Kind One by Laird Hunt, or a Tale of a Real Twice Lost: Writing the Individual and Collective Memory of Slavery

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What the real is to literature, so memory seems to be to History. Indeed both the real[1] and memory seem to eschew representation, separated as they are from the instrument of investigation that is language. Indeed, the real as perceptual experience can only incompletely be seized by language, which by essence is metaphorical—in that it refers to the real by means of a substitutio[2] and is thus marked by lack. In Lacanian terminology, the Real is the state from which the subject is taken from when accessing language or, in other words, and on another level, it corresponds to the impossibility for the signifier to fully evoke the signified and for language to represent the subject itself. This failure of meaning or aporia in the face of the real is formally speaking similar to the failure of language in front of trauma. As for memory writing, be it collective or individual, it raises a second difficulty, since it seeks to invoke a real that is no longer present. Only tenuous traces (archives, such as pictures, testimonies and documents) allow the past to emerge from what seems a barely translucent mist.

[1] Understood as a perceptual experience, and thus considered as irreducible to language. It was also coined as the "impossible" by Bataille and Lacan.

[2] "It is this way with all of us concerning language; we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things—metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities. In the same way that the sound appears as a sand figure, so the mysterious X of the thing in itself first appears as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound." (Nietzche 24).

Literature can provide a partial and dynamic solution to the problems proper to trauma and memory. First, the mimetic operation of telling structures and configures both the real and time, making them more habitable and graspable by the subject.[3] Moreover, poetic strategies such as symbolization, indirection and obliquity, in the shape of metaphors and plays on echoes, also attempt at circumscribing an ever-elusive real, at least partially.

Contemporary historical fiction for example—informed as it is by the notion of presentism and shaped by the evidential paradigm[4]—has increasingly resorted to documents and archives, and woven them into a main narrative, giving way to a spectral, yet expressive, representation of memory. For instance, novels such as Paul Auster's, W. G. Sebald's, Claude Simon's, or Laird Hunt's fiction inspired by History[5] have turned away from chronological representation, historical verisimilitude, as well as binary linguistic signification and explanatory types of discourse, oftentimes indirectly questioning the epistemological tools of historiography,[6] thus trying to negotiate the double hurdle of memory writing.

Moreover, these innovative forms of fiction strive to address the vexed question of the elusiveness of the real. Indeed, they attempt to edge nearer to human experience by confronting themselves to the real—a confrontation that echoes that of the reader. In Hunt's recent work, for instance, mimesis is largely tempered by poetic strategies, as those novels strive to create experiences (affects and impressions, or the absolute absence thereof) that are not likely to be seized by language directly. As Philippe Forest argues in an article about contemporary historical fiction, this dimension in a literary text makes it "more faithful to the truth of life"[7] in comparison with more explanatory and linear historical novels.

[3] As Paul Ricoeur points: "le temps devient temps humain dans la mesure où il est articulé de manière narrative ; en retour le récit est significatif dans la mesure où il dessine les traits de l'expérience temporelle." (Ricoeur, Temps, 17).
[4] The notion of presentism is developed in Hartog, François. *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*. Paris: Seuil, coll. « La Librairie du XXIème siècle », 2003, 262 p. The notion of evidential paradigm, or the idea that the modern historian's relation to History is evidential, appears in Ginzburg, Carlo. "Signs, Traces, and Tracks. Roots of a Paradigm of the Index", *Le Débat,* vol. 6, no. 6, 1980, pp. 3-44.
[5] *Kind One* (2012), *Neverhome* (2014) *The Evening Road* (2017) and *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* (2018) directly deals with American memory and its mythical and fictional texture, *The Exquisite* (2006) explores America's relation to its own past and *Zorrie* (2021) tackles the interweaving of individual and collective memories.
[6] For instance, by subverting and playing with the very form of micro-history.
[7] "C'est à quoi s'emploie, je crois, la vraie littérature vivante d'aujourd'hui, [...] rompant la linéarité de l'intrigue forcément solidaire d'une conception téléologique du temps pour lui substituer l'ordre d'une autre composition qui

Lastly, these poetic strategies have a subsidiary virtue as they seem to provide a partial answer to two major ethical problems raised by memory writing: that of the necessary softening of the violence inherent in History through its representation and of the peril for fiction to alter and distort crucial historical facts. The end of the "Era of the Witness" and the death of the last survivors of the last midcentury disasters have led novelists to reinvent ways of continuing or echoing the witnesses' voices and memories through fiction. Some works have sparked controversies about the legitimacy of fiction in assuming these voices,[8] which led authors to further reflect on the type of writing, poetic license, and reader response the death of the witness could possibly allow. Laird Hunt's novel *Kind One* grapples with this question, favoring an indirect representation of violence, mediated by imagination, metaphors and fragmented, sinuous narratives. Moreover, while leaning on a former slave's authentic account, the text constantly points out its fictional quality[9] by multiplying references from written and oral literary traditions.

Kind One weaves together personal destinies in times of slavery, and confronts the experiences of three young women in separate retrospective narratives. First, that of Ginestra,[10] called Ginny in the novel, who is still a teenager when she is seduced by her mother's distant cousin, Linus Lancaster, an unsuccessful stage actor now owner of a pig farm. As Ginny settles on her new husband's property, which proves to be a small derelict farm far from the "Paradise" he initially depicted, she soon becomes the victim of unceasing humiliations, acts of violence and sexual abuse inflicted by Linus, who proves to be a monster of selfishness and resentment. Ginny can nonetheless rely on Linus' slaves, two younger girls named Cleome and Zinnia, who support and comfort her. When Linus decides to reject Ginny and starts sexually abusing the girls, she turns her

convoque les moments de l'Histoire, les rapproche et les assemble sans souci de la chronologie, mais dans le dessein de produire une représentation concurrente qui soit plus fidèle à la vérité de la vie." (Forest, 2011).

[8] *Le Débat*, vol. 165, no. 3, 2011, pp. 5-5. Debates addressed the blurring of the boundary between historiography and fiction and its ethical implications.

[9] Hunt uses a somehow similar device in *The Evening Road*, which deals, indirectly again, with a lynching in early 20th century Indiana, and in which the whites and the blacks, are named "cornsilks" and "cornflowers" thus defamiliarizing the context and allowing the readers to consider the narrated events in a new light and in their complexity.

[10] The reader can see here a reference to the poem "La Ginestra" (1836) by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi' which offers a description of the meditation on the precarious and vulnerable life of human beings, in the metaphor of the will broom (ginestra) which grows on the slope of the Vesuvio. It suggests that, just like this "collective" and "slow" flower, humans can find in themselves, and as a community, the power to regrow and thrive.

violence against them out of a harrowing sense of betrayal and despair. When Linus is found dead one morning, Zinnia and Cleome, who had earlier turned out to be Linus' daughters, take their revenge on Ginny before running away to the north. Haunted and ashamed by the memories of her time on Linus' farm, Ginny spends the rest of her life at Lucious Wilson's, a farmer who rescued her and strives to help her mend her wounds.

Ginny's circumlocutory and biased narrative is followed by Zinnia's fragmented account of the events, which offers a counterpoint to the first version of the story. The latter intertwines two narrative threads interspersed with misty, oftentimes overexposed, landscape photographs. The first thread allusively portrays Zinnia and Cleome's early life with their father, until he murdered their mother, his former slave and wife. It depicts the years spent on the farm with Ginny until their nightly escape, in the course of which Cleome dies as she gives birth to Linus' son, Prosper. The second thread recounts a later episode, when an ageing Zinnia and her orphaned nephew set on to find Ginny and gather the different protagonists' testimonies.

Two short narratives, Prosper's and Lucious', conclude the collection of personal stories, recontextualizing them and giving them a form of unity. The opening of the novel, a short introductory parable on loss and grief which deals with the death of a child in a well, several decades before the story, seems to invite the reader to carefully listen to the discreet echoes between seemingly dissimilar narratives and to speculate on how they may actually be linked.

This article purposes to examine the specific resources of fiction to overcome the resistance of the real, here the brutal experience of slavery, to convey the extreme character of this experience and to arouse the collective memory of it against the risks of denial or forgetfulness. We will first examine how the novel draws upon history while ostensibly rejecting its chronological markers and its explanatory discourse, to favor the mediation of story-telling and its dynamics of symbolization. Indeed, Hunt invents a hybrid form of fictional historical testimony in which the expressive power of tales and myths stimulates the reader's imagination while composing a transitional object for the memory of slavery to be evoked and passed on. We will then go on to study specific aspects of the poetics of indirection in the novel, showing how Hunt resorts to

allegories, metaphors and the structural mechanisms of trauma to convey the characters' experience of "the real," as they have witnessed the veil of language[11] being torn asunder by traumatic violence.

I. Tales and myths memory is made of

If the novel draws upon archives, documents and tangible traces of the past, of which they borrow the forms and codes, the reflexivity of the novel as well as its fictional nature seem to relegate historical referentiality. Instead, the novel seems to favor story-telling, symbolization, and fictional representations, to which the text resorts while never ceasing to question and revitalize them.

Entering fiction: the initial mise en abyme of the novel

The novel is partly inspired from a piece of archive, the testimony of a direct witness, that of Harriet Jacobs, a slave herself who recorded her experience in an autobiography entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*[12] In the acknowledgements of the novel, Laird Hunt also mentions a History seminar about slavery and the Haitian Revolution which informed his writing. The novel engages in playful exploration of various forms of historical archives. The sections of the novel offer all the characteristics of a set of testimonies, bearing the dates and names of its authors, moreover several metaleptic passages point out the materiality of these documents, mentioning, for instance, "the stack of sheets" written and gathered by Ginny, or the big envelope enclosing several characters' accounts.

Nonetheless, the fictional dimension of the novel is immediately emphasized by the initial mise en abyme of the novel. Invoking a childhood memory of story time, the epigraph of the novel indeed anchors the narrative in the realm of imagination and, while

[11] An image used by Jacques Lacan to refer to the fundamental illusion of language. "What can materialise for us, as it were, in the sharpest way this relationship of interposition, which means that what is aimed at lies beyond what presents itself? Well, something that is truly one of the most fundamental images of the human relationship with the world, namely the veil, the curtain. The veil or curtain that hangs in front of something is still what best affords an image of this fundamental situation of love. One can even say that with the presence of the curtain, what lies beyond as a lack tends to be actualised as an image. The absence is painted onto the veil. This is nothing less than a curtain's function per se, whichever it may be. The curtain assumes its value, its being and its consistence from being precisely that onto which absence is projected and imagined. The curtain is, so to speak, the idol of absence." (Lacan, Seminar IV, 2020, p.147).

[12] Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* New York: Dover Publications, 1862.

formal elements of the fairytale, such as linguistic, thematic or narrative stereotypes of folktales, are everywhere woven into the texture of the novel, acting as counterpoints to the mimesis, the epigraph is particularly evocative of the genre.

> In the evening she would tell it. In the dusk light, when the candles were lit and the fire was low, she would clear her throat. When the windows were closed and the curtains drawn and the children tucked, she would set in to speak. When we had all gathered close, when our shoulders had touched, when we had taken her hands, when we had drawn in our breath. When we had shut tight our eyes, when we had thought of our days, the years of our suffering, our joy in the sunshine, that time by the water, cool drops on our foreheads, warm bread in our mouths. When we had all been spared, when our crops had come in, when the storm had stepped past, when we had said all our prayers. When the night stretched before us, she would open her tale. (9)

The grammatical structure of the paragraph—several protases in "when" followed by a short apodosis—the regular rhythm created by the anaphora, as well as the archaic quality of the prose are evocative of the fairy tale. This scene depicts a past story-telling scene, but its very form simultaneously invokes a second scene of story-telling, in which the narrator recalling his past, describes it while himself adopting and assuming the codes of story-telling.

Several interpretations can be made of this mise en abyme, especially in relation to the fact it introduces a story essentially inspired by historical facts. It first suggests that, just like the story time scene described, the story underway is a tale to be told, shared and transmitted again to future generations. It also points out the act of invention and recreation inherent in storytelling; the reader should thus expect the story, which he may *believe* he already knows, to be distorted, altered or expanded. Not only does the epigraph highlight, in its very form, the fact that the novel will be an imaginary-tinted evocation of memory, but it also points out the fictional portion of any attempt at conveying memory under a narrative form.[13]

The discreet allusions to the Yoruba tradition throughout the novel assign another function to the epigraph. Indeed, tales told by a young slave named Alcofibras—himself an occurrence of the figure of the trickster, mischievously named after the pseudonym of a renowned storyteller, François Rabelais, also known as Alcofibras Niser—are used as

[13] According to Paul Ricoeur, narrative structures itself following narrative codes which are internal to discourse. "Mimésis II" refers to the mediation of fictional narrative, with its multiplicity of imaginative variations, in the process of story-telling. P.127. Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit* I.

distant metaphorical echoes of the violence that his master Linus Lancaster inflicted upon him, his sisters and their mother. These tales offer an oblique access to what cannot bluntly be told in narrative form nor conveyed by the logic of explanation and signification (in the linguistic sense of the term). Those stories seem directly related to folktales of the Yoruba tradition, as they were transmitted to Alcofibras by his grandmother, a first-generation slave who was removed from Africa. From these traditional tales, which were passed on among slaves and marked by the supernatural, symbols and a rhythm that eased the memorization process, the novel borrows another generic trait: their typical opening and closing sections, whose functions were to make the listener step into an imaginary world, where the usual values and notions of time and space are set aside.[14] In *Kind One*, the epigraph and foreword, which are both well separated from the main narrative and appear in italics, seem to bear the same function, and bring the reader to consider the novel itself as a fictional recreation of collective memory, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a literary transitional space for the community of readers, a mediating space that is susceptible to help integrate, at a collective level, what has been collectively repressed or forgotten, that is, here, the violence of slavery.

History blended in fiction

Other narratives such as European folktales and Greek myths both reinforce the imaginary texture of the novel and tend to blur the boundary between historical reality and fictional space, allowing the reader to become fully immersed in the narrative.

Ginny's narrative is endowed with imaginary landmarks borrowed from fairytales that seem to structure her world and representations, references that will prove deceitful. Linus Lancaster's pig farm is named by Ginny, first literally then sarcastically "four-square Kingdom" (87), "his piece of heaven" (56), "his piece of paradise" (77). Those references hint at the tales she cherished as a child and that she nostalgically keeps

[14] "Chez les Yorubas, les contes obéissent à des lois précises et leur oralisation est toujours encadrée par une formule d'entrée et une formule de sortie. [...] L'amorce annonce le commencement du conte, la sortie sa fin. La formule d'entrée sert souvent à mettre en avant le caractère fictif du conte. Ce préambule manifeste la volonté du conteur d'introduire son auditoire dans un monde imaginaire en rupture avec le quotidien. C'est aussi une invitation 'au voyage dans un monde surnaturel'. C'est donc le moment où l'auditoire est uni et cette intégration à l'espace psychique du récit favorise une prise de conscience d'un destin commun" (Laditan).

reading at Wilson's, romances that she calls "my happy stories"[15] and that seems to screen, rather than mediate her painful memories. The action in Ginny's narrative is not set in any referential space, which is also a generic stereotype of the tale, and takes place "ninety miles from nowhere" (17) in Charlotte County which is not actually located in Kentucky State but in Virginia, thus thwarting the reader's reflexes to instinctively anchor fictional places in referential space. However, through the voice of Ginny's father, the text seems to warn the reader against the illusory sense of control offered by instruments of stable representation such as maps: "They make maps so we think we can understand the size of [the world] but we can't" (143).

Mythical references also permeate the evocation of the American space, to which they award a metaphorical depth. For instance, the Ohio River, which figures the border line between Indiana and Kentucky, between the territories of Ginny's childhood and adulthood, but also between the two sides of the Civil War, takes on a shifting mythical connotation. The passage in which the two young slaves, Zinnia and Cleome, run away from Linus' pig farm to seek shelter in Unionist territory with the help of a ferryman, echoes back to the Styx, the river of death and hate in Greek mythology. But the association shifts as Ginny crosses it in her turn, haunted as by a harrowing feeling of guilt over the violence she inflicted. The river is then here associated to the Acheron, the river of pain. The Ohio appears one last time as Zinnia's nephew, Prosper, sails up the river in an effort to record the testimony of the ferrymen who helped the slaves, in order to transmit it to future generations. This travel up the Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, appears as a telling metaphor of the memory work undertaken by the characters.[16]

Subjective immersion rather than historical retrospection

This blurring of spatial referentiality and the anchoring of the plot in imaginary space are coupled with an effort to dim the presence of historical references. Indeed, if the dates of the fictional testimonies do inscribe insert the plot in the timeline of historical reality, setting it before the Civil War and the following Abolition of slavery in 1865, the

[15] "Books in which they die by the cheerful dozen and the knight comes to rescue off the damsel and the good lord of hosts lets it pour down happy ever afters like there wasn't anything else in his skies. Like he didn't have any other eventualities squirreled away up there" (Hunt 19).

[16] See Ricoeur's image of forgetfulness. "L'oubli est ainsi désigné obliquement comme cela contre quoi l'effort de rappel est dirigé. C'est à contre-courant du fleuve Léthé que l'anamnèse fait son œuvre" (Ricoeur, *Mémoire* 33).

plot only occasionally and discretely alludes to the related events. For example, when Zinnia and Cleome escape the farm to momentarily join Horace and Ulysses, Linus' former slaves, in Louisville, the latter let them know about political unrest in Louisville.

> Horace and Ulysses said there was a war coming, that the whole world would be swept away, that we would all be struck down, but we hardly heard them. Our ears where either sill back in Paradise or on up the roes, but not there. (170)

Such vague, generic reference to the beginning of the Civil War, while eschewing historical referentiality, encourages the reader to focus on the characters' actions and immerse in their experiences, thus leading her to partially sympathize with them.

However, if historical landmarks remain mostly hidden, the accurate chronology enables the reader to lean on such implicit historical referential background to appreciate the representation of the characters grappling with a very unpredictable future—which reinforces the reader's sense of the characters' immense vulnerability in the face of the violence of History.

Similarly, the terms "slave" or "slavery" are barely mentioned in the novel, the slaves are referred to as "boys "and "girls". The text uses the paternalistic language of slavery, which also indirectly alludes to the incestual climate which reigns in Linus' home—where everybody including Linus must be considered as Ginny's children. This narrative device emphasizes the perception of the violence of slavery, since the text does not clearly designate it, thus facilitating the reader's identification with the characters. The only occurrence of the word "slave"[17] is finally uttered by Prosper, in a context where the end of the war and the official abolition of slavery have made it possible for him to utter it. This will later on allow him to engrave his mother's name on a nameless tomb, next to the ones of many other slaves who died trying to cross the Ohio to join the North.

The ethical space of the text: destabilizing fictional representations of heroism

Kind One seems to offer a sidestep from representations of heroism with the character of Ginny. If Linus' male slaves, and Horace, are flat characters with no particular function in the plot, Ginny embodies anti-heroic values since she is the one who does not revolt early enough against her monstrous husband, and twice fails to run

[17] "I am writing an article on places where slaves were given help" (Hunt 199).

away from the farm in a timely manner. Worse, she turns against her own companions of misery, Zinnia and Cleome, when Linus realizes Ginny cannot give him a child and starts abusing them. Interestingly, the text strives to bring a partial answer to the enigma of her behavior, by explaining why she turns against the two young women instead of heroically punishing her husband in an exemplary fashion, as myths and tales have generally led the reader to expect. Along with those structural elements, the very notion of willpower is deconstructed in the novel.

The title of the novel, which brings to mind a moral tale, is particularly telling of the ethics the novel. The "kind one" here seems to refer to the positive hero of the tale. However, the characters' roles seem interchangeable and shift as the narrative turns the tables, thus questioning and thwarting the binary morals of a tale, and encouraging the readers to question their own values as they identifiy, in turn, to the victim and the aggressor. The figure of the circulation of rocks in the pockets and mouths of various characters in the novel, bringing to mind Beckett's *Molloy* —in which a similar motif was analysed by Barthes as hinting at the circulation of meaning in a stable structure[18]— also puts forth this fruitful instability of the characters' identity.[19]

Thus the narrative structure of the novel provides an ethical space, which also enables the reader to take the full measure of Ginny's responsibility. Similarly, the change of point of view from that of Ginny to Zinnia's makes their suffering incomparable and Ginny's guilt unquestionable. In parallel, the novel also somehow allows understanding the causes of Ginny's violence, which are rooted in a traumatic childhood. Ginny's words to her protector Lucious Wilson—who offered her a house and work after she fled Kentucky—seem to directly address the reader: "if you had found me, it might not have been me you chose to help" (131). The reader is thus left with a feeling of discomfort that will persist throughout the novel, as the fragmented and biased quality of Ginny's narrative keeps them from prematurely judging her, and enables them to distantly[20] identify with Ginny, just quite enough to understand her. The reader's sympathy is carefully mediated again by the narrative as Ginny feels the need to

[18] For a longer development on the question, see Roland Barthes' comment in the section entitled Argo, in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 1975.
[19] Moreover reversal and circulation of roles and identities are a recurring pattern in Laird Hunt's novel. See, for example, *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* (2018), or *Neverhome* (2014).
[20] Ginny's constant need to underline the irony of her choice, her self-directed sarcasms, and the almost excessive presence of her guilt tend to limit the reader's sympathy.

hammer home that she "helped" the girls (25). This revealing disavowal[21] of the guilt that she feels for having turned against the two young slaves makes her sound sincere in the eye of the reader.

Writing and reparation?

Alluding to the violence she witnessed and took part in, Ginny quotes her father's words: "The land is the land and the land washes itself clean." Forgetfulness seems thus a natural course and the stain of violence or fault eventually fades away, giving way to symptom. Equally, it also implies that memories that have been buried and covered by time can be dug out and re-reinscribed in memory. The dynamics of the plot of *Kind One* tend to suggest so. Indeed, the character of Prosper, born of the incestual union between Linus and Cleome, is the one who digs up the memories and breaks away from the repetition of violence and hate, already initiated by his Zinnia's memory work. Directly preceding Ginny's narrative, the story of the "Deep Well" offers another variation on the theme of excavation. In this parable about grief set in the wilderness, a father digs a well in which his baby daughter falls and loses her life. The reiterated act of digging thus opens the novel, placing it under the sign of loss, a loss that writing seeks to recover.

Prosper's name is quite evocative of his function in the novel since it suggests the one who strives, whose future is enlightened. It is also derived from the latin "*propice*", which refers to someone that manifests active benevolence or kindness. The "benevolent one" as the novel suggests, is the one who cares for the future and transcribes the memories of the witnesses (he pretends to be a "*reporter*" to accomplish this perilous task) and records it for future generations. When finally Prosper engraves his mother's tombstone he honors the memory of his mother and gives her back her identity and a human face that had been denied to her by the slavery.

Doing so, Prosper breaks up the logic of repetition of violence and trauma, and reopens the gates of time and the possibility for change[22]: the plot can then escape from

21 "Si le terme *Verneinung* désigne tout simplement une négation, on est justifié à en renforcer la traduction en 'dénégation' pour en signifier la spécificité inconsciente, il s'agit de l'acte verbal par lequel un sujet, notamment un patient pendant l'analyse, énonce et récuse un état de fait qui s'avère effectif, ce qui révèle une dénégation inconsciente du refoulé*"* (Assoun 30). Ginny's seems to oscillate between conscious and harrowing guilt of her fault and a complete denial of it in the face of its unbearable quality.

the circularity of the formula “Hates returns hate”, against which he warned Zinnia when she let him know she wanted to look for Ginny. The phrase brings to mind Martin Luther King’s sermon “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate” which aimed at peaceful progressive attitude in the struggle to obtain Civil Rights. The novel seems to inscribe the memory of violence into this wider political dynamic at which it discreetly hints through Prosper’s ideology.

The ethical dimension of *Kind One* lies in its ability to eschew direct and teleological representation of a historical period of time in favor of a looser representation that informs and addresses our conceptions of the present, in order to “reroute all the past towards the future”, as Philippe Forest puts it. If literature is not *meant* to heal memorial wounds, for it cannot be reduced to a sole political function, nonetheless the tale-like quality of *Kind One* lets one wonder whether such a literary object could contribute to mend the holes in the collective memory of slavery as the latter continues to haunt American memory and to generate a violence which appears to be symptomatic of it.

II. A poetics of indirection

In *Kind One,* historical violence is evoked in its most intimate degree—that of dehumanizing experiences—and in an effort to find the appropriate distance, a vivid and expressive representation of violence is offered while both sensationalism and the aestheticization of violence are avoided. This is achieved through the combination of the form of the tale with the animalization of characters, so as to obliquely tackle incest and slavery.

Moreover, the text offers a representation of the experience of extreme violence, in which the veil of language is torn apart by the irruption of the real. Ginny’s childhood trauma, for which the text provides an extended metaphor through the figure of the well, illustrates the logics of traumatic violence. While offering a dynamic tableau of trauma, the novel seems to also resort to it as a dramatic force as well as a structuring form.

[22] The novel does not so much integrate temporality in a teleological conception of historical progress, but rather suggests that the repetition of violence, inherent in History, demands a constant work of analysis and understanding that allows for its causes to be addressed.

A tale of 'undifferentiation': telling the intimate experience of slavery

The text represents the violence of slavery as an intentional destruction of the slave's subjectivity, that is to say as the deregulation of human relations, thus allowing the absolute negation of the Other as subject. Indeed, the slave's own desire is denied in favor of the master's. This annihilation of the desiring capacities of the Other is here conveyed through the motive of incest and the extended metaphor of cannibalism.

Hinted at with references to ogre stories, such as Hop-O'-My-Thumb or Hansel and Gretel, incest is first alluded to through the theme of the pigs. The excessive consumption of pork, a metaphorical shift that allows the text to tackles the issue while allowing suspense—as the reader does not know straight away that Cleome and Zinnia are Linus' daughters. Pigs are first presented as the others of humans, as intelligent and sensitive creatures that seem to empathize with their siblings as the latter are slaughtered at Wilson's and then at Linus' farm.[23] The text highlights the similarities between the pigs and the inhabitants of the farm, and plays with them to emphasize the transgressive quality of this abnormal consumption of pig meat at Linus'. Indeed, its occupants, slaves included, consume pork at every meal, in all forms, the text picturing the variations of this unrestrained consumption as characters wear pig skin and have pockets full of skin cracklings.

This consumption viewed as a symbolic variant of cannibalism by numerous cultures suggests a monstrous devoration that hints at incest, which is here mediatized by the animalization process and the metaphorical shift to ingestion.

Linus' name is also enlightening, for the "line" conjures up the image of a *levelling* of generations occurring on the farm, where Ginny must be called the "Mother" of all, husband included, as Linus turns to his own daughters.

The well as an emblem and extended metaphor of trauma

The figure of the well is a recurring one in Laird Hunt's work, and always has to do with trauma, indeed is a metaphor for it, in keeping with usual traumatic backgrounds. The image of the well is all the more effective and telling as it keeps an evocative

[23] Here subtly echoing scenes where Zinnia is held captive in the shed by Linus and where her soft and erratic humming reach the ears of the narrator and the other slaves.

similarity with its usual presentation as a hole, or a stain. But far from being a mere symbol, the figure works as extended metaphor of trauma, which dictates and organizes the whole structure of the narrative.

In *Kind One*, the well is both the place where slaves take shelter from the master's terrible outbursts of anger and a cold and dark place that they fear. It also haunts Ginny's narrative and memory as it is the only view from the shed where she is in her turn held prisoner by Zinnia and Cleome. The haunting image of well keeps coming back in her life, even years after she finally runs away from the farm. The well is tightly linked to her guilt for having contributed to deprive Alcofibras of a proper burial, a fault for which she was made to dig holes in the ground by the two sisters. Indeed, just as she dug holes to sleep in in the shed where she was held prisoner, she continues to look for holes to curl into as she flees to the north. Once a maid for Lucious Wilson, she starts *digging* her own flesh, picking at the scar left by the shackle she was attached with. Here Ginny's compulsive and repeated reenactment of her trauma is evocative of the "positive" expressions of trauma,[24] a notion coined by Freud to refer to a repetition of trauma, of which the well is the allegory.

A logic of revelation and obliquity

A closer investigation of the novel shows that the text is also swarming with discreet, barely visible, traces of trauma — what Freud refers to as "negative" expressions of trauma. The well appearing in the first section of the book, seems to be the echo of a muted trauma, whose traces will have to be found in the details of the text, the associative links of its chapters, or the conspicuous omissions. The story "The Deep Well" which opens the novel, and seems to bear no direct relation with the main plot, ends with a scene where the man, having lost his child, fills the cavity and refuses to ever drink again from any well he dug. Ginny's narrative immediately follows this parable

[24] "Les effets du traumatisme sont de deux sortes, positifs et négatifs. Les premiers sont des efforts pour remettre en œuvre le traumatisme, donc pour remémorer l'expérience oubliée ou mieux encore, pour la rendre réelle, pour en vivre à nouveau une répétition.[...] Les réactions négatives tendent au but opposé : à ce qu'aucun élément des traumatismes oubliés ne puisse être remémoré ni répété" (Freud 163). Or, further down: "l'oublié n'est pas effacé, mais seulement 'refoulé' : ses traces mnésiques existent dans toute leur fraicheur mais sont isolées […] elles ne peuvent entrer en relation […] elles sont inconscientes, inaccessibles à la conscience. Il se peut aussi que certaines parties du refoulé soient soustraites au processus, qu'elles restent accessibles au souvenir, qu'elles surgissent à l'occasion dans la conscience, mais même alors, elles sont isolées, comme des corps étrangers sans lien avec le reste" (Freud 163).

of loss and grief,[25] and in the first description she gives of Linus' farm, a well is mentioned. In the text, which depicts life on the farm, language itself seems all too literal:

> It was a pretty country. Greens were greens. There was snow for Christmas and holly bushes to make sure it looked white. Breezes and flowers for the summer. Trees in autumntime stuffed with red and yellow leaves. Bulbs to crack open the earth when it came up on spring. It has been my whole excuse for a life since I held my breath and pointed my back at that place, but my mind has never learned to hold what transpired there against it. (18)

The vagueness of the description ("pretty"18), the practical quality of it ("varied as to elevation, with good drainage" 17), and the fact that this world is tightly bound together by a necessity which seems artificial ("to make sure", "for") convey a general sense of incongruity. The tautologies also seem to point out the fact that language here is failing: everything happens as if Ginny was describing a simplified world where words could directly and perfectly match the real, the impossible dream of a real that would be transparent to language. Thus, from the beginning of the novel on, something seems to have been kept secret and begs to be revealed, as the image of the piercing bulbs points out. Ginny's narrative and the novel itself, as suggested by the "Overture" and the variations on the excavation motive, eventually and indirectly shed light on it.

In this passage, the truth that is alluded to by the narrative obviously refers to Linus' abuse of the three girls, and to Ginny's active participation in those acts of violence, as she became jealous of Linus' "attention". But to this preposterous and unfathomable reaction, that she herself "cannot account for," the structure of Ginny's narrative, and the chain of her associations will also offer an indirect telling answer.

Indeed, the absence of a father gone to war and who, hardened by the violence of it, regularly beat her ("My father, the same who had been through battles, had a wooden foot and a cane to club on us with" 18) seems to have shaped Ginny's taste for a violent masculine figure, reminiscent of her father, a figure embodied by the knights of the tales she reads, and of whom she pictures herself as bride, as she writes in a tale of her own making, "the princess in the clouds". However, as Alcofibras rightly notes, "clouds were a cold place to live" (28) and finding Linus (a distant figure of Blue Beard, with "blue

[25] The figure of the well in the opening parable of *Kind One* is also quite evocative of a metaphor of the human psyche: the excavation and the building of the layers of colored pebbles, which the water is meant to rise through, do not fail to evoke the image of the subject as a filtered surging desiring energy. It is reminiscent of Freud's second topic, yet the modelling is represented in the making, since the future parents are included, as they lovingly and cautiously pick each pebble (Hunt 4-7).

sheen" in his hair 90) will offer no solace, even though, as her own mother's suitor, he seems to represent for Ginny a very much longed-for eligible bachelor.

A childhood memory, in which Ginny jumps into a dark hole in the ice to get her father's attention, and for which she was beaten up to the point of nearly losing consciousness, closes her long narrative. By the violence of it, and its very situation in the novel, this memory seems to underline its own crucial role in Ginny's psychological organization. Ginny's renewed experience of violence, inflicted in turn by Linus then by the girls, seems to have sent her back into early trauma.

The motif of darkness and night pervades the entire plot: many scenes take place in the moonlight, one section is called "The Candle Story" and the story-time scene of the epigraph happens at nighttime. This obscurity, which sometimes also affects the clarity of language, points out both the dark nature of the events and the fact that they are partly hidden in the folds and meanderings of Ginny's narrative, whose guilt brings her to partly cover her active role in the girls' ordeal. If Ginny progressively admits her wrongs, only Zinnia's narrative really sheds light on the full extent of Ginny's violence. As the novel shifts from a nocturnal to a more diurnal and solar setting, the text also slowly reveals the enigma of Ginny's brutality, which is partly accounted for —but never justified or discharged— by her own experience of suffering violence, which, as the text seems to suggest, brings about more violence.

The role of literature

Ginny describes her quest for a name to be put upon her traumatic experience, in which she struggles, as her words shows. Also, she starts looking for a way to voice it in Lucious Wilson's rich library.

> In the big house […] there is the big shelf of books that is the mother to the little shelf I have here. It isn't just my happy books on that big shelf. It is other things. It is the shallow and the deep parts of the pocket both. […] on that shelf I searched every day for the word to say what it was that befell us in that house in Kentucky. I looked in every book for that word, but I did not see it. It wasn't until a Sunday at the church that I learned what that word was and saw that I had looked at it many times in those books and heard it said every day. (23)

She cannot pin down these "things" she experienced on Linus' farm, as illustrated by her use of the structure "what it was" where "it", usually replacing a noun, here does not

seem to refer to anything. The story of discovery of the word “darkness”, as a convenient label for the blank left in her consciousness, is in its form quite revealing of traumatic “belatedness”[26] as she says she had looked at and heard this word many times in her books but was only able to recognize it now, after a revelation brought to her by the enlightening figure of Lucious.

Alcofibras’ numerous stories are also revealing in the way they somehow speak to Ginny’s trauma in a way that she herself cannot understand, as her comment shows:

> You hear something like that and it walks out the door with you. It follows you out the door to your work or your rest then jumps into your head and runs around inside it like a spider. You think there isn’t much to a story like that and you think you’ve forgotten it, and a week later it is there. A year later it is there. Half a whole lifetime later it is there. Something like that gets in you and gets started and it doesn’t stop (67).

The story of the dough that drinks a woman’s endless tears indirectly echoes Ginny’s bottomless guilt, as she is herself bound to forever eat her own daily tear-fed bitter bread. Further away, the story of the black bark, a persistent passenger in a man’s pocket, hints at Ginny’s haunting feeling. The story of the onion is also reminiscent of Ginny’s self-inflicted doom and self-fulfilling prophecies: having run away from a violent master, an onion is granted human appearance for several years by a stranger, however, as he worries that the spell may be coming to its end and sets out to look for the stranger, he immediately breaks the spell. The significance of those tales does not immediately nor directly show, rather, their meaning fluctuates according to the narrative, just like the moving red rope in Alcofibras’ story,[27] which both speaks of the mythical red thread of Fate, but also, on a metatextual level, of the red thread of desire and its linking property.

These tales also seem to deal with the ability of literature to speak of and to the reader‘s subconscious. While the literal surface of the text offers a clarifying and revealing image of the real, it also seems, by means of playful effects of reflection and

[26] “The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished” (Caruth 4-5).

[27] “There wasn’t much to it. It was about a piece of red rope. The whole of the story was that sometimes that piece of red rope lying there without anybody to touch it would move” (Hunt 76).

shifts of meaning, to address what in the reader's consciousness is not directly accessible.[28]

Conclusion

Kind One literally and figuratively unravels the stuff our representations of the real is made of, by exhibiting the fictional dimension necessarily embedded in any type of discourse and playing with it. Facing the irrepresentable real that is the intimate experience of slavery, the text offers an aesthetic experience of it through an innovative poetics of indirection. What the novel seems to suggests, both poetically and thematically, is that the propensity of violence and trauma to generate their own repetition actually requires a response, demands to be understood and to have their dynamics deciphered, in order to break away from the circle of hate and revenge. *Kind One* finally creates the space that allows for the suspension of the reader's judgement as it strives to circumscribe the very dynamics of violence while questioning and subverting the representations that enable its outburst or its repetition.

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[28] "résoudre l'énigme de l'œuvre d'art demande à prendre en compte non seulement le créateur mais aussi son destinataire. Qu'est-ce qui, d'une œuvre, vient toucher le public ? Les grandes œuvres, atteignant les 'points névralgiques' (Green, 1980, p.153) de l'inconscient du destinataire, sollicitant affects et représentations inconscients, ont un effet qui opère quelle que soit l'époque de sa (sic) production*"* (Emmanuelli 43).

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