

**Robert Beum**

**EPIGRAPHS FOR RUBASHOV:**

**KOESTLER'S DARKNESS AT NOON**

*Darkness at Noon* was a timely book, it was highly praised and, wonder of wonders, not overpraised. In 1940 the immediate enemy was fascist, and the price of immediacy was league with that different order of New Order farther east. But we were beginning to see the latter for what it was. Western European and American naiveté was disappearing—not, of course, as rapidly or as pervasively as was necessary. Soviet participation in the seizure of Poland, and the unprovoked attack on Finland, had rendered the revolutionary claim to humanist idealism finally ludicrous, and brought, or in some cases acted as the catalyst which brought, a host of converts to the West. The image of modern totalitarianism had become, in Newman's phrase, a real rather than a merely notional apprehension: Berlin and Moscow were particulars of the same essence. Koestler's novel provided a look at the totalitarian structure from the inside, from the point of view of only slightly fictionalized personal involvement, rather than in terms of expository or homiletic or allegorical presentation of ideology and machination. Two decades later, the book is unworn. It is standard reading in the curricula of university courses in *The Modern Novel* and in *Philosophy in Literature*; it circulates well in libraries, even in those of small and modest towns.

The book stands in the great tradition of Russian psychological and metaphysical fiction, the tradition of Tolstoi and Dostoevski. To my mind—to make at once a strict normative judgment—it does not come up to *Anna Karenina* or to *The Brothers Karamazov* or even to *Crime and Punishment*. It is more of a special adventure than the first; its scope is not as great as that of the second; and it is philosophically and psychologically less complex than either of the Dostoevski books. Yet it belongs with them (not only normatively but, interestingly enough, thematically as well with the latter two). It seems to me immensely superior to our modern allegories of the new order's utopias—to *Brave New World* and *1984*.

Over these and other such books, it has the inevitable advantage of realism over allegory, of present over possible horror, of character over counter, and of internal conflict and intense conflict of wills over developed and rather panoramic external adventure. And yet critics have not, I think, wholly understood the rationale of its success. There are two insufficiently examined critical assumptions about its unweakening appeal: it is, we are reminded, a political book, and politics still engulfs us; and the book is a study of a thoroughly modern consciousness rendered by the most adroit modern fictional techniques descending from James, Ford, Conrad, and Joyce. The explanations are true, but are not the truth. We are perhaps as weary of politics as we are caught up in it, and yet the most politics-jaded reader turns or returns to *Darkness at Noon*. This fact argues against the first point, but only apparently in favour of the second: the book is a triumph of technique and of subject, but the modernity of both technique and subject has been overstated. Koestler's novel is also an old-fashioned—I would say, distinctly classic—triumph. I am as yet undecided about our mania for seizing upon and hailing as a justification of modernism any and every instance of competent writing which is in part modern in theme and in treatment; it may reveal an enormous insecurity and emptiness, or it may not: but in any case it is not shrewd of us.

I want only to correct our inclination to view the book as an absolute triumph of the absolutely modern in conception and execution. A masterwork of modern fictional technique it certainly is—in some respects. The narrative is pared down to essentials. What goes on in Rubashov's mind and heart—his ideas and attitudes and the incidents of his past seen in retrospect—have great vitality because one senses, from the beginning, that they will determine his relationship to death and his soul's final relationship to his life. The very fact of his confinement and the virtual certainty of his imminent liquidation lend all of Rubashov's reflections and all of the retrospective narrative a power they would not have in more detached circumstances. The book opens without preliminaries; the reader is at once imprisoned with Rubashov. And from there to the last sentence, the restricted point of view is utilized for the unity and concentration which it so well affords. Description, narration, and analysis develop only as a consequence of some action of Rubashov's. Thus, Koestler does not offer independent descriptions of the prison, but sees them through Rubashov's eyes, and then only after the prisoner has come into a mood or situation which would logically cause him to be looking about. Such a technique allows the novelist freedom from excessive delineation; the sole concern is with elementary and symbolic imagery that has stuck in Rubashov's mind. The technique of utter sparseness and the device of somnambulistic flashback and of stream-of-consciousness are un-

deniably modern. But of course they are all the more effective in a book which at the same time observes the unities of action and place strictly, and the unity of time almost as punctiliously. Nor should we fail to see the importance of plot in the old-fashioned sense. True, much of the action has already occurred before the book begins, but it is offered to us (through Rubashov's reveries) as background; we are not able to understand Rubashov without these incidents from his past, and some of them, such as his friendship with Bogrov and his affair with Arlova, bear directly upon the catastrophe. For that matter, though, there occur within the prison itself incidents that produce or help to produce significant inward change: the Bogrov incident contributes powerfully to Rubashov's disaffection, and the grillings weaken his spirit (and body) and cloud his mind significantly. It might be said, too, that the very inaction of the story is in this case active, because it is intense; since the relative inaction is a consequence of imprisonment, the slightest bodily and sequential actions take on a dramatic vividness and create suspense (since the most trivial and routine actions become necessary and, in many cases, are at the same time dangerous to the prisoners). Besides this, there is suspense throughout—not so much about Rubashov's fate as about its shape. The book affords little comfort for champions of the plotless novel.

Rubashov himself is only modern in the sense that Dostoevski characters are modern. He holds the grey values of a subtle mind and Alexandrian age; not even by the end of the book is he able to define with anything like perfect clarity his reasons for dying in the manner he chooses or to arrive at any final judgment on the nature of man or even of his own soul. But he is not more complex than Raskolnikov or Ivan Karamazov. He is certainly as classic a protagonist as ever entered a tragedy. He has magnitude of soul, maturity, intellectual power, and loyalty. He even fulfils one of those qualifications held by Aristotle to be necessary to the tragic figure but neglected assiduously by almost all gifted modern writers: he is a man of official responsibility, of the state. His weakness lies, of course, in his past sins against humanity (in the name of humanity) and against his own soul. But he commands the attention and respect so naturally and easily granted a leader, and his suffering and his end elicit feelings not far below wonder. His humiliation and punishment at the hands of the regime, and the fact that he chooses the most difficult rather than the easiest way in his confessions and at the trial, elicit a response to the god in man. He is, in fact, one of the very few twentieth-century protagonists whose consciousness is modern and intellectually compelling and who remains at the same time the type of the classic hero.

Thus the structure of the novel is that of tragedy, and it is better than any

tragedy the modern stage has seen. But the philosophical ideas themselves, insofar as they have a bearing on Rubashov's fate and ultimate decisions and attitudes, are of no small interest, and they receive a development which they could not properly receive in a tragic drama. Curiously enough, these ideas, and Rubashov's changing feelings about them, achieve much of their distinctness and power through Koestler's technique—a technique of old-fashioned rhetoric—of breaking the book into distinct sections, each treating with one idea and one inner change, and of prefacing each section with one or more highly functional epigraphs. These sententiae are the very themes, and they stick in the mind, haunting it and keeping it on track, like motifs of grave music, or like scriptural texts incessantly charged by the homily. While it is true that Rubashov dies—as the intellectual often dies—without final certainties, it is also true that he has come a long way toward repudiating the totalitarian doctrine that the end justifies the means, and toward confirming the existence of a spiritual reality in man which is violated by a religion of expediency. The five epigraphs mark the stages of Rubashov's spiritual development during his imprisonment.

The first of them, Saint-Just's remark that "Nobody can rule guiltlessly", defines Rubashov's original attitude toward the employment of heartless means in order to attain a seemingly utopian end. It is a mild and abstract remark; it seems almost a commonplace. And of an abstract character is Rubashov's attitude toward such things as his deposition of Richard and of Little Loewy, and his sacrifice of Arlova. These seem to him small sacrifices toward a utopian gain. But Rubashov is able to regard these deaths in the abstract only because he did not witness them in person or even realize them imaginatively (being caught up continually in official business). His devotion to pure reason and expediency, and his absence from the scenes, allowed their deaths an abstract quality which made them relatively easy to justify.

A shallower novelist would have set Rubashov to brooding on these responsibilities, with a view toward repentance, immediately upon his confinement in the prison. But human psychology does not always proceed in such a straight line. Instead, the prisoner launches out upon an even more elaborate philosophical exposition of the doctrine of justification of means by ends. The second of the epigraphs is a quotation (from Dietrich von Nieheim, Bishop of Verden in 1411) which endorses the totalitarian dogma from a medieval Christian point of view: "When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality . . . the use of every means is sanctified, even cunning, treachery, violence, simony, prison, death. For all order is for the sake of the community, and the

individual must be sacrificed to the common good." At the beginning of this section of the book, Rubashov is discovered writing on the Marxist theory of "consequent logic." His abstractions have not yet been sufficiently challenged.

A challenge does occur in this second section, however: Rubashov's dear and longtime comrade, Bogrov, who shares Rubashov's status as a political prisoner, is taken to execution, and for once Rubashov is physically confronted with the spectacle—and a particularly horrible spectacle—of a close friend, transformed by torture into something sub-human, being dragged to his death. The ghost of Arlova appears. And at last "physical liquidation" has become death after torture. Rubashov's revulsion is not at all inconsistent with his past hardness toward political death: he is now dangerously skeptical of the dogmas which could keep it abstract, and he is personally confronted and involved.

But once again his course is not to be in a straight line. Partly through Ivanov's arguments in favor of confession, and through his personal apologies for the Bogrov incident, Rubashov's horror is mitigated, and he half surrenders to Ivanov's suggestions. As the opening of "The Third Hearing" he is again elaborating a doctrine of expediency to which the epigraph from Machiavelli is most appropriate: "Occasionally words must serve to veil the facts. But this must happen in such a way that no one becomes aware of it; or, if it should be noticed, excuses must be at hand to be produced immediately." An additional quotation, however, introduces a new note: "But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." This verse from Matthew is interpreted (in the orthodox tradition, at least) as a counsel of humility, admonishing the prideful oath and the prideful defending of oneself from one's accusers; behind it lies the notion that reason, as applied toward solving human problems, only conjoins with evil unless it is continually adjusted to revealed love and meaning. Rubashov comes to adopt the first position and is, at the end of the book, groping uncertainly toward the second. Realizing, first of all, that he will not find Gletkin's narrow and doctrinaire intellect amenable to a detailed defense of his true position, and secondly, that in actuality he *is* guilty—of Richard, of Little Loewy, of Arlova and others—and thereby does not deserve the luxury of defending himself, he more and more relinquishes his opportunities to answer the accusations. At the trial, he relinquishes his opportunities, and answers, for the most part, in simple agreement with the charges—"Yea, yea." In his last hours he clearly refutes his—and Marxism's—position that man is capable of solving his problems by will and reason alone. He notes that wherever the scalpel of reason has been applied, in the Marxist rebuilding of society, to lift a cancer from the body of humanity, another festering sore has

immediately replaced the old one. He is not at all clear, of course, about alternatives.

In the final section, Rubashov is also brought to realize the entanglement of means and ends: the key line of the epigraph is, "Each different path brings other ends in view." The spuriousness of Ivanov's clever and seemingly humanitarian argument justifying massive experimentation with human lives and societies is now clearly revealed: massive coercion and the abstract, automatic destruction of human lives, so debase the souls of the manipulators that the ends themselves are inevitably transformed, the experimenters no longer being capable of their once lofty (if mistaken) aims.

Yet Rubashov's disaffection is not absolute. There is in this section ample evidence that his going through with the public trial and his acceptance of all accusation still, in part, represent his hope that such a submission will somehow and perhaps remotely be of value to the old aims of the Party. This submission, this loyalty, is entirely possible to a mind which gave even Gletkin the benefit of the doubt, which saw him as a new Neanderthal Man, but as perhaps a Neanderthal ultimately of use to the original character of Marxist aims. Carefully formulated and disciplined ideals are not readily lost, especially in the absence of any positive witness to another faith; and after the exhausting interrogations, Rubashov is scarcely in a condition to be absolute about anything. On the other hand, it is clear that the greatest single motive behind Rubashov's having chosen the ordeal of prolonged confrontation and of relative silence then and at the trial is his distinct sense of guilt. He reminds one of Dmitri Karamazov confessing to spurious crimes as atonement for his actual and lesser crimes. Rubashov's struggle to redefine his relation to the Party, to the world, and to eternity, which is the whole subject of this novel, ends in a manner not unfamiliar to tragedy. He has discovered his own ego, and to a certain extent his own soul. He has overcome self-interest, he has begun to free himself from a narrow, self-contradictory deterministic philosophy, and has experienced, if only somnambulistically, "the oceanic sense," the darkness of the soul obscurely seeking its home.