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Shades of the Eighties: *The Colour of Memory*

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You're History

Novels tend to depict social life over time, and to that extent are concerned with history. But some novels are more historical than others. I'm thinking not so much of the amount of temporal distance involved – of millennial doorstoppers about eighteenth-century duchesses, or recent romantic thrillers set in 1942 – but of the kinds of treatment that novelistic narrative can offer to any period, including the period in which it's written. It is presumably possible to write a contemporary novel which takes on the central dynamics of its age: the political machinations which determine the course of the country, the personal dramas which crucially affect matters of state and national destiny while also being thrown into tragic or ironic relief by them. Equally, it must be possible to write a narrative of the contemporary in a radically ahistorical way – making no attempt to connect the local vicissitudes of plot and character to broader struggles. The lurid-jacketed romance of Starbucks and text-messaging, while unmistakably marked by its time, need make no special attempt to take history on: its own narrative necessities can work themselves out without really inquiring into the character and determination of their own moment. So there are more and less historical ways for fiction to approach its own time: historicity in the novel is a matter of method rather than period, more qualitative than quantitative.

Something like that was the assumption of Georg Lukács, the most distinguished theorist of the historical capacity of the novel. In fact Lukács' model was a good deal more sophisticated than the dichotomy I've just sketched. For Lukács it was not really a choice between great men and trivia, Peter Mandelson and Bridget Jones. To 'grasp the present as history',¹ in Fredric Jameson's phrase, is not necessarily to write about the private life of Napoleon or George W. Bush – it is to write a narrative which exemplifies and connects up with history's main current. Your central characters may be obscure and invented – what matters is that their adventures help us to conceive the wider history of which they are part. The historical novel is one whose dynamism is analogous to that of history itself. A truly historical narrative is one that realizes a parallel between individual and general, private and public, contingently local and socially typical. Literature, Lukács writes in *The Historical Novel*, 'must disclose the social foundations of politics by portraying living human destinies, individual destinies which concentrate in their individual uniqueness the typical, representative features of these connexions'.²

Lukács' theory of the historical novel has an intuitive force, an innate plausibility; and his extensive writing on the subject is far more richly detailed and

nanced than a thumb-nail sketch suggests. For decades he has been altogether too readily available as a fall-guy, a stodgy body of thought against which light-footed innovation can measure itself. I say this as a disclaimer, because I am about to risk repeating this manoeuvre in my account of Geoff Dyer's *The Colour of Memory*. Let us, for convenience, take Lukács as the paragon of an aesthetic for which the historical novel hinges on meaningful narrative – narrative whose meaning derives from its exemplary power, its subtle articulation of what is epochally central. My interest in Dyer's novel is then not in how it fulfils Lukács' requirements, but in the dedication with which it refuses them. The question that the book raises is, in effect: how far can a novel go from Lukács' desiderata while nonetheless being, in its own way, an historical novel? Or to put it another way, what would be the form of a wilfully non-Lukácsian fiction that nonetheless sought to write, in Foucault's pregnant phrase, a history of the present? The rest of what I have to say will be to describe how *The Colour of Memory* answers those questions.³

The Time, The Place

In one quickly evident sense *The Colour of Memory* is an historical novel – and for that matter a geographical one. It has an intense relation to the particularity of place and the experience of time. This conjunction of temporal and spatial interest is registered even before the novel has really begun. Dyer's dedication of the novel 'to my South London friends' signals at the outset the attachment to place, and indeed bids us note the connection between people and places – the tendency of locations and affects, spaces and attachments, to run together. After this, one of the epigraphs to the book, from Arnold Hauser, reads 'There are happy moments but no happy periods in history'.

The dedication has a necessary, rather than accidental, feel: the novel will indeed turn out to be embedded in London – more specifically South London, and even more specifically Brixton. And the epigraph, while enigmatic, also catches at categories of temporal experience with which Dyer and his characters are concerned – the momentary and the periodized. It is a novel which thinks about a stretch of time by paying attention to spots of time – an aspect I'll try to illuminate later. *The Colour of Memory* was published in 1989. It's thus a novel of the 1980s in the most straightforward sense; but it's also a novel that takes the period as its topic. It never announces the precise dates of its action, but various circumstantial details let us pin it around 1987. In fact I once lent it to a friend, an Everton fan, who agreed that the implied status of Everton at one point in the narrative confirmed this with some precision. The book reflects back upon the years immediately preceding its publication, seeking to record and catalogue them: it's a book which seeks to reconstruct the very recent past.

The book is narrated by an anonymous figure, who spends its pages describing the London life and interactions of himself and a group of friends. A good deal of the book is spent simply looking at London, observing the city in its many aspects. We see, for one thing, a world of poverty and insolvency, and the squalor that results. When the narrator moves into a new flat he tells us that 'The area just outside reeked of drains, a damp, heavy smell that made you think of typhoid and cholera epidemics. On the stairways and landings the smell was a mixture of animal shit and piss. On hot days you made your way up and down the stairs through buzzing flags of flies. The flat itself was fine: spacious, light, and smelling like the previous tenant was

decomposing beneath the floorboards'.⁴ Here is one of Dyer's characteristic voices: extravagant in its detail yet cool in its delivery, a dense meshing of hyperbole and irony. Elsewhere we read of the dole culture, of casual cash-in-hand labour, of the mechanical interview processes with which benefits are secured, and of what the narrator calls 'all the fraying strands of state support [that] had to be twisted, tugged and woven together in a secure financial net' (45). The ready availability of state support for Dyer's Brixton bohemians arguably does more than anything to date his novel, to a period before politicians talked about workfare and thinking the unthinkable – a thought which leaves us in the unlikely position of nostalgia for the generosity of Thatcherism. In fact the financial situation of these characters is comparatively charmed: the really scary aspect of Dyer's London is crime. Mugging and murder are motifs that repeat through the novel. Early on we view a wall of police posters showing the faces of murder victims, who have 'something of the random, anonymous quality of their deaths.... The format made the victims look guilty, as if they were being sought in connection with their own deaths' (27). When the narrator rides the tube the police hand him requests for information on the latest stabbing (96): later he witnesses three young men kick an older passenger to a pulp. There is a sense of gathering tension, proximate violence: and of the asocial context in which it proliferates. 'Nobody said anything', we read after that attack on the tube: 'No one wanted to sit near where it had happened. No one wanted to look at anybody else' (135). Some of the novel carries a note of anomie and atomization: Dyer's London is a city where violence seems to grow steadily more casual. The threat of attack is a kind of Russian roulette: given time, the direction of violence will spin to you, whoever you happen to be.

Yet in contrast to this, there is also a utopian character to the novel's portrait of the city. The circle of friends it describes produce a constantly ongoing conversation which reels casually through literature, philosophy, jazz and the condition of England, and discursively reimagines the world through figures of speech, inverted clichés, sudden paradoxes. Dyer's own language remodels London. He transforms the traffic on the Westway into a tapestry of colour (214), or imagines a tower block as an inverted swimming pool, a cube in a sea of blue (224). Late in the novel, Calvino's *Invisible Cities* becomes an ur-text for the reimagination of high-rise living, as an exotic platform community rather than a failed experiment (192-3). Dyer even dares to see a summer night as 'an evening when no one wanted to do anyone else any harm.... an evening when people wanted to notice the trees and the stars that shone through them, they wanted to smell the blossom in the night air and the heat coming off the earth' (216).

It's thus a portrait of the city's diversity, the sundry seemingly irreconcilable ways of experiencing London. A novel of place, it is also very much a novel of period. In many passages, Dyer seems deliberately to be rendering the texture of the mid 1980s: an era in which the walkman is familiar, but a home CD player is an exotic object. Here is an early moment:

I left the dole office and shook my head at the pavement-faced guy selling a revolutionary tabloid. Across the road the pale sun brightened the colours in the huge Nuclear Dawn mural showing a spectral figure of death clad in stars and stripes, striding over the dwarfed, fish-eyed landmarks of London....

Immediately behind the mural was the railway bridge. After the uprisings the local traders paid for huge 'Welcome to Brixton' hoardings to be hung from the bridge. Now only a few tatters were left to cover the blank

boards. A train clanked overhead, pulling a long freight of dangerous-looking, toxic-coloured containers towards some unspecified zone where no one was sure what happened. An innocent possibility of horror, the train clunked and screeched past (21).

The fears of the late Cold War; the unspoken terror of the nuclear enemy within – if I tried now to write a novel of this period, I would have to work hard to stop myself ticking off these boxes of background detail. And lingering throughout the novel, though only hinted at in this passage, is the memory of full-scale riot, of Brixton as a locus of ethnic confrontation. There is a pervasive sense that riots can be predicted like, and in relation to, weather: ‘red sky in the evening, the ghetto is burning’ (71). Meanwhile, the progressive causes of the period are catalogued in comical fashion, by a beggar who wanders Brixton with a jar, and every few months varies the charity for which he claims to be collecting. Having begun with ‘BAND AID. PLEASE GIVE GENEROUSLY. ETHIOPIA FAMINE’ (21), he starts the novel with ‘Nicaragua’ (22), moves on to ‘Mandela’ when begging from a white man and black woman, and finally asks an American tourist to donate to Greenpeace (172). The politics of the time thus frame the actions of Dyer’s characters – but they tend to do so at a distance, as a kind of ground for which the mural is in fact an appropriate figure. I want to return to this later, in its bearing upon my argument about the historical novel.

We are also in an age of the heightened mediation of experience, in which a certain self-consciousness about media and representation is creeping into conversation. At a friend’s flat, the narrator reflects that ‘Carlton – like me – was lifting a mug to his lips with one hand and a barbell to his shoulder with the other. It was as if we were in an advert for strong coffee’ (49). Later as they play a card game, one character reflects aloud that ‘It’s like a news item about the affluent south-east. This is probably what stockbrokers do to relax at night’ (141). A stronger version of this sense of a mediated contemporary comes through at a local concert which feels less real on stage than on the giant screen next to it: ‘The dancers and musicians looked as if they were playing at the County Fair in Brockwell Park; the pictures on the video screen looked as if they were being broadcast live by satellite from Harare or Lagos’ (218). Here is the note of Paul Morley postmodernism: in such a moment the novel visibly partakes of the same cultural conjuncture as a work like Dick Hebdige’s *Hiding in the Light* (1988), which attempted to construct a home-made brand of post-Thatcherite theory, to read the claims of simulation and mediatization through a distinctly British lens.⁵ We now, inevitably, look back on that moment as itself historical, an intellectual episode whose hyperbolic transience belies the cool symmetries of its Neville Brody design. Rereading even the late 1980s, we feel not just its prophecies of our present, but also distance and difference. Most evident is the changed relation to technology: the radically different flavour of everyday life that Dyer’s characters have in an epoch unsuspecting of electronic mail or chatrooms, and in which only TV yuppies have mobile phones. As often with technological change, it is the intimate and quotidian experience of it which shifts most tellingly from era to era.

Countdown

So *The Colour of Memory* is a novel of a particular place and time. But what is most significant about the book is not so much its depiction of these particularities as such,

but the peculiar structural means in which they are framed. The book is organized in sixty sections which, rather than counting up from 1 to 60, count down: 060, 059, 058 – a steady ticking which the reader soon realizes is inevitably heading for zero. In that sense the book has structure and order: the reversal through number imposes an unusually inexorable sense of direction. The further we go, the lower the number: the more that narrative develops, the closer it announces itself to triple nullity, 000.

This form eventually finds an analogue within the novel itself. The narrator remembers a visit to the Pompidou Centre, and viewing the clock which was counting down towards the year 2000:

I liked the idea of time getting denuded like that instead of simply piling up – a countdown to nothing, to an apocalypse that would last only for a second. A new kind of time. It was both awe-inspiring and, at the same time, absolutely pointless: pure anticipation (207).

Pre-millennial Paris thus provides a way of writing pre-millennial London. To an extent, the sense of countdown is accompanied by an increase of tension as the book goes on. Forward movement through time is matched by an accompanying sense of erosion – or even of impending doom. Aspects of the novel indeed become darker as it goes on: street crime, in particular, is a motif which seems to grow more and more regular through the book, as one character after another suffers the mugging or burglary which they have feared all along. As Frank Kermode remarks in *The Sense of an Ending*, the tick-tock of a clock can be viewed as the primal form of narrative shape as such.⁶

Yet the countdown is less notable for the tension it produces than for something very different – its sheer arbitrariness and lack of narrative progress. One character asks what will happen when the Parisian clock works its way down to ‘zero zero nothing’, to which the answer is ‘Maybe nothing. Or maybe the whole process might begin all over again’. There is an echo here of an earlier scene when the narrator goes to his friend Steranko’s house and finds the place blazing with three-bar fires, in an attempt to use as much electricity as possible. In an attempt to save money, Steranko has managed to reverse the direction of the electricity meter, which has carried on to an exorbitant figure beyond zero: he has now reversed it again and has ‘got the house on full steam ahead’ in an attempt to ‘send the meter back past the other side of zero, zero, zero’ (36). Life is being structured around numerical sequence, and at the heart of the sequence is nothing – a kind of maximised nothing, ‘zero zero zero’ or ‘zero, zero, nothing’. These are clues that Dyer is seeking a new relation to novelistic time. I read the book’s internal clock less as a ticking towards apocalypse, more as a piece of formalism: a principle of organization whose sheerly numerical character leaves the novel hospitable to contingency.

This is to say that *The Colour of Memory* is a remarkably open book – a loose structure fashioned to accommodate different kinds of experience. Public and private, comic and elegaic – diverse sorts of remembered material fill the slots of the book’s 60 chapters. I want now to examine the implications of this for the novel’s rendering of the contemporary as history. I shall note in advance three emphases: epiphany, vacancy, and margin.

One Moment In Time

A first major tendency is towards the epiphanic. Epiphany, in James Joyce's famous definition, involved the heightened perception of everyday objects – of a special attention which he called 'the groping of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus'.⁷ The notion is pertinent to Dyer's tendency toward heightened description, as his narrator snatches moments out of the temporal flow and reflects upon them in lyrical detail. In a notable example, the narrator is in the middle of playing football in the park:

I looked around. The trees around the park were perfectly still as if time had stopped, as if every second of the afternoon were held in a single moment: Steranko frozen in his running, his feet barely touching the grass; Carlton bent down tying his shoe, the breeze rippling his shirt; the muscles straining in someone's leg; players jumping for the ball, their feet suspended in mid-air, the goalkeeper's hands rising above their floating hair; the ball hanging over them like a perfect moon. And everything around us: the crease of the corner flag, the wind-sculpted trees, the child's swing at the top of its arc, the water from the drinking fountain bubbling towards the lips of the woman bent down to drink, the cyclist leaning into the curve of the path, a plane stalled in the sky, someone's thrown tennis ball a small yellow planet in the distance (90-1).

The literary effect is to magnify the moment, and to send a gradual gaze around the several spatial aspects of it. In this form of interest in the moment, Dyer appears to be working in the tradition of Joyce and Virginia Woolf, who in their different ways were fascinated with the snatched instant, and the intense aesthetic focus which could enlarge and assess a sliver of experience. Dyer's description also makes us think of film, and the capacity of the frozen frame or still photograph to make stasis out of movement, and thus pluck a kind of illusory eternity out of the ongoing.

In this respect, Dyer's writing is miniaturist, a magnification of minimal content which seeks to tug fleeting incidents into the sustained gaze of art. He plays upon a revaluation of priority: instead of recording political cruces and narrative drama, fiction will lavish its attention on such small things as the many actions contained in that instant in the park.

Do You Have A Vacancy?

The epiphanic mode seems to invest minor things with new and increased significance. Yet just as striking as this is Dyer's interest in *insignificance*. Flaubert famously dreamed of writing a book about nothing; Dyer seems at times to be striving to a similar end, though probably not in the way Flaubert had in mind. Again and again in *The Colour of Memory*, vacancy comes to the fore. Here is an exemplary passage:

Back at Freddie's I circled the phone and played the start of some records, looked out of the window at the nothing-happening grey of the sky, turned a tap on and off, read one and a half lines of the paper and then put it down again. I turned on the TV and found horse-racing on both sides. I watched for about twenty minutes, ignoring the horses and concentrating instead on the

suburban hinterland in the background: a place where it always drizzled, a place that didn't look like anywhere. I turned the TV off, picked up one of Freddie's books and studied the Olympic coffee rings on the cover. I rehearsed things I might say if someone turned up.... I called Freddie, heard the engaged sound, tried again and then remembered that I was actually at Freddie's and had dialled my own number (22).

That last line is typical of the book's humour, founded on wryly observed ironies. But the whole passage is a catalogue of nullity, an encyclopedia of non-achievements. Actions are merely contemplated ('I circled the phone') or only commenced ('played the start of some records', 'read one and a half lines of the paper'). With the study of coffee rings we reach a new low in pointless behaviour. The originality of the passage lies just in this determination to explore nullity – this unswerving fascination with vacancy. Fiction is founded upon event: with conscious perversity Dyer writes a fiction of the non-event. He extends this mode to a longer period of time later in the novel, when we read:

Winter in the city. More snow was forecast but none fell. Sometimes I got to the end of a day and wondered if it had actually taken place. Whole weeks disappeared without trace. I bought disappointing loaves of bread and had conversations with the local shopkeepers. I caught a cold and passed it on to someone else. I went out; I stayed in (135).

The non-event of snow is heightened by its prior announcement, making its non-appearance paradoxically visible. With comic exaggeration, the narrator voices doubts that time is passing at all: for if it were, surely something would have happened? The passage seeks to perform for an extended period what the previous one does for an afternoon: to reimagine the novel as the home of the non-event, to write fiction without capitulating to the demand – a demand within the genre, and thus liable to press upon the novelist from within – for progression and significance. We can almost say that Dyer here tries to *switch narrative off*, and see what remains. In fact this would not be a bad description of *The Colour of Memory* as a whole. The book is an experiment in minimizing the usual qualities of narrative: event, causality, linkage, progression, momentum. What remains is detail, description, the texture of a time – things that in one sense are enabled by narrative, but which also, in practice, cede space to its exigencies. To cancel the demands of narrative is to leave a stasis, a vacant space in which the contingent and inessential can proliferate.

Here is a clue to the importance of weather in this novel. Repeatedly, with apparently inexhaustible enthusiasm, Dyer offers us sketches of the sky. In the first paragraph we read that 'The sky was a grey sea with no tide... When it didn't rain it drizzled and when it didn't drizzle the city sweltered under a thick vest of cloud. Even the clouds looked as if they could do with some sun' (13). He writes of rainstorms, soft summer evenings, heatwaves, snow, with endless dedication: the weather is as much a part of the setting as London itself, and a permanent point of reference through the novel. This phenomenon is illuminated in a 1971 essay by Roland Barthes:

[W]hat the weather happened to be... has a multiple function as writing: it permits the discourse to *stand* without saying anything (by saying *nothing*), it disappoints or deceives meaning, and, coined into a few adjacent notations... it

allows us to refer to some *Dasein* of the world, something primary, natural, incontestable, and in-significant.... Hence we understand the complicity established between these minor notations and the very form of the private diary....: since its intention is only to express the *nothing* of my life (managing not to construe it as Fate), the diary makes use of that special body whose 'subject' is merely the contact of my body and of its envelope and which we call *the weather outside*.⁸

The weather here seems to stand, for Barthes, as a convenient site of insignificance: its sheer inhuman impersonality prevents it from straying into that excess of meaningfulness which Barthes found so schmaltzily, anthropomorphically offensive. Dyer, like Barthes, eschews the pathetic fallacy. The point of his weather is not any mirroring of human states, but its essentially *non-narrative* nature. The sky is a device for avoiding story: it's the ultimate background, to which the writer deliberately turns at the expense of foreground.⁹

A Different Corner

To talk in those terms brings me to the last way I want to describe Dyer's method: as an art of the margin. I mean by this partly that the milieu he depicts is socially marginal: dole claimants, do-nothings and would-be writers, self-consciously askew to the main story of Britain. One character imagines this as a lost generation, 'so lost we're virtually extinct' (68); another articulates his political involvement entirely in terms of the personal, citing facts like 'I never eat at McDonald's, I never play electronic games.... I don't read the review pages of Sunday papers...when people talk about house prices I don't listen. I don't know any bankers or people who work in advertising – I've only ever been to the City once' (126). The narrator himself tries to exercise political power not by voting but by participating in market research surveys: 'If you played your cards tactically you could be influential in preventing a new chocolate bar coming on to the market; or you could be part of a significant minority who thought English newspapers should be printed in Arabic' (150).

These examples demonstrate the would-be bohemianism of Dyer's protagonists, but also their disconnection from the whole idea of political power. As I suggested earlier, the political in this novel is always at a distance, somewhere else, somewhere central. In a telling moment, the characters find themselves in Westminster at night, and are struck by its mystery and authority: 'We had entered museum time' (118), a world of solemn power unknown to them. In a book of endless detail and observation, the greatest omission is that of Margaret Thatcher – a figure whose name and image were inescapable facts of the landscape during the period in question, wherever one was politically located. It's as though Dyer has deliberately shunned the inclusion of this predominant public figure within his book: her absence is determinate, a conscious gesture towards the marginal status to which *The Colour of Memory* aspires. To include Thatcher herself would nudge the book back towards the realm of that mode of historical novel from which *The Colour of Memory* takes such a wilfully exaggerated distance. Instead of a narrative which mimes the movement of society, we have the arbitrary countdown of numbers: instead of an engagement with the realities of Thatcher's third term, we have descriptions of cloud formations.

Social marginality thus finds its correlate in the aesthetic margin: the elevation of background over foreground, detail over narrative, non-event over drama. The emblematic gaze of the book is in that passage already quoted: not towards the racing horses but towards the suburban hinterland beyond them, a place that doesn't look like anywhere. In the novel's most self-conscious moment, the narrator describes the strategy of the novel as a series of snapshots, into the frames of which strangers wander, and in which details acquire an unexpected significance:

Often what happens accidentally, unintentionally, at the edges or in the margins of pictures – the apparently irrelevant detail – lends the photograph its special meaning. What is happening in the foreground in sharpest focus seems somehow unimportant or meaningless compared with – or at least is lent meaning and importance only *through* – the accidental intrusion of detail: the glimpse of someone's shoes; a car in the background, a furred umbrella; the tilt of someone's hat; the child eating a lolly. These details absorb and transform – and are themselves absorbed and transformed by – the principal action; the main subjects become saturated by the accidental inflections of attendant details (181-2).

It is hard to miss the echo here of Roland Barthes, who was saying much the same thing about photography as long ago as 1970, and who waxed it into a theory of idiosyncratic viewing in his last book ten years later.¹⁰ For the later Barthes this quest for the 'obtuse meaning' or *punctum*, the wayward detail sneaked into the photographic frame, was exemplary of a general hankering for the fragment which had fled narrative, the object which had escaped the metaphysics of meaning – in a word, for the contingent. *The Colour of Memory* is ultimately engaged in an analogous project, which attempts to reorganize the historical novel around it. What, the novel asks, if we made a fiction of contemporary history, not around major happenings or emblematic narrative, but around their very opposites – non-event, margin, the unnarratable?

The Colour of Memory occasionally hints that such a narrative would be truer to life – that plots are misrepresentations of the real, and climaxes are evasions of the actual continuity of things (95). I don't really think, though, that it's a question of truth, or of validating one mode over another – just of staging an alternative. Switch off the commands of narrative, and the anxiety of the central and significant, and see what kind of history comes through. The result is a slice of fictionalized time which remembers different things from other novels, or history books, or even *I Love The 1980s*. If it shares with millennial Britain a nostalgia for the 1980s, it's a nostalgia of another colour, which might teach us more surprising ways of remembering.

Notes

¹ Fredric Jameson, 'The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate', in *The Ideologies of Theory, Essays 1971-1986, Volume 2: The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1988), p.113.

² Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1969 [1962]), p.158.

³ Foucault's phrase appears in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991 [1975]), p.31.

⁴ Geoff Dyer, *The Colour of Memory* (London: Abacus, 1997 [1989]), p.45. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁵ See Dick Hebdige, *Hiding In The Light: On Images and Things* (London: Comedia, 1988); and Paul Morley, *Ask: The Chatter of Pop* (London: Faber, 1986).

⁶ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.45.

⁷ James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* ed. Theodore Spencer (London: Paladin, 1991 [1944]), p.216.

⁸ Roland Barthes, 'Pierre Loti: *Aziyade*', in *New Critical Essays* trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp.109-110.

⁹ One possible exception to this rule is Dyer's reference to the great storm which struck Southern England on 15 October 1987 (243-4). Here the weather leaps from its endless background role to become a physical agent which tears up the landscape. Even here, though, Dyer pointedly refuses to allocate meaning to nature's event. The morning after the storm, the narrator reflects: 'These things happen sometimes – that was the only message written on the blank sheet of sky' (244). This view contrasts with those who have sought to link the storm to the stock market crash the following Monday, whether as a causal factor (as in the Channel 4 documentary *Explosive 80s: The Storm and the Crash*, broadcast Monday 16 May 2005) or as a symbol of social upheaval, as in Tim Lott's novel *Rumours of a Hurricane* (London: Viking, 2002; for the storm see pp.329-331).

¹⁰ See Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', in *Image-Music-Text* ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp.52-68, and *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981; published as *La Chambre Claire* in 1980). For commentary see Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed), *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1997).