CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Koestler's Place in English Literature

The foregoing chapters will give the reader an idea of Arthur Koestler as an eminent intellectual and man of letters of this century. It is more as a thinker than as a litterateur—and a creative litterateur at that—that he deserves his recognition. All his writings arise from his preoccupation with the single question of ends and means which, again, was further activated by the prevailing political situation of his time, dominated by conflicting political ideologies. In this he was truly a product of his age, for it cannot be said that Koestler would have been what he was if his times and circumstances were different. Taken as a whole, his writings convey the impression of a writer looking for the ideal way, as it was, for the right path in all matters of human concern.

In his preoccupation with the question of ends and means, Koestler reminds the reader of such writers as Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Aldous Huxley, to name only a few who were also seized of the problem. Koestler's joining the Communist Party and his later disillusion with it is a part of his life-long search for that way. His latter-day writings were stimulated by the ever-growing scientific and technological temper of the age—and the rupture that it brought about with humanistic culture. His response to this emerging situation was basically different from that of C.P. Snow, who also wrote about the two cultures. As is evident to an attentive reader, in Koestler's later writings—the strident intellectuality of his thought and belief gradually make room for
a mellow humanism, and an assertion of a synthesis of the saint and the revolutionary. This, in a sense, can be called an implicit reiteration of the age-old wisdom of following the middle path, and an affirmation of the eternal human values.

Koestler's rejection of the communist ideology as the panacea for all the ills of the world shows his growing sagacity of thought and outlook. It also proves that he was too much of a Western humanist even to reconcile himself to any communist requirement of giving up the freedom of thought.

One of the things to strike the reader most in Koestler is the range and depth of his explorations. His writings reveal his knowledge of different human civilisations and cultures, both of the East and the West, ancient and modern. This comprehensiveness gives greater credibility to his beliefs and opinions.

It may be pertinent at this point to raise the question of Koestler's position in English literature. Determining the exact place of a writer in the history of his literature is not an easy thing to do. By birth a Hungarian, Koestler liked to consider himself first as a member of the European community and secondly as a naturalised British citizen. Adopting England as a permanent home, he absorbed the English atmosphere and contributed a great deal to the enrichment of English letters like another emigré author of distinction--Joseph Conrad.

The political turmoil and social dissension in the first half of the twentieth century led a number of writers and thinkers to ponder over the problem of good and evil. The rise of fascism and the acceptance of
totalitarianism as a form of governance disturbed these writers. Like Franz Kafka, André Malraux, and Ignazio Silone in France, Arthur Koestler, George Orwell and Manes Sperber in England also started writing anti-totalitarian fiction repudiating communism in practice in Soviet Russia. Almost all these writers expressed their disenchantment with a system which they had at one time taken to be the straight road to Utopia.

To Koestler goes the credit of enlarging the scope of English fiction. He introduced a kind of fictional writing marked by an acute political and psychological insight. English fiction, up to his time, was almost exclusively dominated by personal relations, till then considered to be the only subject for true fiction. But Koestler made a departure from tradition by delineating in his novels frightening aspects of modern civilisation. Naturally, the new type that he introduced took time to get its due appreciation from critics and readers. He also acquired the distinction of introducing into English 'confessional' novels, or, for that matter, 'political' novels like those written in France by Gide, Sartre, and Camus. It is seen that a search for a new, regenerated structure led the novelists to the confessional form of fiction. The theme of disintegration dominates the French confessional novels. But Koestler went further to imbue it with a hope that some sort of order and harmony can be established upon the chaotic state of the present world. William Golding's Free Fall, like Koestler's Darkness at Noon, also aims at presenting a system of order, truth, and meaning. Thus the two can be grouped together in a limited way. The system of order as envisaged by them would be established, they believed, through an understanding of the self and its relation to the world.
Iain Hamilton has aptly remarked that within only a year or two of his seeking shelter in England, Koestler had become, in most respects that matter, more English than English (although the cast of his thought was never to lose that sharp intellectuality which is more characteristic of the continental). It must be admitted that a direct expression of fascism and communism alone helped the writers of anti-fascist literature like Malraux and Silone. Koestler's Central-European background actually helped him write the type of fiction he did—particularly a classic like Darkness at Noon. As a writer of political novels, Koestler comes nearer Orwell than any other English novelist. It is, however, necessary to note that there is a point of difference between Orwell and Koestler in the former's reaction to the disillusionment of the thirties. Out of the tragedy of the Russian revolution he created an allegory, Animal Farm, and in response to totalitarianism, a political projection of the future, Nineteen Eighty-Four. Despite the commonness of the theme, they read differently from Koestler's works.

It will not be impertinent to question Koestler is a creative writer in the true sense of the term, the literary elements being so thin in his writings. This question does not today merit much attention, for the obvious reason; nor does the question whether his literature is not mere propaganda. It is true that Koestler's novels and their characters are unlike those of Dickens, Hardy, Henry James, Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf and others who deal with average men and women and with a wide variety of human conflicts and emotions. By virtue of their pronounced intellectuality, Koestler's characters stand far above average humanity. The very few novels that Koestler wrote present revolutionary leaders
modelled on historical figures like Spartacus and Rubashov, and many others full of revolutionary zeal and utopian vision. Their emotion and insight are too complex and two subtle to be fully grasped by the ordinary reader not introduced to their peculiar predicaments.

No other English writer, perhaps, had had the rare advantage of seeing totalitarianism from within. Koestler, with his first-hand experience of totalitarianism in practice and its attendant evils of prison-houses and concentration camps, mock trials and torture chambers, secret police and neanderthalers laid down the foundation of the new kind of fiction in English, namely, that depicting disillusionment and abortive revolutions.

Koestler had also the unique accident of meeting with trying political experiences as he was always at the centre of a turmoil—in Palestine, Berlin, Paris, and Russia. The mellowing of his attitude to life and things in general can be said to have been greatly fostered by it. A man of pronounced secular outlook, Koestler has shown in his books, particularly in fiction, a mystic realisation of a reality of the third order. His autobiographical works show him as a man in pursuit of an arrow in the blue, that is, infinite space, able to decipher the invisible writing and finally discovering in his solitary cell in Seville ('hours by the window') the ultimate reality of his self, 'a grammatical fiction'. It is, however, to be remembered that many disillusioned communists in the thirties (including a poet like W.H. Auden) ultimately turned to the Roman Catholic Church.
In his later years, Koestler came to believe that of his works, only the scientific and not the literary and political ones would be remembered by posterity. He would have changed his opinion had he lived till the nineties to see how relevant his voice of the soothsayer is to the modern world, ridden by terrorism and anarchy—particularly the avalanche in Russia resulting from a conflict between ends and means. It was to depict the critical conflicts inherent in his own time that he adopted a rather flimsy fictional and allegorical wrapping for some of his writings.

In *The Yogi and the Commissar* Koestler has described the novelist as a figure looking at the world from behind a window: he should be neither too involved nor indifferent and remain controlled and sympathetic. It can be easily seen that Koestler himself has attempted to remain within this limit which places him closer to the European novelists (Sartre, for instance) with their existential concern than with the English.

As an essayist, Koestler's place in English literature is with such esteemed writers as E.M. Forster, Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, J.B.S. Haldane, and Julian Huxley, to name only a few. This, however, is not obviously to suggest an agreement of tone and manner, but perspective and emphasis. Koestler appears to be far ahead of any of these writers in sharpness of intellectual edge, depth of probing, range of interest, and analytical power. In the development of English prose, his contribution, as already seen, can hardly be overlooked.

From the moment of his disillusionment with communism in practice, Koestler declared a crusade against the closed system which failed to answer his expectations. The totality of Koestler's literary output,
pursued in their order, gives one the unmistakable impress of a deeply intellectual mind in a life-long search for a synthesis between emotion and intellect in an ever widening gap between the age-old values of tradition and basic human virtues on the one hand, and the endless scientific and technological discoveries relating to the physical universe on the other. This has resulted in the ripening of a humanistic outlook and wisdom which chiefly characterises him as a man of letters. A proper realisation of this point will dispel from the mind of the reader the wrong notion about Koestler prevalent in certain quarters as 'the ogre of inconsistency'.

Koestler's works as a whole will survive the test of time as important documents of the twentieth century where a considerable portion of the masses are, in Koestler's words, 'an accomplice by omission'. In a letter to all who accused him of atrocity-mongering, Koestler wrote in *Horizon* (Dec. 1943):

As long as you don't feel against reason and independently of reason, ashamed to be alive while others are put to death; not guilty, sick, humiliated because you are spared, you will remain what you are, an accomplice by omission.

All his works reveal his basic concern for humanity, and to all socially conscious readers his writings will provide immense succour. One of the most secular thinkers of the century, Koestler reveals in his writings a kind of religious experience. This proves to some extent the Marxist saying that religion is the sigh of the soul in a soulless world.