

Hogarth Essays

Second Series

3977  
f 59

**HUNTING THE Highbrow**

# THE HOGARTH ESSAYS

*Second Series*

I. COMPOSITION AS EXPLANATION.

By GERTRUDE STEIN. 3*s.* 6*d.*

II. ROCHESTER.

By BONAMY DOBRÉE. 2*s.* 6*d.*

III. IMPENETRABILITY.

By ROBERT GRAVES. 2*s.* 6*d.*

IV. CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP.

By ROSE MACAULAY. 2*s.*

V. HUNTING THE Highbrow.

By LEONARD WOOLF. 2*s.* 6*d.*

VI. THE NATURE OF BEAUTY IN ART AND LITERATURE.

By CHARLES MAURON. 3*s.* 6*d.*

VII. THE APOLOGY OF ARTHUR RIMBAUD.

By EDWARD SACKVILLE WEST. 2*s.* 6*d.*

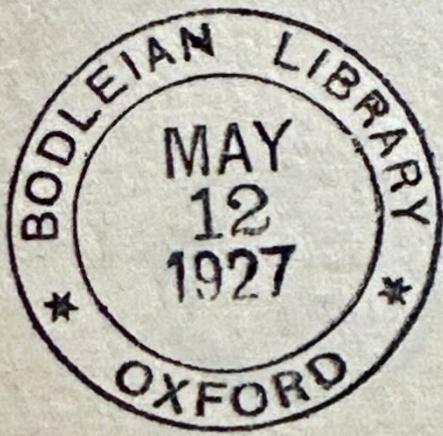
# HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

LEONARD WOOLF



*Published by Leonard & Virginia Woolf at The  
Hogarth Press, 52 Tavistock Square, London, W.C.1*

1927



Printed in Great Britain by  
NEILL & CO., LTD., EDINBURGH.



## HUNTING THE Highbrow

THE highbrow is an extremely unpopular person. The hunt is up in the Press and in the atmosphere, which is used to convey through valves or crystals information, amusement, or strike news to so many happy homes. When I open a paper or listen-in I am continually told that we are all much better fellows —more honest, and clean, and happy, and wise, and English—for being low-brows. Being, if not a highbrow, at any rate on the side of the highbrows, I am not cheered by the news. But the hunt is so persistent and vocal that it has led me to make certain investigations, of which this paper is the result. The paper might, perhaps, be more accurately called Notes on the Natural

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

### History of the Highbrow and on the Reasons for Hunting Him.

Let me begin from two attacks upon the unfortunate creature which fell into my hands in the same week, for they will give us an idea of what the quarry appears to be to the hunters. The first is by Mr Gilbert Frankau, the famous novelist, and is entitled "An Author's Feelings on Publication Day." Mr Frankau broadcasted his feelings, and they were subsequently circulated on paper to the Press. Mr Frankau seems to define a highbrow as anyone who does not like the novels written by Mr Frankau. That is not very illuminating, but he goes on to make the following general remarks:—

"If there are any highbrows listening to-night, I suppose they will think that last sentence of mine a most terrible give-away. Highbrows, you see, are funny people. They do not believe

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

there is any good in the great heart of the British public. They consider that the book or play or picture which entertains and educates and pleases and uplifts ninety people out of every hundred cannot possibly have any real artistic merit. They—the highbrows—think that literature is an exclusive thing—rather like one of those ugly statues, or still uglier pictures, which they are always telling us we ought to admire. But such beliefs are not mine. In fact, I am positive that if an author has a really good story to tell, and really interesting characters to put in it, and really interesting scenes to depict, it is his bounden duty to write his tale in such a way that it is comprehensible and entertaining and uplifting to the vast majority of his fellow-countrymen and countrywomen.

“I do not believe that literature, or any other art, can be the exclusive pro-

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

perty of the few. I feel that a fine book must be the common property of everybody who can read. And I am quite sure that Homer and Virgil and Dante and Shakespeare and Charles Dickens—just to name a few of the world's greatest story-tellers—did not write for any little clique, or for any highbrow, but straight to the hearts of the majority of the people who could either read or listen to them in their day."

I will return to this extremely interesting view of the natural history of the highbrow in a moment, but before doing so I want to quote some extracts from an article by Mr Robert Magill, which appeared in a Sunday paper in the same week in which Mr Frankau broadcasted his opinions. After saying that nowadays it is extremely difficult to be a highbrow, "because good stuff is getting so well known," and "the grocer's boy

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

dumps a pound of tea on the windowsill while he whistles an excerpt from Beethoven's Fourth Quartet," he proceeds:

"It would be well to examine what one means by a highbrow. The real highbrow, of course, is the man who prefers the appeal to his intellect rather than that solely to his senses. But as intellect is rare, and other people also have intellects, this doesn't always work. Therefore, in his disgust at finding somebody he regards as less intelligent than himself is capable of liking the stuff he likes, he retaliates by trying to persuade himself that he doesn't like it at all."

The scientific natural historian often finds that the sportsman has only a vague idea of the nature of the game which he hunts or shoots. The man with a gun includes under the name partridge or snipe, deer or elk, an enormous number of creatures which, the scientist knows,

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

belong to different species or even genera. It will be obvious to anyone with scientific training that those mighty highbrow-hunters, Mr Frankau and Mr Magill, are doing the same thing with the highbrow. It is clear from their own words that they include under the name the following quite distinct species:—

1. *Altifrons altifrontissimus*, the original, primitive, and real highbrow or intellectual who, as Mr Magill puts it, prefers the appeal to his intellect rather than that solely to his senses.
2. *Altifrons æstheticus* var. *severus*, the man who only likes what is best in literature, art, and music, or, as Mr Magill puts it, good stuff.
3. *Altifrons frankauensis*, the man who is not entertained and uplifted by the novels of Mr Gilbert Frankau.
4. *Pseudaltifrons intellectualis*, the man who only likes what nobody else can understand.

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

5. *Pseudaltifrons æstheticus*, the man who, in literature, art, and music, only likes the latest thing or the oldest thing or the thing which the majority dislikes.

This rough and preliminary classification already teaches us something important about the natural history of the highbrow. Speaking broadly, there are two distinct families, species, or genera of this animal, and not only is each of these species subdivided into a considerable number of subspecies, but to each has attached itself a parasitic species of pseudo-highbrow which has been forced by the struggle for social existence or distinction to mimic the true highbrow. The chief characteristic of the one species is a marked development of or attachment to the intellect, of the other a peculiar development of æsthetic appreciation.

Both Mr Frankau and Mr Magill

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

confuse the intellectual with the æsthetic highbrow, but it is most important for scientific purposes to keep them distinct. For they are not the same animal. It is true that not all male highbrows are impotent or female highbrows sterile, and therefore you occasionally come across a hybrid highbrow, who has all the characteristics of both species. But there is no necessary connection between the intellect and æsthetic appreciation, and therefore there are dozens of intellectual highbrows who are not æsthetic, and dozens of æsthetic highbrows who are not intellectual. Aristotle, William Godwin, Jeremy Bentham are typical examples of the pure *altifrons altifrontissimus* uncrossed with *æstheticus*; poets (Swinburne, for example), artists, and musicians will provide you with many examples of *altifrons æstheticus* uncrossed with *altifrontissimus*.

The distinction between the two

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

species is important because, although the hunters are not always themselves fully conscious of the fact, each is hunted for a different reason. I propose to deal with the case of *æstheticus* first. Mr Frankau and Mr Magill between them make it quite clear why the æsthetic highbrow is unpopular. Mr Magill, who is very fair and sportsman-like, implies that the genuine æsthetic highbrow only likes what is æsthetically "good stuff." But the main charge against him is that he does not like what the great public likes, and Mr Frankau, in summing up and passing sentence on him, lets fall the *obiter dictum* that only what the great public likes can really be good stuff.

The quarrel between the æsthetic highbrow and his hunters is, in fact, concerned with a difference in standards, and it raises æsthetic and psychological problems of considerable intricacy and

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

prices for its private and public art collections.

The process is a very mysterious one by which a book, picture, or piece of music either passes into oblivion or becomes a classic, and even more mysterious is the part played in that process by the highbrow and the great heart of the public respectively. Take the five writers mentioned by Mr Frankau. His words make it clear that the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy*, *King Lear*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit* are all accepted as classics by the anti-highbrow, and are certified as going straight to the hearts of the majority of the people. But it is also clear that of two, at least, of these writers Mr Frankau, the spokesman of the public, has never read a word. No one who had ever read a line of the *Aeneid* could possibly say that it has a really good story, or that it has really interesting characters, or that it has

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

really interesting scenes. To call Virgil one of the world's greatest story-tellers is just about as true as to call Aristotle one of the world's greatest poets. The idea that the *Aeneid* could be comprehensible, entertaining, and uplifting to the vast majority of the Romans of the Augustan age is ludicrous. The number of people who have understood and enjoyed that difficult, boring, absurd, and magnificent book since it was first written some 2000 years ago probably has not yet equalled the number of people who are entertained and uplifted to-day by a popular novel in the first week after publication. And ninety-nine per cent. of the people who understand and enjoy Virgil are highbrows, for if there was ever a highbrow poet who wrote for highbrows it was the man who wrote the *Aeneid*. Yet here is a highbrow, who can only be understood and appreciated by highbrows and is

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

only read by highbrows, accepted by the highbrow-hunters as a classic, quoted as an example of a popular writer, and miraculously metamorphosized into a popular novelist. Surely a strange phenomenon!

What I have said of Virgil, I believe to be even more true of Dante. Personally, like Mr Frankau, I have never read Dante, but I have often looked at him, and have always decided to reserve him as a book to be read in old age when the evenings will be long and time will move slowly. But I have opened him sufficiently often to see that he is not a great story-teller, that he does not go straight to the heart of the ordinary Fascist, and that you have to have a pretty high brow even to understand him.

Let me sum up the position to which my investigations of the habits of *altifrons æstheticus* have brought me. This animal is attracted by objects which it

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

calls works of art. It professes to like only what Mr Magill calls "good stuff," and it does not seem to enjoy contemporary popular authors, Royal Academy pictures, or the music played by the Savoy Havana Band. It occasionally announces that a contemporary writer, let us say, is producing "good stuff," and this is the point at which its behaviour is scientifically interesting. I should say that in the vast majority of cases a writer who is pronounced by *altifrons æstheticus* var. *severus* to be a great writer is not accepted as such for an appreciable time by the general public, and that a very large proportion of new writers who are pronounced by contemporary highbrows to be great writers are eventually recognized as such by the great public. You have, then, this curious result, that those who are hunted and derided for their opinions as highbrows are more often than not

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

in the end justified by the opinions of their hunters.

To investigate and explain this phenomenon would involve a long discussion of the relation between artistic value and popular appreciation. I must confine myself to a few disjected suggestions. I suggest, first, that the highbrow is genuinely attracted by elements in literature, let us say, which may conveniently be called æsthetic, and which are not primarily interesting or attractive to the great public. I deny that the qualities which make the *Aeneid*, or *King Lear*, or the *Iliad*, or *War and Peace*, or *Paradise Lost*, or *Madame Bovary*, or *Emma* good stuff have anything to do with such things as really good and uplifting stories, interesting characters, and interesting scenes, though I agree that what the general public primarily wants from a book is a good story and a certain amount of

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

uplift. The highbrow is therefore in literature one of those unpleasant persons whose standards are different from the majority, and that is a very good reason for hunting him.

But that is not the most interesting point. The really curious problem is why in the end the standards of æsthetic highbrowism should prevail with the general public. It is indisputable that by far the greater number of books which live and become classics and are universally recognized as masterpieces are books which are good stuff by the standards of highbrows, not by those of the great public. Mr Frankau, when he wanted to think of a masterpiece, thought of the *Aeneid*, not of *Two Little Wooden Shoes*, which years ago went straight to the great heart of a nation; Mr Magill, when he wanted to think of some musical good stuff, thought of Beethoven's Fourth Quartet (whatever

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

exactly that may be), not of "The Lost Chord," or even "Taratraboomdeay." Every ten years or so tens of thousands of novels, poems, biographies, essays are produced which go straight to the great heart of the world's public; there for a publishing season of six months they flourish luxuriantly, pouring, I hope, a shower of golden blossoms into the lap of the author and publisher; but at the end of each publishing season 999 out of every 1000 have died, and at the end of ten years probably not even the name of one of them survives in the memory of anyone except their own authors, while at the end of fifty years even that has perished with the authors. Meanwhile, one or two or three highbrow productions which, with difficulty, sold 1000 copies to struggle into a second edition after two or three years, will have taken firm root in the heart of the ordinary man, so that at the

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

end of fifty years they are ripe for sanctification in the Temple Classics or Everyman's Library.

I do not pretend that I can give any convincing psychological explanation of this curious phenomenon, but there are one or two points which are worth considering. One of the most obscure points connected with the immortality of highbrow and the mortality of popular literature is this. Why should the good story which goes straight to the heart of one generation practically never go to the heart of any subsequent generation? The highbrow of 1926 reads the *Aeneid*, Dante, *Paradise Lost*, Keats, *Crotchet Castle*, Meredith, and *Erewhon* with considerable pleasure; the reader of Mr Frankau's novels would never dream of reading *The Romance of the Forest* (Mrs Radcliffe, 7th ed. 1806) *The Doctor's Wife* (Miss Braddon, 7th ed. 1866), or *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* (Mrs Wood,

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

1st ed. 1864, 12th 1888). I cannot find any explanation of this fact which really satisfies me. The obvious explanation is that a book which has to make its appeal only through its story and characters and scenes has to be topical. Manners and customs change, and what is a good story in 1806, 1866, or 1888 may well seem simply silly in 1926. There is, of course, some truth in this, but it is certainly not a complete explanation. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are still good stories, and so are *Pride and Prejudice*, *Villette*, and *Wuthering Heights*. I am inclined to think that there must be dozens of dead best-sellers which, if they were republished, might be best-sellers again. Perhaps the terrible infantile mortality among best-sellers is connected with the exigencies of the supply rather than with the tastes of the consumers. A high birth-rate is inevitably accompanied by a high

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

death-rate. People who produce books which are comprehensible, entertaining, and uplifting to the vast majority of their fellow-countrymen and country-women tend to produce one at least every twelve months, and often go on doing this for twenty or thirty years. If all of them remained best-sellers all the time, the rest of the world would very soon have to spend every hour of the day reading best-sellers in order to keep up with the supply. The only solution is to kill off the old in order to make room for the new. On the other hand, the highbrow is a very slow-breeding animal; he is rarely prolific; he is often in favour of and practises birth control; and there are not very many of him who are actually writing books in any generation. The problems of over-population do not, therefore, apply to highbrow literature. The highbrow considers himself fortunate if one book as good as

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

*Crotchet Castle* appears in twenty years, or one as good as *War and Peace* in a century. The consequence is that it is not necessary to kill *Paradise Lost* in order to find time to read Proust.

The most interesting problems are, however, connected with the process by which works which have real artistic merit, according to the standards of æsthetic highbrows, seem eventually to go to the heart of the public and receive the frozen immortality accorded to recognized classics. It should be said at once that Mr Frankau is certainly mistaken on one point. I claim to have as intimate an acquaintance as he has with the modern *altifrons æstheticus*, and it is certainly untrue that this creature holds that the book, play, or picture which appeals to ninety-nine people out of a hundred cannot possibly have artistic merit. Nearly every modern highbrow, for instance, would say that

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

Dickens was a writer of genius, and it is notorious that his novels have always gone straight to the great heart of the British public. It is true that some very severe æsthetic highbrows would maintain that the qualities which make a book or a picture a great work of art are never those which make it appeal to ninety-nine out of every hundred people. But that is a very different thing from saying that a work which is popular cannot have artistic merit.

You have, therefore, to consider two theories which are at the opposite poles to one another. One is that of the most highbrow highbrows, which I have just stated; the other is that of people who believe with Mr Frankau that nothing can be a great work of art which cannot be understood and appreciated by practically all ordinary people. Personally, I incline to think that the truth is too complicated to be covered by such simple

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

and sweeping formulæ, and that it lies somewhere between the two extremes.

Mr Frankau's statement is obviously absurd. The *Aeneid* is indisputably a great poem, but however educated the world might be, it would always exasperate and bore the vast majority of its inhabitants, and in this case I should always number myself among the majority, for in literature often *video meliora proboque*, but, with ninety-nine people out of a hundred, *deteriora sequor*. The *Phædrus* is, to my mind, a greater work of art than the *Aeneid*, but it is certain that not one per 1000 of the Athenians could have understood and appreciated it when it was written. How many people out of every hundred could truthfully say that they understand and are entertained by *Urn Burial*, or Donne's poems, or *Paradise Lost*, or *Tristram Shandy*, or *La Bruyère*, or Wordsworth's *Prelude*, or *The Brothers*

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

*Karamazov*, or Proust? And how many people will be prepared to deny that these are great works of literature? No, the idea that popularity is a test of artistic merit is merely the day-dream of a popular writer. Most great literature is not easy to read or understand; it is often extremely boring; it is very rarely entertaining or amusing. That is why it is rarely read for or with pleasure by the great public and why, when it first appears, it is frequently condemned as mere highbrow stuff by ninety-nine out of every hundred people.

On the other hand, I doubt the statement that the qualities which make a book a great work of art never appeal to the vast majority of people. It is probably true that when a book is both a work of art and popular, the qualities which give it æsthetic merit are not those which have most to do with its popularity—but that is a very different

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

thing. Let me give an example. Mr Frankau says that Shakespeare is one of the world's greatest story-tellers, and in a sense this is true. Shakespeare does sometimes have a good story to tell (though sometimes he has a very bad and muddled one). As a character drawer he is superb, and his scenes, both tragic and comic, are often magnificent. Now I am ready to agree with Mr Frankau that, speaking generally, it is the story and the characters which appeal to the majority of people. But it is absurd to pretend that *King Lear* is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, play ever written because of its story and characters. If you look upon *King Lear* as a story it is really silly, and even the characters are not particularly interesting. The æsthetic merits of the play are in fact very little connected with the story, plot, characters, and scenes. In other words, the æsthetic qualities of

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

Shakespeare are not those which primarily appeal to the majority of people.

One is still left with the question why, in that case, Shakespeare, and not Miss Dell or Mr Hutchinson, is recognized by the public as the greatest of English writers? Partly, of course, it is snobbery. The highbrow is abused and hunted and his standards are derided, but the incorrigible snobbery of the human race brings it about that his æsthetic opinions and standards are adopted by his hunters. It is simply not true that the majority of ordinary people understand and appreciate and read Shakespeare; he bores them, and he bores them because he is an intellectual and æsthetic highbrow writing for intellectual and æsthetic highbrows. And what is true of Shakespeare is infinitely more true of most other great writers.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that the æsthetic qualities which make a book a

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

great work of art never appeal to the public. For one has to face the fact that it is not merely the highbrows who keep the great corpus of classics in all languages alive. The really popular writers of each generation die, the great writers live, and they live to some extent at any rate in the hearts and speech of the public. Chaucer and Shakespeare and Sterne and Fielding and Jane Austen may not be very widely read, but they are English literature to the non-highbrow as well as to the highbrow. Mrs Radcliffe, Miss Braddon, and Mrs Wood are nothing at all; they are simply dead and buried together with Gower, Thompson, and Southey. That, I think, is a very remarkable fact —not a single non-highbrow second-rate popular writer slips through the highbrow sieve of immortality to be enshrined by the great public as a great writer in the teeth of the highbrows.

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

I cannot believe that this is due merely to the æsthetic dictatorship of the highbrow, or to undiluted snobbery of the non-highbrow. Surely, if that were the case, the ordinary man would have occasionally asserted himself, and we should find that one or two really popular writers, who only write good stories and go straight to the great heart of the public, had crept into immortality. But where are they? I cannot see a single one of them, though I could name dozens of pure brows, whom the ordinary man numbers among the world's great writers. The reason must, I think, be that real artistic merit does have, at any rate to a limited extent, some popular appeal. And if one examines the ordinary non-highbrow attitude towards the classics, ancient and modern, one can see something of the way in which this works.

I suggest first that æsthetic qualities,

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

when combined with non-aesthetic qualities which are popular, produce an effect which the ordinary man feels and recognizes as something different from and better than that of popular and ephemeral literature. Thus no first-class novelist is ever as popular as a really bad novelist, because the aesthetic necessities involved in good novel-writing make it impossible for the writer to concentrate his attention on producing a good story and interesting characters, something which will immediately be understood and appreciated by ninety-nine out of a hundred persons. But where a great artist can also produce a good story, he will obtain a modified popularity which is quite distinct from that of the mere best-seller, because his aesthetic qualities have their effect. I believe that thousands of non-highbrows appreciate Scott and Jane Austen in a way in which they do not appreciate

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

Mr Hutchinson or Mr Frankau. They get more undiluted pleasure from Mr Hutchinson and Mr Frankau, but from Scott and Jane Austen they get something besides the pleasure of day-dreaming through a good story; they get, in fact, some of that purely æsthetic pleasure which is what appeals to the highbrow. And the non - highbrow quite consciously recognizes the distinction; he calls Scott and Jane Austen good stuff. What applies to the novelist also applies to the poet and the essayist. Tennyson was never as popular as Ella Wheeler Wilcox, but in his sentiments and sentimentality he had some of the qualities which have sold *Poems of Passion* by the hundred thousand. Those are the qualities which made him a second-class best-seller among poets. But he was also an æsthetic highbrow poet, and as such he is recognized by the non-highbrows;

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

he is good stuff, but Ella Wheeler Wilcox isn't. Considerable numbers of the great public will read and thrill to "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean" a hundred years after it was written, but already the other day I saw Mrs Wilcox sinking into oblivion when I bought one of her books reduced to threepence on Smith's bookstall at Polegate station in Sussex.

There is another reason which makes me think that æsthetic merit can accord an author a modified popularity, at any rate if he be dead. It is obvious that new writers, painters, and musicians of great æsthetic originality are not only not appreciated, but are frequently actively disliked by the public when they first appear. A generation later they will apparently be appreciated by hundreds of people who are not high-brows. There was an element in Keats, Wagner, and Cézanne, for instance, an

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

æsthetic element with an immediate appeal to a few highbrows, which at first aroused in ordinary people a genuine and instinctive aversion. Fifty years later the same element produces no such hostile reaction; on the contrary, it appears to give to a considerable number of the public much of the same kind of pleasure as was originally confined to the highbrow. It seems to me unreasonable to believe that the original hostile reaction was genuine and the later pleasure unreal or mere snobbery. The more probable explanation is this: In works of art the qualities which are primarily attractive to the ordinary man are generally not æsthetic. But when he is given sufficient time to grow accustomed to and understand the æsthetic methods and intentions of an artist or a school, the æsthetic merits have their effect upon and their appeal to him. The non-highbrow who has

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

just begun to understand and appreciate Wordsworth or Beethoven finds himself up against something new and disturbing, which he does not primarily want, when Keats or Wagner swims into his ken—his first reaction is annoyance, and he shows it by deriding any highbrow who may tell him that Keats is a great poet or Wagner a great composer. But give him a little time, and after quarter or half a century he will have grown accustomed to the new rhythms and new methods and will allow them to have their proper, pleasurable effect on him.

I do not know that there is very much more to say about *altifrons æstheticus*, and I still have to deal with *altifrons altifrontissimus*. Before doing so, however, I suppose that I ought to give a word or two to *pseudaltifrons æstheticus*. This is not a very interesting animal, whom we have all come across from time

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

to time lurking in the undergrowth of Cambridge, Oxford, Chelsea, Bloomsbury, and other favourable localities. He is really a cross between two genera widely dispersed over the world's surface, the bore and the snob. Highbrow hunters, who, like all sportsmen, are more interested in killing their game than knowing its habits, always confuse the *altifrons æstheticus* with the *pseud-altifrons æstheticus*. They are also mistaken about the numbers and habits of this animal. *Pseudaltifrons æstheticus* is not, in my fortunate experience, very common. The study of great works of art entails so much tedious labour that bores and snobs usually find other more fruitful fields for their talents and activities. But there are a certain number of hybrid bore-snobs who have fastened upon literature, art, and music as their peculiar habitat. It is not, however, really true that even they, as

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

people like Mr Frankau believe, consider that literature is written for little cliques or is the exclusive property of the few. What is true of them is that, having, with justice, no reliance on their own æsthetic judgments, they are always after the latest thing either in antiquity or modernity—in fact, they are apt to run off with the crumbs which fall from the table of *altifrons æstheticus*. And there I propose to leave them.

*Altifrons altifrontissimus*, whom I now have to deal with, is a most formidable animal, very different from the mild-mannered and often charming *altifrons æstheticus*. He is the intellectual proper, the man who has a passion for the intellect. The reason for hating and hunting him is obvious. Ordinarily an innocuous and slightly ridiculous animal, he may at any moment and in any department of life become a terrible menace.

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

In ordinary times we very rarely think, and the use of the intellect, except for the purpose of finding reasons to support our passions and prejudices, is painful and distasteful to us. But the spectacle of another man using his intellect is much more painful and distasteful to us. By the time that we have arrived at the age of twenty-five most of our opinions are comfortably fixed, but they have not been fixed by reason. They are either prejudices which we have accepted from our surroundings or as reactions against our surroundings, or, if we are clever enough, they are reasons which we have invented in order to prove to ourselves and other people that we are right to do what we want to do. The use of the intellect for any other purpose tends, therefore, to be a very disturbing process, rubbing our prejudices the wrong way and thoroughly upsetting our equanimity. Modern

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

civilisation has devised various extremely effective methods for prescribing rigid limits to the use of the intellect. The most effective of all methods is education. The object of education seems to be partly to teach children and young people that to think is a dreary and laborious process. In my days education in schools and universities impressed upon us the conviction that the intellect should be used as sparingly as possible, but if used at all, should be exercised exclusively upon such useless subjects as dead languages, or upon subjects like Euclid, which were both untrue and completely unconnected with anything real.

Not only the educational system, but the Press, our party system in politics, the theory of the British Constitution, our legal system, the doctrines of religion and patriotism are all ingeniously calculated to make the use of the intellect

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

suspect and unpopular. Oddly enough, the use of the intellect is really extraordinarily pleasant. The solving of a difficult problem or the working out of an intricate train of thought to a successful conclusion is accompanied by a pleasurable feeling which for intensity of thrill can not unjustly be compared to that which the ordinary person gets from Miss Dell's novels or Mr Magill's grocer's-boy is now said to get from the Fourth Quartet of Beethoven. That the non-highbrow is capable of this pleasure is shown by the popularity of the cross-word puzzle and the acrostic, and by the large number of retired colonels who play chess.

*Altifrons altifrontissimus*, or the highbrow intellectual, is an animal in whom this faculty for enjoying the use of his intellect is abnormally developed. Sometimes he is content to confine the exercise of his intellect to safe subjects,

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

and then, if his mind be of a very high order, you get a chess champion like Dr Lasker, or a mathematician like Newton, or a philosopher like Aristotle. But there have always been a certain number of highbrows who insist upon applying the intellect to all subjects and all departments of life—and then the trouble begins. If you begin to think about religion, or the relation of the sexes, or the party system, or education, or patriotism, you are lost, but, what is much more serious, they are lost too. They are the superstructures of illusions and prejudices, and as soon as reason is applied to their foundations they come down with a crash.

Hence the real intellectual is deservedly one of the most unpopular animals in the world. And he is, as I said, unlike the æsthetic highbrow—who is a poor, soft, gentle, long-haired creature—a dangerous and savage beast. In ordi-

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

nary time, it is true, we usually succeed in cutting his claws and in making him harmless. We do this by the simple method of making him ridiculous. It is not difficult to do. An intellectual in politics, a man who applies his intellect to the doctrines of patriotism and puts his principles into practice, a schoolmaster who taught his pupils only what was true and according to the dictates of reason—these people would all simply make fools of themselves. The man who in the ordinary and actual world of to-day appeals to the intellect naturally suffers the fate which would overtake a drunken man who wandered by accident into a meeting of a Temperance Society, or a lunatic who entered a conference of mental specialists.

But the intellectual highbrow is deservedly hated and hunted with an intensity which the hunters of æsthetic

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

highbrows never feel. For, in the first place, *altifrons altifrontissimus*, when brought to bay, is able to defend himself. Even that is not the worst. Although, in normal times he is or appears to be ridiculous, at rare intervals in the world's history periods occur in which he becomes an extremely dangerous and powerful animal. This is due to the efficacy of human suffering. In ordinary times, as I have said, people do not think, and either naturally or through education dislike thought. But if you can make people miserable enough, you can eventually induce them to think about the causes of their misery. The whole of history shows both that you have to make people in large bodies extraordinarily miserable before this happens and that if communal misery gets beyond a certain point it does happen. But nothing is so dangerous as thought applied to the structure of

## HUNTING THE HIGBROW

society, for once people begin to think, you let in the highbrow, and anything may happen.

It is at such periods that the intellectual highbrow becomes a powerful and dangerous animal. At the end of the eighteenth century, and again during the Great War, the sum of human misery reached the point at which quite a large number of people began to think about the causes of their misery and the political and social structure. Naturally that was the opportunity for the intellectual highbrow, who had never been doing anything else and had made himself ridiculous by doing it. The hunted suddenly became a hunter, and President Wilson and Lenin, two magnificent specimens of *altifrons altifrontissimus*, were, for the moment at least, as powerful as the Tsar, the Kaiser, M. Clemenceau, Mr Lloyd George, or Mr Bottomley. It is true

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

that the moment is never a long one. The difficulty of suddenly changing a world based on prejudice and passion into a world based on reason, the vested interests in unreason, the weight of tradition against reason and the enormous mass of people who have grown up in that tradition—all these things make it inevitable that there is a pretty rapid return to what a famous statesman called a healthy state of affairs—every one for himself and God for us all. The power of the intellectual highbrow therefore soon vanishes, but the memory of him as a formidable animal, the consciousness that there are always those latent and dangerous possibilities in him, remain. He is very properly hunted with some ferocity and vindictiveness.

One's judgment of the intellectual highbrow must depend, I think, very much upon one's estimate of how far and how widely it is possible that man-

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

kind may be induced to apply reason to the arrangement of their communal affairs. If human psychology is such that men in groups will never act rationally towards one another, and will allow no permanent place to reason and intellect in the practical organisation of society, then the sooner *altifrons alti-frontissimus* is exterminated the better for the world. For under such circumstances he is usually a nuisance and at times a positive curse. It is much better that a man should be drunk all the time than that he should be sober for only a few hours once every six months, for during those few hours he will probably behave like a suicidal and homicidal maniac, whereas, if he is perpetually drunk, he will merely be asleep or suddenly stupid. So with society, the administration of minute doses of reason into its constitution is only a useless irritant, and the sudden

## HUNTING THE Highbrow

injection every century or two of large doses completely upsets its balance. On the other hand, if there be any real possibility that man may become a rational, political, and social animal, I should be in favour of preserving and even encouraging the intellectual high-brow. For I remain convinced that if men would allow intellect and reason rather than passion and prejudice to have a say in their communal affairs, a good deal of the sordid ugliness and misery would disappear from society.

I have no space in which to deal further with *altifrons altifrontissimus*, though there are a good many other interesting questions connected with him. I should have liked, for instance, to say something of the curious process by which the ideas of intellectual high-brows are usually, when new and alive, fiercely rejected by the majority, but, when they are safely dead, are accepted

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

as the last word in social and political wisdom. The process is oddly similar to that by which eventually the standards of the æsthetic highbrow are adopted even by his hunters.

As for *pseudaltifrons intellectualis*, nothing much need be said about him. The pseudo-intellectual highbrow bears to the intellectual highbrow the same relation as the pseudo-æsthetic highbrow to the æsthetic. He is a parasite, a hybrid between the bore and the snob, who attaches himself to intellectual things and to *altifrons altifrontissimus*. I expect that he is rather more numerous than the pseudo-æsthetic highbrow. I doubt whether he does much harm; the worst thing about him is that he often writes books which other people are unfortunately compelled to review. Indeed, personally, I prefer him to some of the subspecies of real highbrow. For instance, there is *altifrons alti-*

## HUNTING THE HIGHBROW

*frontissimus* var. *adelphicus*. This is a curious small subspecies which has made its appearance in recent times. An extraordinarily highbrow highbrow, it runs about all over the place attracting attention by proclaiming itself to be just an ordinary man, and how much better Life is than Intellect, and how deplorable highbrows are. But I must stop, for if once one begins on the subspecies of highbrow there is no end to it.



# THE HOGARTH ESSAYS

## FIRST SERIES

### I. MR BENNETT AND MRS BROWN.

By VIRGINIA WOOLF. 2s. 6d.

### II. THE ARTIST AND PSYCHO-ANALYSIS.

By ROGER FRY. 2s. 6d.

### III. HENRY JAMES AT WORK.

By THEODORA BOSANQUET. 2s. 6d.

### IV. HOMAGE TO JOHN DRYDEN.

By T. S. ELIOT. 3s. 6d.

### V. HISTRIOPHONE.

By BONAMY DOBRÉE. 3s. 6d.

### VI. IN RETREAT.

By HERBERT READ. 3s. 6d.

### VII. FEAR AND POLITICS: A DEBATE AT THE ZOO.

By LEONARD WOOLF. 2s. 6d.

### VIII. CONTEMPORARY TECHNIQUES OF POETRY.

By ROBERT GRAVES. 3s. 6d.

### IX. THE CHARACTER OF JOHN DRYDEN.

By ALAN LUBBOCK. 2s. 6d.

THE HOGARTH ESSAYS—*continued.*

X. WOMEN: AN INQUIRY.

By WILLA MUIR. 2s. 6d.

XI. POETRY AND CRITICISM.

By EDITH SITWELL. 2s. 6d.

XII. ANONYMITY: AN ENQUIRY.

By E. M. FORSTER. 2s.

XIII. A SHORT VIEW OF RUSSIA.

By J. M. KEYNES. 2s.

XIV. NOTES ON LAW AND ORDER.

By J. A. HOBSON. 2s. 6d.

XV. THE REVIVAL OF ÆSTHETICS.

By HUBERT WALEY. 3s. 6d.

XVI. ART AND COMMERCE.

By ROGER FRY. 2s. 6d.

XVII. THE POET'S EYE.

By VERNON LEE, Litt.D. 1s. 6d.

XVIII. ANOTHER FUTURE OF POETRY.

By ROBERT GRAVES. 2s. 6d.

XIX. THE STRUCTURE OF WUTHERING  
HEIGHTS.

By C. P. S. 2s. 6d.



# Hogarth Essays



## Second Series