

Book review: Roger Scruton, *Notes from Underground*, New York: Beaufort Books, 2014, pp. i-viii, 1-244.

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For many years now there has been an increasing angst in the broad Western world (and Japan) about the collapse of bookish culture: book shops are closing down, and anecdotal evidence indicates that fewer and fewer young people *really* read anymore. What we are losing is not just the habit of reading but the spiritual dimension that accompanies it. This is why Roger Scruton's new novel *Notes from Underground* is so refreshing. The novel depicts the bookish culture in communist Europe in the 1980s: young people were eager to read books by authors such as Dostoyevsky, mainly because such texts were forbidden.

The well known English philosopher has first-hand experience of this culture. He participated in the fight against communism, and was involved in underground activities in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, he was one of many who rejoiced in the triumph of the free world and the liberation of people from totalitarian oppression.

Scruton, however, refuses to sit on his laurels. Over the past two decades he has witnessed how easily people in the free world gave up the culture and traditions which dissidents living under communism defended at the risk (or cost) of their lives. It was because of this disillusionment with the West and respect for the dissidents that Scruton wrote *Notes from Underground*. It is a beautiful love story as well as a political thriller, but most importantly, is a bitter criticism of modern culture.

Set in communist Prague in the 1980s, the story is written as the recollections twenty years later of the hero, who now lives in Washington. The communist society he recollects shares the oppressive mood of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which people are constantly watched and live in fear. It is a world of lies (communist propaganda) in which people are denied the freedom to speak the truth. Unlike *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, however, what is sought after in this novel is not just the truth on politics, but (to use one of Scruton's own terms) "the truth of the soul".¹⁾

One might be cautious about using the word, "soul", as one cannot use the term today without sounding cultic. But ironically under communism, people knew exactly what the term meant and understood its profundity simply because they were denied the ability to live in truth. As Father Pavel, a dissident priest in the novel, says, "there is a truth more easily perceptible by us [the dissidents under communism] than by" the people of the free world (205). This profundity detaches the novel from more overtly political dystopian novels and links it to

works such as Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, a search into the human soul, from which the title was borrowed.

Like Dostoyevsky's underground man, Scruton's hero, Jan Reichl, who is twenty-two years old, initially leads "a life of isolation" (6). Jan's father was arrested when Jan was thirteen in the early 1970s for organizing a reading group, in which members discussed "banished prophets" such as Dostoyevsky, Kafka, and Camus in order to understand what was lost as a consequence of communist oppression, namely culture and traditions (4). Three years after his arrest and sentence to hard labour, Jan's father died in a mine accident, and Jan, his mother, and his elder sister, were forced to lead miserable lives, always being "shunned" by the people around them due to their "criminal connections" (6).

Yet, of course, Jan's family were not the only people who were alienated. Under communism, everyone was, to a greater or lesser extent, disconnected from everyone else. One of the communist successes was the creation of "a world without friendship" in which people distrusted each other.

As the son of a "criminal", Jan was denied an university education, and so, after he left high school, he took a position as a sweeper. It was around this time that in his loneliness Jan started his underground journeys, staying in subway trains for hours and observing people, creating stories about them.

After his father died, his mother supported the family on her meagre salary as a cleaner in a paper factory. Meanwhile she made friends with an under-manager of the factory, and was promoted to senior caretaker. Though having an affair with this under-manager, she "remained faithful in her feelings" to her husband (6). She treated "his few possessions with a special reverence", and when she obtained a typewriter and supply of paper through the under-manager, she herself became a dissident. She started to type up translations of Western authors and the manuscripts of dissidents. Thus she turned her small apartment into a secret "publishing house" which she called "The Powerless Press" (21). The first thing she did in her new publishing house was "to push the TV into the corner of the room" with its screen facing the wall. This was done in order to respect the memory of her husband who called television "a box for morons" (21; 22). She thus rejected the visual popular culture and chose the written word, believing it was a vehicle to restore the past way of thinking, and to protect what her husband had attempted to protect.

Through his mother's publishing house, Jan moved into "a higher form of underground" where dissidents belong (24). Among his father's possessions, he found forbidden texts such as Kafka's *Trial* and Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. Reading these texts, Jan started to write stories. When he left his stories for his mother to read, she typed them and bound them up as a book for circulation. His book was called *Rumours* and his pen name was "Comrade Underground" (24). Nobody except his mother knew the identity of "Comrade Underground" whose name came to be known across the city.

One day Jan fell in love with a beautiful girl whom he met on the subway train. It was

“[l]ove at first sight”, and he did something out of character: he “followed her into the street” and got on a bus after her (24; 25). This was a mistake, because he was so absorbed in his romantic pursuit that he left behind on the bus his ID card and his copy of *Rumours*, which led the police to the discovery of his mother’s publishing house and her arrest.

The day after his mother’s arrest, a visitor came to Jan’s apartment. To his surprise, the visitor turned out to be the girl he had followed. Her name was Betka, and she came to return a copy of *Rumours* which someone had borrowed from Jan’s mother and passed to her. She instinctively knew that Jan was “Comrade Underground”. The similarity of their beliefs drew the two young people closer. Thus their romance began.

The encounter with Betka transformed Jan’s life completely. Though she was only four years older than Jan, she was much more acquainted with the world, knowing what was to be done to secure the release of his mother from jail. Her greatest help, however, lies in cultural and spiritual matters. She turned out to be an intelligent and cultured person who wanted to live in truth. She introduced him to the world of “beauty and antiquity” which were taboo in communist regimes since they were considered to be an “offence” to the progressive “proletarian future” (10). Thus Jan’s eyes were opened to the cultural heritage of his country. For the first time in his life, he visited museums and churches in the city and started to appreciate classical music.

Betka introduced Jan to an underground seminar, in which Rudolf Gotthartová discussed forbidden texts. Rudolf occasionally invited visitors from the West to his seminar – Scruton himself was a visitor to a similar underground seminar during the Cold War – to inform them of the latest scholarship and to help them to remember: “To remember what we are”, in Rudolf’s words (55). Rudolf’s seminar served as a sort of university for Jan and others who were deprived of (higher) education. Here Jan devoured books of literature, philosophy and history that he borrowed from Rudolf’s library.

Another important person Jan met around this time was Father Pavel, an underground priest who guided him spiritually. He not only introduced Jan to “spiritual literature” such as Pascal, but also opened his eyes to sacredness. Pavel also taught Jan the strength of the “powerless” since “God enters [this world] in secret. He is the truly powerless one, whose role is to suffer and forgive” (88).

This remark surprised Jan, because it matched his experience perfectly. After his mother’s arrest, he found a Bible in his mother’s shelf, which he had never seen her read. At first he did not pay any real attention to the Bible, but after his encounter with Father Pavel, he started to read her pencil marks in the margins of the Bible. He learned how much she sought after the “life in truth” and how much she loved her husband (82). Moreover, Jan could for the first time understand why his mother chose “The Powerless Press” as the name of her press.

Though it was Betka who taught Jan to live in truth, she remained secretive about her own life. Distrust seeped into their relationship and when Jan saw Betka with an American professor whom she called a “man without a soul” (201), their romance came to a tragic end. Jan

later learned that she had a daughter who was terminally ill, and she migrated to America in order to provide her daughter with better medical treatment (though in vain). Jan knew for the first time what he had lost.

Two decades later Jan is now in Washington. His being there is thanks to Betka. She is now a professor at New York University and has written a book on the unofficial culture of Czechoslovakia under the communist regime. In this book, she praised *Rumours* and revealed the identity of Comrade Underground. It was thanks to this reference that Jan was invited to a college in Washington.

The novel can be read superficially as a success story of someone who fought against the totalitarian regime and finally obtained a ticket to freedom. Yet such a reading misses Scruton's point. While Jan and Betka appreciate the freedom of their adopted country, America, they are both critical of the lack of profundity in the free world. For it has little to do with "the truth of soul". In fact there is a huge gap between what Scruton elsewhere calls the "easy-going freedom" of the Western world and the freedom of living in truth – the sort of freedom pursued by the dissidents under the communist regime.²⁾

One episode which illuminates the gap between the "easy-going freedom" and the freedom of living in truth is that of the American Professor Martin Gunther, who was invited to Rudolf's seminar to give a speech on human rights. His abstraction and theories, however, failed to capture the hearts of his audience (the dissidents). His words had little to do with humanity and, as Betka says, "this idea of human rights is too malleable to settle our deepest moral questions" (175). She does not deny that the "human rights machine" liberated people under communist regimes – it in fact rescued Jan's mother in the story –, but she is also critical of it for its lack of moral profundity (123). Here Betka shows us that the free world has been so absorbed in fighting against totalitarian oppression that it is often neglectful of the quality of freedom within.

"Easy-going" freedom, however, is not the only thing that undermines true freedom today. In fact the free world is now being filled with another type of lie: the "kitsch" culture of the commercial world (232). The totalitarian government and the "kitsch" culture are similar to the extent that they function to discourage people from deep thinking. This is why Jan laments that "The slaves had been liberated, and turned into morons" (234).

A quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Scruton's book is a timely reminder of the fact that the struggle against soullessness is not over. Dissidents during the Cold War fought with and through the written word. Could we do the same?

I realize today's soullessness is in a sense harder to deal with, because it is not something forced upon people by the state, but instead is something that people have foisted upon themselves. (In this sense, today's free world resembles the dystopian world of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* in which people voluntarily give up books [written word] and choose instead television [image].) Moreover the "easy-going freedom" and the material comfort of the free world dull the sense of cultural crisis and does not induce people to think about what is missing

from their lives. Under communism people had a clear idea about what was to be demolished (from the viewpoint of the state) and what was to be protected (from the view point of the dissidents). As I said earlier, the dissidents were eager to read books by authors such as Dostoyevsky, mainly because such texts were forbidden. Still, to re-introduce totalitarian oppression is not an option for the free world. It is an urgent task to think about what would make people in the free world read again and restore “the truth of the soul”.

Notes

- 1) Roger Scruton, “*Notes From Underground: Book Discussion with Roger Scruton*”, at Hudson Institute, Washington, 17 April 2014. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEHTizzPg-g>.
- 2) Scruton, “*Notes From Underground: Book Discussion with Roger Scruton*”.

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