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The Prisoner Intellectuals

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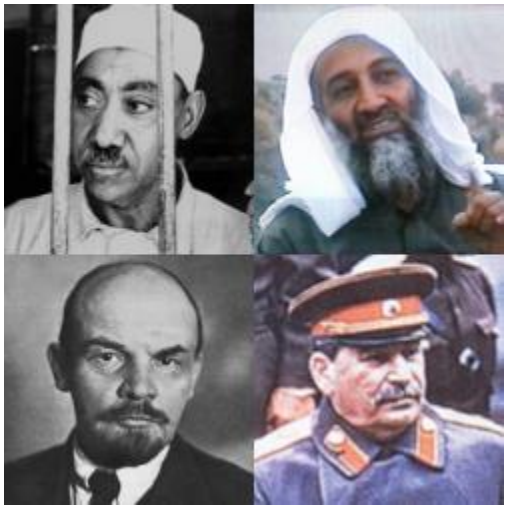

Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth Century Skeptic

By Michael Scammell

(Random House, 689 pp., $40)

I.

The opening pages of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* are thrilling to read. In a very few sentences, Koestler managed to wrap his arms around one of the huge and mysterious philosophical master-themes of the last two centuries, and, in a muscular feat of poetic compression, to reduce his giant theme to a handful of simple images:

The cell door slammed behind Rubashov.

He remained leaning against the door for a few seconds, and lit a cigarette. On the bed to his right lay two fairly clean blankets, and the straw mattress looked newly filled. The wash-basin to

his left had no plug, but the trap functioned. The can next to it had been freshly disinfected, it did not smell. The walls on both sides were of solid brick, which would stifle the sound of tapping, but where the heating and drain pipe penetrated it, it had been plastered and resounded quite well; besides, the heating pipe itself seemed to be noise-conducting. The window started at eye-level.

And Rubashov observes the vista beyond the window bars: the snow, the moon, the Milky Way, a marching sentry, the yellow light of electric lanterns.

You will remember that Rubashov is a hardened militant of the Communist revolution. In the old days, when he was a high-ranking commissar, he used to enforce Communist discipline on the party rank-and-file in different parts of the world, in the interest of the Soviet Union. Now his own comrades have accused Rubashov of all kinds of preposterous crimes and are bringing him to trial—though his true crime is to have entertained a few discreet and sensible reservations about Number One, whom we recognize as Stalin. Koestler portrays Rubashov's gradual surrender, during the course of his prison interrogation, to the idea that, out of loyalty to his own doctrine of party discipline, he ought to accept every outlandish accusation against him. He ought to make a public confession. And he ought to welcome what we understand at once will be his inevitable execution—exactly as Nikolai Bukharin and some other people among the early Bolshevik leaders did at the Moscow Trials in the late 1930s, to the astonishment of the world. Koestler lays out the whole puzzling development with classic simplicity. Rubashov is duly shot—his last flickering thoughts reflecting a touch of confusion about whether he has been executed on the orders of Stalin or Hitler.

But it is those opening images that dominate the book. Koestler keeps returning to them, with slight variations. Some two hundred pages into the novel, Rubashov walks in the prison exercise yard. Snow covers the ground. The sun is pale. Birds glide above the machine-gun turret. Only by this point in *Darkness at Noon* the simple images, more than thrilling, have begun to seem beautiful, too, which is odd to consider, given the death-row landscape. And the beauty is haunting, and there is much to say about it—more to say in our own time perhaps even than in 1940, when Koestler finally completed the manuscript and arranged for it to be smuggled from Vichy France to England, where it was published the next year.

Michael Scammell, in his superb biography, tells us that Koestler read Hemingway, and this was only natural. Koestler, a young journalist, went to report on the Spanish Civil War, ostensibly as an independent liberal correspondent for an English newspaper—though secretly, in those days, as a disciplined Communist himself, reporting to the Soviet intelligence apparatus. And Hemingway, too, went to Spain. Hemingway drew on the experience to compose his own reflection on twentieth-century totalitarianism and how to fight it. His version was *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It came out in 1940, and it began roughly the way that Koestler's novel would.

The hardened militant in Hemingway's novel is a left-wing American military volunteer named Robert Jordan, who has gone to Spain to join the war against the fascists. In the opening lines of the book, Robert Jordan, rather like Koestler's Rubashov, surveys a cruel landscape—which turns out to be a pine forest, an oiled road, a waterfall rendered white by the sun, and so forth, with each object examined for its military possibilities. But in Hemingway's novel we recognize

at once the voice that is recounting these details, the narrator's voice: it is the voice of a true-blue American, rendered laconic by a broken heart and the tragedies of the era—the voice of a sentimentalist who prides himself on having given up on sentimentality. As it happens, the laconic voice has not much to say. Hemingway in 1940 seemed to notice almost none of the big complexities of his own moment, which makes his book barely readable in our moment—an embarrassment, really. Still, the voice in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, its silly Spanglish affectations and all, does have a certain charm, as almost always with Hemingway.

But what kind of voice is speaking in the opening lines of *Darkness at Noon*? This was never obvious, least of all to Koestler himself. He was a Hungarian Jew who, as a child, spoke German at home and Hungarian at school. By the time he finished composing *Darkness at Noon*, he had spent considerable periods of time in Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, Palestine (he adhered to Zionism's Revisionist faction, though his big achievement was to invent the crossword puzzle in Hebrew), Russia (after he abandoned Zionism for communism), Spain (where his principal experience was to sit in a couple of fascist prisons, awaiting what realistically appeared to be an imminent execution), and France (living a journalist's life in Paris, and then a prisoner's life once again, this time in a Vichy concentration camp, where he put in a lot of work on *Darkness at Noon*). And he had already taken a few tentative steps in the direction of his future career as a tweedy English gentleman of letters, too. He studied John Stuart Mill in a Spanish jail.

What kind of literary personality could those extravagant, polyglot, polyideological experiences possibly add up to—what kind of personality, audible on the page? Some sort of baroque cosmopolitan Central European, of course. Or something larger, a pan-European identity stretching all the way to Jewish Palestine. In any case, the various experiences added up to an allergic revulsion to sentimentalities of every kind, including ex-sentimentalities. And they added up to a penchant for abstract thinking and the occasional metaphysical flight of fancy.

Scammell quotes the opening passage of one of Koestler's autobiographical volumes, *Arrow in the Blue*,from 1952, in which Koestler explains that he was always attracted to a "language of destiny." He writes, "Astrology is founded on the belief that man is formed by his cosmic environment; Marx held that he is the product of his social environment. I believe both propositions to be true." Astrological Marxism may seem like polyideology taken one step too far. But it is obvious what Koestler has in mind: a belief in the inevitable. An extreme determinism. Here is the meaning of those opening lines of *Darkness at Noon*. The straw mattress, the washbasin, the toilet can and drainage pipes—these are the signs of human needs and realities at their basest. A low Marxism. And, glimpsed through the barred window, the Milky Way and the moon—there are the signs of cosmic destiny at their loftiest. The material, the celestial. A chilly astrological Marxist "language of destiny" turns out to be the landscape of Koestler's novel.

The whole drama of *Darkness at Noon* consists in Koestler's hero struggling as best he can with the astral and material powers of destiny; and the struggle has already begun in those opening lines. By sentence six, Rubashov has figured out that, by tapping on the pipes, he will be able to communicate, via the "quadratic alphabet" of prisoners, to whoever happens to occupy the cells adjacent to his own. We realize that Rubashov's battle is going to be immense and calculated—the struggle of an authentic hero, endowed with marvelous powers of acuity, resilience, and self-

reliance. And already, before the first page has come to an end, we begin to recognize that Koestler has composed something other than an ordinary psychological or sociological or political novel. He has told a Promethean myth—the story of a man with heroic powers of resistance and boundless will, who is going to put up a ferocious struggle against the cosmic and uncosmic forces of absolute destiny.

II.

A talented little group of intellectuals in the 1930s was keen on Promethean myths, and the center of that impulse was the United States, where the talented group pictured the Communist movement in the light of Prometheus and his struggles. Edmund Wilson devoted his masterwork *To the Finland Station* to the Promethean theme—it, too, came out in 1940, by the way. Wilson's book proposed a history of the idea of social science during the last several centuries—the idea that laws of social development could be discovered and refined, and the subsequent idea that heroic and philosophically acute leaders, conscious of those laws, could put them to use by intervening forcefully in historical events. And the philosophically acute leaders could usher mankind into a higher stage of social development.

Wilson began his history by glancing back at the seventeenth century and Vico, and then he advanced by hops and skips to Marx, whose discoveries in social science proved to be, in Wilson's view, the crucial ones. Marx revealed the laws of history. Marx was Prometheus himself, the greatest of intellectuals—the man who at last had seized into his own human hands the secrets of fire, for the general benefit. And yet, as Wilson saw it, even Marx's Promethean breakthrough contained a flaw, which could lead unthinking Marxists into a spirit of fatalist resignation—thus requiring still another Promethean rebellion, this time within the Marxist movement itself, in favor of action and will. Wilson showed how Lenin, building on Marx's discoveries, led precisely such a rebellion—the rebellion that energized a passive social democracy into a hyperactive Bolshevism of action and will. Lenin arrived by train at Petrograd's Finland Station in 1917 to put Marx's discoveries, as improved by himself, into practical effect. And in that fashion, Lenin and the Bolsheviks launched what Wilson wistfully still hoped, when he began writing the book, would be the final liberation of mankind.

By the time Wilson completed his own manuscript, he knew very well that, in Russia, Marxism had pretty much failed. And he attributed this failure largely to a philosophical error on Marx's part, back in the nineteenth century. Marx had thoughtlessly incorporated into his own doctrine a whiff of mysticism, drawn from Hegel. The mystical whiff had transformed Marx's movement from a sober, progressive-minded, social-science action campaign into a movement of religious inebriates. A religious frenzy had produced a hubris. Under Lenin and the Bolsheviks, hubris led to despotism. And to crime—to the deliberate setting aside of moral considerations. To the dehumanization of humanism.

Such was Wilson's argument in *To the Finland Station*. Here was the Promethean myth, twisted into tragedy: a story of rebellion and counter-rebellion. Freedom and its betrayal. Fire and self-immolation. Wilson's philosophical mentors were Max Eastman and Sidney Hook, and in that

same year each of those redoubtable thinkers came out with his own variation on the same interpretation—Eastman in an essay in *Reader's Digest* (which later appeared in his book *Reflections on the Failure of Socialism*) and Hook in a volume called *Reason, Social Myths, and Democracy*. In the United States in 1940, tragic Prometheanism was more than an argument. It was a school of thought.

And somehow Koestler, composing his novel under European circumstances inconceivably more difficult than anything his American colleagues would ever experience, arrived at roughly the same interpretation. Only, instead of presenting his interpretation as a study of intellectual history (Wilson's version) or as conventional philosophy (Hook) or as popular magazine exposition (Eastman), Koestler made his case in the form of fictional dialogue. One of Rubashov's tasks, back when he is still a party commissar, leads him to Germany during the early days of the Nazi dictatorship. There Rubashov meets clandestinely with a pathetic surviving member of the badly decimated and now-underground German Communist Party. The surviving militant, selflessly heroic, has been distributing Communist leaflets and painting slogans on the walls. But the comrade explains to Rubashov that he has preferred to distribute his own well-reasoned leaflets instead of the foolish and self-defeating leaflets mandated by the party leaders.

In a disciplined Communist movement, though, the rank and file are not supposed to second-guess their leaders. "The Party can never be mistaken," Rubashov tells him. Thus the principle of mystical infallibility. Rubashov says: "The Party is the embodiment of the revolutionary idea in history." More: "He who has not absolute faith in History does not belong in the Party's ranks." Having intoned these dogmas, Rubashov solemnly expels the erring German comrade—which, as Rubashov well understands, will soon enough mean turning in the poor man to the Nazis for arrest: not just a political cruelty, but a moral atrocity.

This is precisely the sort of horrendousness that Wilson, Eastman, and Hook identified in their own writings in 1940, each writer in his own fashion—a Promethean heroism stripped of its moral bearings and rendered ugly, not to mention counterproductive. Koestler went beyond his American fellow-thinkers only in one respect, and this is in his portrait of Rubashov. The American writers pictured the history of Marxism and of its Bolshevik offshoot as if the entire story were dominated by people like Karl Marx, the university-trained philosopher, poring over documents at the Liverpool library—the kind of person whose worst and most devastating error in life might well consist of having leaned too heavily on Hegel instead of on Kant. This was Hook's interpretation of Marx: an upstanding thinker undone by ambiguities in the German philosophical tradition.

Koestler, though, by the second sentence of *Darkness at Noon*, shows us an additional little something, which turns out to be of extraordinary importance. Rubashov is a proper intellectual, but the education at his fingertips goes beyond anything you can learn in libraries. The tapping on the prison walls and the plumbing pipes, the examination of the barred window in search of ways to communicate with the other prisoners: these immediate responses to getting locked in a prison cell draw from a distinctive subculture. And Rubashov's command of that subculture and its cunning adds the extra little twist to the tragic Prometheanism that you do not see in the writings of Koestler's American counterparts.

Scammell tells us that, as a boy in Budapest and Vienna, Koestler read a great many writers, and one of those beloved authors was James Fenimore Cooper, whom not even children read anymore. Cooper introduced a first-rate mythic archetype into the world of literature: Leatherstockings, the American frontiersman. Leatherstockings is a kind of superman—someone who has mastered the secrets of the forests and the wisdom of the surviving Mohicans, which gives him a power of acute alertness and intrepid inventiveness that no ordinary paleskin could possibly possess. And Leatherstockings is ferociously tough. He is the first truly American figure to appear in world literature.

We do not think of Cooper exercising much of an influence on the history of literature and ideas, but Balzac, in the course of *The Human Comedy*, begs to differ. Balzac loved Cooper, and he adopted Leatherstockings, the cagey reader of forest signs, and transplanted him to the wilds of Parisian social life. And then Balzac took another step and, in his character Vautrin, spun yet another variation on Cooper's invention, and transformed the cagey hero into a ruthless crime boss, whose hidden wisdom derives not from the backwoods Mohicans or even from the sophisticated Parisian salons but, instead, from the jails. Here was the new literary archetype, in a sinister new variation: Balzac's Vautrin, the convict manipulator.

It needed only the Russians to transform this idea into its ultimate version—the Leatherstockings-like superman, hardened and crazed by his years in prison, acute with the esoteric wisdom of prison culture, alienated so thoroughly from the rest of the world as nearly to be a different species, now confronting the society outside the prison walls, only not as a frontiersman, nor even as a crime boss. He is, instead, a refined and cultivated member of the intelligentsia, radiant with ardor for justice and the better world of the future. Which is to say, a revolutionary leftist. Vautrin as socialist revolutionary. A jailbird with a well-elaborated program for social progress and a soul that is simultaneously sensitive and grotesquely hardened. Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* was a left-wing utopian novel—Fourierist, to be precise—but it was also a prison novel, which celebrated the notion of a subversive revolutionary superman. Nechayev's *Catechism of a Revolutionary* was likewise a piece of prison writing, the literary consequence of having been chained to the wall of a czarist jail.

Prison writings in one version or another ended up as a pillar of Russian literature, which is to say, of world civilization. The Russian literature even managed to produce an American offshoot, a minor classic of American writing (with a significant and even Koestlerian legacy, if I may call it that), in Alexander Berkman's Prison *Memoirs of an Anarchist*, which Emma Goldman published in 1912. Berkman was a Russian Jew who had emigrated to the United States and, on the basis of his Russian revolutionary ideas, tried to assassinate the steel baron Henry Clay Frick in 1892. This landed Berkman in a penitentiary near Pittsburgh for the next fourteen years.

Berkman's account of prison life is filled with Pennsylvania details. And yet the book, with its ostentatious bows to Chernyshevsky, is fully in the Russian tradition—the tradition that enjoined self-sacrifice for the capital-C Cause, and invoked the obliteration of merely human feelings, and drew on the codes and solidarities of the prison inmates. Of course Berkman hoped that, out of

prison experiences such as his own, the anarchist wing of the revolutionary movement would grow and prosper—meaning, it would produce steely men such as himself, anarchists of the sort whom Chernyshevsky and Nechayev and the other Russian writers had conjured as an ideal. The people who would bring about the revolution. The pride of the socially conscious intelligentsia, who were also, by dint of circumstances, hard men from the prisons.

In his *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, Berkman wrote:

Could anything be nobler than to die for a grand, a sublime Cause? Why, the very life of a true revolutionist has no other purpose, no significance whatever, save to sacrifice it on the altar of the beloved People. What could be higher in life than to be a true revolutionist? A being who has neither personal interests nor desires above the necessities of the Cause; one who has emancipated himself from being merely human, and has risen above that, even to the height of conviction which excludes all doubt, all regret; in short, one who in the very inmost of his soul feels himself revolutionist first, human afterwards.

And, to be sure, the anarchist movement did flourish for a while, just as Berkman hoped. It produced some heroic figures and some first-rate works of literature, such as Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*—Kropotkin, the author of *In Russian and French Prisons*, a humane and scientifically learned man with a graceful prose style and a great many political insights, even if his doctrine did not always point in practical directions. But the political movement that most skillfully captured the spirit of high-brow prison leftism was not Kropotkin's. It was Marxism in a weird Russian variation—a Marxism of action and will, based on the ideal of the revolutionary man of iron, indifferent to his own well-being and even to his own survival—indifferent to the laws of moral behavior, too, so long as the Cause was faithfully served. A Marxism based on the cult of steely militants who, like Berkman, were content to regard themselves as already dead, or very nearly so, and therefore were capable of extraordinary action. A Marxism animated by prison culture. Here was the little detail of intellectual history that Wilson, Hook, and Eastman, the American observers, brilliant as they were, tended to overlook or to downplay.

The perversion that had overtaken Marxism and converted it into a source of grotesque crime was a product of the czarist prisons, and not just of ambiguities within the German philosophical tradition. It was a kind of sewage leaking from the Peter and Paul Fortress—an incongruous mixture of German philosophy and czarist prison culture. The "Knouto-Germanic," in Bakunin's phrase. It was the decision to be, in Berkman's words, a "revolutionist first, human afterwards," the decision to make oneself into a fanatic of a very particular sort—not merely a rigid dogmatist or a ruthless militant but someone visibly superhuman, indifferent to life. The perversion that had overtaken Marxism was the decision, in short, to build a political movement around people of that sort—not a political party in any ordinary sense, and certainly not like Karl Marx's own political party, which was the German Social Democratic Party. Instead, a kind of human tank brigade. Bolshevism, in a word.

III.

This is what Koestler captured in those first sentences of *Darkness at Noon*—the Bolshevik welding of revolutionary zeal and prison culture, joined in struggle against the implacable forces of destiny. The opening lines are exciting to read because, with his handful of images, Koestler managed to evoke the power of destiny and, at the same time, the struggle against destiny by the greatest force that nineteenth-century and twentieth-century thinkers were able to devise: the hardened prison intellectuals, animated by soulful sympathies for the downtrodden and by avant-garde analytic insights and philosophical training, but tempered into steel, also, by the secret knowledge of inmates, the men who were dead and alive at the same moment. The champions of prison culture.

Why, after all, does Koestler's Rubashov confess to preposterous crimes? And, by extension, why did real-life Bolsheviks like Bukharin make their own courtroom confessions at the Moscow Trials? Koestler shows us the conscious side of Rubashov's thinking—the back-and-forth of his debates with his inquisitors, which ineluctably lead him to conclude that ultimately he had better make the confession demanded of him. *Darkness at Noon* is in this respect a novel of ideas—though not everyone has regarded this one aspect as entirely successful.

In 1947, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty devoted a book called *Humanism and Terror* to showing, or trying to show, that Koestler's appreciation of Marxism was thoroughly insufficient, that laws of history did come into play and ought to have been taken more seriously. All in all, as Merleau-Ponty saw it, Koestler had failed to acknowledge the intellectual strength of the Stalinist argument. Merleau-Ponty's ignorance of Soviet realities makes his complaint look pitiful today. But then again, Irving Howe, who detested Stalin and the Stalinists and did know something about the Soviet Union, offered a parallel criticism ten years later in his *Politics and the Novel*. From Howe's point of view, Koestler's portrait of Marxist reasoning lacked the subtleties that Trotsky, in analyzing Soviet policy under Stalin, had displayed in *The Revolution Betrayed*—the analysis of social forces, and not just of philosophical truths and errors.

Howe's criticism does not look pitiful today. Koestler was hugely talented at posing big questions in marvelously simple ways, but he was not always interested in allowing for the little sub-complexities. He wrote essays pontificating on political ends and means, and the essays tend to be altogether too simple—essays that, like Max Eastman's, were aimed at a mass reading public, without managing to achieve Eastman's level of crafty sophistication. Koestler's single most famous essay from the 1940s, "The Yogi and the Commissar," ran in Cyril Connolly's Horizon magazine in England in 1942 and was altogether formulaic—the kind of easy posing of antinomies that makes for a provocative "think piece" but does not bear re-thinking. Koestler argued that, in order to achieve social progress, we need political people to display the qualities of a yogi, saintly, non-violent, and concerned with the inner soul, but also the qualities of a commissar, ruthlessly willing to impose social reforms on everyone else, sometimes even with violence, if necessary. And the two kinds of politics can never be blended. A worthy argument; but Connolly published worthier ones.

Koestler wrote essays on narrowly Soviet themes—in the 1940s, everyone who was anyone tried to define the nature of Soviet society and to explain what had happened to the Russian Revolution—and his essays on Soviet topics likewise seem to me entirely respectable, and yet not especially rewarding to read a couple of generations later. In his essays on Soviet themes,

Koestler even managed to contradict the position he took in Darkness at Noon. He argued in the essays that communism's big mistake was, instead of having incorporated a religious quality, to have failed to incorporate a religious quality.

So Irving Howe had a point. But it is not much of a point (which Howe himself seems to have recognized many years later, with a comment, in the introduction to a reprint of *Politics and the Novel*, on his own "hobbling preconceptions" derived from his "socialist youth and anti-Stalinist Marxism"). For even if Rubashov's Marxist analyses, in Koestler's presentation, lack something of Trotsky's flair, the presentation is good enough to convince us that Rubashov is definitely a Marxist—someone who ruminates seriously about the laws of history and the fate of the proletariat. And Koestler's presentation of Rubashov's fleeting counter-ruminations is likewise good enough to show us that, for all his Bolshevik cult of inhumanity, Rubashov harbors some better instincts, and the Marxist ruminations and the moral reservations are in tension with one another. But the true and wild peculiarity of Darkness at Noon depends mostly on something else, and this is what Koestler tells us about Rubashov the man, instead of Rubashov the Marxist theoretician. And what sort of man is he?

It is odd to reflect that, back in 1947, when Merleau-Ponty published his fellow-traveling criticism of *Darkness at Noon*, and then in 1957, when Howe published his anti-fellow-traveling observations, neither of those critics gave much thought to the landscape of the novel. And yet a novel that begins with a sentence like "The cell door slammed behind Rubashov" could not be clearer on the importance of the landscape. Koestler wants us to know from the outset that, like Leatherstockings in the wilds of the New World, Rubashov is a man at home in the netherworld of cellblocks and iron bars. Someone steely, canny, selfless, fatefully hardened. But then, if Rubashov is a man of the jails, everything he proceeds to do makes pretty good sense even without our having to examine the Marxist arguments about the Russian Revolution. A steely willingness to suffer, together with a willingness to inflict horrible suffering on other people, together with a self-sacrificing cult of absolute loyalty to still other people—why, this is prison culture itself.

The penitentiaries of America right now contain, I am sure, any number of gang members or mafiosi who could win a little mercy from the court or even get themselves released, if only they would blurt out a few all-too-true revelations about their gang mates or bosses. And yet the tough-guy prisoners who feel no compunction about ruining other people's lives feel no compunction about ruining their own lives as well, so long as they can go on demonstrating a steadfast fidelity to their single, beloved principle—their fealty, unshakeable and all-consuming, to the gang and its leaders. Prison culture overlaps with gang culture on this point. Rubashov, then—who is this man? A product of the refined intelligentsia, yes; someone with a book-learned philosophy of history. But also a prisoner like many another—someone who knows the arcana of the jails and exhibits the special toughness of a hard-bitten prisoner and who, by the same token, agrees to take a fall for the benefit of his comrades from the underworld, which in this case means the Bolshevik Party.

Koestler's special innovation, his shocking contribution to nearly a century's worth of Russian or Russian-influenced left-wing prison literature, was to present us with a classic revolutionary prisoner from out of nineteenth-century Russia—whose jailers, instead of being the turnkeys and wardens of the czar, are themselves left-wing revolutionaries, willing to debate their prisoner point for point on who is truer and more authentic in his commitment to the revolutionary cause. The interrogators might even be regarded as superior representatives of the cause—superior because they come from the lower class, and Rubashov is a man of the intelligentsia, someone who holds one of his clandestine revolutionary meetings in an art museum. Merleau-Ponty seized on the various class backgrounds of Koestler's characters as one more shard of evidence to indicate that Rubashov is, in fact, a counterrevolutionary, and the real-life Stalinists were leading a genuine proletarian revolution, even if not a perfect one.

But if you accept as a given the old nineteenth-century heroic notion of the intellectuals and their role in history, and if you accept the Russian prison variation on the heroic idea, then Rubashov, this man of educated refinement and cell-block canniness, makes an irresistibly attractive hero. He is Chernyshevsky's Rakhmetov. He is the Kropotkin of *Memoirs of an Anarchist.* He is the ideal revolutionary of Nechayev's *Catechism*. He is the Berkman of *Prison Memoirs*. It is not a matter of whether Rubashov is right or wrong on any particular political issue. It is a matter of innate personality. He is the Promethean ideal, in the tortured version that had emerged from the czarist dungeons. And in composing that one sentence, "The cell door slammed behind Rubashov," Koestler has confronted his readers with an indisputably neat conundrum.

Every high-minded tradition of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European literature and culture, on its left-wing side, instructs us to admire Rubashov—to revere his unyielding ferocity and his commitment to the Cause, even if Koestler has made us aware of how badly the party under the leadership of Number One has bungled the Cause. And yet, to the degree that we admire Rubashov, we are going to have to condemn the Communist system that has set out to crush him. We are going to have to recognize that the grandest heroes of the anti-czarist revolutionary movement have ended up incarcerated in Bolshevism's anti-czarist prisons; and the logic of nineteenth-century Promethean hero-worship, which has led us into admiration of Bolshevism, is willy-nilly going to lead us into anti-Bolshevism. The more we appreciate revolutionary virtue, the greater will be our loathing of the Bolshevik system. There is no way out of this conundrum. The story of prison life in the Soviet Union leads to no other possibility; and the story of prison life in the Soviet Union cannot be avoided.

This was not a small insight on Koestler's part. This was the nub of the matter. His readers back in the 1940s, at least some of them, sensed the importance of the book as soon as it came out. (Though, as Scammell tells us, the book came out in different countries at different times, and was received in different ways—quietly and without much enthusiasm in Britain; a prestigious and commercial success in the United States; delayed in France because of the Nazi occupation and the war and then received with vast enthusiasm and crucially important political consequences, devastating for French communism; delayed in Germany even after the war because the British were fearful of annoying the Soviet Union; published in Hungary in samizdat only in the 1980s, etc.) But Koestler's achievement has only become more evident with time. For what were the criticisms and revelations that ultimately undid the Communist movement a few

decades after *Darkness at Noon* came out—undid communism, that is, in its original motherland, which was the world of literature and the high-minded intellectuals?

IV.

I will propose an answer by glancing back at Alexander Berkman and his subsequent fate, once he was released from the Pittsburgh penitentiary, in 1906. Berkman took a job as an organizer for a Jewish labor organization, the Workmen's Circle—a democratic socialist and Yiddishist fraternal order. He wrote his Prison Memoirs.According to the historian Paul Avrich, he may have kept up his violent anti-capitalist conspiracies, too—which is easy to believe, given that, along with his fraternal organizing and his autobiographical writing, he published a hard-line anarchist magazine in San Francisco called, not quite anti-violently, *The Blast.* And then, in the last days of 1919, Berkman was deported from the United States to the newly revolutionary Russia, together with Emma Goldman and a few hundred other militants of the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movement in America. He was welcomed in Russia as a hero—a man who, during his years in faraway capitalist America, had lived his life according to the most exacting tenets of the old-fashioned Russian revolutionary ideal.

Russia's revolution was already veering in Bolshevik directions, though. The Bolshevik government was about two years old, and it had not yet succeeded in crushing the other left-wing parties—the Anarchists, the Mensheviks (or social democrats), the Left Social-Revolutionaries, the Right Social-Revolutionaries, the Zionist-Socialists, and so forth, some of whom enjoyed a lot of support in various corners of the Soviet Union, and most of whom stood adamantly opposed to the establishment of any kind of dictatorship. But Lenin had already ordered mass shootings and arrests. The left-wing parties protested. They brought a revolutionary prestige to their protests, too. Kropotkin was by then an elderly figure, living out his last years, but his status among Russians was immense. Some sixty thousand people came out to greet him upon his return from exile, after the overthrow of the czar. In his final political act, he composed a broad criticism of Bolshevik policies and sent it privately to Lenin, and made some of it public, too: a severe reproach, setting out the do's and don'ts of a proper revolution and offering the sincere recommendation that, if Lenin wanted to create an attractive future for the Soviet Union, he ought to encourage a free political and economic system instead of a centralized tyranny. Kropotkin even advised Lenin to emulate a few virtues of the United States of America, and not to go on assuming, as Lenin did, that America's wealth and strength were merely the booty of imperialist violence—a clear indication that, by the end of his life, Kropotkin's version of the anarchist doctrine was tilting in liberal directions.

Kropotkin died in 1921, and his funeral in Moscow proved to be the last legal anti-Bolshevik mass political demonstration to take place in the Soviet Union until the days of Mikhail Gorbachev. Alexander Berkman was Kropotkin's follower in matters of anarchist philosophy, and, given his own prestige, he played a big role in organizing the funeral. He also made his own protest to Lenin. And then, with the direction of events all too obvious in the Soviet Union, Berkman fled to Berlin, and then to France. He threw himself back into one of the traditional campaigns of the far left from czarist times, which was to mobilize left-wing energies to support

the imprisoned revolutionaries of Russia—the victims of Russia's jails and camps. Only this time the persecuted and imprisoned anarchists were victims of the Bolsheviks, not of the czars. Berkman established something called the Russian Aid Fund, a prisoner support organization, which sent packages to the persecuted comrades and tried to document their circumstances and to alert the world to their fate, not that many people were paying attention. Still, Berkman had his admirers in different places around the world.

He died in 1936, a suicide owing to bad health. A number of his comrades stepped forward to continue his work, and the most energetic of those people was a younger member of the Kropotkin funeral committee in Moscow named G.P. Maximoff—a man who had played a significant role in the original revolutions of 1917 and then helped to bring out an anarchist newspaper in Petrograd and Moscow and then, given his opposition to the new dictatorship, ended up with some prison experience of his own. Maximoff fled to Berlin, then to Chicago. He earned his living as a wallpaper-hanger. In his free time, though, he kept up the documentary labor, and he compiled his investigations in a systematic fashion, and ultimately he came out with a 624-page volume. Maximoff called his book *The Guillotine at Work: Twenty Years of Terror in Russia (Data and Documents)*. It came out in 1940—the year of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*,Wilson's *To the Finland Station*, Hook's *Reason, Social Myths, and Democracy*, and Eastman's essay in *Reader's Digest*; the year in which Koestler completed *Darkness at Noon.*

Maximoff suffered a comparative disadvantage in bringing out his own book. From his refugee's blue-collar home in Chicago, he knew how to call on the support of the solid left-wing anti-Communists of the American labor movement; but those people tended to be immigrants, exiles, and ordinary workers like himself. He did not know how to reach out to the mainstream journalists and intellectuals in America or anywhere else. Or maybe, as a movement anarchist, Maximoff was in no rush to reach out. And so his extraordinary book was published by a little committee of his own allies called the Chicago Section of the Alexander Berkman Fund, who drew their own support chiefly from Berkman's old fraternal order, the Workmen's Circle, and from the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (where the anarchists were part of the power structure) and a scattering of Russian and anarchist groups in the United States.

I suppose that, in several corners of the American labor movement, Maximoff's fat volume may have exercised an influence—one more factor contributing to the anti-totalitarian idealism of the Garment Workers Union and some of the other people in the American Federation of Labor. If his book aroused any interest in the general press or among mainstream intellectuals, I am not aware of it. The first half of the book has been kept in print by a variety of anarchist organizations in recent years, but it has been a number of generations since the disciples of Bakunin or Kropotkin exercised even the slightest influence within the American labor movement. The second half of Maximoff's book, which contains the crucial documentation, is completely unavailable nowadays, except in a few libraries and among a very few secondhand book dealers. I would be surprised to learn that more than a handful of this magazine's readers have ever heard of this book.

Even so, of the various works from 1940 that I have been discussing, Maximoff's *The Guillotine at Work*has got to be the most powerful, emotionally speaking, and the most convincing,

intellectually speaking, and the most horrifying, morally speaking. The book portrays Lenin as a monster, committed to murders and terror on the hugest of scales. The book documents the portrait. The book recounts the several phases of Lenin's policy year by year, beginning in April 1918, when the Moscow Anarchists were suppressed. The book explains the mass consequences of Lenin's policy, beginning with a politically induced famine as early as 1921. The book recounts the gradual destruction of any sort of political freedom in the Soviet Union. The book proposes a few statistical consequences.

In Maximoff's analysis, "Lenin's Marxist experiment cost Russia, the general havoc and destruction excepted, from ten to twelve million lives"—though he considers that his figure is an underestimation. The book offers cultural judgments: "Russian literature, the bold, rebellious, enlightening Russian literature, which never bowed its head to any despot, a literature representing the highest pinnacle of morality, has now become fear-ridden, an instrument for turning the people into slaves and eunuchs"; "Art and music have the status of literature and have to submit to every high-ranking idiot." And so on, none of which looks foolish or excessive today.

Yet the most horrifying aspect of *The Guillotine at Work* lies mostly in Part Two, its final three hundred pages, which documents the fate of the Russian anarchists. The anarchists made the mistake of collaborating with the Bolsheviks in the early stages of the Russian revolution—an error that Maximoff never seems to have fully recognized. And then, once Lenin had consolidated his power, the Bolsheviks set out systematically, as Maximoff demonstrates, to annihilate their anarchist allies—all of which Maximoff documents, sometimes with quotations from official Soviet publications, sometimes with anarchist manifestos of the time, or with excerpts from anarchist and Bolshevik newspapers, together with the most chilling of smuggled letters and personal testimonies from a large number of people.

The chapter headings and subheadings tell the story: "The Persecution of the Anarchists in Ukraine." "Revolutionists are Executed in Kharkov." "The Persecution of the Anarchists in Great Russia." "A Letter from the Anarchists in the Riazan Prison." "The Appeals from Taganka Prison" (in which various people announce that they are being starved to death). "Cell No. 4 on Hunger Strike." A manifesto addressed "To the Workers of the World," explaining: "The latest news from Russia troubles us very deeply: *the Bolsheviks decided to kill off the Anarchists in prison*." "Hunger Strikes of the Anarchist Universalists." "Transfer of All Politicals to Solovietzki Islands." "Two Comrades Disappear." "Solovietski Monastery" ("The brutalities perpetrated against the prisoners in the Solovietski Monastery are beyond description. ... Prisoners in this inhuman place are mercilessly beaten for the slightest infraction of the rules, undressed and forced to stand naked in a dark cell, with a temperature below zero. At the present time two prisoners, Klysiev and Zapechin, are lying there crippled with hands and feet frozen off, spitting blood and awaiting death as the only release from their sufferings.") "Driving Politicals to Suicide" ("Conditions in the Yaroslavl polit-isolator can be better imagined than described—conditions that have driven the peasant Anarchist Grigoryev to attempt suicide by means of burning himself alive"). And all of this is accompanied with lists of names and sometimes photographs, together with an account of what is known of this or that comrade: "in the Lefortov prison," "probably dead," "in exile in Obdorsk, Uralsk District, Siberia," "exiled to the Narim District, Siberia," "in complete isolation," not to mention typhus, beatings, and so on.

Three hundred pages of this go a long way, even apart from the previous hundreds of pages on the topic of Lenin's goals and style of thought. Maximoff's message does sink in. You realize that you are reading a documentary history of the extermination of a mass movement, perpetrated by a mad fanatic and his followers. And the movement undergoing extermination consists of precisely the kind of personalities who arose over the course of the nineteenth century to struggle against the czars. The prison-hardened ultra-idealists. The people devoted to the Cause more than to their own lives.

You also realize, reading Maximoff's *The Guillotine at Work*, that here is a kind of preliminary draft of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. Did Solzhenitsyn know anything about Maximoff's great work? Solzhenitsyn definitely knew some of the imprisoned anarchists. In his novels he describes in a somewhat sympathetic fashion the admirers of Kropotkin, living out their fate in Siberian exile. But he appears not to have known anything about Maximoff. Michael Scammell is the biographer of Solzhenitsyn as well as of Koestler, and, though his biography of Solzhenitsyn is enormous (as is the biography of Koestler), Maximoff's name never comes up. Anyway, it is hard to imagine how Solzhenitsyn could have stumbled across Maximoff's fat volume. Maximoff wrote in Russian, but the Chicago Section of the Alexander Berkman Fund published the book in English translation.

It goes without saying that *The Guillotine at Work* lacks some of the rhetorical force of *The Gulag Archipelago*. Maximoff was a man of literary talent, even so. In reading his book, you already begin to glimpse the power that Solzhenitsyn's work would prove to wield decades later. For here, in *The Guillotine at Work* in 1940, is already a total demolition, intellectually speaking, of what Alexander Berkman called, in a pamphlet of his own, "The Bolshevik Myth"—a total demolition because it blows up the Communist idea at its foundation. And what is that foundation? This is worth defining.

Marx, in his own masterwork, *Capital*, wrote about the horrors of poverty, exploitation, famine, and class inequality. Maximoff writes about similar things. But Maximoff's masterwork focused mostly on the horrors of incarceration. *The Guillotine at Work* and *The Gulag Archipelago* are identical in this respect. These are books about jails, not about wages. Imprisonment, not exploitation. About the Solovietski Monastery and the Moscow Taganka prison, not about factories and farms. These books offered the revelation that, under communism, the old czarist prison system, instead of withering away, had gone into bloom. And the revelation that communism's prisons had destroyed the old Russian heroes en masse—whole movements of those heroes, not just Peter Kropotkin's faithful readers and followers, but the Mensheviks, too, the readers of Karl Kautsky, together with the Social-Revolutionaries and everyone else. *This* was the news that broke communism's back—the prison news, and not the revelation that, under communism, the proletariat had failed to thrive, even if it was true that, under communism, the proletariat had failed to thrive.

What was *Darkness at Noon*, then? It was a beautifully simple fable, exposing this reality. It told a story about the classic Russian prison hero, destroyed by the Communists—in Rubashov's case, destroyed with his own approval. Selfdestroyed. This was the heart of the matter. Koestler filled his tale with eerily accurate details, too—or at least, in reading Darkness at Noon, we intuitively believe that he has done so. And we readers are right to believe this. Those opening

lines of *Darkness at Noon*, the lines in which Rubashov begins to size up his prison cell, “The cell door slammed behind Rubashov,” and so on, leading to the moment when Rubashov inquires about the political crimes of his cell-block neighbors—those opening lines hit a distinctly recognizable note.

On page 426 of *The Guillotine at Work*, G.P. Maximoff records his own experience of getting thrown into a Bolshevik prison:

The key clanged and I was shoved into a tiny cell. Another clang of the key and life was left at the other side. I stood still at the door, staring in bewilderment.

The cell represented a tiny room with one window, set below the level of the ground and latticed with iron bars. The window opened into a courtyard facing some mysterious barns. Along the wall, stretching from the door to the window, were plank-beds from which four pairs of eyes were staring fixedly at me. One of them belonged to a pain-wracked, huddled figure, fixed in a seated position upon the plank-beds. The sight of it sent a shiver through my body[....]

“Why were you arrested?” one of them asked.

“Because I refused to carry out police duties while in the army, having submitted a written declaration to that effect.”

“Ah...” One of them drawled, “you’re in a bad fix ... What are you—Menshevik or Social Revolutionary?”

“No. I am an Anarchist.”

“An-ar-chist!” ... He drawled out the word in amazement. “Are you people getting arrested too?”

“It looks that way,” I answered.

“You say,” the second one questioned again, “because you refused.... Well, then you are a finished man.

Somehow Arthur Koestler got every little detail right.

V.

Koestler may have gotten some big details right as well. Reading *Darkness at Noon* in our own time,we are bound to notice that a few points of contact between prison culture and monstrous totalitarian movements do seem to have popped up, after all, in zones well beyond the ancient realms of the czarist empire. Lately I have been reading various writings by the followers of Hassan Al Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and I am struck by how prominently the world of prison and prison culture figures in this literature. Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss Islamic philosopher of our day, who is Al Banna’s grandson, has written a book largely devoted to his grandfather, *Aux sources du renouveau musulman*, or *The Roots of the Muslim Renewal*, in

which he accounts for the terrorist trend within the Muslim Brotherhood by pointing to the mass arrests and prison experiences of the 1950s and ’60s, under the tyrannical rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt. In Ramadan’s view, it was the Egyptian prisons that created the terrorist current within the Islamist movement, and nothing that could be traced back to the doctrines of Al Banna himself. Ramadan’s argument leaves me unconvinced.

But the notion that mass incarceration may have contributed to a perversion of a politicized Islam is easy to accept. Anyway, Ramadan refers his readers to a greater expert on Al Banna than himself, and this is Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi, whom Ramadan reveres. And Qaradawi, as I discover, looks on the contributions of prisons to the Islamist movement in a different light. Qaradawi wrote a book called *Islamic Education and Hassan al-Banna*, in which he defines the Islamist movement’s highest goal, which turns out to be educational—the constructing of a new sort of person, Islamically perfect. And where will this ideal new person be most likely to arise? “The prison-cells saw such deeds of mutual aid and sacrifice which these scarce pages prevent from being written down,” Qaradawi writes, recalling the incarcerations that he himself knew about firsthand. Some of the imprisoned Muslim Brothers took upon themselves the sufferings that otherwise might have fallen upon their comrades: “Many youths bore the torment of the prison-houses even more than their strength and power, merely to relieve such brothers, who were possessors of large families or who had no strength to bear the extremity of such torture.”

Prison, then—here is the site of the Muslim Brotherhood’s greatest triumphs, as Qaradawi would have it. Then again, Qaradawi’s *Islamic Education and Hassan al-Banna*was published in English translation back in 1984—and in the years that followed, the Islamist movement has developed a better method yet of achieving selfless virtue and selfsacrifice, or what Qaradawi calls “love.” This is suicide terrorism—of which Sheikh Qaradawi is the leading mainstream theological champion within Sunni Islam. What is suicide terror, if not a surefire method of achieving perfect selflessness—the absolute sacrifice, the bearing of torment for other people?

Reading Koestler and the Islamist writers together makes me think about not just the prisons of Egypt, as Ramadan and Qaradawi ask us to do, but also about the prisons of Iran. The Shah’s prisons in pre-revolutionary Iran produced a crop of selfless prison Islamists—the heroes of perfect virtue. And now the Islamist prisons contain their own crop of selfless Islamists, who are likewise heroes of perfect virtue. And the conundrum that Koestler painted so lucidly and simply in *Darkness at Noon*—a picture of virtuous heroes, persecuted by still other virtuous heroes, arguing amongst themselves about who is the most virtuous of all—has become a news story, and not just a fable; a problem for foreign policy.

The most interesting period of Arthur Koestler’s hugely interesting life, to my eyes, lasted about fifteen years, and began with the turn against communism that led him to write his great novel. In his earlier years, when he was a Revisionist Zionist, he knew who he was for (the Zionists) and who he was against (Zionism’s enemies). When he became a Communist in the early 1930s, he moved into an equally simple universe, with Communists he favored, and anti-Communists he opposed. But the man who wrote *Darkness at Noon* lived in a world of complications—of Communists whom he opposed, and of fascists, who were communism’s

enemies, whom he opposed even more urgently. He upheld in those years an ethic of democratic socialism, which meant he stood in opposition, as well, to economic arrangements that seemed likely to produce poverty and inequality.

And so he had no end of enemies. But he did know how to rank his enemies—the fascists at the top, the Communists next below, the capitalists still further down the list. And he knew how to accept friendships and allies in nuanced order, as well, not excluding an alliance with the conservatives, if they were democratic-minded, even if he otherwise disliked conservatives. In the middle of World War II, he was capable of writing: "In this war we are fighting against a total lie in the name of a half-truth." Nuance never seemed to discourage him, though. Nor did he lose his talent for making these kinds of distinctions in the period after the war. He was a European socialist who understood, in the worst days of the Cold War, that anti-socialist America was Europe's best hope.

Inevitably Koestler found himself upholding unpopular positions, or at least political positions that were difficult to explain. But he was a genius at journalism, which meant that, no matter how knotty or subtle his argument, he knew how to present it to a general reading public in fairly simple terms, and with a good humor, too—which, in the journalism of ideas, may be the key to everything. The pleasure that he took in explaining his own views seems to have fortified him sufficiently to allow him to shrug off the hostility that was always coming his way. But what strikes me especially is Scammell's thorough and judicious account of Koestler's organizational activities and agitations as well.

Koestler visited the United States in 1948, though it was difficult for him to obtain a visa, given his background in the Communist Party (which is not to suggest that every non-American writer undergoing visa problems in entering the United States ought to be seen as an Arthur Koestler). He struck up relations with the group of New York intellectuals around *Partisan Review*—writers who, as Scammell observes, tended to be a little shrewder on questions of international politics than their European counterparts of those days. Scammell offers a number of excellent cameo portraits of the *Partisan*intellectuals (though he makes an uncharacteristic error in describing Sidney Hook as an ex-Trotskyist). And, as Scammell recounts, Koestler and the New York intellectuals, joining together, organized a remarkable campaign on behalf of liberal ideas and against Communist and Communist-influenced ideas.

Scammell feels a palpable admiration for Koestler, which is one of the charms of the biography, and in his enthusiasm he attributes a large part of the inspiration for this campaign to Koestler himself. I think he underestimates the influence of Hook, who, back in 1939, had already put together a Committee for Cultural Freedom; and he also underestimates the traditions of the American unions with their socialist influences—the International Ladies' Garment Workers especially, the same union that had subsidized Maximoff's *The Guillotine at Work*. Hook's Committee for Cultural Freedom evolved in time into an international organization, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which enjoyed still more subsidies from the Garment Workers and from the agitations of the union's active foreign bureau (though ultimately it benefited also from the CIA). Those were the glory days of the labor-intellectual alliance—a liberal and socialist alliance, dedicated to putting up a fight against the totalitarianisms of right and left.

But Scammell is right in emphasizing how active and effective was Koestler's role in the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its related committees and campaigns in the years around 1950—the activities that went from a famous Berlin congress of anti-Communist intellectuals in 1950 to the establishing of Radio Free Europe and other efforts to reach across the Iron Curtain into the Soviet zone with arguments and news, and not just with military threats and nuclear standoffs. The Congress for Cultural Freedom and its related groups and activities played a big role in persuading intellectuals in the non-Communist parts of Europe to remain non-Communist.

These projects added up to something that Koestler, in his ex-Communist mode, liked to call the "Deminform"—which was a play on the "Cominform," or Communist Information Bureau, and, in any case, drew on his experience in the early and middle 1930s as part of Willi Münzenberg's Communist propaganda network. Here was a case of fighting fire with fire—of countering the Communist campaign among intellectuals with a liberal campaign among intellectuals, not with propaganda but with true and sincere arguments. An argument for democracy, instead of for communism—which, after a few decades, as we have reason to know today, did make a difference.

Reading Scammell's account, I begin to grow a little indignant about the intellectual scene in our own moment, a couple of generations after the major achievements of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. It is very odd that nothing like the Congress for Cultural Freedom exists in our time. A tremendous intellectual debate is taking place right now across huge portions of the world, with the Islamists on one side and a variety of anti-totalitarian liberals, Muslim and non-Muslim, on the other. But the kinds of liberal congresses and campaigns that Scammell describes have never taken place in our day, not on a grand scale anyway. We have human rights organizations, but we do not have sustained campaigns on behalf of the persecuted liberals in countries where organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood wield a lot of influence. We do not even have the kinds of congresses or conferences that would allow liberal-minded writers from different countries and speaking different languages to meet each other and discuss their respective experiences and thoughts. Nor do we have any kind of sustained and coordinated effort to translate books and essays from one language to another—not on a truly large scale. On matters such as these, Hook, the old socialists of the American labor movement, Koestler, his comrade Manès Sperber in France, and their various colleagues of the 1940s were way ahead of us.

VI.

Koestler was a close friend of both Orwell and Camus, which is remarkable to consider, given that in the 1940s these three men were the greatest writers anywhere in the world on totalitarian themes, and they had every reason to regard each other with rivalrous suspicion, not to mention other grounds for rivalry and suspicion—in the case of Koestler and Camus, an interest in the same woman, Mamaine Paget, who became Koestler's wife and had a serious affair with Camus (and was meanwhile earnestly courted by a smitten Edmund Wilson, and turned away a pass from Jean-Paul Sartre, and must have been quite a woman). Orwell and Camus died in their

forties (and Mamaine Paget in her thirties). Scammell finds himself wondering whether Koestler's reputation might not be stronger today if only he, too, had died young.

This seems to me probable. Koestler had always asked all sorts of mysterious questions—about the soul and the meaning of the universe and that sort of thing—and the mysterious questions lent a gravity to his writing. In the second half of his career, however, he made the mistake of coming up with answers. He set out to criticize Darwinian science and to promote semi-scientific or pseudoscientific notions of parapsychology, hallucinogenic drugs, and various mystical speculations. Some of those writings continue to have their champions, and they may even possess the great qualities that Scammell attributes to certain passages. But as Scammell ruefully acknowledges, the explorations in parapsychology and other themes looked a little dubious even at the time, and they have not taken on a greater solidity since. Anyway, even at their best, Koestler's scientific and semi-scientific writings muddied the image that we retain of Koestler himself.

A great writer's greatest creation must always be himself—the narrator who seems to be in command of a unique wisdom or a special magic, whose tales and explanations we will gladly follow from book to book out of the pleasurable belief that something rare and delightful is to be gained. Orwell managed to create such a character, whom we know as "Orwell," and likewise Camus, who created "Camus." But Koestler began to lose a sense of who was "Koestler." He may have been a victim of his own most reliable gift, which was popular exposition—his journalist's talent. He knew how to identify his readers and how to ingratiate himself with them, how to address their concerns and assumptions and how to find the proper tone. And this meant that, when he wrote for Horizon or the London *Tribune*, he presented himself as virtually an Englishman, and when he wrote for *The New York Times Magazine*, he presented himself as virtually an American. Scammell tells us that Koestler went out of his way to dress in idiosyncratically English styles. But he never did learn to make the "w" sound.

He was never able to arrive at a stable sense of his own Jewish identity. In *Arrow in the Blue*, he recounts how his aunt and her family were arrested in Czechoslovakia and sent to Auschwitz to be killed. But the event passes like one more remarkable incident among a series of such events—only to be followed, a hundred pages or so later, by a confused meditation on how Judaism is a racist doctrine. On Jewish matters, Koestler veered erratically from the sort of Central European mini-nationalism that informed Jabotinsky's Zionism to the sort of maxi-anti-nationalism that led him, in the last of his major books, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, to entertain absurd and discredited theories about the ethnic history of the East European and Russian Jews, and ultimately to suggest that Jewishness itself is based on a misunderstanding, which could be cleared up if only the Jews would agree to cease being Jews.

I do not mean to suggest that Koestler failed to take in the news about Nazism or to respond honorably. On the contrary, he was exemplary in his response. He sent one of his finest essays, "On Disbelieving Atrocities," to *The New York Times Magazine*, which published it in 1944, describing with wonderful and characteristic simplicity the difficulties of a writer who is trying to communicate horrific news to a skeptical public—the conundrum of someone who sounds like "a screamer," and who thinks that screaming is an appropriate thing to do, given the reality of the moment, but who knows that screaming is likely to arouse still more skepticism among his

uninformed readers. “Distance in space and time degrades intensity of awareness,” he wrote. “So does magnitude. Seventeen is a figure which I know intimately like a friend; fifty billion is just a sound. A dog run over by a car upsets our emotional balance and digestion; three million Jews killed in Poland cause but a moderate uneasiness.... We are unable to embrace the total process with our awareness; we can only focus on little lumps of reality.”

Only I suspect that, in order to make points like this, Koestler had to focus all of his energies into trying to imagine sympathetically the predicament of an ignorant American reader—someone distant in space from the people getting killed. And there was no energy left for trying sympathetically to understand his own predicament. “On Disbelieving Atrocities” remains a great essay, but it would have been greater if he had allowed us to appreciate more keenly that its author, the “screamer,” was a man who could not make the “w” sound—that he was someone from a different part of the world entirely, and the terrible events were happening to his own family, and to people exactly like his family.

His ideas about philosophy and science veered with equal rapidity and violence, based on the happy fantasy that he himself was a man of science. He never seems to have realized that, in order to make himself seem consistent and interesting, he merely had to present himself as a full-fledged member of the Central European intelligentsia—the intellectual class of cities like Budapest and Vienna, who did have values and instincts of their own: the class of people who, back in the time of the czars, had looked with reverence on the prison martyrs of the Russian intelligentsia. But then again, a Central European intelligentsia has never existed in the English-speaking countries, where Koestler preferred to live. And then, once the world war had ended, the Central European intelligentsia turned out to have disappeared, pretty much, from Central Europe, as well—just as the intelligentsia had mostly disappeared from Soviet Russia. Koestler would have had to present himself as the last of the Mohicans (a phrase that he himself, as an old reader of Cooper, enjoyed using). But he preferred to go on with his fantasies about being an English gentleman of letters, and his fantasies about being a scientist.

Who was Koestler, then? His readers have always had reason to wonder. And it has to be further acknowledged that, in the end, there was something worse than eccentric about the man: there was something ghastly about him. He committed suicide in 1983 at the age of seventy-seven, arguably with a logic behind the act. He had been suffering from one difficult and incurable health condition for seven years by then, and had been diagnosed with a second incurable condition. He had not yet begun to suffer the truly terrible consequences of this double misfortune, and his doctors could not predict how long he might remain functional and reasonably intact—but still it is possible to understand how someone in such a circumstance might prefer to bring his life to an end right away, instead of awaiting a long and dreadful decline.

Yet his wife, too, committed suicide—in her case, with no logic at all to justify the act. She was fifty-five and in good health—someone who, even if she had adopted no new radical steps in life, could have gone on pursuing an interesting and socially useful career as the Widow Koestler, presiding over his writings and persecuting thievish publishers. Why did Cynthia Koestler join her husband in his suicide? Scammell remains discreetly quiet on this topic. This is a factual biography, not a speculative one. Scammell leads us to suppose, though, that Cynthia Koestler

committed suicide partly because she and Koestler had long ago entered into a peculiar relationship of domination and dependence, which was sexual and more than sexual. Then again, I can also imagine (though Scammell says very little about this, apart from noting the strange word “self-deliverance” in Koestler’s suicide note) that Koestler had worked up peculiar ideas of his own about suicide. He was addicted to scientific quackery by then. On matters of fact and science, there was not an ounce of common sense left in the man.

Scammell begins his biography with the double suicide, which is a macabre way to begin. But what else was he to do? The journalist in Koestler must have understood clearly that his wife’s inexplicable suicide, if not his own more explicable one, was bound to cast a weird and troubling light over everything he had done until that final moment. The double suicide was destined to damage any lingering quality of the heroic in his long and generally honorable—even supremely honorable—career. But then why should a writer give a damn about maintaining his own reputation for heroism? The notion that writers ought to be heroic is another legacy of the nineteenth century and its idea of a romantic intelligentsia—it is the origin of the idea that, in Russia, led to the cult of the anti-czarist prison intellectual. But Koestler, it would seem, was done with heroism. To be done with heroism may sound, in our own age of professed modesty, like a virtue. It was not a virtue, though. It was a sin against his own lifetime of literary work. What to make of Arthur Koestler, then? Not even Scammell knows, which speaks well of this huge and scrupulous and unfailingly intelligent book.

Paul Berman is a writer in residence at New York University and the author, most recently, of The Flight of the Intellectuals (Melville House).
