I. Isolation and Separation

Rene Magritte's *Golconda* draws the viewer into a group of increasingly identical men. This progression, from a real, concrete individual (the viewer) to *Golconda*’s undifferentiated mass of abstract mankind, is opposite to Peter Viereck’s suggestion that Rubashov evolves from abstract mankind to concrete man in *Darkness at Noon*. *Golconda* draws attention to the men in its center, only to propel the viewer’s eyes outward along geometric lines to their fellows. As the viewer’s visual focus progresses outward from the center, the exact physical distance between the men establishes their separation. David Sylvester states:

> This surprising separateness, in isolating them and denying their solidarity, seems to make each one vulnerable, for, whereas the familiar prospect of a body of impassive men uniformly dressed side by side in a solid phalanx is a paradigm of human solidarity, the unfamiliar prospect of a similar body of men widely distanced from one another becomes a paradigm of human isolation.

Despite their sameness, these men are utterly disunited. Sylvester suggests that these men have not placed themselves in this separation voluntarily but "seem to have been moved, like chessmen." This idea of men as chess pieces, to be sacrificed in order to achieve a larger goal, suggests the view, portrayed in *Darkness at Noon*, that humans are merely a means to a greater end. Rubashov and the other prisoners, separated into isolation cells, embody Sylvester’s idea of *Golconda* as representing separation. As the prisoners’ human individuality, and hence their shared humanity, vanishes, so does their ability to communicate with one another. Rubashov’s cell visually isolates him from his fellows. Though his jailers observe him through the judas, through it he can only see a miniscule slice of the hallway. His interactions with others, like the conversations he and his neighbors conduct by tapping on the wall, are solely auditory; the visual component of communication has been lost. Even the isolation cells are described through sounds alone: "In all the white-washed cells of this honeycomb in concrete, men were simultaneously arising from their bunks, cursing and groping about on the tiles, yet in the isolation cells one heard nothing." This loss of visual contact appears even more strongly in Rubashov’s medical condition. The pain emanating from the broken-off root of "the right eye-tooth which was connected to the eye-nerve orbitalis" suggests the privation of Rubashov’s vision. His eyes, made useless by the prison, become unusable.

The gazes of *Golconda*’s inhabitants suggest a similar visual isolation. No man in the painting looks at another. Each stares out of the painting to draw the viewer in, or off to the side to push the other men...
away. This lack of visual connection between men repeats itself as the viewer's eyes traverse the painting's first layer, that consisting of the most foregrounded and therefore most detailed men. Held fast in the plane of the painting, its men can only look out of their world, not into it.

Resisting the foreground men's gazed invitations to join their number, the viewer's searching eyes next alight on the monolithic building that occupies the painting's lower half. The building's form is all straight lines and right angles, a neatly arranged and staggered row of rectangular windows themselves divided into smaller rectangles. Each gray, rectangular windowbox, devoid of even one irregular, beautiful flower, is a microcosm of the entire building; it imprisons all, within and without the painting, in its geometric regularity.

Like Golconda's gray monolith, Darkness at Noon's prison reduces its inhabitants' specific names to generalized numbers. This transformation—begins at the cell door:

They reached cell no. 404. Above the spy-hole was a card with his name on it, Nicolas Salmanovitch Rubashov. They have prepared everything nicely, he thought; the sight of his name on the card made an uncanny impression on him. The card, however, does not denote Rubashov's individuality but rather strips it from him. His name, like the card, remains outside the cell. Within the cell, he is no. 404, and his neighbors are 402 and 406. Rubashov observes the mechanical monotony of the prisoners' walks outside, just as his own are restricted to a demarcated six and a half steps. In the quadratic alphabet of the prison, even words become numbers: "A familiar row of figures flashed into Rubashov's mind: 2-3, 1-1, 4-3, 1-5, 3-2, 2-4...'Harelip sends you his greetings.'" The quadratic alphabet, with its letters confined in 5 rows of neatly numbered cells, recalls both the windows of Golconda and the cells of the prisoners. The prison mathematically incarcertates all concepts, from language to individuality. Rubashov, as he strives to express the concept of "I," can only tap out the numbers "2-4." This moment exemplifies the systematic replacement of the real world with an abstract model, an ideal which will be crucial in both works' attempt to provide an internal critique of each movement, one that appropriates the movement's values, such as abstraction, in order to show that these values fail by their own lights.

II. Abstraction and Sameness

The triumph of the logical, and hence of the abstract, suffuses Darkness at Noon. "We replaced vision by logical deduction," writes Rubashov, alluding to the visual bleakness of his prison as well as the creative poverty of Communism. Sight becomes unnecessary to one who has foresight. Rubashov's old idea rests purely on this system of logical deduction, but logical deduction can only be assumed, not proven. Logic works only because humanity must be simplified to the whole numbers of a mathematical model: as Rubashov queries, "Was such an operation justified? Obviously it was, if one spoke in the abstract of 'mankind'; but, applied to man in the singular, the cipher 2-4, the real human being of bone and flesh and blood and skin, the principle led to absurdity." In the real world, logic, by assuming an abstract humanity, ignores human individuality.

Golconda similarly confines humans to an abstract ideal. Magritte said of his painting, "It may have been a result of a research into the
'question of space.' I don't believe a dream would go this far, and indeed the problem is an important one." The quest for abstract perfection denies the variation of human experience. Golconda fits into Robert Hughes' generalization that Surrealism is "doomed to failure when it runs up against the real world." The abstract elements in both works cannot handle the concrete complexity of their human dimension, so abstraction works to remove that dimension. Viereck states of Darkness at Noon, "Were it only political history, Darkness...would remain narrow and two-dimensional. Its artistic vision is what adds a third dimension of human depth." Communist wants political history without human depth. The artistic beauty of the fictional narrative, according to Viereck, gives Darkness at Noon a third, human, dimension. Yet, reducing the human dimension to the abstract, as Darkness at Noon often does, creates a work of art even while satisfying Communism's requirements. Humanity, once represented in two dimensions, can be spread out on the painter's canvas. Magritte himself recognizes that painting abstracts the human dimension: "In contrast to the image we have of them in real life when they are concrete, the painted image aroused a very strong feeling of an abstract existence." Thus Golconda, too, fulfills its function as a narrative of the abstract. The canvas's reduction of humanity to two dimensions takes place in Darkness at Noon as well as in Golconda. Before Rubashov is imprisoned, the portrait of No. 1 haunts his mental world: the colour-print of No. 1, leader of the Party, which hung over his bed on the wall of his room—and on the walls of all the rooms next to, above, or under his; on all the walls of the house, the town, and of the enormous country for which he had fought and suffered. The repetition of No. 1's picture turns Darkness at Noon into a giant Golconda: the same houses with the same picture of the same man inside. The other painting depicted in Darkness at Noon, that of the first Communist Party congress, freezes Rubashov's own past in a two-dimensional frame. This painting combines face, number, and name; it catalogues and depicts the past of Rubashov and his Communist contemporaries. The eventual disappearance of this painting, deleting Rubashov from the past, presages Rubashov's death. Rubashov, in prison, cannot recall the faces of the dead; he forgets the faces of his own contemporaries, the "old guard" depicted in the painting who joined the Communist movement alongside him. Even those he killed become faceless. Rubashov, as he prepares to destroy Richard, finds that "Richard's features began to become hazy in the growing dusk." Similarly, Bogrov's face grows increasingly indistinct as his death fades into the past. By the end, Rubashov cannot even distinguish his own face from No. 1's; he has become faceless to himself through his atrocities, just as his victims were faceless to him. Rubashov asks himself, "Yes, how many of yours have I had shot, I wonder?...there must have been something between seventy and a hundred." When all men are the same, no one man has any value; when no one man has any value, no group can have value. Rubashov's crimes deface his victims both literally and metaphorically. His final crime, his false confession, effects the ultimate loss of face by equating him and No. 1 in his own mind. The progression of faces in Darkness at Noon, from many to one to none, corresponds with the natural progression of Golconda, now moving upwards from the building to the sky. The greater separation of the largest men in Golconda, those who appear most prominent in the page, parallel Rubashov's memory at Darkness at Noon's beginning, when men are still distinct from one another. As the viewer goes deeper to the next level of the painting, all the faces fade into similarity. Like the end of Darkness at Noon, the third, least foregrounded, layer of men in Golconda depicts facelessness. The men of Golconda's third layer are almost entirely faceless, with their identical bowler hats their only distinguishing features. In Golconda and Magritte's other paintings, the bowler-hatted man is a fusion of isolation and sameness: "A metaphysical loneliness, bordering on the spiritual and the stoical, surrounds the bowler-hatted man." This isolation also enables the bowler-hatted man to represent all men. He provides an ideal background for our projected ideas: The bowler-hatted man is rather like Ulrich in Robert Musil's long novel The Man Without Qualities: he has
given up his qualities as a man might give up the world. Magritte's bowler-hatted man is more like a figure in a book than a human being, but a figure with all the inessential elements left out. This idea repeats in Hughes's assertion that *Golconda* fulfill the ideal requirements of both Surrealism and Communism. They are everyone and no-one: "by putting the hat on, you are assured of being the perfect example of the average man." This idea repeats in Hughes's assertion that *Golconda* parallel the experience of an average Belgian clerk on an average Belgian day. Yet, as the exact average, the bowler-hatted man assures his separation from human uniqueness. Even in their conformity, whether large or small, faced or faceless, these men stand alone.

Finally, completely enveloped by the sameness of both works, the viewer searches for a way out, and finds one. The building on the right is pristine, entirely untouched by the cascade of men. At its base, Magritte has inscribed a subversive message: his own name. Magritte's signature, and the building above it, assert the individuality of the artist. This building goes against the other themes of *Golconda*, extending unbroken and untouched by man from the canvas's top to its bottom. Magritte's signature is not abstract geometry, but definite and original, referring to a particular individual: Magritte himself. His assertion of his unique name suggests his ability to transcend logic and abstraction. Magritte steps outside his canvas, as an actor might step out of the stage's mythical "fourth wall," to address his viewer personally. This act on Magritte's part shows that human connection and individual uniqueness can together change an image from one of isolation to one of friendship, and illustrates a way out of the box of abstraction. Meanwhile, the building's unending character, not vertically contained by the boundaries of the canvas, suggests another way to escape abstraction: by means of infinity. Infinity, a quantity not expressible in purely numerical terms, proves the key to resisting the grip of logic's faceless abstraction.

### III. Infinity and Individuality

Another of Magritte's paintings, his later (1963) *La Reconnaissance Infinie*, is both a companion and antagonist to *Golconda*. *Reconnaissance* was given three names in its title: "gratitude," "recognition," or "reconnaissance"). As such, *La Reconnaissance Infinie* provides a further critique of the abstract.

The power of the infinite also undermines the abstract in *Darkness at Noon*: "The infinite was a politically suspect quantity, the 'I' a suspect quality. The Party did not recognize its existence. The definition of the individual was: a multitude of one million divided by one million." Rubashov regrets his ignorance of the infinite, feeling that it establishes his guilt. This concept of infinity appears in the French title of *Darkness at Noon* as well, "Le Zero et l'Infini", which effectively fuses the individual and infinity. Infinity, inexpressible in numerals, challenges the numeric system of *Darkness at Noon*. The Party can enumerate a billion people, but infinity cannot be reached by counting.

Rubashov's victims, like Magritte, resist the abstract through their names. Unlike the faceless prisoners, Arlova, Richard, and Little Loewy assert their identities in Rubashov's mind, refusing to bow to the arithmetic reduction of prison: "The vision of Arlova's legs in their high-heeled shoes trailing along the corridor upset the mathematical equilibrium." These names, like Magritte's in *Golconda*, cannot be reduced to numeric equations. Finally, as Rubashov prepares to kill Bogrov, Bogrov's naming of Rubashov himself awakens Rubashov to existence as an individual rather than as part of a mass, just as Magritte's signature in *Golconda* personalizes the painting and reaches out to the viewer.

The end of *Darkness at Noon* returns to the infinite. "A second, smashing blow hit him on the ear. Then all became quiet. There was the sea again with its sounds. A wave slowly lifted him up. It came from afar and travelled sedately on, a shrug of eternity." The strike to his ear separates Rubashov from his final sense, hearing, while the sea suggests submersion in infinity. As *Golconda* and the viewer disappears into the infinite blue behind the last bowler hat, Rubashov slips into an eternal ocean. Yet even death does not absolve Rubashov of moral responsibility. Rather, it suggests a question Koestler poses in his autobiography:

I was, of course, in prison and might be shot. But this was immediately succeeded by...
silence….The I had ceased to exist….If everybody was an island, how could the world be a concern of his?33

No human begins as an island. Abstraction's danger stems from its balkanization of humanity, dividing humans into units and adding them back together to form an archipelago of identical, yet isolated people. Magritte may in fact use his identical men "to challenge the conformity he pretends to illustrate."34 However, depicting the abstract contains its own seductive danger, that the artist or observer may accept the depiction without recognizing its irony. Embracing human uniqueness and connection, as Rubashov does at Darkness at Noon's end when he rejects the isolated vision of Communism can avoid the isolation and sameness of Golconda's universe. Magritte's recognition that "an object never has the same function as its name or its image,"35 an admission of abstract art's limitation, is similarly important in fighting the conflation of world, word, and image depicted in Darkness at Noon. Only when they subvert the abstract ideals they both illustrate do Golconda and Darkness at Noon become agents for positive change rather than depictions of abject abstraction.

This aspect reflects the iconoclastic nature of each work, not only with respect to the abstract ideal but also with respect to the movements they critique. Both Communism and Surrealism, centering as they do on the manifestoes of Marx (1848/1890) and Breton (1924) respectively, demand at least a modicum of consistency between the form and content of their members’ works and the ideals set down in the manifesto. By utilizing the literary and artistic tropes of abstraction espoused by their respective movements to critique those movements, Golconda and Darkness at Noon upset this idea of consistency and provide a powerful internal challenge, rather than merely an external objection, to Surrealism and Communism.

Works Cited

Magritte R. Golconda, 1953. The Menil Collection, Houston.
Magritte R. La Reconnaissance Infinie, 1963. Leslie and David Rogath Collection, Greenwich, CT.

Endnotes

1 Magritte R. Golconda, The Menil Collection, Houston, 1953.
4 Ibid., p. 296.
6 Ibid., p. 46.
7 Ibid., p. 8.
8 Ibid., p. 12.
9 Ibid., p. 19.
10 Ibid., p. 158.
The most challenging part of writing this paper was definitely the 40-minute walk with a backpack full of oversized art books from the Palo Alto library back to the Marguerite stop on University Avenue. Try it sometime! I am now a junior double majoring in philosophy and biology and still taking literature courses, with my favorite being Joshua Landy’s Proust seminar. When I return from Stanford-in-Oxford, I hope to write an honors thesis on biomedical ethics -- then it’s probably off to graduate school in philosophy, unless I decide that I enjoy sleeping under a roof and regular meals more than I love Kant and Descartes. Outside of class, I enjoy reliving the first-year experience (minus the actual writing) vicariously via my SLE tutees. I also help edit Stanford’s undergrad philosophy journal, The Dualist, and, pre-Oxford, frequently played late-night games of pool at Phi Sig.

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Govind Persad

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