

BOOK REVIEWS

Koestler glimpsed

Nicholas Wade

ARTHUR Koestler must have led one of the most varied and interesting lives of the twentieth century. For a life so filled with thought and action, and which reflects so accurately the major political and intellectual preoccupations of the time, parallels are hard to find. André Malraux and George Orwell are perhaps the closest, yet even they didn't venture into science, the realm of the century's most distinctive achievements.

The range of Koestler's interests is as formidable as his skill in pursuing them. Most of us find it difficult enough to write well in one language: Koestler, whose native tongue is Hungarian, wrote his famous novel *Darkness at Noon* in German, and his later work in English. As a novelist, political activist and historian of science, he has fitted at least three careers, each performed with unusual distinction, into one lifetime. There could be few greater challenges to a biographer.

Iain Hamilton, the poet and former editor of *The Spectator*, has made a creditable attempt to capture the protean nature of his subject. He dexterously follows Koestler through the changing milieus of his life, from student president of a Zionist duelling fraternity at the University of Vienna, to correspondent and science adviser for the Ullstein chain of newspapers, to his establishment in the English-speaking literary world. Yet the biography has several serious faults which spring, I think, from a severe lack of empathy that has somehow developed between the writer and his subject.

Mr Hamilton is too good a reporter to be anyone's Boswell. He has read everything and interviewed everyone relevant to his subject. He has unearthed many details of Koestler's private life, some of which Koestler might prefer not to have seen in print. Yet despite the close-up view, the nature of the subject remains blurred. Hamilton had access to Koestler's papers and diaries, yet does not quote from his interviews with Koestler himself. His desire to be totally independent seems to have led in places beyond detachment, to the point of rivalry with his subject. Too many of his own views obtrude into the portrait, while at the same time he frankly refuses to discuss Koestler's interests from 1970 onward, which have been focused on extrasensory perception. It may well be, as Hamilton implies, that Koestler's writings in this intractable field are worthless: all the more reason for a biographer to try to

Koestler: A Biography. By Iain Hamilton. Pp.398. UK ISBN 0-436-19101-6; US ISBN 0-02-547660-2. (Secker & Warburg, London/Macmillan, New York:1982.) £10, \$19.95.

explain what led him into it.

Admirers of Koestler will be disappointed at the way Hamilton all but ignores the substance of his *oeuvre*. Since Koestler has written four volumes of autobiography covering his early life, perhaps there is little point in going over the same ground. But Hamilton does not have much to say about the subject matter even of *Darkness at Noon*, which along with *Animal Farm* surely ranks as one of the most important and influential political novels of the century. The French edition of *Darkness at Noon* sold by the thousands of copies just before the first post-War election in France, which the Communist Party was expected to win, and the book's impact has been held responsible for the party's narrow defeat. But Hamilton does not evaluate this claim, or discuss the book's influence on the many Western intellectuals who even in the late 1940s could not believe the Soviet experiment had so grossly betrayed its ideals.

Koestler's writings on the nature of scientific discovery are also given rather short shrift. *The Sleepwalkers*, a brilliantly fresh and stimulating account of the early history of astronomy, receives eleven pages of discussion in this 364-page book; *The Act of Creation*, an inquiry into the modes of scientific creativity, is dismissed in eight, and the treatment is thin. Yet these are two of Koestler's major post-War works.

A minor book produced during this period was *The Case of the Midwife Toad*, a passionate defence of the Austrian biologist Paul Kammerer who, like Koestler, was interested in psychic phenomena. Kammerer committed suicide in 1926 after the discovery by the American biologist G. K. Noble that nuptial pads on Kammerer's specimens of midwife toads, interpreted as evidence for Lamarckian inheritance, had been faked. Koestler argued that Kammerer was innocent, and that the pads, which really existed at one time, were perhaps touched up by an overzealous lab assistant. But a brilliant review by Lester Aronson (*Behavior Genetics* 5, 115-125; 1975), a former assistant to Noble, persuades me that Koestler, in this instance, carried defence to the point of whitewash.

The Case of the Midwife Toad, like most of Koestler's other works, receives little substantive attention in Hamilton's biography, presumably on the assumption that they speak for themselves. The trouble with this approach is that the matters which Hamilton discusses at length, such as Koestler's relationships with his wives, or his problems in getting an American visa, are of little interest except in as far as they throw light on Koestler's public achievements. Hamilton does not use them to this end. Indeed the reader is occasionally led to wonder whether the purpose of some of the more trivial episodes isn't to belittle Koestler.

This cannot be the main purpose because, as Hamilton explains in the preface, he for many years "had admired Koestler's work (the greater part of it, at any rate)". Yet the reasons for that admiration are not clearly explained. There are few sustained themes or insights to unify the mass of chronological material presented here. Hamilton also remarks in the preface that:

My reading of Koestler's works has convinced me that he is *au fond* a deeply religious man. He has never admitted this, confessing only to several experiences of the quasi-mystical Freudian 'oceanic' feeling . . .

This is an interesting observation, yet one that is not further explored in the text.

Koestler's life can perhaps be seen as a search for faith. As a young man he embraced Zionism but quickly grew disenchanted. The next faith was Communism, but that was the god that failed. Pursuit of the divine spark led Koestler into the study of Kepler and scientific creativity. More recently came the interest in the paranormal. Like Sisyphus with his stone, Koestler has laboured mightily to ascend the peak, and when the effort fails, he has picked up the pieces and started again. It is this relentless search that has created work after work of intellectual inquiry, each exploring a new area with Koestler's own combination of intensity and clarity. Hamilton's biography portrays the private man behind these public explorations. It is well written and thoroughly researched, yet despite these substantial merits the portrait does not fully capture the essence of its subject.

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