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The Power of Provocation: Shedding Soulful Light on Repressive Domination in

Anthony Doerr's *All The Light We Cannot See*

“Smart beyond your years. There are places for a boy like you. General Heissmeyer’s schools. Best of the best. Teach the mechanical sciences too. Code breaking, rocket propulsion, all the latest.” (Doerr 193)

The most grueling mysteries of Nazi domination and social power are resurrected in Anthony Doerr’s *All The Light We Cannot See*, forcing readers to notice the dubious expressions on the faces of Hitler’s Youth commanders that the main character, Marie-Laure cannot. By strategically hurling his audience down alongside the bombs that set fiery horrors to the city of Saint-Malo before having a chance to breathe, Doerr powers an adrenaline rush in his opening chapters which neatly sharpen all *six* senses for the ones to follow. The other main character, Werner Pfennig, is the guiding light for each loathsome Nazi encounter, whose identity helps us to notice and measure the metaphysical elements, fueling these repressive forces with his comforting manner and centered logic. Somewhere between the “enforced ascetism” and “belligerent torrent” at the “technical institute” in Schulpforta, Werner can sense the flagrant limitations of Nazi ideology and coercion that his friend, Fredrick, seems unable to (Doerr 139). And although he has “never felt such hunger to belong” (Doerr 139), a conflictual voice within Werner’s soul, tells him that he is not in the company of any *true* power sources at his new “school”, as the weakness of terror begins to reveal itself. Provocative scenes of domination unveil a higher state of consciousness common to Hitler’s Youth commanders during these

scenes, challenging us to redirect and revolutionize this energy in ways that may prevent such history from repeating itself.

Raised in a faraway orphanage, deep in German coal country, Werner Pfennig has grown up, seeing, and knowing nothing of “real power”. No more than a short wagon-pull away from the mine that claimed his own father’s life, even during outdoor playtime, Werner and his younger sister, Jutta, are never very far from their nightmares. The only models of authority they know, are the Protestant nuns who care for them at the orphanage and “the figures of second-shift workers [who] shuffle into warehouses while first-shift workers shuffle home, hunched, hungry, blue-nosed, their faces like black skulls beneath their helmets” (Doerr 26). Destined for a future in mining, Werner finds his solace in mechanics during his younger years at Zollverein and spends much of his free time tinkering around with various little machines there. He “repairs a neighbour’s sewing machine, the Children’s House grandfather clock. He builds a pulley system to wind laundry from the sunshine back indoors, and a simple alarm made from a battery, a bell and a wire so that Frau Elena will know if a toddler has wandered outside. He invents a machine, to slice carrots: lift a lever, nineteen blades drop, and the carrot, falls apart into twenty neat cylinders” (Doerr 62).

After finding a busted radio at the age of eight, Werner is delighted to get his hands on this fascinating new, invention for the first time, “carries it up to his attic dormer and studies it for hours” (Doerr 32). Finally, after three weeks of experimental frustration, Werner manages to fix the broken receiver, connecting the warm and beautiful sound of music to the bleakness at Zollverein, and suddenly, “as if, inside Werner’s head, an infinitesimal orchestra has stirred to, life” (Doerr 33). Music seems to add a new layer of emotion to Werner’s experiences at the

orphanage, feeding his hungry soul with nourishment, filling his heart with new hope and possibilities, and changing his whole reality into something worthwhile.

By the age of thirteen years old, Werner is already known in his community as, a skilled radio repairman after word travels round of his uncommon capabilities. Late one night, “a lance corporal with a pistol on his belt and a swastika band on his left arm” (Doerr 80) summons Werner to the home of commander Herr Seidler, where he is challenged to fix “the finest radio he has ever laid hands on” (Doerr 82). After he impresses the commander with his technical skills, Seidler allows Werner to indulge in *three* pieces of cake topped with powdered sugar *and* (forbidden) whipped cream while contemptuously reminding him of his father’s death, bringing a higher level of awareness to Werner’s “place” in the social hierarchy. The commander proceeds to lure him in further, with the prospect of placement at a highly acclaimed “technical school”, that is sure to pique Werner’s interest whilst promising him a letter of recommendation for this school, before sending him on his way back to Children’s House.

When he arrives back home at the orphanage that night, unsurprisingly, everything seems to look more “coal-stained and cramped” (Doerr 86) than it did before to Werner, who starts to make bitter comparisons between his current life at the Zollverein and the luxuriousness of the commander’s life. That night, more provocative words dance around Werner’s head, as he recalls the French scientist’s voice, coming through his own, very modest, shortwave radio saying, “Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever” (Doerr 86), provoking Werner’s next “moves” while also foreshadowing the darkness yet to come in the novel. Compared to the “inclined control panel, magnetic tuning, big as an icebox. Ten tube, all-wave, superheterodyne with fancy gadrooned moldings and a two-tone walnut cabinet...[a] shortwave, wide frequencies [and] a big antenna” (Doerr 82) he handled at Seidler’s house only

hours before, his own receiver now seems like a joke, as he begins to weigh the options of which Herr Seidler had so “generously” and provocatively, laid out before him. At the end of this scene, we can sense that Werner will no longer be “act[ing] in the interest of the world” (Doerr 85) from this point forward, when he ends his night by carrying his shortwave radio out to “the alley behind the house and crush[ing] it with a brick” (Doerr 86).

As soon as Werner arrives at the youth academy in Schulpforta, it becomes very clear to him that any weaknesses are unwelcome there. He quickly learns that weapons are both encouraged and mandatory, as he is guided through his initiation. The “bunk master” insists that “Each boy is to carry a knife in a scabbard on the right side of the belt...no books, no cigarettes, no food, no personal possessions, ...nothing in your locker but uniforms, boots, knife, polish” (Doerr 137). It becomes evident that the boys at this institution will be *forced* back into healthy and ‘natural’ ways of living, if they have not done so already, inspired by Hitler’s idealizations (or “Nazi aesthetic”) at the time, pertaining to “purity, violence, and the human form” (International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences 2001). Peeters, Van Molle and Wils suggest that these widespread practices of self-denial and discipline in Germany during this time-period, may have been heavily inspired by a “hugely popular” (1924) film, *Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit/Ways to Strength and Beauty* by director Wilhelm Prager, who felt that modern civilizations at the time, “posed a threat to the physical and mental condition of the German nation” (1). In general, this film was a confabulation on ascetism and how best to achieve emancipation in “modern” times.

Theoretically, this practice would require a high degree of abstinence, control, exercise, and sobriety which seemed to align perfectly with the new world order planned by German Nazi, leaders who heavily supported Christian ascetism, which specifically connected beliefs regarding

the concession of material possessions and monastic lifestyles with eternal freedom and happiness in the hereafter (Peeters, Van Molle & Wils 5). In one of Hitler's documented speeches to the German public in 1933 (shortly after he is appointed Chancellor of Germany), he states:

...[The government] will preserve and protect the foundations upon which the strength of our nation rests. It will extend its strong protecting hand over Christianity as the basis of our entire morality and the family as the basic cell (*Keimzelle*) of the body of our *Volk* and State. It will reawaken in our *Volk*, beyond the borders of rank and class, its sense of national and political unity and resultant duties. (Koehne 7)

This public pledge to Christianity worked to cement Hitler's validity thereafter in Germany for many, as support for the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) gained momentum after many consenting Christians and Christian families became blinded by the "light" of his sentiments. And though the levels of hyper-vigilance modelled by this new Nazi, dictatorship did *initially*, inspire uncommonly high levels of discipline and focus in, their followers, it also quickly became obvious who was *not* making a strict practice of these new ideals, raising tensions among the German public as, a whole. Paradoxically, this endless ascent to "moral perfection" resulted in a sharp and visible rise in moral *inequality* as well, as individuals practicing stricter levels of self-discipline "rose higher above others", eventually attaining leadership roles and positions of power under the Nazi regime due to a combination of dedication and social rank. Once they assumed these positions however, their higher state of consciousness began to work against them, particularly for the ones who lacked empathy and social intelligence *before* their ascension to power, as they did not know how to maintain their power once they had it.

Dacher Keltner, Director of the Greater Good Science Centre and Professor of Psychology at the University of California is very keen to the dichotomy that exists within power relations and warns that “the skills most important to obtaining power and leading effectively are the very skills that deteriorate once we have power” (2007). And since empathy and social intelligence, are “vastly more important” when wielding power “than are force, deception and terror” (2007), we can start to see why Hitler’s Youth commanders at the academy in Schulpforta had to “resort to coercion to assert their will”, as this is a very common indicator that one’s power, is in fact, slipping away from them, according to Simon and Oakes (109). As for Adolf Hitler, any modesty or empathy he once held, seemed only to disintegrate during his succession into political domination and elevated state of consciousness, eventually giving rise to his own insanity, which resulted in suicide.

However, in *All the Light We Cannot See*, Doerr allows us to see some examples of how and where this “revolutionized” ascetism went wrong, giving his readers the chance to comprehend the metaphysical dangers embedded into the “moral purification” desired by so many at the time. When Werner’s physical training begins at the technical school in Schulpforta, he enters the program with a somewhat “untouched” soul, due to his “sheltered” childhood and modest upbringing and was, in many ways, protected from the “middle class garbage” (Doerr 85) that was more likely to fester in European, city centres. But as time goes on, he too, begins to feel offended by the weakness he sees in others, just as the commanders do, as we start to sense Werner’s soul slowly detaching from his body which, winning essayist, Pradeep Menon, suggests was done in an unconscious, yet desperate, attempt to preserve his “sense of self-identity” at the boy’s institute, which he later uses “to exercise his free will” (2).

One afternoon, commander Bastion, who in Werner's eyes, "looks capable of severe and chronic violence" (Doerr 168), leads the students through a field exercise intended to boost their "ferocity" for the real-life frontline conflict that they would, later, be expected to participate in. The purpose of this training, is to illustrate what will happen to the "weakest" on the battlefield and uses bullied student, Ernst, as an educational tool in this "exercise". Bastion unleashes "the pack" onto the boy, who is given a slight head start, as Werner watches him sprint for his life across the school grounds. In this scene, we can see how "cutthroat" Nazi propaganda and attitudes have begun to infiltrate Werner's soul, when he begins to feel "annoyed" by Ernest's performance, wondering to himself, "Why couldn't Ernst be faster? Why hasn't he practiced? How did he make it through the entrance exams?" (Doerr 170).

In *Emile, or on Education*, philosopher and composer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, guides his audience through a "natural education" designed to educate readers on how a pupil might retain their goodness in civil society or rather, *corrupt* society, from his perspective in 1762. His discourse meticulously guides the audience through the successive motions of child rearing from birth to adulthood, which is meant to assist in a more "seamless" transition into puberty and the competitive passions that will inevitably awaken self-seeking love within. And although this book was banned and publicly burned shortly after its first publication, it was/is, still considered one of the top influencers of France's new national education system (shortly after its "release") which experienced a full overhaul during the French Revolution. During this time, ties between education and the Catholic church began to loosen as education became more secularized, costly, and ironically, the *opposite* of almost everything Rousseau had intended by *Emile, or on Education*, in my opinion. Though, in *All The Light We Cannot See*, main character, Werner Pfennig, is one person whose character does seem to closely resemble that of Rousseau's pupil,

“Emile”, in *Emile, or On Education*, as Werner also does not begin to make comparisons between himself and others until about the age of fifteen, after his acceptance into the Hitler Youth academy. In fact, Werner’s version of a “natural education” under the care of the nuns at Zollveiren, seemed to provide him with the exact “armour” he needed for both the mental and physical trials that he would later endure at the academy; for it is the nurturing voice, of Protestant nun, Frau Elena, whose, gentle and encouraging words ring through his memory and conscience just when he needs them most. “They’ll 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” (Doerr 25). Luckily for Werner, at the most hopeless of moments, these sentiments always seem to overpower the artificial words of Hitler’s commanders, who instead, assault the identities and souls of the German youth with their much more aggressive and pitiless injunctions.

Simon and Oakes explore the topics of identity and social power in their essay titled, “Beyond dependence: An identity approach to social power and domination”, in which they neatly map out a newer model of power that challenges the very “influential conflict-oriented, dependence analysis, in which power operates as an almost exclusively repressive force” (105). This, more hopeful “identity” model of power, makes a sharp distinction between real, (internalized) and artificial compliance within the context of power, the multi-level identities that participate in “power play” and how these identities can be separated into two categories, “higher-level identities” (high social status ranking) and “lower-level identities” (lower social status ranking). Within these two categories, however, there are still two parties experiencing the “power play” (ex. AA, BB or A/B) so, if these two parties are from the *same* social status ranking, (say, AA or B/B), they will be more, likely to experience “consensual power” between



each other because they feel more equal to begin with. Alternatively, if each party belongs to two *different* groups (ex. A/B), party B will be more likely to have a “conflictual power” experience because they are from a “lower-level” social ranking; therefore, will likely “experience feelings of internal tension as a result of the contradictory impulses emanating from their lower-level identity” according to Simon & Oakes (131-133). For party A, this same experience would cause much *less* tension for them because they entered the “power play” with more “ease” to start with than party B did, due to their “higher-level identity” which “legitimized”...? their advantage (Simon & Oakes 132). This model helps to explain why Werner and Fredrick experienced social power and domination differently at the youth academy and why Fredrick did not experience Nazi coercion as intensely as Werner did because he shared the “high-level identity” (higher social status ranking) with the Nazi commanders, therefore, may have felt their power more legitimate than Werner (lower-level social status ranking) did.

It is also interesting to reflect, that according to this model, Nazi Party leader, Adolf Hitler *and* Doerr’s fictional character, Werner Pfennig, would, hypothetically, *both* belong to the “lower-level identity” category, due to their lower-level social status ranking; therefore, may have been experiencing more extreme levels of vigilance compared to others as their ascetic practices may have caused a different (even higher?) state of elevated consciousness because they were both, likely, *already* practicing various forms of self-denial throughout their humble and perhaps, more disciplined upbringings, which would not have afforded them many/any alternatives, one would imagine. This would, of course, be in contrast with the “higher-level identities” who would have experienced a much different “lead-up” to these same events. And though it is unclear whether Werner’s death in *All The Light We Cannot See* was the result of suicide or not, it does still lead one to wonder if Hitler and Werner both experienced a similar

sense of conflict and defeat within their souls toward the end of their lives in (and in Werner's case *under*) Nazi domination, in which neither of them ever found any *real* sense of belonging among all the "higher-level identities" surrounding them at the time.

Although, *Nazi Domination* provides us with one of the most painful and cold-blooded examples of authoritarianism and abuse of government power in history, we must, at least, *try* and use these events to explore the metaphysical elements of power, such as the multi-level identities involved and all the associated interests energizing these dangerous political atmospheres. Furthermore, by studying this history, we can begin to name, recognize (and then, even categorize) the forms of social power and domination taking place in this history and then bring those terms into our contemporary political environments to see if we can find any connections and/or patterns that run parallel to current political events and the actors propelling those events. We can ask ourselves if we see any illustrations of Nazi-like dictatorship taking place within the individual or collective in society. Are there any political parties or actors, whose character seems to resemble that of repressive forces in history? Can we find any patterns that may require red flagging? Moreover, it gives us the opportunity to take a deep sigh of relief and remind ourselves that many "power relations are often unstable, ambiguous, and reversible" according to French postmodernist, Michael Foucault, shedding some hopeful light on any current circumstances that may cause us day-to-day frustration in our lives.

The brutal imagery that written war history conjures, can often prevent us from digging as far as we should into the convoluted politics of past grueling events and the inconceivable forces who powered them. However, in *All The Light We Cannot See*, author, Anthony Doerr connects his characters with both an identity *and* a soul, transcending otherwise, bloodcurdling WWII flashbacks into more universal and spiritually charged conversations that we can not only

observe but also explore and connect. Rather than frustrating his audience with unalloyed opinions about the Nazi occupation of Paris, that risk only perpetuating feelings of hopelessness linked to war history, readers are offered the chance to search for causation in these events, by piecing together meaningful soul connections that can shed hopeful light on very dark circumstances. Amidst the hopeless wreckage and dark history of the Nazi occupation of Paris in 1944, soft glimmers of hope sparkle intermittently between the logistical minds and calm resolution of the protectors and the willful stubbornness and undying loyalty of the protected. The theme of hope seems to descend from these higher soul connections in *All The Light We Cannot See*, reflecting its light off the purifying element of water, or “Emerald Coast”, which offset the angry, burning element of fire in Brittany, France.

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