

Spencer Brown

ARTHUR KOESTLER

The Mellow Machine-Gun

ARTHUR KOESTLER's readers are admiring but uneasy. He is thoroughly versed in the chief political problems of our time; he asks the right questions, questions which few others until recently have dared to ask; when others take up these questions, few give better answers than he. His style has speed, clarity, intelligence. His novels have motion as well as cerebration. But something is indefinably unsatisfactory.

Hence many readers will seek in the first volume of Koestler's autobiography, *Arrow in the Blue*,* a clue to the fundamental shortcoming of his other works. They will find it, too, but first they will find many other things, some admirable, all interesting.

Koestler sees in himself two central paradoxes, like a binary star around which in eccentric orbits revolve lesser paradoxes (these latter are expressed in the titles of most of his books). The first is that of Ahor

and Babo, his odd private names for two features of his neurotic make-up. Ahor is the Ancient Horror of his childhood. Besides the dubious endowment of a fiercely capricious mother who swung "from the emotional climate of the tropics to the arctic and back again," a father who made and lost fortunes on schemes of crackbrained inventors, the parlor maid, Bertha, who set the household tone of fear and guilt, and an almost complete isolation from other children, he had a terrifying and traumatic tonsillectomy, furtive and violent, followed by two other operations. To combat Ahor, he invented Babo — the Baron in the Bog, Munchausen, who saved himself from sinking by lifting himself out by the hair. The first victory of Babo was young Arthur's administering the ether to himself for his third operation. This act he considers highly symbolic: he controls his own destiny. And indeed Koestler has lifted himself by the

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hair — out of a life of considerable failure, of vagabondage and near-starvation, out of the sewer of Communism, of concentration camps.

The other paradoxical symbol is that of the title. At the age of twelve Koestler was obsessed with a vision of shooting an arrow into the blue — a super-arrow that would go beyond the earth's gravity, beyond the sun's, and travel toward infinity. In other ages this thirst for the absolute would have been fulfilled in religion. In our age "it was this same quest and the same all-or-nothing mentality which drove me to the Promised Land and into the Communist Party."

As the arrow splits lengthwise into two, "the two halves have a repellent effect on each other, their orbits become deflected; they continue their flight in opposite directions, one symbolizing Action, the other Contemplation." Koestler recalls a vivid instance of this split, in his having read almost simultaneously about the Arab massacres of Jews and about Einstein's theory of relativity. The call to action comes to him from the outrages of the world: "first the financial, then the physical destruction of the cultural stratum from which I came. At a conservative estimate, three out of every four people whom I knew before I was thirty, were subsequently killed in Spain, or hounded to death at Dachau, or gassed at Belsen, or deported to Russia, or liquidated in

Russia; some jumped from windows in Vienna or Budapest, others were wrecked by the misery and aimlessness of permanent exile." Hence his Chronic Indignation. "On the other hand, I knew that detachment and restraint are essential values in art. Thus the conflict between action and contemplation led into the conflict between art and propaganda. I have spoilt most of my novels out of a sense of duty to some 'cause'; I knew that an artist should not exhort or preach, and I kept on exhorting and preaching."

FOLLOWING his career with a detached irony that does not preclude astonishment at his own folly or success, Koestler recounts his early acquaintance with Communism — the "hundred days" of Bela Kun in his native Hungary, in retrospect a kindly and only half-serious revolution; his education in engineering school in Vienna, which not only grounded him in science but gave him some of the happiest days of his life, oddly enough in a typical dueling, heavy-drinking, easy-loving fraternity; and his first bridge-burning. He had plunged into the Zionist Revisionist movement (a minority within a minority within a minority, whose sectarian politics immunized him later, when he left the Communist Party, against splinter groups). On the eve of getting his degree and settling down as an engineer, he ceremoni-

ally burned his matriculation book, learned Hebrew in a few weeks, and set out for Palestine. A failure in the *Kvutsa*, or collective, he went through a grimly amusing period of near-starvation in Haifa, from which he was rescued by selling an article to the *Neue Freie Presse*. (He later discovered to his chagrin that it was his mother's influence that got the article printed.) On this frail raft he drifted into journalistic success, as correspondent for the Ullstein chain of newspapers first in Jerusalem, then in Paris, then as their science editor in Berlin, and last as foreign editor and assistant editor-in-chief of one of the largest papers in Germany. This success, of the sort commonly described as meteoric, he achieved in 1931, at the age of twenty-five. Then he burned his bridges again and joined the Communist Party. Here the narrative ends, "as those old-time film serials used to end with the hero suspended on a rope over a crocodile-infested river, followed by the promise: TO BE CONTINUED. But then the audience knew that the hero would not really fall among the crocodiles, whereas I did; which makes this tale, I hope, all the more exciting and improving."

It is not so much the tale as the observations by the way that are exciting and improving. There is a shrewd analysis of "Jewishness." There are also obiter dicta on French bourgeois life and on sectarian squab-

blings over the holy bones and stones of Jerusalem. There is even an "elegy on bawdy houses," as sentimental a piece of worldly writing as I have yet seen. There is open and significant hostility to Freud, hostility which any admirer of *Arrival and Departure* will consider literary parricide. There are uneven pages on the Hungarian revolution, the Austrian inflation, the failure of socialist journalism, and the paralysis of the Social Democrats before Hitler.

Best of all to me, a devotee of gadgets and kindergarten astrophysics, is the section on Koestler's work as science editor. The popularizing of science on the Continent had hardly begun when he took the job, and he must have done much to promote it. He recalls interviews with Einstein and de Broglie, the foreshadowings of atomic energy, developments in electronic musical instruments, and delightful encounters with sound but impractical inventors, Rube Goldbergs, and plain charlatans. As science editor Koestler flew with the *Graf Zeppelin* to the arctic when the Ullsteins outmaneuvered Hearst for the news monopoly of the expedition. I for one wish that this section of the book had swallowed up some of the rest. It is clear that much of Koestler's extraordinary skill as a popularizer of political or philosophical complexity, his faculty for illuminating analogy, and his use of ar-

resting paradox, took shape at this time.

BUT THE MAIN THEME of *Arrow in the Blue* is Communism. Koestler discusses the schizoid mentality of the party member who accepts the Dr. Jekyll of "progressive causes" and rejects the Mr. Hyde of revolutionary terror, or vice versa, according to temperament. He analyses the attractions of the "closed system" of thought as an "emotional hothouse." He shows how the trained theologian — Marxist, Freudian, or Catholic — "can make mincemeat of his open-minded adversary. . . . The closed system sharpens the faculties of the mind, like an overefficient grindstone, to a brittle edge; it produces a scholastic, Talmudic, hair-splitting brand of cleverness which affords no protection against committing the crudest imbecilities. People with this mentality are found particularly often among the intelligentsia. I like to call them the 'clever imbeciles' — an expression which I don't consider offensive, as I was one of them."

These are good things and well worth saying. But Koestler has said or implied them before. Koestler's surprises — and they are many — are in words, not in ideas. We always feel him to be repetitive: he has the breadth and sparkling color of an oceanic sameness. It is not disorganized repetition: his novels are tightly constructed. If anything,

they are overschematized; something always equals something — no rose without its thorn, no character, no incident without its symbolic significance. Even in *Arrow in the Blue*, with the characteristically rambling pattern of the autobiography, there are strict bounds set to the ramble.

Though a vastly interesting writer, Koestler is only a chessplayer's novelist. *Darkness at Noon* is a debate with depth and intensity, but Rubashov is only a bundle of characteristics. Gletkin, it is true, is a horrifying creation, but not humanly horrifying like his counterparts in Victor Serge's *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*. Peter Slavek, in *Arrival and Departure*, is a deliberately generalized figure; so are all the people in *Thieves in the Night* and *The Age of Longing*. Koestler confesses that he likes women only too well but that writing about them bores him stiff; hence his vacant and incredible heroines.

As a thinker, Koestler, to use his kind of figure, is a body of high albedo, or index of reflection, but no luminosity. He is the perfect journalist, prodigiously bright, sophisticated in the worlds of idea and experience, having thought much — or rather reflected much. He is a poet without a poet's taste or emotion. He seeks to dazzle as he instructs, forgetting that teaching must sometimes be humdrum. In his role of the Chesterton of anti-

Communism, in his grasping at any handy paradox, he often falls into the polarization and schematization of thought that he castigates in the "closed system." If his optimism in joining the party was naïve, his present pessimism is slick.

Is this, then, the elusive defect in his books? Only part of it. One of his colleagues in Ullstein's Paris office told him: "When you first came to my office you were not human — you were a machine-gun." Koestler uses the past tense; I should use the present. The machine-gun has become mellow but not human. We do not like Koestler as we like, for example, Orwell or Silone. (I am speaking only of the literary personality, of course; Orwell seems to have been a rather formidable person in life.) As a literary personality, Koestler has no warmth. And throughout *Arrow in the Blue* he shows us clearly, in his one-night stands with woman after woman,

in his acquaintances with men made and ended in a flash, in his perpetual rootlessness, that he was personally unable to enjoy either love or friendship. People for him exist to be indignant for, to be knocked down, to be applauded, to be scorned, but not to be pitied or loved.

THIS, it seems to me, is Koestler's fundamental defect, one that he shows few signs of overcoming. Now he can see only "uneasy resignation" to replace the "specious hope" of his early years: "We are forced to fall back on the threadbare values of the past." Yet these threadbare — or perhaps homespun — values are still wearable in our day, as Orwell demonstrated even though he also suffered from Chronic Indignation. Koestler will have none of them, though he has long since grown wise enough not to buy glittering cloth-of-gold or shining armor.

Arbitrary Polarizations

» One of the principal methods of distortion in Communist thought is what one might term "arbitrary polarizations." An example of an arbitrary polarization is the statement: "There are two categories of people: (a) the good ones who travel by train, and (b) the bad ones who travel by air." With a little casuistry it can then be shown that people who travel by sea are (a) good, because they don't fly, and (b) bad, because they don't run on rails.

ARTHUR KOESTLER, in *ARROW IN THE BLUE*, Macmillan, 1952.

Baseball à la Wagner

The Nibelung in the Polo Grounds

***The Natural.* By Bernard Malamud.
Harcourt, Brace. 237 pp. \$3.00.**

BERNARD MALAMUD is the author of a number of short stories of unusual power and stubborn originality. They are impressive because they all read as though they were written by Bernard Malamud and no one else, because there is no indication that they have been trimmed to fit the sails of different magazines, and because they have in the main dealt with the Great Depression's effect upon small shopkeepers, mostly Jewish, without the least self-consciousness that they are covering ground that has presumably been worked to exhaustion. On the contrary, they derive their impact, as does all good non-intellectual art, precisely from the deliberate use of material that is already a part of the common body of experience.

I was eager to see what Mr. Malamud's first novel would be like. And I was surprised to discover that he had chosen not the world of the doomed little businessman but the world of baseball. "The Natural" is Roy Hobbs, a ballplayer of such

phenomenal skill that he can come from nowhere at the age of thirty-four and in one incredible season establish himself as one of the game's immortal figures. He is, together with his golden bat Wonderboy, which he has carved from the heart of a tree split by lightning, the Wagnerian hero of a mythic drama that draws on folk legend, newspaper headlines, and the stylistic manner of the pulps to achieve its effects.

Mr. Malamud has not hesitated to incorporate materials familiar to every baseball fan: Babe Ruth's gargantuan appetite, Branch Rickey's reputed miserliness, Casey Stengel's encounter with the ball flung from the top of the Washington Monument, Eddie Waitkus' shooting by a crazed girl, Shoeless Joe Jackson's tragic downfall. . . . But his hero, although he partakes of many of the more memorable aspects of baseball's gods, is a "natural" in even more meanings of the term than those assigned to it by those professional sentimentalists, the baseball writers.

When Roy Hobbs actually knocks the cover off the ball in his first time