

An open letter to the
Hon^{ble} Mrs PETER RODD (NANCY MITFORD)
on A VERY SERIOUS SUBJECT
from EVELYN WAUGH

DEAREST NANCY,
Were you surprised that your article on the English aristocracy caused such a to-do? I was not. I have long revered you as an agitator—agitatrix, *agitateuse*?—of genius. You have only to publish a few cool reflections on 18th century furniture to set gangs on the prowl through the Faubourg St. Germain splashing the walls with “Nancy, go home.” Class distinctions in England have always been the matter for higher feeling than national honour, the matter of feverish but very private debate. So, when you brought them into the open, of course everyone talked, of course the columnists quoted you and corrected you. Letters poured in to the various editors, many of them, I am told, unprintably violent. You were the subject of a literary competition (which produced very sad entries) and now here am I, late but implacable, chipping in too.

Should delicacy have restrained you? your friends anxiously ask. There are subjects too intimate for print. Surely class is one? The vast and elaborate structure grew up almost in secret. Now it shows alarming signs of dilapidation. Is this the moment to throw it open to the heavy-footed public? Yes, I think it is, and particularly, as you have done, to the literary public. My reproach is that, in doing so, you have in your skittish way bamboozled a great number of needy young per-

sons. Have you ever heard of the “Butler Education Act”? I suppose not, although it happened in the days when you still lived among us. It was one of the things that politicians did when no one was looking, towards the end of the war. It has nothing at all to do with training male indoor-servants nor with instructing the designer of the “Unknown Political Prisoner” in the intricacies of his craft. The name derives from the Mr. Butler who at the time of writing has just knocked something off the price of my clothes. Clearly he is a generous fellow. In his Education Act he provided for the free distribution of university degrees to the deserving poor. Very handy for splitting atoms and that kind of thing, you will say. But quite a lot of Mr. Butler’s protégés choose, or are directed into, “Literature.” I could make your flesh creep by telling you about the new wave of philistinism with which we are threatened by these grim young people who are coming off the assembly lines in their hundreds every year and finding employment as critics, even as poets and novelists. L’École de Butler are the primal man and woman of the classless society. Their novelists seem to be aware of the existence of a rather more expensive world than their own—bars in which spirits are regularly drunk in preference to beer, loose women who take taxis, crooks in silk shirts—but of the ramifications of the social order which have

obsessed some of the acutest minds of the last 150 years, they know less than of the castes of India. What can their critics hope to make of the undertones and innuendoes, the evocative, reminiscent epithets of, say, Tony Powell or Leslie Hartley?

It was a worthy project to take them through a rudimentary course of social map-reading and no one should have been better qualified for the task than you with your host of friends in every class.

Nor was L'École de Butler your only source of pupils. Consider the cinema trade, the immigrant producers from God knows where who perhaps have never set foot in a private house in the kingdom. Their solecisms glare at us in blazing colour and shriek at us from amplifiers. And the BBC and, for all we know, the Television. A huge mission field was white for your sickle. Eager, appealing eyes were turned to you through the cigarette smoke. Was it kind, dear Nancy, to pull their legs?

II

YOU very properly steer clear of the royal family and start your exposition with the peerage. You remark, correctly, that a title in England has a precise legal significance as it has scarcely anywhere else, and that, partly from our system of primogeniture, titled people do not constitute a separate caste. But you go on to say that a man "becomes an aristocrat as soon as he receives a title"; ". . . his outlook from now on will be the outlook of an aristocrat." You know jolly well that that isn't true.

The relationship between aristocracy and nobility in England is certainly baffling. I do not suppose you could find any two people in complete agreement about it. My own estimate would be that about half the nobility are aristocrats and about two-thirds of the aristocracy are noble (in which catalogue I loosely include baronets and people descended in the male line from peers, whether or no they are themselves titled). The official order of precedence is, of course, quite irrelevant in determining true social position. By no means all earls are the superiors of all barons

or of baronets or even of plain gentlemen. Nor is there any greater degree of equality in the Upper House of Parliament than in the Commons. Ancestry, possessions, even intelligence and good looks, have their part in deciding real precedence. You say: "Ancestry has never counted much in England." As a guide to human character, pedigrees are, I suppose, about as valuable as horoscopes. Well, some of the world's greatest men have resorted to astrologers and millions of subtle Asiatics direct their lives by them today. Learned opinion may change. It may be decided that there was something in the stars after all. My own scepticism is based on the impossibility of identifying the real fathers in the ages when adultery was very common and divorce very rare. Whenever there is a scandal elderly persons will remark, "Ah, that is the Fortinbras blood coming out," and explain that all their mother's generation were irregularly conceived. But undoubtedly most of our fellow-countrymen attach great importance to ancestry. Take a look at the shelves marked "Genealogy" in any large secondhand bookshop. You will find displayed at modest prices hundreds of volumes expensively produced, mostly during the last hundred years, for the sole purpose of exalting their authors' families. Genealogy is still as thriving a trade as it was in the days of Elizabeth I, when the Officers of Arms began fabricating the great pedigrees that link the despoilers of the Church with the age of chivalry. People in the last century have been caught filling their parish churches with bogus tombs. Scholars such as Round and Baron spent their lives in exposing fraudulent pedigrees and many who are not scholars, but who, like myself, cherish the delusion that we possess a "historical sense," have felt the fascination of this sonorous and decorative pursuit.

However, you give us some genealogical figures. Are you sure you have got them right? I know you went to high authority for them, but I can't help wondering how much the present Officers of Arms regard themselves as bound in honour to support the decisions of their less scrupulous predecessors.

You say that 382 peers have arms granted before 1485 and have inherited them in the male line. My italics, as they say; for the statement staggers me. Neither of us is an expert. We can only look about us and go by rough personal impressions. It seems to me that a large number of our ancient families have the entry "assumed by royal licence the name and arms" somewhere in their pedigrees. Look at the Fortinbrases. Sly Ned Fartingbrass who got the estate at the Dissolution was known to all. It was for his grandson that the Heralds invented a link with the extinct crusaders, Fortinbras. The peerage was granted by Charles I and failed in the male line in 1722 when Mr. Binks married the heiress and sat in the Commons as Mr. Fortinbras-Binks, exercising the full political influence of his wife's family. His son, who called himself Mr. Binks-Fortinbras, married well, could return two members; he was rewarded by a peerage, Fortinbras, in the second creation. From that time Binks was dropped and the stolen coat of Fortinbras moved across, with the connivance of the College of Heralds, to the first quarter.

You say that 65 existing baronies were created before 1711. Do you include the quaint house of Strabolgi?

Noble families die out almost as fast as new ones are created. I have just taken a sample from Burke's *Peerage and Baronetage 1949* and compared it with the issue for 1885. The volumes fall open, need I say it? at Redesdale. Of the succeeding dozen names only one (and that, incidentally, a family of foreign origin) is to be found in the earlier edition; and of the twelve families who followed Redesdale in 1885, six are already extinct. That is a big turnover in two generations. Perhaps you will argue that it is the new families who die out, since only direct heirs of the original grantee can succeed, and that the older the family the further you can cast back for an heir. Well, looking round, the feudal overlords in the district I inhabit were the Berkeleys. That earldom has just become extinct. And their next-door neighbours, who bear a medieval name and arms, have borne and changed no less than five

surnames in the last eight generations as the property devolved on female heirs. I think you should have questioned your pursuivant more closely before accepting his figures.

III

THE Fortinbrases are a delicious vignette, typical of your fictions. I find one fault only. Surely they should have more children? Impotence and sodomy are socially O.K. but birth control is flagrantly middle-class. But you invented them, I know, to illustrate your theme that aristocrats can't or won't make money. I could remind you of half a dozen prosperous and industrious City men of impeccable origins but I should have to admit that they have not worn well. The acceptance of high living and leisure as part of the natural order is a prerequisite of the aristocratic qualities and achievements. The debonair duke living by his wits, so popular on the stage, soon grows to resemble the plebeian crook. His brother who goes into business and sticks to it and makes good, is soon indistinguishable from his neighbours in Sunningdale. You should have said, not that aristocrats can't make money in commerce, but that when they do, they become middle-class.

It is here that we reach the topic that has caused the pother—the supposed gulf between what you inelegantly describe as "U and non-U." This gulf exists in every English mind. What has shocked your critics is that you fix it where you do, definitely, arbitrarily, and, some would say, capriciously. There is an unwholesome contemporary appetite—the product, perhaps, of psychiatry and the civil service—for categories of all kinds. People seem to be comforted instead of outraged when they are told that their eccentricities entitle them to membership in a class of "psychological types." They are inured to filling in forms which require a "description" of themselves and their houses. So they have fastened with avidity on the section of your comprehensive essay which pretends to provide the mechanism for grading themselves and their friends.

Everything turns on "the grand old name

of gentleman." We have no equivalent phrase in English to "*noblesse oblige*." All precepts of manners and morals define the proper conduct of "gentlemen." Lord Curzon, a paragon of aristocratic usage, when, as Chancellor of Oxford University, he was shown the menu of a proposed entertainment of the King at Balliol, remarked succinctly: "No gentleman has soup at luncheon"; he did not say: "No monarch . . ." or "No marquis. . . ." He appealed above the standards of court or castle to the most elusive standard in the world.

When I was last in Palestine I asked a Zionist how he defined a Jew. Immigrants from every climate from China to Peru were jostling round us. There were atheist Slavs and negroes from the Upper Nile who are reputed to eat snakes. It seemed a pertinent question. He answered: "Everyone who thinks he is a Jew, is one."

In the same way, the basic principle of English social life is that *everyone* (everyone, that is to say, who comes to the front door) *thinks he is a gentleman*. There is a second principle of almost equal importance: *everyone draws the line of demarcation immediately below his own heels*. The professions rule out the trades; dentists, vets; doctors, dentists; the Services, the professions; the Household Brigade, the line regiments; squires, squireens; landed families who had London houses ruled out those who spent all the year at home; and so on, in an infinite number of degrees and in secret, the line is, or was, drawn. It is essentially a process of ruling out. If you examine the accumulated code of precepts which define "the gentleman" you will find that almost all are negative.

Few people are aware, still less observant, of more than a small fraction of this code. Most people have a handful of taboos, acquired quite at random. Usually at an impressionable age someone has delivered a judgment which has lodged in the memory. The lack of reason in these dooms makes them the more memorable, and no subsequent experience mitigates their authority.

For example, there is a cousin of yours, a jolly baron, who affects a nautical non-

chalance in dress. He and I were talking one day when there passed an acquaintance, a grandee, a member of the Jockey Club, your cousin's superior and *a fortiori* mine. Your cousin, not a very serious man normally, regarded this sleek, russet figure with aversion and said, with deep seriousness: "My father told me that no gentleman ever wore a brown suit."

Another cousin of yours, of ducal family, is a man notorious for the grossness of his vocabulary. He has only to hear a piece of *argot* from the Bowery to adopt it as his own. But once, in early youth, he was sharply corrected for calling a kinsman his "relative" or "relation." He cannot remember which, but both words have become anathema. Of all the sage advice poured out on him by schoolmasters and clergymen and dons and commanding officers, that alone remains, and if either word is used in his hearing, he starts as though stung and, being what he is, he rounds on the speaker with abuse.

All nannies and many governesses, when pouring out tea, put the milk in first. (It is said by tea fanciers to produce a richer mixture.) Sharp children notice that this is not normally done in the drawing-room. To some this revelation becomes symbolic. We know a woman, far from conventional in other ways, who makes it her touchstone. "Rather m.i.f., darling," she says to convey inferior social station.

I could multiply examples almost without end. There is practically no human activity or form of expression which at one time or another, in one place or another, I have not heard confidently condemned as plebeian, for generations of English have used the epithets "common" and "middle-class" as general pejoratives to describe anything which gets on their nerves.

It is natural to the literary mind to be unduly observant of the choice of words. Logan Pearsall Smith was the classical case. I met him once only. He did not speak to me until we stood on the doorstep leaving. He then said: "Tell me, how would you describe the garment you are wearing? A greatcoat? An overcoat? A top-coat?" I replied: "Over-

coat." "Ah, would you? Yes. Most interesting. And, tell me, would that also be the usage of an armigerous admiral?"

That way lay madness and I fear that if you are taken too seriously you and Professor Ross may well drive your readers into the bin. When in your novel you made "Uncle Matthew" utter his catalogue of irrational prohibitions, you were accurately recording a typical conversational extravagance. When you emerge *in propria persona* as the guide to Doric youth, you are more mischievous. Of course, it is broadly true that the phrases you dub "U" come more naturally to most ladies and gentlemen, but every family and set develops its private vocabulary and syntax and everyone regards every usage but his own as either pedantically affected or as barbarous. I know of a family whose epithet of condemnation is quite simply "NLU" (not like us). Phrases that were originally adopted facetiously, in inverted commas as it were, pass into habitual use; the chic jargon of one decade—Philip Sassoon's "I couldn't like it more," for instance—becomes the vulgarity of the next; words once abhorred, like "week-end," become polite. If Professor Ross's Finns or your literary critics wander out into the English world armed with your lexicon, seeking to identify the classes they encounter, they will drop many bricks.

For there are no classes in England; there is only precedence. A professor likes to mark anything α β γ . The socialist likes to speak of "capitalists, bourgeois, intellectuals, and workers." In England these easy categories do not apply. There is a single line extending from Windsor to Wormwood Scrubs, of individuals all justly and precisely graded (no one knows this order of precedence: it is a Platonic idea), and the organisation of English society has never been, as I understand it is in many other countries, a system of horizontal strata. You do not find a dozen viscountesses sitting together in a drawing-room while twenty-two baronets play cricket in the park. The grandees met occasionally on state occasions or on the racecourse, but they kept away from one another's houses. English society was a complex of tribes, each

with its chiefs, witch-doctors, elders, and braves, each with its own dialect and deity, each strongly xenophobic.

IV

IT IS when we come to the last part of your article, much the most important part, which has nevertheless attracted least notice, that my amusement at your prank becomes a little strained.

"The English lord is a wily old bird" you take as your text, and your theme is that he is enormously rich. He pays neither taxes nor death duties. He "glories" in turning his house into a public museum. He has given up London simply because he is not witty enough to keep a salon. He sells his pictures because he does not appreciate them. He prefers herbaceous borders and flowering shrubs to formal parterres, which require two dozen gardeners. His reduced circumstances are all a hoax. He is biding his time until the present craze for equality has passed, when he will re-emerge in all his finery to claim all his privileges, to ravish peasant brides and transport poachers to Botany Bay.

Can you really believe any of this, even living, as you do, so remote from the scene you describe? Not long ago an American cutie, married to a Labour politician, published a book propounding the same argument. Everyone tolerantly asked: "What can an American cutie married to a Labour politician hope to know of such things? Ask her to dinner and let her see for herself." But what are we to say now when Nancy, Queen of the Hons, comes out with the same malicious errors? The English, you should remember, have a way of making jokes about their disasters, but you would find, if you lived here, that the loudest jokes about opening Stately Homes are made by the wives who have recent and perhaps direful associations with them, rather than by the husbands. The state-rooms of Bowood, you should know, are being demolished because their owner prefers privacy. I am not familiar with the household accounts of the few magnates who still preserve a recognisable ghost of their former establishments, but I am pretty

sure something has to be sold every year to keep going. But instead of expostulating with you, let me turn to your dupes and tell them two facts, which you have never attempted to hide, bless you, but which are not well known.

The first is rather endearing. You were at the vital age of twelve when your father succeeded to his peerage, and until less than a year before there was little likelihood of his ever succeeding. It was a great day for "Hons" when you and your merry sisters acquired that prefix of nobility. Hitherto it had been the most shadowy of titles, never spoken, and rarely written. You brought it to light, emphasised and aspirated, and made a glory of it. And with that magic vocable came (very briefly it is true) a sensational change of fortune. If your uncle had not been killed in action, if your posthumous cousin had been a boy, all you enchanting children would have been whisked away to a ranch in Canada or a sheep-run in New Zealand.

It is fascinating to speculate what your careers would then have been. Anyway, at that impressionable age an indelible impression was made; Hons were unique and lords are rich.

The other fact is not nice. You are a socialist every bit as staunch as the American cutie. What is more, as you mention in your article, you regard Lloyd George as a great man (and, we must suppose, as a great aristocrat, too, in his last days). Did you, perhaps, once, to tease your father, learn the Limehouse speech by heart? Your incitement to class-war reads like it.

"You think the upper-classes are down and out, do you? Don't you believe it, comrades. They despise you. They spend their time sneering at the way you talk. They are a fascist underground. Smash 'em, comrades, *now*."

Is that what you are really saying, Nancy? I hope you are just teasing, as I am. I hope. I wonder.

Fondest love,

EVELYN

Herbert Luthy

“Algeria Does Not Exist . . .”

ALL of North Africa may be in a state of turmoil at the present moment, but instances of bloodshed occurring on the same day at points some hundreds of miles apart can hardly be accounted for on a single scale of reckoning. In Morocco, the drama is an open one, presented in terms sufficiently clear to render a solution at least possible—as indeed was the case with the Tunisian drama, which went through the same alternating phases of goodwill and violent upheaval, of false starts and setbacks, of brutal repression and an inertia so exasperating as to make all hope seem futile, only to be brought to an end in 1955 by the grant of an autonomy that had already been officially proclaimed as the ripe and proper solution as far back as 1950. Could all that loss of time and of human life, the cleaning-up operations, the terrorism and counter-terrorism, have been avoided? Certainly—if history enacted itself in the form of an intelligent debate between equally enlightened minds that were concerned solely with the future, that operated without regard for contingencies, and were thus remote from passions that are always blind and sometimes sanguinary, from interests that are always imperious and as often respectable as sordid, and from the defence of those acquired positions which, criticise them as harshly as we will, are none the less essential to those who possess them—if, in short, each fresh decision could be inscribed on a *tabula rasa*, was

guided solely by “objective considerations,” and (one must add) executed in an authoritarian way. We know that this is far from being the case: and the tortuous and contradictory path by which grave political decisions are reached exacts a heavy price, amounting at times to catastrophe. In Morocco, everything is on a larger scale than in Tunisia: the nationalist and colonialist traditions, the passions and interests engaged, go far deeper. Nevertheless, Morocco, like Tunisia, does have one virtue: it exists; and since this aspect of the problem is clear and generally accepted, there is at least a basis for discussion.

In Algeria, on the other hand, a much more secret and painful drama is in progress, and one to which, theoretically, there is no solution at all; for it may be summed up in a single sentence: *Algeria does not exist*.

ALGERIA does not exist, either in law, in official terminology, or even in the history textbooks. For that matter, neither do the Algerians. Now part of France, this country, we are told, was nothing, a no-man’s-land, before becoming something other than itself. Can anyone imagine the sum of human tragedies that such non-existence entails? And if Algeria does not exist, how can one even begin to solve a problem that is denied in advance? Of course, everyone admits that there are *problems*—social, economic, cultural, electoral—all of which are