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Zénó Vernyik (ed.): *Arthur Koestler's Fiction and the Genre of the Novel: Rubashov and Beyond*

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The "adventurous" life of Arthur Koestler has frequently been considered paradigmatic of the exigencies of the twentieth century. Indeed, in recent decades, the writer's biography has tended to overshadow the appreciation of his literary output. Mostly forgotten for decades, or wilfully ignored for the propagandistic strain and alleged dated topicality of much of his earlier writing as well as for the perceived crankiness of his later literary engagement with scientific ideas, it is only recently that Koestler's work has received renewed critical attention on a wider scale though there has always been a sustained interest in this once very prominent writer by a more narrowly circumscribed set of researchers. The discovery of the original manuscripts in German of Koestler's *The Gladiators* (*Der Sklavenkrieg*, 1939) and *Darkness at Noon* (*Sonnenfinsternis*, 1940) in the 1990s and in 2015, respectively, which had been lost for decades, has significantly contributed to the reinvigoration of the study of his fiction.

This collection of essays, edited by Zénó Vernyik, offers for the first time in more than three decades a comprehensive engagement in an English-language publication with all the novels published in the writer's lifetime. Propitiously, the volume takes cognizance of the linguistic versatility of Koestler and its implications with respect to the varied provenance of scholarly interest in the author, who, reflecting the various stages of his cosmopolitan existence, wrote in Hungarian, German, English, French, and – in some of his journalistic work – in Ivrit. Koestler's work has accordingly attracted critical attention from a variety of contexts, some of them defined by linguistic boundaries that have remained rather impermeable, as Matthias Weßel notes in his foreword to the collection of essays. The centripetal plurality of Koestler criticism is also acknowledged

in Vernyik's introduction, in which the editor gives a brief but comprehensive survey of research on Koestler and his narrative oeuvre that creates a painful, and tantalizing, awareness of the richness of Central and Eastern European criticism of the versatile author, which – because it remains untranslated into English – has largely eluded acknowledgement in the Anglophone and the Germanophone scholarly communities, who similarly have not fully probed the advantages of a productive conversation across linguistic barriers. To some extent, programmatically gathering contributions from the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, the UK, and the US, the volume offers a synthesis, if necessarily limited, of these different perspectives that extends also to the disciplinary and generational diversity of its contributors (xxvi). The synthetic perspective is, in fact, a mainstay of Vernyik's editorial concept, which is predicated on the productive conversation between his contributors. Vernyik's ambitious claim that the resulting effort is "less a typical edited collection of essays" but rather "a monograph with multiple authors" (xxvi) may be overenthusiastic, but the volume does indeed present a strong thematic cohesion that is frequently missing from other, more haphazardly assembled collections of essays.

This cohesion is achieved mainly by breaking up the chronological sequence of the publication of Koestler's novels and suggesting in its stead, with the headings of the five parts of the volume, a thematic progression. This commences with an exploration of "genres and subgenres" (Part I) before it narrows down to "the political novel" (Part II) and a focus on the individual and the investigation of "the self and its dilemmas through the prism of the novel" (Part III); it then widens again to the Zionist novel and its relation to questions of "nation, identity and race" (Part IV) to conclude eventually with "the novel as summary" (Part V). The implicit narrative of this thematic progression combines structural, narratological, and thematic categories to suggest that Koestler negotiated individual and collective identities in a highly politicized time through the medium of a shape-shifting but always politically inflected novelistic narrative. While this may, to some extent, be misleading in that the thematic subdivisions indicate relative parameters of inclusion and exclusion that appear to neglect the interpenetration of those elements across Koestler's oeuvre as a whole, it nevertheless invites the reader's synoptic view, which is further substantiated with mutual references by the volume's contributors to one another's chapters and with the tendency to situate individual works in conversation with other works and within the writer's oeuvre. Perhaps inevitably, there is some overlap among individual essays, in particular with respect to biographical details, but, generally, the "monographic" approach facilitates a comprehensive and focused discussion of Koestler's fiction.

The particular focus on the genre of the novel indicated in the subtitle is indeed a pervasive concern of the volume that informs all contributions and gives further

substance to its cohesion. It encompasses Henry Innes MacAdam's discussion of *The Gladiators* as a historical, rather than a predominantly political, novel and of the structural and metafictional significance of the inclusion of a Roman-style tragicomic farce. Revaluations of Koestler's overtly political novels are proposed in the essays of Stephen Ingle and Uwe Klawitter, which concentrate on a comparative discussion of *The Gladiators* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and the use of metaphors in *Arrival and Departure* (1943), respectively; and, with a particular focus on Koestler's engagement with Zionism and the construction of Jewish identities, by Jenni Calder and Motti Inbari. Alice Eged investigates the philosophical and ethical dimension of *Darkness at Noon* and, more particularly, explores another comparative angle by reading it alongside the theoretical writings of Michael Polanyi. The same text is discussed as a novel of disillusionment and of consciousness by Krisztián Kacsinecz and Szilvia Deisler, who, moreover, reveal structural and thematic parallels of the Chinese-British writer Jung Chang's novel *Wild Swans* (1991) and the Belarusian Nobel Prize-winning author Svetlana Alexievich's non-fiction text *Secondhand Time* (2013) to Koestler's novel and thus emphasize the continued relevance of his fiction. In his own contribution, the editor critically interrogates the prevalent identification of *The Age of Longing* (1951) as a roman à clef and the concomitant implications of literary inferiority. Louis Gordon offers, in conclusion, a reading of Koestler's final novel, *The Call Girls* (1972), as both a political novel and a campus novel. More specifically, Gordon persuasively argues that "Koestler's science works are not the elements of separate goals, but rather means to achieve the very same goals he adopted in fiction and autobiography" (225) and that the author's fiction was, in fact, from the outset informed by the critical engagement with scientific ideas.

The collection as a whole affirms that while the political aspect is pervasive in Koestler's novels, it is never exclusively so. Rather, Koestler's fiction incorporates a variety of frequently intersecting subgenres of the novel through which the author explores the interrelation of individual and collective. The volume moreover insists on the continued relevance of Koestler's works, which have frequently been described as ephemeral due to their topicality; it posits that Koestler's fiction is rather distinguished by a transcending topicality that is paradigmatic of political and human characteristics, which, like the author's works, are of enduring significance.

Arthur Koestler's Fiction and the Genre of the Novel is a timely reminder of the continued relevance of the fiction of a writer that has frequently been eclipsed by his experiences in an unsettled and challenging age. It is a real merit of the volume that it offers a well-developed and critically aware synoptic view of all of Koestler's novels written in, or translated into, English at a time when – as no one could have anticipated when the individual contributions were completed

– the transcending topicality of the author's work would forcefully reassert itself in response to war and the proliferation of a new refugee crisis in Europe. From the perspective of literary studies perhaps even more important, another true merit of the collection of essays is that it also promotes with much acumen and penetration a new sense of the literary quality of Arthur Koestler's fiction.