

S. S. Officers as Tragic Heroes? Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* and the Narrative Representation of the Shoah¹

In 2006, Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* won the two highest French literature awards, the prix Goncourt and the award of the Académie Française, and sold more than 700,000 copies within a year. However, the French Littell-mania was as short as it was intense; *Les Bienveillantes* dominated the public scene for a season, then quickly disappeared from it.² As was to be expected, the fictive autobiography of an SS-officer drew much attention in Israel and Germany, but the comments tended to be critical. Journalists accused Littell of voyeurism, some even of revisionism.³ The reception in North America bore the imprint of Puritanism: first fascinated with the business success, the American press showed itself, once the novel was translated, disgusted by its obscenities.⁴ The last decades have not seen many books which made such a splash, provoking both enthusiastic praise in one quarter and utter condemnation by others. In this article, I would like to take a second look at *Les Bienveillantes* and consider it as an attempt to narrate the Shoah.

The fundamental issues of historical representation, such as its perspectivity, ethical implications, and ultimate failure to map the past fully, are exacerbated in the case of the Shoah. For no other time does the point of view matter more, towards no other dead is felt an equally strong debt, and no other event has proven more elusive. Lyotard compared the difficulty of representing the Shoah to the attempt to measure the force of an earthquake, which has destroyed all measuring instruments.⁵ While the "vehicle," a natural disaster, may infer a wrong note for the "tenor," man-made crimes, the simile nicely grasps the aporia, which may be only matched by the need to represent the Shoah somehow.

Many approaches have been suggested. Most prominent, but also much-misunderstood, is Adorno's *dictum* that any art after Auschwitz is barbaric.⁶ Less radical, while still close to this position, are voices, which privilege the documentary mode, in particular the testimony of eyewitnesses.⁷ On the other hand, J. E. Young has drawn on historical narratology to show that there is no objective memory, but that any account of the past is narratively encoded.⁸ Therefore, he argues, literary

accounts of the Shoah are legitimate; yet, writers ought to make conscious use of literary devices. While emphasizing that respect for the victims imposes limits on the emplotment of the Shoah,⁹ I share Young's position. As David Carr has shown, the process of narrativization starts with the experiences themselves.¹⁰ The writer thus only continues or, in the case of fictional narratives, transforms a process linked inherently to experiences.

In this article, I shall argue, against the tide of criticism that *Les Bienveillantes* offers a particularly interesting and highly reflective case of narrating the Shoah.¹¹ Littell's novel balances factual information with aesthetic presentation and creates a strong mimetic dimension, while, at the same time, marking its own constructedness. In a first step, I will demonstrate that Max Aue uses the *Oresteia* to stylize himself as a tragic hero. The presentation of the Shoah as a tragedy has prompted critics to accuse the novel of revisionism. However, such a reading overlooks the fact that the narrator's self-fashioning is implicitly challenged by the narrative (I). Additionally, the use of tragedy, together with other plot-types and metapoetic passages, makes *Les Bienveillantes* a hyper-coded narrative (II). At the same time, *Les Bienveillantes* is remarkable for its "experientiality," which ought not to be mistaken for pornography, but fulfils important narrative functions (III). In combining factual evidence with various aesthetic modes of presentation, Littell fully explores narrative's potential to represent the Shoah and its unrepresentability (IV).

I. Max Aue, an Orestes *redivivus* — the Shoah, a tragedy?

This section traces the references to the *Oresteia* in the *Bienveillantes*¹² and shows how the entanglement of personal with political history makes the myth of Orestes serve the exculpatory purposes of the narrator. While much of the scandal triggered by the novel is due to a tendency to identify the position of the narrator with that of the author, I believe that the narrative itself reveals the questionable character of a tragic emplotment of Nazi crimes.

In interviews, Littell pointed out that it was the *Oresteia* which provided him with a structure for his narrative.¹³ *Les Bienveillantes* shares its title with the third play of the Aeschylean trilogy and throughout the text Orestes is evoked as a foil to Max Aue who, like the tragic hero, kills his mother and her new husband. Right at the beginning, Aue is even explicitly called Orestes when he introduces Thomas, his "Pylades," to the writers of *Je Suis Partout* in Paris (60).¹⁴ At Stalingrad, an edition of Sophocles brings to his mind a school performance of the *Electra* in which he starred as the heroine. In the separation of Electra and Orestes, Aue saw a mirror to his separation from his twin sister Una after their incest had been discovered. The role allowed him to feel one with Una again and during the staging

he identified so strongly with the role that he forgot his surroundings and blurred the boundary between fiction and reality: ". . . et la boucherie dans le palais des Atrides était le sang dans ma propre maison" (381). (" . . . and the butchery in the House of Atreus was the blood in my own house" (411). The merging of art and life in Aue's consciousness anticipates his matricide in which he will re-enact the myth of Orestes.

Shortly before Aue murders his mother, he visits an exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris where he comes under the spell of a statue of Apollo, the very god who, in Aeschylus, orders Orestes to kill Clytaemestra (462). After the murder, two detectives who try to convict Aue are on his heels all over Europe, from Berlin (674f.; 686f.; 693f.; 885-9; 893) to Budapest (735f.), to Gleiwitz (786f.), to Pommerania (815), just as the Erinyes chase Orestes. In one of their interviews, they confront the Orestes *redivivus* with a detailed reconstruction of the murder, suggesting that his mother bared her breast to remind him of her breastfeeding and to soften him (887), and, although Aue scores a rhetorical point by saying that he was allergic to his mother's milk (see also 343), the allusion is obvious: In the *Choephoroi*, Clytaemestra appeals to Orestes: "Hold, my son. Oh take pity, child, before this breast / where many time, a drowsing baby, you would feed / and with soft gums sucked in the milk that made you strong" (896-8).¹⁵

When Aue reports to Himmler about the investigations of the police, he remarks: "On m'accuse d'être un assassin, mon Reichsführer. Ce serait comique si ce n'était aussi tragique (692)." ("They're accusing me of being a murderer, my Reichsführer. It would be comical if it weren't so tragic.") (753). Aue uses the epithet "tragic" to highlight the absurdity of the accusations levelled against him, but the reference subtly undercuts his claim by evoking the genre of the text on which the murder of his mother is modelled. The same tension can be found in the entire text: Aue never admits to the matricide, neither as narrator nor as character, but the narration permits no doubts. The evidence collected by Weser and Clemens is overwhelming. By the time they declare that their French colleagues have found a bloody suit of German fabrication in the bath of his mother (693f.) — more precisely, a suit made by Aue's tailor, as they are still to learn (735) — the reader cannot evade the conclusion that Aue killed his mother.

Since the narrator does not admit to the deed, however, the semantic potential of the tragic foil is not activated for Aue's family story. Instead, it is transferred to the second plot line, the history of Nazi Germany. This transferral is facilitated by the close interweaving of both story lines, one fictional, the other factual: Max Aue's career as S.S.-officer is an attempt to follow in the footsteps of his father

who joined the Nazi-movement right from the beginning. When Aue, just after his baccalaureat, sees Hitler for the first time, he notes strong similarities between the Führer and his father and suspects that, were his father still alive, he might be in Hitler's place (430). Later, the downfall of the Third Reich converges with the deconstruction of the image of the father. Back from Budapest, Aue finds Berlin badly damaged and, in his mail, a letter with a photograph featuring his father (736-738). However, the picture is blurred and makes Aue recognize that he has no clear memories of his father. The myth of the father crumbles together with the buildings in Berlin, just as it has paved his way into the Nazi world.

Most importantly, immediately before the matricide, Aue compares the situation of his family with that of Germany, at the middle of the narration and the nodal point of the family plot, mass execution and matricide are juxtaposed with one another:

J'éprouvais à quel point je peinais sous le poids du passé, de blessures reçues ou imaginées, des fautes irréparables, de l'irrémediabilité du temps... En travaillant, je pensais: au fond, le problème collectif des Allemands, c'était le même que le mien; eux aussi, ils peinaient à s'extraire d'un passé douloureux, à en faire table rase pour pouvoir commencer des choses neuves. C'est ainsi qu'ils en étaient venus à la solution radicale entre toutes, le meurtre, l'horreur pénible du meurtre. Mais le meurtre était-il une solution? (484f.)

I could feel the extent to which I labored under the weight of the past, of wounds received or imagined, of irreparable mistakes, of the unredeemability of time... As I worked, I thought: in the end, the collective problem of the Germans was the same as my own; they too were struggling to extract themselves from a painful past, to wipe the slate clean so they'd be able to begin new things. That was how they arrived at the most radical solution of them all: murder, the painful horror of murder. But was murder a solution? (526)

The plot also closely interweaves matricide and mass execution, for, right after the murder, Aue accepts a new assignment to Himmler's personal staff, which makes him work on the administration of the concentration camps.

The parallel between matricide and mass execution, created by Aue's reflections and the plot, allow the narrator to apply the model of tragedy to the "Endlösung." In one passage, the narrator even mentions the Greek term *dike*, which stands at the core of the *Oresteia* for the retaliation the Germans have to fear after their impending defeat (722).¹⁶ The tragic interpretation of the mass execution is unfolded in the chapter *Menuet (en rondeaux)* (542-46). In reflecting on a non-commissioned officer who participated in the euthanasia of the disabled and of wounded German soldiers, the narrator claims that the Nazi crimes were not inhuman. In his argument, he draws on two aspects of Greek tragedy, first the prominence of necessity:

S'il était né en France ou en Amérique, on l'aurait appelé un pilier de sa communauté et un patriote; mais il est né en Allemagne, c'est donc un criminel. La nécessité, les Grecs le savaient déjà, est une déesse non seulement aveugle, mais cruelle. (543)

If he had been born in France or America, he'd have been called a pillar of society and a patriot; but he was born in Germany, and so he is a criminal. Necessity, as the Greeks knew already, is not only a blind goddess, but a cruel one too. (589)

Furthermore, he replaces a Christian ethic, which focuses on intentions with the tragic ethic of responsibility:

Ou bien alors il faudrait considérer ces choses d'un point de vue moral non plus judéo-chrétien (ou séculaire et démocratique, ce qui revient strictement au même), mais grec: Les Grecs, eux, faisaient une place au hasard dans les affaires des hommes (un hasard, il faut le dire, souvent déguisé en intervention des dieux), mais ils ne considéraient en aucune façon que ce hasard diminuait leur responsabilité. Le crime se réfère à l'acte, non pas à la volonté. (545)

Otherwise, you would have to consider these things from a moral standpoint not Judeo-Christian (or secular and democratic, which amounts to exactly the same thing) but rather Greek: for the Greeks, chance played a part in the doings of men (chance, it should be said, often disguised as an intervention of the gods), but they did not consider that this chance diminished one's responsibility in any way. Crime has to do with the deed, not the will. (592)

Together with legal positivism and the dissolution of morals in power politics, the ideas derived from Greek tragedy enable Aue to belittle the crimes of Nazi Germany. The tragic focus on consequences instead of intentions ties in nicely with a concept of justice that is defined not in terms of morals but of power, while the tragic notion of *tyche*, combined with legal positivism, minimizes individual responsibility. Nevertheless, Aue accepts the persecution of Nazis by the Allies, albeit not as superior justice, but as an expression of power politics, while mocking the remorse displayed by Speer against which he pits Eichmann's dictum: "Les regrets, c'est bon pour les enfants" (624). "Regrets, that's for children" (679). Thereby, Aue casts himself as a hero who withstands the assault of *tyche* in tragic grandeur.

The Shoah is often considered a tragedy, albeit most often with regard to the victims of Nazi Germany. Viewing the perpetrators as tragic heroes is not unprecedented, though. Under the title *Zweierlei Untergang: Die Zerschlagung des Deutschen Reiches und das Ende des europäischen Judentums*, Andreas Hillgruber published a treatise on the German defeat in the East, together with a shorter essay on the genocide of the Jews. Unlike Ernst Nolte, Hillgruber does not deny the uniqueness of the Shoah,¹⁷ but his book, published in 1986, was fiercely discussed in the German "Historikerstreit." Several of his ideas, such as the critique of the

assassination on the 20th of July and the assertion that the long resistance of the Wehrmacht in the East saved the lives of many Germans, are open to challenge, but the true scandal is the explicit presentation of the fighting and the expulsion in the East as tragedy and its implicit juxtaposition with the downfall of Europe's Jewry.¹⁸ As critics noted, such a tragic view of Nazi Germany is tasteless and only possible if the war in the East is decontextualized.¹⁹

The tragic interpretation of German history is pushed even further in *Les Bienveillantes*. While the historian casts one strand of the war as tragic, Aue emplots the execution policy as tragedy. Giorgio Agamben notes that this was a common rhetorical strategy and also conviction of Nazi perpetrators:

And yet it is certain that at least from a certain point onward, they invoked it not so much to escape condemnation (the objection was already dismissed during the first Nuremberg trial, given that the German military code itself contained an article authorizing disobedience in extreme cases) as, rather, to make their situation appear in terms of a tragic conflict, which was to their eyes clearly more acceptable. . . . The Greek hero has left us forever; he can no longer bear witness for us in any way. After Auschwitz, it is not possible to use a tragic paradigm in ethics.²⁰ (97ff)

One does not have to share Agamben's gloomy judgement (which smacks, itself, of tragedy) to see the inappropriateness of tragedy as a plot type for the Nazi crimes.

The critique leveled against the supposedly revisionist tendency of *Les Bienveillantes* rests on an identification of Aue's tragic self-fashioning with the message of the novel itself. Littell has thus been accused of attempting to exculpate Nazi criminals. While Littell has done little to challenge such reproaches in interviews, this reading of *Les Bienveillantes* commits one of the most fundamental and, as any teacher of literary criticism will know, most common errors of interpretation: the identification of narrator with author. Of course, we readers are fully exposed to Max Aue, who is an extremely strong narrator, but this in no way justifies assuming that his view is the position propagated by the novel. What makes *Les Bienveillantes* such an interesting attempt to depict the Shoah lies beyond the intentions of the narrator Max Aue.

Littell's novel itself invites the reader to question the casting of the mass executions as tragic. Modeling the killing of six million Jews on the murder of Clytaemnestra by Orestes may not only seem inappropriate, but the very juxtaposition is flawed, for the Germans lack a motive that is comparable to the revenge of the father and the divine order in the Greek myth. Even in Aue's family history, such a motive is absent — unlike Agamemnon, his wife has not murdered Aue's father. The differences from the myth undermine the mythical emplotment of *Les Bienveillantes*; the myth itself deconstructs its application.

Moreover, Max Aue is an unreliable narrator.²¹ To start with, he is a very complex character, very far from a real person.²² On the one hand, Aue is well educated. He is not only familiar with the ancient tradition — besides Herodotus and Plato, he has also studied Tertullian and can converse in ancient Greek with an old “mountain Jew” — but he also knows Lermontov and reads Blanchot as well as Flaubert. He combines a great sensitivity with a rather detached attitude. At the same time, he is involved in the cruelest crimes.²³ Before he is assigned to optimize the work force in the concentration camps, he participates in the massacre of Babi Jar where Littell even has him step out of the role of the detached observer into a fosse to give half-dead Jews the coup de grâce (125f.). Aue’s pathological sexuality and incest make it hard for the reader to identify with him.

Most importantly, Aue’s authority as narrator is seriously challenged by his denial of the matricide. The information that Aue provides about the Nazi regime may be sound, but the tragic emplotment of its history derives from the mythical foil for the matricide about which Aue is unreliable. Thus, the narratorial unreliability also affects the use of tragedy as emplotment for the mass execution. The detective Clemens introduces his reconstruction of the matricide with “On va te raconter comment ça s’est passé” (886). (“We’re going to tell you how it happened”) (966).²⁴ In echoing the very first words of Aue’s account — “Frères humains, laissez-moi vous raconter comment ça s’est passé,” (11) “Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened,” (3) — Clemens’ words invite the reader to question Aue’s entire account.

In *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner argues that Greek myth has lost its plausibility in the modern world.²⁵ After pointing out the failure of the *Oresteia* as model for T.S. Eliot’s *The Family Reunion* (327-30), he concludes: “But today the context is so totally altered that the ancient myths appear in the modern playhouse either as travesty or as an antiquarian character. . . Where the dead gods have been summoned back to the modern footlights, they have brought with them the odour of decay” (330f.). Steiner’s thesis runs the risk of all sweeping generalizations, but in *Les Bienveillantes* the narrator’s application of the *Oresteia* as foil is ambiguous and, far from being persuasive, provokes many questions. Instead of propagating revisionism, *Les Bienveillantes* puts up for discussion a tragic presentation of Nazism, which upon closer inspection is rather questionable.²⁶ It thereby engages the reader in a critical reflection on how to assess the Shoah.

II. Hyper-coding and fictionality

Besides serving the narrator’s exculpatory efforts, the use of the *Oresteia* as template for the plot has another function at the level of reception: it draws attention

to the fictionality of *Les Bienveillantes*.²⁷ There is much factual information and, besides being a witness of Babi Jar, Stalingrad and Auschwitz, Max Aue also encounters Himmler, Eichmann, the “Führer” and others. He himself and some other characters including Dr. Mandelbrod and Leland are fictive though. The intertext of the *Oresteia* on which Max Aue’s biography is modelled is strongly marked and alerts readers to the fictional status of *Les Bienveillantes*.

The fictionality of *Les Bienveillantes* also comes to the fore in a wealth of other intertextual emplotments. For example, Aue casts his childhood with Una in the mold of the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden. Particularly the nudity of the twins is reminiscent of Genesis. Once Max and Una discover their sexuality, they are sent separately to boarding schools, just as Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden:

. . .on nous envoya dans un pensionnat catholique, à des centaines de kilomètres l’un de l’autre, et ainsi, *vom Himmel durch die Welt zur Hölle*, débuta un cauchemar de plusieurs années et qui, d’une certaine manière, dure encore. (190)

. . .they sent us to Catholic boarding schools, hundreds of miles away from each other, and so, *vom Himmel durch die Welt zur Hölle*, began a nightmare that lasted many years and that, in a way, still continues. (201)

The quotation from the beginning of Goethe’s *Faust* in this passage is not isolated, but marks another pre-text on which Aue draws to present his memoirs. His protector, Dr. Mandelbrod, is not only a fictive, but also a rather fantastic character — he already knew Aue’s grandfather as a young man and, when the Third Reich comes to an end, he clears off to Russia. Mandelbrod has Mephistophelian traits: the limping of the devil is increased to an existence in a multifunctional wheel chair and the smell of brimstone transformed to a lack of control of his bowels. More importantly, in a kind of pact with the devil, Max Aue receives from him the assignment to Himmler’s staff, which leads him to the hell of Auschwitz.

On his *Odyssey*-like return from Pommerania to Berlin, Aue reads Flaubert’s *L’éducation sentimentale* whose hero, Frederic Moreau, not only lends his name to Aue’s stepfather but also provides the model for Aue’s growing detachment and apathy. In other cases, the emplotment employs not so much specific texts as generic features. For instance, Littell has Hitler, a few days before his suicide, honor Aue and nine other officers with the *Deutsche Kreuz in Gold* (880f.). Littell increases the absurdity of this ceremony: when Hitler steps up to Aue, he grabs the nose of the Führer and shakes him “comme on fait à un enfant qui s’est mal conduit” (881). The satirical character of this scene is even stronger in the original version, which

Littell changed for the first edition, but reinserted, in the paperback edition. There, Aue *bites* Hitler's nose. . .

Critics like Rastier who take issue with the "name dropping" of *Les Bienveillantes* fail to take into account the potential of intertextuality and do therefore not recognize the hyper-coding of the plot.²⁸ The explicit and implicit references to other texts evoke foils and patterns that give shape to the narrative and enrich it semantically while alerting the reader to its fictionality. The intertextual frames draw the attention of the reader to the constructedness of the narrative she is reading.

Les Bienveillantes also contains implicit reflections on the relation between art and life. In another paper, I examine, for example, the references to Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* inserted into the account of Aue's stay at Piatigorsk.²⁹ Here, the parallels between Lermontov and the hero of his novel, Petchorin, are fully played out, foremost in the duel. The boundaries between fiction and reality are further blurred when Aue himself seems to reenact Petchorin's duel. This and other references to pieces of art, such as the statue of Apollo in the Grand Palais, embed a reflection on fictionality within the action.

The realism of many passages and the wealth of historical detail in which *Les Bienveillantes* abounds may suggest a claim to mimesis, just as Littell has his narrator start with the claim, reminiscent of Ranke's ideal, to narrate "wie es wirklich gewesen": "laissez-moi vous raconter comment ça s'est passé" (11), "let me tell you how it happened" (3). However, alongside metapoetic passages, the great number of intertextual frames and foils highlights that the novel does not give unmediated access to the past. As common as such hyper-coding is in postmodern literature (and, one is tempted to add, as unknown as it seems to be to some of the critics of *Les Bienveillantes*), it has particular significance in a narrative on the Shoah. In the introduction, I pointed out that the general impossibility of representing the past completely is felt with particular force in the case of the Nazi crimes, which must be remembered but, in their transgressiveness, elude signification more than other events. The hyper-coding in *Les Bienveillantes* can be seen as a distinct way of coping with this necessity of narrativizing the unspeakable. Even if only some of the plot types I have mentioned refer directly to the Shoah, the multiple emplotment of the narrative nonetheless alerts the reader to its constructedness.

In considering apt renderings of the Shoah, Saul Friedländer observed: "A common denominator appears: the exclusion of straight, documentary realism, but the use of some sort of allusive or distanced realism. Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the

unsayable unsaid.”³⁰ In highlighting the fictionality of *Les Bienveillantes*, the metapoetic reflections and the dense intertextual framing serve as such a filter. They mark that in the narrative the reality of the Shoah is accessible only through various refractions.

III. “Experientiality” vs. pornography and kitsch

It is now time to touch upon another controversial aspect of Littell’s novel. Besides marking its own constructedness, *Les Bienveillantes* also achieves a high degree of “experientiality,” defined as “quasi-mimetic evocation of ‘real-life experience’” by Monika Fludernik³¹. All critics have not welcomed the graphic quality of some passages; it has even elicited from some the verdict of pornography. This, however, does not do justice to the complexity of the novel: the transgressive passages are balanced by a strong discursive element, aesthetically express the moral transgressions of the “Endlösung” “the final solution” and are crucial to avoiding Nazi kitsch.

Quite a few narratives on the Shoah establish distance by not focusing on the past itself, but on memory. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* is a case in point: The narrator tells of his encounters with Austerlitz and thereby tries to reconstruct the life of Austerlitz, who himself takes pains to learn about his childhood, the story, as is gradually unveiled, of a Jewish boy from Prague who is sent to England while his parents are deported. Spiegelman’s affords a particularly interesting case “commix” *Maus*, which casts Jews as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs. The high reflectiveness of *Maus* is at least partly due to the narrative frame, which features the character of the artist, himself and his father, whose memories the artist transforms into the very comic strip, which we are reading.³² Yet another example of “postmemory” is Daniel Mendelsohn’s *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, in which the author describes his efforts to reconstruct the fate of his relatives.³³

Les Bienveillantes also has a narrative frame, which only comes to the fore, however, when the narrator accounts for his decision to write his memoirs. Otherwise, the narrative pretends to give the readers direct access to the past as experienced by Max Aue, the character. This provides *Les Bienveillantes* with a high degree of “experientiality,” something that is far less prominent in narratives, which establish distance and reflectiveness through their focus on memory. In an interview with Littell, Pierre Nora remarked: “Votre approche, qui suppose une immense maîtrise de la documentation historique existante, est extérieure à la démarche historique et aboutit à une sorte de vérité autre, que les historiens ne peuvent atteindre ni approcher, et qui est de restituer le vécu de l’exécution.”³⁴

The graphic nature of *Les Bienveillantes*, however, has drawn fire from critics who accuse Littell of voyeurism or even pornography. A German journalist, for example, wrote: “*Les Bienveillantes* is a pornographic work. It is characteristic of the pornographic that there is more to see than to understand. Jonathan Littell aims for erasing all kind of reflexive and aesthetic distance.”³⁵ This and similar critiques single out parts of *Les Bienveillantes* at the expense of others, without taking into account the overall narrative economy. They thereby fail to do justice to the complexity of the novel, which may contain very drastic descriptions, but nonetheless forces the reader to reflect.³⁶ In addition to the wealth of factual information, the narrator’s long digressions on Nazi ideology, questionable as they surely are, make the reader to ponder on Nazism. Already at the level of the plot, various aspects of Nazism are made the object of debate, for example in Aue’s encounter with a communist functionary in Stalingrad (362-70). While here Nazism and communism are compared, a fierce discussion between Aue and Voss confronts racism with insights from linguistics (279-84). At a soirée at Eichmann’s, Aue embarks on a dialectical kamikaze trip, trying to make Kant’s categorical imperative conform to the “Führerprinzip” (521-23). These discussions as well as the narrator’s digressions shed light on Nazi ideology from various angles. In addition to emotionally disturbing scenes, *Les Bienveillantes* engages the reader intellectually.

In particular, the graphic description of Aue’s sexual perversions, ranging from anally penetrating his sister in a guillotine to the coprophagous fantasies at the Üxküll castle, have shocked readers, but I think they serve an important function. In one of the few benevolent American reviews, David Mendelsohn contextualizes these descriptions in the French tradition of a “literature of transgression,” thereby making Littell the heir of authors such as the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille (CITE). Although Mendelsohn acknowledges the aesthetic and intellectual value of this tradition, he argues that in *Les Bienveillantes* the pornographic material undermines what he deems to be its “historical/documentary” aspect: “Either Aue is a human brother with whom we can sympathize (by which I mean, accept that he is not simply ‘inhuman’), or he is a sex-crazed, incestuous, homosexual, matricidal coprophage; but you can’t have your *Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte* and eat it, too.”³⁷

As illuminating as I find Mendelsohn’s reading, here I part company with it. Aue’s perversions, as repulsive as they are, are crucial to the “historical/documentary” aspect of the novel, more precisely to the representation of the horrors of the Nazi regime. I have argued that Littell uses the myth of the *Oresteia* to weld together Aue’s biography and Germany’s history. Explicitly in Aue’s reflections in Antibes, implicitly throughout the novel, the deeply disturbed family relations,

including matricide and incest, are made to mirror the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis. Therefore, Aue's perversions mark, metonymically and metaphorically, the transgressiveness of Nazism. His transgressions, represented in transgressive style, are an attempt to express aesthetically the moral abyss of the "Endlösung."³⁸

While this, like any other attempt to represent the Shoah, is open to discussion, it is hard to deny its function in the narrative.³⁹ The shocking sexuality of Aue is crucial to preventing what Friedländer in 1984 called "a new discourse on Nazism," a mode of presentation which seems to have originated at the end of the 60s and which, I may add, has not lost its momentum yet.⁴⁰ Novels such as George Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.* and Tournier's *Roi des Aulnes* and movies including Fassbinder's *Lilli Marleen* and Syberberg's *Hitler, ein Film aus Deutschland* bring together images of death with the kitsch of everyday life in a way which is not only inappropriate, but also reproduces Nazi aesthetics. The danger of such a melange of apocalypse and harmony is obvious for a novel, which is narrated by a Nazi whose aesthetic sophistication matches the firmness of his ideological stance. In addition, as Friedländer points out, myth, which figures so prominently in *Les Bienveillantes*, is congenial to Nazi kitsch.⁴¹ And indeed, there are elements of an eroticization typical of Nazi kitsch in *Les Bienveillantes*: for example, the secretaries of Dr. Mandelbrod, one of whom offers her services to Max Aue on a train, while another gives it a shot on a hunting weekend.⁴² But the ladies are so stereotypical — they are called Hilde, Heide and Hedwig, wear uniform-like suits, and are nearly identical: tall, well-built and, of course, blond — that it seems more appropriate to see in them the parody of a cliché than the cliché itself.

At the same time, Aue's pathological sexuality dissolves any wrong harmony. As charming and well-educated *in rebus aestheticis* as Aue may be, his sexual life and fantasies are so repulsive that the Nazi kitsch criticized by Friedländer cannot emerge. Matricide and incest shatter a harmonious everyday world before it can enter into an uncanny liaison with death. The very target of much polemic, the transgressions of Littell's hero, are in the way of what Friedländer deems more detrimental than revisionism, the presentation of Nazi crimes as normal: "To put the past back into bearable dimensions, superimpose it upon the known and respected progress of human behaviour, put it in the identifiable course of things, into the unmysterious march of ordinary history, into the reassuring world of the rules that are the basis of our society — in short, into conformism and conformity."⁴³ Far from providing extenuating circumstances for his crimes, Aue's perversions prevent the reader from losing sight of the evil character of Nazism by focussing on its banality.⁴⁴ Together with the ruptures and contradictions in Aue's narrative

described in Section II above, they are a weighty obstacle to being taken in by the narrator's logic.

IV. Conclusion

Outside France, *Les Bienveillantes* has attracted much criticism as a novel whose artistic failings are aggravated by its delicate subject, Nazi Germany. I have argued that Littell's novel is more reflective than most critics are willing to acknowledge and that its presentation of the Shoah deserves a closer look. The complexity of *Les Bienveillantes* comes to the fore if we view it against the background of Mesnard's recent survey of attempts to represent the Shoah.⁴⁵ Mesnard distinguishes four "écritures": the "realist" mode, as practised by Vassili Grossmann and David Rousset; the "transcendent" mode, in which, for example Elie Wiesel and Jorge Semprun approach reality through such symbols as the flame — there may not have been flames blazing atop the smoke stacks of the concentration camp crematories, but as a symbol the flames nonetheless express past experiences; the "critical" mode, which makes manifest the gap between the experiences and their representation, as in the works by Imre Kertész or Claude Lanzmann; the "pathetic" mode, which tries to convey the horrors of the Shoah by appealing to the emotions of the audience and is illustrated by Claude Régy's staging of Charles Reznikoff's *Holocauste*.

Les Bienveillantes, as interpreted in this article, combines all four "écritures" explored by Mesnard.⁴⁶ The "realist" element is obvious in the many detailed descriptions and accounts that are indebted to the tradition of the historical novel. More specifically, the *Bienveillantes* contain a wealth of factual information that by far exceeds the accuracy expected from historical novels. At the same time, Littell avoids the pitfall of this mode of representation, namely that "the crime is naturalized."⁴⁷ A strong symbolic level, most obvious in the evocation of Greek and Judaeo-Christian myths, pushes the narrative beyond naturalist presentation towards the "écriture transcendante." Littell's use of myths and topoi, however, has to be distinguished from that found by Mesnard for example in Primo Levi: "Chaque topos est dépositaire d'une parcelle de culture qui recèle le ferment d'une résistance à la destruction."⁴⁸ In *Les Bienveillantes*, in contrast, the numerous myths serve to hyper-code the plot.

Together with metapoetic reflections, this hyper-coding marks, as I have argued, the constructedness of the novel and is thereby also aligned with Mesnard's third "écriture," the "critical" mode. Mesnard notes that, whereas omniscient narrators are typical of realist representations, authors adopting "l'écriture critique," such as Tadeusz Borowski, tend to avoid this type of narrative voice.⁴⁹ This representation applies well to *Les Bienveillantes*. At first sight, Aue the narrator, who is familiar

with all the details of the past, may seem omniscient. While his knowledge supports the realist notion of the narrative, his unreliability, as pointed out in section II, underscores the gap between the events and their representation. Finally, the fourth mode, which appeals to the emotions of the reader, is adopted in the transgressive passages discussed in the preceding section. While not advancing a new “écriture,” Littell’s novel is extraordinary in combining various modes of representation that otherwise tend to be separate.⁵⁰

The density and accuracy of factual information presented in *Les Bienveillantes* is impressive and give the readers much material to think about. This information, in itself, however, is not the merit of the novel, which does not advance a new take on the causes, workings and moral implications of the Shoah, but strongly draws on the works by Raul Hilberg and other scholars. Parts of *Les Bienveillantes* provoke critique — transgressive passages are reminiscent of pornography, the abundance of technical details has bored readers, and others not familiar with, or hostile towards, postmodern narrative have taken issue with “name dropping.” The combination of factual information and an aesthetic presentation that refracts the events through the lenses of a “realist,” “transcendent,” “critical” and “pathetic” écriture, however, renders a particularly complex image of the Shoah. By balancing a high degree of experientiality and a subtle marking of its fictionality, *Les Bienveillantes* goes far in presenting the unrepresentable as well as its unrepresentability.

Notes

¹ The English translations of *Les Bienveillantes* are taken, with slight modifications, from Charlotte Mandell’s translation (2009).

² However, Boblet 2008; Waintrater 2008; Rastier 2009; Colin 2009 illustrate an ongoing interest in *Les Bienveillantes* in francophone scholarship.

³ For an assessment of the German reactions, see Theweleit 2009.

⁴ There were also positive reviews in the US, e.g. by Suleiman in *The Boston Globe* March 15, 2009, and critical voices in France, for example Claude Lanzman.

⁵ Lyotard 1988: 56f.

⁶ Adorno 1976: 30f. For a discussion of the dictum and its context, see Schlant 1999: 8f.

⁷ E.g. Lang 1990.

⁸ Young 1988. On the use of fictional means in literature on the Shoah, see also the reflections in Mesnard 2007: 147-52.

⁹ White 1992 considers various possible emplotments for the Shoah.

¹⁰ Carr 1986.

¹¹ The complexity of Littell's novel is also emphasized by Boblet 2008; Suleiman 2009b; Mendelsohn 2009.

¹² For a more detailed list and close reading of the references to the *Oresteia*, see author (forthcoming). On *Les Bienveillantes* and the *Oresteia*, see also Mercier-Leca 2007; Mendelsohn 2009.

¹³ E.g. Littell/Nora 2007: 30f.

¹⁴ All quotations are from the first French edition, Littell 2006.

¹⁵ The translation stems from D. Grene/ R. Lattimore 1992.

¹⁶ On *dike* in the *Oresteia*, see Goldhill 1986: 33-56.

¹⁷ Cf. Hillgruber 1986: 98.

¹⁸ Hillgruber 1986: „Ob sich der Begriff des Tragischen auf das Geschehen anwenden lässt, das im Zweiten Weltkrieg gipfelt, mag dahingestellt bleiben; Schuld und Verhängnis, legitimes Verlangen und offenes Unrecht, Willkür und Verstrickung sind hier unauflösbar ineinander gemischt. Aber im Falle des Geschehens im Deutschen Osten 1944/45 darf man wohl von tragischen Vorgängen sprechen, die Ausweglosigkeit der Situation für die Soldaten und die Bewohner der Ostgebiete ist evident“ (64).

¹⁹ Cf. Anderson 1992.

²⁰ Agamben 1999: 97ff. See also Friedländer 1984: 100f.

²¹ On unreliable narrators in narratives about Nazi Germany, see Beßlich 2006.

²² Bougnoux 2007: 66f. See Waintrater 2008 for a psychoanalytical reading of Aue as a narcissistic and perverse personality.

²³ Cf. Suleiman 2009b: 15-6, who emphasizes that Aue simultaneously belongs to the the Nazi world and is distanced from it.

²⁴ Cf. Mercier-Leca 2007: 50.

²⁵ Steiner 1980.

²⁶ See Frick 1998: 19f., whose book charts the many facets of the reception of tragedy in the modern age.

²⁷ For yet another possible function, see Boblet 2008: 239-40, who argues that *Les Bienveillantes* lead to a catharsis comparable to the integration of the Erinyes at the end of the *Oresteia*.

²⁸ Rastier 2009: 183-4.

²⁹ Author (forthcoming).

³⁰ Friedländer 1992: 17.

³¹ Fludernik 1996: 12.

³² See for example Young 2000: 12-41, who sees in the photographs by David Levinthal and in the installations by Shimon Attie a similar tendency to deal with memory instead of the events themselves.

³³ Hirsch 1997 defines “postmemory” as the relationship of the second generation to traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that nonetheless have a deep impact on their lives.

³⁴ Littell/Nora 2007: 36. See also Millet in Littell/Millet 2007: 21; Boblet 2008: 224-5; 229-30; Rastier 2009: 182-3 for a critical view.

³⁵ “Die Wohlgesinnten” sind ein pornographisches Werk. Und zum Pornographischen gehört, dass es hier weitaus mehr zu sehen als zu verstehen gibt. Jonathan Littell will die Aufhebung auch der letzten reflexiven wie ästhetischen Distanz.’ (Steinfeld in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* February 22, 2008). In America, see e.g. M. J. Bukiet, in *Special to The Washington Post* March 7, 2009. For a more detailed and nuanced critique of *Les Bienveillantes* along similar lines, see Rastier 2009: 180-1.

³⁶ Cf. Suleiman 2009: 11-12 on the prominence of reflection in the *Bienveillantes*.

³⁷ Mendelsohn 2009: 21.

³⁸ See also Boblet 2008: 233-8, who interprets Aue’s homosexuality and incest as an inversion that expresses the inversion on which Nazism is based.

³⁹ See, for example, Rastier 2008, who is critical of pathos in literature dealing with the Shoah in general and prefers the sober style of Primo Levi, as analysed in Rastier 2005.

⁴⁰ Friedländer 1984.

⁴¹ Friedländer 1984: 46f.

⁴² Friedländer 1984: 74-78. On sex and Nazism in films, see now also Mesnard 2009.

⁴³ Friedländer 1984: 106f.

⁴⁴ This is argued by Rastier 2009: 176.

⁴⁵ Mesnard 2007.

⁴⁶ Let me add that while Mesnard's typology is very helpful for alerting us to the complex character of *Les Bienveillantes*, my application of it is not entirely in tune with his approach. Mesnard is at pains to do justice to all the individual works that he explores, but it is obvious that in general he values the 'critical' most and stresses the limitations of the 'realist' and 'pathetic' modes. I, on the other hand, argue that it is the combination of all four modes that makes Littell's novel noteworthy.

⁴⁷ Mesnard 2007: 101: 'Si dans le texte réaliste conventionnel tout concourt à rendre l'événement vraisemblable, la conséquence dans le contexte historique de notre corpus est que le crime se trouve naturalisé.'

⁴⁸ Mesnard 2007: 123.

⁴⁹ Mesnard 2007: 98-9; 226.

⁵⁰ In another article, I interpret *Les Bienveillantes* as a special case of historiographic metafiction.

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