

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Arthur Koestler

Darkness at Noon

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***Darkness at Noon* is one of the seminal political novels of the 20th century. Written following the author's disillusionment with the Soviet Union and published in 1940, the novel anticipates the onset of the Cold War. Mainly focalised through the central character, the narrative presents Stalinism as a logical consequence of the October Revolution.**

The novel is structured in four parts – three “hearings” and a concluding chapter, “The Grammatical Fiction”. Through the three hearings endured by the protagonist, Nicolas Salmanovitch Rubashov, the reader learns, retrospectively, about his illegal work on behalf of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

During a 1933 visit to Berlin, he chastises Richard, a young communist cell leader, for failing to distribute Party materials and thereby silencing the Party's voice. In this moment, Rubashov echoes Bertolt Brecht's canonical assertion of Party infallibility: “The Party can never be mistaken” (47), he says, and later in the same chapter, “The individual was nothing, the Party was all” (77). (Note that Brecht's *The Measures Taken* similarly declares, “The individual can be annihilated / But the Party cannot be annihilated / For it is the vanguard of the masses / And it lays out its battles / According to the methods of our classics, which are derived from / The recognition of reality.” 29) Both Richard and Little Loewy, whom Rubashov encounters on a Party assignment in Belgium, eventually fall victim to fascists, a consequence of Rubashov's denunciation and the abandonment by the Comintern.

“The Second Hearing” centres on Rubashov's repeated interrogations by Ivanov, an “Old Bolshevik” and intellectual akin to Rubashov. Ivanov attempts to persuade him to accept the remorseless logic of revolution, claiming that a revolutionary must obey the Party's commands – even at the cost of his own life – as anything else constitutes petty-bourgeois individualism. Ivanov delays the use of torture, preferring rational argument and dialogue. Rubashov, whose appearance (marked by thick-lensed pincenez) alludes to Karl Radek, must come to believe in “the logical necessity and the objective rightness of capitulating” (130). This capitulation requires him to confess to all charges against him, including conspiracy, counter-revolutionary activity and an attempted assassination of the state leader, the unnamed “Nr. 1” (Stalin). (Notably, in the novel neither Russia, nor Stalin, nor Rubashov's real-life models Leo Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek are ever mentioned by name, but are, except for Nr. 1, collected under the generational label “Old Bolsheviks”).

Ivanov is eventually replaced and executed, suspected of being too sympathetic to Rubashov. His successor, Gletkin – a peasant-born Party zealot and brutal interrogator – resorts to psychological torture: sleep deprivation, harsh lighting and a coerced false testimony from a fellow prisoner, “Harelip”.

The final chapter, “The Grammatical Fiction” (a Bolshevik term for the first-person singular), serves both as a record of the show trial and a metaphysical reflection. Here, Rubashov experiences something akin to Freud's “oceanic feeling” – a transcendence of ideological binaries such as

individual vs. collective, truth vs. falsehood, and bourgeois morality vs. revolutionary necessity. This allows him, finally, to reconnect with a sense of “eternity” (222).

To illustrate the range of interpretations the novel has inspired, one need only compare Peter Viereck’s 1961 foreword with Irving Howe’s critique in his landmark study *Politics and the Novel* (1957).

Viereck’s foreword offers an unequivocally positive appraisal, praising the novel’s “artistic vision” and hailing it as “a major work of art” (vii). He contrasts what he calls “novels of flat political blueprints” (e. g. Koestler’s own *Gladiators*, Malraux’s *Man’s Hope*, and Remarque’s *A Time to Love and a Time to Die*) with “novels of contoured flesh and blood”, among which he includes *Darkness at Noon*, *Man’s Fate* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (vii).

By contrast, Irving Howe’s reading focuses on how Koestler constructs the “symbolic triumph of Stalinism” (230) as a consequence of revolutionary logic. He critiques Koestler’s dichotomous thinking – such as the binary between “amoral activism and moral passivity” (233) – which culminates in a depiction of Stalinism’s rise as an “inner necessity” of post-revolutionary development. Howe argues that Koestler simplifies a complex issue into “abstract and ultimatic moral terms” (231).

Howe’s critique reveals more than it perhaps intends. Unlike Viereck, Howe insists on the novel’s logical flaws, noting, for example, that Rubashov’s character becomes “thinned into abstractness” (231). He suggests that Koestler’s approach oversimplifies the profound moral and psychological dilemmas faced by leftist intellectuals. Rubashov’s transformation from staunch Bolshevik to victim of Stalinism strikes Howe as “untrue to our sense of human behavior” (232). Quoting Harold Rosenberg, he accuses Koestler of a “mechanical dichotomy” between the individual and history, which “distorts his understanding of the tragedy of the left intellectuals” (232).

For Howe, *Darkness at Noon* is effectively a ‘novel of a flat political blueprint’ diametrically opposed to Viereck’s appreciation of it as “a major work of art”. At the same time, it seems that Howe expects the either/or logic as a defining element of politics to stop at the gates of fiction, which can be achieved in some cases (Howe appreciates Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* to a similar degree as Viereck), but is not a defining dimension of the political novel as a genre (Viereck, for instance, recognises “social journalism” as “art”; vii). Howe even accuses Koestler of impatience: “Koestler is so terribly impatient a writer, impatient as only a journalist can be when he finds himself trying to ‘use’ the novel.” (234)

Howe poses an important question about the political novel as a social phenomenon: is the transparency of the author’s “intention” (234) and the journalistic tone of writing (Howe declares Koestler a “political journalist”, 234) responsible for the novel’s popularity? His answer is telling: even a poorly written novel becomes political the moment readers perceive it as “relevant” (234). He concludes: “one feels that, with all his faults and all his journalistic glibness, [Koestler] has been one of the few writers in our time to drive immediately toward the problems that most concern intelligent men.” (234) These quotes are given in full not simply to repeat Howe’s critique, but to underscore a key feature of certain political novels: they are almost unthinkable without their ideological and historical context – and the politically engaged readers who respond to them. *Darkness at Noon* is a case in point. It is no accident, therefore, that Howe concludes the novel “depends for its impact almost entirely upon its ideology” (235).

In sum, *Darkness at Noon* exemplifies how ideology – and politics more broadly – can come to

dominate the fictional form. Though dismissed by Howe as “crucially flawed” (231), the novel became one of the most influential anti-Soviet books ever written. It was “the first book to lift the curtain on Stalin’s show trials of the 1930s” (Scammell 2019) and resonated with critics of Stalinism within both communist and leftist circles. In Western Europe, it contributed to growing anti-communist sentiment. In this regard, *Darkness at Noon* – a political novel *par excellence* – stands alongside Orwell’s *1984* (1949).

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This title was not censored before publishing