

#1071

The Banality of Evil¹

Arthur Henry King

In memory of the many German student-friends of my youth

Had I been a German in those Thirties,
I should have joined the Party:
I should have gone with the rest.
I should have condoned the persecution of the Jews.
“How very vulgar and arrogant
some of them are,”
I should have said,
“especially the deracinated ones:
they master our mass media,
they vulgarize our culture.”

So I should have turned a deaf ear
to rumours of concentration-camps;
I should have made my desperate contribution
at the *Goetterdaemmerung*;²
and died
(or continued to exist)
with a lump in my throat.

1. This poem, written August 19, 1985, borrows its title from the subtitle of Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil*, concerning the war crimes trial of Adolf Eichmann.

2. *Goetterdaemmerung*: “Twilight of the Gods,” an opera in Wagner's Ring Cycle; any apocalyptic ending.

To have stood out would not have been
Christian humility.

How very boring and bored in our lives
Most of us are!
That's not the root of all evil,
but its not usually recognised meagre foliage.
I owe you this expression of 'solidarity.'

You were lively, intelligent;
you had ideals;
you sang—sang well, and in parts;
you passed me your traditional culture
(warning me not to read Heine, but Moerike).
Well, Goethe, Rilke, and Mann have grown into me.

But you proved weak,
as I now know I too should have been;
or rather, strong for escape into passive evil.
How can I reject you?
You remind me of what I am:
We're all guilty together.³

We hadn't the excuse
of the little workman next me
in the train from Dresden to Prague,
who put his hand on my knee,
and said gently, à propos of nothing in particular,
but everything in general,
'*Der Hitler ist ein fabelhafter Kerl.*'⁴
I just smiled (possibly at "fabelhafter").

3. All guilty: all share blame or guilt for the presence of evil in a community.

4. "Hitler is a marvelous fellow, a person worthy to have a story told about him."

We didn't fall to the temptation
of the tall young man sitting opposite,
who afterwards, standing beside me in the corridor,
watching the Saechsische Schweiz flash past,
began softly to hum the *Internationale*.⁵
I went on staring at the landscape.

Either might have been a provocation;
and the First Secretary to the British Legation in Prague
(he had a distinguished diplomatic name of French origin)
was standing in the first-class section of the corridor,
a few yards up, behind a glass swing-door.

It's easier to let things happen,
or avoid other things from happening.
Accidia⁶ was the sin of the monastery;
now it's the sin of bourgeois civilization.

5. *Internationale*: the Communist anthem.

6. Sloth.