Prison Blues

An essay informed by four Novels

Jim Ferguson

Writers and thinkers in this culture and beyond, have long been fascinated with ideas of crime and punishment, freedom and social control. Religion is much concerned with such ideas as are politics, philosophy, and the majority of present day social sciences. These areas of interest form a core of social thought which, in a pure sense, is rivalled only in recent times by the great rise of rationalism and empirical science with its concomitant technological advances. In the works of Herbert Marcuse, “A good deal of the history of bourgeois society is reflected in the bourgeois theory of authority.”

In Plato’s Republic (c.375 B.C.) and Thomas More’s Utopia (1516) there is lengthy discussion of justice and how criminals ought to be treated. The punishments advocated generally involve some loss of liberty and More has much to say about slavery being a suitable punishment for most crime. “...they likewise make chains and fetters for their slaves, to some of which, as a badge of crime. Their society is reflected in the bourgeois theory of authority.”

During the 1970s Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich was on the syllabus in Scottish secondary schools. This does credit to our internationalist outlook and was my first encounter with a “fictional” work about incarceration. I didn’t much like the book and have never gone back to read it afresh with adult eyes. What strikes me now though is the fact that there was no other text in the syllabus about prison experience. None of the four books above were ever mentioned, nor were any of many possible alternatives. Why not? The British Ballad of Reading Gaol, Tolstoy’s The Resurrection, Kafka’s somewhat more abstract, In the Penal Settlement; or even in the Scottish context, Jimmy Boyle’s A Sense of Freedom? Not one of these books, as far as I know, got anywhere near the syllabus and the school library wasn’t much use either.

It is difficult not to say that, as part of its contribution to the Cold War, the Scottish education system was happy enough to throw copies of Solzhenitsyn at children in the hope they assimilated something about the evil Soviets who imprisoned dissenters in barbaric conditions. It was sufficient to get across that message with little in the way of contextual comparisons. Koestler’s novel might have given too confused a message about the Soviet Union with its implication that the Revolution of 1917 had degenerated and transformed itself in ways that were not intended by those Commissars’ unlucky enough to find themselves at “divergence” with Stalin or “No. 1.”

20th Century

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Jack London (1876-1916) wrote The Star Rover to highlight, among other things, the inhuman treatment of prisoners in the USA. Darrel Standing, the first person narrator, is stubborn to the point of aimlessness. He is killed by them in their use of straight-jacketing as punishment for his part in a fictitious conspiracy to blow up the god. What Standing recognises is the absolute necessity of adopting an anti-authoritarian stance in order to retain his dignity.

London, thought to be the first millionaire author, born into a poor family in San Francisco, was brought up in Oakland and on surrounding farms. He was a tough, rugged, kind of frontier American who believed in living life to the full. "A sailor labourer, oyster pirate, fish and game warden, tramp, gold prospector, soap-box orator, war correspondent, rancher, bohemian—all these hats he wore and more—yet still he wrote a thousand words a day for sixteen years, his entire professional life." London achieved all this in spite of alcohol and drug problems, as well as the difficulties caused by several bad business deals in which he lost large sums of money.

He claimed to be prone to boredom and when something bored him he felt a great sense of disgust with it, due to this disgust he was driven forward. He did not revise any of his work after publication. When asked to do so for later editions he categorically refused. Yet he thought this feeling of disgust which welled up within was a character defect that he would have liked put right. "Something bored him he felt a great sense of disgust with it, due to this disgust he was driven forward. He did not revise any of his work after publication. When asked to do so for later editions he categorically refused. Yet he thought this feeling of disgust which welled up within was a character defect that he would have liked put right but somehow couldn’t. Still, for sixteen years he did not tire of writing and produced around fifty books. Victor Serge (1890-1947), journalist, anarchist and political activist, states in his dedication at the beginning of Man in Prison, “Everything in this book is fictional and everything is true. I have attempted, through literary creation, to bring out the general meaning and human content of a personal experience.” Like Jack London, his concern was to communicate through a novel something of the experience of imprisonment and to connect to as wide a readership as possible. “It is not about ‘me’ about a few men, but about men, all men crushed in that dark corner of society. It seems to me that the time has finally come for literature to discover the masses.”
Serge was born into a political family of impov-erished Russian emigres in Brussels. One of his brothers died of hunger. He was highly motivated politically and much taken with the work of Marx, Nietzsche and Stirner. The last seven years of his life were spent in exile in Mexico, where like Trotsky he was subject to harassment by the NKVD. However, he continued to write regardless of the fact that he found it all but impossible to get his work published.

In *Darkness at Noon* Koestler (1905-1983), describes the incarceration, interrogation and exe- cution of Comrade N. S. Rubashov, taking what can be described in today's terms as a classical anti-Stalinist line. Nevertheless, the novel is not greatly diminished by the ideological axe-grind- ing. For Koestler the anti-Stalinism was central yet today (January 1999) the form of the political sys- tem which devours Rubashov is not central; it is the mechanics of interrogation, humiliation and punishment that come into the foreground through the swamp of ideological information and argument. The arguments are put brilliantly, with lucid cold logic, but essentially it is the deline- ation of systematic oppression (of Rubashov and others by the prison and justice systems) that now gives the novel its strength. Another reason for the diminution of ideological impact is because from official, inter-governmental view the Cold War is over.

Without the anti-Stalinism Koestler’s project in *Darkness at Noon* is rendered meaningless in strict historical terms; this is perhaps a truism, though as a “novel” the work still succeeds on lit- erary terms. It becomes the interrogation, more like Kafka than Koestler. That is, more universally metaphysi- cal and less driven by ideology. Born in Hungary and highly motivated politi- cally, Koestler was both fascinated and haunted by the Russian revolution. Rubashov is modelled partly on Nikolai Bukharin. Koestler was imprisoned during the Spanish Civil War and drew on this experience to write *Darkness at Noon* among other things.

Brendan Behan (1923-1964), a self-styled IRA man, was arrested shortly after his arrival at Liverpool in 1939. He was aged only sixteen but such was his back- ground that he had a thorough knowledge of the history of British oppression in Ireland. After initial incarceration in Walton Prison he was sen- tenced at Liverpool Assizes to three years at a Borstal in Suffolk. Borstal Boy is based on these experiences.

Behan, however, was not so concerned with the facts where the embroidery of them made for a bet- ter story. Immediately after his arrest Behan was taken to CID headquarters in Lime Street. When asked for a statement he declared: “My name is Brendan Behan. I come over here to fight for the Irish Workers’ and Small Farmers’ Republic, for a full and free life, for my countrymen, North and South, and for the removal of the baneful influ- ence of British Imperialism from Irish affairs. God save Ireland.”

He also writes: “In accordance with instruc- tions, I refused to answer questions.”

Yet exactly what instructions he arrived in Liverpool with is open to question. Certainly, Ullick O’Connor has raised this issue and cites sev- eral examples where the version of events given in *Borstal Boy* is at odds with other witnesses. This is why I consider *Borstal Boy* an autobiographical novel.

On his return to Ireland, Behan was gaoled a second time for his part in the shooting of a police- man. The details of this are described by Behan in Confessions of an Irish Rebel. His under- standing of prison and the life there was born of hard experience.

Two warders grabbed him (Behan) and took him out kicking and screaming, leaving the priest purple with rage. They dragged him up some iron steps outside, pulling him so that he fell and split his head. In his cell they gave him a beating on the chest and kidneys and hit him with keys in the face. He was kept the mark of the steel stairs on his forehead for the rest of his life.”

Victor Serge had similar harrowing experiences. Behan, like Jack London, developed an alcohol addiction which eventually would kill him.

Of the four books only Koestler does not use a consistent first person narrative voice. Rubashov and the omniscient narrator are so similar in tone and thought process as to somehow gel in the mind of the reader producing the same closeness as is evoked by straight use of the first person. Also, Koestler uses extracts from the diary of Comrade Rubashov to move directly into the first person. During the interrogation, more like Kafka than Koestler. That is, more universally metaphysi- cal and less driven by ideology. Born in Hungary and highly motivated politi- cally, Koestler was both fascinated and haunted by the Russian revolution. Rubashov is modelled partly on Nikolai Bukharin. Koestler was imprisoned during the Spanish Civil War and drew on this experience to write *Darkness at Noon* among other things.

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These types of prison regime, carried on the winds of imperialism and industrial efficiency, spread around the globe. The main mode of punishment, whether intentional or not, was the enforced aloneness prisoners had to endure. It has been argued that such systems were likely to have health and character building benefits and that while prison officials isolated them, they had contact with the prison chaplain and governor at regular intervals. It is hard to imagine that those incarcerated had much in common with such officials and seems absurd to suggest that such meetings would mitigate the punishment of being removed from one's normal state of sociability. This amount of time spent alone is part of what gives rise to a heightened awareness of the thoughts and voice within one's own mind.

"Introspection opens up the endless vistas of the inner voice and puts into this the most secret recesses of our being. ...But the invisible companion remains." 14 What Serge calls the "invisible companion," Koestler calls the "silent partner" and London calls the "little death" are all aspects of that same introspection and result from enforced aloneness and the attempt to survive it.

Jack London takes this introspection furthest; when Darrel Standing is in the straight jacket he projects himself through time and space by psychological travel. The other three writers do not get so close to the mystical. There is some difficulty in reaching this state of mind but from the very start he has an inner-psychology. Koestler tries to develop the inner voice but it comes through almost in spite of the author.

What Conrade Rubashov discovers as the "grammatical fiction" or "silent partner" (that which has been previously buried by logic of political expediency in his ordinary life) is immediately present in the characters in the other books. London, Serge and Behan do not deny the inner voice and the workings of the conscience. In fact, this inner voice is to a large extent different from the narrative voice throughout. There is for these characters no difference between the inner and the great and the good of historical events. Ironically, at their most isolated physically the characters appear to become less rational, more riddled and more fully human psychologically.

Behan does not hold all the population of Britain responsible for oppression in Ireland. Yet Koestler's attempt to fold the denial of the individual inner voice onto Rubashov results in what seems a very deliberate statement of social and political psychosis. However the dichotomy for London asserts itself, no matter how psychotic or corrupt the political life Rubashov led.

Koestler holds almost everyone who supported the 1917 revolution responsible for Stalinism. This is the logic of this position. Koestler says "having placed the interests of mankind above the interests of man, having sacrificed morality to expediency ...Now they must die, because death is expedient to the Cause, by the hands of men who subscribe to the same principles." It is the historical determinism which says that all revolution-ary change must end in a blood bath. He is in effect meeting one death penalty with another. Yet paradoxically, what remains interesting is the concrete detail in the novel: the size of the cells, the window, the grey light.

One has to assume Koestler read Serge, appreciated the detail but disagreed with the outlook. It seems crazy now to think that almost everything about an individual could be determined by whether or not they supported the Soviet Union and its policies. Prisons can usefully be thought of as punishment factories, how long is such an industry to flourish? There is a common-sensical notion that criminals must be punished but how are we properly to ascribe guilt? How can all be equal before the law when there is inequality everywhere else?

One certain sane aspiration is to happiness with dignity but how in the vast horror of human imperfection and frailty of judgement? Whether we are or are not in a post-industrial age, the relentless growth of capitalist consumption and the underlying "free-market" politics continues at pace. Whilst many influential thinkers, politicians and media persons thought the threat to freedom came from Communism it would make more sense to suggest that the threat comes from the freemarket system itself. (Its judicial system is designed to protect and strengthen free-market principles and practices.) This system is encompassing the globe. From Moscow to Sydney to Glasgow the signs are everywhere. The same multi-national chains are operating. The attacks on indigenous, local cultures continue as footnotes to the success of global capital: local populations who inconveniently get in the way of development suffer terribly. The oil exploitation in Nigeria or the Persian Gulf are illustrative of this, as are the practices of tobacco companies, shipping companies and clothing manufacturers. This is the question of applying justice to these people comes into play. They wouldn't want the standards applied to a shoplifter in Scotland applied to them. For theirs is baseless robbery legally sanctioned by world trade and global free-market practices. To apply such standards to even one multi-national would call for the indictment of the whole system. In the same way, Koestler and others indicted systems which undermined the dignity and happiness of human beings, so the present people in power would have to be once again indicted (and not just in works of fiction).

In these books about prison there is a meeting of social and private anguish. They are very concerned with the experience of one person, in one situation, yet they have an allegorical power which is transcendent. These are super-allegorical texts, there is much to be learned from them and more to be argued over. They touch on major or political questions, from the role of the state to the meaning of freedom, to the right of nations to self-determination; major moral questions from political ethics and means and ends to individual responsibility for one's actions as well as questions of psychological and physical endurance. Above all, they are contributions to human knowledge concerning how to create a culture and civilisation in which we attain our natural dignity.

"Culture cannot live where dignity is killed ...A civilisation cannot prosper under laws which crush it." 16

The irony is that the greatest dignity appears to lie in the resistance to all and any oppression. Perhaps it is in the process of the struggle for freedom we find both dignity and civilisation—and so to happiness where and whatever it might be. The language of the judicial system is designed to dehumanise and depoliticise the actions actually happening to people. Yet there is a need for something, one wouldn't like to have a member of the family killed and nothing to happen to the killer. Human nature cries out for vengeance and if not

Notes
1 Herbert Marcuse, From Luther to Popper, Verso, London, 1983, Pg. 144.
2 Thomas More, Utopia, Cassell & Co., London, 1890, Pg. 103.
6 Ibid., Greenman's introduction, Pg. xxi.
8 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 The narrative technique employed by Koestler in Darkness at Noon might usefully be compared with that of James Kelman in How late it was, how late.
13 Ibid.
16 Albert Camus, Bulletin of the Algerian Cultural Centre, Algiers, May 1937.