Arthur Koestler’s *Arrow in the Blue*  
(Excerpts and Comments)

7th February 2006

Abstract

This is a collection of fragments of Arthur Koestler’s autobiographical book *Arrow in the Blue* taken from the 1954 edition by Collins & Hamilton (Readers Union Edition), London. The choice of fragments is personal and they do not constitute an abridgment. Sentences of special interest are typeset in boldface font. [Comments are interspersed and typeset in this format.]

FROM PAGE 17

I believe that people write autobiographies for two main reasons. The first may be called the ‘Chronicler’s urge’. The second may be called the ‘Ecce Homo’ motive. Both impulses spring from the same source, which is the source of all literature: the desire to share one’s experiences with others, and by means of this intimate communication to transcend the isolation of the self. […] The Chronicler is driven by the fear that the events of which he is a witness and which are part of his life, their colour, shape, and emotional impact will be irretrievably lost to the future unless he preserves them. […] The Ecce Homo motive, on the other hand, urges men to preserve the uniqueness of their inner experiences, and results in the confessional type of autobiography […] Obviously, the Chronicler’s urge and the Ecce Homo motive are at opposite poles on the same scale of values, like introversion and extroversion, perception and contemplation. And obviously a good autobiography ought to be a synthesis of the two – which rarely is. The vanity of men in public life detracts from the autobiographical value of their chronicles; the introvert’s obsession with himself makes him neglect the historical background against which he moves. The Ecce Homo motive may degenerate into sterile exhibitionism.

FROM PAGE 26

The delightful story of the boastful Baron [Munchausen] falling into a bog and sinking deeper and deeper […] he saves himself by the simple expedient of grabbing his own hair and pulling himself out. I was so delighted with the Baron’s escape that I laughed aloud – and in that same instant found the solution to the problem which had been haunting me. […] Since that episode I have learned to outwit my obsessions and anxieties – or at least to come to a kind of modus vivendi with them. To arrive at an amicable arrangement with one’s neuroses sounds like a contradiction in terms – yet I believe that it can be achieved, provided one accepts one’s complexes and treats them with respectful courtesy, as it were, instead of fighting them and denying their existence. It is my profound belief that man has the power to pull himself by his own hair out of the mire.
FROM PAGES 27–28

I had been locked up in the unlighted bathroom in punishment for some offence. [...] Next, I remembered crashing head-foremost against the iron support under the washbasin; this was followed by a sudden flood of light as my mother flung open the door and rushed to the rescue, while I howled in ecstasy of relief, self-pity, and love. I also remembered having registered with satisfaction her worried and self-reproachful antics; and the dim, nascent cloud of a thought, which in coherent language would amount to: “That will teach her!”

I discovered that alive or dead, one cannot fall out of this world. [...] I have been more or less free of the fear of death – though not of the fear of the act of dying, with its painful and degrading paraphernalia.

FROM ‘THE HOUR-GLASS’, PAGES 30–32

I taught myself early the art of poisoning my pleasures by reminding myself of their ephemeral nature. [...] This obsession with the hour-glass character of pleasure never left me. As I grew up, it changed its object from self-pity to pity for others who were engrossed in the pursuit of pleasure without being aware of its treacherous nature.

I became aware that I enjoyed being alone. It was a tremendous discovery [...] the desert sands of my solitude had suddenly turned to gold. [...] As the years wore on, my life gradually fell into a pattern, oscillating, like a pendulum, between periods of complete isolation and short bursts of hectic gregariousness. [...] with a chronic inability to terminate an evening once it is properly started; with a tendency, on the rare occasions when I go to a party, to get drunk and make a fool of myself – followed by another long stretch of complete seclusion. [...] The path of excess does not always lead to the palace of wisdom, as Blake held; but there can be as much harmony and rhythm in the oscillations of a pendulum from one extreme to the other as in the turning of a wheel on smooth bearings.

FROM ‘ARROW IN THE BLUE’, PAGES 33–38

I acquired cleverness rapidly, but wisdom very slowly.

I was convinced – much as the Pythagoreans and the alchemists had been – that science contained the clue to the mystery of existence. I believed that the problems of the universe were hidden in some well-defined secret, like the combination-lock of a safe, the philosophers’ stone, or the elixir of life. To devote oneself to the solution of a secret seemed the only purpose worth living for, and every step of the quest full of excitement and delight.

 [...] the average educated person will be ashamed to admit that a work of art is beyond his comprehension although, in the same breath, he will proclaim not without pride his complete ignorance of the laws which make his electric switch work, or govern the heredity of his offspring [...] He lives in an artificial world of cheap, mass-produced mysteries which he is too lazy to penetrate [...] It is the excitement of the explorer who, even though his goal is limited and specialized, is always driven by an unconscious, childlike hope for stumbling upon the ultimate mystery. [...] the urge to explore was one of man’s vital drives [...] The increasing volume of facts and the specialization of research have made this interest gradually dry up and become a monopoly of technicians and specialists. [...] I grew up during the closing years of that era, before science became so formalized and abstract that it was removed from the layman’s grasp.

Infinity and eternity – aye, there was the rub. [...] You could shoot a super-arrow into the blue sky with a super-force which would carry it beyond the pull of earth’s gravity [...] and there would be nothing to stop it, no limit and no end, in space or time [...] The right to know was self-evident and inalienable – otherwise one’s being here with eyes to see with and a mind to think with made no sense.

So, mathematically, if space was infinity, the earth was zero and I was zero and one’s life-span was zero,
The thirst for the absolute is a stigma which marks those unable to find satisfaction in the relative world of the now and here. My obsession with the arrow was merely the first phase of the quest. When it proved sterile, the Infinite as a target was replaced by Utopias of one kind or another. It was the same quest and the same all-or-nothing mentality which drove me to the Promised Land and into the Communist Party. In other ages aspirations of this kind found their natural fulfilment in God. [...] after the shattering catastrophes which have brought the Age of Reason and Progress to a close, the void has made itself felt. The epoch in which I grew up was an age of disillusion and an age of longing.

To become converted or convinced is a more or less sharply defined act; to lose a conviction is a long process of wear and tear. The dancing figures on the ceiling [which Koestler took to be God when he was a child] faded, and were replaced by a benevolent old gentleman with a white beard, suspiciously like Grandfather Leopold [...] That image, too, became less and less real until it faded away like an old photograph, and its place was occupied by the arrow [...] For the pursuit of science in itself is never materialistic. It is a search for the principles of law and order in the universe, and as such an essentially religious endeavour. If the inferences drawn from it are at times materialistic, this merely means that those who draw them happen to be partisans of a materialistic philosophy.

[...] in our emotionally immature and confused times so many are attracted by movements offering the benefit of a rigidly organized hierarchy of shamans – such as the Communist Party or the Catholic Church.

FROM PAGE 53

There are several types among the timid. With some [...] the insulating layer becomes more flexible, shyness becomes transformed into courteous restraint – an attitude so well suited to the Anglo-Saxon temperament that is even cultivated as a mannerism. With others, the opposite happens: the protective layer becomes a rigid, impenetrable veneer which chokes its wearer and frightens all passers-by away. Then there is a third type, the one to which I belong, which may be called the ‘intermittent timid’ [...] phases of tongue-tiedness and cramp alternate with others of extreme garrulousness and uninhibited behaviour. Which of the two will come to the fore on a given occasion depends on circumstances beyond the subject’s control.

FROM PAGES 55–56

The effort to ‘catch the I’, to achieve identity between the subject who knows and the object of its knowing, could be represented as a converging spiral which will only reach its own centre after the arrow. The arrow went off at a tangent on its quest for the infinitely remote; the ego spiral curled inward, toward the infinitely close, which was yet as unattainable as the other. [...] In the ‘arrow-state’ consciousness expands towards mystic union with the All-One while the ego is felt to dissolve in the infinite. In the opposite ‘spiral state’ consciousness contracts, is focused on the self, strives to establish identity between subject and object, to permeate the self with awareness of itself. The ecstasies described by most Christian mystics seem to belong to the former category, whereas certain yoga exercises, aiming at the conscious control of all functions of body and mind, seem to belong to the spiral state.
[...] emotional commitment came first, and the arguments came later. [...] all evidence tends to show that the political libido is basically as irrational as the sexual drive, and patterned, like the latter, by early, partly unconscious experiences – by traumatic shocks, complexes, identifications, repressions, and the rest. Early emotional conditioning plays a decisive part; the arguments which justify and rationalize the credo, come afterwards. ‘There is nothing, Sir’, said Dr Johnson, ‘that you may not muster up some plausible arguments for.’

Judgements on the rational and ethical value of a political attitude are only possible if a clear distinction is made between primary and secondary developments of the political libido. The first phase must of necessity be irrational; it may be dominated by some overwhelming emotional experience such as the hanging of Lenin’s brother, or by steady conditioning like that of an English public school. The majority of people never seem to outgrow this primitive emotive phase – their political loyalties remain in the state of infantile fixations. [...] The second phase, if it occurs, is one of doubt: critical reasoning asserts itself over emotive belief. It corresponds, in Freudian terms, to the ascendancy of the reality-principle over the pleasure-principle. This phase should end – and so rarely does end – with the emergence of a new, mature faith, in which reason and emotion are harmoniously blended.

FROM ‘THE BLESSINGS OF UNREASON’, PAGES 89–90

One night in October I came home late after a long discussion on free will and determinism with a Russian student named Orochov [...] he had stubbornly defended the determinist position, while I maintained that, within certain limits, man has freedom of decision and ultimate mastery of his fate [...] I got home, and in a state of manic exaltation, lit a match and slowly burnt my Matriculation book [...] the end of my progressive career as a respectable citizen and member of the engineering profession.

The act was unpremeditated. No doubt it must have been maturing for a long time in my unconscious mind. But in my conscious mind I had never before dared even to contemplate it. [...] The reason for that act of apparent lunacy was a sudden enamouredness with unreason itself. The discussion with Orochov had brought on a condition which I can only describe as a severe shock of ‘oceanic feeling’; and in that condition all values are reversed. The experience as such has no verbal content; it is merely an inchoate, luminous experience of euphoria; but it sometimes has the power to crystallize the amorphous underground processes of the mind. It appeared to me as self-evident truth that reason was absurd. Already Kant had proved that reason had to abdicate before the problems that really mattered, like eternity and infinity [...] The inflation, with prices of a thousand kronen for a loaf of bread, had reduced economic standards to complete absurdity [...] Life was a chaos, and to embark on a reasonable career in the midst of chaos was madness.

I had no plans except to ‘lead my own life’. In order to do that I had to ‘get off the track’. This metaphorical track I visualized very precisely as an endless stretch of steel rails on rotting sleepers. You were born on to a certain track, as a train is put on its run according to the timetable; and once on the track, you no longer had free will. Your life was determined, as Orochov maintained, by outside forces [...] If you accepted that condition, running on rails became a habit which you could no longer break. The point was to jump off the track before the habit was formed [...] To change metaphor: reason and routine kept people in a strait-jacket which made their living flesh rot beneath it. [Compare with Colin Wilson]

The decision to abandon my studies was made in the rarefied atmosphere of the ‘tragic plane’ where questions like Free Will and Determinism are all that matter, and practical considerations do not count. But the major part of a twenty-four-hour day is usually spent on the ‘trivial plane’ of routine, where the big words have no currency of meaning, and are shrugged off as an expression of overstrung nerves.

During those months of transition, I lived in a purgatory of guilt and remorse. [...] rotting in a crumpled bed until afternoon meant for me sinking into an abyss of depravity – and yet I could not get up. The force that paralysed me in this daily dismal struggle was obviously fear.
People kept to themselves, their church, clan, or party. It was an austere, pharisaic town, full of hatred, distrust, and phoney relics. [...] I have never lived at such close quarters with divinity, and never farther removed from it. The whole unholy history of the city [...] is an illustration of the destructive power of faith, the failure of man’s attempts to come to terms with God, and the resulting unpleasantness of the union of the mortal and the divine.

The French, next to the Americans, are probably the most individualistic people in the world. But whereas American individualism is youthful and aggressive, aimed at outsmarting the other fellow, French individualism is resigned and defensive. [...] The Frenchman defended himself in his underpaid job; he defended himself against the State by cheating on income tax, against his fellow men by an attitude of suspicion and defiance, a manner of sour surliness. [...] tenaciously rooted in his country, town, quartier, family and habits; and also because he never went abroad, had no curiosity about other countries and other lives; because he regarded any idea of change with contempt; because he was smug and self-satisfied, and for all his narrow-mindedness and meanness, lived in a profound harmony with himself and enjoyed his food, wine, fishing, and sex in his grumbling, sour, deprecatory manner more than people in any other human community that I had seen.

The secret of this pathological relationship seems to lie chiefly in the pimp’s brutality to his women. It is a calculated and nauseating kind of brutality which has its own ritual and cant [...] its obvious function is to satisfy the tramp’s craving for punishment – a craving more consistent as it is mostly unconscious [...] ‘Punishment’ consists mostly in slaps, kicks, or mere verbal abuse; overtly sadistic practices hardly ever occur. They would defeat the purpose of the whole relationship, which is based on the axiom that the punishment is an act of justice which the victim deserves for being ‘bad’. In short, the prostitute creates her own ritual of penance; the kick on the shin and the slap in the face represent the act of absolution; the unsavouriness and repellant physique of the protector and avenger are a logical part of the pattern [...] It was a meeting with the sense of guilt in its crudest, most primitive, tangible form. It was startling to see how powerful this complex of guilt acted upon creatures apparently devoid of any sense of moral responsibility. It was even more startling to discover that the sense of guilt and craving for atonement did not procure them grace, but drove them even deeper into perdition. This is a point which, I believe, Dostoyevsky has always missed [...] that suffering without redemption may exist, and that an awareness of guilt may serve the purposes of the devil, was an idea too frightening even for Dostoyevsky to face.

Abundance of opportunity has a neutralizing effect. In the adolescent’s imagination the shared bed of marriage is a scene of permanent voluptuousness; the Anglo-Saxon idea of a Paris House was equally wide of the mark.

The Paris Houses, while they were legal, were neither Sodom nor the idyllic places described in some novels; they were orderly, commercial establishments were sex, deprived of its mystery, was traded as a commodity. The sale of any human faculty as a commodity is obviously a degrading process [...] we take the body more seriously than the spirit. It is absurd to expect that in a mercantile society the most potent human urge should escape the process of commercialization. And once trading in sex is recognised as inevitable, a legal, regulated trade is preferable to the squalor of the black market.

The Houses were not an edifying spectacle, but they spelt death to homosexuality, impotence, neurosis, to the stammer and blush, to sexual crime. They helped to keep the nation spiritually sane [...] the erotic equivalent of the Salvation Army soup. [Koestler ‘never commented on the balance of power in the male-female relationship that enabled this sadistic performances ... Homophobia justified the degradation of women.’ (cf. David Cesarany’s Arthur Koestler, A Homeless Mind, Vintage UK, page 66).]
But the moment I put a blouse on, and a skirt over my behind, my price goes up ten times and I become a femme fatale. You know why? Because the moment I put my blouse on, this here (she slapped her pretty bare bosom) becomes a mystery. Some would pay a hundred francs for a peep down that blouse when here they can have everything for five francs, serviette comprise. And they tell me how clever I am, and how spirituelle I am, and that I am the woman they always dreamt of. [...] all the excitement is about nothing.

FROM ‘PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR AT TWENTY-FIVE’, PAGES 169–172

I resolved around two poles: furious work and a hectic chase after women. [...] it was a phantom chase and not a pleasure hunt [...] Yet the pattern of one's life depends to a large extent on the manner in which one organizes one's own particular phantom chase. [...] Mix in a mortar an acute sense of loneliness with an obsessive thirst for absolute values; add to this an aggressive temperament, sensuality, and a feeling of basic insecurity that needs constant reassurance through token victories: the result will be a fairly toxic potion.

The distinction between true and false applies to ideas, not to emotions; an emotion may be cheap, but never untrue.

This sensation of apparent uniqueness is the essence of the whole problem; falling in love restores one’s virginity.

The process of devaluation [of the initial experience of love] was free from hostility, but accompanied by a growing reluctance [...] The fatal predictability and response produced a mood of detached observation, a destructive awareness of detail; and to be actor and observer at the same time is the end of innocence. Helena, deprived of her magic and mystery, became depressingly familiar; a sister, fondly liked, and tabooed by the senses – and that, for her, is the ultimate indignity. When that stage was reached, fight remained the only honourable solution.

The reason why I started to write fiction so late is intimately connected with this subject. A phantom chase is nearly a full-time job. [...] ‘each calory produced by the soul can only be used either to live or to create’.

FROM PAGE 180

The Socialists, on the other hand, subscribed to the same principles in which I believed. I had regarded them as the legitimate heirs and trustees of the Judeo-Christian tradition – of the Hebrew prophets and the Sermon of the Mount; of the Kantian Imperative; of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. The Nazis were savages who remained true to themselves; the Socialists were my own kin who had betrayed their trust. You cannot hate a tiger for being a tiger; but the irresponsible keeper who exposes people to the beast’s claws you would like to shoot on the spot – even before you shoot the tiger. It is an emotional attitude deeply rooted in the political psyche. Few generals hate their opponents; but they grow ulcers and throw fits of apoplexy because of their allies. The Church tries to convert the pagans, but burns her heretics. It seems to be a general law in politics that hatred increases in proportion to the amount of shared convictions and interests. Accordingly, on the eve of Hitler’s victory [in the German parliament], the Socialist and Communist leaders concentrated their main efforts on fighting each other.

FROM ‘THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONVERSION’, PAGES 182–188

By the time I had finished with Engels’ “Feuerbach” and Lenin’s “State and Revolution”, something had clicked in my brain and I was shaken by a mental explosion. To say that one had “seen the light” is a poor description of the intellectual rapture which only the convert knows (regardless to what faith he has been converted). The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull; the whole universe falls into a pattern like the stray pieces in a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There is now an answer to every question; doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past – a past already remote, when one had lived in dismal ignorance in the tasteless, colourless world of those who “don’t know”.
The first, and decisive, effect which the study of Marxism had on me I can only describe by saying that, without my being aware of it, I had stepped from an intellectually open into and intellectually close world. Marxism, like orthodox Freudianism, like Catholicism, is a closed system. By ‘closed system’ I mean, firstly, a universal method of thought which claims to explain all phenomena under the sun and to have a cure for all that ails man. It is, further, a system that refuses to be modified by newly observed facts but has sufficiently elastic defences to neutralize their impact – that is, to make them fit the required pattern by a highly developed technique of casuistry. It is, thirdly, a system which, once you have stepped inside its magic circle, deprives your critical faculties of any ground to stand on.

Within the closed system of Freudian thought you cannot, for instance, argue that for certain reasons you doubt the existence of the so-called castration complex. The immediate answer will be that your arguments are rationalizations of an unconscious resistance which betrays that you yourself have such a complex. You are caught in a vicious circle from which there is no logical escape. Similarly, if you are a Marxist, and if you claim that Lenin’s order to march on Warsaw in 1920 was a mistake, it will be explained to you that you ought not to trust your own judgement because it is distorted by vestiges of your former petit-bourgeois class-consciousness. In short, the closed system excludes the possibility of objective argument by two related proceedings: (a) facts are deprived of their value as evidence by scholastic processing; (b) objections are invalidated by shifting the argument to the psychological motive behind the objection.

The disciple receives a thorough indoctrination, and an equally thorough training in the system’s particular method of reasoning. As a result of his training, he acquires a technique of argumentation which is mostly superior to that of any opponent from outside. He is thoroughly acquainted with the great debates of the past between the apostle and the unbelievers […] he recognises at once the type and attitude of his opponent, is able to classify the latter’s objections according to familiar categories; knows the questions and answers as though they were opening variants of a chess game […] can at any time make mincemeat of his ‘open-minded’ adversary and thus prove the superiority of his system to the world and to himself.

In discussion with pagans, patients, and bourgeois reactionaries, he is calm, paternal, and impressive. His superiority, his self-assurance, the radiance of his sincere belief, create a peculiar relationship between the initiate and the potential convert. […] I believe no man has become a convert without going through the phase of admiring devotion […] for the person who does the converting, and serves as a master and example.

Every closed system must of necessity develop an apostolic hierarchy. The original master, whose word is revelation, delegates his spiritual and secular authority to his select inner caucus […]. Even the member on the lowest level of the hierarchy feels that he is the bearer of a torch whose flame has been passed down to him from the Holy of Holies. […] is invested with the prestige of an esoteric order. He is not an ordinary proselytizer but a messenger from a different and fascinating world, surrounded by a halo; a purer, more dedicated, more admirable being, whose example one would like to imitate if only such dedication were within one’s power.

Worship of the proletarian appears at first sight as a typically Marxist phenomenon, but is in fact merely a new variant of romantic shepherd cults, peasant cults, noble-savage cults of the past. That, however, did not prevent Communist writers in the nineteen-thirties from feeling for workers in an automobile factory the same kind of emotion which Proust felt for his duchesses.

FROM PAGES 191–193

The rebel always has a touch of the quixotic; the revolutionary is a bureaucrat of Utopia. The rebel is an enthusiast; the revolutionary a fanatic. […] It is mostly revolutionaries who alter the material course of history; but some rebels leave a subtler and yet more lasting imprint on it.

Woe to the shepherds who feed themselves but feed not their flocks! […] I felt like […] throwing sticks of dynamite. At whom? It was an impersonal fury, directed at no individual or group in particular. […] it was directed at the System in general, at the oily hypocrisy and suicidal stupidity which were driving us all to perdition.
behind the achievements of reformers, rebels, explorers, and innovators who keep the world moving, there is always some intimate motivation – and it mostly contains a strong element of frustration, anxiety, or guilt. The happy are rarely curious; those who are smugly tucked into the social hierarchy have no reason to destroy the conventional system of values, nor to build new ones. The contempt of the hale and healthy for the neurotic is justified so long as the latter’s obsessions remain sterile and find no constructive outlet. But there is another type of neurotic who labours under the curse of experiencing a collective predicament in terms of personal pain, and has the simultaneous gift of transforming individual pain into social or artistic achievement.

FROM PAGE 195

I still regarded happiness as a problem in social engineering.

FROM PAGE 201

The mentality that I had adopted [was] one of progressive schizophrenia – a method of thinking which, while in itself coherent and even ingenious, has lost touch with reality, or produces an absurd distortion of it. […] When I ask myself with the melancholy wisdom that comes after the event, how I could have lived for years in this mental trance, I find some comfort in the thought that mediaeval scholasticism and Aristotelian exegesis lasted for a much longer period, and completely befuddled the best brains of that time; and furthermore, that even in our day many approve of the idea that ninety per cent of their contemporaries are designated for an eternal super-Auschwitz by their loving Father in heaven.