Hotel Histories: Modern Tourists, Modern Nomads and the Culture of Hotel-Consciousness

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> Eat. Drink. Walk March. Back to the hotel. To the Hotel of Arrival, the Hotel of Departure, the Hotel of the Future, the Hotel of Martinique and the Universe . . . Back to the Hotel without a name in the street without a name.[1]

Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) is a novel which anatomises – with humour, precision and restraint – the condition of defeat. It tells the story of Sasha Jensen, aged thirty nine, who drinks too much and cries too much, and who is not enjoying a two-week stay in Paris. She used to live there as a young married woman, and her return is haunted by the memories of a faithless husband, the death of her baby, and the degradations of poverty. Nor does her present sojourn promise to exorcise these Parisian ghosts. Isolated, and afraid of herself as much as of others, Sasha is offered cold comfort during her stay: she attracts only the self-interested attentions of a gigolo and the lecherous advances of a commercial traveller.

This dark, spare tale about loss – and the lost – represents a new departure in Rhys's fiction.

> It lets go of what's been, so far, the heroine's world. It's never been a solid world, and it's gradually got less solid; but in *Good Morning, Midnight*, it breaks up and disappears altogether. The heroine has always lived in cheap hotels, but at least other people had homes and houses . . . There are no homes left in *Good Morning, Midnight*; the whole world is cheap hotels.[2]

The novel, textually evicted from the rooted domestic world, tenants the shiftless and shifting terrain of the hotel. It is a blurred landscape of dirty beds and stained walls; a tireless continuum of cheap and grubby rooms which makes no distinction between Sasha's remembered past and her actual present. Eternally – then, as now – it is 'back to the hotel. Always the same hotel. You press the button. The door opens. You go up the stairs. Always the same stairs, always the same room.'[3]

Good Morning, Midnight's structural and thematic preoccupation with hotels is not an isolated or aberrant imaginative obsession. Hotels, both at home and abroad, proliferate in novels, films, short stories and travelogues of the 1930s. Writers as diverse as Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Rosamond Lehmann, George Orwell and J. B. Priestley all demonstrate a fascination for the hotel in their writing. Waugh, for example, engages with the hotel in travelogue and in fiction: in *Labels* (1930), an account of a Mediterranean journey, the duping of Maltese hotel agents provides material for an amusing anecdote; in *A Handful of Dust* (1934), hapless Tony Last must endure the bracing discomforts of an English sea-side hotel so that he can be discovered by the chambermaid in make-believe adultery and his wife can sue for the divorce she requires. In Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* (1938), there is the faded, shabby Karachi Hotel, where a relic of the Great War, Major Brutt, lives in a poky attic eyrie. By way of contrast, Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) sees the wealthy Rollo Spencer take his mistress to a sparkling-new, luxurious hotel for a romantic, and very expensive, weekend. J. B. Priestley encounters a wide range of provincial hotels in his *English Journey* (1933); and Henry Green's Bright Young Things of *Party Going* (1939), fog-bound in a Railway Hotel, circulate intrigue round its respectable corridors.

Nor is the hotel – as architectural, social and imaginative locus – a purely literary or purely British preoccupation. Edith Wharton observes hotel manners and mores with a trans-Atlantic twist in *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Buccaneers* (1938). Modris Eksteins cites Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice* (1912), set against the backdrop of the Hotel des Bains, as one of the key cultural moments which define the origins of the modern age.[4] Moving away from literary representations, F. W. Murnau's silent film, *The Last Laugh* (1924) takes as its subject the humiliations of an aged hotel-doorman, demoted to the lowly position of lavatory attendant; and Greta Garbo is just one of the stars who graced the MGM portmanteau movie, *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932).

The interest provoked by the hotel during this period is unprecedented – and unexplained. 'Hotel-consciousness is a largely unexamined feature of the imaginative life of the period,' remarks Paul Fussell in *Abroad*, his study of inter-war travel and travel writing.[5] But having coined the intriguing phrase 'hotel-consciousness', Fussell himself does not go on to explore its implications. He continues in the same strain, commenting that 'everyone seems to have been remarkably hotel-minded',[6] before moving on and leaving untouched the tantalising questions: why does 'everyone' have hotels on the brain? Who *is* everyone? And how does this imaginative obsession manifest itself? It is with these questions that this article is concerned.

In part, inter-war fascination with the hotel reflects and inflects socio-economic conditions, most significantly, the increasing ease and economy of foreign travel after the First World War, and the growth of tourism within England itself. Venturing abroad was facilitated by the growth of scheduled flight; British Airways opened for business in the mid 1930s, and, by 1938, had accounted for over 200 million miles.[7] The period also saw the construction of new passenger liners: floating hotels, melding travel and accommodation – the end and the means – into one luxurious whole. The Cunard Line's *Queen Mary* made her first Atlantic crossing in 1936 and Sir Colin Anderson's *SS Orion* undertook her maiden voyage to Australia in 1935.[8] International railways enjoyed immense popularity: in addition to the already-famous Orient Express, operating since 1883, the Blue Train and the Rhinegold Express came into named existence in 1928, gradually acquiring an exotic cultural legacy of their own.[9]

In England, too, things were on the move, especially in the late 1920s and the 1930s when, in the South at least, economic conditions began to improve after the Depression. The railway was still popular as a means of transport, but the growth in the numbers of buses and motor coaches played their own part in the opening-up of England. J. B. Priestley, beginning his journey round the provinces, observes that 'there seems to be a motor coach going anywhere in this island'[10] and claims that the speed and cheapness of this mode of travel has 'annihilated the old distinction between rich and poor travellers.'[11] But the most significant advance in transport in these years came in the shape of the motor car. Mass-production brought down the cost and hire-purchase schemes made the buying process itself relatively painless. By 1939 there were over two million cars on the road, bringing unprecedented freedom and mobility even to those of only moderate income.[12] Touring holidays became very popular as motorists took to the open, and relatively empty, roads of rural England

The increase in tourist traffic during the inter-war period entailed a concomitant growth in tourism as an industry in a mutually dependent relationship between economics and leisure. The Holidays with Pay Act of 1938 covered eleven million people by the following year,[13] but the nation's holiday spirit had caught alight long before this legislation came into effect as testified to by the many organizations dedicated to leisure which flourished during the period. The Camping and Caravanning Club, founded in 1901, enjoyed increasing popularity; the Youth Hostels Association took off in England during the 1930s – and then there was the introduction of the Holiday Camp. Billy Butlin's first camp, in Skegness, opened in 1936.[14] The hotel was, of course, crucial to this burgeoning holiday culture; in England, during the 1920s and 1930s, a huge number of hotels were opened to cater for a newly mobile and leisured population. Their bricks-and-mortar presence offers an explanation for the cultural phenomenon of hotel-consciousness: everyone has hotels on the brain because hotels are everywhere; hotels are everywhere because everyone has them on the brain.

The prestigious Savoy, opened in 1889, run by the European hotelier, Cesar Ritz, and famed for its decadent opulence and glittering clientele, was renovated and modernized in the early 1930s. Claridges, owned, like the Savoy, by the D'Oyley Carte family, was also refurbished at this time. These older establishments were in competition with brand new hotels, opening throughout the period, which promised innovate architecture and luxurious design as standard: the Dorchester, for example, or Park Lane; the Strand Palace Hotel, or the Midland Hotel in Morecambe.[15] The Strand Palace, which opened in 1930, boasted a startlingly modern foyer of glass and steel and marble and dazzling lights; it was designed by Oliver Bernard, who was also responsible for the interiors of Lyons Corner Houses. And 1933 saw the final flowering of the Railway Hotel when the Midland, commissioned by the London, Midland and Scottish Railways, opened its doors. Oliver Hill was its architect and it was sumptuously conceived and executed, with sculptings and mouldings by Eric Gill, rugs by Marion Dorn and murals by Eric Ravilious.[16] Every attention was devoted to aesthetic detail – for example, colour co-ordinated towels were placed in the bathrooms, a decision which caused some unease to the commissioning railway company. A representative of the LMS wrote to Oliver Hill: 'I am not satisfied that the clientele that we are likely to get at Morecambe will appreciate too much of this kind of idea . . . We must not be too influenced by what is done in what I might call the more artistic circles of London.'[17]

But this nebulous suspicion of avant-garde excess was in keeping with the traditional remit of the Railway Hotel. The advent of the railways in the nineteenth century brought a newly-mobile sector of the population into being, and from the mid-1800s, hotels began to be built to cater for these passengers. These were often huge, staid edifices – the almost brutish facade of the Great Royal Western at Paddington an architectural world away from the sinuous curves and sleek lines of Art-Deco influenced structures like the Dorchester or the Midland. Railway Hotels traditionally offered decent standards of comfort at a reasonable cost: met by porters at the station, the guests had their luggage carried to and from the hotel; and, once inside, the place promised cleanliness and a certain respectable solidity in fittings and fixtures. Nor was it priced outside the budget of middle-class incomes.

But the building of a *new* Railway Hotel in the 1930s, in the glamorous shape of the Morecambe, was driven by the economic imperative to attract a more sophisticated holidaying public. Railway Hotels designed and built in the Victorian period had to face stiff competition in modern times. This is a

1938 advertisement promoting the attractions of the Victorian-built Great Northern Railway's Royal York Hotel: 'Direct Access form Station – Porters Meet Trains. Hot and Cold Running Water in All Bedrooms, Central Heating, Hairdressing Saloon, Restaurant. *Modern Garage with Private Lock Ups*.'[18] The hotel still promises the service of old, ferrying luggage from platform to bedroom, and then back again. But it also promises more modern conveniences, in keeping with advances in the hotel trade: central heating, hairdressing saloon, and, if no en-suite bathrooms, at least running water in all bedrooms. Most striking, though, is the italicised assurance of a *Modern Garage*: a railway hotel which offers such empathic provision for motor cars seems to be undermining its own identity and function in the process.

But in 1938 this is a very necessary compromise, for 'cheap motor cars brought about a new style of hotel industry.'[19] No hotel, whatever its history or tradition, could afford to ignore the new mobility of so many. Some establishments were re-born with the advent of mass-motoring: cars opened up the countryside beyond the rail routes and the influx of tourists to rural England brought about the renaissance of the country inn, which had been all but extinguished by train travel. Such inns had relied upon the old passenger coaches, and once they vanished, the inns went with them, especially in very remote areas. The Fourth Earl Grey, trying to halt the rural decay that the railways had brought about, suggested the founding of the Public House Trust, a scheme which looked to reenergize old public houses by promoting food and accommodation rather than alcohol. It was a success. By 1919 the Public House Trust was a limited company, owning over a hundred inns and enjoying a capital of over a million pounds.[20]

These inns, like the architectural flag-ship hotels, or the railway hotels, lend themselves to interpretation via facts, figures, dates and photographs. Their remarkable and recordable statistics – how old, how new, how much – intimates a kind of shared hotel-consciousness to be accessed through cultural histories and architectural journals. But there were many more hotels which opened in the period that did not conform to type; cheap, shabby hotels that never had any claim to public interest and have left no architectural or historical evidence behind. These nameless hotels, scattered in various villages and towns all over England, also played their part in the cultural construction of a 1930s hotel-consciousness.

J. B. Priestley notes down his encounters with some of the worst of them during his journey in the provinces. Spending the night in Coventry proves to be a depressing experience, not least because the 'room they gave me was [an] inhuman little box with stained wallpaper and containing no running water.'[21] Then there is the hotel in Swindon 'which received me with a complete lack of enthusiasm. I found the chambermaid busy trying to fasten the wallpaper in my room to the wall with drawing pins, and was in time to indicate a few spots where a pin would be valuable.'[22] The anecdotal quality of

Priestley's writing, deceptively transparent but in fact carefully crafted, renders these hotel encounters as much fiction as fact. 'Hotel-consciousness' is a creative as well as a mimetic state.

This is demonstrated in Elizabeth Bowen in *The Death of the Heart* (1938); her portrayal of the Karachi Hotel seamlessly blends observation and invention. The Karachi is home to Major Brutt, just back from Malay, always 'trying one thing and another'[23] and always failing at them all. His modest resources – no family, no money, no friends – have left him nowhere to go but the Karachi. Bowen, herself a famously liberal and accomplished hostess,[24] berates the wretched hospitality the hotel offers its guests.

> In the Karachi Hotel, all upstairs rooms, except the drawing room, have been partitioned to make two or three more: the place is a warren. The thinness of the bedroom partitions makes love or talk indiscreet. The floors creak and the beds creak, drawers only pull out of chests with violent convulsions; mirrors swing round and hit you one in the eye.
>
> At the end of Monday (for this was the end of the day unless you were gay or busy) dinner was being served . . . In the dining room each table had been embellished some days ago with three sprays of mauve sweet peas. Quite a number of tables, tonight, were empty, and the few couples or trios dotted about did not say much – weighed down, perhaps, by the height of the echoing gloom.[25]

Opportunistic greed, feeding on the inter-war glut of tourists, shows itself in cheap building work and faulty furniture. The result is a miserable abode of gimcrack fittings and thin walls, through which one's own life leaks out, and other lives blurt in. Bowen's use of the present tense to describe the construction of the Karachi suggests the now-ness, the present-day currency, of this flimsy building work; the colloquial arc of the mirrors which 'swing round and hit you one in the eye' reflect not only the bruised face of a hapless guest, but the casual, insolent character of the hotel itself. No wonder the guests are so crushed; the day itself is crushed by the Karachi. Monday ends prematurely during dinner, all hopes for future happiness – if only for the remainder of the evening – killed off by the cheerless ritual.

These kinds of hotels, as 'factionalised' by Priestley and Bowen, are characterized by a sense of lack, of absence. They are crippled by the meanness of all the things that are missing: no running water, no paper on the walls; no beauty, no light, no civility. But there is another variant upon the inter-war hotel – and another strain of hotel-consciousness, culturally interwoven with it – which is preoccupied with the idea of *excess*. That hotel is a rural species: the *pseudo*-old inn.

The car-driven exploration of the countryside was, in some ways, as much about invention and deception as discovery. A crop of books was published during this period about rural England and its institutions; books that were both products of, and contributors to, a celebration of a mythic, pre-industrial notion of 'Olde England' that was very popular at the time.[26] These 'Olde England' books included, for example, A. E. Richardson's *The Old Inns of England* (1934); *The Legacy of England* (1935), with contributions by Adrian Bell, Edmund Blunden, Ivor Brown and others; and H. V. Morton's *In Search Of England* (1927). These books take the reader on a journey round the villages of England, commending their various buildings, traditions and past-times. But vital to their production, and vital to the market which welcomed them, was the new presence of the motor car, which made such wide-ranging rural tourism possible in the first instance. Conflict and contradiction is the inevitable textual result.

A. E. Richardson, for example, maintains the integrity of the rural myth in the face of incontrovertible technological evidence to the contrary. Writing specifically about village inns, he remarks: 'At the crossroads of England many of the smaller public houses still stand, modest but inviting, disdaining the attractions of Neon lights and touring-club signs, but nevertheless offering a simple welcome to the weary traveller who chances to stop his car and enter by the tap-room door.'[27] The almost-humour of this pronouncement is unintentional. There is, it seems, nothing incongruous in the tableau of the humble yet homely inn, frozen in 'olde worlde' time, offering a warm welcome to the weary traveller – who 'chances to stop his car by the taproom door'. Neon lights, touring clubs and motor cars are, of course, all products of the same modern world. It is just that neon lights and touring clubs, suggestive as they are of mass-produced, popular leisure, are inimical to the maintenance of the tranquil, timeless rural ideal. The motor car, more than any of the above, is representative of a mass-produced age – but as it provides the only means by which the rural ideal can be accessed, literally and textually, it is magnificently ignored.

The village inn lies at the heart of this conflict between old traditions and new demands. Day-trippers and holiday-makers, enjoying their motorized freedom – and armed, perhaps, with a copy of *The Old Inns of England* – ventured into the countryside with the expectation of discovering timeless beauty and age-old tradition. Needing somewhere to eat and drink, and somewhere to stay, these new tourists offered recovery for the rural economy. But they wanted to experience the rose-bedecked version of 'Olde England' as invented by popular culture – compromised as that mythic invention was by the inevitable advances of a modern age. The off-spring of this compromise was the pseudo-old inn. Catering for a new market hungry for the old, it had antiquity built in from the beginning. (The Public House Trust renovated original old inns, but they were too small and too few to accommodate all the rural newcomers.) The architect Basil Oliver, himself responsible for the reconstruction of the famous Red Lion Inn at Grantchester, berated the pseudo-old inn for both its structural and ideological fakery; for all its sham excess:

> When oak was plentiful in England it was the natural building material for our forbears to use . . . But it is entirely unconstructional and the purest make-believe, merely to face a brick building of the present day with such a framing, and it is still a greater offence when the sham 'veneer' is made up of nothing more than one inch creosoted boards applied to the exterior . . . It is neither traditional nor the reverse, but it *is* falsification.[28]

This kind of 'make-believe' establishment makes an intriguing appearance in Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936): intriguing, because its representation offers another understanding of what it is that underwrites the cultural phenomenon of hotel-consciousness. The novel charts the illicit love affair between married aristocrat, Rollo Spencer, and Olivia Curtis, also married, but now separated from her husband. In the course of their relationship, virtually every kind of contemporary hotel is visited, observed, reflected and created: a German pension, a luxurious modern establishment on the coast, a stuffy provincial hotel – and a pseudo-old inn.

Rollo and Olivia visit this inn twice. On the first occasion, they are drunk and are deceived by its antique fakery; they believe the 'falsification' to be the truth. Afterwards, Olivia tries to recall the blurred details of the place: 'What was it called? . . . A pretty name . . . The Wreath of May. Picturesque is the word for it – old, thatched, whitewashed, sagging, full of beams.'[29] But on their second visit, and sober, things look disconcertingly different: 'when she looked at the house, she noticed things she hadn't noticed before – only one wing was old, the rest was shoddy pseudo-old-world, with thin, poor thatching'.[30] And it is not only alcohol – or the lack of it – that marks this change in perception. Their first stay at the inn saw Olivia and Rollo intoxicated as much with love and lust as with drink; immersed in each other, there was no attention spare to devote to architectural anomalies. Their return, some months later, is shadowed by unhappiness. The relationship is on the point of collapse but both adopt a show of jollity to conceal the inevitable from each other, and from themselves. 'Flippancy, foolish jokes had never come easier; she'd made him laugh all through dinner. We're hollow people, and our words are so light and grotesque'.[31] The dining room itself is part of the pseudo-wing, 'a long dreary pallid room with curtains of pink casement cloth, lit by three electric lamps hanging from the ceiling beneath ornamental orange-tinted shades of bogus marble.'[32] Ersatz, tawdry, fake: the Wreath of May serves as a metaphor for the pretence between the lovers, and their pretence emphasizes the bogus structure of the inn. The place exists both as a building in social and architectural space and time, and as a suggestive metaphor for the fag-end of love – and each existence is dependent upon the other.

The idea of the hotel as a place where reality and metaphor slide seamlessly into one another offers its own definition of hotel-consciousness. In part, as already discussed, hotel-consciousness is a physical phenomenon: the numbers of hotels of all different kinds that opened in the period make their presence felt in different representational guises. But inherent in this literal understanding of hotel-consciousness is a more figurative understanding of the hotel as a place where metaphor and reality are as one.

A commonly-voiced perception made of the inter-war period was that a terminal condition of rootlessness had struck at the heart of things: a 'general post-war fissuring and crack up of all social and moral structures.'[33] George Orwell, in 'Inside the Whale' (1940), asks:

> how many of the values by which our grandfathers lived could not be taken seriously? Patriotism, religion, the Empire, the family, the sanctity of marriage, the Old School Tie, birth, breeding, honour, discipline – anyone of ordinary education could turn the whole lot of them inside out in three minutes.[34]

These are the ties that bind; that keep England firm, rooted – and now, one by one, for good or ill, they have been loosed and the nation has been set adrift. Orwell celebrates this debunking process even as he acknowledges it leaves emptiness in its wake.

Elizabeth Bowen, too, is sensitive to the perceived modern condition of rootlessness, although her political stance was essentially conservative and thus very different from that adopted by Orwell. Her fiction of the 1930s is densely populated with those who, unsure of where they have come from, have no idea of where they are heading for now. This deracinated spiritual state is first diagnosed in *To The North* (1932), by the opinionated Lady Waters who announces to any who will listen, that '"All ages are restless . . . But *this* age is more than restless: it is decentralised."'[35] And decentralisation spreads like a virus in Bowen's work; virtually every character in *The Death of the Heart* – Matchett, the housekeeper, excepted – is infected. And the condition of rootlessness is endemic in the war-time world of *The Heat of the Day* (1949).

Contemporary representations of moral, spiritual and social deracination have a reciprocal relationship with representations of travel. New means of transport, new resources and amenities – including the hotel – by their physical presence and the functions they fulfil, act simultaneously as cultural metaphors for the often-perceived and proclaimed transience and deracination of the modern age. Internal-combustion mobility bears the stamp of a contemporary *zeitgeist* concerning the unsettled character of inter-war life – and emotional, spiritual and cultural rootlessness is encoded in the language of travel, of movement, of speed.

Here is Elizabeth Bowen, writing, in 1933, on the question of 'Manners'. Once, she remarks, the individual did not have to negotiate the minefield of social etiquette. Enjoying the safety 'of a prescribed world [he] stayed where he was and knew what he must comply with.'[36] Now, things are disturbingly different.

> That is just the crux of the matter: we move about. The lives of most people now, say in their thirties, have changed inconceivably since childhood. Tradition is broken. Temperament, occupation, success or failure, marriage, or active nervous hostility to an original *milieu* have made nomads of us all. The rules we learnt in childhood are as useless, as impossible to take with us, as the immutable furniture of the family home.[37]

Bowen slides between literal and figurative observation; physical travel and spiritual nomady seem not only interchangeable, but part of the same modern process. The past she speaks of is physical, geographical: the social being of old knew his place because, literally, he never left it. But the present makes for rather more treacherous terrain. The pronouncement that, now, 'we move about' – in contrast to our static ancestors – suggests that Bowen is talking about physical relocation. And, certainly, the physical act of travel is a driving narrative force in Bowen's work: trains, planes, automobiles – and ships, for good measure – power her fiction. She was to thank her good fortune as a writer that she 'was there while [speed] came into being around me.'[38] But it is something more than a regard for miles-per-hour movement that drives this disquisition on the advance of modern manners. The observation that 'we move about' is as much a comment on the vagrancies of the homeless consciousness, travelling without traditions or rules, as it is on the possibilities of internal-combustion mobility. A '*milieu*' – flight from which 'makes nomads of us all' – the OED defines as a 'medium, environment, surroundings': ambiguous elucidation, which refers at once to a social, emotional, spiritual or physical setting. It is hardly surprising that twentieth-century nomads find the art of social intercourse fraught with difficulty; drifters, they worry about proving the validity of their background and identity, 'never certain their passports are in quite in order, and . . . therefore, unnerved by the slightest thing.'[39] Travel is, it seems, a dual process, in which literal and metaphorical journeys are inextricably linked. The modern individual is forever shuttling between the two, unsure of where and what the destination is; or if a destination even exists.[40]

The hotel has its own part in this reciprocal interplay between actual and metaphorical travel. For even nomads have to pitch tent for the night. The hotel supplies the physical wants of an itinerant tourist population, and, inherent in that function is the metaphoric service it offers: a temporary abode for the modern, flitting mind. Cultural fascination with the hotel is, then, not only a product of socio-economic developments. The hotel also constitutes a certain *milieu* which renders it an apt setting for representations of the restless modern mind. Hotel-consciousness is a two-fold awareness, which understands the figurative and imaginative existence of the place to be an integral part of its existence. The hotel is a building; it is also a state of mind and a resonant metaphor for modern life

Elizabeth Bowen, as a writer particularly responsive to the condition of modern nomady, is correspondingly sensitive to the role that the hotel plays in this peripatetic state. Hotels of all shapes ands sizes inhabit her 1930s fiction: there is the Parisian hotel in *To The North* where Emmeline and Markie consummate their 'decentralised' relationship; there is the Rams Head in *The House in Paris* (1935), a strange, almost mythic place, where Karen and Max become lovers and tear apart the solid world; and there is the desolate Karachi hotel, of course, in *The Death of the Heart*. Hotels play a part in her short stories, too: the deserted hotel in 'Love' (1935), for example, where a young man and an old woman live, mutually adoring prisoners of each other, against the ghostly lounge back drop of dusty palms and rickety tables.

Any one of her hotel fictions encourage and reward close scrutiny – but *The Death of the Heart* outlines with particular clarity the modern condition of hotel consciousness. Portia Quayne is the unhappy orphan at the centre of the action, brought to live in London with her brother and his wife after the death of her much-loved mother. The girl is, we learn, on off-spring of hotel life, brought up on the Continent in 'an out of season nowhere of railway stations and rocks.'[41] She remarks, with composure, of that unsettled life: '"Mother and I got fond of it in some ways. We used to make up stories about the people at dinner, and it was fun to watch people come and go"' (p. 55). Knowing nothing else, Portia has found reassurance in transience and leant the customs of habit through the witnessing of continual change.

But as the product of a deracinated culture, the orphaned Portia disturbs the placid surface of English middle-class life wherever she touches it. As one who has lived nearly all her life as an itinerant member of a dysfunctional family made up of ever-changing unknowable hotel guests, she can see with unnerving clarity the failure of domestic life in the small scale. She recognizes domestic emptiness and the lack of harmony and ease in the private house – for she learnt about the lack of those things from the cold domestic charter of the hotel. She and her mother slept in 'eiderdowns that smelled of the person before last' (p. 55); they came to know domesticity, hard-nosed, as a commodity that must be bought and paid for – 'where one's bills wait weekly at the foot of the stairs, and no "extra" is ever over looked' (p. 189).

To Portia, the home-life she shares with her brother and his wife has very much the same quality as hotel-life. She knows that domestic comforts cost, and that 'by living at Windsor Terrace, eating what she ate, sleeping between sheets that had to be washed, by even so much as breathing the warmed air, she became a charge' (p. 189). But more than this, there is the same awareness that these three – family – are strangers brought together in arbitrary union under one roof:

> three Quayne's had lived, packed close in one house through the winter cold, accepting, not merely choosing each other. They had all three worked at their parts of the same necessary pattern. They had passed on the same

> stairs, grasped the same door handles, listened to the strokes of the same clocks. Behind the doors at Windsor Terrace, they had heard each other's voices, like the continuous murmur inside the whorl of the shell. (p. 149)

Home-life, transient and casual, here might as well be that of the hotel. Existence at Windsor Terrace has the same distant, once-removed quality that characterises hotel living. Just as Portia and her mother connect with the transient family of the hotel via the smell of the person-before-last eiderdown, so these three Quaynes, living all under the same roof, seem only to know each other through the objects that they share. They are solitary individuals, guests who pass through this house, who hear the hum of life through walls and doors – just as it is heard in the Karachi – but never engage with it. Domestic life in Windsor Terrace is distant, remote, hidden in the convolutions of a shell: the murmur is continuous but somehow inhuman, and infinitely remote.

The end of the novel finds Portia in a hotel-proper once more. Betrayed by the adult world, she throws herself, literally, on the kindly and ineffectual Major Brutt for rescue, and goes to visit him in his Karachi room. But she is such a desolate figure that even the hotel – home to the lost – can no longer house her; we learn that, 'unhappy on this bed, in this temporary little stale room, Portia seemed to belong nowhere not even here' (p. 239). This is a grim diagnosis of the modern condition of spiritual nomady. The hotel, temporary and stale, is still more solid and rooted than the soul who inhabits it. Our last sight of Portia is sombre. Lying, apathetic, in Major Brutt's bed, her 'body looked like some drifting object that has been lodged for a moment, by some trick of the current, under a bank, but must be dislodged again and go on twirling down the implacable stream' (p. 298). Disowned by the hotel, Portia is so much driftwood. She will only be held here a moment between Major Brutt's sheets, before even this inhospitable resting place finds it cannot shelter her and gives her body up to the fast-moving current.

Bowen, looking back on her creative career, wrote: '[i]magination of my kind is most caught, most fired, most worked upon by the unfamiliar: I have thriven, accordingly, on the changes and chances, the dislocations and (as I have said) the contrasts which have made up so much of my life.'[42] But unfamiliarity, change and dislocation have a resonance in a 1930s context that transcends the purely autobiographical. In an unsettled and troubled decade, the personal cannot help but evoke the political – during these years 'a world's apprehension, strain at home and in Europe were gravely written . . . across the mind's surface.'[43] Bowen's fascination with the hotel and hotel-consciousness proposes modern nomady as a way of life and a state of being at the decentralised heart of a 1930s *zeitgeist*.

Notes

1 J. Rhys, *Good Morning Midnight* [1939] (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 120. Original ellipses.

2 C. Angier, *Jean Rhys* (London, 1992), p. 407.

3 Rhys, *Midnight*, p. 28.

4 M. Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London, 1990), pp. 23–28.

5 P. Fussell, *Abroad: Literary Traveling* [sic] *Between the Wars* (New York and Oxford, 1980), p. 53.

6 Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 53.

7 See J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Society* (London, 1990), p. 26.

8 See G. Naylor, 'Design and Industry', in B. Ford (ed.) *Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 74.

9 See A. J. Burkart and S. Medlik, *Tourism: Past, Present and Future* (London, 1974), p. 27.

10 J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* [1933] (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 9.

11 Priestley, *Journey*, p. 9.

12 Burkart and Medlik, *Tourism*, p. 28.

13 Urry, *Tourist Gaze*, p. 26.

14 Urry, *Tourist Gaze*, p. 26.

15 See Mary Cathcart Borer, *The British Hotel Through the Ages* (London, 1972), p. 240.

16 For a full discussion of the design of the Midland Hotel, see A. Powers, 'The Stone and the Shell – Eric Gill and the Midland Hotel, Morecambe', *The Book Collector*, 47:1 (1998), 43–66.

17 Naylor, 'Design', p. 272.

18 *Official Guide to the City of York* (York, 1938), p. 43.

19 Borer, *British Hotel*, p. 28.

20 See Borer, *British Hotel*, p. 237.

21 Priestley, *Journey*, p. 69.

22 Priestley, *Journey*, p. 41.

23 E. Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* [1938] (London, 1998), p. 59.

24 'Elizabeth became a compulsive and inspired hostess . . . People came because Elizabeth was enchanting, amusing, stimulating, her company had the same heightened quality that Virginia Woolf's had, but without the unpredictability and fiendishness: she had the Irish warmth, fostering and welcoming.' V. Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (London, 1977), p. 103.

25 Bowen, *Death of the Heart*, pp. 285–86.

26 The British display at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937 included a photo-mural which exactly encapsulated this version of national identity. It included 'scenes of harvesting, ploughing, village cricket, country houses, cathedrals and landscape views.' J. Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design* (Oxford and New York, 1997), p. 93.

27 A. E. Richardson, *The Old Inns of England* (London, 1934), p. 33.

28 B. Oliver, *The Renaissance of the English Public House* (London, 1937), p. 131.

29 R. Lehmann, *The Weather in the Streets* [1936] (London, 1991), p. 218. Original ellipses.

30 Lehmann, *Weather*, p. 320.

31 Lehmann, *Weather*, p. 331.

32 Lehmann, *Weather*, p. 330.

33 R. Lehmann, *The Swan in the Evening: Fragments of an Inner Life* [1967] (London, 1982), p. 69.

34 G. Orwell, 'Inside the Whale' (1940) in G. Orwell, *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 35.

35 E. Bowen, *To the North* [1932] (London, 1983), p. 168.

36 E. Bowen, 'Manners', *The New Statesman*, 1936, in E. Bowen, *Collected Impressions* (London, 1950), p. 67.

37 Bowen, 'Manners', pp. 67–8.

38 E. Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, (ed.) S. Curtis Brown (New York, 1975), p. 43.

39 Bowen, 'Manners', p. 68.

40 There are many more examples of travel as a state of mind, as well as body, that I would like to discuss, but which are beyond the scope of this article. However, of interest in this respect are: Bowen's *To The North* (1932); Orwell's essay, 'England Your England (1941); Christopher Isherwood's *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939); Henry Green's *Party Going* (1939); and Graham Greene's *England Made Me* (1935).

41 Bowen, *Death of the Heart*, p. 56. The rest of the article consists of a discussion of this novel; hence any subsequent quotations will follow in brackets in body of text.

42 Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, pp. 36–7.

43 Bowen, *To The North*, p. 173.

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