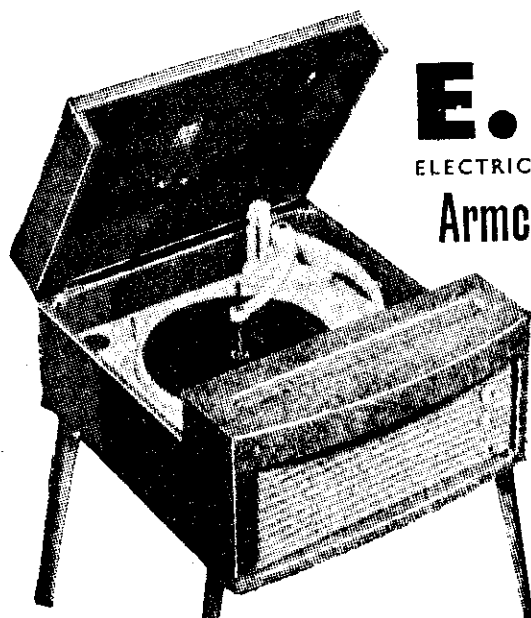


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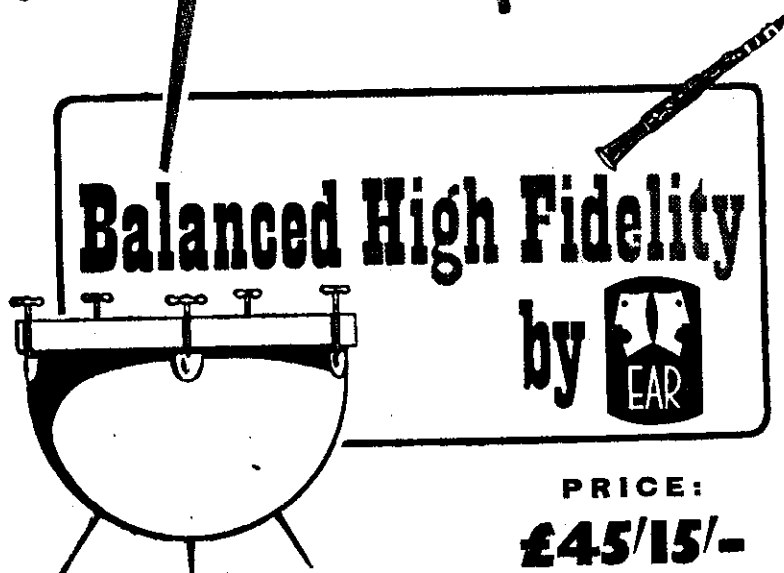
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## U and Non-U

INTELLECTUAL fads and fancies, aided by airmail deliveries of journals in which the symptoms first appear, now reach New Zealand a little earlier than they used to. Some of them make no impact on life in these islands; and life, in may be added, goes on quite smoothly without them. But now and then the signals are picked up from abroad: new and strange words creep into our vocabulary, or a phrase from a film ("See you later, Alligator") is heard so often that any person who responds with a blank, uncomprehending stare is almost a social misfit. An example of this sort of infection, more insidious because some scholarship is behind it, may be found in a few scattered references (one at least, so far, in our own columns) to a mysterious formula—U and non-U. According to a jargon now affected in parts of England, "U" signifies aristocratic usage, and "non-U" stands for usage at lower social levels.

It appears that in 1954 a learned professor published a paper, *U and Non-U*, in a Finnish philological journal. His subject touched on linguistic class-indicators, which he was able to show are by nature ephemeral. An article by Nancy Mitford, based on the professor's thesis, then appeared in *Encounter*, and aroused so much interest that it was followed by a book, *Noblesse Oblige*, in which Miss Mitford made large generalisations about English aristocracy. By then the whole thing was becoming a sort of parlour game (odd, isn't it, the way the English stay in the parlour, even on TV shows?). It was in fact a revival of a practice to which people in the middle classes have long been addicted. They like to decide among themselves the words and customs which denote their social origins. An aristocrat, for instance, will use a napkin and not a serviette; he

will speak of scent instead of perfume; and he will not crook his little finger while he takes (or has) a cup of tea. It is believed also that the aristocrat, on equal terms with the peasant, will avoid euphemisms when he mentions natural functions: he is not afraid of seeming to be indelicate.

Class-stratification is a subject for academic study, but in literary circles it becomes either an intense preoccupation (some writers work really hard to give their characters the eligible graces) or a playful snobbery. Beyond this professional interest there must be a great deal of snobbery without the playfulness. It can hardly be otherwise while the redistribution of wealth brings about the merging of classes. The process has roots in a deep sub-soil of history; and it will continue indefinitely while England has a dual system of education. Intellectuals have their own way with snobbery: they hold it up to ridicule. But it is easy to exchange one sort of affectation for another. The columns of some English journals reveal more than is intended; it is instructive to see how often critics slip into a patronising vein when they are obliged to notice books from more barbarous parts of the Commonwealth. True, the superior tone may not be snobbery; but it comes from those same distinctions of class and group which divide the washed (figuratively speaking) from the unwashed. And yet, although this latest parlour game for intellectuals appears to be silly, it illustrates an attitude which could exist only where people are interested in ideas and values. Perhaps it is better to be snobbish about accents and manners than about money and chattels, as in New Zealand. Or are they merely different aspects of the same thing, deserving equally to be classed among the non-U manifestations of human weakness?

**N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 9, 1956.**