

<CHT>DEHUMANIZATION IN LITERATURE AND THE FIGURE OF THE PERPETRATOR¹

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<abstracttitle>Abstract

<abstracttext>Chapter 14. Andrea Timár engages with literary representations of the experience of perpetrators of dehumanization. Her chapter focuses on perpetrators of dehumanization who do not violate laws of their society (i.e., they are not criminals) but exemplify what Simona Forti, inspired by Hannah Arendt, calls “the normality of evil.” Through the parallel examples of Dezső Kosztolányi’s *Anna Édes* (1926) and Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950), Timár first explores a possible clash between criminals and perpetrators of dehumanization, showing literature’s exceptional ability to reveal the gap between ethics and law. Second, she examines novels focalized through perpetrators and the difficult narrative empathy they provoke, arguing that only the critical reading of these novels can make one engage with the potential perpetrator in oneself. As case studies, Timár examines Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which may potentially turn its reader into an accomplice in the process of dehumanization, and J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986), which puts on critical display the dehumanizing potentials of both aesthetic representation and sympathy as imaginative violence. Third, she reads Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* [*Les Bienveillantes*, 2006], which can make the reader question, through the polyphony of the voice of its protagonist, the notions of narrative voice and readerly empathy, only to reveal that the difficulty involved in empathizing with perpetrator characters lies not so much in the characters’ being perpetrators, but rather in their being *literary* characters. Eventually, Timár briefly touches upon the problem of the aesthetic and the comic via Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) to ask whether one can avoid some necessarily dehumanizing aspects of humor.

<H1>14.1 Introduction

<TX1>This chapter will examine the *relationship* between dehumanization and literature by focusing on the ways in which dehumanization is presented in literary works. Even though the truth claims literature makes are non-referential (i.e., fictional works are not expected to have a historical, verifiable referent), this chapter is based on the assumption that the critical study of literary fiction, can open new paths in our understanding of real world atrocities, too. As Aristotle famously claims, “the function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e., what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. [...] For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars” (Aristotle 1987, p. 12). Indeed, the fictional status of literature does not reduce its heuristic potential; literary fiction may invite to imaginatively experience what it is like to be dehumanized, to dehumanize, or both, while also offering a “safe distance” necessary for critical thinking to take place. This duality of proximity and distance, emotional engagement and critical reasoning, the immersion in and reflection on language offered by the literary space may equally contribute to the better understanding of “our”² own potential implication in processes of dehumanization (Rothberg, 2019). Meanwhile, the language of literature as a *non-transparent* medium that draws attention to itself may help us ask questions about the relationship between dehumanization and representation *per se*.

<TX2>The kind of dehumanization I shall consider is not an ontological or (post-)historical given, nor is it the consequence of some natural or biological disaster (induced or not by humans), as is the case with climate change fiction or with fictive accounts of the development or spread of a disease (which would make a timely topic, at present). On the contrary: I understand dehumanization as a complex interpersonal experience, embedded in human history, acted out in human relations, and inflected by human beings onto other human beings. I shall treat dehumanization as a process, rather than a state, or a single event.

<H1>14.2 Literature, empathy, human rights

<TX1>There is scholarly agreement that the literary representation of the experience of victims of dehumanization advances the cause of human rights (Slaughter, [2007](#)). Literature has the potential to brush history against the grain and present a story from the point of view of the dehumanized, generating empathy with victims (Rorty, [1989](#)). According to the historian Lynn Hunt, it was particularly the 18th century novel's ability to generate sympathy for those who had previously been considered as "less than human" that paved the way for the invention of universal human rights (Hunt, [2007](#)).³ According to Martha Nussbaum's influential account, when "one does manage for whatever reason to take up to the individual the literary attitude of sympathetic imagining, the dehumanising portrayal is unsustainable" (Nussbaum [1995](#), p. 92). Nussbaum's key term is "sympathetic imagining," a derivative of what Adam Smith, the 18th century Scottish philosopher, calls "sympathetic imagination"; however, while Smith argues that sympathy is, in fact, "deceitful" and only permits to put ourselves in others' shoes to feel what we ourselves would feel in their situation (Smith [2000](#), pp. 6-7), Nussbaum's sympathy is supposed to allow us to imaginatively experience what it feels like to be *another* person. While scholars offer various criteria to define degrees and forms of sympathy (depending on whether the emphasis is on similarity, difference, the self, the other affects, cognition, etc.⁴), this chapter, rather than discussing these complexities further, will simply use the terms sympathy, narrative empathy, and readerly identification interchangeably, and focus on their role in the imaginative experience of dehumanization generated by literary fiction.

<TX2>Although narrative fiction is still seen by many as "a communicative process in extending the reach of human rights," the link between literary representations of previously dehumanized others and the extension of human rights has also often been questioned (Bex, Craps, Vermeulen, [2019](#), p. 2). For there is no direct relationship between readers' willingness to indulge in the pleasures of narrative empathy, and their empathy for real "others" (Keen, [2007](#); Smith, [2000](#), p. 33; Zunshine, [2006](#)), let alone, their willingness to help them (Prinz, [2011](#)), and/or never to dehumanize them again (Bloom, [2016](#)). Further, Hunt's advocacy of the fundamental similarity of all human beings, which makes readerly identification possible, may equally yield the appropriation of the voice of the other, and the comfortable certitude of always "knowing what they mean and how they feel" without respecting their difference and distance (cf. Spivak, [1999](#)). As Lyndsey Stonebridge puts it, "[i]magining what it means to be someone other than ourselves might (just) still be the 'core of our humanity,' but unless we reckon with the chequered history of that 'humanity,' generous imagining will remain just that: imagining" (Stonebridge, [2017](#), p. 8).

<H1>14.3 Perpetrators of dehumanization or criminals?

<TX1>In what follows, rather than concentrating on the ways in which victims of dehumanization are or can be represented in literature, I shall examine three novels written from the point of view of the perpetrator. In fact, it is "easy" to empathize with the victims; as Leake puts it, "As readers we are commonly asked to empathize with those who are seen as most deserving of our empathy. These are victims of abuse and oppression. This is a relatively easy form of empathy, because who would not want to empathize with those who are the victims of abuse by others" (p. 176). On the other hand, Leake calls narrative empathy with the perpetrators "difficult empathy," because it affects the image we entertain of ourselves as a good person: when we are invited to identify with a perpetrator, we have to engage, according to Leake, with the potential evil in ourselves. (p. 177) However, as I will later show, stories are never singular, but multiple and ambiguous, and the story of one individual is always more than one: most often, it is not (only) with the perpetrator that we empathize, but (also) with the victim within the perpetrator.

<TX2>Drawing on Hannah Arendt's conception of the "banality of evil," Simona Forti ([2014](#)) makes a historical distinction between, on the one hand, the old image of evil conceptualised

as revolt (epitomised by Milton's Satan), and, on the other, our contemporary concept of the "normality of evil." This latter is characterized by obedience to rules and the perpetuation of existing social norms, and is epitomized by the Nazi (see also Adorno, 2005, pp. 197-198). In a similar vein does Robert Eaglestone (2017) distinguish, via Arendt, between the fascinating monstrosity of characters like Milton's Satan or Richard III on the one hand, and the "emptiness," the "thoughtlessness" of perpetrators on the other (2017, pp. 38-39; see also Brudholm and Lang on dehumanization with or without hate, in this volume.). These latter, as Hannah Arendt (1963) says of Eichmann, are totally unable "ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view" (47-48). Although Arendt is careful not to use the term "empathy" because it denotes a feeling that we should be weary of, and prefers the phrase "enlarged thinking," we may still say, in the context of the present argument, that these perpetrators of dehumanization lack what we would today call cognitive, or perspective-taking empathy. As Arendt puts it, "the ability to see things not only from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present" and to "mak[e] present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent" (Arendt, 1968, pp. 220-222).

<TX2>Although the term "perpetrator" generally designates a perpetrator of crimes, or, more recently, of genocide (Üngör and Anderson, 2019, p. 7), I shall first focus on perpetrators of dehumanization who do not commit crime(s) in the legal sense of the term. In other words, I shall examine characters whose acts are immoral but conform to the political and the legal system of their own place and time. In this context, Ivan Raskolnikov (from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*), or Patrick Bateman (from *American Psycho*), or Shakespeare's Richard III would *not* be considered perpetrators, but criminals, whereas Mr B. from Richardson's *Pamela*, or Alec from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*⁵ are perpetrators of dehumanization who do not break the laws of their own place and time.

<TX2>The best way to discern the difference between criminals and those whom I call perpetrators of dehumanization is to look at literary works presenting criminals and perpetrators side by side as antagonists. As is established, individual revolt against systemic dehumanization instituted as the norm often takes the form of criminal violence (Arendt, 1970, p. 64.), and literature can contribute to our understating of the process and the consequences of dehumanization through its exquisite potential to show the gap between ethical and legal justice. For example, when Moses, the black handyman in Doris Lessing's *Grass is Singing* (1950) murders his cruelly racist white mistress and is awaiting trial, Tony Marston, the bystander, has the "feeling that a monstrous injustice is being done" (Lessing, 1973, p. 31). This "feeling" of "injustice," just like the novel as a whole, reveals an abyss between ethics and law, which may turn out to be more pervasive, more general than the concrete context of Lessing's book.

To take another example, in Dezső Kosztolányi's *Anna Édes* (1926), which otherwise constitutes a world apart, the eponymous servant girl, Anna, similarly kills her mistress, and the bystander witness's, Mr. Moviszter's, testimony at the court equally evokes a "feeling" that points to a kind of justice that is beyond the grasp of the law:

<EXT1>'They [the mistress and the master] behaved coldly towards her [Anna],' stated Moviszter [...]'I always felt so. They gave her no affection. They were heartless.'

<EXT1>'And how did this heartlessness show itself?'

<EXT1>'It is hard to say precisely. But it was distinctly my impression.'

<EXT1>'Then these are only feelings, doctor, mere suspicions, such delicate shades of behaviour that this bench, faced by such a brutal and terrible crime, can hardly take them into account. Because on one side, we have facts: bloody facts. And we too require facts. [...]'

<EXT1> ‘My impression,’ he stubbornly repeated, ‘my impression is that they did not deal with her as with a human being. To them she was not a human being but a machine.’ (Kosztolányi, 1993, pp. 210-211)

<TX2> Whereas the law is applicable only to “facts,” to criminal acts, the process of dehumanization often consists of “shades of behavior” that cannot be pointed at and condemned in a legal proceeding. However, literature is able to show these shades of behavior (from both their perpetrator’s and their victim’s side), and make the reader, like Mr. Moviszter, imaginatively engage with them.

<TX2> Meanwhile, what makes it possible for ordinary perpetrators of dehumanization, such as the colonizers in *The Grass is Singing* or the exploitative bourgeois in *Anna Édes*, to become what they are is the political and social system (the machine) that renders what is ethically unjust (the everyday perpetration of dehumanization) “normal” and legal. Therefore, imaginative engagement with complex perpetrator characters may also bring one closer to an engagement with the potential perpetrator of dehumanization in oneself; rather than strengthening one’s feeling of moral superiority by offering the satisfaction of an easy empathy with the victims (Leake, 2014), they may make one realize that even though it is highly improbable that one ever becomes a criminal, one may easily become a perpetrator of dehumanization.

<TX2> In what follows, I shall examine four novels foregrounding the experience of perpetrators. I shall read them as literary commentaries on the relationship between dehumanization and literary representation, and focus throughout on the function of readerly identification in negotiating this relationship. The first one, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) will serve as an example for dehumanizing literary representations which lure the reader in the position of the perpetrator. The second one, J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986), this critical 20th-century rewrite of *Robinson Crusoe*, will serve as an example for the literary representation of dehumanization. As I will show, *Foe* critically reflects on the dehumanizing potentials of representation itself, and draws attention to the potentially violent aspects of sympathetic imagination, too. The third novel, Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones* [*Les Bienveillantes*, 2006], apart from critically representing dehumanization, also makes us question, through the polyphony of the voice of the protagonist, the very notions of narrative voice and readerly empathy. Eventually, I shall briefly touch upon the problem of the aesthetic (as pertaining to the appreciation of the beautiful) and the comic via Nabokov’s *Lolita*.

<H1>14.4 Readerly complicities: dehumanizing representations, representations of dehumanization

<TX1> In the beginning of the 18th century, there was unanimous agreement on “the conceptualisation of blacks as less than fully human” (Boulukos, 2008, p. 95). Defoe’s 1719 novel, *Robinson Crusoe* is the fictional autobiography of a sailor who builds up a civilization on a desert island, and who eventually turns into the slave-owner of a man he names Friday. *Robinson* has been canonized as the first English novel and the first *Bildungsroman*, as well as the paradigmatic fictional representation of the British colonial expansion, predicated on the dehumanization and concomitant enslavement of the non-European other. Curiously, as Joseph Slaughter reminds us, the novel also served as an example for drafting Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Adopted in 1948, UDHR says, “Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible” (quoted by Slaughter, 2007, p. 48). According to Slaughter, human rights discourse “*presumably* aspires to promote the free and full personality development [not only of bourgeois white men like Crusoe but also] of so many Fridays” (Ibid., p. 53. italics added).

<TX2>We get to know from Crusoe's first person singular account that he rescued, from the hands of cannibals, a "hand some fellow" who had "had all the sweetness and softness of a European in his countenance":

<EXT1>At last he lays his Head flat upon the Ground, close to my Foot, and sets my other Foot upon his Head, as he had done before; and after this, made all the Signs to me of Subjection, Servitude, and Submission imaginable, to let me know, how he would serve me as long as he liv'd; I understood him in many Things, and let him know, I was very well pleas'd with him; in a little Time I began to speak to him, and teach him to speak to me; and first, I made him know his Name should be *Friday*, which was the Day I sav'd his Life; I call'd him so for the Memory of the Time; I likewise taught him to say *Master*, and then let him know, that was to be my Name. (Defoe, 2007, p. 174)

<TX2>Later, Crusoe teaches Friday to speak English, instructs him of the existence of the "true God," and converts him into a Protestant. This may indeed appear as a process of *Bildung* initiated by a benevolent master/educator, Crusoe, who typically wishes Friday to become almost the same, but not quite as, cultivated, Protestant, healthy white Englishman. And since the first person singular narration makes us identify with Crusoe's point of view, we are made to forget that it is precisely by trying to "humanize" Friday that Crusoe dehumanizes him: Crusoe's sole purpose is to render Friday obedient—that is, to use him as a means rather than an end in himself. And even though the thematic level of the novel is supportive of Crusoe's perspective (Friday not only consents to his subjection, but also happily offers to become Crusoe's subject), what we can witness on a rhetorical level is the erasure of Friday as an individual with a proper name and language of his own.

<TX2>In fact, the humanist ideology of *Bildung*, emerging in the 18th century, has long been shown to be conditioned by the forgetting of the processes of dehumanization on which it relies, and by the exclusion of its dehumanized others from the category of the human (cf. Redfield, 1996 as well as Kontler in this volume). And since the 18th-century Defoe *does not frame* Crusoe's dehumanizing narrative and practice as dehumanizing (Defoe shares Crusoe's values), dehumanization is *not critically displayed* as such. Hence, the first person singular narration used in *Robinson Crusoe* may still generate readers' identification with Crusoe's point of view, and they therefore become complicit in dehumanization. This is the result of what literary historians call Defoe's "realism": the text is presented as the true autobiography of a sailor called Robinson Crusoe and seeks to deny its own literary status. In other words, it is the absence of critical distance between author and narrator and the absence of any moral reflection on the part of the narrator that has the most potential to yield naïve readings sympathetic with the narrator protagonist. Only critical readings attentive to Defoe's narrative technique can debunk the dehumanising processes at work in this arch-humanist narrative, which is supposed to represent the process of becoming fully human.

<TX2>As a contrast to *Robinson Crusoe*, J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* is a highly self-conscious novel, which constantly foregrounds its own literary status. Further, it puts on critical display the violent erasures necessarily involved in representation, while equally offering a challenge to the widely accepted claim, propagated by human rights discourse, that it would be desirable to give "human" voice to the "other." As Stonebridge puts it, human "[r]ights [...] are rewarded for the ability to voice the human" (Stonebridge, 2013, p. 117). Coetzee's *Foe* does not vindicate a voice for Friday, but rather acknowledges the complexities involved in the notion of voice, and the equation often made between voice and rights (Rickel, 2013, p. 162).

<TX2>*Foe* is a rewrite of *Robinson Crusoe* but bears strong links to Defoe's other novels, such as *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, too. Whereas women are curiously absent from *Robinson Crusoe* (they have no place in the project of subject and/or empire building), Coetzee introduces a female narrator, Susan Barton, a castaway arriving belatedly and eventually being rescued from Crusoe's island. After Crusoe's death, she lands in England with Friday and becomes obsessed with the

imperative to “confess” to Foe, the novelist, what happened to the three of them *by* telling the story of the loss of Friday’s tongue. However, in the absence of either a shared language or any other means of communication with Friday, her ability to testify becomes predicated on a leap of the sympathetic imagination—on her ability *to feel what it feels like to be* Friday.

<TX2> Susan’s first reaction to Friday, who is unable to tell his story, is not sympathy but disgust: “But now I began to look on him—I could not help myself—with the horror we deserve for the mutilated. [...] it was the very secretness of his loss that caused me to shrink from him” (p. 24). Indeed, as Adam Smith has already argued in the 18th century, in order for our sympathy to rise, and we can imaginatively place ourselves in the other’s situation, it is essential that the other’s situation be part and parcel of a narrative:

<EXT1> General lamentations that express nothing but the anguish of the sufferer don’t cause in us any actual strongly-felt sympathy. The Propriety of Action what they do is to make us want to inquire into the person’s situation, and to make us disposed to sympathize with him. The first question we ask is ‘What has happened?’ Until this is answered, our fellow-feeling is not very considerable. (Smith, 2000, p. 4)

<TX2> And, as opposed to Susan, who, as a woman, is silenced “only” in the fields of politics and arts, Friday’s silence is definitive:

<EXT1> You err most tellingly in failing to distinguish between my silences and the silences of beings such as Friday. Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal. I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? [...] No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself?—how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. (Coetzee, 1986, pp. 121-122)

<TX2> In fact, Susan’s relentless but always frustrated desire to get to know Friday’s story equally reveals the potentially dehumanizing violence *necessarily* involved in representation, even in the most benevolent attempt to extract a “human voice” from the other. As another of Coetzee’s narrators puts it, “Is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears?” (Coetzee, 2000, p. 70). Differently put, *Foe* not only questions the equation between humaneness and narrative voice, but equally reminds us that without having respect for the non-transparency, “secrecy” at the heart of the other (see also Crary, 2010, p. 263.), the wish to sympathize with or extract the voice of the other, may turn into imaginative violence.

<TX2> Both Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Coetzee’s *Foe* invite us to put ourselves in the shoes of the one who is in a relative power position and has the potential to be or to become a perpetrator of dehumanization (Crusoe and Susan compared to Friday). Their first person singular appeal to our narrative empathy puts us into a difficult position as readers: do we take their side or that of their victim? Whereas Defoe does not invite us to take a critical stance toward his narrator, Coetzee’s purpose is to foreground the problematic character of representation itself:

<EXT1> I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You ‘will respond: he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself?—how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him. (Coetzee, 1986, pp. 121-22)

<TX2>The question of the relationship between representation and dehumanization provokes yet another important question; namely, the uneasy connection between the human and the aesthetic *per se*. Both *Robinson Crusoe* (uncritically) and *Foe* (critically) point to the aesthetic criteria as often determining whether one qualifies as “human” or not. In cases where aesthetic criteria are used to define the human, then humans have to live up to a certain context-dependent standard of beauty to count as fully human. Defoe’s purpose with emphasizing Friday’s aesthetic (i.e., European) qualities is to humanize him: “He was a comely, handsome fellow, perfectly well made [...] he had all the sweetness and softness of a European” (Defoe, 2007, p. 173). On the other hand, as we will later see in the context of Nabokov’s *Lolita* too: aestheticization is also the high way to objectification, and, therefore, to dehumanization.

<TX2>In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the Creature, because of his disproportionate, monstrous body, seems to fail the test of humaneness; the other characters, primarily Frankenstein, perceive him not as a human but as a monster. This novel, however, does problematize the equation between physical beauty and humanness. Readers (as opposed to the characters in the book) are able to *read* the Creature as human: he is given narrative consciousness and we get to know his story. The novel thereby also resists the ideology of the aesthetic.

<TX2>Meanwhile, as was mentioned, it is precisely the correlation between narrative voice and humaneness that is challenged by Coetzee’s *Foe*. Further, *Foe* equally complicates the link between the aesthetic and the human. Despite the fact that Friday is disgusting to Susan, who also compares him to “an animal wrapt entirely in itself” (Coetzee, 1986, p. 64.), she acknowledges his humanness. However, even though this may at first sight suggest that one’s acknowledgment or recognition by another human individual is enough to make one human (i.e., no other “essentially human” characteristic is required), the novel does not present this individual, private solution as satisfactory. In the end, Friday withdraws to a symbolic place where “bodies are their own signs” (p. 157), which means that he has, in fact, remained outside the realm of the public and the political: despite Susan’s individual efforts, Friday has not acquired the right to have rights (Arendt, 1951), and does not become part of any human community.

<H1>14.5 Dehumanization and literariness: The difficulty of difficult empathy

<TX1>In another novel by Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, the eponymous writer argues that “there is no limit to the extent to which we [especially writers] can think ourselves into the being of another,” *but* “certain things must remain off stage, [...] certain things are not good to read or to write” (Coetzee, 2003, p. 173). The object of Costello’s critique, this time, is not imaginative violence, but a living writer, Paul West (1935-2015), whose novel *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* gives a detailed description of the tortures suffered by the members of a complot against Hitler. Costello calls West’s descriptions “[o]bscene because such things [...] ought not to be brought into the light but covered up and hidden forever” (Ibid., p. 159).

<TX2>I shall now turn to a novel that is obscene in both the ordinary sense of the word and Costello’s sense: Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*. The first person singular narrator of this novel, with whom readers are invited to identify, is Dr. Aue, an ex-SS officer who retrospectively tells us about his public career in the SS, and about his private life as a passive homosexual with violent sexual fantasies who used to have an incestuous relationship with his twin sister. While Aue is adamant that he never actually killed any Jews, we get to know that he killed his mother and his stepfather who had separated him from his twin sister when they were children. After the murders, he is persecuted by two policemen until he eliminates them as well. Hence, he is both a criminal with understandable human motives and a perpetrator of dehumanization whose acts are unjustifiable, and who embodies the “normality of evil” (Forti) in his own historical milieu. Meanwhile, he constantly

tries to lure us into believing that we would have equally become perpetrators had we been in a similar situation.⁶

<EXT1>I am not trying to say I am not guilty of this or that. I am guilty, you're not, fine. But you should be able to admit to yourselves that you might also have done what I did. [.....] If you were born in a country or at a time not only when nobody comes to kill your wife and your children, but also nobody comes to ask you to kill the wives and children of others, then render thanks to God and go in peace. But always keep this thought in mind: you might be luckier than I, but you're not a better person. (Littell, 2009, p. 20)

<TX2>Aue's narrative looks persuasive. He presents himself as one of us, and, in a sense, he is right: he was only one among the many thousand perpetrators during the Second World War. And even though we may feel certain that *we* could never become a Nazi, and the psychological phenomenon of "imaginative resistance"—that is, "readers always resist the invitation of authors to imagine morally deviant fictional scenarios" (Szabó, 2000)—equally puts an obstacle to the exercise of narrative empathy, readers may still recognise in themselves the moral laziness against resisting orders and acting against circumstances, as well as the good excuses for doing so. But, as opposed to a scientific knowledge of this all too human propensity for evil (that we can also derive from the famous Milgram and Stanford experiments), the fictional knowledge derived from novels is different: through our imaginations we experience what it feels like to be someone else, and can also critically reflect upon this reading experience. However, what makes it possible to empathize, to temporarily feel with a character who is a perpetrator, and even to become concerned about their fate, is *not* only or not necessarily our shared potential for evil.

<TX2>During the periods of imaginative identification, it is, in fact, not with the narrator's deeds and thoughts *as* a perpetrator that we sympathize, but it is with someone telling us the all too human story of *his* victimization by certain (historical, biological, psychological, or even social and cultural) circumstances, or someone sharing with us his all too human aspirations (e.g., his desire to climb the hierarchy ladder, to achieve his amorous goals, or to escape from a life threatening situation). Stories are never singular, but multiple and ambiguous, and the story of one individual is always more than one. Aue's narrative moves, for example, always aim to temporarily make us forget about the bigger picture, his active agency as a victimizer (starkly contrasting the true lack of agency of the victims), so that the human individuality emerging from these stories obliterate his overall inhumanity. In other words, while we sympathize with his efforts in trying to escape the detectives or the other Nazis wanting to denounce him for his homosexuality, we identify with the victim *within* the perpetrator, and may temporarily lose sight of his active involvement in the perpetration of Nazi crimes. Considering this, difficult empathy might not even be so difficult after all.

<TX2>Slavoj Žižek calls our attention to the redemptive lure surrounding all narrative, since narratives can present everyone as human:

<EXT1>What is truly unbearable about the Nazi executioners is not so much the terrifying things they did, as how "human, all too human" they remained while doing those things. 'Stories we tell ourselves about ourselves' serve to obfuscate the true ethical dimension of our acts. In making ethical judgments, we should be story-blind. (2010, pp. 38-39)

<TX2>Humanization through narrative is, indeed, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, because narratives individualize and present singular subjectivities, or souls, with a capacity to suffer, they have the potential, as Lynn Hunt and Martha Nussbaum have shown us, to re-establish the humanity of someone hitherto dehumanized. On the other hand, however, because of these same features, narratives can also present the inhuman as human, obscuring the ethical for the sake of the emotional. Curiously, Adam Smith, the 18th-century advocate of sympathy endorsed by Martha

Nussbaum, actually destabilizes the connection between the emotional and the ethical in the first paragraph of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

<EXT1>This sentiment [sympathy], like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous or the humane [...] The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it. (3)

<TX2>While sympathy is universal, people endowed with sympathy can still violate the laws of society (see also Bloom, [2016](#); Timár, [2016](#)); that is, there is nothing in “human nature,” not even our allegedly universal capacity for sympathy, which could prevent people from becoming perpetrators of crimes. Dr. Aue is sensitive to the suffering of Jewish children, but his belief in the system (the machine) and his narcissism in advancing his career do make him a perpetrator, even though he is himself traumatized by the atrocities he committed (see also Meretoja, [2017](#), p. 230). Hannah Arendt frames perpetrator trauma in an absolutely non-forgiving manner in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: “instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people! the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders” (Arendt, [1963](#), p. 98). Indeed, one of the perpetrators’ means of generating empathy is to exhibit the signs of the trauma he suffered while traumatizing and killing others.

<TX2>At the same time, I also suggest that what Littell puts on critical display is precisely the notion of narrative voice, and he thereby severs the link often established between voice, humanness, and “readerly” empathy. To see how this happens, we have to examine, first, the ways in which the novel foregrounds the arbitrariness and sovereignly performative character of the “we”–“them” opposition that conditions discourses of dehumanization positing this binary as “naturally existing.” First of all, the Nazi narrator, Dr. Aue, is the uncanny double of the American Jewish writer, Jonathan Littell, writing his novel in French: both can pass for French, which is not their native tongue (Redfield, [2016](#); Timár, [2019](#)). Second, on the thematic level of the novel, the Nazis are always at pains to establish the Jewishness of the Jews, to draw—the impossible—distinction between Jew and non-Jew (the Nazi Aue, himself, is circumcised because of a childhood illness), and one of the significant “other voices” of the novel is a German scientist of the SS who rightly argues against the possibility of establishing separate “races.” And, third, because the distinction between self and others is merely performative (it does not describe an existing state of affairs but creates one), neither the victims (the “others”) nor the perpetrators (the “we”) can be defined based on some essential characteristics. The perpetrator is merely the one who perpetuates; that is, perpetrates the discourse that repetitively institutes the difference between enemy (other) and friend (same).

<TX2>One of the most trenchant definitions of dehumanization is pronounced by the SS Doctor Wirths:

<EXT1><EXT1>I came to the conclusion that the SS guard doesn’t become violent or sadistic because he thinks the inmate is not a human being; on the contrary, his rage increases and turns into sadism when he sees that the inmate, far from being a subhuman as he was taught, is actually at bottom a man, like him, after all, and it’s this resistance, you see, that the guard finds unbearable, this silent persistence of the other, and so the guard beats him to try to make their shared humanity disappear. Of course, that doesn’t work: the more the guard strikes, the more he’s forced to see that the inmate refuses to recognize himself as a non-human. In the end, no other solution remains for him than to kill him, which is an acknowledgment of complete failure. (Littell, [2009](#), p. 624)

<TX2>Dehumanization, as an attempt “to make their shared humanity disappear,” is the institution of a breach within humanity, yielding the “political,” the distinction between friend and enemy (Schmitt, [2007](#)). The latter has lost the right to have rights (Arendt, [1951](#)) and can be killed (but not

sacrificed [Agamben, 1998]). But are we to take this speech at face value given that it is pronounced by a Nazi and figures in narrative fiction?

<TX2>Curiously, the literariness of this discourse does not reside either in its fictionality or in its unreliability but in the way in which it fails to perform what it says. What the words of the character Dr. Wirths (based on a historical Eduard Wirths, chief doctor of the Auschwitz concentration camp) anachronistically evoke are Emanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, which offers exactly the same argument on the "ethical resistance" of the other as "the sole being I can wish to kill" (quoted by Eaglestone, 2017, pp. 56-57, note 61). By making a fictional Nazi anticipate the thoughts of a French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish ancestry who survived the Holocaust as a prisoner of war, the novel performs what the Nazis strive to annihilate through the institution of "racial" difference. In other words, the novel shatters the differences (between "we" and "them," friend and enemy) it thematically stages, and thereby reveals these differences to be performative, perpetuated by repetitive (speech) acts. Hence, *The Kindly Ones* equally destabilizes narrative voice, which later fails to do what it says. Other instances of intertextuality (including the title referring to the ancient Greek myth of Orestes; the initial address to the readers, "Oh my human brothers," evoking poems by Francois Villon and Charles Baudelaire; or the textual evocations of Bataille, de Sade, etc.) as well as the occasional appearance of other voices (such as that of Aue's mother, revealing that the narrator's views of his parents are just as mistaken as his views on race) further undermine the self-identity of the first-person narrative, thereby equally challenging the possibility of empathetic identification. With whom shall we empathize? Whose voice is it that we hear? Is there one voice at all, or rather a web of intertexts that never entirely overlap, sliding upon each other? Fiction not only creates narrative voice but also often destabilizes it, challenging the possibility of any kind of empathetic identification.

<TX2>Meanwhile, the always self-differing voice of the cultivated Nazi can still generate if not so much empathy, then a certain degree of intellectual complicity in the reader. It was perhaps partly the sense of this complicity that provoked a critical scandal at the book's publication (see Timár, 2019) similar to the one provoked by Nabokov's *Lolita* (1995). Indeed, the novel echoes many aspects of one of the classics of perpetrator fiction, *Lolita*. In this latter book, the first person singular narrator, Humbert Humbert, not only wishes to make the reader forget, in various ways (Durantaye, 2007, p. 94; Péter, 2019; Zunshine, 2006, p. 106), that he is a pedophile and that the object of his desire is a twelve-year-old girl, but also that he seems to be in denial himself concerning the implications and manifold consequences of his abduction, seduction, and repetitive rape of his step daughter, Dolores.

<TX2>At the same time, however, as opposed to the characters previously discussed, who are banal perpetrators of dehumanization not violating the laws of their own social, political, and historical context, Humbert Humbert is clearly a criminal. Yet, his character is exemplary in summarizing some of the essential points that have been made so far about perpetrators of dehumanization. As Richard Rorty puts it,

<EXT1>*Lolita* [...] will survive as long as there are gifted, obsessive readers who identify themselves with Humbert. [...] These books are reflections on the possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets—masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human beings into images on a screen' while simply not noticing that these other people are suffering. (1989, pp. 157, 169)

<TX2>While turning his victim into an (aesthetic) object, disregarding the pain she suffers, Humbert presents himself as an artist in distress, thus attempting to establish both an intellectual and an emotional complicity with the reader. Making highbrow stylistic allusions to various suffering male heroes of the Western literary tradition, he tries to make us believe that he is, in fact, a victim rather

than a perpetrator. For example, he writes that Lolita was “like the cheapest of cheap cuties. For that is what nymphets imitate—while we moan and die” (1995, p. 120).

<TX2>At the same time, Humbert’s narrative not only supports but can equally complicate what has been said so far about the reading experience of perpetrator fiction; our feeling of intellectual complicity is not only due to his being a “cultivated pedophile” (anticipating the cultivated Nazi of *The Kindly Ones*), but also, and even more importantly, due to his puns, his self-irony (cf. “we moan and die”) and his thoroughly ironic attitude to the world around him (Wepler, 2011). Especially provocative in the present context is the sense of comic resulting from his dehumanizing representation of others, especially those he considers “less than cultivated (i.e., human).” For example, Humbert describes his first wife, Valeria, as someone “waddling” by his side, shaking “her pobble head vigorously,” and uttering ridiculous *clichés* taken from pop culture (“There is another man in my life,” p. 27). Animal comparisons are, indeed, dehumanizing, but Humbert succeeds in making us see his fellow humans through the ironic lens of his highbrow misanthropy. For not only the tragic, the disastrous, the catastrophic, and the absurd but the comic, too, has been seen by artists and philosophers to emerge from our ability to dehumanize, to perceive others as well as ourselves as “less than human” (e.g., Baudelaire, 2008; Bergson, 1924; Freud, 2003).

<H1>14.6 Conclusion

<TX1>If literary representations of the victims of dehumanization can advance the cause of human rights because they make us empathize with people who are treated as if they were “less than human,” then literary representations of the experience of perpetrators of dehumanization may make us engage with the potential perpetrator in ourselves. The ordinary, everyday perpetrators of dehumanization foregrounded in this chapter do not violate laws; they simply follow the norms of their own historical, political, and social *milieu*. These perpetrators are not only *not* criminals, but, what’s more, they generally present themselves as victims, lacking agency. They pretend to be determined to a large extent by certain inner or external circumstances—psychological, biological, historical, political, social, or geographical. At the same time, the eminently literary character of novels that put dehumanization on critical display (such as the always self-differing voices of narrators, or the narratorial reflections on the relationship between representation and dehumanization) may equally make one realize that the difficulty involved in the process of difficult empathy with perpetrator characters lies not so much in the characters’ being perpetrators, but much rather in their being literary characters.

<TX2>Hannah Arendt argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that dehumanization is always unjustified and unjustifiable, because the victims of dehumanization are criminals without crimes: they are punished just because they belong to a certain group (considered “less than human”) and *not* because they committed a crime. Their group membership is essentialized. However, our literary examples have equally shown that, quite paradoxically, the reverse of this statement might also be true. Perpetrators of dehumanization may also be criminals without crimes: they do not break the laws that are in place. And even though some of them are convicted later (when legal system has changed for the better: see Corrias in this volume), it might, in fact, be difficult to put such a perfect legal system into practice that could be applied to all of those “shades of behavior” (Kosztolányi, p. 210) that are dehumanizing. Indeed, this unbridgeable gap between ethics and the law (cf. Derrida, 1999) may equally reveal that it is the *absence* of legal transgression (as opposed to the moral transgression) in the most ordinary cases of dehumanization that may make it possible for us to imagine how we ourselves could become perpetrators of dehumanization.

<backmatter><backmatter>

<H1>Notes

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² This chapter is written from a European perspective, and by saying "us," it posits various kinds of potentially "implicated subjects" (Rothberg, 2019).

³ On the important difference between fictitious others (characters) and real others (people), see Felski (2019).

⁴ For a comprehensive take on this subject, see McGlothlin (2016) and Keen (2007). For the ethical stakes of the difference between identification and empathy, and the important notion of "empathetic unsettlement," see LaCapra (2000). For an emphasis on similarity and the necessity of a filtering helper figure, see Breithaupt (2019), pp. 130-148. Historically, "sympathy" is derived from the Greek συμπάθεια, the state of feeling together (derived from the composite of fellow [συν]- feeling [πάθος]). [...]. "Empathy" (from the Greek ἐν (en), "in, at") is a word that was coined only in the 20th century in order to capture the meaning of the German *Einfühlung*, which means to enter into somebody's feelings' (Schliesser, 2015, p. 1).

⁵ Both characters (try to) seduce the female protagonists without their consent. However, both narratives are presented from the point of the female victim.

⁶ On the ethical challenges involved in this perpetrator's narration, see Suleiman: "Should such a protagonist be allowed the privilege of the narrative voice, given the almost automatic call to empathy that accompanies first-person narrative?" (2009. p. 2.).