A Different 'Darkness at Noon'

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Last July a German doctoral student named Matthias Weßel made a remarkable discovery. He was examining the papers of the late Swiss publisher Emil Oprecht for a dissertation on Arthur Koestler's transition from writing in German to writing in English at the end of the 1930s.

Oprecht was a left-wing fellow traveler who had founded his famous publishing house Europa Verlag in Zurich in 1933, and was well known for his anti-Nazi views and support for writers in exile, including Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, Ignazio Silone – and the young Arthur Koestler. Weßel told me that at the time, "I was looking for letters and royalty reports, because I wanted to know how many copies were printed of the first German edition of Koestler's *Spanish Testament*." He failed to find the answer to his question, but while looking over the Europa holdings in the Zurich Central Library he came across a cryptic entry: "Koestler, Arthur. Rubaschow: Roman. Typoskript, März 1940, 326 pages."

This was extremely odd. Weßel knew of no such novel (*Roman*) in Koestler's German writings, but the name Rubaschow rang a bell. Rubaschow (in English, Rubashov) is the hero of Koestler's finest novel, *Darkness at Noon*. Weßel hardly dared think about what he had found, suspecting a sequel or perhaps a false entry, for it was well known that the original text of the novel–the last one Koestler wrote in German before he switched to English–was lost during his flight from France at the start of World War II. That was seventy-five years ago and it has never been seen since. With trepidation, Weßel ordered a scan, which showed a typed carbon copy, with corrections in Koestler's handwriting. The date on the title page, March 1940, was the date on which Koestler is known to have finished the novel. There was no doubt. Weßel had stumbled across a copy of the German manuscript of Koestler's masterpiece.

The implications of Weßel's discovery are considerable, for *Darkness at Noon* is that rare specimen, a book known to the world only in translation. This peculiar distinction has been little discussed in the vast critical literature about Koestler and his famous novel. In my lengthy 2009 biography of Koestler I barely touch on it, yet the phenomenon is all the more extraordinary when one considers that the novel has been translated into over thirty other languages, every one of them based on the English edition, meaning that they are not just translations, but translations of a translation. This includes the German version, which Koestler himself translated back into German in 1944.

It is not certain that the Zurich typescript is the absolutely final version of Koestler's novel, but it's undoubtedly very close. Weßel has compared it with Koestler's back-translation, and while the plot and characters are the same, he has found a host of discrepancies between the two. "The more pages I analyze," Weßel wrote in an e-mail, the more the differences between the Zurich MS, [the English] translation and Koestler's retranslation add up. The deviations vary widely in quality and quantity, but taken together the versions are so different in content and style that there can be no doubt that a new German edition...is not only justified but rather absolutely necessary.

It's hard to believe the same author could have produced two such different versions of his own novel, until one remembers that Koestler was working from the English edition the second time around. In the intervening four years he had learned to think and write in English himself, which helps to explain why the discrepancies were so wide. When he ran into trouble with his translation into German he consulted some native German speakers for advice and showed a sample to Rudolf Ullstein, scion of the great German publishing house (for which Koestler himself had worked in the 1930s). Ullstein noted that Koestler was using "a great deal of foreign words instead of German expressions" in his translation and asked for permission to change them into idiomatic German. There is irony here, for the English translation Koestler worked from is itself full of German words and phraseology, a neat reversal. After further drudgery, Koestler acknowledged his limitations and asked another German friend to revise the entire translation for him, but the final version, with all its weaknesses, was still his.

With the original text of *Darkness at Noon* now available, Weßel hopes it will help to secure for Koestler a much better literary reputation in Germany than he has had up to this point. Koestler's prison memoir, *Dialogue with Death*, incorporated into *Spanish Testament* and praised by Orwell, Sartre, and Camus, among others, was written in German, along with his two major novels, *The Gladiators* and *Darkness at Noon*, but neither of the novels has appeared in its original form, only in translations into German from the English versions of the originals (*The Gladiators* was translated from a translation by Edith Simon). As it happens, I found four copies of the German original of *The Gladiators* in a Soviet archive many years ago, when doing research for my biography, but I was forbidden to copy the novel or bring it out of the country.[1)] Weßel plans to obtain and publish it now, and calculates that the publication of both *The Gladiators* and *Darkness at Noon* in their original German will sway German critical opinion and vanquish the widespread idea in Germany that Koestler wrote important works only in English.

American and British critical assessments of Koestler have been very different, of course, but it's surprising how little attention has been paid to the issue of translation, for *Darkness at Noon* sounds awfully wooden in its present English form. It is full of Germanisms and awkward formulations, showing that the translator was unfamiliar with the Soviet reality and Soviet terminology that inspired it; but it has not been possible to document this until now. Given the helter-skelter way Koestler conceived and wrote his novel and the chaotic conditions in which it was translated, it's not surprising that the results were so unsatisfactory.

Koestler, who had been born in Budapest, educated mostly in Vienna, and worked as a journalist in the Middle East, Paris, and Berlin for German-language newspapers, had come up with the idea for the novel while living in France in the summer of 1938. He was responding to the shock of Stalin's show trials, and in particular to the notorious trial that year that targeted a large group of popular Party leaders, including the prominent reformist Nikolai Bukharin. In common with their predecessors, Bukharin and his codefendants confessed to hair-raising crimes against the state and abjectly professed to welcome the death penalty as their due.

Like other European Communists, Koestler had struggled to make sense of these trials, and having utterly failed to do so, he handed in his Party card. He started his novel in an attempt to decipher the tortured logic of the confessions, taking as his hero a Bukharin-like disillusioned high Party official, Nikolai Salmanovich Rubashov. In the course of the novel Rubashov is interrogated by two secret police officials, the "good cop" Ivanov (a former friend) and the "bad cop" Gletkin (a younger, robotic apparatchik), who between them force him to review his life as a Party leader and convince him that by following his ideals he has disobeyed the Party line and has violated his oath of loyalty. In Party-speak, he was guilty of counterrevolutionary activities. Broken by the logic of his interrogators, Rubashov listlessly confesses at a public trial and is taken to a prison cellar where he is executed with a bullet in the head. The novel's provisional title was "The Vicious Cycle" and after that "Rubashov."

While working on his novel, Koestler met and fell in love with a young English sculptor named Daphne Hardy, and in the spring of 1939 they moved from

his tiny apartment in Paris to a house in Provence, where Hardy worked on her sculpture and Koestler on his novel. They had three months of peace and quiet before the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact sent them scrambling back to Paris, where Koestler was arrested on suspicion of being a Soviet agent and dispatched to the Vernet internment camp just outside Toulouse. Thanks to the disorganization of the camp authorities, he was able to continue to work on his novel, and following his release in January 1940, managed to finish it in March after returning to Paris, despite having to break off and report to the local police station every few days.

Foreseeing more trouble ahead, Koestler planned to escape to England and pressed Hardy – who had attended a German school in The Hague where her father was a diplomat – into translating his novel into English before it was too late. She did so at top speed and at times virtually as he wrote it. In her journal she describes herself bent over a tiny table behind a curtain strung down the middle of their studio apartment, while Koestler wrote furiously at the kitchen table on the other side. Hardy was twenty-two years old at the time, somewhat unsure of her ability as a writer (she had left school at fourteen to pursue her art studies), and had absolutely no experience as a translator. When lost for a word or a phrase she consulted Koestler, whose own English was far from fluent at the time. Between them they cobbled together a complete draft in English before mailing it to Koestler's publisher Jonathan Cape in London on May 1, 1940, ten days before they fled south to escape the German occupation.

In the shambles of their departure from Paris, Koestler left a typescript of the novel on the kitchen table, and on their way south gave another to a Jewish friend in Limoges. The friend was soon forced to flee the German advance herself and left the second copy in her apartment (after the war, Koestler went back and found some parts of his novel in both Paris and Limoges, but not the whole text). He joined the French Foreign Legion to avoid a second arrest, while Hardy traveled to England on her British passport and arrived in London in July. Koestler's editor at Jonathan Cape, Rupert Hart-Davis, had started to edit his novel by then but was worried about the English text and the way it mimicked German syntax and vocabulary. He took it as a draft, and in a letter to Oprecht in Zurich dated July 10, 1940, asked for Oprecht's help:

> I understand that you have in your possession a manuscript of Arthur Koestler's new novel called *Rubaschow*. As I dare say you know, we are going to publish an English translation of this book...[but] all we have here is a rough typescript of the English translation. In order to get this touched up and put into final shape, it is essential that we should get hold of the original.

Farther on he added, "I imagine that by now your manuscript is the only copy of the original in existence," and suggested that Oprecht make a further copy for safekeeping.

This is the first and only indication we have that a copy of the German original of *Darkness at Noon* had survived the flight from Paris, and Hart-Davis was probably right that it was the only one in existence. The letter doesn't explain why Oprecht never answered, or why he didn't publish the novel himself. The Zurich copy bears a French censor's stamp, reading *Controle des Informations*, with the initials "RF" in the middle, standing for *République Française*, which shows it must have been sent from France before the Vichy regime came to power, and it's likely Hardy herself contrived to send it. When no word came from Oprecht, she must have concluded (this was wartime) that neither the manuscript nor the letter had arrived, leading Koestler, who was in a British jail at the time, to conclude that all copies were lost.

Having no German text to compare it with, Hart-Davis decided to go ahead and publish Hardy's translation without alteration, but under a new title, *Darkness at Noon*, which Hardy thought up at Hart-Da-

vis's prompting. His gamble paid off. The story of the doomed Rubashov shook the British left to its core, and though it didn't sell particularly well, it deeply impressed perceptive critics such as George Orwell and Michael Foot as a work of literary and political distinction.

In America, the book sold better, but it was only after the war and the start of the cold war that *Darkness at Noon* took off. In France in 1946, when the French Communists looked as if they would win a referendum on a postwar constitution, the novel sold over 400,000 copies and was widely credited with bringing about their defeat. Translations were made from the English edition into over thirty other languages, and its popularity soared as the cold war intensified. It has remained in print in many languages ever since, which brings us back to the question of translation and how good or bad the ur-translation into English might be.

Having acquired and studied a copy of the German manuscript myself, I can confirm the English translation as the source of most of the errors, omissions, and mistranslations that Weßel found in Koestler's translation back into German. Since it's virtually certain that most of those errors and omissions have been reproduced and multiplied in the thirty to forty translations made from English into other languages, I've been able to form a pretty good idea of what readers of *Darkness at Noon* have been getting. A spot check of passages from the beginning, middle, and end of the English translation reveals an uncomfortably close adherence to German word order, syntax, and grammar; German cognates are regularly substituted for more apt and accurate English synonyms; and unnecessary inversions of verb form occur on almost every page. There is also an excessive use of the pronoun "one" (in place of "he" or "you"), a symptom of the way the colloquial tone and plainspokenness of the original have been replaced by the stiff language of polite society and by fussy, Germanic circumlocutions that slow the narrative down.

This woodenness is intensified by several other problems. The most glaring is the misleading presentation of Rubashov's prison regime, which starts on the contents page. Here we learn that Koestler's novel is divided into four sections: "The First Hearing," "The Second Hearing," "The Third Hearing," and "The Grammatical Fiction." It's obvious to anyone with knowledge of the Soviet Union that these are not hearings, but interrogations, and they are carried out not by two "examining magistrates," as the English would have it, but by two interrogators: Ivanov, acting as the good cop, and Gletkin, the bad cop. Rubashov, at the novel's opening, is taken to prison not by a "chauffeur," as in the translation, but by a police driver, and he is watched over not by civilian "warders," but by secret police guards. Rubashov has been consigned not to the mercies of a civilized and rational system of justice, as the British terminology cozily suggests, but to a militarized secret police apparatus not in the least bound by the niceties of habeas corpus or the rule of law.

This misleading terminology disarms the reader and subverts the harshness of Koestler's political message. The prison was a place from which no one returned to normal life. There would be no hearings and no impartial court decision, but a sentence decreed beforehand from above, followed by a sentence to the gulag or summary execution. Hardy, as translator, was probably hearing about most of these things for the first time and can be excused for not understanding the machinery of the totalitarian state, and Koestler didn't know enough English to correct the terms she used.

As a result, Hardy softened Rubashov's fate by civilizing his surroundings and cushioning his pain. At the beginning of his second interrogation, for example, Rubashov awakes from a dream about his past in which he is arrested and struck in the face by "a revolver butt." This detail is omitted in the English translation, but it is important, because the scene is set in Germany when Rubashov was there as a Soviet agent, so we can deduce that this brutal arrest was by the Nazis. The similarities between Nazi and Soviet atrocities later became a cliché of Western journalism, but were new when Koestler wrote about them, and though neither regime was specified – the setting was obviously Soviet – the parallel was one of the themes of Koestler's novel.

Meanwhile the "fever" Rubashov suffers during his interrogations is lowered to a "temperature," his "heavily swollen" right cheek from toothache is reduced

to "swollen," and when he "struggles to emerge from the deep fog" of his sleep, he is said to "find himself." Since the image of the fog, standing for Rubashov's semiconscious state, is carried over several pages, its loss weakens the literary as well as the sensory impact of the scene.

A besetting sin of the translation, in fact, is the silent removal or weakening of Koestler's intensifying adjectives and repetitions. Ivanov, a former college friend of Rubashov's who has since joined the secret police, is already waiting in the cell for Rubashov to wake up, and his position of authority is emphasized when a junior officer enters the cell and salutes Ivanov "with exaggerated zeal," a phrase omitted from the English. Rubashov, while pacing his cell, makes a point of "automatically turning his back or hiding his face" from Ivanov, but this is mostly omitted from the English. Later, in the third interrogation conducted by the brutal Gletkin, Rubashov is repeatedly blinded by a light that is shone into his eyes until the moment when he breaks down and agrees to sign a confession, a crucial episode that is similarly blurred in translation.

Some of the omissions and shortcuts can be almost comical. At one point in the interrogation, Rubashov and Ivanov argue about the Communist Party's history and ideals compared with its disastrous practices, and Rubashov launches into a diatribe on the subject. When Rubashov announces that "our leadership [is] more grotesque than that jumping jack's with the little mustache," the English gives us "more Byzantine than that of the reactionary dictatorships," which completely loses the direct reference to Hitler and again weakens the connection Koestler makes between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

Probably the longest omission in the translation is a paragraph in which Rubashov meditates on the subject of masturbation and a burning dispute among prisoners about whether revolutionaries should remain chaste or not in accordance with their political principles. A vote is taken in which the prisoners come out against masturbation on the grounds that it would absorb more psychic energy than it is worth, given the unbearable pressures of imprisonment itself. In view of the prudish conventions of the 1940s, this paragraph may well have been cut by the publisher, rather than the translator, but it's unfortunate. The moment is psychologically important, occurring on a night when Rubashov's neighbor in the adjoining cell is tossing and turning and Rubashov himself can't sleep. He starts to fantasize about the voluptuous curves of his former mistress, Arlova, and can't stay still, a juxtaposition whose implications are missed in the translation, along with the detail (also omitted) of the wire mesh cutting through the straw mattress into Rubashov's back. He is described as "smoking the seventh or eighth cigarette of a chain" (instead of "chain-smoking his seventh or eighth cigarette").

The sum total of these mistranslations and omissions (of which I've given only a few examples) is overwhelming, and they assume additional weight in view of the debate about the "truth" of *Darkness at Noon* that erupted in the 1950s and has continued on and off ever since. After Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956, in which the Soviet leader shocked the world by revealing the extent of the physical torture used by Stalin to extort confessions, some critics argued that this new evidence contradicted what had come to be known as the "Rubashov theory" of confessions, which held that leaders like him had been ideologically disarmed and persuaded to perform "one last service to the Party" because they recognized their complicity in the Party's crimes and didn't have to be physically tortured.[2)]

These critics were writing from hindsight. With the exception of Soviet torturers and their bosses, neither the critics nor Koestler nor any but the unfortunate (and mostly dead) victims had known many of the details of Stalin's atrocities in 1938, and though Koestler stuck to his view of Rubashov's motives, he needn't have been as defensive as he was. There are repeated references in *Darkness at Noon* to Rubahov's

friends and junior colleagues being tortured. Images of mutilated prisoners being dragged through the corridors and past Rubashov's spy hole crop up more than once toward the end of the novel, and Rubashov is in no doubt about what awaits him if he doesn't cooperate. He isn't exposed to gross and extreme torture himself, but the effect of his repeated interrogations is similarly to break his resistance through persistent physical and psychological pressure. Toward the end of the novel Gletkin is congratulated by his secretary on his success in breaking Rubashov. Gletkin points to his lamp. "That...plus sleep deprivation and physical attrition" did it, he says drily.

Such methods would appear more serious if Rubashov's harsh prison regime and the systematic privations he suffered were more accurately conveyed by the translation. "Sleep deprivation and physical attrition," cited above, is rendered as "lack of sleep and physical exhaustion,"[3] a softening that is of a piece with the "hearings" and "magistrates" cited earlier, and with the entire effect of an unintentionally misleading translation that is unfaithful both to Koestler's literary sophistication and to his penetrating analysis of the devastating consequences of Communist psychology.

When *Darkness at Noon* appeared in 1940, it illuminated realities that were little known (and sometimes denied) in the West: show trials, confessions, prison conditions, totalitarian psychology, and human oppression. After the Soviet Union became the West's ally during World War II, the book's topicality faded, only to reassert itself with the start of the cold war. Moreover, when the cold war ended, *Darkness at Noon* did not fade away as many cold war books, movies, and other cultural artifacts did. Like *Animal Farm*, *1984*, and a few other novels from that time, *Darkness at Noon* had staying power, for Rubashov's story, like all good stories, transcends time and place. The book has little in the way of conventional plot, but it powerfully illuminates the human condition, men's moral choices, the attractions and dangers of idealism, the corrosive effects of political corruption, and the fatal consequences of psychological and ideological fanaticism.

This is all the more impressive given the novel's flawed translation, and it is a tribute to the quality of *Darkness at Noon* that it has had such a strong impact on readers despite this handicap. Now we no longer have the excuse of being denied the original text. It's not only possible, but in my view imperative, that someone undertake a new translation that will communicate the book's artistic qualities more accurately and offer a richer and more nuanced account of Koestler's complex narrative.

For readers, it will be like seeing a cleaned oil painting for the first time after the old and discolored varnish has been removed. Objects in the picture will assume their proper proportions, new details will come into view, the brushwork will be more discernible and easier to appreciate, and our understanding of the novel as literature, independent of its time and subject matter, will be enormously enhanced. I am speaking of the English, of course, but just imagine the possibilities if translations from the original German into two to three dozen other languages followed suit.

1) Tsentr khraneniya Istoriko-dokumental'nykh cobranii (Center for the Preservation of Historical Document Collections). All four existing copies of *The Gladiators* in German were confiscated by the French police when they arrested Koestler in 1939. The French police archives were later captured by the Nazis and transferred to Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, and when the Red Army occupied Berlin, the Gestapo archives were sent to Moscow. The four copies are now in the Russkii Gosudarstvennyi Voyennyi Arhiv (Russian State Military Archive) in Moscow.

2) See K.A. Jelenski's contribution to *Scaling the Wall: Talking to Eastern Europe: The Best of Radio Free Europe*, edited by George R. Urban (Wayne State University Press, 1964).

3) See the blog post by Shane O'Mara, a brain specialist at Trinity College, Dublin, "Sleep Deprivation as the Torture of Choice in Koestler's 'Darkness at Noon,'" October 31, 2013.