

The Janus Faces of Arthur Koestler

Norman Moss

On the day before my first interview with Arthur Koestler I mentioned his name to a professor of physics at a leading British university with whom I was having lunch. He rose to it with great interest.

Surprisingly, he had not read *Darkness at Noon* or any of Koestler's other novels or his essays. He was not even aware that many people, including me, consider *Darkness at Noon* one of the great political novels, indeed one of the great novels, of the century and Koestler's two-part autobiography one of the great autobiographies. And he knew nothing of Koestler's extraordinarily eventful life, save the fact that, like most intelligent people, he was born Hungarian.

But my luncheon companion had read one of Koestler's nonfiction books, *The Sleepwalkers*, which touched on his own field, and it was this that aroused his enthusiasm. He assured me that Koestler more than anyone else had conveyed the significance of the early astronomers and their achievements, and particularly the transition from medieval-style inquiry to the atmosphere of modern science. This was a striking reminder of the many creative sides of Arthur Koestler. It was also a reminder that the *festschrift* presented to him on his seventieth birthday two years ago was called *Astride the Two Cultures*.

Arthur Koestler came to England in 1940 after an adventurous life in several European countries as, among other things, a journalist and Communist propagandist. He has lived for some years now in a tall, narrow house on a garden square in Knightsbridge, a quiet, wealthy section of London. He is a small and stocky man, with a face shaped like an inverted triangle, reminiscent of one of Picasso's figures. It is not an old face but a young man's face ridged with age. He chain-smoked small cigars as he answered my questions carefully, talking slowly in well-organized sentences. He seemed a far cry from the stormy figure of the many

stories told about him, the veteran of affairs and marriages, and of front-line participation in many of the battles that have shaped our time: Zionism, communism, anticommunism. There seems to be a mellowing, not only with age but also with having settled into membership in the British literary/intellectual establishment.

Taking my cue from my encounter with the physicist of the day before, I asked Koestler first how it came about that he, a writer preoccupied for much of his life with politics, both contemporary political issues and fundamental philosophical questions, should have turned to the study of science and, furthermore, several of the sciences. Is he a scientific amateur? Can one be a scientific amateur in today's world of specialization?

"I wouldn't say 'amateur' because the word carries an implication of dilettantism, and I hate dilettantism," he replied. "What I am trying to do is to synthesize the various branches of science that are relevant to the condition of Man, that are so specialized that the lay reader simply cannot keep abreast." He pointed out that he had started out as a science student at Vienna University, and in his last years he has gone back to this—"On *reviens toujours à son premier amour*." But there is also a more objective explanation, he said.

"If you have been writing political novels and essays for a long period, then you realize that politics and economics are not enough. You begin to ask yourself, 'What are the psychological motivations that make people tick, and that make people go raving mad, by voting a Hitler into power, for instance? How do emotion and reason go together?' So you are driven into studying psychology. And once you are in psychology you are driven one step further, into the theory of evolution. Because the question immediately arises of how much a person's behavior and a group's behavior are genetically determined by heredity and how much by environment. So you see, you can't help it, you are driven into digging into further and further strata."

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Koestler's approach to ideas has always been one of commitment. When he became a Zionist as a young man, he went to Palestine as a settler. When he was converted to the Communist ideology, he worked for the Communist party. When he became an anti-Communist, he was a celebrated polemicist. This same energy and adventurousness has characterized his approach to the sciences. In biology he challenged the prevailing Darwinian theory of evolution. In psychology he has gone into parapsychology. When I raised this with him, he played down the extent of his scientific heterodoxy.

"I didn't challenge the Darwinian theory, I only challenged the totalitarian claims of the neo-Darwinians," he said, reverting to the language of politics, "the claim that change mutation plus natural selection explains *everything* in evolution. I believe that the Darwinian theory gives us a part of the picture, but not the whole picture. And I share this belief with a great number of biologists—professional biologists—today."

"But you suggest that there is another force that influences evolution...."

"That there are a *number* of other forces," he corrected me. "Many unknown forces, which will gradually emerge. Probably it's a wide spectrum of multiple causation that keeps the wheels of evolution turning."

But isn't he a Lamarckian, believing with Jean Lamarck that acquired characteristics can be inherited?

"*Not altogether. I think there is a place in that spectrum of causes for a modified, mini-Lamarckism, as I have called it. By that I mean that if certain environmental challenges are repeated through thousands and thousands of generations, then something of the animal's ways of coping with it might seep through into heredity and become instinctive. This goes against the prevailing orthodoxy. But there are hundreds of bright young biologists who share this skepticism about the totalitarian claims of the orthodox Darwinians.*"

In physics too he has gone beyond the frontiers of sciences, as they are drawn on most intellectual maps, in his imaginative speculations, beginning with his interest in psychic phenomena. When I put this to him, he again protested that he is not all that unorthodox.

"*It's amazing how many physicists today are interested in extrasensory perception and all that kind of thing. Today, physicists are mystics. For example, John Wheeler, professor of physics at Columbia University, has postulated hyper-space, of infinite dimensions. Eugene Wiener, a Nobel laureate in physics, is convinced, like the Taoists, that intellect is woven into the physical structure of the universe. That intelligence is not an epiphenomenon, something that some animal on this planet has developed, but something that is as basic to the structure of the physical universe as quantum numbers or electric charge.*"

Which seemed to bring us to Koestler's two recent books in which he speculates on the possible significance of coincidence, *The Roots of Coincidence* and *The Challenge of Chance*,

which he wrote with the biologist Sir Alister Hardy and the psychologist Robert Harvie. All this went far beyond an interest in telepathy and precognition.

Again, he stressed that he is not alone in his speculations. Indeed, they stem from a paper on coincidence written jointly by C.G. Jung and the physicist Wolfgang Pauli, known to modern science for the "Pauli Exclusion Principle."

"*Pauli, who was a great atomic physicist, was led to realize that science, and physics especially, is only concerned—and can only be concerned—with one level of reality, and that there may be other aspects, other levels of reality, which elude physics. So he joined forces with Jung, and together they evolved this concept of synchronicity, which is defined as an a-causal—a noncausal—principle, or agency, operating in the universe, of equal importance to causality.*"

When I read *The Roots of Coincidence*, I was already at home with ideas about ESP and clairvoyance, but synchronicity, and its surrounding territory, was a strange world to me, and a staggering one. To accept its existence seemed to me to undermine the whole of our Western intellectual tradition and the picture of a rational universe it gives us. So I pressed him to explain further. Does an a-causal agency mean an area in which cause and effect don't exist?

"*In which cause and effect as defined in physics is not applicable. But this synchronicity principle was only a very imaginative extension of something quite accepted in modern physics, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, according to which we can operate on the subatomic level only in terms of probabilities, not certainties.*"

Insofar as I understand Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle I have always felt that it has had loaded onto it more philosophical significance than it can carry. Surely, I suggested, modern physics assumes that the rules that govern the subatomic universe are different from those that govern our everyday universe in which we have our experience.

"*Not totally different, but different by degree. On the subatomic level physics is no longer based on causality but on statistical probability. We can say what a mass of subatomic particles will do, but not what each individual particle will do. It is a matter of pure chance whether a single particle will move in a certain way or not. We cannot explain its movement in terms of a cause. The world of modern physics is not the simple, mechanistic world of cause and effect. Modern physics has destroyed materialism. Matter evaporates, it runs through the fingers like sand. We have holes in space into which matter vanishes. We have a particle, the tachyon, that appears to travel backwards in time for a brief moment. It's an Alice-in-Wonderland universe. The unthinkable propositions of modern physics make the unthinkable concepts of parapsychology a little less unacceptable.*"

But the clusters of events, the synchronicity, that are discussed in *The Roots of Coincidence* do not occur at

the subatomic level but in the world of our daily lives and experience. Two men with the same name, living in different parts of the country, collide in their cars in a country lane. Koestler, facing death, derives comfort from a passage in a book by Thomas Mann in which Mann quotes Schopenhauer. Later Koestler writes to Mann, whom he has never met, telling him this. Mann, sitting in his garden, feels a sudden urge to look up that essay by Schopenhauer for the first time in forty years, and he is doing so when the mailman arrives with Koestler's letter. Was this synchronicity? Could this principle operate in our daily lives and affect what we do?

"It might impinge upon our lives, yes."

"And make someone behave in a certain way? So as to bring about a coincidental meeting, for instance?"

"Something might impinge on our behavior, something we cannot define, which is beyond our capacity to formulate logically, as we are unable to visualize matter transforming into energy. There may be things we call a-causal that transform into energy somehow."

But wouldn't this destroy free will? If this coincidental meeting comes about—if someone meets someone on the street he hasn't seen for years, say, after experiencing a series of coincidences in relation to his name—and if this has some universal meaning, then doesn't this mean that his walking down that street at that time was not a product of his own will but had to fit in with some universal scheme, just as the movement of an electron does?

"Yes. But maybe his own will was a part of the universal scheme. That doesn't destroy free will."

I suggested that some of these coincidences might be explained by telepathy, producing an unconscious motivation for doing something, such as walking down a certain street.

"But that's just another word. You can say telepathy, you can say coincidence, you can say providence. They're just words. We are facing here a type of phenomenon known to humanity since the dawn of civilization, for which no explanation has been put forward, and which has been swept under the carpet in embarrassment as occultism, superstition, magic, and so on. But all these are just words. Is coincidence any more mysterious than telepathy?"

I suggested that it is. Telepathy, after all, is a part of the causal universe. It can be considered in terms of conventional science, as a phenomenon we don't yet understand. The classic experiments in telepathy and ESP are absolutely orthodox scientifically in their method and their criteria. But concepts like synchronicity and coincidence go beyond what we think can be comprehended today by scientific criteria and scientific method.

"It's one step further, but again it's only a difference in degree, not in kind. Telepathy is not explainable by the conventional concepts of physics; for one thing, it has been found that distance makes no difference to the

intensity of the signal, which goes against Newton's inverse square law. Even less, some of the Rhine experiments, like willing the dice to fall on one side or the other, or those experiments in which a person guessing at cards regularly guesses two cards ahead. He's seeing into the future, the immediate future. Two point six seconds ahead. That doesn't fit into the conceptual framework of physics. And synchronicity is a further step."

We turned to his last book, *Janus: A Summing-Up*, which summarizes many of his conclusions over the last two decades (Random House, 1978). Janus, the two-faced god who looks in both directions, has cropped up several times in his works.

The book ranges as wide as his own speculations, but at the core is the concept of the holon, which functions as an independent entity but also as a part of a larger, integrated structure. Man is such a creature, in this view, and so are other entities rising higher in the universal order and down to the electron. Janus is the symbol of this: "The face turned towards the higher systems in the holarchy is that of a subordinate part of a larger system, the face turned towards the lower levels shows a quasi-autonomous whole in its own right." Koestler said the book attempts to look at life in the universe all the way from the single living cell to the phenomenon of extrasensory perception. "It's a stratification of reality with different levels of complexity."

Moral values have a place in this universe. "The more complex a system becomes, like the step from amphibian to reptilian, or from animal to man, the greater degree of freedom—in the physicist's sense—the system has. It can react in so many different ways to the same type of stimulus. There is less determinism, more freedom, and, therefore, more individual responsibility. You find you get a strata-by-strata approach to where Man comes from and where Man is going."

He appears to be seeking in science and its implications some more clues to what he called in his autobiography "the invisible writing." The phrase occurs in a description of the mystical experience he underwent when he was in a Franco prison cell during the Spanish Civil War and facing possible execution, an experience described within a framework of rigorous skepticism and intellectual precision. He wrote that he came to have "a direct certainty that a higher order of reality existed, and that it alone invested existence with meaning." The nature of this ultimate reality is a text written in invisible ink. We cannot read it; yet the knowledge that it exists has profound implications for the way we live.

Currently, Koestler is working on a book he says is an autobiographical episode he has meant to tell for some time. "It is more bio than auto. I don't come into it very much." He works what he calls a bank clerk's hours, from 9:30 to 1:00 and 3:00 to 6:00, and he climbs the stairs to the book-lined study at the top of his house to do so. His third and present wife, Cynthia, is well-placed to give him support. She was his secretary before they married, and she can still find a quotation for him in any of his own books, and in most others as well.

“The tragedy of philosophy is that philosophers live such sheltered lives.”



Janus begins by questioning, not the nature of the universe, but the chances of survival of mankind in the situation we have created for ourselves. So I raised the point with him: Does he think mankind will survive?

“Well, you know, the probabilities are pretty dim. Since Hiroshima we have got the means to annihilate, not just a few tens of thousands or even a few million people, but the total biosphere. This is not just a matter of avoiding a total war for the next twenty years or two hundred years. It’s with us forever, like a time bomb that we carry around our necks.”

“So the conventional ‘observer from a different planet’ would say that if you take into account Man’s record as a species, and his power of total destruction, then the chances of survival are not very high. Read the headlines in the newspaper any day. There are conflicts that can escalate into the irreversible. But I think one never has the right to give up.”

Mention of the headlines brought me to another question. He is known best as a writer about politics, both contemporary issues and the fundamental philosophical issues of power and morality, means and ends. But he said in an essay in 1955 that he would not comment anymore on politics, and he has not uttered an opinion on any of the issues that have agitated contemporary intellectuals. Why had he stuck to this so rigidly?

“I explained at the time that I felt I had said on these subjects all that I had to say. A politician or a journalist has the right, and even the duty, to repeat himself. But a writer should not do it. And now I’m going to other pastures.”

Does he sometimes feel tempted to break this vow of silence?

“Yes of course. Because privately I feel just as passionately about these questions as I did at the time that I wrote about them. But I still feel that it would be wrong to go back, wrong and repetitive.”

But aren’t there new issues?

“Yes, but the basic pattern has remained essentially the same. You actually see now, in certain branches of the Left, the same arguments, the same dialectics as in the 1930’s.”

Koestler is almost unique in contemporary writers of stature in the life he has led as a man of action—André Malraux is the only other who compares with him in this respect. I pointed out that the man of action and the man of contemplation are usually seen as opposites.

*“Well, we all have our contradictions. And you know, the titles, the antithetical titles of my books—like *The Yogi and the Commissar*, *Arrival and Departure*, *Darkness at Noon*—there are others, these antithetical titles do express a certain dualism. And this choice of titles was not conscious. Somebody pointed it out to me afterwards. He rubbed my nose in it.” And he chuckled at this recollection.*

“So I suppose I always did have this split existence. Between man of thought and man of action?”

“Yes. I need that as a kind of metabolism, you know? I think it’s a satisfactory thing not to live in an ivory tower, and not to live in the market place, but to live somewhere between them. The happiest moments are when thought and action go together. When one is campaigning for a cause, for instance. Like the abolition of capital punishment—I was very active in that campaign.” How very English, I thought, to choose as an example an issue about individuals rather than an ideology.

Since he had mentioned his campaigning against capital punishment in the movement that led to its abolition in Britain a few years ago, I asked him how this related to his period in a Spanish prison cell when he was awaiting execution (one of three prisons he has been in).

“Not awaiting exactly, but thinking it could happen, that one could be bumped off at any time. Life was cheap. Other prisoners were being taken out and

executed all the time. I was always against capital punishment, for a number of ethical and practical reasons, long before that. But that gave a personal depth to my conviction. When you are in such a ticklish situation"—and what an English choice of adjective—"then it becomes something very personal. It's an emotional as well as an abstract ethical issue. And that's what I mean, you see, by harmonizing the two sides of one's nature, reason and emotion, instead of the two being at loggerheads, as is mostly the case. The tragedy of philosophy is that most philosophers lead such sheltered lives."

One might say that this can make for detached objectivity, but Koestler, not surprisingly in view of his activist attitude to life, does not value detachment highly.

"Detachment leaves out something very essential: the suffering, the injustice, the immediate perception of the horror that is around. There's something missing, a feeling of urgency. So modern linguistic philosophy provides a terribly one-sided, sheltered, padded view of reality. It leaves out the ethical component. When the logical positivists declare that questions of value, of good and evil, and so on are meaningless, they castrate philosophy. Marx said that the task of philosophers is not just to describe the world, but to change it. That's one of the few fragments of Marx to which I cling."

I pointed out that as well as having several marriages and being committed to several causes, he had also lived in several countries. Why had he decided to settle in Britain?

"Well, I'd led a sort of nomadic existence, and I was in early middle age when I escaped from the German-occupied continent and settled here. And I've sort of grown more and more roots, and friends. I love this house and that old square you see through the window."

He edited a book some years back about Britain's

decline, called *Suicide of a Nation?*, which caused a stir in Britain, as it was intended to. Is he as anxious now as he was then?

"I am anxious about the future, yes. I think Britain is still hiding its head in the sand, refusing to face realities." He paused and searched his mind, less sure now than he had seemed to be about the metaphysics of atomic particles.

"There's something else, a massacre of incentives. It's difficult to put one's finger on it. Everytime I go abroad and come back I'm struck by the fact that people don't work as hard here. And the middle classes, somehow, have no more confidence. The bourgeoisie, in the classic French sense, the third estate, seems to have lost its will to live."

However, he has never regretted his decision to live in Britain. "We've considered many times living somewhere else. We've often thought of living in France. Or a writer's tax haven. But somehow we'd rather live here and pay the taxes. And after all, the gross national product is not the only criterion of human happiness. If there is a decline here—which there is, of course—it's a gentle decline. Like the fall of autumn leaves." He dwelt on the metaphor with evident satisfaction, and then repeated it. "A gentle autumn."

"England is still a more civilized country than most. The things that make it more civilized are going, but they're going more slowly than in other countries."

The interview over, he insisted on escorting me down to the ground floor, partly, he told me, because he wanted to say hello to his two puppies, furry little bundles of different colors, rare breeds. He introduced them proudly and stroked them affectionately.

I walked out into the square, as gentle and civilized a spot as you can find in any big city. It was late in the year, and one of the last of the autumn's leaves drifted down from a tree in front of me, perhaps symbolically, perhaps coincidentally, perhaps even synchronistically.