The Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde of 20th Century Intellectual History

written by Michael Wreszin | July 3, 2011

ANYONE INTERESTED in intellectual history from the great depression of the thirties to the post war 1980s will be familiar with the impact of Arthur Koestler, whose famous assault on Stalinism and the Soviet Union in his novel *Darkness at Noon* was a widely praised international bestseller. There was a vehemently critical biography written by David Cesurani, *Arthur Koestler—The Homeless Mind* published in London in 1998. It was an opinionated attack on Koestler's personality and moral stature. It also portrayed him as a brutal womanizer and a self-loathing Jew. A more scholarly biography has now appeared written by Michael Scammell, the well-known biographer of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Scammell's work does not have the polemical, hyperbolic prose of Cesurani but it too is a strongly opinionated defense of Koestler, seeing him as one of the greatest intellectual journalists and writers of the 20th century. Scammell describes Koestler as a Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde, both intellectually brilliant and often mean-spirited, a bourgeois in domestic habits, bohemian in public, both idealistic and cynical, generous and kind on the one hand and brutal and even violent on the other. Books about Koestler are not likely to be written with a detached scholarly disinterest.

Scammell's biography is nearly 700 pages long. It has been acclaimed as a masterpiece of intellectual history. Koestler had an extraordinarily full life participating in nearly every intellectual, cultural, and scholarly debate and controversy of his time as well as being an actual participant in many major events including the Spanish Civil War, World War II and as a dissident voice throughout the post war years. Putting Koestler in the historical context demanded a full-scale history of the period. Scammell has delivered.

His book, however, poses the problem of so many post-computerized biographies: They become doorstop tombs. Everything is included; nothing of any import is left out. Koestler in addition to being a prolific author (he wrote 30 books and hundreds of articles and essays) was a promiscuous satyr who made an effort to have sex with nearly every woman he encountered. He manipulated an endless string of often talented and attractive women into his bedroom and anywhere else where sex might occur. Scammell leaves little out. Page after page is devoted to these seemingly endless encounters, which were often accompanied by drunken debauchery. This becomes more than tedious due to the repetitiveness of these episodes. They also distract from the ostensible reason the book is being written: a study of Koestler's intellectual achievements, his love of ideas, his magnificent conversational ability, his probing and inventive mind and imagination.

Ignazio Silone once observed that "The last struggle will be between the Communists and the anti-Communists." Koestler, having been both, made a lifelong career as a knowledgeable critic of Communism, Stalinism, and ultimately the entire Soviet Union. He became a major spokesman for the Cold War West. Scammell is an enthusiastic admirer of this Cold War warrior and often uncritical of that history.

At the very start of the narrative Scammell quotes George Steiner, another Eastern European intellectual and friend of Koestler:

> There are men and women who in addition to having special gifts, seem to embody the times in which they live. Somehow their biographies take on and make more visible to

> the rest of us the shape and meaning of the age. Even if Arthur Koestler had not been a significant writer and publicist, future historians would be fascinated by his career. It touches with uncanny precision on the hopes and nightmares, on the places and events, which have given the 20th century its flavor.

Arthur Koestler was born in Budapest, Hungary on September 5, 1904. His Jewish parents did not identify themselves ethnically. His mother came from a very wealthy family and was an avid socialite and partygoer. She often neglected her son, leaving him in the care of several nannies while she traipsed around Budapest and then Vienna. He had little love for his mother and later blamed her for his mental instability and lack of self-confidence. His father, a struggling businessman, was often away traveling and seldom had time for his son. With the death of a grandfather when he was just five and the only person he was close to, he grew up a sullen and lonely boy mostly on his own. He did prove to be an exceptional student. While still in high school he was an avid reader of Shakespeare, Rilke, Goethe, Heine, and Byron, and an undiscriminating reader of novels. But his major interest was in science and he excelled in that field. He was admitted to the Technisch Hochschule, the equivalent of MIT, in Vienna where his parents had moved to escape the results of the Hungarian Revolution of 1919.

Koestler began publishing articles and stories, which were printed in several magazines, but he was forced to leave school when his father's business collapsed and he could no longer pay tuition. Having become involved in Zionist organizations while in school, he managed to find his way to Palestine, hoping to find some kind of utopian existence. After a disappointing stint in a Kibbutz, he went to Haifa and began his career as a journalist. He traveled extensively throughout the Middle East as a correspondent and then went to Paris, and finally, Berlin where he became the science editor of a classy newspaper, *Alte Tante Voss*. He turned out an article a week for the *Voss* and its sister papers. He interviewed Einstein, rode on the maiden flight of the Graf Zepplin to the North Pole, and wrote flamboyant accounts of his adventures. He became a celebrity in Berlin and was promoted to greater editorial responsibilities.

In addition to his heavy work routine he began to live the life of a flamboyantly promiscuous man about town, and according to his own diary "managed to sneak into the beds of desirable women, or to seduce all the women in a harem in a single night and then brag about it." His brilliant and aggressive conversational argumentation became his signature mark but it was often undermined by drunkenness, which developed into a serious problem.

Because of Koestler's continued and "obsessive search for nirvana" he became interested in Communism at the beginning of the Great Depression and was persuaded by a friend to join the Communist Party in 1932. This led to an extensive trip through much of the Soviet Union. Initially enamored, he wrote of his experience in the language of Communist propaganda, but it proved to be, like his other searches for nirvana, a disillusioning experience.

It took his extraordinary trip to Spain during the civil war to crystallize Koestler's hatred of oppression and totalitarian control. He was jailed by the Franco forces as a spying foreign correspondent for a British paper, the *News Chronicle,* in February of 1937. He spent a horrendous time in a Spanish jail, convinced that he would lose his life as did so many of his prison comrades. He was released after an international effort sparked in England where 56 members of the British Parliament signed a letter of support.

Koestler's accounts of the Spanish experience in his book The *Spanish Testament* and especially its second part, *Dialogue with Death,* published by the Left Book Club in 1937, launched his career. His account of the very real and constant nearness of death prompted Sartre to praise it as an "early

example of existentialism." Koestler's months in the Spanish jail, Scammell writes, were "crucial to his intellectual and spiritual development." All of the major themes of his writing appear there: the problem of means and ends, free will, predestination, morality versus ideology.

It was not long after the publication of his Spanish book that Koestler left the Communist Party in April of 1938. He had encounters with party colleagues that angered him with their defense of violence and insistence that the ends justify any means. Scammell claims that Koestler had "grasped the corruption and degradation of the party far ahead of his comrades on the left." With *Darkness at Noon* (1940), Koestler's most famous work, he had launched all out war with Communism, Stalinism, and the Soviet Union. *Darkness at Noon* was a worldwide bestseller. Its tremendous success guaranteed his financial security for the rest of his life. Selling over a half million copies in two years was, according to Scammell, "a record for a serious novel and Koestler's greatest publishing triumph." It was declared the "most devastating exposure of Stalinist methods ever written" and "one of the few books of this epoch which will survive it." Koestler stated in a later interview that "Perhaps the truth is that real leftism today can only be anti-Communism. . . . Communism isn't what sprang from our little student brains. Communism is the Soviet Union. They are building the most cruel dictatorship ever seen." He went on to assert that Bolshevism had created fanatics ready to make any sacrifice for the sake of the party . . . Stalinism wasn't Marxism. It ignored the teachings of Marx in *Das Kapital*, and its biggest crime was that it had substituted rule by decree for laws of society." He quickly equated Stalinist Russia with Nazi Germany under the rubric of Totalitarianism.

Enormously prolific, he produced novelistic autobiographies and nonfiction accounts of his own life in such works as *The Scum of the Earth,* memoir (1941), *Arrival and Departure*, novel (1943), *The Yogi and the Commissar*, collected essays (1945), *Thieves in the Night*, novel (1946), and *The God that Failed: Six Studies in Communism,* a memoir with others edited by Richard Crossman (1950). All of these works and several others became classic statements of post World War II Cold War antiCommunism. Koestler had become a staunch defender of American foreign policy. He ridiculed those in France and other European and American leftists who wanted an independent third force to counter the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. Koestler presided at the Berlin Conference in 1951, where the Congress for Cultural Freedom was established and its publication financed by the American government through fronts established by the CIA. He attended their first major meeting and celebration in Paris. When not on wild nighttime bashes at bars and strip clubs, he met with some very conservative types. When he came to America, Erika Mann (actress, daughter of Thomas Mann) was appalled by the "right wing company he kept."

Scammell approves of Koestler's role here and informs us that in his dispute with Sartre over the promotion of a more vigorous opposition to the Soviet Union, Koestler was "absolutely right and Sartre wrong." He does concede that many on the left in Europe and America did not accept the belligerent stance of Koestler. Scammell is eloquent in his defense of Koestler, but his explanation of the French left's opposition is biased and inadequate. He has no criticism of such unsavory characters as Mel Laski, who ultimately became a CIA operative. He defends the argument that the covert funding of an association that allegedly stood for cultural freedom and professed to be independent was legitimate during the cold war. At one point he suggests that Lasky and Ruth Fisher were not aware of the secret funding. That has been clearly proved in the works of several writers dealing with these cold war affairs. Scammell calls Trevor Roper "irresponsible" for his critique of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the nefarious influence of Sidney Hook, Koestler, and Franz Borkenau who he assumed were supported by the American government. A recent English study by Frances Stoner Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War* (1999) hardly supports the views of Scammell. Scammell does not note her study in his bibliography despite the fact that she devotes many pages to Koestler and his relationship with United States government officials.

Neglected in my review is the second life of Koestler when he abandoned politics and became a

scientific searcher for an understanding of the "unitary source of mystical and scientific modes of experience and the disastrous results of their separation." He developed a strong belief in mind over matter, which led him to an interest in ESP (extra sensory perception), levitation, and parapsychology. In Britain he was ridiculed by scientists and described by one as "the freakiest of our sages." He toyed with the idea of communication through séances, took a serious interest in UFOs (unidentified flying objects) and all forms of transcendental meditation.

I also neglect a detailed account of his incredible womanizing, the charges of coercive sex and on one alleged occasion rape (which Scammell nearly dismisses), the endless inebriation and outrageous public conduct, his frequent cruelty to the women he dominated, and his occasional resort to physical violence.

But it’s all here in this extensive volume. There is more than ample evidence of Koestler’s brilliance, his inventive imagination, his ability to ask the right questions, his fight against capital punishment, and his early exposure of the horrors of the holocaust, his personal awards to convict artists. Along with his extraordinary personal strengths, flaws, failings, and serious mental instability.

Arthur Koestler and his wife, Cynthia, carried out a suicide pact on March 1, 1983. It was very carefully planned and skillfully carried out. There have been charges that Koestler domineeringly coerced Cynthia, but Scammell convincingly argues that it was a mutual agreement and that Cynthia had said she did not want to live without him.