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# Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*. An ongoing debate

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The reception of *The Kindly Ones* in the German press

*The Kindly Ones* was written in French by Jonathan Littell and published in 2006. The book was an out-and-out literary sensation in France; in a short time some 800,000 copies were sold and on October 26<sup>th</sup> of the same year the author was awarded the *Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française* for best novel and on November 7<sup>th</sup> it won the *Prix Goncourt*. Wishing to avoid the media glare, Littell, who was born in New York in 1967 into a family of émigré Russian Jews, did not collect the prizes in person; he later moved to Barcelona where he still lives with his Belgian wife and their two children. On first sight, the publishing event that this 943-page novel created can be explained by the fact that it not written from the point of view of the victim, but from that of the 'perpetrator'. Its central character, Dr. Maximilien Aue, relates the events he was involved in between 1937 and 1945, although even while compiling this account in the 1990s, he is still trying to justify his actions: "My subject was political mass extermination. To understand it I had to write in first person," he declares.

Jorge Semprun, himself once incarcerated in Buchenwald, was pleased that the novel won the *Goncourt*, adding that it would make it possible for future generations to realize what happened in Europe during the Third Reich. In contrast, Claude Lanzmann, one-time member of the French Resistance and director of the famous 1985 documentary, *Shoah*, was critical, observing that executioners do not talk like they do in Littell's book, in fact "executioners do not talk at all" (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 28-11-2007). Lanzmann's was, however, one of the few critical voices, and in France the novel was generally considered a masterpiece.

Albeit with some exceptions, the coolest reception given *The Kindly Ones* was in countries such as Italy, where the novel was pub-



lished by Einaudi in 2007, in Spain (by RBA in 2007)<sup>1</sup> and in Germany, where it was published by Berlin Verlag on February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2008. We will concentrate here on the immediate reactions of the German press, which, in my opinion, are pertinent to the present discussion.

The publication of the novel did not particularly garner many reviews or articles, although the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (F.A.Z.) tried to fuel the debate, much to the dissent of some critics.<sup>2</sup> Its editorial director, Frank Schirrmacher, opened an internet reading room ([www.faz.net/littell](http://www.faz.net/littell)) with the idea of holding an open debate on the subject of Germany's past claiming, "This work will provoke discussion. And we intend to conduct it. Precisely because ours is not the last word." («F.A.Z.», 02-02-2008). Nevertheless, despite the advance publication of 120 pages of the novel and the participation of historians, critics and readers themselves, the discussion lasted a mere three weeks and it has generally not been revived since then.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, however, the issue of the *last word not being ours* is an important one in that it reflects the intentions of *The Kindly Ones* more than a cursory glance might indicate. Keeping the discussion open was undoubtedly an advantage from a general, ethical-political point of view as well as regarding a literary evaluation of the novel.

In fact one thing is immediately clear: the reviews and commentaries which accompanied the first German edition are of the same critical opinion, their moral and aesthetic condemnation going hand in hand. The first reason for doubt is the fact that *The Kindly Ones* retells the Shoah, that is, an ethical-political event of the greatest historical importance, from an ambivalent point of view; the main char-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jorge Semprun, «Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung» («F.A.Z.»), 08-02-2008, who claims that Spain avoided any real discussion of *The Kindly Ones* due to the fact that it has not come to terms with its own past, while agreeing with others who believe that Germany is the ideal country to engage fully with the novel.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Anne-Catherine Simon, 'Wo Gehirn spritzt, kommen die Fliegen', in «Die Presse», 05-02-2008.

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, at 10.40pm on February 28<sup>th</sup> 2008, *Arte* broadcast a programme entitled '*Die Wohlgesinnten* – Auf den Spuren eines literarischen Phänomens'. Among later commentators, cf. Karl-Josef M. Müller, 'Ehrenrettung des gehobenen Nationalsozialismus? Ein Plädoyer für "Die Wohlgesinnten" von Jonathan Littell', in «Jüdische Zeitung», (2009).



acter/perpetrator seems to be presented by an author who is almost acting here as 'pornographer'. In «Die Presse» (05-02-2008) Anne-Catherine Simon wrote that the executioners in *The Kindly Ones* talk like "Hannibal Lecter, to the joy and thrills of the public". It is therefore no surprise that in many of the macabre scenes "where brains splatter", *the flies* – the unappeased Furies – multiply, as they do in Sartre's play of the same name. The latter, in fact, is a modern version of the *Oresteia*, one of the many works read by the learned Nazi officer in Littell's novel. Many other reviewers agree on this fundamental issue: Harald Welzer («Die Zeit», 14-02-2008) talks of "an escalation in Nazi fascination" and of "a celebration of horror" that is all the more shocking given that the author is Jewish. In the same edition of *Die Zeit*, Iris Radisch criticizes the rehandling of the question of guilt in such a *kitsch* text which switches genres from thriller-documentary to élite porn. She concludes (albeit with the words "pardon, chers amis français") that she cannot find one good reason for recommending the book. The writer Georg Klein («Süddeutsche Zeitung», 16-02-2008) also emphasizes that "pornographic *kitsch*" is a means for evil to be depicted in the media. Burkhard Scherer (*Berliner Zeitung*, 22-02-2008) claims that the novel is an example of "world literature", in that it is a mix of "a porn story, a thriller, a splatter flick, a fantasy, a tragedy, a banal kitsch novel, an account of a trip through Pomerania and a new essay about the Holocaust", while "the guide to this little excursion through different genres is an *SS-Obersturmbannführer* who wants us to believe: "I am like you!".

And so on and so forth. Micha Brumlik («Frankfurter Rundschau», 22-02-2008) thinks that the novel is a "heap of pornographic rubbish" and a "history of the times amassed from here and there" with the addition of "chunks of moral philosophy"; Ina Hartwig («Frankfurter Rundschau», 22-02-2008) maintains that any perversion is simply "decoration" or "plastic obscenity"; Thomas Steinfeld («Süddeutsche Zeitung», 22-02-2008), under the headline "a crafty pornographer", feels that "the narrator's role in the book consists solely of organizing a trip through hell and in so doing guarantees thrills for the voyeuristic reader"; Christoph Jahr («Neue Zürcher Zeitung», 23-02-2008) maintains that *The Kindly Ones* is a "large step



backwards” in which “a trash novel is crossed with the library of a historian”, an argument that Jürgen Ritte takes up in the same newspaper, saying the book regards “the Holocaust as trash”; Andrea Kachelriess («Stuttgarter Nachrichten», 23-02-2008) mentions its “Hollywood-like plot” and adds that it is successful in France “perhaps because the French don’t have access to the images that are fixed in the collective memory of us Germans”; Otto Paalz (*Littells “Wohlgesinde” bleiben Erinnyen, nur freilich zahnlos*, at <<http://statweb.de>, 01-06-2008>) claims that Littell’s Erinnyes seem “somewhat toothless” compared to the tragic events which the book narrates. In contrast, Volker Weidemann («F.A.Z.», 17-02-2008) feels that the author succeeds in making “the past sink its teeth into our flesh”,<sup>4</sup> for the very reason that it is left to the reader to deal with the highly dramatic, intense scenes, allowing for no identification with the cold perpetrator.

There is also another element that many reviewers agree on. Indeed there is shock, or rather indignation, at the fact that the hero learns nothing in the long years following the events that are narrated; in fact, he claims he is impenitent. Iris Radisch sees the central character of *The Kindly Ones* as “a well-read idiot who writes badly, is wracked by sexual perversion, and is devoted to an elitist racist ideology and an antiquated belief in destiny”. Gregor Dotzauer would have preferred “a desire for humiliation, admitted with candour”, whereas Littell does not seem to allow “his first person narrator to ever think about all the people shot, hanged or exterminated that he continuously sees”. Dirk Knipphals also criticizes the author for having behaved like his main character, merely skimming “the surface of monstrosity”. Jan Süselbeck («Konkret», April 2008) emphasizes the danger that the “pseudo-philosophical and highly problematic” musings of this cultured Nazi could encourage a relativist view of German guilt, and that the “we are all Germans” argument plays right into the hands of revisionists. Burkhard Scherer

<sup>4</sup> As Aue says, “But the past is a thing that, once it has sunk its teeth into your flesh, doesn’t let go” (J. Littell, *The Kindly Ones* translated by Charlotte Mandell, Vintage, London 2010, p. 733).



complains that a search for any link between historical action and the personal events in Aue's life is missing, concluding disconsolately, "as there is nothing in the mind of Aue/Littell about this, this reviewer intends to follow suit". Christoph Jahr agrees: "There is no connection worthy of mention between the historical action and Aue's sexual obsessions which are laid out in full for the reader".<sup>5</sup>

Disagreeing with Frank Schirrmacher, Iris Radisch writing in *Die Zeit* maintains that while there is a lack of any final response, we have, for now, an initial answer which is rather unsatisfactory. Let us summarize the reasons for this dissent: firstly, there is criticism of an author who is seen as a "pornographer of horror", and who, as *voyeur*, blurs the distinction between victim and perpetrator. This difference should remain clearly defined symbolically speaking, above all as far as the Holocaust is concerned. The second reason concerns the novel's central character, who declares that he is unrepentant and is incapable of learning from experience. In fact only Klaus Theweleit («F.A.Z.», 24-02-2008) defends Littell against the accusation of having written a *kitsch* text: *The Kindly Ones*, he says, is undoubtedly made up of a "tide of sludge, sperm, blood and shit", but "what did people expect?" Perhaps a book in the style of Thomas Mann, capable of maintaining a sense of distance? This would indeed have been criminal, whereas Littell's linguistic concoction hits the mark. Theweleit also calls attention to the unfolding theme in the novel regarding Aue's sister Una (to which we shall return); in an imaginary conversation, Una claims that she knows the reasons for anti-Jewish hatred in Germany: "By killing the Jews [...] we wanted to kill ourselves, kill the Jew within us, kill that which in us resembles the idea we have of the Jew".<sup>6</sup> What is more, the symbiosis for Littell not only regards the relationship between Jewish and German

<sup>5</sup> The German scholar Helmut Kiesel – who, along with historians, publicists and media experts was one of the scholars that the «F.A.Z.» invited to take part in their reading room (25-02-2008) – also thinks that "Aue's sexual compulsions that not only lead to incest and homosexual acts, but also to his mother's murder" are not legitimized by the character's development and do not suggest any connection with historical events.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 874.



culture,<sup>7</sup> but also that between Nazism and Bolshevism. Theweleit asks himself, “Why aren’t such passages in Littell’s book discussed in the reviews? Too controversial, too substantial? A further example of the usual German repression?” These are central questions that demand an answer; it is perhaps worth questioning more closely our reactions to a novel that is worth exploring in greater detail.

### The complex nature of Maximilien Aue

We will examine the ethical-aesthetic objectives of *The Kindly Ones* later: for now we will concentrate on the main character. A point raised in France, and repeated in Italy,<sup>8</sup> is that Littell shatters the quasi-sacred idea of the Shoah, which has hitherto required a strict division between good and evil, a founding belief of our modern Western civil conscience.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the shift in the relationship between these two extremes is highlighted in the novel largely through the make-up of the main character, whose ambivalence has been the focus of reviewers. Maximilien Aue is the central character in both historical and in personal events, which do not, however, seem to have anything to do with one another. He is both an “idiot” and a well-educated man; he sees every action, but it is as if he does not understand it, he remembers things, but is unable to really experience them. For this reason, both the historical events in which he participates as well as those in his own private life have no effect on him. In fact from his very first words he presents himself as an unrepentant Nazi who lives a quiet life as husband and father in Alsace, the place that he disappeared to after the war and where he manages a factory that produces lace.

<sup>7</sup> In the chapter on antisemitism in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno define this relationship a “pathetic projection”. See, however, the more recent perspective offered by Frank Mecklenburg, *Symbiose aus amerikanischer Sicht*, in «MEDAON – Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung», 6 (2012), n. 11, pp. 1-12.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Anna Mariani, in *Jonathan Littell, “Le Benevole”*, edited by Anna Baldini *et al.*, in «Allegoria», 58 (2011), p. 227 f.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Houghton Mifflin, New York 1999, p. 15.



The events in which he took part between 1937 and 1945 are undoubtedly revealing. Aue initially enlists in the SD, the Nazi intelligence service, to avoid an accusation of homosexuality, but we later see him at some of key scenes of Nazi crimes, from Poland and Stalingrad to Auschwitz and Krakow, as well as in Budapest during the deportations, in occupied Paris and in Berlin in ruins at the end of the war. His journey through this horror begins on the Eastern Front, where, as part of the *Einsatzgruppen*, he takes part in the mass-slaughter of 33,000 Jews at Babi Yar in Kiev. Owing to his indulgent behaviour regarding the Semitic origins of some Muslim groups, Aue is transferred to the *Kessel* at Stalingrad, where he arrives in 1942 on the eve of the defeat of von Paulus' Sixth Army. Back in Germany, and having recovered from a serious head wound, Himmler orders Aue to find a way of increasing the productivity among the prisoners in the concentration camps.<sup>10</sup> With *Sonderaktionen*, *Kessel*, *KZ* no horrors are spared (indeed, if the book seems 'inauthentic' at times it is because Aue always seems to find himself in the right place at the right time; he not only meets Heinrich Himmler, but also Albert Speer, Rudolf Höß, Adolf Eichmann, Josef Mengele and various others, right up to Adolf Hitler himself, and thus the reader is able to see them through his eyes too). On April 28<sup>th</sup> 1945, the day of the Nazi defeat, Aue escapes using the documents belonging to his friend Thomas (who he kills); in that instant he frees himself from his past actions, although the memory of them remains intact.

However, Maximilien Aue not only sloughs off his Nazi past but his private life too. The personal events in his life centre on a complex *family romance* comprising a German father, an early Nazi supporter, now dead and idealized, his sister Una, with whom he has an incestuous relationship, and his French mother, desired and detested in equal measure, who Maximilien kills along with her second

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Vasily Grossman, 'The Hell of Treblinka' in *The Road*, «New York Review Books», New York 2010, p. 148: "Hitler's regime, after all, had the capacity to produce experts of all kinds: experts in the use of a hammer to murder small children, expert stranglers, expert designers of gas chambers, experts in the scientifically planned destruction of large cities in the course of a single day. The regime was also able to find an expert in the exhumation and cremation of millions of human corpses."



(French) husband. Regardless of this, he returns to France after the war where the incest and murder of his family past lie submerged in his commonplace bourgeois existence.

It should be said, however, that the historical and family pasts not only appear to be separate, at least on first glance, but also as they are perceived by Max Aue. There are different registers both in the phase of the acquisition and initial codification of experiences, and in the phase of their recovery through the first-person narration. From a historical perspective, Aue seems to be the “veritable memory factory”<sup>11</sup> that he claims to be. In fact he has a perfect episodic memory which records everything going on within his vision and hearing. During an inspection at Auschwitz he is shown the gas chambers where everything is “explained”<sup>12</sup> to him. Generally speaking, no detail escapes him; Aue remembers every date, place, action and conversation, even the most insignificant, to the extent that he himself comments, “[A]h, but what’s the point of relating all these details day by day? [...] How many pages have I already stacked up on these uninteresting bureaucratic episodes?”<sup>13</sup> For this reason, it is no surprise that the past first person narrative is presented in a realist-documentary style – what the historian Pierre Nora calls ‘hyperrealism’ – and presupposes a detailed knowledge of the sources; indeed, Littell himself consulted Russian, Polish and Ukrainian archives assiduously, read publications on specialist topics and interviewed survivors.

In contrast, the *family romance* makes no distinction between “memory or image or fantasy or dream”,<sup>14</sup> made up, as it is, of flashbacks and gaps, that render it fragmented and confused. A clear example of this is the incident in which his mother and stepfather are killed. Aue is alone in the house and finds that his clothes are covered with blood; while all the evidence seems to point to the fact that he has murdered them, he remembers nothing; in fact he has completely erased the event from his mind to the extent that his re-

<sup>11</sup> J. Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 791.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 778.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 492.



turn journey to Berlin unfolds “like in a film”.<sup>15</sup> Following in the literary footsteps of de Sade, Genet, Bataille and Céline, this first person retelling of the past continues, to the point it seems an account of a nightmare; it is also peopled by archetypes, including Clytemnestra, “the *odious bitch*”,<sup>16</sup> the bronze Apollo from the Louvre, the god who urges Orestes to kill his mother, apart from the myth of Hermaphroditus and his twin sister Una (a name which recalls Musil), who Aue yearns to connect with in a single indistinguishable unit. He imagines this “until all distinctions were erased [...]: ‘I am your sister and you are my brother,’ and she: ‘You are my sister and I am your brother.’”<sup>17</sup> These, however, are more like figures of projection than mirrors in which Aue can see himself and, as such, are of little use in helping him to fathom out who he is. On the contrary, they distance him definitively from himself: “I *kept feeling* as if I were on the point of *understanding something*, but this *comprehension* remained at the tip of my *lacerated fingers*, mocking me, imperceptibly *withdrawing* as I *approached* it.”<sup>18</sup>

These two spheres of experience – the two halves that make up the novel – are not just different in register. Indeed, characterized as they are by a block or by a perceptive interference regarding the codifying of events, the two spheres are unlikely to intersect or merge in the consciousness of Dr. Maximilien Aue. He does not know how to transform events into experience; only his body reacts psychosomatically by vomiting, with diarrhoea and, when he is old, with constipation, “physiological parallels to a life without interest or joy; indifferent, hidden, secondary.”<sup>19</sup>

In each case, these unsettling distinguishing traits are associated with other characteristics which might, on first sight, actually seem positive. It is almost as if he can be seen – as Christopher Brown, the American historian puts it<sup>20</sup> – as a ‘normal’, intelligent German who

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 531.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 515.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 888.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 515. My emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> Anna Baldini *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. also Harald Welzer, *Täter – Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden*, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 2007.



is a conscientious, well-mannered and cultured doctor of Law, proficient in French, Latin and Greek, who loves music and is familiar with the works of Plato and Kant. This is how, for example, it is possible for Aue, along with his linguist friend Voss (who claims that the Nazi idea of race is “scientifically indefinable and hence without any theoretical value”<sup>21</sup>), to take the reader on an engaging journey of discovery into Caucasian languages and dialects, habits and customs. Indeed we would almost forget that Aue is a murderer, that is, the Other himself. Indeed, the complexity of Aue’s character, both reckless and human, hampers the role that he is called upon to play in the novel. An eventual conversion on the part of Aue would certainly have reassured readers and reaffirmed their faith in the stability of their world. This does not, however, seem to be the aim of *The Kindly Ones*. Also because while any repetition of the Holocaust is unthinkable, Littell, has himself witnessed the massacres in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Rwanda and Syria, and thus intends to involve the reader in a more complex and yet fundamental dynamics. This is a point to which we shall return.

### Narrative strategies and reception

Maximilien Aue does not change, perhaps because it is not him that is meant to change. It is the receiver that Aue’s motives and his lack of redemption are meant to affect. In this regard, it is interesting to note that a paradox exists from the very beginning. The events are narrated in first person, from the internal point of view of a perpetrator, and yet this perpetrator does not seem to possess any inner self: he is incapable of interiorizing experience and therefore incapable of developing and integration. For Aue, the stimuli of the outside world do not become experiences of any depth: the fact that “the person who provides the facts [...] is within us,” as Jung puts it, goes unheard. The character is thus always destined to remain the same to himself, a prisoner of the events that make up the story of his life. Claude Lanzmann claims that “executioners don’t talk at all”,

<sup>21</sup>J. Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 292.



but perhaps Aue talks in order *not* to talk. In any case, if anything, it is the reader who is called upon to fill Aue's silence.

It should be remembered that Aue commences with an authoritative urge to common humanity: "Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened. [...] this concerns you: you'll see that this concerns you". The narrative strategies Littell adopts, however, are not aimed at bringing the reader any closer to Aue, who, as we said, is an intelligent, conscientious, well-mannered and cultured German; they are aimed even less at bridging the gap between victim and perpetrator (and any consequent alleviation of his guilt). In fact, despite some analogies, Littell's perspective does not recall either Hannah Arendt's idea of the "banality of evil" or Primo Levi's "grey area".

*The Kindly Ones* falls back on an interesting ambiguity of a different kind, based on the tension between similarities and differences. Aue himself mentions this, demonstrating that he is not really aware of what he is saying: "everyone, or nearly everyone, in a given set of circumstances, does what he is told to do; and, pardon me, but there's not much chance that you're the exception, any more than I was".<sup>22</sup> From the start, Aue's aim is to involve the reader in a process of identification, a point he returns to a little further on: "But the ordinary men [...] now there's the real danger. The real danger for mankind is me, is you. And if you're not convinced of this, don't bother to read any further."<sup>23</sup> As he continues with his story, however, he reflects more than once upon what makes him *different*, of the sense of shadowy otherness that lurks in the depths of every human being. In the latter case, his pleas (that he himself is incapable of acting on) aim at circumventing any refusal of him, which would involve deceiving our consciousness and repressing disturbing details: "and when I come to think about it, it's true that the insults people prefer, the ones that come most spontaneously to their lips, often in the end reveal their own hidden faults, since they naturally hate what they most resemble."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 691. Cf. also the opinion of Dr. Wirth, chief doctor of the garrison at the *Stammlager* of Auschwitz, on the relationship between guards and inmates: "The SS



Aue certainly does not convert such assertions into any deep understanding. His character appears to be marked on the one hand by a constant rationalization of collective events and on the other by his instinct to experience personal acts “like a film,”<sup>25</sup> in which he occasionally plays the leading role. In this way, he simply reveals that “wide fields of possible perceptions are permanently eliminated”, protecting him from things “which are not yet, or no longer, capable of consciousness”.<sup>26</sup> The two parts of his narrative, the ‘reified’ “memory factory” and the repression of subjective wounds are therefore destined to remain separate. Furthermore, his future prospects do not point to any integration but to division, undermining his vital energies. Aue confesses that even as an adult he still feels when he is with his mother “as if I were shrinking; before this imperious voice [...], I was going to pieces, I was becoming a fearful child”.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, even his nostalgic urges to be at one with his sister, above all his appreciation of the Hermaphroditus myth (which trigger the desire to return to an undifferentiated symbiotic state), show that progress for him does not mean going forwards: “I kept feeling as if I were on the point of understanding something, but this comprehension remained at the tip of my lacerated fingers, mocking me, imperceptibly withdrawing as I approached it”.<sup>28</sup>

It is this split, however, that in the end explains the slippery ‘normality’ of this character. Consequently, any clash between the two parts of *The Kindly Ones* is only apparent, given that Aue’s behaviour in the outside world is so closely linked to his private life, and indeed, is rooted in it. He identifies with both generic and collective

guards did not become violent or sadistic because they thought that the inmates were not human; in actual fact, their anger grew and became sadism when they realized that the inmates, far from being inferior beings as they had been taught, were, after all, basically men like them and it was this discrepancy, you see, that the guards could not stand, this silent endurance of these others, and so the guards beat them in an attempt to rid themselves of their common humanity.” (p. 603). See also p. 100 f.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 531.

<sup>26</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Foreword* to D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Grove Press, New York 1964, pp. 21-22 f.

<sup>27</sup> J. Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 520.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 515.



identities; this is all that he has.<sup>29</sup> He pays no heed to the many, various sides to his nature of which he is the sum, and any integration of the personality is thus impossible. He is the son of a German who was an early supporter of the Nazis, and he blames his French mother having abandoned her husband. He is also the brother of Una, the only love of his life, and he attended the élite Janson de Sailly grammar school. He is also a doctor of Law and reads Proust and Stendhal; he is killer who murders and allows murder, but he keeps these different identities separate.

Aue will never bring this complex personality together and so for him there is no release. A central role is therefore entrusted to the reader to work out Aue's fundamental ambiguity: it is the reader's job to make the connection between shared history and individual events, between the 'objective' *memory factory* and his subjective wounds, between the perpetrator and the man of culture. Indeed, it is identifying these links that distinguishes the reader from Aue. This proximity to the Nazi Aue, who claims, "I am guilty, you're not, fine," but also, "pardon me, but there's not much chance that you're the exception", can create a useful dissonance and also eventually be resolute if the reader is able to handle this tension in the opposition between similarities and differences, by feeling similar and not excessively different. Not because readers are also perpetrators, but because, unlike the latter, they are capable of facing the shadows that only they can know, and are able to avoid projecting outside of themselves those things that might disturb those who have a (perhaps too) clear conscience.

We thus come to the next point, that is, the questions that have been raised as regards the ethical-aesthetic intentions of *The Kindly Ones*. The main point is that Littell is not a *voyeur*; it is Aue who is the voyeur, although so too, in a sense, is the reader who is willing to follow through his story. This poses the risk of 'fraternizing' with the perpetrator. However, the novel's purpose is not to show that

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, Vintage, London 2006, p. 3: "Everything that lives is unique. [...] If you attempt to erase the peculiarities and individuality of life by violence, then life itself must suffocate."



even a Nazi can be intelligent, well-mannered, cultured, and in his own way, conscientious. On the contrary, *The Kindly Ones* shows the “absurdities which make history look like a prolonged delirium [that] have their root in one essential absurdity: the nature of power” (Simone Weil), that is, a history that is the result of all the great and small misdeeds in which individuals partake. Maximilien Aue talks so as not to talk, but it is difficult not to agree with him when he says, quoting the father of scientific materialism, “Just as, according to Marx, the worker is alienated from the product of his labour, in genocide or total war in its modern form the perpetrator is alienated from the product of his actions. This holds true even for the man who places a gun to the head of another man and pulls the trigger. For the victim was led there by other men, his death was decided on by yet others, and the shooter knows that he is only the last link in a very long chain [...]. So who is guilty?” As Robert Musil said at the International Congress for the Defence of Culture in June 1935, it is not culture, good intentions, or of being or finding yourself on the right side that make a difference, but of dealing with one’s own ‘shadow’ (to draw upon a key concept in analytical psychology). And this is where Dr. Maximilien Aue fails miserably: “The past that will not pass” is his reality, and this should be seen as a warning.

Nonetheless, the novel does not just document *ex negativo* the existence of a close connection between individual and collective awareness, but also presents two characters who, unlike Aue, do not take ‘one step forward and two steps back’. The first of these is Una, Maximilien’s twin sister. When their mother and stepfather separate brother and sister by sending them to different boarding schools, Una sees it as a chance for a “renewed sense of spirituality”.<sup>30</sup> She later studies psychology in Zurich and so she not only learns of the theories of Otto Rank on incest, but also becomes a pupil of her much-admired teacher, Carl Gustav Jung. By the time she sees her brother again she is freed from the *family romance* they once shared. While Maximilien wants “everything to be like before”, Una replies, “That’s impossible. [...] *Even before wasn’t like before. Before never existed*”

<sup>30</sup>J. Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 524.



(my emphasis).<sup>31</sup> “You have to grow up,”<sup>32</sup> she later stresses, “now I’m a woman, and you’re still a little boy”;<sup>33</sup> and, even more specifically, “You’re still a prisoner of the past.”<sup>34</sup> The fact that Una has freed herself is also evidenced by her marriage to an eccentric Latvian aristocrat, who admires Schönberg and is in contact with those behind the July 20<sup>th</sup> plot against Hitler. Una’s husband suffers from a paralytic condition and Una has thus made a conscious decision to renounce sex, thereby remedying the guilt that she feels at having given into her brother one final time (and subsequently giving birth to twins herself). Again it is Una who makes the connection between individual behaviour and collective history explicit, identifying the individual, and therefore collective reasons for the German persecution of the Jews in the ambiguous dynamic between similarities and differences.<sup>35</sup>

The second, *ex positivo*, example is the character of Nahum ben Ibrahim, a Jewish sage from Dagestan who is able to shoulder the weight of the collective past for the very reason that he has mastered his own past. For him, it is the *family romance* itself that is where the individual and the community meet. It is no coincidence that the first time this old man speaks is to ask Aue about his father: “How am I supposed to know who I’m talking to if I don’t know who your father is?”<sup>36</sup> As far as ben Ibrahim is concerned, his family history is part of his people’s history to such a degree that Aue objects, “You couldn’t have known Shamil yourself. [...] It’s written here that you were born in 1866. Shamil was already a prisoner of the Russians then”. Maximilien has read much, as ben Ibrahim recognizes, but this old man is a “scholar”:<sup>37</sup> “When I was born, the angel didn’t seal my lips. So I remember everything that happened before”. First and foremost, the past involves for ben Ibrahim, everything that is “writ-

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 490.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 486.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 489.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 484.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *infra*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 271.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 279-80.



ten in the Book of the Creation of the Child”, which speaks of him and of all human beings. The difference between Aue and the old man is that the latter has not only processed his past, but his memory reaches the depths of the subconscious, to times long before his own birth: “In the beginning, the man’s parents mate”.

Nahum ben Ibrahim’s awareness of space is similarly complex; when he meets Aue (with whom he speaks in Ancient Greek), he asks him to help him fulfil his destiny by his digging a ditch and killing him in the precise spot where he is fated to die.<sup>38</sup> He knows this place in advance, just as he knows other places where he has never actually been; unlike Aue, what he knows and remembers is based on profound intuition, beyond the range of sight and hearing. Finally, like Una, the old man offers Aue a key to understanding himself. Initially he calls him *meirakion*, or ‘young man’, equivalent to the third of the seven stages of life in ancient Greece, but later says that the ditch Aue digs is not deep enough to hold an entire life, complaining, “You aren’t going to give me a poor man’s grave, me, Nahum ben Ibrahim!” and adding later, “Come on, you’re not a *ne-pios*”,<sup>39</sup> that is, a child that cannot yet talk and has no experience of life. However, Aue is, in a very real sense, suffering from a head wound and he is rootless;<sup>40</sup> he would not know how to die on his own and so he does not really know how to live, unlike the old man who is able to choose even the time and the place of his death, at peace with his fate, and having pacified the Furies.

We thus come to the novel’s title and what it implies for reading this work. It is certainly ambiguous. The kindly Eumenides, who oversee the shift from the law of blood and family to that of the city, derive from the Erinyes, or Furies, who demand revenge and expiation, and hound Orestes after he kills his mother. In fact Aue’s long delirium after being wounded in the head in Stalingrad, has a parallel in Sophocles’ *Electra* (a play in which Aue had taken the leading role at school). It also reflects his contradictory relationships with

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 281.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 283.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Florence Mercier-Leca, “Les Bienveillantes” et la tragédie grecque. Une suite macabre à ‘L’Orestie d’Eschyle”, in «Le Débat» (2007).



his mother and his sister. As a complete anti-hero, Aue does not face up to his own past but 'backs away', following a path that goes in precisely the opposite direction to that which is 'kindly'. Following the latter is, to quote Kafka, "remembering is perceiving that you have forgotten". Aue is not at peace; he is that "veritable memory factory"<sup>41</sup> but his "comprehension remained at the tip of [his] lacerated fingers",<sup>42</sup> the fingers of the same hand with which he writes his past.

On the other hand, Clemens and Weser, the two carping policemen in the novel can be compared to two 'Furies' ("We want justice"<sup>43</sup>), unsuccessfully accusing Aue of his mother's death: "We've already judged you [...] We found you guilty."<sup>44</sup> They not only come across as caricatures of justice (and in this sense they are to all intents and purposes as "toothless" as Otto Paalz notes), but they even end up getting killed themselves. Indeed, judgement in Sophocles is the process of pacification that is marked by a shift from the law of blood to that of the city and this is what Aue cannot experience, given that his personality is divided into the distinct elements that make up his life. The task of finding a link between these elements is entrusted to the reader and thus the act of pacification becomes extratextual.

I believe that we can now return briefly to ethical-aesthetical aims, which in fact tend to coincide with the *Wirkungsästhetik* of *The Kindly Ones*. The division presented in the novel is not between absolute good and evil but between order and chaos, rationality and madness, and the righteousness and guilt that can coexist in the same person. The Shoah retains its symbolic importance, although this is no longer seen as separate, but has been, as Littell says, "*dejudaisiert*".

For a similar reason, Littell avoids categories regarding the Holocaust that recall religious tenets of the indivisible, the indescribable and the unfathomable, to which mythology is held captive As Giorgio Agamben observes: "But why indescribable? Why confer upon

<sup>41</sup> J. Littell, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 515.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 966.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 968.



extermination the prestige of the mystical? [...] Saying that Auschwitz is ‘indescribable’ or ‘unbelievable’ is tantamount to *euphèmein*, to venerating it in silence as if it was a god”.<sup>45</sup> The novel not only repositions the Nazi perpetrator among his ‘brothers’, but also reconnects the Shoah, the blame for which can only be shouldered by each individual, with the actual history of every single human being in conflict with his or her own demons. *Tua res agitur*.

By encouraging the reader to face the self, *The Kindly Ones* favours a cathartic connection with our own deepest impulses, something that is what every literary work worthy of its name should do. Wolfgang Iser notes that in the process of reception, “the constitution of meaning and the constitution of the person who is reading” come together, while Robert Jauss, for whom reception equals a “new amplified view, deconceptualized or renewed thanks to its disorienting effect”, feels that it involves “a view based on recognizing and a recognition based on seeing”.<sup>46</sup> It follows that although “for many people it is better to be convinced of an absolute good and to listen to the voice of those who espouse the superiority of unambiguous thinking”, it is the “one who can join the shadow and the light [who is] the possessor of the greater riches”.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as Franz Kafka, for example, conjectures, this is the person who is in touch with their “inherent baseness”,<sup>48</sup> also because this is probably the best way of dealing with it. As Simone Weil observed in 1937, only in this way is it possible to avert the situation where “empty words are given capital letters, then, on the slightest pretext, men will begin shedding blood.” While Maximilien Aue gives in to this, the purpose of the

<sup>45</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L'archivio e il testimone*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1998, p. 29. Cf. also Georges Didi-Huberman, *Immagini malgrado tutto*, Cortina, Milan 2005, p. 193: “An ethical life is not simplified by denying the ‘radical evil’ of the ‘absolute Other’.”

<sup>46</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens*, Fink, München 1976, p. 246 and 251. Robert Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1982, p. 128.

<sup>47</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, “Mysterium Coniunctionis”, *The Collected Works*, vol. 14, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1970, p. 125.

<sup>48</sup> Franz Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, edited by Erich Heller and Jürgen Born (translated by James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth), Schocken Books, New York, 1973.



novel is otherwise, in that it repropose “the very elements of intelligence: the ideas of limit, measure, degree, proportion, relation, comparison, contingency, interdependence, interrelation of means and ends”.<sup>49</sup> It leaves it to the reader to decide which of these apply to them.

Jonathan Littell has experienced a human being's capacity to regress; again in the words of Simone Weil: “there is no need of gods or conspiracies to make men rush headlong into the most absurd disasters. Human nature suffices”.<sup>50</sup> Born in 1967, it is true that Littell did not witness the atrocities of which he writes at first hand. From 1993 to 2001, however, he worked for the humanitarian organization Action Against Hunger in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Chechnya and the Democratic Republic of Congo, while his wife worked with Médecins Sans Frontières. In 2001 Littell was wounded in the North Caucasus region and so decided to rest for a while, also to spend time with his children. Given this experience, he has had the chance to distinguish the recurring guises of evil, the roots of which reach deep into the history of every individual: “I am not a relativist,” Littell has declared in an interview: “I want to contribute through my work to understanding better the decisions that every individual makes”; also because in our times everyone has various options from which to choose («F.A.Z.», 03-11-2007).<sup>51</sup>

Littell adds that the story of Maximilien Aue (who shares the author's own birthday of October 10<sup>th</sup>) regards us all for the very fact that collective evil derives from individual repression, from the many individual repressions. The latter is “not transcendent, just as good

<sup>49</sup> Simone Weil, *Selected Essays: 1934-1943*, edited by R. Rees, Oxford University Press, London 1962. p. 156.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 156.

<sup>51</sup> One of the episodes in *The Kindly Ones* that lingers in the memory is the scene in which Aue delivers the coup de grâce and kills a delicate young Jewish woman: “her pretty lips trembled and seemed to want to form a word, she stared at me with her large surprised incredulous eyes, the eyes of a wounded bird”. He would have liked to have bent down to “caress her cheek and tell her that it was going to be all right” but he succumbs to “this senseless human waste” and repeatedly shoots her in the head “which exploded like a fruit” (p. 130). The space in which individual sovereignty holds sway has been reduced to such an extent that Aue cannot contemplate any alternative.



is not”, but is the result of decisions made by every individual («F.A.Z., 03-11-2007). *The Kindly Ones* reposes the following question: “Why should the worker assigned to the gas chamber be guiltier than the worker assigned to the boilers, the garden, the vehicles? The same goes for every facet of this immense enterprise”.<sup>52</sup> This is true not only for Nazism, but for every authoritarian system, and it is this that makes Maximilien Aue like every human being, that makes him a ‘brother’ to everyone who has lived before and will live after him. If, broadly speaking, this is the meaning of the novel, then it is right for the debate to continue, and not only in Germany.

*Translation from the Italian: Peter Douglas*

<sup>52</sup>J. Littell, *op.cit.*, p. 19.