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THE ISLAND AND THE ~~METAPHOR~~ AUTOBIOGRAPHER: ARTHUR KOESTLER ON THE RIVER

> When we settle into the theatre of autobiography, what we are ready to believe—and what most autobiographers encourage us to expect—is that the play we witness is a historical one, a largely faithful and unmediated reconstruction of events that took place long ago, whereas in reality the play is that of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness. (Eakin, *Fictions* 56)

Arthur Koestler's autobiographical history is one that suffered from his own invention, intervention and revision over a period of some 47 years. During these years Koestler sought to correct, edit and even destroy earlier autobiographical works towards a final 'true' version of his self, albeit one almost wholly described in metaphor. The metaphors that comprise the core of Koestler's autobiographical project are a series of interrelated metaphors, metaphors that have been described as "oceanic" by Koestler himself, and that others have observed are self erasing.[1]

Koestler's use of metaphor is firstly a *creative* act—one that places memory and imagination in an intimate relation in the act of autobiographical narration.[2] It is also creative insofar as these metaphors become *conditions* of Koestler's autobiographical narration and of his subsequent development. He comes to narrate his self and life *in terms of* his chosen metaphors. More than this, though, he actually comes to live his life in terms of these metaphors. So whilst they may not constitute the literal 'facts' of his life, Koestler's metaphors, as organising principles of that life, in many ways *create* and govern the life lived. In this sense, they *become* the facts of his life.

I want to describe Arthur Koestler's autobiographical history and how he revised and shaped it over time to tease out some ideas of the links between autobiographical narration and living and the impacts that each has upon the other. These in terms of Koestler's metaphors of self, their implicit relationship to islands, and an island—a particular island—and the role it played in the autobiography of Arthur Koestler. What I offer, then, is a somewhat speculative

reading; bearing in mind the role of the imaginary in autobiographical narration, I'm seeking to explore something of the effect the literal has upon that imaginary in the process of autobiographical writing.

Nearly all of Koestler's works have been published and republished on several occasions and over a number of decades. The definitive Danube Editions were published up to eighteen years after the first editions[3] with the addition of footnotes, and some minor corrections and alterations. Koestler was a great recycler of his earliest and, by and large, most successful works. This is particularly the case with his autobiographical works, where the later editions of *Arrow in the Blue* and *The Invisible Writing* revisit that which was already written in *Spanish Testament, Dialogue with Death, Scum of the Earth,* and *The God that Failed.*[4] Koestler himself described these as akin to "Russian dolls" (*Bricks* 10), with the later editions enclosing the earlier editions, and so on. In this context, Koestler's observation that "I have never outgrown, merely overgrown (AB 103)" is particularly apposite.

One of the first difficulties with Koestler's 'Russian dolls' is deciding, precisely, which doll is the first, or smallest, one at the core of his autobiographical project. The problem is complicated by Koestler's own misrepresentations of the history of his autobiographical oeuvre. In a footnote in *The Invisible Writing*, he informs us that:

> In all foreign editions, including the American, *Dialogue with Death* appeared as a self-contained book. In the original English edition, however (Gollancz and Left Book Club, 1937), it formed the second part of *Spanish Testament*, the first part of which consisted of the earlier propaganda book on Spain that I had written for Muenzenberg. *Spanish Testament* is (and shall remain) out of print; *Dialogue with Death* has been reissued in England under that title, in the form in which it was originally written (IW 411).

Koestler may like to think this is the case—he may even have believed it—but his reason for including this footnote is primarily to 'recycle' the first half of *Spanish Testament* in *The Invisible Writing* in order to stress that he wishes *Dialogue with Death* to be understood as his 'first' volume of autobiography.[5] But this raises a number of difficulties. The first is Koestler's determination that *Spanish Testament* shall remain out of print. *Spanish Testament* is quite probably the most important of all of Koestler's autobiographical works; not only because of its formative position in the oeuvre, but also because of its repeated and ongoing influence upon both Koestler's 'politics' and his persona. The assertion that *Spanish Testament* 'shall remain out of print' amounts to an attempt by Koestler to change his

textual history (Cesarani 7–8). Regarding the above footnote, Murrary Sperber observes that:

> Most of Koestler's textual information is incorrect. He does not tell us that he has made crucial changes from text to text: the first half of *Spanish Testament* "consisted of" more—over a hundred pages more—than "the earlier propaganda book," *L'Espangne*, and the "Dialogue" section of *Spanish Testament* was significantly altered for *Dialogue with Death*—there are hundreds of major and minor deletions and additions (Sperber 109).

Sperber goes on quite convincingly to argue that *Spanish Testament* is indeed a more 'complete' work than the truncated version reissued as *Dialogue with Death* (119), and details the changes in Koestler's life and identity that can be traced through and around his different versions of his Spanish War experience: his gradual break from the Communist Party, to his emergence as an individual writer; his change from writing in German, to writing in English, thence to becoming more and more competent with writing in English; and his gradual move from Communist-dialectical thinking, to anti-communist propagandist, to parapsychological polemicist—all of these are marked in the different versions of his Spanish War experience.

This is particularly interesting, both in what it reveals to us about Koestler, and in what it reveals about the writing of his autobiography. Although claiming *Spanish Testament* shall remain out of print, he has already re-used much of *Spanish Testament* in *The God that Failed* and *Arrow in the Blue*, as well as in the chapter in *The Invisible Writing* to which the above footnote is the conclusion. In fact, *Spanish Testament* is reprinted and reprinted in partial, *configured*, form throughout Koestler's later writing, and it would appear that the main reason for its remaining out of print is to *conceal* the full scope of its reuse.[6] Further, as Richard Freadman notes: "In a man like Koestler ... it is also ... a complex form of narcissistic self-justification—*to trounce the earlier self* is to affirm later forms of the self, *especially the writing self that pens the autobiography* (Freadman 194, my emphasis)." In Koestler's revisioning, hindsight is a wonderful thing; but the apparent 'truth' of a hindsight so claimed, will always only be provisional and dependent upon future revisioning.

What we therefore see in the 'definitive' Danube Editions of Koestler's autobiography is something like 'the man he became' seeking to assert himself in the story of 'the man he [once] was'. Not unlike Ricoeur's formulation in *Time and Narrative*, where he talks about following the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time (Ricoeur, 54); here we are following the narration of a prefigured man

becoming refigured man via the mediation of a configured man—the self-that-was-written in *Spanish Testament* becoming the self-that-writes *The Invisible Writing* via the mediation of the self-that-was-written into *The Invisible Writing*. And this self-that-was-written into *The Invisible Writing* is 'configured' almost entirely via Koestler's metaphors. Here I am seeking some understanding of the relationship between the self-that-writes and the self-that-is-written in the hope of eventually 'locating' this self-that-writes as he remains something of a ghost outside of his own autobiography—'locating' him in his true historical and geographic location, *as he writes*. In doing so I hope to demonstrate something, however slight, about the Island and the Autobiographer. It is in the revised/updated autobiographical narratives of *Arrow in the Blue* and *The Invisible Writing* that the 'traces' of this self-that-writes are most evident.

> I went on to recall Euclid's proof that the number of primes is infinite ... as I recalled the method and scratched the symbols on the wall, I felt the same enchantment.
>
> And then, for the first time, I suddenly understood the reason for this enchantment: the scribbled symbols on the wall represented one of the rare cases where a meaningful and comprehensive statement about the infinite is arrived at by precise and finite means ... The significance of this swept over me like a wave. The wave had originated in an articulate verbal insight; but this evaporated at once, leaving in its wake only a wordless essence, a fragrance of eternity, a quiver of the arrow in the blue. I must have stood for some minutes, entranced, with a wordless awareness that 'this is perfect—perfect'; until I noticed some slight mental discomfort nagging at the back of my mind—some trivial circumstance that marred the perfection of the moment. Then I remembered the nature of that irrelevant annoyance: I was, of course, in prison and might be shot. But this was immediately answered by a feeling whose verbal translation would be: 'So what? is that all? have you got nothing more serious to worry about?'—an answer so spontaneous, fresh and amused as if the intruding annoyance had been the loss of a collar-stud. Then I was floating on my back in a river of peace, under bridges of silence. It came from nowhere and it flowed nowhere. Then there was no river and no I. The I had ceased to exist (IW 428-430).

Some key points concerning Koestler's major metaphors of self: the

oceanic metaphor *began* in Spain, *during* Koestler's imprisonment in Seville Gaol; the influence of the oceanic metaphor is evident in *all* of Koestler's subsequent writings, *especially* in his various volumes of autobiography; this metaphor is fundamental to all of his subsequent personal development and autobiographical narration, and thus fundamental to his subsequent major autobiographical metaphors—most particularly "the arrow in the blue" and "the invisible writing". These metaphors have not only provided the titles of his two major volumes of autobiography, both are also 'oceanic' in sense, and both the arrow in the blue and the invisible writing are each described in the oceanic terms that were first used in *Darkness at Noon*.[7] In fact, Koestler's apparently newer metaphors of self are almost verbatim repetitions of Rubashov's original meditations upon the oceanic which, of course, were Koestler's own. What is even more interesting is that, in the course of his autobiographical revisioning, Koestler used these metaphors to describe the years and experiences of his life prior to his 'discovery' of the oceanic, so he describes his childhood and adolescence in the 'oceanic terms' that were 'realised' as an adult in prison in Spain—thus narrating their 'realization' as inevitable and predestined in the light of his fictitiously 'oceanic' childhood. Here we see how autobiographical narration is always provisional and dependent upon subsequent narration and revision.

But these wave mechanics are not just apparent in the oceanic foundations of Koestler's major metaphors of self; they operate on all levels of his autobiographical narration. When he tells us that, "Then I was floating on my back in a river of peace, under bridges of silence," one might suggest that he is floating upon a river that flows, once again, into the ocean in which he will dissolve; or upon which, as ship's captain, he will set sail bearing the invisible writing in his pocket (IW p. 432). Here there are two more metaphors which relate to Koestler's wave imagery and which are both used repeatedly throughout his autobiographical writings. These are the 'river' and the 'bridge'.

The instances in which rivers and bridges occur in Koestler's autobiography are too numerous to detail here. Koestler has a favourite image of himself as a 'bridge-burner'—an irrational act that he ascribes to various moments of 'oceanic impulse' and via which he demarcates various phases of his life. In a chapter entitled "The Blessings of Unreason", he separates his childhood from his young adulthood in Palestine, Paris and Berlin with a description of bridge-burning (AB 153–155). He similarly separates his young adulthood from his communist period with a description of bridge-burning that coincides with the first appearance of the invisible writing (AB 412, IW 24). "Bridge-Burning" is the title of the first chapter of *The Invisible Writing*, under the subtitle "Euphoria". And, indeed, his "floating in a river of peace under bridges of silence" above is nothing less than a description of euphoria. These sorts of metaphoric and

descriptive interconnections are rife throughout Koestler's autobiography. It is in the chapter entitled "The House on the Lake" (IW 350–367) that he tells us of the invisible writing appearing on his horizon and closing in. With hindsight he narrates the various incidents that occurred there as prime examples of *"le langage du destin"* that he first mentioned in the closing pages of *Arrow in the Blue*. However, these purportedly paranormal occurrences are interspersed with, in the main, descriptions of swimming in, sunbathing by, or watching the sunset over, the lake; and so the intimations of invisible writing are literally connected with images of water, wave, swimming, drowning and so forth. As readers, we are thus left with a tapestry of metaphor and literal description; a tapestry of wave-related imagery that implies the metaphors are every bit as 'real' as the house upon the lake, and Koestler's swimming in that lake.

As I have said, such interconnections can be found throughout Koestler's autobiographies, from his earliest to his last (posthumously published) volume.[8] As I direct this discussion towards that 'notion' of islands, one could say that he got into the habit of thinking of himself, his life, and his destiny, in oceanic terms—articulated, and I use that term in its fullest senses, by a wave—upon and/or in, the water.

For my purposes, the most important feature of the description of oceanic euphoria induced by scratching Euclid's proof on the wall of Cell No. 41 is the way elaborates upon the original descriptions found in *Spanish Testament*. Scratching Euclid's proof may have been a trigger for Koestler's first oceanic experiences, but it actually came about as a consequence of prolonged meditation upon the experience of time—particularly the extreme experience of time he was undergoing in solitary confinement. When he later described his adolescent meditations upon the paradox of spatial infinity (which he did by introducing the idea of the arrow in the blue), he did so in terms inclusive of temporal infinity: "if space was infinity, the earth was zero and I was zero *and one's life-span was zero, and a year and a century were zero"*(AB 67–68). Similarly, Koestler's account of Euclid's proof extends to temporal infinity and, by his account, occurred as a direct result of his prolonged speculation upon the paradox of time.

> The astonishing thing, the puzzling thing, the consoling thing about this time was that it passed. I am speaking the plain unvarnished truth when I say that I did not know how ... But there was something that was more astonishing, that positively bordered on the miraculous, and that was that this time, these interminable hours, days and weeks, passed *more swiftly* than a period of time has ever passed for me before.

> I was conscious of this paradox whenever I scratched a fresh mark on the white plaster wall ... [including Euclid's proof].
>
> Speculating on the subject of time was one of my favourite nostrums, and at times the only remedy that could help me to while it away. There was a bizarre, bitter, ironical consolation in the knowledge that these interminable, torturing hours, as soon as they had ceased to be present, would shrink to nothing ... It was a *constant swimming against the stream*; the agony lifted as it converted itself into the past; *one remained always at the same spot in the river, but all that was floating downstream was vanquished and overcome* (ST 290–292; DD 119–121. First emphasis is original; final sentence is my emphasis).

The importance of this extreme experience of time, and its subsequent influence upon identity growth and autobiographical narration, makes Koestler's *Spanish Testament* vital for comprehensive readings of his subsequent volumes of autobiography. With nothing else to do, Koestler simply had to watch and await time's passing. Rather than being in the 'river of time', he tried to experience time by 'swimming against it'.

> When I was still young in this prison I tried to lie in wait for the hands of my watch, to experience pure time. Now I know that an inexorable law prevails: increasing awareness of time slows down its pace, complete awareness of time would bring it to a standstill. Only in death does the present become reality; time freezes.—he who succeeds in experiencing "pure time" experiences nothingness (ST 323–324).

In effect, his swimming against the stream was an experience of nothingness (or as close to as one might imagine): spending time waiting and watching time pass is not 'living'. When confronted with the infinitude of this river of time, against which he might swim forever only to see the vanquished time "shrink to zero"—literally, to achieve nothing—Koestler was physically and experientially confronted with the paradox he would later use to describe his adolescence in terms of the arrow in the blue and the "Paradox of the Ego Spiral" (AB 99). It was precisely here that Euclid's proof 'saved' him: "the scribbled symbols on the wall represented one of the rare cases where a meaningful and comprehensive statement about the infinite is arrived at by precise and finite means (IW 429)." With this small knowledge of the infinite, Koestler, for a brief time, at least, gave up his "swimming against the stream" and floated off "on a river of peace, under bridges of silence".

But more than this: *"one remained always at the same spot in the river, but all that was floating downstream was vanquished and overcome."* Recalling the 'trouncing' of past selves, 'vanquished and overcome', 'never outgrown, merely overgrown': this metaphoric description of overcoming time, is equally a description of Koestler's own writing about the past and his past selves, of overcoming that troubled life—"the agony lifted as it converted itself into the past". Finally, Koestler 'remained' at the same spot on the river in order to 'overcome' his past, and it is at this point, in this sense, that I think of the Island.

During the period in which Koestler developed his notions of the invisible writing and during which he wrote both *Arrow in the Blue* and *The Invisible Writing* he purchased two particular properties. These were "Verte Rive" at Fontaine-le-Port (purchased in 1949) on the Seine—in which he regularly swam, canoed, rowed, and sailed; and "Island Farm" (purchased on a whim in 1950) which was, as its name suggests, an island on the Delaware River some 34 miles North of Philadelphia. It was from this place, in this location, that he sought to reconfigure his past autobiographical narratives towards his then final narrating self. It was on Island Farm that *Arrow in the Blue* was written, and it was here that Koestler developed his ideas about the invisible writing and began the next volume of his autobiography with that title.

What we can see here is something of the influence of the imaginary and the symbolic significance of Island Farm to Koestler's two main volumes of autobiography, volumes that sought to literally erase earlier volumes of his autobiographical record. The metaphors first written in *Spanish Testament* (above) not only *describe* Island Farm "remaining at the same spot in the river," but eventually *led* Koestler *to* Island Farm; and *from* there he wrote of bridge burning, wave mechanics, the arrow in the blue and the invisible writing—the island itself the symbol, form and substance of the development (or injury) his persona endured during his Spanish War experiences.

This tells us something about all autobiography to a lesser or greater extent: that the writing of the life is not distinct from the living of that very life—it can even be *constitutive* of it. Self-knowledge is predicated upon the narration of that very self. As Eakin observes: "autobiography turns out to be part of the fabric of our experience *as we live it,*" and, rather than being an art of retrospect: "autobiography's adaptive value ... is an art of the future ... an act of self-determination ..." (Eakin, *Living* 148, my emphasis). When we narrate ourselves this changes how we live; and when we *renarrate* ourselves it is in light of the present, and in anticipation of our futures. Roughly, within the bounds of circumstance, we live our lives according to how we narrate them—so that

our narrations of self are authentic; indeed, so that our narrations of *self* feel authentic to ourselves; so that they have adapted, and we *have adapted* to the world *we* find ourselves in.[9]

It is no coincidence that Koestler, under "the blessings of unreason", bought an island on the Delaware River from which he wrote the two major volumes of his autobiography. It is demonstrative of this interactivity between autobiographical narration and living, having been *anticipated* in Koestler's earlier autobiographies and *enabling renarration of his whole life* from this point (and *to* this point) in the future. In effect, it was only upon the island, 'on a river of peace', 'floating', 'dissolving'—it was only *from* this island that he could write his two main volumes of autobiography, in the very metaphors flowing around that island—articulating it, "making sense" of his life and experience, including his earlier autobiographies and the changes that their writing presaged.

ENDNOTES:

1 See: Stephen Spender, "In Search of Penitence," in *Arthur Koestler: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Murray A. Sperber (ed.), p. 105.

2 This has been discussed at length by many others. See, for instance: James Olney, *Metaphors of Self*, p. 34: "One creates from moment to moment and continuously the reality to which one gives a metaphoric name and shape, and that shape is one's own shape"; and p. 37: "Symbolic memory is the process by which man not only repeats his past experience but also *reconstructs* this experience. Imagination becomes a necessary element of true recollection"; and Francis Jacques, *Difference and Subjectivity*, p. 30: "... what we are dealing with in reality is an imaginary self."

3 See: Preface to the Danube Edition of *Arrow in the Blue*, p. [11] (In the case of *The Yogi and the Commissar*, the Danube Edition was published some 23 years after the original).

4 David Cesarani details at length Koestler's 'recycling' of much older texts—particularly *Von Weissen Nächten und Roten Tagen* (the virtually unpublished autobiographical account of his travels in Russia in 1932–33) in *The Invisible Writing*. See: David Cesarani, *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind*, p. 85. Murray A. Sperber similarly details Koestler's (at least) four versions of his experiences of the Spanish War and the "hundreds of major and minor deletions and additions" that I will come to shortly. See: Murray A. Sperber, "Looking Back on Koestler's Spanish War," in Sperber (ed.), p. 109.

5 See the facing page to the title page of the Danube Edition of *The Invisible Writing*. There is no mention of *Spanish Testament*, even though it was first published in English, *before* either *The Gladiators or Darkness at Noon*, nor the much earlier *Von Weissen Nächten und Roten Tagen* which is also, in many important ways, the earliest volume of Koestler's autobiography—hence his recycling of it in *The Invisible Writing*.

6 Both Sperber and Cesarani have written at length on the full scope of the influence *Spanish Testament* (and Koestler's Spanish War experience) has had upon all his writings—fictional, autobiographical, scientific/scientistic, political, and parapsychological.

7 See: *Darkness at Noon*, pp. 203–207: "These experiences held nothing mystic or mysterious; they were of a quite concrete character," and "indeed, one's personality dissolved as a grain of salt in the sea; but at the same time the infinite sea seemed to be contained in the grain of salt." This passage is the precursor to both the arrow disappearing into the blue (AB, pp. 67–68), and the invisible writing "dissolving one" in "the universal pool" (IW, pp. 429–432).

8 *Stranger on the Square*, with Cynthia Koestler, Harold Harris (ed.), London, Hutchison, 1984.

9 These ideas are much more fully discussed in: Paul John Eakin, Living Autobiographically: *How We Create Identity in Narrative*. See particularly: "The Homeostatic Machine," pp. 152–159.

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