

BOOK REVIEWS

The Roots of Coincidence by Arthur Koestler (retrospective). London: Hutchinson & Co, 1972. 160 pp.

This past year, 2005, saw the centenary of Arthur Koestler's birth and the twentieth anniversary of the Koestler Parapsychology Unit at Edinburgh University, a unit thrown into crisis by the unexpected and untimely death of the Koestler Professor, Bob Morris, in August 2004. Literally as this is being written (end December 2005), the selection process for his successor is coming to its conclusion. It is therefore timely to remind ourselves of Arthur Koestler and his place in the history of parapsychology.

Koestler was born in Budapest, Hungary, into a German-speaking Jewish family. He studied science and psychology at the University of Vienna but at the age of twenty-one he left before finishing his degree. Although he was to eventually renounce his religious heritage, Koestler had as a student come under the influence of the Zionist Movement and went to live in what was then the British Protectorate of Palestine, eventually becoming a Jerusalem-based correspondent for two German newspapers. In 1930, he transferred to Berlin where he became, variously, science and foreign editor for one or other of the newspapers. From 1932, Koestler based himself in France working as a freelance journalist. He covered the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) as a correspondent for the *London News Chronicle*, but was captured by Franco's fascistic Nationalist forces in 1937. He was imprisoned in Seville under sentence of death. During his incarceration awaiting—as he thought—execution, Arthur Koestler sought various forms of “metaphysical comfort”. One of these forms is of particular interest, as detective work by author Guy Lyon Playfair shows. One day a passage from Thomas Mann's novel *The Buddenbrooks* (1902) popped into Koestler's mind. It was from the chapter in which Thomas Buddenbrook realises he is going to die and finds solace in Arthur Schopenhauer's essay, “On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Essential Selves”. Schopenhauer argues that death is but a reunion with a cosmic unity. The piece brought similar peace of mind to Koestler in his cell. So much so, that one of the first things he did after being set free was to write to Mann, whom he had never met, and to thank him for the comfort his words had brought. Mann replied almost immediately, saying that he had not looked at the Schopenhauer essay since writing *The Buddenbrooks* thirty-five years previously, but a few days earlier had suddenly felt impelled to read it again. He had gone to fetch the book when the doorbell rang. It was the postman delivering Koestler's letter. The incident made a profound impression on Koestler. It was, as he put it, “instrumental in changing [my] attitude towards ESP [Extra Sensory Perception]”, to which he had previously been sceptical though not hostile.

Koestler returned to France and continued with his anti-Stalin and anti-Hitler stance. But in 1940, after German troops had invaded France, Koestler was arrested by the Vichy government and interned in a detention camp at Le Vernet. Taking an opportunity to escape, he fled to England.

Of Koestler's many books, his primary work on parapsychology is *The Roots of Coincidence* (1972), in which he attempts to find a basis for paranormal events in coincidence, synchronicity, so that there is only one phenomenon to explain rather than many. He points out that C. G. Jung, usually the one associated with the concept, was not the first to ponder on synchronicity; rather, Jung was greatly influenced by Paul Kammerer who spoke of "seriality", which he considered to be "ubiquitous and continuous in life, nature and cosmos", and Arthur Schopenhauer, who wrote on "the simultaneous occurrence of causally unconnected events". With considerable prescience, Koestler goes on to seek the roots of coincidence in the Alice-in-Wonderland world of quantum physics, where our everyday logic no longer holds sway, where ghostly forces swim in the dark, unfathomable ocean of probability before the manifestation of either matter or mind. Along with H. H. Price, Koestler writes that mainstream confirmation of psi phenomena would "transform the whole intellectual outlook upon which our present civilisation is based". He concludes with a plea that parapsychology be made "academically respectable and attractive to students", otherwise the "limitations of our biological equipment may condemn us to the role of Peeping Toms at the keyhole of eternity".

Although the book came as a surprise to Koestler's many fans, he had held an interest in the paranormal from his early days. In his first volume of autobiography, *Arrow in the Blue* (1952), he recounts that while gazing at a clear blue sky at the age of fourteen "the paradox of spatial infinity suddenly pierced [my] brain as if it had been stung by a wasp". He was lifted up into what he described as a state of "spontaneous illumination". Other such mystical moments befell him at various points in his life, including when in his Spanish death cell. There, as he recalls in *The Invisible Writing* (1954), he underwent an experience in which he felt as if he were "floating on [my] back in a river of peace, under bridges of silence". Eventually "there was no river and no I"; there was a sense of dissolution and of limitless expansion. Coming back to his grim reality was "like waking up from anaesthesia". He went on to have such experiences of what he called "oceanic feeling" a few times every week during his incarceration.

Lesser phenomena also occasionally impinged upon him. On one occasion a highly-strung friend told him "something is going to happen" moments before a large picture fell from a wall. Koestler was intrigued to note that the hooks remained in the wall and the picture-wire was unbroken. He compared this incident to the two unexplained loud reports that emanated from a bookcase when Jung and Freud were having a heated discussion—Jung predicted the second bang shortly before it occurred. Koestler's interest in possible psi phenomena appears to have been with him all his life; at the age of twenty-six, for instance, while living in Berlin, he advertised in a newspaper for "authentic

reports on occult experiences—telepathy, clairvoyance, levitation, etc”. It seems he was disappointed with the response.

Koestler was also intrigued by coincidences. One case he describes in *The Invisible Writing* involved a mentally disturbed friend, Attila Jozsef, who one day tried to kill himself by lying down on a railway track in order to get run over by a goods train that passed through the village every day at a given hour. On this occasion, though, the train did not come and Jozsef had to give up the suicide attempt. It transpired that the train was delayed because it had run over another suicide farther up the track.

Koestler joined the Society for Psychical Research in 1952 but gave his interest in the paranormal a fairly low profile, the reason why the publication of *The Roots of Coincidence* came as a shock to many people, some of whom did not like him dabbling in the subject. They liked it even less when he started up the KIB Foundation in the mid-1970s in order to conduct psychic research.

The late Brian Inglis, a respected journalist and an author well-known for his writings on matters psychic, mediated between Arthur Koestler and financier Tony Bloomfield to set up the KIB Foundation, which identified itself using the initials of the three men’s surnames. It existed for roughly eight years from its inception to Koestler’s death in 1983, whereupon it became simply the Koestler Foundation. Ruth Tudge (nee West), who was deeply involved in KIB’s activities, recalls that Koestler framed the Foundation’s terms of reference as “to promote research in areas that lie beyond the bounds of scientific orthodoxy”. Koestler’s particular interest was levitation, and that became the Foundation’s main focus. His idea was to use biofeedback techniques to induce subjects to lessen their body weight by small amounts measurable by a “levitation machine”. Koestler reasoned that if people could be trained to alter their body temperature using biofeedback information, which is indeed the case, then the same thing could apply to body weight. Bloomfield provided a substantial sum to get the project off the ground, so to speak, and a levitation platform (essentially a very sensitive weighing machine) was constructed. The subject was to sit on the platform and any tiny fluctuations in weight would be picked up by an arrangement of springs beneath the platform and printed out on a chart. This did not entirely please Koestler who wanted a strong visual display instead of a printout, feeling that a subject would respond better to feedback presented in a pictorial manner. (To Koestler, feeling—*meaning*—was a vital component in the production of psi phenomena.)

Various subjects came forward—including slimmers, Tudge recalls. “They mistook the experiment as a form of weight-loss exercise!” she explains. Others included Transcendental Meditation (TM) practitioners who claimed to be able to perform TM levitation (one of the most skilled of these was a Nobel prize-winning physicist Tudge prefers not to name, but there are no prizes for guessing who it is). These subjects revealed a fatal flaw with the levitation machine: they would sit cross-legged on the platform then suddenly move upwards into the air, a disturbance causing the spring arrangement to become unstable, making

precise measurements impossible. (Actually, this may have indicated that TM levitation was a rebound effect.) It appears Bloomfield was not prepared to put any further funding into the project to allow the device to be re-designed and so the levitation research programme came to an end without any clear conclusions.

Levity took other forms within KIB—at its inception the founders promised themselves not to take things too seriously all the time, and merry levitation and spoon-bending parties were held at the Koestlers' home. But all too soon the party was over: Koestler decided to take his own life after suffering years of physical decline with Parkinson's Disease and a slowly developing form of leukaemia. A note "To Whom it May Concern" he wrote nine months before his suicide shows that it was a carefully planned act. On 3 March 1983, the seventy-seven-year-old Koestler was found dead at his London home from a drugs overdose—drugs, the early suicide note informed, that he had legally obtained and hoarded over a considerable period. Koestler's fifty-five-year-old wife, Cynthia, was lying dead in the house too—it had been a double suicide. In his long-prepared suicide note Koestler informed that he had "timid hopes for a depersonalised after-life beyond the confines of space, time and matter and beyond the limits of our comprehension".

The Koestlers' joint funeral and memorial service was held at Mortlake Crematorium on 11 March 1983. Ruth Tudge remembers that Koestler's paranormal interests were downplayed. But Koestler was to have the last laugh: both he and Cynthia had left almost their entire estates for the endowment of a chair of parapsychology at a British university, or to support research fellowships in parapsychology if a chair could not be established. Whichever, the money was to be used for "parapsychology and parapsychology alone". (This will caused the novelist and critic Stephen Vizinczey to spit out that Koestler had "committed suicide twice".) The Koestler bequest defined parapsychology as "the scientific study of paranormal phenomena; in particular the capacity attributed to some individuals to interact with their environments by means other than the recognised sensory or motor channels".

As an executor of the Koestler will, John Beloff's responsibility was to find a university or college that was, in his words, "not afraid to admit Koestler's Trojan horse into its citadel!" (*Encounter*, 1983). It proved a tricky task, but after a number of rebuffs from academic institutions Beloff found a home for the endowment at Edinburgh University, where he had worked within the psychology department since 1963. While in the department he had supervised a number of PhD students in parapsychological topics and he reckoned this had "inoculated the university against the worst fears" of the subject. So it proved: the university established the Chair. Beloff sat on the selection committee that chose American parapsychologist Bob Morris from a shortlist of nine people to be the first Koestler Professor of Parapsychology, and the Koestler Parapsychology Unit was embedded in the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences. Over a decade after their deaths, the Koestlers' Trojan horse had finally been wheeled inside the walls of academe.

The future of that Trojan horse is now, again, in the balance. In the United States, parapsychology is to some extent in decline, despite the doubtless accurate claims of a growing "invisible college" of academics interested in psi phenomena. This is because in the United States psi private benefactors have primarily funded research. But as these individuals die off, or lose interest and divert their funding to other areas, parapsychological researchers are being left somewhat high and dry. On the other hand, parapsychology in Britain is booming—numerous universities there now have parapsychology units (largely due to Bob Morris's stratagem of seeding academe with dozens of PhD's in parapsychology) and this pattern is expanding as these places produce more PhD graduates. But some psychic researchers in Britain are unhappy with this development, complaining that university-based parapsychology is essentially reductionist in attitude, seeking to embed itself within mainstream paradigms. They fear a sell-out at Edinburgh, a fear exacerbated by rumours that the Koestler Chair has been renamed the Robert Morris Chair and that the shortlist of candidates for the Chair contained mainly psi-sceptical psychologists. But lobbying of Edinburgh by the concerned psi researchers seems to have had some effect because the shortlisted candidates were rejected as of 8 December 2005. At the time of this writing, the whole selection process appears to be in limbo because of this unexpected outcome and the subsequent advent of the holiday season. The final conclusion is therefore in doubt. It could come to pass that Koestler's name might be effectively written out of the history of parapsychology, with a career psychologist quite possibly inherently hostile to the idea of psi phenomena sitting in the Chair he founded. On the other hand, wiser counsel might prevail. By the time readers see this page, it is possible all will be revealed.

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Locus Solus: Lombroso e la Fotografia edited by Silvana Turzio. Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 2005. 182 pp. 18.00 Euros. ISBN 88-424-9210-8.

The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult by Clément Chéroux, Andreas Fischer, Pierre Apraxine, Denis Canguilhem, and Sophie Schmit. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. 288 pp. \$65.00. ISBN 0-300/011136-3.

Visual representation has long been a powerful ally in the study of what is perceived to be unusual, be it the abnormal or the paranormal. Early physicians, for example, used drawings to illustrate the range of human monstrosities, what later was called teratology (Bitbol-Hespériés & Gana, 2003).