Over the garden wall

by Theodore Dalrymple

Some years ago, I visited a learned antiquarian bookseller of my acquaintance. He had the largest collection of classical-music CDs that I have ever seen, and when I arrived he was playing an exquisite performance of the *Winterreise*, both sensitive and moving. It was obviously a recording of a live performance, for one could hear in the background the faint shuffling and suppressed coughing of an audience.

“What performance is it?” I asked.

“Berlin,” he replied. “1943.”

Berlin, 1943: refinement, sensitivity, and powers of discrimination in the year of Stalingrad and the Final Solution, in the capital city of a political regime so vicious and brutal that it has remained the gold standard of human evil, so to speak, ever since.

Hans Frank, the governor-general of Poland, was among the worst of the worst—no brute more brutish—but he was also an accomplished pianist. And the predilection of several leading Nazis for Schubert lieder is now almost a cliché.

Not only is it well known, but it is sometimes used as an argument against high culture itself. After all, if cultivation does not immunize people against the commission of the worst crimes imaginable, then what use is it? Especially is this the case in a culture that prided itself on its high culture. This being so, it follows that no culture is to be preferred to any other. As the Argentinian tango has it, *Todo es igual, nada es mejor*—everything is equal, nothing is better. No one, I think, can hold this view honestly, or at least consistently: for a lack of preference, moral or aesthetic, is as abhorrent to the human mind as is a vacuum to nature. But people often pretend to believe what they cannot truly believe, because it is convenient to them to appear to believe it.

There is, of course, no historical event or episode from which the wrong lesson cannot be learned, especially if that lesson is one ardently desired in the first place. And what strange lesson might be learned, by those who desire to learn it, from Jonathon Glazer's film (based on the 2014 Martin Amis novel of the same name) *The Zone of Interest* (2023), a fictionalized depiction of the home life of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz?

Glazer's film illustrates the wisdom of Emily Dickinson's injunction that we should tell the truth, but tell it slant, for success in circuit lies. In this case, of course, it is not our infirm delight in truth's superb surprise that is too bright for us, but horror at evil's magnitude that makes it difficult to look it full in the face. In the film, the horror is almost entirely implicit rather than explicit, conveyed at most by occasional distant screams or gunshots, later with a faint roar of gas ovens in the background. The effect depends

on the audience’s preexisting knowledge of what Auschwitz was, though the Nazi uniforms that appear from time to time in the film are by now a cultural metonym for evil.

Höss’s domestic life in the very shadow of Auschwitz is portrayed in the film as having been almost abnormally normal. Höss might as well be a middle manager in an insurance company, a daily commuter who returns to the bosom of his family every evening, for all that the nature of his work obtrudes on that life. The family residence is separated tidily from the death camp by a gray wall with a few rows of barbed wire stretched across the top. On one side of the wall is the site of industrial mass murder, on the other a kind of petty-bourgeois paradise, which Rudolf’s wife, Hedwig, works hard to keep clean and running smoothly—with the help of staff, of course, whom she treats imperiously, as someone unused to command but glad to have it now. Her pride and joy is her garden, both flower and vegetable. There is a little pool for the children to paddle in.

Hedwig is not so much unaware of what goes on in the camp next door as she is willfully ignorant. In the film, she navigates with skill the large hinterland between knowing and not knowing: when she tries on a fur coat obviously taken from an inmate, she treats it as a fashion accessory like any other that might have been bought for her by a doting husband. And yet she must know that it is no such thing.

In historical reality, Hedwig was fully aware in a straightforward (and approving) manner of much more than she appears to know in the film. But the fictional ambiguity is important because it invites us to reflect on our own hinterland of knowing and not knowing, or of choosing not to know. If Hedwig were shown in the film to be fully aware of what was happening over the wall, she would simply be an appalling and deeply evil person, and the impact would be lost.

As for Rudolf himself, he clearly knows all. In one particularly chilling scene, he is shown listening to two salesmen from Topf and Sons, the engineering company, who explain their design for the crematoria of Auschwitz. They speak in precisely the way that today's salesmen for solar panels do, with a kind of disinterested enthusiasm. But Höss, at least at home, is also a good family man; he gives time to his children, whom he loves, and he does not drink to excess or abuse them. What philandering he's guilty of takes place on the other side of the wall.

This, of course, causes us to reflect on the human capacity for compartmentalization: on our own ability to divide our mental world into different, hermetically sealed compartments, such that our actions and beliefs may contradict one another without our becoming fully aware of it. Thus, a fond father can go off to work to murder millions. I remember the friendly Indonesian officers in the bar of a hotel in Dili, East Timor, who asked, after a hard day's oppression of the local population (the death penalty was yet in force for speaking Portuguese in this former Portuguese colony) what love songs I would like to hear them sing.

A man may be a devoted and compassionate doctor as well as a domestic tyrant; a man may be a generous philanthropist and yet fire ten thousand employees without a moment's hesitation or thought for their suffering.

The opening scene of the film, after three minutes of a near-blacked-out screen to the accompaniment of an ominous soundtrack, is of a sunlit family outing to a lake in the forest a car ride away from Auschwitz. The landscape is Edenic; the clear sunlight comes as a shock after so much darkness; the scene is almost like one painted by Sorolla. The contrast between this rural family idyll on the one hand and the career that enabled it on the other is the whole point of the film. The willingness of Höss to commit any evil in pursuit of a high—but not fantastically high—standard of

living suggests an utterly depraved scale of values. Höss's wife so adores the home and garden that she has created in the shadow of Auschwitz that she is deeply upset when her husband is moved to a post in the SS bureaucracy, and he tries to obtain permission for her to stay in their home. But happiness soon returns for the Höss family: by now an expert in extermination, Rudolf is recalled to Auschwitz to supervise the killing of 700,000 recently deported Hungarian Jews. Hedwig can return to her roses and her dahlias.

By analogy with the argument that love of Schubert lieder did not prevent Nazis from committing the worst atrocities, thereby casting doubt on the final value of Schubert lieder, some who see this film might conclude that a happy family life was likewise valueless, and that therefore such a goal is not to be extolled, any form of close human association being as good as any other. The same might go for striving to improve one's material circumstances: it leads to ruthlessness.

The Nazi taint is so strong that it besmirches everything that can possibly be associated with it. For example, it was doctors in Nazi Germany who first provided evidence that smoking causes lung cancer. After the war, one of the foremost British researchers of the subject, Richard Doll, omitted to mention for forty years that he first suspected the connection between smoking and cancer when he toured Nazi Germany as a student, attending lectures by those doctors. Instead, he presented his research hypothesis as independently and fully formed, rising like Venus from the waves. Any idea emanating from Nazi Germany would have met with resistance to its conclusions, no matter how true they were, so it was best to remain silent about its provenance.

The resort to the Nazi period for immoral illumination is commonplace. A couple of weeks before seeing this film, I watched 2022's *Die Wannseekonferenz* (The Wannsee Conference), a reconstruction of the meeting under the chairmanship of Reinhard Heydrich that decided on the total extermination of

Jews in Europe. The film used the conference's sole surviving set of minutes as the script. Of the fifteen attendees, eight had the title of "Doctor" (of what use is education then?), and the actual building on the Wannsee as a set. It was brilliantly played. In Heydrich (played by Philipp Hochmair) we find a controlled, snake-like menace. Here again we witness the mental compartmentalization that allowed outwardly civilized men, in civilized surroundings, to discuss the murder of millions as if it were only a thorny technical problem, soluble with the right policies (the film lasts exactly as long as had the conference).

These two films might either put us on our guard against mental compartmentalization or lower our guard against it. They might cause us to see slippery slopes everywhere. Once in Germany I had dinner with a man who ran a forestry company. He described how the staff had met to decide the company's mission statement. Someone suggested "Forestry with Pride." There followed an hour-long discussion as to whether pride in anything is the beginning of the slope towards Auschwitz. This was four decades after the end of the war.

But these films might also make us complacent. We are so confident, perhaps, that we are different from those who lived happily in the shadow of Auschwitz or who attended the Wannsee Conference that to observe them is only a matter of prurient historical curiosity. Whatever happens, we shall never be like *them*. No slippery slopes for us.

But the Nazi period was so catastrophic that its effects are with us still. Its specter so continues to haunt Europe that practically any measure undertaken on the Continent to protect itself against either internal or external enemies is criticized as proto-Nazi, and the mere accusation is enough to frighten those who promote any such measure.

But the *argumentum ad Hitlerum*, as it has been called, is, or can be, mentally lazy. It is a way of avoiding the difficult

and painful demands of thought. For the fact is that compartmentalization is inevitable in a complex world such as ours. We go about our lives, with our petty concerns and projects, despite our awareness of the enormous evils prevalent in the world, even some that are close at hand. Can I properly enjoy luxury foods or an expensive meal when I know that people not far away have difficulty paying for enough to eat? Can I indulge in sumptuary expenditure while poverty still exists? If I can, are there limits, and if so, where are they? Can I be a tourist when I know that tourism ruins everything that it touches? Can I eat meat when I am aware that the conditions in which it is produced are horrible and cruel? If a policy pursued by my government seems to me deeply wrong, how much of my time and energy should I devote to opposing it, and how much to enjoying myself? Is it a mere rationalization, at least in a free country, to say that there is nothing I can do about it so that I might as well ignore it? At what point does such an argument become, in effect, complicity with evil?

In essence, I side with Feste:

> Present mirth hath present laughter,
> What's to come is never sure . . .

Of course, this attitude must also have limits: but where are they? The easy resort to the Nazi example will not help us decide, albeit that example should never be forgotten either.

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