

## Lots of Tiny Searches

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### The Ongoing Moment

by Geoff Dyer.  
Pantheon, 2005,  
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AT THE END of the acknowledgments section of his book on photography, *The Ongoing Moment*, Geoff Dyer makes an interesting statement. It's tucked away, probably not by accident, in the volume's final sentences, where presumably only his most manic readers will find it. He thanks his wife, Rebecca, for her multiple readings of the manuscript, and goes on to say that "charmingly, she kept saying she wished there was more of me in it. The reader will, I suspect, be glad that for once I didn't follow her advice."

This is not a throwaway comment but a genuine acknowledgment, in the finer-edged sense of the word. Dyer is acknowledging on the book's final page what even the most casual Dyer admirer has surely noticed by the end of the book's first: aside from one reference to Burning Man, the occasional self-deprecating remark about his own "research" or "diligence" or lack thereof, and a smattering of riotous riffs about, among other things, Alfred Stieglitz's "heavy-handed" overprocessing of Georgia O'Keefe's pudenda, there is precious little Geoff Dyer in the book. It is, however, difficult to imagine what such a casual Dyer enthusiast might look like. As I have found in lending out his books too indiscriminately—some peevisly dismantled or hastily flung back or both, the rest simply never returned—he's a writer with a voice so lavish there seems scant room for waffling. So Geoff Dyer's omission of Geoff Dyer in this book feels, at first, like a betrayal, and it's unsurprising that he feels he should acknowledge this.

Despite this omission—or perhaps because of it—*The Ongoing Moment* is one of his two finest and most characteristic books. *The Ongoing Moment*, replete with almost no Geoff Dyer, ranks alongside his masterpiece *Out of Sheer Rage*, which swarms with Geoff Dyer. *Out of Sheer Rage* is a face-hurtingly funny book about D. H. Lawrence that's simultaneously about Geoff Dyer's inability—or, more specifically, endless parade of diverting inabilities—to write a book about D. H. Lawrence. *The Ongoing Moment* couldn't be further removed. It's an electrical storm of idiosyncratic art criticism, the photographs he surveys lit up with lightning flashes of brilliance, but it at least pretends to be unswervingly about photography, not about Geoff Dyer.

To frame it in terms Dyer introduces, *Out of Sheer Rage* is first and foremost a book *by* Geoff Dyer, whereas *The Ongoing Moment* is first and foremost a book *about* photography. But these terms, borrowed from art critic Gilbert

Adair, are a Wittgenstein's ladder, extended only to be tossed aside. What makes Dyer's book so singular in the history of photography criticism is that he thinks this much-debated question—of whether a photograph's kernel is its by-ness or its about-ness—might no longer be worth asking. As Janet Malcolm puts it in her own study of photography, they are "two roads, one destination."

Dyer begins by taking seriously this by/about distinction, whereby conventional wisdom dictates that paintings, for example, are a matter of *by* and photographs are a matter of *about*. The book is ingeniously structured as a stroll through an imaginary photography museum, with galleries differentiated by subject matter and extended captions provided by Dyer. We are ushered from, for example, photographs of the blind to photographs of the night—from stairs to curbs to beds to benches and back, across photography's hundred and fifty years. Dyer would like us to take his pagination as a polite suggestion; ideally, the book would be read as a kind of art-critical Choose Your Own Adventure, with greater surface area and more intricate contiguities than a book allows. "In a sense," he writes,

the wonky structure of this book—the result of looking at different photographs of the same thing—assumes, as Arbus claimed, that the subject is paramount. But it assumes this in the hope that by showing the similarities between certain photographs, the differences between the photographers who have approached these same things will become clearer. Conceding the primacy of the subject affirms the distinction of the artist.

No sentence could better describe *The Ongoing Moment* itself. His scaffolding provides for two different but entangled projects. It's on one hand a novel way of mapping the history of photography: Diane Arbus shoots strangers on a bench and sees "a multiplicity of isolations"; Garry Winogrand looks at the same bench and comes up with "inexhaustible patterns of social flux"; André Kertész frames a broken bench as an emblem of "the observer's dilapidation," the ruined refuge of a vocational spectator. One of the most poignant of Edward Weston's final photographs, as he shuffled into Parkinsonian senescence, was of a broken bench.

On the other hand, conceding the primacy of the subject—which, at least prima facie, is the opposite of what he does with Lawrence—becomes a way for Dyer to come to a kind of stylistic resolution of his own love for these photographs, and by proxy of the other neurotic gambles that gather his life and work. There is, Dyer remarks, "a strange rule in photography, namely that we never see the last of anyone or anything." This observation is the

charge behind Dyer's elegantly scatter-shot way of using photographic reiterations of hats, park benches, overcoated figures, to stalk the inexhaustible—or, rather, his own dread of the exhaustible.

The book's title coins a phrase which, though he doesn't make this explicit, replies to Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous definition of photography as "the decisive moment." Dyer's point, to which we shall circle back, is that the photographic moment is not only decisive but ongoing; in fact, it's decisively ongoing. For Dyer, seeing photographs as nodes in a sprawling tradition has a tonic effect: where the decisive embalms, the ongoing is a balm. Walker Evans photographs some barber shops in the Thirties. Robert Frank, in the Fifties, photographs a barber shop through a door, reflecting upon Evans's photograph. There's a hat on the chair in Frank's shop, a nod to a hat in the Evans (Dyer's unerring eye and memory for detail, distilled through his congenital laziness, lend his readings of individual photographs a sporting ease). In the Eighties, Michael Ormerod photographs a closed barber shop. "The picture says: the barber shop photograph is over with. It's been done. Now it's closed." But, of course, here comes Peter Brown in the Nineties, photographing another closed barber shop and reopening the tradition, bursting this fake cul-de-sac. Photography as a subject—as subjectively inexhaustible—suits Dyer well: his worry to this point has been the possibility of exhaustion, and exhaustion's rancid bloom, despair.

*Out of Sheer Rage* uses his failure to write a "sober, academic" study of Lawrence as one more example of what he calls his "rheumatism of the will," his "chronic inability to see things through." He can't let himself see anything through for fear of the quietly desperate life blanketed by layers of the seen-through. "Once I have finished this book on Lawrence," he says, "depend on it, I will have no interest in him whatsoever. One begins writing a book about something because one is interested in that subject; one finishes writing a book in order to lose interest in that subject: the book itself is a record of this transition." He concludes this passage by conceding that such a reborn uninterest—an exorcism of the daemons—is, as it ever is, both his greatest hope and his greatest fear. "When nothing interests you any longer, I think to myself, looking at the place on the shelves which will one day be occupied by my book which is intermittently about Lawrence, then you can stop writing and be happy: then you can despair."

One trail of his book about photography thus runs from compulsion to inertia and back over the higher ground in between. Paul Strand was asked how he chose the things he photographed. "I don't," he said. "They choose me." Arbus and Cartier-Bresson said almost the same exact thing, Dyer footnotes. Winogrand was ultimately overcome, couldn't stop shooting—hundreds of thousands of undeveloped rolls, unprinted negatives—until he had driven himself mad. Weston, and Evans until he discovered the Polaroid in the twilight of his life, emptied themselves too successfully. It's not Winogrand's

fate that haunts Dyer.

In the Lawrence book, Dyer's end-run around despair—despair as defined by having seen things through, in both senses, too well, of having got rid of the drives that send him on absurd junkets to "beastly Oaxaca" and terrible Algiers—is sparked by the intermittent. What he must avoid at all costs is the looming threat of comprehensiveness, of the kind of sober, academic monograph that turns literature into "graveyards of dust." He wants to write about Lawrence but he doesn't want to kill Lawrence. But of course, as Dyer knows, there's no question of killing Lawrence: not even an army of ravenous Eagletons could kill Lawrence. Even if they strive for the panoptic, Lawrence's sheer multiplicity will confound them. Comprehensiveness—the decisive moment—is always an empty threat.

What this anxiety before the definitive displaces is an anxiety before the *urge* to be definitive. What consumes Dyer is the possibility that he might in turn consume his own despair-staving engagement with Lawrence. (Lawrence, as Dyer reminds us, suffered from consumption.) Rather than put forth his own academic study of Lawrence, Dyer would like to elide that line between imaginative and critical writing and involve his hero as Auden did in his elegy for Yeats, Brodsky did in his elegy for Auden, Heaney did in his elegy for Brodsky.

Thus his Lawrence book heaps back upon itself in an endless series of digressions and digressions from digressions, with devastatingly useful readings of Lawrence smuggled in on a strictly intermittent basis. What makes this so successful on the page-by-page front is that Dyer is just completely fucking hilarious; I can't imagine another writer whose musings on his own revolting skin ailments I can reread with almost alarming frequency. What makes this so successful with regard to the whole book—whose "real subject, the one that writing it was an attempt to evade," he confesses in the soaring decrescendo of the book's final pages, "is despair"—is that it explains Lawrence's farflung discontents and contents (again, both senses of the word) with reference to Dyer's own sheer anti-quietist, contented rage. Our most minor irritations—eczema, perhaps—reveal the seriousness of our life-affirming commitments, which commitments set the stage for our chance pleasures.

Our lives are actually made up of lots of tiny searches for things like a CD we are not sick of, an out-of-print edition of *Phoenix*, a picture of Lawrence that I saw when I was seventeen, another identical pair of suede shoes to the ones I am wearing now, even, I suppose a *cornetto integrale*, ideally, a place where they serve perfect *cornetti integrali* each day without fail. Add them together and these little things make up an epic quest, more than enough for one lifetime.

Which is why photography presents itself as the perfect vehicle "to see if *style* could be identified in and by—if it *inherited* in—content." That is, to see if the *about* might reveal the *by* in the way that in *Out of Sheer Rage* the *by* reveals the *about*—how Dyer's own restlessness readies us to understand Lawrence's peripathea. What is photog-

raphy if not “lots of tiny searches” for the decisive moment? What is an accumulation of these decisively tiny searches, then, if not the very idea of the ongoing moment? And what is an ongoing moment if not a description of the inexhaustible?

The Lawrence book avoids the murderously definitive through digression; the photography book serves the same end with his “wonky” structure of skipping from one element to the next in this vast repertoire of photographic subjects. It’s in this assembly that Dyer finds respite from the exhaustible, both in the solace of tradition—each generation remaps the roadside, reconfirms the indefatigability of the park bench—and in the near-disorder of photographs half-shuffled in an old trunk. “To reconcile the simultaneous and the successive: that is one of the ambitions of these pages.” To reconcile the systematic and the aleatory, the consuming and the consumed, to categorically describe the uncategorical. To create in writing the forms of ritualized improvisation, making way for the torrential inexhaustibility of the literary unconscious as a photographer makes way for the inexhaustibility of her optical unconscious. *The Ongoing Moment* is shot through not with Dyer himself but with traces of his rich, serious nomadism, with what Ashbery called “this careless / Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow.” With this book, Geoff Dyer seems to have found his fighter’s peace.

In the end, Dyer has come full circle from one extraordinary book to another, books so different in pitch that each is for all intents and purposes the other’s sequel. One way to put it is this: He first wrote a book that seemed to be unmistakably by Geoff Dyer but in the end was secretly about D. H. Lawrence. Then he wrote a book which seemed to be primarily about photography but was just as revealingly by Geoff Dyer.

Another way to put it is this: In 1924, Edward Weston famously photographed D. H. Lawrence in Mexico City. We know about this photograph from *Out of Sheer Rage*, though at the time neither we nor Dyer knew it was by Weston. Now he does, and we do, and coming to Lawrence through the lens of Weston has enhanced the dimensions of the two men. This photograph, a node in both books, has come to be simultaneously about Lawrence and by Weston. One suspects Dyer has seen the last of neither.