THE EXTINCT SCENE

Late Modernism and Everyday Life

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INTRODUCTION

LATE MODERNISM AND THE OUTWARD TURN

IN THE PREFACE to her volume of short fiction from the Second World War, Elizabeth Bowen apologizes for not giving "'straight' pictures of the British wartime scene."[1] Her readers will find no harrowing portrayals of air raids and no heroism from the civilians of the so-called People's War; instead Bowen recreates the "war climate" of a besieged city where the routines, habits, and affective dimensions of everyday life are turned inside out. In Bowen's war city, the simple acts of buying flowers and reading acquire the most extraordinary significance while "a bomb on your house was as inexpedient, but not more abnormal, than a cold in your head."[2] In her 1941 story "In the Square" Bowen tracks these changes in everyday life and openly wonders if they are ciphers for something else. In the story's opening scene, Rupert, recently returned to wartime London, steps out of a taxi and into a windswept, vacant city square. Shuttered and glassless windows stare out from Blitz-damaged buildings. The square is newly awash in late sunlight, "able to enter brilliantly at a point where three of the houses had been bombed away."[3] Bowen's narrator dubs this urban dead zone "the extinct scene" (609): empty, depopulated, eerily still. For Rupert, this place is still familiar. He remembers it as the setting for dinner parties "on many summer evenings before" (609). Despite its ruinous appearance, "the square's acoustics had altered very little" (609). When Rupert ventures inside to see Magdela, an old friend, his attention turns to other familiar things: furniture, the ringing telephone,

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smells of cooking from the basement, and the arrangement of rooms. And yet these things have all been slightly altered—the chairs and sofas are newly worn; a sheltering family lives in the basement; the drawing room, once "the room of a hostess" (610), has "no aspect at all" (610). Bowen's extinct scene, then, is not just an evacuated, ravaged war zone; it is the place where we glimpse an uneasy coexistence of familiarity and disorientation, of everydayness and history. Those places, memories, things, and habits that ground experience and knowledge become unsettled and draw attention like a magnetic field. In their sustained attention to those disruptions of everyday life, Bowen's stories ask what the unsettled surfaces of the everyday might tell us about less visible historical transformations. This is exactly why the story concludes with Magdela's question to Rupert: "Do you think we shall see great change?" (615). The question is not if "great change" will occur, but if—and how—we shall see it.

Bowen's extinct scene typifies a broader set of questions about everyday life that cuts across late modernism. How do these agitations at the level of everyday life correspond to "great change"—that is, the large scale of war, systemic change, and historical events? And what form of attention to the everyday is required to establish that correspondence? This book unfolds the relationship between late modernism's outward turn—the form of attention it gives to the temporalities, spaces, surface appearances, textures, and rhythms of everyday life—and the disorder in the world-system that pushed the locus of global power from Britain to America.[4] More specifically, I argue that late modernism's outward turn figures everyday life as a scene where world-systemic distress attains legibility. In works as varied as Elizabeth Bowen's wartime stories and Vic Reid's anticolonial fiction, late modernist texts look to the everyday to explain a historical transformation in the structure of the world-system.

This book developed out of an initial curiosity about the organization Mass-Observation and the unimaginably large archive of everyday life they assembled in the 1930s and 1940s.[5] Why would an oddball collective of surrealists, documentary filmmakers, poets, and anthropologists feel so compelled to scrutinize everyday life during periods of national and international distress? Was it possible—and even desirable—to create some form of cooperation between avant-garde aesthetic practices and sociological inquiry? I was rather surprised to find the same constellation of everyday life, historical crisis, and aesthetic experimenta-

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tion taking shape in other zones of late modernist cultural production. That early curiosity evolved into the research questions that animate this study: why would writers in a historical period plagued by extraordinary crises divert their attention away from those crises and focus instead on the everyday? What could it mean that this preoccupation with the everyday surfaced in the late work of older modernists, former surrealists, cinematic neophytes, and colonial novelists? Indeed, some of the most direct confrontations with everyday life emerged from places as different as the editing rooms of the nascent documentary film movement and the confines of the Bloomsbury Group. John Grierson, godfather and brash proponent of documentary film, conceived his own cinema of everyday life in explicit opposition to the high modernism of the 1920s: "Documentary represent[s] a reaction from the art world of the early and middle 1920s—Bloomsbury, Left Bank, T. S. Eliot, Clive Bell, and all—by people with every reason to know it well. Likewise, if it was a return to 'reality,' it was a return not unconnected with Clydeside Movement, ILP's, the Great Depression, not to mention our Lord Keynes, the London School of Economics, Political and Economic Planning and such."[6]

By 1932 Virginia Woolf declared a similar move away from the thickly interiorized narration of her earlier fiction: "There's a good deal of gold," she writes, "—more than I'd thought—in externality."[7] Perhaps Stephen Spender captured the mood best when he claimed in 1935 that the economic and political convulsions of the era should "turn the reader's and writer's attention outwards from himself to the world."[8] In its efforts to track the various manifestations of the outward turn, this book aims to produce a version of late modernism elastic enough to encompass figures as dissimilar as Woolf and Grierson but focused enough to pull into view the reciprocal relationship between aesthetics and world-systemic change during this transitional period.

It should be said from the outset that I make no grand claim that these writers and artists were the first to see everyday life as artistic material, nor do I believe that modernism, in any of its phases, is better equipped to mediate everyday experience than realism, romanticism, naturalism, or anything else.[9] If literary history has gained anything from the study of modernism, it should be a suspicion of claims for modernism's absolute novelty. I suggest that the depth, scale, and particularity of late modernism's encounter with everyday life becomes apparent only by way of a dialectical inquiry into the interrelationships between late

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modernism's use of various genres—documentary cinema, the historical novel, auto-ethnography, travel writing, the gothic, vernacular fiction—and the accumulating pressures attending the breakup of the British world-system. My argument turns on two interrelated propositions. First, I claim that late modernism's outward turn constitutes a dialectical twist in a long trajectory of modernist aesthetics, one that significantly affects the mediating powers of modernist forms, genres, and techniques; second, I argue that late modernism figures everyday life as the scene where structural changes in the world-system attain legibility. The remainder of this introduction will elaborate both of these propositions and show how late modernism's descriptions of everyday life serve as mediated expressions of world-systemic disorder and its far-reaching consequences.

MODERNISM AND THE SCENE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The very notion of late modernism as aesthetically and historically unique is still relatively new.[10] This project joins the field carved out most recently by Tyrus Miller, Jed Esty, Marina MacKay, Robert Genter, and many others, all of whom link late modernism's aesthetic distinctiveness to specific historical pressures. While my project follows their lead in this respect, it tells a different story about late modernist aesthetics and historicity. I want to start, then, with a two-part question: how is the outward turn specifically a late modernist form of attention, and how did late modernists themselves understand their aesthetic practice as distinct from their predecessors? To begin answering these questions, we should first note that everyday life is a central, abiding concern of the most iconic works of high modernism. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) marshals a stunning array of narrative techniques to capture a single day in the life of the rather unremarkable Leopold Bloom; another single-day novel, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), interweaves complex observations on sexual and psychic life with the rather mundane tasks required to host an evening party. And, amidst the dense thicket of literary and theological allusions in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), demotic speech buzzes in public houses and hushed interiors while taxis hum on the streets and a typist listens to a gramophone. This is to say nothing of the avant-gardes of the teens and twenties—futurists, surrealists, Russian futurists—who expended

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a great deal of energy trying to transform everyday life into something radically new. In fact, we might say that modernism is the name we give to art that treats everyday life as a problem and not a given.

Still, recognizing the importance of the everyday to modernist aesthetics raises more questions than it answers. Why does attention to everyday life require formal complexity? How does the aesthetic treatment of everyday life vary over space and time? What would be political about such aesthetic treatment? Recent work in modernist studies by Liesl Olson, Bryony Randall, and Juan A. Suárez reframes the typical features of modernist writing—dilated, contracted, and multiple temporalities, fragmented *and* encyclopedic forms, anaesthetizing repetition, weak plots—as the result of a specific form of attention to everyday life.[11] In Suárez's words, modernism "was a way of doing something" with the materials of everyday life and "in this process, it exposed and critiqued the limitations of everyday life while it simultaneously sought to escape them."[12] Olson's *Modernism and the Ordinary* formulates an altogether different, and one might say less critical, version of modernism's rapprochement with the everyday. Rather than transforming or defamiliarizing everyday life, modernism, Olson argues, shows us how "the ordinary indeed may endure in and of itself, as a 'final good.'"[13] In this argument, the construction of modernism as the art of epiphany, shock, or rupture altogether misses the role played by a persistent ordinariness.[14] The formal innovations so celebrated in the works of high modernists such as Joyce, Woolf, and Gertrude Stein result from a struggle to represent everyday life without transforming it into something extraordinary or transcendent.

The first distinction I want to mark here is that late modernism's engagement with the everyday cannot be explained as either the defamiliarization or the preservation of the ordinary. This means my account moves away from the set of conceptual dyads that govern existing studies of modernism and everyday life: ordinary and extraordinary, familiar and unfamiliar, mundane and ecstatic.[15] I suggest that late modernism requires us to leverage that internal dialectic onto the larger terrain of world-systemic disorder where the very concept of everyday life, however riven with contradictions, acquires specificity and coherence within an articulated network of political, economic, and social life. Less bewitched by the comfort of routine or the ecstasy of the unfamiliar, the late modernist texts that I examine describe the particulars of everyday life and arrange those particulars in a

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way that expresses some feature of world-systemic disorder. In short, late modernism's encounter with everyday life is not primarily aesthetic or ethical; it is simultaneously aesthetic *and* political.

John Grierson's early writings on documentary crystallize the volatile realignment of aesthetics, politics, and everyday life after the 1920s. In his efforts to develop a documentary aesthetic, Grierson subjected what would become infamously known as the inward turn to a scathing critique. However, he also understood documentary as spearheading another wave of aesthetic innovation. In August of 1930 he pondered over the fate and future of modernism in his young, troubled decade:

> It may be—and what I understand of aesthetic bids me believe—that in making art in our new world we are called upon to build in new forms altogether. Fantasy will not do, nor the dribblings of personal sentiment or personal story. The building of our new forms has been going on, of course, for a long time in poetry and the novel and architecture, and even within such limitations of medium as one finds in painting and sculpture. We have all been abstracting our arts away from the personal, trying to articulate this wider world of duties and loyalties in which education and invention and democracy have made us citizens.[16]

Grierson's call for "new forms" harmonizes with Ezra Pound's "make it new," replaying the most recognizable of all modernist doctrines. His antipathy to the personal is but a thinly veiled critique of the experiments with psychic interiority and subjective experience underwriting some, but not all, of the most significant high modernist achievements—Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. Christopher Isherwood also pointed to the political and economic realities of the 1930s as the moment when Virginia Woolf, Bloomsbury, and the modernism it represented lost some of its luster: "After he and Stephen [Spender] had been to see *Kameradschaft*, Pabst's film about the coal miners, in 1931, Christopher told Stephen that, when the tunnel caved in and the miners were trapped, he had thought: 'That makes Virginia Woolf look pretty silly.' Stephen replied that he had been thinking something similar, though not specifically about Virginia."[17] In Grierson's and Isherwood's diagnoses, the modern aesthetic practices of their

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predecessors now appear newly aged, cloistered from the political and economic storms surging around them.

The salient point here is that these writers, artists, and filmmakers already understood the bloc of figures later institutionalized as high modernist as an identifiable, if not entirely coherent, set of cultural producers. Though Edmund Wilson did not employ the "m" word, which Vincent Sherry tells us Wilson found offensive, *Axel's Castle* did much in 1931 to consolidate a self-consciously modernist aesthetic.[18] The figures that head Wilson's chapters would not look out of place in a university seminar on modernism today: W. B. Yeats, Paul Valéry, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and, of course, Arthur Rimbaud. But if a version of a modernist aesthetic was recognizable as early as 1931, this meant artists could now work both with and against it. Yet, as the coming chapters will bear out, a wholesale abandonment of modernist techniques was never on the agenda. On his BBC broadcast series "The Poet and the Public," Humphrey Jennings would offer T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a model poem for bridging the gap between poetic work and public life; in a similarly unlikely venue, Cecil Day-Lewis would defend modernism and Eliot's poem in the pages of the *Left Review* against hardline calls for social realism.[19] Mass-Observation plundered surrealism in order to develop new forms of social research while Jennings marshaled surrealist techniques in his wartime propaganda films. Modernist experimentation as exemplified by Eliot, Joyce, and Woolf might have served as a foil for Grierson, Isherwood, George Lamming, and even late Woolf, but it was also open for conscious manipulation and renovation.

Whatever techniques or ideas late modernists borrowed from their predecessors, it is certainly true that their efforts to render everyday life look markedly different than anything by Proust, Joyce, or Woolf in the teens and twenties. To demonstrate a characteristically late modernist form of attention to everyday life, I turn to Henry Green's obscure novel *Party Going*. At the level of genre, Green's daybook would seem to fit neatly with other modernist masterpieces such as *Ulysses* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. Yet Green's novel generates another form of attention to everyday life, one specifically aimed at transforming quotidian experience into signs of the economic and political crises of the late 1930s.

Michael North sees *Party Going* as "a throwback to an earlier decade."[20] And, from one angle, Green's novel does seems more at home with the daybooks of

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the 1920s than with the literary production of the 1930s. While his novels rarely assume pride of place next to Woolf, Joyce, and Lawrence, his contemporaries thought him on par with these decorated authors.[21] For my purposes, *Party Going* emblematizes two distinct and interrelated features of late modernism's treatment of everyday life: first, the novel renovates familiar modernist techniques in order to interrogate daily life as a pressure point for class antagonisms and to express the decade's war anxiety, or what Paul Saint-Amour memorably dubs "pre-traumatic stress syndrome."[22] Like other modernist daybooks, Green's novel weaves in and out of the lives of multiple characters, oscillating between a third person omniscient point of view and free indirect discourse; it creates moments of narrative simultaneity through cross-cutting and spatial form. Second, Green's novel deemphasizes interiority and subjective experience, choosing instead to scrutinize the everyday as a sign of historical transformation. By tracking these two features in more detail, we can underscore the type of reading late modernist texts require.

Party Going follows a group of well-to-do, mostly young Londoners taking a holiday at the expense of Max Adey, a handsome rake about town. Their plans are stalled when a thick, slow-moving fog settles over London, halting all trains and disrupting the movement of the city. Green's leisured youths spend most of their time in a hotel above the train station as it fills with Londoners anxious for the city to resume its normal operations. Green's characters kill their empty time with cocktails, gossip, and idle talk. Unlike *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Ulysses*, Green's daybook does not chronicle a day in the life of a bustling modern metropole. By contrast, Green's London is a suspended city. This urban stasis is recapitulated in the virtual plotlessness of *Party Going*. Nothing much happens and when the trains resume after four hours, nothing much is resolved. We might see the novel, then, as a chronicle of a minor interruption in the structures, rhythms, and habits of everyday life. Yet, for Green, even a minor disturbance in the everyday is enough to make the social and economic structures of daily life appear.

Green organizes the narrative of *Party Going* spatially. For much of the novel, Max and his party sit comfortably in a hotel room overlooking the train station and "that swarm of people" below.[23] The novel translates class difference into spatial separation, but, as Marina MacKay notes, Green's narrative "shifts backwards and forwards between the hotel and the station floor with an air of neutrality."[24] In addition to the narration's movement between these two spaces, Green's

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novel is equally concerned with the pressure placed on the very structural divisions between the wealthy party goers above and the restive masses below. This brief suspension instigates a period of disorder, which Green expresses in terms of breached boundaries, heightened vulnerability, and a nightmarish anxiety that an entire social and economic system may falter. Green articulates these fears through the trope of infection. The novel opens with a cryptic but ominous scene that leads to the story's first infection. A pigeon, blinded by the fog, flies into a balustrade and drops dead in front of Miss Fellowes. She fetches the dead bird and washes it in the train station restroom and quickly grows weak. When she encounters Angela Crevy and Robin Adams in the train station, she passes her dead pigeon, now cleaned and swaddled in paper, to Robin and asks him to dispose of it. "She felt better at once, it began to go off and relief came over her in a glow following out of her weakness" (387). She soon retrieves her "parcel" from the wastepaper basket and falls into the illness that will grip her throughout the novel. Miss Fellowes succumbs to fearful fever dreams:

> Miss Fellowes, in her room, felt she was on a shore wedged between two rocks, soft and hard. Out beyond a grey sea with, above, a darker sky, she would notice small clouds where sea joined sky and these clouds coming far away together into a darker mass would rush across from that horizon towards where she was held down. As this cumulus advanced the sea below would rise, most menacing and capped with foam, and as it came nearer she could hear the shrieking wind in throbbing through her ears . . . it was so menacing she thought each time the pressure was such her eyes would be forced out of her head to let her blood out. (423)

This instance concludes with the storm receding and "a sweet tide" (423) washing over a relieved and relaxed Miss Fellowes. But the stock imagery—accumulation of amassed clouds, an unstoppable force, physical vulnerability—allegorizes the encroaching threats to the relative security of both the upper classes and, more broadly, a British population who had long enjoyed the geographical protection afforded to an island state with the world's most powerful navy.

The trope of infection reappears throughout the novel to figure the fraying lines between classes. Julia Wray leans out of her upstairs hotel window and gazes onto the crowds below, but their spatial distance offers little protection from the

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infectious nature of the crowd.[25] Noises and tobacco smoke from below rise up, creeping into Julia and Max's ears and throats. "Also whatever there is in crowds had reached into her, for these thousands below were now working up a kind of boisterous good humour" (467). At first blush, Green suggests some sort of transmission of joy from the crowds "into" Julia. Yet the novel switches from Julia's free indirect discourse to an omniscient narrator who assures us that what has "reached into" Julia is far more insidious: "What she could not tell was that those who were singing were Welshmen up for a match, and what they sang in Welsh was of the rape of a Druid's silly daughter under one of Snowdon's wilder mountains" (467). Julia's misrecognitions continue: "Also she felt encouraged and felt safe because they could not by any chance get up from below; she had seen those doors bolted, and through being above them by reason of Max having bought their room and by having money, she saw in what lay below her an example of her own way of living because they were underneath and kept there" (468). Her space of security inverts into one of entrapment. The steel doors protecting the hotel from the masses limit the mobility of those inside, putting the hotel into "a state of siege" (451). Like the accumulating clouds in Miss Fellowes's fever dream, the sheer density of the masses precipitates destruction and disorder.

Party Going deploys recognizably modernist techniques—free indirect discourse, fragmented narration, spatial form—to diagnose economic, social, and political anxieties of the 1930s. Unlike other famous modernist daybooks that employ similar narrative techniques, Green's novel cavalierly dismisses the inner complexity of character. On more than one occasion, he underscores the triviality and sheer depthlessness of his characters' inner lives. *Party Going* moves outward to the scene of everyday life, registering a social order mortally wounded by the economic pressures of the 1930s and the coming war. In this winding, unremarkable story about a mass of people waiting for the trains to move, Green's narrative techniques sap characters of their robust subjectivities and create a scene of everyday life that lays bare the structure, function, and anxieties of an entire city.

As Green, Isherwood, Mass-Observation, and others discovered, modernist aesthetics would not easily map onto the historical realities of the post-1920s world. Those historical realities seep into Green's text, infecting it at every level. In this way, *Party Going* stands in here for the aesthetic conflicts that arise in all

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of the following chapters. For Green and the other late modernists that populate these pages, the everyday carries the traces of past historical events, internalizes the antagonisms of the present, and sometimes serves as a mute indication of possible futures. As late modernist works demonstrate directly or indirectly, the accumulating world-systemic distress of the decades after the roaring twenties migrated into the aesthetic theories and formal structures of modernism, changing their role, appearance, and mediating power.

By turning their focus outward, these texts renovate established modernist techniques, often dispensing with certain features and ideas, replicating others, and putting still others to uses for which they were not quite intended. In late modernism, we see radical avant-garde techniques marshaled for state-sponsored film and liberal norms; high modernists retreat from aesthetic practices that defined their earlier careers and cemented them as icons; the cosmopolitan allure of travel gets distorted by layered networks of financial and political might that maintain geopolitical order; texts from a wartime capital convert the city from a vibrant center of intellectual activity into a mass grave; and, finally, the "revolution of the word" slides down from the airy world of abstract art into a tool for articulating unauthorized forms of political belonging. Late modernism designates the moment when modernism no longer recognizes itself.

While much of the work I investigate cuts its figure against earlier forms of modernism, late modernism should not be misconstrued as either a retreat from modernist aesthetics *tout court* or a return to realism. To be sure, Woolf's enchantment with "externality" and her fascination with Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy in the 1930s, like Mass-Observation's outspoken commitment to the actualities of daily life, might sound like a return to realism. However flexibly defined, realism has typically been considered the proper style for registering the seemingly insignificant details of daily life and making ordinary people and experiences the central subject matter of literature.[26] Arguably, no one inventoried the materials of daily life with more care and attentiveness than Honoré de Balzac.[27] Yet, as the coming chapters will show, writers and filmmakers constantly negotiated the conflict between an art attuned to the gritty realities of social and political life and the viability of aesthetic experimentation. This tension drives a good deal of midcentury cultural production, including documentary film, anglophone Caribbean

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vernacular fiction, and wartime art. We might say that late modernism's fascination with the everyday discloses an uneasy relationship between the epistemological claims of realism and the aesthetic resources of modernism.

In order to account for this uneasy relationship, we might begin by questioning the conventional wisdom that positions modernism and realism as dialectical opposites. At first blush, this critical commonplace has much to do with stylistic categories serving as periodizing terms. As literary history tells us, certain stylistic features emerge, peak, and decline over a period of years: romanticism gives way to realism, which then develops into naturalism. At the summit of these nineteenth-century literary innovations stands modernism, canceling out its predecessors and offering something "new" and "radical." A twice-told tale, to be sure, but this story forgets as much as it preserves for cultural memory. The problem of accounting for the prolonged existence of styles and techniques after their purported demise remains the embarrassment of literary history's fidelity to periodization.[28] Although modernist studies has admirably flexed the temporal and spatial dimensions of modernism to include more variegated aesthetic practices, modernism and realism have lost none of their descriptive and evaluative force; campaigns for an expanded or more inclusive modernism rarely question the power "modernism" or "realism" wield as markers of value.[29]

How might we think of the aesthetic techniques "modernism" and "realism" designated separately from the periods they denote? These questions in part drive Fredric Jameson's arguments in *A Singular Modernity*. While acknowledging the ineluctability of periodization, Jameson also criticizes periodizing gestures and, along the way, undercuts the pat narrative of modernism's supersession of realism: "Modernism is an aesthetic category and realism is an epistemological one; the truth claim of the latter is irreconcilable with the formal dynamic of the former. The attempt to combine the two into a single master narrative must therefore necessarily fail."[30] Splitting the difference between modernism and realism into aesthetics and epistemology certainly renders useless any "single master narrative" of literary history.[31] As Jameson knows well, aesthetics and epistemology may be derived from "two unrelated systems," but the fate of art in any given era is tied to the types of relationships it tries to stage between these two.[32] Aesthetic theory since Immanuel Kant has attempted to refigure the relation of art to both pure (epistemology) and practical reason (ethics and politics). One may uncover

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a different form of relation between art and knowledge across modern aesthetic theory—the Jena romantics' literary absolute, Georg Hegel's supersession of art by philosophy, and Friedrich Nietzsche's positioning of art against knowledge are but a small sample. Marxist aesthetics itself is caught in these very dynamics, particularly those key debates on modernism and realism. For everything else that sets them apart, Georg Lukács's broadsides against modernism and Theodor Adorno's unflinching defense of it both address the question of art's relationship to knowledge, whether it functions as a way to cast class structures into relief or as a pointed critique of instrumental rationality. The problem modernism *and* realism pose is precisely *how* art relates to knowledge.[33]

While it has become almost routine to pit realism and modernism against one another, some scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature have recognized several points of overlap and continuity. If realism's initial discovery was, in the words of Peter Brooks, that it "found and dramatized the exceptional within the ordinary," then it isn't so much of a leap to see "the realist vision is alive in Woolf," even if Woolf flips that vision predominantly, but not entirely, from the external world into the "quivering subjectivities" populating her novels from the 1920s.[34] Like Brooks, Laurie Langbauer's study of realism and everyday life ends with Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson; similarly, Ruth Yeazell's *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* meanders through French and English realists before concluding with Marcel Proust, "this last of the realists."[35] The point is not to put periodizing or stylistic categories on trial or to assume righteously that fluid boundaries and pluralized modernisms and realisms are inherently better. Instead we might note that for Langbauer, Brooks, and Yeazell, querying the relationship of aesthetics to everyday life brings these odd convergences into focus and, as a result, contests the most dearly held conventions of literary history. In one way, these works of literary criticism demonstrate the very problem that puzzles philosophers of everyday life such as Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, Maurice Blanchot, and others: the everyday proves to be both generative and corrosive to those critical, theoretical, and aesthetic projects that attend to it. But more than that, we might also say that conflating styles and periods proves to be, at best, provisionally useful and, at worst, historically flat. In certain historical moments, one style appears dominant, the other recessive; and, as is the case with late modernism, styles often coexist, producing

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the sort of texts that fit their historical moment, but prove disobedient to stadial narratives of literary history. The way to make sense of late modernism, then, is to plot it more firmly within its historical moment and to ask how it marshals aesthetics to think that moment.

"A SINGLE INTEGRATED SCENE": LATE MODERNISM AS GEOPOLITICAL DESCRIPTION

The most convincing and influential versions of late modernism describe it as part of British imperial decline or as a response to the pressures of the Second World War. In my account, late modernist texts mediate what Immanuel Wallerstein would call the "terminal transition" of a highly networked, interconnected British world-system.[36] To be clear, I am not swapping one context for another, nor am I contesting the claims made by Esty, MacKay, and others, all of which greatly inform this book. Unlike other theories of conceiving the world that tend to foreground cultural flows, ethical encounters, or multiple versions of something dubbed "modernity," world-systems analysis prioritizes the interplay of force and capital accumulation that link different states, geographical areas, and international actors. It is true that many world-systems analysts have spent little time poring over the particulars of cultural activity (much less literary history) or demonstrating how such macro-level thinking might be applicable to humanistic inquiry. This negligence is partially to blame for the reluctance, and even suspicion, voiced by many humanities scholars.[37] Yet, as Richard E. Lee has recently noted, the picture of the world we get from world-systems analysis does not by necessity marginalize culture. A world-system, he argues, is composed of "three analytically distinct but functionally, and existentially, inseparable structural arenas . . . : the axial division of labor, the interstate system, and the structures of knowledge. They define a singular "world."[38] Structures of knowledge, call it the cultural sphere, may not garner as much attention as the other two arenas in the works of the aforementioned thinkers, but culture *is* an integral part of the world.[39] For my purposes, plotting aesthetic activity within the capitalist world-system opens the way not only for relating artworks to geopolitical realities but also for theorizing how artworks generate a valuable, if not singular, mode of conceptualizing those geopolitical realities.

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How exactly do we draw the relationship between late modernism's outward turn and the world-system? This is, above all, a question of scale. In many ways, it isn't an entirely new question as it recalls old, abiding problems of relating the general to the particular, history to art objects, and macro-level analysis of world processes and events to the micro-level interpretive work of close reading. Recent work by Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and Nirvana Tanoukhi has clearly demonstrated that there are multiple ways to calibrate the relation between the world-system and the literary.[40] For my purposes, I want to demonstrate that late modernists render legible their moment of systemic disorder by attending to the particulars of everyday life and hoping, in the end, that the arrangement of those particulars might yield some tangible knowledge about a crumbling world-system. So, in this regard, the question of scale asks how literary descriptions of daily life broaden out to geopolitical description.

Late modernist efforts to think the world-system at the moment of its undoing will be one of the narrative threads running through all of the chapters. For now, though, we can glimpse the difficulty of thinking and describing geopolitical disorder in Christopher Isherwood and W. H. Auden's *Journey to a War*, their account of the Sino-Japanese war. The duo sit in a foreign concession on the heavily guarded river island of Shameen; British and American gunboats patrol the outer shores and armed men ensure that terrified, immiserated Chinese civilians won't stampede the protected area in the event of a Japanese air raid. But bombs do fall beyond the secured enclosure of the concession, and Isherwood nervously scans the interior of their room:

> My eyes moved over this charming room, taking in the tea-cups, the dish of scones, the book-case with Chesterton's essays and Kipling's poems, the framed photograph of an Oxford college. My brain tried to relate these images to the sounds outside; the whine of the power-diving bomber, the distant thump of the explosions. Understand, I told myself, that these noises, these objects are part of a single, integrated scene. Wake up! It's all quite real. And, at that moment I really did wake up. At that moment, suddenly, I arrived in China.[41]

Isherwood assembles for us the parts of this single integrated scene—a piece of territory reserved for foreign imperial powers, a brutal war occurring just beyond its boundaries, and the cultural objects and literary texts that fall into his vision

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as his body registers the thud of detonating bombs. Even if he cannot discern how these pieces all fit into a geopolitical totality, Isherwood knows they are part of a highly networked system. This moment from Isherwood's text becomes a central question for my own project: how do we coordinate the complexities of a highly interconnected world with individual art objects? And, moreover, how do we understand the aesthetic techniques that attempted to relate everyday activities like taking tea with global war and imperial rivalry? In what ways might the aesthetic developments of late modernism be tied to these efforts to construct the "single integrated scene"?

As Isherwood's war diary illustrates, late modernists themselves understand that a vast interdependent network of states, colonies, and outposts constitutes a geopolitical totality even if such a totality remains impossible to comprehend or describe fully. They are also acutely aware that this system has entered a phase of heightened disorder. John Darwin points to 1929 as the year when "the British system was caught up in the world's economic and geopolitical earthquake. . . . By the mid-1930s the British system seemed plunged (to some observers at least) in a terminal crisis."[42] For Darwin, this terminal crisis resulted from the erosion of three specific conditions the British world-system required to maintain any semblance of order: "a 'passive' East Asia, a European balance of power, and a strong but unaggressive United States. If those conditions broke down, the imperial archipelago, strung across the world, would soon start to look fragile."[43] The late modernists I take up in the coming chapters are openly preoccupied with these and other phenomena that upended the British world-system: the Sino-Japanese war, the expansionist policies of fascist states and a civil war in Spain that destabilized the continental equilibrium Britain so needed, and transformations in sovereignty and political belonging wrought by decolonization and mass migration after the Second World War. In order to take full measure of this period of systemic disorder, the geographical coordinates of this study include two states competing to control the balance of power in Europe (Britain and Germany), semiperipheral states (Spain and, less directly, Ireland), and peripheral states (Jamaica and China). Although I maintain throughout that late modernist texts attempt to describe systemic disorder as it unfolds, their description of it and its consequences varies. For example, we will see in chapter 4 that the end of a system of order generates profound anxiety in the war stories of Elizabeth Bowen; yet, as

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I show in chapter 5, disorder signals a possibility for greater political autonomy for Jamaica in Vic Reid's optimistically titled novel *New Day*.

These works and others like them engage in descriptive acts as a means to conceptualize their historical moment as it occurs, which they by and large understand to be transitional (although their idea of what that transition portends varies).[44] In the chapters that follow, I foreground multiple instances of late modernist description that move us from the particulars of quotidian experience to broader levels of world-systemic change: Isherwood's probing, panoramic look at the architecture outside of his Berlin window gives shape to Weimar's decline and the rise of a totalitarian state; Vic Reid's description of the violence wrought on the Jamaican population during the Morant Bay rebellion reimagines the history of colonial revolt; George Orwell's scrutiny of the daily doings in a war zone counteract the grand allegory of good versus evil that framed the Spanish Civil War for so many international observers and participants. These writers, then, do not engage in description as some sort of value neutral practice; nor are they invested in re-enchanting or preserving the everyday for its own sake. Late modernism's geopolitical description attempts to arrange concrete particulars so that they yield something tangible about world-systemic disorder. In certain instances, the oscillation between these two levels takes the more familiar shape of allegory. Vic Reid's *New Day*, for example, functions as a national allegory, presenting Jamaica's movement toward independence through the eyes and speech of the colonized. In other moments, and this is the core argument of chapter 3, attention to everyday life dismantles allegory or makes allegorization impossible. In both instances, however, these texts attempt to think of the relation between everyday life and world-systemic change. In this way, late modernism emerges as an aesthetic response generated by world-systemic transition but also as a response that conceptualizes that transition and its consequences.

AGAINST AUTONOMY, WITHOUT COMMITMENT: LATE MODERNISM AND POLITICAL FORMALISM

These brief forays into Christopher Isherwood, John Grierson, and Henry Green should immediately clarify why we can no longer sort literature from the thirties

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onward into separate camps labeled "modernist" or "realist." Those stylistic divisions have also segregated literature from this period into the heavily policed zones of aesthetic autonomy or committed literature. Yet, when we historicize late modernism within the world-system, aesthetic autonomy looks more and more tenuous; similarly, if politics and literature converge only in committed works, there is little space to think of literary form "doing" politics, as Jacques Rancière would say. Jessica Berman rightly observes that the split between aesthetic autonomy and political commitment forecloses any investigation of the political work of modernist form or the formal operations of those texts marked as "political" literature.[45] Like Berman, a number of scholars have recently located the political work of modernist form beyond the boundaries of autonomy and commitment. John Marx's *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel, 1890–2011* reads form in modernist and contemporary fiction as modeling and critiquing modes of liberal governance; Matthew Hart's *Nations of Nothing but Poetry* explains how the melding of vernacular and avant-garde aesthetics functions as "the gateway to a negative dialectical politics of autonomy and interrelatedness that was alone adequate to the unevenly transnational character of the modern world"[46]; and Jed Esty's *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* shows the way the modernist bildungsroman tropes uneven global development into its very form.[47] All of these studies ground modernism historically but do not presume that historical and political pressures arrive in literary texts or artworks in any direct, easily discernible way. The political formalism I advance in my reading follows from the lessons of these scholars and, more directly, from Theodor W. Adorno's dictum from *Aesthetic Theory*: "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form."[48] In short, I suggest late modernism's politics of form has little to do with either autonomy or commitment and far more to do with the formal mediation of those antagonisms.[49]

Statements like the one from Adorno often serve as inflexible aesthetic maxims. Rather than graft one of these maxims onto a set of aesthetic phenomena, I want instead to derive a methodological procedure from Adorno. In *Aesthetic Theory* and elsewhere, he asserts that art's relationship to society cannot be explained by direct references to this or that historical phenomenon, through a vast array of sociological information, or by marshaling biographical data. We have to consider another way in which those "unsolved antagonisms" arrive in aesthetic form:

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> Society is not . . . directly, tangibly, and . . . "realistically" continued in its works of art. It does not become directly visible in them; else there would be no difference between art and empirical existence, no such line as even the ideologues of dialectical materialism must eventually draw when they refer art and culture to special departments of their administration. True, even the most sublime esthetic qualities have a social positional value; their historic side is a social one at the same time. Yet society's entrance into them is not immediate; it often occurs only in rather hidden formal constituents. These have a dialectics of their own, which then, of course, reflects the real one.[50]

What Adorno calls society is not "directly visible" in art, nor is its penetration into artworks "immediate." Instead, historical and social antagonisms appear in aesthetic form in indirect, highly mediated ways. For Adorno, formal complexity does not detach art from its historical conditions of possibility. No work of art, not even those hermetic works of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka that Adorno so prized, ever attains pure autonomy or pure separation. The internal dialectics of an artwork disclose for us the contradictions of its historical moment. We might say that Adorno's analysis thaws the frozen dichotomy of immanence (formalism) and transcendence (historicism), putting this static binary opposition into motion. Because this formalist account is dialectical, it preempts the causal structure of certain types of historicism. The task is not to rebuild a "context" and illuminate the historical truth of an artwork or to declare its replication of or resistance to ideology. The late modernists I examine register a structural transformation in the world-system as it unfolds. The context we as critics may erect retrospectively is not available to them; their historical experience and our historical perspectives may not always align, and we would do well to suspend any impulse to fashion direct causal explanations for aesthetic developments.[51]

This is what I take Adorno to mean when he states that the aesthetic dialectic "reflects the real one" of an historical process. Reflection, again, is nothing direct. The contradictions and movements within a work of art encrypt and disclose an historical process in its moment of unfolding. If we read for form in this way, then form emerges as "the enabling condition and the product of reading. . . . It becomes both theory's/ideology's/history's shadow and the force that permits the text to emerge as ideology's or theory's interlocutor, rather than as its example."[52] As a rehabilitated category of analysis, and as one that does not necessitate the

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negation of history or the political, form encrypts the multidirectional, multilayered workings of a world-system.

The politically inflected analysis we can derive from Adorno formulates a dialectical relation between art and history. History does not determine art's meaning or content, nor is art sealed off from the outside world. This type of relationality recalls the structure of Karl Marx's analysis of the commodity.[53] As readers of *Capital* will recall, the commodity bifurcates into use–value and exchange–value, ultimately disclosing the idea of value as "socially necessary labor time."[54] No single component causes the other, and no component can be discussed without the others; the ensemble exists in a highly mobile, generative relationship. This is the model for thinking form historically and critically. As I try to show throughout this book, formalism of this sort neither elevates artworks outside of the material and social world nor does it come at the expense of historical and archival work (quite the contrary). Conceived in this way, a critical formalism does not imply that artworks transcend their historical circumstances nor does it value only those works that, through some tour de force reading, appear to replicate or rebuke ideological forces. In other words, my approach to aesthetic objects prioritizes the relationship of form and politics but in a way that circumvents what Rita Felski has rightly identified as the formulaic readings grounded in a hermeneutics of suspicion. In this regard, political formalism—or any political reading, for that matter—needs to avoid the burdens and, indeed, dead ends of suspicious reading: the nearly reflexive attribution of ideological resistance to aesthetic techniques; the distrustful, sometimes disdainful approach to texts that elevates the critic's heroic reading above the assumed political naiveté of authors and texts; and, ultimately, "the threat of banality" such reading bears with it.[55]

In opposition to the narrow political formalism that Felski rightly criticizes, others such as Nathan Hensley and James Hansen have called for another critical disposition, which Hansen describes as a "politically and historically inflected formalism . . . capable of doubting its own truth-claims without giving up on the object's *Warheit-Gehalt* (truth-content) wholesale."[56] Sensitive to both the dangers and potentialities that Felski and Hansen outline, this book's assemblage of historical, archival, and formal methods demonstrates two things: the past is not a static master code, and the artwork should not be cast solely as a privileged site of resistance or transgression.[57] As part of an expanded constellation of materials,

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artworks come to reveal as much about those historical and archival sources we use to explain them as that material discloses about the art object. In this way, formal analysis is dialectical analysis. Artworks operate within a widened historical and social field. With such a dynamic conception of form, the text, in Eleanor Rooney's memorable words, "bites back."[58]

The chapters that follow provide an historical and formal account of late modernism's figurations of everyday life. I have tried to see the period and all of its aesthetic vicissitudes beyond the conventional ways to frame British literature in the post-1920s era, whether it be the Auden Generation, the fading of high modernism, or the literature of the Second World War. My sense is that everyday life surfaces as the foremost preoccupation in multiple areas of late modernist activity, whether it be in the late work of Virginia Woolf, the British surrealists, documentary film, or the fictions of Caribbean migrants arriving on English shores after the Second World War. The forthcoming chapters are roughly chronological, but they are arranged around particular genres that have long been judged and defined by how closely they attend to everyday life. Each chapter pairs a genre with a specific facet of world-systemic disorder. Briefly, these pairings are documentary and the British state's management of national and international affairs; the historical novel and the unraveling of the progressive philosophies of history that underwrote the British world-system; the war travel book and the rise of a new geopolitical realism; the war gothic and enhanced state security; and, finally, vernacular fictions and historic transformations in political belonging after the Second World War. Operating within a genre is "an interpretive choice," one that directs our attention and frames what we see and how we see it.[59] Yet, as signifying systems embedded in historical processes, genres are never immutable. Wai Chee Dimock sees genres as "provisional set[s] that will always be bent and pulled and stretched by many subsets."[60] The "bending and pulling" of genres in the coming chapters results from both the urgency of examining everyday life within a hemorrhaging world-system and the strain such examination places on aesthetic practices.

The first chapter focuses closely on the aesthetic theories and practices of the British documentary film movement and Mass-Observation. These two groups exemplify one way that late modernists repurposed avant-garde techniques to investigate everyday life. I argue that both groups create versions of everyday life that

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extol and maintain the norms and values of British liberalism during the troubled years of the 1930s. In films such as Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* and Humphrey Jennings's *Listen to Britain*, montage and asynchronic sound produce images of everyday life that normalize the imperial and domestic policies of the British state. Similarly, Mass-Observation's published works draw on the aesthetic energies of surrealism to measure (and extend) the reach of political power into everyday life. Because Grierson's definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" will reverberate throughout all of the chapters, I devote considerable time to his early, lesser known publications on vorticism and modern painting for the *Chicago Evening Post* as well as his various writings on cinema for *Sight & Sound* and *Cinema Quarterly*. I pair the British documentary film movement and Mass-Observation not simply because their membership overlapped; even more compelling is the way their projects used techniques culled from surrealism and Soviet cinema to advance the interests of the British state when the state's authority was under duress. In the end, the version of the outward turn we find here is one that strives to preserve the liberal norms of the British world-system when they are most aggressively challenged.

The combination of historical crisis and aesthetic innovation resurfaces in the second chapter, where I take up Virginia Woolf and Christopher Isherwood's versions of the historical novel. Although Woolf and Isherwood represent either side of the high and late modernist generational divide, they similarly disfigure the historical novel, a genre that traditionally reads the movement of history through the daily lives of characters. Woolf's late novel *The Years* jettisons many of the narrative techniques that mark her other novels as decidedly Woolfian and, indeed, as high modernist. And yet Woolf's novel is not simply a resuscitation of a familiar realist genre. At the level of form, we find spotty occurrences of free indirect discourse, fragmented plots, and—what most concerns my analysis—aprogressive temporalities. In her scrupulous presentation of the daily lives of the Pargiter family, Woolf encodes a recursive time whereby past events return in augmented form in the present: childhood traumas and fantasies return in the personal and political lives of the young Pargiter women, past historical violence returns in more destructive forms of war, and, ultimately, the present promises no relief from these cycles. What we ultimately find in Woolf is the appearance of an aprogressive time at the level of everyday life, which achieves its most spectacular articulation in

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Woolf's characterization. In Woolf's novel, this conflict between the recursive time of daily life and the linear march of historical time, reflected so clearly in the dated chapters, encodes a crisis of historical consciousness, a creeping disbelief in those philosophies of inevitable historical progress that attended the rise of the British world-system and substantiated it for decades.

Like *The Years*, Isherwood's novel will not be confused with those high modernist experiments he believed were outmoded and shabby by the turn of the 1930s. Often celebrated for its camera-eye narration and close attention to the details of everyday life in Weimar, Germany, Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* employs a range of modernist techniques: spatial form, fragmented narration, and weak plots. The novel's greatest achievement is the way it transforms the minor details of everyday life into tropes of an ailing German republic. The combination of disorientation and familiarity, of historical rupture and everyday life, with which this introduction opens, pulses throughout Isherwood's novel. If *The Years* treats Britain's waning geopolitical power as a historical disaster slowly unfolding, Isherwood's novel tells us how a totalitarian state emerged and contested the balance of power in Europe.

Chapter 3 moves out to Spain and China, two of the global hot zones of the late 1930s. While travel books traditionally recorded daily practices in foreign or "exotic" locales, books such as Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* and Auden and Isherwood's *Journey to a War* figure the everyday in a war zone as a problem; it is simultaneously upended by and quickly accommodated to the nightmare of total war. Despite their attention to the particulars of quotidian experience, be it the boredom of the trenches or the normalization of air raids in China, these texts are unable to organize those particulars into a narrative totality. This breach between the particularity of experience and a general framework for assembling and narrating that experience mirrors another separation I chart in the sphere of international law and geopolitics: the technologies and practices of warfare have outpaced the legal and conceptual apparatuses for defining and limiting total war. In the dialectical arrest between the particulars of quotidian experience and conceptual knowledge, *Homage to Catalonia* and *Journey to a War* register an emergent form of warfare shifting the balance of power in Europe and Asia.

The fusion of war and daily life abroad arrives in Britain in 1940. The popular People's War myth and a great deal of wartime cultural production show the

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British resolutely continuing their daily lives during the worst of the bombing. This fourth chapter examines ways late modernists modulated the gothic in order to render the insecurity pervading everyday life in wartime Britain. In these works, everyday life is a site of perpetual insecurity. Henry Moore's famous sketches of the Tube shelters convert these spaces of safety into mass graves; photographic surveys of bombed London nervously archive the destroyed buildings, monuments, and spaces of everyday life; and, finally, Elizabeth Bowen's short stories express deep fears about the coming redistribution of wealth and power in postwar Britain. Taken collectively, these gothic figurations of daily life in wartime England make legible the insecurity about Britain's present and near future.

These first four chapters suggest that late modernism operates under the dual anxieties of loss and anticipation; it express disenchantment with the philosophical, political, and psychic givens that ground everyday life and ensure its continuity. In the closing chapter, late modernism's outward turn renders the changes in political belonging wrought by the twin phenomena of decolonization and mass migration from the Caribbean to British shores. By focusing on the seemingly negligible dimensions of everyday existence, Vic Reid, Samuel Selvon, and Colin MacInnes produce vernacular fictions that juxtapose the ideas of political belonging emerging in political discourse, the mass media, and the courts with the everyday lives of marginalized populations. Whether written from the Caribbean or within the postimperial metropole, these novels suggest that figural procedures have material effects. Their use of vernacular does not ask us merely to see from another perspective but to see how perspectives are produced and delimited.

My epilogue cycles back to the concerns of description and periodization. This book contends that, on one hand, the outward turn is generated during the late stages of the British world-system; on the other hand, late modernist attention to everyday life makes systemic disorder legible. In the closing pages I look at W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and consider the possible afterlife of the outward turn, of the prolonged existence of a technique after its period of emergence and relevance would seem to have closed. I follow Sebald's wandering amnesiac Austerlitz as he extracts the material of history from the spaces and objects of everyday life. The labyrinthine, hypotactic prose of Sebald's novel mediates the winding, nearly endless process of retrieving Austerlitz's all but extinguished past. In its close attention to the sedimentation of history in architecture, photographs, postcards,

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and other ephemera, the novel's descriptive techniques bear forth Walter Benjamin's imperative to read history against the grain, to recover the vanquished from the debris of a violent historical process. This is, after all, why Austerlitz reminds us "we also have appointments to keep in the past."[61] Yet the infinite regress of Austerlitz's archive of everyday objects suggests that remembering is an endless, maybe impossible task. *Austerlitz*'s descriptions of everyday life transform quotidian experience into signs of history. Yet Austerlitz's quest indicates that such signs may be illegible and, perhaps, that we have arrived too late to read them.