

## Ghosting the Lost Generation: Geoff Dyer's *Paris Trance*

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In the Acknowledgements he inserts at the back of his 1998 novel *Paris Trance*,<sup>1</sup> Geoff Dyer lists ten instances in which, using an analogy from hip-hop, he says he “sampled” *The Sun Also Rises*. Dyer did not choose to appropriate such familiar Hemingway lines as “It is awfully easy to be hard-boiled about everything in the daytime, but at night it is another thing” and “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” Instead, he borrowed such banalities as “It was amazing champagne” (PT 120), “It was raining hard outside” (PT 173), and “He took a big gulp of coffee” (PT 218). The effect is to make a mockery of literary debt, to suggest that, even in the most insipid statements, we cannot help but echo others. Dyer presents himself as a self-conscious avatar of the Lost Generation, the disenchanting exiles who had already exhausted irony by the time that Gertrude Stein bestowed on them the famous epithet. But it is hard to be more arch than the arch-champions of modern angst.

Quoting F. Scott Fitzgerald in the very first sentence—merely to affirm that twenty-six, the age of the protagonist, is “a fine age for a man” (PT 1)—*Paris Trance* is a study in belatedness, the story of young expatriates who arrive in Paris seventy years after it has ceased to be a moveable feast. Dyer’s novel recounts the Parisian experiences of an Englishman whose name, Luke Barnes, brands him as a scion of Hemingway’s Jake Barnes. Early in his Paris stay, Luke orders a beer at a café that posts a sign that reads: “Ernest Hemingway did *not* drink here” (PT 17); and it only serves to underscore how very difficult it is for an expat writer at the end of the twentieth century to avoid the spirits of the Lost Generation. Luke arrives in the eleventh arrondissement with vague ambitions of creating a novel about his own experiences abroad. A consummate slacker, he never does. “Why write something if you can live it?” (PT 219), Luke, described by a friend as “a complete waster” (PT 146), asks. He earns a living lifting parcels in a book warehouse but comes to life with conversation, drugs, films, food, and sex. Luke meets fellow Briton Alex Warren while both are hauling books, and the two soon become inseparable. Each acquires a lover, and the foursome forms a small community of expatriates intent on living in the moment. Historically, the cultural moment comes seven decades too late.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Paris Trance: A Romance* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation PT.

"The ideal," explains Alex's lover, Sahra, "is to feel at home anywhere, everywhere" (PT 95). Sahra, who has been living in Paris for the past three years, grew up in Libya, Chicago, and Singapore, and her ideal seems indistinguishable from feeling at home nowhere. Luke forms a strong sexual bond with a Serbian émigré called Nicole. Not only does her name recall the character in Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, but it also portends a parallel to the collapse of Nicole and Dick Diver's rapturous life in France.

As narrator of *Paris Trance*, Alex is to Luke as Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway is to Jay Gatsby. Alex idolizes Luke. "It is his life—and not mine—which is exemplary, admirable, even enviable" (PT 1), insists Alex in the first paragraph of the novel. In another of many instances of life imitating life within Dyer's art, Alex emulates his inimitable friend. "You like imagining you're him" (PT 147), notes Sahra. But Alex also witnesses Luke's self-destruction and the disintegration of the ecstatic Paris trance that Luke tries to construct for himself and the other expatriates attracted to him. Luke disappears, and eight years later, when Alex tracks him down in a shabby London flat, he finds a listless, sottish recluse, a charismatic personality blunted by TV and beer. It is Alex who ends up writing the autobiographical novel that Luke never even started, which, in fact, is *Paris Trance*. He also sires a son, who, in yet another act of duplication, is given the name Luke.

A mirror is said "to ghost" when the reflections it offers are slightly delayed. An ancient looking glass that Nicole has brought with her from Belgrade frequently ghosts. When Luke and Nicole make love in front of it, we are told that: "Everything they saw lagged fractionally behind what they felt" (PT 110). A haunting novel about the spectral intervals between event and perception, *Paris Trance* gives to Alex its first and last words, verbal mirrors positioned to capture vanished images. Light emitted by a distant star reaches the earth millions of years after the star itself has ceased to exist, and that light, like our image of the Lost Generation, is not quite the same as the star itself.

*Paris Trance* concludes with the image of a military jet high above the coast of France. From the ground, sea and sky appear to merge, but the aircraft has disappeared by the time a spectator can hear its sound. It is a striking metaphor for the novel's own relationship to the Lost Generation. The gap between phenomenon and perception, between world and word, is a theme that lurks throughout all its author's published works. Dyer titled his first novel *The Colour of Memory* (1989),<sup>2</sup> and it is because the color of memory bleeds into other forms of consciousness that later experience is tainted by tardiness.

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<sup>2</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Colour of Memory* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation *CoM*.

Dyer's first book, *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger* (1986),<sup>3</sup> takes as its subject the versatile English art critic, novelist, poet, translator, and screenwriter whose singular influence would induce anxiety in any emulous acolyte. Dyer acknowledged Berger as a "mentor" and dedicated *But Beautiful: A Book About Jazz* (1991),<sup>4</sup> a series of riffs on giants of jazz, to him. But six years later, the object of his apprehensive adoration had shifted from Berger, Lester Young, Charles Mingus, and Thelonious Monk to D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence attracted Dyer in part because the author, born in 1958 and sharing a background in the English working class, saw an alter ego in the writer who was born in 1885. Lawrence, claims Dyer at the outset of a book that begins in homage and ends in ire, "made me want to become a writer."<sup>5</sup> His exasperating attempt to narrow the gap between himself and Lawrence is the basis for Dyer's most effective book to date, *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence* (1997). Though eleven years older than Fitzgerald, Lawrence, like American members of the Lost Generation, wrote in exile and in revulsion from the illusions that were buried in the cemeteries of World War I. Dyer's relationship to him anticipates the ghosting that constitutes *Paris Trance*.

Dyer describes his hybrid of biography, travelogue, and memoir as "method criticism" (SR 128), as if he is practicing a kind of writing that approximates Konstantin Stanislavsky's call for actors to immerse themselves in their roles, to become the characters they are impersonating. Attempting to revive Lawrence's spirit in himself, Dyer retraces his itinerary, through Eastwood, Rome, Taormina, Alonissos, Oaxaca, Taos, and Vence. He reads Lawrence's own travel writings and all seven volumes of his letters, but he ends up creating a mock-biography that mocks biography, the presumption that it is possible to resuscitate another human being within the pages of a book. Far from venerating his subject, Dyer comes to admit that he does not even like Lawrence and cannot bear to reread the man's novels. If successful biography demands a perfect congruence between author and subject, Dyer concedes he is doomed to failure; there will always be a gap between him and Lawrence. In fact, Dyer is not even congruent with Dyer. Not only is he incapable of creating Lawrence's biography, but, as if the writer's mirror always ghosts his subject, he declares: "I find I am not even qualified to research my own, to be my own biographer" (SR 187).

And yet, in one of many paradoxes characteristic of Dyer's signature style of repeated contradiction, reenacting irreparable gaps even in his syntax, he recognizes that his very failure renders him Laurentian. Dyer fulminates against Oxford ("the highest concentration of dull-witted, stupid, narrow-minded people

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<sup>3</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger* (London: Pluto, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Geoff Dyer, *But Beautiful: A Book About Jazz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence* (New York: North Point, 1997) 2. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation SR.

anywhere in the British Isles," SR 131), against Greeks ("they pride themselves on being swine," SR 28), against seafood ("vile food which I will eat under no circumstances," SR 64), and against *Women in Love* ("I read it in my teens and, as far as I am concerned, it can stay read," SR 104), and he comes closest in spirit to his petulant master when railing in sheer rage against writing about Lawrence. Digressive, fragmentary, and inconclusive, *Out of Sheer Rage* approaches the character of those Lawrence books—including *Sea and Sardinia*, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, and *Twilight in Italy*—that Dyer admires most. Yet even in this simulation, there is an interval between original and imitation that Dyer knows he will never eliminate. "If this book *aspires* to the condition of notes," says Dyer about *Out of Sheer Rage*, careful to distinguish between intention and execution, "that is because, for me, Lawrence's prose is at its best when it comes closest to notes" (SR 118). Yet Dyer's pages are mere footnotes to Lawrence's.

The subtitle of Dyer's book promises that he will be "wrestling" with D. H. Lawrence, but he recognizes that his intractable subject refuses to be pinned. He derives his title from comments Lawrence made about a study of Thomas Hardy that he began in 1914 but left unpublished at his death in 1930. "Out of sheer rage I've begun my book on Thomas Hardy. It will be about anything but Thomas Hardy I am afraid—queer stuff—but not bad,"<sup>6</sup> observed Lawrence, in remarks that Dyer appropriates as an epigraph to his own book. Thus, the very project of using "the detour as straight line" (SR 142), of employing passionate digressions to capture the essence of D. H. Lawrence, had already been anticipated by Lawrence in his own study of Hardy. Like Luke Barnes in Paris, Dyer has arrived too late to do more than experience what he calls "plagiarised emotion" (SR 129), to ghost the feelings already felt by Lawrence.

Dyer was born in time to be classified within Generation X, a demographic cohort that grew up deafened by the Baby Boom. With predecessors so abundant and assertive, the Gen Xers had to cut some slack for themselves, find some space beyond the race against competitors who had already begun their run. In *Slacker* (1991), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *SubUrbia* (1996), and other films about people of a certain younger age who, renouncing the ethic of achievement, loaf and invite their souls, director Richard Linklater created a generational anthem whose melody accompanies Dyer's books as well. "My greatest urge in life is to do nothing," Dyer declares toward the end of his quest to write about Lawrence. "It's not even an absence of motivation, a lack, for I *do* have a strong urge: to do nothing" (SR 226). This goalless goal of *la agrodolce far niente* affects and afflicts the characters of *Paris Trance*, *flâneurs* in the French capital more than a century after Charles Baudelaire established himself as the laureate of creative lassitude. Luke Barnes never acts on his wish to learn French while in Paris, nor does Dyer himself take advantage of residence in Rome to pick up Italian. "Although I love the idea of speaking foreign languages," he explains, "I hate doing anything in

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<sup>6</sup> *Sheer Rage*, epigraph, n.p. Dyer attributes the citation to "D. H. Lawrence, 5 September 1914."

life that requires an effort" (SR 14). Of course, it requires strenuous, sustained effort to feign effortlessness successfully. As William Butler Yeats, no sluggard among poets, wrote: "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught" ("Adam's Curse").

The characters in Dyer's first novel, *The Colour of Memory*, are also slackers, Gen Xers in London's Brixton neighborhood who, unemployed and living on the dole, are devoid of conventional ambition. Dyer's narrator holds on to a trumpet he never plays, explaining that: "Its principal function now is to serve as a symbol of non-achievement" (CoM 134). Like Luke Barnes, a character named Freddie has vague intentions to write a novel, one whose amorphousness will reflect the drift of his life: "Oh no there's no plot," explains Freddie. "I hate plots. Plots are what get people killed. Generally the plots are the worst thing about books" (CoM 111). Plots are not the most conspicuous feature of Dyer's desultory books. "Whatever makes events into a story is entirely missing from what follows," Alex Warren warns the reader of *Paris Trance* (2). And yet Dyer carefully plots his books to appear plotless. Projecting a persona infused and enthused with what he calls "energetic torpor,"<sup>7</sup> he draws on the paradox of avid languor to title one book *Yoga for People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It* (2003).

In that account of his meditations at and on remote locations, Dyer, an errant slacker, is keenly aware that he is a travel writer who arrives too late to find aught but traces of previous travelers. "It is impossible to visit the Riviera without wishing you had been there earlier, with Scott and Zelda in the twenties" (Y 207), he complains. But even when beating a path away from familiar destinations, to Libya, Cambodia, and Indonesia, Dyer cannot escape the sense that his experience is derivative. One late afternoon, after climbing Phnom Bakheng, the hill overlooking Angkor Wat, he finds a horde of strangers staring at the horizon: "There were hundreds, possibly thousands of people, but they weren't waiting for a party—they were waiting for the sunset" (Y 41). Dyer characterizes sunset-watching as yet another form of energetic torpor. "Idleness, doing nothing, is raised to the level of sharply focused purpose" (Y 42), he observes. And what he ends up describing is not so much the sunset over Angkor Wat as the experience of watching others watch the sunset over Angkor Wat.

Dyer lifts a contrapuntal passage by the Goncourt brothers as an epigraph to *Yoga for People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It*: "Everything is unique, nothing happens more than once in a life-time. The physical pleasure which a certain woman gave you at a certain moment, the exquisite dish which you ate on a certain day—you will never meet either again. Nothing is repeated, and

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<sup>7</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Yoga for People Who Can't Be Bothered to Do It* (New York: Pantheon, 2003) 27. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation Y.

everything is unparalleled." However, Dyer's own writings bear witness to the impossibility of originality. He encounters a world whose walls seem already spray-painted with the motto "Been There Done That," a world in which everything is repeated and nothing is unparalleled. Like Edmond and Jules Goncourt, Luke's friend Miles proclaims a belief in singularity: "In this world there is one unique path which no one but you may walk," he contends. "Where does it lead? Don't ask: take it." However, Luke immediately takes the opportunity to reply: "You always sound like you're quoting, Miles" (PT 111). Even in affirming primacy, suggests the example of Miles as well as the work of his author, we cannot help but be derivative.

Dyer borrows from Friedrich Nietzsche for the second epigraph to *Yoga*, and it is the philosopher of *Die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*, of Eternal Recurrence, much more than the prophet of the *Übermensch* who haunts the later writer's books. "The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" proclaims Nietzsche in a passage from *Le Gai Savoir* that is quoted by the narrator in *The Colour of Memory* (72). The character Freddie, too, reads Nietzsche, and he views life as an endless video loop. "History is like the Cup Final," he contends. "If you miss it in the afternoon you can always catch the highlights later on in the evening when it's shown again" (CoM 58).

Nietzsche influenced Lawrence, but in his book on Lawrence Dyer is more concerned with his own relationship to the German philosopher. In *Out of Sheer Rage*, Dyer recalls his first encounter with the Nietzschean theme that has intrigued him most: "I discovered Nietzsche in Brixton, in the mid-80s. Never to wish anything different, not now, not through all eternity: I can still remember the rush I felt on coming across that ideal of *amor fati*, absolute affirmation in the face of the Eternal Recurrence. My God! What an idea to live up to, what a challenge!" (SR 168). Dyer meets the challenge of inscribing the theme of Eternal Recurrence into his fiction by having the characters in *Paris Trance* experience surges of *déjà vu*, intimations that what they are doing together in Paris now has been done before. Describing one such instance, when Luke is overwhelmed by the feeling that the occasion is not new, Alex generalizes about the phenomenon of *déjà vu*: "And at that moment you glimpse the Eternal Recurrence as a potential fact, as a mechanism, rather than a metaphor. That is the solution contained in the riddle of *déjà vu*. All memories are premonitions, all premonitions are memories" (PT 162).

In the world as TV rerun, if memories are the same as premonitions and all is Eternal Recurrence, then initial occurrence is an otiose concept. There is nothing new under Dyer's sun, burning within a Baudrillardian system in which all is simulacrum, nothing original. It is a universe of Andy Warhol silkscreens, of identical images in which it would be pointless for Don DeLillo to try to identify Mao I. Luke, Alex, Nicole, and Sahra are faded versions of the enervated

Lost Generation, who were themselves keenly aware of what Ecclesiastes, the source for both title and epigraph to *The Sun Also Rises*, noted, that novelty is illusory.

Even the concept of the Lost Generation, insists Freddie in *The Colour of Memory*, was not unique to the world-weary writers who gathered in Paris in the 1920s. “Every generation wants to think it’s lost,” he says. “Take us. Who could have been more lost than us? We’re so lost we’re virtually extinct” (CoM 58). However, one historical circumstance that might appear to distinguish the group whom Stein dubbed The Lost Generation was their situation as disillusioned survivors of the Great War, their—ingenuous—sense that the gruesome enormity of the War to End All Wars disabused them, uniquely, of any tendency toward idealism. However, even in that, Dyer ghosts his predecessors. They were not the last to bid farewell to arms. In a book he called *The Missing of the Somme* (1994),<sup>8</sup> Dyer, too, reflects on World War I—or rather, he reflects on reflections on World War I. A study of how war is remembered, *The Missing of the Somme* examines the legacy of World War I in monuments, poems, and memoirs. Dyer cites the astonishing statistic that between 1920 and 1925, 30,000 war memorials were erected in France alone. His book constitutes yet another, though mediated by its predecessors. It is a memorial to memorials. In one of the moments most characteristic of Dyer as a belated Hemingway, he recalls traveling to a cemetery at Redan Ridge and being reminded by the visitors’ book that he has been following in the footsteps not only of other lost generations but also of himself. He has already visited that cemetery and signed the ledger: “It is the second time I have been here and there is a strange pleasure in standing in exactly the same spot again. I find the proof of my last visit, in my own handwriting, in the visitors’ book” (MoS 108). Dyer is his own doppelgänger, except that it is impossible to determine who’s on first, who is the double.

Trailing himself trailing himself, Dyer never quite catches up. Like many of his fictional characters, he is both slacker and tracker, in dawdling pursuit of a quarry—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Lawrence, and others—always one step ahead. In Dyer’s novel *The Search* (1993),<sup>9</sup> a character given the appropriately ambulatory name Walker is hired by a shadowy woman named Rachel to track down her former husband, an elusive figure named Malory. By foot, car, bicycle, bus, boat, and train, Walker travels through places with allegorical names including Friendship, Despond, and Nemesis in search of his prey. At most, he spots a glimpse of Malory disappearing into a crowd, but by the end of the novel, after repeated failure at fulfilling his assignment, Walker is overwhelmed by a sense of déjà vu. He becomes convinced that he has been following in his own footsteps, and he boards the train back home. Like Samuel Beckett’s Moran in

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<sup>8</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation MoS.

<sup>9</sup> Geoff Dyer, *The Search* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1993).

futile pursuit of the Molloy who is his alter ego, Dyer's Walker is Malory, another version of himself he is condemned forever to follow but never to catch.

In his famous comment on *The Sound and the Fury*, Jean-Paul Sartre noted that "Faulkner's vision of the world can be compared to that of a man sitting in an open car and looking backwards."<sup>10</sup> The characters in *Paris Trance* live their lives doubling back upon themselves, in what, describing the portentous evening in which he first met Sahra, Alex calls "anticipated retrospect" (PT 87). Though the trance pursued in *Paris Trance* is the state of "living in the moment," Luke is forever poisoning the moment with the proleptic perspective of later moments, just as Alex's narration doubles back on Luke's own thoughts. When Luke buys Nicole a Polaroid camera, Alex comments that "Luke loved these Polaroids, loved the way the present became a memory as soon as it occurred: an instant memory" (PT 184). If the present is immediately translated into memory, then it indeed becomes impossible to live in the moment. Yet, however instantaneous the process, there is always an interval between moment and memory, like the ghostly gap between object and reflection created by Nicole's old Belgrade mirror. The instants of greatest intimacy that Luke shares with Nicole are dispelled by Luke's awareness of their transience. On one such occasion, they are lying in bed together, and Luke's reflections shatter the integrity of the moment: "There will come a time, he thought, when I will look back on this night, when I will lie in another bed, when happiness will have come to seem an impossibility, and I will remember this night, remember how happy I was, and will remember how, even when I was in the midst of my happiness, I could feel a time when it would be gone" (PT 105). And not even that insight is unique, as Alex notes: "The same thought went through many remixes as he lay there, drifting, alert, sort of asleep" (PT 105).

Luke watches the same melancholy movie, *Brief Encounter* (1945), every year on his birthday. Every year, Trevor Howard's Alec Harvey and Celia Johnson's Laura Jesson find and lose each other during a few fugitive Thursdays in a railway station. Luke is particularly drawn to Laura's speech about the consolations of anticipated retrospection: "This misery can't last. Nothing lasts really, neither happiness nor despair. Not even life lasts long.... There'll come a time in the future when I shan't mind about this any more" (PT 17). Positioned early in the novel, this passage prepares both Luke and the reader for his relationship with Nicole and for its aftermath.

Another cinematic facsimile of Dyer's novel about the impossibility of originality is the 1995 movie *Strange Days*, which Luke, Nicole, Alex, and Sahra go together to see one evening. On this, his third, time viewing the movie, an

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<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Work of Faulkner," trans. Annette Michelson, in William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. David Minter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994) 267.



apocalyptic thriller set at the end of the millennium directed by Kathryn Bigelow and starring Ralph Fiennes, Luke is struck by a revelation that *Strange Days* “was a commentary on all the movies it had come out of: a pastiche of everything, even itself” (PT 159). Obviously indebted to the literature of the Lost Generation, *Paris Trance* could, like the rest of Dyer’s writings, also be described as a commentary on all the books it has come out of. And especially in such metafictional passages, it is a commentary on itself, on its own circularity.

Dyer is not the first author to ghost the Lost Generation. The protagonist of Somerset Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge* (1944), Laurence Darrell, is, like Hemingway’s Jake Barnes, an American in Paris who has been shattered by combat in World War I. David, the protagonist of James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), is another American in Paris hanging out with other expatriates, including Giovanni, the bartender from Italy to whom he is sexually attracted. And Woody Allen’s “A Twenties Memory,” from his collection *Getting Even* (1978), spoofs the mythology of the Lost Generation. Nor is Dyer the last to rewrite *The Sun Also Rises*. The wry premise of Arthur Phillips’s 2002 novel *Prague* is that the Czech capital is the post-Communist approximation of post-World War I Paris but that its fictional expatriates must make do with Budapest instead. But more explicitly and repeatedly than most others, Dyer employs his sense of belatedness toward the post-World War I authors to repeat that all is pastiche. At this late date, if you hang out in cafés beside the Seine, you can’t help but step beside the same river twice.