ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH (II)

The Double Suicide of Arthur Koestler and His Wife, Cynthia

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Abstract: *The present article is a sequel of “Encounter with Death (I). An Interrupted Dialogue” (DOI:10.2478/rjp-2020-0013 Rom J Psychoanal 2020, 13(1):197-204) and it aims at exploring the possible psychoanalytical semantics of the double suicide committed by Arthur Koestler in 1983, together with his wife, Cynthia, at their home in London. It tries to relate the tragic event (in the context of Koestler’s previous life-threatening experience in the prison of Seville) to the Freudian death drive and to Imre Hermann’s clinging instinct, as approached in Philippe Van Haute and Tomas Geyskens’s book “From Death Instinct to Attachment Theory”.*

Keywords: Koestler, death drive, clinging instinct, aggressiveness, double suicide.

Introduction. The Facts

On the 1st of March 1983, A. Koestler, aged 77, committed suicide together with his wife, Cynthia, in their home, in Montpellier Square (London), by ingesting barbiturate tablets of “Tuinal” with

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whiskey and wine. The writer had been suffering from Parkinson's disease, as well as from chronic leukemia for several years. Yet, at the time of their suicide, Cynthia was in her 50's and rather in good health. Although both spouses had left a letter in which they explained the reasons behind their terrible decision, the public scrutiny raised the question of Koestler's moral responsibility for having accepted his wife's demise as an act of supreme loyalty to him. From Michael Scammell's famous biography *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic* we find out that Cynthia's father also committed suicide (actually, he committed suicide when she was only 13), but, prior to her husband's decision to take his own life, there were no signs of her flirting with the idea, according to one of the couple's friends (Scammell, 2009, p. 12759, Chapter 48). In June 1982, Koestler had already written his suicidal note, feeling that his ever worsening medical condition would soon reach the point of no return. In the letter, he said that he was leaving "in a peaceful frame of mind, with some timid hopes for a depersonalized afterlife beyond the confines of space, time, and matter, and beyond the limits of our comprehension. This "oceanic feeling" has often sustained me at difficult moments, and does so now, while I am writing this" (Scammell, 2009, p. 12745, Chapter 48). The "oceanic feeling" mentioned in the suicide letter, firstly contemplated or mentally perceived as a sense of "infinite" at the age of 12, when he imagined the trajectory of an arrow overcoming gravity (Laval, 2005, p. 19), would become a real epiphany in the prison of Seville, while waiting for his execution (Laval, 2005, p. 223). In *Dialogue with Death* the author describes it as "pure time" (complete awareness of time brought to a standstill) or "nothingness" (Koestler, 1937, pp. 323-324). In *The*

Invisible Writing, this almost mystical feeling represents the total dissolution of the “I”: “I was floating on my back in a river of peace, under bridges of silence. It came from nowhere. There was no river and no I. The I ceased to exist” (Koestler, 1954, p. 370).

We also discover from Scammell’s biography that his preoccupation with the practical matters related to ending one’s life went back to 1969, when he became a member of the *British Euthanasia Society*. Given the fact that after the double suicide, an “Exit booklet” with “details of how to kill oneself, with Koestler’s own summary of the steps required” was found, there is no doubt about the seriousness and meticulousness with which he approached the subject. As for his concerns about Cynthia, years prior to her decision to join him in death, the writer had seemed to be deeply worried about what would become of her after his passing, according to another friend of the couple... (Scammell, 2009, p. 12790, Chapter 48).

But what were Cynthia’s good-bye words? “I fear both death and the act of dying that lies ahead of us. However, I cannot live without Arthur, despite certain inner resources. Double suicide has never appealed to me; but now Arthur’s incurable diseases have reached a stage where there is nothing else to do” (Scammell, 2009, p. 12766, Chapter 48). A laconic, 100% rational account of the situation... No hopes, no projections about the afterlife, emotions or fantasies about it. Should these thoughts been interpreted as a peaceful acceptance of her fate or rather as an indication of possible defense mechanisms (rationalization, isolation of the affect) at play?

Double suicide is considered to be quite unusual in Western culture, compared to its traditional roots in Japan, resurfacing after World War II, as well as in the most recent years. At least at the time

Arthur and Cynthia Koestler committed it, there had been only two famous precedents in the European literary world: the double suicide of German writer Heinrich von Kleist & his close friend Henriette Vogel in 1811, and that of Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig & his wife Charlotte in 1942.

If we were to look at the Koestlers' suicide pact from a psychoanalytical point of view, what would be the most relevant (for us) observations to make?

The Suicide. A Freudian Perspective

Arthur Koestler's first significant encounter with death happened when he was 32, in the prison of Seville, while waiting to be executed by the nationalists of General Franco. The first supposition we made when putting this near-death experience into the context of his late suicide was that killing himself might have been "his way to have the last word in this dialogue of youth, interrupted way back in Spain ... or a declaration of freedom (see liberation / feeling of infinity), together with the restoration of his self-esteem as a human being, seriously injured during that first confrontation with death" (Popescu, 2000, p. 202). His conviction that life should be ended before the undignified rhetoric of the body degradation became too loud took, through his suicide, the form of a final statement, allowing for this "oceanic feeling" or, in other words, for this longing for nirvana (or death drive) to finally reach its purpose. However, what was Arthur's first traumatic experience at the core of the compulsion to repetition, responsible for constantly putting him in difficult, risky or life threatening situations

(as a Zionist in the collective farm in Palestine, as a Communist sentenced to death in the prison of Seville, as a daring opponent to Communism afterwards, or even as a member of the North Pole expedition of the *Graf Zeppelin* etc.), to eventually make him commit suicide? Apparently, when he was 5, little Arthur was subjected to the horrifying experience of having his tonsils torn out of his throat by dr. Neubauer, a relative of his parents, “with no explanation before the procedure and very little afterward” and - most appalling of all - “without benefit of anesthetic” (Scammell, 2005, p. 451, Chapter 1). As he recalls in *Arrow in the Blue*, “Those moments of utter loneliness abandoned by my parents, in the clutches of a hostile and malign power, filled me with a kind of cosmic terror.” (Koestler, 1952, p. 34). It was then that he felt what he would call the “archaic horror” to which he “was inclined to attribute his adult preoccupation with violence, terror and torture” (Scammell, 2009, p. 451, Chapter 1). It would probably be worth mentioning that Arthur Koestler authored, in 1956, *Reflections on Hanging*, a book in which he pleads for the abolition of the death penalty, by presenting its history throughout the centuries in England. Apart for the moral and philosophical arguments, the approach also gives graphic, gruesome details regarding the physiology of the death through hanging...

If we were to look for the unconscious reasons behind the writer’s suicide, other than those he offered as a rational explanation, Freud’s theory of the death instinct and the compulsion to repetition from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), together with that regarding the primacy of a vital infant trauma from *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926) might speak volumes when we examine Koestler’s life and death history. In other words, the traumatic event of tonsils

extraction at the age of 5 might be interpreted as the one triggering the compulsion to repeat life situations of “archaic terror”, humiliation and loss, evoking the passivity and helplessness of the baby, entirely dependent on the mother for his vital needs to be taken care of. What is particularly relevant about this brutal surgical intervention is that it came as a complete shock for little Arthur, in the absence of any previous explanation that could have prepared him for what was about to happen. Its violent character highly qualified it for the compulsion to repetition, whose function in the mental apparatus is to allow the development of the anxiety that couldn’t be experienced at the moment of the event due to its sudden occurrence. According to Freud, the force of the trauma is directly proportional to its unexpectedness (Freud, 1926, p. 32).

In conclusion, the compulsion to repeat as a way to actively relive the traumatic event rather than being subjected to it powerlessly, might have driven Arthur Koestler to act it out in various life-threatening situations throughout his life, till he eventually committed suicide, in a final attempt to take control over the “archaic horror”.

The Double Suicide: Oscillating between Attachment, Separation and Aggression

Had Arthur Koestler taken his own life as any of the long-listed suicidal writers in the history of literature did, the present article might have stopped here. But he and his wife left this world together, as a result of a meticulously planned suicidal pact that put an end to a long and abusive relationship. Not only had the author of *Darkness at Noon* been a notorious philanderer before meeting Cynthia Jeffries, but he

continued to have relations with other women long after having become intimate with her. Born in South Africa, she was only 22 when he started working for him as a secretary. Many of those who knew the couple confessed that Koestler never really cared about her feelings, constantly humiliating and using her in a dictatorial manner: as his assistant, lover, cook, housekeeper, nurse, friend, and servant or (later on) wife. To the end of his life though, when the advancement of his debilitating diseases made him completely dependent on her, the balance of power between the two of them changed radically. “George Mikes was astonished one day to hear Cynthia laugh almost hysterically over one of Koestler’s mispronunciations of an English word. She would never have laughed that loudly before, he felt, let alone in front of the others, and he realized that as Koestler had grown more dependent on Cynthia, her self-confidence had steadily increased. She had ‘achieved her childhood dream’. She was not just the secretary of a writer; she was his wife and keeper. She was now obliged to drive him everywhere. He couldn’t go out without her, and was in effect her prisoner” (Scammell, 2009, p. 12728, Chapter 48). Some friends considered that Koestler would have never wanted Cynthia to commit suicide with him “and would have resented it for interfering with the message he wished to give the world on the virtues of euthanasia”, while another was convinced that “Cynthia would have never done it if Koestler had allowed her to have children” (Scammell, 2009, pp. 12893-12904, Epilogue). Enemies, instead, blamed him for talking her into it... Yet everybody agreed on one thing: that she had been bullied by him during almost their entire relation. A sadistic-masochistic union that perfectly fitted his psychological, as well as sexual aggressiveness, since many of his lovers seemingly complained about it. Whether he

consciously approved or not of his wife's decision to follow him in death is less relevant. The fact is that, having a long history of placing himself in 'death instinct related' situations, as well as of leaving one after the other not just his women, but also his political causes/ideologies, it is probably not by chance that Cynthia was the only one allowed to accompany him in this journey to eternity. Why she, of all significant women in his life (two previous wives and a long list of lovers)? In order to answer this question we might need to go back to his childhood and take a closer look at his relation with his mother, Adele. "The very chapter in which Koestler recounts his childhood is called 'The Tree of Guilt'. It's hard to say how just this is, or when Koestler started to blame his mother for his later miseries. His few childhood letters to her that have survived are conventionally effusive and adoring, but there are very few from her to him, and her frequent absences from home suggest that she was indeed a cold, egotistical, and selfish person, whom he held responsible for his own mood swings, inferiority complex, rootlessness, and obsessive search for nirvana in the arms of countless women" (Scammell, 2009, p. 301, Chapter 1). In response to this treatment, as an adult, he continually distanced himself from her throughout his entire life. Cynthia, on the other hand, is described by another friend of the Koestlers, Elizabeth Jane Howard, as a woman who "was totally flexible and totally accommodating toward Koestler, accepting his bullying, his seductions of other women, and everything he could throw at her, but 'she never broke. And in the end he became dependent on her, and it was she who got the upper hand'" (Scammell, 2009, p. 12904, Epilogue).

It is obvious that Cynthia, as the opposite feminine figure to his cold, neglecting and egotistic mother (opposite to the extent of a

complete dissolution of her personal identity into “moral masochism”), nevertheless managed to undo some of the damages Adele made to her son’s capability to form attachments to people. With respect to that, a more appropriate interpretation framework at this point of our analysis might derive from the work of Hungarian psychoanalyst Imre Hermann (1889-1984) who, as Philippe Van Haute and Tomas Geyskens demonstrate in their book “From Death Instinct to Attachment Theory”, addressed the Freudian-Kleinian problematic of death instinct from the perspective of a clinical anthropology of attachment (Van Haute et al, 2007, p. 98).

In short, from the ethological study of apes, Hermann came to the conclusion that various forms of attachment behavior (as Bowlby would also explore later on) are original dimensions of the instinct (and not derivatives of the sexual instinct or of the instinct of preservation, as Freud believed). “The need to be in the vicinity of the mother occurs in all higher primates as an original innate tendency. No one escapes from being left on one’s own once in a while, just as everyone will sooner or later be obliged to separate from his or her mother. This is one of the inevitable vicissitudes of attachment. For this reason Hermann postulates a universal experience of insecurity (*Haltlosigkeit* – lack of hold, having nothing to hold on to). The loss of the object is not primarily a problem of the vital needs of hunger and thirst; it is first and foremost a loss of ground. According to Hermann, the most basic anxiety is consequently not the fear of the tension of needs (Freud) or the fear of the death instinct, but the fear of being abandoned by others. The primal catastrophe according to Hermann, is not a question of hunger, but the traumatic separation from the mother to whom we cling, and who holds us tight” (Van Haute et al, 2007, p. 130). The Hungarian

psychoanalyst's point of view is that aggressiveness forms through the frustration of this instinct and it is not a reflection of the death instinct. Frustration of the clinging instinct can also have as an effect the reaction formation "of separating from the mother at all costs", the tendency to separation being not an original instinct, but the effect of the cultural suppression of the instinctual tendency to cling to the mother, which actively repeats in a non-traumatic manner the earlier separation from the mother that the child endured passively (Van Haute et al, 2007, p.137).

By comparing the two psychoanalytical frameworks that we have employed so far as different means to understand Kostlerian repetition of life threatening experiences and the double suicide, we have come to the conclusion that Hermann's perspective seems to offer a more coherent approach to both of them. If the active repetition of the separation from the mother as a secondary instinct or reaction formation of "separating from her at all costs" can be the alternative to the Freudian death instinct, then it is worth noticing that, in this form, it may explain not only the writer's compulsion to repeat life threatening experiences, but also his obstinate attitude of detachment towards his mother as an adult. At the same time, the other feminine figure that he ultimately invested with apparently similar importance (by finally becoming completely dependent on her, as an infant depends on his mother), his third wife, Cynthia, manages to deflate this reaction formation of separation (separation from his primary object of attachment (the cold and selfish mother), as well as from all women that he intensely cathected at some point or the other in his existential adventure. We may also notice the aggression at play in his interactions with women (he was often accused of sexual brutality), and the

continuous search for ideals and causes, to which he never got completely attached, at least not for good.

Conclusions

Obviously, the present article does not intend to suggest in any way an axiological hierarchy with respect to the Freudian theory of death instinct and to that of attachment proposed by Imre Hermann in his article *Sich Anklammern – Auf Suche gehen* in 1936. But the latter seemed to us apt to address more interesting aspects of the case in question.

As a final conclusion, we might say that, if we had to consider Hermann's theory of attachment, then the double suicide of Arthur and Cynthia Koestler would (paradoxically) offer the writer the double benefit of acting out the ultimate and irrevocable gesture of separation from his mother, thus carrying out the purpose of a repeated reaction formation throughout his lifetime (aggravated by her neglect and coldness) while, at the same time, phantasmatically reuniting with her through the commitment of the everlasting suicidal pact between him and his wife, rejuvenated and benevolent symbol of the original attachment to the first love object. In other words, we would be talking of the fulfillment of the clinging instinct in death. Not to mention the collateral satisfaction of the aggression instinct directed to women as a punishment for the maternal egotistic detachment

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