

CHAPTER
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Section 2

LITERATURE SELECTION *from Darkness at Noon*
by Arthur Koestler

Hungarian-born British author Arthur Koestler (1905–1983) was a Communist during the 1930s. He eventually became disillusioned with the Communist Party and left in 1938. His novel Darkness at Noon, published in 1941, is the story of the purge trials of the 1930s in Stalinist Russia from the point of view of an aging Communist revolutionary who has been arrested and imprisoned. As you read this excerpt, think about how the main character, N. S. Rubashov, feels about No. 1, the totalitarian leader.

Rubashov had the feeling that he was being watched through the spy-hole. Without looking, he knew that a pupil pressed to the hole was staring into the cell; a moment later the key did actually grind in the heavy lock. It took some time before the door opened. The warder, a little old man in slippers, remained at the door:

"Why didn't you get up?" he asked.

"I am ill," said Rubashov.

"What is the matter with you? You cannot be taken to the doctor before to-morrow."

"Toothache," said Rubashov.

"Toothache, is it?" said the warder, shuffled out and banged the door.

Now I can at least remain lying here quietly; thought Rubashov, but it gave him no more pleasure. The stale warmth of the blanket became a nuisance to him, and he threw it off. He again tried to watch the movements of his toes, but it bored him. In the heel of each sock there was a hole. He wanted to darn them, but the thought of having to knock on the door and request needle and thread from the warder prevented him; the needle would probably be refused him in any case. He had a sudden wild craving for a newspaper. It was so strong that he could smell the printer's ink and hear the crackling and rustling of the pages. Perhaps a revolution had broken out last night, or the head of a state had been murdered, or an American had discovered the means to counteract the force of gravity. His arrest could not be in it yet; inside the country, it would be kept secret for a while, but abroad the sensation would soon leak through, they would print ten-year-old photographs

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dug out of the newspaper archives and publish a lot of nonsense about him and No. 1. He now no longer wanted a newspaper, but with the same greed desired to know what was going on in the brain of No. 1. He saw him sitting at his desk, elbows propped, heavy and gloomy, slowly dictating to a stenographer. Other people walked up and down while dictating, blew smoke-rings or played with a ruler. No. 1 did not move, did not play, did not blow rings. . . . Rubashov noticed suddenly that he himself had been walking up and down for the last five minutes; he had risen from the bed without realizing it. He was caught again by his old ritual of never walking on the edges of the paving stones, and he already knew the pattern by heart. But his thoughts had not left No. 1 for a second, No. 1,

who, sitting at his desk and dictating immovably, had gradually turned into his own portrait, into that well-known colour-print, which hung over every bed or sideboard in the country and stared at people with its frozen eyes.

Rubashov walked up and down in the cell, from the door to the window and back, between bunk, wash-basin and bucket, six and a half steps there, six and a half steps back. At the door he turned to the right, at the window to the left: it was an old prison habit; if one did not change the direction of the turn one rapidly became dizzy. What went on in No. 1's brain? He pictured to himself a cross-section through that brain, painted neatly with grey water-colour on a sheet of paper stretched on a drawing-board with drawing-pins. The whorls of grey matter swelled to entrails [intestines], they curled round

one another like muscular snakes, became vague and misty like the spiral nebulae, on astronomical charts. . . . What went on in the inflated grey whorls? One knew everything about the far-away nebulae, but nothing about the whorls. That was probably the reason that history was more of an oracle [prediction] than a science. Perhaps later, much later, it would be taught by means of tables of statistics, supplemented by such anatomical sections. The teacher would draw on the blackboard an algebraic formula representing the conditions of life of the masses of a particular nation at a particular period: "Here, citizens, you see the objective factors which conditioned this historical process." And, pointing with his ruler to a grey foggy landscape between the second and third lobe of No. 1's brain: "Now here you see the subjective reflection of these factors. It was this which in the second

quarter of the twentieth century led to the triumph of the totalitarian principle in the East of Europe." Until this stage was reached, politics would remain bloody dilettantism, mere superstition and black magic. . . .

from Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 10–12.

Discussion Questions

Determining Main Ideas

1. What does Rubashov do to pass the time in prison?
2. What does he want to know about No. 1?
3. ***Making Inferences*** Why do you think Rubashov thinks obsessively about No. 1?