Pasquale Pasquino and Stefano Poggi

On

Jonathan Littell’s The Kindly Ones

The City of Grief
Pasquale Pasquino

Per me si va ne la città dolente,
per me si va nell’eterno dolore,
per me si va tra la perduta gente
Dante, Inferno, canto III, 1-3

[Through me you reach the city of grief.
Through me you reach eternity of pain.
Through me you reach the region of the lost]

In his book Economic backwardness in historical perspective (1962), Alexander Gershenkron included a number of masterly essays of economic history that are based entirely on literary sources. In his novel The Kindly Ones (Les Bienveillantes, published in French in 2006; published in English translation in 2009) Jonathan Littell has written a kind of history book, and a highly successful one, that takes the genocide of the Jews in central Europe as its theme, as recounted by an imaginary character, Maximilien Aue, an SS officer at the time of the events in question.

The remarkable success of the book in terms of sales, particularly in France, has also provoked considerable debate and criticism. There is no need to pay any significant attention to those who accuse the novelist of failing to be original by simply narrating history. The self-appointed border guards in this case (perhaps in all cases) appear rather ridiculous and simply transfer the good old rules applying to private property and the territorial state to areas where there are no borders and no border guards. Those who specialize in the Shoah may perhaps be able to complain about the lack of originality in Littell’s work, but they can hardly denounce his account for any lack of verisimilitude; nor resent the fact that their special area of study has been

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opened up to hundreds of thousands of readers who can thus discover for themselves the results of detailed research largely written by and addressed to a very limited range of specialists. And that a work of literature cannot, or should not, speak the truth is a thesis so excessive and absurd that there is no need to try the patience of the reader by discussing it any further here.

Littell’s book actually recounts three stories: the story of the persecution of the Jews in the eastern territories of the Third Reich; the story of Nazism seen from within, from the point of view of members of the SS; and finally, the story of the narrative voice of the protagonist – the story of a psychopath who survives the self-destruction of Germany, the tragic moments of which the book itself illuminates.

With regard to certain parts of the text, we are dealing with a major French literary work by an American who learned the language of Pascal at school, has studied at the University of Yale, and has worked as a war journalist, in the period before and after the production of his substantial novel. The chapter on the battle of Stalingrad and the final description of the inferno in Berlin, with the invading Russians and the flooded tunnels of the underground, are quite remarkable, as is the account of the protagonist’s flight from the pursuing Bolsheviks in Pomerania, and the description of Aue’s delirium as he sinks, half-dead, into the waters of the Volga.

As far as the first of these stories is concerned, the story of the genocide, I have to say that, as I read the book last summer when I was in Berlin, not far from the Nazi bunker in Reinhardtstrasse, an edifice that is too costly to demolish and thus still bears witness to the German military madness of the time, there were many occasions when I was tempted to lay the book aside. The brutality of the account is often unbearable. Yet on every such occasion, I was overcome by a painful and distressing urge to carry on reading, especially when I realized that I could not possibly turn away from the description of the Majdanek Camp, where my father somehow managed to survive, or of the forced marches of the prisoners, as they were moved from the Polish camps and driven towards Germany in the face of the advancing Red Army. I am not sure whether I would have persevered to the end, if it were not for my curiosity to learn about what those days and nights were like, about the terror and the incredible hope, about the tenacious desire to live of the individual who gave me my name. Our young people really ought to read certain extracts from Littell’s book in school, just as the students in German schools are taken to visit the former concentration camps that are now museums of memory and horror. It is unnecessary to add any further comments about this part of the book. The author relates what happened. And shows why those who experienced these things, whether they were lost or saved in the end, were unable, with very few exceptions, to relate the events in systematic detail with the precision of a Nazi officer, precisely on account of the pain that lacerates the body and devastates the spirit.

The story of Aue – a fascinating German word that evokes the verdant stretches that run along the river, like the particularly beautiful wooded ones on the Rhein between Bingen and Mainz – is, I repeat, the story of a psychopath, a cultivated and reasoning, though unreasonable, man, an individual who has become unbearable through a trail of completely neurotic relations that bind him inexorably to a dead and idolized father, to a mother who is hated precisely because she has married again, to a twin sister from he cannot separate himself, a predicament that has left him paralyzed.
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with a morbid lack of affect. This is the part of Littell’s book that inspires much less interest, and that one could simply skip, even though it has probably encouraged some (perhaps many?) to read his book in the first place.

The more complex question, and in my view the one that is more worthy of discussion, concerns the way in which Littell describes the world of the Nazi officers. This dimension of the narrative appears to me to be the most original and the one most deserving of serious debate. Some have claimed that the image of Nazism presented in the novel is basically false. But the arguments advanced by certain critics of the book, such as P. Schoettler and C. Lanzmann, seem weak and insufficiently developed. For in point of fact, we can now draw upon some excellent research into the cultural mentality of those who belonged to the SS, such as the monumental contribution of Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002). Fifty per cent of the members of the organization that planned and directed the extermination of the Jews in Europe held doctorates, usually in the field of law or political science, that had been awarded by what were then amongst the finest universities of the world. Reinhardt Heydrich, who is cited by Wildt, testifies to the fundamentalist ideology that was shared by this peerless group of criminals: “Were we to fail to fulfill our historical duty through being too objective and too humane, then no one will make allowances for mitigating circumstances. They will merely say: they did not fulfill their duty to history.”

Various people, including Littell himself in an interview with the historian Pierre Nora, have compared the perspective of the book with that of Hannah Arendt’s controversial and much-quoted work on the Eichmann trial. Nonetheless, we ought to distinguish the cowardly conduct of the Italians, the French, and almost all the Germans during the extermination of the European Jews, from the active and deliberate participation of the Nazi officials in the genocide itself. In the debate surrounding the events of the Shoah some have sought to construct a *demi-monde* between the sphere of the egregious criminals at the top, such as Himmler or Heydrich, and the sphere of those rather lower down, a kind of purgatory of evil which would include the executors of the act rather than the original creators and instigators of the idea, such as the real Eichmann or the imaginary Aue. But this clever multiplication of the sites and topography of morality is unconvincing, and seems more like a rhetorical exercise than something that really provides a niche of partial salvation, like an extreme attempt to remove the absurdity and criminality involved from the realm of the irrational. It remains a fact that the officials and functionaries of the SS firmly believed, without deviating even for an instant, in the untruths of their own delirious ideology; they entertained no periodic doubts or suspicions about what they consciously and deliberately perpetrated; and as Germans educated in Kantian morality, here emptied of all content, they were able to invest the evil they did with moral value.

In the case of Aue himself, it has no sense, it seems to me, to speak of the “banality of evil.” The peroration with which the novel begins, “Frères humains,” in what is perhaps a clever literary move, sounds like a vacuous *captatio benevolentiae*, like trying to scale mirrors that show nothing but images of corpses. “The search for truth” that Aue lists amongst the indispensable needs of human life (p. 5) has never bothered him during the entire war and the extermination of those who are now his dead and butchered brothers. This “decent” Nazi, who reacts bodily to the collective madness by bouts of
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dysentery and nausea, never hesitates mentally even for a moment. He does not understand anything that his linguist friend Voss says to him. Aue is a well-educated and cultivated bourgeois individual who dislikes shooting a disarmed “enemy,” but never doubts that he has to do it, that someone has to do it in order to purify Germany and the world from the contagion of the Jews. What is more, he wants to do it efficiently, but he has not grasped that Nazism is bearing his chosen country, which he decides to embrace by leaving Paris, towards a collective suicide. Those of my generation, who watched Rossellini’s film Germania anno zero, or of the younger generation, perhaps, who have seen Oliver Hirschbiegel’s film Der Untergang [Downfall], will recall these things. In the last analysis, we are talking about a rationalist who unveils the utter destitution of purely instrumental reason. What strikes us most of all here is not the banality of evil, but a limitless insensitivity in the face of reality (as one example among many, we might consider the murderous ideological tirade recounted on pp. 566ff. of the novel, or the terrifying description of the collective cupio dissolvi). But also struck by the fact that this Nazi by vocation (one that springs perhaps from his morbid relation to his father) possesses an extraordinarily acute sense of survival, even to the point of killing his best friend, something that saves his own life and makes him even more odious in our eyes.

Aue, the narrator of the novel, is a counter-witness, like Littell. He can tell the whole truth – and I am speaking of the author of the novel who gives his protagonist a voice – because he was not there, because he has read these things rather than seen them, or has seen what still transpires at the margins of a prosperous Europe in this new millennium of ours, from Bosnia to Kosovo to Chechnya. Voss, perhaps the only positive figure in the novel, attempts to explain to Aue, the well educated Nazi, and to the other members of the SS, that there are no races, but only languages. But Voss simply runs up against a wall of ideological delusion that cannot hear or respond to argument. Here we discover a noteworthy difference between the way in which the Nazis and the Israelis define what it is to be a Jew. Throughout the long debate about the fate of the Bergjuden of the Caucasus, the Nazis show no interest whatsoever for religion (or for language) but simply cling to their repulsive myth of race. They cling to an imaginary phantasm in which they all, with the exception of Voss, actually believe, like the deluded individuals who once believed in witches and burnt heretics alive. Yet religion, or at least the absence of a different religion, is a crucial if not the only criterion for being accepted into the nation of Israel.

With regard to the “moralization” of genocide, a perfect example of a contradicio in adjecto, Herlineide Pauer-Studer and J. David Vellemann have written an important, as yet unpublished, article in which they present a disturbing thesis that is nonetheless worthy of careful consideration, and one that Littell’s historical novel appears to take up at least indirectly. Rejecting the philosophical habit of appealing to those forms of argument where “the Nazi” regularly plays the role of a simple target to be refuted – a rather simple exercise after all – the authors claim that the “execution of the Jews was regarded by the executioners themselves not as a guilty excess but rather as an onerous duty.” Aue believes in his task without attempting for a moment to evade its demands. He simply wishes to perform it in a clean and “rational” manner. Why kill the Jews, or cause them to die of hunger, without first exploiting their forced labor for the benefit of Germany?

In the short chapter which opens the novel, entitled “Toccata,” we hear the echo of this idea: “I do not regret anything: I did my work, that’s all “ (p. 5) – the need to
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obey and fight; “I realized that thinking is not always a good idea” (p. 6) – the need to abandon reason; “What I did, I did with my eyes open, believing that it was my duty and that it had to be done, disagreeable or unpleasant as it may have been” (p. 18) – this is how it is! And the conclusion that appeals to complicity: “But you should be able to admit to yourselves that you might also have done what I did” (p. 20). Yet this insults the memory of all those, more numerous than one would think, who throughout the years of the Nazi terror actively opposed it, and finally defeated it.

The memory of the horror and the memory of the honor of those who struggled against the latter must be preserved and maintained against anyone who would draw a shameful veil of oblivion over these things. For this reason, *The Kindly Ones* should remain the sad and pitying deities of remembrance that is incumbent upon future generations. As Adriano Prosperi has recently written: “Auschwitz signifies the Shoah: the Pillars of Hercules through which the whole of humanity has entered on a new history, has discovered the devastated passage to a new world [...] For anyone who still wished to live in a world where we breathed an air thick with the ashes of the millions who died, there was only one commandment: to remember [...] It is a duty that is intolerable and unavoidable” (*La Repubblica*, 19. 12. 2009).

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**On Avoiding Psychoanalytic Short Cuts**

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More than twenty years ago now, in Germany, at one of those innumerable interdisciplinary conferences that typically involved the regular participation of philosophers and architects, I got talking with an Italian colleague who was then engaged as a teacher in a rather prestigious Hochschule, and learnt some interesting things about the reconstruction of Germany after the end of the Second World War – things which are of course well known to specialists in the field – and was very struck by what he told me. The reconstruction of the cities in that part of Germany that was administered by the Allied powers, of cities such as Munich, Cologne, Frankfurt, and Düsseldorf, actually started rather quickly, at the end of the 1940s, as the Cold War began to set in and the Morgenthau Plan was set aside and replaced by the Marshall Plan. All this was possible on the basis of plans for reconstruction that had already been prepared by the technical departments of the Ministries of the Third Reich at the very beginning of the war. For it was expected that the eventual victory destined to furnish the basis for the “new order” in Europe would exact a high price in terms of the destruction of many buildings and the loss of innumerable forms of infrastructure. The post-war reconstruction would provide an opportunity for reorganizing the entire fabric of the urban system, and for developing the new industrial apparatus in a radically mod-
ern way at the same time. One could have said that the bombing unleashed by the Lancasters, by the B17s and the B25s, wreaked destruction on such an enormous and systematic scale that it made the massive program of reconstruction easier and faster than originally envisaged. Yet, as it was pointed out to me, this would have been impossible if the plans prepared by the Nazi regime had not also recognized the need for an adequate degree of standardization not only for the projection and construction of new buildings, but also in relation to the various accessories – and in particular the fixtures – required by the latter. We are all now familiar with the windows and sliding windows that, depending on the three possible positions of a single handle, can be open, closed, or half-open. In the aluminum version (introduced in the 1950s) these fixtures are generally known as “Schüco” windows.

Obviously, it is not simply the example of the Schüco fittings – we only have to think of the Maggiolino Volkswagen – that allows to recall the nature and number of all these German projects and patents that successfully survived the collapse of the Third Reich to become part of everyday life for people in Europe – and not only in Europe – in the decades following the end of the Second World War. These are all examples of a specifically functional, and in a sense rather “aseptic,” approach that facilitates the creation of products which can succeed in a market much broader than the initial one precisely on account of their superior technical quality. This is how the specifications of the DIN (the Deutsches Institut für Normung) have come in the course of time (indeed from 1917 onwards!) to represent a paradigm of innovation and reliability insofar as the norms rigorously observed by the producer provide an effective guarantee for the user and buyer.

It might seem somewhat strange or even absurd that a reading of The Kindly Ones should inspire reflections on such matters, or prompt us to recall circumstances that could well be thought essentially irrelevant, or at least marginal or insignificant, in the face of the momentous events that Jonathan Littell’s book vividly evokes as the convulsions of a demented self-destructive venture. In describing these things the author is undoubtedly highly effective in a number of passages, even if we must sometimes describe the style as somewhat Grand Guignol, even obviously rather derivative – when it assumes the character of cameo and pastiche – considered in the context of the enormous and extremely variable contributions that have been made to this area on the part of literature and film. But there are some good reasons for thinking that our initial approach to these questions is perhaps not so strange or absurd after all. I would like to say something more about these reasons here.

The fundamental theme of Littell’s book concerns the persistence, the effectively indestructible character of that dark side of the human soul that found such a tragic manifestation in the butcheries perpetrated by the SS. Littell’s book confronts the reader with a veritable excess of horror. A horror that grows with the pitiless advance of the Nazi war, with the radical tragedy of the Shoah, witnessed and narrated here not through the eyes of the victims, but through the gaze of a butcher committed to the efficient fulfillment of his appointed tasks, of a man who is not some dull slow-witted executant, but an intellectual whose official tasks do not appear to impair his refined artistic sensibilities. The reader feels himself increasingly caught up in all this horror, and not as a hardened or uninvolved spectator. For the reader cannot experience the horror without being provoked into certain reactions that, in an fervid
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unfolding dimension that is at once obscure and violent, can also lead to an effective mechanism of self-identification with the protagonist, thus revealing something that, for Littell, is both true and unmentionable. And indeed it is impossible to deny the fascination, even if it runs the whole gamut from radical condemnation to revanchist fidelity to the cause, that continues to be exerted by an almost mythic obsession with the phenomenon of Nazism. And it is also true that this clearly indicates that the events in question have once again revealed something that “nests deep within the human soul,” as we would once have put it, something that seems impossible to eliminate: none of us can simply remove or detach ourselves from these events, as Littell indicates right from the opening observations of the book, since what transpired at this time – a prologue to further tragedies because it replicates one and the same single tragedy – could have involved ourselves as actors in the story too. It is difficult, indeed impossible, to obliterate these events from the history of Europe, where the traces they have left remain profound, but also where they have sown seeds that still continue to germinate and grow. Littell has worked for years in humanitarian organizations that have witnessed new massacres at the end of the century, from Bosnia to Chechnya. With his own eyes he has seen the horrors of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, and seen them with the eyes of a Jewish man born in New York in 1967 within a family not itself directly touched by the Shoah. The Nazi horror is not, in his eyes, a unique phenomenon. And for the same reason, he is clearly convinced that the victims too can one day become the persecutors, a hostage to the violence that has always marked the history of humanity.

In its extreme, indeed excessive, style and tone, Littell’s book thus poses the question of the survival, of the stubborn persistence of forces whose source seems to be rooted in human nature itself, over and beyond the contingent historical occasions on which these forces come to manifest themselves. But he takes things – this is the point – to an extreme by deciding to compose the autobiography not of one of the innumerable grey functionaries of the Nazi extermination machine, but of an almost caricatural figure with traits of demonic perversion. Perhaps some tragic family event has marked the childhood of Maximilien Aue, has distorted his personality, has driven him to incest and led him to live out his own homosexuality in masochistic terms, has turned him into a matricide and a murderer, in some descent into hell that is intimately bound up with his advance through the ranks of the Nazi hierarchy charged with administering “the final solution.”

In giving all this space to the personal-psychoanalytic dimension, Littell ends up rather losing sight of the continuing importance of the fundamental problem that confronts us when we attempt, as we must, to understand what Nazism itself was and why it emerged. The problem, namely, of explaining “the form of life and thought” of Nazism as a combination of organized technological efficiency and extreme violence, as something that is far more than simply a particular episode in the history of Europe or the world, as something that was capable of provoking certain perhaps ineliminable urges in the human soul, but the understanding of which cannot be reduced to a recognition of the inevitability of periodic eruptions of those urges. For the recognition of such inevitability in fact encourages an apologetic approach with many different aspects to it, but is insidious in its slow but inexorable evacuation of the actual problem – a by no means secondary factor in the fascination that the phenomenon of Nazism,
this undoubtedly powerful and evocative complex of images and rituals, still continues to exercise in a whole variety of contexts.

Nazism was not simply a case of criminal folly, a species of nihilistic mysticism, or a neopaganism designed to revive ancient myths and to exalt Teutonic culture as a pure expression of the Aryan race against the weakening influences of the Jews. For Nazism also signified the systematic use of scientific techniques and applications not only in the industrial planning of military capacity, but also in the plans for reorganizing the entire social and economic life of the German nation, and indeed of Europe as a whole. Maximilien Aue is also a cog in this mighty machine, a machine of death and destruction that is designed and activated in order to provide the basis for creating the “New Order” of “The Thousand Year Reich.” To turn Maximilien Aue, as Littell does, into an ideal type of a B movie representation of a high-ranking SS officer complete with military cap and collar sporting the Totenkopf, a man of cold and pitiless sadism, effectively results – even if we naturally acknowledge the particular demands and requirements of literary creation – in an almost grotesque simplification of an extremely complex phenomenon, and thus potentially allows us to combine the radical condemnation of Nazi atrocities with the almost comforting thought that a commitment to Nazism and an active involvement in the functioning of the machinery of extermination can largely be explained by reference to psychotic factors. It is clear that the terms of the question are thereby reversed: the “obscure forces,” the bestial urges, the entire gamut of deviances and so-called perversions – and Maximilien Aue furnishes abundant examples in this regard – have unfortunately represented, and will continue to represent, a constant aspect of human nature. And there is no doubt that the unleashing of violence, however it takes place and whatever the relevant causes may be, creates the conditions in which these “obscure forces” can find ample expression. This is what happened with Nazism, just as it has happened and will continue to happen in situations where violence, let alone a violence so clearly and deliberately unleashed, comes to prevail. But the phenomenon of Nazism is hardly exhausted in the permission to kill that is accorded to groups of psychopaths, given that the numbers of “willing butchers” who came from the sphere of completely normal life were far greater, and above all even greater the numbers of Germans who gave their express support to Hitler’s regime.

Nazism, or National Socialism (and it is no accident that in the former DDR the preferred expression was always “Hitlerian Fascism”), was something rather different, more extensive, and more dangerous: it was the destruction of the individual sphere as the required premise for creating a “new order” envisaged as a system of domination. We know very well how Nazism regarded the legitimation of its recourse to violence in terms of all possible forms of institutional hypocrisy, but what must always be recognized above all, what must never be forgotten, is that this violent destruction of the individual sphere, which thus functioned as the midwife of the “new order” of “The Thousand Year Reich,” was sustained by the conviction, in those who conceptualized it and delegated others to realize it – “knowledge is power” – that it did not spring from a vague longing to return to some primordial world dominated by pure force, let alone that of the “blond beast.” The conviction in question was very different: it was the conviction that it is possible to intervene in human nature, and to shape it with the instruments of scientific knowledge itself, by studying and analyzing
the biological, physiological, and also psychological components in order to guarantee effective access to the real and authentically natural foundations of human nature, and thus – and there is much one could say here about the roots of more than one current version of ecological thought! – to return this nature to its original dimension. This conviction of the “technical” possibility of intervening in human nature in a way that is guaranteed by the development of scientific research and is capable of reaching down into the deepest roots of this nature thus gave rise to the very necessity of doing so, and this went hand in hand with the evocation of the “nomos of the earth” on which the society of the “new order” would find its new and in this case also more natural foundations. It may be said that all of this well known, just as it is well known that there were many engineers, jurists, economists, doctors, scientists and scholars – from the world of the natural sciences as well as that of the social and human sciences – who contributed their technical knowledge to the reorganization of German society after 1933, and who consciously and eagerly collaborated not only in the planning of the country’s military forces and capacities, but also in what would become, once the “final solution” had been accomplished, the construction of a new Germany, with its new rational and efficient cities, full of linear buildings properly equipped with fixtures of the “Schüco” type.

The brilliant jurist Maximilien Aue also belongs to this group, and there are many pages where the author makes full use of the vast amount of reading and research that inspired him to reconstruct the imaginary autobiography of his protagonist, and to present Aue to us as he strives to provide an intellectual justification of his work, as a technician, in support of the Nazi project. Yet these are not I think amongst the most successful pages of this monumental work, even if in certain cases the discussions between Aue and some of his interlocutors away from the front – with the linguist Voss, for example, in the course of what might be described as the “Georgian idyll” of the first part of The Kindly Ones – do effectively communicate a sense of the unreality involved in someone expatiating on questions of linguistics, ethnology, and art history in the interludes of what has already become a ruthless war of extermination. It is this same sense of unreality – in those sections of the book that are perhaps the most successful parts of a narrative that pays the inevitable price for its excessive length – that the reader experiences when, again in the interludes of the appalling tragedy of which he is the protagonist, Maximilien Aue finds himself convalescing far from the front, far from the massacres, momentarily returned to a normality that can no longer be normal at all: the true, terrible reality, and normality, is that of the horror from which nothing now separates him, which is a part – and a dominant part – of his life itself. But – indeed – it is a kind of unreality: that of an incubus that will not vanish, of a hallucination without end. From the point of view of literary success, the imaginary autobiography of a high-ranking SS officer is a very effective conceit, though not without some danger of pandering to a public whose taste is now so accustomed to the strongest fare that it is readily drawn to the coprophilic excesses so amply provided by The Kindly Ones. From the point of view of genuine understanding on the other hand – to ignore certain conceits such as the deus ex machina role ascribed to the industrialist Mandelbrod, with the undeniably Jewish name, who reminds us of the managing director of “Spectre Inc.” in the film versions of Ian Fleming’s work – we are faced with the real risk of failing to make the effort of continuing to study the reasons why
National Socialism could emerge and grow in the heart of Europe, and enact the primal scene of a politics whose first and fundamental imperative is the manipulation of the masses, masses that must be fed on myths (in the soft version too) and sated with the modern (and now technological) version of panem et circenses.

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