

Mitchell Abidor

Arthur Koestler's Darkness and Light

For almost fifty years, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940) was taught in schools across the U.S. as a lesson about the horrors of communism, about its drive to crush the individual, about how revolutions devour their young. With the Cold War over, the book has fallen from the syllabus, which is a shame, for *Darkness at Noon* was a great, subtle, and insightful novel, a brilliant transposition of a Dostoevskyan situation into 20th-century Russia. In *Darkness*, it is as if one of Pyotr Verkhovensky's conspirators in *The Possessed* had lived on as one of the protagonist's interrogators.

Michael Scammell's brilliant biography reminds us that Arthur Koestler wrote far more than this one novel. He wrote an important novel on the struggle for Palestine and two volumes of autobiography that have stood the test of time; he also wrote brilliantly of his experiences in Franco's prisons and in a French concentration camp. However, alongside these books about political commitment, dictatorship, and the confrontation with death, Koestler also wrote in defense of pseudo-scientific theories (mental telepathy, psychokinesis, levitation and more), and that cost his reputation dearly. Scammell strives, and for the most part succeeds, in restoring, at the very least, Koestler's literary reputation.

Koestler said of himself in 1935 that "for a brilliant and hyper-sensitive young man I was remarkably stupid where others were concerned," and in the pages of Scammell's book we see that if we remove the adjective "young" from this sentence,

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we have an accurate summary of Koestler's entire non-writing life. He revered Dostoevsky and was a man possessed of all the foulness of the worst of the Russian master's most evil characters: a drunk, an egomaniac, a compulsive womanizer, an abusive husband, and an intellectual bully.

Koestler described himself as a "typical . . . member of the Central European educated middle class,

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Koestler, the Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic, by Michael Scammell. 2009, Random House, 720 pages.

born in the first years of our century." Significantly, he omits the qualifier "Jewish" from this characterization, yet it is impossible to understand him or his background without that element.

He was born into a prosperous family in Budapest in 1905, the only child of an unhappy marriage. In later life, Koestler blamed most of his personal problems, particularly those related to women, on his strained relations with his selfish and capricious mother. One companion observed that "Koestler thought of his discarded mistresses the way he thought about his mother, and invariably recoiled once he was done with them." His treatment of women was, indeed, compulsive and abominable, up to his final deed of convincing his younger, healthy wife to commit suicide alongside him in 1983.

Koestler attended good schools, read much, and until his university years seemed on his way to be-

ing another successful Jewish Central European. Then he became involved in a Jewish fraternity, which led to his discovery of Zionism. Koestler soon left Europe behind and made an unsuccessful attempt at *khalutz* (pioneer) life in Palestine, barely lasting a couple of weeks at manual labor.

Failing as a pioneer, he discovered his calling as a journalist. Within a few years he was a star of German journalism, reporting on events in Palestine, on science, and even on a Graf Zeppelin journey over the North Pole.

Living in Berlin, he was unavoidably aware of the dangers of fascism and secretly joined the Communist Party. He spent over a year travelling in the Soviet Union, and also used his credentials as a journalist to travel to Spain during that country's Civil War. There he was captured by the fascists, imprisoned, and sentenced to death. Finally released thanks to a campaign in England, he wrote two important books based on his near-death experience, *Spanish Testament* (1937) and *Dialogue with Death* (1942).

Koestler's confrontation with death seemed to fracture his communist beliefs, and the Moscow Trials, which would serve as the historical basis for *Darkness at Noon*, completed the process. Reading about the trials, knowing many of the principals, and hearing the experiences of friends who lived in the USSR propelled him from communism to anti-communism.

There is no denying the literary worth and psychological acuity of *Darkness at Noon*. People were asking from all points along the political spectrum: How could old revolutionaries like Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev make the confessions they made at the Moscow trials? Torture seemed the obvious answer, and torture there was, both in reality and in *Darkness*, as Rubashov passes from one interrogator to another. But the true insight of *Darkness* was that at a certain point a revolutionary has to recognize that in order to remain consistent with his ideas, he cannot place his personal interests above those of the Party, but must confess even if he is objectively innocent of any crimes. Rubashov follows this logic to the end and accepts his "guilt" and his execution as the necessary consequence of

his beliefs. This is part of the richness of *Darkness at Noon*: Rubashov's admission of guilt is not an act of cowardice or defeat, but the final revolutionary act of a revolutionary life.

Even as a newly minted anti-communist, Koestler was not easily free of his communist past and reputation, which led to his internment in a concentration camp in Le Vernet, France during the "*drôle de guerre*" (phony war) that followed the German invasion of Poland — an experience he recounted in his memoir *The Scum of the Earth* (1941).

After many adventures in France, including a brief stint in the Foreign Legion, Koestler made it to England, where he served in an auxiliary force made up of foreigners and wrote (in German; the text was translated by a friend) his farewell to communism. As successful as *Darkness at Noon* was in the U.S., the book was even bigger in France, with three hundred thousand copies sold in five years. Although Koestler was later to develop a visceral hatred for France and all things French, he was lionized there, with the political right and center treating him as a central voice against the French Communist Party, which, after its heroic role in the World War II Resistance, was the largest political party in the country.

As the post-war world fissured into pro- and anti-Soviet camps, Koestler became a wealthy star in anti-communist circles. He was a founding member of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (later discovered to be funded by the CIA). During his first trip to the U.S. in 1946, he told an audience that he felt "the enormous burden which is fully on your shoulders. For there will either be a Pax Americana in the world or there will be no pax."

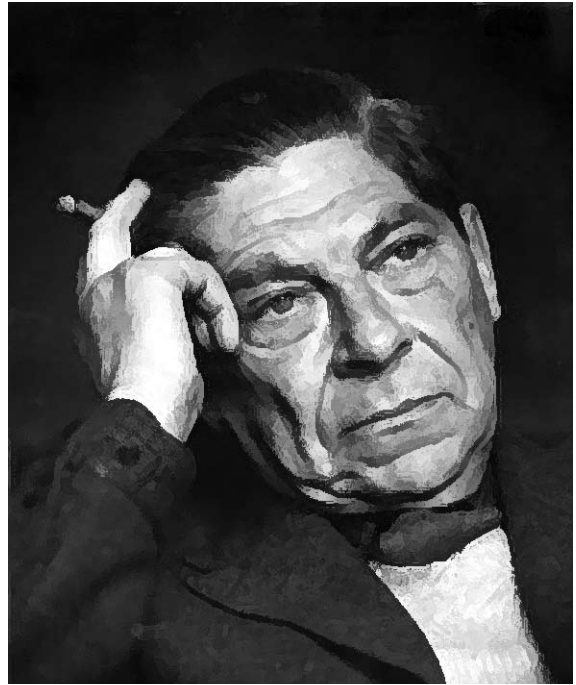
When Koestler's proposals for how to run and enlarge the Congress for Cultural Freedom met opposition, however, his opinions of his fellow workers in the fields of anti-communism were less than measured: "[Georges] Altman (a despicable coward), [Raymond] Aron (also a coward), [David] Rousset (a cynical politician with absolutely no sincerity or integrity), [James] Burnham (a dangerous lunatic), [Ignazio] Silone (a political catastrophe), [André] Malraux (mad and hopelessly inefficient)" — all of this about friends who simply disagreed with his strategic plan for the CCF to form a mass

movement. His willingness to deny any legitimacy (or even sanity) to those who opposed him seems a holdover from his communist days. Koestler described himself as a seeker after the absolute, and the absolute shifted throughout his life, from Zionism, to communism, to anti-communism — and then to pseudo-science. In this lie many of the flaws in his life and thought, but in this also lies his richness.

Koestler took his crackpot science seriously enough to endow a chair at the University of Edinburgh in parapsychology, and he told an earlier biographer that he didn't care what he said about his private life as long as the biographer treated Koestler's scientific writings on the same level as his literary ones. For his part, Michael Scammell is unsparing in his portrayal of Koestler as a wretched heel of a man, yet Scammell stops short at several points, futilely seeking extenuating circumstances, rationalizations, justifications, and even defenses for Koestler's most vile acts and pseudo-scientific positions.

One example of this positive spin comes in Scammell's treatment of *The Ghost in the Machine* (1967), which expressed Koestler's conviction that many of humanity's most evil tendencies were the result of a physical defect in the human brain that could possibly be removed through surgery. Failing that, Koestler at first proposed and then experimented with putting tranquilizers in drinking water as a way to soothe the beast within. Next he advocated the mass use of pills. "To hope for salvation to be synthesized in the laboratory," he wrote, "might seem materialistic, crankish, or naïve, but when man decides to take his fate into his own hands, that possibility will be within reach."

The crackpot aspect of proposing mass distribution of tranquilizers is glossed over by Scammell, who cites conferences and journals that have since promoted psychopharmacology in treating violent criminals. "Except for the sweeping breadth of his conclusions," Scammell concludes, "Koestler wasn't so far out after all." Yet it is precisely the "sweeping breadth of his conclusions" that renders Koestler's proposal bizarre, at least in its day. (America has by now caught up with him, with



Artwork by Babette Elderbee

about one in ten Americans prescribed a psychopharmacological medication.)

Similarly, in discussing *The Case of the Midwife Toad* (1971), an investigation of a supposed proof of the heritability of acquired traits in 1920s Vienna, Scammell notes that the book received positive reviews from literary critics but was panned by specialists, which he attributes to "an element of circling the wagons" among close-minded scientists against the encroachments of an outsider. That scientists might be more knowledgeable about a scientific topic than literary critics seems not to have occurred to Scammell, who compounds his error by citing a negative review by Stephen Jay Gould, whom he calls "a presumptive ally." Gould's review, writes Scammell, contained "many mistakes . . . in his summary of evolutionary theory." Thinking that a Darwinian like Gould would be a "presumptive ally" of the discredited theories of Lamarck leads one to question Scammell's awareness of the issues involved; to accuse Gould of having made mistakes in his summarizing of evolutionary theory is nothing short of *khutspe*.

Scammell's worst moment occurs in his discussion of what has been, since the publication of David Cesarini's 1998 biography, *Arthur Koestler — The Homeless Mind*, the most-discussed event in

Koestler's life: his alleged rape in 1951 of Jill Craigie, the wife of Labour Party leader Michael Foot. Craigie told Cesarini that on the day in question she and Koestler had travelled around the French countryside near Koestler's home; that Koestler, as was his wont, had imbibed and made a pass at her; that when she resisted, he pulled her to the floor. She then ran outside, and when she returned Koestler pulled her hair and choked her.

Scammell defends Koestler by citing the fifty years between the event and Craigie's public revelation and by questioning "whether the event was as violent as Craigie described it." Most shamefully, Scammell notes that "the exercise of male strength to gain sexual satisfaction wasn't exactly uncommon at the time," and that "he almost certainly behaved like thousands of other men of his generation (and since)." These are weasel words, especially since the book is filled with examples of Koestler's violent outbursts with women, most famously with Simone de Beauvoir.

That Scammell resorts to such hoary methods for casting doubt on a rape victim's account dishonors him, but it could well be that his barbs are aimed less at Craigie than at the author of the published account, David Cesarini. Scammell is so dismissive of Cesarini and his biographic methods that one suspects the defense of Koestler to be primarily a defense of the author's turf.

Born into the flowering Hungarian Jewish world of the early 20th century, in a Budapest that was 20 percent Jewish and where the professions, law and medicine, were thoroughly dominated by Jews, Koestler was surrounded by Jews throughout his youth, both in school and in his social circle. At university he joined Unitas, a Jewish fraternity, and then went on to embrace Zionism. Yet according to Manés Sperber, a long-time friend and also a former communist, Koestler became a Zionist "not because of his Jewishness, but against it. It was a kind of Zionism that wanted to prove that Jews were gentiles, that is, non-Jewish. What these young people were trying to prove was not that they had the courage to be Jews, but that they had the courage to be like everybody else. Koestler's path to Zionism seems to us very odd because it

was a flight away from his Jewishness." These are perhaps the most insightful words ever uttered about Koestler, and they perfectly summarize his confrontation with the Jewish question.

In keeping with his absolutist attitude, Koestler's preferred brand of Zionism was Vladimir Jabotinsky's Revisionism. Even during the period of Israel's struggle for independence, when the anti-communist Koestler insisted on his liberal if not socialist bona fides ("perhaps the truth is that real leftism today can only be anti-communist"), his closest comrades in Israel were leaders and members of the Irgun and the Stern Gang.

His Palestinian novel, *Thieves in the Night* (1946), was his first direct expression of his feelings about Zionism, and if he has reservations about the "Jewish Tarzans" he found in Palestine, he also lends support to the Jews who took up arms against the British and the Arabs. For Koestler's main character, nationalism and the nation mean something different for Jews than they do for others: "[T]hey are married to their countries; we are searching for a lost bride." Jewish involvement in revolutionary movements is explained: "We are homesick for a Canaan which was never truly ours. That is why we are always foremost in the race for utopias and messianic revolutions, always chasing after a lost paradise."

This brand of Zionism served Koestler's feeling of hatred and contempt for the old Jewish world, including Yiddish and Yiddish literature. For him, the diaspora was an era during which "the warlike people of Judah were growing ripe for the ghetto." Those victims of anti-Semitism who didn't opt for the most violent forms of Zionism were suffering a fate perfectly consonant with the Jews' degeneration since the fall of the Temple. It was only in Palestine that Jews could thrive, and Scammell correctly locates in a statement from the 1920s the kernel of what was to become the heart of Koestler's position: "All Jews should either move to Palestine or assimilate."

In *Thieves in the Night* Koestler again explained the Jewish diaspora character he despised:

Made homeless in space, they had to expand into new dimensions . . . The loss of the

spatial dimension transformed this branch of the species as it would have transformed any other nation on earth, Jupiter or Mars. It made them cunning and grew them claws to cling on with as they were swept by the wind through countries that were not theirs. It increased their spiritual arrogance: deprived of space they believed themselves chosen for eternity in time . . . [As they lived] in bondage, cringing became second nature to their pride. Their natural selector was the whip: it whipped the life out of the feeble and whipped the spasm of ambition into the fit.

When the Jewish state was finally founded, Koestler declared that it confronted every Jew with “the choice between becoming a citizen of the Hebrew nation and renouncing any claim to separate nationhood.”

In 1973, Koestler provided the intellectual underpinnings for his position on Jewish identity in *The Thirteenth Tribe*. If, as Scammell states, Koestler’s position was that the only way to end anti-Semitism “was for Jewry outside Israel to cease to exist,” what better method than to prove that their existence had no historical roots? Basing his argument on the conversion of the Central Asian Khazars to Judaism in the 8th century, Koestler proved to his own satisfaction that the bulk of world Jewry, particularly Eastern European Jews, had no connection to the ancient Israelites. All claims to Jewish nationhood and international ties among Jews were thus nothing more than mythical, “a system of traditional beliefs based on racial and historical premises that turn out to be illusory.” Therefore, “whatever came out of the Diaspora is either not specifically Jewish or not part of a living tradition.”

By contrast, he said, the Khazar past was “irrelevant to modern Israel. The Jews who inhabit it, regardless of their chequered origins, possess the essential requirements of a nation.” Koestler ends *The Thirteenth Tribe* by inserting his view on the heritability of acquired traits, saying that “it may also be significant that the native Israeli ‘Sabra’ represents, physically and mentally, the complete

Happy Birthday
to two dedicated, special women
BARBARA FELDMAN
and
ADELE OLSON
with love from
Shirley and Jerry Anger
Lenny Feldman
Bernice Grader
Troim and Fran Handler
Mickey and Sam Leiner
Milly Safar

opposite of the ‘typical Jew’ bred in the ghetto.” The traits picked up in Palestine building cities and *kibbutzim* and fighting Arabs had virtually changed the genetic makeup of these particular Jews. Koestler missed, however, the logical conclusion of his own thesis: If the great bulk of Jews have no ties to the Hebrews of the Bible, what right have they to be in Israel?

Decades after his death, and notwithstanding his many faults, Koestler’s life and work retain importance — not just because of the verve of his writing, or because of his extreme personality, but because he lived through and thought intensely about the crises of the murderous 20th century and daringly confronted questions that are still with us. What are the proper relations between political means and ends? How did humanity become what it is today? How are we to confront death? What does it mean to be a Jew in a non-Jewish world?

His answers were often doubtful, but sometimes the posing of the right questions is more important than having the answers. Scammell is certainly right in defining Koestler as a “skeptic,” and the skeptic’s true role is often that of a catalyst, a person who destroys comfortable certainty. There is no need to follow Koestler’s precise path, or to embrace his own certainties, to see him as a useful and provocative guide. **JC**