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A fellowship of imaginations: Sebald's aesthetics of chiaroscuro in *The Exquisite* by Laird Hunt.

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Sebald's death gave rise to a profusion of novels paying homage to the work of the German writer, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. A great many novels were published which imitated his characteristic fictional prose allying his melancholy narrator's aesthetic of montage, long digressions and typical billowing sentences. In the acknowledgments of his novel *The Exquisite*, Laird Hunt distances himself from such a tendency to imitate Sebald's aesthetics and produce a "dilution," here borrowing Ezra Pound's expression¹.

By contrast, Laird Hunt says, *The Exquisite* is a playful referential homage to the master whose "favorite themes and obsessions" have been recast and taken up in a "ghost noir," a book "*unlike one Sebald would have written*" (Hunt 244). Nonetheless, a close reading of Laird Hunt's novel reveals a more complex dialogue between *The Exquisite* and *The Rings of Saturn*, which seems to exceed the conscious literary homage; here is another exemplary case of a work whose writing seems to have drifted away from its literary programming.

¹ Laird Hunt refers to Pound in *The Exquisite*'s acknowledgments, Hunt 244. See Ezra Pound's edged typology of authors: "When you start searching for 'pure elements' in literature you will find that literature has been created by the following classes of persons: 1. Inventors. Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process. 2. The masters. Men who combined a number of such processes, and who used them as well as or better than the inventors. 3. The diluters. Men who came after the first two kinds of writer, and couldn't do the job quite as well." Ezra Pound 39.

In order to resolve this knot, one needs to understand that Sebald's influence on *The Exquisite*—and more generally on Laird Hunt's writing—does not stem from the imitation of Sebald's fictional prose whose guiding principles would have been consciously deduced by Laird Hunt so as to integrate them into his writing (Attridge 116). Rather *The Exquisite* is the product of elective affinities and of a fellowship of imaginations. Indeed, *The Exquisite* far exceeds the mere intertextual homage to Sebald's favorite motifs as it becomes the locus of an extensive and fruitful exchange between what Pierre Bayard calls two "inner books"² (82), whereby Laird Hunt elaborates his literary response to Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*—a development of Sebald's preoccupations and prolonging of the literary possibilities opened out by the latter's novel.

One thus needs to explore what in Laird Hunt's novel stems from this affinity of imaginations and to study *The Exquisite* closely in order to make out the "red thread"³ (Goethe 203) which is common to both works, that is, as Goethe's metaphor implies, their common thematic *material*, but also the aesthetic principles which organize both writings.

A playful homage to *The Rings of Saturn*

The Exquisite appears as a playful homage to *The Rings of Saturn* and takes up quotes, patterns, and other recognizable features of Sebald's writing. Both texts are the disjointed fruits of a retrospective assemblage by melancholy narrators whose accounts take the shape of detective stories.

A chronology of memory

In both works, memory loss, paralysis, vertigo, depression and panic attacks appear as the many traces of trauma. The text literally quakes with the narrators' symptoms. From their hospital beds, the melancholy narrators strive to recollect scattered memories of their peregrinations and this recollection process shapes the very form of their narratives. The

² "I propose the term inner book to designate the set of mythic representations, be they collective or individual, that come between the reader and any new piece of writing, shaping his reading without his realizing it. Largely unconscious, this imaginary book acts as a filter and determines the reception of new texts by selecting which of its elements will be retained and how they will be interpreted." Bayard 82-83.

³ "There is, we are told, a curious contrivance in the service of the English marine. The ropes in use in the royal navy, from the largest to the smallest, are so twisted that a red thread runs through them from end to end, which cannot be extracted without undoing the whole; and by which the smallest pieces may be recognized as belonging to the crown. Similarly a thread of attachment and affection is woven into Ottilie's diary which connects it all together, and characterizes the whole." Goethe 203.

narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* retraces his wandering through Suffolk along a stream of consciousness in which the resurfacing of memories follows a natural and organic chronology. Indeed, the thread of the narrative is fragmented, taking the shape of remembrance, and by means of digressions, circumvolutions and looping narratives, seems to skirt around “a blind, insensate spot” (Sebald 4). Each chapter thus becomes an echoing chamber for the recurring themes of the novel and the narrator’s nameless pain. Similarly, the narrator of *The Exquisite*, a confused middle-aged New Yorker, delivers a narrative that recalls the tendril-like quality of Sebald’s prose. The two different though all-but complementary plots that compose Laird Hunt’s novel and which inform and echo each other in alternating chapters, also express a disjointed notion of time. In both novels, time is that of memories, of the event and of remembrance⁴.

Both narrators’ melancholia suffuses the forms and themes of their narratives. They drift in a saturnine atmosphere and their mental state reflects on their perception of reality and the way they convey it—hence the presence of ghostly figures shrouded in mist, ashes and dust, drifting in gothic nocturnal landscapes of smoky rubbles and debris. In *The Exquisite*, the city of New York becomes a disquieting place, which conjures up its earlier name, New Amsterdam, for the capital of the *nether lands* is the place where an infamous thief named Aris Kindt died. The dissection of his corpse by eminent Dr. Tulp in front of a crowd of philosophers and scientists gave way to the Rembrandt painting that is analyzed in detail by the narrator of the *Rings of Saturn* in the opening chapter of the book. Aris Kindt is in fact the common denominator of both texts and is also the central character around which both simultaneous plots of *The Exquisite* gravitate.

Epistemological quests and personal investigations

In his acknowledgments, Laird Hunt claims to have written a “ghost noir” and, in fact, the *noir* narrative form seems appropriate to evoke Sebald’s prose, as the main narrative in his books is looking for a missing story (Eisenzweig 9). *The Rings of Saturn* is no exception; as in detective fictions, narrative time here does not coincide with the time of the events. Indeed, the narrator writes the journal of his long walk along the English seaside *ex post*, only after he has strived to painstakingly remember the chain of events

⁴ I acknowledge my indebtedness to Muriel Pic’s reading of Sebald and the acuity of her analyses.

from his hospital bed. So does the narrator of *The Exquisite*, who writes a sort of retrospective statement once he has been convicted for the murder of Aris Kindt. A few metalepses interspersing the text mention it, such as “where I seem to have spent so much time over the course of these pages” (Hunt 230). Caught up in epistemological quests, both narrators are probing into their pasts and memories in search of the origin of their melancholia. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator attempts to shed light on the causes of the recurring symptoms that punctuated his trip, namely “a paralyzing horror when confronted with the traces of destruction” (Sebald 3), while Henry investigates a childhood trauma that was kindled anew by a succession of intimate incidents in the aftermath of 9/11.

Each of the two works thus features an investigation into its narrator’s interiority. Parallel to this intimate investigation, *The Exquisite* offers a playful variation on the epistemological quest as the text develops as a thriller in which the enigma of Aris Kindt’s death will be unraveled – the incipit announces the death to be investigated with the words “my dear friend who is now dead” (Hunt 1). Sebald’s writing dramatizes the interpenetration of the world of the living and of the dead. His prose stages the way the dead inhabit our world and reminds the reader of their presence by inserting numerous allegories and *vanitas*, such as the picture of Thomas Browne’s skull (Sebald 11), Aris Kindt in Rembrandt’s painting and the various portraits of deceased authors and notables. Death is exhibited in archives and documentary pictures and is thereby *pinned up* in the text as in an entomology framework, inviting the reader to a meditation on time and destruction. Death is thus literally anatomized by Sebald’s prose. Similarly, although it borrows from hardboiled novels and crime fiction, *The Exquisite* focuses more on the process of annihilation than on missing corpses. For instance, the novel offers numerous variations of the *danse macabre*. Tulip—an avatar of Dr. Tulp in one of the stories of *The Exquisite*—mentions the rhyme *Ring Around the Rosie*, “a danse macabre for kids growing up in plague times” (Hunt 128) and evokes the virtues of “playing dead” (128) when explaining to Henry why some New Yorkers are ready to pay for murder simulacra. Indeed a “mock-murder service” masterminded by the exquisite Aris Kindt and his accomplices offers to stage a fake death in which each step of a murder is choreographed and thereby analyzed and decomposed. This theme recalls the function of Sebald’s prose

which induces the reader to consider any archive, picture and plot element as potential traces of, and consequently as potential clues to, an elusive and inaccessible truth—albeit indirectly⁵.

As the *femme fatale*—one of the fake murderers in *The Exquisite*—explains to Henry, in what seems to be a direct allusion to the hypotext's narrative strategy, "Murder is death amplified and pinpointed. Big focused death" (Hunt 93). The mock-death rituals must then be understood as a variation of *danse macabre*.

Anatomizing the tissues of Sebald's text

By borrowing Sebald's narrative strategy and by setting the narrator in the same situations, while giving him a similar mindset, *The Exquisite* conditions the reader to respond to the text in a specific way. The body of the text itself becomes the locus of an investigation, a literal and playful paperchase along which the reader comes to consider it as a woven structure spangled with references to and quotes from *The Rings of Saturn*. Laird Hunt's novel draws the reader's attention to such braiding of references by taking up Sebald's metaphor of the dark net. This net, which drapes the window in the narrator's hospital room in *The Rings of Saturn* and is supposed to prevent him from committing suicide, is the only thing that the narrator can see from his bed (Sebald 4). It is both a metaphor of realist representation, as the grid-pattern enables the elaboration of a supposedly more realistic perspective, but also an analogy of the weft of the text. The text of *The Exquisite* also induces the reader to adopt a playful reading by pointing to its own materiality. It pastiches hardboiled style and comments upon its own recourse to the genre, its clichés and its particular lingo ("it sounded like bad noir dialogue" [91]). Besides the numerous metalepses, the first person switches to second person, thus highlighting the reader's role as extra-diegetic detective. Sebald's favorite metaphor of the writer as a weaver⁶ contributes to this approach of the text. In the *Rings of Saturn*, writing and silk weaving are two activities that bring the craftsmen to a state of profound melancholia. And

⁵ Muriel Pic associates this particular feature of Sebald's prose to detective fiction and literary investigation by taking up Carlo Ginzburg's notion of "evidential paradigm." See Ginzburg, 147-148.

⁶ See Roland Barthes' metaphor of the text as tissue: "What is a text for the current opinion? It is the phenomenal surface of the literary work; it is the fabric of the words which make up the work." "[T]he very graphics of the letter—although remaining linear—suggest not speech, but the interweaving of a tissue (etymologically speaking, 'text' means 'tissue')." Barthes "Theory" 32.

in fact it affects both narrators, for they both are actual writers. In *The Exquisite* characters and the text itself respond to and elaborate on the metaphor of weaving and “the melancholy from which, as it is well-known, weavers have a tendency to suffer” (160). Consequently, reading *The Exquisite* partly consists in unraveling the skein of thematic references and Sebaldian motifs borrowed from *The Rings of Saturn*, such as references to Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson*, herring fishing, Thomas Browne’s concepts, *wunderkammers*, among others. Such references operate as so many patterns woven “not so much *onto* but *into* the plush carpet” (Hunt 129). The text weaves in the title of Sebald’s novel and suddenly starts ringing with playful references (Aris Kindt’s name “has a ring to it,” the narrator is “heading into the ring,” “all those rings and lines,” “Ring around the Rosie” [124-128]) while the narrator evokes Tulip’s silk robe.

The text of *The Rings of Saturn* is atomized into *The Exquisite* and its literary patterns seem to run across Laird Hunt’s text. The image of the “red thread,” borrowed from Goethe by Sebald and metaphorized by a black silk thread in the synecdoche of death and its shroud, is also taken up in *The Exquisite*. Indeed, if death was the red thread in the *Rings of Saturn*, that of *The Exquisite* seems to be Sebald’s text itself, namely both the principle that binds the whole text together and the motifs adorning the weft of the text.

An archeology of pain: Laird Hunt’s literary response to Sebald’s preoccupations

Beyond a playful exploration of Sebald’s writing, *The Exquisite* seems to be the locus of an elaboration—whether unconscious or not—on the central preoccupations of *The Rings of Saturn*. Perhaps the case of the character lying at the core of *The Exquisite*, namely Aris Kindt, needs to be looked at more closely in order to better understand how Laird Hunt’s writing becomes the continuation of Sebald’s words and literary intentions.

Aris Kindt is the subject of a prosopopeia, as the dead character is given the floor. The fact of giving voice to what Judith Butler calls an “ungrievable”⁷ (34) of the historical discourse is one of the stakes of *The Exquisite*, and is also where Laird Hunt’s novel more profoundly meets Sebald’s fictional prose.

⁷ Judith Butler defines the term as follows: “[I]f a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note. It is already the unburied if not the unburiable. It is not simply, then, that there is a ‘discourse’ of dehumanization that produces these effects but rather that there is a limit to discourse that establishes the limits of human intelligibility. It is not just that a death is poorly marked but that it is unmarkable. Such a death vanishes, not into explicit discourse, but in the ellipses by which public discourse proceeds.” Butler 34-35.

A literary attempt to subvert the history of the victors

In his work, Sebald strives to subvert a certain way of writing history. According to him, literature is the place where individual and collective memory can freely expand through imagination and escape the procrustean bed of positivist historical discourse. *The Rings of Saturn* seeks to question and decry the dominant discourse and strives to show history told from the point of view of the oppressed. It challenges the very idea of a single perspective on events and reconsiders historical discourse in the sense that the latter is always a “history of the Victors”⁸ (Felman 29). In *The Exquisite*, history is oftentimes tackled by Aris Kindt and depicted as an ogre-like history that eats men up and makes them vanish. History, he says, “doesn’t so much hate us as blindly devour us like a growing whale eating plankton” (Hunt 126). Against such oppressive, positivist conception of history, both works seek to point out those who have been deprived of their humanity and who are missing a face and a voice. Aris Kindt is one of those individuals that the Dutch justice had sought to annihilate and reduce to the state of mere object of scientific scrutiny, as highlighted by the character of Mr. Kindt before finally calling him by his real name, “Adriaan Adriaanszoon”, “[a] man who has been given a face by history, an anguished face cast into shadow, a false name that has blotted out the real one, a body whose tenure has been forcibly completed” (165). Indeed, as the novel signals at the beginning: “Unchecked, [Kindt] said, our belief systems eventually overrun everything, blot out the world, at the very least rewrite the map” (23). Thus naming the corpse in the painting means giving back his identity to a man whose body *and* identity have been annihilated. In his interpretation of Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* points out the fact that the painting reflects the painter’s empathy for Aris Kindt, as indeed the rules of realism seem to have been deliberately and grossly breeched in order to displace the “punctum” (Barthes 26) of the painting. Consequently, not only is the painting a vivid and realistic representation of a dissection but it is also the portrait of a victim, who was hastily convicted and sentenced to death for a petty theft and whose punishment was followed by and prolonged into a dissection at a time when science supposed that a body could still experience pain after death.

⁸ See also Shoshana Felman’s comments on Walter Benjamin article “Theses on the Philosophy of Justice”.

The same intent to shed light on the face of the corpse—the locus of Adriaan Adriaanszoon's identity—can be noticed in *The Exquisite* as the text, while insisting on the status of Aris Kindt as a victim, depicts a “man whose face was cast in shadow [...] torn open in the name of progress” (Hunt 128). Finding the name of the dead body is one of several narrative knots in *The Exquisite*. The novel stages a quest for the mysterious Aris Kindt's real identity, along which the reader will have to make the genealogy of each namesake⁹ to get back to the original Aris Kindt. Just like the character himself, the text talks “about death and destruction,” “sing[s] of death and its agents, bright and dark” as in a *danse macabre* in order to recall the memory of the dead or those who were killed “while they remain alive” (109)—namely slaves and other oppressed peoples and individuals whose unrecorded stories continue to haunt historical discourse.

Voicing pain

In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's prose seems to be stricken by an aching pain of several orders: a collective one, which was inflicted in the name of progress and which will need to be voiced in order to be relieved, and a more intimate one, namely the wound left by a trauma whose memory remains buried. Not only does *The Exquisite* tackle the subject of pain, as one acceptance of the title could suggest, but it also explores it by offering diverse representations of and variations on pain in an attempt to convey the *real thing*. Adriaan Adriaanszoon's harrowing dissection is diffracted in the narrative. Henry's dream of a dissection where Tulip is carving a man-size herring, then Mr. Kindt's body, is evoked several times, hypotyposes and reenactments of Rembrandt's painting¹⁰ flourish in both plots of Laird Hunt's novel and the character's pain is carefully conveyed by the narrator or Aris Kindt himself. The latter is characterized by his relation to pain: “He liked for his neck, as a reminder [of his namesake], he said, to have to hurt” (48). Pushed by an ancient guilt “spurred by the aftershock of a violation [reaching] deep into the past” (232), the exquisite character is drawn to some sort of masochism and enjoys being lashed at the Russian baths where he takes the narrator and Tulip. The novel also

⁹ The text deliberately seeks to lose its reader in their enterprise: “Are you talking about your namesake or the namesake of your namesake?” Henry asks the last Aris Kindt as he describes Adriaanszoon's dissection. Hunt, 108.

¹⁰ “In front of an audience [...] led by a most famous doctor, one with scalpel and illustrative anatomic manual devoured me.” Hunt 107.

digressively expatiates from the pain of the real Aris Kindt: “Did you know that in those days we still believed that after death one could feel pain? I certainly could. Most excruciating were the extremities. The first thing they did was to open up my arm” (224). The exquisite pain haunts the novel: the text gives body and flesh to suffering which is no sooner evoked than it conjures up another one, thus abolishing time. In fact, all sufferings are compared and connected to each other: the pain that needs to be experienced by the victims of the mock-murders, Aris Kindt’s pain which immediately summons up his namesakes’, to gather them in a timeless universe. Indeed, sufferings are depicted as though they were wired to each other. “You know the old adage, my boy: touch one part of the web and the whole thing quivers,” Aris Kindt says when mentioning the bizarre sorrow he feels when confronted with the dissection of fishes at the fishmonger, and he goes on to evoke “waking nightmares” (83) as one of these deadly agonies. The text obsessively endeavors to list all the acts of tortures and painful deaths, recalling Sebald’s and Thomas Browne’s writings. As in a Museum of Natural History, or according to the model of a catalogue, both images favored by Sebald—and alluded to in *The Exquisite* through the visit of the diorama—the text endeavors to achieve an—illusory—exhaustive enumeration of all meanings covered by the hyperonym. Precisely both authors’ writing styles proceed from accumulations and enumerations.

Of rubbles and ashes

By means of the accumulation of facts, archives and documentary images, Sebald’s prose tentatively sketches a natural history of loss whereby the text attempts to deal with the lost object that haunts its narrative. Rubbles and traces of destruction marking the sites visited by the narrator are examined and referenced. Also, *The Rings of Saturn* is teeming with collections of objects, lists and enumerations, for instance in the long inventory of objects and debris gathered by the sea when Dunwich was engulfed, or as the picture of Michael Hamburger’s obsessive collections of boxes, envelops and preserves shows. Sprawling sentences borrowed from Thomas Browne¹¹, like so many

¹¹ The narrator comments while simultaneously taking up Thomas Browne’s style: “Browne wrote out of the fullness of his erudition, deploying a vast repertoire of quotations and the names of authorities who had gone before, creating complex metaphors and analogies, and constructing labyrinthine sentences that sometimes extend over one or two pages, sentences that resemble processions or a funeral cortège in their sheer ceremonial lavishness.” Sebald 19.

textual *wunderkammers* that sometimes develop according to a vertiginous syntax, seek to probe the layers of debris that appear as so many remainders of human daily lives. The text metaphorizes such accumulations with the deposit of sand, ashes and dust, and develops the image of the glacier. Its form keeps arising throughout the text and appears for the first time in the description of Janine Dakin's office where scraps and papers have been accumulating:

"Like a glacier when it reaches the sea, it had broken off at the edges and established new deposits all around on the floor, which in turn were advancing imperceptibly towards the center of the room. Years ago, Janine had been obliged by the ever-increasing masses of paper on her desk to bring further tables into use, and these tables, where similar processes of accretion had subsequently taken place, represented later epochs, so to speak, in the evolution of Janine's paper universe."
(Sebald 8)

Precisely, Laird Hunt's novel unfolds under the aegis of "alluvial" writing—Aris Kindt's "favorite word" (1).

Indeed the kin notions of stratification, sedimentation, or the piling up of materials are illustrated by landscapes of rubbles such as Ground Zero and New York Number two, an inaccessible and spectral second New York.

Down dark, windswept hallways, across empty public spaces, past vanished water-tasting stations and stopped-up springs, along oily waterways littered with rusting barges and sleeping gulls, down abandoned subway tunnels and the parking guts of disused power station: into the second New York. (153)

The Exquisite offers playful variations on this theme such as the depiction of New York city life and landscape through a piling up of facts, daily scenes and impressions: "New York is swell. It is swell on a cold wet night and it is swell on a cold clear dawn. It is swell with the cars coming fast toward you and it is swell down by the subway tracks, where the people come to gather and watch each other and wait" (54). Accumulation—here presented by a concrete swelling of the text—is developed by Mr. Kindt when evoking History according to the model of the Indian mound, namely "layer after layer of oyster shells, animal bones, and miscellaneous bric-à-brac: everything plus dirt" (24). In both Sebald's and Laird Hunt's books, the memory of something has been lost and remains inaccessible. Traces and remainders of destruction affect perception: smoke, mist and clouds of dust are screens thwarting vision just as accretions of rubble, sand and dirt cover

the object of loss, giving rise to melancholia¹² and grief. For, in both novels, as highlighted by Mr. Kindt in *The Exquisite*: “Sadness builds like sediment with the kind of predictability that still manages to astonish, the kind that often ends by masking its original cause” (Hunt 82). The past and the event of the trauma are places that can only be probed by way of an archeological excavation: the character who literally *haunts* the narrator, Henry’s aunt, is curing her depression by gulping down pills in order “to pull out her stegosaurus” (99). Similarly, in a childhood memory, Henry is sent to the garden to “dig out the devil” (98) at the rear end of the family garden.

While both narrators strive to voice and access a nameless pain, the text puts forward the hurdles hampering such an endeavor and seems to suggest that indirectness is the only way to explore memory.

Oblique access: the aesthetics of *chiaroscuro*

Rubbles, debris and smoke appear as so many vestiges of the past and traces of destruction that stand in the characters’ and readers’ way towards meaning. Here meaning seems to skirt any attempt at a frontal approach, as it remains a blind spot that words can only try to circumscribe negatively, by way of patchy enumerations. How then can meaning emerge? In response, both works offer an aesthetics of *chiaroscuro*, a noir writing which merely highlights the ridges and crests of an ink-and-paper reality, and which invites the reader to invest those dark alleys of the text with their own imagination.

About the violence of light

In both works, light has a negative connotation. Sharp light is disquieting or “harrowing,” as shown by the effects of the dog days on the narrator’s mental health in *The Rings of Saturn*. In Sebald’s novel, light is first and foremost related to various forms of violence and the will to shed light on reality necessarily implies brutality, especially if this undertaking is led in the name of the progress of science and civilization. As put forward by the narrator, one of the manifestations of this positivist mind is colonization: “The aim,

¹² “This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not what he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious.” Freud 19.

King Leopold said, was to break through the darkness in which whole peoples dwelt, and to mount a crusade in order to bring this glorious century of progress to the point of perfection” (Sebald 118). The blank space on the map of Africa, tackled by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, is also an obscure territory, namely a place yet unexplored and unmapped by the white man, a place to be enlightened and submitted to western civilization’s supposed rationality. However, the light of progress is so strong it transfigures the whole landscape as the uplands of Congo become “sun-scorched” (122) so that the territory becomes all the more mysterious and resists naming while darkness spreads in the minds of the colonists and contaminates them. By referring to Joseph Conrad’s novella, *The Rings of Saturn* suggests that nothing can eschew obscurity. Indeed, the text points out that the idea of perfectly shedding light on reality and thus both figuratively and literally attaining full understanding of the world is but an illusion, a mere effect of perspective, for full light does not mean the absence of obscurity but simply that the viewer cannot make out the shadows from his vantage point.

Intense light even triggers strong anxiety and panic attacks in both texts, as though the narrators had the firm conviction that this allegedly comprehensive and clear vision of things misses part of what was there to see. Henry acquires an increased “visual clarity” after his lobotomy, however he “[does] not feel at all well” and experiences “a rising surge of nausea” (181) in face of this “preternaturally lit” place. Clearness is a lure if not perhaps even a detrimental factor: “all the wonderful light seemed like it might start scorching the room” (181), Henry comments after his lobotomy. Detail and subtleties are burnt off of his memory just as in one of the numerous overexposed pictures in *The Rings of Saturn*, thus generating a “blind, insensate, spot” (Sebald 4) in Henry’s mind as well. Both texts suggest that this blind spot left by trauma in the narrator’s memory will only be more elusive if tackled *point-blank*. For this reason, both texts intend to give obscurity its right place in the economy of the narrators’ lives and in the text itself. Darkness is not to be driven out of the narrators’ minds but accepted and fraught with meaning—be it elusive; hence the omnipresence of night and ghostly presences as appeasing figures in *The Rings of Saturn*. Obscurity also pervades *The Exquisite*, in the parallel world of New York number two, “the great black yonder” (Hunt 157) also called the Necropolis. As in *The Rings of*

Saturn, the realm of the dead interpenetrates the world of the living: “We are all of us wrapped in the darkened shadows of our after-selves” (156).

This *danse macabre* through various representations such as the mock-murders, gruesome nursery rhymes, and other *memento mori*, helps the various characters of the novel to fully realize that life and death are tightly interwoven. Similarly, the texts weave a web of black silk and ashes as so many metonymies and metaphors of death that enable the navigation between the banks of life and death.

The aesthetics of literary montage and noir writing

W. G. Sebald’s and Laird Hunt’s writings—just as Thomas Browne’s—display similar views of the world where obscurity is predominant and where knowledge is precariously rebuilt around it.

And yet, says Browne, all knowledge is enveloped in darkness. What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow filled edifice of the world. (19)

Their writings implement indirectness and circumvention as strategies to access truth—or some truth, be it partial and plural—and proceed from what François Jullien calls “allusive distance,” namely blurry descriptions, mediated representations, digressions, and obscure antitheses, all meant to stimulate the work of imagination and to open an indirect access to meaning¹³. The fragmented narratives and their dislocated organic chronology that follows the thread of the narrator’s thoughts and recollections call for a loose form of reading, so to speak, whereby the reader’s imagination invests the dark corridors of the text. Here meaning *comes out* of the text rather than it is told by its narrator as the reader recreates it by associating echoing elements. And in Sebald’s prose indeed, the concentric rings of the narrative circumvolutions only tighten around the blind spot at the center of writing without ever naming it. Sebald’s literary montage proceeds from this oblique associative and indirect reading. The reader has to forge the link between text and images as they weave between them. Indeed, in *The Rings of Saturn*, the meaning of images remains unstable for they are never mere illustrations of the text. Their *punctum* drifts according to the process of reading. The play of analogies, metaphors and echoes, what

¹³ See François Jullien about Chinese imagination and its “loose” representation of reality that favors distance and indirectness and that renders reality in a blurry or obscure way. Jullien 451.

with the presence of other images, influences their interpretations. For instance, the picture of the tremendous quantities of herring caught in mass fishing loses its illustrative quality when the historical narrative gives way to considerations about the fishes' ability to feel pain, and to their dissections for obscure scientific reasons. The picture will finally echo the image of the dead bodies photographed at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen camp. In Sebald's prose, meaning emerges or comes out without any clear mention.

Laird Hunt's novel is the locus for an aesthetics of indirection that also calls for a "loose" reading. In *The Exquisite*, the narrator *talks around* the event of 9/11, only to let out a flashing image or a sudden hint sometimes, giving the impression of a looming menace upon the characters' minds. The event is never mentioned directly but only referred to metonymically via its own traces such as ashes, smoke, the sounds of the worksite and images that were relayed by the media. When Henry attempts to name it and calls it "the horror downtown" (Hunt 76), he uses a word that only screens its signified and that simultaneously conjures up its acceptance in *Heart of Darkness*—one of Sebald's hypotexts—where it pointed to the limitations of language¹⁴. The event appears as a subsidiary element, though it pervades the text. Indeed, it is woven in a network of small signs that are so many facets of a reality that is characterized as *scattered* as it is indeed perceived by Henry through the black netting that covers the window of his hospital room. Reality is "scattered and lovely [...] like some kind of sparkling sea creature" (47), the text comments, in a playful passage that evokes the evasive Melvillian chimera of a unified representation of reality. Writing warns the reader against the lure of clarity and accuracy which, just as light, prevent meaning from reaching the surface of the text. Henry explains "how accuracy too often undoes us and precision too often blurs" (239). The form of the novel proceeds from this reticence to clarity as the plots thwarts the hermeneutic quest by alternating chapters of two distinct though twin narrative threads, which, despite numerous similarities, only respond to and inform each other. The result of such structure is the fundamental allusiveness and obscure quality of the text. As Henry says: "The story of [his] life is different, though, and even if it is not entirely coherent, even if *some parts have*

¹⁴ At the end of the novella, on his death bed, Kurtz, the rebellious colonist the narrator was seeking, starts fully grasping the extent of Western colonization and the evil nature of his own conduct although failing to satisfyingly name this realization. Facing a linguistic pitfall, he can only utter these words: "The horror, the horror!" Conrad 11.

been elided into others, it does have a beginning, a middle, and an end”¹⁵ (120). The narrative of Henry’s life is fragmentary, and the signified sometimes seems to have migrated into other signifiers, as in a dream, or an unhinged memory, some events having been displaced by others. Nonetheless the reader can still decode the text, though in this noir writing, meaning is not so much an act as an event. Meaning actually occurs in the reader’s imagination provided the latter has carefully recorded the play of echoes and the telling asides of the text. As in the surrealist game of the *exquisite cadaver*, the missing imaginary links between apparently very different chapters or passages will surface in these interstices, if at all. Within the play of relations at the heart of this noir literary montage, meaning may show up in a loose reading of the text—a reading itself conditioned by the allusive writing and structure. The text playfully thematizes this reading by staging a mock psychoanalysis session where Dr. Tulp listens to Henry’s disjointed monologue. Just as Dr. Tulp does, the reader is invited to carefully follow Henry’s narratives while associating and loosely stitching back dissimilar yet corresponding stories.

A close reading of *The Rings of Saturn* and *The Exquisite* bears witness to shared visions of the world and affinities of imagination. Rather than speaking of an influence of Sebald’s aesthetics upon Laird Hunt’s work, it would be more accurate to say that reading Sebald and more particularly *The Rings of Saturn* has left an impression on Laird Hunt’s imagination, that it has both impressed and imprinted it, and has thereby influenced Laird Hunt’s “inner book.” His response—first as reader then as writer—lies at the junctions where Sebald’s prose breeches the closed system of representations, and tentatively prolongs its exploration of both real and intimate broken landscapes.

Strolling along Sebald’s prose through reading has, it appears, opened new literary possibilities for Laird Hunt in the same way as other artists’ imaginations may have been marked by other aesthetic experiences or travels, as André Gide pointed in a lecture entitled “Concerning Influence in Literature”:

When Delacroix set out for Morocco, it was not to become an Orientalist, but rather, through the understanding he was to gain of more lively, more delicate, more subtle harmonies, to become more ‘perfectly aware’ of himself, of the colorist that he was.
(26)

¹⁵ Emphasis mine.

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