UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

CORSO DI DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE,
FILOLOGICHE E LETTERARIE

CICLO XXXI

THE CONFLICT REVISITED:
REPRESENTING THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FICTION

Coordinatore: Ch.mo Prof. Rocco Coronato

Supervisore: Ch.mo Prof. Emanuele Zinato

Dottorando: Marco Malvestio

Abstract

The thesis seeks to illuminate the post-postmodern poetics of contemporary global literature about World War II. Whereas twentieth-century novels concerned with the representation of the Second World War tend toward postmodern playfulness and deconstructivism, contemporary literatures about the Second World War, I argue, pay renewed attention to reality. Through textual examples, I convey how authors reprise the techniques of modern and classical genres in tandem with postmodern traits in order to realise the Second World War as an historical event as well as a discursive subject and a plot device through which to explore the intersections of human history and violence. This thesis considers in detail works by Chilean author, Roberto Bolaño; French author, Jonathan Littell; American author, William T. Vollmann; and Australian author, Richard Flanagan. It also makes comparisons between their approaches to representing World War II and those of other writers such as Philip Roth, Laurent Binet, Giorgio Falco, Martin Amis, Andrea Levy, Sarah Waters, Ian McEwan, and others. The breadth of authors analysed is intended to convey the extent to which contemporary representations of World War II converge around a post-postmodern return of the real, and therefore testify to the evolution of post-postmodern poetics as an international phenomenon and the form of the global novel.

Contents

Overview of the Work and Methodological Premise, p. 1

1. Overview of the Work, p. 1

2. Considerations on the Choice of Texts, p. 5

3. Methodological Premise. Thematic Criticism and the Global Novel, p. 7

    3.1. Was There A Single Second World War?, p. 7

    3.2. Thematic Criticism, p. 11

    3.3. Global War, Global Literature, p. 13

Introduction: Post-Postmodernism and the Second World War, p. 18

1. The Historical Singularity of the Second World War, p. 18

2. The Memory of the Second World War, p. 22

3. The Ethics and Poetics of Post-Postmodernism, p. 30

Board Games, Serial Killers, and the Banality of Evil: The Part about Roberto Bolaño, p. 51

1. The Ethics of the Board Game, p. 52

2. A Distant Nazi, p. 57

3. 666 x 2, p. 64

4. Between Post- and Post-Post: The Style of Roberto Bolaño, p. 75

5. Spy Stories and Alternate Histories: A Comparison with Philip Roth, p. 84

A Collection of Parables: William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central*, p. 96

1. A Collection of Parables, p. 97

2. Humanism and Totalitarianism, p. 110

3. The Perpetrators, p. 111

4. Völkisch Ideology: The Sleepwalker and Colonel Hagen, p. 115

5. Martyrs and Tragic Heroes, p. 122

6. ‘Fiction Cannot Be Reduced to Mere Falsehood’: Literature as Experience, p. 132

7. A Digression in *The Zone of Interest*, p. 135

‘Un véritable conte moral’: Jonathan Littell’s *Les Bienveillantes*, p. 142

1. Plot, Characters, Time, p. 144

2. Objections, p. 152

3. Max Aue, an Intellectual Hero, p. 156

4. From Athens to Auschwitz, p. 161

5. ‘Un véritable conte moral’, p. 171

6. Comparisons and Oppositions, p. 174

6.1.‘Quoi de plus vulgaire, en effet, qu’un personnage inventé?’. Laurent Binet’s Metafiction, p. 175

6.2. Giorgio Falco’s ‘Objective Piety’, p. 181

6.3. Comparative Conclusion, p. 191

‘The Strange, Terrible Neverendingness of Human Beings’: Zen Buddhism and the Second World War in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 193

1. Deconstructing the Australian Myth, p. 195

2. Deconstructing the Emperor’s Myth, p. 200

3. The War of Subalterns, p. 204

3.1. Smith, Levy, Waters, Bandele, p. 207

4. The Dangers of Memory, p. 219

4.1. McEwan, Seiffert, Bock, Kennedy, p. 222

5. ‘He Felt the Void He Was Becoming’: A Buddhist Reading of World War II?, p. 233

Conclusion: the Second World War and the Post-Postmodern Novel, p. 241

Bibliography, p. 250

Overview of the Work and Methodological Premise

The key aim of the thesis is to link the prevalence, interpretation, and treatment of the Second World War as a literary theme in twenty-first century global literature with the evolution of post-postmodern poetics. Further, I contend that the choice of the Second World War as the subject of an increasing number of important post-postmodern literary works signals growing anxieties over de-realisation and notions of a lack of agency and purpose that manifest themselves in several aspects of everyday life in post-postmodern societies and in contemporary digital technologies and warfare. The particular mobilisation of the Second World War to counterbalance these sensibilities can be attributed to its historical importance and to the peculiarity of its memorialisation.

As a corollary to this core aim, the thesis also develops a nuanced account of post-postmodern poetics. Through an analysis of the four authors I have chosen as case studies (Bolaño, Vollmann, Littell, and Flanagan), I highlight several common features of post-postmodernism as a literary phenomenon. Expanding on current descriptions of post-postmodernism, I posit that post-postmodernism is characterised by a renewed preoccupation with the relationship between reality and fiction, and by a non-parodying reprise of the narrative techniques of the traditional novel (plot, characters, temporality, mimetic effort) together with postmodern features (metafiction, autofiction, reprise of genre literature). I also elucidate how post-postmodern poetics treat history in a way that is radically different from postmodern deconstructivism (particularly, from historiographic metafiction). Specifically, post-postmodernism recovers the materiality of history, where postmodernism reduces history to the textual.

1. Overview of the Work

The thesis is divided into an introduction and four chapters. The introduction makes a case that, by wielding a thematic approach to contemporary literature about World War II – produced at

a variety of global locations – we can illuminate the extent to which post-postmodernism is the paradigmatic form of the global novel. The methodological premise establishes the methodological framework of the thesis. I elucidate that thematic criticism is a tool through which to historicise literature, and I argue that a global perspective on literature is important in as much as it highlights a wider network of influences and models than those provided by a national framework. In the introduction, I clarify the peculiarity of the Second World War both as an historical fact (thus, as the first and most complete total war) and as the object of a memorial process. Then, I trace the evolution of contemporary literature after the events of World War II and after postmodernism. Within this section, I also register the contrast between the historical circumstances of the Second World War and the unmanned, global dynamics of contemporary warfare.

The remaining four chapters of the thesis are dedicated to the case studies I have chosen as representative of a post-postmodern treatment of the Second World War. Each chapter is dedicated to the work of a single author. However, each also includes a section within which I compare and contrast the title text's thematic treatment of World War II with those of other texts.

In the first chapter, I analyse the work of Roberto Bolaño, focusing on several of his novels than span his literary career (*El Tercer Reich*, written in 1989 and published in 2010; *La literature Nazi en América*, 1996; *Estrella Distante*, 1996; and *2666*, 2004). I show how, in Bolaño's work, the political violence of the Second World War functions as a symbol for all human violence, and as an abstract representation of the class conflicts present in contemporary society. From a literary perspective, Bolaño's portrait of the Second World War evolves through his work. While in his first, unpublished novel, *El Tercer Reich*, he employs the trope of the war-game to criticise the postmodern attitude towards history as a source of entertainment deprived of consequences, in *2666*, Bolaño mimetically represents the war in all its violence. With this in mind, the chapter moves to discuss the features of post-postmodern realism – specifically, the hybridisation of postmodern features (metafiction, genre literature), a serious, non-ironic attitude, and the formal means of the traditional novel (most importantly narratorial authorship). Finally, I compare Bolaño's oscillation between postmodernism and post-postmodernism with the evolution of the memory of the Holocaust in two novels by Philip Roth – *Operation Shylock* (1993) and *The Plot against America* (2004).

In the second chapter, I analyse *Europe Central* by William T. Vollmann (2005). My discussion of Vollmann's work begins with an analysis of the concept of 'parable', which the author uses

to describe the stories that compose the book. By analysing Vollmann's partial misuse of parable, which he interprets as a psychodrama rather than as a brief story aimed to clarify truth, I show that the aim of Vollmann's fiction is to be a portrait of moments of moral indecision, rather than a means of expressing an ideological truth. The Second World War represents for Vollmann a privileged historical moment through which to comprehend these peculiar moments of moral ambiguity. In this sense, and by considering Vollmann's theoretical reflections in *Rising Up and Rising Down* (2005), I discuss how ambiguity is at the centre of Vollmann's stories in *Europe Central*, and how this ambiguity provides access to empathy and historical understanding. Finally, from a stylistic perspective, I illustrate how Vollmann's post-postmodern literary style and hybrid realism are coherent with a notion of literature as an experience, rather than an act of persuasion (as his description of *Europa Central* as a series of parables suggests). Having excavated the moral ambiguity of *Europa Central* and its consequences for the memorialisation of the Second World War, I undertake a comparison of his portrait of the character, Kurt Gerstein and Martin Amis's controversial representation of a Sonderkommando in *The Zone of Interest* (2014). This comparison serves to underscore the success of Vollmann's *Europe Central* in eliciting empathy for the perpetrators of heinous war crimes by way of a post-postmodern poetics, and to offer an example of the way in which some post-postmodern treatments of World War II perpetuate the exceptionalism of the Third Reich and, in so doing, limit the important teleological work that post-postmodern strategies enact.

In the third chapter, I focus on Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* (2006). I foreground how the author's deployment of traditional, modern and modernist (or mythic) stylistic devices helps to stage the novel as the memoir of a former SS officer which we cannot help but intelligise and empathise with. I begin by considering the interpretation that the author provides of the Holocaust as a phenomenon bound to – rather than incongruent with – the mechanisms of industrial modernity (an interpretation that mainly coincides with that of Zygmunt Baumann in *Modernity and the Holocaust*). I then explore the peculiarity of the narrator of *Les Bienveillantes*, before noting the extent to which the novel reprises the characteristics of the traditional novel (in features such as a clear plot, of round characters, and of a consequential temporality), and the modern novel (such as his protagonist's flânerie and intellectual introspection). I also highlight that the novel is structured on the mythical scheme of Orestes' myth, recovering in this sense the modernist mythical method. The combination of these features is distinctly post-postmodern; *Les Bienveillantes*'s post-postmodern poetics enable the novel to function as an experience that transports and at the same time surpasses the ideological framework of the novel. Having established the uniqueness of the poetic voice, I then consider

the choice of a perpetrator as a narrator within the frame of the novel's mimesis; specifically, I elucidate how the novel prompts a suspension of disbelief rather than enacting a reflection on the mechanisms of memorialisation and historicisation, as in postmodern historiographic metafiction. I propose that the negative empathy that the combination of these features supports the novel's aim of being an experience of self-discovery and discussion for readers, rather than the exposition of an ideological theory. After having explored how *Les Bienveillantes*' portrayal of the Second World War's reality mobilises post-postmodern poetics within which we can infer empathy and teleology, I carry out a comparison of Littell's novel with two other literary works (*HHhH* by Laurent Binet, 2010, and *La gemella H* by Giorgio Falco, 2014). I highlight that, whereas *HHhH* and *La gemella H* are each characterised by an antirhetorical style and conduct a detached treatment of the Second World War that fails to transform the memorial conditions of World War II, Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*' mimetic effort and its elicitation of negative empathy encourage readers to develop a new understanding of the Second World War whereby the perpetrators are real, proximal and human.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to Australian writer Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013), which does not depict the European war like the previous novels, but the war in the Pacific. I argue that *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* shares with the other novels a series of topics and traits that we have already discussed. These characteristics are the epics of the decisive moment, the attention to the point of view of the perpetrators, the realistic treatment of the war, the multiplicity of viewpoints, and the maximalist attempt to combine various forms of artistic expression (prose, poetry, painting). Moreover, the novel can be connected to the others from a stylistic viewpoint, as it exhibits post-postmodern features such as mimetic realism, a non-ironic use of an omniscient narrator and characters, and a non-self-referential employment of literary references. Moreover, Flanagan's work is a reflection on the dangers of memory. It therefore depicts certain characters' troubles with their own memory, and how memory modifies the reality they lived. It also portrays the deformations of public memory, and thus the contradictions of history, memory and fiction. In doing so, it deconstructs both the Australian myth of the war and the Japanese propaganda dedicated to the Emperor. Finally, this whole argument relating to memory and reality is a means to engage a wider argument on the nature of life and time, reprised by Zen Buddhism. I argue Flanagan's employment of several references to Buddhist Zen forms of art (calligraphy, painting, poetry) to structure the novel is coherent with a post-postmodern vision of literature as experience. Furthermore, in this chapter I introduce two digressions from *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Flanagan's novel discusses (but is not limited to) two important themes of the literature

about the Second World War: the role of minorities, thus an interpretation of the war as a blank space for marginal identities (colonial, female, queer); and the deceptive nature of individual and public memory. These two themes are central in several contemporary writings on the Second World War; however, I have to treat them in detail for reasons that they scarcely appear in the other novels discussed in the thesis. With this in mind, I have chosen to devote part of this chapter to a discussion of these topics through a series of contemporary novels: *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith (2000), *Atonement* by Ian McEwan (2001), *The Dark Room* by Rachel Seiffert (2001), *The Ash Garden* by Dennis Bock (2001), *Small Island* by Andrea Levy (2004), *The Night Watch* by Sarah Waters (2006), *Burma Boy* (published in the US as *The King's Rifle*) by Biyi Bandele (2007), and *Day* by A. L. Kennedy (2007).

My conclusion draws together analysis from each of the chapters to explore the extent to which the authors analysed mobilise post-postmodern literary techniques in order to intervene in the memorialisation of World War II. It also remarks upon how the theoretical framework of the thesis itself intervenes current debates around world literature, comparative studies, and memory studies. Specifically, I propose that my exploration of the post-postmodern traits of historical fiction about the Second World War from around the world, insofar as it presents post-postmodernism as the archetypal form of the global novel, allows us to better comprehend the role of literature in relation to global memorialisation and to anticipate new questions that will face literary and memory studies in the context of a globalised world.

2. Considerations on the Choice of Texts

With the exception of *Operation Shylock* and of Bolaño's first books, all the novels I have considered in this thesis were written in the new millennium, and, with the exception of Roth, all the authors I have considered belong to the postwar generations. Authors such as Norman Mailer, who wrote novels about the Second World War in the 2000s (*The Castle in the Forest*, 2007), but who was alive during the war, were excluded. This distinction is not arbitrary. My aim is to analyse the Second World War as a literary theme, and not as a personal experience. Although the aforementioned book can hardly be considered a memoir (it is the story of the corruption of the child Adolf Hitler by the devil), I have chosen to restrict my enquiry to the generation born in the sixties and those who have no personal involvement with the experiences of the war (which is also the case with Roth, a child at the time). Because, as we will see, such

an involvement can be memorial or postmemorial, I have also excluded books that focus on the experiences of the parents or the families of the author (such as *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer). In other words, in the novels analysed in this thesis the Second World War is a literary theme, and not a personal experience, however mediated.

My choice of Bolaño, Vollmann, Littell, and Flanagan as the main focus of my work is motivated by the critical acclaim that has greeted these novels, and by the preeminence that these authors award the theme of the Second World War. In the cases of Bolaño and Littell, the reputation of the novels among critics and the debate they generated made them an almost obligatory choice. The same could be said to a certain extent also about Vollmann and Flanagan, although not to the same degree; primarily, I chose them because of the originality and interest of their representations of World War II. Moreover, this selection is international, and offers an account of different national literatures (Chilean, American, French, and Australian) and on the interrelations between them. Books such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement* or Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, although hugely successful both among the reading public and critics (certainly more so than Flanagan's novels), could not become the monographic focus of the chapters because of the relatively marginal role that the Second World War has within them. On the contrary, Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch* certainly is an interesting novel owing to its portrayal of the Second World War as a space of freedom for queer identities. This being said, Waters' extremely traditional storytelling and narration result in a lack of complexity both regards the characters and the plot. Considering that my aim is to trouble straightforward accounts of World War II by highlighting its contested memory in contemporary literature, these narrative limitations foreclose the opportunity to devote her the same space as novels such as Littell's or Vollmann's.

I am painfully aware of the two main risks of literary criticism, when the analysis involves contemporary writers: abstractness and imprecision. I fail to find useful those books that impose theories (aesthetical, psychological, economical) on a set of texts, to the expense of their content and context. It is my belief that the content of the book should be explained, and its coordinates provided extensively. For instance, those who desire to study Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* ought to provide an explanation not only of the theory of alternate history, but also of what the I Ching is and what function it performs in the novel – no matter of their approach to the text. Therefore, the reader of this thesis will find digressions on board games, kabalistic parables, and Japanese poetry, as these subjects are contained in the novels I discuss, and are intertwined with the role that the Second World War has in my literary corpus. At the same

time, I understand that the risks of this rigorous approach are to devote *too much* attention to the single books and, by consequence, to neglect the general framework in which they are inserted. In order to combine these two approaches of what we might characterise as close and distant reading, and to avoid these two risks, in the four monographic chapters I have tried to balance the close reading of the novels with a wider comparison between them, especially for what concerns their stylistic features. I have also devoted the conclusions of this work to an extensive comparative analysis.

During the three years of my PhD, I have published several articles, and spoke at several conferences. These activities of professionalisation have quite organically represented for me occasions of deepening and expanding some of the ideas I discuss in my thesis, or, vice versa, taking the first steps of an enquiry which I have later developed in the present work. Although this thesis is not a collection of articles or papers, but a coherent and original work, there are some overlaps between this text and what I have published in the last few years, which I aim to signal in order to clarify the evolution of my research and, maybe, offer further readings to those interested. The core of the chapter about Roberto Bolaño has been discussed at the conference *2666. 650 anni prima* (Padova, 6-8 April 2017), and published in its proceedings. The part of the first chapter dedicated to Philip Roth is a re-elaboration of the second half of an article published in the journal *Acoma*, whilst the relationship between alternate history and historiographic metafiction was partially discussed in an essay on Italian alternate history published on *The Italianist*. A first analysis of the structure of Vollmann's book can be found in the proceedings of the conference *Genealogie del racconto contemporaneo* (Bergamo, April 2016), while a paper on the role of myth in Vollmann's and Littell's work has been published among the proceedings of the CUSL conference of June 2016 (Milan-Pavia). See the bibliography at the end of the thesis for complete references.

3. Methodological Premise. Thematic Criticism and the Global Novel

3.1. Was There A Single Second World War?

When we refer to the Second World War or World War II, it seems easy to agree on what is meant. It indicates the conflict fought between the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, Japan, and

their allied and satellite countries) and the Allies (mainly the United States, the Soviet Union, China, France, the United Kingdom, and the members of the Commonwealth) from 1 September 1939 to 8 May (in Europe) and 2 September (in Asia) 1945. In a strictly formal perspective, this portrait is correct and above criticism. Behind the clarity of this formula, however, the reality is much more complex. More than any other war in the history of humanity, the Second World War is not an isolated conflict that occurred between two precise dates, but it is composed of several distinct parts. In fact, as Bellamy suggests, the Second World War appears to be a sum of at least four separate wars, rather than a coherent set of facts: the "cabinet war" that followed Germany's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939; the war in the Mediterranean and in North Africa; the war on the Eastern Front, which can be backdated to the 1939-1940 Soviet-Finnish War; and the war in Eastern Asia, which started with Japan's invasion of China in 1937 and reached global proportions in 1941[1].

These wars have also different dates, which go beyond the chronological limits of World War II. For instance, the hostilities in Asia can be backdated to 1931[2], while German aggressions and annexations started in 1938, and soldiers of the Axis powers already fought the Allies during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Similarly, the actual date of the end of the war is a controversial matter, and not only because it ended in two different moments in Europe and in Asia (as Germany surrendered on May 7 and Japan on September 2). Different dates have been considered as the moment at which the series of conflicts that we call World War II terminated: 1947, the beginning of the Cold War; or 1948, the end of the economic restrictions in Germany; or even 1989, the end of the Cold War[3]. The widely accepted end date of 1945 does not adequately account for the fact that Allied troops continued to be involved in several wars that were the direct consequence of the events of the Second World War (such as the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Algeria and Indonesia)[4]. All this considered, it appears clear how 1 September 1939, the date of the invasion of Poland, represents more a conventional date, rather than a precise starting point for processes that had been going on long before that day. Moreover, even if the perspective I choose to adopt in this thesis is temporally limited, it ought

[1] Bellamy 2009, pp. 3-4.
[2] Calvocoressi, Wint and Pritchard 1972, p. 618. In fact, in Japan the Second World War is called 'the Fifteen-years war'.
[3] Rousso 2010, p. 5.
[4] Lagrou 2010, p. 288.

to be noted that several historians refer to the period between World War I and World War II as 'European civil war'[5].

Bearing in mind the spatio-temporal scale of the Second World War and, moreover, the diversity of opinion as to when the war started and ended, it is unsurprising that literature about the Second World War conveys a vast number of possible narratives. Tales set on the Russian front, in atomized Japan, in the Apennines of the Italian Resistance, in London or Dresden under bombs, in the Thai 'Railway of Death', in Berlin surrounded by the Red Army, in Iwo Jima or in Pearl Harbor, in Manchuria, in Alsace, in Spain, in Norway, in Greece, in Stalingrad, all belong to the category of 'novels about the Second World War', despite their experiential and narrative heterogeneity.

At this early point, I want to clarify that I am not concerned with *war literature*, but with the Second World War *in* literature. In other words, I do not limit my analysis exclusively to those texts that narrate the experience of soldiers fighting. Instead, I also include texts in which the Second World War merely appears, and in which it is thematised as a structural element of the plot and as a precise historical fact (therefore not through metaphors or symbols). By way of example, in this thesis I consider both novels narrating the active war (such as *Les Bienveillantes* by Jonathan Littell or *Europe Central* by William T. Vollmann), and novels in which there are almost no depictions of actual fights, but in which the presence of the war is essential to the plot and its meaning (for example, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by Richard Flanagan).

There is another and more important ambiguity that must be clarified. My emphasis is on how contemporary literature registers the Second World War, not totalitarianism or the

[5] This concept has been coined by Ernst Nolte in his controversial *Der europaïsche Bürgerkrieg 1917-1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolchewismus* (1987), in which it is argued that the violence of Nazism against the Jews was a reaction to the fear of the Soviet atrocities. Enzo Traverso uses the same expression in order to refer to an age of political and cultural violence (2007, p. 9). Eric Hobsbawm (1994) uses instead the more generic term 'Age of Catastrophe', while Ian Kershaw calls the first half of the twentieth century 'Europe's Era of Self-Distruction' (2015, pp. 1-7).

Holocaust[6] which, of course, were coterminous with the conflicts[7]. I am interested in the Second World War in a broader sense; therefore, the aim of this research is neither the narration of fascist and communist dictatorships and repressions, neither the study of the Holocaust Novel[8], which now occupies its own space in literary criticism and in university teaching[9]. In this introduction and whilst referring to texts, I will often mention the Holocaust, the debate over its historical uniqueness, and the abuse of its memory because, in many ways, the trivialisation and mediatisation that characterise it parallels treatments of the Second World War as a whole. This thesis is not, however, a study on the historical and philosophical meaning of the Holocaust, and neither on memorial and post-memorial literature. These fields are too wide and complex; to treat them here in a study of literary war memorialization would be to risk marginalising Holocaust concerns and the related vibrant field of study that it has borne. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that considering the Second World War as an historical event implies automatically these other two events – totalitarianism and the Holocaust.

The *theme* of World War II implies the other two; however, the opposite is not true. Except for in military history and board games, the Second World War cannot be conceived without mentioning totalitarianism and the Holocaust. Many of the powers which fought in the war were totalitarian dictatorships (Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union and, in certain aspects, Japan as well). Moreover, both the motivation and the implementation of the Axis aggressions were based on ethnic and racial reasons[10]. This is to say, the events of World War II are unconceivable without the idea of a totalitarian state ruled on ethnic bases, or the fight against it. As Traverso argues, the German aggression of 1941 aimed to fulfil two of the main ideological premises of Nazi ideology: the fight against Communism and the conquest of

---

[6] It is appropriate to take some space to clarify that I do not use inadvertently the word Holocaust instead of Shoah, and that I do not ignore the polemics surrounding the sacral dimension of the term Holocaust, which therefore would place the extermination of Jews in a teleological perspective. It is worth noticing that the term Shoah is not less charged with religious meanings than the Holocaust, as Agamben notes (1998, p. 29). Esther Benbassa is even more specific: 'Ainsi shoah, mot hébraïque, exprime-t-il un désastre causé par la colère divine […]. Et si son adoption officielle en Israël et sa laïcisation ont continué à gommer les connotations initiales de "péché" et de "châtiment", il n'en renvoie pas moins, malgré lui, à l'une des lectures théologiques orthodoxes de la souffrance des camps. Tous les ingrédients d'une théologie séculière de l'Holocauste sont ainsi déjà présents dans ce terme' (Benbassa 2007, pp. 156-157). Moreover, because of its history and its trivialisation, I agree with Weissman in considering the term 'Holocaust' the most appropriate to express both the historical event and its reception, transmission, representation, trivialisation, Americanisation (Weissman 2004, pp. 25-26).

[7] In this sense, things are complicated of course by the fact that, as the Second World War, the Holocaust is a series of events rather than a single event. See Novick 2000, pp. 63-69.

[8] For an analysis of the Holocaust novel as a genre, see Patterson 1992 and Sicher 2005.

[9] Bauman 1989, p. IX.

[10] Fritz 2011, p. 4. See also Hartmann 2013, p. 3. It is very significant in this sense, as Hartmann points out (pp. 32-33), that Hitler was unwilling to exploiting Slavic collaborators in his war against the Russians. For what concerns the racial premise of the war in the Pacific, see Dower 1986.

Lebensraum, a ‘living space’[11] (similar in its scope to the colonial dominions of France and England). If the extermination of Jews was carried on until the very last days of the Reich and in clear contrast with economic and practical considerations[12], it is because it represented one of the central aims of the Nazi war.

Whilst there is no Second World War without totalitarianism, totalitarianism has many existences outside of the war. It is possible to talk about fascist and communist dictatorships, their totalitarian dimensions and their crimes without talking about their involvement in the conflict for reasons that totalitarian states pre-existed the war and, in the Russian and in the Spanish case, they survived it. In the same way, it is possible to talk about the Holocaust without necessarily invoking the war. In fact, as we will see later in this introduction, while it is true, as Bauman writes, that war is the necessary condition for the development of the Holocaust[13], it is also more productive to analyse it with reference to the Nazi bureaucratic machine rather than the German army.

I appreciate that these considerations may seem quite schematic when considered abstractly, but their significance will become clearer if we consider examples of literary production. We would never qualify Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* or Thomas Keneally’s *Schindler’s List* (to mention two rather different novels) as books about the Second World War: they are books about the Holocaust, imprisonment, and factorised extermination. On the other hand, in novels such as *2666* by Roberto Bolaño, *Europe Central* by William T. Vollmann or *Les Bienveillantes* by Jonathan Littell, which each take as their topic the Second World War in its complexity, the Holocaust plays a relevant role.

3.2. Thematic Criticism

My use of the word *theme*, signals that this thesis, in a way, is a work of thematic criticism. I say ‘in a way’ because of course I am not dealing with a metahistorical or an anthropological theme (with a Jungian archetype, Curtius’ *topos*, or Frye’s imagery), but with an historical one – the Second World War. Thematic criticism often risks creating a catalogue of presences at the expense of nuance and differentiation. We ought to heed this caution as we proceed to

[11] Traverso 2003, p. 68.
[12] Traverso 1998, p. 308.
[13] Bauman 1989, p. 94.

undertake an examination of the Second World War as theme, particularly insofar as there are questions as to whether the Second World War is a proper literary theme or just the common subject of a series of books[14].

A literary theme is something quite hard to define[15], and even the most renowned critics refuse to give it a precise meaning[16]. In his important book about the theme of encounter in nineteenth and twentieth century literature, Romano Luperini has described a theme as something which not only influences the content of a novel, but also its structure – as part of the *inventio* as well of the *dispositio*, as the content and as the form that this content takes[17]. World War II is, in the novels I am going to analyse, a subject, an event, and a plot device[18]: it is not only *what* is in a text, but also something that a text *does*, since it influences the destinies and the decisions of the protagonists and gives shape to the narration. Moreover, in terms of literary criticism and literary history, the Second World War is a theme because it produces in these books meaning and interpretation[19]. For our interests, its analysis allows us to underline some key features of literature after postmodernism.

While it can be argued that the Second World War is not a theme, war itself categorically is[20]. War as a literary theme carries the motives of the decisive action (opposed to the apparently meaningless actions of life in peaceful times) and of the coincidence of individual and collective destinies – motives that belong to the Second World War too. However, the reason why I chose to focus on the Second World War instead of a more generic concept of war is that World War II has acquired such a peculiar and distinctive status in contemporary public memory on a global scale; by consequence, it refuses comparison with other conflicts, be it previous (the Napoleonic Wars, the Great War) or subsequent (the Vietnam War, the Gulf War). Although enormously significant at the time in which they were fought, these conflicts have not achieved the same memorial status in the present day of World War II. Due to its historical singularity, in other words, the Second World War has gained a *paradigmatic* value[21].

---

[14] Brinker 1993, p. 31.
[15] Giglioli 2008, p. 49. In the same issue of the journal *Allegoria*, see also Bertoni, Domenichelli, Pellini, and Viti.
[16] Ceserani 2008.
[17] Luperini 2007, p. 6.
[18] Viti 2011, p 132. See also Fasano 1999, p. 63.
[19] *Ibid*, p. 63.
[20] Ceserani, Domenichelli and Fasano 2007, pp. 1072-1078.
[21] Cinquegrani 2018, pp. 9-10.

3.3. Global War, Global Literature

This research is pursued in the context of an international literary landscape, rather than in a national one. The main authors I am considering in this thesis are Chilean (Bolaño), American (Vollmann), French (Littell), and Australian (Flanagan). Moreover, my approach is comparative not in the sense that I compare two or more national literatures, but because I compare several novels in different languages as part of a wider global literature.

In the latest two decades, the discipline of comparative literature has been reinvigorated by debates about the concept of World Literature. World Literature is not a canon of texts: it rather represents a network of exchanges – which is to say, a system. Theorists of World Literature insist on the comparison between the literary world-system and the economic one as theorised by historians such as Fernand Braudel and sociologists such as Immanuel Wallenstein[22]. As Franco Moretti writes in his influential essay, 'Conjectures on World Literature', the initial hypothesis for his conception of World Literature comes from 'the world-systems school of economic history, for which international capitalism is a system that is simultaneously one, and unequal: with a core, and a periphery (and a semi-periphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality'[23]. Pascale Casanova echoes Moretti's definition of literature as embedded within the world-system. However, she underlines the distance between this model and the pure economic model of Fernand Braudel: literary space is not something that can be geographically depicted, but is made of symbolic forms, and its 'primary characteristics […] are hierarchy and inequality'[24].

As it appears clearly in Moretti's and Casanova's quotations, World Literature is a way of understanding literature and its mechanics, not a set of texts. According to David Damrosch, one of the leading scholars on this topic, World Literature is 'an elliptical refraction of national literatures; […] writing that gains in translation; […] a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our place and time'[25]. In this sense, an international approach to literature is much more productive than a national one because it enables us to understand that the hierarchies of literature, its balances of power and even its historical progression do not take place in a self-sustained national space. Rather, they exist *because* of their interactions

[22] Casanova 2004, p. XII.
[23] Moretti 2013, p. 46.
[24] Casanova 2014, p. 200.
[25] Damrosch 2003, p. 281.

with other national literatures and, thus, national and linguistic boundaries are not sufficiently useful to interpret literary domination and inequality[26].

Just as no nation exists in a void, but is determined by its relation and opposition to other nations[27], literature appears more as a transcultural phenomenon than as a national one. This assumption is particularly true when we talk about the contemporary novel. In fact, the literary objects that I am considering in this thesis belong to the category of the so-called global novel (or 'cosmopolitan global novel'[28], or 'international novel'[29]), in the sense that they are novels conceived and composed in a global literary landscape, which makes the comparison between them possible and significant. What is important to underline is that the global novel emerges as a distinct cultural product in the post-1989 era as a result of the typically postmodern tendency to merge low and highbrow culture, and to put in contact the centres of literary geographies with their peripheries.

While World Literature is a network of relations, the global novel is an object, and it is the product of a global literary market – opposed to the national novel, conceived for a national market[30]. Its main trait of originality is that not only it belongs to a world-system (which, as we have seen, it is a characteristic of all literature), but that it is *conceived* in this system: 'This novel form is a distinct product of the age of informational capitalism in the sense that its capacity to be world-oriented is inextricably linked to the capacity of a global informational economy to work as "a unit in real time on a planetary scale". […] It means […] that the novel now evinces a capacity, predominantly through a global informational infrastructure, to imagine the human condition on a scale larger than ever before in history and certainly beyond national and regional configurations'[31].

The international dimension of these texts involves of course also the language in which they are written. English has preeminence among them as it is the most diffused, known, and translated language in the world, and is the official language (or *an* official language) in several countries in all the continents. Although this dimension signals a form of global inequality, in as much as the vast diffusion of the English language relegates to the margins other languages,

[26] Casanova 2014, pp. 198-199.
[27] Casanova 2004, p. 36.
[28] Levin 2014, p. 478.
[29] Patterson, 2014, p. 3.
[30] Casanova 2014, p. 169.
[31] Ganguly 2016, p. 2.

especially non-European ones[32], it is also true that it allows an exchange in equal linguistic terms among different realities. Moreover, English is definitely not the only country to have such an international dimension. Languages such as Spanish, Portuguese or Arabic can be interpreted as 'regional world-languages', in the sense that, although they are not diffused worldwide like English, they 'constitute' a world, due to their super-national role and diffusion'[33]. Moreover, a similar debate started in 2006 about the global dimension of French literature, since 'five of the seven major literary prizes awarded in France that year were awarded to writers who were not ethnically French'[34].

Both World Literature and the global novel represent useful concepts through which to understand literature rather than necessarily bearing a set of precise characteristics. Talking about the contemporary novel as a global product is an invitation to overcome its national features and to focus on the way in which it is related to a global literary landscape. In this thesis, I refer to the global novel as a market category, not to generically imply exoticness[35]. Further, I adopt the moniker of the global novel critically, and recognise that such methods of organisation risk denying the differences that exist between the novels I am considering and the literary spaces in which they have been written. In other words, and as Emily Apter puts it, I have clear in my mind the risks of a translatability assumption[36]. In my analysis, I am not going to ignore that Bolaño, for example, is a Chilean writer whose career is deeply influenced by the political history of his country and by the Chilean literary environment; that Vollmann's work is influenced by American postmodernism; that Littell has a strong relationship with the French literary tradition; or that Flanagan addresses issues that are specific to Australia. At the same time, however, I stress the importance of understanding these authors in a wider, international context, for reasons that their work engages themes involving international politics, and is influenced by an international, rather than national, literary canon. William T. Vollmann claims his main models to be Japanese, Serbian and Italian writers such as Yukio Mishima, Yasunari Kawabata, Danilo Kiš, and Elsa Morante[37], and his novel here analysed has German and Russian protagonists. Richard Flanagan is the winner of the 2014 Man Booker Prize, an

[32] Beecroft 2015, p. 257. This dynamic is echoed and reinforced by the system of literary prizes. For instance, 'of the 110 men and women awarded a Nobel prize in Literature between 1900 and 2013, eight […] wrote in non-European languages, of whom all except Mo Yan and the two Japanese writers wrote in Europe itself, on Europe's periphery, or under European rule' (*ibid*).
[33] *Ibid*, p. 269.
[34] *Ibid*, p. 265. The debate was followed by, and summarized in, the collective volume *Pour une littérature-monde* (Le Bris and Rouaud 2007).
[35] *Ibid*, p. 24.
[36] Apter 2013, p. 3.
[37] Vollmann 2004 (2), pp. 35-38.

international literary award for the best novel written in English and, in his novel, he focuses on Australian and Japanese characters. Roberto Bolaño's literary world is international both in characters and space, and he himself spent his life in several countries and two continents. Jonathan Littell explicitly denounces the end of national literature as a critical concept:

> Tout ce que vous [Richard Millet] dites est vrai si l'on se place d'un point de vue qui n'est pas le mien, qui est qu'il existe des littératures nationales. Pour moi, le découpage littéraire national a eu certainement une réalité à l'époque où les transmissions étaient beaucoup plus longes. Du fait de l'isolement, là il y avait de grandes distinctions entre les littératures nationales […]. Aujourd'hui, à l'ère de la communication et de la connexion de masse, c'est beaucoup moins vrai. Les interpollinisations d'un pays à un autre se font à une échelle de temps tellement rapide que tout écrivain digne de ce nom est nourri par toute la littérature[38].

Needless to say, this international dimension of contemporary literature is of utter importance, as my research focuses on the Second *World* War – a phenomenon, in other words, that was lived, and continues to be represented at national, inter-, and transnational levels[39], being thus global and local, singular and plural at the same time.

In recognition that the Second World War was a global phenomenon and that, partly by consequence, literature registers the war in global terms, a comparative, world literature studies-inflected approach is paramount. A genuinely global outlook on cultural production necessitates a studying of breadth. As Moretti tells us, 'distance is a condition of knowledge'[40]; this is the reason he advocates that literary criticism adopt the means of biology[41]. Moretti's methodology of distant reading is framed as the opportunity to study more texts and schematise their relationships. Certainly, this approach is central for the study of literatures written and published in the past, as it enables us to avoid dependence on a limited series of transmitted canonical texts. But is it applicable when we study contemporary literature? Moretti assumes Braudel's disregard for 'l'historie événementielle'[42], in favor of a history of profound structure,

[38] Littell and Millet 2007, pp. 16-17.
[39] Echternkamp and Martens 2010, p. 249.
[40] Moretti 2013, p. 48.
[41] Moretti 2007. Most interestingly, Alexander Beecroft proposes, for a better understanding of the dynamics of world literature, the adoption of the language of ecology. Beecroft divides the world into ecozones ('the eight large-scale geographic regions into which the earth's land surface are divided', p. 22) and biomes ('a collection of fourteen types of enviroments, sharing conditions of climate, landscape, and major plant types', *ibid*). As the author writes, 'the notion of biome – a set of typological conditions of climate and terrain found in different locations around the world and generating similar kinds of adaptations in plant and animal species – suggests a possible new approach to the comparative study of the literatures of the world. […] In other words, rather that limit our study to specific systems within which literature circulates (Early Modern Europe, say, or East Asia, or the contemporary Anglosphere), we might want to think about how literature circulates, what sorts of constraints operate on that circulation, and how particular literary communities respond to those constraints' (p. 25).
[42] Braudel 1958.

of ‘longue durée’. However, how far can we go with this disregard when we deal with a period (post-89 contemporaneity) in which human (and indeed literary) events are moving faster than any time before? Mayer has pointed out that short-term history has to be revalued when it comes to an event such as the Holocaust, since it only took the Nazis three and a half years (1941-1944) to wipe out ‘a community that had been part of the history of Europe for two thousands years’[43]. In a very similar way, we should ask ourselves to what extent distant reading can be useful when it comes to considering such a fast-developing, hyper-connected period. For this reason, when it came to choosing how many texts to analyse in this thesis, I opted to treat in-depth a selection of texts based on national and linguistic diversity and on claimed critical approval (certainly part of a still in formation post-postmodern canon), rather than treat briefly a great amount of texts.

[43] In Traverso 2003, p. 4.

Introduction: Post-Postmodernism and the Second World War

1. The Historical Singularity of the Second World War

The peculiar role played by the Second World War in contemporary narrative can be attributed to two factors closely related one to another: the intrinsically exceptional nature of the conflict, and the omnipresence of its memory. In order to illustrate the incomparable dimension of the Second World War, I will refer to all the three components that, as I explained in the methodological premise, are evoked in its memory: the war, the Holocaust, and totalitarianism.

The exceptional status of the Second World War is not simply a truism, but stems from the reality of the war itself. Chris Bellamy, in his important study on the war on the Eastern front, defines the Russian campaign as 'the greatest and most hideous land-air conflict in history. A war that was total, because it was fought by all elements of society. And a war that was absolute, because both sides aimed "to exterminate the opponents, to destroy his political existence", and in doing so perpetrated extremes of heinous violence and cruelty, shedding almost all of civilized nations'[1]. Despite the fact that Bellamy only refers to the war in Eastern Europe, an analogous discourse can be made also for the war in the Pacific, which, while being 'inevitably overshadowed by Hitler's war in Europe', was also 'interdependent with it, and its events crisscrossed with those of the western conflict'[2]. Looking only at the war's scale, then, a self-evident truth can be reaffirmed: a conflict of such geographical extension, in which so many people and economic resources were involved, with such a deathtoll and number of casualties, and with a similar extension of violence on civilians, never took place before, nor has it ever taken place after.

Writing about the Second World War, Bellamy evokes Clausewitz's categories of total war. The Second World War is a total war because, as with the First World War, it was a conflict in which the whole productive capacity of a country was mobilised, and because the development

[1] Bellamy 2009, p. 19.
[2] Calvocoressi, Wint and Pritchard 1972, p. 617.

of air technologies extended the front line to every single part of the hostile countries. As Mary Kaldor writes, in a total war the whole society is incorporated in the public sphere, and the borders between public and private, military and civil, combatants and non-combatants tend to blur[3]. Furthermore, the war on the Eastern front can also be interpreted with the categories of Clausewitz's trinity: 'primordial violence, hatred and enmity; the play of chance and probability; and the political direction to which it is, and must remain, subject'[4]. The explanation is simple: the racial dimension (a political dimension) of the war against Russia led to forms of violence unexperienced in the Western front; and chance and probability played a vertiginous role in crucial battles such as Stalingrad or Leningrad (hence the prevalence of World War II in the literary genre of alternate history science fiction). While this is true for the war on the Eastern front, it is also true for the Pacific war. Although the Japanese campaign did not specifically aim for total annihilation as the German one did, the Japanese occupation in China led to the death of between eleven and fifteen million Chinese people in the most inhuman and ferocious ways imaginable, and of four more million European and other Asian ethnic groups such as Philippine, Indonesian, Korean and Malayan[5]. The total sum is not far from the twenty million deaths of the European Eastern front.

The way in which I characterised the Second World War for its range and its unprecedented dimensions, is of course valid for the Holocaust as well. Commentators tend to agree that 'the destruction of the European Jews between 1933 and 1945 appears to us now as an unprecedented event in history', owing to its special and chronological extents, to the amount of its victims (five million people), and to the means with which this destruction was carried out[6]. Despite the fact that the Holocaust is the culmination of two thousand years of European anti-Semitism[7], nothing similar had never been attempted, neither in numerical terms, nor especially in terms of systematicity and scientificity. While the thesis of the uniqueness of the

---

[3] Kaldor 2012, pp. 27. According to Clausewitz, however, we have an absolute war (*der totale Krieg*) only if: '(a) War were a wholly isolated act, occurring suddenly and not produced by previous events in the political worlds; (b) it consisted of a single decisive act or a set of simultaneous ones; (c) the decision achieved was complete and perfect in itself, uninfluenced by any previous estimate of the political situation it would bring about' (Clausewitz 2011, p. 21). Now, like Bellamy, I must underline that, of course, neither the Second World War nor the war on the Eastern front were isolated acts, and they did not consist in single decisive acts (or a set of simultaneous ones), and that the initial decisions were very far from the final result of the war. For instance, at the beginning of the war, US and USSR were relegated to the passive roles of attacked countries, and at the end of the war they were the only two countries able to aim to world domination. Nevertheless, I agree with Bellamy when he states that 'the war on the Eastern front was probably the most "absolute" war ever fought, on both sides' (Bellamy 2009, p. 19).

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Dower 1986, pp. 295-296.

[6] Hilberg 1985, p. 8.

[7] *Ibid.*

Holocaust represents in various ways a trivialisation of the event, its paradigmatic value (its singularity) is undeniable.

In the methodological premise, I stated that the Holocaust can be thought of without the war, but not the contrary. The Second World War is not conceivable without the motivations that moved the aggressors – which means, the construction of an empire on racial bases, which involved the enslavement of perceived inferior races and the elimination of dangerous ones. However, the Holocaust can and must at times be understood without Germany military aggression, which nevertheless made it possible. It has to be conceived as an act of state violence against its subjects, and not as an act of war between two powers. It must be examined as a violence, in other words, carried out with the means of a repressive bureaucracy, and not those of the military invasion.

Nazism itself can be placed in coordinates similar to those Bauman traces for the Holocaust, which I will analyse in greater depth in the chapter on Jonathan Littell. According to Bauman, the Holocaust does not represent an eclipse of reason, but rather a phenomenon perfectly coherent with the logic of industrial and enlightenment modernity. Indeed, if the vastness of its crimes and the radicalness of its politics distinguish Nazism from all the other totalitarian regimes (although they share its means such as propaganda, police, and militarization of society), these elements also make Nazism a kind of totalitarian paradigm and the most extreme case of political violence in the twentieth century. Norman M. Niamark, who stresses that Stalin's crimes have to be considered as genocides like the Holocaust, underlines the uniqueness of the Holocaust. He puts it that that the peculiar ferocity of Nazi ideology, the historical coordinates in which the Holocaust took place (which forbade both the escape of Jews and aid by foreign countries), and the technological means employed, made the Holocaust a case on its own, more extreme than every other genocide in human history[8].

According to Enzo Traverso, in much the same way as the Holocaust is the product of the logic and the dynamics of modernity, Nazism is an ideology perfectly coherent with European thought generated by the Enlightenment era, which resulted in colonial violence, reclusion as a solution to social problems, mass wars and assembly lines: 'The uniqueness of Nazism thus lies not in its opposition to the West, but in its capacity to find a way to synthesize the West's various forms of violence. World War II was when all the elements identified in this genealogical study came together. […] The guillotine, the abattoir, the Fordist factory, and

[8] Naimark 2010, p. 122.

rational administration, along with racism, eugenics, the massacres of the colonial wars and those of World War I had already fashioned the social universe and the mental landscape in which the Final Solution would be conceived and set in motion'[9]. Just as the extermination camp is nothing but the application of Fordist dynamics to the elimination of human beings[10], so too is the entire racial ideology of Nazism nothing but a more brutal and extreme application of the colonial policies of European countries. In this sense, Nazism, like the Holocaust, has a paradigmatic value that makes it, more than any other totalitarianism, carrier of a variety of meanings and interpretations still relevant to the present time. These characteristics give the impression of the fight against Nazism a dimension that has no comparison with other wars; it offers (and indeed offered to those who fought it) the idea of a fight between Good and Evil[11].

Before moving on, I want to underline two things. The first is, again, that the Second World War, totalitarianism and the Holocaust are inseparable phenomena not only in our memorial perception, but also in history. World War II was a total and absolute war because it was caused by a totalitarian dictatorship founded on an ideology of scientific racism; scientific racism gave to the conflict those traits of cruelty and ferocity for which we now remember it; and the Holocaust was made possible partly because of the suspension of laws generated by the state of war.

Secondly, even if what I have stated so far concerns almost exclusively the European theatre of the war, it also variously applies to the war in the Pacific, and not only in terms of its violence and magnitude. Japanese totalitarianism is in many ways similar to European fascism and though it does not share the same cultural roots as European dictatorships, it shares with them an anti-modern inspiration bound with a strong technological efficiency. Notwithstanding, Japanese violence against civilians is radically different from the Holocaust. Although the Japanese Empire committed despicable atrocities[12], they were never carried out as a scientific

[9] Traverso 2003, pp. 150-151.
[10] *Ibid*, pp. 44-45. Traverso evokes the double paradigm of the concentration camp: the guillotine, which means mechanical execution and serialised death (exonerating then the perpetrators from ethical responsibility); and the prison, which both segregates and dehumanises the prisoners.
[11] This should not lead us to forget, however, that although the nature of the crimes of Japan and USSR may have been different, their magnitude is openly comparable to the crimes of the Nazis, and it may even exceed it. I already mentioned the incredible number of victims in the Japanese war. Moreover, political repressions in the USSR led to the death of some twenty million people, a number that is comparable with the victims of the Nazi Germany (as verifiable in Werth 1999). From a merely numerical point of view, the memory of the Russian and the Japanese totalitarianism also represents a huge milestone, just as the war in the Pacific was an equally violent conflict.
[12] Crimes include: the exploitation of war prisoners as slaves (as in the infamous construction of the Death Railway on the Burma Road), indiscriminate massacres of civilians (as in the rape of Nanchino), forcing women of the occupied countries to serve as sexual slaves, the practice of vivisection, and the use of chemical weapons (Calvocoressi, Wint and Pritchard 1972, p. 609-613; Crowe 2014, pp. 122-136). A thoroughgoing account of these crimes and an analysis of Japan's refusal to recognise them as such can be found in Szczepanska 2014. The case

total extermination, but as pogroms. Moreover, the nature of Japanese racism was archaic and traditional rather than positivistic, and therefore different from the 'scientific' racism of the Nazis[13]. Of course, an event casts a shadow over the war in the Pacific, which is absent from the war in Europe: the atomic bombings. Although they did not reach the same symbolic status of the Holocaust[14], the explosion of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the only atomic bombs ever exploded in human history, whose memory held the world in a state of paranoia for decades, gives to the war in the Pacific an element that is comparable, in terms of perception, to the Holocaust.

2. The Memory of the Second World War

The exceptional status of the Second World War has fostered an exceptional treatment of its memory. The relationship between history and memory is complex. Common opinion would draw a clear line between historical facts and the scientific precision of historiographical discourse on the one hand, and the emotiveness of individual and public memory on the other. However, there is an ambiguous interaction between these two poles, owing both to the reconsideration of the past, and the conditions in which it happens. Facts do not exist pure and simple, they are never free from interpretation. In this sense, the war does not only involve national propaganda, but also the self-representation of soldiers or their relatives:

> Many commentators […] have argued that two war experiences exist: a real one, and by this they normally mean a history based on evidence of argument, dissent, division and suppression of truth, and what they define as the imagined one, created by government-controlled propaganda agencies […]. This division is simplistic. The real war – whatever it actually constituted – was being imagined and mythologized as it happened by its participants, both great

of the Thai-Burma 'Railway of Death' will be discussed in detail in relation to Richard Flanagan's novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.

[13] Calvocoressi, Wint and Pritchard 1972, p. 624. Dower (1986, pp. 262-290) stresses the peculiar nature of Japanese nationalism, which insists more on the divine origins of the Japanese people than it relies on the denigration of other races. See also p. 205: 'While the Japanese were not in-adept at belittling other races and saddling them with contemptuous stereotypes, they spent more time wrestling with the question of what really meant to be "Japanese", how the "Yamato race" was unique among the races and cultures of the world, and why this uniqueness made them superior'.

[14] Levy and Sznaider 2006, pp. 39-40.

> and small, which meant it was always being recast, reframed, reinterpreted even as it continued[15].

Like individual memory, public memory changes through time, is forced to compromise with narratable forms and tales, and has a performative dimension, as it aims not only to document but also to control and educate. All this considered, and given the fallacy of every memorial discourse, one could oppose to it the methodological rigidity and the precision of the history. However, between history and memory there is not a rigid separation, but an interconnectedness. More than the opposite conceptual poles of a discourse, history and memory are two different postures toward the real, but they are bound together, and mined in their accuracy. As Foot notes, despite the existence of a prejudice (even among historians) towards memory as unreliable and opposed to history which, on the contrary, is perceived as more scientific and truthful, such a distinction between memory and history is no longer acceptable: indeed, 'memory is part of history'[16].

The interaction of history and memory generates what can be called collective or cultural memory – an expression whose numerous synonyms ('public memory', 'collective memory', 'social memory', 'popular memory', 'mass memory', 'vectors of memory', 'transactive memory', 'prosthetic memory' and 'multidirectional memory'[17]) testify to the proliferation of

---

[15] Connelly 2004, p. 4. This happens because individual memory itself collides with the inevitable distance that separates it from the events in the very moment they are being lived. An autobiography is not, simply, a writing in which author, narrator and protagonist coincide (Lejeune 1975, p. 14), but the narration of the memory one has of his life (Mariani 2011, p. 9). This difference is extremely important, since it signals the substantial unreliability of autobiography. Autobiography, which Mariani proposes to call, with Deleuze, memory-tale, *memoria-racconto* (*ibid*, p. 10), in order to avoid the rigidity of the definition, carries three problems: the lack of stability of the self through time; the deformation of memory through time; the inevitable compromises between memory and narration. The self changes constantly through time (*ibid*); it is made both of the indivisible self of the person who is writing, and of the perception of its plurality through time. Moreover, autobiography is a performative act, which changes the self in the very moment it is written (Eakin 1985, p. 188, and D'Intino 1998, p. 145). The intermittences of memory and of self-perception alone do not justify this fallacy of the self, which is caused also by the dishonesty of who writes his own life. Despite the declaration of honesty made by the writer, the autobiographical self can be nothing but an unreliable narrator. Autobiographical truth is a content evolving in a process of self-discovery and self-creation, and therefore the autobiographical self is a fictive structure (Eakin 1985, p. 3). Memory and imagination thus reach in the autobiographical act such a level of complementarity that it is impossible to distinguish between them not just for the reader, but also for the autobiographer (*ibid,* p. 6). Finally, it is the narrative nature of autobiography, and therefore the compromises it must make with the logics and the dynamics of narration, that ratifies its unreliability. As every narration, in fact, autobiographical writing does not only intend to document, but it gives meaning and direction to the events forcing them into a plot. The selection of the material which forms the autobiography is arbitrary, and so is its disposition: the writer has to make sense of a confusing amount of emotions, sensations, memories and data belonging to all the diverse stages of his life in order to organise then all these materials in a linear order. This order cannot be neither the order of the 'facts' as they happened, nor the order of the idea as they come to his mind when he writes, since both these orders are non-linear.

[16] Foot 2009, p. 5.

[17] Noakes and Pattinson 2014, p. 6. Richard Crownshaw suggests that while collective memory 'might imply some kind of a shared essence, "cultural memory" foregrounds the cultural means of its transmission' (2010, p. 3).

memory studies in the second half of the twentieth century. The weight of World War II as an historical fact has to be connected with the role of the witness (and of his heirs) in the second half of the last century. Further, both these factors have to be connected to, and read concurrently with, the enormous space that the Second World War occupies in public debates and in nation-building processes.

I have signaled how the paradigmatic value of the Holocaust is inseparable from the facts of the war, and contributes to its exceptional nature. In this chapter, I will dedicate some space to the Holocaust and its memory. This is not simply because in our memory the Second World War and the Holocaust are inseparable, but also because the Holocaust has become the touchstone by which subsequent traumas are measured[18].

The identity of the individual must confront the identity of the collectivity. Collective identity is determined by memory – by the way in which it is received and transmitted. As Eaglestone argues, 'our personal memories relate to our own larger stories [...] and these in turn relate to wider narratives that structure more public life, the narratives that make up our national and international identities, narratives and behaviors that are, as Homi Bhabha argues, both pedagogical and performative, both taught to us and acted out by us'[19]. Collective memory later becomes cultural memory, a set of models and ideas that are passed through generations, forming the personality and the ideas of those who receive it[20]. Collective and cultural memory are influenced by the changes through time of the community that produces it, the stylisation of the events, and their use for propagandistic purposes. The postwar generation of American Jews was far more integrated than previous generations. Nevertheless its identity was shaped by a memory of sufferance and discriminations never experienced in person. As Esther Benbassa writes in her study titled *La souffrance comme identité*:

> Et aujourd'hui encore, lorsqu'on évoque l'histoire des Juifs, c'est cette mémoire de souffrance qui est mise en avant, devenue le dénominateur commun d'un peuple en dispersion, créant à la fois une identité pour les Juif sécularisés et de la cohésion dans l'exil. Un tel usage de la mémoire et de la souffrance fait certes souvent obstacle à une juste compréhension de l'histoire, à sa mise en perspective, à la distanciation pourtant nécessaire entre histoire et émotion, entre histoire et mémoire. Dans l'histoire des Juifs, ces derniers mais aussi les non-Juifs après eux ne retiennent

[18] Wieviorka 1998, p. 15. See also Hirsch 1997, p. 20.
[19] Eaglestone 2004, p. 76.
[20] Crownshaw 2010, pp. 1-3.

> souvent que le discours sur la souffrance, dès lors que la mémoire vécue ou imaginée de la souffrance a longtemps fait office d'histoire et qu'elle continue de le faire de nos jours[21].

Even for those who did not live it in person or through the tales of their parents or relatives, the Holocaust becomes the lens through which Jewish history at large is read. The perception of history – here, the Holocaust – comprises both the historical events and the transmission of these events; additionally, the circumstances in which these events take place are not less important than the events themselves[22]. The exceptional dimension of the memory of the Holocaust is such that it haunts following generations, and influences them. For this phenomenon, Marianne Hirsch coined the concept of postmemory: 'Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation'[23].

Although this thesis does not regard strictly post-memorial novels, postmemory still represents a crucial concept through which to understand the way in which postwar generations dealt with the memory of the war and the Holocaust. It is especially useful for thinking about the Second World War and the Holocaust because it communicates the prevalence and pervasiveness of generational memory and narrativisation. Postmemory 'characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated'[24]. It denotes how the representation and the transmission of events is generated for those who have never experienced them a sort of real memory[25], even leading them to wish to witness the Holocaust themselves in order to gain an experience that they can only perceive at a temporal and experiential distance as virtual and mediated[26]. Those who have never experienced the Holocaust find themselves in a cultural

---

[21] Benbassa 2007, pp. 52-53.
[22] Young 2000, p. 2.
[23] *Ibid*, p. 22.
[24] Hirsch 1997, p. 22. In her essay *The generation of postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, Hirsch suggests that this attachment to parental past has been described as 'a "syndrome" of belatedness or "post-ness"', and proceeds to list all the definitions it has been labeled as: '"absent memory" (Ellen Fine), "inherited memory", "belated memory" (Cecilia Lury, Alison Landsberg), "mémoire trouée" (Henry Raczymow), "mémoire des cendres" (Nadine Fresco), "vicarious witnessing" (Froma Zeitlin), "received history" (James Young), "haunting legacy" (Gabriele Schwab), and "postmemory"' (2012, p. 3).
[25] *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.
[26] Weissman 2004, p. 4.

ambient shaped and modeled by the Holocaust and its memory[27]. Having not directly experienced it, the historical facts are as real and unattainable for them as their representations.

Immediately after the war, the Holocaust was not the centre of public debate, owing to historical and political reasons[28]. Moreover, the Holocaust is an event that, for its weight and dynamics, challenges the normal logic of narration. As Dan Diner writes, 'Auschwitz has no appropriate narrative, only a set of statistics'[29]. The systematicity of the Holocaust's mass-slaughtering has a natural consequence in its '*un*narrability'[30], or at least in its difficult communicability. This lack of narratability led, in the early post-war years, to the literary choice of subjects less relevant but closer to the epic features of the traditional narratives of war, such as the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto[31], or to persecution, as in *The Diary of Anne Frank.* It is only in 1961, with the Eichmann trial and its wide media coverage, that the Holocaust started to be perceived as a distinct and coherent set of events: indeed, it was with the trial that the extermination of the Jews started to be widely referred with the term Holocaust in the US[32].

The spectacularisation of witnessing, however, leads to the spectacularisation of memory. The beginning of a public discourse about the Holocaust after the Eichmann trial was followed by a huge mediatisation of Holocaust memory in television, theatrical, cinematographic shows. A notorious example is the TV series *Holocaust* (1979), which on the one hand importantly popularised the memory of the Holocaust, but on the other trivialised its content[33] (just as it had happened in the 1950s with the Broadway show and the movie inspired by Anne Frank's *Diary*[34]). The increasing interest in Holocaust memories (and postmemories) culminated in the huge success of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and the inauguration of the US Holocaust

---

[27] Young 2000, p. 1.
[28] Novick 2000, pp. 92 ff. The historical reason is that, as I have already stated in the methodological premise, it was difficult to comprehend and reconstruct the series of events that now goes under the name of Holocaust. The political reasons are mainly focused on the will of the America authorities not to place too much blame with Germany, now a precious ally against the communists, and not to recall, by contrast, the American war crimes. The Jewish authorities, too, did not feel safe to insist, in the years of McCarthism, on the stereotype of the antifascist, and therefore communist, Jew.
[29] Diner 2000, p. 178.
[30] *Ibid.*
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] Novick 2000, p. 133. In this sense it is significant, as Hannah Arendt reports, that the court defended the 'right of the witnesses to be irrelevant' to the evaluation of the actual responsibilities of Eichmann, in order to give a wider and more vivid picture of the Holocaust as a whole (Arendt 1963, p. 225). With the Six Days War (1967) and the war of the Yom Kippur (1973), moreover, a significant change started for what concerned Israeli public policies: under the threat of Arab countries, the public representation of a warrior Israeli in charge of his own destiny is taken over by into a wider space dedicated to the memory of extermination (Benbassa 2007, pp. 182-185).
[33] Wieviorka 1998, p. 129. On the reactions to Holocaust, see also Levy and Sznaider, pp. 116-118.
[34] Weissman 2004, p. 13.

Memorial Museum in Washington in 1993[35]. In other words, rather than a simple historical event, the Holocaust became ‘a multi-layered sedimentation of images and discourses that reach from documentary to soap opera, survivor testimony to narrative fiction, concentration camp to memorial painting’[36].

I have taken some space to explain the peculiar dimension of Holocaust memory for two reasons: the first is that, as I have repeated several times, the relationship between World War II and the Holocaust is inseparable; the other is that similar memorial processes characterised the memory of the Second World War. It is not only the memory of the Holocaust that is subjected to these processes, but also the memory of the war. The presence of the Second World War in public discourse replicates in the following generations the same effects generated by the mass-mediatisation of the Holocaust. As Eley tells us:

> “Remembering” World War II requires no immediate experience of those years. This is especially true of the immediate postwar generation (born between 1943-1945 and the mid-1950s), who grew up suffused in the effects of the war years but whose “memory” of them came entirely after the fact. During that generation’s formative years (say, until the mid-1960s), official and popular cultures were pervaded by the war's presence, via citations, evocations, stories, and commentaries, quite apart from the traces and indentations of everyday life and the private marks of families and personal histories. Consciously and unconsciously, this field of connectedness to the war became worked into public discourse in inspiring, insidious, and enduring ways, making an active archive of collective identification. Beyond the set pieces of anniversaries, speeches, sermons, retrospectives, and the honoring of the dead, entertainment cultures became a rich arena of such memory production[37].

The Second World War had enormous consequences in all the countries involved. After the Second World War, Germany was occupied by the forces from four different countries and

[35] Langford 2013, p. 113.

[36] Huyssen 1993, p. 258. A different yet complementary approach is the popular, rhetorical idea that the Holocaust represents not only something peculiar and worth of attention, but also something unique in a mystical, even religious way. Many writers and survivors have expressed the idea, in the postwar era, that the Holocaust cannot be understood by those who did not experience it personally, and that its meaning cannot be communicated with words (Eaglestone 2004, p. 18). This claim, just like the objections of those historians who refused to consider the Holocaust among other political massacres without underlining its magnitude and its singularity (Katz 1996, pp. 19-39), have been trivialised by public opinion in a view of the Holocaust as an event that someway does not belong to human history. This turn in Holocaust memory can be linked to the cultural currency of the Holocaust as some sort of a civic religion in countries such as the US and Israel. However, such approaches foreclose serious attempts to comprehend the extermination of the Jews by placing it in an historical context and, further, to take from it something more than a metaphysical and moralistic lesson on the evilness of human nature. Such diffused ideas reinforce the *absolute* dimension of the Holocaust, which would be a manifestation of *absolute*, *pure* evil (Nazism). This simplistic consideration strengthens the role of the Holocaust, and therefore of Nazism and Second World War, as a sort of gold standard of abjection.

[37] Eley 2001, pp. 818-819.

divided in two separate states. Italy suffered a civil war and a dual occupation, and later abandoned the monarchy to become a republic. The British Empire fell into pieces due to the enormous war effort. Japan endured two atomic bombs, lost its empire and its army, and the Emperor was forced to renounce his divine nature. France had to face the fact that part of its citizenry and its institutions had collaborated with the Nazis. Eastern Europe fell into Russian hands after years of indiscriminate massacres by the Germans. The US and USSR entered the war as assaulted countries and, by the end of it, they controlled two empires that covered the whole world. After the war, if not because of the war, the state of Israel was born. Finally, the atrocities of the war provoked a reconsideration of the relationships between European states, leading to the creation of the European Union.

The memory of the war, however, is not univocal, but is a continuously made object of redefinitions and accusation, since all the countries involved in the war use it in nation-building processes[38]. In Italy, for instance, the 'myth' of the Resistance has been promoted for decades as a purifying moment for Italian people after twenty years of Fascist dictatorship, while the history of the Repubblica Sociale has been neglected with all its unpleasant implications[39]. In the United Kingdom, the war against the Nazis gained the status of ethnic myth[40], while its most humiliating aspects, such as the defeats in the Pacific Ocean, have been obscured[41]. In Israel, initially, there was a contraposition between the active, fighting and heroic 'new Jew' and the Jew of the ghetto, perceived as a passive, insecure, non-heroic figure[42]. However, a new politics took place, which tried to reconcile religious traditions and modern politics, placing the Holocaust at the centre of history and of the very existence of Israel[43].

[38] Hall 1995, p. 613.
[39] Foot 2009, pp. 157-158.
[40] Gilroy 2004, pp. 95-104.
[41] The success of the war against the Nazis and the resistance during the Battle for Britain overshadowed humiliating defeats such as the fall of Singapore in 1942 and the Japanese progress in Burma. Moreover, the loss of the Empire, which started right after the war with the independence of India in 1947 and was a consequence of the excessive war effort that Britain had to face, made the memory of the Pacific war even more painful, while at the same time the victory against the Nazis gained more and more importance (Noakes and Pattinson 2014, p. 15). Paula Hamilton notes that in Australia it has happened the opposite way, and that the war in the Pacific is commonly considered "the Battle for Australia" (2015, p. 50).
[42] Gentile 2001, pp. 189-190. See also Wieviorka 1998, p. 138.
[43] This is not an isolated case: several countries appear to appropriate the memory of the Holocaust for propagandistic purposes. The so called 'Americanization of the Holocaust', which refers to the hypertrophy of the public memory of the Holocaust in the US, amounted to 'the repeated assertion that whatever the United States has done to blacks, Native Americans, Vietnamese, or other pales in comparison to the Holocaust', and therefore to an '*evasion* of moral and historical responsibility' (Novick 2000, p. 15). It is worth noting that even a country like Japan which did not participate in the extermination of Jews, still uses Holocaust memory in its public discourses, evoking the uniqueness of the Holocaust to diminish the gravity of its own crimes in Asia. According to William F. S. Miles, the thesis of the uniqueness of the Shoah allows others responsible of genocides to minimise their actions (Miles 2004, pp. 386-387). However, as Alvin Rosenfeld writes, all the countries involved in the Holocaust adapted the memory of the extermination of Jews to their purposes, diminishing their responsibilities

Given a similar, widespread presence of war memory in public discourse, it does not come as a surprise to find that it is also overexposed in pop culture. I have already mentioned the overwhelming presence of high and low cultural products concerning the Holocaust since the 1970s (with the precedent of the theatrical and filmic versions of Anne Frank's *Diary*) – presence which continues in the contemporary era[44]. But a very similar argument can be made more generally about the Second World War and Nazi imagery. As Alvin Rosenfeld points out, this presence can be traced to the early years after the war[45], and can be linked to something we already observed, which is to say the exceptional status of the Nazi Holocaust among all the other genocides of the twentieth century[46].

According to Sabina Hake, fascism is restaged in the postwar period as a postmodern equivalent of evil – which means that 'moral categories have been displaced into aesthetic ones'[47]. This ideal process, culminated in the great Naziploitation cinematic era of the 1970s, continues in the proliferation of humor about the Nazi legacy and the Holocaust[48] – humor that finds its natural space on the internet[49] thanks to the communicative mechanism intrinsic to the websphere. As Gavriel Rosenfeld writes, the underlying motivations of the 'memefication' of Hitler are, once again, 'to subvert and ultimately reverse the symbolism that has traditionally

(Poland, Austria, France) or giving greater space to their own role as victims, as in Russia (Rosenfeld 1995, pp. 4-5; for further details on this topic, see the monumental collective volume *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, Wyman 1996). Rosenfeld does not mention Italy, but in that country as well the public memory of the Holocaust is focused mainly on the Italian victims or on the partisans (Perra 2013, pp. 24-45). On the contrary, there is a strong emphasis on two stereotypes of the aversion of the Italian people for the racial laws, the one of 'italiani brava gente' ('good guys, good folk'), and of the grey area (Gordon 2012, pp. 139-156). In particular, the most important Levian concept of a 'grey area' between the perpetrators and the victims as 'a deliberate creation of confusions, of indecipherable areas of ambiguity' (*ibid*, p. 141) is trivialized as a simple moment of indecision for the people involved in the deportation of Jews, and is used to absolve them from their inactivity or from their wrong choices, blaming the circumstances instead. In the same way, the countries of the so-called second and third world appropriate the memory of the Holocaust in order to accuse the old colonial powers of analogous crimes – or to absolve themselves from the same accusation. Miles writes, in this sense, about an H/holocaust parallelism, meaning a parallelism between a capital Holocaust and a plurality of holocausts. This parallelism is used instrumentally, to raise solidarity or to justify military intervention, or, on the contrary, for a 'diminishment of culpability by distancing from the Shoah' (Miles 2004, p. 382; see also Levy and Sznaider 2006, pp. 5-6). Something similar happens also among the ethnic minorities of several countries I mentioned, especially in the United States (Rosenfeld 1995, pp. 17-18), in which there is a sort of concurrence of victims (Chaumont 1997), with minorities accusing their oppressors of crimes of similar proportions to those of the Nazis. According to Michael Rothberg, however, we are not dealing with concurrence but with multi-directionality. Collective memory has not to be interpreted as competitive, 'as a zero-sum struggle', but rather as multidirectional: 'as subjective to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowings; as productive and not privative' (Rothberg 2009, p. 3).

[44] Langford 2013 provides examples of Holocaust trivialisation in blockbuster films such as *Chicken Run* (2000), *Captain America – The First Avenger* (2011), the *X-Men* franchise (2000-2011, updatable to 2016 with *X-Men Apocalypse*, in which the mutant Magneto destroys the Auschwitz camp, furiously remembering when he was held prisoner there), and the horror movies *The Exorcist – Dominion* (2004), *Hostel* (2005), and *The Unborn* (2009).

[45] Alvin Rosenfeld 2011, p. 5.

[46] *Ibid,* pp. 14-16.

[47] Hake 2012, p. 162.

[48] *Ibid,* p. 11 and p. 244.

[49] Gavriel Rosenfeld 2015, p. 294.

surrounded the Nazi dictator. As an internet icon, Hitler has acquired dual semiotic significance. He has become both a symbol of evil *and* a symbol of humour. Indeed, he has become a symbol of humour precisely *because* he is a symbol of evil'[50]. Nevertheless, this often insensitive humour risks aestheticising, relativising, and normalising Nazism[51].

Rosenfeld argues that normalisation is a key process through which to appreciate our relationship with the memory of the Nazi legacy[52]. In fact, all the processes we have underlined in this chapter – a temporal distance from the events which allows to use them as a political tool, the abuse of memory in artistic products, the universalisation of the Holocaust – lead to a normalisation (and sometimes trivialisation, sanitisation, and universalisation[53]) of the Nazi legacy, be it organic or aesthetic. The normalisation of the memory of the Second World War is not in contradiction with the importance of its memory in our culture: in fact, it happens precisely because of the hypertrophy of memory in public discourse. There is a complementarity between the opposite processes of mythisation and of trivialisation. A certain event becomes a myth because of its incomparable meaning for the history of a people, and thanks to the processes of public memory that it involves. At the same time, an event's status as mythic sees that it becomes, with time, trivialised – an object of humor or a vessel for banal metaphors or comparisons. Vice versa, the diffusion of this trivialisation reinforces an event's status as a myth. This is what has happened with the memory of the Second World War: its centrality in public memory has led, through the decades, to its centrality in popular culture. The attempt of art (in a broader sense: written, visual, cinematic) when it approaches World War II is to overcome the sense of inauthenticity that characterises both the mythisation and the trivialisation of the memory of the war.

3. The Ethics and Poetics of Post-Postmodernism

The aim of my thesis, as I have intimated, is to underline the key features of literature after postmodernism, by analysing the Second World War as a common theme. As I show in the analysis of the novels, the theme of the Second World War allows a series of peculiar stylistic features and ethical postures of post-postmodernism to emerge. The exceptionality of the war,

[50] *Ibid,* p. 307
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Ibid,* pp. 7-14.
[53] Weissman 2004, p. 12.

in terms of its historical and symbolic importance, proves to be an excellent case study for a literary poetics concerned with narrability, empathy, and commitment. Moreover, the analysis of post-postmodern features in the representation of the Second World War allows the emergence of its characteristic traits of singularity and totality, while postmodern fictions about the war were more concerned with its transmission, reception and memorialisation.

It is generally agreed by literary critics that the phenomenon called postmodernism is over, and that its end has to be dated around twenty-five years ago. A precise moment for its death has been variously traced between 1989[54] (with the epoch-making changes due to the fall of the Soviet Union), 1993 (a symbolic date for the moment when popular media finally appropriated postmodern poetics[55]), or with the terrorist attack at the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001[56]. Irrespective of the relative inaccessibility of a precise date, however, the most important critics of postmodernism have agreed that in the early 1990s its function as avant-garde style was over. In the 2002 reprint of her landmark book, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon argues that not only have we assisted in an institutionaliation of the postmodern, but also in 'its transformation into a kind of generic counter-discourse'[57]. She indicates that the subversive power of postmodern poetics has been diminished by their entry into common critical parlance with the effect that postmodern poetics no longer have a transformative effect on reality (and thus that their invocation can represent complicity).

First of all, it has to be underlined that total agreement has never been reached among critics about what postmodernism exactly was. With this in mind, and, moreover, postmodernism's variety of contents and forms, we ought to consider it in the plural as postmodernism*s* rather than as *a* postmodernism[58]. Potter and Loperz agree, suggesting: 'given postmodernism's celebratory orientation to diversity, difference, ambiguity and contradiction, it is not surprising that wildly conflicting theory, practices and alleged knowledges, might all fly under the same designation or be labelled as doing so'[59]. In the beginning, the term started to be used to label an architectonic reaction against the international style, and only later became the name of a literary style. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, terminological confusion further results from the

[54] Eshel 2014, p. 170: 'Why 1989? Although history hardly ended in 1989, the year signals in my view a noticeable shift in our cultural and intellectual discussion of the past as it relates to the future, a change reflected in the contemporary novel'. See also p. 14, and Ganguly 2016, p. 3.
[55] Andrew Hoberek (2007, p. 233-4) echoes Minsoo Kang's judgment on John McTiernan's *The Last Action Hero* (1993), starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. This blockbuster is a metafictional satire of the genre of the action movie.
[56] Eshel 2014, p. 177.
[57] Hutcheon 1989, p. 166. See also Hutcheon 2007, p. 16. The same idea is also supported by Ihab Hassan (2003, pp. 199-212).
[58] Stierstorfer 2003, p. 3.
[59] Potter and Loperz 2001, p. 5.

overlap between the notion of postmodernism as a literary style and postmodernity as a historical period or cultural condition 'determined by universal, diffuse cynicism, by a panic sense of the hyperreal and the simulacrum'[60]. When referring to postmodernism, it is therefore necessary to differentiate between postmodernism itself as an artistic product (but not as a coherent movement), postmodernity as an historical period (although this definition has never been used by historians, but by sociologists), and postmodern as a cultural era. This distinction, however, as Donnarumma notes, is misleading in the extension and interrelation of these phenomena and their impact[61].

Nevertheless, the phenomena variously called postmodernism are held together by some common denominators. Postmodernism refers both to philosophical and literary issues. As far as philosophical and sociological issues are concerned, postmodernism means the incredulity towards the meta-narratives, as Francois Lyotard famously put it[62], owing to increasing diversity of and contact between languages and cultures. Its representation of reality can be summarised by what Baudrillard called 'media-dominated hyper-reality, in which all values are subsumed to the only value left: the value-indifferent exchange value'[63], while its cultural dynamics are those of late capitalism, in which life is dominated in all its parts by market laws and economic value[64].

However, the sociological traits of postmodernism are one thing, and postmodern poetics are quite another. From a literary perspective, postmodernism indicates literature after the Second World War and, more importantly, after modernism, as Ihab Assan's famous spelling *POSTmodernISM* suggests. To quote Brian McHale,

> This ISM (to begin at the end) does double duty. It announces that the referent here is not merely a chronological division but an organized system—a poetics, in fact—while at the same time properly identifying what exactly it is that postmodernism is *post*. Postmodernism is not postmodern, whatever that might mean, but post modernism; it does not come *after the present* (a solecism), but after the *modernist movement*. Thus the term "postmodernism," if we take it literally enough, *à la lettre,* signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism, and not some hypothetical writing of

[60] Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 23.
[61] Donnarumma 2014, pp. 25-26.
[62] Lyotard 1979, p. 7: 'On tient pour "postmoderne" l'incrédulité à l'égard des métarécits".
[63] Zima 2003, p. 22.
[64] *Ibid,* pp. 22-23: 'In a late capitalist society, the market laws and the exchange value dominate all spheres of life and undermine the ideological […] engagement of individual and collective subjects. In this situation, the great […] meta-narratives decline and give way to local ideologies in the ecological, feminist, eco-feminist, ethnic or anarchist sense. The languages of these ideologies are incommensurate […], and their incompatibility yields a social and linguistic situation of radical pluralism'. See also Rudrum and Stavris 2015, p. XII.

> the future. As for the prefix POST, here I want to emphasize the element of logical and historical *consequence* rather than sheer temporal *posteriority*. Postmodernism follows *from* modernism, in some sense, more than it follows *after* modernism. […] Postmodernism is the posterity of modernism— this is tautological, just as saying that pre-romanticism is the predecessor of romanticism would be tautological. But there is more than mere tautology to the relation between modernism and postmodernism if we can construct an argument about how the posterior phenomenon emerges from its predecessor—about, in other words, historical *consequentiality*[65].

Postmodernism is therefore not so much a radical break from modernism (as either a literary movement or set of cultural sensibilities) but a reaction against – and therefore intimately related to – modernism. As we will see later in this chapter, among the main features of literary postmodernism are irony in the form of parody and pastiche, the crisis of the subject and therefore of the character, the death of the author, and a great self-reflexiveness of the narrative structures (hence the importance of the prefix *meta*).

Just as the word *postmodernism* has been used to label several manifestations, the period after postmodernism in which we are currently living has been given many names[66]. This terminological diversity can certainly be attributed to the ambition of many critics to vindicate the salience of particular expressions. While not all the labels are equally useful, and though they differ in emphasis, all of them encompass certain features. Among all these possible expressions, I have chosen to use for my purposes the term *post-postmodernism*, as in Jeffrey T. Nealon's book *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just in Time Capitalism*, despite Nealon's study being concerned mainly with socio-political issues rather than with literature. There are two main reasons for this choice. The first one is the sense of continuity that it conveys both with postmodernism itself, which is mentioned in the term, and with the definition of postmodernism given by McHale. As Nealon writes: 'With its stammering inability to begin in any way other than intensifying the thing it's supposed to supersede, "post-postmodernism" is a preferred term for suggesting just such a super-postmodernism, hyper-postmodernism, or maybe a "late-postmodernism", as opposed to the overcoming or rendering obsolete of postmodernism that would be implied by a phrase like "after postmodernism"'[67].

[65] McHale 1987, p. 5.
[66] The volume *Supplanting the postmodern*, edited by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris, provided me with a first collection of several of the writings I am mentioning in this section.
[67] Nealon 2012, pp. IX-X.

The second reason that has led my choice is the relative neutrality of this term, which expresses a sense of evolution and continuity without forcing strict interpretative patterns. I appreciate that sometimes neutrality is a way of not taking a position towards a certain matter, but it is also true that several other labels attributed to post-postmodernism are part of a manifesto, which means that they do not only describe the current literary landscape, but try to prescribe its contextual and formal emphases. Those terms that are not part of a manifesto and that simply try to describe reality, moreover – such as digimodernism, hypermodernism and automodernism – foreground a single aspect of contemporaneity, and only offer a view on the sociological aspects. Post-postmodernism as I intend it, by contrast, is highly interdisciplinary in connotation and practice; like postmodernism itself, it focuses both on sociological and literary aspects. Although the aim of this work is not to show how society has changed in the last twenty to twenty-five years, some sociological considerations are undeniably useful to understand both why the Second World War is such a popular theme in contemporary fiction, and why literature has enacted a return to (a form of) realism.

As I explained at the beginning of this section, it is not easy to delineate neatly the periodization of the passage from postmodernism to post-postmodernism, as cultural transitions tend to be porous and irregular. Although critics agree to identify the Nineties as the decade in which postmodernism ceased to be an avant-garde style and became diffused in mainstream culture, several important postmodern novels were published in that decade, such as Roth's *Operation Shylock* (discussed in the next chapter) or Antonia S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990). On the other hand, the main works of markedly post-postmodern authors such as Bolaño and Vollmann were composed and published in the very same decade. If I have chosen to mention the twenty-first century in the title of this work is because the vast majority the novels I discuss are all published in the new millennium, and most importantly because I believe that, irrespectively for its actual beginning and for its precursors, post-postmodernism is the literary style of the present.

Fields such as hypermodernism, automodernism and digimodernism look at the end of postmodernism from a political and sociological point of view, rather than a literary one. All these labels focus on the continuity between postmodernism and the processes that characterise the age in which we are living. Hypermodernism, a term coined by Gilles Lipovetsky, is one of the most incisive labels attributed so far to post-postmodernism. Automodernism and digimodernism, on which I will focus later in this section, insist on the importance of the changes in public and private life generated by the development of the World Wide Web and

portable devices. Hypermodernism, instead, as the word suggests, implies a continuity of the processes of modernity rather than their substitution with something else (while postmodernism, intentionally and unintentionally, signaled the end of modernity and modernism). These processes, however, are present at a level of intensity never experienced during the postmodern period, and are much more pervasive in everyday life. The mechanics of modernity create a society of excess and individualism – or better, hyperindividualism:

> Même les comportements individuels sont pris dans l'engranage de l'extrême comme en témoignent la frénésie consommative, les pratiques de dopage, les sports extrêmes, les tueurs en série, les boulimies et anorexies, l'obésité, les compulsions et les addictions. Deux tendances contradictoires se dessinent. D'un côté, plus que jamais, les individus prennent soin de leur corps, sont obsédés d'hygiène et de santé, obéissent aux prescriptions médicales et sanitaires. D'un autre côté, prolifèrent les pathologies individuelles, les consommations anomiques, l'anarchie des comportements. L'hypercapitalisme se double d'un hyperindividualisme détaché, législateur de lui-même mais tantôt prudent et calculateur, tantôt déréglé, déséquilibré, chaotique. Dans l'univers fonctionnel de la technique s'accroissent les comportements dysfonctionnels. L'hyperindividualisme ne coïncide pas seulement avec l'intériorisation du modèle d'homo oeconomicus poursuivant la maximisation de ses intérêts propres dans la plupart des sphères de la vie (école, sexualité, procréation, religion, politique, syndicalisme) mais aussi avec la déstructuration des anciennes formes de régulations sociales des comportements, avec une marée montante de pathologies, troubles et excès des comportements[68].

In this hypermodern world, the dissolution of traditional institutions and ideologies, which began with modernity and continued with postmodernism, no longer encounters any obstacle. Individualism in private life and technocracy in public life are the consequences of these processes.

This sense of continuity with postmodernism, however, is more difficult to detect when one looks at literary production. Eshelman's performatism, Toth's renewalism and Vermeulen and van den Akker's metamodernism focus mainly on literary or artistic problems, and they all agree in underlining both the presence and the necessity of a new ethical approach to literature in order to overcome postmodern nihilism. Performatism, both a manifesto and an historical diagnosis, tries to keep together the postmodern assault on metaphysics and a new presence of

[68] Lipovetsky and Charles 2004, pp. 76-77. See also Donnarumma 2014, pp. 99 e ss.

ethical values in art[69]. In doing so, like renewalism and metamodernism, performatism requires that the reader enact a kind of voluntary oscillation between naivety and cynicism[70].

One condition of this process is the instantiation of a monist *semiotic*, which 'requires that things or thingness be integrated into the concept of sign'[71]. No longer is the world purely textual, made of language and idiolects as postmodernism suggested. For post-postmodernism and related turns, words refer to things, and this relation is not up for discussion. Something very similar is also advocated by renewalism, which aims to embrace 'both the possibility and the impossibility of the specter'[72] (where postmodernism instead needed to expose it), and which simultaneously embraces and defers the possibility of the referent and of mimesis[73]. Toth's renewalism notes a return to 'neo-realism' or 'dirty-realism' (which is to say, a realism achieved by means of postmodern literature's language)[74]. Something similar is suggested also by metamodernism, which is described as 'another modernism' characterised by 'a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment'[75]: 'indeed, both metamodernism and postmodernism turn to pluralism, irony, and deconstruction in order to counter a modernist fanaticism. However, in metamodernism this pluralism and irony are utilized to counter the modern aspiration, while in postmodernism they are employed to cancel it out'[76].

One of the main problems in dealing with post-postmodernism is that, as we have observed, reflections on post-postmodernism involve both sociological and literary aspects and, further,

---

[69] Eshelman 2008, pp. XI. According to Eshelman, the postmodern era is passed, with 'its essentially dualist notions of textuality, virtuality, belatedness, endless irony, and metaphysical skepticism', and we are entering an era in which 'monist virtues' are taking their place (*ibid*).
[70] *Ibid,* p. 3.
[71] *Ibid,* p. 36.
[72] Toth 2010, p. 118.
[73] *Ibid,* p. 123.
[74] Toth and Brooks 2007, pp. 1-9. The expression 'dirty-realism' can be backdated to the late 1980s. See Rebein 2011, pp. 41-65.
[75] Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010, p. 2. See also p. 4: 'We do not wish to suggest that all postmodern tendencies are over and done with. But we do believe many of them are taking another shape, and, more importantly, a new *sense*, a new meaning and direction. […] Most significantly perhaps, the cultural industry has responded in kind, increasingly abandoning tactics such as pastiche and parataxis for strategies like myth and metaxis, melancholy for hope, and exhibitionism for engagement'. See also Holland 2014, pp. 1-3 and 199-202. Vermeulen and van der Akker have expanded their contribution on the topic in the collective volume *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism* (2017), in which they explain further the terminological meaning of their term: 'meta in Greek means three things: with or among, between and after' (44.2). Hence, metamodernism is situated *with or among* 'older and newer structures of feeling' (*ibid*), 'is characterized by an oscillating in-betweenness, or, rather, a dialectical movement that identifies with and negates […] conflicting positions, while being never congruent with these positions' (49.5), and historically *after* postmodernism (53.1). On metamodernism, see also Vittorini 2017. Konstantinou's post-irony, 'a contribution to the critical project of naming what comes after post-modernism' (2016, p. 37) which reprises David Foster Wallace's New Sincerity, can be considered a similar category to metamodernism, as it focuses on the importance of believing over irony in contemporary fiction (2016, pp. 167-266).
[76] *Ibid,* pp. 9-10.

these aspects tend to differ significantly. Sociologically, post-postmodernism is seen as a continuation of the processes of de-realisation which already marked postmodernism, and, in a wider sense, of the dissolutive processes that can be dated back to modernity: 'hypercapitalisme, hyperclasse, hyperpuissance, hyperterrorisme, hyperindividualisme, hypermarché, hypertexte, qu'est-ce qui ne révèle plus une modernité élevée à la puissance superlative?'[77]. However, from a literary perspective, post-postmodernism is seen as a break, often intentional, with the poetics of postmodernism, and ushering in renewed attention to realism and an ethical approach to literature.

This sense of cultural continuity is extremely significant. Lipovetsky calls the time we are living in a 'seconde modernité', absolutely modern since it rests 'sur trois axiomatiques constitutives de la modernité elle-même: le marché, l'efficacité technicienne, l'individu'[78]. David Rudrum argues that, instead of focusing on the prefix 'post' and its disappearance, more emphasis should be put on the persistence of the word 'modern' which suggests that, contrary to what postmodernists suggested, modernity has not ended, but rather it has changed, or has implemented its characteristical features[79].

From a literary perspective, we face another problem when we talk about post-postmodernism, a problem that has already been briefly noted. This problem is that, just as the passage from modernism to postmodernism was not an abrupt change, neither is the passage from postmodernism to post-postmodernism precise. This is true in two senses. First, like postmodernism, post-postmodernism is a product of avant-garde (or at least high culture) authors. A diffusion of its poetics in a high culture context does not correspond to a diffusion in mass culture. Therefore, what we mean with the end of postmodernism is that it is no longer appealing to "cultured" and experimental writers and its end has been called by most of its critics. Nevertheless, its poetics are still deeply present in popular culture (let us say, superhero movies, cartoons, and mainstream fiction).

The second sense as to postmodernism and post-postmodernism's indistinguishability is similar: some of the formal means of postmodern poetics are still surviving in post-postmodernism. As Hoberek writes, 'postmodern techniques – even if they no longer play quite the dominant role they once did – have hardly disappeared from contemporary fiction'[80]. In fact, post-postmodernism is not different from postmodernism because of a set of narrative

[77] Lipovetsky and Charles 2004, p. 72.
[78] *Ibid,* p. 74.
[79] Rudrum 2015, p. 334. See also Zima 2003, p. 26.
[80] Hoberek, p. 236.

techniques[81], but because of an ethical approach[82]. I have outlined this earlier in reference to performatism, renewalism and metamodernism, but I will proceed now to describe how some postmodern techniques survive in a different cultural ambient, and why.

The main features of the poetics of postmodernism were, with an inevitably rough but not inaccurate simplification, irony, the crisis of subject, the death of the author, and a general self-reflexiveness of literary texts. The importance of irony in postmodern literature can be seen in the prevalence of pastiche and parody[83], in the reprise of genre literature, and in the contamination of high and low textualities. The crisis of subject, already a modernist theme, resulted in fragmented and dubious characters[84]. Similarly, the death of the author, as exposed by Roland Barthes, compromised the traditional notion of authorship (and readership) by allowing to read a text as ‘un espace à dimensions multiples, où se marient et se contestent des écritures variées, dont aucune n'est originelle: le texte est […], un tissu de citations’[85]. The importance of self-reflexiveness in postmodern literature is testified to by the importance of the prefix *meta*, as in more generic metafiction and in more specific *historiographic* metafiction (which will be discussed later in this chapter). According to Patricia Waugh, ‘metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction’[86]. This means that, in literature for which such literary meta-techniques are central, the borders between reality and fiction become blurred, suggesting that the world can be seen as a vast textuality.

Some of these features no longer belong to post-postmodernism. The death of the author is a concept that belongs more to literary criticism than to literature itself; it is difficult to find authorial negation in contemporary novels, whose narrators have been said to have regained a sort of ‘narrative authorship’[87]. Something similar can be said about the death or fracturing of the subject, since post-postmodernist novels show more round, complete and serious characters in a way that is definitely non-ironic. However, some other postmodernist devices survive in

---

[81] Donnarumma 2014, p. 46.
[82] Hoberek 2004, pp. 238-239. Hoberek notes this in regard of Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), a book which I have discussed in a similar perspective in my article ‘“Everything can't be a lie”: Philip Roth e l'Olocausto’ (2017).
[83] Hutcheon 2007, pp. 8 and p. 89
[84] Zima 2003, p. 24.
[85] Barthes 1984, p. 65.
[86] Waugh 1984, p. 6. By this definition, and as we will see, the different use of paratextual insertions in postmodern and post-postmodern fiction is also very significant.
[87] Pennacchio 2014, pp. 9-28.

post-postmodern fiction: by way of example, if we look at post-postmodernist fiction, we will find a great reuse of genre fiction (*Les Bienveillantes*, *2666*), metafiction (Ian McEwan's *Atonement*), and autofiction (Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*). The crucial point here is that even those features shared both by postmodernism and post-postmodernism differ in their intentions: irony no longer represents the base of the literary creation[88]. Post-postmodernism does not ignore the double-coding poetics of postmodernism as if they never existed, but tries to incorporate them in a serious discourse about the world and displays renewed faith in the capability of literature to understand and influence the real.

The form of post-postmodernism has been described variously as 'moderno realism serio'[89] or 'critical realism' (but also 'hybrid realism' as a continuation of 'magical realism'[90], or 'melancholical realism'[91]). This is the most significant innovation, compared to postmodernism: in fact, while it is true that postmodernism was actually born as a committed poetics (despite its ambiguities[92]) and that postmodern literature sought to criticise the real by providing a critical mimesis of it, it is also true that it has always been the least realistic of poetics[93]. Postmodernism adopted realism in order to refract and distort it, presenting it through metafiction as a naïve possibility in which the contemporary novelist can no longer believe. As Donnarumma writes:

> Che tipo di realismo è dunque quello ipermoderno? Ha tratti unificanti? In primo luogo, e ancora una volta, occorre tornare a un confronto con la letteratura postmoderna. È esistito un realismo postmoderno? L'ascesa di poetiche realistiche segnala una frattura nei confronti degli anni precedenti, è uno scivolamento rispetto ad essi o, al contrario, si pone in linea di continuità? L'*anything goes* non escludeva la ripresa e l'omaggio a modi della tradizione realistica; ma citarla voleva dire già disconoscerla, ridurla a una delle tante maniere possibili da rifare al secondo grado, negarne la pretesa di mordere su una realtà i cui, del resto, la cultura postmoderna non credeva affatto[94].

[88] Donnarumma 2014, p. 199. See also p. 107: 'Ciò che è cambiato rispetto al postmoderno è insomma la posizione intellettuale di chi scrive e si sente chiamato a prendere la parola sul presente; con la conseguenza di un vistoso mutamento anche nella scelta dei temi di rappresentazione'.
[89] Mazzoni 2011, p. 361.
[90] Potter and Lopez generically but eloquently suggest that the difference between postmodernism and realism is in 'the tone' (2001, p. 5).
[91] Ganguly 2016, p. 19.
[92] Hutcheon talks about a 'complicitous form of critique' of postmodernism, of 'its tendency to deconstruct cultural monoliths but never to reconstruct' (2007, p. 16). See also Hutcheon 1989, p. 4.
[93] Hutcheon 1989, p. 2.
[94] Donnarumma 2014, pp. 145-146. According to Alberto Casadei, postmodern poetics are not concerned with realism as they focus on ironic and parodic metanarration, and on the reprise of already existing textualities: 'il problema di una narrazione realistica non si pone, perché essa non pare più praticabile, una volta constatato il dominio delle immagini-simulacri e lo svuotamento di significato della realtà' (2000, p. 33).

This gap is particularly evident when one thinks about historiographic metafiction, the most common postmodern means of historical representation. Historiographic metafiction is an eminently postmodern style, and has to be understood as a consequence of the 'postmodern challenge to history'[95] launched by the so-called *linguistic turn* in historiography. With the publication of *Metahistory* in 1975, Hayden White forcefully underlines the eminently narrative (and thus fictional) nature of the historiographical discourse, founded on sources which are continuously changed and re-elaborated throughout their transmission[96]. Historiographic metafiction is different from the traditional historical novel because it focuses more on the way in which history is transmitted to us rather than on history itself. As with many other features of postmodernism, this style was a response to a demand of political commitment[97] to the extent that it represents a form of deconstruction levelled against dominant narratives. Historiographic metafiction has represented an important paradigm of the postmodern approach to history, and therefore to reality. The main feature of historiographic metafiction is 'theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs'[98]. Thus, it becomes a way to rethink and rework the traditional representations of the past. Works of historiographic metafiction, therefore, focus mainly on the way in which the transmission of history takes place rather than on the historical events themselves, thus exposing the artificiality and non-objectivity of historical writing. While it is true that historiographic metafiction does not mine the actual existence of the past, but just our capability to know it, the outcome of this form of historical representation has often been a manifestation of hermeneutic pessimism, since it suggests that history can be known only through texts that have already been object of manipulation and transmission[99].

However, historiographic metafiction no longer applies to post-postmodernist historical fiction. This terminological shift is not because post-postmodernism has somehow dismissed the reflections of Burke and White on history as a product of representation, rather than as an objective discipline, but because the focus has moved again from the condition of representation to the represented object itself. I will elaborate this distinction in the next chapter, referring to Philip Roth's transition from *Operation Shylock* to *The Plot Against America*, but it is also extremely productive for a book such as *Les Bienveillantes*, where the cultural dimension of

[95] Singles 2013, p. 22.
[96] White 1975, p. IX e p. 428.
[97] Hutcheon 1989, p. 48: 'It is not simply a case of novels metafictionally reveling their own narrativity or fabulation; here narrative representation – story-telling – is a historical and a political act'.
[98] Hutcheon 1988, p. 5.
[99] *Ibid*, p. 16.

historiographic representation is clearly signaled, but it does not interfere with the unequivocal message of the book. Josh Toth has defined the post-postmodern form of historical writing ‘historioplastic metafiction’, instead of historiographic: while Hutcheon’s category ‘emphasises the inescapability of the graphic construct’, historioplastic metafiction ‘shifts our attention to the infinite yet bound pliability of the past’[100].

Even those postmodern historical novels that cannot be considered historiographic metafiction are unrealistic in their style. Let us consider some of the most remarkable postmodern novels about the Second World War. Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) is structured circularly and non-chronologically, making it difficult for the reader to follow the action. Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) is an alternate history, and thus its plot pivots on an event that never happened: the Nazi victory of the Second World War, and the invasion of the US by German and Japanese forces. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969) involves journeys through time, and an alien race called Trafamadorians. Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), set in wartime London, has as a protagonist a man whose erections seem to foretell the explosions of the V rockets. In Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* (1991), the soul of a concentration camp doctor narrates his life in reverse chronology[101].

Let us look at the scheme Ihab Hassan drew of the conceptual and stylistic contrasts between modernism and postmodernism respectively: symbolism versus Dadaism; form versus anti-form; purpose versus game; project versus case; hierarchy versus anarchy; completed object of art versus process of interpretation; creation versus recreation; narration versus antinarration[102]. It is easy to notice that post-postmodernism, as we have described it so far, belongs more to the first set of characteristics that the second. This being the case, post-postmodernism and post-postmodern literature does not ignore postmodernism’s lessons of scepticism and doubt. Post-postmodernist realism represents an attempt to return to the characteristics of modernism without forgetting the lessons of postmodernism. In other words, these novels are more similar to the novelistic production of modernity than to postmodernity[103]. This return to an open narratability signals the end of the double coding poetics of postmodernism. All the elements that were disdained or parodied by postmodern writers, such as plot, temporality and characters[104], return as the centre of the narration. This sociological and literary shift is also the

---

[100] Toth 2017, 137.6. See also Timmer 2010, p. 360.
[101] On the topic of the Second World War in postmodernist narratives, see Crosthwaite 2009, Wyatt 2010 (pp. 135-162), and Brett 2016.
[102] Hassan 1987, pp. 91-92.
[103] Calabrese 2005, p. VIII.
[104] *Ibid,* p. 14.

result of the influence of non-Western literatures and of best-sellers – traditions closer to a kind of pure narration, free of metafictional and hyper-literary implications[105].

Before moving on, I want to emphasise that, despite my insistence on the concept of realism, I do not agree with interpretations of post-postmodernism as, simply, a new realism. Such has been a view of the phenomenon widely diffused in Italian academia (and especially referring to Italian literature) under the label of 'ritorno al reale/realismo'. This category celebrated the end of a vision of (Italian) postmodernism as a playful, detached set of poetics, in which language and puns had more importance than reality. Romano Luperini, who argues that postmodernism has been substituted by a sort of 'neo-modernism'[106], offers a particularly harsh judgment over the Italian postmodern experience. With reference to the philosophical school of Gianni Vattimo and his 'pensiero debole', and the literary works of Umberto Eco and the late Italo Calvino, he writes: 'C'è stata una anestesia della vita collettiva, e una anestesia specifica degli intellettuali […]. Si è diffuso un nichilismo morbido e soddisfatto, insensibile alla cura del mondo'[107]. Specifically, Luperini seems to overlap postmodernism with a general tendency to disengagement, promoted since the 1980s by the media of Prime Minister-to-be, Silvio Berlusconi[108]. According to Luperini, the violent irruption of the real represented by the attacks to the Twin Tower of 11 September 2001 impeded this tendency[109]. A renewed attention to realism has been marked in Italian literature by an explosion of non-fiction writing, and the increasing tendency to merge fiction and non-fiction in essayistic and documentaristic novels, the most famous of which is Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra*[110].

Although the label of 'ritorno al reale' usefully and accurately highlights the general attention of post-postmodernism to realism, it has significant flaws and limits. As I have argued, post-postmodern realism has to be understood not as a simple recovery of modern or pre-

[105] *Ibid.*
[106] Luperini 2005, p. 8.
[107] *Ibid,* p. 12.
[108] *Ibid,* p. 16.
[109] Donnarumma and Policastro 2008, p. 9.
[110] See on this topic Simonetti 2008, pp. 116-125, Palumbo Mosca 2013, pp. 185-205, and Palumbo Mosca 2014, pp. 9-15. It is worth noticing that this position has been influenced by the revival of Lacan's concept of the Real, especially in the work of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2009) and French philosopher Alain Badiou (2005). In a Lacanian sense, the Real is an absolute order, irreducible to a Symbolic or Imaginary representation – which is to say, irreducible to linguistic representation. The characters of irreducibility and unattainability of the Lacanian Real have represented for contemporary Italian thinkers and literary critics (as in Recalcati 2012) an opposition to the processes of mediatization that characterized postmodern culture and postmodernism as a literary style, viewed as an attempt to sedate and exorcize the disruptive power of experience. The Real, in other words, resists language and representation, and, in a literary perspective, a return to the Real implies an escape from the endless recursivity and self-reflexiveness of postmodernism. The Italian debate on the 'ritorno al reale' has been excellently summarized in Somigli 2013.

modern poetics, but rather as a form of realism obtained through postmodern means (while Luperini suggests that 'neo-modern' texts present a form of realism *despite* their postmodern style[111]). Thus, it is more correct to talk about a renewed attention to *reality* than of a return to *realism*, for reasons that the means with which to enquire in this reality are markedly different from those of classical pre-modern realism. Although I will insist on the word 'realism' in my analysis of the texts, their novelty cannot (and will not) be reduced to that, but rather to the non-ironic (or post-ironic) reprise of classical and modern literature, together with typical stylistic features of postmodern literature.

At this juncture, another question arises: how is the cultural panorama in which this 'return to the real' takes place shaped? Is it different from postmodernity, and how? I have signaled that post-postmodern times continue the 'crisis of experience' that was typical of modernism and postmodernism[112]. This crisis of experience results both from the gradual mediatisation of life and a sense of lack of agency. The postmodern age, from the late fifties onwards, has been marked by the invention and the diffusion of television: the post-postmodern age (from the nineties) is defined by the development of the World Wide Web. In the last fifty years, the world we live in has been characterised by a progressively more invasive presence of the media in everyday life. On the other hand, the development of atomic armaments and the transformation of work from industrial to post-industrial has produced a sense of alienation – a sense of lack of agency.

Postmodernist fiction has reacted to this triangular, technological, economic and psychological state of affairs by parodying the real and discussing its founding, and by trying to deconstruct the main narrative of the capitalistic world. Postmodernist fiction has, however, proven itself incapable of proposing a counter-narrative that would not end in nihilism. Post-postmodernist fiction, on the other hand, reacts to the state of affairs in which it appears through a return to reality – specifically, a return to great narratives and great themes[113]. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the Second World War occupies a central position in contemporary fiction.

Robert Samuels, in his description of automodernism, highlights that the internet experience is essentially postmodern in as much as it involves open texts and digital transpositions of the

[111] Luperini 2005, pp. 75-76.
[112] Donnarumma 2014, p. 88.
[113] Lipovetsky and Charles 2004, p. 143: 'Ce qui définit l'hypermodernité ce n'est pas exclusivement l'autocritique des savoirs et des institutions modernes mais aussi la mémoire revisitée, la remobilisation des croyances traditionnelles, l'hybridation individualiste du passé et du moderne'. Kirby 2009, pp. 396.6-429.4.

self, and because the Internet allows a recovery of agency, which seemed to be lost in postmodern times, through a kind of trade-off between the concrete self and the textual self. Indeed, the notion of personal freedom that is implied in the ability to interact with machines and others and through social media – notwithstanding its being representative of a social and agential evolution when compared to the unidirectionality of the pre-internet media – is partially misleading. Certainly, instruments such as smartphones offer their users both a great range of choices and a sense of agency. But such devices also make users dependent on them: they generate, in other words, 'a paradoxical combination of individual autonomy and automated mechanics'[114]. Moreover, the diffusion of media exposes us to a variety of stimulus and images that do not fulfil the role of real experiences, but substitute them. Encounters and interactions made through the Web are 'visually boxed into the confines of the screen', which thus serves 'as a mental container for Otherness. Like a cage at a zoo or a picture frame at a museum, the structure of the framed screen provides a strong sense of limits and borders[115]. Virtual reality, as Slavoj Žižek argues, 'is experienced as reality without being so'[116].

Individuals' and social groups' lack of experience, paradoxically expanded by digital technologies, is typical of the times we are living – of post-postmodernity. Even wars, that more than any other event should be referred as traumatic, are perceived by Western viewers as anesthetised and hyper-mediatised experiences. Let us take as an example the perception and the reception of one of the most traumatic and iconic events of post-postmodernity, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11 2001. Far from representing, as Luperini affirmed, an irruption of the real in the ironic and metafictional atmosphere of postmodernity, the 9/11 attacks resembled in their media coverage a blockbuster movie[117]: by absorbing fiction's energy, reality itself has become fiction[118]. They were followed by a continuous, even endless representation by world media, which contributed – just as it happened ten years before with the Gulf War – to a perception of the attacks as something unreal.

It is not a coincidence that the experiential absence of trauma in our Western societies (the absence of famines, epidemics, wars and environmental disasters) is related to the spectacularisation of violence. Daniele Giglioli argues that, although our Western society is one of the safest and least traumatic in human history, and although human life has never been so protected and valued, trauma is *evoked* everywhere: 'Non vivendo traumi, li immaginiamo

[114] Samuels 2008, p. 229.
[115] *Ibid,* p. 232
[116] Žižek 2002, p. 11.
[117] *Ibid,* p. 16.
[118] Baudrillard 2002, p. 28.

ovunque. È come se fossimo così traumatizzati dall'assenza di traumi reali da doverci costringere a inseguirli ansiosamente in ogni situazione immaginaria possibile'[119]. We perceive trauma only through an endless and invasive series of media representations, and we are continuously surrounded by cultural products that restage traumas our life lacks. The prevalence of pulp movies, violent films, and other extreme textualities that attempt to exorcise the crisis of individual experience can be attributed to the absence of trauma in Western life[120]. The prevalence of the Second World War (and of other traditional great epics) in contemporary literature, meanwhile, results from the un-narratability of contemporary wars and terrorist attacks.

Paradoxically enough, in fact, this absence of trauma can be referred to war itself, as traumatic distance and invisibility are central to the politics of contemporary warfare. In the first section of this introduction, I have drawn a brief summary both of the historical uniqueness of the Second World War and the facts related to it, as well as the peculiarity that characterises its memory. My aim was to draw attention to the contrast between the trauma of World War II as a historical event and the world without trauma in which we live. This contrast explains the prevalence of the Second World War as a literary theme. Historiography can debate the intrinsic exceptionality of World War II or the Holocaust as events, but the exceptional status of its memory cannot be denied. Memories and postmemories of the war utilise different stylised traits. Nevertheless, contemporary renditions each place great emphasis on the uniqueness of the Second World War. One last issue that makes the memory of the Second World War again so interesting and contested among contemporary writers has to be pointed out; it concerns the way in which warfare has changed in the last sixty years. This change involves two main aspects: the form of warfare itself, which changed from totalising (as in a total war) to low intensity; and the representation of the conflict[121]. These changes to how wars are fought and depicted make contemporary warfare nearly un-narratable, and they prevent contemporary wars from gaining mythological status comparable to that of the Second World War.

As I said before, the Second World War was a total war: the fighting powers exploited all the means of their nation and all the people of the population they controlled in an effort to achieve the complete destruction of the enemy. The whole population was involved in the war effort, and the vast majority of them were threatening with becoming part of the casualties (be

[119] Giglioli 2011, pp. 8-9.
[120] *Ibid,* p. 7 'Che il tempo che stiamo vivendo possa essere definito come l'epoca del trauma senza trauma; meglio ancora, del trauma dell'*assenza di trauma*. E che la letteratura rechi testimonianza di ciò attraverso il ricorso a una postura condivisa che chiameremo *scrittura dell'estremo*'.
[121] Ganguly 2016, p. 1.

it during land invasion or air bombing). The degree of citizenry involvement and citizens' omni-precarity is no longer true when it comes to modern warfare.

While part of the distinctive elements of the so-called postmodern war[122] that we witness today can be located in the Second World War (strategic bombing, system analysis, and computers[123]), the latter ought to still be considered a modern war rather than a postmodern one, since 'it continued modern war's quest for totality, up to and including Hiroshima'[124]. The first example of postmodern war is the Vietnam War: it was 'the SA war, the electronic war, the computer war, the technological war'[125], planting the seeds, in this sense, for contemporary post-1989 wars.

Contemporary or postmodern warfare is characterised by four main elements: low intensity, both geographically and economically; global scale; spectacularisation; and depersonalisation as a result of high technological development. Contemporary wars are 'high-tech, low density deadly conflicts'[126], fought far away from the national soil of Western countries, in countries of the so-called second or third world. They involve a small number of professional soldiers and an impressive display of technology and media. In contemporary wars fought by Western countries, battles are avoided, and substituted by a spectacular, intimidating use of violence:

> The strategies of the new warfare draw on the experience of both guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency, yet they are quite distinctive. In conventional or regular war, the goal is the capture of territory by military means; battles are decisive encounters of the war. Guerrilla warfare developed as a way of getting around the massive concentrations of military force which are characteristic of conventional war. In guerrilla warfare, territory is captured through political control of the population rather than through military advance, and battles are avoided as far as possible. The new warfare also tends to avoid battle and to control territory through political control of the population, but whereas guerrilla warfare, at least in theory articulated by Mao Tse-tung or Che Guevara, aimed to capture "hearts and minds", the new warfare borrows from counter-insurgency techniques of destabilization aimed at sowing "fear and hatred". […] The terrorism experienced in places such as New York, Madrid or London, as well as in Israel or

---

[122] Hables Gray 1997, pp. 21-23: 'This form of warfare has been labeled also permanent war, technology war, high-technology war, technowar, perfect war, imaginary war, computer war, war without end, light war, cyberwar, high modern war, hypermodern war, hyperreal war, information war, netwar, neocortical warfare, Third Wave War, Sixth Generation War, Fourth Epoch War, [and] pure war'.
[123] *Ibid,* p. 149.
[124] *Ibid,* p. 128.
[125] *Ibid,* p. 158.
[126] *Ibid,* p. 27.

Iraq, can be understood as a variant of the new strategy – the use of spectacular, often gruesome, violence to create fear and conflict[127].

Something similar happens in war economy. The low density of contemporary warfare also spreads to the economic system. While the total war needed a 'centralized, totalizing and autarchic' system, contemporary wars are globalised, and mostly depend on predation and external financial support, rather than involving the whole economic life of the state, as during the Second World War[128].

These low intensity wars also have a global scale, since the range of spectacular violence has widened, as 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks have proved[129]. The contradiction lies in the fact that, despite being this range virtually infinite, war is never experienced by the most of the population of Western countries, who are continually exposed to the virtual spectacle of the war without ever personally witnessing it or its effects[130]. Therefore, Western countries deliver war all around the globe, and populations from all around the globe answer Western aggressions with terrorist attacks: however, war itself is never present on the soil of Western countries, although continuously and spectrally evoked by digital media and in social networks[131]. Notions such as the 'global war against terror' transform war into something indefinite in time and in space[132], quite the opposite of Clausewitz's traditional categories. This being said, and despite the fact that no actual act of war has ever been enacted on Western soil in the last seventy years, the threat of terrorism (which, analogous to the fight against it, is discoursed as indefinite in time and in range) creates a state of perpetual fear. The 'ghostly enemy' represented by terrorism, Baudrillard has argued, has created a situation in which 'the antagonism is everywhere, and in every one of us'[133]. This fear is exacerbated by its perpetual representation in the media.

Another notable element of contemporary wars is their mediatisation. Even if propaganda has always been part of warfare, it reaches a new, macroscopic impact in the post-1989 wars. While the beginning of this mediatisation process can be traced back to the Vietnam War, it gained a new proportions during the Gulf War[134] and the wars in Yugoslavia[135]. Contemporary

[127] Kaldor 2012, p. 9. See also Burke 2012.
[128] *Ibid,* pp. 94-95.
[129] Kaldor 2012, p. 13.
[130] Ganguly 2016, pp. 146-147.
[131] *Ibid,* pp. 152-153.
[132] Chamayou 2013, p. 53.
[133] Baudrillard 2002, p. 15.
[134] Hables Gray 1997, pp. 44-45. Ganguly 2016, p. 155-156.
[135] *Ibid,* p. 8.

wars attract media representation, which effectively "sells" conflict (by displacing its reality) to the public without any filter and any distinction from war movies. 'Les media font de la pub à la guerre, la guerre fait de la pub aux media, et la pub rivalise avec la guerre'[136], Jean Baudrillard wrote in his famous article 'La guerre du Golfe a-t-elle vraiment lieu?', which satirically questioned the very existence of the Gulf War.

Moreover, through social media, civilians participate in the mediatisation (and narration) of contemporary wars, providing that they actively engage with images and videos posted and shared on, for example, Facebook or Twitter. Even civilians of other countries, through social media, can have an influence on wars fought at vast geographical and cultural distances, as the Kony 2012 campaign testifies[137]. However, and as I have already explained, social media platforms provide their users with an enlarged sense of agency whilst, in reality, they expose users to deceptive and manipulative marketing campaigns. Social media in general, and Facebook in particular, encourage an 'identity performance'[138] that consists in the construction of a public image through the selection and the sharing of contents – including, of course, political content. At the same time, 'this voluntary and ubiquitous opportunity for capturing, storing and sharing personal data' can be considered a 'participatory panopticon'[139]. This reprise of Foucalt's imagery of the panopticon underlines the ambivalence of the performativity on Facebook, particularly as the organisation produces controllable personal data that societies can manipulate and share. In the case of politics and especially political activism, the use of social media is dubious and contradictory for reasons that it represents the use of 'a private-sector platform whose reason for being is not tied to movement activism'[140] for the purposes of political mobilisation and public lobbying. Social media organisations, moreover, very rarely distinguish between the nature of activism that is promoted on their platforms, which ranges from right-wing agendas to, for instance, veganism – not to mention the lack of control on the proliferation of frauds, hoaxes, and fake news[141]. On the one hand, it is true that in totalitarian societies, citizens' access to social media can mitigate their state-enforced ignorance of local and global events and, further, can enable them to enact and generate political participation (as in the case of the so-called Arab Spring[142]). However, in Western democracies, social media activism has tended to inspire a more performative sharing of content between users rather than

[136] Baudrillard 1991, p. 22.
[137] Ganguly 2016, pp. 138-141.
[138] Marichal 2012, pp. 7-9.
[139] *Ibid,* p. 76.
[140] *Ibid,* p. 114.
[141] Lee 2013, pp. 103-119.
[142] Marichal 2012, pp. 122-126.

representing a serious commitment to a cause (what has been labeled as 'slacktivism', a misture of oversimplification and virtue-signaling). The aforementioned Kony 2012 campaign is an excellent example of this phenomenon. If it is true that it shows how 'social networks [are] empowering people in voicing their concerns over injustice in the world'[143], at the same time commentators have warned against 'its harrypotterfication [sic] of reality and its transformation of Africa from a complex, infinitely nuanced society into a Manichean Madison Avenue fantasy of good and evil'[144].

Finally, contemporary warfare is characterised by an increasing use of drones – which means, 'in the official vocabulary of the U.S. Army, […] "a land, sea, or air vehicle that is remotely or automatically controlled"'[145]. The use of drones as substitutes for human soldiers allows states to maximise the war effort and yet suffer virtually no losses. While it is true that some aspects of World War II, such as the mass bombings or the use of atomic weapons, already represented an attempt to minimise human loss and reduce the risk of retaliation[146], this technological shift in the way violence is carried out has now reached enormous proportions; it has led to radical changes in the traditional military ethos founded on personal bravery, sacrifice, and mateship[147]. These technologies have a double alienating effect, both on their victims (as long as they do not perceive to be fighting against other human beings)[148], and on their users (as long as they are completely detached from the effects of their actions). Everything the drone pilots do, indeed, 'is filtered through the interface'[149]; they see without being seen[150]. The distance between the drone and its pilot breaks the phenomenological unity of the act[151]. The distancing effect of technology has now reached unprecedented proportions[152].

Given recent changes in the ways wars are fought and the peculiar dynamics of contemporary warfare, the relative narrative appeal of Second World War can be easily understood. Contemporary wars are detached from the real experience both of civilians and fighters. They involve a system of perpetual, globalised, low-density conflicts, ambiguous in

[143] Lee 2013, p. 119.
[144] Andrew Keen in *ibid,* p. 123.
[145] Chamayou 2013, p. 11. *Ibid.*
[146] Bourke 1999, p. 7. Chamayou 2013, pp. 17 and 53. See also Coker 2001, pp. 11-15.
[147] Chamayou 2013, p. 17.
[148] Chamayou 2013, pp. 44-45.
[149] *Ibid,* p. 117.
[150] *Ibid,* p. 118.
[151] *Ibid*, and pp. 106-113. See also Sparrow 2011, p. 118: 'Perhaps the first issues to arise in any discussion of robotic weapons is the ethics of killing at distance. The pilots who operate Predator and Reaper are safely ensconced thousands of kilometres away from the people they kill. The drones they operate fly so high and so quietly that the people that have target have often no idea that they are there until their missiles arrive'.
[152] Žižek 2002, pp. 35-36.

their causes and motivations. The Second World War, on the other hand, offers an apparently clear panorama in which the fighting can still assume a heroic dimension, in which the roles of the good and the bad, although problematised, are clearly stated, and in which it is achieved as a result of a coincidence of human and collective destinies. This also provides it with a narratability that contemporary wars do not have[153], fragmented as they are and continuously mediatised by old and new media. In other words, the Second World War offers some relief in the search for materiality, teleology and authenticity that moves contemporary literature. Similarly, it should be underlined that the abstractness and depersonalisation that characterises contemporary warfare has seen authors (re)construe the war with a return to the real, in a vain attempt to make it less inhuman and unmanned. To an increasingly cybernetic and virtual form of war-making, contemporary literature seems to respond with a return to a realistic style.

[153] Robert Eaglestone, commenting Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Salman Rushdie *Shalimar the Clown*, and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, argues that these novels are 'dishonest' in their depiction of terrorism. Indeed, 'the languageless pictures of terrorist acts, shown in the media, fetishize a lack of communication and understanding of events in their context'. This reflection is generated by the work of Rosalind Morris, according to whom 'the "Empire of Images" – the US – "displays rather than explains itself" and "demands imitation not understanding"' (2009, p. 365).

Board Games, Serial Killers, and the Banality of Evil: The Part about Roberto Bolaño

Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003) was one of the most important writers of his generation, not only in Latin American and in Spanish-speaking countries, but on a global scale. Born in Chile, he moved to Mexico where he started to work as a journalist, before returning to Chile, which he had to leave after the 1973 right-wing coup of Augusto Pinochet. After four years in Mexico, Bolaño moved to Europe, finally settling in Spain in 1977, where he died in 2003 of liver failure. Bolaño considered himself primarily a poet, and switched to writing prose only at a later moment in life, in an effort to provide a more substantial income for his family. This being said, Bolaño was a prolific prose writer. In 1984, he published two novels, *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* and *La senda de los elefantes* (reprinted in 1999 as *Monsieur Pain*). From 1993, the publication date of *La pista de hielo*, to the date of his death, he published several collections of short stories and novels (most notably *La literatura nazi en América*, 1996; *Estrella distante*, 1996; *Los detective salvajes*, 1998; *Amuleto*, 1999; and *Nocturno de Chile*, 2000). He left several others unpublished (*El Tercer Reich*, 1989, posthumously published in 2010), among which *2666* must be counted, published in 2004, one year after his death.

The impact of Roberto Bolaño's work on contemporary culture is incommensurable, and he is widely recognised as the most important Latin American writer of his generation. Not only have his works received an enormous amount of critical attention, resulting in the production of countless dedicated articles, conferences, collections of essays and monographs, but he has also gained cult status among a generation of readers worldwide, in a way that has very few comparisons in the present day (the most significant probably being with David Foster Wallace).

Nazi imagery is a theme that inflects Bolaño's whole oeuvre, from *El Tercer Reich* (*TR*) to *2666* (*2666*), through *La literatura nazi en América* (*LNA*) and *Estrella distante* (*ED*). In fact, as Federico Finchelstein argues, 'Bolaño's work frames fascism at the center of politics and

literature'[1]. In *2666*, in particular, an account of the Second World War occupies a central position of the fifth section, 'La parte de Archimboldi', and serves as a stage of Hans Reiter's *Bildungsroman*. In Bolaño, the memory of Nazism represents both a metaphor for the violence of the dictatorships of South America, and a symbol of the unintelligibility of evil. This emphasis on violence coheres the endless list of feminicides described in the fourth section, 'La parte de los crímenes,' of *2666*. Rather than simply drawing a comparison between varieties of violence, it is precisely through an implicit confrontation with the violence of the war that Bolaño stresses that there is a continuity between the world we live in and what is the paradigm of absolute evil in our culture.

1. The Ethics of the Board Game

In *El Tercer Reich*, the protagonist Udo – a German wargames champion – travels to Spain with his girlfriend Ingeborg, in a bid to prepare a new strategy for his favorite game called Third Reich (and modeled on the hex wargame, *Rise and Decline of the Third Reich*). During his stay at the end of the tourist season, Udo finds himself in an increasingly hostile and ambiguous environment, that culminates with the death of another German tourist. After this event, Ingeborg leaves Udo and goes back to Germany. In the empty hotel, and in a hallucinatory state, Udo plays Third Reich with El Quemado, an employee of the hotel covered with burns. What was supposed to be an easy game between the champion and the beginner turns into a disaster for Udo, who is defeated. After his victory, El Quemado claims his prize and almost beats Udo to death.

In *The Third Reich*, the wargame is not only the thematic centre of the novel, but also structures the narration, with several chapters dedicated exclusively to what happens in the game. Meanwhile, the development of the game runs parallel to the change of relationship between Udo and El Quemado. In the wargame, a double criticism takes place, directed towards: the map as a knowable totality, and to the game as a trivialisation of the war into a counterfactual entertainment technology. Postmodern literature parodies nostalgically the totalising and complete map (a symbol of the modern, topographically-organised theories of

[1] Finchelstein 2016, p. 32.

knowledge[2]). The modern map is a means of objective knowledge, a structured, readable representation of a world deprived of interferences. However, such a model is made impossible by the lack of faith in great narrations that characterises postmodernity[3]. Since the traditional map of the Enlightenment and of the modern era presented itself as an objective, scientific instrument or document, its condition is the possibility of knowing and representing objectively and unproblematically a territory[4]. This condition, however, has been made impossible by postmodern deconstructivism.

Bolaño's obsession with maps reminds us of Borges, an author with whom he is very familiar, and who satirizes 'el rigor en la ciencia'[5] with his famous paradox of the map of the empire that, to ensure accuracy, should be as wide as the empire it represents. It is also useful to remember Borges's sarcasm, directed against the analytical language of John Wilkins, to which he opposes as equally valid the absurd divisions contained in a 'cierta enciclopedia china' where the animals are divided into 'pertenecientes al Emperador, embalsamados, amaestrados, lechones, sirenas, fabulosos, perros sueltos, incluidos en esta clasificación, que se agitan como locos, innumerables, dibujados con un pincel finísimo de pelo de camello, etcétera, que acaban de romper el jarrón, que de lejos parecen moscas'[6]. This sarcastic elencation is aimed to the the conclusion that 'notoriamente no hay clasificación del universo que no sea arbitraria y conjetural. La razón es muy simple: no sabemos qué cosa es el universo'[7]. In the same way, Bolaño parodies in the wargame the very possibility of comprehending the real. To map the real permanently represents an act that would deprive it of its complexity.

Bolaño's work is rich with maps, lists, and summaries; his own novels sometimes adopt the form of a catalogue (or, as it has been suggested, of an atlas[8]). Examples include *La literatura nazi en América*, and, to a certain extent, *2666*[9] (whose narrator has been described as 'narrador-archivista'[10]). Several "authors" of *La literatura nazi en América*, by which I mean Bolaño's

---

[2] Mitchell 2008, p. 2: 'Furthermore, this notion of the totalizing map is implicitly linked with classical and modern theories of knowledge. Traditional epistemology is consistently defined in geographical terms – knowledge is surveyed and divided into fields, topics (from *topos*, or place), provinces, domains, realms, spheres'.
[3] *Ibid,* pp. 10-16.
[4] *Ibid,* p. 2.
[5] Borges 1960 (1), p. 103.
[6] Borges 1960 (2), p. 142.
[7] *Ibid,* pp. 142-143. For further details on Borges' list, see Duszat 2012 and Wicks 2003.
[8] Schmukler 2013, pp. 113-123. Valeria de los Ríos argues that in Bolaño the territory is not described, but experienced, as in Benjamin's category of the flâneur (2013, p. 260).
[9] Grall 2013, p. 485. Examples of the presence of the catalogue as a structural element ('a world made of objects without any narrative') in *2666* are, according to Grall, Seaman's recipes, Florita Almada's plants, Elvira Campos's list of phobias, the list of misogynistic jokes contained in 'La parte de los crímenes,' or the genealogy of Lalo Cura.
[10] Blejer 2010, p. 273.

invented right-wing writers protagonists of the stories of the book, use maps in their work. Willi Schurloz writes map-poems that include verses and topographic plans that 'no llevan título. Son ininteligibles' (*LNA*, pp. 104-105). Zach Sodenstern is the author of the absurd novel *El Control de los Mapas* (*LNA*, pp. 116-117). Harry Sibelius is the author of a counterfactual novel, and his inspirations are, eloquently, 'la lectura de Norman Spinrad y de Philip K. Dick y tal vez la posterior reflexión sobre un cuento de Borges' (*LNA*, p. 130); further, he ends his career writing *wargames* (*LNA*, p. 134).

The very nature of the biographies of *La literature nazi in América*, however, suggests the futility of the catalogue insofar as they mainly focus on small details that make no evident sense, but are yet proposed as complete portraits of the characters' lives[11]. In the same way, the summaries of Archimboldi's novels in *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* represent a map both complete and completely unreliable, since they lack the only thing essential to understand the value of an author – his writing[12]. In *2666*, finally, Amalfitano draws a series of meaningless diagrams in an obscure attempt to organize the philosophical knowledge[13].

None of these maps, however, reliably reproduce the infinite variety of the world. Every model is insufficient in the face of this variety. As Bolaño, following Borges, writes knowingly in *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*, (posthumously published in 2011) 'el Todo es imposible, (.) el conocimiento es una forma de clasificar fragmentos' (p. 259). This being the case, in *El Tercer Reich*, we see how Bolaño depicts his characters as invested in the veracity of maps. When Ingeborg asks Udo why he likes the wargame so much, he answers that what attracts him is 'su claridad' (*TR*, p. 150).

In the introduction to this thesis I explained that parody and irony are among the main features of postmodern literature. It could be said, thus, that to a certain extent the vast presence of this attitude in the first phase of Bolaño's work – a parodied belief in maps' objectivity and the knowability of the world – represents an eminently postmodern trait. The mobilisation of such ironic distances between the author and his characters denounces a form of nostalgia for the object it derides (notwithstanding the fact that, in a way, Udo's passion and ambition belong to Bolaño too). However, the second critical element present in the wargame of *El Tercer Reich* signals that, in this phase of his work, the author is already attempting to overcome postmodern

---

[11] For instance, we can see the biography of the Duchess of Bahamontes ('Duquesa y cordobesa. Y punto. […]. Problemas de orina y anorgasmia. En la vejez, buena jardinera', *LNA*, p. 223), or the insistence on the dimension of general Entrescu's virility (*ibid,* p. 226).

[12] Ríos Baeza (2013, pp. 243-244) notes that this approach is typical in Bolaño: for instance, we are unaware also of the content of Udo's strategic articles and of the poems of the protagonists of *Los detectives salvajes*.

[13] Blejer, 2010, p. 272. Patterson, 2014, pp. 209-210.

irony[14]. The wargame, in fact, is not simply a game, but rather a counterfactual game, in which every historical fact can be repeated and contradicted. Indeed Udo, contrary to the Wehrmacht, conquers Moscow and invades Spain and England. Alternate history, as we will see later in this chapter when we turn to discuss Philip Roth, is a genre strongly connected to the 'postmodern challenge to history'[15]. Its authors focus on the narrative, and therefore fictive, form of historiography: they consider alternative and minoritarian versions of truth and challenge the public official discourse; moreover, they trace an equivalence between history and narrative, and thus between reality and fiction. Alternate history, then, by discussing polemically the univocity of history (as Bolaño, great admirer of Philip K. Dick[16], well knows) and equating what has happened with what might have happened, signals a strong continuity between the present and the past. Yet, at the same time, it permits the avoidance of this past, which could easily have never happened, or have happened differently. All this is present in the wargame at the centre of *El Tercer Reich*. As Udo explains:

> Seguí con la naturaleza del juego, no recuerdo exactamente cuántas estupideces dije, entre ellas que la necesidad de jugar no es otra cosa que una suerte de canto y que los jugadores son cantantes interpretando una gama infinita de composiciones, composiciones-sueños, composiciones-pozos, composiciones-deseos, sobre una geografía en permanente cambio: como comida que se descompone, así eran los mapas y las unidades que vivían dentro de ellos, las reglas, las tiradas de dados, la victoria o derrota final (*TR*, pp. 171-172).

In the wargame of *El Tercer Reich*, Bolaño attacks both the ambition of a knowable totality, and the vulgarisation of history and its horrors to the level of a source of entertainment. Like the postmodernist, Bolaño satirises the modern ambition of knowledge, he refutes at the same time the playful and detached vision of history typical of so many postmodernist authors, and their characteristic equation of facts and fiction. Udo is in fact so absorbed in the abstract coordinates of the game he is playing that he does not understand the implications of what happens around him ('Todo la han tocado [Hanna] pero tú estabas encerrado en la habitación con tu guerra', *TR*, p. 151). Responsibility for the death of the German tourist probably lies with El Quemado himself, who feels an irrational and never fully explained hatred for Germany ('- ¿El Quemado es sudamericano? / - Caliente, caliente… / - ¿Y la quemaduras de su cuerpo…? / - ¡Premio!', *TR*, p. 326), and who ultimately brings Udo back to reality with his violence[17]. In

[14] Asensi Pérez 2010, p. 349.
[15] Singles, p. 26.
[16] Rios Baeza 2013, pp. 122-136.
[17] Kurnick 2015, p. 113. According to Kurnick, El Quemado represents 'the omnipresent proximity of the political real'. Wolfenson (2013, p. 207) suggests the existence of a metafictional dimensión in *El Tercer Reich*: 'Es posible

other words, rationality, represented in Udo's maniacal meticulousness, cannot hide the violence that permeates reality, and is destined to fail in controlling it: 'Cuando le comento al Quemado que los papeles que leo son planes para ganarle, todos los movimientos y contramovimientos previstos, todos los gastos previstos, todas las estrategias indefectiblemente acotadas, una sonrisa atroz le cruza la cara (he de suponer que a pesar suyo) y allí acaba su respuesta' (*TR*, p. 246). The smile of El Quemado is a sardonic disparagement of Udo's characteristically modern attempt to categorise and order the world.

Udo is also unable to decipher the meaning of the war that for him represents only a game. El Quemado is South American, and his burns are obscurely related to the political struggles in the continent – a fact that brings him to perceive in Germans a manifestation of the Nazi dictatorship, emblematic and the culmination of every totalitarianism. Udo, on the contrary, just as he is unable to relate his German origins to what is happening to him, never draws a parallel between the war he plays and the horrors of Nazism[18]. For him the Second World War represents a game, so lacking in consequences that he dares to draw a comparison between the generals of the Wermacht (for whose names and divisions he has a kind of a fetish) and the German writers of the twentieth century. Indeed, he does not even suspect the monstrosity of a comparison between Edwin Rommell and the prisoner of a labor camp, Paul Celan:

> Si el Quemado supiera y apreciara algo la literatura alemana de este siglo (¡y es probable que sepa y que la aprecie!) le diría que Manstein es comparable a Gunther Grass y que Rommell es

---

decir algo más: esta novela quiere mostrar cómo la ficción (la literatura, representada en su contraparte lúdica a través del juego de mesa) contamina la realidad e influye en ella irreversiblemente. En esta obra de carácter metaficcional, Bolaño parece alegar que, a pesar de las omisiones o tergiversaciones, o quizá debido a ellas, toda historia no resuelta tiende a repetirse, porque su violencia reprimida tiende a transfigurarse, reencarnar o encontrar un medio para manifestarse'. However, I strongly disagree with Wolfenson's interpretation. According to her, the novel stages the power of literature to modify reality, as the game Udo plays changes the landscape around him and leads to his destruction. I would argue, however, quite the contrary: Udo's fall is not owing to the influence of the game, but to his presumption of keeping the game and reality separate. In other words, it is not Udo's obsession that changes the world around him, but it is the world that changes *despite* Udo's obsession. I believe that Udo's continuous inability to acknowledge the omens around him must be interpreted in this sense. Moreover, there is nothing explicitly metafictional in the novel: Udo's game does not produce the reality around him, it simply runs parallel (in Udo's mind) to it, until it intersects it. Most of all, it is hard to understand how Wolfensen can describe Udo and el Quemado as 'una forma de fascismo al estilo nazista (el primero) y una forma de comunismo al estilo estalinista (el segundo)' (*ibid,* p. 220). According to Wolfensen, this interpretation is made possible by the fact that Udo is a fervent reader of a group of German writers among whom Ernst Junger, and that El Quemado, on the other hand, reads Neruda and Lorca. While it is true that this opposition communicates the distance between the characters, it does not seem to me appropriate to identify them as a Nazi and a Stalinist, since no other clue of this identification is given in any other part of the novel. Udo's literary taste (which, incidentally, is evoked in opposition to the cheap detective novel that Ingeborg reads, and not opposed to left-wing literature) is coherent with his tendency to separate the spheres of reality and literature, as in the case of the board game.

[18] In his study on wargames, Van Creveld argues that, although there are games that incorporate political factors in their rules, war is presented with a degree of autonomy from politics that real war does not have. Moreover, wargames cannot reproduce, for practical reasons, the variety of factors and conditions that influence the course of real wars, and on the contrary are forced to adapt to the limits of the equipment and of the timing of the game (2013, p. 4).

> comparable a... Celan. De igual manera Paulus es comparable a Trakl y su predecesor, Reichenau, a Heinrich Hann. Guderian es el par de Jünger y Kluge de Böll. No lo entendería. Al menos no lo entendería aún. Por el contrario, a mí me resulta fácil buscarles ocupaciones, motes, hobbies, tipos de casa, estaciones del año, etcétera. O pasarme horas comparando y haciendo estadísticas con sus respectivas hojas de servicios. Ordenándolos y reordenándolos: por juegos, por condecoraciones, por victorias, por derrotas, por años de vida, por libros publicados. [...] Figuras simpáticas, pese a todo (*TR*, p. 283).

Despite Udo's historical superficiality, together with his perception of the generals as 'sympathetic figures, despite everything', his disaster is strongly bound to the Second World War played in the wargame, and with the memory of South American dictatorships. Spring 1942, the moment that marks the end of Udo's initiative in England and the beginning of his retreat and defeat, follows September 11 in the novel (which is Udo's diary), the day of Pinochet's coup in Chile[19]. This date does not mean, again, anything for Udo, representing for him nothing more than 'el día de Cataluña' (*TR*, p. 235).

2. A Distant Nazi

In *La literatura nazi en América*, Bolaño's part novel and part collection of short stories (modelled on Borges' *Historia universal de la infamia* (1953)[20]), the author links the lives of fictitious American fascist writers with the memory of European fascism. The genre of the collection of fictional biographies, which conventionally starts with Marchel Schwob's *Vies imaginaries* (1896), has been widely adopted by postmodernism as a form of epistemological critique of traditional technologies of knowledge – in this case, the encyclopedia. In addition to Borges, this theme has been excavated by authors such as Rodolfo J. Wilcock (*La sinagoga de los iconoclastas*, 1972, a personal favourite of Bolaño) and Danilo Kiš (*Encyclopedia of the Dead*, *Enciklopedija mrtvih*, 1982).

These texts, and indeed Bolaño's too, qualify themselves as biographical dictionaries or encyclopedias. According to these models, their content should aim to compile a complete and exhaustive sum of information, composed of precise and meaningful data. At the same time, however, the incompleteness, the eccentricity, and the randomness of the content of these

[19] Kurnick 2015, p. 114.
[20] O'Bryen 2015, p. 18.

encyclopedias (that focus on minor characters and protagonists of forgotten events) denounce the possibility of any organisation of knowledge by insisting on their knowledge's partiality, relativity and the heterodoxy. The parodying nature of these texts is already evident in their titles, as they contain a first element claiming their scientificity and exhaustiveness, and a specification that contradicts them. By way of example, Borges's 'universal history' is 'of infamy' – therefore of a behavioral and moral element that has nothing to do with science, but rather with some medieval manual or Theophrastus's *Characters*. Wilcock's synagogue (a term that does not belong to science but that nevertheless speaks of a sense of ecumenical wisdom[21]) is inhabited by iconoclasts, thus by eccentrics in open contradiction with official science. Wilcock's pseudo-scientists, inventors, esotericists, archeologists and magicians, furthermore, are both imaginary and historical; such a choice underlines the author's polemic intent against traditional means of knowledge and their demi-mondes as it reminds the reader how many charlatans historically succeeded into passing as respectable professionals. Kiš writes about an encyclopedia of the dead. On the one hand, this is a redundant specification, as generally an encyclopedia rarely concerns the living. On the other hand, however, such a specification is so vast that it renders the encyclopedia, in the end, useless. Such an encyclopedia violates both the principle of relevancy on which the selection of material should be based, and the syntheses by which its contents should be exposed. An encyclopedia that aims to contain a biography of each human being not famous enough to appear in any other encyclopedia is evidently a product that escapes the normal logic of encyclopedic knowledge, to the extent that it is completely useless, both because of its content and the digressive, ekphrastic, anecdotal vastness of every entrance. The encyclopedia of the dead, moreover, by stating that everything in human history is worth remembering, undermines the very principles of selection that underlies the encyclopedic model, as it denies the existence of any hierarchy of knowledge and thus of every form of knowledge that is not empirical. Indeed, Bolaño's book follows this path: *La literatura nazi en America* appears immediately as an eccentric literary history, both in the sense that its characters would be marginal in the context of literary history (in most of the cases, they write just one or two obscure books, sometimes even published posthumously), and because it is, generically, right-wing literature, not all qualifiable as Nazi, the specificazion of the title being thus hyperbolic rather than descriptive.

Seemingly, then, we are not so far formally or regards content from what we have observed above in *El Tercer Reich*: the encyclopedic model is a variation on the wider theme of the

[21] "Synagogue" comes from the Greek συναγωγή, gathering.

critique of the map. However, what makes *La literatura nazi en America* such a remarkable and peculiar text among the vast amount of other collections of fictional biographies, is that it has an explicitly political purpose. Of course, it is true that there is some playfulness in the description of the eccentric right-wing aristocrats, young and bright war fanatics, anti-modern thinkers, anti-communist agitators, reactionary writers of science fiction, elitist magicians, ordinary criminals, Christian fundamentalists, white supremacists, hooligans, and bikers that crowd the book (a playfulness indeed consonant with Wilcock's iconoclasts). However, the book aims beyond humour and deconstruction: beneath this apparently joyful and funny catalogue, Bolaño points to the extent of the diffusion of right-wing ideologies in South America (whose ghastly effects he experienced himself), and their survival in contemporary times. As Augusto Monterroso's epigraph eloquently (and yet, again, playfully) states: 'Cuando el río es lento y se cuenta con una buena bicicleta o caballo sí es posible bañarse dos (y hasta tres, de acuerdo con las necesidades higiénicas de cada quien) veces en el mismo río'. Once again, Bolaño uses a postmodern form to convey a politically-committed message (hence both the seriousness and the playfulness of the title's specification); and this leads us to the last of these stories.

The last of the fictitious biographies of *La literatura nazi en América* is the novella 'Ramírez Hoffman, el infame', whose narrator is revealed in the last sentence to be Bolaño himself. This novella, enriched with details and the addition of several other episodes, later became a novel on its own, *Estrella distante*. Here, the autofiction continues from the first page. Bolaño narrates the story of the mysterious experimental poet, collaborator of the Chilean regime and serial killer, Carlos Wieder – a pseudonym for Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, who Bolaño meets before the coup and later follows from a distance, through the testimonies of his friends.

Wieder is part of the same group of left wing poets who gather around the figure of Juan Stein, but, after Pinochet's coup, he murders two women of that group in their sleep the Garmendia sisters, his good friends. After this proof of loyalty to the new regime, Wieder starts a series of action of air poetry, which Bolaño models on the work of Raúl Zurita[22]. In these performances, Wieder paints in the sky sentences from Genesis or about death, statements that come to represent 'the regime's attempt to whitewash its reputation and present itself as a supporter of the fine arts, as if the avant-garde artists and the military intervention shared the same understanding of that historical context'[23]. In 1974, after one of these shows, Wieder

[22] Usandizaga 2005, pp. 87-88.
[23] Villalobos-Ruminott 2009, p. 196.

inaugurates a personal exhibition in a private house where he displays a series of photographs of mutilated and killed women, among whom there are the Garmendia sisters and other *desaparecidas*.

Although Wieder is not officially persecuted by the regime for this exhibition, he is forced to leave Chile. The news Bolaño receives of him is imprecise and filtered through the testimonies of their mutual friends: in the following years, Wieder continues to write for increasingly obscure magazines and fanzines, and to self-duplicate into a series of pseudonyms. In the middle of the 1990s, Bolaño is asked to identify Wieder (now a cameraman in low quality pornographic movies, living in northern Spain) as Abel Romero, a police detective at the time of Allende and now a contract killer on commission. Bolaño positively identifies Wieder, and Romero kills Wieder on behalf of his client.

As Bolaño writes, in *La literatura nazi en América* 'Ramírez Hoffman, el infame' functions 'como contrapunto, acaso como anticlímax del grotesco literario que lo precedía' (*ED*, p. 11). Like in the previous short stories, the Second World War is never directly depicted, but the Nazi heritage is implicit in the comparison between Carlos Wieder (who, not by chance, chooses a German pseudonym) and Pinochet's dictatorship, with which he collaborates. Despite the absence of overt reflections on the war, however, *Estrella distante* is a very important text in relation with *El Tercer Reich* and *2666* for three reasons: its parallel between Nazism and South American totalitarianism is already present in *La literature nazi en América* and openly illustrated in *El Tercer Reich*; Carlos Wieder's sociopathy and detachment resonates with, for example, Udo's; and because it tells the story of Juan Stein, a military history aficionado and apparent descendent of a Russian general in the Second World War.

Wieder's obsession with death is evident both in his exposition of photographs of corpses and in his last air show, during which he writes in the sky that death is friendship, Chile, responsibility, love, growth, communion, tidiness and finally that 'la muerte es mi corazón' (*ED*, pp. 89-91). This morbid infatuation is inseparable from his political faith, but it cannot be reduced to that. If Wieder's homicidal mania has an equivalent in the death cult of fascist ideology (epitomised in the Franchist motto 'Viva la muerte'), at the same time it exceeds it. Wieder, in fact, is a monster, a sociopath, as Chris Andrews eloquently defines him[24], rather than a political criminal; he is a man who does not commit evil to gain an advantage for himself, but who on the contrary is damaged by the crimes he commits.

[24] Andrews 2014, pp. 156-161.

'Like the star of the book's title, Wieder remains distant'[25]: he remains physically distant not only from the narrator (who meets him personally only in the first and the last pages, but who for the rest of the novel cannot but follow him through the testimonies of his friends) – and temperamentally distant. He is always described in a state of almost unnatural calm, in stark contradiction with the brutality of his crimes. After the exhibition of photos of mutilated women, Wieder is shown to us 'junto a la ventana, en perfecto estado, sosteniendo una copa de whisky en una mano que ciertamente no temblaba y mirando el paisaje nocturno' (*ED*, p. 102). When Bolaño meets him twenty years later, even if he notes that he has aged disgracefully, he cannot help noticing the very same calm and distance (*ED*, p. 153). These qualities highlight Wieder's detachment from normal people, but at the same time are also related to his political faith. Wieder commits his first crime 'con la seguridad de un sonámbulo' (*ED*, p. 32), an expression that, as Bolaño certainly knew, was famously used by Adolf Hitler. 'I follow my path', said Hitler at the time of the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, 'with the precision and the self-confidence of a sleepwalker'[26].

In this sense, the main model for the character of Wieder is represented by the protagonist of the short story 'Deutsches Requiem', in the collection, *El Aleph* by Borges. In Borges' short story, the narrator, Otto Dietrich zur Linde (the fanatic director of a death camp talking the night before his execution) is, like Wieder, a cultivated and aristocratic Nazi (comparable to Wieder by manners, if not by birth). Both of them show contempt for the people around them, even their own comrades ('Individualmente, mis camaradas me era odiosos; en vano procuré razonar que para el alto fin que nos congregaba, no éramos individuos'[27]), but they also show a fanatical devotion to their cause – although, as I mentioned, Wieder's seem to be more personal than political. Moreover, zur Linde's parable crosses over into the realm of art, as he deliberately decides to drive mad the Jewish poet, David Jerusalem, a prisoner of his camp. What makes these characters similar is their lack of feeling: zur Linde's conveys impassibility in the face of death, whilst Wieder is nonplussed about the consequences of his deeds. For clarity, despite receiving the death sentence, zur Linde is not afraid to die because he is sure of the rightness of his actions. And, while we do not know if Wieder is or is not afraid of death, we know that he certainly does not pay too much attention to the punishment he may encounter for his actions.

[25] *Ibid,* p. 156.
[26] Galli 1989, pp. 108-109. This metaphor of the sleepwalker is of utter importance also in Littell and Vollmann.
[27] Borges 1957, p. 83.

To a certain extent, there are also points of contact between Wieder and Udo: Wieder represents the macroscopic and monstrous expansion of that detachment from reality that Udo manifested in *El Tercer Reich*. It is not by chance that Wieder himself is (or may be, uncertain as we are of the truthfulness of the narrator's identifications) author of a wargame dedicated to the 1876 war between Chile and the alliance of Peru and Bolivia[28]. What in Udo was thoughtlessness, a sort of incapacity to connect the real and the fictional, becomes in Wieder a cancellation of the boundaries between art and life, which results in a lack of respect for human life and leads him to use corpses for works of art[29]. Wieder is, however, a symbol of evil, one of those incarnations of absolute evil that inhabit each of Bolaño's novels, as impenetrable and magnetic as black holes. For this reason, Wieder resembles El Quemado more than Udo, and performs a role not so distant from the one played by the feminicides and by the Holocaust in *2666*, as we will see. The very name 'Wieder' belongs to the semantic field of menace, and its variety of meanings makes Carlos mean, literally, legion (together with the list of its pseudonyms), showing eloquently the alienation and intimidation evoked by the character. The novel itself reflects on the revealing connotations of Carlos Wieder's name:

> *Wieder*, según Bibiano nos contó, quería decir "otra vez", "de nuevo", "nuevamente", "por segunda vez", "de vuelta", en algunos contextos "una y otra vez", "la próxima vez", en frases que apuntan al futuro. Y según le había dicho su amigo Anselmo Sanjuán, ex estudiante de filología alemana en la Universidad de Concepción, sólo a partir del siglo XVII el adverbio *Wieder* y la preposición de acusativo *Wider* se distinguían ortográficamente para diferenciar mejor su significado. *Wider*, en antiguo alemán *Widar* o *Widari*, significa "contra", "frente a", a voces "para con". Y lanzaba ejemplos al aire: *Widerchrist*, "anticristo"; *Widerhaken*, "gancho", "garfio"; *Widerraten*, "disuasión"; *Widerlegugn*, "apología", "refutación"; *Widerlage*, "espolón"; *Widerklage*, "contraacusación", "contradenuncia"; *Widernatürlichkeit*, "monstruosidad" y "aberración". Palabras todas que le parecían altamente reveladoras. E incluso, ya entrado en materia, decía que *Weide* significaba "sauce llorón", y que *Weïde* quería decir "pastar", "apacentar", "cuidar animales que pastan" […]. E incluso *Weïden* también quería

[28] *ED*, pp. 108-109. This wargame displays some obscure, mystical features that might be connected to Fascist esotericism, or at least to a supernatural interpretation of nationalism. It is worth noticing that among the exponents of this cultural movement there were figures such as Miguel Serrano, the Chilean Nazi philosopher and magician founder of the movement of Esoteric Hitlerism. Serrano, as Felipe Ríos Baeza notes (2013, p. 133), inspires several characters of *La literatura nazi en América*.

[29] Wieder's attitude is echoed in 'La parte de los críticos' of *2666* by the episode in which Edwin Johns, a British painter, cuts his hand and attaches it to a painting. Johns provokes the same disturbing effect that Wieder does. When he first hears his story, Morini appears troubled, and he does not know how to react. Later in the novel, Pelletier, Espinoza and Morini visit the painter in an asylum in Switzerland, where he is confined, and Morini has a secret conversation with him. After that, he leaves his friends and goes back to Turin without providing explanations.

> decir regodearse morbosamente en la contemplación de un objeto que excita nuestra sexualidad y/o nuestras tendencias sádicas (*ED*, pp. 50-51).

There is another thing that *Estrella distante* and *El Tercer Reich* have in common, and it is one character's obsession with the military history of the Second World War. Jean Stein, a poet and professor around whom Bolaño and his left-wing friends gather before the coup, is said to have at home more geographical charts than books (*ED*, p. 59), seemingly attracted by the realm of possibilities they pose. Moreover, hung on his wall there is the photograph of Ivan Chernyakhovsky, the youngest ever general of the Red Army, whom Stein claims to be a remote relative. As in Udo's case, Stein is obsessed with the military career of his hero and with his victories. Although motivated by political reasons, this passion takes the form of the list in a way that resembles very closely certain passages of *El Tercer Reich*[30]. However, as in Udo's case, this passion never impacts on the real, but remains an intellectual exercise: in fact, Stein (who disappears after the coup and, for years, will be believed by Bolaño to be fighting fascism in several Latin American countries) seeks refuge in the South of the country, at his mother's place, where he remains repairing tractors[31].

Stein's story is opposed to that of his friend Diego Soto, another poet who leaves Chile after the coup. While Stein is so proud and passionate about his political commitment to idolize a Soviet general, despite his Trotskyism, Diego Soto is described as unconcerned about politics ('Soto era simpatizante del Partido Socialista, pero solo eso, simpatizante, ni siquiera un votante fiel, yo diría que un izquierdista pesimista', *ED*, p. 75), a serene and relatively selfish bourgeois character (*ED*, p. 77). However, while the passionate and politically-committed Stein will behave as a coward after the military coup, Soto dies a brave death trying to prevent some right-wing vandals from killing a homeless man. The meaning of the double parable of Stein and Soto, compared to Wieder's story, is clear: intellectual engagement does not preclude cowardice (Stein) or savage cruelty (Wieder), because commitment remains a way of behaving and

[30] *ED*, p. 59: 'Según Stein, aquél había sido el mejor general de Segunda Guerra Mundial. Bibiano, que entendía de esas cosas, nombró a Zhukov, a Kniev, a Rokossovski, a Vatutin, a Malinovski pero Stein se mantuvo firme: Zhukov había sido brillante y frío, Koniev era duro, probablemente un hijo de puta, Rokossovski tenía talento y tenía a Zhukov, Vatutin era un buen general pero no mejor que los generales alemanes que tuvo enfrente, de Malinovski se podía decir casi lo mismo, ninguno podía compararse a Cherniakovski'. This passage can easily be compared in its structure with the part of the chapter 'Mis Generales Favoritos' in *El Tercer Reich*, where every German general is named with a peculiar surname (*TR*, pp. 283-284): "Model el Titán, Schörner el Ogro, Rendulio el Bastardo, Arnim el Obediente, Witzleben la Ardilla, Blaskowitz el Recto, Knobelsdorff el Comodín, Balck el Puno, Manteuffel el Intrépido, Student el Colmillo, Hauser el Negro, Dietrich el Autodidacta", etc.

[31] O'Bryen 2015, p. 29.

requires practice rather than merely intellectual statements. 'Entre Tel Quel y el OULIPO la vida ha decidido y ha escogido la página de sucesos' (*ED*, p. 80)[32].

Once again, Bolaño seems to punish those characters whose political fervor is only intellectual, and is not substantiated by a similar ethical commitment in practice. We have already noticed this paradigm as it relates to Udo in *El Tercer Reich*, and it can be seen even more clearly in 'La parte de los criticos' of *2666*. The contrast between Stein and Soto and, in a wider perspective, Stein and Wieder, is significant in this sense. Wieder is distant, but is also a star. His magnetism is such that he draws the attention of Bolaño for decades. In other words, Bolaño seems to tolerate monstrosity more than doubleness, favouring insane passion over apathy. Wieder's magnetism, moreover, is important in the sense that it suggests the mediumistic dimension of fascism (the fascination, etymologically, of it), a trait that generates ambivalence in the narrator's attitude and that is of great importance also in Littell and Vollmann.

3. 666 x 2

2666 is Bolaño's magnum opus. This book, published in 2004, is a one thousand page-long masterpiece composed of five parts (in a sense, of five independent novels). The apocalyptic title (which should be read as 'two/twice 666', notoriously, the 'number of the beast' in Saint John's *Revelation*) immediately suggests the importance of the theme of evil in the novel. Indeed, the book's main concern is the impressive and disturbing mass of feminicides occurring in Ciudad Juarez (Santa Teresa in the novel) between 1993 and 1997. However, *2666* is divided into five different parts: 'La parte de los críticos,' 'La parte de Amalfitano,' 'La parte de Fate,' 'La parte de los crímenes' and 'La parte de Archimboldi.' Although interrelated, the five parts of the novel can be read as five independent books. This is especially the case given that the structure of the narration is circular, even when the parts are read in a different order.

[32] Such is also the theme of a short story 'Henri Simon Leprince', contained in the collection *Llamadas telefónicas*. The eponymous protagonist of the story is an unsuccessful and untalented French writer who, during the Second World War, joins the anti-fascist resistance and risks his life hiding and helping persecuted intellectuals and partisans. By stressing the lack of contradiction between Leprince's lack of talent and the generosity and selfishlessness of his efforts (while so many other writers happily join the collaborationist regime in an attempt to gain personal power and influence), Bolaño aims to suggest once again that there is no apparent correlation between literature and ethical behaviours, and that on the other hand the most successful writers can easily be the most vile.

‘La parte de los críticos’ describes the attempt of four European literary critics (Jean-Claude Pelletier from France, Piero Morini from Italy, Manuel Espinoza from Spain, and Elizabeth Norton from Britain) to find the German writer, Benno von Archimboldi. Although Archimboldi’s fame is rapidly increasing, nothing is known about his personal life, and no one seems to have ever met him. The professors, who are the greatest experts of Archimboldi, meet each other and bond together at several conferences about the writer. Soon, Norton engages in two separate sexual relationships with both Pelletier and Espinoza, who nevertheless remain good friends. When they are informed that the writer has been seen in Santa Teresa (a Mexican city in the Sonora desert), the critics (with the exception of Morini, who suffers from sclerosis) move there. Their guide to the city is the Chilean professor of literature Oscar Amalfitano. During their stay, they realise that they are unable to find clues and pieces of evidence for the presence of Archimboldi; as a result, they abandon their task. Norton flies back to London, revealing in an email to her colleagues that she is in love with Morini. Although they are aware that they will never meet Archimboldi, Pelletier and Espinoza remain in Santa Teresa.

‘La parte de Amalfitano’ focuses on the everyday life of Oscar Amalfitano, a professor of philosophy who has just arrived in Mexico with his daughter, Rosa. Amalfitano is an eccentric figure, and his behavior is erratic. In the most notable episode of this part, he finds a book of geometry and, since he cannot recall how he happened to possess it, he hangs it to the drying rack. He also produces obscure diagrams with the names of famous philosophers. These diagrams seem to suggest a hidden relationship between the names, but which remains unexplained.

In ‘La parte de Fate’ the protagonist is Oscar Fate, an African-American journalist from New York, sent to Santa Teresa to cover a boxing match for his newspaper. Fate, who is informed by a local colleague about the feminicides taking place in Santa Teresa, starts to investigate. He eventually becomes close to Rosa Amalfitano and receives money from her father to take her back to the United States. At the end of this book, however, Fate brings Rosa with him to interview the main suspect for the feminicides, Klaus Haas, a German albino giant.

‘La parte de los crímenes’ is a disturbingly long, accurate and detached description of the one hundred and twelve feminicides that occurred in Santa Teresa between 1993 and 1997. It also documents the failed attempts by police to solve the crimes. These attempts only result in the capture of Klaus Haas; but it is doubtful whether he is guilty or not. In fact, it is evident that, even if guilty, he cannot be guilty of *all* the murders, which are too many, and are committed with different *modus operandi*.

The final section, 'La parte de Archimboldi,' narrates the life of Archimboldi (whose real name is Hans Reiter) from his childhood. Reiter participates in the Second World War as a private, fighting in Poland, Ukraine, and Romania. In Romania, in Dracula's castle, after a formal dinner comprising SS officers, members of German aristocracy and Romanian intellectuals, he witnesses the violent sexual intercourse between the Romanian General Entrescu and Baroness von Zumpe. Later in the novel, Archimboldi will witness the crucifixion of Entrescu during a mutiny. During the retreat in Ukraine, Archimboldi finds the diary of Boris Ansky, a Jewish Soviet writer. In the diary, Ansky tells of his friendship with the science-fiction writer, Ivanov who is sentenced to death by Stalin; fearing the same destiny, Ansky escapes Moscow. In this diary, Reiter finds a mention of the Italian painter, Archimboldi, whose name he later adopts as a pseudonym. After the war, Reiter is held in a prisoner camp where he receives the confession of Leo Sammer, a Nazi administrator responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Jews. Although apparently unshocked by his story, Reiter kills him in his sleep. After the war, Hans Reiter starts his career as a writer by the name of Benno von Archimboldi. Despite the commercial failure of his books, Archimboldi's publisher continues to support him. The publisher's wife, with whom Archimboldi has an episodic sexual relationship, is the same Baroness von Zumpe he spied in Dracula's castle. In the last few pages of the book, through an account of the life of Archimboldi's sister, it is revealed that Klaus Haas (the man arrested on suspicion of femicide in 'La parte de los crímenes') is Archimboldi's nephew. The novel ends with Archimboldi preparing his departure to Mexico in order to help support him during the trial.

2666's approach to the Second World War represents an overturning of Udo's perspective. In Bolaño's major accomplishment, the Second World War is no longer an abstraction nor a game, but the central moment of the biography of Hans Reiter who, on the Eastern front, and in the pages of Boris Ansky's diary, finds his pseudonym Archimboldi. The Second World War appears in *2666* in two distinct but related forms: in the horrors of the war, culminating in the grotesque crucifixion of general Entrescu; and in the horrors of totalitarianism, represented in tandem by the story of Soviet writers, Ivanov and Ansky and the confession of the Nazi administrator, Leo Sammer.

The narrative involving the Romanian general, Eugenio Entrescu, is one of the moments in which evil manifests most clearly in *2666*[33]. Entrescu – who, prior to the 2004 novel, recurs as a background character in *La literature nazi en América* – appears in several moments of 'La

[33] Candia 2006, p. 125.

parte de Archimboldi.' The first time that Reiter meets Entrescu is during a stay by the German army at Dracula's castle[34]. There, Entrescu dines with the young and erudite Paul Popescu, General Von Berenberg, the writer Hoensch, an SS officer and the baroness Von Zumpe (whose cousin was a friend of Reiter and who later becomes the wife of his publisher). In this gothic parenthesis, the guests have a long conversation about Konrad Halder, relative of the baroness and a painter of dead women (similar, in this sense, to Carlos Wieder[35]). Later that evening, Reiter and two other soldiers spy the passionately violent intercourse between the general and the baroness. On this occasion, Entrescu is described, as in *La literatura nazi en América*, as having a thirty centimeters-long penis (maybe, suggests Finchelstein, an allusion to the Fascist obsession with masculinity[36]).

Reiter never sees Entrescu alive again. During the retreat through Romania, in a rural castle (but no longer Dracula's), Reiter's division meets a group of Romanian soldiers who deserted and killed their commander, Entrescu, and then crucified him. Reiter sees the general's corpse in what seems to be an absurd and grotesque parody of a sacred image, complete with a soldier praying before it: 'Reiter contempló el rostro de Entrescu: tenía los ojos cerrados pero la impresión que daba era la de tener los ojos muy abiertos. Las manos estaban fijadas a la madera con grandes clavos de color plata. Tres por cada mano. Los pies estaban remachados con gruesos clavos de herrero. A la izquierda de Reiter un rumano jovencito, de no más de quince años, a quien el uniforme le venía demasiado grande, rezaba' (*2666*, p. 932). This crucifixion is senselessly conducted by the soldiers ('- La hicimos [the cross] antes de matar al general – dijo un rumano-. No sé por qué la hicimos, pero la hicimos antes incluso de emborracharnos', *2666*, p. 933), and it does not seem to have a precise meaning in the novel. Like Bolaño's insistence on Entrescu's genitals, this crucifixion simply recalls the disturbing presence of the real: it is a manifestation of the bestial violence that underlies human history, and at the same its indiscriminate enactment[37].

---

[34] An analysis of the role of Dracula and vampirism more generally in the work of Bolaño is provided in Chihaia 2015, pp. 155-170. Moreover, I cannot help finding delightful, brilliant, and almost convincing blogger Edwin Turner's theory that Dracula is an actual character of *2666*. According to Turner, the Count appears in disguise as the unnamed SS officer who organises the dinner and the stay of the group in the castle, since he behaves as the castle was his own, insists that Dracula was of Teutonic origins, and remains in the castle when the group leaves (Turner 2012).

[35] Lainck 2014, p. 194.

[36] Finchelstein 2016, pp. 42-43.

[37] The randomness of the war (as synecdoche of the randomness of human life) is also the centre of 'Otro cuento ruso', a short story contained both in *Llamadas telefónicas* and in *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*. The protagonist, a simple-minded recruit of the División Azul (Blue Division, the unit of Spanish volunteers in the Russian campaign), is mistakenly dispatched not with his regiment but in a SS camp, where he is charged with the cleanings. When the camp is captured by the Russians, the soldier is interrogated and tortured as a SS member, and starts swearing in Spanish: however, the pain deforms the word he pronounces ('coño') into 'Kunst', German

To a certain extent, Entrescu is not an ordinary character. In the conversation in the castle, his opinions about art and life are morbidly extreme[38]. Moreover, in a conversation between Popescu and a mutilated official of Entrescu's division that takes place decades after the end of the war, we come to learn that the general was adored by his soldiers almost like a prophet[39] (although we ignore, as usual, why). The place where he ordered that the trench be dug was a graveyard (or perhaps a potter's field). The disturbing memory of bones irrupting from the earth where the soldiers dug tormented the official for decades after the war:

> - Los huesos, los huesos – murmuró el capitán mutilado - ¿por qué el general Entrescu nos hizo detenernos en un palacio cuyos alrededores estaban plagados de huesoso?
>
> Silencio.
>
> - Tal vez porque sabía que iba a morir y quería hacerlo en su casa – dijo Popescu.
>
> - Dondequiera que caváramos encontrábamos huesos – dijo el capitán mutilado-. Los alrededores del palacio reposaban huesos humanos. No había manera de cavar una trinchera sin encontrar los huesecillos de una mano, un brazo, una calavera. ¿Qué tierra era ésa? ¿Qué había pasado allí? ¿Y por qué la cruz de los locos, vista desde allí, ondeaba como una bandera? (*2666*, p. 1070).

It has been suggested by Finchelstein[40] that Entrescu is a prototype of the Fascist, like Wieder in *Estrella distante*. Entrescu displays apparent calm and detachment before the troops, as opposed to his brutality which Reiter spies in Entrescu's intercourse with the Baroness. Although it is true that Entrescu's opinions about art are similar, in a way, to Wieder's[41], I find hard to agree with this interpretation that straightforwardly aligns Entrescu and Wieder politically. First of all, Entrescu's detachment does not appear pathological like Wieder's, but it rather depends on his position in the army; further, it gains to him the respect, rather than the suspicion, of his comrades. Indeed, as the captain explains, the soldiers seem to attribute to Entrescu almost supernatural powers. Entrescu's violence too cannot be seriously compared to Wieder's, to the extent that his certainly violent intercourse with the Baroness is nothing but

for 'art'. Believing him to be an artist, the Russians spare his life. Although more ironic than Entrescu's cruxifiction, this apologue (not dissimilar to a Zen koan) highlights the coexistence of the farcical and the serious in every moment of human life, even in war, not dissimilarly from the insistence on the dimensions of Entrescu's virility.

[38] Lainck 2014, pp. 196-197.

[39] *2666*, pp. 1066-1067: 'Y todos seguíamos a nuestro general Entrescu, todos esperábamos una idea, un sermón, una montaña, una gruta resplandeciente, un relámpago en el cielo azul y si nubes, un relámpago improvisado, una palabra caritativa'.

[40] Finchelstein 2016, pp. 41-42.

[41] *2666*, p. 854.

consensual. In particular, Entrescu's sex is not at all Sadean, as Finchelstein suggests, because it lacks all the elements of abuse and control that typify sadistic relationships. It should also be noted that Entrescu's command – that the soldiers dig in a field full of human bones – in a moment in which he seems to know he is going to be killed, can be interpreted as an act of denouncing the crimes that his army, among the Axis powers, has committed. He effectively makes the soldiers face the reality of their violence, with the potential consequences of remorse. Finally, and for this reason, Entrescu's resignation in of the face of death is very different from that of Borges's zur Linde, to the extent that it does not signal fanatical faith, but rather repentance.

While Entrescu serves as a symbol for the horrors of the war, the Soviet writers, Ansky and Ivanov[42] and the Nazi administrator, Leo Sammer are manifestations of the intrinsic evilness of power. Reiter discovers Boris Abramovich Ansky's diary in Crimea, in a rural house where he hides. In the diary, Ansky narrates his youth as a Jew, his faith in the revolution, his career as a writer, the persecution under Stalin and his friendship and collaboration with Efrem Ivanov. Ivanov is a science-fiction writer who, according to Ansky, was successful between the 1920s and the 1930s but, after 1935, underwent an inexplicable and unpredictable fall from favour, before he ultimately died at the hands of the political police. The reasons for the persecution of these two characters by the political police is never explained: for instance, while it is said that Stalin finds Ivanov's novel *El Ocaso* suspicious (*2666*, p. 902), no reason is given to justify this judgment.

Leo Sammer, whom Reiter meets in prison after the fall of Berlin, is a Nazi civic administrator in occupied Poland who is asked, in the chaos of the general retreat, to organise the elimination of five hundred Greek Jews. Sammer does not know how to complete this task. He first tries to use them as labor force in a local factory, and then sends them to the Chelmno extermination camp. He is torn between obedience to his superiors and the fear of retaliation, and the human sense of sympathy he feels for the Jews. He tries confusedly and contradictorily to take care of them, feeding them and ensuring that the population does not disrespect them. Despite this sense of pity, however, he ultimately obeys orders and has them all killed.

2666 could not be farther from what we have observed in *El Tercer Reich*. During the twenty pages in which Bolaño makes Sammer speak, given that he is an Eichmannesque administrator

[42] On the 'Russian' part of *2666*, and especially on Bolaño's encyclopedic knowledge of the Soviet literary demi-monde, see Possamai 2017.

rather than an anti-Semitic fanatic[43], we are immersed in the bureaucratic and moral mire in which he is stuck, as represented by his difficulty to reconcile his pity and desire not to kill the Jews with his obligation to obey orders. In a striking similar manner to what Jonathan Littell enacts in *Les Bienveillantes*, as we will see, Bolaño refuses to give the Holocaust a metaphysical dimension. He rehearses its sordid details as part of an everyday routine: Sammer discusses the problem of the Greek Jews with the civil officers of the city during a serene work breakfast. Moreover, their fate is discussed among other everyday problems, such as a change of borders between two fields and the disappearance of a truck full of potatoes (*2666*, pp. 949-950).

Sammer's crime is not the consequence of his deliberate will, but of a bureaucratic logic that is, in the end, senseless. In fact, a few pages later, the order of exterminating the Greek Jews completely loses importance, and the priority becomes the evacuation of the Germans. The representation of the Holocaust is not even set into an abstract dimension, but is bound to practical problems such as how to feed the Jews, where to make them sleep, where and how to send them. At the same time, the elimination of the Jews performed by Sammer is not an act of sadism or sociopathy, as it was in the case of Wieder. Sammer himself does not think of himself as an evil man, and places the blame with the situation in which he was stuck: '- Otro en mi lugar - le dijo Sammer a Reiter - hubiera matado con sus propias manos a todos los judíos. Yo no lo hice. No está en mi carácter' (*2666*, p. 959).

Another element of realism present in Sammer's story is the choice of the narrator – not the omniscient narrator of *2666*, but Sammer himself. This, as Bieke Willem notes, allows Bolaño to recreate a bureaucratic language of omissions and euphemisms that characterised the official Nazi communications about the Holocaust: 'En la conversación telefónica entre Sammer y el secretario de la Oficina de Asuntos Judíos, descubrimos de nuevo las huellas de los discursos y eslóganes ideados por Himmler para neutralizar los problemas de conciencia'[44]. This is not true only in the case of the communication between Sammer and his superiors, but also in Sammer's narration itself: in the pages dedicated to the actual extermination of the Jews (*2666*, pp. 950-958), carried out on a small group each time, Sammer's voice becomes elusive and evasive. He prefers circumlocutions to exact words. For example, he tells us: 'Y había sucedido lo que tenía que suceder' (*2666*, p. 952), that the Jews 'desaparecion' (*ibid*), that the children whom he forces to kills the Jews 'trabajan a destajo' (*ibid*). In addition, and when they dig around the potter's field, he does not name what they find, but simply says that 'allí había algo' (*ibid*).

[43] Andrews 2014, p. 161-165.
[44] Willem 2013, p. 87.

Everyone around Sammer seems nervous and uncomfortable, but he deliberately never explains why.

In *El Tercer Reich*, the Second World War represents for Udo an all-encompassing passion that gives form and meaning to the plot of the novel: but it is a passion completely detached from reality. It takes the form of fetishism rather than knowledge. In *2666*, Bolaño represents the Second World War, both in the horrors of totalitarianism and the war itself, as a complex phenomenon with precise historical coordinates and problematic ethical choices, strikingly distinct to the abstractness and imprecision of the wargame maps. Human history is not a board game through which to challenge our lucidity and dexterity, but an entangled series of unpredictable, cruel and degrading situations where, to borrow examples from *2666*, the disappearance of a truck full of potatoes can be compared to the death of five hundred people, or where it can happen to pass, in the space of a day, that a person moves from inhabiting success to prison, as it happens to Ivanov. None of Udo's commendable generals could be crucified in the wargame like Entrescu: Bolaño depicts two opposite, antithetical ways to approach history: one is detached and abstract, postmodern in the worse sense of the term; and another engages the ethical complexity of what is being narrated.

Once he has told his story, Sammer is killed by Reiter in his sleep. Sammer's complaint against the circumstances of his actions and his good faith of are futile: as Chris Andrews writes, 'his compassion is soon extinguished, and his disobedience comes too late'[45]. This death, however, is not shown. We are laconically informed that Sammer is found dead (*2666*, p. 960) and, a few pages later, in a brief dialogue with his girlfriend Ingeborg, it is revealed that the killer is Reiter himself (*2666*, pp. 969-970). It is an act that is not problematised, which lacks argumentations as well as representation. There is a possible objection, then: if Bolaño is trying to present the reader an ethical responsibility, why is the narrator always silent when it comes to providing a moral judgment?

The memory of the Second World War and totalitarianisms in *2666* is always used as a parallel both for Latin American dictatorships and the atrocious feminicides of Santa Teresa Juarez narrated in 'La parte de los crímenes.' I have already explained the importance of the parallel between Nazism and South American dictatorships in *El Tercer Reich*, *La literatura nazi en América* and *Estrella distante*. What is more significant, in *2666*, is the parallel with 'La parte de los crímenes.' Like the Holocaust in Sammer's story, this long and extenuating list

[45] Andrews, p. 164.

of more than a hundred feminicides in the Sonora desert, and the narration of the fruitless investigations into them, is illustrated with a richness of detail and at the same time a sense of detachment that resembles a journalistic chronicle or autopsy.

The feminicides are a catalogue – a list – as the sterility of their presentation underlines[46]. As we have seen with Bolaño's maps, no explanation is offered to the problem of evil; the feminicides merely depict it in its monolithic incomprehensibility[47]. In the same way, the representation of the Holocaust is deprived of every metaphysical dimension, contradicting the trivialisation of the inexpressibility of the Shoah. We have already seen in *El Tercer Reich* (via the mysterious origins of El Quemado's hate for Udo) and in *Estrella distante* (via the reason behind Wieder's crimes), that Bolaño refuses to explain the causes and the nature of evil. Entrescu and Ivanov's death, Ansky's persecution and Sammer's transformation into a mass murderer are all manifestations of the irrational and arbitrary course of human history, just like the feminicides of the previous part[48]. We can also plot a similarity between the text's refusal to narrating the act of killing, preferring only to show the discovery of the corpses in 'La parte de los crímenes,' and the euphemistic language adopted by Sammer to describe the extermination of Jews. Both the feminicides and the Holocaust 'son fenómenos ininteligibles y por eso inefables'[49]. At the same time, the punishment for these crimes is left unmotivated: Sammer, like Wieder, is killed, but their death is an act of revenge and not of justice, a personal and not a collective decision. Of course, he has committed a crime, both in the eyes of the reader and Reiter, but he does not face a trial for it, because his crime is unspeakable. He only faces punishment. Similarly, the monstrous detective quest around which *2666* is constructed is left without solution and without causes.

The judgment that is never explicitly given by the narrator of *2666* is given however by the formal juxtaposition operated by Bolaño. The collocation of these narratives traces a moral equivalence between the Holocaust and South American feminicides, but also more broadly between Hitlerism and Stalinism, and European and South American fascism. The juxtaposition of these episodes that, as always in Bolaño, floats in the river of narration without direct

---

[46] Walker 2010, p. 201.

[47] Donnarumma 2015, p. 224: 'Si pensi alla frequenza con cui Bolaño ritorna al nazismo, in *2666* come in tanti altri suoi libri, dalla *Letteratura nazista in America* al *Terzo Reich*: l'analogia fra la dittatura hitleriana e le dittature latinoamericane è tanto insistita quanto sottratta ad analisi e argomentazione. È insieme evidente ed enigmatica, perché addita qualcosa che esorbita dalla Storia: rappresenta anzi il punto in cui il male trova la sua manifestazione più nera, causando il collasso della possibilità di interpretare razionalmente l'agire umano'.

[48] Barberán Reinares argues that 'the gruesome deaths of countless poor and racialized women become the Lacanian "real" of Bolaño's narrative – the ugly, traumatic, and ever-present junction where many different characters intersect' (2010, p. 55).

[49] Willem 2013, p. 82.

explication of their meaning, traces an equivalence and an implicit judgment, but it refuses to name what cannot be named, the nature of evil. This equivalence, moreover, is not operated artificially. This is to say, it does not use the Holocaust as a measure of all crimes. Rather, it reconstructs its circumstances and represents it as an everyday fact, generated in a precise situation and consequence of the deliberate actions of some people and the complicity and cowardice of others[50].

From this standpoint, the purpose of the poised relationship between the Mexican and the European part of the novel, and between the two chronological plains is clearer. As Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott argues, 'violence [i]s the synecdoche of contemporary history'[51]: 'What makes Latin American political history part of the European saga (and vice versa) is war and violence, which are not accidental to the plot but its main topic'[52]. It is not by chance that it is Arcimboldi who serves as the bond that holds together these two parts – his being the only character that has a direct relationship both to the Second World War and Santa Teresa, and the reason why critics move from Europe to Mexico[53]. Arcimboldi's name itself, Benno, is symbolic of his role as a kind of spatial and thematic conjunction, insofar as it refers simultaneously to Benito Mussolini, Benito Juarez (after whom Mussolini himself was named), and Benedict of Nursia, patron saint of Europe (*2666*, pp. 1012-1013).

The formidable variety of *2666*, not only thematic but also spatial and chronological, and its progression by juxtaposition that seems able to continue forever, creates another contrast with *El Tercer Reich*. The setting of the novel – an hotel on the Spanish shore at the end of the touristic season – represents not simply (or not only) a parody of the purgatorial theme of the sanatorium, but also a derision of the postmodern ambition to present a close space as a comfortable allegory of the world's chaos. Like this allegory, the world represented by the map of the wargame is a product of modern cartography, and is therefore abstract, cold, lacking human and subjective implications: but the irruption of the real destroys this illusion. On the contrary, the Second World War represents in *2666* the space for what is neither explicable nor intelligible (such as the senseless death of a science fiction writer or the crucifixion of a Romanian general). It refutes the precise clarity of the wargame, and its accompanying oppositions of good and evil, instead paradoxically illuminating a grey area that challenges individual responsibilities and ethics.

---

[50] Kurnick 2015, p. 128.
[51] Villalobos-Ruminott 2009, p. 201.
[52] *Ibid,* p. 202.
[53] Boe Birns 2015, pp. 67-84, p. 68

Bolaño's critique of purely intellectual passion, which lies at the centre of *El Tercer Reich* and is present in *Estrella distante* in the story of Juan Stein, also strongly inhabits *2666*. Despising the pure intellectual, in favor of picaresque, self-educated and omnivorous poets and scholars, Bolaño marks his distance from postmodern models, signaling an interest more in the combination of life and literature than literature as an abstract phenomenon that requires no practical elaboration[54]. From this point of view, the comparison between Sammer and Entrescu echoes the double comparison of *Estrella distante* between Stein and Soto, and Stein and Wieder. The Nazi administrator tries to excuse himself for his crimes, while Entrescu never apologies but admits his responsibilities when he orders to dig in the graveyard and, ultimately, faces his death. In *2666*, this opposition can be seen clearly in 'La parte de los críticos.' Pelletier and Espinoza's intellectual superiority does not prevent them from committing a racist aggression against a Pakistani taxi driver in London (*2666*, pp. 101-102)[55]. Moreover, their quest for Amalfitano is presented as purely intellectual. It terminates when they are stuck in Santa Teresa, and therefore in the place where the mysterious and unspeakable nature of evil manifests itself.

In *El Tercer Reich*, the Second World War is a fetish, the object of a professional and specialised interest in virtue of its enormity and uniqueness. In *2666*, by contrast, a metaphysical or teleological vision of the conflict is refused. It is implicitly compared to other epiphanies of evil. Bolaño refuses to explain and judge; however, by simply presenting the events in their complexity and dramatic strength, he underlines through their incomprehensibility their menacing and imponderable importance. As Oscar Fate says, talking about the feminicides of Santa Teresa, 'nadie presta atención a estos asesinatos, pero en ellos se esconde el secreto del mundo' (*2666*, p. 439). Amalfitano, a scholar whose statelessness and apparent madness position him between intellectualism and real life, creates a readymade, inspired by Marcel Duchamp[56]. This takes place after he has drawn the diagrams I have already mentioned (another symbol of the partiality of the map). He hangs on the drying rack, exposed to the wind and the rain, the copy of a book he cannot recall ever receiving, called *Testamento geométrico*, 'para ver si aprende cuatro cosas de la vida real' (*2666*, p. 251). We might say that Roberto Bolaño enacted something very similar to Amalfitano by exposing the postmodern detachment parodied in *El Tercer Reich* to reality in *2666*.

---

[54] Donnarumma 2015, p. 226.

[55] Martin Paul Eve (2016, pp. 103-111) offers a convincing reading of the university in *2666* as a space of complicity and collusion with the neoliberal dynamics of power.

[56] On Duchamp in *2666*, see Piva 2017.

4. Between Post- and Post-Post: The Style of Roberto Bolaño

What I have exposed so far is the importance of the Second World War in Bolaño as a literary theme, underlining how its preeminence is significant in order to position Bolaño's work outside the field of literary postmodernism. However, it is also important to understand to what extent Bolaño's style represents an evolution of postmodernism.

As I stated in the introduction, the authors discussed in this thesis belong to a new, globalised form of narrative that has been variously defined, but that is mainly known as the global novel. Among these authors, Bolaño, as a South American and not Anglo-Saxon, is probably the one to whom this category most fits (alongside Jonathan Littell). Although Bolaño's narrative is, of course, deeply rooted in the Chilean political experience, and in the trauma of Pinochet's coup, Bolaño's personal history and the variety of his inspirations makes him, as Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott has said, a 'post-nationalist':

> This almost unanimous recognition, however, should not lead us to forget how Bolaño's works are deeply committed to suspending our common understanding of two basic notions of standard criticism, world and literature. His peripatetic style implies a narrative strategy that has already been called 'post-nationalist' and his representation of the world as one deep nightmare crossed by war and violence makes it impossible to conceive of him as a simple part of the Latin American canon, nor even as a cosmopolitan member of the recent generations of Latin American post-Boomers (Crack and McCondo, for instance)[57].

In other words, rather than conceiving Bolaño simply as a nationally-situated writer, his statelessness and his self-taughtness allow to understand him within a post-national and globalised framework – a nomadic position connected to the form of contemporary warfare as a conflict virtually infinite both in time and space[58]. In fact, even those who contest this definition of Bolaño as a post-nationalist agree that the national aspects of his work deal with themes of marginality, liminality, and postcolonial agency that cannot be understood but in relation with other countries and in a globalised context[59]. Bolaño's global character is further

---

[57] Villalobos-Ruminott 2009, p. 193.

[58] *Ibid,* p. 200: 'Let me be clear about this: I am not demanding a reading of Bolaño's novels in a different canon, rather what concerns me is the inaccuracy of any given criticism based upon these "natural", regional or local, understandings, since what is at stake in his narrative is the manifestation of this global articulation of war, say, onto-theology'.

[59] Kurnick 2015**,** pp. 123-124. On this topic, see also the previously mentioned volume, *Roberto Bolaño as World Literature*. Nicholas Birns, in his article in this book, underlines the importance of American (and not just South American) heritage for Bolaño (2016, pp. 220-243).

reinforced by his being a Spanish-American writer, and thereby situated by his own language in a super-national landscape (or, to reprise Beecroft's distinction, in an ecosphere).

That several features of Bolaño's work are strictly connected to postmodern poetics is almost self-evident: let us think about the strong connection with genre literature and low culture media, or the use of meta- and auto-fictional devices. These features, however identical to postmodern poetics, have a different role and meaning than their postmodern origins would suggest. Moreover, in Bolaño we can also find some typical traits of post-postmodernism, such as narrative authorship and a general attention to realism.

The use of genre literature is what places Bolaño close, at a first sight, to postmodern poetics, specifically to his models Borges and Cortázar[60]. His work is crowded with references to genre literature (mostly, but not only, the detective novel) and pop culture. I previously mentioned the author's mobilization of low culture forms in relation to certain passages of the works analysed in this chapter, but *repetita iuvant*. Felipe A. Ríos Baeza[61] provides a rich and convincing analysis of the occurrences of the use of low literature and mass culture in Bolaño, be it science fiction (as we have seen in regard of *La literatura nazi en América*), pornography (as in the case of Wieder), the fantastic and supernatural novel (as in the episode of *2666* set in Dracula's castle), B-movies (for example, zombie movies are invoked in the surname of the detective of *Estrella distante*, Romero, who appears also in *Los detectives salvajes*, 1998), and television (as in the reference to David Lynch's *Fire Walk With Me* in *2666*, the cinematic prequel of his TV series, *Twin Peaks*).

The detective novel, in particular, is a recurring model in Bolaño's works, both thematically and structurally. We can see it in his early work, *El Tercer Reich*, evoked through the book by the presence of the Florian Linden novel (a detective story which Ingeborg reads), but also mirrored in Udo's very behavior in as much as he investigates the mysterious events around him (while his solitude in the desert hotel may recall the setting of Stephen King/Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*). The same can be said about *Estrella distante*, in which we find a real detective trying to identify Wieder, but also Bolaño himself (both as a narrator and a character) acting as a detective, who speaks of how he collected information about Wieder in the previous years. In *2666*, this parallel gains macroscopic proportions. The whole plot of the novel focuses on the critics' quest to find Arcimboldi, and then (most importantly) on the feminicides

[60] Ríos Baeza 2013, p. 122.
[61] *Ibid,* pp. 123-215. Carmen Fragero Guerra shows how close Bolaño is to the *feuilleton* novel (2012, pp. 245-264). On Bolaño and science fiction, see Bizzarri 2017.

occurring in Santa Teresa. Finally, in *Los detective salvajes*, the theme of investigation is doubled. One detective strand relates to the three young 'detective' poets who look for Cesarea in the Sonora desert, whilst one characterises the reader's own role who, himself, is turned into a detective as he seeks the elusive characters of Ulises and Arturo through the endless interrogations in the central part of the book.

As we have seen, however, the detective investigation in Bolaño is always unsuccessful, or, when successful, it leads to disaster. The latter is true of *Los detective salvajes*, in which the protagonists end up accidently killing the woman for whom they were looking. *El Tercer Reich* ends with Udo's beating, while in *Estrella distante* Wieder's discovery and death do not represent the recovery of a previous order, but an act mysteriously motivated, the execution of which the reader does not witness. In *2666*, the critics never find Arcimboldi, and the police never captures the party responsible for the many deaths of women: the man arrested for the feminicides, Klaus Haas, may be guilty of some of them, but certainly not of them all.

This account appears to show that the presence of the detective novel has in Bolaño the function of a parody, as it was for postmodern literature. Several postmodern authors, from Borges to Eco, have adopted the means of crime fiction in order to represent an impossible quest for truth in a world where truth cannot be found. On the one hand, it is true that the detective novel as a genre can be seen 'as a paradigm and an implement of the hegemonic processes of the Western nation-state, tantalizing readers with aberrant, irrational criminality while assuring them that society ultimately coheres through a shared commitment to reason and law'[62]. However, it is worth noticing, at the same time, that Bolaño does not look at classic crime fiction, but to the rather less gratifying realist crime fiction. This distinction is significant. Classic crime fiction (such as that by Agatha Christie), by showing the disruption of an order and then its recovery, fits the previous definition of crime fiction as a socially reassuring genre[63]. By contrast, the realist crime novel (such as those by Raymond Chandler) shows a world already chaotic, where there is no previous order to restore. Therefore, while it is true that Bolaño's crime investigations do not lead anywhere, it is also true that it happens at least partly because of the very rules of that genre. Thus, postmodern parody is potentially not taking place.

[62] Pearson and Singer 2009, p. 1.
[63] With due exceptions, of course: let us think, for instance, of the profoundly disturbing ending of Christie's *Crooked House* (1949).

This contrast is much more striking if we compare Bolaño's reprise of the crime fiction novel to its mobilisation by postmodern authors such as Borges, Auster or Eco. With the partial exception of *El Tercer Reich*, in fact, Bolaño's use of the crime fiction novel has nothing of the 'hermeneutic skepticism and generic self-reflexivity of the metaphysical detective stories'[64] written by postmodern writers. While Borges' metaphysical detective stories certainly represent an inspiration for Bolaño, whose work is patterned by philosophical reflections, the reader will not find in Bolaño's novels the rarified, paradoxical atmosphere of postmodern prose. Instead, his works are an attempt to engage reality as a material fact (and not as an abstract principle), using the means and the patterns of genre literature.

If we compare Bolano's reprise of the detective novel with Paul Auster's postmodern masterpiece *The New York Trilogy* (1985-1986)[65], we can see some similarities, but the differences are striking. Auster's trilogy is composed of *City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* (1986), and *The Locked Room* (1986). All of these novels can be qualified as detective fiction[66]. In *City of Glass*, writer, Daniel Quinn is mistaken for a private detective named Paul Auster; notwithstanding his lack of expertise, he accepts the case and starts to investigate the mysterious behaviour of a former philosopher recently released from prison. In *Ghosts*, private eye, Blue is paid to keep under surveillance a person named Black. In *The Locked Room*, the protagonist is a writer whose obsession for his childhood friend, Fanshawe leads him to marry his wife, raise his children, and publish his work. Later, the protagonist begins an investigation to find out where Fanshawe is hiding. Both Bolaño and Auster's characters belong to the category of the 'accidental detective'[67]: they are amateurs, most often literates or writers, who end up solving mysteries. They are, in other words, an update of the decadent 'art for art's sake' myth, which starts to infect the detective story from Poe's C. Auguste Dupin onwards.

However, in Auster's trilogy, the detective fiction genre is employed as an auto- and metafictional experiment that investigates the gnoseological limits of our language. In Bolaño, by contrast, detective fiction is rather a metaphor (although structural) for the lack of clarity of the world. Auster's triptych sets up structuralist reflections on language, and 'deconstructs the form of the novel, the canons of criticism, theory, and tradition, and it deconstructs itself, as it literally falls apart in its profession'[68]. The thematic centre of *The New York Trilogy* is the

---

[64] *Ibid,* p. 6.
[65] On Auster's book, see Chénetier, Sorapure, and Bernstein in Dennis Barone's *Beyond the Red Notebook* (1995) and Zilcosky, Lavender, and Russel in Harold Bloom's *Paul Auster* (2004).
[66] Rather, we might understand them as anti-detective fiction, given their parodying form (Russel 2004, p. 97).
[67] Ciocia 2012, pp. 198-199
[68] Lavender 2004, p. 78.

blurring of individual identity in a world deprived of meaning and ruled by chaos, in which the very basis of communal life falls apart. As Enrico Testa argues, Auster's premise is the linguistic nihilism so common in twentieth century literature, according to which words hide, rather than revealing, the objects to which they refer. Such a condition renders both the communication between individuals and one's self-representation impossible[69]. This aim is pursued through a vast deployment of exhibited literary and intertextual references (most notably of Don Quixote, of which *City of Glass* aims to be a re-writing), and the continuous loss of identity experienced by Auster's characters, narrators and, to a certain extent, readers, as all the characters are also readers of someone else's and their own story. Even the author himself appears as doubled in the collection; he operates as the private detective that Stillman's wife is looking for, and he has his identity taken up by Quinn. Just to make a few examples of this pervasive confusion, in *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn is the author of detective novels which he publishes under the pseudonym of William Wilson (William Wilson, of course, is the eponymous protagonist of Poe's novella on the double). In *The Locked Room*, the narrator confuses himself with his friend, Fanshawe. Again, in *City of Glass*, we can find two characters with the same name, Peter Stillman, father and son, plus a lookalike that another character mistakens for one of them. The narrator of *The Locked Room* pretends to be Peter Stillman, while Fanshawe pretends to be Henry Dark (therefore, the literary persona behind which Peter Stillman senior hid his ideas).

This complex and often pointless confusion leads the characters to madness and annihilation. As Testa writes, at the end of their path there is nothing but decay and dissolution: a no-man's land where identity is an empty shell, the self disappears, and personal destinies are inexorably decomposing[70]. The reprise of the detective story in Auster has a double purpose. First of all, it provides a metafictional framework, and therefore a sense of unreality, to the story: the characters more and more have the feeling of turning into characters in a novel the more they make the plot proceed. Second, it gives an even stronger sense of meaninglessness and unknowability through the contrast between the pointlessness of the story and that genre that more than any other else should be characterised by clarity and conclusion. 'Everything is simple, if you arrange the facts methodically'[71], states Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie's insuperable *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). Nothing could be farther from Auster's sabotage of the detective novel, made of meaningless clues and indecipherable behaviours.

---

[69] Testa 2009, pp. 28-29.
[70] *Ibid,* pp. 29-30.
[71] Christie 1926, p. 73.

Bolaño's wide and vast deployment of the detective genre, and his exhibition of the aimlessness of the investigations, signal that the detective novel has more than a literary value. But what separates Bolaño's use of genre fiction from postmodern pastiches such as Auster's? According to Andrea Torres Perdigón, Bolaño is parodying, but its style can never be reduced to a pastiche[72]. In fact, he never imitates the style of the detective novel; he simply appropriates the form in order to fill it with his own contents[73]. The premise to Bolaño's ironic, eccentric, dispersive investigations are a tragic and violent vision of the world, rather than a metaphysical one or a kind of nihilistic intellectual experiment:

> Por ende, la novela policial en Bolaño se desmonta como estructura plausible de organizar satisfactoriamente el mundo. Si el mundo del "crimen" ingresa despiadadamente en el mundo de la "ley" [...]; si el detective, dueño de todas sus capacidades analíticas, es trasmutado por el poeta, por el periodista, por el perverso sexual o por el mesmerista; si la resolución de los enigmas no se produce o bien se convierte en anécdota secundaria y absurda; y si la "verdad" que se pretende alcanzar, por cumplimiento de las cláusulas del tácito pacto autor-lector, se resemantiza hacia interpretaciones subjetivas de los eventos, entonces puede afirmarse, con Magda Sepúlveda, que "la historia no se comporta como un ciclo narrativo, es decir, no transita de un punto a otro, postulándose más bien la historia como un fragmento donde el sujeto no puede explicar qué sucede realmente[74].

In other words, there is nothing in Bolaño similar to the endless, deceptive quest staged by Auster, for whom 'the detective novel [is] an allegory for novels in general'[75]. Bolaño's reappropriation of detective fiction is not intended as a labyrinthian exposition of the meaninglessness of life and the limits of human understanding, but rather echoes the form of a world that is meaningless already per se. While it is true that Bolaño's detectives never find what they are looking for, they always find something else, at the end of or during their quest. Incapable of finding *the* truth, they find a multiplicity of experiences of which, in the end, the truth consists. The quest of Garcìa Madeiro, Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano in *Los detective salvajes* is a failure: when they meet the woman for whom they have been looking for the whole book (as their quest begins in the first part and ends, after endless digressive prolepsys, in the last part), they accidently kill her. However, this quest ends up rather marginal in a book which is composed in large part of interviews with the protagonists' friends, each one with his own

---

[72] Torres Perdigón 2015, pp. 98-99. See also Asensi Perez 2010, pp. 349-350.
[73] *Ibid,* p. 96.
[74] Ríos Baeza 2013, p. 164.
[75] Lavender 2004, p. 77.

story. In Auster, the detectives cannot find anything but the very absence of something to find; in that void they find their own meaninglessness.

Another allegedly postmodern feature of Bolaño's fiction is the presence of meta- and sometimes autofictional devices. Although Bolaño rarely uses explicitly metafictional devices (unless we consider Garcìa Madero's and Ansky's diaries as such), the vast presence of writers and poets in his books (such as his alter ego, Arturo Belano), together with the centrality of the experience of Pinochet's coup, at least suggests the idea that there is a continuity between Bolaño's life and fiction. There are cases, moreover, in which Bolaño make intertextual references to other novels that resemble the main novel in their style (such as Arcimboldi's *Bifurcaria Bifurcata* in *2666*) or structure. The latter is the case for *Estrella distante* which mentions a book by Bibiano O' Ryen that, except for the chronological delimitation and the focus on real rather than fictional people, resembles closely *La literatura nazi en América*, the collection of biographies where the novella first appeared: '*El nuevo retorno de los brujos* es un ensayo ameno […] sobre los movimientos literarios fascistas del Cono Sur entre 1972 y 1989. No escasean los personajes enigmáticos o estrafalarios, pero la figura principal, la que se alza única de entre el vértigo y el balbuceo de la década maldita, es sin duda Carlos Wieder' (*ED*, p. 117)[76].

Estrella distante is also the only book in which Bolaño explicitly exploits meta- and autofictional devices. As we read in the introduction:

> En el último capítulo de mi novela *La literatura nazi en América* se narraba tal vez demasiado esquemáticamente (no pasaba de la veinte páginas) la historia del teniente Ramírez Hoffman, de la FACH. Esta historia me la contó mi compatriota Arturo B, veterano de las guerras floridas y suicidas en África, quien no quedó satisfecho del resultado final. El último capítulo de *La literatura nazi* servía como contrapunto, acaso como anticlímax del grotesco literario que lo precedía, y Arturo deseaba una historia más larga, no espejo ni explosión de otras historia sino espejo y explosión en sí misma. Así pues, nos encerramos durante un mes y medio en mi casa de Blanes y con el último capítulo en mano y al dictado de sus sueños y pesadillas compusimos la novela que el lector tiene ahora ante sí. Mi función se redujo a preparar bebidas, consultar algunos libros, y discutir, con él y con el fantasma cada día más vivo de Pierre Menard, la validez de muchos párrafos repetidos (*ED*, p. 11).

[76] The title of O' Ryen's book resembles, of course, the popular esoteric compendium *Le Matin des magiciens* (1960) by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier. It is worth noticing that this book served as a model for Wilcock's farcical *La sinagoga degli iconoclasti*, which is one of Bolaño's inspirations for *La literature nazi en America*.

This preface is particularly complex: Bolaño claims that the story of Ramírez Hoffman, present in his previous novel, was told to him by his friend Arturo B, whose personal details encourage the reader to recognise him as Arturo Belano, future protagonist of *Los detective salvajes* and alter ego of Bolaño. Belano was not satisfied with the result, so he and Bolaño get together to write a better one – but apparently, Belano is the only author, despite Bolaño being the protagonist.

This case is particularly relevant in explaining Bolaño's approach towards postmodern poetics. Meta- and autofictional devices were developed by postmodern writers to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, to challenge our perception of the real and, ultimately, to contest the existence of a univocal version of history, as it indeed happens in Auster. Bolaño, however, uses them here to insert himself as protagonist and witness of events that never happened. These events, however, are set in a context (Pinochet's coup, and subsequent mass exile) that Bolaño *did experience* firsthand. The use of this autofiction, then, is not intended to create confusion between fact and fiction, but to connect a personal experience with a symbolic figure (Wieder). The metafictional premise of the book, manifested in the claim that it was Belano and not Bolaño who authored *Estrella distante*, simply aims to link the experience reported in the book with his other works (which are crowded with vagabond poets such as Belano), and to extend their meaning to incorporate the parables of the book. In other words, Bolaño's meta- and autofictional devices are intended to give new and multiple voice to his personal experiences.

If we can say that Bolaño's use of postmodern strategies is atypical insofar as it generally tends toward serving or increasing reality, then his use of post-postmodern techniques confirms his commitment to material reality. Indeed, a typically post-postmodern feature in Bolaño's work is his realism. As we have seen in the introduction, post-postmodern realism is problematic: while on one hand post-postmodern authors display renewed attention to reality and its representation, their works continues to oscillate between mimetic and antimimetic features. This hybrid realism is very important in Bolaño's style. We have noted in the section about *2666* that Bolaño displays a serious effort both in recreating the circumstances in which the Holocaust took place and replicating the bureaucratic language through which the perpetrators communicated. The same thing can be seen in all his novels: Bolaño recovers what Guido Mazzoni calls the 'enviromental paradigm', which involves the accumulation of details that are unnecessary to the narration, but which furnish the description of the setting and the

characters – making them, therefore, real[77]. Despite this mimetic effort (a constant that I will point out in several other novels), Bolaño's fiction could hardly be considered realism in the traditional sense. The category of hybrid (or dirty) realism that I evoked in the introduction seems to be more suitable – which is to say, a realistic effort with unrealistic tendencies. Bolaño's work is full of unreal (or rather surreal) elements, both stylistically (such as the use of metafiction and of the genre plots we just noted, or the elliptical development of the plot), and thematically. A sense of *unlikeliness* flutters on Bolaño's novels. As Ercolino notes: it is not that the facts narrated are impossible (as we never deal with the openly supernatural in Bolaño), but rather that they are strange, grotesque, and ridiculous[78]. A mimetic effort in the recreation of certain circumstances is paired with the utter strangeness of the events narrated: for instance, the detachment and the hyper-realism of the depiction of the feminicides of Santa Teresa is intertwined, to use Ercolino's example, with the enquiry into a mysterious church desecrator with a supposedly giant bladder.

Such an oscillation between the real and surreal can be observed within the narrator. As Filippo Pennacchio (on whose analysis I rely in this paragraph) convincingly notes, the narrator of *2666* has, in opposition to the fragmented, feeble and unaware postmodern narrator, the traditional traits of omnisciency and authorship. Bolaño's narrator is a rather classic one: a third person narrator, external to the events of the novel, and using the past tense[79]. This is particularly true in the first and the fifth part. In the second and third part, the narration is almost entirely focalised on Amalfitano and Fate while, in the fourth, the narrator employs the technique of impersonality. However, Bolaño often augments or deviates from certain characteristics of the omniscient narrator, for example by using summaries in order to manipulate the temporality of the story[80]. Moreover, Bolano's use of narrator, despite the apparent precision of the omniscient narrator, often incorporates traits of impossibility. The passage that Pennacchio mentions is significant, in this sense. In 'La parte de los críticos,' Pelletier is telling Norton about an episode in which he, Espinoza and Morini encounter a painter who mutilated himself and is now secluded in a Swiss asylum. During Pelletier's story, the focalisation moves from Pelletier's, to Morini's, to the painter's himself, and this transition is evidently impossible as Pelletier cannot be aware of the feelings of Morini and of the painter.

[77] Mazzoni, p. 268.
[78] Ercolino 2015, p. 254.
[79] Pennacchio 2017, p. 203.
[80] *Ibid,* p. 205.

This oscillation between a classical model of omniscient narration and the violation of the model through playful imprecision and implausibility, that characterises the whole oeuvre of Roberto Bolaño, is once again typical of a post-postmodern poetics. For clarity, post-postmodernism lies between a serious recovery of the tradition of the modern and modernist novel, and a postmodern (although definitely not ironic) freedom in this recovery. The very same thing can be said about Bolaño's realism, his utilisation of genre literature, and employment of auto- and metafictional devices. Similarly, Bolaño's representation of the Second World War as a symbol of absolute, yet contextualised, evil, is suggestive of a thematic, and not only stylistic, 'return to the real', which gains greater importance as a result of the sustained critique of postmodern poetics that can be found in his work.

5. Spy Stories and Alternate Histories: A Comparison with Philip Roth

I believe that Bolaño's approach to postmodernism, and indeed his oscillation between post- and post-postmodernism, can be better understood if compared to an author who produced important works of both these tendencies, Philip Roth. In particular, I want to analyse two novels, each one representing the peak of Roth's production in these two styles: *Operation Shylock* (*OS*, 1993) and *The Plot Against America* (*PAA*, 2003). They both involve a historical theme, the Holocaust, and each undertakes a resurrection of genre literature (spy fiction and alternate history, respective). However, they could not be more different in their outcome.

The Holocaust is a constant presence in Roth's work, implied as a central experience among, and crucial for the identity of American Jews. This identity is the product of a history of suffering and discrimination, epitomised and symbolised by the Holocaust which casts its shadow over the Jewish community longer after its end: we have seen in the introduction how vast an echo it had and indeed still has in American popular culture. The Holocaust is therefore central to, yet constantly separate from, the experience of the contemporary American Jews that populate Roth's novels. His protagonists cannot consider themselves fully American because of the insistent presence of this memory which shapes their identities. Yet, such a history of discrimination is no longer present in their life, and this absence forbids them from wholesale identifying as Jews. In *Goodbye, Columbus*, the collection of short stories with which Roth debuts in 1959, the Jewish community is progressively integrating with American society and losing touch with its past. This distance results in an inauthentic and instrumental use of a

patrimony of traditions, as in ‘Defender of the Faith’, in which three recruits employ their Jewish heritage to obtain better treatment from their sergeant. On the other hand, Roth illustrates how an attempt to integrate Jewish and American identities results into a nervous breakdown, as it happens to Eli, protagonist of ‘Eli, the Fanatic’. A similar thing happens in the trilogy *Zuckerman Bound* (*The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, 1979-1983), the Bildungsroman of Roth’s alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman as a writer. In *The Ghost Writer*, Nathan struggles between his ambition as a writer and the protests of his family, who find the content of his stories offensive and anti-Jewish: to find a way out of this quagmire, Nathan fantasises about a love story with Anne Frank.

Notwithstanding Roth’s commitment to the representation of a variety of Jewish characters, it is only with *Operation Shylock* that the Holocaust becomes unambiguously part of Roth’s narrative, as an object of enquiry, although not of representation. The structure of the novel is complex and labyrinthian; Roth arrives at its form – autofiction – as a culmination of an ongoing ‘preoccupation with the relation between fiction and the real world’[81]. This preoccupation led to the production of two unsuccessful attempts of autobiographical non-fiction, *The Facts* (1988) and *Patrimony* (*P*, 1991). *The Facts* is subtitled as *A Novelist's Autobiography*, and it is an actual autobiography, although inserted in a rather peculiar frame. The book is Roth’s letter to Nathan Zuckerman, who answers this letter in the last forty pages of the book, condemning Roth’s work as insincere and narratively ineffective. In other words, Roth adds to his autobiography a text that denounces the very possibility of writing an autobiography. As Tirinanzi writes, ‘il tentativo di essere veritiero insomma è fallito: i “fatti” sono stati espunti dal narratore *proprio perché* li ha *narrati*’[82]. In *Patrimony* (subtitled as *A True Story*), on the other hand, Roth narrates his father’s death, but again on the understanding that utter sincerity is an impossibility, and on the knowledge that the narration of an event cannot render it truthfully, but it is contaminated by the mechanisms of storytelling (*P*, p. 74).

Operation Shylock, thus, is premised on a lack of faith in the possibility of literature to narrate life, and an awareness of the dangers of fiction. The novel is in fact autofictive with an extremely complex plot. The protagonist, Philip Roth, learns that in Israel someone who pretends to be him is among the audience of the Demjanjuk trial. This person, moreover, is making appeals for diasporism, an ideology that preaches that Jews should leave Israel and return to Europe. Roth must travel to Israel anyway to interview Aharon Appelfeld and, whilst

[81] Shostak 2004, pp. 223-224.
[82] Tirinanzi De Medici 2012, p. 30. See also Marchese 2014, p. 204, and Gooblar 2011 p. 119.

there, he begins to investigate on the impostor, whom he calls Moishe Pipik, after the character of Jewish folktales. Roth's search sees him embroiled in a series of secret plots involving PLO and Mossad agents, Holocaust survivors, and a group of diasporists called Anti-Semites Anonymous. At the end of the novel, Philip Roth agrees to participate in an operation of espionage named Operation Shylock but the details of this operation, for safety reasons, are removed from the book[83].

The novelty of *Operation Shylock* is not its critique of Jewish victimhood complexes, which in the novel become a sort of alibi for the abuses committed against Palestinians (who appear to employ the very same rhetoric of victimhood). Nor does its novelty lies within its critique of the spectacularisation and trivialisation of the Holocaust, tendencies that, as already discussed in relation to *Patrimony* (*P*, pp. 211-222), border on pornographisation. The novel's most interesting characteristic, instead, is its radical criticism of the possibility of knowing and understanding history. This hermeneutical problem is staged through autofiction and the characters' continuous doubling. Both these elements are also structural in Roth's discussion of the Demjanjuk trial.

Autofiction is defined as a text in which, as in autobiography, there is the coincidence of author, narrator, and protagonist[84], but in which the facts narrated are understood by the reader to be false[85]. Autofiction begins thus as a deliberate breaking of the autobiographic pact, and represents the result of a hybridisation of autobiography and the literary theories of the twentieth century[86]. If autobiography, as we have seen in the introduction of this thesis, already bears an ambiguous relationship with truth despite its professed interest in accurately representing a life, autofiction is premised on the deliberate exhibition of this ambiguity. The author guarantees, through paratexts such as the title, subtitle, notes, dedications and epigraphs[87] (therefore, the classic warranties of truthfulness for autobiographical writing), that what happens to the character that bears his name is true, while it is, indeed, false. Through this exhibition, autofiction offers a double opportunity. On the one hand, and by staging the author as protagonist-narrator, it assumes the properties of reality: we know that the author really lived and so we are tutored to recognise the books as faithful accounts of a real person. On the other,

[83] Rothberg 2007, p. 61.
[84] Lejeune 1975, p. 14.
[85] Marchese 2014, p. 10. This understanding can come from internal elements, such as the presence of supernatural features in the story, or from a statement of the author – even, in this sense, the simple fact that the book is published under the name 'novel'.
[86] *Ibid,* p. 78.
[87] Gasparini 2008, pp. 72-84.

autofiction represents the widest disclosure of the mechanisms of the narration. There is no kind of writing that is, at the same time, so personal and so artificial, in which the real person of the author (as autofiction, like autobiography, is founded on reality) and narrative artificiality (the gap between truth and fiction) are exposed. Indeed, although the readers are advised by the author (or at least by the paratexts) that what they are reading is a work of fantasy, the coincidence of protagonist and author forbids us from reading autofiction without the feeling that its content is the *real* life of the writer.

In this novel, not only is Roth the prototype of the unreliable narrator, to the extent that he is under the effects of Halcion – a drug that causes hallucinations (*OS*, pp. 23-24), but he denies twice, in the paratexts, the nature of his writing. *Operation Shylock* is subtitled as 'A Confession', as underlined also in its premise: 'I've drawn *Operation Shylock* from notebook journals. The book is as accurate an account as I am able to give of actual occurrences that I lived through during my middle fifties and that culminated, early in 1988, in my agreeing to undertake an intelligence-gathering operation for Israel's foreign intelligence service, the Mossad' (*OS*, p. 13). However, in the note at the end of the book Roth states that 'This book is a work of fiction. […] The names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events of locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental' (*OS*, p. 399). Nevertheless, again, the words with which Roth ends *Operation Shylock* are 'This confession is false' (*ibid*), which could refer both to *Operation Shylock* itself, 'a confession', and to its last page, that affirms its fictional nature.

This confusion is fuelled by the text's continuous references to real data and facts. As Tirinanzi notes, Roth inserts real events in the novel, not only private as in the previous works, but also public, such as the First Intifada and the Demjanjuk trial; most importantly, these facts are represented truthfully without alterations of their historical occurrences, as can easily be verified by readers[88]. While for the present-day reader the fictional nature of *Operation Shylock* is now a fact, the result of this strategy was that, at the time of the publication, several commenters believed that Roth actually collaborated with Mossad[89].

This ambiguity influences and populates the whole material of the novel. *Operation Shylock* is characterised by the continuous production of doubles, from which no character is excluded. There is a real and autobiographical Philip Roth, and there is a fictional one. There is Philip

[88] Tirinanzi De Medici 2012, p. 33.
[89] Basu 2012, p. 180.

Roth, the protagonist of the novel, and there is Philip Roth/Moishe Pipik, the man who pretends to be him. There is George Ziad, Roth's Palestinian former classmate, who doubles himself in the quiet and reflexive person of Roth's memories. There is the anti-Zionist fanatic of the novel, and who represents also 'one more impersonation for Philip, offering a voice that opposes those of the Israelis'[90]. Demjanjuk is both the Sobibor killer and the Ukrainian workman who migrated to the US. Several versions of the same character coexist at the same moment. This makes it impossible to pronounce a final verdict on them, just as the double negation of the paratexts makes it impossible for the reader to decide if what they have read is fact or fiction.

The protagonists of *Operation Shylock* move in a confused, externally-directed world in which they lack even the certainty of their individual identity. The confusion of the plot echoes the impossibility to know and understand history. As Moishe Pipik says to Philip, 'Demjanjuk in that courtroom has *everything* to do with us' (*OS*, p. 82). Not only is the Demjanjuk trial framed by a paranoid and fruitless spy story, but it is meant to represent the doubling that all the characters experience in an historical and historiographic context. The identification of Demjanjuk and Ivan the Terrible, the guard of the Sobibor concentration camp, suggested by several survivors, gives a central role to direct witnessing in the trial, creating a further coexistence of compatible realities. In fact, it seems possible at the same time to remember with absolute precision, and to forget several details; to be incredulous about the possibility that the ghastly acts Demjanjuk is accused of really happened, and to be certain that they actually did[91]. Demjanjuk's lawyers based their whole defense on the unreliability of the witnesses, underlining errors and contradictions in their depositions[92]. They did not deny that the crimes their client was accused of really happened, but claimed 'only that Demjanjuk and Ivan the Terrible were two different people' (*OS*, p. 49).

And how could it have ever been possible to prove the contrary? The witnesses are unreliable because in *Operation Shylock* everything that is narrated is inevitably false, or at least contradictory and unverifiable:

> This man is not a skilled verbalist, he was never a historian, a reporter, or a writer of any kind, nor was he, in 1945, a university student who knew from studying the critical prefaces of Henry James all there is to know about the dramatization of conflicting points of view and the ironic uses of contradictory testimony. He was a meagerly educated twenty-three-year-old Polish Jewish survivor of a Nazi death camp who had been given paper and a pen and then placed for

[90] Shostak 2004, p. 142.
[91] McLoughlin 2007, pp. 120-121.
[92] *Ibid*, pp. 123-124

> some fifteen or twenty hours at a table in a Cracow rooming house, where he had written not the story, strictly told, of his own singular experience at Treblinka but rather what he had been asked to write: a memoir of Treblinka life, a *collective* memoir in which he simply, probably without giving the matter a moment's thought, subsumed the experiences of the others and became the coral voice for them all, moving throughout from the first-person plural to the third-person plural, sometimes from one to the other within the very same sentence (*OS*, p. 294).

Narration, even in its least fictional forms, is unable to convey an unequivocal meaning, and to report one's experience without perverting it. This dichotomy, expressed in Roth's choice of autofiction, is further underlined in the novel by the quotes of the real interview that Roth recorded from her conversation with writer, Aharon Appelfeld. Appelfeld is what Roth is not, a Holocaust survivor. His presence in the novel is once again meant to highlight the contradiction that makes the Demjanjuk trial so disturbing. Those who did not witness what Appelfeld narrates cannot but have a perverted idea of it. However, to be truthful to his own experience, Appelfeld has to provide a mystification of it: 'I wanted to be faithful to reality and to what really happened. But the chronicle that emerged proved to be a weak scaffolding. The result was rather meager, an unconvincing imaginary tale. The things that are most true are easily falsified' (*OS*, p. 86).

Although *Operation Shylock* is not an historical novel, it nonetheless stages in the trial a historiographic inquiry and challenges our capability of knowing history objectively and unequivocally. For this reason, it is useful to recover Linda Hutcheon's category of historiographic metafiction, discussed in the introduction earlier. The very expression historiographic metafiction insists on the paradox of writing historiography through a self-reflexive and self-referential form that exhibits its own fictionality, in which fact and fiction have the same epistemological value. Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refutes the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying system; both history and fiction derive their major claim to truth from that identity[93].

This approach to history, taken to the extreme by the nihilism of *Operation Shylock*, undermines the very possibility of having an objective idea of the past. This problem is underlined by Roth in his portrait of the Demjanjuk trial. Because there is no difference between

[93] Hutcheon 1988, p. 93. See also Hutcheon 1989, p. 55: 'The representation of history becomes the history of representation'.

facts and fiction in *Operation Shylock*, which is at the same time a confession and an invention, Demjanjuk's words are as valid and credible as his accusers' testimony because reality is impossible to understand and less still communicable to those who did not witness.

Roth's treatment of the Holocaust in *Operation Shylock* is intended, in other words, to deny its knowability. Those who did not witness it cannot understand it; those who did witness it cannot narrate it. The characters are deprived of a certain identity, and their stories do not seem to follow a precise direction. More broadly, history becomes a maze of senseless facts. The useless complexity of the plot (as it does not reach any conclusion) and its paranoia (*OS*, p. 385) reinforce the idea that history can neither be transmitted nor understood. From *Operation Shylock* one can grasp only that '*everything* can't be a lie' (*OS*, p. 223), and not much more.

Over the course of the first decades of his literary production, Roth has analysed in-depth the gap between contemporary Jewish-American identity and the Holocaust, the experience that more than anything else contributed to this identity. In *Operation Shylock*, Roth insists on this experiential lacuna, suggesting the impossibility of narrating history. However, with *The Plot Against America*, Roth recreates a fictional American Holocaust. The nihilism of *Operation Shylock* is followed by a surprising renewed faith in the capability of fiction. This optimism begins first and foremost with the so-called American Trilogy, composed of *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000). As stated by David Gooblar, with the historical setting of the episodes of the trilogy, 'Roth […is] no longer "bogged down in self-indulgent game playing", but instead investigating "the larger ironies and tragedies of the American communal experience" (Cryer 4K)'[94]. This strikingly contradicts Roth's supposed previous tendency of being 'concerned mostly with himself, writing solipsistic riffs on his autobiography that forsake the wider world in favor of an unremitting inward focus, endless variations that tell us more about Philip Roth than anything else'[95].

Consistent with Roth's previous works, the novels of the American Trilogy constantly underline the artificiality of the narration. He uses various strategies to undermine narrative veracity, such as: the inclusion of the marginal yet pervasive presence of the meta-character and narrator, Nathan Zuckerman (already protagonist of the Zuckerman trilogy, and alter-ego of the author); his admission of making up certain parts of the plot; and his various ironic parallels with classic mythology in *The Human Stain*. Unlike in *Operation Shylock*, this artificiality is no longer an obstacle to the comprehension of history, but it is accepted as

[94] Gooblar 2011, p. 131.
[95] *Ibid*, p. 131.

constitutive of the narration. The reflection on the relationship between facts and fiction is no longer at the centre of these novels: Zuckerman's personal troubles regarding the gap between literature and life are no longer a pivotal of the plot. Nathan is the narrator and not the protagonist of the American Trilogy, and functions as a guarantee that the reader suspends disbelief[96].

The Plot Against America follows the path Roth traced in the American Trilogy. The novel is an alternate history in which the author imagines what would have happened to America if Charles Lindbergh had won the Republican primaries and then the general election, and thus guided an isolationist and filo-Nazi government. The Lindbergh presidency of the novel lasts, among anti-Semitic pogroms and governmental programs for the forced relocation of the Jewish community, from 1940 to 1942, when the President disappears during a solo flight with his personal plane. After an attempt by Vice President, Burton K. Wheeler to continue to implement Lindbergh's policies introducing martial law, the President's wife announces on the radio the plot against America that gives the novel its title. We find out later that Lindbergh, in fact, participated in the race to the presidency and introduced anti-Semitic policies only because blackmailed by Hitler, who had ordered the famous kidnapping of the aviator's son. After new elections, won by Franklin Delano Roosvelt, in 1942 the American navy is attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbour, and the US enter war with the Axis, who are to be defeated in 1945.

Several critics suggest that the purpose of the book is to create a critique of the present through a critique of the past, and that therefore Lindbergh's filo-Fascist regime has to be interpreted as an allusion to the authoritarian traits of the Bush administration[97]. Even if that was true, it would be nonetheless problematic: Lindbergh, an isolationist and anti-Semite, is not a very appropriate double for George W. Bush, a supportive ally of Israel and promoter of the fiercest and most expensive American war since Vietnam. The critical aim of the novel is even less evident if we consider that Lindbergh does not act on behalf of his own worldview, but because blackmailed by Nazi Germany. Moreover, to see *The Plot Against America* only as a political satire is extremely reductive. The reason why Roth chooses alternate history is because this is the only way to reconcile an experience he always perceived as unreachable. As Kaplan

---

[96] Tirinanzi De Medici 2012, p. 44.

[97] See Rosenfeld 2005, p. 155-156 and Shiffman 2009, pp. 61-73. Brett Ashley Kaplan emphatically writes: 'It is significantly less scary to write about *The Plot Against America* during the Obama presidency than it was when Roth published it' (2015, p. 162).

writes, '*The Plot Against America* portrays precisely what the American myth of infinite freedom forbids: an imagination of what the Holocaust in America would look like'[98].

It is not the first time that Roth has indulged in counter-factual hypothesises. In the *The Ghost Writer*, Zuckerman imagines the life of Anne Frank had she survived the Holocaust and fled to America. The coexistence of two possible versions of the same story is also the core of *Operation Shylock*, where the possibility that Demjanjuk is at the same time an ordinary American and a genocidal criminal conceals the possibility that the Holocaust could have happened in America as well[99]. However, in *The Plot Against America* alternate history is referred to Roth himself, and not to someone else: the novel is, once again, an autofiction. The narrator of the story is Philip Roth, who reports that the events occurred to his family between 1940 and 1942, when he was a child. In this sense, as Singles argues, 'Roth has written many novels with himself as the narrator, and the *Plot against America* may be situated among a series of autobiographical writings along with *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* and *Patrimony: A True Story*'[100]. This narratorial choice allows Roth to exhibit a great amount of real information in his stories. This information does not come only, as typical of the alternate history, from quotes of fake historical sources (newspapers, historical books) and from the insertion of real historical characters, but from Roth's childhood and from the details about his family. Readers can recognise these details, as they have registered them before in autobiographical writings, biographies, and interviews[101].

To approach the event that more than any other shaped the identities of Jewish Americans in the twentieth century, Roth employs a self-evident lie: an alternate history that is also an autofiction. The presence of Roth as a child is used precisely to cast away the patent falsity of the topic of the narration, and is aimed to increase the participation of the reader in the imaginary drama that the narrator Philip Roth presents as real. As Donnarumma writes:

> La finzione deve la sua efficacia proprio all'interferenza con i dati di realtà, che nell'appendice sono richiamati nel loro corso effettivo, e soprattutto alla voce del narratore-personaggio, con il suo coinvolgimento emotivo e con la conseguente spinta all'identificazione nel lettore. Simularsi testimone e partecipe di eventi evocati con la precisione della cronaca, ma la cui natura fittizia è palese, significa accreditare quei fatti sul piano non della realtà, ma della verità finzionale […]. La presenza di Roth come personaggio ha dunque una funzione di

[98] Kaplan 2015, pp. 149-150. See also Geraci 2011, pp. 195-196.
[99] Kaplan 2015, p. 71.
[100] Singles 2013, p. 173.
[101] *Ibid,* p. 179.

> accreditamento: quello che leggiamo è palesemente falso, ma ci permette di esperire quella verità non fattuale che turba Roth[102].

In delineating the possibility of an American Holocaust and its effects, *The Plot Against America* goes in the opposite direction of the eminently postmodern *Operation Shylock*, in which history is understandable only through fictions that nevertheless perpetually fail in giving shape to reality. The very means of autofiction are used in a diametrically opposed sense. In *Operation Shylock* they cast a shadow on the truthfulness of the whole novel, while in *The Plot Against America* they are used to increase the participation of the reader to the story through internal focalisation and by way of providing a realistic context for the actions of the story.

An objection, however, is still possible. Is not alternate history a typically postmodern genre? How is the vision of history presented by *The Plot Against America* different from that of *Operation Shylock*, if the narration of the American Holocaust is, again, so evidently false? As Rosenfeld notes, it is beyond doubt that the fortune of alternate history depends on postmodernism[103], and on a vision of history that, as we have already seen, is no longer univocal and monolithic, but dynamic and open to new readings and re-thinkings. The main difference between alternate history and historiographic metafiction, however, lies in the possibility of knowing and understanding history. Historiographic metafiction denies, whilst representing on the other hand, the basis of the very possibility of a counter-factual hypothesis. In order to re-think history, it is indeed necessary for its mechanisms to be understandable. History as an impenetrable enigma or as a spy story without solutions, in which every story can be at the same time true and false, as it appeared in *Operation Shylock*, is no longer part of *The Plot Against America*, which is, by contrast, founded on an idea of history more similar to the Rankean vision of great men and historical moments[104].

The prevalence of alternate history is strongly connected to the postmodern tendency to re-think history. However, the rules that regulate uchronic writing remain, as in classic historiography, those of causality and contingency[105], and not those of cultural historiography or even of Braudel's profound structures. The peculiarity of the novel, however, is that not only does it have a *point of divergence* (that moment in which history takes a different path: in this case, Lindbergh's candidature to the Republican primaries), but it also has a *point of*

---

[102] Donnarumma 2014, pp. 135-136.
[103] Rosenfeld 2005, pp. 4-10.
[104] Singles 2013, p. 170.
[105] *Ibid,* p. 187.

convergence[106], thus a moment in which history takes again its normal path (with Roosevelt's 1942 election and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour). This, as Singles notes, does not represent an infraction of the law of causality: 'If the course of history can be re-routed by Lindbergh's candidacy for president, why should his disappearance not have an equally significant effect? It can, of course; the logic of contingency remains intact'[107].

The presence of a *point of convergence* represents the most peculiar trait of *The Plot Against America* as an alternate history, and its most significant message as a discourse about the Holocaust. Between the focalisation of the child, Philip Roth, the continuous exhibition of private and public precise details, and the rich historical appendix (complete with the lives of Lindbergh, of Burton K. Wheeler, and of Henry Ford, and with Lindbergh's entire anti-Semite speech 'Who Are the War Agitators?, historically pronounced on 11 September 1941), the return of history on its normal path is aimed to remind the readers that what has just been narrated is not a dream or a fantasy, but a real possibility. Indeed, if Lindbergh's election seems to be without consequences for American history, which proceeds normally after 1942, it is rich in consequences for the protagonists. The Roth family is divided by a fight between Philip's cousin and father; Philip's classmate, Seldon, loses his mother, who was killed during a pogrom; and the husband of aunt Evelyn, rabbi Bengelsdorf, ends up in jail for his collaboration with the Lindbergh administration. But most of all, on everything presides fear: 'perpetual fear' (*PAA*, p. 1).

The gap that separates *Operation Shylock* and *The Plot Against America* resembles closely Bolaño's inclination towards postmodernism and at the same time its refusal and overcoming. As Robert Eaglestone writes, postmodernism was partially born as a response to the Holocaust, 'questioning to its very core the culture that made it possible'[108], since the critique of great meta-narrations and attention to the Other are generated as a reaction to the menace of totalitarianism. *Operation Shylock*, by exhibiting the hermeneutic equivalence of facts and fiction, represents a surrender in the face of the possibility of understanding the real. Bolaño's unwavering contempt for this nihilistic postmodern approach to history and reality is mirrored in Roth's representation of an American Holocaust through the means of science fiction in *The Plot Against America*. Roth employs genre literature and a forced sense of unlikeliness to

[106] *Ibid,* p. 172.
[107] *Ibid.*
[108] Eaglestone 2001, p. 4: 'Postmodernism is a response to the Holocaust'.

convey a deadly serious historical (and autobiographical[109]) message, as Bolaño does though his whole oeuvre.

[109] Hoberek 2007, pp. 238-239.

A Collection of Parables: William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central*

William Tanner Vollmann is one of America's most prolific writers as the author of twenty-four books, including fiction, non-fiction, memoir, philosophical speculation, and cultural studies essays[1]. Despite Vollmann's fecundity, very little has been written about him relative to the scale of his production. As Larry McCaffery argues, although Vollmann has been 'regularly (and mostly favorably) reviewed' and awarded, and although 'he has achieved a kind of cult status among certain readers', there is so far 'no extended treatment at all, no book-length scholarly studies'[2]. If we confront Vollmann with other authors of his generation, such as David Foster Wallace, whose complexity and variety of themes can be compared to Vollmann's, this lack of critical studies is striking. Except for the non-academic volumes by Michael Hemmingson *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews* and *Expelled From Eden. A William T. Vollmann Reader* (edited by Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson), and apart from single articles published in academic journals, the only complete academic studies dedicated to Vollmann of which I am aware are: *Under Fire*, a critical study on *The Rifles* edited by Françoise Palleau-Papin; Gabriele Costa's Lacanian and Zizekian comparison between Vollmann and Roberto Saviano, *Il perverso ritorno del reale*; and *William T. Vollmann. A Critical Companion*, edited by Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes, published only in 2015.

---

[1] Vollmann made his debut in 1987 with the cyberpunk science-fictional *You Bright and Risen Angel* and, in 1990, started the publication of the *Seven Dreams* series, which focuses on the colonisation of the Americas and is composed so far of five volumes (of seven planned), published between 1990 and 2015. His fictional production also includes the so called 'Prostitution Trilogy' (*Whores for Gloria*, 1991; *Butterflies Stories: A Novel*, 1993; and *The Royal Family*, 2000), and the collections of short stories *The Rainbow Stories* (1989), *Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epitaphs* (1991), *The Atlas* (1996), *Last Stories and Other Stories* (2014). Vollmann's first editorial success was the narrative reportage, *An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or, How I Saved the World* (1992), and his other non-fictional works are *Poor People* (2007), *Riding Toward Everywhere* (2008), *Into the Forbidden Zone: A Trip Through Hell and High Water in Post-Earthquake Japan* (2011). He is also author of the essays, *Uncentering the Earth: Copernicus and the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* (2006), *Imperial* (2009) (a more than one thousand page-long historical, sociological and economic study on the region of Imperial County, California at the border with Mexico), and *Kissing the Mask: Beauty, Understatement and Femininity in Japanese Noh Theater* (2010). Finally, Vollmann's magnum opus is *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means* (2003), a philosophical essay in seven volumes concerned with the role of violence in human history and which stands as an attempt to answer the question as to whether violence can ever be justified. The literary object of this chapter, *Europe Central*, was published in 2005 and was awarded the National Book Award for Fiction in the same year.

[2] McCaffrey 2015, p. XIV.

The vastness of Vollmann's work and the apparent reluctance of critics to engage with it communicate the difficulty of working on what is a mostly unexplored territory, but also the value of doing so. As I will argue in this chapter, *Europe Central* (*EC*, 2005) represents one of the most complete and complex examples of post-postmodern novels published so far; it is also one of the most insightful views on the Second World War written by a contemporary novelist. At the same time, however, the book is often obscure and contradictory, and, this being probably the very first critical study about it in its entirety, I feel that I should warn the reader that a lot could, and hopefully will, be said, that I had not the space or the acuity to mention here.

1. A Collection of Parables

Europe Central is composed of thirty-seven short stories, featuring mainly historical protagonists[3], disposed in chronological progression from 1914 to 1975 and set in Germany and in the Soviet Union. These stories are different lengths (from a couple of pages long to a

[3] It is appropriate to provide a brief biography of the most important characters of the novel, although their stories will be discussed more extensively later in this chapter. Nadezhda Konstantivna Krupskaya (1869-1939) was a Russian communist revolutionary and wife of Vladimir Lenin from 1898 to his death in 1924. Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) was a German sculptor, painter and lithographer, best known for her portrait of the moral and material misery that followed World War I and the struggles of the working class. Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) was a Russian composer who, despite his fame and greatness, faced severe censorship and persecution during Stalin's regime. Roman Karmen (1906-1978) was a Russian film director who shot documentaries and propaganda film about the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, and the Communist regimes born in Asia and Southern America during the 50s and 60s. Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) was a Russian poet, one of the most celebrated artists of her time, who, as Shostakovich, faced censorship and persecution under Stalin's regime. Andrei Vlasov (1901-1946) was a Russian general who, after having fought in the battles of Moscow and Leningrad, was captured by the German army and joined the occupation forces creating an army of collaborationists. Friedrich Paulus (1890-1957) was a Russian Field-Marshal, commander of the Sixth Army during the siege and the fall of Stalingrad, the military disaster that signed the definitive overturn of the German offensive. Zoya Kosmodemyanaskaya (1923-1941) was a Soviet partisan who, after being executed by the Nazis, became a symbol of resistance for the people of the Soviet Union. Kurt Gerstein (1905-1945) was an SS officer who during the war tried to denounce the crimes of the concentration camps, managing to communicate them to the Swedish ambassador and several members of the Catholic Church, without however succeeding in his purpose. Vasily Chuikov (1900-1982) was the Soviet general who won the battle of Stalingrad and guided the Russian advance on the Eastern front. Erich von Manstein (1887-1973) was a German Field-Marshal, one of the most famous and talented generals of the Second World War, who had a decisive contribution in the defeat of France and the initial victories over the Soviet Union, and who later, after a failed attempt to rescue Paulus in Stalingrad, guided the last German offensive on the Eastern front at Kursk (Operation Citadel). Hilde Benjamin (1902-1989) was Minister of Justice in the DDR, where she distinguished herself for her mercilessness. Harvey Van Cliburn (1934-2013) was an American pianist who attained world fame for winning in 1958 the Tchaikovsky Piano Competition, a Russian international prize intended to state the superiority of the Soviet Union in cultural life; he was awarded of the prize by Shostakovich.

hundred) and variously have, depending on the subject matter, the tone of plain narration, lyrical sketch, dreamy divagation, and metahistorical reflection.

It is worth noticing that critics are not unanimous in defining the form of this book. As can be seen in newspaper reviews that accompany the Penguin Books edition, *Europe Central* is catalogued as 'part novel and part stories' by the *New York Times Book Review*, 'stories' by the *Los Angeles Times*, 'novel' by the *Washington Post*, and generically 'work of fiction' by the *Boston Globe*; meanwhile, the jury of the National Book Award calls it 'a half-continent of fictions—sketches, stories, novellas, a full-length novel'[4]. Stefano Ercolino, on the other hand, although he does not consider directly Vollmann's book, includes it in the canon of the maximalist *novel*[5]. Finally, Michael Hemmingson argues that '*Europe Central* almost functions as a novel […] an ambitiously big book of interlinked texts'[6]. He compares it to *The Rainbow Stories* and *Thirteen Stories and Thirteen Epithets*, since all of them are not 'compilations of random short stories written over a certain period of time, as many collections tend to be. Each is compounded on a high concept, a grand metaphor; the volumes are cycles of related texts with recurring topics and motifs'[7].

With its mixed form of a novel and a collection of short stories, Vollmann's book exemplifies that tendency of topic dispersion that seems to characterise the maximalist model. Although there are strong elements of cohesion between the separate stories (mainly recurring characters and the uniformity of metaphorical imagery, taken from the musical and mythological areas), the stories function autonomously. The characters, even the recurring ones, are always introduced as if they had not appeared before in the book. For instance, we can read in 'Opus 110' about 'Paulus, who if you don't keep up with such things was the Field-Marshal we'd capture at Stalingrad' (*EC*, p. 650), 'Lenin's widow Krupskaya' and 'that petty Nazi, K. Gerstein, who'd joined the SS in order to reveal its secrets' (*EC*, p. 694) – all of whom were protagonists of previous stories). This is also the case for the recurring protagonists, such as Dimitri Shostakovich, Elena Konstantinovskaya and Roman Karmen. Although their love triangle, as we will see, occupies eight stories, they are often introduced as if never mentioned before. For instance, Elena is called 'a certain Russian woman whose initials are E. E. K.' (*EC*, p. 473), and Karmen is 'a certain Roman Karmen' (*EC*, p. 514). Similarly, the events that they live are narrated several times as if they were happening or at least were being recounted for

[4] Judges' citation, available at: <http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2005_f_vollmann.htm> [accessed 20/06/2017].
[5] Ercolino 2015, p. 10.
[6] Hemmingson 2009, p. 22.
[7] *Ibid.*

the first time. This is the case for Shostakovich's indecision between Elena and his wife Nina, which is one of the subjects in 'Operation Barbarossa', and is already narrated in the previous 'Opus 40'.

These texts can be further defined as short stories because they respond to the criteria according to which we define a short story: the brevity effect, the unity of impression as self-containing narrations of a single event, and exemplarity[8]. The stories, as I have mentioned, never last for more than a hundred pages (qualifying thus as novellas), and have a sole protagonist and focalisation. They are also characterised by a strong unity, be it thematic or chronological (even the longest of them, 'The Last Field-Marshal', focuses only on Paulus' life at Stalingrad; and later, 'Breakout' focuses on Vlasov following the siege of Leningrad). This means that when the whole life of an individual is narrated, it is done by insisting on a precise theme: 'Woman with Dead Child' reports the story of the life of Käthe Kollwitz, focusing on the presence of grief and mourning in her life; 'The Saviors' centres on the meeting of Krupskaya and Fanny Kaplan, and on the effects of this meeting in the life of Lenin's widow; *The Sleepwalker* enacts a parallel between Hitler's life and Nordic mythology. Even when the characters are recurring, the texts dedicated to them focus on a selected chronological period (the siege of Leningrad in 'The Palm Tree of Deborah') or on thematically concluded episodes (Shostakovich giving a book to Elena in 'Ecstasy', and Shostakovich at the stadium in 'Operation Barbarossa').

It is not superfluous, in the context of an analysis of the role of World War II in Vollmann's work, to focus on the form that his narrative takes. Usually, and like Robert Bolaño, Vollmann tends to create narratives that function by a juxtaposition of implicitly connected episode. For instance, the *Seven Dreams* books have an almost analogous structure to *Europe Central* to the extent that they consist of short narrative units, chronologically disposed. Vollmann, however, defines the *Seven Dreams* books as 'Symbolic History'[9]. On the other hand, when Vollmann refers to *Europe Central*, he always calls the parts that compose it as *stories* or *parables* (*EC*, p. 753). In a sense, *Europe Central* may be referred to as a short story cycle, in the sense that the stories, however independent, are indeed 'so linked to one another that the reader's experience of each one is modified by his experience of the others'[10]. Notwithstanding the

[8] Zatti 2010, pp. 15-18.
[9] Vollmann 1990, p. 397.
[10] Ingram 1971, p. 13. Specifically, Ingram suggests that the stories of a short story cycle are so linked together that 'the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts' (p. 19), and that these cycles are regulated by 'the dynamic patterns of recurrence and development' (p. 20). It is worth noticing that these characteristics fit perfectly Vollmann's work,

author's own perspective, it has to be noted that, in contrast with this apparent form (very popular in American literature), several stories in *Europe Central* are too long to qualify as stories. They are, rather, novellas. Moreover, the chronological order in which the stories are collated is more typical of the coherence of the novel than of the relative freedom of the short story collection – however interrelated the latter's units may be. According to the author, 'the goal […] was to write a series of parables about famous, infamous and anonymous European moral actors at moments of decision' (*ibid*); therefore, parable in this context is not to be intended as a 'rise and decline' story[11]. In *Europe Central*, we are thus facing a series of related but autonomous short stories. Each one can be read autonomously, but all are held together by their moral meaning. Further, their moral meaning is highly influenced, as we will see, by the fact that these stories ask to be read as parables – although this term requires some clarification.

A parable is a short, invented story an author uses to illustrate a truth or a religious teaching. If we think of the parables contained in the Gospels or in certain Buddhist sutras[12], however, we will fail to recognise in Vollmann's novel. Without being too specific, a parable possesses two main qualities: brevity and clarity. A parable, it has been argued, is an extended simile, differing thus from an allegory which is 'a series of extended metaphors'[13]. Therefore, the meaning which can be attributed to a parable is one and only one, while allegory is open to a multitude of interpretations. Although Robert H. Stein warns against too strict an application of these categories, since Christ's own parables are on several occasions indistinguishable from allegories, there is some truth in this distinction. Moreover, the differences between parable and allegory are striking significant when we face Vollmann's 'parable'.

First of all, the stories that compose *Europe Central* are primarily not invented, to the extent that they tell the story of real characters and not stylised symbolical figures. Secondly, they are also mostly excessively long – too long to be considered parables ('Breakout', 'The Last Field-Marshal' and 'Opus 110' last for more or less a hundred pages each). Finally, and most importantly, they are profoundly ambiguous in their meaning, taking as their subject, for instance, the life of a defeated German Field-Marshal, a Soviet traitor, a repentant SS officer,

---

and especially the many stories dedicated to Shostakovich. Nevertheless, it is the various length of the stories that forbids us from defining all of them as short stories. In this sense, once again, *Europe Central* seems to place itself between a maximalist novel and a collection of stories, in a way that resembles (but does not coincide) with Ingram's categories. See also Nagel 2001, pp. 1-17.

[11] A common meaning of 'parable' is adopted from the name of the mathematic figure, "parabola", which is a curve; hence, the interpretation of parable as a tale of a metaphorical curve, a 'rise and decline' story.

[12] For instance, an example of Buddhist parable is the story depicted in the Ten Oxherding Images I analyse in the chapter of this thesis dedicated to Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.

[13] Stein 2000, p. 31.

and the blood-lusting East-German minister of Justice. In a very critical article about Vollmann's book, Peter G. Christensen argues that the model of the parable cannot be applied to *Europe Central*. Although his critique is generally quite unfair – in as much as it mainly focuses on the historical imprecisions of Vollmann's depiction of Shostakovich, and therefore fails to accept the idea that an artist can select his material and treat it as he wants[14] – Christensen's position on the issue of the catachresis of parable is agreeable. As Christensen writes, in the parable, 'the reader should be able to see a cause and effect relationship in a clear narrative line'[15]. For what concerns Shostakovich's story, by way of example, Christensen argues that, while Vollmann puts great effort into recreating thirty years of love suffering, the story of Shostakovich and Elena would need a proper resolution and a precise meaning to be called a parable[16].

Bryan M. Santin accuses Christensen of having a 'rigid, antiquated, didactic' view of the parable, and of trying to impose on Vollmann a 'generically conservative definition of parables'[17]. However, I cannot see in what wider, innovative sense he may be suggesting we should interpret the concept of parable in Vollmann's case. Considering that the definition I provided earlier is the only meaning generally attributed to the parable, we can derive two different conclusions: the stories of *Europe Central* are actual parables in the sense that this definition suggests, and that they present a clear meaning (an idea that is refused by the very core of Santin's article about Gernstein's story); or Vollmann is using the word parable in a very extensive way, as a synonym for allegory or metaphor – thus, incorrectly.

[14] Christensen claims: 'Anyone angry at Vollmann for his fabrications risks being called a positivist and a person who does not take a postmodern novel on its own terms. Anyone who praises Vollmann for the same fabrications, however, takes the view that the "historical" in the term historical novel is the junior partner to "novel" and ignores the facts that Soviet propaganda has been hard to cut through and that historical characters in other historical novels are treated with far less liberty' (2007, p. 97). This statement speaks of Christensen's prejudice against the freedom of the contemporary novel to treat creatively its material. Most importantly, Christensen's article focuses only on the fact that the real Shostakovich and Vollmann's portrait do not coincide, as if it really was a problem, without taking in any consideration whether *Europe Central* is or is not an accomplished work of art, to be judged on the basis of its own purposes and their fulfillment.
[15] *Ibid,* p. 98.
[16] *Ibid,* p. 99.
[17] Santin 2015, p. 161, note 29. It is also worth noting that the Santin himself, in the title of his article ('The Tragic Parable of Kurt Gerstein'), seems to be using the word 'parable' in the sense of life progression, *exemplum*: how could a simile, in fact, be tragic? In his article, moreover, Santin claims that 'in lieu of clear moral or spiritual edification, Vollmann's parables aims to mystify readers, instilling them not with self-assurance but self-doubt'. While this is certainly true, as ambiguity and paradox are key to understanding *Europe Central*, I do not understand how such an assumption can cohere with the following: 'Vollmann adheres closely to the original etymological meaning of parable […] "to put side by side" or to "compare item 'a' with item 'b'" (p. 146). Indeed, given their ambiguity and their length, it is exactly what Vollmann's parables do *not* do. Actually, Santin does not explain, in his article, which 'item b' is supposed to match Gerstein's parable.

My sense of Vollmann's misuse of the word, parable, is confirmed also by the dissemination of references to the Kabbalah (*EC*, pp. 215, 601, 671; and the whole story 'The Saviors'), echoed, in different contexts, by the reflections on calligraphy (*EC*, pp. 121-122, 209, 523, on the runes, *EC*, p. 224, and on Shostakovich's musical signature, *EC*, p. 94). Of course, the reprise of the Hebrew mystique can be interpreted also as a reference to the Jewish world victimised in the text both by the Nazi and the Soviet regime[18]. However, the role of Kabbalah in *Europe Central* is mainly to suggest the presence of a mystical, allegorical value of the stories (far, in this sense, from the parable's simile) and, by implication, the idea that words and language contain an inexpressed, mystical meaning[19].

I recognise that the fact that the Kabbalistic tradition makes such a wide use of parables may appear to validate Vollmann's self-reading instead of undermining it. However, Kabbalah is evoked in *Europe Central* not as a literary model, but for its mystical knowledge of the divine (*EC*, p. 628). In 'The Saviors (A Kabbalistic Tale)', we read about the Kabbalistic diagrams (*EC*, p. 15), which are again symbols, and not similes. A few paragraphs later, when the exchanging of the rings between Lenin and Krupskaya is called 'a parable-within-a-parable' (*EC*, p. 16), not only it is not clear what this parable is supposed to signify, but Vollmann himself denies it a precise meaning, suggesting instead that it has a symbolic, supernatural value. The 'parable-within-a-parable' is said to possess an 'ironic symbolism' (*EC*, p. 16), but at the same time Vollmann claims that 'we need not detain ourselves here with mystic correlation and analogies, God being ineffable anyway' (*EC*, p. 17). Finally, Vollmann implies that the sense of the so-called parable lies in a hidden meaning, invisible for the non-initiated: 'In their shape the rings are said to have resembled the letter *Samekh* – a sort of *o* which tapers as it rejoins its starting point, and which sports a tiny bud on top, imagined by dreamy brides to be a precious stone. Need I add that this character of the mystical alphabet symbolizes both help and sleep? (Recall Marx's ambiguous proverb: Religion is the opium of the masses)' (*EC*, p. 18).

[18] *EC*, p. 628: 'What drew Shostakovich to Jewish harmonies? The simplest answer, and the truest, might be their sadness. Leave this aside for the moment. Although I cannot forbear to discern insectoid shapes in musical notation, within a score there dwell many human forms. A tremble clef, for example, resembles a Muscovite or Leningrader in a bulky hooded parka. A bass clef bends as simply and painfully as a silhouetted widow in Leningrad drawing water from the whiteness of a frozen canal. I myself can't explain why this should be so, unless those figures somehow indicate or represent an underlying content, perhaps the Infinite Cause of Causes. Why not? After all, Kabbalists believe that the very letters of the alphabet are emanations of God; and in our Soviet Union we accept the Marxist conception that art, and indeed all culture, comprises a mere superstructure founded on economic realities'.

[19] Scholem 1970, p. 13.

Although these references are indeed strongly connected to the teachings of Kabbalah, they are not connected to the concept of a 'parable' – not even, in fact, with the Kabbalistic parable. While Kabbalistic teachings are often complex and paradoxical, Kabbalistic parables rarely are[20], especially in the most important of the Kabbalistic texts, the Zohar[21]. What is most important to register, however, is that, despite the content of the Kabbalistic parables, and despite their complex and paradoxical nature, they always present themselves as short stories which ask to be understood intellectually[22]: Vollmann's, as I have already explained, are not.

Vollmann's aim is to show people at moments of decision, rather than the complexity or the context of that decision. As readers of *Europe Central* quickly come to appreciate, he is interested in showing the psychological processes that come before and after a complex decision, and not the relation of cause and effect behind it (in this sense, he refuses to elaborate specific economic and political circumstances). While Vollmann's stories do not present a precise meaning, they do present examples, even conduct models, in a certain way: I would argue therefore that they are, rather than parables, *exempla*, hagiographies, *passiones*. This change in terminology allows us to retain the religious, mystical meaning implied in the Kabbalistic parable, but also to pay attention to the structure and the complexity of the texts.

The book is rich in comparisons between the characters and the Saints ('His [Gerstein's] story is as rare, and hence as shocking, as full-figure reliefs of the saints on otherwise featureless walls', *EC*, p. 425), for reasons that Vollmann's characters act as exemplar figures, portrayed in a decisive moment of their life. They are victims, martyrs, witnesses, 'tragic heroes' (*EC*, p. 808). Shostakovich and Paulus exemplify this characterisation:

> I see him [Paulus] as the central figure of a parable, and therefore apathetic in spite of himself; in his long leather trenchcoat, his gloves and collar perfectly white even now, his loyalty gleaming, he was brought into the story of our Reich to illustrate a principle, to carry out a function, to think and suffer while things were done to him […]. He was nothing but a playing-card soldier, a character in a book. He sat very still in his tent and listened to Beethoven on the gramophone; his gloves were already soiled again. Did he have an inkling yet what he would be forced to suffer? Probably, since by then more than one man heard him say: History has already passed its verdict on me… (*EC*, pp. 393-394)

[20] Scholem 1962, pp. 59-60.
[21] *Ibid*.
[22] A selection of Kabbalistic parables can be found in *The Living Palm Tree. Parables, Stories and Teachings from the Kabbalah* (Satz 2010).

Paulus is said to be ‘the central figure of a parable’, to be brought to life in order ‘to illustrate a principle, to carry on a function, to think and suffer while things were done to him’. If we think at the traditional meaning of the parable, these sentences seem at least contradictory. First of all, which principle, and which function is Paulus supposed to be carrying? The reader is never told, and they do not appear clearly in the text. Moreover, the idea that Paulus's role is ‘to think and suffer’ does not fit in the parable's aim to bestow a (moral) meaning insofar as it stands as a simile for something more difficult to comprehend. His tortured role rather suggests that Paulus is an example, a metaphor of the human condition, without explaining this analogy further.

In the very first pages of the book, Vollmann seems to suggest that his stories have some gnostic value, a clear and immediately comprehensible meaning: ‘The tale of Lenin's bride, N. K. Krupskaya, makes for a happy parable. And doesn't the parable possess greater integrity, greater righteousness we might almost say, than any other literary form? For its many conventions wave a holy covenant between the reader, who gets the mystification he craves in a bonbon-sized dose, and the writer, whose absence renders him divine’ (*EC*, pp. 13-14). This passage, however, as in the previous case, only makes the readers doubt whether there really is a ‘bonbon-sized dose’ of precise meaning in what he reads. Having read the whole story (‘The Saviors’), we are forced to consider, what could this meaning be? Considering that integrity and righteousness are qualities that apply more to human beings than to stories, I would argue that also in this case Vollmann is using the word ‘parable’ to refer to something much closer to hagiography. In other words, while parables are used to explain a concept, providing a form and efficiency that it would not have otherwise[23], they are not an object of contemplation as the life of the Saints, nor a psychodrama to be re-interpreted by the reader. Parables ask to be intellectually understood, rather than to be experienced. As I said, however, Vollmann's stories are not intellectual theories, but require an emotional response. Indeed, in Vollmann's works, participation and empathy are means through which to reach the comprehension of a phenomenon.

It is extremely significant that the protagonists of these ‘parables’ are not only martyrs, as in Zoya or Shostakovich (and it has to be noted that, as Christensen points out[24], historical reality is modified in order to make Shostakovich look more like a martyr and less complicit with the regime), but also, and mainly, morally ambiguous figures, like Paulus, Vlasov or Gerstein. The

---

[23] Stein 2000, p. 35.
[24] Christensen 2007, p. 100.

latter are characters stuck in mechanics that partially dictate their fates and which consign their decisive action to the best decisions their situations allow. Vollmann's short stories are psychodramas, just in the sense in which Christian *passiones* were[25]. They invite readers to reflect and to act, to consider how these stories relate to their own experience and their own times, to find in them a metahistorical message, and to move them to change. In this sense, 'The Saviors' proves once again to be an almost programmatic text:

> Most literary critics agree that fiction cannot be reduced to mere falsehood. Wellcrafted protagonists come to life, pornography causes orgasms, and the pretense that life is what we want it to be may conceivably bring about the desired condition. Hence religious parables, socialist realism, Nazi propaganda. And if this story likewise crawls with reactionary supernaturalism, that might be because its author longs to see letters scuttling across ceilings, cautiously beginning to reify themselves into angels. For if they could only do that, the why not us? (*EC*, p. 27)

Just as in Christian hagiographies[26], Vollmann's protagonists are exceptional characters who distinguish themselves because of their internal strength or the suffering they undergo. Further, in much the same way as the life of the Saints is not narrated as a whole but only to the extent that it shows the presence of God and exhorts the reader to the imitation of Christ (hence the variety in length and genre of the hagiographic patrimony), so too does Vollmann report his characters' lives minimally – only to the extent that they testify to an opposition of humanism and totalitarianism. As we will see later, this opposition is central to his book. This allusive and metonymic use of character can involve the telling of almost the whole life of a character but, crucially, by focusing only on their losses and mourning (as in the case of Käthe Kollwitz, Anna Akhmatova, or Shostakovich). Or it can see the focalisation of only the climatic episode of a life (as for Zoya) and its aftermath (as for Paulus).

In this sense, a comparison could be drawn between the oppositions of fable/fairytale and parable/hagiography. Fables, in their brevity, their moral message, and their didactical purpose,

---

[25] Brown 1981, p. 82.

[26] The label of hagiography refers very generically to the biography of a Saint, but, as stated, it can easily mean just a small fraction of this life, or a collection of anecdotes. Guy Philippart (1994, p. 14) distinguishes between '*passions*, consacrées au récit de la mort des martyrs, dans les *biographies*, dans les *anecdotes édifiantes* ou "utiles à l'âme", non miraculaires (comme dans les *Vitae Patrum*), dans les *récits miraculaires* et dans les *histoires de reliques* (*inventiones*, *translationes*, *adventus*, *elevationes*, *circumlationes*)'. Thomas Head (2000, p. XIV), by noticing that the most immediate meaning of the word 'hagiography' is 'writing about the saints', extends this catalogue to 'lives of saints, collections of miracle stories, accounts of the discovery or movement of relics, bulls of canonization, inquests held into the life of candidate for canonization, liturgical books, sermons, and visions', suggesting thus that hagiography is a collection of genres rather than a single, defined one.

are a kind of parable[27]; while hagiographies, narrating longer episodes focusing on a single hero and requiring emotional involvement rather than intellectual understanding, are similar to fairytales. Parables (in the Gospels and in Christian teachings) invite an understanding of the doctrine, while hagiographies aim to move the reader to the imitation of the Saint and of Christ.

In the aforementioned passage, Vollmann characterises the author thus: ‘The writer, whose absence renders him divine’; and in fact, the author is never present in *Europe Central*. The narrators are different in each story (with an exception we will see later). Generally, it could be said that the narrators are first-person and that they tell stories they seem to have witnessed. They seem to be both internal and external to the events they narrate. They are external or extra-diegetic because of the chronological gaps they mention and the evident impossibility of certain facts make it impossible for them to have actually witnessed the events. By way of example, in ‘Mobilization’, the narrator is implied to be at least one hundred years old, without this remarkable age being ever discussed in the story: ‘But even now (I’m writing in 2002), Berlin remains the city of eagles; and in 1914, when everything began to happen, we were, if I might say so, graced to perfection by those kingly war-birds’, *EC*, p. 33). The narrators are also internal or intradiegetic because they are completely uniformed of the cultural environment of the country in which the story is set. We will see it more clearly later, but for now let us just appreciate that there are no Russian narrators who are not communists, and that there are no German narrators who are not Nazis; this is not only evident from their political proclamations, but also from the highly specific language they speak, respectively influenced by Marxist materialism and Wagnerian mythology. This contrast between German Nazi and Russian communist is made starker by the way in which, on several occasions, the narrators’ (nationalist) perspectives change inside the same short story, depending on the country in which the action is taking place. For instance, in ‘Breakout’, having as protagonist the traitor Soviet general Vlasov, the narrator is evidently Soviet as long as Vlasov is in the USSR (‘Our Soviet Union’, *EC*, p. 262), German as long as he is in Germany (‘Our Fuhrer’, *EC*, p. 280), and Soviet again when he goes back into the USSR (‘Pursuant to Article 11 of our criminal code, the death sentence of the traitor A. A. Vlasov had been carried out’, *EC*, p. 280). These narrators are not hypostasis of a general, chameleonic narrator who writes in 2002 and switches roles according to the set of the tale, since at least one of the narrators, comrade Alexandrov, appear also as a character, and Manstein’s veteran performs a monologue. On the contrary, this variety of narrators is suggestive of the absence of a superior narrator, coinciding with the author, who

[27] Stein 2000, p. 31.

judges his characters and provides a moral for their tales. To recall the author's own words, Vollmann remains divinely absent.

In the three-page story of 'Denazification', there are three different narrators: one that might coincide with the writer ('the ageing of the blueprints as I study them in 2001', *EC*, p. 533), a Nazi ('Field-Marshal von Manstein had walked beside us smiling and alert', *ibid*), and a Soviet ('And so we denazified them', *EC*, p. 535). This is not the only occasion in which the author seems to coincide with the narrator, as it happens also (or at least it seems chronologically likely) in 'The Saviors', 'The White Nights of Leningrad', and 'Far and Wide My Country Stretches'. For example, it is said that, 'Roman Karmen has been called a great artist. And was he? In the year 2002, when I telephoned the University of Chicago film expert Yuri Tsivian, the following verdict came down' (*EC*, p. 229)[28]. The 'I' here could easily be Vollmann himself. However, this coincidence seems always casual; not much importance is attributed to it, and the presence of the author is not fully exploited as a meta-fictional device[29]. For instance, we read at the beginning of part 12 of 'Woman with Dead Child' what is evidently a declaration of poetics, when the author intervenes as himself to point out the nature of his work and his inspirations: 'This story, like this book itself, is derivative. In his unsurpassable *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich…*' (*EC*, p. 55)[30]. However, three paragraphs later, not even in the following part, the narrator claims to have read the account of the fictional Comrade Alexandrov, to whom he claims to be very close (*EC*, p. 30). This oscillation simultaneously makes the author visible to the reader and refuses to draw attention to him. Therefore, it cannot be interpreted as a meta-fictional, self-reflexive, postmodern device.

This distance of the author from the polyphony of the protagonists and the narrators coincides with what Coffman calls Vollmann's 'moral nonintervention'[31], his constant refusal to pass judgment. Literature, according to Vollmann, must be animated by the aim of pursuing the truth, which means a proper understanding of the circumstances in which his characters act: 'other people's codes, until they tell us otherwise, must be presumed to be good enough for them'[32]. *Rising Up and Rising Down* (*RURD*, 2005), an analysis of the role of violence in

[28] It is worth highlighting that, as can be verified on the website of the University of Chicago, Yuri Tsivian is an actual professor of film studies, and an expert of Soviet cinema.
[29] Santin 2015, p. 146.
[30] The work of Danilo Kiš is one of the explicit models of *Europe Central*. On the influence of Kiš on Vollmann, see Cox 2015, pp. 123-140. Vollmann also wrote the afterword for the Penguin edition of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. This introduction can be found in *Expelled From Eden. A William T. Vollmann Reader* (edited by McCaffery and Hemmingson, 2004), pp. 333-341.
[31] Coffman 2015, pp. 1-22. p. 15.
[32] Vollmann in *ibid,* p. 14.

human society and an attempt to understand whether it is ever justified, explicitly states the importance of avoiding moral judgment in order to properly understand human actions:

> No credo will eliminate murder. But if we think about a sufficient number of cases we may be able to plant the seeds of a tentative ethics which others could consider, pick and choose from and hopefully benefit from even if they cannot improve. That is my hope for this book. I know that other people's advice has rarely made me better than I was. When it has, it was less often the advice itself than the spirit in which it was given which helped me, requiring me out of sheer respectful reciprocity to listen, search and consider […]. (*RURD*, p. 31)[33]

For reasons that Vollmann refuses to intervene in the narration, it is no surprise that *Europe Central* so often contains unpleasant and disturbing characters, such as Comrade Alexandrov, the Red Guillotine, or Von Manstein's veteran. However, even for those characters who present the most erratic and cruel behavior, Vollmann's guiding principle remains 'no context, no judgment' (*RURD*, p. 36). Even when judgment comes, it is still accompanied by understanding and respect: 'My policy will always be to treat with empathy and respect anyone agreeing to be studied, interviewed, exposed. I would have been courteous to Eichmann. My obligation, however, is to the truth. But again, what is truth? […] If, on the other hand, doubt has nowhere to hide, as in Eichmann's case, then one *must* condemn, but never without respecting the human being inside the evildoer' (*RURD*, p. 44). This is the purpose of *Europe Central*, of the eclipse of its author, and of the uniformity of the narrators to the cultural environment surrounding them: to provide a series of unique and exemplary 'parables' that help to understand the moral circumstances and the meaning of the Second World War[34] not through an intellectual statement, but through an empathic reconstruction.

This very ambition to knowledge and understanding is expressed in the introductory story of *Europe Central*, 'Steel in Motion'. This *ouverture* provides an enumeration of almost all the characters and actions of the book (sharing this function, in a way, with the map that opens the volume, chaotically filled with names of the protagonists and military operations, and with the portraits of the main characters and of the most famous Generals of the war[35]). It mentions the

---

[33] Vollmann published two versions of this book, the first one in seven volumes and 3500 pages, the second one in a single volume, with significant cuts, and only 705 pages long. I am reading the latter.

[34] Dushane and Vollmann 2007, p. 147: 'TD [Tony Dushane]: "So your work is really a way of opening up to people who aren't able to have those experiences and showing them what's going on in the world?" / WTV [William T. Vollmann]: "In a way. You know in *Europe Central* it's too easy just to say, "Oh, the Nazis were terrible, the Stalinists were awful". And that's true, but where do you go from there? If you can realize the deeper truth, which is not only that were they terrible but if I were born in that time and place, I probably would've been one. And even if I resisted with all my being, I would still have characteristics of one, no matter what I did"'.

[35] The map that opens the volume is not intended to be a useful tool of interpretation for the text, or to guide the reader through the narrative, nor does it help the reader to follow the peregrinations of the characters. It features

vast majority of the main characters of the subsequent stories (Shostakovich, Akhmatova, Gerstein, Kollwitz, Krupskaya, Paulus, Zoya, the Sleepwalker, the Realist), and it sums up symbolically the beginning and the end of the war ('Russian cavalry charge into action against German tanks; German schoolgirls try to neutralise Russian tanks by pouring boiling water down the turrets', *EC*, p. 7). The cognitive value of *Europe Central* is expressed in the last sentence of the story, where the narrator claims his intention to 'invade the meaning of Europe' (*EC*, p. 10). However, again, this meaning with which the novel wants to supplant the meaning of Europe is shrouded with ambiguity, a variety of possible interpretations pulsating within it:

> What set steel in motion? The SS-Obersturmführer Kurt Gerstein has counseled me to seek the answer in Scripture, meaning Europe Central's old Greek Bibles [...] He asked himself what he dared not ask his strict father: Why, why all the death? His blood-red Bibles told him why.
>
> The telephone rings. It informs me that Gerstein's answer has been rejected, that Gerstein has been hanged, obliterated, ruthlessly crushed. It puts former Field-Marshal Paulus on the line.
>
> Paulus advises me that the solution to any problem is simply a matter of time and manpower. (*EC*, pp. 9-10)

What the narrator (which in this story seems to merge together all the characteristics of the distinct narrators of *Europe Central*) seems to be suggesting is, again, that no answer is definitive and absolute, and has to be searched in each singular experience: as Vollmann states in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, 'to describe universal forces, one must by definition take many excursions into alienness' (RURD, p. 31) – one must, in other words, put himself in the perspective *both* of Gerstein and Paulus.

Let us now prepare, then, to invade the meaning of *Europe Central*.

---

names of military operations that have no particular relevance in the text (Operation Blau, for instance); and the name of Roman Karmen is written on the Spanish part of the map despite his being in Russia for most of the novel. On the contrary, the map has to be interpreted, just as the *ouverture*, as a way of summing up and evoking the themes and the places of the war, without providing an explanation or a proper historical and geographical context. The allegorical value of the map is evoked also in the text (*EC*, p. 7): 'Behind the wall, rubberized black tentacles spread across Europe. Military maps depict them as fronts, trenches, salients and pincer movements. Politicians encode them as borders (*destroyed*, *razed*, *utterly smashed*). Administrators imagine that they're roads and rivers. Public health officials see them as the black trickels of people dwingling day by day on Leningrad's frozen streets. Poets know them as the veins of Partisan Zoya's martyred body. They're anything. They can do anything'.

2. Humanism and Totalitarianism

The meanings of the tales of *Europe Central* have to be contextualised by the opposition between humanism and totalitarianism. The terms of this opposition, to my knowledge, have first been pointed out by Christensen[36] in a critical sense, as a trivialisation of the complex (and, in his opinion, ambiguous) experience of Shostakovich under the Soviet regime. Although the illustration of these opposite poles is meant by Christensen as a critique of Vollmann's novel, their structural function in the book is undeniable. According to Christensen, the presence of music in the stories about Shostakovich and the pervasiveness of references to Wagner's operas in the stories set in Nazi Germany create an opposition between Shostakovich's humanism and the nationalist völkisch ideology.

I would argue that this opposition has to be extended to the whole structure of *Europe Central*, and to the whole cast of characters: it is not just an opposition between humanism and völkisch nationalism, but between humanism and totalitarianism. The sense of the word humanism has to be explained: in fact, not only it is never thematised in the text, but it seems to represent an absolute, completely positive category, in contrast with the completely negative totalitarianism. And while totalitarianism is considered absolutely negatively in the book (although not explicitly), the same cannot be said for the positive value, 'humanism': the situations and the characters that can be connected to this concept are acting mostly ambiguously. It has thus to be underlined that, with this totalitarianism/humanism opposition, I mean mainly the opposition between perpetrators and victims.

Totalitarianism, in *Europe Central*, means Nazism and Communism. I have already pointed out in the introduction the similarities and differences of these two political systems and their crimes. Vollmann is extremely explicit on this point: 'The moral equation of Stalinism with Hitlerism is nothing new. V. Grossman made that point first and best in his novel *Life and Fate*. Here it is merely a point of departure' (*EC*, p. 754). In fact, even if Nazism and Communism are always connoted differently, as I already mentioned in relation to the narrators, they are also assimilated by the fact of always representing the side of the perpetrators, as opposed to the side of the victims. In several cases, moreover, they represent equally hostile environments to the same characters.

[36] Christensen 2007, p. 106.

As I have stated, the opposition between totalitarianism(s) and humanism has not to be interpreted as rigid. While it is true that *Europe Central* presents some extremes (incarnations of pure evil such as the Sleepwalker, sociopaths such as Hilde Benjamin and Comrade Alexandrov, and, on the other hand, Saint-like figures such as Zoya and Kollwitz), it should also be noticed that most of the characters are situated in a middle position of ethical compromises and moral uncertainties (for example, Paulus and Karmen). In this sense, it is very important that Vollmann does not simply present the cases of the victims, but also of the persecutors: as he states in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, 'A major defining ethical constituent of violence is *the unique relationship between each victim and perpetrator at a given time*' (p. 38).

This division between victims and perpetrators, however schematic when we consider the book as a whole, is useful also to describe the situation of those characters who oscillate in morally ambiguous situations. As we will see, characters such as Vlasov or Gerstein are actually in between the role of victim and perpetrators, between then the human impulse of being merciful towards other and the need to obey orders. Their tragedy lies in the impossibility of a third role.

3. The Perpetrators

What characterises the perpetrators seems to be the lack (or the progressive loss) of compassion towards others. This is evident from the very first story of *Europe Central*, after the introductory 'Steel in Motion'. 'The Saviors (A Kabbalistic Tale)', narrates the fictional (and unlikely) meeting between Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, and Fanya Kaplan, Lenin's assassin, who reveals her to be a messenger of a godly revelation. Krupskaya, however, fails to understand this revelation, and Kaplan is sentenced to death[37]. What is worth noticing about 'The Saviors' is the progression of Krupskaya's character. Although she is described as a saint-like figure, willing to sacrifice herself in favor of others ('She was one of those souls who long more than anything to be of use in this world', *EC*, pp. 14-15), at the end of the story, her pity is nullified, and her compassionate love for the others is turned into a fanatical devotion to the cause of the Revolution:

[37] Christensen 2007, p. 99.

> When the new wave of 'repression' began in 1928, the peasants, who worshipped her, sent her many letters begging her to save their families from dekulakization, exile and imprisonment. It was impossible even to answer them all. She said to herself: My personal reading of these words is irrelevant. The Revolution must be saved. – The rapture was gone: She no longer hoped to write in the Book of Life, or even to be Lenin's copy-editor; all that remained to her was to read aloud whatever might be set before her. In 1936 we find her writing in support of Stalin's show trials that many of her own former comrades-in-arms deserved to be shot like mad dogs […].
>
> Superior in her destiny to the murdered murderess, she escaped even the show trials. The rumor that Stalin poisoned her need not be credited. She died of arterial sclerosis in 1939, and this seems to me a strangely appropriate disease for one whose vitality and spontaneity had been gradually clogged. (*EC*, p. 31)

In other words, even if the story is complicated by Vollmann's use of Kabbalistic references and by the obscure meaning of the message that Kaplan tries to communicate to the widow of the man she killed, it introduces at the very beginning of the book the theme of power as a source of moral corruption, and of devotion to a cause as an obstacle to acting mercifully. At the same time, the complicated references to the Kabbalah are suggestive of the complicated, self-referential mechanisms of that bureaucratic and political power that Krupskaya serves.

A similar attitude characterises also the two other Soviet examples of totalitarianism, Comrade Alexandrov and Hilde Benjamin. The fictional Comrade Alexandrov is, with Comrade Alexeev, the narrator of at least nine stories: 'Woman with Dead Child', 'You Have Shut the Danube's Gates', 'Elena's Rockets', 'Opus 40', 'And I'd Dry My Salty Hair', 'Far and Wide My Country Stretches', 'The Second Front', 'The Red Guillotine', and 'Opus 110'. Much more space is dedicated, however, to Alexandrov than to Alexeev, who is only described as ignorant in music (*EC*, p. 94), and who never expresses his own opinions, as Alexandrov does.

Alexandrov, a political commissar in Leningrad, is a constant presence throughout the whole book, since he is the person deputed to the surveillance of several of the protagonists, such as Anna Akhmatova, Elena Konstantinovskaya, and Shostakovich. As a commissar, Alexandrov shows detachment and impassibility to the faith of those who are under his control ('In 1933, when we arrested her son Lev for the very first time, just to tease him…', *EC*, p. 113), and even anger against those he thinks are traitors of the revolution, to the extent that, in one of Alexandrov's rants, Shostakovich gets called 'cocksucker' (*EC*, p. 107).

Alexandrov's idealism borders with sociopathy. As he says to Käthe Kollwitz in 'Woman with Dead Child', 'I used to believe that if I lived out my life without making anybody feel

compassion for me, I would have done well. And I loved the masses because they didn't excite my compassion, even when they perished […]. To hell with personal feelings! I wanted to live only as a part of a collective' (EC, p. 53). Although he reveals to Roman Karmen the relationship between his wife Elena and Shostakovich, and although in the last part of the book he interacts with Shostakovich himself, his emotional distance always seems to be unbridgeable. Talking about Elena, for instance, he claims he 'never touched' her: 'I never introduced myself, not even when I arrested her', (*EC*, p. 74). He also insists on the superior position granted to him by his distance and his observation: 'when she died in 1975, I respectfully refrained from attending her funeral' (*EC*, p. 74). By showing Alexandrov as refusing to interfere on a personal level, even in the moment of Elena's death, Vollmann offers a portrait of a character so devoted to his cause that he behaves with formality and respect of the protocol even when his task has ended.

Nevertheless, Alexandrov shows in his relationship with Anna Akhmatova ambiguities that he does not show anywhere else in the book (especially in the case of Shostakovich). We are informed earlier, during his encounter with Kollwitz, that Alexandrov has a particular predilection for the arts (*EC*, p. 117), and that he is in fact a great lover of classical music (*EC*, p. 65). This love of the arts does not make Alexandrov more pitiful and sympathetic in persecuting Akhmatova but leads him to a strange fixation with and participation in her poems. He expresses through the story his knowledge and appreciation of her work ('I don't mind admitting that it's got a few nice turns of phrase', *EC*, p. 112; 'Sometimes she recited from *Rosary*, which I have always considered her weakest collection…', *EC*, p. 117). Indeed, he is even moved by her work:

> All this is a way of leading up to the fact, which fails to embarrass me in the least, but which for obvious reasons I wouldn't confide to just anyone, that on one freezing December afternoon – dead black by four-o'-clock – when Akhmatova happened to be in a delicately happy mood because on my instructions we'd accepted her parcel that day […] and Chukovskaya took full advantage of that success to ask her oracle for an elucidation of "At the Seashore" […] a sincere joy overcame me, because that's my favorite poem; and a quarter-hour later, when Akhmatova, shivering there in her black dressing gown with the silver dragon on the back, agreed to recite the poem, I could hardly believe my luck; then she began: *Bays wounded the low shore* and my heart thrilled. (*EC*, p. 117)

In this sense, Alexandrov (like Wieder in *Estrella distante* or Maximilien Aue in *Les Bienveillantes*) represents a variation of the theme of the cultured, sensitive persecutor. Despite being far from insensitive, he is nevertheless untroubled in his duty by the emotions he feels.

By way of example, he is disturbed by Akhmatova's poetry ('my head was filled with all kinds of ridiculous word-rubbish'), to the extent that he cannot help thinking about it ('What was I to do?'). But he finds a solution to his being emotionally stirred by picking up *The Foundations of Leninism*: he tell us he 'read two pages at random. That cured me' (*EC*, pp. 119-120). Nevertheless, Alexandrov admits that he 'still felt melanchonic' (*EC*, p. 120).

The other communist persecutor of *Europe Central*, however, is untouched by art, and by any possible form of compassion. It is the case of Hilde Benjamin, known as the Red Guillotine, the East-German Minister of Justice. Unlike Alexandrov (and despite her being Walter Benjamin's sister-in-law, I would also say), art never becomes part of her life, nor is she ever moved to compassion, even in the worst scenarios. When asked by a delegation of doctors to allow German women to have abortions when raped by the soldiers of the Red Army, and when confronted with the rape and death of an eleven year old German girl, her only response is 'My feelings are of no relevance […]. We brought it here ourselves. I refuse to discuss this case any further' (*EC*, p. 583). Indeed, Benjamin's formal and business-like language reflects her attitude.

Towards the end of her life, however, Hilde Benjamin is shown as a scared old woman who is deprived of her power by the younger generation, and who has to face her world changing and beginning to fall apart (*EC*, pp. 588-600). Just like Alexandrov's morbid inclination towards Akhmatova and her work, this final glimpse on Benjamin's life is the illustration of the humanity of the perpetrators just like the victims. It is as if to be intrinsically evil is not the case of the individuals, but of power itself, which seems to corrupt everything it touches, and everyone who handles it. Most important, finally, is to highlight that, although presented as negative characters in the balance of forces of the book, the perpetrators are never judged by the author for their evildoing but by their intentions: Krupskaya, Alexandrov and Benjamin are convinced that they act for the good of humanity, or at least their country.

Nevertheless, a reader of *Rising Up and Rising Down* can understand that the author, although sympathising with the perpetrators as human beings, is not forgetting their deeds, as they break what Vollmann defines as 'Golden Rule' according to which violence is justified:

> 1.The Golden Rule: *Do as you would be done by*. But in the event that I would wish others to do unto me something which others would not wish for themselves, then the Golden Rule would not be justified. In fact, it would become the Zealot's Golden Rule. [Mostly justified]
>
> […]

> 2.The Empath's Golden Rule: *Do unto others, not only as you would be done by, but also as they would be done by. In the case of any variance, do the more generous thing.* [Justified]. (*RDRD*, p. 449)

Vollmann's Golden Rule is a reprise and an expansion of Jesus's sentence, in order to exclude a too strict interpretation of it. The Empath's Golden Rule, moreover, suggests one should always act not only according to his view of the world, but also in order to meet others'. Nevertheless, as the comments between brackets show, Vollmann is open to the possibility of exceptions in the very moment he formulates his rules. Neither Alexandrov nor Benjamin (or Hitler, to move to the other ideological extreme) would accept the violence they inflict upon others, or think that others would accept it. In Vollmann's system, violence is also justified 'in legitimate self-defense or the defense of other human beings against imminent physical arm' and 'in defense of individual right' (*RDRD*, p. 461). In this context, 'legitimate self-defense means that the provocation and thus the initial threat lie largely on the other side'. While Vollmann does not explicitly judge characters such Alexandrov or Benjamin, one must not take this silence for sympathy or support. In Vollmann, the author's silence and abstinence from commenting is the basis of narration, but the evidence of the moral failure of the characters is evident by their very presentation and in the style in which their stories are written (the harsh yet ambiguous judgments of Alexandrov, the harsh and bureaucratic sentences of Hilde Benjamin), and it appears increasingly patent in the wider context of Vollmann's theory of violence.

4. Völkisch Ideology: The Sleepwalker and Colonel Hagen

Völkisch ideology is characterised in the book by a continuous evocation of myth. The mythological references of *Europe Central* are originated from various sources of German mythology, mainly the *Poetic Edda* and the *Nibelungenlied*, often filtered through Wagner's operas. Mythological elements are appropriated without any particular onomastic coherence, in order to be faithful to the incongruence and the variety of the fonts[38].

[38] *EC*, p. 754: 'Regarding the *Ring* Cycle, *Parzival*, Eschenbach's *Tristan and Isolde*, the *Nibelungenlied* and the Norse songs of the *Poetic Edda*, it should be noted that the names and acts alter in variations of those stories: Hogni is Hagen, and Gunther Gunnar; Brynhild spells her name "Brunnhilde" whenever she finds herself in a Wagner's opera. Guthrùn may metamorphose into Kriemhild or Grimhild, or vanish entirely. Siegfried wins Brunnhilde for Gunther by riding through a wall of flame, or else he has already done this, awoken her and pledged troth before he ever met Gunther. In either case, the relation between Siegfried and Gunther is a constant:

Mythology is central to the language of the German narrators, as opposed to the Soviet narrators who openly refuse it ('In our Soviet literature of today […], there is scant room for epics and suchlike old trash', *EC*, p. 64). This language gives form to an idea often implicit, yet central, in fascism. Vollmann describes fascism not only as an ideology but also as a *magical*[39] attempt to transform the present into a mythical time and to cancel history and therefore death ('to push death aside for ever and ever', *EC*, p. 12), thereby creating a 'time without time'[40]: 'He said to me: "How well do you remember our national epic?" / "The one that's seven hundred years old, or the one we're writing now?" / "They're the same"' (*EC*, p. 103). To express this feature of fascism, Vollmann makes his narrators speak a language not only full of mythological references but constructed as a mythological discourse: Norse mythology is not a comparison to events contemporary to the narrator, but a parallel, something that is happening in the very same moment. In *Europe Central*, historical events are narrated as if they were mythological tales, and mythological tales are presented as real events:

> What else was happening when Parzival killed the Red Knight? On the far side of Myrkvith Forest, where ogresses ride wolves and use snakes for reins, past Sun Fell and Snow Fell, in Sowjet-Russland, another Red Knight (I mean Kirov) fell to Russia's Parzival, who attended the funeral, called for vengeance, and launched his Great Terror. It was a year after Erich von Manstein had been promoted to Colonel and a year before Friedrich Paulus would be promoted to Colonel. (*EC*, p. 84)

The very nickname Adolf Hitler is given throughout the whole book, the Sleepwalker, is indicative in this sense, to the extent that it suggests that his actions are taking place in a mythical, dream-like landscape, rather than in history (and in fact, as we have seen, in 'The Sleepwalker' Hitler's story is paralleled with Wagnerian references), or that history itself is shaped as myth. Although Vollmann is the only author I study who explicitly refers this term to Hitler himself, the theme of sleepwalking in reference to Nazism is shared also by Bolaño (in *Estrella distante*, we have seen that Wieder is said to commit his first crime 'con la seguridad de un sonámbulo', *ED*, p. 32) and Littell (Max's matricide is carried out in a state of consciouslessness). The diffusion of such a motive is a sign that this theme is modelled on a certain magical and mediumistic interpretation of Hitlerism.

---

vainglorious complacency on the one hand, with a hint of illicit intimacy between Siegfried and Brunnhilde, and envious, resentful dependency on the other. I have tried to respect the appropriate consistencies and inconsistencies'.

[39] Emanuele Severino quoted in Galli 1989, p. 11.

[40] Esposito 2015, p. 287. See also Galli 1989, pp. 5-7, and Mazower 1998, pp. 26-31.

Sleepwalking connotes a dream-like condition that is situated outside history and traditional logic. In this sense, like the proliferation of mythical metaphors and images in the book, sleepwalking reflects the irrational (meaning non-logocentric) ideas that underlie fascism, and its ambition to create a time outside history and outside time itself (a Thousand-Year Reich). Moreover, this reference to sleepwalking is also surely intended to refer to the almost mediumistic and spiritualistic qualities that Hitler, as an orator, displayed in the eyes of his contemporaries[41], exciting the masses as if he was possessed. On the contrary, when Stalin is given a nickname, he is suggestively called 'the Realist'.

The elimination of historical time in favor of a mythical, circular time is a key feature of fascist ideology that Vollmann demonstrates to have clearly understood, placing it at the core of his representation of fascism. It is a philosophical vision that structures the thought of two of the main right-wing, anti-modern thinkers: Julius Evola and René Guénon. Since his seminal work, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (1931), Evola's thought – inseparable from magical and esoteric elements, full of references to Tantrism, Indian philosophy, Gnosticism and Neoplatonism – is centered around the concept of Tradition (always capitalised). Tradition is not a cultural heritage, but a set of absolute and eternal principles such as authority, hierarchy and discipline[42] in perennial struggle again chaos and dissolution. Guénon's Traditionalism (also known as Perennialism), as with Evola's ideas, operates an eclectic and syncretic reading of Christian, Hindu, Taoist and Sufi mysticism; further, it also focuses on the existence of an absolute and ahistorical truth[43]. What is important to notice in relation to the image of the Sleepwalker is therefore the existence, in the self-representation of fascism, of a gnostic path that can lead to the knowledge of an absolute, metaphysical truth, that fascism as an ideology attempts to restore on Earth. Sleepwalking, then, is not just an image of a mythical action (the performance of a certain rite, for instance), but a mythical thought and vision of human history.

The Sleepwalker's story is often critically read in relation to (and enriched by) references to the great German epics of *Nibelungenlied* and *Parzival*, both also appropriated by Wagner in

---

[41] *Ibid,* pp. 100-102. This aspect of fascism was foreseen by Thomas Mann already in 1929, in his novella *Mario und der Zauberer*, where the figures of the magician and hypnotiser become an allegory for the Fascist leader. In Vollmann and the other authors of this thesis, the hypnotiser can perform his magic only because he is already hypnotised himself.

[42] See on this topic Cassata 2003, pp. 77-90, Furlong 2011 (1), pp. 33-34 and 2011 (2), pp. 37-52, and Cassini Wolf 2016, pp. 481-482. In his first important work, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, Evola underlines explicitly the coincidence of historical time with the time of modernity, suggesting instead that his esoteric research focuses on a time outside history. The opposition between historical and mythological time is not, according to Evola, relative, as if these two ages were part of a same timeline: it is, on the contrary, qualitative, substantial, since they differ completely, and do not belong to the same conceptual category (1934, p. 10).

[43] Sedgwick 2004, pp. 21-54 about Guénon, and pp. 95-118 about the relationship between Traditionalism and fascism.

his operas. While I will refer to the *Nibelungenlied* and its meaning in Hitler's parable later in this section, I shall now treat Hitler's comparison with Parsifal. This comparison is less emphasised but perhaps more obscure than Hagen's story, even if only for the fact that it is a comparison and not a symbolic figuration, and that therefore the terms to explain are two and not a single one. Vollmann refers to the hero, Parzival (using then the old spelling and not the Wagnerian diction, Parsifal) in the story 'When Parzival Killed the Red Knight'. He evokes two episodes contained in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, specifically in books III and IV: the killing of the Red Knight, and the liberation of the city of Queen Condwiramus by the kill of Galogandres, standard bearer of the besieging king Clamidê. It is not particularly clear what these episodes are supposed to signify: while the killing of the Red Knight is quite arbitrarily paralleled with the elimination of Röhm's SA[44] (is it possible that Röhm is called a 'red' knight because of the socialist sympathies of his Brownshirts?), the reference to Galogandres and Condwiramus seem rather obscure. The aim of the presence of such legends in the text is not to clarify but to obfuscate historical events and reflections, situating them in a haze of Germanic references used as totems.

However, if we look at the version of the myth given by Wagner in his *Parsifal*, a more coherent meaning of Vollmann's comparison can be deduced. In Wagner's opera, Parsifal was raised by his mother, whose husband and other sons were killed in war. Parsifal is unaware both of his name and of the ideals of knighthood. However, having met a group of Knights of the Round Table, he expresses his desire to become a knight himself. He represents therefore an image of a *tumbe klâre*, a pure idiot, a primitive saint – the only one, thus, capable of accomplishing the task of healing King Amfortas. To an extent, then, this comparison reflects the certainty of Hitler (whose obsession for Wagner is notorious, and often recalled in the book) as being some reincarnation of that principle of holy naiveté that Parsifal represented. Such a thought was shared to a certain extent also by his contemporaries and was part of the political mythology of the Reichskanzler, such that Ezra Pond could famously write that Hitler was a modern Joan of Arc[45]. Moreover, two of the main personal biographical details of Wagner's

[44] *EC*, p. 81: 'When Parzival killed the Red Knight simply because he longed to wear his armor, the King felt sad and the court damsels wept; all the same, one couldn't blame Parzival any more than one can the kitten who proudly slays his first robin redbreast. Action is what it is: scarlet feathers, red blood, grey guts and a stench. Cruel? Yes. Useless? Not at all. That's how they learn. / When a certain sleepwalker liquidated the Brownshirts, don't think he didn't have his reasons!'. It is worth noticing that, at the end of the story, Stalin is defined 'Russia's Parzival', his Red Knight being Kirov (p. 84).

[45] Hans Rudolf Vaget has written extensively on this topic (2007, pp. 95-114). Adopting Greenblatt's category of self-fashioning, Vaget argues that 'Hitler's identity formation displays that characteristic initial step of submitting to an absolute authority. In Elizabethan England, God, as revealed in scripture, represented that authority. In Hitler's case, that authority was Wagner' (p. 98). While it is true that Hitler was mainly inspired in his political role of tribune of the people by Wagner's *Rienzi* (p. 100), frequent references to *Parsifal* are also present in Hitler's

Parsifal are also shared by Hitler. One is Parsifal's chastity (Wagner's main innovation on the myth[46]), since, although Hitler had sexual relations in his life, he was notoriously uninterested in women, and disapproved of promiscuity. The other is the saviour-knight's vegetarianism[47]: Hitler was a well-known vegetarian (at least for propaganda purposes)[48]. In other words, the attribution of Parsifal's pure madness to Hitler (however preposterous and the result of self-representation and indirect discourse by Hitler himself) is nothing but a way of reinforcing the very same meaning of the image of the Sleepwalker. This being said, I believe that, although the general meaning of the parallel with Parsifal may be explained, the specific references are not entirely supposed to have a precise meaning, and that they aim, on the contrary, rather to create a sense of uniformity and mythological dreaminess in the language of the German narrators.

Strictly correlated to the linguistic pattern of the narrators and to Hitler's figuration as the Sleepwalker is the presence of Hagen in the book, who is the protagonist of the stories 'Operation Magic Fire' and 'Operation Hagen', and who makes appearances in several others. Hagen (who also appears with the name Hogni and a significantly less important role in the *Poetic Edda*) is one of the main characters of the *Nibelungenlied*, the thirteenth-century epic poem that merges the stories[49] of Siegfried and Kriemhild's love, and the destruction of the people of the Burgundies by the hand of the Huns. In this poem, Hagen represents an ambiguous figure. On the one hand, especially in the first part, he seems to incarnate the reason of State, and serves as a symbol of loyalty and devotion to his king[50]. It is in fact for King Gunther's sake that he decides to kill Siegfried with fraudulently, and for the glory and safety of the Burgundies that he deprives Kriemhild of the treasure. On the other hand, Hagen seems also to represent a desire for death, the voluptuous and heroic acceptation of it in the name of honour. It is significant that Vollmann has Hagen's first appearance coincide with a mention to Wagner's *Ring Cycle* (*EC*, p. 100), as if to suggest that Hagen is a both a figure of German national spirit and a product of the self-representation of German identity.

---

self-myth-making (p. 112). These aimed to present Hitler as a pure saviour of German people in the troubled times of Weimar, as Parsifal was for King Amfortas.

[46] McGlathery 2005, p. 56.

[47] Manacorda 1997, p. XV-XVI.

[48] According to Galli (1989, p. 105), Hitler derived in fact his vegetarianism from Wagner's example and the moral of *Parsifal*.

[49] The stories that compose the *Nibelungenlied* are so different and sometimes contradictory to have leaded the critics to question its structural and thematic unity (DeVane Brown 2015, p. 356). This contradiction clearly reflects also on the interpretations given to the figure of Hagen, who 'is typically seen either as a loyal and capable vassal or as the central villain of the poem' (*ibid,* p. 365).

[50] Mancinelli 1972, p. LIV.

This becomes true especially in the second part of the poem. At the end of the first part, Hagen, with the consent of King Gunther, kills Siegfried after having deceived his wife, Kriemhild into telling him which is the only vulnerable part of his body. After his death, he throws Siegfried's hoard into the Rhine in order to prevent Kriemhild from using it to secure revenge against the Burgundies. Years later, Etzel (Attila), King of the Huns, asks Kriemhild to marry him, and she accepts in order to gain the means for revenge. Despite Hagen's reluctance, the Burgundies accept Kriemhild's invitation to Hungary, where they are all killed after a gruesome battle. In *Europe Central*, the acceptance of Etzel's invitation is clearly represented by the Second World War. During the crossing of the Danube (a situation that takes the form of a katabasis in the realm of the dead[51]), the nymphs of the river inform Hagen of the woeful death that awaits the whole expedition: 'It is fated that no one of you shall survive there apart from the King's chaplain […] as is well known to us. Only he will get back to Burgundy alive'[52]. After he attempts to annul this prophecy by killing the chaplain, Hagen, seeing him reaching the opposite shore alive, accepts the fate of death they are inevitably going to meet. He does not accept it, however, with melancholical resignation, but with furious effort, almost transforming the words of the nymphs into a self-fulfilling prophecy. He is the one who destroys the boats, actually preventing all of the Burgundies returning, and he starts the hostilities with the Huns, first provoking Kriemhild by wearing Siegfried's sword, and then decapitating Attila's infant son. As Mancinelli writes, Hagen gains a heroic status because of the obstination with which he consciously provokes and hastens the fall of the Burgundies[53]. Such an attitude is exemplified, in Mancinelli's reading, by the purposeless assassination of Etzel's son.

In *Europe Central*, the role of Hagen (who now appears to be an SS colonel[54]) is not even remotely so preeminent: he is but one of the several characters that crowd the stories and could easily be ignored by a reader unfamiliar with Norse literature. However, his presence in the book should not be underestimated. Hagen represents both the incarnation of the sense of duty

---

[51] *Ibid,* pp. XLVI-XLVII.

[52] *The Nibelungenlied*, p. 194.

[53] Mancinelli, p. XLIX. Lionarons 1998, p. 170: 'Once both Hagen and the audience realize fully that the annihilation will be absolute, that no one will survive the journey, nothing looks the same. Any vestige of ordinary life in the historical world […] becomes acutely ironic, while the progress of events leading to the final destruction takes an almost mythic air of inevitability. The Burgundians have entered an Otherworld in which they are not dead, yet are no longer alive in any meaningful way'.

[54] Several references, especially in 'The Sleepwalker', are made to the *Poetic Edda* version of Hagen's story. They do not differ particularly in meaning from the ones of the *Nibelungenlied*, although the role of Hogni (the Norse version of Hagen) is reduced. As Vollmann explains in the notes to 'The Sleepwalker' (*EC*, p. 765): 'Gunnar, Hogni and Guthrùn – so they are named in the "Greenlandish Lay of Atli" in the Elder Edda, from which the *Nibelungenlied* in part derives. In the latter version of the tale, Gunnar is Gunther, Hogni becomes the barefully noble Hagen, and Guthrùn, who never wanted her brothers to come to their destruction, is now Kriemhild, who lures them to it in order to take revenge for their murder of Siegfried'.

and loyalty towards the state, and the fascination with death that infects Nazi ideology. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Hagen is proud to take the blame of the evil deeds that he suggests and which his king commits ('Let me take the blame', he says when he convinces Gunther to steal the hoard from Kriemhild[55]). Similarly, in *Europe Central* his only function seems to be to take the blame for the crimes of Germany ('So we retreated, laying down land mines like metal suitcases, and next to me a shellshocked colonel with sunken eyes kept saying over and over again: my name is Hagen. My job is to take the blame', *EC*, p. 511):

> I saw Hagen at Nuremberg – naturally. How could he not be there? He's a principal defendant! They might have let him off, since he was only a colonel, but he insists the he was really a general.
>
> I'll never forget the look on Justice Jackson's face when Hagen rose, stared straight out forward, and coolly explained: "The function of Germans in Europe, and our duty itself, is to take the blame for everything. We commit crimes so that the rest of you can feel pure". (*EC*, p. 527)[56]

Curiously enough, Hagen seems to be acting as a Christ-like figure, offering himself as a sacrifice to save and purify his people; and yet, the meaning of this purification is at least ambiguous insofar as Germany made an attempt to "resurrect" an original "purity" through ethnic cleansing during the war. While, on the one hand, Hagen serves as scapegoat for Germany's crimes (indeed, in the same way Germany has been turned into a scapegoat for European crimes), he is also the incarnation of Germany's will of self-destruction. As the narrator of 'Woman with Dead Child' says, 'This war [the Great War] was Siegfried's war. The next war would be Hagen's' (EC, p. 40)[57]. The narrator is referring to the total destruction that the Second World War brought to Germany, paralleled to the fall of the Burgundies. Despite his reluctance to go to war ('Hagen, more anciently called Hogni, had been opposed to attacking Russia in the first place', *EC*, p. 525), Hagen is a symbol of the Hitlerian *cupio dissolvi* that led to a war on multiple fronts: 'Now he [the Sleepwalker, meaning Hitler] comprehends in his soul why Gunnar and Hogni could not resist the Hunnish invitation: Although it meant doom and sister-woe, at least they'd win that brilliant if sinister moment of light when they drew near their foemen's forecourts' (*EC*, p. 136). This will of self-destruction is both explicit, as in Hitler's case, and implicit, when it manifests itself in the fanatical devotion to the principles of

[55] *The Nibelungenlied*, p. 148.

[56] Hagen reappears in what seems to be a nightmare of Hilde Benjamin, who puts him on trial again, accusing the Allies to have only simulated his hanging in Nuremberg (p. 593).

[57] In this sense, it is interesting to observe that, in the *Nibelungenlied*, Hagen functions as a double of Siegfried. Both of the heroes are protagonists of episodes related to the underworld: Siegfried's rescue of the Nibelung warrior in adventure 8, and Hagen's encounter with the nymphs in adventure 25 (Lionarons 1998, pp. 167-169).

law, honor and duty (as it happens, for instance, in Paulus's case). In *Europe Central*, like in the *Nibelungenlied*[58], an excess of zeal in obedience leads to catastrophe. As the anonymous soldier narrator of 'Operation Citadel' states, 'it wasn't our task to win […]. It was only our job to take the blame' (*EC*, 486)[59].

5. Martyrs and Tragic Heroes

More than anything else, *Europe Central* is a book filled with depictions of victims. With the exception of the perpetrators (specifically, when they enact forms of persecution – be that corporeal violence or the inappropriate use of bureaucratic languages in cases of human rights abuses), all the characters of the book share various degrees of victimhood – be it pure and simple violence or the obligation to collaborate with its perpetrators. Of course, Vollmann's victims are not equated as such simply by the fact that they are threatened or are subjected to violence, but by the fact that they share the same inclination to act pitifully, and the same desire to help the others, to understand and take care of them, and to sacrifice themselves (all those qualities, as noted, that Krupskaya loses when she gains power). In other words, while the perpetrators, although not deprived of human impulses and moral shades, are presented as sociopaths, incapable of perceiving the suffering of the others, victims are depicted as those

[58] Gentry 1998, p. 77: 'It is ironic to note that all the concepts which have been discussed in this essay [honor, generosity, love, manners, nobility, loyalty] should have functioned – and were meant to function – as constructive elements of society. But, as we have seen, the opposite is true: an inflexible perception of the meaning and implication of these terms brings about irrevocable destruction'.

[59] On this point, we should register that Hagen is not only ambiguous in his meaning and his acts of purification but also in his name. Together with the onomastic oscillation between the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Poetic Edda*, it is unclear which historical figure may have functioned as a model for Colonel Hagen. The only two people named Hagen that could be compared with the Colonel Hagen of *Europe Central* are Albrecht von Hagen and Herbert Hagen. The first was a German jurist known for participating in the plot to assassinate Hitler in 1944, and hanged after that. However, in *Europe Central*, no mention is made to this episode, and nothing allows us to draw a comparison between the jurist and the colonel. The latter was a SS-Sturmbannführer, the youngest official of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Main Security Office) and a collaborator of Adolf Eichmann – involved therefore in the extermination of Jews. Herbert Hagen seems to be the most likely candidate as Colonel Hagen's historical double: however, he was only a commandant, never a colonel. Moreover, the book's Hagen is presented as already powerful and influential in 1936, at the beginning of 'Operation Magic Fire'; while, in 1936, Herbert Hagen is only twenty-three years old and had just become a member of the Sicherheitsdienst (the intelligence office of the SS). While I do understand that Vollmann may not have intended to refer to anyone else but to the mythological character, I also believe that this ambiguity enriches the character's own complexity. Finally, a coincidence of which, however random, Vollmann was surely aware having read Friedlander's biography of Gerstein: Hagen is also the name of the town where Gerstein spent his early years. In other words, Vollmann seems to be making a deliberate use of these coincidences in order to add layers of interpretation to the text. Most importantly, by pluralising the possible identifications for Hagen, Vollmann renders him a figure of a German *everyman*, indeed able to function as a symbol for Germany.

who constantly suffer, but who suffer, mainly, because they are incapable of helping others, or of preventing the damage being done to them.

The prototype of all the victims of totalitarianism in *Europe Central* is Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, simply known in the book as Zoya. A Russian partisan famously hanged by the Nazi occupants, Zoya functions as a prototype because of her lack of characterisation. Through the whole novel, she is only referred to by her first name; her identity is alluded to by the famous photograph of her hanging and her equally famous last words ('You can't hang all hundred and ninety millions of us', *EC*, p. 268). Her function, in other words, is almost that of an icon – thus reinforcing the idea that the characters of *Europe Central* are meant to be examples, rather than similes.

If 'The Saviors' opens the book and evokes a reflection on the loss of compassion in the life of Krupskaya, 'Woman with Dead Child', the story of the life of Käthe Kollwitz between the two wars, introduces the theme of victimhood. In this story, the constant references to Kollwitz's artistic career and to her paintings and sculptures filled with grief (paralleled to her own personal story and her difficulties) introduce the mass of obscure, yet real, people who suffered and died during and between the wars. The focus of Kollwitz's work is, since the First World War, the miserable conditions of the lower classes, portrayed with a style that merges (not unlike Vollmann's prose) realistic details and allegorical figures.

Kollwitz can be considered an antithesis to the lack of empathy of the perpetrators, because of her personal life (she lost her son during World War I and her grandson during World War II) and especially because of her artistic work (which merges together social themes such as the suffering of the working classes with universal, isolated figures of grief as in her famous *Woman with Dead Child* (1903)[60]). Of course, this perpetual witnessing of suffering cannot but lead to the pain of the witness, and to their reduction, in Vollmann's universe, to a destiny of martyrdom. As Lucy R. Rippard writes, 'I suspect that the real burden Kollwitz was trying to express was the burden of caring too much, the almost tragic concern of a person who cannot ignore what happens around her, to whom social justice is necessary as food and shelter. She wrote of "the woman who feels everything" and said: "I want to do a drawing of a person who sees the suffering of the world"'[61].

[60] Rippard 1981, p. VIII: 'Her politics emerged from her social life, her gut, her heart, her historical awareness, and merged with the forms of the human bodies that were the vehicles for her beliefs. She dealt with tragedy, not pathos, though tragedy was not usually associated with the lives of working-class people'.
[61] *Ibid,* p. X.

A figure open to comparison with Kollwitz is of course Anna Akhmatova, the delegate of the literary world in *Europe Central* (since Vollmann only notably depicts one character for each form of art: Shostakovich the musician, Akhmatova the poet, Kollwitz the painter, Karmen the director). I have already discussed Akhmatova's life in opposition to the figure of her persecutor, Comrade Alexandrov (and it is worth noticing that Kollwitz manifests a fear of Alexandrov during her journey in the Soviet Union, *EC*, p. 56), and the morbid abuse she faces from an officer who is clearly obsessed by her personal life and her work. What Kollwitz and Akhmatova have in common are the reaction to the losses they suffer and the pain they are inflicted – reactions which are not, as Shostakovich's, of compromise, and which does not provoke nervous breakdown but rather take the form of decent grief. Both women conduct a kind of private suffering that does not allow their persecutors to take anything more of their lives.

The story of Käthe Kollwitz also functions as a device to depict at the beginning of the book both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, since she, as a Communist sympathiser, is invited to exhibit her works in the USSR. This geographical duplication (that has a comparison in the book only with Vlasov's, as we will see) transforms her, paradoxically, into a victim of both the regimes. The conclusion of the story is extremely suggestive in this sense, since it underlines the equivalent distance of both these political systems from that quality of human compassion that Kollwitz incarnates:

> In the end, her art got supplanted in both zones. A grief-stricken mother holding her dead child is all very well, but perhaps a trifle too universal – or, as Comrade Stalin would say, incorrect. For how could our ends be served by implying that everybody, even the enemy herself, grieves over dead children? Better by far that famous poster of the Red Army woman with one hand on her hip, another on her bemealed breast, standing sentry-straight before a bullet-pocked German wall, her red-starred cap at an angle to show off her hair (short, yet feminine) as she smiles into the sideways future! Thus runs the Russian view. On the other side we merely need to quote our Führer's dictum that *the Germans – this is essential – will have to constitute amongst themselves a closed society, like a fortress.* (*EC*, pp. 62-63)

The most present, although not the most important of these victims, is Dimitri Dimitriyevich Shostakovich. The life of the composer and his love relationship with Elena Konstantinovskaya inhabits the book, being the centre of several of its stories. However suggestive and voluptuously written, their love story (by Vollmann's own admission widely exaggerated and fictive in several of its parts, *EC*, pp. 807-808) does not help very much in understanding the meaning of *Europe Central* – although Vollmann claims that 'above all Europa is Elena' (*EC*,

p. 808; sic). This refers to her attractiveness, to her mysteriousness, and to her capability of loving and being loved, while indeed the name 'Elena' as a metaphor for a continent destroyed by the conflict of two factions is an allusion to the *Iliad*. In fact, Shostakovich seems to represent mainly, in *Europe Central*, the prototype of the victim hero, an ambiguous martyr like Gerstein: 'When I think of Shostakovich, and when I listen to his music, I imagine a person consumed by fear and regret, a person who […] did what little he could to uphold the good – in this case, freedom of artistic creation, and the mitigation of other people's emergencies' (*EC*, p. 808).

Shostakovich is persecuted by the Soviet regime for his formalism – in other words, a deviation from the canon of socialist realism that the minister, Andrej Ždanov preached. Like Akhmatova, Shostakovich – profoundly sympathetic in all his fears and tics (such as the continuous 'you know' that he mutters), even in 'his selfishness, his ugly spitefulness, his narcissism' (*EC*, p. 214) – represents passion and artistic freedom against the attempt of totalitarianism to enslave it. In this sense, his burning love for Elena seems to work as a simile for the effort and passion he puts into his music, which Vollmann describes in powerful, emotional passages[62].

Shostakovich's life is not depicted as a progression, as a rise-and-decline parable: instead, it seems to be a sort of stillness in fear. From one of the first stories, 'The Palm Tree of Deborah', which describes the disastrous performance of *Ledi Mekbet* in Moscow, in the presence of Stalin himself, and Shostakovich's terror when the dictator leaves the theatre before the end of the production, Shostakovich is always described as under the menace of the Communist Party. The accusations of formalism, and therefore of reactionism, are a leitmotiv of the whole book (*EC*, pp. 175, 190, 623, 629, 634, 638), and he undergoes every form of humiliation, from accepting that his son is forced to denounce him (*EC*, p. 638) to receiving lessons about Stalin's political thoughts (*EC*, p. 656). However, it is worth noticing that Shostakovich refuses, for the main part of his life (and especially during Stalin's dictatorship), to become a member of the Communist party, a sign of his unwillingness to participate to the suffering of others and join the perpetrators in exchange of a better life (since, when he finally joins the party, the condition of artists in Soviet Russia have significantly improved).

[62] *EC*, p. 180: 'The opening theme [of the Eight Symphony in C Minor] truly does bear comparison with the "Fate" motif of Beethoven's Fifth, but whereas the urgency of the German melody is tempered by its composer's autumnal mellowness, Shostakovich's version strikes us as harshly as a Russian winter. The apples have fallen, snow is here, and destiny holds out no possibility of anything but evil. The deep, thrumming resonance of the very first chord evokes a community united only by sleep. Wickedness hovers outside the frosty windows of Leningrad. This wickedness is on the march; and the Eight Symphony, compressing time like the walls of a condemned cell, hastens its arrival'.

Despite the fact that readers (at least those interested in classical music) are aware of the fame and fortune of Shostakovich's work in the present day, the end of his story, like Kollwitz's, resembles the outcome of the life of so many protagonists of *Europe Central*: after a life of suffering, they are forgotten. Notwithstanding his critical success and the public position he reaches in his later life, Shostakovich is a loser, since the persecutions he faced prevented him from reaching the success and the notoriety he deserved:

> One might think that his reputation was embalmed as safely as was Lenin in the mausoleum (Stalin, I'm afraid, had been secretly taken out once his fame decayed). And yet the regime might have felt some bitterness about his formalist infidelities. I may be imagining things. However, The Soviet Way of Life, published the year before his demise, mentions the interesting results obtained from a poll conducted in industrial enterprises in the Urals. The workers were asked to name their favorite artists. Of the composers, Tchaikovsky gets mentioned first, and Mussorgsky last, with a couple of foreigners in between. Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich does not appear. After all, no one individual can be indispensable in our Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, greatest and most perfect country in the world, whose borders touch a dozen seas. (*EC*, p. 727)[63]

It is not important that these words are, in fact, false: what matters is that the narrator of the story has the possibility to pronounce them, stating therefore the victory of the Soviet state over their citizenry – a victory that extends its proportion even after death.

Although he cannot be listed among the perpetrators, Roman Karmen's obedience to the Soviet regime and his enthusiasm as a propaganda artist mark his ideal opposition to Shostakovich. While their relationship with Elena is described as a triangle, it resembles more two oppositional poles, where Shostakovich's freedom in musical composition (his 'formalism') leads him to persecution, and where Karmen, whose work is enthusiastic yet cold and shallow, represents the artist immanent to the regime. In a form of retaliation, Karmen's destiny, unlike Shostakovich's posthumous triumph of which the reader is aware, is to be forgotten, and the quality of his work is underestimated: as 'the University of Chicago film expert Yuri Tsivian' says, 'If he filmed the surrender at Stalingrad, that wasn't because he was a great artist, but because he was a trusted official. He was brave and reliable, but not anyone I would admire' (*EC*, p. 229). However, Vollmann does not judge him for the apparent modesty

[63] This ending seems modeled on the incipit of Danilo Kiš's story, 'A Tomb for Boris Davidovich' (that gives its name to the whole collection): 'History recorded him as Novsky, which is only a pseudonym (or, more precisely, one of his pseudonyms). But what immediately spawns doubt is the question: did history really *record* him? In the index of the *Granat Encyclopedia*, among the 246 authorized biographies and autobiographies of great men and participants in the Revolution, his name is missing' (1976, p. 73).

of his artistic efforts: ‘Poor Karmen! And yet, what if Professor Tsivian was wrong? For that matter, even if he were right, how was Karmen supposed to act? All we can do in our life is our best’ (*EC*, pp. 229 and 808). Karmen’s oblivion, in other words, is real, as it is stated by an impartial narrator that can be assimilated to Vollmann himself, and by a real scholar of Soviet cinema; Shostakovich’s destiny is just the empty proclaim of Comrade Alexandrov.

Despite their differences, the two specular characters of Andrei Vlasov and Friedrich Paulus are called to represent in the book the opposition between politics and military ethos, and the attempt to find a space in between to operate the good. What is interesting about these two characters is that they both commit errors and crimes because of the faith they have in their country and their leaders. However, at the same time the suffering that their obedience brings to their soldiers is no less than that which they bring to themselves, transforming them into victims.

Andrei Vlasov is a Soviet general who is captured by the Nazis during the Leningrad siege, and who guides the Russian Liberation Army (a military organisation promoted by the Germans) in an attempt to raise support for their occupation. However, the creation of Vlasov’s army encounters great resistance among the high ranks of the Nazi party, among them Hitler himself, and it is forbidden to operate until the very last days of the war. In this sense, Vlasov, like Kollwitz, is crushed between the two opposite totalitarianisms. During his service in the Russian forces, he proves himself a brave and competent general, but he is forced to sacrifice the life of his men in unsuccessful (and completely vain) attempts to defend the front. To his objections that a retreat is necessary, and that it would save the life of his soldiers without bringing any damage to the war effort, the political commissar of his unit replies: ‘Everything you say may be correct from the military viewpoint, but politically speaking it’s quite incorrect’, reminding him that his ‘eldest brother was shot for anti-Bolshevik activity during the Civil War’ (*EC*, p. 266).

In the same way, Vlasov meets in Germany the same political opposition to rational conduct of war affairs, when Hitler repeatedly forbids his army to operate (*EC*, p. 311). Vlasov is also aware both of the brutalities of the Soviet Communist party and of the Nazi party, since he is informed of the massacre of Babi Yar (*EC*, p. 277) and of the existence of death camps (*EC*, pp. 290-291). However, in the interstice between these two totalitarianisms, Vlasov attempts desperately to opt for the choice that would be best not for him, but for the people he is asked to guide. The sentence that the narrator gives about him in the last few paragraphs of the story

points out clearly the opposition of the form of compassion his figure incarnates, relative to the fanaticism that totalitarianism requires:

> We might say that his mistake was cosmopolitanism, which the Great Soviet Encyclopedia defines as the bourgeois-reactionary ideology of so-called "world citizenship". Cosmopolitanism pretends to be all-embracing. Really it's but a front for the aggressively transnational surges of capital. Humanistic pacifism and utopianism are other masks of the same phenomenon – which of course differs utterly from proletarian internationalism. (*EC*, p. 327)

Paulus, the Field-Marshal in command of the Sixth Army during the disaster of Stalingrad, and later a prisoner and collaborator of the Soviets, shares a similar meaning with Vlasov. In a passage that I have quoted in the first section, Paulus is explicitly said to be part of the story of Germany in order 'to illustrate a principle, to carry out a function, to think and suffer while things were done to him' (*EC*, pp. 393-394). And in fact, Paulus is one of several figures in Vollmann's books that seem to find meaning in an almost gnostic path of suffering and degradation[64]. In his case, the end of this gnostic path through suffering is the grade of Field-Marshal, a role he yearns for with patience, obedience, and devotion to his Führer:

> [Von Manstein's promotion] made twelve [field-marshals] already. How could he, Friedrich Paulus, become the thirteenth? After the reduction of Stalingrad, if the Führer did want that city, Sixth Army would press on to the Caspian Sea. Possibly, were his progress sufficiently rapid and his prisoners numerous enough, the Führer might remember him… Sitting down to his field-desk, he composed a message of congratulations to Field-Marshal von Manstein. (*EC*, p. 342)

Of course, Paulus' devotion is not to Hitler as a person or to his ideology (and in fact 'immediately upon succeeding to command of Sixth Army, he'd canceled our late Field-Marshal von Reichenau's order 10.10.41 to proceed with extreme measures against subhumans', *EC*, pp. 347-348). His devotion is rather to Hitler as an incarnation of Germany. Like Vlasov, he accepts the sacrifices he has to make ('Against all your objections I speak two words: Adolf Hitler', *EC*, p. 372), and, like Vlasov, he does not commit any crime out of cruelty[65]: the suffering and the humiliation he endures are mitigated by the trust that Hitler seems to have in him ('Then he was happy again. Our Führer still believed in him. Our Führer's confidence was as vital to him as is gasoline to our troops at Stalingrad', *EC*, p. 376).

---

[64] Coffman 2015, p. 15.

[65] *Ibid,* pp. 347-349. Vollmann, commenting on the already mentioned quotation about order 10.10.41, opposes to Paulus the more implicated figure of von Manstein (p. 808).

Despite his faith (not dissimilar to Vlasov's faith in Russia during the defence of the country), Paulus ultimately has to face the very same destiny as the Russian general: he is captured and has to join a group of collaborationist officers and, after the war, he is held captive in East Germany where he is used for propaganda purposes (while Vlasov is executed in 1945). In this sense, their tales can be compared, in as much as, despite their implication with criminals, their intentions are always pure, and they are never ignorant of the suffering of others, nor are they spared pain. On the contrary, another general, von Manstein, is often presented as pretentious and hypocritical, and Vollmann expresses a negative judgment upon him explicitly[66].

Kurt Gerstein is, in many ways, the core hero of *Europe Central*, or at least the one whose drama is more striking and more significant for Vollmann's purpose. Gerstein is a devoted Christian who joins the SS in order to gain information of their crimes, denounce them, and sabotage them – as he does throughout the whole war, both damaging the loads of toxic gas he is supposed to look after, and trying to inform several foreign dignitaries of the Holocaust. Gerstein's tragedy lies then in the fact that his only way to influence the course of the narrative (and, of course, history) without consequences for his innocent family is to participate in deplorable actions: his only way to denounce the extermination of Jews is to contribute to it. As Santin writes, 'Gerstein's moral dilemma is not characterized by an obvious choice between "right" and "wrong", which is a recipe for melodrama, but by an exigently tragic collision between "right" and "right"; he must make a crushing moral choice between saving the life of innocent Jews while also keeping his family safe'[67].

In this sense, Gerstein's dilemma is different both from Vlasov and Paulus (who morally struggle between obedience to orders and the wellbeing of their soldiers) and from victims such as Shostakovich or Kollwitz (who are simply persecuted). Like the Generals, Gerstein attempts to fulfil two opposite demands; but, unlike them, his collaboration with the perpetrators is only useful to his purposes, and he does not benefit from it. Vollmann unambiguously states the

[66] *EC*, p. 805, note: 'My own assessment of the man has much to do with the following remark in "Lost Victories" [von Manstein's book of memories] (p. 533): "I can only say that it was not granted to me – as one who had for several years past been engrossed in arduous duties at the front – to perceive Hitler's real nature, or the moral deterioration of the régime, to the extent to which we can obviously do today. Rumors of the kind that circulated at home hardly penetrated to the front, perhaps least of all to ourselves". I can accept this to an extent, but, as the Nuremberg Trial verdicts insisted, blindness at some point becomes culpability. Moreover, what does "moral deterioration" mean? Did he think the Third Reich to be moral at its inception? Did the mass murder of the Brownshirts and the opening of concentration camps at the very beginning not trouble him?'.
[67] Santin 2015, p. 141-142.

righteousness of Gerstein, and his ‘clean hands’ (something he does not do for any other character):

> The tale of Gerstein has haunted me for a number of reasons. “At the beginning of Nazism in Germany”, writes Marie-Louise von Franz, “I was several times asked by Germans in what respect they were abnormal, for though they were unable to accept Nazism, not doing so made them doubt their own normality […] Misery fell upon people who had done the right thing”. […] Some of the remarks in ‘Clean Hands’ about the conflicting necessities of parleying with evil and of respecting it by not investigating it are partially indebted from this book; likewise the notion that someone who continues to fight evil and gets victimized is from a psychological perspective complicit. Basically, what von Franz is arguing is that if we repress our own evil side, it will come out somewhere else. My motivation in placing such arguments into the mouths of the other characters is to deepen our sense of what Gerstein’s biographer has called “the ambiguity of good”. All the same, I firmly believe that there was nothing ambiguous about Gerstein’s good, unavailing though it proved to be. He is one of my heroes. (*EC*, p. 784)

The expression ‘ambiguity of good’ comes from the first serious study on the figure of Gerstein, Saul Friedlander’s *Kurt Gerstein ou L’Ambiguïté du Bien*. The meaning of this expression, which recalls Hannah Arendt’s banality of evil, is however explained by Friedlander in the introduction, commenting Gerstein’s suicide in the prison where he was held, waiting for judgment. Despite his being, according to his friends, ‘a convinced Christian’ and ‘a man of absolute purity’, ‘one feels a certain malaise, an inability to arrive at a full explanation of Gerstein as a person. Otto Wehr says: “A figure such as Gerstein, judged in half-light, or better still, in the glaring light of bourgeois criteria, cannot fail to seem improbable. His uncanny skill in hiding his deep, inner, Christian life under a mask, for the sole purpose of helping others, defies judgment. It is impossible to do justice to this man […] if one applies normal moral standards or if one attempts to explain him in political or psychological terms”’[68].

What emerges from Friedlander’s (and Vollmann’s) portraits of Gerstein is a tormented man who desperately tries to help others with all the means he has. Notwithstanding Gerstein’s apparent exemplary moral character, after his death he is not recognised as a hero or just, nor is he condemned as a criminal. He is perceived simply as a sort of accomplice. His name, says Vollmann, is not written in the list of the just nor the persecutors: ‘What then is Gerstein? Wherein should he be inscribed? GEHEIM’ (*EC*, p. 425; *geheim* means *secret*). Gerstein’s destiny is, as for other characters we have seen, a destiny of silence and inattention. In fact,

[68] Friedlander 1967, p. X.

after the war, having revealed to the Allies his actions during the conflict, he kills himself, and is posthumously condemned as a ‘petty Nazi’ by the Denazification Council of Tubingen. Finally, as Vollmann notices, his pardon in 1965 goes unnoticed, being too late for him to function as a popular example (*EC*, p. 471).

What seems to be refused by those that would judge him is his apparent ambiguity, the fact that his hands, apparently, are not clean at all. Gerstein himself is painfully aware of this contradiction: ‘Herr Gerstein, forgive me for asking this, but have you ever personally taken part in the actions against the Jews? / I have clean hands, he replied through clenched teeth’ (*EC*, p. 464). However, as Santin notices, ‘Kurt Gerstein’s moral conscience remains “clean” precisely because he gets his hands “dirty” – that is, because he makes difficult, messy moral decisions without “washing his hands” of Nazi atrocities’[69].

Gerstein is not a typical hero, and certainly he is not the typical hero of a tale of resistance against totalitarianism. The nature of his task and efforts is hidden (*geheim*) to everyone else, and, in addition to the posthumous disdain of his judges, in life he has to experience resistance from his own family and friends. Gerstein’s family opposes his intent not only by the pressure they put on him, but also by the way in which they actively obstructing him: his wife opposes his task (*EC*, p. 439), and his father, a judge, repeatedly denies the preeminence of Christian compassion over the laws of the State (*EC*, pp. 430 and 464). A friend of his also accuses him of exaggerating the extermination campaign and the plight of those held in concentration camps, and to be secretly enjoying his own martyrdom (*EC*, p. 467). Apparently, no one seems to be able to accept a hero who stands in between two evils, and who does not fit into precise rigid categories of heroism or martyrdom: however, ‘his story is as rare, and hence as shocking, as full-figure reliefs of the saints on otherwise featureless walls’ (*EC*, p. 425; the alliteration of the f is suggestive of the nobility of the alliterative poetry of the ancient epic poems of the German and Anglo-Saxon tradition). By placing such relevance on the profound ambiguity of main character, Kurt Gerstein’s story, Vollmann performs a double task. He cleans Gerstein’s reputation showing that, to an extent, there was nothing ambiguous in his good, and that good actions can only be performed through compromising reality. And at the same time, he illustrates, through Gerstein’s perpetual sense of guilt, that even a correct and heroic behaviour can lead to self-destruction.

[69] Santin 2015, p. 158.

To reach a conclusion, now that we have seen the intrinsic ambiguity of Vollmann's heroes (and in the presence of the one who most of all exhibits and is immune to heroism), and now that we have observed the continuous moral non-intervention of the author, we should return once again to the concept of parable that we evoked at the beginning of this chapter. As I have already said, despite Vollmann's semantic shift, what he calls parable is a key concept through which to understand *Europe Central*. As Santin writes, 'by using fiction to represent a historical moral actor like Kurt Gerstein judging different moral categories and choosing between them, Vollmann illustrates how fiction in particular is the most useful companion to his moral calculus. [...] In Vollmann's fiction, imaginative empathy precedes moral logic because his fiction does not demand that readers *assent* to a philosophico-ethical belief; instead, it asks readers to *imagine* a particular moral actor's historico-ideological matrix and then draw their own conclusions[70]. I have already stated that, in my opinion, Vollmann's use of the word parable is a catachresis, and that he should have instead called them *exempla*. Santin emphasises the point. Vollmann offers his readers no answer to the question he asks, and no solution for the problems he evokes. Instead, the aim of his narrative is the very fact of raising such questions and problems by recreating the moral circumstances in which they take place, and asking for a personal, empathic understanding rather than for an intellectual, ideological one.

6. 'Fiction Cannot Be Reduced to Mere Falsehood': Literature as Experience

According to Theophilus Savvas, Vollmann, like Foster Wallace and Franzen, belongs to a 'lost generation' of 'reluctant heirs to the first generation of postmodernists', who 'retain some of the impulses of postmodernism, but want to say something more directly than they believe postmodernism has the capacity to'[71]. Indeed, among the authors of this thesis, Vollmann is the one on whom the influence of American postmodernism is strongest. This is evident in the anti-mimetic, strange lyricism of his prose, which has been identified in the oscillation of narrators and in the vast employment of mythological references in the depiction of hostilities. Nevertheless, as Savvas says, Vollmann's work is distinguished from postmodernism by the profound attention he pays to reality and its complications. While it is true that Vollmann does not indulge in mimetic realism as Bolaño or Littell do, and that he does not care to recreate the

[70] *Ibid,* p. 144.
[71] Savvas 2011, p. 160.

material conditions in which the actions of his heroes take place, preferring instead intrusions of the fantastic and the supernatural, the psychological realism of his work is striking. As we have seen, Vollmann's characters, treated in moments of important moral decisions, are recreated with extreme precision as they experience their internal struggle. Moreover, even the continuous deployment of supernatural and mythical elements that characterises the German narrators must be understood as a form of ventriloquism. This is to say, the confusion of myth and history, or the presence the Kabbalistic tales is used to characterise the narrators and the protagonists; they are not a feature of the novel as a whole, as suggested by the variety of sources in this reprise of the supernatural.

Except for few symbolic characters such as Zoya, Vollmann's characters, furthermore, are not the feeble and uncertain characters of postmodernism, but round figures with strong motivations and who participate in deep introspection. The continuous shifts of narrators and focalisation are not intended to suggest the characters' lack of identity. This is evident, for instance, in the Sleepwalker's case. The use of supernatural evidence and mythical references aims, on the one hand, to guide a reading of Hitler's story, but it does not reduce it to mere allegory. Instead, by imitating the words of the Nazi propaganda, it transforms Hitler into a character coherent with the world in which he lives, made of pure ideology.

Similarly, the alternation of narrators does not suggest the 'death of the author' or a confusion of personalities and viewpoints: all the narrators are strong characters, and share the ideological framework of their countries. Their alternation, therefore, aims to produce a chorus of voices rather than to create a narrative schizophrenia. Similarly, the narrators' oscillation between omniscience and first-person (not distant from what we have seen in Bolaño) both makes the author visible to the reader and obscures him. Therefore, the narrative voice cannot be interpreted as a meta-fictional, self-reflexive, postmodern device.

The notes in *Europe Central* do not create a metafictional space or an hypertext, and do not continue the narration of the main text – as it happens in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), in which the notes contain digressions and developments of the main story, to the extent that (in Danielewski's case) they cannibalize and dissolve it. *Europe Central*'s notes rather aim to provide actual sources (although sometimes deformed or superficially interpreted[72]) for the story. Except for a few remarks, some of which I have already quoted, they are not intended to be read as part of the narration

[72] Christensen 2007, pp. 100-102.

or as supplementary comments: the story does not evolve into them[73]. Not only does Vollmann utilisation of notes signal an ambition of fidelity that has nothing in common with postmodern fiction but, further, it denies the very core of postmodern historical writing, historiographic metafiction. To explain: such a faith in historical documentation (as manifested by the notes) seems to indicate that history can indeed be known and understood, and that historians may be trusted without readers problematising their sources.

Together, these post-postmodern features (the eclipse, but not the death, of the author; psychological realism; a purpose of truthfulness) create a literary form in which the experience of the protagonists is shown in all its multiplicity and depth, with consequences that their narrative lives may be experienced by readers themselves[74]. The variety of experiences and stories that the book contains suggests that *Europe Central* does not seek to pass moral judgment over its characters, but to present them as examples of the difficulties of moral behaviour in troubling times. In *Rising Up and Rising Down*, Vollmann reports that 'the translator of two old collections of Zen koans has noted that there is no "correct" answer to a koan, and, indeed, one student's right answer may be wrong if uttered by another' (*RURD*, p. 445). Indeed, the idea that truth is, to a certain extent, performative shapes the parables of *Europe Central*. The characters are never judged according to an abstract or universal system of values, but according to their capacity and their will to act in the situations they are forced to inhabit. By way of example, Gerstein is neither defined as a villain for participating in the Holocaust nor hypocritical because he tries to sabotage the organisation he joined; he is presented as a hero because (differently, for instance, from Alexandrov) he does everything in his power to help others.

In other words, Vollmann seems to choose the Second World War as an archetypal case study for, and the opportunity to fictionalise, what he described theoretically in *Rising Up and Rising Down*. The Second World War as an historical event and as the object of memory has an exemplary status that cannot be meaningfully conveyed by the everyday violence or the late twentieth century wars and genocides described in Vollmann's theoretical essays. Insofar as *Europe Central* appears to represent the literary practice of the theoretical framework described in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, we might conclude that, at least for Vollmann, literature presents itself as the only technology through which to successfully convey a message and to intimate

[73] The main examples are a note to 'Far and Wide My Country Stretches' in which Vollmann elaborates on the relationship between Elena Kostantinovskaya and Roman Karmen (*EC*, pp. 772-773), and a personal memory in the notes at 'The Red Guillotine' (*EC*, pp. 798-799).
[74] An analysis of this characteristic of Vollmann's novelistic production is provided in Palleau-Papin 2016, with reference to *The Rifles* (1994).

the violence of human society. Vollmann himself reflects on the importance of literature as a tool through which to promote participatory interpretive and moral reflection:

> The colors of the Burmese jungle at twilight, or the scorched smell of a shelled city, do not themselves further analytical understanding. In fact, it may be argued (as I have done in my remarks on authorities and experts) that their very particularity gets in the way of it. [However] it is precisely because local conditions have such an effect upon a person's outlook that they ought to be described. […] Descriptions of personalities, appearances and the settings in which people act and react will hopefully provide further means for the reader to make that re-creation himself, and thereby to evaluate my judgment. (*RURD*, pp. 48-49)

Europe Central, being eminently more readable and more interesting than *Rising Up and Rising Down*, both because of the quality of its prose and of the intrinsic importance of the Second World War as a case study, can answer practically those questions that Vollmann raised theoretically in his essays. Vollmann as a theorist is very much aware of the power of fiction; as a consequence, he chooses to leave aside his theoretical reflections in *Europe Central* rather that inserting them and passing commentary on the novel them from a meta-narrative position of superiority. On the contrary, the stories of *Europe Central* perform the function of interrogating the certainties of readers. They serve as an invitation to readers to experience the very same dilemmas that led Vollmann to the composition of *Rising Up and Rising Down*.

7. A Digression in *The Zone of Interest*

In the 2014 novel, *The Zone of Interest* (*ZI*), Martin Amis returns to Auschwitz, twenty-five years after *Time's Arrow*. The story is told by three narrators: Angelus Thomsen, a SS officer and nephew of Martin Bormann employed in the organisation of the Buna Werke; Paul Doll, a lunatic SS officer of higher rank and a director of the Lager (camp); and Szmul (whose words occupy a significantly smaller part of the novel), a Polish Sonderkommando. Thomsen, a cynical and spoiled womaniser, becomes erotically obsessed with Doll's wife, Hannah, and courts her. Although nothing ever happens between the two, an affection grows, leading Paul Doll, increasingly paranoid, to mad jealousy, until he forces Szmul to kill Hannah, telling him that he would kill Szmul's own wife if he did not. Szmul, nevertheless, refuses, and kills himself in front of Hannah instead (only to be shot by Doll during the act), revealing to her Paul's plot.

After the war (and Paul Doll's trial and execution), in 1948, Thomsen and Hannah meet again, and once again he begins courting her, who, nevertheless, refuses.

Amis' novel resembles and even imitates Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* (and not especially brilliantly or successfully), which was published seven years earlier in 2006, more than Vollmann's *Europe Central*. I treat Littell extensively in the next chapter but, for now, it is sufficient to say that there are indeed several similarities between *The Zone of Interest* and *Les Bienveillantes*. Thomsen, as a narrator, resembles Maximilien Aue, Littell's protagonist. Thomsen is fascinating, cultivated (towards the end of the novel we learn that he used to collect works by Klee and Kandinsky), and the truthfulness of his faith in National-Socialism is questionable. In fact, eventually, he betrays the regime, with a change of ideals that can only be described as preposterous for a man employed in the organisation of the Buna Werke until a moment before. Moreover, like the second half of *Les Bienveillantes*, Amis's novel treats Nazi ideology with ferociously irony, as can be observed in its depiction of the character of Paul Doll. The Nazi system of thought is also ridiculed indirectly, exposing the inherent absurdity of its theories: this happens with scientific racism in *Les Bienveillantes*, and with Hanns Hörbiger's 'theory of the cosmic ice' (a para-scientific cosmology which stated the superiority of the Aryan race) in *The Zone of Interest*. Bormann's stupidity is highlighted by his belief in these kinds of ideas, just as Littell emphasises Himmler's own idiocy by having him approve a memorandum by Aue, inspired by Burroughs's science-fiction novels.

Moreover, Amis makes use of certain themes and techniques which were adopted widely by Littell (although it could be argued that they are, rather, topos respectively of the representation of the Nazi regime and the historical novel). In fact, like Littell, Amis presents the exasperated bureaucratisation of the extermination process, the inefficiency of the labour camps, and the profound irrationality of the whole system. For example, in *Zone of Interest*, we are exposed to a debate between Thomsen and a civilian manager on the possibility of increasing the productivity of the camp by increasing the food rations of the prisoners. To this proposal Thomsen replies: 'The Kommandant and I can't afford to be so purely practical. We dare not lose sight of our complementary objective. Our political objective. […] This is not a sanatorium' (*ZI*, p. 30; see also pp. 87-90 and 104-106). Additionally, in much the same way as Littell, Amis attempts to represent the Holocaust as a primarily practical problem for its perpetrators. For example, he recreates a discussion about the disposal of the corpses (*ZI*, pp. 65-66, and 74) which, as we will see, is not so far from the narration of the work and the difficulties of the Eisantzgruppen in *Les Bienvellantes*. Amis also humorously points out the

absurdity of the Nazi language, disproportionately composed of euphemisms and extremely bureaucratised – which, as we will see, is also a central topic for Littell. The following passage provides an indication of the emphasis Amis places on the complex and acronymised vernacular of Nazism:

> Mobius was originally a penpusher at the HG of the Secret State Police, the Gestapa – not to be confused with the Gestapo (the actual Secret State Police), or the Sipo (the Security Police), or the Cripo (the Criminal Police), or the Orpo (the Order Police), or the Schupo (the Protection Police), or the Teno (the Auxiliary Police), or the Geheime Feldpolizei (the Secret Field Police), or the Gemeindepolizei (the Municipal Police), or the Abwehrpolizei (the Counter-Espionage Police), or the Bereitschaftpolizei (the Party Police), or the Kasernierte Polizei (the Barracks Police), or the Grenzpolizei (the Border Police), or the Ortspolizei (the Local Police), or the Gendarmerie (the Rural Police). (*ZI*, pp. 149-150)

Finally, like Littell, Amis makes vast use of real persons (most notably Martin Bormann, Thomsen's uncle) to provide a sense of realism, and exhibits his knowledge of the historical sources (something Littell does only indirectly) in a seven page-long bibliographic list (*ZI*, pp. 303-310), enriched by a picture of Adolf Hitler and Martin Bormann.

I would argue that *The Zone of Interest* is a novel largely inferior to Littell's and Vollmann's, with which I am comparing it; however, the origin of its flaws (a radical lack of empathy for the characters) is useful when undertaking a comparison with the work of Vollmann. Its plot solutions, such as the love of Thomsen for Hannah and Paul Doll's jealousy, fail to reach a point and to create a meaning proportionate to their setting – since Doll's plot of uxoricide hardly changes readers' opinion of him. Similarly, Thomsen's conversion, in the final pages of the book, seems incoherent with everything the readers have known about him so far and, as a result, is unconvincing. The major flaw of the novel, however, is Amis's attitude towards his protagonists, who are all, to a certain extent, perpetrators: from Doll, who directs the operations; to Thomsen, who witnesses them without opposition; to Szmul, whose position does not involve active killing but is nevertheless infected by his forced collaborations with the executioners. Szmul's case is definitely the most interesting of the three, and its similarities with Gerstein's story led me to include *The Zone of Interest* in this chapter rather than in the following. While I will discuss his case later in this section, it should be pointed out that the pages dedicated to Szmul are very few, and constitute a tenth of the book (some thirty pages of the three hundred page total). The rest of the novel is problematically dedicated to Thomsen and Doll's voices.

As a character, Thomsen, as I said, is not entirely convincing, proceeding from mindless complicity in the first half of the novel to harsh criticism of the regime in the second. Further, his narrative is generally focused on his relationship with Hannah. Paul Doll's part is mostly tragically farcical. Doll deludes himself into believing in his own self-importance (as he presents himself as much more significant than he actually is, and often refers to himself in third person) and is further deluded as to the state of the war. No matter how serious the news from the front is, Doll never goes further than admitting that 'whilst clearly hegemony may elude us, there's no possibility of defeat' (*ZI*, p. 198). His faith in Nazism and his devotion to the cause of the Final Solution are unshakeable, and the contradiction with the historical reality of the facts, of which readers are aware, makes Doll's words involuntarily ironic and his figure grotesque. Amis's portrait of Doll does not elude the usual stereotype of the Nazi officers (which we will see reprised in Binet's *HHhH*) as narrow-minded, petty, opportunistic bureaucrats who have no motivation but for a handful of grotesque theories and a tragic lack of empathy towards human suffering. While this vision of the Nazis can be true, it evidently makes it impossible to go beneath the surface of their personality. Indeed, such depictions exclude the very possibility that there is something else beneath the surface. In the epilogue of the novel, Thomsen, now working for the victims' reparation office, melancholically states:

> Under National Socialism you looked in the mirror and saw your soul. You found yourself out. This applied, *par excellence* and *a fortiori* (by many magnitudes), to the victims, or to those who lived for more than a house and had time to confront their own reflection. And yet it also applied to everyone else, the malefactors, the collaborators, the witnesses, the conspirators, the outright martyrs […] and even minor obstructors, like me, and like Hannah Doll. We all discovered, or helplessly revealed, who we were. (*ZI*, p. 285)

What, however, does Thomsen reveal and discover? His path of understanding is described as easy and unproblematic. And what, most of all, does Doll? Readers are not offered any further understanding of him if not as a clinical case. In the final notes, Amis, by quoting Primo Levi (to whom, with Celan, the book is dedicated) refuses not only the possibility, but also the opportunity of understanding the Holocaust: 'Of mainstream historian, no one claims to understand him, and many take a point of saying they don't understand him […]. We know a great deal […] about how he did what he did; but we seem to know almost nothing about the why. [As Levi said,] there was no why in Auschwitz. Was there a why in the mind of the Reichskanzler-President-Generalissimo? And if there was, why can't we find it?' (*ZI*, p. 305).

Amis follows Levi's idea that '"Perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened, because to understand is almost to justify. […] Perhaps it is desirable that their words (and also, unfortunately, their deeds) cannot be comprehensible to us. They are non-human words and deeds, really counter-human…"' (in *ZI*, p. 310). 'Historians', Amis argues, 'will consider this more an evasion than an argument. To non-discursive writers, though (and we remember that Levi was also a novelist and a poet), such a feint or flourish may be taken as a spur' (*ibid*). One could wonder, however, what is the purpose of writing a fictional novel about the Holocaust in the year 2014 if not to understand (which, as Amis states, is impossible) or create in the readers a disturbing empathy for the perpetrators (which Littell does, as we will see, but which Amis's grotesquerie forbids)? Amis invents characters and judges them in order to tell readers something they already know (that the Nazis were evil), without nuancing or considering the teleology of this evil. For this reason, I would argue that, although greatly entertaining, Amis's novel is not comparable to Littell's or to Vollmann's. By pre-judging his protagonists and maintaining a strong degree of authorial control, he forecloses readers' opportunity to thoughtfully engage with the war and the Holocaust. Remembering that, I have shown in this chapter how Vollmann's abstinence from judgment and his carefulness in recreating empathically the system of thought of his protagonists does not result in complicity, but rather in a portrait that aims to guide readers to a personal profound comprehension of the historical events.

Nevertheless, Amis's novel performs something that most writings on the Holocaust tend to avoid. It creates a powerful portrait of a figure caught between victim and perpetrator: the Sonderkommando Szmul, whose story resembles Gerstein's in *Europe Central*. Szmul is forced by threats to his life to join the Sonderkommando, the unit of prisoners who helped the Nazis to escort other prisoners to the gas chambers and managed the corpses afterwards. Not only does the activity of the Sonderkommando not involve any acts of killing per se, but it can involve saving lives: 'We save a life (or prolong a life) at the rate of one per transport. Sometimes none, sometimes two – an average of one. And 0.01 per cent is not 0.00. They are invariably male youths' (*ZI*, p. 34). Moreover, Szmul's death is an act of altruism as he opts to kill himself rather than harm Hannah. Nevertheless, the relative good that the Sonderkommando can enact (and yet so precious in the hell of the Lager) does not by any means amount to a justification of their collaboration with the system:

> We are of the Sonderkommando, the SK, the Special Squad, and we are the saddest men in the Lager. We are in fact the saddest men in the history of the world. And of all these very sad men I am the saddest. Which is demonstrably, even measurably true. I am by some distance the

> earliest number, the lowest number – the *oldest* number. As well as being the saddest men who ever lived, we are also the most disgusting. And yet our situation is paradoxical. It is difficult to see how we can be as disgusting as we unquestionably are when we do no harm. The case could be made that on balance we do a little good. Still, we are infinitely disgusting, and also infinitely sad. (*ZI*, p. 33)

The members of the Sonderkommando are the most extreme and most exemplary persona of the grey area[75], according to Giorgio Agamben. They embody the greatest monstrosity of the concentration camp – which is to say, the forced collaboration of the victims with the perpetrators in the very act of their extermination: 'the Jews can only prolong their lives by helping the enemy to victory – a victory that for the Jews means what?' (*ZI*, p. 238). Similarly in *Europe Central*, as we have seen, Gerstein faces a dilemma in which every available choice means harming someone: if he collaborates with the SS he joined, he participates in the extermination of the Jews; if he does not, his innocent family will die. Faced with this unresolvable situation, all Gerstein can do is sabotage the system from within, and try to tell of and denounce its crimes outside Germany. Nevertheless, Gerstein does not think that his intentions absolve him from his deeds, and he kills himself after the war.

For these reasons, Amis represents Szmul like a martyr, like Vollmann does with Gerstein: he is both a witness of something virtually unprecedented, and he is asked to both participate in and suffer something no one else has ever experienced before. 'I feel that if you knew every day, every hour, every minute of human history, you would find no exemplum, no model, no precedent. *Martyer*, *mucednik*, *martelaar*, *meczonnik*, *martyr*: in every language I know, the word comes from the Greek, *martur*, meaning *witness*. We, the Sonders, or some of us, will bear witness. And this question, unlike every other question, appears to be free of deep ambiguity. Or so we thought' (*ZI*, p. 77). Szmul's will of bearing witness is not only metaphorical because his sections are part of his diary, which he hides before killing himself in front of Hannah Doll.

According to Vollmann, Gerstein's heroism is free of ambiguities; so, too, is Szmul's apparently. Nevertheless, the absence of his guilt does not absolve him from the unerasable stain of collaborating with such a criminal system. As both Amis and Vollmann show, the de-humanising nature of the Lager is such that it creates an unbridgeable gap between those implicated in it (however unwillingly) and those who did not experience it: 'I love my wife with all my heart, and I wish her every happiness, but as things now stand I'm glad I'll never see her

---

[75] Agamben 1998, p. 23.

again' (*ZI*, p. 80). Whereas Szmul knows that he is destined to die anyway (and this knowledge allows him to selflessly save Hannah), Gerstein, who could survive, chooses death.

While Thomsen, Doll, and Hannah fails to be credible and interesting portraits of perpetrators, Szmul's lugubrious reflections on the crime of which he is the object and, at the same time, a collaborating subject are extremely powerful. Indeed, Amis's novel as a whole fails to provide a credible portrait of the perpetrators, owing to the prejudices the author has against his own characters; however, when he is free of these prejudices (which is to say, when he can represent a victim instead of a pure perpetrator), Amis is very effective in his reconstruction not only of the inherently absurd dimension of the Holocaust as a bureaucratic process, but also of the unprecedented moral catastrophe it represented. As in Vollmann, this catastrophe is such that those involuntarily involved in its proceeding are transformed (in contradiction with the Nazis' ambition of de-humanising their victims) into Saint-like figures, martyrs separated and elevated from the rest of humanity by their purity and their guilt.

‘Un véritable conte moral’: Jonathan Littell’s *Les Bienveillantes*

Les Bienveillantes by Jonathan Littell (*LB*, 2006) abandons both postmodern irony and avant-garde experimentalism, recovering instead the formal means of the traditional (eighteenth and early nineteenth century), modern (late nineteenth), and modernist (early twentieth) novel. Mimetic realism, the most notable stylistic feature of the novel, together with the length of the book and its chronological and thematic variety, is what contributes to making *Les Bienveillantes* one of the most significant examples of the post-postmodern epic.

The protagonist and narrator of *Les Bienveillantes* is Maximilien Aue, SS-Obersturmbannfürher, and an incestuous homosexual who kills his mother. When it was published, the novel was welcomed with hostility and polemics, inciting opposing reactions amongst French critics[1], and generally negative reviews in America[2] and Germany[3]. These critiques focus mainly on two issues. First of all, critics considered scandalous Littell’s decision to give the main voice to an SS officer, and his reasons and excuses: a choice that makes *Les Bienveillantes* almost unprecedented[4]. Secondly, and more important, the novel attracts another critique, concerning its style: how is it possible in the twenty-first century, it has been argued, to write as if Joyce, Proust, Faulkner, or the Structuralists never existed, not to mention Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie or Michel Houellebecq? Littell’s novel, in other words, is anachronistic, as it seems to uncritically recover a literary tradition that has been surpassed[5]. This critique is only partially acceptable, because Littell does not write exactly as if he was part

[1] Thierry 2010, pp. 11-18. Blanrue reports 500.000 copies sold only in 2006 (2006, pp. 9-15).
[2] Goslan 2010, pp. 174-183.
[3] Theweleit and Nunan 2009, pp. 21-34.
[4] Suleiman 2009, pp. 1-2: ‘Fictional representations of the inner world of perpetrators (as opposed to the standard external view of Nazi villains in countless films) are also hard to find. Robert Merle’s novel *La mort est mon métier* (*Death Is My Trade*, 1952), a fictionalized version of Höss’s autobiography, was until recently the only full-length novel narrated in the voice of a Nazi perpetrator. Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “Ein Deutsches Requiem” (“A German Requiem”, 1949) is the unrepentant monologue of a Nazi officer about to be executed, and George Steiner concludes his novel *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* (1981) with a first-person self-justificatory rant by Adolf Hitler himself. David Grossman’s novel *See Under: Love* (1989) devotes some brilliant pages to the inner life of the camp commandant Neigel, obviously modeled on Treblinka’s real-life commandant, Franz Stangl; Martin Amis’s novel *Time’s Arrow* (1991) is the postwar narrative of a Nazi doctor, but told in reverse order, as if to deny not only what happened but also any sense of responsibility on the part of the protagonist-narrator’.
[5] Mazzoni 2008, p. 233. These names have been listed by Sylvain Bourmeau in a review of the novel on *Les Inrockuptibles*.

of the nineteenth century literary tradition, and he is very well aware of the existence of Joyce (and of Houellebecq), as we will see. However, in its superficiality, this accusation points to something that has been overlooked by several critics (who focused mainly on the *ethics* of the novel). Notably, Littell, narrating Aue's history, recovers the style of the traditional novel, abandoning both the experimentalism of the twentieth-century avant-gardes and the parodying dimension of postmodern literature.

Lermonier points out that 'Jonathan Littell, auteur du roman qui a remporté en 2006 le grand prix de l'Académie française puis le prix Goncourt, est américain'[6]. Littell's cultural and linguistic identity is significant. Littell was born in New York on 10 October 1967, and finished high school in Paris in 1985, continuing his studies at Yale. His father, Robert, is a Sovietologist and the author of several best-selling novels. *Les Bienveillantes* is Littell's first serious literary work, but not his first novel: at the university, in addition to translating Sade, Genet, Quignard and Blanchot into English[7], he published the cyberpunk novel, *Bad Voltage* (later repudiated)[8]. During the nineties, Littell worked with NGOs, an occupation that saw him witness some of the worst massacres of the late twentieth century – in Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya and Afghanistan. Even after the publication of *Les Bienveillantes*, Littell recommenced charity work in Chechnya (*Tchéthcénie, An III*, 2009) and Syria (*Carnet de Homs. 16 janvier – 2 février 2012*, 2012).

It is worth bearing in mind Littell's cosmopolitanism, since it influences his stylistic choices. Refusing formal and linguistic experimentalism, Littell refuses also the idea that the novel is bound to a specific, national tradition. In fact, Littell's inspiration does not come but marginally from French authors (Blanchot and Bataille), but rather from Russians (Tolstoj, Dostoevskij, Grossman), Anglo-Saxon (Joyce), German (Hofmannsthal, Mann), and classics (Aeschylus). Littell, in a passage I partially quoted in the introduction, underlines his refusal to consider literature as a national product:

> Tout ce que vous [Richard Millet] dites est vrai si l'on se place d'un point de vue qui n'est pas le mien, qui est qu'il existe des littératures nationales. Pour moi, le découpage littéraire national a eu certainement une réalité à l'époque où les transmissions étaient beaucoup plus longes. Du fait de l'isolement, là il y avait de grandes distinctions entre les littératures nationales [...].

[6] Lermonier 2007, p. 11.
[7] *Ibid,* p. 12.
[8] Littell and Blumenfeld 2006: 'Littell: *The Kindly Ones* isn't quite a real second novel. Between the two I wrote other books which are still in a drawer, where they belong. I have sometimes wished *Bad Voltage* was never published, but I was trapped in a contract and didn't have the money to break it. I was 21 years old; it was a youthful folly. I have never tried to hide that novel, but I don't shout about it either. I started thinking about *The Kindly Ones* when I was 20 years old. Richard Millet, my Gallimard editor, wanted to call *The Kindly Ones* a "first novel," but I refused. In the end we hit on the phrase "first literary work" for the back cover'.

> Aujourd'hui, à l'ère de la communication et de la connexion de masse, c'est beaucoup moins vrai. Les interpollinisations d'un pays à un autre se font à une échelle de temps tellement rapide que tout écrivain digne de ce nom est nourri par toute la littérature – dans mon cas la russe presque autant que la française ou la littérature en langue allemande, ça peut tout aussi bien être les littératures asiatiques, africaines, etc. C'est pourquoi l'idée de littératures nationales me semble un mythe, aujourd'hui[9].

In this sense, it appears clear that Littell is a perfect example of both the global dimension of contemporary literature (or at least of a Francophone, rather than French, literature[10]), and of the post-postmodern tendency to repossess non-ironically the traditional features of the novel. In particular, in Littell, we face '[il] recupero non problematico dei tre elementi più tipici del romanzo ottocentesco, trama, personaggio e temporalità'[11].

Littell recovers from the traditional novel of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the focus on a specific individual, immersed in a precise and carefully recreated environment, and thus on his everyday life, and on his relationship with the surrounding ambient. The nineteenth century novel (the novel of modernity) provides Littell with the figure of the intellectual hero, while the mythical method is inspired by modernism[12] (although this use of myth, as we will see, has important differences from the modernist tradition).

1. Plot, Characters, Time

Two elements signal the presence of the traditional novel in *Les Bienveillantes*: the presence of a recognisable plot, and mimetic realism. The development of the modernist novel endorses the decline of plot, according to Calabrese[13]. This depreciation of plot continues with

[9] Littell and Millet 2007, pp. 16-17.
[10] Moura 2012, pp. 253-265.
[11] Tirinanzi De Medici 2012, p. 167.
[12] Mazzoni (2011, pp. 272-310) agrees with Lukàcs in distinguishing between two different phases of the novel in the nineteenth century, 'legate da un rapporto dialettico, fatto di continuità e rotture' (p. 292). In the second part of the century the novel abandons the means of the melodrama, creating what he calls the novel of personal destinies ('romanzo di destino', p. 302): '*Madame Bovary*, *Guerra e Pace*, *L'educazione sentimentale*, *Middlemarch* o *Anna Karenina* non ci attraggono per la novità delle peripezie, per la singolarità dei personaggi o per il valore rappresentativo e tipico delle trame. Mentre il romanzo melodrammatico gonfia le storie particolari per calarvi dentro dei significati universali, mentre il *novel* che contiene elementi di *romance* immette l'avventura nella ripetizione dell'esistere, queste opere riducono gli stati di eccezione e si concentrano sui momenti nei quali una vita, intrecciandosi e scontrandosi con altre vite, prende una forma determinata, crea o subisce la propria sorte' (*ibid*).
[13] Calabrese 2005, p. 22.

postmodernism. If, prior to the advent of modernism, the novelist carefully tried to create a balance between the centre of the story (the close-ups) and its satellites (the spatial and temporal settings), in the third decade of the twentieth century the satellites started to gain priority whilst the centres dispersed, scattered in a 'galaxy of epiphanies'[14]. Littell, on the contrary, chooses without irony a clear plot: *Les Bienveillantes* tells the story of Maximilien Aue from 27 June 1941, the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, to 28 April 1945, two days before Hitler's suicide. Several flashbacks cover the period from 1919 to 1941, and the narrator is writing between the 1960s and 1970s[15]. Aue's history proceeds with great precision: it starts in Ukraine, where Max, part of the Einsatzgruppe C, witnesses the Babi Yar massacre, and continues in Caucasus, following the march of the German army. Aue is then moved to Stalingrad because of a fight he has with another officer who insinuates that he is a homosexual, and because he is less than convincing while pursuing the case against the Bergjuden. Later, he is urgently sent back to Berlin after the fall of the Kessel. He is decorated by Himmler for his courage in battle, and hired in his office as a collaborator of Eichmann in the supervision of the Polish death camps and the deportation of the Hungarian Jews. During the siege of Berlin, finally, Max succeeds in escaping, joins the civilian refugees, and reconstructs himself in France.

Aue changes significantly his behaviour and perception of the world after the head wound he receives in Stalingrad (what he calls his 'œil pinéal', *LB*, p. 410, the location of the human soul, according to Descartes), gradually losing control of himself. Until that moment, however, the model that regulates the development of the plot is that of the classical novel. It is not by chance that, in the first half of the novel, Stendhal is a recurring presence; Aue reads his works between Ukraine and Caucasus. Moreover, it could be argued that Aue's proud, rebellious character – him being much more cultured and sensitive than his colleagues – is modelled on the impulsive behavior of Julien Sorel in *Le rouge et le noir* since, ultimately, his conduct leads to his punishment and transfer to Stalingrad. Be this the case or not, Max, in the first half of the novel, is moved by a vague but undoubtable ambition, as in the typical nineteenth Bildungsroman:

> La tensione romanzesca alla parabola […], il movimento della trama, e insomma l'articolazione propulsiva dell'intreccio presuppongono un investimento di energia, la dinamica di un desiderio che può essere d'amore o di grandezza o di affermazione sociale o di tutt'e tre queste cose insieme. C'è una tensione nell'eroe che lo induce non solo a muovere la macchina narrativa, forzandola verso nuove direzioni, ma anche a confrontarsi direttamente con la realtà, a

[14] *Ibid,* p. 23. The translation is mine.
[15] Tirinanzi 2012, p. 168.

conoscere e ad attraversare l'altro in nome di una esigenza bruciante di rinnovamento e di esperienza totale[16].

As I have intimated, after the battle of Stalingrad, the plot runs aground, paralleling Aue's psychological decline. I will cover this topic in more detail later in this chapter, since the disintegration of the plot is not typical of the traditional novel, but the modern novel. What is worth observing for now is that the first part presents an adventurous plot while the second part prioritises introspection over action. The first half of the novel (from chapters 'Toccata' to 'Sarabande') is geographically located on the Russian front[17]. Not only is geared toward the representation of Nazi atrocities and the war, but it is also a way to pay homage to the Russian writers Littell admires, such as Dostoevskij[18] and Grossman[19] (therefore, indirectly, Tolstoy). Specifically, a reference to Grossman is expressed in the reappropriation of the famous interrogation scene of *Life and Destiny* (*Žisn'i sud'ba*, 1980) in which the Nazi officer and the soviet prisoner discuss politics[20], while Lermontov is mentioned in several episodes in Caucasus (*LB*, pp. 243 ff.).

Referring to epic novels such as those by Tolstoy and Grossmann, and mimicking their serious tone and their aspiration of totality (which *Les Bienveillantes* shares, being almost one thousand pages long) is the only way to tell the story of the *absolute* war. The explicit presence of certain models in the context of the work, therefore, is what allows Littell to increase by extension the epic proportions of his novel, which itself represents one of greatest epics of contemporary literature[21].

The other most notable element of Littell's recovery of the nineteenth century model in *Les Bienveillantes* is his mimetic effort in recreating, plausibly and in detail, a world that he did not experience firsthand[22]. This mimetic effort represents one of Littell's most significant novelties in relation to the narration of Second World War. Maximilien Aue is not a metaphysical incarnation of evil, like many Nazis in low and high culture products, but a specific man,

---

[16] Luperini 2007, p. 16. By contraset, we can consider what happens in Pynchon's postmoden manifesto *Gravity's Rainbow* (Casadei 2000, p. 164): 'La *quête* principale di GR [*Gravity's Rainbow*] è priva di possibilità di approdo: il Missile si rivela progressivamente come irraggiungibile, addirittura inconoscibile. È vero che sono numerosissime le definizioni e le notizie sul Rocket […], ma esse sono talmente varie e contraddittorie da renderlo appunto un simbolo non decifrabile'.
[17] As Littell reminds us, this interest was increased by the profession of his father, who is a Sovietologist and author of bestselling spy stories set during the Cold War (Littell and Nora 2007, p. 27).
[18] Nivat 2007, p. 56.
[19] *Ibid,* pp. 58-60.
[20] Panichi 2014, p. 129.
[21] Watts 2012, p. 155: 'The Kindly Ones stand as one of the major European epics of the postwar world'.
[22] Mazzoni 2008, p. 233.

moving in a precise ambient, carefully recreated. Aue is a 'particular being' ('un essere particolare'[23]), who meets and interacts with other particular beings[24], is identified by a personal story and a set of personal data[25], who aims to satisfy his ambitions[26], and who moves, with realistic rhythms, in a recognisable physical and cultural landscape, of which he is a product. As we have seen in the introduction, postmodernism is characterised by a disregard for realism. If we compare *Les Bienveillantes* to postmodern attempts to portray Nazi perpetrators such as Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow*, we can understand how much of a novelty Littell's effort represents. Amis's book refutes realism by way of its very narrative structure. In fact, *Time's Arrow* narrates the life of a Nazi doctor involved in the Holocaust but in reverse chronological order, and the narrator is a sort of second consciousness of the protagonist (his soul?). Such a narratorial and chronological choice evidently forbids mechanisms of causality and responsibility to emerge. On the other hand, as Michael Mack writes, 'the hyperreality of Littell's novel is of course not that of the nineteenth-century realism, but it is certainly removed from the playful accounts of fantasy and bricolage'[27].

How is this mimetic effect achieved in *Les Bienveillantes*? We can identify four different strategies through which Littell achieves realism: a first person narrator who often assumes the traits of the omniscient narrator; the exhibition of historical characters; the reproduction of the cultural ambient and its language; the exhibition of precise details.

Les Bienveillantes is staged as the memoir that Aue writes some decades after the war. This device allows Littell to give Max both the partial point of view of the protagonist and the totalising point of view of the narrator of the historical novel; Littell makes him, in other words, both a witness and an omniscient narrator[28]. The fact that Aue writes of events that could be reconstructed by consulting history books (something he himself admits he has carried out to aid his memory), makes his testimony acceptable and credible. This being said, on several occasions, Aue proves himself an unreliable narrator insofar as, for the duration of the novel, he denies killing his mother. He operates in the text a validatory function. Aue speaks in first-

---

[23] Mazzoni 2011, p. 55.
[24] *Ibid,* p. 56.
[25] *Ibid*.
[26] *Ibid,* pp. 56-57.
[27] Mack 2014, p. 206.
[28] Pennacchio 2014: 'Dalle *Benevole* di Jonathan Littell fino a *Gomorra*, gli "eccessi dell'io" di cui oggi tanto si discute a ben vedere implicano quasi sempre l'assunzione da parte delle voci narranti di prerogative e posture onniscienti, a loro teoricamente precluse – e quali portano con sé il rischio di scivolare nell'incoerenza se non addirittura nell'implausibilità'. This quote is taken from the online version of the essay published on the literary blog *Le parole e le cose*. In the later version of this essay on the journal *TiConTre* (2, 2014), the reference to Littell is abandoned. See also Suleiman 2009, pp. 8-9.

person to move readers to identification, and to encourage them to forget that they are reading a novel; this is despite the evident falsity of some of the details that the text contains. This oscillation between omniscient and first-person narration is not uncommon in post-postmodern novels, as Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* indicates.

Another validatory mechanism that Littell exploits is the presence of historical characters. In fact, real persons represent the majority of the characters: except for his family; his protectors (Mandelbrod and Leland); his prosecutors (Clemens and Weser); his friend and double, Thomas; his semi-fiancé Helene; the three colleagues Boss, Hoheness and Osnabrugge; and a few minor others, Aue seems to be interacting only with non-fictional characters. This is even more significant if we consider, as I will explain later in this chapter, that the fictional characters carry a mainly symbolic role. Aue has the chance to meet Heydrich and Hitler, works for Himmler, is close to Albert Speer, and is a colleague and a friend of Adolf Eichmann. But more than these very famous names, it is the nebula of minor hierarchs, officials and functionaries that creates a safety net of fidelity that allows the narration to proceed without incredulities. These include: Waldemar von Radetzky, Paul Blobel, Walter von Reichenau, Otto Ohlendorf, Lucien Lippert, Ernst Junger, Helmut Knocher, Werner Best, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Robert Brassilach, Lucien Rebartet, Richard Korherr, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Odilo Globockic, Hermann Hofle, Isle Koch, Rudolf Hoss, Josef Mengele, Hans Frank, and Otto Hermann Fegelein.

Furthermore, these characters, like Aue, are not just empty symbols of absolute evil. For instance, although Littell generally shares Hannah Arendt's thesis, Max portrays Eichmann as a photographic negative of the profile drawn of him in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. While in Arendt, Eichmann insistently complains that he did not have a brilliant career[29], according to Aue, these missed promotions depend on the structural problems of the organization for which he is working (*LB*, pp. 511-512). While in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Eichmann is systematically depicted as forgetful, unable to recall at mind basic facts of his private and public life[30], Littell has Aue praise Eichmann's excellent memory (*LB*, p. 519). While Arendt depicts Eichmann's famous interest for the Kantian imperative as late and deceptive, Littell portrays the Obersturmfürher's sincere fascination for the work of Kant (*LB*, pp. 521-524). In fact, Aue carefully underlines that Eichmann 'n'était pas non plus une incarnation du *mal banal*, un robot sans âme et sans visage, comme on a voulu le présenter après son procès' (*LB*, p. 524). Although the conclusions of the author differ from those of his narrator, Littell continues to attempt to

[29] Arendt 1963, p. 49.
[30] *Ibid*, p. 53.

provide a fair and complete depiction of Eichmann as a complex human being, who inhabited a specific cultural landscape, and a man with passions, interests and defects, but also with talent and brilliance in certain tasks. He is trying, in other words, to offer a portrait of Eichmann as 'un bureaucrate de grand talent, extrêmement compétent dans ses fonctions, avec une envergure certaine et un sens de l'initiative personnelle considérable, mais uniquement dans le cadre de tâches délimitées' (*LB*, p. 525), not simply as someone who never really understood the consequences of his actions. This attitude towards Eichmann is also suggestive of a fundamental disagreement of Littell with Arendt's work. In his opinion, it is evidently more useful to present readers with a character they can relate to and even admire, rather than someone whom they despise[31]. I will return on this point later in this chapter.

The historical characters that Littell presents are credible not only because they have real-life counterparts but also because the language they speak and the ambient they move in are real as well. This environmental paradigm, again, is inherited from the nineteenth century novel tradition[32]. Littell makes his characters speak according to the Nazi ideology, in an accurate and non-stereotypical way. Even Aue, who is, as we will see, a very atypical Nazi, thinks according to the official doctrine of the Party (thus, pseudo-scientific racism), and he is scandalised when the linguist, Voss, exposes its lack of scientificity (*LB*, pp. 280-283). In fact, even when he is depicting the worst absurdities and vileness, Littell is always being historically accurate. One can consider, for instance, the discussion about the *Fuhrerprinzip* between Aue and Eichmann, or the soldiers debating during the siege of Stalingrad on the eventual racial inconvenience of eating the corpse of a Russian and the moral inconvenience of eating the corpse of a German (only to agree on the compromise of eating a Ukrainian Hiwi, *LB*, p. 349). Or we might consider the grotesque results of Nazi racial theory, such as Governor Hans Frank's intentions of building in postwar Krakow a zoo for the extinct human races (*LB*, pp. 628-631). Or we could note Himmler's enthusiasm for a brief essay, written by Aue in a feverish delirium, suggesting the relationship between red and green Martians in Edgar Rice Burroughs' books as a model for the racial politics in the occupied territories (*LB*, pp. 755-756). These absurdities are not explicitly mocked at the moment of their appearance in the book, since Aue considers them coherent within the framework provided by Nazi ideology. This ideology was, notoriously, a synthesis of magic and advanced technology, and Hitler was a man pursuing irrational aims

[31] Palumbo Mosca 2014, pp. 108-109.
[32] Mazzoni 2011, pp. 269 ff.

with rational means[33]. Similarly, the at least partly esoteric roots of anti-Semitism[34] and Hitler's foreign politics are well known[35]. It is not so much parody than historically credible that Himmler, who was convinced he was the reincarnation of Henry the Fowler[36], and who consented for an expedition to find the entrance of Hollow Earth in the Baltic Sea[37], was persuaded by the theories of a book for children[38].

Just as names and cultural issues are portrayed extremely accurately, Littell's topographical precision is impressive. The abundance of precise place names, whether readers know them or not, serves to validate the words of the narrator[39]. In the depiction of the bureaucratic processes regulating the life in the Third Reich, too, the use of a specific lexicon is important: Littell always uses the German word for every institution of the Reich, for every division on the Russian front, and for every military grade of the Whermacht, the SS and the Waffen-SS. He even provides a glossary at the end of the book. Aue reflects, in this sense, on the hypnotic and intimidating power of the specific words for the survival of the regime and the extermination process, and implies that the reader themselves are subjected to the same effect:

> Et peu à peu, la signification [of *Endlosung*, final solution] avait glissé vers l'abîme, mais sans que le signifiant, lui, change, et c'était presque comme si ce sens définitif avait toujours vécu au cœur du mot, et que la chose avait été attirée, happée par lui, par son poids, sa pesanteur démesurée, dans ce trou noir de l'esprit, jusqu'à la singularité : et alors on avait passé l'horizon des événements, à partir duquel il n'y a plus de retour. On croit encore aux idées, aux concepts, on croit que les mots désignent des idées, mais ce n'est pas forcément vrai, peut-être n'y a-t-il

[33] Severino in Galli 1989, p. 11.
[34] *Ibid,* p. 55.
[35] *Ibid,* p. 145.
[36] *Ibid,* p. 155
[37] *Ibid,* p. 159
[38] Actually, as exhaustively explained by Richard J. Goslan (2012, pp. 204-226), Aue's knowledge of Burroughs is slightly unlikely for chronological reasons, although the reader cannot be aware of that unless he is an expert on the subject. Nevertheless, Burroughs' presence is important, since, as Goslan writes, the attention that Aue and Himmler pay to Burroughs' escapist science-fiction in such a critical time is an eloquent allusion to the delusional belief in super weapons of several Nazi leaders, and of the illogicity of their ideology.
[39] Briand (2010, p. 99) lists all the places on the Eastern Front that Max visits in the novel: Sokal, Lutsk, Radziechow, Lemberg, Jitomir, Tsviahel (Novohrad-Volynsky), Korosten, Kiev, Pereiaslav, Iagotine, Poltava, Kharkov, Simféropol, Yalta, Eupatorie, Mélitopol, Rostov, Perekop, Marinpol, Taganrog, Krasnodar, Vorochilovsk (Stavropol), Maikop, Essentouki, Kislovodsk, Piatigorsk, Minvody, Mineralnye Vody, Mozdok, Prokhladny, Naltchik, Kotelnikovo, Tatsinkaia, Pitomnik, Stalingrad, Gourmak, Rakotino, Hohenlychen, Usedom, Swinemunde, Orianenburg, Krakow, Lublin, Himmlerstadt (Zamosc), Belzec, Kielse, Kettowitz (Katowice), Auschwitz, Birkenau, Berlin, Posen (Poznan), Nordhausen, Mittelbau (Dora), Mauthausen, Budapest, Breslau (Wroclaw), Gleiwitz (Gliwice), Stettin (Szczecin), Alt Draheim, Klaushagen, Bad Polzin (Polczyn-Zdroj), Korlin (Karlino), and Horst.

> pas vraiment d'idées, peut-être n'y a-t-il réellement que des mots, et le poids propre aux mots. Et peut-être ainsi nous étions-nous laissé entraîner par un mot et son inévitabilité (*LB*, p. 580)[40].

Finally, the reality of the war and of extermination of Jews are not depicted as a metahistorical epic or a sacred memory, but as entirely human events that, as such, depend on a myriad of material circumstances and practical details. Describing the sweeps in Ukraine, for instance, Littell exposes their logistical difficulties, and presents the Nazis as men trying to find the most acceptable solution to a practical problem; it does not matter that this practical problem is to kill the highest number of people in the easiest and quickest way (*LB*, pp. 97-101). A similar argument can be made for the parts of the novel dedicated to Auschwitz and Hungary – the chapter, 'Menuet (en rondeaux)' (*LB*, pp. 495-792).

One of the moments that exemplify Littell's interest in the practicalities (rather than the metaphysical or moral dimensions) of Nazism, in this sense, is the discussion about the Bergjuden (*LB*, pp. 297 ff.). During the occupation of Caucasus, the SS and the Wehrmacht must decide whether to proceed with the deportation of these people of ancient Hebrew heritage but now of almost pagan faith. The SS want to deport them, while the Wehrmacht opposes. What is impressive in this passage is how the destiny of an entire people is bound to the misleading, dull and completely irrational discussions of the Nazi officers ('"De toute manière, dit Weseloh, leur caractère juif crève les yeux. Leurs manières sont insinuantes, et ils ont même essayé de nous corrompre"', *LB*, P. 298). The death (casual, unexpected and off-stage, so to speak) of the linguist, Voss – one of the very few positive characters of the book, who opposes the deportation – almost causes the SS to triumph in this controversy. They are unsuccessful only because of a stratagem of a Wermacht general, who proposes to delay the debate until the occupation of the original land of that people, Daghestan. For patriotic reasons, the SS cannot oppose this decision claiming that, at that stage of the war, it is clear that Daghestan will never be conquered.

The enormous quantity of historical details, of which Aue ironically admits the excess, creates the base on which this book works, and on which the identification of the reader with Aue is made possible. I will clarify the way in which the novel encourages an empathic response in more detail later in this chapter. For now, it is important to observe that Littell models his mimetic effort on a non-ironic appropriation of the traditional novel form, from which he learns

[40] Lamy-Rested (2014, pp. 40-41), argues that in similar passages Littell implicitly quotes Victor Klempeer's *Lingua Tertii Imperii. The Language of the Third Reich* (1947), that reflects on the Nazi use of language as a means of propaganda.

how to use 'con sprezzatura' those details unnecessary to the development of the plot but which give the reader a reality effect[41].

On this matter, it must not be forgotten that the novel does not tell the story of an ordinary man, but of an SS officer who goes through all the most important events of the Second World War. The importance of the allusions to Russian literature appear even clearer: showing in detail the ambient in which the protagonist moves, Littell portrays also the relationship between the cultural milieu and his protagonist, and therefore the influence of the circumstances and chance on human life. What Littell's mimetic effort aims to demonstrate, in other words, is that the evil committed by people is never absolute, unencumbered by context, but generated and cultivated in a specific ambient and in certain circumstances[42]. This pivotal concept, partially discussed in reference to Bolaño's character, Leo Sammer, earlier, is of utter importance when directed toward a war that has become, in public memory, a symbol of absolute evil. Littell's realism, instead, restores an everyday dimension to the war, suggesting thus that it does not belong to a parallel metaphysical dimension, but to a realm of concrete possibilities.

2. Objections

Two objections have been often levelled against the realism of *Les Bienveillantes*. The first one concerns Littell's abuse of Kitsch and pulp expedients in the representation of the protagonist and other characters. The second one complaint concerns the scant credibility of Maximilien Aue as a SS officer.

It is true that the choice of narrating the story (rich in scatological and sadistic scenes) through a homosexual, incestuous SS officer makes the novel vulnerable to accusations of somehow belonging to the Nazi-porn genre[43]. In this sense, Aue would simply be the last of in long series of stereotypical, sexually-perverted Nazi officers, of which we have already seen an example in Amis' *The Zone of Interest*. The sexualisation of the Nazi legacy is a typical trait of several films from the late 1960s and 1970s, which started with high culture movies (such as Luchino Viconti's *La caduta degli dei*, 1969, Liliana Cavani's *Il portiere di notte*, 1974, Lina Wertmuller's *Pasqualino Settebellezze*, 1975, and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate*

[41] Mazzoni 2008, p. 233.
[42] Tirinanzi 2012, p. 176.
[43] Levéel 2010, pp. 141-154.

di Sodoma, 1975[44]) and can be traced back to Roberto Rossellini's representation of the Nazi officer in *Roma, città aperta* (1945)[45]. Although these films tried to create a connection between sexual deviation and the perversity of power, their imagery was soon adopted by several cheap and semi-pornographic films. These movies (which establish the so called *Naziploitation* canon) are: Don Edmonds's *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975), Cesare Canevari's *L'ultima orgia del III Reich* (1976), Luigi Batzella's *La bestia in calore* (1977), Sergio Garrone's *Lager SSadis Kastrat Kommandantur* (1976), and Bruno Mattei's *Casa privata per le SS* (1977) and *KZ9 – Lager di sterminio* (1977); a liminal role, for its pretentious ambitions, is played by Tinto Brass' *Salon Kitty* (1975)[46].

This quite exhaustive list aims to underline how prevalent and pervasive the stereotype of the sexually-perverted Nazi is in contemporary culture. Indeed, this imagery, as Tirinanzi notes, pervades, for instance, Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009)[47]. Although Littell explicitly claims to despise the so-called *Naziploitation* genre[48], it is hard to deny that several details belong to the same Kitsch paradigm. I am thinking, for instance, of Max's seduction of his comrade Partenau in Krimea ('Je lui montrai la couverture: "*Le Banquet*. Vous l'avez lu?" – "Je dois avouer que non". Je le refermai et le lui tendis: "Prenez-le. Je le connais par cœur"', *LB*, p. 184); the description of the excesses of the SS in Poland, veined with an hint of lesbianism (*LB*, pp. 530-532); the introduction of the mysterious doctor, Mandelbrod, with his cat on his knee like a James Bond villain (*LB*, p. 416); and of his 'amazons' Hilde, Helga and Hedwig, who offer their body to Max and recall partly Wanda in *Venus in Furs*, partly *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*[49]. Furthermore, the very idea of a detective subplot in the Third Reich, which takes place when Clemens and Weser start to investigate the death of Aue's parents, recalls Kitsch bestsellers such as Robert Harris *Fatherland* (1992), rather than Philip K. Dick's alternate history classic, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962).

While it is true that these superfluous, overtly sexual or popular culture inclusions (that made the critics define Littell as a fanatic of Nazi Kitsch[50]) stand out against the normality of the background and the dull bureaucratic processes depicted, it must also be underlined that they are very few in a novel that lasts for almost one thousand pages. In other words, their relative

---

[44] Hake 2012, p. 131.
[45] *Ibid,* p. 134.
[46] *Ibid,* p. 150.
[47] Tirinanzi 2012, p. 188.
[48] Littell and Nora 2007, p. 40.
[49] Lermonier 2007, p. 40.
[50] *Ibid,* pp. 224-225.

scarcity does not spoil the credibility of the historical reconstruction[51]. This merging of high and popular culture sources may lead us to associate *Les Bienveillantes* with postmodernism in as much as, as we have seen, pastiche is important for postmodernist poetics. However, Littell's intent is never ironic. The reprise of pulp and Kitsch details is intentional and contributes to, rather than undermines, the narrative impact that the novel has on the reader. Pierre Nora in this sense has spoken of 'quelque chose de parfois juvénile dans [le] livre, qui en fait à mes yeux le charme, mais qui, pour un sujet aussi lourd, lui donne une légèreté, une étrangeté, que l'on pourrait vous reprocher'[52]. Littell himself expresses his admiration for cinematographic works such as *Apocalypse Now*[53] and *Shining*[54], suggesting that the presence in his novel of so many midcult elements is due to the incisiveness of many of their scenes. The author seems to ask from readers for a kind of naïveté that is typical of post-postmodernist fiction: he encourages them, in other words, to ignore the falsity of the *mise-en-scène*, which is openly admitted, in order to completely enjoy (and thus understand) the novel. In this sense, Littell's intention is typically post-postmodern, because he looks seriously and not ironically to mass products as models for his work. As Mazzoni, a passionate and diligent reader of *Les Bienveillantes*, writes:

> Uno scrittore più alessandrino non avrebbe mai sovraccaricato Maximilien Aue di tratti psicanalitici da manuale; un regista con un senso più gelido e controllato della forma non avrebbe mai usato un brano di puro *midcult* come la cavalcata delle Walkirie per accompagnare l'attacco degli elicotteri al villaggio vietnamita. Eppure questo atteggiamento familiare, sciolto, sfrontato – verrebbe voglia di dire "americano" – nei confronti della tradizione produce risultati straordinari. Nel caso delle *Benevole*, la forza dell'opera sta nella possibilità di combinare registri narrativi diversi per raccontare una storia carica di sovrasensi[55].

The second critique levelled against *Les Bienveillantes*, the scarce credibility of Max as an SS officer, is more significant. If the traditional novel interest us because it narrates a common individual, set in a reproduction of their society, why should readers be interested in such an eccentric, problematic and unlikely character as Maximilien Aue? First of all, it must be said that the objection that Aue is an unlikely Nazi because he is too smart and cultivated (the readers face exchanges such as: '"Avez-vous lu Platon?" Il me regarda, interloqué: "Quoi?" "Non, ce n'est rien"', *LB*, p. 39) does not cohere with what we know historically and biographically. Such a view is therefore the consequence of a very naive prejudice against the Nazis, who were

[51] Sandberg 2014, p. 250.
[52] Littell and Nora 2007, p. 29.
[53] Littell and Millet 2007, p. 6.
[54] *Ibid,* p. 14.
[55] Mazzoni 2008, pp. 234-235.

not just blood-thirsty animals, but often cultivated people, as happens in every social and political group. The aim of the novel is precisely to insist that crimes of monstrous proportions such as the Holocaust were carried out not only by normal people like Eichmann, but also by well-educated people – by opera lovers and readers of Plato, Stendhal, and Flaubert. In other words, the Holocaust was not the result of a lack of culture, but it was coherent with European culture itself. It is sufficient to remember that, among the Nazis, there were men such as: Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, Ernst Junger, Albert Speer and, working for the SS, Otto Ohlendorf, in whom critics recognise the most likely model for the character of Maximilien Aue[56].

Aue's eccentricity, moreover, is always confined *in interiore homine*, and therefore it is false, as Husson says[57], that it would not have been tolerated among the SS. Heydrich and Himmler never have the chance to witness Aue's psychological problems, and his homosexuality is largely malevolent gossip for the people around him (*LB*, pp. 253-254). It is true therefore that Aue is a peculiar kind of Nazi, but it cannot be argued that these characteristics would have been an obstacle for his career. This is not to mention the fact that there were several openly homosexual Nazis, such as Robert Brassilach and Lucien Rebartet. In other words, the fact that Aue is an atypical Nazi does not make him an impossible Nazi, as it has been suggested. I will focus later in this chapter on the reasons that lead Littell to choose certain peculiar psychological features for Aue. Nevertheless, it is true that Aue's peculiarity distances him from the stereotypes of his times, and places him cognitively and culturally closer to his readers by focusing on literary references, relativization, and sexual morbidity. Such a closeness is necessary for readers to fully empathise with the protagonist.

However, Aue's unlikeliness raises another doubt about *Les Bienveillantes*. Aue is an extremely self-aware narrator, who displays great knowledge of rhetorical mechanisms and a high degree of erudition. Moreover, he admits to readers that he has been consulting historical sources in order to write his memoir. At the same time, however, Aue is an unreliable narrator, who refuses to admit the obvious truth (or convinces himself he is not guilty) of killing his mother. His potential implausibility as a Nazi officer is encapsulated by the surrealism of certain passages of the plot, such as the final pages in which Aue bites Hitler's nose, and the Kitsch morbidity in which several characters and situations are depicted, as we have just seen. All these features seem to suggest, in other words, that *Les Bienveillantes* belongs to the genre of historiographic metafiction, rather than to the historical novel.

---

[56] Compagnon 2012, pp. 117 ff.
[57] Husson 2006.

It has been argued that Littell's work can be considered metafictional[58]. Philippe Carrard suggests that 'it is this use of actual rather then fictional characters as middlemen that makes *The Kindly Ones* into a piece of historiographic metafiction. […] By challenging the conventions of the historical novel, at least those identified by Lukàcs [according to whom historical characters traditionally have the role of middlemen], Littell's text becomes self-reflexive'[59]. A similar effect is produced by the presence of a glossary of terms at the end of the novel, as it 'constitutes a reflection on the relations between text and paratexts in a novel that aims at factual accuracy'[60]. However, despite the presence of great narratorial and authorial self-awareness, and therefore of a certain amount of metafictionality, *Les Bienveillantes* cannot be considered historiographic metafiction in the sense outlined by Linda Hutcheon. Littell's focus is not on the way in which we know and understand the past, neither on the fact that we cannot know the past but through its representations. In fact, although Aue uses books and historical sources to structure his narration, his main source of knowledge and validation is his direct testimony. Even if in some parts of his story Aue acts as an unreliable narrator, this fact never undermines the faith of the reader in the truth of what is being narrated. Aue's unreliability, in other words, never casts doubt on the historicity of the Holocaust, or on the way it has been transmitted to us: on the contrary, Aue's testimony endorses the truthfulness of direct witnesses and survivals (unlike, for instance, *Operation Shylock*). Further, his admission of using historical sources endorses the work of historians. Littell's exploitation of metafictional means is not a playful and dubitative way to discuss the hermeneutic value of literature, but, as we will see later, an attempt to convey a further meaning that is not in contradiction with the mimetic effort.

3. Max Aue, an Intellectual Hero

Another book is severally evoked during the second half of the novel, after the battle of Stalingrad. Gustave Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*, both *Bildungsroman* and historical novel[61], accompanies Aue until the very last moments of the history of the Reich (*LB*, p. 867), and is recalled in the name of Aue's stepfather, Moreau, the same surname of Flaubert's

[58] Grethlein 2012, p. 92.
[59] Carrard 2014, p. 184.
[60] *Ibid,* p. 185.
[61] Imbaud 2010, p. 186.

protagonist. The meaning of this choice is apparently clear, since the second part of the novel narrates (mainly through flashbacks) the love story of Max with his sister, Una. In this context, the promise that Max made to her when he was a teenager, not to love anyone, else acquires importance insofar as it recalls the one made by Frederic to Madame Arnoux in *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Moreover, the existence of this promise is for Flaubert's Frederic an excuse for his irresoluteness, as it allows him to avoid a serious commitment to Madame Dambreuse. Similarly, Aue abides to the promise he made to Una (who meanwhile got married) to stay anchored to an infantile incestuous fantasy that prevents him from having a mature relationship with Helene[62].

An additional and more interesting meaning of this choice can be attributed to Littell's inclusion of Flaubert which registers the new literary tradition instantiated with *L'Éducation sentimentale* (and which is also partially take up by *Les Bienveillantes*). To explain, according to Romano Luperini, Flaubert's novel can be interpreted as the milestone that separates the traditional and the modern novel:

> Dopo il 1848 qualcosa è cambiato in profondità. A partire dall'*Educazione sentimentale*, l'eroe appare ormai privo di una spinta propulsiva. La dialettica del desiderio sembra aver perduto il proprio vigore. Nel romanzo di Flaubert l'aspirazione all'amore, alla gloria e all'affermazione sociale resta perennemente indefinita. Il velleitarismo, la tendenza a mancare o a svuotare gli appuntamenti importanti (amorosi ma anche politici) rendono il protagonista inetto e inconcludente. La pulsione del desiderio non è più indirizzata in avanti, ma ripiegata all'indietro: diventa, scrive Brooks, "concupiscenza retrospettiva"[63].

It is significant therefore that Littell introduces Flaubert at the juncture of Aue's psychological impasse, after a more eventful and active first part of the novel, written under the sign of Stendhal. In fact, to paraphrase the famous incipit of Malaparte's *Kaputt* (1944), the battle of Stalingrad signals the end of the *winning* war, and the start of the *losing* war. In this second part Aue, also as a consequence of his head wound, loses concreteness and will, and moves from *acting* to *being acted* by the circumstances that surround him. Seemingly, he continues to perform his duties with the usual efficiency, but he is unable to perform all larger-scale actions, except for the desire, soon frustrated, to be transferred to France (*LB*, p. 425).

If in the first part of the novel, Aue acted by his own initiative (like in Caucasus, where he pays for his actions with the transfer to Stalingrad), now his activities are regulated by the

[62] *Ibid,* p. 701.
[63] Luperini 2007, p. 19.

mysterious figures of Leland and Mandelbrod who recommend him to Himmler and Speer. Aue's passivity becomes almost total at the end of the novel – specifically, in the long, delirious chapter, 'Air', in which Flaubert's novel is explicitly mentioned. Aue's will, just like Frederic's, manifests itself in sudden, arbitrary, and fleeting acts of pride[64], as when he kills a Prussian Junker (*LB*, pp. 854-855) and his former lover, Mihai, out of rage (*LB*, pp. 870-871).

Aue's condition is, of course, metaphorical, because his intellectual and psychological disarray is a symbol for the state of decay in which Germany finds itself at the end of the war. If it is true, to quote Di Giacomo, that the importance of *L'Éducation sentimentale* has to be found in the dramatisation of inaction and erosion[65], then it appears clear that Flaubert represents an important intertext through which to read the second half of Aue's story. From the modern (late nineteenth) novel, Littell borrows distinct features, and bestows them on his protagonist: Aue is a flâneur, and an intellectual hero.

Aue's flânerie does not require much explanation, given that it is evident on a structural level. In fact, given Baudelaire's echo in the novel's incipit[66], it could be said that it is evident from the very beginning of the book. Max travels throughout Europe during the war, following a path which traces precisely the stages of German military expansion and retreat (Ukraine, Caucasus, Stalingrad, Poland, Hungary), as well as the symbolic progression of the Holocaust (from the France of the Enlightenment to the concentration camps[67]). Aue visits Paris, the capital of flânerie[68], and registers the actions and the impressions of the people he meets and of the things they do.

Actually, being a flâneur, Aue is mainly an observer: except for his time in Hungary, he is never asked to work actively. In Paris, before the war, his job is to analyse the inclination of the French political right towards the Nazis. In Caucasus, he is tasked with studying the Bergjuden in order to understand if they are real Jews; in Stalingrad, he is charged with investigating the morale of the troops; while, in Poland, he controls and supervises the camps. In the last part of the novel, when Aue and his friend, Thomas, go back to Berlin after Max's hallucinatory permanence in Pomerania, the road becomes for real the location of absolute chance. Everything can happen, and every encounter can be made (for instance, with an old Prussian Junker who plays the organ in an abandoned church, *LB*, pp. 854-855), and the chronotopos of

[64] *Ibid,* p. 71.
[65] Di Giacomo 1999, p. 68.
[66] Dambre 2012, p. 173.
[67] Briand 2010, pp. 87-102.
[68] Davies 2010, p. 176.

the road transforms into an apocalyptic landscape (as in Frye[69]), made of ghostly forests, ruins, and children-soldiers.

Aue's flânerie is intimately connected to another important characteristic of his: he is an eccentric hero, both intellectually[70] and psychologically. I have already mentioned that this eccentricity has led many to consider Aue as an unlikely character, and how this objection is not acceptable. What I now want to underline is the role that this intellectual and psychological diversity has in the novel. According to Littell himself, 'une grande partie de la fonction de Max Aue est de servir de regard sur les autres. Etant effectivement un personnage décalé par rapport à son environnement, il peut apporter ce regard lucide, qui balaie presque comme un scanner'[71]. In other words, Max's eccentric personality is motivated by his being a kind of shape-shifter or liminal persona who adopts characteristics appropriate to the different material circumstances he inhabits. Aue's mutable identity is also signaled by his native land, Alsace, a borderland with a contested and mixed cultural identity[72], and by his name, which is not only (or sounds) French, but is also a sonorously *liquid* name, in stark contrast with the asperity of all the German names that crowd the novel[73].

Aue is a problematic hero according to Lukàcs' definition: he is a character fighting against himself and the external world[74]. By consequence, he exhibits irony (one of the typical traits of the character of the modern novel[75]) in various parts of the novel. For instance, when looking closely to Heydrich or Himmler, Max realizes how unpleasant they look. This irony is the result of the confrontation between Aue and a world of which he perceives the absurdity[76]. It is an implicit perception, however, not an explicit one: Aue never openly ridicules at what he believes in.

Aue's eccentricity manifests psychologically in his sexual perversions. In order to fully understand the meaning that this part of Aue's behavior for Littell, we must look at the author's essay, *Le sec et l'humide*, which stands as a kind of preparatory sketch of *Les Bienveillantes* in

[69] Frye 1957, pp. 141-146.
[70] Bougnoux 2007, p. 67: 'Aue incarne l'intellectuel […]. Sa culture, son raffinement esthétique, ses ruminations morales autant que sa naïve impulsivité […] en font le contraire d'un Eichmann'.
[71] Littell and Millet 2007, p. 22. Moreover, see Littell and Blumenfeld 2006: 'A sociologically credible Nazi could never have expressed himself as my narrator does, would never have been able to shine a spotlight on the men surrounding him in the same way. Those who really existed, such as Eichmann and Himmler, and those I made up. Max Aue is a roving X-ray, a scanner'.
[72] Tame 2010, p. 218.
[73] Bougnoux 2009, p. 69.
[74] Tame 2010, p. 218. On the same topic, see Ferdjani 2010, p. 265.
[75] Di Giacomo 1999, pp. 32-36.
[76] On Aue's and, more interesting, Littell's irony, see Yves Boisseleau 2010, pp. 277-298.

the form of a commentary on Leon Degrelle's autobiography, and which is heavily influenced by Kauls Theweleit's *Mannerphantasien*[77]. According to Theweleit,

> Le modèle freudien du Ça, du Moi et du Surmoi, et donc de l'Œdipe, ne peut pas lui être appliqué, car le fasciste, en fait, n'a jamais achevé sa séparation d'avec la mère, et ne s'est jamais constitué un Moi au sens freudien du terme. Le fasciste est le "pas-encore-complètement-né". Or ce n'est pas un psychopathe; il a effectué une séparation partielle, il est socialisé, il parle, il écrit, il agit dans le monde, de manière hélas souvent efficace, il prend même parfois le pouvoir. Pour y parvenir, il s'est construit ou fait construire – par le truchement de la discipline, du dressage, d'exercices physiques – un Moi extériorisé qui prend la forme d'une "carapace", d'une "armure musculaire". Celle-ci maintient à l'intérieur, là où le fasciste n'a pas accès, toutes ses pulsions, ses fonctions désirantes absolument informes car incapables d'objectivation. Mais ce Moi-carapace n'est jamais tout à fait hermétique, il est même fragile ; il ne tient réellement que grâce à des soutiens extérieurs : l'école, l'armée, voire la prison. En période de crise, il se morcelle, et le fasciste risque alors d'être débordé par ses productions désirantes incontrôlables, la "dissolution des limites personnelles". Pour survivre, il extériorise ce qui le menace de l'intérieur, et tous les dangers prennent alors pour lui deux formes, intimement liées entre elles : celle du féminin et celle du liquide, de "tout ce qui coule"[78].

Aue, in this sense, is both a typical and an atypical fascist. Like Theweleit's fascist, Aue is tormented by nightmares that comprise liquid elements and scatological fantasies, and his discomfort with the tasks he has to carry out is somatised in violent diarrhoea (that transforms in constipation after the war). His social and political contradictions start to emerge especially after Stalingrad, and erupt definitively in the 'Air' chapter. The condition of siege (from the Latin *obsidere*) makes Stalingrad 'une ville obsédée' (*LB*, p. 357), the ideal place for Aue's insanity to start manifesting violently. On the other hand, Aue openly embraces this obsession for the humid and the feminine: he is a passive homosexual who desires to be a woman like his sister, Una (*LB*, p.192), who in fact accuses him of still being a child (*LB*, p. 449).

It can be clearly seen that the sexual peculiarity of Max, and his serene acceptance of it, is in contradiction with the fearful masculinity of Theweleit's fascist. For this reason, it is inappropriate to consider Aue's depravation as a(n) (obvious) metaphor for the moral depravation of Nazism, as Samuel Moyn does[79]. Aue is a passive homosexual who does not indulge in acts of sadism: his sexuality does not compensate for an internal weakness, nor does he try to create master-slave relationships with his lovers, nor is he sexually aroused by the idea

[77] Littell 2008, p. 25.
[78] *Ibid,* p. 26.
[79] Moyn 2012, p. 132.

of killing his victims[80]. This contradiction, like his intellectual status and his bilingualism, makes Max more sensitive than what we perceive as common fascists, and therefore allows him to examine more critically the reality around him.

4. From Athens to Auschwitz

Littell models the structure of *Les Bienveillantes* on the early nineteenth century novel and the modern novel; however, the book is littered with references to literary modernism. Apart from meeting Céline and Junger, Aue reads Blanchot's *Faux Pas*, while the expression 'œil pinéal' is a clear homage to Bataille's theories. Littell himself, pointing out his sources, mainly mentions the classics of literary modernism – Beckett, Blanchot, Bataille[81], Musil[82]. In addition to this, and to the fact that the novel is divided according to musical criteria[83], the main feature of literary modernism that can be observed in the text is the structural importance given to myth.

The reflection on myth has great importance for modernist poetics, since myth represents an attempt to close '[the] ontological gap between event and meaning': a symbol, therefore, that gathers, conserves and condenses a series of sometimes incompatible but still coexisting meanings[84]. In the works of some of the most important modernist authors (Ezra Pound, Saint-John Perse, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Thomas Mann), myth has two main roles: first, it gives meaning to the narrative and symbolic material; second, and most important, it serves to trigger latent meanings. In other words, myth points to the lack of authenticity of the contemporary world and the persistence of an archetypical pattern[85]. In *Ulysses, Order and Myth*, T. S. Eliot famously defines the *mythical method*, arguing that the reuse of myth that Joyce operates succeeds 'in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity' and

[80] Levéel 2010, p. 143: 'L'homosexualité de Maximilien Aue – appelons-la ainsi – ne représente pas le duo classique de la sexualité et du Mal fondé sur un rapport de force maître-esclave; à l'inverse, l'officier Aue ne trouve aucun plaisir pervers dans la subjugation sexuelle d'êtres dits inférieurs, comme d'autres officiers. Il ne pense pas aux Juifs, aux Polonais, aux prisonniers comme à des objets sexuels que son pouvoir lui permettrait de dominer et d'humilier'.
[81] Littell and Millet 2008, p. 24.
[82] *Ibid*.
[83] The novel is divided in six sections (*Toccata*, *Allemandes I et II*, *Courantee*, *Sarabande*, *Menuet (en rondeaux)*, *Ait*, *Gigue*) that remind us of the Bachian model (Littell and Millet 2007, pp. 9-10): this division forces the reader to confront with 'con l'asemanticità del *significante* musicale: poiché priva di denotazione, la musica non *significa* alcunché' (Tirinanzi 2012, p. 170). This division, thus, suggests '*l'assolutezza del testo dal contesto*: un testo isolato che la forma richiude su se stessa' (*ibid*).
[84] Gould 1981, p. 6.
[85] Dei 2015, p. 78.

that the mythical method 'is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'[86]. As Eric Gould notes, to say that the myth is a structure does not simply mean that novelists are free to steal or rewrite or juxtapose great stories because they are worthy of being told again, but that they find themselves stuck with the logics of mythical thinking every time they try to make sense of their material[87]. The modernist myth is therefore a source of discipline, illumination, order[88].

White indicates two characteristics of what he calls 'mythological novel': 'First, that the mythological parallel is suggested as an analogy or contrast to the contemporary world in which the main events of the novel occur; and second, that the parallel is an extended one and could be described as a motif'[89]. There is no doubt that these two formal characteristics can be found without great differences in both *Ulysses* and *Les Bienveillantes*: in this sense, there is an undeniable analogy between the way in which myth is adopted by Littell. What is different, however, is Littell's relationship with myth, and therefore the meaning of this reprise. As with Vollmann's deployment of myth, between the modernist appropriation of myth and Littell's there is an unbridgeable distance. In *Les Bienveillantes,* the use of myth does not recall some absolute, metahistorical meaning[90], in which the author can no longer believe, but has eminently an argumentative function, as if part of a metaphor. It is not by chance that, while the modernist mobilisation of myth looks to anthropological (James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*) or psychoanalytical works (Jung and Kerenyi, who connect mythical structures to the basic behavioral and psychic structure of man), Littell approaches myth through its secular version – tragedy.

At the same time, Littell's utilisation of myth has nothing to do with the parodying motivations of postmodernism. The postmodernist use of myth is characterised by an ironic approach that signals writers' disenchantment with epistemology: in authors such as Julio

---

[86] Eliot 1923, p. 201.
[87] Gould 1981, p. 137.
[88] Donoghue 1997, p. 211.
[89] White 1971, p. 7.
[90] On the metaphysical conception of the modernist myth, see Pierre Jamet (2015, p. 244): 'This type of work is based on a non-Hegelian conception of time and on skepticism toward the idea of progress. In this perspective, events or periods of time do not necessarily replace previous ones or make them obsolete. They give way to a new conception of time in which the past may reveal its present live relevance instead of sinking into oblivion or just barely yielding the possibility for a minority of privileged people of contemplating an embalmed kind of beauty'.

Cortazar, Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster[91] and David Foster Wallace[92], the mythical content is part of a broader parody of the our capacity to know the world; myth's hermeneutic value is explicitly ridiculed. This is not the case in *Les Bienveillantes*. In Littell's novel, myth represents a serious attempt to parallel Aue's personal life with a reflection on the meaning of the Holocaust, and it is never the object of parody or irony. What I am trying to suggest is that Littell's reprise of myth is essentially post-postmodern. It does not replicate the modernist faith in a metaphysical order opposed to the chaos of contemporary society, but, on the other hand, it still represents a serious part of the novel's structure.

The title of *Les Bienveillantes* reminds us, of course, of the myth of Orestes, which appears in the *The Oresteia*, by Aeschylus. Aue is Orestes because he kills his mother and her lover (whose name, Aristide, is an anagram for Atrides, Atreidai) to vindicate his father, whom they had declared dead and who was, as Agamemnon, a famous and ferocious soldier. Aue's mother is described with the traits of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' tragedy: she is stronger and more virile than her lover (*LB*, pp. 343-344), and shows her breast to her son while he is killing her (*LB*, p. 887). Aue's incestuous relationship with his sister also recalls the ambiguous relation between Orestes and Electra, although its explicit model is said to be *Una and Monos* by Edgar Allan Poe[93] (and not, as Nivat suggests, from Nabokov's *Ada*[94], whom Littell detests[95]; while other possible inspirations could be Camus' *Caligula*[96] and Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*[97]). Moreover, Littell sets part of the novel in Crimea, classically known as Tauris, a region famously connected to the saga of the Atrides by the sacrifice of Iphigenia.

The other figure who recalls Orestes' myth is Thomas, Aue's inseparable friend whom Brassilach refers as his Pylades (*LB*, p. 60). Thomas stands by Aue throughout all the difficulties he faces, and incites him to act: in the same way, Pylades pronounces his only line to convince Orestes of the necessity of the matricide[98]. Thomas' aid unfortunately causes Max to enroll in the SS (*LB*, p. 75), and he remains present through the whole novel, helping him and giving suggestions. Thomas has profoundly disturbing, diabolical traits : 'un moment, mais juste avant;

---

[91] On the first two authors, see Hocevar (2012, pp. 107-118) and Monballieu (2012, pp. 131-144). Auster does not use an actual myth, but the 'myth' of Don Quixote, which is however used to structure the novella, 'City of Glass' in the same way Joyce uses the Odyssey. On this topic, see Ciccarello di Blasi (1995).
[92] Ercolino 2015, pp. 150-153.
[93] Raciti 2013, p. 18.
[94] Nivat 2007, p. 56.
[95] Littell and Millet 2007, p. 20.
[96] Levéel 2010, p. 151.
[97] Nivat 2012, pp. 19-31.
[98] Aeschylus 1979, p. 155, vv. 899-903: 'Orestes: "Pylades, what am I to do? Shall I respect my mother, and not kill her?". Pylades: "Where henceforth shall be the oracles of Loxias declared at Pytho, and the covenant you pledged on oath? Count all man your enemies rather than the gods!"'.

ainsi, il semblait à chaque fois qu'il avait toujours été là, et que les revirements de la préséance bureaucratique ne faisaient que le rattraper' (*LB*, p. 61). He is an almost supernatural figure: his capability of recovery from a wound seems unnatural to Aue (*LB*, pp. 381-2), just like it seems unnatural to him that Thomas has parents (*LB*, p. 834). Thomas' surname, to clarify, is Hauser: it would not have been strange if, like Kaspar, his origins were mysterious.

The novel concludes with Max killing Thomas and stealing his false documents, which will allow him to escape to France. Thomas, like Una, is Aue's double[99], but a demonic one ('C'est ainsi que le Diable élargit son domaine, pas autrement', he comments when Thomas convinces him to join the Einsatzgruppe in Ukraine, *LB*, p. 63). Una and Thomas represent two opposite instances of Aue's personality: respectively, discomfort for the world in which he lives and the tasks he has to carry out, and cynical obedience and adherence to *Völkisch* society. The presence of two doubles of the protagonist, the feminine, Una, and the demonic, Thomas, is important not only for the mythological parallel, but also, as we will see, for the novel's reflection on the very nature of Nazi anti-Semitism.

Most significantly, Aue is tormented by the Erinyes, the 'kindly ones' of the title, who are personified in the novel by Clemens and Weser, the detective duo who investigate Aue on suspicion of matricide. Clemens is a suggestive name ('benevolent' in Latin), and they are described, in a reappropriation of the traditional iconography of the Erinyes, as a couple of bulldogs (*LB*, p. 735). Their persistence in persecuting Aue is somewhat irrational, insofar as they continue even after the end of the process (and Aue's absolution) and during the catastrophic fall of Berlin (*LB*, pp. 885-894)[100]. Ironically, as noted by Dominick LaCapra, the two detectives share the names of two infamous Nazi criminals[101].

Which sources does Littell use? I would argue that he mobilises myths of both Aeschylus and Sophocles, rather than, as Mercies-Leca suggests[102], only one of them. If it is true, in fact, that the novel lacks the actual moment of Aue's judgment (while Aeschylus's *Oresteia* concludes with Orestes' judgment), it is also true that the Erinyes are physically present in the novel, while in *Electra* they are not. Other important sources are Seneca's *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon*, both for the political meaning of the myth of the Atrides and for its abundance of gory details. The ubiquity of this myth in German theatre is also significant, since it does not

[99] Fusillo 1998, p. 25.
[100] Philip Watts (2012, p. 163) suggests that the scene (Littel 2006, p. 345) in which Aue watches Moreau eat a sausage that he previously used to masturbate is a parody of Thyestes' feast.
[101] LaCapra 2013, p. 102.
[102] Mercier-Leca 2007, p. 47.

only take place at the dawn of the recovery of the classics[103] or in Hofmannsthal[104], but also because it lasts, literary, among the ruins of Berlin, in Hauptmann's work[105]. I would not take in consideration, on the other hand, Oedipus' myth, which Troubetskoy[106] and de Tholozany[107] want to substitute with Orestes' for the simple reason that the figure of Oedipus merges the political novel, the family novel, and the themes of incest and parricide[108]. Indeed, the references to the *Oresteia* are too many and too evident to be substituted with another, completely different myth.

There is a text that, more than all others, isolates the conceptual centre of Orestes' myth: *Faux Pas* by Maurice Blanchot. Littell notably mentions Blanchot's text in the novel. Blanchot gets at the core of Orestes' dilemma:

> Oreste se rend coupable par obéissance. Il n'est pas maître de son crime. Il n'est que la chaînon indispensable dans la chaîne des forfaits. […] Le jeune justicier, devant cette situation insoluble qui, quoi qu'il fasse, qu'il s'abstienne ou qu'il tue, le transforme en coupable, ne se lamente pas sur sa sorte imméritée. Il s'y soumet mais il l'accepte. Tout le drame des Choéphores, la préparation au crime, l'appel du fils à son père ne signifie que l'acquiescement de plus en plus profond à l'acte sanglant de la vengeance, l'effort d'Oreste pour se changer lui-même en cette nuit du mal et de l'horreur que représente la mort d'Agamemnon, en somme la volonté d'Oreste de devenir intérieur à sa propre fatalité[109].

Blanchot describes how a crime may be committed simply by obeying the superior and inescapable will of the god of reason. If we apply this rationale to *Les Bienveillantes*, we might identify that Max's crime of matricide is depicted as an inevitable crime, committed according to a warped perception of duty to his father. This being said, only on a very elementary level is the inevitable crime that of matricide: the allusion is clearly to the Holocaust. 'La nécessité, les Grecs le savaient déjà, est une déesse non seulement aveugle, mais cruelle' (*LB*, p. 543). When I referred to an indissoluble relation between the two parts of the novel – the narration of historical facts and of Aue's psychic life; the traditional and the modernist novel – this is precisely to what I was alluding. Just as Littell's mimetic effort shows us an infinite chain of

[103] Turato 2014, p. 153.
[104] *Ibid,* p. 340.
[105] *Ibid,* p. 497.
[106] Troubetzkoy 2010, pp. 19-30.
[107] de Tholozany 2010, pp. 197-212.
[108] Troubetzkoy 2010, p. 25.
[109] Blanchot 1943, p. 77.

events in which, apparently, no one is guilty, the reference to the myth of Orestes shows us the evil committed as necessary and inevitable.

As Raciti points out, the real assassin in *The Eumenides* is Apollo[110], who orders Orestes to commit the homicide of his mother and promises him forgiveness (again, as Pylades says: 'Count all man your enemies rather than the gods!'). Apollo is also the assassin in *Les Bienveillantes*. I am not simply referring to the presence of demonic and supernatural figures who push Aue towards increasingly wicked and criminal responsibilities (like Thomas and Mandelbrod[111]). Littell's effort is much more elegant and profound. What Aue points towards as a root of Nazi evil is the Enlightenment rational spirit. The Holocaust, in other words, as I insisted in the introduction, is nothing but the most extreme product of European modernity:

> La destruction par nos soins du peuple de Moïse ne procédait pas uniquement d'une haine irrationnelle pour les Juifs […] mais surtout d'une acceptation ferme et raisonnée du recours à la violence pour la résolution des problèmes sociaux les plus variés, ce en quoi, d'ailleurs, nous ne différions des bolcheviques que par nos appréciations respectives des catégories des problèmes à résoudre […]. En Europe du moins, à partir du XVIII siècle, toutes les solutions distinctes aux divers problèmes – le supplices pour les criminels, l'exil pour les malades contagieux (léproseries), la charité chrétienne pour les imbéciles – ont convergé, sous l'influence des Lumières, vers un type de solution unique, applicable à tous les cas et déclinable à volonté : l'enfermement institutionnalisé, financé par l'Etat, une forme d'exil intérieur si l'on veut, à prétention pédagogique parfois, mais surtout à finalité pratique […]. Mais pourquoi alors, demanderait-on aujourd'hui, les Juifs ? Qu'est que les Juifs ont à voir avec vos fous, vos criminels, vos contagieux ? Pourtant, il n'est pas difficile de voir que, historiquement, les Juifs se sont eux-mêmes constitués comme « problème », en voulant à tout prix rester à part (*LB*, p. 642).

In pages as such, echoes of Foucault's theories abound[112], as well as the very modern fury that animates (long before Foucault) Faust, one of the most iconic symbols of the ambiguity modern science and development. Indeed, this passage illustrates how a 'desire for *development*'[113] and

[110] Raciti 2010, p. 72.
[111] Lermonier 2010, p. 38.
[112] Littell and Nora 2007, p.38: 'On pourrait alors partir d'une lecture foucaldienne en disant qu'au XVIII siècle, pour résoudre les problèmes sociaux, quels qu'ils soient, les fous, les malades mentaux, les endettés, les criminels, on passe par l'enfermement'. See also Savattieri 2008, p. 242.
[113] Berman 1982, p. 39.

'the drive to create a homogeneous environment, a totally modernized space'[114] move him to kill Baucis and Philemon[115].

Littell's thesis is historically founded, and is coherent with several interpretations of the Holocaust as an historical phenomenon. If we look at European history between the two wars, it can be seen that conservative and anti-democratic doctrines were much more popular than democratic policies[116] and, further, that the myth of a 'pure nation'[117] was the theoretical basis for territorial distribution after the Great War, even for liberal democracies. Moreover, this anxious research for purity coincided on the home front with the large diffusion of genetics policies. The Third Reich was but one of the countries that adopted forced sterilisations and other coercive methods of population control[118], and even the most extreme of these policies gained wide popular support[119].

In his most important study, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Bauman warns against both considering the Holocaust as a matter important only to Jews, and simply counting it among the many massacres which pervade European and world history[120]. On the contrary, the Holocaust represents a paradigmatic case of the modernity's capacity for destruction and de-humanisation. In fact, European anti-Semitism itself does not offer a satisfactory explanation for the Holocaust, which is unconceivable without Enlightenment thought and industrial modernity. The Holocaust, for Bauman, does not represent the emergence of dark tendencies of human nature, nor does it contradict the motivations and outcomes of human civilisation thus far. Rather, the Holocaust is uncomfortably coherent with human civilisation, and represents a consequence of modernity: 'The Hobbesian world of the Holocaust did not surface from its too-shallow grave, resurrected by the tumult of irrational emotions. It arrived […] in a factory-produced vehicle, wielding weapons only the most advanced science could supply, and following an itinerary designed by scientifically managed organization'[121].

---

[114] *Ibid,* p. 68.
[115] In *Les Bienveillantes*, the character of Osnabrugge, the engineer whose passion is building bridges but who has the duty of destroying them, is a real symbol of the perversion of the Enlightenment ideas under fascism and national socialism.
[116] Mazower 1998, pp. 3-4.
[117] *Ibid,* p. 41.
[118] *Ibid,* pp. 77-105.
[119] *Ibid,* pp. XII-XIII.
[120] Bauman 1989, pp. 1-3.
[121] *Ibid,* p. 13. Of course, however, the roots of the tragedy of Jews lay in their history, thus in the symbol made of them by the Catholic Church: 'the age of modernity inherited "the Jew" already firmly separated from the Jewish men and women who inhabited its own town and villages' (*ibid,* p. 39). Characteristic to 'the Jew' were his universality, his extra-temporality and his extra-territoriality – all elements which made him ripe for virtually every propaganda, an empty vessel able to incarnate, depending on the occasion, the essence of capitalist or Bolshevik

While capitalistic modernity builds, with economic levelling, a world in which the old ethnic and caste identities dissolve and change, nationalism asks for the creation of a separate space in which these differences are still clear (insofar as nations derive their identity in distinction to other nations). Being a Nation without a State, Jews were never able to fight using the means of the Nation-State, representing in the mind of their enemies an image of physical corruption in the healthy body of the Nation[122]. In the context of the equalisation of citizens in front of the law and the neutralisation of religious differences, anti-modern thought reacts by re-codifying the eccentricity of the Jew as no longer physically separate (the inhabitant of the ghetto), but biologically different. 'The distinctiveness of the Jews had to be rearticulated and laid on new foundations, stronger than human powers of culture and self-determination'[123] – which means, via the pseudo-scientific notion of race.

Paradoxically enough, despite moving from anti-modern instances, the extermination of Jews cannot be conceived without the context of modernity: the Nation-State and the very notion of scientific racism are modern; likewise, modern are the means used to practically eliminate Jews. As recognisably modern as the discourses and technologies that facilitated the Holocaust may be, the unprecedented meaning of the Holocaust lies in the fact that extermination was no longer a means (to conquer a land or to impose someone's will) but a purpose[124]. The extermination is not incidental, but it is a specific aim. Such a vision is clearly unconceivable without the bio-politics of the Nation-State. As Bauman sardonically remarks: 'Modern genocide, like modern culture in general, is a gardener's job'[125].

To be enacted, the Holocaust required the synchronisation of 'some ordinary factors of modernity which are normally kept apart'[126]. Some of these factors are incidental to, but not in contradiction with, modernity, such as racialised anti-Semitism and the exceptional state of war.

---

cosmopolitanism, the refractoriness of adherence to the Nation-State, and the cowardice of not having a Nation to defend (*ibid,* p. 41. Fritz 2011, pp. 4-5).

[122] *Ibid,* p. 35. It would be an error to think that the statelessness of the Jews was perceived as a problem only by the Nazis: the same happened, for instance, in the Soviet Union. In 1934 'the Soviet government established the Jewish Autonomous Region [.] in a remote, sparsely populated region of the Soviet Far East. Located along the Sino-Soviet border some five thousands miles east of Moscow, the J.A.R. – popularly known as Birobidzhan, the region's capital city – was designated the national homeland of the Soviet Jewry' (Weinberg 1998, p. 13). More generally, anti-Semitism has been (and indeed still is, even if sometimes disguised as anti-Israel or anti-Sionism) a typical feature of anti-capitalistic literature. According to Michele Battini, the existence of a 'anti-Jewish anticapitalist paradigm' (2010, p. 3) can be backdated to the Catholic reaction against the French revolution, and characterizes European culture for more than one century. This paradigm identified the new market economy with finance, and finance with the Jews.

[123] Bauman 1989, p. 59.

[124] *Ibid,* p. 91. See also Traverso 1998, p. 304, and Diner 2000, pp. 196 and 199.

[125] Bauman 1989, p. 92.

[126] *Ibid,* p. 94.

Others are fundamentally modern: the presence of a strong centralised State, the ability to control an efficient bureaucracy, and the moral neutrality of the majority of the population[127]. The concentration of violence attributed the hierarchisation of work, and therefore the replacement of *ethical* responsibility with *technical* responsibility[128]; the de-humanisation of bureaucratic objects; the fall of moral safeguards that these forms of de-humanisation would ordinarily imply[129] are all modern factors typical of the capitalist factory. The extermination of Jews, in conclusion, was enacted both according to the logic of industrial modernity and with the means, the instruments and the symbols that so typically belong to it. As Traverso argues, the 'industrial methods of execution' used in Auschwitz resembled closely the factory production, and so did the architecture of the death camp and 'its position at the center of an industrial zone and an important railway junction. Production and extermination were indistinguishable, as if massacre […] was simply a particular form of production'[130].

The positivistic mechanisms that structured the process of extermination gave also shape to the language of the killing bureaucracy. As I have underlined in the first part of this chapter, Littell's Greek tragedy portrays a world in which personal initiative has little to no space: just as the victims are not free to avoid death, nor are the perpetrators free to avoid killing. In this sense, Littell's vision is profoundly deterministic, and this determinism is reflected by the great use of specific lexicon, comprising serious yet vague terms. It is not only the monstrous dimensions of the bureaucratic machine that leads the men to their crimes, but also the very language they speak:

> Et c'était peut-être là, au fond, la raison d'**ê**tre de nos *Sprachregelungen*, assez transparents finalement en termes de camouflage (*Tarnjargon*), mais utiles pour tenir ceux qui se servaient de ces mots et de ces expressions – *Sonderbehandlung* (traitement spécial), *Abtransportiert* (transporté plus loin), *Entsprechend Behandelt* (trainté de manière appropriée), *Wohnsitzverlegung* (changement de domicile) o *Executivmassmahemn* (mesures exécutives) – entre les pointes acérées de leur abstraction. Cette tendance s'étendait a tout notre langage bureaucratique, notre *Burokratische Amtsdeutch*, comme disait mon collègue Eichmann : dans les correspondances, dans les discours aussi, les tournures passives dominaient, "il a été décidé que…", "les Juifs ont été convoyés aux mesures spéciales", "cette tâche difficile a été accomplie", et ainsi les choses se faisaient toutes seules, personne ne faisait jamais rien,

[127] *Ibid,* pp. 94-95.
[128] *Ibid,* p. 98.
[129] *Ibid,* pp. 98-116. See also Diner 2000, p. 165: '[…] Savagery was in fact not necessary for the smooth functioning of the industrial machinery of murder'.
[130] Traverso 2003, p. 37.

> personne n'agissait, c'étaient des actes sans acteurs, ce qui est toujours rassurant, et d'une certaine façon ce n'étaient même pas des actes, car par l'usage particulier que notre langue nationale-socialiste faisait de certains noms, on parvenait, sinon à entièrement éliminer les verbes, du moins à les réduire à l'état d'appendices inutiles (mais néanmoins décoratifs), et ainsi, on se passait même de l'action, il y avait seulement des faits, des réalités brutes soit déjà présentes, soit attendant leur accomplissement inévitable, comme l'*Einsatz*, ou l'*Einbruch* (la percée), la *Verwertung* (l'utilisation), l'*Entpolonisierung* (la dépolonisation), l'*Ausrottung* (l'extermination) (*LB*, pp. 580-581).

The Nazi imperatives of order and purity are inevitably frustrated by reality, and by their own inconsistency. In *Les Bienveillantes*, this frustration is represented not only by the long digressions detailing dull bureaucratic processes and the wastes of the State machinery or by the practical and physical difficulties of carrying out extermination, but also by Aue's nervous breakdown.

The task Apollo dictates, behind whose 'beauté froide, calme, inhumaine' (*LB*, p. 484) Max hides, turns into a terrible nightmare. In terms of the matricide, it is very significant that Littell chooses to have Max commit the crime in state of unconsciousness – and in fact Aue never admits to be the assassin. The crime is committed when Max is not able to control himself, and is therefore guided by his most obscure passions: how can we not recall, in this sense, Hitler's famous sleepwalking? As with Bolaño and Vollmann, Littell stages an actual sleepwalker to suggest the mediumistic nature of fascism, and its capability to raise the enthusiasm of the masses as if by hypnotism. At the same time, the portrait of the Holocaust as an apparently inevitable event, both culturally and linguistically, parallels Max's individual crime with the collective crime that was being committed at the same time.

Where Apollo is, Dionysus appears too – this is the great lesson of *Der Tod in Venedig*[131]. The novel explicitly refers to Mann's work at the end of the 'Sarabande' chapter, in which Aue gets lost in the snow like Hans Castorp, the protagonist of *Der Zauberberg*[132]. Like Castorp, Aue penetrates the realm of death[133], but he does not witness any salvific vision that helps him to make a choice. The opening of the *œil pinéal* and the encounter with death only serve to further dismantle Aue's subconscious, precipitating in him an increasing paranoia which does not lead to any further knowledge.

---

[131] Moyn 2007, p. 135.

[132] Mazzoni 2008, p. 234*:* 'La scena visionaria in cui Aue a Stalingrado, nel delirio del ferimento, immagina di perdersi nel Volga ricorda da vicino la scena della *Montagna magica* in cui Hans Castorp si perde nella neve'.

[133] Neumann 2010, pp. XI-XLIX, p. XLIII.

All this considered, it would be hard to classify Littell's use of the myth as experimental. While the novel of the twentieth century 'può essere definito "antiromanzo", dal momento che il lettore non entra in una storia da un'estremità per uscire dall'altra, seguendo un tragitto continuo, ma penetra in un universo nel quale può soltanto errare, […] vag[are] come in un sogno'[134], *Les Bienveillantes* inserts frequent moments of oneiric delirium. For instance, the whole chapter, 'Air', (*LB*, pp. 795-837) is structured in chronologically and topographically precise manner. Even those moments in which Littell's prose abandons itself to something similar to a stream of consciousness, as in the pages commenting on Himmler's discourse of 6th October 1943 (*LB*, p. 610), it is still extremely clear, controlled and lucid. In this particular example, for instance, the lack of punctuation for several pages does not make Aue's reasoning less easy to follow.

5. 'Un véritable conte moral'

It appears necessary now to summarise many different discourses and try to give them coherence and meaning. To understand why Littell wrote such a despairing and provocative novel such as *Les Bienveillantes*, we must ask ourselves why he choose to narrate the Second World War, and why he let a perpetrator speak.

As I explained in the introduction, the narration of the Holocaust has for decades been the patrimony of the witnesses and of their heirs. However, *Les Bienveillantes* does not belong to 'the era of the witness', as Annette Wieviorka called it[135]: it is an historical novel in which the protagonist is a fictional witness. The reader is well aware of the protagonist's fictionality, and cannot mistake Aue for a real person. Littell, born in New York in 1967, is not a Holocaust survivor, nor the son or grandson of one[136]. Although he did not personally experience the tragedies he narrates, Littell can exploit the emotive weight that develops around this theme. As we have seen, the Holocaust is not a massacre among many others, but the outstanding massacre of the twentieth century. Just as the Second World War is *the* absolute war, the Holocaust is *the* absolute tragedy – the one with the highest symbolic value.

[134] Di Giacomo 1999, p. 121.
[135] Wieviorka 1998.
[136] Luzzato 2008, p. 222. Tirinanzi 2012, p. 190.

Now, in the context of this symbolic density, it is quite strange to notice that the aim of Aue's discourse is to seduce us[137]. Everything in the book, attempts to make us sympathise with the perpetrator, from the *captatio benevolentiae*[138] that opens the novel to Aue's continuous wit, and from the literary references to the character's exhibition of culture and contrition. Even when he exposes his rationale, it may sound reasonable for a moment, but we already know that it is false, or at least hypocritical. Indeed, his excuses are not there to persuade us, but to conquer us with their wit and slyness. Aue himself is never really convinced that his reasoning can absolve him, and in fact, unlike Orestes, he does not undergo judgment, and cannot expiate his crimes[139]. In what can only be described as a remarkable exercise of attacking imaginary enemies, Édouard Husson attacks the tendency of *Les Bienveillantes* to relativise Nazi crimes[140]. What such an accusation fails to notice, however, is that it is not *Les Bienveillantes* that relativises them, but Aue. By overlapping author and narrator, Husson does not realise that Littell is simply providing Aue with preposterous excuses for his deeds. While, on the one hand, these excuses actually remind readers that it is possible to compare the Holocaust and other more recent genocides, on the other, it insists that such comparisons are not to be accepted. Aue's relativisation does not cancel the enormity of his actions. Aue desperately justifies himself, and this continuous anxiety in providing excuses signals his own lack of faith in the possibility of redemption and, to an extent, understanding.

Max's attack 'on differentiations of any kind'[141] at the beginning of the book, his claims that Germany's only fault is that it lost the war and that every other Western country has committed similar crimes, may come from respectable theories, and may help Littell to convey a message on our contemporary world. But they do not absolve Aue. *Les Bienveillantes* portrays a deterministic world, where there is no place for individual choice; even the language the characters speak forces them to commit certain acts, as we have seen. However, determinism is not a justification for Max, and he knows it: 'Les Grecs, eux, faisaient une place au hasard dans les affaires des hommes […], mais ils ne considéraient en aucune façon que ce hasard diminuait leur responsabilité' (*LB*, p. 545). In this sense, it is very significant that Max is an unreliable narrator. In much the same way as his denial of the homicide he committed never succeeds to convince readers of his innocence, his continuous justifications remain fruitless in proposing his lack of guilt. But why then does Aue speak?

---

137 Razinsky 2012, p. 147.
138 Delorme 2010, p. 33.
139 Mercier-Leca 2012, p. 52.
140 Husson and Terestchenko 2007, p. 39.
141 Razinsky 2012, p. 47.

This narratorial choice is bound to the final message of *Les Bienveillantes*. According to Littell's *Le Sec et l'Humide*, the aim of the fascist is to eliminate the Other so that the Other will not menace the integrity of his body. It is notable then that, throughout the whole novel, Aue cannot help but see himself in others. We now understand the importance of the presence of Aue's two doubles, Una and Thomas, who constantly remind him with their presence and distance of the existence of contradictory parts of his character. He understands, since the beginning of the war, that the presence of the Other is not erasable, no matter how inhuman the methods and how scrupulous the artificial distinctions between human beings may be:

> J'en suis arrivé à la conclusion que le garde SS ne devient pas violent ou sadique parce qu'il pense que le détenu n'est pas un être humain ; au contraire, sa rage croît et turne au sadisme lorsqu'il s'aperçoit que le détenu, loin d'être un sous-homme comme on le lui a appris, est justement, après tout, un homme, comme lui au fond, et c'est cette résistance, vous voyez, que le garde trouve insupportable, cette persistance muette de l'autre, et donc le garde le frappe pour essayer de faire disparaître leur humanité commune. Bien entendu, cela ne marche pas : plus le garde frappe, plus il est obligé de constater que le détenu refuse de se reconnaître comme un non-humain. A la fin, il ne lui reste plus comme solution qu'à le tuer, ce qui est un constat d'échec définitif (*LB*, p. 574).

Littell's idea, expressed also in the already mentioned *Le Sec et l'Humide*, is that the Nazi hatred for Jews is located in the fact that they see in them something they want to hide of themselves (*LB*, p. 636). In an hallucination (for that already mentioned irruption of Dionysus that, as Massimo Fusillo underlines, always forces an encounter with the Other[142]), Max sees Hitler wearing the typical Jewish shawl (*LB*, pp. 431-432), he sees his hated mother when he looks at himself in the mirror (*LB*, p. 474), and we happen to know that he is circumcised. And murder and death do not eliminate the presence of the Other and his pressure on us: after having killed Thomas, Max has to lose his own identity[143].

As I stated above, the Nazis hated the Jews, according to Littell, because they saw in them something they were trying to hide in themselves. But we, too, hate the Nazis because they incarnate the perversion of the positive ideals that regulate our modern society: not, therefore, because they are different from us, but because we share the same roots and we belong to the same cultural landscape. The unavoidability of the encounter with the Other, then, works also in another sense. In much the same way as Aue cannot but help identifying with others, readers cannot help sympathising with Aue and identifying with him. Laurent Binet, whom I will

[142] Fusillo 2006, pp. 30 ff.
[143] Compagnon 2012, p. 125.

discuss later in this chapter, suggests ironically that Max is not the mirror of his times, but of ours. This is exactly Littell's purpose. Max's public, his 'frères humains' (*LB*, p. 11), are not the men who fought with him in Russia or other SS officers, but contemporary readers, who are not asked to accept or discuss Aue's reasons and ideas, but to be fascinated by them, and, in the end, to identify with him. This is remarked on in the very opening page of the book: 'Ne pensez pas que je cherche à vous convaincre de quoi que ce soit; après tout, vos opinions vous regardent' (*LB*, p. 11). In other words, Aue's opinions are not important: the important is the very fact that Aue is talking. Similarly to Vollmann, for Littell, the exhibition of moral problems and ambiguity is more important than explicit moral judgment.

The decision to allow a perpetrator to speak, to make him the protagonist of the most symbolical massacre in European history, the mimetic effort, the validation means, the persuasiveness of Aue's speech – together these narrative decisions encourage the banal consideration that Nazis are men just like us, and, more terrifying, that we are men just like Nazis. We could have behaved like them in the same circumstances. In this sense, the value of Littell's novel is to force us to face what we not willing to see by ourselves. For this reason, it is extremely significant that the author chooses to coincide the protagonist and the narrator, foreclosing his own opportunity to explicitly judge the actions and the ideas of the novel. Littell condemns his judgment as unimportant. What is important is that action and ideas are respectively taking place and being said. To quote Littell on a painting by Francis Bacon: 'the question is not what the painter *meant*: it is what the paint he applied *says*'[144].

6. Comparisons and Oppositions

Since its publication, the problematic content and style of *Les Bienveillantes* has raised great controversy among literary critics and historians. Littell's choice of a perpetrator as a narrator has often been met with repudiation, either because it has not always been understood in all its implications, or because it was considered unacceptable in the first place. I have already mentioned that entire scholarly books have been written that criticise Littell's novel. What is more interesting, however, is that Littell's approach has influenced other writers in their literary efforts, encouraging both imitation and repulsion. In this section of the chapter, I discuss two

[144] Littell 2011, p. 43.

books, Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (*HHhH*, 2010) and Giorgio Falco's *La gemella H* (*GH*, 2014), whose approaches can be considered the opposite of Littell's, in the sense that the authors refuse the sensational and sometimes Kitsch fictionality of *Les Bienveillantes*. They, instead, prioritise strict historical accuracy (Binet) and detachment (Falco). Although these books are not written as a response to *Les Bienveillantes*, they interact with Littell's novel (in Binet's case, it is even mentioned in the text). Further, a comparison is useful insofar as it enables us to highlight the existence of a different approach and its flaws.

6.1.'Quoi de plus vulgaire, en effet, qu'un personnage inventé?'. Laurent Binet's Metafiction

Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (an acronym for the German, *Himmlers Hirn heißt Heydrich*, 'Himmler's brain is called Heydrich') is an account of Operation Anthropoid, the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, head of the RSHA, the SS secret service, and Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia, which was carried out by Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš. It is a metafictional account, as the narrator[145] sews together the history of the operation (and the biographies of its protagonists) and his own attempt to write it. Indeed, the novel *is* this attempt, as it contains pieces of narration, enumerations of historical sources, a critique on other fictional texts (including Littell's) concerning this event, and progressive corrections of information provided earlier in the text. As Carrard sums up, the narrator's intrusions are personal (autobiographical details), scholarly, metafictional, metanarrative, meta-novelistic, polemical, or they 'formulate hypotheses and acknowledge lacks'[146].

HHhH, in other words, is not simply a mixture of novelistic parts and the account of their writing: it illustrates, instead, the process of constructing a novel via a narrator that shows its making and provides corrections to his own text during the process. It is clear, then, that the real subject of Binet's book is not Operation Anthropoid, but rather the struggle of writing a truthful historical novel. For instance, the narrator of *HHhH* criticises the film, *Conspiracy*

[145] I talk about a non-specified narrator and not of the author as the novel never explicitly suggests that there is a coincidence between the two. Nevertheless, there are some biographical similarities between them, such as some details of Binet's biography on the cover of the book which are reprised in the text ('Il a effectué son service militaire en Slovaquie', the back of the cover says). Kelly has written about an 'aura autofictive' (Kelly 2013). I find this expression satisfactory, since the author does not deny a possible coincidence with the narrator, but he does not insist on it, and it has not, as in autofiction, a pivotal role in the novel. Binet himself simply talks about a 'narrateur fictif' (2013).

[146] Carrard 2014, pp. 188-190.

(*HHhH*, pp. 18-20), and explains how and where he collects his information, offering a biographical account of a visit to a museum (*HHhH*, pp. 24-26). Again, instead of presenting a fixed fictional text, he offers different versions of it, correcting himself in his writing. For instance, while chapter 83 ends with the sentence 'A 9 heures, enfin, le premier char allemand pénètre dans la ville' (*HHhH*, p. 131), chapter 84 opens with this remark: 'En fait, je ne sais pas si c'est un char qui pénètre en premier dans Prague. Les unités les plus avancées semblaient être massivement constituées de mots et de sidecars. A 9 heures, donc, des soldats allemands motorisés entrent dans le capitale tchèque' (*HHhH*, pp. 131-132). Similar observations are a constant in the book: 'Rien ne me dit que ce sont les Anglais du SOE (le Special Operation Executive) qui ont fourni leurs habits à Gabčík et Kubiš. Bien au contraire, il est plus probable que la question des vêtements ait été réglée par les services tchèques de Moravec. Donc il n'y a pas de raison que le sous-officier qui s'occupe de ça soit anglais. Quelle fatigue…' (*HHhH*, p. 237).

In this sense, Binet does not write a historical novel ('Si mon histoire était un roman…', *HHhH*, p. 286), but a metafictional novel, or, as he defines it, an *infranovel* ('infra roman', *HHhH*, p. 327)[147]. His refusal to write a historical novel is motivated by a concern about the dangers of historical fiction when it comes to such a complex matter as the resistance against Nazism. Binet attributes great importance to realism, but not in the sense of Littell's mimetic realism: while Littell looks for plausibility, Binet claims to be looking for truth. The narrator of *HHhH* is constantly worried by the risk of sounding fictional, thus false, since literary fiction, however effective and entertaining, cannot succeed in rendering the truth of an event: 'Kundera laisse entendre qu'il a un peu honte d'avoir à baptiser ses personnages […]. Quoi de plus vulgaire que d'attribuer arbitrairement, dans un puéril souci d'effet de réel ou, dans le meilleur des cas, simplement de commodité, un nom inventé à un personnage inventé? Kundera aurait dû, à mon avis, aller plus loin: quoi de plus vulgaire, en effet, qu'un personnage inventé?' (*HHhH*, pp. 9-10). Not only is the invention of a character vulgar, but also the use of a historical figure in a fictional novel is a violence against historical truth: 'Quelle imprudence de marionnettiser un homme mort depuis longtemps, incapable de se defender! De lui faire boire du thé alors que si ça se trouve, il n'aimait que le café. […] J'ai honte' (*HHhH*, p. 145).

This lack of faith in literature leads Binet to the creation of a sophisticated work of historiographic metafiction. This solution allows him to retain the reality of data and sources,

[147] It is not clear what this definition means. However, with 'roman' meaning 'novel' in French, and with 'infra' meaning 'below' in Latin/English, I assume that it is a variation on 'meta-novel'.

and the fictional narration; while the use of the narrator constantly signals the distance between reality and its reconstruction, filling the gaps between them:

> Rien n'est plus artificiel, dans un récit historique, que ces dialogues reconstitués à partir de témoignages plus ou moins de première main, sous prétexte d'insuffler de la vie aux pages mortes du passé. [...] Quoi qu'il en soit, mes dialogues, s'ils ne peuvent se fonder sur des sources précises, fiables, exactes au mot près, seront inventés. Toutefois dans ce dernier cas, il leur sera assignée, non une fonction d'hypotypose, mais plutôt, disons, au contraire, de parabole. Soit l'extrême exactitude, soit l'extrême exemplarité. Et pour qu'il n'y ait pas de confusion, tous les dialogues que j'inventerai (mais il n'y en aura pas beaucoup) seront traités comme des scènes de théâtre. Une goutte de stylisation, donc, dans l'océan du réel. (*HHhH*, pp. 33-34)

Realism, in *HHhH*, does not mean the ability to imitate another historical period and the actions of other people, but rather to give a precise account of the historical sources, deprived of literary invention. Binet explicitly refuses to enact the mimetic model of the nineteenth century historical novel, so pivotal in *Les Bienveillantes* (*HHhH*, pp. 31-32).

Curiously enough, Binet chooses historiographic metafiction not to undermine the truthfulness of historiography and to counter the official narrations on the past, but to discuss the authority of literature to reconstruct history. In postmodern historiographic metafiction, by contrast, literature is used to fill the holes of official historical reconstructions, and to open new spaces for minorities and marginal identities. Binet, rather, trusts greatly his historical sources, and when he contradicts them it is always on the basis of another more reliable source. History, in other words, is perfectly knowledgeable, and it is literature that is put on trial: the meta-narrator is exploited precisely to signal the separation of invention and facts. Contrary to postmodern historiographic metafiction, history is not a discourse, but a set of precise information and data, according to a model that is still positivistic[148]. Moreover, in Littell's novel (and also in Falco) history is presented as an incontrollable flow of events that involve masses of human beings on a vast stage, comparable in its uncontrollability to the role of fate in Greek tragedy. The obsession of Binet's narrator for Operation Anthropoid, on the other hand, reveals an idea of history that is still, to an extent, the Rankean model of great men and decisive situations.

Although not sharing the ideological framework of historiographic metafiction, the novel shares its hermeneutic limits: the metafictional frame is indeed more interesting than its content. It is not that the story told is not fascinating, or that Binet is unable to create narrative tension

[148] Bracher 2015, p. 100.

in the description of the actions of the Czechoslovak agents. In the climatic end of the book, the narrator almost enters the story by relaying the events of the night using the chronological details of his own actions: '29 mai 2008. L'eau commence à monter. Gabčík, Valčík et leurs deux compagnons ont les pieds dans l'eau' (*HHhH*, pp. 425). The main flaw of Binet's historiographic metafiction is that the preeminent role of the narrator has the effect of distracting the readers from the story of Operation Anthropoid, constantly shifting the focus toward how the novel is being written. At the same time, his obsession for reality (and not simply plausibility) forbids the creation of a real, psychological portrait with which readers can interact, and thus creates a distance between the characters and readers that inhibits sympathy. As Peter Tame argues, 'un des problèmes – ou peut-être est-ce un inconvénient – de l'approche de Binet, c'est l'importance accordée aux interrogations du narrateur, à la première personne du singulier'. Littell, Tame continues, enacted something similar with the first person narrator, Maximilien Aue, but nevertheless created a persona and narrative that fascinates readers. Binet, meanwhile, 'plus neutre et fade, risque de l'ennuyer avec ses tergiversations, ses spéculations et ses délibérations qui tournent principalement autour de faits historiques'[149].

Famously, Littell is made the object of a direct attack in the book[150] for the liberties he takes in his fictional reconstruction of the Second World War, and for the Kitsch excesses of some parts of it (a matter on which I have given as accurate an account as possible in the first sections of this chapter). For instance, Littell becomes representative of the lack of precision of the historical novel: 'Je me demande bien comment Jonathan Littell sait que Blobel, le responsable alcoolique du Sonderkommando 4a de l'Einsatzgruppe C, en Ukraine, avait une Opel. […] Si c'est du bluff, cela fragilise toute l'oeuvre. Parfaitement! Il est vrai que les nazis se fournissaient massivement chez Opel, il est donc tout à fait vraisemblable que Blobel ait possédé, ou disposé, d'un véhicule de cette marque. Mais vraisemblable n'est pas avéré. Je radote, n'est-ce pas? Les gens à qui je dis ça me prennent pour un maniaque. Ils ne voient pas le problème' (*HHhH*, pp. 307-308). Such an imprecision, in Binet's opinion, indeed makes all the difference between his

[149] Tame 2013.

[150] Not inappropriately, Binet's publisher forced him to eliminate from the novel some twenty pages of direct attacks on Littell (the novel, as it was published, only contains three pages of explicit critique). The 'Missing pages' were later published, in English, on the website *The Millions* (Binet 2012). A reader can see in these pages how juvenile, envious, and sneering the narrator's remarks often sound. Just one example: 'Yesterday, I met a young woman who works in a library. She told me about an old lady, a former Resistance fighter, who regularly borrows books. One day, the old lady took home Littell's *The Kindly Ones*. Soon afterwards, she brought it back, exclaiming: "What is this shit?". When I heard this, I thought straightaway that it would require a great deal of willpower not to put this anecdote in my book'.

novel and Littell's, as it signals a liberty of approach that undermines the fictional construction as a whole, and its ambition to describe history truthfully.

Moreover, Binet's narrator also finds Littell guilty of having created a fictional account of the Holocaust, innerved with morbid details and hyper-literary references:

> J'ai lu dans un forum un lecteur très convaincu qui disait à propos du personnage de Littell : "Max Aue sonne vrai parce qu'il est le miroir de son époque". Mais non! Il sonne vrai (pour certains lecteurs faciles à blouser) parce qu'il est le miroir de *notre* époque : nihiliste post-moderne, pour faire court. A aucun moment, il n'est suggéré que ce personnage adhère au nazisme. Il affiche au contraire un détachement souvent critique vis-à-vis de la doctrine national-socialiste, et en cela, on ne peut pas dire qu'il reflète le fanatisme délirant qui régnait à *son* époque. En revanche ce détachement qu'il affiche, cet air blasé revenu de tout, ce mal-être permanent, ce gout pour le raisonnement philosophique, cette amoralité assumée, ce sadisme maussade et cette terrible frustration sexuelle qui lui tord sans arrêt les entrailles… mais bien sûr! Comment n'y avais-je pas pensé plus tôt ? Soudain, j'y vois clair: *Les Bienveillantes*, c'est "Houellebecq chez les nazis", tout simplement'. (*HHhH*, p. 327)

I detailed why an interpretation of Aue as an *impossible* Nazi is inaccurate earlier. Binet, despite the vastness of his historical documentation, cannot escape the very naïve paradigm according to which the Nazis were all blood-thirsty idiots or ruthless animals. While Heydrich indeed fits this model, not all the men involved with the Nazi party, and not all members of the SS, do cohere with the narrow portrait; I do not think it is particularly useful to falsify their character. A man such as Albert Speer, cultivated, doubtful towards the purposes of the Reich and at the same time devoted to them, who often appears also in *HHhH*, has much more in common with Aue than with Heydrich. Moreover, saying that nothing in the novel suggests that Aue really believes in National-Socialism is simply a lie, or an utter misunderstanding of the text. Aue is not a fanatical Nazi (and it is worth remembering that he joined in the SS in order to avoid a scandal about his homosexuality), but he does believe in the propaganda of the Reich, as he shows in his conversations with Voss. He has doubts about the cultural processes of the Reich, but also faith in their purpose, as the whole episode of the Bergjuden demonstrates. Moreover, his psychological structure is coherent (up to a certain point, as we have seen) with that of the fascist as outlined by Theweleit. In other words, Aue is not a likely Nazi (and this is what allows him to work 'as a scanner'), but he is not impossible.

Nevertheless, it is true that Littell creates a character that, plausible Nazi or not, most certainly is not an everyman. This choice, together with the fact that he is 'a mirror of our

times', is precisely what allows Littell's public to empathise with Aue and admire him, and thus to be disturbed by this empathy. Binet's aim, on the other hand, is less subtle. His motivation in writing the book, as stated by the narrator, lies in his admiration of the two men who carried out Operation Anthropoid, and his hatred towards Heydrich – a hatred often expressed by an abundance of insults and mockery. Binet opposes his admiration of Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík to the 'decadence, mediocrity and superficial concerns of his own time'[151], a mediocrity encapsulated by the sensationalist murder of the collaborationist René Bousquet and, indeed, by the very success of *Les Bienveillantes*[152]. 'Those finding themselves adrift in an era devoid of substance and meaning naturally gravitate toward its drama and intensity'[153]; such is the case for Binet.

I would argue that the main flaw of Binet's novel lies in this stylisation. Readers know from the first page of the book that the heroes are some of the most admirable people who ever lived, and that the villains are despicable human beings; their knowledge and understanding of the war, as relates to heroes and villains or victims and perpetrators, does not evolve of an inch throughout the novel. On the other hand, Littell has no interest in disapproving of the Holocaust, as he nevertheless obviously does: 'Littell doesn't tell the reader what he already knows and doesn't seek to make him feel what he already feels'[154]. Binet, by refusing to provide readers with a psychological recreation of some of his characters' thoughts, obtained through an imaginative effort, abandons the purpose of saying something more than what motivated readers could have found in a history book. In other words, while Littell *shows* the readers a disturbing and seductive portrait of someone they *could* have been, were they born in a particular time and place, Binet simply *states* something that they already know and produces a distancing effect.

Although clever and entertaining, I would argue that Binet's novel fails to say something significant about the Second World War, or to encourage readers to experience empathy and understanding for someone other than them. In the second paragraph of this section, I stated that *HHhH* is more a novel concerned with writing a novel than a novel about the Second World War; it is precisely Binet's metafictional framework that prevents him from saying anything new or arresting about the war. Binet's choice of historiographic metafiction ultimately represents the use of a problematic and fecund literary device as an excuse not to reconstruct

[151] Bracher 2016, p. 14.
[152] *Ibid,* p. 19.
[153] *Ibid.*
[154] Benn Michales 2013, p. 923.

psychological portraits of his heroes insofar as the narrator does not even interact with his material by problematising it. In the story of Operation Anthropoid, as told in *HHhH*, there are no ambiguities nor any experiences that can be (re)made: the novel simply provides a testimony of heroism that was already in history books. Considering how Binet's own indifference towards literature has led him to such an impasse, one could remember Appelfeld's words in *Operation Shylock*, a book published twenty years before *HHhH* and animated by the same concerns (but with so different an outcome): 'I wanted to be faithful to reality and to what really happened. But the chronicle that emerged proved to be a weak scaffolding. The result was rather meager, an unconvincing imaginary tale. The things that are most true are easily falsified' (*OS*, p. 86).

6.2. Giorgio Falco's 'Objective Piety'

Giorgio Falco's approach to the historical novel is different from Binet's, and lacks his polemic intent. Nevertheless, I argue that there are similarities between the two, especially when considered in opposition to the model of *Les Bienveillantes*. Specifically, just as Binet avoids empathy and identification by using a metafictional narrator, Falco chooses distancing and alienating textual strategies in order both to prevent readers from participating in the drama of the protagonists (mediocre everymen), and to show the continuity of fascism as capitalism by focusing mainly on objects and commercial goods.

Before I proceed to analyse *La gemella H*, it is worth devoting some space to explain why I chose this novel among the many novels on World War II published in Italy and, more generally, why I have not included a wider perspective on Italian narratives in my thesis given that my academic background is as an Italianist. In Italy, narratives on the Second World War have peculiar features, compared to the novels I have discussed so far. In fact, seventy years after its end, the narration of the Second World War in Italy still mainly coincides with the narration of anti-fascism, the occupation, and the Resistance. It comes as no surprise that the Resistance continues to have such a pivotal role in Italian public memory: as a historical phenomenon, it has been read as a moment of revenge for a people oppressed by a twenty year-long dictatorship, and as a moment of atonement for that dictatorship's crimes.

Furthermore, since the aftermath of the war, the Resistance has also been at the heart of the main part of the narration of the war, although the partisan war was fought but by very small

fraction of those who took part in the conflict. Specifically, the narration of the Resistance has gained preeminence over the experience of fascist fighters of the RSI (Italian Social Republic, the collaborationist northern Italy), and, less obviously, that of the Italian soldiers abandoned by the government after the 8 September 1943 armistice[155]. The canon of postwar Italian literature centres on Resistance novels such as Elio Vittorini's *Uomini e no* (1945), Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1946), Cesare Pavese's *La casa in collina* (1948), Renata Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire* (1949), and Beppe Fenoglio's *I ventitrè giorni della città di Alba* (1952) and the posthumous *Il partigiano Johnny* (1968)[156]. On the contrary, a memoir dedicated to the experience of a deported, Italian Jewish writer, *Se questo è un uomo* by Primo Levi (1947), initially encountered a rather cold reception; meanwhile, the first major literary work on the withdrawal of Italian soldiers is published only thirty years after the war (Stefano D'Arrigo's *Horcynus Orca*, 1975)[157].

More than other European countries, Italy's memory of the war has a peculiar 'divided memory', to quote the suggestive title of John Foot's essay (2009). The Resistance functions as an essential space of the country's symbolic reconstruction after twenty years of dictatorship and, for this reason, it has been variously reclaimed and diminished for political purposes. Nevertheless, despite some controversial moments[158] and the quarrel between the various movements (socialist, communist, Christian) of the anti-fascist fight, the Resistance has been the pivotal moment of Italian public memory of the Second World War during the First Republic (1948-1992), especially with Presidential election of the anti-fascist and former partisan, Sandro Pertini (1978). However, this Resistance literary tradition started to change, both culturally and politically, in the early 1990s. In 1991 and 1992 two books were published which challenged the conventional reading of the Resistance: Claudio Pavone's *Una guerra civile* (1991) and Romolo Gobbi's *Il mito della Resistenza* (1992). While the first is a reading of the Resistance as a series of wars (a patriotic war against the Germans, a civil war between North and South and between different political ideologies, and a class war) rather than a single, coherent one, the latter is a controversial attempt to debunk the 'mythological' axioms of the public memory of the Resistance. Moreover, the action of right-wing governments (and indeed

---

[155] Foot 2009, pp. 111-114.

[156] Cooke 2011, pp. 31-34 and 49-52. An exception to the centrality of the Resistance paradigm is represented, of course, by Curzio Malaparte, whose novels *Kaputt* (1944) and *La pelle* (1949) enjoyed huge commercial and critical success. Nevertheless, Malaparte stands alone as a peculiar (and indeed eccentric) figure in the literary panorama of his time.

[157] Alfano 2000, pp. 10-15.

[158] Most notable was the arrest and trial of 3,500 Communist partisans in 1949, and the Tambroni affair in 1960 (the attempt of the Democratic-Christian Party to form a government with the Neo-Fascist Party). See Cooke 2011, pp. 42-44 and 84-86.

the rise to power of Alleanza Nazionale, direct heir of the Fascist Party) in the 1990s and in the 2000s was perceived by many as undermining the values of Resistance[159]. In the present day, the post-ideological nature of the Movimento 5 Stelle leads its members to often equalise fascism and anti-fascism.

It goes without saying, then, that within a national literature in which the concept of *impegno* (political and social commitment[160]) is so historically preeminent, a vast majority of recent Italian literature about the Second World War still focuses on the centrality of the anti-fascist experience. Such is the case in novels such as: *Storie di uno scemo di guerra* by Ascanio Celestini (2005), *Dove finisce Roma* by Paola Soriga (2012), *Partigiano inverno* by Giacomo Verri (2012), *In territorio nemico* by the SIC group (Scrittura Industriale Collettiva, 2013), *Il tempo migliore della nostra vita* by Antonio Scurati (2015), and *Rosso nella notte bianca* by Stefano Valente (2016), to mention only the main recent Italian narratives on the Second World War. To a certain extent, this is also true in the case of thematically and narratively more elaborate texts such as *Le rondini di Montecassino* by Helena Janeczek (2010) or *Point Lenana* by Wu Ming 1 and Roberto Santachiara (2013), which make strong use of meta- and autofictional devices as well as a complex narrative framework. Generally, it can be said that these novels attempt, emphatically and often directly referring to the literary tradition of the Resistance, to create a parallel between the anti-fascist experience and the present political struggles.

In other words, contemporary Italian literature appears to still depend on a national literary model and state-specific political controversy. Such dependence has led me to exclude these kinds of texts from my thesis for reasons that they are not coherent with the working framework of a global dimension of the novelistic form and the representation of World War II. Moreover, even those novels that attempt to situate the Italian national experience in a transnational framework tend to result in a Kitsch exploitation of the Second World War. In Janeczek's novel, for instance, the transnational Allied effort in the Battle of Montecassino is paralleled with the present-day protests against Silvio Berlusconi. Indeed, nor are those novels which avoid focusing on the Resistance worthy of extensive consideration. Giuseppe Genna's *Hitler* (2008) is a fictional biography of the Führer, innerved with mythological elements and literary references that ultimately creates an inadvertent parody of Vollmann's *Europe Central*. Enrico

[159] It is worth mentioning, on this issue, the controversial revisionist work of Giampaolo Pansa, highly sponsored by right-wing newspapers (Cooke 2011, pp. 177-186).
[160] On this topic, see Burns 2001. As Burns shows, the seminal concept of *impegno* was still very much present in the apparently politically and socially detached 1980s and 1990s.

Brizzi's mainstream alternate history[161], *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* (2008) – the first novel of a trilogy alongside *La nostra guerra* (2009) and *Lorenzo Pellegrini e le donne* (2010) – reprises the postmodern and science-fictional device of uchronia. Despite Brizzi's ambition to create a portrait of contemporary fascist Italy that mirrors the real republican history (full of references, of course, to Berlusconi's Italy[162]), and thus to show the continuity of fascism in the present age, the result is rather stereotypical and stylistically shallow.

The one exception that I have found striking within this literary landscape is *La gemella H* by Giorgio Falco (2014), one of the few contemporary Italian novels that evades the paradigm of the Resistance, and the most accomplished of them. What makes Falco's novel even more interesting is that the requirement of sociopolitical commitment (so typical of Italian literature) is present not only thematically, but also stylistically. Falco exploits the formal expedients of the Italian *neo-avanguardia* (a literary movement of the 1950s and 1960s) in order to create in readers a sense of detachment and to provide them with a critical reading of their present. This sense of detachment, prevalent in Falco's novel, is what marks its distance from Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* and is what allows me to compare it with Binet's *HHhH*.

In *La gemella H*, Giorgio Falco extends both thematically and geographically the focus of the traditional paradigm of the Resistance, drawing a parallel between the Nazi dictatorship and contemporary consumerist society. Falco locates the origins of contemporary neo-capitalist economies in the mass policies of twentieth century dictatorships: as stated by Leo Longanesi's epigraph to the book, 'Il fascismo era lo spirito, UPIM era il corpo'. The protagonists of the novel are the Hinner family from Bockburg, a fictional Bavarian town north of Monaco. The family is comprises Maria and Hans, the parents, and the twin sisters, Hilde and Helga. Hans Hinner, a journalist, is an early member of the Nazi party. The novel follows him from Bavaria to Merano (Alto Adige), where he buys a house for his terminally ill wife, and then onto Milan, where he escapes after the war, and finally to the Adriatic *riviera*, where he buys and runs a small hotel, the Hotel Sand.

The fortune of the Hinners is intertwined with the fortune of the Nazi Party. Hans Hinner ('un nazista piccolo piccolo', as Roberto Saviano defines him[163]), who has occupied his profession and role in the Party since 1929, benefits from the rise to power of Adolf Hitler.

[161] Italy has a recent but rich history of uchronic narratives, which, as is common in the field of Italian science fiction, belong to a semi-amateurish world of fandom. On this topic, see my article 'Cronache del Fantafascismo' (Malvestio 2018).
[162] Brioni 2015, pp. 305-318.
[163] Saviano 2014.

Moreover, the real root of his economic prosperity lies in the possibility of his buying the house of his Jewish neighbours after the establishment of the Norimberga laws. The Hinner family witness without objection the violence the Kaumann family (their neighbours) are subject to by the SS, and then buy, heavily underpriced, their house and car. Further, the properties that the Hinners buy increase in value because of the German success in the war; at the same time, the low price at which Hans buys a house in Merano is justified by the disproportionate success of the Italian and German military operations.

Traditionally, the family novel is geographically stable and chronologically various: the insistence on a precise and meaningful place such as the family home or a town balances the temporal vastness of the narration. In *La gemella H*, however, the continuous peregrinations of the Hinners signal both the transnational (and super-national) nature of capitalism, and the evolution of one cultural and commercial system into another. As the writer Giorgio Vasta argues, '*La gemella H* collauda un'ipotesi stupefacente: ciò che siamo, le forme del nostro pensiero, il modo in cui viviamo è filiazione diretta delle logiche totalitarie'[164]. Indeed, after the war, the rituals of mass consumerism substitute those of the mass party and the totalitarian State: National-Socialism and its anxiety for racial purity evolve into the flawless models of the Rinascente, the first Italian chain of department stores, 'la nuova grande madre' where Hilde works (*GH*, p. 179). Hilde is hired after accurate medical exams and aesthetical evaluations, she wears a uniform, and is invited to suppress her German accent and to talk 'un italiano sorridente e radiofonico' (*GH*, p. 180): in other words, the world of mass consumerism continues those processes of selection and uniformity that started during the fascist era. As Falco writes:

> Ci aiuta l'insorgenza di un anomalo disturbo della memoria. Il motto collettivo è qualcosa di simile a dimenticate in memoria di me. Le nostre azioni passate svaniscono, seppellite dagli stereotipi. Il Grande Male. La Belva Umana. Il Criminale Assoluto. Milioni di morti e siamo ancora qui, pronti a nuovi oggetti, a criteri di comportamento volti alla concupiscenza delle cose. Ridimensionata la visibilità dell'ideologia – ora diluita sotto ogni traccia – resta la volontà di vivere secondo quelle stesse dinamiche totalitarie applicate ai rapporti lavorativi e familiari. Possiamo fare e subire tutto, purché rimaniamo in una sfera economica, finanziaria. (*GH*, p. 215)

The character of Franco, Helga's boyfriend and later husband, seems to suggest that entrepreneurship is intertwined with the abuse of others. Franco, who at his first appearance is

[164] Vasta 2014.

compared to Mussolini because of his gestures (*GH*, p. 229), is a young and resourceful cook who convinces Helga that he should be hired in her father's hotel, as he would be able to greatly improve the service. This is indeed what happens, since, once hired, Franco continuously shows his economic shrewdness by inventing ways to save on food whilst simultaneously providing the impression of higher quality dishes, thus deceiving customers. For Franco to be hired, however, he and Helga have to get rid of the previous cook, and so Helga hides three apples (the same that appear on the cover of the novel) in her purse, and informs her father of the cook's "theft". Hilda, who witnesses the misdeed, does not interfere with her sister's plan. Hans fires the woman and hires Franco, and their collaboration improves the fortune of the hotel, thus showing how, once again, the Hinners' economic fortune is intrinsically wedded to deception and violence.

The evolution of National-Socialism into capitalism and the continuity of two goods-oriented systems are underlined also by Falco's style, which maintains the formal experimentalism which characterised his previous books and his collections of short stories, *Pausa caffè* (2004) and *L'ubicazione del bene* (2009)[165]. What characterises *La gemella H* stylistically are the distancing effects and the novel's insistence on the focalisation of objects. Thus, the text enacts a *lateral* dislocation of the point of view (I will return later to this term). The distancing effects are mainly generated by the narrator's lack of emotional participation in the events of the plot, by the neutral and un-emphatic tone of the language, and by the variation of the narrators. In fact, whilst, in the second part and in the intermezzo, the narrator is in third person, in the first part, it is Hilde herself, who nevertheless also reports events that she cannot have witnessed (such as her birth). Moreover, the story of the Hinner family is interrupted by the insertion of exchanges by letter, pages of diaries, and essays. Similarly, the focalisation is always varied in order to confound readers and forbid them from getting attached to the characters and the story. For instance, after the arrival of the Hinners in Merano, Falco devotes some pages to a digression on the work of Franz Lenhart, a commercial illustrator whose work depicts the uniform and satisfied happiness of a rich touristic resort. After these pages, he moves the focalisation of the story to a new, anonymous character inspired by Lenhart's work, simply introducing him with the words: 'Abbiamo i tagliandi delle scommesse in tasca. Siamo l'uomo di Lenhart' (*GH*, p. 96). Such an approach is equivalent to Binet's metafictional framework,

[165] A comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Falco's literary style has been provided by Francesco Rizzato in his Masters dissertation, *L'occhio estraneo*, discussed at the University of Padova in 2017.

which creates a distance between readers and the characters of the story, and it is indeed opposite to Littell's seductive and philosophising first-person narrator.

This distancing effect is augmented by the overwhelming presence of objects in the novel. Falco's attention is always focused on the inanimate goods that crowd the Hinner family's life. Not only is such a focus intended to the creation of a sense of realism in the story (as Falco carefully recreates the objects and their social function), but it distracts readers from the interior life of the characters. Indeed, objects are a central character in *La gemella H*. However, the opposite is also true: characters are reduced to objects, deprived of interiority. Such objects are the properties which are bought and sold by the Hinners, and the automobiles that signal the social and economic accomplishments and the progression of the family history. Hans buys an Opel Olympia out of envy for his Jewish neighbors, then, once they have been forced to leave their own Mercedes; and finally, after the war, a Volkswagen Beetle[166]. Similarly, the Rinascente where Hilde works is filled with objects as well and is much of a temple of contemporary consumerism. The Rinascente has a pivotal role in the novel. It represents both the first step of Hilde's economic independence from her family, and the beginning of a new life for the Hinners. At the same time, it represents a symbol of the continuity of fascism and consumerism. Not only was its name coined by Gabriele D'Annunzio, the proto-fascist intellectual, but the franchise continues to pursue the same social policies the regime initiated, 'attività dopolavoristiche […] iniziate durante il fascismo e pervenute intatte in questi anni italiani' (*GH*, p. 186).

Between these objects and the protagonists there is neither personal nor emotional evocation. The food that is served to the clients of the Hotel Sand is not treated as the tasteful product of human labour which, shared, can provide joy and bring people together: instead, it is only treated as an economic good from which to take the maximum profit. It is not by chance that, in the pages that introduce us Franco, his work of cleaning and cutting eighty chickens per day is described, for his precision and rapidity, akin to an assembly line (*GH*, pp. 235-236). Similarly, the policies of the Rinascente transform Hilde into something of a serialised object. Through capitalist labour, she becomes an unproblematic and standardised image of femininity, deprived at the same time of individual meaning and agency: 'Potrei essere la figlia, la sorella, la cugina, la nipote, la bambinaia di molte clienti, potrei essere la fidanzata, la compagna di banco, la giovane amante di molti clienti. Sono una commessa della Rinascente, la somma potenziale di tutto, e in verità niente di tutto questo' (*GH*, p. 179). Moreover, the house that the

---

[166] Marsilio 2016.

Hinners possess are not homes, but rather spaces full of objects, ready to be sold for money or better properties. As Hans argues, when his wife claims to be already in love with the house they want to buy in Merano, 'com'è possibile innamorarsi di una casa?' (*GH*, p. 129). Even the Hotel Sand, the building where half of the narrative takes place and which mostly influences Hans' fortune, is a non-descript place that could be any other, as Hans himself underlines when he buys it (*GH*, p. 198). This anonymity and potential meaninglessness is expressed also by its own name: 'Hilde, come lo chiameresti? Lo chiamerei Hotel Sand. Sand è la sabbia. Per i tedeschi e gli anglosassoni. Anche gli italiani sanno pronunciare Sand. Tutti possono dire Sand. In fondo, Sand non significa nulla. Potrebbe essere qualsiasi cosa' (*GH*, p. 199).

The text's narrative prioritisation of objects is rooted into the culture of material welfare promoted by Mussolini's and Hitler's regime, which paid great attention to the wellness of the middle class as a political and propagandistic tool[167]. Falco, in the novel, often suggests what his characters do not (or refuse to) realise, and thus that their economic wealth is intimately tied to abuse and violence:

> Abbiamo il frigorifero elettrico, il refrigerante è al freon, non all'ammoniaca come quello di nonna Christa, che ha il difetto di un accumulo di brina. Sembra un miracolo la trasformazione del freon da gassoso a liquido e il passaggio al freddo. Abbiamo l'aspirapolvere, risucchiamo briciole, capelli, insetti, i rifiuti delle bambole, i peli di Blondi, i petali dei fiori morti. Abbiamo il ferro da stiro a vapore, l'asciugacapelli che mi sorprende ancora, lancia un getto di aria calda sui capelli bagnati, lo agito come uno strumento musicale, chiudo gli occhi, ho i capelli asciutti e lucenti in tre minuti. Abbiamo la lavatrice e la lavastoviglie, il tostapane automatico per il pane caldo e croccante, e tutto quello che ci serve, la credenza piena di provviste, potremmo resistere settimane senza uscire di casa, ne sarei contenta, eviterei di andare a scuola, dimenticherei il dettato, la guerra in Polonia, nell'angolo destro della cartina appesa in classe. (*GH*, p. 74)

Nevertheless, the characters do not show love or affection for any of these objects (cars, houses, food): all they can be is a terminal of envy and jealousy, and a means to affirm one's social position. Similarly, this relationship with objects and goods is shown in fascist Italy by the protagonist of a digression of the novel, the anonymous banker of Merano simply called 'uomo di Lenhart' (man of Lenhart). Such a strategy of description, evidently modelled on taxonomic categories such as 'man of Neanderthal' or 'man of Cro Magnon', together with his namelessness, forms part of Falco's toolbox of distancing effects. It suggests readers should

---

[167] Hobsbawm 1994, pp. 122-124.

perceive the man of Lenhart as an anthropological type rather than as a character. Indeed, the man of Lenhart is the prototype of an Italian, superficially and conveniently fascist and obsessed by his salary and what it can grant him.

Andrea Cortellessa suggests that this attention to the interaction between the material and the human, and indeed to the way in which the material determines the human, together with the absence of pathos in the narration, is influenced by texts of the neo-avanguardia (a poetic movement of the 1906s characterised by formal experimentalism and political commitment), such as *La ragazza Carla* by Elio Pagliarani (1959). He writes: 'Lo sguardo di Falco, allora come oggi, si concentra catatonico su oggetti, appunto, che – immotivatamente isolati dal contesto – d'improvviso assurgono a epifanie, allucinate quanto inappellabili, di una connotazione intrinsecamente morale: allorché viene davvero da pensare al "noi" che risuona, implacabile, in certi celebri incisi della Ragazza Carla'[168]. Cortellessa attributes to Falco what Pagliarani calls in a poem, 'objective piety', thus the absence from the page of the pathetic effect of the narrative 'I', which allows the creation of a collective point of view[169]. Such a stylistic choice is expressed also by Falco himself in a passage of *La gemella H* in which he opposes this detachment to the emphasis and sensationalism that characterise the narration of the Second World War, often based on easily narratable structures, and reduced to clichés:

> I giornali celebrano gli anniversari della guerra per farla scomparire nella memoria affollata da decine di altre commemorazioni alternate a curiosità belliche e inezie quotidiane: rievocazioni del processo di Norimberga scritte come i dialoghi di un romanzo poliziesco, le condanne a morte, la dispersione delle ceneri in una puntualissima alba piovosa d'autunno; gerarchi trasformati in rappresentanti di commercio; rivelazioni improvvise del cameriere o dell'autista di Hitler, tutti pronti a svelare lo scoop, il segreto banale che dovrebbe spiegare la Storia: quanti litri occorrono per bruciare un cadavere? Non sarebbe meglio domandare all'autista, scusi, cosa provava a guidare in autostrada, in corsia di sorpasso, con Hitler sul sedile posteriore? (*GH*, pp. 273-274)

This quote can also be referred to the lateral dislocation of the point of view of the narrator, reinforced by its continuous variation and by the attention to detail seemingly without importance. I use the word 'lateral' not arbitrarily but in reference Falco's self-description of his writing, contained in his intervention in the 'Dizionario affettivo della lingua italiana' edited by Matteo Bianchi and Giorgio Vasta:

---

[168] Cortellessa 2015.
[169] *Ibid.*

> La mia parola è *laterale*. Sono a mio agio quando non sto in ciò che è considerato il centro. Preferisco stare defilato, non completamente fuori dal centro ma nemmeno inglobato. Non significa mettersi in disparte. […]. Il fotografo Guido Guidi, per spiegare la sua idea di fotografia, cita, tra le altre cose, Ruggero Pierantoni quando parla delle icone, le madonne al centro e la mobilità degli angeli sui bordi. Non a caso, mentre sorseggiamo un the caldo a cento metri dall'autostrada A14, Guido dice, il prete al centro dell'altare rappresenta Dio, ma appena si sposta anche solo di un paio di metri, appena diviene *laterale* vicino al leggio da cui predica, il prete ritorna uomo. Il *laterale* per me è come un messaggero tra l'immagine centrale e ciò che è marginale, anche sfuocato, ciò non si vede chiaramente, l'ignoto che sta fuori, sul bordo. Ecco, bordo è un'altra parola che mi piace, però per me implica anche un punto da cui precipitare. Per il momento, preferisco *laterale*[170].

In such a dislocation of perspective, Falco is influenced by his interest in photography (as the previous quote shows), and specifically in the work of the New Topographics – the group of American photographers who participated in the homonymous exhibition in 1975, and who focus on a less rhetorical and lyrical representation of the American landscape. Falco is also greatly influenced by the work of William Eggleston, whose artistic practice aims to 'sottrarre le cose quotidiane dalla banalità dello sguardo e dalla loro stessa essenza: trasforma il familiare in anomalo, attraverso un'angolatura sbieca rispetto alla visione usuale, dominante'[171]. Such a definition perfectly fits also the object-centered and detaching poetics of *La gemella H*[172]. During a lesson at the Galileian School of Higher Education, Falco discussed Eggleston's famous close-up of a tricycle, shot in 1969, in which the unusual perspective transforms an everyday object in a source of anxiety: as Marsilio notes, such a process is comparable to Falco's prose, in which unusual attention to otherwise insignificant details projects a sense of uncanniness on everyday life[173]. In the case of *La gemella H*, this disproportion of attention to the details is intended to overturning readers' perspective of the Second World War, and forcing them to see a continuity between the willful perpetrators of Nazi Germany and the enthusiastic and successful capitalists of the 1950s and 1960s.

Falco's novel is free of the heroic and emphatic dimension that characterises the Italian Resistance narrative, as it focuses on a continuity between the age of totalitarianism and the present. The narration of the war is thus a simple episode in an equally disturbing and violent

[170] Bianchi e Vasta 2008, pp. 110-111.
[171] Falco 2009.
[172] Marsilio and Zinato 2015, p. 256.
[173] I do possess further details of this lesson, which I contributed in organising, but Falco has not agreed for its transcription to be disseminated. Nevertheless, a summary of the lesson can be found in Marsilio and Zinato, who were also present (2015, pp. 257-258).

narration of peace. According to Andrea Cortellessa, ‘col coraggio delle sue scelte, Giorgio Falco ha compiuto un miracolo che pareva impossibile. […] Nessuno [...] aveva avuto sinora il coraggio di far proprio il punto di vista della Zona Grigia: di quell’area sdrucciolevole che non comprende solo la complicità delle vittime, come ci ha mostrato Primo Levi, ma anche il silenzio dei testimoni, il mutismo che li rende a loro volta complici’[174]. While I would not go as far as calling Falco’s novel ‘a miracle’, as Cortellessa does (but, then, he is no stranger to sensationalist claims), and I am not sure that Falco’s attempt is really unprecedented, it is true that *La gemella H* represents a different approach in a panorama of war writings generally centered on telluric events and tragic heroes. In this sense, despite the similarities, Falco is equally distant from both Littell and Binet. Falco’s everymen, instead, illustrate a different side of the war from that of the victims and the perpetrators: that of the willing collaborators.

6.3. Comparative Conclusion

As we have seen, both Binet and Falco, although in different ways, depart from Littell’s model of an emphatic, character-centred historical novel, preferring instead a metafictional framework (Binet) and an emotionless, alienating minimalism (Falco). Both the authors withhold, most of all, the very possibility of identification between readers and the characters, as they refuse to adopt the formal means that might enable such an empathetic response. I would argue that these two novels have also some flaws in common, which hinge on their stylistic choices and their ideological aims.

Falco and, to a lesser extent, Binet, write in order to show a continuity between two seemingly different models (fascism and totalitarianism). However, by focusing in their analysis of fascism on the purely economic side (as neither Binet’s Heydrich or Hans Hinner seem to believe in the ideology they support, but just to be seeking advantages from it), they leave out the pivotal, irrational side of fascist ideology. Such a choice is, in my opinion, a significant limit in every interpretation of fascism: according to these authors, the supporters of fascism *must be* hypocritical. On the contrary, Littell, by referring to Theweleit’s theory, chooses a psychological interpretation that creates empathy in readers, and leaves the evidence

[174] Cortellessa 2014.

of a continuity between two systems (or rather, of their common roots) to Aue's excuses and to mythical symbolism.

Furthermore, Binet and Falco never seek the participation or the empathy of readers, as their stylistic choices signal. Readers are placed at a psychological distance, and never interact emotionally with the characters. In other words, despite an apparently straightforward attitude, we are still facing a form of intellectualism – postmodern in Binet's case, avant-garde in Falco's. I say 'postmodern' because Binet still retains the postmodernist scepticism toward the dangers of fiction, even if he does not employ it as a fundament of his narration. On the other hand, it is precisely Littell's full employment of fiction and all its means (and indeed also of all its midcult resources) that allows his novel to become an *experience* for readers, and not simply the statement of a series of ideological contents.

‘The Strange, Terrible *Neverendingness* of Human Beings’: Zen Buddhism and the Second World War in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

Richard Flanagan is an Australian writer, author of several important and commercially successful novels, among which the most significant are *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997) and *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001). Although less known and discussed than Bolaño and Littell, and definitely not a cult writer like Vollmann, Flanagan has often been considered the most important living Australian writer, and gained international recognition when *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (*NRDN*, 2013), his sixth novel, was awarded with the Man Booker Prize in 2014.

Before we begin, I would like to anticipate the most significant objection to the insertion of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* among this set of texts, which concerns whether we ought to regard the text as a postmemorial novel. Flanagan claims he was moved to write the book because his father was a Japanese prisoner of war, ‘one of Dunlop's Thousand, that now near-mythical group led by Lieutenant Colonel Edward “Weary” Dunlop, who lived and died on the Death Railway in what was then Siam and is today Thailand’[1]. Therefore, contrary to the other three books I have discussed so far, there is a personal involvement of the author in his topic, World War II; the other authors never experienced the war either in first person or via relatives. However, although personally moved by his father’s experience and stories, and although he meets and interviews one of the guards of his father’s camp[2], Flanagan did not model the book on his experience. Except for the epigraph (‘For prisoner san byaku san jū go (335)’), Flanagan never mentions his father. Further, the protagonist Dorrigo is only slightly modelled on Edward Dunlop, while his love story with Amy is inspired by the story of ‘a Latvian man my parents knew’[3]. While it is true that the experience of Flanagan’s father informs the author in the choice of his topic, I believe that *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* does much more than simply

[1] Flanagan 2013.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*

reporting a personal experience. As we will see, Flanagan weaves together a critique of the Australian myth of the POWs and the ethics of Bushidō, a reflection on colonial structures of power, thoughtful contemplations on the relationship between East and West, and ruminations on the Buddhist concept of anattā (non-self). In other words, the book is not a report of his father's experience: it is instead a profound and complex reflection on war and human nature. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is not dependent on Flanagan's father's story more than *Les Bienveillantes* is dependent on Littell's Jewish heritage, *Europe Central* on Vollmann's German heritage, or *2666* on Bolaño's personal, political commitment.

In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Flanagan tells, from multiple viewpoints, the stories of several characters who are involved in the construction of the infamous Burma-Thai 'railway of death'. These stories pivot around a specific day, when Darky Gardiner, an Australian soldier, is beaten to death by a Korean guard. The novel, however, does not simply refer the events of that day, but follows the characters before and after their experience on the Line, through a complex narrative system of flashbacks and plot twists. These devices give the book a circular form, rather than a linear one, and as we will see later in this chapter, this is enormously important to the meaning of the book.

The protagonist of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is Dorrigo Evans, a Tasmanian surgeon and officer. During his years as a slave for the Japanese, Dorrigo acts as a leader for the prisoners, who give him the epithet, 'Big Fella'. After his liberation, he is saluted as a war hero by public opinion; however, he has mixed feelings towards his fame and the memory of those years. Most of all, Dorrigo is tormented by the memory of his extra-marital affair with Amy, his uncle's wife, and is therefore unhappy about his marriage with Ella, whom he is considering leaving for Amy before leaving for the front. However, during his imprisonment, he receives a letter from his wife informing him that Amy was killed in the explosion of her husband's pub. Amy, as well, is informed by her husband that Dorrigo's unit is captured, and that her lover is probably dead. Both Amy and Dorrigo, therefore, presume each other to be dead, until they briefly meet in a crowd, decades later: they recognise each other, but they do not speak.

Although Dorrigo's love story occupies a significant part of the book, functioning as his motivation to stay alive in the Line, it could hardly be considered the centre of the novel. Flanagan follows in detail the lives of the other members of Dorrigo's brigade as well as those of the Japanese perpetrators after the war. Choi Sang-min, known as the Goanna, is the Korean

guard who beats Gardiner to death, and who is later sentenced to death after the war for crimes against humanity. Colonel Kota, the man who accuses the Goanna and other guards in order to escape his own punishment, is an officer who has developed a morbid taste for public beheadings. Major Nakamura, finally, one of the officers in charge for the construction of the railway, is the central figure among the perpetrators. Despite professing a faith in his mission and in the Emperor, he is deeply troubled by the difficulty of his task and addicted to amphetamines (provided by the army with the name shabu). After the war, he escapes punishment by changing identity. He marries and gets hired in the Japan Blood Bank owing to the intercession of Colonel Kota.

It is important to reiterate that the plot of the novel is not linear. The love story of Amy and Dorrigo, for instance, is scattered throughout the whole book, mostly presented through flashbacks, and only in the last few pages do readers find out that Dorrigo receives Ella's letter the very day of Gardiner's beating, and that Amy is not really dead. At the same time, only at the end of the novel is it revealed that Darky Gardiner was the bastard son Dorrigo's brother had with a woman whose intercourse with his brother represents one of Dorrigo's first memories, and with which the novel opens. Although Flanagan's style is far from formal experimentalism, this circularity is everything but aesthetic and arbitrary. It is interrelated with the profound meaning of the book, which, as we will see, is deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism.

1. Deconstructing the Australian Myth

The construction of the Thai-Burma railway has become a symbol *par excellence* of the Japanese war crimes committed against prisoners of war. 'A seemingly impossible task', the construction of a railway in the jungle between Ban Pong in Thailand and Thanbyuzayat in Burma 'entailed carving a pathway through utterly inhospitable terrain involving the shifting of 3,000,000 cubic metres of soil and rock; the building of 4,000,000 cubic metres of embankments; and the construction of a monumental fourteen kilometres of bridges'[4]. The railway could be realised only with the exploitation of slave labour. The number of people used as slaves by the Japanese forces is impressive: although the precise numbers are impossible to

[4] Burne 2014, p. 579.

ascertain, it has been calculated that 200,000 to 300,000 people were involved in the construction[5]. Of these people, 60,000 were Allied prisoners of war (British, Australian, and Dutch), while the vast majority (at least 200.000) were Asian (Malayan Tamils, Javanese, Burmese, Chinese, Vietnamese)[6]. The deaths among the Asians total 100,000, and among the Allied prisoners, 12.000[7]. Ironically, the railway had to be abandoned soon after its completion, owing to the retreat of the Japanese forces[8].

Among the Allied prisoners, 21,726 were Australian: of them, 7,412 died during the construction[9]. The conditions in which the Japanese army held them were particularly harsh: in addition to enduring tropical diseases and hard work, the prisoners were almost starved, receiving just some 2,000 calories a day to perform heavy duties[10]. It is no surprise, then, that the 'Railway of Death' gained such infamy in the Australian memory of the Second World War (a myth comparable only with the infamous campaign of Gallipoli during World War I[11]), in part owing to the publication by ex-prisoners of commercially successful accounts of their experience. According to this national mythology, 'Australians in wartime manifested the qualities of resilience, resourcefulness, disrespect for authority, independence of mind and, above all, loyalty to, and compassion for, mates (or comrades). Prisoners of the Japanese, even though they were defeated, were able to depict themselves as mates and survivors against the odds: in effect, wartime variants of another national stereotype, the "Aussie battler"'[12].

The Narrow Road to the Deep North centres on the realisation of the Thai-Burma railway, but it denies every possibility of epicisation and, further, refuses to present the conventional, consolatory portrait of the prisoners as loyal to and supportive of each other. It is, instead, harshly critical of the aforementioned myth of the 'Aussie battler', with what Flanagan calls the 'treacherous weight of *mate*' (*NRDN*, p. 335), referring to the Australian and British slang for 'friend'. The life on the Line is a life of betrayal and selfishness, of reciprocal hate and bullying. Although bound together, the soldiers feel no sense of comradeship, and are ready to steal food from one another. Moreover, Flanagan does not indulge in the traditional, pleasing portrayal of

---

[5] Beaumont and Witcomb 2015, p. 67.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] Tanaka 1996, p. 3.
[10] Bowden 1984, pp. 42-3.
[11] In April 1915, ANZAC forces participated in a wider effort of the Entente to force the Turk control from the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, and eventually conquer Constantinople. The place where the Australian troops landed was uncomfortable and unsuitable for attack, and, after months of gory but useless battles with the Turks, they were evacuated. The campaign resulted in 8,587 men killed and 19,367 wounded (Calder 1991, p. 5).
[12] Beaumont and Witcomb 2015, p. 72. See also Duthie 2016, pp. 159-162.

the innocent victim: the prisoners are as vicious to each other as the guards are towards them. The execution of Darky Gardiner is carried out because he takes the blame for group of prisoners, who do nothing to spare him his undeserved punishment. They are not even so ideologically different from their perpetrators, since they can easily sympathise, in the end, with the ideas expressed by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* (*NRDN*, p. 194).

Flanagan's characters express scepticism toward ideas of a British or an Australian spirit, thereby refusing to perpetuate any nationalistic ideology in favour of contingent, material urgencies: 'Starvation stalked the Australians […]. Against it they could proffer only their Australian wisdom which was really no more than opinions emptier than their bellies. They tried to hold together with their Australian dryness and their Australian curses, their Australian memories and their Australian mateship. But suddenly Australia meant little against lice and hunger and beri-beri, against thieving and beatings and yet even more slave labour. Australia was shrinking and shriveling, a grain of rice was so much bigger now than a continent' (*NRDN*, p. 50). The insistence on the words 'Australia' and 'Australian' is intended to suggest the emptiness of the nationalistic mantra, and its uselessness in raising the morale of the prisoners, despite its propagandistic importance at home. Similarly, Dorrigo mocks his fellow officer, Colonel Rexroth's notion that 'all their national British strength would be enough, that their British esprit de corps would hold and their British spirit would not break and their British blood would bring them through it together' (*NRDN*, p. 43): instead, Dorrigo claims, the men need drugs, food, and sleep. Neither the patriotic image of home nor the imperial standard can function as a consolation for the present troubles.

Dorrigo also rejects the consolatory myth that those who suffer will be repaid in kind by the memories of others – in other words, that memory will provide justice for them. To a soldier that argues that memory is a form of justice, Dorrigo answers that it is instead 'the creator of new horrors'. Nothing survives forever, neither empires nor memories, and memory can easily be deceptive or help to normalise the horrors of history to the extent that the soldier's drawings documenting the life on the Line can equally be interpreted as evidence of slavery and propaganda (*NRDN*, pp. 243-245). The moral and cultural relativism of this passage is particularly important because it highlights the anti-rhetorical character of Dorrigo and, through his voice, of Flanagan's novel. What is more broadly rejected, here, is the idea that a public discourse can make amends for the suffering of some, in much the same way as the idea of an idolised homeland or an empire cannot not provide consolation for them.

This is not to say that *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* does not contain acts of heroism, or heroic figures. However, these acts of heroism have nothing to do with the traditional representation of the war hero, but they rather depict defeated heroes. Dorrigo's actions on the Line are not an example of military heroism: on the contrary, they are important precisely because they are distant from military ethics and rhetoric[13]. Moreover, those characters who can be considered heroes are also questionable figures: Dorrigo is unfaithful to his wife, causing her great unhappiness; and Darky's acceptance of an undeserved punishment is balanced by his constant thefts of other prisoners' belongings, which indeed endangers their lives. If a form of heroism can be seen in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, it is a heroism deprived of emphasis, and highly problematised in its very happening. In one of the first episodes set on the Line, Dorrigo refuses a steak he is offered by his men for his efforts in mediating with the Japanese command. Its refusal, however, is not an example of stoicism. It is not performed with serenity, not even apparent: presented with the steak, Dorrigo has to force himself to refuse it, and he shouts at the cook, knowing that the longer the food stays in front of him, the greater the temptation to eat will be. Dorrigo's obsession with Tennyson's poem, *Ulysses*, (which, with the frequent references to Dante's *Inferno*, is evidently reminiscent of Primo Levi's account of the concentration camp in *Se questo è un uomo*) aims to draw a comparison between him and the Greek hero, as both are longing to go back home to their wives. It is a significant comparison as Ulysses is not the prototype of the war hero, but rather of the refugee: he is a man whose value does not lie in his ability in battle but in his capacity to adapt to the circumstances surrounding him. Though this is very pertinent in Dorrigo's case, it ought to be pointed out that this comparison is but partly persuasive as Dorrigo's Penelope is not his wife, but his uncle's wife. The one for whom he longs is, therefore, an object of illegitimate affection whom he thinks to be dead, and within whom he will never be reunited again[14].

The anti-rhetorical nature of Flanagan's approach to Australian national mythology is also underlined by what is the main post-postmodern feature of the novel: its realism. Indeed, as in Littell and Amis, the representation of the war and imprisonment is deprived of an allegorical or symbolical meaning. Instead, it is reconstructed in its complexity and ambiguities. As with the Holocaust in *Les Bienveillantes*, the construction of the Line is a primarily practical problem, which involves scarcity of food and tools, tropical diseases, the dangers of the jungle, and the use of POWs. Indeed, the pivotal moments of the novel are focused on the material

[13] Duthie 2016, p. 170.
[14] *Ibid,* pp. 164-165.

conditions of the prisoners, on their lack of food, on the difficulties of guaranteeing a health service in the camp, or on the deadly consequences that the loss of a pair of shoes can represent in the jungle. At the same time, again, this realism is not a naïve imitation of the classical novel, but rather, as we have seen in the previous chapters, a sociopolitically-important and emotionally-genuine interest in reality. As we will see, the novel's insistent inclusion of Japanese art and philosophy, as well as the presence of images and poems, problematises this realism.

For these reasons, I strongly disagree with Martin Staniforth's thesis that '*The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is a national, and nationalist, novel that reinstates and reinforces the values of settler Australia'[15]. As Staniforth states, following a study by Russel Ward, these values consist in 'taciturnity; practicality; a willingness to improvise; a skeptical approach to culture, religion and intellectual pursuits; hostility to authority; a basic egalitarianism; and above all a strong sense of mateship, the willingness of one man to stand up for another in all circumstances'[16]. These values originated in the first traumatic war experience of the Australian army, the Gallipoli campaign[17]. While it is true that there surely is a certain stoicism in the behaviour of Dorrigo or Darky, and also a general scepticism toward national mythologies among the prisoners, I would argue that the novel contradicts almost every point on Staniforth's list. The prisoners are not taciturn at all; instead, they are continuously talking, exchanging memories and mocking each other. Nor are they hostile to authority; they are willing to elect a leader (Dorrigo), to obey his orders without question, to grant him privileges, and to rely on him for the organisation of the camp. Moreover, even if the prisoners are practical and show a willingness to improvise, it could be argued that such qualities are the *conditio sine qua non* of surviving in a labour camp. Most of all, what Flanagan performs is precisely a debunking of the idea that imprisonment brings 'a strong sense of mateship'. Staniforth argues that 'Flanagan presents the Australian prisoners as the innocent victims of a brutal and uncaring imperial power determined to crush them into subservience'[18], and that thus they can survive only thanks to 'an exaggerated exercise of mateship'[19]. On the contrary, as we have seen, the main part of the novel aims to deny this idea: the prisoners steal from one another, and it is precisely their *lack* of mateship that causes the death of Darky. Flanagan, who is aware of this national mythology,

[15] Staniforth 2017, p. 584.
[16] Ward in *ibid,* p. 579.
[17] Calder 1991, pp. 5-6.
[18] Staniforth 2017, p. 580.
[19] *Ibid*.

writes *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* to contradict it, providing instead a realistic and problematic version of the life in the Line.

2. Deconstructing the Emperor's Myth

In addition to deconstructing the Australian mythology of the POWs, Flanagan also dismantles the Emperor's myth of the Japanese army. Although sympathetic with the perpetrators, as we will see, Flanagan presents the emptiness of values such as the faith in the Emperor, the Japanese spirit and bushidō. In fact, there is a striking contradiction between the ideals expressed by the characters and their actions. Flanagan does not spare any of the details of the despicable crimes committed by the Japanese army during the war, not only on the Line (for example, the employment of slave labour and the starvation of prisoners), but also elsewhere. In fact, although tangential to its topic, the novel does manage to mention both cannibalism and the use of prisoners for medical experiments: in this case, an American airman is vivisectioned (*NRDN*, pp. 127 and 352-358)[20].

Major Nakamura, more than any other character, emphasises the importance of the Emperor's myth for his task of building the railway: 'Nakamura worked with Japanese maps, Japanese plans, Japanese charts and Japanese technical drawings to impose Japanese order and Japanese meaning on the meaningless and aimless jungle, on the sick and dying POWs, a vortex seemingly without cause and effect, a growing green maelstrom that spun faster and faster' (*NRDN*, p. 93). The most important task is to honour the will of the Emperor, who represents the national spirit of Japan, 'even if everybody dies' (*NRDN*, p. 114).

In his exchanges with Dorrigo, Nakamura stresses the importance of the Emperor's myth for the realisation of the railway, and he opposes it to the false myth of freedom that characterises Western societies: 'You, doctor, call it non-freedom. We call it spirit, nation. Emperor. You, doctor, call it cruelty. We call it destiny. With us, or without us. It is the future' (*NRDN*, p. 74). I would argue that Dorrigo's lack of answer to this statement underlines the anti-rhetorical nature of Flanagan's work, which does not enforce the stereotypical opposition between good Allied and bad Axis soldiers, or between West and East. It is worth noticing, however, how

[20] Needless to say, Flanagan does not invent anything. Details about cannibalism can be found in Tanaka 1996, pp. 111-134; records of biological experiments on human beings in *ibid,* pp. 135-165.

Nakamura himself fails to fully believe in this patriotic myth, despite repeating to himself its keywords as mantras: 'But what that *spirit* was, Nakamura would have had difficultly saying. It was good and it was pure, and it was for him a more real force than the thorny bamboo and teak, the rain and mud and rocks and sleepers and steel rails they worked with each day. It had somehow become the essence of him, and yet it was a thing beyond words. […] Nakamura cared about the railway, honour, the Emperor, Japan, and he had a sense of himself as a good and honourable officer. But still he tried to fathom the confusion he felt' (*NRDN*, pp. 115-116).

Nakamura's confusion is signaled by his dependence on Philopon, an amphetamine (*shabu*) provided by the Japanese army to motivate the soldiers, to increase their productivity, and 'to inspire fighting spirits' (*NRDN*, p. 91). While the use of drugs (be it alcohol or amphetamines) in war is no surprise, as it was an extensive practice both in the Allied and the Axis forces, Flanagan grants it special significance. He mobilises the abuse of Philipon as a metaphor for the abuse of patriotic ideas despite their meaninglessness, to the extent that Fukuhama, another officer, can tell Nakamura that 'Philopon is an expression of Japanese spirit' (*NRDN*, p. 94).

What is most impressive about Flanagan's depiction of the Japanese crimes is that displays how they do not seem to have been committed *despite* the virtuousness of the Japanese ideals, but *according to* them. It is precisely because of the monocratic, hierarchical structure of Japanese imperial society that such a number of crimes could be committed, and so terrible. The lack of responsibility generated by the existence of a hierarchy of responsibilities (similar, in this sense, to the one that characterised Nazi Germany and that I described in the previous chapter) allowed individuals to commit the most terrible actions under the protection of the Emperor. As Tanaka argues:

> The absence of a developed liberal concept of universal human rights in Japanese society had a corresponding effect on the everyday Japanese concept of the rights of others as individuals. The "other" was conceived of in national, social, and organic terms as "sibling", owing similar duties to the national family-state. Responsibility was conceived in terms of a pyramidal model. Duties were always to one's superior: the duty of a family to a father, of the father to the state, and of the state to the emperor. The chain of responsibility was conceived of as predominantly unidirectional, from subordinate to superior. / Responsibility was effectively unlimited; there was no concept of "inalienable rights" to serve as a bulwark against the demands of the state. Duty was always seen in highly sentimental terms – up to and including one's duty to die for the emperor. The terms of such duty could be highly arbitrary. Apart from duty to one's superior, there were no clear guidelines as to whom one owed responsibility. Nor it was clear what

> demands could be made on an individual – in the name of duty – by the different people in the hierarchy. Thus the notion of "national duty and responsibility" in general led to a collapse of responsibility in particular. The specific and habitual duties of citizens, and the reasonable limits to these responsibilities, were never clarified. Universal responsibility thus laid the groundwork for a comprehensive irresponsibility in individual conduct[21].

In this sense, Flanagan insists on what could be considered the perversion of bushidō operated in Shōwa era Japan. Bushidō is a term that contains a wide variety of meanings, but most broadly refers to an ethics of the samurai class, similar in its rules and historical development to the Western concept of chivalry[22]. The concept of bushidō was formalised and developed at the end of the nineteenth century, during Emperor Meiji's reformation of the military. The Imperial Code of Military Conduct, issued in 1882 by Emperor Meiji, stressed seven qualities for the ideal soldier: righteousness, courage, humanity (love, tolerance, sympathy), especially towards the weak, propriety ('the realization of humanity in acts of kindness'), sincerity, honor, and loyalty as 'obedience to one's senior but never blind obedience'[23]. During the Shōwa era (the period between the coronation of Hirohito, the Shōwa Emperor, and his death in 1989) until the end of World War II, bushidō was employed as an ideological tool to insist upon unconditional obedience to the Emperor[24]. As Benesch states, 'by redefining bushidō as a transcendental "way of the warrior" rather than a historicized "way of the samurai", imperial bushidō became an important pillar of the larger ideological state structure that sought to mobilize the entire nation for a holy war against the West'[25]. Specifically, bushidō greatly influenced the military – specifically to intentionally mistreat the POWs, since, within their ideological framework, surrender was seen as a 'mortal shame'[26].

In his portraits of Japanese officers, Flanagan continuously underlines the centrality of a perverted concept of bushidō in guiding their criminal behaviour. Even more than Nakamura, the figure of Colonel Kota appears to be emblematic in this sense. Kota is Nakamura's superior, and is morbidly obsessed by beheading prisoners according to the samurai tradition: 'Necks, continued Colonel Kota […]. That's all I really see of people now. […] I meet someone new, I look at his neck, I size it up – easy to cut or hard to cut. And that's all I want of people, their

[21] Tanaka 1996, p. 201.
[22] Benesch 2014, p. 1.
[23] This list and the two quotes are taken from Tanaka 1996, p. 207. The concept of bushidō became widely popular (also in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the publication of Inazo Nitobe's *Bushido* [sic]: *The Soul of Japan* in 1900.
[24] Benesch 2014, pp. 176-187.
[25] *Ibid,* p. 212.
[26] *Ibid,* p. 210. See also Tanaka 1996, p. 208.

necks' (*NRDN*, p. 124). Kota's actions are determined by his sadism and his lack of consideration for human life: 'I no longer felt anything for that man. To be honest, I despised him for accepting his fate so meekly and wondered why he wouldn't fight' (*NRDN*, p. 123). And yet, they perfectly conform to the practice of bushidō as a Zen Buddhist way of the warrior; this is precisely what Kota, in the aftermath of the war, argues in some articles published in Zen magazines. According to Kota, Zen teachings, to that extent that they underlined the absence of a distinction between life and death, rendered the Japanese so powerful and efficient in war (*NRDN*, p. 362).

We will see later in this chapter, the importance of Zen Buddhism and haikus for Flanagan and the structure of the novel. However, it is important to point out how Kota represents the militaristic perversion of ideals. The ritual Kota performs before beheading a prisoner, complete with the declamation of a haiku, is the image of the distortion of poetry's traditional purpose and value. The dependence of Kota on this ritual is such that, when he forgets the haiku he intends to declaim, he cannot proceed with the decapitation of Darky Gardiner (delegating his punishment thus to the Goanna, and generating the climatic scene of the novel). This formal fanaticism does not have anything in common, as we will see, with the spirit of Japanese culture that Flanagan tries to evoke in his novel, but it is symptomatic of its historical perversion by military hierarchies[27]. Kota's decision to die and become a living Buddha by employing the process of self-mummification known as *sokushinbutsu*[28] can be seen as a satirical critique of obsessive attachment to ascetic rituals that completely eschew love and kindness.

It is worth noticing that, in describing Japanese nationalism, Flanagan recovers a common topic in the representation of European fascisms, which we have seen in the previous chapters of this thesis. Flanagan insists on the mediumistic, irrational nature of nationalistic ideology. Like Nazism, this ideology is irrationally motivated, as it is founded on the presumption of

[27] As Brian Daizen Victoria shows in his most important study *Zen at War* (2006), during the Meiji and the Shōwa eras, the Buddhist clergy widely supported Japan's imperialistic aggressions since the Russo-Japanese War. According to Buddhist scholars and high priests, Japan's military aggressions were justified by the fact that the Emperor was the defendant of Buddhist religion, to the extent that 'Japan's wars are not only just but are, in fact, expressions of Buddhist compassion' (p. 30). In this context, an 'Imperial-State Zen' was theorised in order to adjust Zen values such as obedience, and the concentration and calm gained through meditation (the mental state called *Samadhi*). Such an appropriation of Zen into a nationalistic framework was carried out despite Japan's national religion not being Buddhism but Shinto (pp. 95-129). See also Gier 2014, pp. 183-200.

[28] Information about this process can be found in the amateurish Jeremiah 2010, and in Lobetti 2014, pp. 130-136. Sokushinbutsu is a process of self-mummification, conducted by several monks in Japan between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. The monk follows a diet 'consisting of pine needles, tree bark, pinecones, chestnuts and occasionally stones and crystals' (Lobetti 2014, p. 131) for ten years, and he then stops taking liquids, causing himself dehydration. He is finally put in a chamber in the ground, where he dies chanting mantras in honour of the Buddha, therefore entering Nirvana.

Japanese superiority over the rest of the world: but this irrationality expands to the whole system of thought of the Japanese army, and becomes a source of motivation. Flanagan aims to suggest the absurdity of human history by highlighting how a false premise can lead an entire people to such ominous actions: in this sense, the insistence on the divinity of the Emperor is not distant from the mythological language of Vollmann's German narrators. Moreover, this irrationality also has effects on the way in which the war is carried out, by which I mean that military actions are inevitably influenced by the false premise of racial superiority. We have seen Vollmann's insistent treatment of this aspect of fascism, expecially in the chapter dedicated to Vlasov, who is forbidden to form a collaborationist army because of the racial prejudices of the Germans. Moreover, the obstinacy with which the Japanese army employ malnourished POWs in the seemingly impossible construction of the Line reminds us of Littell's (and Amis') description of the contradictory efforts of exploiting slave labour in the concentration camps. Littell, Amis, and Flanagan present discussions between those who believe that the workforce would benefit from an improvement in nutrition, and those who, believing that the POWs are racially inferior and thus worthless, deny them nourishment.

3. The War of Subalterns

The falsity and duplicity of Japanese imperial ideology is of course also evident in its colonial ideology. In this sense, the Goanna is a central character, although he appears so late in the novel[29]. The official Japanese motivation for its aggressive foreign policy and for the Fifteen Years War (1931-1945) was the *hakkō ichiu* ideology, 'The Whole World Under One Roof': an imperial project that was geared toward the construction of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Asia, liberated from the foreign white men, would have been benevolently guided by Japan – the only nation able to do so, as an organisation of mutual help and support[30]. Of course, nothing could have been farther from truth: Japanese colonisation was characterised by oppression, cultural assimilation, slave labour and the stealing of natural resources[31]. This last

[29] The Goanna is modelled on Lee Hak Rae, also known as the Lizard, a Korean guard who worked during the construction of the Thai-Burma railway. However, contrary to the Goanna, Rae was not hanged, but spent twenty years in prison. See Utsumi, Nakamura and Heong-yun, 2007.
[30] Hotta 2007, p. 2. It is worth noticing that the creation of a Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was not the ex-post justification of the war, but the very motivation for starting it (p. 182).
[31] *Ibid,* pp. 202-212.

practice was particularly important insofar as Japan notoriously lacked those resources necessary for industrial production.

The Japanese officers of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* explicitly evoke the *hakkō ichiu* ideology in order to justify their efforts and the war: 'Last night I was talking with an Australian doctor, [Nakamura] said. The doctor had wanted to know why Japan had started the war. And I had explained the nobility of universal brotherhood that was our guiding idea. I mentioned our motto, *The Whole World Under One Roof* […]. And so I said how, in short, it was now Asia for the Asians, with Japan the leader of the Asian bloc. I told him we were liberating Asia from European colonisation' (*NRDN*, p. 115). They seem also to be animated by some sort of postcolonial desire for revenge against Westerners: the war 'it's about the European learning that they are not a superior race, Nakamura said. / And us learning that we are, Colonel Kota said' (*NRDN*, p. 125).

The character of the Goanna, however, is present in the novel to contradict these empty claims. Instead of being part of a free Asia under Japanese rule, the Goanna is no less a slave than the slaves he guards and tortures. Almost deprived of rights, constantly beaten and threatened, the Goanna is most of all deprived of his own identity. Not only is Korea, for him, a concept emptied of meaning by Japanese cultural assimilation and his work as a slave for the Japanese but his own identity is blurred and erased. As the following passage reveals: 'Hurrah for the Great Korean country! Cried out one Korean as he walked the fateful thirteen steps. / What great Korean country? wondered Choi Sang-min. what about my fifty yen [the pay he was supposed to receive for his service in the Line]. I am not Korean, he thought to himself. I am not Japanese. I am a man of a colony' (*NRDN*, p. 347). As a colonial subject, the Goanna is at the same time deprived of his identity as Korean, considered an inferior nation, and as Japanese, since Koreans had not the same status as their Japanese masters.

Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and a colony in 1910. From the beginning of the occupation, a significant effort was made to eradicate Korean language and culture, or at least to relegate them to the margins of public life. These policies culminated in language planning[32], the substitution of Confucian rituals with Emperor worshipping[33], and the forced adoption of Japanese family names[34]. This last issue was particularly humiliating, if we consider

[32] Rhee 1997, pp. 50-60. On the cultural implications of the Japanese occupation, see also Atkins 2010, Tsurumi 1984, and Caprio 2009, pp. 92-110.
[33] Rhee 1997, pp. 68-72.
[34] *Ibid,* pp. 74-75.

that since, according to Confucianism, the family name ‘gives a male his definite place and identity in society […] the changing of the family names […] implied a symbolic death of the concepts of descent and kinship’[35]. The Goanna suffers from a depersonalisation and a loss of identity that comes directly from this fight against Korean culture and language – against, in other words, the very idea of a Korean nation. To the empty, meaningless mantras of the Japanese officers, the Goanna can oppose nothing but his statelessness:

> Though he had many names – his Korean name, Choi Sang-min; the Japanese name he had been given and made to answer to in Pusan, Akira Sanya; his Australian name that the guards now called him, the Goanna – he realised he had no idea who he was. Some of the other condemned had strong ideas about Korea and Japan, the war, history, religion, justice. Choi Sang-min realized he had no ideas about anything. But the ideas of others had seemed no better to him than having no idea. Because they were not their ideas, but the ideas of slogans, wireless broadcasts, speeches, army manuals, the same ideas they had absorbed with the same endless beatings they too had endured in their Japanese military training. (*NRDN*, p. 348)

It is significant, in this sense, that he is the only one among the guards and the officers of the camp to be judged and sentenced for his behaviour as a class B criminal[36], while those who have higher responsibilities never face such a punishment (*NRDN*, p. 321). Despite never being granted with the rights of a citizen, the colonial subjects act as tools and scapegoats.

According to his situation within Japanese colonialism, the only form of identity that the Goanna is granted is the one that he derives from his fear and dread of the POWs, and the respect that these two emotions generate. Significantly, the only name by which we know the character for most of the book is neither his Korean nor his Japanese name but his camp epithet of Goanna. Only through violence and prevarication does the Goanna seem able to take back a form of identity, which was denied to him when he was a child when he was punished for speaking Korean instead of Japanese, and treated worse than the family pet by the Japanese family he worked for. As the narrative reflects: ‘For he sensed in the Australians the same contempt for him that he had known in the Japanese. […] Beating the Australian prisoners, on

[35] *Ibid*.

[36] Tanaka 1996, pp. 1-2: ‘Three types of war crime categories were established. The A Class consisted of “crimes against peace”, and those who were prosecuted included military leaders and politicians who had instigated the war against the Allied nations and bore final responsibility for the various war crimes committed by their own forces. The B Class encompassed more “conventional” war crimes – those committed by soldiers in the field against either enemy soldiers of civilians of enemy countries. The C Class, which covered “crimes against humanity”, consisted of crimes against civilian of any nationality. This last category was especially created in order to prosecute Nazi war criminals who had committed crimes against their own citizens […]. However, because in the Japanese case the difference between B and C categories was not always clear, they were usually combined to form a single B and C class for the purpose of the prosecution’.

the other hand, had made a lot of sense. However briefly, he felt that he was somebody while he was beating the Australian soldiers who were so much larger than him […]. That had made him something and someone, if only for as long as the Australians crumpled and moaned' (*NRDN*, p. 322).

Once again, the cause of the Goanna's violence ought not be identified with some sort of sadistic impulse, but located within the system of reciprocal violence he inhabits. The double-standard system of oppression that characterises colonial domination, allowing one who is oppressed in his own country to act as an oppressor towards the colonial subjects, implicates colonial subjects as well, who seek to (re)define themselves and acquire social status through the stratification of a colonial class. The perversion of bushidō, which places loyalty to the Emperor above every other value, causes also a transfer of oppression from Japanese to colonised peoples, and from them to the prisoners of war. As Tanaka argues, the idea that 'the worth of individuals was conceived in terms of their proximity to the emperor'[37] 'led in many cases to unbalanced psychological states: extremes of self-abnegation in relation to the Japanese domestic hierarchy alternating with excessive self-regard in relation to colonial non-Japanese subjects. The repressed resentment of the former was often expressed in violence toward the latter'[38].

3.1. Smith, Levy, Waters, Bandele

It is a common topos of war writing that the war represents a blank space open to a redefinition of individual and collective identities. The case of the Goanna is liminal, as the new identity provided by his Japanese masters is everything but a positive thing: and yet, the war still grants him what he is denied in peacetime. This topos of liminality and war as the opportunity to rearticulate identity is lively in a series of contemporary texts, most notably *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith (2000), *Small Island* by Andrea Levy (2004), *The Night Watch* by Sarah Waters (2006), and *Burma Boy* by Biyi Bandele (2007). This vision of the war is also not a simple interpretation, but rather an incontrovertible historical fact of the Second World War, and a direct consequence of the *total* nature of the war. The Second World War was a conflict between imperial, thus transnational, forces. It represented, therefore, a moment in which the

[37] Tanaka 1996, p. 203.
[38] *Ibid*, p. 204.

roles and the balances of power in these empires (often linked to ethnicity as well as caste, religion and occupation) started to be renegotiated. For the British Empire, specifically, the Second World War engendered a progressive loosening of the boundaries of domination between the mother-country and the colonies, at the same time as a wide mobilisation of colonial troops throughout the empire. Smith, Levy, and Bandele extensively treat this subject, showing Pakistani, Jamaican, and Nigerian subjects of the Empire dispatched to fight for interests other than their own in distant and foreign countries. At the same time, however, this transnational dimension of the war, with the migrations and the sceneries of destruction and reconstruction that it implies, generates the possibility of new identities, both individual and collective.

Similarly, the *total* nature of the Second World War, by eliminating the distinction between home and front (as indeed the air bombardments created a *physical* home front, and only a metaphorical one), elevates women to the position of direct subjects in the war. While previously women could be involved in the war only in case of direct invasion or as relatives of the fallen, the new air technologies employed in the Second World War dissolved the differences between army and civilians: the front line is at Coventry no less than at Dunkirk. Moreover, to a greater extent than the Great War, the Second World War represents the moment when women begin to gain mass labour employment. As Penny Summerfield has argued, the war has been a moment in which female labour has been employed not only in the traditional patriarchal context, but also in the frame of a capitalistic economy: and in these contradictory economic systems, different needs and demands coexist and clash[39]. The effects of the war did not last long after its end, as the number of female workers in the job market quickly contracted[40]. Moreover, a significant portion of the jobs women secured during the war was still, in many ways, gendered, to the extent that these policies resulted in the reinforcement of gender inequality after the war, rather than diminishing it[41]. Nevertheless, the Second World War was a moment in which women had access to jobs and positions that were previously reserved for men, with the freedom that this process implies. Sarah Waters' novel is dedicated to this topic, and to the sexual liberty (both hetero and homosexual) that this economic freedom engenders, which is indeed another, if different, manifestation of this vision of the war as a blank space for minorities and excluded subjectivities.

[39] Summerfield 1984, pp. 29-31.
[40] *Ibid,* p. 187.
[41] *Ibid,* p. 185.

White Teeth (*WT*) by Zadie Smith (a British author born of Jamaican and English parents) is a vast and comical novel focusing on the life of first and second generation immigrants in the multicultural metropolitan area of London. A pivotal role in the novel is carried by the friendship between the English, Archibald Jones and the Bengali Muslim, Samad Iqbal. *White Teeth* tells the stories of their wives (respectively: Clara, a Jamaican Jehovah's Witness, and Alsana, a Bengali woman who Iqbal marries in an arranged marriage) and children. While Archie and Clara have a daughter with low self-esteem and who is somewhat ashamed her Jamaican heritage, Iqbal and Alsana have two twins, Magid and Millat. Preoccupied with the moral dissolution of the West, Iqbal sends Magid (then still a child) to Bangladesh to receive a Muslim education, while keeping Millat with himself, as, in his eyes, the child is already corrupted. However, while Millat becomes a Muslim fundamentalist, Magid comes back from Bangladesh an atheist of Western manners.

It goes without saying that *White Teeth* is not a novel about the Second World War. Nevertheless, the war and the redefinition of social roles that it brought about is fundamental for Samad and Archie's friendship. In consonance with the general tone of *White Teeth*, the description of the war is farcical. Archie and Iqbal do not fight a real war, but they wander with their company through the Balkans, and they do not participate in any real conflicts: the only moment of violence in their war experience, which leaves the other three men of their company dead, takes place when they are sent in exploration to a village nearby. Moreover, the principal part of their action takes place *after* the actual end of the war, since a problem of radio communication makes them unaware of the cessation of the hostilities. The legacy of the Second World War is also what brings together all the characters at the very end of the novel. All the protagonists of *White Teeth* gather (to protest or to support) at the presentation of geneticist, Marcus Chalfen's project of genetically- modifying the DNA of a mouse. In fact, Chalfen's mentor is revealed to be Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret, also known as Dr. Sick, the Nazi doctor Samad and Archie capture in Bulgaria after the end of the war, whom Samad plans to kill in order to have made at least one victim during the conflict. Although he asks Archie to carry out the homicide (which he accepts), Archie ultimately does not dare to take another man's life. However, he reports to Samad Perret's death, the falsity of which Samad finds out at the end of the book, at Marcus' presentation.

The narration of the war covers only thirty pages of the novel, but it is central in the story, as it represents the moment of exception from ordinary life that allows the friendship between a Briton and a colonial subject to emerge, and the Briton's suspicion to end: 'In short, it was

precisely the kind of friendship an Englishmen makes on holiday, that he can make only on holiday. A friendship that crosses class and colour, a friendship that takes as its basis physical proximity and survives because the Englishman assumes the physical proximity will not continue' (*WT*, p. 83). Moreover, the death of the rest of their company (who mocked Samid for his origins and called him 'Sultan' despite him being Bengali and not Arab) overturns the relation between coloniser and colonised to the extent that is who Samid takes over the leadership of the two men. The more simple-minded and quiet Archie follows patiently his suggestions and listens to his long speeches.

There is another point of the novel in which the memory of the war emerges, and it is located within the oft-quoted episode in which Millet, Magid and Irie visit Mr. Hamilton's house, as part of a school project dedicated to helping the elderly and keeping them company. Hamilton, an elderly, white British man, is racist and senile, and believes that the children are there to rob him. When he is convinced to the contrary, he lets them inside his house, and starts complaining that his bad teeth will not permit him to eat the canned food the children have brought him. He then starts lecturing the children about the importance of dental hygiene, but suddenly comments that 'white teeth are not always wise' (*WT*, p. 149). 'When I was in Congo', he explains, 'the only way I could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth, if you see what I mean. Horrid business. Dark as buggery, it was […]. See a flash of light and bang! as it were… […] All these beautiful boys lying dead there, right in front of me, right at my feet. Stomachs open, you know, with their guts on my shoes. […] Beautiful men, enlisted by the Krauts, black as the ace of spades; poor fools didn't even know why they were there, what people they were fighting for, who they were shooting at' (*WT*, p. 149). The children are obviously shocked at the story, and Millat answers saying that his father, Samad, fought in the war as well, at which Hamilton replies: 'I'm afraid you must be mistaken […]. There were certainly no wogs as I remember – though you're probably not allowed to say that in these days are you? But no… no Pakistanis… what would we have fed them?' (*WT*, p. 149). As Perfect suggests, Hamilton represents Britain's tendency to erase its colonial past, and to undermine the importance of colonial subjects in the war effort[42]. Nevertheless, Hamilton is the only openly racist character of the novel, and this episode is the only one in which racism is openly thematised in *White Teeth*[43]. It is significant, then, that racist views are propounded only occurs by a man so evidently senile and not in complete control of mental faculties (as his morbid

[42] Perfect 2016, p. 244.
[43] Perfect 2014, p. 87.

insistence on dental hygiene suggests)[44]. Moreover, this episode takes place in his decrepit house, a 'confined, uncomfortable environment […] immediately contrasted to open, urban areas of London where it is "possible to breath"'[45]. In other words, and as Perfect argues, Hamilton and the space of racism he comes to embody represent an anachronism in the otherwise pacific, multicultural London landscape. Furthermore, as Perfect notes, Hamilton's account of the war is misleading. During the Second World War, Congo was not occupied by the Nazis, but was loyal to the Belgian government in exile and Congolese troops participated in the war on the same side as the Allied forces. For this reason, if Hamilton's account is true, he killed his own allies, and not men armed 'by the Krauts'. Thus, it is possible to say that Hamilton not only represents the British amnesia directed toward the importance of its colonial subjects in the war effort (a motif frequent also in Levy's novel), but he also evokes Britain's contradictions and ambiguities as relates to the purpose and development of the war[46].

Andrea Levy's successful and straightforward novel[47], *Small Island* (*SI*), is a book that pivots, so to speak, on a series of disappointments. Each of its four characters and narrators' experiences are based on their expectations being disappointed by reality. The protagonists are Jamaican (Gilbert and Hortense) and English (Queenie and Bernard). Despite their trust in British institutions, and despite being both formally British citizens, both Gilbert and Hortense are betrayed by the nation, as they suffer persecution when they move from Jamaica to London. Gilbert is discriminated both in military and in civilian life. By way of example, his superiors are troubled by the colour of his skin and exclude him from several tasks. Similarly, Hortense is denied the possibility of securing a job as a teacher for which she is trained because of the colour of her skin. More generally, the novel tells the story of Hortense's arrival in London, which comprises a continuous betrayal of expectations. Hortense is extremely proud of her manners and her accent, which she has carefully learned and perfected in an effort to model the example of the ruling classes of the country. However, her vocabulary leaves her unprepared to walk the cockney-speaking streets of London, and her manners are misunderstood as barbarisms by the native Britons she meets. Hortense's disappointment is felt towards the surroundings of London; specifically, she is horrified by the conditions of the house in which Gilbert lives (*SI*, pp. 20-21), in as much as it lacks space and comfort, and is shared with several

[44] *Ibid.* See also Tew, pp. 68-69.
[45] Perfect 2014, p. 87.
[46] Perfect 2016, p. 244.
[47] James 2014, pp. 52-64.

other people. This sense of betrayal by the motherland towards its colonies is expressed by Gilbert after the war, during which he has been threatened harshly and left penniless:

> Let me ask you to imagine this. Living far from you is a beloved relation whom you have never met. Yet this relation is so dear a kin she is known as Mother. Your own mummy talks of Mother all the time. "Oh, Mother is a beautiful woman – refined, mannerly and cultured". […] There are many valorous stories told of her, which enthrall grown men as well as children. Her photographs are cherished, pinned in your own family album to be admired over and over. Your finest, your best, everything you have that is worthy is sent to Mother as gifts. […] Then one day you hear mother calling – she is troubled, she needs your help. Your mummy, your daddy say go. Leave home, leave familiar, leave love. […] After all you have heard, can you imagine, can you believe, soon, soon you will meet Mother? The filthy tramp that eventually greets you is she. […] She offers you no comfort after your journey. No smile. No welcome. Yet she looks down at you through lordly eyes and says, "Who the bloody hell are you?". (*SI*, p. 139)

As in *White Teeth*, *Small Island* opposes the sunny weather and friendliness of the people of the colonies, and the gloomy, cold stiffness of traditional British weather and its people. In fact, Hortense is disturbed by the lack of light that characterises the weather conditions and the clothes of the English (*SI*, pp. 220 and 330). British stiffness is personified in the novel by Bernard, Queenie's husband, a shy man of modest ambitions who persuades her to marry him by moving her to pity, and who forces her into an emotionless and loveless life. Indeed, with the exception of Queenie, British people are presented as racist and opposed to difference and change. As Queenie comments: '[her neighbours]'d have got all those words out – decent, proper – polished them up and made them shine, before blaming Mrs Queenie Bligh for singlehandedly ruining the country. They were the same during the war, although even they couldn't blame me for that. Too many Poles. Overrun by Czechs. Couldn't move for Belgians. And as for Jews. They moaned about the Jews even after they knew what the poor beggars had been though' (*SI*, p. 112). Similarly, Bernard complains that 'these Jews are more trouble than they're worth' (*SI*, p. 267).

Racism is a problem for the Jamaican characters of the novel, and for those who sympathise with the marginalised. As Perfect argues, one of the strengths of *Small Island* is that it contests the self-presumption that, since the Allied forces fought against a racist ideology, their own countries did not enacted racist policies[48]. Such a vision is expressed continuously throughout the novel. Gilbert's cousin, Elwood, tries to convince him that he '"should be fighting the

---

[48] Perfect 2016, p. 252.

British, not joining them'" (*SI*, p. 131), and that the only fight worth fighting is for Jamaica, 'to see black skin in the governor's house doing more than just serving at the table and sweeping the floor. A black man at Tate and Lyle doing more than just cutting cane' (*SI*, p. 129). Even Hortense, quieter and generally more docile with respect to the colonisers, notices the contradiction at the heart of the Britain – its vexed identity as both a liberator and coloniser. For example, when her friend says that Hitler's victory would bring back slavery, she replies that she is currently working for no pay (*SI*, p. 71). Nevertheless, Levy highlights the relative progressiveness of British legislation of the time (despite its lack of effect in practical life) by introducing an implicit comparison with American segregation policies, which are depicted both during Gilbert's military training in Alabama and in the United Kingdom. In fact, Bernard's father, whom Queenie looks after, is accidentally killed in a fight with American soldiers generated by racist remarks towards Gilbert in an English cinema.

Bernard is not exempt from the delusions of Britain experienced by other characters. His experience of the war, in fact, contradicts his expectations: while he joins the army in order to seem more manly and virile in Queenie's eyes, his experience of the war is everything but heroic. By way of explanation, he is dispatched to India, implicated in an incident that causes the death of several fellow soldiers, and then placed in prison. He also contracts syphilis from an underage prostitute, which leaves him debilitated and slightly insane. The sum of these experiences causes Bernard to be too ashamed to return to London sooner than three years after the end of the war. Nevertheless, his suffering does not evolve into an understanding of the conditions of colonial subjects, nor into a critique of the very same propaganda that deluded him: 'Bernard is utterly ignorant of the historical connections between the British Empire and the violence that he observes [in India]. This ignorance not only allows him to view the warring groups as a "ragged bunch of illiterates" that have "nothing to do" with the British whatsoever, but also to regard the British Empire as being a civilised, civilising and even altruistic force for good that is trying to prevent the uncivilised violence, rather than a colonial power that is largely *responsible* for that violence'[49]. In other words, and to a certain extent similar to Hortense, Bernard's suffering is caused by an inability to escape a propagandistic vision of the empire, and its implications for his role within it. Being convinced that he is superior to colonial subjects, Bernard cannot participate in the communion of pariahs that closes the novel. To explain: Queenie – who, during the war, rents the house to several soldiers of colour – gives birth to a baby she conceived with one of them, a Jamaican airman. She asks Gilbert and

[49] Perfect 2014, p. 68.

Hortense to take care of him, recognising that it would invite suspicion and ridicule for two white people to raise a dark-skinned child. Bernard, however, refuses to join this communion, as it does not conform to his (British) idea of the world. After Gilbert's speech, Bernard refusal is laconic yet categorical:

> "Listen to me, man, we both just finish fighting a war – a bloody war. For the better world we wan' see. And on the same side – you and me. We both look on other men to see enemy. You and me, fighting for empire, fighting for peace. But still, after all that we suffer together, you wan' tell me I am worthless and you are not. Am I to be the servant and you are the master for all time? No. stop this, stop it now. We can work together, Mr Bligh. You no see? We must. Or else you just gonna fight me till the end?" […] "I'm sorry… but I just can't understand a single word that you're saying". (*SI*, pp. 525-6)

Despite their initial troubles, the changes that the war brings allow Gilbert and Hortense to improve their conditions, and at the end of the novel they purchase a house. Needing several renovations, the house is nevertheless their own: a metaphor for the realm of possibilities created by the war. Queenie, on the other hand, embodies the possibilities that the war creates for women. While her disappointments continue to be generated by her marriage to Bernard, the war creates for her a possibility to escape it, a moment in which excitement, personal reinvention, and romance are made possible: 'That raid was the most exciting thing that had ever happened in this house. Tingling with life, that was how I felt. […] There was no doubt about it, I was looking forward to this war' (*SI*, p. 266). While Gilbert and Hortense's mobility is physical, Queenie's is metaphorical. The war allows her to socially and psychologically move and become once again in charge of her own life. Bernard's leaving for the front makes a house owner of her (and indeed she will keep the house even after Bernard's late return). Indeed, Queenie's house, in ruins and in need of renovation, is an image of an empire in collapse: nevertheless, it is precisely its liminal status (its exception from the British standard of decency) that allows it to function as a space where meetings and a redefinition of individual identity is possible[50]. The ending of *Small Island* is much more pessimistic regards racial integration than *White Teeth*. The characters find themselves in hostile territory, and Queenie has to give her child away owing to the patent impossibility of raising a multiracial child on her own[51]. Nevertheless, Queenie, Gilbert and Hortense do face an improvement of their conditions, made

[50] Muñoz-Valdivieso 2012, p. 107.
[51] MacPhee 2011, pp. 162-163.

possible (if precarious) by a condition of war which has opened new and previously forbidden spaces, both physical and symbolic.

Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch* (*NW*) focuses on the Second World War as a space for the emergence of non-conforming sexualities. The novel follows several intertwined characters, all of whom exhibit by sexual and behavioural deviations from the (monogamous, heterosexual) norm. Viv, a heterosexual woman, is the lover of Reggie, a married man. She is the colleague of Helen, the former lover of Kay – a masculine lesbian and ambulance driver who during the war saves Viv's life after she experiences complications from an illegal abortion Reggie has forced upon her. Helen cheats on Kay with Julia, Kay's former lover, who then also starts cheating on Helen. Finally, Viv has a brother, Duncan, imprisoned during the war because of his involvement in an attempted double suicide in which only his friend (and implied lover?) is killed. For clarity, he attempts suicide in a bid to escape being drafted by the military.

In a general sense, *The Night Watch* presents an overturning of conventional gender roles: while the female characters are heroic in facing the bombardments, the men appear cowardly (Reggie) or apathetic (Duncan). In a climatic scene of the novel, Viv finds out she is pregnant with Reggie's child. He first suggests that she takes poison to get rid of the baby, and later organises for her an appointment with an illegal abortion doctor. After the abortion, however, she falls ill, and starts bleeding heavily, at which point Reggie deserts her in fear of damaging his reputation. Her life is saved only by the arrival of Kay and Mickey, two masculine-presenting lesbians who work as ambulance drivers. Duncan, moreover, is in prison because he attempted suicide in protest of the war; his imprisonment can therefore be interpreted as a punishment for his evading his duties as a man and citizen. Furthermore, in Waters' novel, it is the war that allows the development of otherwise illicit relationships: 'London is imagined as a blank space open to potential re-inscriptions'[52]. In particular, the moment in which societal rules and norms were effectively suspended as a result of the German blitz can be regarded as a 'queer time'[53]. In 1944, Helen and Julia start seeing each other in ruined houses. They have their first romantic meeting during a blackout in the ruins of a church, in much the same way as Kay and Helen, in 1941, meet for the first time during a bombardment. Similarly, Viv and Reggie's relationship is made possible by the suspension of norms that the war implies, since Reggie, a soldier, is forced to leave his family; thus, it is queer in its rejection of the social (and

[52] Wood 2013, p. 313. See also O'Callaghan 2016, p. 314. In a similar way to *White Teeth*, the openness of the bombed city is opposed to the suffocating stiffness of British homes (Jones 2014, p. 36).
[53] O'Callaghan 2017, 316-318.9.

spatial) norm[54]. Moreover, the space of the prison in which Duncan spends the duration of the war 'encourages homosexuality' because of the 'forced proximity' it creates between inmates[55].

The end of the war, however, terminates this apparent realm of possibilities, and, after the end of the benefits the war brought, all the characters are, in one way or another, haunted by negative memories of it. Viv's affection for Reggie is compromised by the memory of the abortion, Kay is tormented by the memory of Helen's betrayal, Helen faces Julia's betrayal, and Duncan is forced into the very same rhythms of prison despite being now a free man, since he lives with a former guard of his prison. More specifically, it is Kay who benefits most from wartime, and who undergoes the greatest loss after its end. A very masculine-presenting woman, often wear male clothing and mistaken for a man (*NW*, p. 94; while her friend Mickey looks like 'a male impersonator on the stage', p. 331), Kay is granted by the war a professional position as an ambulance driver. As we have seen, the lack of male labour during wartime offers women access to professions previously reserved for men. Similarly, wartime provides relative tolerance towards homosexual affairs, even public ones. Nevertheless, Kay's freedom to express her identity is only permitted by the war, and terminates with it: wartime 'tolerance is not the same as acceptance'[56]. After the war (and thus at the beginning of the novel, which follows a reverse chronology), and without a job and a social position, Kay is presented as lacking identity and purpose: she is 'a person whose clocks and wrist-watches have stopped, and who tells the time, instead, by the particular kind of cripple arriving at her landlord's door' (*NW*, p. 3). Moreover, Kay has lost her lover as well, since Helen leaves her for Julia. Tired of her lack of identity, Kay invests a lot in her romantic relationship with Julia, fearing the lonely outcome of a life of meaningless relationships (*NW*, p. 241). Significantly, Waters ties the reason why Kay loses her job to Helen's betrayal. In fact, when she knows that a bomb has fallen near their home, she takes the ambulance without permission and goes there – only to find out that Helen is safe, since she was with Julia. In other words, 'Helen and Julia's affair functions (troublingly) as a form of punishment to Kay for her apparent investment in heterosexual idealism'[57].

The Night Watch is a carefully reconstructed historical novel, and Waters exhibits her sources in a conclusive note to the book (*NW*, pp. 471-3)[58]. Natasha Alden has argued that *The*

---

[54] *Ibid,* 338.9
[55] *Ibid,* 321.6.
[56] O' Callaghan 2017, 321.6.
[57] O'Callaghan 2016, p. 208.
[58] See also Alden 2013, pp. 70-83 for a closer examination of Waters' sources.

Night Watch should be regarded as historiographic metafiction for reasons of its polemic attitude towards official historiography and its focus on minorities and the excluded[59]. Well-made though her argument may be, I would argue that the text does not cohere with the ideological values of this category. While it is true that the novel contests the official vision of history by giving new relevance to those categories who are excluded by the public memory of the war (for example, homosexuals, and women outside normal married relationships), Waters never contests the possibility of knowing history. Note again that she provides her sources to verify the fidelity of her account. Further, the novel does not make use of metafictional devices. What Waters does, nevertheless, is criticise the traditional values of Britishness, showing their ambivalence and their role as obstacles in the characters' abilities to be themselves (such as the topos of the pastoral idyll, which turns for Viv into an unpleasant and unwilling love meeting with Reggie)[60].

The novel follows a reverse chronology: it starts in 1947, and then proceeds to 1944 and 1941. As Mitchell eloquently notes, the reverse chronology of the novel challenges the notion of historical progress, and underlines the role of past trauma in defining the characters[61]. Such a chronological framework is different both from Levy's *Small Island* (in which the narration shifts constantly from the war period to its premise and aftermath) and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, in which the same method was employed to playfully undermine the possibility of knowing history, and the idea of personal responsibility. Not nearly as radical as Amis's postmodern novel, Waters uses a reverse chronology in order to illustrate the extent to which the past can influence and haunt the present of the protagonists. Moreover, by presenting at the very beginning of the novel the miserable conditions of the protagonists, Waters aims to undermine the idea of the Second World War as a founding moment of real liberation for women, suggesting instead that it should be read as a parenthesis between equally problematic times.

Burma Boy (*BB*) by the Nigerian writer, Biyi Bandele is dedicated to 'the 500,000 troops from the Royal West African Frontier Force and the King's African Rifles who served with the Allied Forces during the Second World War. And to the memory of my father […], a "Burma Boy" whose stories of war in the jungle echo still in my ears' (*BB*, p. 1). It tells the story of Ali Banana, a fourteen year old Nigerian who joins the British army out of admiration for the

---

[59] Alden 2016, p. 65.
[60] Cavalié 2014, pp. 84-100.
[61] Mitchell 2013, p. 87. See also Stewart 2015, p. 230.

successes of the African colonial forces in the war against the Italians in Ethiopia. He is sent to Burma, were he becomes part of a guerrilla group fighting the Japanese in the jungle. Banana's simple-mindedness transforms his coming-of-age story into an almost comical (yet terrible) account of the war in the jungle. Such is also the effect of the cultural and geographical distance between the Nigerian soldiers and the place they are sent to fight, 'filled with strange plants and nameless animals' (*BB*, p. 25).

This sense of strangeness, owing to the transnational composition of both the Allied and the Japanese forces and to the global dimensions of the war, is recreated through language[62]. The soldiers speak in Nigerian English and by way of a restricted vocabulary, comprising deformations of words and military grades: '"I here to fight na Boma", Banana declared. "I here for to killi di Janpani"' (*BB*, p. 33). As a colonial soldier, Banana fights a war that he does not understand for a country other than his own, against enemies he has nothing against:

> He didn't understand why King George was waging a war in Burma from far away England. And it didn't matter to him.
>
> He was in Burma to fight King George's war and that was the end of the matter.
>
> The Japs were King George's enemies and that was the end of the matter.
>
> The Japs were his enemies.
>
> He would kill the Japs or the Japs would kill him.
>
> That was the end of the matter. (*BB*, p. 206)

As Rastogi notes, the Nigerian soldiers are employed by the white colonialists 'against Another Other […] which is *both* the Burmese landscape and the Japanese army'[63]. The effort against this double enemy (the men who are trying to kill them, and the landscape in which the action takes place) is fuelled by the only rhetoric that the colonialists master, the Orientalist one, since 'the Burmese blankscape is represented in the classic colonialist terms of harboring disease, threat, death, and self-estrangement that mirror the "savage" Japanese soldiers lurking in the jungle'[64]. India, on the other hand, insofar as it is colonised by the British, represents a safe area of 'metropolitan modernity and civilization'[65]. Through the simple-minded perspective of Banana, the readers are shown this propaganda in its making, and its effect; and while Banana

[62] Baxter 2013, pp. 357-8.
[63] Rastogi 2015, p. 22.
[64] *Ibid*.
[65] *Ibid*.

actually believes it, readers become aware of its contradictions[66]. Banana is tricked by the colonisers to risk his life for a cause he does not share. Differently from the Goanna of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, however, Banana is not forced to do so. Although the reality of the war is far more terrible than his candid expectations, it still represents for him an occasion of personal growth and maturation that has nothing in common with the brutality experienced by the Goanna.

The openness to new experiences and identities represented by the Second World War is not, in the authors we have considered, without ambiguities. In Flanagan, a character deprived of identity in peacetime is granted an identity based on violence during the war. But such an identity can only last as long as the war lasts, and in fact it is terminated at its end, leaving the Goanna disoriented and empty. In Bandele, the profound injustice of the colonial war can nevertheless function as the setting for a Bildungsroman – just as, in Zadie Smith, it represents a moment in which the contrasts and contradictions of colonial dominion can be at least partially overcome. The position of Levy and Waters, on the other hand, is not so optimistic to the extent that the protagonists are unable to retain all the benefits they expected or enjoyed during the war (such as opportunities for the redefinition of selfhood and of social mobility). As we will see later in this chapter, this ambiguity is also central to the treatment of the memory of the war, both for Flanagan and another group of authors.

4. The Dangers of Memory

Let us now return to *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. What we have observed in the digression above represents, in a sense, a marginal (if important) topos of Flanagan's text: an invitation to doubt national mythologies, and to reflect on the gap between reality and propaganda, and between historical facts and public memory. However, these polemics must be understood in the wider framework of a reflection on the dangers of memory. These dangers are of two kinds: first of all, of course, the haunting power of memories, and the power they have to inhibiting one to carry on with his or her life; and, more importantly, the mystification that memory brings.

[66] *Ibid*.

The first danger of memory – its arresting and traumatising potential – is evoked at the very beginning of the novel: 'A happy man has no past, while an unhappy man has nothing else' (*NRDN*, p. 3). Dorrigo incarnates the prototype of a man haunted by his past, since the memory of Amy prevents him from finding happiness in his marriage and his family. All the members of his brigade, however, seem to keep suffering because of their memories in the years following the war: some commit suicide, some become alcoholics, some have senseless bursts of rage – like when they destroy Nikitari's fish shop, the restaurant of a Greek immigrant where Darky Gardiner used to love eating (*NRDN*, pp. 327-333). It is not important here that memory is flawed and or that it undergoes changes of meaning and content through time, as it happens to Jimmi Bigelow. The time spent on the Line still remains the only thing that he, in the end, seems to have experienced, no matter how false his memory of it is: 'It became hard to believe that all the things that had happened to him had ever really happened, that he had seen all the things he had seen. Sometimes, it was hard to believe he had ever really been to war at all. There came good years, grandchildren, then the slow decline, and the war came to him more and more and the other ninety years of his life slowly dissolved. […] Then [at] the age of ninety-two, as he lay dying in hospital after his third stroke, […] [he] once more saw the smoke and smelt the flesh burning, and suddenly he knew it was the only thing that had ever happened to him' (*NRDN*, p. 249).

Even the Japanese forces are haunted by the memory of what they did on the Line; decades later, they continue to try and absolve themselves from accusations that were held against them. At the end of the novel, Nakamura meets again his former assistant, Tomokawa, who with other engineers of their regiment, restored a car of the first train to travel the whole Siam-Burma railway. Tomokawa claims that the years they spent on the Line were the best of his life (*NRDN*, p. 393). While this statement is evidently false, since readers have seen what the life on the Line meant even for Japanese officers in terms of physical and psychological distress, it is extremely significant that Tomokawa still finds it necessary to insist on the positivity of the Line. The memory of those days, however terrible, has become so strong as to blur nearly everything else.

Most important, memory is presented in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* as incapable of rendering the reality of experience. All the characters are stuck between what they have experienced on the Line, and a false memory of this past. Memory is flawed: as with Jimmy Bigelow, Dorrigo too cannot grasp the variety of his own experience, which starts to fade in his mind (*NRDN*, p. 20). The flaws of memory, however, are much more pervasive than simply affecting personal memory. They infect collective memory as well. Again, this is particularly

true in the case of Dorrigo, who is uncomfortable with the status of war hero he gained after the war, afraid, as Tennyson's Ulysses, to 'become a name' (*NRDN*, p. 18):

> Inexplicably to him, he had in recent years become a war hero, a famous and celebrated surgeon, the public image of a time and a tragedy, the subject of biographies, plays and documentaries. The object of veneration, hagiographies, adulation. He understood that he shared certain features, habits and history with the war hero. But he was not him. He'd just had more success at living than dying, and there were no longer so many left to carry the mantle of the POWs [...]. Whatever they called him – hero, coward, fraud – all of it now seemed to have less and less to do with him. It belonged to a world that was ever more distant and vaporous to him (*NRDN*, p. 16).

Memory, and especially public memory, is not able to grasp the complexity and the variety of the war, as Dorrigo explains to a journalist: 'It is not that you know nothing about war, young man. It is that you have learnt one thing. And war is many things' (*NRDN*, p. 20). He even admits himself, in reference to his war memoir, that accuracy does not coincide with truthfulness (*NRDN*, p. 56). Accuracy can be opposed to truth insofar as the accumulation of details cannot offer a portrait as lively as the experience one lived. This gap between life and its account, between experience and memory, will be underlined, as we will see, by the references to Zen Buddhism.

The opposition between memory and experience is, in a way, an opposition between theory and practice, and between, most of all, literature and reality. This is particularly important because the whole book is perforated with references to literary works: haikus, and poems by Tennyson, Kipling and Dante. However, literature seems to be useless. Poetry can help the prisoners to bear their suffering only if it becomes an empty mantra, as exemplified by *Ulysses* in Dorrigo's case or Kipling's misunderstood lyric in the case of Bonox Baker (*NRDN*, pp. 243-244). The latter mistakes a poem about how everything is forgotten in the end for a poem about how everything survives in memory. Similarly, as we have seen, their love for literature does not prevent the Japanese from committing atrocities. The perpetrators' culture and love for art is always central in the reflection about the Second World War (as in Littell's novel), and is explicitly thematised by Paul Celan's epigraph, 'Mother, they write poems'[67].

[67] Flanagan 2014 (1).

4.1. McEwan, Seiffert, Bock, Kennedy

The importance of this theme in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* calls for a second digression, concerning a different group of novels: *Atonement* by Ian McEwan (2001), *The Dark Room* by Rachel Seiffert (2001), *The Ash Garden* by Dennis Bock (2001), and *Day* by A. L. Kennedy (2007). All these novels, similarly to Flanagan's, highlight the treacherous and deceptive nature of individual and public memory, reprising a distinctive trait of the postmodern approach to history, without nevertheless pushing it to its extreme, nihilistic consequences.

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (*A*), published late in the author's career (McEwan was born in 1948) and immediately hailed as a major success, is probably the most remarkable book to deal with the infidelity of the memory of the Second World War as well as the crucial relationship between memory and fiction. The plot of the novel (divided into four parts, or, better, three parts and a post scriptum) is well-known. In the first part, set in the luxurious country house of the Tallis family, Briony Tallis, a 13-year-old girl with literary ambitions, accuses Robbie Turner, her sister's lover, of having raped her cousin Lola. Briony's accusation is based on a mixture of jealousy, her pretended dislike of Robbie (of a lower social class), and on her misinterpretation of the romantic interest between Robbie and Cecilia. Specifically, Briony misunderstands a moment of sexual passion that the two lovers share as a sexual violence. The same evening, while the whole family is outside searching for a couple of missing children, Lola is raped by a man she cannot distinguish in the dark. Briony, who witnesses the escape of the culprit, accuses Robbie of the crime, for which he is arrested and imprisoned. In the second part, Robbie has been freed in exchange of his enrolment in the army, and is fighting in Dunkirk. Cecilia has become a nurse, in protest at her family who does not believe in Robbie's innocence. The two lovers have remained in contact during his imprisonment, without having the possibility to meet, and have the chance to say goodbye before he leaves for France. In part three, Briony, now aware of the falsity of her accusation and of the proportion of her fault, has become a nurse as well, and is willing to make amends. When she meets again with her sister and Robbie, they both refuse to forgive her, but insist that she begins fixing her mistake by producing legal documents that exonerate Robbie from the crime and which implicate a family friend (now married to Lola) as the real culprit. The third part terminates with the words 'BT / London, 1999' (*A*, p. 349). These epistolary formal devices – specifically, Briony's initials, suggest that what readers have read so far is a fictionalised account of events provided by

Briony herself. In fact, in the fourth part, a diary entry set in 1999, the now seventy-seven year old Briony is a celebrated writer, who explains that what we have read so far is her last novel, to be published for legal reasons after her death. Moreover, in the penultimate pages of the book, she informs readers that Robbie and Cecilia did not survive the war, the former dying at Dunkirk, the latter during a bombardment, and did not have thus the chance to reunite. Briony's *atonement*, then, is not only the time she spends as a nurse, but the very novel contained in the previous three parts.

As in Smith's *White Teeth*, the war plays a relatively small role in *Atonement*: while central to the plot, it can be considered at a first glance marginal as a theme. And yet, *Atonement*'s complex metafictional frame, together with Briony's unreliability as a narrator, casts a shadowy light on the process of the memorialisation of the Second World War. As Bentley has summarised, 'this metafictional twist shifts the ontological status of the novel from objective account by an extradiegetic third-person narrator to a homodiegetic, historical (if somewhat fictionalized) memoir'[68]. Briony, who is the implied author of the first three parts of the novel, and the first-person narrator of the last, is indeed an unreliable narrator – both because of her homodiegetic voice and because she claims to be suffering from vascular dementia (*A*, p. 354)[69]. She also claims that legal preoccupations have forbidden her to publish the book (*A*, pp. 369-370): but preoccupations about the legal consequences of writing are notoriously a topos of fictional writing, aimed to suggest its truthfulness rather than to prove it (once again, let us think to Roth's *Operation Shylock*, in which the same device is used with identical purposes). Moreover, we are informed of Briony's unreliability by the very fact that she lies to us, hiding until the end the truth about the death of Robbie and Cecilia. Such a contradiction raises suspicions about everything that Briony as a narrator (implied or explicit) has said, and she is aware of that. As she choreographs Robbie to say in the third part, 'if you were lying then, why should a court believe you now? […] You're an unreliable witness' (*A*, p. 336; see also p. 358). Indeed, her contradictions invalidate the whole content of her confession (and her attempt of atonement), and it is certainly possible, as it has been suggested, that the lovers did not die, or that Robbie was truly the rapist[70].

---

[68] Bentley 2014, p. 150.
[69] Similarly, the Philip Roth protagonist of *Operation Shylock* claims to suffer from hallucinations owing to the drug Halcyon.
[70] Jacobi 2011, pp. 55-73; Marsh 2017, pp. 1-19.

Moreover, Briony's unreliability is connected with the wider theme of the dangers of fiction[71]. To the extent that, as a lonely child with a passion for literature, 'Briony's worldview has been shaped by aesthetic expectations'[72], she is incapable of reading reality outside the paradigm of the melodramatic romance she avidly consumes (as symbolised by the play, *The Trials of Arabella*, which she writes for the occasion of the family reunion). When she finds out what happens to her cousin, then, her reading of the misdeed is influenced by a novelistic vision of Robbie as a brute – a vision which ignores both the struggles and the resentment of his coming from a different social class than the rest of the group, and the carnal aspects of romance. Sexual interest, in the literature Briony consumes, can only be interpreted as assault. Thus, paradoxically enough, literature ultimately leaves Briony unable to read literature itself: Robbie is considered guilty on the basis of a playful letter filled with obscenities directed to Cecilia (which Briony reads although he did not intend to send it). Such a letter is evidently a product of imagination, comparable to Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, but the very literary background of Briony prevents her from reading it as such. She can only interpret it as further evidence of Robbie's criminal behaviour.

Significantly, the novel opens with a long epigraph from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*[73]. Such an epigraph carries a double function: it alludes to the model of the British country house novel, and it signals the thematic importance of the dangers of fiction[74]. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen famously satirises the reader's infatuation with the implausible plots of Gothic novels, and constructs a story in which the heroine fails to interpret the events around her because she forces them into the framework of the Gothic novels she so avidly reads. Briony evidently does the same thing, but her misreading brings more (and more dangerous) consequences than in Austen's novel. Moreover, this reference to Austen signals McEwan's will to adapt his style to the models of the great British modern (and modernist[75]) novel. Such a reprise, of course, also

[71] Möller 2011, pp. 55.
[72] O'Hara 2011, p. 76.
[73] The question of who places there the epigraph there, McEwan or Briony, remains. And the question is not superfluous. If the quotation has to be considered as Briony's choice, then we must interpret it as a further moment of *her* reflection on her own story, meaning the first three parts; otherwise, it is McEwan's comment on the *whole* book, including the final post scriptum. It is my belief that the quotation has to be ascribed to the author of *Atonement* and not to Briony, as it is placed before the beginning of part one, right after the dedication of the book 'to Annalena'. Since this dedication is evidently McEwan's, as we have no reason to suspect otherwise, lacking the text of Annalenas, it is fair to assume the same of the epigraph.
[74] Finney 2004, p. 70.
[75] Briony's aspiration of being a writer, which causes the dramatic false accusation of Robbie, persists as she grows up, and she becomes a professional writer, as we come to learn in the post scriptum. In the third part of the novel, she submits a story (a dramatisation of the day in which her misdeed takes place) to *Horizon*, a famous modernist literary magazine, and receives an answer by Cyril Connolly. On references to modernism and modernist literature in *Atonement*, see Robinson 2010, pp. 473-495, and Mitric 2014, pp. 715-740. As O'Hara notes, Briony's evolution

implies a critique of the ideological, classist content of the traditional country house novel, given the extent to which class disparities are central and yet unproblematised in the genre[76]. Moreover, considering that it is upper-class Briony that recreates the country house novel and that provides Robbie and Cecilia with a happy ending, it could be argued that her novel is not simply an attempt to achieve atonement, but also to return to 'a more innocent and intelligible time', which is however 'undercut by the guilt and horror that permeates the sections set during the war'[77].

Nevertheless, as Bentley argues, *Atonement* provides 'not only critical realism, but a critique of realism'[78]. Stylistically, McEwan deploys the means of the modern novel (regards plot, realistic characters, omniscient narrator, mimetic realism, real characters in the background) to provide a reconstruction of the Second World War, and to arouse sympathy for the fate of his protagonists. In her answer to Briony's story, the character of Cyril Connolly criticises her experimental style owning itself 'a little too much to the techniques of Mrs Woolf' (*A*, p. 312). She suggests that Briony make it less abstract and more plot-centered:

> Rather than dwell for quite so long on the perceptions of each of the three figures, would it not be possible to set them before us with greater economy, still keeping some of the vivid writing about light and stone and water which you do so well – but then move on to create some tension, some light and shade within the narrative itself. Your most sophisticated readers might be well up on the latest Bergsonian theories of consciousness, but I'm sure they retain a childlike desire to be told a story, to be held in suspense, to know what happens. […] Simply put, you need the backbone of a story. (*A*, pp. 313-314)

Connolly's letter provides the first clue as to the metafictional nature of *Atonement*, in as much as it creates a coincidence between the first part of the novel and Briony's short story, and prefigures the novel's existence as a work of fiction; this is the case even though it is not explicitly stated that the first part *is* her story[79]. Moreover, what Connolly suggests is precisely what the present-day Briony does with the novel she writes and in which the letter is contained: indeed, it is what McEwan does. McEwan attacks the abstractness of literature, but at the same time upholds the necessity of fiction to tell a truth and raise empathy in readers: 'How could that [their death] constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw

---

in aesthetic tastes is in itself a form of atonement, as it implies an understanding and a condemnation of the melodramatic imagination that caused Robbie's imprisonment (2011, pp. 82-83).

[76] Quarry 2015, pp. 194-199.

[77] *Ibid,* pp. 201-202.

[78] Bentley 2014, p. 142.

[79] Alden 2014, p. 168.

from such an account? Who would want to believe that they why never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism?' (*A*, p. 371). What McEwan provides in *Atonement*, in other words, is a recovery of the means of the modern novel and yet with a metafictional twist (and the exorcism of the ingenuity that this recovery could imply). It is needless to say that such an oscillation between conventional novelistic commitment and postmodern meta-reflexivity is definitely a post-postmodern trait of *Atonement*. We are told: 'Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It's not impossible' (*A*, p. 372). However, the very existence of the post-scriptum undermines this hypothesis, and Briony's unreliability only deepens readers' retrospective suspicion toward what they have witnessed so far. Nevertheless, the emotions that the narrative has raised were real, despite the falsity of their object: while McEwan warns against the dangers and the edulcoration that fiction, be it personal or national, operates, the atonement of the title can be obtained only through it[80].

Finally, the war. A central moment of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* is represented by the description of the Dunkirk evacuation. The importance of this passage is doubled by the ending of the novel, in which the narrator Briony tells the readers that Robbie did, in fact, die there, and he did not manage to survive as we were previously told. Dunkirk has been a central topic of British propaganda during and after the war, and it still possesses a strongly evocative power, as the simple solemnity and the enthusiastic reviews of Christopher Nolan's recent film *Dunkirk* (2017) prove. The evacuation of the vast majority of the British Expeditionary Force (more than 300,000 men) from the shores of Dunkirk, besieged by land and air by German forces, represented a symbol of hope and resistance at a moment in which the British Empire was suffering crushing defeats in Europe as well as in Asia. The myth of the 'finest hour' of the British people and of the Commonwealth ('produced with apparent spontaneity from below and sometimes engineered politically from above by crown and government'[81]) largely depended on the capability of the army and the fleet to endure the military catastrophe and to prepare the counterattack that led to the final victory in the war.

Nevertheless, the part of the novel dedicated to the Dunkirk evacuation is everything but propagandistic. McEwan carefully represents the conflict in its chaos, classism and internal struggles among British soldiers, thus debunking the official myth of the 'finest hour'[82]. In the

[80] Cinquegrani and Re 2014, pp. 209-214.
[81] Gilroy 2004, p. 97.
[82] Bentley 2014, pp. 151-152.

novel, Robbie marches towards Dunkirk with two corporals who mock him for his manners and behavior; indeed, this conflict is highly symbolic of the class issues that pervaded British society. Robbie was of lower class but had the chance to study at Cambridge thanks to a scholarship provided by the Tallis family. His manners and accent are contrasted with those of the corporals who, as a result of their difference, despise him. The three have dramatic encounters with officers who ask them to perform impossible military tasks, proving themselves unfit to command. One of these tasks is a last, desperate attempt to slow the German march, which Robbie and the corporals decline, proving once again their anti-heroic status. Moreover, on the shores of Dunkirk, the British troops almost lynch an aviator, held personally responsible for the unsatisfactory effort of the RAF, and Robbie is tempted to participate. As Alden writes, McEwan's recreation of Dunkirk is far from the official myth of the retreat, but shows instead how it happened in a chaotic 'moral vacuum'[83]. The graphic, traumatic descriptions of the dead and wounded both in Dunkirk and in London testify to Alden's remarks. Most importantly, however, the profound reflection on the fragility of memory, the deceptiveness of fiction, and the narcissism of self-representation that frame the account of the Dunkirk evacuation are intended to be a comment on the memory of the war itself. As Paul Gilroy has written:

> I think there is something neurotic about Britain's continued citation of the anti-Nazi war. Making it a privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding reveals a desire to find a way back to the point where the national culture – operating on a more manageable scale of community and social life – was, irrespective of the suffering involved in the conflict, both comprehensible and habitable. That memory of the country at war against foes who are simply, tidily, and uncomplicatedly evil has recently acquired the status of an ethnic myth. It explains not only how the nation remade itself through war and victory but also can be understood as a rejection or deferral of its present problems. That process is driven by the need to get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings[84].

Gilroy labels this problematic relationship of Britain with its past 'postimperial melancholia'[85]. Briony has a narcissistic personality, as we have seen by her childhood mistake and her fictional recreation of it, the latter of which constructs a safe haven for her, untouched by the consequences of history. By framing the memory of the Second World War within her account, McEwan warns readers of its status as a patriotic myth, recreating it instead in all its contradictions. It is true that it is Briony that highlights these contradictions, but she does so in

[83] Alden 2014, p. 149.
[84] Gilroy 2004, p. 97.
[85] *Ibid,* p. 98.

order to gain the atonement she seeks. Moreover, the reflection on the unreliability of the narrator invites us to problematise the whole reception of the memory of the war, and of its account[86].

Rachel Seiffert's highly praised novel, *The Dark Room* (*DR*), is a remarkable reflection on the problematic nature of memory, which questions the reliability of personal memory as a source of historical knowledge, and of historical knowledge as a source of understanding of human events. The book is composed of three unrelated stories set in Germany[87], each one focusing on a different time of the life of perpetrators and their heirs, and each one taking its title from the name of its protagonist. In 'Helmut', set during the rise to power of the Nazi party and in the first years of the war, the protagonist is a boy employed in a photography shop, and a photographer himself, who witnesses without understanding events related to the war on the Eastern front and the extermination of Jews. Lore, in the second story, is a young girl who leads her brothers and sisters through Germany in the immediate aftermath of the war. She is the daughter of an SS officer, her mother has been arrested, and her father is missing. In the last story, set between 1998 and 1999, Micha is a German schoolteacher who finds out that his grandfather was a member of the Waffen SS, and starts to investigate the activity of his unit only to discover that it was involved in the extermination of Jews.

[86] As Bentley 2014 notes, Kazuo Ishiguro enacts something similar to McEwan in his 1989 novel, *The Remains of the Day*, the first-person account of the British butler, Stevens. Several years after the war, Stevens is making a journey to visit Miss Kenton, a former employee of Darlington Hall, the house where he has served for his whole life and which has now been acquired by an American businessman. During his journey, Stevens reflects on the events of the pre-war years, when Lord Darlington organised several meetings between English and Nazi government members in order to arrange an appeasement between the two countries, and Britain's neutrality in the forthcoming conflict. Stevens' memories focus also on his relationship with Miss Kenton. Stevens' personality and behaviour are founded on the qualities of the ideal butler – loyalty, sobriety, dignity. Similarly, his language is reticent, composed of omissions and euphemisms: a typical unreliable narrator, the gaps in Stevens's story or understanding of the events allow readers to understand the reality of what happens. Such is the case of his romantic involvement with Miss Kenton: the two are in love with each other, but Stevens' shyness and role never allow him to confess this to her and to fulfill the evident (for readers) tension between them. In the end, she marries another man. Similarly, Stevens never expresses an opinion on Lord Darlington's attempts to mediate between the Nazis and the British government. In this sense, the role of the narrator's unreliability in Ishiguro is similar to McEwan's, as it is intended to signal the (self) deceitfulness of memory, and the reticence of a country to confront its uncomfortable past. In particular, there is an absence at the centre of Stevens' narration: the Second World War (caused by Lord Darlington's friends and allies) is never problematised by the narrator, nor it is presented as related to his master's political views. It only appears as an allusion, and is not commented upon, as in the scene in which Stevens, spending the night in a country pub, is placed to sleep in the bedroom of the owners' son, died in the war. In the end, Stevens' life is ruined by his own total devotion to his ideals, which leads him to remain as a ghost in Darlington Hall even after Lord Darlington's fall in disgrace and death, and forbids his union with Miss Kenton as well as his dissent from his master's pernicious political views.

[87] Born in England to a German mother and an Australian father, Rachel Seiffert 'was raised bilingually and visited Germany regularly. She has kept a close relationship with her German relatives, and even lived in Berlin for some time' (Martínez Alfaro 2013, p. 268).

As the title of the book suggests, all these stories highlight the problematic nature of photography as a historical source[88]. Far from being a denunciation of the Nazi regime, Helmut's portfolio coincides with the official propaganda of the regime, since it mainly contains pictures of architectural and technological innovations and mass assemblies[89]. However, Helmut does not belong to this triumphalist view of the world, since he is born with an arm defect that prevents him from joining the other boys during gymnastics at school and, later, from joining the army. In the climatic scene of the story, he witnesses a roundup of Romanis, but fails to understand what is happening, and is simply frightened by the Romani people rather than horrified by their arrest. Nevertheless, his disability does not strengthen in his eyes the similarities between him and the excluded and persecuted, but only reinforces his will to be part of the group of the "normal". At the end of the story, during the useless and helpless defence of Berlin from the Red Army, Helmut is enrolled in a reserve force 'with the fat boys and the boys with the bad teeth, the old men and the amputees' (*DR*, p. 62). Glad to be part of the army despite the desperation of the defence, Helmut is shown in the last sentence of the story 'standing high on his rubble mountain, over which Soviet tanks will roll with ease, [...] smiling' (*DR*, p. 63).

In 'Helmut', photography fails to become a means of comprehension; in 'Lore' it becomes a means of deception. The destruction of the family portraits by Lore's mother, and thus of the evidence of her husband being an SS officer, allows Lore to travel unrecognised through Germany. Moreover, during their journey, Lore and her siblings meet Thomas, a man who says he has been in prison for a long time and who offers them his help. Later in the story, however, Lore find out that the man is not who he pretends to be, but a German war criminal: Thomas has stolen the documents of a Jewish man who resembles him, and uses them to travel safely the country. As Hirsch notes, Thomas's deception utterly undermines 'the evidentiary authority of photography'[90]. Even the images of the concentration camps cannot offer a representation which goes beyond doubt. When she first sees a picture of the prisoners of a concentration camp, Lore does not immediately understand what she is looking at:

[88] Indeed, like Giorgio Falco, Seiffert's style is influenced by the technology of photography itself, as it is a 'dispassionate, objective, even quasi-documentary style that, for the most part, precludes editorial comment or prescriptive judgments' (Zeitlin 2006, p. 223). Moreover, the use of the point of view of two children in the first two stories is a distancing effect that allows the narrator to present the events in an innocent light which lacks, at a first glance, comprehension of the meaning of what happens (*ibid*).
[89] Rau 2006, p. 300.
[90] Hirsch 2012, p. 65.

> In front of Lore is a picture of a rubbish heap, or it might be ashes. She leans in closer, thinks it could be shoes. Below each of the photos is a place name. One of them sounds German, but the other two don't. […] The pictures are of skeletons. Lore can see that now, pulling her hands back, tugging her sleeves down over her glue-damp palms. Hundreds of skeletons; hips and arms and skull in tangles. Some lying in an open railway carriage, others in a shallow hollow in the ground. Lore holds her breath, looks away, sees the next picture; hair and skins and breasts. […] People. Lying naked in rows. Skin thin as paper over bone. Dead people in piles with no clothes on. (*DR*, p. 103)

Despite their tragic content, the pictures of the dead are not believed: the people suggest instead that: 'It's all a set-up. The pictures are always out of focus, aren't they? Or dark, or grainy. Anything to make them unclear. All the people in the photos are actors' (*DR*, p. 175; see also pp. 202-3). Paradoxically enough, photographic evidence does not provide clarity, but more confusion and deception[91].

Something similar happens also in 'Micha', the last story of the book. Micha, a progressive German schoolteacher, finds out that his dead grandfather was a Waffen SS, and was held prisoner by the Russians for more than a decade. Disturbed by this finding, Micha starts investigating the tasks and the misdeeds of his grandfather's unit in Belarus, where he travels to meet a survivor, Jozef (who later will confess to have been a collaborationist), who witnessed the actions of the Germans. After long talks, when the ghastly activities of the SS in the region, including deportations and mass shootings of Jews and partisans, are revealed, Micha shows the collaborationist a photograph of his grandfather, whom the man recognises and whose name he remembers. Nevertheless, the photograph is unable to prove beyond doubt that Micha's grandfather is culpable of war crimes. This is to say, whilst the collaborationist remembers him, he never witnessed him participating in the shootings; however, he does remember those who did not participate: '- Did you see my Opa [grandad] do anything? […] - He killed people. I am sorry, Michael. He killed Jews and Belarussian people. […] - You saw that? […] - I know that he did' (*DR*, p. 362). At Micha's further enquiry, Jozef answers: 'There were so few who didn't do it. I could tell you all the names and faces who didn't do it because they were so few' (*DR*, p. 363).

[91] Pividori 2008, p. 89. Indeed, Seiffert's choice of narrating the story from the point of view of a child provides a certain degree of ambiguity towards the paternal figure, who the readers know to be an SS officer, while Lore has no real idea of his job and tasks. In this sense, Seiffert 'challenges the very possibility of an innocent subject position' (Baackmann 2017, p. 166).

As Petra Rau argues, ‘Seiffert does not equate photography with historical proof. On the contrary, she repeatedly contests that photographs are effective mnemonic devices or unequivocal pieces of evidence. At best, they are a version of ‘reality’ or merely a synecdochal representation’[92]. Photography is the most celebrated and trusted technology of public and individual memory; yet, it proves to be deceptive both in the comprehension of the present (‘Helmut’) and in the reconstruction of the past (‘Lore’, ‘Micha’). Of course, Seiffert does not aim to negate the possibility of knowing the past. Micha, despite the uncertainty in which he is left, knows for sure that his grandfather *did* participate to the shootings. However, the continuous ambiguity with which photography as an instrument of clarity is presented suggests that readers take care in relying on photographs for their understanding of the past. Indeed, Seiffert’s problematisation of photography aims to incite a wider problematisation of memory, which is distinct from history as it is not completely reliable (as Micha’s indecision proves), but which on the other hand provides a form of experience otherwise unattainable.

Canadian author, Dennis Bock’s *The Ash Garden* (*AG*) also represents the memory both of the victims and the perpetrators, and their interaction. The novel focuses on the intertwined stories of Anton Böll, a German physicist involved in the Manhattan Project and in the construction of the first atomic bomb, and Emiko Amai, a victim of the Hiroshima atomic bombing and later involved in an experimental program of surgical reconstruction in the USA. Both of them are haunted by the memory of the atomic bombing, and disappointed by the official public remembrance of the events. In order to seek atonement for his involvement in the construction of the bomb, Anton travels to Japan to study the effects of the atomic bomb on the population, and intercedes to facilitate the participation of a young girl (which later in the novel we discover to be Emiko) in a free, experimental program of reconstruction in America. He later becomes an anti-nuclear activist, following the example of Bertrand Russell, and starts lecturing against the dangers of the atomic bomb.

Emiko’s memory is not only a memory of trauma and loss, as her parents and her brother die in the bombing, but it is carved in her own skin. The wounds of the atomic bomb are unerasable, mark her for life, and separate her from the rest of humanity: ‘even translated into my own language, much of what the doctor said was incomprehensible; it was a technical language invented to describe creatures like me’ (*AG*, p. 128). Tormented by the death of her family and forced to leave her country, Emiko begins to film a documentary that features

[92] Rau 2006, p. 297.

interviews with the people involved in the bombing (both victims and perpetrators). The documentary is intended to counter the official propaganda about the bombing, and to seek its truth. As she comments when Anton shows her some secret footage of the aftermath of the bomb, the official public memory of Hiroshima is self-absolving and anesthetised:

> I'd already looked at hundreds of hours of Hiroshima tapes. Always edited, censored by some military board in some forgotten New Mexico outpost or some such place. I knew how the sanitized version went. It was meant to be consumed in classrooms and public libraries across the land, nothing nearly as hideous as I'd known it, graceful in its platitudes to the suffering of the Japanese people, but still unrepentant. *This was war*, after all. *Remember Pearl Harbor*. Some of these films showed brief shots of the destroyed city, some bandaged children receiving medical treatment from American doctors and food supplies from international organizations. Normally they didn't mention, much less focus on, the festering wounds, the destroyed families, the orphans. (*AG*, p. 191).

The Ash Garden is also a novel about the possibility and the right of seeking atonement for one's own deeds. Anton spends his life trying to make amends for his deeds, but never achieves it. When, in the last pages of the novel, Emiko finds out that her participation in the surgical program is because of Anton's intervention (who came to know her grandfather during his permanence in Japan), she contests his right of seeking atonement, and the generosity of his gesture: 'You robbed me of the last precious thing I had. […] You went back to Japan to ease your conscience. To help one of thousands. Helping one doesn't erase the memory of the thousands you didn't' (*AG*, p. 263). In *The Ash Garden*, in other words, there is no escape from memory: the events of the past stay with those who have committed or endured them forever, and no escape is possible, neither through forgetting nor forgiving.

A. L. Kennedy's novel, *Day* (*D*), fictionalises eloquently the haunting power of memory, together with the fear of its lack of truthfulness. The eponymous protagonist, the air gunner Alfred Day, is employed after the war as an extra in a film about Nazi prison camps. During the war, Day was a POW himself, and the fictional recreation of his experience has the twofold effect of prolonging the sense of suspension that his imprisonment caused for him and casting a feeling of unreality upon it:

> Yesterday morning you'd gone round to have a swill, get yourself presentable, and had to pause, sit down on the clean, fake steps of some other clean, fake hut and realise you were tearful, ached, because the pretend camp, pretend fences, pretend guards – they had been what you wanted. The bastard thing had made you miss it. The fucking thing had put itself inside you so

> deep that you felt this happiness to see it built again and straggling with men: pretend Kriegies – *Kriegsgefangene*: all German, that word – pretend POWs, like yourself and more than only you coming back for their second time, volunteering for their prison, more than only you. (*D*, p. 19)

Alfred's drama is that of inexperience: being captured during his first mission, not only did he miss the war, as he spent its duration as a prisoner, but its fictional reduplication only deepens his feelings of being an inauthentic soldier. Moreover, such a fictionalisation is also used by Vasyl, a fellow actor, to cover his being part of the Waffen SS during the war, and his collaboration with the *Einsatzgruppen* (*D*, pp. 225-229). Vasyl's use of a propaganda film as a cover for his war crimes evokes the treacherous role of fabricated, fictional memories in the remembrance of the war.

During his imprisonment, moreover, Alfred is haunted by the memory of Joyce, a woman he met before leaving for the front and with whom he is in love. Coherently with the pattern I delineated in Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch*, the love of Joyce and Alfred is made possible by the suspension of rules engendered by the war By way of explanation, Joyce's husband, a soldier, had to leave home, and she and Alfred have their first meeting in the forced proximity of a shelter during a bombardment. The harrowing experience of the war, nevertheless, still casts a disturbing shadow on their relationship even after its end, as Joyce's husband has come back home apathetic and traumatised. Despite the optimism of its protagonists, then, the novel refuses to provide happy ending: the lovers are reunited, but the troubles they have faced, although passed, are still painfully present in their psychical lives.

5. 'He Felt the Void He Was Becoming': A Buddhist Reading of World War II?

Returning now to the task at hand, I want to draw attention to the extent to which *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is littered with references to Japanese art. As Flanagan states: 'I am no expert on Japanese literature, but I do have a great love of it. For the novel to escape judgment, I did seek to use the influences of Japanese poetry and fiction to shape the essence of a book. The structure, really, is that of Akutagawa's *Rashōmon*; the language's economy informed by

Japanese poetry. There is much else besides, but that's not the point'[93]. Akutagawa's *Rashōmon* was turned into a commercially successful and critically acclaimed film in 1950 by Akira Kurosawa, who combined material from both *Rashōmon* and *In a Grove*, also by Akutagawa. Kurosawa took the plot and the characters from *In a Grove*, and the set from *Rashōmon*: the title, in fact, refers to the southern gate of Tokyo, in ruins at the time in which the story is set, and completely destroyed today. In the short story and the film, the same story (the killing of a samurai and the rape of his wife by a bandit) is told from multiple viewpoints that differ from each other, making the reader and the viewer doubtful of the truth of the narration. In this sense, it is clear why Flanagan chooses to refer to *Rashōmon* (also evoked at the beginning of Nakamura's story, *NRDN*, p. 307): like Akatugawa and Kurosawa, he aims to show different sides of the same fact by telling the stories of different, opposing characters.

Two other, more traditional forms of Japanese art play an important role in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*: haikus (a poetic form) and ensō (a subject of Zen calligraphy). While their role is, of course, partly that of connoting the Japanese characters and differentiating their cultural references from Australian ones, I would argue that Flanagan's references to Japanese art could hardly be considered as a form of cultural appropriation or exotic maquillage. In fact, since both these artistic forms are strictly related to Zen Buddhism, their presence in the novel is structural rather than decorative, and they play an essential role in conveying the message of the book.

A haiku is 'an independent verse form with a 5-7-5 syllabic rhythm'[94]. Aside from Kota's delirious degradation of poetry in public executions, haikus are evoked in the novel from its second epigraph – a haiku by Bashō[95] – and four haikus by Issa are used to separate the five parts without title of the novel. More importantly, the very title of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is a translation of Bashō's most famous book of travel sketches, *Oku no hosomichi*[96]. Flanagan explicitly states Bashō's importance as relates to the form of the novel

---

[93] Flanagan 2014 (2).

[94] Barnhill 2005, p. 182: 'A modern term, it was popularized by the great but short-lived poet Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), who wanted to establish the *haiku* as a verse form that stands by itself, separate from the linked verses of a *renga* ["a sequenced poem with multiple, alternating stanzas]. It is supposed to contain a season work (*kigo*). When the West first learned about Bashō and other premodern poets, the term *haiku* was anachronistically applied to their *hokku* ["the first stanza of a *renga*", *ibid*]. Properly speaking, haiku refers only to poems written in the modern period (beginning 1868)'.

[95] One of the most famous poets in Japanese literary history, Bashō (1644-1694) gained renewed fame in Western countries as well as in Japan at the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the journey narrated in *Oku no hosomichi*. To describe the great number of events organised for this occasion, both in Japan and in Europe and the US, Kerkham has used the expression 'Bashō boom' (Kerkham 2006, p. 2-8).

[96] Of course, since Bashō's book is the account of his long and difficult journey through Japan (Barnhill 2005, pp. 3-4), its presence in the text can be compared to Tennyson's figure of Ulysses, as an allusion to Dorrigo's perpetual

when he claims that he wrote his novel 'as a story composed of linked haiku […], in the form of a haibun [a prosimeter that combines prose and haikus]'[97].

An ensō is also incorporated in the novel, at its beginning and its end, and presented as a visual poem: 'On his death bed, the eighteenth century haiku poet Shisui had finally responded to a request for a death poem grabbing his brush, painting his poem, and dying' (*NRDN*, p. 28). The ensō, the poem that the poet 'paints', consists in a slightly open circle drawn with a single brushstroke, and the most emblematic subject of Japanese calligraphy. Dorrigo contemplates this figure again one moment before dying, finally grasping its meaning (*NRDN*, p. 444). In this sense, the ensō is presented as a variation of the kōan, a typical Zen practice consisting of an apparently meaningless or unrelated act or sentence used by Zen masters to invite to an act of knowledge that would overcome logical and linear thought[98]. The kōan, like the ensō, represents 'both the tool by which enlightenment is brought about and an expression of the enlightened mind itself'[99]. While Flanagan's depiction of the ensō as a form of poetry is imprecise, it is not, however, completely false. The ensō is a distinguished form of calligraphy, and one of the most common in this particular art[100]. It does not simply represent the one-time exploit of a master. It shares with the haiku strong similarities in meaning and structure; both are essential for understanding Flanagan's novel, as the preeminence of these two forms in his book suggests.

The roots of the ensō can be found in the parable of the *Ten Oxherding Pictures*, that trace back to Hinduism, but that has a great ubiquity in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism[101]. These pictures present the phases that lead to enlightenment, and the behaviour of the enlightened after that. The ox is a metaphor for enlightenment. These phases are traditionally called: Searching for the ox; Seeing the traces, finding the tracks; Seeing the ox; Catching the ox; Taming the ox; Riding home on the ox; The ox forgotten, the self remains; Forget both self and ox; Return to the origin, back to the source; and Entering the marketplace with extended hand[102].

---

feeling of homesickness. As the Japanese poet writes at the beginning of his book, 'For those who drift away on a boat, for those who meet age leading a horse by the mouth, each day is a journey, the journey itself home' (*ibid,* p. 49). *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is mentioned twice in Flanagan's novel (*NRDN*, pp. 125 and 363).

[97] Flanagan 2013 (1).

[98] Heine and Wright 2000, p. 4.

[99] *Ibid,* p. 3.

[100] Loori in Seo 2007, pp. XI-XII.

[101] Seo 2007, pp. 14-15. See also Autore 1991, pp. 11-23 and Ueda 2006, 291-311.

[102] I take these names from Mumon 2004, a translation of the lectures Yamada Mumon Roshi's gave to his monks in 1985 (Victor Sōgen Hori's 'Translator's Note' in Mumon 2004, p. XI).

The eighth image, portraying the forgetfulness of both the man and the ox, is usually depicted as an empty circle, from which the calligraphic practice of the ensō is born[103]. The emptiness of the circle symbolises the transcendence of a dualistic logic: the man and the ox represent the subject seeking for truth and truth as an object of desire, Samsara and Nirvana conceived as opposed to Samsara[104]. Only the elimination of both of them can lead to true enlightenment: 'In this […] there is no satori or awakening, no Dharma to be awakened to, and no self awakened. Here Buddha-nature stands completely and totally revealed. This is the culmination of practice and the completion of discipline. It is, in other words, the perfect circle'[105]. While some painters end the series at the eighth stage, it is significant that it is usually also provided with two more stages, the last one portraying the wandering of the man as a monk. This last picture suggests in fact once again the overcoming of a dualism, since enlightenment does not take place outside the world and has not to be understood in opposition to it but, rather, it enables a more radical and complete experience of the world (the man having become a bodhisattva, a being who attained illumination but who refused to enter Nirvana in order to help all the other sentient beings to reach it[106]).

The form of the ensō represents therefore two main things. First of all, by separating the inside and the outside of the circle, the circumference separates finite and infinite, thus Samsara and Nirvana. At the same time, however, this separation is not complete, as the quality of emptiness is the same inside and outside the circle, suggesting therefore a continuity between them. This continuity is suggestive, again, of the necessity of transcending every dualism. As Pasqualotto writes, the circle of the ensō delimits two spaces, the one inside the circumference, and the one outside. While the external, infinite space (the Samsara) is the space in which each particular being manifests itself, the internal, finite space represents a condition of indetermination, thus the end of separation and opposition, which coincides with Nirvana. Nevertheless, these two dimensions are not in opposition, since the ensō is not a complete circle, but it is usually unfinished, showing that internal and external spaces are actually a single space: the circumference distinguishes them without separating them[107].

The role of emptiness in the ensō is strikingly clear at first glance. However, in the case of the haiku, this is less immediately intelligible. Nevertheless, the haiku itself has a precise meaning

---

[103] Seo 2007, p. 15.
[104] Pasqualotto 2007, p. 177.
[105] Mumon 2004, p. 80.
[106] Autore 1991, p. 19.
[107] Pasqualotto 2007, p. 197. This paragraph and the following are to be intended as a paraphrase and a partial translation of Pasqualotto's reflection on the ensō and the haiku.

as a Zen form of poetry, as it is founded on an emptiness of self that allows the poet to grasp the emptiness of all things – an emptiness that, like in the ensō, enables one to grasp the relation between those things (what in Buddhist terms is called conditioned coproduction). Commenting on Bashō's most famous haiku, 'Old pond — a frog jumps in — water's sound'[108], Pasqualotto argues that there is no subject in the poem, no cause-and-consequence linearity, but rather three equivalent and simultaneous events: none of the three subjects of each verse 'acts' ('agisce') more than the others, since it is their relationship that 'acts'. However, for this relationship to act, the three subjects have to be open and mobile – have to be, in other words, non-subjects, deprived of selves[109].

These last few pages must surely have given the reader the impression of a digressive path. What does it all have to do with a novel about the war in the Pacific? I would argue that Flanagan does not superficially refer to Japanese culture in order to provide some exotic coordinates for his story, but that what I have explained so far about haikus and the ensō is strongly interrelated with the human experience depicted in the book. Indeed, Flanagan's exhibition of literary knowledge through continuous references to Japanese culture is neither self-referential nor a parodying exercise, as in postmodern literature, but has a structural role in the construction of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*[110].

What we have seen in the first part of this chapter concerning the gap between memory (and representation) and experience is echoed in the poetics of immediateness that informs Japanese

---

[108] Bashō 2004, p. 8.
[109] Pasqualotto 1992, p. 108.
[110] A comparison that may come to mind in regard of Flanagan's reprise of Asian culture in his novel is, of course, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, in which the author creates an alternate history that portrays the Japanese occupation of the Western United States, and a Nazi occupation of the East Coast. Not only do almost the totality of the characters of Dick's novel make a great use of the Chinese oracle I Ching, but Dick himself consulted it in the composition of the book, using it to orient the actions of his characters. Although Dick's use of the I Ching is evidently not parodying (as it is, for instance, Calvino's use of the tarots in *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, 1969), it functions as a metafictional device, and reinforces a postmodern view of history. The I Ching is a metafictional device to the extent that *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* – the novel within the novel that narrates an historical timeline alternate to the alternate history and coherent with ours (thus with the Allies winning the Second World War) and which functions as a double for the novel itself – is composed by its author using the I Ching. Moreover, as Mountfort underlines, Dick uses the I Ching to reinforce a view of history and time that 'is not only cyclical but *synchronistic*: basic tropes repeat throughout history from the micro- to the macro-level and, furthermore, simultaneities can be provoked by the chance throw of yarrow sticks or coins to produce an oracle that reflects the situation of the questioner' (2016, p. 291). In this sense, *The Man in the High Castle* proposes a view of history which is far from teleological, and, by exploiting the oracle both as a theme of the novel and a means for its composition, abolishes the mechanisms of causality and responsibility typical of traditional, positivistic historiography. Finally, it is worth noticing to this regard that Dick's novel parallels two realities that seem to be equally possible: the one described by the novel itself, in which the Axis forces won the war, and the one described by the novel within the novel and dictated by the oracle, in which the Allied armies won. On the contrary, Flanagan's use of Buddhist sources does not aim toward gnoseologic deconstructionism, but rather to the portrayal of a different and original relation between the characters.

Zen art, and that is a variation of the classical motif of the 'crucial moment' in war. Although varied in space and time, the whole plot pivots around a single event – participation in which, both directly and indirectly, groups the characters. This event is the death of Darky Gardiner. The importance of one single event in shaping a characters' lives is a common motif in novels, and especially in war novels. In this sense, it contradicts the various degradations and flaws of memory that characterise *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Most significantly, however, the preeminence of this topic is strongly related to the seemingly immediate nature of knowledge in the story of those who can be considered the main characters of the book, Dorrigo and Nakamura. *Seemingly* immediate: because, like the ox herding, this understanding takes literally their whole life to be reached. In the moment of his death, after having dreamed for one last time 'of just one day' (*NRDN*, p. 442), the day of Darky's death, Dorrigo finally understands the meaning of the ensō he saw earlier in the novel – 'he felt the void he was becoming – [image of the ensō] – and finally he understood its meaning' (*NRDN*, p. 444). In the same way, Nakamura has an identical experience during his visit to Tomokawa: 'He kept his eyes closed, conscious that all around him the world lived as he had never known it had lived, and just as he finally opened himself up to this joy, he also realized that he was dying' (*NRDN*, p. 382). He experiences a kind of stream of consciousness, crowded with memories from his life on the Line and afterwards. In this state, he comes to realise the meaninglessness of his ideals, and, at the same time, the necessity of standing with them. In a way, Nakamura dies unrepentant; but in a broader sense, he finally understands the void. In this sense, there is no contradiction with his formal unrepentance and the poem he writes in the imminence of his death: 'Winter ice / melts into clean water – / clear is my heart' (*NRDN*, p. 395).

The interrelatedness of phenomena and characters is another topic essential to the Buddhist practice and is perfectly highlighted both by the ensō and the haiku. According to the Buddhist phenomenology, beings do not exist on their own, but are rather the product of an interminable series of interdependent elements. Beings do not possess an individual, eternal soul, but are the result of causes and circumstances (be them the actions committed in one's past lives, or the ambient surrounding them). Thus, beings are prone to change when the circumstances that determine them change: they are, in a sense, empty of essence, because their essence is determined by the relationship between each being (hence the prevalence, in Buddhist iconography, of the net or of the wheel[111]). In this sense, the symbology of the void employed

[111] Ghilardi 2011, pp. 83-85.

by Zen art is important, as it suggests a continuity between phenomena rather than a duality (being/non being, man/non man) between them.

This concept is employed by Flanagan to strengthen the chorality and the multiplicity of the narration, and to allow him to employ continuously different perspectives which underline, at the same time, ‘the strange, terrible *Neverendingness* of human beings’ (*NRDN*, p. 430). Moreover, the character of the Goanna, with his multiplicity of identities depending on the circumstances in which he lives, or even the double nature (private and public) of Dorrigo’s character, are suggestive of a performative and unstable notion of being which is coherent with a Buddhist vision of phenomena as links rather than essences.

The idea of interrelatedness is also connected with the image of the circle. I have already stressed the correspondences of flashbacks and revelations throughout the novel that craft its circular structure (orchestrated by an omniscient narrator, which is another post-postmodern feature of the novel). The book opens with Dorrigo’s late years as he reflects on Amy, while his final, silent encounter with her is placed at the end of the book. However, it is only on the last page that we find out that he learns about her (presumed) death the same day of Darky’s execution. The circularity of the novel alludes to the circular structure of the ensō as a symbol of the overcoming of both Samsara and Nirvana. When first introduced, the circle of the ensō is described as ‘a contained void, an endless mystery, lengthless breadth, the great wheel, eternal return – antithesis of the line’ (*NRDN*, p. 28). This speaks to the line, of course, but also to the Line; it communicates the linearity of the narration, but also our traditional notion of experience and life as a meaningful procession. However, the final page of the novel marks the refusal of an ending. Dorrigo, in the Line, keeps reading a love novel to distract himself from the horrors of the imprisonment:

> Love is two bodies with one soul, he read, and turned the page. But there was nothing – the final pages had been ripped away and used as toilet paper or smoked, and there was no hope or joy or understanding. There was no last page. The book of his life just broke off. There was only the mud below and the filthy sky above. There was to be no peace and no hope. And Dorrigo Evans understood that the love story would go on forever and ever, world without end. (*NRDN*, p. 447)

In other words, it is the relationship between human beings to be important, in a world otherwise deprived of meaning.

Finally, this circularity, and the abolition of dualities that takes place within it, invite readers to rethink and evade the traditional, rhetorical opposition between victims and perpetrators. This is not to say that there is a moral equivalence between victims and perpetrators in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. However, the borders between them are blurred insofar as the prisoners act as perpetrators to other prisoners, and some perpetrators (such as the Goanna) are shown to be victims as well. Moreover, except for the case of the protagonist Dorrigo, Flanagan dedicates the same space in the narration to the Japanese officers and the POWs, and, most importantly, he depicts them with the same compassionate attitude, underlining the common ground between them, rather than simply highlighting their differences.

Not only is the Buddhist temple of Borobudur, in Java, built in 778 AC, crowded with iconological references to the Buddha (and thus to the process of liberation from the self), but it is also shaped like a mandala. The mandala is a sacred painting that, like the ensō, is both a tool of enlightenment and an image of the mind of the enlightened. The mandala is shaped as a series of squares and circles that offer the image of the realms of existence of the Samsara, of the shape of the universe, and of the path to reach the enlightenment. For clarity: the centre of the mandala can either be a figure of Buddha (or an equivalent symbol, such as a lotus flower) or, like in the ensō, a void. Being shaped like a mandala, the temple of Borobudur is both an image of the human soul and of its path to liberation, and a representation of the universe[112]. Most significantly, however, is that, being a physical space, the temple offers the pilgrim an *experience*, symbolic but also in first person, of the liberation from the realms of existence, and of the void as the necessary constituent of the very existence of phenomena. Flanagan's novel, by representing at the same time the world as a never-ending series of inter-related phenomena, and the mental path that leads to the understanding of the world as such, performs a similar task. Indeed, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* can be read as the novelistic, concrete manifestation of a philosophical thought and of a Buddhist process of liberation. The role of literature, once again, is to provide the reader with an experience of knowledge and understanding, and not simply of entertainment, rather than sustaining a thesis.

[112] Pasqualotto 2007, p. 101. See also, more in general, pp. 77-102.

Conclusion: the Second World War and the Post-Postmodern Novel

By way of beginning this conclusion, I want to evoke Jorge Luis Borges' famous paradox of the map, which provided a useful point of reflection in the previous chapter on Bolaño. According to Borges, the map, in order to faithfully represent the territory to which it refers, ought to operate a 1:1 scale. Of course, if it respected this proportion, the map would no longer be a map (i.e. a schematisation of the world meant to make its comprehension easier), but merely a useless copy. My evocation of Borges here is intended to convey the risk that conclusions, especially those based on textual analysis, often similarly repeat lists of evidence already exposed throughout theses. In this analogy, the thesis functions as the world, and the conclusion as the map whose integrity rests on its ability to render concise that which is large and complex. The risk of conclusions unhelpfully reiterating theses through concision is even greater when the detailed analysis of single texts represents at least partially the very purpose of the research – as it is indeed the case of literary criticism, and especially criticism in the field of contemporary literature.

Nevertheless, by summing up and recapitulating the common traits of the novels discussed so far, I aim to show how my focus on the texts here included allows us to identify the most important characteristics of the post-postmodern novel and of its approach towards historical writing. My attention to these texts illuminates their coherence in both stylistic traits and their treatment of the Second World War as the subject of historical novels – a treatment congruent with post-postmodernism's interest in realism and great narrations. Of course, since this thesis concerns only a selected amount of case studies, further research can be developed in regard of the global dimension of contemporary literature, with other case studies concerning national literatures that I have not considered, such as German, Russian, or Japanese. Moreover, a definitive and unambiguous theorization of the magmatic concept of post-postmodernism as a coherent phenomenon is yet to be proposed. Futhermore, other scholars might want to investigate the relationship between the use of mimetic devices and the development of empathy toward the perpetrators, and the hermeneutical scopes of this empathy. Although I

have developed this aspect of post-postmodern novels on the Second World War, more research in this sense can, and hopefully will, be done, concerning the authors I have focused on or different writers.

My corpus, as every corpus, is partial. Notwithstanding, as I have argued in my introduction, my selection of Roberto Bolaño's *El Tercer Reich*, *La literature Nazi en América*, *Estrella Distante*, *2666*; William T. Vollmann's *Europe Central*; Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*; and Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, together with the other texts with which I compared them, is not arbitrary. My highly international corpus is able to cast light on several aspects of contemporary literature that a more selective body of works would have left obscure. For example, over the course of this thesis, we have found that contemporary literature is strikingly post-postmodern in its mobilisation of classical and modern literary forms, and in its resurrection of grand narratives, combined with a postmodern self-consciousness. Furthermore, we have found that the authors here discussed are, to varying degrees, each interested in complicating the memory of World War II and in recovering its reality and its humanity. The occurrence and diffusion of such common stylistic and thematic traits on a global scale does not simply testify to the existence and coherence of a global literature, but also to diffusion of the memorial processes that animate the Second World War. The importance that the war gains not only for authors who have a personal or national connection with these events, but also for authors whose countries did not take part in the conflict, communicates the symbolisation that World War II underwent in the decades after its end. Indeed, the salience of the Second World War as a literary subject testifies to its role as a paradigm of contemporary conflicts all over the world. We have seen, for instance, how World War II is reused by Bolaño as a synecdoche of the political violence in Latin America, or by postcolonial authors such as Smith and Levy, or queer authors such as Waters, as a tool to comment obliquely on present-day political struggles.

Speaking of the present through the past is a function of the historical novel in general. However, it is also true that the Second World War is evoked more widely, and in the greatest number of different contexts, to contemplate present crises because of its nature as an absolute war. World War II was an epoch-making event without parallel in terms of savagery, magnitude and consequences. At the same time, the paradigmatic value of the war is, as I have explained in the introduction, the product of the unprecedented amount of memorial testimonies produced about the conflict, and of the mediatization that this memory underwent in every possible medium. In other words, the symbolic currency of the Second World War in the twenty-first

century depends on the fact that the twentieth century was an age of witnesses, to borrow Wieviorka's expression. Whereas the post-memorial novel insists on the personal dimension of the historical reception of the war, and on the effort necessary for coming to terms with it however, in the novels I have considered, the relationship of second generations with the war is not thematised. Indeed, for the texts of this thesis, the paradigmatic and symbolic dimensions of World War II are axioms that locate, rather than dictate their narratives.

The interest in the Second World War amongst contemporary authors is not only linked to the war's unique memorialisation but also has to do with the difficulty of memorialising contemporary conflicts. By this, I mean that contemporary authors turn to the Second World War in order to exploit a patrimony of drama and epicness that other conflicts of the twentieth and the twenty-first century do not possess for reasons of changes in warfare and of an increasing virtualisation of conflicts and their perception.

In terms of its scale and form, the Second World War resists comparison, and so too does the Holocaust – the memory of which is inextricably bound to that of the conflict. Although this resistance to comparisons does not imply an exceptionalisation of the Second World War in the authors analysed, it allows it to function as an unparalleled paradigm of human violence. Contemporary wars waged by industrialised and militarised states are fought with mechanical vehicles controlled from kilometres of distance, with a notable disproportion of forces. Retaliation by non-militarised states is, by contrast, sometimes disorganised, limited and non-lethal for reasons of poverty and/or symbolism. At the same time, I have observed how the representation of the war in traditional and digital media appears increasingly virtualised, disturbingly similar to the cinematic replicas of war, and thus anesthetised. In this context, the writers analysed in this thesis turn to the Second World War in search of epic dimensions (as Vollmann in particular does), or morally liminal situations that require practical and problematic solutions, differently from (and more dramatically than) peacetime (as, for instance, Littell or Flanagan do).

Having clarified the attraction of the Second World War amongst the contemporary authors discussed in this thesis according to the conflict's particular history, I want to remark in the following pages on the connections between each author's specific engagement with World War II. As has emerged in my extended analyses of works by Bolaño, Vollmann, Littell and Flanagan, my corpus of contemporary texts share stylistic traits. As we have seen, these novels are characterised by a non-ironic reprisal of plot, characters, causality, and narratorial

authorship, and by a tendency toward realism. In other words, we have noticed a generic recovery of those characteristics of the traditional novel that were abandoned or parodied by postmodernism. Postmodernism tended toward a representation of an unknowable, fragmentary world, reduced to its own textuality and representation. Post-postmodernism, on the contrary, through the non-ironic reprise of the formal tools of the traditional Western novel, distances itself from this hermeneutic nihilism and displays renewed faith in the capability of literature to address and describe reality.

Moreover, the protagonists of the novels I have analysed are not the feeble, fragmented, doubtful figures that crowd postmodern novels, but rather are precise individuals immersed in a very specific cultural and material landscape. Despite his intellectualism and indecision, Max Aue, whose biographical details swamp readers, is an individual, rather than a symbol of the incomprehensibility of the world or of its fictionalisation (as Paul Auster's characters are). Vollmann's protagonists, despite their suggested belonging to parables, are on the contrary the focus of moral dilemmas and pragmatic indecisions. Whereas Amis, for instance, refuses to engage with the humanity of the Nazi officers he portrays, and to allow readers to empathise with them, Vollmann creates enough moral ambiguity to allow a more complex readerly interaction with the Second World War, which is less characterised by the polarization between victims and perpetrators. In other words, the intensity of Oriental Christian icons substitutes the bidimensional figures of Calvino's tarots.

Similarly, even when the authors employ self-reflexive narrators (or even sporadically self-deceptive, as in Littell's case), the subject of their narration, and the direct relationship between their words and the world that these words describe, are never questioned. The narrators of post-postmodern novels recover characteristics of omniscience and authorship, instead of the partial and self-reflexive personalism of postmodern narrators. Littell's case is particularly significant, since the narrator merges the characteristics both of the first-person narrator, and of the omniscient narrator (given that he writes about the past and claims to have done extensive research). At the same time, Aue's narratorial unreliability is limited to an event of his private life, and is not extended to our capability of knowing history, or to the truthfulness of his account of the Holocaust. In the same way, in McEwan, while the unreliability of the narrator invites a reconsideration of the public memory of Dunkirk, this reconsideration is conducted on the basis of historical testimonies exhibited in the text itself. In Vollmann as well we have noted that the sporadic presence of the author among the variation of narrators in the stories of *Europe Central* does not result in a metafictional frame. Nor does it cast doubt on the truthfulness of

the narration or shift the focus on the author as author, on his biographical details. On the contrary, while the constant shifting of narrators aims to offer different characterisations to the stories, the appearances of the author serve to verify the correctness of certain information. In *2666*, likewise, the moments of incoherence of the narratorial voice do not influence the suspension of disbelief in readers.

Consequently, the plot of these novels is distant from the vast allegories of the purposelessness of the world that characterised the postmodern novel, and especially postmodern renditions of the Second World War. On the contrary, these novels return to a plot based on the mechanisms of causality. This is true even in those texts characterised by a circular (as in Flanagan) or regressive (as in Waters) temporality. While postmodern novels employed the same technique of temporal circularity or regression to contest the consequentiality of history and thus our ability to understand it, in Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch*, these peculiar temporalities, taken in conjunction with their teleological storytelling, actually serve the materiality of history. Relatedly, in Bolaño, the construction of the narratorial frame and the circular temporality of the plot aims to parallel, through juxtaposition instead of argumentation, different narrative and ideological plans.

The recovery of these characteristics of the traditional novel has led me to define the post-postmodern novel as realistic, when compared to postmodern texts. Nevertheless, I have also noted that post-postmodern realism presents problematic traits, being at the same time rich in mimetic and anti-mimetic features. In this sense, it has to be remembered once again that post-postmodernism is not a set of techniques, but rather a posture of literature toward reality – an attitude that David Foster Wallace, ahead of the time, labeled eloquently as New Sincerity. Specifically, I have highlighted that a general unlikeness characterises, for instance, *Europe Central* and *2666*. But I have also noted that this hybridisation of realism with the grotesque and the supernatural has to be contextualised within a renewed attention to the real, rather than to the textual; to the object, rather than to the sign. On the contrary, postmodernism is an anti-mimetic style not because of the presence of unrealistic elements, but because of its representation of the world as a text.

It is in this context that the use of myth, a preeminent trait of two of the novels discussed, *Europe Central* and *Les Bienveillantes*, has to be understood. This recovery is different both from postmodern parody, and from the mystical, archetypical use of the modernist mythical method. On the contrary, myth is not used by these authors to suggest a superior order of reality

opposed to the squalor and the meaninglessness of contemporary history, nor to ridicule tradition. In Vollmann, the use of myth connotes a narratorial voice, and recovers thus the abuse of mythical references that defined the very propaganda of the Third Reich. In Littell, the Greek myth of Orestes functions as a metaphor – logical and intellectual rather than symbolic and irrational – for Bauman's interpretation of the Holocaust. The peculiarity of these recoveries testifies that, despite the anti-mimetic connotation that mythology inevitably carries, myth does not obstruct the realism of the historical reconstruction.

The recovery of specific features of the postmodern novel, such as autofiction and metafiction, has also to be understood in this sense. While metafiction, and even more autofiction, were used in postmodern literature as an instrument to comment on the erosion of the borders between reality and fiction, I have shown that this is no longer their function in post-postmodern literature. Laurent Binet, in *HHhH*, employs metafiction not to undervalue the knowability of history, but rather to remark on the complete truthfulness of historiographic sources, and to distinguish meticulously between historical accuracy and novelistic invention. In McEwan's *Atonement*, the metafictional frame serves to debunk the diffused memorialisation and monumentalisation of a historical event. However, the counter-history that is proposed instead is founded on historical documents that not only are exhibited in the text, but come from institutional sources such as the Imperial War Museum.

Autofiction, moreover, is a postmodern literary device employed by the authors here studied in a significantly different way from that for which it was conceived. While initially the function of autofiction was to comment on the lack of distinction between reality and fiction, and thus on the progressive fictionalisation of postmodernity and its pathological production of simulacra, in the post-postmodern novel it performs a validatory function. In Bolaño and especially in Roth, autofiction is used to give credibility to the narratorial voice, making it possible for it to take on the narratorial means of the witness, despite the patent impossibility of the facts narrated. This kind of characterization is even more significant if compared to the opposite, doubtful, nihilistic use made by Roth himself in the postmodern *Operation Shylock*.

The stylistic traits used by the authors considered cross global borders insofar as the texts originate from different nations and literary traditions. In response to the stylistic consonance of the texts in this context of such geographical and cultural variety, I have insisted that we consider the post-postmodern novel as a form of global literature. The contemporary post-postmodern novel does not merely happen sporadically or in a national environment, but is

rather conceived in a global cultural landscape within which, despite the singularities, a communality of postures and praxis exists. The global dimension of the contemporary novel is not a consequence of post-postmodern poetics; rather, it depends on the conformation of the global editorial market and of the complex net of cultural influences, often, but not always, imbalanced in favour of countries that are more powerful economically. Nevertheless, the global diffusion of post-postmodernism as a literary phenomenon suggests the coherence between the needs of different narrative cultures, and the attention to the real of post-postmodern poetics. Postmodernism, on the contrary, did not have the same uniformity in its diffusion, as it manifested itself, especially in Europe, in a plurality of (sometimes contradictory) currents and idiolects.

The formal features I have highlighted in this analysis show that the post-postmodern novel has a radically different approach toward historical writing than the postmodern novel. In the introduction, as well as in the analysis of the novels, I have remarked that the postmodern approach toward history can be summarised by what Linda Hutcheon defines as historiographic metafiction. By focusing on how history is transmitted, and thus on how historical knowledge is the product of inevitably partial and adulterated transmissions, historiographic metafiction portrays history as an essentially human construct. This deconstructive approach has as a natural consequence a hermeneutic pessimism towards history, which cannot be known except through sources that are already per se re-elaborations. Stylistically, the postmodern novel has widely employed the metafictional strategies discussed above to render textually this doubtful posture.

The post-postmodern novel, on the contrary, while not completely deserting certain formally postmodern features, abandons this posture, and asserts renewed faith in the capability of literature to name and investigate reality. If we turn once again to those that, among the texts discussed, exhibit a direct relationship with their sources, such as Vollmann's, Littell's, and to a lesser extent McEwan's, it can be noted that the sources are not evoked polemically, but rather to give credibility to the narration. As I noted earlier, even the only proper historiographic metafiction I have analysed, Binet's *HHhH*, aims to attest to the superiority of historiography over literature, rather than to the postmodern equivalence of facts and fiction. Similarly, even those authors interested in a contestation of the public memory of the war, such as Flanagan, Waters, and Levy, avoid the excesses of postmodern hermeneutic pessimism, and do not reuse its forms.

The four authors to which I have dedicated my chapters are characterised by another similarity in the representation of the Second World War, which is the problematic, but not insistently polemic, portrayal of the perpetrators. If in authors such as Binet, Falco, or Amis we can notice a clear separation between positive characters and negative characters that coincides with the separation of victims and perpetrators, in other words of anti-fascist and fascist characters, in Bolaño, Vollmann, Littell and Flanagan this separation is more ambiguous. Such an ambiguity does not reflect that these authors sympathise with fascism. It is, on the contrary, a voluntary ambiguity in their representation, intended to enrich and complicate readers' understanding of the Second World War. It is not by chance that all these authors insist, in different ways, on the mediumistic nature of fascism, on the fascination that the deliberately irrational system of ideas which constitutes fascism can exercise. In this sense, these authors distance themselves from a purely economic, Marxist interpretation of fascism, which can be found in Falco, and from Binet's and Amis' representations of the fascists as either sociopaths, cheaters, or idiots. Bolaño presents Wieder as a distant star, a seducing and all-absorbing black hole. Vollmann uses myth to render the orotund and insistent language of the Third Reich. Littell employs the figure of the Sleepwalker (which, as we have seen, derives directly from a speech by Hitler, and is also common to the other novels) to render the deliberate irrationality of fascist actions. Flanagan insists on the Zen rites performed by Japanese officers to convey a sense of voluntary alienation and unconsciousness, and parallels them with Nakamura's abuse of amphetamines. While other authors in this thesis ridicule the self-mythology of fascism, Bolaño, Vollmann, Littell and Flanagan use it to give credibility to their characters, instead of straightforwardly passing judgment over them from the outside.

Indeed, the moral ambiguity elicited by these texts is connected to each author's refusal to express, within their novels, an explicit opinion about their characters. In the case of Bolaño, we have noticed that the genocidal Sammer receives death as retaliation for his actions, but also that no explicit explanation is given by his assassin. In Littell, Aue is animated by a persuasive intent, and his voice is left without contradiction. In Vollmann, the ecumenicity of the author's posture is open to recognising intellectual honesty even in those characters who would not normally appear under the label of heroes (Paulus, Vlasov), and to elevate as a model Gerstein, whose purity derives precisely from his willingness to accept ambiguity in the service of performing a greater good. In Flanagan, Major Nakamura escapes a process and a sentence, and enjoys the possibility of reinventing himself after the war, while the Goanna, who is condemned

in a trial for his crimes, is absolved by the narrator as a victim himself of the abuses of the Japanese.

The profound ambiguity of the main texts analysed has allowed us to underline how these literary works aim principally to be an engaging experience for readers, by challenging commonly held views and perceptions of the Second World War. The presence of parallels with religious texts (in Vollmann) or meditational practices (in Flanagan) might be said to allude to these texts' experiential function. If, as we said, the Second World War is evoked for its paradigmatic role, which allows it to function as a scenario without parallels for the iconicity and radicality of the moral problems it questions, the attention to the reasons of the perpetrators, excluded from the twentieth century novels about the war, and especially the post-memorial ones, comes as no surprise. A focus on perpetrators could represent an opportunity to further immortalise the memory of the Second World War and its exceptional place in history. And yet, this is not what these texts enact. The renewed attention to reality in post-postmodern literature, which manifests itself in the recovery of the mimetic techniques associated with the traditional novel, invites a reassessment of the victim-perpetrator paradigm. Indeed, these texts function as spaces in which a problematic encounter with a disturbing other can happen.

Bibliography

The Nibelungenlied, edited and translated into English by Arthur Thomas Hatto, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969)

Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, translated into English by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) [first edition 1979]

Agamben, Giorgio, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998)

Alden, Natasha, '"Possibility, Pleasure and Peril": *The Night Watch* as a Very Literary Story', in *Sarah Waters. Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Kaye Mitchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 70-83

Alden, Natasha, *Reading Between the Lines. Postmemory in Contemporary British War Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014)

Alden, Natasha, '"Accompanied by Ghosts': The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters Lesbian Fiction', in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminism*, edited by Adele Jones and Claire O'Callaghan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 61-78

Alfano, Giancarlo, *Gli effetti della guerra. Su* Horcynus Orca *di Stefano D'Arrigo* (Napoli: Luca Sossella Editore, 2000)

Andrews, Chris, *Roberto Bolaño's Fiction: An Expanding Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014)

Amis, Martin, *The Zone of Interest* (London: Vintage, 2015)

Apter, Emily, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013)

Arendt, Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, Penguin, 1979 (1963)

Asensi Pérez, Manuel, ‘Atreverse a mirar por el agujero: lo real y lo político en *2666* de Roberto Bolaño’, in *Roberto Bolaño. Ruptura y violencia en la literatura finisecular*, edited by Felipe A. Rios Baeza (México D. F.: Eón, 2010), pp. 342-368

Atkins, E. Taylor, *Primitive Selves. Koreana in the Japanese Colonial Gaze, 1910-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010)

Autore, Migi, *Le dieci icone del bue. L’incanto poetico della via del risveglio in un antico testo Ch’an Zen* (Genova: Erga Edizioni, 1991)

Baackmann, Susanne, ‘Lore, or the Implicated Witness: Rachel Seiffert’s Postmemory Work’, in *Memory Frictions in Contemporary Literature*, edited by María Jesús Martínez-Alfar and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017), pp. 165-186

Badiou, Alain, *Le Siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2005)

Bandele, Biyi, *Burma Boy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007)

Barberán Reinares, Laura, ‘Globalized Philomels: State Patriarchy, Transnational Capital, and the Femicides on the US-Mexican Border in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*’, *South Atlantic Review*, 75, 4 (2010), pp. 51-72

Barthes, Roland, ‘La mort de l’auteur’, in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), pp. 61-67

Bashō, *Bashō’s Haiku. Selected Poems of Matsuo Bashō*, translated into English by David Landis Barnhill (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004)

Bashō, *Bashō’s Journey. The Literary Prose of Matsuo Bashō*, translated into English by David Landis Barnhill (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005)

Basu, Ann, ‘Before the Law: *Operation Shylock: A Confession*’, *Philip Roth Studies*, VIII, 2 (2012), pp. 179-195

Battini, Michele, *Il socialismo degli imbecilli. Propaganda, falsificazione, persecuzione degli ebrei* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2010), translated into English by Noor Mazhar and Isabella Vergnano, *Socialism of Fools. Capitalism and Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016)

Baudrillard, Jean, *La guerre du Golfe n’a pas eu lieu* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1991)

Baudrillard, Jean, *L'esprit du terrorism* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), translated into English by Chris Turner, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (New York: Verso, 2002)

Bauman, Zygmunt, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity, 1989)

Baxter, Katherine Isobel, 'Reading New Black Fiction of East Asia. An Ex-Centric Approach to Transnational Literary Studies', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 48, 3 (2013), pp. 349-362

Beaumont, Joan and Andrea Witcomb, The Thai-Burma Railway. Asymmetrical and Transnational Memories', in *The Pacific War: Aftermaths. Remembrance and Culture*, edited by Christina Twomey and Ernest Koh (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 67-87

Beecroft, Alexander, *An Ecology of World Literature. From Antiquity to the Present Day* (London: Verso, 2015)

Bellamy, Chris, *Absolute War. Soviet Russia in the Second World War: A Modern History* (London: Pan, 2009)

Benbassa, Esther, *La souffrance comme identité* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2007)

Benesch, Oleg, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai. Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushidō in Modern Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

Benn Michaels, Henry, 'Forgetting Auschwitz: Jonathan Littell and the Death of a Beautiful Woman', *American Literary History*, 25, 4 (2013), pp. 915–930

Bentley, Nick, '"Who Do You Think You Are Kidding?": The Retrieval of the Second World War in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', in *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction*, edited by Elodie Rousselot (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 138-159

Berman, Marshall, *All that is Solid Melts into Air. An Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982)

Bernstein, Stephen, 'Auster's Sublime Closure: *The Locked Room*', in *Beyond the Red Notebook. Essays on Paul Auster*, edited by Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 88-106

Bertoni, Clotilde, 'Rischi e risorse dello studio dei temi: percorsi possibili', *Allegoria*, 58 (2008), p. 9-24

Binet, Laurent, *HHhH* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2009)

Binet, Laurent, 'Missing Pages', 16/4/2012, available at: https://themillions.com/2012/04/exclusive-the-missing-pages-of-laurent-binets-hhhh.html [last access 1/12/2017]

Binet, Laurent and Philip Watts, 'Entretien avec Laurent Binet', in *Mémoires occupées*, edited by Marc Dambre (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013), available at http://books.openedition.org/psn/393 [last access 29/11/2017]

Birns, Nicholas, 'Black Dawn: Roberto Bolaño as (North) American Writer', in *Roberto Bolaño as World Literature*, edited by Nicholas Birns and Juan E. De Castro (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 220-243

Bizzarri, Gabriele, 'Lo propio y lo alienígena: ciencia ficción y identidad en la construcción imaginaria de Santa Teresa', *Orillas*, 2 (2017), pp. 171-183

Blanchot, Maurice, *Faux Pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943)

Blanrue, Paul-Éric, *Les Malveillantes. Enquête sul le case Jonathan Littell* (Paris: Éditions Scali, 2006)

Blejer, Daniella 'Pensar/clasificar/denunciar: las resignificaciones del archivio en *2666*', in *Roberto Bolaño. Ruptura y violencia en la literatura finisecular*, edited by Felipe A. Rios Baeza (México D. F.: Eón, 2010), pp. 253-280

Bock, Dennis, *The Ash Garden* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001)

Boe Birns, Margaret, '666 Twinned and Told Twice: Roberto Bolaño's Double Time Frame in *2666*', in *Roberto Bolaño, A Less Distant Star. Critical Essays*, edited by Ignacio López-Calvo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 67-84

Boisseleau, Yves, '*Les Bienveillantes* : une position ironique', in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 277-298

Bolaño, Roberto, *Llamadas telefónicas* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1997)

Bolaño, Roberto, *La literatura nazi en América* (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 2008)

Bolaño, Roberto, *2666* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2009)

Bolaño, Roberto, *El Tercer Reich* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2010)

Bolaño, Roberto, *Estrella distante* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2010 (1996)

Bolaño, Roberto, *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2011)

Borges, Jorge Luis, *El Aleph* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1957)

Borges, Jorge Luis, *El hacedor* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1960)

Borges, Jorge Luis, *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1960)

Bougnoux, Daniel, 'Max Aue, personnage de roman', *Le Debat*, 144 (2007), pp. 66-69

Bourke, Joanna, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999)

Bowden, Tim, *The Changi Camera. A Unique Record of Changi and the Thai-Burma Railway* (Sidney: Hachette, 2012) [first edition 1984]

Bracher, Nathan, 'L'Histoire à l'épreuve de l'affabulation romanesque: *HHhH* de Laurent Binet comme cas de figure', *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 69, 2, (2015), pp. 98-110

Bracher, Nathan, 'Timely Representations. Writing the Past in the First-Person Present Imperfect', *History & Memory*, 28, 1 (2016), pp. 3-35

Braudel, Fernand, 'Histoire et sciences sociales: la longue durée', *Annales*, 13, n. 4 (1958), pp. 725-753

Brett, Laurel, *Disquiet on the Western Front. World War II and Postmodern Fiction* (Newcastle upon Thyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016)

Briand, Denis, 'Max aux enfers. Esquisses «topographiques»…', in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 87-102

Brinker, Menacher, 'Theme and Interpretation', in *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, edited by Werner Sollors (Harvard and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 21-37

Brioni, Simone, 'Fantahistorical vs. Fantafascist Epic: "Contemporary" Alternative Italian Colonial Histories', *Science Fiction Studies*, 42 (2015), 305-318.

Brown, Peter, *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015) [first edition 1981]

Burke, Jason, *The 9/11 Wars* (London: Penguin, 2012)

Burne, Peter, *Descent into Hell (The Fall of Singapore – Pudu and Changi – the Thai-Burma Railway*) (Sidney: Allen and Unwin, 2014)

Burns, Jennifer, *Fragments of* impegno. *Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative 1980-2000* (Leeds: Northern University Press, 2001)

Calabrese, Stefano, *www.letteratura.global* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005)

Calder, Angus, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1991)

Calvocoressi, Peter, Guy Wint and John Pritchard, *Total War. The Causes and Courses of the Second World War, Volume II: The Greater East Asia and Pacific Conflict* (London: Penguin, 1989) [first edition 1972]

Candia, Alexis, '2666: la magia y el mal', *Taller de letras*, 38 (2006), pp. 121-139

Caprio, Mark E., *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945* (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2009), pp. 92-110

Carrard, Philippe, 'Historiographic Metafiction, French Style', *Style*, 48, 2 (2014), pp. 181-202

Casadei, Alberto, *Romanzi di Finisterre – Narrazione della guerra e problemi del realismo* (Roma: Carocci, 2000)

Casanova, Pascale, *The World Republic of Letters* (Harvard: Harvard University Press 2004)

Casanova, Pascale, 'Literature as a World', in *World Literature in Theory*, edited by David Damrosch (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), pp. 192-209

Cassata, Carlo, *A destra del fascismo. Profilo politico di Julius Evola* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003)

Cassini Wolf, Elisabetta, 'Evola's Interpretation of Fascism and Moral Responsibility', in *Patterns of Prejudice*, 50: 4-5 (2016), pp. 478-494

Cavalié, Elsa, '"It's Like Gold Leaf, and Now It's Rising, Peeling Away": Britishness and Exoticism in Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch*', in *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-*

Historical Fiction, edited by Elodie Rousselot (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 84-100

Ceserani, Remo, Mario Domenichelli and Pino Fasano, *Dizionario dei temi letterari* (Roma: UTET, 2007), 3 voll.

Ceserani, Remo, 'Il punto sulla critica tematica', *Allegoria*, 58 (2008), pp. 25-33.

Chamayou, Grégoire, *Théorie du Drone* (Paris: La Fabrique Editions, 2013), translated into English by Janet Lloyd as *A Theory of the Drone* (New York: The New Press, 2015)

Chaumont, Jean Michel, *La concurrence des victimes: génocide, identité, reconnaissance* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1997)

Chénetier, Marc, 'Auster's Pseudonymous World', in *Beyond the Red Notebook. Essays on Paul Auster*, edited by Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 34-43

Chihaia, Matei, 'Bolaño y Dracula. Cuatro modelos para hablar del autor', in *Roberto Bolaño. Violencia, escritura, vida*, edited by Ursula Henningfeld (Madrid and Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana and Vervuert, 2015), pp. 155-170

Ciccarello di Blasi, Maria Grazia, *Intertestualità e contaminazione: il Quijote borgesiano di Paul Auster* (Roma: Libreria Istituti Nuovi, 1995)

Cinquegrani, Alessandro and Valentina Re, *L'innesto. Realtà e finzioni da Matrix a 1Q84* (Milano: Mimesis, 2014)

Cinquegrani, Alessandro, *Il sacrificio di Bess. Sei immagini su nazismo e contemporaneità* (Milano: Mimesis, 2018)

Ciocia, Stefania, 'The Last of the Romantics? The Accidental Investigator in Postmodern Detective Fiction', in *Legacies of Romanticism. Literature, Culture, Aesthetics*, edited by Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 198-210

von Clausewitz, Carl, *On War*, edited and translated into English by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (London: The Folio Society, 2011)

Coffman, Christopher K., ‘Introduction: Lonely Atoms’, in *William T. Vollmann. A Critical Companion*, edited by Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), pp. 1-22

Coker, Christopher, *Humane Warfare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001)

Compagnon, Antoine, ‘Nazism, History, and Fantasy: Revisiting *Les Bienveillantes*’, *Yale French Studies*, 121 (2012), pp. 113-127

Connelly, Mark, *We can take it! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2004)

Cooke, Philip, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Cortellessa, Andrea, ‘Giorgio Falco. La gemella H’, 15/3/2014, available at: http://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/parole/giorgio-falco-la-gemella-h [last access 1/12/2017]

Cortellessa, Andrea, ‘Epica e fotografia. Giorgio Falco con Sabrina Ragucci’, 15/9/2015, available at http://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/anteprime/epica-e-fotografia [last access 1/12/2017]

Cox, John K., ‘Writing Europe: Death, History, and the Intersecting Intellectual Worlds of William T. Vollmann and Danilo Kis’, in *William T. Vollmann. A Critical Companion*, edited by Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), pp. 123-140

Peter G. Christensen, ‘Shostakovich in Love: William T. Vollmann's “Europe Central”’, in *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 40, 1 (2007), pp. 97-108

Crowe, David M., *War Crimes, Genocide, and Justice. A Global History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Crownshaw, Richard, *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

Crosthwaite, Paul, *Trauma, Postmodernism, and the Aftermath of World War II* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)

Dambre, Marc, ‘The Memory of Some French Texts in *Les Bienveillantes*: The Explicit and the Implicit’, *Yale French Studies,* 121 (2012), pp. 169-184

Damrosch, David, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003)

Davies, J. Marina, 'La Shoah en flânant?', in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 171-184

Dei, Fabio, 'Il mito in Frazer e nelle poetiche del modernismo', in *Filosofie del mito nel Novecento*, edited by Giovanni Leghissa and Enrico Manera (Bologna: il Mulino, 2015), pp. 71-80

Delorme, Julie, '*Les Bienveillantes*: une parole qui donne la voix au bourreau', in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 31-46

DeVane Brown, Katherine, 'Courtly Rivalry, Loyalty Conflict, and the Figure of Hagen in the Nibelungenlied', in *Monatshefte*, 107, 3 (2015), pp. 355-381

Di Giacomo, Giuseppe, *Estetica e letteratura. Il grande romanzo tra Ottocento e Novecento* (Bari: Laterza, 1999)

Diner, Dan, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2000)

D'Intino, Franco, *L'autobiografia moderna. Storia, forme, problemi* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1998)

Domenichelli, Mario, 'L'immaginario reticolare: memoria personale, memoria culturale e tematologia', *Allegoria*, 58 (2008), pp. 34-48

Donnarumma, Raffaele, and Gilda Policastro, 'Ritorno alla realtà? Otto interviste a narratori italiani', *Allegoria*, 57 (2008), pp. 9-25

Donnarumma, Raffaele, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2014)

Donnarumma, Raffale, 'La macchina dell'oscurità', *Allegoria*, 71-72 (2015), pp. 216-229

Donoghue, Denis, 'Yeats, Eliot, and the Mythical Method', *The Sewanee Review*, 2 (1997), pp. 206-226

Dower, John W., *War Without Mercy. Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986)

Duszat, Michael, ‘Foucault’s Laughter. Enumeration, Rewriting, and the Construction of the Essayist in Borges’s “The analytical language of John Wilkins”’, in *Orbis Litterarum*, 67 (2012), pp. 193–218

Duthie, Fiona, ‘Enemies of Honor: Heroes and Prisoners of War in Richard Flanagan’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and Tom Keneally’s *Shame and the Captives*’, *Antipodes*, 30, 1 (2016), pp. 159–171

Eaglestone, Robert, *Postmodernism and Holocaust Denial* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001)

Eaglestone, Robert, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Eaglestone, Robert, ‘“The age of reason was over. . . An age of fury was dawning”: Contemporary Fiction and Terror’, in *Terror and the Postcolonial: A Concise Companion*, edited by Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton (Hoboken: Wiley-Blakwell, 2009), pp. 361-369

Eakin, Paul John, *Fictions in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)

Echternkamp, Jörg and Stefan Martens, ‘The Meanings of the Second World War in Contemporary European History’, in *Experience and Memory. The Second World War in Europe*, edited by Jörg Echternkamp and Stefan Martens (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 245-269

Eley, Geoff, ‘Finding People’s War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II’, *The American Historical Review*, 106, 3 (2001), pp. 818-838

Eliot, Thomas Stearn, ‘*Ulysses*, Order and Myth’, *The Dial*, 1923, p. 201

Eshel, Amir, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014)

Eshelman, Raoul, *Performatism, or The End of Postmodernism* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers, 2008)

Esposito, Fernando, ‘Mito e fascismi’, in *Filosofie del mito nel Novecento*, edited by Giovanni Leghissa e Enrico Manera (Bologna: Carocci, 2015), pp. 281-290

Eve, Martin Paul, *Literature Against Criticism. University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict* (Cambridge: Open Book Publisher, 2016)

Evola, Julius, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1969)

Falco, Giorgio, 'William Eggleston. Lo sguardo democratico dell'America', *La Repubblica* 26/8/2009

Falco, Giorgio, *La gemella H* (Torino: Einaudi, 2013)

Falco, Giorgio, 'Laterale', in *Dizionario Affettivo della Lingua Italiana*, edited by Matteo Bianchi and Giorgio Vasta (Roma: Fandango, 2008), pp. 110-111

Fasano, Pino, 'Il ritorno della critica tematica', *Neohelicon*, 26, 2 (1999), pp. 59-67

Ferdjani, Youssef, '*Les Bienveillantes*: Le National-socialisme comme mal métaphysique', in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 263-276

Finchelstein, Federico, 'On Fascism, History, and Evil in Roberto Bolaño', in *Roberto Bolaño as World Literature*, edited by Nicholas Birns and Juan E. De Castro, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 32-53

Finney, Brian, 'Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27, 3 (2004), pp. 68-82

Flanagan, Richard, 'Freeing my father', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21/11/2013, available at http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/freeing-my-father-20130915-2ttiz.html [last access 10/10/17]

Flanagan, Richard, 'An Interview with Richard Flanagan', 2014, available at http://threeguysonebook.com/an-interview-with-richard-flanagan/ [last accessed 15/10/17]

Flanagan, Richard, 'Richard Flanagan Webchat – As It Happened', 8/10/2014 available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/live/2014/oct/08/post-your-questions-for-richard-flanagan [last accessed 15/10/17]

Flanagan, Richard, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (London: Vintage Books, 2015)

Fragero Guerra, Carmen, 'La novela popular y *2666* de Roberto Bolaño', *Anales de Literatura Hispanoamericana*, 41 (2012), pp. 245-264

Friedlander, Saul, *Kurt Gerstein ou L'Ambiguité du Bien* (Paris: Casterman, 1967), translated into English by Charles Fullnam as *Counterfeit Nazi. The Ambiguity of Good* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969)

Foot, John, *Italy's Divided Memory* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) [first edition 2009]

Fritz, Stefen, *Ostkrieg. Hitler's War of Extermination in the East* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011)

Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of criticism. Four essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) [first edition 1957]

Furlong, Paul, 'Riding the Tiger: Crisis and Political Strategy in the Thought of Julius Evola', in *The Italianist*, 31:1 (2011), pp. 25-40 (1)

Furlong, Paul, *Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011) (2)

Fusillo, Massimo, *L'altro e lo stesso – Teoria e storia del doppio* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1998)

Fusillo, Massimo, *Il dio ibrido* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006)

Galli, Giorgio, *Hitler e il nazismo magico*, (Milano: Rizzoli, 1989)

Ganguly, Debjani, *This Thing Called the World. The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016)

Gasparini, Philippe, *Autofiction* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008)

Gentile, Emilio, *Le religioni della politica* (Bari: Laterza, 2001)

Gentry, Francis G., 'Key Concepts in the *Nibelungenlied'*, in *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, edited by Winder McConnell (Rochester: Camden House, 1998*),* pp. 66-78

Geraci, Ginevra, 'The Sense of an Ending: Alternative History in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*', "Philip Roth Studies", VII, 2 (2011), pp. 187-204

Ghilardi, Marcello, *Arte e pensiero in Giappone. Corpo, immagine, gesto* (Milano: Mimesis, 2011)

Gier, Nicholas F., *The Origins of Religious Violence. An Asian Perspective* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014)

Giglioli, Daniele, 'Archetipo e sopravvivenza. Due modelli per lo studio dell'immaginario', *Allegoria*, 58 (2008), pp. 49-60

Giglioli, Daniele, *Senza Trauma* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011)

Gilroy, Paul, *After Empire. Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004)

Gooblar, David, *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011)

Gordon, Robert, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture 1944-2010* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012)

Goslan, Richard T., 'The American Reception of Max Aue', *Substance*, 39, 1, 121 (2010), pp. 174-183

Goslan, Richard J., 'Perversion and Pulp: Reading Edgar Rice Burroughs and Figuring America in *Les Bienveillantes*', *Yale French Studies*, 121 (2012), pp. 204-226

Gould, Eric, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981)

Grall, Catherine, '*2666* by Roberto Bolaño: fiction as an attempt to travel between worlds', *Neohelicon*, 40, 32, (2013), pp. 475-487

Grethlein, Jonas, 'Myth, Morals, and Metafiction in Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*', *PMLA*, 127, 1 (2012), pp. 77–93

Hables Gray, Chris, *Postmodern War. The New Politics of Conflict* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997)

Hake, Sabina, *Screen Nazis. Cinema, History and Democracy* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012)

Hall, Stuart, 'The Question of Cultural Identity', in *Modernity. An Introduction to Modern Societies*, edited by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (London: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 596-632

Hamilton, Paula, 'Contested Memories of the Pacific War in Australia', in *The Pacific War: Aftermaths. Remembrance and Culture*, edited by Christina Twomey and Ernest Koh (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 50-66

Hartmann, Christian, *Operation Barbarossa. Nazi Germany's War in the East, 1941-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Hassan, Ihab, *The Postmodern Turn. Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987)

Hassan, Ihab in, 'Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust', in *Beyond Postmodernism. Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, edited by Klaus Stierstorfer (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 199-212

Head, Thomas, 'Introduction', in *Medieval Hagiography. An Anthology*, edited by Thomas Head (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000), pp. XIII-XXXVIII

Heine, Steven, and Dale S. Wright, 'Introduction: Kōan Tradition – Self-Narrative and Contemporary Perspectives', in *The Kōan. Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, edited by Steve Heine and Dale S. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3-14

Hemmingson, Michael, *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2009)

Hilberg, Raul, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003) [first edition: 1985]

Hirsch, Marianne, *Family Frames. Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) [first edition: 1997]

Hirsch, Marianne, *The generation of postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

Hoberek, Andrew, 'After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53, 3 (2007), pp. 233-247

Hobsbawm, Eric, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994)

Hocevar, Drina, 'Pynchon's Maas: Subversion or Polyphonic Echoing and Mirroring of Myth', in *Myth and Subversion in the Contemporary Novel*, edited by José Manuel Losada Goya and Marta Guirao Ochoa (Newcastle upone Thyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 107-118

Holland, Mary K., *Succeeding Postmodernism. Language and Humanism in Contemporay American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013)

Hotta, Eri, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Husson, Edouard, '*Les Bienveillantes*, un canular déplacé', Le Figaro, 8/11/2006, available at <http://www.lefigaro.fr/debats/2006/11/08/01005-20061108ARTFIG90047-les_bienveillantes_un_canular_deplace.php> [last access 27/11/2017]

Husson, Edouard, and Michel Terestchenko, *Les complaisantes. Jonathan Littell et l'écriture du mal* (Paris: Francois-Xavier de Guibert, 2007)

Hutcheon, Linda, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988)

Hutcheon, Linda, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2007) [first edition: 1989]

Hutcheon, Linda, 'Gone Forever, But Here to Stay: The Legacy of the Postmodern', in *Postmodernism: What Moment?*, edited by Pelagia Goulimari (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 16–18

Huyssen, Andreas, 'Monuments and Memory in a Postmodern Age', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 6, 2 (1993), pp. 249-252

Imbaud, Patrice, 'À propos des *Bienveillantes*. Variations autour de la perversion', in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp.185-196

Inazo, Nitobe, *Bushido. The Soul of Japan* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1969)

Ingram, Forrest L., *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century. Studies in a Literary Genre* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971)

Jacobi, Martin, 'Who Killed Robbie and Cecilia? Reading and Misreading Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 52, 1 (2011), pp. 55-73

James, David 'The Immediacy of *Small Island*', in *Andrea Levy. Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Jeannette Baxter and David James (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 52-64

Jamet, Pierre, 'Modernist Concerns and Greek and Latin Culture: Thomas S. Eliot's Mythical Method in Thomas C. Wolfe' s Novels', *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*, 1 (2015), pp. 229-244

Jeremiah, Ken, *Living Buddhas. The Self-Mummified Monks of Yamagata, Japan* (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, 2010)

Jones, Adele, 'Disrupting the continuum: Collapsing Space and Time in Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch*', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 21, 3 (2014), pp. 32-44

Kaldor, Mary, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012)

Kaplan, Brett Ashley, *Jewish Anxiety and the Novels of Philip Roth* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015)

Katz, Steven T., 'The Uniqueness of the Holocaust: the Historical Dimension', in *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, edited by Alan S. Rosenbaum (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 19-39

Kellt, Van, 'La rhétorique d'*HHhH*: Entrer dans le virage avec Binet, Heydrich, Gabčík et Kubiš', in *Mémoires occupées* , edited by Marc Dambre (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle 2013), available at http://books.openedition.org/psn/389 [last access 29/11/17]

Kennedy, A. L., *Day* (London: William Heinemann, 2001)

Kerkham, Eleanor, 'Introduction. Haikai Intersections', pp. 1-22, in *Matsuo Bashō's Poetic Spaces. Exploting Haikai Intersections*, edited by Eleanor Kerkham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

Kershaw, Ian, *To Hell and Back. Europe 1914-1949* (London: Penguin, 2015)

Kirby, Alan, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (London: Continuum, 2009), EPUB

Kiš, Danilo, *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča* (1976), translated into English as *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985)

Konstantinou, Lee, *Cool Characters. Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016)

Kurnick, David, 'Comparison, Allegory, and the Address of "Global'" Realism (The Part about Bolaño)', *Boundary 2*, 42, 2 (2015), pp. 105-134

LaCapra, Dominick, *History, Literature, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013)

Lainck, Arndt, *Las figuras del mal en* 2666 *de Roberto Bolaño* (Münster: LIT verlag, 2014)

Lagrou, Pieter, '1945-1955. The Age of Total War', in *Histories of the Aftermath. The Legacies of the Second World War in Europe*, edited by Frank Biess and Robert G. Moeller (London and New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 287-296

Lamy-Rested, Élise, *Parole vraie, parole vice. Des Bienveillantes aux exécuteurs* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014)

Langford, Barry, 'Globalizing the Holocaust: Fantasies of Annihilation in Contemporary Media Culture', in *Holocaust Intersections. Genocide and Visual Culture at the New Millennium*, edited by Axel Bangert, Robert C. S. Gordon and Libby Saxton (Leeds: Legenda, 2013), pp. 98-111

Lavender, William, 'The Novel of Critical Engagement: Paul Auster's *City of Glass*', in *Paul Auster*, edited by Harold Bloom (Broomal, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), pp. 77-96

Le Bris, Michel and Jean Rouaud (eds.), *Pour une littérature-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007)

Lee, Newton, *Facebook Nation. Total Information Awareness* (New York: Springer, 2013)

Lejeune, Philippe, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975)

Lermonier, Marc, Les Bienveillantes *décryptées* (Saint-Amand-Montrond: Le Pré aux Clercs, 2007)

Levéel, Éric, 'Maximilien Aue: une homosexualité de rigueur?', in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 141-154

Levin, Stephen, 'Is There a Booker Aesthetic? Iterations of the Global Novel', *Critique*, 55 (2014), 477–493

Levy, Andrea, *Small Island* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2004)

Levy, Daniel and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006)

Lionarons, Joyce Tally, 'The Otherworld and its Inhabitants in the *Nibelungenlied'*, in *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, edited by Winder McConnell (Rochester: Camden House, 1998), pp. 153-171

Lipovetsky, Gilles and Sébastien Charles, *Les Temps Hypermodernes* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 2004)

Littell, Jonathan, *Les Bienveillantes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006)

Littell, Jonathan and Samuel Blumenfeld, *Interview* (2006), available at: <https://thekindlyones.wordpress.com/littell-interview-with-samuel-blumenfeld/> [accessed 10 March 2017]

Littell, Jonathan and Richard Millet, 'Conversation a Beyrouth', *Le Debat*, 144 (2007), pp. 4-24

Littell, Jonathan and Pierre Nora, 'Conversation sur l'histoire et le roman", *Le Debat*, 144 (2007), pp. 25-44

Littell, Jonathan, *Le sec et l'humide* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008)

Littell, Jonathan, *Tchéthcénie, An III* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009)

Littell, Jonathan, *Triptych. Three Studies after Francis Bacon* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011)

Littell, Jonathan, *Carnet de Homs. 16 janvier – 2 février 2012* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012)

Lobetti, Tullio Federico, *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014)

Luperini, Romano, *La fine del postmoderno* (Napoli: Alfredo Guida Editore, 2005)

Luperini, Romano, *L'incontro e il caso* (Bari: Laterza, 2007)

Luzzato, Sergio, 'Jonathan Littell, *Le benevole*', *Allegoria*, 38 (2008), pp. 215-253

Lyotard, Jean-François, *La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979)

Mack, Michael, *Philosopy and Literature in Times of Crisis. Challenging Our Infatuation with Numbers* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014)

MacPhee, Graham, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011)

Malvestio, Marco, '"Everything can't be a lie": Philip Roth e l'Olocausto', *Ácoma*, 12 (2017), pp.183-201

Malvestio, Marco, '*Europe Central* tra raccolta di racconti e romanzo massimalista', *Nuova prosa*, 67 (2017), pp. 99-122

Malvestio, Marco, 'Mito e romanzo negli anni Zero: Littell, Roth, Vollmann', *Classicocontemporaneo*, 3 (2017), pp. 14-30

Malvestio, Marco, '*Wargames*, etica e responsabilità: la Seconda Guerra Mondiale in *El Tercer* Reich e *2666*', *Orillas*, 6 (2017), pp. 85-97

Malvestio, Marco, 'Cronache del *fantafascismo*. L'ucronia in Italia e il revisionismo storico', *The Italianist*, 38 (2018), pp. 89-107

Manacorda, Guido, 'Prefazione', in Richard Wagner, *Parsifal* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1997), pp. V-XXIX

Mancinelli, Laura, 'Memoria e invenzione. Introduzione alla lettura del "Nibelungenlied"', in *I Nibelunghi* , edited and translated into Italian by Laura Mancinelli (Torino: Einaudi, 1972), pp. I-LXI

Marchese, Lorenzo Marchese, *L'io possibile. L'autofiction come paradosso del romanzo contemporaneo* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2014)

Mariani, Maria Anna, *Sull'autobiografia contemporanea* (Roma: Carocci, 2011)

Marichal, José, *Facebook Democracy. The Architect of Disclosure and the Threat to Public Life* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012)

Marsh, Huw, 'Narrative Unreliability and Metarepresentation in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*; or, Why Robbie Might Be Guilty and Why Nobody Seems to Notice', *Textual Practice*, 2017, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1276955 [last access 20/12/2017]

Marsilio, Morena and Emanuele Zinato, 'Le idee letterarie degli anni Zero', *L'Ulisse*, 18 (2015), pp. 244-268

Marsilio, Morena, 'Un alfabetiere per la gemella', 25/11/2016, available at: http://www.laletteraturaenoi.it/index.php/interpretazione-e-noi/586-un-alfabetiere-per-la-gemella.html [last access 1/12/2017]

Martínez Alfaro, María Jesús, 'The Spectral Evidence of Photography in Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room*: An Album of Fractured Lives', *Alicante Journal of English Studies*, 26 (2013), pp. 259-270

Mazower, Mark, *Dark Continent: Europe's 20th Century* (London: Penguin, 1999) [first edition: 1998]

Mazzoni, Guido, 'Jonathan Littell, *Le benevole*', *Allegoria*, 38 (2008), pp. 215-253

Mazzoni, Guido, *Teoria del romanzo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011)

McCaffery, Larry, 'Preface: The Chrysantemum and the Flame Tower', in *William T. Vollmann. A Critical Companion*, edited by Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), pp. XII-XVI

McEwan, Ian, *Atonement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001)

McGlathery, James M., 'Erotic Love in Chrétien's Perceval, Wolfram's Parzival, and Wagner's Pasifal', in *A Companion to Wagner's* Parsifal, edited by William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer, (Rochester: Camden House, 2005), pp. 55-79

McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2003 (1987)

McLoughlin, Kate, '"Dispute Incarnate": Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*, the Demjanjuk Trial, and Eyewitness Testimony', *Philip Roth Studies*, III, 2 (2007), pp. 115-131

Mercier-Leca, Florence, '*Les Bienveillantes* et la tragèdie grecque', *Le Debat*, 144 (2007), pp. 45-55

Miles, William F. S., 'Third World Views of the Holocaust', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6, 3 (2004), pp. 371-393

Mitchell, Kaye, '"What Does It Feel to Be an Anachronism?": Time in *The Night Watch*', in *Sarah Waters. Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Kaye Mitchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp.84-98

Mitchell, Peta, *Cartographic Strategies of Postmodernity: The Figure of the Map in Contemporary Theory and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2008)

Mitric, Ana, 'Turning Points: *Atonement*, *Horizons*, and Late Modernism', *Modernism/modernity*, 21, 3 (2014), pp. 715-740

Möller, Swantje, *Coming to Terms with Crisis. Disorientation and Reorientation in the Novels of Ian McEwan* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2011)

Monballieu, Aagje, ‘Perseguidores de la nada: la subversion del mito de Jasòn y los Argonautas en *Los Premios* de Julio Cortàzar’ in *Myth and Subversion in the Contemporary Novel*, edited by José Manuel Losada Goya and Marta Guirao Ochoa (Newcastle upone Thyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 131-144

Mountfort, Paul, ‘The *I Ching* and Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 43, 2 (2016), pp. 287-309

Moretti, Franco, *Graphs, Maps and Trees* (London and New York: Verso, 2007)

Moretti, Franco, *Distant Reading* (London and New York: Verso 2013)

Moura, Jean-Marc, ‘French Within Europe and Beyond: the Case of “Francophone” Writers’, *European Studies*, 29 (2012), pp. 253-265

Moyn, Samuel, ‘To Wipe the State Clean’, *Yale French Studies*, 121 (2012), pp. 128-139

Mumon, Yamada, *Lectures on the Ten Oxherding Pictures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’I Press, 2004)

Muñoz-Valdivieso, Sofía, ‘Metaphors of Belonging in Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*’, in *Metaphor and Diaspora in Contemporary Writing*, edited by Jonathan P. A. Sell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 99-116

Nagel, James, *The Contemporary Short-Story Cycle. The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2001)

Naimark, Norman M., *Stalin’s Genocides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

Nealon, Jeffrey T., *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just in Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012)

Neumann, Michael, ‘Discesa agli inferi’, in Thomas Mann *Der Zauberberg* (Berlin: Fischer Verlag, 1924), translated into Italian by Renata Colorni as *La montagna magica* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2010), pp. XI-XLIX

Nivat, Georges, ‘*Les Bienveillantes* et les classique russes’, *Le Debat*, 144 (2007), pp. 56-65

Nivat, Georges, ‘Adelphic Incest in Musil, Nabokov, and Littell’, in *Writing the Holocaust Today. Critical Perspective on Jonathan Littell’s* The Kindly Ones, edited by Aurélie Barjonet and Liran Razinsky (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 19-31

Noakes, Lucy and Juliette Pattinson, ‘Introduction: the Cultural Memory of the Second World War’, in *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, edited by Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson (New York and London, Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 1-25

Nolte, Ernst, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917-1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1987)

Novick, Peter, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000)

O’Bryen, Rory, ‘Writing with the Ghost of Pierre Menard: Autorship, Responsibility, and Justice in Roberto Bolaño’s *Distant Star*’, in *Roberto Bolaño, A Less Distant Star. Critical Essays*, edited by Ignacio López-Calvo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 17-34

O’Callaghan, Claire, ‘“Grisley ‘L’ Business”: Re-valuating Female Masculinity and Butch Subjectivity in *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*’, in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminism*, edited by Adele Jones and Claire O’Callaghan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 193-213

O’ Callaghan, Claire, *Sarah Waters. Gender and Sexual Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)

O’ Hara, David K., ‘Briony's Being-For: Metafictional Narrative Ethics in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 52, 1 (2011), pp. 74-100

Palleau-Papin, Françoise, ‘Composition as Infinity’, in *William T. Vollmann,* The Rifles*: A Critical Study*, ed. by Françoise Palleau-Papin (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 83-100

Palumbo Mosca, Raffaello, ‘Notes on Hybrid Novel and Ethical Discourse’, MLN, 128, 1 (2013), pp. 185-205

Palumbo Mosca, Raffaello, *L’invenzione del vero* (Roma: Gaffi, 2014)

Panichi, Camilla, ‘Narrare la guerra. Da *Vita e destino* a *Le benevole*’, *TiConTre. Teoria, Testo, Traduzione*, I (2014), pp. 125-140

Pasqualotto, Giangiorgio, *L’estetica del vuoto* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1992)

Pasqualotto, Giangiorgio, *Figure di pensiero* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2007)

Patterson, Annabel, *The International Novel* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014)

Patterson, David, *The Shriek of Silence. A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1992)

Pearson, Nels and Singer, Marc, 'Introduction: Open Cases: Detection, (Post)Modernity, and the State', in *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonian and Transnational World*, edited by Nels Pearson and Marc Singer (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), pp. 1-14

Pellini, Pierluigi, 'Critica tematica e tematologia: paradossi e aporie', *Allegoria*, 58 (2008), pp. 61-83

Pennacchio, Filippo, 'Autorialità *reloaded*. Qualche nota (e un'ipotesi) sul narratore del romanzo globalizzato', *TiConTre*, 2 (2014), pp. 9-28

Pennacchio, Filippo, *Autorialità* reloaded*. Qualche nota (e un'ipotesi) sul narratore del romanzo globalizzato* (2014), available at: <http://www.leparoleelecose.it/?p=16815> [accessed 10 March 2017]

Pennacchio, Filippo, 'Appunti per una lettura narratologica di *2666*', *Orillas*, 6 (2017), pp. 201-212

Perfect, Michael, *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism. Diversity and the Millennial London Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Perfect, Michael, '"He Wished to Defend a Country That Wasn't His". British Subjects/British Servicemen in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*', in *Long Shadows. The Second World War in British Fiction and Film*, edited by Petra Ray (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016), pp. 241-262

Perra, Emiliano, 'Between National and Cosmopolitan: 21st Century Holocaust Television in Britain, France and Italy', in *Holocaust Intersections. Genocide and Visual Culture at the New Millennium*, edited by Axel Bangert, Robert S. C. Gordon and Libby Saxton (Leeds: Legenda, 2013), pp. 24-45

Philippart, Guy, 'Introduction', in *Hagiographies. Histoire internationale de la littérature hagiographique latine et vernaculaire en Occident des origines à 1550*, vol. 1, edited by Guy Philippart and Monique Goullet (Brepols: Turnhout, 1994), pp. 9-24

Piva, Marika, 'La parte della letteratura: combinazione e trasformazione in Roberto Bolaño e Michel Houellebecq', *Orillas*, 2 (2017), pp. 235-249

Pividori, Cristina, 'Out of the Dark Room: Photography and Memory in Rachel Seiffert's Holocaust Tales', *Atlantis*, 30, 2 (2008), pp. 79-94

Possamai, Donatella, 'Tracce di Russia in *2666* di Roberto Bolaño: "La parte di Arcimboldi". Per una ricognizione', *Orillas*, 2 (2017), pp. 225-234

Potter, Garry and José Loperz 'After Postmodernism: The New Millennium', in *After Postmodernism. An Introduction to Critical Realism*", edited by José Lopez and Garry Potter (London and New York: The Athlone Press, 2001)

Quarrie, Cynthia, '"Before the Destruction Began": Interrupting Post-Imperial Melancholia in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*', *Studies in the Novel*, 47, 2 (2015), pp. 193-209

Raciti, Giuseppe, *Ho visto Junger in Caucaso* (Milano: Mimesis, 2013)

Rastogi, Pallavi, '"The Leeches Are the Least of the Worries": Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers* and Biyi Bandele's *The King's Rifle*', *Research in African Literature*, 46, 1 (2015), pp. 19-36

Rau, Petra, 'Beyond *punctum* and *studium*. Trauma and Photography in Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room*', *Journal of European Studies*, 36, 3 (2006), pp. 295-325

Razinsky, Liran, 'The Similarity of Perpetrators', in *Writing the Holocaust Today*, *Critical Perspective on Jonathan Littell's* The Kindly Ones, edited by Aurélie Barjonet and Liran Razinsky (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 47-60

Razinsky, Liran, 'We Are All the Same: Max Aue, Interpreter of Evil', *Yale French Studies*, 121 (2012), pp. 140-154

Rebein, Robert, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists. American Fiction after Postmodernism* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001)

Recalcati, Massimo, 'Il sonno della realtà e il trauma del reale', in *Bentornata realtà*, edited by Mario De Caro and Maurizio Ferraris (Torino: Einaudi, 2012)

Rhee, M. J., *The Doomed Empire: Japan in Colonial Korea* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997)

Rìos Baeza, Felipe A., *Roberto Bolaño. Una narrativa en el margen* (Valencia: Tirant Humanidades, 2013)

de los Ríos, Valeria, ‘Mapas y fotografías en la obra de Roberto Bolaño’, in *Bolaño Salvaje*, edited by Edmundo Paz Soldán and Gustavo Faverón Patriau (Barcelona: Editorial Candaya, 2013), pp. 257-278

Rippard, Lucy R., ‘Foreword’, in *Kathe Kollwitz. Graphics, Posters, Drawings* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1981), pp. VI-XIII

Robinson, Richard, ‘The Modernism of Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 56, 3 (2010), pp. 473-495

Rosenfeld, Alvin, *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Ann Arbor: Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, The University of Michigan, 1995)

Rosenfeld, Alvin, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011)

Rosenfeld, Gavriel, *The World Hitler Never Made* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Rosenfeld, Gavriel, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past Is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Roth, Philip, *Patrimony. A True Story* (London: Vintage, 1991)

Roth, Philip, *Operation Shylock. A Confession* (London: Vintage, 2000) [first edition: 1993]

Roth, Philip, *The Plot Against America* (New York: Vintage International, 2005) [first edition: 2004]

Rothberg, Michael, *Roth and the Holocaust*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth*, edited by Thimothy Parrish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Rothberg, Michael, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009)

Rousso, Henry, ‘A New Perspective on the War’, in *Experience and Memory. The Second World War in Europe*, edited by Jörg Echternkamp and Stefan Martens (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010), pp. 1-9

Rudrum, David, ‘Notes on the Supplanting of “-post”’, in *Supplanting the Postmodern*, *An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, edited by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 333-348

Rudrum, David and Nicholas Stavris, ‘Introduction’, in S*upplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, edited by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. XI-XXIX

Russell, Alison, ‘Deconstructing *The New York Trilogy*: Paul Auster’s Anti-Detective Fiction’, in *Paul Auster*, edited by Harold Bloom (Broomal, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), pp. 97-112

Sandberg, Eric, ‘”This Incomprehensible Thing”: Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* and the Aesthetics of Excess’, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 43, 3 (2014), pp. 231-255

Samuels, Robert, ‘Auto-Modernity after Postmodernism: Autonomy and Automation in Culture, Technology, and Education’, in *Digital Youth, Innovation, and the Unexpected*, edited by Tara McPherson (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2008)

Santin, Bryan M., ‘Kurt Gerstein and the Tragic Parable of “Clean Hands”: The Imaginative Role of Fiction in the Moral Calculus of William T. Vollmann’, in *William T. Vollmann. A Critical Companion*, edited by Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), pp. 141-166

Satz, Mario (ed.), *The Living Palm Tree. Parables, Stories and Teachings from the Kabbalah* (London: The Matheson Trust, 2010)

Savattieri, Cristina, ‘Jonathan Littell, *Le benevole*’, *Allegoria*, 38 (2008), pp. 215-253

Saviano, Roberto, ‘Un nazista piccolo piccolo dal Terzo Reich a Rimini’, *La Repubblica* 20/2/2014

Savvas, Theophilus, *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Scholem, Gershom, *Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), translated into Italian as *Il nome di Dio e la teoria cabalistica del linguaggio* (Milano: Adelphi, 1998) [first edition 2010]

Scholem, Gershom, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1962), translated into English by The Jewish Publication Society as *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987)

Schmukler, Enrique, 'Abrir la historia: Roberto Bolaño, el "principio atlas" y los modos ficcionales de re-presentar la historia literaria', *Mitologías Hoy*, 7 (2013), pp. 113-123

Sedgwick, Mark, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Seiffert, Rachel, *The Dark Room* (London: Vintage, 2002)

Seo, Audrey Yoshiko, *Ensō. Zen Circles of Enlightenment* (Boston & London: Weatherhill, 2007)

Shiffman, Dan, '*The Plot Against America* and History Post-9/11', *Philip Roth Studies*, V, 1 (2009), pp. 61-73

Shostak, Debra, *Countertexts, Counterlives* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004)

Sicher, Efraim, *The Holocaust Novel* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005)

Singles, Kathleen, *Alternate History. Playing with Contingency and Necessity* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2013)

Simonetti, Gianluigi, 'I nuovi assetti della narrativa italiana (1996-2006)', *Allegoria*, 57 (2008), pp. 95-136

Smith, Zadie, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin, 2000)

Somigli, Luca, 'Negli archive e per le strade. Considerazioni metacritiche sul ritorno alla realtà nella narrativa contemporanea', in *Negli archivi e per le strade. Il ritorno alla realtà nella narrativa di inizio millennio*, edited by Luca Somigli (Roma: Aracne Editore, 2013), pp. 1-2, available at https://www.nazioneindiana.com/2013/06/26/negli-archivi-e-per-le-strade/ [accessed 20 November 2018]

Sorapure, Madeleine, 'The Detective and the Author: *City of Glass*', in *Beyond the Red Notebook. Essays on Paul Auster*, edited by Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 71-87

Sparrow, Robert, 'Robotic Weapons and the Future of War', in *New Wars and New Soldiers: Military Ethics in the Contemporary World*, edited by Jessica Wolfendale and Paolo Tripodi (Surrey, UK & Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 117-133

Staniforth, Martin, '"Shades of the prison house": Reading Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and Peter Carey's *Amnesia*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53, 5 (2017), pp. 578-589

Stein, Robert H., 'The Genre of Parables', in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, edited by Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Compani, 2000), pp. 30-50

Stewart, Victoria, 'The Second World War in Contemporary: Women's Fiction: Revisiting the Home Front', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 9, 3 (2015), pp. 416-432

Stierstorfer, Klaus, 'Introduction: Beyond Postmodernism – Contingent Referentiality?', in *Beyond Postmodernism. Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, edited by Klaus Stierstorfer (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 1-10

Suleiman, Susan Rubin, 'When the perpetrator becomes a reliable witness of the Holocaust: On Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*', *New German Critique* 36, 1 (2009), pp. 1-19

Summerfield, Penny, *Women Workers in the Second World War. Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1984)

Szczepanska, Kamila, *The Politics of War Memory in Japan: Progressive Civil Society Groups and the Contestation of Memory in the Asia-Pacific War* (London: Routledge, 2014)

Tame, Peter, 'Lieux réels et lieux imaginaires dans *Les Bienveillantes*', Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 213-230

Tame, Peter, '"Ceci n'est pas un roman". *HHhH* de Laurent Binet, en decà ou au-delà de la fiction?', in *Mémoires occupées*, edited by Marc Dambre (Paris : Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013), available at http://books.openedition.org/psn/387 [last access 29/11/2017]

Tanaka, Yuki, *Hidden Horrors. Japanese War Crimes in World War II* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1996)

Testa, Enrico, *Eroi e figuranti. Il personaggio nel romanzo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009)

Tew, Philip, *Zadie Smith* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010)

Theweleit, Klaus and Timothy Nunan, 'On the German Reaction to Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*', *New German Critique*, 106 (2009), pp. 21-34

Thierry, Laurent, ‘La réception des *Bienveillantes* dans les milieux intellectuels français’, in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 11-18

de Tholozany, Pauline, ‘Le «curieux exercice» : voyeurisme et conscience du meurtre dans *Les Bienveillantes*’, in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 197-212

Timmer, Nicoline, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010)

Torres Perdigòn, Andrea, *La littérature obstinée. Le roman chez Juan José Saer, Ricardo Piglia et Roberto Bolaño* (Bruxelles: P. I. E. Peter Lang, 2015)

Toth, Josh and Neil Brooks, ‘Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?’, in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, edited by Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 1-9

Toth, Josh, *The Passing of Postmodernism. A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010)

Toth, Josh, ‘Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Rise of Historioplastic Metafiction’, in *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van der Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London and New York: Rowan and Littlefield International, 2017), [EPUB]

Traverso, Enzo, ‘La singolarità storica di Auschwitz. Problemi e derive di un dibattito’, in *Nazismo, fascismo, comunismo. Totalitarismi a confronto*, edited by Marcello Flores (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1998), pp. 303-324

Traverso, Enzo, *La violenza nazista. Una genealogia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), translated into English by Janet Lloyd as *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York and London: The New Press, 2003)

Traverso, Enzo, *A ferro e fuoco. La guerra civile europea 1914-1945* (Bologna: il Mulino 2007)

Troubetzkoy, Wladimir, ‘«Frères humains… »: *Les Bienveillantes*, une historie de familles’, in Les Bienveillantes *de Jonathan Littell*, edited. by Murielle Lucie Clément (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), pp. 19-30

Tsurumi, E. Patricia, 'Colonial Education in Korea and Taiwan', in *The Japanese Colonial Empire*, edited by Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 275-311

Turato, Fabio, *Eredi ingrati. Mondo germanico e tragedia greca tra nascita del II e apocalisse del III Reich (1871-1945)* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2014)

Turner, Edwin, 'Wherein I Suggest Dracula Is a Character in Roberto Bolaño's Novel *2666*', 2012, available at: <https://biblioklept.org/2012/09/11/wherein-i-suggest-dracula-is-a-character-in-roberto-bolanos-novel-2666/> [last access: 22/11/17]

Ueda, Shizuteru, *Zen e filosofía* (Palermo: L'Epos, 2006)

Usandizaga, Helena, 'El reverso poético de la prosa de Roberto Bolaño', in *Jornadas Homenaje Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003). Simposio Internacional*, edited by Ramón González Férriz (Barcelona: Casa Amèrica a Catalunya, 2005), pp. 75-94

Utsumi, Aiko, Ikemi Nakamura and Gil Heong-yun, 'Lee Hak Rae, the Korean Connection and Japanese War Crimes on the Burma-Thai Railway', *The Asia Pacific Journal*, volume 5, issue 8, 2007, available at <http://apjjf.org/-Aiko-Utsumi/2505/article.html> [last accessed 11/10/17]

Vaget, Hans Rudolf, 'Wagnerian Self-Fashioning: The Case of Adolf Hitler', in *New German Critique*, 101 (2007), pp. 95-114

Van Creveld, Martin, *Wargames. From Gladiators to Gigabytes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

van der Akker, Robin, and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Notes on Metamodernism', in *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, 2, 1 (2010), available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677> [last access: 10/11/17], pp. 2-15

van der Akker, Robin, and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism', in *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van der Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London and New York: Rowan and Littlefield International, 2017), [EPUB]

Vasta, Giorgio, 'Giorgio Falco e la gelida microfisica dell'impotenza', 28/4/2014, available at <http://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/la-gemella-h-giorgio-falco/> [last access 1/12/2017]

Victoria, Brian Daizen, *Zen at War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006)

Villalobos-Ruminott, Sergio, ‘A Kind of Hell: Roberto Bolaño and The Return of World Literature’, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 18, 2-3 (2009), pp. 193-205

Viti, Alessandro, ‘Per una tematologia ermenutica. Sul *Dizionario dei temi letterari*’, *Allegoria*, 58 (2008), pp. 98-109

Viti, Alessandro, *Tema* (Napoli: Alfredo Guida Editore, 2011)

Vittorini, Fabio, *Raccontare oggi. Metamodernismo tra narratologia, ermeneutica e intermedialità* (Bologa: Pàtron Editore, 2018)

Vollmann, William T., *The Ice-Shirt* (New York: Viking, 1990)

Vollmann, William T., ‘Afterword to Danilo Kiš’s *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*’, in *Expelled From Eden. A William T. Vollmann Reader*, edited by Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), pp. 333-342 (1)

Vollmann, William T., ‘List of “Contemporary” Books Most Admired by Vollmann’, in *Expelled From Eden. A William T. Vollmann Reader*, edited by Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), pp. 35-38 (2)

Vollmann, William T., *Rising Up and Rising Down. Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom, and Urgent Means* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co, 2005)

Vollmann, William T., *Europe Central* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006) [first edition: 2005]

Walker, Carlos, ‘El tono del horror: *2666* de Roberto Bolaño’, *Taller de letras*, 46 (2010), pp. 99-112

Watts, Philip, ‘Remnants of Tragedy’, *Yale French* Studies, 121 (2012), pp. 155-168

Waugh, Patricia, *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2001) [first edition: 1984]

Weinberg, Robert, *Stalin’s Forgotten Zion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)

Weissman, Gary, *Fantasies of Witnessing. Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004)

Werth, Nicolas, ‘A State Against Its People’, in *The Black Book of Communism. Crimes, Terror, Repression*, edited by Stéphane Courtois, translated into English by Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 33-268

White, Hayden, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975)

White, John J., *Mythology in the Modern Novel. A Study of Prefigurative Techniques* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971)

Wicks, Robert, 'Literary Truth as Dreamlike Expression in Foucault's and Borges's "Chinese Encyclopedia"', in *Philosophy and Literature*, 27 (2003), pp. 80-97

Wieviorka, Annette, *L'Ère du Témoin* (Paris: Plon, 1998)

Willem, Bieke, '"Las palabras servían para ese fin": la literatura y el mal en *2666* de Roberto Bolaño', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 90, 1 (2013), pp. 79-91

Wolfenson, Carolyn, 'El Tercer Reich y la historia como juego de guerra', in *Bolaño Salvaje*, edited by Edmundo Paz Soldán and Gustavo Faverón Patriau (Barcelona: Editorial Candaya, 2013), pp. 204-228

Wood, Rachel, '"Walking and Watching" in Queer London: Sara Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch*', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 17, 3-4 (2013), pp. 305-316

Wyatt, David, *Secret Histories. Reading Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010)

Wyman, David S. (ed.), *The World Reacts to the Holocaust* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

Young, James E., *At Memory's Edge. After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000)

Zatti, Sergio, 'La novella: un genere senza teoria', in *Moderna*, XII, 2 (2010), pp. 13-24

Zeitlin, Froma I., 'Imaginary Tales in the Land of Perpetrators', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 5, 2 (2006), pp. 213-228

Zilcosky, John, 'The Revenge of the Author: Paul Auster's Challenge to Theory', in *Paul Auster*, edited by Harold Bloom (Broomal, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), pp. 63-76

Zima, Peter V., 'Why the Postmodern Age will Last', in *Beyond Postmodernism. Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, edited by Klaus Stierstorfer, (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003) pp. 13-28

Žižek, Slavoj, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real. Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London and New York, Verso, 2002)

Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2009)