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By CHARLES POORE

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A WEEK-END devoted to reading Arthur Koestler's new book of essays, "The Trail of the Dinosaur,"* is like spending three solid days at an intellectual bicycle race. He has one of the liveliest and most probing minds of our time. But he numbs you with the swiftly changing paces of his astoundingly wide-ranging ideas.

In retrospect, it is the glancing characterizations, the byplay, that somehow stand out in your memory of what is, essentially, one more Koestlerian dirge for the parlous state of Western man's civilization.

That, I suppose, is natural. After all, he did his most memorable work, struck his greatest blows for freedom in such books as "Darkness at Noon," "Arrival and Departure," "Thieves in the Night," and "The Yogi and the Commissar"—to which this new book is a sequel or, rather, a continuation.

We know where he stands, of course, opposed to totalitarianism of every stripe. It would be ungrateful to forget, though, that we also know where the world stands much more clearly because of the light thrown by Koestler. And each time the Communist party line changes and some former Soviet hero is rubbed out or reprimanded for suddenly discovered grievous errors, we have only to look into "Darkness at Noon" to see how such policies are stage-managed in a hell-away from hell.

End of Obsessions

This book, Koestler believes, is a farewell to arms. He says that the political essays in it belong to the past, and that he has said all he has to say on questions that have obsessed him for twenty or thirty years.

"Now the errors are atoned for, the bitter passion has burnt itself out; Cassandra has grown hoarse and is due for a vocational change."



Erich Hartmann

Arthur Koestler

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Very well then. But the sketches scattered here among Cassandra's last gloomy pronouncements give excellent promise of vigorous new vocations as Koestler expands his wry observations on the human race.

Take, for example, this vignette plucked from the section called "A Guide to Political Neuroses":

"In the days of the London blitz," Koestler recalls, "the P. E. N. Club had asked Louis Golding to give a talk comparing the American to the British novel. Golding had just finished when the air-raid warning went, but the discussion was continued, business as usual. The second or third speaker was a crumpled, tweedy, lovable little man who, I believe, had written a biography of an obscure Wiltshire naturalist of the seventeenth century. He was attacking Hemingway, Dos Passos, Faulkner and others.

"It seems to me," he gently explained, "that these modern American novelists suffer from a morbid preoccupation with violence. When you read their books you would think that the ordinary man spends his life punching people's noses or being hit on the head. Now, as a matter of fact, ordinary people rarely meet with violence in their lives. They get up in the morning, potter in their gardens. * * *

"A bomb whistled and crashed some blocks

THE TRAIL OF THE DINOSAUR. And Other Essays. By Arthur Koestler. 253 pages. Macmillan. \$3.50.

away, and the anti-aircraft batteries started their infernal hollering. The little man waited patiently for the next lull, then calmly continued:

"What I mean to say is, violence rarely plays a part in ordinary people's lives, and it is positively indecent for an artist to devote so much time and space to that kind of thing. * * *

Or consider the refreshing Koestler approach to the matter of art reproduction in this world full of esthetes who shudder so predictably at the very idea of the prefabricated, the machine made. The thought of Piero della Francesca produced in bulk, he grants, is nothing to send a thousand critical hats sailing through the air.

"But," he adds, in a dialogue on "An Anatomy of Snobbery," "we have no similar objection to mass-produced gramophone records; nor to mass-produced books, and yet they too fall in the category of 'reproductions.' Why then do you prefer, according to your income, a more or less second-rate original picture on the wall to a first-rate reproduction of a masterpiece? Would you rather read a mediocre young poet in manuscript than Shakespeare in a paper-cover edition?"

Departure Is New

It's straws in the wind like these that make me think Koestler's "The Trail of the Dinosaur" may mark the beginning of a splendid new phase in his writing career.

Let's hope so, anyway. Let's hope, also, while we're about it, that he does something to free his prose style from tortuous locutions. For he still commits sentences like this one, from his piece on "The Future of the Novel": "Archetypes are ever-repeated typical experiences rooted in the human condition; inherited patterns of instinct-conflicts; the psychic residue of the 'suffering and delight that has happened countless times in our ancestral history, and on the average follows the same course.'"

Which shouldn't happen even to the notion that history repeats itself; storytellers repeat one another.

