

POLITICAL CONTENT IN *DARKNESS AT NOON* BY ARTHUR KOESTLER

Minodora Otilia SIMION

Assoc. Prof. PhD.,

Constantin Brâncuși University of Târgu-Jiu

Abstract:

Koestler’s novel entitled Darkness at Noon has an obvious political content. It appeared in 1940(written in German, but first published in English translation) and it marked its author’s disillusion with Russian socialism since to the thirties generation, who had often seen Russia as an ideal socialist state set in opposition with the expanding threat of fascist Germany, the Non-Agression Pact signed between Russia and Germany in 1939 came as a great shock. Moreover, in Darkness at Noon, Koestler sets out to explain the Moscow trials of the thirties in which Stalin had shocked the world again by purging members of his own party. Koestler records in his dedication: “The characters in this book are fictitious. The historical circumstances which determined their actions are real” and thus his intentions are at least partly documentary. The life of his hero, N. S. Rubashov is a synthesis of the lives of a number of men who were victims of these trials and the book is dedicated to them”.

Introduction:

In her essay *The Leaning Tower* (1940), Virginia Woolf mentioned some of the factors that had affected literary development in the thirties in a negative way, in her view. ”In 1930, she wrote, it was impossible-if you were young, sensitive, imaginative-not to be interested in politics; not to find public causes of much more pressing interest than philosophy. In 1930 young men(...) were forced to be aware of what was happening in Russia, in Germany, in Italy, in Spain. They could not go on discussing aesthetic emotions and personal relations(...) they had to read the politicians. They read Marx. They became communists .They became fascists”[1].

The same idea is pointed out in G. Orwell’s essay also written in 1940, *Inside the Whale*, where Orwell says that “during the past ten years literature had involved itself more and more deeply in politics....the younger writers have gone into politics and the movement is in the direction of some rather ill-defined thing they called Communism”.[2]

Both Orwell and Virginia Woolf indicated the main feature of nineteen-thirties fiction was its development away from the “aesthetic emotions and personal relations” which were replaced by the direct reflection of the political events and public causes of the period.

Two main factors encouraged this change of interest:

1. The first was the critical, threatening nature of public affairs at the time(the collapse of the Wall Street stock market late in 1929, the economic depression, the devaluation of the pound, the unemployment peaking at 3 million in 1932 which provoked hunger marches and riots,

the effects of the depression in Germany where Hitler seized power in 1933 and in Italy with Mussolini, in both countries fascism becoming actuality. Stalin's Bolshevik Russia with its powerful ideological influence, the Spanish Civil War- the battlefield of the two modern ideologies, announcing the Second World War that emerged in 1939.

2. The second was the preparedness of the thirties writers to be aware that there was an emergency as Stephen Spender remarked for a generation hounded by external events.

Many of the novelists who emerged during the decade (Christopher Sherwood, Rex Warner, George Orwell, Anthony Powell, Henry Green) were more disposed to confront the nightmare of history not through imaginative or aesthetic transformations which partly denied or tried to escape its processes, but through direct, political attitudes which sought to transform reality and historical processes themselves.

Unimpressed by the modernist innovation, inappropriate for their social and political concerns, thirties and forties novelists wanted to return to the “mainroad of English fiction”, Woolf's urge to “look within” being often replaced by an inclination to “glance out” at external reality and social being”(the essay “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown”. Arthur Koestler's political novels :*The Gladiators*(1939), *Darkness at Noon*(1940) and *Arrival and Departure*(1943) are the works of a Hungarian born journalist and former member of the German Communist Party who gave up his beliefs after his experience as a reporter in the Civil War from Spain.

The Conflict between Politics and Human Feeling

Koestler's hero in *Darkness at Noon*, N.S. Rubashov, was formerly a party leader who was imprisoned and executed for disloyalty to the party. Finally, as a consequence of constant brainwashing he confesses these imaginary disloyalties, and his utopian socialism cannot be adjusted to the political pragmatism of Stalin's rule. The Old Bolshevik (one of the founders of the Soviet Union) is arrested at night and imprisoned. He is subjected to a series of prolonged interrogations, first by an “old college friend and former battalion commander” Ivanov, then, when Ivanov too is removed, by Gletkin, one of the “generation of modern Neanderthals produced by the State omniscience and infallibility. Rubashov recalls his own past when owing to his allegiance to the Party he was a blind instrument of human destruction; now he is himself destroyed by means of torture, and by the fact that he admits that his statements can be represented as dangerous to the regime and as threatening the life of “No.1”, i.e. Stalin. In the end he is marched from his cell and shot in the back of the head while walking along a cellar corridor.

Koestler's conflict between politics and human feeling is successfully dramatized through concentration on the workings of Rubashov's mind. Koestler's technique reminds us of Kafka's vision of an isolated individual threatened by an incomprehensible society and also, as Malcom Bradbury puts it in his book entitled *The Modern British Novel*, “of Dostoevsky's treatment of mental suffering, doubt and guilt in confinement”[3] leading to an obvious “deepening of the inner life” of the character.[4]

In a 1973 postscript to *Darkness at Noon* Koestler wrote that even if this novel was based on his experiences as a member of the Communist Party and dissenter it was not centered upon the issue of communism because, as he said: “*Darkness at Noon* is the second novel of a trilogy which revolves around the central theme of revolutionary ethics, and of political ethics in general: the problem whether, or to what extent, a noble end justifies ignoble means, and the related conflict between morality and expediency. This may sound like an abstract conundrum, yet every politician is confronted with it at some stage of his career; and for the leaders of a revolutionary movement, from the slave revolt in the first century BC to the Old

Bolsheviks of the nineteen-thirties and the radical New Left of the nineteen-seventies, the problem assumes a stark reality, which is both immediate and timeless. It was the realization of this timeless aspect of Stalin’s regime of terror, he added, which made me write *Darkness at Noon* in the form of a parable-albeit thinly disguised-without naming persons or countries; and which made Orwell, in writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, adopt a similar technique”[5]

In the foreword to the novel, Koestler explicitly says that the life of his hero, N. S. Rubashov is a “synthesis of the lives of a number of men who were victims of the so-called Moscow Trials” and the book is dedicated to them”.

Albert Gates in his article *On the significance of Koestler. The Conclusion of a Polemic*, , pointed out this resemblance: “As the first fictionalized work on the Moscow Trials”, he says, “*Darkness at Noon* was a graphic account, the verisimilitude of Koestler’s portrayal, that certain knowledge that comes from having been an experienced Stalinist who knew the methods of the police regime, in some respects overshadowed the political implications of the book. For it marked the first hesitant step by Koestler to identify Stalinism with Bolshevism and the Moscow Trials with an inevitable fate of revolution”.[6]

As far as the title of the novel is concerned, Koestler attributed its English version to its translator to whom it was suggested by a phrase from Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*: O dark, dark, dark amid the blaze of noon, /Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse? Without all hope of day!” [7]

Rubashov’s situation clearly suggests that for him there is no escape from the darkness of prison except for the even darker “noon” of death.

The structure of *Darkness at Noon* is quite simple. The title of the first three chapters: “The First Hearing”, “The Second Hearing”, “The Third Hearing” refer to the hero’s interrogations; the first two by Rubashov’s former friend Ivanov; the last by Ivanov’s successor Gletkin, the” new Soviet man”.

The first two chapters consist of Rubashov’s self-reflections, Koestler locating his novel in the cell and the interrogation room of a prison and focusing on thought rather than action. The only significant action is presented only in flashbacks, everything concentrating on Rubashov’s mind.

Koestler’s Point of View

By using third person narration the author can control the distance between the reader and the literary work and even the temporal distances can be varied, reminding us of Wayne Booth’s assertion in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “the central intelligence...will seem most sympathetic if presented as an isolated, unaided consciousness, without the support that a reliable narrator or observer would lend...So long as what the character thinks and feels can be taken directly as a reliable clue about the circumstances he faces, the reader can experience those circumstances with him even more strongly because of his moral isolation”.[8]

Thus, we have the opportunity to look out at Rubashov’s world from within and the hero can gain our sympathy and trust. But Koestler’s third person point of view is not entirely omniscient, since the narrator mostly limits the reader’s perspective to Rubashov’s inner self. Everything is described only as the hero perceives it and this technique enables us to share his mind. By using such a third person narration the author creates us the illusion that we are free to make our own judgement and we forget that Koestler is the actual source of the whole story due to the impersonality and authority given by his choice of this point of view.

Koestler’s third person point of view is not omniscient. Instead of saying “Rubashov was being watched by the warder”, he says “Rubashov had the feeling he was being watched...”

forcing us to be part of the character’s mind and limiting our view to the main hero’s perception.[Koestler: 18]

Koestler gradually manages to change the focus of our attention from Rubashov’s prison cell to his inner life, from “the mattress looked newly filled...the walls...would stifle the sound of tapping...., the heating pipe itself seemed to be noise-conducting...So far, everything was in order(p 90 to” decided...felt protected...was not afraid(p 10).As a consequence,the readers gradually immerse themselves in Rubashov’s personality and experience his enormous sense of guilt. Through Koestler’s use of this restricted point of view we share his” familiar and fatal constraint to put himself in the position of his opponent, and to see the scene through the other’s eyes”.[Koestler:24].

Conclusions

Koestler’s criticism of Marxism is embodied in the workings of Rubashov’s mind, in the hero’s personal and political crises he undergoes ,the book being considered as Sidney A.Pearson, Jr. puts it, “both at the time of its original publication in 1941 and ever since, as one of the truly powerful works of twentieth-century political literature” [9].The subject of this novel is not only why some victims of the purge trials confessed but also why such a movement intending to regenerate mankind still retained its appeal to many thinkers when its failure was obvious, such popularity of Marxism as a doctrine among well-intended Western intellectuals being rather incomprehensible.

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