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CARPET SLIPPERS

Carpet slippers are apparel of the utmost importance. I'll try to tell you why. They are, at least for me, the very emblem of the nineteenth century and what it learned and what it knew.

Consider it this way. A man comes home from his work in the City or the Bourse or from the antechambers of the Hofburg. He steps with a certain weariness up the burnished steps to his apartment, hands his hat to the maid, who helps him off with his muffler, his overcoat, his boots. She squats and guides his toes into his carpet slippers. They have thin leather soles, quite flexible, stitched to uppers. One pair is in scarlet felt, with a reticent pattern in gold thread, symmetrical, but he has never quite identified the insignia or design. Another pair is fine soft goatskin. It is this pair he is being shod with even as we speak. He admires the heavy bronze hair of the maid, its conscientious parting; the pale skin of the scalp is too physiological for him, it gives him a slight tremor in the sphincters – not disgust, certainly, but a distinct aversion. He looks up across the hallway to the double-doors of the drawing room, through which his wife is not visible.

With his feet in the nice warm slippers (they had been sitting near, not too near, the great porcelain stove), he allows the maid to help him out of his suit jacket and into his smoking jacket, a rather gorgeous dark crimson double-breasted affair with satin lapels and sash. It is of course worn over his waistcoat. She hands him his plush fez, and arranges its tassel so it falls behind his left ear. His collar is still firm, his necktie in place.

The girl curtseys and leaves the room. Now our man is ready for his home. He crosses the hall into the drawing room, picks up the evening paper and settles with it into an armchair not too close to the stove. He crosses his legs and begins to read.

What we have seen is a man of the nineteenth century coming home. Now what I would have you attend to is this: our man was dressed for work, for street, for luncheon with his colleagues, for meetings with his chief, for interviewing suppliants and clients, for walking along the Graben or into Harrod's, for complaining at the police station about a deficiency of streetlamps, for buying tickets to the opera, for slipping into the church for a quick round of the Rosary or into a certain establishment where he has an understanding with a young woman from Carinthia. Dressed as he has been all day, he could be photographed by the newspaper as he gives his report on the decline of the tanning industry, or as he receives a silver medal from the Singverein for his focused if slightly dry tenor in an amateur performance of excerpts from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.

Now he has taken off those clothes and donned another suit altogether. With his necktie and collar and waistcoat and smoking jacket and fez he is as modestly dressed as ever, no fresh skin is exposed, everything formal, everything neat. But he is indoors for the day now. For the night. He is home.

The point here is that he has entered personal space. Inside. The space called Private.

This was the great invention of the Victorian (the Wilhelmine, the Republican) era: the distinction between public and private. The distinction is precious. And is being lost. When television first started, people dreaded this Eye set up inside their houses. People were afraid to undress or make love in front of the flickering Presence in the box.

But that's not what hurt the private life. It turns out that the flickering Eye was our own eye, looking out. And where we turned our eyes was the private life of other people. So that the greatest danger to civil liberty and decency and common sense in America (Europe, Asia) is the collapse of the distinction between what is public and private. We worry about a pair of frou-frou intruders waltzing through security into the White House. What we should be worrying about is our own frou-frou appetites being treated to the inside of other people's houses, other people's lives. We call it 'reality TV,' and we know it's real because people are crying. When people are being humiliated we are happy. Suffering is democratic. Joy is elitist. When we have brought a joyful citizen down (the famous golfer, the peccant governor, the secret invert) we rejoice in turn. We are a land of Schadenfreude now.

That's why slippers are important. How dare we be naked in our own house? Nothing is private anymore, and to be a celebrity means to be exposed. That's why our Viennese (British, Parisian) businessman is so important, the worn wool of his slippers, the greasy headband of his fez—these are signs of the sacredness of the interior. Put on your carpet slippers and forget the peccadilloes of statesmen and athletes and singers. They are in their slippers too, they pinch their own maids and no one knows, they sleep in their downy beds and no one knows. There is a

crucifix on the wall or a painting of the beach at Dieppe or a Laughing Cavalier. Nobody sees, nobody knows, nobody cares. This is paradise. The man and his wife in their fresh-laundered nightshirts, their pointy nightcaps drowse in deep pillows. Soon they will dream of meadows, mountains, gondolas with masked naked figures, children running along the top of an old stone wall, a priest preaching a sermon to a row of bicycles. This is sleep. No one knows you in this country. Your slippers are beside the bed, pointing into the dark.

13 December 2009