

# “betwixt and between”: Towards a (N)ontology of the Mediocre

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## Abstract

The mediocre – or what constituted mediocrity – was a matter of intense debate in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Britain. Cultural commentators, popular writers, satirists and members of the public all attempted to define the mediocre without success. Characterized by the average, the fair, the middling, the mediocre’s very unremarkability made it remarkably difficult to define.

In reference to modern newspaper articles and criticism, this essay moves towards a (n)ontology of the mediocre, examining the (failure of the) strategies used to define the mediocre in the modern(ist) period. It argues that the mediocre, in its dogged desire not to shake the status quo, perversely disrupts the very idea or *possibility of definition*, not only calling established systems of cultural and social classification into question, but also challenging accepted notions of singularity, essence and *beingness* in the process.

**Keywords:** *modernism, middlebrow, genealogy, cultural history, deconstruction*

Mediocre [sc. style], a meane betwixt high and low, vehement and slender.

Angell Day, *The English Secretorie*, 1586<sup>1</sup>

it is not well written; nor is it badly written. It is not proper, nor is it improper — in short it is betwixt and between.

Virginia Woolf, *Middlebrow*, 1932<sup>2</sup>

Ridiculed, dismissed and derided since (at least) the sixteenth century, the category of the mediocre – the fair, the average, the middling – has never been deemed worthy of sustained critical analysis. Distinguished only by its indistinguishableness, the mediocre, from the classical Latin “*mediocris*, of middle degree, quality, or rank”, evolved in France during the sixteenth and seventeenth century from a term to describe literary or rhetorical style to a noun denoting people, cultural objects and, in the plural, an entire class.<sup>3</sup> In English, the term was rarely used as noun until the nineteenth century. This date is significant; in Britain, the category of the mediocre was shaped by the social, economic and cultural changes wrought by industrialisation and urbanisation:

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<sup>1</sup> Angell Day, *The English Secretorie*, 1586, quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* online, s. v. “mediocre, adj. and n.” (Oxford University Press), accessed April 5, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115738?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=JGjzyn&>.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Middlebrow,” in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), 116.

<sup>3</sup> See the *Oxford English Dictionary* online, s. v. “mediocre, adj. and n.”.

mass enfranchisement, mass education, mass communication, and the emerging mass public, mass culture and middle classes.

In particular, debate about the mediocre (who and what it was and what its effects were) was fuelled by the new circulating libraries of the 1890s. As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, it became associated with the new mediums emerging from technological advances – wireless, records, cheap novels and moving pictures – and the new audiences that appeared with them: typists, commuters and the “tired business man”.<sup>4</sup> This was the “age of the mediocre”; a time in which the “great supply of mediocre brains greatly exceed[ed] the demand”.<sup>5</sup> “Society was sinking “under the nemesis of universal mediocrity””;<sup>6</sup> indeed, according to critics and commentators, “never in history were novels so atrociously mediocre as they are today”.<sup>7</sup>

Mediocrity, this “nemesis” of culture and civilization, continued to inspire fierce debate throughout the early twentieth century before morphing, (almost) unchanged except in name, to the “Battle of the Brows” of the ‘twenties, ‘thirties and ‘forties. During this period, the mediocre – and its related dangers – was still a central concern, but the term itself was subsumed by the similar, yet not synonymous, category of the middlebrow. When many modernist critics attempted to describe (and deride) the middlebrow, what they were describing would have been labelled as “mediocre” twenty years earlier.

This (perceived) semantic interchangeability is crucial; although the two terms (middlebrow/mediocre) were not the same, the fact that they were used *to mean the same thing* reveals the instability, the uncertainty, the *differance* at the heart of the mediocre. Despite decades of attempts to pin its essence down, definitions were always endlessly deferred. Vague and unsatisfactory, such (non)definitions fell into two camps: the first, the mediocre as middling, a mid-point between two extremes; the second, the mediocre as moderate, average, pedestrian. While both groups broadly defined the mediocre as “neither here nor there”, they used diverging strategies to provide specific definitions. Those who defined the mediocre as middling relied upon spatial metaphors, situating the mediocre beneath the high, intellectual, superior and elite but above the low, vulgar and crass. Those who concentrated on the mediocre’s ordinariness, on the other hand, utilized strings of near-synonyms – the commonplace, the “usual thing”, the customary, the sentimental, the respectable, the middlebrow etc. – to try and circumscribe it.

Ultimately, neither strategy proved successful; by its very (non)essence, the mediocre is neither here nor there, neither this nor that. It is relative, “betwixt and between”, slippery yet fixed in its ways, insubstantial yet solid and dependable. As such, it will always – can only – evade definition; it is paradoxically secretive, hiding in

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the famous typist scene in T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 68-69. In it, Eliot uses the “bored and tired” typist, with her “food in tins” and her “undesired” and “indifferen[t]” sexual encounters to castigate the mediocrity of human relationships and breakdown of meaningful communication that characterized modernity. Lawrence Rainey is writing a cultural history of the typist; see his note on “The Waste Land”, for more on the history of the typist in modern(ist) literature: Lawrence Rainey, *Modernism: An Anthology* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 132.

<sup>5</sup> Callisthenes, “Mental Mediocrity,” *The Times*, January 28, 1939, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick W. Stevens, *Observations by an Obscure Mediocrity, on a Recently Published Brochure Entitled “The Nemesis of Mediocrity”* (Ann Arbor: George Wahr, 1918), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Bennett, “Novelists and Agents,” in *Books and Persons: Being Comments on a Past Epoch, 1908-1911* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1917), 22.

plain view. Thus, through an examination of these dual strategies of definition (mediocre as middling and mediocre as moderate), this essay will gesture towards a (n)ontology of the mediocre, arguing that despite – or rather *because of* – its mundane nature, the mediocre is – if it *is* anything – of vital critical interest.

## Mediocre as Middling

Modern definitions of the mediocre often relied on spatial metaphors: it was “a middle kind” (Swift), a mid-way point between the higher and lower impulses, art and entertainment, intellectual superiority and commercial vulgarity. While the exact terms of this tripartite conception of culture differed – Matthew Arnold favoured “Barbarians”, “Philistines” and the “Populace”; modernist critics such as Virginia Woolf, Q. D. Leavis and Clement Greenberg preferred “high-”, “middle-” and “low-brow”; and the sociologist Edward Shils spoke of “superior”, “mediocre” and “brutal” culture – the mediocre was always in-between, liminal, interstitial.

In general, conceptions of the mediocre as mid-point revolved either around its intermixing of “high” and “low” or – on a related note, if high and low are seen to be mutually exclusive – its inability to fit into either cultural category. In an essay on ragtime in his seminal *Seven Lively Arts* (1924), Gilbert Seldes defined mediocre music as “something between the art and the popular song”.<sup>8</sup> For him, such songs were “unbearable. Because here you have a pretentiousness, a base desire to be above the crowd and yet to please (it is called “uplift,” but it does not mean exalt) the crowd; here is the touch of “art” which makes all things false and vulgar.”<sup>9</sup> Seldes’s description makes two key points: firstly, he draws a connection between the mediocre and the masses (to which we will return); secondly, he argues that by distinguishing itself from the low but not reaching towards the high, the mediocre is dishonest, grubby and pretentious. This complaint appears repeatedly: in 1932 Q. D. Leavis wrote that middlebrow mediocrities are “anxious to get the best of both worlds”;<sup>10</sup> a sentiment echoed by Clement Greenberg when he defined middlebrow (mediocre) culture “by the fact that, though its audience shrinks from the trials of highbrow culture, it nonetheless refuses to let its culture be simply a matter of entertainment and diversion on the lowbrow order”.<sup>11</sup> Even Friedrich Nietzsche, who cast the “mediocre” not as the middle but as the third and bottom portion of his cultural and social “*order of castes*”, utilized a similar definition in *The Antichrist* (1893). Where the “superior” elite were “pre-eminently spiritual” and the “intellectual” middle were “pre-eminently strong in muscle and temperament”, the “mediocre ones” were those “who excel in neither one respect nor in the other”.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the different terms used, then, these formulations equate to the same thing: class snobberies born of cultural anxiety. Industrialisation and urbanisation, in

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Seldes, “Tearing a Passion to Ragtime,” in *Seven Lively Arts* (New York and London: Harper & Bros, 1924), 78.

<sup>9</sup> Seldes, “Ragtime,” 78.

<sup>10</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 197.

<sup>11</sup> Clement Greenberg, “The Plight of Our Culture,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 3 Affirmations and Refusals 1950-1956*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 133.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1976), 645.

addition to the social, political and educational reforms of the late nineteenth century, led to the rapid formation of an urban middle class, what George Gissing called the “quarter-educated”: “the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board schools”.<sup>13</sup> This new middle class, Arnold Bennett’s “backbone of the reading public” was voracious for “culture”, yet it

dislike[d] ... the raising of any question which it deems to have been decided: a peculiarity which at once puts it in opposition to all fine work, and to nearly all passable second-rate work. It also dislikes being confronted with anything that it considers "unpleasant," that is to say, interesting. It has a genuine horror of the truth neat. It quite honestly asks "to be taken out of itself," unaware that to be taken out of itself is the very last thing it really desires. Its religion is the *status quo*.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that Bennett’s description of the “middle-class” contains many of the primary criticisms of the mediocre – its conventionality, its preference for pleasure above intellectual rigour – demonstrates that the mediocre, in its plural form, was equated – and rather *conflated* – with a particular social class.

Indeed, critics such as Bennett believed that the explosion of a mediocre middle class would result in a parallel explosion of mediocre cultural objects. The middle-class’s mediocre tastes were “levelling down” culture, reducing “standards” and affecting a loss of “values”.<sup>15</sup> This new mass audience did not want to be “prodded or excited or seduced into spiritual activity”, but rather “comfortably bored into somnolence after its meals”.<sup>16</sup> It wanted, as Richard Aldington wrote in *The Egoist* (1909), “to be delicately and sentimentally tickled—more or less delicately, more or less sentimentally according to climate—with tales of love in varying degrees of chastity. Hence the demand for mediocre books.”<sup>17</sup> To satisfy the demands of the “quarter-educated”, literature was becoming a “trade”, reduced to something which “can be produced at a turning-lathe and taught in a reading-room”.<sup>18</sup> The “crux of the whole matter”, according to Aldington, was that

"Literature as a trade" needs a constant demand for new books, and since most people have uninquiring minds an imitation of good book or a popular book is more to their taste and therefore more profitable to publishers than an original, good book, whose originality will annoy most people and therefore make the book unprofitable to the publisher.<sup>19</sup>

In the twentieth century, then, it was “imitations” of “innocuous” dead authors such as Keats, not “original” works of art, that would sell – and thus, ultimately, it was the mediocre, not the artistic, that would get published.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 460.

<sup>14</sup> Arnold Bennett, “Middle-Class,” in *Books and Persons: Being Comments on a Past Epoch, 1908-1911* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1917), 97-98.

<sup>15</sup> Such claims appeared in many texts from this period, especially those by modernist critics. Indicative texts include F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: The Minority Press, 1930); Clive Bell, *Civilization* (West Drayton, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1947); and T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948). For more on the elite’s fear of this loss of “values”, see below.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Aldington, “Reviewing,” *The Egoist*, January 1, 1916, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Aldington, “Reviewing,” 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ouida, “New Literary Factors,” *The Times*, May 22, 1891, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Aldington, “Reviewing,” 5.

<sup>20</sup> Aldington, “Reviewing,” 5.

According to this logic, not only would the expansion of the mediocre middle classes lead to more mediocre cultural objects, but it would also threaten the *very existence* of high (elite) culture. In his seminal *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-9), the first text to define “culture” in the modern sense of “the best that has been thought and known”, Matthew Arnold claimed that the “middle-class [...] do not pursue sweetness and light”, but prefer instead the “machinery of business, chapels [and] tea meetings”.<sup>21</sup> If (high) culture was not “properly” valued, that is, if there was no longer a demand for “sweetness and light”, then publishers – and society at large – would give less funding to the arts, and the mediocre would engulf (high) culture completely. This idea of “engulfing” is significant: descriptions of the mediocre used water imagery to express its seemingly unstoppable rise. In his pamphlet, *The Nemesis of Mediocrity* (1917), Ralph Adams Cram described how “the feeble gleams of an old liberty are extinguished in the water-floods of doctrinaire legislation”.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Ouida argued in *The Times* that commercial literature “floods and gluts the English book market”,<sup>23</sup> and Edward Garnett wrote in *The English Review*, (1909) that “[w]ithout the constant revolt of the great, free spirits who are the innovating forces in art against the petrifying tendency of tradition, we know that the fairway of the main channel would gradually be silted up by the sand of mediocrity and the soft ooze of custom.”<sup>24</sup>

This wonderful phrase, “the soft ooze of custom” encapsulates everything the elites detested in what they termed the mediocre; oddly, it was the mediocre’s indeterminacy, its middle-of-the-road *inoffensiveness* that caused the most offense. Unlike the simple, unpretentious working classes, those whom Q. D. Leavis patronisingly called “country folk”, who “lived to some purpose without the aid of books other than their Bible”,<sup>25</sup> mediocre texts and people had “ideas above their own station”. Not content with just being “bad”, argued Woolf, the mediocre text or individual “ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power or prestige.”<sup>26</sup> By mixing “high” and “low”, mediocre objects and people forged a middle path, constructing a culture which, although (evidently) devoid of value, could be mistaken by the untrained eye for “culture *as such*”.<sup>27</sup> This was the elite’s real fear: that, as Greenberg warned, the mediocre would “cut the social ground from under high culture”.<sup>28</sup> If, as critics such as I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot and the Leavises believed, high culture was the “storehouse of recorded values”,<sup>29</sup> then the mediocre represented a serious challenge to the future health of Western civilisation and culture – not to mention an even more serious challenge to the intellectual elite’s (hitherto uninterrupted) cultural supremacy. If the “masses” began to question the elite’s privileged position as arbiters of taste, replacing “approved” cultural texts with the “pleasurable”, the “whimsical” or the “foolish” – in

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism,” in *Culture and Anarchy and other writings*, ed. Stevan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 99.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Adams Cram, *The Nemesis of Mediocrity* (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1919), 57-58.

<sup>23</sup> Ouida, “New Literary Factors,” 3.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Garnett, “Mr Doughty’s Poems,” *The English Review*, September 1909, 371.

<sup>25</sup> Leavis, *Fiction*, 209.

<sup>26</sup> Woolf, “Middlebrow,” 115.

<sup>27</sup> Greenberg, “Plight of Our Culture,” 140.

<sup>28</sup> Greenberg, “Plight of Our Culture,” 140.

<sup>29</sup> I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1949), 32.

short, the mediocre – then the elites could no longer justify or even fund their current way of life.

Consequently, the question of defining the mediocre is ultimately a question of power, one bound up with cultural protectionism and anxiety over lost revenue or status. The language used to describe the mediocre as a class reflects this fear: as D. L. LeMahieu observes, the cultural elite “often described crowd behaviour in language calculated to strip people of their full humanity”.<sup>30</sup> Plural nouns signifying the mediocre took on animalistic connotations such as “mongrels” (Cram), “sheep” (Woolf), or the “herd” (Q. D. Leavis). These troubling metaphors conjure up images of a passive, *subhuman* mass, motivated only by base or blind instinct. The mediocre (middle classes) are entirely homogenous, devoid of any individuality.

Such a generalization was characteristic of attempts to define the mediocre: while critics agreed upon their broad characteristics – they mixed high and low, they upheld the status quo, they constituted the majority and they had a collective mentality – critics offered little offered in the way of specifics. This lack of specificity is unsurprising; after all, “middling” is a relative term. How does one define the middle? That is, how does one define that which is “between”? Any attempt to define the interior, the “essence” of the middle has, perversely, to hinge on the without rather than the within, on the external categories or regions which border it, which *give it* its meaning, its identity, as middle. Its interior is dictated by its exterior, but this exterior is itself *interior*, an interstitial space sandwiched *between* high and low. The mediocre thus occupies a strange position in relation to the (its) exterior: usually, identity is defined positively according to the inside and negatively according to the outside: the “I” springs both from what is internal to me and how I differ from others. In the case of the mediocre, however, it is hard to discern between the inside and outside: its inside “is” (what is) outside.<sup>31</sup> Its identity springs solely from *that which it is not*; it is *neither* high *nor* low, and yet it is defined exclusively by its position *between* them. Any shift in (what constitutes) high or low – any shift in cultural value(s) – effects a parallel shift in the mediocre: it expands, contracts and contorts to absorb that which *no longer fits*, those people, texts and objects which have fallen from grace or risen too high.

The middling mediocre, then, *is not*; it “is” constituted according to context, through *positioning*. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes in *Being Singular Plural*,

"Being" is neither a state nor a quality, but rather the action according to which what Kant calls "the [mere] positing of a thing" takes place ("is"). The very simplicity of "position" implies no more, although no less, than its being discrete, in the mathematical sense, or its distinction *from*, in the sense of *with*, other (at least possible) positions, or its distinction *among*, in the sense of *between*, other positions. In other words, every position is also dis-position...<sup>32</sup>

The mediocre “is” what Nancy speaks of when he speaks of the “between”: its meaning, its content, its “beingness” emanate(s) from this distinction *among* or distinction *from* other possible positions, specifically, as a position that is not but “is” between high/low. It (passively) allows itself to be (dis)placed, defined and demarcated by what it is not,

<sup>30</sup> D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 108.

<sup>31</sup> For more on this relationship between inside and outside, see Jacques Derrida, “The Outside Is the Inside,” in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 44-64.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O-Byrne (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 12.

by those positions to which it is denied access. *As such*, its meaning cannot be unearthed or excavated; it has no sovereign properties, no essence. To again quote Nancy,

This "between," as its name implies, has neither a consistency nor continuity of its own. It does not lead from one to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge. Perhaps it is not even fair to speak of a "connection" to its subject; it is neither connected nor unconnected; it falls short of both...<sup>33</sup>

This point is crucial: the mediocre is not just a simple mid-way point between two extremes: it does not (properly) occupy *any place* and yet it resides "all over the place"; it is the norm, the standard, the *status quo*. It is everywhere and nowhere, (full of) content but (never simply) absent, always the same yet endlessly *displaced*, *deferred*, *different*: in short, *differant*.<sup>34</sup> As we will see in the following section, to try and pin down the mediocre was (is) to rely on near-synonyms, an infinite chain of substitutions in which meaning always slips out of reach.

## Mediocre as Moderate

The second related but different strategy of defining the mediocre used synonyms and substitutions to determine its essence. This strategy was as problematic as using spatial metaphors, not least because many of the "synonyms" were "fuzzy" (non)concepts "themselves". The mediocre was described as the average, the normal, the comfortable, the "usual thing", the conventional, the uniform and the commonplace, but none of these near-synonyms captured the mediocre's *essence*. They simply deferred and displaced the problem of definition: replacing the question, "what is (the) mediocre?" with "what is (the) "normal"?" In both cases, such questions are qualitative *and* quantitative, concerned both with sheer numbers (how many people have to do something before it becomes "normal"?) and issues of context, classification and value (at what point does a prevalent practice become "normal"? And, more importantly, who decides?); as a result, any answers – any definitions – could never be concrete.

And yet, despite this ontological indeterminacy, the mediocre as a category continued to be used, largely because *the term itself* appeared so natural, so commonsense. The mediocre thus represents a *paradigmatic* case of the Marxist notion of "naturalization": it is the (normal) making normal (of) the "norm", the (commonplace) rendering (of) the "commonplace" commonplace. This "naturalization" unfolds twice: it is a *double process*, first, acts are naturalized to make them appear normal, and thus "mediocre"; second, this naturalization is "itself" naturalized, making *the category of* the mediocre (and the systems of classification and evaluation which produce it) appear normal and commonsense. Although true of all ideology, with the mediocre this "naturalness" is all the more (in)visible: by its very (non)essence, the mediocre surrounds everyone everywhere; as a consequence, it is (apparently) impossible not to know what it is. The mediocre is so pervasive, so ubiquitous that it is appears *above* definition: why define that which is self-evident? As an anonymous book reviewer wrote in the *Observer* (1920), "if I cannot furnish a concise and exact definition of a high-brow any more than I can of an elephant or of a crowd, I know all

<sup>33</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 5.

<sup>34</sup> I will defer my discussion of difference here, posting it back to myself like Derrida's proverbial postcard before returning to it later (if, that is, one ever leaves difference behind).

three when I see them, and can make a number of definite assertions about each.”<sup>35</sup> While this sentiment relates to the high-brow and not to the mediocre, the principles remain the same – if it is easy to identify (and then berate) the mediocre, why bother defining it?<sup>36</sup>

Of course, as the vast array of characteristics ascribed to the mediocre demonstrates, there was no critical consensus on what comprised mediocrity. Ironically, the category of the mediocre was itself a sematic “everyman”, capable of being all things to all people. Mediocrity was a matter of perspective: those who identified with the middlebrow “common reader” felt that the mediocre possessed many admirable qualities. Oscar Levy, writing in *The New Age* (1908), maintained that the mediocre stood for “order, obedience, work, industry, duty, soberness, vegetarianism, and all good things”. Such “virtues” were the “very flower”, the “choicest fruit”, of Christianity.<sup>37</sup> In 1913 a leading article in the *Times* argued that even “great men [...] preferred the society of mediocre people”, quoting Swift’s portrait of the mediocre as ““a middle kind, both for understanding and fortune, who are perfectly easy, never impatient, and complying in everything”” to prove it.<sup>38</sup> Such “humble admirers” offered great writers “a holiday from criticism”, a chance to “talk lazily or whimsically, to say more or less than the truth without being asked to qualify or complete it”.<sup>39</sup> To the sympathetic, the mediocre were “splendid” people, “industrious, thrifty, honest, capable, healthy, patriotic to a high degree”.<sup>40</sup> They were “honourable” and always had their “hearts in the right place”.<sup>41</sup> To the unsympathetic (elite), on the other hand, the mediocre were, to cite another water metaphor, the “uncouth flotsam of the intellectual underworld”.<sup>42</sup> The mediocre individual was “lazy” (Aldington), “trivial”, “silly and weak” (Seldes); “the man whose passions and emotions are not deep, who is not overflowing with spirit and health, who is a mere collector of facts, figures and measurements, and who, in short, is mediocre” (J. M. Kennedy).<sup>43</sup> Where its supporters described the mediocre as pleasant, cheerful and respectable, its detractors portrayed the mediocre as self-satisfied, banal and ignorant.

Such characteristics appear to contradict one another – one cannot square laziness with industriousness, for instance, nor silliness with soberness – and yet there was often a surprising degree of convergence in descriptions. Definitions differed less according to content and more according to the *value placed upon* such characteristics. For example, while Dora Marsden conceded in her 1914 article “The Nature of Honour” that the mediocre were honourable, “honour” was but a

device of the moralists to escape the consequences of morality: from sameness, monotony, mediocrity, being the name given to estimates of actions conducted in the conventional

<sup>35</sup> “The World of Letters: “High-Brows” in Books,” *The Observer*, 17 October, 1920, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Yet, as we shall see implicitly at the end of this essay, one may also begin to suspect that this quandary is characteristic of *all* attempts at definition, thus rendering the mediocre just another (blander) instance of a more generalizable (in)essential indeterminacy.

<sup>37</sup> Oscar Levy, “Stendhal, the Prophet,” *The New Age*, April 18, 1908, 488.

<sup>38</sup> “The Humble Friends of Great Men,” *The Times*, August 2, 1913, 7.

<sup>39</sup> “Humble Friends,” 7.

<sup>40</sup> Stevens, *Observations*, 35.

<sup>41</sup> Stevens, *Observations*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> Cram, *Nemesis*, 8. In one way or another, all the watery metaphors used in those descriptions of the mediocre are suggestive of junk drifting with the current or, as the stock phrase now goes, “going with the flow”.

<sup>43</sup> J. M. Kennedy, ““Nietzsche and Art”,” *The New Age*, September 7, 1911, 455.



sphere, but conducted with such a degree of intensity as to constitute a distinction which is conferred on the sphere itself. Moral conduct being customary conduct, it is in its very intention destined to be mediocre. It is the "usual thing," and honour is conferred when the "usual thing" is done with such an intensity of energy as to sublimate its non-distinctiveness into distinction.<sup>44</sup>

In this scathing attack, Marsden takes apart the supposedly positive quality of "honour", a quality that for others was not just admirable but absolutely *vital* when at war, exposing it as a weak, spineless, limpet-like adherence to the monotonous and moral. Such an attack is perhaps not surprising given that it was published in *The Egoist*, key modernist journal and mouthpiece of several reactionary modernists, including Ezra Pound, who himself later bemoaned the "tawdry cheapness" that results when beauty is "decreed in the marketplace".<sup>45</sup> Yet Marsden was not alone in reappraising such values: that same year an editorial in the (much less radical) *Times* attacked the analogous quality of "respectability", arguing that while the term denoted those that were "clean, honest and sober", "[n]o one would say he liked a man because he was respectable; he might describe a cook or gardener in these terms to some one [*sic*] who asked for their character, but he would not recommend an equal so".<sup>46</sup> Respectability was a virtue "that one would mention in a servant rather than a friend"; as such, the "word acquired a slightly patronising meaning, and we speak of a respectable performance when we mean it is painstaking but mediocre".<sup>47</sup>

The fact that *the same* characteristics were painted so differently shows just how much definitions of the mediocre were dictated by notions of value and "taste". The mediocre is thus what Terry Eagleton, after John E. Ellis, calls a "functional" rather than an "ontological" term; it "tell[s] us about what *we do*, not about the fixed being of things".<sup>48</sup> Rather like the (non)category of "literature", the mediocre is the name given to a text (or person) which (appears to) possess certain qualities which we do or do not value. To speak of the mediocre is to speak of systems of evaluation and classification, that is, of "taste", that apparently "natural" matrix which, as Pierre Bourdieu has so powerfully argued, is the product of class distinctions.<sup>49</sup> Again, the mediocre was governed not by content, or by essence, but by the socio-economic.

Ultimately, these differing definitions of the mediocre revealed a parallel disparity in individual outlooks on art and life (and the former's role in the latter). So much of that classified as "mediocre" simply constituted that which the commentator disliked; instead of focusing on the mediocre's specific characteristics, critics such as Clive Bell, Aldous Huxley and the Woolfs focused instead on what the mediocre *liked*. In *Civilization* (1928), Clive Bell described the mediocre as those who could conceive of "no better life" than

a day spent in pursuing and killing, or in some bloodless pastime, champagne at dinner, and long cigars after, an evening at the movies or music-hall, with an occasional reading of Miss Corelli and Michael Arlen, *The Mirror*, *John Bull*, or *The Strand Magazine*, and all

<sup>44</sup> Dora Marsden, "The Nature of Honour," *The Egoist*, November 16, 1914, 417.

<sup>45</sup> Ezra Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Rainey, 50.

<sup>46</sup> "On Respectability," *The Times*, May 27, 1914, 9.

<sup>47</sup> "On Respectability", 9.

<sup>48</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 8 (my emphasis).

<sup>49</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (New York and London: Routledge, 1984).

the time a firm belief in the sanctity of the marriage-tie and a genuine detestation of foreigners, artists, and high-brows.<sup>50</sup>

While Bell makes some attempt to characterise the mediocre (their belief in marriage and dislike of foreigners), he really just draws up a list of activities he *himself* did not enjoy. Such a list seems to anticipate the one Jean-François Lyotard assembled some fifty years later to denounce the “degree zero” of postmodern consumerist eclecticism, in which “one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald’s food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and “retro” clothes in Hong Kong”.<sup>51</sup> Although Lyotard was speaking of a more globalised world, the *way* the two critics admonished this perceived “slackening” of public taste is arrestingly similar.

Indeed, the fact that the touchstones and signifiers of mediocrity are so different in Bell’s and Lyotard’s condemnations (McDonald’s as opposed to champagne at dinner) demonstrates just how impermanent and transitory the category of the mediocre is. Even during the same period, considerations about the mediocre varied according to personal taste. Compare, for instance, Bell’s account with Aldous Huxley’s acerbic depiction of the mediocre “Englishman and Englishwoman” in “Forehead Villainous Low” (1931):

They have about a thousand a year and perhaps two children, who are perpetually making the sweetest, the most killingly Barrie-esque remarks. They are, of course, the greatest dears and awfully good sports; and as for their sense of humour – it’s really priceless. When they find a couple of woodlice in their garden, they instantly christen them Agatha and Archibald – than which, as every one will agree, nothing could well be funnier.<sup>52</sup>

Or with Woolf’s portrayal of the mediocre, who like

Queen Anne furniture (faked, but none the less expensive); first editions of dead writers—always the worst; pictures, or reproductions from pictures, by dead painters; houses in what is called “the Georgian style”—but never anything new, [...] for to buy living art requires living taste.<sup>53</sup>

In each description, the individual writer simply seizes upon a characteristic or object they dislike and this becomes, like the “tins of food” in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, emblematic of a wider, endemic mediocrity. Such depictions are consequently very bitter: they stem from a deep-rooted distaste, prompted yet again by the fear and anxiety with which the elite viewed the rising middle classes. Even putting the malice to one side, these debunkings *still do not work* as definitions: they are too subjective and specific to provide any insight into what the mediocre actually *is*.

More often than not, then, those attempting to define the mediocre as moderate (like those who defined the mediocre as middling) resorted to using the *via negativa*, to determining it by its *lack*, not possession, of qualities. The mediocre was (portrayed as) so *undistinguished*, *unremarkable*, *unintellectual*, *uncritical*, *inoffensive*, *indifferent* that one is left wondering whether, in spite of the overwhelming piling up of (non)categories, the mediocre “has” any positive identifying characteristics at all. For something so ubiquitous, so completely, *essentially* “normal”, the mediocre is strangely

<sup>50</sup> Bell, *Civilization*, 73.

<sup>51</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 76.

<sup>52</sup> Aldous Huxley, “Forehead Villainous Low,” in *Music at Night & Other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), 201.

<sup>53</sup> Woolf, “Middlebrow,” 118.

lacking, devoid of meaning, presence or properties. It lurks in the shadows of full daylight, always there but properly no-where. Thus, while they utilised different strategies, those who defined the mediocre as middling and moderate came to the same impasse. Notwithstanding their best attempts at definition, the mediocre remained slippery, “betwixt and between”, “neither this nor that”, exceeding and eluding ontological netting.

“Like” Derrida’s nonconceptual differance, then, the mediocre “*is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form”: it “has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent.”<sup>54</sup> Consequently, any ontology of the mediocre must thus be a *nontology*, an exploration of difference (as distinction from, and among, high and low) and the (eternal) deferral of meaning, essence, *being*, in unsatisfactory chains of “nonsynonymous substitutions”.<sup>55</sup> To (dis)place it (again) in another chain, the mediocre, recalls the “trace”, the “supplement”, the “reserve”, in that it “is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself”.<sup>56</sup> In this the mediocre is not the exception – if the mediocre “is” anything, it is anything *but* exceptional – but rather the general rule: it is that “assemblage”, that “name” (one of many) which (re)marks, gestures towards, *traces* the differance at the “heart” of all things, of all (non)concepts. It “reveals” the violence of the same, the unique or singular, and thus of naming and classifying; in doing so, it exposes the constructedness of *all* cultural categories/categorisations, of *all* systems of value. It shows that the *very practice of* definition represents not an unearthing of innate meaning, but rather a violent “gathering into the One”, a violent *imposition* of sameness, an imposition born of the desire to control, to protect, to conceal, to oppress.<sup>57</sup>

Paradoxically, then, the category of the mediocre disrupts the very *status quo* it attempts to maintain. In (passively) resisting definition it exposes the play of politics, wealth, power and privilege behind the commonsense or “natural”, calling into question the established, familiar, *comfortable* cultural and social codes that underpin Western society. It is a *pharmakon*: both remedy and poison, leading its-self (doubly) astray, destabilizing not only that which it sets out to protect (the *status quo*) but also *and at the same time* – the mediocre is defined, after all, *as* the *status quo* – destroying its own (simulacrum of) self-presence, of essence. It inflicts violence upon itself, a double violence that “itself” springs from/traces/re-marks *an-other* (inverse) violence: the origin-al violence of “The One”, namely, the violent exclusion of the “other”.<sup>58</sup> This double, triple, these *multiple* violence(s) are all – or, rather, they all *return to* – the “same”, this same violence of the same that is the same in all things.

In “exposing” this original violence, this play and suppression of differance, the mediocre thus traces (a trace of) the radical two- or other-ness at the “core” of everything. Consequently, ironically, we are left with the (un)comfortably (un)surprising conclusion that definitions of the mediocre as status quo may be more accurate than we suspected, albeit not in ways we first imagined. Despite the detours,

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 6.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, “Différance,” 12.

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, “Différance,” 24.

<sup>57</sup> The phrase “gathering into the One” is Derrida’s: for more on violence and/of The One, see below but also Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 78.

<sup>58</sup> Again, see Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 78.

the wrong turns, the deferrals, the mediocre can still be defined as - it "is" still, perversely, *above all else* - the usual thing, the commonplace, the quintessentially *normal* state of affairs.

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## **Nici prea-prea, nici foarte-foarte Spre o (n)ontologie a mediocrului**

Mediocrul sau ce constituia mediocritatea era o problemă de dezbatere intensă la finalul secolului al XIX-lea și la începutul secolului al XX-lea în Marea Britanie. Comentatori culturali, scriitori faimoși, pamfletari și membri ai publicului au încercat cu toții să definească mediocrul fără succes. Caracterizat de cel „mediu”, cel drept, cel din mijloc, mediocrul, prin lipsa lui de remarcabilitate, este un concept „remarcabil” de dificil de definit.

Cu privire la articolele de ziar modern și critică, eseu se îndreaptă către o (n)ontologie a mediocrului, examinând (lipsa) strategiilor utilizate pentru a defini mediocrul în perioada modern(istă). Articolul susține teza că mediocrul, în persistența sa de a nu-și agita starea de fapt, în mod pervers perturbă însăși ideea sau posibilitatea definirii, nu doar denumirea sistemelor stabilite de clasificări culturale sau sociale în chestiune, dar și provocând noțiunilor acceptate ale singularității, esența modului de a fi.