The Gray Zone

From Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*
Arrival at the Camps

• ...the arrival in the Lager was indeed a shock because of the surprise it entailed. The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also inside, the “we” lost its limits...One entered hoping at least for the solidarity of one’s companions in misfortune, but the hoped for allies, except in special cases, were not there...(Levi 38)

• ...the entry ritual, and the moral collapse it promoted, was abetted more or less consciously by the other components of the concentration camp world: the simple prisoners and the privileged ones. Rarely was a newcomer received, I won’t say as a friend, but at least as a companion-in-misfortune; in the majority of cases, those with seniority...showed irritation or even hostility. The “newcomer”...was envied because he still seemed to have on him the smell of home...He was derided and subjected to cruel pranks...there is no doubt that life in the Lager involved a regression, leading back precisely to primitive behavior (Levi 39)
Inside the Camps

• It is naïve, absurd, and historically false to believe than an infernal system such as National Socialism sanctifies its victims; on the contrary, it degrades them, it makes them resemble itself, and this all the more when they are available, blank, and lacking a political or moral armature (Levi 40).

• The ascent of the privileged, not only in the Lager but in all human coexistence, is an anguishing but unfailing phenomenon: only in utopias is it absent....It is a gray zone, poorly define, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge (Levi 40).

• Thus the Lager, on a smaller scale but with amplified characteristics, reproduced the hierarchical structure of the totalitarian state, in which all power is invested from above and control from below is almost impossible (Levi 47).
The Sonderkommando

• ...one is stunned by this paroxysm of perfidy and hatred: it must be the Jews who put the Jews into the ovens; it must be shown that the Jews, the subrace, the submen, bow to any and all humiliation, even to destroying themselves (Levi 52).

• Conceiving and organizing the squads was National Socialism’s most demonic crime. Behind the pragmatic aspect (to economize on able men, to impose on others the most atrocious tasks) other more subtle aspects can be perceived. This institution represented an attempt to shift onto others—specifically, the victims—the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence (Levi 53).

• In fact, the existence of the squads had a meaning, a message: “We, the master race, are your destroyers, but you are no better than we are; if we so wish, and we do so wish, we can destroy not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed ours (Levi 53-54).