

## The X Way Out

What about us, indeed? What class are we in, and what do we think about our entrapment there? A useful exercise is to ask of Amis's poem, what class is the speaker in it? Not a prole, we know, because his grammar is unexceptionable. Not middle-class either, because he notices that something's deeply wrong with the public architecture of Aberdarcy and has no fear of starting controversy by criticizing it. And he can't be upper-class because he's speaking in verse, which requires talent, learning, and effort. His sharp eye, satiric humor, and complex comic sympathy for poor middle-class Evans and Mrs. Rhys, in addition to his artistic sensitivity, suggest a special identity. Let's say that the speaker is not in a class at all but is rather a member of category X.

"X" people are better conceived as belonging to a category than a class because you are not born an X person, as you are born and reared a prole or a middle. You become an X person, or, to put it more bluntly, you earn X-personhood by a strenuous effort of discovery in which curiosity and originality are indispensable. And in discovering that you can become an X person you find the only escape from class. Entering category X often requires flight from parents and forebears. The young flocking to the cities to devote themselves to "art," "writing," "creative work"—anything, virtually, that liberates them from the presence of a boss or supervisor—are aspirant X people, and if they

succeed in capitalizing on their talents, they may end as fully fledged X types.

What kind of people are Xs? The old-fashioned term *bohemians* gives some idea; so does the term *the talented*. Some Xs are intellectuals, but a lot are not: they are actors, musicians, artists, sports stars, "celebrities," well-to-do former hippies, confirmed residents abroad, and the more gifted journalists, those whose by-lines intelligent readers recognize with pleasant anticipation. X people can be described as (to use C. Wright Mills's term) "self-cultivated." They tend to be self-employed, doing what social scientists call autonomous work. If, as Mills has said, the middle-class person is "always somebody's man," the X person is nobody's, and his freedom from supervision is one of his most obvious characteristics. X people are independent-minded, free of anxious regard for popular shibboleths, loose in carriage and demeanor. They adore the work they do, and they do it until they are finally carried out, "retirement" being a concept meaningful only to hired personnel or wage slaves who despise their work. Being an X person is like having much of the freedom and some of the power of a top-out-of-sight or upper-class person, but without the money. X category is a sort of unmonied aristocracy.

Identifying X people is not difficult once you know the signs. Their dress and looks, for one thing. Since there's no one they think worth impressing by mere appearance, X people tend to dress for themselves alone, which means they dress comfortably, and generally "down." One degree down will usually do the trick: if black tie is designated, an X person appears in a dark suit (of a distinctly unstylish, archaic cut) and a notable necktie. If suits are expected, he omits the tie. If "informal" is the proclaimed style, his jeans will be torn and patched, his cords very used, if not soiled. If others are wearing bathing suits, X people are likely to show up naked. X shoes are always comfortable, regardless of current modes, and they usually suggest that they have been chosen (like sandals and moccasins) for walking on soft carpets of pine needles. Indeed, L. L. Bean and Land's End are the main costumers for X people, who annually consume the bulk of the down vests, flannel shirts, and hiking boots vended in this country. Xs are likely to wear these things specifically where most people are got up in jackets and nice dresses. If the Xs ever descend to legible clothing, the words—unlike BUDWEISER OR

U.S.A. DRINKING TEAM—are original and interesting, although no comment on them is ever expected. Indeed, visibly to notice them would be bad form. When an X person, male or female, meets a member of an identifiable class, the costume, no matter what it is, conveys the message “I am freer and less terrified than you are,” or—in extreme circumstances—“I am more intelligent and interesting than you are: please do not bore me.” The question of whether to select a black or a beige raincoat never troubles X people, for they don’t use raincoats at all: they either get wet and pay no attention or wait under cover—they are not the slaves of timeclocks—until the rain stops. X people are almost never fat, for they exercise a lot, naturally and for the fun of it. They were exercising thirty years ago, before the upper-middles had been instructed about jogging by the popular press. Favorite X sport: ad hoc games of touch football, especially while slightly drunk. X people tend to eschew the obvious kinds of pets, leaning instead toward things like tame coyotes, skunks, peacocks, and anteaters. X people are likely to appear with unexplained sexual partners, and some have been known to become pregnant at socially inappropriate moments. Their infant issue they may tote about in ways that appear novel, if not shocking, to the middle class: in slings, for example, or backpack papoose carriers.

The places where X people choose to live usually have a decent delicatessen and a good wine store. There is likely to be a nearby Army and Navy or hiking shop, for the dress-down clothes, and a good public or university library as a stay against boredom. A sophisticated newsdealer is also an attraction, for one needs British, French, German, and Italian periodicals. X people move away when they, not their bosses, feel they should. They like where they live, and when they stop liking their location—when, for example, it seems drifting too speedily middle- or prolewards—they move. Their houses, which are never positioned in “developments,” tend to be sited oddly—on the sides of mountains, say, or planted stubbornly between skyscrapers. Their houses (never, of course, “homes”) are more likely to be old than new: old ones are cheaper, for one thing, and by flaunting a well-used house you can proclaim your freedom from the childish American obsession with the up-to-date. Since X people disdain the standard kinds of status display, their houses are likely to have no driveways, and their cars, unstylish and most often unwashed, will be parked in the street. The understatement principle govern-

ing the kind and condition of the automobile will determine that no stickers, college or any other kind, ever appear in the windows, although a black-and-white "A" sticker, indicating the minimal gasoline ration during the Second World War, would be a permissible archaic gesture. Of course X people shun turnpikes and freeways, those tedious, characterless conduits for the middle class, preferring instead slowpoke back roads because of their "charm." In the X spirit of parody, the lawn and yard of the X house are never impressive and often give off powerful satiric overtones. Thus instead of grass the front yard may feature a spread of gravel, asphalt, or cement (sometimes painted bright green), haphazard arrangements of stones and weeds, and ostentatious marijuana patches. In addition to parody middle-class effects, parody prole items may make an appearance, like ironically ugly lawn furniture and joke flower-bed edgings. But regardless of the way it's furnished, the front yard must be nondescript, for the street façade of the house is negligible to Xs, the backyard being the important place because private. There you can play unobserved. X people like to have houseguests, although they never designate them by that upper-middle-class term. They lodge them not in guest rooms but on spare couches or in sleeping bags, and there may be lots of coming and going at night, never mentioned in the morning.

The readiest way to describe an X living room is to say that anything recommended in a sound home-furnishings magazine will not appear there. The guiding principle will be parody display: there may be an elephant's foot umbrella stand and some unlikely manifestations of the art of the taxidermist—stuffed cats and dogs, penguins, iguanas. Lots of campy fabric—odd curtains, fringed shawls draped about, walls covered in museum cloth. The pictures on the walls will bespeak vigorous inner-directedness: there will be shameless nudes (all sexes and ages), and instead of the chart of Nantucket or Catalina Island favored by the upper-middles, a chart of Bikini Atoll or Guadalcanal. On the coffee table, *Mother Jones* and *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. The nearer you approach pure X the closer to the floor you find yourself sitting. The ultimate X living room displays no furniture legs at all, no sitting, dining, or reclining surface being higher than twelve inches from the floor. The floor is either entirely bare wood or covered irregularly with thick rugs, always from uncommon places like Nepal or Honduras. There will usually be a

large and not too neat working fireplace, less because it's pretty than because it's fun to copulate on the floor in front of it. And there are copious bookshelves packed with hardbound books, most of them dating from well before the 1950s.

X people watch a lot of TV but never look at anything remotely improving, regarding National Educational Television as a menace to culture. On their sets, which will often display a fairground plaster Popeye on top, Xs like to watch classic reruns like *The Honeymooners* and *I Love Lucy*, experiencing ecstasies watching for the fiftieth time Jackie Gleason's Chef of the Future or Lucy's manic game of golf. By these pursuits X people pay their own obeisance to the great status principle of archaism. They will often seek out live transmissions, in the hope of witnessing comic error—the football flubbed, the manuscript of the public speech blown away and scattered by an impudent gust, the gaffe extempore committed by a President, governor, senator, mayor, or high clergyman. X people still treasure the moment during John F. Kennedy's inauguration when the speaker's stand being used for public prayer by His Eminence Richard Cardinal Cushing suddenly caught fire, the ominous wisps of smoke unperceived by the unwitting grandees on the platform.

Drinking: X people drink not to show off but to get quietly tight. Vodka and gin they find the most expedient means to this end, although some Xs will also be seen drinking white wine pretty freely. Regardless of the tipple, X people like to buy it in quantity and cheaply, specializing in excellent but unknown liquor-store house brands—Beefeater Gin and Cutty Sark Scotch betray the credulous victim of advertising, and hence the middle class—and on X premises gallon jugs of drink are commonly seen.

X people seldom eat at stated mealtimes, hunger and convenience being their only motivations for eating. Like the uppers, Xs generally eat late rather than early, and their meals tend to last a long time, what with all the prolonged comic and scandalous narrative at table. The X cuisine is seldom the pseudo-French or mock-British of the upper-middle class: it is more likely to be North African, or Turkish, or "Indo-Chinese," or vegetarian, or "organic," or "health." Feeling no insecure need to display themselves in the act of dominating inferiors by issuing orders and demanding that their whims be honored, X people generally avoid eating out. Intelligent and perceptive as they are, they know

that if you're at all clever, you can feed better at home. Besides, Xs go in for a lot of things you can't readily get out, like herbal teas, lemon-flavored vodka, and baked goods made of stone-ground flour. Now and then X people will suddenly, without warning, lurch away from their usual exotic foods and go ape American, eating nothing but apple pies, hams, hot dogs, hamburgers, chili, and turkey. But regardless of the style of the cuisine, X food is always (1) good and (2) unpraised by the company, its excellence taken for granted. Except for the occasional sauterne or after-dinner port, the wine is dry, good, and never discussed. There's one surefire way, other things being equal, to identify an X dinner party. All the wine brought by guests, no matter the quantity, is inevitably consumed, and so is more of the host's stock than he's probably anticipated.

Instinctively unprovincial, X people tend to be unostentatiously familiar with the street layouts and landmarks of London, Paris, and Rome—and sometimes Istanbul and Karachi. This is in accord with their habit of knowing a lot for the pleasure of it, as well as their more specific curiosity about people, no matter where or when they live. Hence the X interest in history, literature, architecture, and aesthetic styles. (The critic of Aberdarcy's main square is right in the center of the tradition.) Regardless of the work they do, the Xs read a great deal, and they regard reading as a normal part of experience, as vital as "experience" and often more interesting. They never belong to book clubs. Because they choose their own books entirely themselves, they will often be heard complaining about the vulgarity and hopelessness of their local book outlets. The X reader reads everything, his curiosity being without limit. On occasion he will even read best-sellers, but largely to see if their cliché content is as high as usual. X people have usually "been to college," but they generally throw out unread, together with other junk mail, their college alumni magazine.

Being entirely self-directed, X people pursue remote and uncommonplace knowledge—they may be fanatical about Serbo-Croatian prosody, geodes, or Northern French church vestments of the eleventh century. When in a flux of joy X people burst into song, the air is likely to derive from opera of the Baroque period, or from *Don Giovanni* or *The Messiah*. Even the tunes they whistle will be from the classical repertory: a really able X person can whistle a given Beethoven quartet with hardly a lapse. X people

are good at playing musical instruments, but seldom the expected ones: instead of the violin or the recorder, they will play the melophone, the autoharp, or the nose flute.

Although X people abjure the word *creative*, regarding it as stylish, sentimental, psychologically naive, and therefore middle-class, they adopt toward cultural objects the attitude of makers, and of course critics. It's not hard for an X person to imagine himself producing any contemporary work of art or drama or architecture. Thus with films X people are as interested in the styles of directors as of actors. Although they may know a great deal about European ecclesiastical architecture and even about the niceties of fifteen centuries of liturgical usage, X people never go to church, except for the odd wedding or funeral. Furthermore, they don't know anyone who does go, and the whole idea would strike them as embarrassing. When obliged to bow their heads in prayer in public places, some X people have been known to raise their eyes surreptitiously to inspect the expressions, postures, and clothing of their more conformist neighbors. X people tend to make their own rules and to get away with so doing, which means that many of them are writers. And, as Diana Trilling has said, "If everyone . . . wants to be a writer, this is not only because of the promise of celebrity but also because of what the life of the artist promises of freedom to make one's own rules."

X people are verbal. They're good at languages and take it for granted that it is disgraceful, because merely American and provincial, to remain monolingual. Instead of the occasional dress-up foreign word of the middle and upper-middle classes (*gourmet*, *arrivederci*, *kaput*), Xs can deliver whole paragraphs in French, Italian, German, or Spanish, and sometimes Russian or Chinese as well. The more self-conscious Xs will sometimes go so far in the international direction as to cross their sevens. Soliciting no reputation for respectability, X people are freely obscene and profane, but tend to deploy vile language with considerable rhetorical effectiveness, differing from proles by using *fucking* as a modifier only now and then and never dropping the *g*. They may be rather fonder than most people of designating someone—usually a public servant or idol of the middle class—an *asshole*. This will suggest that generally they eschew euphemism, as, for example, when they insist that their children use the words *penis* and *vagina*. But they don't always call spades spades. Sometimes they will euphemize, but unlike more genteel speakers Xs like to use eu-

phemisms ironically or parodically, favoring those especially which low newspapers use with a knowing, libel-skirting leer. Thus when an X person lifts one eyebrow slightly while referring to someone as a *confirmed bachelor*, we are to gather that *flaming homosexual* is meant. Similarly, as Neil Mackwood observes, *starlet* is the ironic euphemism for *whore*, *constant companion* for *lover*, *tired* (or *overtired*) for *publicly drunk*, and *fun-loving* for *promiscuous*. Applied to young women, *willowy* means *near death from anorexia*. X people can also use the middle class's euphemisms for sardonic effect if sufficient irony is signaled at the same time. Thus it is possible to speak of some poor soul's *kleptomania problem* in such a way as to install viciously skeptical quotation marks around the words.

Scrutinizing the British social classes over a century ago, Matthew Arnold identified the standard three and then observed that each class has in it people he termed *aliens*, those who feel they don't belong there and want out. It's largely from their current American counterparts that the X group is recruited. Some members, like Gore Vidal, enter from the upper class. Some, like James Jones, come from the proles, or even the destitute. One can have as little "education" as Jones, or as much as the brilliant kids from the more demanding universities who have developed confidence in their intellect and taste there. X people constitute something like a classless class. They occupy the one social place in the U.S.A. where the ethic of buying and selling is not all-powerful. Impelled by insolence, intelligence, irony, and spirit, X people have escaped out the back doors of those theaters of class which enclose others. And people fearful that X-hood may be somehow un-American should realize that, on the contrary, it is firmly in the American grain. Knowing that, Mark Twain created an exemplary category-X person and said when first introducing him, "Huckleberry came and went, at his own free will."

Although their places are not inheritable and although they lay little stress on manners, in their freedom X people constitute a sort of parody aristocracy. In some ways they resemble E. M. Forster's "aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate, and the plucky," whose members are "sensitive for others as well as themselves, . . . considerate without being fussy." And "they can take a joke." "On they go," says Forster, warming to his vision, "an invincible army, yet not a victorious one":

---

Authority, seeing their value, has tried to net them and to utilize them as the Egyptian Priesthood, or the Christian Church or the Chinese Civil Service or the Group Movement, or some other worthy stunt. But they slip through the net and are gone. . . .

If people with small imaginations and limited understandings aspire to get into the upper-middle class, the few with notable gifts of mind and perception aspire to disencumber themselves into X people. It's only as an X, detached from the constraints and anxieties of the whole class racket, that an American can enjoy something like the LIBERTY promised on the coinage. And it's in the X world, if anywhere, that an American can avoid some of the envy and ambition that pervert so many. De Tocqueville saw as early as 1845 what was likely to result from the official American reprehension of the aristocratic principle. "Desires still remain extremely enlarged," he wrote, "while the means of satisfying them are diminished day by day." And thus "on every side we trace the ravages of inordinate and unsuccessful ambition kindled in hearts which it consumes in secret and in vain." The society of Xs is not large at the moment. It could be larger, for many can join who've not yet understood that they have received an invitation.



.

|

---

Appendix:

Exercises, and the Mail Bag

Vertical line of text on the right side of the page.

# Exercises

## LEARNING TO DRAW CLASS INFERENCES

(Answers at end of Exercise)

Indicate the class of each of the following:

1. A small girl who gives this account of her first visit to a symphony concert: "A waiter came out and tried to beat the band with a little stick."

2. A 50-year-old man on the deck of a 35-foot Chris-Craft, drinking from a can of Bud and attended by three luscious girls wearing halters and inexpensive white yachting caps.

3. A clean-cut young man on a plane. He's dressed in a three-piece dark suit, with a white shirt and conservative tie, and as he talks to his neighbor you can pick out words like *interface*, *funding*, *dialogue*, *life-style*, and *bottom line*.

4. A clean-cut young man on a plane. He's dressed in a three-piece dark suit, with a white shirt and conservative tie, and as he talks to his neighbor you can pick out words like *patina* (pronounced not just correctly but assertively and elegantly), *quattrocento*, and *the V and A*.

5. A young woman lawyer in a large New York firm who likes to watch Shakespeare on Educational Television and to frequent restaurants said to serve gourmet food. "*The New Yorker* is practically my Bible," she says.

6. A middle-aged woman professor of classical epigraphy at a large and old East Coast university who spends her summers on digs in Anatolia and her winters copulating with a much younger

boyfriend. Her mother was an orderly in a woman's prison, her father a high-school teacher of woodshop. Both were avid churchgoers.

7. A man in his late twenties wearing three shirts at once. The undermost one is bright red, then there's a yellow one, and the one on top is a light-blue Oxford-cloth button-down.

8. A small-town barber whose wife is getting very fat.

9. A boy and girl in their twenties on a flight from New York to Los Angeles. They both wear dirty, raggedy jeans, and the boy's cotton shirt is faded and torn. Beneath her shirt you can clearly see her nipples. They both wear moccasins without soles, and without socks.

## ANSWERS

### (LEARNING TO DRAW CLASS INFERENCES)

1. This girl's class depends on the way the conductor was dressed. If he was in white tie, the girl's probably upper-class. If he was dressed otherwise, she's upper-middle—no little girls below upper-middle would be taken to the symphony.

2. He's a high prole, and he's saved all his life for that horrible boat. If he'll take the caps off the girls and pour his beer into a glass, he might pass for middle-class, or even upper-middle if he gets the girls into men's old shirts with the tails hanging out.

3. This guy's middle-class or even high-prole, a trainee with some hypertrophied corporation on his way to a "conference." He thinks he's giving off an upper-middle-class effect, but boy, is he wrong. He thinks he's going to be high in the company someday, but he's wrong there, too.

4. This guy's either upper-middle or upper. He's inherited some money, but he still enjoys doing a little work if it's appropriate—in his case, either part-time museum curatorship or light work in a gallery classy enough to deal in non-contemporary art. His friends will roll their eyes with astonishment if he ever marries.

5. She is hopelessly middle-class, and probably consumed with secret bitterness that she's not made upper-middle.

6. Category X, obviously, which makes the family background irrelevant, thrown in here merely as a smokescreen.

7. He is not insane, merely upper-middle-class displaying his command of layering. If he's stepped out of a very dirty old Chevrolet, he's probably upper-class.

8. He is barely a craftsman, but still he is one, and so he qualifies as a high prole. But if his wife gets much fatter, he will sink to mid-prole.

9. They are either upper-class or category X, engaged in the *épater-les-bourgeois* act of dressing way down for travel. If they were middle-class or prole they'd be dressed way up. Watch them closely. If they take off their moccasins and pad up and down the aisle in bare feet, they're probably category X. The nipples already argue category X.

## THE LIVING-ROOM SCALE

(Revised)

(An early, primitive form of this was promulgated in 1935 by F. Stuart Chapin in his book *Contemporary American Institutions*.)

Begin with a score of 100. For each of the following in your living room (or those of friends or acquaintances) add or subtract points as indicated. Then ascertain social class according to the table at the end.

Hardwood floor	add 4
Parquet floor	add 8
Stone floor	add 4
Vinyl floor	subtract 6
Wall-to-wall carpet	add 2
Working fireplace	add 4
New Oriental rug or carpet	subtract 2 (each)
Worn Oriental rug or carpet	add 5 (each)
Threadbare rug or carpet	add 8 (each)
Ceiling ten feet high, or higher	add 6
Original paintings by internationally recognized practitioners	add 8 (each)
Original drawings, prints, or lithographs by internationally recognized practitioners	add 5 (each)
Reproductions of any Picasso painting, print, or anything	subtract 2 (each)

CLASS

Original paintings, drawings, or prints by family members	subtract 4 (e)
Windows curtained, rods and draw cords	add 5
Windows curtained, no rods or draw cords	add 2
Genuine Tiffany lamp	add 3
Reproduction Tiffany lamp	subtract 4
Any work of art depicting cowboys	subtract 3
“Professional” oil portrait of any member of the household	subtract 3
Any display of “collectibles”	subtract 4
Transparent plastic covers on furniture	subtract 6
Furniture upholstered with any metallic threads	subtract 3
Cellophane on any lampshade	subtract 4
No ashtrays	subtract 2
Refrigerator, washing machine, or clothes dryer in living room	subtract 6
Motorcycle kept in living room	subtract 10
Periodicals visible, laid out flat:	
<i>National Enquirer</i>	subtract 6
<i>Popular Mechanics</i>	subtract 5
<i>Reader’s Digest</i>	subtract 3
<i>National Geographic</i>	subtract 2
<i>Smithsonian</i>	subtract 1
<i>Scientific American</i>	subtract 1
<i>New Yorker</i>	add 1
<i>Town and Country</i>	add 2
<i>New York Review of Books</i>	add 5
<i>Times Literary Supplement</i> (London)	add 5
<i>Paris Match</i>	add 6
<i>Hudson Review</i>	add 8
Each family photograph (black-and-white)	subtract 2
Each family photograph (color)	subtract 3
Each family photograph (black-and-white or color) in sterling-silver frame	add 3
Potted citrus tree with midget fruit growing	add 8
Potted palm tree	add 5
Bowling-ball carrier	subtract 6
Fishbowl or aquarium	subtract 4
Fringe on any upholstered furniture	subtract 4
Identifiable Naugahyde aping anything customarily made of leather	subtract 3

Any item exhibiting words in an ancient or modern foreign language (Spanish excluded)

Wooden venetian blinds

Metal venetian blinds

Tabletop obelisk of marble, glass, etc.

No periodicals visible

Fewer than five pictures on walls

Each piece of furniture over 50 years old

Bookcase(s) full of books

Any leather bindings more than 75 years old

Bookcase(s) partially full of books

Overflow books stacked on floor, chairs, etc.

Hutch bookcase (“wall system”) displaying plates, pots, porcelain figurines, etc., but no books

Wall unit with built-in TV, stereo, etc.

On coffeetable, container of matchbooks from funny or anomalous places

Works of sculpture (original, and not made by householder or any family member)

Works of sculpture made by householder or any family member

Every item alluding specifically to the United Kingdom

Any item alluding, even remotely, to Tutankhamen

Each framed certificate, diploma, or testimonial

Each “laminated” ditto

Each item with a “tortoiseshell” finish, if only made of Formica

Each “Eames chair”

Anything displaying the name or initials of anyone in the household

Curved moldings visible anywhere in the room

## CALCULATING THE SCORE

245 and above	Upper class
185–245	Upper-middle
100–185	Middle
50–100	High prole
Below 50	Mid- or low prole

Vertical line on the right side of the page.

---

## The Mail Bag

Dear Sir:

We are a young couple about to buy our first home. May we assume that a fireplace has more status than a garage?

The Hopefuls

Dear Hopefuls:

It does, but the garage shows: go for the garage. And don't say *home*—it's vulgar.

---

Dear Sir:

What about the class aspects of standing on the sidewalk in a large city and eating a hot dog or similar viand bought from a street peddler presiding over one of those little carts?

Puzzled

Dear Puzzled:

Only people very expensively dressed or terribly good-looking can do this without impairing their status. Middle-class people demean themselves further by doing this sort of thing, but uppers can confirm their high status by it, like appearing at an afternoon ball game in a costly suit, suggesting that you're doing the occasion honor. You also, in both activities, get high class-credit for your upper-class magnanimity in appearing to be democratic.

---

Dear Sir:

I am an Englishman planning to emigrate to the United States. Can you help me by explaining the class system there?

T. Atkins

Dear Mr. Atkins:

No, you'd never get it—much too complicated. You must be born and nurtured here. But you should have no worries, because here the fact of British birth raises your class at least one notch, no matter how nondescript and fourth-rate you may in fact be.

---

Dear Sir:

Is the metric system vulgar?

Anxious

Dear Anxious:

A complicated question. To the degree that the metric system deviates from older British usages, it is rather vulgar. But then too, insofar as it evokes French and even Italian practices, it has a certain panache, as in "I'd like a half-kilo of that nice-looking *ris de veau*." I think it finally depends on what you measure with it. Knowing how much a liter is, after all, identifies you immediately as a person long intimate with the contents of imported wine bottles.

---

Dear Sir:

I have been living in Georgetown for thirty years and find I must move to Del Rio, Texas. Will I suffer a loss of caste?

Nervous

Dear Nervous:

How can you ask? You'll never be able to show your face in civilized company again. But at least you're not moving to Miami.

---

Dear Sir:

To settle a bet, would you indicate some things that are vulgar?

Curious

Dear Curious:

I'd say these are vulgar, but in no particular order: Jerry Lewis's TV telethon; any "Cultural Center"; Beef Wellington; cute words for drinks like *drinky-poops* or *nightcaps*; dinner napkins with high polyester content; colored wineglasses; oil paintings depicting members of the family; displa of laminated diplomas. On the

other hand, these things are not vulgar: fireworks on the Fourth of July; sirloin steaks; paper napkins; old clothes. You should be able to infer the principle and go on from there.

---

Dear Sir:

I play a carillon in a church tower. Someone I know says that carillons are lower in class than regular church bells. Is he right?

Ringer

Dear Ringer:

I'm afraid he is. But some of the status weakness can be mitigated by playing nice things, like, say, "Melody in F" instead of "Annie Laurie," "The Old Gray Mare," or "The Impossible Dream." Since your letter does not come from Southern California, I assume you actually push the handles rather than play an amplified tape very loud. If you're terribly worried about your status, you should seek another line of work. And try to find acquaintances who are more tactful.

---

Dear Sir:

My son attends Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, but he insists on putting a Harvard sticker in the rear window of his car. Is this wrong?

Worried

Dear Worried:

It is very wrong, but at least it indicates that he's learning something down there. He may go far.

---

Dear Sir:

My bank teller embarrasses me terribly by saying at the end of the transaction, "Have a nice day." I don't know what I'm supposed to say back. Can you help?

Sincere

Dear Sincere:

I suppose you can say "You too" or "Have one yourself," although this last, like "Have one on me," would sound a bit flippant. You should never say "Mind your own business"—that would be very rude.

The best response to "Have a nice day," I think, is the one devised by a British friend of mine. He says: "Thank you, but I have other plans." Perfectly polite, and yet it leaves no doubt that you are *not* in that person's social class.

## About the Author

In real life Paul Fussell is Donald T. Regan Professor of English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania and author of many books on the British eighteenth century and on modern British culture. His book *The Great War and Modern Memory* won the National Book Award in 1976, together with the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award of Phi Beta Kappa. His more recent books are *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (1980) and *The Boy Scout Handbook and Other Observations* (1982), a collection of essays from a wide range of British and American magazines. He has taught at Connecticut College, the University of Heidelberg, and, for twenty-eight years, at Rutgers University, and he has lectured widely at universities here and abroad. He publishes literary and cultural criticism in *Harper's* and *The New Republic*, both of which he serves as a contributing editor.

