

# HAND IN GLOVE

Negative Indexicality in André Breton's *Nadja*  
and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

*Anneleen Masschelein*



AT FIRST SIGHT, ANDRÉ BRETON'S SURREALIST "NOVEL" *Nadja*—celebrating love, the chance encounter, and the ideal of convulsive beauty—seems far removed from the melancholy poetics of mourning, destruction, and trauma of Sebald's *Austerlitz*. The only common denominator would be the juxtaposition of photography and narrative. However, both novels share many themes and motifs, as well as a high degree of self-referentiality and a sophisticated use of *mise en abyme*, on a microscopic, textual level as well as on the macroscopic level of the book as a whole. Both *Austerlitz* and *Nadja* are hybrid texts in which the guidelines for interpretations are blatantly present: metafictional statements about writing, interpretation, time, space, history, memory, love, death continually double the narrative. This assigns to the reader a position either inside or outside the logic of the text. Somehow every interpretation seems already inscribed within the texts, governed by poetics that are totalizing in their explicit dialectics. In the end, all the fragments, motifs, events, names, and objects fit together in a greater design (the surrealist vision of reality or the Western history of trauma), while on the other hand the grand scale of society, politics, and history permeates the most minute particulars. To resist an allegorical reading in which fragments acquire meaning in terms of something else, we must instead attempt a *metonymical* reading, following the paths through which objects are linked. This results in a kind of textual substance or density that never completely yields its partial or fragmented status, but that nonetheless *contains* it. This locus of substance can also be seen as a starting point of creativity in the fullest sense of bringing dead matter to life.

## 1

Both *Nadja* and *Austerlitz* are named after the main characters in the novel, whose mental confusion and breakdown are recorded by an I-narrator, who is in both cases assumed to coincide with the author of the books, André Breton and W.G. Sebald. Whereas André Breton is addressed in the novel as "André," *Austerlitz's* narrator remains nameless and in the

ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN

background, faithfully fulfilling the task of listener assigned to him by the protagonist Jacques Austerlitz. However, the many parallels with Sebald's other prose works—the reappearance of themes, motifs, style, form, and characters—which identify the narrator as Sebald reinforce the autobiographical nature of the I-witness here. The narrator is emphatically present throughout the novel: his own narrative occasionally interrupts the meticulous, verbatim recording of the minute details of Austerlitz's and other characters' stories, and he takes the utmost care to always indicate who is speaking. This is what Sebald calls "periscopic writing": "Everything that the narrator relates is mediated through sometimes one or two other stages, which makes for quite complex labyrinthine syntactic structures and in one sense exonerates the narrator, because he never pretends to know more than is actually possible."<sup>1</sup> In his foreword to the 1963 revised edition of *Nadja*, Breton comments on the "two imperative 'anti-literary' principles to which this work obeys"<sup>2</sup>: on the one hand, the photographs, which are meant to eliminate all description; on the other hand, the tone of the story, a mixture of medical observation and live journalism. Thus the account presents itself from the beginning not as a novel but as a document "recorded live" ("pris sur le vif").

Although their prose styles differ, both narratives employ their photographs in similar ways—to support the documentary style and to guarantee the authenticity and reality of the events by showing that something or someone did in fact exist. And yet in both cases the effect of reality and objectivity is undermined by the narrator's emphatic mediation. In the case of *Austerlitz*, the artificiality of the narrative situation—the complex embedding of the "periscopic writing"—is reinforced by what Sebald himself calls the use of "extremism" and hyperbole. Both the narrator and Austerlitz abundantly use absolute terms like "always" and "never" and make exaggerations that highlight the fictionality inherent in telling a story. Likewise, the detailed accounts of the memories and the continual use of perceptual metaphors contrast with the complex indirect representation, as in this sentence: "Vera remembered, said Austerlitz, that the happy excitement Agáta felt at this first successful outcome of her efforts was overshadowed by her grief and anxiety as she *imagined* how *I would feel*."<sup>3</sup> This results in the overexposure of visions: memories, dreams, and feelings are rendered so accurately and in such painstaking detail, even on the third or fourth level of embedding, that they end up seeming unreal rather than real.<sup>4</sup> This excessive clarity is continually contrasted with a blurring of vision, as in the objective correlatives of the weather conditions and light—mist, fog, twilight, rain, cumulus clouds, dust, dim light, under water—which make perception difficult. The images that result from this disturbed perception are underexposed. The same logic of the continual reversal of one extreme into its opposite is found in manipulation of dimensions and proportions. On the one hand, people are continually dwarfed by the gigantic dimension of buildings or natural scenes, which are in turn reduced to ruins by the greater forces of catastrophe. On the other hand, the focus is often reversed to extreme close-up, zooming in on small objects, such as insects, patterns of fabric, or buttons, endowing the observation with symbolic or allegorical value. In accordance with the text, the dimensions, perspective, and focus of the photographs in *Austerlitz*, as well as their position in the text, greatly vary.

In *Nadja*, after reading the preface, one is surprised to find that the dominant mode in the opening paragraph is not documentary realism, but the ghostlike. "Who am I? If this

once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I 'haunt.' I must admit that this last word is misleading, tending to establish between certain things and myself relations that are stranger, more inescapable, more disturbing than I intended. Such a word means much more than it says, makes me, still alive, play a ghostly part, evidently referring to what I must have ceased to be in order to be *who* I am."<sup>5</sup> Breton immediately draws out the ambiguity of the French verb *hanter*, translated in Richard Howard's English version as "haunt." In French it means "to frequent" as well as "to haunt,"<sup>6</sup> and qualifies Breton's quest for identity not in terms of known facts but in terms of something of a different order, something that can only be retraced by going back.

My image of the "ghost," including everything conventional about its appearance as well as its blind submission to certain contingencies of time and place, is particularly significant for me as the finite representation of a torment that may be eternal. Perhaps my life is nothing but an image of this kind; perhaps I am doomed to retrace my steps under the illusion that I am exploring, doomed to try and learn what I should simply recognize, learning a mere fraction of what I have forgotten.<sup>7</sup>

The search for self-knowledge is a quest of self-retrieval, which, as Breton goes on to add, is not conducted by a subject that "*presupposes* myself," but which is determined by chance and by difference.<sup>8</sup> This conception of subjectivity in its unconscious state is, strictly speaking, unknowable. It can only be approached in the negative, as it arises against the background of what it is *not*: the subject's uniqueness is realized in its difference from the objects, spaces, and other subjects he describes.

Breton's encounters are not organized in a coherent, causal, or chronological way; rather they are stimulated by the narrator's associations, according to the surrealist principle of automatism, which is equivalent to psychoanalytic free association. Like dream images, the surrealist events and encounters are overdetermined. They form clusters of meaning belatedly, in the light of what happens afterwards. Chance occurrences strongly affect the subject, and they also frequently effect a change in the perception of reality. Words, objects, and people announce future events or turn out to be connected in some enigmatic way, thus creating the surrealist mode of "le merveilleux," "the marvelous." This process of "belated semi-osis"<sup>9</sup> is mirrored in the practice of reading. The photographs and Nadja's drawings that accompany the text are connected to the relevant textual passages by captions and page references.<sup>10</sup> However, the pictures more often than not *prefigure* the descriptions. They announce the text rather than accompany it, and they acquire their significance in the book only after the text they illustrate has been read.

## 2

*Nadja* and *Austerlitz* do not just exude a comparable atmosphere, which could be described as hyperreal, unreal, surreal, grotesque. In addition to their thematic similarities,<sup>11</sup> both texts share what could be called "an uncanny poetics of profane illumination." In his text on surrealism, Walter Benjamin characterizes the surrealist concept of the "marvelous" in terms of "profane illumination." The surrealists aim at provoking a kind of shock, a sublime experience of the ordinary. The surrealist world, exemplified by the person of Nadja and by the city of Paris, of which she is an exponent, is a *Dingwelt*, a world of objects. The

ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN

way to approach the mystery of this *Dingwelt* and gain access to it is not by trying to understand it or uncover its meaning, but by coming near its objects in their most profound ordinariness. Overexposure of this ordinariness will turn reality into its opposite and reveal the dark, occult, or magical side of the world in a profane illumination of excess or surreality.<sup>12</sup>

In his reading of *Nadja*, Benjamin shows how this profane illumination affects various aspects of the book. Breton's fascination with *Nadja* is modeled on the ideal of courtly love that never intends to actually approach or touch the beloved, but reveals her negatively by showing the things surrounding her in a new light. Likewise, the outmoded, forgotten objects and the locations in the city of Paris are permeated by the ordinary force of mass production and industrialization (Benjamin's comparison of the illustrations in *Nadja* to the serial novel could be read as a kind of *mise en abyme* for the presence of mass production in the book itself). The spirit of the masses and their mute revolt is revealed in a negative way, through the objects and spaces that they produce, inhabit and haunt. Surrealism is the heir to the tradition of the occult and of evil in literature.<sup>13</sup> According to Benjamin, ordinary words are endowed with the power of animistic medieval realism, of spells and magic formulas that transforms their status from art into that of an irreducible, dangerous reality. The real force of surrealism, then, is precisely its spirit of material revolt, which penetrates the world of objects and transforms it from within. The very flatness, negativity, and resistance inherent in surrealist imagery form a bodily remainder, a substratum that cannot be recuperated by an idealistic, dialectic movement and is therefore a spirit of real, ongoing revolt.

The surrealist effect of the marvelous in *Nadja* and in the prose texts following it, notably *L'amour fou*, is related to the notion of "convulsive beauty"—which brings to mind the sudden, uncontrollable convulsions of the hysteric celebrated by the surrealists—and the notion of "objective chance," the way in which coincidences acquire meaning. More recent criticism has emphasized that the surreal experience is not always pleasurable. It is often mingled with fear and, in the case of *Nadja*, with madness and death. Hence critics like Hal Foster, Victor Burgin, and Margaret Cohen have proposed to read *Nadja* not so much in terms of the marvelous, but in terms of the uncanny.<sup>14</sup>

Reading *Austerlitz* through the notions of "objective chance" and "convulsive beauty" in their reverse or uncanny form works remarkably well.<sup>15</sup> The narrator's encounters with Austerlitz are nearly always determined by chance. Likewise, Austerlitz's quest for his past is governed by chance to the point of becoming incredible and artificial: the most minute detail of the story belatedly acquires meaning, creating the impression of an endless mirroring and doubling in a self-contained universe, which extends to Sebald's entire oeuvre.<sup>16</sup> The sensation of the uncanny—the familiar that has become strange through the return of the repressed—is predominant in Austerlitz's obsessive recuperation of his traumatic past, not just through memory, but also in experiences of *déjà vu* and derealization.<sup>17</sup> This sense or *Stimmung* of the uncanny exceeds Austerlitz's psychological condition. It functions as a symptom of a generalized, existential condition of homelessness (or, to use Vidler's term, "unhomeliness")<sup>18</sup> and alienation that characterize man's position in a history of disaster, destruction, and dehumanization. In addition, many of the textual and photographic images of nature and architecture (e.g., dead moths; overgrown ruins; rooms covered with dust; the female characters, who are invariably transparently pale and fragile and on the verge of death; and the recurrent breast-shaped form of the dome) could be classified as

instances of convulsive beauty, subtly shifting the boundary of life and death, in which the aspect of death seems to be predominant.<sup>19</sup>

Sebald's poetics of trauma and melancholia is particularly acute in the notion of writing, which is present in *Austerlitz* as a theme and motif—in the *mise en abyme* of Austerlitz's endless, manic writing, culminating in writer's block, silence, and breakdown, the repression and recovery of his maternal language and the importance of testimony—as well as in the novel's intricate, labyrinthine prose style. The ongoing, paragraphless prose (interrupted only once, by an asterisk) contrasts oddly with the tendencies towards closure on the level of the story (the gradual disclosing of the details of Austerlitz's past implies an end to the quest, even if it is not fully attained in the narrative). In a way, this repetitive language of melancholia could be seen as a counterpart or mirror image of the surrealists' automatic writing. In *Nadja*, there is a similar self-reflexive doubling of writing, which is thematized in Breton's detailed descriptions of surrealist experiments with automatic writing and in his repeated reflections on the process of constructing meaning belatedly as well as on the act of writing and rewriting *Nadja*. Breton's prose style is, like Sebald's, long-winded, tightly constructed, and slightly archaic, in seeming contrast with the idea of the free expression of the unconscious in automatic writing. The associative linking of short fragments stimulates an active engagement of the reader (and spectator) in a search for a different type of connections through processes of metaphor and metonymy, which can be grasped or touched in the very concrete, material qualities of language and images.

### 3

The coexistence of narrative and photography in both novels seems to privilege the aspect of vision as it raises questions about representation, recollection, and referentiality. However, radically taking the indexical quality of photography as a starting point allows us to depart from the predominant mode of visual representation and to focus instead on the sense of touch. This opens up a very basic spectrum of human experience ranging from bodily contact and affectivity to mental grasping. In Rosalind Krauss's seminal essay on surrealist photography, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," the hand and the notion of the hand's imprint appear, not only in the form of various surrealist photographs of hands and gloves,<sup>20</sup> but also in her theory of surrealist photography.

Surrealist photography exploits the very special connection to reality with which all photography is endowed. Photography is an imprint or transfer of the real: it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a way parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints or the rings of water that cold glasses leave on tables. The photograph is thus genetically distinct from painting or sculpture or drawing. On the family tree of images it is closer to palm prints, death masks, cast shadows, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches. Technically and semiologically speaking, drawings and paintings are icons, whereas photographs are indexes.<sup>21</sup>

This metonymic conception of photography builds on Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, in which the photograph is described as "literally an emanation of the referent," because light that is captured by the photographic process is directly transmitted to the viewer.

ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN

From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze; light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.<sup>22</sup>

In her text Krauss slightly deflects Barthes's animistic or alchemical conception of photography when she emphasizes the *semiotic* quality of the index. In her view, surrealist photography aims at producing a "paradox of reality constituted as a sign—or presence transformed into absence, into representation, into spacing, into writing."<sup>23</sup> This view is related to Breton's concept of convulsive beauty,<sup>24</sup> which Krauss understands as the perception of reality in terms of language:

If we are to generalize the aesthetic of surrealism, the concept of convulsive beauty is at the core of its aesthetic, a concept that reduces to an experience of reality transformed into representation. Surreality *is*, we could say, nature convulsed into a kind of writing.<sup>25</sup>

In her persuasive readings of surrealist photographs, Krauss demonstrates how, through the use of frames and manipulations, the objects from reality and nature represented in the photographs are transformed into signs that become readable and interpretable. At the same time, the photographs self-reflexively and often humorously draw attention to this transformation process.

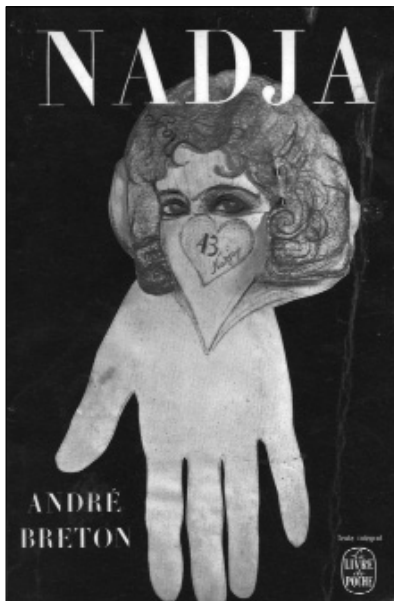
Krauss's aesthetic relies heavily on poetical statements from *Nadja* and *L'amour fou*, endowing the texts with a theoretical rather than fictional status. At no point does she comment on the interplay of photography and text in the books. And yet the problematic of representation, of turning the object into a language that supplements reality, is further complicated in the novels by the juxtaposition of photography and text and the complex, metonymic way in which they refer to each other.<sup>26</sup> The juxtaposition of text and image in

*Nadja* and also in *Austerlitz* highlights the importance of contiguity in the reading process, in the Derridean sense of deferral of meaning<sup>27</sup> as well as in the Barthesian sense of contiguity and contact. The pervasive surrealist image of the hand also represents the sense of touch. In a reading of the glove as a mold for the hand, we will look at the way in which contiguity and contact negotiate between absence and materiality in *Nadja*, in a kind of "negative indexicality" produced by the interaction between words and image.

#### 4

In the pocket edition of *Nadja*,<sup>28</sup> we immediately encounter the glove on the front cover which singles out one of Nadja's drawings (**figure 1**)<sup>29</sup> and puts it on display.<sup>30</sup> The motif of the glove itself figures in various forms throughout the book. The first time is just before the first encounter with Nadja, when Breton remembers the playful suggestion of "the lady with the glove" to offer one of her remarkable sky-blue gloves to the "Centrale Surréaliste." However, the prospect of taking up this gauntlet fills Breton with panic or sudden

Figure 1:  
Cover of the Livre  
de Poche edition  
of André Breton's  
novel *Nadja*.



fear and he begs her not to take her glove off, not quite knowing why: "I don't know what there can have been, at that moment, so terribly, so marvelously decisive for me in the thought of that glove leaving that hand forever."<sup>31</sup> A few days later, the lady deposits on a table a bronze glove (**figure 2**), which he had already seen before at her house: "also a woman's glove, the wrist folded over, the fingers flat—a glove I can never resist picking up, always astonished at its weight and interested apparently, only in calculating its precise weight against what the other glove would not have weighed at all."<sup>32</sup>

The meaning of this object is complex.<sup>33</sup> On one level, the notion of taking off the glove and throwing it on the table is both a challenge and a sexual invitation. Breton's panic that the lady might take off the glove could be interpreted in terms of castration anxiety: the object takes on the value of a fetish. However, what Breton cannot bear is the idea that the glove would be forever separated from the hand, which would turn it into a dead object. It is to this second anxiety that the lady responds when she brings the bronze glove: the warm, soft, formless object that receives its shape and meaning from the hand that wears it (the fingers have no thickness) has become hard and cold, yet in death it has obtained a weight, a substance of its own: it has become an object.

The glove reappears in Nadja's drawing on page 144 (**figure 3**): "There is enough cut out, but in two parts, so that the angle of the head can be varied, the whole consisting of a woman's face and a hand."<sup>34</sup> The drawing is reprinted on the left page, against a black background, with a caption (the last part of the description cited above), facing two other, smaller drawings of Nadja on the opposite page. It consists of a pencil drawing of the top of a woman's head coming out of a hand, which is white on a black background. On the top of the head, the name "Nadja" is written in reverse on the left hand side in the curly hair, as a kind of hairclip. The eyes are the most prominent feature of the drawing: they are worked out in detail and are surrounded by the shadowy contours of masklike makeup. Instead of a nose, a heart appears, with the number 13 written inside and below, and on the right-hand side, again the name "Nadja." There is no mouth, and the lower part of the face disappears in the opening of the glove. Behind the face, there are the contours of a kind of collar that arises out of the folds of the glove, from which the head arises. The hand itself, which takes up the largest part of the drawing, is left white and contrasts with the lines and shades of the pencil drawing of the face. However, a closer look at the color reprint of the drawing on the cover of the Folio pocket edition (see figure 1 above) reveals some yellow stains on the paper object as well as some faint pencil traces outlining the fingers and the head, next to where the drawing has been cut out. Although it is clear that the drawing is in fact a cutting, it is not discernible from the reprint (in fact it seems

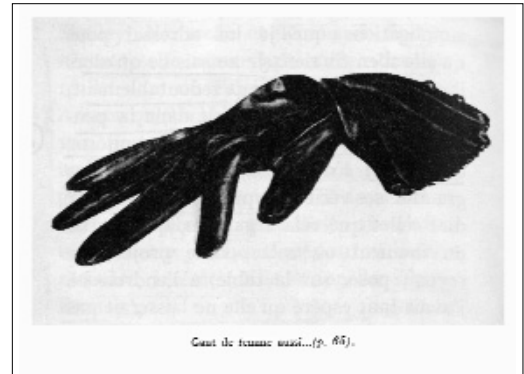


Figure 2:  
Bronze glove.  
(Nadja, 66.)



Figure 3:  
Nadja's drawing.  
(Nadja, 144.)

doubtful) whether the object actually consists of two parts, hand and head, so that the head could be tilted, as Breton says in his description.

The object, a kind of paper doll, acquires the meaning of a self-portrait of Nadja, not merely because it is reprinted on the cover, but also because it contains the main elements with which Nadja is associated: the eyes, the hand, and the heart with the ominous number 13 in the center.<sup>35</sup> The implications are rather sinister: the face (only the eyes) and the heart are hidden in an empty glove without being able to speak or breathe. In his description, Breton speaks not of a glove but of a hand. A closer look at the shape of the fingers in the cutting reveals that the drawing probably started out from a tracing of Nadja's hand, upon which the drawing was superimposed. Hence the cutting not only symbolically represents Nadja's disembodied status, but it is an index of her presence as well. Like the lady's bronze glove, the paper glove is a negative hand, in a redoubled, absolute absence that curiously reinforces the material qualities of the objects (bronze and paper) rather than their meaning.

The glove belatedly calls to mind the motif of the hand, which appears conspicuously in various forms in the story. At the beginning of their affair, the hand is a sign of distance as well as of physical passion. On their very first encounter, Nadja tells Breton the story of her first lover, whom she met again by accident. "Even as he took her hands, he could not help telling her how changed he found her...he was surprised how well manicured they were (though they are not at all so now)."<sup>36</sup> When she in turn looks at his hands, she sees that they are deformed: two of his fingers are joined together. Nadja had never noticed this handicap before, even though she lived with the man for quite some time. In an emotional outburst, she reflects on the curious lack of knowledge one can have even in the most intimate relationship, which throws into question the nature of love. Is it some kind of blindness inherent in love, or rather is it the lack of love that makes one overlook such a characteristic physical detail? Or does the absence or disappearance of love makes one alert to the defect previously overlooked? The emphasis on hands and on bodily presence in the opening conversation raises the expectation of a passionate love affair, but in hindsight it highlights the curious lack (or omission) of physical affection.

The hand reappears in Nadja's visions or hallucinations, in the form of "the hand of fire" ("la main de feu"). On one of their nocturnal walks, Nadja suddenly sees a hand of fire above the Seine. When Breton wants to go on, she clutches a gate and becomes annoyed: "But what does that hand mean? How do you interpret it? Let me look at that hand! Why do you want to go away now? What are you afraid of? You think I'm very sick, don't you?"<sup>37</sup> In this instance, the "hand of fire" announces Nadja's mental illness. Breton's irritation signals for the first time a gap between the surrealist vision and the hallucinations of madness; it also reveals a striking lack in the book that is never commented upon. The second time, again on the edge of the Seine, Nadja again refuses to continue.

She is still quite distressed, and tells me to follow a line slowly traced across the sky by a hand. "Still that hand." She shows it to me, as a matter of fact, on a poster, a little beyond the Dorbon bookstore. It so happens that there is, high above us, a red hand with its index finger pointing, advertising something or other.<sup>38</sup>

This time, the hand, which starts from a trace in the sky, is not a mere hallucination. As in the case of the lady with the glove, Nadja's hallucinatory hand is doubled in a representation (which is not reproduced photographically): the real image of a hand on a billboard.

Nadja's gesture of placing her hand against the traced hand highlights the indexical quality of the photographic imprint and foreshadows the paper cutting. At the same time, the hand of fire also acquires a more complex symbolic meaning when Nadja says: "The hand of fire, it's all you, you know, it's you" and explicitly introduces the notion of fading, of absence.

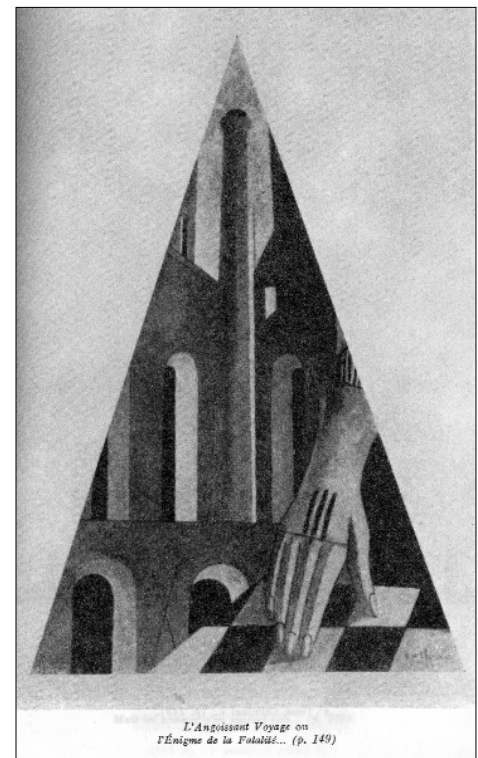
Then suddenly, standing in front of me, virtually stopping me, with that extraordinary way she has of calling me, the way you might call someone from room to room in an empty castle: "André, André?... You will write a novel about me. I'm sure you will. Don't say you won't. Be careful; everything fades, everything vanishes. Something must remain of us."<sup>39</sup>

This passage reveals the isolation of Nadja, who seems trapped in the empty castle of her mind and who, like Austerlitz and his narrator, desperately tries to reach someone to ensure that her story will be preserved and told. Emphatically addressing Breton, she commands him (repeating as it were the mute command of the index finger on the picture)<sup>40</sup> to write down their encounter in order to preserve a trace of what will be lost. Thus the novel itself acquires an indexical quality, quite like that of the photograph, when Nadja's voice is captured in the printed words, in the same way in which the real hand, the traced hand, the imaginary "hand," are all reproduced in the description.

Nadja also asks Breton to take a pseudonym, which would express the core of "fire" from the image of the "hand of fire."<sup>41</sup> Thus, the hand of fire becomes a metaphor or symbol for Breton, in the same way that Nadja's drawings are symbols for her, but with the request for a pseudonym, the report also enters into the realm of deceit and fiction, introduced by Nadja's specification "roman," a novel. If Breton had obeyed Nadja's demand faithfully, he would have taken a pseudonym, but his loyalty lies with the reader, whom he promised at the beginning of the book to record everything as it happened in a documentary fashion. Nadja's drawing could thus also be read as an emblem of her sacrifice, for she is erased in the process of writing. As a source of inspiration and invocation for the book, she quite literally disappears and becomes what her drawing represents: consisting only of an empty glove, a heart, and eyes, she is a disembodied and mute index. The title of the novel repeats the objectifying gesture, in suggesting that Nadja will be the main character of the book, while in fact it turns out to be an autofictional account of Breton's life and the working mind.

Nadja's tragic fate is symbolized one last time when she recognizes "the famous hand of fire"<sup>42</sup> in Giorgio de Chirico's painting *L'angoissant voyage ou L'énigme de la fatalité* ("The Disturbing Journey or the Enigma of Fatality") (figure 4). The hand of fate pointing upwards, against the background of a tall, churchlike building, is not only another index of its own semiotic nature, but also a pointer to the outside of the frame. In this case, we could perhaps read it as a sign leading us to Austerlitz's fearful and melancholy journey. Indeed the tall buildings and blank Roman windows that rise up from the chessboard of fate and narrow down at the top of the triangle,

Figure 4:  
Giorgio de Chirico,  
*The Disturbing  
Journey or the  
Enigma of Fatality.*  
(*Nadja*, 151.)



pointing to an impossible realm beyond the hand of fate on the foreground, resemble the imperial architecture that dominates Austerlitz's quest and could be read as an allegory of the terrible, blind history of destruction which no longer holds a promise of redemption.

## 5

Our statement at the beginning of this essay, that in *Nadja* and *Austerlitz* subject and object are constituted through the negative, can now be qualified as a "negative indexicality" that paradoxically points to the materiality of absence, as became clear in the reading of the gloves in *Nadja*. The problem of negativity is thus not primarily a philosophical one; rather what we are hinting at is a force of erasure and obscurity that produces a kind of negative inscription and recollection. This negative "force"—the work of the negative—will be approached in terms of its elaboration by the French psychoanalyst André Green in his reading of a case study provided by D.W. Winnicott in *Playing and Reality* that is particularly appropriate in the context of *Austerlitz*. Winnicott's well-known notion of the transitional object<sup>43</sup> is related to the development of subjectivity and object relations as well as to the origin of thinking and sublimation, which he conceives of as the investment of drive energy in the "experiencing" of art, religion, and creative thought. When the mother is somehow unable to provide sufficient support for the baby or is absent for too long, the baby's relation to transitional and external objects may be disturbed, resulting in the decaethexis (withdrawal of libido) from the outside world, resulting in psychosis and other pathologies. The latter phenomenon is illustrated with the case of a woman who, like Jacques Austerlitz, was sent away as a child during the war. The woman was later reunited with her parents, but she was never able to establish a link with her mother. As a result of this trauma, the woman, although very intelligent, can only live in the negative. In her relationships with people, she seems obsessed with "the negative side of relationships," with absence and loss.<sup>44</sup>

Winnicott suggests that the devastating effect of the separation on the child could be related to her relationship with her mother in infancy. Until the age of two, the child was developing normally and gradually learned to deal with separation through transitional objects and phenomena, which were both "real" for the child because they provided comfort and at the same time "symbolic" in the sense that they represented absence.<sup>45</sup> However, at a certain point something occurred that disturbed the normal process of subject-and-object formation. After her parents went away for a while, her mother told her that they heard her cry all the time. This lie was something the infant could not cope with at that time, for it disturbed the notion of absence, which she was just starting to learn; it also undermined the reliability of the mother.

Here was a picture of a child and the child had transitional objects, and there were transitional phenomena that were evident, and all of these were symbolical of something and were real for the child; but gradually; or perhaps frequently for a little while, she had to *doubt the reality of the thing they were symbolizing*. That is to say, if they were symbolical of her mother's devotion and reliability they remained real in themselves but what they stood for was not real. The mother's devotion and reliability were unreal.<sup>46</sup>

As a result, the girl has to learn to deal with absence, not by gradually acquiring the notion that the parents will come back, but by acknowledging the painful reality of the fact

that they are not there, that their absence is what is real.<sup>47</sup> This reality of absence is reinforced with the child's separation from her parents in the war, but it had already been prefigured by the fact that the mother was somehow not securely and unambiguously established as a good internal object<sup>48</sup>—a necessary precondition to guarantee the health of the psyche.

What we witness in this case study is not one trauma but a series of traumas, especially if we take into account André Green's continuation of the study. (Coincidentally, the same patient came to Green for analysis, so that he was able to provide some additional details to the case.) In Green's view, the separation from the parents did not result in mourning. The object was not lost; it was never there in the first place. The internal representation of the parents was dead or petrified. Instead, there was a void—nonexistence and blankness. Green reads Winnicott's study in the light of a more general, metapsychological elaboration of a concept of the negative, of which he sees several instances in Freud, such as the concept of the unconscious, which can only be grasped in analysis through the latent elements operating behind the scene, "a meaning that would make us think of a photograph, the negative being the element through which the positive can appear."<sup>49</sup>

What is of the greatest importance is the *introjected construction of a framing structure* analogous to the mother's arms in the holding. This framing structure can tolerate the absence of representation because it holds the psychic space, like Bion's container. As long as the framing structure "holds" the mind, the negative hallucination [i.e., the phantasmatic perception of something that is not there], can be replaced by hallucinatory wish fulfillment or fantasy. But when the baby is confronted with the death experience [i.e., the fading of the internal object or framing structure due to insufficient support from the external object, as Winnicott pointed out], the frame becomes unable to create substitute representations—it holds only the void. This means the non-existence of the object or any substitute object.<sup>50</sup>

Green sums up the aspects of psychic functioning in terms of the drives, which he reformulates as two functions. On the one hand, there is "the objectualizing function," in which drive energy is cathected in the relation with objects (this is the binding force of libido or eros as Freud defined it) and which constitutes "the power of the human mind to constantly create new objects."<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, the death drive is described as a "disobjectualizing function": "that is, the process by which an object loses its specific individuality, its uniqueness for us, and becomes any object, or no object at all."<sup>52</sup> The disobjectualizing function implies a decahexis or withdrawal of drive energy from all objects external, internal, or even transitional, and it "is linked less with aggression than with nothingness." This process can cause objects to fade and disappear from the psyche, resulting in absence.

The enigmatic ending of Green's article is worth quoting in full, for it will gradually lead us back to the problem of representation and photography, and to *Nadja* and *Austerlitz*.

Let us go back for a while to prehistoric representations. This is not speculation, like the earliest mother-baby relation, of which, in fact, we know very little. Prehistoric man designed all sorts of drawings in his caves: finger printings, representations of women with large breasts, wild animals, mammoths, rhinoceroses, lions. But on some parts of the ceilings were other representations: what prehistorians call *negative hands*. To represent the hands, prehistoric man used two devices. The simplest was to paint the hand and to make an impression on the wall, leaving a direct trace of it. The second was more indirect and more sophisticated. Here the hand that draws does not draw itself. Instead it is placed out on the wall of the cave and allows the colours all around it to spread out. Then it separates from the wall, and a non-drawn hand appears. Such could be the result of the physical separation from the mother's

ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN



Figure 5:  
Non-drawn negative  
hands from the  
Lascaux caves.

body. Prehistoric man did not expect us to know what the negative is about.<sup>53</sup>

The analogy here is quite complex. In the first place, drawings are ways of dealing with absence by representing what is not there. They are also objects of sublimation in the sense that they are created.<sup>54</sup> On another level, they also literally function as transitional objects in a double sense. The first type of negative hand is an index, i.e., it does not merely represent the hand but metonymically refers to it: the imprint of the hand on the ceiling is part of the subject that

left its mark. In another sense, it is capable of bridging the gap between the world of the painting subject and the spectator. Touching the hand brings us into contact with the prehistoric hand that once touched the wall. The second type of negative hand is more complex and more mysterious, because the absence seems doubled (**figure 5**).<sup>55</sup> The “non-drawn hand” is the result of an initial absence created by the absence of color. Touching this hand will not yield the illusion of contact, for the spectator’s hand can only fill the void that allowed the hand to appear. In that sense, it is like the baby’s separation from the mother’s body, which allowed its subjectivity or inner space to develop precariously, as an empty internal space held together by the internalized framing structure of the mother’s arms. This imaginary or internal sense of embrace is crucial to the integrity of the primitive psyche, and yet it does not leave any physical trace or imprint at all.

## 6

In *Austerlitz*, the motif of the glove, which is another type of negative hand, appears several times, always in relation to the maternal. The first time is in one of Vera’s stories about Austerlitz’s past. She recounts how they used to visit her aunt Otylie’s glove shop (one of those ladies of “alarmingly fragile appearance”).<sup>56</sup> After an account of the various kinds of gloves and Otylie’s intricate ordering of her stock, the story moves to Austerlitz:

And I remember, Vera told me, said Austerlitz, that it was aunt Otylie who taught you to count at the age of three and a half, using a row of small shiny black malachite buttons sewn to an elbow-length velvet glove which you particularly liked—*jeden, dve, tri*, counted Vera, and I, said Austerlitz, went on counting—*ctyri, pet, sest, sedm*—feeling like someone taking uncertain steps on the ice.<sup>57</sup>

The glove and the buttons, almost tangible in the description of their materiality, suddenly bring back Austerlitz’s repressed maternal language. Here it is the touch that teaches, that ingrains the numbers: the mere imagining of pointing out and touching the buttons when counting awakens the body’s memory, and this leads the narrative to Austerlitz’s only “real” memory of his mother.<sup>58</sup>

Significantly, this memory is set in the theater (one of the only buildings in the book that is being restored rather than being left dilapidated) where his mother played her first big role, which happens to be that of Olympia, the automaton of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Sandmann.” When Austerlitz visits the theater where they once attended one of his mother’s dress rehearsals of the opera, he is unable to remember anything at all: “the harder I tried

to conjure up at least some faint recollection of her appearance, the more the theater seemed to be shrinking, as if I myself had shrunk to the stature of a little Tom Thumb enclosed in a sort of velvet-lined casket.”<sup>59</sup> The fact that he cannot remember his past, that literally nothing is there, makes Austerlitz feel as if he is disappearing and dead in his tomb. However, when the heavy theater curtain suddenly ripples, some images start to return, finally conveying an image of a sky-blue shoe embroidered with silver sequins. This classic fetishistic object,<sup>60</sup> the shoe, like the glove, is a metonymy: as part, it signifies the lost “whole” of the women with which it is associated: Agáta and Otylie.

When...Vera...confirmed, in answer to my question, that Agáta had indeed worn sequined sky-blue shoes with her costume as Olympia, I felt as if something were shattering inside my brain. Vera said that I had been deeply affected by the dress rehearsal in the Estates Theater, first and foremost, she suspected, because I was afraid Agáta had genuinely changed into someone who, though she might now be a magical figure, was also a complete stranger to me, and I myself, Austerlitz continued, suddenly remembered that I had been filled by a grief previously unknown to me when, long past my bedtime, I lay with my eyes wide open on the divan in Vera’s room, listening to the church clocks strike the quarter hours and waiting for Agáta to come home, waiting for the car bringing her back from that other world stop outside the gate, waiting for her to come into the room at last and sit down beside me, enveloped by a strange theatrical odor in which dust and drifts of perfume mingled. I see her wearing an ashen-gray silk bodice laced up in front, but I cannot make out her face, only an iridescent veil of pale, cloudy milkiness wafting close to her skin, and then, said Austerlitz, I see the scarf slip from her right shoulder as she lays her hand on my forehead.<sup>61</sup>

Like the woman’s mother in Winnicott’s case study, Austerlitz’s mother seems to have been lost long before he was sent off to England, making his story not the quest for one trauma, but an endless series of repetitions of traumas, doubled on the macroscopic level by the ongoing series of historical traumas that have shaped European history. However, through the power of memory, he is able to conjure up a sensation, determined by all the senses, hearing, perception, but especially smell and ultimately touch—the touch of her hand—rather than a mere image of her face, which retrieves the mother in her absence, in the negative.

The second glove in the story occurs somewhat later and repeats the first scene. Austerlitz’s quest for an image of his mother’s face brings him to Theresienstadt and later on to a film about the life in the ghetto. Just before he manages to trace the film, he succeeds in overcoming his breakdown by reading the detailed description of ghetto life in Theresienstadt by H.G. Adler. At first, he is disappointed:

Despite Adler’s meticulous account, which I had read down to the last footnote with the greatest attention, I found myself unable to cast my mind back to the ghetto and picture my mother Agáta there at the time. I kept thinking that only if the film could be found I might perhaps be able to see or gain some inkling of what it was really like, and then I imagined recognizing Agáta, beyond any possibility of doubt, a young woman as she would be by comparison with me today, perhaps among the guests outside the fake coffeehouse, or a saleswoman in a haberdashery shop, just taking one fine pair of gloves carefully out of one of the drawers, or singing the part of Olympia in the *Tales of Hoffmann* which, so Adler says, was staged in Theresienstadt in the course of the campaign.<sup>62</sup>

When Austerlitz finally gets hold of the film, he studies it again and again, slowing it down infinitely to a haunting memorial for the living dead, until he discerns the face of a

ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN



Figure 6:  
Still from the Nazi  
propaganda film *Der  
Führer schenkt den  
Juden eine Stadt*.  
(Austerlitz US  
2001, 251.)

young woman. “I gaze and I gaze again at that face, which seems to me both strange and familiar” (figure 6). However, Austerlitz is not certain, and he attributes the unreliability of his memory to the imperfection of the human eye, symbolized by the time indicator on the film still, which covers half the face: “the hundredths of a second flash by so fast that you cannot read and capture them.”<sup>63</sup> The film image, so carefully studied, so strangely familiar, proves to be a false recollection when he shows it to Vera, along with a newspaper clipping found in the Prague theatrical archives, showing an anonymous actress. Casting aside the still, Vera “immediately and beyond a shadow of a doubt, as she said, recognized Agáta as she had then been”<sup>64</sup> in the newspaper clipping, which reveals the mother in a kind of ghostlike *clair-obscur* (figure 7). In the end, however, vision is not important; the memory of the hand’s imprint on his forehead is more real than the photographic image. The ultimate discovery of his mother’s face turns out to be an anticlimax. It does not put an end to his journey. After this, the quest turns to his father and the lost beloved, Marie de Verneuil,<sup>65</sup> and it will go on after his narrative has ended, just as the history of disaster will continue after the Holocaust, inscribing this dreadful, unique culmination point within an ongoing series.

As in *Nadja*, the imaginary glove functions as a ghostly index for the hand that should realize its shape and function. Only two other instances of hands are found in the novel, each time associated with a maternal figure. During his unhappy, loveless childhood with the Eliases in Bala, who are each in their own way grief-stricken and literally dying of loneliness, there is only one sign of affection. Gwendolyn, the minister’s wife, has been crying in an empty room. “When she saw me standing in the doorway she rose and said it was nothing, she had only caught a cold, and as she went out she ran her fingers through my hair, the one time, as far as I remember, she ever did such a thing.”<sup>66</sup> The second instance occurs when Austerlitz turns up at Vera’s doorstep. “Vera covered her face with her hands, hands which, it flashed through my mind, were endlessly familiar to me, stared at me over her spread fingertips, and very quietly but with what to me was a quite singular clarity spoke these words in French: “*Jacquot, she said, dis, est-ce que c’est vraiment toi?*”<sup>67</sup>

In these two instances, the hands appear to be connected in rare moments of happiness to substitute mothers, who appear in the narrative in reverse order, announcing Agáta, who ultimately remains absent. Gwendolyn’s caress is a rare display of tenderness in the story, and again it is the sense of touch that determines the memory. Her deep, unexplained grief casts her as a precursor of Agáta; indeed, she seems to incarnate Agáta’s depression after she has sent her son off. Like the mother who “heard” her child crying when she was away in Winnicott’s case, this has the curious effect of negating the mother’s absence and of casting Gwendolyn as a neg-



Figure 7:  
Agáta’s face.  
(Austerlitz US  
2001, 253.)

ative double of Agáta or the dead mother. A few pages later, we find this impression—belatedly, in a second reading—reconfirmed when Austerlitz describes Gwendolyn lying in her coffin. Again, it is the glove and the buttons on the glove (the material suggestively called mother-of-pearl) that trigger the memory and the emotion.

She was wearing her wedding dress, kept all these years in a trunk upstairs, and a pair of white gloves with a great many mother-of-pearl buttons which I had never seen before. The sight of them brought tears into my eyes, the first tears I had ever shed in the manse.<sup>68</sup>

Likewise, Austerlitz's immediate recognition of Vera's hands contrasts with the painstaking attempts to remember his mother. It is also accompanied by a double affirmation of his identity, when Vera calls him by his name and by her rhetorical question.

And yet, on the level of the story, the name Vera uses in French—Jacquot—is strangely empty, for it resonates with the name of the stuffed parrot's name, Jaco, in Andromeda Lodge, the house of Austerlitz's friend Gerald Fitzpatrick.<sup>69</sup> In this passage we find an odd juxtaposition of text and photograph: the parrot appears first as a dead, stuffed animal in the text, but is subsequently shown alive on the very large two-page photograph on pages 86–87 (**figure 8**). The picture exudes a nineteenth-century colonial Englishness which stimulates the reader's curiosity and imagination, illustrating Barthes's notion that a photograph captures the moment of life on the verge of death. It shows the parrot looking straight into the lens of the camera (and the eyes of the spectator) on the very left of the photograph, sitting on the shoulder of one of Gerald's ancestors, whose eyes are directed slightly away from the camera. On the same horizontal height, four figures appear. Two men are in black tail-

Figure 8:  
Parrot with  
Fitzgerald family  
members.  
(Austerlitz US  
2001, 86-7).



ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN

coats. The one in the middle of the photograph is wearing a hat and sporting a cane, who appears to be looking at the parrot. On the right page two women wearing hats are looking in the direction of the parrot, with slightly disconcerted expressions. The woman in the middle is covering her mouth with her hand. Both of the ladies are clutching pairs of gloves. When we lower our gaze to the hands in the picture, it becomes clear that the hands, starting from the man with the parrot on the left page to the fourth lady's crossed hands holding the gloves on the right, follow an oblique line in the composition of the photograph, directing the gaze away from the parrot to the right-hand page. When our gaze returns to the parrot on the left, we are following the horizontal line set out by the direction of the women's eyes. In the background of the left page, there is a fifth figure, a man half-hidden behind the man sporting the parrot. The light coat of this man contrasts with the black tailcoats of the men in the foreground. The contrast between light and dark emphasizes the divide between the foreground and the background, and the enigmatic figure seems to almost blend in with the surface of the lawn on which the figures are standing.<sup>70</sup>

The enigmatic man in the background and the parrot are the only figures in the photograph staring straight into to the lens of the camera, marking them as the central point from which the spectator's gaze starts to explore the image from left to right and then back, in a movement that resembles reading. Although the composition of the photograph is symmetrical and rather rectilinear, the photograph itself seems somehow disproportionately large, and the gutter in the middle of the book makes it difficult to really see the image. The difficulty of deciphering the image prevents us from identifying it fully with a past reality, and instead draws our attention once more to the fictional quality of the photograph. Thus, like the gloves, the parrot is much more than a mere detail in the photograph or the narrative. At the moment of Vera's utterance "*Jacquot, dis, est-ce que c'est vraiment toi?*", the parrot suddenly becomes a symbol for Austerlitz's problematic identity. In a roundabout way, this brings home the realization that, like a parrot's speech, Austerlitz's words are devoid of meaning. In a typical movement, the jubilatory affirmation of his identity reverses into its opposite through hyperbolic ridicule. Belatedly, the connections established by the name "Jacquot" with the parrot Jaco earlier in the story turn Vera's rhetorical question into an almost cruel parody of Austerlitz's quest for identity. This interpretation is further reinforced by the emphatic "quite singular clarity" of her voice—another instance of the effect of unreality created through overexposure—and by the meaning of her name, Vera ("truth"), which reverses her verification of his identity into its opposite, the meaningless repetition of a parrot's name.

If the photographs in *Nadja* testify to the existence and reality of what is described, it is the narrative report that undermines a purely indexical reading and a straightforward factual account. The text does turn out to be more fictional than Breton would like to admit, and it fundamentally rests on the absence of what motivates the writing: Nadja, the anecdotes and objects described, the city of Paris, and a clearly delineated subject that would hold the fragments together. In *Austerlitz*, the photographs emphasize the artificiality and fictionality of the narrative, and they resist an interpretation of the book as a testimony. No matter how chilling and haunting its content may be, we know that Austerlitz is a fictional character and that the photographs are a collage. And yet here the indexical nature of the photographs has the curious effect of throwing into question the *unreality* of the narrative: surely

something must have been there? Amidst the ruins of the narrative, some kind of presence is felt precisely in the experience of a void that contains the objects, fragments, images, and narrative, and which urges us to read the novel as a testimony, in spite of its fictional status, in spite of the absent subject that put all this together, whom we are—against all intentional fallacy—tempted to call “Sebald.”<sup>71</sup>

## 7

The dead heaviness of the bronze glove object and the flimsy paper cutting of Nadja; the ghostly lightness of the imaginary gloves in Austerlitz’s memory and imagination; and André Green’s “negative hands,” the one a trace or index, the other a nondrawn hand or void: in each of these objects absence, representation, and subjectivity are related. In Breton’s surrealist poetics, absence leads to an endless game of representation: the blue glove, its bronze counterpart, the account of the anecdote in the book, and the photograph of the bronze object. They all represent a further step in a process of absence, away from the reality of the human hand that was once there, but they also function as indexes in a double sense, on the one hand referring to reality in a negative way, and on the other hand, often belatedly, highlighting other events and objects in the novel that are linked in metonymic chains. The glove reappears in Nadja’s cutting, another type of negative hand, a non-drawn hand. Here its indexical quality also emphasizes the material quality of the object—paper—that literally constitutes the substance of Breton’s novel, which paradoxically erases and yet preserves the trace of Nadja’s and Breton’s presences, speaking from the void that is opened up by the textual and photographic traces of the objects and spaces that used to surround them.

In *Austerlitz*, the glove is a truly imaginary object, present only in memory, yet its power is so strong that it brings back his maternal language in a moment of spiritual but also sensual and linguistic rebirth. However, the return of the repressed does not solve the trauma; nor does it end the suffering. In fact it opens up a series of traumas, absences, and losses, doubled in the accounts of (the destruction and decay of) architecture, history, and nature, that function as an endless series of *mises en abyme* for the ongoing history of death and destruction. Still, this very repetition of destruction also implies that something always survives. As in *Nadja*, the empty glove, a mere detail in the text, belatedly highlights the scant appearances of human hands and touch, rare moments of tenderness linked with maternal presence. These images of human touch in turn draw out the delicate sensuous structure of Sebald’s prose, which is both self-contained, labyrinthine, and suffocating on the one hand, and smooth, clear, and light on the other, like the substance of a wasp’s nest, as Sebald describes it: “a kind of ideal vision: an object that is extremely complicated and intricate, made out of something that hardly exists.”<sup>72</sup>

The heavy bronze glove and the paper cutting of the surrealists versus the intricate and dangerous substance of the wasp’s nest: these objects are retrieved from death rather than life, but they glow and buzz with a dim light and a faint hum. The bronze glove, the paper doll, the hand of fire and the memory of the comforting motherly touch are stuff that memories, dreams, and art are made of. What is at stake in the writing of *Nadja* and *Austerlitz* is not so much the unconscious or the repressed, but the *mediation* of the unconscious and the repressed in their absence. This opens up the realm of thought, reflection, memory, and

ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN

judgment through the negative and establishes a kind of contact with a writing subject whose presence is felt rather than known. I believe that this sensation somehow ties in with Barthes's animistic conception of photography, which he also characterizes in terms of hallucination, of the negative.

The image, says phenomenology, is object-as-nothing. Now, in the Photograph, what I posit is not so much the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has indeed existed and that it has been there where I can see it. Here is where madness is, for until this day no representation could assure me of the past of a thing except by intermediaries; but with the Photograph, my certainty is immediate: no one in the world can undecieve me. The Photograph then becomes a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand: "it is not there," on the other "but it has indeed been"), a mad image, chafed by reality.<sup>73</sup>

This effect of hallucination, an illusion of life in the Winnicottian sense of something that is not there and yet is very real—the light captured by the photograph which metonymically links the object to the viewer—is not merely the result of a confrontation between an image and the person who looks at it. The experience of contact opens up a third space, in which the object is created and acquires a life of its own, even if that animation is intangible and always on the verge of disappearing. This third space, which could also be called "transitional," is at stake in writing and reading. The words on the paper somehow capture and transmit the life of what they represent.

It seems to me that the hallucinatory effect of life, against the pervasive negativity of death, in *Nadja* and *Austerlitz* is perhaps produced on the most basic, material level of the text: style, layout, and the formal confrontation of text and photography. The short, enigmatic fragments in *Nadja* mimic the convulsions of the hysteric or of a body on the verge of death, whereas Sebald's onrushing prose, with its continual shifting of focus and perspective, imitates the pulsating contractions of a very slow heartbeat underneath his tale of loss and absence. In both texts, the co-occurrence of text and image interrupts a linear reading, forcing the reader to page back and forth in the book in order to establish and renegotiate connections between what happened and what is about to come, between text and object, but also doubling the experience of reading, making us aware of it, in a conscious, but also in a very sensuous way.

## Notes

*For my brother Wouter—always just beyond reach.*

*I would also like to thank Mary Jacobus, Bart Philipsen, Vivian Liska, Liliane Weissberg, Lise Patt, and the editors and readers at the Institute of Cultural Inquiry for their help and inspiration.*

1 James Wood, "An Interview with W.G. Sebald," *Brick* 69 (2002), 28. In fact Sebald uses the term to characterize Thomas Bernhard's writing, which greatly influenced his own work. See also Mark A. Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness: On W.G. Sebald,"

*October* 106 (2003), 106.

2 "Deux principaux impératifs 'anti-littéraires' auxquels cet ouvrage obéit." André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 6; my translation. *Nadja* was first published by Gallimard in 1928, but a new edition, entirely revised by the author with a new preface (entitled "avant-dire (dépêche retardée)") was reissued in 1962. In the preface Breton claims that the revised edition only corrects the style without altering or censoring the objective and subjective

- truth of the content. The pocket edition of the text (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1964) is also based on this revised edition, which is generally accepted as the standard version in the French-speaking world. However, the only existing English translation of *Nadja*, made by Richard Howard in 1960 (and which I will use throughout this article), is based on the original 1928 edition of the text and therefore does not include the preface.
- 3 W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 173; my emphasis.
- 4 A closer look at the complex verbal structure of this sentence has striking narratological consequences. The first level of the report (to say) incorporates various levels of cognition (to remember) and experience (to feel) ending in the imperfect tense of "I would feel." On the one hand, the imperfect indicates conjecture rather than a fact (a *potentielle*); on the other hand, it links up the past with the present and establishes a connection between the child Austerlitz and the I-narrator Austerlitz by its connotation of an incomplete or ongoing action. The improbability that is built up in the verbal sequence belatedly affects the series of narrators, and it is precisely the accurate rendering of voices that forces the reader to question the reliability of the narrators and the accuracy of memory after all these years. Sebald's remarks on the function of memory in *Die Ausgewanderten* also applies to the temporal structure of *Austerlitz*: "The fact that the older you get the more the passage of time between your present age and your childhood or youth begins to shrink somehow. You see things that are very distant with extreme clarity, very highly exposed, whereas things that happened to two or three months ago somehow vanish": Wood, 25.
- 5 André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 11.
- 6 The ambiguity of *hanter* also draws out the double meaning of the verb form *suis*, which can mean both "am" or "follow." This ambiguity is emphasized by the italicized *qui* at the end of the passage.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 8 "Over and above the various prejudices that I acknowledge, the affinities I feel, the attractions I succumb to, the events which occur to me and to me alone—over and above a sum of movements I am conscious of making, of emotions I alone experience—I strive, in relation to other man, to discover the nature, if not the necessity of my difference from them." *Ibid.*, 12–13.
- 9 I coin the phrase "belated semiosis" to indicate a process of meaning (*semiosis* in the classic, semiotic sense of the term) in which new information, which comes later, forces one to continually reinterpret what came before (as in the Freudian concept of belatedness, *Nachträglichkeit*).
- 10 Sornig briefly compares the use of photography in *Nadja* and *Sebald*, especially with regard to the use of captions: "Between the literal illumination of the texts and these texts' uncertain status, somewhere between fiction and autobiography, there remains an uncanny semiotic gap—a silent no-man's-land that plays with Barthes's understanding of photographs as being 'a message without a code.' Unless they have been labeled or captioned (even in the way Breton captions the photographs and drawings in his surrealist novel *Nadja*) photographs are silenced. The linguistic aspect of the text is the vocal, articulate element – the photo is silent, enigmatic—it must be voiced by the text." David Sornig, "Picturing the Story: Image and Narrative in Brian Castro and W.G. Sebald," *Text* 8.1 (2004), 8. See also Adrian Daub's subtle reading of 'the logic of the caption' in this volume.
- 11 Interesting parallels could be pursued on the level of the stories and motifs, focusing for instance on the nomadic vagaries through the city, the importance of topography, the motifs of the eye and the visual, of the theater and staging, the theme of madness and breakdown, of Gothic and grotesque elements.
- 12 "Any serious exploration of occult, surrealistic, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena presupposes a dialectical intertwinement to which a romantic turn of mind is impervious. For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday." Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," trans. Edmund Jephcott. *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 216.
- 13 Tellingly, Benjamin again uses the negative image of the X-ray in this context: *ibid.*, 212.
- 14 The *uncanny* is a Freudian concept generally defined as the fear that arises when the familiar suddenly becomes strange. According to Freud, this is due to the return of the repressed. For a history of the concept, see Anneleen Masschelein, "Unheimlich/Uncanny," *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, vol. 6, Karlheinz Barck et al., eds. (Munich: Metzler, 2005), 241–259. Victor Burgin, "Chance Encounters: Flâneur and Détraquée in Breton's *Nadja*." *Qui Parle* 4 (1990), 47–61; Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of the Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of

- California Press, 1993); Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).
- 15 In Hal Foster's Lacanian reading in *Compulsive Beauty*, the Bretonian marvelous is uncanny because it reveals what Breton's poetics of desire continually represses: that chance and the unconscious are not merely governed by eros and desire, but also by the repetition compulsion and death. Hence Foster coins the term "compulsive beauty" to indicate how the ideal of convulsive beauty, exemplified in images of the arrest of motion or instances of natural beauty that appear artificial, confuses the boundary between life and death and reveals the incessant pull of the death drive underlying desire.
- 16 In Austerlitz, the impression of artificiality works on several levels: there is the complex temporality, also found in *Nadja*, where enigmatic things and events in the story acquire meaning belatedly—as *mise en abyme*, double or mirror scene—of something encountered later on in the forward movement of reading, which is in fact the gradual, complexly embedded uncovering of the past. The sense of artificiality is further heightened by the motif cluster of opera, theater, and staging, which leads to the paradoxical setting of the book. Against a background of "real" historical events and places, the causality of the story based on highly improbable coincidences in fact makes reality and history appear artificial. Victor Burgin describes a similar effect in *Nadja*: "Images of places and things, including the drawings which Nadja made for Breton, are deployed throughout the book like so many decorated curtains, rising and falling between scenes with the turn of a page, like so many theatrical 'flats.' We may recall that one of the origins of perspective is the art of scenography. Breton's city is a stage for the encounter with the marvelous in the everyday. Breton is actor-director and general manager": Burgin, 58.
- 17 *Derealization* is a psychological term to indicate the (momentary) loss of a sense of reality.
- 18 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomeliness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991). Vidler applies the concept of the uncanny to deconstructive architecture, focusing on modern forms of the spatial uncanny, the sense of not being at home in the world (the city) or in the house (the private bourgeois home). In his conceptualization of the architectural uncanny, Vidler highlights the relation of the uncanny to sociopolitical issues of alienation and homelessness, and proposes the neologism "unhomely" as translation for the German *unheimlich*.
- 19 Motifs like the double and the appearance of Olympia from Hoffmann's "Sandmann" are explicit intertextual references to Freud's analysis of Hoffmann's story in Freud's essay "The Uncanny," generally seen as a precursor of the notions of the death drive, the repetition compulsion and trauma, central to post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory.
- 20 Rosalind Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," in Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville, 1985), 21–26.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 22 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1982), 80–81.
- 23 Krauss, 31.
- 24 Breton famously introduced this term in the last sentence of *Nadja*. Both Krauss and Hal Foster emphasize the image as a key concept of surrealist poetics.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 26 In a sense, the strategy of "superimposition" discussed above by Bettina Mosbach could also be considered in terms of metonymy and contiguity, even if Mosbach very persuasively focuses on the creative metaphoric process at work in "superimposition."
- 27 This deferral of meaning is Derridean *différance*, i.e., the process in which meaning is never fixed, but always endlessly deferred because the meaning of a signifier is always a reference to yet another signifier in an ongoing signifying chain. Although Krauss refers to language in the metonymic sense of a chain of signifiers that produce and defer meaning through *différance*, her readings seem to be primarily metaphorical: the objects that are represented lose their literal meaning and come to stand for something else.
- 28 The Folio pocket edition published by Gallimard in 1964 (based on the 1963 revised edition of the text) is still widely available.
- 29 All images from *Nadja* will be taken from this edition. A useful comparison of the various covers of subsequent pocket editions of *Nadja* (Livre de Poche, Folio, Folio Plus and Foliothèque), sporting different variations of Nadja's drawing can be found on: <[http://www.ac-versailles.fr/pedagogi/Lettres/Breton/nadja\\_couvertures.htm](http://www.ac-versailles.fr/pedagogi/Lettres/Breton/nadja_couvertures.htm)>.
- 30 André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).
- 31 Breton, *Nadja* (trans. Howard), 56.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Foster, 33.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 121.

35 Breton does not characterize the drawing as a self-portrait, but the suggestion, reinforced by the reprint on the cover of the pocket edition, is certainly there and the drawing is generally seen by critics as such. Ian Walker focuses on the photographs rather than the drawings and he examines the photograph of Nadja's eyes that was added in the 1963 edition. Walker examines Marcel Mariën's claim that Nadja was in fact the actress Blanche Derval. Through a different road, starting out from the factual references of the photographs, rather than the fictional status of the "novel," he does come to a conclusion that resonates with my own reading: "Everything, everyone in the book haunts everything, everyone else. All the photographs in *Nadja* have that unnerving quality of never quite being what they seem. They interact with the text in a constant weave of presence and absence, factuality and fictionalisation. The photographs may at first sight seem to simply illustrate the text, as pictures often do. But then they make us question what we are being told in that text. At the same time, what we are told in the text makes us question what we see in the photographs. It is that constant state of provocation and uncertainty that continues to make *Nadja* a major example of how photographs and text can work together, not to provide certainty, but to undermine it." Ian Walker, "Her Eyes of Fern: The Photographic Portrait in *Nadja*," *History of Photography* 29 (2005), 139.

36 Breton, 65–66.

37 Ibid., 85–86.

38 Ibid., 100.

39 Ibid.

40 Georges Raillard discusses the photograph of the library *L'Humanité*, in which there is a similar sign "On signe ici," accompanied by an arrow, which reinforces the appeal for political commitment by an index. In Georges Raillard, "On signe ici," *Littérature* 1 (1971), 30–31. This photograph, like the billboard with the pointed finger, demonstrates the reflexivity of surrealist photography by drawing attention to its semiotic nature. The photographs also point at a different semiotic realm, that of the text, which, as I said above, frequently supplements the image rather than the other way around. The juxtaposition between the two is rarely a simple one-on-one relation, even if Boiffard's photographs are almost invariably characterized as "banal" illustrations. The opaque relation between text and image is evident in the enigmatic captions, which frequently fail to make sense, even after reading the narrative from which they are taken.

41 "But it doesn't matter: you'll take another name:

and the name you choose, I ought to tell you, is extremely important. It must have something of fire about it, for it is always fire that recurs in anything to do with you" (Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Howard, 100). Throughout the novel Nadja does not have a fixed name. In their first encounter she explains that she chose the name "Nadja" for herself because it is the beginning of the Russian word for "hope." She is also called Lena by one of her gentleman friends.

42 Ibid., 129.

43 The transitional object is an object (such as a blanket, a toy, or a teddy bear) that marks an intermediary stage in the separation process of mother and baby, through which the subject-object division is realized. According to Winnicott, the task of a "good-enough mother" is one of illusion and disillusionment. By providing the illusion of immediate availability, by always being there when the baby needs her, the mother confirms the baby's sense of omnipotence and allows for the internalization of the good object in the unconscious. This is crucial for the elaboration of a secure internal world that constitutes the baby's developing psyche and personality. Thus, the capacity for creativity is stimulated, which allows for the libidinal investment in the process of thought, i.e., the ability to create something insubstantial that is nonetheless real. On the other hand, the mother must also gradually disillusion the baby (by not always providing the breast in the process of weaning) and teach it to cope with her absence as a necessary step towards independence and subjectivity. Transitional objects or phenomena (such as thumb sucking or cuddling a blanket) play a complex role in this process. Because they are perceived as in between, neither inside, nor outside, they both are and are not part of the baby. Thus they serve as primitive models of the separation of subject and object at a later stage of development. Moreover, their material qualities of softness and warmth can soothe the anxiety and aggression generated by the absence of the mother. In normal development, the transitional object naturally loses its function when the attachment is extended to the outside world and relations with real, separate objects are established.

44 Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1989 [1971]), 21.

45 Ibid., 22.

46 Ibid., 24.

47 "Just before she went she said: 'Do you know I believe when I went away at the time of evacuation [in the war] I could say that *I went to see if my parents were there*. I seem to have believed I would

## ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN

- find them there. (This implies that they were certainly not to be found at home). And the implication was that she took a year or two to find the answer. The answer was that they were not there, and that *that* was reality." Ibid., 25.
- 48 The establishment of good, secure internal objects relies on the support of the external object.
- 49 André Green, "The Intuition of the Negative in Playing and Reality," in *The Dead Mother: The Work of André Green*, ed. Gregorio Kohon (London: Routledge, 1999), 217.
- 50 Ibid., 218. Bracketed insertions are my comments.
- 51 Ibid., 219.
- 52 Ibid., 220.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Green points out that the objects of sublimation "are not only the objects that are involved in the process of sublimation but the activity of sublimation but the activity of sublimation itself. The object of the sublimation of the painter is not only the naked body of the woman [as the classic Freudian theory of sublimation has it] but painting itself. It is painting that which becomes our shared object beyond the representation of what is painted: the nude and its origins in the child's experience." Ibid., 219.
- 55 Images of negative hands are found on various web pages, e.g., <[http://home.iprimus.com.au/gus\\_tillers/images/santandercaves/cave\\_castillo\\_hand.jpg](http://home.iprimus.com.au/gus_tillers/images/santandercaves/cave_castillo_hand.jpg)> or <<http://rupestre.net/tracce/12chauv2.jpg>>.
- 56 Sebald, 159.
- 57 Ibid., 159–60.
- 58 Avi Kempinski offers an interesting parallel to my own focus on the mother and maternal figures in *Austerlitz* in his reading of the mother-image in Sebald and Barthes, in this volume.
- 59 Sebald, 161.
- 60 Coincidentally, the color of the shoe is the same as the lady's glove in *Nadja*. In both cases the color enhances their eerie quality as fetish objects. According to Freud, the fetish is an object that phantasmatically acquires the value of a phallus in order to deny the physical evidence of castration. In *Austerlitz* an effect of ambiguity of sex and death, similar to the episode of the lady with the bronze glove in *Nadja*, is created by Agáta's role of Olympia, which brings to mind the connotations of the automaton and the uncanny in Hoffmann's story "Der Sandmann."
- 61 Ibid., 161–162.
- 62 Ibid., 245.
- 63 Ibid., 252.
- 64 Ibid., 253.
- 65 The names of the characters are highly significant. Marie (Mary) places her in the line of maternal figures that begins with Agáta, whose name means "good and who is associated with sensual impressions and proceeds to Vera ("truth"), who assists in the intellectual recovery of his past through memory, guaranteeing it and even correcting it if necessary. The father, on the other hand, is called Max(imilian), which, in a none-too-subtle Freudian vein, could be read as an indication of his position at the top of the Oedipal triangle: finding him would then be the ultimate goal of the quest and would provide the final, symbolic proof of Austerlitz's identity.
- 66 Ibid., 46.
- 67 Ibid., 152–153. The phrase "Jacquot, tell me, is it really you?" appears in French in both the German and the English texts.
- 68 Ibid., 65.
- 69 In the same way, Austerlitz's last name is doubled in the story as the battle of Austerlitz and the Paris train station, which also has the effect of robbing him of his identity.
- 70 A similar blending occurs at the bottom of the page, where the photograph is faded. Again, this fading paradoxically highlights the patterns of the fabric of the man's striped pants and the women's dresses, in a curious play with over- and underexposure.
- 71 Adrian Daub's reading, in this volume, of Sebald's photographs as simulacra very intelligently shows the narcissistic streak inherent in Sebald's aesthetics of melancholia.
- 7 Sarah Kafatou, "An Interview with W.G. Sebald," *Harvard Review* 15 (1998), 32.
- 73 Barthes, 115.