

Darkness at Noon

A.Koestler

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Yet another book I find in my parents library, the slightly gory cover of which I must have been familiar with before I knew any English. The book published by a now defunct British paperback company - Four Square books, was sold at 2'6. The paper is brittle and yellow, and I naturally think of it as being acquired in the 40's, maybe not so long after the book was first published in 1940. It comes as something of a jolt to find out that the book was printed in 1959, and maybe even bought a few years later, thus a long time after it was hot. When 'Darkness at Noon' originally written in German ('Sonnenfinsternis') came out it caused a stir. It sold in millions of copies and made the author rich and famous (a kind of breakthrough every author, even serious ones, hopes will happen at least once during their career). It is thought of as an indictment against Stalinism. Reading it seventy years later one is struck by its gentleness. In 1940 the reality of political imprisonments, tortures and arrests, were not so generally well-known so it constituted something of a revelation. In comparison with what Solzhenitsyn published in the 70's it certainly pales. It is not so much a novel about political oppression as a coming of terms with past convictions held by the author, who at one stage was a Communist. This certainly added spice to the tale.

The book presents the protagonist Rubashov who is taken early one morning to a cell. As he is a victim our sympathies are naturally engaged on his behalf, even if his past may not have been so snow white after all. One is led to reflect that the roles could easily have been different, and that Rubashov could as well have been on the dispatching end as on the receiving. It all takes place in an unnamed country, but there is of course no doubt that it is Russia. Stalin figures, so does Lenin, but neither with name. Stalin is simply No 1, and Lenin is nostalgically referred to as the former leader. Rubashov is not for the first time under suspicion, some years earlier he had sacrificed his mistress, a big-busted secretary, to save his own neck. After all he was needed for the Party. This betrayal will of course now be laid against him.

What has gone wrong? Was not Rubashov with countless others a most devoted Communist, serving with distinction in the Civil War, showing unquestioning loyalty to the Party? How come so many of those who provided the backbone of the Party and were responsible for its success has fallen out of favour and been tainted as counter-revolutionaries, and liquidated for that very reason, the memory of which are being erased in the historical documents? Why does the Revolution devour its own Children, turning against those who made it possible? What does it really mean to resign from the Communist Party? Does it mean that you feel that the ideals of Communism have been betrayed. Or does it mean that Communism is rotten to the core, it is built on illusion and duplicity, a mere stratagem for the acquisition of power, and more to the point, the maintenance of the same. What ultimately counts is to stay on as long as possible, and for that reason being willing to compromise and betray every single idea it supposedly stands for, or has rhetorically claimed. After demasked what remains? Nothing?

Rubashov addresses a few philosophical issues raised by the spectre of Communism, thus making the novel something of a didactic exercise only partially shrouded. A crucial one is the role of the individual. Is he just a 'grammatical fiction' with no existence beyond that of the grammatical pronoun 'I'? In the words of Rubashov, is an individual nothing but a mass of one million individuals divided by a million. In other words is the collective the basic unit, and the individual only a derived one, and as such insignificant and redundant? The notion of suffering itself more or less disappears if the individual has no independent meaning. Only with the individual does the awful concreteness of death and execution stir the imagination. Rubashov, whom we are led to believe to have been ruthless when in power, has looked at death as something very abstract. What a jolt to him when he in his imprisonment, looking through the spyhole of the door to his cell, sees the wreck of an old Comrade being dragged to his execution. What have they done to this fellow, once so strong and proud? What really makes matters excruciatingly concrete is that this fellow calls out his own name - Rubashov, as he is led away and disappearing behind a corner. Did even his mistress die under such humiliating circumstances, rather than painlessly dissolve into thin air?

Another issue he grapples with is rationality. How far can you be led by your thinking? Should thinking be free and unbridled, or should it be weighed down by ballast? If you are not able to float free of traditions, maybe your thinking are held within bounds? And then what does it mean that the masses are ready and mature, fully conscious of their rights? Maybe the consciousness of the masses is relative and not absolute, maybe it is related to circumstances. Every new technological breakthrough changes society fundamentally, and the masses cannot keep up. Their consciousness becomes outdated and it needs to develop. To rise or to be raised so to speak to a new level required. The metaphor Koestler thinks of through his protagonist is a system of locks. A barge has to be transported, it rises on the rising level of the water in each lock. The water corresponds to the consciousness of the masses, and every new lock represents a technological change, in which the water level has to be increased. This process takes time. History does not think in terms of minutes and hours, but in generations. Koestler is obviously quite proud of this metaphor.

The plot of the novel is simple enough. Rubashov has for some reason, it does not matter really what, fallen out of favour and become redundant and has to be removed. From the onset he is aware of the rules of the game, he has after all lived with them for most of his adult life, and in some small way perhaps contributed to them. He knows that this can only end in his execution. This is a thought that does not particularly trouble him, after all he is now old (in his fifties) washed-out, a shadow of his former self. With old age comes the thought of death as well as the necessary resignation required. But before that some kind of charade has to be played. He is interrogated, or should we say interviewed by an old Comrade - Ivanov, whose task it is to convince him to see reason. He has been loyal to the Party and there is one remaining way for him to show his loyalty and devotion for one last time, namely to act as a cautionary figure, to freely confess his sins in a public trial. To break him and make him play along is of course not an easy thing it is realized, but maybe not quite as hard as they fear. The strategy of Ivanov is to be gentle, to use no violence, only to appeal to the basic rationality of the victim. To confess is just the most rational thing to do, anything else would be illogical, and in the end, who would like

to break the rules of logic? Rubashov and Ivanov know each other from long ago. They were comrades in arms once upon a time. They share values, memories, loyalties. In fact, Ivanov indicates, their roles could have been reversed. It is just a matter of chance who happens to sit at what side of the table. Ivanov is not above a certain show of cynicism. He and Rubashov have seen through the system, they are required to act in a play, why not do it properly according to the set rules? After all what does the individual matter in comparison with the collective, the masses, or the Party itself, set to steer the course on the waves of History. Rubashov is in fact presented with an offer he cannot refuse. He will be given two weeks to think things over. Then he will be presented with the papers to sign. There are after all only two options available to him. One, the spectacle of a public trial, and who knows what this can lead to in the end; or simply the choice of an administrative act. Being shot with no further ado, no public knowledge, just a matter of administrative duty.

After that things improve for Rubashov. He is given paper and pen, and he is regularly taken out to exercise in the free air. He knows deep down that he will relent, that he will capitulate, and this awareness fills him with peace. There are distractions of course, a hurting tooth-ache that comes and goes and affects his orbital nerves. Then there are fellow inmates with whom he communicates directly or by relay by tapping on the wall using a commonly known code. With his neighbour he carries on a conversation relieving some of the boredom, exchanging gossip, inanities and jokes, but also relaying public information, such as the execution of fellow prisoners, to be paraded along the corridors.

The day before his term is at end, Ivanov pays him a visit. Whether as an interrogator or a friend is hard to discern. But when it comes to the final stage Ivanov is no longer there, he has been replaced by a sub-ordinate, a certain Gletkin, a younger, far more ruthless man, who has opposed the soft gentle methods of this superior, instead proposing a more direct brutal approach. Gletkin is of another generation, and of another class. Rubashov learned to read and write as a child, and was also given his first watch by then. Gletkin instead comes from peasant stock, he did not know how to read and write and tell time until he was an adult. It shows.

Trumped up charges, ridiculous charges are brought up. Rubashov is aghast and tries to remonstrate, but Gletkin is unmoved, correct and brutal. In fact a correct brutality is what characterizes him, Rubashov reflects. What follows is torture. Not the hard physical one, that might be easier to deal with, but a far more insidious kind - lack of sleep. He is dragged before the relentless Gletkin at all times of day, a bright light shining in his eyes. In the end he never knows what time of day it is, his reprieves being so few. No, Gletkin does not allow him to sign all the confessions right away, every single confession must be painfully and painstakingly worked out. Once he is allowed a small victory, one charge is dropped, be it a minor one, yet Rubashov experiences a short-lived triumph. Now Gletkin is in charge all the time, he does not allow himself to be replaced, which is usually the routine. In that way the victim loses his sense of moral superiority, the interrogator is with him all the time, suffering the same deprivation, yet holding up, while Rubashov gets weaker and weaker and eventually start to pass out. They have discussions. What is truth? merely what is useful Gletkin reminds him. And here we are reminded perhaps of the pragmatism of a William James, who was mercifully spared having its ultimate

consequences spelled out to him. The masses are told what is useful to them. Russia is two hundred years behind the times, what is now happening in Russia so brutally, happened in England two hundred years ago. The Russian peasantry is not used to industrialization, it has to be brutally forced down their throats. Who cares about the individual workers, the main thing is that the industrialization works, that future generations will benefit. And as to Ivanov, what happened to him? Rubashov learns that he has been taken off the case and suffered an administratively executed death. In the end, after having been confronted with a son of an old Comrade, and a fellow prisoner, and learning that he had instigated him to poison the supreme leader, he signs the papers. He has capitulated, as he had foreseen, and experiences a deep relief. He is now allowed to sleep. There is a trial, in which he makes abject confessions, crawling on his belly, being watched by an unsympathetic and derisive audience, to which he makes at the end a pathetic appeal. What does it matter what he says.

At the end of the novel there is a knock on the door. He is once again escorted by two guards, this time down to a basement. Walking down the steps he stumbles, drops his pince-nez, which has figured so prominently as a prop during the whole narrative. The pince-nez is broken into pieces, but so what, he does not need it anymore. What follows is a long corridor which does not seem to end. He walks and walks and waits for the last moment, the drawing of the revolver. Instead there is a dull blow striking at the back of his head. He falls to the floor. All kinds of visions come to him. Another blow and so the lapping waves of the sea of eternity.

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