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**Narrative perspective in two contemporary perpetrator novels:
Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2010) and Martin Amis' *The
Zone of Interest* (2014)**

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July 2015

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Germanística

Driven by thirst, I eyed a fine icicle outside the window, within hands reach. I opened the window and broke off the icicle but at once a large, heavy guard prowling outside brutally snatched it away from me. “*Warum?*” I asked him in my poor German. “*Hier ist kein warum*” (there is no why here), he replied, pushing me inside with a shove.

(Levi 1996: 29)

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the help of many people. I wish to thank in particular Professor Andrew Monnickendam, who is both an excellent teacher and an outstanding supervisor, for taking the time to read my countless drafts and always giving me invaluable advice and guidance. I also wish to thank Dr. Jordi Coral, whose classes on the MA course were I believe not only interesting but also extremely useful in terms of academic writing skills. Moreover, many thanks to Professor Aránzazu Usandizaga, Dr. Sara Martín, Dr. Cristina Pividori and Dr. David Owen, for reading my work and giving me constructive and useful feedback. I also want to express my deepest gratitude to my parents, Hugues Serraf and Caroline Lopez, who have encouraged and supported me throughout my research.

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Formatting

This dissertation has been written in general agreement with the guidelines established by the 2009 MLA *Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (seventh edition)

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Introduction

My dissertation focuses on Holocaust literature and more specifically on the recent phenomenon of perpetrator fiction, which can both complement and challenge more traditional modes narrated by victims. It is divided into two chapters; the first one will concentrate on how and why the perpetrator novel emerged along with pointing out what specific issues it produces, whilst the second will analyse the figure of the perpetrator in two contemporary novels. I analyse Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2010) and Amis' *The Zone of Interest* (2014) in light of two theoretical models, Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil' and Rachel MacNair's recent studies on Perpetrator Induced Traumatic Stress. As I consider the interpretative problems raised by perpetrator novels, my purpose is precisely to analyse to what extent texts written from the perpetrator's point of view lead to moral problems of identification.

Even though the research question is a simple one, I would like to begin my dissertation by outlining a situation which appears radically different from this case study, but illustrates the complexity of the debate and the pertinence of attempting to understand the psychology of perpetrators.

Rony Brauman, former president of Doctors Without Borders¹, states in a university conference on Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* that 'humanity is an inexhaustible reservoir of killers', as the 'violence one encounters in the context of humanitarian action seems to be constantly renewing itself' (2007 in Centre Roland Barthes). Brauman, who is now a director of studies at the organisation's research centre², goes on to describe the daily contact of doctors,

¹French- founded medical humanitarian organisation.

²Under the sponsorship of the Fondation Médecins Sans Frontières, the Centre de Réflexion sur l'Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires (CRASH) is a unique structure in the world of NGOs, aiming at inspiring

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nurses and logistics coordinators working in the field with killers, rapists and kidnappers. He focuses on a specific case in Ethiopia, where Doctors Without Borders were present during the famine of 1983-84. While the medical teams worked to provide assistance to those in need, the Derg military junta used Live Aid and Oxfam money to 'fund its enforced resettlement and "villagification" programmes, under which at least 3 million people are said to have been displaced and between 50,000 and 100,000 killed' (Rieff 2005). These transfers of population were extremely violent and had become the first cause of mortality. The dilemma the organisation faced was that the whole of the rescue measures and the opening of the country to humanitarian aid were in fact accelerating the process of the forced resettlement. As Brauman puts it, doctors went from assisting the victims to assisting the strategy of their persecutors (ibid). Leader of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) at the time and torn between continuing helping starving civilians and withdrawing his teams from Ethiopia, he explains he was advised to read Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to help him take a decision. Brauman says he found in Arendt's essay two particularly interesting subjects. The first one is that of Adolf Eichmann, the zealous worker, deprived of any feeling, obsessed with the idea of completing his task. Secondly, the members of the *Judenräte* (German for Jewish councils). The *Judenräte* were (controversial) organisations set up by the Gestapo in ghettos and occupied zones. As leaders of the Jewish community, the members of these councils were appointed as intermediaries between the enclosed Jews and the Nazis. In certain ghettos, the *Judenräte* cooperated with Jewish resistance movements. These two cases stood out to Brauman because they represented on the one hand the submission to authority, the constant will to do one's duty, and on the other hand a devotion to the community and a concern to help people survive. Brauman recognised in his medical staff the

'debate and critical reflection on field practices and public positions, in order to improve the association's actions' (CRASH 2015).

same aspects of constant work and infinite compassion while participating, unwittingly, as they were being involved in a wider violent scheme³. The doctor's reading of Arendt therefore led him to think of the main moral aspect missing from both Eichmann and the *Judenräte* members' behaviour: whilst one sometimes cannot prevent a crime from being committed, one has the freedom to decide not to participate in it. The doctor suggests that his understanding of Eichmann's bureaucratic, zealous yet murderous actions shed light on what his own staff members were doing and was pivotal in his decision to withdraw all teams from the field. A few years later, wanting to explore further the idea of how evil can be the result of apparently banal and necessary actions, Brauman directed a movie, *The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal* (1999), created from footage of Eichmann's trial.

In light of this, there seems to be an increasing urgency today—in a context where terrorism is a growing threat—to try and understand the psychology of perpetrators. The focus of this dissertation is killers who have committed crimes in a context in which a State is collectively involved in mass murder, perpetrators as members of a larger organised group, acting within the framework of a certain ideology and/or responding to a direct order to kill, as opposed to that of the individual psychopath or murderer. Perpetrators of the Jewish genocide during the Second World War, as the previous example of Rony Brauman's reflection shows, have become a point of reference in terms of attempting to grasp the reasoning of State crimes. The Shoah—the systematic, industrialised genocide of Jews and other minorities—was an unprecedented⁴ event in

³ It goes without saying that Brauman is not likening Doctors Without Borders workers to Nazi officers, he is highlighting one aspect of Eichmann's personality and one aspect of the *Judenräte* organisation. Eichmann was very obviously on the perpetrators' side during the war, whereas the NGO was providing medical assistance to victims.

⁴ Here I write 'unprecedented' but not 'unique'—it was a precedent to other genocides, like those in Cambodia or Rwanda. Bauer lists five factors that render the Shoah 'unprecedented': the totality of the Holocaust (all Jews were to be killed with no exception), the universality of the Holocaust (the Nazis

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History. Ever since the world became aware of the existence of the camps, countless artists, writers, politicians, psychologists and more have been seeking answers to the question 'why?'. As Dr. Bauer explains, the Holocaust 'is the most extreme form of a sickness that affects all of us, and because it's the most extreme case, we have to start with this paradigmatic genocide to be able to deal with others' (2008).

sought to kill Jews in every area where German interests predominated), the non-pragmatic nature of the Nazi ideology (one good example is that Jewish scientists and Jewish armament workers were sent to extermination camps), the centrality of race in the organization of the National Socialist state and the National Socialist view of the Jew as the eternal, omnipresent threat to the Third Reich and Nazi civilization (2012: 690-692).

Chapter I: From the Victim to the Perpetrator

a) Remembering the Shoah: Overcoming the Trope of Unutterability

Auschwitz et Treblinka sont autre chose – et ils demeureront toujours autre chose. (Wiesel 1985: 222)⁵

Today, seventy years after the evacuation of Auschwitz, as the last survivors are dying, commemorations and Memorial Days are set up in a somewhat compulsive effort to keep the memory of the Shoah alive. The biblical injunction *Zakhor* (remember), is more relevant than ever; it is urgent to reflect in depth on the transmission of memory. In light of this, at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, visitors are encouraged to visit the ‘Voids’. The Voids are five large separate spaces where nothing is exposed. The cold, cavernous rooms have walls of bare concrete and are largely without artificial light. Daniel Libeskind, the architect who designed them, explains the Voids refer to ‘that which can never be exhibited when it comes to Jewish Berlin history: Humanity reduced to ashes’ (1999: 65). The Israeli artist Menashe Kadishman created a sculpture in the Memory Void: *Shalechet* (Fallen Leaves) is composed of over 10,000 steel-cut, anonymous faces with expressions of pain and despair scattered across the floor. The visitors participate in the artwork by walking on the horrified faces, generating loud noises of slamming steel, resembling shrieks and wails. The audio guide asks the visitors—who are being made to take part, albeit indirectly, in the genocidal violence—not only to remember, but also to reflect on *how* they remember. Both these artists aim at expressing through emotions and sensations what words, or even images cannot describe, therefore highlighting the main challenge of keeping the memory of the Shoah alive, what Reiter refers to as ‘the trope of unutterability’ (2000: 18). The approach

⁵My translation from French: Auschwitz and Treblinka are something else – and will forever remain something else.

of Holocaust Studies to silence may be seen as a composite of both literary concepts of aesthetic representation and the assumptions made by the field of psychological Trauma Theory (Kidron 2012: 7). Adorno's famous claim—'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1949: 19)—is emblematic of the Trauma Studies' approach to the unspeakable as signifying 'the ineffability of the disaster' (Blanchot 1986: 45) and the limits of its representation. In this section I aim to highlight the reasons behind the *unspeakableness* of the Holocaust.

The idea of the unspeakable is today defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as that which '*cannot or may not* be expressed in words', usually because it is 'inexpressibly bad or objectionable' (1989 'Unspeakable', emphasis added). The idea itself of the 'unutterable' was not born with the Shoah. Long before that, the dawn of the *ère contemporaine* calls into question the powers of language, both regarding the idea of a possible inadequacy between the world and our words imposed itself, as well as that of the heterogeneity of language and thought. In this context, the Jena romantics in Germany were the first to resort to the word 'unspeakable' to designate what could not be expressed satisfactorily with words (Boulay 2009). From this new conception of language emerged the figure of a poet-prophet, determined to face the 'unspeakable as such' (Baron 2002: 277) and to transform poetic language into a means of discovery and clairvoyance. This sheds light on the essentially ambivalent dimension of the 'unspeakable': having to be somehow conquered by Literature, it also is the source of a dialectic tension in literary discourse, structuring therefore its shape and form, both in terms of aesthetic and ethical values.

If many intellectuals in the nineteenth century denounced the arbitrary character of language and its incapacity to give an account of things in their singularity, this mistrust of language became more evident in the wake of the two World Wars. The Great War was one of the deadliest conflicts in history (killing over sixteen million people) and traumatised a

generation. In 1939, the Second World War broke out and culminated in the unprecedented bureaucratic genocide of the Jews and other minorities. Post 1945 saw a simultaneous re-evaluation of both testimonial writing and the transmission of memory and also, ontologically, Literature itself. Writers that experienced the war and the camps were forced to reflect on the approach one must adopt when recounting such events. In some cases this conflict silenced writers entirely, the experience could be deemed to be one which 'negates all literature' (Wiesel 1979: 197). In the Western imagination, the Holocaust constitutes a paradigm of unspeakable collective experience, to which other genocides of the twentieth century will then refer to.

In the context of the literature of the Shoah, the 'unspeakable' first refers to that which cannot be verbally described by the human language. Language and its use by the perpetrators played an important part during what Alvin Rosenfeld qualifies as a 'linguicide' as well as a genocide (1980: 115). The will for destruction, the 'I do not want you to be' idea, is analysed by Robert Antelme as 'I do not want you to speak, I do not want you to have a voice' (1957: 201). In the camps, the prisoners were stripped of their language and a new, harsh one was forced upon them. Language becomes there the instrument of death and is no longer the mirror of humanity, the destruction of it is concomitant to the destruction of Man. This perversion of language is especially evident in mottoes such as '*Arbeit macht Frei*'⁶, the panel that 'welcomes' the prisoners to Auschwitz. Levi explains that 'if the Lagers had lasted longer, a new harsh language would have been born' (1991: 129).

This destruction of language led to what Belpoliti and Gordon describe as the main complexity of Holocaust literature, the need to 'find apt working tools for representing and understanding, for forging a language in which to write about such a phenomenon' (2007: 51).

⁶'Work sets you free'. Schwarz sees it as 'an obscene falsehood suggesting that the purpose of the concentration camp was to reform inmates who would then earn their freedom' (1999: 33).

Whilst human language is by definition infinite, its referential power is paradoxically limited. With a finite number of means (phonemes and graphemes), we are capable of creating an infinity of sentences – human language is characterized by its creativity. As Descartes explains, Man is ‘capable of arranging various words together through which he makes his thoughts understood’ (1965: 46). Yet, there are some extraordinary experiences that seem to refuse to be translated into words. Amongst the things said to be essentially incommunicable are the nature of our emotions (love for example), the experience of birth, religious experiences and the meaning of life. As we have already said, the Holocaust was a completely unprecedented event. Holocaust Literature presents the author and the reader with a lack of shared experience, of a ‘mutual recognizable frame of reference between the world of the camps and the world of the reader’ (King 2008: 60). There were vain attempts to recreate a new language specific to the camps, but authors quickly realised it was an impossible task. Levi was one of many who highlighted the powerlessness of language when it comes to narrating trauma, pointing out that ‘our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man’ (1996: 26). Elie Wiesel also feels frustrated by the fact ‘all words seem inadequate, worn, foolish, lifeless’, whilst he wants them ‘to be searing’ (1995: 23). As Levi explains in *If This Is a Man*:

Just as our hunger is not the feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger', we say 'tiredness', 'fear', 'pain', we say 'winter' and they are different things. They are free words, created by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes (1991: 129).

Some authors talk about an ‘Auschwitz jargon’, referring to words that in the camps found a new meaning—for example the verb ‘to organise’ meant ‘stealing’, or a ‘muselmann’ was a person who had lost their will to live, completely hopeless, physically and spiritually exhausted. Levi ironically asks us in *If This Is a Man*: ‘Do you know how one says never in camp slang? *Morgen Früh*, tomorrow morning’ (1991: 133). Almost inevitably, due to the unspeakable character of the

Holocaust, the author and the reader of survivors' testimonies do not use the same words having in mind the same meaning, the same feeling, the same object, making it hard for the author to get their message through and for the reader to understand fully and in its authenticity the text before them. Language then produces the 'very sense of unfamiliarity and novelty that it is generally designed to overcome' (Reiter 2000: 91). In that sense, the question of the level of 'communicability of lived experience' (13) concerns both the level of production and the level of reception of language.

The idea of the unspeakable is also an intimate component of the idea of *trauma* and the impossibility of deciphering an experience that one struggles to come to terms with. The traumatic experience is beyond representation, and therefore in many cases remains ineffable and unknowable. After World War I inaugurated a new human experience of carnage on an unprecedented scale, most of the veterans who came back from the front refused to speak. Whilst most of the soldiers in the trenches remained 'more or less sane', they all agree that they 'lived on the very threshold of Hell' (Ellis 1989: 9). It is arguable that they stayed silent more for reasons of 'enduring mechanisms of human psychology' than for a question of security and censorship (Ben-Ghiat 2014: 1). Later, when in the 1980s the American Psychiatric Association coin the term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to name the psychological, physical and psychosomatic responses to near-death experiences; they refer to a pathology 'that cannot be defined either by the event itself' (which may or may not be catastrophic and may not produce the same effect on everyone) but rather consists solely of the '*the structure of its experience* or reception' (Caruth 1991: 3, emphasis added). To be traumatised is not only to have gone through a specific event, but to be haunted by it, as 'the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it' (ibid). The nature of trauma, according

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to Freud, who in the 1920s worked with World War One veterans after their return from the Great War, resides in the 'literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits' (ibid). He explains the following about the dreams (rather nightmares) the soldiers experience once back from the front⁷:

Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. [...] Anyone who accepts it as something self-evident that dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams. (1939: 84)

Trauma manifests itself in an uncontrollable way and is not a symptom of a subconscious wish or desire, victims themselves struggle to recognise and understand the event itself. The traumatised 'become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely process' (Caruth 1991: 4). Victims of trauma are disturbingly confused by memories they sometimes do not fully fathom. In the context of the Holocaust, many survivors have explained being unsettled by their memories, not knowing if they were true or not. Florabel Kinsler suggests the following example:

A child survivor of the Holocaust who had been at Theresienstadt continually had flashbacks of trains, and didn't know where they came from; she thought she was going crazy. Until one day, in a group of survivors meeting, a man says, "Yes, at Theresienstadt you could see the trains through the bars of the children's barracks." She was relieved to discover she was not mad. (1990)

The paradox of trauma is that although memories/hallucinations are often extremely clear, the subject itself cannot comprehend them, the problem resides within the very knowledge of the victims themselves. Gretchen Braun states that 'psychic trauma is pre-eminently understood as a threat to the self so potentially damaging that the consciousness cannot comprehend it as it occurs and must wrestle with it belatedly' (2011: 191).

⁷Freud also interestingly points out the feature of 'latency', the idea that trauma does not necessarily manifest itself directly after the event, but sometimes many years after it, after what he calls an 'incubation period'. (1939: 84)

This leads us to reflect on the communicative and narrative problems that victims of trauma encounter. Ninety-eight percent of the few Holocaust survivors never wrote about their experiences and remained silent (Reiter 2000: 19), suffering from what is seen today as 'pathological silence'. This is because trauma characterises itself by a subconscious attempt on the behalf of the victim to numb or block out completely their experience. Trauma seen as 'an overwhelming threat to bodily integrity and/or to the coherent, socially viable selfhood' (Braun 2011: 191) is readable through the silences, ellipses and obfuscations at times present in survivors' testimonies. As an extreme example, in Appelfeld's 1978 novel *The Age of Wonders*, the reader is confronted to an ellipsis that covers not only a few hours but a few years. A German Jewish child narrates the daily life of his family, gradually ostracised and then destroyed by Nazism. The narration brutally stops when the narrator and his mother are taken with other victims on a cattle wagon. When the narrative resumes the narrator Bruno is an adult, and comes back for a brief visit to his mother country. In between the two narrative blocks stand only two very short sentences: 'When all was accomplished' and 'Years after'. Appelfeld chooses to never actually mention the Shoah, only to refer to it in a subtle and discreet manner, only in premonitory signs or in the evocation of its aftermaths, asking the reader to mobilise their own knowledge to understand *what* was really 'accomplished'. Caruth explains that trauma-related silence is discursively framed as the burial or repression of speech, and that as the traumatic event creates a rupture in the linear flow of experience, 'any attempt at verbal representation will inherently resist narrative' (Caruth 1995).

Another aspect of the unutterability of the Holocaust is related to what may not be told for ethical reasons, 'because it is too bad or too objectionable' (OED 1989 'unspeakable'). A good example of this idea is the debate that surrounded the construction in 2005 of the *Memorial to the*

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Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin (*Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*). The 2,711 concrete slabs or 'stelae', arranged in a grid pattern, were seen by some as too big, too aesthetic or simply unnecessary—particularly by Ignatz Bubis, the then leader of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Others objected to the fact the names of the victims or the place where they died do not figure on the steles, unlike memorials found in Auschwitz, which display thousands of pictures of the murdered Jews. A stele itself is in fact originally a monument for funerary or commemorative purposes in Ancient Greece, as they would have texts or decorations in memory of the dead. The memorial in Berlin is devoid of any individual reference to the dead, shockingly to some and interestingly to others—architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff claimed the memorial 'is able to convey the scope of the Holocaust's horrors without stooping to sentimentality, showing how abstraction can be the most powerful tool for conveying the complexities of human emotion' (2005). To keep the memory of the Holocaust alive through memorials or other artistic forms is difficult, as Wolfgang Thierse, a German politician, explains: 'it is not easy for a country to remember, in the centre of its capital, the worst crime it has ever committed' (cited in Marion 2005). Dabezies explains why facing evil is so difficult. The Shoah presents us with 'disturbing, provocative images: it denounces to Man his own weakness and throws in his face the weight of Evil which he carries in himself as a constant threat'. He goes on to say that 'it is very tempting to ignore or to refuse this kind of realism, to prefer to it romantic and triumphal dreams' (1997: 152).

Until the 1980s, the memory of the Holocaust was centred on the victims and on their experience of the war. Much less attention has been paid to texts dealing with the point of view of the Nazi themselves, the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Very few ex-Nazi officers have left

memoirs, fearing reprisal or overwhelmed by guilt⁸. Therefore, the majority of the texts written from the perspective of the perpetrators available to us are fictional works. These are far less commonly read, mainly because the idea of writing, let alone studying fiction focusing on Nazi psychology poses seemingly insurmountable moral problems. When, in 1953, Robert Merle publishes in France his novel *Death Is My Trade*—the fictive memoirs of Rudolf Höss, head commandant of Auschwitz—the writer and editor Jean Cayrol, ex-prisoner of the Mauthausen camp, reacts virulently, condemning the novel and describing it as an undue attempt to ‘give a romantic body to what was only a monster impossible to describe’ (1953: 577). Indeed, bearing in mind the unprecedented character of the Shoah, of its ontological non-transferability, isn’t fiction the ‘moral crime’ that Lanzmann denounced (cited in Deguy 1990: 309)⁹? In light of this, writing from the point of view of perpetrators poses an important ethical problem. Others follow the view that ‘to understand or analyse a perpetrator perspective is to exonerate or to encourage inappropriate identification’ (2014: 15), here referring to a moral problem. Primo Levi highlighted the potential danger of trying to comprehend the Nazis: ‘perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened, because to understand is almost to justify’ (1991: 395). Thus, very little writers have dared to write novels exploring the SS identity.

However, there has been an evolution in the representation of the Second World War and the Shoah. Annette Wieviorka claims that Eichmann's trial in 1961 'marks a real turn in the

⁸ The most read memoirs of ex-Nazis are those of Rudolf Höss, ex-commandant of Auschwitz. He wrote his autobiography whilst in prison awaiting execution in 1947. His confessions were first published in 1958 as *Kommandant in Auschwitz; autobiographische Aufzeichnungen* and later as *Death Dealer: the Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*.

⁹ Lanzmann explains that 'fiction is the most serious transgression in the case of an event like this' (Deguy 1990: 309). In 1979, he violently criticised the American series *Holocaust*, broadcast by French television: 'this is fiction. That is to say, [...] a pure lie, a moral crime, the assassination of memory. The Holocaust is unique in the sense it erects a ring of fire around itself that cannot be crossed, because there is a certain degree of horror that cannot be transmitted: to pretend it can be done is to make oneself guilty of the most serious sort of transgression.'(295)

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emergence of the memory of the genocide', as the figure of the executioner and the testimony of a perpetrator become for the first time the centre of attention during a widely broadcast and commented on court case (1998: 81). Charlotte Lacoste names 'the era of the perpetrator' the period which starts then, a time which asks us to 'put ourselves in the executioner's shoes' (2010: 65).

The following section of this chapter aims at looking more closely at the 'turn to the perpetrator' in the recent decades, focusing on the moral challenges arising from the study of texts written from the perpetrator point of view.

b) From the Nuremberg Trials to Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Collective Reflection on Evil*.

In the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the Allied forces establish the legal process of denazification, aiming at eradicating Nazism in public and private institutions in Europe. In France, a violent purge (often not legal) of presumed war collaborators leads to the condemnation of about 55,000 citizens (sentences ranging from 'national unworthiness' to the death penalty)¹⁰. In 1945, in Nuremberg (a symbolic place as it is there that the first anti-Semitic laws of 1935 were introduced), an international military tribunal is created and the trial of the twenty-four ex-Nazi officers starts on November 20th, 1945. There, the idea of 'crime against humanity' appears for the first time as a legal concept, to describe the extraordinary atrocities committed during the Shoah. The Nuremberg trials were criticised, mainly because some saw in them a form of 'victors' justice', as double standards seemed to be applied to Nazi officers and Allied forces. To many, the expeditious trial limited the responsibility of the war to the Germans alone, 'omitting' to recall the civilian deaths caused by the bombings of entire regions by France, England and Russia. Crimes committed on the Allied side were simply ignored, 'because their publicity might poison inter-Allied relations' (Overy 2011).

Simultaneously, the idea (or rather the *myth*) of *résistancialisme* (term coined by Henry Rousso), according to which the majority of citizens in allied countries actively participated in the war against the Nazis, becomes very popular. In France particularly, de Gaulle inaugurates

¹⁰The French *libération* leads in certain regions to riots. Female collaboration with the Nazis is sanctioned with a deliberately humiliating measure, shaving women's hair off. The shaved women are accused of *collaboration horizontale*, that is to say having had sexual relations with the enemy. Many men and women are violently attacked during the *savage* purge, often without being formally tried, as a form of release for a frustrated population after the war.

the *Mémorial de la France Combattante* in 1960, and movies like *The Battle of the Rails*¹¹, which narrates the story of French train drivers and their effort to sabotage German plans, are very successful. Around the same time, the majority of the German population denies any responsibility in supporting the Nazi regime. Opinion polls carried out in the Federal Republic of Germany between 1945 and 1949 show that most Germans still consider Nazism ‘a good idea, badly applied’, and 37% of the surveyed say that ‘the extermination of the Jews and Poles and other non-Aryans was necessary for the security of Germans’ (Judt 2005: 58).

A radical change in opinion takes place with the new generation coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s. In France, the publication of Robert Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* in 1973 leads the country to finally evolve and recognise that most people during the war did not resist, but merely were partisans of a wait-and-see policy and did not attempt to go against the Vichy government and the Nazi regime. However, it is really the Eichmann trial that triggers a vast collective reflection on civilians' responsibility in the war—not exempt of guilt. The SS officers' actions cease to be a taboo subject and historical publications by German intellectuals start pointing out the implication, previously categorically denied, of a part of the civilian population in Nazi crimes.

Adolf Eichmann, a German Nazi *SS-Obersturmbannführer* (lieutenant colonel) and one of the major organisers of the Holocaust appears before the court indicted on fifteen different charges on April 11th, 1961, amongst which figure ‘crime against humanity’ and ‘crime against the Jewish people’. The trial attracted twice the number of journalists than the Nuremberg trials and,

¹¹Directed by René Clément in 1946. From 1946 to 1948, it is the *Comité de Libération du Cinéma Français*, founded by resistance fighters, that runs the production of all French movies by allowing or censoring movies judged too linked to the Germans or collaborators. During this period, more than 20 films released focus on the War, many of them on the *Résistance*. The aim is to make realistic movies which exalt heroic values.

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despite the reluctance of Ben Gurion, was entirely filmed and later widely broadcast on TV. It provoked both international controversy and emotion, as viewers worldwide observed Eichmann in his glass booth, listening to an endless series of witnesses describing his role in the transportation of victims to concentration and extermination camps. Eichmann's only defence was that he was only doing his 'duty' and 'following orders' whilst Inspector Less noted that he did not seem 'to realise the enormity of his crimes and showed no remorse' (cited in Cesarani 2005: 244). He was found guilty at the end of an eight-month trial, sentenced to death (after appeal) on March 28th, 1962 and hung on May 31st in the prison of Ramala. His last words are said to have been the following¹²:

Long live Germany. Long live Argentina. Long live Austria. These are the three countries with which I have been most connected and which I will not forget. I greet my wife, my family and my friends. I am ready. We'll meet again soon, as is the fate of all men. I die believing in God. (Cited in Cesarani 2005: 321)

Among the journalists who attended the trial was Hannah Arendt, representing the *New Yorker*. The American philosopher was already known for her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), linking modern anti-Semitism to the rise of totalitarian regimes. She published her report on the trial in the form of five articles in the *New Yorker*, entitled *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Hannah Arendt expected to meet a monster when she arrived in Jerusalem to cover Eichmann's trial. Yet she was not faced with a fanatic or a sociopath but an ordinary, rather narrow-minded civil servant. She draws from this

¹²However, Eichmann's executioner, Shalom Nagar explains he cannot recall him saying anything: ' It was just me and Eichmann. I was standing a few feet from him, and looked him straight in the eye. He refused to have his face covered, and he was still wearing those trademark checkered slippers. Then I pulled the lever and he fell, dangling by the rope' (cited in Ginsberg 2005).

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the conclusion that evil is not the product of specifically malevolent brains but of ordinary people, even simple bureaucrats like Eichmann:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgement, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together. (Arendt1994: 276)

This concept of the 'banality of evil' implies that all men are susceptible to commit abject crimes in certain circumstances, if they have renounced to make use of their conscience and their free will. Arendt never denied that Eichmann was an anti-Semite and maintains that he is fully responsible for his crimes, however she argues that whilst his actions were exceptionally cruel, they were motivated by a wholly unexceptional thoughtlessness. The following passage subtly sums up her view on the matter:

He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing. It was precisely this lack of imagination [...] In principle he knew quite well what it was all about, and in his final statement to the court he spoke of the 'revaluation of values prescribed by the [Nazi] government.' He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical to stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is 'banal' and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace. (287-8)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the controversial problem of remembering a Nazi past changes yet again. Other genocides have by then taken place—in Cambodia, the massacre carried out by the Khmer Rouge regime led by Pol Pot between 1975 and 1979 resulted in the death of nearly three million people; near one million Rwandans died in the Rwandan massacre of 1994—and the question of punishing evil is transformed into that of understanding it. Evans explains that 'the legacy of the Third Reich extends far beyond Germany and Europe, it raises in the most acute form the possibilities and consequences of human hatred and destructiveness that exist, even if only in a small way, within all of us' (2008: 746).

c. Writing From the Point of View of the Perpetrator: a Controversial Reception

*Tous les moyens sont bons pour secouer l'humanité de la torpeur et de l'oubli.*¹³ (Popi 2012: 18)

After the end of the war, there was only a brief period of attention to the Holocaust. The world becoming aware of the atrocities that had been going on in Europe and the realisation of the cruelty of the mass murders were followed by a long years of silence. Survivors were reluctant to speak whilst others were reluctant to listen (Herman 2012)¹⁴. It is only in the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s that this silence is brought to an end. There was a sudden explosion of literature, films and paintings on the Shoah. Levi's *If This Is a Man* (1959) and Wiesel's *Night* (1960) become bestsellers in the weeks following their publication. Museums and memorials are opened, Holocaust Studies courses are organised in universities and the Shoah starts appearing on school history curriculums.

Whilst people are mesmerised by survivors' testimonies, little attention is paid to the perpetrators of the Shoah. The Nazis and SS officers in the 1960s primarily exist through the voice of the victims, and appear in testimonies as dehumanised beings, often lacking a name and rarely given a voice. The first literary work which dares to explore the Nazi as an authentic human figure, as briefly mentioned previously, is Merle's novel *Death Is My Trade* (1952). At a time when bookshops are saturated with publications about the concentration and extermination camps, Robert Merle is aware of the controversy his novel will result in: 'When I was writing *Death Is My Trade*, from 1950 to 1952, I was perfectly aware of what I was doing: I was writing

¹³My translation from French: All means are good to shake humanity out of torpor and oblivion.

¹⁴Here, one needs to bear in mind that I am referring to a 'public' silence. Survivors did write during that period, but were not published on a large scale. Levi's *If This Is a Man* was only translated into English twelve years after the author first published it.

a book that was going against the tide'¹⁵ (2004: I). The novel is the fictional autobiography of Rudolf Höss (alias Rudolf Lang), commandant of Auschwitz. Höss tested and carried into effect various methods to accelerate Hitler's plan to exterminate the Jewish population, particularly introducing pesticide Zyklon B containing hydrogen cyanide to the killing process, 'thereby allowing soldiers at Auschwitz to murder 2,000 people every hour' (Levy 2005: 324). It is both a fictional work and a historical text, divided into two parts. The first recounts Lang's childhood, based on the interviews the psychologist Gustave Gilbert had with Nazi officers during the Nuremberg trials. Reminiscing about his early years, Lang reveals a difficult past marked by the presence of a strict father, an ex-serviceman, transferring onto his son the expiation of his past mistakes. The second part narrates Rudolf's evolution in the Nazi hierarchy. Devoid of any personality, blind follower of a shallow ideology, Lang has no difficulty in becoming a high-ranked officer. Lang seems to have eradicated all reflection from his mind by constantly focusing on his work. Merle explains the following in his preface:

Everything Rudolf did, he did not do it because he was mean, but in the name of a categorical imperative, of his loyalty to his superiors, of his submission to the established order, of his respect for the State. In short, he was a man of duty, and it is precisely this that makes him a monster.¹⁶ (2004: III)

Merle's retrospective narrative, by choosing to link childhood memories to the setting up of death factories, tackles a universal question: what leads an ordinary man to become party to the mass genocide of Jews? The book comes out before Höss' authentic autobiography, published by the Auschwitz International Committee in 1959, which presents an equally cold and remorseless

¹⁵My translation from French: '*Quand je rédigeais La Mort est mon métier, de 1950 à 1952, j'étais parfaitement conscient de ce que je faisais : j'écrivais un livre à contre-courant*'.

¹⁶My translation from French: '*Tout ce que Rudolf fit, il le fit non par méchanceté, mais au nom de l'impératif catégorique, par fidélité au chef, par soumission à l'ordre, par respect pour l'État. Bref, en homme de devoir, et c'est en cela justement qu'il est monstrueux*'.

confession. At the time of its publication, Merle's novel was attacked almost unanimously by the critics. Yet, it remains a reference point for the writing of literary works on the Shoah.

In the 1980s, as we mentioned earlier, the stereotypical image of the Nazi officer is brought down when new historiographical discoveries discredit the thesis according to which the genocide was only performed by high-ranked SS. After Raul Hilberg's publications, amongst others, on the implication in the Shoah of people coming from all spheres of German society, there was a need to deconstruct preconceived ideas on the operating form of the genocide. In light of this, the publication of works written from the perspective of the perpetrator allowed Western society to draw new historical conclusions about the Holocaust.

The popular but reductive opinion regarding perpetrator novels slowly shifted as critics began to see these works as illustrations or evidence of the war rather than immoral texts. Just like survivors' accounts, they are a way to fight Holocaust denial and an attempt to understand the Holocaust, trying to solve the 'Hitler enigma'. Understanding perpetrators is today more than ever urgent. It is a question applicable to all generations. As Littell says, there was the Vietnam War, decolonization, now there is Guantánamo and Iraq. Today, 'we are all, to a certain extent, the perpetrators' (Crom 2007).

Our second chapter seeks to understand why narrating the Shoah from the Nazi point of view is still controversial today, focusing on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in two recently published novels, *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Littell (2008) and *The Zone of Interest* by Martin Amis (2014). Both texts focus on fictional Nazi characters zealously performing their task during the Third Reich, and both resulted in wide controversies over their content. *The Kindly Ones* received the two prestigious awards of the *Prix de l'Académie Française* and *Prix Goncourt* in France, but was deemed a 'strange, monstrous book', 'full of errors and

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anachronisms about wartime German culture' in Germany (Bremner 2006). What particularly disturbs the reader in this novel, more than the constant presence of sexual and scatological scenes (which seem to insult the memory of the dead), is the astounding devotion of a highly intellectual and 'civilised' man to the Third Reich. A human being—in theory admirable and respectable—is presented as a violent murderer, without passion or compassion, without doubts or hesitations, moved by a pure, simple and frightening concern with efficacy. In *The Zone of Interest*, Paul Doll is on the contrary a relatively simple, arguably stupid character; a zealous bureaucrat who, not unlike Eichmann, blindly performs his tasks. This will lead us to focus particularly on how both authors reflect on 'the banality of evil' as defined by Hannah Arendt, and on the way these two different portrayals affect our understanding and our perception of the Nazi figure.

Chapter II: The Twentieth Century's (im)Moral Fascination With Evil

a) The Texts

The two novels I focus on in this analysis of the perpetrator's point of view in Holocaust literature, *The Zone of Interest* and *The Kindly Ones*, were both published recently and were both extremely successful, albeit dealing with complex issues and containing particularly gruesome scenes. It is first important to contextualise them before analysing them in detail.

Born in New York in 1967, Littell spent most of his childhood in France. He then went back to the United States to study at Yale. During an interview with the historian Pierre Nora, Littell explains that it is there that he started planning 'a delirious ten-volume writing project' (Littell and Nora 2007: 31). He later realised that this was bound to fail as he was too young and lacked experience at the time, being only in his twenties. After writing a short science fiction novel, *Bad Voltage*, in 1989, he decided to go and 'work around the world' (ibid). During the 1990s, he worked for the international humanitarian organization Action Against Hunger, mainly in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also in countries like Chechnya, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan. Unlike Robert Merle¹⁷, Jonathan Littell has experienced war and its devastating effects. However, the author does not explain his interest in the Holocaust by his status of witness of world conflicts and genocides. He states that it was Claude Lanzmann's movie *Shoah* that convinced him to go back to his original idea and led him to write his first book in French, *Les Bienveillantes* (2006). The novel narrates the story of a young German jurist who participated in the massacres on the East front.

¹⁷ The author of *Death is My Trade*, see Chapter 1 section C:

Rather than giving them indications on the text itself, the paratext of Littell's novel blurs the expectations of readers who will, from the beginning, be surprised by the memoirs of a former Nazi. Genette explains that the paratext, or all the elements around the text (title, author name, preface etc.) is the means through which a text becomes a book and presents itself as such to a reader, and more generally to an audience (1987: 7). The paratext is a 'threshold' which invites the reader to enter the literary piece (ibid). Interestingly in the case of *The Kindly Ones*, the title encourages a reading embedded in culture as it refers to a Greek myth. The Kindly Ones were first the Erinyes (or Furies), the goddesses of revenge who gained their name after Orestes' trial, who killed his mother to avenge his father¹⁸. The correspondence between the Greek Myth and *The Kindly Ones* leads to one main interpretation, linking Max Aue to Orestes. Charlotte Lacoste sees the novel as a distasteful rewriting of the myth, where Aue becomes a victim of the Erinyes and seeks to be absolved of any blame (2010: 183). Similarly, Pauline de Tholozany highlights the perversity of the title as she explains it highlights the voyeurism of murder and the fact that Aue will remain forever unpunished (2010: 210). Furthermore, the title of each chapter refers to a musical piece which has, at first sight, no particular link with the text itself. The novel is divided into seven parts, 'Toccata', 'Allemandes I et II', 'Courante', 'Sarabande', 'Menuet (en rondeaux)', 'Air' and 'Gigue'. Varying in textual and temporal length, the chapters separate the text in several geographical locations. Similar to a Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy masterpiece, this gargantuan novel requires attentive (although at times tedious) reading. Yet, it has sold to date over a million copies. In the introduction to their collective work on Littell's novel, Barjonet et Razinsky define

¹⁸Orestes kills his mother Clytemnestra after she was unfaithful to Agamemnon whilst he was fighting in the Trojan War. After murdering her, Orestes is harassed by the Erinyes, angry that he killed a member of his family, and has to go to Athens to face justice. Athena intervenes and casts the deciding vote which acquits Orestes, then pleads with the Furies to accept the trial's verdict and to transform themselves into Euripides, 'most loved of gods, with me to show and share fair mercy, gratitude and grace as fair' (Aeschylus 2001: 1003-4),

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the novel as such: 'An extraordinary success both commercially and among critics, Littell has won two of France's most prestigious literary prizes, the *Prix Goncourt* and the *Prix de l'Académie Française*, and the debate that his novel has ignited has made its appearance the most significant literary phenomenon in France in recent years' (2012: I).

In the past, British writer Martin Amis (1949) had already shown an interest in the Shoah and the Nazi figure, having written *Time's Arrow: on the nature of the offence* in 1991, and describing his 1995 *Lionel Asbo: State of England* as a 'Nazi novel'. He therefore wanted to explore the issue once again, albeit George Steiner and Cynthia Ozick's injunctions: 'Don't go there. Don't write about the Holocaust, particularly don't write a novel about the Holocaust' (cited in Amis' interview for Lateline - ABC 2014). *Zone of Interest* (2014) takes its title from the sordid euphemism which referred to a specific part of Auschwitz, 40 square kilometres solely in the hands of one SS commandant. The *Interessengebiet* was the zone of interest in the economic and financial sense of the term. Auschwitz and Hitler are never named in the novel but the dark and violent love story Amis narrates does take place in the extermination camp. The novel is divided into six chapters and an epilogue. Each of the six chapters contains three sections, each of them narrated by a different narrator: *Obersturmführer* Angelus (Golo) Thomsen, a Nazi officer in charge of the Buna-Werke factory; Paul Doll responsible for overseeing the arrival of prisoners at Auschwitz; and *Sonderkommandoführer* Szmul, the head of a team of Sonders, Jewish prisoners who assist the Nazis in killing and disposing of their fellow-Jews—'vultures of the crematory' (Amis 2014: 67). The epilogue, *Aftermath*, is also divided into three sections, all of them narrated by Thomsen, and each devoted to a different woman: Esther, Gerda Bormann and Hannah Doll. The styles of the narrators vary, from the sexually obsessed Thomsen to the zealous Doll and the dark, obscure Szmul who mostly reflects incredulously on his work in the camp. It

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seems the aim of the author is to highlight the absurdity of certain aspects of the genocide. He uses satire and humour, as well as cynicism and the grotesque to achieve his objective of ridiculing the Nazis.

Gallimard, the French publishing house which did not hesitate to publish *The Kindly Ones*, however refused to do the same with Martin Amis' *Zone of Interest* six years later. Used to provoking heated debates with his work, the British writer said he was 'disappointed and surprised' at Gallimard's decision (in Donadio 2014). Whilst he says he does not 'quite understand what motivate[d] it', Gallimard is said to have declined for 'literary reasons', most probably related to the growing climate of anti-Semitism and rising number of racist incidents in France in the last few years (ibid). Mr. Amis' usual German publisher also refused *The Zone of Interest*, claiming he 'had found the main character, Paul Doll, an SS officer, too sympathetic to the Nazi cause' (ibid). Gina Thomas explains this controversy is due to cultural differences, explaining that 'the problem with the novel lies in its inhibited English perception of humour' (ibid). Yet the novel received largely positive reviews, some considering it his best work since his 1989 *London Fields*. Joyce Carol Oates, writing for *The New Yorker*, described the novel as 'a compendium of epiphanies, appalled asides, anecdotes, and radically condensed history', with Amis 'at his most compelling as a satiric vivisectionist with a cool eye and an unwavering scalpel' (2014).

How can one explain such a strong literary enthusiasm for this type of novel? Garnett suggests the idea that these novels reflect the generational change in the approach of Holocaust memory¹⁹, as one no longer wonders 'what happened?' but 'what would I have done?' (cited in Lamoureux 2015: 108). According to Charlotte Lacoste, both these works highlight the new

¹⁹ See Chapter 1 section B.

obsession with the perpetrator present in the media today—an era of '*Nazisme décomplexé*' where the trend is to exonerate the culprits (2008: 25). She warns us against the danger of an era where Evil is not only '*à la mode*', but also highly praised by the critics who swoon at the eloquence and culture of SS officers (ibid). On the other hand, Rony Brauman, one of the founders of Doctors Without Borders and lead doctor on numerous of humanitarian missions in Rwanda, maintains that 'to fight evil, [...] one needs to recognise and name it' (1994: 2). Sue Vice, in her recent article 'Exploring the Fictions of Perpetrator Suffering', approaches texts dealing with perpetrators in a radically different way. Quoting Browning, who considers the 'analytical usefulness' of the study of the Nazi figure, and Holland, who claims 'identifying genocidal behaviour' is a way to 'challenge Holocaust denial and [...] honour the victim's memory' (in Vice 2014: 15), Vice considers necessary and legitimate the aim to understand evil. Whilst she is aware of the moral challenges this involves, she states the issue resides in our reading of the texts rather than in the texts itself:

The philosopher Gillian Rose has argued that representation of the compromised and morally suspect perpetrators constitutes a greater ethical challenge to readers than the contemplation of heroic or sentimentalized survival. [...] I am to follow Rose's approach in suggesting that some of the unease readers may experience on contemplating perpetrators, and the psychic cost of their actions, arises from *the uncomfortable and challenging nature of the self-scrutiny that this entails*. (15-16 emphasis added)

Vice implies that being confronted to works analysing the psychology of perpetrators²⁰ necessarily leads to identifying with the killer and unwillingly recognising in them universal human traits. This chapter, focusing on Littell's *The Kindly Ones* and Amis' *The Zone of Interest*, aims to analyse to what extent texts written from the perpetrator's point of view lead to moral

²⁰Vice focuses on 'literary and filmic representations of the Einsatzgruppen' (2014: 13). The *Einsatzgruppen*, German for 'task forces', were the paramilitary death squads of Nazi Germany responsible for mass killings, primarily by shooting, during World War II.

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problems of identification. The following sections will concentrate on different aspects of the texts, first analysing the portrayal of the *SS* officers in both novels and then focusing on the question of the use of language in both texts.

b) **Portraying the Nazi: the Vulgar Bureaucrat Paul Doll Versus the Sophisticated Intellectual Max Aue**

Recently, many authors and philosophers have developed the idea that a perpetrator resides inside every human being, that is to say that everyone has the intrinsic potential of becoming a killer (Lacoste 2010: 157). At first this seems interesting as it sheds doubt on our own beliefs as to how we think we would have acted during the war, had we been on the 'wrong side' of the conflict²¹. Christopher Browning deconstructs this reflection, as he explains in his conclusion to *Ordinary Men*: 'But those who killed cannot be absolved by the notion that anyone in their situation would have done as they did. For even among them, some refused to kill and some stopped killing. Human responsibility is ultimately an individual matter' (1992: 188). The theory that we are all potentially evil becomes problematic when it leads us to put into perspective and play down the importance of the Nazis' crimes. By ignoring all universal moral value, the perpetrators might be dangerously mistaken to be victims of their own humanity. Levi also warns us of this danger by explaining that 'to confuse [perpetrators] with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth' (1988: 33).

Yet, *The Zone of Interest* and *The Kindly Ones* both seem to have a clear purpose, to reveal to us our own potentiality as a perpetrator. Max Aue, the narrator of *The Kindly Ones*, claims: 'I live, I do what can be done, it's the same for everyone, I am a man like other men, I am

²¹In 2013, Pierre Bayard wrote an essay reflecting on the behaviour he would have had, had he been born thirty years earlier. He described the aim of his work as so: 'I will here, by transporting myself and reconstituting my life, carefully examine the attitude I would have had during the Second World war had I been old enough to participate in it, the choices I would have faced, the decisions I would have had to make, the mistakes I would have made and the faith that would have been mine' (my translation from 2013: 13).

a man like you. I tell you I am just like you' (Littell 2010: 24) and Littell himself says that 'the Nazis were like you and me' (cited in Lacoste 2011: 172). The first person narratives and the intense self-reflection of the characters in both novels seem to want to lead us to following the precept of 'know thyself', aiming at focusing our attention on our likeness to perpetrators as a warning to what we could become. Amis and Littell have however decided to portray two very different kinds of Nazis to encourage us to understand the inner world of the killers. Our question here is to analyse to what extent we empathise with both author's characters, and whether their portrayal does really entail the reader's 'self-scrutiny' as Vice suggests (2014: 15-16).

Let us first concentrate on Amis' descriptions of unpleasant and deviant *SS* officers—two particularly rude and wicked men, yet incredibly ordinary in their attitude and psychology. Paul Doll and Golo Thomsen seem to be a disturbing direct reference to Arendt's theory of the banality of evil. *Kommandant* Paul Doll, described by Oates as a 'vainglorious buffoon' (2014), is an irritating alcoholic middle-aged man, who is overworked by his superiors and whose marriage is falling apart. Whilst participating in the killing of thousands of Jews every day, he faces 'normal' problems which readers can to an extent relate to. Responsible for overseeing the arrival of the new prisoners, Doll is extremely stressed as he is caught between the demand of the Economic Administration Head Office to help 'swell the labour strength (for the munitions industries)' and the demand of the Reich Central Security Department to direct 'the disposal of as many evacuees as possible, for obvious reasons of self-defence' (Amis 2014: 73). The officer therefore faces logistical issues and struggles to take his mind off work and is constantly concerned about the eventual contamination of the water because of the dead bodies, the locals noticing the smell of the furnace, etc. In a particularly sordid passage, Paul Doll sits through a Nazi concert 'estimating how long it would take (given the high ceiling as against the humid conditions) to gas the

audience ' (70). Frustrated, Doll complains of being grounded in Auschwitz 'offing old ladies and little boys, whilst other men gave a luminescent display of valour' (123). This type of remark as well as Doll's Nazi jargon (referring to Jews as 'pieces') is not without recalling Rudolf Höss, the real commandant of Auschwitz. When accused of murdering three-and-a-half million people, Höss replied: 'No. Only two-and-one-half million — the rest died from disease and starvation' (cited in Appleborne 2007). It is also impossible to fail to notice the reference to the insensitive and work-obsessed zealous employee Eichmann when reading the following:

And mind you, disposing of the young and the elderly requires other strengths and virtues—fanaticism, radicalism, severity, implacability, hardness, iciness, mercilessness, und so weiter. After all (as I often say to myself, somebody's got to do it—the Jews'd give us the same treatment if they had ½ a chance, as everybody knows. (Amis 2014: 123)

Amis' other Nazi figure is that of *Obersturmführer* Angelus (Golo) Thomsen, a mid-level Nazi officer in charge of the Buna-Werke factory²². Golo's commitment to the Reich is questionable, yet he fulfils his tasks like any bored and tired employee would do: 'We were obstruktiv Mitlaufere. We went along. We went along, we *went along with*, doing all we could to drag our feet [...] but we went along. There were hundreds of thousands like us, maybe millions like us' (148). His main interest is Hannah, Paul Doll's wife, who he constantly fantasises about in sexually explicit daydreams, 'this would be a *big fuck*' (14)—Oates subtly describes him as 'a compulsive womaniser and a sexual braggart' (2014). In light of this, one could say Amis' novel focuses on two Nazis who are in the end simply a pair of bureaucrats involved in an unexciting love triangle. Paul Doll himself maintains he is normal: 'For I am a normal man with normal needs. I am *completely normal*. This is what nobody seems to understand. Paul Doll is completely normal' (Amis 2014: 32).

²²The Buna-Werke was a factory for making synthetic rubber, built a few kilometres away from Auschwitz-Birkenau. It was at first one of the many sub-camps of the main camp, but became Auschwitz III with its own sub-camps in 1943.

Why choose to associate evil with ordinariness? Lacoste believes that authors like Amis prove to have misinterpreted Arendt's concept of the banality of evil (2011: 173). To Arendt, the banality of evil refers to the ordinariness of Eichmann's acts, and his incapacity to link his daily decisions to the suffering on millions. Arendt explains this by highlighting the fact Eichmann only spoke in 'stock-phrases and self-invented clichés' during the trials and kept repeating the same meaningless sentences, never showing any empathy (1994: 48). She states that for this reason, 'no communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such' (49). Eichmann, through a process of constant self-justification, convinced himself his acts were not criminal but normal. Some misunderstand the banality of the administrative task of Nazi officers and describe evil as banal and ordinary itself. A misguided reading of Arendt's theory is rapidly transformed into a normalisation of the perpetrator. Lacoste highlights that the danger of counterproductive novels like that of Littell and Amis might lead us to follow the same process as Eichmann and perceive what they do as normal (2011: 173).

One could say that perhaps Lacoste's reading of Amis is far too reductive and misses the most interesting question in the novel, that of the sarcasm and irony of the text. In *The Zone of Interest*, the ordinariness of the characters is linked to the grotesque with the aim of highlighting the absurdity of the Shoah. As the book progresses, Doll becomes more and more ridiculous, a 'fat and hairy old housefly (a housefly that is nearing the end of its span' (Amis 2014: 138). He drinks, he smells of vomit, he makes extremely distasteful jokes. A particularly striking example is the following conversation between Doll and a female inmate:

“You seem well enough, my dear. The crewcut's most becoming. And is that your phone number? Just joking. Nicht? Come on, Alisz, let's have a look at you then. Mm. That suit's not much help in these temperatures. You've the 2 blankets, I hope? And you're getting the Tierpfleger ration? Turn around a moment. You haven't lost any weight at least.”

She's short in the Unterschenkel, Alisz, but she has a glorious Hinterenteil. As for the other stuff, the Busen and such, it's hard to say—but there's certainly no argument about the Sitzfläche.

“You're better off here, you know, than in Ka Be. I wouldn't want you in the Typhus Block. Or in Dysentary for that matter, dear.” (127)

Does Amis really expect us to identify with a man who gifts his wife with a recently gassed woman's underwear²³? Unlikely. Paul Doll in *The Zone of Interest* is not normal or ordinary. He is a caricature of normality, and through the same process of self-justification Eichmann followed, comes to persuade himself that he is acting fairly and rationally. Amis is in no way exonerating Nazis; in the novel, the grotesque prevents us from seeing Doll as a victim of trauma trying to fool himself into believing he is a not cruel murderer, on the contrary the sarcasm highlights his perversity. By the third chapter of the book, the unbearable sex jokes and puns on the smell of dead bodies put as much distance between Doll and the reader as they could ever be. Amis explains he 'wanted the irony to be militant, satirical [and] use[d] mockery as well as revulsion' (cited in Lederman 2014). Kakutani adds that Amis uses 'his long-time fascination with bodily functions and the grotesque [...] to give the reader a stomach-turning awareness of the abominations the Nazis inflicted on their victims' (2014). This is particularly visible for example in his insistence on the permanent stench in Auschwitz, about which Doll constantly complains, 'the outright putrefaction of the meadow and pyre' and 'the funk of hunger—the acids and gas of thwarted digestion, with a urinous undertang' (Amis 2014: 99). Using dark humour and sarcasm to describe the horror of the Shoah is not without reminding us of Tadeus Borowski, an Auschwitz survivor who published a collection of short stories in 1959 under the title *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. Borowski describes Auschwitz with disturbing calm and indifference and often uses dark humour to describe unimaginable atrocity. In his most famous

²³I picked [this 2nd garment] up in Kalifornia [...] Albeit controversial, it was a gorgeous article of clothing.' (Amis 2014: 177)

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short story, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, dealing with the excitement of the narrator at the idea he will be able to get food and clothing from the imminent arrival of new prisoners, he describes life in the camps in a very distant, unreal manner:

All of us walk around naked. The delousing is finally over, and our striped suits are back from the tanks of Cyclone B solution, an efficient killer of lice in clothing and of men in gas chambers. [...] But all the same, all of us walk around naked: the heat is unbearable. [...] The heat rises, the hours are endless. We are without even our usual diversion: the wide roads leading to the crematoria are empty. For several days now, no new transports have come in. Part of Canada has been liquidated and detailed to a labor Kommando —one of the very toughest — at Harmenz. For there exists in the camp a special brand of justice based on envy: when the rich and mighty fall, their friends see to it that they fall to the very bottom. And Canada, our Canada, which smells not of maple forests but of French perfume, has amassed great fortunes in diamonds and currency from all over Europe.

Several of us sit on the top bunk, our legs dangling over the edge. We slice the neat loaves of crisp, crunchy bread. It is a bit coarse to the taste, the kind that stays fresh for days. (Borowski in Teichman 1994: 66)

In another story entitled *People Who Walked On*, there is a scene that describes prisoners playing football, and the end of a particularly ghastly paragraph states that 'between two throw-ins in a soccer game, right behind my back, three thousand people had been put to death' (1976: 84)'.

This said, there is indeed a didactic dimension to the book, as Amis does reflect on the general idea of human nature in his novel, particularly through the figure of Szmul, the *Sonderkommando-Führer*, one of the 'saddest men in the history of the world' (Amis 2014: 33). Members of *Sonderkommandos* were Jewish prisoners who were forced to aid in the disposal of gassed bodies. Amis treats this character in a radically different way to the two others, in a sentimental and philosophical tone. The position of *Sonderkommandos* is a complex one to understand and analyse, as they were killed if they refused to cooperate, unlike SS officers who were not under direct threat by their superiors. On this question, Primo Levi's concept of a 'grey zone' between the status of victim and that of perpetrator is interesting. He explains that

Sonderkommandos are within this blurred zone of compromise and collaboration and that readers should hold their urge to judge²⁴. Szmul is a melancholic figure who meditates on the downfall of humanity (in my opinion a rather poor copy of Wiesel or Levi's reflections in *Night* and *If This Is a Man*). In his first appearance, he tells the story of a king who orders his wizard to fashion a magic mirror that 'showed you your soul, [...] who you really were' (33). No one 'could look into it without turning away' (ibid). Szmul says of Auschwitz that 'the KZ²⁵ is that mirror but with one difference [...] you can't turn away' (ibid), implying the Holocaust leads one to face who they are and what they are capable of. Here again, it is hard to identify with Szmul as his situation is so far from the ordinary and the 'death of his soul' way beyond our own range of experience. We do experience sympathy though for the *Sonderkommando*, drowning in pain and suffering—'I am afraid of dying because it is going to hurt' (201).

Similarly, in the last few pages of the book, Golo Thomsen reflects on his time in the camp:

Under National Socialism you looked in the mirror and saw your soul. You found yourself out. This applied, *par excellence* and *a fortiori* (by many magnitudes), to the victims, or to those who lived for more than an hour and had time to confront their own reflections. And yet it also applied to everyone else, the malefactors, the collaborators, the witnesses, the conspirators, the outright martyrs [...] and even the minor obstructors like me, and like Hannah Doll. We all discovered, or helplessly revealed, who we were. Who somebody really was.

That was the zone of interest. (28)

Here again, there is no place to identify with, let alone even remotely even exonerate the Nazi officer. He himself states that him and Hannah Doll, who is incredibly remorseful at the end of

²⁴Let us confine ourselves to the Lager, which (even in its Soviet version) can be considered an excellent "laboratory": the hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary constitutes its armature and at the same time its most disquieting feature. It is a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.' (Levi 1988: 42)

²⁵KZ or Kat Zet — short for "Konzentrationslager," or concentration camp — is Amis's term for Auschwitz.

the book (even though she did not do much to stop her husband from killing millions apart from beating him up from time to time)²⁶, 'were never victim[s]' (299). Golo is aware there is no right to feel commiseration or empathy for either of them, or anyone involved in the Holocaust except for the victims themselves. When Hannah dramatically says she is 'finished' (298) as she is overwhelmed with guilt, Thomsen replies that she hasn't 'got a right to say that' (ibid). Amis does not seek for us to engage in self-scrutiny as he portrays these perpetrators, but aims at highlighting how even the Shoah can have absurd moments. As he states, it is a 'historical' novel, a fictional portrayal of the camps (cited in Cronin 2014).

In *The Kindly Ones*, Littell radically moves away from the image of the idiotic, ruthless SS officer by portraying a highly cultured, intellectual and music-lover Nazi soldier. Max Aue, an accomplished jurist in love with Bach and Couperin and who speaks fluent Greek and Latin, is definitely not an ordinary man. Even the book structure itself is based on a Bach suite, each section given the name of a Baroque dance movement. Littell sheds light on the highly intellectual basis of the Nazi regime, pointing out that whilst the SS officers gassing Jews in camps and shooting civilians in the East might have been mostly brutish employees following orders, the Third Reich elite was partly constituted of clever and sophisticated personalities. Hitler himself is said by historian Schwarz to have 'considered himself an artist, in fact, an artistic genius, and that much can be deduced from this self-image, this overheated artist's ego' (Schwarz Spiegel 2009). It is universally acknowledged today that Hitler was an art lover²⁷, but Schwarz

²⁶Hannah Doll regularly breaks into spectacular crazy fits of rage and at one point in the novel gives her husband a pair of black eyes (Amis 2014: 97).

²⁷Many are the anecdotes where Hitler proved to be obsessed with paintings. Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, an Italian archaeologist who was in charge of leading Hitler and Mussolini around Rome whilst the head of the Third Reich was visiting Italy, reported in his diary that Mussolini got bored and agitated as Hitler seemed to spend a lot of time admiring paintings and buildings (Bianchi Bandinelli 2011: 26).

explains that people have 'underestimated' the consequences of his passion for paintings, and deplores the fact it 'has hardly played a role in the research to date' (ibid). He insists on the key idea that Hitler saw himself as a genius, and that this is what led him to be able to implement concepts like that of the Final Solution during the Third Reich:

The genius has outstanding ideas, and they must be implemented, even if they are completely amoral. [...] Let me say it one more time: The genius was allowed to be above morality. The amorality of the Nazis represents taking this position to its unthinkable extreme. Goebbels wrote the brutal sentence: "Geniuses consume people." [...] Hitler's deluded view of himself as a genius is based on the confused system of thought emerging in the late 19th century, which centred on the idea that a genius—a strong personality who outshone everything else—could do anything and could do anything he pleased. (ibid)

The point here is to understand that the Führer himself was not a banal bureaucrat, quite the opposite. Historians like Schwarz believe that 'in fact, his love of art led directly into the heart of evil', as 'his fanatical pursuit of his own cause, and his self-image as a genius, contributed to his powers of persuasion and, therefore, his success' (ibid).

Littell chooses to explore the link between culture and cruelty. Max Aue might be highly cultured, but he is also a confirmed Nationalist-Socialist and a fervent anti-Semite; a high intellect and a taste for beauty do not necessarily exclude a potential for perversity. Although he explains he does not enjoy the physical act of killing, Max still murders his mother, his best friend, and does not hesitate much when he has to give agonizing Jews the *coup de grâce* after they have been shot and have fallen in a mass grave. This apparent incongruity and paradoxical personality is what renders the character of Max Aue implausible. How can a man fond of poetry and whose biggest regret in life is not having learnt to play the piano kill innocent victims in such a cold-blooded manner? Littell himself explains Aue is 'not, indeed, a plausible character', but that is because 'a sociologically credible Nazi could never have expressed himself as my narrator

does, would never have been able to shine a spotlight on the men surrounding him in the same way' (cited in Blumenfeld 2006). By adding to his fictional Nazi characteristics like sexual obsession and a sordid incestuous passion for his sister, Klaus Theweleit observes that 'Littell needs his Aue to be able to show as many sides of the Nazi countries, the wars, the SS, the extermination camps, cruel violence, sexual violence and bureaucracy as possible' (2008). In light of this, it is not easy for the reader to identify with the narrator and to engage in what Sue Vice names 'self-scrutiny' (2014:15-16).

Yet, the author uses several literary devices with the aim of leading the reader to, if not identify, at least understand the narrator's psychology and motivations for killing. Delorme notes that Littell resorts to the rhetorical device of *captatio benevolentiae* (2010: 33). Trying to dispel traditional stereotypes connected to the figure of the perpetrator, the narrator aims at 'capturing our benevolence' and transform him into an ally. To bring down the prejudices of violence, cruelty and perversity linked to the Nazi, the narrator from the beginning aims at establishing a relationship between the reader and himself: 'Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened' (Littell 2010: 3). This first line, to French readers a relatively obvious reference to Villon's *La Ballade des Pendus*²⁸ (1462), is a way for Max to implore not only pity but also a favour: a request for the reader to consider him as a humble man, to a certain extent a victim of the Third Reich who little by little led him to unwillingly commit atrocities. Whilst Todorov explains that 'a being who only obeys orders is no longer a human' (1991: 180), Aue is aware of his crimes, and his confessions might lead the reader to sympathise and rationalise with his argument in the first pages.

²⁸François Villon is one of France's best-known poets from the Middle Ages, sentenced to death for murdering a priest. This poem is said to have been written whilst he awaited his execution and starts with the famous verse '*Frères humains, qui après nous vivez*' (1961: 64).

Contrary to the usual Nazi stereotypes, the perpetrator in *The Kindly Ones* is sensitive to other humans' suffering. He is able to show *sympathy* towards his victims. In accordance with the etymology of the word (from the Greek *syn* 'together' and *pathos* 'feeling', meaning 'fellow-feeling'), Aue establishes a relationship with the victims of the Holocaust through compassion. At the beginning of the novel, Aue is distressed when seeing the extent of the physical violence inflicted on the prisoners in the Ukraine camps. The digestive problems he then goes through seem to be symptoms of some kind of traumatic reaction to seeing his colleagues beating the Jews. Aue acts as if he is frustrated by his powerlessness and his inability to help the victims. Throughout the novel, Aue experiences frequent diarrhoea and violent, almost permanent nausea which only get better when he leaves the concentration camps. Max himself tries to explain his symptoms:

Before the war, I never vomited, when I was little I had almost never thrown up [...] Hanika [...] suggested [...] I was suffering from an intestinal flu: I shook my head, that wasn't it. [...] I continued vomiting almost every night or at least every other night, right away at the end of meals, once even before finishing [...] the huge retchings that preceded the upwelling of the food left me emptied, drained of all energy for a long time. (Littell 2010: 167)

During his stay at his sister and stepfather's empty manor in Pomerania, Aue is physically stable, but his symptoms return as soon as he goes back to Auschwitz. When he gets to Birkenau, where he is in charge of investigating the nutritional and sanitary conditions of the Jews, the *Obersturmbannführer* Höss is keen on showing him the selection process of the prisoners' arriving at the camp. Max helplessly watches the division of the members of a convoy arriving from France, and as he sees people 'bleeding' and children 'crying', he feels 'the old, familiar nausea rise up again' (607). MacNair explains that whilst Nazis' deeds are most of the time considered 'too callous to have psychological consequences', there is today such a concept as

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perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS), 'a subsection of post-traumatic stress disorder' (2002: 163). Here Max Aue seems to fit Vice's definition of PITS, which states that 'witnessing or fearing one's own or another's death is at the root of post-traumatic stress', leading to 'acute reactions that take place on the spot, such as rages, vomiting, and other bodily responses' (2014: 22). Aue is not the only one in the novel suffering from PITS, as Colonel Paul Blobel²⁹ is taken to hospital after breaking into a fit of rage (Littell 2010: 36). Max Aue also experiences nightmares, hallucinations and 'dissociative mania in relation to shooting when in extremely stressful situations:

'My arm detached itself from me and went off all by itself down the ravine, shooting left and right, I ran after it, waving at 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' (Littell 2010: 130).

In light of this, Aue is not the 'good soldier and [the] true Nazi' who Hilberg describes, he is not in the eyes of *Einsatzgruppen* leaders a man who managed to 'overcome himself', but simply someone 'without self-control' (1985: 210). The moral strain on Nazi officers was something that the hierarchy was aware of, and 'it was indeed the danger of psychological collapse that prompted the development of the more impersonal methods of killing, such as the use of gas vans and then gas chambers' (Vice 2014: 18).

Max Aue's trauma can to a certain extent lead the reader to understand him, or at least approach the Nazi figure with less prejudice and aversion. His unbearable physical reactions combined with his apparent sympathy for his victims make him more approachable and above all

²⁹The character of Blobel is based on the real Paul Blobel, a chief officer in an *Einsatzgruppen* kommando who was relieved of his functions for health reasons.

humanise him. Several passages show Aue trying to express his feelings in a political context that forbids him to do so, like here in his short interaction with a young girl (probably an orphan):

[A]t the edge of a grave, a little girl of about four years old came up and quietly took my hand. I tried to free myself, but she kept gripping it. In front of us, they were shooting the Jews. “*Gdye mama?*” I asked the girl in Ukrainian. She pointed towards the trench. I caressed her hair. We stayed that way for several minutes. I was dizzy, I wanted to cry. “Come with me,” I said to her in German, “don't be afraid, come.”[...] I picked her up and held her out to the Waffen-SS: “Be gentle with her,” I said to him stupidly. I felt an insane rage. (Littell 2010: 109)

In another passage, Max denounces the gratuitous violence of his colleagues, as he intervenes when he sees a fellow SS Turek striking the head of a naked man lying on the ground:

I reached Turek in two strides and seized him roughly by the arm: “You're insane! Stop that at once!” I was trembling. Turek [...] was trembling too. “Mind your own business”, he spat. [...] Bolte had joined me. [...] . “It wasn't your place to intervene”, he reproached me. “But that sort of thing is unacceptable” “Maybe, but Sturmbannführer Müller is in charge of this Kommando. [...] You're here only as an observer”. I was still trembling. I returned to the car and ordered the driver to take me back to Pyatigorsk. I wanted to light a cigarette; but my hands were still shaking, I couldn't control them and had trouble with my lighter. [...] Back in Vorshilovsk, I wrote my report, confining myself mostly to the technical and organizational aspects of the action. But I also inserted a sentence about *certain deplorable excesses on the part of officers supposed to set an example*. (243-244, my italics)

In this particular passage, is it interesting to note that it is unclear if Max is disturbed by the very fact Jews are being killed, or simply by the idea they are not being killed in the *correct* way. Still, what the reader understands from Aue is that although he is a killer, he never enjoys the act of murdering in itself, and certainly does not get any satisfaction from seeing others suffering. Therefore, the reader has a possibly more lenient mindset towards Max when he kills for the first time, as Littell describes a tortured, traumatised but overall humanised murderer rather than a ruthless brute like Amis' Paul Doll. Aue unwillingly executes orders from his superiors: 'I took out my pistol and headed for a group: a very young man was sobbing in pain, I aimed my gun at

his head and squeezed the trigger, but it didn't go off, I had forgotten to lift the safety catch, I lifted it and shot him in the forehead, he twitched and was suddenly still' (128).

Still, in *The Kindly Ones* as in *The Zone of Interest*, it is the grotesque, and even to an extent the obscenity of the characters that prevent us from fully identifying with the Nazi and lead us to a process of self-scrutiny (Vice 2014: 16). Max Aue, when he is not attempting to convince the reader that he was a victim of his own Nazi environment, takes pleasure in describing in detail scenes of degradation and slaughter: 'Jews being lashed with a horsewhip; a baby being cut out of its dying mother by Caesarean section, then smashed to death against the corner of a stove; hanged men with "their tongues sticking out," streams of saliva running "from their mouths to the sidewalk"; emaciated prisoners covered in excrement, forced to defecate "as they walked, like horses"' etc.' (Kakutani 2009). On top of that, we are subjected to pages and pages of Max's grotesque sexual fantasies, from sodomising his twin sister Una, on a guillotine³⁰ (Littell 2010: 491-2) to masturbating on a tree plank in the forest behind an old manor (901). The *captatio benevolentiae* device is an illusion, a trap set by the narrator to soften his own monstrous personality. Similarly, his physical reaction of aversion when witnessing horror must not be mistaken for the feeling of guilt, something he never once expresses. Max Aue is not only a killer involved in the wider governmental murder scheme that was the 'Final Solution', but also an individual psychopath who murders people without being ordered to. Throughout the novel, Aue becomes more and more insensitive, cruel violence culminating in the last chapter when he inexplicably kills his best friend and then nonchalantly carries on his narration. During this cold-blooded murder, Aue shows no hesitation, let alone sympathy for Thomas:

³⁰Littell won the '*Literary Review's* Bad Sex in Fiction Award' in 2009 for that particular scene.

Next to him, I saw a thick iron bar, torn from a nearby cage by explosion. I picked it up, weighed it, then brought it down with all my strength on the nape of Thomas's neck. I heard his vertebrae crack and he toppled over like a log, across Clemens's body. (Littell 2010: 975)

In the end, it seems Littell aims at confirming Dr. Wirths' idea that 'even the men who, at the beginning, hit only by obligation, end up enjoying it (Littell 2010: 623). Dangerously linking the perpetrator to the figure of the Jewish victim who comes out the camps forever changed and altered, Littell however presents us with a purely cruel and deranged human being.

Unlike Vice, I am of the opinion that in terms of Littell and Amis' novels, it is hard to talk about 'self-scrutiny'. The unease produced by these texts comes from the crudity of certain scenes and the perversity of the Nazis' psychology. Paul Doll, Golo Thomsen and Max Aue are not characters readers can relate to in any way, and hence do not lead anyone to self-reflect. On the contrary, they produce a reaction of fear, repulsion and disgust, which is what I believe the authors intended. Whilst they both choose to portray two different types of Nazis—which is interesting from a historical point of view, leading us to reflect on the fact anyone and everyone, stupidly average or incredibly romantic, could have committed atrocities—they are not implying that we could all be perpetrators, but that perpetrators are to some extent like us.

The conclusion these two novels present us with is a valid one: one cannot dissociate an explanation of what we call evil—something that is extremely concrete and tangible, people murdering, raping, torturing...—from the idea that the perpetrators of evil are human beings like everyone else. Perpetrators 'shit, fuck, breathe, like' (Littell 2007 in Centre Roland Barthes) like anyone of us and have the same daily experience of life as the rest of the world. What these books produce is not a troubling sense of identification, but a necessary reflection on the reasons that lead a normal human being to transform into a ruthless monster.

c) **The Language of the Novels: Littell's 'Perverted Fairy Land' and Amis' 'Tinkertoy' Accumulation of German Words**

As mentioned previously, Alvin Rosenfeld qualifies the Holocaust as a ‘linguicide’ as well as a genocide (1980: 115). In their endeavour to dehumanise their victims once imprisoned in the camps, the Nazis ripped them from their belongings, their clothes, their hair and their language. The process of dehumanisation involves destroying the ontological human faculty of language. As Descartes argues, language is essentially human as it is the expression of a uniquely human ability, rational thought (1911: 116). Whilst animals can solely express feelings and instinct, Man is endowed with Reason. The fact that we can express our thoughts is specific to humans, unlike animals who can only express feelings. Without language, man is an animal. This is why Levi often refers to animalistic descriptions of the prisoners in his memoirs, seeing the camps as the ‘bestialisation’ of Man—‘the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts’ (1961: 35).

One of the first changes the prisoners have to face is that they are no longer spoken to as humans. They are not spoken to as individuals, but as a terrorised group of sub-humans (or even non-humans). Correlatively, they also have to understand that they are no more entitled to free speech. There is no communication possible with the *SS*. In *Night*, by Wiesel, the narrator’s father spontaneously asks a Kapo a question, and the latter stares at him for a moment, ‘as if he wanted to convince himself that this man addressing him was really a creature of flesh and bone, a living being with a body and a belly’ (1981: 50). His reaction after that is to deal ‘[Wiesel’s] father such a clout that he fell to the ground, crawling back to his place on all fours’ (ibid). Robert Antelme, in *The Human Race*, describes the cringe and fear of some German women

when they come face to face with prisoners in Dachau. The women are not scared because of the prisoners' physical appearance, but because of the fact one of them *speaks*. Antelme remembers saying the word 'please' to one of his fellow prisoners—polite habit from a long lost world—which inevitably shows he is still human, rendering the vision of the prisoners unbearable to the women. ““Please”, from one of us, must have been a diabolical sound’ he recalls, before saying that ‘in front of this woman, for a moment’ he had ‘behaved like a *normal* man’. The narrator realizes ‘it was the human in [him] that made [the woman] back away’ (1957: 201). Language becomes there the instrument of death and is no longer the mirror of humanity, the destruction of it is concomitant to the destruction of Man. The will for destruction, the ‘I do not want you to be’ idea, is analysed by Antelme as ‘I do not want you to speak, I do not want you to have a voice’ (ibid). Levi, in his famous chapter ‘To Communicate’ in *The Drowned and The Saved* explains the following about a world in where ‘your tongue dries up in a few days, and your thought with it’ (1988: 71):

We immediately realized, from our very first contacts with the contemptuous men with the black patches, that knowing or not knowing German was a watershed. Those who understood them and answered in an articulate manner could establish the semblance of a human relationship. To those who did not understand them the black men reacted in a manner that astonished and frightened us: an order that had been pronounced in the calm voice of a man who knows he will be obeyed was repeated word for word in a loud, angry voice, then screamed at the top of his lungs as if he were addressing a deaf person or indeed a domestic animal, more responsive to the tone than the content of the message.

If anyone hesitated (everyone hesitated because they did not understand and were terrorized) the blows fell, and it was obvious that they were a variant of the same language: use of the word to communicate thought, this necessary and sufficient mechanism for man to be man, had fallen into disuse. This was a signal: for those people we were no longer men. (91)

However, there is another important aspect to Rosenfeld's idea of ‘linguicide’, that of the murder of the German language. The mysterious links between words and acts, language and

behaviour, have always fascinated researchers in the most diverse fields. In the context of the Shoah, language is used to lead individuals to commit acts they would not necessarily do in a habitual context. Many have noted that the Nazis had to 'murder the German language first, associated as it was with high culture, rationality, and philosophical thought' to create 'a new, degraded form of German [...] first in Germany itself, then in the camps, where it found its most brutal expression' (Wallace: Web). The Nazi authorities, with the aim of implementing their extermination policies more easily, not wanting to provoke either the reticence of those involved in the killing or the distrust of the victims, systematically resorted to the technique of coded language. The various operations leading to the physical elimination of victims were concealed with trifling, anodyne official jargon, so as to avoid speaking too openly about massacre and death. Haidu explains 'members of the elite recognize the necessity of apophasis, of not speaking, of silencing certain matters' (1992: 285). All documentation and correspondence was subject to a 'language norm' (*Sprachregelung*), a kind of semantic consensus established by the hierarchy. In the autumn of 1939, *Euthanasie* was in reality the execution of the mentally ill. The 'special treatment' (*Sonderbehandlung* often abbreviated S.B) is the widely generalised euphemism for execution, while 'evacuation' (*Aussiedlung*), 'transportation' and 'resettlement' (*Umsiedlung*), and 'work in the East' (*Arbeitseinsatz in Osten*) become synonyms of murder. A series of compound words appears around the key word *Sonderbehandlung* appears: *Sonderaktion* ('special action'), *Sonderkommando* ('special commando' or 'special chore' in the camps'), all words used in the ghettos and camps. The gassing trucks are also sordidly named *Sonderwagen* or *S-Wagen*.

Instinct, pleasure and horror, hostility and hatred, the stereotypes and degrading image of those considered 'undesirable' are all transmitted through language. In that context, language

becomes a powerful political device, where the instigators of the genocide establish a clear link between the well being of the citizens and the obedience due to them. Military and government officers then trust their leaders, because of the simple fact they are leaders. One ought to obey and to proceed to exterminating the Jews in the name of the authority. Obedience is encouraged through positive terms like 'honour' and 'duty' and is rewarded with medals honouring those who participated in violent acts—'It is—as usual— "morality" that is invoked for the most immoral acts' (Haidu 1992: 286)³¹. It is also reinforced through the destruction of the individual's identity and *amour propre*. The individual should not linger over the consequences of the acts themselves; justification is linked to manipulation and the concealing of reality. Cohen refers to 'the cauterization of conscience by the use of metaphor and euphemism' listing the sordid examples of expressions like 'the disinfectant of lice, the burning of garbage, the incineration of trash' used by the Nazis, who never ordered to 'kill, burn, murder that old Jew, that middle-aged Jew, that child Jew' (1993: 7-8).

To Primo Levi, 'the entire history of the brief 'millennial Reich' can be reread as a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of memory, falsification of reality, negation of reality' (1988: 31)³². The Nazi's new reality is one in which the Jews are not killed but 'purged',

³¹Haidu explains that when analysing Himmler's speeches, 'What strikes the reader with horror [...] is that the very qualities we admire and defend [...] are qualities claimed by his discourse as leading to the Event' (1992: 293).

³²The author of *Wartime* Paul Fussell also interestingly highlights the following in the chapter 'Fresh Idiom': 'The hope entertained by both Allies and Axis that they were conducting the war with maximum efficiency and thoroughly up-to-date methods was nourished by the widespread employment of acronyms and abbreviations. [...] The Germans had great success with GESTAPO (*Geheim Staats Polizei*) for Secret State Police, FLAK (*Flieger-Abwehr Kanone*) for anti-aircraft gun, SS (*Schutzstaffel*) for Protection Service, and of course NAZI, for *National-spezialistische Deutsch Arbeiter Partei*, for National Socialist German Workers Party. (Fussell 1989: 258)

'disinfected'. The genocide was transformed in a non-genocide by the words employed to describe it: killing was no longer killing. He states:

I did not realize--I realized this only much later--that the Lager's German was a language apart: to say it precisely in German, it was *Orts- und zeitgebunden*, "tied to the place and time." It was a variant, particularly barbarized, of what a German Jewish philologist, Klemperer, had called *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, the language of the Third Reich, actually proposing for it the acronym LTI with an ironic analogy to the hundred other acronyms (NSDAP, SS, SA, SD, KZ, RKPA, WVHA, RSHA, BDM, etc.) dear to the Germany of that time.

About LTI, and its Italian equivalent, much has already been written, also by linguists. It is an obvious observation that where violence is inflicted on man, it is also inflicted on language. (97)

Understanding how language functions and how it is able in some cases to submerge part of our personality is a key enterprise in understanding the Holocaust. Our aim here is to highlight how the use of language in *The Zone of Interest* and in *The Kindly Ones* serves the purpose of enabling us to get a clearer idea of the who the Nazis were, as well as reflecting on how this language affects the reader, analysing to what extent it leads them to a process of identification and 'self-scrutiny' (Vice 2014: 15-16).

In Amis' *Zone of Interest*, the author focuses on this idea of language as a primary tool of the Holocaust. The thoughts of the two Nazi officers (as well as that of the *Sonderkommando*) are, as Amis puts it in his 'Afterword', 'garnished' with German words (Amis 2014: 310). Unlike other writers focusing on the Holocaust, Amis does not provide the reader with a glossary of the German terms and their English translation. The characters' use of German seem to have two clear objectives, on the one hand highlighting the 'convoluted, euphemistic constructions that characterized Nazi jargon' (Franklin 2014), and on the other simply, much more controversially, reinforcing the vulgarity and grotesqueness of the SS.

As previously mentioned, Auschwitz and Hitler are never named in the novel. Amis only refers to the *Konzentrationslager* (abbreviated Kat Zet) and the Führer. From the beginning of the book, the reader is faced with German technical words referring to places, military ranking or secret operation—it is the policy championed by the Reichssicherheitshauptamt itself' (Amis 2014: 31). Paul Doll seems to have internalised the official Nazi vocabulary, as he refers to his Jewish victims as 'pieces' rather than human beings—'the pieces have started to ferment' (61). He himself seems to conduct some kind of reflection on the German language, as he explains the irony of the word *Kadavergehorsam* (ideal obedience), which contains the word 'corpse' (222). The language of the Nazi officers in Amis' novel seems to be a perfect rendering of Haidu's concept of 'desubjectification' (1992: 291). He explains the 'desubjectification of the victim was a programmed precondition for his or her victimization, a precondition enabling the perpetrators' enactment of the narrative program of exterminations' (ibid). German becomes a pervert, corrupt bureaucratic language through which Doll stops thinking and reflecting as an individual, and more importantly ceases to see his victims as individuals. Linked to the German jargon is the style in which Doll's narration is written. In the first chapter in which Doll is given a voice, 'The Selektion', the reader is presented with a series of very short paragraphs and even shorter sentences, a distracting use of punctuation with an overload of ellipses and dashes. To add to the cryptic narrative and jargon, Amis chooses to introduce telegrams in this same first chapter:

JUNE 25

BOURGET-DRANCY DEP 01.00 ARR COMPIEGNE 03.40 DEP 04.40ARR
LAON 06.45 DEP 07.05 ARR REIMS 08.07 DEP 08.28 ARR FRONTIER
14.11 DEP 15.05 JUNE 26 ARRIVE KZA(I) 19.03 END (Amis 2014: 21)

The use of German combined with dark humour, also reinforces in the novel the idea that the Nazi officers are vulgar and grotesque³³. Wood describes as 'Monty Pythonesque' the list of the names of the German department (2014). Franklin goes as far as reading some humorous reference to the Kit Kat Club in Golo's way of naming the camp *Kat Zet* (short for *Konzentrationslager*) and finds 'unfortunate' the shortening of the crematorium to 'crema', 'which looks like something you might put in your coffee' (Franklin 2014). Mostly, the sprinkling German language is used in a humorous and satirical manner. One does not need a translator to understand the following:

She ground my face roughly and painfully into the brambles of her Busche, with such force that she split both my lips, then released me with a flourish of contempt. I opened my eyes, and saw the vertical beads of her Ruckgrat, the twin curves of her Taille, the great oscillating hemispheres of her arsch. (Amis 2014: 237)

Even when not using German, Amis mocks the officers when making them use particularly sophisticated or witty expressions in the morbid context of Auschwitz. Paul Doll describes a kimono as 'sapphirine' (179) and refers at one point to 'the Autobahn to autocracy' (184). During a surreal Christmas party, Gerda Bormann is said to be 'hoist[ing] a tureen the size of a bidet' (205), and the names of Nazis' children are changed to suit the Führer: 'I'm sorry I called Rudi Rudi. I mean I'm sorry I called Helmut Rudi.' "Oh, and remember. Don't call Ilse Ilse' (206).

What can the reader make of these ridiculous, zealous monsters? Amis presumably does not expect us to identify with them in any way, rather the opposite. Golo Thomsen states the following in a letter to his lover Anna:

When the future looks back on the National Socialists, it will find them as exotic and improbable as the prehistoric meat-eaters (could they really have existed, the velociraptor, the tyrannosaur?). Non-human, and also non-mammalian. They are not mammals. Mammals, with their warm blood and live young. (162)

³³ Something which German publishers understandably criticised. (See Chapter 2, section A).

The Nazis, to use another one of Thomsen's phrases, are 'beyond assimilation' (161). They are these surreal monsters who indeed existed, but they are neither rational nor logical. Amis' use of language highlights the absurdity of scenes like that of Doll's spoilt daughters moaning about getting a pony in the middle of Auschwitz³⁴. Golo Thomsen and Paul Doll are not plausible, but they are not supposed to be. Amis even provokes a voluntary confusion about what language the characters are speaking in the book. Among the smatterings of German, Thomsen asks himself whether 'the story of National Socialism could have unfolded in any other language' (276), whilst we are indeed reading it in English. The widow Bormann has been told 'English is a hideous language' (282), then again we are asked to 'suspend our disbelief' about what language she said this in (Wood 2014).

Whilst Amis' use of language clearly highlights the key concepts of the desubjectification of the victims and the grotesqueness of the Nazis, Littell resorts to a very different kind of lexical field and wordage to focus on yet other aspects of the Nazi psychology.

The Kindly Ones has often been praised for the precision and exactness of the historical facts and chronology of the novel. Littell explains he spent five years working on the text, and travelled to Ukraine, Russia and Poland amongst other places to obtain authentic documentation. He also spent two years studying the Second World War archives of the genocide, looking at recordings of Nazi trials, administrative and military organisation charts, historical studies, etc. Yet, however impressive the novel is in terms of historical data, much of the controversy the novel is due to the language and style of the author. The stomach-turning violence, page-long incestuous sex scenes and morbid monologues are certainly unsettling. Sandberg writes about

³⁴One could argue that Amis is sometimes excessive, as when he rewrites a famous line from Holocaust survivor and poet Paul Celan in which a Nazi officer 'plays with his vipers' [his victims] (Celan 1948), transforming it into Doll 'playing with his Viper' (237), that is to say masturbating.

Littell's 'aesthetics of excess' (2014 : 236), as the reader is confronted with a novel where the usual distance between the narrator and the atrocities present in Holocaust Literature is completely eliminated. Unlike most survivors' account or even fictional texts, Littell chooses to present to us the horror of the Shoah in the clearest details, rejecting 'the minimal and distanced language, the literary approximation of respectful silence before the grave' (ibid) of texts like Wiesel's *Night* or Appelfeld's *The Age of Wonders*. The very graphic descriptions of the Nazis' crimes, 'the visceral depictions of multiple acts of stupefying violence' (ibid) (both on a personal and political level), led Littell to be seen as a 'pornographer of violence' who offers a failed 'poetics of horror' (Mönninger 2006). Mönninger explains that in scenes 'where skulls burst and bone shards fly, Littell takes great pleasure in violating historiography's visual conventions, according to which the greatest horror is described from a distance' (ibid). It is interesting to reflect on whether this strategy of reducing the reader to being a mere *voyeur* and spectator of violence is simply a distasteful one encouraging an immoral fascination with murder, or has a wider, more didactic objective.

From the beginning of the book, the reader is 'at the heart of terrible things, atrocities' (24), forced to 'look'. Aue warns us in the first pages: 'If you can't bear this you'd better stop right here. I'm no Hans Frank, and I can't stand mincing words' (Littell 2010: 5). This reminds us of what the judge Landau said when the Eichmann trial started, 'Whoever cannot bear this must leave the courtroom' (in Buerkle 2008: 211). The narrator explains he wants 'to be precise, as far as [he] is able to', as he writes 'to clear up one or two obscure points' and 'search for truth' (Littell 2010: 5). Aue announces that he writes to tell the truth, and that he will do so in a raw, unpolished manner 'to get [his] blood flowing, to see if [he] can still feel anything, if [he] can still suffer a little' (12). The use of constant violence is therefore indeed an ambiguous 'curious

exercise' (ibid) in *The Kindly Ones*, as Aue wants to teach us about the Holocaust and proceed to a self-reflection on his emotions.

Aue's first encounter with violence takes place in Lutsk, part of Poland until the 1939 German invasion. As the Soviets were retreating, they shot prisoners:

The corpses were piled up in a big paved courtyard, in disordered mounds, scattered here and there. An immense, haunting buzzing filled the air: thousands of heavy blue flies were hovering over the bodies, the pools of blood, the fecal matter. My boots stuck to the pavement. The dead were already swelling up, I gazed at their green and yellowish skin, their faces gone shapeless, as if they'd been beaten to death. The smell was vile; and this smell, I knew, was the beginning and the end of everything, the very signification of our existence. (pp. 33–4)

Here, the unbearable description of the uncountable bodies, their position, colour and smell, along with the shocking analogy of blood and excrement clearly illustrates Littell's 'aesthetics of excess'. Even more unsettling is Aue's ridiculously inappropriate reflection on humanity as he watches the dead. The repulsion Aue feels when seeing these bodies is strangely associated with a simultaneous attraction to them: 'I wanted to close my eyes ... and at the same time I wanted to look, to look as much as I could, and by looking try to understand, this incomprehensible thing, there, in front of me, this void for human thought' (p. 34).

The next violent scene in the novel actually features Aue as a killer, a participant in the crime, rather than just a witness. Again, 'the experience would be farcical if it were not so horrible' (Sandberg 2014: 241). To start with, after they have been ordered to proceed to executing a certain number of Jews, an SS squad is frustrated to see the spot they had planned on using to kill their victims is already full of 'mouldy, shrivelled almost mummified bodies' (Littell 2010: 83). When they then ask their victims to dig up other burial trenches, the Nazi grow angrier as the men hit a pipe and dig slowly 'with muddy water up to their knees' (84). To top off the

morbid situation, Jews seem to not be dying immediately once shot, and Nazi are sent into the tranches to finish them off:

The Ukrainian finally fired blind, the shot took the Jew's jaw away but still didn't kill him, he was struggling, catching on to the Ukrainian's legs. "Nagel," I said.—"What?" His face was haggard, the pistol hung from his arm.—"I'm going to go wait in the car." In the wood, we could hear gunshots, the Orpos were shooting at the fugitives. [...] Near the ditch, one of the Jews started weeping. (87)

One could analyse every sentence of this scene highlighting its intolerable perversity, yet this passage serves another objective. In the first experience of atrocity in which Aue is involved himself, the 'rational, calculated and impersonal detachment with which Aue observes and narrates his observations' is particularly obvious. During the shooting, Aue realises he notices 'long splinters of very fine wood stuck in [his] fingers, right under the nails' (84). For an entire paragraph, Aue is absorbed in an intense reflection about how 'strange' it is that he did not feel the splinters immediately, proceeding 'to pull them out delicately, one by one, trying to avoid drawing blood' (84). In the next few sentences (right in the middle of the shooting scene) Aue inexplicably decides to tell us about the lovely landscape around him in a romantic, poetic description:

I walked away from the cordon along a gentle incline, through tall weeds and flowers, already almost dry. Farther down began a wheat field, guarded by a crow crucified by its feet, its wings spread out. I lay down in the grass and looked at the sky; my soul spread calm and flat over the field, gently lazing out to the rim of the woods. I closed my eyes. (84)

Whilst Sandberg sees this scene as an example of Aue's symptoms as a victim of trauma—his unawareness of pain when he first got the splinters, according to the critic, 'arises from powerful emotional stress' (2014: 243)—one could say the excessive violence in *The Kindly Ones* combined with Max's attitude to it is a way to point out his extraordinary lack of empathy and compassion.

Throughout *The Kindly Ones*, the violence gets worse as the murderers get ‘used to the procedures’, which is, according to Aue ‘probably normal’ (Littell 2010: 87–8). The more Jews he tortures and kills, the easier it is for Aue to complete orders. As Sandberg states, ‘the extraordinary becomes habitual through grotesque repetition’ (2014: 244). For Aue, the ‘feeling of scandal came to wear out all by itself’ (Littell 2010: 178), he completely internalises the worst evil habits, and it is in full acceptance of it. Here, Aue scandalously loses touch with any human feeling or human empathy, like Eichmann as he was zealously sending trains to Auschwitz. In *The Kindly Ones*, the ‘initial shock, that sensation of a rupture’ associated with witnessing mass execution, death in its absolute form, is replaced with a ‘dull, anxious kind of excitation, always briefer, more acrid’ (179). The simple act of walking becomes unfamiliar: ‘to reach some of the wounded, you had to walk over bodies, it was terribly slippery, the limp white flesh rolled under my boots, bones snapped treacherously and made me stumble’ (128). Estrangement is also visible in Aue's obsession with numbers. ‘Math’, he tells us, ‘is useful; it gives one perspective, refreshes the soul’ (13). In the very first pages, he presents us with the following table:

Soviet dead	20 million
German dead	3 million
Subtotal (for the Eastern Front) . . .	23 million
Endlösung.	5.1 million
Total	26.6 million, given that 1.5 million Jews have also been counted as Soviet dead (‘Soviet citizens murdered by the German-Fascist invaders’, as the extraordinary monument in Kiev so discreetly puts it). (15)

Not only is this a rather unemotional and cold-blooded summary of the war casualties, but Aue then starts an elaborate calculation that goes on for pages, trying to work out exactly how many people were killed per minute: ‘Thus for the overall total in my field of activities we have an average of 572,043 dead per month, 131,410 dead per week, 18,772 dead per day, 782 dead per hour, and 13.04 dead per minute’ (15). Aue's ‘lethal arithmetic’ (Sandberg 2014: 239) as well

as his constant use of German jargon—I believe Littell knows not many readers will often refer to the seven-page long glossary explaining all the different German acronyms—is a way for the author to highlight this idea of the primacy of bureaucracy in the minds of men who lost touch with their own selves.

Whilst this idea of desubjectification of the victims in the novel is an interesting one from the point of the view of the reader who aims at understanding the Nazi psychology—it can also be seen as ethically and morally unacceptable. Just like Lacoste warns us of the consequences of Littell's fascination with evil, the book can lead us to become blasé ourselves, to see violence as a routine procedure. In the novel, one is tempted to quickly skip pages which narrate yet another killing. Atrocity might become familiar, and Aue's insensitivity might correlate with the reader's feeling of 'besmirched numbness before the gruesome passages on annihilation' (Sanyal 2010: 50). Elie Wiesel himself writes that 'records of suffering ever become wholly familiar to us, they will make sense of what we must let remain senseless' (in Whittier Treat 1995: xvii). I understand these concerns, and am of the opinion Littell may have been paradoxically excessive in his own wish of depicting excessive violence, as for the mere sake of the reader's ability to read the novel in one go without cringing and putting it down, some passages could have been moderated. Yet the violence in the book does serve the didactic purpose of showing the reader the Nazis' capacity to completely distance themselves from their victims. Lacoste's view that the violence in *The Kindly Ones* is an immoral and distasteful way of getting the reader to identify with Aue as identification is at the heart of the genre of the novel—she refers to an interesting scene where the mob screams with pleasure whilst humiliating some Jews—is too reductive (2008: 1). Lacoste starts her whole analysis from the postulate that readers see Aue as a 'role

model', however believing we are even remotely similar to Max would be falling into his own trap.

The other idea related to the 'aesthetics of excess' in Littell's novel is of course his graphic sexual fantasies, particularly with his sister. Aue takes pleasure in telling the reader the details of his past incestuous relationship with his twin sister, his sporadic homosexual encounters with other soldiers as well as his taste for particularly violent self-abuse. Perhaps one should be wary in reading Max's homosexuality as an added flaw in the perverse, cruel Nazi. The issue in Max's sexuality is more the violence, the incestuous and the necrophilic tendencies than the fact he is attracted to men. The reasons behind Max's uncontrollable and masochistic sexual urges very obviously add to the many other destructive inclinations of the character, yet I suggest Littell is aware of the trap he is laying for the reader. Just as Max tells us he is just like us and we are no better than him, the extensive description of his past, (particularly his childhood in a boarding school and his relationship with his parents) could lead us to justify his actions because of traumatising memories. In light of this, I choose not to focus extensively on these questions of the language of sexuality as they are beyond the scope of this essay.

Another point that needs to be stressed when commenting on the language of *The Kindly Ones* is the fact the novel presents us with an extraordinary canvas of genres. Littell's aestheticization of horror involves him graphically describing killing scenes as well as romantically depicting the sky, the towns and the landscape around him. Aue goes from writing about serious, rational intellectual considerations about Kant and Nietzsche to talk about 'shit' and blood. The text includes oniric passages—like the one where Aue, wounded in Stalingrad, finds himself in a coma, delirious and lost in his dreams—and other voluntarily grotesque ones—as when Aue pinches the nose of Hitler himself in the bunker at the end of the novel. Montéty

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explains that 'the author included in his work a lot of things he is familiar with: philosophy, history, economics, semiology, pamphlet, polar; poetry too, as when the exhausted soldier contemplates the strangely calm Ukrainian landscape, the evening after the battle' (2007). *The Kindly Ones* seems to be constantly oscillating between the terrible reality of the war and the genocide and fascinating, captivating literary fantasies.

Max Aue, who has a PhD in law, is an intellectual who in his youth 'wanted above all else to study literature and philosophy' (Littell 2010: 10). He has indeed read a lot, and systematically contrasts his sophisticated readings with the dreadful things that surround him:

Leafing through my Plato, I had found the passage of *The Republic* that my reaction in front of the corpses in the Lutsk fortress had brought to mind. (98)

And the Kantian imperative? To tell the truth, I didn't have much of an idea, I had told poor Eichmann pretty much whatever came into my head. (570)

I slept a few hours on pine needles and they read my misshapen book³⁵ until nightfall, forgetting my hunger in the sumptuous descriptions of the banquets of the bourgeois monarchy. (934-5)

Aue admires Coventry Patmore, whose verses he cites '*The truth is great, and shall prevail / When none cares whether it prevails or not*' (760), or E. R. Burroughs³⁶, whose 'profound social reforms' he believes 'the SS should envisage after the war' (823). Intertextuality is omnipresent in *The Kindly Ones*, from rewriting Greek myths to reflecting on classical philosophy, French intellectuals or Russian literature. Aue speaks fluent Russian, regularly quotes Pouchkine and Lermontov and even fancies himself as a Russian literary hero as he challenges another SS to a duel. *The Kindly Ones* produces a unique literary atmosphere amongst the military battles and exterminations, a 'perverted fairyland' (131).

³⁵Aue is reading Flaubert's *L'Education Sentimentale*.

³⁶E. R. Burroughs is an American fantasy and science-fiction writer of the early 20th century. He is best known for creating the characters Tarzan of the Apes and John of Mars. In his novel *Princess of Mars* (1917), the dying planet is represented as a harsh desert where individuals are divided into distinct racial categories.

The novel leads us to the idea of an 'impossible language' (Zenkine 2010: 237), a discourse that belongs to no one, an ontological ambiguity of words that is constantly putting into question the veracity of Aue's narrative. However, Max himself is aware of this unclearness, as he assures that 'All this is real, believe me' (406). The theme of the ambiguity of language is repeated throughout the book, as a friend tells Max about the Hitlerian bureaucracy: 'It's normal that orders are always vague: it's even deliberate, and it stems from the very logic of the *Führerprinzip*. It's up to the recipient to recognize the intentions of the one who gives the command, and to act accordingly' (548). In another ironical passage, Max watches Vöss, a passionate linguist, unable to speak coherently as he is dying:

I watched Voss: the strange, terrifying sounds, forming almost by themselves, kept coming out of his mouth, which was working convulsively. An ancient voice, come from the beginning of time; but if it was a language, it wasn't saying anything, and expressed only its own disappearance. (317)

This novel—resembling an epic in terms of its length and its huge geographical scope—raises the obvious question of the plausibility of the narrator due to its constant references to literary texts, the confused switch to dreams, memories and fantasies, and the journey of Max himself as he goes from Stalingrad to Berlin to be 'in the right place at the right time' whenever extraordinary events happen. *The Kindly Ones* is arguably not a historical novel *per se*. As Littell explains, he gets under the skin of the perpetrator to use Aue as a narrative device through which he wants to present certain realities of the war:

Perhaps I can reply with a quotation from Georges Bataille: "The perpetrators have no voice, or if they do speak, it is with the voice of the state." Perpetrators do speak—some of them at great length, even. They even give one the actual details of precise events. But the more I read the perpetrators' texts, the more I realized they were empty. I would never get anywhere by sticking with classic fictional recreation, with the omniscient author, mediating as Tolstoy does between good and evil. The only option was to put myself in the perpetrators' shoes. And I knew that place. I had hung out with killers. I started with what I knew, which is to say myself, with my own ways

of thinking and seeing the world, and decided to put myself in the shoes of a Nazi.
(cited in Blumenfeld 2006)

Through the exercise in style of using different genres, Littell can touch on different themes and different questions, without necessarily worrying about plausibility. As he says, 'You cannot create a novel if you insist solely on plausibility. Novelistic truth is a different thing from historic or sociological truth' (ibid). Through the grotesque and violent scenes—for example that of the hanging of Wolf Kieper where he watches 'horrified, his engorged penis, still ejaculating' (95)—Littell show us the extent of the perversity of the Nazis. If one cannot bear *reading* about these atrocities, how can one truly empathise with the victims who had to *endure* them? Through the romantic genre and the pastoral scenes, Littell's aestheticisation of National-Socialism and anti-Semitism also serves a greater purpose of understanding the link between culture and barbarism³⁷. The Shoah proved the failure of German, European, Western culture, which to some remains forever disqualified; thus, Adorno claims that 'writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1949: 19). Littell precisely illustrates what Wiesel wrote after the war: 'in truth, Auschwitz signifies not only the failure of two thousand years of Christian civilization, but also the defeat of the intellect that want to find a Meaning—with a capital M—in history' (1982: 183).

To conclude this reflection on language in the two novels, one could say both Amis and Littell carefully structured their texts to highlight one key aspect of the Nazi psychology, that of the desubjectification of the victim, the process leading to a complete lack of empathy and compassion towards the dead. Amis does this mainly through the extensive use of German words and acronyms as well as a very laconic style, whereas Littell presents us with a character for

³⁷Littell's first impulsion to write *The Kindly Ones* was a picture of Zoya Kosmodemianskaïa, a young soviet hung by the Germans in 1941: 'At the time, it really disturbed me: the gap between this girl's beauty and the atrocity of the scene, of this corpse in the snow, torn apart by dogs. It's a horrific picture, but a beautiful one.' (Littell for Georgesco 2006).

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whom the process of desubjectification is at the beginning more difficult, as Max Aue seems to find it hard to cope with the extent of the cruelty he witnesses. Amis uses humour and the language of the grotesque and Littell presents us with romantic yet extremely morbid scenes: two ways to describe monsters. Ridiculous on the one hand, extraordinary cultured on the other, Paul Doll and Max Aue are still monstrous; both authors aim at pointing out deranged psychopaths can be anyone and everyone. In light of this, Amis and Littell do not aim at leading the reader to what Vice considers a process of 'self-scrutiny' (2014: 15-16), their argument is not that we are like monsters but precisely the opposite, that monsters are like us.

Conclusion

This work set out to explore the moral issues produced by fictional texts about the Holocaust written from the point of view of the perpetrator. First, it aimed at highlighting how and why the literature of the perpetrator emerged and the issues it presents us with. Furthermore, it specifically aimed to analyse to what extent texts written from the perpetrator's point of view lead to moral problems of identification. My analysis has led to several conclusions.

Firstly, as I have argued, perpetrator novels do not necessarily lead the reader to identify with the killers, nor do they provoke any empathy towards them. Despite the SS officers' insistence on repeating they are perfectly normal, the texts do not encourage any kind of affinity with them. In Amis' *The Zone of Interest*, the grotesqueness and the vulgarity of Paul Doll prevent the reader from relating to this alcoholic, sexually frustrated man who is simply a caricature of normality. In Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, the scarily rapid transformation of a jurist into both a zealous officer who gladly shoots his victims in the head and a cold-blooded murderer who kills both his mother and his best friend overshadows any of the narrator's poor psychological justification for his actions.

Not only does the narrative language of perpetrator literature not lead to empathy with murderers, but, on the contrary, it provokes completely the opposite reaction, the aversion of the reader towards the Nazis. My dissertation focused particularly on the language of the two novels, which heightens the cruelty of the Nazis. Alongside the extreme violence of certain scenes and the shocking nature of many distasteful jokes, both authors write in such a way as to insist on the lack of compassion of these men. I referred to several examples which highlight the SS officers' ability to 'desubjectify' their victims. The constant use of German bureaucratic jargon and sordid humour in *The Zone of Interest* depict Paul Doll and Golo Thomsen as monsters entirely deprived

of pity. In *The Kindly Ones*, it is the corruption of the intellectual, the immoral exploitation of Greek myths or classical music which, juxtaposed with stomach-turning scenes of agonising Jews, render Max Aue a dehumanised monster. These men have lost what Rousseau saw as an inherent human quality; 'a natural repugnance to seeing any sentient being, and principally our fellow men, perish or suffer' (1988: 6). If anything, these novels lead the readers to distance themselves even further from the *SS* officers.

The portrayal of the 'normal' Nazi and the cultured murderer aims at showing us that perpetrators are to a certain extent like us, not the other way around. Monsters can be brutish employees or doctors in Law, they are still monsters. Some say these books lack a 'moral dimension' (Van Goethem 2013), that they only show one face of humanity and omit to mention the idea that one always has the freedom not to comply, a right that some did find the courage to exercise. However, this is precisely the objective of these novels, to depict these monsters and recognise that they really existed (and still do). These descriptions of the Nazi psychology are certainly fictional, but they are based on thorough historical research and various documents left by the *SS* (be it the archives of Eichmann's trial or diaries pointing out Hitler's love of art), presenting us with reasoning and behaviours that did exist. The idea that perpetrators are first and foremost normal human beings is particularly interesting in the case of the Second World War given the scale of the Nazi machinery, the sheer number of people involved in the genocide. If we eliminate the small minority of natural psychopaths who happily joined the *SS* and the few people who resisted the regime and refuse to comply with orders, we are left with thousands who willingly became involved in the Shoah. What these novels achieve is to come to an understanding of how some people become, be it subconsciously or not, horrifying murderers. As George Bataille states:

We are not only possible victims of the perpetrator: the perpetrators are our fellow men. We must ask ourselves: is there nothing in our nature that makes such horror impossible? And we would be correct in answering: no, nothing. A thousand obstacles in us against it [...] Yet it is not impossible. (1991: 17)

I hope this dissertation has managed to illustrate the relevance and the legitimacy of perpetrator narratives, and would like to end it by quoting Bataille again:

There is in a given form of moral condemnation a fleeting means of denial. All in all, they say: this abjection [the Shoah] would not have happened if monsters had not been there. This virulent judgement removes monsters from the possible. They are accused of being implicitly beyond the borders of the possible; instead it should be seen that their excess specifically defines this limit. And it may doubtless be that, to the extent that this language is addressed to the crowd, this infantile negation seems efficacious, but it fundamentally changes nothing. (cited in Surya 2002: 360)

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