After Testimony

The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future

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Performing a Perpetrator as Witness

Jonathan Littell's Les Bienveillantes

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How convenient it would be if the Third Reich's citizens had been somehow evil by nature, demons in somebody's album of the damned—in other words, unlike us. The actual case, of course, is far more terrible.

—William T. Vollman, "Seeing Eye to Eye"

In an essay published two decades ago, before he had embarked on his authoritative two-volume study Nazi Germany and the Jews, the historian Saul Friedländer reflected on the "unease in historical interpretation" regarding the Holocaust and the Final Solution. Despite the enormous amount of work that historians had devoted to the subject, he noted, "an opaqueness remains at the very core of the historical understanding and interpretation of what happened" ("Unease" 103). This opaqueness, this stubborn resistance to meaning, manifests itself, Friedländer explained, in two areas in particular: the psychology of the perpetrators and the possibility of "integrating the Holocaust into a global historical interpretation" (104)—that is, of making the Holocaust somehow "usable" for an understanding of the present and the future.

Today, even after Friedländer's own considerable work, we are no closer to a full understanding of the Holocaust—and in particular of the "psychology of the perpetrator," which I take to refer to the tangle of motivations, justifications, and self-understandings that allowed thousands of individual Germans, either by administrative decision or by action on the ground, to engage over several years in genocidal mass murder and industrial extermination of those whom their government considered "not worthy of life"—
than we were twenty years ago. That fact may at least in part account for why, in recent years, novelists and filmmakers have turned their attention to a serious consideration of the “everyday life” of Nazi killers—not Nazis portrayed as caricatures (as in Martin Amis’s Time’s Arrow, which James Phelan discusses in this volume), nor Nazis as secondary characters in stories focused on victims (Amon Goeth in Schindler’s List), but Nazis as the heroes of their own stories, the way every human being can be said to be the hero of his or her own story. In the case of such figures, whether they are historical (like Hitler or Goebbels in Oliver Hirschbiegel’s 2004 film Der Untergang, or one of the several Nazi figures whom William T. Vollman focuses on in his 2005 novel Europe Central) or else invented, like the main character in Jonathan Littell’s Les Bienveillantes (The Kindly Ones), their personal story is embedded in the larger, collective history of Germany and Europe in the twentieth century. Any insight we may seek about them as individuals is thus indissociable from that larger history—from how they themselves viewed their role in it and how we view both that history and their role.

The phenomenal publishing success of Littell’s novel (which the author claims totally surprised him) is by now well known. Published in the fall of 2006 in Paris, this 900-page work by a previously unknown writer was not even French (Littell, born in 1967 in New York, grew up in France, was educated at Yale, and spent several years working for NGOs in Chechnya and Bosnia before writing the book) won France’s most prestigious literary prize, the Prix Goncourt, as well as the Grand Prix of the French Academy, and sold more than half a million copies in its first year. It was reviewed everywhere, eliciting wildly divergent opinions from critics and the public: to some, it was a masterpiece worthy of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, while to others it was nothing more than voyeuristic, pornographic kitsch that desecrated the memory of the Holocaust. Nor could the reviewers be divided into “elite” versus “lowbrow” or other clear-cut categories: eminent intellectuals, including the historian Pierre Nora, the novelist Jorge Semprun, the psychoanalyst and cultural critic Julia Kristeva, expressed admiration for the book; others, equally eminent (the filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, the Academician Marc Fumaroli, and historians Friedländer and Raoul Hilberg) dismissed it. Its reception in Germany and Israel was equally stormy, although it appears that the negatives were more numerous there than the positives—the book was, however, a bestseller in Germany, and an international conference was devoted to it alone in Jerusalem in June 2009. In the United States, where it did not appear until 2009 due to a delay with the translation, the reception was mixed (I discuss some of the positive and negative reviews below). The New York Times noted, in a separate article, that it seemed unlikely the book would earn back the huge advance paid by its publisher (Rich). Independently of the critics and the media, however, Les Bienveillantes is certain to continue being discussed in conferences and learned journals, at least for a while. Like it or not, it is a “case,” and as such it must elicit serious commentary.

What makes it a case is also well known: this novel, which gives us a comprehensive and historically accurate account of the Nazi genocide of the Jews, starting in June 1941 on the Eastern front and ending with the January 1945 death marches from Auschwitz, is narrated exclusively from the point of view, and in the voice, of a former SS officer who witnessed it all. Critics have pointed out that this ubiquity makes the narrator a kind of Zelig, or Forrest Gump, highly implausible by realist criteria. The important question, I believe, is not that of verisimilitude but rather: What kind of point of view and what kind of voice does Littell’s narrator Maxmillien Aue represent, and how are we to respond to him as readers? I would like to answer this question in a way that will allow me to engage with some of the novel’s most negative critics. This approach is through the concept of performance.

Performance studies has become, over the past two decades, an institutionalized, interdisciplinary field that studies an immense range of phenomena, from theatrical performances of all kinds to sports, cultural rituals, and the routines of everyday life. My own use of the concept of performance is practical rather than theoretical; my purpose is not to engage with the field of performance studies as such, but to think about performance in order to illuminate a particular text.

Performance and the Reader’s Judgment

The meaning of “performance” ranges widely, both in actions and in words. The analytic philosopher J. L. Austin, in his foundational work How To Do Things with Words, coined the term “performatives” to designate verbal utterances that function as concrete acts in the world, and that can be pronounced with their full force only by certain qualified persons: the justice of the peace who proclaims “I now pronounce you man and wife,” or the political leader who declares war on an enemy country in the name of his own. An ordinary individual may also utter performatives—for example, by promising to do something that the speaker is actually capable of doing. Austin noted that performative utterances can be spoken “infelicitously” or “non-seriously,” either because the person uttering them carries no actual authority or capacity (a simple citizen cannot truly declare war, and a five-
be the best criterion for judging the ethical quality of a novel or a fiction film that purports to deal with that (or any other) historical atrocity. If a work evokes the horrors of the Holocaust arbitrarily, as mere background for a story or only for their shock effect, or else commits gross errors in historical representation, it disqualifies itself at the start.

In terms of narrative performance, *Les Bienveillantes* presents a complicated structure of levels of speech and communication. Like all autobiographers, be they real or fictional, Max Aue functions as both narrator in the present (which in the novel occurs some time in the 1970s), addressing himself to “my human brothers,” his assumed readers; and as a character in the past, with most of the past action occurring between 1941 and 1945 but with frequent flashbacks to his childhood and youth in the 1920s and 1930s. Aue thus performs an intricate autobiographical speech act; but he also performs, as I have said, an act of historical testimony when he reports on events of the war that he witnessed or in which he participated. (I will return to this unusual combination of fictional status and historical reliability.) Of course, behind Aue the narrator there is Littell the author, who communicates with what Phelan and other theorists call the authorial audience, or with what Wayne Booth and others called the implied reader, the reader as positioned by the text—and there is the crux, for the responses of an actual reader may not at all correspond to those attributed to this interpretive construct. Leaving that complication aside for the moment, we can think of the author, Littell, as “performing” the role of Max Aue, casting himself into the character’s persona and voice. This becomes especially relevant when we consider Aue’s role as historical witness, for obviously it is to the author that we must attribute the historical accuracy of the fictional character’s reporting.

J. M. Coetzee, in his novel *Elizabeth Costello*, which is a series of reflections about authorship and creativity cast in the thoughts and occasionally in the voice of a fictional, elderly Australian woman author, has his heroine state as she waits “at the gate” after her death (clearly an allusion to Kafka’s parable “Before the Law”) that her job in life was to “do imitations, as Aristotle would have said” (194). Every author of a fictional narrative can be said to “do imitations,” taking on the voice and performance of his characters; and this is especially clear in works narrated by a character protagonist. But the author’s performance is more comprehensive than that, for she not only invents—or, in the case of historical figures, evokes—and “impersonates” characters in their words, thoughts, and actions; she also makes decisions about the plot, organization, language, style, and length of the novel, as well as about the ideas expressed there—in short, about everything that constitutes the finished work. The author’s performance, both in the narrow
sense involving characters and in the more general sense involving the whole work, is directed at the reader (the real reader this time), who is summoned to respond to that performance.

Both author and reader are concerned with ethical as well as aesthetic questions, and this is especially true, or urgent, in the case of works that deal with issues of collective historical significance. The reader is constantly, albeit not necessarily consciously, asking herself as she reads: What does this author’s performance overall (including both ethical and aesthetic choices) “say” or “do” about issues that matter to me? The author here is less the actual person than what Wayne Booth called the “implied author” but what might more precisely be called the “constructed or deduced author,” since the reader’s response is based first of all on the author she has deduced from the work, not on what the actual author-person might say about the work in interviews or other external commentary. The reader’s answer to that question—and we must recognize that readers may have astonishingly divergent answers—will determine the emotional coloration as well as the intellectual tenor of his or her response to, and evaluation of, the work.

Obviously, or tautologically, those readers who express admiration for Les Bienveillantes judge Littell’s performance as author to be highly successful; that means, among other things, that they consider his fictional creature Max Aue complex, original, compelling—even if, in many respects, he repels them or shows himself to be reprehensible, even horrifying. Such readers never lose sight of the fact that Aue is a fictional being, a construction of the author; and they judge Aue precisely in those terms—not as a “person,” but as a character created for this particular literary performance. If I may be allowed to quote myself, this is how I put it in an earlier essay:

We have never yet seen a comprehensive account of Nazi atrocities during the Second World War that is told entirely from the perspective, and in the voice of, a perpetrator. Littell’s Maximilian Aue has qualities that any fictional character can have: he is present, as an observing participant, in just about every place where the worst crimes against humanity were committed; he has access to privileged information available only to the inner circle around the SS leader Heinrich Himmler; and most importantly, he possesses the intelligence and analytical ability, the emotional detachment and temporal distance, as well as a certain moral sensibility, which allow him to act as a reliable historical witness. The combination of participant status as a perpetrator with historical reliability, and with what I will call moral witnessing, which Aue possesses, is a totally new phenomenon in fiction.7

The main focus of my interpretation, and I think of all positive appreciations of this novel, concerns Aue’s paradoxical function as a reliable historical witness—and even, on occasion, a reliable moral witness, when he reflects on his actions in a way the reader can adhere to. His role as historical witness is paradoxical given his fictional status, but logical if one thinks of the author behind the character, who gets the credit for having invented such a figure. In fact, as a character, Aue displays a complex combination of traits, for he is part of the Nazi system, yet he offers an often devastatingly critical analysis of it. I have called this particular combination the “insider/outsider” model of witnessing, since Aue is both within the system—indeed, he rises steadily in its ranks during the war—yet feels sufficiently distanced from it, ideologically and emotionally, to see it clearly (Suleiman, “Raising Hell”). This insider/outsider status becomes even more evident if one compares Aue to another important character in the novel, his good friend and quasi-double, Thomas, who has no distance whatsoever from the system or its values, even though he is sufficiently savvy to exploit the system for his own advancement, like any ambitious climber. Had Littell chosen to make Thomas or a character like him the narrator, we would have a very different novel.

Daniel Mendelsohn, writing in the New York Review of Books, also sees Aue as a complex figure:

[Aue] is a well-educated and indeed sensitive person, musical, literate, cultured, who far from being monstrously indifferent to the crimes he sees perpetrated and which he is called on to commit himself, spends a good deal of time reflecting on the questions of guilt and responsibility that a self-aware person could be expected to entertain.

But Michiko Kakutani, in her review in the New York Times (which, given Kakutani’s symbolic capital as a critic, is surely partly responsible for the book’s cool reception in the United States), sees Aue—and by extension, Littell’s performance as author—in a far harsher light:

Although Aue contends that he is “a man like other men,” “a man like you” and depicts himself as a cultivated intellectual who reads Flaubert and Kant, his story is hardly a case study in the banality of evil. [ . . . ] Aue is clearly a deranged creature, and his madness turns his story into a voyeuristic spectacle—like watching a slasher film with lots of close-ups of blood and guts.

Unable to understand Aue, much less sympathize with him, the reader is not goaded . . . to question his or her own capacity for moral compro-
muse. Instead Mr. Littell simply gives us a monster talking at monstrous length about his monstrous deeds . . .

For Michiko Kakutani, Aue cannot act as a reliable historical witness, let alone as a moral witness to the Holocaust, since he is a monster—not human. And Aue's monstrous performance (but one should say performances, for Kakutani refers to his narration as well as his actions) signals the failure of Littell's performance. Kakutani's review shows beautifully how the evaluation of the character very quickly morphs into an evaluation of the author. In a way, it is Littell himself who here stands accused of voyeurism, perhaps even of monstrosity (in his imagination, to be sure).

This accusation, developed more fully, is also found in the book-length indictment of Les Bienveillantes that was published in France six months after the novel's appearance. Titled, parodically, Les Complaisantes (The Complacent Ones) and co-signed by the historian Edouard Husson and the philosopher Michel Terestchenko, this work—whose seriousness and intellectual passion cannot be doubted, even if one finds it wrongheaded, as I do—presents a long list of accusations that boil down to one essential point: in Max Aue, Littell has created a character who is inhuman, and he has thereby led the reader into an ethical trap, for the reader might find herself identifying with Aue despite his inhumanity. Why is Aue inhuman? "Not only because he is incestuous and a parricide, but because, through words, he desecrates the bodies of the victims." This desecration is achieved, Husson and Terestchenko maintain, by Aue's insistent, voyeuristic fascination with the victims' dead bodies and with scenes of horror. Nor is it only Aue who is fascinated by horror. The real problem, according to the authors, is that Littell himself manifests that fascination: he does not take sufficient distance from Aue, does not "warn" the reader against sharing Aue's perverse fascination. Here they evoke Plato's allegory of Leontius, in The Republic, which is cited by Aue himself after he sees mounds of dead, rotting bodies in the early days of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. (As it happens, and against Husson and Terestchenko's insistence that the victims "desecrated" by Aue's voyeuristic gaze are the Jews murdered by Nazis, these are bodies not of Jews but rather of Polish prisoners who were presumably shot by the Soviets during their retreat.) In Plato, Husson and Terestchenko tell us, the story of Leontius—who cannot stop himself from looking at a mound of dead bodies after their execution, and who curses his eyes for that weakness—was meant to warn us "not to succumb to that perversion of the gaze" (137). But Aue, they maintain, and by extension Littell himself, feels no Platonic shame at being fascinated by horror. As a result, the reader is also led into such fascination:

"What is particularly pernicious in Littell's novel is that, through a Sadean atmosphere, it leads the reader to be fascinated by Nazi violence" (76).

Husson and Terestchenko support their accusations by selective quotes from the novel; they never analyze a whole sequence, quoting only "shocking" passages in the text wherever they find them. But the aesthetic particularity of this novel, especially where scenes that describe Nazi violence against the Jews are concerned, is that Aue never merely narrates or observes atrocity, with whatever degree of fascination or horror he manifests. He almost always follows observation with reflection, either in his present voice as narrator or as thoughts attributed to his earlier self at the time of the events (which is quite unrealistic, though effective); one must therefore read a whole sequence in order to get the full impact of his account. To cite just one example: in Aue's detailed account of the horrendous killings at Babi Yar—where more than 30,000 Jewish men, women, and children were murdered by shooting in the space of two days—Husson and Terestchenko pick out a particularly awful moment when Aue himself is sent into the ditch to finish off prisoners who were shot but did not die. (This is the only time in the novel we actually see him murdering Jews—I think it is significant that Littell chose to have him perform mercy killings, rather than placing him among the shooters at the edge of the ditch.) At one point, Aue describes seeing a beautiful and dignified-looking young woman who is among the naked prisoners at the edge of the ditch, and whom he finds among the corpses at the bottom a few minutes later, still breathing despite the bullets she received. She looks at him with "large surprised incredulous eyes, the eyes of a wounded bird" [ses grands yeux surpris, incroyables, des yeux d'oiseau blessé], an observation that Husson and Terestchenko don't quote; instead, they quote what comes next, and even that only partially:

Ce regard [the text says "et ce regard" ("and that look") separated by a comma from "oiseau blessé,"] se planta en moi, me fendit le ventre, et laissa écoulérer un flot de sciure de bois, j'étais une vulgaire poupée et ne ressenti rien, et en même temps je voulais de tout mon coeur me pencher et lui esayer la terre et la sueur mêlée sur son front, lui caresser la joue et lui dire que ça allait, que tout était pour le mieux, mais à la place je lui tirai convulsivement une balle dans la tête, ce qui après tout revenait au même, pour elle en tout cas . . . (Les Complaisantes 94; original text with different punctuation: B 126)

[That look stuck into me, split open my stomach and let a flood of sawdust pour out, I was a rag doll and didn't feel anything, and at the same time]
I wanted with all my heart to bend over and brush the dirt and sweat off her forehead, caress her cheek and tell her it was going to be all right, that everything would be fine, but instead I convulsively shot a bullet into her head, which after all came down to the same thing, for her in any case if not for me... [K 130]

Husson and Teretchenko cut off their quotation here, in mid-sentence, with the following comment: "Definitely, there would have been every reason to return the manuscript to its author as unpublishable." But, they go on, Parisian intellectual "chic" likes to "continue to proclaim that we are 'beyond good and evil' despite the genocides of the twentieth century and those that threaten our world [today]." (94). In their righteous (if perhaps somewhat facile) indignation at modern genocides and moral relativism, the authors fail to note what happens in the rest of Littel's sentence and paragraph, which continues as follows:

... pour elle en tout cas si ce n’était pour moi, car moi à la pensée de ce gâchis humain insensé j’étais envahi d’une rage immense, démésurée, je continuais à lui tirer dessus, et sa tête avait éclaté comme un fruit, alors mon bras se détacha de moi et partit tout seul dans le ravin, tirant de part et d’autre, je lui courais après, lui faisant signe de m’attendre de mon autre bras, mais il ne voulait pas, il me narguait et tirait sur les blessés tout seul, sans moi, enfin, à bout de souffle je m’arrêtai et me mis à pleurer. (B 126)

... for her in any case if not for me, since at the thought of this senseless human waste I was filled with an immense, boundless rage. I kept shooting at her and her head exploded like a fruit, then my arm detached itself from me and went off all by itself down the ravine, shooting left and right, I ran after it, waving it to wait with my other arm, but it didn’t want to, it mocked me and shot at the wounded all by itself, without me; finally, out of breath, I stopped and started to cry. [K 130]

The shape and meaning of this very long sentence, with its jerky rhythm and its hallucinatory description of Aue’s own traumatic dissociation as he meets the face and look of his wounded victim (his arm detaching itself and running amok independently of his control) are entirely overlooked by Husson and Teretchenko in their drive to condemn Aue’s “inhumanity.” If one takes the trouble to read this passage without prejudice, one sees that Aue appears here most definitely human: it is one instance in the novel where he significantly fails in his performance as an SS officer, since he breaks down and starts to cry. Aue’s failed performance here can be contrasted with the actions of his friend Thomas, who never fails to do what is expected of him, with no scruples whatsoever. Thomas is the “perfect” SS officer, and the divergence between him and Aue underlines the latter’s status as an insider/outside who is never fully at home in the system.

In fact, the paragraph ends with Aue being relieved of his duty in the ditch by another officer, who tells him, “C’est bon, Obersturmführer, je vous remplace” (B 126) (“That’s enough, Obersturmführer, I’ll take over for you” [K 130]). Husson and Teretchenko overlook this ending. And they also overlook the fact that in the very next paragraph, Aue reflects on what has just happened, in a way that places him squarely in the position of an “outsider” analyst even as he continues to say “we”:

Même les boucheries démentielles de la Grande Guerre... paraissaient presque propres et justes à côté de ce que nous avions aimé au monde. Je trouvais cela extraordinaire... Notre système, notre État, me moquait profondément des pensées de ses serviteurs. Cela lui était indifférent que l’on tue les Juifs parce qu’ils haïssaient ou parce qu’on voulait faire avancer sa carrière ou même, dans certaines limites, parce qu’on y prenait du plaisir... Cela lui était même indifférent, au fond, que l’on refuse de les tuer, aucune sanction ne serait prise, car il savait bien que le réservoir des tueurs disponibles était sans fond... (B 127)

[Even the insane butcheries of the Great War... seemed almost clean and righteous compared to what we had brought into the world. I found this extraordinary... Our system, our State couldn’t care less about the thoughts of its servants. It was all the same to the State whether you killed Jews because you hated them or because you wanted to advance your career or even, in some cases, because you took pleasure in it... It did not even mind, in the end, if you refused to kill, no disciplinary action would be taken, since it was well aware that the pool of available killers was bottomless... ] (K 130–31)

This is a clear instance where the reader can appreciate Littel’s performance as author behind the character, since it is obvious that these reflections are being put into the mouth of the narrator-character by an author who has read real-life analysts of the Holocaust whose work came many years after the time when Aue claims to have thought these thoughts. The authorial audience—or let us just say, the careful reader—understands this, communi-
cating above Aue’s head with the author. As I wrote elsewhere, commenting on this very passage:

This is a reality observed through the later analyses of Hannah Arendt on totalitarian systems, or Christopher Browning on the role of “ordinary men” in mass murder. And it is made, fictively, by an SS officer who was in the ravine shooting people a few hours earlier. Unrealistic, no doubt, but very powerful; and pointing not only to historical facts, but to their ethical and moral implications. (“When the Perpetrator” 10–11)

One could say, then, with all due respect, that in their way of handling quotations, as exemplified in the passage I have been discussing, the authors of Les Complaisantes engage in some seemingly “complacency” themselves. They are so intent on indicting Littell (behind his character) for his unethical performance that they lose sight of their own responsibility as readers. Husson and Terestchenko constantly hammer the theme of the writer’s ethical responsibility, and Littell’s failure to live up to it (in their opinion). But surely there is a case to be made for ethical reading as well. As J. Hillis Miller noted in his Ethics of Reading: reading too is a performance. It must therefore be done responsibly: not cutting off an author in mid-sentence, when the end of the sentence radically changes the meaning suggested in the beginning; not rushing to judgment before taking account of a whole sequence, if not the whole work.11

This may all be very true. But considering the sharply divergent readers’ judgments that have been voiced about Les Bienveillantes makes me wonder whether it is ever possible to persuade a reader to change his or her mind about a novel once that mind is made up. Even if one demonstrates, as I have tried to do, that a critic—who is a particular kind of reader, having to defend his or her responses by reasoned argument—has failed to read a certain passage responsibly or failed to make a convincing case, and even if one were to succeed in persuading that very critic to recognize his or her error concerning a particular passage in the novel, that would in no way guarantee that the latter’s overall judgment of the work would change. All the more so when “ordinary,” nonprofessional readers are concerned: to the extent that reading is subjective and that a reader’s response to a text is immediate, one might even say visceral, before any critical reasoning occurs, there is probably not much one can do to persuade a reader that he or she is “wrong” to love or hate a work. At best, one can try to make the strongest case for one’s own reading, addressing it implicitly to a virtual third party or “bystander” in the debate.12 In that process, one can cite other readers whom one agrees

with, as allies in interpretation. For example, I can cite Daniel Mendelsohn once again:

While some will denounce Littell’s cool-eyed authorial sympathy for Aue as “obscene”—and by “sympathy” I mean simply his attempt to comprehend the character—his project seems infinitely more valuable than the reflexive gesture of writing off all those millions of killers as “monsters” or “inhuman,” which allows us too easily to draw a solid line between “them” and “us.” The first line of the novel takes the form of Aue’s unsettling salutation to his “human brothers”: the purpose of the book, one in which it largely succeeds, is to keep alive, however improbably, that troubling sense of kinship.

Thus are interpretive communities formed, consisting of like-minded readers of a text. But there will always be other communities, with equally strong views, to make the opposite case where certain controversial works are concerned. I would suggest, furthermore, that the kind of performance engaged in by Littell in this novel, consisting of an “act of impersonation” (to use Sidra DeKovens Ezrati’s phrase) of a Nazi, carries with it a particular danger. Quite possibly, a writer or artist cannot imaginatively project himself, even with distastening devices such as irony or paradox, into the mind and words of a participant in genocide without running the risk of being identified—or even, at times, genuinely identifying—with such a character. Sidra DeKovens Ezrati, commenting on similar “acts of impersonation” undertaken by the artists who participated in the controversial exhibit Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art organized by the Jewish Museum of New York in 2002, noted, “What is common to most of this art is a form of appropriation that is always in danger of becoming, or being confused with, collaboration” (19). Although my own reading of Les Bienveillantes credits Littell with major critical intentions—if not always toward his character, certainly toward the system whose description he puts into the character’s mouth—I must recognize that far less sympathetic readings of Littell’s achievement and intentions are also possible.

Transgression and Witnessing
An Uneasy Union

My admiration for Littell’s performance in Les Bienveillantes does not come without reservations. Like a number of other critics, I am troubled by a
jarring discrepancy that the novel does not satisfactorily resolve: on one side, there is Aue’s paradoxical and artistically highly successful role as an insider outsider who functions as a historical and moral witness to the Holocaust; on the other side, there is Aue’s personal story, featuring incest (with his twin sister Una, whose name is borrowed from Poe’s “Colloquy of Monos and Una” and whose status as an incestuous twin is borrowed from Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*), matricide, homosexuality, and increasingly delirious sexual fantasizing. The relation of the personal story to the historical account is never made clear, or even hinted at, by Littell. The personal story is the one pointed to in the novel’s title, which evokes the Greek trilogy of the Oresteia. In Aeschylus, the Furies who pursue Orestes after his double murder (of his mother and his stepfather) are placated at the end and are renamed the “Eumenides,” “The Kindly Ones,” even as Orestes goes scot-free. In Littell’s novel too, Aue goes unpunished (he escapes from Berlin at the end of the war and ends his days as the director of a lace factory in northern France), but that is not the part I find most troubling. Rather, it is the “disconnect” between Aue’s private excesses and his function as historical witness: if Aue is meant to appear as a reliable historical witness who gives detailed accounts of the massacres in Ukraine, the rout of the German army at Stalingrad, the machinery of the extermination camps in Poland, and the last days of the war in a bombed-out Berlin, how does that role square with the fact that he has no memory of the family murders he committed in the middle of all that? And if he is to appear as a “human brother” to the reader, situated both inside and outside the system he describes and analyzes, how can we reconcile that representative status with his excessive sexual tastes and desires, which are quite far from those of most “normal” people? Michiko Kakutani was not wrong to say that he is not a “banal” Nazi—but oddly, his “non-banality” as a Nazi, that is, his inability to perform his role as perpetrator as evidenced by his breakdown at Babi Yar, for example, allows the reader to feel a certain shared humanity with Aue. The excesses of his personal history, however, which constitute the other aspect of his “non-banality,” emphasize the difficulty that most readers will have in considering him as a “human brother.”

In terms of narrative theory, we could formulate the problem as one of conflicting reliabilities: whereas Aue is a reliable narrator where the historical narrative is concerned—not only in the accuracy of his reporting but even in many of his judgments, to which the reader adheres—he is stunningly unreliable in recounting some major events of his personal story. Thus he never relates his murder of his mother and stepfather, and the reader must deduce it from an ellipsis in the narrative. Nor does he remember his action later, and he fails in other ways as well—for example, in understanding (as the reader certainly does) that the twin children he meets at his mother’s house are most likely his own offspring from his incestuous relationship with his sister.

I have suggested elsewhere that the Oresteia plot may have to be read alongside the historical account (rather than implicated with it), as a parallel reflection on the question of guilt and justice that Aue struggles with throughout most of the novel (“When the Perpetrator” 18–19). In fact, in a striking *mise en abyme*, Aue himself evokes Greek tragedy and its notions of justice, right after a long reflection on the humanity of the “ordinary” Germans who were enrolled in the machinery of extermination. Having just had a conversation, in Sobibor, with one such man, a family man named Doll who has been gassing people ever since he was assigned to the euthanasia program in Germany in the late 1930s, Aue affirms that, contrary to what some commentators have said, the actions of that individual were not inhuman but were part of “thumain et encore de l’humain” (“humanity and more humanity”. B 542, K 589). He then goes on to ask whether Doll should be held responsible for his actions, for after all, it was by chance that he and not some other German was sent to Sobibor. Perhaps it is all of Germany that should be called to account for his crimes—unless, Aue muses, one considers the question not in terms of Judeo-Christian ideas of justice, which take into account the intention of one who commits a crime, but rather in terms of Greek notions of guilt and punishment, where the action alone matters, independently of intention:

Le lien entre volonté et crime est une notion chrétienne..., Pour les Grecs, peu importe si Héraclès abat ses enfants dans un accès de folie, ou si Oedipe tue son père par accident: ce ne change rien, c’est un crime, ils sont coupable, on peut les plaindre, mais on ne peut les absoudre—et cela même si souvent leur punition revient aux dieux, et non pas aux hommes. (B 546)

[The link between intention and crime is a Christian notion. For the Greeks, it makes no difference that Heracles murders his children in a fit of madness, or that Oedipus kills his father by accident. It doesn’t change anything, it’s a crime, they’re guilty. We can pity them, but not absolve them—even if often their punishment is done by the gods, not by men.] (K 589)

If we recall that Aue kills his mother and stepfather without having any memory of the crime and without ever acknowledging it as his own, then this commentary (which occurs in the novel after the double murder) can be considered as an oblique reference to his own guilt in Greek terms. The burlesque detectives, Weser and Clemens, who pursue Aue with increasing
circumstantial evidence of his guilt (his bloodstained clothes were found in the bathtub, for example) and whom he manages to elude until the very end, would then function as the human attempt at punishment, which fails. But the somewhat ambiguous last line of the novel, "Les Bienveillantes avaient retrouvé ma trace" ("The Kindly Ones had picked up my scent"—B 894, K 975; translation modified) could be read as an indication that the "Kindly Ones"—who despite their euphemistic new names are representatives of divine retribution—have never actually left him. In Greek terms, Aue is guilty—not only of the matricide he does not remember committing, but also of the murders he does recall, such as the killing of the beautiful girl in Babi Yar. It was a mercy killing, and he accomplished it in a sense despite himself; but it was a killing nevertheless.

In one way, then, we can think of the "excessive" personal story as a displaced (in the psychoanalytic sense) commentary on the question of guilt and responsibility—a question that concerns above all the historical narrative of Nazi atrocities, but that is displaced into the realm of individual family history, away from the more horrific realm of collective murder. Displacement, as Freud showed, about dreams and other psychic phenomena such as screen memories, is a defense mechanism to protect the subject against truths that would be unbearable if stated directly. Aue, who tells us at the start that he does "not regret anything" ("ne regrette rien"—B 12, K 5) about his wartime actions, is clearly unable to face his guilt about the Nazi genocide directly. His body responds to the killings he witnesses (witnessing, as he himself admits, is a form of participation) with symptoms of rejection—vomiting, diarrhea, which later turns into constipation—and with insomnia, but he never explicitly acknowledges either his guilt or his disgust at the killings. I am suggesting that on the authorial level, Aue's whole personal story can be seen as a displacement—and here its function is not to evade, but rather to reinforce the questions about guilt and responsibility by creating a parallel story that transposes the historical crimes into a personal register. The intertextual weight of the Oresteia myth would then function as additional reinforcement.

Another explanation for the problematic relation between the wartime story ("the genre of testimony") and the private story ("the genre of excess")—has been offered by the Israeli scholar Liran Razinsky. Razinsky argues, in an unpublished paper, that the literature of excess, epitomized in the chapter titled "Air" toward the end of the novel—when Aue spends a week alone in a Pomeranian castle belonging to his sister and her husband, masturbating in every room and engaging in increasingly scatological fantasies—is necessary to the novel's testimonial project, because it is through this transgressive sexuality that Aue reaches an ethical awareness of "the other." Thus, while fantasizing about his sister, he remembers a young woman he saw hanged in the Ukraine, fantasizes about her too, and then sobbs in helpless rage: "Nous lavions pendue comme un boucher égorge un bœuf; sans passion, parce qu'il fallait le faire... et une telle cruaute n'avait pas de nom, quelle que soit sa necessite, elle ruinait tout, si lon pouvait faire ca... alors on pouvait tout faire" ("We had hanged her the way a butcher slaughters an animal, without passion, because it had to be done... and such a cruelty had no name, even though it was necessary, it ruined everything, if one could do that... then one could do anything"; B 835–36, K 912). Razinsky argues that through an excessive jouissance (his own and the ones he fantasizes in his sister and in the young woman victim), Aue arrives at an ethical awareness he would not have reached otherwise.

This elegant argument resonates with Susan Sontag's well-known observations about the "pornographic imagination" as a conduit to the experience of limits that has fascinated avant-garde European literature for over a century. Indeed, Littell's debt to Georges Bataille and other avant-garde theorists of transgression has often been noted. Still, this argument does not explain the many places in the novel—notably before the "Air" chapter, which occurs very late—when Aue acts as a clearly played analyst of the Nazi system sans erotic fantasies; nor does it explain his murderous actions after his supposed epiphany in the castle. The only murders he commits before this episode are the matricide, of which he has no memory, and the mercy killings in the pit at Babi Yar, which make him sick and soon get him transferred out of Ukraine. (Later, he also orders the execution of an old Jewish man in the Caucasus, but only after the man himself has demanded that he do so—this is one of the stranger episodes in the novel.) After the "Air" chapter, however, in quick succession, he shoots an old man playing Bach's Art of the Fugue in a village church; kills a homosexual acquaintance with whom he had had casual sex and who makes another pass at him in public; and kills a policeman with a stone, after tweaking Hitler's nose in a burlesque incident staged in Hitler's bunker! Finally, in a real shock to the reader, he kills his friend Thomas, allowing for an exchange of identities and his eventual escape to France. Thus his most cold-blooded and amoral actions occur after the great sobbing scene in the castle, which suggests that if he gained ethical insight and an awareness of "the other" in that chapter, it didn't last very long. Significantly, in these final pages of the novel, we have no philosophical reflections or other internal monologues by Aue: he performs his bizarre or criminal deeds with no warning, and he reports them with brutal directness, unaccompanied by any explanation or commentary.
In fact, as Leland Deladurantaye has noted, the last hundred or so pages of the novel, after the "Air" chapter, read quite differently from the rest: in contrast to the "meticulously realistic main plot . . ., brilliantly organized and written," these pages "show signs, if not of fatigue, then of something approaching fever." Deladurantaye sees this as a serious flaw in the novel, a weakening in Littell's authorial performance; but this "feverishness" could be interpreted as Aue's rather than the author's (as such, it would be part of the author's design), serving to indicate the increasingly nightmarish and unreal quality of the last days of the war in Germany. In that case, we could see the growing loss of control in the narration as textually mirroring the disintegration of Berlin, bombed to smithereens, of the German army and bureaucracy, of Aue himself as he becomes another man—and also the disintegration of realist narrative, as Aue's narration becomes more and more hallucinatory and grotesque.

Notes

1. Eight years later, in his introduction to the first volume of Nazi Germany and the Jews, Friedländer appeared to have revised his views at least on the second of these areas: a study of Nazi Germany, he maintained, could in fact yield some enlightenment about the present; for together with its "peculiar frenzy of . . . apocalyptic drive against . . . the Jew," Nazi Germany shared in the "murderous potentialities of the world that is also ours." Whence the universal significance of "The Final Solution of the Jewish Question" (Introduction, 6)

2. For a brief account of the critical reception of the novel in France, see Suleiman, "When the Perpetrator Becomes a Reliable Witness of the Holocaust," 3–4. Saul Friedländer and Raoul Hilberg did not write reviews, but spoke dismissively about the book in public and private conversations.

3. For a wide-ranging panorama of the possibilities of performance studies around the time it was stabilizing as an academic field, see the 1998 collective volume edited by Peggy Phelan and Jill Lene. The Ends of Performance. Many other works seeking to define this enormously varied interdisciplinary field, whose borders are not at all clear, have been published since then.

4. See Phelan, Living to Tell about It, and Genette, Narrative Discourse.

5. As always, such self-confident generalizations can be contested by reality—in this case, by the reality of Quentin Tarantino's 2009 film Inglourious Basterds, which I found to be a highly successful work of art and not ethically irresponsible, even though it ignores some of the most basic historical facts about the Holocaust—for example, by having Hitler and all his top lieutenants burned to death in a movie theater in Paris circa 1944! Many critics do not share my positive view of the film, however, for various reasons, including that of historical accuracy.

6. Phelan, in his book Living to Tell about It, proposes a detailed terminology for analyzing the complex relations between author and character, and between author, character, and authorial audience. I will not attempt to duplicate his terminology here, which he summarizes very usefully in his own essay in this volume. He situates his model not in the field of performance but in that of rhetoric (following the precedent of Wayne Booth's classic work The Rhetoric of Fiction).

7. Suleiman, "When the Perpetrator Becomes a Reliable Witness of the Holocaust," 5. In that essay, I focus specifically on the fictional Aue's paradoxical role as a reliable historical witness, without evoking the concept of performance. I have not changed my overall interpretation of the novel since that first analysis, but in the present essay I attempt to take into account more of Aue's problematic aspects, as well as engaging with his negative criticism.

8. Husson and Terestchenko, Les Complicesantes, 131. Here and throughout, translations from the French are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

9. See Littell, Les Bienveillantes, 97, and The Kindly Ones, 98; hereafter, page numbers will be cited in the text, with B for the French version and K for the English translation by Charlotte Mandel.

10. In my reading of Plato's text, the "moral" of the story of Leonitus is not as clear as Husson and Terestchenko suggest. The story, told by Socrates to illustrate the three parts of the soul, does not necessarily carry the heavy didacticism (about the "perversion of the gaze") attributed to it in Les Complicesantes. It's true, however, that Plato insists on the need to subdue the baser passions, bringing them under the control of reason. Whether Littell takes no distance from Aue, and whether Aue is an exclusively "base" character, as Husson and Terestchenko assert, are precisely the questions up for discussion. Relevant to this discussion is the fact that Littell has Aue himself quoting the Leonitus parable from The Republic and then commenting, "To tell the truth, the soldiers rarely seemed to feel Leonitus's anguish, only his desire [to look], and it was this that was disturbing the hierarchy, the idea that the men could take pleasure in these actions" (K 98). Husson and Terestchenko ignore the complications—and the distancing—introduced by this and similar reflections throughout the novel.

11. Husson and Terestchenko refer to Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello (though not to the episode I mentioned earlier) to support their contention about the writer's duty to write responsibly. They cite with approval a chapter wherein the heroine expresses strong doubts about whether writers should engage with certain painful or horrifying subjects, but they don't seem to recall that some of Coetzee's own works (e.g., Disgrace or Waiting for the Barbarians) are strong examples of that very kind of engagement. Not every opinion expressed by the heroine of Elizabeth Costello is to be taken at face value, or as representing Coetzee's own philosophy.

12. It can be asked whether this view does not put into question the value of teaching literature, since after all, teachers try to persuade their students to share their view of a work. I would say that it is easier to persuade students (or any reader) who have not yet made up their minds than to change the minds of those who have already formed a strong reaction, especially to a work that is perceived as controversial. For a recent, hostile discussion of Les Bienveillantes, see Charlotte Lacoste's book, based on her doctoral dissertation: Séductions du bourreau (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010). The author and I participated in a 2009 conference in Paris where we both spoke about Littell's novel and where I was able to note first-hand that mutual persuasion was impossible: neither she nor I changed our minds after hearing the other.

13. The murder occurs between two sentences: "I went upstairs and fell asleep. When I woke up the light had changed, it was quite dark" (K 529).
14. LitteI has expressed the same idea in his own name in interviews; see, for example, Georgesco, "Jonathan LitteII.

15. The names of these grotesque detectives are actually borrowed from volume two of Victor Klemperer's diary, I Will Bear Witness, where they figure as real-life anti-Semitic policemen whom Klemperer fears and loathes. This may be a wink to the reader on LitteI's part, one of the many intertextual allusions that permeate the novel.

16. Razinsky, "History, Excess and Testimony in Jonathan LitteII's Les Bienveillantes (The Kindly Ones)," unpublished paper, 2008. I understand from Razinsky that he has modified his views somewhat subsequently; but I find his argument in this paper interesting, even if I don't fully agree with it.

Works Cited


