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ALAIN DE BOTTON THE ART OF TRAVEL

THE TOP TEN BESTSELLER

ALAIN DE BOTTON
THE ART OF TRAVEL

'Lucid, fluid, uplifting ... it can enrich and improve your life' *Sunday Times*

II

On Travelling Places

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The service station

The airport

The plane

The train

Guides

Charles Baudelaire

Edward Hopper

1.

Overlooking the motorway between London and Manchester, in a flat, featureless expanse of country, stands a single-storey glass and red-brick service station. In its forecourt hangs a giant laminated flag that advertises to motorists and to sheep in an adjacent field a photograph of a fried egg, two sausages and a peninsula of baked beans.

I arrived at the service station towards evening. The sky was turning red in the west and in a row of ornamental trees to the side of the building birds could be heard against the incessant bass note of the traffic. I had been on the road for two hours, alone with clouds forming on the horizon, with the lights of commuter towns beyond the grass banks, with motorway bridges and the silhouettes of overtaking cars and coaches. I felt dizzy stepping out of my craft, which gave off a series of clicks as it cooled, as if paper clips were being dropped through the bonnet. My senses needed to readjust themselves to firm land, to the wind and to the discreet sounds of night drawing in.

The restaurant was brightly illuminated and exaggeratedly warm. Large photographs of coffee cups, pastries and hamburgers hung on the walls. A waitress was refilling a drinks dispenser. I slid a damp tray along a metal runway, bought a bar of chocolate and an orange juice and sat by a window that made up one wall of the building. Vast panes were held in place by strips of beige putty, into whose chewy clamminess I was tempted to dig my nails. Beyond the window, the grass sloped down to the motorway, where traffic ran in silent, elegant symmetry along six lanes, the differences in makes and colours of cars disguised by the gathering darkness, leaving a uniform

ribbon of red and white diamonds extending into infinity in two directions.

There were few other customers in the service station. A woman was idly rotating a teabag in a cup. A man and two small girls were eating hamburgers. A bearded elderly man was doing a crossword. No one was talking. There was an air of reflection, of sadness too – only heightened by the faint sound of piped upbeat music and the enamel smile of a woman about to bite into a bacon sandwich in a photograph above the counter. In the middle of the room, hanging from the ceiling and dancing nervously in the breeze of an air vent, was a cardboard box announcing an offer of free onion rings with every hotdog. Misshapen and upside down, the box seemed only a rough approximation of what head office must have stipulated, like those milestones in distant parts of the Roman Empire whose form strayed from the designs of the centre.

The building was architecturally miserable, it smelt of frying oil and lemon-scented floor polish, the food was glutinous and the tables were dotted with islands of dried ketchup from the meals of long-departed travellers, and yet something about the scene moved me. There was poetry in this forsaken service station, perched on the ridge of the motorway far from all habitation. Its appeal made me think of certain other equally and unexpectedly poetic travelling places – airport terminals, harbours, train stations and motels – and the work of a nineteenth-century writer and a twentieth-century painter he had inspired, who had, in different ways, been unusually alive to the power of the liminal travelling place.

2.

Charles Baudelaire was born in Paris in 1821. From an early age, he felt uncomfortable at home. His father died when he was five, and a year later his mother married a man her son disliked. He was sent to a succession of boarding schools from which he was repeatedly expelled for insubordination. In adulthood, he could find no place in bourgeois society. He quarrelled with his mother and stepfather, wore theatrical black capes and hung reproductions of Delacroix's *Hamlet* lithographs around his bedroom. In his diary, he complained of suffering from 'that appalling disease: the Horror of Home' and from a 'feeling of loneliness, from earliest childhood. Despite the family – and with school friends especially – a feeling of being destined to an eternally solitary life'.

He dreamt of leaving France for somewhere else, somewhere far away, on another continent, with no reminders of 'the everyday' – a term of horror for the poet; somewhere with warmer weather; a place, in the words of the legendary couplet from *L'Invitation au voyage*, where everything would be 'ordre et beauté/Luxe, calme et volupté'. But he was aware of the difficulties. He had once left the leaden skies of northern France and returned dejected. He had set off on a journey to India. Three months into the sea crossing, the ship had run into a storm and had stopped in Mauritius for repairs. It was the lush, palm-fringed island that Baudelaire had dreamt of. But he could not shake off a feeling of lethargy and sadness and suspected that India would be no better. Despite efforts by the captain to persuade him otherwise, he insisted on sailing back to France.

The result was a lifelong ambivalence towards travel. In *Le*

Voyage, he sarcastically imagined the accounts of travellers returned from afar:

We saw stars
And waves; we saw sand too;
And, despite many crises and unforeseen disasters
We were often bored, just as we are here.

And yet he remained sympathetic to the wish to travel and observed its tenacious hold on him. No sooner had he returned to Paris from his Mauritian trip than he began to dream once again of going somewhere else, noting: 'Life is a hospital in which every patient is obsessed with changing beds. This one wants to suffer in front of the radiator, and that one thinks he'd get better if he was by the window.' He was, nevertheless, unashamed to count himself among the patients: 'It always seems to me that I'll be well where I am not and this question of moving is one that I'm forever entertaining with my soul.' Sometimes Baudelaire dreamt of going to Lisbon. It would be warm there and he would, like a lizard, gain strength from stretching himself out in the sun. It was a city of water, marble and light, conducive to thought and calm. But almost from the moment he conceived of this Portuguese fantasy, he would start to wonder if he might not be happier in Holland. Then again, why not Java or else the Baltic or even the North Pole, where he could bathe in shadows and watch comets fly across the Arctic skies? The destination was not really the point. The true desire was to get away, to go, as he concluded, 'Anywhere! Anywhere! So long as it is out of the world!'

Baudelaire honoured reveries of travel as a mark of those

noble questing souls whom he described as 'poets', who could not be satisfied with the horizons of home even as they appreciated the limits of other lands, whose temperaments oscillated between hope and despair, childlike idealism and cynicism. It was the fate of poets, like Christian pilgrims, to live in a fallen world while refusing to surrender their vision of an alternative, less compromised realm.

Against such ideas, one detail stands out in Baudelaire's biography: that he was, throughout his life, strongly drawn to harbours, docks, railway stations, trains, ships and hotel rooms; that he felt more at home in the transient places of travel than in his own dwelling. When he was oppressed by the atmosphere in Paris, when the world seemed 'monotonous and small', he would leave, 'leave for leaving's sake', and travel to a harbour or train station, where he would inwardly exclaim:

Carriage, take me with you! Ship, steal me away from here!
Take me far, far away. Here the mud is made of our tears!

In an essay on the poet, T. S. Eliot proposed that Baudelaire had been the first nineteenth-century artist to give expression to the beauty of modern travelling places and machines. 'Baudelaire ... invented a new kind of romantic nostalgia,' wrote Eliot, 'the *poésie des départs*, the *poésie des salles d'attente*.' And, one might add, the *poésie des stations-service* and the *poésie des aéroports*.

3.

When feeling sad at home, I have often boarded a train or airport bus and gone to Heathrow, where, from an observation

gallery in Terminal 2 or from the top floor of the Renaissance Hotel along the north runway, I have drawn comfort from the sight of the ceaseless landing and take-off of aircraft.

In the difficult year of 1859, in the aftermath of the *Fleurs du mal* trial and the breakup with his mistress, Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire visited his mother at her home in Honfleur and, for much of his two-month stay, occupied a chair at the quayside, watching vessels docking and departing. 'Those large and beautiful ships, invisibly balanced (hovering) on tranquil waters, those hardy ships that look dreamy and idle, don't they seem to whisper to us in silent tongues: When shall we set sail for happiness?'

Seen from a car park beside 09L/27R, as the north runway is known to pilots, the 747 appears at first as a small brilliant white light, a star dropping towards earth. It has been in the air for twelve hours. It took off from Singapore at dawn. It flew over the Bay of Bengal, Delhi, the Afghan desert and the Caspian Sea. It traced a course over Romania, the Czech Republic and southern Germany, before beginning its descent, so gently that few passengers would have noticed a change of tone in the engines, above the grey-brown, turbulent waters off the Dutch coast. It followed the Thames over London, turned north near Hammersmith (where the flaps began to unfold), pivoted over Uxbridge and straightened course over Slough. From the ground, the white light gradually takes shape as a vast two-storeyed body with four engines suspended like earrings beneath implausibly long wings. In the light rain, clouds of water form a veil behind the plane on its matronly progress towards the airfield. Beneath it are the suburbs of Slough. It is three in the afternoon. In detached villas, kettles are being filled. A television is on in a living room with the sound switched off. Green and red shadows

move silently across walls. The everyday. And above Slough is a plane that a few hours ago was flying over the Caspian Sea. Caspian Sea–Slough: the plane a symbol of worldliness, carrying within itself a trace of all the lands it has crossed; its eternal mobility offering an imaginative counterweight to feelings of stagnation and confinement. This morning the plane was over the Malay peninsula, a place-name in which there linger the smells of guava and sandalwood. And now, a few metres above the earth which it has avoided for so long, the plane appears motionless, its nose raised upwards, seeming to pause before its sixteen rear wheels meet the tarmac with a blast of smoke that makes manifest its speed and weight.

On a parallel runway, an A340 ascends for New York and, over the Staines reservoir, retracts its flaps and wheels, which it won't require again until the descent over the white clapboard houses of Long Beach, 3,000 miles and eight hours of sea-and-cloud away. Visible through the heat haze of turbofans, other planes wait to start their journeys. All across the airfield, planes are on the move, their fins a confusion of colours against the grey horizon, like sails at a regatta.

Along the glass and steel back of Terminal 3 rest four giants, whose liveries indicate a varied provenance: Canada, Brazil, Pakistan, Korea. For a few hours, their wing-tips will lie only a few metres apart, until each set begins another journey into the stratospheric winds. As every ship turns into a gate, a choreographed dance begins. Trucks slip to the underbelly, black fuel hoses are fastened to the wings, a gangway bends its rectangular rubber lips over the fuselage. The doors of the holds are opened to disgorge battered aluminium cargo crates, perhaps containing fruit that only a few days ago hung from the branches of tropical

trees or vegetables that had their roots in the soil of high silent valleys. Two men in overalls set up a small ladder next to one engine and open its casing to reveal an intricate terrain of wires and small steel pipes. Sheets and pillows are lowered from the front of one cabin. Passengers disembark for whom this ordinary English afternoon will have a supernatural tinge.

Nowhere is the appeal of the airport more concentrated than in the television screens which hang in rows from terminal ceilings announcing the departure and arrival of flights and whose absence of aesthetic self-consciousness, whose workmanlike casing and pedestrian typefaces, do nothing to disguise their emotional charge or imaginative allure. Tokyo, Amsterdam, Istanbul. Warsaw, Seattle, Rio. The screens bear all the poetic resonance of the last line of James Joyce's *Ulysses*: at once a record of where the novel was written and, no less importantly, a symbol of the cosmopolitan spirit behind its composition: 'Trieste, Zurich, Paris.' The constant calls of the screens, some accompanied by the impatient pulsing of a cursor, suggest with what ease our seemingly entrenched lives might be altered, were we to walk down a corridor and on to a craft that in a few hours would land us in a place of which we had no memories and where no one knew our names. How pleasant to hold in mind, through the crevasses of our moods, at three in the afternoon when lassitude and despair threaten, that there is always a plane taking off for somewhere, for Baudelaire's 'Anywhere! Anywhere!': Trieste, Zurich, Paris.

4.

Baudelaire admired not only the places of departure and arrival, but also the machines of motion, in particular ocean-going ships.

He wrote of 'the profound and mysterious charm that arises from looking at a ship'. He went to see flat-bottomed boats, the 'caboteurs', in the Port Saint Nicolas in Paris and larger ships in Rouen and the Normandy ports. He marvelled at the technological achievements behind them, at how objects so heavy and multifarious could be made to move with elegance and cohesion across the seas. A great ship made him think of 'a vast, immense, complicated, but agile creature, an animal full of spirit, suffering and heaving all the sighs and ambitions of humanity'.

Similar sentiments may arise when looking at one of the larger species of aeroplane, it too a 'vast' and 'complicated' creature which defies its size and the chaos of the lower atmosphere to steer serenely across the firmament. Seeing one parked at a gate, dwarfing luggage carts and mechanics, one is induced to feel surprise, overriding any scientific explanation, at how such a thing might move – a few metres, let alone to Japan. Buildings, among the few man-made structures of comparable size, do not prepare us for a plane's agility or self-possession; for these buildings are cracked by slight movements of the earth, they leak air and water and lose parts of themselves to the wind.

Few seconds in life are more releasing than those in which a plane ascends to the sky. Looking out of a window from inside a machine standing stationery at the beginning of a runway, we face a vista of familiar proportions: a road, oil cylinders, grass and hotels with copper-tinted windows; the earth as we have always known it, where we make slow progress, even with the help of a car, where calf muscles and engines strain to reach the summit of hills, where, half a mile ahead or less, there is almost always a line of trees or buildings to restrict our view. Then suddenly, accompanied by the controlled rage of the

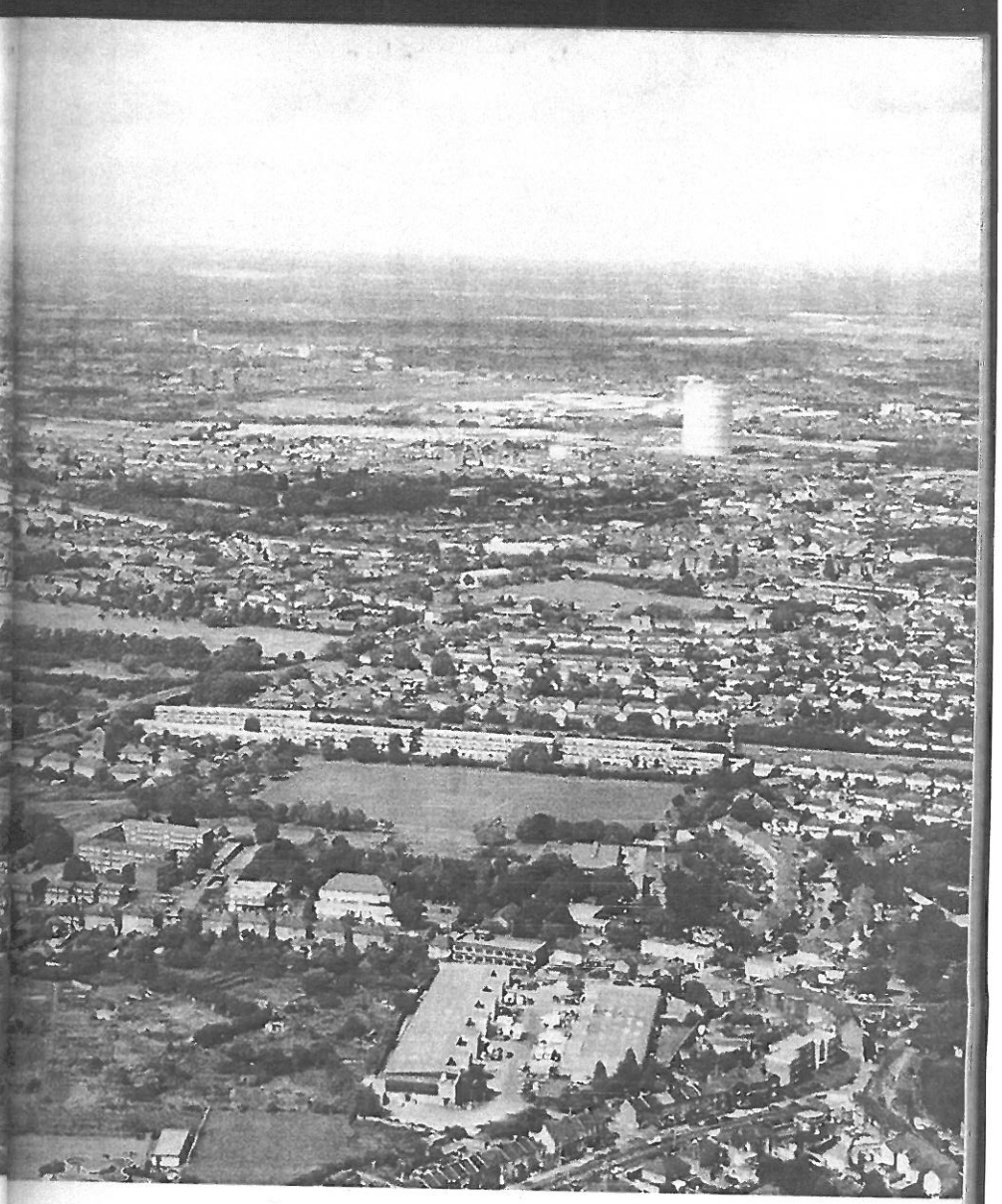
engines (with only a slight tremor from glasses in the galley), we rise fluently into the atmosphere and an immense horizon opens up across which we can wander without impediment. A journey which on earth would have taken an afternoon can be accomplished with an infinitesimal movement of the eye; we can cross Berkshire, visit Maidenhead, skirt over Bracknell and survey the M4.

There is psychological pleasure in this take-off too, for the swiftness of the plane's ascent is an exemplary symbol of transformation. The display of power can inspire us to imagine analogous, decisive shifts in our own lives; to imagine that we too might one day surge above much that now looms over us.

The new vantage point lends order and logic to the landscape: roads curve to avoid hills, rivers trace paths to lakes, pylons lead from power stations to towns, streets that from earth seemed laid out without thought emerge as well-planned grids. The eye attempts to match what it can see with what the mind knows should be there, like a reader trying to decipher a familiar book in a new language. Those lights must be Newbury, that road the A33 as it leaves the M4. And to think that all along, hidden from our sight, our lives were this small: the world we live in but almost never see; the way we must appear to the hawk and to the gods.

The engines show none of the effort required to take us to this place. They hang in the inconceivable cold, patiently and invisibly powering the craft, their sole requests, painted on their inner flanks in red letters, being that we not walk on them and feed them 'Oil only: D50TFI-S4', a message for a forthcoming set of men in overalls, 4,000 miles away and still asleep.

There is not much talk about the clouds visible up here. No



one seems to think it remarkable that somewhere above an ocean we are flying past a vast white candy-floss island which would have made a perfect seat for an angel or even God himself in a painting by Piero della Francesca. In the cabin, no one stands up to announce with requisite emphasis that, out of the window, *we are flying over a cloud*, a matter that would have detained Leonardo and Poussin, Claude and Constable.

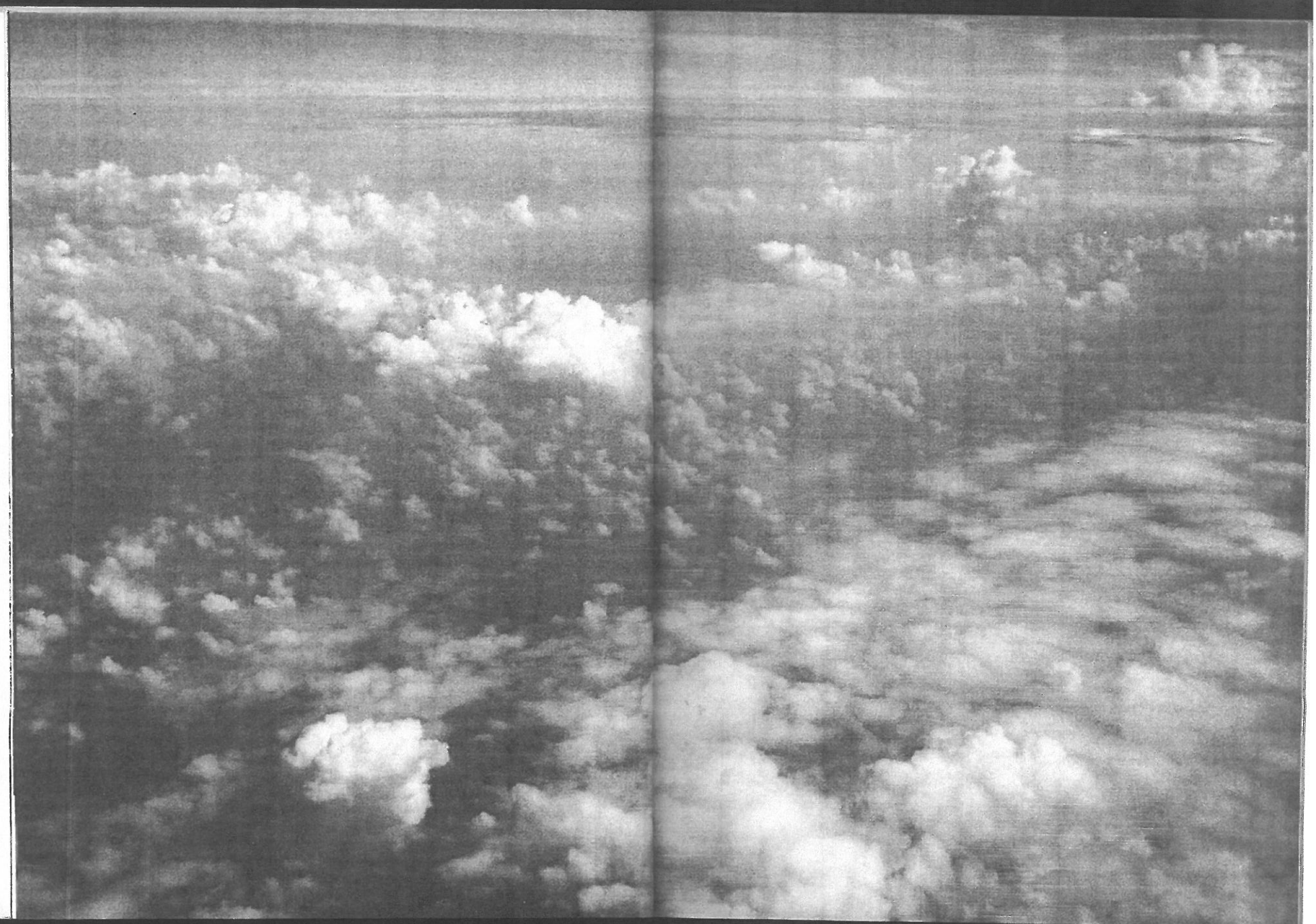
Food that, if sampled in a kitchen, would have been banal or even offensive, acquires a new taste and interest in the presence of the clouds (like a picnic of bread and cheese that delights us when eaten on a cliff-top above a pounding sea). With the in-flight tray, we make ourselves at home in this unhomely place: we appropriate the extraterrestrial landscape with the help of a chilled bread roll and a plastic tray of potato salad.

Our airborne companions outside the window look unexpected when scrutinized. In paintings and from the ground, they appear like horizontal ovaloids, but here they resemble giant obelisks made of piles of unsteady shaving foam. Their kinship with steam is clearer, they are more volatile, the product of something that may have just exploded and is still mutating. It remains perplexing that it would be impossible to sit on one.

Baudelaire knew how to love the clouds.

THE OUTSIDER

Tell me, whom do you love most, you enigmatic man: your father, your mother, your sister or your brother?
I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.
Your friends?
You're using a word I've never understood.



Your country?
I don't know where that might lie.
Beauty?
I would love her with all my heart, if only she were a goddess and immortal.
Money?
I hate it as you hate God.
Well then, what do *you love, you strange outsider?*
I love the clouds . . . the clouds that pass by . . . over there . . . over there . . . those lovely clouds!

The clouds usher in tranquillity. Below us are enemies and colleagues, the sites of our terrors and our griefs; all of them now infinitesimal, scratches on the earth. We may know this old lesson in perspective well enough, but rarely does it seem as true as when we are pressed against the cold plane window, our craft a teacher of profound philosophy – and a faithful disciple of the Baudelairean command:

Carriage, take me with you! Ship, steal me away from here!
Take me far, far away. Here the mud is made of our tears!

5.

There was, apart from the motorway, no road linking the service station to other places, no footpath even; it seemed not to belong to the city, nor to the country either, but rather to some third, travellers' realm, like a lighthouse at the edge of the ocean.

This geographical isolation enforced the atmosphere of solitude in the dining area. The lighting was unforgiving, bringing out pallor and blemishes. The chairs and seats, painted in childishly bright colours, had the strained jollity of a fake smile.

No one was talking, no one admitting to curiosity or fellow feeling. We gazed blankly past one another at the serving counter or out into the darkness. We might have been seated among rocks.

I remained in one corner, eating fingers of chocolate and taking occasional sips of orange juice. I felt lonely but, for once, this was a gentle, even pleasant kind of loneliness because, rather than unfolding against a backdrop of laughter and fellowship, in which I would suffer from a contrast between my mood and the environment, it had its locus in a place where everyone was a stranger, where the difficulties of communication and the frustrated longing for love seemed to be acknowledged and brutally celebrated by the architecture and lighting.

The collective loneliness brought to mind certain canvases by Edward Hopper which, despite the bleakness they depicted, were not themselves bleak to look at, but rather allowed their viewers to witness an echo of their own grief and thereby feel less personally persecuted and beset by it. It is perhaps sad books that best console us when we are sad, and to lonely service stations that we should drive when there is no one for us to hold or love.

In 1906, at the age of twenty-four, Hopper went to Paris and discovered the poetry of Baudelaire, whose work he was to read and recite throughout his life. The attraction is not hard to understand: there was a shared interest in solitude, in city life, in modernity, in the solace of the night and in the places of travel. In 1925, Hopper bought his first car, a second-hand Dodge, and drove from his home in New York to New Mexico, and from then on spent several months on the road every year, sketching and painting on the way, in motel rooms, in the backs

of cars, outdoors and in diners. Between 1941 and 1955, he crossed America five times. He stayed in Best Western motels, Del Haven Cabins, Alamo Plaza Courts and Blue Top Lodges. He was drawn to the neon signs that blink 'Vacancy, TV, Bath' from the side of the road, to the beds with their thin mattresses and crisp sheets, to the large windows that give out on to car parks or small patches of manicured lawn, to the mystery of the guests who arrive late and set off at dawn, the brochures for local attractions in the reception area and the laden housekeeping trolleys parked in silent corridors. For meals Hopper would stop at diners, at Hot Shoppe Mighty Mo Drive-Ins, Steak 'N' Shakes or Dog 'N' Sudds – and he would fill up his car at petrol stations displaying the logos of Mobil, Standard Oil, Gulf and Blue Sunoco.

And in these ignored, often derided landscapes, Hopper found poetry: the *poésie des motels*, the *poésie des petits restaurants au bord d'une route*. His paintings (and their resonant titles) suggest a consistent interest in five different kinds of travelling place:

1. HOTELS
   Hotel Room, 1931
   Hotel Lobby, 1943
   Rooms for Tourists, 1945
   Hotel by a Railroad, 1952
   Hotel Window, 1956
   Western Motel, 1957

2. ROADS AND PETROL STATIONS
   Road in Maine, 1914
   Gas, 1940

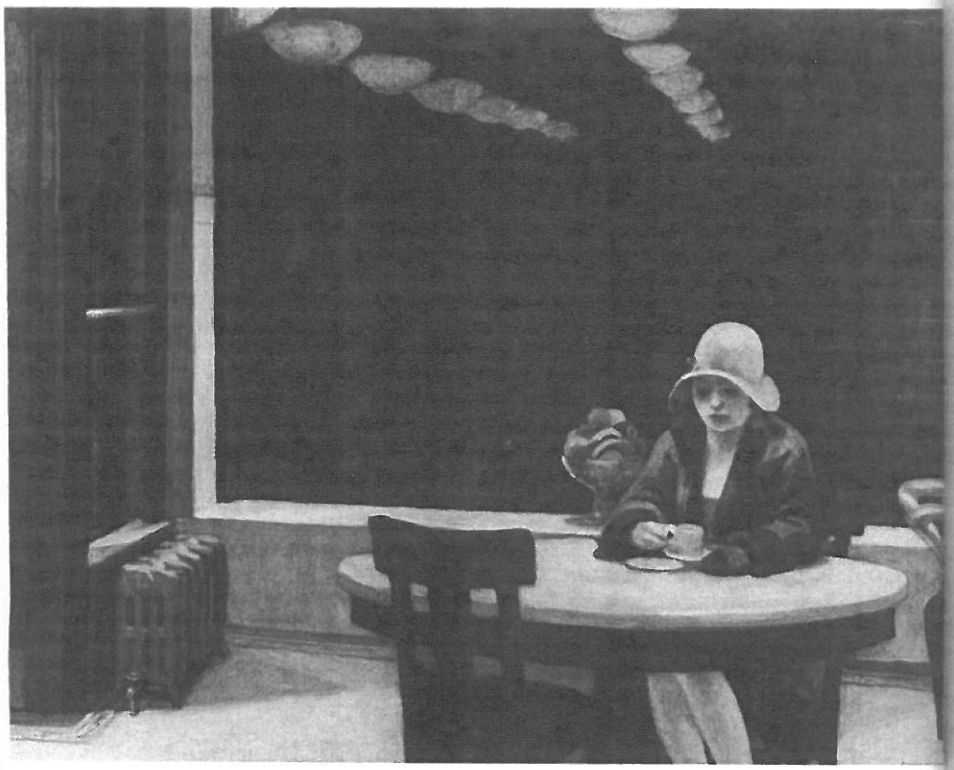
   Route 6, Eastham, 1941
   Solitude, 1944
   Four Lane Road, 1956

3. DINERS AND CAFETERIAS
   Automat, 1927
   Sunlight in a Cafeteria, 1958

4. VIEWS FROM TRAINS
   House by the Railroad, 1925
   New York, New Haven and Hartford, 1931
   Railroad Embankment, 1932
   Toward Boston, 1936
   Approaching a City, 1946
   Road and Trees, 1962

5. VIEWS INSIDE TRAINS AND OF ROLLING STOCK
   Night on the El Train, 1920
   Locomotive, 1925
   Compartment C, Car 293, 1938
   Dawn in Pennsylvania, 1942
   Chair Car, 1965

Loneliness is the dominant theme. Hopper's figures seem far from home; they sit or stand alone, looking at a letter on the edge of a hotel bed or drinking in a bar, they gaze out of the window of a moving train or read a book in a hotel lobby. Their faces are vulnerable and introspective. They have perhaps just left someone or been left; they are in search of work, sex or company, adrift in transient places. It is often night and through



Edward Hopper, *Automat*, 1927

the window lie the darkness and threat of the open country or of a strange city.

In *Automat* (1927), a woman sits alone drinking a cup of coffee. It is late and, to judge by her hat and coat, cold outside. The room seems large, brightly lit and empty. The décor is functional, with a stone-topped table, hard-wearing black wooden chairs and white walls. The woman looks self-conscious and slightly afraid, unused to sitting alone in a public place. Something appears to have gone wrong. She unwittingly invites the viewer to imagine stories for her, stories of betrayal or loss. She is trying not to let her hand shake as she moves the coffee cup to her lips. It may be eleven at night in February in a large North American city.

Automat is a picture of sadness – and yet it is not a sad picture. It has the power of a great melancholy piece of music. Despite the starkness of the furnishings, the location itself does not seem wretched. Others in the room may be on their own as well, men and women drinking coffee by themselves, similarly lost in thought, similarly distanced from society: a common isolation with the beneficial effect of lessening the oppressive sense within any one person that they are alone in being alone. In roadside diners and late-night cafeterias, hotel lobbies and station cafés, we may dilute a feeling of isolation in a lonely public place and hence rediscover a distinctive sense of community. The lack of domesticity, the bright lights and anonymous furniture may come as a relief from what are often the false comforts of home. It may be easier to give way to sadness here than in a living room with wallpaper and framed photos, the décor of a refuge that has let us down.

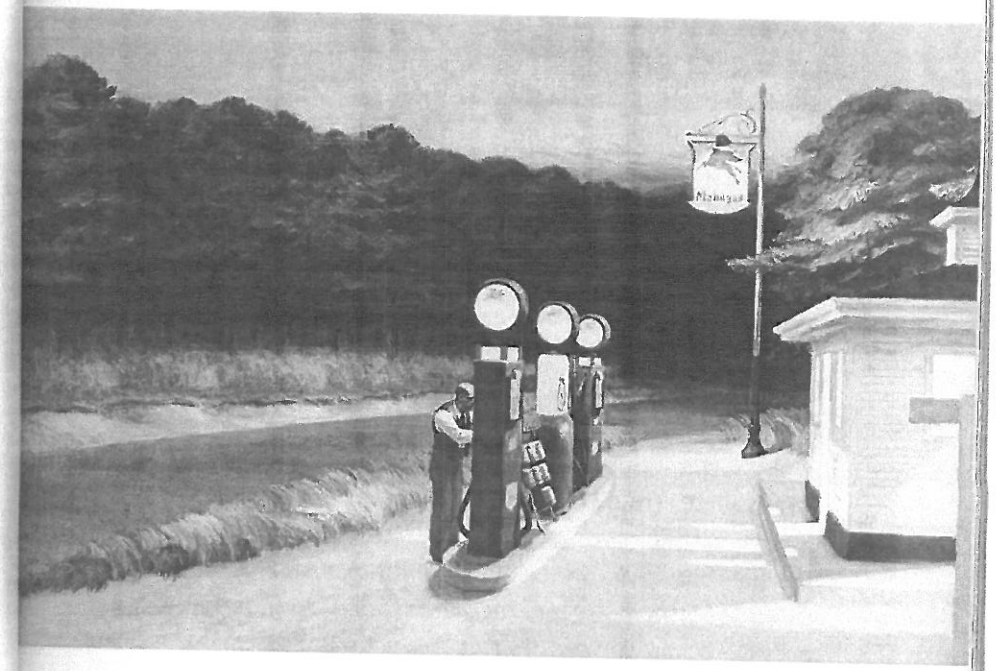
Hopper invites us to feel empathy with the woman in her

isolation. She seems dignified and generous, only perhaps a little too trusting, a little naïve – as if she has knocked against a hard corner of the world. Hopper puts us on her side, the side of the outsider against the insiders. The figures in Hopper's art are not opponents of home *per se*, it is simply that, in a variety of undefined ways, home appears to have betrayed them, forcing them out into the night or on to the road. The twenty-four-hour diner, the station waiting room and the motel are sanctuaries for those who have, for noble reasons, failed to find a home in the ordinary world, sanctuaries for those whom Baudelaire might have dignified with the honorific 'poets'.

6.

As the car slips along a winding road through the woods at dusk, its powerful headlamps momentarily light up whole sections of meadow and tree trunks, so brightly that the texture of the bark and individual stalks of grass can be made out in a clinical white light better suited to a hospital ward than woodland, and then dip them back into the undifferentiated murkiness as the car rounds the corner and the beams turn their attention to another patch of slumbering ground.

There are few other cars on the road, only an occasional set of lights moving in the opposite direction, away from the night. The car's instrument panel casts a purple glow over the darkened interior. Suddenly, in a clearing ahead, a floodlit expanse appears: a petrol station, the last before the road heads off into the longest, densest stretch of forest and night completes its hold over the land – *Gas* (1940). The manager has left his cabin to check the level on a pump. It is warm inside and light as brilliant as that of the midday sun washes across the forecourt.



Edward Hopper, *Gas*, 1940

A radio may be playing. There may be cans of oil neatly lined up against one wall, along with sweets, magazines, maps and window cloths.

Like *Automat*, painted thirteen years before it, *Gas* is a picture of isolation. A petrol station stands on its own in the impending darkness. But in Hopper's hands, the isolation is once again made poignant and enticing. The darkness that spreads like a fog from the right of the canvas, a harbinger of fear, contrasts with the security of the station. Against the backdrop of night and wild woods, in this last outpost of humanity, a sense of kinship may be easier to develop than in daylight in the city. The coffee machine and magazines, tokens of small human desires and vanities, stand in opposition to the wide non-human world outside, to the miles of forest in which branches crack occasionally under the footfall of bears and foxes. There is something touching in the suggestion – made in bold pink on the cover of one magazine – that we paint our nails purple this summer and in the invocation above the coffee machine to sample the aroma of freshly roasted beans. In this last stop before the road enters the endless forest, it is what we have in common with others that looms larger than what separates us.

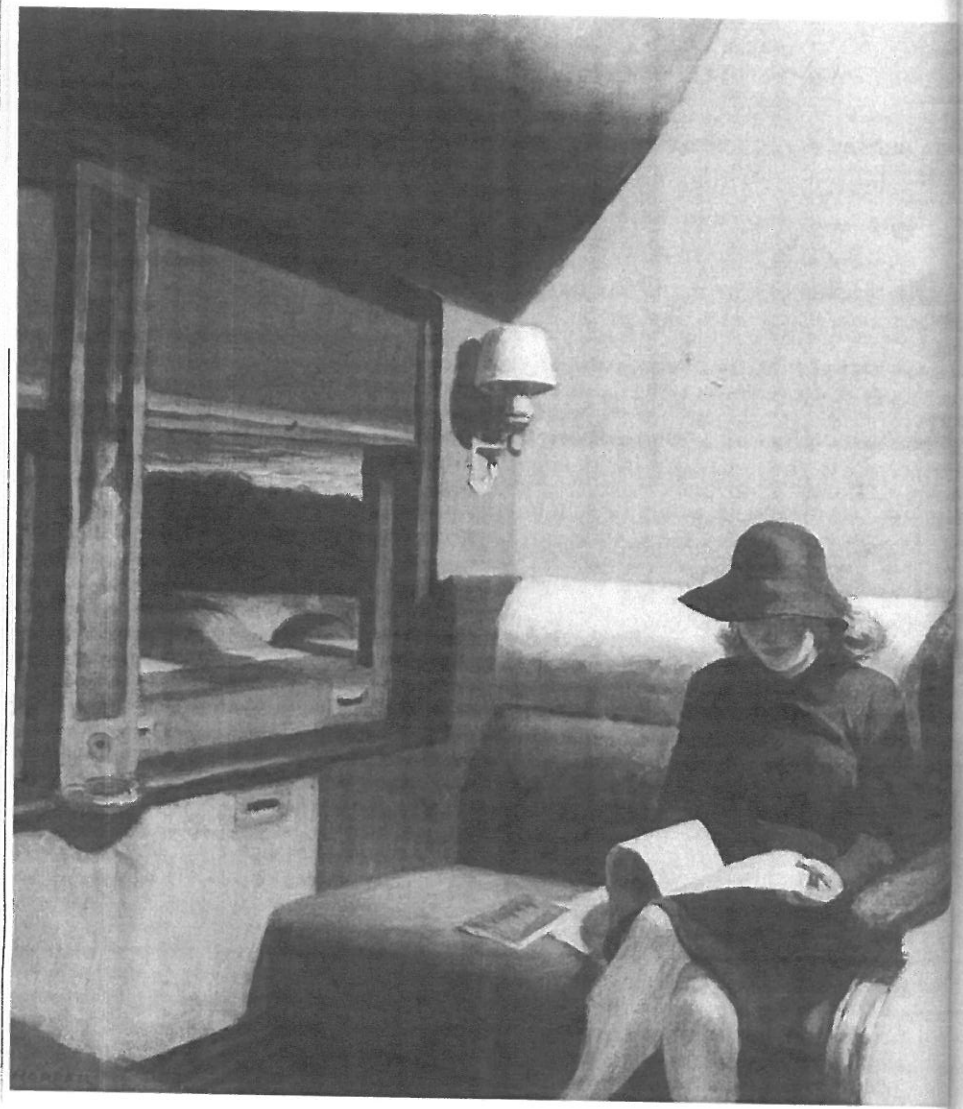
7.

Hopper also took an interest in trains. He was drawn to the atmosphere inside half-empty carriages making their way across a landscape: the silence that reigns inside while the wheels beat in rhythm against the rails outside, the dreaminess fostered by the noise and the view from the windows, a dreaminess in which we seem to stand outside our normal selves and

have access to thoughts and memories that may not arise in more settled circumstances. The woman in *Compartment C, Car 293* (1938) seems in such a frame of mind, reading her book and shifting her gaze between the carriage and the view.

Journeys are the midwives of thought. Few places are more conducive to internal conversations than a moving plane, ship or train. There is an almost quaint correlation between what is in front of our eyes and the thoughts we are able to have in our heads: large thoughts at times requiring large views, new thoughts new places. Introspective reflections which are liable to stall are helped along by the flow of the landscape. The mind may be reluctant to think properly when thinking is all it is supposed to do. The task can be as paralysing as having to tell a joke or mimic an accent on demand. Thinking improves when parts of the mind are given other tasks, are charged with listening to music or following a line of trees. The music or the view distracts for a time that nervous, censorious, practical part of the mind which is inclined to shut down when it notices something difficult emerging in consciousness and which runs scared of memories, longings, introspective or original ideas and prefers instead the administrative and the impersonal.

Of all modes of transport, the train is perhaps the best aid to thought: the views have none of the potential monotony of those on a ship or plane, they move fast enough for us not to get exasperated but slowly enough to allow us to identify objects. They offer us brief, inspiring glimpses into private domains, letting us see a woman at the precise moment when she takes a cup from a shelf in her kitchen, then carrying us on to a patio where a man is sleeping and then to a park where a child is catching a ball thrown by a figure we cannot see.



Edward Hopper, *Compartment C, Car 293*, 1938

On a journey across flat country, I think with a rare lack of inhibition about the death of my father, about an essay I am writing on Stendhal and about a mistrust that has arisen between two friends. Every time the mind goes blank, having hit on a difficult idea, the flow of my consciousness is assisted by the possibility of looking out of the window, locking on to an object and following it for a few seconds, until a new coil of thought is ready to form and can unravel without pressure.

At the end of hours of train-dreaming, we may feel we have been returned to ourselves – that is, brought back into contact with emotions and ideas of importance to us. It is not necessarily at home that we best encounter our true selves. The furniture insists that we cannot change because it does not; the domestic setting keeps us tethered to the person we are in ordinary life, but who may not be who we essentially are.

Hotel rooms offer a similar opportunity to escape our habits of mind. Lying in bed in a hotel, the room quiet except for the occasional swooshing of an elevator in the innards of the building, we can draw a line under what preceded our arrival, we can overfly great and ignored stretches of our experience. We can reflect upon our lives from a height we could not have reached in the midst of everyday business – subtly assisted in this by the unfamiliar world around us: by the small wrapped soaps on the edge of the basin, by the gallery of miniature bottles in the mini-bar, by the room-service menu with its promises of all-night dining and the view on to an unknown city stirring silently twenty-five floors below us.

Hotel notepads can be the recipients of unexpectedly intense, revelatory thoughts, taken down in the early hours while the breakfast menu ('to be hung outside before 3 a.m.') lies

unattended on the floor, along with a card announcing the next day's weather and the management's hopes for a peaceful night.

8.

The value we ascribe to the process of travelling, to wandering without reference to a destination, connects us, the critic Raymond Williams once proposed, to a broad shift in sensibilities dating back some 200 years, whereby the outsider came to seem morally superior to the insider:

> From the late 18th century onwards, it is no longer from the practice of community but from being a wanderer that the instinct of fellow-feeling is derived. Thus an essential isolation and silence and loneliness become the carriers of nature and community against the rigours, the cold abstinence, the selfish ease of ordinary society.
>
> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*

If we find poetry in the service station and motel, if we are drawn to the airport or train carriage, it is perhaps because, in spite of their architectural compromises and discomforts, in spite of their garish colours and harsh lighting, we implicitly feel that these isolated places offer us a material setting for an alternative to the selfish ease, the habits and confinement of the ordinary, rooted world.