

**Writing Out of Place:
Women's Fiction of the Inter-War Period**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Abstract | iii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter One The Personal Element: Place, Personality and Feeling in the Girls' School | 18 |
| Chapter Two Hotel-Consciousness: Desire, Domesticity and Hotel Culture | 73 |
| Chapter Three Typists Home at Teatime: Femininity, Domesticity and the Office | 138 |
| Chapter Four Home Time: History, Modernity and the Private House | 195 |
| Afterword There's No Place Like Home | 252 |
| Bibliography | 259 |

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the fictional representation of place and femininity in women's writing during the inter-war period. It is a thematic study, which focuses on writers as diverse in method and style as Elizabeth Bowen, Stevie Smith and Daphne du Maurier, it also draws on a range of contemporary cultural resources in order to investigate fully women's interaction with place. The girls' school, the hotel, the office, and the private house: all these are places where the presence of women discloses and inflects inter-war societal preoccupations; as such, all have proved richly responsive to interdisciplinary research. Contemporary theories of architecture and design have provided immediate points of reference; but of equal value in this study of place and femininity have been the creative discourses of cinema and advertising, women's magazines, and sociological and historical studies of the time. The use of such material creates a notion of place which is simultaneously architectural, social and imaginative; at once, a bricks-and-mortar structure, an ideological construct and a creative framework. Working with this multivalent definition of place allows for a dynamic, intertextual and interdependent understanding of women's identity and experience during the inter-war period, and through inter-war culture.

The first chapter of this thesis is concerned with representations of the girls' school. Discussing texts which cut right across the cultural spectrum, the argument centres on the 'personal element' of feeling and identity, and the ways in which this subversive element operates within the regimented world of the girls' school. As an institution, the girls' school was a relatively new entity in the period; often constructed out of the remnants of a private house, and still bearing its domestic architectural legacy. Using the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen and Antonia White, this chapter argues that it is at the structural and metaphorical fault lines where home and school meet that schoolgirls are able to escape from the institutionalized boundaries of school, and indulge in a dangerous, pleasurable and subversive 'personal element'.

In the second chapter, it is feminized representations of the hotel that come under scrutiny. The hotel constitutes an *illusion* of home. It has, as a given, bedrooms, bathrooms, lounges, dining-rooms; the fittings and fixtures of the private house. Yet its domesticity is professional and its family itinerant. This domestic strangeness has a particular impact upon women of the inter-war period, for whom a career as wife and mother in the traditional, small-scale private-house is viewed as the cultural ideal. This chapter documents the process of "making-strange" that takes place when women in hotels expect one version of domesticity, and encounter another. Looking at the fiction of Virginia Woolf, Rosamond Lehmann and Elizabeth Bowen, the chapter goes on to argue that this sense of domestic alienation underwrites a feminized version of 'hotel-consciousness' - a disorientating and energizing state which has far-reaching implications for women as social, sexual and domestic subjects, for it encourages them to become not house-wives, but hotel-lovers.

The third chapter is concerned with the portrayal of working women. After the First World War, women were strongly urged to leave paid employment and return to the private house. Anger was directed against those women who remained in work, and who, it was felt, were depriving men of their rightful employment. This sense of outrage was particularly aimed towards those women who were perceived to have usurped the mechanized space of the modern office. Repeatedly, the office-girl - flighty, feckless, sexually loose and economically independent - is culturally posited against the wife and mother - placid, nurturing, dependent. Using Elizabeth Bowen's *To The North* (1932) and Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), this chapter will explore the consequences for women who attempt to conflate these restrictive models of femininity in order to achieve a symbiosis between home and work.

These three chapters, as well as engaging with places outside the home, have also been in negotiation with ideas of home, and with cultural conceptions of domestic femininity. The final chapter goes back home, and explores the representation of the private house in negotiation with other versions of itself. In so doing, it uncovers a state of domestic warfare that is raging in the inter-war home between the desire for privacy and the desire for display. The figure of the domestic servant - who stands simultaneously for domestic display, and for domestic intrusion - is at the centre of this battle. Drawing on Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and E. H. Young's *Miss Mole* (1930), the chapter goes on to argue that in their energizing representations of female servants, these fictions show the way forward, out of domestic conflict, and into a new way of home living.

INTRODUCTION

‘Nothing can happen nowhere’, Elizabeth Bowen advises in her ‘Notes on Writing a Novel’.¹ This is a duplicitous truism if ever there was one - but, nonetheless, it signals the starting place of this thesis. Bowen’s double-edged precept adumbrates my exploration of women’s fiction of the inter-war period.

‘Nothing can happen nowhere’, given a positive spin, reads as ‘everything must happen somewhere’: no event can exist in a void; all life is subject to location. Bowen’s own fiction is a case in point - it is, as she herself remarks, deeply infused with a sense of ‘somewhere’, of place. ‘Am I not manifestly a writer for whom places loom large?’² she demands, with some acerbity, amazed at the curiosity she finds habitually not displayed about this aspect of her work. Because England and Ireland, ‘between them, contain my stories, with occasional outgoings into France or Italy’, the nomadic Bowen does not consider herself a ‘“regional” writer in the accredited sense’.³ Her fascination with place finds its most eloquent voice in the representation of bricks-and-mortar: of houses, schools, flats, offices and hotels: once, it is said, she considered architecture as a career.⁴

¹ Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Notes on Writing a Novel’ [1945]. Rpt. in Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 177. Posthumously published, and edited by her literary executor, Spencer Curtis Brown, this book contains fragments of an autobiography, entitled *Pictures and Conversations*, begun in 1969; one chapter of an unfinished novel, *The Move-In*; an essay on ‘The Art of Bergotte’ [1971]; a Nativity Play, first performed in Derry Protestant Cathedral in 1970; and her ‘Notes on Writing a Novel’, originally published in *Orion II* in 1945.

² Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, p. 34. Throughout this study, I have incorporated page references within the body of the text wherever possible. However, so as not to clutter the text further, I have - as in this instance - used additional abbreviated footnote references, where it is not immediately obvious that the work has been previously cited.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴ See Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 41. Referred to hereafter as *Elizabeth Bowen*.

The mapping of place in these solidly-realized guises is central to the construction of Bowen's fictive world, a world in which 'the locale of the happening always colours the happening, and often, to a degree, shapes it.'⁵ Everything must happen somewhere.

And yet - although this is a logical and sensible translation of Bowen's cryptic pronouncement - it does not entirely capture the spirit of the original. She does not, after all, command that 'everything must happen somewhere'; she suggests that 'nothing can happen nowhere.' With a writer like Bowen, who delights in the exact science of syntax, it is impossible to ignore the shadowy implications contained within this double negative. She is, certainly, fascinated with the representation of place in concrete form - but the phrase 'nothing can happen nowhere' also speaks of a more nebulous and tentative possibility: that a non-event can happen in an amorphous region known as 'nowhere'. Bowen's ambiguous axiom responds both to a literal, logical reading, and to this lateral and oblique translation. And both these ways of understanding 'nothing happening nowhere' are of importance in this thesis, dictating its methodological stance as well as shaping and forming its content. For this study is concerned with the representation of place - with the representation of somewhere and nowhere - in women's fiction of the inter-war period. What places? which women and what type of fiction?: these are questions of approach that I hope to answer in unravelling Bowen's cryptic pronouncement.

It was not so long ago that critical engagement with 'women's fiction of the inter-war period' was, itself, something of a nothing happening nowhere. Valentine Cunningham,

⁵ Bowen, 'Notes on Writing a Novel', p. 177.

writing in 1988, explains that the 'myth of the Auden generation, in choosing by and large to leave out novelists, and even if it does let in Isherwood and Upward and a tiny clutch of other prose writers, is clamantly leaving out women'.⁹ But having identified this literary lacuna, Cunningham does not himself go on to fill it. It is a conscious decision, for, as he proceeds to explain, his book, 'lacks the space to do full justice to anything like all of these customarily absented authors. But at least the gap that commonly denotes their absence can be defined . . . and their place can be marked on the '30s map for future reference' (27). A rather unrepentant apologia, this, for the lack of interest his book will go on to display in women writers of this period - obviously, their exclusion from the literary scene does not constitute such a 'clamant' exile after all. Nonetheless, in the years that have followed the publication of Cunningham's work, the gap he locates as marking the spot of female absence *has* been largely filled in. Women are now very much on the map.

Nicola Beauman, in her study of women's fiction of the inter-war years, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (1983), introduced some of the key cultural and social issues of the period. Other works followed: Alison Light's *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991); Maroula Joannou's *Ladies, Please Don't Smash Those Windows: Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38* (1995); and Heather Ingman's *Women's Fiction Between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters and Writing* (1998). These studies range widely, engaging variously with the political, cultural, literary and psychological territory of the period, as it is explored through the medium of women's writing. Critical biographies and studies of

⁹ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 26.

individual women authors have also helped to fill the literary 'gap': there is Hermione Lee's biography, *Virginia Woolf* (1996) and her critical study, *Elizabeth Bowen* (1999); Jane Dunn's *Antonia White: A Life* (1998), and Marion Shaw's *The Clear Stream: A Life of Winifred Holtby* (1999). Nor has women's poetry of the period been ignored: Janet Montefiore devotes a chapter to it in *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (1996), and Jane Dowson has put together a collection entitled *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* (1996). As a result of these critical and biographical ventures, the work of writers as diverse as Nancy Cunard, Stevie Smith, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Daphne du Maurier, Elizabeth Bowen and Ivy Compton-Burnett, now constitutes - if not well-traversed territory - certainly a familiar landscape.

My own study has been particularly influenced by Alison Light's book, *Forever England*. Hers is a work which moves away from the official, authorized history of the inter-war period to delineate a different, more introspective version of its life and literature. Light argues that the First World War brought in its traumatic wake something of a national crisis of masculinity: 'Britain is the place where it is no longer possible to be properly male - a country gelded, as Lawrence might have said, and emasculated by the aftermath of war.'⁷ This emasculation necessarily prioritizes an understanding of home and family at the heart of national life - an understanding which, Light argues, amounts to nothing less than a 'redefinition of Englishness. What had formerly been held as the virtues of the private sphere of middle-class life take on a new and public significance'(8). The 'private sphere of the middle class' was perceived at this time as essentially feminized and

⁷ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 7. Referred to hereafter as *Forever England*.

domestic territory - hence Light's exploration of women who wrote from within, and about, its conservative boundaries. Looking at the writing of Ivy Compton-Burnett, Agatha Christie, Jan Struther and Daphne du Maurier, she describes a species of middle-class domestic fiction which is also that of the nation-state; and articulates the energizing aesthetic that comes from merging the conservative values of the past with the claims of the modern present.

The idea of history as a plural process; the notion of inter-war middle-class England as feminized and domestic territory; and the premise that women's writing is, therefore, of particular interest in the analysis of this period: my thesis is indebted to Alison Light's study for illuminating so clearly these considerations. Her analysis clearly signals that any exploration of 'place' in middle-class women's writing during these years cannot ignore, for long, the private house - and nor have I.

What initially intrigued me was the prospect of exploring places *outside* the home, as they were portrayed in women's fiction. If the private house, at the centre of national life, is 'somewhere', then I wanted to explore a succession of places, outside the domestic sphere, that might seem to symbolise a feminized 'nowhere': energizing and emergent representational territory, at once a social, architectural and imaginative landscape, a region which has no name and cannot be easily mapped by the approved and official domestic discourses of the inter-war period.

The girls' school, the office, and the hotel: these were three places that seemed to lend themselves especially to being read as unmapped representational landscape with particular social and creative resonance for women at this time. The cultural topicality of

these places is suggested by the fact that all three institutions make a significant fictive appearance in the very different writings of, for example, Antonia White, Stevie Smith, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamond Lehmann and Winifred Holtby. I have argued that the emergent quality of these places lies in their *newness*. In the inter-war period, all three institutions were relatively new in their own right; or, if already established, then women were new to them; or each were new to the other. The girls' school of the period could only boast of a history of fifty or sixty years duration; the modern office was younger even than that, and had the presence of women at the centre of its mechanized genesis. The period also saw a burgeoning of the tourist industry, and a huge growth in the numbers of hotels either refurbished or built from scratch - with a newly leisured and mobile female population willing and able to frequent them.

But what became increasingly clear as my research progressed was that portrayals of places outside the home - both in women's fiction, and filtered through other cultural media - are also in negotiation with the home, and with discourses of home. Similarly, portrayals of women's and girls' experiences outside the home are in debate with representations of domestic femininity. The inter-war obsession with domesticity infiltrates every strand of contemporary culture, whether or not the home itself is actually at issue. The role of wife, mother and homemaker is championed everywhere as the ideal to which all girls and women should aspire. These powerful domestic and feminine imperatives cannot but shadow the representation of places which are not home, and women who are not exclusively homemakers.

The girls' school, the office and the hotel, are, certainly, deeply interfused with ideas of home. Many girls' schools in this period were constructed out of the shells of private houses, and still bore the very tangible domestic legacy of a makeshift architectural conversion. The inter-war mechanized office - and the women who worked there - were perceived as the insubstantial, soulless antitheses of the solid world of domesticity, and of the rooted wife and homemaker. And the hotel, commercial and non-familial, wears domesticity as a disguise, undermining and making-strange women's expected place in the home-proper. This thesis is, then - almost by default - as much about the private house and domestic femininity as it is an exploration of girls and women away from home.

The realization that notions of home must always underwrite notions of being away has informed the ultimate direction this thesis has taken: as much a venture into the interior as an exploration of the unknown; as much an engagement with 'somewhere' as 'nowhere'. And it has proved an intriguing journey. The fact that the feminized territory of home is so well-mapped and traversed in the cultural and social life of the inter-war period might suggest that it is an all-too-familiar landscape with little left of interest to offer. At best, it would seem to serve as a reliable and stable constant, against which more dynamic models of place and femininity can be posited. But this has not been the case. For the process of representation in women's fiction of place is *reciprocal*: received ideas of home do temper perceptions of the non-domestic world - but that world also, in turn, impacts upon the home. As a result, depictions of 'home' - and its women - are as fluid and malleable and as open to critical question and ambiguity as fictions of anywhere else.

It is with this idea that the final chapter of my thesis is concerned. After previously witnessing the architectural merger between home and the girls' school, unravelling the conceit of the hotel as a home, and observing the conflict between the home and the office, the last chapter investigates the connection between the private house - and the private house. Explored through the volatile medium of the domestic servant, as portrayed in Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), and E. H. Young's *Miss Mole* (1930), the home, as feminized territory, is seen as anything but the reliable constant of inter-war middle-class life. Rather, it is perceived to be in sharp disagreement with itself. The home questions its own domestic function and purpose in the modern world - and lays itself open to change in the process. 'Nowhere' and 'somewhere' are seen to be part of the same feminized landscape.

It is in the heart of this landscape that this thesis is, finally, situated. In the reciprocal representational process whereby the home comes into contact with other institutions - including other versions of itself - there emerges a blurred and shifting 'middle ground' where feminized preoccupations and concerns from both sides, conflate.⁸ The women and girls who occupy this middle ground of somewhere and nowhere escape definitive classification - socially, sexually, and emotionally. They are women who may be wives, mothers and home-makers, and who once were schoolgirls, but, in occupying this middle ground, also become something else - intriguing, and not quite knowable. This study sets out to explore that 'something else' which is created at the middle ground where nowhere and somewhere meet.

⁸ I am grateful to Alison Light for her suggested usage of this term.

Ideas of middle ground as an ambiguous and unknowable spatial and creative terrain have, then, dictated the thematic concerns and content of this thesis. But 'middle ground' has also provided a way of understanding *social* terrain, and, as such, has guided the direction of my primary research and influenced my choice of authors and texts. This study adopts an inter-disciplinary approach and it draws across a range of contemporary cultural discourses which include journalism, film, advertizing, women's magazines and sociological texts. The inclusion of these types of material suggests that the representation and interpretation of place is a polyvalent exercise, and in this plurality lies a full and involving debate with the diverse cultural life of the period. But this thesis does not claim to be an inclusive survey of women's writing during the inter-war period. Nor is it a comprehensive socio-economic exploration of women's lives in these years. What this thesis is - and what my research, primary and secondary, has been largely focused upon - is an exploration of middle ground. The very timescape of the inter-war period itself could be described thus: as resting uneasily in temporal middle ground, caught between one war and the next.⁹ But the way I have chosen to understand inter-war middle ground is as a metaphor for a particular social and cultural terrain.

No one tried harder to delineate this landscape in the inter-war period than Q. D. Leavis. In *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), she offers a neat breakdown of social class according to reading habits:

If the Times Book Club and Mudie's serve the upper middle-class and Boots' the lower middle-class, while the news-agent's represents the bookshop for most people, there is the bookshop of the working class to consider. Where

⁹ See Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Life and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Bodley Head, 1976), p. 38.

multiple stores have a branch there is usually to be found a bazaar of the American firm, Messrs. Woolworth: here for 3d. or 6d. nearly everything necessary to existence can be bought, including literature.¹⁰

She goes on to categorize further, still using literary institutions as the bases for social classification:

The *Criterion* will review only those novels which have some pretensions to literary merit and can be criticised by serious standards . . . ; the *Times Literary Supplement*, representing a 'safe' academic attitude, will summarise and comment on the plot and merits of any work by a novelist of standing; while a whole handful of cheap weeklies appear to satisfy a demand for literary gossip and information about the readableness of books. It will be convenient to call these levels 'highbrow', 'middlebrow' and 'lowbrow'. (20)

It may be 'convenient' for Leavis to label so cleanly the different social groupings and their cultural habits - but her classification is not, ultimately, sustainable. She herself finds the boundary lines continually being re-drawn, however hard she tries to rationalize the blurring process away. Some readers of the *Sunday Despatch* - who 'may be presumed to be representative enough of the great public' (36) - choose James Joyce's difficult, modernist text, *Ulysses* (1922) as an example of a post-war book that will survive into the next generation. This is a choice which Leavis finds hard to take, coming as it does from such an unelevated readership; she attributes it to the 'factitious fame censorship has conferred upon [*Ulysses*]'; and then, unable to let the anomaly go, adds in a footnote that, among such a social group, the presence of the novel as an important book is only to be explained by 'word-of-mouth repute.' (282). At the other extreme, a 'highbrow' novelist

¹⁰ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), p. 14.

is jealous of the best-selling author, Florence Barclay, whom he thinks ‘undoubtedly a great writer *on her plane* - Shakespeare of the servants’ hall . . . I had infinitely rather have written *The Rosary* than *The Forsyte Saga*, for example” ’ (63). This yearning for the lowbrow Leavis justifies as ‘the fascinated envy of an ever-intellectual novelist for the lower organism that exudes vital energy as richly as a manure heap.’ (63)

But it is not just that ‘lowbrow’ may aspire to ‘highbrow’, and ‘highbrow’ root around in the muck of ‘lowbrow’, thereby disrupting the established boundaries of social life and literary appreciation. The ‘middlebrow’, it seems, is always already a problematic and blurred cultural and social territory. Even as she bullet-points the characteristics of the three levels, Leavis flounders over the ‘middlebrow’, and finds herself having to negotiate its meaning:

- A. ‘Highbrow’
- B. ‘Middlebrow’ read as ‘literature’
- C. ‘Middlebrow’ not read as literature, but not writing for the lowbrow market
- D. Absolute bestsellers (45)

‘B’ and ‘C’ are nebulous, shifting categories, cagily barred with careful inverted commas, or framed in negative space - ‘not read as literature, but not writing for the lowbrow market’ leaves what is being written for, and read by whom, in intriguing shadow: very much a case of nothing happening nowhere.

It is this shadowy and unquantifiable quality of inter-war, middle-class social and cultural life that I am interested in exploring in this thesis - precisely because ‘middlebrow’, as Leavis understands it, is so inadequate as a descriptive term for that

social and cultural life. Which is where the idea of 'middle ground' comes in. To explore the 'middle ground' is, of course, to explore the middle classes: their preoccupations and neuroses, their desires and aspirations, their cultural preferences and social habits. But the notion of an *expanse* - of a landscape; a social and creative terrain - suggested by the phrase 'middle ground' allows for a more fluid and generous definition of the middle classes than that which Leavis permits. 'Middle ground' retains the intriguing sense of ambiguity which Leavis unwittingly attributes to the 'middlebrow', whilst softening the cultural reprimand that her usage of it represents. 'Middle ground' understands the middle classes of the inter-war period as a particularly fluid and emergent group, continually expanding and redefining its boundaries, whilst still trying to keep a sense of its identity. New professions and new money bring new types of home-owners, car-drivers and leisure-seekers into the ranks of the middle classes, who go to form part of an evolving and unexplored social landscape. 'Middle ground' sees the middle classes of these years as something of an unknown quantity: both flourishing and insecure; retrenching traditional values even as new ones evolve. As Alison Light points out, the very word ' "middle class" was . . . undergoing radical revision between the wars and any use of the term must ideally stretch from the typist to the teacher, include the "beautician" as well as the civil servant, the florist and the lady doctor, the library assistant and the suburban housewife, and the manifold differences between them.'¹¹

A preoccupation with the nebulous and not-quite-knowable 'middle ground' of the inter-war period has suggested the methodology that governs my thesis, underwriting the

¹¹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 12.

choice of some authors and texts, and the necessary, if unwilling, exclusion of others. Genre fiction - crime, romance - has not been part of this study; nor has magazine fiction. Although these types of literature do play a part in the cultural formation and understanding of inter-war 'middle ground', it has been beyond the scope of this thesis to devote the kind of critical attention that would have been necessary in order to analyse convincingly the particular characteristics and readership of genre fiction.¹² I have been more interested in choosing women's fictions which simultaneously depict and inhabit the fluid, unknowable terrain of the inter-war middle classes - just as the feminized representation of place, of 'middle ground', *within* these fictions, is, itself, emergent and uncertain. I have already mentioned, in discussing individual chapters, some of the authors under discussion: these include E. H. Young, Stevie Smith, Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf and Daphne Du Maurier. The presence of Woolf might seem incongruous here. Other 'Modernist' writers - Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, Djuna Barnes - have been excluded, on the grounds that they are not representative of 'middle ground' culture. Q. D. Leavis puts Woolf, too, in the 'highbrow' camp: she observes in *Fiction and the Reading Public* that 'the usual complaints of would-be readers of Mrs. Woolf's novels are "She doesn't write about anything," "Her characters aren't real," and "There isn't any story"'. The novels are in fact highbrow art' (222-23). And there has not been a place in this thesis for Woolf's experimental novels of the Twenties: *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), for example, or *To The Lighthouse* (1927), or

¹² And genre fiction has been explored convincingly by various critics. Alison Light devotes a chapter to the crime fiction of Agatha Christie in *Forever England*. Rachel Anderson has explored romance fiction in *The Purple Heart Throbs: The Sub-Literature of Love* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974); more recently, Catherine Belsey has explored similar themes in *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

Orlando (1928). But I have looked in some depth at *The Voyage Out* (1915), for its representation of hotel-culture; and at *The Years* (1937), for its treatment of the servant problem: an early novel¹³, and a late fiction. Neither text can truly be described as ‘highbrow art’ in quite the way Leavis means it. *The Voyage Out* is, in many respects, a novel in the traditional mould - that is, it has recognisable ‘characters’ who develop, and a ‘story’ which has a beginning, middle and end: Woolf very much writing about ‘something’. And *The Years*, in spite of Woolf’s own doubts, proved to be ‘a big, popular, best-selling success’¹⁴ - which, according to Leavis’s social and aesthetic criteria, automatically excludes it from the rarefied ranks of ‘highbrow art.’ But it is precisely these factors - of artistic accessibility and commercial success - which warrant the inclusion of *The Voyage Out* and *The Years* in a discussion of inter-war ‘middle ground’.

Other writers included in this thesis are more naturally at home in this territory. Stevie Smith’s *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), is sensitive to the strangely unknowable quality of suburban life: its narrator, Pompey - herself a child of the suburbs - speaks of suburban Bottle Green as a mysterious maze or labyrinth - ‘I have wandered about having a *nostalgie* for this suburb, but no means of getting into the inside of it’, she complains.¹⁵ E. H. Young is a now a little-known writer, although she was successful in the period¹⁶: her novel, *Miss Mole*, is extremely responsive to the insecurities and anxieties of the middle

¹³ Very early: I am aware that this novel falls outside the nominal boundaries of the inter-war period. However, its themes are so pertinent to the period - are picked up and elaborated upon by, for example, Elizabeth Bowen in her 1927 novel, *The Hotel* - that I have included a discussion of it in this thesis.

¹⁴ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 675.

¹⁵ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* [1936] (London: Virago, 1993), p. 223.

¹⁶ She was awarded the James Tait Black memorial prize in 1930 for *Miss Mole* - a prestigious award: previous winners included E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence. See Chapter 4 for more on E.H. Young’s intriguing personal life and literary output.

classes in these years, describing as it does a new breed of homes and home-dwellers who are 'just emerging from the basement era'¹⁷: with new traditions and rules, the only thing that matters is to 'give the impression that nothing unusual or indecorous can happen within their walls' (57). The heroine of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* is drawn from the 'middle ground': much of the novel's conflict arises from her social incompatibility with the old-fashioned and unsustainable aristocratic traditions of Manderley, so firmly entrenched and enforced.

But the writer who lies at the centre of this thesis is Elizabeth Bowen. It is not only that she displays such a creative fascination with place - and with women's relationships with place - so that the girls' school, the house and the hotel resonate as architectural and symbolic structures throughout her novels and short stories of the period. It is also that her work both emerges from and reflects the fluid and unknowable quality of inter-war 'middle ground'. By her own account, she belongs to no literary group or clique: although friendly with Virginia Woolf, she was not affiliated to Bloomsbury; no more was she a part of the politically-driven writership of the Thirties.¹⁸ She reviewed and wrote for magazines as disparate in content, style and readership as *Vogue* and *The New Statesman*.¹⁹ And her fiction, in its desire to encompass the full social milieu of 'middle ground', has been perceived as being that 'of the magazine order': rather vulgar: not-quite art.²⁰

¹⁷ E. H. Young, *Miss Mole* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 57.

¹⁸ See Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-26.

Perhaps there is something in Bowen's own background which explains her fascination with the nothing and everything, the somewhere and nowhere of 'middle ground'. Anglo-Irish, she was caught between England and Ireland all her life, but, by her own reckoning, perhaps the most significant exchange between the two cultures took place in her seventh year, when, prompted by the mental illness of her father, she and her mother moved to England. Leaving the ancestral Irish home, Bowen's Court, she and her mother relocated to the Kent coast, and there began a five year peregrination between one rented villa and another:

Dotted over hills in sight of the sea and in valleys out of it, villas came in all shapes - a phantasmagoric variety - and sizes. And not only were there villas but one could live in them - in Ireland one could not: habit, fatalism or piety bound my people either to inherited homes or homes they had inherited ideas about.²¹

Elizabeth and her mother came to love these villas, so free of social or familial baggage - 'unhistorical little gimcrack bubbles of illusion.'²²

With the first echo of our steps on the stripped floors, or of our voices excitedly hushed by these new acoustics, another dream-future sprang into being. We took wherever we were, at the first glance. Yes, what a suppositious existence ours came to be, in these one-after-another fantasy buildings, pavilions of love.²³

These are places where nothing can happen nowhere because they barely exist yet. Inheriting as she does an Anglo-Irish legacy which upholds 'grace, charm, courtesy and

²¹ Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, pp. 27 - 28.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

respect for tradition',²⁴ Bowen's work is also infused with a sense of excitement and curiosity about the social and historical unknowability of 'middle ground', as exemplified in her description of these empty, youthful villas, as much a structure of illusion and fantasy as reality; of supposition as fact.

This unknowable quality is transmitted into the fictional depiction of her social world and her women. Bowen is not comfortable in her portrayal of working-class women: her ear is not attuned to the faithful representation of speech patterns that differ from her own stylised modulations, and she is not happy in the transcription of dialect. But neither does she focus much on the world of aristocrats. Her women are middle class - that is, they form part of the fluid cultural and social landscape of inter-war 'middle ground'. Her women read intellectual French novels, but they also go to see the Marx brothers at the cinema. Their daughters go to school, but are also taught at home by governesses. They go out to work in libraries and offices, but they also stay at home and do absolutely nothing at all. They live in large country houses, small city flats, decaying Irish piles, and in suburban estates so newly built they are unfinished. They get married and have children - and they also commit adultery, contemplate murder, see ghosts, and go quietly insane.

'Middle ground', as Bowen writes it, permits all these versions of femininity house-room. As such, her fictions of place and space - her representations of a feminized territory where nothing can happen nowhere - locate her, if not in the middle, then certainly at the heart of this thesis.

²⁴ Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 3.

CHAPTER ONE

The Personal Element: Place, Personality And Feeling In The Girls' School

The subject, indeed, [of personal relations] may well be omitted or avoided, as it bristles with difficulties . . . It is, however, of such fundamental importance that it is well to attempt to say something on the subject, more especially as mistakes are so often made in this sphere of our work, and when made are so fatal . . . In secondary education in particular, the 'personal element' is everything.¹

To acknowledge the very existence of the 'personal element' in female education is, it seems, a task fraught with difficulty. The emotions contained within the confines of school walls must be strangely powerful and disturbing, for if they are not approached with care, terrible injury - 'fatalities', even - may result. Yet the source of this emotional energy remains undisclosed. The writing circles nervously round the 'bristling' subject of schoolgirls, but is unable to confront openly the awkward and potentially dangerous creature that is a youthful female community.

These tentative anxieties about the schoolgirl state draw on a considerable inheritance of doubt and unease. In 1792, the political radical and feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft, roundly denounced the physical intimacies inherent in boarding-school life: 'a number of girls sleep in the same room, and wash together . . . [and] I should be very anxious to prevent their acquiring nasty, or immodest habits; and as many girls have learnt very nasty tricks . . . the mixing of them thus

¹ Sara A. Burstall, *English High Schools for Girls: Their Aims, Organization and Management* (London: Longmans, 1907), p. 164. Referred to hereafter as *High Schools*. Unless stated otherwise, all ellipses in quotations are my own, and denote a textual elision.

indiscriminatingly together, is very improper.’² Wollstonecraft’s fear of contagion - of moral infection, picked up and passed on ‘indiscriminatingly’ from one girl to another - is echoed in other, later, discussions of the girls’ school.

Charlotte M. Yonge, for example, writing in 1876 about the state of female education, frames her concern for girls’ emotional welfare at school in the sinister language of sickness. Yonge was a devout Christian, the editor of the girls’ magazine, *Monthly Packet*, from 1851 to 1890, and the author of many morally improving domestic novels written especially for adolescent girls.³ As such, the girls’ school threatens the allegiances to home and church that she holds most precious: ‘it is not possible to have large numbers of young girls boarding together without injuries to qualities more essential than intellect,’ she writes. ‘It is a curious thing, but of universal experience that while most boys are improved by free intercourse with their own kind - in large numbers generally, the larger, the better - girls as certainly deteriorate in proportion as the sense of family is lost.’⁴ When girls are massed together, they will, it seems, ‘deteriorate’ - a word that suggests moral consumption just as strongly as it does physical wasting. If daughters are taken away from the private house, and lose interest in domestic duties and preoccupations, then, Yonge infers, they are threatened with corresponding ‘injury’ - although the exact nature of the hurt remains ominously unspecified.

² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792] (London: Everyman, 1995), p. 144.

³ See Joanne Shattock, *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1993), pp. 480-81, for a fuller account of Yonge’s life and career.

⁴ Charlotte M. Yonge, *Womankind* (London: Mozely & Smith, 1876), p. 31. Yonge’s most successful novel was *The Daisy Chain, or Aspirations* (1856), which unfolds the history of a large Victorian family. Its heroine, the fifteen-year-old Ethel May, dreams of raising enough money to build a church. With the proceeds of the novel’s sale, Yonge herself raised enough money to help build a missionary college in New Zealand.

Nearly thirty years separate Yonge's cautionary advice from that which is nervously proffered by the quotation which begins this chapter. This latter is taken from Sara Burstall's *English High School for Girls*, published in 1907. The book is sub-titled: *Their Aims, Organization and Management*, and its two hundred pages chart the development of Girls' High Schools during the last half of the nineteenth century,⁵ as well as offering advice on the day-to-day running of a modern educational establishment. Sara Burstall is herself, the headmistress of Manchester High School for Girls.⁶ She is a scholar and educationalist: the frontispiece of her work lauds her achievements - 'lecturer in education at the University of Manchester and member of the Education Committee of the Manchester City Council; sometime scholar of Girton College, and a mistress in the Frances Mary Buss schools.'⁷ As a title in Longmans' *Books on Pedagogy* series, *English High Schools for Girls* is suitably and meticulously detailed, advising on topics as diverse as 'The Journey to School' and 'The School Doctor'; 'The Use of the Library' and 'Form Management and Moral Training'.

And yet, in spite of Sara Burstall's academic credentials, and her forward-thinking and innovative approach to girls' education, it seems that she is as suspicious of schoolgirls as is Wollstonecraft or Yonge. Although she knows she

⁵ She concentrates, for example, on the growth of the Girls' Public Day School Company, founded in 1872; the increase in the numbers of girls' schools during the 1880s; and the raising of educational standards when, in 1863, Cambridge University permitted girls to sit local examinations.

⁶ A 'first grade public endowed school' which opened in 1874. See Burstall, *High Schools*, p. 6.

⁷ Frances Mary Buss founded the North London Collegiate School in 1850, on which the High School Movement was based. For more information on the history of female education, both at school and at university, see Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985); Joyce Senders Peterson, *The Reform of Girls' Secondary and Higher Education in Victorian England* (New York and London: Garland, 1987); Gillian Avery, *The Best Type of Girl: A History of Girls' Independent Schools* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991); and Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities 1870-1939* (London: UCL Press, 1995).

must 'attempt' to tackle the subject of schoolgirls' emotions and personalities - and their relationships with each other - she is unable even to *define* the fatal danger of the 'personal element', let alone diffuse it. Instead - and drawing on the metaphors of sickness already familiar in discussion about the girls' school - Burstall recommends a cure without satisfactorily diagnosing the disease. She recommends that girls should 'learn to believe in the open window at school . . . [They] should be warmly clad, take exercise and be trained to dislike hot rooms. They are apt to be rather too fond of warmth'(75). In part, this is the expression of a genuine medical concern which feeds into contemporary anxieties about the closed world of school acting as a breeding ground for infectious diseases such as influenza and typhus. It is a concern that would see numerous girls' schools opened in the Twenties and Thirties on the South and East coasts of England, as bracing sea air was believed to curb the spread of illness.⁸ But Miss Burstall's philosophy of the open window holds true for moral as well as physical well-being. Her ambiguous pronouncement that girls are 'apt to be rather too fond of warmth' reads classroom temperature as a gauge of feeling: the hotter the emotional atmosphere the more harm is done to impressionable young minds. So the window is opened, a bracing cure for all ills. A chilly breeze promotes bodily health - but also prevents the languorous sensibilities of warmth-loving schoolgirls from taking pernicious root in the classroom.

⁸ See Avery, *The Best Type of Girl: A History of Girls' Independent Schools*, pp. 335-36, for more information on outbreaks of illness at school, and the new wave of coastal establishments that opened in the inter-war years. Referred to hereafter as *The Best Type of Girl*. The popular currency of the open-window school of health care finds articulation in Virginia Woolf's novel, *To The Lighthouse* [1927], with Mrs Ramsey's insistence that all windows should be left open. 'The drawing-room door was open: the hall door was open: it sounded as if the bedroom doors were open: and certainly the window on the landing was open, for that she had opened herself. That windows should be open, and doors shut - simple as it was, could none of them remember it?' (Harlow: Longmans, 1984), p. 23.

Moving forward into the inter-war period, girls' schools become topical and popular cultural currency, and discussion of their structure and workings is various and abundant. Elizabeth Bowen, Antonia White, Winifred Holtby and Ivy Compton-Burnett wrote fiction for adults about girls' schools; and Rosamond Lehmann's novel, *Dusty Answer* (1927), explores the intense emotional energy at loose in a women's college. The influential German film, *Mädchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931), is set in a Prussian boarding school, and tells the story of a pupil's romantic attachment to her housemistress. Meanwhile, Angela Brazil, Elinor M. Brent-Dyer and Elsie J. Oxenham were feeding an ever-growing demand from girls themselves for a school literature of their own.⁹ The inter-war period also saw an enormous influx of child-care manuals, many based on Freudian or Jungian psychology, which devoted considerable attention to unconscious sexual drives and behavioural impulses. Dr Alice Hutchinson's *Motives of Conduct in Childhood* (1931); Frances G. Wickes' *The Inner World of Childhood* (1927); and E. Mildred Nevill's *A Study of Childhood and Youth* (1939), were just a few of the titles published during these years.

These cultural offerings were both products of, and contributed to, the rapid growth of the girls' school in the period. Convent schools, with their ancient traditions and European heritage, had been a part of the educational landscape in England since the seventeenth century. But the inter-war period witnessed an unprecedented surge in the popularity of existing schools; and an increase in the

⁹ 'A survey carried out in Sheffield Public Library in 1938 showed that during the ten days of the survey, girls borrowed 454 school stories, as compared with 286 fairy stories, the next most popular genre.' Sheila G. Ray, *The Blyton Phenomenon* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982), p. 195. For more on the history and development of the girls' school story, see Rosemary Auchmuty, *A World of Girls* (London: The Women's Press, 1992) and Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *You're a Brick, Angela!: The Girls' Story 1839-1985* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1976).

numbers and types of new schools. For the rich few, there were the grand public schools - like Roedean - founded in 1885 by the three Lawrence sisters: Dorothy, Millicent and Penelope. This establishment, which moved to its present-day location in Rottingdean in 1899, was run on the same lines as the great boys' public schools. Considerable emphasis was laid upon playing games, and playing the game; upon the House, school honour, and the building of *esprit de corps*.¹⁰

Then, also for the few, there were the experimental schools. A. S. Neill founded Summerhill in 1927, a co-educational enterprise in free expression and unstructured living: 'lessons in Summerhill are optional,' he writes. 'Children can go to them or stay away - for years if they want to.'¹¹ It was in this same year that the philosopher, Bertrand Russell, established Beacon Hill, his own version of the progressive school. His daughter, Katherine, remembers that '[we] were to have absolute freedom of inquiry; our natural curiosity was to be encouraged in every way.'¹² But she goes on to chart Russell's own disillusionment with the project, and his eventual realization that 'to let the children go free was to establish a reign of terror, in which the strong kept the weak trembling and miserable' (77).

These were two extremes of the school as a growing and changing entity during these years: the girls' public school, trying to assimilate an ancient tradition, not its own; and the experimental school, breaking entirely new educational ground. More mainstream territory was occupied by the Girls' High Schools, which were accountable to a board of trustees and governors, and offered a sturdy, no-nonsense education - like Sara Burstall's own Manchester High School, which

¹⁰ Avery, *The Best Type of Girl*, pp. 99-102. This chapter is indebted to Avery's wide-ranging research into the history of the girls' school.

¹¹ A. S. Neill, *That Dreadful School* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd., 1937), p. 158.

¹² Katharine Tait, *My Father Bertrand Russell* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977), p. 73.

pledged a girl's 'right to complete development, to a share in the spiritual development of the race, to the opportunities of making the best of her faculties.'¹³

Then there were the girls' schools which were privately owned and run, and which opened in unprecedented numbers in this period. Accountable to no body or board, they could vary enormously in quality, size and educational method. Olive Willis, an old girl of Roedean, founded Downe House School in 1907, in reaction to the rigid hierarchies and structures of the former establishment. Its status as a private enterprise allowed for an eccentric and personal approach to education - the prioritization of literature and languages over science and maths and geography, for example - but the charismatic personality of Miss Willis ensured the school's success among the liberal, intellectual middle classes.¹⁴ Other private schools were not so distinguished - they did not need to be - in order to thrive. In a prospectus for Highfield School in Hertfordshire, taken from the Truman and Knightley Schools Directory of 1930, it is clear how little importance is devoted to academic matters. Athletic facilities, certainly, there are in abundance: schoolgirls enjoy 'ample opportunities for Outdoor Games (Tennis, Hockey, Netball, Croquet and Lacrosse), and there is a large Open-Air Swimming Bath.' In contrast, academic opportunities are rather more briefly outlined, and are confined to the restraints of the lower case. Simply, the 'curriculum is as wide as is consistent with thoroughness in essential subjects.' The headmistresses are unqualified, and the 'aim of the School is to train character as thoroughly as possible'¹⁵ - character,

¹³ Burstall, *High Schools*, p. 13.

¹⁴ See Avery, *The Best Type of Girl*, pp. 102-105.

¹⁵ This advertisement is quoted in Avery, *The Best Type of Girl*, figure 18.

rather than mind. But establishments like these flourished during the inter-war period.

Cultural satellites - film and fiction, essay and memoir - evolved and developed as did the various schools themselves. Antonia White recounts the unchanged traditions and rituals of a convent education in her autobiographical novel, *Frost in May* (1933), while Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936) charts the regeneration of a Girls' High School. Elizabeth Bowen highlights the idiosyncrasies of the small private school in her short story, 'Maria' (1934): the eponymous heroine's 'slight tendency to curvature and her dislike of all puddings' are taken 'into loving consideration' by a school which teaches 'swimming, dancing, some French, the more innocent aspects of history, and *noblesse oblige*.'¹⁶

In these texts - and in many others of the period - the 'personal element' in schoolgirl life is of enormous importance. The child's personality and her physical appearance; her emotions; and her relationships with other girls: all are freely discussed. The concern not quite articulated by Wollstonecraft, Yonge and Burstall - that the girls' school is an unhealthy site of contagion - is, for example, fully aired and sanitized by the child-care manuals that proliferated at this time. They use the language of psychology to provide a suitable vocabulary to explain and authorize what had seemed unspeakable or illicit. In *The Growing Child and Its Problems* (1937), an entire chapter is devoted to 'The Adolescent Girl': to her emotional needs, sexual fixations and repressions. Laura Hutton, B.A., M. R. C. S., L. R. C. P., cool and calm in her medical authority, reassures her reader that, 'from the

¹⁶ Bowen, *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* [1980] (London: Penguin, 1983), pp. 408-409. Referred to hereafter as *Collected Stories*.



psychological point of view, the girl's homosexual attachment to her schoolfriend will not destroy her psycho-sexual development.¹⁷

What becomes evident, however, is that in spite of the cultural fascination with the girls' school displayed in this period, the representation of the 'personal element' still presents textual difficulties. It is no longer the case that the subject 'bristles' with all that cannot be spoken about the 'fatal' impulses of young girls massed together in an atmosphere of unhealthy emotional warmth. Rather, the 'personal element' - the handling of feelings, identity and relationships in the girls' school - has become the very opposite: not spiky, but *slippery*: not untouchable, but unknowable. It is a tantalizing treatment, which renders the 'personal element', commonly discussed as it is in the period, as difficult to grasp as ever.

The reason for this disconcerting textual treatment is closely caught up with the historical development of the girl's school - in particular, its *newness*, its comparative youth.¹⁸ The OED has 1809 as the date for the first usage of the word 'schoolgirl', and girls' schools did not exist in any significant number until the 1870s.¹⁹ Very few establishments in the Twenties and Thirties, even the most prestigious, could boast of a history of more than fifty or sixty years duration. The very notion of a 'schoolgirl' was comparatively raw. In contrast, the great boys' public schools enjoyed a much more august heritage: Eton, founded in 1441, Harrow, in 1571, St. Paul's, in 1510. These institutions enjoyed unbroken centuries of existence in which to acquire the rituals, traditions, rules and slang which

¹⁷ Laura Hutton, *The Growing Child and its Problems* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1937), p. 95.

¹⁸ The exception, of course, being the Convent School, to which I shall return.

¹⁹ The Schools Inquiry Commission of 1868 - the Taunton Commission - criticized the deplorable state of female education, and recommended improvements at secondary level. These came into effect in the 1870s.

defined them. Girls' schools could not share in this leisured, measured historical process. Their buildings were often makeshift and impromptu, their traditions necessarily raw and unfledged in comparison.

And this untried, experimental quality is what emerges in the *writing* of the girls' school - and in the writing of the 'personal element'. It is the unshaped rawness of the girls' school - as a historical concept, and as a physical structure - which infuses the shifting, slippery representation of the feelings and relationships therein. There is no mould in which the 'personal element' can be textually set, just as there is often no designated building in which to house the girls' school itself, and no entrenched, centuries-old traditions and rituals which, when housed, it is able to adopt. It is new textual ground as it is new educational and architectural ground. Each feeds into the other, and the resulting cultural territory is intriguing, elusive and difficult.

The Old School (1934) offers a route into this territory. Edited by Graham Greene, it is a collection of short school memoirs written by some of the most pre-eminent writers of the period, including W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bowen, Harold Nicholson, Stephen Spender, and Greene himself. The book is one more variation upon the topical inter-war theme of education. There are few surprises among the essays written by the male contributors. Homosexuality, casual brutality, flogging and fagging, the honour code, and the House: these are the key notes of the boys' public school system which resonate throughout *The Old School*, and, indeed, throughout much male writing of the Thirties.²⁰ The larger and more prestigious among the girls' schools emulated many of the same codes and traditions, and it is

²⁰ See Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, pp. 127-135.

this imitation of the male establishment that the novelist and film critic, E. Arnot Robertson, deplores in her essay, 'Potting Shed of the English Rose'. Writing about Sherborne Girls School, she complains that the place was 'run on a male system imperfectly adapted to female needs',²¹ with a quite unnecessary emphasis placed on games, team spirit, and school honour.

But whereas the male contributors frequently adopt a casual, matter-of-fact tone to describe what are, after all, the routine and entrenched tropes of public-school life, Robertson has more stylistic difficulties in approaching her subject matter. Arthur Calder-Marshall, for example, in his contribution to the collection - 'More Frank than Buchman' - writes of his career at St. Paul's with an understated, dry touch, mentioning lightly that 'when I reached puberty, I looked round for boys to fall in love with' (63): schoolboy homosexuality as an unsensational given. But Robertson has to work her prose much harder to prove her point - the writing has to be *seen* to be working. So in condemning the excessive athletic bias of Sherborne, she herself makes excessive use of parentheses: one example, '(run, girls, run!)', appears four times in the short essay. The school's philosophy is hammered home with the emphatic use of capital letters - 'The High Moral Tone of the School'(175); 'The Sherborne Type'(177) - and dashes are sprinkled with a liberal hand. The hearty school atmosphere, Robertson maintains, is generated by the hysterical mantra: 'Oh-goody-goody-we-ought-to-do-well-in-lacrosse-this-term. Hurrah-for-the-house-and-I'm-so-glad-I'm-not-pretty'(179).

These devices impart a mannered, self-conscious edginess to the text, for the tropes of the girls' public school - which are, in this case, borrowed from the boys'

²¹ Ed. Graham Greene, *The Old School* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 174.

- are being worked too hard. Robertson's essay must work laboriously with crude semantic and stylistic tools in order to make a mark on the relatively blank historical and cultural page of the girls' school. The comfortable robes of schoolboy tradition and ritual, fashioned over the centuries and worn lightly, are awkward and ill-fitting when borrowed by the upstart educational fledgling. It is as if Robertson's essay is trapped in the same mimetic pattern as Sherborne itself, and is unable to strike into new textual territory. Certainly, there is no room for discussion of the 'personal element' in this uncomfortable writing, ill at ease with its subject and itself. Robertson depicts the public life of the school, rather than the private; and sketches 'the Sherborne Type' in her broadest athletic outline, rather than delineating the individual.

Elizabeth Bowen's essay, 'The Mulberry Tree' - also in *The Old School* - flags a more intriguing departure into the uncertain, untested territory of the girls' school and the 'personal element'. Girls' schools plainly fascinate Bowen. They appear in different guises - both sinister and comic - in much of her fiction. And it is an attraction that spans a career: from her short story, 'The Jungle' (1929), through the novels of the Thirties - *Friends and Relations* (1931), *To The North* (1932) and *The Death of the Heart* (1938) - and into the late fiction - *The Little Girls* (1964) and *Eva Trout* (1969) - the girls' school enjoys an enduring presence in her work. But given Bowen's evident preoccupation with the place as an imaginative locus, to read 'The Mulberry Tree' for the first time is a disconcerting experience - for it is impossible, quite, to catch its register.

In the posthumously published *Pictures and Conversations*, Bowen, writing about the importance of place, says that 'schools - as I knew them - crystallized

place feelings.’²² But there is nothing clear-cut or transparent about ‘The Mulberry Tree’, which describes Elizabeth’s experiences at Downe House School just after the outbreak of the First World War. It is an essay which stresses the prosaic, detached pattern of schoolgirl life, whilst all the time suggesting a current of deeper emotion and feeling which tugs beneath the placid school surface. So Bowen seemingly refutes the idea that the girls’ school is a potential site for dangerous, powerful emotion, professing that ‘No one of my companions betrayed my affections, corrupted me, aggravated my inferiority complex, made me wish I had more money, gave me a warp for life, or did anything that is supposed to happen at schools’(58). Yet there is always a shadow of textual doubt hanging over the veracity of such observations.

The narrative voice which unfolds ‘The Mulberry Tree’ is frequently unreliable, duplicitous, confusing, teasing. Who, after all, *is* the narrator? Pronouns shape-shift confusingly throughout the essay: in the space of a single paragraph, the text moves from the collective assertion that ‘we cannot really have been idiotic girls’ - to discussion of ‘a friend of mine’ - to a detached observation made by ‘oneself’ - before finally reverting back to the group ‘we’(46-47). All these different pronouns carry different shades of meaning and understanding in their narrative roles. Their interchange creates an edgy balance between the personal and the impersonal, the general and the specific - between autobiography and social documentary. And this multiple narrative voice, confusing enough in itself, also suffers from amnesia. No less than four times, Bowen confesses that ‘I do not remember’, and the essay concludes with the reminder that ‘memory . . . is so oblique and suggestive that no

²² Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, p. 44.

doubt I see my school-days through a subjective haze'(58). The shifty narrator draws attention to her own duplicitous status; is deliberately inviting doubt as to the truthfulness and reliability of her observations.

This kind of textual teasing underwrites 'The Mulberry Tree'. After all, to list so assiduously the vices of the girls' school - corruptions, warps, complexes - if only, as Bowen does, to list their *absence*, is nonetheless to invoke a sense of their presence. To articulate them, even as non-existent, is to give them textual life. They power the sentence, especially given that no positive alternative - that which Bowen's contemporaries *did* do to her - is offered in their stead.

Then there is her treatment of nightingales, their song traditionally a metaphor for passionate, intense feeling. In Rosamond Lehmann's novel, *Dusty Answer* (1927), for example, a nightingale's music transfixes its two heroines as they sit in the window of their college room on a golden summer's evening: 'an icy echoing flute bubbled over in rich and complicated rapture. They stared at each other with tragic faces. It was too much, this happiness and beauty.'²³ The bird song provides a wordless but entirely eloquent articulation of the girls' passionate feelings towards each other. But 'The Mulberry Tree' seemingly undermines this romantic trope. Adopting the passive voice and informative tone of a guide book, Bowen appears, ungracefully, to interrupt the lush, lyrical song, and the lush, lyrical *writing* of the song. She remarks: 'The Cudham valley was said to be a great place for nightingales, but we girls can never have walked there at the right time . . . ' (46). And yet, all is not quite so matter-of-fact as it seems. For the ellipsis with which the sentence trails away is Bowen's own device - a silence, an omission - but

²³ Rosamond Lehmann, *Dusty Answer* [1927] (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. 140-41.

signifying what? Regret, secrecy, longing - another memory lapse, perhaps? Those three dots conceal what it is impossible to know. Only conjecture and guess-work are allowed. But the use of an ellipsis after such a romantically-loaded reference as that of the nightingale cannot help but intimate a silence rich in feeling.

Bowen's essay moves with supple ease between disclosure and revelation, emotion and reserve, imagination and reality.

We danced (we thought) rather glamorously in the gymnasium to a piano . . . On summer Saturday evenings we walked round the garden between dances, feeling unlike ourselves. The garden was long, with lime trees and long grasses with cuckoo flowers in it: it looked very beautiful in the late evening light.' (54-55)

The parenthetic '(we thought)' deflates the moment: what had seemed so glamorous at the time was only ever that which "seemed" - a subjective illusion, or delusion, conjured up by self-regarding young minds. And yet the scene is not the sole province of an amused, retrospective detachment. The beauty of the garden, described "straight", remains unqualified. Its lime trees and grasses and flowers were not then, and are not now, subject to distortion. How is the 'personal element' - the complex amalgam of personality, looks and feeling - to be juggled between these two types of perception: between what is, and what seems? Typically, 'The Mulberry Tree' offers only a tantalizing suggestion as to how the 'personal element' operates. 'We felt unlike ourselves', Bowen writes, hinting at an emotional epiphany - which remains undisclosed. What, after all, do 'ourselves' normally feel like; and what is feeling unlike them, like? Bowen does not say.

The fact is, playful secrecy and controlled suggestion are the only textual certainties in her essay. The whole point lies in not getting to the point, whilst

making it quite clear that the point most certainly exists. Or, as Bowen puts it, 'The test of what *is* to be said, told, written (or to remain in writing) is . . . not least, its power to make known, by suggestion or evocation of something further, what needs to be known without being told.'²⁴ The shifting territory of suggestion and evocation is that which Bowen occupies in 'The Mulberry Tree'. The amorphous, equivocal quality of the writing mirrors the metamorphic, exploratory shape of the girls' school itself in this period, both as a physical and historical construct. The 'personal element' in female education is not textually untouchable as it once was. It is more that the unfinished newness of the girls' school infuses the 'personal element' - and the depiction of the 'personal element' - with its own sense of unknowability. Using Bowen's essay as a starting point, I want to go on to explore in closer detail the ways in which cultural representations of looks, identity and feeling reflect and inflect the inter-war structures of the girls' school.

Getting oneself across

The ever difficult business of getting oneself across was most pressing of all at this age . . . Foibles, mannerisms we therefore exaggerated most diligently. If anyone said 'You are always so such-and-such' one felt one had formed a new intimacy and made one's mark.
(*'The Mulberry Tree'*, p. 47)

According to Bowen, the schoolgirl's identity is a supple, mercurial creation. Still fluid, not yet set in adult postures or attitudes, her sense of self is as malleable as the school which houses her. The success of forays into selfhood are measured by

²⁴ Bowen, 'Exclusion' in *Afterthought: Pieces About Writing* (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 220.

their recognition by other girls within the school community: you do not know that you have become 'so such-and-such' until someone tells you so. The individual can only see herself as she seems to others, and identity can be made or destroyed by this reflexive process.

Downe House - the school on which 'The Mulberry Tree' is based - prided itself on its championing of the unusual and the bizarre, and it repudiated the regimented structures of school life. There were no prefects or head-girls or houses; no school songs or school prizes. The "done thing" as far as personality was concerned was to be different; to exaggerate 'foibles and mannerisms' - 'to be at least one thing to excess'.²⁵ For Bowen and her contemporaries, the act of creating and defining identity was, then, always new and intriguing - a continual, self-conscious exercise in seeming to be something. (Bowen was to fictionalize a version of Downe House in her 1931 novel, *Friends and Relations*. At Mellyfield School, girls 'developed very early a feeling for character. They were interested in their own personalities, which they displayed, discussed and altered. They read psychology to each other on Sunday afternoons.'²⁶)

But such strivings for individuality are unusual. Conformity is the more general rule: 'the agonizing wish to be like everyone else, known only to children at boarding school.'²⁷ The writer and social commentator, Margaret Cole, remembers her misery at the rigid establishment of Roedean, 'where you can never, for thirteen long weeks at a time, get away from seeing your personality mirrored in the eyes of others - or watching them move away from the vision in repulsion.'²⁸

²⁵ Bowen, 'The Mulberry Tree', p. 47.

²⁶ Bowen, *Friends and Relations* [1931] (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 43.

²⁷ Antonia White, *Frost in May* [1933] (London: Virago, 1990), p. 29.

²⁸ Margaret Cole, *Growing Up Into Revolution* (London: Longmans, 1949), p. 26. Referred to hereafter as *Revolution*. Margaret Cole was married to the Fabian economist G. D. H. Cole.

As a non-conformer, she is imprisoned by a grotesque view of herself which others have created. *Her* identity - who she is - is dependent upon *their* perception - how she appears, how she seems, how she looks - which is then 'mirrored' back to her as a distorted but all-powerful version of her own reality. The only way to avoid such a harmful process is to conform - or seem to conform - absolutely with everyone else, in looks, social background, and personality.

Conformity, as Gwen Raverat recalls, means being an 'Ordinary Person'.

I passionately wanted to be an Ordinary Person, and I tried very hard, and quite ineffectually, to conceal all my real interests from their contempt and mockery . . . It took me some time to realize that it was considered queer to be interested in anything whatever except horses, or things like hat-pin knobbing; or, of course, games or gossip . . . I did my best to pretend that I did like what I didn't and that I didn't like what I did. But it was no good: they knew perfectly well that there was something wrong about me, so that I always felt inferior and out of it . . . No one can succeed in running with the hare and hunting with the hounds for very long.²⁹

The necessity of appearing to be an 'Ordinary Person' is a constant in school society, policed by the girls themselves, who keep a vigilant and critical watch for any deviation from the norm. Mostly, this scrutiny is effective in maintaining the status quo: as one schoolgirl remarks, 'I don't see why anyone should change their character to suit others, but gradually you have to change, and you do, not knowing that you do.'³⁰ By the time you have been absorbed into school society, you are no longer aware that such a process of assimilation has taken place: now,

She wrote detective fiction in collaboration with her husband, but also published - as here - alone.

²⁹ Gwen Raverat, *Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 72.

³⁰ Mallory Wober, *English Girls' Boarding Schools* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1971), p. 143.

you *are* the status quo, and always have been. But if you 'cannot fit the pattern'³¹ of school life, then the critical gaze of the other girls is directed against you. Their perception constructs a personality for you - unlovely and unloved - which it is very difficult not to inhabit.

Sociologists attribute this hostile behaviour to insecurity.

Indeed, it is often at those moments when a collectivity is threatened with change that its culture and bonds become exposed to itself: only when an obvious 'outsider' appears do group members suddenly realize aspects of their common bonds as insiders. . . . The token's contrast effect, then, can lead dominants to exaggerate both their commonality and the token's 'difference'. They move to heighten boundaries of which, previously, they might even have been unaware.³²

The girls' school in the inter-war period was, after all, a relatively new form of 'collective'. The raw, unfledged historical status, and the makeshift physical structure of so many girls' schools at this time, offers an explanation for the unforgiving ferocity of the girls' vigilance, which seeks to heighten the boundaries of school society. It is a policing scrutiny all the more searching because it has to safeguard a collective which is new and uncertain; a tentative collective which insists all the more urgently upon definition by clearly visible symbols of unity and uniformity.

Physical appearance provided an immediate visual index of school unity during the inter-war period. Popular culture propagated a very exact physical ideal of girlhood, and of the schoolgirl - an ideal which was the product of, and contributed to, the development of the schools themselves. It was considered wise to keep the

³¹ Cole, *Revolution*, p. 26.

³² Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 222.

adolescent girl as physically *un*-girlish as possible. A mother who worries that her daughter is becoming a tomboy is assured that her fears are groundless.

There can be no authority quoted, probably, who will disprove the statement that a woman has as much need of good muscles and thoroughly developed physique as a man . . . The longer you keep your girl from self-consciousness the better. It is glorious to be a woman, and it will be no less glorious when the shackles fall. Not only let your girl be a tomboy, but see that she gets the training of the gymnasium and the development that comes from plain old fashioned duties.³³

An extension of Miss Burstall's open-window philosophy, this advice promises to extinguish the dangerous glowing embers of languorous and 'self-conscious' femininity with the exacting rigours of gymnastic training. Time enough for 'your girl' to become a 'glorious' woman when she has developed the no-nonsense strength - physical and moral - of a boy. With its emphasis on boyish vigour and sense over girlish feebleness and sensibility, this kind of writing feeds into the growing enthusiasm in many girls' schools for regimented games - hockey and lacrosse in Winter, netball and cricket in Summer - which all must play, in order to instil strength to the body, and team spirit to the soul.³⁴ A 1933 girls' school story, entitled 'The Amazing Centre-Forward', captures something of this quasi-religious fervour. Its heroine, Pixie, is that amazing centre-forward, suddenly bowed down by the tragedy of her father's financial ruin which threatens disaster for her own dreams of a hockey-playing future. She feels she can never play again: anticipating a new and humble career as an office girl, the 'very sight of her hockey stick made

³³ William Byron Forbush, *Guide Book to Children* (London: Hutchinson, 1922), pp. 417-18.

³⁴ 'We were *obsessed* with games . . . their value was absolutely unquestioned, and without some sort of proficiency it was difficult for any but a very exceptional character to gain popularity . . . It was all like the Boys' School Story raised to the *nth*.' Cole, *Revolution*, p. 30.

Pixie's heart throb.³⁵ But she soon realizes that the glory of the team and the honour of the school come before her own wishes, and she plays her final game out. 'Pixie had forgotten as the first whistle blew, that she was anything or anyone . . . just a part of St. Hilda's hockey team. As the first bully-off started, something that, somehow, didn't seem to be Pixie herself, took her game. "Beat 'em. We will!" '(149). And they do. Pixie, mystically taken over by the spirit of the game, has her reward - spotted by a county player, she is offered a place in their team on the spot. ' "It would be a sin and a shame for England if you drop out . . . Hockey needs the best. It needs you!" '(154).

Such emotive propaganda for the 'athletic ideals' of inter-war girlhood filtered into notions of an ideal physical appearance. School uniform, in the functional form of a loose, all-purpose tunic, became popular, and it was the fashion to keep hair worn short, in a boyish crop. To be girlishly pretty was to be potentially despised, and any attempt to ape adult glamour, ridiculed. Antonia White's novel, *The Lost Traveller*, published in 1950, but set in a pre-war time-frame, captures this bluff, tomboyish school atmosphere in its depiction of St. Mark's High. A group of its girls, remorselessly scrubbed and natural - 'four faces, respectively freckled, pale, rosy, sunburnt, all smelling identically of cloakroom soap'³⁶ - take exception to one of their number, the glamorous and exotic Patsy. ' "I swear she uses rouge or something ghastly," insisted Blackie. "I vote we get hold of her and give her a good scrub under the cold tap" '(152). The androgynous nickname, the dislike of 'ghastly' feminine tricks and wiles, and the suggested remedy - half-playful, half-

³⁵ Mary Shrewsbury, 'The Amazing Centre-Forward', in *Hulton's Girls' Stories: The Best Annual for Girls* (Manchester: Allied Newspapers Ltd. 1933), p. 148.

³⁶ White, *The Lost Traveller* [1950] (London: Virago, 1993), p. 151.

violent - of cold water: all suggest the no-nonsense, unsentimental, boyish qualities and looks of the ideal inter-war schoolgirl.³⁷

Episodes like these, which show how rigidly the conformist school code is enforced, offer both a definition of the 'personal element', and an explanation for the ambiguous, elusive treatment it often receives in representations of the girls' school. In the new, raw collective of the inter-war girls' school, there is no legitimate place for the 'personal element' - literally 'personal' in this context: that which belongs to the individual, rather than to the group. Any unusual personality trait, any quirk of physical appearance which cannot be assimilated into the main school body, is evidence of the wayward 'personal element', and signals a threat to the collective. When deviancy is detected, therefore, the culprit is punished. First, the aberrant individual is made to feel unbearable to herself; then, she is driven out of the collective and into the wilderness, where she subsists at a shadowy tangent to the school majority. The 'personal element' serves as a description both for the original deviancy; and for the lonely terrain the excluded girl must go on to inhabit. Representations of the 'personal element' are, necessarily, representations of unorthodoxy and exile; and are, therefore, in the same way, textually adjunct to the lawful, mainstream discourses of regulated and ordered school life. All the crystalline outlines of the girls' school dissolve in the shadowy depiction of the 'personal element' - an unknowable terrain where 'nothing can happen nowhere'.

³⁷ Very boyish: I think much inter-war schoolgirl literature owes a debt to schoolboys' fiction - especially to Rudyard Kipling's influential *Stalky and Co.* (1899). Stalky, with his freckles and love of mischief, his resourcefulness and inherent honesty, finds frequent incarnation in schoolgirl stories. For example, in Enid Blyton's *St Clare's* series, the tomboyish Bobby plays a key part. 'Bobby's freckled face had a very boyish look, and she was very like a boy in her ways, full of fun and tricks.' Blyton, *Claudine at St. Clare's* [1944] (London: Mammoth, 1994), p. 2.

Elizabeth Bowen's short story, 'The Apple Tree' (1934) demonstrates how effectively schoolgirls detect, punish, and then drive out those who do not physically belong to their ranks. Narrated as a seamless, dreamy weave of narrative flashbacks and present-day hauntings, the story suggests in its style and structure the ambiguity inherent in representing the 'personal element' of schoolgirl life. It is a macabre piece which tells of Myra, a married woman, who is still pursued by school ghosts. As a girl, her cruelty resulted in another's suicide; and it is the vision of Doria's body, hanging from the apple tree, that continues to haunt Myra's dreams. She remembers:

'Doria and I were always in trouble. I suppose that was why we knew each other. There were about eighteen other girls but none of them liked us. We used to feel we had some disease - so much so that we were sometimes ashamed to meet each other: sometimes we did not like to be together . . . We used to pretend that we were all right; we got in a way to be quite proud of ourselves, of being different . . . In those days I was very ugly. Doria was as bad; she was very queer looking; her eyes goggled and she wore big round glasses . . . We did not even care for each other: we were just like two patients in hospital, shut away from the others because of having some frightful disease. But I suppose we depended on each other.'³⁸

Myra and Doria are 'queer-looking' - their looks deviate from the schoolgirl norm - and this crime ensures their exile from the rest of the school community. Made to feel infected by their ugliness, they are driven into the 'personal element' and placed in untouchable quarantine. Theirs is an unwelcome intimacy, born of exclusion, and founded on fear and dislike. Myra and Doria share the same self, speak in the same voice, and yet sometimes cannot endure the sight of one another. They are the same person, they 'depended on one another' to make each half-self

³⁸ Bowen, *Collected Stories*, p. 468.

whole - but the mirror image reflected back to each girl via Doria's thick and distorting glasses, is at times too awful to contemplate. This explains the prevarications of Myra's memories, which are qualified by a 'suppose'; a 'pretend'; a 'seemed'; it is as if, even retrospectively, this intimacy is so unbearable that it must be veiled in illusory language. This equivocal usage is also of a piece with the dream-like narration which characterizes the story, and which describes the nebulous, unknowable territory of the girls' school.

Then something happens to disturb Myra and Doria's exile. Myra recalls the fateful term: ' "when I was twelve I got measles: another girl of my age got the measles, too, and we were sent to a cottage to get well. She was very pretty and clever; we made friends" '(468). Measles is a recognizable illness, with a rash and a temperature; an illness that has a name, a treatment and a cure. Measles is nothing like the sinister disease of being 'queer-looking' which plagues Myra and Doria at school, and for which there is no remedy - or only that of eternal isolation in the 'personal element'. Having conformed, at last - if only by way of catching an acceptable illness - Myra makes friends with her fellow patient. This intimacy continues when they return to school, and Myra takes care to mould herself to her new friend's likeness. ' "I took great trouble to please her," ' she remembers, and, gradually, ' "the others began to like me" '(469). Doria she ignores. Doria now has to bear alone the weight of the forced friendship; has to bear the double burden of the diseased self they shared, and the combined load of their physical ugliness. ' "It was as though everything I had got free of had fallen on her, too; she was left with my wretchedness" '(469). This pressure is too much for Doria, for whom the 'personal element' has become a truly individual prison, embodied and inhabited by

herself alone. The only means of escape afforded to her is suicide, and she hangs herself one night from the apple tree in the school gardens.

But physical appearance is not the only criterion to impinge upon cultural perceptions and representations of schoolgirl life in this period. The physical trappings of social class are also of great importance in the conformist world of the girls' school during the inter-war years. In the early history of the girls' school, a prestigious establishment like Cheltenham Ladies' College did not 'receive all-comers, but is distinctly intended for the "daughters of gentlemen", and references in regard to social standing are required before admission.'³⁹ But such an exclusive policy was impossible to sustain: the majority of girls' schools in the inter-war period - especially as these years saw such an increase in their number - had to dabble in the murkier waters of the middle classes if they were to survive. Many High Schools of the period were loath to use that title for fear that its unglamorous associations might detract prospective pupils from the desired social background: Winchester High was renamed Winchester School for Girls in 1914, and, finally, St. Swithun's, in 1927.⁴⁰ But nor could privately-owned schools rely on attracting old money and titled families. Mostly, their numbers were gathered from the middle classes - and it is the variations that existed within that social band that were cause for concern in the classroom. As Alison Light points out, the definition of the word ' "middle class" was . . . undergoing radical revision between the wars and any use of the term must ideally stretch from the typist to the teacher, include the "beautician" as well as the civil servant, the florist and the lady doctor, the

³⁹ Alice Zimmern, *The Renaissance of Girls' Education: A Record of Fifty Years' Progress* (London: A. D. Innes, 1898), p. 35. Referred to hereafter as *Renaissance*.

⁴⁰ See Avery, *The Best Type of Girl*, p. 4

library assistant and the suburban housewife, and the manifold differences between them.⁴¹ Such social diversity can be problematic in school, where the appearance of sameness is all-important.

The headmistress in Winifred Holtby's fictional study of provincial life, *South Riding* (1936), delights in the explosive social mix of Kiplington High School, where Lord Sedgemire's granddaughter must consort with Lydia Holly from the town slums, 'a fat vulgar girl . . . lowest of the low.'⁴² But in literature of the period written for schoolgirls, the appearance of social conformity is far more rigidly observed, and any deviation from the accepted mainstream is punishable. The girls of Enid Blyton's St. Clare's - a 'sensible, no-nonsense'⁴³ private school for the upper-middle classes - are full of distrust and dislike for the Honourable Angela Favourleigh because she flaunts her social status so crudely. Hand-made shoes and uniform, expensive tennis racquets, huge amounts of pocket money: all these overt symbols of wealth and class have flawed her character, and Angela must learn from the mockery and hostility of the other down-to-earth girls that she is a 'rude, discontented, horrible little snob'(128). But nothing that falls *below* the social norm of St Clare's is acceptable, either. In this clear-cut fictional world, the forthright Janet exposes Sheila's origins as a grocer's daughter, and denounces her *nouveau riche* pretensions and possessions in brutal fashion.

'Manners! *You* talk about manners! . . . What about your own manners. I would like to know! You can begin to talk about other people's when you know how to wash your neck and brush your hair, and how to eat decently . . . My goodness, you talk about your servants, and your Rolls Royce cars, your home and your lake and

⁴¹ Light, *Forever England*, p. 12.

⁴² Winifred Holtby, *South Riding* [1936] (London: Virago, 1988), p. 111.

⁴³ Enid Blyton, *The Twins at St. Clare's* [1941] (London: Granada, 1980), p. 10.

goodness knows what - and then you talk like the daughter of the
dustman.' (107)

Received pronunciation, clean neck, tidy hair, nice table-manners - these are the physical indices which guarantee the correct social class. There is no room for doubt or ambiguity. As with physical appearance, anyone who visibly falls outside the prescribed societal limits imposed by the school collective, is driven out. The deviant 'personal element' in a girl, whether it be revealed in accent or clothes or cleanliness, cannot be assimilated; and she is elbowed out into the blurred and shifting wilderness. The representation of this process in schoolgirl literature reflects the severity of the initial exclusion, but in schoolgirl fiction for adults, the uncertainty - the tangential quality of the subsequent exile - also receives attention.

Portia Quayne is the strange, uncomfortable orphan in Bowen's novel, *The Death of the Heart* (1938). She disturbs the placid surface of life wherever she touches it. She is also sixteen years old, a dangerous age according to the dictums of headmistress, Miss Burstall, who fears that 'it is very difficult to get a girl right at sixteen years of age, when her habits of work or idleness, her moral and social ideas, and a great part of her character, are already formed.'⁴⁴ Certainly, Miss Paullie, the principal of Portia's school, finds her newly-arrived charge a problem. For Portia has grown up on the continent; having spent her childhood moving with her disgraced mother from one third-rate hotel to another, she is the product of a nomadic, deracinated culture that feels itself at home nowhere. Now, the orphaned Portia is physically rooted in the upper-middle class world of her brother and his wife - but mentally, emotionally, she is entirely absent. Her 'moral and social ideas'

⁴⁴ Burstall, *High Schools*, p. 164.

are non-existent for she has nothing on which to base them; she has no idea about *anything* to do with her new life. She certainly has yet to understand the rigid class-politics at work in the girls' school.

One day, at her lessons, she commits two social crimes, the discovery of which result in her immediate exile from the school community. She brings her bag with her into the classroom, instead of leaving it in the cloakroom; and she reads a letter on her knee, secretly, under the desk. Miss Paullie, who 'was very particular what class of girl she took'⁴⁵ denounces Portia's behaviour as a deplorable legacy from the dubious world from which she has emerged. ' "This is not the place or time to read your letters, is it? I think you must notice that the other girls don't do that. And, wherever one is, one never does read a letter under the table: have you never been told? What else is that you have on your knee? Your bag? . . . To carry your bag about with you indoors is a hotel habit, you know" ' (55).

Portia is mortified as she feels the room turn against her, and the other girls disown her - for, after her telling-off, it was 'not only diligence, or caution, [that] kept the girls' smooth heads bent, and made them not look again at Irene's child'(56). Irene was Portia's mother. She had had an affair with a married man, whose wife divorced him when she found out that Irene was pregnant with Portia. He and she fled to the Continent, and set up fragile home there. He died abroad, Portia and Irene began their impoverished wanderings, and then, just before the novel begins, Irene, too, dies. Identifying Portia, here, as 'Irene's child' is to introduce her unhappy origins and her doubtful upbringing and social background, into the well-groomed atmosphere of the school room.

⁴⁵ Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* [1938] (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 56.

But a sense of Portia's not being quite what was what had seeped, meanwhile, into the billiard-room. She almost felt something sniffing at the hem of her dress . . . For a moment, Portia felt herself stand with her mother in the doorway, looking at all this in here with a wild askance shrinking eye. The gilt-scrolled paper, the dome, the bishop's chair, the girls' smooth heads must have been fixed here always - while she and Irene, shady, had been skidding about in an out of season nowhere of railway stations and rocks. (56)

School is rigid, 'fixed here always'; and the ornate paper and well-groomed heads of its pupils denote that, socially, it has always adhered to the respectable middle classes. Portia, Irene's child, who has come from a far more dappled and 'shady' social climate, feels herself hunted down in this quiet classroom. The other girls' smoothly-brushed and diligently-bent heads signal a cared-for and respectable social world, to which Portia cannot belong. Her blunders with the bag and the letter have revealed why not - because she is 'not quite what was what'. Something about her smells rotten. First, she is 'sniffed' out by the bloodhound-keen schoolgirl sense of exactly what *is* what; next, she is driven to the liminal hinterland of the doorway, and into the elusive territory of memory and imagination. 'Portia felt herself stand with her mother in the doorway, looking at all this in here with a wild askance shrinking eye.' The girl is caught, petrified, in the 'personal element' of her social disgrace, Irene's ghost by her side: she is not allowed to cross the threshold and join the other girls, but nor is she able to walk away with her mother. Irene, after all, is dead; and Portia is a school prisoner.

Physical appearance and the physical manifestations of social class are also of importance - although differently so - at Lippington, the convent school described in Antonia White's *Frost in May*. An autobiographical novel, which draws on White's own conversion and subsequent Catholic education, it unfolds four years

of Nanda's life spent in the powerful atmosphere of a convent. Lippington is an establishment which is run on the ancient lines of a French Catholic tradition, and the Lippington 'collective', secure in its long-founded and established history, does not *need* to impose a physical ideal upon its members in order to affirm its own existence, as the raw, Protestant girls' school tradition does. For one thing, the convent houses within its walls a number of European children, whose families have long been a part of that ancient Roman Catholic tradition. These girls look exotic, and deviate dramatically from the set-pattern of frank and freckled English girlhood. Among the staid, placid Marjories and Mildreds wander 'dark skinned, graceful creatures with gold rings in their ears . . . talking Spanish at the tops of their voices.'⁴⁶

And then there is the rarefied air of the convent itself. The nuns openly despise the hearty athleticism and brisk practicalities of the typical Protestant High School, and the boyish physical type which that establishment lauds as the ideal. An action as seemingly innocuous as raising a hand to attract attention is frowned upon as a display of breathless and ungraceful "keenness".

There was a chorus of 'Mc. please. Mother.' One or two even held up their hands. Mother Frances surveyed these with distaste and the hands dropped like plummets.
'We don't hold up our hands at Lippington,' she said coldly. 'This is not a high school.' (23)

The Catholic religion, with its fetishization of object and ritual, develops a finely tuned aesthetic perception - a feeling for the senses as well as the spirit - that is offended by the no-nonsense functionalism of 'high schools'. This development of

⁴⁶ White, *Frost in May*, p. 19.

the senses is inextricably linked with convent life: 'Looking back upon my schooldays, it seems to me that they stand out so vividly in my memory because there was such a deliberate, calculated attack made upon the different senses, the gateways of the soul.'⁴⁷

And yet, in other ways, the convent tries to repress the physical senses - especially sight. In her contribution to *The Old School*, 'A Child of the Five Wounds', Antonia White recalls that looking-glasses were forbidden at her convent school, and that the girls were expected to wash in calico shrouds 'which tied around our necks and fell in heavy folds to our feet. They protected us from the scandalising sight of our naked bodies . . . Dressing was conducted behind closed curtains and on the same principles of modesty' (231). The convent atmosphere is, then, disorientating, disconcerting: a potentially explosive mix of repression and indulgence, severity and sensuality, harshness and beauty. These heady conditions make it impossible to dictate or legislate upon personal appearance. There is no conformist standard; however unorthodox a girl's looks, there is no punishment inherent in diversity.

Far more, the nuns are on their guard to intercept and destroy any vagaries in *outlook* - any visible signs of religious unorthodoxy. In these matters, there *is* a rigid physical standard, which all are expected to attain and maintain. In 'A Child of the Five Wounds', White remembers the convent's peril: that of not demonstrating the correct religious appearance of a Catholic schoolgirl.

I wore neither scapulars nor miraculous medals under my serge uniform. I could not boast of having been dedicated to Our Lady and dressed exclusively in white for my first seven years. . . I often made the Sign of the Cross with the wrong hand, forgot to genuflect to the

⁴⁷ Mary Catherine Goulter, *Schoolday Memories* (London: Burns and Oates, 1922), p. 2

Blessed Sacrament or bow my head at the Holy Name . . . In fact, I was far more of an outsider than any of the foreign children . . . They might be inarticulate but the very way their trunks were packed, with a crucifix folded in tissue paper . . . was proof of a 'good Catholic home in the background.' (230)

The symbols are missing, the clothes are wrong, the signs of faith incorrectly made. Her religious appearance is incorrect: as such, she feels herself an 'outsider' in convent life. And so does Nanda, the heroine of *Frost in May*. Appropriately enough, it is her look - her very eyes - which give her away: they are never focused on the right thing at the right time. Instead of reading her missal like the other girls, her gaze wanders; 'she had been watching Léonie and trying to trace her profile with her finger on the flyleaf'(99). Even on the momentous day of her first communion, Nanda is looking elsewhere - her Catholic appearance is not as it should be: 'Nanda tried to fix her concentration on the mass, but she could not . . . She stole a look at Léonie, whose pale, bent face was stiff and absorbed . . . Nanda was horrified at her own detachment. . . she looked at the other eleven, to see if they felt as she did. But every face was gay or recollected or content . . . Her First Communion had been a failure'(83-85). Nanda knows that she has to 'steal' those looks at the others, and that they are not permitted religious currency. Yet she cannot help herself; she *must* look. Nanda's identity is continually torn like this between seeing and seeming; between being a Catholic, and *appearing* to be a Catholic - between feeling the faith and merely practising it. Her personal unorthodoxy - represented textually by her distracted, sideways-slanting look - cannot help but exile her from the other girls, so that she feels 'with all her efforts, all her devotion, there was something wrong with her'(85).

In its insistence upon the maintenance of this correct Catholic appearance lies the convent's collective strength; and an important part of that visual orthodoxy is a clear display of the right social background. For Catholicism is the pure-cut aristocratic religion, one which can be traced back through countless generations. It is the religion of the oldest and wealthiest families, lending a glamour of its own which is indissoluble from the highest ranks of society.⁴⁸ Certainly, in the Catholic world of *Frost in May*, the appearance and manners of excellent social breeding, matter.⁴⁹ Convert Nanda is not only raw and unfledged in matters of faith, she is also uninitiated as to the existence of the wealthy classes which have upheld that faith over many centuries. But she soon recognizes the existence of this class; realizes that 'there were such things as country houses and deer parks and children who had ponies of their very own (27); and manages to adapt by seeming to belong. She learns to

soften and enlarge the outlines of her home life. When everyone else had butlers, it seemed ridiculous to have a mere parlour maid, and she got used to referring with fine carelessness to "our butler." Also the cottage in Sussex grew by imperceptible degrees to "our place in the country", though she wisely alluded to this as little as possible.
(30)

Nanda may be incapable of conforming to the correct Catholic appearance, but she has the initiative and ability to seem to conform socially. Others do not have

⁴⁸ A consideration which seemed particularly attractive in the inter-war years, and to a generation reacting against 'soulless God-forsaking suburbia, which cuts its lawns and listens to the radio on Sundays. The inter-war years saw a stampede . . . of sensitive and intellectual persons away from the vulgarities of the secular world. Roman Catholicism offered an attractive haven, with its ancient tradition and Latin liturgy.' John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 82

⁴⁹ During the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was common practice for convent schools to divide themselves into 'upper' schools and 'middle' schools: these were divisions not of age, but of class. See Avery, *The Best Type of Girl*, p. 2.

Nanda's inventive facility, and they find themselves exiled from Lippington society, as much by the nuns as by the other girls. Monica Owen, whose parents cannot afford the Lippington fees, languishes in just such an exile, and she is made to suffer dreadfully:

She was never given new lesson books but had to be content with shabby copies blotted and torn by a former owner. Her uniform, too, had been made over from an elder sister's and shone lamentably at shoulder and elbows. When the rest of the school was fitted out with new white dresses for feast days. Monica was forced to go on wearing her old nun-veiling yellow with age and of an antique and conspicuous pattern. (152)

The Protestant school collective, newly established and unsure of its own identity, punishes one who does not conform by constructing an excessively repulsive persona for the hapless misfit. Doria and Myra feel themselves to be diseased; Portia that her social offences smell to heaven. But the secure convent collective does not need to go the lengths of *creating* flaws. The unfortunate Monica is doled out already existing fragments of identity - blotted books, old clothes - all unwanted and shabby cast-offs. And this casual distribution is quite punishment enough. For Monica, as a social and physical unit, is thus put together out of these mis-matched shards of worn-out identity. She must become a grubby, second-hand person and personality, as penance for her second rate social standing. Even her exile isn't her own.

The rules of physical appearance and social identity are unyielding and restrictive, whether applied in the new world of the Protestant girls' school, or in the established territory of the convent. If a girl conforms to the clearly-defined requirements, then she will flourish; if she does not, then she is exiled to the shady.

elusive realm of the 'personal element'. I now want to go on to look at representations of the school building itself, in order to examine the effect its bricks-and-mortar structure has on schoolgirl life, and on the understanding and portrayal of the 'personal element'.

The schoolhouse

Some years after I left, the house, after so much pounding and trampling, began to wear out: the school moved and the building has been reinstated as some kind of shrine, for Charles Darwin lived there for some years and died there, I believe, too. Our Morris wall papers have been all stripped off and the white woodwork grained . . . Our modern additions have been pulled down: the geography mistress has re-erected the chapel, the gymnasium, the lavatories and the music-rooms elsewhere.

(*'The Mulberry Tree'*, p. 59)

Elizabeth Bowen's school has changed its shape, its outline, since she was a pupil there. Physically altered to remove all traces of female occupation, the house is now viewed, literally, as Darwin's home. And how makeshift and portable the trappings of female education are, and how easily the metamorphosis has taken place: just one geography mistress, seemingly, has pulled down and rebuilt half the school. Girls' schools of the inter-war period were particularly vulnerable to this kind of physical transformation because, as relatively recent institutions, many of them still carried the palpable history of the private houses in which, with often limited funds and resources, they were founded.⁵⁰ Schools such as these are architectural hybrids.

⁵⁰ A fact bemoaned by Alice Zimmern, who remarks that 'Although good premises and beautiful surroundings have long been regarded as essential for boys' schools and colleges . . . the prejudice that makeshift was good enough for girls has died hard, if indeed it can now be

Sometimes, these diverse strains are well-balanced. 'St. Agatha's had been a house, IVa classroom probably the morning room. The blinds were lace bordered. There was a garlanded wallpaper, called to order by having on it a bald, pontifical clock.'⁵¹ There is a kind of symmetry to this description, contained in both the balanced rhythm of the sentences, and in the measured order of their content. The classroom and the morning room share equal gravitas in the construction of the sentence; the wallpaper is domestically flowered, but is 'called to order' by the stern, authoritative clock. The equilibrium of the whole is maintained.

But not all girls' schools are so well ordered, semantically or structurally - especially not those private establishments, unaccountable in every sense, which sprung up so rapidly in the inter-war period, often in the most impromptu surroundings. 'The Truman and Knightley schools directory of 1930 lists hundreds of private schools, and it is noticeable from the photographs that advertise them how many occupy what appear to be town houses ill equipped for educational purposes.'⁵² Just such a malformed establishment makes a fictive appearance in Bowen's novel, *The Death of the Heart*, in the shape of the small finishing school which Portia attends. It has none of the pleasing symmetries of St. Agatha's. Rather, the place seems strangely distorted:

Miss Paullie's father was a successful doctor; her classes were held in a first floor annexe, built for a billiard room, at the back of his large house. In order that they might not incommode the patients, the pupils came and went by a basement door. Passers-by were surprised to see the trim little creatures, some of whom hopped out of limousines, disappear down the basement like so many cats. At the

called dead.' *Renaissance*, p. 33. Thirty years after this was written, this 'prejudice' still could not be called dead, as many girls' schools were opened in the inter-war period on exactly these makeshift terms.

⁵¹ Bowen, *The Little Girls* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), p. 73. Although a late work, the novel's school section is set in the inter-war period, which is why I have included it here.

⁵² Avery, *The Best Type of Girl*, p. 128.

top of a flight of crooked stairs they hung their hats and coats in the annexe cloakroom, and queued up for the mirror, which was very small . . . the billiard - (or school) - room smelt of carpet, radiators and fog - this room had no windows (52)

Any girls who stayed to lunch at Miss Paullie's lunched in a morning room in the annexe basement: down here the light was almost always on. (57)

The reader feels like one of those passers-by, amazed at the incongruities of this structure from Alice's Wonderland. For Miss Paullie's school is squeezed and corseted into the most bizarre shape, mutated by the demands of the larger establishment which houses it. The place is made up of fragments, addendums to the main domestic body: all the rooms are annexes - not quite rooms proper, but lean-tos, make-shift architectural afterthoughts fighting for living space. Instead of physical and textual balance between domestic and academic realms, Miss Paullie's school can only exist perilously, in parenthesis, nearly overpowered by the masculine presence of the billiard room it once was. Spatial expectations are surprisingly deflated: the school entrance is in the basement, the morning room knows no morning, and even the stairs are 'crooked', bent out of their proper kilter and compromised in function and purpose. Faced with such structural anomalies, no wonder the school relies on 'fixity' in its appointments, and social sameness in its smooth-haired girls, in order to impose a clear-cut sense of its identity on its aberrant and shifting surroundings.

Bowen represents the architectural hybrid of the girls' school to more sinister effect in the short story, 'The Apple Tree'. Of the building itself, the haunted Myra remembers: "They called it a home school, I suppose because most of us stayed for the holidays - we had no parents . . . the house was very large and dark-looking, but full of pictures to make it look homely" (468). Reality and illusion

converge, visually and verbally. The appellation 'home school' only draws attention to the fact that this is a school for the truly *homeless*: a place which is, by default, also a home because there is nowhere else to go. And the decoration inside the building is just as physically and semantically uneasy - both ill-designed, and ill-designing. The school is gloomy and sinister, not only dark in colour, but 'dark-looking': *projecting*, creating blackness. This source of ominous dark is covered up with pictures, imitations of other realities, which try to coerce the school into looking what it is not - 'homely'. It is a bleak exercise in illusion.

Another awkward conflation of home and school exists in the design of Lippington, the convent in White's *Frost in May*. Convent schools are not the new-born establishments that so any private and high school are at this time. Just as the conformist strength of the Catholic tradition swallows up and absorbs diversity in physical appearance, so it subsumes any individual architectural vagaries in the convent itself. Faith, and the timeless rituals of faith, are what endure when buildings have crumbled away. This sense that the convent is an eternal state of mind - or soul, or spirit - as much as it is a solid structure infuses White's novel, and explains why the external architecture, the outward appearance of Lippington, receives no mention. It just does not matter. But what is of importance is the *internal* architecture, the structural soul, of the convent. To Nanda, the understanding of this inner life seems insurmountably difficult, for Lippington is made up of layers - it is 'a house within a house'(89). The girls and the nuns live together within the same outer shell of the building, but there are architectural convolutions *within* that shell that separate one group from another, and one house from another. These labyrinthine twistings which divide school from

convent, and girls from nuns, are secret: even after several years spent at Lippington, Nanda does not know her way around the building:

But where was the community infirmary? Somewhere in the building, there must be, she knew, a hundred cells and a whole counterpart of the school, libraries, class-rooms, study-rooms and sick-rooms, where no lay person except the nuns' doctor was allowed to set foot . . . She knew the forbidden stairs that led to the community's quarters, but that was all. (89)

The nuns' quarters are like a parallel universe, identical to the girls' own, but existing in a different spatial dimension, a different physical reality altogether. The 'forbidden stairs' span the two realms - beyond which fact, Nanda's information is exhausted. She remains lost and stranded at their foot.

An architectural ideal for the girls' school, uncompromised by a confusing legacy from the private house, did exist in the period. Manchester High School, founded in 1874 in two rented houses on the Oxford Road, became so successful that six years later the school moved into newly-built premises that cost the enormous sum of £30, 000.⁵³ So Miss Sara Burstall, writing *English High Schools for Girls* in 1907, does so in the enviable position of headmistress of a girls' school proper - of a school designed and built to play the principal architectural role, rather than sharing the part with structural extras from the private house. Certainly, Miss Burstall's description of the ideal school is as precise, and her requirements as demanding, as befits one who has in her charge a beautifully designed and constructed educational machine. Indeed, the similarities that emerge between her

⁵³ Avery, *The Best Type of Girl*, p. 66.

vision of the ideal school, and Foucault's description of the ideal disciplinary institution, are uncanny.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), a historicized exploration of the means and methods of social control, Foucault proposes that a disciplinary institution

works space . . . on the principle of elementary location, or *partitioning*. Each individual has his own place, and each place its individual . . . Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed. One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation.⁵⁴

Miss Burstall, also, in *English High Schools for Girls*, recognizes the disciplinary importance of spatial distribution in the ideal school. Each 'girl must have her place in the school, her desk, locker, peg' (88). Even the very oxygen she breathes must be partitioned - 'the air space should be at least 250 cubic feet per pupil', the headmistress urges (75).

Foucault goes on to expound the purpose of this partitioned space. It is to create an entirely new kind of building:

architecture that is no longer built simply to be seen (as with the ostentation of palaces), or to observe the external space (cf. the geometry of fortresses), but has to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control - to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them. Stones can make people docile and knowable. (172)

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 143. Referred to hereafter as *Discipline and Punish*.

Miss Burstall, in turn, reveals the architectural details which she has found ensure control in the girls' school. 'The classrooms should have the upper panels of the doors glazed with clear glass, in order to facilitate inspection without disturbing the work in the room' (80); also, 'it is most necessary to have an open staircase that can be controlled from above or below' (81); and the cloakrooms, 'for reasons of discipline and womanly modesty should be easily accessible and easily controlled' (85). And so she continues, bolstered in her disciplinary methods by the architectural clarity of her own school.

The problem, as we have seen, is that so many girls' schools of the inter-war period - in both actual and fictional incarnations - are *not* designed or built to these rigid specifications. They are architectural hybrids - blurred, jumbled up with private-house remnants which compromise educational and disciplinary purpose with their domestic legacy. And the awkward structures of these schools splinter the smooth, regular stones which make 'people docile and knowable'. The ideal disciplinary model is necessarily fractured when it meets the girls' school, with its impure, untidy architecture and construction. This fracture has intriguing implications for the depiction of the girls' school - and for the understanding and representation of the 'personal element'.

For as an institution that melds home and school together, the girls' school, in splintering the model of a disciplinary ideal, is itself guilty of non-conformity. It breaks its own clearly-defined rules, and refuses final assimilation into its own architectural body. As such, the girls' school enjoys a structural allegiance with the non-conformity that defines the 'personal element' in school society. This allegiance, held within the very fabric of the school walls, permits the 'personal

element' to be understood as an exciting and subversive realm, rather than as a place and state of exile. In the fracturing of the institutional ideal lies the articulation of pleasure that is engendered by imaginative and physical escape, and by the indulgence of illicit feeling. It is the representation of the 'personal element' as a subversive experience, and its implications for the clear-cut world of the girls' school, that I want to go on now to explore.

Breaking the rules

We lived, however, intensively in the present: when the present became overpowering there was an attic-loft over the bedroom ceilings in the main buildings, with sacks and a cistern in it, where an enterprising person could go and weep.

(*'The Mulberry Tree'*, p. 52)

In spite of authority's best efforts, the structure of many girls' schools cannot safeguard against 'the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their dangerous coagulation.' In fact, the buildings' aberrant architectural features *encourage* unauthorized movement. The stones that are used to build the girls' school are fragile; they cannot make people 'docile and knowable'; and schoolgirls cannot always be regulated by the spatial limitations of their desks, pegs and lockers.

This architectural sloppiness plays its part in the forming of the school collective, which has to work doubly hard to maintain its uniformity and regularity in the face of structural deviancy. But, for all that, exploitation of the school's architectural faults offers its own illicit pleasures. Forbidden 'circulation' and 'coagulation' is dangerous and fun.

Some nights - you could never tell which nights it would happen - there was something in the air about the place, and children's voices rose and laughs and screams rose high to echo round the panelled ceiling of the dining room, along the gallery, seeming to cry out for space in which to spread.⁵⁵

Here, only the children's voices congregate and circulate, pushing the walls out with sound and thereby escaping the prescribed school boundaries. The volume and pitch of their laughs and screams denote the fever-pitch excitement of the unlawful noise. But it is, even so, a tentative bid for freedom: there is an elusive quality about this writing which talks about 'some nights', when a certain 'something' permeates the air; and the children's voices 'seem' to search out a space which remains unknown.

The search for illicit 'space' is a given in the schoolboy world of Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* (1899). The incorrigible members of Number Five Study, like 'all right minded boys, built huts in the furze-hill behind the College - little lairs whittled out of the prickly bushes, full of stumps, odd root ends, and spikes, but, since they were strictly forbidden, palaces of delight.'⁵⁶ These dens are real places, made out of tangible materials, and bearing recognizable labels, marked 'hut', or 'lair' or 'palace'. It is as if these hide-outs - permanent, established fixtures - are comfortable and assured extensions of the boys' public school itself, secure in tradition and structure. The convent school, with an ancient tradition of its own, offers similarly sturdy and concrete opportunities for escape in the form of the game *cache-cache*, an elaborate and ritualistic version of hide-and-seek in which

⁵⁵ Elizabeth North, *Dames* (London: Cape, 1981), p. 180.

⁵⁶ Kipling, *Stalky & Co.* (London: Macmillan, 1899), p. 1.

'the school was divided into two camps, religiously preserved from year to year so that the secret of traditional hiding places should not be revealed.'⁵⁷

But in the raw, upstart world of the Protestant girls' school, the search for unauthorized space, and its representation, is necessarily a more experimental and tentative exercise. In the extract quoted earlier from Elizabeth North's novel, *Dames*, it is the girls' voices which seek out the furthestmost edges of the dining-room in search of freedom. But actual bodies are equally preoccupied with the delicate spatial politics of 'edges'; of perimeters. That is why Bowen's 'attic-loft', in which 'an enterprising person could go and weep', offers such an attractive haven. It exists within touching distance, almost, of lawful places: it is a secluded eyrie, a relic of the private house, which is all the while echoing with the sounds of regulated, institutional life. Its very charm as a place of escape is that it lies so close to the disciplinary centre of the school, resting as it does on top of the main buildings.

Similarly, Bowen remarks earlier on in 'The Mulberry Tree' that 'great friends were not put together and we were not allowed into each other's bedrooms, but it was always possible to stand and talk in the door, with one toe outside. The dormitories were called bedrooms Ours were in fact the bedrooms of a fair-sized country house, divided into from four to six cubicles'(47). Bedrooms, architecturally and conceptually, belong to the private house - and yet here they have been made subject to school rules and regulations. Fear of the unregulated coagulation of girls who are 'great friends' means that that these partitioned rooms are out of bounds. The threshold of a bedroom marks, however, a boundary line,

⁵⁷ Avery, *The Best Type of Girl*, p. 52.

and the pleasure of the illicit meeting is increased by playing with the perimeter of space that divides the lawful from the unlawful. To stand in forbidden territory, but with one token-toe residing in official school space, is to reinforce the keen emotional and physical pleasure to be had in subverting the rules at that structurally weak fault line where home and school meet. 'Nothing can happen nowhere' in this volatile space, because it is a nebulous region school authority cannot define or control. The thrill of this kind of rebellion is not visceral or concrete - no den-building here - but relies upon the delicate manipulation of regulations and constraints; and upon taking advantage of the non-conformist structure of the girls' school itself. Where home and school meet demarcates an un-named territory where rules and discipline dissolve; and unlawful freedom is given a subversive voice.

Espionage - and counter-espionage

I often wonder whether in after life one has not suffered from an overstrained honour from having been put too constantly upon it in youth, and whether the espionage one hears of in foreign schools might not have kept one's sense of delinquency more enduringly active.

(*'The Mulberry Tree'*, p. 55)

Perhaps Bowen is thinking back to Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), when she talks of the spying and intrigue that is so much a part of 'foreign schools'. In the novel, English stranger, Lucy Snowe, is employed at Madame Beck's school in the Belgian town of Villette. On her very first night, Lucy discovers how her new employer governs her domain. Madame Beck 'ruled by espionage . . . she would

move away on her “souliers de silence”, and glide ghost-like through the house watching and spying everywhere, peering through every key-hole, listening behind every door.’⁵⁸ And Lucy prefigures Bowen in maintaining that that ‘all this was very un-English: truly I was in a foreign land’(132).

Certainly, this method of discipline which feeds upon secrecy and silence, does not exist in the more bracing air of thoroughly English, Protestant schools. In Miss Paullie’s establishment, in Bowen’s *The Death of the Heart*, the absolute authority that lady commands is openly acquisitioned, and openly acknowledged. ‘These silent sessions in Miss Paullie’s presence were, in point of fact (and well most of them knew it), lessons in the deportment of staying still, of feeling yourself watched without turning a hair’(55).

But *Frost in May*’s Lippington, although situated prosaically enough on the outskirts of London, is still enmeshed in the dark secrets and arts of espionage so dear to ‘foreign schools’. At this fictional convent, created out of White’s own educational experiences, ‘the old French tradition was stronger than any new-fangled British notion about “leaving girls on their honour.”’⁵⁹ An all-searching disciplinary perception is employed by the nuns in order to keep order in the schoolgirl ranks. But this perception is not always as laser-sharp as it seems. It can be unreliable, and is open to abuse. And again, it is the hybrid architectural structure of the school which is responsible for the failure of the disciplinary ideal, and for the subsequent emergence of a subversive and powerful ‘personal element’. For Lippington has that secret structural heart - the ‘house within a house’, in which the nuns live - which is a realm which Nanda has never seen, and cannot

⁵⁸ Charlotte Brontë. *Villette* [1853] (London: Penguin, 1987). p. 136.

⁵⁹ White. ‘A Child of the Five Wounds’, p. 240.

even imagine. This repressive construction starves her imagination so that she seems blasphemous to herself even to try to think of these things. She tries to let her mind loose, thinking of her old teacher, Mother Frances, who lies dying somewhere in that part of the convent that Nanda has never seen.

[Nanda] tried to imagine the scene in the community infirmary . . . How strange it was, she thought, that living side by side with the nuns, the children knew nothing of their lives. She had never seen a nun eat or drink: she could not imagine Mother Frances, even on her death-bed . . . Did they wear nightgowns? Did they have looking-glasses? . . . Yet even to imagine such things seemed to Nanda blasphemous. (89)

Just as she approaches the Holy Trinity - 'with one's mind, as it were, properly gloved and veiled' (46) - so Nanda approaches the inner realm of the convent that she is not allowed to enter or know: with her imagination swathed in proprieties and forbidden free rein. Even though she feels sure that the nuns' quarters are a counterpart to the girls' own surroundings, the 'house within a house' protects itself with such care that it is rendered somehow strange and unfamiliar - and Nanda cannot even begin to conjecture as to its existence. Operating as it does in an entirely different spiritual and physical dimension, the hidden heart of the convent remains unknowable.

Which suggests that the architectural convolutions of Lippington are a disciplinary success: the nuns live in the convent as if in a fortress, invulnerable to intruders - even to intruders of the imagination. But as the nerve centre of disciplinary power, the nuns' secret quarters are, in fact, far from ideal. For it is the same unknowable quality of the 'house within a house' - that which seems to maintain control - which actually enables the unleashing of a powerfully subversive

element in the convent. Foucault defines the 'perfect eye' of control as one that 'nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned.'⁶⁰ But the nuns have no architectural centre; or, at least, it is invisible, hidden away as it is in the depths of the convent building. Its dark, convoluted structure is alien to the clean transparencies and bright surfaces and visible operations of the ideal institution described by Foucault. And this means that, although the nuns are able to scrutinize the girls, they are themselves so hidden in architectural secrecy that the girls cannot imagine where the disciplinary gaze issues from, let alone turn their own towards it. Nanda knows 'the forbidden stairs that led to the community's quarters, *but that was all*' (89; my emphasis). The girls cannot see - and the nuns, in their enclosure, cannot be seen. Far from evidencing an effective regime that is based on the constant *possibility* of surveillance, it is this reciprocal sensory deprivation which fractures, for both parties, the ideal disciplinary model.

The unknowability of the nuns' centre of power compromises their methods of espionage. Mother Radcliffe, for example, is the Mistress of Discipline at Lippington; and sometimes she plays a game with the school. She is able to guess which of the girls is hiding something in her pocket, simply by looking carefully into every face. She always guesses correctly, and, at the moment of her triumphant disclosure is greeted by the 'muffled clapping of eighty gloved hands'(147). This response is suggestive, denoting that Mother Radcliffe has not so much played a game as given a performance and is receiving her rightful, if muted, dues. There is something of the magician's flamboyance about the stylized, drawn-out ritual of the proceedings, as the nun walks 'slowly down the rows of

⁶⁰ Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*, p. 173.

seated figures, peering into each face, skimming over some and gazing for nearly a minute at others'(147).

The Mistress of Discipline is deprived of the affirming gaze which would define her as the central 'perfect eye' of control, because there is no visible, structural centre in the convent towards which the girls can turn their eyes and minds. So Mother Radcliffe becomes the centre of attention herself, by turning the secret discipline of spying into a species of performance art. That is the only way her methods of control can be seen to be controlling, and thus validated - in this instance, by applause. Paradoxically, spying - the art of concealing the art of looking - is turned onto a theatrical performance which shows off, reveals, that very concealment. Such a public show compromises the methods of secret observation on which the disciplinary life of the convent is based. Firstly, it arouses the girls' scepticism:

'I hate that sort of spiritual showing-off. If we had dossiers of the community as they have of us. I daresay we could bring off this Sherlock Holmes business just as successfully.'

'Yes? But how did she do it? . . .'

'She probably noticed you, my dear Watson,' said Léonie. 'There's a rational explanation of most miracles.' (148)

Mother Radcliffe's theatrical display of the results of these secret reports transforms her knowledge of the girls' into a cheap and secular detective trick which anyone can learn. This lack of reverence for the sacred mysteries of spiritual espionage is a by-product of the flawed disciplinary model of Lippington, where the structural invisibility of the convent's heart has obliged the nuns to bring out into the open, and render vulnerable, their secret methods of control.

But this is not the only flaw in the convent's disciplinary system. For the strange art of public spying becomes a necessity for the nuns, whose skills of espionage are just *too* well hidden when contained in the unseen house within a house. Mother Radcliffe, for example, is addicted to spying. She cannot stop herself, or break the dramatic cycle of concealment and disclosure which constitutes Lippington's disciplinary code. She *needs* to pin down, and then theatrically reveal, the evil which she is determined to see lurking in a child's personality. She must be seen to be Mistress of Discipline - she who works unseen. And therefore her hungry, spying gaze is not necessarily a reliable one. Sometimes her look is *too* piercing, *too* searching; and it finds evils which are not truly there. She is too much caught up in the addictive art of spying itself to detect the difference between the two.

Nanda's novel is just such a chimera. Its conception in her mind is perfectly innocent, for 'she decided to describe a wicked, worldly society, preferably composed of painters, musicians, and peers, and to let all the characters be sensationally converted in the last chapter'(158). Her imagination, circumscribed by the convent's repressive structure and atmosphere, is incapable of formulating any ending other than this. When her friends beg to be allowed to see the work-in-progress, she refuses: ' "The whole point's the *end*, you see" '(202). But Mother Radcliffe finds the novel when it is only half-finished. To her eyes, it is visual. conclusive proof of wickedness: there is no possibility of error. She 'knew the handwriting of every child in the school' (209), and she shows the offending article to Nanda's parents in this same uncompromising, empirical light. A meeting with them, and Nanda, too, is the forum Mother Radcliffe chooses in which to display her findings. Certainly, Nanda's beloved father, in berating his daughter, vindicates

and praises the nun's espionage methods; he affirms her status as the perfect eye of control, maintaining: ' "Yesterday, if anyone had shown me the disgusting and vulgar fifth that I have seen today in your own handwriting, I would have doubted my own eyes. Today, with the evidence I have from Mother Radcliffe, I am forced to believe that you wrote it" '(215). No one will let Nanda explain that the nun has made a mistake, has spied wrongly and too soon, and that what seems so reprehensible, is, in reality, so very innocent - even orthodox - 'propaganda for the Faith'(208).

The convent children are threatened by these arbitrary and ruthless methods of discipline. But they are not entirely controlled by them. It is, in fact, these repressive visual politics which enable the discovery and enjoyment of a subversive 'personal element'. The hidden, inner shell of the convent cannot be seen by the girls - which is why the nuns must bring their secrets into the open, with often problematic results. But the girls, too, are sensorily deprived. Unable to locate the physical, structural centre of power in Lippington, the girls are placed in visual limbo - and that means a *disciplinary* limbo, too. The model of the 'perfect eye' as a 'centre towards which all eyes would be turned' has been ruptured by the unsuitable, uninstitutionalized design of the school building. As it is, the girls are in possession of surplus, unused visual energy. They cannot expend it on what they cannot see or imagine - but they *can* exhaust their visual and creative resources on what they see about them, all the time: each other. Running counter to the nuns' theatrically zealous observations, are the girls' own perceptions of each other - lingering, speculative looks, which are charged with unconcealed eroticism. In a complex visual exchange of espionage and counter-espionage, the look of

discipline is indivisible from the look that speaks of a forbidden and dangerous 'personal element'; the look which nurtures sensuality, fantasy and physical desire. The nuns are aware of the dangerous pleasures to be enjoyed in such a gaze, and try to enforce the rule that 'if certain children were known to like each other's company, they must at all costs be kept apart'(92). But this veto only lends extra, illicit appeal to the girls' visual exploration of the "personal element".

[Rosario] took down her gaily beribboned guitar from the wall and seated herself . . . As she tested the strings. Clare cried excitedly: 'Let's put out the lamps. The fire's heaps bright enough . . . Now we're ready.' she purred luxuriously. Rosario bent over her guitar. In the glow its belly had a ruddy shine. Her hair, as she continually tossed it back from her face, seemed to give off flakes of light, while Clare's red-brown head was frayed with gold at the edges. Nanda and Léonie drew back into the shadows. (198)

Legitimate and lawful lamp-light, all-seeing, is extinguished; in its place, the shadowy, suggestive flickers of firelight, which lend a sensuous richness to everyday sight. Nanda and Léonie withdraw, and from the shadows where they cannot be seen, they look out at the other two girls, who are irradiated as much by their admiring gaze as by this new and illicit light. Convent girls are not allowed looking-glasses, but here, the fire acts as a reflective surface, throwing back images that are exotic, erotic and beautiful. Everything is glowing and alight with lush, rich colour; the pleasure the girls feel is not inspired by religious ceremony, but by flesh and blood, transfigured in turn by light and gaze.

Clare, one of the girls who 'purred luxuriously' in front of the fire, is particularly enmeshed into this subversive cult of looking and feeling. She really belongs to the schoolgirl world of *Olivia* (1949), where sensual and passionate

emotions are given free, tempestuous rein.⁶¹ But Lippington is a more restrained establishment, and Clare must channel into narrower straits a feeling all the more intense because it is restricted. And her methods for directing this emotion are visual; everything about the way she looks, and is looked at, is charged with erotic feeling. A Protestant, she longs to become a Catholic, but her visual energy resists the spiritual and encourages the physical, the flesh. Nanda wonders, with a mixture of delight and shame, why it should be ‘that when everyone else seemed just face and hands, Clare always reminded one that there was a warm body under her uniform?’ (113). The reason behind this tactile reminder is that Clare is expert at manipulating and harnessing all the visual energy at loose in the convent towards herself, towards her own body. She becomes a very visible centre, not of a disciplinary gaze, but of a fascinated, eroticized scrutiny. Her very eyes suggest this power. Nanda comments that ‘“they’re brown, but if you look closely they have little green rays like chips of emeralds in them” ’ (142). Their dazzling irregularity encourage and reward close, intimate scrutiny. As does her body - with a little help from Clare herself.

‘Clare burnt herself badly last night . . . She’s just bandaged it up anyhow, but she ought to have it properly looked after.’

‘Well, let’s see the burn.’ said Léonie sensibly.

She laid her hand on the arm of the sling, and Clare drew in a sharp breath of pain.

‘No, I’m perfectly all right, silly child.’ she said bravely.

‘I insist on looking.’ said Rosario. Her soft voice sounded dangerous. Clare looked at her queerly for a minute, then burst into one of her crows of laughter. Suddenly she tore viciously at the knot of her sling with her free hand and teeth.

‘Then look, darling.’

⁶¹ ‘Olivia’ is the pseudonym for Dorothy Strachey, sister of Lytton Strachey. Her novel, *Olivia* (1949), is an intense account of life in a French Catholic school, where the beautiful and charismatic Mademoiselle Julie runs her establishment on the lines of beauty and grace and aesthetic appreciation: delicious foods, dancing, poetry. Olivia, the heroine and narrator, falls in love with Mademoiselle Julie, and the novel charts the turbulent emotional currents of their relationship.

Her white, lightly-freckled arm was bare and unscarred.
'Just a joke, darling. I so adore to see you looking angry and worried.'
(123-24)

Clare waits until the other girls are as eager to look as she is to be looked at, before revealing that she is unhurt. Léonie touches Clare's arm, wanting to remove the flesh-covering bandage; Rosario sounds 'dangerous', such is her thwarted desire to gaze on the imagined burn. The distinctive covering fetichizes the limb and draws attentive, desirous looks and touches. It is a strategy, it is suggested, that Clare has practised before now: 'she nearly always had a bandaged ankle or cut finger. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why one was always so conscious of her body'(123). For Clare, the caress of the female look is as pleasurable as that of physical touch, and she desires and inveigles this eroticized contact whenever she can. There is nothing spiritual or ethereal about the appreciative, fascinated glances she promotes and receives from the other girls; there is everything sensuous and tactile about them. The shadowy, illicit 'personal element' of intense emotion and physical desire is at subversive work at Lippington. It finds a form of visual articulation and eloquence in the repressive convent air - or rather, the 'personal element' finds expression *because* of the repressive convent air.

The strange architecture and hybrid constructions which characterize the history and representation of the girls' school - whether new and Protestant, or ancient and Catholic - blur the clean lines of the ideal disciplinary model, and upset the uniformity demanded by inter-war-schoolgirl culture. This disruptive process engenders the existence of an underground and unknowable 'personal element', a

territory which can constitute a place of exile; but also signals the means to escape, physically and emotionally, from the stifling sameness of the school collective.

The shadowy, tentative representation of the 'personal element' has become, paradoxically, one of the most enduring creative tropes of the girls' school, finding articulation in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), for example, and in Peter Weir's atmospheric film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). The very appeal of the 'personal element' as an imaginative concept lies in its tangential status - and in its oblique representation lies the continued, intriguing unknowability of schoolgirl-life: 'the most closely guarded mystery in existence, a conspiracy entered into with verve by womanhood in the shape of staff, mothers and non-communicative, enigmatic schoolgirls.'⁶²

⁶² Siriol Hugh-Jones, 'A Short Ramble Round the Prison House' in *The St. Trinian's Story: The Whole Ghastly Dossier*, compiled by Kaye Webb (London: Perpetua Books, 1959), p. 20.

CHAPTER TWO

Hotel-Consciousness: Desire, Domesticity And Hotel Culture

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 anatomizes - 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 child, and the degradations of poverty. Nor does her present sojourn promise to exorcise these Parisian ghosts. Lonely, and afraid of herself as much as of others, Sasha is offered only dubious company and comfort during her stay: the self-interested attentions of a gigolo, and the lecherous advances of a commercial traveller, are all that are presented to her by way of salvation.

This spare, dark novel about loss - and the lost - represents, literally, a new departure in Rhys's fiction, for it 'lets go of what's been, so far, the heroine's world. It's never been a solid world, and it's got steadily 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

¹ Jean Rhys. *Good Morning, Midnight* [1939] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 120. Referred to hereafter as *Midnight*. Original ellipsis.

no homes left in *Good Morning, Midnight*; the whole world is cheap hotels.’² Evicted from the rooted domestic world, the novel tenants the shiftless and shifting world of the hotel. It is a blurred landscape of dirty beds and stained walls; a tireless continuum of cheap rooms which makes no physical or imaginative distinction between Sasha’s remembered past and her actual present. Simply, 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 The hotel is like a mathematical figure, recurring again and again to infinity - and Sasha herself is trapped within the endless, nightmarish process.

This novel’s structural and thematic preoccupation with hotels is not an isolated or aberrant imaginative obsession. Hotels - both at home and abroad - abound in novels, films, short stories and travelogues of the inter-war period. Writers as diverse as E. M. Forster, Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Virginia Woolf, Henry Green, Rosamond Lehmann, George Orwell and J. B. Priestly, all demonstrate a fascination for the hotel in their writing. There is the Florentine pension in Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908), where Lucy Honeychurch and Charlotte Bartlett battle over love, propriety, and rooms that look out over the Arno and rooms that do not.⁴ Evelyn Waugh 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

² Carole Angier, *Jean Rhys* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 407.

³ Rhys, *Midnight*, p. 28.

⁴ I mention Forster’s novel, even though it falls considerably outside the period, because its influence is so tangibly felt in later fiction. His story of the undeveloped English girl, whose mind and heart are awakened by foreign travel and experience, is, for example, elaborated upon by Virginia Woolf in *The Voyage Out* (1915), and by Elizabeth Bowen in *The Hotel* (1927).

anecdote; in his novel, *A Handful of Dust* (1934), the hapless Tony Last must venture to an English sea-side hotel, so that he can be “discovered” in a make-believe infidelity, and his wife can have grounds for the divorce she requires. In Elizabeth Bowen’s novel, *The Death of the Heart*, there is the shabby, faded Karachi Hotel, where relic of the Great War, Major Brutt, lives in a poky attic eyrie. By way of contrast, Rosamond Lehmann’s novel, *The Weather in the Streets*, has the wealthy Rollo Spencer take his mistress to a brand-new, luxury hotel for a romantic, and very expensive, weekend. J. B. Priestly encounters a wide range of provincial hotels on his *English Journey* (1933); and Henry Green’s *Bright Young Things* of *Party Going* (1939), fog-bound in a Railway Hotel, find themselves more intrigue in the respectable corridors of that establishment than any Mediterranean excursion could offer.

Nor is the hotel - as architectural, social and imaginative locus - a purely literary, or purely British, preoccupation. The American writer, Edith Wharton, keenly observes the influences and implications of hotels in such novels as *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Buccaneers* (1938). Modris Eksteins cites Thomas Mann’s novella, *Death in Venice* (1913), set against the windowed backdrop of the Hotel des Bains, as one of the key cultural moments which define the origins of the modern age.⁵ Moving away from literary representations, Greta Garbo famously wants to be alone in the MGM movie, *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932). And 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.

⁵ Modris Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London: Black Swan, 1990), pp. 23-28

The cultural fascination with the hotel during these years is unprecedented - and unexplained. 'Hotel-consciousness is a largely unexamined feature of the imaginative life of the period', remarks Paul Fussell in his study of inter-war travel and travel writing.⁶ But, having coined the intriguing phrase 'hotel-consciousness', Fussell does not go on himself to explore the implications of his observation. He continues in the same strain - 'everyone seems to have been remarkably hotel-minded'(53) - and then moves on, leaving untouched the tantalizing 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 chapter is concerned.

The 'why'

The 'why' of 'hotel-consciousness' is a question with intriguing social and cultural implications. For, in part, the inter-war fascination with the hotel reflects and inflects socio-economic conditions - most importantly, the increasing ease and economy of foreign travel after the First World War, and the growth of tourism within England itself. Simply, more people on the move demanded the opening of more hotels; the opening of more hotels generated a need for more travellers.

Venturing abroad was facilitated by the growth of scheduled flight; British Airways opened in the mid-Thirties, and, by 1938, over 200 million miles had been accounted for.⁷ The period also saw the construction of new passenger liners -

⁶ Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling [sic] Between the Wars* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1980), p. 53. Referred to hereafter as *Abroad*.

⁷ See John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 26. Referred to hereafter as *Tourist Gaze*.

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 a maiden voyage to Australia in 1935.⁸ International railways enjoyed immense popularity in the period: trains named the Orient Express, the Golden Arrow, the Blue Train and the Rhinegold Express carried their passengers to all parts of the globe, gradually acquiring an exotic cultural legacy all their own.⁹ Nor was travelling in this period prohibitively expensive, as cheap labour and fuel kept the cost within reasonable limits.¹⁰

In England, too, things were on the move - especially in the late Twenties and Thirties, when, in the South at least, economic conditions began to improve after the Depression. The Holidays with Pay Act of 1938 covered 11 million people by 1939, but the nation's holiday spirit had caught alight long before this legislation came into effect, as testified to by the many organizations founded during the period dedicated to leisure: the Youth Hostels Association, the Cyclists Touring Club, the Camping Club of Great Britain - and the Holiday Camp. Joseph Cunningham's Isle of Man Camp opened in 1908; Billy Butlin's first Camp, at Skegness, in 1936.¹¹

The railway was still popular as a means of transport, but the growth in the number of buses and motor coaches on the roads played their own part in the opening-up of England.¹² J. B. Priestly, beginning his journey round the provinces.

⁸ See Gillian Naylor, 'Design and Industry', in *Early Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. Boris Ford (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 271. Referred to hereafter as 'Design and Industry'.

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

¹⁰ See Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 72.

¹¹ See Urry, *Tourist Gaze*, p. 26.

¹² See Burkart and Medlik, *Tourism*, p. 29.

observes that 'there seems to be a motor coach going anywhere in this island', and claims that the speed and cheapness of this mode of travel has 'annihilated the old distinction between rich and poor travellers.'¹³ Certainly, one of the reasons that Morecambe proved such a popular holiday resort was that it was served, cheaply, by both rail and coach. But the most significant advance in transport during these years came in the sleek and small-scale 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 2 million cars on the road, bringing unprecedented freedom and mobility in their wake, even to those of only moderate income.¹⁴ 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 necessarily entailed a concomitant growth in tourism as an industry: a mutually dependent relationship of economics and leisure. The hotel was, of course, crucial to this burgeoning holiday-culture; in England, during the Twenties and Thirties, a huge number of hotels were opened to cater for newly a mobile and leisured population.¹⁵ Their concrete presence provides an elementary explanation of 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. And they come in all shapes and sizes.

The prestigious Savoy - opened in 1889, run by European hotelier, Cesar Ritz, and famed for its decadent luxury and glittering clientele - was renovated and

¹³ J. B. Priestly, *English Journey* [1933] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 9.

¹⁴ See Burkart and Medlik, *Tourism*, p. 28.

¹⁵ As already mentioned, 'hotel-consciousness' is an international phenomenon. However, it is beyond the remit of this chapter to examine closely the history, architecture and culture of the hotel outside the British Isles.

modernized in the early Thirties. Claridges, owned, like the Savoy, by the d'Oyly Carte family, was also refurbished at this time. These older establishments were in competition with brand new hotels, opening throughout the period, which promised luxury and modernity in architecture and design as standard: the Dorchester, for example, or Park Lane; the Strand Palace Hotel, or the Midland Hotel in Morecambe.¹⁶ 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. The final flowering of the Railway Hotel was in 1933, when the Midland Hotel, commissioned by the London, Midland and Scottish railways, opened its doors. Oliver Hill was the architect, and it was sumptuously conceived and designed, with sculpturings and mouldings by Eric Gill, rugs by Marion Dorn and murals by Eric Ravilious. Every attention was devoted to aesthetic detail - coloured towels were placed in the bathrooms, for example, a decision which caused some unease to the commissioning railway company. A representative of the LMS wrote to Hill, 'I am not satisfied that the clientele 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 may call the more artistic circles of London.'¹⁷

But this suspicion of avant-garde excess - however nebulously formulated - was in keeping with the traditional remit of the Railway Hotel, which made no concession to aesthetic extremes. The advent of the railways in the nineteenth century brought a newly mobile sector of the population into being; and from the

¹⁶ See Mary Cathcart Borer, *The British Hotel Through the Ages* (Guildford and London: Lutterworth Press, 1972), p. 240. Referred to hereafter as *British Hotel*.

¹⁷ Naylor, 'Design and Industry', p. 272

mid-1800s, hotels began to be built at terminus stations by the various railway companies to cater for these passengers. They were 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 hotels like the Dorchester or the Midland. Railway Hotels promised 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.

No wonder that coloured towels seemed so much effete nonsense to the LMS, who had commissioned the Midland. But the move to build a new Railway Hotel - and a new *kind* of Railway Hotel - as late as the Thirties, was driven by a desperate economic need to attract the more sophisticated holidaying public of the inter-war period. 'The LMS was concerned to update the image of railway travel. Facilities at the English sea-side compared poorly with the Continent'.¹⁸ And - doubts over bathroom accessories aside - the company's bold decision to allow the most modern architects, designers and artists to fashion the beautiful Midland, at the inclusive cost of £57, 000, did prove a commercially successful one.

Other Railway Hotels, still in Victorian guise, had to face stiff competition in a modern age. This is a 1938 advertisement for the Great Northern Railway's Royal York Hotel: 'Direct Access From Station - Porters Meet Trains. Hot and Cold Running Water in All Bedrooms, Central Heating, Hairdressing Saloon,

¹⁸ Alan Powers. 'The Stone and the Shell - Eric Gill and the Midland Hotel, Morecambe', *The Book Collector*, 47 1 (Spring 1998), p. 43.

Restaurant. *Modern Garage With Private Lock Ups.*¹⁹ The station hotel still promises the faithful service of old, ferrying luggage from platform to bedroom, and then back again. It also advertizes more modern conveniences, in keeping with advances in the hotel business: central heating, hairdressing saloon, and, if no en-suite bathrooms, at least running water in all bedrooms. Most striking, though, is the italicized assurance of a *Modern Garage* - for a Railway Hotel which offers such emphatic provision for motor cars would seem to be undermining its own identity and function in the process.

But in 1938 this is a necessary compromise - simply, 'cheap motor cars brought about a new style of hotel industry.'²⁰ 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 had vanished 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 Company. Each county should establish a company dedicated to the resuscitation of dying public houses - the plan was 'to buy inns and put in paid managers, who should receive a salary and commission on food and lodgings.'²¹ The scheme was first put into action in Hertfordshire, in 1904, at the Waggon and Horses at Ridge Hill. It proved a success. By 1919, the

¹⁹ *Official Guide to the City of York* (York: York Chamber of Trade and York City Council, 1938), p. 43.

²⁰ Borer, *British Hotel*, p. 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Public House Trust was a limited company, owning over a hundred inns, and enjoying a capital of over a million pounds.²²

The luxuries and aesthetic attractions of newly-built hotels; the solid, sensible comforts of traditional Railway Hotels; and the rural peace and architectural individuality of old inns: these are three distinct species of hotel which were constructed, adapted and renovated during the period. All three types - because daringly new, or wonderfully old; incredibly big, or enormously expensive - lend themselves to interpretation via facts, figures, dates, and photographs. They feed into, and are fed by, public and official and approved discourses: what amounts to a kind of *shared* hotel-consciousness, accessed through cultural histories and architectural journals. But there were many more hotels that opened in this period which 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 undistinguished villages and towns all over England, also played their part in the cultural construction of inter-war 'hotel-consciousness'.

J. B. Priestly records 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.'²³ 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

²² Ibid., p. 238.

²³ Priestly, *English Journey*, p. 69.

valuable'(41). Characteristically robust Priestly-speak: though, in fact, the anecdotal quality of his writing - deceptively transparent, but actually carefully crafted - render these hotel encounters as much fiction as fact. 'Hotel-consciousness' is a creative as well as a mimetic state.

As is demonstrated by Elizabeth Bowen - her portrayal of the dreadful Karachi Hotel in *The Death of the Heart* is a seamless blend of observation and invention. The Karachi Hotel is home to Major Brutt, just back from Malay, always 'trying one thing and another'(59), 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. (285-86)

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

²⁴ See Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 103.

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 love or respect, time or money, has gone into the making of this hellish place. In the dining room, the sweet peas - now not even fresh, and doled out with a strict eye on portion-control - make a mockery of the grandiloquent 'embellishment' they aim to provide. 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 "factionalized" by Priestly 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.²⁵ These "Olde England" books included, for example, A. E. Richardson's *The Old Inns of England* (1934); *The*

²⁵ 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.' Jonathan Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1997), p.93.

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.

H. V. Morton's *I Saw Two Englands*, published in 1942, is an account of a car journey he made through the pre-war English countryside of 1939.²⁶ He is aware of the changes the car has wrought on the rural environment, and, as a champion of "Olde England", deplors them; 'inevitably the country has changed in appearance . . . I sometimes think it would be a good thing if every motor car could be put out of action for six months to give us time to think where all this is leading us.'²⁷ But, Morton assures us the next moment, there are, thankfully, still 'two Englands: the bright, vulgar, crowded England of the main roads, and the quiet, lovely England of the side roads and lanes'(32). He appears unconscious of the effect of his own motorized presence, both literal and textual. Not only driving through the countryside, but writing for the tourist-market about driving through the countryside, Morton is, himself, with unprecedented mobility and speed, in the process of blurring two Englands into one.

Employing a similar kind of doublethink is A. E. Richardson, who maintains the integrity of the rural myth in the face of incontrovertible technological evidence to

²⁶ H. V. Morton was a journalist and travel writer, most remembered for his *In Search of . . .* volumes: *In Search of England* (1927), as already mentioned; to follow was *In Search of Scotland* (1929); *In Search of Ireland* (1930); and *In Search of Wales* (1932).

²⁷ Morton, *I Saw Two Englands* (London: Methuen and Co., 1942), p. 32.

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.'²⁸ 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 tap-room 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

²⁸ A. E. Richardson, *The Old Inns of England* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd. 1934), p. 33.

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 'vener' 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.²⁹

This kind of 'make-believe' establishment makes an intriguing appearance in Rosamond Lehmann's novel, *The Weather in the Streets*: intriguing, because its representation signals another answer to the cultural 'why' of inter-war 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, and eking out a financially and emotionally impoverished existence in a semi-Bohemian hinterland of London. 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.

²⁹ Basil Oliver, *The Renaissance of the English Public House* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p. 131. Original emphasis.

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, and her memory supplies her with what seems to be genuine observation. 'What was it called? . . . A pretty name . . . The Wreath of May. Picturesque is the word for it - old, thatched, whitewashed, sagging, full of beams.'³⁰ 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'(320). 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 the growing unhappiness and futility of the relationship. Break-up is inevitable, but neither wants to admit the fact, so both adopt a pretence of light-heartedness. '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'(331). The falsification of the inn highlights, and is itself illuminated by, the emotional falsification Rollo and Olivia perpetrate on each other. The Wreath of May serves as a metaphor for the fakery between them; and their fakery emphasizes the constructional pseudery of the inn. The place exists simultaneously as a building in social and architectural space and time, and as a suggestive metaphor for the fag-

³⁰ Lehmann, *The Weather in the Streets* [1936] (London: Virago, 1991), p. 218. Original ellipses. As Lehmann makes frequent use of ellipses, I will differentiate between those which are part of her text, and those which I have used to mark a textual elision, by placing my own in square parentheses.

end of love and desire - and each existence is dependent upon, and impacts upon, the other.

The idea of the hotel as a place where reality and metaphor slide seamlessly into one another, offers its own answer to the 'why' of hotel-consciousness. In part, hotel-consciousness - cross-cultural, inter-textual - is a physical phenomenon: the sheer numbers of hotels, of all different kinds, that opened in the period, make their concrete presence felt in different representational guises. But, inherent in this literal understanding of hotel-consciousness is a more figurative understanding. Improved transport at faster speed; more leisure; more money: these are the socio-economic and technological advances that promote, and are promoted by, a culture of travel. But these same advances also promote an interdependent metaphoric resonance.

A commonly-voiced perception made of, and on, and during, 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.'³¹ George Orwell, in his essay 'Inside the Whale' (1940), asks retrospectively of his generation, '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.'³² 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

³¹ Lehmann, *The Swan in the Evening: Fragments of an Inner Life* [1967] (London: Virago, 1982), p. 69. Referred to hereafter as *The Swan*.

³² George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale' (1940). Rpt. in Orwell, *Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 35.

been set adrift. Orwell celebrates this debunking process even as he acknowledges it leaves emptiness in its wake. Indeed, in the same essay, he attributes the fervid embrace of Communism by English intellectuals in the Thirties to a need to fill the void; 'the patriotism of the deracinated', he calls it (36).

Orwell, whose political interests inform his fictional writing as much as his factual, is a cultural world away from Elizabeth Bowen. She is essentially conservative in outlook; and maintains that the production of literature is an aesthetic rather than a political act - a novel is a 'non-poetic statement of a poetic truth', she writes.³³ Yet she, too, is aware of the perceived modern condition of rootlessness: her fiction of the inter-war period 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 her 1932 novel, *To The North*, 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." '³⁴ This sense of decentralisation spreads; virtually every character in Bowen's later novel, *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 derecination understandably form a reciprocal relationship with representations of travel. New means of transport, new resources and amenities - including the hotel - by their very physical presence and the functions they fulfil, act simultaneously as cultural metaphors for the often-perceived and proclaimed transience and deracination of

³³ Bowen, 'Notes on Writing a Novel'. Rpt. in Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, p. 170

³⁴ Bowen, *To the North* [1932] (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p. 168.

the modern age. Literal, internal-combustion mobility bears the stamp of a contemporary *zeitgeist* concerning the unsettled character of inter-war life; and vice versa. 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 delicate question of 'Manners'. Once upon a time, 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.'³⁵ 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. (67-68)

Bowen slides imperceptibly between literal and figurative observation; physical travel and spiritual nomadism 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. The 'particular world into which he had been born' (67) was the one in which he would die. 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. But there is an elusiveness about the writing which

³⁵ Bowen, 'Manners', *The New Statesman*, 1936. Rpt. in Bowen, *Collected Impressions* (London: Longmans, 1950), p. 67. The review is of Viola Tree's *Can I Help You?* (London: Hogarth Press, 1937).

resists any one interpretation. (Though, certainly, Bowen is fascinated by the physical act of travelling: ships, aeroplanes, trains, and cars all power through her fiction. In retrospect, she thanked her good fortune that she 'was there while [speed] came into being around me: much that went on was new not only to me but wholly new in itself, by its own right.'³⁶) 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.'³⁷ 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.³⁸

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

³⁶ Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, p. 43.

³⁷ Bowen, 'Manners', p. 68.

³⁸ 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 chapter. 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).

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, and contributory to, socio-economic developments. The hotel also constitutes a certain *milieu* - complete with all the different shades of meaning that word carries - which renders it a popular setting for representations of the restless modern mind, as well as of the newly mobile body. 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.

This definition of hotel-consciousness certainly makes bleak sense of Sasha Jensen - blighted heroine of Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* - whose homeless story began this chapter. She is endlessly trapped in hotel-terrain, whether it be physically, in the actual hotel she stays in now; or mentally, in the remembered hotels from her past. Whichever, the same miserable, monotonous conditions apply. 'Always the same hotel. You press the button. The door opens. You go up the stairs. Always the same stairs, always the same room . . . ' (28).

The idea that the hotel is a mental state as well as a physical place has currency with Katherine Mansfield, too. The pursuit of health in warm climates saw her spend many reluctant months at a time in hotels. An 'actual' traveller, she was very much concerned with the everyday, physical realities of hotel life. Here, with playfulness that is part brutal and part despairing, she complains of the poor sanitary arrangements of the Hotel des Bains - and the poor sanitary habits of its guests.

Another thing I hate the French bourgeoisie for is their absorbed interest in evacuation. What is constipating and what is not? That is the real *criterion* . . . At the end of the passage there is a w.c. Great Guns! they troop and flock there . . . and not only that . . . they are

victims of the most dreadful Flatulence imaginable. Air-raids over London don't hold a candle to 'em.³⁹

No en-suite facilities - let alone coloured towels - make for a noisy and noisome habitation in this visceral description of hotel life. Yet the unwelcome, swarming presence of hotel guests - all too real - also supplies material for a metaphorical complaint.

True to oneself! which self? Which of my many - well, really, that's what it looks like coming to - hundreds of selves? For what with complexes and repressions and reactions and vibrations and reflections, there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor who has all his work cut out to enter the names and hand the keys over to the wilful guests.⁴⁰

The restless modern mind is likened to a hotel, where the 'wilful guests' of a plural and shifting identity demand temporary house room. Hotel-consciousness indeed: Mansfield, as well as perceiving the nomadic actualities of hotel life - rather, *because* she perceives them - is able to extend those actualities into metaphor.

The two-fold origins of inter-war 'hotel-consciousness' - a fusion of the literal and symbolic - are, then, reflected and inflected by cultural representations of the hotel as both a physical place, and as a state of mind. Answering the 'why' of hotel-consciousness to a large extent defines the 'how'. Now the question that needs to be addressed is the 'who'.

³⁹ Ed. C. K. Stead, *The Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield: A Selection* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 99. Entry dated 6th February, 1918.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173, n.d.

The 'who'

Tonight I come back to the hotel alone: the other has decided to return later on. The anxieties are already here, like poison already prepared (jealousy, abandonment, restlessness): they merely wait for a little time to pass in order to be able to declare themselves with some propriety. I pick up a book and take a sleeping pill 'calmly'. The silence of this huge hotel is echoing, indifferent, idiotic (faint murmur of draining bathtubs); the furniture and the lamps are stupid; nothing *friendly* that might warm . . . Anxiety mounts: I observe its progress like Socrates chatting (as I am reading) and feeling the cold of the hemlock rising in his body: I *hear* it identify itself moving up, like an inexorable figure, against the background of *the things that are here*.⁴¹

A Lover's Discourse (1977) carves emotion up using the clinical, abstract language of sign and structure, subject and object, self and other. This stern, unyielding vocabulary dissects the condition of "love" into its constituent parts, laying open to cool analysis the emotions and circumstances from which it is born, and in which it lives - jealousy and enchantment, for example; anxiety and agony; sentimentality and stupidity. Yet, in spite of the austerity of the structuralist vernacular, *A Lover's Discourse* is not an austere text. It is a faithfully detailed and strangely moving document, in which feeling is theorized; and thought is felt. The self-contained fragment quoted above - entitled 'Agony' - finds Barthes' lover-narrator in uneasy repose in a hotel bedroom. Where else? The modern soul feels itself homeless, rootless: there 'is a whole in which everyone has a place . . . everyone except me.'⁴² Drifting thus in social free-fall, the narrator is drawn into the hotel, home to the deracinated; and it is here that the vigil of pain begins.

⁴¹ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* [1977], trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 29. Original emphasis.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Barthes' fragment evokes the hotel as a home that has homelessness built in. All that home traditionally represents - privacy, permanency, familiarity; an institution run on love rather than for money - is undermined by the hotel. The hotel is a professional, profit-making home; it sells domesticity by the night, and sells it to strangers. Home should be animate and personal, and the hotel, in function and design, is its opposite.

The lover-narrator is particularly sensitive to the physical details which render the professional, mass-produced domesticity of the hotel so unsettling. Yes, the hotel offers silence - but it has a vast, echoing quality; there is nothing small-scale or private about quiet which resounds like thunder. The uneasiness of this peace is overlain by the barely audible, parenthetical murmur of draining bathtubs, which trickles the unwelcome intimacy of strangers into the silence of the room. Nor is the narrator comfortable with the fittings and fixtures. It is not only that they are cold and impersonal, their bland functionality providing 'nothing *friendly* that might warm'. It is also the fact that there is something fundamentally incongruous about the existence of domestic paraphernalia in a hotel room at all; something inherently 'stupid' about the placing of furniture and lamps in a room which is not a home, to create the illusion that it is a home, for the individual who, whilst staying there, has no home.

This perception of the hotel as an illusory version of home - illusory, because it conceals homelessness at its heart - provides an intriguing answer to the 'who' of hotel-consciousness. Barthes' lover-narrator has identified that the hotel is deeply interfused with ideas of home - but that insight does not appear to carry with it any gendered baggage. Neither here, in the hotel, nor at any other point in *A Lover's*

Discourse, is the sex of either the 'self' or the aberrant 'other' revealed. This policy of catch-all inclusiveness is analogous with Paul Fussell's generous claim of the inter-war years - that 'everyone seems to have been remarkably hotel-minded.' And certainly, hotels are, in themselves, a cross-gendered imaginative preoccupation in the period, fascinating to both men and women: fascinating to 'everyone', in fact.

But the private house is not such inclusive social or creative inter-war territory. The private house is primarily feminized territory. Gender specificity is built in. To transpose, then, Barthes' hotel paradigm - a paradigm which has the private house as integral to the understanding of the hotel - onto hotel culture of the inter-war period, is an intriguing exercise. In this act of transposition, a species of hotel-consciousness is uncovered which - by virtue of its domestic focus - is necessarily particular to women. Women are not 'everyone', and a domestically-orientated understanding of hotel-consciousness is not, of course, definitive. But this interpretation does offer an interesting partial-answer to the 'who' of inter-war hotel-consciousness. If, according to the lover-narrator, half of hotel-consciousness is made up of "home-consciousness", then it is, by definition, a condition especially significant to women's domestic, social, sexual and creative experience during the inter-war period. It is this experience, and fictional representations of it, that I want to go on to explore.

Home-consciousness

The inter-war focus on the home as a woman's place was represented and propagated by various social, legislative and cultural means. Abundant new housing, cheap mortgages and advances in domestic technology enjoyed an interdependent relationship with women's magazines, advertizing, home-care and child-care manuals, and a heavy crop of domestic novels, primarily by female authors for a primarily female readership.⁴³ All brought home - literally - the message that domesticity and femininity were one and the same thing. Paid employment played little part in this symbiosis. Women were encouraged not to take a job in the first instance; or, if already in work, marriage bars prevented them from continuing to be in it if they chose to marry. Home-making was the female profession, acknowledged as fact and truism, for good or ill, across the whole cultural spectrum.⁴⁴

Writing about the history and institution of marriage, socialist observer Margaret Cole observes that it is economic necessity that persuades women to adopt the insular profession of marriage and home.

While the pay of men and women in this country continues to be as unequal as it is - and there is no present sign of much change - so long will women as a whole have a strong economic motive for entering upon the career of marriage, since to work simply for pay promises a strait life and a penurious old age, while to get married promises at the worst security with hard labour, and at the best a chance of being *Kep* [*sic*] without any labour at all.⁴⁵

⁴³ See Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1984), pp. 1-13, and 94 -120, for further discussion of the inter-war domestic novel, its major proponents, and its readers.

⁴⁴ See Chapters Three and Four, on the Office and the Private House, for more detailed consideration of this material.

⁴⁵ Cole, *Marriage Past and Present* (London: J. M. Dent, 1939), p.196. Referred to hereafter as *Marriage*.

Making the same point, but from an entirely different cultural viewpoint, and in an entirely different register, is a short story from *Woman's Magazine* (a mainstream, middle middle-class publication, consisting of short stories, readers' letters, human-interest features, recipes, knitting patterns and home-improvement ideas). Entitled 'A Whole-Time Job', this particular story uncovers a moment of personal crisis for its heroine, Mrs Harmald, the salaried president of a successful charity - a woman who 'had always directed, controlled, executed.'⁴⁶ A close colleague announces her retirement, on the grounds that 'matrimony is a whole-time job' (125). Mrs Harmald is badly shaken, suddenly realizing that devotion to her career has undermined the foundations of her own domestic life. Her family no longer needs her, but relies instead on the kindness of housekeepers: she, the wife and mother, is no longer the sun around which the home revolves. So she determines to change matters. She will give up her job, and instead go to work - 'whole-time' - on her own home. 'She had won her way through opposition and difficulty to the top of the ladder in her outside life. Could she do the same in the life she had forsaken? Win back again to their allegiance that dour boy of twenty, the baby of seven, and, most of all, the lover of her youth?' (128). There seems little room for doubt that such a penitent home-maker will succeed in re-rooting herself in domestic soil.

Approaching the same ideas in yet another guise is Rosamond Lehmann's novel, *A Note in Music* (1930). Writing of her own childhood, Lehmann remembers being trained by her mother for entrance into the female profession. Simply, 'girls should be pretty, modest, cultivated, home-loving, spirited but also docile; they should chastely await the coming of the right man, and then return his love and marry him

⁴⁶ *Woman's Magazine*, November, 1932, p. 126.

and live as faithful, happy wives and mothers, ever after'.¹⁷ By the time Lehmann achieved her sensational notoriety as author of the daring novel, *Dusty Answer* (1927), she was, as she goes on to relate in *The Swan in the Evening*, in fact 'unhappily married, childless, separated, wishing for a divorce'(68). The fairy-tale mantra of domestic femininity chanted over and over to her during her childhood has proved to be no more than empty mouthing - leaving her, adrift, without an approved career, in a modern and uncertain world.

And similarly deceived by the 'whole-time' promise of a domestic career is the heroine of *A Note in Music*, Grace Fairfax. She, too, was 'brought up to believe in matrimony . . . and monogamy, and pure womanhood waiting for pure love to come and lead it off to a pure home.'¹⁸ Trusting in the efficacy of purity, she marries. But the resulting childless union with a man she learns to despise and pity is not happy. Grace's discontent with her fate is expressed in terms suggestive of stagnation and suffocation; the immovable dead-weight of a 'whole-time' home-making career allowing her no personal freedom or identity. 'It was only that . . . only that she could not express herself at all, in any way - least of all through possessions; through walls and pieces of furniture and ornaments, and all the incredible paraphernalia of household things [. . .] Besides, she was not here really . . . no, she was not here: not in this cage'(14).

In the middle section of the novel, Grace decides to be 'not here' in body as well as spirit. In an attempt to sever the roots of home - break free of the cage bars - she goes on holiday, into the countryside, alone. It is a significant departure. Unsited for the static profession of home-making, she has embraced a more

¹⁷ Lehmann, *The Swan*, p. 68.

¹⁸ Lehmann, *A Note in Music* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930), p. 248

nomadic state of being. For a while, she enjoys an unprecedented sense of release: she 'wove herself into an iridescent web, linking small charm with frail enchantment, until the shining fabric hid her from the commonplace noon, the ordinary night'(190). Delicate-spun stuff of dream and fantasy promises to lift Grace free from the solidly-grounded realities of domestic life. But disillusionment is to follow in the airy wake of that promise. For Grace's new-found wanderlust is not mirrored in her choice of resting place: she takes temporary lodgings not in the homeless world of a hotel or inn, but in the bosom of a close-knit family. Looking at this family, one evening, as they sit round the kitchen table, Grace observes that there 'was not a sound or a movement. Out of the luminous obscurity emerged the domestic union of their figures, with the significance at once placid and poignant, illustrative and transcendental, particular and symbolic, of a Dutch painting'(198).

Grace has escaped from her own painting, her own interior - only to stand here, looking on at another. This domestic scene, beautiful as it is, is also deadly static and outdated, offering no new model for domestic life. Rather, the pictorial allusion only reinforces the sense of home as a place of fixity, of permanence; nothing here is malleable, nothing here is seen for the first time. The family are caught, as if on canvas, in timeless attitudes of domesticity. Both literally and metaphorically this family tableau - 'particular and symbolic' - reminds Grace that home, and all that 'home' means for women, is here to stay. 'Let her remember why she had come here. She had come here, not to prepare for change, for further flight, for life and love, but for the resumption, after a little rest and change of air, of her duties as a housewife. Let her remember there was no escape'(226). In spite of her nomadic dreams of 'further flight', her choice of lodging means that it is

'home' that imprints its elemental, timeless patterns on her gaze. For Grace, the act of departure has become that which ensures her return.

The inevitability of Grace's final destination is prefigured by the domestic tableau of her landlady's family, an eternal interior from which there is no escape. But no such frozen familial scene could exist in the shifting world of the *hotel*, and there is nothing inevitable or final about women's interaction with that temporary space. Barthes' fragment of 'Agony' illustrates how the hotel wears its domesticity with an unsettling difference, transforming 'home' - permanent and stable - into a restless and vagrant simulacrum. And this difference carries a disturbing resonance for women in the inter-war period, for whom the whole-time, everlasting profession of home is championed as the social and cultural ideal. For to encounter a hotel is to mutate this dominant strain of 'home-consciousness'. The female profession of home-making, adopted within the small-scale precincts of the private house, is realigned by both the physical and the metaphorical construction of the hotel, which renders solid household objects - including women themselves - into symbols of impermanence. This realignment process is integral to the shaping of, and representation of, a feminized 'hotel-consciousness'. The latter is an awareness, born of pre-existing domestic knowledge, that the hotel *is* a species of home - and yet also the sense that it is utterly *not*. It is an unsettled response to the domestic strangeness of the hotel - and yet also a recognition that the strangeness, because it emanates from ideas of home, is, at the same time, familiar. And it is the sense, finally, that the hotel alters the status of women themselves, as rooted domestic subjects. They are still the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters they

were in the private house - but, *not* in the private house, they are also something completely different: hotel-nomads with home on their minds.

Strange sameness

Nowhere is the domestic encounter with the strange sameness of hotel life more acutely delineated, concretely and imaginatively, than in Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). It tells of a young woman, Rachel Vinrace, who is invited to stay with a charismatic uncle and aunt in their villa in the Southern American port of Santa Marina. Before embarking on her travels, Rachel's life obeyed the strict rules of respectable middle-class womanhood.

When she thought of their day it seemed to her that it was cut into four pieces by meals. The divisions were absolutely rigid, the contents of the day having to accommodate themselves within the four rigid bars. Looking back at her life that was what she saw.

'Breakfast nine: luncheon one: tea five: dinner eight', she said.⁴⁹

Living in Richmond with staid Aunt Lucy and Aunt Eleanor, Rachel's youth has passed in this domestic prison, caged by tradition and ritual. But, once ensconced in the Southern American villa, she starts gradually to awaken, her new surroundings providing welcome freedom and mobility for mind and body. One of her greatest pleasures is to go out at night into Santa Marina with her Aunt Helen: ' "Seeing life" was the phrase they used for their habit of strolling through the town after dark' (112). During one of these expeditions they venture as far as the

⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* [1915] (London: Hogarth, 1957), p. 254.

hotel - the port is a popular tourist resort - and peer in at the windows. What they see exactly captures the 'strange sameness' of a feminized hotel-consciousness. The hotel is a domestic space, familiar to women proficient in the arts of the private house - and also unfamiliar, because of the intrinsic *homelessness*, physical and metaphorical, that underwrites a hotel's restless domestic life.

A row of long windows opened almost to the ground. They were all of them uncurtained, and all brilliantly lighted, so that they could see everything inside. Each window revealed a different section of the life of the hotel. They drew into one of the broad columns of shadow which separated the windows and gazed in. They found themselves just outside the dining-room. It was being swept; a waiter was eating a bunch of grapes with his leg across the corner of a table. Next door was the kitchen, where they were washing up; white cooks were dipping their arms into cauldrons, while the waiters made their meal voraciously . . . Moving on, they became lost in a plantation of bushes, and then suddenly found themselves outside the drawing-room, where the ladies and gentlemen, having dined well, lay back in deep armchairs . . .

Turning the corner they came to the largest room in the hotel, which was supplied by four windows and was called the Lounge, although it was really a hall. Hung with armour and native embroideries, furnished with divans and screens, the room was less formal than the others, and was evidently the haunt of youth . . .

The people were scattered in couples or parties of four, and either they were actually better acquainted, or the informal room made their manner easier. (114 - 16)

Disturbed in their observation, the two women run off, not stopping for breath until 'the hotel was only a square shadow in the distance, with red holes regularly cut into it'(117). This last glimpse - the bulk of the hotel shadowily etched as negative space, defined against the bright gashes of window - is representative of the visual obliquity that has characterized their espionage mission. The hotel offers a new, unsettling way of seeing domestic space. Divided with bars, the building visually echoes the constraints of the private house, which previously sectioned Rachel's life into such dull segments. Only, at the hotel, these bars are not made up

of rigid ritual and custom, but of lighted windows of life, stretching out one after another. Uncurtained and bright and big, these windows do not cage off events within, but project outwards, into the dark. Far from presenting a frozen canvas to the eye, this viewing experience is modern, mobile: cinematic. Each lighted window offers its own showing of life, each narrative invites a different interpretation. It is a restless, non-sequential, flitting spectacle - which Rachel and Helen, as nomadic watchers, moving from one to the next - themselves co-create. And these brief clips of life all show the realignment of the small-scale contours of the private house, by the function and construction of the public, restless entity - the hotel.

The presence of servants, for example, is a professional necessity in a hotel, just as it is a social necessity in the respectable homes of the middle classes. Rachel's Aunt Lucy sees servants as one more bar in the cage which keeps domestic life properly contained and controlled; ' "at half-past ten in the morning, one expects to find the housemaid brushing the stairs" ', she remarks (34). Aunt Lucy's dictum ensures the maintenance of privacy so essential to the private house: the housemaid is to be seen on the stairs at half-past ten so that she will not be seen on them at any other time. But the hotel does not recognize Aunt Lucy's act of partition. Hotel servants are not obedient to the behests of the private house, but to the mass-produced, commercial demands of the hotel machine; and the service they offer is concomitantly impersonal, casual and detached. The waiter eats grapes with a leg thrown over a guest's table; the cook plunges unhygienic arms into 'cauldrons' - vast, and faintly sinister cooking-pots, in which bubble unspecified things in very large quantities. These servants' relationships with the guests are

purely those of commercial interest. as the sprawling and itinerant nature of a hotel family forbids any more intimate contact. And their disinterest means they do not exist at a subordinate physical and temporal tangent to the main action; they, as much as anyone, *are* the main action. They are not to be found on the stairs, or below stairs, but on an equal footing with the guests. The lighted windows shows these servants existing on the same eye-level as those they serve. Their duties, meals, leisure-time, are worthy of the same visual notice and human interest. And it is the strange domestic world of the hotel that makes this viewing process possible - physically, because the sheer size of the hotel allows this ground-floor span of all-seeing windows; and conceptually, because the impermanent transience which underlies the hotel's function as home for the homeless, blurs the traditionally stable social boundaries between household and servant, server and served.

This dislocation between one version of domesticity and another - between home and hotel - continues to imprint its strange sameness on the gaze. The dining-room, the kitchen, the lounge, the drawing-room: all are firmly established in the domestic canon of the private house. But the hotel skews them off balance. The Lounge, for example, is one room masquerading as another. The fact that 'it was called the Lounge although it was really a hall', demonstrates an arbitrary usurpation of private-house terminology. Actually a large public space, it has been crafted to resemble a much more intimate environment: screens and divans have been used to 'shut off convenient corners', both reducing the size of the room, and providing cosy, hidden corners for more private social intercourse. Rachel and Helen are unsure as to the nature of the relationships in this room, which is the largest in the hotel, and yet professes the intimacy of the private house in its décor

and arrangements. People are grouped in small clusters, obedient to the coercive enclosure of screens - but are they really close to each other, or is the physical trickery of the room constructing an emotional and social illusion? It is impossible to know for sure, and the matter is left undecided; 'either they were actually better acquainted, or the informal room made their manner easier.' Again, the large-scale workings of hotel-space, dedicated to the nomadic needs of the homeless, blur the physical and emotional contours of the private house.

This blurring process is especially confusing for Rachel. Even though she has lived in the same house with her aunts since she was a child, at times the petty, circumscribed ritual of their lives 'appeared before her eyes as something quite unfamiliar and inexplicable'(34). It is this feeling of domestic strangeness, emanating from the very heart of the private house, that prompts her shocking, stammered question, which tries to understand the emotional truth of the household. ' "Are you f-f-fond of Aunt Eleanor, Aunt Lucy?" ', she asks (34). Aunt Eleanor replies without answering, 'with her nervous hen-like twitter of a laugh, "My dear child, what questions you do ask!" . . . and the argument was spilt irretrievably about the place like a bucket of milk'(34). So, to Rachel, looking in at the hotel Lounge, its physically skewed domestic appearance, and ambiguous social groupings, seem no more off-balance and incomprehensible than the small-scale cage of family life in her own London home. The strange physical and conceptual construction of the hotel has shown up the inadequacies of the feminized domestic model on which it is founded. The hotel is as normal - or abnormal - as the private house.

This kind of domestic distortion is intrinsic to the representation and interpretation of a hotel-consciousness particular to women. For Rachel and Helen, their vigil at the lighted windows of the hotel brings new and uncertain resonance to their favourite pastime of 'Seeing Life'. They have certainly seen life - but it is not life as they know it. The skewing of familiar domestic trappings renders a hotel encounter a disorientating, unsettling, and equivocal experience for women - unsettling because the hotel questions and challenges the structures of the private house even as - or precisely because - it imitates them so strangely. This unease is heightened by the sense that women are, themselves, a species of domestic trapping. Physically and symbolically, culturally and socially, the inter-war period locates women at the heart of home; rooted to the hearth stone. And so the homelessness that underlies the construction and function of the hotel alters their status as domestic subjects in much the same way as it blurs the shape and meaning of domestic objects. The hotel renders women strange to themselves - they are entering the unknowable and emergent territory of 'nothing and nowhere'. It is the representation of this process I want to go on now to explore.

A lover's discourse

The Voyage Out is, as its title suggests, a novel all about journeying; questing; seeking things beyond the familiar and known. Its Southern American setting provides a literal interpretation of foreign travel. But the voyage for Rachel is also an intellectual, emotional and spiritual passage. On this journey, she meets Terence, a guest staying at the hotel, and the novel charts the growth of the

intimacy between them, based on a mutual sharing of ideas, sympathies and understanding. They fall in love, and become engaged to be married.

But their particular romance is also part of a more generic literary convention: that the hotel is a place for lovers. Certainly, some element of love and desire colours every hotel-fiction mentioned so far. Lucy and George discover the condition of attraction in a Florentine pension in *A Room With a View*; Max, Amabel and Julia, stranded in a Railway Hotel, circle round each other in a tangle of desire and neuroses in Green's *Party Going*; and in Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, the sixteen-year old Portia, defeated by the world, lies in Major Brutt's hotel bed and asks that he marry her. J. B. Priestly remarks on the phenomenon, criticizing a certain breed of novelists who, even in these troubled times, 'continue writing their charming stories about love affairs that begin in nice country houses and then flare up into purple passages in large hotels in Cannes.'⁵⁰ Woolf herself, in *The Voyage Out*, seems aware of this fictional trope, and makes fun of it, for during the course of the novel, not only Terence and Rachel, but another couple who meet in the hotel, announce their engagement. One of the guests says, 'Getting engaged seems to be quite the fashion. It cannot often happen that two couples who have never seen each other before meet in the same hotel and decide to get married' (386). The joke being that, as far as fictional fashion goes, it is entirely to be expected that couples - in the plural - who have never seen each other before, will meet in the same hotel, fall in love, and decide to get married.

It is intriguing that Barthes' narrator in *A Lover's Discourse* should locate and contextualize a fragment of experience in a hotel bedroom - intriguing, because

⁵⁰ Priestly, *English Journey*, p. 313

such attention to external setting is an unusual occurrence. *A Lover's Discourse* is a largely internalized exploration; a '*Journal of my reverberations* (of my wounds, my joys, my interpretations, my rationalizations, my impulses)' (93; original emphasis). As such, there is little inclination or need to engage with the outside world. 'I am my own theatre', the lover proclaims (161) - so why go elsewhere to be entertained? But the hotel *is* elsewhere, a physical place as well as an emotional locus. Its descriptive presence in *A Lover's Discourse* - a manifesto of desire - suggests how closely the place, the emotion and the act are intertwined.

In practical terms, the hotel provides lovers, simply, with a place to go: a room with a bed. And should the encounter be illicit, the hotel's fleeting, transient population and unfamiliar society promises anonymity and security. But inherent in these physical factors are less tangible reasons which account for the hotel's attraction for lovers - especially for female lovers.

In her study of desire, Catherine Belsey charts the Western culture, history and discourses of that emotional and physical state. Writing about romantic novels, she argues that their women readers are routinely disappointed by the formulaic endings of these fictions, which see the heroine's exciting and passionate love affair finish safely in marriage. Desire, as an emotion experienced both inside the text, by the heroine, and outside the text, by the vicarious reader, 'preserves its precious rarity and momentariness by virtue of the fact that an eternity of domesticity is not an option.'⁵¹ In other words, emotional and narrative disappointment is inherent in the romantic, sexual and domestic closure of marriage and home. In order to 'preserve' the fragile and precious state of desire, in an ideal world an 'eternity of

⁵¹ Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 38.

domesticity' would be avoided at all costs, and a romantic novel would never end - or would, at least, end differently. These are considerations which have intriguing implications for this chapter, and for the fictions it discusses.

For the hotel, with literal and metaphorical homelessness at its heart, is a place which exactly fulfils that criteria for the survival of desire - more, it actually guarantees that an 'eternity of domesticity' is an impossibility. The hotel provides the bare domestic bones of a room and a bed; those things which allow the physical fulfilment of desire. But its vagrant and shifting quality means that it provides little else: the hotel is domestically unstable, uncertain; it is not built for married life, and cannot sustain it. The hotel's everchanging character knows nothing about the finality of endings, or closure, and is therefore quite alien - conceptually and narratively - to the happy-ever-after eternity of the married and domestic state.

The hotel's transience - physical and temporal - has a particularly disturbing impact upon women's status as domestic and fictive subjects, especially in the context of the inter-war period when an 'eternity of domesticity' was marketed as the feminine ideal, and the popular form of the domestic novel reflected and contributed to that ideal. The hotel's resistance to domestic eternity questions, ironizes, and makes strange women's culturally and fictively determined careers as wives, mothers and home-makers. This same resistance also allows the emotional fulfilment and narrative expression of a sexual desire which is normally killed off by the finality of domestic eternity. This interdependent process offers women an alternative, or additional identity, strange to themselves: that of hotel-lover.

Elizabeth Bowen's novel, *The Hotel* (1927), makes very apparent the difficulties inherent in being a hotel-wife. The novel charts the lives, loves and hates of a

group of guests brought together in a hotel on the Italian Riviera. Numbered among these guests are a married couple, Mr and Mrs Lee-Mittison. Travelling from one out-of-season resort to another, and with no home of their own, theirs is an unglamorous nomady, not so much acquired as thrust upon them. And these travels are particularly hard on Mrs Lee-Mittison. The flitting, restless character of hotel life undermines her identity as a married woman: she is culturally and fictively expected to provide an 'eternity of domesticity' in the private house, and yet is offered something very different, and entirely hostile to those expectations, by the hotel. One day, on a picnic expedition into the hills, she finds herself unexpectedly alone, and faces the truth of her experience as hotel wife.

She looked down the slope beside her into the valley below and saw a little house, with a blue door whose colour delighted her, beside the bed of a river. Two lemon trees were beside it, and this little house which she seemed at once to inhabit gave her the most strange sensation of dignity and of peace. She saw herself go climbing up the garden from terrace to terrace, calling the goat, and the goat, beautiful in its possessedness, come loping down to meet her, asking to be milked . . . She carried the milk frothing warm in the pottery jug inside, into the dark interior of the house, which would not be dark from within. Here, something turned her back and she could not follow herself; she saddened, feeling excluded from some very intimate experience . . . The villino suddenly dropped away from her eye as though she had put down a telescope, and as her life sprang back into focus she must have been dizzy, for she felt sick at the thought of their hotel bedrooms which stretched out in unbroken succession before and behind her. She felt sick at the thought of for how many mornings more she would have to turn the washstand into an occasional table by putting away the basin and jug in the cupboard and drape with Indian embroideries the trunk in which they concealed their boots.⁵²

The contrast between the life she has and the life she wants, could not be more plainly outlined. Mrs Lee-Mittison longs for the private, intimate life that the little

⁵² Bowen, *The Hotel* [1927] (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), p. 42.

house, with its quirky blue door, promises. The repetition of words that suggest insularity and enclosure contained in the single image - of herself, carrying a jug 'inside, into the dark interior of the house, which would not be dark from within' - speaks eloquently of her wish for the close embrace of a home. She would not feel the claustrophobia of cage bars, only the security of their confining strength. But her dream of domestic happiness is rendered so nebulous through lack of real-life experience, that she is unable to finish it. She is turned back at the door, and must leave her mind's-eye self in the dark interior - doing what, she literally cannot imagine. Mrs Lee-Mittison's real life is hotel life, and is entirely opposed to the 'eternity of domesticity' she needs in order to fulfil her prescribed wifely role.

Under normal circumstances, she does her best with the insubstantial domestic material provided by the hotel, and creates for her husband the illusion of permanence in a transient world: when he returns to their table after performing his habitual social round in the dining room, 'she leant sideways and pulled his chair farther out for him, tucked her knitting away in a bag and gave him all her attention. The return was in the nature of a home-coming; she was the kind of wife who can always create this atmosphere'(24). But out here, alone on the hillside, this selfless act of deception is dropped, and Mrs Lee-Mittison recognizes the truth of a hotel home-coming. The bedrooms that 'stretch out in unbroken succession before and behind her' make a mockery out of a notion of eternal domesticity, in that life lived in them certainly seems endless - but is hardly domestic, and anything but permanent. Mrs Lee-Mittison has, in fact, to fashion an 'eternity of domesticity' brand new every morning, turning the washstand into a table, and hiding the trunk which hides boots, in an attempt to transform their wandering,

cramped existence into a spacious and stable home. It is continual see-saw contrivance of pretence and illusion; no wonder she feels sick at the thought of it

The hotel is a place of misery to the married woman. With the shadow of departure always ghosting the solid present, the hotel shuns any sense of permanence, and is therefore hostile to the feminized arts of home-making, and to the emotional, sexual and physical 'eternity of domesticity' which marriage promises. Distressing to the identity of the dedicated wife, an awareness of the literal and metaphorical transience which underwrites the hotel has a more equivocal effect upon the fictional representation of women who are not so committed to fulfilling the womanly inter-war ideal. For in the act of forbidding the closure of domestic eternity, the hotel both challenges and makes strange that feminized ideal; and permits the possibility of experiencing something else - sexual desire which only acquires its full seductive power outside, or in addition to, the marital state.

Desire is imperilled by an 'eternity of domesticity', and the narrative finality which that state entails. But the hotel keeps domestic eternity, with all the implications which that reality contains for women during this period, in a state of continual deferral. Domestic life is always evoked by the 'strange sameness' of the hotel to the home; but is always challenged, ironized and resisted by the homelessness which informs all that a hotel is and what it offers. This process of domestic deferral promises women an experience of desire which is continually exciting, precious and novel, because that which habitually kills desire - the career of wife, mother and home-maker - is kept at an eternal, estranging distance. In other words, in questioning the finality of domestic closure the hotel permits the

exhilarating and precious 'momentariness' of desire to *continue* to exist. An eternity of stasis has been replaced by the paradox of eternal change; everlasting transience. The physical and conceptual vagaries of the hotel allow women to adopt the restless, uncertain career of lover - a change of profession which renders women, as fictive and domestic subjects, strange to themselves. They are occupying unknown territory: they do not know themselves. Nothing is happening nowhere. This representational process of making-strange, integral to a feminized hotel-consciousness, carries with it intriguing social, emotional and fictional implications, which I want to go on now to examine.

A phantom society

It was not just women's work that was channelled into the private house during the inter-war period. Female sexuality, too, was officially directed into the maintenance of marriage and the production of children. Marie Stopes' manual of sexual technique was entitled *Married Love* (1918), and her treatise on birth control, *Wise Parenthood* (1918), thus rendering bald truths more palatable by encoding them in the language of societal and familial convention. Sexual pleasure can only be a part of 'married love' (to obtain a divorce was still a legal and administrative ordeal); birth control is about responsible and wise parenting, rather than the consequences of illegitimacy and abortion (the latter, of course, illegal at this time).

It is a period that has been criticized by its contemporaries as being, generally, 'extremely prudish'.⁵³ Certainly it was a time of sexual censorship: D. H. Lawrence was prosecuted for obscenity over *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928); Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) was banned because of its openly lesbian subject matter. Nor was literature the only cultural medium to be affected. The Hays Code was introduced in 1930, a directive of Will Hays, the first president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. The Hays Code demanded the upkeep of strict moral standards on screen: intimate kissing or embraces were vetoed, as was any glimpse of a double bed.

Popular culture directed towards women allowed very little articulation of female desire apart from that which ended in marriage. In *Marriage Past and Present*, Margaret Cole questions the motives of popular advertising in women's magazines: 'To what end', she asks, 'is a girl or woman urged to use a particular

⁵³ Cole, *Marriage*, p. 126

soap, to drink a particular milk, to keep her bowels open with X's salt, or to clean her teeth with Y's dentifrice? Simply in order that she may either attract the particular attention, or keep it when attracted, of a man who can afford to keep her'(195). Advertising, as an instrument of social conditioning, persuades women to look more beautiful, more sexually appealing - but only in order to secure their appointments as wives. And yet Cole is equally doubtful about the status of extra-marital relationships. Simply, with society as it is, they are untenable.

For, though I do not think that there are sound theoretical reasons against this sort of experimentation, there obviously are practical reasons for which one cannot light-heartedly advise young people to undertake it openly. One must, if one is honest, tell them that if you are known to be 'living in sin' - or if people think you are - you may be badly handicapped. There are a good many jobs to which you will not be appointed, or from which, having been appointed, you may be dismissed; and you may have to face a hostile public opinion of whose strength and power to depress you have not any idea as yet. Even if you think you will not mind not being called upon by the vicar, you do not know, until you have experienced it, what it means to be sniffed at by the tradesmen and discussed perpetually by the neighbours. (245-46).

'Living in sin' is at best experimentation; at worst, professional and social suicide. Inter-war manners dictate a rigid code of morality, which, as Cole suggests, it is extremely unwise to be seen, or even suspected, to be breaking. This is especially the case for women, for whom 'social and sexual place are one, and if they lose one, they lose both.'⁵⁴

But what becomes clear is how often sexual and social codes are, if not broken, at least *obfuscated* by the hotel's blurred domestic and temporal contours. Certainly, adopting the rootless career of hotel-lover is an act of bold rebellion for

⁵⁴ Light, *Forever England*, p. 180

women, who thereby become estranged from a sense of themselves as socially and culturally approved beings. But it is not an act of suicide. For the hotel's construction and function means that 'propriety' is an entirely negotiable concept, and can, with care, be side-stepped.

A 'phantom society'⁵⁵: this is the term that Edith Wharton - a writer fascinated by the modern strangeness of hotel worlds - uses to describe the social groups that form within these homeless places. The phrase contains a touch of menace, suggesting as it does a society peopled by hotel-ghosts. But, more, it evokes a shadowy, insubstantial entity: half-seen, half-felt: not real. Hotel society - the guardian of sexual and social propriety - cannot exist in anything other than this phantom state. The impermanence that underwrites all dimensions of hotel life infects social inter-relations with uncertainty and ambiguity. Modern nomads come without a history, and leave before they can write one: no one knows anything about anyone, for certain. And this makes for a shifting, uneasy social *milieu*. Hotel society is founded on the brief coming together of like with like; and founders because hotel life makes it impossible to determine exactly who 'like' is. This means a disproportionate social importance is placed on surface appearance: on what else is there to draw? Seeing has to be believing - which, as a code of manners, is open to abuse.

In Bowen's novel, *The Hotel*, a collective of respectable middle-aged, married women foregather in the hotel's drawing room on rainy days. This collective excludes those who obviously do not possess its defining characteristics. The shy

⁵⁵ Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (New York: Scribners, 1913), p. 273. For more on Wharton's creative fascination with hotels, see Susan Koprince, 'Edith Wharton's Hotels', *Massachusetts Studies in English*, 10:1 (1985), 12-23.

spinster, Miss Fitzgerald, feels she cannot go in: 'the room presented a too unbroken front of matronhood'(53). The young, unmarried Joan will not go in, for 'she was a little daunted by the habitués of the drawing room, who . . . were impeccably manicured and had a hardish eye that negatived one's own importance'(54). Bluff military man Colonel Duperrier is appalled by a 'kind of gasp of feminine conversation' (52) which escapes when the drawing room door is opened, and prefers to sit in the Lounge, cold and bleak as it is. So far, so good: the 'habitués' of the drawing room deploy a discriminating, 'hardish eye' in order to attract 'like' to their number, and to keep 'unlike' at a distance - preferably, on the other side of a shut door. But there is one guest, a Mrs Kerr, who does not fit into any feminine category the drawing-room collective can recognise. She is enigmatic, elusive; and resists all the many attempts that are made to define her. Her "otherness" offers a challenge to the familiar range of experiences and interests which are the traditional province of domestic life. ' "I cannot think," said one, "what a woman of that sort finds to do with herself." She spoke with emphasis, this remark had been throughout a recurring point in the conversation. "She has no interests. She hasn't a large correspondence. She does nothing." '(58). It cannot be resolved to anyone's satisfaction exactly what 'sort' of woman Mrs Kerr is, or what she does; she can only be partially and unsatisfactorily defined by what she isn't and doesn't. Her social and sexual position remains undetermined. This episode demonstrate exactly how important appearances are in the transient social world of the hotel - and exactly how easily those appearances can be confounded. The enigmatic Mrs Kerr, by appearing to do absolutely nothing at all, cannot be

detected by the social radar of the drawing room set, and remains resolutely unknowable.

But it is equally possible to dupe the hotel's 'phantom society' with the appearance of appearances, with the appropriate display of propriety. The full ramifications and implications of deceiving hotel society are explored in Winifred Holtby's novel, *South Riding*. In the course of this long and detailed study of provincial life, the novel's modern heroine - headmistress, Sarah Burton - falls in love with Robert Carne, local land-owner, and relic of a dying feudal age. Everything prevents their union; quite apart from a basic antagonism each has for the other's views, he is married. One night, however, they meet by chance in a Manchester hotel. After drinks and dinner and dancing, Sarah invites him to her room, quite prepared to estrange herself from her respectable identity, and adopt that of a desirous and desired lover. She puts it rather more bluntly - 'he thinks I am a little tart. Well? . . . I will be his little tart'(350-51). But the only passions enacted in Sarah's room turn out to be those of Robert Carne, as he does tempestuous battle with the physical pain of angina. He nearly dies. The chapter which describes these events is entitled 'Two in a Hotel are Temporarily Insane'. The use of 'temporarily' captures exactly that sense of transience which colours all hotel happenings, real and metaphorical. But the use of the word 'insane' has rather more sober implications. Obviously, for Carne, the insanity lay in arousing - with drink as much as lust - his serious illness. But Sarah's insanity is social and sexual. She is a modern-thinking, single career woman, so it is not her domestic standing which is in danger, but her professional reputation. And hers is, as we have seen, an entirely deliberate act of madness; a deliberate estrangement from her

public identity. 'I have Kiplington High School; he is a governor. This may destroy me. Even if I do not have a child, this may destroy me She meant the end of her security as a respectable and respected professional woman'(351).

Yet she finds herself able to deceive the hotel's 'phantom society' with the appearance of appearances. Carne himself takes initial precautions, waiting until 'the hotel began to settle itself down for the night' (351) before coming to her room; and then running up the stairs to avoid the announcing clatter of the 'tell-tale lift'(351). But once he falls ill, it is Sarah's responsibility to save his life, and her own social standing - not necessarily in that order.

And even as she crouched above him, feeling through her nerves the tortures of his pain, her cold mind, entirely calm, considered. I could tell the hall-porter I heard him here in the passage groaning and got him into my room. No. They know he's on the first floor. I shall say he knew me - I'm his daughter's school teacher. He felt ill and came to me for advice and fainted. (353)

'They' - who comprise the phantom entity of hotel society - know that Carne's room is on the first floor. But that knowledge is rendered powerless by Sarah's invention, based, ironically, partly on truth - a dangerous decision as the very thing that she stands to lose in the event of discovery, her job, is what she uses to fashion the appearance of propriety. Not only a school teacher, but the school teacher of Carne's own daughter: these facts, twisted by Sarah into a hotel fiction, surely preclude any taint of scandal. The sick man even comes to her for the impersonal tutelage of 'advice', rather than help. 'They' will never be able to discern the unrespectable actuality entwined in so many other respectable truths - especially as Sarah and Carne are themselves a fleeting part of the hotel's phantom society.

staying for one night only, and then leaving, for ever, taking the real version of events with them.

In a period when female sexuality was allowed no official expression outside the home, there is a social ambiguity afforded by the rootless domestic and social construction of the hotel which provides women lovers with the means to elude moral censure. Women can conceal their actual motives and behaviour behind a more acceptable social front, and the 'phantom society' of the hotel cannot tell, for certain, the difference between their real and assumed identities. It is an involved subterfuge process, in which, by challenging the moral norm, women become strange to their own social, sexual and fictive identities.

Nowhere is the estrangement process endemic to hotel-consciousness more completely realized than in Bowen's novel, *The House in Paris* (1935). Karen Michaelis is its heroine, and it is her unchartered venture into the unknown terrain of the hotel - and into her own self - that I want to go on to examine.

Hotels and *The House In Paris*

The House in Paris is a novel in which time is folded up like tissue paper. The first and the last third are part of the same temporal piece - The Present - and chart a single day in the eponymous house, where two children are unexpectedly brought together in order that they might wait. Cool, self-contained Henrietta is waiting to take the night train to the South and her grandmother. Tense, strung-up Leopold is waiting to meet the mother he has never seen. Both children are under the nervous chaperonage of Miss Naomi Fisher, and the overhead, listening presence of her

invalid mother, Mme Fisher, imposes its own sinister watch on the house and its occupants. The middle section of the novel unfolds *The Past*. It explains, retrospectively, who Miss and Mme Fisher are; it introduces Leopold's parents, and unfolds the convoluted twists of passion, betrayal and loss which have led to the son's ignorance of his origins.

Karen and Max are Leopold's parents: she is a beautiful young English woman from a respectable upper middle-class family; he is half-French, without money or family, and not quite respectable for each and all of those reasons. The two met when Karen spent a year in Paris, staying as a paying guest at Mme Fisher's house, where she also met and befriended the timid and adoring Naomi Fisher, easy emotional prey for her charismatic and sinister mother. When Karen and Max meet again, some years later, both are engaged to be married - Max to Naomi, Karen to solid and safe Ray, who is very much from her own world. Indeed, their marriage 'would have that touch of inbreeding that makes a marriage so promising; he was a cousin's cousin; they had met first at her home.'⁵⁶ But in spite of their respective engagements, and all the social factors which forbid their intimacy, Karen and Max are drawn towards each other. They end up spending the night together; and it is then that Leopold is conceived.

Reasons of practicality and security dictate that Karen and Max's one night is spent in a hotel - or, in this instance, an inn: the Ram's Head, in Hythe. Arguably, this episode is the most significant of the novel. Its placing, halfway through the middle third, adds another layer of meaning to Karen's observation of herself and Max: that 'they had both come a long way, without consulting each other, to sleep

⁵⁶ Bowen, *The House in Paris* [1935] (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 71.

under a ceiling with this barred light'(152). The novel, too, has come a long way to encompass this moment - travelling through time as well as space - and the repercussions of this moment provide hindsight for the first third of the novel, and foreshadow the happenings of the last. Its pivotal structural position is of a piece with the enormity of the act, which breaks not only impersonal social rules, but the intimate rules of friendship and trust. The Ram's Head is a textual epicentre, which sends out shock waves through the rest of the novel.

Before they even arrive, Karen is struck by the awareness that adopting the role of hotel-lover entails a process of estrangement from all the social, domestic and sexual codes that have previously made up her world and herself. 'She had taken off the sapphire ring that morning and put a bought wedding ring on the finger, which had so far made her keep her left-hand glove on. . . The taxi drove down the High Street and pulled up; Karen got out, and, waiting outside the Ram's Head, felt rain from this new sky on her face'(150). The priceless engagement ring is swapped for a 'bought wedding ring', in order to dupe the phantom society of the hotel with this symbol of respectability. But assuming a false social and sexual identity in this way engenders a feeling of strangeness. Karen tries to assuage it by refusing to take off her glove; she does not want to see the proof of her deception on the finger. Yet leaving only the one glove on is, in its own way, an act which draws all the more attention to it; whether she takes it off or keeps it on, the ring hand is accentuated, and made strange to her own perception. No wonder that the rain outside the inn suddenly seems to fall from a 'new sky'. In the process of exchanging one ring for another, Karen has destroyed the old version of her world,

and her own staid part in it; and has made another universe and another Karen within it.

This process of alienation from her old surroundings and self continues inside the Ram's Head, where Karen is made acutely aware of the social, sexual and domestic strangeness inherent in her chosen role as hotel-lover.

A real ram's head glared from the hall wall: the manageress looked through her hatch with glass eyes too. 'Number nine,' she said. The head-maid's bumping backview, with crooked apron-string bow . . . went on up . . .

The maid said: 'Number nine,' ahead, opening a door. Karen saw the chestnut over the white blind. She looked round and put the hat on the bed. The boots brought the bag up: the maid who would not go re-folded a towel over the jug: Number Nine shuffled with servants staring into your back . . . The maid, the boots, had to go: the door shut. Karen looked at her face in the strange glass. She thought: 'I must go down,' but stopped to see the room behind in the glass. (150)

The inn may be old, but that does not render its domestic life any the more stable or permanent. The fact that the room is repeatedly referred to as number nine reinforces the sense that the room is not unique, one-off, but part of a larger domestic machine; and the presence of the manageress serves as a reminder that this machine is a business, professional and profit-based. Her glassy-eyed indifference, like that of the stuffed ram's head, suggests both the casual impersonality that passes for the domestic life of a hotel, and also a studied refusal to see anything suspect in the situation in front of her. (Rather like the hotel manageress in Bowen's short story, 'A Love Story' (1941). Frank and Linda are hotel-lovers who call themselves cousins - to which announcement the manageress responds blandly ' "Ah yes" . . . not batting an eyelid.'⁵⁷ Appearances may be

⁵⁷ Bowen, *Collected Stories*, p. 502.

deceiving - but it does not make commercial sense for the hotel management to look too closely for the reality behind them.)

Karen is disorientated by the domestic strangeness of the Ram's Head, and by a sense of her own strange, new status as a hotel-lover. These feelings of alienation are expressed through the medium of room nine itself: it is, after all, the place where she will abandon marital pretence and adopt the role of illicit lover. The room 'shuffled with servants staring into your back' - and it is as if number nine is already revealing this new, illicit identity of hotel-lover to the scrutiny of everyone in the room, including that of Karen herself. She knows she ought to go downstairs, but is transfixed by the 'strange glass', in which she looks first at her own face, then at the room behind her. The oddness of mirror-image sight reflects, literally, the oddness of the situation; this is a new, unfamiliar Karen, and number nine, seen back-to-front and behind her in the glass, is complicit in her making-strange.

And it is in this room that Karen and Max become lovers. Immediately afterwards, Karen is assailed by a sense of desolation and loss. Lying in bed next to the sleeping Max, Karen thinks that 'people must hope so much when they tear the streets up and fight at barricades. But, whoever wins, the streets are laid again and the trains start running again. One hopes too much of destroying things. If revolutions do not fail, they fail you'(152). Karen's decision to go to the Ram's Head was an act of social and sexual revolution which she hoped would break down the safe boundaries of her respectable world, and the known limits of her own experience. But it seems that her revolution has failed her.⁵⁸ She will marry

⁵⁸ This reference to revolution echoes an episode in Flaubert's *L'Éducation Sentimentale* (1869), when, at the end of Chapter VI, Part II, lovers Frederick and Rosanette are disturbed in their

Ray - which 'will be like being with mother' (153) - and Max will marry Naomi: 'streets are laid again and the trains start running again.' The finality of domestic and narrative closure threatens the lovers.

But they *are* in a hotel - a blurred, transient domestic world which resists the concept of finality; of endings. Here, this resistance is woven deep into the textual fabric. This episode contains some of the novel's most intriguing writing, especially in its depiction of Karen's night thoughts, as she lies, listening to the rain, and watching the shadow of the chestnut tree etch itself on the walls and ceiling. This writing is slurred, difficult, and elusive, combining as it does the drifting quality of a waking dream with Bowen's own characteristic linguistic precision and syntactic formality.

Having done as she knew she must she did not think there would be a child: all the same, the idea of you, Leopold, began to be present with her . . .

The weight of being herself fell on her like a clock striking. She saw the clothes she would put on to go home in hanging over a chair. While it is still Before. Afterwards has no power, but afterwards it is the kingdom, the power and the glory. You do not ask yourself, What am I doing? You know. What you do ask yourself, what have I done? you will never know.

Had this not been escape? She was washed back ashore again. Further out than you dare go, where she had been is the outgoing current not strong enough not to let you back? Were you not far out, is there no far out, or is there no current there? I am let back safe, too safe; no one will ever know. (151-52)

This is instantly recognisable as Bowen-terrain: its authoritative aphoristic quality; its 'clock' simile striking as at once inevitable and fresh, its convoluted syntax and sentence structure. But it is more unusual to find her consciously 'writerly'

hotel bedroom by the noise of revolution and gunfire in the streets. Bowen first read this novel in 1932, and was much impressed - a few months later, she began translating it. See Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 117

techniques operating in conjunction with the representation of consciousness as a felt and immediate state, rather than as a thought-out and deliberate process mediated through an authoritative textual presence. What makes this passage disconcerting is the combination of these two methods of writing - especially when it comes to identifying a narrative point of view. Who is talking about whom? is the question which demands to be asked, but cannot be definitively answered, again and again in this passage. 'You' and 'I' execute a dazzling interplay of textual meaning, their referents continually requiring realignment. Nothing can be taken as read, not even that the fictional world is separate from the reader's world: Leopold himself achieves the status of reader of his own narrative when he is informed that 'you, Leopold, began to be present with her'. The questions, 'what am I doing?', and 'what have I done?', are likewise ambiguous, and can be variously addressed to the author, by the reader; to the character, by the author; to the author, by the character; and to the character, by the character. Karen, we learn, has been washed out, further 'than you dare go' - but who are 'you'? Did Karen drift out further than you - the reader - or further than her own reserves of courage could take her?

The effect of these techniques is to inform Karen's half-awake thoughts with the lucid yet absurd logic of a dream landscape. But they also play with the concept of identity to the extent where it becomes hard to know where characters and author end, and readers begin. Identity, thus written, becomes transient, plural, and seamless - rather like the hotel itself. It is conceived of as a shared entity, occupied by a succession of narrative parties - character, reader and author - just as a hotel room is tenanted by a nightly succession of bodies. By writing identity in this way,

it is as if hotel-consciousness has itself permeated the narrative. The literal and metaphorical rootlessness and impermanence of hotel life infuses the writing which describes it, making strange the textual understanding and representation of identity in the process. Hotel-consciousness as a narrative energy means that identity, and the writing of identity, becomes an unfinished, ever-changing and renewable process: 'you', 'I', 'she', and 'her' - all nomadic guests in the hotel of the mind.

'Hotel-consciousness' as a restless, rootless state of fiction, as well as a condition of mind and heart, is in textual sympathy with Karen's need to resist the sense of domestic eternity which tinges her desire with a sense of loss. The written presence of room number nine has already demonstrated that it has the power to estrange Karen from her domestic, sexual and social self. But it also has the energizing power to make strange, and thus anneal, her feelings of loss. Again, she thinks of her situation:

These hours are only hours. They cannot be again, but no hours can.
Hours in a room with a lamp and a tree outside, with tomorrow eating
into them . . . The maid will make this bed and fold back two corners
of the eiderdown like they were folded back when I put my hat on it.
If I could brush the rain off his sleeve again, and drive past the
tamarisks, and walk up behind the maid with the bumpy bow on her
back, and put my hat on the bed - . . .
Whatever may happen this morning, it will be part of afterwards.
(153)

At first, Karen is once more depressed by thoughts of the end; the hours she has spent with Max 'cannot be again'. But then the abstract concept of hours is textually redefined in terms of hotel-time. These are not just hours, but 'hours in a room' that have 'tomorrow eating into them' - an exact description of the transient

world of the hotel, in which the homeless present is continually invaded by an uncertain future. Once this ephemeral quality of hotel life has been evoked, Karen's own feelings of depressing finality are changed. Her thoughts now dwell on the idea of an energizing renewal: of re-running events again and again. The maid will make the bed in the morning in preparation for other arrivals, who will play out the brief hotel narrative of their own lives. But as this concept of the ever-changing repetition of hotel life develops, Karen turns it on herself and Max. Instead of considering the end, she thinks of them as existing in a more conditional, equivocal hotel medium of time and space, which will allow her to experience desire as an exciting state of re-liveable continuum: 'If I could brush the rain off his sleeve again, and drive past the tamarisks, and walk up behind the maid . . . and put my hat on the bed - ' There is no end to this sequence: she and Max will come back, night after night, to the hotel, and yet, without the threat of domestic ending, the expression of their desire will be as precious and new as on their first visit. She will still put her hat on the bed of number nine for the first time. The 'momentariness' so important to the survival of desire has been safeguarded, if only in Karen's own mind. Her feelings of loss have been tempered, made strange, by the possibilities of hotel-time and space. When she thinks of the morning again, she still knows it will mark something, but not the end - rather, 'afterwards', a far more uncertain and supple state.

In fact, what actually happens in the morning is that Max asks Karen to marry him. Both will break off their existing engagements. Karen agrees, but the marriage never takes place. The shadow of tragedy hangs over the concept of an eternal union for these two. At the moment when they agree to be married, 'last night

seemed to be undone, so that they kissed with unfamiliar lips, tasting rain on each other's lips. Drawing apart like a pair of very young people, they stared at each other, and at what had happened now'(166). The sensation of familiar desire suddenly rendered strange and untasted, is the twisted and transient domestic legacy of the hotel, with its rooms that rub out traces of lives like sea on sand, only to allow those same lives to play themselves out in strange dream-like sameness, again and again. Even when planning the eternity of marriage, this is the pattern of Karen and Max's relationship: a continual series of unfamiliar and erotic beginnings. The quality of their relationship is indissoluble from the hotel which gave it life. The language with which their engagement is cemented suggests the sense of disaster that underlies the intended marriage, working as it does against the characters' own professed wishes. The use of the word 'undone' to describe the moment of their kiss; the fact that they draw apart like 'very young people' (my emphasis); and the portentous placing of the concluding 'now' - all conjure up a sense that something catastrophic has happened, and that Karen and Max, instigators of the disaster, cannot control it.

This prefiguring of disaster for the pair is a correct omen. Max, goaded beyond endurance by the taunts of Madame Fisher, kills himself. Karen finds herself pregnant with Leopold, goes abroad to have the child in secret, and then marries Ray, the man to whom she was initially engaged. Leopold is put up for adoption, and Karen refuses to know him, see him or contact him. Her refusal is born partly out of social necessity: according to Margaret Cole, a child born out of wedlock is still an affront to public decency, and 'the mother is less presentable than a

divorced woman; she is practically debarred'.⁵⁹ But Karen's refusal to acknowledge Leopold also proves to be a way to keep alive the unfinished, ever-renewable quality of her brief hotel love affair with Max.

She and her husband, Ray, have a continual, cyclical argument about the child (Ray would like Leopold to join them). Their argument about her son, 'being circular, has no end. Under silences, it can be heard by the heart pursuing its round'(218). Her continually not wanting the child makes Ray continually evoke its wanted presence; the result is that Leopold himself is always present but never there. His reality exists in a state of endless deferral. It is a painful process - Karen and Ray's married life is haunted by the ghost of an absent third, a child, whose physical incarnation is almost created out of their surroundings, but is always, finally, denied tangible form. There is that 'third chair left pushed in at a table set for a couple. After-dark fountains playing in coloured light, for no grown-up eye'(219). But if Karen were to see Leopold, she would finish her and Max's story. Another narrative would begin, that of herself and her child - but she and Max would come to the end of their journey. Whilst her relationship with Leopold himself remains thus unfinished - the boy always present, but unseen - so her relationship with Max exists in the same poised, expectant state as in their one precious night spent in the hotel together.

In the final third of *The House in Paris*, Karen determines to visit her child - but then changes her mind. And it is a hotel room which is witness to her decision. She 'shuddered on the Versailles bed, with the gloves she had out on to go to Paris, then pulled off, dropped on the floor, and the violets she had pinned on for

⁵⁹ Cole, *Marriage*, p. 140.

Leopold pressed dead between her breast and the bed'(215). Her inability to leave the hotel, violent in its very inertia, reveals Karen's unwillingness to claim her son, and, by so doing, bring herself and Max to an end. Indeed, the strange domestic world of the hotel - the 'Versailles bed' a group concern, so many have lain in it - is an apt location for her state of mind and heart. The violets bought for Leopold, crushed dead between her breast and the uncaring, unknowing bed, demonstrate that the process of making-strange which is an integral part of female hotel-consciousness is still on-going. The nurturing breast crushes the life out of the flowers when pressed against the hotel bed - a symbolic estrangement from the strong maternal instincts demanded by inter-war society and culture.⁶⁰ Karen, under the alienating influence of hotel-consciousness, is willing to sacrifice the son in order to save the mother and the father. She has no intention of leaving the Versailles bed. Ray goes to meet Leopold in her stead, and the novel moves on without her. The meeting between parent and child, endlessly deferred for reader as well as character, is thus brought about by this uneasy proxy. A tense alliance between an awkward boy and a desperate man, whose 'inappropriateness to each other made people stare' (238), brings about an ending of a sort. It is equivocal, uncertain; Leopold bombards Ray with questions that it is not in the novel's final paragraphs to answer.

'Then?'
'Come on,' Ray said, quickening his steps again.
'Will my mother come tonight?'
'Come on,' Ray repeated.
'Where to?' (239)

⁶⁰ See Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989), p. 20. Referred to hereafter as *Home and Duty*. See also Diana Gittens, *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure 1900-1939* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 51. Referred to hereafter as *Fair Sex*.

But, nonetheless, the novel concludes with a sense that a journey - emotional, physical and textual - has come to a halt. 'Ray had not seen Karen's child in bright light before; now he saw light strike the dilated pupils of Leopold's eyes. Egotism and panic, knowing mistrust of what was to be, died in Ray as he waited beside Leopold for their taxi to come'(239). Ray, at the last, has seen Leopold for the first time - as Leopold - and not as Karen's child. By recognising the boy in his own right, rather than as a living adjunct of a love affair, Ray has himself finished Karen and Max's story. What the consequences of that closure may be, he does not know - but, as the novel ends, Ray, at least, knows peace.

Karen, left behind in the hotel, does not enjoy anything approaching that state. And the wretchedness of her final novelistic moments, lying in violent immobility on the Versailles bed, does raise questions about the ultimate implications of a feminized hotel-consciousness, and of the fiction which evokes it. Karen's miserable end suggests that the social, emotional, sexual and domestic estrangement engendered by a state of hotel-consciousness is an equivocal process. Hotel-consciousness challenges and questions women's prescribed domestic identity; it allows the intense expression of a desire that would otherwise have no means of expression - but it exacts in return a high cost in nervous exhaustion and social anxiety. Its fictive cost is also dear. If the representation of a woman's most profound romantic and sexual experience belongs in a hotel, so hostile to settled, permanent life, how is she to achieve anything like the happy ending inter-war society and culture demands? Does she even want to achieve it, when such an ending brings its own sense of loss in its wake? Fictively, if her life's defining

moment owes its written existence to a hotel, a place which resists closure - and if the writing is itself influenced by the estranging devices of hotel-consciousness - then how is she to end at all, happily or otherwise?

It is with endings - equivocal endings that have their origins in the hotel - that I want to conclude.

Happy ever after

'I think we'll see each other again,' he said, staring at her fixedly.
'Rollo, you are an awful man . . .'
'Let's not be final and desperate darling.' Coaxing, stroking her palm. 'It's so silly, isn't it? We've had such lovely times. Haven't we? Life's so short. When two people get on so well together, it's so stupid to say never again. Don't you agree?'
'Yes . . . perhaps . . .' [. . .]
'Do you remember our drives in the mountains?' he was saying. 'And the heavenly places where we stayed? The little inns? Do you remember that queer one under the chestnut trees? - with the funny little band? . . . It was fun, wasn't it darling?'⁶¹

Here, on Rollo's unanswered question, ends Lehmann's novel, *The Weather in the Streets*. Officially, Rollo and Olivia are no longer together: after a car accident which nearly killed him, and the discovery of the forbidden relationship by his mother, Rollo returns to his wife, and Olivia to her semi-Bohemian existence. This is meant to be their final meeting. But, for all that, it is an eloquent and seductive plea for the impossibility of closure: it is a non-ending. A love affair that belongs in hotels cannot easily be finished, whether emotionally, sexually or fictively. Rollo pleads that the relationship be resumed, evoking the hotel scenes of the past, and Olivia weakens at his insistence, ' "Let's not be final and desperate" '.

⁶¹ Lehmann, *The Weather in the Streets*, pp 382-83.

And then the narrative thread of the novel itself, which has unravelled their story, is just snapped clean. Rollo's final question does not constitute any sense of ending, of closure, or of resolution: it is as if the novel has been switched off. Their conversation is unfinished, and so, it seems, is the round of their desire. They have more of the same to experience again and again: drives, hotels, inns, desire, in an ever-changing-yet-exactly-the-same loop of hotel-time and space. This is an equivocal prospect for Olivia. Of course, the prospect of taking up again with Rollo is attractive. But the affair with him has already estranged her from herself in so many ways. Before now, she has caught herself wishing that 'I could be free again, able to belong to myself The burden is too heavy, there's hardly a moment to fit in the happiness of loving And I would like to do something definite with my life' (203). Caught in the all-consuming absorption of love and desire, Olivia finds herself barely knowing who she is, or what she wants to do. Not least, the relationship has alienated her from her own body, in the hostile shape of an unwanted pregnancy and an illegal abortion.

And yet, the novel's abrupt stop - making strange the fictive concept of ending - suggests that the physical and metaphorical impermanence that underwrites hotel-consciousness is still in evidence as the restless energy that drives their relationship. Rollo might do all the talking - but the novel's ending by non-ending signals Olivia's complicity. For in a narrative infused with the desirous politics of a feminized hotel-consciousness, what other destination is there for her, but to keep on going? This is not the formulaic ending of romance fiction, that disappoints because it is safe, known, finished. It is an ending that unsettles because it is so very unfinished. The awareness and representation of this inconclusive state of

being and feeling - of nothing happening nowhere - make *The Weather in the Streets* a new kind of love story: shifting, uncertain and equivocal, for a restless modern age.

CHAPTER THREE

Typists Home At Teatime: Femininity, Domesticity And The Office

The process of perception and sensation, attention, imaginative reproduction and association bear the marks of a corresponding occupation. We are sensitive in perception of objects connected with our occupation, and we are deaf and dull to the objects which are heterogeneous to it. Still greater is the occupational influence on the processes and on the character of one's evaluations, beliefs, practical judgements, opinions, ethics and whole ideology.¹

Work does nothing so gentle as mould people: fiercely exacting, it brands its slaves with its own indelible signature and thereby claims them for its own. The personality 'bears the marks of a corresponding occupation' just as flesh would bear the scars of a corresponding hurt. The very objects in the work-place conspire to this end, dulling the receptive senses to anything which is outside the given occupational sphere. Recent sociological studies which have investigated the relationship between work and personality tend to concur with this view, albeit with not quite such italicized emphasis: - simply, 'people become what they do.'² But this chapter is more concerned with the idea that 'people become where they are': specifically, that the geography and design of the office during the inter-war years stamps its mark - or attempts to stamp its mark - on those who work there. It

¹ Pitriam Sorokin, *Social Mobility* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1927), p. 321. Original emphasis.

² Catherine Casey, *Work, Self and Society: After Industrialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 81. She cites some of those sociological studies of interest: Melvin K. Kohn and Carmi Schooler, *Work and Personality: An Inquiry Into the Impact of Social Stratification* (New Jersey: Ablex Publication, 1983), and *The Nature of Work: Sociological Perspectives*, eds. Kai Erikson and Steven Peter Vallas (New Haven Yale University Press, 1990).

is the implications of this branding process that I want to go on now to explore, by examining cultural representations of office space and office life in the period.

The office

Bengartens was a square stocky building. From the outside it sometimes reminded her of a smaller type of prison . . .³
[Louie] had become so used to it that she hardly ever looked at it now. She just went in solemnly into the women's entrance down into the basement and had her clothes locked up by the old woman. But now the glittering look of frost was on it, and suddenly it seemed a very cold, a very grey, a very hard-set steely place, overlooking a crowded street. It stood there solidly with an eyelidless stare on its face. There were no curtains, only blinds which were always pulled so far up that they might not have been there during the day-time at all. There was a squat grey stone cupola at the top. It was rather like a head without a face appearing between two square shoulders. (155-56)

Eliot Bliss's 1931 novel, *Saraband*, follows the life of its sensitive, dreamy heroine, Louie, from childhood to young womanhood. The girl's real sympathies lie with the creative and intense life of the artist, but practical necessities dictate she attend a commercial training college called Bengartens. The time she spends there teaches her little about shorthand and typing - her real education is that of the soul, and is harshly taught by the austere appearance and design of Bengartens itself. Uncompromising and cold and grey, the place threatens imprisonment; a threat obliquely realized as Louie's outdoor clothes - her link to the outside world - are 'locked up' in the basement for safe-keeping. It is, architecturally, an inhuman building - or, rather, its humanity is grotesquely mutilated and distorted. Its hard

³ Eliot Bliss, *Saraband* [1931] (London: Virago, 1986), p. 143. Bliss was born in Jamaica in 1903 and moved to London in 1925. She worked in publishing, and wrote two novels during the Thirties: *Saraband*, and *Luminous Isle* (1934).

gaze is not softened by the eyelids of blinds, and the cupola suggests the nightmarish aspect of a blank, faceless head. This attempt to eradicate humanizing lineaments from the outside of the building is paralleled by the regime which operates inside Bengartens, where individual human life is seen to be always subordinate to the good of the larger clerical machine. Louie herself realizes, in a moment of epiphany, that

during the two months she had been at Bengartens she had been very slowly getting used to things that had at first struck her as being absolutely unbearable and like a nightmare And that was what Bengartens had intended. Bengartens was trying to mould an unwieldy mass of humanity into an efficient mechanical system. First of all it would train out of one little fads and fancies: then it would gently, tactfully, attack the personality behind those little fads and fancies. (164-65)

Bengartens' training system, which attempts to mechanize and dehumanize the individual, draws on the popular contemporary theories of scientific management in the work-place, as first expounded by Frederick Taylor in his 1911 work, *The Principles of Scientific Management*. Taylor's research had been carried out in American factories, where time-and-motion studies revealed that workers' productivity was being adversely affected by 'wasted movements, misdirected effort and badly designed tools and equipment'.⁴ The following years saw a new wave of books published on the subject following in Taylor's wake; and a gradual adoption, first in America and then in Europe, of the techniques of scientific management in the work-place. Vital to the implementation of these management theories was the sacrifice of the individual to the group and the body to the

⁴ Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society Since 1750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), p. 122. Referred to hereafter as *Objects of Desire*.

machine. In the office, the clerk or secretary would no longer write letters and file correspondence and tally accounts, but would perform only one of those tasks continually throughout the working day. In the factory, the artisan would be replaced by a conveyer-belt series of workers, each with a single duty to fulfil over and over again.

The process of departmentalization brought increased speed and efficiency into the work-place. It also brought with it anxieties about the welfare of the individual, whose hapless form must bear the scars of a new relationship with a thoroughly mechanized culture and industry. *Saraband* is only a single example: one out of many contemporary texts which express both concern and fear about a working relationship, which is ‘characterized by the desire to *intervene* in the body: to render it part of modernity’.⁵ Such a process of intervention can be seen operating in a film like *Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, 1936), in which the ‘tramp’ is himself physically absorbed into the never-ending, always-moving conveyer-belt of the departmentalized factory. Other narratives which explore the implications a mechanized world holds for the human race include Karel Capek’s play, *R.U.R.* (1920); Fritz Lang’s twenty first-century urban nightmare, *Metropolis* (1926); and Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel, *Brave New World* (1932). Non-fictional texts of the period also engage with the theme of humanity versus the machine. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), George Orwell makes the observation that, ‘like a drug, the machine is useful, dangerous and habit-forming. The oftener one surrenders to it the tighter its grip becomes. You only have to look about you at

⁵ Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p. 6. For more on the influence of mechanized culture on the individual, see Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800-1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); and Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

this moment to realize with what sinister speed the machine is getting us into its power.’⁶ Dangerous, sinister, powerful - and alluring - the age of the machine is here. It is difficult to gauge the exact register of Orwell’s response here, writing a book that he hoped would be - and eventually was - circulated by the Left Book Club. For as he goes on to point out, one of the main objections posited by *opponents* of the Left is that it is a soulless, urban and restrictive ideology, mechanized in concept and in practice. So Orwell’s equivocal observations of the technological age - ‘it is obvious even now that the process of mechanization is out of control. It is happening merely because humanity has got the habit’ (181) - are problematic. If this is Orwell’s own position, then he is breaking affiliation with the Left; if this is Orwell stating the opposition’s case, then he does so rather too persuasively.

But there can be no such room for ideological and textual doubt with J. B. Priestly’s response to the mechanized world and the mechanized work-place. Like Orwell’s 1937 work, his *English Journey* of 1933 is a state-of-the-nation text - although it takes a very different form from the meticulously detailed field-work and strangely equivocal polemic which makes up *The Road to Wigan Pier*. A rambling tour of England - its county towns and villages, its factories, its pubs and clubs, its churches and shops - the very sub-title of Priestly’s journey is characteristically peripatetic and unfocused: *English Journey: being a rambling but truthful account of what one man saw and heard and felt and thought during a journey through England during the Autumn of the year 1933*. Yet this subjective, wandering litany of ‘what one man saw and heard and felt and thought’ is a blind:

⁶ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* [1937] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 178-79.

Priestly, in this deceptively transparent and innocent guise, goes on to analyze the social and cultural condition of England, and to proffer, when he can, solutions to the problems he perceives. Whilst visiting Nottingham and Leicester, he visits a factory that makes typewriters.

A typewriter is a very difficult machine to manufacture because it has so many parts, from fifteen hundred to two thousand, mostly tiny; and it must be accurate . . . I went first through the workshops where the separate parts are made. It was rather frightening, like finding yourself inside a typewriter with some colossus hard at work writing on it. There seemed to be an awful lot of power for the space. There were dozens and dozens of small machines, of the lathe kind, turning out springs and screws and nuts. These machines were so close to one another, and there seemed such enormous power harnessed between these narrow aisles, that you felt that if one belt broke you would be torn to pieces. Every machine had a constant thick flow of lubricating oil. But on one machine the pouring liquid was crimson, and it looked for one startling second as if the moving metal were being drenched in blood. But that, I was told, is a new lubricant, strongly antiseptic. (120)

All the contemporary tropes of anxiety and fear which characterize the relationship between the individual and the machine are figured in this passage. Priestly himself, witnessing the workings of departmentalized labour, feels as if he is trapped inside some enormous typewriter, his senses hammered at as if they were its keys by all the separate machines, each tirelessly turning out their own minute portion of the end product.⁷ But the dominant theme is one of tension: it is as if human life is being stretched taut by the exact demands - and the sheer physical presence - of machinery. It is impossible for the individual to maintain intact his or her flesh-and-

⁷ When first commercially produced in the 1870s, the machine was known as a "Type Writer". This conflation of person and machine prefigures the mechanization of industry and culture that was to follow. See Margery W. Davies, 'Women Clerical Workers and the Typewriter: The Writing Machine', in *Technology and Women's Voices: Keeping In Touch*, ed. Cheri Kramarac (New York and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), pp. 29-40. Referred to hereafter as 'Women Clerical Workers' and *Women's Voices*.

blood corporeality under the pressure of a mechanized system which is so much the stronger organism. Under cover as an innocently receptive observer, Priestly veils his strongly-felt response in the language of an uninformed layman: 'There seemed to be an awful lot of power to the space'; 'there seemed such enormous power harnessed between these narrow aisles', he writes, as if not entirely sure. But the images that follow are so violent that there is no room for textual doubt that his initial, intuitive reaction to the factory is the correct one. The wound-up pressure of power that surges through the 'narrow aisles' - which is where human life must exist - is so great, that should the pressure be released - 'if one belt broke' - the individual would be blown apart: 'you would be torn to pieces.' No wonder the machine suddenly seems to run red with human blood. Even when this sacrificial vision is replaced with reality, the truth of the red stream is hardly more attractive. A 'strongly antiseptic' lubricant is what keeps the machines running sweetly: it is a sterile, inhuman life stream which runs through the factory veins.

This mass-manufacture of the typewriter is significant. It is partly symbolic of an inter-war shift in the nature and function of industry, which saw a move away from the heavy steel and iron works of the North, and a move into lighter, more leisure-based and technological manufacture which established itself in the Midlands and South of England.⁸ It is also significant because the typewriter was just one of the clerical machines that began to be mass-produced in ever-increasing numbers in this period. The shape and design of the inter-war office, and of office equipment, began to reflect the new vision of the work-place as a tireless machine in which human beings were subordinate to the larger clerical good.

⁸ See Beddoc, *Home and Duty*, pp 54-55

[Mechanization] has virtually transformed and rationalized all methods of recording, filing and indexing; in addition there are in practically all large offices today elaborate inter-war office communication systems, time-recording systems, machines for printing circulars, show-cards, catalogues, and other advertizing material; the envelope is mechanically addressed, sealed and stamped, and even the process of dictation has been mechanized.⁹

Nor were these the only advances in the transformation of the clerical work-place. Office furniture was now often made from steel, its clean cold lines a deliberate visual reminder of the uncompromising functionality of the factory. Even the most traditional emblem of office life - the desk - fell victim to the principles of scientific management.

The desk is the most useful piece of furniture in the office. The office employee is at it constantly. The highest type of working efficiency in a desk is obtained when the desk itself is so constructed and arranged that it doesn't in the slightest degree interfere in the progress of a person's work, but on the other hand aids it in every possible way . . . The chief objection to the roll top is that it becomes a receptacle for papers which are forgotten. The pigeon holes become filled with "trash" which may as well be thrown away and is only occupying valuable space. Most papers that are filed in the pigeon holes should be placed in the files where they are accessible to everyone who needs them.¹⁰

Once, the desk was an intimate, individual piece, with its compartments and drawers and high-backed top which shielded its occupant when in use, and guarded its contents under lock and key when not. Personal and professional privacy was inherent in its roll top design. But according to the doctrines of scientific management, the intricate, convoluted contours of that office desk are no longer

⁹ F. D. Klingender, *The Condition of Clerical Labour in Britain* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), p. 63.

¹⁰ John William Schulze, *The American Office: Its Organization, Management and Records* (New York: Key Publishing Company, 1913), pp. 62-63

acceptable - a much tauter and leaner model is required. A desk stripped of its roll-down top and with limited storage space, forbids that dangerous secretion of documents - or "truck" - which is so harmful to the smooth running of the office machine. This new desk not only renders privacy impossible but, with its backless, exposed construction, positively encourages an office culture of monitoring and inspection more evocative of school than the work-place.

The danger of the loss of important papers as well as the incalculable loss of time searching for them can be greatly reduced by insisting on desk system. Desk system should be taught to all clerks, and close watch kept until they have thoroughly learnt it. To ascertain just how well they are proceeding, suddenly ask for an eraser or a ruler . . . and see how long it takes to locate it. If it cannot be located at once, without the slightest loss of time, the lesson has not been learned.¹¹

All these austere recommendations vouchsafe that the successful adoption of scientific management in the work-place will brand workers with its own regimented and efficient stamp. The design of the office and its equipment, dedicated to the mechanized needs of departmentalization, permit those who work there only the most limited and circumscribed patterns of movement and behaviour. Clerks under the exacting thrall of 'desk system' will bear the marks not only of what they do, but of where they are.

This shift in the conception of the office can be traced in various fictional portrayals: there is, for example, a striking difference between the responsibility and satisfaction afforded to Charles Pooter by his job in the City, as recorded in

¹¹ William Henry Leffingwell, *Scientific Office Management* (Chicago and New York: A. W. Shaw Company, 1917), p. 208. As if the main body of the text were not sufficiently impressive, Leffingell dots the margins of his pages with the new proverbs of scientific management: 'It pays to give the typewriter a fair chance' and 'Be on the look out for a better way' (206); or 'Work should travel regularly.' (211)

The Diary of a Nobody (1892), and the departmentalized, joyless nature of office life as experienced by Leonard Bast in *Howards End* (1910), who 'understood his corner of the machine but nothing beyond it.'¹² Then there is Eliot Bliss's *Saraband* and its 1931 representation of office ideology. This text demonstrates how far the theories and practice of scientific management have infiltrated society and culture by this time; after only a couple of months in attendance at Bengartens commercial college, Louie finds herself 'afraid of turning into a machine' (169). This fear is given concrete shape in a dramatic accident which takes place in the college. The bell has rung for lunch, and the students are making for the stairs.

Suddenly in front of them the crowd swayed. There was a shriek from the floor above. Something black flew down inside the closely-bared cage of the lift, something that flung out around it as if it were a bird trying to fly. The bell was still clanging.

'Good God! What was that?'

The crowd on the stairs surged round the iron bars.

'What was it?' cried a hundred voices.

A girl was shrieking on the top floor in hysterics. Intense excitement seemed to have collected in the atmosphere in a few seconds. People pushed behind and in front of them.

'What was it? What was it?'

'A girl got into the lift on the fifth floor and it's not working, it's out of order; it wasn't there.'

'But the door - it's an automatic door,' said someone.

'Well, there's nothing very automatic about that,' said Jonquil in a clear voice above the crowd. (159)

A lift is designed to obey the human command; designed to carry its human cargo from one floor to another - swiftly, efficiently - at the touch of a button. But here, at Bengartens, this relationship is abruptly terminated, and we are made aware how perilously balanced the power of command is between operator and machine. The lift is broken, and its failure has fatal consequences for the vulnerable human bodies

¹² E. M. Forster, *Howards End* [1910] (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 144.

that customarily command it. (And is that command, anyway, illusory? The lift is described as a 'closely-barred cage', which speaks more eloquently of entrapment-by-machine than control-of-machine.) This passage resonates with the same kind of anxieties as were evident in the extract from Priestly's *English Journey*: the individual ultimately helpless in the face of either mechanical supremacy, or mechanical frailty. In this case, a girl summons a non-existent lift and steps into an empty shaft. There is a literal sacrifice of humanity to the machine; and real blood flows.

J. B. Priestly believes this new sacrificial work force to be largely female: 'the interested executives, the masters of the machines, are men, and the routine workers, the servant of the machines, are recruited more and more from girls and young women.'¹³ *Saraband*, also, understands this to be the case: Bengartens is full of women learning how to type and write in shorthand and file and take dictation - learning to become servants of the office machine. This strong female presence signifies intriguing developments in office culture, and in the representation of office culture, during this period. It is women's place in the office that I want to go on now to explore.

The first typist

These years which saw technological advances in the office also saw a dramatic increase in the numbers of young women working there, and training to work there. They were cheaper than men to employ, and were perceived, because of the

¹³ Priestly, *English Journey*, p. 122.

strong likelihood of their marrying, to have 'a more or less temporary attachment to the job [which] made most of them less interested in advancement, which office positions usually lacked.'¹⁴ The girl thinking of taking up such work

likes the prospect of sitting in a well-lighted, warmed, aired and furnished office . . . : she likes the regular and not over-long hours of office work and the liberal holidays. These very tangible attractions have drawn a large and ever-growing stream of girls from the sources that feed the channels of domestic service, dressmakers' workrooms and even the factories and shop counters.¹⁵

By 1911, women made up nearly a third of all clerical workers - their numbers 'grew from 55, 784 in 1901 to 177, 057 in 1911'¹⁶ - and this was a figure which was set to rise still further. The typewriter, one of the earliest office machines, introduced in the 1870s, was marketed as a woman's machine from the start: invented by Christopher Sholes, one of the first advertisements for the typewriter showed his daughter sitting at the keyboard. The copy reads, 'Miss Sholes 1872. The first typist.'¹⁷ The office as a mechanized space had women as an integral part of its workings from the very beginning, and, by the Thirties, they had become firmly associated with the genesis of a new kind of work-place.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Faulkner Baker, *Technology and Women's Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 215. Priestly writes that young women seem to perceive their working lives as nothing but a 'busy but dreamy interlude between childhood and marriage.' *English Journey*, p. 128.

¹⁵ M. Moyston Bird, *Woman at Work: A Study of the Different Ways of Earning a Living Open to Women* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1911), pp. 126-27. Referred to as *Woman at Work* hereafter.

¹⁶ Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), p. 56.

¹⁷ See Davies, 'Women Clerical Workers', pp. 33 and 38. For a detailed discussion of women's association with the typewriter as machine, see Kittler, *Discourse Networks 188-1900*, pp. 347-68. Not least, he claims that 'Remington typewriters turned the systematic handicap of women, their insufficient education, into a historical opportunity. The sales division of the firm just cited had only to discover, in 1881, the masses of unemployed women - and out of an unprofitable innovation came the typewriter as mass-produced product . . . The so-called "emancipation of women" was their taking hold of the machine that did away with pedagogical authority over discourse' (352-53).

The male is the name on the door, the hat on the coat rack, and the smoke in the corner room. But the male is not the office. The office is the competent woman at the other end of the buzzer, the two young ladies chanting his name monotonously into the mouthpiece of a gutta-percha halter, the four girls in the glass coop pecking out his initials with pink fingernails on keyboards of voluble machines . . . [and] the half dozen assorted skirts whisking through the filing cases of his correspondence. . . . The office, in other words, is woman's newest world . . . a nation of silk knees, slender necks, nervous fingers and ironic mouths.

In this office, the female worker is subject not to the shadowy presence of her employer, but to the mechanized shape of the work-place itself which dictates her every move: (people becoming where they are). For the office is so structured that women are partitioned each in their own ghettoized division: one is attached to the end of a buzzer; two more are harnessed to a 'gutta-percha halter'; and yet another cluster are, like so many hens, shut into a glass coop where they peck tirelessly at their 'voluble' typewriters. This close identification of women with the automated design and operation of the departmentalized office reflects and contributes to the idea that these new workers are human cogs turning the larger machine of business.

But what is also particularly intriguing about this passage is the way it evokes the office not only as a mechanized zone, but as an erotic zone, with women at its centre. The 'male' boss of the office is a shadowy physical figure - never seen - but all the machinery of the office is dedicated to him: his name is spoken into the buzzer, his initials are pecked out on the typewriter, his correspondence is sorted in the filing cases. The writing seems to take a fetishistic pleasure in its detailed description of these office-girls who are harnessed to strange, unyielding machines

¹⁸ 'Women in Business', *Fortune*, August 1935, p. 50.

in order to render service to the 'male' by cold automated proxy. It is a kind of harem of technology. To ascribe to the female typist the role of pliant servant of a mechanized office God is to eroticize and fetichize her function even as - or even because - it dehumanizes her. As befits such non-visceral, detached sexual pleasure, the erotic appeal of the office-girl herself has a similarly detached and superficial quality about it. Pink fingernails, whisking skirts and silk knees; slender necks, nervous fingers and ironic mouths: this is an attraction about parts rather than the whole; about coverings rather than depth.

The female office worker as an externally glamorous and alluring figure lends her representation a concomitantly insubstantial, fragile air - physically and morally. Necks are slender - but do 'nervous fingers' and 'ironic mouths' suggest frailty of a different cast? When the typist or stenographer is concerned, attractiveness without frequently suggests hollowness within. The novel, *Saraband*, gives concrete voice to this suggestion. The young heroine, Louie, imagines what her life as a modern office-girl will be like, once she has left Bengartens.

In the autumn she was going to start . . . rushing about with a portfolio under her arm and a pencil behind her ear, taking down letters in shorthand in a business office. - I am a business woman now. - Powdering one's nose and going out for coffee and biscuits in the middle of the day. Leaving twopence for the waitress on the marble-topped table. Perhaps one would have an egg. Coffee and biscuits did not seem very much. That was why most of those little girls looked so thin. Perhaps they spent it on silk stockings. (128)

This version of the secretary is, then one who prioritizes surface over substance. Mentally and physically, she flits over the surface of life. For 'taking down letters

in short hand' - that which Louie imagines will form her future - is a discipline of obedient transcription and one which forbids intellectual participation: it is 'a curious mechanical service this, both of memory and tapping fingers. The stenographer has to listen with attention and transcribe with accuracy into shorthand or with her typewriter, the ideas of her employer, while her own must be non-existent.'¹⁹ There is not much mental weight to this task. But nor is there much weight to the stenographer herself. As Louie sees her, she is a flimsy, frail girl, fecklessly underfed on coffee and biscuits. Rather than spend her earnings on fleshing out her skinny frame, she instead buys glamorous and alluring things to cover and enhance its parts: cosmetics and silk stockings.

The office-girl's perceived adherence to sexually appealing paraphernalia - and to the intellectually insubstantial and the culturally flitting - seems to be a well-acknowledged trope in inter-war culture. This trope is both recognized and reinforced by Elizabeth Bowen in a piece called 'Dress' (1937). 'Clothes', she writes 'never remain a question of pure aesthetics, far too much personal feeling is involved in them. They play such an intimate part in the delicate business of getting oneself across that it seems impossible to discuss them, for long, objectively.'²⁰ Clothes are a medium through which the personality expresses itself: people, it seems, are now becoming what they wear. Bowen then continues:

The truth, probably, is, that everybody would like to look like one preconceived person, a figure suggested to them by the propaganda of fashion: they believe the figure to be their private ideal and do not realize how general the figure is. Stenographers with good figures.

¹⁹ M. Moyston Bird, *Woman at Work*, p. 126.

²⁰ Bowen, 'Dress', *The New Statesman and Nation*, 1937. Rpt. in Bowen, *Collected Impressions*, p. 112. The review is of C. Willett Cunnington's *English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937).

quick eyes and uncomplex natures approximate to this ideal most nearly. (113)

It is, as so often, difficult to gauge the exact tone of Bowen's remark. Stenographers, slim and young with their 'good figures' and 'quick eyes', come physically closest to the glamorous ideal propagated by high fashion. So they are, surely, a type to be admired; 'everybody' wants to look like them; wear whisking skirts, silk stockings, and make-up. But the stenographer's is also an 'uncomplex' nature: superficial, transparent, insubstantial. As such, her close approximation to the fashionable ideal must raise serious doubts about that ideal, the propaganda behind it, and the desire 'everybody' has to emulate it. If people become what they wear, then do all women - especially those with properly complex natures - really want to become stenographers? The fact is, according to Bowen, the uncomplicated office-girl has swallowed wholesale the fashion propaganda of magazines and movies, and her allure is entirely derivative of those superficial cultural sources. Somehow, things have been flipped on their head: stenographers should not be envied or emulated for most nearly achieving the fashionable, glamorous, sexually attractive ideal. Rather, the very fact that it is empty-headed stenographers who most nearly achieve it is the best reason to be sceptical of it, see it as propaganda, and reject it as unworthy of the truly complex woman.

The automated office - the office as machine - eroticizes the representation of its women workers and simultaneously ascribes an intellectual and moral emptiness to their flitting existence. Their external allure, acquired by artificial means, denotes a hollowness within. The prim little typist in Bowen's short story, 'Love' (1939), defines herself in marked opposition to 'other girls in business, always off where

you can pick up a boy.’²¹ Sexual forwardness is synonymous with being ‘always off’ - always on the move; never rooted. The beautiful Fanny, in Elizabeth Von Arnim’s novel, *Mr Skeffington* (1940), divorces her husband not after his first fling with a typist, but after his seventh. The excessive number of these dalliances with identical “types” reinforces the trope of the sexually available working woman, even as it makes fun of it.

Obliged to forgive the first typist, such was his penitence and such his shame, the second one, though humiliating, didn’t distress her quite so acutely. Over the third she was almost calm. The fourth made her merely wonder there should be so many young persons liking him enough for that sort of thing, but she supposed it must be his money. The fifth she called on, earnestly inquiring of the alarmed and shrinking creature what she saw in him. At the sixth, she went out and bought some new hats; and after the seventh, she left.²²

Typists are sexually available, abundant and - for those very reasons - irresistible. There is nothing, literally, to differentiate the ‘first’ from any of her successors: ‘pretty little girls in the office’ (3) are all after the same thing, and all cast in the same mould. That they are referred to by number rather than name, and are believed to be in it for the money rather than for the love, exactly captures this sense of them as shallow, insubstantial creatures - mechanized replicants - whose very allure is based upon their ersatz quality.²³

In a book which gives advice to working women, the stenographer’s technical prowess is articulated in terms of prostitution - only instead of offering her body up

²¹ Bowen, *Collected Stories*, p. 540.

²² Elizabeth Von Arnim, *Mr Skeffington* [1940] (London: Virago, 1994), p. 3.

²³ Being identified by a number rather than by a name was the actual fate of a typist who worked for a Mayfair Employment Agency in 1935, who remembers that ‘Nobody was allowed to use your name. You had a number and you were referred to as a number. My number was 55. So I was 55.’ An Oral Interview with Katie. Rpt. in Beddoe, *Discovering Women’s History: A Practical Manual* (London: Pandora, 1983), p. 147.

for sex, 'the actual thing she offers for sale'²⁴ is her automated skills on the keyboard. The portrayal of the typist in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) reinforces with particular harshness this perception of the office-girl.

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast,
lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window, perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's
last rays
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles and stays.²⁵

Makeshift domestic arrangements and the erotic squalor of underwear, strewn in casual abandon round the bedsit, make a mockery of the 'home' the typist returns to, and prefigure her cheerless sexual encounter with 'the young man carbuncular'. The slovenly juxtaposition of breakfast mess and teatime tins; the bathetic, sun-set irradiation of her 'drying combinations'; and the divan, shamelessly 'piled' with intimate garments, all signify the typist's rejection of the socially approved role of home-maker, and her adoption of a more heedless and promiscuous sexual existence.

Inherent in Eliot's representation of the office-girl is a note of fear; a sense that the new working woman is dangerous. (She does, after all, make up part of the deathly scenery of his 'waste land'; she is playing her own part in the destruction of the modern world.) This fear feeds into, and is fed by, heated inter-war debate about the presence of women in the work-place.

²⁴ Moyston Bird, *Woman at Work*, p. 135.

²⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909 - 1962* (London: Faber and Faber), III, 'The Fire Sermon', 222-27.

Fear and the woman who earns

This is the title of an article by the feminist writer and novelist, Winifred Holtby, in which she expresses her concerns about the fear and dislike she detects in every level of society directed against the woman worker.

It would be foolish to deny that undercurrent of fear, resentment and antagonism running through current comment upon the position of the woman wage-earner. 'Pin-money girls', 'two incomes form one family', 'married women taking men's jobs instead of letting their husbands keep them' - these are the targets for protest. . . . [R]esentment and suspicion so often exist when there should be only mutual respect and understanding . . . antagonism too often replaces co-operation, and . . . a hot emotion of anger overcomes the men who see girl typists crowding City buses.²⁶

As Alison Light has commented, England suffered something of a crisis of masculinity after the First World War, and began to be seen as 'the country where it is no longer possible to be properly male'.²⁷ This crisis was triggered, in part, by the 'position of the woman wage earner'. During the war years of male absence, women had, by necessity, come to new prominence in the work force. Their inclusion in the labour market after the war coincided with the decline of heavy industry, and the emergence of light-weight manufacture: clothing, cosmetics, chocolate - or typewriters, as already seen - which were commonly perceived of as feminine and feminized industries.²⁸ The inter-war years also saw the blossoming of entirely new "white-collar" professions, and, according to Vera Brittain, 'the

²⁶ Holtby, 'Fear and the Woman Who Earns', *News Chronicle*, 9 March 1934. Rpt. in *Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*, eds Paul Berry and Alan Bishop (London: Virago, 1985), pp. 81-83. Referred to hereafter as *Testament of a Generation*.

²⁷ Light, *Forever England*, p. 7. See also Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture* (London: Virago, 1987), pp. 167-94.

²⁸ See Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 216-228. Referred to as *Women Workers* hereafter.

best openings for women are provided by new businesses and professions capable of alteration and expansion.’²⁹ She cites advertizing as an example of such a profession - and, certainly, the novelist Antonia White earned considerable amounts as a freelance copy writer.³⁰ Another promising professional opportunity for women was that of work in the rapidly expanding sphere of women’s magazines, for this period saw the birth of a great number of new publications: *Good Housekeeping* in 1922, *Women and Home* in 1926, *Woman’s Own* in 1932 and *Women’s Illustrated* in 1936 were just a few of the titles that were introduced during the inter-war years. Stella Gibbons wrote *Cold Comfort Farm* whilst working as a journalist and sub-editor for *The Lady* - ‘one plum of a job’³¹ - and Stevie Smith was the private secretary of Sir Neville Pearson at Newnes, the magazine publishers.

But the feelings of ‘fear, resentment and antagonism’ Winifred Holtby talks about are not directed so much against these glossy, new feminized professions, as against women who are seen to be taking over the jobs that were once the province of men. The horde of women typists on the City buses are literally ‘crowding’ men out. And there is something about the ‘hot emotion of anger’ that ‘overcomes’ these hapless men that is half-desirous, too: a sense that sexual allure always underlies the flighty construction and representation of the working woman. It seems that the resentment and fear men feel on City buses derives, in part, from the fact that these girl typists are sexually unattainable by them because they are professionally superior to them.

²⁹ Vera Brittain, *Women’s Work in Modern England* (London: Noel Douglas, 1928), p. 40. Referred to hereafter as *Women’s Work*.

³⁰ See Jane Dunn, *Antonia White: A Life* (London: Virago, 1998), p. 96.

³¹ Stella Gibbons, ‘Genesis of a Novel’, *Punch*, 20th April, 1966. Rpt. in Reggie Oliver, *Out of the Woodshed: A Portrait of Stella Gibbons* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 83.

Sexually-charged criticism of working women - which resonates with fear and lust in equal measure - runs right through the inter-war period, and right across a range of different discourses. The populist newspaper, the *Daily Express*, described the new female species in 1924:

With short hair, skirts little longer than kilts, narrow hips, insignificant breasts, there has arrived a confident, active, game-loving capable human-being, who shuns the servitude of household occupations. With her smaller, lither, more ornamental figure and greater capabilities, she has ousted the less capable or less fortunate men out of their occupations . . . this change to a more neutral type . . . can be accomplished only at the expense of her sexual organs.³²

A close relative of the 'Flapper', this new woman is both alluring - and unnatural.³³ The prose enjoys detailing so exactly her 'lithe' and 'ornamental' charms, and her active, darting lifestyle, so fiercely resistant to the 'servitude of household occupations.' Yet it is precisely these things which have 'ousted' weak men from their jobs and have turned her into an object of fear. Linger over her body as it does, the article catches itself in time to administer punishment to this creature because of the fear her androgynous person engenders. These professional and sexual achievements 'can only be accomplished at the expense of her sexual organs': attractiveness and capability without, biological destruction within.

³² The *Daily Express*, 12 November, 1924. Rpt. in Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the 1920s: Flappers and Nymphs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 23. Referred to hereafter as *Flappers and Nymphs*.

³³ The flapper was an 'independent unchaperoned young woman, often supporting herself by a job as a secretary, reporter or salesgirl . . . her speech hinted at a lack of reticence about sex which might or might not have been true in practice: "Hello darling, how's your sex life?" "Lousy, darling, how's yours?" was recorded as a fashionable exchange of greetings in 1928.' Charles Loch Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 213. His source for this sexually-uninhibited exchange is Nerina Shute, *We Mixed Our Drinks: The Story of a Generation* (London: Jarrolds, 1945), p. 11. For a full explanation of the derivation of the word 'flapper', and a discussion of the representation of this type in popular culture, see Melman, *Flappers and Nymphs*, pp. 15-37.

Moving into the Thirties, the figure of the flapper largely faded out of the cultural canon. But the resentment and sexually-charged fear of working women continued to find voice. Louis MacNeice, writing in 1938, despairs of an entire group of women - who include 'school teachers, women secretaries [and] proprietesses of tea shops' - because, as new wage earners, they have the economic power to demand low-brow culture in order to seek 'an uncritical escape from their daily lives.'³⁴ He despairs, even as he fantasizes over, the frivolously-squandered finances of hospital nurses - who seem to have entered the same dangerous sexual territory as office-girls - and who 'spend all their savings on cosmetics, cigarettes and expensive underclothes'(88).

In her dazzling, difficult essay, *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf quotes from letters published in the Daily Telegraph in January, 1936 which express discontent at the perceived female invasion of the once-male work-place.

There are today in Government offices, post offices, insurance companies, banks and other offices, thousands of women doing work which men could do.

I am certain I voice the opinion of thousands of young men when I say that if men were doing the work that thousands of young women are now doing, the men would be able to keep those same women in decent homes. Homes are real places of the women who are now compelling men to be idle. It is time the Government insisted upon employers giving work to more men, thus enabling them to marry the women they cannot now approach.³⁵

These Amazonian women, crowding into the work-place in their empowered thousands, are frighteningly forceful in their acquisition of jobs: they 'compel' the

³⁴ Louis Macneice, 'The Play and the Audience' [1938]. Rpt. in *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: OUP, 1987), p. 88.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* [1938] (London: Hogarth Press, 1991), p. 60.

men of England to be idle. And the men's subsequent enforced passivity is so debilitating that it is up to the Government to gird them with partisan legislation. Again, the inference is that working women are not only professionally and economically untouchable; they are also sexually unattainable. Men can only look on, with a mixture of resentment and desire. When women have been removed from the work-place, men, empowered in their place, will be able to 'approach' them again. This letter-writer states the case plainly: not only will men regain their masculinity, but women will lose their dangerous power, if the latter can but be returned to their 'real place' - the home. This sentiment is quite common. For while one strand of contemporary debate condemned the working woman, another, woven into it, championed the domestic role of wife and mother.

The typical representation of the office-girl necessarily entails a rejection of inter-war notions of ordered domesticity; of solid home and stable family. Her slender-necked, silk-kneed frame resists generous maternal lineaments, and her lifestyle is makeshift and portable - all her belongings having been 'trained . . . to live in the sized suitcase which a woman can carry'.³⁶ These commonly-held perceptions of the typist have little affinity with the rooted comforts and rooted responsibilities associated with economically and emotionally comfortable domestic life in this period. There is a world of difference between the erotic frivolity of silk stockings and pink fingernails, and the worthy, brisk wholesomeness of the beauty advice given to young wives in the respectable middle-class publication, *Woman's Magazine* - namely, 'that a short beauty routine is a not-to-be-despised form of National Service'.³⁷

³⁶ Cole, *Marriage*, p. 281.

³⁷ *Woman's Magazine*, December 1939, p. 30.

It is not so much that one version of femininity has little in common with the other: more, that inter-war culture polarizes the representation of these two types. A wife and mother burns like a steady, torch-like beacon at the very centre of domestic and national life - 'it is up to them in these difficult times to keep the torch burning brightly in the home. A son's health and future outlook depend so much on his early upbringing, and the quality of a husband's work is often affected by the atmosphere which prevails at home.'³⁸ Or, in a similar strain,

An elementary understanding of biology shows that equality between men and women is as impossible as equality between a chicken and a potato. Both are excellent things in their way, but they are utterly different. A woman is one manifestation of the life force, a man another . . .

Woman is the steady, stabilizing element, man the adventurer. Man, with his greater strength and pioneer spirit, can initiate; woman, with her steady endurance and power of patience, prevents him from making blunders, holding him back into more practical channels.³⁹

Steadiness, solidity, practicality, endurance: 'woman' is the unshakeable bedrock - or the rooted potato - of the English home. Whereas the office-girl is quite another species: indelibly marked by her automated work-place, she is seen as flighty, feckless, sexually available, desirable and dangerous - and thoroughly undomesticated.

Vera Brittain trenchantly sums up this polarized version of femininity, and asserts that, as things stand, women are faced with an impossible decision.

Of recent years intelligent women in ever-growing numbers have been faced with an intolerable choice. The choice has been forced upon them by local government bodies, by education authorities, by the castes that make rules for the long-established professions, and by public opinion of the old-fashioned type. In effect, it is this: Shall a

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 452-53.

³⁹ "L. E.", 'Woman's Life and Work', *Daily Herald*, 22 January, 1927.

woman who loves her work for its own sake continue it throughout her life at the sacrifice of marriage, motherhood and all her emotional needs? Or shall she marry and have children at the cost of her career, and look forward to the rest of her days to an existence which . . . may mean intellectual starvation and monotony?'⁴⁰

Statistics, however, suggest that the 'intolerable choice' is not as agonizing as Brittain suggests. For while the numbers of women workers rose overall, the numbers of married women working outside the home actually fell during this period: 'the percentage of all women working in 1901 was 29.1 per cent, in 1931, 29.7 per cent, while the percentage of married women working was 6.3 per cent in 1901 and 4.8 per cent in 1931.'⁴¹ It was a phenomenon that was noted by contemporary observers, too: 'the proportion of married women has increased, and the proportion of married women working for gain, decreased.'⁴² Many factors were at work which can account for this drop.

One was the introduction of the Marriage Bar in 1918, which prevented women civil servants and teachers from remaining in employment if they chose to marry. Winifred Holtby writes in despair of a ballot held by the Civil Service Clerical Association, in which women themselves voted for the implementation of a Marriage Bar. 'To the question "Are you in favour of the retention of women in the service after marriage in the event of a gratuity being retained for those who retire on marriage?" 3, 537 voted against the retention of married women as

⁴⁰ Brittain, ' "Semi-Detached" Marriage', *Evening News*, 4 May, 1928. Rpt. in *Testament of a Generation*, p. 130.

⁴¹ Gittens, *Fair Sex*, p. 45.

⁴² Sylvia Anthony, *Women's Place in Industry and Home* (London: Routledge, 1932), p. 12. Referred to hereafter as *Women's Place*.

against 1, 396 who would let them stay on.’¹³ The lure of the marriage gratuity proved too strong to resist.

And money is a crucial factor here. Women, at all professional levels, were paid less than men who did the same job.¹⁴ This partly explains the strong female presence in the work-place: women, in undercutting men, were an economical option for many employers. But the financial disparity also provides an explanation for women’s decision to leave work after marriage. Vera Brittain talks only of ‘intellectual starvation’ if a woman gives up her career for a home life - but there are economic imperatives at work, too. According to the facts and figures gathered by Margaret Cole, marriage offers the best financial package for the majority of women.

It comes back to this, that, with a very few exceptions, the educated woman like her working-class sister, will be better off *economically* especially when she is over thirty or thirty-five, if she can find a man in something like her own economic condition who is willing to marry and support her, even if she has to resign all thoughts of earning money herself.¹⁵

¹³ Holtby, ‘The Wearer and the Shoe’, *Manchester Guardian*, 31 January, 1930. Rpt. in *Testament of a Generation*, p. 64.

¹⁴ Sylvia Anthony, in *Women’s Place*, provides examples that cut across the professions. In the year of 1931, male elementary school teachers earned £334 per annum; women £254. Male graduate secondary school teachers earned £436; women £348. The figures were taken from the *Report of National Expenditure* (May Committee, 1931), pp. 48-50. Rpt. in *Women’s Place*, p. 30. She also cites the comparative wages of clerks. In figures collated from the Milk Distributive trade for the same year of 1931, male clerks in rural areas earned 60s a week; women 38s. In non-rural areas, men earned 67s 6d a week; women 42s. In London, men earned 70s; women 48s. *Women’s Place*, p. 32.

¹⁵ Cole, *Marriage*, p. 154. She, too, cites comparative figures for men’s and women’s earnings - only, she draws attention to the fact that the disparity between them becomes more pronounced with age. According to her data - source unspecified - men and women under twenty five employed in ‘Commerce’ both earn 35s a week. Once over twenty five, men earn 80s; women 52s 6d. In other words, as women get older and their wages drop correspondingly, the economic incentive for them to marry becomes ever stronger.

The domestication of England is, it seems, as much an economic process as any other.

Another explanation for the drop in the numbers of married working women is the shift in feminist thought and practice which took place during this period. Once full female enfranchisement had been won in 1928, the women's movement diversified, and lost its militant political impetus. What emerged from this shift was what was known as 'new feminism'. Its most notable exponent was Eleanor Rathbone, the first elected Independent woman member of Parliament; and its aim - via the introduction of Family Allowances - was to raise the status of the private house to a national issue, and 'to give dignity and independence to the non-working wife and mother.'¹⁶ And the concept and practice of motherhood is itself crucial to the understanding of the married woman's return to the home. Owing to the fear that the population was dropping to dangerously low levels,¹⁷ there was strong insistence placed in these years on the value of motherhood: 'over and over both the government and the medical profession emphasized the importance of women as *mothers* and their "natural" duty to their children; married women working was discouraged, often prohibited, as a danger to the health and welfare of their children.'¹⁸

¹⁶ Ruth Adam, *A Woman's Place: 1910 - 1975* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 164.

¹⁷ 'It was predicted in 1936 that by the years 2033 England and Wales would have a population no larger than London.' Beddoe, *Home and Duty*, p. 20. Her source is: Pilgrim Trust, *Men Without Work* (Cambridge: CUP, 1938), p. 231. This fear was pronounced - as is evidenced by the very titles of works such as E. Charles' *The Twilight of Parenthood* (London: Watts & Co., 1934), and G. F. McCleary's *The Menace of British Depopulation* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1937).

¹⁸ Gittens, *Fair Sex*, p. 51. For example, in a book entitled *Motherhood and Its Enemies*, its author, Charlotte Haldane, urges all women to have children: 'every woman who refuses motherhood is curtailing her psychological as well as her physiological development in a manner which may have serious consequences to herself.' (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), p. 214.

Housing figures offer their own, interlinked, interpretation of the statistical anomaly contained within women's work. The inter-war years saw an enormous number of new houses built for private sale: even cheaply priced and with affordable mortgages, they could not all be filled. 'Within twenty years, the housing situation was transformed: in 1918 there were 610, 000 fewer houses than families while by 1938 there was a surplus of over 500, 000 houses.'⁴⁹ With the housing market sated - with new estates, new suburbs, new garden cities - it became economically imperative to persuade as many families to occupy as many of these new homes as possible. (Indeed, it is intriguing to speculate whether the championing of domesticity so characteristic of this period, was, in part, created by this jumbled teleology: the frenzied building of homes necessitated the privileging of the family unit, rather than the reverse.⁵⁰) The results of this house-building boom, however, are not open to interpretation: the work-place was emptied of married women, and the private house was filled with them instead.

It became common, as if by way of recompense, to represent domesticity as a career - even to the extent of introducing theories and techniques of scientific management into the home. This trend was first popularized in America - the home of scientific management - by Christine Frederick, with her influential book *Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home* (1920). Concurrent with the introduction and mass production of domestic machinery - such as

⁴⁹ John Stevenson, *British Society 1914 - 1945* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 221.

⁵⁰ There is something of this sense in Elizabeth Bowen's short story, 'Attractive Modern Homes' (1941), which describes a family's unsettling move to a raw, unfinished housing estate, and the gradual mental breakdown of the wife and mother in these strange surroundings. Her collapse is brought about as she realizes that the advertisements for attractive modern homes are not for the purpose of selling property to families, but are actually for creating families to fill them. Her own family, now trapped in the raw sprawl of the estate, has been deceived by the cynical promises of the building company and the advertisers.

vacuum cleaners and refrigerators - the idea of applying the mechanized theories of the work-place into the home became more and more attractive, both to advertisers and consumers, in America and then in Europe. COSMITH - the Council for Scientific Management in the Home - was set up in 1932. As has been remarked, though, scientific management in the home is both a contradiction in terms; and a deeply confused cultural and social metaphor.⁵¹ The solitary housewife cannot possibly operate in a departmentalized environment; and the clean, clinical efficiency and productivity associated with scientific management is at fundamental odds with the championing of domesticity as a human, warm discipline, with the wife and mother at its stable, rooted centre.

It is socio-economic, legislative and cultural factors such as these - simultaneously attractive and repressive - that must largely account for the fall in the numbers of married women in the work-place, even as the numbers of female workers overall rose in the period. Fear of the woman who earns has initiated a national movement which cuts across discourse and class. In the attempt to neutralize the effects of the working woman, her placid, unthreatening opposite is posited as the alternative, to be culturally praised and financially rewarded. In this national movement, there is no shared ground between the office-girl, unmistakably branded by the mechanized techniques of the modern work-place - insubstantial,

⁵¹ 'The housewife was expected to 'manage' her own labour 'scientifically', to be executive and worker simultaneously, which was a contradiction of the principle of Scientific Management based on factory production methods. . . . The housewife's cooking and cleaning work were also invested with values that were part of her maternal role, too: house work became emotionalised.' Suzette Worden, 'Powerful Women: Electricity in the Home, 1919-1940' in *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*, eds. Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (London: The Women's Press, 1989), pp. 139-140. See also Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 151-91. See also Chapters Two and Four of this thesis, for more detailed consideration of both the notion of domesticity as a career, and the development of household technology in this period.

flitting, sexually alluring and available, and dangerous to the hollow core - and the wife and mother; rooted in domestic soil, fleshed out, solid - and safe.

This state-fuelled debate which runs on the fear of women who earn is very powerful, able as it is to permeate every level of cultural, social and legislative discourse. This power is demonstrated in Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936). Pompey Casmilus, office worker and narrator of the novel, is employed by a publishing house which specializes in women's magazines, and is frequently inundated with short stories which are deemed appropriate for inclusion. She summarizes a typical example - giving it her own particular spin in the process.

So into this bright little tight little hell box comes this friend from the office, and she says and says: Why not come back to the office? The boss is willing. There is money there. And so the wife thinks, and by and by she says: Yes, she will come back. And then, just as she is trying to open the front door, that is in a jam, that is always in a tight set jam, Tommy knocks the stewpan over, the stewpan that had supper in it for the husband. The stewpan is very hot and Tommy is very hurt, so the wife thinks: I very nearly left my lovely Home, my lovely Tommy, my lovely husband.⁵²

The world of work is an attractive option: not only does it promise money, it promises friends; companionship; a welcome and sociable release from the isolation of the private house. And, according to Pompey, the private house is a place women need to be released from - a 'hell box', where the door is 'always in a tight set jam' (a reference to the shoddy, gimcrack construction of so many new houses in the period, as well as a metaphor of entrapment). The wife nearly escapes - but, at the last, is forcibly reminded of her natural duties as mother and wife and rejects all thoughts of her career. The fact that Pompey chooses to ironize the style and

⁵² Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* [1936] (London: Virago, 1993), pp. 153-54.

format of a woman's magazine story is in itself significant, for she demonstrates, even as she parodies, how pervasively insidious this type of narrative is. The office is quite clearly the more attractive option - but, even as parody, the story must end in the approved domestic realm. More, Pompey's take on popular women's fiction challenges the fear and resentment directed towards working women which underlies its production and propagation. For the wife is horribly and unnecessarily punished for even thinking of leaving home: it is not enough that she can't open her own front door, but her son must also be badly burned as a direct consequence of her domestic neglect. Societal outrage provoked by working women has mutated this story into a crass, deliberately obvious morality fable - and the punished wife who thought of straying into the work-place serves as an unnatural warning to all her sex. This "story" shows how firmly rooted these opposing constructs of femininity are embedded in inter-war society and culture: parody mocks them and undermines them, but cannot overturn their authorized version of womanhood. Pompey, in her re-write of magazine fiction, does not attempt to break down this polarized concept of femininity, but only flips it around, so that, briefly, the role of the working woman is championed above that of housewife and mother.

But I want to go on now to explore fictional representations of a feminized "middle-ground", where the preoccupations and obligations of home and office meet - an unmapped region where nothing can happen nowhere. Looking more closely at Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*, and Elizabeth Bowen's novel, *To The North*, I want to examine how socially-authorized models of femininity are blurred and dissolved - even as they are acknowledged - and metamorphose into

subtly different and shifting templates which realign women's place at work and at home.

Venturing *near* the interior

Elizabeth Bowen and Stevie Smith seem, initially, an incongruous pairing: the former writing from within the upper-middle-class conservatism of Anglo-Irish tradition, the latter proclaiming herself an unashamed child of the English suburbs. Smith adopts a colloquial, garrulous and irreverent voice for her autobiographical novel - itself a loose, sprawling ramble of a book, in which diversions and incursions into Pompey's mind constitute an endlessly flexible and seamless "plot". Whereas Elizabeth Bowen uses language with scalpel-like syntactic precision and a formal, patterned grace. *To The North* - the story of two unmarried women, Emmeline and Cecilia, and the choices they make - is a tightly choreographed piece, the narrative thread held taut and the loose ends of digression forbidden.

Yet both writers share a love of distinctive syntax, and both are fascinated by the rhythms of language and dialogue. They also display interest in similar fictional themes: families and the lack of them, Englishness and foreignness, politics, homes and houses and hotels, the anatomy of love, friendship and sexual desire - all filtered through the medium of women's lives in contemporary middle-class society. And so, Bowen's and Smith's individual novelistic handling of shared themes makes for an intriguing comparison - each throws the other into relief - as, for example, with *Novel on Yellow Paper* and *To The North*, both of which are

concerned in different ways with the problematic relationship between women, the office, and the private house.

In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Pompey works as a private secretary to the publishing magnate, Sir Phoebus. Indeed, so much of her time is spent at work that the bulk of the novel itself is written there, hence its genesis on yellow office paper. Pompey's fictive position mirrors Stevie Smith's own, as secretary to Sir Neville Pearson at the enormous magazine publishing firm, Newnes. Smith 'veered between feeling that the job was too good for her and that she was too good for the job.'⁵³ On the one hand, the position of private secretary was not tremendously demanding, and Smith always found the mental energy to write the poems which she considered to be her true professional vocation. But, conversely, the sheer number of hours the job entailed - the need to be in the office daily, submitting to its routines and rituals - meant that Newnes inevitably branded her with its own indelible mark. It both 'patterned and restricted her.'⁵⁴ Or, as Smith herself wrote: 'The secretarial position may not be arduous, but it is a trifle confining.'⁵⁵ And her fictional alter ego, Pompey, endures a similar sense of 'confinement' in her own working life. She says of herself and Sir Phoebus on a typical working day:

We indulge in the utmost limit of boredom, he in his room and I in mine, and stagger out when tea time comes, as it must, however it comes, whether rung for on the house phone, or trundled in by the hired girl, that's like an angel of grace breaking in on the orgy of boredom to which my soul is committed. (16)

⁵³ Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 48. Referred to hereafter as *Stevie Smith*.

⁵⁴ Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 91.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, eds Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1981), p. 294. The quote comes from a letter written to Kay Dick, dated 25 April, 1953.

The indecently excessive boredom of one routine is relived only by 'indulgence' in another, that of tea time - and at least the latter ritual allows for physical movement, a tottering escape from the four office walls. And later, on the same tack, Pompey urges:

Forget the Job-Job-Job. with all its paraphernalia of subordination, turning always upon the pivot of littleness. tunnelling, burrowing back, down and through, to something receding, ever diminishing, suffocating, close-cramping. (208)

As she writes, Pompey conjures up the sense of the office-as-machine: the repeated 'Job-Job-Job' the tireless note of its engine as it bores down into the 'close-cramped' and 'suffocating' core of working life. And as the machine tunnels to reach the 'something' that lies at the heart of it all - the meaning and purpose of office work - that 'something' always recedes, draws back, leaving only a sense of futility and claustrophobic 'littleness.'

Suffocated in the 'paraphernalia of littleness': that is how Pompey feels about office work. And this feeling places her strangely at odds with her own narrative. She is bored in the office - that is partly why she writes her novel in the first instance -

that is why I type yellow, typing for my own pleasure, and not sending it by clerical error to the stockbrokers for a couple of thou. in Tekka Taiping, and not sending it to the Chief of Police with a formal complaint, and not sending it to Great Aunt Agatha asking her to, and asking her to . . . (1 -16)

Her ready, pat list of those to whom she is *not* sending missives reveals how frequently such prosaic communications must in act issue forth from the office -

especially to Sir Phoebus's Aunt Agatha. The insignificance of those particular notes is so profound that Pompey cannot even bear to transcribe them to her readers, but instead trails off into a weary ellipsis. Yet the novel that she sits down to write in this enclosed world is entirely free-fall, loose: unconfined. Its sub-title is 'Work it Out for Yourself', and Pompey announces, by way of warning to her more traditional readers, that 'this is a foot-off-the-ground' novel (38). It proclaims itself, then, to be without moral or meaning - the reader must 'work it out' - and, unlike the narrator, it is floating free. Nebulous at its heart, the novel is made up of the dazzling, shifting surfaces of Pompey's mind: dreams, fantasies, monologues, diatribes, anecdotes, poems.

In some ways, the structure of *Novel on Yellow Paper* parallels those tropes of femininity typically represented as those belonging to the working woman: the book is morally and physically insubstantial; it is flitting and feckless; and it is addicted to glossy, slick superficiality. Whereas Pompey herself, physically confined and intellectually bored by her work, appears to have more in common with precisely that model of domestic womanhood which she parodies: the wife and mother trapped in a 'tight little hell-box'. This intriguing anomaly between structure and narrator reveals that Pompey is unable to keep these two neatly opposing constructs of femininity from merging into each other, even as they are acknowledged. She is unable to prevent a sense of the private house infiltrating the office. More, she seems to encourage its admittance. Here, she describes how she alleviates the boredom of her day.

The only way I can lose myself is by doing those cables. We have a secret code which I have simplified because as it was you can have too much of a good thing. There is too much fancy footwork in the old way code. So I simplified it, and now it is just a nice clean game

to help you forget that there's sixty seconds run off to every minute.
(18)

Codes are all about surfaces; and the more elaborate, ornate and diffuse the surface is, the better the code. *Novel On Yellow Paper* is itself a species of code - only one which it is pointless to crack, because the 'fancy footwork' which makes up the novel's style and structure is its very point. There is no secret message behind it: its surface is its substance. But Pompey herself, instead of relishing the slippery surface of a difficult cypher in the work-place, actually simplifies it, and rubs away at its concealing covering. What she devises in its place is a labour-saving code with dust-free surfaces - a 'nice clean' code - just as if it were some kind of new domestic appliance. By this act of simplification, Pompey has shown herself resistant to the 'fancy footwork' of surfaces; of coverings. Her refusal to participate in the game of surfaces - which constitutes such an important part of office culture - leaves the work-place vulnerable to the admittance of "rootedness", to solidity: to the very tropes of domesticity she criticizes.

The perception that Pompey is herself allowing the home to enter the office is strengthened by the lack of concern she displays about her physical appearance as a working woman. For Pompey is defiantly uninterested in the erotic glamour that is available to her position. She is immune to the allure of clothes and cosmetics. She remarks of a friend, with stinging indifference, 'she has a yellow pullover and fawn jodhpurs and a fawn felt hat. And who cares' (10). On another occasion:

Lottie said: 'Pompey you should dress with more *chic*. So. And she put on me her hat and a coat with hanging sequin sleeves, and round my neck a piece of fur . . . I stood in front of a long glass and began to laugh silently.

Because it was funny . . . And presently I said: 'Oh Lottie isn't it fun dressing up. you never know quite how funny you look until you put someone else's clothes on.' (61)

The outrageous and flamboyant glamour of these clothes does not belong to Pompey, and nor does the overt sexuality this new '*chic*' represents: in all senses, Pompey has donned borrowed weeds. But by shunning the outward attractions typically associated with the working woman, she again necessarily prioritizes a more rooted, solid and respectable version of femininity as her own. She writes defiantly, 'There's no sugar dad in my life and those looking for sugar dads can shut up here and throw back at Miss-in-Boots chemists book store'(17). The glamorous, shellacked appeal of the female type that attracts a 'sugar dad'; and the superficial fiction which reflects and creates that type - via Boots lending library - are both roundly rebutted. Pompey's rejection of the superficial has allowed a sense of its other - that which is solid and rooted - to influence both her working environment, and her own looks and behaviour as a working woman. Pompey's narrative might be structurally feckless and flitting, yet contained within it is a narrator who finds herself bored and confined in a 'tight little hell box' of an office which she herself has rendered more of a domestic space than a work-place.

Why does Pompey not lead the same feckless life as her narrative? The answer is caught up with the parallels and patterns of two relationships: that which Pompey has with her boss, Sir Phoebus, and that which she has with Freddy. Her love for Freddy, their tense engagement, his quarrels with her and her quarrels with him, and, finally, their break-up, is a narrative thread which weaves in and out of *Novel on Yellow Paper*. She remembers of their happiest times

prancing forth light and malicious as tiger on padded paw. to play, scratch. pat. prod. prink. to hug. kiss. lick. bite. to lie in the firelight: to be happy: a hearth rug's ivory tower of bliss. a little space. a time pocket for love and play and friendship: long days in the summer, playing. teasing. laughing. (206)

She writes as if she and Freddy are a pair of cubs rolling and playing and fighting and sleeping in the warmth of the fire, or the heat of a summer's day - and their love-play is seamlessly incorporated into this discourse. Pompey always portrays her relationship with Freddy thus, as born out of the see-saw viciousness and tenderness of young animals or children. Freddy is 'my own peculiar friend and playmate' (207); he is 'my sweet boy' (206). But sometimes, when he and Pompey fight, it is with the sudden frenzy of scrapping cubs - 'we have strained and strained against and away from each other' (216); or, at other times when they quarrel, Pompey resorts to childish insults: 'do not be so deeply dippy', she tells him (220).

This portrayal renders the relationship between Pompey and Freddy sexually and emotionally unthreatening; not quite serious; not *grown up*. And Pompey's treatment of sex throughout the novel strengthens this childlike effect, for she finds the whole topic a rich seam of giggly humour. 'There have been many things about sex in my life that have made me laugh, and so now I will tell you', she writes (124). She then goes on to relate an anecdote from her school days, about the ridiculous Miss Hogmanimy, 'who gave up her whole life going round giving free lectures on how babies are born' (124). Pompey takes sex back into the classroom as she describes how Miss Hogmanimy

would draw sections on the blackboard and then stand her stout body in front of it, blushing furiously. it was all so holy. and all so terrible

if it wasn't legitimate. And she did so hope that we would not drink wine, and that we would not wear provocative décolleté. (13-38)

Pompey's child's-eye view of sex, both with Freddy, and as an abstract concept, is adopted as an evasive strategy; the means of combating a fundamental fear which underlies the insouciant, slangy narrative of *Novel on Yellow Paper*. For Pompey is on the run, trying to escape a monster, a chimera, that haunts her nights and plagues her days. That chimera is the hard, legal contract of marriage, and of life in the private house proper. If it catches her, then it will kill her. Pompey's treatment of love and sex as a form of child's play is her way of avoiding a side of Freddy which has suddenly become very grown up and frightening - which is 'no longer any sweetie pie, but a monster'(208). He has had enough of his role as a play-fellow, and wishes to place their relationship on a more stable, traditional and socially-approved footing. He wants to marry Pompey.

Now we are engaged to be married . . . But somehow marriage and being engaged to be married does not bite upon my consciousness at all, it is not right, perhaps it is not the right sort of acid, it has no bite. And so when we are engaged I move my mother's engagement ring that I had from her when she died when I was sixteen, this ring I shift to my engagement finger, it is like a game that has no significance but to play that we are engaged. (216)

Pompey refuses to see their engagement as anything more than a different sort of play - and as play that has none of the fun, none of the 'bite', of the scraps and caresses she once enjoyed in front of the fire. Her treatment of sex as an activity best enjoyed as a childish romp - crucially, non-procreative - and her view of the engagement as a rather silly, dull game, underwrite her attempts to escape the powerful monster that is waiting to pounce if she stops playing and chattering and

fooling for one instant. For 'married to him in the morning, in the evening I should be dead'(218).

Pompey would rather die than map so neatly onto the approved template of inter-war femininity. She also could not survive in the house that Freddy would choose to put her: a nice, snug little semi-detached box in the suburb of Bottle Green. His very 'heart is in these little homes'(234). Pompey herself used not to be immune to the fascination of suburbia. 'I have wandered about having a *nostalgie* for this suburb, but no means of getting into the inside of it. And I have burned to know the suburb from top to bottom and round and about and within'(233). And this is from someone who has grown up in Bottle Green. As a non-member of the tennis club and a non-member of the amateur dramatics club, she has, however, always been outside the suburban centre. It is precisely her status as outsider that accounts for her sense of *nostalgie*: her illusory homesickness is for a place she has never known. But when Freddy does take her into the sturdily beating heart of Bottle Green, Pompey's fascination becomes drawn to what she now perceives as an abomination. She says, 'I cannot always be in that stifling atmosphere, it is warm, but by and by it is too warm, and too close. And if you are married it is very difficult to make it to remain always a visit' (234).

So Pompey decides she cannot follow her destiny as contemporary society would fashion it for her. She tells Freddy she will not marry him, and he leaves her. She is heart broken, but also deeply thankful: 'Oh chaps he was sweet was Freddy, there were moods when never sweeter. But oh sweet of sweet, what helps, when sweet but in chimera-coat he trips beside?'(239). Freddy may once have been her sweet play mate; she tried, with her playful approach to sex and love and marriage,

to escape the frightening chimera of home and marriage by not taking it seriously. But all the while Freddy was carrying it with him in his coat tails, and 'now he is proud, revengeful; will have marriage now or nothing'(207). Pompey chooses nothing - or that, at any rate, is how society threatens to value and represent her - as 'unmarried, uncomfortable, alone'(218).

Pompey does not languish in this unpleasant region, though. In her depiction of her working life, and her relationship with her boss, Sir Phoebus, she re-energizes her own status and position, and undermines and negates the institution of marriage itself. Paradoxically, her description of the office as a kind of home is integral to her evasion of the real thing. Her ventures *near* the dangerous interior of the real private house shed new light on the phantom-domestic of the office. Vital to this reciprocal process is the relationship Pompey has with Sir Phoebus.

Pompey is a private secretary. Contemporary representations of typists concentrate on the image of them as mass: crowding onto city buses, taking over banks and offices in their thousands. But Pompey is one of a kind. She is still related to her clerical sisters - she feels the disapproving weight of society pressing down on her as a woman who earns; she has been trained in 'useful mechanical arts',⁵⁶ and is aware of the concomitant mechanized rote of office work - but her role within that office is rather different. Unlike the pool of typists whose contact with the boss is limited to the sight of his hat and coat on the rack, the private secretary is in continual and intimate contact with the man who wears them. 'She adapts in any number of ways: calming him down when he is angry, cheering him up when sad, taking the initiative when he is away, curtailing it when he is

⁵⁶ Moyston Bird, *Woman at Work*, p. 135

present.’⁵⁷ Pompey chooses to represent this relationship as a form of marriage; the office as a form of home.

Here, she lists a typical day’s activities:

paying servants. doing accounts. coding and decoding. walking dogs. writing charitable publicity for firm’s pet charity (103 different appeals to the season): reading manuscripts. Signing my letters: Phoebus Ullwater *tout court*. without the hedging chivvying invaliant p.p. Phoebus Ullwater in slanting. ruffling. swashbuckling forgery. Forgery. (203-204)

This list slides seamlessly between domestic and clerical duties: paying servants and walking dogs belong to the home, whereas reading manuscript and signing letters for Sir Phoebus belong to the office. Her repeated emphasis of the word ‘forgery’ is intriguing. It suggests how deliberate is Pompey’s conceit that the office is a species of home. Initially, her admittance of the domestic realm into the office seemed to bore her, and to place her at odds with her own flitting and darting narrative. But, in fact, the domestic life she writes into the office can be seen as one more instance of complex game-playing. Hers is a serious playfulness which allows her to form a subtly different feminized territory, where office life takes on the character of home, and home is infused with the politics of the office. In this game, there are no losers, no monsters and no deaths. After all, the domestic boredom Pompey represents as belonging to the office is off-set, in turn, by the harmony of her “marriage” with Sir Phoebus, which is described in purely professional terms.

⁵⁷ Anne Machung, “Who Needs a Personality to Talk to a Machine?”: Communication in the Automated Office”, in *Women’s Voices*, p. 69

I love Sir Phoebus at the moment. I love him with a deep and grateful love. He is the only man with whom I have consistently . . . behaved myself, as an efficient worker, as a willing donkey, as a happy equable creature, blandly and happily performing its duties . . . So grateful to him that for him at least I can be no tearing devil sobbing and fighting. I look at him with a smiling, happy, guiltless face. I look at him across the desk. I laugh, there are always so many things to laugh about, and so much work to do. (204)

It is plain to see that Pompey spends a lot of her working day reading fictional manuscripts for inclusion in women's magazines. Much of the narrative of the novel is set up against the style and content of such fiction, whether in parody, or outright condemnation. Here, she describes the routine of office life as if it has come from such a magazine, with herself smiling fondly over at Sir Phoebus over the desk and her work, instead of over the breakfast table. But her version of the story criticizes the formulaic original as it rewrites it. For such happiness as this, it seems, can only exist when a phantom-marriage is represented via the counterfeit proxy of the office. The real thing, in a real house, is to be feared and dreaded; and the wife and mother is punished if she ever thinks to leave. Here, in the office, Pompey has both career and marriage, and in a guise that satisfies her need for pretence and play. She can safely love Sir Phoebus as if he were her husband, precisely because she isn't his wife. She need not fear him, nor fight against him, but is able to carry out her duties - the superficial chores of the office - with all the placid obedient satisfaction of the dedicated homemaker.

This is a liberating counter-narrative which runs in opposition to the hard, legal imperatives of marriage which would see Pompey out of the office for good, and into the private house for ever. It also subverts the emotional and cultural imperatives of marriage, too. After all, we see that her love for Sir Phoebus,

although deep and grateful and consistent, in the best magazine tradition, is also conditional, and qualified and transient. 'I love Sir Phoebus, at this moment, I love him', she writes - allowing herself the option not to love him at another given moment, when the clerical pleasure of 'having so much work to do' may be transformed into 'an orgy' of domestic tedium.

Then, as with Freddy, Pompey's relationship with Sir Phoebus is childless: another blow for the socially-approved version of inter-war domestic life. But, whereas with Freddy, Pompey adopted the guise of a child in order to render the bearing of her own child an impossibility, with Sir Phoebus, playing at homes in the office, she chooses a more proactive and independent reason for not having children - a reason that promotes, rather than destroys, what she perceives of as her true career. Upsetting the received maternal obligations of the homemaker, she announces, simply, that 'I think of my poems as my kiddo'(28).

In these playful, slippery ways, Pompey manages to achieve a satisfactory synthesis of home and work, creating for herself in the process a femininity which is impossible to categorize or label. She is married to the job in a way that makes her intriguingly unknowable and unaccountable: as such, the chimera she dreads cannot touch her. She has fashioned for herself a place of liberation, where nothing can happen nowhere.⁵⁸ But Emmeline Summers, heroine of Bowen's novel, *To The North*, is not so fortunate.

Like Pompey, employed in the newly thriving business of women's magazine publishing, Emmeline finds herself working in one of those modern occupations

⁵⁸ For further discussion of the creative pleasure Stevie Smith takes in the blurring of opposites, see Kathleen Wheeler, *Modernist Women Writers and Narrative Art* (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 141-61.

which, as Vera Brittain has already pointed out, 'provide the best openings for women'.⁵⁹ Emmeline works in travel; in tourism. With a little capital, and a business partner, Peter, she has set up a travel agency in Bloomsbury. The notion of travel as a single, organized package only came into practice in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century with the entrepreneurship of Thomas Cook, so it certainly stands as a relatively new industry in the inter war period. The tourist trade also expanded continually during these years to accommodate a growing demand for travel as leisure.

To The North feeds into and out of this new and booming phenomenon. At a party, Emmeline discusses the genesis and growth of her travel agency to Julian, a new acquaintance. He asks her:

'You don't only deal with Bloomsbury?'

'No,' said Emmeline. A shade of distinct displeasure passed over her face; evidently that kind of thing had been said before. 'All round Woburn Place,' she said fluently, 'there are temperance hotels full of people from Wales and the North so intoxicated at having left home at all that they are ready to go on anywhere. When they walk round the square after breakfast they see our posters.' (27)

Travel-drunkenness - dizzying, exhilarating - has swept the land. Whether sending 'a Congregational Choir to Paris' (31), or handling 'fifteen art-students from Macclesfield who were wishing to make a walking tour in Andalucia' (117), Emmeline is always kept busy.⁶⁰ But even though her job is so in tune with the mood and circumstances of the time, Emmeline's profession seems, like Pompey's,

⁵⁹ Brittain, *Women's Work*, p. 40.

⁶⁰ For more on the boom in inter-war travel, see Chapter Two of this thesis. Also Hugh Haughton's introduction to the Vintage edn of *To The North* - (London: Vintage, 1999), pp vii-xix - which examines the novel as a set of variations on the topical and resonant inter-war theme of travel.

intriguingly out of joint with the narrative which she inhabits. For Emmeline's business is to promote rootlessness: 'she shot her travellers like arrows [over] rippled seas, ribbed hills, white-and-shady cities to which this office had been the arch'(124). Eternal movement, swift flight: it is to these ends that her agency is dedicated. And yet *To The North* is a novel all about *roots*: it is not types of travel, but notions of home that provide the real impetus for the narrative.

This may seem perverse: *To The North*, after all, as its title suggests, and as Emmeline's profession renders inevitable, is a novel full of travel. Yet Bowen uses travel, paradoxically, to stabilize and regiment the narrative. There are three main "set-pieces" of travel in *To The North*: a train journey at the beginning, an air flight in the middle, and a drive in a motor car at the finish. This neat symmetry and equitable distribution of different modes of transport denote that travel has been firmly mapped out to follow prescribed routs through the narrative. There is nothing of Emmeline's zeal to be found in its carefully choreographed placing. And the *function* of these set pieces is equally precise, each being crucial to the progression of the plot. (In a literal sense with this novel, Bowen's pronouncement on the art of novel-writing holds true: 'Plot is the knowing of destination.'⁶¹) The train journey which begins the novel carries Cecilia, Emmeline's sister-in-law, into the narrative. The half-way flight to Paris takes Emmeline and her lover, Markie, to Paris, where they consummate their relationship. And the final drive, fast and frantic though it is, only hastens the novel to its dramatic car-crash ending. This is travel for business, not pleasure. Movement, thus firmly rooted and routed, narratively and structurally, is made to play its own part in the ultimate stabilizing

⁶¹ Bowen, 'Notes on Writing a Novel'. Rpt. in Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, p. 169.

of the text - even as Emmeline, within that text, worships travel as an arrow-like dart of light into the unknown.

She is, however, the only character in the novel who actually enjoys travelling. Her passion is a lonely one. Even her business partner, as devoted to the agency as Emmeline herself, suffers from motion-sickness and rarely travels. Cecilia, on her endless train journey from Milan to Bolougne feels that 'if one is not sad one is bored'(14). And Markie is a nervous traveller: in a plane he is 'suspicious' (133), and, a non-driver himself, in a bumpy taxi ride he 'stiffened and swore'(147). In Emmeline's own little car, hurtling northwards, he is, baldly, 'very frightened'(234). It is only Emmeline who abandons herself delightedly to movement, to travel - other characters always keep a tentative foot on the ground.

This sense of fundamental groundedness underpinning the novel is strengthened by the fact that the narrative is scattered with so many different houses; so many different versions of domesticity, each offering their own model of "rootedness". Certainly, Emmeline spends much more textual time and space in these houses than she ever does in the heady process of travel. There is Emmeline's own home, which she rents with Cecilia; there is Lady Water's London home, Rutland Gate, and her country place, Farraways; there is Markie's flat in lower Sloane Street; Julian's flat in Westminster; and Connie Pleach's cottage near Devizes. It is, then, hardly surprising that Emmeline, dedicated to the advancement of rootlessness, should be at strangely at odds with this novel. Certainly, she does not feel at home in any of the houses she enters. Of the place she shares with the vibrant Cecilia, she occupies only a nebulous region. To her friend, Julian: ' "This house is Cecilia," ' she remarks. ' "When I come in I see her, simply, whether she's in or out. Nothing

feels part of me, yet I live here too. I feel I leave nothing but steam in the bath”
(188). At Farraways, the country house of Lady Water’s - Emmeline’s cousin,
once removed - Emmeline imagines herself at peace.

Here Emmeline . . . thought she would like to live. Here . . . she had
woken happy. But already a vague expectation of Monday and
Tuesday filled her: looking out from the shade of the lime already she
saw the house with its white window frames like some image of
childhood, unaccountably dear but remote. (64-65)

But, again, the house seems a strangely nebulous entity to Emmeline. The reality of
the peace she finds at Farraways is not as powerful as a shimmering mirage - the
‘vague expectation’ of her working life which waits to claim her on Monday.
Emmeline’s very choice of travel as a profession means that she cannot but meet
certain criteria for the typical working woman: she, as much as any typist, is
perceived to be domestically rootless, adhering only to the drifting surfaces of life.

But this is not quite all. Like *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Bowen’s novel conflates
the tropes of home and work, and the constructs of femininity that accompany
them. For there is no doubt that for Emmeline, her most successful venture into the
domestic interior is via the office. Her business methods and environment
acknowledge the existence of scientific management techniques as propagated in
books, manuals and films, even as they undermine them by positing an entirely
rooted, humanized and domestic alternative.

The very architectural history of the travel agency speaks of the private house,
for the office ‘had once been someone’s back dining room’(35). And instead of the
low, backless modern desks recommended as the ideal, ‘Peter and Emmeline each
had roll-top desks of their own’(35). Their secretary, Miss Tripp, has an even more

outmoded piece, and 'occupied a deal table half into the fireplace; she had wedged the legs with blotting paper'(35). Nor is Miss Tripp anything like the mechanized, glamorous automaton familiar as an office type. She entirely lacks the 'seductive efficiency of a platinum blonde stenographer' (124), and spends much of her time 'patching up her mistakes with a purple pencil. The mistakes were many, but machine-like efficiency is not, she had been given to understand, compatible with high intelligence'(117). Miss Tripp earns ten shillings a week - pocket money wages, when even unskilled office workers could expect to earn a minimum of forty five shillings a week in London.⁶² This token sum for inefficient services adds to the sense that Emmeline's enterprise has something other than pure profit at its heart.

Then, the business methods of the agency are disarmingly *ad hoc*. Casting the accounts, Emmeline is pleased, if somewhat surprised, to discover that ' "we are six pounds seven and nine to the good that I cannot account for" '(93). This is all very different from the regulated efficiency which powers her friend, Julian's, office, with

people coming in quietly over carpets. trays of paper put down or taken away, a muted efficiency, telephoning in a tone of governed irritability, interviews of varying smoothness, and, at a blink from Julian, a dark-green blind twitched down by the secretary to forbid the bold afternoon sun that approached his desk. (114)

It is the attention devoted to the most minute workings of the machine - as reflected in Bowen's meticulous prose - that has ensured that Julian is in the possession of a 'rather too flourishing family business'(25). But Emmeline's much

⁶² See Anthony, *Women's Place*, p. 33.

smaller enterprise, run on such different lines, is also doing well, and her success is directly proportional to the particular nature of her business methods which have their roots in the home. For she 'received newcomers [to the office] with sympathy, even with tenderness' (92) - and, according to Bowen, 'solicitude, tenderness are single-minded and narrow: from this the integrity of the home'(165). Emmeline's very obsession with travel, itself single-track and narrow, manifests itself in 'tenderness' for her clients, and thus the 'integrity of the home' is transferred to the office.

It is in these ways that the rootless Emmeline - in a novel full of houses in none of which she belongs - manages to construct her own model of harmonious, unsensational domestic happiness. It is this conflation of home and work that lends her the quality of unknowability which is, paradoxically, her defining characteristic. It is difficult to put a trace on her: Markie, her lover, says of her: "You lead such a funny life, like a cat: always coming and going" (144). It is impossible to really understand her: 'there was not much more, it occurred to Cecilia, than the idea of company in [Emmeline's] company' (132). And Emmeline, a woman who cannot be quite known, is happy living this enigmatic existence in the unmapped territory she has formed for herself. But, as with Pompey, it is when sexual and emotional love enters the narrative that Emmeline finds the politics of office and home must alter. She falls in love with Markie, an unscrupulous and opportunistic young lawyer, and enters into a sexual relationship with him without guilt or shame. Fittingly, it is with the metaphor of her trade, travel, that her abandonment is described: Markie is faintly chagrined by a sense of 'having been overshot, of having, in some final soaring flight of her exaltation, been outdistanced'(140).

Emmeline, as a joint partner of her own business concern, is by no means a typical working woman. Pompey was set apart by virtue of her status as private secretary; Emmeline, as owner and manager, is even more socially and professionally divorced from the mainstream mass of typists.⁶³ But when Emmeline enters into a relationship with Markie, and herself actively *adopts* the commonly-perceived guise of the sexually available office worker - the typist - then everything changes, at work and at home. It is not only that by seeing Markie Emmeline has committed the greatest social and sexual crime her world recognizes, moving as she has 'clear of the everyday, of conduct with its guarantees and necessities, into the region of the immoderate'(181).⁶⁴ It is more that her action throws fatally off-balance the energizing equilibrium of her life, in which home and office were so finely balanced. The domestic shrine of the office cannot remain immune to her drastic departure into the sexual realm of the office-girl.

For example, there is the effect her clothes have on the working environment. Before meeting Markie, Emmeline, like Pompey, showed little interest in glamorous office clothes: 'she never came to work in anything but a coat and skirt, or a linen dress as severe'(115). But after a long, heady, enchanted lunch with Markie, Emmeline returns to the office still in the green silk dress she wore to meet him. It is bad enough that the sensual, tactile sheen of the fabric turns her mind from her work - for 'there was no doubt that her green sleeve rubbing against the

⁶³ As Deirdre Beddoe remarks of the inter-war period: 'The achievements of individual women were very considerable, but when we turn to the figures for women in the professions . . . the striking thing is how small their share of the top jobs were.' For example, in 1921, women made up 0.35% of all medical practitioners, in 1931, they still made up only 0.72%. *Home and Duty*, pp. 76-77. Margaret Cole writes that, 'generally speaking, the educated working woman who is making £300 a year is doing very well.' *Marriage*, p. 153.

⁶⁴ See Chapter Two of this thesis for a closer consideration of the social and sexual crime of extra-marital sexual relations

desk distracted Emmeline at that moment. The silk was still warm from the sun; she still saw Markie's square-tipped fingers where the silk creased a little inside the elbow'(117). The malleable texture of the material, its yielding to imprint, its warmth, all denote an eroticism which lies uncomfortably with the cool, work-laden surface of Emmeline's desk. Even more harmful to the equilibrium of the office is that the sight of the beautiful Emmeline in this dress prompts an outburst from her secretary who announces an emotional attachment to her employer. It is almost as if Miss Tripp - who previously defined herself in opposition to the typical working girl - has herself been infected by Emmeline's adoption of the sexually-charged role, and, in passionately expressing her feelings, is only following her manager's lead. The domestic idyll of the office is certainly shattered by the scene, and Emmeline is very much aware that 'if I hadn't come in this dress she would not have spoken . . . Emmeline suffered an agony of conscience: through herself the peace of the office had been destroyed' (125).

And it is never recovered. As a result of this brief outbreak of sexual feeling in the office, Miss Tripp leaves, and Miss Armitage comes in her place. She is ruthlessly efficient, and ultimately destructive to the office-as-home which Emmeline conceived.

She held every inch and gained others: she undermined them. Emmeline, upon whom inefficiency was growing, found she no longer had the power to fill her own desk. She sat staring at bottles of coloured ink . . . or turned over dully the letters put out for her to sign: once she signed something she had not read . . . Everything passed through their secretary's hands: she had tentacles everywhere: without her, these days, they did not know what they were trying to do . . . The old gay routine broke up: Miss Armitage made the tea: the partners were never alone. They became more regular, more efficient - but so were Cook's, so were Lunn's. Emmeline saw from the faces of clients how the whole character of the office had changed. (218)

The happy old ways have gone, and in their place has evolved a far more sinister routine. The ruthless Miss Armitage seems intent upon turning the travel agency into an office in the modern style. She has introduced the departmentalized practices of scientific management even into this small-scale enterprise: so it is that Emmeline and Peter, the very owners of the business, are not responsible for its whole, but only for disjointed parts that the secretary doles out onto their desks. Once, Emmeline does not even read what is put out for her to sign. The fact that Miss Armitage is now the one to make the tea is another sign that it is her role to break up the unity of the office. The integrity of the home has been replaced by the diaspora of the departmentalized work-place. It is as if Miss Armitage, the automated product of a technological office revolution, is in the very process of turning this office, too, into a machine, with herself the driving cog at its centre. Her very presence comes to define what business and office life means: 'without her, these days, they did not know what they were trying to do.' Not only do her many tentacles reach to all parts of the office, but her ruthless efficiency - efficiency for its own sake - seems now to be the self-fuelling motor of the operation. As the office becomes more like an office, clients fall away. Its individual character which had so endeared it to its nomadic disciples, has 'changed'.

As Emmeline embarks on a sexual relationship with Markie and thereby adopts the typical mantle of the working woman, we see the blurred construct of office and home - and the intriguingly blurred constructs of femininity that accompanied them - begin to separate out, and become polarized once more. As with Pompey, it is the chimera of marriage that proves so conclusive in the treatment of office and

home. But whereas for Pompey, this chimera takes on a monstrous form, for Emmeline, it has its being in the other meaning of the word: an illusion, a fantasy, a shifting and elusive dream.

With an office that is no longer a home, and in a novel full of houses, Emmeline is now adrift. She must search for another resting place, somewhere she can truly feel settled, and, for this, she turns to Markie. But 'she sought the hearth, he led her into a theatre' (72). This is partly a metaphor for Emmeline's desire to know the real, unadorned Markie, and his continued insistence on putting his personality on like a show for her. But the phrase also has a more literal significance. Emmeline, her office destroyed, has no choice but to look for a home with Markie; for marriage with Markie. Her enigmatic identity as a working woman at home in the office is destroyed - she no longer has the power to fill her own desk, as if literally fading out of business life. If she is to be left with any sense of herself then it must be as a wife. Markie, however, has other ideas.

'You delude yourself,' he said ungently. 'I couldn't live with you: point blank, Emmeline. I don't want to. I should feel myself dropping to pieces before your eyes.'

'That's as you feel,' she said, helpless.

'And also, what an impossible end for *you!*'

'But how am I to end?'

'I've no idea,' he said, with that nervous coldness she dreaded. (148)

Emmeline's question is to the point: cut adrift in a rooted novel, how and where is she to end? Marriage, and the domestic life, take on the form of a tantalizing chimera, always shimmering with the promise of peace and security, then dissolving into emptiness. The crisis comes when Emmeline and Markie go away for the weekend to a cottage in the country - another house in this novel for

Emmeline to ghost with her shadowy presence. She arrives, intent on turning this cottage into a domestic haven for them; comes laden with groceries and hopes. But Markie resists her version of domestic bliss. ‘ “Here we are,” she had thought, coming in: but she had been wrong, they were not. For ever coming and going, no peace, no peace. What did Markie always want to avoid?’ (197).

It is not only Emmeline herself who is always on the move, it is the elusive shape of home, too, that is always ‘coming and going’ - a shifting, tantalizing chimera of peace. Markie, too, proves a nebulous creature, continually evading the very stability Emmeline craves to find in marriage. And the appeal of the legal status of that institution is not to be underestimated. Pompey might reject its strictures, but Emmeline longs for its authority. No longer defined by her unknowability, she now longs for absolute definition, saying to Markie, desperate, ‘ “People in love like Cecilia and Julian, people married, have passports everywhere” ’(206). It is as though marriage guarantees, with an official stamp, a proper sense of identity and a calm, rooted sense of belonging. That night, Emmeline’s sexual desire for Markie, the initial impetus for the relationship, is transformed into a sense of longing for those very things. She ‘clings closer to Markie, beseeching from the rough and impersonal contact of passion a little comfort and peace’(203).

Emmeline’s contact with Markie, originally sanctioned by the sexual freedom granted by the office, eventually destroys that office which existed so finely balanced between domestic and professional obligations and preoccupations. Now the travel agency, under the iron rule of Miss Armitage, is no longer the energizing realm inhabited by the unknowable Emmeline; a place where nothing could happen

nowhere. Now, it is just an office. And Markie refuses to turn the chimera of legal marriage and rooted home into a reality. The novel, and Emmeline herself, 'end' with her ultimate submission to 'coming and going', to rootlessness and transience: she kills herself and Markie in a car accident.

The dramatic end-scenes of *To The North* seem - literally, with Emmeline at the wheel - to have taken the discussion a long way from where it started: an exploration of the ways in which the development of the office in the inter-war period affected the women who worked there. Mechanized strategies of scientific management branded the female office worker; she was perceived to be morally insubstantial, glamorously clothed, attached to superficialities, domestically incapable - and sexually dangerous. But, even as this construct was shaped, one of home-loving, rooted maternal femininity was built in opposition to it - equally prescriptive - and obedient to various and numerous sociological and cultural imperatives.

But looking at Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*, and Elizabeth Bowen's *To The North*, and their fictionalized treatment of individual women workers and individual offices, it becomes clear that these opposing constructs of womanhood, based on location and occupation, cannot remain entirely polarized. It is only, finally, the hard legal contract of marriage that will not be assimilated into the office - to Pompey's advantage, and to Emmeline's cost. But notions of home and the politics and design of the office conflate intriguingly at numerous other points: Pompey enjoys marriage with the job, Emmeline sets up home in the office. In this conflation, the construct of the working woman and the mechanized office has been problematized - as has that of wife and home-maker. Each is seen to subtly

redefine the other. Emmeline and Pompey negotiate depth as well as surface - are rootless and rooted; are nowhere and somewhere - as the pleasures, trials and responsibilities of home infiltrate the office.

CHAPTER FOUR

Home Time: History, Modernity And The Private House

The great Victorian novelists did not complete their task, their survey of the English psychological scene. One by one they died: their century ended, a decade or two before its nominal close . . . What, then, was this task the Victorians failed to finish, and that the Edwardians declined to regard as theirs? A survey of emotion as an aggressive force, an account of the battle for power that goes on in every unit of English middle-class life.¹

It is Ivy Compton-Burnett, Bowen argues, who has picked up where the Victorians left off. Her claustrophobic novels of domestic life set in the latter years of the nineteenth century, although startlingly modern in technique, are faithful to the subject matters and themes dear to the Victorians.² The private house, the family, money, marriage: these are the Victorian preoccupations which Compton-Burnett has inherited, assimilated and re-introduced into her own fictive version of that period.

But, as Bowen's use of the present tense suggests, the 'battle for power that goes on in every unit of English middle-class life' is still on-going. It is not a conflict that is confined to the nineteenth century, or to representations of the nineteenth century.

¹ Bowen, 'Ivy Compton-Burnett', *Cornhill Magazine*, 1944. Rpt. in Bowen, *Collected Impressions*, pp. 85-86.

² Alison Light devotes a full chapter to the strange and uncomfortable fiction of Ivy Compton-Burnett, in *Forever England*, pp. 20-60. Here, though, is her excellent summation of Compton-Burnett's *oeuvre*. 'Her novels really *are* peculiar. The fictions are all but relentlessly uniform in conjuring up the lives of the well-to-do, an imagined petty aristocracy and a propertied but usually impoverished upper middle class in their country places and small mansions, locked into the late Victorian years . . . Their bizarre quality resides, however, in these doings being rendered primarily as "sayings": each novel consists entirely of highly-wrought, stylised conversations between family groupings in mannered Victorianese which is the standard unchanging vernacular from 1925 to 1969.' (20-21)

Bowen's own fiction continually observes, and participates in, the hostile power-politics of the family and the private house - a war inherited from a previous century, and which still rages in modern domestic middle-class life.

George Orwell goes one step further, and broadens his frame of domestic reference to embrace a concept of national identity. England, he writes,

resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family, with not many black sheep in it but with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons. It has rich relations who have to be kowtowed to and poor relations who are horribly sat upon, and there is a deep conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts.³

Secrets and silence, money and power: English life, it seems, resembles nothing so closely as a Victorian novel. Orwell's use of a domestic metaphor to describe the nation-state is unremarkable; it is of a piece with an inter-war ideology which placed 'the home and a whole panoply of connected issues at the centre of national life.'⁴ The private is now very much the public. What is more intriguing is that Orwell's vision of England as a domestic realm has at its heart a battle between past and present; old and new. The young are at loggerheads with their elders; the 'stuffiness' of the national family is at odds with the modern age. The Victorian preoccupation with the home has bequeathed a fraught emotional legacy to the equally home-orientated national consciousness of the inter-war period. But the inevitably anachronistic quality of this legacy brings its own conflict into the domestic arena. The battle for power fought

³ Orwell, 'England Your England' [1941]. Rpt. in Orwell, *Selected Essays*, p. 78.

⁴ Light, *Forever England*, p. 10.

over in the inter-war homes of England is not only inherited from the Victorian period; it is simultaneously a battle *with* that age. It is the representation of this domestic war - which is also a form of national conflict - that I am concerned with here.

Previous chapters have engaged with the conflict that is occasioned when the home - as both an architectural and ideological structure - comes into contact with new institutions and modern women. But now, in this final chapter, it is time to observe the battle for power which is unleashed when the private house - always already feminized territory - comes into contact with *itself*. It is a tense struggle between privacy and prestige, the past and the present; and in no area of inter-war domestic life is it more acutely felt and expressed than in the presence, function and representation of servants. Their existence in the middle-class Victorian private house was a given - as is their presence in the "Victorian" fiction of Ivy Compton-Burnett. But the changing social and cultural identity of servants in the inter-war period cuts to the heart of the private house as a national institution, laying open to scrutiny the perceived character of home, the existence of the women who live there, and the war-torn character of inter-war domestic fiction itself. It is these concerns that I wish to go on to examine.

The servant problem

servants may be identified as butlers, tweenies, and slaves, but the considerable textual space allotted to them is filled with much the same repertory of comic gestures and devices . . . it should be clear at any rate that the literary servant does not represent actual servants, or at most does so only tangentially.⁵

⁵ Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: Fiction From Below* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 6 and 11-12.

Talking here about the fictional status of nineteenth-century domestic servants, Bruce Robbins complains that the novelist's reliance upon formulaic tropes commonly suffices as a means of their representation. Art is not interested in imitating life when it means having to carry the canvas below stairs. But this is not the case with the fiction that I intend to discuss here. The portrayal of these literary servants is responsive to the social, cultural and economic position of servants in the inter-war years; and uncovers the particular character of the domestic warfare which rages in the private house during the period.

The representation, for example, of Matchett - housekeeper to the Quayne family in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* - is one which is very sensitive to the fundamental tension which underlies the position of servants in the inter-war period: that it is anachronistic. As early as 1916, an enquiry by the Women's Industrial Council concluded that 'domestic service is, to some extent, an anachronism. You cannot modernize industrial conditions within it unless you transform these conditions completely.'⁶ The intimately, inimically, linked concepts of a modernizing present and traditional past, each contiguous yet hostile to the other, constitutes a tense impasse which characterizes many modes of discourse concerned with the servant question.⁷

⁶ C. V. Butler, *Domestic Service: An Enquiry by the Women's Industrial Council* [1916] (New York and London: Garland, 1980), p. 94. Referred to hereafter as *Domestic Service*.

And not just the servant question, of course. Light posits the conflict between past and present as an energizing force in women's domestic writing of the inter-war years, and at the heart of her own study. As she explains, this conflict denotes a 'contradictory and determining tension in English social life in the period which I have called a conservative modernity: Janus-faced, it could simultaneously look backwards and forwards: it could accommodate the past in the new forms of the present: it was a deferral of modernity and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before.' *Forever England*, p. 10. It seems to me that the 'servant problem' signals a particularly sensitive and volatile trouble-area in this domestic war between the past and the present, which is why I have chosen to concentrate on it in this discussion of the private house.

It is, certainly, a fraught, blocked emotional relationship between past and present that is delineated in Elizabeth Bowen's portrayal of Matchett. The housekeeper plays an important role in the strange drama which passes for life in the Quayne household at 2 Windsor Terrace. It is a house of cold unreality and pretence where you 'sat round a painted, not a burning fire, at which you tried in vain to warm your hands'(149).⁸ Warmth, sincerity, love: all are absent from Windsor Terrace, where the orphaned Portia resides in uneasy conjunction with her brother, Thomas, and his wife, Anna. And it is only Matchett who appreciates and articulates this absence of humanity: she uses the solid referents of household objects, the guardianship of which is her function, to identify the *lack* of emotional solidity in the Quayne ménage. ' "Unnatural living runs in a family, and the furniture knows it, you be sure" ', she remarks (81). It is Matchett's devotion to the physical well-being of the house that draws attention, in physical, tangible ways, to the spiritual sickness that resides within. Her spring cleaning, for example, only serves to lay bare - scrubbed raw - the stark emotional contours of Windsor Terrace.

Vacantly overlooking the bright lake, chestnuts in leaf, the house offered that ideal mould for living into which life so seldom pours itself. The clocks, set and wound, ticked the hours away in immaculate emptiness . . . The spring cleaning had been thorough . . . Blue spirit had removed the winter film from the mirrors: now their jet-sharp reflections hurt the eye: they seemed to contain reality. (229)

⁸ See Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 107-109, for further discussion on the hollowness of the Quaynes' domestic life, and on Matchett's role in the household.

Matchett's cleaning has scoured the house into an uncomfortable state of reality - uncomfortable because the only reality contained in Windsor Terrace is vacancy: 'immaculate emptiness'. It is the sharp reflection of what isn't there that hurts. 'In this airy vivacious house, all mirrors and polish, there was no place where shadows lodged, no point where feeling could thicken'(42).

No wonder, then, that Matchett, who has the power to display thus the Quaynes' inadequacies through the physical medium of the house itself, is a dangerous presence. Simply, 'something edited life in the Quayne's house If Matchett were feared, if she seemed to threaten the house, it was because she seemed likely to put her thumb on the thing'(171). Again, we see that it is Matchett's physical bond with the house that gives her power and understanding. She is the one most likely to put her finger on what is missing in Windsor Terrace, because it is her hands that are always nurturing and maintaining what is there, and show their intimate knowledge of the Quaynes' lives in every work-worn line - for 'her fingers were bleached and their skin puckered, like the skin of old apples, from unremitting immersion in hot water, soda, soap'(231).

But Matchett is not only to be feared for her ruthless, 'unremitting' exposure of the Quayne family. She also threatens the cold, painted perfection of the house because she puts her finger on what is missing by the ultimate act of physical intervention: she *becomes* it. It is the past - forgiveness of the past, acceptance of the past - which is absent from Windsor Terrace. For the Quaynes' have a dubious family history: a broken marriage, followed by an unsuitable marriage; then foreign exile, death, and an unwanted, uncomfortable orphan: these events constitute its inglorious annals.

Thomas and Anna do not wish to give house room to such unpleasant family skeletons. But Matchett, with her greater influence on the physical life of Windsor Terrace, makes them welcome guests. She is a conduit for the past; she *is* the past.

Her general ideas of service and family are old-fashioned, and 'date from the family house, where the young ladies, with bows on flowing horsetails of hair, supped upstairs with their governess'(42). And her emotional investment in the Quayne household is also based on loyalty to the past: we learn on first meeting her that 'she had been years in service in Dorset with Thomas Quayne's mother, and after Mrs Quayne's death had come on to 2 Windsor Terrace with the furniture that had always been her charge'(23). Matchett's own history is indissoluble from the Quaynes' - their past defines her past - and her care of the old furniture suggests that she is eager to nourish and protect this shared past and its associations. And so it is not only her intimacy with inanimate solid household objects that reveals to Matchett the Quaynes' brittleness; it is also, as she herself realizes, the fact that many of these household objects are eloquent reminders of a past which is disturbing to their present. ' "Oh, furniture like we've got is too much for some that would rather not have the past" ', she says (81). But her care of it ensures the past's survival - as does her care of Portia, the unwelcome orphan of her father's unsuitable second marriage, and herself a living reminder of the Quaynes' past.

Portia finds that her brother, Thomas, child of the first marriage, is unwilling to talk about their father. When she mentions him in passing, 'Thomas's face went slowly set and heavy . . . He looked at Portia, at their father's eyebrows marking, here, a more

delicate line. His look made it clear he would not speak'(243). But Matchett will, and does, speak. Every night when Thomas and Anna are out, she goes up to say good-night to Portia. She demonstrates the same watchful tenderness towards the girl as she does to the precious furniture - 'smoothing the top of the sheet, she arranged Portia's hands on it like a pair of ornaments: she stayed low enough to keep guard on them'(80). And she also allows Portia, 'fascinated as ever' (74) by the story of her own troubled origins, to ask her about her father; to find out the circumstances of her birth. Matchett is more than willing to perform this anachronistic duty: to be the medium through which Portia can access the past: to upset, with her presence, the Quayne family chronology. To Matchett, the past must live in conjunction with the present - to accept this anachronism is to bring tradition, ease, honour and love into the home, and is to appease its ghosts. To accept this anachronism is the way to fill up the emptiness of Windsor Terrace. As things stand, she can only say of Thomas and Anna that they would ' " rather no past - not have the past, that is to say. No wonder they don't rightly know what they're doing. Those without memories don't know what is what" '(80).

And the conclusion of *The Death of the Heart* would seem to support Matchett's anachronistic stance on family relations. For the end of the novel sees Portia run away from Windsor Terrace, and she refuses to return unless Thomas and Anna discover the right thing to do to get her back. Eventually, the two of them decide that the 'right thing' is to send Matchett to fetch her: as Anna caustically remarks, ' "they're on very good terms . . . they talk about the past" '(311). Finally, the past - its mistakes and

loves - has been permitted to step foot in the house. The crisis of Portia's flight spurs Thomas, for the first time, into acknowledging the importance of the past tense in the present situation they find themselves in, as he says "We know what we think we've done, but we still don't know what we did. What did she expect, and what is she expecting now?" (308). In sending Matchett to bring Portia back home, the Quaynes are admitting both that the past is contiguous to the present, is important to the present - and are also admitting their own inadequacy as conduits for that past. It is Matchett who shows the way, and who shows them up. In maintaining the fabric of the house itself, and the fabric of the past, she serves as a counter-operative in the novel, embodying the domestic values of tradition, comfort and ease, and opposing the wilderness of dysfunctional family life - emotional desolation, vacuum, and deathly chill.

It is the similar concerns of furniture and family that condition Crosby's response to the past, in Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Years* (1937). Crosby is the devoted housekeeper of the Pargiters, and, again, we are made aware that it is the servant's particularly intimate relationship with the material effects of a household that engenders her correspondingly deep, ingrained knowledge of, and attachment, to the family and its history.

[Crosby] had known every cupboard, flagstone, chair and table in that large rambling house, not from five or six feet of distance as they [the family] had known it, but from her knees, as she scrubbed and polished; she had known every groove, stain, fork, knife, napkin and cupboard. They and their doings had made her entire world.⁹

⁹ Woolf, *The Years* [1937] (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 232.

Crosby's loving ministrations belong, both grammatically and emotionally, to the 'past perfect' - to an ideal past which she reveres and which defines her. But the past perfect carries a sting in its tail, for it must always 'refer to a time earlier than some other past time.'¹⁰ Crosby is not just of the past - she is of a past that is *before*, even, the past: she is from another age, entirely out of joint with the present time.

And indeed, *The Years* shares none of that respect for the past which so colours *The Death of the Heart*. Crosby's anachronistic reverence for family history is not upheld by the vigorous, forward-moving structural impetus of the narrative which sweeps the Pargiter family from 1880 through to The Present Day. Nor are her fond memories sanctioned by the events of the novel. The Pargiters do not begin to enjoy emotional, physical and spiritual fulfilment - do not experience any of the pains or pleasures of unexpurgated adult life - until the family home is dissolved. When Crosby looks round the house, remembering her 'past perfect', the year is now 1913, the Pargiter domicile is about to be turned into flats, and the family members themselves have long gone - were glad to go. She makes one last appeal to the past: ' "It was my home for forty years" ', she cries (233). But Eleanor, eldest daughter of the house, long-suffering captive within its dark walls for many years, is only thankful that the past is gone, and feels uncomfortable that Crosby cherishes it so. 'The mixture of emotions was positively painful; she was so glad to be quit of it all, but for Crosby it was the end of everything' (232). And Eleanor's brother is even more forthright. 'It was an abominable system, he thought; family life; Abercorn Terrace . . . It had one

¹⁰ Sylvia Chalker and Edmund Weiner. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (London: QPD, 1994), p. 287.

bathroom and a basement, and there all those different people had lived, boxed up together, telling lies'(239). This is a stark, desolating vision of an earlier model of domestic life - and Crosby's still unquestioning devotion to its physical inconveniences and emotional duplicities, serves as an uncomfortable, 'painful' reminder of a past that cannot be forgiven until it is forgotten.

Awkward, uncomfortable anachronisms: both Matchett and Crosby - housekeepers, dedicated to the care of the material fabric of the home and the history which patterns it - bring an unwelcome emotional past to bear on the domestic chronology of the present. They play their part in the emotional warfare of the private house. These "privatized" versions of an anachronism - the individual servant a disturbing reminder of a particular family's unwelcome past - do, however, also lend themselves to the interpretation of a wider cultural and social conflict. Domesticity is a national preoccupation now. The motif of the servant as an unsettling reminder of the past, in the present, is one which has hostile currency across a broad spectrum of inter-war domestic discourses. Those specific skeletons in the Quaynes' and the Pargiters' family closets, brought out and lovingly aired by the devotions of Matchett and Crosby, can also be seen to represent more universal anxieties about the servant's antagonistic associations with the home and the past. For, in the transition of servant-keeping practice from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, a paradox which plagued the domestic lives of middle-class mid-Victorians has, in a mutated form, infiltrated the domestic lives of the inter-war middle classes. And it is the figure of the

modern servant who embodies this troubling paradox of the past: that of privacy and prestige.

From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, there came to be something of a crisis in middle-class England about the nature and function of servants. Smartly dressed in uniform, the number of servants in a household provided a conspicuous index of a family's social standing. After all, 'the possession and exploitation of servants [serves] as a means of showing superfluity'; a large retinue of domestic staff demonstrates a master's 'ability to sustain large pecuniary damage without impairing his superior opulence.'¹¹ This demonstration of painless expenditure was necessary to show how deep the financial reserves went, and could be 'most clearly symbolized in the domestic sphere rather than in the husband's work. The husband earned the money, the wife displayed it and servants helped in this display.'¹² But the need for this display rested uneasily with a growing desire for familial privacy - and the presence of domestic staff 'began to be increasingly resented, as a threat to the tranquillity and security of the home.'¹³ The battle for power within the home between employer and employed had begun in earnest. Architectural solutions were devised to

¹¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* [1899] (London: Unwin Books, 1970), pp. 57-58.

¹² Pam Taylor, 'Daughters and Mothers - Maids and Mistresses: Domestic Service Between the Wars', in *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, eds John Clarke, Chas Critcher and Richard Johnson (London: Hutchinson, 1979), p. 124. Referred to hereafter as 'Maids and Mistresses'.

¹³ Anthea Trodd, 'Household Spies: The Servant and the Plot in Victorian Fiction', *Literature and History*, 13:2 (Autumn 1987), p. 177. Referred to hereafter as 'Household Spies'. Trodd believes the reason for this increasing dislike of servants in the home lies in the decline of the faithful family retainer, and the growth of the professional servant, who was perceived to be career conscious, ambitious, and untrustworthy.

combat this unbearable sense of domestic intrusion and the unwanted scrutiny of the working-class servant gaze -

architects like Robert Kerr were contriving ways physically to separate the two distinct communities - the family and the servants - who co-existed under one roof. The solution was to plan the most rigid segregation of the two groups, each with separate lines of communication by stairways and corridors, by heavy sound-proofing; and by the installation of an elaborate system of bell-pulls, so that the servants need only intrude when summoned to do so. Internal planning focused almost obsessively upon the problem of segregating the two groups from one another.¹⁴

The wish for privacy battles within the very structure of the house itself with the desire for display. By such architectural means, family members hoped, 'at least to some extent, [to] get away from the ubiquitous, prying, eavesdropping and gossiping servants'¹⁵ - domestic hostility, here, as a 'ubiquitous' given. But, realistically, if the family's status demanded the presence of 'deference givers' - servants - a sense of intrusion was inevitable: 'the private drives and the gates could not completely keep out the alien influences . . . the stranger was already within their doors.'¹⁶

It is this same war-torn paradox with the servant at its heart, that is inherited by the middle classes of the inter-war period, modified as that paradox is by modern domestic preoccupations and neuroses. We have already witnessed, in other contexts, the cultural, legislative and socio-economic championing of the family; the importance devoted to the bearing and rearing of children; and the growth in house and car

¹⁴ Lawrence Stone and Jeanne Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540 - 1880* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p. 348.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

¹⁶ Leonore Davidoff, 'Mastered For Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', *Journal of Social History*, 7:4 (Summer 1974), p. 417. 'Deference givers' is Davidoff's coinage.

ownership in this period. In this investigation of the privacy and prestige paradox, it becomes clear that all these elements of national life encouraged what amounted to a cult of private life; of domestic privacy.

In some Continental cities the flat has become the uniform dwelling for workers, but I think the English ideal will always be for an individual house and garden. The flat can offer more communal services, such as hot water, central heating, laundering, a swimming-pool perhaps, and other amenities which the individual cannot afford. The house is quieter, larger, and above all is more private. [Suburbs] are hybrid, town-country, neither one nor the other. The ideal of the garden city . . . has been lost in the actuality of the garden suburb. In practice the garden part of the suburb is mostly hidden. It is back garden. I do not think that the suburb idea in itself is unsound. It is natural that each family should want its own garden as it has its own table. But the passion for detachment, or at least semi detachment, is unfortunate, and does not secure any more privacy.¹⁷

Whatever the fashion may be abroad, the Englishman's home is his own, private castle. Ideas of privacy, detachment - with even gardens 'hidden' round the back - are domestic images inherited from the past. However misguided and 'unfortunate' they may be, these old ideas have been modified into a new understanding of home-making, and are maintained by a new conception and construction of the private house itself.

Crucial to this new understanding of familial seclusion and privacy is the *exclusion* of servants. Instead of the convoluted architectural wranglings of the Victorian period which aimed to render servants invisible, a new model of the middle-class home was crafted, termed 'labour-saving', which could be maintained by the mistress of the house without extra domestic help. Hence, the introduction of 'hot and cold running

¹⁷ Noel Carrington, *The Shape of Things: An Introduction to Design in Everyday Life* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1939), p. 112.

water on all floors, dumb waiters' - the very name describes a new ideal in domestic service - 'and no dust-catching mouldings'.¹⁸ And, of course, there was electricity:

What is the stroke of magic which for the last few years has been transforming household tasks, formerly so burdensome, into a part of the daily routine cheerfully undertaken by mistress or maid? Watch the keen interest of women in domestic labour aid appliances at any Home Exhibition. You will discover the little electric motor is largely responsible for this welcome change. Indeed, Electricity comes as a timely solution of the servant and other problems, which threatened to disturb that most potent factor in civilization - THE HOME. Electricity provides the modern housewife with a perfect servant - clean, silent, economical.¹⁹

On one level, new household technology is being championed purely for its own marketing's sake: a magical intervention in domestic life for, impartially, either 'mistress or maid'. But we also see how closely interwoven with this ideal model of the private modern home, is the need to rid it of servants. For it is not simply that electricity will replace the maid, as an economical and practical alternative - the implication behind this 'welcome change' is that the maid's presence, which previously represented the domestic norm, was always an unwelcome one, and a threat to the well-being of the household.²⁰ Electricity offers more than a substitute for labour; it

¹⁸ Forty, *Objects of Desire*, p. 118.

¹⁹ 'Chats' *About Electricity*. Electrical Development Association Pamphlet no. 422 [1925], p. 5. Rpt. in Forty, *Objects of Desire*, p. 207.

²⁰ This sense of a hostile domestic presence is vividly realized in Katherine Mansfield's short story, 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel' [1922]. After the death of their tyrannical father, his daughters, Constantia and Josephine, are faced with the prospect of many changes - one of the most attractive being the thought of dismissing Kate, their maid. They are habitually intimidated by her aggressive manner, and spend their lives in placating her - asking her, for example, to bring them hot water ready-poured in cups rather than on a tray with a jug, 'feeling that would be a labour-saving indeed.' Ed. D. M. Davin, *Selected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), p. 262. But, more than this, they find her presence sinister. 'Constantia suspected, she was almost certain that Kate went to her chest of drawers when she and Josephine were out, not to take things but to spy' (268). Theft itself would be more acceptable in this war between employer and employed than the treacherous practice of espionage.

also provides an entirely deaf, dumb, and blind servant, whose discretion is assured, and who will never intrude unbidden. It offers a 'timely solution', not only to the perceived shortage of available domestic help in these years, but also to the inherently sinister and intrusive nature of the servant's position, which is so hostile to the modern culture of domestic privacy, and which threatens to 'disturb that most potent factor in civilization - 'THE HOME'.

This same fear of domestic invasion by an outsider in the home, allayed by the intervention of modern household practice, is surely what underlies these sentiments, too:

My maid left to go to munitions work . . . I've been thinking, and I'm glad she's gone! I have got to the bottom of why I don't like housework, and conclude it is because I have never had the right thing to work with at the right time. I recall that 'there are always tools to work with for those who will', and on the other hand, that 'a poor workman loses his tools'.²¹

What was actually perceived as the advent of a crisis in the home - servants leaving to take up better paid munitions work - is here turned to the domestic good. The tools of modern technology have rendered housework accessible and attractive to the housewife herself. The mass-production of items such as vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, dishwashers and washing machines means that she can tend the domestic fabric of the home herself. She is 'glad' the maid is gone, who used previously to have that intimate task; who pervaded every room in the house on her domestic round, and

²¹ A reader's letter sent to *Ladies Home Journal*, November, 1918, p. 28.

observed every nuance of family life - and who posed a dangerously knowledgeable threat to that family as a result.

Looking again at the Quaynes and Pargiters, it becomes clear that their uneasiness regarding Matchett and Crosby derives not only from the housekeepers' knowledge of *specific* family history. Another reason why they are perceived as disruptive domestic anachronisms in a private-house war is because they serve as reminders - inherited and modified from a Victorian legacy of servant mistrust - of a more widespread preoccupation with domestic insularity. So we see that, to the Quaynes, the desire for privacy amounts to a self-imposed quarantine; 'their privacy was surrounded by an electric fence - friends who did not first telephone did not come'(87). Again, the modern apparatus of the telephone enables a state of domestic solitude to be maintained. But Matchett herself cannot be removed - 'Matchett stays with the furniture'(312). And so it is small wonder that Anna Quayne - who, not out at work, spends most of her time at home - feels herself sometimes hunted by Matchett, both emotionally and physically, within the confines of Windsor Terrace. She lurks nervously in her bedroom, feeling convinced that ' "Matchett is simply waiting to pop back and rustle about and spring something on me" '(240). Integral to Matchett's intrusive presence - her ability to spring an unwelcome self and unwelcome information on a hapless Anna - is her physical engagement with the house, an engagement that is decidedly untechnological. She will 'rustle about' - not with the clean, impersonality of an electrical appliance, but with a persistent whispering of

busy, probing hands - and then she will pounce, as if empowered by her domestic findings.

Similarly, in *The Years*, we see the Pargiters longing for a privacy which is denied them by Crosby's intrusive presence. And, again, it is the sheer laboriousness of old-fashioned domestic methods and hand-performed rituals that are seen to be a particular threat to the family's insularity: time consuming, lingering duties necessarily entail the lingering presence of servants in every room and over every chore.

'No, no, no,' said Delia, stretching her arms out. 'It's hopeless . . . ' she began. But she broke off, for Crosby had come in. She was carrying a tray. One by one with an exasperating little chink she put the cups, the plates, the knives, the jam-pots, the dishes of cake and the dishes of bread and butter, on the tray. Then, balancing it carefully in front of her, she went out. There was a pause. In she came again and folded the table-cloth and moved the tables. Again there was a pause. A moment or two later back she came carrying two silk-shaded lamps . . . When she had drawn the curtains in both rooms, a profound silence seemed to fall upon the drawing-room. (19)

With Crosby going in and out, lovingly dwelling over every ritualistic detail of clearing the tea-things, the Pargiters' life is effectively broken off: for her intrusive presence forbids family discussion. With prose as exasperatingly measured and steady as Crosby's leisurely domestic routine, Woolf evokes Delia's sense of frustration at her speech cut off - held repeatedly at a pause, while Crosby comes in once, then again, and then a third time - only, finally, to be lost for ever in 'profound silence'. No wonder that, years later, at an informal dinner party, stripped of ceremony or ritual -

served in a basement, but not by servants - the talk runs as free as the wine. ' "Isn't it much nicer," said Eleanor, taking her plate. "not having servants"(305).²²

The portrayals of Matchett and Crosby as uncomfortable anachronisms within their own narratives, articulate, then, a strong current of inter-war, insular middle-class thought, inherited from the Victorian preoccupation with domestic privacy and servant intrusion, and mutated by modern domestic technology, design and architecture. But the desire for privacy was only one half of the paradox which troubled mid-nineteenth century domestic life. There was also the need for prestige and display and status - and that was most successfully met by the presence of servants.

Similarly, the domestic privacy championed by a certain sector of middle-class inter-war culture, is also only one half of the same inherited paradox. The facts and figures and fictions which promote and analyse the characteristics of private domestic life, also have their paradoxical opposites, which suggest that a love of display and prestige ensures that the servant-keeping tradition is alive and well in the inter-war period. This, after all, 'was the era of maids. Everyone seemed to boast or complain of the maids. I remember girls at school judging each other's wealth by the number of maids each had. And sometimes, I suspect, inventing an extra one to impress their friends. We had two.'²³ Servants, even make-believe ones, are vital aids to boasting

²² A stance that Virginia Woolf herself adhered to. All her life she was plagued by the presence of domestic servants that she did not want, yet could barely imagine doing without. It was only, finally, in the war-time winter of 1940 that her last live-in servant, Mabel Haskins, left the Woolf's Sussex house at Rodmell. See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), pp. 752-53.

²³ Anonymous recollections from *Within Living Memory*, a collection produced by the Norfolk Federation of Women's Institutes [Norfolk, 1972], p. 80. Rpt. in Taylor, 'Maids and Mistresses', p. 125.

about oneself, and judging others - and one major factor in inter-war middle-class life offers its support to this end.

For the fact is that there was an incredible demand for servants during these years. Nothing is so suggestive of their continued popularity as domestic fixtures; as suppliers of a prestige that blandly unobtrusive electrical appliances are not. Indeed, the major constituent of the 'servant problem' was the perceived lack of them. E. M. Delafield's *Provincial Lady* is only too well acquainted with the servant shortage, and spends much time and energy in securing domestic staff. Even then, she does not always succeed; she notes in her diary that she has had to 'spend [an] exhausting day in Plymouth chasing mythical house-parlourmaids'²⁴, and is eventually obliged to take on Howard Fitzsimmons, 'house-parlourman . . . Jib at thought of being called by him in the mornings with early tea . . . Very unsatisfactory solution'(53-54). Young working-class women who had first tasted the freedom and greater financial benefits of factory work during the war, were less and less willing to return to the long and unregulated hours of domestic service. Or, as Vera Brittain understands it, 'domestic service still offers very poor opportunities to the enterprising worker, owing, not to the difficulty of obtaining employment, but to the uncertainty of its conditions in an unorganized occupation which suffers from a long tradition of excessive hours, low wages and tyrannical restrictions.'²⁵ In 1923, the perceived fall in the numbers of girls willing to become servants was recognized as a national problem, and a Ministry of Labour Committee was established, under a Mrs E. M. Wood, in order to investigate

²⁴ E. M. Delafield, *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* [1930] (London: Virago, 1984), p. 41.

²⁵ Brittain, *Women's Work*, (London: Noel Douglas, 1928), p. 31.

the reasons behind this shortage.²⁶ Measures to coerce women back into domestic service were also taken at a national level: 'in 1921, the government decided that the Labour Exchanges could refuse out-of-work donation to anyone who had been a domestic servant in the past'²⁷, in the hope of forcing the reluctant individual back into uniform.

Curiously, though, looking at the figures, it is intriguing to notice how very slow, almost imperceptible, the drop in domestic servants actually is in this period. Over a period of about fifty years, from between 1890 to 1940, the number of servants per household fell from 0.24 in 1891, to 0.12 in 1931.²⁸ But looking specifically at the inter-war years, this drop hardly registers, for 'numbers of servants remained high and actually increased by 16 per cent between 1920 and 1931, from 1, 148, 698 to 1, 332, 224.'²⁹ So a reasonable explanation behind the perceived national shortage of servants - when the figures suggest otherwise - is that the demand for domestic help was, in fact, growing, and exceeding supply during these years.

And, after all, the keeping of servants became a viable option for the first time for a burgeoning social group in the inter war period: that of the lower middle classes. Their numbers had grown significantly: a new army of salaried workers, including in their ranks elementary school-teachers, shopkeepers and clerks, increased from 'about 1.7

²⁶ 'The Committee identified five main causes, in order, for the scarcity - the lack of facilities for training, the question of status, "psychological aspects", the hours and conditions of employment and the defects in the present system of recruitment.' John Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p. 141. Referred to hereafter as *Useful Toil*.

²⁷ Jane Lewis, 'In Search of Real Equality: Women Between the Wars' in *Class, Culture and Social Change: a New View of the 1930s*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (Sussex: Harvester, 1980), p. 213.

²⁸ Forty, *Objects of Desire*, p. 213.

²⁹ Taylor, 'Maids and Mistresses', p. 121. Taylor and Forty have both gathered their statistical evidence from the *Great Britain Census Reports, 1891-1931*.

million in 1911 to about 2.7 million in 1921.³⁰ It was among this aspirational class that the keeping of one maid became a common occurrence: 'according to the sample survey or the 1931 census, 357, 000 girls worked under these conditions'³¹ To keep even one maid suggests an alliance with the traditions of the past - including the traditions of display - thereby allowing a family to accrue legitimate social prestige whilst concealing its *nouveau* origins. Indeed, Taylor suggests, from evidence gathered from women who had been in domestic service in this period, that the old-fashioned status rituals that attended the keeping of servants, were particularly pronounced in these modern households which had only recently attained the privilege.³² A nurse-housemaid - her solitary status as the only servant dictates this hybrid role - recalls that 'my employers didn't seem to have much money themselves; he was a clerk of some sort, but they liked the idea of having a 'nursemaid' and made me buy a cap, collar, cuffs and an apron. The mistress took me to have a photograph taken with the children grouped round me.'³³ The family's newly-acquired status is not only guaranteed in the instant, but is also caught on film for posterity.

Uniforms for servants first became a widespread means of domestic display in the 1860s³⁴; but to dress servants thus continued as a common practice until 1939. One inter-war employer remembers her solitary maid masquerading, as it were, as many

³⁰ Forty, *Objects of Desire*, p. 209. Forty is citing figures from A. L. Bowley and J. Stamp, *The National Income, 1924*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), pp. 11-12.

³¹ Taylor, 'Maids and Mistresses', p. 124

³² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³³ Lilian Westall, *The Good Old Days* (unpublished autobiography) in Burnett, *Useful Toil*, p. 216.

³⁴ 'By the mid-nineteenth century, the lowering of the price of printed cottons and the fact that printers would reprint fashionable designs upon cheap fabric made it possible for servants to dress themselves in garments that could be mistaken for smart dresses in their mistresses' wardrobe. . . . Faced with this prospect . . . mistresses began to insist upon uniforms for their maids, particularly parlour-maids, who would be seen by visitors.' Forty, *Objects of Desire*, p. 81.

maids during the course of the day, by changing her uniform. This girl ‘started the day in a pink linen dress to do all the housework; after lunch she added a stiff white collar and became a Nanny taking my son out to walks with other Nannies; then for tea she changed into a brown dress and coffee-coloured apron and became a parlour-maid.’³⁵ By shamelessly exploiting the elaborate Victorian dress code, with one servant fulfilling all roles with a change of clothes, this modern household evidently aspires to some kind of similar display of domestic wealth, using its multi-purpose maid as an immediate and easy referent.

Prestige, then, is as important to middle-class domestic life as privacy: modern technology exploits the ideal of familial insularity and wifely capability, whilst more established and traditional domestic rituals fulfil the need for household display. Servants, their very uniformed presence an anachronism, embody this tense paradox. Bringing the past into the private house of the present, they are the instigators and focus of the concomitant domestic war.

Nor is the private house itself immune to the conflict. We have seen one strand of thought promoting privacy as the modern domestic ideal - but it is important to note that much of the domestic discourse that advocates the removal of servants is at the “cutting edge” of advertising and promotional copy, introducing as it does to its female readership a new technological and architectural vocabulary which renders the presence of servants unnecessary. But the technological and architectural *mainstream* of the inter-war period still has a fond eye on the domestic past. For every few truly

³⁵ Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Dublin and New York: Macmillan and St Martin's Press, 1975), p. 173.

labour-saving ideal homes, hundreds of thousands more were designed and built looking backwards - the boxy shape of a scaled-down Victorian villa, decorated with mock-Tudor timbering, and erected in the rapidly growing suburbs of the inter war years, replete with barge-boarded gables, leaded windows, and heavy oak front doors with coloured stained-glass insets of Elizabethan galleons and other references to bygone eras.³⁶ Inside these new-old homes, too, there is an architectural attachment to the past which still denotes the presence of servants as a guarantor of respectable middle-class life. The result is a private house, built on modest lines but sensitive to the needs of display and prestige, which is in many ways as anachronistic as servants themselves - a fact lamented even as it is acknowledged by the Women's Industrial Council.

The problem of accommodation is, like so many building problems, largely a bequest from the past . . . With regard to [sleeping apartments], new buildings are often as defective in bedroom accommodation as the Victorian and pre-Victorian houses . . . The servant's room in these is apt to be very ill-ventilated, and very small . . . We insert the comment of an experienced architect: 'For one house designed by an architect, at least fifty are built by the speculative builder, cheapness being the first consideration. "Ordinary Domestic Architecture" means, therefore, the speculative builder's "architecture". His custom is to place the servant's bedroom in the roof, which in August is the hottest room in the house and in January the coldest.'³⁷

Even in spacious houses, it is customary for the servants to live in the upper regions: at Windsor Terrace, Matchett 'slept alone, next the box-room: across the same top landing the cook and Phyllis shared an airy attic with a view of Park Road'(23). But in

³⁶ Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design*, p. 92.

³⁷ Butler, *Domestic Service*, p. 44.

more compact houses, too - the typical three-bedroomed suburban villa, so much smaller than its six or seven-bedroomed nineteenth-century counterpart - architectural provision is still made for a maid: a tiny, ill-ventilated room in the roof. The family's social status, is, however, assured, via these cheap building methods which rely on the shrinkage, Alice-like, of a traditional Victorian domestic mould, servant accommodation and all.

Of course, the smaller the property into which a servant has been squeezed, the harder it becomes to maintain the family's privacy; there is no doubt that this style of architecture, compact, but with attachment still to the display rituals of the past, is hostile to the modern trend of domestic insularity. Such houses as these not only witness the battle for power between maid and mistress, but actively participate in the aggression. Even in comfortable middle-class homes of middle size, this conflict is sharp and intense, and domestic relations stand, at best, in a state of uneasy impasse. In a review of a book entitled *A Housewife in Kensington*, Elizabeth Bowen adopts a somewhat cryptic approach. She writes of it: 'It is (I suppose) written to inculcate pity for women and kindness to the middle class. It should also explain why women, well-to-do women, look so obsessed or aggrieved, and why they are never having a nicer time.'³⁸ The parenthetical qualification with which she opens her discussion denotes her equivocal response to this Kensington housewife - suggesting that, having read the whole, she can still only 'suppose' as to its intended effect. The explanation, she goes

³⁸ Bowen, 'Horrible Dictu', *The New Statesman and Nation*, 1939. Rpt. in Bowen, *Collected Impressions*, pp. 63-64. The review is of Mary Wylde's *A Housewife in Kensington* (London: Longmans, 1939).

on to reveal, for the unhappiness of these women is that they live in a state of warfare - or they feel that they do. And the private house is itself party to the conflict.

Here is a world governed by class neurosis, in which employed and employers are hyper-conscious of each other's hostile existences the whole time. Mrs Wylde is a plucky woman: she displays reserves of culture, humour, idealism. Her maids lack humour, culture, idealism: in fact, they seem to be simply sluttish and warped . . . Can it be possible, also, that maids do not care for culture, humour, idealism?

Inevitably, Mrs Wylde has her pessimistic moments . . . At intervals during the year this journal covers she shuts herself up in the upper floor of the house in what seems to be an acute state of nervous siege. Once or twice she is shot right out of the house by some sheer malevolent pressure. At times, she shows persecution mania - and really, who can wonder? (65)

Who, indeed? Bowen, it seems, for one. Her sly writing mocks the 'plucky' Mrs Wylde for all the very little - as far as Bowen sees it - that she has to put up with. Nevertheless, her analysis of this domestic war, and the role the private house plays in it, is acute. The motives which impel Mrs Wylde to keep maids she dislikes are laid open to scrutiny: if not as a crude guarantor of wealth and status, the Kensington housewife requires servants to confirm and affirm by their housekeeping skills their employer's 'culture, humour, idealism'. This they singularly fail to do. The result is a hostile and claustrophobic battle of wills and emotions played out in the private house: the 'whole time' nature of the nervous aggression Bowen describes suggests the cabined quality of antipathetic lives shared under one roof.³⁹ Nor is Mrs Wylde's home a passive agent in the struggle. It is on the side of those who know it intimately,

³⁹ In her autobiography, *Below Stairs* (London: Peter Davies, 1968), Margaret Powell recounts a life spent in domestic service. She, too, reports the hostility of private house war-fare - but from the other side. 'We always called them "Them." "Them" was the enemy, "Them" overworked us, and "Them" underpaid us, and to "Them" servants were a race apart, a necessary evil.' (79)

and habitually tend to its needs - the maids. The house and its servants form an unholy and unbreakable alliance which the housewife is powerless to break. She becomes at odds with her own home - at times, forced to retreat to an 'upper floor' to escape the perceived mental persecution; at others, driven out of doors altogether.

The servant's uniformed presence, both unwelcome and yet necessary, raises problematic questions about a basic conflict at the heart of inter-war, middle-class domestic life, identified in many different strands of contemporary discourse: in advertising, journalism, statistical data, fiction. The private house, both structurally and ideologically - and its female occupants - are torn between the conflicting wants and desires of 'then' and 'now'. The home is at war with the past, and is not at peace in the present. The fiction I am moving on to explore is fascinating in relation to this paradox. It charts the private-house war between history and modernity, but also finds a way to resolve the conflict - and it does so through the representational medium of the servant.

Sensation

Just as the inter-war period inherited and transmogrified the Victorian preoccupation with the dual function of servants - as both domestic intruders and as the guarantors domestic status - so the fiction I am concerned with now has also inherited and adapted the Victorian literary form in which this preoccupation is most dramatically realized: the sensation novel. The early 1860s saw the flourishing of this

extraordinarily popular literary phenomenon, with the publication of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860), Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863). A lurid development of the domestic novel, these were tales of secret crime and the detection of secret crime, all issuing from the heart of the respectable family and the sanctum of the private house. It is domestic fiction, which makes its wildness all the more attractive and dangerous.⁴⁰

And these fictions are, it has been persuasively argued, in part born out of the Victorian anxiety about intrusive servants threatening the security of the family - for

the householder's outraged sense of routine invasion of privacy by his domestic staff expressed itself in the production of crime plots in which servants, so often inconspicuous in other kinds of fiction, here play highly visible and sinister roles The threat [they] present is two-fold: they appear either as spies or blackmailers, or as witnesses, exposing to the outside world by their distraught behaviour the secret their employers are incapable of concealing.⁴¹

It is this sense of outrage that the narrator of *Aurora Floyd* articulates, asking

Why is it that the dependants in a household are so feverishly inquisitive about the doings and sayings, the manners and customs, the joys and sorrows, of those who employ them? Remember this, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters, when you quarrel, *The servants enjoy the fun* Nothing that is done in the parlour is lost upon these quiet, well-behaved watchers from the kitchen.⁴²

⁴⁰ For a full account of the development of sensation fiction, see Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); and Jenny Bourne Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁴¹ Trodd, 'Household Spies', pp. 175 and 178.

⁴² Mary Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* [1863] (Oxford: OUP, 1996), pp. 177-78. Original emphasis.

And there are even more pernicious ways that servants can betray the security of the family within this fictional arena. The fact is:

sensationalism [was perceived] as a natural characteristic of servant discourse. The secrets of the household were likely to be distorted and further sensationalised by the servants who came into possession of them . . . Servants, then, were not only incapable of preserving secrets, they had a natural affinity with the sensational, and were likely to be active in producing and extending opportunities for it.⁴³

Not only participants in low-brow sensational plots, but actual contributors to, and creators of them, servants are potential dynamite, who threaten to blow the private house to bits. *Aurora Floyd* again:

They discuss your affairs, and make out your income, and settle what you can afford to do and what you can't afford to do; they prearrange the disposal of your wife's fortune, and look prophetically forward to the day when you will avail yourself of the advantages of the Bankruptcy Act. (178)

This most torrid version of the domestic novel, which describes the concealment and detection of unspeakable crime behind the wholesome frontage of the family home - with the hindrance and help of the family servants - is, of course, modified and modernized in its inter-war incarnation. The domestic crime now committed is more likely to be unethical than illegal: the 'death of a heart' the offence, rather than the poisoning of a husband; the servant an uncomfortable reminder of the family's past rather than the sinister agent of destruction.

⁴³ Trodd, 'Household Spies', p. 179.

Although this seems hardly true in the case of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), a novel very much in the tradition of sensation fiction.⁴⁴ Its huge popularity - 60, 000 copies printed in its first year of publication⁴⁵ - suggests it has the same kind of thrilling ingredients that made the sensation novel such a commercial success. It is also rather intriguing that du Maurier herself saw *Rebecca* 'as a psychological study in jealousy'⁴⁶ - and it is jealousy that is the driving impetus for one of the most notorious sensation novels of all, *East Lynne*, in which the heroine, under the sway of that 'so fantastic, so delusive, so powerful' an emotion,⁴⁷ fancies her husband in love with another woman and commits adultery herself in desperate revenge.

But there are many other entirely characteristic elements of the sensation genre also in evidence in *Rebecca*. Filtered through the narrative of the second Mrs de Winter, we uncover the secrets surrounding the first Mrs de Winter - Rebecca herself - and they are criminal secrets. Behind the beautiful, gracious frontage of Manderley, the de Winter's stately home, there are dark mysteries waiting to be exposed about Rebecca,

⁴⁴ By both contemporary reviewers and modern critics. *Rebecca* has often been perceived as a re-working of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* [1847]. See Margaret Forster, *Daphne du Maurier* (London: Arrow, 1994), p. 140; and Alison Light, ' "Returning to Manderley" - Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class', *Feminist Review*, 16 (Summer, 1984), p. 7. And there are, of course, some obvious similarities: a mixed class marriage, a sinister first wife, and the destruction of the family seat by fire. For a full discussion of du Maurier's fiction, which engages with her fascination with the past, and with literatures of the past, see Light, *Forever England*, pp. 156-207. Light perceives du Maurier as being variously influenced by the Brontës, R. L. Stevenson, Alexandre Dumas and R. M. Ballantyne. But in this discussion of *Rebecca*, I want to highlight the novel's debt to sensation fiction - particularly in its treatment of servants.

⁴⁵ Forster, *Daphne du Maurier*, p. 140.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁷ Mrs Henry Wood, *East Lynne* [1861] (London: Everyman, 1994), p. 184.

and they are the trusted favourites from the sensational repertoire: blackmail, 'the spectre of female sexual insatiability',⁴⁸ and murder.

And, most importantly, *Rebecca* is a novel which adheres to that other fundamental tenet of sensational fiction - the portrayal of intrusive servants as harmful to the security and well-being of the household. It is not only that their presence acts as a curb on the mistress of the house, so that, hearing the library door open, she 'sank back on [her] heels, pretending to reach for a log to throw on the fire while Frith came into the room followed by Robert and the ritual of . . . tea began.'⁴⁹ This is the warfare which plagues everyday domestic life, as recognisable to the Kensington housewife as to the second Mrs de Winter. But in the sensational narrative of *Rebecca*, servants also adopt the more sinister guise of spies. The socially-insecure heroine finds herself trying to evade their scrutiny - going to eat a between-meal snack in the woods, 'in case one of the servants should see me on the lawn from the windows, and then go and tell the cook that they did not think Mrs de Winter cared for the food'(174). Or, if evasion is impossible, she plumps for deception, hoping to bluff her way past their all-knowing gaze. One dreadful night, Maxim does not come to bed; in the morning, a distraught heroine 'rumped it, to make it look as though he had slept there. I did not want the housemaids to know'(274). Partly, the heroine's own sense of insecurity accounts for her excessively sensitive, and largely imagined, response to the servants of Manderley. But Mrs Danvers, the housekeeper, is no figment of a young girl's

⁴⁸ Elaine Showalter, 'Family Secrets and Domestic Subversion: Rebellion in the Novels of the 1860s', in *The Victorian Family: Structures and Stresses*, ed. Anthony Wohl (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 108. Referred to hereafter as 'Family Secrets'.

⁴⁹ Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* [1938] (London: Heron Books, n.d.: facsimile reprint of Victor Gollancz 1938 edn), p. 136.

neurotic imagination. Mrs Danvers - 'tall and gaunt, dressed in deep black, whose prominent cheek-bones and great, hollow eyes gave her a skull's face, parchment-white, set on a skeleton's frame' (77) - seems, literally, to have risen from a sinister, sensational past to haunt the fictional present. Her devotion to her former mistress, Rebecca, turns the sight of the second Mrs de Winter to poison in her veins, and she begins to plot against her: a creator of, as well as a participant in, the sensational narrative. Not only a spy, watching the heroine from the upstairs room in the west wing that had been Rebecca's, she also deploys Machiavellian cunning in order to humiliate her new mistress and harm her marriage with Maxim. It is at Mrs Danver's suggestion that the heroine chooses, unknowingly, exactly the same costume for the Manderley fancy-dress ball that Rebecca had once chosen. Maxim is furious, the heroine is disgraced and sent up to her room to change - where she sees Mrs Danvers. 'I shall never forget the expression on her face, loathsome, triumphant. The face of an exulting devil. She stood there, smiling at me'(249). As her parting shot, it seems highly likely that the fire that razes Manderley to the ground is started by Mrs Danvers, when she discovers that it was Maxim who killed Rebecca. Certainly, she is the main suspect, bolting from the house on the evening of the fire never to be seen or heard of again.

In these respects, *Rebecca* is faithful to the traditional conventions of sensation fiction. But there are certain things about this novel which bear evidence to a subtle re-working of the genre, a re-working in which the servant's intrusive function as revealer and creator of secret information is intriguingly problematized. The result is a

novel which, as part of its sensational inheritance, outlines the feminized domestic conflict between privacy and prestige, past and present - between the house and the house, as it were - with particular emphasis.

Indubitably, *Rebecca* is a novel about the past; about the power the past has to disrupt the present. Its narrative, after all, takes the form of an extended flash-back - the middle-aged heroine recalling the dramatic events of twenty years ago - so, in that sense, the entire story belongs to a time past. And then, within this remembered narrative, the second Mrs de Winter continually goes back still further, imagining life at Manderley when Rebecca was alive: imagining, of course, Rebecca herself. 'The past remains to haunt, to ghost, the present and disturb the familiarity of home.'⁵⁰ But, key to a reading of *Rebecca* as a modern sensation novel is to understand that there was never any comforting familiarity in the home to begin with; that Manderley is, in fact, always in the process of ghosting itself. It is haunted by its own past, a physical tangible past, which is hostile to the present. It is this sense of unbearable tension between then and now - not as psychological concepts, but concretely realized within the very fabric of the house - that destroys Manderley as surely as Mrs Danver's act of arson. And the reason that this tension is so palpable and so destructive is because it is a war waged by the narrator herself. It is she, within the course of her story, who exposes and undermines the foundations of Manderley; it is she who threatens the domestic security and traditions of the home. She is, after all, a strange, uncomfortable creature. The second Mrs de Winter is a kind of hybrid: part mistress, but also part

⁵⁰ Janet Harbord, 'Between Identification and Desire: Rereading *Rebecca*', *Feminist Review*, 53, (Summer 1996), p. 95.

servant, and it is that confused, conflicting position which informs and problematizes her modern sensation narrative.

For it is not only Mrs Danvers, in her 'black dress, the skirt just sweeping the ground like the full, wide skirts of thirty years ago' (290), who embodies a fictional and domestic anachronism. The heroine, too, belongs to a fading past as well as a modern present. Before marrying Maxim, she is employed as a paid companion, the latest in a long lineage of 'young women in reduced circumstances' (30) - orphans like Jane Eyre and Becky Sharp - who are obliged to earn their keep in other people's families and homes. Impoverished and orphaned Lucy Snowe, in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, is forced to become a paid companion to the invalid Miss Marchmont, and 'two hot, close rooms thus became my world . . . I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers, seas, an everchanging sky outside the steam-dimmed lattice of this sick-chamber; I was almost content to forget it' (97). Lucy Snowe, famously calm, is resigned to her lot. But the heroine of *Rebecca*, paid companion to the vulgar American, Mrs Van Hopper, is not so placid an inmate, thinking with distaste of an afternoon spent inside at her employer's behest, when

the sun shone very brightly still, and there was a gay high wind. In half an hour we should be sitting to our bridge, the windows tightly closed, the central heating turned to the full. I thought of the ash-trays I would have to clear, and how the squashed stubs, stained with lip-stick, would sprawl in company with discarded chocolate creams. (21)

This heroine has rather more modern duties to perform than those of Lucy Snowe, who attended in the archetypal Victorian sick-room. The paid companion now finds

herself, incongruous, in a world of central heating, lip stick and cigarettes - even though she is still treated in the same old-fashioned way. During the course of the afternoon's bridge, she is embarrassed by her own intrusive presence - 'I felt my presence put a curb upon their conversation, much as a parlour-maid does until the arrival of dessert'(21). The simile is too like the truth to be effective: the heroine is, in fact, as much like a parlour-maid as she feels she is, and the servant's sense of being an unwelcome domestic intruder is carried with her to Manderley. Nor is this to be wondered at. Maxim's proposal of marriage disconcerts and disappoints the heroine because he phrases it in terms of service, of work - with himself as her exacting employer. He says ' "instead of being companion to Mrs Van Hopper you become mine, and your duties will be almost exactly the same. I also like new library books, and flowers in the drawing room, and bezique after dinner. And someone to pour out my tea" '(61).

And it is in this hybrid guise that the second Mrs de Winter comes to Manderley: as half mistress, half servant. This is the real crux of her ambiguous social and narrative position: not simply that she is young, and that Manderley is old; or that she is 'bourgeois' and the de Winters are aristocratic, but that she comes to the house as both its mistress and its servant, a fact which includes all the former considerations and adds some domestic concerns of its own. The heroine is certainly aware of her uneasy position as the second Mrs de Winter. On first seeing Manderley, she remembers feeling like 'a little untrained maid who has never left home before, seeking a situation'(72). And trying to explain to an unsympathetic Maxim why it is that she

finds her new life so daunting, she tells him, " " I am like a between-maid . . . I know I am in lots of ways . . . We are on the same sort of footing" '(166). It is this odd, 'in-between', incompatible mixture, with its opposing claims to privacy and prestige, past and present, that is so disruptive to the domestic life of Manderley. Her narrative position, too, is rendered dangerous and unstable by this combination of mistress and maid, playing as it does with the expectations of sensationalism. As mistress of Manderley, she wants to preserve its secrets; as one of its servants, she works, spy-like, to uncover and expose them. Both by what she is, and by what she writes, the heroine shows Manderley to itself - and reveals it to be an unsustainable structure. Here, for example, she describes her first breakfast in the great house:

How impressed I was. I remember well; impressed and a little over-awed by the magnificence of the breakfast offered to us. There was tea in a great silver urn, and coffee too, and on the heater, piping hot, dishes of scrambled eggs, of bacon, and another of fish. There was a clutch of boiled eggs as well, in their own special heater, and porridge, in a silver porringer. . . . There were scones, too, on the table, and toast, and various pots of jam, marmalade, and honey, while dessert dishes, piled high with fruit, stood at either end. It seemed strange to me that Maxim, who in Italy and France, had eaten a *croissant* and fruit only . . . should sit down to this breakfast at home, enough for a dozen people, day after day probably, year after year, seeing nothing ridiculous about it, nothing wasteful. . .

And I wondered what happened to all the rest . . . Were there menials, I wondered, whom I should never know, never see, waiting behind kitchen doors for the gift of our breakfast? Or was it all thrown away, shovelled into dustpans? I would never know, of course, I would never dare to ask.

I lingered long over my first breakfast . . . (91-92)

The heroine does, indeed, linger long over her first breakfast, and in her detailed description lies many of the anachronistic tensions which exist at Manderley, and which her arrival has exposed. We see immediately that the heroine's hybrid status

complicates her stance. Her lingering and loving description of the food - especially the way it is served in such splendour, and kept so beautifully in readiness to be eaten, although it never is - suggests that she is susceptible to the magnificence of Manderley, its gross and conspicuous display, and would want to preserve it, untouched and at the perfect temperature, like the breakfast itself. But the servant in her, with its sensational function of espionage and exposure, longs to uncover the secrets behind this enormous spread. She wants to creep in behind the kitchen doors and see for herself what happens to the lavish left-overs. As mistress of Manderley, whose womanly duty it is to preserve the secrets of the household behind an impressive facade, she dare not ask - but as servant-narrator of *Rebecca*, she does. The servant in her, the anachronistic in her, responds to and locates the anachronistic in Manderley - in this instance, the fact that in modern, small-scale, private domestic life, it is 'wasteful', and - perhaps worse - 'ridiculous', to serve enough breakfast for twelve people, to two.

And it is this conflict and questioning that shadows the heroine's life at Manderley. Her uncertain, hybrid status means that she has divided loyalties: half faithful to Maxim and to the preservation of the household; half seeking to expose and relate the truth about that household. As a result, Manderley is cagey with her. The house does not trust her, and will not grant her free access. For in spite of the heroine's protestations that 'all this was mine now' (80), a sense of ownership that is once-removed pervades the narrative. In Rebecca's bedroom, she looks around her and knows that the 'exquisite mantelpiece, the ceiling, the carved bedstead and the curtain hangings, even the clock on the wall and the candlesticks upon the dressing-table

beside me, all were things I would have loved and almost worshipped had they been mine. They were not mine though'(192). She means that they are Rebecca's. But the same emotion applies throughout the house, and not only in connection with Rebecca. Walking through the drawing-room, the heroine finds she 'had no wish to linger there, I could not see myself sitting ever in those chairs, standing before that carved mantelpiece, throwing books down on to the tables. It had all the formality of a room in a museum, where alcoves were roped off'(95). She knows she will never be allowed to make free with this petrified room; that her body will never leave its physical impress. Similarly, the outside of the house keeps her at a distance, admire it as she does. 'We came round the sweep of the drive and Manderley was before us, serene and peaceful in the hollow of the lawns, surprising me, as it always did, with its perfect symmetry and grace, its great simplicity'(156). Every time the heroine sees the house it is as if for the first time: she is 'always' surprised anew by its beauty. It never becomes a familiar vision; never becomes a home.

The half-servant status of the second Mrs de Winter threatens to destroy Manderley - if she can, she will find out and reveal its secrets in the best tradition of sensational narratives. So the house, by denying her a sense of physical closeness with its own fabric - the closeness which is characteristically the province and power of the servant - is trying to prevent the heroine from gaining the secret knowledge which is so dangerous, and so harmful to the domestic good if revealed. Indeed, Manderley tries to assign her a new identity altogether, neither that of servant nor mistress - but that of *tourist*.

How vast the great hall looked now that it was empty. My feet rang on the flagged stones, echoing to the ceiling, and I felt guilty at the sound . . . My feet made a stupid pitter-patter as I walked, and I thought that Frith [the butler], with his felt soles, must have thought me foolish.

'It's very big, isn't it?' I said . . .

'Yes, Madam. Manderley is a big place . . . This was the old banqueting hall, in old days. And the public are admitted here, you know, once a week.'

'Yes' I said, still aware of my loud footsteps, feeling, as I followed him, that he considered me as he would one of the public visitors, and I behaved like a visitor, too, glancing politely to right and left, taking in the weapons on the wall, and the pictures, touching the carved stair case with my hands. (82-83)

Faithful retainer, Frith, with his whole-hearted reverence for old days and past glories, offers a reproach to the intrusion of this servant who comes as mistress, and who would dare to seek out Manderley's mysteries, and expose its splendours as anachronistic and unsustainable. Compared to the centuries of Manderley's life, that of its new mistress is little more than a blip: a passing visit. But it is the inquisitive, loud footsteps of the tourist, echoing from floor to ceiling, which nonetheless signal the disturbing resonance of the heroine's presence at Manderley.

Earlier, before the girl and Maxim were married, they had sat over lunch, and she mentioned the legendary Manderley as the reason why her snobbish employer was interested in establishing ties with him. Maxim was not pleased, and the heroine wondered whether 'Maybe there was something inviolate about Manderley that made it a place apart, it would not bear discussion. I could imagine her tramping through the rooms, perhaps paying sixpence for admission, ripping the quietude with her sharp, staccato laugh'(26). The heroine is of very different cast from Mrs Van Hopper - but Manderley makes little distinction between them. Neither woman allows the house to

rest, inscrutable and wonderful, guarding its secrets jealously, but each must walk through the great rooms, disturbing the peace, whether it be with a laugh or with the echo of footsteps. The only difference between them is that Mrs Van Hopper comes to Manderley for the day and pays her sixpence - and that the heroine, the second Mrs de Winter, comes for life.

Neither proper mistress nor proper servant of Manderley, the house makes her understand her hybrid status as being that of a permanent public visitor. Her appreciation of Manderley is always coloured with the slightly detached sense that belongs to the tourist rather than to the owner. But in this lies Manderley's undoing, not its salvation. By protecting itself on the one hand by trying to keep the spying servant-heroine from intimate contact with the house, it destroys it with the other by turning her into a tourist - for what is a servant who is not allowed to touch or become intimate with the fabric of the house, but who only looks on, observing and speculating and seeking information, but a domestic tourist? Here is a contemporary description by a tourist-proper, visiting a stately home in Kent.

We stood in rooms with Gothic windows and in rooms with Tudor and Jacobean windows, admiring this and that in the hushed, embarrassed tones of uninvited guest. The pressure of other people's lives was strong, and every time I entered a room I half expected to see its occupant beating a hasty retreat. People who are kind enough to open their houses to the public once a week must spend that day being chased from room to room.⁵¹

⁵¹ Morton, *I Saw Two Englands*, p. 39.

Similarities with the feelings and actions of the second Mrs de Winter are striking: the sense of being an uninvited intruder in the house, slightly unsure of how to behave; the palpable, yet unseen presence of elusive family members who are 'chased' round the wonderful rooms by the tourist eager to lay a claim on their lives, find out their domestic secrets. The heroine, socially insecure, feeling like a between-maid, also finds herself an 'uninvited guest' - permanently uninvited - at Manderley. Yet her curiosity about the Rebecca whom she imagines in every room sends her on an investigative and sensational pursuit of the mystery.

The servant as tourist of family life: it is a bizarre apotheosis of the anachronistic battle between past and present, privacy and prestige. The modern servant is an unwelcome intruder in the home, but is necessary for the maintaining of domestic prestige; and the tourist at Manderley is also an unwelcome visitor, but is vital, in economic terms, for the upkeep of its display. The girl, the second Mrs de Winter, is, in a sense, both of these things, and both work to reveal Manderley as an anachronism - a show piece, an exhibit, a piece of heritage tourism, 'the house of the picture post card, the house that was famous'(80). It is a beautiful piece of the past, but it is ultimately a stuffed museum exhibit, unable to sustain modern, intimate, small-scale domestic life over the breakfast table. When the heroine imagines the library transformed by the children she and Maxim will one day have, she foresees how 'on the table there, polished now and plain, an ugly case would stand containing butterflies and moths, and another one with birds' eggs, wrapped in cotton wool'(80). The image is again of things exhibited in cases, on show, on display. Family life at Manderley can

never be anything other than that: petrified, beautifully preserved - but fragile - and unliving. In a sense, the fire that destroys Manderley is form of mercy killing; putting an old house out of its modern misery is the dramatic resolution to the domestic conflict which would otherwise tear it apart.

Underneath the overtly sensational happenings in *Rebecca*, this alter-sensational narrative runs, too, in which the heroine exploits the dangerous revelatory status that belongs to the sensationalized servant in order to uncover Manderley's troubles with itself. Manderley, though, is hardly an ordinary house, and *Rebecca* outlines its conflict between the past and the present, privacy and prestige, on a suitably extreme scale: enormous breakfasts, vast banqueting halls, and one small heroine, as servant-tourist, exposing this domestic life as untenable. The novel I want to look at, finally, is domestic fiction written in a much lower register, and on a smaller scale: as an account of middle-class, semi-detached villadom, it could not be further removed from the Cornish grandeurs of *Rebecca*. But it is concerned with similar domestic preoccupations - with the war zone of middle-class family life and the family home - and, again, the revelatory status of a female servant is vital to its diagnosis and treatment. The novel is *Miss Mole* (1930), by E. H. Young, and its eponymous heroine is a servant; a housekeeper.

Emily Young is an intriguing and little-known writer, whose own life gives some indication of a major theme in her work, and which is certainly central to *Miss Mole*: and that is secrecy; the power of secrets - both the keeping and the telling of them. After sixteen quiet married years, and her husband's death in the First World War,

Young moved to London, and into the home of a married man, Ralph Henderson, headmaster of Alleyn's public school. His wife lived there, too. It was, apparently, a friendly arrangement; 'Mrs Henderson was wife in name only, and she, her husband, and Mrs Daniell - as Emily Young was always called in private life - lived there together for some twenty years.'⁵² Of course, this ménage-à-trois was - had to be - a dead secret to the outside world. And so it is hard not to see Young's fictional treatment of secrets as permeated with a first-hand awareness of their dangerous power and allure. It is also impossible to ignore the fact that secrecy is the driving force behind sensation fiction - indeed, the 'power of Victorian sensationalism derives . . . from its exposure of secrecy as the fundamental and enabling condition of middle-class life, rather than from its revelation of particular scandals.'⁵³ What is being concealed hardly matters: the act of concealment and the threat of detection is all.

And Young plays with this idea of secrecy as an energizing, explosive power in its own right in her fiction. In *The Vicar's Daughter* (1928), the entire novel centres round the untangling of a web of secrets about an illegitimate child - the vicar's daughter - only for the characters, and the reader, to discover at the end that she is not his child, and that all the machinations and plottings have been for nothing - 'how simple things were when they were explained!', the vicar's wife thinks in some relief.⁵⁴ By deliberately rendering the particular scandal non-existent, Young shows how

⁵² Sally Beauman, Introduction to E. H. Young's *The Misses Mallett* [1922] (London: Virago, 1984), p. x

⁵³ Showalter, 'Family Secrets', p. 104

⁵⁴ E. H. Young, *The Vicar's Daughter* [1928] (London: Virago, 1992), p. 282.

secrecy is self-fuelling, and will happily run and run in the middle-class home without any extra motor.

Miss Mole, too, in content, style and structure, is dedicated to all the arts of secrecy - only, here, Miss Mole's position as heroine, who is also servant, problematizes the domestic practice of secret keeping and secret telling. The novel tells of the dysfunctional Corder family: father, a Nonconformist minister and emotional tyrant; mother, dead; three children, wretchedly unhappy; and a feckless cousin, Wilfred, who lodges as a paying guest. It sounds like a family from the hell of an Ivy Compton-Burnett novel - but the Corders have none of the brittle brilliance and mordant conversational wit that characterizes the domestic world of Compton-Burnett's fiction. They are altogether a more scrappy, messy collection of warring humanity; 'a small community in which personalities were stronger than theories of conduct'.⁵⁵ (In a Compton-Burnett novel, personalities *are* theories of conduct.) It is to this family that Miss Mole, plain and middle-aged, imaginative and enigmatic, comes as housekeeper. Only she does not exactly 'keep' house - she exposes it - and thereby brings about a resolution to domestic conflict.

Although change is the one thing that Miss Mole would appear *not* to carry with her. By her own admission, she fulfils exactly that anachronistic function which keeps the house in its warring state between past and present, privacy and prestige. Miss Mole, surely, does not represent change: she is the past; one of a dying breed whose survival is perilous in the modern world -

⁵⁵ Young, *Miss Mole* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 89.

women like herself who went from house to house behind their boxes, a sad multitude of women with carefully pleasant faces, hiding their ailments, lowering their ages and thankfully accepting less than they earned. What became of them all? What was to become of herself? Age was creeping on her all the time and she had saved nothing, she would soon be told she was too old for this post or that, and, for a second, fear took hold of her with a cold hand and the whispering of the dead leaves warned her that, like them, she would be swept into the gutter. (60)

The Women's Industrial Council Report answers Miss Mole's questions about her fate, and that of those like her. Elderly unmarried servants, it seems,

may be squeezed out of service probably when between fifty and sixty years of age. If - and this often happens - she has no relations or friends' homes near to her, her prospects are very dismal. For a time she can live on her savings. . . but most - and especially those rolling stones who have been in poor service, and have frequently changed their places - have little to hope from this.⁵⁶

Miss Mole knows that if she must earn her keep by domestic duties, she would be wiser to become a charwoman, a daily help. Their numbers rose rapidly in the early decades of the century, and they obviously provided a kind of transition between the domestic traditions of the past to the innovations of the present. It is intriguing, for example, that the Quaynes, in *The Death of the Heart*, employ a daily: a 'charwoman, Mrs Wayes, now came in to clean and polish, ostensibly leaving Matchett freer to maid Anna and Portia and valet Thomas. But Mrs Wayes's area was, in fact, jealously limited by Matchett'(23). It is as if the family long for the impersonal touch of one who does not know all the secrets of the household, and is not bothered about learning them from the furniture. But Matchett guards her own territory - and nor, probably, is

⁵⁶ Butler, *Domestic Service*, p. 58.

hers an entirely emotional custodianship. Char-ladies were often perceived as untrustworthy - not with the family secrets, but with the family silver - a new twist on the problem of domestic intrusion, only now the threat comes from the mercenary outsider rather than the spying insider. Certainly, the Women's Industrial Council report is wary of this new breed, saying of the 'daily servant [that] her position offers obvious difficulties in regards to cleanliness' - her own or that of the house? - 'and in temptation to small forms of dishonesty, as well as other dangers.'⁵⁷ And Miss Mole herself is faithful to the odd anachronisms of her status as housekeeper for much the same reasons. 'She had looked at a charwoman with envy, desiring healthy labour with brush and bucket, but for her folly in not hiring a bedroom and letting herself out for the day, she blamed what must have been an odd lingering desire for the gentility she affected to despise' (78).

So it is as a housekeeper that Miss Mole, Hannah Mole, arrives at the Corder's house, wearing the domestic past in her 'sweeping skirts' (80). And the house itself is as architecturally anachronistic as she is sartorially - one of many in a mid-Victorian suburb.

The houses in Beresford Road are just emerging from the basement era. Their kitchens are still a few steps below the level of the sitting rooms, but they have been raised from their cellerage whence a sturdier, or dumber, race of servants was content to ascend a long flight of stairs an innumerable number of times a day. Some of the houses are surrounded by their own gardens: others look like one house and are really two, with their entrances deceptively placed at the side: they give, and want to give, the impression that nothing unusual or indecorous can happen within their walls. (57)

⁵⁷ Butler, *Domestic Service*, p. 56.

These houses bear the physical legacy of the conundrum which perplexed the generation which built them, and which, in a new, present-tense genesis, still troubles the modern middle classes who have inherited it: that of combining the need for privacy with the aspirational desire for display. The outside of these houses are dedicated to show: if detached, with their own gardens; if semi-detached, they present the appearance of a united whole, with the two separate parts containing two separate families, shunted round to the side and out of sight. Yet, within, the concept of domestic privacy has been compromised. A suburban villa, of a suburban size, is built on modest lines; it does not have a basement, the servant's traditional haunt. Now, with the kitchen only a few steps below the level of the other rooms, the servant is so much closer to the family, so much closer to all the unusual and indecorous things - belied by the irreproachably respectable outside of the house - which may be happening inside.

As such, then, Miss Mole's presence in Beresford Road embodies this domestic conflict. The Corder's house is one of those semi-detached villas conspiring, with its twinned partner, to present a united front to the world, so its owner, Robert Corder, has particular need to assert his status - hiding his actually modest assets in the unfashionably long skirts of a housekeeper he buys cheap for fifty pounds a year. Yet at the same time her presence in the house is profoundly unsettling: 'a housekeeper, like a son at Oxford, was a good thing to mention casually, but an irritation in the flesh'(149). It is not only that her ministrations to the house disturb his peace, so that, even in his study, 'even in that sanctuary, he could not be unaware of sounds and

movements' as she tends to her duties. (192) More, he has a feeling that her presence is somehow dangerous to his home, efficient though she is. He senses that 'it was necessary to keep an eye on the stranger in the house' (196), and, frankly, 'felt mentally securer when she was out of the house'(149). So we see that Miss Mole plays her expected role in the home, disturbing its peace and exposing its tensions by her anachronistic appearance and function.

But she does more than this. She also brings about change to the Corder household - breaks up the domestic war which the house is waging on itself. She effects this change, not just as a female servant, but - in the terms of sensational discourse - as the conduit for and, sometimes, creator of, secret information. For, as already mentioned, *Miss Mole* is all about secrets: it is within a framework of secrecy - of concealment and detection - that the story of the Corder family is placed. The style and structure of the novel, indeed, support these secretive ends, both delighting in the elusive, the slippery and the duplicitous. Young frequently employs a convoluted, lengthy sentence construction, clause following clause, phrase following phrase, the final dénouement deferred until the last moment. The reader is left in a kind of continual textual suspense, waiting for the revelation which each sentence contains within its labyrinthine turnings. For example, here, Miss Mole contemplates the loneliness which Christmas brings to her in its festive wake:

There were a few people from whom, in the course of her career, she had not been completely severed, and to these she wrote, but the paucity of her acquaintances and her lack of real intimacy with them were very present to her at this time of the year and almost persuaded her of some failing in herself, but it was not easy, and Robert Corder had lately emphasised the fact, to make friends outside the house in which she was a dependent, and to most of the people she had served, often wholeheartedly, sometimes

with misguided zeal. becoming absorbed in their affairs as though they were her own. she remained as mere Miss Mole. whose importance vanished with her useful presence. (210)

This sentence, with its shifts from thought to thought, contains ambiguities - is it not easy to persuade herself of some failing; or not easy to make friends in a house in which she is a dependent; or both? We follow it through all its diversions and asides, trying to uncover the heart of the sentence, only to find Miss Mole herself vanishing at the anti-climactic finish. This is typical of Young's stylistic obfuscation, which makes the reader work to uncover the secrets of syntax along with all the other mysteries in the novel.

And there are plenty of those, mostly presented through the means of delayed decoding - itself a slippery practice. An event is presented, quite without explanation or context, for our consumption. It is only later, in tantalising morsels, that the mystery is fed to us, and the actual nature of the happening revealed. The novel opens with such an episode, setting the tricky way for what is to follow. On the first page, from nowhere:

Mrs Gibson had shut the front door: she had returned to the problems which ought never to have arisen in her respectable house, and Hannah, freed from the necessity for action, for the expression of sympathy and the giving of advice, was able to admire the skill she had shown in these activities, but first, because she was grateful by nature as well as appreciative of herself, she offered up thanks for the timely justification of her faith in the interest in life. (7)

Again, it is characteristic of Young's stylistic deferral that we only learn what Hannah did first, at the last. But there are other delaying tactics being deployed, too: who Mrs Gibson is, what the problems that have arisen in her respectable house are, and how Miss Mole has become involved in them, are questions that are not answered until nearly fifty pages later. And when the truth is revealed, it is with the expected oblique touch:

Yet it was better to be Hannah Mole than to be Lilla who could see herself as one person only, and that was Mrs Spencer-Smith, who had never broken a basement window to save a man from gas poisoning, dragged him from the neighbourhood of the oven, and then consoled the baby who was crying, neglected, in his perambulator. (45)

It is only by discovering what Mrs Spencer-Smith never did that we discover what Miss Mole - thwarting a suicide attempt in the basement of Mrs Gibson's lodging house - actually did.

These are the narrative and stylistic threads of secrecy and concealment which run through the fabric of the novel. And they complement what is so central to *Miss Mole*: the housekeeper's own love of, and need for, secrecy. Part of that which she conceals is her own inner life, an intense and imaginative subjectivity, for which her subdued appearance provides a satisfactory disguise. But Miss Mole also has a far more dangerous and tangible secret - one which, if revealed, would bring about her professional and emotional ruin. As a young woman, she loved and lived with a man to whom she was not married. It is this skeleton from the past that threatens her security, in the shape of a Mr Pilgrim, fellow minister of Robert Corder, who knew of and

disapproved of her behaviour years ago, and has now reappeared as suitor of Robert Corder's eldest daughter. It is this secret - the difficulty of keeping it, the danger of revealing it - that is at the suspenseful heart of the novel; and made all the more suspenseful as we ourselves are not made privy to the full details of Miss Mole's past until the very end of the novel.

So, Miss Mole is in possession of her own secrets. Within a sensational frame of reference, she becomes a servant who is not interested in revealing the scandals and secrets of the family she serves. Indeed, the one time she takes advantage of her intimate position as housekeeper to reveal a secret about the dead Mrs Corder to her husband, she is bitterly ashamed of herself. 'He would not forgive her for possessing the information, she could not forgive herself for passing it on'(222). No; Miss Mole is far less concerned with the exposure of the Corders' secrets than she is with the preservation of her own. She does not seek out secrets: she *is* the secret. Such is her fear of discovery by the family she works for that she is quite unscrupulous in her methods of concealment. To safeguard herself, she is more than happy to lie, for 'lies were a form of imagination and a protection for the privacy of her thoughts and, in a life lived in houses which were not her own and where she was never safe from intrusion, it was necessary to have this retreat'(121). Things have turned upside-down now it is the servant who needs to protect her status, her respectability, and whose 'privacy' is threatened by the 'intrusion' of the family members.

In this reversal of convention - in this reworking of the tropes of sensationalism - the novel is turned on its head. The Corder household is liberated from its

anachronistic conflict as Miss Mole herself takes on a new, transmogrified function within the discourse of domestic secrecy. For it is intriguing to see how the hierarchies and boundaries of the private house, caught in its inherited paradox of privacy and prestige - social, emotional and architectural divisions - are blurred and diffused by Miss Mole's new and emergent status, as housekeeper-heroine with a secret. Out of her secrecy - the old-fashioned secret of the ruined woman - comes a new kind of domestic openness.

The Corder family is aware that in Miss Mole's enigmatic quality lies her transforming power. For her presence, mysterious and unfathomable, acts as a powerful kind of magnet in the house, with strong powers of attraction. It is not only her long nose that makes Wilfred liken her to the Mona Lisa - "Not a bit of it! It's the secret smile . . . She may be plain but she's the most fascinating woman in the world" (82-83). This 'fascinating' air of secrecy, of all that lies underneath her meek exterior, draws family members - whether willingly or no - to her, wherever she is in the house. They follow Miss Mole to her attic eyrie, or to her low kitchen; or detain her in the family sitting rooms - and thus the map of the private house is redrawn. In this modernizing movement is the dissolution of the social and architectural barriers between servant and family that have kept the private house in its state of anachronistic warfare for so long.

So a frightened Ruth, youngest daughter of the house, runs up to Miss Mole's attic bedroom after a bad dream. The housekeeper comforts and reassures her.

Ruth laughed, and it was the first time Hannah had heard her do it naturally . . .

'But I don't want to go back to that room. Miss Mole.'

'You shan't. I'll go. We don't mind each other's sheets, do we? And you'll feel happy up here, won't you, with my little ship on the mantelpiece, and you'll go to sleep.'

Ruth nodded. 'Where did you get your little ship?'

'Off the mantelpiece in my old home in the country. I'll tell you about it some day.' (86)

Ruth is at her most 'natural' in this part of the house where she traditionally has no place: the servant's attic. Nor is she there as a tourist - in her acquiescence with Miss Mole's suggestion that they swop beds she is showing her willingness to inhabit rather than visit a new domestic country - a country without boundaries. In this act of physical closeness - and there is a peculiar intimacy about lying in someone else's sheets - there lies the collapse of architectural and social and emotional divides. The daughter of the house sleeps in the attic, the servant in her bedroom, and both parties are content about this shared act of classless goodwill which blurs the divided geography of the home. And, again, there is a reminder that this blurring process has its roots in Miss Mole's unusual and fascinating magnetic status as a servant with a secret of her own. Ruth is content to be left in the attic alone with just one of the housekeeper's mysteries - the little ship in a bottle, the history of which Miss Mole will tell her one day, but which remains, at the moment, an enticing unknown.

And then there is the head of the house himself, Robert Corder, the most unwilling convert to Miss Mole's unusual fascinations. After all, he it was who wanted a housekeeper as a guarantor of the family's status; he it is, therefore, who wants to keep the house in its state of domestic strife. He would like Miss Mole to know her social and feminine place, and that means knowing her architectural place: 'he had

been amiable this evening, praising the mushrooms, with perhaps a covert suggestion that the kitchen was her sphere and she would do well to stay in it'(122). But, once more, her position as the possessor of her own secrets problematizes her occupation of that sphere. For Corder, 'baffled' and 'puzzled' by her secretiveness - her 'slyness', as he calls it - is nonetheless attracted to her, as strongly, if unwillingly, as the other members of his family: indeed, 'she became oddly fascinating' to him (199). One of her regular duties is to bring him a late-night drink and biscuits in his study - and every time she goes to leave 'she knew she would be called back when she reached the door'(141). He detains her in the most private room in the house, often in order to make a criticism, but still wishing to prolong her presence for as long as possible.

'Just a moment. Miss Mole. Mrs Spencer-Smith expressed some surprise that you had not been to see her. I think it would be courteous to pay her that attention . . . Her At Home day is the first Friday in the month.'
'Does she have an At Home day?' Hannah asked with a wide smile. 'I thought that was unfashionable. Then I can't go until December.'
'You misunderstand me', he said gently. 'It might be better for you to avoid that day.'
'Yes, they're dreary occasions aren't they? Thank you for telling me. Good night.' (141)

It is significant that as part of the modernizing impulse Miss Mole represents in her unusual domestic position, she criticizes At Homes - a mainstay of respectable, middle-class female life - for being old-fashioned, even while she wears the long skirts of her anachronistic profession. But there is more than that to this conversation, as we see Miss Mole once more blur the hostile divides that conventionally demarcate her position from that of her employer. For the minister's hint that she would be socially

unwelcome at Mrs Spencer-Smith's At Home day is firstly belied by Hannah's continued and unnecessary presence in a room in his own house where she does not belong. And then, she, and the reader, are in possession of a secret which Mr Corder is not, which is that Lilla Spencer-Smith, wealthy from trade and powerful in the local community, is her cousin. The secret joke is that she and Hannah Mole come from exactly the same social background, and it is a background which more befits the job of housekeeper than it does that of society doyenne, which is the role that the *nouveau riche* Mrs Spencer-Smith has taken upon herself. ' "I come of the same stock as you do, Lilla, and we know what that is" ', Miss Mole reminds her cousin. ' "Simple yeoman stock, and my father often dropped his aitches and so did yours. I know you don't like remembering it, but there's the fact"' (42). In other words, the class distinction Robert Corder would like to impose between Miss Mole - the housekeeper - and her betters - the Spencer-Smiths - does not exist. She nurses this secret from her employer, and chooses instead to deliberately, wilfully, misunderstand his hint, pretending that he is against her going to the At Home purely because she would find it dreary. By this deliberate misunderstanding Miss Mole undermines the social barriers, not only the non-existent ones that Robert Corder would erect between herself and Mrs Spencer-Smith, but also those that Robert Corder would put up between himself and her. For he dare not set her right a second time - though she does not need setting right, he does not know it - and so her wilful misunderstanding of his remark, as one to a social equal, stands as the true version. His own study, a room in

which she traditionally has no place, is witness to the sly blurring process which Miss Mole brings about.

Nor is Robert Corder content with detaining Miss Mole in his part of the house. Attracted by her enigmatic quality, he finds himself venturing into her own domain: the kitchen.

He would hear a murmuring from the kitchen as he passed through the hall and, sometimes, a burst of laughter, and making some excuse, such as the need for another pair of boots, he would penetrate into the kitchen regions and find Miss Mole and Doris mysteriously busy at the table or the stove, when he had expected to find one or both of them idle.

'The Christmas puddings are ready for stirring,' Hannah said to him on one of these occasions. 'Will you have your stir now?'

'Everybody has to stir, for luck.'

Doris turned aside with a giggle. She was embarrassed by the presence of the minister in the kitchen and by Miss Mole's airy way with him, and Robert Corder, interpreting this sound correctly and reacting to it immediately, took the opportunity to prove his essential homeliness. He stirred manfully. (197)

It is as if the minister, invading the kitchen, expects to find the servants engaging in the dangerous idle low chatter suspected of those below stairs, their natural inclination to the sensational urging them to propagate and invent family scandal. But nothing could be further from reality. Whether aware of it or no, Robert Corder is being initiated into a realm of the house he hardly knew existed. His invasion is hardly forceful or interrogative: the fact that he has to make some excuse in order to 'penetrate into the kitchen regions' - as if it were some unexplored country - and that the maid, Doris, is embarrassed by his presence, all indicate how rare it is to see him there: 'the minister in the kitchen'. Once more, Miss Mole brings an air of enticing mystery to wherever she is and whatever she is doing, even if, on this occasion, the mystery is no more

profound than the practice of culinary arts, which are entirely unknown to Robert Corder.

To draw the man of the house into the kitchen: there can be no more dramatic breaking down of inter-war hostilities between servant and employer, man and woman. He does more than look, too; he also stirs the pudding 'to prove his essential homeliness' - the joke being that he is so essentially unhomely. Yet sometimes the proof of the pudding is in the stirring, not the eating. His act is more than its motive, for it shows him in touch with the intimate physical life of his home; it is the beginning of his learning of the private house in a new way, and from a different perspective which is not to be found in the family sitting rooms. In the minister's venture into the kitchen, the war-torn social and physical architecture of the private house, its domestic traditions, have been radically remodelled - stirred up, like the pudding itself.

From the top of the house to the bottom - and the rooms in-between - Miss Mole brings about change. As a housekeeper-heroine in the possession of one great secret, and many small mysteries, she reverses the domestic, sensational expectations of her role, and the Corder's home is up-turned with her. As such, both the house, and herself, move on from the anachronistic battle in which they were caught, and begin to embrace a new model of domestic life, freer from architectural and social restraints, and released from the paradox of privacy and prestige which is so connected with those restraints. *Miss Mole* is a novel which, in its borrowings and modifications from and of the sensation genre, reveals the private house to itself, but also shows that out of that exposure lies the way forward to a new kind of domestic openness.

AFTERWORD

There's No Place Like Home

This study, which began with the cryptic pronouncement that 'nothing can happen nowhere', ends on a similarly elusive note. That is: in my exploration of women's fiction of place in the inter-war period, I have discovered that there is 'no place like home'; no single, stable, constant that can be known and labelled as 'home.' Similarly, there is no one stable notion of femininity which can be seen to occupy that domestic territory.

Previous chapters have documented the cultural and historical debate between the private house and other feminized institutions. The girls' school is physically constructed out of the private house; the hotel markets itself as a home for the modern nomad; and the office is posited as the demonic antithesis of hearth and home. The widely-marketed feminine ideal - the tomboy who grows into the devoted wife, mother and homemaker - is evoked but also challenged and *realigned* in the act of representing women's and girls' occupation of these places. Whether depicted in fiction, or through other cultural media, an unorthodox narrative can be seen to run in parallel with authorized versions of femininity: games-mad school girls subvert discipline and feel passionately; respectable young women become hotel-lovers; working women fashion themselves a home in the office. These are hybrid roles, assimilating inter-war cultural and social expectations of domestic femininity, whilst expanding or re-presenting them according to the demands of the school, office and hotel. It is this hybrid quality

which signals the emergent and exciting state of being, where 'nothing happens nowhere'. There are no inter-war labels for the 'middle ground', where home meets school, office and hotel; or for the articulation and representation of femininities which this middle ground promotes.

But the same holds true when the home is in debate with itself. The representation of domesticity is a tentative, uneasy exercise: here, as much as anywhere, there is no place like home. Both *Rebecca* and *Miss Mole*, as I have tried to show, realign established models of domestic femininity, and channel them into a shadowy and unexplored realm. There are few precedents for housekeeper-heroines with secrets; or for mistresses who are servants as well as tourists - but these are exactly the hybrid and energizing domestic roles that are enacted in the two novels when past and present go to war.

But there is more to it than this. War, after all, requires winners, and it is not always easy to identify exactly who it is that has emerged ultimately victorious in the feminized conflict played out within the confines of the private house. My readings of *Rebecca* and *Miss Mole* as novels of domestic challenge and feminine re-definition do not belie the fact that both texts are also deeply indebted to the past: *Rebecca* is more than half in love with the anachronistic traditions it destroys, and *Miss Mole* shows up all that is unsustainable in one traditional female role - that of housekeeper - only to celebrate another: that of wife. The latter novel ends with the otherwise empowered and enabling Miss Mole trembling before the curate, Mr Blenkinsop, who asks her, 'in unmistakable accents' (351), to marry him. She accepts rapturously and gratefully. And the end - or, given the novel's flashback structure, the beginning, of *Rebecca* (the end of the novel's plot is the

beginning of its story) - reveals that the new domestic life which has replaced the old ways of Manderley is not much of a substitute. The heroine lives with the blighted Maxim in a quiet foreign hotel, 'where day after day dawns very much the same' (6): the food is indifferent; the landscape barren and scrubby; the sky hard and glittering.

The past - a domestic, feminized past - does enjoy a kind of final victory in these texts, then. It is affiliation with the past that sees Miss Mole rewarded by marriage in the best romantic tradition, and the second Mrs de Winter punished by childless exile for her part in the destruction of Manderley. In the domestic battle between past and present, the power of the past, as revealed in these final textual destinations, is seen to be greater than that of the present day. Which is a sombre reflection: there is something depressing about the independent Miss Mole's surrender to marriage; something unjust about the second Mrs de Winter's routine and soulless domestic exile. They deserved something more than they received. *Miss Mole* and *Rebecca* are novels that spark off an energizing domestic conflict; in their re-workings of the sensation genre, they challenge feminized domestic models of the past - whilst still acknowledging and, finally, relying upon those models. They are novels which, even as they question the hold of the past on the present day, themselves succumb to its pull.

And not only of the present day: I would like to end by looking forward to Elizabeth Bowen's 1949 novel, *The Heat of the Day*, and its portrayal of the same domestic battle between past and present. Set during the war years, Bowen introduces into a cast of the otherwise domestically dispossessed, a family - the Kelways; and a family house - 'Holme Dene'. Robert Kelway is the long-grown-up

and departed son of the household: now, in war-time, he returns to Holme Dene with his divorced lover, Stella, to undergo the ritual of afternoon tea with his mother, sister, and assorted children. Robert is resigned to, Stella astonished by, domestic life at Holme Dene.

The English, she could only tell herself, were extraordinary - for if this was not England she did not know what it was. You could not account for this family headed by Mrs Kelway by simply saying that it was middle class, because that left you asking, middle of what? She saw the Kelways suspended in the middle of nothing. She could envisage them so suspended when there *was* nothing more. Always without a quiver as to their state.⁵⁸

Stella's vision of this English tea table is bleak: 'nothing happens nowhere' at Holme Dene all right, but this sort of non-being hardly signals the emergence of a new, exciting feminized territory. Domestic 'middle ground' is no more than wasteland - desert, quite unable to sustain emotional and social life.

Stella's observation of the Kelways - with Mrs Kelway immovable at the matriarchal helm - posits a problematic reading of the domestic conflict between the past and present, in which victory for the 'now' is by no means a given. On one level, of course, Stella perceives the physical insecurity of the present day. The metaphorical 'nothingness' in which the household is embalmed could all too soon be blasted into literal nothingness by the tactics and tools of modern warfare. But Stella also notes the complacent stasis of this suspended family, hanging in frozen nothingness, and 'always without a quiver as to their state'. The world may be collapsing around them, but the Kelways, sitting round their tea table, never question for a second the viability or validity of their existence. Wilfully blind to

⁵⁸ Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949), p. 109.

present day circumstances, they radiate confidence as to the ever-after permanence of their social and domestic life.

This sense of confidence intrigues and appals Stella in equal measure. Divorced, parents dead, no home of her own but a rented furnished flat, with interesting work to do and a lover to adore, the war has allowed Stella to inhabit an emergent feminized region, free of domestic obligations and ties - free of the past, no less. 'She . . . had come loose from her moorings . . . [and] what she had left behind her dissolved behind her. . . Life had supplied her so far with nothing so positive as the abandoned past.' (109)

So it is not to be wondered at that Stella feels uncomfortable at the petrified tea table of Holme Dene. Seen through her eyes, the novel invites us to think, and hope, that this house will be blown to pieces and that the domestic neuroses it breeds will go up with them. But, as the novel goes on to suggest - and as hindsight makes clear - Mrs Kelway did right to sit so staunchly at her tea table: her world is not going anywhere just yet, and it is Stella who will have to change her feckless domestic ways.

For the post war period did not see the domestic and social revolution promised, and, to a certain extent, fulfilled by the upheaval of war. Post 1945 saw, in fact, the return of English society to traditional pre-war domestic values. The reasons for this retrospective shift are not clear-cut. The desire to resume 'normal life' with a vengeance after the war, the belief that feminism was no longer necessary, the worry that the birth rate was falling to dangerously low levels, and the return of men to the work force: all these have been posited as underlying causes behind the 'propagation of an ideology of domesticity' in post-war

England.⁵⁹ Whatever the causes, the results are disturbing. The year of 1947 saw a record number of weddings - 401, 210 (the pre-war annual average had been 325, 813, increasing to 370, 997 during the war).⁶⁰ During the same year, the number of women in gainful employment shrank to 18.1 percent.⁶¹ And, according to the 1949 findings of the Royal Commission on Population, this domestic trend found particular favour among middle class, university-educated women, who were having larger families than their working class sisters, and appeared to be thoroughly embracing domestic life. One such woman writes, 'I personally am *delighted* to give up work. I love gardening and dressmaking, and I compose cookery recipes with the exultation of an ode.'⁶²

And it does seem as if this worship of the domestic is prefigured in *The Heat of the Day* - in Mrs Kelway's unshakeable faith that her world will remain untouched, and in Stella's ultimate, enforced submission to that world. Yes, the war has enabled her to free herself from the domestic past in a way that Miss Mole and the second Mrs de Winter could not. The times have allowed her to cut free from her moorings: her son, 'at school when this war began, was now in the Army - to her, the opportunity to make a break, to free herself of her house, to come to London to work had not been ungrateful.' (23) But, even so, this novel - written, after all, in 1949 - is mindful of the 'back to the kitchen movement' which followed the war, prefiguring it in Stella's fate.

For Stella is not allowed to keep the non-domestic, foot-loose quality of her war-time relationship with Robert in which the 'very temper of pleasures lay in

⁵⁹ Alan Sinfield, *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: Athlone, 1997), p 204.

⁶⁰ See Ruth Adam, *A Woman's Place*, p 159

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 164-65

their chanciness, in the canvas-like impermanence of their settings, in their being off-time' (89). In fact, she is not allowed to keep Robert at all. A traitor to his country, discovered and on the run, Robert dies trying to escape his pursuers.

Without Robert, and with the war coming to an end, Stella loses her fluid domestic status. The last thing we hear of her is that she is to be married - married ' "to a cousin of a cousin" ' (311) - thereby tightening once more the noose of family and social ties. Marriage will bring about the end of her peripatetic, free-fall way of life, not only in the future, but in the instant. Harrison, her sinister admirer, chastises her as the bombs drop around them:

'What do you think you're doing, skittering round in a top-floor flat on a night like this, with the heavy stuff coming down all over the place? Far from fair on the chap: you should think of him.' (311)

No more 'skittering round in a top-floor flat'; such feckless domestic life is 'far from fair on the chap' - and not only because the bombs are falling, but because it denotes an independence of thought, a *not* 'thinking of him', which is antipathetic to the married state. Stella's war-time story ends here - she has travelled hopefully through an emergent feminized landscape, where nothing can happen nowhere. But she has, finally, arrived where the post-war mood has led her: which is back to Miss Mole and the second Mrs de Winter; back to the private house; and back to the past.

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