

## SOME NOTES ON ARTHUR KOESTLER

ARTHUR Koestler is unique among modern novelists for two reasons. Firstly he has written novels which have achieved wide popularity without in any way sacrificing their claim to be serious literature. Secondly, his political philosophy is sufficiently mature to enable him to analyse left-wing politics from a left-wing standpoint and yet to arrive at conclusions far more balanced and critical than we are entitled to expect from any British political commentator starting from the same assumptions.

The popularity of his two novels, *Darkness at Noon* and *Arrival and Departure*, has been achieved by his use of all the reader-appeals of the modern best-seller. His subject matter is extremely palatable to those types of middle-class intelligentsia who frequent the circulating libraries. Koestler's chief appeal, of course, is his topicality. The setting of his novels is in modern Russia and Germany. But one has only to compare his grasp of political realities with the tedious platitudes and gross over-simplifications of such a political novelist as Philip Gibbs to appreciate Koestler's mature and informed political criticism through characters and vividly localised details.

Koestler, too, is a 'strong' writer: he will gain a place on the shelf of the circulating library beside Hemingway. But his violence is not the barbaric blood and guts violence of Hemingway but rather the controlled reaction of extremely sensitive emotions. In Koestler the lurid passages can always be justified as having a proper place in the development of the novel. For example, in *Arrival and Departure* the torturing of Slavek is the turning point of the whole book. Physical suffering is for Slavek (and by implication for most of the peoples of Europe to-day) the only remaining touchstone for the validity of their ideals.

In his powers of description, in his journalistic facility as a novelist, Koestler must be compared with J. T. Farrell and Dos Passos. The two American novelists have the power to hold their readers' attention by vivid and accurate description, but it is truer to say that they are journalists of a very high order rather than novelists. What they lack, and what Koestler possesses, is a standpoint from which to evaluate what they describe, and also the power to make their observations cohere as novels. On reading Dos Passos's *Big Money* and F. L. Allen's *Only Yesterday* side by side, it is hard to say whether Dos Passos is writing a serious novel or a light modern American history. In Dos Passos's most recent novel, *Number One*, he makes his hero acquiesce in the political racketeering of 'Number One' and this is able to absolve himself from the necessity of making a political-

moral comment. Koestler, however, is a writer of political novels—his preoccupation politics, his medium the novel, his comments ethical and moral. Koestler's seriousness is dependent upon his political maturity as a left-wing writer.

In *Darkness at Noon*, Koestler projects the mental conflict of the 'Old Bolshevik,' Rubashnov, who has lived by the ideal of historical determinism and who is now confronted by the totalitarian Communism represented by 'No. 1' (Stalin): 'The horror which No. 1 emanated above all consisted in the possibility that he was in the right, and that all those whom he killed had to admit, even with the bullet in the back of their necks, that he conceivably might be in the right. There was no certainty: only the appeal to that mocking oracle they called History, who gave her sentence only when the jaws of the appealer had long since fallen into dust.' There's the rub. Although No. 1's policy was the very antithesis of the policy which Rubashnov himself had pursued without scruple or hesitation, yet, by the verdict of History, No. 1 might be proved to be right. And History, to the Revolutionist, is amoral: 'History is *à priori* amoral; it has no conscience. To want to conduct history according to the maxims of the Sunday school means to leave everything as it is.' The ruthless extermination by No. 1 of those who disagree with him in policy is merely the relentless pursuit of the same belief as Rubashnov's—a belief in the infallibility of history and in the life and death importance of politics. Politics have, in fact, become the substitute for religion—the O.G.P.U., the substitute for the Inquisition. Ivanov, Rubashnov's old friend, and now his interrogator, puts the case clearly: 'There are only two conceptions of human ethics and they are at opposite poles. One of them is Christian and humane, declares the individual to be sacrosanct, and asserts that the rules of arithmetic are not to be applied to human units, the other starts from the basic principle that a collective aim justifies all means and not only allows, but demands, that the individual should be in every way subordinated and sacrificed to the Community—which may dispose of it as an experimentation rabbit or a sacrificial lamb.' It is interesting to note that to the mind of the materialist, Christianity is linked with the defence of human values. But belief in historical determinism, faith in reason alone, is a faith that will not stand the simple test of experience—is No. 1 wrong or am I, asks Rubashnov: 'But how can the present decide what will be judged truth in the future? We are doing the work of the prophets without their gift. We replaced vision by logical deduction; but although we are started from the same point of departure we came to divergent results. Proof disproved proof, and

finally we had to recur to faith—to axiomatic faith in the rightness of one's own reasoning. That is the crucial point. We have thrown all ballast overboard; only one anchor holds us: faith in one's self. Geometry is the purest realisation of human reason; but Euclid's axioms cannot be proved. He who does not believe in them sees the whole building crash. No. 1 has faith in himself, tough, slow, sullen and unshakable. He has the most solid anchor-chain of all. Mine has worn thin in the last few years . . . the fact is I no longer believe in my infallibility. That is why I am lost.' Rubashnov even envies his cell-mate, No. 402, the conventional officer-type, who lives at least by a code, albeit a simple one.

Rubashnov decides within himself that 'one can only be crucified in the name of one's own faith,' yields to the ignominy of signing a 'confession' of his counter-revolutionary activities and goes through the ordeal of a forced interrogation. At the farce of the public trial Rubashnov states the reasons for his action: 'Vanity and the last remains of pride whispered to me: Die in silence, say nothing: or die with a noble gesture, with a moving swan-song on your lips; pour out your heart and challenge your accusers. That would have been easier for an old rebel, but I overcame the temptation. With that my task is ended. I have paid; my account with history is settled.' In the final chapter of the book, as Rubashnov awaits his execution, his inner self, which he has hitherto called 'the grammatical fiction,' asserts itself, and queries the value of his sacrifice; 'When he asked himself, for what actually are you dying? he found no answer. It was a mistake in the system; perhaps it lay in the precept which until now he had held to be incontestable, in whose name he had sacrificed others and was himself being sacrificed: in the precept that the end justifies the means. It was this sentence which had killed the great fraternity of the Revolution and made them all run amock. What had he once written in his diary? "We have thrown overboard all conventions, our sole guiding principle is that of consequent logic; we are sailing without ethical ballast."

'Perhaps the heart of the evil lay there. Perhaps it did not suit mankind to sail without ballast. And perhaps reason alone was a defective compass, which led one on such a winding, twisted course that the goal finally disappeared in the mist.

'Perhaps now would come the time of great darkness.'

Rubashnov dies, not out of a logical belief in the necessity of violence, but by way of atonement for the violence of his own revolutionary method—in atonement for the lives which he himself had sacrificed. Reason is not infallible—the course of the Revolution is

not infallible. One is left, negatively, with faith in oneself and the value of the human person.

Where *Darkness at Noon* is concerned with the analysis of Revolutionary theory, *Arrival and Departure* is concerned with the analysis of the motives for revolutionary activity. Peter Slavek, a young left-wing intellectual and hero of underground resistance, escapes from a totalitarian state (one infers Germany) into a neutral country. There, with the aid of a female psychologist, Sonia, he tries to analyse his motives and tries to decide whether or not he will continue to fight for a lost cause. Sonia tries to disabuse Slavek of belief in any ethical or moral criteria, and in the words of her psychologist's stock-in-trade, attributes the motives of his heroic actions to 'guilt compulsion': 'The clue to your past adventures is that feeling of guilt which compelled you to pay all the time imaginary debts.'

Slavek's belief in the necessity for continuing his quixotic struggle against totalitarian materialism is further challenged by Bernard, who puts the German case against 'the democracies.' The civilised West has no right to continue its supremacy—it is living on the spiritual capital of the past; 'Even if we lose this war, the spreading of our ideas can no longer be stopped. The West has no vision of the future to set against it, their slogans are those of a decayed tradition—sentimental hypocrisy, hollow commonplaces. All they can do is to fight a delaying action against History, under the limp, ragged flags of the past. And yet . . .' He broke off, but Peter knew what he wanted to say:

“. . . and yet they may win.”

Something more potent than the abstract left-wing idealism is needed to combat the Nazi 'realism,' claims Bernard: 'Believe me, my friend, if the need of Justice and Freedom were primary instincts of the human race, if ethical urges were as real as sexual urges, then your left intelligentsia would have been different in character from what it was—you would have been the new Promethei stealing the flame from the gods, not a bunch of neurotics, intriguing and squabbling from defeat to defeat.' The true tragedy of Slavek and of the left is graphically presented in the Kafkaesque allegory, 'The Last Judgment' at the end of the book; '. . . a young man with a timid expression advances along the empty aisle to face the Court.

"Who is this?" roared the Judge.

"A crusader who lost his cross," said the Prosecutor. . . .

I should like to re-emphasise here Koestler's importance as a novelist and as a craftsman. He has a command of novel 'form'—there are no rough edges in his work, every incident and character is adroitly selected and carpentered into place. He has, too, an

imaginative sympathy, almost a Dickensian sentimentality in his portrayal of minor characters, *e.g.* Richard, Little Loewy and 'Rip Van Winkle' in *Darkness at Noon* and Mr. Wilson in *Arrival and Departure*.

But Koestler's thesis, or rather his conclusion reached through the medium of the novel, is particularly significant, in fact disturbing for Catholic readers. The tragedy of Koestler's two heroes, Rubashnov and Slavek, is the tragedy of all the left-wing intellectuals. They are possessed of a tenacity of purpose and a courage that exceed in all proportion the validity of their political ideals and beliefs. (The tragedy is, in fact, that most intellectuals possessed of any political energy turn inevitably to the left.). 'One can only be crucified in the name of one's own faith'—but Rubashnov dies knowing that his political faith is unworthy of his own martyrdom. Slavek is 'the crusader who has lost his cross,' but he continues his crusade fully aware of his loss. Lost and bewildered he may be, but he is still 'the eternal adolescent through whom the race matures.' As Catholics we have derided too long the left-wing intelligentsia: we should rather deplore their dissipation of moral energy in the pursuit of an amoral ideal. Our churches bear crosses but they do not seem to breed crusaders. We cannot accept with complacency the fact that the political, literary and artistic energies of the modern world lie with people whose positive faith is nebulous probably even to themselves. The zeal for making the world a better place, for sacrificing one's own comfort, position, and even life for the sake of others, lies with those who are devoid of light of religion, even of a guiding principle—this humiliating fact has to be learned by professing Christians.

I think that modern Catholics may fruitfully meditate upon Koestler's novels, and that their sympathy and understanding will be of value both to themselves and to the left-wing intelligentsia whom Koestler represents.

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NOTE.—This article was written in March, just before crossing the Rhine—I hope that excuses some of its inadequacies. Since then Mr. Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar* has been published. I am glad to hear that it will be reviewed in a later issue of *BLACK-FRIARS*.—20th June, 1945.