trivial. It was not just that they were one main form in which everyday life was colonized in the later nineteenth century—given over to experts, addicts, entrepreneurs, consumers—but that there was such active disagreement over who had the right to plant the flag in the new territory. The colonies were claimed by various uneasy fractions of the middle class; by those who wished to reaffirm a status which had previously been made in the world of work, but seemed no longer to be available there; and by those who believed they had a right to the same status, even if their conditions of employment still seemed menial in many ways. The world of leisure was thus a great symbolic field in which the battle for bourgeois identity was fought; the essential warring claims were to forms of freedom, accomplishment, naturalness, and individuality which were believed to be the keys to bourgeoisie; actions both rearguard and offensive were mounted, disinformation was much in evidence.

Leisure was a performance, Veblen said, and the thing performed was class; though what is interesting about the acting in the 1870s, say, is its relative incompetence, as in Argenteuil, les canotiers.

I think this implication of leisure in class struggle goes some way to explain the series of transformations undergone by the subject in painting from 1860 to 1914. In particular it seems to me to shed light on the painters’ changes of mind about how leisure should be depicted: the way, for example, styles of spontaneity are repeatedly displaced by styles of analysis—grandly individualistic modes of handling, that is, abandoned in favour of ones claiming to be anonymous, scientific and even collective. The classic instance is Neo-Impressionism: I do not believe that its vehemence (or its appeal to Pissarro) can be understood unless it is seen as deriving from an altered view of leisure, and of art as part of that leisure—which in turn derived from a new set of class allegiances. But just as interesting is the speed with which the Fauvist style—which had appeared for a moment to open nature again to the free play of fantasy—collapsed into its Cubist opposite. By the time of Fauvism, one could say, the myth of recreation could be stated only in overtly mythical terms: the dream of freedom and self-consciousness, of crepuscular boating and Bonheur de vivre, is adjourned to the golden age.

The reader should be warned, finally, that the notion of the “nouvelles couches sociales” being involved in any great revision of class society—any wholesale change in social structure—is controversial. Gambetta, for one, repudiated it. “I said nouvelles couches not classes,” he said somewhat ruefully in a speech at Auxerre in 1874; “that last is a bad word I never use.”

A BAR AT THE FOLIES-BERGÈRE

A Mabille, entre deux figures
Un jeune homme qui disait Baron,
M’offre un hôtel et deux voitures
Pour y faire briller mon bon ton.
En baisant les yeux je m’approche,
Mais en voyant bien du nouveau,
J’vois des ciseaux sortant d’sa poche. . . .
L’Baron n’était qu’un calicot. . . .

—Café-concert song, 1867.

The Argument

That the adjective “popular,” applied to persons, manners, or entertainment in the later nineteenth century, came to mean too many, too indefinite things. The word’s elusiveness derived from its being used for ideological purposes, to suggest kinds of identity and contact between the classes—ways they belonged together and had interests in common—which did not exist in their everyday life or organized social practice, but seemed to in the spectacle. There was a sense in which the “nouvelles couches sociales” were nothing in our period, or very little, without the place allotted to them in “popular culture”—which is not to say that they lacked a determinate economic position, only that it was not yet clear, to them or anyone, what it was. Popular culture provided the petit-bourgeois aficionado with two forms of illusory “class”: an identity with those below him, or at least with certain images of their life; and a difference from them which hinged on his skill—his privileged place—as consumer of those same images. Painting was mostly a complaisant spectator of this spectacle, perfecting the petit bourgeois’s view of things and leaving behind the best picture we have of what it amounted to. But there are certain canvases which suggest the unease and duplicity involved in this attaining to a new class; something of the kind is claimed in this chapter for Manet’s last painting, Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère (Plate XXIV).
One of the things very often said at the time about Haussmannization was
that it had ushered in an amount of make-believe and uncertainty in
modern life, especially in matters of social class. It is not entirely clear that
the charge was true, and that Paris was any fuller than usual of people
pretending to be better or worse off than their incomes allowed. But the
business of their doing so was visible and glittering in a new way.

Writers believed that the favourite premises for such behaviour were
the glorified beer halls which came to be known as cafés-concerts or cafés-
chantants. A guide to Paris was not complete without a brief description
of these institutions, and advice to the traveller to see them and savour
their vulgarity. All the best novels had a scene at the Ambassadeurs or the
Eldorado in which the seal was set on a character's ruin; and painters,
following suit, were fond of doing studies of the leading performers or
the crowd at the tables taking their lukewarm consommations. The cafés-
concerts were thought to be trivial but representative. To call them "in-
stitutions" at all, as I have done, is to adopt the commentators' tone, which
was a bit sententious and a lot condescending: it was out to let the reader
know that this particular Parisian had resisted the Eldorado's charm but
had done his duty and looked at the audience—even at the stage—in order
to find out what it was that appealed to whom in such places. It seemed
important to know, since all Paris was there with the writer, and he could
not detect anyone else resisting.

The Goncourt's, we have seen in chapter one, were the pioneers of this
kind of account. They had ventured into the Eldorado rather early, in
1860, four or five years before it was customary for the grands bourgeois
to do so; and they had taken their evening as a comprehensive sign that
things were changing for the worse. To see women and children out at
night on their own, or, just as bad, escorted by a proud papa: this struck
them as sufficient evidence that one form of life was ending and another
being born. The interior was dying, they said, and life henceforth would
be lived in public, over the tables at the Jockey Club or on top of the
Butte de Chaillot. They did not want that to happen, and the disdain they
felt for the Eldorado was intense, almost naïve—or as near to naïvete as these
writers were capable of. Their feelings did not soften with time. They went
back to the same café in 1865, accompanied now by a good sprinkling of their
semblables, and wrote the following lines in their journal:

At the Eldorado... A big circular room with two tiers of boxes, all gilt and
painted with false marble; dazzling chandeliers; a café inside the room, black
with men's hats; bonnets of women from the barrière; children in military képis;
hats belonging to prostitutes in company with shop assistants, pink ribbons on
the women in the boxes; the breath of all this crowd visible, a cloud of dust and
tobacco smoke.

Towards the back a theatre stage with footlights; and on it a comic in evening
dress. He sang disconnected things, interspersed with chorliring and farmyard
noises, the sounds of animals in heat, epileptic gesticulations—a Saint Vitus's
dance of idiocy. The audience went wild with enthusiasm... I may be wrong,
but it seems to me we are heading for a revolution. There is a rottenness and
stupidity in the public, a laughter so unwholesome that it will take a great upheaval,
the spilling of blood, to clear the air and make even comedy sanctify.  

As with the Goncourt's joyless afternoon at Bougival three years before,
what is striking in the entries on the café-concert is the way they anticipate
so much of later, lesser commentary; the way they seem to have happened
upon a serviceable attitude towards the odd things they portray. "At present
we live a great deal out of doors, we are all more less in flight from the
interior and the hearth... " No one
here is at home, alas! The Parisian does not have a home any more. Everyone behaves as if he lived in a cheap hotel. So much so that the interior no longer has any intimacy or comfort, and each of us is disposed to think it disgusting and live out of doors as much as possible."

Even the Goncourt’s admixture of fear and hatred, and their transparent delight in both, were not unusual when the subject was the café-concert. The sense of blood and revolution in the background was not normally so explicit, let alone so ghouling; but the stress itself was commonplace when journalists turned to Paris by Night. The Eldorado would not have been so appealing if it had not provoked some such frisson; its fans and defenders, of whom there were many in 1865, were often inclined to agree with the Goncourts and admit that what they relished in the ambience was idioty and its attendant risks. Degas’s brother René is typical of the mild form of this enthusiasm: writing home to his parents in New Orleans in 1872, he slips straightway into the prescribed form of words: “After dinner I go with Edgar to the Champs-Elysées, from there to the café-chantant to hear idiotic songs, like the song of the compagnon maçon and other absurd nonsense.”

“Idiots” . . . “bêtes” . . . “absurdes”: the insults are casual and not meant to be wounding. Nonetheless they are insults, and their persistence in other descriptions—their positive urgency on occasions when one would not have expected such a note to be sounded—ought to strike us as odd and in need of explanation. If, for example, the serious Parisian had turned to his Larousse du dix-neuvième siècle for guidance on the new phenomenon, he would have found under “café-chantant” a long entry which depended for its tone, and most of its detail, on a citation in extenso from Louis Veuillot’s Odeurs de Paris. The worthy Larousse confessed to detesting Veuillot’s (Catholic) opinions in general, but in this case had “nothing to add; the photograph is accurate and exaggerates nothing.” The “photograph” —it is of the Alcazar, and the singer described is the most famous of all, Théra, seen at the height of her powers—reads as follows:

Through the smoke we saw two or three empty seats which we reached not without difficulty. What an atmosphere! What a smell of tobacco, spirits, beer, and gas all mixed together! It was my first time in this place, the first time I had seen women in a café with smoking permitted. All around us were not just women, but Ladres.

Twenty years ago, you could have sought in vain for such a spectacle in all of Paris. Visibly, these ladres had dragged their defeated husbands here; the vexed and embarrassed air of those unfortunate made that all too clear. But the ladies themselves seemed hardly out of their element . . . The presence of these “well-bred” women gave the audience a quite particularly slovenly appearance—gave it a kind of social slovenliness!

There was still half an hour to go, and all the places were taken. . . . A baritone came on, to a round of applause. He had a fine voice and the most funereal aspect imaginable. You would have guessed him to have been in bygone days a représentant du peuple, a member of the Montagne, a “thinker” who prided himself on his looks; Monsieur de Floxe, for example. [Larousse left out the last sentence, with its twenty-year-old sneers at the politics of 1848; but it is appropriate that the Alcazar should provoke such memories in Veuillot.] If this baritone were to figure in the troubles which await us, I for one would not be surprised. He sang:

- Un nid, c’est un tendre mystère
- Un ciel que le printemps bénit
- A l’homme, à l’oiseau sur terre,
- Dieu dit tout bas: Faisons un nid!

The crowd of pipers, all far away from their own nests for the moment, and in no hurry to return, listened to the song with softened expressions; the “little women” could hardly restrain their tears; the well-bred ladies signalled their approval in a genteel fashion. . . . she was about to appear; a thunderous outbreak of applause announced her entry.

I did not find her so hideous as I had been told she was. She is rather a large girl, quite well built, without any charm besides her fame—which is charm of the first order. I admit. She has, I believe, some hair; her mouth appears to stretch right round her head; she has great fat lips like a Negro; shark’s teeth. . . .

She knows how to sing. As for the song itself, it is indescribable, like its subject. You would need to be a Parisian to appreciate its qualities, a refined Frenchman to savour its profound and perfect ineptitude. It has nothing in common with any known language, or art, or truth. It is picked out of the gutter; but even the gutter has its own standards of taste, and one must find in the gutter the product which has the real flavour of the gutter. Parisians themselves are not without skill in seeking out such delicacies. . . .

The music has the same character as the words; they are both vulgar and corrupt caricatures, and moreover cheerless, like the sly face of the guttersnipe. The guttersnipe, the natural Parisian, does not cry, he blubs; he does not laugh, he cackles; he does not joke, he wisecracks; he does not dance, he does the chauss; he is not a lover but a libertine. [Le voyou, le Parisien naturel, ne pleure pas, il pleurniche; il ne rit pas, il ricane; il ne plaisante pas, il blague; il ne danse pas, il chatouze, il n’est pas amoureux, il est libertin.] Art consists in assembling these ingredients in one song, and this the songwriters manage nine times of ten, with the singer’s help. Success varies with the strength of the dose.

All of it smells of old pipes, gas leaks, fermenting liquor; and there is sadness at the bottom of it, that flat and eloquent sadness we call ennui. The physiognomy of the audience in general is a kind of troubled torpor. Nowadays these people come alive only as a result of a shock [Ce gén-là ne vient plus que de sévoues]; and the chief reason for the success of certain “artists” is that the shock they give is the strongest. It passes quickly, and the habitué falls back into his torpor. The
spectator who is not a habitué makes haste to depart and breathe the pure air of the street."

Veullot in fact draws breath and stumbles on down to the next circle; the reader of Les Odeurs de Paris is treated to a further ten pages describing the Café Bataclan. Larousse, we may be thankful, breaks off at about this point (I have actually shortened his indefatigable citation by a good third), and one presumes that the seeker after encyclopaedic knowledge would have known by now what he was supposed to think.

For us, however, the text is obscure, and its length and magniloquence make it only the more elusive. How seriously are we meant to take it, and in particular its sense of impending social doom? It is a performance, no doubt, in the old grand manner, but its tropes are not merely decorative; they were certainly not seen as outlandish or unmotivated at the time (otherwise they would not have found their way into Larousse); and even Veullot’s gifts of prophecy were not noticeably inaccurate. There was a revolution round the corner, made by baritones or not. The minister of Public Instruction was quite clear in 1872 that “the orgy of songs produced during that epoch” (he means the Commune) was partly to blame for the Communards’ depravity; he made it a reason for reimposing censorship on the café-concert in an effort to prevent such things from occurring again."

All the same, the evidence so far is bound to strike the twentieth-century reader as something less than photographic. These writers seem to be making a scapegoat of the Eldorado, and probably for good reasons—because it was visible, because it was fashionable, because it was easy to deride its repertoire and audience. The reader will have noticed that Veullot and the Goncourts are not at all clear about who made up the normal crowd in the café-concert. Was it comprised of guttersnipes, and whores in cheap hats from the barrières? Or was the tone somehow set by respectable women who had dragged their husbands—sometimes even their children—this far down, at least for an evening? The crowd was some kind of canaille, for certain, but in it there figured some new recruits: those unhappy families, those ladies with ribbons, and those putains brought in on the arms of commis de magasin.

I propose to retreat from this uncertainty for a moment and try to establish some obvious things about the cafés-concerts. They were cafés, not theatres. The law took the distinction very much to heart, and only reluctantly allowed the performances to consist of more than a singer and a stand-up comic. It took years for the state to agree to costumes and scenery, or to let the poètes behind the singer move. This was partly the reason why places like the Alcazar laid on the scenic effects in the body

of the hall: the tiers of boxes, the great candelabra, the sixteen colossal statues of women in the cupola, the ceiling painting of Candide in Eldorado, the two fountains, the mouldings by De Bay, the enormous mirror behind the bar; they were there to distract the audience’s attention from the strict, bare choreography on the other side of the footlights. Often there was little or no such pretence: a café-concert would declare itself to be a café plus a singer plus a stage. There are pictures by Manet and Degas that seem to indicate just such a lack of pretension, with beer and tables filling the foreground and the spectacle itself half glimpsed in a mirror, or largely left off to one side. Lighting was important in the better class of café-concert—gas at first, and then the famous glare of electricity. (The blankness of the new white light was one of the main effects in Manet’s Bar aux Folies-Bergère; several critics in 1882 were not sure that Manet had captured its full intensity.) Lights and gilt and ladies on stage in stunning décolletage: the cafés-concerts were meant to be loud, vulgar, and above all modern: it was not for nothing that Haussmann’s beloved architect Davioud tried his hand at designing the Ambassadeurs in the Champs-Élysées; or that Pissarro, passing judgement on the new Hôtel de Ville in 1891, should call it “that horrible café-concert” and evidently feel that nothing more need be said.

The cafés-concerts were once again essentially Baron Haussmann’s creation. They grew fat in the free market for eating and drinking which boomed on the boulevards in the 1860s. As the journalists never tired of saying, there seemed no end to the Parisian’s appetite for public victuals;
customers appeared out of the night with every new establishment, and yet a café’s survival depended on its fixing those customers’ habits and persuading them to return. "Victor Fournel was on the whole admiring of the various bistrot and stratagem adopted by the hard-pressed proprietors: the free billiards and resident freaks, the performing monkeys, the feuilletons sold with each franc’s-worth of beer." The cafés-concerts were one such stratagem, the most ordinary and successful. By the early 1870s there were at least 145 of them, probably many more. 

People naturally wondered at the time what made for success, and who it was that came back so regularly. Various answers were proposed to the second question, and I shall begin my own by listing some of them and pointing to the main themes and variations. Occasionally a commentator had no doubt about the audience in the Eldorado: it was simply the people of Paris, the "culotiers de pipe," the "blouses blanches," the "très petits gens." Murray’s Handbook for Visitors to Paris had the following to say of the cafés-concerts in its 1872 edition—it had a duty that year to advise its readers where not to go, in a city so recently reclaimed for tourism: There are two or three in the Champs-Elysées, where the spectators sit in the open air and listen to singing and music by performers outrageously overdressed and seated in a brilliantly lighted little theatre. No charge is made for admission, but the spectators are expected to take some refreshments, usually of an inferior quality. The company is not the most select, and the performance tends to the immoral. Respectable people keep aloof."

The trouble was that Murray’s verdict—the one contained in his last four words—was plainly wrong. Even in 1872 respectable people came down in droves to the Ambassadeurs; it was their presence there that most exasperated Veullot and the Goncourt. Writers on the whole agreed with Veullot, as opposed to Murray: the cafés-concerts were characterized by a mingling of the classes, or at least an agreement to listen to the same songs. Of course, agreement did not necessarily mean mingling, and often the writers interested themselves in the manner by which a degree of aloofness—or at any rate separation—was maintained even here. It was effected primarily by money: drinks were dearer at the best-placed tables, the Eldorado had private boxes, and the grander establishments took to charging an entrance fee. (The Folies-Bergère cost two francs for admission in 1882, but drinks in other places could anyway run as high as three francs, and the Eldorado had long ago insisted that its customers "replenish their glasses" at regular intervals.) One way or another the gamins and their ladies were kept from contact with the poor—though a crowd which presumably qualified as poor was often noted, standing outside the ring of lights and tables on the Champs-Elysées, hanging on the singer’s every word. It was even picturesque, that presence: The most curious aspect of the picture for the flâneur who cares to observe is the audience outside, which gives itself the pleasure, free of charge, of seizing the new songs on the wing; they are Parisians, listening naively to the inept refrains they so much want to learn by heart. There is no fear of their interrupting the singers with one of those formidable dances which—following the present fashion—our young men about town like to organize with their lady companions. The naïve listener will have none of it; he grows angry; and the visitor from the provinces beats a retreat."

Those gamins in the darkness, climbing the plane trees for a better view, were supposedly close to the great performers’ hearts. In her ghosted Mémoires of 1865, Thérèse claimed to be singing with them in view; they were her sounding board, her own people, the audience that understood her best."

Nobody made believe, in other words, that tensions and distinctions ceased to exist in the café-concert, but many were struck (and alarmed) by the sheer fact of contact—the cramming together of classes in one place and the general “social dishevelment.” Three thousand people at least were stuffed inside—this is Victor Fournel at the Alcazar in 1872—"bourgeois, small shopkeepers, a few workers in their Sunday best, entire families out for an outing, provincials, foreigners." Given the right rhyme scheme, the list could be extended indefinitely:


And no doubt the emperor himself in mufti.

The listing and naming very soon became formulaic, but the formulas were not necessarily this straightforward. In particular, the roll call of popular and bourgeois types—so eighteenth-century in flavour—was often supplanted by a stress on the audience containing all kinds (specific kinds) of petits bourgeois. These people were regularly held to be the key to the
café-concert’s success. They held the institution together, it was claimed, and set its peculiar tone:

Passionate habitués of those establishments in which melody is sold by the pint or the glass, they belong in general to the special caste of gavotins who are dandies only by night.

Their days are spent at some job or other, bureaucratic or commercial, and their evenings given over entirely to the platonic love they have sworn for Mlle. Pétronille......

For the most part they are worthy fellows, but they have made the mistake, having as they do only the few hours after dinner to take the air and exercise necessary for their health and intelligence, of going instead to brutalize themselves in an atmosphere of tobacco smoke, breathing lungfuls of mephitic air in a narrow room crammed with hundreds of people. —And all this to listen to what, I ask you!36

The Concorde’s shorthand for such people, we have seen, was the dismissive job description “commis de magasin.” The term and its cognates are never far away when writers depict the audience at the café-concert. It crops up in Maurice Talmey, for example, when he points to the white ties and official faces at the Ambassadeurs, and then notices alongside them, rubbing shoulders with them, a crowd of little people, shopkeepers, shop assistants, and manservants; and beside them, inevitably, cranks and criminals and thugs. There can be seen here, without any barriers between them, each quite at home with the other, the woman for sale and the society lady, the ex-convict and the magistrate, masters and servants, honest men and thieves.37

It is there in Le Bébé in 1886, when the crowd at the Alcazar is summed up as “a wholly Parisian public of toffs, prostitutes, petits bourgeois with their families, and shop assistants” (de gommeurs, de filles, de petits bourgeois en famille et de courtasds de boutiques).38

The most effective code name for these unfortunate— it appears repeatedly from the 1860s on —was the simple metonymy calicot. They were what they sold, the metonymy said, for all their wish to be something better; the word came into widespread use around the time that shopworkers were forming a union and going on strike,39 and its nearest equivalents in English are “draper’s assistant” or “counter-jumper”— the latter perhaps to be preferred for its period flavour and less than affectionate snobbery. (“I don’t want to see my daughter spinning round a public assembly room in the arms of any counter-jumper,” as the dictionary quotes Miss Braddon in 1880.) The calicots were supposed in turn to haunt the Alcazar and the Eldorado; if any part of Paris belonged to them it was this one:

There are persons who come each evening to deposit their tribute of flowers at the feet of the open-air prima donna. They can be seen at the tables next to

101. Georges Seurat, Café concert, c. 1887. Conté crayon.
the orchestra. These strictly optical devotees are generally calicots whose shops close early, notaries' clerks taking the day off; married men—who said they were going to the Club.98

Their pleasures were infinite, unsuble, easily described:

*Il passent tout leur temps à rire, à se pâmier,*
*Ces bourgeois, calicots, et gommeux très peu dignes*
*Qui hêlent la chanteuse et l'appellent par signes.*
*On est heureux, on boit, on chante, on peut fumer,*
*Et garder son chapeau pour ne pas s'enflammer.*

Men with their hats on—a good sign of vulgarity, this—gulping mephitic air; torpid Parisians in search of shocks; children in képis, barons with scissors in their pockets; clerks, employees, little people, "commis-voyageurs en bordée." The café-concert, wrote one Walter Francis Lonnergan in 1880, "is the Elysium of the emancipated calicot, or apprentice."

The songs Théresia sang, and the general run of the entertainments which the calicot enjoyed, were often described as "popular."99 The best discussion of this word in a comparable context is the one provided by T. S. Eliot in his 1923 obituary of Marie Lloyd:

Marie Lloyd was the greatest music-hall artist of her time in England: she was also the most popular. And popularity in her case was not merely evidence of her accomplishment; it was something more than success. It is evidence of the extent to which she represented and expressed that part of the English nation which has perhaps the greatest vitality and interest.

Among all of that small number of music-hall performers, whose names are familiar to what is called the lower class, Marie Lloyd had far the strongest hold on popular affection. The attitude of audiences toward Marie Lloyd was different from their attitude toward any other of their favourites of that day, and this difference represents the difference in her art... And the difference is this: that whereas other comedians amuse their audiences as much and sometimes more than Marie Lloyd, no other comedian succeeded so well in giving expression to the life of that audience, in raising it to a kind of art. It was, I think, this capacity for expressing the soul of the people that made Marie Lloyd unique, and that made her audiences, even when they joined in the chorus, not so much hilarious as happy....

Marie Lloyd's art will, I hope, be discussed by more competent critics of the theatre than I. My own chief point is that I consider her superiority over other performers to be in a way a moral superiority: it was her understanding of the people and sympathy with them, and the people's recognition of the fact that she embodied the virtues which they genuinely most respected in private life, that raised her to the position she occupied at her death. And her death is itself a significant moment in English history. I have called her the expressive figure of the lower classes. There is no such expressive figure for any other class. The middle classes have no such idol: the middle classes are morally corrupt. That is to say, their own life fails to find a Marie Lloyd to express it; nor have they any independent virtues which might give them as a conscious class any dignity.100

This is not exactly the kind of argument, particularly in its closing stages, that one associates with T. S. Eliot, though the piece was never dropped from the canon of his prose. It is tempting to ask how far the obituary might apply to Théresia, who was in many ways Marie Lloyd's Parisian counterpart. The question is difficult to answer at all conclusively, however, because so much of the evidence is lacking, and so much that remains is spuriously vivid. The words on the page of Théresia's sheet music, for example, or the notes of the simple tunes she put to them, seem concrete enough, but they do not come near the heart of her undoubted power. It would be hard to argue, after all, that the lyrics of Marie Lloyd's "One of the Ruins That Cromwell Knocked Absaft a Bit," or the melody of "My
Old Man Said Follow the Van,” establish at once what Eliot was on about. It was Marie Lloyd’s way with the songs that impressed him—her ability to invest them with detail and pathos, her sense of how they might be made to carry the inflections of genuine stoicism in the one instance, or comic self-knowledge in the other. The claims being made for Thérésa’s art are of a similar kind, and will involve us in a certain amount of guesswork and a great deal of reading between the lines.

When we attend, for example, to the lyrics of one of Thérésa’s most famous songs, “A bas les pattes s’il vous plaît,” and single out the following verses from the rest—

—Que j’aime à voir votre poitrine blanche
Donc la blancheur est rivale du lait:

105. Célestin Nanteuil, cover illustration for “Un Grand Clerc de notaire,” c. 1864. Lithograph.
—we are looking essentially for the ways such modest material might have been used, by the right performer, to do something as grand as "giving expression to the life of a class." And we can sometimes intuit how it was done. There is a framework here in which the singer had room to introduce a wide range of plausible qualities: disabused tolerance, for example, sexual hardheadedness, lack of false modesty, simple high spirits, outright salaciousness. These were attitudes and attributes that supposedly belonged to the lower classes, or so the bourgeoisie believed. The performer's job was to make them come alive in the course of the song.

Even Veuillon conceded that Thérèse had a fine, powerful voice. "She acts out her song," he said, "as much as she sings it. She acts with her eyes, her arms, her shoulders, her haunches, unflinchingly." Her act was visual, in other words, and when we try to imagine what it looked like, there are images we can call to our aid. Photographs survive of Thérèse in her heyday, and though the poses are stiff and discreet, enough can be seen of her thickset body and emphatic face to make it clear how she must have exploited them on stage. There are sometimes vignettes on the covers of café-concert sheet music—like the one by Célestin Nanteuil for a song from the early 1860s called "Un Grand Clerc de notaire"—which seem to translate the atmosphere of the lyrics inside quite successfully. Fig leaves were never larger or less concealing than in Nanteuil's lithograph, fathers more menacing, girls more dreamy and stolid, suitors less to be trusted.

(The censor decided that the song itself had better be left out of the Alcazar's repertoire.)

What Nanteuil seems to have wished to evoke as characteristic of his song was its raucous good humour, its sentimentality, and the sheer physical presence of its objects, bursting from flowerpots and elbows of suits. These were Thérèse's qualities too; and they seem to have been what attracted Degas's attention as he sat with his brother on the Champs-Elysées. Some time towards the middle of the 1870s he did several studies of Thérèse: one in oil and pastel called La Chanson du chien (Plate XXII), another in pastel and distemper called La Chanteuse au gant, and a series of pastel-on-monotype which most probably show Thérèse's lesser competitors. These pictures treat their common subject in very different ways. In one or two the singer is on her own, facing the audience, her features whitened by the glare of the footlights, her eyes hooded, her arm raised to clinch a final note. In others the picture is crammed with significant detail, much of it familiar by now: top hats and chapeaux de patains in the foreground, dishevelled musicians, batteries of lights and foliage, fidgeting poissons. But the heart of the matter is always Thérèse: the stab of her thumb back towards her body in between the lines of a chorus, the sweep of an arm to include the audience in a song, the piled-up hair, and the pugilist's face. These were her ways of dominating the distractions all round her and making them part of her act. She floated on top of the lights and profiles
and flowery hats, and carved out a space for herself against them. The picture which finds the best form for this relationship, I think, is La Chanson du chien—in some ways the least elaborate and crowded of the series. In it Thérèsa is partly detached from her surroundings, her face half flattened against a pillar and a globe of electric light; but the distance established is clearly provisional, and the singer in a sense is placed quite graphically in the middle of things, face to face with her unkempt audience, almost down on its level. The crush of spectators is filled in around and behind the performer as a kind of backdrop, and Thérèsa’s obliging, sardonic address to her public—her pretending to be a good dog and beg for her supper—therefore makes straightforward comic sense. She is wrapped up in her preposterous song, her eyes almost closed, her body erect and still, her hands weightless; but the song makes no sense without its answering, excluded context—the trees, providing such excellent cover for women doing business in the shadows; the scurrying men in brown suits and bowler hats; the small moustachioed faces looking patiently towards the star.

The relation between art and its circumstances in this picture is a special one, and I think that Degas was aware of its strangeness. If we compare the picture of Thérèsa with one of its principal prototypes in Degas’s art, Le Musicien à l’orchestre from 1872 (Plate XXIII), it soon becomes clear that La Chanson du chien was built by reversing almost all of its predecessor’s main terms. In the earlier picture art is also being made against an active
backdrop, a surface of thickly painted forms—perhaps trees and foliage—and intense affective colour. A dancer at the right comes forward to the footlights and drops a curtsy; she addresses the audience a little naively and the viewers are allowed to see, looming formally in the picture's lower half, the machinery which supports the illusion on stage—the attentive musicians, their brisk haircuts and well-starched collars. The painter has chosen a moment in between illusions, so to speak, in which the audience lets off steam and the corps de ballet stands at ease. And certainly there are moments when art is so confident of its effects—so sure of its basic hold on an audience—that it can afford to dispense with continuity and accept applause. Degas often painted such interim states; they allowed him to focus on art as a kind of production, and they gave him space to show off his own artistic means—his dazzling, casual checkwork of background and foreground, all half-glimpsed shapes and strange connections; the sharp touches of colour he used to establish a fingernail or differentiate a row of faces; and above all the bold, unmotivated marks he allowed himself on the distant scenery.

Thérèse, by contrast, had to be shown in the throes of her art and absorbed by it; but it had to be suggested at the same time that that fact no longer guaranteed the artist a hold on her audience. The audience was there all round her, some of them looking towards the stage and others intent on different business altogether. And in a sense the singer's art was nothing without this public's inattentiveness. For they were the illusion, those prostitutes and petits bourgeois in the shadows: they were the matter to be made over into Art, and their very distance from any such thing—but also their willingness to be enlisted by it—were part of the art form's special character. The illusion depended, as Gustave Geffroy was to put it later, on "the tacit complicity of the crowd, of these people so much resembling each other, this gathering of the bored." Complicity in such a place could not be assumed or suspended at will, since boredom was always waiting in the wings; it had to be won by shock and interpellation, with the crowd being pulled in and out of the realm of art by the sheer force of the singer's will.

A great deal of the writing about Thérèse was concerned with that force and the audience's submission to it. Degas himself urged a correspondent to go quick and hear Thérèse at the Alcazar. . . . She opens her great mouth and out comes the most grossly, delicately, wittily tender voice imaginable. And feeling, and taste, where could one find more? It is admirable. And Jules Vallès, writing his history of the decade leading up to the Commune, was in no doubt about the politics of the case:

One day there came along a woman with virile voice and gestures, at a time when men all had their mouths tight shut and their arms amputated. She cried out: It is time we gave the people something in return for their money! And the people understood her and applauded, they made the fortune of the singer whose "Sauteur" sapped an empire by holding it up to laughter. Some of the clearest accounts of Thérèse are offered in retrospect or in the period of the singer's long decline, because in describing her failure the writers feel obliged to state explicitly what had previously made for success. This, for example, by an anonymous columnist in 1886:

Once upon a time I had plenty of admiration for Thérèse. It seemed as if, in that huge voice with its low-pitched notes, there vibrated the soul of the people. She stirred me and made me shiver; more than once she brought tears to my eyes. In the last two years I have gone to her comeback performances as if to visit an old friend, searching for that impression of the past which she cannot reawaken. Her fine diction, so strong and clear, is spoilt now by pretentiousness, pomp, and solemnity. No doubt she imagines she is now a social force, and that each word she drops will have repercussions in the world. She adopts without discarding songs which are inept, and tries to colour their empty words with a redundant sentimentality and a false picturesqueness. Instead of the brutal and sincere art which used to delight me, the singer displays a procedure which has grown uniform and a search for violent effects.

The last two or three sentences in particular are a good definition, in negative, of Thérèse's original strengths.

I think these descriptions are worth reproducing; they often include some not quite standard detail or judgement (it was a matter of dispute, for example, whether Thérèse undermined the empire or was its faithful servant), and they suggest the peculiar weight of significance that soon accrued to her every gesture. And yet of course the claims they make for her performances are essentially modest in comparison with Eliot's for Marie Lloyd. What was the nature of Thérèse's popularity? To what extent did she ever "represent or express that part of the French nation which had perhaps the greatest vitality and interest"? Was she a social force or not? No doubt answers are offered to these questions by Veuillon and Vallès, but the ones they give are too obviously the product of vague enthusiasm or contumely; they lack detail, they do not contain any very impressive discussion of particular cases.

The answer I shall offer is bound to be tentative and ought to be a bit sceptical. By 1869 Thérèse's actual effects were hard to distinguish from the machinery of stardom that surrounded her. She was packaged and cosseted, censored and ghosted, admired by Aubert and Rossini, invited to sing for the empress at the Palais des Tuileries. She was fast becoming a bore, in short, in the familiar modern manner; and the process provoked...
an answering agnosticism even at the time. *Le Hannon*, for example, had a cover in 1867 which showed the singer Darcier—the voice of 1848, the favourite of those who still pined for a previous, radical age of popular song—putting a firm hand over Thérésa’s outsize mouth. And the socialist paper *La Rive Gauche* (it was published in Brussels to avoid imperial censorship) had this to say on the subject of Thérésa in 1865:

The other day she was the subject of a brawl on the Champs-Élysées between the police and a crowd of idlers and dandies who had come to hear her sing. It appears that several officers were knocked about and had to draw their swords, but no blood was spilled.

What a great people, which knows how to fight for a brasserie singer but can do nothing to win back its liberty! I for one find it easy to sympathize with *La Rive Gauche* and *Le Hannon*; but all the same the lines they draw, in their exasperation, are a little too clear-cut. Had not Darcier, after all, possessed his quota of haut-bourgeois admirers? Did not Berlioz write a *feuillet* in his praise? And Darcier had written some of Thérésa’s first songs. Could not a defender of the Alcazar have argued that the violence on the Champs-Élysées was better—from *La Rive Gauche*‘s point of view—than no violence at all? For the spectacle of revolution does occasionally lead to revolution proper, and the word “revolutionary” was applied to Thérésa by all kinds of witnesses, many of them not having Vallet’s axe to grind. The unctuous Gaston Jollivet, for example, penning his *Sous-Even de la vie de plaisir sous le Second Empire*, produced this memory of the singer in her heyday:

She launched her revolutionary challenge from the depths of her magnificent contralto, to the bosses and exploiters of the poor:

*Nous sommes ici trois cent fémelles,  
Et la danse (bis) va commencer.*

This is no doubt trivial testimony, but its very lack of seriousness lends it a kind of weight. People believed that Thérésa posed some sort of threat to the propertied order, and certainly the empire appeared to agree with them. It policed her every line and phrase, and its officers made no secret of the fact that they considered the café-concert a public nuisance. Things had evidently gone too far for the new institution to be suppressed outright, but the censor could dream of an Alcazar where torpor was largely untroubled and the bored stayed bored. He drafted memos on how to achieve that desirable state, and he realized it would be a matter of very fine tuning. Everything depended on his success in permitting a popular edge to the entertainment without having that quality be too emphatic or precise.

The kind of popularity that appealed to the censor, we might guess, is the one exemplified by Paulus’s ballad “Le Baptême du petit écheniste”—the same the cartoonists used in 1865 as mock-heroic point of reference for *Olympia*. In it a proud artisan father is overheard proposing a toast to his newborn son. He gathers about him his audience of carpenters and cabinetmakers, pays preliminary homage to the father of popular song, Pierre-Jean de Béranger, and launches into his favourite themes—the joys of matrimony and the wrongs once done to the great Napoleon:
of the Parisian working class, a fact they signified most effectively by their choice of language and by the way of singing ThÉrÈsa made famous: her use of the body to carry a phrase, her fierce low notes, her sudden shifts from stuttering patter to full vibrato, her manner of making the audience part of the song—making them join in, literally or figuratively, with a wave of her hand or an interpolated line of argot.

The café-concert produced the popular, and did so in a seemingly incongruous setting. The language of laundresses and ÉbÈnistes issued from the throats of overdressed contraltos surrounded by mouldings, mirrors, and chandeliers. The songs themselves were sometimes cynical about the whole performance:

Puis qu'il le faut, et pour vous plaire,
Je parle argot comme un chiffonnier.
J'ai pris la voix d'une écaillÈre,
Et les allures d'un palfrenier;
Je leve la jambÈ mieux que Clodoche
J'chant pas si just'qu'la Malibron.
J'suis distinguÈ tout comme Gavroche . . .

'Èh! que qu'à ça fait! j'gagne cent milliÈre.49

It may not seem to us a very powerful piece of metalanguage, this, but it was too much for the censor: in 1867 he refused permission for the song, "L'Étoile des concerts," to be performed at the Eldorado.

Perhaps the censor was right to be nervous. For the circuitry of popular art in capitalist society does appear to be delicate, and therefore to stand in need of fairly constant overhaul if it is not to produce undesirable effects. The situation in the Eldorado is typical of many that followed in the later heyday of the industry—from the vogue for flamenco in the 1890s to the first years of rock 'n' roll. On the face of things, it seems that those who control the means of symbolic production in these societies repeatedly have reason to exploit the values and images of the working class and allow them some form of representation. And this cannot simply be a matter of careful, sardonic hegemony over the masses—the provision of bread and circuses—since the bourgeoisie itself is an avid consumer of the representations in question. "That is to say, their own life fails to find a Marie Lloyd to express it; nor have they any independent virtues which might give them as a conscious class any dignity." To put Eliot's verdict in a more limited form: the middle class in the later nineteenth century, and even the early years of the twentieth, had not yet invented an imagery of its own fate, though in due course it would do so with deadly effectiveness: the world would be filled with soap operas, situation comedies, and other small dramas involving the magic power of commodities. But for the time

And on it goes. Moral, naïve, sentimental, patriotic . . . a dream world of hard work and high emotion.

By "popular" in such a case was meant a certain range of reference, a style of delivery, and a claim—mostly implicit, but flaunted on the right occasion—to be addressing one kind of audience and excluding several others (those "débauchés vulgaires," for instance). The songs that ThÉrÈsa and Paulus sang were supposed to draw on the concerns and experiences
being it was obliged to feed on the values and idioms of those classes it wished to dominate; and doing so involved it in making the idioms part of a further system, in which the popular was expropriated from those who produced it—made over into a separate realm of images which were given back, duly refurbished, to the "people" thus safely defined.

From the start this process was far from trouble-free. The material called popular had to be continually renewed and recast, lest its working-class users find ways of giving it back its original consistency—making it assume, for example, the form called proletarian. In the 1860s the signs of that struggle for possession of the popular were particularly clear in the cafés-concerts. The government regarded them as dangerous, unruly places whose repenté repertoire was prone to two main deviations—politics, which the censor believed he had under control, and obscenity, which he knew he did not.

The extraction of politics from popular song had preoccupied the empire all through the previous decade. Its scribes had drawn up their registers of forbidden ballads year by year: titles like "L'Aumône du pauvre" and "Du Pain pour tous" crying with the new "Crédit républicain," the various "Chants du prolétaire, des laboureurs, du travailleur," the cries for "Dieu sur terre" and "Christ au peuple," the stories of "Misère en Irlande." It was excellent to see the lists get shorter and the reports of provincial recrudescence less frequent, but the censor in the 1860s could not rest easy. His spies reeled from the concert halls, their notebooks filled with disarranged clothing, broken cornets-à-pistons,91 bad smells, and requests not to "fourrer vot-nez là-dedans." "Do you want to know the titles of a few of the songs which are sung in our cafés-concerts?" asked Marc-Constantin in 1872. "Just listen and judge for yourself:

—Où qu'il est que je lui retire ma casquette.
—Je renonce mon chapeau.
—Je trouve que vot-s-moi ça.
—Soullevez dessus.—Quel barbottage!
—Faut avaler ça, Verpillon.
—Ote donc ces pieds d'là, ça sent la trichine.
—J'ai tapé dans le tas.
—Asseyez-vous dessus!
—Je t'envôle le balion, etc., etc."92

Or Victor Fourner, insatiable as ever, describing the Café-Concert de la Pégase:

Nothing in particular to be said about the singers—apart from the fact that they had white gloves and black suits, the poor things—the public likes that—but what suits and what gloves they were!

I memorized the titles of the principal songs:

"Je n'entreprends pas ça"—"Je suis tout chose"—"Complet partou"—"La Veuve au bateau"—"Comment qu'on s'fait?"—"La Calotte de velours"—"Je n' suis pas préparé."93

In that last song, as in several others, the tenor did not fail to interpolate a patriotic couplet of monstrous ineptitude [the year is 1872], delivered with ridiculous emphasis and received with thunderous applause. This way of coupling patriotism and obscenity struck me as the most ignoble profanation of them all. For does it need saying that all the songs whose titles I have just transcribed are nothing but a tissue of filthy allusions and double-entendres, thoroughly worthy of such a public?94

It is hard to decide which is the more tedious, the titles themselves or the journalists' high moral tone.

One of the things these writers wish to insinuate is in fact confirmed by the other evidence we have: there seems to have been precious little wit or variety to the café-concert's depiction of sex. Yet however monotonous and niggling these songs may have been, even in Théran's hands, they remained a firm favourite with the audience at the Alcazar.95 And the question remains, what could they possibly have represented to the blouses blanches and calicots who gathered there? The answer derives from the general logic of popular art which I outlined previously: like all the other imaginary attributes of working-class life, obscenity was partly a provided imagery and partly an insubordinate one. No doubt the songs on Marc-Constantin's list did reproduce the relations of the sexes in frozen, preposterous form. No doubt their humour was false-gentle or lavalier: their subject was often apparently sex disallowed and uncontrollable, but they regularly ended by agreeing with the censor that there did not need to be a language to deal with such things. They were best confined to the margins of discourse, matters one didn't stick one's nose into, needs about which the audience was always pretending to be ignorant (comment, finally, que çà se fait?) but happily knew what there was to know before the singer started.

If this had been all there was to obscenity, the censor need not have worried so much about its social consequences. And in a sense he did not worry; he was almost convinced that obscenity was trivial, a sign of the mental and somatic inferiority by which the working class confirmed its station in life. But what an unfortunate sign it was! It could not be good for a class to revel in its own inferiority as the crowd at La Pégse seemed to do; it could not be safe to put such stress on the claims of pleasure and have the body represented each night as a mad categorical imperative—innocence and cynicism, all itches and flushes and going-too-far. And
other kinds of terror or denial: it is the mode most often and plausibly used to insist that all repressions are the same—sexual, political, religious, economic. That may in itself be an equivalence too easily made, but it is one which has certainly had political, religious, and economic effects.

The censor appears to have feared that it might do so again. Of course his files are not to be trusted if we are trying to arrive at the real extent of the problem, for what were his spies paid for if not to report that the minister’s wishes were being flouted each night, that singers were putting back forbidden verses and provoking a glee that was clearly unsafe? Yet other sources tell roughly the same story. Censorship was a brake on custom: if the proprietor of a café-concert wanted to keep a hold on his audience—an audience whose values and vocabulary were changing fast all through the 1860s—he simply could not afford to obey the ministry’s regulations. No doubt the censor was resourceful: he multiplied his army of spies and his books of prohibited gestures. But the sheer pressure of the market defeated him; year after year he wrote his disparited, hectoring reports to the minister, pointing out the insufficiency of the empire’s police: how could it be that the Alcazar was entitled to publish a songbook in 1869 which contained all the words the censor had crossed out? Would it not help if the Paris authorities really investigated a man’s moral character before granting him a licence to put a stage at the back of his bar? Might I be permitted respectfully to suggest ...? The minister seemed to have more important things on his mind.

The informer went into the smoke-filled café and found the audience singing

a resolutely antisocialist ditty of which I retained the following four lines:

Puisque tous les hommes sont frères,
Je demande que les cens qu’a pas l’œuf
Recois des rentes viagères
De ceux qui couch’t dans l’asou.

The blouses blanches themselves seemed to laugh till their buttons popped, and I got up to leave with an agreeable taste in my mouth.

Of course this is a journalist speaking, not a spy: a spy would not have risked quite this degree of sarcasm in his nightly report, and he would have made it clear that he stayed till the bitter end. Yet Vallès and Veulliot, Degas and Fournel, Nanteuil and Agent X from the Faubourg du Temple have all clearly been listening to the same song; and they do not essentially disagree with one another about what they mean. The café-concert was the home of disorder: its audience lived for the moment when the band struck up “La Canaille” and the singer invited them to join in the chorus
of "J'en suis! J'en suis!"? A rabble they were, and Thérèsa thrived on her ability to give form to the fact.

The reader may reasonably be wondering by now what has happened to the little clerks and respectable commis de magasins. It is true that journalists and spies are prone to take for granted that an audience has an audience laughing at songs like these must be basically working-class. But I seem to have followed them in assuming that when the subject is disorder, the class that concerns us—concerns the censor—is largely composed of labouring men; and then to have felt free to discard the innuendo, as the journalist often does, when it suited my purpose to stress how low the middle class had come in its entertainments.

Well, yes. There is a kind of shifting going on in my account, and in those of the commentators I am using, but it seems to me appropriate to the odd thing we are concerned with, and in any case unavoidable. It is a shifting induced by the café-concert itself, a set of uncertainties we might almost describe as the El Dorado's best production. To explain what I mean by that verdict I shall first set down again, in summary form, what I take to be the essence of the new entertainment, and then attempt to see it broadly as playing a part in the new relations between the classes. (The part it played was not altogether negligible: that will be my main point.)

Writers who bothered with the café-concert at all tended to agree that its appeal had to do with its popular character. The epitaph was applied to the performance on stage but also to the audience—in particular, to the way the audience was included in the spectacle and accepted the identities provided for it there. The café-concert produced the popular, which is to say that it put on class as an entertainment. And part of its doing so, the critics thought, was that the customer should entertain himself with the same material, putting on class for the evening, playing at being a baron or a navvy. (The idea that there were places or persons where class was inessential seems to have been a great comfort in this society. We have seen it was one of the courtisane's tasks to provide a similar reassurance.) There were unmistakably two main types of traffic going on: first, the pretence of the bourgeois to be working-class; but second, mixed in with that general slumming, and making the mixture all the more weird, the pretence of a certain kind of worker to be bourgeois, or something quite like it—the calicato sitting at the table next to the homme d'affaires, taking care not to spill beer on his best suit or miss the words of Thérèse's latest song.

Calicato, I have said already, was a code word for a whole class of people secreted by capitalist at a particular stage: the new army of clerks, accountants, cashiers, brokers, petty bureaucrats, insurance agents, bank tellers, salesmen, and commercial travellers; to be joined before long by stenographers, telegraphists, primary-school teachers, and advertising men—the class which a later historian dubbed, perhaps not even ironically, "low white collar." There was a "blank in the life of the lodger"—the phrase is from the prospectus of a Methodist social club in the 1890s—and an industry developed to try to fill it. It began with the feuilleton, the chronométrie, and the democratization of sport, and soon proceeded to a tropical diversity of forms: drugstores, news agents and tobacconists, football, museums, movies, cheap romantic fiction, lantern-slide lectures on popular science, records, bicycles, the funny pages, condensed books, sweepstakes, swimming pools, Action Française.

Yet it has sometimes been argued that a connection exists between this industry of leisure and the emergence—or at least the self-consciousness—of the "nouvelles couches sociales." I agree with the argument and would like to put it in stronger form: it seems to me that the two main histories dealt with in this book, the commercialization of leisure and the beginnings of suburbia, are both forms—perhaps pre-eminent ones—in which the "nouvelles couches sociales" were constructed as an entity apart from the proletariat. To phrase things more strictly: the rise of commercialized entertainments in Paris, catering to a mass public and dependent on large injections of capital, cannot be understood apart from the process described in chapter one—the end of the old patterns of urban neighbourhood and the birth of a city organized round separate unities of work, residence, and distraction.

In a sense there was never much mystery to that connection: observers in the 1860s saw quite well that Haussmann's city was nothing if not a pattern of residence plus a pattern of entertainments. But the less obvious thing to be said is this: both of these patterns were forms of class formation and class control. They were what constituted the new working class in white collars, but a form of bourgeoisie—one that was often portrayed as subordinate and comic, but was nonetheless allowed its peculiar access to middle-class identity, and above all confirmed in its difference from the wider proletariat.

Of course, that difference was never cut and dried, and there exists in all contemporary descriptions of the class—whether seen singing in the Alcazar or as part of a crowd cheering General Boulanger—a speculative, anxious undertone, as if the writers were wondering how long the illusion could last. Often these people seemed too bourgeois to be true. They laid claim to a rigid and primitive version of class consciousness, in which the stress on what separated them from the workers struck the real bourgeoisie...
as embarrassing; their probity was awful, their gentility insufferable, their snobbery outright comic: they made it too clear what being middle-class amounted to. And at the same time they were unaccountable in many ways, unfixed and inauthentic creatures, without so much as songs of their own or their own way of dressing, given to dangerous enthusiasms (particularly political ones) and ideas above or below their station—populism on the one hand and rank social-climbing on the other.

The very word “populism” is a late-nineteenth-century coinage, and it has built into it from the start the suggestion that producing the popular is a risky business. What begins as a process of control and containment is too often liable to end in mob rule. That is the case because the “popular” is not simply a commodity made from dead, obedient materials—here a phrase, there a value—waiting to be worked over and decently represented. It is something done with actual violence to resistant forms of life; and those forms survive in Thérése’s chorus and the audience she appeals to; they are always capable of recapturing the apparatus of production. In producing the popular, bourgeois society produces its opposite; and for the most part it manages to make that opposite into an image—one withdrawn or provided at opportune moments. Yet the image itself—the main sense of what is pictured—is inimical to everything the bourgeois most believes in, and its effects cannot be calculated as accurately as the class would wish. There is always a chance that a line or phrase will be used by the singer to enforce fleetingly the kind of attention—the kind of collective vehemence—that Veuillot and the censor fear.61

It is above all collectivity that the popular exists to prevent, and doing so means treading a dangerous line. If the entertainment does not provide a passable facsimile of that other mode of appropriating the world, it will fail altogether to engage its audience; but if it falls short of framing and arresting that facsimile—if it fails to make it a spectacle—then the other mode may take over the song and put it to unpredictable uses. The best effects of popular art are therefore won against the standardized melodies, the foiling lyrics, the cynical production values, the farrago of violence and souped-up emotion. Those who possess the means of symbolic production in our societies have become expert in outflanking any strategy which seeks to obtain such effects consistently; but they cannot control the detail of performance, and cannot afford to exorcise the ghost of totality once and for all from the popular machine.

Yet none of this exactly addresses the problem we were supposed to be dealing with; in some ways, it seems to make matters worse. For if this is the nature of popular entertainment—or even the characteristic risk associated with it—then why did it appeal so much to an audience of clerks and shop assistants? How did it fit with their striving to be middle-class? These people were widely believed to be extracting themselves from collectivity and becoming individuals; they wished to be respectable, opinionated and well dressed. Was their going to the Alcazar part of that determination or not?

These questions can only be answered, I think, by looking again at the café-concert’s place in the late-nineteenth-century class system. It was not, to repeat, that he had no place, or even an accidental or peripheral one. As an economic fact he was here to stay, and as a political one he was used to having speeches aimed in his direction. But he found it was possible to be declared an economic and political fact by all and sundry, and still be allotted no stable place in the established system of social identities; and it was this that led to his peculiar, excessive insistence on class—on class as a matter of forms and proprieties. The café-concert laid claim to membership in the bourgeoisie, but the way that he did so, we have seen, most often embarrassed or amused that class’s spokesmen. And yet it could not be the case, he said, that he belonged anywhere else in the social order, especially not to the proletariat. His “way of life” prevented that; his tastes, beliefs, and aspirations; his cultural skills. He posited his class position—opened a distance between himself and his inferiors—in terms of preferred representations, in terms of sheer style.

That he was obliged to do so at all is evidence of some kind of uninterlingibility in his relation to the means of production; and that so much of his stress was put on the difference between himself and those below him suggests that the difference was small. His presence in the Alcazar thus bears on the general dilemma of the “nouvelles couches sociales”: it seems that if class identity has to be claimed largely at the level of cultural choices, then the claimants are bound to immerse themselves in those forms and values they wish not to be their own. It is as if the clerks and shop assistants are required to admit their cultural and material links to the working class even as they deny them: they define themselves by their difference from the popular but also their possession of it, their inwardness with its every turn of phrase. They are the connoisseurs of popular culture, its experts, its aestheticians; but that expertise is a way of establishing imaginary distance and control. It is the power of the petite bourgeoisie over the proletariat.

The argument so far can now be recapitulated:

The various forms of commercialized leisure which bulged so large in the late-nineteenth-century city were instruments of class formation, and
the class so constructed was the petite bourgeoisie. It was defined primarily by its relation to the working class, and by that relation being given a spectacular form. Popular culture was produced for an audience of petit-bourgeois consumers; a fiction of working-class ways of being was put in place alongside a parody of middle-class style, the one thus being granted imaginary dominion over the other.

Both these fictions were unstable, and realized to be so: the popular was prone to divulge too much of the actual form of working-class collectivity, and the café to seem merely absurd. (If this happened too often, it was feared he might discover in the popular the grounds of his belonging after all to the proletariat; the appeal of Thérèse was therefore not safe. Remember that the 1860s was the time when Varlin predicted an end to the state of affairs "which up to now had made workers and shop assistants two different classes."53)

The café-concert mitigated these instabilities by making a spectacle of them. It generalized the uncertainty of class, and had everyone's be a question of style. It may well have been that this nightly pretence and playing out only served to confirm class identities for those who possessed them at all securely; but it was not clear whose class was secure in the late nineteenth century, at least in cultural terms. For a part of the public, at any rate, it seems most likely that the masquerade had a different effect: it confirmed their sense of class as pure contingency, a matter of endless shifting and exchange; for society was pictured in the café-concert as a series of petty transfiguration scenes, in which everyone suffered the popular sea-change, the "real" bourgeois as much as the false.

It is hard to say anything precise about the psychology deriving from this sort of night out. Observers agreed about the guardedness and anonymity of the crowd in the Alcazar, their troubled torpor, their air of vacancy, the infinite care they took with appearances, their seeming wish to give nothing away.54 These are partly formulas of condescension, but they should not simply be dismissed on that ground. The sneering has something as its object—some noticeable new way of presenting the self in public.

This is the place to quote the most famous description of analogous states of mind, that given by Georg Simmel in his 1903 essay, "The Metropolis and Mental Life." It is a theoretical sketch, of course, quite lofty and general in a late-nineteenth-century way, and clearly it describes a limiting case of big-city anomie. Nonetheless, its imagery does seem to apply without too much forcing to the material presented so far:

There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which is so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook. . . .

The essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things. Not in the sense that they are not perceived, as in the case of mental dullness, but rather that the meaning and the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless. They appear to the blasé person in a homogeneous, flat and grey colour with no one of them worthy of being preferred to another. This psychic mood is the correct subjective reflection of a complete money economy to the extent that money takes the place of all the manifoldness of things and expresses all qualitative distinctions between them in the distinction of "how much." To the extent that money, with its colourlessness and its indifferent quality, can become a common denominator of all values it becomes the frightful leveller—it hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair. They all float with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money. They all rest on the same level and are distinguished only by their amounts. . . . The nerves reveal their final possibility of adjusting themselves to the content and the form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them.55

In 1882 Manet sent two works to the salon, one a picture of a young Parisian woman called Jeanne and the other, larger and more elaborately finished, of Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère (Plate XXIV). The latter had been described to the readers of Le Réveil one month before the salon opened, by Paul Alexis, a pupil of Zola:

Standing at her counter, a beautiful girl, truly alive, truly modern, truly "Folies-Bergère" in the expression on her made-up face, plies her small trade. She is seen again from the back, in the glass behind the counter—a glass which reproduces the whole room, with its candelabra, the busy, teeming crowd, and far away in the background a redness which is the red velvet of the boxes; a glass in the corner of which is also seen reflected the whiskered face of a client, an ardent admirer perhaps, who is in intimate conversation with the pretty salesgirl. Finally, in the foreground, on the counter, glitter all sorts of amusing and varied wares: liqueur decanters, bottles of champagne, mandarin oranges in a crystal bowl, flowers in a vase, etc., the whole thing rendered as Manet knows how to render still lifes.

Such will be, for me, the great attraction of the salon, the most exactly modern and the most typical of the works on show. Perhaps, and I do not believe my prediction will turn out to be wrong, Manet will even have a success with the public—as big a one as he had with Le Bon Bock.56

Alexis's preview set out the main terms in which Un Bar would be described by other critics a month or so later, but his prediction did not quite come true. It was only six months since a scandal had been whipped up in the press over Manet's being given the Legion of Honour through the good
offices of his friend Antonin Proust, and in any case the critics had not forgotten or forgiven the outlandish portrait of Perusset "assassinating his bedside rug in the desert" which Manet had shown in the Salon of 1881. They were looking forward to further eccentricities, and *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* did not fail to provide them. Here is Jules Comte’s description, in *L’Illustration*:

A young woman standing at the counter of a bar; in front of her the various decanters and bottles awaiting the customer; behind, a mirror in which the room is reflected, and in the foreground the figure of a habitué who is seen chatting with the same woman viewed from the back; that is the subject, which we shall take as it is offered, without discussion. But what strikes us first of all is that this famous mirror, indispensable to an understanding of all these reflections and perspectives, does not exist: did Monsieur Manet not know how to do it, or did he find an impression of it to be enough? We shall refrain from answering this question; but let us simply note this fact, that all of the picture takes place in a mirror, and there is no mirror. As to the incorrectness of the drawing, as to the absolute inadequacy of the form of the woman, who is, after all, the only person shown, as to the lack of correspondence between the reflected objects and their images, we shall not insist on these things: they are lacunae which are common to these Impressionist gentlemen, who have excellent reasons for treating drawing, modelling and perspective with disdain. At least, we had always heard that Manet’s great merit was to show men and things in their true colours, in the atmosphere which surrounds them; but look how this fine principle is applied here: the bar and the room are lit by two globes of electric light, that white, blinding light we all know; but Monsieur Manet has probably chosen a moment when the lamps were not working properly, for never have we seen light less dazzling; the two globes of polished glass have the look of lanterns glimpsed through a winter’s fog.46

Jules Comte’s criticisms were often repeated in 1882. The woman in Manet’s picture was held to be badly drawn and insubstantial; the light was “indecisive,” “bluish and murky”;47 the glass and reflection were hopelessly botched. Sometimes the critics were almost kind to this last imperfection, or at least untroubled by it—it was something in the picture that they could test out verbally and declare to be simply, factually wrong. “Manet’s Bar almost makes one want to go there, one of these evenings, in order to understand the truth of the room’s reflection in the mirror on the spot, in front of nature.”48 “The effect of the mirror difficult to understand; the woman’s head rather agreeable.”49 “I agree that the effect of the reflection in the glass is not understandable at first sight. But what law in art decrees that effects should be seized and perceived straightforwardly? I spent three days in Amsterdam without seeing a thing in the *Night Watch*. You can surely grant Manet three minutes.”50

The mirror on its own did not seem to provoke any great uncertainty in Manet’s first public: it was either straightforwardly a failure or sketched in boldly enough for the job it had to do.51 The general critical tone was set by the cartoonist Stop in *Le Journal Amusant*, who pretended to offer Manet a helping hand with a minor problem. His caption read:

*UNE MARCHEUSE DE CONSOLATION AUX FOLIES-BERGÈRE.* — (Son dos se reflète dans une glace; mais, sans douce par suite d’une distraction du peintre, un monsieur avec lequel elle cause et dont on voit l’image dans la glace, n’existe pas dans le tableau. — Nous croyons devoir réparer cette omission.)

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Not all the writing in 1882 was as genial as this, or as much in agreement about what could be seen and how best it could be interpreted. In particular the critics were strikingly lacking in unanimity when it came to saying
something about the pose and expression of the barmaid. Was she beautiful and animated, as Paul Alexis had asserted in passing, or pasty, listless, and inert? And what was it she was selling, after all? Giving answers to either of these questions did not produce any great turbulence in the critics’ discourse—the barmaid was not Olympia—but the answers themselves make a strange, contradictory set.

The Bar aux Folies-Bergère is interesting and ingenious. The salesgirl is seen head-on, and there can be seen behind her, in the mirror she leans her back against, the whole room with its spectators, the crush and movement on the balconies, the blinding lights. The woman is firmly established, with a natural movement which is a little brutal. The foreground is taken up by still life, magisterially handled.78

Thus Charles Flor in Le National de 1869. Or alternatively this, from Caroline de Beaulieu:

... the chief of the Impressionist school has deigned to take up his pencil and draw the accessories of the Bar aux Folies-Bergères [sic]; and it is true that Monsieur Manet has painted with a remarkable sureness and truth of tone a number of decanters, arranged very well, and a bowl of mandarin oranges done very effectively; the salesgirl is so surprised at this fact that she is paralysed in place by it. Next year Monsieur Manet’s figures will no doubt possess movement and grace. . . . 79

Compare the terms of Emile Bergerat’s enthusiasm—

Here is something seen, sincere, new, something which shakes us out of our habits! Furthermore, the fine girl in the blue-black dress who stands at the counter is excellently drawn, modelled with a fine sense of local tone, frank in colouring, natural in pose and altogether full of character.79

— with those of Maurice Du Seigneur:

I shall not deny that Monsieur Manet has the truth of the matter; the young woman at the counter, with her hair combed down over her forehead, her bored look, the bottles of champagne, the flasks of multicoloured liqueurs, the pile of oranges, the bundles of barley sugar [sic], they are done from life . . . . 79

Or Le Senne’s defence in Le Télégaphre—

The salesgirl, her tight-fitting dress which shows off an anatomy which is mediocre and all the more Parisian for that, her low hairdo, the brightness of her gaze, the tension of her arms, all that is profoundly observed and happily rendered.80

— with Henri Houssaye’s assault in La Revue des Deux Mondes:

It seems that this picture represents a bar at the Folies-Bergère; that this gaudy blue dress, surmounted by a cardboard head like those one used to see in milliners’ shopwindows, represents a woman; that this mannequin of uncertain form whose face is slashed in with three brushstrokes represents a man; and that this stump which holds a cane represents a hand. It seems also that those vacillating shadows which sit in the background, in front of the new façade of the Opéra, with balloons floating above them, represent, reflected in a mirror, the public of the Folies-Bergère, the stage on which gymnasts are performing, and the globes of electric light. . . . In all good faith, are we supposed to admire the flat and plastered face of the bar-girl, her body without modelling, her offensive colour? Should we admit that the painter has succeeded, by means of a little white dust spread over the young woman’s back, in giving the illusion of a scene reflected in a mirror? Is this picture true? No. Is it beautiful? No. Is it attractive? No. But what is it, then?80

It is not just that these descriptions disagree with one another, but that each is produced so casually, as if the meanings and interpretations involved were self-evident. And one can understand the critics’ unconscious way of thinking here: it is as if they assume that an image which seems in many ways so plain and straightforward in its arrangement, lining up its objects and persons so that they can be taken in completely at a glance, must also provide an equally uncomplicated set of expressions and exchanges. The critics begin with a visual reading and move quite confidently to an affective one; but that the cues for the latter are fragmentary or opaque is suggested at once by the way both “âtelie de carton,” say, and “toute pleine de caractère” are offered as obvious verdicts on the same face.

The business of interpretation was greatly helped in 1882—or so the writers seemed to believe—by the viewers all knowing, as men of the world, what the woman was up to at her bar in the Folies-Bergère. “It is not possible to be more of a fille than this creature the artist has installed . . . behind the marble,”81 “A young person in charge of a bar—in French a buffet—puts on the most innocent expression so as to pretend she does not know that her twin sister is being chatted up behind her, by a man of property.—Hypocrisy! cries out Monsieur Joseph Prudhomme. You are found even here, in the very sanctuary of easy pleasures!”81 The girl who sells, according to the always well informed Philippe Burtin, “American and other drinks” is also, we have seen, “une marchande de consolation”; the image in the mirror is of a “monsieur with whom she flirts”;81 and so on. This possibility—the presence yet again of prostitution, thinly disguised—is something that the critics appear to delight in; it gives their reading added spice, and, looking back at Paul Alexis, one is inclined to believe that it is what makes the barmaid “living” and lends her made-up face whatever expression it has for him. Certainly in Alexis’ case it is what makes the barmaid “modern”: if what the woman is selling is herself, then she becomes at once a standard figure in the Naturalists’ typology of modern life. She could be construed, therefore, as an elegant variant of