ANNALS OF MARRIAGE

# THE DANGERS OF DEVOTION

*Arthur Koestler is remembered as one of the century's great anti-authoritarians. Does the story of his marriage make a mockery of his work?*

BY BERNARD AVISHAI

THIS much is known. During the evening of March 1, 1983, in the sitting room of their London house on Montpelier Square, Arthur Koestler and his wife, Cynthia, swallowed spoonfuls of honey laced with lethal quantities of barbiturates. They died together during the night. On March 3rd, their bodies were found. A note, almost certainly typed by Cynthia, instructed the maid to call the police. Koestler was in an armchair, a glass of brandy still clutched in his hand. Cynthia was lying on a sofa, her whiskey on the table beside her.

Nobody who knew Koestler well was surprised that he took his life when he did. He was seventy-seven years old, terribly sick with Parkinson's disease, and—though only a few people knew this—with terminal leukemia. And he was a member of Exit, the Society for the Right to Die with Dignity. Harold Harris, Koestler's editor, friend, and literary executor, recalled that he had borne up with wry humor and "unexpected patience." But the last time Harris saw the couple alive, five days before the end, Arthur's speech was disjointed, he was unable to stand, and he could not concentrate on what was being said to him. Cynthia phoned Harris the following day to say that Arthur had been hallucinating. George Mikes, another intimate friend, wrote later that Koestler chose "the date he chose" because a swelling had been discovered in his groin, suggesting a metastasis of the cancer.

He was remarkably well prepared. His suicide note, a "farewell message," had been composed some nine months before, in June, 1982:

> After a more or less steady physical decline over the last years, the process has now reached an acute state with added complications which make it advisable to seek self-deliverance now, before I become incapable of making the necessary arrangements.
>
> I wish my friends to know that I am leaving their company in a peaceful frame of mind, with some timid hopes for a depersonalised after-life beyond due confines of space, time and matter and beyond the limits of our comprehension. This "oceanic feeling" has often sustained me at difficult moments, and does so now, while I am writing this.

Cynthia's death came as a shock. She was not yet fifty-six years old, and she seemed vigorous. She, too, had belonged to Exit, but there was no obvious reason for her suicide other than one that she acknowledged without elaboration when she brought her husband's note up to date, probably on the night of March 1st. She added these lines, apparently intended for Harris:

> I should have liked to finish my account of working for Arthur—a story which began when our paths happened to cross in 1949. However, I cannot live without Arthur, despite certain inner resources.

When Koestler composed his farewell message, he had taken for granted that Cynthia would survive him:

> What makes it nevertheless hard to take this final step is the reflection of the pain it is bound to inflict on my few surviving friends, above all my wife Cynthia. It is to her that I owe the relative peace and happiness that I enjoyed in the last period of my life—and never before.

From the position in which their bodies were found, it seems certain that Koestler finally came to know his wife's intentions, though Harold Harris thought her decision may have been made as late as the morning of the day she added her postscript to Arthur's note. Characteristically, she seems to have been content to let her husband's note speak for her.

AT first, the suicides were reported with delicacy, usually in tandem with largely adulatory obituaries for the author of "Darkness at Noon." That novel deals with the terrors of Stalin's purge trials during the late nineteen-thirties; now it was the spring of 1983, and Stalin's heirs were dying off. It was hard to think of any other writer, except perhaps Koestler's friend George Orwell, who had so pre-

sciently exposed the moral debauch of Soviet Marxism. "Darkness at Noon," first published in England in 1940, and then widely translated after the war, had been followed up with confident essays, a 1945 collection entitled "The Yogi and the Commissar," and then, in 1950, a riveting autobiographical contribution to Richard Crossman's anthology "The God That Failed," which established Koestler as something of a Cold War celebrity in the United States. (In 1950, the Communist daily *L'Humanité* confirmed his stature in France, grotesquely, by publishing a map pinpointing Verte Rive, Koestler's villa in Fontaine-le-Port, near Paris, apparently inviting someone to blow it up.) In a front-page obituary, the New York *Times* pronounced Koestler an "archetype of the activist Central European intellectual"—a man engaged in the defining conflicts of the interwar generation, whose life revealed their peculiar savageries.

Koestler had spent his childhood in Budapest, and his adolescence in Freud's Vienna; he was back in Budapest during the abortive Communist coup of 1919. After dropping out of the Vienna Polytechnic engineering program just before graduation, he went to Zionist Palestine shortly after the onset of serious Arab resistance to the British Mandate. It was in Palestine, in 1927, that Koestler began writing, sending reports back to Vienna's liberal *Neue Freie Presse* (as it happens, Theodor Herzl's old paper). Koestler later covered the Paris of Briand and Cocteau and the Berlin of Planck's quantum and Hitler's rallies. He joined the German Communist Party and travelled hellbent through the Soviet Union at the cruellest time of the collectivizations. He returned to Paris, and wound up working for an independent wing of the Comintern. Then, after he had all but renounced Moscow, he was captured as a Red by Franco's forces in Spain, and was very nearly executed. Finally, there was an eleventh-hour flight to Portugal before the Nazis overran France, and refuge in London during the Blitz. He had been, as he put it in a memoir, "Arrow in the Blue," "accident prone."

There was little information about Cynthia's life in the obituaries. Few of Koestler's readers had ever heard of her. Melvin J. Lasky, the co-editor of the British cultural journal *Encounter*, told the New York *Times*, "Their marriage was almost impossibly close; her devotion to him was like no other wife's I have ever known." In the summer of 1983, Lasky gave over two issues of *Encounter* to Koestler, and he invited a short article about Cynthia by Mary Benson, a lifelong friend. Benson revealed that Cynthia's father, whom she adored, had killed himself when she was a young girl, and that this had "shattered" her. As for her life with Koestler, Benson pretty much stuck to a description of an empathic secretary conquering "shyness" to become his friend and partner. She had taken his dictation and helped him to get his books out. Because he loved entertaining, Benson writes, Cynthia became a thoughtful hostess and a sophisticated cook: "Her overriding feeling was how fortunate she was to share his life; it was not in her nature to realise how fortunate *he* was to have her."

*Koestler dictates to his future wife, Cynthia, in Verte Rive, 1949. She would become keenly aware of her obsessive connection to him.*

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BOTH the obituaries and the *Encounter* symposium gave short shrift to the work that had absorbed the last three decades of Koestler's life. Lasky included a rather apologetic essay by Brian Inglis on Koestler's growing interest in "parapsychology," but the later work seems to have induced a studied reticence among the anti-Communist intellectuals—Raymond Aron (himself near death), Sidney Hook, Maurice Cranston, David Astor—with whom Koestler had made his reputation. In a radio interview, William Phillips, the longtime editor of *Partisan Review*, praised him faintly as the author of "one great book."

What Phillips did not just come out and say was that many of Koestler's contemporaries had doubts about him. After completing his memoirs in the early nineteen-fifties—books which were often more daring in their sexual self-scrutiny than in their political ideas—Koestler had begun to write things that puzzled most admirers of his political fiction: books about science and psychology, rich in historian's polemic and technical detail. He was not alone in challenging deterministic notions of scientific discovery, or in arguing for the uncomfortable view of scientific breakthrough as disjunctive, mysterious, governed as much by perverse inspiration as observation. But he did not stop there. The publication, in

1959, of the book he considered his masterpiece, "The Sleepwalkers," seemed to announce Koestler's wholesale return to the theme he had sketched out in 1949 in "Insight and Outlook": that scientific knowledge was itself failing us in a troubling way—that our technology was outpacing our "cosmic awareness and spiritual clarity."

Koestler mounted new arguments about the limits of science during the nineteen-sixties. "The Ghost in the Machine" referred to men as "holons," at once material beings yet "absolute." He published "The Case of the Midwife Toad" in 1971, in which he seemed willing to defend the Lamarckians' generally discredited theory of evolution. "The Roots of Coincidence" seemed to be a sincere defense of ESP. Little wonder that fewer and fewer of his old admirers, no longer Marxists but still in some reasonable way materialists, took Koestler's work seriously. Many members of the scientific community regarded him as simply a crank.

At the time of Koestler's death, George Steiner summed up (and betrayed) the latent hostility toward him in a *Sunday Times* obituary:

> Close friends and admirers found the resulting brew of psychosomatic inference, mystical biology, and murky parlour tricks hard to swallow. . . . His public stance did cut him off from all but an eccentric handful in the very community which he most prized: that of the working scientists.

Only Iain Hamilton, the author of the biography "Koestler"—and with whom the biographee had broken relations for a time—tried to stitch the patches together, though in a rather too brilliant argument that cast doubt on whether he had ever been on Koestler's side. Hamilton wrote in *Encounter* that Koestler's shift into parapsychology at the end of his life was "typical of the retreat into the irrational common among ex-Communists who cannot, or refuse to, quench their thirst for the absolute with the disciplined 'irrationality' of religious dogma." The confession of his suicide note (his "timid hopes for a de-personalised after-life") suggested that the shift had been complete. First there was the God that failed, Hamilton implied, and then, presumably, the God that cannot.

THOUGH Hamilton does not refer to Cynthia's death, the tone and direction of his essay suggest how skepticism about Koestler's work and questions about the joint suicide might reinforce one another. Some of Koestler's former allies began to speak of the suicides as the culmination of a career become "eccentric," and the questions soon became attacks. The first salvo came from Alexander Cockburn, who published a kind of anti-obit in the *Village Voice* a month after the Koestlers' deaths: "I called up my mother," wrote Cockburn, whose father, Claud Cockburn, a Communist, had been in Spain with Koestler during the Civil War, "to check whether she thought that Mrs. K. had somehow done the noble thing and was delighted to find her outraged. 'Claud always said what a bastard Koestler was,' she shouted down the international phone line indignantly, yet with the satisfaction of someone finding a point well proved at last."

Cockburn's insinuation lived on in gossipy ways, playing on the strong prejudices evoked by the suspicion of a powerful man's domination of a woman. It was easy to imagine some version of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" playing itself out on Montpelier Square, the "irrational" but stronger husband patronizing his younger wife into some ultimate act of self-effacement. George Mikes reported that Koestler had once or twice confided his anxiety that Cynthia was, in a way, "emotionally retarded"—unable to make friends on her own. Was Cynthia's death Koestler's fault? Soon the insinuation had become a conventional wisdom which troubled Koestler's closest friends, partly because of its logic, and partly because of the toll on his posthumous reputation.

Finally, Mikes decided to do a little investigating. On August 3, 1986, he wrote a short article in the London *Observer*, titled "Who Killed Cynthia Koestler?," in which he claimed to have uncovered important new evidence bearing on the case. He reported that he had talked to a physician who had been a friend of the Koestlers for many years. There was reason to believe, Mikes wrote, that Cynthia was herself suffering from cancer during the winter of 1983.

The inference to be drawn from this new evidence was that lingering suspicions about Koestler's "responsibility" for Cynthia's death should be put to rest. She, too, was dying. She had decided to end things for the

*"As usual, Dominique, everything was absolutely business class."*

## GRANADA

Red earth and raw, the olive clumps olive and silver
in the thud of wind like a cape shaping the car,
the tormented olives smaller than you thought they were,
as a sadness, not incalculable but measured,
its distance diminishing in the humming coil of the road
widens astonishing Granada. This is how to read
Spain, backwards, like memory, like Arabic, mountains
and predicted cypresses, confirming that the only tense
is the past, where a sin lies that is all of Spain's.
It writhes in the olive's trunk, it gapes in the ochre
echo of a stone hillside, like a well's dry mouth; "Lorca."
The black olives of his eyes, the bread dipped in its saucer.
A man in a torn white shirt with its wine stains,
a black suit, and leather soles stumbling on the stones.
Try and stand outside, apart from it, and the other ones
on the open hill, the staccato of machine-gun fire,
of the dancer's heels, the "O" of the flamenco singer
and the mouth of the guitar, they were there in Goya,
the clown that dies eyes wide open in "The Third of May,"
where the heart of Spain is. Where Spain will always suffer.
Why do they come back from this distance, this far
from the cypresses, the mountains, the olives turning silver.

—DEREK WALCOTT

same reasons Koestler had, and in the same spirit. Their joint suicide was a kind of final, merciful communion.

But if Mikes thought his article would rally Koestler's friends he was mistaken. Harold Harris understood that between the lines of this argument was an opening for even more serious assaults on Koestler's name, and he replied immediately ("For the Love of Arthur," *Observer*, August 10, 1986), refuting the new claim and the charge it seemed to dignify:

> The reason why [Mikes'] article was a disservice to Cynthia's memory, and even more to Arthur's, was the underlying assumption that, if she did not have a motive such as cancer, Arthur must have been responsible in some way for her decision. This unjust suspicion seems to persist, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Harris had checked with Cynthia's personal physician, who said that Cynthia had not been ill. The pathologist who had conducted a careful postmortem had found no trace of cancer. But, more important, what can it mean to say that Koestler was somehow "responsible" for Cynthia's death? Harris was adamant that during the last days of Koestler's life, when Harris visited him, he had been "physically and mentally incapable of persuading her to take any course of action or of dissuading her from it." Cynthia must have come to her own conclusion that life without her husband would be literally unendurable. She had been a passionate gardener but gave up her garden when *he* was no longer capable of enjoying it. That said it all. "Seldom, if ever," Harris wrote, does one come across "a story of such utter devotion as Cynthia's for Arthur." She didn't need anyone to persuade her that her life was over if his was. "If he had tried to tell her otherwise she would for once have disobeyed him."

Harris might have added that Cynthia was herself keenly aware of her obsessive connection to her husband of nearly twenty years—was aware that she was bound up with him in something of a neurotic contract. In fact, the most vivid portrait we have of the marriage comes from her. Harris had been surprised to learn that she had begun a memoir of her life with Koestler. She had had the grace not to publish her version of their complex relationship while her husband was alive, but after the suicide Harris found the manuscript, and a year later published it in a single volume, along with some of Koestler's final autobiographical fragments. The book, which he entitled "Stranger on the Square," covers Cynthia's childhood and then the period from their first meeting in the late forties up to the mid-fifties. She writes in a curiously detached manner, like someone reporting on a career in middle management.

CYNTHIA JEFFERIES was twenty-two years old when she came to work as a stenographer at Verte Rive in 1949. Koestler was then living with Mamaine Paget, whom he had met five years earlier and whom he introduced to all as his wife; he was (secretly) about to receive papers formally dissolving his marriage, to Dorothy Ascher, an erstwhile comrade from whom he had parted amicably not long after being released from a Spanish prison. His turbulent affair with Daphne Hardy (the translator of "Darkness at Noon") had been breaking up just about the time Mamaine—beautiful, elegant, "an indubitably upper-class girl"—was introduced to him at a party of Cyril Connolly's.

Photographs of the time show Cynthia Jeffries to have been an attractive if not prepossessing young woman, with handsome, angular features. She had been raised in a prissy South African household, she writes, and had come to Paris to join her mother, from whom she says she felt deeply estranged, though she never explains why. Her father, his death, her age at the time of his death, her deep feelings for him—none of these things make it into the narrative, at least not directly. Harris notes in the book's epilogue that she was not told of her father's death until three days after it occurred, and that she did not find out for sure that he had ended his life himself, by slitting his wrists, until 1969. Nevertheless, Harris writes, she "might have been subconsciously aware of his suicide all her life."

Cynthia's recollections of childhood are rushed. She records that, from the start, she had been happiest when reading—that her "favourite people were the imaginary heroes of books rather than those living around me." Then she is twelve: there is a subtle elision in the narrative, a silent surrender to loss, perhaps, a sorrow contained and brought too hastily to closure. She shut herself in the bathroom with a pencil and note-book and started to write a historical romance whose hero was "a dashing Regency buck." The words did not come. At fifteen, she "was inspired to write a play,"

and even produced a draft. She tore it up. Sailing for Paris from Cape Town, just twenty, she reached the conclusion that the closest she would get to writing was working for a writer.

Cynthia began working for Koestler when he was at the height of his powers—"Darkness at Noon" behind him, the Congress for Cultural Freedom before him—and just in time for his wedding to Mamaine. Her first impression of Koestler was of "a tired-looking man with red rings under his eyes" and "no reassuring words." She began typing chapters of his new novel, "The Age of Longing." She remembers blushing when he called attention to her bashfulness. She fell instantly in love. "Every week I came out to Fontaine-le-Port from Paris and typed a new installment," she wrote in an essay about her husband's postwar career. "I could hardly wait for the next one. It reminded me of my childhood when every Thursday my father used to bring home my favourite comics—*Tiger Tim*, *Bubbles* and *Puck*."

What Cynthia could not have known at the time but might well have felt in a resonating way was that Koestler was also plagued by feelings of intense vulnerability. Mamaine's letters to her twin sister, Celia Goodman, often spoke of his insecurities and depressions, his eruptions of temper, his insomnia and fiendish nightmares, his drunkenness, and his frustration at being "unable to feel rapture." Some years before, in Paris, humiliated by Party hacks who had mocked his first efforts at fiction, he had attempted suicide. Now Koestler's attacks of "anxiety-neurosis" (as he called them) were harbingers of badgering and even brutality.

In September of 1949, just after Cynthia came along, Mamaine wrote Celia that she had allowed someone to drop by whom Koestler did not wish to see and "he went quite mad with fury and struck me a stunning blow on the head." Teddy Kollek, who was later the mayor of Jerusalem, visited the Koestlers during this period, and remembers the sounds of the couple quarrelling violently into the night. Cynthia was witness to many of these scenes as well, and they upset her. But there were also Koestler's indefatigable displays of wit, paternalism, and care, especially when Mamaine fell seriously ill. "The rows always seemed to be on trivial matters and my sympathies were always with Mamaine," Cynthia writes. "Paradoxical as it may seem, this in no way changed my feelings towards Arthur." Before long, Cynthia had given herself over to his career. She was swept up by his life and conversation—"a dream to me," she writes, "as if I were actually taking part in an exciting novel."

When Koestler and Mamaine bought an island retreat in the Delaware River in 1950, Cynthia followed them dutifully, exuberantly. Koestler was starting on his memoirs, and he would pace around dictating, and she would faithfully record every word:

> Sometimes I made a mistake in typing a letter. When this happened, an expression of irritation would flit across Arthur's face; he might even bring his fist down on the desk with a little rap. . . . He never dictated fast and sometimes there were long silences; but I could have sat there for ever. I tried to be like Arlova, Rubashov's secretary. When I read "Darkness at Noon" in the summer of 1949, I decided she was the kind of secretary Arthur wanted. She never spoke, never reacted in a distracting way; . . . I only wished that I was wearing an embroidered Russian blouse like hers.

KOESTLER and Mamaine, whose health was deteriorating, returned to Europe and were separated in August of 1951. (Mamaine had written her sister in March of that year, "God, how many more of these scenes will I have to go through, and how will the whole thing end? One thing K agreed about was that he couldn't live with any woman, however perfect, and he agreed with my analysis of his attitude as being a hostility to women derived from his hatred of his mother.") As the marriage fell apart, Mamaine could no longer put up with his rages. Cynthia understood and admired Mamaine's decision, but implies that this was not what she would have done: "I wondered how Mamaine could bear the thought of a day passing without knowing what Arthur's opinions were on this or that topic. I was so deeply dependent on him myself—what he thought of a book, a film, a new sensation—and his reactions always surprised and impressed me."

It is not clear from "Stranger on the Square" whether or not Cynthia had become Koestler's lover by then—she is curiously elusive on this point, though she volunteers how much she envied his mistresses, and speaks of continuing loyalty toward Mamaine. In any case, though his affection for and sense of dependency on Cynthia were growing, his feelings for her did not go very deep. No woman (he conceded in "Arrow in the Blue") ever satisfied him for long. "The phantom that I was after," he writes, "is as old as man: victory over loneliness through the perfect physical and spiritual union." And he quotes Goethe's Mephisto: "every wench is Helena to you." A woman starts out as Helena, but she becomes contemptible by becoming available.

In 1952, Koestler grew anxious about Cynthia's dedication and began to signal a breaking off of their relations. She knew the end was near and retreated. She considered suicide, but the impulse passed. Curiously, the fantasy of her death consoled her. ("Buoyed up by thoughts of suicide, I continued to live what I believed to be a temporary existence.")

For the first time now, Cynthia implies that she has a lover, an unnamed man who "swept all thoughts of suicide from my mind"; she determines to get on with a life "of my own"; Koestler (who is now consulting a psychiatrist) has "opened my eyes before it was too late." The affair is soon over. Then, suddenly, she is married. "A friend with whom I frequently corresponded returned to England on holiday. He worked for a publishing company in America. We got married before he returned to New York." That is all Cynthia has to say about the courtship. She followed him to New York, and the marriage failed after a few months.

Unexpectedly, in June, 1954, Mamaine died of acute asthma. Koestler, who had remained her close friend, was devastated. Much later, in a passage that appears in "Stranger on the Square," Koestler confessed that his petty furies had forced Mamaine to leave him; that he had not realized how illness undermines one—something he could appreciate in old age—and how she required his indulgences. The summer after Mamaine's death (while he was contemplating an engagement to another woman, a relationship that ultimately failed), he wrote in a journal, "I can neither live alone, nor with somebody. It is true, I always picked one type: beautiful Cinderellas, infantile & inhibited, prone to

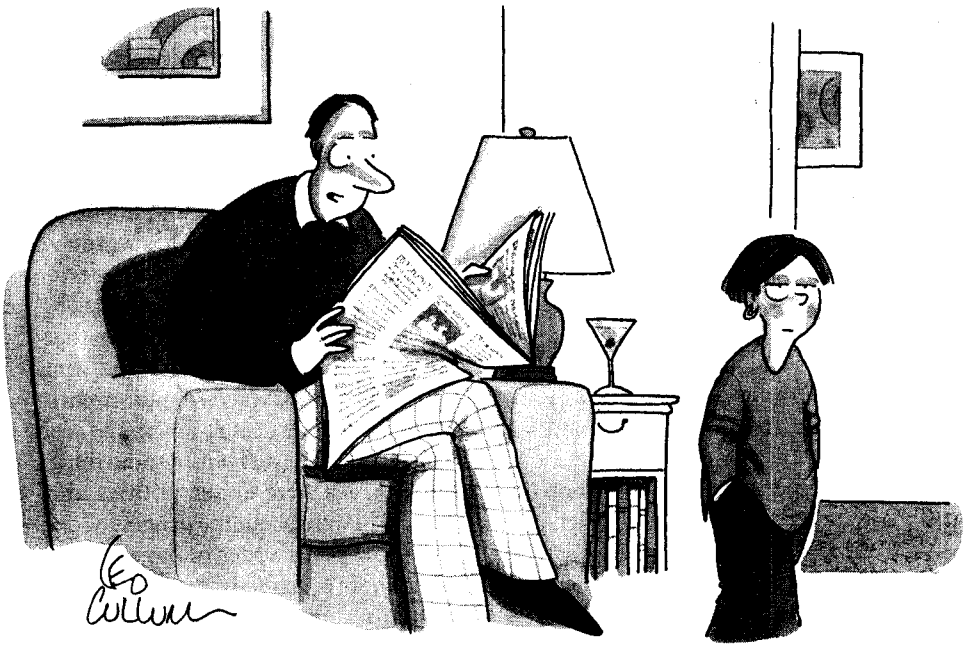
be subdued by bullying. But this realisation doesn't solve the problem."

CYNTHIA turned up in London in July of 1955. She did not need much persuading when Koestler asked her to type his book "Reflections on Hanging." She then returned to New York, and, in November of that year, Koestler became bogged down in his biography of Johannes Kepler, which eventually grew into "The Sleepwalkers." Impulsively, frantically, he cabled Cynthia to come back. She rushed to London, and never left him. After 1955, Cynthia was Koestler's only steady companion, cooking his meals and putting up with his complaints about them, sharing his bed and refraining from asking who else was doing so. Koestler, Cynthia recalled, had some years before precipitated an irreparable quarrel with a new fiancée, accusing her of carrying on private conversations at his dinner parties, which he liked to conduct like seminars. Cynthia would not make this mistake.

He bought her a mews house near his own house, and told her (in George Mikes' presence) that he loved her but was "too neurotic" ever to be married. Then he had a change of heart, prompted by attitudes that now seem quaint. In January of 1965, Koestler was a visiting scholar at Stanford. "Those puritanic Americans could not possibly allow that two people should live in sin on the campus," Mikes writes, and Koestler and Cynthia married. They returned to London later that year and settled into a comparatively quiet life in Knightsbridge: writing during the day, perhaps a game of Scrabble with Mikes and his companion in the evening.

"She was intelligent, openhearted, kind, very pretty, and completely lacked malice," Mikes recalled after the Koestlers' deaths. "She did not talk about herself because she regarded the subject as unimportant and uninteresting." The one serious illness she had, in 1979, was an attack of appendicitis. Two days later she was taking Koestler's dictation from her hospital bed. Arthur called her Angel—"even," Harris writes sardonically in his introduction to "Stranger on the Square," "if he was accusing her of some supposed heinous crime."

Cynthia grew outwardly more confident as the years went by, and Koestler grew more seasoned. She "teased Arthur—gently and lovingly," Mikes writes, "in a way she would not have dared a few years before. If she made a complete mess of a dish and Arthur grumbled—less offensively than in early days—Cynthia apologised in vague terms, but, quite obviously, was not much concerned. There was a shrug of the shoulder in her voice." After Koestler became gravely ill, it was Cynthia who came into her own, at least in the context of their domestic life. He became pretty much dependent on her—became, in a way, Mikes writes, Cynthia's "prisoner."



*"Is everything all right, Jeffrey? You never call me 'dude' anymore."*

Yet Cynthia had obviously never made much headway against the complex of terrors her husband's power personified, and a certain discreet resentfulness shapes many of her later anecdotes in "Stranger on the Square." When she dozed off, and he reprimanded her coldly, she was "black with guilt." Koestler had nightmares: "I wished Arthur were not so infectious. He also infected me with his moods—his depressions and melancholias." Or this, about a trip to France: "I had never traveled with Arthur before and was wildly excited at the prospect of being with him day and night for three weeks—though also daunted. The thought of having to speak French in front of him was agony."

There is one particularly moving expression of her enigmatic attachment to Koestler, which had surprised even Harris. Cynthia records matter-of-factly that she had become pregnant twice during the early years. Each time, she complied with Koestler's demand that she get an abortion. He would be a terrible father, he said—"too neurotic." As a matter of fact, Koestler had fathered a child out of wedlock, a daughter, a couple of years before he and Cynthia had begun to keep house together. He had asked Cynthia to stay with him for moral support on the day the mother—a married woman who lived in France, and whose husband adopted the child—came to see him. Koestler had even confided, looking at snapshots of the plump child, that he feared he was giving up his "last chance." Nevertheless, Cynthia writes, Koestler referred to her first pregnancy in his diary as her "food poisoning." The euphemism did not seem to protect her as well as it did him:

> On the first floor [of a strange house] an operating table had been set up, upon which I lay, embarrassed by the false bonhomie of the Mayfair doctor and nurse. They disappeared briefly and came back transformed in sinister black gowns of rubber which made a rustling sound. Held down by the nurse, I tried not to struggle as the doctor wielded his scalpel. . . .
>
> I was soon in a taxi bound for Montpelier Square, melodramatically haunted by the scene in *Arrow in the Blue* of [Koestler's] childhood tonsillectomy.

One wonders who first thought to characterize her revulsion as "melodra-

matic." Anyway, this experience remained "a nightmare in slow motion," which would be replayed in Cynthia's mind many times.

After the Koestlers were found dead, it was discovered that on the morning of March 1st, Cynthia had brought their lapdog, David, to the vet to be put down. One can only imagine the agony out of which she acted. Mikes writes that "Cynthia projected her own feelings onto the dog. She was convinced that David—had he been able to choose—would not want to survive in new surroundings, among strangers. . . ."

In his introduction to "Stranger on the Square," Harris writes that Koestler

> never made any secret of the fact that he was difficult to live with. . . . He never tried to hide his demanding nature, the violence of his moods, his abrupt changes of direction, his obsessional chasing of women. . . . Behind all that was a man of intense intellect, a man who could show enormous kindness and generosity, a man of incomparable humour, and—most of the time—a companion of the utmost charm.
>
> Cynthia was well aware of his faults which he did not try to conceal. Yet, in all the thirty-three years of their association, the only times that she was really unhappy were during the first six years, when, occasionally, Arthur tried to break the links which bound them together. . . . It is hardly an exaggeration to say that his life became hers, that she *lived* his life. And when the time came for him to leave it, her life too was at an end.

EERILY enough, Koestler had prophesied Cynthia's anguish before he ever met her. In "Insight and Outlook," where he deals with the psychology of crying, he considers the grief of an inconsolable widow. If she (the hypothetical widow) cannot be comforted, he writes in his most clinical-sounding voice, it is because she cannot imagine how a great many of the satisfactions she had got from her husband are in fact "replaceable"; indeed, she cannot imagine the fullness of self-possession. The loss is "irreplaceable [only] with regard to those relations in which the independence of the self was given up." But had Koestler ever explored the psychology of a man who would exact or even accept such a tribute?

Actually, he did—as a writer this is mostly what he did, although this point has been lost both in the gossip about Koestler and in Harris's public effort to defuse it. Harris's sympathetic description of the Koestlers' marriage is intended to thwart allegations that Arthur talked Cynthia into suicide and that his "eccentricity" caused her untimely death. Harris is defending his friend. But he was also the literary executor (he died over three years ago), and his words—particularly the vexing phrase "utter devotion" to describe Cynthia's feelings for her husband—obscure something that is integral to Koestler's work and that legitimatizes readers' fascination with his marriage and death. From 1937 to 1978, Arthur Koestler wrote some thirty books. Most were about politics and science. All were about the dangers of devotion. No other writer in our time described more touchingly the understandable human impulse to surrender oneself out of loyalty to others, and no writer worked so doggedly to establish a difference between what is understandable and what is right.



The real threat in "Darkness at Noon," after all, is in the link between moral authority and psychic dependency. We meet Nicolas Salmanovich Rubashov—the exhausted, denounced Commissar, rotting in prison—growing coldly conscious of that threat. He ruminates, tormented, on the morality of his actions on behalf of the Party: Hadn't its leaders simply done what was necessary? Hadn't he justifiably served them, killing only when necessary? Rubashov had hoped to find ethical ground, and meaning for his lonely life, in devotion to Party theoreticians. Numbed by interrogation, he never quite comes up with the arguments against this devotion, though he manages to assert near the end (not quite cogently, alas) that Raskolnikov, the hero of "Crime and Punishment," finds out how "twice two are not four when mathematical units are human beings."

What truly haunts Rubashov is the memory of his secretary, Arlova, the woman who had adored him, served him, and then sacrificed her life to his political rehabilitation (the character a young Cynthia had wished so much to be like). He cannot stop visualizing the curve of her breast. Their lovemaking had put him, if only momentarily, in a space where he had become "absolute"—where action had meaning that could not be justified by a calculation of political consequences. She was arrested for participating in one of his intrigues. He did not come to her defense. She was tried; at last she was executed. (" 'You will always be able to do what you like with me,' she had told him—and he did!")

Imagine, then, how Rubashov would have come to scrutinize a marriage in which a wife cannot live without her husband: What, as he awaited the Stalinist executioner, would he have thought about people who spoke of her utter devotion? If the husband *were* the wife's sole reason for being (one can just hear Rubashov growling), had they colluded in some compulsive—no, immoral—way? Had he, perhaps, exploited her weakness for servility from the start, the way the Party had exploited his own? For her part, had she not exploited his corresponding weakness for control?

THE point is that Koestler began early on in his literary career to seek a way to enshrine the principle that human life is not to be trifled with, that no human life is a means to any other end, that we cannot be relied on to do what is right if all we have to work with is our pain or history or interest. This is precisely the point he was pressing in his later work: that the social-scientific quest for certainty, so characteristic of nineteenth-century positivism, is pretentious, that it became murderous in twentieth-century politics. We moderns, who have lost "contact" with "a religion whose content is perennial but not archaic," are inclined toward secular religions instead. Modern writers must try to establish limits on the moral prestige of science or we shall all become suckers for leaders who claim to govern by its laws.

It is not at all clear that his fascination with "the supernatural" really helped Koestler discredit the old materialism, but it is also not clear that he should be ridiculed for this, or thought an impresario of suicide for his stubbornness. In 1990, the *Times Literary Supplement* published a review by Martin Gardner assailing "parapsychology," in which he noted in an aside that "a terminally ill Arthur Koestler persuaded his healthy and younger wife to join him in a suicide pact"—as if the case were closed and its relevance to Koestler's work self-evident.

Actually, Koestler's late books on evolution and "parapsychology" do not so much advocate Lamarckism and ESP as

appeal for less smugness from their detractors. The alter-ego protagonist of Koestler's last novel, "The Call-Girls," himself supposes that some of the notions suggested by parapsychology make "one's hair stand on end." The point is, "they sound a little less preposterous in the light of the equally wild concepts of sub-atomic physics," the notion that an electron can be in two places at once, that it can race backward in time, that space has holes in it. "God is dead," he concludes, "but materialism is also dead, since matter has become a meaningless word."

While wanting us to reject material certainty, Koestler wanted us to embrace the "absolute"—a feat that is not (as Kant taught) as paradoxical as it sounds. In "The Lotus and the Robot," which he published in 1960, Koestler is on his first visit to Japan. He writes that he came up against a leading professor of comparative religion, an expert on Buddhism. The first question Koestler reports putting to the professor was this: Is it "possible to have a system of ethics divorced from any transcendental belief?" Somewhat taken aback, his Japanese host denied that the word "transcendental" had any meaning for him. Then why, someone else followed up, do we tell the truth when it is in our interest to lie, why do we not murder the socially inconvenient types, what is evil, why be tolerant?

These were not exactly original questions. They were also not exactly bad ones. But at the heart of Koestler's work were just such rudimentary questions, *the* Koestlerian questions: How can human life be thought absolute, sacred, in a world of evolutionary accidents?

It is very hard, though not impossible, perhaps, to reconcile Koestler's notion of the absolute with Cynthia's suicide. It *is* impossible to square this with her devotion, as described by Harold Harris. This is not a private matter. It goes to the heart of what writers like Koestler aspire to be and why they should be remembered. Imagine if Dickens had been discovered beating his children for taking a second helping, or if Orwell had tried to suppress unfavorable reviews of "Animal Farm." Imagine if friends had rushed to defend them with intimate details of children's hectoring or critics' stupidity. Would we not be missing something if we failed to explore the contradiction? Would not Koestler himself have appreciated the irony?

I am not suggesting that the lives of writers should be held to the standards they create for their heroes. Of course moral writers soothe themselves with their stacks of pages; of course their fictions and essays often promise a triumph against the very weaknesses they imagine themselves succumbing to. A hallmark of Koestler's own nonfiction was to expose such compensating inconsistency in writers' (and scientists', and revolutionists') lives, including his own. It is not his apparent hypocrisy that is worth our time, it is his apparent tragedy. Rubashov dies without ever working out how, as he put it, the "idea of man" is to be valued over the "idea of mankind." Koestler claimed no such doubts. The remainder of Koestler's working life may be seen as dedicated to supplying Rubashov rejoinders he did not have the wit to write for him in "Darkness at Noon." That was a noble desire. The question is, were they any good?

Is it not obvious, in this context, that Koestler's peculiar version of the "absolute" proved too sublime to be of use to him, or to Cynthia, not only at the end, but during their many years together? Why, therefore, was Koestler so relentlessly drawn to it, and is there a connection to his (often strange, "supernatural") version of transcendental belief? At times, Koestler speaks of this as if it were hovering in space above the messes of the world; as if he could yank it into the everyday, like an evangelical preacher yanking in Christ—a first principle to save us from ourselves, we who (like him, presumably) are searching in panic for "rapture," wanting a "victory" over loneliness. Then again, is a man who was admittedly "too neurotic" to be a father our best authority on the subject of the transcendental in the first place?

To pose such questions, even if they do not vindicate Koestler, at least keeps open the debate he truly relished, which is how we are to "justify our existence," as Simone de Beauvoir (another of his Helenas) put it. Why do we love? And who if not Koestler would be pleased to leave us wondering if any writer can be trusted? ♦

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TODAY'S HISTORY: On this day in 1840, Prince Albert married Queen Elizabeth I in England.—*Cumberland (Md.) Times-News.*

We are not amused.