Arnold Bennett’s Hotels

Randi Saloman

Hotels are exercises in practical salvation.
—Wayne Koestenbaum

Virginia Woolf famously accused Arnold Bennett of caring more about the mundane houses characters live in than about those characters themselves, neglecting the interior defining qualities of characters in favor of superficial descriptions that reveal too little. “He is trying to make us imagine for him,” she tells us in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), “He is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there” (328-29). Bennett’s fascination with the hotel space, in life and in art, would seem to support this claim. In Those United States (1912), a collection of essays detailing his first transatlantic voyage, Bennett confesses “[his] secret ambition had always been to be the manager of a grand hotel” (149-50), though this ambition was hardly as secret as Bennett suggests. Two of his most popular novels, The Grand Babylon Hotel (1902) and Imperial Palace (1930), feature hotels based on London’s Savoy as the setting for nearly all of their action. A number of his other novels and short stories—notably The Old Wives’ Tale (1908), his masterwork—similarly take place in and around hotels. Yet in these works, Bennett enthusiastically reconceives accepted notions of home and domestic life, resituating his characters within the parameters of the hotel, and thus creating new kinds of characters, representing in new ways individual subjectivity and its relation to material space as he explores the modern hotel in all its various incarnations. In doing so, Bennett addresses the very questions he is accused by Woolf of avoiding, illuminating the deeply complicated relationship between internal and external conditions, between domestic selves and public identities.
Chronologically situated between Victorianism and high modernism, Bennett closely examines the transition of his characters from the one period to the other, and thus focuses, in the most pragmatic sense, on the question of where they live, how they define and are defined by the rooms they occupy. Where Woolf sees this as banal materialism, we might recognize Bennett’s acute realization that the houses of the nineteenth century—and the identities they shape—were becoming obsolete, and something needed to replace them. While Woolf accuses Bennett’s characters of “deserting even the well-built villa in the Five Towns” for “an eternity of bliss spent in the very best hotel in Brighton” (“Modern” 148)—leaving a dull though solid grounding for an existence wholly trivial—she ignores the very real significance of such relocation as Bennett represents it. As brilliantly as modern authors might explore inner psychological worlds, the physical realities of characters’ lives remained important, the inner worlds and the outer realities shaping one another in a variety of ways. Domestic life might change radically—as it does, time and again, in Bennett’s works—but it remains crucial to character.

Bennett’s two explicit “hotel novels” were written at opposite ends of his career. Imperial Palace was Bennett’s last completed novel and is a far lengthier and more ponderous work. Each book focuses on the operations of a London luxury hotel (modeled on the Savoy) and each is deeply invested in the question of Englishness, signaling Bennett’s concerns with larger issues of nation and identity. The Grand Babylon Hotel is filled almost entirely with non-English characters, while within its walls the Imperial Palace offers a miniature reproduction of England—specifically of its class system. Even more urgently, perhaps, these novels are concerned with the desire to find or create a home in the modern world, and how the hotel, seemingly at odds with such desire, becomes the means by which a new model of domesticity can be identified.

Modernism has traditionally been defined by its rejection of Victorian notions of the domestic, a breaking away from home and family, and from all the network of connections and loyalties that such material conditions and relationships entail. Of course, this is a position that has been challenged on a number of fronts in recent years. Critics such as Victoria Rosner and Christopher Reed have focused on the importance of interior design (it defining the home as artistic workshop and as itself a work of art) to the modernist project, while Davida Pines finds modernism more traditional in its insistence on the domestic roles assumed
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by men and women than is often recognized. Such approaches, however, accept Victorian definitions of domesticity, looking for evidence of its persistence in modern lives. Bennett goes further—articulating new modes of domestic life, following his characters as they not only adapt but reformulate their ways of being in the world. The hotel spaces of Bennett’s novels—and of early twentieth-century novels more generally—suggest, that is, a new understanding of domestic relations, and of community and nation, one not attached to specific geographical locations, but crystallizing spontaneously yet definitively, within the hotel space.

Bennett was far from alone in his infatuation with hotels. It is reflective of a fascination on the part of modern authors of all stripes and nationalities with the narrative opportunities afforded by the hotel setting. Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and E. M. Forster, and other British modernists, were taken with hotels, as were their American counterparts—writers like Henry James, a self-proclaimed “hotel child,” Sinclair Lewis, and Edith Wharton—and Continental writers such as Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, and Joseph Roth. Indeed, the list goes on and on, until one appears to be studying not an isolated phenomenon, but modern literature—or modern life—itself. To a degree, this reflects the increased ease of travel, both domestic and international, leading to rapid growth in the hotel industry during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many authors spent significant periods of time in hotels, developing an interest in them that extended to their writing. Questions of identity and transience, central for so many modern writers, are, moreover, naturally underscored in hotels, places where, by definition, one stays only temporarily in an impersonal domestic space—neither wholly public nor wholly private—largely ignorant of and unknown to others.

Thus, if Bennett’s accessible and popular work made him an outcast among his difficult and abstruse modernist contemporaries, his love of hotels did not. Virginia Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), begins onboard a ship (a sort of hotel in its own right) from England to South America, then takes place primarily in and around the main hotel of tourist Santa Marina, where young Rachel Vinrace is initiated into a society unlike any she has known in her sheltered life with her father. This hotel is very different from the London establishment where Peter Walsh will take up occupancy in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1924), and the reasons for this speak to Woolf’s own anxieties about modern life. The “Sirens” episode of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) takes place in the Ormond hotel restaurant and bar,
while the Dubliners of his short stories wander the boarding houses and temporary residences of their city; the climactic moments of “The Dead,” the most prominent of these stories, occur in the hotel room where Gabriel Conroy, struck with a truth about his marriage, begins to negotiate a more complex understanding of both his domestic existence and his personal identity. Lucy Honeychurch meets her future husband George Emerson in the Italian pension where E. M. Forster’s *A Room With a View* (1908) both begins and ends, the rules of hotel engagements (in all senses of the word) essentially structuring the novel’s plot. And in *Howards End* (1910), Helen Schlegel and Leonard Bast spend a fateful night in an English hotel, leading to Leonard’s final ruin but also to the production of the heir of Howards End—and to the birth of the new version of English life the novel heralds and celebrates.

With a few key exceptions, literary critics have nevertheless paid little attention to modernist hotels. In one such exception, Bettina Matthias’s relatively recent book on hotels in early twentieth-century Austrian and German literature marks the literary hotel as a place of danger and uncertainty, as well as of opportunity: “Hotel rooms are rented spaces to which we are not the only ones who have a key. They are filled with objects and furniture that an indiscriminate number of people have used and will use, that we neither bought nor chose, placed in a room that says nothing about us” (41). In another, Charlotte Bates wrestles with Paul Fussell’s declaration that the imaginative life of the 1930s was characterized by “hotel-consciousness”: “The interest provoked by the hotel during this period is unprecedented—and unexplained,” she suggests (63), concluding that “the hotel . . . constitutes a certain milieu which renders it an apt setting for representations of the modern restless mind” (71). Yet, by and large, the field is limited to brief studies of individual authors or works and their relation to a given hotel or hotels, independent of any larger consideration of the significance of the hotel as an entity in its own right.  

Cultural critics have shown more interest in hotels. Overwhelmingly, however, they view these spaces only as a symptom of the restlessness and isolation of modern or postmodern life. Marc Augé has classed the hotel as an example of what he terms the “non-places” that are constitutive of contemporary life: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (77–78). Fredric Jameson famously reads the Westin Bonaventure as a
postmodern space, which its occupants are not and cannot be prepared to navigate:

I am proposing the notion that we are here in the presence of something like a mutation in built space itself. My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace. (38)

Invoking Lévi-Strauss’s words, James Clifford describes the hotel as “a place of transit, not of residence” and as “somewhere you pass through, where the encounters are fleeting, arbitrary” (Clifford 17), while Wayne Koestenbaum finds in the hotel both freedom from the routine life and thought to which it stands in contrast and a deep nostalgia for the family home it evokes through imitation as well as through acknowledged difference. The disjunction between such characterizations and the often attractive and reassuring representations of hotels in the novels of the first half of the twentieth century partly reflect their historical periods. Augé and Jameson in particular are concerned mainly with later, post-modern incarnations of the hotel, which have, in their view, lost whatever personal quality that may have inhered in earlier establishments. But although these relatively recent accounts focus on hotel phenomena contemporary with themselves, they have nonetheless inflected the few literary-critical readings we do have of the very different sorts of hotels in earlier twentieth-century texts.

As spaces of modern consumerism, as potent symbols of the new, and as imaginative sites of self-creation and re-creation, hotels nevertheless serve key and as yet largely unrecognized roles in modern literature. As they sacrifice the security of more fixed abodes, literary hotel guests remake their domestic lives and reconceive their own identities, and hotel owners and employees adopt authorial roles as they attempt to make sense of these new narratives. In representing both sets of characters, modern authors come at questions about domestic life—and its various implications—from unexpected angles. Most strikingly, however, modernist literary hotels are, by and large, not unwelcoming spaces, but places of community and connection, complex and vexed sites of the literary dimensions of modernism and its uneven development, its historical tra-
jectory, and its various aesthetic permutations and political consequences. They are not places of isolation, but overwhelmingly—often unexpectedly—positive and productive spaces, emblems of a largely unremarked conception of modern domesticity, and of a new understanding of home and personal relations in the modern world.

As opposed to the alienating spaces described by cultural critics, then, hotels emerge time and again in Bennett’s writing, not as places of anxiety or despair, but of excitement and discovery. While acknowledging the specter of the postmodern hotel, its residents, owners, managers, and employees don’t lose their identities in these spaces, or spend themselves in mourning the loss of more permanent or traditional homes. Their hotels are welcoming locations, inviting both characters and reader to discover a modern existence, with all of the potential and uncertainty that modernity brings with it. At the same time community and self are preserved, and domesticity survives the physical removal from the Victorian family home—and is reinvented in innovative and often unexpected ways.

The Grand Babylon Hotel

The real Savoy Hotel features an “Omelette Arnold Bennett” on the menu of its main restaurant, The Savoy Grill. For about £10, London diners can partake of this signature concoction of eggs, smoked haddock, heavy cream, and cheese, which legend declares Bennett ate while staying in the luxury accommodations. It stands as a reminder of the deep-seated connection between Bennett and hotel life, in and beyond his work. Indeed, the premier “hotel author” of his day, Bennett explored the literary hotel space with a patience and fascination unmatched by his contemporaries.

The Grand Babylon Hotel features numerous individuals of different nationalities coming together in social, professional, and romantic contexts. While the hotel’s name might suggest a site of chaos where participants can’t communicate or work together toward a common goal, the actuality is just the opposite. At its core, the novel plays with the idea of difference, acknowledging the various possibilities that emerge as questions of identity are seemingly destabilized, and the confusion of identity categories the hotel prompts is seen as a boon rather than a difficulty. A source of such destabilization emerges early in the book, as Theodore Racksole, a New York railroad millionaire, “the third richest man in the
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United States, and therefore probably in the world” (Grand 5–6), decides on the spur of the moment to buy the Grand Babylon Hotel—the most famous and renowned such establishment in London—both for control over the hotel service, and for a sense of security in his new English lodgings. Admitting to “anxieties” that he is trying to distract himself from through his holiday activities, the millionaire is warned at the time of sale by the hotel’s eponymous owner, Félix Babylon, of the dangers he faces in his new role as proprietor. According to Babylon, rather than the straightforward business affair Racksole imagines it to be, the hotel is of necessity a site of subterfuge and questionable acts. The Grand Babylon has a life of its own, Félix insists, to which he as manager does not have—and must not have—access:

Do you not perceive that the roof which habitually shelters all the force, all the authority of the world, must necessarily also shelter nameless and numberless plotters, schemers, evil-doers, and workers of mischief? The thing is as clear as day—and as dark as night. Mr. Racksole, I never know by whom I am surrounded. I never know what is going forward. Only sometimes I get hints, glimpses of strange acts and strange secrets. You mentioned my servants. They are almost all good servants, skilled, competent. But what are they besides? For anything I know my fourth sub-chef may be an agent of some European Government. For anything I know my valuable Miss Spencer may be in the pay of a court dressmaker or a Frankfort banker. Even Rocco may be someone else in addition to Rocco. (24–5)

To draw a comparison Bennett himself practically proposes, a hotel is like a late nineteenth-century novel: large, complex, multi-layered, with many characters important and minor, and numerous simultaneous plots afoot. Placing modern characters in this setting offers a natural transition from the kind of nineteenth-century novel that attempts to take in an entire society to one more focused on the individual. Bringing together people from many different nations and classes, the hotel highlights their individual stories while making evident that their temporary cohabitation and interactions form not a microcosm of the larger society, but a world apart—in which unique, flexible, but very real rules apply.

As it happens, Babylon is not far off in his speculations; the very employees he names are key players in the criminal activity that structures
the novel’s plot. Declining to investigate the “glimpses of strange acts and strange secrets” (Grand 24) of which he has “hints” makes him complicit in a kidnapping, a murder, and an international plot against a foreign government, all of which occur under the auspices of his hotel and might have been prevented by him with due vigilance. Babylon’s point, however, is that his hotel cannot be read like a Victorian triple-decker: the plots won’t resolve or even come to light; the characters won’t reveal themselves willingly or at all. If he, in a sense, occupies an authorial role, he is far from omniscient, attending to the surface of things, rather than invading the privacy of his employees and thus delving into unpleasantries. In his judgment, he thus maintains the flexibility and autonomy that allow his hotel to operate. Yet Babylon rightly surmises that the hotel’s new owner will find himself decidedly less tranquil in the face of this complex reality.

For Theodore Racksole has come to England with the idea of taking root, believing that he can find stability in his father’s native land, simply by “build[ing] a house in Park Lane” and “buy[ing] some immemorial country seat with a history as long as the A. T. and S. railroad” (Grand 49). The son of an Oxford bed-maker who went on to accumulate a fortune in Pittsburgh steel, Racksole romanticizes England as the place where truth and history reside, and imagines his entry into English life will solidify his identity, rather than confront him with the need for self-definition. Of course, the instability of turn-of-the-century America has led Racksole to overestimate the legibility and coherence of an England on the cusp of modernity.

My father took the wise precaution of having me educated in England. I had my 3 years at Oxford, like any son of the upper middle class! It did me good. It has been worth more to me than many successful speculations. It taught me that the English language is different from and better than the American language, and that there is something—I haven’t yet found out exactly what—in English life that Americans will never get. Why, he added, in the U.S. we still bribe our judges and our newspapers. And we talk of the 18th Century as though it was the beginning of the world. (48)

Convinced that national identity is a fixed quality, Racksole is certain that his English background and education will set him on a clear path to a traditional aristocratic English life. However, the larger confusion over the meaning of such national identity is underscored by his own inde-
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terminate one. If it is Racksole’s very Americanness that has propelled his wealth, it is also what fuels his romantic notion of an idyllic England, free from the crass profiteering he associates with the United States. Yet in the course of his adventures at the Grand Babylon, Racksole finds that the England he imagined does not exist—and is not worth pursuing. Indeed, the world of the hotel reveals to him a world of international intrigue and foreign encounters.

While it may be synonymous with England in the minds of its guests, almost no one in the famous London hotel Racksole purchases, is English. The Grand Babylon’s success is built upon its attracting European dignitaries, who have befriended its owner and made a home for themselves within its walls:

The Grand Babylon counted that day wasted on which it did not entertain, at the lowest, a German prince or the Maharajah of some Indian State. When Félix Babylon—after whom, and not with any reference to London’s nickname, the hotel was christened—when Félix Babylon founded the hotel in 1869 he had set himself to cater for Royalty, and that was the secret of his triumphant eminence. The son of a rich Swiss hotel proprietor and financier, he had contrived to establish a connection with the officials of several European Courts, and he had not spared money in that respect. Sundry kings and not a few princesses called him Félix, and spoke familiarly of the hotel as “Félix’s”; and Félix had found that this was very good for trade. (7)

The Swiss hotelier is thus only one of many foreign presences in the novel. The Racksoles are American; the royals at the center of the novel’s activity are from the tiny German province of Posen, and are being victimized by rival Bosnians; their would-be financier is a Jew. The staff is even more multifarious than the guests. Several of them, for portions of the book, even disguise their national identities. Rocco, the heavily-accented Italian chef, is actually an American. Miss Spencer, the hotel’s secretary, disappears only to revisit the hotel disguised as an elderly Eastern-European baroness, her true background (is she English? married to Jules?) remaining hidden. Prince Aribert is immediately identified by Nella as the “plain Count Steebock” she met in Paris the previous spring, “doubtless travelling incognito” (44). Though he is masquerading as a Frenchman, Jules, the head-waiter and ringleader of the criminal activ-
ity, may well be the only “true” Englishman (a native of Hertfordshire, whose real name, he tells Racksole, is Tom Jackson) within the confines of the hotel. Finally, the Grand Babylon is neither English nor foreign; the multiple identities of its guests and staff, and their multiple deceptions, undermine the stable meaning of each of these terms.

Although the threat of the foreign hangs over *The Grand Babylon Hotel*, in the end it is the closed, nationalist idea of England held initially by Racksole that is the real threat. There is no home for the Racksoles here, not if they stick to their original plan, and so they adapt. In the engagement of Prince Aribert and Nella that concludes the novel, Bennett refuses isolationism or xenophobia, and individual characters take each other largely on trust. Aribert will give up his royal status to marry Nella; Racksole will bestow half his fortune on his daughter. The domestic future in search of which Racksole has come to London will emerge not from the now quaint-seeming acquisitions of property he imagined at the novel’s outset, but from his daughter’s marriage to a penniless German prince who has abdicated his title—the agreement formalized in a hotel. Finally, *The Grand Babylon Hotel* welcomes such cultural mixture.

The hotel is not a permanent residence. Figuratively if not literally the Racksoles have been the guests of Félix Babylon, who returns to reclaim his hotel just as their own adventures come to an end. But the Racksoles have learned from the Grand Babylon to understand domestic life in a new way, and it seems plain that they will not follow the trajectory upon which they began—to purchase a quiet country home and settle into English life. And of course, Nella’s marriage will necessitate her own decisions about where and how to live. What Bennett offers here is a model for establishing a domestic life in a world where permanence is perhaps all but extinct. The Racksoles move into the Grand Babylon, become fully invested in it, and then leave, moving on to another chapter, their departure reflecting not upon the quality of the hotel, but upon the reality of modern life. Modern domesticity requires a degree of mobility incompatible with permanent settlement—and is built not all at once, but progressively, in increments, as individuals move from place to place, taking pieces of each temporary residence along with them.
The Imperial Palace standard

In his well-known essay on the hotel lobby, Siegfried Kracauer characterizes it as the antithesis of the physical interior of the church—“the inverted image of the house of God”—and marks the hotel manager as an empty God-figure, invisibly overseeing the trivial affairs of the hotel space:

In both places people appear there as guests. But whereas the house of God is dedicated to the service of the one whom people have gone there to encounter, the hotel lobby accommodates all who go there to meet no one. It is . . . a space that encompasses them and has no function other than to encompass them. The impersonal nothing represented by the hotel manager here occupies the position of the unknown one in whose name the church congregation gathers. (175-76)

A very different vision is embodied in the Imperial Palace’s Evelyn Orcham, who succeeds, perhaps at too great a cost, in seeing meaning and purpose in the management of his hotel. Orcham believes it to be both possible and necessary that he know everything about the Imperial Palace, including the staff or guests. He is disturbed at the prospect of the transfer of the hotel’s ownership to businessman Sir Henry Savott, who wants to replicate the success of the Imperial Palace by creating a conglomerate of similar hotels. Though his job is never in question, Orcham is skeptical about the idea of a chain of Imperial Palaces, partly because he dislikes the idea of mass-marketing the hotel in which he takes such individual pride, but also because he could not maintain constant presence at—and control over—multiple hotels.

The Imperial Palace is Evelyn’s residence as well as his place of business. He is deeply identified with it and uncertain what would happen to that identity should the hotel cease to be a singular operation under his direction. Defined less by his Englishness, or his class than his profession, Orcham feels himself on common ground only with those who are equally entrenched in the physical life of the hotel.

In his devotion to his hotel, part of Orcham’s aim is to create a home for himself. While the Grand Babylon opens itself to the all comers, the Imperial Palace looks to draw its circle closer, creating a domestic oasis of homely comforts (and first-class luxury) for those inside, as it seeks to isolate itself from the unpredictability of the outside world. In this way, they offer two competing models of cosmopolitanism—the oneembrac-
ing the unrestricted coming together of various people and experiences, the other working to contain and domesticate such encounters. Yet both represent the search for a secure domestic life that can be sustained in a modern world.

That Orcham has transformed the hotel into a domestic space not only for those who visit but for himself and his employees as well, is suggested by his two romantic relationships. He first becomes entangled with Henry Savott’s daughter, Gracie. Orcham believes their affair will lead to marriage, but Gracie breaks it off when she realizes that her lover will never be able to devote himself entirely to her, so committed is he to his hotel. Briefly disappointed, Orcham soon realizes he is temperamentally much better suited to Violet Powler, the head housekeeper of the Imperial Palace, whose rise from the hotel laundry he has engineered. Unlike Babylon, who wishes to allow his hotel complete autonomy, disowning the activity that takes place within its walls, or Racksole, who wishes to decode the mystery of the Grand Babylon, Orcham wants to domesticate the variety of experiences that the Imperial Palace houses, rendering the zoo-like collection of exotic guests homely and non-threatening. Its employees are not the reckless outlaws of the Grand Babylon, but committed laborers with physically demanding, often unrewarding jobs, whose individual identities are subsumed in the hotel—and who welcome this process. Obedient and deferential in her work, Violet Powler is more at home in the Imperial Palace than her parents’ flat, which she visits dutifully on Sundays, briefly leaving the hotel room that is her primary residence:

As for Violet, this excursion into South London—she had made several before—was the first to awaken her fully to the quick growth of her affection for the Palace. As she journeyed eastward in the tram she was positively impatient to be back on the Floors with all their endless small surprises and anxieties; quite ready to be immersed again in a sea of trouble—what some people would call trouble but she wouldn’t. (313)

The couple’s engagement closes the novel on what might seem a happy note, though it is also an unsettling one. Violet lacks the glamour or charm of Gracie, one of Bennett’s most appealing characters—and is a great challenge to Orcham’s traditional ideas about gender roles and romantic relationships. The insularity of the Imperial Palace seems strangely
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unmitigated by the compromise that Orcham ultimately reaches with Savott and the company’s board (or by his decidedly practical marriage). Indeed, it appears that his own stewardship of the hotel will go on more or less unchallenged, and that the domesticity that he will create within the Imperial Palace will look disappointingly conventional.

If there is something disturbing about the domesticity of the Imperial Palace, perhaps it is because it seems to so strongly imitate an earlier version of the domestic that was becoming outmoded. While Orcham finds a wife and settles comfortably into domestic life at his hotel, it is by no means clear that the more attractive option would not have been to take his chances with Gracie Savott. Orcham does not appear to value the sort of worldliness that attracts men like Theodore Racksole or Félix Babylon to hotel life. Rather, for him the hotel represents an opportunity to shut out the larger world.

Towards hotel life

Bennett’s most well-known and critically admired novel, *The Old Wives’ Tale* narrates the lives of sisters Constance and Sophia Baines. While Constance remains for her entire life at their childhood home in Bursley, a town in the industrial regions of northern England referred to by Bennett as “The Five Towns,” Sophia leaves at the first opportunity, and becomes, by turns, hotel keeper, owner, and guest. A confused and self-doubting heroine, Sophia embodies Bennett’s search for a new model of domesticity—built not on female dependence or stagnation, but on dynamism. Neither the outwardly developed but inwardly hollow character decried by Woolf, nor the morally and sexually ambiguous figure so often associated with hotels (as in Woolf’s own *The Voyage Out*), she is a pragmatic, though decidedly idiosyncratic, individual moving steadily from a late nineteenth-century world of, to her, unsatisfactorily domestic possibilities, to a twentieth century in which she may reconceive rather than replicate such lives. Her hotel life begins with her youthful flight to the Hatfield—a “respectable” London hotel, where she plans to elope with traveling salesman Gerald Scales. At this early point, Sophia, who has run away from her home and family, is still innocent of hotel life, and her “flashing youth” is set in contrast to the “patched and senile drabness of the bedroom” with its “disturbing sensation of dirt everywhere concealing itself” (257). From this point forward, the couple’s relationship takes place almost entirely in hotels, as they have no fixed home, largely because, as
becomes clear, Gerald does not really want such a permanent domestic space, preferring to let life take its course and to drift from one location to another until the funds run out. Sophia, on the other hand, seeks a more stable domesticity, with the sense of at-homeness provided by her Bursley life, though not its homebound oppressiveness. After a brief stay in Paris, the couple travels to Auxerre, as Gerald is eager to watch a public execution scheduled to take place there. Gerald promptly leaves Sophia alone in the ghastly Hotel de Vézelay, while he goes off to enjoy the festivities. As she watches the procession of the prisoner and the frenzy of the crowd from her hotel room window, Sophia has her first real insight into her own condition—a new bride with an unreliable husband, alone in a foreign country, having severed all ties with her family and community—and draws a parallel between herself and the condemned man:

Sophia waited, horror-struck. She saw nothing but the gleaming triangle of metal that was suspended high above the prone, attendant victim. She felt like a lost soul, torn too soon from shelter, and exposed forever to the worst hazards of destiny. Why was she in this strange, incomprehensible town, foreign and inimical to her, watching with agonized glance this cruel obscene spectacle? Her sensibilities were all a bleeding mass of wounds. Why? Only yesterday, and she had been an innocent, timid creature in Bursley, in Axe, a foolish creature who deemed the concealment of letters a supreme excitement. Either that day or this day was not real. Why was she imprisoned alone in that odious, indescribably odious hotel, with no one to soothe and comfort her, and carry her away? (314)

Sophia’s horror is partly a reaction to the execution—and partly a realization that she has married a man who would take her to such a place on her honeymoon and then leave her to her own devices. The Hotel de Vézelay is by far the most terrifying of the hotels Bennett presents in his novels. Lacking even the veneer of culture or hospitality, it houses the mob mentality of the voyeuristic crowd gathered to see the spectacle that has drawn them to the town. Yet it is in her brief stay at this hotel that Sophia realizes that Bursley is no longer her home and that Gerald will not be able to create a new home for her. Instead, she must learn to think of herself and her life in less absolute terms.
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Her identification with the prisoner indicates both Sophia’s feelings of vulnerability in her situation, and the sacrifice of herself that she is preparing to make. As they suffer for their respective crimes, both she and the “prone, attendant victim” take on Christlike qualities (“Her sensibilities were all a bleeding mass of wounds”). Sophia’s terror here will be replaced later by marked self-sufficiency, as she builds a thriving hotel business without experience, training, or financial support from others, but it is in this brief interlude at the Hotel de Vézelay that Sophia understands what it means to attempt to establish identity, beyond her material conditions, and accepts that challenge.

Unlike some of Bennett’s other characters, Sophia lacks the freedom of movement or the financial independence that might allow her to take her situation in stride. Another Bursley native, Edward Henry (“Denry”), the hero of both The Card and The Regent, offers a strong contrast here. In The Regent, he is drawn from Bursley by the excitement of London—and builds his life there with Wilkins’s, the most exclusive hotel in the city, as his base. But while Edward Henry can move back and forth with ease between Bursley and London (leaving his wife, mother, and three children behind on his trips to the city), Sophia has no such luxury. Secure in his own identity, Edwin Henry is free to play with it in the space of London’s hotels and to experiment with ideas of himself and the spaces that suit him, as he works, more or less on a whim, to build the Regent Theatre. He only, briefly, brings his two lives together when he fears becoming romantically involved with the actress Elsie April, employing his wife and family as a safeguard, though still keeping them separate from his London existence. For Sophia the stakes of leaving Bursley are much higher. She leaves her childhood home with no thought that she could or might come back. There is no part of her endeavor that is not marked by the realization that success is necessary not merely to avoid embarrassment, but to survive.

Sophia and Gerald’s squandering of Gerald’s inheritance is traced in their movement from the resort hotels of France to cheap, run-down rooms—and ultimately, for Sophia, to a convalescence at Madame Foucault’s, after Gerald, finally broke, abandons her. This dubious establishment, where rooms are rented no questions asked reveals the underside of the hotel business, where prostitution, illicit sex, and other criminal activities thrive. It is here that Sophia first finds herself serving as de facto manager of room rentals and guests, and begins her transition from
customer to proprietor of a hotel establishment. While she has rejected the dreariness of the domestic life in Bursley chosen by her sister, and abandoned hopes of resuscitating her ill-fated marriage, Sophia, housing men whose wives have been sent out of Paris while the city is under siege, finds herself acting in the capacity of wife and homemaker to these “siege widowers.” The men who find themselves in Sophia’s care are grateful for her meticulous attention to their needs and idealize Sophia and their own domestic situation:

The four men appreciated their paradise. In them developed that agreeable feeling of security which solitary males find only under the roof of a landlady who is at once prompt, honest, and a votary of cleanliness. . . . Quite naturally they came to regard her as the paragon and miracle of women. They endowed her with every fine quality. According to them there had never been such a woman in the history of mankind; there could not have been! . . . In short, Sophia was perfect for them, an impossible woman. Whatever she did was right. (379)

As hotel matron, Sophia does much of the same work that would be required of her as a wife or mother, but in a professional, rather than a familial context. She refuses the requests of these boarders only when they take the form of sexual propositions, which she firmly, but professionally, declines. In choosing to run such an establishment, and avoiding social or romantic engagement with those around her, Sophia attempts to close herself from scrutiny, and to limit her curiosity about those she serves to the basic external facts she needs to confidently rent her rooms.

Her self-containment becomes even more apparent when Sophia decides to buy a small pension, previously run by an English couple who have failed to manage their finances properly and must abandon the business. She purchases the Pension Frensham and runs it with marked success for over three decades:

Sophia’s sole interest was in her profits. The excellence of her house was firmly established. . . . Often she had to refuse guests. She naturally did so with a certain distant condescension. Her manner to guests increased in stiff formality; and she was excessively firm with undesirables. . . . She was a landlady. She was the landlady: efficient, stylish, diplomatic, and tremendously expe-
There was no trickery, no baseness of Parisian life that she was not acquainted with. She could not be startled and she could not be swindled.  

Sophia steps into a role previously occupied by the original Mrs. Frensham, but her guests do not register a distinction:

She was known as Mrs. Frensham. Across the balconies of two windows the Frenshams had left a gilded sign, “Pension Frensham,” and Sophia had not removed it. She often explained that her name was not Frensham; but in vain. Every visitor inevitably and persistently addressed her according to the sign. It was past the general comprehension that the proprietress of the Pension Frensham might bear another name than Frensham.

Sophia’s seamlessly occupying the roles of Parisian hotel manager and “Mrs. Frensham” illuminates both identity’s mutability and its fixed nature—which remains wholly un tarnished by any inauthenticity in the life she has chosen. More regular guests take pride in knowing Sophia’s “real” name, one of them (Mr. Mardon, who will ultimately purchase the hotel) causing Sophia to be identified by Matthew Peel-Swynnerton, a Bursley native, who happens to be staying at the pension. Matthew recognizes Sophia’s married name of “Scales” from local Bursley legend, and is genuinely taken aback at the magnitude of his discovery. “‘Well, well!’ he thought. ‘Of all the queer things—!’ At last he had encountered something really strange in the spectacle of existence. It had fallen to him to discover the legendary woman who had fled from Bursley before he was born, and of whom nobody knew anything” (427). But while it is easy to understand his realization seems momentous to the young man, aside from her physical location within Paris and her profession, Peel-Swynnerton has discovered nothing about Sophia, who has steadfastly concealed her inner life from those around her, as she has built up psychological as well as financial reserves.

In casting herself as hotel manager, Sophia assumes the authorial role, separating herself from the other characters, who she sees as interchangeable.

What struck Sophia was the astounding similarity of her guests. They all asked the same questions, made the same exclamations, went out on the same excursions, returned with the same judge-
ments, and exhibited the same unimpaired assurance that for-
eigners were really very peculiar people. They never seemed to
advance in knowledge. There was a constant stream of explorers
from England who had to be set on their way to the Louvre or
the Bon Marché. (412)

This interchangeability renders irrelevant to Sophia the question of how
much can be known about the guests. In this regard, she is quite different
from the hotel managers in Bennett’s other novels, who similarly recog-
nize the need to respect their customers’ privacy, but do so because they
recognize their individuality. This difference reflects the fact that Sophia
is female, needs to support herself, and, because of her experiences, is
extremely defensive, whereas Bennett’s other hoteliers are male, wealthy,
and love hotels for their own sake. Sophia runs her business successfully,
but this life in which she believes herself to be permanently fixed, is, in
the end, quite easily disposed of, sold to the dubious Mr. Mardon.

The final hotel in the novel is the Rutland, the Buxton hotel that So-
pia and Constance visit while the Bursley home is temporarily without
a servant. While Constance is uneasy here and anxious to return home,
Sophia is at ease, though humbled to realize that it is finer than her own
hotel, and that she is not the worldly woman she has imagined herself to
be, but in fact has been in “a groove as deep as Constance’s” (Old 502)
for thirty years. Bennett’s point is not only that the distinction between
the women is extreme, but that it can be attributed neither simply to
life experience nor to personal bent alone. The hotel neither shapes nor
conceals identities, but merely provides a space for their expression.

The Rutland is far from a perfect solution to the loss of the Baines’
home—which has been slipping away gradually, first as the druggist
Critchlow takes over the half of the house in which the Baines had run
a tailoring shop, and finally as the Midland Clothiers Company declines
to renew Constance’s lease. While Sophia can accept life in the Rutland,
acknowledging, as she does, that she made mistakes in leaving her home
and family so lightly, but finding that hotel life, for better or worse, suits
her, Constance cannot separate herself from the physical home. While the
hotel offers the protection of anonymity, it also demands an understanding
of identity as independent of material circumstances. Sophia has learned
to maneuver in this world, Constance has not.

Sophia’s transition from guest to manager to owner and then again to
guest allows her to encompass the larger world of the hotel, to encounter
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these spaces in England and France in their various incarnations. She is certainly altered by these encounters, but her identity is not fundamentally transformed. In this novel, the hotel becomes a new and entirely distinctive space. At first a place of mystery and foreign influence, it soon grows familiar and comfortable, a place over which Sophia is able to exercise a degree of control. The temporary connections made in hotels take on enduring meaning as they form individual and collective lives in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, revealing rather than reshaping identity.

Hotel cosmopolitics

The favorite slander of the narrow nationalist against us cosmopolitans is that we are rootless; what my father believed in, however, was a rooted cosmopolitanism, or, if you like, a cosmopolitan patriotism. Like Gertrude Stein, he thought there was no point in roots if you couldn’t take them with you. (Appiah 91)

Like contemporary theorists of cosmopolitanism such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, David Hollinger, and Mitchell Cohen, Bennett and his characters struggle to understand what it means to maintain “rooted” or autonomous identities while at the same time opening themselves to participation in a larger sphere. In Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation (1998), Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah bring together a wide sample of scholarship on cosmopolitanism, but all of it shares a sense of the burden that is assumed by taking seriously cosmopolitanism’s premises. We live in a world full of all different kinds of people and must constantly assess the interests of individuals or groups—and perhaps most frequently, nations—against a larger concept of what is right; to establish one’s loyalty to a particular place is both to define oneself more clearly and to risk limiting an understanding of the complexities of identity. Bruce Robbins summarizes the problem in its most general terms:

Yes, we are connected to the earth—but not to “a” place on it, simple and self-evident as the surroundings we see when we open our eyes. We are connected to all sorts of places, casually if not always consciously, including many that we have never traveled to. . . . It is frightening to think how little progress has been made in turning invisibly determining and often exploitative
connections into conscious and self-critical ones, how far we remain from mastering the sorts of allegiance, ethics, and action that might go with our complex and multiple belonging. (3)

Bennett’s novels suggest that the tasks Robbins and others define might be a good deal less arduous than often supposed—at least under the proper circumstances (the insulation of wealth and the resources it makes available are lost on no one in Bennett’s works). As a result, Bennett prefigures many of the debates raised by today’s critics. The Racksoles are the epitome of the “rooted cosmopolitanism” suggested by Kwame Anthony Appiah. Their desire to experience England—and the international world that the Grand Babylon opens to them—is not a rejection of their American roots, but its deepest expression. Both Evelyn Orchem and Sophia Baines find themselves most at home in a hotel environment that allows them to interact freely with people of all different backgrounds and nationalities, appreciating rather than resisting difference and exchange. Where “the humanist requires us to put our differences aside,” Appiah writes, “the cosmopolitan insists that sometimes it is the differences we bring to the table that make it rewarding to interact at all” (111). In shaping his narratives as he does, Bennett suggests a number of the difficulties outlined by theorists of cosmopolitanism—how to deal with hybridity, for example, or foreignness, or the dangers of deception—need not be quite so difficult, so long as identity is properly understood as inherently (rather than circumstantially) cosmopolitan. In other words, the indeterminacy of the hotel space suggests that while conditions retain their shaping power, finally, cosmopolitan experience depends on independent personal development, with or without the kind of worldly exposure generally associated with the term.

The use of the hotel space as a synecdoche for modern life underscores the more sophisticated and urbane qualities of Bennett’s work, which was largely influenced by the literary traditions of France and Russia. Nonetheless, Kurt Koenigsberger (one of the few to recognize this worldly undercurrent) observes that “despite his deep sympathies for things Continental and a mild contempt for narrowly English cultural and political views, Arnold Bennett and his work came to be regarded as essentially provincial over the course of the twentieth century” (131). As I try to suggest, it is time this reading were refined. While Bennett’s characters may sometimes give the impression of bourgeois indifference
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to those of lower class or status, as they build their domestic, cosmopolitan lives, they also practice a respect for individual privacy and inscrutability that points toward a new understanding of what it means to be at home in the modern world. The domesticity Bennett maps out is both familiar and new—promising a respite from modern life and a model for living it.

Notes

1. Hotels and boarding houses feature in any number of Bennett’s works, and they are notably front and center in The Card (1911) and The Regent (1913). In the earlier work, main character Edward Henry (Denry) stays in a boarding house in Llandudno and honeymoons in a high-class Swiss hotel; in The Regent, he stays for an extended period at Wilkins’s, the most elite hotel in London. The eponymous heroine of Hilda Lessways (1911) runs a boarding house for a time, and hotels also enter into Bennett’s more playful works, such as the short stories collected in The Loot of Cities (1905). Clearly for Bennett these establishments are not a special or unusual setting, but a basic feature of modern life.

2. Derek Taylor’s Ritzy: British hotels 1837-1987 provides a detailed account of British hotels during this period (as well as before and after). Elaine Denby’s Grand Hotels: Illusion and Reality examines the social and architectural history of luxury hotels throughout the world. A more concrete account of the economic and social history of British hotels (and their relation to railway development and tourism) is offered by Jack Simmons, who traces these developments in “Railways, Hotels, and Tourism in Great Britain 1839-1914.”

3. Betsy Klimasmith considers the hotel space in Edith Wharton’s The Custom of the Country and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short fiction. Susan Koprince also turns her attention to Wharton, while Ayako Muneuchi (and others) are intrigued by the hotel rooms of Jean Rhys’s Good Morning, Midnight. Elizabeth Bowen, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, and Marcel Proust similarly draw the attention of the hotel-minded.

4. Koestenbaum’s unclassifiable book contains two separate works within it: a wide-ranging meditation on hotels and the mental and physical spaces they evoke, and a novel titled Hotel Women, set in a Hollywood hotel of this name, and featuring Liberace and Lana Turner as main characters struggling with what it means to be “at hotel.” The two works run concurrently down either side of the page and challenge the reader to attempt to occupy both simultaneously—and to think critically about the many literary, philosophical, and ethical implications of the hotel and its representation in art.
5. Orcham was modeled by Bennett on George Reeves-Smith, long-time manager of the Savoy. There is thus an element of the roman à clef in Imperial Palace.

6. The impressive organization that Orcham has built is impressive to his shareholders only on the basis of its profits, not of any less tangible results. Yet this does not mean that Orcham’s own genuine (and non-commercial) devotion to the hotel is not a critical part of the operation—or that it does not have a large part in enabling the positive results investors seek, directly or indirectly.

Elizabeth Outka’s discussion of Selfridges department store highlights the ways in which this establishment caters to its customers precisely by treating them not as customers but as guests. The “authentic” reality that is marketed in Selfridges is an ideal home, one in which its customers—and especially its female customers—may do as they please, without any responsibilities or obligations:

Visitors were given small silver keys on opening day, with the wish that they would feel “at home” in Selfridges. . . . At the top of the store, elaborate and luxurious rooms of rest awaited the guest: reception rooms, a library, the Silence Room, and the Retiring Room, each with special attendants ready to serve the visitors. . . . There were even special rooms for different European guests, decorated in the décor of the visitors’ home country and staffed by native speakers so “visitors to town can find themselves a welcome and at home.” . . . Of course, Selfridges did not re-create the home but presented a vision of a new and improved home, one that had the markers of comforting familiarity yet promised to improve on the reality. (113)

The ultimate profitability of Selfridges, as its “guests” know (willingly suspend their disbelief though they may), is determined not by goodwill but by sales.

7. Sharon Crozier-De Rosa outlines the frustrations that faced “new women” like Bennett’s Hilda Lessways, and, one might argue, like Sophia, who sought professional lives outside of domestic drudgery, only to be confined to “female” jobs (Hilda, too, runs a boarding house for a time) that offered little if any possibility of advancement. The relevance of such struggles in understanding this transitional period of female professionalization is evident, as Crozier–De Rosa argues, from Hilda Lessways’s immediate popularity.
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Works cited


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