CLASS

A Guide Through the American Status System

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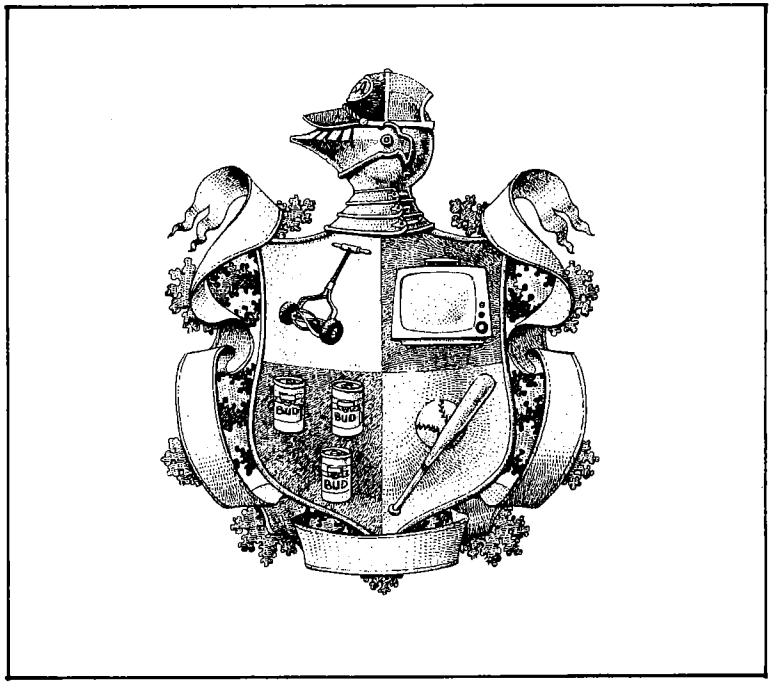
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I

A Touchy Subject

Although most Americans sense that they live within an extremely complicated system of social classes and suspect that much of what is thought and done here is prompted by considerations of status, the subject has remained murky. And always touchy. You can outrage people today simply by mentioning social class, very much the way, sipping tea among the aspidistras a century ago, you could silence a party by adverting too openly to sex. When, recently, asked what I am writing, I have answered, "A book about social class in America," people tend first to straighten their ties and sneak a glance at their cuffs to see how far fraying has advanced there. Then, a few minutes later, they silently get up and walk away. It is not just that I am feared as a class spy. It is as if I had said, "I am working on a book urging the beating to death of baby whales using the dead bodies of baby seals." Since I have been writing this book I have experienced many times the awful truth of R. H. Tawney's perception, in his book *Equality* (1931): "The word 'class' is fraught with unpleasing associations, so that to linger upon it is apt to be interpreted as the symptom of a perverted mind and a jaundiced spirit."

Especially in America, where the idea of class is notably embarrassing. In his book *Inequality in an Age of Decline* (1980), the sociologist Paul Blumberg goes so far as to call it "America's forbidden thought." Indeed, people often blow their tops if the

subject is even broached. One woman, asked by a couple of interviewers if she thought there were social classes in this country, answered: "It's the dirtiest thing I've ever heard of!" And a man, asked the same question, got so angry that he blurted out, "Social class should be exterminated!"

Actually, you reveal a great deal about your social class by the amount of annoyance or fury you feel when the subject is brought up. A tendency to get very anxious suggests that you are middle-class and nervous about slipping down a rung or two. On the other hand, upper-class people love the topic to come up: the more attention paid to the matter the better off they seem to be. Proletarians generally don't mind discussions of the subject because they know they can do little to alter their class identity. Thus the whole class matter is likely to seem like a joke to them —the upper classes fatuous in their empty aristocratic pretentiousness, the middles loathsome in their anxious gentility. It is the middle class that is highly class-sensitive, and sometimes class-scared to death. A representative of that class left his mark on a library copy of Russell Lynes's *The Tastemakers* (1954). Next to a passage patronizing the insecure decorating taste of the middle class and satirically contrasting its artistic behavior to that of some more sophisticated classes, this offended reader scrawled, in large capitals, "BULL SHIT!" A hopelessly middle-class man (not a woman, surely?) if I ever saw one.

If you reveal your class by your outrage at the very topic, you reveal it also by the way you define the thing that's outraging you. At the bottom, people tend to believe that class is defined by the amount of money you have. In the middle, people grant that money has something to do with it, but think education and the kind of work you do almost equally important. Nearer the top, people perceive that taste, values, ideas, style, and behavior are indispensable criteria of class, regardless of money or occupation or education. One woman interviewed by Studs Terkel for *Division Street: America* (1967) clearly revealed her class as middle both by her uneasiness about the subject's being introduced and by her instinctive recourse to occupation as the essential class criterion. "We have right on this street almost every class," she said. "But I shouldn't say class," she went on, "because we don't live in a nation of classes." Then, the occupational criterion: "But we have janitors living on the street, we have doctors, we have businessmen, CPAs."

Being told that there are no social classes in the place where the interviewee lives is an old experience for sociologists. " 'We don't have classes in our town' almost invariably is the first remark recorded by the investigator," reports Leonard Reissman, author of *Class in American Life* (1959). "Once that has been uttered and is out of the way, the class divisions in the town can be recorded with what seems to be an amazing degree of agreement among the good citizens of the community." The novelist John O'Hara made a whole career out of probing into this touchy subject, to which he was astonishingly sensitive. While still a boy, he was noticing that in the Pennsylvania town where he grew up, "older people do not treat others as equals."

Class distinctions in America are so complicated and subtle that foreign visitors often miss the nuances and sometimes even the existence of a class structure. So powerful is "the fable of equality," as Frances Trollope called it when she toured America in 1832, so embarrassed is the government to confront the subject —in the thousands of measurements pouring from its bureaus, social class is not officially recognized—that it's easy for visitors not to notice the way the class system works. A case in point is the experience of Walter Allen, the British novelist and literary critic. Before he came over here to teach at a college in the 1950s, he imagined that "class scarcely existed in America, except, perhaps, as divisions between ethnic groups or successive waves of immigrants." But living awhile in Grand Rapids opened his eyes: there he learned of the snob power of New England and the pliability of the locals to the long-wielded moral and cultural authority of old families.

Some Americans viewed with satisfaction the failure of the 1970s TV series *Beacon Hill,* a drama of high society modeled on the British *Upstairs, Downstairs,* comforting themselves with the belief that this venture came to grief because there is no class system here to sustain interest in it. But they were mistaken. *Beacon Hill* failed to engage American viewers because it focused on perhaps the least interesting place in the indigenous class structure, the quasi-aristocratic upper class. Such a dramatization might have done better if it had dealt with places where everyone recognizes interesting class collisions occur—the place where the upper-middle class meets the middle and resists its attempted incursions upward, or where the middle class does the same to the classes just below it.

If foreigners often fall for the official propaganda of social equality, the locals tend to know what's what, even if they feel some uneasiness talking about it. When the acute black from the South asserts of an ambitious friend that "Joe can't class with the big folks," we feel in the presence of someone who's attended to actuality. Like the carpenter who says: "I hate to say there are classes, but it's just that people are more comfortable with people of like backgrounds." His grouping of people by "like backgrounds," scientifically uncertain as it may be, is nearly as good a way as any to specify what it is that distinguishes one class from another. If you feel no need to explicate your allusions or in any way explain what you mean, you are probably talking with someone in your class. And that's true whether you're discussing the Rams and the Forty-Niners, RVs, the House (i.e., Christ Church, Oxford), Mama Leone's, the Big Board, "the Vineyard," "Baja," or the Porcellian.

In this book I am going to deal with some of the visible and audible signs of social class, but I will be sticking largely with those that reflect choice. That means that I will not be considering matters of race, or, except now and then, religion or politics. Race is visible, but it is not chosen. Religion and politics, while usually chosen, don't show, except for the occasional front-yard shrine or car bumper sticker. When you look at a person you don't see "Roman Catholic" or "liberal": you see "hand-painted necktie" or "crappy polyester shirt"; you hear *parameters* or *in regards to*. In attempting to make sense of indicators like these, I have been guided by perception and feel rather than by any method that could be deemed "scientific," believing with Arthur Marwick, author of *Class: Image and Reality* (1980), that "class . . . is too serious a subject to leave to the social scientists."

It should be a serious subject in America especially, because here we lack a convenient system of inherited titles, ranks, and honors, and each generation has to define the hierarchies all over again. The society changes faster than any other on earth, and the American, almost uniquely, can be puzzled about where, in the society, he stands. The things that conferred class in the 1930s—white linen golf knickers, chrome cocktail shakers, vests with white piping—are, to put it mildly, unlikely to do so today. Belonging to a rapidly changing rather than a traditional society, Americans find Knowing Where You Stand harder than do most

Europeans. And a yet more pressing matter, Making It, assumes crucial importance here. "How'm I doin'?" Mayor Koch of New York used to bellow, and most of his audience sensed that he was, appropriately, asking the representative American question.

It seems no accident that, as the British philosopher Anthony Quinton says, "The book of etiquette in its modern form . . . is largely an American product, the great names being Emily Post . . . and Amy Vanderbilt." The reason is that the United States is preeminently the venue of newcomers, with a special need to place themselves advantageously and to get on briskly. "Some newcomers," says Quinton, "are geographical, that is, immigrants; others are economic, the newly rich; others again chronological, the young." All are faced with the problem inseparable from the operations of a mass society, earning respect. The comic Rodney Dangerfield, complaining that he don't get none, belongs to the same national species as that studied by John Adams, who says, as early as 1805: "The rewards . . . in this life are *esteem* and *admiration* of others—the punishments are *neglect* and *contempt*. . . . The desire of the esteem of others is as real a want of nature as hunger—and the neglect and contempt of the world as severe a pain as the gout or stone. . . . " About the same time the Irish poet Thomas Moore, sensing the special predicament Americans were inviting with their egalitarian Constitution, described the citizens of Washington, D.C., as creatures

Born to be slaves, and struggling to be lords.

Thirty years later, in *Democracy in America,* Alexis de Tocqueville put his finger precisely on the special problem of class aspiration here. "Nowhere," he wrote, "do citizens appear so insignificant as in a democratic nation." Nowhere, consequently, is there more strenuous effort to achieve—*earn* would probably not be the right word—significance. And still later in the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman, in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), perceived that in the United States, where the form of government promotes a condition (or at least an illusion) of uniformity among the citizens, one of the unique anxieties is going to be the constant struggle for individual self-respect based upon social approval. That is, where everybody is somebody, nobody is anybody. In a recent Louis Harris poll, "respect from others" is what 76 percent of respondents said they wanted most. Addressing prospective purchasers of a coffee table, an ad writer recently spread before them this

most enticing American vision: "Create a rich, warm, sensual allusion to your own good taste that will demand respect and consideration in every setting you care to imagine."

The special hazards attending the class situation in America, where movement appears so fluid and where the prizes seem available to anyone who's lucky, are disappointment, and, following close on that, envy. Because the myth conveys the impression that you can readily earn your way upward, disillusion and bitterness are particularly strong when you find yourself trapped in a class system you've been half persuaded isn't important. When in early middle life some people discover that certain limits have been placed on their capacity to ascend socially by such apparent irrelevancies as heredity, early environment, and the social class of their immediate forebears, they go into something like despair, which, if generally secret, is no less destructive.

De Tocqueville perceived the psychic dangers. "In democratic times," he granted, "enjoyments are more intense than in the ages of aristocracy, and the number of those who partake in them is vastly larger." But, he added, in egalitarian atmospheres "man's hopes and desires are oftener blasted, the soul is more stricken and perturbed, and care itself more keen."

And after blasted hopes, envy. The force of sheer class envy behind vile and even criminal behavior in this country, the result in part of disillusion over the official myth of classlessness, should never be underestimated. The person who, parking his attractive car in a large city, has returned to find his windows smashed and his radio aerial snapped off will understand what I mean. Speaking in West Virginia in 1950, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy used language that leaves little doubt about what he was really getting at—not so much "Communism" as the envied upper-middle and upper classes. "It has not been the less fortunate or members of minority groups who have been selling this nation out," he said, "but rather those who have had all the benefits . . . , the finest homes, the finest college education. . . . " Pushed far enough, class envy issues in revenge egalitarianism, which the humorist Roger Price, in *The Great Roob Revolution* (1970), distinguishes from "democracy" thus: "Democracy demands that all of its citizens begin the race even. Egalitarianism insists that they all *finish* even." Then we get the situation satirized in L. P. Hartley's novel *Facial Justice* (1960), about "the prejudice against good looks" in a future society somewhat like ours. There, inequalities of appearance are redressed by government plastic surgeons, but the scalpel isn't used to make everyone beautiful—it's used to make everyone plain.

Despite our public embrace of political and judicial equality, in individual perception and understanding—much of which we refrain from publicizing—we arrange things vertically and insist on crucial differences in value. Regardless of what we say about equality, I think everyone at some point comes to feel like the Oscar Wilde who said, "The brotherhood of man is not a mere poet's dream: it is a most depressing and humiliating reality." It's as if in our heart of hearts we don't want agglomerations but distinctions. Analysis and separation we find interesting, synthesis boring.

Although it is disinclined to designate a hierarchy of social classes, the federal government seems to admit that if in law we are all equal, in virtually all other ways we are not. Thus the eighteen grades into which it divides its civil-service employees, from grade 1 at the bottom (messenger, etc.) up through 2 (mail clerk), 5 (secretary), 9 (chemist), to 14 (legal administrator), and finally 16, 17, and 18 (high-level administrators). In the construction business there's a social hierarchy of jobs, with "dirt work," or mere excavation, at the bottom; the making of sewers, roads, and tunnels in the middle; and work on buildings (the taller, the higher) at the top. Those who sell "executive desks" and related office furniture know that they and their clients agree on a rigid "class" hierarchy. Desks made of oak are at the bottom, and those of walnut are next. Then, moving up, mahogany is, if you like, "upper-middle class," until we arrive, finally, at the apex: teak. In the army, at ladies' social functions, pouring the coffee is the prerogative of the senior officer's wife because, as the ladies all know, coffee outranks tea.

There seems no place where hierarchical status-orderings aren't discoverable. Take musical instruments. In a symphony orchestra the customary ranking of sections recognizes the difficulty and degree of subtlety of various kinds of instruments: strings are on top, woodwinds just below, then brass, and, at the bottom, percussion. On the difficulty scale, the accordion is near the bottom, violin near the top. Another way of assigning something like "social class" to instruments is to consider the prestige of the group in which the instrument is customarily played. As the

U.S. Army scene: a senior officer's wife (note pseudo-upper-middle-class getup) pours coffee into cups of subordinates' wives

composer Edward T. Cone says, "If you play a violin, you can play in a string quartet or symphony orchestra, but not in a jazz band and certainly not in a marching band. Among woodwinds, therefore, flute, and oboe, which are primarily symphonic instruments, are 'better' than the clarinet, which can be symphonic, jazz, or band. Among brasses, the French horn ranks highest because it hasn't customarily been used in jazz. Among percussionists, tympani is high for the same reason." And (except for the bassoon) the lower the notes an instrument is designed to produce, in general the lower its class, bass instruments being generally easier to play. Thus a sousaphone is lower than a trumpet, a bass viol lower than a viola, etc. If you hear "My boy's taking lessons on the trombone," your smile will be a little harder to control than if you hear "My boy's taking lessons on the flute." On the other hand, to hear "My boy's taking lessons on the viola da gamba" is to receive a powerful signal of class, the kind attaching to antiquarianism and museum, gallery, or "educational" work. Guitars (except when played in "classical"—that is, archaic—style) are low by nature, and that is why they were so often employed as tools of intentional class degradation by young people in the 1960s and '70s. The guitar was the perfect instrument for the purpose of signaling these young people's flight from the upper-middle and middle classes, associated as it is with Gypsies, cowhands, and other personnel without inherited or often even earned money and without fixed residence.

The former Socialist and editor of the *Partisan Review* William Barrett, looking back thirty years, concludes that "the Classless Society looks more and more like a Utopian illusion. The socialist countries develop a class structure of their own," although there, he points out, the classes are very largely based on bureaucratic toadying. "Since we are bound . . . to have classes in any case, why not have them in the more organic, heterogeneous and variegated fashion" indigenous to the West? And since we have them, why not know as much as we can about them? The subject may be touchy, but it need not be murky forever.

II

An Anatomy of the Classes

Nobody knows for sure what the word *class* means. Some people, like Vance Packard, have tried to invoke more objective terms, and have spoken about *status systems*. Followers of the sociologist Max Weber tend to say *class* when they're talking about the amount of money you have and the kind of leverage it gives you; they say *status* when they mean your social prestige in relation to your audience; and they say *party* when they're measuring how much political power you have, that is, how much built-in resistance you have to being pushed around by shits. By *class* I mean all three, with perhaps extra emphasis on *status*. I do wish the word *caste* were domesticated in the United States, because it nicely conveys the actual rigidity of class lines here, the difficulty of moving—either upward or downward—out of the place where you were nurtured.

How many classes are there? The simplest answer is that there are only two, the rich and the poor, employer and employed, landlord and tenant, bourgeois and proletariat. Or, to consider manners rather than economics and politics, there are gentlemen and there are cads. Asked by a team of sociologists what's involved in "social class," one respondent said, "Whether you have couth or are uncouth." And there's a "social" division distinguishing those who "entertain" in their domestic premises and those who wouldn't think of it. Paul Blumberg notes "a fundamental class cleavage" today between people who can afford to buy a house—any house—and people who can't, a fairly elevated version of the distinction down below between those who own cars and those who must depend on public transportation and who thus spend a great deal of their time waiting around for the bus to show up. In her book *Class* (1981), British humorist Jilly Cooper suggests a bipartite social scene in which the two parties are the Guilty and the Cross:

> On the one side are the middle and upper classes, feeling guilty and riddled with social concern although they often earn less money than the workers. On the other are the working classes, who have been totally brainwashed by television and magazine images of the good life, and feel cross because they aren't getting a big enough slice of the cake.

Two classes only were in the consciousness of the British Eighth Army infantryman in North Africa during the Second World War who delivered this eloquent account of them:

> Sir, this is a fine way for a man to spend his fucking life, isn't it? Have you ever heard of class distinction, sir? I'll tell you what it means, it means Vickers-Armstrong booking a profit to look like a loss, and Churchill lighting a new cigar, and the *Times* explaining Liberty and Democracy, and me sitting on my arse in Libya splashing a fainting man with water out of my steel helmet. It's a very fine thing if only you're in the right class—that's highly important, sir, because one class gets the sugar and the other class gets the shit.

A way of bringing home that soldier's conclusion is to realize that all work everywhere is divided into two sorts, safe and dangerous. Every year 100,000 workers are killed or die of work-related accidents or disease; 400,000 are disabled; 6 million are hurt at work. In *The Working-Class Majority* (1974), Andrew Levison says, "All the clichés and pleasant notions of how the old class divisions . . . have disappeared are exposed as hollow phrases by the simple fact that American workers must accept serious injury and even death as part of their daily reality while the middle class does not." And he goes on:

> Imagine . . . the universal outcry that would occur if every year several corporate headquarters routinely collapsed like mines, crushing sixty or seventy executives. Or suppose that

> all the banks were filled with an invisible noxious dust that constantly produced cancer in the managers, clerks, and tellers. Finally, try to imagine the horror . . . if thousands of university professors were deafened every year or lost fingers, hands, sometimes eyes, while on their jobs.

And speaking of death and injury, probably the most awful class division in America, one that cuts deeply across the center of society and that will poison life here for generations, is the one separating those whose young people were killed or savaged in the Vietnam War and those who, thanks largely to the infamous S-2 deferment for college students, escaped. Anyone uncertain about class consciousness in this country should listen to a working-class father whose son was killed:

> I'm bitter. You bet your goddam dollar I'm bitter. It's people like us who give up our sons for the country. The business people, they run the country and make money from it. The college types, the professors, they go to Washington and tell the government what to do. . . . But their sons, they don't end up in the swamps over there, in Vietnam. No, sir.

And a mother adds: "We can't understand how all those rich kids —the kids with beads from the suburbs—how they get off when my son had to go."

The two-part division has the convenience of simplicity as well as usefulness in highlighting injustice and registering bitterness. A three-part division is popular too, probably because the number three is portentous, folkloristic, and even magical, being the number of bears, wishes, and Wise Men. In Britain three has been popularly accepted as the number of classes at least since the last century, when Matthew Arnold divided his neighbors and friends into upper, middle, and lower classes, or, as he memorably termed them, Barbarians (at the top, notice), Philistines (in the middle), and Populace. This three-tiered conception is the usual way to think of the class system for people in the middle, for it offers them moral and social safety, positioning them equally distant from the vices of pride and snobbery and waste and carelessness, which they associate with those above them, and dirtiness, constraint, and shame, the attendants of those below. Upper, middle, and lower are the customary terms for these three groups, although the British euphemism *working class* for *lower class* is now making some headway here.

If the popular number of classes is three, the number sociologists seem to favor is five:

Upper
Upper middle
Middle
Lower middle
Lower

And trying to count the classes, some people simply give up, finding, like John Brooks in *Showing Off in America* (1981), that "in the new American structure there seem to be an almost infinite number of classes," or like the man in Boston asked about class there who said, "You have too many classes for me to count and name. . . . Hell! There may be fifteen or thirty." (He then added, like a good American, "Anyway, it doesn't matter a damn to me.")

My researches have persuaded me that there are nine classes in this country, as follows:

Top out-of-sight
Upper
Upper middle

Middle
High proletarian
Mid-proletarian
Low proletarian

Destitute
Bottom out-of-sight

One thing to get clear at the outset is this: it's not riches alone that defines these classes. "It can't be money," one working man says quite correctly, "because nobody ever knows that about you for sure." Style and taste and awareness are as important as money. "Economically, no doubt, there are only two classes, the rich and the poor," says George Orwell, "but socially there is a whole hierarchy of classes, and the manners and traditions learned by each class in childhood are not only very different but—this is the essential point—generally persist from birth to death. . . . It is . . . very difficult to escape, culturally, from the

class into which you have been born." When John Fitzgerald Kennedy, watching Richard Nixon on television, turned to his friends and, horror-struck, said, "The guy has no class," he was not talking about money.

Anyone who imagines that large assets or high income confer high class can take comfort from a little book titled *Live a Year with a Millionaire,* written by Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney and distributed by him (free) to his friends for Christmas 1981. Not to put too fine a point on it, the banality, stupidity, complacency, and witlessness of this author can remind a reader only of characters in Ring Lardner or in such satires by Sinclair Lewis as *The Man Who Knew Coolidge.* "They are a cosmopolitan group," says Whitney of people he meets at one party. "Come from places all over the States." The more he goes on, the more his reader will perceive that, except for his money, Whitney is a profoundly middle-class fellow, committed without any self-awareness to every cliché of that social rank.

And down below, the principle still holds: money doesn't matter that much. To illustrate the point, John Brooks compares two families living in adjoining houses in a suburb. One man is "blue-collar," a garage mechanic. The other is "white-collar," an employee in a publishing house. They make roughly the same amount of money, but what a difference. "Mr. Blue" bought a small, neat "ranch house." "Mr. White" bought a beat-up old house and refurbished it himself. Mrs. Blue uses the local shops, especially those in the nearby shopping center, and thinks them wonderful, "so convenient." Mrs. White goes to the city to buy her clothes. The Blues drink, but rather furtively, and usually on Saturday night with the curtains closed. The Whites drink openly, often right out in the backyard. "The Blues shout to each other, from room to room of their house or from corner to corner of their lot, without self-consciousness; the Whites modulate their voices to the point where they sometimes can't hear each other." As household objects, books are a crucial criterion. There's not a book in the Blues' house, while the Whites' living room contains numerous full bookshelves. Brooks concludes: "Here, in sum, are two families with hardly anything in common . . . , yet their . . . incomes are practically identical." Likewise, it was Russell Lynes's awareness that it's less money than taste and knowledge and perceptiveness that determine class that some years ago prompted him to set forth the tripartite scheme of

A high prole regarding a destitute with disdain, but less for his poverty than for his style

highbrow, middlebrow, and *lowbrow.*

Not that the three classes at the top don't have money. The point is that money alone doesn't define them, for the *way* they have their money is largely what matters. That is, as a class indicator the amount of money is less significant than the source. The main thing distinguishing the top three classes from each other is the amount of money inherited in relation to the amount currently earned. The top-out-of-sight class (Rockefellers, Pews, DuPonts, Mellons, Fords, Vanderbilts) lives on inherited capital entirely. No one whose money, no matter how copious, comes from his own work—film stars are an example—can be a member of the top-out-of-sight class, even if the size of his income and the extravagance of his expenditure permit him to simulate identity with it. Inheritance—"old money" in the vulgar phrase—is the indispensable principle defining the top three classes, and it's best if the money's been in the family for three or four generations. There are subtle local ways to ascertain how long the money's been there. Touring middle America, the British traveler Jonathan Raban came upon the girl Sally, who informed him that "New Money says Missouri; Old Money says Missoura."

"When I think of a really rich man," says a Boston blue-collar, "I think of one of those estates where you can't see the house from the road." Hence the name of the top class, which could

just as well be called "the class in hiding." Their houses are never seen from the street or road. They like to hide away deep in the hills or way off on Greek or Caribbean islands (which they tend to own), safe, for the moment, from envy and its ultimate attendants, confiscatory taxation and finally expropriation. It was the Great Depression, Vance Packard speculates, that badly frightened the very rich, teaching them to be "discreet, almost reticent, in exhibiting their wealth." From the 1930s dates the flight of money from such exhibitionistic venues as the mansions of upper Fifth Avenue to hideways in Virginia, upper New York State, Connecticut, Long Island, and New Jersey. The situation now is very different from the one in the 1890s satirized by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In his day the rich delighted to exhibit themselves conspicuously, with costly retainers and attendants much in evidence. Now they hide, not merely from envy and revenge but from exposé journalism, much advanced in cunning and ferocity since Veblen's time, and from an even worse threat, virtually unknown to Veblen, foundation mendicancy, with its hordes of beggars in three-piece suits constantly badgering the well-to-do. Showing off used to be the main satisfaction of being very rich in America. Now the rich must skulk and hide. It's a pity.

And it's not just that the individual houses and often the persons of the top-out-of-sights are removed from scrutiny. Their very class tends to escape the down-to-earth calculations of sociologists and poll-takers and consumer researchers. It's not studied because it's literally out of sight, and a questionnaire proffered to a top-out-of-sight person will very likely be hurled to the floor with disdain. Very much, in fact, the way it would be ignored by a bottom-out-of-sight person. And it's here that we begin to perceive one of the most wonderful things about the American class system—the curious similarity, if not actual brotherhood, of the top- and bottom-out-of-sights. Just as the tops are hidden away on their islands or behind the peek-a-boo walls of their distant estates, the bottoms are equally invisible, when not put away in institutions or claustrated in monasteries, lamaseries, or communes, then hiding from creditors, deceived bail-bondsmen, and gulled merchants intent on repossessing cars and furniture. (This bottom-out-of-sight class is visible briefly at one place and time, muttering its wayward fancies on the streets of New York in the spring. But after this ritual yearly show of itself it retreats

into invisibility again.) In aid of invisibility, members of both classes feel an equal anxiety to keep their names out of the papers. And the bottoms—"the lower or spurious leisure class," Veblen calls them—share something more with the top-out-of-sights. They do not earn their money. They are given it and kept afloat not by their own efforts or merits but by the welfare machinery or the correctional system, the way the tops owe it all to their ancestors. And a further similarity: members of both classes carry very little cash on their persons. We can say, in summary, that the virtual identity, in important respects, of top- and bottom-out-of-sights is a remarkable example of the time-proven principle that Extremes Meet.

The next class down, the upper class, differs from the top-out-of-sight class in two main ways. First, although it inherits a lot of its money, it earns quite a bit too, usually from some attractive, if slight, work, without which it would feel bored and even ashamed. It's likely to make its money by controlling banks and the more historic corporations, think tanks, and foundations, and to busy itself with things like the older universities, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Foreign Policy Association, the Committee for Economic Development, and the like, together with the executive branch of the federal government, and often the Senate. In the days when ambassadors were amateurs, they were selected largely from this class, very seldom from the top-out-of-sight. And secondly, unlike the top-out-of-sights, the upper class is visible, often ostentatiously so. Which is to say that the top-out-of-sights have spun off and away from Veblen's scheme of conspicuous exhibition, leaving the mere upper class to carry on its former role. When you pass a house with a would-be impressive façade visible from the street or highway, you know it's occupied by a member of the upper class. The White House is probably the best example. Its residents, even on those occasions when they are Franklin D. Roosevelts or even John F. Kennedys, can never be designated top-out-of-sight but only upper-class. The house is simply too showy, being pure white and carefully positioned on high ground, and temporary residence there usually constitutes a come-down for most of its occupants. It is a hopelessly upper-class place—or even lower than that, as when the Harry Trumans lived there.

Of course no person is located within one of these class categories exclusively. Consider William Randolph Hearst and his

establishment at San Simeon. The location is in a way top-out-of-sight, for the "house" isn't visible from the highway, the nearest public access. But the façade of the main building, once you penetrate through the miles of outdoor park and "zoo," is designed to evoke respect, or rather awe, in the breast of the apprehender, and that indicates how very un-top-out-of-sight Hearst remained despite his pseudo-aristocratic airs. He cared too much what effect he was having on people. His using paper napkins at his sumptuous and pretentious dinner parties is a promising sign of a genuine aristocratic eccentricity, but his care that his place should look impressive from the front—it looks like the Cathedral of Avila, among other similar structures—gives him away. Merely upper-middle-class stumbling around in a boy's understanding of showing off.

Like all the classes, the upper class has its distinct stigmata. It will be in the *Social Register,* for example, whereas the mere upper-middle class will not be, although it will slaver to get in. Having streets named after you is a signal that you are probably upper-class. At least if the street name's your surname: if it's your first name (like *Kathy Street*), you are middle-class or worse. Speaking French fluently, even though French is irrelevant to one's actual life, business, interests, and the like, is an upper-class sign, although it's important not to speak it with anything resembling a correct, or "French," accent.

Not smoking at all is very upper-class, but in any way calling attention to one's abstinence drops one to middle-class immediately. The constant coming and going of "houseguests" is an all but infallible upper-class sign, implying as it does plenty of spare bedrooms to lodge them in and no anxiety about making them happy, what with all the drinks, food, games, parties, etc. It is among members of the upper class that you have to refrain from uttering compliments, which are taken to be rude, possessions there being of course beautiful, expensive, and impressive, without question. The paying of compliments is a middle-class convention, for this class needs the assurance compliments provide. In the upper class there's never any doubt of one's value, and it all goes without saying. A British peer of a very old family was once visited by an artistic young man who, entering the dining room, declared that he'd never seen a finer set of Hepplewhite chairs. His host had him ejected instantly, explaining, "Fellow praised my chairs! Damned cheek!" Dining among the uppers,

one does not normally praise the food, because it goes without saying that the hostess would put forth nothing short of excellent. Besides, she's not cooked it. Likewise, if you spill a glass of wine, don't fret: the staff will clean it up.

Although not an infallible sign, because the upper-middle class has learned to ape it, devotion to horses—owning them, breeding them, riding them, racing them, chasing small animals while sitting on them—is, the way backgammon was before it became popular and lost caste, a fairly trustworthy upper-class mark. But it is, finally, by a characteristic the American upper class shares with all aristocracies that ye shall know them: their imperviousness to ideas and their total lack of interest in them. (A mark of the top-out-of-sights too, as Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney's literary performance attests.) Their inattention to ideas is why Matthew Arnold calls them Barbarians, and he imputes their serenity specifically to their "never having had any ideas to trouble them." Still, they are a nice class, and the life among them is comfortable and ample and even entertaining, so long as you don't mind never hearing anyone saying anything intelligent or original.

We now come to the upper-middle class. It may possess virtually as much as the two classes above it. The difference is that it has earned most of it, in law, medicine, oil, shipping, real estate, or even the more honorific kinds of trade, like buying and selling works of art. Although they may enjoy some inherited money and use inherited "things" (silver, Oriental rugs), the upper-middles suffer from a bourgeois sense of shame, a conviction that to live on the earnings of others, even forebears, is not quite nice.

Caste marks of the upper-middles would include living in a house with more rooms than you need, except perhaps when a lot of "overnight guests" are present to help you imitate upper-class style. Another sign of the upper-middle class is its chastity in sexual display: the bathing suits affected by the women here are the most sexless in the world, Britain and Canada included. They feature boy-pants legs, in imitation of the boxer shorts favored by upper-middle-class men. Both men's and women's clothes here are designed to conceal, rather than underline, anatomical differences between the sexes. Hence, because men's shoulders constitute a secondary sexual characteristic, the natural-shoulder jacket. Epaulets emphasize the shoulders. They are thus associated with the lower classes, whose shoulders are required

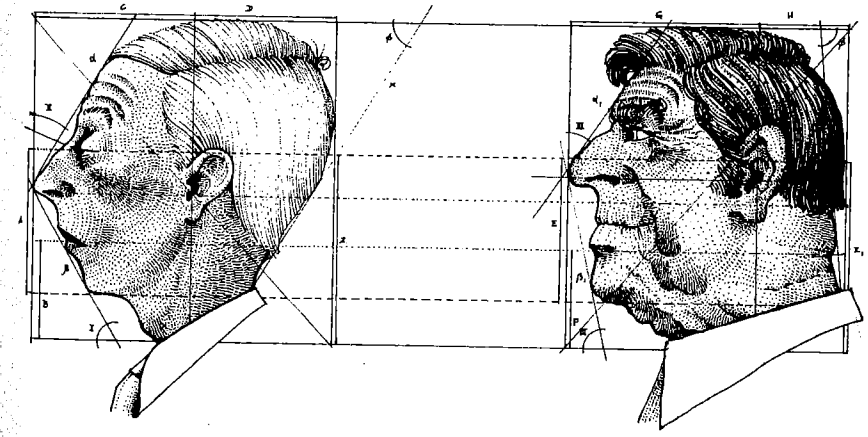
for physical work. The military makes much of epaulets, betraying instantly its prole associations. If you know someone who voted for John Anderson at the last presidential election, ten to one she's (or he's) upper-middle. This class is also the most "role-reversed" of all: men think nothing of cooking and doing housework, women of working out of the house in journalism, the theater, or real estate. (If the wife stays home all the time, the family's middle-class only.) Upper-middles like to show off their costly educations by naming their cats Spinoza, Clytemnestra, and Candide, which means, as you'll have inferred already, that it's in large part the class depicted in Lisa Birnbach and others' *Official Preppy Handbook,* that significantly popular artifact of 1980.

And it is the class celebrated also in the 1970 Ivy-idyllic film *Love Story.* The vast popularity of these two products suggests the appeal of the upper-middle style to all Americans who don't possess it. Indeed, most people of the middle classes and below would rather be in the upper-middle class than even the upper or the top-out-of-sight. A recent Louis Harris poll showed that when asked what class they'd like to be in, most said the middle class, and when asked what *part* of the middle class they'd like to be in, most said the upper-middle class. Being in the upper-middle class is a familiar and credible fantasy: its usages, while slightly grander than one's own, are recognizable and compassable, whereas in the higher classes you might be embarrassed by not knowing how to eat caviar or use a finger bowl or discourse in French. It's a rare American who doesn't secretly want to be upper-middle class.

We could gather as much, if in a coarser way, from a glance at two books by John T. Molloy, *Dress for Success* (1975) and *Molloy's Live for Success* (1981). Molloy, whose talents are not at all contemptible, designates himself "America's first wardrobe engineer," in which capacity he is hired by businesses to advise them on principles of corporate dress. The ideal is for everyone in business to look upper-middle-class, because upper-middle-class equals Success. As he puts it with significant parallelism, "Successful dress is really no more than achieving good taste and the look of the upper-middle class." Even executives' offices can be tinkered with until they too emit an air of habitual success, which means, as Molloy says, that "the successful office exudes the qualities of the upper-middle class." That is, "It is (or looks)

spacious and uncrowded. It is rich. It is well kept. It is tasteful. It is impressive. It is comfortable. It is private." And the waiting room too: it, "like the rest of your office, must immediately spell 'upper-middle class' to every visitor."

For Molloy, it's not just people's clothes and offices and waiting rooms that can be cosmeticized toward the upper-middle look. It's their faces, bodies, gestures, and postures as well. In *Molloy's Live for Success,* by the aid of line drawings he distinguishes between the male profile of the prole and the male profile of the upper-middle class. The prole either has his jaw set in bitterness and defiance or his mouth open in doltish wonder. The upper-middle-class male, on the other hand, has his mouth closed but not too firmly set, and his shoulders avoid the hangdog, whip-me-again-master slouch Molloy finds characteristic of the unsuccessful. "Upper-middle-class and lower-middle-class people not only stand and sit differently," Molloy points out, "they move differently. Upper-middle-class people tend to have controlled precise movements. The way they use their arms and where their feet fall is dramatically different from lower-middle-class people, who tend to swing their arms out rather than hold them in closer to their bodies."



Upper-middle and prole profiles
(after Molloy)

There's little doubt that instructors like Molloy—and Michael Korda, author of *Success! How Every Man and Woman Can Achieve It* (1975)—can teach aspirants to simulate the upper-middle look. It's less certain that they can ever teach what goes with it and might be understood to cause it, the upper-middle-class sense of relaxation, play, and, to a degree, irony. In any other class we can imagine people contriving euphemisms for "Let's fuck." We can imagine, indeed, members of any other class coming up with the colorful invitation "Let's hide the salami." But it's unlikely that any but the upper-middle class would say, as *The Official Preppy Handbook* records, "Let's *play* hide the salami" and then affectionately abbreviate *salami* to *salam'*, the way it abbreviates Bloody Marys to Bloodys and gin and tonics to G&T's. It's all a game (in fact, "the game of life") with the upper-middle class, and hence its natural leaning toward frivolities like golf and tennis and yachting. Who wouldn't want to be in a class so free, secure, and amusing?

Before proceeding downward from these three top classes, we must pause to consider the importance of geographical place in defining them. People from the middle and prole classes will be tempted to imagine that place has little to do with class, that you can belong to the top classes just anywhere. Nothing could be more wrong.

("I understand, young man, that you want to join the Cosmopolitan Club."
"Yes, sir."
"Tell me, where do you come from?"
"Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, sir."
"I see." [*Averts eyes.*])

There are tens of thousands of places in the United States grand enough to have earned a Zip Code number. Given sufficient knowledge and a fine taste, it would be possible to rank them all according to their varying degrees of class, from Grosse Point and Watch Hill down to Needles and Pikesville. The best places socially would probably be found to be those longest under occupation by financially prudent Anglo-Saxons, like Newport, Rhode Island; Haddam, Connecticut; and Bar Harbor, Maine. Los Angeles would rank low less because it's ugly and banal than because it was owned by the Spanish for so long. A similar fact explains why St. Louis outranks San Antonio, Texas.

It's ultimately impossible to specify exactly what gives a place class. Fifty years ago H. L. Mencken, in *The American Mercury*, tried to create a trustworthy gauge by developing a hundred "social indicators" like the number of people in a given place who are listed in *Who's Who*, or who subscribe to *The Atlantic*, or who use up lots of gasoline. Today one would probably want to rank well up there a place that has experienced no dramatic increase in population since Mencken's time. This, at least, we can infer as a criterion from the fact that since 1940, the population of so awful a place as Miami has increased from 172,000 to 343,000; of Phoenix, from 65,000 to 683,000; and of San Diego, from 200,000 to 840,000. Another sign of class desirability might be the absence of facilities for bowling. I say that because Richard Boyer and David Savageau, in their *Places Rated Almanac* (1981), have found that the following places provide the best access to bowling alleys, and we can't fail to note what regrettable places they are:

Billings, Montana
Owensboro, Kentucky
Midland, Texas
Peoria, Illinois
Dubuque, Iowa
Odessa, Texas
Alexandria, Louisiana

As I've just shown, it's probably easier to tell what makes a place socially impossible than to indicate why it's desirable. Another way to estimate a place's undesirability is to measure the degree to which religious fundamentalism is identified with it. Akron, Ohio (a dump, to be sure, by other criteria), is fatally known as the home of the Rex Humbard Ministry, the way Greenville, South Carolina, is known as the seat of Bob Jones University, and Wheaton, Illinois, is identified with Wheaton College and remembered thus as the forcing ground of the great Billy Graham. Likewise Garden Grove, California, locus of the Rev. Robert Schuller, famous for his automatic smile and his cheerful Cathedral of Glass. Can a higher-class person live in Lynchburg, Virginia? Probably not, since that town is the origin of Dr. Jerry Falwell's radio emissions, the site of his church, and the mailing address for free-will offerings. Indeed, it seems a general principle that no high-class person can live in any place associated with religious prophecy or miracle, like Mecca, Beth-

lehem, Fatima, Lourdes, or Salt Lake City. It's notable that the most civilized places—London, Paris, Antibes, and even New York—pass safely through this test, although by the strictest application of the rule, Rome is a little doubtful. Still, classier than Jerusalem.

One signal of desirability is the quality of a city's best newspaper. The class inferiority of Washington, despite all its pretenses to high status, with its embassies and all, can be sensed the minute you open the *Washington Post,* which on Sunday provides its readers (high proles?) with not just a horoscope but lengthy plot summaries of the TV soaps, together with the advice of Ann Landers. In the same way, you can infer that Indianapolis carries little class clout by noticing that the *Indianapolis Star* offers its readers all these features, plus "Today's Prayer" on the front page. Both Florida (except perhaps for Palm Beach) and Southern California (except perhaps for Pasadena) have been considered socially disastrous for decades. As if the facts were well known, the vilest nightclubs abroad, especially in gotten-up new places like West Germany, are likely to be named Florida. One reason no civilized person could think of living near Tampa is that during the 1970s this sign was visible there, advertising nearby Apollo Beach: "Guy Lombardo Wants You as a Neighbor." In the same way, retired persons are solicited to share some of the magic of their musical hero by buying into the Lawrence Welk Country Club Mobile Estates in Escondido, California. In the classified section of a recent issue of the prole *National Enquirer* there were four ads offering fraudulent university degrees: all four listed California addresses. And some events seem class perfect: how right that the derelict *Queen Mary* should end as a piece of junk in precisely so witless a place as Long Beach, California, or that St. Petersburg, Florida, should find itself the site of the Dali Museum, or that Fort Lauderdale should be the headquarters of the STP Corporation.

In the face of this, the question arises, "Where then may a member of the top classes live in this country?" New York first of all, of course. Chicago. San Francisco. Philadelphia. Baltimore. Boston. Perhaps Cleveland. And deep in the countryside of Connecticut, New York State, Virginia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. That's about it. It's not considered good form to live in New Jersey, except in Bernardsville and perhaps Princeton, but any place in New Jersey beats Sunnyvale, Cypress, and Compton, California; Canton, Ohio; Reno, Nevada; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Columbus, Georgia, and similar Army towns; and Parma, Ohio, a city of 100,000 without a daily newspaper, bus system, hotel, or map of itself. Impossible also are Evergreen, Colorado, because John Hinckley came from there, and Dallas, because—among many other good reasons—Lee Harvey Oswald lived there. It is said that experts on the subject regard Las Vegas as "the world capital of tacky," and I suppose you could get some idea of the height of your social class by your lack of familiarity with it. And Acapulco as well?

Back, now, to the classes. The middle class is distinguishable more by its earnestness and psychic insecurity than by its middle income. I have known some very rich people who remain stubbornly middle-class, which is to say they remain terrified at what others think of them, and to avoid criticism are obsessed with doing everything right. The middle class is the place where table manners assume an awful importance and where net curtains flourish to conceal activities like hiding the salam' (a phrase no middle-class person would indulge in, surely: the fatuous *making love* is the middle-class equivalent). The middle class, always anxious about offending, is the main market for "mouthwashes," and if it disappeared the whole "deodorant" business would fall to the ground. If physicians tend to be upper-middle-class, dentists are gloomily aware that they're middle, and are said to experience frightful status anxieties when introduced socially to "physicians"—as dentists like to call them. (Physicians call themselves *doctors,* and enjoy doing this in front of dentists, as well as college professors, chiropractors, and divines.)

"Status panic": that's the affliction of the middle class, according to C. Wright Mills, author of *White Collar* (1951) and *The Power Elite* (1956). Hence the middles' need to accumulate credit cards and take in *The New Yorker,* which it imagines registers upper-middle taste. Its devotion to that magazine, or its ads, is a good example of Mills's description of the middle class as the one that tends "to borrow status from higher elements." *New Yorker* advertisers have always known this about their audience, and some of their pseudo-upper-middle gestures in front of the middles are hilarious, like one recently flogging expensive stationery, here, a printed invitation card. The pretentious Anglophile spelling of the second word strikes the right opening note:

In honour of
Dr and Mrs Leonard Adam Westman,
Dr and Mrs Jeffrey Logan Brandon
request the pleasure of your company for
[at this point the higher classes might say *cocktails,* or, if thoroughly secure, *drinks*. But here, "Dr." and Mrs. Brandon are inviting you to consume specifically—]
Champagne and Caviar
on Friday, etc., etc.
Valley Hunt Club,
Stamford, Conn., etc.

The only thing missing is the brand names of the refreshments.

If the audience for that sort of thing used to seem the most deeply rooted in time and place, today it seems the class that's the most rootless. Members of the middle class are not only the sort of people who buy their own heirlooms, silver, etc. They're also the people who do most of the moving long-distance (generally to very unstylish places), commanded every few years to pull up stakes by the corporations they're in bondage to. They are the geologist employed by the oil company, the computer programmer, the aeronautical engineer, the salesman assigned a new territory, and the "marketing" (formerly *sales*) manager deputed to keep an eye on him. These people and their families occupy the suburbs and developments. Their "Army and Navy," as William H. Whyte, Jr., says, is their corporate employer. IBM and DuPont hire these people from second-rate colleges and teach them that they are nothing if not members of the team. Virtually no latitude is permitted to individuality or the milder forms of eccentricity, and these employees soon learn to avoid all ideological statements, notably, as we'll see, in the furnishing of their living rooms. Terrified of losing their jobs, these people grow passive, their humanity diminished as they perceive themselves mere parts of an infinitely larger structure. And interchangeable parts, too. "The training makes our men interchangeable," an IBM executive was once heard to say.

It's little wonder that, treated like slaves most of the time, the middle class lusts for the illusion of weight and consequence. One sign is their quest for heraldic validation ("This beautiful embossed certificate will show your family tree"). Another is their custom of issuing annual family newsletters announcing the most recent triumphs in the race to become "professional":

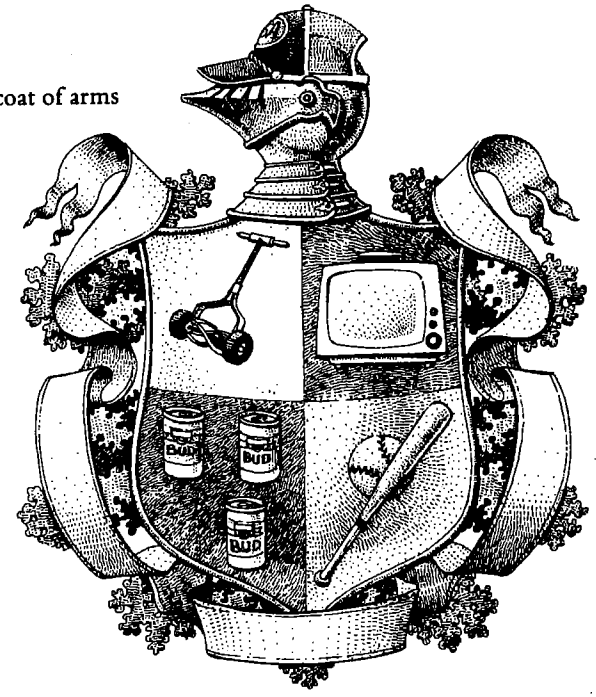
John, who is now 22, is in his first year at the Dental School of Wayne State University.
Caroline has a fine position as an executive secretary for a prestigious firm in Boise, Idaho.

Sometimes these letters really wring the heart, with their proud lists of new "affiliations" achieved during the past year: "This year Bob became a member of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Beer Can Collectors League of North America, the Alumni Council of the University of Evansville, and the Young Republicans of Vanderburgh County." (Cf. Veblen: "Since conservatism is a characteristic of the wealthier and therefore more reputable portion of the community, it has acquired a certain honorific or decorative value.") Nervous lest she be considered nobody, the middle-class wife is careful to dress way up when she goes shopping. She knows by instinct what one middle-class woman told an inquiring sociologist: "You know there's class when you're in a department store and a well-dressed lady gets treated better."

"One who makes birth or wealth the sole criterion of worth": that's a conventional dictionary definition of a *snob,* and the place to look for the snob is in the middle class. Worried a lot about their own taste and about whether it's working for or against them, members of the middle class try to arrest their natural tendency to sink downward by associating themselves, if ever so tenuously, with the imagined possessors of money, power, and taste. "Correctness" and doing the right thing become obsessions, prompting middle-class people to write thank-you notes after the most ordinary dinner parties, give excessively expensive or correct presents, and never allude to any place—Fort Smith, Arkansas, for example—that lacks known class. It will not surprise readers who have traveled extensively to hear that Neil Mackwood, a British authority on snobbery, finds the greatest snobs worldwide emanating from Belgium, which can also be considered world headquarters of the middle class.

The desire to belong, and to belong by some mechanical act like purchasing something, is another sign of the middle class. Words like *club* and *guild* (as in Book-of-the-Month Club and Literary Guild) extend a powerful invitation. The middle class is thus the natural target for developers' ads like this:

Prole coat of arms



You Belong
in Park Forest!
The moment you come to our town you know:
You're Welcome.
You're part of a big group. . . .

Oddity, introversion, and the love of privacy are the big enemies, a total reversal of the values of the secure upper orders. Among the middles there's a convention that erecting a fence or even a tall hedge is an affront. And there's also a convention that you may drop in on neighbors or friends without a telephone inquiry first. Being naturally innocent and well disposed and aboveboard, a member of the middle class finds it hard to believe that all are not. Being timid and conventional, no member of the middle class would expect that anyone is copulating in the afternoon instead of the evening, clearly, for busy and well-behaved corporate personnel, the correct time for it. When William H. Whyte, Jr., was poking around one suburb studying the residents, he was told by one quintessentially middle-class woman:

"The street behind us is nowhere near as friendly. They knock on doors over there."

If the women treasure "friendliness," the men treasure having a genteel occupation (usually more important than money), with emphasis on the word (if seldom the thing) *executive*. (As a matter of fact, an important class divide falls between those who feel veneration before the term *executive* and those who feel they want to throw up.) Having a telephone-answering machine at home is an easy way of simulating (at relatively low cost) high professional desirability, but here you wouldn't think of a facetious or eccentric text (delivered in French, for example, or in the voice of Donald Duck or Richard Nixon) asking the caller to speak his bit after the beeping sound. For the middle-class man is scared. As C. Wright Mills notes, "He is always somebody's man, the corporation's, the government's, the army's. . . ." One can't be too careful. One "management adviser" told Studs Terkel: "Your wife, your children have to behave properly. You've got to fit in the mold. You've got to be on guard." In *Coming Up for Air* (1939) George Orwell, speaking for his middle-class hero, gets it right:

> There's a lot of rot talked about the sufferings of the working class. I'm not so sorry for the proles myself. . . . The prole suffers physically, but he's a free man when he isn't working. But in every one of those little stucco boxes there's some poor bastard who's *never* free except when he's fast asleep.

Because he is essentially a salesman, the middle-class man develops a salesman's style. Hence his optimism and his belief in the likelihood of self-improvement if you'll just hurl yourself into it. One reason musicals like *Annie* and *Man of La Mancha* make so much money is that they offer him and his wife songs, like "Tomorrow" and "The Impossible Dream," that seem to promise that all sorts of good things are on their way. A final stigma of the middle class, an emanation of its social insecurity, is its habit of laughing at its own jests. Not entirely certain what social effect he's transmitting, and yet obliged, by his role as "salesman," to promote goodwill and optimism, your middle-class man serves as his own enraptured audience. Sometimes, after uttering some would-be clever formulation in public, he will look all around to gauge the response of the audience. Favorable, he desperately hopes.

The young men of the middle class are chips off the old block. If you want to know who reads John T. Molloy's books, hoping to break into the upper-middle class by formulas and mechanisms, they are your answer. You can see them on airplanes especially, being forwarded from one corporate training program to another. Their shirts are implausibly white, their suits are excessively dark, their neckties resemble those worn by undertakers, and their hair is cut in the style of the 1950s. Their talk is of *the bottom line,* and for *no* they are likely to say *no way*. Often their necks don't seem long enough, and their eyes tend to be too much in motion, flicking back and forth rather than up and down. They will enter adult life as corporate trainees and, after forty-five faithful years, leave it as corporate personnel, wondering whether this is all.

So much for the great middle class, to which, if you innocently credit people's descriptions of their own status, almost 80 percent of our population belongs. Proceeding downward, we would normally expect to meet next the lower-middle class. But it doesn't exist as such any longer, having been pauperized by the inflation of the 1960s and 1970s and transformed into the high-proletarian class. What's the difference? A further lack of freedom and self-respect. Our former lower-middle class, the new high proles, now head "the masses," and even if they are positioned at the top of the proletarian classes, still they are identifiable as people things are done to. They are in bondage—to monetary policy, rip-off advertising, crazes and delusions, mass low culture, fast foods, consumer schlock. Back in the 1940s there was still a real lower-middle class in this country, whose solid high-school education and addiction to "saving" and "planning" maintained it in a position—often precarious, to be sure—above the working class. In those days, says C. Wright Mills,

> there were fewer little men, and in their brief monopoly of high-school education they were in fact protected from many of the sharper edges of the workings of capitalist progress. They were free to entertain deep illusions about their individual abilities and about the collective trustworthiness of the system. As their number has grown, however, they have become increasingly subject to wage-worker conditions.

Their social demotion has been the result. These former low-

white-collar people are now simply working machines, and the wife usually works as well as the husband.

The kind of work performed and the sort of anxiety that besets one as a result of work are ways to divide the working class into its three strata. The high proles are the skilled workers, craftsmen, like printers. The mid-proles are the operators, like Ralph Kramden, the bus driver. The low proles are unskilled labor, like longshoremen. The special anxiety of the high proles is fear about loss or reduction of status: you're proud to be a master carpenter, and you want the world to understand clearly the difference between you and a laborer. The special anxiety of the mid-proles is fear of losing the job. And of the low proles, the gnawing perception that you're probably never going to make enough or earn enough freedom to have and do the things you want.

The kind of jobs high-prole people do tempt them to insist that they are really "professionals," like "sanitation men" in a large city. A mail carrier tells Studs Terkel why he likes his work: "They always say, 'Here comes the mailman.' . . . I feel it is one of the most respected professions there is throughout the nation." Prole women who go into nursing never tire of asserting how professional they are, and the same is true of their daughters who become air stewardesses, a favorite high-prole occupation. Although Army officers, because they are all terrified of the boss, are probably more middle-class than high-prole, they seem the lower the more they insist that they are "professionals," and since their disgrace in Vietnam, and their subsequent anxiety about their social standing, that insistence has grown more mechanical. An Army wife says, "Some like to speak of doctors, lawyers, etc., as professionals. All [Army] officers are professionals." And then, a notable deviation from logic: "Who could be more professional than the man who has dedicated his whole life to the defense of his country?"

One way to ascertain whether a person is middle-class or high-prole is to apply the principle that the wider the difference between one's working clothes and one's "best," the lower the class. Think not just of laborers and blue-collar people in general, but of doormen and bellboys, farmers and railway conductors and trainmen, and firemen. One of these once said: "I wish I was a lawyer. Shit, I wish I was a doctor. But I just didn't have it. You gotta have the smarts."

But high proles are quite smart, or at least shrewd. Because

often their work is not closely supervised, they have pride and a conviction of independence, and they feel some contempt for those who have not made it as far as they have. They are, as the sociologist E. E. LeMasters calls them and titles his book, *Blue-Collar Aristocrats* (1975), and their disdain for the middle class is like the aristocrat's from the other direction. One high prole says: "If my boy wants to wear a goddamn necktie all his life and bow and scrape to some boss, that's his right, but by God he should also have the right to earn an honest living with his hands if that is what he likes." Like other aristocrats, says LeMasters, these "have gone to the top of their social world and need not expend time or energy on 'social climbing.' " They are aristocratic in other ways, like their devotion to gambling and their fondness for deer hunting. Indeed, the antlers with which they decorate their interiors give their dwellings in that respect a resemblance to the lodges of the Scottish peerage. The high prole resembles the aristocrat too, as Ortega y Gasset notes, in "his propensity to make out of games and sports the central occupation of his life," as well as in his unromantic attitude toward women.

Since they're not consumed with worry about choosing the correct status emblems, these people can be remarkably relaxed and unself-conscious. They can do, say, wear, and look like pretty much anything they want without undue feelings of shame, which belong to their betters, the middle class, shame being largely a bourgeois feeling. John Calvin, observes Jilly Cooper, is the prophet of the middle class, while Karl Marx is the prophet of the proles, even if most of them don't know it.

There are certain more or less infallible marks by which you can identify high proles, They're the ones who "belong" to Christmas and Channukah Clubs at banks, and they always buy big objects on installments. High proles are likely to spend money on things like elaborate color TVs, stereos, and tricky refrigerators, unlike the middles, who tend to invest in furniture of "good taste" to display in the living and dining room. Riding in sedans, high-prole men sit in front, with their wives planted in back. (As you move up to the middle class, one couple will be in front, one in back. But among upper-middles, you're likely to see a man and woman of different couples sharing a seat.) High proles arrive punctually at social events, social lateness of twenty minutes or so being a mark of the higher orders. If you're in a bar and you want to estimate the class of a man, get him, on some pretext, to

take out his wallet. The high-prole wallet always bulges, not just with snaps of wife, children, and grandchildren to exhibit when the bearer grows maudlin, but with sentimental paper memorabilia like important sports-ticket stubs and letters and other documents which can be whipped out to "prove" things. The definitive high-prole wallet has a wide rubber band around it.

All proles have a high respect for advertising and brand names. By knowing about such things you can display smartness and up-to-dateness, as well as associate yourself with the success of the products advertised. Drinking an identifiable bottle of Coca-Cola outside on a hot day is not just drinking a Coke: it's participating in a paradigm deemed desirable not just by your betters—the Cola-Cola Company—but by your neighbors, who perceive that you are doing something all-American and super-wonderful. John Brooks has observed that the graffiti inscribers in the New York subway cars tend to write everywhere but on the advertising cards, "as if advertising were the one aspect of . . . society that the writers can respect." Philip Roth's Sophie Portnoy hovers between middle-class and high-prole. If her habit of vigorous self-praise is middle, her respect for advertised brand names and her acute knowledge of prices is high-prole. "I'm the only one who's good to her," she tells her son, referring to the black cleaning woman. "I'm the only one who gives her a whole can of tuna for lunch, and I'm not talking dreck either, I'm talking Chicken of the Sea, Alex . . . 2 for 49!" *True Story,* aimed at "blue-collar women," assures its advertisers, doubtless correctly, that its readers are "the most brand-loyal group there is." If you're a high prole you do the things a commercial society has decreed you're supposed to do. In the Southwest, a place whose usages all of us are apparently expected to embrace in order to avoid "elitism," a popular high-prole family entertainment in the evening is going out to the car wash, with a stop-in at the local franchised food establishment on the way home. Or you might go to the Ice Show, titled, say, "Bugs Bunny in Space."

High proles are nice. It's down among the mid- and low proles that features some might find offensive begin to show themselves. These are the people who feel bitter about their work, often because they are closely supervised and regulated and generally treated like wayward children. "It's just like the Army," says an auto-assembly-plant worker. "No, it's worse. . . . You

just about need a pass to piss." Andrew Levison, author of *The Working-Class Majority* (1974), invites us to imagine what it would be like to be under the constant eye of a foreman, "a figure who has absolutely no counterpart in middle-class society. Salaried professionals do often have people above them, but it is impossible to imagine professors or executives being required to bring a doctor's note if they are absent a day or having to justify the number of trips they take to the bathroom." Mid- and low proles are perceived to be so because they perform the role of the victims in that "coercive utilization of man by man" that Veblen found so objectionable. (Imposing the coercion, instead of having it imposed on you, is the prerogative of the more fortunate: managers, teachers, writers, journalists, clergy, film directors.)

The degree of supervision, indeed, is often a more eloquent class indicator than mere income, which suggests that the whole class system is more a recognition of the value of freedom than a proclamation of the value of sheer cash. The degree to which your work is overseen by a superior suggests your real class more accurately than the amount you take home from it. Thus the reason why a high-school teacher is "lower" than a tenured university professor. The teacher is obliged to file weekly "lesson plans" with a principal, superintendent, or "curriculum coordinator," thus acknowledging subservience. The professor, on the other hand, reports to no one, and his class is thus higher, even though the teacher may be smarter, better-mannered, and richer. (It is in public schools, the postal service, and police departments that we meet terms like *supervisor* and *inspector:* the prole hunter will need to know no more.) One is a mid- or low prole if one's servitude is constantly emphasized. Occupational class depends very largely on doing work for which the consequences of error or failure are distant or remote, or better, invisible, rather than immediately apparent to a superior and thus instantly humiliating to the performer.

Constantly demeaned at work, the lower sorts of proles suffer from poor morale. As one woman worker says, "Most of us . . . have jobs that are too small for our spirit." A taxi driver in St. Louis defended the Vietnam War by saying, "We can't be a pitiful, helpless giant. We gotta show 'em we're number one." "Are you number one?" Studs Terkel asked him. Pause. "I'm number nothin'," he said. There's a prole tendency to express class disappointment by self-simplification, and when examining proles

it's well to be mindful of the observation of British critic Richard Hoggart: "There are no simple people. The 'ordinary' is complex too." Robert Bly would agree, as his poem "Come with Me" suggests:

> Come with me into those things that have felt this
> despair for so long—
> Those removed Chevrolet wheels that howl with a
> terrible loneliness,
> Lying on their backs in the cindery dirt, like men
> drunk, and naked,
> Staggering off down a hill at night to drown at last
> in the pond.
> Those shredded inner tubes abandoned on the
> shoulders of thruways,
> Black and collapsed bodies, that tried and burst,
> And were left behind;
> And the curly steel shavings, scattered about on
> garage benches,
> Sometimes still warm, gritty when we hold them,
> Who have given up, and blame everything on the
> government,
> And those roads in South Dakota that feel around in
> the darkness . . .

"A click": that's who runs things, say mid- and low proles, retreating into their private pursuits: home workshops and household repairs, washing and polishing the car; playing poker; fishing, hunting, camping; watching sports and Westerns on TV and identifying with quarterback or hero; visiting relatives (most upper-middles and uppers, by contrast, are in flight from their relatives and visit friends instead); family shopping at the local mall on Saturday or Sunday.

At the bottom of the working class, the low prole is identifiable by the gross uncertainty of his employment. This class would include illegal aliens like Mexican fruit pickers as well as other migrant workers. Social isolation is the norm here, and what Hoggart says of the lower working class in Britain applies elsewhere as well: "Socially . . . each day and each week is almost unplanned. There is no diary, no book of engagements, and few letters are sent or received." Remoteness and isolation, as in the valleys of Appalachia, are characteristics, and down here we find

people who, trained for nothing, are likely out of sheer wayward despair to join the Army.

Still, they're better off than the destitute, who never have even seasonal work and who live wholly on welfare. They differ from the bottom-out-of-sights less because they're much better off than because they're more visible, in the form of Bowery bums, bag ladies, people who stand in public places lecturing and delivering harangues about their grievances, people who drink out of paper bags, people whose need for some recognition impels them to "act" in front of audiences in the street. When delinquency and distress grow desperate, you sink into the bottom-out-of-sight class, staying all day in your welfare room or contriving to get taken into an institution, whether charitable or correctional doesn't matter much.

Thus the classes. They are usefully imagined as a line of theaters running side by side down a long street. Each has a marquee and lots of posters on the front. Plays about self-respect are running constantly in all of them, from the most comfortable to the barest and meanest. But the odd thing is that there's no promotion from one theater to the next one up. And the important point is this: there's no one playing in any of these theaters, no matter how imposing, who isn't, much of the time, scared to death that he's going to stumble, muff his lines, appear in the wrong costume, or otherwise bomb. If you find an American who feels entirely class-secure, stuff and exhibit him. He's a rare specimen.

III

Appearance Counts

How is it tnat if you're sharp, you're generally able to estimate a person's class at a glance? What caste marks do you look for?

Good looks, first of all, distributed around the classes pretty freely, to be sure, but frequently a mark of high caste. Prudent natural selection is the reason, as Jilly Cooper perceives. She notes that if upper-class people marry downward, they tend to choose beauty only, and concludes: "In general, good-looking people marry up . . . and the insecure and ugly tend to marry down." Smiling is a class indicator—that is, not doing a lot of it. On the street, you'll notice that prole women smile more, and smile wider, than those of the middle and upper classes. They like showing off their pretty dentures, for one thing, and for another, they're enmeshed in the "have a nice day" culture and are busy effusing a defensive optimism much of the time. And speaking of dentures, I witnessed recently an amazing performance in which a prole man in a public place dropped his top plate into a position where he could thrust it forward with his tongue until, pink and yellow, it protruded an inch or so from his mouth. The intent seemed to be to "air" it. Now one simply can't imagine the middle or upper-middle classes doing that sort of thing, although you'd not be surprised to see an upper-class person, utterly careless of public opinion as he'd be, doing it.

Sheer height is a more trustworthy sign of class in England

than everywhere, but classy people are seldom short and squat, even here. Regardless of one's height, having an ass that protrudes is low, as is having, or appearing to have, very little neck. The absence of neck is notable in Lawrence Welk, country-and-Western singers like Johnny Cash, and similar proles. If you're skeptical that looks give off class messages, in your imagination try conflating Roy Acuff with Averell Harriman, or Mayor Daley with George Bush. Or, for that matter, Minnie Pearl with Jackie Onassis.

Because 62 percent of Americans are overweight, a cheap way to achieve a sort of distinction is to be thin. This is the general aim of the top four classes, although the middle, because its work tends to be sedentary, has a terrible time abstaining from the potatoes. Destitutes and bottom-out-of-sights usually don't go around flaunting a lot of extra flesh, but seldom from choice. It's the three prole classes that get fat: fast foods and beer are two of the causes, but anxiety about slipping down a rung, resulting in nervous overeating, plays its part too, especially among high proles. Proles can rationalize their fat as an announcement of

"Your weight is an advertisement of your social standing."

steady wages and the ability to eat out often: even "Going Out for Breakfast" is a thinkable operation for proles, if we believe they respond to the McDonald's TV ads the way they're conditioned to.

A recent magazine ad for a diet book aimed at proles stigmatizes a number of erroneous assumptions about weight, proclaiming with some inelegance that "They're All a Crock." Among vulgar errors thus rejected is the proposition that "All Social Classes Are Equally Overweight." The ad explains:

> Your weight is an advertisement of your social standing. A century ago, corpulence was a sign of success. But no more. Today it is the badge of the lower-middle class, where obesity is *four times* more prevalent than it is among the upper-middle and middle classes.

And not just four times more prevalent. Four times more visible, for flaunting obesity is a prole sign, as if the object were to offer maximum aesthetic offense to the higher classes and thus exact a form of revenge. Jonathan Raban, watching people at the Minnesota State Fair, was vouchsafed a spectacle suggesting calculated, vigorously intentional obesity:

> These farming families . . . were the descendants of hungry immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia. . . . Generation by generation, their families had eaten themselves into Americans. Now they all had the same figure: same broad bottom, same buddha belly, same neckless join between turkey-wattle chin and sperm-whale torso. The women had poured themselves into pink elasticized pantsuits; the men swelled against every seam and button of their plaid shirts and Dacron slacks.

And lest they not be sufficiently noticed, Raban reports, many of the men wore caps asking us to believe that, in opposition to the wisdom of the ages, "Happiness Is Being a Grandparent." Raban found himself so fascinated by U.S.A. fat that he proposes a Fatness Map, which would indicate that the fattest people live in areas where the immigration has been the most recent and "ancestral memories of hunger closest." On the other hand, "states . . . settled before 1776 would register least in the way of fatty tissue. Girth would generally increase from east to west and from south to north. The flab capital of the U.S.A. should be

located somewhere in the triangle of Minnesota, Iowa, and the Dakotas."

We don't have to go all the way with Raban to perceive that there is an elite look in this country. It requires women to be thin, with a hairstyle dating back eighteen or twenty years or so. (The classiest women wear their hair for a lifetime in exactly the style they affected in college.) They wear superbly fitting dresses and expensive but always understated shoes and handbags, with very little jewelry. They wear scarves—these instantly betoken class, because they are useless except as a caste mark. Men should be thin. No jewelry at all. No cigarette case. Moderate-length hair, never dyed or tinted, which is a middle-class or high-prole sign, as the practice of President Reagan indicates. Never a hairpiece, a prole usage. (High and mid-proles call them *rugs, mats,* or *doilies.* Calling them *toops* is low-prole.) Both women's and men's elite looks are achieved by a process of rejection—of the current, the showy, the superfluous. Thus the rejection of fat by the elite. Michael Korda in his book *Success!* gets the point. "It pays," he finds, "to be thin."

But the elite rejection of the superfluous in no way implies a "minimal" look in clothes. Rather, "layering" is obligatory. As Alison Lurie says in *The Language of Clothes* (1981), "It has generally been true that the more clothes someone has on, the higher his or her status." And she goes on: "The recent fashion for 'layered' clothes may be related, as is sometimes claimed, to the energy shortage; it is also a fine way of displaying a large wardrobe."

The upper-middle-class woman will appear almost invariably in a skirt of gray flannel, Stuart plaid, or khaki; a navy-blue cardigan, which may be cable-stitched; a white blouse with Peter Pan collar; hose with flat shoes; hair preferably in a barrette. When it gets cold, she puts on a blue blazer, or, for business, a gray flannel suit. But the color toward which everything aspires is really navy. There will be lots of layering and a tendency to understate. The indispensable accessory will be a glasses case decorated with homemade needlepoint (an important caste mark: the needlepoint suggests hours of aimless leisure during which someone has worked on it—unthinkable for proles). If a woman does a lot of knitting for family and friends, chances are she's upper-middle-class. But if when she finishes a sweater she sews in a little label reading

Handmade by Gertrude Willis

she's middle-class. If the label reads

Hand-crafted by Gertrude Willis

she's high-prole.

If navy is the upper-middle-class color, purple is the prole equivalent, and it is scourged frequently by Barbara Blaes, wardrobe adviser to the Departments of Labor and Commerce as well as the CIA and the Food and Drug Administration. She gets $400 a day for rooting out prole garments from among women working in government departments. What she wants women to look like, as much as possible, is female men, in navy or gray tailored suits. Not, not assuredly, the pantsuit, especially not in purple, and especially not in purple polyester. That is the absolute bottom, the classic prole costume. It's right down there with another favorite prole getup, this one favored by the slender the way the pantsuit is by the obese. I refer to designer jeans worn with very high heels. This is a common outfit among newcomers to the suburbs who've not yet mastered the pseudo-prep, upper-middle look.

The purple polyester pantsuit offends two principles that determine class in clothes: the color principle and the organic-materials principle. Navy blue aside, colors are classier the more pastel or faded, and materials are classier the more they consist of anything that was once alive. That means wool, leather, silk, cotton, and fur. Only. All synthetic fibers are prole, partly because they're cheaper than natural ones, partly because they're not archaic, and partly because they're entirely uniform and hence boring—you'll never find a bit of straw or sheep excrement woven into an acrylic sweater. Veblen got the point in 1899, speaking of mass-produced goods in general: "Machine-made goods of daily use are often admired and preferred precisely on account of their excessive perfection by the vulgar and the underbred, who have not given due thought to the punctilios of elegant consumption." (The organic principle also determines that in kitchens wood is classier than Formica, and on the kitchen table a cotton cloth "higher" than plastic or oilcloth.) So important for genuine upper-middle-class standing is the total renunciation of artificial fibers that the elite eye becomes skilled in detecting even, as *The Official Preppy Handbook* has it, "a small percentage of polyester in an Oxford-

cloth shirt"—a sad middle-caste mark. The same invaluable book praises young Caroline Kennedy unreservedly—"on technical points Preppier than Mummy"—because "during four years at Harvard Square, an unnatural fiber never went near her body." It somehow seems very American and very late-twentieth-century—that is, very prole—that we are now invited to buy bath towels, whose only office is to absorb moisture, with their cotton, the sole absorbing fiber they contain, carefully diluted by 12 percent Dacron polyester, to keep them from absorbing so well.

But no one talks that way without risking rebuke from Mr. Fisher A. Rhymes, Director of Public Affairs of the Man-Made Fiber Producers Association, with headquarters in Washington, where it's in a position to persuade the Army and Navy to introduce the maximum number of man-made fibers not just into their towels but into their mops and sponges as well. Mr. Rhymes stands ready at all times to rebut calumnies, as he does in a recent letter to the *New York Times* defending polyester against a fashion writer's strictures. "Polyester," he says, "in its many luxurious forms, is the most widely used fashion fiber today." (Just what's wrong with it, of course, from the class point of view.)

If you can gauge people's proximity to prole status by the color and polyester content of their garments, legibility of their dress is another sign. "Legible clothing" is Alison Lurie's useful term to designate things like T-shirts or caps with messages on them you're supposed to read and admire. The messages may be simple, like BUDWEISER or HEINEKEN'S, or they may be complex and often lewd, like the one on the girl's T-shirt: THE BEST PART IS INSIDE. When proles assemble to enjoy leisure, they seldom appear in clothing without words on it. As you move up the classes and the understatement principle begins to operate, the words gradually disappear, to be replaced, in the middle and upper-middle classes, by mere emblems, like the Lacoste alligator. Once, ascending further, you've left all such trademarks behind, you may correctly infer that you are entering the purlieus of the upper class itself. The same reason a T-shirt reading COKE'S THE REAL THING is prole determines that the necktie reading COUNTESS MARA is vulgar and middle-class.

There are psychological reasons why proles feel a need to wear legible clothing, and they are more touching than ridiculous. By wearing a garment reading SPORTS ILLUSTRATED or GATORADE or LESTER LANIN, the prole associates himself with an enterprise the

Legible clothing, middle class (left) and prole

world judges successful, and thus, for the moment, he achieves some importance. This is the reason why, at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway each May, you can see grown men walking around proud to wear silly-looking caps so long as they say GOODYEAR or VALVOLINE. Brand names today possess a totemistic power to confer distinction on those who wear them. By donning legible clothing you fuse your private identity with external commercial success, redeeming your insignificance and becoming, for the moment, somebody. For $27 you can send in to a post-office box in Holiday, Florida, and get a nylon jacket in blue, white, and orange that says, on the front, UNION 76. There are sizes for kids and ladies too. Just the thing for the picnic. And this need is not the proles' alone. Witness the T-shirts and carryalls stamped with the logo of *The New York Review of Books,* which convey the point "I read hard books," or printed with portraits of Mozart and Haydn and Beethoven, which assure the world, "I am civi-

lized." The gold-plated blazer buttons displaying university seals affected by the middle class likewise identify the wearer with impressive brand names like the University of Indiana and Louisiana State.

The wearing of clothes either excessively new or excessively neat and clean also suggests that your social circumstances are not entirely secure. The upper and upper-middle classes like to appear in old clothes, as if to advertise how much of conventional dignity they can afford to throw away, as the men of these classes do also when they abjure socks while wearing loafers. Douglas Sutherland, in *The English Gentleman* (1980), is sound on the old-clothes principle. "Gentlemen," he writes, "may wear their suits until they are threadbare but they do so with considerable panache and it is evident to the most uncritical eye that they have been built by a good tailor." On the other hand, the middle class and the proles make much of new clothes, of course with the highest possible polyester content. The question of the class meaning of cleanliness is a tricky one, not as easy, perhaps, as Alison Lurie thinks. She finds cleanliness "a sign of status, since to be clean and neat always involves the expense of time and money." But laboring to present yourself scrupulously clean and neat suggests that you're worried about status slippage and that you care terribly what your audience thinks, both low signs. The perfect shirt collar, the too neatly tied necktie knot, the anxious overattention to dry cleaning—all betray the wimp. Or the nasty-nice. The deployment of the male bowtie is an illustration. If neatly tied, centered, and balanced, the effect is middle-class. When tied askew, as if carelessly or incompetently, the effect is upper-middle or even, if sufficiently inept, upper. The worst thing is being neat when, socially, you're supposed to be sloppy, or clean when you're supposed to be filthy. There's an analogy here with the excessively washed and polished automobile, almost infallibly a sign of prole ownership. Class people can afford to drive dirty cars. Just as, walking on the street, they're more likely to carry their business papers in tatty expanding files made of reddish-brown fiber, now fuzzy and sweat-stained, rather than in neat-looking attaché cases displaying lots of leather and brass, items that are a sad stigma of the middle class.

This principle of not-too-neat is crucial in men's clothing. Too careful means low—at least middle-class, perhaps prole. "Dear boy, you're almost too well dressed to be a gentleman," Neil

Mackwood, author of *Debrett's In and Out* (1980), imagines an upper-class person addressing someone in the middle class, as if the speaker were implying that the addressee is not a gent but a model, a floorwalker, or an actor. "A now famous Hollywood actor," Vance Packard reports, "still reveals his lower . . . origins every time he sits down. He pulls up his trousers to preserve the crease." And King George IV is said to have observed of Robert Peel: "He's not a gentleman: he divides his coattails when he sits down."

The difference between high- versus low-caste effects in men's clothes is partly the result of the upper orders' being used to wearing suits, or at least jackets. As Lurie perceives, the suit "not only flatters the inactive, it deforms the laborious." (And the athletic or strenuously muscular: Arnold Schwartzenegger looks especially comic in a suit.) For this reason the suit—preferably the "dark suit"—was a prime weapon in the nineteenth-century war of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat. "The triumph of the . . . suit," says Lurie, "meant that the blue-collar man in his best clothes was at his worst in any formal confrontation with his 'betters.' " We can think of blacksmith Joe Gargary in Dickens's *Great Expectations,* dressed miserably to the nines for an appearance in the city, being patronized by the comfortably dressed Pip.

"This strategic disadvantage," Lurie goes on, "can still be seen in operation at local union-management confrontations, in the offices of banks and loan companies, and whenever a working-class man visits a government bureau." That's an illustration of John T. Molloy's general principle of the way men use clothing to convey class signals. When two men meet, he perceives, "One man's clothing is saying to the other man, 'I am more important than you are, please show respect'; or, 'I am your equal and expect to be treated as such'; or, 'I am not your equal and do not expect to be treated as such.' " For this reason, Molloy indicates, proles who want to rise must be extremely careful to affect "Northeastern establishment attire," which will mean that Brooks Brothers and J. Press will be their guides: "Business suits should be plain; no fancy or extra buttons; no weird color stitching; no flaps on the breast pocket; no patches on the sleeves; no belts in the back of the jacket; no leather ornamentation; no cowboy yokes. Never."

It's largely a matter of habit and practice, says C. Wright Mills in *The Power Elite* (1956): no matter where you live, he insists,

"anyone with the money and the inclination can learn to be uncomfortable in anything but a Brooks Brothers suit." And, I would add, can learn to recoil from clothes with a glossy (middle-class) as opposed to a matte (upper-middle-class) finish. Middle-class clothes tend to err by excessive smoothness, to glitter a bit, to shine even before they're worn. Upper-middle clothes, on the other hand, lean to the soft, textured, woolly, nubby. Ultimately, the difference implies a difference between *city* and *country*, or labor and leisure, where *country* betokens not decrepit dairy farms and bad schools but estates and horse-leisure. Thus the popularity among the upper-middle class (and the would-be upper-middle class, like members of Ivy university faculties) of the tweed jacket. Country leisure is what it implies, not daily wage slavery in the city.

The tweed jacket is indispensable to the upper-middle-class trick of layering. A man signals that he's classy if, outdoors, he comes on in a tweed jacket, with vest or sweater (or two), shirt, tie, long wool scarf, and overcoat or raincoat. An analogy is with the upper-class house, which has lots of different rooms for different purposes. Wearing one shirt over another—Oxford-cloth button-down over a turtleneck, for example—is upper-middle-class, and the shirt worn underneath can even be a dress shirt (solid color is best) with its own collar, a usage I've seen in warm weather on Madison Avenue in the upper eighties. Since sweaters are practically obligatory for layering, it's important to know that the classiest is the Shetland crew-neck pullover, and in "Scottish" colors—heather and the like, especially when a tieless Oxford-cloth shirt (palpably without artificial fibers) just peeps over the top. Add a costly tweed jacket without shoulder padding and no one can tell you're not upper-middle at least. The V-neck sweater, designed to prove conclusively that you're wearing a necktie, is for that reason middle-class or even high prole. It's hard to believe that sometimes people tuck pullovers into the top of their trousers, but I'm told they do. If this does happen, it's a very low sign.

The interpreter of men's class appearances can hardly do better than study the costumes of the Presidents as they come and go. The general principle here is that the two-button suit is more prole than the three-button Eastern-establishment model. Most Presidents have worn the two-button kind before, and when they assume the leadership of the Free World, they feel obliged to

change, now affecting three-button suits and resembling the Chairman of the Board of the Chase Manhattan Bank. This is what made Richard Nixon look so awkward most of the time. He was really comfortable in the sort of Klassy Kut two-button suit you might wear if you were head of the Savings & Loan Association of Whittier, California. His successor, Gerald Ford, although brought up on the hick two-button model, managed to wear the three-button job with some plausibility, being more pliable and perhaps a faster study than Nixon. But he never really pulled off the con, in features resembling as he did Joe Palooka rather than any known type of American aristocrat. James Earl Carter knew himself well enough to realize that he should reject two- and three-button suits alike, sticking to blue jeans and thus escaping criticism as one who aspires to the Establishment but fails.

Ronald Reagan, of course, doesn't need to affect the establishment style, sensing accurately that his lowbrow, God-fearing, intellect-distrusting constituency regards it as an affront (which, of course, to them it is). Reagan's style can be designated Los Angeles (or even Orange) County Wasp-Chutzpah. It registers the sense that if you stubbornly believe you're as good as educated and civilized people—i.e., those Eastern dudes—then you are. He is the perfect representative of the mind and soul of the Sun Belt. He favors, of course, the two-button suit with maximum shoulder padding and with a Trumanesque squared white handkerchief in the breast pocket, which makes him look, when he's dressed way up, like a prole setting off for church. Sometimes, for leisure activities (as he might express it), he affects the cowboy look, which, especially when one is aged, appeals mightily to the Sun Belt seniles. One hesitates even to speculate about the polyester levels of his outfits.

Indeed, Reagan violates virtually every canon of upper-class or even upper-middle-class presentation. The dyed hair is, as we've seen, an outrage, as is the rouge on the cheeks. (Will the President soon proceed to eye shadow and liner?) So is the white broadcloth shirt with its omnipresent hint of collar stays. (Anxiety about neatness.) The suit materials are scandalously bucolic middle-class: plaid, but never Glen plaid. The necktie is tied with a full Windsor knot, the favorite of sophisticated high-school boys everywhere. When after a press conference Dan Rather, not everyone's idea of a Preppy, comes on to "summarize" and try

to make sense of the President's vagaries, his light-blue Oxford-cloth button-down and "regimental" tie make him, by contrast, look upper-middle-class. The acute student of men's class signals could virtually infer Reagan's politics of Midwestern small-town meanness from his getups, just as one might deduce Roosevelt's politics of aristocratic magnanimity from such classy accessories as his naval cape, pince-nez, and cigarette holder.

It's not just Ronald Reagan who violates all canons of gentlemanly attire. It's the conspicuous members of his "team" as well, like Al Haig. (Even though he's no longer Secretary of State, he wants so much to be President that he's appropriately dealt with here.) It's cruel, of course, to demand that a soldier know anything about taste on those occasions when he's obliged to disguise himself as an ordinary person. (Although there's always the example of General George C. Marshall, who, after a lifetime of appearing in uniform, managed in mufti to wear the three-button, three-piece suit as if to the classy manner born.) Al Haig's class stigma is the gaping jacket collar, always a prole giveaway. Here, the collar of the jacket separates itself from the collar of the shirt and backs off and up an inch or so: the effect is that of a man coming apart. That this caste mark is without specifically reactionary political meaning is confirmed by a photograph of Richard Hoggart, the British radical critic and Labour Party enthusiast, used to promote a recent book of his: his jacket collar is gaping a full inch at the rear, ample indication that jacket gape afflicts the far left as well as the far right. What it betrays, indeed, is less the zealot than the stooge. Like the poor chap interviewed on TV recently by William F. Buckley. He was from Texas and wanted to censor school textbooks to repress, among other evils, *pro-mis-kitty*. (As gently as possible, Buckley corrected this mispronunciation of *promiscuity* so that the audience would know what the poor ass was talking about.) But even if the Texan had not, with complete confidence in his unaided powers, delivered repeatedly this prole mispronunciation, his perceptiveness and sensibility could have been inferred from the way his jacket collar gaped open *a full two inches*. Buckley's collar, of course, clung tightly to his neck and shoulders, turn and bow and bob as he might. And here I will reject all accusations that I am favoring the rich over the poor. The distinction I'm pointing to is not one between the tailored clothes of the fortunate and the store clothes of the others, for if you try you can get a perfectly fitting suit

Prole jacket-gape

collar off the rack, or at least have it altered to fit snugly. The difference is in recognizing this as a class signal and not being aware of it as such. You've got to know that, as Douglas Sutherland says in *The English Gentleman*, almost the most important criterion in a suit worth wearing at all is "that it should fit well round the shoulders."

In addition to the gaping "Haig" or "stooge" jacket collar, there are two other low signals, visible usually when the subject is unjacketed, which instantly proclaim the wearer either middle-class or high-prole. They are, first, the nerd pack, and second, belt hangdowns of any kind. The nerd pack is that little plastic envelope, often with advertising on the outer flap, worn in the breast pocket of a shirt to prevent pens and pencils from soiling the acrylic. In the nerd-pack trade, it is called a "Pocket Protector." One mail-order catalog aimed at high proles assures you that your nerd pack can be personalized with a three-letter mon-

ogram. Nerd packs are favored by people obliged to simulate efficiency, like supermarket managers, or by people hoping to give the impression that their need to pull out a pen is virtually constant, like itinerant insurance salesmen.

Belt hangdowns, usually of real or fake leather, are another all but infallible signal of middle-classness or even outright prolehood. These vary from slide-rule cases, at the top, all the way down to dark-glasses cases, cigarette-pack holders "with Western hand-tooling," and—in a catalog—an "Eyeglass and Pen Holster: Deluxe Cowhide, Personalized with Your Initials." The term *holster* suggests the would-be macho implications of all these belt attachments. The fact that these hangdowns are usually high-prole indicates the social class of the low homosexuals who advertise their "sexual preferences" by wearing key rings on their belts, dangling from left or right, front or rear, as the case may be. One reason we may feel it difficult for an engineer ever to be upper-middle-class is that even in college he's begun this habitual daily wearing of belt hangdowns—if not slide rules or calculators, then low tools like geology picks and the like.

Imagine a man dressed in the summer costume appropriate for his work. He's wearing a short-sleeved white shirt (Dacron, largely), a necktie, dark trousers, and a nerd pack. He's a middle-class or high-prole clerk in a hardware store. Now notice: all you have to do to turn him into an "engineer" is to add one or more belt hangdowns and pop a white hardhat onto his head. Thus the social-class problems of engineers, uncertain always where they fit, whether with boss or worker, management or labor, the world of headwork or the world of handwork. And actually, anything attached to the belt, even if it doesn't ignominiously hang down, is a high-prole sign. Sunglasses, for example, in an artificial leather case. Rather than sport them on your belt, it's better even to let them dangle by the sidepiece from the top buttonhole of your shirt—a middle-class but at least not a prole habit.

If nerd packs and belt hangdowns instantly imply prole leanings, there are other signs almost as clear. When you're wearing a shirt with a sweater or jacket over it but omitting a necktie, what do you do with the shirt collar? Keeping all of it inside both sweater and jacket is upper- or upper-middle-class, partly, I suppose, because the effect is "careless" rather than "neat." On the other hand, displaying it spread out over the jacket collar, unless

you're a member of the Israeli Knesset or teach at the Hebrew University, is flagrantly middle-class or prole—and may be even then. All you really have to know about this practice is that when out riding or otherwise got up in sports costume, the President favors it.

Shirts, indeed, are among the most class-eloquent garments, and there are countless ways you can lose caste through their agency. Wearing "white on white" is an easy way to drop to middle or high prole, while wearing a vest over a short-sleeved shirt or—like Ed Norton, in *The Honeymooners*—over a T-shirt will sink you to mid- or low prole. Sometimes one sees suspenders worn over a T-shirt, the equivalent of socks worn with sandals. In England especially, but also in Anglophile parts of the United States, these usages suggest that you're a middle-class secondary-school teacher of math or chemistry who, by appearing in his holiday garb, is secretly lusting for demotion to high prole.

Jewelry is another instant class-lowerer, like the enameled little Old Glory lapel pins worn by the insane and by cynical politicians working backward districts. When their ladies wear them with the colors picked out in rhinestones, the effect is even lower—deep-prole, shall we say. The general class rule about wristwatches is, the more "scientific," technological, and space-age, the lower. Likewise with the more "information" the watch is supposed to convey, like the time of day in Kuala Lumpur, the number of days elapsed in the year so far, or the current sign of the zodiac. Some upper-class devotees of the Cartier tank watch with the black lizard strap will argue that even a second hand compromises a watch's class, implying as it may the wearer's need for great accuracy, as if he were something like a professional timer of bus arrivals and departures. The other upper-class watch is the cheapest and simplest Timex, worn with a grosgrain-ribbon strap, changed often: black ones for formal wear are amusing. One prole mistake is to conceive cuff links classy, especially ones like those in the wardrobe of Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, the optometrist hero of *Slaughterhouse-Five:* simulated Roman coins, quite large; little roulette wheels that actually turn; and "another pair which had a real thermometer in one and a real compass in the other." These come close to the cuff links made of the "finest specimens of human molars" which Meyer Wolfsheim in *The Great Gatsby* is proud to call attention to.

Another significant social-class divide is the color of the raincoat. After extensive and really quite impressive research, John T. Molloy has discovered that in raincoat colors beige far outranks black, olive, or dark blue. The black raincoat proves to be, indeed, a highly trustworthy prole sign. Thus Molloy exhorts his prole readers ambitious to acquire an upper-middle-class look to equip themselves with beige raincoats as soon as possible. The implication of beige, one supposes, is that it advertises one's greater carelessness about the risk of stains: there's a go-to-hell air about it that doesn't attend the prudent black number. You will not be at all surprised now to hear that in *I Love Lucy* the raincoat worn by Ricky Ricardo is black.

Go-to-hell in spirit also are the sports or playtime trousers which identify the upper-middle class, especially the suburban branch. One common type is white duck trousers with little green frogs embroidered all over them. A variation: light-green trousers, with dark-blue embroidered whales. Or signal flags. Or bell buoys. Or lobsters. Or anything genteel-marine, suggesting that the wearer has just strolled a few steps away from his good-sized yacht. Thus also the class usefulness of Topsider shoes, the ones with the white soles "for gripping wet decks." The same with windbreakers displaying lots of drawstrings. The Chris-Craft mail-order catalog will show you the look to imitate, but classes much below the upper middle should take warning that they're unlikely to affect this yachtsman's look with much plausibility. A lot depends on a certain habitual carelessness in the carriage, a quasi-windblown calculated sloppiness. It's almost impossible to imitate, and you should have a long thin neck, too.

The topic of the class implications of men's neckties deserves a book in itself. Here I can only sketch a few general principles. Skimpy as its contribution of fabric to the total ensemble may be, the tie does add to the effect of layering and for this reason if for no other is identified with high status. But it must be said too that in the right context omitting the tie entirely conveys the message that one is so classy—say, upper-class—as to be above all criticism, and that conventional canons of respectability don't apply. The necktie's association with responsibility, good employeeship, and other presumed attributes of the obedient middle class is well documented by an experiment conducted by Molloy. He had a series of men interviewed for good jobs. Some wore ties, others did not. "Invariably," he found,

> those men who wore their ties to interviews were offered jobs; those without them were turned down. And in one almost incredible situation, the interviewer . . . was made so uncomfortable by the applicant's lack of a tie that he gave the man $6.50, told him to go out and buy a tie, put it on, and then come back to complete the interview. He still didn't get the job.

The same suggestion that the necktie is an important marker of the division between the middle and the prole classes emerges from another of Molloy's experiments, this one performed at the horrible Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York, a traditional locus of every imaginable vice, menace, and outrage. He himself posed as a middle-class man who had left his wallet home and had somehow to get back to the suburbs. At the rush hour, he tried to borrow 75 cents for his bus fare, the first hour wearing a suit but no tie, the second hour properly dressed, tie and all. "In the first hour," he reports, "I made $7.23, but in the second, with my tie on, I made $26, and one man even gave me extra money for a newspaper."

The principle that clothing moves lower in status the more legible it becomes applies to neckties with a vengeance. The ties worn by the top classes eschew the more obvious forms of verbal or even too crudely symbolic statement, relying on stripes, amoeba-like foulard blobs, or small dots to make the point that the wearer possesses too much class to care to specify right out in front what it's based on. (This illustrates the privacy principle, or the principle of mind-your-own-little-disgusting-middle-class-business, a customary element of the aristocratic stance.) Small white dots against a dark background, perhaps the most conservative tie possible, are favored both by uppers and upper-middles and, defensively, by those nervous about being thought low, coarse, drunken, or cynical, like journalists and TV news readers and sportscasters, and by those whose fiduciary honor must be thought beyond question, like the trust officers working for the better metropolitan banks.

Moving down from stripes, blobs, or dots, we come to necktie patterns with a more overt and precise semiotic function. Some, designed to announce that the upper-middle-class wearer is a sport, will display diagonal patterns of little flying pheasants, or small yachts, signal flags, and sextants. ("I hunt and own a yacht. Me rich and sporty!") Just below these are the "milieu" patterns,

designed to celebrate the profession of the wearer and to congratulate him on having so fine a profession. These are worn either by insecure members of the upper-middle class (like surgeons) or by members of the middle class aspiring to upper-middle status (like accountants). Thus a tie covered with tiny caduceuses proclaims "Hot damn! I am a physician." (Significantly, there is no milieu tie pattern for dentists.) Little scales signify "I am a lawyer." Musical notes: "I have something to do with music." Dollar signs, or money bags: a stockbroker, banker, perhaps a wildly successful plastic surgeon, or a lottery winner. I've even seen one tie with a pattern of little jeeps, whose meaning I've found baffling, for surely if you were a *driver* in any of our wars you'd not be likely to announce it. Other self-congratulatory patterns like little whales or dolphins or seals can suggest that you love nature and spend a lot of time protecting it and are thus a fine person. Any of these milieu ties can be alternated with the "silk rep" model striped with the presumed colors of British (never, *never* German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, or White Russian) regiments, clubs, or universities.

As we move further down the class hierarchy, actual words begin to appear on ties, and these are meant to be commented on by viewers. One such exhibitionist artifact is the Grandfather's Tie in dark blue with grandchildren's names hand-painted on it, diagonally, in white. Imagine the conversations that ensue when you wear it! Another kind reads "I'd rather be sailing," "skiing," etc., and these can also be effective underminers of privacy—"conversation-starters," and thus useful adjuncts to comfy middle-class status, in the tradition of expecting neighbors to drop in without warning. Some ties down in this stratum affect great cleverness, reading "Thank God It's Friday" or "Oh Hell, It's Monday"; and a way to get a chuckle out of your audience and at the same time raise your class a bit is to have these sentiments abbreviated on your tie with yachting signal flags. At the bottom of the middle class, just before it turns to high prole, we encounter ties depicting large flowers in brilliant colors, or simply bright "artistic" splotches. The message is frequently "I'm a merry dog." These wearers are the ones Molloy is addressing when, discussing neckties, he warns, "Avoid purple under all circumstances."

Further down still, where questions of yacht ownership or merry doghood are too preposterous to be claimed even on a

necktie, we come upon the high- or mid-prole "bola" tie, a woven or leather thong with a slide (often of turquoise or silver), affected largely by retired persons residing in Sun Belt places like New Mexico. Like any other sort of tie, this one makes a statement, saying: "Despite appearances, I'm really as good as you are, and my 'necktie,' though perhaps unconventional, is really better than your traditional tie, because it suggests the primitive and therefore the unpretentious, pure, and virtuous." Says the bola, "The person wearing me is a child of nature, even though actually eighty years old." Like many things bought by proles, these bola ties can be very expensive, especially when the slide is made of precious metal or displays "artwork." The point again is that money, although important, is not always the most important criterion of class. Below the bola wearers, at the very bottom, stand the low proles, the destitute, and the bottom-out-of-sight, who never wear a tie, or wear one—and one is all they own—so rarely that the day is memorable for that reason. Down here, the tie is an emblem of affectation and even effeminacy, and you can earn a reputation for being la-di-da by appearing in one, as if you thought yourself better than other people. One prole wife says of her spouse: "I'm going to bury my husband in his T-shirt if the undertaker will allow it."

Today, hats, because of their rarity, present an easier class problem than neckties. Since the felt fedora went out, upper-middle-class people can wear only the equivalent of parody hats —"Russian" fur, the L. L. Bean "Irish" tweed hat favored by Senator Pat Moynihan, or the floppy white fishing or tennis hat popular among the top classes despite its being favored by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Class accrues to hats now only as they declare themselves to be frivolous accessories. To take any hat seriously is to descend. Especially such novelty hats as the brown-or-black-dyed rabbit-fur fedoras affected in the early 1980s by the middle class in the Northeast and upper Midwest, who sought, at once, respectability and a touch of dash. Another hat that had considerable success with the same class was the dark-blue visored "Greek fisherman's cap" as merchandised through *The New Yorker*. When worn, this item was designed to state, "I've been to Greece and am thus well-to-do, rich enough to fly long distances on Olympic Airlines, as well as adventurous enough to relish exotic things like retsina, taramasalata, etc." But the problem with this headwear was its proletarian associations, which

became even more egregious when it began appearing in versions made of black leather. Actually, only six things can be made of black leather without causing class damage to the owner: belts, shoes, handbags, gloves, camera cases, and dog leashes.

There once was a time, when Czar Nicholas and King George V wore yachting caps, when visors did not convey instant prole signals, as they do now, associated as they are not just with Greek fishermen but with workmen, soldiers, chauffeurs, policemen, railway personnel, and baseball players. Proles take to visor caps instinctively, which accounts for the vast popularity among them of what we must call simply the prole cap. This is the "baseball" cap made largely of plastic meshwork in primary colors (red, blue, yellow) with, in the rear, an open space crossed by a strap for self-adjustment: "One Size Fits All [Proles]." Regardless of the precise style of the prole cap, it seems crucial that it be ugly. It's the male equivalent of the purple acrylic slacks worn by the prole's wife, and like all items of clothing, it says something. It says to those whose expensive educations have persuaded them that the ideal of dignity is the Piazza San Marco or the Parthenon or that the ideal of the male head derives from Michelangelo's *David* or the Adam of the Sistine Chapel: "I'm as good as you are." The little strap at the rear is the significant prole feature because it demeans the buyer and user, making him do the work formerly thought the obligation of the seller, who used to have to stock numerous sizes. It's like such other prole features of the contemporary scene as the jet plane and the supermarket, where convenience for the seller is disguised by publicity and fraud to pass for convenience for the buyer. To achieve even greater ugliness, the prole will sometimes wear his cap back to front. This places the strap in full view transecting the wearer's forehead, as if pride in the one-size-fits-all gadget were motivating him to display the cap's "technology" and his own command of it. President Reagan wore a prole cap while in performance once atop a tractor in Peoria. It looked natural. And any lingering uncertainty about the class meaning of the prole cap can be resolved by a glance at the upper-middle-class L. L. Bean catalog, which, while offering all sorts of headgear, draws the line at the plastic prole cap, although it does go so far as to offer one in suede. Next to the T-shirt, the prole cap is probably the favorite place for the display of language, running all the way from rudenesses like UP YOURS to gentilities like CAROLINA TOOL AND ENGINEERING CO.,

The popular prole cap, here worn backward to exhibit the adjusto-strap to advantage

BALDWIN FILTERS, OR PARK'S SAUSAGES. Tom Carvel's prole ice-cream-franchise holders wear prole caps with CARVEL on the front.

One might think that with the prole cap one has reached the nadir in men's headgear. But no: there are one or two steps down even from it. One is the version of the prole cap into whose visor attached plastic sun-glass lenses fold up. And below even this stooge item is the Sunbrella Hat. This erects itself on little stilts from a headband and opens and closes like an umbrella. It is some twenty inches wide, and the gores between the ribs are usually red and white. It is thoroughly "modern," the sort of idea that would occur to someone only in the latter days of the twentieth century.

Which brings up the whole matter of archaism and top-class taste. We've already seen that organic materials like wool and wood outrank man-made, like nylon and Formica, and in that superiority lurks the principle of archaism as well, nylon and Formica being nothing if not up-to-date. There seems a general agreement, even if often unconscious, that archaism confers class. Thus the middle class's choice of "colonial" or "Cape Cod" houses. Thus one reason Britain and Europe still, to Americans,

have class. Thus one reason why inheritance and "old money" are such important class principles. Thus the practice among top-out-of-sight and upper classes of costuming their servants in some archaic livery, even such survivals as the white apron on the maid or, on the butler, a striped vest. It's a way of implying that the money goes back a considerable time, and that one retains the preferences and habits one learned very long ago.

What Veblen specified as the leisure class's "veneration of the archaic" shows itself everywhere: in the popularity among the upper-middle class of attending opera and classical ballet; of sending its issue to single-sex prep schools, because more unregenerate and old-style than coed ones; of traveling to view antiquities in Europe and the Middle East; of studying the "humanities" instead of, say, electrical engineering, since the humanities involve the past and studying them usually results in elegiac emotions. Even the study of law has about it this attractive aura of archaism: there's all that dog Latin, and the "cases" must all be rooted in the past. Classy people never deal with the future. That's for vulgarians like traffic engineers, planners, and inventors. Speaking of the sophisticated TV viewer's love of old black-and-white films, British critic Peter Conrad comments, "Style for us is whatever's perished, outmoded, lost." Since the upper orders possess archaism as their very own class principle—even their devotion to old clothes signals their retrograde sentiment—what can the lower orders do but fly to the new, not just to sparkling new garments but to cameras and electronic apparatus and stereo sets and trick watches and electric kitchens and video games?

As Russell Lynes perceived in *The Tastemakers,* despite the façade of modernity a corporation erects to impress the proles, behind the scenes the upper business classes cleave to flagrantly archaic effects. "If you will visit Lever House in New York," he writes,

> the sheer glass box that sits handsomely on Park Avenue to house the offices of Lever Brothers, you will find that the higher the echelon the more old-fashioned the surroundings. The public front is one of daring modernity. The offices of the clerks and department managers are in the functional tradition. But when you reach the offices of top management you will find that there are open fireplaces and chandeliers with an Early American flavor. . . . If you will visit the executive dining room of the J. Walter Thompson Company . . . you will find yourself in what appears to be a Cape Cod house furnished with Windsor chairs and rag rugs. It has wooden casement windows.

As all salesmen recognize, if you're selling something it's better for your social class to be selling something archaic—like real wine or unpasteurized cheese or bread without preservatives or Renaissance art objects or rare books. Selling something old, indeed, almost redeems the class shame of selling anything at all. Even trading in real sponges is class-preferable to trading in artificial ones, a fact permitting us to appreciate the way the organic and archaic finally fuse into one classy thing.

It is in part because Britain has seen better days that Anglophilia is so indispensable an element in upper-class taste, in clothes, literature, allusion, manners, and ceremony. The current irony of the Anglophilic class motif will not escape us. In the nineteenth century, with Britain commanding much of the world, it would seem natural for snobs to ape British usages. Snobs still do, but not because Britain is powerful but because Britain is feeble. To acquire and display British goods shows how archaic you are, and so validates upper- and upper-middle-class standing. Thus tartan skirts for women, Shetland sweaters, Harris tweeds, Burberrys, "regimental" neckties. A general American male assumption among classes above high prole is that to be "well dressed" you should look as much as possible like a British gentleman as depicted in movies about fifty years ago. One reason riding lessons are vouchsafed the young of the top classes is that the socially best outfits and accessories are imported from England. Top-class food resembles British, being bland and mushy, with little taste and no chances taken. The upper-middle-class Sunday dinner is often indistinguishable from its British counterpart: roast, with potatoes and two veg. Being the American ambassador to the Court of St. James's is still felt to confer upper-class status, even if you're really Walter Annenberg. It's not like being ambassador to Sri Lanka or Venezuela.

Deeply engraved on the American consciousness is the superstition, abundantly visible in the Gothic flourishes of our university architecture, that institutions of the higher learning are the more authentic the more they allude to their two great British originals. Thus a low mail-order degree mill in Glendale, Califor-

nia, searching for a name for itself that will attract maximum prole bucks, comes up with—Kensington University. But it's when you move north from the prole and middle classes and approach the upper-middle that you begin to get overpowering whiffs of Mother England, which smells like expensive old leather bindings, Jeyes's fluid, and tar soap. You realize that in the upper-middle class are people who actually believe that Oxford and Cambridge are better, rather than just odder, than Harvard and Yale—and the University of Michigan, for that matter. Examining the upper-middle class, you find people who, despite their normal proud resistance to advertising, believe that Schweppes club soda is better than White Rock. You meet people whose dinner tables ring not just with passing references to the royal family but with prolonged earnest dissertations about Charles and Lady Di and Margaret and Anne and Andrew and little Prince William.

And the appeal of Anglophilia to even the middle class should never be underestimated. I say this on the evidence of a correspondence I once had with a friend of mine, a "developer" or mass house contractor who built whole new towns at once. Having run out of names for his streets, he solicited my help. (I was living in Knightsbridge at the time.) He asked me to supply him with an alphabetical list of classy—that is, British—street names that would attract the eminently middle-class buyers of his houses. Knowing how important this was for the self-respect and even mental health of his clients, I sent him a list immediately, which started like this:

Albemarle
Berkeley
Cavendish
Devonshire
Exeter
Fanshawe, etc.

All he had to do was add such terminations as

Street
Court
Circle
Way
Lane (as in Park "Lane")
Grove

and his house-buyers would be spared the shame of living on McGillicutty Street or Bernstein Boulevard or Guappo Terrace. When I reached the end of the alphabet—passing through Landsdowne and Montpelier and Osborne and Priory—I couldn't resist "Windsor" for W, and today there's some poor puzzled fellow wondering why success is so slow in arriving, since for years he's been residing at 221 Windsor Close instead of living on West Broad Street. New terrible jumped-up places like Houston are quick to surround themselves with tract suburbs bearing the most egregious British names, like these (which actually are parts of Houston):

Nottingham Oaks
Afton Oaks
Inverness Forest
Sherwood Forest (!)
Braes Manor
Meredith Manor

There's even a Shamrock Manor, hardly Anglo and only very doubtfully classy, but Houston's so far from Boston that perhaps no one will catch on. It all reminds one a bit of poor Dr. Herman ("Hy") Tarnower, done to death by his upper-middle girlfriend, who hoped to disguise his vulgarity by strewing his waiting room with British periodicals.

The same sense that if it's British it must have class prompts those who change their names to opt for Anglophilic sounds. No one would change from Poshenitz to Gamberini, but all would change from Horowitz to Howe. And if you merchandise tasteless little blobs of dough, you can sell billions of them by calling them "English" muffins.

IV

About the House

When in one of his poems W. H. Auden indicated that *healers* were to be found not only in city clinics but in

country houses at the end of drives,

he was hardly suggesting that they were proles, or even middle-class. An acute reader of class signals, he knew that the sort of driveway you have, if any, suggests virtually as much about you as the house it leads to.

If you're not able to find some people's driveways at all, you are safe to infer that they're top-out-of-sight. It's only with the upper class that driveways become visible and available for study. In general, we can say that there, the longer the drive the higher the class, with the proviso that long and curved is grander than long and straight. The reason, as Veblen perceived, is that the curved driveway is more "futile," taking up more land. "The canon of futility," he notes, dictates that the best driveway is "a circuitous drive laid across level ground." (If the ground weren't level, there might be a utilitarian reason for the curve: as it is, it's pure play and show.) Even with the more modest upper-middle-class driveway, if it goes straight into the garage, it has less class than if it curves. The surface of the drive is important too. The most impressive surface you can have on an upper-middle-class driveway is gravel in some neutral or dark shade. Beige is best.

White gravel is lower, violating as it does the axiom that bold effects and vivid contrasts are always to be avoided. Asphalt is lower still—too utilitarian and economical. Gravel beats asphalt not just because it's more archaic but because it must be renewed often at considerable expense and inconvenience. Because the desire for privacy is a top-class sign, high walls—anything higher than six or seven feet—confer class, while low ones, or see-through fences, or none at all, proclaim the middle class. Unless the house is known to be very splendid and is out of sight from the road, entryway gates are pretentious.

But you can be pretentious merely with the way you display your house number. One form of vainglory is to spell the number out (you can do this on stationery too), like "Two Hundred Five" ("Two Hundred and Five" is even more offensive). Or you can plaster your family name on the façade or mailbox: "The Johnsons," as if you were an institution. Or you can name your house as if it were something like Windsor Castle and blazon the name somewhere on the front: "The Willows." There's almost no limit to how cute you can be here, especially if you are upper-middle-class and fancy British usages. But in England, house-naming is also popular among proles who want to signal the message that their premises are not public housing but are owned and (largely) paid for by the occupants.

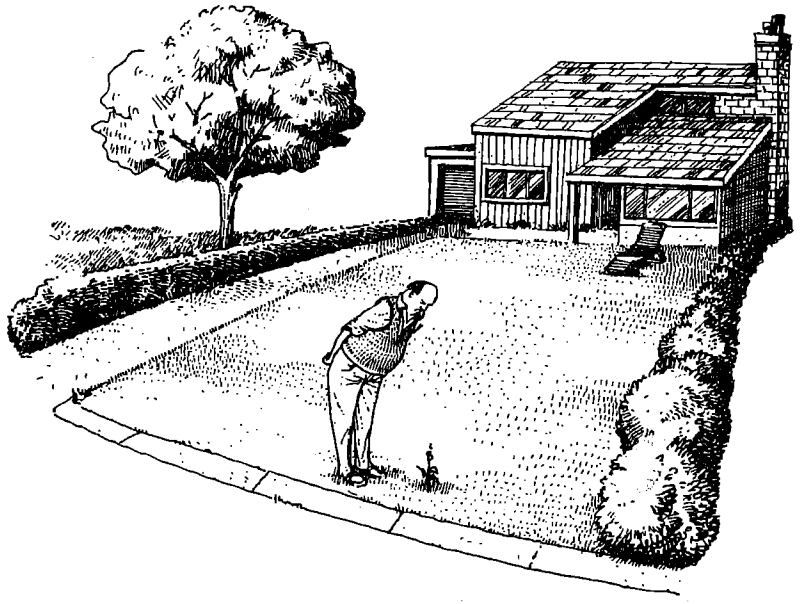
Garages: the upper-middle-class and middle-class house used to act ashamed of its garage, concealing it well in back with other unseemly outbuildings. But now the garage is very much a part of the owner's class presentation, and it's been moved forward on the lot so that passersby can appreciate its two-car size and admire its basketball backboard and hoop (evidence that the house contains at least one member of the leisure class junior grade). The more visible from the street the garage is, the more its costly trick doors can be noted and envied. Three-car and larger garages are seldom seen, not because there aren't any but because they're part of the invisible residences of the top-out-of sights.

Approaching any house, one is bombarded with class signals. The serious student will not panic but will take them one at a time. The lawn first. Its very existence is an announcement of Anglophilia, England being the place where the lawn came into its own. Finicky neatness here is usually a sign of social anxiety, a tip-off that we are approaching middle-class premises. If there's no crabgrass at all, we can infer an owner who spends much of

his time worrying about slipping down a class or two, the lawn being, as Brooks notes, "a crucial arena for classical predatory indiviousness and its concomitant, anxiety." Neglect of one's lawn in middle-class neighborhoods can invite terrible retribution. "The sanctions are not obvious," says William H. Whyte, Jr., "but the look in the eye, the absence of a smile, the inflection of a hello, can be exquisite punishment, and they have brought more than one to a nervous breakdown." If you keep an animal to crop your lawn (only the upper class does this), it's essential that it not be something useful in other ways like a sheep or cow or even a goat, creatures which, as Veblen says, have about them "the vulgar suggestion of thrift," but an animal of a more wasteful and exotic kind, like a deer, something "not vulgarly lucrative either in fact or in suggestion," and thus a happy emblem of "futility."

In cold-weather areas a problem arises for the middle class when the lawn is snow-covered and thus unavailable for invidious display. Hence the middle-class Christmas light show as a form of compensation, with reindeer prancing on the asbestos shingles, jocose Santas entering chimneys, and, on pious lawns, plywood Nativities. No one has ever sufficiently studied the middle-class determination to avoid criticism by putting on, as John Brooks says, "the biggest Christmastime light show on the block," nor sufficiently investigated the relation of the light show to "lawn care." One suburb studied by Whyte for his book *The Organization Man* (1956) goes so wild lighting up at holiday time that every year 100,000 people (proles, surely) drive through to marvel at the effects.

When the front lawn becomes a showcase for permanent objects meant to be admired, we know that we are proceeding down toward the proles. High-prole items for lawn exhibition are urns painted blinding white, as well as front-yard "trees" consisting of some fifteen green-painted wrought-iron branches, each holding, in a ring at the tip, a flower pot. Some prole lawn objects are meant to be not just admired but actually worshiped, like a statue of the Blessed Virgin, which one sees sometimes presented inside an old-fashioned claw-footed bathtub propped upright. A slightly lower kind of class statement is that made by plaster gnomes and flamingos and Disney animals, and by blue or lavender basketball-size shiny spheres resting on fluted cast-concrete pedestals. Proceeding further downward (we're now at about low prole),



A middle-class householder confronts a damning impurity on his lawn

we see things like defunct truck tires painted white with flowers planted inside. (Auto tires are a grade higher.) At the very class bottom are flower-bed enclosures made of rows of dead light bulbs or the butts of disused beer bottles. Down here, another bit of front-yard décor will be a rusty supermarket cart, waiting quietly for further employment.

Anyone imagining that just any sort of flowers can be presented in the front of a house without status jeopardy would be wrong. Upper-middle-class flowers are rhododendrons, tiger lilies, amaryllis, columbine, clematis, and roses, except for bright-red ones. One way to learn which flowers are vulgar is to notice the varieties favored on Sunday-morning TV religious programs like Rex Humbard's or Robert Schuller's. There you will see primarily geraniums (red are lower than pink), poinsettias, and chrysanthemums, and you will know instantly, without even attending to the quality of the discourse, that you are looking at a high-prole setup. Other prole flowers include anything too vividly red, like red tulips. Declassed also are phlox, zinnias, salvia, gladioli, begonias, dahlias, fuchsias, and petunias. Members of the middle class will sometimes hope to mitigate the vulgarity of bright-red flowers by planting them in a rotting wheelbarrow or rowboat displayed on the front lawn, but seldom with success.

Advertising is a good way to ascertain what we might call the social language of flowers. In her study of the American funeral business, *The American Way of Death* (1963), Jessica Mitford calls attention to an ad in an undertakers' trade journal celebrating the profits to be realized in the traditional collusion between the cadaver embalmer and the florist. In the ad a new young widow is being presented with some flowers, and, as the picture caption says, "Softness comes back to her face as sorrow begins to slip away." The acute reader will not need to be told that the flowers in question are—chrysanthemums.

But what of the house we are approaching? If it is relatively new it will be so commonplace and uniform and ugly that ascertaining the exact class of its owner will be difficult. A sarcastic but perhaps not unfair view of it is Russell Lynes's:

> Today's house, however expensive, has become a box . . . , or a series of boxes. Sometimes the box has a sharply peaked roof and is covered with white clapboards, in which case it is called a Cape Cod. If it is a box longer than it is wide and has a gently pitched roof, then it is a ranch house. If it is a square box, it is . . . a bungalow. If it is a two-story box, it is "colonial." If it is two boxes set next to each other but one a little above the other, then it is a split-level. (It can be either a split-level Cape Cod or a split-level ranch.)

That is the upper-middle-class and middle-class house. The upper-class version will be set back farther from the street, but if built in the last twenty-five years it will be essentially little different. The prole model, on the other hand, will be identifiable less because it's smaller than because of the power boat, trailer, or "recreational vehicle" exhibited in the driveway, which will be, of course, straight and asphalted. This in addition to the one or more moribund automobiles disposed about the premises. These are most authentic if elevated on concrete blocks. If you remove these driveway or backyard vehicles and instead plant a fake white wooden well-house in the front yard, you instantly, all other things being equal, transform the prole house into middle-class. This well-house is a component of the New England look, which is one form taken by the snob archaizing impulse of the middles. Other elements of the New England look are brass or black-painted "coach" lanterns on either side of the front door, with a similar lamp on a tall white post to illuminate the front walk; a weather vane on a detachable white cupola imposed on the roof of the garage; and a gilded or black "colonial" eagle above the front door: it will be made of cast aluminum but painted to ape hand-carved wood. There seems no house too mean to display the eagle, although it gradually seems to be losing its power to convey the snob message "Early America": one upper-middle-class friend of mine who had noticed a lot of these eagles on rather mean little houses thought they designated the residences of naval aviators. Other archaic house styles favored by the middle class are the model imitating the nineteenth-century American farmhouse (virtuous and cozy) and the "Tudor," with a brave show of half-timber work on the front (solid, impeccably trustworthy).

Given the structural uniformity of the boxes constituting the current house, the owner must depend largely on front-porch and façade appliqués and decorations (like the eagle) to deliver the news about the social status he's claiming. In the 1950s this used to be the social function of both rooftop television aerials and protruding window air conditioners, but now of course both transmit entirely unhonorific status messages. The front porch

and doorway area are to the house what the mouth is to the human face, like the mouth conveying ungainsayable class signals. Whether high or low, the domestic façade labors to extort respect, and it is thus one of the most pathetic of artifacts, bespeaking the universal human need to claim dignity and high consequence.

One middle-class way of doing this is through "neoclassic" effects of absolute symmetry, of the sort achieved by a potted small tree on either side of the front door or by the well-known emblem of the precisely equal side curtains pulled back from the ranch-house picture window to reveal a table lamp, the cellophane on its shade visibly inviolate, positioned exactly in the middle of a centered table. A similar symmetrical effect (saying, "We are instinctively neat") is aimed at by installing two outdoor chairs (metal, with pipe arms) as a "conversation group" on the front porch, in stubborn defiance of the traffic thundering past. The middle-class longing for dignity frequently expresses itself in columns or pilasters arguing the impressive weight of the edifice. In one model of a middle-class house, these often attenuate to mere white-painted sticks (four of them, usually) two stories tall, supporting a flyweight rooflet extending over the façade of a Tara-like "Southern mansion." This sort of fraudulent support is endemic in the middle-class dwelling, and it's visible in a socially slightly lower form in two massive square brick pillars holding up a light porch roof, or in obese porch columns made of large boulders stuck together with mortar, or in heavy wrought-iron supports pretending to be needed to prevent a thirty-pound jalousie from crashing to the ground.

Near where I live there's a middle-class house which beautifully illustrates the dangerous proximity of dignity to pomposity. The house is actually a modest bungalow, a one-story gray box covered with asbestos "shakes" and topped by a simple peaked roof. It looks very like a one-story army barracks—nothing at all fancy in the basic fabric. But the owner, gnawed by *folie de grandeur,* has equipped it with a fake brick front, with, on each side of the front door, white fluted Ionic columns holding up nothing at all. (The principle that curves are classier than straight lines operates with columns as with driveways, and has been understood by this aspirant. Square columns are the lowest; round ones the next highest; round and fluted highest of all.) Against this man's fake, bright-red brick facing we find a maximum of "colonial" white

trim as a vivid contrast—sills, shutters, canopies, etc. The house begs the observer on no account to look at its honest sides and rear but only at its front. It nicely illustrates Veblen's acute point about the apartment houses built in his time: "The needless variety of fronts presented by the better class of tenements and apartment houses in our cities is an endless variety of architectural distress. . . . Considered as objects of beauty, the dead walls of the sides and back of these structures, left untouched by the hands of the artist, are commonly the best feature of the building."

Bright red juxtaposed with blinding white somehow connote elegance in that social place where middle class meets high prole. I'm thinking of a high-prole little house I know in a small city. It's sited very close to the sidewalk and approached by a short concrete stairway. On either side of the stairway is a small lion *couchant* made of cast concrete. The two lions are painted dead white with their mouths picked out in brightest red. You feel that some sort of quasi-"heraldic" message is being aimed at, although ascertaining exactly what it is would engage a staff of semioticians for some weeks. Another way of achieving the red-and-white effect is to paint the bricks bright red and the mortar pure white. You're likely to come upon this where you also see such prole signals as what can be called the Sheraton Effect—the front steps (three at least) covered with brilliant green outdoor carpeting, very neatly applied, with razor-sharp edges and hospital corners. On high-prole porches there will usually be a "glider," although on low-prole porches the backseat removed from an old auto will serve. The point is to have something to court on. And in Southern states there will be a refrigerator on the front porch, its curious position perhaps owing something to the nineteenth-century tradition that the proper place for the ice box is the back porch, so that the iceman (a member of a yet lower class) can be excluded from the house proper. The refrigerator on the prole front porch serves two purposes: it announces to passersby that you own a costly appliance, and it contains items you need to consume while courting on the glider—"soda" (or "dopes"), fruit, and similar refreshments.

Walking now around behind the house, we should consider the way windows manifest social standing. The principle applying is, as usual, archaism. Socially, the highest kind of windows are pseudo-eighteenth-century wooden sash windows, and the more panes per sash, the better: six is standard, twelve, distinguished.

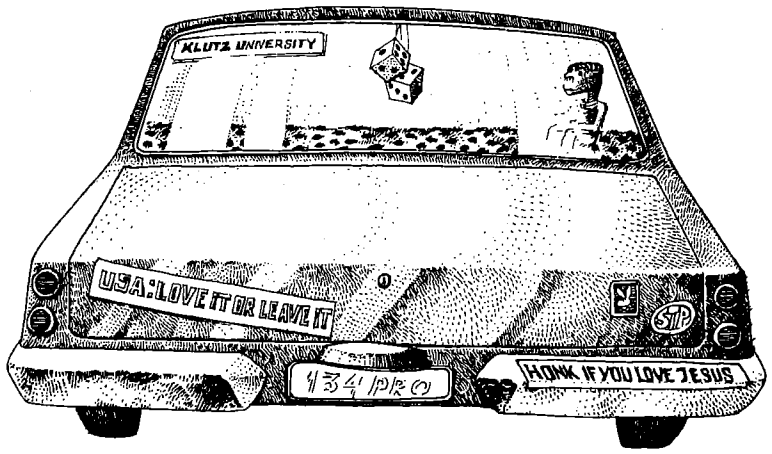
One would think that the archaistic principle would confer great class on the mock-Tudor leaded window with diamond-shaped panes, but it doesn't: these windows are too palpably fraudulent, theatrical, and Camp, simply absurd, like collegiate or church Gothic architecture, in a country founded only in the eighteenth century. Some proles aim for status by going in for "portholes" on their split-level ranch houses, circular openings a foot and a half in diameter with white surrounds suggesting archaic life rings. By this means they hope to suggest time spent in yachts. Few will be deceived. If you have storm windows fitted over your sash windows, for class purposes the wooden ones are better than metal, both because they honor the organic-materials principle and because, on a large house, they seem to presuppose a servant (or "outdoor man") to put them up and take them down.

If there were such he'd also be in charge of the outdoor furniture around in back. Organic materials are important here, dictating that the lowest you can sink is to folding chairs made of aluminum tubing with bright-green plastic-mesh webbing which, with wear, grows gradually looser. Wooden furniture is probably the classiest, with plenty of overstuffed cushions, for it's a top-class principle never (except on a yacht) to be in the slightest degree uncomfortable. If you wouldn't sit on stretched vinyl strips indoors, why do it outside? If there's a patio, for class purposes it should be much larger than needed, and on it should stand a table with a glass top. The glass should be clear, not wrinkled, for clear glass, being harder to keep clean, suggests a servant to clean it—hence, by the way, the desirability of lots of mirrors indoors. Breakfast at this clear-glass-topped table on the extra-large patio is an upper-class or upper-middle-class practice established by the films of the 1940s and 1950s. At a table like this, you sit on white wrought-iron chairs equipped with deep cushions, and you drink orange juice, freshly squeezed, of course, but certainly not by yourself. (White-painted wrought iron is one of the few permissible deviations from the organic-materials principle.)

The automobile, like the all-important domestic façade, is another mechanism for outdoor class display. Or class lack of display we'd have to say, if we focus on the usages of the upper class, who, on the principle of archaism, affect to regard the automobile as very *nouveau* and underplay it consistently. Class understatement describes the technique: if your money and freedom and carelessness of censure allow you to buy any kind of car, you provide yourself with the meanest and most common to indicate that you're not taking seriously so easily purchasable and thus vulgar a class totem. You have a Chevy, Ford, Plymouth, or Dodge, and in the least interesting style and color. It may be clean, although slightly dirty is best. But it should be boring. The next best thing is to have a "good" car, like a Jaguar or BMW, but to be sure it's old and beat-up. You may not have a Rolls, a Cadillac, or a Mercedes. Especially a Mercedes, a car, Joseph Epstein reports in *The American Scholar* (Winter 1981-82), which the intelligent young in West Germany regard, quite correctly, as "a sign of high vulgarity, a car of the kind owned by Beverly Hills dentists or African cabinet ministers." The worst kind of upper-middle-class types own Mercedes, just as the best own elderly Oldsmobiles, Buicks, and Chryslers, and perhaps jeeps and Land Rovers, the latter conveying the Preppy suggestion that one of your residences is in a place so unpublic that the roads to it are not even paved, indeed are hardly passable by your ordinary vulgar automobile. And the understatement canon determines that the higher your class, the slower you drive. Speeders are either young non-Anglo-Saxon high-school proles hoping to impress girls of a similar sort, or insecure, status-anxious middle-class men who have seen too many movies involving auto chases and as a result think cars romantic, sexy, exciting, etc. The requirements of class dictate that you drive slowly, steadily, and silently, and as near the middle of the road as possible.

The class expressiveness of a car doesn't stop with the kind and condition of car it is, or with the way you drive it. It involves also the things you display on or in it, all the way from the rack holding three rifles, shotguns, or carbines in the rear window of the pickup with the Southern Methodist University sticker to the upper-middle-class rear-window announcement "I'd Rather Be Sailing." Proles love to decorate their cars, not just with mock-leopard upholstery and things like dice and baby shoes dangling from front and rear windows but with bumper stickers (AUSABLE CHASM; SOUTH OF THE BORDER; AYATOLLAH — PIG'S ASSHOLAH; HONK IF YOU LOVE JESUS), and of course little plastic Saint Christophers and the like on the dashboard. The middle class likes bumper stickers too, but is more likely to go in for self-congratulatory messages like CAUTION: I BRAKE FOR SMALL ANIMALS.

Americans are the only people in the world known to me



The prole automobile, rear view

whose status anxiety prompts them to advertise their college and university affiliations in the rear windows of their automobiles. You can drive all over Europe without once seeing a rear-window sticker reading CHRIST CHURCH or UNIVERSITÉ DE PARIS. A convention in the United States is that the higher learning is so serious a matter that joking or parody are wholly inappropriate. Actually, there's hardly an artifact more universally revered by Americans of all classes than the rear-window college sticker. One would sooner defile the flag than mock the sticker or what it represents by, say, putting it on upside down or slantwise, or scratching ironic quotation marks around "College" or "University." I have heard of one young person who cut apart and rearranged the letters of his STANFORD sticker so that his rear window said SNODFART. But the very rarity of so scandalous a performance is significant. And no family fortunate enough to be associated with Harvard or Princeton, no matter how remotely, would fly a KUTZTOWN STATE COLLEGE sticker as an ironic jest. These stickers pose an ethical problem uniquely American: how long after a family member has ceased to attend a classy college may one display the sticker? One year? Ten years? Forever? The American family would appreciate some authoritative guidance here, perhaps from the colleges themselves.

Just as you generally don't joke with the college sticker, you don't joke with the furnishing and decorating of the rooms of the house likely to be seen by strangers. Especially the living room, "the family's best foot a few inches forward, or sometimes a few miles," as Russell Lynes says. An upper-middle-class and often a middle-class house can be identified immediately you're inside by the way it stints the space allotted to the bedrooms and backstage areas so that the living room can constitute a more ample theater of display. The kinds of cultural emblems exhibited there were the focus of an elaborate study by sociologist F. Stuart Chapin almost fifty years ago in his book *Contemporary American Institutions* (1935). "The attitude of friends and other visitors, and hence social status," as he said, "may be advantageously influenced by the selection and proper display of cultural objects in the living room." To assist in measuring the class message projected by a living room, Chapin devised what he called "The Living-Room Scale," awarding or subtracting points for various items exhibited. Thus, if you had an alarm clock in your living room, you forfeited 2 points, but if you had a "fireplace with three or more utensils," you gained 8. A hardwood floor brought you 10, each curtained window 2, each bookcase with books 8. Each displayed newspaper and magazine earned 8, but a sewing machine, if you were so thoughtless as to position it in your living room, cost you 2. Admirable as this idea is, there are a couple of weaknesses in it. Chapin's distinctions, for one thing, aren't fine enough. The displayed magazines, for example: it matters terribly what magazines they are. A *Reader's Digest* and a *Family Circle* should lower you considerably on the scale, but they can be counterbalanced by display of a *Smithsonian* or *Art News*. And secondly, Chapin failed to take into account the practice among some upper-middles of parody display, a practice which has advanced dramatically since his day. All the regrettable items he notices, including even the sewing machine, could be advantageously exhibited today in a Camp or hi-tech-parody setting. I have tried to bring Chapin's Living-Room Scale up to date and make it a more trustworthy gauge for measuring the social class of your neighbors and friends. You'll find my version in the Appendix of this book.

The upper-class living room is very likely to have an eleven-to-thirteen-foot ceiling, to contain wasteful curves—moldings on baseboards, door panels, and the like—and, if wood is visible, to feature dark rather than light wood (more archaic-looking).

There must be a hardwood floor—parquet is best—covered, but not entirely, with Orientals so old as to be almost threadbare, suggesting inheritance from a primeval past. (On the other hand, a new Oriental, no matter how visibly expensive, is an all but infallible middle-class sign.) In the upper-class living room there may be exquisite homemade petit-point chair seats or a brick doorstop covered in needlepoint—these suggest yards and yards of leisure on the part of the lady of the house. In general, the more allusions to European architectural décor, the higher the class: black-and-white marble entryways, balustrades and railings, brocaded wall coverings, brass door fittings (which imply daily polishing by someone, certainly not the owner)—all confer the air both of archaism and the un-American so essential for upper-class status. There is one item which, although not indispensable in an upper-class setting, is never found outside one. It's the tabletop obelisk made of marble or crystal, a sly allusion not to Egypt—there would be no class there—but to Paris. And also to Tiffany, known by the cognoscenti to be the main local outlet for these choice items. And flowers usually appear in upper living rooms. (*Fresh flowers,* the middle-class housewife will call them, to distinguish them from the plastic ones assumed in her world.)

As we move down a bit to the upper-middle class, certain features begin to enter the picture. Like the middlebrow "oil portrait" of the head of the household or his wife or issue, executed by someone like Zita Davisson, "the noted portrait artist . . . celebrated throughout the world for her realistic, expressive style." You can book a sitting with her through Bergdorf-Goodman. If that's too costly, you can display a photographic portrait of yourself (as if you were Churchill) made by Yousuf Karsh, who advertises in *The New Yorker.* If you put it in an easel frame, the frame must be of silver, like the cedar-lined cigarette box on the coffee table. If your living room has come equipped with more bookcases than you need, you can always respond to the ad of a company calling itself Books by the Yard (601 Madison Avenue, New York City): "Leather Bound Books, 18th and 19th Century Fiction, Biography, Ecclesiastic, Essays, Shakespeare, Fielding, Carlyle, Swift, Pope, Johnson, Milton, etc. . . . Excellent source for interior decorators." In the genuine upper-middle-class living room nautical allusions will be visible somewhere, like a framed map of Nantucket, implying intimate

familiarity with its waters. In this class, the Orientals will be worn but not threadbare.

If the living rooms of the top classes tend to ape art galleries and museums, those of the middle class and below resemble motel rooms. Socially crucial is the dividing line where original works of art or *virtu* are replaced by reproductions. The Tiffany lamp is a case in point. It lost caste fatally the moment reproductions with plastic "glass" began showing up in middle-class houses and restaurants, and now one sees the things even in prole settings. The middle-class living room may display "louvers" somewhere, and the furniture (most likely in the "colonial" style) will be of maple or pine. There may be cute wall plates at the light switches—porcelain, with flowers, cartoon characters, imitation samplers, etc.—and hanging against a wall you may find a rack soliciting admiration for a vast "collection" of outré items like match folders or swizzle sticks. The floor will be carpeted wall to wall, and there will be venetian blinds made not of wood but of metal, with the slats curved. If potted plants are displayed, there may be cactuses among them.

But the most notable characteristic of middle-class décor is the flight from any sort of statement that might be interpreted as "controversial" or ideologically pointed. One can't be too careful. Pictures, for example: safe are sailing vessels, small children and animals, and pastoral scenes, unlike images that hint any ideological import, like "France," "Civil War," "New York City," or "East European Immigration." Argument or even disagreement must be avoided at all costs. In aid of this high-minded end, benign mottos and signs are useful, like the favorite which reads,

> Great Spirit, grant that I may not criticize
> my neighbor until I have walked a mile in
> his moccasins.

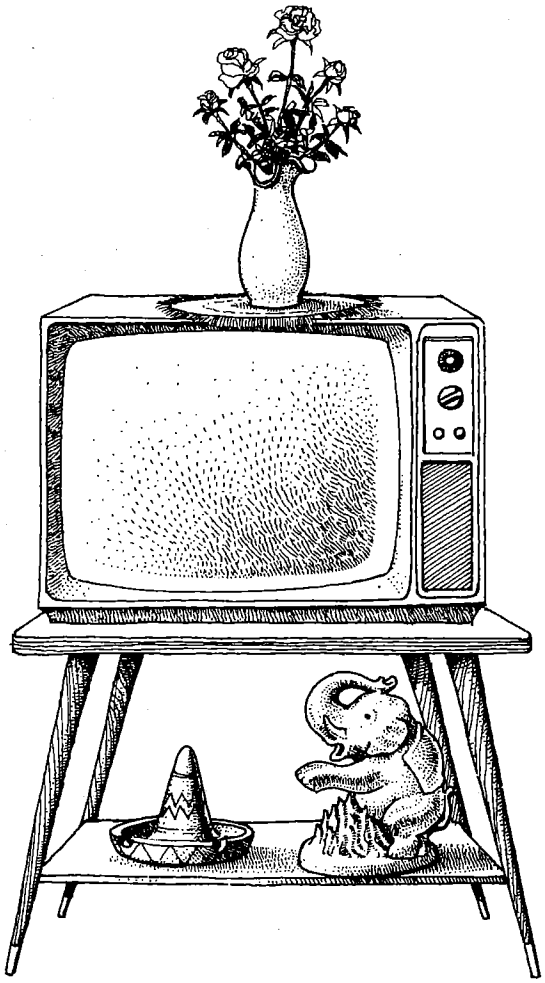
Audubon prints on the wall are nicely nonideological, and "wall systems" are popular because they are more likely to contain stereos and TVs than bookshelves, always a danger because they may display books with controversial spines. In the same way your real middle class refuses to show any but the most bland books and magazines on its coffee tables: otherwise, expressions of opinion, awkward questions, or even ideas might result. Thus

in lieu of conversation, the photographic slide show—a pleasantly nonideological middle-class fixture, almost as welcome as an antidote to ideas as the *National Geographic* itself. The middle-class anxiety about ideology is strongly implied by a phrase popular among the middles, "good taste," which means, as Russell Lynes notes, the "entirely inoffensive and essentially characterless." (To do your living room in "good taste" you go to W. & J. Sloan in New York or Marshall Field in Chicago.) One reason for the absence of character in middle-class decorating is that the women get their ideas from national magazines and assume, as one woman told Lynes, that "if you've seen something in a magazine —well, people will nearly always like it." Hence the brass skillet hung against the brick wall, the "colonial" wallpaper, etc. And it's true too that much of this characterlessness can be imputed to the frequency with which the middle class is moved from suburb to suburb by the corporations which employ it. What works in one house must work in the next. As one middle-class wife told Vance Packard, "I settle for something that will move well."

To change a middle-class living room to a prole one, you'd add a Naugahyde Barcalounger and reinvite ideology back into the pictures, but the ideology would be the sort conveyed in the popular chromo "Christ at the United Nations." Thick transparent plastic would cover the upholstery, fringe would appear around the bottom of the sofa, and little woolly balls would dangle from the lampshades, which might be tied with large bows. These things would satisfy the prole hunger for, as decorators put it, "lots of goop." The dining table would be of metal and Formica, and somewhere a bowling-ball carrier might be visible.

An observer with little time to spend in a house can make a fair estimate of the class of the occupants by noting the position of the TV set. The principle is that the higher in class you are, the less likely it is that your TV will be exhibited in your living room. Openly and proudly, that is: if you want it there for convenience or because there's no other place to put it, you'll drain away some of its nastiness by an act of parody display—indicating that you're not taking the TV at all seriously by using the top as a shelf for ridiculous objects like hideous statuettes, absurd souvenirs, hilariously awful wedding presents, and the like.

(This is assuming you have a TV at all. The upper class tends not to. In a recent book of one hundred photographs of upper-



TV set disarmed of some of its nastiness by Parody Display

class people in their houses in Lake Forest, Illinois, only one TV set is to be seen. TV is distinctly, as one industry spokesman said recently, "not a patrician medium," and it's a startling fact that there are upper-class people who've never heard of Lucy or the Muppets.)

An upper-middle-class way to devulgarize the set is to have it gussied up to look like something else, like "fine furniture" or a

Gothic drinks cabinet in "valuable woods." Or you can have it hidden behind a two-way mirror, or behind a painting, which can slide up on tracks when it's necessary to disclose the small screen. Or, as the British critic Peter Conrad observes, "Often in highbrow households the set will be found snugly lodged in a wall of bookshelves, as if proximity could make an ersatz literary object of it."

Down among the middles and high proles the set ceases to be an occasion of shame and becomes instead a specific glory of the family. Here you find sets flaunting their complicated technology, with control panels looking like fixtures from jet aircraft or space capsules. Here also you're likely to find two or more sets (color, of course), and the further down socially you proceed the more likely that they'll be on all the time. In fact, if you're in the presence of one or more sets that are seldom dark, you're either a prole, someone who works in the TV or news industry, someone who does public relations for the President of the United States, or a person who runs an appliance store. Among mid- and low proles, the set will probably be found in the dining room or kitchen, wherever the family gathers for meals. This allows the TV to replace conversation entirely, which is why these classes depend upon it.

And of course what you watch on the set betrays your class at once. Or don't watch, for the upper-middle class, those whose sets are disguised as something else, watches little more than an occasional emission from National Educational Television or a news special, like coverage of the current political assassination. The middle class likes *Mash* and *All in the Family,* with the occasional dose of *Paper Chase,* but what it prefers most is sports viewing, although *viewing*'s not precisely the right word. That's what you'd be doing if you were present at the game. TV sports watching is "Indirect Spectatorism," as Roger Price says. "Someone else," he comments rather severely, "is even doing our *watching* for us." And of course the more violent the body contact of the sports you watch, the lower your class. Tennis and golf and even bowling are classier to watch than boxing, hockey, and pro football. TV news is also watched regularly by the middle class, the audience that deified Walter Cronkite and whose loyalty to the seven-o'clock news, even if that snotty Dan Rather is reading it, is the main cause of the death of afternoon papers all over the country.

The bottom stratum of the middle class, together with the high proles, furnishes the audience for game shows, from the higher (like *Family Feud),* with their fairly sophisticated sexiness and venturesome jokes, to the lower (like *Tic Tac Dough*), with their nonhumiliating questions and nonthreatening emcees. The uglier the gamemaster, the greater appeal of the show to proles. *Blockbusters* is an illustration. There's no chance of being patronized or put down by a person so unprepossessing as the just-folks emcee Bill Cullen, whose polyester clothes in addition make him seem quite one of us proles.

The lower proles will watch any of this stuff on occasion, because as long as the set's on and playing, they're moderately satisfied, pleased with the subliminal message their TV's always conveying: "I Am Owned by a Family that Can Afford a Color TV." On their ostentatiously technological sets, mid- and low proles like to watch sitcoms based either on outright magic *(The Flying Nun)* or on some technological marvel *(The Hulk, The Bionic Woman, The Six Million Dollar Man).* The Hulk's emanating from an overdose of gamma radiation (whatever that may be) is as attractive to proles as Superman's association with "Krypton." Science and technology have never quite made it socially (whatever Sebastian Flyte was studying at Oxford in *Brideshead Revisited,* it wasn't chemistry), partly, I suppose, because excitement over them—and the illusion of "progress" they propose—is a prole characteristic. Mid- and low proles also like sitcoms like *Love Boat* and *Gilligan's Island* with dialogue so untaxing that no one in the viewing family will be embarrassed by not getting it. Close to the bottom as a class indicator is *The Flintstones,* appealing as it does to the audience that takes in a paper only for the funnies. Watching news or sports interviews on TV, you doubtless have seen people, not all of them adolescents, who carefully position themselves just in the background and jump up and down and wave frantically while wearing theatrically broad smiles. Hoping to be distinguished if only for a moment by being caught by "a media" and recognized—glory!—by family and friends, they reveal that they are low proles.

Because most mid-and low proles work under supervision and hate it, they identify readily with TV characters in similar predicaments, harassed like the viewer by superintendents and foremen and inspectors. One reason police shows are popular is that they involve such appealing elements as brutality and coercion, but

they're popular also because the prole viewer can identify himself easily with characters who are constantly either disobeying a boss, "getting around him," or humoring him. Likewise with newspaper shows like *Lou Grant* and "employee" dramas like *Alice* and *Nine to Five*.

Proles like TV commercials. At times their conversation consists of little more than allusions to them: "I can't believe I ate the whole thing"; "Don't leave home without them"; "How do *you* spell relief?" Bottom-out-of-sights love TV, but the choice of what to watch belongs largely to institutional personnel like prison guards or nurses and orderlies at establishments for the senile. In prison any show is popular which depicts luscious girls and stimulates imagery of having to do with them. As one former inmate told Studs Terkel, "Your whole day was sitting in a room . . . watching television. *The Dating Game* was a big hit because it dealt with women."

So much for the living room and its main giveaway piece of furniture, the TV. Although the living room is the most important conveyer of class signals, two other rooms should not be neglected, the kitchen and the bathroom. The upper-class kitchen, designed to be entered only by servants, is identifiable at once: it's beat-up, inconvenient, and out-of-date, with lots of wood, no Formica whatever, and a minimum of accessories and labor-saving appliances like dishwashers and garbage disposals. Why tolerate these noisy things when you can have a silent servant do precisely what they do? The upper-class kitchen does have a refrigerator, but so antique that it has rounded corners and a big white coil on top. Neatness and modernity enter as we move down toward the middle class, and the more your kitchen resembles a lab, the worse for you socially. An electric stove has less class than a gas one, the appearance of modernity and efficiency, here as everywhere, severely compromising one's status presentation. The "tech" kitchen, with lots of microwave and toaster ovens and coffeemakers, is socially as fatal as the TV set whose control panel suggests a youth misspent at a technical institute.

The bathroom: the upper-class one will resemble the upper-class kitchen in its backwardness. A toilet seat in dark varnished wood is class-eloquent, and so is the absence of a shower, the latter deprivation being especially valuable because of its allusion to England. Two items infallibly found in top-class bathrooms, the Mason Pearson hairbrush and the Kent comb, are trustworthy

status emblems, as expressive in their way as the scented toilet paper and pink acrylic johnny-rug of the middle class.

The high-prole bathroom reveals two contradictory impulses at war: one is the desire to exhibit a "hospital" standard of cleanliness, which means splashing a lot of Lysol or Pine Oil around; the other is to display as much fanciness and luxury as possible, which means a lurch in the opposite direction, toward fur toilet-seat covers and towels which don't work not merely because they are made largely of Dacron but also because a third of the remaining threads are "gold." The prole bathroom is a place for enacting the fantasy "What I'd Do If I Were Really Rich." It's a conventional showcase for a family's aspirations toward the finer things, like chrome plate, flounces and furbelows, magazine racks, gadgets and shelves, bottles and jars, creams, unguents, and lotions, with perhaps Water-Piks and electric toothbrushes thrown in as well. For dolling up the high-prole bathroom, Woolworth's sells a complete set of color-matched vinyl ruglets, one for the toilet lid, one for the toilet seat, one for the surrounding floor, and one for the top of the toilet tank, in case you should want to sit up there. For high proles the bathroom is a serious place, and you're not likely to encounter jocular display there, like toilet paper imprinted with lewd verses or simulacra of U.S. banknotes. The water in the toilet is likely to be bright blue or green, a testimony to the resourcefulness and quick response to advertising of the housewife.

In domestic settings whether upper or prole, domestic animals are bound to be in attendance, and like everything else they give off class signals. Dogs first. They are classier the more they allude to nonutilitarian hunting, and thus to England. Top dogs consequently are Labradors, golden retrievers, corgis, King Charles spaniels, and Afghan hounds. To be upper-class you should have a lot of them, and they should be named after the costlier liquors, like Brandy and Whiskey. The middle class goes in for Scotties and Irish setters, often giving them Scottish or Irish names, although it reserves "Sean" (sometimes spelled "Shawn" to make sure everyone gets it) for its own human issue. Proles, for their part, like breeds that can be conceived to furnish "protection": Doberman pinschers, German shepherds, or pit bulls. Or breeds useful in utilitarian outdoor pursuits, like beagles. The thinness of dogs is often a sign of their social class. "Upper-class dogs," says Jilly Cooper, "have only one meal a day and are therefore

quite thin, like their owners." She perceives too that classy people often affect certain breeds of dogs just because the classes below can't pronounce them. Thus their commitment to Rottweilers and Weimaraners. Dogs are popular with the top classes not just because, if large and rowdy especially, they convey the message that their owner is a member of the landed gentry, or what passes for it here. They're also popular among the uppers for the reason Jean-Jacques Rousseau indicated over two hundred years ago when he was talking with James Boswell about dogs versus cats as pets:

> ROUSSEAU: Do you like cats?
> BOSWELL: No.
> ROUSSEAU: I was sure of that. It is my test of character. There you have the despotic instinct of men. They do not like cats because the cat is free, and will never consent to become a slave. He will do nothing to your order, as the other animals do.

Thus the upper orders' fondness for a species they can order about, like their caterers, gardeners, and lawyers, and one that fawns the more it's commanded. "Sit! That's a good boy."

The dog is both more visible and more audible than the cat, and is for that reason a better class-display investment. The cat is also "less reputable," as Veblen observes, "because she is less wasteful; she may even serve a useful end," like repressing mice. Upper-class cats, the equivalent of poodles in the dog world, are those held to originate in such exotic places (that is, expensive to get to) as Burma and the Himalayas. If you are upper-middle class you'll be tempted to name the cat "Cat." Middles go in for Siamese cats, proles for alley cats, which they name "Puss." Birds in cages are very middle-class, fish in aquariums high-prole. The more elaborate the underwater "set" you provide for your goldfish—sunken galleons, mermaids, giant clams—the more prole you.

V

Consumption, Recreation, Bibelots

There is hardly a richer single occasion for class revelation than the cocktail hour, since the choice of any drink, and the amount consumed, resonates with status meaning. For example: if you are a middle-aged person and you ask for white wine—the sweeter it is, by the way, the lower your host and hostess—you are giving off a very specific signal identifying yourself as upper- or upper-middle class. You're saying that of course you used to booze a lot on expensive hard liquor, a habit mastered at a socially OK college, but that now, having been brought to the brink of alcoholism by your attractive excesses, you are bright enough to shift your style in midlife and drink something "milder." (The reputation of dry white wine as the lowest calorically of drinks also recommends it to the thin-obsessed.) So many classy people have now forgone hard liquor that there's a whole new large group of upper- and upper-middle-class white-wine drunks who, because they are seen to be knocking back only something light and sensible, hope that their swayings and stammerings will pass unnoticed. One of their favorite tipples is Italian Soave, which is cheap, readily available, and pronounceable, while remaining foreign enough to qualify as a conspicuous import and thus a high-class item. Frascati is another favorite. Asking for Perrier (upper) or club soda (middle), while others are consuming alcohol, delivers a message similar to asking for white wine. It says: "I am