

A Tasteful Season

by Peng Wu

The summer I read *Germinale* was a dreary summer. Perhaps the dreariness of it all was what drew me to that book in the first place. I really had no immediate interest whatsoever in the spiritual emancipation of French coal miners in the nineteenth century. I thought these downtrodden people existed for the sole purpose of being exploited and abused in the prose of lofty, political European fiction. *Germinale* was the sort of book I checked out from the library because the words "world classics" engraved in golden lettering against the dark green binding were especially dignified and pleasing to the eye. *Germinale* was also sort of book that I placed on the shelf right next to my bed. And as I spent the days engrossed in Agatha Christie and Georgette Heyer Regency romances, I would glance up periodically at the weighty tome, resting solidly against my other frivolous titles, and congratulate myself on my discerning taste in literature.

Yes. Had it been any other summer, to this tragic fate *Germinale* would have fallen, along with many other admirable works, such as *Ulysses*, *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, and various novels of Anthony Trollope. Good books, or so I've been told. Obviously I cannot speak from personal experience. Nevertheless, they were very pleasant to behold and did a great deal for my budding literary ego.

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W. S. Gilbert once wrote, "You can't get high aesthetic tastes, like trousers, ready made..." The man was implying that these aforementioned qualities are not easily obtained, regardless of one's power, money, or prestige. Rather, taste is the result of many years of cultivation, contemplation, hard work, and perseverance, especially if one endeavors to be a highbrow.

Many labels and definitions have been affixed to the highbrow. Russell Lynes, in his seminal Harper's article of 1949, tried to define the highbrow through a series of quotes. Most of them are witty, humorous, and rather insulting. To Edgar Wallace, a highbrow was "a man who has found something more interesting than woman." Brander Matthew thought a highbrow was "a person educated beyond his intelligence."

The ridiculous qualities of a highbrow cannot be denied. Here is a person who is absolutely determined to be in possession of good taste, regardless of the consequences. Hence, the highbrows are usually employed in a position of low financial remuneration, not that they would ever be influenced in any way by such base and materialistic considerations. Deep in their heart of hearts, they'd all prefer to be starving intellectuals. Low-to- medium salary also does not deter the highbrow from always serving expensive wines and purchasing the occasional first edition, which is placed on the jammed, disheveled bookshelves along with all the Standards of the Western Canon, a smattering of ancient philosophy, and a few, slender volumes of obscure poetry from the Orient.

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However, my parents decided that the time had come for their moody offspring to relinquish futile dreams of cultural ostentation and experience the wonders of utility, by joining the work force. Strings were pulled. Before I knew it, I was spending every Monday, Tuesday, and Friday in a cramped basement office, the unpaid intern of International Cultural Communications Incorporated (ICC), "the only U.S. international public relations firm that specializes in communication through a synthesis of culture, art, history, and science." "By recognizing the power of cultural heritage and diversity, your organization can reach foreign markets to promote trade, tourism, fine and performing arts, and special services," our brochures proclaimed in an elegant font. These pamphlets were littered in great profusion throughout our basement office, which we shared with a computer software development company.

Shady as it sounds, ICC was actually quite well off. The basement office was in a townhouse in Georgetown, a very wealthy area of Washington DC. Just across the street was the Four Seasons Hotel, where tea is served every afternoon with scones and lemon tarts. Just down the street was Bluemercury, a posh salon where Monica Lewinsky got her eyebrows waxed.

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The middlebrow is the category to which the majority of the people belong. The most confounding of groups, the middlebrows are philistines to the highbrows and bosses to the lowbrows. One middlebrow may adore Mahler while another eats hot dogs for breakfast. Such an infuriating range of hobbies and preferences exist within this group that further division is necessary for any insightful categorization, if such a thing is possible. There are two essential types: the upper-middlebrow and the lower middlebrow.

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The president of ICC was a tall, elderly lady who always wore light-colored pantsuits and bright blue mascara. The wall across her desk was lined with photos of her standing enthusiastically with notable personages, such as Reagan, Carter, and various other vaguely familiar men in grey suits. Clearly, after an illustrious career in the periphery of the political arena, she was leisurely planning to pursue her other interests. Often the last to appear in the morning, she was also the first to leave for a two-hour lunch at Café Milano or Citronelle. In between, she'd call me into her office and talk vaguely, with a great deal of hand gesturing, about a museum exhibit on Confucius in the sometime future. I didn't mind.

Her idea of research consisted of sending me to Borders with a blank check to purchase all the books on Confucius that I could find, after which I treated myself to a Starbucks frappuccino.

In my early days at the company, she also gave me various memos to translate from Chinese to English. These memos were from a certain Dr. Kang in China, with whom she was cooperating in order to establish a souvenir shop in the Forbidden City of Beijing.

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According to Russell Lynes, the upper middlebrow "takes his culture seriously, as seriously as his job allows, for he is gainfully employed." Publishers, museum directors, or magazine editors are all usually of this ilk. On the one hand, they love culture and seek to bring it to the masses. On the other hand, the latest philosophical treatise on human morality by an obscure, pimply, scrunchie-faced bohemian with a ten-syllable name doesn't sell hot off the press. The upper middlebrow must often balance precariously between the need to entertain and the urge to enlighten. Fortunately, compromise and mediocrity are not atrociously repulsive qualities to the upper middlebrow. Though the highbrows would regard such a life of aesthetic ambiguity as a fate worse than death, the upper-middlebrows embrace theirs with grudging good cheer.

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To be honest, my Chinese was not very good. I would often meet with my father, who worked nearby, for lunch in some under-lit, over-priced, pseudo-French bistro in the neighborhood. Over steamy bowls of salty onion soup, we sat and murmured in low voices, co-conspirators of international cultural organizations. He glanced over the memos, which usually turned out to be inventory listings or contracts in which side A would provide the funding for the purchase of lithographs while side B would provide the funding for the procurement of quasi-jade knick knacks. I madly tried to scribble my father's dictations onto a notepad before the entrees came to the table. The rest of our meal passed in amicable chitchat, nosily speculating upon the possible outcome of ICC's endeavor. Upon returning to the office, I would pretend to labor over the memos with my various dictionaries for several hours, and print out the translation about five minutes before the time of my departure.

This farce continued for a week or two, but gradually the memos from Dr. Kang ceased. We all found this to be perplexing. My father also put a stop to the extravagant, clandestine lunches in French restaurants. Nevertheless, I was kept occupied with various clerical tasks such as copying, filing, learning to use the office microwave to heat up my leftover, Tupperware lunches etc etc.

The workload began to lull when the president of our company left for unspecified surgery. She came back in a few days, just in time to discover the reason for Dr. Kang's sudden and enigmatic halt in communication. He had been embezzling money from her.

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Lower-middlebrowism is characterized by ambition. Aesthetic preference takes a back seat to the never-ending yearning for a newer sedan, a bigger refrigerator, and nicer furniture. The lower middlebrow's existence is not clouded or troubled by conflict between profit and intellectual integrity. But when situation allows for leisure, the lower middlebrow is happy to indulge in some cultural pursuit. Nothing complements the improvement of fortune as well as improvement of the mind. For the most part, the lower middlebrow is the primary victim of those cultural do-gooders, also known as the upper middlebrow. Lower middlebrow reads the magazines edited by the upper middlebrow, joins book clubs to read the novels praised by the upper middlebrow, and visits the museum exhibits directed by the upper middlebrow.

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As the activity in ICC became more and more exciting, the less consequential I became, and the fewer menial tasks there were for me to perform. I did not welcome this newfound leisure, as one would assume. Instead, I was filled with a morbid dread that someday everyone would recognize how utterly useless and dispensable I was. "How embarrassing," I thought, "to be the only unpaid intern in history to be fired."

I was determined to preserve the illusion of utility. The important thing was to look constantly occupied. One morning, as I was rushing off the office, I grabbed a bunch of miscellaneous papers and a book. To be precise, I grabbed *Germinal*. Over the next week or so, I clutched *Germinal* and read as if for my dear life. As the few employees scurried through the office, performing their essential duties, protecting our little haven of international cultural communication from the perils of foreign embezzlement, I crouched in my dark office in the corner, brow furrowed, determined to be entranced by the day-to-day travails of the phlegm-coughing, coal-mining, nutritionally-lacking Maheu family.

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The lowbrow's psyche is generally unclouded by any concern over matters of taste. Whatever their other worries and dilemmas might be, they do not squander time contemplating whether an object is worthy of their praise or disdain. The lowbrow is happy to accept their immediate impression as their final judgment. Words such as "nice," "beautiful" and "ugly," which are virtually meaningless for the highbrow, are perfectly adequate for lowbrow parlance.

Lowbrows do not necessarily only limit themselves to the enjoyment of pulp and shallow entertainment. Rather, their characterizing trait is one of nonchalance and acceptance. Lowbrows can pick up any book, whether it be a Spiderman comic or a socially conscious mini-epic like *Germinal*, and take from it what enjoyment they can, and move on with life in general.

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The Maheus were having hard times indeed. Only the iciest of hearts would remain unmoved by this family, composed of a proud mother, an aging father, numerous grubby-faced tots, a deformed hunchback daughter, and a well-formed daughter, Catherine, pursued by the local lecher. Set against the turbulent backdrop of a workers' strike, the novel was filled by the admirable Emile Zola with enough sex, violence, and melodrama to captivate the mind of any adolescent.

I was really no different. My days were divided between reading this sensational tale of love and death, lingering over my microwaved lunch, leaving early to window-shop through the streets of expensive boutiques, and wandering toward the little theater near the canal to view the posters of obscure, upcoming movies.

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In the year 1993, the cinema adaptation of *Germinal* was released, starring Gerard Depardieu, and directed by Claude Berri. The movie was filmed entirely on location in Lille, northern France, with a thirty million dollar budget. *Germinal* opened in America to respectful critical acclaim. Roger Ebert, the paragon of upper-middlebrowism, called the film "ambitious," "convincing" and "realistic." Though hardly packing the theaters, *Germinal* was viewed by a substantial group of people with literary inclinations who generally enjoy that sort of thing.

Unfortunately, *Germinal* opened in France around the same time as Jurassic Park. Compared to the thrills and chills offered by that dinosaur-infested, action-packed blockbuster, the rewards of a grimly "realistic," two-and-a-half hour long social epic seemed bleak indeed.

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Personally I was especially taken with the romantic angle. Surely Catherine Maheu would scorn the advances of the lecher, eventually dump the brutish Chaval, and realize her love for the sensitive mechanic Etienne. Georgette Heyer had taught me that much.

The book also introduced me to a new sort of romantic figure: the solitary, angst-filled man. I was absolutely besotted with the Russian anarchist Souvarine, a mysterious creature of woe, detachment, and weariness. To be sure, his passion for destruction and death was somewhat alarming and perplexing to my tender comprehension. Still, my affection was unshaken. Souvarine's dark fanaticism only added another layer to his exotic, Russian, devil-may-care allure.

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Emile Zola Revisited, published in 1992, written by William J. Berg and Laurey K. Martin, professors of French literature at the University of Wisconsin, is an excellent example of highbrow analytical prowess. Placing an emphasis on thematics, the book includes a thorough discussion of the precise political significance of all the characters in *Germinal*.

Etienne, presented as the protagonist, spreads throughout the novel a hazy version of Marxism. Many of his significant actions, though political on the surface, are actually prompted by inner passions of lust or jealousy, rather than intellectual fire. Most of the characters in the novel who are rivals for Etienne's leadership are equally if not more flawed. The progressive priest Ravvier is plainly portrayed as a hypocrite while the barman Rasseneur is more content argue than to act. Souvarine is actually the only character throughout the novel who never wavers from his beliefs in anarchism, whether in speech or in action. He holds nothing dear except the fateful words of Mikhail Bakunin: "The passion for destruction is a creative passion."

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Summer jobs, on the whole, have but one redeeming virtue. Employers are usually quite happy to be rid of you. For if they didn't need someone to fill that position during the rest of year, then it was probably a quite useless creation in the first place. Overall, the process of resignation tends to be rather pleasant for both parties. Exceptions are made, naturally, for ice cream shops, wedding caterers, and swimming pool installation companies.

I shuffled into the president's office one morning, and broke the news to her that my term of employment might soon come to an end. August had but barely graced the season with her presence, and already I was muttering about upcoming tennis team tryouts, practices, and possibly a family vacation to Yellowstone. She looked at me sympathetically, nodded her carefully primped coiffure, and murmured, "I understand♦I understand♦" in return. I couldn't but notice a slight relief in her manners, but I was too relieved myself to be offended. We came to an agreement as to the date of my termination, which I fancy was not as soon as either of us would have preferred.

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"Taste is not only a part and an index of morality," wrote John Ruskin, "-it is the only morality♦Tell me what you like, and I'll tell you what you are." Alas, we are often too acutely aware of how our preferences reflect upon ourselves. Is a man who likes dogs always kind? Or a woman who likes Armani always elegant? I like Bach. Am I cultured? Do I like Bach because I like Bach? Or because I want to be the sort of person who likes Bach?

The degree of thought that is invested into any answer regarding aesthetic preference is perhaps fifty-percent contrived to fit our own self- concept. That is not to say the answer is automatically invalid. After all, people inhabit the highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow with equal pride. Brow level is a very conscious choice. Ultimately, taste not only reflects who we are, but who we want to be.

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On the last day, the secretary called me into the president's office. As I entered, the president gestured diffidently towards a present in a box lying on her desk. At this point in life, I was still ignorant of a certain Max Beerbohm who once wrote, "I tried to feel cynical, but was thrilled with excitement, with wonder and curiosity." Unfamiliar as I was with the man, I was certainly familiar with the sentiment. I stuttered expressions of gratitude and opened the box to behold a dark green ceramic flowerpot.

Years have passed. Since then, I have reflected upon the gift with more wisdom in the ways of the world. I eventually realized that the plain brown box, the lack of packaging, and the sheer randomness of the object itself all bespoke a haphazard grab as she was leaving her well-decorated apartment, probably located somewhere in Chevy Chase.

Still, at that precise moment, my young heart was touched. I held up the pot with both hands, looked into the president's eyes, and said, "Thank you so much," with great sincerity. She grew flustered with embarrassment, and muttered something along the lines of "Oh, it's nothing—it's the least you deserve."

Well, I guess I did deserve it.