women's literary prizes, novels which through the mechanism of the awards reach a broad swathe of 'ordinary' readers and become – briefly or more durably – part of the middlebrow canon. Two very different examples of twenty-first-century winners will help to delineate the field and demonstrate both the variety and the common features of contemporary feminine middlebrow. Claudie Gallaï's *Les Déferlantes* won the *Elle* prize in 2009, a novel that exemplifies what might be – and has been – termed the good holiday read:<sup>20</sup> with a vivid sense of place, a plot that combines the investigative pleasures of the detective genre with quietly intense romance and the narrative voice of a dour but

19 At the height of its success in 1965, *Elle* was apparently being read by one in eight French women; circulation figures for 2012–13 were close to 400,000.

20 Josyane Savigneau's review in *Le Monde des livres* (3 August 2008) describes the book: 'Bien qu'il soit gros, donc un peu encombrant, c'est le roman qu'il faut emporter en vacances' ('It's a big book to fit in the luggage, but it's still the one to take on holiday').

likeable heroine, aged around forty and at a turning point in her life, *Les Déferlantes* (translated as *The Breakers*) became a huge bestseller, has been translated into numerous languages and was adapted for television in 2013. Leonora Miano's *La Saison de l'Ombre* (*The Season of Shadow*) was the first novel by a francophone African writer to win the Femina in 2013 – Miano is Cameroonian, though resident in France. Set in pre-colonial Cameroon, focalised by protagonists whose worldview is radically unfamiliar, not least in their merging of the natural and the supernatural, Miano's novel is far from the 'littérature de convention, peu audacieuse' that Ducas associates in particular with women's prizes (2003, 56). It nonetheless uses an accessible form of narrative realism to tell an engrossing story.

The unnamed narrator/heroine of *Les Déferlantes* begins the novel in a state of utter grief caused by the death of her lover some months previously. She has adopted a place – the small port of La Hague on the tip of the Cotentin Peninsula in Normandy – that mirrors the emotional bleakness she feels: 'C'est une affaire de peau, La Hague. Une affaire de sens' (138; 'It is a matter of skin, La Hague. A matter of the senses'). La Hague is 'un endroit comme un bout du monde' (11; 'An end-of-the-world sort of place'), exposed to the elements, with its wild, desolate shoreline and raging seas. But La Hague is also the site of a human community, into which one day there arrives an apparent stranger, Lambert. Through a well-tried and familiar narrative device, the stranger sets off the novel's two interwoven lines of plot: a love story, through which the narrator will slowly and painfully return to life, and a mystery, for the new arrival is gradually revealed to be a man whose past is closely entwined with La Hague and with the lives of its inhabitants. As a series of clues turn into revelations, the truth of the past comes to light and the possibility of a future for the narrator is gradually realised. Suspense and curiosity produce the desire to turn the pages, and so too does the reader's identification with a narrator petrified by sadness but increasingly attentive to the presence of others and particularly of this new 'other' whose significance for the plot is immediately signalled in the novel's opening words: 'La première fois que j'ai vu Lambert, c'était le jour de la grande tempête' (9; 'The first time I saw Lambert was on the day of the big storm'). Narrative closure is achieved both through the unravelling of the mystery of the past and the realisation of what has become gradually apparent to the reader, that is, the unspoken but mutual warmth and desire between the narrator and Lambert. Love, like the revelation of truth, has a clearly redemptive quality: as the two

embark on a shared life, they also return from private grief to form part of the wider human community: ‘Lambert a pris ma main. C’était une main large, chaude et confiante. [...] Ensemble on a rejoint le monde des hommes’ (539; ‘Lambert took my hand. He had a big, warm trusting hand. [...] Together we went back into the human world’).

The dull, clipped spareness of the narrative voice is, I think, an essential part of the novel’s wide appeal. The narrator’s short sentences, abstention from imagery and all but the most generic of adjectives – ‘le ciel était noir, très bas’ (9; ‘the sky was black, and very low’) – together with the condensing of dialogue into tersely summarised indirect speech – ‘Il a parlé des mains de sa mère’ (15; ‘He spoke of his mothers’ hands’) – echo Duras’s haunting ellipses and combine to place the reader inside a state of emotional anomie, from which slow emergence then becomes pleasurable. We are invited to occupy another subjectivity, and as the narrator’s numbed impassivity gradually gives way to curiosity, empathy and desire, so the small world of La Hague comes alive and the stories of individual characters mesh to produce a coherent if multistranded narrative, and also a network of themes and imagery. If the proximity of death remains present throughout, with repeated motifs of loss, drowning, shrouds and burials, the themes of rebirth, revival and reclamation typify the fundamental optimism of the middlebrow. The heroine’s renaissance is echoed in a discreet but insistent set of images: many of the houses in La Hague are constructed from wood reclaimed from shipwrecks; damaged animals – a starving rat, a wounded seagull, stray cats and homeless horses – are saved and restored; wounds heal; one character succeeds in restoring and launching a derelict boat; the sculptor Raphael creates beauty through figures that represent extremes of human suffering, enacting an artistic credo of ‘faire du juste avec l’injuste, de la passion avec la misère’ (191; ‘making justice from injustice, passion from poverty’). Raphael introduces a quietly self-reflexive theme into the novel: plot-driven and grounded in the familiar genres of the romance and the family drama, *Les Déferlantes* also unostentatiously reflects on the redemptive possibilities of art and language in a number of ways. One of these is the referencing of two French writers, Jacques Prévert and Françoise Sagan: both had houses in the Cotentin area which have become shrines for their readers since their deaths, and both combined serious literary purpose with mass popularity.<sup>21</sup>

21 Jacques Prévert (1900–77) was a poet and screenwriter. His scenarios made the poetic-realist films of Renoir and Carné some of the most significant and widely

It will already be apparent that the depiction of place is also crucial to the success of *Les Déferlantes*. The novel provides a compellingly graphic portrayal of a very particular landscape, concentrating the action within a small location besieged by the elements and threatened too by human intervention through the looming profile of the power station just along the coast, and the narrator's work as a conservationist studying the seabirds threatened by environmental change. The sense of immersion in the fictional world is created in part through the representation of a landscape and seascape that are both mimetically accurate and metaphorically powerful: La Hague has been chosen by the narrator because it corresponds to her inner sense of desolation and wounded vulnerability. As she regains some small sense of agency and desire, so the narrative space opens beyond the single village: she travels a little way up the coast with Lambert, goes to Caen to discuss a return to normal work and at the end the couple make a trip south to a very different part of France. The all-consuming intensity of the place 'like the end of the world' is relativised within a wider canvas.

*Les Déferlantes* uses a laconic style, classic narrative tropes and transparently familiar imagery including the pathetic fallacy to transport the reader to a powerfully realised fictional world, both geographic and emotional. Through its gripping story of detection and romance, it invites a vicarious living through of common emotions, and situates the personal within a wider social world that is unmistakably also the reader's own.

*La Saison de l'ombre*, on the other hand, stands in a far more oblique relationship to the contemporary reader's own experience. Miano's novel is set in Cameroon, Central Africa, in the early days of the transatlantic slave trade, seen from the point of view of 'ceux dont on ne dit jamais rien' (Simon, 2013; 'those who are never spoken of') or the Africans who lost loved ones to slavery. Told from the perspective of the Mulongo, a small clan living at some distance from the coast, for whom the world extends no further than the neighbouring Bwele tribe a day's travel across the bush, *La Saison de l'ombre* recounts the disappearance of ten Mulongo boys and two adult men after a raid on the village, and the subsequent search to recover them that takes the mother of one of the lost boys as far as the hitherto unknown ocean. The mystery of the boys' disappearance

viewed of the late 1930s; his poetry collection *Paroles* (1946) entered the bestseller charts, many of the poems also being adapted to become famous and much-loved songs. For Françoise Sagan, see Chapter 5.

sets off journeys beyond the Mulongo's known world, and leads at last to the discovery of their fate, sold to slavers and now either transported or, in the case of those who resisted, dead. But the event also triggers a questioning of the clan's structures of power and authority, including the ways in which these are gendered. Although the clan's mythology makes its founder a queen, Emene, the chief and elders are now always and only men, with only the oldest women – 'Celles qui ne voient plus leur sang depuis de longues lunes' (11; 'Those who have ceased to bleed many moons ago') – considered to be in any way 'les égales de l'homme' ('men's equals'). When the boys disappear, this is assumed to be in some mysterious way the fault of the mothers, and the ten women are isolated in a single hut to mourn together at a safe distance from the community. But the narrative foregrounds the perspective of women, from the midwife and female elder Ebeise, more alert to the signs of historical change than the 'bande de vieux filous' (48; 'bunch of old scoundrels') who govern the clan, to Eyabe, the mother who defies the clan's laws, supported by Ebeise, and sets out across unknown territory to seek her son.

The reader enters the fictional world not through a single subjectivity, as in *Les Déferlantes*, but through a varied system of focalisation that sustains the sense of a world whose parameters are very different from our own. Apart from Ebeise and Eyabe, the novel's perspectives are mainly those of the Mulongo's chief, the wise and courageous Mukano who also takes the road to seek the lost boys, and his wily, dissolute brother Mutango, whose capture and torture by the clan's enemies, in league with the slavers, will lead to his moral regeneration. Different as these protagonists are in values and emotions, they share a vision of reality that fuses the material and the spiritual, so that it is in dreams that Eyabe hears the voice of her son, Mukate, and learns that he has been taken to the coast, a place for which the Mutongo language has no words: 'Mère, il n'y a que de l'eau. Le chemin du retour est effacé, il n'y a plus que de l'eau' (68; 'Mother, there is nothing but water. The road back home has disappeared, there is only water'). She has no need of maps or stars but is led by love for her son to find the kidnapped boys, and those who are already dead (including Mukate) return to life in the ghostly form of the orphaned child Bana, who accompanies Eyabe on a part of her search then vanishes again when her quest reaches its conclusion. The integration of the supernatural into the natural, the absence of any sense of a larger map of Africa or the world – these are elements that carry readers out of their familiar sense of reality; love and loyalty, friendship, the obstinate quest to find a missing child connect

more directly with a contemporary sensibility. In a way that bears some comparison with *Les Déferlantes*, the bleakness of a story that opens on to loss, destruction and bereavement, in this case on a massive historical scale, is offset by imagery of hope, human resourcefulness and renewal.<sup>22</sup> The clan's women accede to a stronger sense of their own agency as the story proceeds. On the road to the coast, Eyabe (if there is a heroine it is she) is given refuge by the Bebayedi, a heterogeneous community of runaways and refugees from the slavers, its members coming from many different and hitherto separate tribes and cultures. This new community is in the process of creating a new culture and form of social organisation out of the ruins and traces of what has been lost:

Bebayedi est une g n se. Ceux qui sont ici ont des anc tres multiples, des langues diff rentes. Pourtant, ils ne font qu'un. Ils ont fui la fureur, le fracas. Ils ont jailli du chaos, refus  de se laisser entra ner dans une existence dont ils ne ma trisaient pas le sens, happer par une mort dont ils ne connaissaient ni les modalit s, ni la finalit . Ce faisant, sans en avoir pr cis ment con u le dessein, ils ont fait advenir un monde. (131)

(Bebayedi is the birth of something new. Those gathered here have different ancestors and different languages. Yet they form a single unit. They have fled all the anger and turmoil. They have emerged from chaos, refusing to let themselves be dragged into a life whose meaning they did not understand, or swallowed up by a death whose terms and final purpose they did not recognise. In doing so, without exactly intending this, they have brought a new world into being)

As the Mulongo clan disappear from history after a further raid on the village sees the remaining inhabitants massacred, their culture will be integrated into this composite new tribe, and also into the world of the slaves carried across the ocean:

L  o  il ont  t  emmen s, ils font comme nous. M me   voix basse, ils parlent notre langue. Lorsqu'ils ne peuvent pas la parler elle demeure le v hicule de leur pens e, le rythme de leurs  motions. (227)

22 Suzanne Clark's description of Alice Walker's prize-winning *The Color Purple* (Pulitzer and National Book Award for Fiction, 1983), also condemned by some critics as irredeemably middlebrow, could apply in some respects to *La Saison de l'Ombre*. Clark writes of an 'overlapping of freedom and domesticity' that 'generates a rereading of desire [to] include erotic love, but also maternal and spiritual love and community' (1991, 184). Walker's happy ending, she points out, contributed to the novel's dismissal as 'sentimental' for 'it violates the irony usually required of modernist narratives' (182).

(In the place to which they have been taken, they do as we do. Even if softly, they speak our language. Even when they cannot speak it, it remains the vehicle of their thought, and the rhythm of their emotions)

*La Saison de l'Ombre* employs the classic narrative dynamic of the quest to tell a story of maternal love and tenacity, and of the dissolution and rebirth of a microcosmic human community. It illuminates a rarely told aspect of history, that of the peoples whose worlds were torn apart by the arrival of the early slavers. It is a violent, sometimes painful text to read, but through Ebeise and Eyabe's discovery of their own strengths, and through the affirmation of the human power to adapt and create the new from the ashes of the old, it shares the redemptive quality of Gallay's text – now mapped onto a global historical canvas.

### Conclusion

Middlebrowness, we have seen, is not simply a set of textual qualities but is also a matter of 'audience and accessibility' (Roberts, 2011, 121). Literary prizes thus play an important part in the construction of a shifting, mutable middlebrow canon of literary fiction, for they designate certain novels 'good' and 'interesting', and thus suggest that a non-professional reader in tune with their times might find pleasure and instruction in reading them. Prizes nudge or mentor readers to try the winning texts, even where these might appear too difficult (avant-garde or intellectually weighty) to give pleasure.

Where 'difficult' prize-winners do reach and touch a chord with a 'general' audience, this is often because this less specialised readership is open to dimensions of the text ignored or considered irrelevant by academic and professional critics: the page-turning quality of a plot, the arousal of empathetic emotion, the affirmative worldview that can emerge from even the saddest or most harrowing story. It is these qualities – implicitly gendered feminine – that make for a broadening of audience and commercial success, but at the same time they threaten the prize-winner's high cultural status, so that many laureates (more men than women) who self-identify as avant-garde and above the market are as dismayed as they are delighted by their award and its attendant promotion of their text as a potential 'good read'.

The cultural legitimacy bestowed by a prize is even more compromised in the case of the women's awards (in France the Femina and *Elle* prizes), given the close association between 'middlebrow' and 'feminine'.



However, these annual prizes play a role that goes beyond the purely commercial. Given that women writers still form only a small minority of national award-winners, the more gender-balanced record of the female juries goes some way to rectifying the under-representation of women's writing on the national scene. Judged by female juries, they reward and draw attention in roughly equal measure to male- and female-authored works, increasing the public presence of novels that represent women's experience and perspectives. The prizewinning novels discussed here might each be said to display in their different ways what Suzanne Clark, in her study of modernism's powerful discrediting of sentiment, calls 'maternal irony': 'the irony which undermines the heroic', 'the reproductive irony that ordinary death but also ordinary life simply keeps going on: the domestic, the minimal, the maternal, the sentimental' (1991, 190).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Realism, Romance and Self-reflexivity

## Twenty-first-century Middlebrow

What do women read in twenty-first-century France? If reading has declined in the face of competition from an increasing number of alternative media (Donnat, 2011, 2), it still remains a widely shared leisure activity: a 2014 national survey by the Centre National du Livre showed that 70 per cent of the French population reads at least one book per year, a figure unchanged since 1973 (Donnat, 2011, 3), and that 26 per cent of the French population reads more than 20 books per year, a 9 per cent rise in this category since 2008 (Donnat, 2008, 6). Sixty-one per cent of these ‘big readers’ (‘gros lecteurs’) are women. Women read more than men, and they show a much stronger taste for literary fiction: although detective novels figured in the top five book categories for both sexes, it was only on the women’s list that ‘contemporary novels’ appeared as a preferred genre. Women said that they read primarily for leisure and relaxation, as well as ‘to discover other worlds and points of view’: this suggests fiction, whereas a majority of the men surveyed named ‘extension of knowledge’ as their primary motivation for reading. Women, according to a 2010 survey (‘Qui lit quoi?’, 2010), make up over two-thirds of France’s fiction-reading public.

Of course women’s reading tastes are not limited by the author’s nationality or sex. France is one of Europe’s leading publishers of translations and among these almost 60 per cent are literary (Literature across Frontiers, 2010); any list of bestsellers confirms that the French reading public happily accepts novels in translation. Women read male authors, as their strong taste for *policiers* confirms: the detective novel remains a largely male-authored genre despite its many female stars from Agatha Christie to France’s Fred Vargas. It nonetheless remains true that women read women, and the substantial number of women authors in

contemporary France who combine serious, topical themes with accessibly pleasurable narrative – and thus qualify as middlebrow – is testimony to this, many of these attracting warm appreciation from women readers (in blogs, online discussion boards, at book-signing events) and, in equal measure, indifference, suspicion or condescension from critics. For despite all the progress made on gender equality, including the inscription of gender parity in the law of the land,<sup>1</sup> there is a continuing disparity between the feminised reading public and the intermediaries who judge, promote and publicise literature, as the previous chapter on literary prizes shows. Glaring proof of this embarrassed the left-leaning weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* in December 2012, when their list of 12 ‘must-read’ French novels of the year contained not a single book by a woman author. Their *mea culpa* article responding to complaints from (women) readers also acknowledged the discrepancy between the books they and the rest of the press review (26 out of the 30 most reviewed in 2012 were written by men) and the interests of readers themselves: online reviews by ‘ordinary’ readers showed virtual parity between books by men and by women (Caviglioli, 2012).

Fiction written and largely read by women continues to be identified with sentimentality, facility, reading for therapeutic rather than properly aesthetic and philosophical purposes, so that for the serious-minded critics of the ‘quality’ media, like their academic counterparts, much female-oriented literature simply fails to fit with the criteria for greatness. Thus Anna Gavalda, author of some of the bestselling novels of the early 2000s, is asked by authoritative TV journalist Patrick Poivre d’Arvor (a household name as ‘PPDA’) if her work functions essentially as ‘blotting paper’ for the emotions of her women readers (Gavalda, 2008); elsewhere she is accused of moral blandness, predictability and a sentimental emphasis on happiness (Lançon, 2004; Martin, 2004). The legions of young women who enjoy reading Amélie Nothomb (a consistent favourite of readers since her first novel in 1992) are repeatedly referred to (as are Gavalda’s readers) as her ‘fans’ (Lee, 2010, 66–67); that is, as emotionally committed, potentially hysterical, the very opposite of that ‘critical, judicious, and masculine’ reader that Rita Felski defines as

1 In 2000 a law designed to promote parity of political representation was passed in France, with supplementary measures added in the following years. In terms of members of the *Assemblée nationale*, this has had limited success (over 75 per cent of *députés* were still men in 2015) but state commitment to the principle is significant.

the ideal recipient of the authentically literary text from modernism on (2003, 33).<sup>2</sup> Nothomb, in fact a highly versatile and formally complex novelist, also stands accused of producing ‘romans de gare en série’ or formulaic romance fiction (Landrot, 2011).

Does it matter if critics patronise and marginalise women writers, since readers seem to simply ignore them and, thanks to new media, now have the public forums in which to express alternative views? The problem is that critical silence or opprobrium makes it particularly difficult for a woman author to aspire to *both* literary recognition *and* a wide readership, which is surely a legitimate goal for any writer. If blogs and reading groups – both ‘live’ and online – have spread to France, there has been no equivalent there of the Oprah Winfrey (USA) or Richard and Judy (UK) phenomena, televised book shows that provided ‘warm, reader-oriented public spaces’ (Driscoll, 2014, 62) for literary discussion. Both of these programmes, and their media offshoots, assert the value of the sort of plot- and character-driven page-turners derided by professional critics, but also propose more demanding texts as available for middlebrow reading (Winfrey, for example, selected Steinbeck’s classic *East of Eden*, while Richard and Judy presented A.S. Byatt’s complex historical novel *The Children’s Room* as well as Cormac McCarthy’s bleakly dystopian *The Road*).<sup>3</sup> Both programmes redefine and democratise the concept of literary value by proposing a canon for their times that is essentially middlebrow, in that its criteria are those of pleasurable, immersive reading and engagement with social and moral issues. In France, the closest equivalent is *La Grande Librairie* (The Big Bookshop), a 90-minute, prime-time book programme – successor to Bernard Pivot’s long-running *Apostrophes* – that began in 2008. Decidedly more ‘highbrow’ than Oprah or Richard and Judy, *La Grande Librairie* nonetheless addresses a broad reading public, features a wide variety of authors and popularises contemporary literature very effectively – extending its presence on the national scene with stands at Paris’s annual Salon du livre, and features (including ‘books to take on holiday’) filmed in provincial bookshops. The programme’s success

2 See above, Chapter 1.

3 Richard and Judy’s list of 100 great ‘books of the decade’ (2011) contains three French novels: Muriel Barbery’s *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, Delphine de Vigan’s *No et moi* and Irène Némirovsky’s *Suite française*. These can all be described as middlebrow in terms of the criteria I propose here.

suggests some recent opening up in France of that narrow, inhospitable middle ground where elite and popular fiction overlap.

So far in the twenty-first century there is no Colette, no Némirovsky or Sagan who may be said to dominate the female middlebrow market. Rather, there is a constellation of authors, some with a single bestseller and others with a repeated pattern of success, who occupy the conflicted territory between acknowledged literary value and popular acclaim. Their novels largely deploy realist narrative techniques to create three-dimensional imaginary worlds in which the reader travels driven by desire to know what happens next, and by empathetic curiosity about characters and their fates. More 'literary' or highbrow contemporary French fiction favours less immersive reading, where the reader is disoriented (albeit often rewardingly) by a text that oscillates between realism and the fantastic (Marie NDiaye, Marie Darrieussecq), or between fiction and autobiography (Camille Laurent, Christine Angot, Catherine Millet, Nina Bouraoui), and the very form of the text is sufficiently unexpected, shocking or linguistically complex to demand attention and impede an immersive reading. Fully popular fiction, on the other hand (for example Harlequin romance, Marc Levy, Guillaume Musso, Katherine Pancol) shares the immersivity of the middlebrow, but does not pretend to a realist rendering of the readers' world, opting unashamedly for a stylised, idealised representation of what are nonetheless real desires and fears. Middlebrow novels satisfy a human – it would seem particularly feminine – desire for stories, and at the same time a thirst for knowledge and self-development. To capture the contemporary female middlebrow both in its continuity with the past and its specificity, I propose to consider a small, exemplary and diverse corpus of twenty-first-century novels, connected by very high sales and (online reviews suggest) a warm reception from a mainly female public, and by their blending of thematic heft with pleasurable page-turning immersivity. The central corpus (for brief reference will be made to other novels) covers the middlebrow spectrum from its borderline with the popular to the point where the middlebrow/'literary' divide blurs: starting from the 'popular' end, the novels are Anna Gavalda's *Ensemble c'est tout* (2004), Tatiana de Rosnay's *Elle s'appelait Sarah* (2006), Muriel Barbery's *L'Élégance du hérisson* (2006), Catherine Cusset's *Amours transversales* (2004) and *Un brillant avenir* (2008), Amélie Nothomb's *Barbe-bleue* (2012) and Nancy Huston's literary bestseller *Lignes de faille* (2006). I begin with what might be designated the ur-text of contemporary middlebrow: Anna Gavalda's massive 2004 bestseller *Ensemble c'est tout*.

Anna Gavalda and *Ensemble c'est tout* (2004)

In the final story of Anna Gavalda's first published book, the story collection *Je voudrais que quelqu'un m'attende quelque part* (*I Wish Someone Were Waiting for Me Somewhere*, 1999), a thirty-something aspiring author manages to submit her completed manuscript to a respected publisher, despite the obstacles of lack of time (she is a working mother), the mockery of husband and friends, and her own severe lack of self-belief. She dreams of a future as a fêted writer, fantasising about book fairs and book-signings, international tours and adoring readers, working on a public image that will be suitably sombre and imposing ('elle a son statut d'artiste maudit à travailler' [144; 'she has to work on her "artiste maudit" image']) – but her hopes are finally dashed when her short-story volume is rejected. Funny and self-reflexive, the story playfully acknowledges the difficulty of being taken seriously as a woman author located in the domestic and the 'ordinary' ('what are your stories about?' asks the assistant at the printers. 'All sorts of things', she replies, 'but mostly love', 144), and acknowledges with unusual honesty the appeal of fame, fortune and a large responsive readership. It proved prophetic: five years later, after the substantial but unexceptional success of *Je voudrais* and the first novel that followed it (*Je l'aimais*, 2003), Gavalda hit the top of the bestseller charts with *Ensemble c'est tout* (2004). A film adaptation featuring 'face of the moment' stars Audrey Tautou and Guillaume Canet followed in 2007, sustaining the novel's popularity throughout the decade.

Though it belongs at the popular end of the category, *Ensemble* is a quintessentially middlebrow novel. It is substantial in size, providing what Janice Radway, writing of the middlebrow preference for long novels, calls 'a sense that the world is an enormously rich, multi-layered and complicated place' (1997, 314). It is romantic, the attraction between two central characters forming a crucial narrative thread, and optimistic, with a narrative arc that leads through pain, poverty, loneliness and misunderstandings to conclude in happy resolution. But it is also realist, in the sense that the story deals with social issues that are very much of their time: the problems of housing and unemployment for young singles alone in the city, what to do with an ageing population, how to live with others as the traditional family starts to disintegrate. Beyond these – by now familiar – attributes of middlebrowness, *Ensemble c'est tout* contains a dimension particularly marked in twenty-first-century middlebrow: a self-reflexive irony about the cultural hierarchy and its own intermediate space within it.

Short chapters, the text generously spaced, introduce the four main protagonists: three young, one old. Camille is an artist, supporting herself in Paris by underpaid work as an office cleaner, excessively thin because loneliness and depression suppress her appetite. Philibert is the scion of an impoverished aristocratic family, an eccentric but erudite and warm-hearted throwback to a pre-republican age, all at sea in modern life. Franck is a trainee chef and a biker, brusque and surly because always exhausted as he tries to combine long working hours with caring for a beloved grandmother, Paulette, who lives many hours from Paris and whose health is declining. These four gradually come to form a household, a sort of surrogate family in a world where the biological family is shown to be largely dysfunctional. Their cohabitation includes the inevitable misunderstandings, quarrels and material problems, but fulfils the basic needs of each for warmth, shelter, food (Franck's cooking, however ungraciously presented, restores Camille's appetite and health), friendship and in Paulette's case escape from the awful alternative of a regimented old people's home (ironically called, after Proust, *Le Temps Retrouvé*). The plot follows their separate trajectories – Camille's strained relationship with her mother, warm solidarity with her workmates and rediscovery of her artistic talent, Franck's apparently unrequited love for Camille and growing skill as a chef, Philibert's search for a place to belong in an alien world, Paulette's brave but failed attempts to remain independent – and weaves these together to the satisfying conclusion, albeit tinged with sadness, of Paulette's peaceful death surrounded by love, and the collaborative opening of a restaurant by the other three. The dénouement combines that most traditional of French forms of well-being, good cuisine, with twenty-first-century entrepreneurship and a celebration of love, intergenerational legacy (Paulette's is both material and emotional) and friendship.

If readers consistently praise the plausibility and engaging quality of the protagonists – and reviews on Babelio, France's largest online book club, are almost unanimous on this – this is partly due to Gavalda's skilful plotting (we want to know what happens to them) and partly to narrative techniques that both bring the characters to life and inspire empathy. Dialogue is used extensively since much of the action is concerned with developing relationships, and verbal style is an important element of characterisation (Philibert's quaintly formal, Franck's slangy and scatological). Free indirect style merges the narrator's voice with her characters' own tone and register: 'Un baratin pour la forme et elle

serait dehors' (17; 'A bit of bullshitting to the doctor and she'd soon be out again') thinks the anorexically thin Camille as she undergoes a health check-up at work. The sense of complicity between narrator and protagonists, into which the reader is invited, also takes the form of dialogue: 'Eh ben alors?' says the narrator to the lovelorn Franck in *Ensemble*, 'Qu'est-ce qui ne va pas, mon grand?' 'Euh ... je commence par où?' (255; 'What then? What's the matter, big guy?', 'Euh ... where shall I start?'). The reader's empathy, as Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel* suggests may occur (2007, 82), attaches not only to individual characters but also more broadly to the narrator, whose warm, upbeat but often ironic worldview informs the story as a whole. Empathy with a compassionate but discerning attitude to life, validated by the novel's upbeat resolution, is pleasurable, all the more so because the social reality depicted closely connects the textual to the extra-textual world.

For the France of *Ensemble* is the France (at least French) readers know: its implicit critique of low pay, the threat of homelessness, inadequate or soulless provision for the old, and its posing of the question of how to live together beyond a family model that no longer fits – all of this resonates with the real France of the new millennium. Moreover, woven into the engaging story of the four protagonists are many of the themes central to the more 'literary' female-authored fiction of recent years: negotiating the family, mothers and daughters, the body and sexuality, gender roles. Camille struggles with anorexia, and to overcome memories of an earlier abusive relationship and respond actively to Franck's expressed desire. In her recognition of the beauty in Paulette's ageing body – her paintings of Paulette, including nudes, are instrumental in reviving Camille's sense of herself as an artist – there is also a contestation of the dominant view of women's post-menopausal bodies as aesthetically uninteresting because outside the norms of sexual attractiveness. Like the middlebrow bestsellers of earlier periods, *Ensemble* represents its society mainly, but not exclusively, from a female perspective, and adopts a tacitly feminist stance. Its solutions are certainly personal and moral rather than political – the novel scarcely engages with the economic structures and ideologies that underlie social inequality – and the depiction of French society is largely restricted to the white population, with only Camille's friend and workmate Mamadou evoking the presence of France's large ethnic minorities. But there is no claim here to present a complete twenty-first-century 'comédie humaine', nor to embrace any overtly political agenda. The overall logic of the novel is that the precariousness and isolation of



contemporary life can be managed and remedied through generosity, cross-generational cooperation, imagination and creativity, and identification with the text's optimistic philosophy constitutes one of its chief pleasures, as readers abundantly confirm on Babelio: 'un livre qui vous réconcilie avec la vie' ('a book that reconciles you to life'); 'un livre qui vous donne de l'espoir' ('a book that gives you hope').

Readers' reviews also register the divide between their enthusiasm and the derogatory judgements of most professional critics. as one contributor (pen name GribouilleLechat) put it:

Quand je pense que j'ai failli ne pas l'acheter car j'avais lu quelque part que c'était dégoulinant de bons sentiments, mièvre et tout et tout ... Comme quoi, il ne faut pas se fier aux critiques et toujours se forger sa propre opinion.

(When I think that I almost didn't buy it because I'd read somewhere that it was soppy, full of drippy sentimentality and all that ... The lesson is don't trust the critics and just make up your own mind)

And as the prescient story of the would-be author showed, Gavalda's fiction itself alludes self-reflexively to the hierarchical view of culture that condemns texts such as hers to the inglorious rank of the female popular. In *Ensemble*, she uses the opposed class backgrounds and cultural tastes of her two lovers (Camille and Franck) to comment on the high-low divide. Camille, more educated and from a more affluent background than Franck, has a taste for 'high' culture (Vivaldi, nineteenth-century painting, a wide range of literature) whereas Franck's cultural life stops at popular music, and his view of elite culture is mockingly hostile: 'Oh! les petits oiseaux et les jolis papillons [...] Oh! non! ne redescendez pas, ça pue trop en bas!' (260; 'Oh! look at the little birds and the pretty butterflies! [...] No, don't come back down to earth, it stinks down here!'). Camille – and the novel is clearly with her – refutes the stratified model of culture both through her actions, not least that of falling in love with Franck, and through eloquent argument. Using the slangy, elliptical style of everyday speech, she explains to Franck why her passion for Vivaldi's *Nisi Dominus* is entirely compatible with her love of Marvin Gaye's *Sexual Healing* album (one of Franck's favourites), and refutes his reduction of 'intello' tastes to mere snobbery by casting them as a form of the commonly shared desire to 's'instruire, être curieux, attentif, admirer, s'émouvoir, essayer de comprendre comment tout ça tient debout et tenter de se coucher un peu moins con que la veille' (260; 'learn, to be curious, to pay attention, to admire, be moved, try to

understand how it all hangs together and to go to bed a bit less stupid than you were yesterday'). Franck's own knowledge and practice of great cuisine, she insists, are another form of response to this human impulse to understand, create and share. The novel in fact articulates a middlebrow philosophy: humanist, reverential towards 'high' art but contesting the denigration of majority culture, defending a view of art as whatever forms of culture, in Todorov's words, 'make us understand the world better and help us to live' (2007, 72).

### Narrative arcs

The optimism of *Ensemble c'est tout* arises from its redemptive structure – a virtual journey through cold, hunger, loneliness and insecurity to warmth (both literal and metaphorical), plenty, friendship and love – and from its communication of a belief that individual moral goodness can make life better. The world out there is harsh but not intractable, we can also own and modify at least our corner of it for ourselves and others: through virtual experience, fiction becomes Winnicott's transitional space of an external reality that is solidly, sometimes painfully *there* but over which we have some inner control.<sup>4</sup> As we have seen, for the fictional illusion to work and set off that pleasurable entrancement that makes readers want to read and reread, there must also be a dose of Kermode's 'chaotic, viscosly contingent reality' (1967, 145) – to which we will return – but the middlebrow successes of the new millennium largely share *Ensemble's* optimistic narrative arc. Hugely varied in their narrative techniques, they feature the recurring structure of the quest rewarded, the destination reached, love in some way fulfilled.

Tatiana de Rosnay's *Elle s'appelait Sarah* (*Sarah's Key*, 2007) is an eminently middlebrow bestseller in the sense that it deals seriously with the traumatic experience of the Holocaust but through a page-turning, satisfying narrative that was also (like so many middlebrow texts) adapted successfully for cinema (Paquet-Brenner, 2010). Its dual narrative structure alternates between the story of a ten-year-old French Jewish girl, Sarah Starzynski, arrested with her parents in 1942 and sent to the now notorious Vélodrome d'Hiver (Vél d'Hiv) whence most French Jews were taken to extermination camps, and the contemporary (2002) story of Julia Jarmond, an American journalist married to a

4 See Chapter 1, pp. 27–29.

French man and living in Paris, whose assignment to report on the fiftieth anniversary of the events of 1942 becomes a passionate personal quest to uncover the truth of French complicity in the Holocaust. The plotlines are connected by the discovery that after the 1942 raids, the Starzynski's apartment passed to Julia's family-in-law, who still own it; furthermore, in the urgent moments before the police took them, Sarah had hidden her four-year-old brother in the secret cupboard in the wall of their bedroom – returning briefly months later, after her escape, she discovers that the little boy was never found and died there alone. Julia's quest thus becomes personal and she seeks to discover Sarah's fate; Sarah's story can clearly not end happily, and indeed it transpires that though she escaped the French camp and went on to marry and have a child in the USA, she killed herself in 1966. However Julia's quest for truth is fulfilled, and the personal story of her unhappy marriage and late pregnancy (in her forties) not only ends happily with the birth of a daughter but also suggests a sort of symbolic redemption: she names the new baby Sarah. I will return to the relationship between the two plotlines – but *Sarah* despite its harrowing subject confirms the pattern of an optimistic narrative arc.

So too does philosophy lecturer Muriel Barbery's surprise bestseller<sup>5</sup> of 2006, *L'Élegance du hérisson* (*The Elegance of the Hedgehog*), a novel that combines the 'high' of its narrators' reflexions on philosophy, aesthetics and the finer points of French grammar with the 'low' of romance, humour and narrative resolution. *Hérisson* is another double-stranded narrative. It is composed of the alternating diary entries of its two heroines, both resident in an upmarket apartment block in central Paris, both concealing intellectual brilliance and a fiercely critical view of their fellow inhabitants beneath a camouflage of 'normality'. Renée is the building's middle-aged caretaker, whose prickly performance of the stereotypical *concierge* (gruff and plebeian) masks a fine, self-taught brain and a discerning set of aesthetic tastes. Twelve-year-old Paloma, the second narrator, masquerades as the 'normal' daughter of her affluent bourgeois family to conceal a critical intellect well in advance of her years; her disgust at the shallow, predictable lives of her parents and

5 The novel rapidly sold a million, remained for 102 weeks on the bestseller lists, won several national and regional prizes, and was adapted for the screen in 2009 as *Le Hérisson*, directed by Mona Achache and starring Josiane Balsako as Renée. The novel also had considerable success in the UK and was serialised in the BBC's *Woman's Hour*/early evening drama slot.

their kind is such that she plans to kill herself on the eve of her thirteenth birthday. The two ‘hedgehogs’ recognise each other as kindred spirits and become friends. Since their voices form the narrative, the reader is positioned with Renée and Paloma against the majority of their fellow residents, who are shown to be snobbish, materialistic and – despite their pretensions to cultural distinction – profoundly philistine.

The plot is set in motion by the death of one of the flats’ owners and its purchase by the Japanese Monsieur Ozu. Japan figures here as the contrasting ‘other’ of contemporary French culture, for it is credited with a refined, minimalist aesthetic, a discretion and sense of proportion that are ‘éternel et divin’ as opposed to ‘vieux et prétentieux’ (98; ‘old and pretentious’). Ozu (who shares the name of Renée’s favourite film director) immediately sees through Renée’s camouflage and delicately draws her out through invitations to indulge their shared enjoyment of music, film and the discussion of ideas. Seduced by an aesthetic that permeates M. Ozu’s tastes, behaviour and speech, Renée seems set to emerge from her hedgehog spikes and accept a friendship that has strong overtones of romance. Even though the anticipated dénouement is deflected by the surprise of Renée’s sudden death, the narrative arc remains optimistic: her repressed intelligence and sincere passion for beauty have been recognised and rewarded, and Paloma lives on, convinced by the friendship she has enjoyed with Renée and M. Ozu that life contains some ‘toujours dans le jamais’ (‘always among the nevers’), and that there is (in the novel’s closing words) some ‘beauté dans le monde’ (356; ‘beauty in the world’). The social inequality that has limited Renée’s life chances remains firmly in place, but the novel pits authentic intelligence and sensitivity against the veneer of culture provided by class-based affluence, and has the former triumph.

The same buoyant trajectory shapes most serious but popular fiction, as two further, very different, examples will show. Catherine Cusset’s historically realist bestseller *Un brillant avenir* (*A Brilliant Future*, 2008, winner of the Prix Goncourt des lycéens), follows the life course of its Romanian heroine Elena through girlhood, marriage, motherhood and professional success into old age, moving with her across continents and the history of the mid-twentieth century, from life under the Soviet bloc to contemporary America and France. It concludes with the loss and sadness of widowhood, but these are redeemed by the warm relationship the heroine has developed with an initially resented daughter-in-law and, above all, by her small, beloved granddaughter, who illuminates Elena’s old age and represents life’s cyclical renewal.

Although Amélie Nothomb's fiction diverges considerably from the middlebrow aesthetic that characterises most of my contemporary corpus, her novels too provide the vicarious experience of resolution, of personal agency affirmed, or sense made of a (in Nothomb's case, ludically) complex world. Nothomb occupies the middle ground of the French literary scene because her self-reflexive, stylised, generically diverse (from sci-fi to fantasy to auto-fiction) novels, published at the rate of at least one per year, display distinct elements of the 'high' avant-garde, but her very prolificity and immense popularity with a loyal female readership situates her among the popular, with all the critical suspicion that this brings.<sup>6</sup>

The reasons for Nothomb's success with readers are many, and will be returned to below, but the satisfying shape of her narratives is certainly one relevant factor. *Barbe-bleue* (2012), for example, retells the story of the wife-murdering Bluebeard, setting it in contemporary Paris and pitting an unsentimental, tough-minded heroine, aptly named Saturnine Puissant (Saturnine Powerful), against Don Elemirio, the Bluebeard figure. Saturnine, desperate to find housing in the city, accepts a tenancy in Don Elemirio's magnificent residence, despite the fact that all his previous female tenants have mysteriously disappeared. The novel ends with Saturnine's victory: with neat poetic justice, she locks the murderer in the dark, freezing room that houses portraits of all his murdered 'wives', then quaffs champagne and (for Nothomb is not averse to a touch of magic realism) 'turns into gold'.

The victory of good over bad, life over death is thus a consistent feature of the successful middlebrow, and it is this satisfyingly upbeat narrative arc that attracts the scorn of most professional critics. Philippe Lançon in *Libération* (2007), for example, mocks *Hérisson's* too-comfortable positioning of the reader with the good 'little people' against a snobbish world, seeing in the former's predictable triumph a 'glazing of Anna Gavalda'. Many readers though – like GribouilleLechat, quoted above – object to the assumption that an optimistic ending is synonymous with 'drippy sentimentality': several, for instance, see in *Hérisson* not triteness and complacency but humanity and elegance. Rather than being morally facile, these novels could be said to affirm individual (and female) moral agency, and the possibility of making sense of existence in the face of a world experienced as harsh and incoherent. In Baroni's

6 For Nothomb's literary stardom and its place in her reception as a 'serious' writer, see Holmes (2016).

abstract but useful formulation, narrative fiction can work to ‘créer un espace à l’intérieur duquel l’indétermination du futur et du monde s’inscrit dans l’harmonie et l’intelligibilité d’un discours’ (2007, 406; ‘create a space within which the unpredictability of the future and of the world itself is set within the harmony and intelligibility of discourse’).

### Realism: across time and space

From the Belle Époque on, middlebrow women’s fiction has made pleasurable reading out of the real circumstances and social and moral concerns of its readers’ lives. If the overall narrative arc is generally a hopeful one, the most successful of middlebrow novels also accommodate that ‘lingua franca of reality’ which, Frank Kermode argues, must be present if fiction is to achieve the ‘basic human task of imaginative self-invention’ (1967, 146).<sup>7</sup> These are novels of manners that chart, explore and critique the social mores of their day, but often they are also, however unostentatiously, ‘state of the nation’ or even ‘state of the world’ novels that register, more or less critically, the historical and political contexts that shape contemporary existence.

Fiction allows us to travel in time, and if contemporary novels favour stories set in their own era, they also return to the past, and particularly to those periods that retain a strong imaginative hold on the present. In France, the years of the Nazi Occupation (1940–44) are still acutely present three-quarters of a century on, in the form of street names, monuments, long-standing family scissions, linguistic and symbolic echoes of national traumas<sup>8</sup> – and fictional recreations. *Ensemble* is an intensely contemporary novel, but Paulette’s status as the source of a positive legacy – at once emotional, as the only source of love in Franck’s childhood, and practical, as his initiator into the art of good cooking and as Camille’s artistic inspiration – is significantly reinforced by the discovery after her death of the small but heroic role she played just

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the far-right National Front party was led until 2011 by its founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose popularity with some voters and abhorrence of others rested in part on his denial of the Holocaust and sympathetic stance towards the collaborationist Vichy regime. Marine Le Pen, who succeeded her father as leader, was taken to court in 2010 for a speech in which she termed Muslims’ use of public spaces for collective prayers an ‘occupation’: the word is still highly evocative and emotionally powerful.

after the Liberation. In the immediate post-Occupation era, the settling of scores with those who had collaborated with the Germans included the ugly, humiliating practice of shaving the heads of women accused of relationships with occupying soldiers. Paulette, out of solidarity with a *tondue* (shaven) friend no longer able to face the world, had her own head shaved and a smiling photo taken of the two of them. ‘C’était quelqu’un ma mémé, hein?’ (552; ‘She was quite something, my granny, wasn’t she?’) says Franck, through his tears. More than half a century on, the Occupation years remain a touchstone of national morality and figure extensively in popular and middlebrow culture, from Sagan’s Occupation novels discussed in Chapter 5 to Régine Deforges’s bestselling multivolume saga *La Bicyclette bleue* (1981–2007, also adapted for French television in 2000), to the success of Némirovsky’s posthumously discovered *Suite française* (2004), to Jonathan Littell’s Goncourt-winning *Les Bienveillantes* (2006).

The Occupation period is most strikingly central to *Elle s’appelait Sarah*, a novel that exemplifies the strengths of middlebrow’s mission to inform and edify through compelling narrative, whilst also highlighting its potential weaknesses. On the positive side, the novel’s depiction of the Vichy police’s active and brutal role in the deaths of French Jews is harrowingly true to reality, and the scenes set in occupied France are acknowledged to be ‘admirable in their historical accuracy’ (Sobanet, 2013, 129). Making Julia a journalist justifies her purposeful reconstruction of the facts and thus their exposition to the reader. De Rosnay also incorporates into her story some of the more recent scholarship on the longer-term effects of traumatic experience on survivors and subsequent generations, notably through the character of Sarah’s son (whom Julia manages to trace), what has been named ‘postmemory’, or the passing on of the trauma of memory to the children of Holocaust survivors (Hirsch, 1997, 21–22). Though French (and not just German) responsibility for the deaths of French Jews has been more fully recognised in recent decades,<sup>9</sup> accessible fictions also have a role to play in setting the record straight, for fiction can make theoretical knowledge concrete, salient, emotionally interesting. As a highly successful novel (and film), *Elle s’appelait Sarah* helped to

9 In 1995 the then President Jacques Chirac officially recognised the responsibility of the French state and especially the police in the French dimension of the Holocaust (or Shoah); Shoah memorial museums were inaugurated in the Marais (historically the Jewish quarter) in 2005, and at Drancy in 2012.

generalise awareness of active French complicity in the Holocaust and its long-term effects.

At the same time, the novel reveals the dangers that attend the translation of sensitive historical topics into accessibly pleasurable narrative form. Andrew Sobanet, who praises de Rosnay's careful accuracy, also finds the book (and the film) ethically problematic. In her bid to authenticate Julia's self-appointed role as a retrospective witness to a traumatic moment of French history, and to 'mimic the urgency of testimonial [...] narratives' (Sobanet, 2013, 133), de Rosnay interweaves the struggle of a highly privileged woman to save her marriage and her pregnancy with the almost unspeakable horror of Sarah's story, implying some small redemption of the latter by Julia's discovery of its full truth, and by the birth of a new Sarah. Though the page-turning quality of the narrative certainly benefits from the meshing of Julia's personal dilemma (her French husband rejects her unexpected pregnancy so that she must choose between him and keeping the baby) with her eventful quest to uncover Sarah's fate, the discrepancy between the moral weight of the two experiences is uncomfortable, and weakens the empathetic relationship with Julia that is clearly intended. American Julia's right to bear witness and to commemorate Sarah by the naming of her own daughter can also be seen as an appropriation of the position of real second-generation 'survivors'. Because it is emotionally powerful and persuades the reader to confront the painful past, the novel does help to raise consciousness of France's historical responsibility, and of human beings' capacity to dehumanise others: compellingly accessible fiction has its part to play in processing traumatic history. The danger that *Sarah* exemplifies, though, is that of narrative efficacy overriding moral complexity: an excess of Kermode's *chairos* can deny the brutal reality of *chronos* or, to adapt his glossing of the term, of just one appalling thing after another.<sup>10</sup>

The Second World War is again a central narrative element in Nancy Huston's 1999 *L'Empreinte de l'ange* (Grand Prix des Lectrices de *Elle*), and in her equally widely read *Lignes de faille* (Prix Femina 2006), the multigenerational, continent-crossing saga of a troubled family that traces the roots of conflicted identity and failed parental/filial relationships to the Nazi policy of *lebensborn*. This policy meant the enforced removal of Aryan-looking children from their parents in occupied countries to swell the ethnically 'pure' population of the Third Reich. Divided into

10 See Chapter 1, pp. 22–23.



four sections, *Lignes de faille* is narrated by four six-year-old narrators from successive generations of the family. Kristina, the final narrator and great-grandmother to the youngest, was taken from her Ukrainian family as an infant and raised by a Hitler-respecting German family: her shocked discovery of her lost identity will determine her adult story and resonate through those of her daughter, grandson and great-grandson.

Huston's novels weave personal stories and historical fact into narratives that are both compelling and informative, demonstrating her view that, as the narrator of *L'Empreinte de l'ange* puts it, 'Nous avançons grotesquement, à cloche-cloche, écartelés: un pied dans nos petites histoires et l'autre dans l'Histoire du siècle' (196; 'We stagger awkwardly through time; one foot firmly in our own little stories and the other planted in the History of the century'). More multilayered, polyphonic and ethically nuanced than de Rosnay's novel, Huston's historical fictions largely avoid the subjection of ethical complexity to diegetic coherence, though their warm reception by 'non-professional' readers is testimony to their immersive force – 'la force de ce texte m'a emportée de pages en pages' ('the sheer power of this book carried me on from page to page') is a typical Babelio comment – and to their maintenance of hope despite the grimness of the history they address. Love and the transcendent power of imagination resist the pain of mortality and the wounding historical scale of human cruelty throughout Huston's fiction.

Catherine Cusset's *Un brillant avenir* (Prix Goncourt des lycéens, 2008), another cross-generational portrayal of the second half of the twentieth century, also extends readers' awareness of history, this time that of the Soviet era in Eastern Europe and the mingled pain and relief of voluntary exile to the West, through a woman's story that concludes on a muted note of hope for the future.

One of the great pleasures of fiction is that – in the words of another of Nancy Huston's narrators, in *Instruments des ténèbres* – it allows writer and reader to 'voler à travers non seulement le temps mais l'espace, l'espace sans fin' (12; 'fly not only through time but also through endless space'). Many of the novels that gain a wide enthusiastic readership reflect a contemporary sense of a globalised world of cross-planetary connections and permeable borders. As Chapter 6 shows, Leonora Miano's *La Saison de l'Ombre* addresses colonial legacies, gendered power and the experience of exile though a story set in seventeenth-century Central Africa. Nancy Huston's own transnational status as a writer – she is an anglophone Canadian whose career has

been made primarily in French and in France, though she also publishes most of her books in English – is evident in the geographical scope of her fiction. Catherine Cusset and Tatiana de Rosnay are both French writers who have spent long periods resident in the USA, and situate much of their narrative in American cities, the USA figuring both as a more extreme model of the technological modernity and fast-moving consumerist culture that also characterises contemporary Europe, and as France's 'other' – in *Elle s'appelait Sarah* a more liberal-minded, open and forward-looking other, since France is associated with ageing and death, and with the silence of repressed memory. Japan recurs too as a significant 'other' to France, figuring extensively in the fiction of Amélie Nothomb (who spent part of her childhood there) both as a culture of rigidly enforced hierarchies (*Stupeur et tremblements*, 1999), and as one of delightful subtlety and sensuality (for example in *Métaphysique des tubes*, 2000, and *Ni d'Eve, ni d'Adam*, 2007). *L'Élégance du hérisson*, as we have seen, echoes this use of Japanese culture to represent a life-enhancing aesthetic that is simply woven into the everyday.

In Catherine Cusset's *Amours transversales*, as in Marie NDiaye's Goncourt-winning bestseller *Trois femmes puissantes*,<sup>11</sup> the acutely contemporary issue of poverty-induced migration becomes central to plots set in countries far from France. The fourth of *Amours transversales*' linked stories concerns the strained and finally tragic encounter between Luis, an economic exile from his rural village trying to make a living in a luxury tourist hotel on the Mexican coast, and Camille, a young French woman staying in the hotel with her rich and largely absent businessman husband. Camille's mild guilt about her life of aimless luxury leads her to take a well-intentioned interest in Luis, but the story shows the dangerous chasm between their experience and hence their visions of the world, most acutely in the culminating scene of the pair's night-time tryst on the beach, where Camille's expectation of illicit but casual sex clashes with Luis's desperate hope of using 'la gringa' to improve his life chances. Alternating focalisation has the reader empathise with each of these incompatible desires, and feel the escalating tension that explodes, in a startling *dénouement*, into violence. Fiction sets immediate experience in a wider temporal and spatial context, and proposes a different kind of knowledge from that gleaned from the news media or factual sources – one gained through the vicarious, intensely imagined experience of situations and scenarios,

11 See the conclusion to this book.

or what Schaeffer terms ‘emotional and ethical constellations’ that may be ‘internalised through immersion’ (1999, 47).

### Matriarchal realism

As in earlier periods, though, it is the here and now of readers’ lives that forms the setting for the majority of mainstream fiction. In the introduction to her 1992 study of post-war women’s writing, Lorna Sage coined the concept of ‘matriarchal realism’. What women writers enjoy in representation (mimesis), she noted, is ‘precisely what Plato hates – its local, partial, illusionist tricks; everything that makes the quotidian world of passion, habit, conflict and muddle seem “real”’ (Sage, 1992, x). Sage connects this (unfashionable) attachment to mimesis to the underlying feminist politics of so much women’s fiction: representation of the ‘quotidian muddle’ is central to the ‘utopian uses women have found for fiction’ (1992, x). This holds true for twenty-first-century middlebrow: rarely explicit in their feminism, bestselling women’s novels nonetheless tackle issues of gender, love, sex, family, work and domesticity – issues that make up the fabric of most readers’ lives – in a way that validates female perspectives and desires and takes the ‘quotidian world’ seriously. Part of the pleasure of fiction read for entertainment and relaxation comes from its shaping of the complicated texture of the everyday into narrative form – for form itself provides some degree of hope and sense of agency.

Though marriage no longer figures as an inexorable female destiny, the quest for love and choice of a life partner continue to drive narratives along, and to shape protagonists’ stories. Gavalda’s Camille in *Ensemble c’est tout* has known the seductive thrill of the ‘poète maudit’ lover, the rebel genius with a tortured soul who still stalks the pages of popular romance (most recently in E. L. James’s record-breaking international bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2011), inspiring in its heroines both a passionate desire to save the wounded hero from himself and an agreeable conviction that they are singled out by his desire from the ranks of their ordinary sisters. ‘Une vraie image d’Épinal’, Camille recalls of her own Heathcliffian lover, ‘chevelu, torturé, génial, souffreteux’ (461; ‘The perfect stereotype [...], long-haired, anguished, a damaged genius’). Camille almost wrecked her own talent by becoming ‘la sœur, la muse, la grande femme derrière le grand homme’ (462; ‘his sister, his muse, the great woman behind the great man’); her resulting wariness of romance

defers the consummation of the evident mutual desire between herself and Franck, but their relationship can succeed, and contribute to the novel's happy ending, because it is shown to be equal, based both on mutual fascination with the other's difference and on friendship. The romance plot, and lightly satirical treatment of the seductive 'bad boy' (and the need to resist him) also appears in Nothomb's *Barbe-bleue*. Its heroine Saturnine is a no-nonsense, highly articulate young woman who nonetheless finds herself falling for her sinister landlord – "Je suis une idiote comme les autres" enrageait-elle' (73; "I'm just an idiot like all the others", she fumed'). Her will to save her own life and avenge the deaths of her predecessors remains intact – to acknowledge Bluebeard's magnetism is not to condone his crimes – but the love plot enhances the comic poignancy of her murder-by-freezing of the serial killer.

The thrill of reciprocal desire and curiosity, and the life chances this opens up, are imagined and explored in much widely read fiction. *Un brillant avenir* makes meeting, courtship and a long, happy marriage central to Elena's story: it is part of Elena's strength as a heroine that in order to marry the Jewish Jacob she overrides the anti-Semitism of her family and society. In *Hérisson* too, although the affinity between Renée and Kakuro Ozo is primarily intellectual and aesthetic, the basic structure of romance is observed. Monsieur Ozu erupts into Renée's life and changes its direction, immediately seeing through her 'habit de concierge semi-débile' (141; 'semi-moronic concierge disguise'), courting her with invitations to dinner and conversation, making her laugh and getting to the heart of her lifelong fear of self-revelation. In response, Renée not only sheds her hedgehog prickles in his company, but also discovers a new interest in her own appearance, trying out hairstyles, dresses and make-up like any heroine of the popular love story. The couple's last dinner together takes place in an atmosphere Renée describes as 'brillante, pétillante, racée, feutrée, cristalline. Magnifique' (335; 'brilliant, sparkling, distinguished, discreet, crystalline. Magnificent'), and concludes with Kakuro's open-ended statement that 'Nous pouvons être amis. Et même tout ce que nous voulons' (341; 'We can be friends. And anything else we wish to be'). If Renée's sudden death withholds the expected happy ending, the novel nonetheless references the familiar structure of romance, from meeting through mutual attraction and self-revelation to the possibility (realised or not) of a shared future.

That future too becomes part of many narratives. Cusset's novel follows romance far beyond its 'happily ever after' promise into old age, Jacob's dementia and death, and Elena's widowhood; De Rosnay's Julia

faces up to divorce and a return to single living in her forties; Barbery's Renée has had a long, companionate if passionless marriage before the plot of *Hérisson* begins. Heterosexual love predominates, though Nancy Huston's Erra (Kristina in her earlier life) follows a series of sexual and amorous relationships with men by a durably happy love affair with a woman, Mercedes. Same-sex desire and romance were for so long taboo topics that their matter-of-fact appearance in mainstream fictions is still relatively rare,<sup>12</sup> and lesbian love has been more extensively represented in stylistically experimental writing such as that of Anne Garréta or Nina Bouraoui, or in the radical porno-trash style of Virginie Despentes.<sup>13</sup>

If heterosexual life partnerships – with or without marriage – figure strongly in middlebrow narratives, sex is also explored beyond the context of romantic love, and women's sexual agency assumed or explicitly affirmed. When Camille and Franck finally make love, it is Camille who takes the initiative, climbing into his bed as he sleeps – 'Lestafier, je vais te violer' (475; 'Lestafier, I'm going to rape you') – and insisting that he remain completely still as she takes him inside her and reaches orgasm. Franck responds happily – 'C'était trop beau pour être vrai' (477; 'It was too good to be true'). Sexually as well as emotionally, the novel's main romance is an egalitarian one. Catherine Cusset, in particular, writes sex graphically from a woman's point of view. In the third story of *Amours transversales*, 'Numéro Quatre', Myriam finds herself alone in a Prague hotel on her fortieth birthday: she is an actress on tour, happily married to Xavier with whom she has two children, but his plan to fly from Paris to join her for a birthday celebration fails. Myriam phones Hans, an ex-lover, in Berlin and takes the train there, booking into a hotel before her rendezvous the next day, and going out to explore the city without

12 There have been occasional exceptions, such as Jocelyne François's *Joue-nous España* (Prix Femina, 1980) and Hélène de Montferrand's *Les Amies d'Héloïse* (Prix Goncourt 1990), which – not least thanks to the prizes – sold well and (we can assume) were quite widely read. In *Lesbian Desire in Post-1968 French literature* (2002), Lucille Cairns studies the extent to which her corpus offers 'the pleasures of mimetic fiction' (4) and appeals to a wide readership, but she uncovers few cases of middlebrow commercial success.

13 Known for sexually graphic, violent works such as *Baise-moi* (2000), Despentes's more recent fiction (*Apocalypse bébé*, 2010; *Vernon Subutex*, 2015–17) combines shock and violence with highly readable narrative and compelling characterisation, which has taken her onto the bestseller charts. She has won a number of literary prizes and been elected to the Académie Goncourt. Despentes may well be *en route* to middlebrow status.

any clear intention, but quietly open to chance. The story follows her through three brief sexual couplings: with a stranger encountered in the street and invited back to her room, with a young student met at the hotel breakfast table and finally with Hans. Two of these are unsatisfactory, even distasteful – Hans in the present turns out to be surly and selfish, smaller and tubbier than she remembered, when he undresses ‘Son sexe pendait entre ses cuisses, long et blanc’ (136; ‘his penis hung between his thighs, long and white’) – but the encounter with the student, urgently consummated in the moments before his taxi leaves for the airport, is positive: ‘Pas l’amour. Pas la passion. Mais quelque chose de bon et de doux’ (120; ‘Not love. Not passion. But something good, something sweet’). There is no life-changing drama, no agonizing guilt or emotional revelation. Myriam goes to sleep that night feeling mildly disgusted by the Hans episode – ‘Rien ne pouvait faire qu’elle n’ait pas été cette femme allongée sur le dos, les cuisses ouvertes, les pattes en l’air comme un gros cafard’ (139; ‘Nothing could change the fact that she had been that woman lying with her legs open, feet in the air like a giant beetle’) – and physically sore, but wakes ‘de bonne humeur, sereine’ (140; ‘in a good mood, feeling serene’) and goes to an exhibition where she sees a video installation (a real one, by the artist Pipilotti Rist) in which a woman walks down a street carrying a huge red flower with which she gracefully, joyfully smashes the windscreens of a whole row of cars; a police officer appears and seems about to arrest her but instead gives her a complicit smile and walks on – revealing a ponytail, and her identity as not a policeman but a police woman. Myriam laughs, watching the video repeatedly, delighted. Thus the story ends on a note of sexual impunity – Myriam’s adulteries have not changed her life but simply brought a gain in experience and one mutually enriching exchange – and of serene, good-humoured resistance to male power signified by the cars, those ‘jouets virils’ (141; ‘virile toys’). The law threatens but is disarmed by the two women’s smiling solidarity.<sup>14</sup>

Types of relationship, both romantic and sexual, are thus modelled, examined, rejected or celebrated. ‘Matriarchal realism’ also extends more literally to the representation of motherhood: mother-daughter relations remain a recurring theme across the ‘brows’ of women’s writing,<sup>15</sup> both in the sense of blood ties and in their broader, metaphorical form.

14 At the time of writing, the installation *Ever is Over All* could be viewed online, for example at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a56RPZ\\_cbd](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a56RPZ_cbd).

15 See for example Hirsch (1989); Giorgio (2002); Rye (2009).

Camille's fraught relationship with her own depressive, self-absorbed mother in *Ensemble c'est tout* is countered by the warmth of her friendship with Paulette, who provides a legacy of approval and quasi-maternal love. In *L'Élégance du hérisson*, Renée's role in Paloma's life – her endorsement of the girl's critical intelligence and aesthetic sensibility – could also be described as maternal. In *Un Brillant avenir*, the relationships that takes centre stage are those between mother and son (one of the title's multiple meanings is the brilliant future Elena imagines for her son, Alex) and mother and daughter-in-law. Elena struggles to like the young French woman, Marie, who she feels has usurped her place in Alex's heart, and the two women's slow, faltering achievement of a good relationship is traced through the novel with its syncopated temporal structure that shifts between different periods of Elena's life: girlhood, as a daughter herself, young adulthood and maternity, middle and old age. Nancy Huston too deals with the chain of generations, the elements of inheritance in individual identity and the maternal-filial relationship seen from both sides, as *Lignes de faille* moves from each protagonist's childhood to – in the following section – that of their parent. Erra/Kristina, for example, is first met as six-year-old Sadie's erratic, neglectful and often absent mother, the source of her daughter's suffering – 'Si seulement je pouvais me *fondre* en elle' (294; 'If only I could merge into her'), Sadie thinks – then, through her own story, she is explained and to some extent justified: Erra's own initially happy childhood was brutally stolen from her, both literally (at Germany's defeat, she is dispatched to an adoptive family in the USA) and emotionally (by the revelation of her real origins).

The changing structure of families, the extension of the family defined by kinship to more complex units determined by remarriage or simply choice, is also reflected – often positively – in contemporary narratives. Gavalda's *Ensemble* proposes a utopian solution to the solitude and the housing problems of her four protagonists in their establishment of what they call the 'famille Bras Cassés' ('the Loser family'): 'Nous quatre, ici, maintenant [...], libérés, ensemble, et que vogue la galère' (378; 'We four, here and now [...], free, together, come what may'). In de Rosnay's *Sarah*, the traditional happy ending of romance is reversed as the contemporary plotline concludes positively with Julia's divorce and cheerful setting-up of a single-parent household with her two daughters. The chain of inherited trauma in Huston's *Lignes de faille* means that nuclear families are consistently represented as painful, strained or damaging environments for the novels' six-year-old narrators, though

in Kristina/Erra's German childhood, before the truth is revealed, the possibility of emotional warmth and enabling security in the traditional family gleams briefly in the parents' and grandparents' tenderness towards the child, in the grandfather's storytelling – 'Je n'aime rien au monde autant que d'être lovée sur les genoux de mère [...] à écouter grand-père raconter une histoire à toute la famille' (377; 'There is nothing in the world I love more than being snuggled up on mother's lap [...] listening to grandfather tell a story to the whole family') – and in Kristina's delight as she swings high into the night sky and whirls on the roundabout in the snowy playground close to the family home, safe in the thrill of sanctioned danger.

In *Lignes de faille* the child's sense of freedom and joyful possibility depends on that (soon to be destroyed) sense of belonging, of a home – whatever form that may take. Though these novels display fully fiction's enchanting power to carry us through space as well as time, the central importance of Sage's 'quotidian world' is also reflected in the prevalence of domestic spaces as the emotional heart of these stories. If, at one level, the centrality of images of home confirms Bachelard's thesis in *La Poétique de l'espace* that houses in the human imagination represent 'la topographie de notre être intime [...] notre coin du monde [...] notre premier univers [...] cosmos' (1958, 24; 'the topography of our most intimate self [...] our own corner of the world [...] our first universe [...] cosmos'), it also has a particular relevance for women writers and readers. Though gender roles have certainly become less polarised, women remain responsible for the lion's share of domestic labour and nurturing (in France as elsewhere).<sup>16</sup> No wonder, then, that houses and the relationship between house (material) and home (emotional) should figure largely in the 'matriarchal realism' of women's fiction.

In *Ensemble*, the decaying, once-elegant apartment belonging to Philibert's family (and on temporary loan to Philibert) provides a spacious if shabby refuge for the 'famille Bras-Cassés', and Paulette's small, homely house and garden form part of her legacy to Franck and to the rootless Camille, who has dreamt since her (unhappy) childhood of a house 'vieillotte, discrète, silencieuse, envahie par la vigne vierge et les rosiers grimpants' (70; 'old, tucked away and silent, covered with

16 A 2015 study by the Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales confirmed that while large proportions of men never iron, cook, etc., 93 per cent of women do most of the housework and cooking – a disparity that increases with the birth of children. See Bigot, Hoibian and Daudey (2015).



climbing vines and roses'). In *Sarah*, the key space is the apartment belonging to Julia's family-in-law into which, for reasons she does not at first understand, she is reluctant to move with her husband and daughter. Her research reveals that it was from there that Sarah and her parents were taken to the Vél d'Hiv, and there that the little brother died, locked inside the wall cupboard for his safety. The apartment becomes a haunted space that figures the unlaidd ghosts of Occupation history still present beneath the elegant surface of bourgeois Paris, and connects this inability to confront painful realities with Julia's husband and her growing dissatisfaction with their marriage.

*Hérisson* takes place almost entirely within the Parisian apartment block where Renée and Paloma – and later Kakuro Ozu – live, Renée's shabby ground-floor lodge with its concealed signs of her real self (philosophy books well-hidden while the television is left permanently on) representing both her dual persona and her lowly place in the class hierarchy. *Barbe-bleue* too is located in a single domestic building. The story opens with Saturnine's homelessness and resulting first visit to Don Elemerio's Parisian *hôtel particulier*, takes place almost entirely in the kitchen where each night he cooks her dishes 'd'une perfection intimidante' (14; 'of an intimidating perfection') accompanied by champagne and declarations of love, and concludes with her final departure. Throughout, the sinister threat behind Don Elemerio's eloquent charm is signified by the locked, forbidden darkroom. And if both Cusset and Huston tell stories that cross countries and continents, their stories return again and again to the setting up of homes. Some of these are temporary and painfully abandoned: as a child, Cusset's Elena (*Un brillant avenir*) is obliged by political circumstance to move repeatedly with her family, and three of Huston's child narrators (Randall, Sadie, Erra/Kristina) are also uprooted from domestic settings that have come to mean security and warmth. Other homes are Bachelard's 'espaces heureux' (1958, 17), sites of happiness that can transcend material poverty or the unhappiness that prevails outside their walls, like Elena and Jacob's single room where they begin their life together and where at the birth of their child 'leur lit s'agrandissait pour inclure un berceau' (235; 'their bed grew to include a cradle'), or Erra and Mercedes's well-lit, colourful loft in the Bowery. It is there that Randall, the son of Erra's difficult, often absent daughter, experiences the magic of music and stories, and the delights of good food served as an improvised picnic in an 'ambiance spéciale à cause du ciel dehors, gris sombre comme un vieux château, et à cause de la pluie qui fouette

le vitres comme une queue de dragon' (172; 'an atmosphere that was special because of the sky outside, a sky the dark grey of an old castle, and because of the rain lashing the windows like a dragon's tail'). Light, warmth and playfulness within, cold rain lashing the windows – there could scarcely be a better example of Bachelard's representation of the house as the primary image of all that 'maintient l'homme à travers les orages du ciel et les orages de la vie' (1958, 26; 'sustains man through the storms of the sky and of life itself').

### Self-reflexivity

Though self-reflexivity – the use of textual devices that foster awareness of the medium itself – is normally associated with highbrow literature and the legacy of modernism, it also has its place in the middlebrow. *Ensemble c'est tout* (like much of Gavalda's fiction) explores the question of its own literary status within the diegesis, notably through Camille's reflexions on the cultural hierarchy of taste. This self-awareness, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out, can coexist quite happily with immersion (2001, 352): we continue to suspend disbelief in Camille's reality even as she invites us to reflect on the status of the novel we are reading. Indeed we have seen (Chapter 4) that novels from the interwar heyday of British women's middlebrow frequently alluded self-reflexively to their own low cultural status, sharing with readers that mixture of respect and mild derision that characterises a middlebrow view of high culture, and defending, through their realist form as well as discursively, a literature that deals with that 'world of necessity and compromise [...] with which [everyone must] ultimately reckon' (Kennedy, 1924, 280).<sup>17</sup> As, even in France's hierarchical literary culture, the lines start to blur between the 'authentic' and the commercial under the pressure of online amateur book reviewing, the proliferation of prizes, the unavoidable commodification of 'high' as well as 'low' texts and authors, self-reflexivity about where the boundaries are drawn is also becoming more evident in French middlebrow fiction.

*L'Élégance du hérisson* is less concerned to challenge the superiority of an established canon than it is to challenge the function of this canon in maintaining class privilege. The affluent, socially esteemed inhabitants of Renée's apartment block assume opera, philosophy, avant-garde art

17 See Chapter 4, p. 95.

and literature and refined gastronomy to be their domain: when Paloma's family discover the fashionable, culturally rich holiday venue of Tuscany they are at once convinced (says their cynical younger daughter) that 'La "Toscâne" leur appartient au même titre que la Culture, l'Art et tout ce qu'on peut écrire avec une Majuscule' (255; "'Tuscany" belongs to them in the same way that Culture, Art, and everything written with a capital letter belongs to them'). Culture is what constitutes their 'distinction' in the Bourdieusian sense. The novel contrasts their mere display of these cultural signifiers with Renée's concealed but profound pleasure in intellectual rigour and subtlety and in the beauty of form. Renée's origins in a rural, low-income family shaped the expectations she met at school and hence her life chances: her access to culture has been clandestine and entirely self-propelled, and the novel implicitly argues for a democratised access to high culture rather than disputing the distinction between 'high' and 'low'. Renée's tastes, though, do not stop at the canonical: her reading extends to the enthusiastic consumption of crime novels, and in cinema her love of Hollywood blockbusters matches her passion for the *auteur* cinema of Ozu. Proud of her self-taught singularity, Renée is dismayed to hear an esteemed sociologist on the radio say that her eclecticism fits a broader trend in the evolving cultural practices of the intellectual classes, 'désormais poles de syncrétisme par où la frontière entre la vraie et la fausse culture se trouv[e] irrémédiablement brouillée' (78; 'nowadays the boundary between authentic and false culture is becoming hopelessly blurred'). Renée is of course the heroine of a novel that contributes to this very phenomenon – though the passage suggests that even cultural eclecticism can be recuperated as a further mark of distinction.

Amélie Nothomb's lasting popularity in France also confirms the coexistence in contemporary middlebrow of immersive storytelling and 'interactivity', or attention to – and pleasure in – the literary medium itself. Nothomb's willing, artful complicity with celebrity culture – she is a frequent media presence and very much in control of her own image – both incurs the disdain of literary critics and fuels the sustained enthusiasm of her vast, mainly female and to a large extent young readership.<sup>18</sup> But her 'literary rock star' ('Amélie Nothomb', 2016; Frey, 2014) quality alone cannot account for the extraordinarily high sales (normally 200,000 within months of publication) of her prolific output

18 On the relationship between contemporary middlebrow fiction and literary celebrity, see Holmes (2016).

(at least one novel per year). Short – *Barbe-bleue*, typically, reaches 124 pages of generously spaced text – generically diverse, overtly crafted, often featuring the intra-diegetic appearances of the author herself, Nothomb's novels are far from the expansive, page-turning realism of the other twenty-first-century novels discussed here, even though (as I have argued above) they share middlebrow's satisfying narrative arcs, deployment of romance and (often) engagement with the everyday realities of readers' lives, from housing to the beauty imperative. Their appeal surely rests too on the interesting and manifest relationship between content (the story told) and style (the text's formal structure and voice). Indeed, though Nothomb's readers express similar appreciation to those of Gavalda – 'elle s'intéresse aux gens' ('she's interested in people') recurs in readers' online comments; 'elle est sidérante d'intelligence et de finesse' ('she's amazingly intelligent and subtle'; 'Biographie d'une lectrice', 2013) – they also place more emphasis on her stylistic qualities, or what one reader terms her 'écriture unique et incroyable' ('Biographie d'une lectrice', 2013; 'incredibly unique style').

The self-awareness of Nothomb's fiction takes several forms. Sometimes she adopts a story or a genre that is already familiar, then knowingly overturns its conventions: *Blue Beard* is not the only fairy story to be subjected to this treatment,<sup>19</sup> and elsewhere Nothomb plays with the forms of the autobiography, futuristic science fiction and the love story. Often her plots, as in *Barbe bleue*, take the form of a duel that is primarily verbal (even if it concludes in physical violence), so that the reader's attention is drawn to the combative fluency of the protagonists' language. The adversaries are in most cases a young heroine and an older, more powerful man who exercises a certain seductive charm (even when, as in Nothomb's first novel, *Hygiène de l'assassin*, he is hideously ugly) through his wit and eloquence, but is also potentially lethal. Within the diegesis, it is the heroine – who, thanks to internal focalisation, becomes the reader's textual avatar – who triumphs: Saturnine (in this she is typical of many other Nothombian heroines) is superlatively equipped for victory, not only 'la plus jeune et la plus jolie' (8; 'the youngest and prettiest') of all Don Elemirio's tenants, but also cool-headed, resourceful and superbly articulate. There is clearly an immersive, identificatory pleasure here: battling an older, socially more

19 See for example, Perrault's *Riquet à la houppe*, 2016. Even where no specific fairy tale is revised, Nothomb's fiction abounds in murderous ogre figures, beautiful young heroines, castle-like dwellings, islands and forests.

powerful yet worthy opponent and winning is something few of us (one can surmise, and I am thinking particularly of women) often achieve, and is thus enjoyable at a vicarious level. The pleasure, though, depends on appreciation of a linguistic dexterity that is both the heroine's and the author's.

The question of control resonates through Nothomb's narratives, at the levels of both theme and form, and appears to resonate too with readers. Nothombian heroines are creatures of contained appetites: if love plays a part in several plots, sex rarely motivates action, and heroines are highly selective in their relationship to food. Saturnine devours Don Elemirio's food and drink, but this is because his cooking and the champagne he offers her are of the most exquisite quality, 'd'une perfection intimidante' (14): as she tells her host, she 'ne mange pas n'importe quoi' (32; 'she doesn't eat just anything'). To eat indiscriminately means to gain weight, and excess flesh is always a sign of abjection in Nothomb, for it escapes the immediate control of the subject's will: her heroines are slender, mobile, almost prepubescent in shape; one of the more extreme cases, the anorexic dancer Plectrude in *Robert des noms propres* (2002), starves herself till her 'légèreté insultait aux lois de la pesanteur' (75; 'lightness defied the laws of gravity'). Sex too implies adult femininity with its encumbrances of breasts, hips – and the possibility of maternity, all of these largely ignored or explicitly avoided in Nothomb's world. And this imagined exercise of control over a daunting reality is mirrored at the level of form: Nothomb's narrative voice is crisp and ironic, her dialogues (which constitute a large portion of the narratives) are strategically articulated, perfectly coherent: as Shirley Jordan says, 'In Nothomb's fictional universe people do not say things like "pass the salt"' (2003, 97). The narrative arcs are not merely harmonious, they are tightly patterned towards a stylised form of closure; their trajectories are spare and purposeful, unadorned by the humanising complexity that more often characterises middlebrow. Nothomb's texts are in the strict sense performative: they perform, textually, that mastery of the world (the body, others, material reality) staged by their plots. Theatrical, witty, never off-guard (rather like their author's own star persona), Nothomb's novels give narrative form to pervasive anxieties about the female body, in an age in which it is subject to extreme and public eroticisation, and about female agency, in a context of marked disparity between official commitment to gender equality and an often dissonant reality. They are middlebrow in a very twenty-first-century way: deceptively slight in their length and concise,

throwaway form, and thus dismissed as ‘romans de gare’ (popular romance), but for their readers they are both pleasurable to consume and deal, thematically and formally, with issues that matter.

### Conclusion

The contemporary female middlebrow is extremely diverse, though connected by its combination of compelling, accessible narrative form and capacity to explore and process contemporary experience. It is that body of fiction that France’s ‘big readers’, most of them women, choose and appreciate, sometimes entering into explicit conflict with the gatekeepers of literary ‘standards’ when the latter cast emotion as sentimentality and the ‘matriarchal realism’ of the everyday as mere banality. The territory of the middlebrow, as represented here by a small and inevitably partial (in both senses) corpus, stretches from southern borders with the popular to a northern frontier with the highbrow. As a whole, it displays both continuity with earlier periods – an optimistic narrative arc, a rejoicing in the sheer power of immersive fiction to send us travelling in space and time, a realism of both form and theme that may be termed (in Lorna Sage’s coining) ‘matriarchal’ – and something new. Self-reflexivity was by no means absent from earlier middlebrows, but in the globalised, highly networked and hybrid society of the new millennium, awareness of the constructed nature of both literary form and cultural hierarchies becomes part of the lingua franca of fiction itself.

# Conclusion

## Marie NDiaye's *femme puissante* – a Double Reading

*Trois femmes puissantes* (translated as *Three Strong Women*)<sup>1</sup> won the Prix Goncourt in 2009, with the result that it shot to the top of the French bestseller chart for that year alongside novels by Dan Brown, Anna Gavalda and Marc Levy.<sup>2</sup> Its author, Marie NDiaye, was already a well-known novelist and playwright whose work had received much scholarly attention and acclaim, but the media coverage and extensive marketing that accompany the prize offered her latest work for wider consumption. The book is not exactly a novel: it is composed of three stories, loosely linked by some minimal recurrence of characters from one to the other, and by the volume's striking if somewhat misleading title. Each story does indeed contain a woman, but the relevance of the adjective 'powerful' is not immediately apparent, and in the second story a male protagonist takes centre stage. The story that most clearly fits the title, and which has received the most attention from press and readers, is the third, the story of Khady Demba. Its heroine is a young widow in an unnamed African country who is sent by her family-in-law on the illegal migrant trail to Europe. Dramatic, moving and already topical (though its topicality would intensify a few years later, with the refugee crisis), this is the most accessible of the three stories, and the one that has divided critical opinion precisely because of its departure from the author's characteristically enigmatic, non-realist writing style towards

<sup>1</sup> Translated by John Fletcher and published in 2012 by the MacLehose Press. All English translations are taken from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> For overall book sales figures in 2009, see Ipsos (2010).

narrative that is more straightforwardly mimetic. It is on this story that I want to base my two readings.

First I propose to read the story as a ‘middlebrow reader’, that is, as myself in non-academic mode, reading for pleasure, interest and curiosity. Then I will read the same story as a literary critic, analysing technique and taking account of existing critical studies. There will inevitably be overlap, for our various ‘selves’ intermingle and are far from watertight. But my aim here is to try to understand what academic study often misses or omits, to ‘provide an account of the pleasures of a characteristically middle-brow way of reading’ (Radway, 1997, 12). Literary criticism expands knowledge: it is part of the great enterprise of understanding how we function as human beings, and how language shapes and opens up experience. Its grasp of the reading process, however, is inevitably coloured by ‘the interests and concerns of a highly specialised, quite heavily trained, and quite small professional audience’ (Radway, 1997, 230), whereas the reading of fiction is the province of a much wider public. ‘Literature’, as Rita Felski once put it, ‘may speak to readers in ways that literary critics are [...] ill-equipped to deal with’ (2003, 162).

### The story of Khady Demba (i) a middlebrow reading

The cover of the Livre de poche edition of *Trois femmes puissantes* features a beautiful strong-faced black woman with braided hair dressed in a loose robe with a bright floral design. The first story is set in an unnamed, non-Western tropical country, the second in France but with an important ‘back story’ set in postcolonial francophone Africa, so that I begin this, the volume’s third story, with some expectation of an African setting. Though never explicitly stated, this is soon confirmed by the heroine’s name, by the ‘pagne’ she wears – translated as ‘batik’ – and by the words ‘Year of the African Woman’ woven into the print of her sisters-in-law’s skirts. In my imagination I am soon in a hot land with a rainy season (2009, 262); Khady and her husband kept a little café (‘buvette’) in a lane in the ‘médina’ (2009, 262), a word evocative of Islamic culture and white-walled towns with narrow, maze-like streets and inner courtyards. The story is written in the third person but I am immediately situated with Khady, a young woman recently widowed who knows that her childless, dowry-less state makes her a drain on the meagre resources of her dead husband’s family, so that they seek only to be rid of her. Even her memories of three years of married life with



a man ‘si bon, si pacifique’ (NDiaye, 2009, 261) (‘a peaceable, kindly man’; NDiaye, 2012, 219) carry an undertow of remorse and sadness, for Khady recognises that in her anxiety to conceive at all costs she reduced him to a means to an end, their lovemaking to a purposeful, frequent but loveless exercise. She remembers with shame that when he collapsed and died at a fertile moment of her cycle, a sense of wasted opportunity competed with her grief: ‘N’aurait-il pas pu mourir après-demain, dans trois jours?’ (2009, 263; ‘Could he not have waited for two or three days?’ [2012, 220]). Neither wife nor mother, ‘écartée de la communauté humaine’ (‘excluded from the human community’ [2009, 269; 2012, 225]), Khady retreats into a self-protective state of mute torpor until she is literally banished by her family-in-law, sent off with a people smuggler to make her way to Europe and, her mother-in-law commands her, to send back money. The plot follows her journey, from the point of view of a Khady whose limited knowledge of the world provides no reference points, no clear expectations, no totalising view of world geography.<sup>3</sup> First travelling on foot, then in a crowded car on dusty roads, then embarked on a rotting, leaking ship from which she flees before it sails, only to find herself marooned and penniless in a hostile port, Khady crosses deserts where border police demand bribes and brutalise those who cannot pay; she accepts prostitution in order to survive and continue her journey and finally, sick and prematurely aged, finds herself camped with other desperate refugees before the high fences that mark the European frontier in a Spanish enclave of North Africa. A desperate collective attempting to scale the fence is met with a barrage of bullets, and Khady falls to her death.

This is a quest story, one of the most basic forms of narrative. Khady’s search for safety and for some sort of future carries me along: with a mixture of hope and dread, I want to know what happens to Khady Demba. My sense of entrancement or of being inside the fictional world is supported by the forward movement of the plot that drives Khady on from one peril to another interspersed with brief sequences of relative calm, and also by the plot’s location within a recognisably real setting, both spatial and political. Though the story’s unnamed locations scarcely relate to my own first-hand experience, they map onto a geography recognisable from general knowledge and from other fictional sources: the decaying colonial city port where the migrants are

3 Thus I experience the geography of the story as what de Certeau terms ‘space’ rather than as mapped, clearly located ‘place’. See Chapter 1, p. 21.

to embark, the balcony columns of its crumbling mansions like ‘de très vieux os soutenant quelque grand corps d’animal ravagé’ (2009, 288; ‘very old bones propping up the ravaged body of some large animal’ [2012, 240]); the rusty, putrid-smelling boat rocking on a dark sea; the hostile borders in arid, desert lands; and finally the encampment near a frontier that must be Melilla or Ceuta, Spanish cities on the Moroccan coast and thus heavily guarded gateways to Europe. Europe figures only as a vague mirage of hope and as a fortress armed against the poor and the desperate. My engagement with the story is fostered too by another form of referentiality: I know that Khady’s plight is representative of that of vast numbers of real refugees fleeing persecution and poverty to reach the affluent West. This knowledge provides the ballast of reality to my foray into fiction, but the knowledge itself is also changed: sympathetic as I may have already been to the situation of desperate migrants, to travel the harsh migrant trail vicariously with Khady Demba makes this knowledge felt, on the senses and through the emotions. The sense of learning something, or of deepening knowledge, also plays a part in the pleasure of reading fiction.

Compellingly plotted and mimetically grounded, the story’s appeal depends too on my caring about the fate of its central protagonist. And I do: despite the huge gap between her ordeals and my own comfortable experience as a privileged white woman living in an affluent society, for the duration of the narrative I experience the world through Khady’s eyes and Khady’s emotions. NDiaye’s writing very effectively draws me into a subjectivity that is not my own, rendering Khady’s experience graphically through the rhythm and shape of sentences as well as through telling sensory detail. The long, fluid sentences that describe Khady’s monthly cycle, as she tries with increasing desperation to conceive, capture the mounting exuberance of ovulation – ‘une ascension éperdue vers une possible bénédiction’ (2009, 259; ‘a frantic climb towards a possible benediction’ [2012, 217]) – before falling to the dull ‘effondrement’ (collapse) of renewed bleeding, and a state of ‘morne découragement’ (2009, 259; ‘gloomy despondency’ [2012, 217]) that precedes the cycle’s next upward turn. The physical horror of prostitution in the most sordid conditions is graphically rendered in sensory terms, as the hot bodies of strangers crush Khady into the dirty mattress (2009, 319; 2012, 265), and she suffers the pain of further friction on a vagina already swollen and inflamed. Though the vicarious experience of bitter disappointment, of pain and degradation are not exactly pleasurable, they situate me with Khady against a cruel world and intensify my imaginative involvement

in the fiction. Moreover, Khady opposes to the horror of her situation a determined attention to an external reality beyond her pain, telling herself even as she undergoes the violence of unwanted sex, that ‘Il y a un moment où ça s’arrête’ (2009, 319; ‘There’s a time when it stops’ [2012, 265]), detailing ‘les fissures des murs rosâtres, le plafond de tôle’ (2009, 320; ‘the cracks in the pinkish walls, the corrugated-iron ceiling’ [2012, 265]) of the sordid hut to which she is confined, or just listening to the sound of her own heart beating. She recognises too the fear, the sense of entrapment and shame of her clients, fellow victims of poverty and exploitation. There is horror, but there is also resistance through resolute awareness of the world beyond the self, which also means generosity to others. My imagination is coaxed into simulating Khady’s sensory and emotional perception of the world, to adapt Marie-Laure Ryan’s formulation (2001, 122), and I am also ‘rooting for her’.

Reading for pleasure, I don’t pay conscious attention to the brilliance of NDiaye’s technique (though I might pause to reread a particularly nice sentence), but simply feel its effects. One central technical choice is that of an external, third-person narrative voice, where Khady’s subjectivity could have been expressed, for example, through a first-person stream of consciousness. NDiaye uses a form of free indirect style that remains rigorously close to Khady’s point of view, whilst rendering this with an eloquence and breadth of reference that are clearly in excess of the protagonist’s own. To take just one example, as she sets off on her enforced journey away from all she has ever known, Khady realises that she is noticing the sights around her, emerging from the cocoon of dreamy vagueness that has protected her since her husband’s death. A rhetorical question conveys Khady’s thoughts: ‘S’agissait-il qu’elle fût malgré elle protégée, arrachée à la somnolence dangereuse maintenant qu’elle se trouvait livrée à l’inconnu?’ (2009, 274; ‘Now that she found herself cast into the unknown, could it be that she had been wrenched from her dangerous torpor and was willy-nilly being protected?’ [2012, 229]). The language (imperfect subjunctives, erudite vocabulary) cannot be Khady’s, but its effect is to attribute to the semi-literate woman a subtle and complex psychology that does not depend (the text implies) solely on the possession of rich linguistic resources. Narrator (and hence reader) remain at one remove from Khady’s subjectivity, yet she is lent a voice that renders the shape and substance of a rich inner life. This seems to me to have the unconscious effect of registering the real distance between Khady’s situation and mine, whilst at the same time affirming the possibility of imaginative empathy.

And Khady's inner life is also a vital element of that optimism that characterises middlebrow fiction and is abundantly present here, transcending the grimness of her experience and the story's sad dénouement. For to the socially perceived 'nullité et absurdité de son existence' (2009, 265; 'worthlessness and absurdity of her existence' [2012, 222]), to the violence and suffering she undergoes, Khady opposes a stalwart, indeed an exultant sense of her own unique identity. The story returns insistently to Khady's awareness of being 'unique en tant que personne [...] satisfaite d'être Khady' (2009, 266; 'unique as a person [...] proud to be Khady' [2012, 223]). Even at her journey's lowest point, when the money she has painfully saved to escape prostitution is stolen by the man who seemed to be her ally, Khady experiences the joy of simply being herself:

Et cependant son esprit était clair et vigilant et elle se sentait encore parfois inondée d'une joie chaude quand, seule dans la nuit, elle murmurait son nom et une fois de plus le trouvait en convenance exacte avec elle-même. (2009, 325)

(Still, her mind was clear and alert, and she was sometimes overwhelmed with joy when, alone at night, she murmured her own name and once again savoured its perfect affinity with herself [2012, 270])

This powerful conviction of her own selfhood seems remarkable, given Khady's lifelong experience of dependence on the will of others, but NDiaye links it plausibly to Khady's upbringing by a grandmother who, though undemonstrative and demanding, recognised in her granddaughter 'une petite fille particulière nantie de ses propres attributs et non pas une enfant parmi d'autres' (2009, 266; 'a special little girl with her own attributes, not just any child' [2012, 222]). To use Winnicott's terminology, Khady has experienced sufficient 'holding' to enable her to create an integrated sense of self, and hence to relate to the world beyond (1986, 107) – and the story suggests too that this 'holding' was echoed in her gentle husband's loving, affirmative view of her. Against the harsh inhumanity of the world depicted, Khady's valiant sense of self repeatedly asserts a core of inner freedom, and the possibility of maintaining faith in the value of life. At the same time, her indestructible joy in simply being 'moi, Khady Demba' (2009, 312) bracingly asserts the individual selfhood of each refugee among the largely unnamed thousands that we glimpse on the news. As Khady falls from the high fence that finally blocks her road to Europe, a bird soars overhead: 'C'est moi, Khady Demba', she thinks for one last time 'dans l'éblouissement

de cette révélation, sachant qu'elle était cet oiseau et que l'oiseau le savait' (2009, 333; "It's me, Khady Demba", she thought, dazed by the revelation, knowing that she was the bird and that the bird knew it too' [2012, 276]).

A short 'counterpoint' confirms the ultimate optimism of a story whose central focus is on human cruelty and suffering. Lamine is the boyish refugee who shared Khady's journey from the port, across the desert and on to the grim little tavern where Khady sells her body to pay for their food and keep. Though they have been allies, even lovers, and she has treated him with kindness, Lamine steals the money Khady has saved and condemns her to further months or years of this wretched life before she can resume her journey. At the end, Lamine has reached France and is living the insecure, hand-to-mouth life of an illegal immigrant. He has at least reached his goal, and often thinks or dreams of Khady, incorporating her into his inner life as a confidante and a protector. Sometimes, when the sun warms his face, 'alors il parlait à la fille et doucement lui racontait ce qu'il advenait de lui, il lui rendait grâce, un oiseau disparaissait au loin' (2009, 333; 'and then he would talk to the girl and tell her softly what had become of him. He would then give thanks to her. A bird flew away: far, far away' [2012, 277]). Khady leaves a legacy, and the avian imagery attributes to this at least some small transcendence of death.

Optimism, a compelling plot, a powerful sense of place, an 'identification with [an]other who is not like oneself' (Huston, 2008, 182–83) – Khady Demba's story works as an 'entrancing' fiction. Because I vicariously live through Khady's journey, it has what Schaeffer calls a 'modelling function' (2010, 27), enabling me to 'interiorise by immersion' 'scenarios of action' and 'ethical constellations' far beyond my own lived experience.<sup>4</sup> My passage through this imagined world – at once mimetically grounded in reality and shaped into vivid narrative – is pleasurable as stories are, because they satisfy curiosity and a desire for Kermode's *kairos* (time ordered into significance) rather than mere *chronos* (time merely passing, 'one damn thing after another' [Kermode, 1967, 47]). But I also emerge from it just slightly changed: the metaphor of travel captures the experience of immersive reading, and as psychologist Richard Gerrig puts it in *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, 'the traveller [always] returns to the land of origin somewhat changed by the journey' (1993, 10–11; cited in Ryan, 2001, 94).

4 See Chapter 1, p. 17.

## (ii) Reading as a critic

To approach this story as an academic means to enter the collective, dialogical enterprise of literary studies. Context is required: where does this story belong in the work of a prolific and highly esteemed writer? How have other critics analysed this story, and what can I bring to this? What are the narrative techniques that produce the particular vision of the world articulated in the story of Khady Demba?

Marie NDiaye has had a dazzling career since her first novel, *Quant au riche avenir*, was published by the prestigious Éditions de Minuit in 1985, when she was a 17-year-old schoolgirl. Both a novelist and playwright, she has won many prizes including the Femina in 2001 for *Rosie Carpe*, the Goncourt for *Trois femmes puissantes* and two nominations (2013 and 2016) for the Man Booker international prize; her critical reception has been equally warm and included, to date, four international conferences devoted to her work, three edited volumes, numerous articles, doctoral theses and a monograph. She is not regarded as a realist or popular novelist, but as a fine, original stylist and interpreter of her age, writing at the avant-garde edge of the novel form.

NDiaye is often considered too as a postcolonial writer, though she was born and entirely educated in France, her Senegalese father left the family when she was a small child and she first visited Africa as an adult. NDiaye rarely writes explicitly about race or ethnicity, but her fictional protagonists are often marked by some unnamed and disavowed difference that sees them marginalised, humiliated or rejected by their surrounding community, as for example in *Mon Cœur à l'étroit* (2007), in which Nadia, an apparently respected and successful secondary teacher living in Bordeaux, suddenly and inexplicably finds herself and her husband the targets of abuse, harassment and violence. Nadia travels to an unnamed island which, despite her own conviction that she has never been there before, shows multiple signs of being her place of origin. There, among other strange happenings, Nadia's stomach swells, and she gives birth to a dark, non-human creature that then simply disappears. The mysterious, disquieting nature of such events is typical of NDiaye's non-realist narrative style: her colourful, often violent plots, though largely set in mimetically real places and dealing with recognisable types of social interaction and emotion, border on the fantastical. Characters are often oddly mute, or what they say hints only obliquely at their situation or their feelings. Narratives feature the Devil (*La Femme changée en bûche*, 1989), protagonists resurrected from the

dead (*En famille*, 1990), witchcraft (*La Sorcière*, 1996), zombies (*Rosie Carpe*, 2001), metamorphosis from woman to dog (*Ladivine*, 2013). The strangeness of NDiaye's world, its figurative resonance and irreducibility to realist interpretation, is highly valued by analysts of her work: Andrew Asibong, author of the first monograph on NDiaye, finds for example that she gives 'her readers and spectators new signs and symbols with which to conceive of unmourned emptiness or loss [...], fresh and disturbing images with which [they] may be sufficiently stimulated to move forward towards new forms of life, colour and presence' (2013b, 4).

It is not surprising then that the critical reaction to *Trois femmes puissantes* was mixed, and included some disappointment at the more mimetic, realist style of, in particular, the story of Khady Demba. Some of this disapproval was directed at the marketing of the volume as a whole: in their desire to signal to readers that this was an accessible book on an identifiable and coherent theme, the publishers of the paperback edition (Gallimard) packaged the three, only loosely linked stories in a cover bearing the image of what Asibong sardonically describes as a 'generic "Mother Africa", an exotic strong, "authentic" seeming repository for a collective fantasy about the sort of woman "we" think a novel such as this should ultimately be "about"' (2013a, 397). NDiaye's reticence and subtle, indirect approach to the issue of race had been replaced by a cruder characterisation of her as an authentically black writer, a 'brown-skinned poster girl for difference and diversity' (Asibong, 2013b, 100), and three quite different texts reduced, somewhat artificially, to a single, unified narrative. Lydie Moudileno, another perceptive and largely approving analyst of NDiaye's work, found that the book's presentation subscribed to a cliché of the "femme africaine" misérable et sublime', 'son corps servant à la fois de métonymie d'un continent à l'agonie et de symbole de survie' (2013, 72; "African woman", at once wretched and sublime, her body serving both as a metonymy for a dying continent and a symbol of survival').

The title and cover of NDiaye's Goncourt-winner are to some extent misleading, implying a simple, unifying theme to the whole that is not apparent in the stories themselves. However, critical scorn for 'the text's conversion into something coherent, readable and uplifting' (Asibong, 2013a, 393) extends beyond its marketing to the presence of those qualities (coherence, readability, optimism) in the narrative itself, and above all in the character of Khady Demba. Asibong finds the whole book 'relatively unconvincing' in comparison to NDiaye's other 'breath-taking, if less conventionally successful work' (2013a, 387), and judges

the portrayal of Khady's indestructible sense of self (her 'puissance') to be 'twee' and 'disingenuous' (2013b, 102–03). Moudileno, in a more nuanced and ambivalent assessment, still finds Khady's 'stabilité narrative' problematic in relation to the rest of NDiaye's *œuvre*: a fully named, unified and consistent character, she finds, stands out among the enigmatic, shape-shifting protagonists of NDiaye's usual world like 'a statue among human beings' (2013, 74).

These negative criticisms from discerning scholars of NDiaye's work deserve proper attention and make me question my initial reading of Khady Demba's story. What is at stake is this: can the techniques of realism (as we have seen, the dominant mode of the middlebrow) render adequately the traumatic, inchoate and – for the privileged Western reader – profoundly foreign experience of a poor African migrant, of what postcolonial studies terms 'the subaltern'? Is it ethically or politically acceptable to imagine her inner life in a way that grants Western readers the pleasure of empathy – is this a form of neocolonial appropriation of her experience? And is it patronising and clichéd (the 'femme africaine, misérable et sublime') to attribute to Khady an invincible conviction of her own selfhood that survives trauma and even, symbolically, death? Do I have the right to be 'uplifted' by the imagined valour and resilience of a victim of the global inequality of which I myself am a beneficiary?

Some critical work on the story of Khady Demba is more sympathetic to the text's realist register and the characterisation of its heroine, suggesting that close analysis can also endorse my first, positive response to the text. Both Deborah Gaensbauer and Shirley Jordan recognise this story as the most overtly political of NDiaye's work: its mimetic referentiality (as opposed to NDiaye's habitually oblique, fantastical narrative mode) clearly show Khady's suffering as gendered (she is an outcast because women only have social value as wives and mothers, and power at the border camp is exercised in part through rape) and as determined by global inequality (postcolonial Europe is shown to jealously guard its affluence against those whose land and labour it exploits). For Gaensbauer, the fact that *Trois femmes puissantes* is overtly 'about' the migratory experience of contemporary women is positive, and laudably based on NDiaye's 'careful attention to testimonial documents collected by human rights organizations' (2014, 12). Jordan too comments favourably on Khady's status as 'à la fois une distillation et une évolution plus ouvertement politisée de la figure principale ndiayenne de la femme errante' (2012, 263; 'both a distillation and a more clearly politicised development of NDiaye's figure of the wandering woman').



Both these critics perceive NDiaye's choice of third-person narration focalised through Khady as an ethically aware, carefully modulated technique rather than an appropriation of another's voice. Gaensbauer's analysis of narrative voice echoes my subconscious response to this as a 'middlebrow reader', for she finds that the recognisable gap between the narrator's erudite language and syntax and the protagonist's limited linguistic resources constitutes a way of 'putting oneself in the other's position' without 'taking her place' (2014, 12). The palpable disparity between eloquent narrator and semi-wordless character, she argues, 'raises in pointed form [...] the problem of [...] composing narratives that [do not] confuse one's own voice or position with the victim's' (Gaensbauer, 2014, 15).<sup>5</sup> Jordan reads NDiaye's use of bird imagery not only as an aesthetic device that introduces into the story (and indeed into all three stories of *Trois Femmes Puissantes*) that disquieting hybridity of animal and human that characterises NDiaye's fictional universe, but also as a further element in the careful rendering of Khady's subjectivity. Khady's perception of her first trafficker as a crow – 'Cachait-il derrière ses verres miroirs les petits yeux ronds, durs et fixes des corbeaux [...]?' (2009, 283; 'Was he hiding behind his gleaming lenses the small, hard, round, staring eyes of the crows?' [2012, 236]) – vividly conveys his sinister, predatory role and evokes the association of crows in many cultures with cunning and with death. When she sees her fellow migrants as harbouring feathery wings beneath their clothes, the fantastical image (conjured up by a Khady whose exhaustion and hunger might well be producing hallucinations) suggests an ironic comparison between the legendary freedom of birds, and the utter subjection of the migrating hordes of refugees. At the same time – as Jordan points out – Khady's bird imagery is consonant with the narrative's psychological realism, for the text establishes (through allusion to her grandmother's storytelling) that she inhabits a culture where animal imagery is commonly used to express human emotion, and where the borderline between human and animal is far from absolute. No wonder then that Khady pictures the victory of her own spirit over adversity as a long-winged bird hovering in the sky (2009, 333; 2012, 276). Free indirect style, both inside and outside the subjectivity of the protagonist, eloquently renders a less verbal, more pictorial mode of thought.

5 Gainsbauer draws here on the work of historian Dominick LaCapra on the writing of trauma.

Critical assessment of this story is divided, then, and this carries through to the narrative's marked insistence on Khady Demba's indestructible sense of selfhood. Some critics have seen this not as sentimental or disingenuous but as central to the protagonist's 'power' as a memorable and resonant fictional figure. For Shirley Jordan, the proud repetition of Khady Demba's full name echoing through the text, asserts the 'plénitude existentielle' (2012, 273; 'existential plenitude') of a woman whose bodily integrity, by contrast, is constantly under assault. If Khady starts the story self-protectively cocooned in aphasic numbness, shrunk to avoid notice into a 'bloc de silence et de désaffection' (2009, 265; 'a silent, uninteresting heap' [2012, 222]), her travels soon see her body opened to a brutal world through exposure to the elements, through the wound on her leg that refuses to heal and through unwanted sexual penetration. The sensorial nature of NDiaye's narrative brings her sufferings vividly to life. Yet, like a mantra, the words 'je suis Khady Demba' affirm her uniqueness, her 'pleine valeur sociale et humaine' (Jordan, 2012, 273; 'full social and human value') and thus (as my first reading subliminally grasped) that of all the hundreds of thousands of anonymous refugees in similar situations. As Jordan concludes, Khady's urgently affirmed selfhood interpolates the reader: we see the world in part through her eyes, yet are also objectively on the side of that 'fortress Europe' and its allies who deny her full humanity. This heroine, whose 'narrative stability' (Moudileno, 2013, 74) both conforms to and exceeds the conventions of realism, is a powerful figure because she poses a haunting, difficult question: 'aux dépens de qui atteignons-nous notre confort?' (Jordan, 2012, 280; 'At whose expense do we procure our own comfort?').

If I pursue my own critical analysis, I will take account of readings that go against my initial reaction to the text but will be drawn inevitably to those that explain and endorse my first, emotional response. Following Gainsbauer's and Jordan's sympathetic treatment of NDiaye's narrative voice, for example, I might return to the way the structure and rhythm of her sentences mirror Khady's perceptions, a technique that certainly had an effect on my initial reading, for example in the passage concerning Khady's cycle from exhilarated ovulation through the hope of conception and back down to flat despair. This reflection of the shape of Khady's thought in the syntax of the narrative is a recurring stylistic feature, and one that contributes to the story's inside/outside narrative voice. One such instance is the moment when Khady's mother-in-law announces to her, in the presence of the whole family, that Khady is to be sent off

to Europe. The narration takes the form of paragraph-long digressive sentences that simulate Khady's own self-protective inattention to the frightening message, veering off to observe the skirts of her sisters-in-law and their hands which recall those of her dead husband, the syntax so complex that the stark message of Khady's banishment gets lost in the reading. When, a few days later, Khady's mother-in-law prods her in the back and orders, 'Prépare tes affaires' (2009, 271; 'Get your things' [2012, 227]), the reader shares Khady's sense of shock, heightened by the sudden switch from intricate, multiclausal sentences to the sharp brevity of direct speech. Khady's strategic retreat from clear comprehension of her fate is both externally observed – 'Elle ouvrait de nouveau son esprit qui lui tenait lieu de pensées depuis qu'elle habitait chez ces gens' (2009, 271; 'She opened her mind once again to the insipid pipe dreams that had stood in for thoughts ever since she came to live with these people' [2012, 226]) – and shared from within, through the mimetic effect of style.

Close analysis supports a positive reading of NDiaye's narrative voice as empathetic but non-appropriative. But a critical reading needs to pursue further the contested question of the story's ethical stance, seen by some critics as shallow and sentimental, and by others as compelling and effectual. I will return in this light to just two aspects of the story: the depiction of Khady's attitude to others and the text's transcendent optimism.

If, as my 'middlebrow' reading suggested, this story invites the reader's empathy with its heroine, empathy is also one of the themes that threads through the narrative. Its opposite, an instrumentalist view of others that denies their full humanity, is abundantly present: Khady accuses herself of just this in her reduction of a loving husband to a mere progenitor; her family-in-law fail to distinguish between 'cette forme nommée Khady et celles, innombrables, des bêtes et des choses qui se trouvent aussi habiter le monde' (2009, 269; 'the shape called Khady and the innumerable forms of animals and things which also inhabit the world' [2012, 225]); the traffickers, depicted figuratively as birds of prey, refuse all communication with their victims; the border guards exert their power over the excluded migrants through rape, beatings and finally by killing them. But to this denial of the other's reality (in which, as Shirley Jordan argues, the reader is implicated), the figure of Khady Demba opposes a generous recognition of the other, expressed unemphatically but persistently, simply through the text's attentive focalisation, through Khady's eyes, of all those she encounters. Enabled by her stable belief in her own place in the world, Khady observes others with the same empathy that

her character invites from the reader. This is exemplified in her first meeting with Lamine on the beach, where she has jumped ship from the trafficker's leaky craft, badly wounding her leg. Though in extreme pain, as well as lost and desperately hungry, Khady clearly perceives Lamine's boyishness, his nervous tension, the evidence of a past suffering greater than her own – 'trempe dans le bain glacial des sacrifices obligés' (2009, 300; 'tempered in the icy water of unavoidable deprivation' [2012, 250]) – and makes a considered decision that it is in both their interests to form an alliance, and that she will care for him, even if she can't entirely trust him. Understanding his humiliation when his confident plans for their onward journey fail, and when he is brutalised by a border guard, Khady is 'navrée de ne pouvoir à sa place endosser l'humiliation, elle qui savait supporter cela' (2009, 316; 'upset at not being able to take on the humiliation in his stead, she who could bear it' [2012, 263]) and 'ne lui en tenait pas rigueur' (2009, 317; 'did not hold it [their failure to cross the frontier] against him' [2012, 263]). Her non-judgemental attentiveness to others extends to the woman who pimps her to endless clients (whose face she perceives as 'ronde et bienveillante' (2009, 321; 'round, kindly' [2012, 266]), and to the clients themselves whose own desolate loneliness she recognises: it is through these brief interludes where attention shifts from her own suffering to the reality of other lives that Khady's own life, and indeed the narrative, remain bearable. If this story exemplifies what Nancy Huston calls fiction's 'ethical role' by 'encouraging identification with others who are not like ourselves' (2008, 182–83), it also displays that empathetic relation to the other in the figure of its heroine.

Khady's goodness is part of the story's optimism, of that 'uplifting' quality that some critics have found facile and sentimental. Middlebrow fiction, as this book has shown, tends to offer hope, at the very least by shaping the 'chaotic, viscously contingent reality' of life (Kermode, 1967, 145) into the relative coherence of plot, and often too by the depiction of human virtues (generosity, integrity, bravery) triumphing, morally if not practically, over evil. Sentimentality enters where fiction ignores or disguises Kermode's 'lingua franca of reality' (1967, 107), merely 'sealing up the cracks' in Baroni's image (2007, 409), and thus offering 'mere fantasy [...] unrelated to the basic human task of imaginative self-invention' (Kermode, 1967, 146). The middlebrow fiction that has most appealed to readers over the past century does not do this, but acknowledges the discordant, painful, uncongenial dimensions of existence even as it provides a safe and ultimately hopeful space to explore them. Khady Demba's story is in this vein, balancing the

buoyancy of her powerful self-belief with a forceful emphasis on the horror of her situation. From Khady's callous banishment from her home, through the eloquently rendered cruelty and indifference she encounters *en route*, to her last mortal fall with hands and feet ripped by the barbed wire fence, the story is unstintingly grim in its portrayal of poverty and exclusion. It ends with Lamine's sense of the internalised legacy of Khady's kindness, but also with the recognition that the long, painful itinerary that finally brought him to France has ended in insecure poverty, which means selling his labour wherever he can earn a few euros. The avian imagery that soared, in the previous paragraph, to express Khady's final transcendence, now finds a grim echo in the ironic name of the restaurant where Lamine washes dishes: Au Bec fin.<sup>6</sup>

### (iii) The power of fiction

Critical controversy around the story of Khady Demba arises from its middlebrow qualities of coherence, accessibility and optimism, particularly as none of these are the attributes admired in its author's previous work. They are literary features that have been as little prized by critics, over the past century, as they have been enjoyed by readers. Studying this text purely as a critic, notebook by my side and paying due attention to NDiaye's previous work and to critical commentary, I might also be uneasy about the author's unexpected shift into a more mimetic, referential, hence potentially less resonant mode of narrative; about the story's confident rendering of the inner life of a semi-illiterate woman from so distant a culture; and about the plausibility of its heroine's resilient conviction of her own invincible identity. Yet, as a 'reader for pleasure', I was entranced by Khady's fictional journey, moved by her suffering and her stoical openness to the reality of others, and at least subliminally aware of the delicacy with which an empathetic depiction of Khady's subjectivity maintained awareness of her difference and her singularity. Rather than facile or sentimental, I experienced the story's 'uplifting' quality as the result of satisfying narrative form, a compassionate, enlightening perspective on a real contemporary phenomenon and the affirmation, through the story's heroine, of faith in life's value, even in the cruellest of situations.

6 Literally the slender beak of a bird, but connoting a fine palate, gastronomic excellence.

What academic criticism can easily ignore is the sheer joy of fiction's power to send us travelling through time and space, beyond the frontiers of our own individual consciousness and into the mind and heart of another. The narrative devices that most easily achieve this effect include Radway's 'rush of a good plot and [...] inspiration offered by an unforgettable character' (1997, 7), to which might be added the mimetic anchoring of fictional story in the recognisably real – both of which have been the object of critical deprecation or indifference across most of the past century. Yet what is variously termed 'immersive reading' or 'entrancement' – and what I refer to here as 'middlebrow reading' – is particularly close to that experience of 'transitional space' that Winnicott holds to be crucial to mental and emotional health. For Winnicott, as we saw in Chapter 1, healthy development of the self requires both the acknowledgement of external reality – and thus of limits on the child's early sense of omnipotence – and a maintained sense of subjective agency: if play effects this difficult balance in childhood, it is culture that takes its place in adult life. Reading fiction – arguably even more than watching fiction on film or television – plays out this negotiation between compliance and creativity, accepting the existence of a fictional world rooted in the real, and drawing on one's own stock of experience and perceptions to imagine this world into existence. The entranced reader accepts and seeks to learn about an external reality, but also takes pleasure in her or his own sense of agency.

Middlebrow reading, in other words, has a salutary effect. At once serious and pleasure-oriented, throughout the twentieth century and up to the present it has engaged a huge (and increasingly female) sector of the population in the regular practice of imagination, exploration and empathy. 'French literature' generally refers to a French canon, heavily male-gendered, selected and endorsed by a 'specialised, trained, quite small professional audience' (Radway, 1997, 230, adapted). If we use the term instead to mean 'literature that has pleased and affected a majority of French-speaking readers', then literary history and contemporary criticism change both in content – for one thing, far more women writers appear – and in emphasis, since disregarded criteria such as the well-crafted plot, the capacity to 'entrance', a rich 'modelling function' (Schaeffer, 2010, 27) return to prominence. The middlebrow was long defined as Virginia Woolf's 'betwixt and between', the 'neither one thing nor the other', the blandly mediocre. Instead, it may be seen as a creative space of imagination tempered by a desire to understand and get to grips with the real: as the vital 'transitional space' of culture.

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