Safe Harbour in Turbulent Times: Preservation of Self-Identity in

Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See*

[Isn’t life a kind of corruption? A child is born and the world sets upon it. Taking things from it, stuffing things in it. Each bite of food, each particle of light entering the eye - the body can never be pure. (Doerr 276)]

When powerful forces manipulate an unsophisticated young person to accept and act according to an extreme ideology, could the individual lose his humanity completely and become a brute? Could he or she retain any residue of self-identification and free will, after undergoing such a mutation? Werner Pfennig, one of the two main characters in Anthony Doerr’s novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, was attracted to the Hitler Youth organization because it offered education and career opportunities that would not otherwise be available to someone from his undistinguished background. As a poor orphan and uncorrupted by “middle-class garbage,” he was the ideal candidate for induction into the Hitler Youth (Doerr 85). The individual and the organization were thus an ideal match, or so it seemed, because their interests were complementary. However, in the bargain, the Nazi ideology demanded that the youth forego their identity as individuals and merge with the “national community” (Appleby 3). As Werner’s impressionable age made him especially “susceptible to the teachings of national socialism” (Stachura xvii), the corruption slowly but inexorably rotted away his moral compass. Largely due to the indoctrination and partly due to instinctive self-preservation, Werner participated in violence, intimidation, and later as an accessory to murder. Though he felt powerless to intervene
or conscientiously object to the depravity around him, Werner’s conscience was often troubled by what he saw, heard or did. Only the reader, who is privy to Werner’s thoughts, knows that almost from the very beginning, Werner had misgivings about Nazi ideology and its methods. Though Werner ostensibly effaced himself completely for the cause of Nazism, he secretly created a private mental space for doubts about the ideology and kept alive his sense of self-identity. The moral strength that he thus cultivated enabled Werner to eventually exercise his free will and rebel against the Nazi doctrine.

In order to escape the dreadful poverty of his surroundings in Zollverein, Werner sought opportunities “beyond the mills, beyond the gates” (Doerr 54). Werner’s early childhood was spent in an orphanage in Zollverein. Those were difficult years in Germany, marked by hyperinflation, starvation, disease and mass unemployment (Kater 6). Gifted and resourceful, Werner was always “interrogating the world,” asking many questions, collecting specimens from nature, scheming to provide sustenance for his fellow orphans and inventing gadgets and toys (Doerr 24-25). The Frenchman’s broadcasts on science were life-changing for Werner during his childhood, as they gave him an appreciation of the wonders of nature and the imperative to “open [his] eyes and see what [he] can do with them before they close forever” (48). Despite his obvious talent and intelligence, Werner seemed destined to go to work in the mines, like all the other boys in the orphanage (43). The starkness of his surroundings became obvious to him during his visit to Herr Siedler’s luxuriously furnished house, as in comparison, the orphanage looked “coal-stained” and meagerly provided for (86). When Herr Siedler offered an opportunity for Werner to study in a reputed technical school in Schulpforta (85), Werner sensed that this could be the break that he was waiting for (86), though it necessitated his acceptance of Nazi ideology and propaganda.
The ubiquity of Nazi propaganda in Germany was just as instrumental in shaping the teenage Werner as his ambition to escape his miserable surroundings through education and self-improvement. Nazi indoctrination sought to “extirpate the emphasis on individualism … and replace it with a system which would encompass and impregnate the whole being of a person with their ideas” (Stachura 201). Like everyone at the time, Werner was bombarded with propaganda by the “staccato voice of the Reich” (Doerr 63), regular radio broadcasts that emphasized loyalty to Hitler, German exceptionalism, and the necessity for self-immolation in the cause of the führer and the Reich. Adolf Hitler was presented as the “omniscient and omnipotent father” who would provide safety and security in those uncertain times (Kater 5). As membership in the Hitler Youth became compulsory, Werner immersed himself in an environment that was all about “glory and country and competition and sacrifice” and participated in Nazi parades and quasi-military exercises (Doerr 62). The not-so-subtle suggestions of Hitler Youth members like Hans Schilzer and Heribert Pomsel, soon had everyone, including Werner, saying heil Hitler (69). Werner’s spouting of Nazi ideology in the presence of Herr Siedler, was a reflexive outburst borne out of his growing assimilation of the propaganda (84). Though Werner’s mind was always brimming with questions, he was constantly warned by the ideologues of Hitler Youth that “minds [were] not to be trusted” as they were “always drifting toward ambiguity, towards questions, when what you really need is certainty. Purpose. Clarity” (264). The Nazi cant proposed that their ideology provided the certainty that their adherents craved and that they need not look elsewhere.

Whether motivated by opportunism, propaganda or both, Werner absorbed the Nazi ideology, methods and causes without any professed reservations. He was in the pack of cadets that chased Frederick (192) and stood by silently even as Frederick was being savagely beaten by Rödel. Buying into the racist dogma that the Polish and the Russians are Untermensch (227), he obediently threw “the water like all the others” on the Polish prisoner, thus becoming complicit in
the murder of the latter (229). Even as he felt a deep revulsion for the Ukrainians and the apparent disorder of their villages and cities (355), it did not occur to him that the chaos was caused by the German invasion. Though he realized that the triangulation devices that he co-invented with Dr. Hauptman, were being used to locate and kill partisans, he continued to be part of the team that conducted those killings. Believing that the operation was simply “a problem to solve,” he felt “ravishing delight in the chase” (344).

Though Werner overwhelmingly accepted Nazi ideology, he progressively discerned the frivolousness and depravity of the belief system. Even as a young child, he found the swagger of the Hitler Youth “comical” and “ridiculous,” as they indulged in “leaping over bonfires, rubbing ash beneath [their] eyes, [and] picking on little kids” (42). He decided that the best way to avoid being a victim of their bullying was to subdue his identity and “keep [his] presence small, inconspicuous” (42). At Schulpforta, Werner was perturbed by Bastian’s targeted attacks against perceived weaker cadets. His apprehension congealed into a dreaded realization that he had crossed the point of no return. Werner went along, “acting less out of duty than out of a timeworn desire to be dutiful” (277). Even as Dr. Hauptmann refused to let Werner leave the school, Werner felt trapped just like his father may have felt before the latter died in the mines (272). He realized too late that the system was set up to transport young boys, “[g]reat rows of them walking to the conveyor belt to climb on” towards the battlefield (277). Even though he could not avoid going to the front line, his debilitating fever and diarrhea in the war zone (354) may have been an emanation of pent-up disgust for his participation in the conflict.

While Werner had qualms about the Nazi ideology and methods, he nevertheless did not overtly object to them owing to a sense of self-preservation. However, unlike his compatriots who were imbued “with a spirit that [left] them glazed and dazzled” (263), Werner retained in his inner core a safe harbour for his uncertainties. On the way to his fateful meeting with Siedler, Werner
had a “sharp longing to run” away from and forestall the inevitable (81). Following his success in the entrance exams for Schulpforta, he could not understand why his moment of triumphal escape from the shabbiness of Zollverein was troubled by “some inexplicable warning murmur in a distant region of his mind” (131). In Schulpforta, he had his doubts but kept them “at bay by memorizing lyrics or the routes to classrooms, by holding before his eyes a vision of the technical sciences laboratory” (139-140). Witnessing his friend Fredrick being beaten by the cadets, “every part of him [wanted] to scream: is this not wrong” (194).

Within that mental safe harbour, he retained images from a happier past, so as to construct a sense of self-identity that had a semblance of humanity. The poverty of his early years had been mitigated by the love and support of his caretaker, Frau Elena and his younger sister, Jutta. Frau Elena would whisper inspiring words to Werner: “They will say you’re too little, Werner, that you’re from nowhere, that you shouldn’t dream big. But I believe in you. I think you’ll do something great” (25). Jutta was his comrade-in-arms and stood up for him even as others like the vice minister and his wife attempted to mock Werner’s precocious nature (58). In Schulpforta, Werner mentally blotted out the horrors that he witnessed with mundane but happy memories of Zollverein, “the laundry; Frau Elena’s overworked pink fingers; dogs in the alleys; steam blowing from the stacks” (194). In the chaotic and wretched environment of the battlefield, he yearned for the simple pleasures of his childhood home, such as Frau Elena’s singing, the heat emanating from a stove, voices of his fellow orphans, and Jutta’s drawings (325).

Werner’s sister, Jutta, was the mirror that he held against his conscience, and the yardstick with which he derided his own corruption. Her insightful observations and the ability to discern the truth belied her age. Jutta was the first to warn Werner that Germany was committing atrocities in France, though he wanted to avoid discussing the subject (133). She rhetorically asked Werner whether it was right “to do something only because everyone else is doing it” (133). As the brutal
nature of the Nazi ideology became obvious to Werner, he acknowledged that Jutta seemed to have an instinct for distinguishing right from wrong (263). Her doubts had infiltrated his otherwise near-total acquiescence to the Nazi ideology to become the “impurity in him, the static in his signal” (263). Jutta’s cautionary advice unhinged the certainty that the ideology provided to Werner, and persuaded him to recognize its immorality.

The innocents who were destroyed by the maelstrom tormented Werner. The maltreatment of those who were deemed weakest at Schulpforta, such as Ernst and Frederick, disturbed Werner. His participation in the torture notwithstanding, Werner privately questioned the decency of the treatment of the Polish Prisoner’s dead body (239). Long after Frederick was seriously hurt by the students of Schulpforta and forced to leave the place, Werner felt his presence linger in the dormitory (263). On the way to Russia, Werner was horrified to see the trains full of dead and dying prisoners of war (319). The innocent seven-year old girl, who was killed in Vienna due to Werner’s error, haunted him during his journey to France (449). The Jewish lady, Frau Schwartzenberger also appeared accusingly in his delirious hallucinations on the battlefield (449).

Werner’s revulsion about the regime and his part in it came to a head whilst his unit was searching for the originator of partisan radio broadcasts in Saint-Malo. Although he had previously believed that partisans were “wretched and filthy … ragtag desperados with nothing to lose” (354), Werner was surprised to discover that Etienne, an ordinary old man and his grand-niece, Marie-Laure, a blind girl (411), were perhaps conducting the surreptitious act. As soon as Werner hears Etienne speak on the radio, he recognizes that “the quality of the transmission and the tenor of the voice match[es] in every respect the broadcasts of the Frenchman he used to hear … The recognition is immediate. It is as if he has been drowning for as long as he can remember and somebody had fetched him up for air” (406). This recognition was the turning point that tipped him in the direction of making amends with his conscience and engaging in his first and only open
act of rebellion. He did not disclose to his army unit that he had heard Etienne’s broadcast, though he knew that such an act amounted to treason (408). While trapped in the cellar under the destroyed Hotel of Bees, he heard Marie-Laure’s plaintive call for help (442). Escaping the cellar, he headed towards Marie-Laure’s house, determined to save her from whoever threatened her. His mission now had purpose and clarity, turning the Nazi exhortations on their heads. Stripped of uncertainty and determined to prove that he was not the “weakest,” he rallied himself to confront the danger lurking in Marie-Laure’s house (460). Determined to rescue Marie-Laure, he commits his only direct act of killing during his fateful confrontation with the German sergeant major von Rumpel (465). He then realizes that he had not lived his life “in years. But today. Today maybe [he] did” (469). For years, his self-identity was subsumed into the regime and his actions directed and performed solely for its causes. By maintaining a safe space for doubts, moral indignation and an independent identity, he was eventually able to exercise his free will and perform the selfless act of rescuing Marie-Laure.

Werner ultimately was part of “the great majority [in Germany] who either ignored the evils they saw or were ignorant and naive in their enthusiasm for a cause that appeared good and right to them at the time” (Rempel 255). Economic circumstances and personal ambition caused Werner to find opportunity in the power dynamics of the 1930s and 1940s. As membership and collusion with the Nazi regime was then the only guaranteed conduit for personal growth, Werner acquiesced to a corrupting radical creed that robbed him of individualism, and became an instrument of destruction. His misgivings about the regime, its philosophy and his part in it were hidden in the depths of his mind and privy only to the reader of the novel.

Werner in the end accepted his suffering and that of his cohorts as punishment for their violent crimes and betrayals (Doerr 205). He believed that entombment in the cellar under the Hotel of Bees, the “Atelier de réparation” as he calls it, was fitting and commensurate with their
crimes (205). Even though he escaped the cellar and rescue Marie Laure, he then chose to be captured by the Americans. Whether his death on the minefield (483) was accidental or suicidal, one cannot say for sure. His confused and strange last thoughts may give us a clue as to how he came to be at peace with himself. Moments away from his death, he remembered the toy sailboats that he had once built for his sister (482). The first one had not worked and sunk, which saddened Jutta. He had consoled Jutta, saying “things hardly ever work on the first try. We’ll make another, a better one” (482). He seemed to recall that he had then built a second sailboat and that it had worked. Was the first sailboat symbolic of his failed life? The corruption that ultimately overwhelmed his personality, had entered his life of his own volition. Though he was warned by his inner voice and his sister, he had nevertheless, allowed the corruption to shape his life and consume his innocence. His many crimes were unconscionable and perhaps for that reason, he may have felt that he had to die. His hopeful but hesitant recollection of a second boat that may have worked is possibly Werner’s final hope for possible redemption in the eyes of his sister. Despite the debasement that had eroded and compromised his short life, he had finally listened to Jutta (192). Unlike Werner’s earlier furtive attempts to protect Frederick only if it did not threaten his person, his final act of bravery was purposeful, rebellious, and made without any thought of self-preservation. Contrary to all his previous actions, which were guided by the imperatives of the Nazi regime, Werner risked his life for a cause not only greater than he but also of his choosing. Werner thus demonstrated that one could retain one’s self-identity, exercise free will and hold on to higher, humanistic values even in a milieu that demanded the opposite.


