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"Pour Les Morts": Tedium, Identity, and the Ethics of Representation in *Les Bienveillantes*

Holocaust literature generally draws the narratives of victims into the discursive center, giving a voice to the voiceless. This summer, I researched Jonathan Littell's 2006 novel *Les Bienveillantes* (or, in English, *The Kindly Ones*), which was a sensation upon its publication in France, winning prestigious awards and causing the presses to temporarily stop printing *Harry Potter* in order to meet demand for Littell's novel. This work was intriguing to me because it subverts the more common victim-as-eyewitness frame. While Littell's dedication reads "Pour les morts," or "For the dead," his novel tells the story of Maximilien Aue, an SS officer—a perpetrator rather than a victim. This unusual angle does more than merely push the empathic capabilities of the reader to their limits. Littell opens his novel from Aue's point-of-view with the words, "Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened" (3), implying the reader's complicity through a direct address that is both relational and possessive, doubly denying the desire of the reader to distance themself from Aue. The act of continuing to read (presuming that the reader does in fact continue) then unwittingly becomes the tacit granting of permission to Aue to tell his story. As such, the reader is implicated in the (re-)enacting of the events via Aue's text, which in effect revives ghosts only to watch them get killed all over again in the present moment.

The call to readerly complicity on Aue's part suggests Hannah Arendt's banality of evil, an expression she coined in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. For Arendt, the evil that Eichmann exemplifies is not born of any underlying sociopathy or even of fanatical devotion to the Nazi ideology, instead emerging from his very averageness—his intellectual dullness, his easy willingness to do his job and follow unthinkingly, with no moral impulse to check him.

The banality of evil as Littell imagines it is slightly different. Aue gestures towards his likeness to the rest of humanity (as embodied in the reader) as making him so thoroughly interchangeable that culpability becomes a fraught question, writing,

> But the ordinary men that make up the State—especially in the unstable times—now there's the real danger. The real danger for mankind is me, is you. And if you're not convinced of this, don't bother to read any further. You'll understand nothing and you'll get angry, with little profit for you or for me. (21)

But he himself is far from average, intra- or extra-textually. To begin with, he is portrayed as exceptionally intellectual. Debarati Sanyal's "Reading Nazi Memory in Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*" explores the novel's dialogue with an earlier French literature of complicity. By alluding to such French authors as Villon, Baudelaire, Camus, and Céline, Aue demonstrates his erudition, and it is this intellectualism, Sanyal argues, that prevents Aue from truly committing to a single ideological stance. Consequently, the mode of complicity in *Les Bienveillantes* is ironic; while the text appears to demand that the reader identify with Aue, it undermines this identification through its portrayal of Aue's internal schism—his own inability to fully identify with himself. This is made most obvious in Littell's portrayal of Aue's sexuality. While Aue does not characterize himself as gay, he only has sex with men, claiming that no woman could supplant his twin sister Una, and that the very attempt to replace his incestuous love for her with something more ordinary would be somehow wrong. Moreover, in making love to men, he can pretend he *is* Una. Aue admits that

> the matter of the fact, I'm not ashamed to say, is that I probably would rather have been a woman. Not necessarily a woman living and functioning in this world as a wife or a mother; no, a woman naked, on her back, her legs spread wide open, crushed beneath the weight of a man, clinging to him and pierced by him, drowning in him as she becomes the limitless sea in which he himself is drowned, pleasure that's endless, and beginningless too. (23)

It must be said that Aue's sexuality is itself not particularly unusual insofar as having sex with other men goes—it can be categorized as deviant only in the sense of having departed from the arbitrary social standard of heterosexuality. But the idea of heterosexuality as the default still exists as a kind of cultural fulcrum about which other sexualities must pivot. That Littell depicts his protagonist who at first seems to make an appeal as an archetypal everyman as falling outside of that norm is significant; but Aue falls even outside the norms of homosexuality with his professed incestuous desire for Una and his projection of her onto himself in the sex act. Getting to the point of real identification with Aue, then, is a process that obstructs itself, requiring the reader to hold paradoxically intimate and distant perspectives, to reconcile the profoundly deviant (statistically and otherwise) and that which Aue proclaims to be ordinary to the point of universality. The banality of an idiot à la Eichmann no longer seems applicable, especially given how integral Aue's intellectual stance is on both his sexual proclivities and his political position as a National Socialist. Indeed, what ideology he has is entirely reliant upon his intellectual leanings, which allow him to rationalize genocide as a necessity for manifesting the will of the Volk. Aue expresses disdain for those Nazis who take vulgar pleasure from the act of killing or who capitalize on the opportunity to violate the Jews because of the markedly unintellectual rationale underlying their actions—so too does he disdain those whose motives seem, if not corrupted and base, then empty of thought entirely. His own disinclination toward the killings is rooted in the visceral rather than the analytical—he repeatedly expounds upon the increasing severity of the psychosomatic symptoms of trauma he undergoes, spending pages in unsparing detail on his vomiting and bowel movements.

It is this same intellectualism that allows Aue to expound upon the bureaucratic intricacies of orchestrating atrocity at length in like manner to his depictions of his various bodily grievances. For all that Aue does engage in murder directly and witness various events in the field, he is essentially a paper pusher for the regime. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that much of the novel (which is approximately 900-1000 pages, depending on language and edition) is devoted to a deluge of dry bureaucratic information. It would prove unwieldy for obvious reasons to attempt to quote this in its entirety. We may gather Aue's own attitude from a smaller part, however, when he writes,

> We babble, we simper, we flounder through an insipid morass made of words such as glory, honor, heroism—it's tiresome, no one says anything anymore. Perhaps I'm a bit unfair, but I dare to hope that you understand me. The television bombards us with numbers, impressive numbers, in the seven- or even eight-figure range; but who among you has ever seriously stopped to think about these numbers? (13)

He then proceeds to crunch the numbers over the span of several pages, protracting the process far more than would be expected in any other novel. Besides the historically authenticating role this plays, it hints at something beyond banality in the horror of mass murder: that people are not made abhorrent by how easy or pleasurable it is to kill, but by how difficult and tedious it is—how so many of them must choose to make a protracted effort through number crunching,

through layers of red tape and stacks of documents to arrive at such an end. Narrative tedium shows genocide to be an intellectual and careerist enterprise, not a cartoonishly sadistic one.

Yet this seems to run counter to the claims of gratuitous violence and grotesque portrayals of sex in *Les Bienveillantes*. How can a novel mesh the sensationalized with the boring? The answer is through patterns of repetition, vacillations between the overwrought and that which would not seem worthy of having been wrought to begin with. C. Namwali Serpell's description of the experience of reading Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, a differently violent text, in her book *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* is also quite applicable in describing the experience of reading Littell's work: "Erased by our weariness and boredom with the same thing again and again, the words diffuse from the paper. First you stop caring about the descriptions and then you stop noticing them. Eyes skim along the lines. Finally, only the blank page lingers" (208). To Serpell, the specific effects of repetition—semantic generation, in which repetition reinforces the reality of what is described, and semantic satiation, in which repeated words begin to sound unreal and gradually become meaningless—create this effect, simultaneously establishing and bleeding palpability from the narrative world.

In Littell's novel, this takes on a new significance. While Ellis's novel is certainly violent and deviant, the violence it depicts is generic; Littell's is historically accurate, even if the principal character through which the violence is viewed is not. The reader is gradually inured to the horrors Littell writes of; this then becomes mimetic of their suggested complicity. The true horror is the infliction of apathy, that polar opposite of compassion and ethical action, on the reader through the very act of their sustained reading. In equating the act of continued reading with the act of perpetration, Littell poses a troubling counter—what I would call the ultimate prompt to ethical soul-searching on the part of the reader—to the commoner question of why we enjoy violence so much: why do we persist in the perpetration of evil when even the visceral pleasures of it have been drained away?

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