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For the Dead: Witnessing Images of Violence in Jonathan Littell's *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*

Abstract

This article deals with representing violence and witnessing in Jonathan Littell's novel *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*. First, I show how by means of renouncing mimetic representation, Littell "weaves" a reality of violence and excessive sensations into a text and creates disturbing abstract-corporeal images that stimulate readers' attention to contemporary prevailing violence in our societies. I then claim that narrators in the novel, in their role as abusers, victims, or witnesses, become fascinated with images of violence that stupefy them, turning them into blinded witnesses who cannot testify on ungraspable and impenetrable images of violence. As witnesses, narrators become gazes, mirrors, and bodies bereft of subjectivity that embody the collapse of witnessing and the violence done to bodies in the text.

Keywords

Littell, Blanchot, corpse-image, violence, witnessing

For the Dead: Witnessing Images of Violence in Jonathan Littell's *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*

Orit Yushinsky Troupin

Twelve years after the publication of his controversial *The Kindly Ones*, Jonathan Littell published *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* ('An Old Story: New Version'), an intriguing and enigmatic novel that draws on themes and constitutive elements of his typical stylistic grammar.¹ Based on *Une Vieille Histoire*, a two-chapter *récit* 'story' published in 2012, the seven chapters of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* present seven first-person accounts recounting the experiences and transformations of men, women, a boy, and a transgender person² in their roles as victims, perpetrators, and witnesses within different sites, situations, and social (power) relations.

The reception of *The Kindly Ones* and *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* differed notably. Littell's previously acclaimed novel gained commercial, critical and academic recognition and success, winning the 2006 Goncourt prize and the award of the Académie Française, despite mixed critical reactions to the novel (Grethlein 566; Suleiman 3-4). Even though *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* initially stirred similar scandalous reactions for its descriptions of violence and brutal sexuality, it ended up receiving less critical attention and was met with lukewarm critiques (Deglise, Grainville). Despite winning the 2018 Sade Prize (Thomas) and the 2019 Prix Renaudot Poche (Contreras and Turcev), it has not been translated yet into English, and, to my knowledge, has not been the subject of a full-length academic article until today. The uproar caused by *The Kindly Ones* stemmed from the novel granting an exclusive voice to a Nazi perpetrator who not only had an incestuous relation with his sister, but also killed his parents (Suleiman 16), making it also a crucial read within Holocaust literature studies. In contrast, *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* deals with violence and sexual power relations in a generalized and unspecified though detailed manner. This could be one of the reasons for the novel's relatively lesser success, but also, as I explicate, for its far-reaching significance: in capturing the essence of contemporary yet timeless states of violence, it draws the readers' attention to these very states in their own societies.

Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version follows the structure of repetition and difference already present in *The Kindly Ones* (Razinsky, "Similarity" 50-59), but this time in more explicit ways. Every chapter begins with the same image: a narrator gets out of a swimming pool and runs through a convoluted grey corridor until he hits a doorknob that opens into a house and a garden. After a dramatic experience in this location, specific for each narrator, the narrator begins to run again in a corridor and opens a door

¹ Future references to this book will appear as VHNV.

² Despite its controversial use, in what follows I opt for "hermaphrodite" following Littell's own use of the term in reference to Bacon's paintings.

leading to a hotel room, and subsequently, to other locations such as a studio, a city, and a wilderness area. At the end of each chapter, the narrator returns to the swimming pool. This narrative structure generates a series of repetitive plots that invite the following metatextual reflections: why do the same elements reappear in different contexts, and what does this repetition signify?

In approaching these metatextual questions in Littell's novel, I draw on Lucien Dällenbach's classification of the *mise en abyme* in literature, and on Maurice Blanchot, one of Littell's major influences, and his concept of the image as an image of death (Millet and Littell 20). In framing the analysis of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* I am also inspired by Jacques Derrida's "hauntology," a term he coined in *The Specters of Marx* to designate that which incessantly disrupts ontology, haunts presence, and makes being quiver by introducing alterity, absence, and silence.³

Mise en abyme, Blanchot's concept of the image, and Derrida's hauntology are three concepts that relate to the semiotic break that has allowed Littell, among others, to discard mimetic representations of an "exterior" reality in favor of either abstract representations, simulacrum devoid of referents, or "figural" embodiments of the artistic object without an "exterior" referent, à la Deleuze (Littell, *Triptych* 90-95; Fort 227). Narrators and characters are therefore depicted as "real" isolated embodied images, who are "true" to their nature as images that renounce representation and create a hauntological space. In what follows, I show the ways in which the novel combines abstract and corporeal images in presenting uniquely conjoined portrayals of indefinite bodies that are nonetheless enraptured in extreme sensations.

Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version presents power relations between narrators and characters in which violence and aberrant sexual acts, pain, and trauma accompany the destruction of space. The novel ponders about representing violence and giving testimony to violent actions, suffering, trauma, and other excessive sights and sensations. These issues also appear in *The Kindly Ones*; but in this case, as noted in secondary sources, the question of representation and witnessing is directed towards the outrageous violence of the Holocaust: Max Aue, the narrator-perpetrator plays the witness role, and gradually becomes increasingly engaged in persecuting Jews (see for example, Sandberg, Barjonet, Grethlein, Razinsky, Roth, Suleiman). Furthermore, stylistic and thematic elements such as the novel's length, repetitive descriptions of corpses, the combination of reality and fantasy, intertextuality, and the blend of Aue's sexual abominations, matricide, and genocide, place *The Kindly Ones* in the context of the literature of excess (Razinsky, "Testimony" 70; Sandberg 236).

³ Derrida defines "hauntology" as that which is "neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death" (Derrida 63. See also Loevlie 337).

In spite of lacking the historical specificity of *The Kindly Ones*, *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* is also thematically and stylistically excessive. It is overstuffed with vividly detailed orgies and brutalities, intimate sensations, as well as extreme portrayals of bruised, twisted bodily organs, orgasms, bodily fluids, deterioration, loss, and decay. Interruptions and fragmentations of the narrative—for example, in transitions from one site to another—add to the novel's stylistic excessiveness. The narration of unspecified warfare or state violence toward the end of each chapter accentuates an idea already insinuated in *The Kindly Ones* about the universality of violence and war. By generalizing violence and war, the novel presents them as a universal problem, as if violence was always the same old story (“une vieille histoire”) repeatedly told again and again, conveying that violence can only be presented metonymically since it is, in fact, unrepresentable.

The excessive styles of both *The Kindly Ones* and *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* transcend classical forms of representation and break with the usual conception of the narrator who safely witnesses events from a distant vantage point. Further, violent and excessive images in both novels dazzle narrators, preventing them from seeing and grasping, leaving them in a state of fixed fascination with images in an exchange of opaque gazes.

Here is where my argument about the “hauntological” structure of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* and its corporeal death-images becomes relevant, for it concerns the collapse of the typical agency of witnessing and its replacement by a witness whose “blindness” can only offer a gaze, a mirror, or a body bereft of subjectivity. This new kind of witnessing, I argue, is unable to see and represent horror and violence; the most it can do is to present them metonymically in a fragmented and embodied form.

Expectedly, readers may be either enraptured by the novel's excessive images or, alternatively, exhausted by their perpetual recurrence, but they may also realize the disjuncture between images and their metatextual force. Whereas narrators in the novel are naturally blind to the metatextual effects of writing, readers are at a vantage for making sense of these narrative strategies.⁴ Readers' attentiveness to the gap between violent and excessive images and their metatextual purposeful creation may encourage an ethical reading of the novel, in which readers' ethical sensitivity to prevailing violence may be sharpened.

The dialectical gap between narrators and writing in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* may be extracted from Littell's intricate comment on Bacon's painting: “the figure is the painted *object* in the picture; the subject, as in all painting... is paint itself. It is the paint that talks about what it is about” (Littell, *Triptych* 40). If writing is the subject of the novel, then the

⁴ In this context, Susan R. Suleiman's assessment of *The Kindly Ones* is relevant, for she identifies the novel's “derealization” effect or the subversion of its realistic dimension due to readers' awareness of the author's stylistic manipulations, “the way we might be aware of the camera's movements in a film” (Suleiman 9).

object is the narrator-witness who is also, in Dälenbach's terms, "The Mirror in the Text"; that is, an object that reflects and deflects other objects and narrators or characters, as well as the act of writing itself. Indeed, since objects and narrators are, paradoxically, also words deriving from writing, a reflection on the novel's *mise en abyme* is due.

Mise en abyme, Writing, and Violence

To paraphrase Littell's synopsis on the back cover of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, his novel deals with essential human relations within the family, the couple, and the group, as well as situations such as solitude and war. Yet, these relations and situations are presented in significantly abstract forms that enhance the enigma of the text. Narrators are nameless, almost amorphous, lacking even their basic symbolic functions (mother, father, son). Only a few differentiating features distinguish between them: short-haired woman, blond man, blond child, and so on. Rather than appearing as unique or complex individuals, their fabricated character is purposely accentuated, revealing their factitious creation. This artificiality is augmented as narrators find themselves enmeshed in unexpected situations: a man exits a labyrinth, gets a military uniform, and turns instantly into an officer; objects appear suddenly and out of nowhere: keys crop up in a car's glove compartment; food is found in a deserted apartment. Narrators seem to play a role as if in a film set.⁵ Further, although each one of them speaks in the first person, it is not clear whether the novel presents one narrator metamorphosing into seven narrators or several narrators taking on various forms along the narrative. In this respect, narrators and other characters might not be characters at all; instead, each of them may represent "a voice, a tone, a gaze," recalling how Littell characterized Aue in *The Kindly Ones* (Nora and Littell 29). This abstract narrative style, however, stands in stark contrast to detailed descriptions of sensations, body parts and fluids, and enrapturing experiences of sex and violence.

The combination of abstract reductive descriptions and excessive corporeal details destabilizes both representation and the gap between reality and representation, generating "unstable ontologies" (Marchant 26) in which reality and fiction become perforated and haunted by each other. This hauntological space of literature may be illustrated by the metatextual device of *mise en abyme*.

In *The Mirror in the Text*, Dälenbach contends that art, specifically arts "void of content, or non-signifying semiotic systems, such as music," are one of the thematic fields that may serve as metaphors for the organization of the text (Dälenbach 96-7). Indeed, in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*,

⁵ Littell said in an interview on the occasion of the novel's release that the different sets of the novel may be viewed as film sets, some of which were created around the production of his 2016 documentary *Wrong Elements*, about child soldiers in Uganda (Littell, *Entretien*).

music functions as a textual *mise en abyme*, reflecting the very act of writing, similar to the weaving machine in *The Kindly Ones* (Barjonet 117).⁶ In *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, other arts, such as photography, film, and painting, besides music, also serve as metaphors for the narrative's code, or, in Dälenbach's words, for "the narrative's ability to define its signs through these signs themselves, and thus to make explicit its mode of operation" (218 n.9).⁷

For example, lying on a beach and listening to music with her headphones, the hermaphrodite narrator in Chapter Six of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* recounts:

La musique s'entrelaçait à mon corps, en explorant les moindres possibilités pour les intensifier, avant d'en susciter de nouvelles; en retour, le champ neutre que je formais offrait aux intervalles entre les notes la dimension nécessaire pour pleinement développer la folle richesse de leur vide sonore; ainsi, ils traçaient mes limites tout en les annulant, et moi, je faisais de cette abstraction une chose charnelle, juteuse, vivante, gonflée de sève s'écoulant par la moindre fente. (Littell, *VHNV* 289)

The music interlaced with my body, exploring the slightest possibilities in order to intensify them, before arousing new possibilities; in turn, the neutral field I formed offered in the intervals between the notes the necessary dimension for fully developing the mad richness of their sonorous emptiness; thus, they traced my limits while cancelling them, and I, I made from this abstraction a carnal thing, juicy, lively, filled with sap flowing through the slightest crack.⁸

Music sounds intertwining with the hermaphrodite's body both reflect and define the operative principles of the text; namely, the act of writing as manufacturing "from this abstraction a carnal thing." Images in Littell do not remain abstract; they become embodied. Beyond their supposed role in the

⁶ Dälenbach explains the distinction between the textual and the fictional *mise en abyme*: "Like the double-sided reality of linguistic signs, the utterance can be either apprehended in its reference to something else or grasped in itself. The way it is constituted therefore produces two different sorts of *mise en abyme*, one (fictional) duplicating the narrative in its referential dimension as a story told, the other (textual) reflecting it in its literal aspect as an organization of meaning (Dälenbach 94).

⁷ In this sense, Littell's *Triptych* is not just a theoretical key to the author's literary work. Littell deals with Bacon's painting and art in general as an intermedial device that reflects on literature and his own fiction, becoming a repetitive metareference in his *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, where he employs scenes *à la* Bacon depicting a myriad of bodily sensations, including so-called "obscene" functions (defecating, copulating, dying—as he already did in *The Kindly Ones*), and incorporates music pieces and narratives describing photographs, and the process of filming a pornographic movie (Littell, *VHNV* 295-307).

⁸ All translations of quotes from *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* are mine.

plot, the body and its sensations, as well as its excessive sexual and violent experiences become sites for crafting further images.

In addition to music, several forms of reiterative action in the novel, such as running, walking, wandering, erring, and plunging, surfacing, and swimming in a pool may be seen as encoded metaphors of writing, following a textual *mise en abyme*. In each chapter, narrators run through grey, dim, and labyrinthine corridors without visible ceilings and a distinctive inside or outside, bumping into almost indiscernible walls.⁹

Pondering the origin of a text within a text, Dälenbach also suggests "transcendental *mise en abyme*," as a subcategory of the textual *mise en abyme*, "because of its ability to reveal something in the text that apparently transcends the text, and to reflect, within the narrative, what simultaneously originates, motivates, institutes and unifies it, and fixes in advance what makes it possible" (Dälenbach 101). The transcendental *mise en abyme* reflects on the impossible origin of the text, which for Blanchot is "the central point of the work . . . the point which cannot be reached, yet the only one which is worth reaching" (Blanchot, *Space* 53).¹⁰ Indeed, it is impossible to reach the work's origin because it is always already included in the work, and can only be reflected upon from within it. In *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, images such as the sea, the river, the pool and the mirror seem to function as metatextual tropes of the work's unrepresentable origin, from which narrators, figures, and other images emerge.¹¹

If the work of art cannot represent its external beginning; if everything is already fictionalized, then, paradoxically, everything is real. Citing Blanchot's words in *The Madness of the Day*, Littell's epigraph in his *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* reads "tout cela était réel, notez-le."¹² Not coincidentally, *The Madness of the Day* ends with: "A story? No. No stories. Never again." For Blanchot and Littell, literature blurs the limits between reality, truth, and fiction. In this respect, Littell cites Van Gogh's words—

⁹ See, for example, pp.12, 26, 53-54, 100-01, 104, 135, 163-64, 325, and 328. The structure and subject of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* are suggestive of Blanchot's *Thomas the Obscure*, where the movement from one site to another (the sea, the woods, the hotel room, the grave, etc.—in Blanchot's *récit*) is metatextually analogous to the experiences of writing and reading. The contorted and dimmed corridors and leather walls in the novel are reminiscent of Beckett's story *Le Dépeupleur* (*The Lost Ones*) mentioned by Deleuze in the context of Bacon's art. In Beckett's story characters dwell in a flattened and dimmed cylinder with rubber walls covered with niches and alcoves. The characters climb ladders and roam around in search of their lost ones. The lost ones might be the characters' others—loved ones, doubles, or bodies (Deleuze xi, 14).

¹⁰ Dälenbach mentions Blanchot's *The Book to come* in this respect (Dälenbach 101 n.19, 219).

¹¹ See, for example, Littell's description of Bacon's painting of George Dyer in which "the figure grows out of the pool," not reflecting the referent, but constituting an image bereft of a referent (Littell, *Triptych* 111).

¹² In *The Kindly Ones*, Aue expresses almost the same words when, suffering from an ear infection, he narrates his hallucinations: "Tout ceci est réel, croyez-le" (Littell, *Bienveillantes* 222) 'All this is real, believe me.' (*Kindly Ones* 407).

referenced by Bacon—about "the need to make changes in reality, which become lies that are truer than the literal truth. This is the only possible way the painter can bring back the intensity of the reality which he is trying to capture. I believe that reality in art is something profoundly artificial and that it has to be recreated" (Littell, *Triptych* 98). Creating the "true image" (73-113) is thus a way in which literature transforms reality, or the way in which the text—in Dälenbach's words—"weaving itself... aims to change the world by using it as the primary matter for its methodical elaboration" (Dälenbach 100). The novel may be viewed, then, as a "récit sur rien,"¹³ a 'story about nothing,' representing neither the text nor any reality beyond it, but, instead, a story that weaves reality by blurring the boundaries between reality and haunting images.

But if writing is the subject of the novel, a "récit sur rien" that "talks about what it is about," then violent images are some of the novel's objects. By means of breaking with mimetic representation and the creation of excessive "true images," Littell weaves violent reality into *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*. Indeed, narrators in the novel witness violence, experience it, and also force it on others. In Chapter Three, the narrator, a woman who appears to be a prostitute, is mercilessly beaten, stubbed, raped, and humiliated by a customer, on whom she later takes revenge by sodomizing him (Littell, *VHNV* 115-25). Later on in the chapter, the same narrator is brutally penetrated and hit during an orgy (148-49); and at the end she is seized and abused by an undefined group of soldiers in a war zone (154-64)—and these are only few examples of violent images in the novel.

The interrelation between writing and violence is conveyed, according to Aurélie Barjonet, by the lace industry, which serves as a metaphor in *The Kindly Ones* for the extermination industry and "the transformation of bodies," as well as for writing as "manufacturing memories" (Barjonet 112-13; Littell, *Kindly Ones* 4). The double metaphoric meaning of the weaving loom as an apparatus for manufacturing fiction and Nazi extermination, noted by Barjonet, can also apply to *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, where violent and captivating images are manufactured from the threads of its subject—words and writing. The connection between weaving, writing, and violence, implied in the title of *The Kindly Ones*, is also rehearsed in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, in which an old story of violent human relations is being weaved, unraveled and recounted in various versions.¹⁴ In the next section, I analyze the way death images devoid of referents weave violent reality into images of violence. As will be further clarified below, I

¹³ "Récit sur Rien" (2009) is a *récit* 'tale' written by Littell. Parts of it seem to echo in the sixth chapter of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*. In the "Air" chapter of *The Kindly Ones*, Aue cites a poem by Guillem IX in which the speaker refers to his intention to write a poem about nothing, writing "I'll make a song about nothing at all" (Littell, *Kindly Ones* 913).

¹⁴ As Barjonet notes, the weaving loom metaphor implicated in the title of *The Kindly Ones* recalls Greek myths that reference characters in Aeschylus's original tragedy, such as Athena, the Goddess of war and weaving, and the Parcae, the three weavers of destiny (Barjonet 115).

suggest that by presenting rather than representing disturbing images of violence, this novel may encourage readers' moral alertness to prevailing violence in their own societies.

Death Images as Images of Violence

I now turn to examine Blanchot's death images, which function at two levels in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*. Metatextually, they operate both as images bereft of a referent and as sites of corporeal excessive or violent sensations. These two levels correspond respectively to Littell's dialectical ideas about writing as the subject of the novel and about images of violence as its object.

In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot presents two versions of the image. According to the first, the image revives inanimate objects, becoming thereby "the life-giving negation of the thing" and as such subjected to our grasp and understanding. However, this first version is always complemented and haunted by another in which the image or poetic language do not represent the thing in its ideal and vivid form, but present it as an obscured double, as an enticing, overpowering shadow that transports us "not to the absent thing, but to its absence as presence, to the neutral double of the object in which all belonging to the world is dissipated" (262).

Since the image appears as a residue, a specter, a shadow of the absence of a referent, rather than its representation, the ultimate image for Blanchot is the corpse: the residue of a body, hovering between life and death, already not alive and yet dying incessantly and interminably (Blanchot, *Space* 26-7). Significantly, as Littell warns, the image of death in art is not meant as a material death (Littell, *Triptych* 111), but as an indication of the transformation of the referent into paint or words: a "smear of painted blood" (113). As such, the death image is a metatextual reference to the creation of images and to weaving a reality of violence, death, and sensation into the text.

The cadaver of a naked woman and the genderless hermaphrodite are the ultimate literary corpse-images in the novel. The character of the hermaphrodite, which recurs throughout the novel and reappears as the narrator in Chapter Six, denotes the neutrality of the death image. The hermaphrodite is what Blanchot calls "the neuter," that which is "non-present, non-absent," but "an excess that is a lack" (Taylor 232-233), and, as such, it disturbs being and presence. For Blanchot, the neuter is the "third," the third gender that is "neither masculine nor feminine," which is written as *il* 'it' (233). 'It' forms an alterity that encumbers any possible unity and identity. But as an indefinite neutrality, the hermaphrodite in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* designates not only a death image, but also constitutes an abstract-corporeal witness who attends the killing of two men by her gangster lover (Littell, *VHNV* 315-16) and experiences a police transphobic violence during and after the gang's arrest (321-24). The figure of the hermaphrodite

encompasses, then, a death image weaved into the text to underline the problem of contemporary violence.

Similar to the hermaphrodite, the cadaver constantly reappears throughout the chapters in different contexts as an impersonal body, bereft of (sexual) identity, and always mysterious and fascinating. It, too, embodies a death image which is also an image of violence. In Chapter Five, the image of a cadaver reappears both in repelling and captivating ways before the narrator, a boy. Floating on a raft in a river, amid a savaged, Edenic zone, the child finds a naked cadaver lying on a bed, covered by a worn out green-gold bed cover. When the boy finds the naked cadaver, it is so badly decomposed, with its buttocks covered with worms, that the child is not able to determine if it is a man or a woman. Appalled by this sight, the boy recounts "Je frissonnai mais n'arrivai pas à détacher mes yeux de cette vision affreuse, je l'examinai en retenant mon souffle, remarquant les moindres détails, comme la coupe des cheveux, ras sur la nuque putréfiée" (Littell, *VHNV* 245) 'I shuddered but couldn't detach my eyes from that awful vision, I examined it holding my breath, noticing the smallest details, like the haircut, short on the putrefied neck.' A variation of this image reappears later on in Chapter Five (263). Besides its function as a death image and an image of violence, the naked woman's cadaver and the narrator's reaction correspond to the fascination with the image, which I explore below.

Violent Images and their Effects

Blanchot defines the image as "a nothingness that regards us from out of the heart of all possible experience" (Fort 224), or, in his words, "the image, capable of negating nothingness, is also the gaze of nothingness upon us" (Blanchot, *Friendship* 40; Littell, *Triptych* 95). Both fascinating and haunting, the image looks back at us with its appalling and destabilizing power. Fascinating its witness, the image—in its double engendering and haunting capacity—freezes the stunned spectator in a combination of revulsion, curiosity, and attraction.

Violent images both attracting and repelling narrators are recurrent themes in Littell's novels. Besides the episode quoted above, such images appear in other places throughout *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* (Littell, *VHNV* 51, 88-100, 245, 263, 331, 355). The narrator on the first chapter, for example, is riveted by a scene in which a blond boy (who could be his own son from the beginning of the chapter) is executed (51). The same contradictory reactions of fascination and repulse appear also in *The Kindly Ones* when Aue faces the bodies of Jews who were killed in Lutsk: "I wanted to close my eyes, or put my hands over my eyes, and at the same time I wanted to look, to look as much as I could, and by looking, try to understand, this incomprehensible thing, there, in front of me, this void for human

thought" (Littell, *Kindly Ones* 34).¹⁵ Serving as an example of reality weaved into fiction to form an excessive image, this scene from *The Kindly Ones* and similar scenes in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* demonstrate the impenetrability of violence and the violent image. Baffled before such sights, narrators are neither able to fathom them nor to detach from them.

Referencing war photographs and images in *The Kindly Ones*, Zoë Roth claims that often images may not only represent violence, but also produce it. More generally, linking the representation of the Holocaust in *The Kindly Ones* with media images of recent wars and terror attacks, Roth points to the "war of images," or the power of images to produce terror and to traumatize.¹⁶

Our contemporary "war of images" finds in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* a more comprehensive take on the effects of gazing at representations of violence and war, when these are general and ubiquitous rather than bound by a specific time and place. This broader take highlights the potentially exhausting and dulling effects of such a "war of images" on spectators—either narrators within the novel or readers. This is intimated in Chapter Two by the narrator who appears as a war photographer in the final part of the chapter.¹⁷ The sight of war and war victims is unbearable to him and he constantly tries to turn his eyes away from seeing these sights and evade the experience of war; yet, paradoxically, he relentlessly documents and takes pictures (Littell, *VHNV* 88-100). In one of these incidents, the narrator-photographer captures with his camera the rear end of a bloodstained van, imbrued with bits of flesh, from which a cadaver is sliding to the ground. Pondering this image, he says:

Mais vu sur le petit écran de mon téléphone, ce spectacle affreux perdait toute sa charge, se rapetissait, prenait une teinte presque abstraite, qu'il ne perdrait pas, je le savais, lorsque, téléchargé et diffusé, il se répercuterait sur les écrans de monde entier, arrachant peut-être à certains de ceux qui le contemperaient une brève inspiration d'horreur, déjà oubliée dans le temps du geste nécessaire pour passer à l'image suivante. (89)

¹⁵ Aue then recalls a scene from Plato's *Republic* which he later cites, describing Leontius, who, disgusted at the prospect of dead bodies, struggles with himself at the thought of watching them, and finally, overcome by his desire, enjoys watching the dead bodies (98).

¹⁶ The actuality of this concern turns *The Kindly Ones* into a novel that "historicizes the present, not the past" (Roth 83).

¹⁷ For Littell, the photographic image is "the ultimate image, the ultimate icon, [it] is always the picture of the instant of death, of death *as it is happening*" (Littell, *Triptych* 95, italics in original). Besides echoing Roland Barthes's words in *Camera Lucida* about photography as "a micro-version of death" (14), photography here reflects intermedially on the very act of writing.

But seen on the small screen of my phone, this horrible spectacle lost all its power, shrank, took on an almost abstract hue, which it would not lose, I knew it, when, downloaded and broadcast, it would reappear on the screens all over the world, perhaps extracting from some of those who would contemplate it a brief inspiration of horror, before being forgotten by the time necessary for the gesture to move on to the next image.

This narrator comments on our epochal malady of becoming too accustomed to horror due to the over-exposure to images of violence or the "war of images." This problem is at base of Aue's mental and moral deterioration in *The Kindly Ones* from being an observer to becoming a perpetrator whose "feeling of scandal came to wear out all by itself" (Littell, *Kindly Ones* 178). Notably, "this habitualisation of the most profoundly evil behavior is the real scandal," notes Sandberg (244). In a textual *mise en abyme*, the various comments made by narrators in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* may seem to be reflecting on a generalized difficulty with the profusion of images of violence and ecstasy in Littell's novels, which might anesthetize readers rather than agitate and awaken them. Some critics disparage this effect as pornography of violence (Grethlein 576), which becomes a futile attempt to shock numb readers who had already fallen prey to the overall weariness of contemporary superabundant images.

In contrast, I claim that *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, similar to *The Kindly Ones*, points at rather than produces the problem of habitualization to violent images. From a critical perspective, Littell seems to be suggesting that the horror of war is too excessive to document and that any unmediated reproduction or direct mimetic representation (as shown in the narrator-photographer's camera example) would not convey the atrocity but instead abate it. By means of artistically manipulated images, the estrangement produced by shocking reproductions of violence would give way to critical representations that would keep readers morally alert.¹⁸ Rather than appearing in the novel as acheiropoietic impersonal reproductions, photographic images in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* are often manipulated, doctored, or damaged (Littell, *VHNV* 128-29, 237, 257, 284-85, 344) in order to impart them with a personal significance. This prevents images from becoming what Blanchot critiqued as frozen and lifeless public photographs that lose their singularity when they become part of the culture industry (Lyons 119-123). Recalling Littell's reference to Bacon's insistence on "the importance of the painter's hand in his work," it is the writer's hand that "blemishes" his creations in the novel, producing intriguing images that avoid the numbing and anesthetizing of the "war of images" (Littell, *Triptych* 102).

While narrators and characters in Littell's novels remain fascinated by violent or spectacular images, readers might discern the literary artistic ruse

¹⁸ Sandberg mentions Viktor Shklovsky's effect of estrangement in this respect (245).

aimed at highlighting the contrived nature of literary images and the very process of creating them. Fascination turns narrators into blinded witnesses, especially when, towards the end of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, they become mere bodies, mirrors, or gazes devoid of any subjectivity.

Flesh-witnessing and the Gaze of the Image

Narrators in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* appear frequently as witnesses who cannot testify to what they see, since what they see are unbearable, forbidden, or impossible events. This kind of gazing is connected to a literary image of the body that hints to a neutral body or the body as a site of neutrality. Being unable to witness and see, the most this neutral body or witness can do is to mirror and show violence, trauma, and enraptured experiences.

A significant feature of the image of the corpse/hermaphrodite, prevalently presented throughout *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, emphasizes its buttocks or backside (Littell, *VHNV* 16, 65, 72, 91, 245, 281, 285, 305, 364-65). Buttocks, as body parts of the lower back, become one of the ciphers indexing death and remains, and whatever is left behind and improper. Belonging to cadaverous body matters out of bound, similarly to other body fluids such as feces, vomit, sperm, urine, and organs such as the anus and vagina, Bataille identified such remains as ciphers or "objects" of the gaping body, a body lacking definite boundaries (Taylor 126, 134).

Depictions of backs turned away from viewers and shut eyes denote death in the novel. Indeed, Littell hints to this when he describes Bacon's paintings of his lover George Dyer in the process of dying, "with his eyes tightly shut" and his back turned away from viewers (Littell, *Triptych* 67). Eyes closed are associated with a kind of seeing and testifying in which the ability to see and to testify is subverted and finally cancelled, since the object to be seen—or rather its absence—dazes the spectator, fascinates, and blinds her. The spectator's gaze, unable to see, grasp, and understand the image, becomes coagulated and neutralized, like the image, becoming "a directionless gleam" (Blanchot, *Space* 32) that looks without seeing. When shocking images block a narrator's vision, the allure of objects emerge, unraveling what is typically hidden from sight; namely, the image. Ungraspable by ordinary vision, the image oscillates between being unraveled or concealed in rapturous experiences that blur vision. The fascination with the image is double; once when we gaze at the image and once when we are gazed back by it: "the image gazes, with no symmetry able to make of this returned gaze the abyssal projection of the actual gaze" (Ropars-Wuilleumier 142). Therefore, the abyssal gaze of the image is what makes it so mesmerizing, making it also impersonal, ungraspable, and unattainable.

The recurring images of buttocks and anuses in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* are also connected with this abyssal gaze (Littell, *VHNV* 15, 16, 65, 72, 91, 245, 281, 285, 305, 364-65). In his "The Pineal Eye," Bataille

links the pineal or “third” eye with the anus as two inverted and analogous objects in which vision “is torn out and torn apart by the sunbursts into which it stares” (Bataille, *Visions* 84). In Chapter Five, the child’s vision is blurred as his gaze is riveted by the corpse’s rotting buttocks (see above, Littell, *VHNV* 245). In *The Kindly Ones*, also abundant in anal and coprophagous imagery, Aue refers to “the hole” in his head, caused by his injury in Stalingrad, as a “pineal eye... not turned to the sun... but directed at the darkness, gifted with the power of looking at the bare face of death” (Littell, *Kindly Ones* 443). In a dream he dreams while working in Auschwitz, Aue describes himself as “more like a pure gaze or even a camera than a living being” (620). Nevertheless, he neither sees nor grasps death and evil but is only able to present them as a blind, “dead” witness allured by them. Paradoxically, whereas his fascination is “the real scandal” (Sandberg), it simultaneously enables exposing the atrocity of the Nazis’ extermination machine.

Petrified in front of an atrocious spectacle, dazzled and dazed witnesses become mere gazes, opaque mirrors that look at images within the text and at readers. Narrators become “dead” witnesses or images of death.¹⁹ This is enabled by the separation of the corporeal death image from the living subject, described by Blanchot as resemblance and doubling of the deceased: “[I]t is as if he were *doubled* by himself, joined to his solemn impersonality by resemblance and by the image” (Blanchot, *Space* 258).

Separated from their subjectivity, some of the narrators in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* appear to be detached from the pain and suffering they have caused, despite meticulously depicting their sexual transgressions and abuse of others. This characterization fits well with what Littell defined, when analyzing Bacon’s paintings, as “the indifferent witness” (Littell, *Triptych* 46-47, 66-67): a witness who “looks away from the other’s suffering or glances at it without caring” (46). Such witness is indifferent and blind, captivated by an atrocious image and capable only to mirror it. In Chapter Seven, for instance, the narrator cuts up photographs of him and a young boy, apparently his estranged or dead son (family ties are only implicit in the novel), and looks coldly yet extensively at the shreds: “Cela suscitait en moi un sentiment glacial, je ne pouvais détacher les yeux de ces images et en même temps je ne pouvais plus les regarder” (331) ‘That aroused in me a cold feeling, I could not detach my eyes from these images, and at the same time I could not look at them any longer.’ Later on, when this narrator attends a form of ritual humiliation of a blond woman, he is both fascinated and repelled by the spectacle and thus avoids taking part in it (355). At the end of the chapter, this narrator depicts, in the same cold and painstaking style, the rape and murder of a blond woman—possibly his wife in Chapter One—who recognizes him, while he is oblivious to her. He later on describes himself

¹⁹ “Pour les morts” ‘for the dead’ the dedication to the dead in the Holocaust and WWII, written at the beginning of Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*, may signify here an inscription of and for writing *qua* creating images of death and inner mirrors, i.e., witnesses who can only deflect and reflect on violent images.

killing a blond boy, who could be his son, based on the first and following chapters.

The significance of these detached testimonies of horrific events in *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* may be clarified by Liran Razinsky's analysis of the role of witnessing and testimony in *The Kindly Ones*. Following Yuval Noah Harari's distinction between the eyewitness and the flesh-witness during war, Razinsky claims that Aue is a flesh-witness, because he is focused mainly on his own war and extermination experiences, rather than on mere objective details.²⁰ However, Razinsky observes how Aue's reporting as a flesh-witness collapses at one point, as his own body becomes the witness and his speech turns superfluous, unable to represent and transfer his subjective yet incommunicable experiences (195).

Furthering this argument, I claim that, specifically towards the end of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, Littell chooses a third type of witness: neither the speaking subject nor the narrator's body (as in Aue), but just a body, an indefinite and neutral body in which pores, scars, and holes serve simultaneously as protruding bulges and phalluses that become, following Bataille, eyes capable of gazing back at spectators.²¹

Illustrating "flesh witnessing," the image of the infinite, volatile body appears in Chapter Seven, when the narrator finds, in a studio, a wall covered with leather wallpaper studded with "petits anus," (Littell, *VHNV* 346) 'little anuses' which he fingers, licks and "makes love" to. After the narrator's body merges with the wall and becomes one with it, it emerges from the wall in the shape of an enameled statue: "je coulais dans le mur, mon corps en émergeait encore comme une figure en ronde-bosse" (347) 'I sank into the wall, my body emerging again like a sculpture in the round.' The narrator describes how the anuses on the wall wink at him, as small mirrors that both reflect his fragmented body and gaze back at him: "comme des yeux me regardant à leur tour, petits miroirs me reflétant fragment par fragment" (346) 'Like eyes looking at me in turn, small mirrors reflecting me fragment by fragment.' The embedded anuses form a genderless porous body: "certains étaient pâles et clairs, d'autres plus foncés, voire violacés, mais rien d'autre ne permettait de les distinguer, ni de discerner s'ils appartenaient à des mâles ou des femelles" (346) 'some were pale and light, others darker or even purple, but nothing else could distinguish them, or determine whether they belonged to males or females.' Neither male nor female, the wall nonetheless resembles "une peau humaine" (346) 'a human skin,' soft, warm and moist. Reflecting on the

²⁰ According to Harari, the eyewitness concentrates on objective facts, the flesh-witness deals with the witness's own subjective experience of presence and participation in the scene of action (Razinsky, "Testimony" 184).

²¹ Blanchot also writes in the context of alterity about "the body of no one, of the interval" (Blanchot, *Disaster* 28). Here, he goes beyond Levinas in viewing the Other as an anonymous entity that haunts, disrupts, and inflicts subjectivity, describing it as "a *subjectivity without a subject*: the wounded space... the already dead body which no one could ever own, or ever say of it, *I, my body*" (30).

eventual coalescence of his body with that of the wall, the narrator says, "enfin je m'y confondis tout à fait, ma peau tendue comme celle qui la prolongeait sur toute la surface, seul mon proper anus se démarquait encore, un petit renflement sur la surface lisse, que je serrais et relâchais" (347) 'Finally, I was quite confused, my skin stretched like the one that extended it all over the surface, only my anus protruded again, a little bulge on the smooth surface, which I tightened and released.'

The section about the volatile wall reflects, in a fictional *mise en abyme*, the recurrent labyrinthine corridors of the novel. The walls of corridors are also studded with niches, statues, doorknobs, holes, abysses and fleeting shadows, which narrators run into, caress, open, and penetrate (342-43). Walls, corridors, doors, and other openings, therefore, correlate to penetrated and beaten bodies of narrators and characters, accentuating the neutrality and impersonality of their bodies, while bearing witness on a more general way to the trauma and violence done to bodies.

In conclusion, by means of "flesh-witnessing," these abstract-corporeal and spectacular images of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version* metonymically convey the general sense of an all-encompassing, global violence that inherently exists everywhere in our present-day world. This violence cannot be grasped by a mindful witness or even represented by the bodily effects of a witness; it can only be "flesh-witnessed," that is presented in a series of figural, corporeal death images. In order to communicate the uncommunicable horrors of violence to readers, a transcendental *mise en abyme* is needed, which transforms reality into distorted death-images, and only then could be weaved into a text. Flesh-witnessing, by means of which the bodies of narrators and characters become images and sites of violence that gaze back at readers, constitutes the disturbing corpus of *Une Vieille Histoire: Nouvelle Version*, *The Kindly Ones* and Littell's work in general. This unsettling yet compelling corpus seems to be aimed at grabbing readers' attention to timeless states of violence in order to shake them out of the ethical indifference in which contemporary society has sunk into.

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