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Hannah Arendt Reconsidered: Collaboration and the Banality of Evil in Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt's 1963 study "Eichmann in Jerusalem", based on the former Nazi's 1961 trial, broached two highly controversial topics: The first was her theory of the banality of evil—the uncomfortable moral scenario that leads ordinary individuals, for the most trivial and arbitrary reasons, to commit heinous atrocities; and the second was her fierce condemnation of Jewish collaboration with the Nazis. This paper argues that the novelist Jonathan Littell's critically acclaimed best-seller *The Kindly Ones* (2010) provocatively revalorizes and builds upon these two aspects of Arendt's study: Firstly, it posits her theory of banality as a challenge to the comforting presupposition that terrible evils can only be committed by a minority of monstrous individuals, by suggesting instead that "normal" readers share the same capacity to commit atrocities as Nazis such as Eichmann. Secondly, the novel nuances Arendt's damning indictment of Jewish collaboration by regarding it as the inevitable consequence of the terrible predicament faced by Jews at that time. Finally, the paper concludes with Littell's consideration of banality as a phenomenon that not only invites an uncomfortable moral self-analysis, but also legitimises a return to a justice system based on the ancient Greek model.

Keywords

Banality, Arendt, Littell, collaboration, justice

Margarethe Von Trotta's recent film *Hannah Arendt* (2012) intelligently re-examines the considerable controversy generated by the German philosopher's theory of the banality of evil, based on her detailed study of prominent Nazi Adolf Eichmann's 1961 trial and execution in Israel. It shows how the unprecedented moral implications of her theory—that even the most unspeakable evil can be carried out by an ordinary and thoughtless bureaucrat, not to mention her polemical assertion that a number of influential Jews collaborated in the Holocaust for questionable reasons, led to her brutal ostracisation from the New York Jewish community.

This paper focuses on French educated, Jewish

American novelist Jonathan Littell's equally controversial but critically acclaimed best-seller, *Les Bienveillantes* (2006), translated into English as *The Kindly Ones* (2010). It argues that Littell's novel not only revalorises Arendt's notion of the banality of evil through the eyes of a former Nazi perpetrator but also offers a nuanced reappraisal of the topic of Jewish

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collaboration. In revealing interviews, Littell has suggested two reasons why the phenomenon of banality is so central to his novel. The first relates to his personal encounter with a Serb colonel and former fisherman, while conducting humanitarian work in the Balkan conflict of the mid-1990s. The colonel explained to him that he bombed Sarajevo, not out of a premeditated desire to ethnically cleanse the Bosnians, but because they stole his fishing tackle from his flat to the value of 20,000 Marks (Blumenfeld 2006). This episode led Littell to the realisation that an ordinary man, who was not intrinsically a monster, but started out as a simple fisherman, committed unspeakable evil for the most trivial of reasons: petty revenge. The implicit lesson to be drawn from this is one of moral self-recognition—a moral self-recognition he elicits from the readers of his novel: If he could do it, then so could they. Not for nothing did Littell state in the same interview that had he been born 30 years earlier, he could have become a Nazi. Secondly, in a separate interview in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* (Georgesco 2007), Littell asserts that recent Holocaust historians, such as Christopher Browning, who in the last 15-20 years have commendably turned their attention to the perpetrators, have nevertheless fallen into the trap of underestimating the psychological specificity and arbitrariness of their actions (Browning 1992).

Such historians have naively placed their trust in the reliability of documentary sources, chiefly those interviews provided by the Nazis themselves, to conclude that many of the perpetrators were ordinary men and women who killed out of a basic obedience to authority and peer pressure, even if they found these actions morally reprehensible. Littell fully acknowledges that such first-hand testimonies often provide accurate and vital details about the implementation of the terrible events that took place in the death camps; but what they fail to do, he suggests, is truly revealing the full range of individual

psychological motivations behind these events, because they tend to reduce banality to the “logic of obedience”. This is because, that George Bataille points out “The perpetrators have no voice, or if they do speak, it is with the voice of the state”. Statements made by perpetrators, in other words, tell us very little about their own intentions, because they invariably transfer responsibility for individual crimes onto a higher authority such as the state or party—this, of course, was Eichmann’s notorious defence, analysed by Arendt: “I was only following orders”. If Bataille is correct, as Littell believes he is, then the supposedly “authentic” documented voice of the real perpetrators is merely an expedient, a self-justificatory explanation that conceals the real reasons why they commit evil, reasons which according to Littell are often far more complex, unpredictable and surprisingly banal than are generally assumed. This does not mean to say that there were not people who killed solely out of ideological fanaticism such as Nazism, or anti-Semitism; but in many cases, as we shall see, such atrocities are carried out by individuals who initially seem as unremarkable and morally innocuous as any other member of society and simply end up killing for money, self-advancement, or some other perfectly ordinary reason that stretches credulity precisely because its trivial nature seems disproportionate to the seriousness of the act committed. This is why his fictional first-person narrator, former SS officer Max Aue, provides greater psychological insight into the banality of evil—especially that of notorious Nazi Adolf Eichmann than the documentary historians.

THE BANALITY OF EVIL

As a former SS officer now hiding in France, Aue is in a sense the very antithesis of the plausible or real perpetrator. Far from seeking to escape responsibility for his acts or those of his fellow Nazis, Aue is willing to both admit to his individual guilt and give a “warts

and all” explanation of the multitude of arbitrary and often trivial reasons that tragically led to “*la Shoah*”. Thus, those who accuse Littell of having created an implausible character are missing the point. It is Aue’s very implausibility, such as his unconventional sexual tastes—in particular, his homosexuality and incestuous attachment to his sister—and his purely fictional, as opposed to historical, existence that makes his perspective on the banality of evil paradoxically more compelling and truthful than any “real” witness testimony. Yet this does not mean to say that Littell did not thoroughly research the historical setting of his novel, nor that he confines himself to fictional as opposed to real characters. He also provides a psychological insight into the actions and motives of real Nazis such as Eichmann; but he chooses to reconstruct these historical figures as semi-fictional characters in a way that authentically lays bare their possible psychological motives, rather than exclusively confining himself to what they said in historical testimonies, which merely skim the surface of these motives.

In a knowing nod toward Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Littell consciously revisits the notion of the banality of evil through his detailed semi-fictionalised reconstruction of Adolf Eichmann. Through the eyes of Max Aue, Littell offers us a nuanced, in-depth psychological portrait of Eichmann that stresses the dangerous combination of his sheer “ordinariness” and efficient bureaucratic mentality, both of which made him a prime candidate for succumbing to social ambition and the trappings of power. In his public role, Eichmann puts on an act. His voice and mannerisms become affected when he talks to Jews, he enjoys patronising and shocking them with a combination of exaggerated politeness and swear-words; he charms and fraternises with Hungarian high society, thoroughly enjoying invitations to their castles and being treated as an equal in the company of countesses. But in private, the self-important delusions of grandeur that Eichmann

displays in public are debunked by a reminder of his distinctly non-aristocratic origins as a humble policeman, of his extreme bureaucratic fastidiousness and prudence, his deference to social rank combined with envy, ambition, and a fondness for the bottle:

(...) he forgot his deepest nature, which of a bureaucrat of talent, even of great talent in his limited field. Yet as soon as you saw him one-on-one, in his office, or in the evening, if he had a little to drink, he became the old Eichmann again, the one who scuttled about the offices of the Staatspolizei, respectful, busy, impressed by the slightest stripe superior to his own and at the same time devoured by envy and ambition, the Eichmann who had himself covered in writing, for each action and each decision (...) and who kept all his orders in a safe, carefully arranged, the Eichmann who would have been just as happy—and no less efficient—buying or transporting horses or trucks, if that had been his task, as concentrating an evacuating tens of thousands of human beings destined to die. (Littell 2010: 786)

Rather like the Serb colonel Littell encountered in his own life, the Eichmann that he reconstructs here is a boringly efficient, unremarkable, and mediocre man. And the surprising extent of his ordinariness is matched by the equally baffling arbitrariness and lack of moral reflection that lies behind his choice of career. We are confronted by the frightening possibility that Eichmann could just as competently and willingly have pursued a career in buying and transporting horses or lorries as in ordering the mass extermination of Jews. The narrator is suggesting the profoundly unnerving moral possibility that the difference between committing genocide and accomplishing menial tasks is purely incidental, and in no way contingent on the intrinsic moral qualities or choices of the individual. Eichmann’s mediocrity and thoughtlessness are further emphasised by his superior, Winkelmann: “He (Eichmann) does not have the slightest scruple about exceeding the limits of his authority, if he believes he’s acting in the spirit of the person giving him his orders” (Littell 2010: 723). Eichmann, in other words, is motivated by satisfying

those in power. The extremity of his acts derives not from any intrinsic predisposition toward evil, but nothing more banal than gaining the favour of his superiors. By succumbing to the all too human traits of vanity, ambition, and thoughtlessness, he is not presented as an intrinsically evil individual, merely a weak one who becomes enmeshed in unspeakable acts. And this is Littell's point: If an ordinary bureaucrat like Eichmann can be involved in the genocide, why not everybody else? His unnervingly plausible tableau of the banality of evil in no way seeks to minimise the suffering of the victims or exonerate the perpetrators; rather he alerts his readers to the frightening possibility that those whom they would feel more comfortable in labelling as genocidal maniacs have the same human foibles as them, and thus perhaps they brought to the realisation that they too, are potentially closer to perpetuating genocide than they would like to think.

Unsurprisingly, this is the aspect of Arendt's theory of banality that has proved most unsettling to her readers because it demands from them an unprecedented level of moral self-scrutiny that completely shatters their commonly held belief that an evil as horrendous as the Holocaust could only be committed by a small minority of despicable individuals with whom they have absolutely nothing in common. Littell's novel, however, shows this assumption to be based not on reality, but on moral disingenuousness. Specifically, a disingenuousness that reflects a fundamental human need to perceive oneself as morally good. In other words, society's overriding tendency to identify evil with individuals that can be categorised as radically different from the "norm" in every respect—people who for instance can be labelled as "monsters" or "fanatics"—is the most expedient and reassuring way it has at its disposal to disassociate and exonerate itself from the types of evil they commit.

Aue, however, denies his readers this reassurance by confronting them with one of the most blatant

examples of their moral disingenuousness. Namely, their assumption that ideological fanaticism is a precondition for participation in the Holocaust:

(...) even if, objectively, there was no doubt about the final aim, it wasn't with this aim in mind that most of the participants were working, it wasn't that which motivated them and drove them to work so energetically and single-mindedly, it was a whole gamut of emotions. (Littell 2010: 781)

Aue makes an important distinction here between culpability and motivation. On one hand, he makes it quite clear that all those who participated in the final solution did so knowingly and fully mindful of its ultimate sinister aim; on the other hand, he makes it equally clear that this collective guilt is not the necessary consequence of a shared motivation. Those who participated did so for reasons that were far more personal, complex, and varied in origin than a common ideological goal, even in the case of as senior and apparently uncompromising a Nazi as Eichmann. Aue systematically dismantles the myth that the Holocaust was the result of a coherent, transparent policy efficiently implemented and coordinated by a self-contained group of like-minded Nazi ideologues. The reality is far more cynical, fragmented, and murky. Many participated for self-serving reasons that had less to do with ideology than the competing interests of different bureaucratic bodies, agencies, or individuals. The Hungarian bureaucracy, for instance, "just wanted to see the Jews leave Hungary but didn't give a fuck about what would happen to them"; Speer, the Minister of Armaments and War Production and his colleague Kammler, the high-ranking SS officer, wanted Jews who could work, but could not have cared less "about the ones who could not work"; the specialists in the Ministry of Food "saw the evacuation of the Jews... as a measure that would allow Hungary to free up a surplus of wheat for Germany" (Littell 2010: 782). For one particular expert from the Ministry of Food and Agriculture,

“feeding the inmates and other foreign workers in Germany, that wasn’t his business, and for him the evacuation of the Jews was the solution to his problem, even if it became someone else’s problem in turn” (Littell 2010: 783).

What emerges here is a depressing portrait of the Holocaust as the culmination of a highly volatile, socially Darwinist climate of cynical expediency and ruthlessly competitive power politics. It quickly becomes apparent that responsibility for the genocide cannot conveniently be limited to a handful of homogeneous, easily identifiable Nazi fanatics who can swiftly be demonised and kept at arm’s length; rather, this responsibility must be shared amongst a heterogeneous and disparate group of individuals comprising both Nazis and other members of society, and each of whom has his or her own specific agenda or axe to grind. Evil is thus shown to be the domain not just of the few, as “normal” society would like to believe, but of the many. Any attempts by society to “immunise” itself from evil by projecting it exclusively onto the Nazi, “other” are thus revealed to be disingenuous and factually inaccurate.

But this disingenuousness, Aue suggests, is not only confined to the supposedly innocent, anti-Nazi moral majority, but also extends to the Nazis themselves. If as has been argued, a common mistake is to assume fanatical adherence to Nazi ideology to be a precondition for participation in the Holocaust, then by the same token, it must also be recognised that even those who proudly profess to be die-hard Nazi ideologues, such as Eichmann, are themselves deluded about their own true motives. No more is this apparent than in the impassioned conference speech Eichmann delivers to his colleagues soon after his appointment as head of Jewish affairs in Hungary, a speech in which he warns them, in the pseudo-scientific, incendiary language typical of anti-Semitic, Nazi racial theory of the fierce resistance of the Jewish ghettos and hence of the pressing need to eradicate this “germ-like” race.

He (Heydrich) knew that the strongest Jews, the toughest, the cleverest, and the wildest, would escape all selections and would be the hardest to destroy. And it is precisely those who form the vital reservoir from which Jewry could spring back, the germ cell for Jewish regeneration, as the late Obbengruppenführer said. Our struggle prolongs that of Koch and Pasteur—we have to follow it through to the end... (Littell 2010: 777; Dederichs 2009: 92)¹.

At first blush, this speech epitomises what Arendt identifies as Eichmann’s self-proclaimed idealism: It recalls his defiant declaration during his police examination in Israel that he would, if necessary, have been perfectly willing to sacrifice the life of his own father to the greater glory of the Third Reich (Arendt 1965: 41-42)². But Aue knows better than to take Eichmann’s ideological rant at face value. By this stage, he has developed sufficient insight into his personality through their close working relationship in Hungary to recognise that Eichmann’s rhetorical flourish is too out of character not to indicate the underlying presence of more complicated psychological traits: namely, vanity, ambition, and self-importance. In other words, perceived purely on its own terms as an instrument of Nazi propaganda, Eichmann’s speech is more than plausible enough to convince others, (let alone himself) of his exemplary fanaticism; but when viewed from the psychological standpoint of an insecure and narcissistic personality, this speech can also be understood as one big ego-trip, an expression of the intoxication of power brought about by his recent promotion and consequent craving for approval:

A thunder of applause welcomed these words. Did Eichmann really believe in them? It was the first time I heard him talk this way, and I had the impression that he had got carried away, let himself be swept along by his new role, that he liked the game so much that he ended up becoming one with it. (Littell 2010: 777)

Once again, Littell’s forensic analysis of Eichmann as the most notorious example of Arendt’s

theory of the banality of evil invites a reconsideration of established moral assumptions about the Holocaust by paying heed to a plethora of complex motives that have far more to do with a flawed individual psychology than political conviction.

JEWISH COLLABORATION

A second, equally controversial aspect of Arendt's study, with which Littell also engages in his novel, is the thorny question of Jewish collaboration with the Nazis. Arendt, following Ralf Hilberg (Arendt 1965: 118), was among the first to tackle this troubling historical reality head on, and she did so in an uncompromisingly moralistic tone that further incurred the wrath of those who already objected to her theory of the banality of evil.

Few would quibble with Arendt's clear-headed account of the Nazi motives for seeking cooperation with the Jews, which were unapologetically cynical and pragmatic: namely, bureaucratic and economic expediency. Jewish collaboration would minimise the administrative chaos and severe drain on German manpower that resulted from the rounding up of Jews; it would also, especially in the latter part of the war, provide able-bodied Jewish workers for the increasingly stretched armaments factories (Arendt 1965: 104). But where Arendt caused anger, and continues to do so this day, is over her unequivocal condemnation of Jewish leaders for collaborating with the Nazis: "Wherever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, co-operated one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis" (Arendt 1965: 125). Her forthright language spares none of the Jewish leaders, all of whom she castigates on two grounds. Their supposed enjoyment of the power with which they were entrusted and their naïve miscalculation that sacrificing a number of able-bodied Jews to the Nazis would save a great many more from certain extermination:

In the Nazi-inspired, but not Nazi-dictated, manifestoes they issued, we can still sense how they enjoyed their new power—"The Central Jewish Council has been granted the right of absolute disposal over all Jewish manpower", as the first announcement of the Budapest Council phrased it. We know how the Jewish officials felt when they became instruments of murder—like captains "whose ships were about to sink and succeeded in bringing them safe to port by casting overboard a great part of their precious cargo"; like saviours who "with a hundred victims save a thousand people, with a thousand ten thousand". (Arendt 1965: 118)

It is deeply ironic that what Arendt denounces in the Jewish Councils is the very same intoxication of power as Littell diagnoses in Eichmann. But she also provides empirical evidence to suggest that the "sacrificial logic" of prominent Jewish leaders such as Kastner, the Zionist who collaborated with Eichmann in Hungary, only later to be utterly discredited by an Israeli court trial and ultimately shot dead, spectacularly backfired: "The truth was even more gruesome. Dr. Kastner, in Hungary, for instance, saved exactly 1,684 people with approximately 476,000 victims" (Arendt 1965: 118).

Indeed, Kastner, who also features on several occasions in Littell's novel, is further singled out by Arendt for pursuing the same policy of social discrimination as the Nazis themselves when it came to determining which Jews should or should not be saved: "Kastner was proud of his success in saving 'prominent Jews', a category officially introduced by the Nazis in 1942, as though in his view too, it went without saying that a famous Jew had more right to stay alive than an ordinary one" (Arendt 1965: 132).

In the same vein as Arendt, Littell broaches the question of Jewish collaboration (as indeed he does her theory of banality) through the lens of Eichmann's psychology, focusing in particular on his attitudes to specific Jewish collaborators such as Kastner. Given his status as a prominent Nazi, we would expect Eichmann to despise the Zionist leader. And yet, paradoxically, as Arendt perceptively suggests, it is precisely because of his Nazism rather than despite

that he actually grows to admire and respect him. For he identifies in Kastner's Zionism that the same uncompromising idealism and policy of discrimination that he proudly upholds as the benchmarks of Nazi racial theory:

The greatest "idealist" Eichmann ever encountered among the Jews was Dr. Rudolf Kastner, with whom he negotiated during the Jewish deportations from Hungary and with whom he came to an agreement that he, Eichmann, would permit the "illegal" departure of a few thousand Jews to Palestine (the trains were in fact guarded by German police) in exchange for quiet and order in the camps from which hundreds of thousands were shipped to Auschwitz. The few thousand saved by the agreement, prominent Jews and members of the Zionist youth organizations, were, in Eichmann's words, "the best biological material". Dr. Kastner, as Eichmann understood it, had sacrificed his fellow-Jews to his "idea", and this was as it should be. (Arendt 1965: 42)

Arendt's provocative analysis of Eichmann's blinkered attitude to collaboration prefigures a passage in *The Kindly Ones* in which Aue similarly observes his colleague's unmistakable admiration for Kastner, in whose staunch Zionism he also identifies the exact counterpart to his inflexible, racially selective Nazism:

Eichmann claimed he was very impressed by his coldness and his ideological rigour and thought that if Kastner had been a German, he would have made a very good officer in the Staatspolizei, which for him was probably the highest compliment possible. "He thinks like us, that Kastner", he said to me one day. "He thinks only about the biological potential of his race, he is ready to sacrifice all the old to save the young, the strong, the fertile women. He thinks about the future of his race. I said to him: "Me, if I were Jewish, I'd have been a Zionist, a fanatical Zionist, like you". (Littell 2010: 798)

As a further indication of his implicit debt to Arendt, Littell therefore mines Eichmann's psychology in order to achieve a more subtle understanding of the Nazi motives for collaborating with the Jews. But when it comes to examining the opposite perspective—the reasons why the Jews chose

to collaborate with the Nazis—Littell takes a far more nuanced and empathetic stance than Arendt. Arendt deliberately quotes Judge Benjamin Halevi, who presided over Kastner's trial in Israel, in order to vilify the Zionist leader as the man who "sold his soul to the devil" (Arendt 1965: 143). She makes absolutely no concession to the complex moral predicament in which Kastner found himself. Such a view contrasts markedly with that of Littell's central narrator—Max Aue, who, despite his status as a former Nazi, is prepared to acknowledge and even praise Kastner's actions as those of a highly courageous, dignified, and self-possessed man:

An impressive man, always perfectly elegant, who dealt with us as equals, with a complete disregard for his own life, which gave him a certain strength when confronted with us: No-one could make him afraid (there were attempts, he was arrested many times, by the staatspolizei or by the Hungarians). (Littell 2010: 798)

What is more, with respect to the so-called "blood for wares" negotiations (where Jewish lives would be spared in exchange for 10,000 trucks supplied to the crumbling German army) (Arendt 1965: 144); Aue credits Kastner and his fellow Zionist collaborators with a lucidly pragmatic and realistic attitude to the fate of the Jews, who could not even count on the support of ostensibly friendly countries to provide them with a safe haven from Nazi oppression:

The Zionists, I suspect, and Kastner in the lead, must have understood right away that it was a lure, but also a lure that could serve their own interests, let them gain time. They were lucid, realistic men, they must have known as well as the Reichsführer that not only would no enemy country ever agree to deliver 10 thousand trucks to Germany, but also that no country, even at that time, was ready to welcome a million Jews either. (Littell 2010: 796)

By adopting a balanced and empathetic attitude to the Jewish collaborators, Littell's novel has far more in common with recent critics of Arendt's stance than with Arendt herself, thereby suggesting his greater

familiarity with the more accurate, up-to-date historiography on the subject, such as that recently provided by Tony Judt. Judt particularly takes Arendt to task for what he considers to be her gross insensitivity to the predicament of the Jews and her sweeping historical generalisations—especially her exaggeration of the power that the Jewish leaders had at their disposal and their grasp of the terrible events going on around them:

Copious research on the *Judenrate*, the Jewish councils of Nazi-dominated Europe, suggests what should have been obvious at the time: Arendt knew little about the subject and some of her remarks about Jewish “responsibility” were insensitive and excessive, but there is a troubling moral question mark hanging over the prominent Jews who took on the task of administering the ghettos. She was not wrong to raise the matter, nor was she mistaken in some of her judgements; but she was indifferent, perhaps callously so, to the dilemmas Jews faced at the time, and was characteristically provocative, even “perverse” (as the historian Henry Feingold put it) in insisting on the powers of the Jewish leaders and neglecting to call due attention to their utter helplessness and, in many cases, their real ignorance of the fate that awaited the Jews. (Judt 2008: 82)

Judt’s more measured tone echoes *The Kindly Ones* in its call for a pragmatic empathy for which Arendt’s critique makes absolutely no allowance.

And yet if Littell, as already suggested, provocatively reconstructs Eichmann’s psychology via his central narrator Aue in order to revivify and nuance debate on the two most controversial aspects of Arendt’s study—her theory of the banality of evil and the question of Jewish collaboration, these are by no means the only aspects of his novel to have troubled critics. Another, more immediate source of disquiet is his choice of a central narrator as perpetrator rather than victim. Susan Suleiman pertinently notes that such a move is still considered by many to be taboo in the Holocaust novel, which remains a genre that—with a few notable exceptions, overwhelmingly privileges the voice of the victim over that of the perpetrator (Suleiman 2009: 1-2)³. It is

perhaps no surprise, therefore Claude Lanzmann, the maker of the most famous French documentary about the Holocaust *Shoah* (Lanzmann 1985), who has provided such a moving testimony to the suffering of its victims, should have taken particular exception to the narration of this atrocity through the eyes of a former SS officer. Lanzmann has stated that even to entrust the task of bearing witness to the Holocaust to a Nazi, as opposed to the Jewish victims or those who survived them is an ethical aberration. He also legitimately points out that Littell’s fascination with sexual perversity and the grotesque is both distasteful and irresponsible because it does not make his central protagonist Aue a believable character and thus invalidates the moral force of his argument. Nor is it responsible or realistic to portray an SS officer who is so cultured and well read, since this makes him dangerously attractive to the reader.

Lanzmann and the critic Paul-Eric Blanrue (Blanrue 2006) strongly object to the novel on the basis that the central character is too refined and perverse to be credible, a flaw that they regard as logically inconsistent with Littell’s emphasis on the ordinariness or banality of evil. But perhaps, deep down, this accusation of implausibility acts as a convenient smokescreen for their real moral concern. Littell could in fact be right, that the gap between perpetrator and victim is actually far narrower than is commonly assumed, and that the Max Aues of this world, whom law-abiding society would prefer to demonise and keep at arms length, are not so far removed from this respectable society in their capacity to commit evil. Lanzmann and Blanrue, therefore, arguably succumb to the same moral disingenuousness discussed above and to which all human beings are unfortunately prone; a disingenuousness that makes it far easier to think of Aue as a freak or a “monster”, because by doing so, he is placed in a restricted, enclosed category of immorality that is unequivocally different from that to which the moral majority belongs. By finding evidence of his singularity and

difference, it is possible to maintain and legitimise the reassuring gap that separates those who commit evil from those who do not, the vile perpetrators from the innocent victims; maintaining this divide avoids having to confront the unnerving possibility that there is potential within every member of society to commit the same evil.

This blurring of boundaries between victim and perpetrator, or more precisely between perpetrator and non-perpetrator, is confirmed by the implicit literary intertext (from Villon and Baudelaire) that opens Littell's novel: "Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened" (Littell 2010: 3). The confessional tone of the SS officer and his appeal to a shared fraternity that includes both himself and his readers is a tactic for morally implicating the reader in the evils described within the text. The reader is morally ensnared by the text, confronted by the unnerving realisation that she is complicit in the evils committed by those "monsters" about whom she reads. Littell gradually erodes the comforting barriers that readers and interpreters of the Holocaust have erected between themselves and those individuals who carried out such unspeakable atrocities. They naturally want to keep these barbarians at arm's length, yet reluctantly recognise in their psychology certain characteristics that recall their own "dark side". This point is further reinforced by his suggestion that the banality of evil is a characteristic of most perpetrators:

There are psychopaths everywhere, all the time. Our quiet suburbs are crawling with paedophiles and maniacs, our homeless shelters are packed with raving megalomaniacs; and some of them do indeed become a problem, they kill two, three, 10, even 50 people—and then the very same state that without batting an eye send them to war crushes them like a blood-swollen mosquito. These sick men are nothing. But the ordinary men that make up the state—especially in unstable times—now there's the real danger. The real danger for mankind is me, is you. (Littell 2010: 21)

This passage is shocking on two counts: Firstly, because of contrary to Eichmann and the historically

documented perpetrators of "*la Shoah*", this narrator makes no attempt to excuse the atrocities he and his associates have committed by hiding behind the "logic of obedience"; secondly, because he implies that the real dangers to society are not obvious criminals or delinquents, but ordinary people such as the reader himself. In other words, while evil on this scale is clearly inexcusable (and more could have been done by the SS authorities to restrain its most extreme perpetrators) (Littell 2010: 19), the real problem is that everyone is potentially capable of committing it. Paradoxically, it is not the obvious candidates society normally demonises as monsters that it should be wary of—the "loose canons" such as paedophiles or psychopaths, but rather society itself. If readers cannot understand this point, he warns, then they should proceed no further with the novel.

THE RETURN TO ANCIENT GREEK JUSTICE

Yet Littell's focus on banality serves not only to elicit moral self-recognition of evil in the individual reader, but also as a basis from which to establish objective universal criteria for evaluating and punishing war crimes, criteria he believes are to be found in the ancient Greek system of justice:

With the Judaeo-Christian approach we are saddled with wrongdoing and sin, caught up in the complex interplay between sinful thoughts and sinful acts. The Greeks had a far more straightforward attitude. This is the point I make in the book: When Oedipus kills Laos, he doesn't know it's his father, but the gods couldn't care less: You killed your father (...). Intention doesn't come into it. This is exactly the approach that was adopted in the war trials, and it's the only way of doing it. This particular bloke committed this particular act. The reason why he committed it is immaterial. Whether he acted in good faith, or bad faith, whether he did it for money or out of conviction, that's his problem: He committed this act, he will be judged and sentenced. That's it. In the end, some people were executed, others sent to jail, some of them were released; there were even those who escaped arrest altogether... It's not fair. Too bad. That's just

the way the process goes. Guilt has nothing to do with it. (Georgesco 2007)

In this interview, Littell draws on Greek justice to bring into sharp relief the fundamental moral problem raised by the banality of evil: the impossibility of establishing clear criminal intent. We have seen on the contrary, the sheer arbitrariness and thoughtlessness that has often led to these atrocities. Crimes can result from ideological conviction, greed, envy, ambition, expediency, and career choice, but not necessarily from a clear premeditated desire to commit evil. The Judaeo-Christian moral notion of justice is thus ill-suited to judging this banality of evil because it seeks not only to establish evil acts, but also evil intentions, intentions which, as we have seen, are very difficult to pin down. Questions of intentionality revolving around sin and culpability plague Judaeo-Christian ethics in a way that they were not those of Ancient Greece. How, for instance, does one pinpoint evil intentions in the long and tortuous chain of command that constitutes the impersonal bureaucratic mechanism behind the act of genocide? It is very difficult to attribute responsibility to one person for the gassing of Jews since nurses, doctors, technicians, cleaners, labourers, police officers, train drivers, and railway signalmen—all those who worked near or within the gas chambers, or facilitated the transport of Jews to their terrible fate, or disposed of their corpses or registered their deaths, had their allotted roles and followed specific orders; how does one apportion individual criminal intent for these acts, among a collectivity of individuals whose exact job descriptions may have been different, but who were all directly or indirectly engaged in the same mass process of extermination?

Questioned after the war, each one of these people said: What, me, guilty? The worker who opened the gas spigot, the man closest to the act of murder in both time and space, was fulfilling a technical function under the supervision of his superiors and doctors.

The workers who cleaned out the room were performing a necessary sanitary job—and a highly repugnant one at that. The policeman was following his procedure, which is to record each death and certify that it has taken place without any violation of the laws in force. So who is guilty? Everyone, or no one (Littell 2010: 19).

All these people, one way or another, were involved in the genocide, and some like the cleaners, were less directly involved than others, such as those who operated the gas valves; yet to try to subdivide or mitigate the guilt of particular individuals according to their different job descriptions is as suspect as trying to hide behind the excuse of “following orders”. Littell’s suggestion that the Nuremberg Trials sensibly chose to focus on acts rather than intentions which is confirmed by Aue’s own summary of these trials in the preface to the novel: “Why hand the interior minister Frick and not his subordinate Stuckart, who did all his work for him? A lucky man, that Stuckart, who only stained his hands with ink, never with blood” (Littell 2010: 20).

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the above examples of Nazi perpetrators provided by Littell via his main protagonist Aue, what moral conclusions, then, can be drawn? And more specifically, just how seriously can these conclusions be taken when they are based on an ancient Greek model of justice whose focus on evil acts, rather than intentions, appears to allow certain perpetrators to get off astonishingly lightly, while others are more severely punished for no apparent reason. The answer, quite simply, is that this straightforward approach to justice is—no pun intended, the lesser of two evils. If, as has been demonstrated, establishing culpability and intention is practically impossible, especially when the ready-made excuse “I was only following orders” is inevitably used, as it was by Eichmann, then the only solution is to condemn people for the acts they

commit, irrespective of whether these “acts” are understood to be only indirectly linked to the killings, directly linked, writing out orders, or merely following them. Some apparently harsh sentences may well result from this approach, but that is too bad: “that is just the way the process goes”, as Littell says in the interview passage quoted above. Littell seems to be advocating a system of justice that accepts a necessary degree of arbitrariness that is commensurate with the arbitrariness inherent to the banality of evil itself, and in this regard, his solution is perhaps more pragmatic—or at least more satisfying to secularists, than the Judaeo-Christian conception of justice that is focused on criminal intent. And in a quite different context—that of the oppressed Jewish victim rather than the Nazi perpetrator, Littell demonstrates this same moral pragmatism when he adopts a nuanced and empathetic attitude toward the thorny question of Jewish collaboration. However abhorrent this collaboration may have seemed to Arendt, certain allowances have to be made for the terrible dilemmas and genuine fears with which the Jewish leaders were faced at that time. In conclusion, the ultimate success and originality of Littell’s novel thus lie in its capacity to morally engage his readers at three intricately related levels: Firstly, it invites them, via the notion of banality, to delve into some uncomfortable truths about their shared susceptibility to immoral actions; secondly, it poses some difficult but necessary questions about what constitutes a morally acceptable course of action in the most extreme circumstances any human being can face: the threat of imminent extinction; and thirdly, in light of how the Nazi perpetrators of this terrible extermination were subsequently tried at Nuremberg, it harnesses the banality of evil—a major contributing factor to their heinous crimes, to a fruitful and timely re-examination of the modern justice system. Littell’s tone and subject matter may well have proven too controversial for some, but they have a serious and underlying ethical agenda that remains highly relevant to the post-holocaust world in which we live today.

Notes

1. Reinhard Heydrich, one of the main architects of the Holocaust, and to whom Eichmann refers in this speech reconstructed by Littell, is considered by historians to be the most sinister figure of the Nazi elite. Even Hitler described him as “the man with the iron heart” (Dederichs 2009).
2. Arendt describes Eichmann’s self-professed idealism thus: An idealist, according to Eichmann’s notions, was not merely a man who believed in an idea or someone who did not steal or accept bribes though these qualifications were indispensable. An “idealist” was a man who lived for his idea—hence he could not be a businessman, and who was prepared to sacrifice for his idea everything and, especially, everybody (...). The perfect “idealist”, like everybody else, had of course his personal feelings and emotions, but he would never permit them to interfere with his actions if they came into conflict with his “idea” (Arendt 1965: 41-42).
3. Among the few works focusing exclusively or partially on the subjectivity of perpetrators rather than victims Suleiman cites Robert Merle’s *La mort est mon métier* (1952), Jorge Borge’s short story *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (1949), George Steiner’s *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (1981), David Grossman’s *See Under: Love* (1989), Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* (1991) as well as Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List* (1993) and Oliver Hirschbiegel’s *Der Untergang* (2004) (Suleiman 2009).

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