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Containing the Chaos: On Spiral Structure and the Creation of Ironic Distance in Memoir

I recently attended a performance of *Quidam* by Cirque du Soleil, that Canadian performance group whose highly trained, super-pliable acrobats showcase the wondrous capabilities of the human body. At one of the various breath-stopping climaxes of the show, a group of gymnasts hiked themselves, monkey-like, up a series of cables to the very high ceiling of the city's sports arena. They wrapped, as they went, their enviably muscled bodies in great lengths of scarlet silk and then dive-spiraled from ceiling to floor—a high-speed spinning freefall—with apparently insane daring. Though I'd been no more than an observer up in the 54th row, it took me most of the day to recover.

Later, in my own sedentary attempt at audacity, I found I'd bent myself so far over the keyboard, becoming so lost inside the memory I was trying to recreate, a particularly difficult one that I'd caused myself actual physical harm. I stretched back in counter-pose, feeling every joint crack, feeling intently the need to get out of the house, to run, yell, cry. I'd been doing this to myself for months, making myself ill by reliving each scene of my chaotic personal history with similar intensity. The back pain had been preceded by any number of minor ailments indicative of long-trapped *chi* suddenly released: cold sores, eye irritation, shingles, and a cruel allergy to all things alcoholic. As I stretched out, I took a giant, full breath and my gut did that gurgling release-of-tension thing it does when you can actually hear the trapped energy spiraling noisily upward through the inner ladder of your chakras. I was reminded of those acrobats I'd seen twisting themselves up their cables before spinning madly to the ground. When I doodled, wasn't that what I drew: little coils that started in the center of my page and swirled outward, or else back inward? The

making of that shape—its dynamic form—seemed to represent something essential to the creative process, a daring unraveling. It seemed, too, to provide a clue regarding how the writer of personal narrative, especially that concerning traumatic events, might contain the lived chaos of that experience on paper.

I'd been privy that afternoon at the circus, I saw, not to a group of death-wish artists, but to people putting their trust in physics: in a timeless, predictable pattern. What I'd witnessed, in fact, was a spatio-visual display of the classic mathematical concept known as the Fibonacci Sequence, a series of numbers in which each pair of successive integers is added together to produce the next number ($0 + 1 = 1 + 2 = 3 + 5 = 8 + 13 = 21 + 34 = 55$, and so on).

We encounter this phenomenon, of course, in patterns of natural growth—in the corollae of flowers, in shells, fern fronds, pinecones, storm clouds, star formations—and also in visual art, in Zen mandalas and labyrinths, and the proportions of fine architecture; we hear it in musical composition—the things that lend us pleasure. It's the shape, too, from which we all begin; the DNA strands from which we're made, and indeed of Jo March's creative vortex in Alcott's *Little Women*, the outward physical release in words of the "divine afflatus" (256) or inspiration that drives her work: the music of our gut. It is a form flexible yet strong enough to contain and express our strongest memories, while lending our text reliability—the sense that we are in control of our material. The ideal container, then, for a story that looks both ways—one that fixes firmly on past events, while seeking to make meaningful connections with the both the present moment and the experience of the greater world.

The vortex or spiral form is useful because, like the blank page, it possesses these properties of infinite possibility while offering, simultaneously, the promise of the steady, step-by-step evolution of an idea—one that emerges with organic, incremental logic out of the sum of what's come before. Its shape suggests a release of creative and forward-thrusting narrative energy within a controlled framework. Further—and here's the really exhilarating discovery for the writer of memoir—the Fibonacci sequence

also exists in negative form, known to mathematicians as ‘negafibonacci.’ Thus, the spiral offers both a path of forward-moving discovery—a systematic unfurling of experienced events—and a measured, meditative retracing of one’s steps. In other words: a balanced, dynamic tug between retrospection and narrative momentum. Like when a child twists tight the suspending chains of a playground swing and then lets go. She spins first one way, then the other, until she comes ultimately to stasis. At each change in direction, too—at the “top” of each spin—she experiences a brief, climactic hiatus—a moment of epiphany, perhaps, regarding her relationship to time and space, in which she comes to appreciate the pleasure of surrender: she laughs.

This experience of joyful two-way spiraling is exemplified in the sharply intelligent and highly entertaining memoirs of two British writers, Jenny Diski and Geoff Dyer. Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica: A Journey to the End of the World* and Dyer’s *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* each describe traumatic events and the authors’ consequent struggle with debilitating depression, but neither of these texts feels simply an enactment of the therapeutic, but each text reverberates far beyond the therapeutic, or solipsistic. Rather than paddle in their sorrows, Diski and Dyer offer a sparkling and nuanced reflecting pool—the creation of an ironic yet affecting distance—and structural brilliance to boot.

Though each book begins with a confession of the author’s psychic difficulties, this is offered in a lightly humorous tone and, equally important, each writer follows up with a prompt promise of action. Diski describes how she decided, on an extravagant whim informed by a lifelong desire for oblivion—the forgetting of a very difficult past—to travel to Antarctica; Dyer, cursed by inaction and chronic near-despair, explains his sudden compulsion to embark on an equally ambitious journey. He is impelled, after years of postponement, to visit the numerous and various haunts of his literary hero and forebear, that ultimate itinerant, D.H. Lawrence—and finally create the book about him that he’s longed to write. The promised journey, in each case, holds out the possibility of resolution to a particular ontological question

that has risen, disobligingly, to the surface of the author's psyche. Diski, once suicidal, hasn't seen her mother for thirty years, not since that mother attempted suicide herself before storming off in a histrionic rage when her only daughter was a teen, and the grown, abandoned daughter lives in a state of what she claims to be contented uncertainty regarding her unhappy parent's existence and whereabouts: what she describes as a closed 'Schrodinger's Box' (a sealed telegram, if you will, that is only potentially destructive if opened). Is her mother dead or alive, and should she risk 'opening the box' to find out? Is there something wrong with her if she doesn't? Dyer, for his part, admits to a chronic struggle with issues of selfhood, confidence and belonging that have developed into a sort of frantic, early-onset mid-life crisis. He has left behind his native land, and seems to have lost the possibility of contentment. "I have had so much disappointment in my life," he laments, "that the tiniest amount is now enough to drive me to despair" (155). Where, having left, and given infinite freedom of choice, should he live? How can he overcome his disastrous habits of prevarication and sit down to write. Ultimately—"the real subject of the book" as he puts it—how can he avoid despair?

This may sound like the prelude to pity, but Dyer and Diski know better. Each has learned to make literary lemonade out of a wildly contradictory, latently self-destructive nature, and each exploits his or her schizophrenic tendencies by interweaving an examination of personal psychic fracture between amusing and enlightening 'real time' scenes that arise out of the author's recent travel experiences. Both create witty, highly original narrative, instilled with contemplative sincerity and biting wit, knowing in exactly which direction they're headed, even when they don't. They push us through a sometimes-wild narrative sea with one hand firmly on the tiller, and we keep on turning the pages.

Diski shows us in satisfyingly concrete terms the southern tip of the world: the "higgledy-piggledy" Argentinian tax haven of Ushuaia, "a collective act of imagination unhampered by planning constraints...dwellings that would make the designers of Oz hearts' sing" (56-57). (It is human, it seems, to abjure constraint.) She introduces us to the lonely British soldiers who keep a vigil over the Falklands

and the abandoned whaling stations and “obscene,” “aesthetic disaster of the elephant seal” (148). She gives us “timeless standing, unwitnessed” penguins, and “otherworldly” ice floes and bergs, and she creates unforgettable portraits of her insufferable yet fascinating fellow travelers, Big Jim and less-big Jim; Mona, the verbose, birdlike Scot; ultra right-wing Zionists, Emily and Manny Roth, who rudely challenge Diski’s own quietly-lived Judaism, and super-depressive, “wraith”-like Janice: “someone,” Diski says, who lives deep, or perhaps not so very deep, inside me... uncomfortably familiar and frightening” (141-142).

Geoff Dyer, equally engaging, takes us on a grand tour of D.H. Lawrence’s old haunts: insufferably hot and outmoded yet fascinating European cities and villages, and parts of Mexico. Both writers, incidentally, show us England, insular instigator of their state of must-act, travel-bug restlessness.

It is from a position of comfortable self-incarceration in the “very small,” all-white bedroom of her London apartment, and with a mood of contented, lethargic stasis, that Jenny Diski first imagines Antarctica: “I am not entirely content with the degree of whiteness in my life,” she writes. She continues by opening the idea further:

My bedroom is white: white walls, icy mirrors, white sheets and pillowcases, white slatted blinds. It’s the best I could do. Some lack of courage—I wouldn’t want to be thought extreme—has prevented me from having a white bedstead and side-tables... In the morning, if I arrange myself carefully when I wake I can open my eyes to nothing but whiteness... Morning moments of indescribable satisfaction. Eventually, I have to let colors in to my day, but for a while I can wallow in a seemingly boundless expanse of white (1-2).

Here, Diski adopts the role of geographer: tough broad and competent, reflective adult, but she also hints at her vulnerable, restive underside—that “lack of courage;” that “not entirely content...the best I could do.” She hints, too, at her understanding that escape is only ever temporary (“Eventually, I have to...for a

while I can...”) (40). This is the contained private world from which she must wind her way out—the place and state of mind that inspires her to travel to “the great whiteout” that is Antarctica and to which she must, in the end, return—her mirror-walled room; her self.

Aboard the *Akademik Vavilon*, the ship that takes her from Patagonia southwards to the Antarctic Sound, the author is delighted to find that her cabin—tiny, spartanly furnished—is an almost exact replica of her room back home: a “monk’s cell” (61). Both are ideal settings for reflection and confession, a writer’s paradise, and she retreats to the cabin as often as possible to avoid her camera-and-opinion-toting fellow “Ur-American” and “Ur-British” shipmates. From this point of contemplative stillness, Diski looks out at the vast, uncluttered polar landscape and is able to capture the clean stretch of her life: to think with absolute, *id*-like yet mature clarity about her traumatic past. She spirals deeply inward to relate the story of a tragically confused childhood, and we become her privileged intimate, happily pulled in. We hear how she suffered at the hands of two incapable parents sexual molestation, constant uncertainty, and physical abandonment: how she’s recently discovered that her once beloved, early-deceased father was a conman on the postwar black-market, who twice attempted suicide. She tells us, quite dispassionately and often drolly, about her own resulting suicide attempt and hospitalization as a teenager—we’re treated, for example, to the “near-demented Sister Winniki (identical twin to Big Nurse)” (2)—and about her dissociative amnesia regarding her childhood self. This doppelganger, the young ‘Jennifer Simmonds’, is the vulnerable, shut-in little-girl-lost and grandchild of Jewish immigrants, the Zimmermans, who lurks beneath the middle-aged, authorial surface: the child and overflowing container of grief, whose tightly wound spool of memories must be released before Diski can head home at peace with herself.

This kind of personal information might be unbearable, or unreadable, but balanced as it is with highly objective digression and forward-looking travelogue, the reader, like Diski herself, is able to take these awful truths in her stride while never losing sight of their influence, or the benefits of the more

stable present moment. Behind Jennifer and the other various Jennies of Diski’s previous existence hovers the author in her role as structural engineer and logician—the reeler-out and reeler-in of spirals.

By cycling from present to near past to distant past to hypothetical future—how will she feel if or when she discovers the truth about her mother?—with diversions on everything from how memory works to the advantages of disappointment, to quantum physics, to the history of polar exploration, she generates both narrative energy and a beguiling multi-layered perspective. Importantly, it is the retelling of memories—the spiraling inward towards an understanding of the past—that gives rise to these meditations, and, conversely, meditation that sometimes kindles a significant memory. In this way, we actually witness the creation of wisdom: how it is achieved through a combination of internal, emotional exploration, and external, objective thought.

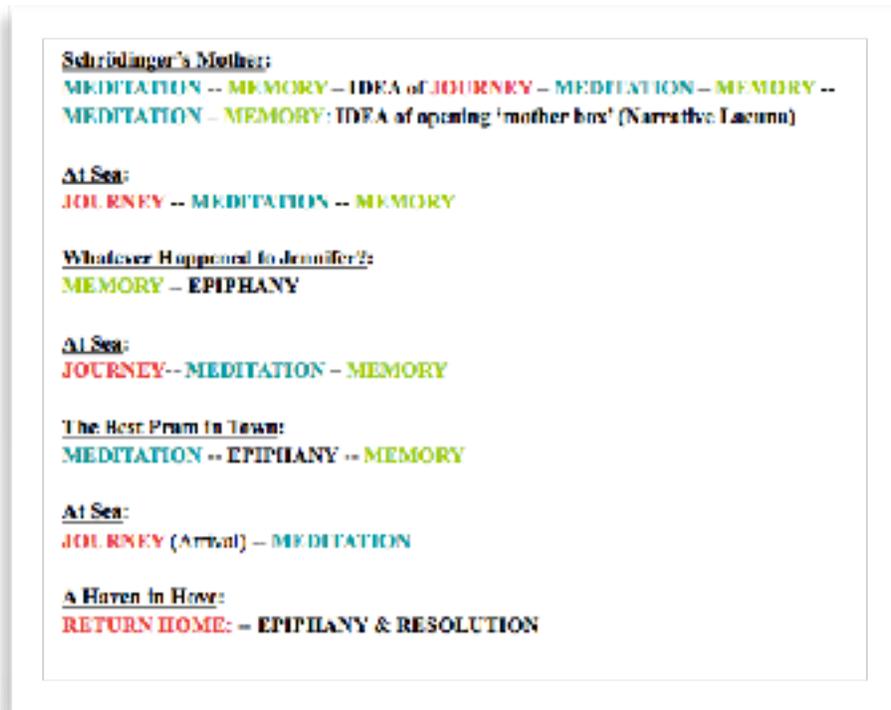
Graphically speaking, the book, divided into balanced sections, looks something like this:



The back-and-forth of the virtuosic opening section, called “Schrödinger’s Mother”, sets up a defining pattern here—from meditation (present thought, or stasis) to memory (inward spiral) to action-inspiring idea or narrative lacuna (outward spiral, or forward-moving narrative), and so on. With the subsequent contrasting sections,

this creates the dualistic, dynamic form of the book, while imitating its underlying psychological topography. In the tidal suck-and-push of the narrative, we feel the vicissitudes of human experience made concrete: Diski shows us our own innate, inescapable polarity. Most importantly, this particular

structural model draws us in while presenting a rationally developed yet always surprising path to follow. While the inwardly-spiraling sections (*shown in green above.*) are deeply reflective in tone, the three longer ‘outward-spiraling’ sections, each entitled “At Sea,” (*highlighted in red*) provide a fresh and energetic ‘refrain’ that possesses the attractive vigor inherent to travel narrative.



Along with the book's subtitle, "A Journey to the End of the World," these segments also describe the metaphorical thread that holds the book together, so that by the final "At Sea" chapter, when Diski reaches the most southern point of her journey, the landscape reflects all that she's come to understand about the internal effects of her fractured, uncertain childhood. We look out with her and see:

The world... flat and still except for the bergs ranged above us.... uncanny and peaceful, a near oblivion, but deceptive... Nothing about this region would be quite the same again, as the floes and bergs floated and melted... It was so untroubled by itself that the heart ached.... this was truly a dream place where melting and movement

seemed only to increase immutability. Nothing there stays the same, but nothing changes (231-232).

At the end of the world, Diski suggests, what you find is a state of the ultimate lyrical equivocation, and it is as beautiful as it is impossible to know. And depression, she concludes—that metaphorical apocalypse—“is Antarctic”(236-237), both terrible and, in its promise of escape, oddly desirable. She also realizes with comic delight that, having come all the way to Antarctica, she needn't actually get off the boat. The choice of whether or not to go out on the ice—a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—like the choice over opening ‘the mother box’, is finally within her control. She expresses this liberating epiphany with brilliant economy: “Myself shrugged” (226): the gasp of pleasure at the ‘top’ of the twisted swing’s final hiatus.

It is *this* Jenny with her self-chosen, made-up surname, Diski—contentedly divorced, middle-aged, successful writer and mother, philosopher and Antarctic traveler, at peace with her past—who returns home to London and the news, delivered by her daughter Chloe, that her mother did indeed die a number of years ago. Diski is able to accept with equanimity Chloe’s desire to peer inside the ‘grandmother box’ because during her journey south she has put Jennifer Simmonds, the damaged child, and Jenny the psychiatric patient, Jenny the hard-hearted survivor, of whom she confesses she’s been ashamed, firmly behind her. Though she returns to London and her white room, she has disembarked, psychically speaking, into another land.

Geoff Dyer wants nothing more than to find Diski’s kind of equilibrium: her room with an inner view. The narrator of *Out of Sheer Rage*, quite literally sick of his nomadic lifestyle, battles with a self-confessed addiction to indolence and indecision that—in contrast to Diski’s—tortures him. He wants to write a book about his great influence, Lawrence, also a novel, and can settle to neither because of his inner agitation: a result mostly of his love-hate-mostly-hate relationship with his English homeland: the way its post-industrial ugliness and mood of crushed potential has pushed him—like Lawrence—like this writer—out, taking him away from the not inconsiderable comforts of his beloved British ‘telly’. Propelled

forward, as it were, by this inner schism, his text spins dangerously, dizzyingly between poles of opposing thought, while remaining always under Dyer's strict control. The opening paragraph is a prime example:

Looking back it seems, on the one hand, hard to believe that I could have wasted so much time, could have exhausted myself so utterly, wondering when I was going to begin my study of D. H. Lawrence; on the other, it seems equally hard to believe that I *ever* started it, for the prospect of embarking on this study of Lawrence accelerated and intensified the psychological disarray it was meant to delay and alleviate. Conceived as a distraction, it immediately took on the distracted character of that from which it was intended to be a distraction, namely myself... (1)

And so it goes on: parallel structure; unapologetically lengthy sequences of appositives and run-on sentences; fastidious grammatical piecework—all Fibonacci elements that work towards the construction of the carefully unwinding narrative spiral of a man who knows exactly what he's doing without knowing exactly where he's going. These lengthy, existential prevarications about the frustrating illogicality of life boast their own hilariously extended, syllogistic logic, and we bounce along from one sentence and one paragraph to the next, loving the antic exhilaration of the ride, knowing at some point we'll end with our feet on the ground, if only temporarily. We're there at the fairground with Dyer in his clown suit and big shoes, chasing after the little dog of truth in its pointy hat and ruffed collar. Neither Dyer nor the reader ever quite catches that dog, but that's the point. The joy (wretched as it is)—the entertainment—is in the chase, and, as in *Skating to Antarctica*, it is the consistent narrative voice and deft structure that keep us merrily following along.

Where Diski's narrative is held together by symbols of ice and white space, Dyer's controlling metaphor is himself. This is his genius: he creates a persona behind which he can protect his ego and yet through which he reveals his most elemental self. As he puts it, "I can walk down a street in my best clothes and fall flat on my face with no appreciable loss of dignity because I am someone who is, in some

sense, already flat on his face, already devoid of dignity” (184), and that’s the really witty thing: Dyer presents himself, as does Diski, ultimately as a character of great dignity, a profoundly human philosopher of a man, as alive to his inner feelings and intelligence as his great models and inspirations, Lawrence, Rilke, Camus, Nietzsche, and Thomas Bernhard—all, in their own way, infuriatingly brilliant.

Dyer begins this riotously equivocal yet insightful narrative from an enclosed situation not dissimilar to Diski’s—an apartment in Paris he can’t decide whether or not to abandon—on a voyage to find the inner tranquility necessary to write his book—or books: his version of *Cabin 532*. Where *should* he go in order to focus on his work? His girlfriend’s apartment in Rome? A Greek Island? Lawrence’s former lodging in Sicily? “Abroad...at the edge of myself, of what I was capable of”? Or back to England, “the soft centre of my being” (13)? Yes, no, yes, no. Where Diski’s narrative spirals turn like a ship’s wheel, slow and definite, cranked by a judicious story-weaver’s hand, Dyer’s are vertiginous, and navigating them is like doing time in a wonderful purgatory. The book, chapter-less, sucks you into its vortex, and you go to it with delicious dread, as to an afternoon of Olympic-caliber plate spinning. Dyer starts in the middle, and works his way, in his words, “out to the edges” of his text (174). He breaks all the traditional rules of overall structural composition, so that he can break the ultimate one and write a book about not writing a book that indeed turns into that book—one that ends up being about so much more than D. H. Lawrence: not least desolation, not to mention the supreme importance of equivocation and rebellion in the creative act.

As a result, the climax of *Out of Sheer Rage* arises almost like a mirage. Midway through the book, the narrator takes us to Oaxaca, where he’s drifted with his girlfriend after the grand failure of a pilgrimage to the Mexican leg of his “so-called Lawrence trail,” which, he admits, “was fast becoming unrecognizable, identified, if at all, by its lack of direction, by its overwhelming purposelessness” (171). Dyer and his “almost-wife,” ‘Laura’ (these names are a word-tease in themselves—she calls *him* ‘Lorenzo’) end up sunbathing nude on a beach, thoroughly stoned. When he confesses to Laura with pitch-perfect

pathos, “on the brink of tears,” “I am so wound up in myself I am not even a man” (174), we sense powerfully his imminent implosion. But only almost, for then Dyer, quickly throwing off any threat of self-focused sentimentality, proceeds to describe a scene of sandy-fisted masturbation before Laura’s dozing, sprawling form. He does this, he explains, as a means of release that will distract him from his sense of insufficiency and emasculation—a way to prevent breakdown. Immediately, we are back in the realm of gleefully shocked laughter—situation comedy of the best kind. *This* happened, says Dyer (meaning emotional breakdown) ... but then *this*: skinny Dyer, doped up; “drawn into a whirlpool of anxiety,” having abandoned his “chafing swimming trunks,” looks down with disgust at “My Bambi legs” and then, “her cunt...her cunt...My prick...My prick...Laura’s cunt,” before abandoning altogether the thought of gritty “mastur-chafing.” He “turn[s] around, away from Laura, and star[es] at the ocean, letting [his] prick soften” (174-175). This wonderful, extended moment of deflation, pure Chaucerian-style bathos, provides the perfect anti-climax for a book essentially about just that—onanism and comedown. We’re not left there for long, though. As soon as Dyer arrives at that point, he quickly spins away from it. Looking out over the ocean, he sees a young woman, a stranger, drowning. Back we spin towards reality and gravity: towards the ultimate universal issue. At Zipolite, whose name, Dyer tells us, “means something to do with Death” (171), with its huge “Berlin Wall waves...crashing in”(176), Dyer stares Death in the face. The drowning woman survives, but only just, and she’s saved by another, brawnier man, an Australian, with our scrawny British hero looking hopelessly on.

Dyer pulls us into this wretched world and makes us want to stay there for two hundred odd pages by dint of this overtly subversive, almost seditious to-and-fro banter and structure, but it’s out of this unlikely and implausible foundation that spins up, as if liberated, his unique and deeply honest voice. Like Diski, he laughs at adversity and at his own shortcomings, and has made of those survival techniques an almost perfect, Wildean-style art: “Life is really no more than a search for a hot drink one likes;” he quips (72). “Life is bearable even when it’s unbearable: that is what is so terrible, that is the unbearable thing

about it” (204); “I cannot accept myself as I am but, ultimately, I am resigned to accepting this inability to accept myself as I am” (189).

While this is all undeniably fun, the truly clever part of Dyer’s enterprise is the way in which he manages to insert into this personal rollercoaster ride a fine critique of D.H. Lawrence’s work. Just as our patience with his solipsistic see-sawing, and avoidance of his promised subject is stretched to its limit near the front of the book; at the precise moment we’ve abandoned all hope of the promised appreciation of Lawrence, we’re dropped suddenly—eighty pages in—deep into its beautiful heart. Here, the narrator adopts a tone of high seriousness and, through an unabashedly affirmative presentation of Lawrence’s letters, reveals his appreciation of the man “who made [him] want to write;” the “gravitational pull” of whose work, “always away from the work, back towards the circumstances of its composition, towards the man and his sensations,” he so admires (111). It’s through his thoughtful and loving discussions of these letters and essays that Dyer reveals his own tender humanity and heroism, because, really, he’s describing both the inspiration behind and the power of his own spiral-like writing process:

His [Lawrence’s] writing urges us back to its source, to the experience in which it originates...There is... a sense of the words welling up in him unbidden. Each paragraph pulses into life from the seed of the preceding one; each paragraph offers an amended version of the same material; each version enters more deeply into the experience, and, at the same time advances it incrementally...so a narrative emerges: the narrative of his attempts to fix an experience that is vast, shifting, apocalyptic. (113-117)

Having ‘whirled’ us deep into Lawrence’s radical mind, Dyer spins out again to describe the physical details of that author’s nomadic life, including his charming quirks (Lawrence apparently loved DIY; he was a fastidious book-keeper). Only then does he return to the subject of himself and the revelation that he, too, is vulnerable to severe bouts of self-doubt and depression, though he remains wittily equivocal on the subject, describing his condition, ever obliquely, as a “rheumatism of the will” (196) and himself as “a

poor prospect in anyone's eyes, even my own" (7). We're never quite sure why he's so morose, and perhaps that's Dyer's point: the causes of his despair are infuriatingly, evasively non-specific.

As in Diski's memoir, we'd be less tolerant of this, albeit slantwise navel-gazing if we hadn't first been taken on a fascinating jaunt both around Lawrence's mind and the physical sights of Europe. Fully relaxed by the involving detail and rapid-paced wit of the forward-moving travel narrative—this is a book you can't read without laughing out loud and which, truly, you can't put down—we are prepared, laid open as it were, to the emotionally serious aspect of the text. We're ready to spiral the other way—inwards—to see what might exist at the very center of Dyer's—and maybe our—being: that Lawrentian “soft center” from which both Dyer and his champion have run; to which Dyer ultimately returns, besting as it were Lawrence, setting up home back in Oxford, or ‘Dullford’ as he calls it, utopia be damned.

In the end, Dyer explains that he outwitted depression—that assassin of interest in life—by developing an interest in that very subject; by writing a book about it, and he closes on a note of typically prevarication-tinted certainty: “One way or another we all have to write our studies of D. H. Lawrence... even if we will never complete them.” It's “the best we can do” (232), a fascinating echo of Diski's opening words in *Skating to Antarctica*.

Ironically—for Dyer's work *is* irony—*Out of Sheer Rage* winds up as a celebration: a festival of the bloody-minded refusal of the mind to stay in one place—our complete lack of free will—and a demonstration of how, if we embrace that agonizing truth, we can actually exploit it in our writing. Like Diski's tale, Dyer's book provides us with the ultimately comforting knowledge that our real-life journeys, however damaging and chaotic, *do* contain shape and meaning: we just have to set the story in motion—write down the first pair of integers, and keep on adding.

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