

# Muddying the Waters of Faith

**Janus: A Summing Up**

by Arthur Koestler

Random House, 368 pp., \$10

Reviewed by

Robert Claiborne

EVERY GENERATION or so our society goes through a spell of believing in fairies, or reasonable facsimiles thereof. Currently, tens of millions of Americans, many of them literate, regularly consult their zodiacal signs for guidance; others, seeing the fault not in their stars but in themselves, seek salvation in Roling, est-ing, or the ministrations of assorted gurus. ESP and psychokinesis again raise their phantasmagoric heads, while UFOs and chariots of the gods promise us close encounters with what looks suspiciously like the Second Coming. As a nation, we seem to be back with St. Augustine's *credo quia absurdum*, but with a veritable smorgasbord of absurdities to choose from.

Arthur Koestler also believes in fairies—more accurately, perhaps, in miracles. He believes in Lamarckism (the inheritance of acquired characteristics), vitalism, and various other fantasies of nineteenth-century scientific romanticism. He believes in ESP and psychokinesis, maintains at least a benign neutrality toward flying saucers, and ends (if I have understood his last paragraphs correctly) by embracing some ill-defined variety of God. Most of these notions have appeared in earlier Koestler creations, but *Janus* is his *Summa Theologica*. However, it does not convince.

Koestler's problem is that for him, unlike St. Augustine, faith is not enough. He wants his absurdities justified by scientific works—a God literally from the machine. In pursuit of this devoutly wished-for consummation, he cites the wilder conjectures of selected scientists, misrepresents the findings and theories of others, and generally name-drops like a convention of Hollywood agents. He never achieves an understanding of what scientific evidence is and of how to draw valid conclusions from it.

Koestler's rationale for pursuing miracles is worth examining in some detail, both because it typifies his research methods and because it probably tells us something about why irrationalism and anti-intellectualism have suddenly become popular and profitable. In summary, Koestler has given up

on humanity. *Homo sapiens* is "an evolutionary misfit, afflicted by an endemic disorder": paranoia. The proof of this follows five lines of argument.

First comes the "ubiquity" of human sacrifice, the leading case being that of Abraham and Isaac. In fact, this story dramatized Jehovah's (and the Jews') rejection of human sacrifice. The institution has of course been extinct in the civilized West since the fall of Carthage and in the civilized Far East for at least as long; I doubt if it was at any period "ubiquitous." Nor where it existed was it credible evidence of paranoia, of the need to "placate and flatter gods conceived in nightmare dreams." More often than not, it was an attempt to manipulate the powerful, mysterious, and often inimical natural and social forces personified by the gods—forces that could engender not "nightmares" but such real catastrophes as plague, famine, and war.

Koestler's second argument, that our species is "virtually unique in the animal kingdom" in its "lack of instinctive safeguards against the killing of conspecifics," is simply false. The more we learn about the behavior of other animals in the wild, the more it becomes apparent that murder is by no means a uniquely human recreation.

Passing over his third argument—the alleged gap between intellectual and emotional functioning, which is so abstractly stated as to be unverifiable—we arrive at the fourth: the "striking disparity between the growth curves of science and technology on the one hand and of ethical conduct on the other," with "no discernible growth curve" in ethics between the sixth century B.C. and the present. His proof? The sixth century saw "the rise of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism," the twentieth begat Hitlerism, Stalinism, and Maoism. It is of course an old rhetorical trick to compare the best, or presumed best, of one era or society with the worst, or presumed worst, of another—a maneuver often employed, for example, by apologists for Soviet "socialism" or American "free enterprise." But of course such rhetorical hanky-panky proves nothing except, perhaps, the naïveté or disingenuousness of the rhetorician.

To accept Koestler's fourth argument, moreover, is to reject his first, or vice versa. If, that is, human sacrifice was once universal, as he assures us, yet is now extinct or nearly so, some moral advance has surely occurred!

Koestler's fifth proof of human paranoia is the alleged leading role in history of murderous religious fanaticism—"homicide for unselfish

reasons." As examples, he cites the "fervent" crusaders, who sacked Christian Constantinople as cheerfully as they had earlier plundered Moslem Palestine; the equally fervent Moslems, whose "holy" wars won them the lands of the Near East, North Africa, and most of Spain; and "the massacres, in the name of true religion, of the Thirty Years War"—which began with Protestant Saxony fighting for the Catholic "true religion" and ended with Catholic France backing the Protestants. Robbery with violence, whether individual or national, may be evidence of moral insensitivity but hardly of insanity.

Koestler's other arguments are on a level with those just surveyed. Indeed, I found not one area where I possess even modest expertise in which he does not misstate the facts—often grossly. He considers the circulatory system "controlled by the heart"; the respiratory system, by the lungs. No such control exists: Both are controlled by the nervous system. He contends that man's biological evolution "came to a virtual standstill in Cro-Magnon days, 50,000 to 100,000 years ago," which misstates both the probable course of human evolution and the dates of the Cro-Magnons (post-40,000 years ago). He alleges that the Cro-Magnons made "hardly any use" of their modern-type brain but rather manufactured "spears, bows and arrows of the same primitive type" for "millennium after millennium." In fact, the outstanding feature of the Cro-Magnons, the first anatomically modern human beings, was their propensity to innovate at what was for their time a breakneck pace. They invented hosts of new tools (one was the bow and arrow), more efficient hunting techniques, warmer garments, and a whole new region of human consciousness and technology: art. In some 30,000 years they produced more innovations than their ancestors had in three million.

People who have given up on humanity are almost compelled to believe in fairies—or miracles, or gurus, or God. But St. Augustine was right: If you want to believe, *believe*; don't muddy the waters of faith by dumping in the earthy, gritty facts of science. Otherwise you end up where Koestler does: with atrociously bad science and unconvincing theology. ●

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# Books in Brief

## Time in Its Flight

by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer  
Doubleday, 782 pp., \$12.95

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, the versatile and exuberant author of *Anya*, has written a new novel formidable in ambition and scope, as well as length. *Time in Its Flight* is built around the marriage of Edna, a spirited Boston teen-ager of quite original attitudes, and the morose but passionate John Steele, a dedicated Vermont country doctor.

Set in the latter half of the past century, the book is a chronicle of the burgeoning Steele family in its passages through joy and adversity, births, illnesses, and death, with accompanying probes into the meaning of time, change, mortality, and other imponderables. When these large themes are embodied in action or event, the results are admirable, but they are too often pursued in an expository, didactic manner.

Schaeffer has a teeming imagination, and scatters ideas, anecdotes, and descriptions with a prodigal hand (the portrayal of nineteenth-century New England rural life is in fact educational, offering meticulous details about domestic customs, farm lore, fads, superstitions, tidbits from magazines and newspapers); unfortunately, only a portion of these contribute to any formal design or movement. Similarly, Schaeffer's attempt to render a photographic reality of affectionate family life (children underfoot, pancakes sizzling) yields tedium. When Schaeffer is not patronizing her characters or reminding the reader how lovable they are in all their quirkiness, her writing can be taut and vigorous: the episode in which the Steeles' youngest daughter, a religious extremist, goes mad after the loss of her husband and children in a diphtheria epidemic, or the sharp, witty passages showing Edna's early, bitter conflicts with her fashion plate mother. These are small gems in a framework too lax and comprehensive to sustain excitement.

—LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ

## Undesirable Alien

by Régis Debray  
Translated by Rosemarie Sheed  
Viking, 256 pp., \$9.95

The House of Fiction is a delicate structure, never more vulnerable than when weighed down with politics. The edi-

fice totters in this first novel by Régis Debray, the young French theorist whose *Revolution in the Revolution?* became a Guevaraist handbook for Latin-American guerrillas in the late 1960s, when Debray was imprisoned for a time in Bolivia following Che's death.

Here is the stuff of an absorbing political tale; yet far more than I wished, the fate of Debray's Frank, a Swiss guerrilla operating in an unnamed Caribbean oil republic, is set in motion not by character but by a major dictum of the handbook: "The penalty of a false theory is military defeat."

Like Hemingway's Robert Jordan, Frank joins a struggle on foreign soil, encounters revolutionary types, falls in love, battles bravely, and dies somehow victorious in a lost cause. Separating these two heroes, however, is a chasm of history. "The age of absolutes no longer exists," Frank decides. Splintered by his roles as political mentor, guerrilla tactician, and lover—pulled every which way by the conflicting ideologies of the movement and the Communist party, by urban and mobile strategies, by violence and political collaboration, by personal desires and sacrifice—Frank is immobilized by dubious actions and ambiguous hopes. In the hands of a novelist surer of his craft and his narrative direction, such modern political complexities could have a Conradian drive and resonance.

*Undesirable Alien* falls short as a gripping imaginative experience, but it is a telling exploration of revolutionary motives. To anyone who has ever asked why some men and women choose a quality of death to make life more bearable for others in the unforeseeable future, *Undesirable Alien* is a revealing document.

—ROBERT MAURER

## A Considerable Town

by M. F. K. Fisher  
Knopf, 224 pp., \$8.95

How much one likes M. F. K. Fisher's book about Marseilles will depend on one's appetite for ambience. *A Considerable Town* is not a history or a guidebook but an evocation of the port city—long on impressions and short on facts.

Fisher has lived in or visited Marseilles over a period of almost 50 years, inhaling the city's characteristic odors and happily eating the provender it scoops from the Mediterranean. (The best chapter, "The Food of Artemis," deals with the sensuous and pungent food of the region.) Yet Fisher begins by describing the city as *insolite*—mysterious and indefinable—and the mys-

tery is not dispelled by these accumulated anecdotes.

The vignettes she sets down have a tone that is more *New Yorker* than *Marseillais*. In the way of that journal, many of the stories—Christmas in a hotel room, an encounter with an angry taxi driver, a walk with some nervous visitors—end on a note that is mildly benign or mildly quizzical or mildly despairing—anyway, *mild*. This process of stringing together a series of tiny epiphanies makes me more than mildly impatient; reading them is rather like trying to make a meal out of cocktail snacks.

—RHODA KOENIG

## Shrinking

by Alan Lechuk  
Little, Brown, 564 pp., \$11.95

By the age of thirty-eight, a failed marriage, several breakdowns, and two poorly received novels have reduced Lionel Solomon's struggle with destiny to mere survival and have supplanted a paradigm of brilliance with a captious hypocrite. He paces before his students "like a caged animal," and to his colleagues at the university, he has become "a caste figure walking amidst the Brahmins."

Enter young and voluptuous Tippy Matthews, an adoring fan whose sycophancy ignites Solomon's smoldering existence. Tippy masters Solomon's vincibility, and it is not long before he lies naked to both her physical and her spiritual presence in an affair perpetuated by sexual dementia. But Solomon is soon slapped back to reality upon realizing that Tippy's grand design is his total evisceration.

*Shrinking* is a discordant étude of one man's madness orchestrated by greed and desire. Written in the form of a spiritual purge, the book is a self-analytic discourse on the endurance of man, the capitulation of society, middle age, the death of literature and the subsequent starvation of the serious novelist, and the plight of the American Indian—all of these misguided by and commingled with 57 varieties of paranoia. It is a confusing, often brilliant work that is too grandiose in scope to command the force or the focus necessary to substantiate any one of its many subplots. It is as if Lechuk diagnoses his own literary perplexity when, halfway through the book, Lionel asks a student to comment on a piece of prose. "A frightening juxtaposition of feelings," she says. "It's unbelievable all together like that."

—ROBERT STEPHEN SPITZ