

The Consolations of Communism

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ARTHUR KOESTLER WRITES in his first volume of memoirs, *Arrow in the Blue*, that he would gladly exchange a hundred readers from his own time for just one of the next century. That's an intriguing trade for any writer, and Koestler probably meant it. But it is only about twenty years since his joint suicide with his wife Cynthia, and it is hard to see where that reader will come from. He was a Cold War literary celebrity, and the Cold War is over. His politics were shaped by the mass upheavals of the twentieth century, but the mass technologies of mass upheaval have been superseded. Jaded by communism, he argued voluminously against deterministic notions of scientific discovery, but the epistemological wars, fought out in academic circles, have been won mainly without him.

As a moral writer, Koestler warned of the dangers of devotion--to the Party, the tribe, scientific "progress"--and yet his younger and healthy wife ("utterly devoted," his friends said) was found dead by his side. *Darkness at Noon* was grippingly told, but his other political novels have the quality of a master's thesis with added characters to personify arguments. His last polemical books in the philosophy of science did not quite defend, but did attack the attackers of parapsychology and Lamarckianism. And returning late in life to the Jewish question, he tried to prove against Zionist wisdom (and as if it mattered) that European Jews were actually descended from Slavic converts. Why bother with him?

Most who do have found in him a compass pointing away from the ideological claims of twentieth-century communism and cannot resist framing his life along these lines. This approach is reasonable enough but also a missed opportunity. For the appeal of communism was never simply in the way it organized the political landscape in terms of an elaborate ideology. Communism's appeal--and Koestler has been indispensable to our seeing this--was also to a particular kind of internal landscape, to a cast of mind that is drawn to the order promised by elaborate ideology itself and, indeed, may be most distinctive for the way it denies internal landscapes altogether.

Communism may be gone, but the appeal of secular religions is not. Neither, for that matter, is the appeal of orderly answers to sublime questions.

So now that we are in the next century, what makes Koestler worth reading, if at all, is his self-conscious exposure of an exemplary self-consciousness, something like what Koestler himself found in Rousseau's *Confessions*, a book he tried to emulate when writing *Arrow in the Blue*. With Koestler, we see the subordination of an outside to an inside, see how powerfully what we see can be absorbed into what we hope. These vexing connections are not easily teased out, except perhaps by one's analyst on a good day (and indeed, Koestler at times compared writing to the analyst's couch). In Koestler's case, the most interesting connection may be between his confessed emotional fragility and his romance with communist bosses--not a political dream, exactly, but the dream of an authoritative scientific community, mastering history, who he hoped would exercise an engulfing political power. This was, so he would later say (when the term was still fresh and a little risqué), a "neurotic" attraction. Becoming a communist had for him the quality of a conversion to a religious orthodoxy, a positivist trance, a love of "objectivity," which still claims many proselytes.

When we review how Koestler accounts for his becoming a communist, we do not find a person with (now quaint) visions of proletarian revolutionary consciousness. Rather, we find one with both the training to expose and the opportunity to oppose the scientific pretensions of communism--and who nevertheless wholeheartedly supported it. For we also find a lonely young man with an impulse to intellectual rigidities and pack-fellowship. Koestler's communism, in other words, was the culmination of his hubris, a marker on his journey to what may be called, in any century, faith.

I. SHRINK TO INSIGNIFICANCE

REVIEW THE CASE NOTES as Koestler himself writes them in *Arrow in the Blue*. A young Jewish intellectual, approaching his twenty-sixth birthday, often depressed, as accomplished as he is troubled, is living in Berlin during Hitler's rise. His conversion, though imminent, is hardly a foregone conclusion; indeed, reasonable people might think this the furthest thing from his mind. As a child in Bela Kun's Budapest, then Freud's Vienna, he had been the prince of his mother's ambitions and the foil for her touchiness--both roles carrying a vaguely erotic charge. He had been little shielded by his father, whose distant, cheerful, wishful thinking--and botched commercial adventures--had come to seem inherently irresponsible. The child, in this retrospective account, comes

into manhood with richly mixed feelings: a terror of loneliness and the fear of suffocation, leaking rages and exaggerated empathy for the underdog, a yearning for "absolute" commitments and an impulse to break vessels. He does not trust himself.

The young man compensates, Koestler writes, with alternating fantasies of extreme moral responsibility and suicide. But there is one, unexpected source of balance. He takes as his Bible a popular philosophical treatise of the day, *The Riddle of the Universe*, by Ernst Heinrich Haeckel, the German biologist and philosopher. This confirmed him in the opinion that scientific progress was--given the careful application of scientific method--cumulative, gradual, and inevitable. (For Haeckel, the world was unfolding inexorably toward a new order; Haeckel writes that freedom of the will was "a pure dogma, based on an illusion, and having no real existence.")

Ostensibly, the young man shares the philosophical implications of scientific practice, its resistance to orthodoxy, its commitment to doubt. Even more, however, he likes the cultural prejudices of scientists, their air of impartiality, their pride in the logic of discovery and mastery. He also likes the serenity of science's vantage point, where nature is all, and people "shrink to insignificance." He consoles himself, ironically, with both parts of a contradiction: science says that everything is matter, and so a secure order is possible; but this means that we are matter, so a secure order is, at least from a moral point of view, accidental. We are matter, can we matter? The tragic and the trivial coexist uncomfortably. The self is fugitive, a drop in an ocean of causes only the self can contemplate.

But young men, Koestler continues the case summary, can preempt idiot drives with philosophical self-effacement for only so long. Inevitably, triumphal longings assert themselves--in this young man's case, in big-shot ideas of national power. Now an engineering student, he becomes a Zionist, a follower of Vladimir Jabotinsky, the most romantic and nationalist Zionist of them all; and he plays out the drama of self-determination, albeit from a safely abstract distance. He comes into his own, throws off his parents' conventions and even materialist neutrality. For a while he revels in acts of spontaneous will: dueling, womanizing, speechmaking, marching, spiting anti-Semites left and right. Then he prepares to go to Palestine, leaves university, burns his bridges to a "respectable" career--panics, falls into despair. Eventually he screws up his courage and actually exchanges a failed Jewish home for a pristine Jewish homeland. But the dream of national power dissipates almost immediately upon its coming true. In the collective farms of Palestine, the pleasure principle

is pounded by the reality principle; like the "Helenas" he will later fall in love with, the Jewish National Home quickly comes to seem a bundle of pedestrian demands. So he tries to escape again but learns, this time, that the price of freedom is an impossible self-sufficiency. He nearly starves; he relapses into depression. His adventure only intensifies latent suspicions that his impulses are not to be trusted.

Then the young man does something unexpected. He rebounds. He has learned, so he thinks, the difference between being free and shaking the bars. He determines to lace his ambitions with a measure of respectability and applies for a job with a foreign newspaper. He catches on as a journalist with a famous foreign newspaper chain, the German Ullstein Trust, and by and by returns to the disciplines of rigorous observation. He works hard; he excels.

The young man's life, Koestler concludes, is one of greater detachment, but there is the ambiguous pleasure of being taken seriously and making money--of living well in the world. So after a couple of years, he separates from the Jewish National Home and returns to Europe, the larger civilization. He still aches to belong, still resents privilege; his heart still pounds in the presence of real men and seductive women. Still, he determines not make the same mistake twice. He would never again give up the "laws of nature and history" for a "seething rage." He presents himself to the headquarters of the Ullstein Trust in Berlin, his home newspaper chain, during the summer of 1929.

II. SICK OF HOLINESS

KOESTLER'S SUPERIORS TOLD HIM that if he were "sick of holiness" he could go to Paris. For Koestler this meant an end to being his own master--"venting opinions and passing oracular judgments" in the manner of Ullstein foreign reporters. It also meant a cut in salary and rank. He leapt at it.

[M]y education seems always to have proceeded shock and jolt. The process of quiet maturing I can find nowhere in my past. The most wonderful of these jolts was the change in scenery from the Judean Desert to the Luxembourg Gardens, from the Holy City to Sodom on the Seine, from the Levantine fringe of civilization to its luminous center.

He arrived in Paris at what might have been its brightest moment since the Great War. Koestler does not make much of this in his memoirs, but William

Shirer recalls that the summer of 1929 was a time of unparalleled industrial expansion in France, of an exceptionally favorable trade balance and a grand total of 812 people unemployed. Such numbers imply many social advantages, but they also help to explain a pleasant change in Koestler's working responsibilities.

In the Judean Hills, the thought must have occurred to him, one toiled constantly to make something grow. Work in Paris was to trim things back. It was the same in journalism. Compared with the Middle East, where every story was a tour de force, covering French politics was methodical. He found himself doing a kind of journalistic shift work, and he entered the life of the city, not as a tourist, but functionally. Professional obligation consisted in reporting votes of confidence and parliamentary speeches: Daladier's progressive reason, Maurras's reactionary thunder. There were the usual debates, wins and losses to be tallied among Socialists, Conservatives, and Royalists. With a government surplus of some nineteen billion francs, there were also ministerial corruptions to ferret out. At the onset of the depression, these brought the Third Republic to the brink of collapse.

However, these difficulties came later. For now, the mundane quality of French politics was a relief from messianists and Islamic nationalists. Koestler took particular pleasure, ironically, in a style of work not unlike the one he fled from on the kibbutz (though, to be sure, working a paragraph was not exactly like working an orchard). A sobering regimen counteracted wanderlust: the same restaurant's prix fixe, the same half liter of wine with the girlfriend from the office, the same Metro stop, the same walkway beside the Louvre. He writes that he developed an "easy affinity" (who does not?) for French paintings, buildings, and novels. He hung out with the other "smaller fry" at the smoke-filled Salle des Journalistes, a lounge in the basement of the Stock Exchange. He was in bed by midnight, up by 7:30. Orwell was down and out just now. Koestler was engaged and climbing--"a paragon of petit bourgeois virtue."

Koestler's chief at the Paris bureau was a plodding man who ran the office with the elan of a high diplomat and, apparently, about as much political imagination. For his part, Koestler was in a pyramid of intelligence gathering and copy writing. In his first three months on the job, during which he reported on it almost daily, he actually set foot in the Chamber of Deputies only one time. And only once did Koestler bungle his duties: one morning in October, he passed a story to B. Z. Am Mittag predicting, on wholly specious grounds, the imminent collapse of the Briand government. When nothing happened during the day, his chief was livid--except that, fortuitously, the

government actually did fall that evening, for reasons Koestler knew nothing about. "It was one of the few occasions," Koestler recalls wistfully, "when I had been right for the wrong reasons--a more cheering experience than to be wrong for the right reasons, as I mostly seem to be."

III. COZY STINK

THE HOURS AT THE ULLSTEIN BUREAU were taxing, but not exhausting. His confidence provisionally restored, Koestler made time for a rather more desultory night life of bawdy-houses and cafes--especially after a change in shift required him to stay up through the night most of the week. His impressions of the French grew more true to form. He began to notice that the second-class carriage of the Metro emitted a "cozy stink," that its riders insinuated a certain defensive meanness, that their mistresses were "unattractive." On se defend. But he came to his senses in another way, too. This was the Paris of Hemingway and Cocteau, after all. Koestler's appetite for sex became avid. He grew curiously content in his restiveness. Paris seemed to him "an adulterous town," frigid to her legitimate masters, passionate to the passing stranger.

At times, Koestler would stroll down to Les Halles and swill oysters and wine. He would watch mountains of produce being unloaded by stolid men--people, who, like him, experienced a sad comradeship, people who knew the torture of alarm clocks and felt contempt for drunks. But it was other night workers, Paris prostitutes, who particularly fascinated him, and he writes about them at length. There was more than the consolation of their beds here. In this crossing of sex and the market, Koestler had his first chance to make out those shadows of desire that eventually appeared on his analyst's walls. The whores, he instructs us, were only human.

There were two types, Koestler writes: those who were serieuses and those who were not. The former worked in closed houses and observed a strict code of etiquette, serving a more or less stable group of middleclass men. Their houses had parlors, with leather benches and easy crowds. Men periodically brought their wives to chatter with the women and "study life"--pretending to both an appropriate worldliness and an unfamiliarity with the locale. ("At last the husband, with a demonstrative yawn, pulls out his watch and proposes that it is time to go to bed. To save his masculine pride, he accompanies the word 'bed' with a pathetically roguish twinkle....") The only difference between the house and a cafe was that the women of the night would sit through such

conversations almost entirely in the nude. They were mostly aspirants to bourgeois respectability themselves, and many of them would reach it.

Even in retrospect, Koestler saw in the civilized sex trade of the *serieuses* an important symbol of civil society. The sale of any human faculty as a commodity was degrading to some degree, but trading one's embraces for money--as opposed to trading one's mind--was a difference of degree, not kind. For Koestler, the fact that we abhor sexual prostitution more than literary (or political, or managerial) prostitution revealed only that people in the West are weird enough to value their bodies more than their spirit. Koestler remained so taken by this insight that, in time, he turned it into the premise of his most forgettable book, *The Call-Girls*--a 1972 spoof on the international academic circuit, in which writers and scholars sell their talk ("return fare economy class and a modest honorarium") for a week in Switzerland:

[One] studied the faces of the call-girls along the table. Nikolai was doodling with his lower lip pushed forward like a chimpanzee's.... Von Halder has his right hand cupped behind his ear, a sure sign that he was not listening. Harriet kept handing notes to Tony, which he acknowledged with polite smiles.... Wyndham's benign smile was so sustained that he seemed to be risking cramp in his dimples.

Actually, Koestler's mature view of the *serieuses* was not entirely sophomoric. In *Arrow in the Blue*, he explains why in retrospect he favored their work over the sermons and strictures that promised to overcome the raggedness of human nature. He writes (and you can almost hear him addressing both Commissar and Mother here): "The off-spring of the marriage of Eros and Logos is tolerance, and the knowledge that the stability of society rests on its system of safety valves." Indeed, what impressed Koestler most about the brothels--both at the time and also writing about them in retrospect--was how obviously neutralizing the effect of sexual abundance was. ("In the adolescent's imagination the shared bed of marriage is a scene of permanent voluptuousness; the Anglo-Saxon idea of a Paris house is equally wide of the mark.")

Where sex was traded, it ceased to be a mystery and, implicitly, the focus of any grand desire. For Koestler, this insight became a pathway to understanding the sheer power of the romantic imagination. Only the unknown becomes an object of desire, a vessel to receive what is pentup. A whore puts on her clothes

and changes from a tramp to femme fatale. Koestler remembers one young woman reporting to him that men would offer her ten times more when she was on her way home than clients would pay in the house: "And they would tell me how clever I am, how spirituelle I am, and that I am the woman they've always dreamt of--so much noise for an omelet. It is because they see a mystery where there is only a corset with elastic panels. Oh les pauvres malheureux."

Koestler was hardly immune himself. He explores the point, and its political implications, a little later in *Arrow in the Blue*--his first crack at unpacking the Helena obsession:

The phantom that I was after is as old as man: victory over loneliness through perfect physical and spiritual union. Surely a modest aim? And certainly not an original one. Yet the pattern of one's life depends to a large extent on the manner in which one organizes one's own particular phantom chase.

Nor does the chase bring diminishing returns to a man of certain character. The distinction between true and false applies to ideas, not emotions. "An emotion may be cheap," Koestler writes, "but never untrue." As the number of experiences grows, it does not really affect the power of the illusion, which is merely "withdrawn from one object and projected onto another, carrying the same luminosity." Indeed, the creation of the illusion responds to a need as deep, inexhaustible, and recurrent as the addict's craving for his drug. As for politics, the longing to embrace the perfect cause turned him, he writes, into a "Casanova of Causes." The quest for the secret of the arrow was followed by the search for the knowing shaman, then by the pursuit of Utopia.

Koestler does not do so himself, but it is hard to resist juxtaposing these last reflections with his view of the second kind of whore, those who were not serieuses. Here was a darker problem, which made him queasy, but drew him like a moth to fire. At the center of the life of the not serieuses was the awful power of the pimp--the "seedy, weedy, greasy, swaggering" man, often ugly and impotent and short, devoid of any manly stature, but who (so Koestler reports being told) thrilled his women with a touch and inspired fanatic loyalty. Koestler concluded reluctantly that the secret of this pathological relationship lay in the pimp's very brutality:

It is a calculating and nauseating kind of brutality, which has its own ritual and cant.... [I]ts obvious function is to satisfy

the tramp's craving for punishment--a craving the more consistent as it is mostly unconscious.... "Punishment" consists mostly in slaps and kicks or mere verbal abuse; overtly sadistic practices hardly ever occur. They would defeat the purpose of the whole relationship, which is based on the axiom that the punishment is an act of justice that the victim deserves for being "bad." In short, the prostitute creates her own ritual of penance; the kick on the shin or the slap in the face represent the act of absolution.

The experience taught Koestler a lesson of which he became fully conscious only years later. It was derived from meeting up with the sense of guilt in its crudest, most primitive and tangible form: "The pimp is the real hero of the show. He is the false messiah of the fallen woman, who makes her suffer without offering redemption." It was startling, he writes, to see how powerfully this complex of guilt acted on creatures apparently devoid of any sense of moral responsibility (though no more startling, we think, than Cynthia falling in love with Koestler as he dictated these words to her in his study at Fontaine Le Port).

IV. COSMIC REJECTION

KOESTLER SOLDIERED ON, preparing foreign dispatches for the Ullstein's many papers and, discretely (like many other liberal journalists), for the Social Democratic Party's News Agency, a relationship which soured him considerably on the Social Democrats' aloofness and staleness. ("Their voice was the voice of the pamphlet, or the lecturer in the evening school.") As his talents became more and more noticed, Koestler wrote features on film, the arts, politics, and science--which particularly caught the attention of his editors. His greatest triumph that year was an article on (including an exclusive interview with) the Duc de Broglie, whose theory of light had just won the Nobel Prize.

Koestler's unusually competent grasp of the new physics and obvious facility in writing about science for the general public gained him the paternal interest of Franz Ullstein, who was soon to be engaged in a struggle with his family for control of the Trust. Koestler tried to stay out of this fight, but discovered the futility of doing so; his chief in Paris backed the other side, and Koestler was nearly fired. In the end, however, Franz Ullstein prevailed and opened a new road for his protege. By the end of the summer of 1930, Koestler was offered

the coveted job of Science Editor of the *Vossische Zeitung*--entailing a move to Berlin--and the equally prestigious title of Science Advisor to the whole Ullstein chain.

Alternately swept by euphoria and wallowing in self-doubt, Koestler accepted. He moved to Berlin on September 14, 1930, the very day of the Reichstag elections, in which Hitler's seats jumped from 12 to 107. It was the true beginning of the Depression in Germany. The Communists registered important gains as well.

Berlin, to be sure, was still the stronghold of the liberal and socialist intelligentsia, and Ullstein journalists occupied the very eye of a hurricane. Their newspapers were the crown jewels of the Weimar Republic, and the people who worked for them by now joked nervously about the political forces which, they intuitively sensed, sealed their doom: the polarization of the political camps, old German provincialism, economic chaos, intellectual decadence. Even so, the powerful editors and media bosses--who were mainly Jews--began bending to the storm's magnetism. During the summer of 1931, editorials written over Koestler's head at *B. Z. Am Mittag* took on a mocking tone toward the Western powers. A year later, a regular column began to appear in the *Vossische Zeitung* that was devoted to German ethnic minorities outside the Reich. It is clear from Koestler's memoir that although the Nazis were not necessarily winning the national debate just yet, they were setting its terms: intellectuals were suddenly forced to take seriously the fate of "Sudeten-Germans," who had for ten years of Weimar never even come up in serious conversation.

Once in Berlin, Koestler was himself overwhelmed by the mounting political crisis, but he turned it to his professional advantage. He determined to prove his mastery of international affairs in addition to science journalism. It was characteristic of his insecure genius that he could not commit to any one area of specialty at a time; every achievement was a staging ground for a new conquest. And this time his restlessness paid off. Within a year he became Foreign Editor of *B. Z. Am Mittag*, in addition to Science Editor of *Vossische Zeitung*. This was an impressive combination of responsibilities for a man not quite twenty-six, and his combined salary came to something close to 2,000 marks a month, near the maximum any German journalist could be expected to earn.

And yet it is equally clear from *Arrow in the Blue* that all of this personal success seemed disturbingly comic to Koestler. He had made it to the very

center of German intellectual life, but he had never had a serious love affair and continued to be both high-strung and retiring. He was disliked by everyone. His admittedly contrived effort to appear dashing was fairly transparent. Many years later, friends who talked with him about this time in Berlin recalled that they had found him repellently arrogant during the day, embarrassing in his drunken vulnerability during the evening. One friend (whom Koestler described as "shrewd") confessed many years later that he had suspected Koestler of suffering from schizophrenia. Koestler writes:

At twenty-five, I had accumulated enough experience to make me into a wise and old man.... Yet all this seems not to have brought me an inch nearer to maturity.... Emotionally I was still nearly as unbalanced, naive, unsure of myself, ready to fly off at a tangent, as at sixteen. I sat behind an important desk, had a secretary, two telephones, several mistresses, and was called Herr Redaktor, but it was as if I was still surrounded by the taboo-forest of polar bear rugs and potted palms in the parental flat.

In the middle of this turmoil, during the summer of 1931, Koestler undertook the single most glamorous assignment of his tenure with the Ullstein Trust. He was honored as the only journalist commissioned to accompany the Graf Zeppelin expedition to the Arctic. On his way to the polar circle, Koestler got his first look at the Soviet Union, from a height of five hundred feet--the ideal vantage point from which to confirm the enthusiastic descriptions he had heard from communists and fellow-travelers back in Berlin. Arrow in the Blue reproduces some of his impressions of Leningrad, which Koestler committed to manuscript in 1933, after he had himself become a communist: "Look," he would write, "that is Karl Marx Street, and over there is Engels Boulevard. In the factory whose belching chimneys you see over there, there is a black board and a red board on every wall of every workshop, and a bulletin board with friendly quips at the management."

Then, at last, he came upon the glaciers of Cape Flora and was suddenly in the grip of a disturbing vision:

Now the midnight-sun changed to red, and the glaciers of Cape Flora reflected this colour with the intensity of mirrors. Around the cape there was a stretch of open sea, and the colour of the water was black.... As we came nearer, the island, glaciers, and

rock constantly changed their color, from red to violet, to molten gold, and the sea from black to faint lavender. Yet this fantastic display caused no surge of elation--rather a feeling of awe and oppression; in the heavy silence which dated from the last Ice Age, the faint hum of our engines swelled to a roaring blasphemy.... [T]here is a psychic effect of the arctic landscape known as Eiskoller, the "glacial tantrum." It has been responsible for many polar tragedies and seems to stem from the unbearable feeling of solitude when [one] is exposed to another, prehuman geological age--an experience of cosmic rejection.

One imagines Koestler dictating this portion of *Arrow in the Blue* in one of his morbid oceanic reveries. As a matter of fact, his diary records: "Finished boring Zeppelin part--at last." Perhaps actually flying "like an arrow in the blue" was disappointing to him in the way the realization of a long-imagined fantasy leaves one feeling diminished: the adventure was too graphic, too full, the subtle colors and barren ice mountains might well have encroached upon his beloved metaphor, as choreography may ruin a piece of music.

But--obviously, Koestler understood this--the polar landscape was also a journey into sheer loneliness, and it exposed the real shallows of his emotional reserves. If there were such a thing as cosmic acceptance, where was it to be found?

V. NOT BY PROCESS OF ELIMINATION

KOESTLER'S SWING TO the Communist Party was perverse not because it was unreasonable on pragmatic grounds. In 1932, one-third of the German workforce was unemployed, and Stresemann's Social Democratic Party was crushed between the fascist gangs and Communist cells. Civil war seemed imminent. During the summer of 1932, the Social Democratic government of Prussia was chased out of office by one lieutenant and eight men, acting on Von Papen's orders. Koestler had been sympathetic to the Social Democrats; now he could barely contain his revulsion for socialist politicians:

[H]atred, like love, can flourish only where there is common ground.... I had regarded them as the legitimate heirs and trustees of the Judeo-Christian tradition--of the Hebrew prophets and the Sermon on the Mount; of the Kantian imperative; of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The Nazis were savages who remained true to themselves; the socialists were my own kin who had betrayed their trust. You cannot hate a tiger for being a tiger; but the

irresponsible keeper who exposes the people to the beast's claws
you would like to shoot on the spot--even before you shoot the
tiger.

There was some possibility of fleeing to the United States--Palestine was now out of the question for him--but this was the summer of 1932, the depth of the Depression, before Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election; and to any Ullstein Jewish intellectual, America seemed the very proof of capitalism's decadence. In Germany, one in three workers was living on the dole, near starvation, yet the German newspapers spoke laconically about millions of tons of American coffee dumped into the sea, wheat burned, pigs cremated, oranges doused with kerosene--"to ease," Koestler writes with continuing distaste, "the conditions of the market."

It was an awful paradox that seemed to foretell the demise of the whole international system of market societies. Intellectuals the world over--Gide, Malraux, Auden, Isherwood, Spender, Sinclair, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, to mention only a few--seemed to concur and joined in expressing a kind of populist, if not properly proletarian optimism. "Even by a process of pure elimination," Koestler writes, "the Communists, with the mighty Soviet Union behind them, seemed the only force capable of resisting the onrush of the primitive horde with its swastika totem." There was no more dignified move than to the Left, and no more serious one than to the militant Left.

Still, in spite of these huge forces narrowing his choices, what made Koestler's turn to communism so contrary was the wholeheartedness with which he began to devote himself not only to the Party, but to its "scientific" claims. Koestler did not simply make an implicit contract with the Party leadership to accept their discipline so long as a winning struggle against fascism had to be waged. No, the same young man who had months before written treatises on the new physics undermining materialist assumptions of science suddenly espoused Soviet Marxism's deterministic theories of class struggle, its materialist theories of history and consciousness, in a way quite like his embrace of the strictures of ultra-nationalist Zionism a few years before. He had "fallen in love," he writes, "with the Five Year Plan":

It was not by process of elimination that I became a Communist
.... Tired of electrons and wave-mechanics, I began for the first
time to read Marx, Engels and Lenin in earnest. By the time I had
finished with Feuerbach and State and Revolution, something had
clicked in my brain which shook me like a mental explosion. To say
that one had "seen the light" is but a poor description of the

intellectual rapture which only the convert knows (regardless to what faith he has been converted). The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull. The whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke.

Remember, Koestler had never brought himself to identify with ordinary working people when he was either in Paris or Berlin; he never socialized with them or even frequented their bars. Indeed, the political impulses he had acquired with Zionism and his kibbutz experience worked against any common Marxian ideal. He had been a disciple of the rightist "Revisionist" Zionist Jabotinsky, and had himself flirted with some of the ideological claims of fascism--Social Darwinist, if not racist theories, militarist celebrations, anticommunist dogmas. He had remained a staunch opponent of socialist-Zionism. Nor, presumably, was Koestler much taken with what we might call the moral tastes of socialists, with their pure visions of sharing, classlessness--of an end to greed and self-regard. He might well have affected a love for such values once he was in the Party. Yet Jabotinsky had almost certainly convinced him to doubt that art and bliss could survive socialism.

There is even some question, I think, about whether Koestler was ever really persuaded by what Marxist intellectuals mean by "political economy." Search Koestler's memoirs and novels and you will not turn up a single reference to, say, such iconic communist terms such as "surplus-value" or "relations of production." Significantly, Koestler did accept casting historical changes in terms of the antagonisms among social classes. He admired Marx's historical works for their focus on class conflict. But who didn't? Such varied social thinkers as Thomas More, Thomas Hobbes, Edmund Burke, Herbert Spencer, and Max Weber had all accounted for social changes in a corresponding way.

Even after many years of reflection, Koestler seems only to wink at Marx's most complex and illuminating economic theories, and certainly shows no mastery of them. *The God That Failed*, for instance, argues that Marx's version of the classless society was modeled on the image of a lost paradise, "a legendary Golden Age." Thus, he writes, the communists' revolt was also a revival, and at the end of the "dialectical spiral" stood virtually the same "primitive Communist society" which had stood at the beginning.

In fact, though Marx had many wistful theories about the eventual shape of communist society, the idea of a return to some primitive commune was, explicitly, not one of them. Marx argued rather sanctimoniously against the pristine little communes of his day, even in that classic communist text, *The*

German Ideology, which Koestler cites. For Marx, the proletarian revolutionist would have to embrace what was present and imminent in capitalism: the science of political economy, the revolutionary power of capitalist traders to dissolve the primitive relations of feudal society, the new technologies of competing factories that promised to end scarcity, and so on. Koestler explores none of these principles, though some are just taken for granted.

What did seem to draw Koestler in was Soviet Marxism's familiar and reassuring positivist ethos, so much like Haeckel's, a laboratory style of positing historical directions and making positive claims. Indeed, Koestler conceded that Marxist social-scientific rhetoric transported him back to the serene state of mind he had acquired as a youngster, when the world was in chaos, and science seemed on the verge of making it orderly.

What, after all, does Engels actually write in "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy" that Koestler would have particularly latched onto? At the risk of oversimplifying an already over-simple thesis, it was Engels's view that communists should see themselves in the materialist paradigm begun by Hobbes, to which Feuerbach, an inspiration to Marx, was merely a contributor. Engels argued (again, much like Haeckel) that thinking was no more than a passive process of accepting imprints on mind, that men were a kind of matter-in-motion, affective appetites, and that their relations of production divided them into classes, which determined their thought. The only novelty Koestler would have encountered in Engels's argument was something a disciple of Haeckel would have particularly admired, namely, an attempt to reconcile Marx's materialist version of class struggle and consciousness with Darwin's conception of evolution. Ever since his eulogy at Marx's graveside, Engels had begun to claim that Marx had done for the social world precisely what Darwin had done for the natural world. Communists were thus to think of classes as evolving "historically," by which he meant organically, as if endowed with the directed force of an animal species.

"Irrespective of their wills," Engels writes, classes played out their part in a determinate "struggle for existence," from feudalism to capitalism, from capitalism to revolutionary crisis. It was the "irrespective of their wills" part that Koestler liked best. He conceived of the Party's brain trust as a kind of social-scientific elite. These were people who were uniquely open to what the underlying historical laws were organizing for them, parsing the forces that made it possible to disregard wills. Communist intellectuals would penetrate and manipulate social forces in the manner of a Realschule student modeling bridges. They would make the world achieve its potential. They would bring

about new and final social conditions that, in turn, would ultimately bring out the best in human nature. We get our best statement of this state of mind not from the memoirs, but from *Darkness at Noon*, when our hero, Rubashov, and his interrogator, Ivanov, begin their intellectual duel:

At the time ... what did the others know of history? Passing ripples, little eddies and breaking waves. They wondered at the changing forms at the surface and could not explain them. But we had descended into the depths, into the formless, anonymous masses, which at all times constituted the substance of history; and we were the first to discover her laws of motion. We had discovered the laws of her inertia, of the slow changing of her molecular structure, and of her sudden eruptions. That was the greatness of her doctrine. The Jacobins were moralists; we were empiricists. We dug in the primeval mud of history and there we found her laws. We knew more than ever men have known about mankind: that is why our revolution succeeded.

How could Koestler of all people have fallen for such claims? He had been among the comparatively small number of German intellectuals who understood how the philosophical implications of quantum physics undermined the materialist certainties that were of cardinal importance to communist intellectuals. Although Koestler was moving from abstract speculations to political activism when he joined the Party, he was also abandoning the new physics for a political science--Engels's treatise on materialism, Lenin's corresponding theory of the Party--which, given a little reflection, had been largely discredited by the larger implications of the new physics.

Koestler applied for membership on the last day of 1931 and was deeply disappointed when Party officials demanded that his status remain a secret and that he join no cell, so as not to jeopardize his still-influential position with the Ullstein papers. For the first half of 1932, he played out his assigned role in the Party apparatus. He met his contacts twice a week, in secret, and dictated Ullstein gossip along with bits of inside diplomatic news to a mysterious, unfriendly woman, who was at times joined by a higher-up called "Edgar." (Both paced the floor, Koestler remembers with a shudder, marching at right angles across his sitting room, which created an atmosphere of fraternal collaboration: "That is about as much warmth as I got out of the Party at that stage.")

Gradually, like a suitor courting a woman who is playing hard to get, Koestler insinuated himself deeper into the Party's network. This meant slowly yielding his independence of mind. The first "bourgeois tendency" to go was his journalist's curiosity, which he replaced with a view of the world couched in the Party's sophistry. Koestler could see no reason why, for example, with Hitler's power growing, the Party fought the Social Democrats as a "class-enemy" and refused to work for a united front. However cowardly the Socialist politicians, they had some eight million supporters and--this was before the Von Papen coup--were still a considerable power in the Reichstag. From his position at the Ullstein papers Koestler knew many in the Socialist rank and file to be people of courage and sincerity. Should the communists really have been working all along to bring down the Weimar state? That question, Koestler was informed, was not to be pursued. He accepted the discipline.

Morally, the Party was always right because its aims were right, in accord with history as it must unfold. It was justified in all its actions, however apparently unscrupulous. Logically, the Party was always right because it embodied--"and knew it embodied"--the will of the Proletariat, the active, universal class of history. Opponents of the Party on this or that issue, however cogent their arguments, were the mere products of their perverting environment, the bearers of false consciousness. Renegades from the Party were lost souls. The Social Democrats, while "subjectively" allies of the Party's causes, were objectively allies of the Nazis; they were always lackeys of the ruling class, "Social Fascists."

None of these claims persuaded Koestler. The point is, they consoled him.