

20th Century Prison Blues

An essay informed by four Novels

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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 words of Herbert Marcuse, "A good deal of the history of bourgeois society is reflected in the bourgeois theory of authority."¹

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 infamy, they hang an earring of gold..."²

Doubtless More was influenced by his reading of Plato; both are at pains to describe highly mechanistic and prescriptive social arrangements, showing them to be for the overall good of the community wherein the individual is subsumed.

It is not my intention here to dwell on the historical development of such ideas but accept that the history exists (and can be argued over) whilst looking at some aspects of prison and punishment in relation to 4 twentieth century texts:

The Star Rover, Jack London, Novel 1915

Men In Prison, Victor Serge, Novel 1930

Darkness at Noon, Arthur Koestler Novel, 1940

Borstal Boy, Brendan Behan, Autobiographical Novel 1957

These Western/North European texts are, in a sense, part of that literary tradition. A tradition which encapsulates a specific set of values and social assumptions about how people live, what governments are and, indeed, what a novel or any

other piece of literature actually (or supposedly) is. However, they illuminate much of the ideological landscape of the twentieth century as well as the detail of individual experiences in the process and circumstances of imprisonment. At the same time, almost by necessity of the subject matter, they are in opposition to both the literary tradition they come from and the institutionalisation they describe.

The main characters in these books believe that, on some level, their treatment embodies injustice; that the injustice has its roots in larger political questions and/or social arrangements but is manifest in the institutions of the prison and justice systems. Each author presents state authority as the perpetrator of unjust punishment and indicts these state institutions simply by detailed description of an individual life, by exposing what happens on the inside. In making these detailed descriptions of prison life the writers are appealing to a higher sense of moral justice in the consciousness of the reader: that is part of the way the novels work. Another way in which they work is by making concrete the details of an experience which is to the majority of people extremely unfamiliar. The more extreme and removed from everyday life the actions described, the more the minute details render them as true. "The mind projects into the concrete its spiritual tragedy."³

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 Oscar Wilde's *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."



Convicts Exercising at Pentonville

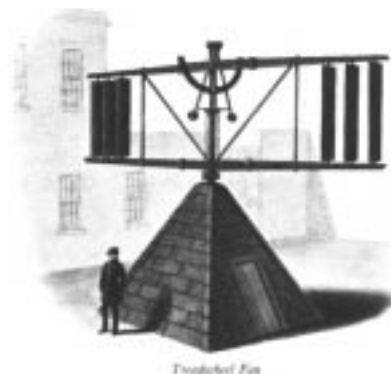
Jack London (1876-1916) wrote *The Star Rover* to highlight, among other things, the inhuman treatment of prisoners in the USA. Darrel Standing, the first person narrator, is stubborn to the point of daring the authorities to kill him by their use of straight-jacketing as punishment for his part in a fictitious conspiracy to blow up the gaol. 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."⁴ 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 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 *Men 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."⁵ 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."⁶



Tweeldeel's Pen

Serge was born into a political family of impoverished 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* Arthur Koestler (1905-1983), describes the incarceration, interrogation and execution 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-grinding. For Koestler the anti-Stalinism was central yet today (January 1999) the form of the political system 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 delineation 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 an 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 literary terms: it becomes however, more like Kafka than Koestler. That is, more universally metaphysical and less driven by ideology.

Born in Hungary and highly motivated politically, 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 years but such was his background that he had a thorough knowledge of the history of British oppression in Ireland. After initial incarceration in Walton Prison he was sentenced 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 embroidering of them made for a better 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 came 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 influence of British Imperialism from Irish affairs. God save Ireland." 7

He also writes: "In accordance with instructions, I refused to answer questions." 8

Yet exactly what instructions he arrived in Liverpool with is open to question. Certainly, Ulick O'Connor has raised this issue and cites several examples where the version of events given in *Borstal Boy* is at odds with other witnesses. 9 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 policeman. The details of this are described by Behan in *Confessions of an Irish Rebel*. His understanding 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 to keep the mark of the steel stairs on his forehead for the rest of his life." 10

Victor Serge had similar harsh 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. 11 Also, Koestler uses extracts from the diary of Comrade Rubashov to move directly into the first person. During the interrogation sequences we hear Rubashov clearly, the logic of his thinking is expressed in his own words. One hears the absurd arguments of the interrogation, where those with power are in complete control.

The others (London, Behan, Serge) use a first person narrative which functions to emphasise the truth of the experience described; the bearing of individual testimony to acts systematically designed to undermine the human spirit. Singularity of viewpoint enhances the sense of enforced aloneness in prison as well as the triumph of communication. Prisoners find ways of communicating with each other. Jack London calls tapped messages between cells "knuckle-rap". There are whispered messages in the exercise yard or at work. Each system of imprisonment is different yet there are huge similarities between what the characters experience in France, the Soviet Union, the USA and England. Behan possibly has a better time of it than the others, being mostly in a borstal rather than an prison for adults.

The first person narration brings the reader closer to the situation of the prisoner; it offers a technical solution to the problems of both voyeurism and authorial distance. Koestler uses different technical solutions to achieve the same effect. This is interesting given the concern with *ends and means* underpinning, to a greater or lesser extent, all four narratives.

The prisoners in three of the books (not London's) are "Political Prisoners". Only in that one particular are they extraordinary. Yet all prisoners are political as in political with a small *p*. All societies make decisions as to what activities are taboo or unacceptable and therefore made criminal, thus the necessity for systems to deal with individuals or groups who indulge in such proscribed activities. In accepting imprisonment as a suitable way for dealing with offenders it then follows that within such institutions there must be rules of behaviour and regulation of the activities of offenders. We logically arrive at what is sometimes termed the *institutional regime*.

The prison regimes in the so-called "developed world" have much to thank the city of Glasgow for and more specifically one William Brebner (1783-1845) who hailed originally from Huntly in Aberdeenshire. Brebner put into practice a system at the Bridewell, on Glasgow's Duke Street, which was to spread quickly through Europe and North America. The Bridewell, governed by Brebner from 1808 until his death, was regarded as a model institution, indeed a House of Commons Select Committee on Scottish Prisons reported in 1826 that "The prisoners are kept silent, and at constant work from six o'clock morning till eight at night." 12 Thus in the early 19th century, the governance of prisons was not left to chance but organised along somewhat industrialised lines.

"Much has been written about the respective merits of the so-called separate and silent systems of imprisonment which were introduced into prisons in the first half of the nineteenth century" 13



Chief Warder, Pentonville



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 prisoners were isolated 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 life, shines a penetrating light into 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 effort. The other three writers do not get so close to the mystical. Standing has some difficulty in reaching this state of mind but from the very start he has an inner-psychology. Koestler tries to deny Rubashov this inner voice but it comes through almost in spite of the author.

What Comrade 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 no different from the narrative voice throughout. There is for them no possibility of the inner voice differentiating between the individual and the great flow of historical events. Ironically, at their most isolated physically the characters appear to become less reified and more fully human psychologically.

Behan does not hold all the population of Britain responsible for oppression in Ireland. Yet Koestler's attempt to foist 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 Koestler is that the humanity of the inner voice 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."¹⁵ It is the historical determinism which says that all revolutionary 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 commonsensical 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 free-market 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 almost as footnotes to the success of global capital: local populations who inconveniently get in the way of this 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 where 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 barefaced 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 Serge, 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 more 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 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 *ends and means* 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 depoliticise its function. In fact much of the ritualised processing of offenders is designed to dehumanise and depoliticise what is 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

vengeance then justice. As with most things, prevention is better than cure, but what do we do if the remedy appears worse than the disease —if prisons are teeming with petty offenders, non payers of fines and other such people who have no business being in prison at all?

The secretive and conservative nature of prisons, the attempted depoliticisation of language and process cannot keep these questions off the agenda for ever. Eventually everyone will know someone who is or has been in prison for something trivial and changes will have to be made. Democracy, however, may not be so responsive. The mechanisms for controlling public thought might not allow such free reform. Still, it feels better to live in a country where the death penalty is not dealt out in a courtroom. Yet, even at that, one does not feel one is living altogether freely; somehow the competitive clouds of smoke and scorching flames of control that rise out from within the anonymous free-market envelop and imprison, driving one back from that real freedom to which civilisation and dignity would direct our aspirations.

Notes

- 1 Herbert Marcuse, *From Luther to Popper*, Verso, London, 1983, Pg. 144.
- 2 Thomas More, *Utopia*, Cassell & Co., London, 1890, Pg. 103.
- 3 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Penguin, London, 1975, Pg. 113.
- 4 In Introduction, *The Collected Jack London*, Ed. Steven J Kasdin, Dorset Press, New York, 1991.
- 5 Victor Serge, *Men In Prison*, Writers & Readers, London, 1977.
- 6 *Ibid.*, Greeman's introduction, Pg. xxv.
- 7 Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy*, Arrow Books, London, 1990, Pg. 4.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 See Ulick O'Connor, *Brendan Behan*, Abacus, London, 1993.
- 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*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1994.
- 12 In Andrew Coyle, Inside: Rethinking Scotland's Prisons, *Scottish Child*, Edinburgh, 1991, Pg.31.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Victor Serge, *Men In Prison*, Writers & Readers, London, 1977, Pg. 36.
- 15 Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing*, London, 1954, Pg. 479.
- 16 Albert Camus, *Bulletin of the Algerian Cultural Centre*, Algiers, May 1937