La bienveillance de la critique polonaise. An Analysis of the Polish Reception of *The Kindly Ones*[1]

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This article surveys Polish reactions to The Kindly Ones *in relation to the polemic arguments surfacing within Western criticism of Littell's novel, thereby aiding an enhanced understanding of his complex text. Following one analysis, this article posits abjection as the force behind both Aue's matricide and the "Final Solution" as well as a possible explanation of some of the novel's more puzzling elements, such as the protagonist's implausibility. Finally, while speculating about the possible reasons for Littell's overwhelmingly positive reception in Poland, the article situates the unanimous Polish acclaim in the context of a recent Polish coming to terms with the uncomfortable issue of Poland's role in the Holocaust.*

"Poland will never be a beautiful country, but some of its landscapes have a melancholy charm" (*KO* 574),[2] states Maximilien Aue while on his way to inspect concentration camps set up on what was, until 1939, Polish territory. Somewhat surprisingly, this is one of the very few references to Poland in this over nine hundred-page book centered around the extermination of European Jews and partially set in the country on whose soil much of the horror of the Holocaust unraveled. Despite – or perhaps exactly because of – this curious absence of the Poles from Littell's novel, the Polish response to *The Kindly Ones* was overwhelmingly positive, both upon the book's publication in France in 2006 and when it appeared in Polish translation in 2008. Before investigating the possible reasons behind such a reception of Littell's novel, I will offer a survey of Polish reactions to *The Kindly Ones*, focusing on those arguments which – implicitly or explicitly – polemicize with the criticism directed at Littell in the West, and which can potentially further illuminate our understanding of this complex and puzzling text. I will then pay particular attention to one critic's Kristevan reading which I develop by positing abjection – rather than melancholia – as the force behind both Aue's matricide and the Nazis' mass murder of the Jews. I also argue that abjection can potentially elucidate some of the novel's perplexing elements such as the protagonist's alleged implausibility or the highly criticized German-Jewish dichotomy thematized throughout Littell's book. Finally, I will speculate about the reasons for the nearly unanimous acclaim for *The Kindly Ones* in Poland. I place these conclusive remarks in the broader context of Polish-Jewish relations and, in particular, of Poland's recent coming to terms with the uncomfortable question of anti-Semitism, raised, for example, by the release of Claude Lanzmann's seminal documentary *Shoah* (1985) or the publication of Jan T. Gross's books, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (2001) and *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (2006).

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[1] I would like to thank the Polish Institute in Tel Aviv for facilitating my participation in the international conference "Writing the Holocaust and WWII Today. On Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*" which took place at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem on 21–23 June 2009 and during which an abridged version of this article was presented. I am also grateful to Prof. Adam Chmielewski (University of Wrocław) for his insight regarding Heideggerian philosophy.

[2] "La Pologne ne sera jamais un beau pays mais certains de ses paysages ont un charme mélancolique." (*B* 529)

Verisimilitude and Decorum

Beside the petty criticism of Littell's use of French and German, the questions raised thus far by *The Kindly Ones* deal generally speaking, with two French classicist notions, *la vraisemblance* and *la bienséance*, which mean that the characters and the plot must be credible and the reader's good taste should not be offended. As for the novel's verisimilitude, several Western critics accuse the narrator – an erudite doctor of law whose inherent sensitivity allegedly jars with his sexual perversity, the brutal murders he commits, or his quasi-fanatical allegiance to Nazi ideology – of being "a post-Freudian abstraction" (Husson and Terestchenko 50), of "lacking substance," or of "speaking like a Jew," which supposedly makes Aue an unlikely figure (Lanzmann).[3] Some also criticize the "hybrid" quality of *The Kindly*

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[3] Translations from the Polish and French are my own, except those taken from *Les Bienveillantes*.

Ones, which can be considered as neither fiction nor a historical novel (Husson and Terestchenko 24),[4] and reproach Littell for approximating history (Petitdemange 686) or even for "unashamedly corrupting the work of historians" (Dauzat 72).

Implicitly agreeing with Liran Razinsky's reclassification of *The Kindly Ones* as a work which, whilst writing history, positions itself on the crossroads between testimonial literature and literature of transgression (70–1), Wojciech Pięciak, German specialist for the Roman Catholic weekly magazine *Tygodnik Powszechny*, vehemently rejects the labeling of *The Kindly Ones* as a historical novel and, consequently, the accusations of both a lack of historical accuracy and the improbability of some characters including the narrator. Similarly, novelist and literary historian Stefan Chwin redefines *The Kindly Ones* as a "phantasmagoric" novel which "blends reality with illusion" and offers a "hyper-realistic description of a fantasy world made up of facts, traumas, and obsessions." As for Aue, Chwin argues that "[h]e is entirely realistic to those who are familiar with various, monstrous, perverse, and transgressive protagonists in modern literature, and who appreciate Süskind's *Perfume* or Sartre's *Nausea*." The critic then explains Max's penchant for homosexuality and incest as a refusal to accept the natural order of the world as supported by Aue's problematic relationship with his own birth and with the reproductive function of women's bodies: "This novel is about man's confrontation with the incredible horror of being [and] the Holocaust is just one of the numerous examples of this monstrosity. Littell multiplies them, so much so that the novel effectively becomes a compendium of examples of how horrible our existence is" (Chwin).

Appreciative of Chwin's re-classification of *The Kindly Ones*, Michał Głowiński, a prominent literary scholar and a Holocaust survivor, argues that Littell's book is not a historical novel since a historical novel can only deal with periods considered irreversibly closed. According to Głowiński, the Holocaust is

> too traumatic and too horrific to be seen as one of those events that have passed and crystallized, which is not only because a handful of survivors […] are still alive but also because it is only during the last few decades that we have begun to fully realize what the Holocaust really was. As a col-

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[4] In my view, the validity of Husson's comments is undermined by the fact that in "La vraie histoire des *Bienveillantes*" he speaks of "Polish death camps" and "Polish ghettos" (8–9).

> lection of facts the Holocaust has ended. However, it has not ended as a problem, a set of questions […], a subject for reflection. ("Od strony kata" 119)

Finally, like Chwin, Głowiński contests the criticism leveled at Aue who, capable of capturing the reader's attention over a thousand pages, "cannot be deprived of all qualities, be a collection of clichés borrowed from other works of literature [….], or be an artificial construct like the hero of a morality tale or one or another type of allegory" ("Od strony kata" 113).

Insofar as *The Kindly Ones* addresses the tragedy of the European Jews, the question of genre becomes inevitably intertwined with that of appropriateness since many Holocaust scholars either ban aesthetic discourse on the Holocaust altogether, or privilege documentary or historical accounts.[5] *The Kindly Ones* has provoked debate amongst Western critics over the novel's form and language, which some judge totally inappropriate, calling the novel "voyeuristic," "nihilistic," "sadistic," "obscene," "scandalous," "blasphemous," "offensive," and "pornographic." Moreover, Husson and Terestchenko accuse the book of "trading human abjection" (16), "abusing the memory of Holocaust victims" (29), "digging up the dead" (122) and "rekindling evil" (140), and reproach Littell for having given a voice to a Nazi, which supposedly encourages empathy or even identification with Aue. Some critics are also scandalized by the interchangeability of the criminals and the victims, as announced already by the novel's dedication ("For the dead") and invocation ("Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened" *KO* 3),[6] and spelt out by the *Zeughaus* scene where Aue watches Hitler metamorphose into a rabbi.[7] Finally, some suspect Littell of wishing to strip the Holocaust of its uniqueness by de-contextualizing, de-historicizing, and "de-jewifying" the sacred event that the Holocaust has become.[8]

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[5] Amongst those scholars are Berel Lang who, whilst acknowledging that non-historical writings may heighten the awareness of the Holocaust, believes that fictionalized discourses are inherently tendentious and include the possibility of Holocaust denial (*Holocaust Representation* 12–3). See also Lang's "The Representation of Evil". Similarly, Adorno claimed that any representation of the annihilation of Jews means transforming the victims' suffering into the art which had legitimized the actions of the Nazis (*Negative Dialectics* 367). Finally, Elie Wiesel, who maintains that the victim's experience must be translated into words although, in the face of the Holocaust, they will be "inadequate, worn, foolish, lifeless" (201–2), uses his own novels to denounce Holocaust literature.

[6] "Frères humains, laissez-moi vous raconter comment ça s'est passé" (*B* 11).

[7] See, for example, Lasdun.

The polyvalent "transgressiveness" of *The Kindly Ones* has not escaped the attention of Polish critics either. Most of them, however, have been more indulgent than their Western counterparts, trying to understand or even justify both the apocalyptic levels of horror and the extremely graphic and seeming endless descriptions of Max's sexual excesses. Defending the author's narrative strategy, the distinguished Germanist Łukasz Musiał considers the Western critics' indignation at Aue's sado-masochism hypocritical since "[i]t is hard to claim that eroticism, even the 'correct' one, is stripped of all brutality […]; for any physical contact means *friction* of two bodies and one does not necessarily need to reach for Sade's books to learn it" (47).[9] Rather than condemning the descriptions of extreme violence or of Max's sexual proclivities as either gratuitous or aimed at capturing the public's attention, Musiał incites the reader to "trust" Littell and to search for a deeper meaning and purpose of the novel's "transgressive" character (46). To cite another opinion, Piotr Augustyniak, a lecturer in German philosophy at the Economic University in Krakow, views both "the truly Sadean frankness that reaches far beyond the socially and culturally entrenched rules of propriety, polite silence, and good taste," and the fact the Aue's story is "set against the background of the most shocking war atrocities," as necessitated by the times we live in and by the correlated (in)sensitivity of modern readers (107).

As for Littell's choice to give a voice to a Nazi, a reviewer for the Polish-language edition of *Newsweek* was bemused by the outrage of Western critics and reminds us that already some of Tadeusz Borowski's sardonic Auschwitz stories, first published in 1947,[10] are narrated by a deputy Kapo who positions himself between the perpetrator and the victim, systematically blurring the difference between the two ("Auschwitz na ostro"). Indeed, for Augustyniak, Littell's narrative technique reflects the true nature of the Holocaust since, just as in reality, in *The Kindly Ones*:

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[8] The arguments listed in this paragraph are repeated with a varying degree of virulence by Husson and Terestchenko, Dauzat, Blanrue, Viart, and others. This does not mean, however, that there were no positive reactions to *The Kindly Ones* in the West. For examples, see Theweleit or Suleiman.

[9] This and several other articles on *The Kindly Ones* appeared in *Przegląd Polityczny*, a highly reputed socio-political quarterly that dedicated much of its two consecutives volumes in 2009 to Littell's novel.

[10] See *Pożegnanie z Marią* published in English as *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*.

> the executioners are named and their stories are rich in thousands of details […] whilst their victims remain anonymous […], are a mere number; they are standing over the communal graves they have dug themselves in Polish, Ukrainian, or Russian soil, they are swarming on the ramp in Birkenau, Treblinka, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Belzec. (107)

Similarly, Czapliński asserts that by "humanizing" the perpetrator, "Littell restores the personal dimension to the Holocaust," makes it tangible, desacralizes it and "challenges the idea of a 'bureaucratic crime'" (75). Finally, Głowiński, who believes that "literature is there to deal with anything, even when by doing so it upsets our sense of propriety or creates controversy," judges naïve a view that autodiegetic narration necessarily creates empathy and opens the trap of identification with the undeniably monstrous Aue ("Od strony kata" 111).[11] That said, the critic observes that in the immediate aftermath of the war such a narrative strategy may have raised objections, as did Robert Merle's fictionalized autobiography of Rudolf Höss. Since 1952, however, which is when *La Mort est mon métier* came out, "[t]he boundaries of appropriateness have been extended and therefore what until recently would have been out of place […] has ceased to be unacceptable not only from a literary but also from a moral point of view" ("Od strony kata" 119). Furthermore, adopting the perpetrator's perspective may be revealing without, as Littell's novel proves, "lighten[ing] the weight [of the genocide], falsify[ing] historical truth, or even diminish[ing] its documentary value" ("Od strony kata" 119–20).

In the introduction to a volume of essays on the ethics of Holocaust representation where Głowiński endorses Berel Lang's dogmatic position on the fictionalization of the Holocaust while simultaneously agreeing with Alvin Rosenfeld's conviction that silent mourning would only sentence the victims to a double death, aesthetization of the Holocaust is described as inevitable in the face of the encroaching absence of survivors ("Wprowadzenie" 12). As a result, instead of fading away with the last eyewitnesses, the Holocaust "becomes a sort of general issue no longer limited to the transcription of personal experiences or even second-hand accounts based on reports and stories of participants and observers" ("Wprowadzenie" 9). While stressing the subjectivity of the term "appropriateness," Głowiński draws a list of stylistic figures or narrative forms that would be definitely unsuitable in Holocaust literature. These include – naturally – anti-Semitic and negationist discourse but also pathos, allegory, and kitsch. Interestingly, this last term was used by several Western journalists to denounce Littell's novel, a categorization to which one Polish critic has openly objected by stating that if we only bothered to define kitsch we could see that *The Kindly Ones* has nothing to do with this low form of art.[12] Finally, according to Głowiński, what is decidedly inappropriate in regard to the Holocaust is a "neutralizing" discourse, whereby the critic understands any attempt to rob the Holocaust of its specificity by treating it as one of the many tragedies that have punctuated European history or as a "tale speaking, for instance, of the rule of evil or flaws of human nature" ("Wprowadzenie" 17).[13]

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[11] Having recently co-edited a collection of essays whose title may be translated as *Appropriateness and Form. How to Write about the Shoah?*, Głowiński is particularly well placed to comment upon the ethics of Holocaust representation.

Without overlooking Littell's wish to use the Holocaust as a pretext for contemplating the nature of evil, Polish critics do not see it as concomitant with the trivialization of the Holocaust. Perhaps they share Głowiński's liberal view that whilst equating the Holocaust with other genocides would distort the truth, "[s]ome kind of […] universalization is inescapable as events become more historically remote and as their contours become more clearly perceived than the reality, the details or the hard facts that fill the space that they demarcate" ("Wprowadzenie" 17). Thus, Augustyniak, who emphatically claims that *The Kindly Ones* "is not a novel about World War Two," sees nothing wrong with the fact that Littell's narrative is concerned, as he believes, with the tragedy of the human condition in the twentieth century, and that it is meant to hold a mirror up to today's readers by presenting them with “the naked and integral […] existential truth” that Aue, despite all his perversities, is one of us (107). Likewise, Musiał reads *The Kindly Ones* as an enquiry into the origins and essence of evil, and so the question that absorbs the critic is the following: is literature “innocent” or, to put it differently, should “evil” books be written and, if they already exist, should they be read even if they revive evil?[14] Considering Littell’s text in the light of artistic traditions that claim a radical separation between ethics and aesthetics, championed by Baudelaire, Sade, Goya, E. T. A. Hoffmann, or Ernst Jünger whose works “depict evil as both deplorable and aesthetically attractive,” Musiał refuses to subscribe to the accusation of the “aesthetization of violence” echoing through the French reviews of *The Kindly Ones* (47). Instead, he subjects the novel to a Heideggerian reading – an odd choice considering the philosopher’s embroilment with Nazism – to see if by re-presenting or, to use another translation of the verb *vorstellen*, placing evil before us, Littell is not in fact concealing (*verstellen*) it.[15] This is because

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[12] See Musiał (54). The critic quotes Prof. Maria Janion for whom kitsch means "an unjustified quest for harmony, a cheap apology of 'simple' moral values, a resistance to fatality and contradictions, supplying everything with a *happy end*."

[13] This is indeed a widespread view, shared by, amongst others, the award-winning writer and Holocaust survivor Henryk Grynberg who insists that denying the Holocaust its exceptional status or its unprecedentedness inevitably leads to the misunderstanding of the phenomenon and the falsification of history.

> even if we delude ourselves to be thinking “objectively” and “independently,” in reality we only accept what is being put before us and […] what existed before us, preceded us. In this sense, thinking becomes a field of violence, is a result of concealment and in itself exacerbates violence: it blocks out the truth and, moreover, exerts violence upon us, wanting to enslave us with its re-presenting. (50)

Thus, evil persists because we think about it (but how not to do so when reading Littell?) and so the best solution, as the critic provocatively suggests, would be total amnesia. Indeed, Musiał states that evil grows with our awareness of the Holocaust which in turn increases with the growing number of publications on the subject: “Paradoxically the culture of remembering – remembering the terrible things that took place – becomes a trap: it preserves the pain which then holds us hostage” (51). We are dealing therefore, as Musiał corrects himself, with a “culture of hypocrisy,” since knowledge and thinking about evil make us feel superior to those who know and think less than us. Hence, it is also a “culture of forgetting,” forgetting that we are in fact no better than others and that, if presented with an opportunity – and this point is also made by Littell's novel – we would most likely become evil ourselves. Having said that, Musiał, once again following Bataille, decides that since literature is part of life and not only "a pastime of erudite people," it must be like life itself, that is "it must have its share in both good evil" (54).

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[14] Here Musiał is referring to Bataille’s proposition “literature is not innocent” (10) and to J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* (2003).

[15] The critic refers specifically to Heidegger’s series of lectures *Was heißt Denken?* (1952).

Polish critics are similarly open-minded when it comes to the intellectual and affective reciprocity between the Germans and the Jews, voiced by the grey eminence of the Nazi regime, Dr. Mandelbrod, who insists upon parallels between Zionism and Nazism, and by Aue's sister who thinks that the Germans are exterminating the Jews to kill what they hate about themselves and to internalize what they admire in their victims: "our German dream […] was to be Jews, pure, indestructible, faithful to a Law, different from everyone else and under the hand of God" (*KO* 875).[16] Without questioning their appropriateness, Czapliński sees these ruminations as a straightforward illustration of Grynberg's theory which blames the Final Solution on the anti-Semitism born out of the centuries-long rivalry between Christians and Jews.[17] While there may be a link, however tenuous, between the Polish-Jewish writer's views and those articulated by the two protagonists, I think that Littell's representation of the Germans' anti-Jewish feelings better reflects Freud's concept of the narcissism of minor differences. For Freud claims that "[i]t is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness" (114) and that "it [was not] an unaccountable chance that the dream of a Germanic world dominion called for anti-Semitism as its complement" (114–5). Similarly, for Aue, the new German nation is being founded on the hatred of the Other, before being finally consolidated by the genocide in which each citizen must be implicated: "we're bound together now, bound to the outcome of this war by acts committed in common" (*KO* 142),[18] states Max in relation to the Final Solution.

Returning to Grynberg's theory, Czapliński notices that Littell's novel constantly plays it against Zygmunt Bauman's thesis which, undermining the centrality of Jew-hatred to the Final Solution, claims that the Holocaust could not have happened without – not to say was a direct consequence of – the rise of modern society with all its technological achievements (transport, mass media etc.).[19] For Czapliński, it is to this ongoing dialogue between the two mutually exclusive ideas that Littell's novel owes its interest and complexity, turning "the Holocaust from a riddle with a single answer into a mystery that may never be resolved" (73). The critic nevertheless rejects both hypotheses as the key to understanding *The Kindly Ones*, attempting instead a psychoanalytical reading of Aue's relationship with his parents, which he sees as a metaphor of Germany's struggle to reinvent itself after its defeat in WWI. Inspired by Aue's own comparison of his personal situation to that of the beleaguered Germany – "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" (*KO* 526)[20] – Czapliński considers Max's matricide "the same as the mass murder of one nation by another nation: it is the means of establishing an autonomous identity and the basis for a new community [which] enters history, [and] confirms and legitimizes its existence by committing an apocalyptic and originary act" (74).

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[16] "notre rêve d'Allemands, c'était d'être juifs, purs, indestructibles, fidèles à une Loi, différents de tous et sous la main de Dieu" (*B* 802).

[17] See Grynberg, especially 104–5.

[18] "nous tous, nous sommes liés maintenant, liés à l'issue de cette guerre par des actes commis en commun" (*B* 137).

Abjecting the (M)other

Czapliński's analysis brings to mind Julia Kristeva's oft-repeated claim that the separation from the mother is vital for our individuation.[21] The failure to accomplish a symbolic matricide resolves in the subject's inability to establish a meaningful heterosexual relationship (which is indeed Aue's case), or even in depression and suicide as, after the maternal object has been introjected, it is the subject that comes under the fire of the matricidal drive (*Black Sun* 27–30).[22]

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[19] See Bauman, chapters 2, 3 and 4.

[20] "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" (*B* 485).

[21] I am referring here in particular to *Black Sun* where Kristeva claims that "[m]atricide is our vital necessity, the sine qua non condition of our individuation" (27–8) and *Powers of Horror* where the author argues that the passage to the symbolic depends on the mother being ab-jected (13).

[22] Following Kristeva, I use the terms "depression" and "melancholia" interchangeably.

It is also in this context that Aue’s difficult relationship with his mother attracts Musiał’s attention. For the critic, the narrator’s aversion to Héloïse Moreau, accompanied by his idealization of his absconded father, is akin to the thetic break which, according to Kristeva, marks the infant’s passage from the semiotic chora – a preverbal space associated with the mother defined as a non-expressive totality formed by drives and anterior to spatiality and temporality[23] – to the symbolic order of the Father and, above all, language. Consequently, Musiał interprets Max’s incestuous love for Una, his hatred for the one who gave birth to him, and his devotion to National Socialism as expressions of both his nostalgia for the lost paradise of the oneness with the maternal body and his desire to identify with the Father and his Law. Combined with the instability of the paternal function (the father’s identity becomes progressively obscure), the inefficacy of the matricide he commits places Aue, according to Musiał, under the sign of melancholia whose only symptom – as far as I can see – would be the narrator’s logorrhea. Using his “mother tongue” to write about his involvement in the war, Aue may be trying – to use Kristeva’s words – “to retrieve [the mother] as sign, image, word,” and to work through the mourning (and thus overcome his melancholia) by (re-)establishing a symbolic system (*Black Sun* 74). Yet, rather than Max’s use of the prosodic economy of literary creation or his efforts to sublimate loss into a beautiful object, which Kristeva identifies as antidotes to depression,[24] it is Aue’s baroque style, characterized by enumerations, tautology, reduplications, wastefulness, excess, profusion of parenthesis and digressions, and overabundance of signifiers in relation to meaning, that Musiał sees as the proof of the narrator’s “melancholy imagination.” For indeed, Max’s narrative “swells with the overload of facts, numbers, dates, characters, places, objects, events,” and “overflows with filth, phlegm, flesh, […] sperm, blood, vomit, and excrement” (Musiał 54).

It is precisely Littell’s systematic emphasis on the malfunctioning of Aue’s body which has encouraged me to see abjection – rather than melancholia – as the explanation of the protagonist’s matricide and, consequently, of the Germans’ obsessive anti-Semitism. Abjection could serve to elucidate both Max’s apparent inconsistency and the troubling dichotomy of the Jews and the Nazis. In Kristevan terms, the abject refers to the subject's violent reaction to the loss of distinction between itself and the object, characteristic of the fusion with the (m)other that precedes the narcissism of the mirror stage and the acquisition of language. Shit, vomit, disease, degeneration, menstrual blood, skin that forms on the surface of warm milk, and – of course – the corpse, which, poised between human and inhuman, allows death to infect life, are all abject since they call into question and threaten the boundaries defining the subject's autonomy and substance (*Powers of Horror* 2–3). In the Judaic tradition, which has an obvious influence on Aue's thinking, the mother can also be "horrific," especially when defiled by bodily fluids such as breast milk or blood. The circumcision which, in Kristeva's view, repeats the severing of the umbilical cord, thus serves to separate the (male) infant from the impure mother (99–100).

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[23] See *Revolution in Poetic Language* 25–31.

[24] See chapter IV of *Black Sun* “Beauty: The Depressive’s Other Realm” 95–104.

It appears therefore that whereas Max's obsessive love for his twin sister or the pleasure he takes in being naked, in rolling himself in a ball, and in submerging himself in baths and pools, betray his fantasy of oneness with the female he enjoyed in the womb, the dread that Héloïse Moreau inspires in him expresses his need to "ab-ject" the mother in order to forge for himself an autonomous and separate ego-identity. The cruel ejection from the idyllic state of harmony and unity is repeated in the scene where, floating in a swimming pool at Globocnik's party, Max is seized by anguish, imagining the water around to have become a heavy, suffocating blanket (*KO* 602). Significantly, this panic attack is induced by the execution of two Jews, the double killing possibly bringing back the memory of the twins' double birth, which Max will later try to "undo" with the double murder of Héloïse and Aristide Moreau. Aue's distress at his inability to demarcate himself from his mother is also manifest in other episodes including the narrator's visit to the hairdresser's where the sound of scissors makes him break out in cold sweat (444), or the dreamlike sequence where Thomas, Max's symbolic twin brother,[25] gathers his bowels back into his belly which he then fastens with the protagonist's scarf as if it were an umbilical cord (410). The scene communicates a fantasy of giving birth to oneself which is, however, powerless against abjection since, as Kristeva states, a fetus signified by entrails – even if these are one's own – is by definition abject (*Powers of Horror* 101). Allergic to his mother's milk as if fearing that the passage of liquid from the breast to the mouth may jeopardize the separation attempted at birth, Aue considers Héloïse Moreau impure, her moral downfall being symbolized by her collapse into a puddle. Moreover, this image likens her to a corpse since the Latin verb *cadere* – to fall – is, as Kristeva observes, at the origin of the noun "cadaver" (3). Finally, the mother's marriage to a foreigner who shares the surname with Flaubert's Frédéric Moreau, transforms the virtuous maternal figure into a Mary Magdalene, an adulteress (Max refuses to accept his father's death), and an all-engulfing mother whose love for her son is tinted by incest, which is indeed how the young protagonist of *L'Éducation sentimentale* thinks of his affair with Marie Arnoux. Crucially, Max's matricidal hatred reaches its apex in the scene where, engaged with a chance lover, the narrator tenderly contemplates his reflection but believes it to be that of Una. As he climaxes, the beloved face is brutally replaced by the hateful image of Aue's mother which, in Kristevan terms, signifies the narcissistic crisis where the abject irrupts into the economy of auto-contemplation and self-sufficiency, and where Narcissus suddenly glimpses his own death (*Powers of Horror* 14–5).

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[25] One of the twelve Apostles was Thomas Didymus and Didymos is the Greek word for "twin." In Syrian Thomas [Tau'ma] means twin.

The blood that stains Aue's hand when he shatters the mirror presenting him with the image of the death-bearing mother prefigures the brutal murder he will commit so as to arrive at a separate, unambiguous and homogenous identity. For despite his brilliant career in the SS and his participation in the Nazi genocide, Max is a locus of ambiguity: half-French and half-German, dark-haired, circumcised, homosexual and involved in incest, Max, whose name invokes that of the Franco-German writer of Jewish origin Max Aub,[26] imagines himself as Himmler's *Judelein* – little Jew – or styles his union with Una on a Jewish wedding. The night of Orlando and Tristan's conception, Max breaks a wine glass and then quotes a passage from Proust's *Jean Santeuil* referring to the destruction of the Temple as symbolized by the smashing of a glass by Jewish newlyweds (*KO* 486). Ironically, this inherent duality renders the narrator himself abject. A committed Nationalist Socialist on the surface, in reality, and like Kristeva's immoralist, Max flouts all moral rules and commits most hideous crimes (*Powers of Horror* 4).

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[26] See Blanrue (72). The replacement of the final consonant by a vowel fulfils Max's wish of being a woman, the final "e" of the past participles and adjectives in French rendering, according to Aue, women so "female" (*KO* 896).

Interpreted as driven by abjection, Max's quest for a distinct identity is even more clearly analogous to Germany's plan for a new society based on the purity of blood and free of any ambiguity. Indeed, the novel's most ardent anti-Semites, Mandelbrod and Turek, both embody the German-Jewish duality, the former having a Jewish-sounding name and the latter being endowed with dark, curly hair, a prominent nose, and sensuous lips. It is therefore to engineer a perfectly homogenous society that the nation is expelling all the *Fremdkörper* – the foreign bodies – which menace to penetrate and contaminate the healthy organism of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, as do the splinters which enter Max's flesh unnoticed during the first mass execution he witnesses. The nation to be born out of this process reveals itself to Max as Mandelbrod's female entourage made up of quasi-indistinguishable women or, in a nightmare where the new Germany resembles a concentration camp, "these men and women weren't distinguished from one another by any special characteristic; they all had white skin, light-colored hair, blue, pale, lost eyes, Höss's eyes, the eyes of my old olderly Hanika" (*KO* 620).[27]

However, like Aue's brutal double killing, the Final Solution seems ineffective in the struggle against abjection, as suggested by the questions that plague Max just before he assassinates his mother and stepfather: "What if murder weren't a definitive solution, what if on the contrary this new fact, even less reparable than the ones before it, opened in turn onto new abysses?" (*KO* 526)[28] This is because, like hypocrisy, lies, treachery, or an unrepentant rapist, a premeditated murder is abject since, in Kristeva's view, it undermines society's legal order (*Powers of Horror* 4). Thus, because the Holocaust put at the service of death both science, which normally serves to preserve life, and childhood, which epitomizes life, it has become, according to Kristeva, the apogee of abjection (*ibid*.). This thought is developed by Littell's novel which shows how work was meant to destroy the worker (*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*), how lawyers were hired to assassinate innocent people without trial, or how doctors in white coats supervised a selection of inmates or conducted cruel medical experiments on prisoners. No wonder that throughout the war Max is tormented by nauseas, diarrheas, panic attacks, and nightmares (in themselves full of filth and excrement), which, as Kristeva would have it, are meant to protect him from abjection. "[B]efore the war, I never vomited" (*KO* 166)[29] asserts Aue thus tracing his psychosomatic problems back to the spectacle and stench of decaying corpses. And although many years have passed since the end of the war Max continues to vomit, whilst the flow of excrement has been replaced by the interminable flow of words. These, like the lace produced by Max's factory and leaving the looms stained with graphite, emerge from under the narrator's pen full of gaps and soiled with blood, shit, and vomit, yet at the same time beautiful in their delicate and intricate nature.

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[27] "ces hommes et ces femmes ne se distinguaient les uns des autres par aucun trait particulier, tous avaient la peau blanche, les cheveux clairs, les yeux bleus, pâles, perdus, les yeux de Höss, les yeux de mon ancienne ordonnance Hanika" (*B* 571). It may be no coincidence that all of Mandelbrod's assistants have a name beginning with the letter H as do Höss and Hanika mentioned in this passage. This may be an allusion to the Hebrew alphabet letter Heh (H), God's single-lettered unpronounceable name or simply – though less likely – to Hitler.

[28] "Et si le meurtre n'était pas une solution définitive, et si au contraire ce nouveau fait, encore moins réparable que les précédents, ouvrait à son tour de nouveaux abîmes?" (*B* 485).

"The Kindly Ones"

Intricate and beautiful is also how several Polish critics judge *The Kindly Ones*. Czapliński, for example, writes that Littell's book has "the acrid taste of a long-awaited novel" and has helped him "rediscover the meaning of reading" (68). It is because the text "destabilizes the whole contemporary world, and it does so superbly by systematically retelling a nightmare, by subjecting horror to the rules of syntax, and by lending the narrated atrocities the elegance and precision of its style" (*ibid*.). Likewise, Głowiński esteems *The Kindly Ones* to be an "excellently written," "important," and "extraordinary work of literature" ("Od strony kata" 107−8), describing it as "a momentous, remarkable and perhaps even seminal text which has significantly extended the possibilities of the Holocaust narrative" (119), and which, most importantly, "provokes thought and discussion" (108).

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[29] "avant la guerre, je ne vomissais jamais" (*ibid.* 159).

The question that still remains to be asked is why in contrast to many Western critics the majority of Polish reviewers have been so well-disposed towards *The Kindly Ones*.[30] One potential answer is that the novel illustrates rationalizations of the Holocaust offered by Polish-born writers such as Grynberg or Bauman. Also, it evidently inscribes itself into a renewed interest in the Holocaust which, under Communism, was seen as separate from the non-Jewish Poles' sufferings under German Occupation and which at times was even a taboo subject.[31] Since 1989, however, this situation has been slowly changing and in the last few years Poland has seen a wealth of publications dealing not only with the Holocaust itself but also with the ethics of Holocaust representation.[32]

Another and perhaps the most important reason for the critical success of Littell's novel in Poland is the fact that *The Kindly Ones* fails to implicate the Poles in the extermination of the Jews as did, for example, Gross's books or Lanzmann's epic documentary. Such is the view of Czapliński who implicitly alludes to *Neighbors* and *Fear* as well as to *Shoah* when he states that "[u]nfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) for us Aue did not operate on Polish territory [sic]. He did not visit Jedwabne, Wąsosz, Radziwiłów or Wizna. He did not converse with the locals, did not incite or force them to cooperate" (75). Indeed, although a significant part of the novel's action takes place on former Polish territory, Max hardly ever comes into contact with the locals, restricting his movements to hermetically sealed German enclaves such as the concentration camps and the adjacent factories, or the Wawel Castle from which Hans Frank rules over occupied Poland. His journey from Berlin to Poznań in an armored train carrying the offices of Party dignitaries is therefore symbolic of Aue's limited engagement with Poland. Amongst the few Poles Max encounters is his driver Piontek (described as a Silesian *Volksdeutscher*) whose name, signifying in Polish "Friday," intertextually relates him to Robinson Crusoe's loyal companion and implies that, for Aue, Poland is as desolate as a desert island, a no man's land of culture and civilization. The other two Poles that Max meets work at the *Deutsches Haus* in

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[30] Dorosz's article is the only decidedly negative review of *The Kindly Ones* that I am aware of. Its author reiterates the criticism levelled earlier in France at the novel's lack of verisimilitude and violation of decorum.

[31] For an analysis of the Holocaust representation in Polish literature see Levine.

[32] See, for instance, Ubertowska.

Lublin where, in the frightening proximity of KL Majdanek, the corruption and debauchery that have engulfed Germans and Poles alike reign. On his arrival, Max is offered sexual favors, first by a chambermaid, and then by an anonymous man who slides his hand through a crack in the lavatory wall as Aue is defecating. It is impossible to know how Max guesses the man's nationality, yet he resolutely decides that he is being seduced by a "Polish hand."

The virtual absence of the Poles from *The Kindly Ones* is not entirely unexpected given that Aue arrives in Poland many months after its loss of sovereignty and on its way to be resettled by the Germans whilst the indigenous population is destined for extinction. On the other hand, considering that Littell tries to show as many facets of the Holocaust as possible, it is somewhat surprising that Aue almost never reports on the Poles' attitude towards the Jews or vice versa. The only times he breaks his silence on the topic is to comment on the National Army's supply of poor quality munitions at exorbitant prices to the Warsaw ghetto, or when he comes across a graffiti "KATYŃ = AUSCHWITZ" (*KO* 619) (see Razinsky in this volume) which, by comparing the Holocaust to the 1941 mass murder of Polish officers by the Soviets, provokes the narrator to reflect on Polish-Jewish relations.

Although the representation of Polish people as the Germans' sexual servants is hardly flattering, the Lublin episode is only a minor one. What is striking, on the contrary, is the marginality of the Poles which, if read as symptomatic of the country's total pacification by German forces, is likely to be music to the ears of Polish readers. This absence also means that, unlike Gross or Lanzmann, Littell represents the Poles neither as ardent anti-Semites ready to pass from word to action, nor as opportunists eager to profit from the tragedy of their neighbors, nor even as passive onlookers on the annihilation of Polish Jews. Conversely, the Ukrainians, who feature prominently in *The Kindly Ones*, are depicted as nationalists, blood-thirsty, anti-Semites, and as the Nazis' willing helpers, whilst the Germans themselves come across as diligent and cultivated bureaucrats, only occasionally capable of acts of utmost brutality or compassion. It is noteworthy that such a description of various nationalities closely corresponds to the Poles' general understanding of wartime reality, as demonstrated by a survey conducted by the leading daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* on the seventieth anniversary of the German invasion of Poland. Interestingly, more respondents have a negative image of Polish-Ukrainian than of Polish-German relations whilst the Poles themselves emerge as the greatest victims of the Nazi regime who would, notwithstanding their situation and the risks involved, help their Jewish neighbors. Needless to say, the knowledge about the murders of several, entire Jewish communities in July 1941 still remains patchy, the responsibility being frequently attributed to the Germans or even the Russians.[33]

That *The Kindly Ones* endorses the Poles' perception of their relations with other national groups and their somewhat idealized image of their own role in the war may thus be what largely determined the positive press that Littell's book has received thus far in Poland. At last there is a Holocaust novel – the Polish reviewers seem to be saying – which has been written by an outsider and is partially set on the Polish territory, yet which abstains from incriminating the Poles in the tragedy of the European Jews. This is why, as Czapliński puts it, "[t]he […] debate about Littell's novel risks remaining sterile: whilst some will reproach [the author] with the dangerous aesthetization of evil, other will be seeking the work's cohesive meaning" (76). To this comment one could add, by way of conclusion to the present article, that because for once emotions are not running high the Poles can finally engage in an informed academic debate about a Holocaust novel and, instead of concentrating on politics and national myths, discuss the intrinsic value of the text, exposing it, as it has been done in the case of *The Kindly Ones*, to innovative and illuminating readings.

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[33] See Szacki and Wojciechowski.

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