Becoming Elias Canetti

by Roger Kimball

Elias Canetti is regarded by many as one of the century’s most distinguished writers. At least since he was awarded the Nobel Prize, in 1981, he has been regularly compared, if not to Proust or Joyce or Mann, then certainly to his Viennese brethren Robert Musil and Hermann Broch. Yet one suspects that, in America at leasts Canetti’s works have been rather more respected than read. This is particularly true in the case of the two long and difficult books upon which his reputation mainly rests: *Auto-da-Fé* (1935), his first and only novel, and *Crowds and Power* (1960), the meticulously idiosyncratic contribution to social theory that he considers his major work.[1]

In fact, Canetti is one of that handful of writers whose reputations have been successfully nourished largely offstage. His relatively few works have aspired to be exemplary productions: scrupulously avant-garde yet “large” enough in their ambition to command mainstream critical attention. But the long periods between works seem equally exemplary. Canetti’s silences are conspicuous silences. In this age of volubility, when many writers seem to be as intent on keeping their name in front of the public as they are on cultivating their art, simply being circumspect about publishing one’s work precipitously carries with it a presumption of integrity. And Canetti has been nothing if not circumspect. *Crowds and Power*, for example, was the result of over twenty years of research and meditation, followed by another eleven years devoted to writing. “I realized,” Canetti wrote in one recollection, “that one can devote a whole lifetime to one or two works, and patience, which I had always admired, acquired something monumental for me.” Such reticence has endowed his career with an aura of self-possession and authenticity. Though his fame as a writer has grown slowly—“accreted,” one is tempted to say—it has matured without compromise or adulteration. The pearl-like result is remarkable as much for its carefully nurtured shape as for its beguiling sheen.

With the publication of the first two volumes of Canetti’s memoirs, *The Tongue Set Free: Remembrance of a European Childhood* (1977) and *The Torch in My Ear* (1980), something of this painstaking development was set before us. These volumes took us from Canetti’s itinerant childhood through his intellectual maturity in Vienna. They provided a moving portrait of the writer’s family and youth—especially of his intensely intimate, though increasingly strained,
relationship with his mother—and set forth the formative enthusiasms of his intellectual apprenticeship in the Twenties.

The recent appearance of the third volume of memoirs, *The Play of the Eyes*, completes the chronicle of Canetti’s early years.[2] Bringing us through the death of his mother in 1937, the trilogy includes a detailed account of the years in which he wrote *Auto-da-Fé* (1930-31) and two of his three major plays,[3] and formulated the basic argument of *Crowds and Power*. In addition, the second and third volumes, especially, contain sharply realized sketches of the many leading cultural figures that populated Canetti’s life in the Twenties and Thirties. Freud fails to make an onstage appearance—we learn that Canetti’s antipathy to Freud’s theories is deep—but Karl Kraus, Alban Berg, Hermann Broch, Berthold Brecht, George Grosz, Oskar Kokoschka, Robert Musil, and others of similar stature emerge with a sometimes ruthless clarity in these pages. Besides supplying us with revealing tableaux of Canetti’s distinguished friends and acquaintances, these memoirs tell us a good deal about his own developing preoccupations—his rebellion against the fact of death, his fascination with the phenomenon of the crowd, his elevation of aesthetic fastidiousness to an almost moral passion. Indeed, taken together, Canetti’s memoirs may be said to offer us an unsurpassed introduction to the motivating themes, influences, and *dramatis personae* that made up the substance of his work and world. As such, they provide an apt occasion to review the signal ambitions and achievements of this difficult writer.

Since 1938, when he fled Austria to escape Hitler, Canetti has divided his time mostly between London and Zurich. But his beginnings were hardly so cosmopolitan. He was born in Ruschuk, Bulgaria, in 1905, to well-established Sephardic parents with deep familial and business ties in the area. The first of three sons, he seems to have been quite doted upon. Nevertheless, his childhood was not what one would describe as blissful. “When I think back on my early years,” he tells us in *The Tongue Set Free*, “the very first things I recognize are the fears, of which there was an inexhaustible wealth.” The word “terror” and its variants occur with notable frequency in this first volume of memoirs, whose title would seem to recall not only Canetti’s growing command of language but perhaps also, in a macabre way, his inauguration to fear. The book opens with his earliest memory, of a smiling man who approaches him in a friendly manner when he is out walking with the maid:

He steps right up close to me, halts, and says: “Show me your tongue.” I stick out my tongue, he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a jackknife, opens it, and brings the blade all the way to my tongue. He says: “Now we’ll cut off his tongue.” I don’t dare pull back my tongue, he comes closer and closer, the blade will touch me any second. In the last moment, he pulls back the knife, saying, “Not today, tomorrow.” He snaps the knife shut again and puts it back in his pocket.

Every morning, we step out of the door . . . and the smiling man appears .... That’s how the day starts, and it happens very often.
The smiling man turned out to be the maid’s lover, his jackknife the means to secure the young Canetti’s silence.

The rich, polyglot, still largely peasant culture of Ruschuk no doubt did much to stock Canetti’s imagination. His work, especially his purely literary work, has a crowded earthiness that one may plausibly trace to the influence of those early years. But the town came to be a prison for his parents. They had courted and married in Vienna, and their hearts had remained there; they reserved German as their language of intimacy, speaking only Ladino, a Sephardic Spanish dialect, to the children and the rest of the family. Both parents had had artistic aspirations, his mother in the world of the theater, his father primarily in music. The pressures of marriage, their own domineering parents, and a growing family business conspired to blight those aspirations, tearing the couple away from their beloved Vienna and forcing the provincialities of Ruschuk upon them. Canetti’s father, Jacques, seems to have found life there particularly oppressive. He seized the chance to move his family to Manchester, England, when a suitable business opportunity opened up in 1911. Jacques’s own father, the family patriarch, strongly, intractably, opposed the move; a few days before his son was to depart for England with his family, he solemnly cursed him in public and swore he would have nothing more to do with him.

Canetti spent about two years in Manchester. He began attending school, learned English, and grew quite close to his father, who gave him children’s versions of Dante, Grimm’s fairy tales, *The Arabian Nights*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Tales from Shakespeare*, and other works, patiently reviewing his son’s reading with him every evening. The grandfather Canetti’s curse proved cruelly potent, however: in the fall of 1912, when he was but thirty years old, Jacques Canetti died suddenly, apparently of a stroke. In what he describes as “the final version” of his father’s death, Canetti tells us that his mother much later confessed that his father had been in a jealous rage when he died. She had just returned, at his father’s insistence, from taking the cure at Bad Reichenhall, where she had twice prolonged her stay. Her doctor there had fallen in love with her—largely, it seems, over their spirited discussions of the plays of August Strindberg, who was his mother’s favorite playwright. In the end, nothing happened between them. But when she returned and told Jacques of the doctor’s attentions, he became furious, refused to believe her innocent, and threatened not to speak a word to her until she confessed everything. His resolve lasted until the next day, when after a sleepless night he collapsed and died.

A few months after his father’s death, Canetti moved with his mother and two brothers first to Zurich and then to Vienna. On the way to Vienna, his mother decided that the time had come to initiate him into the German language. Her method was nothing if not simple. She would recite German sentences to him and make him repeat them until she was satisfied with his pronunciation; then she would translate them for him once only and expect him to remember them. Patience was never her special virtue, however, and when he failed to remember his lesson correctly, she grew exasperated and rewarded him by shouting such encouraging remarks as, “My son’s an idiot! I didn’t realize that my son’s an idiot!” or “Your father knew German too, what
would your father say!”

The romantic, high-strung, imperiously demanding temperament of Canetti’s mother played a dominating role in his life. Nevertheless—or perhaps for this very reason—Canetti became extremely close to his mother in succeeding years, in many respects taking his father’s place as the emotional center of her world. He supported her in her grief, her guilt, assuming emotional and intellectual responsibilities beyond his years. At the age of ten, he would spend evenings reading and discussing Shakespeare, Schiller, and the wonders of the theater with her. Not surprisingly, he did not look with favor upon his mother’s suitors, of whom there were not a few. In 1915, he recalls, when she seemed to be encouraging the attentions of one hopeful candidate, “the jealousy that tortured me all my life commenced, and the force with which it came over me marked me forever. It became my true passion . . . .” About the same time, when he overheard his mother talking with his grandmother and aunt about the possibility of remarrying, he burst into the room and declared, “If you get married, I’ll jump off the balcony.’ It was a terrible threat, it was meant in earnest; I know with absolute certainty that I would have done it.”

The threat worked. Canetti’s mother never did remarry, preferring to devote—or, as she liked to put it, to “sacrifice”—herself to her son. Such sacrifices are not purchased lightly, of course, and she never let him forget it. In later years, whenever Canetti would become seriously involved with a woman, his mother would revile her and upbraid him for ingratitude. He learned to practice an elaborate dissimulation about his private life, inventing numerous casual liaisons to distract her. When he finally got married, in 1935, to a woman named Veza (I do not believe Canetti ever tells us her maiden name), he attempted to keep news of his marriage from his mother. She soon discovered it, however, and before long wrote to him saying that she never wanted to see him again.

Canetti’s mother is the emotional lodestar of The Tongue Set Free and much of The Torch in My Ear. As he grows more independent, other, equally formidable, personalities and his own work—above all his own work—crowd in upon his life, tearing him further and further from his mother’s orbit. She is not a major presence in most of The Play of the Eyes. But it is only fitting that this extraordinary woman should return to center stage at the end of the volume, exerting for one last time her claim on Canetti’s allegiance and bringing this cycle of memoirs to a close. In June, 1937, two years after his mother had broken with him, Canetti received word from his youngest brother that she was mortally ill. He went to Paris to see her, and presented her with a bouquet of roses that he said were from Ruschuk. The imperious old lady lay there and took in the fragrance of the roses, the fragrance of her childhood, seeming to accept them and pardon their giver. Even now, though, she did nothing to make things easy. At first she asked her son to move his chair farther and farther from her bed, until finally he was sitting in the corner on the other side of the room. Time and again she told him to leave the room and wait outside.
Her breathing grew weaker, but the power of her eyes grew stronger .... She looked at me until she hated me. Then she said: “Go!” Every day she said that several times, and each time it was to punish me ... . Then I would wait in the next room until the nurse came in and nodded to let me know my mother had asked for me. When I went in to her, her gaze would seize hold of me with such force that I feared it would exhaust her, her eyes grew wider and brighter, she said nothing. Then suddenly would gasp: “Go!”

A few days later, she was dead. The play of the eyes had ended.

In many respects, Canetti’s youth was extraordinarily sheltered. “It was true that I didn’t want to learn what the world was like,” he noted about his life in the mid-Twenties. “I had the feeling that by gaining insight into something objectionable, I would make myself its accomplice.” Canetti’s own works, which deal with a great many objectionable things, suggest that he later came to appreciate the value of such insight, though it may be that elements of his earlier reticence lived on in his insistence on absolute artistic purity and distaste for anything having to do with business. But throughout his adolescence, he strove to preserve for himself a spiritually rarefied atmosphere untroubled by anything worldly. When he went to school in Zurich in his early adolescence, for example, he lived at a girls’ boarding school, and was the only male at the school. But his mother had managed to impose a taboo on sexual intimacy so successfully that then and for years afterwards, he claims, “I never asked about sex, it was never on my mind . . . .”

At this time, at least, his pleasures would seem to have been exclusively cerebral. He read voraciously, was precocious in his literary tastes, and soon began to develop literary interests of his own. At fourteen, he wrote a play based on the career of Junius Brutus, the Roman consul who had had his sons executed for taking part in a conspiracy against the Republic. He sent the play to his mother with great expectations, but her lack of reaction led him to make a more sober estimate of its aesthetic merits: “There may have been young writers revealing talent at the age of fourteen. I was definitely not one of them.”

It was around this time, too, that Canetti began to develop a serious—or at least a sustained—interest in science and natural history. “‘Scientific’ became a magic word for me at that time,” he recalled, though, at least initially, his mother was none too encouraging about his scientific endeavors. She always insisted that education have a direct relevance to “life” (the word as she used it must appear in quotation marks), and for her a purely intellectual concern with “the phylogeny of spinach”—as she was wont to disparage his scientific studies—was simply a waste of time. Not that she encouraged him to pursue his studies for any merely practical end; in accordance with her romantic-theatrical—not to say histrionic—conception of “life,” the main thing was to express oneself forcefully on the stage of cultured society. While Canetti never had any real intention of pursuing a scientific career, he nevertheless persevered with his studies, eventually taking a Ph.D. in chemistry at the University of Vienna in 1929.

Canetti describes his two years at the boarding school in Zurich, from 1919 to 1921, as “a time without fear
"and “the only perfectly happy years” of his life. Yet his mother had other ideas about his time there. She had become increasingly worried about the self-absorbed path her son’s life was taking at the cloistered environment of the boarding school. Visiting him in 1920, she delivered herself of a devastating harangue, accusing him of living a life of decadence and effeminacy, a life oblivious to the pulse of real life. Real life is not a matter of books, she insisted; while he might be perfectly content to sit there and study, eventually— he was fifteen at the time— "One has to stop learning and do something. That’s why you have to get away from here.” “You’ve done nothing” Canetti reports her as saying.

“Do you really think you’re a human being? A human being is someone who has struggled through life. Have you ever been in any danger? Has anyone ever threatened you? No one’s ever smashed your nose .... You’re not a human being yet. You’re nothing. A chatterbox is no human being.”

Her prescription for transforming him into a human being was a healthy dose of German discipline, and thus Canetti soon found himself removed to Frankfurt, where he lived for the next few years with his mother and brothers. Now once again, he writes, his life was “filled with terror.” But while he claims that he never got over leaving Zurich, he concludes that he, “like the earliest man, came into being only by an expulsion from Paradise.”

Canetti’s first, and in many respects his most important, guide outside the Eden of Zurich was the Viennese satirist and radical pacifist Karl Kraus. Kraus was an enormously influential figure in Viennese intellectual circles—rivaled, according to Canetti, only by Freud. Since 1899, when he started the fortnightly polemical journal *Die Fackel*, “The Torch,” Kraus had devoted himself body and soul to exposing the hypocrisy and aesthetic decadence of fin de siècle Viennese life. Kraus’s criticism was verbally brilliant, often savage, and his standards of honesty ruthless—so ruthless, it seems, that in time he concluded that only he could fulfill them: after 1911 he became the magazine’s sole contributor.

By all accounts, Kraus was also an extraordinarily effective orator, devastatingly sensitive to the linguistic foibles and subterfuges of his targets. As it happened, when Canetti first heard him lecture, in 1924, he was not much impressed. But in time Kraus became his paragon. Canetti estimates that all told he attended some one hundred of Kraus’s lectures. The influence of Kraus’s example on Canetti shows itself nowhere more clearly than in his unremittingly serious approach to language; “how sick I was of seeing words thus debased,” Canetti writes in one typical passage, “for I took them so seriously that I even disliked distorting them for playful purposes, I wanted them intact, and I wanted them to carry their full force.” Language was the torch in Canetti’s ear, and there can be little doubt that it was lit in large part by his encounter with Karl Kraus and *Die Fackel*. Kraus’s passionate satire was instrumental in awakening Canetti to the world, in giving his work the sense of direction and critical edge—what Canetti himself would later identify as a sense of “responsibility”—that life outside Paradise required.
Canetti's introduction to the world continued in Vienna—he met Veza around this time—and was as it were perfected by his visit to Berlin in the summer of 1928 at the invitation of the publisher Wieland Herzfelde. For one of Canetti’s fastidious, even, as he describes it, “puritanical” constitution, Berlin in the Twenties was both a shock and a revelation. Its sleazy nightlife, frenetic pace, and ambience of despair contrasted markedly with Vienna, whose decadence was still wrapped in the garb of middle-class respectability. Above all, Berlin was awash with famous people. “So here I was in Berlin,” Canetti writes, “never taking more than ten steps without running into a celebrity.” Herzfelde seemed to know everyone, and Canetti was soon introduced to the leading literary and artistic personalities of Weimar Berlin, most notably to Berthold Brecht and George Grosz. He was also finally introduced personally to Karl Kraus, who was a friend of Brecht’s and was visiting Berlin at the time. Canetti was astonished and delighted when he went with Herfelde to meet Grosz at his studio and the artist gave him a copy of his Ecce Homo prints, which had been banned as obscene. Grosz’s biting exposés of corrupt Berlin society were just the thing to appeal to Canetti’s sensibility. “His drawings had struck me to the core at first sight,” Canetti recalls. “Since they were extreme, I regarded them as Truth.”

In Canetti’s view, it was only on returning to Vienna in the fall of 1929 after his second trip to Berlin that his “necessary life” really began. His official studies were at an end; he had received his Ph.D. in chemistry in June. What continued and accelerated were the unofficial studies that would occupy him for the rest of his life. He worked translating Upton Sinclair into German to make a living, but devoted his best energies to his own writing projects. In a room somberly decorated with a print of Grunewald’s Isenheim altarpiece and looking out on the Steinhof insane asylum, he was seized with the inspiration for what would become Auto-da-Fé. He originally envisioned an eight-part epic to be titled the Human Comedy of Madmen. He spent the year 1929-30 in an ecstasy of writing. It was, he recalled, “the richest, most unbridled year of my life.” He worked in a fever, sketching his various madmen, among them a religious fanatic, a technological visionary, a spendthrift, a man obsessed with truth, and a Büchermensch, a “Book Man” who lives only for and among his books. In the end, it was the Book Man who emerged from the crowd of characters to capture Canetti’s imagination. He postponed his epic ambitions, devoting the following year, 1930-31, to writing a novel about him.

Essentially, Auto-da-Fé is a cautionary tale, depicting in graphic detail how reality can be capsized by obsession. It tells the story of Professor Peter Kien, “man of learning and specialist in sinology,” whose ruling passion is his personal library of more than twenty-five thousand volumes. Auto-da-Fé is a long and involved novel, complicated by several subplots. But the main action recounts Kien’s violent though celibate marriage to his uneducated housekeeper, Therese, who with her starched blue skirts and her own obsessive personality is perhaps Canetti’s most successfully realized character. Kien grows increasingly out of touch with reality as the novel unfolds, until in the third and last section, “The World in the Head,” he is a full-fledged paranoiac. This is the “blinding” to which the book’s German title primarily refers. The tale ends with Kien’s self-
immolation in his beloved library. “When the flames reached him at last,” the narrator concludes, “he laughed out loud, louder than he had ever laughed in all his life.”

Canetti knew from the start that the novel would end with the Book Man’s self-immolation; the symbolic significance of fire, soon to be developed at length in *Crowds and Power*, was already one of his main preoccupations. He had accordingly named his protagonist “Brand,” that is, “conflagration,” in his first sketches. As work on the novel progressed, “Brand” was rechristened “Kant” and the book was provocatively entitled *Kant Catches Fire*. It was Hermann Broch who insisted that the name “Kant” be changed. Canetti settled finally on “Kien” — “resinous pinewood” — thus preserving a hint of the combustibility he had tokened with “Brand.”[4]

In tone, outlook, and texture, *Auto-da-Fé* may be described as a cross between Kafka (Canetti mentions that he first read *The Metamorphosis* around this time) and the Borges of stories like “The Library of Babel.” It possesses, at any rate, something of the nightmarish quality of Kafka’s tales as well as the cosmically displaced intellectuality that Borges specialized in. In a 1973 essay on the composition of *Auto-da-Fé*, Canetti recalls that “One day, the thought came to me that the world should not be depicted as in earlier novels, from one writer’s standpoint as it were; the world had crumbled, and only if one had the courage to show it in its crumbled state could one possibly offer an authentic conception of it.”[5] Surely, *Auto-da-Fé* succeeds in depicting the world in a “crumbled state.” And in this respect it is undoubtedly an imaginative triumph of sorts; in sheer relentlessness, at least, it can have few rivals.

But I doubt whether even Canetti’s most ardent admirers could wish that he had gone on to complete his epic. The idea that there might have been eight volumes like *Auto-da-Fé* is a prospect unpleasant to contemplate. For notwithstanding its obvious force and integrity, *Auto-da-Fé* is a brutal book. I suspect that most readers will agree with Hermann Broch when he accuses Canetti of being deliberately, even gratuitously, “terrifying” and complains of the “grotesqueness” of his characters. “You believe in alarming people to the point of panic,” Canetti quotes Broch as saying. “[Y]ou end cruelly, mercilessly, with destruction .... Does it mean that you yourself have not found a way out or that you doubt the existence of a way out?”

Canetti answers no, but his response to completing the book suggests a more ambiguous reply. He begins *The Play of the Eyes* by claiming that he, too, had been devastated by the fire that consumed his character Professor Kien and his twenty-five thousand books. “What happens in that kind of book is not just a game, it is reality,” he tells us solemnly. Like many of Canetti’s more portentous comments about his own work, it is probably best not to consider this statement too closely. It seems designed mostly to underscore the existential pathos with which he would have us invest the work. At any rate, Canetti never really returned to the *Human Comedy of Madmen*. In his search for a “way out” of the chaos of modern life he embarked upon different paths: his satirical plays and, especially, his monumental study of mass behavior, *Crowds and Power*.

For many readers, the chief interest of *The Play of the Eyes* will be in the many sketches it provides
of Canetti’s literary and artistic colleagues. There are portraits of Hermann Broch, the egotistical, womanizing conductor Hermann Scherchen (“He seemed to conduct [women] into loving him,” Canetti observes, “and dropped them before they had even settled into their new position”), the composer Alban Berg, the sculptor Fritz Wotruba, and others. Perhaps because it is such a common feature of real life, pettiness among the great is a leitmotif of these pages. Thus we encounter James Joyce at a reading Canetti gave of his play *The Comedy of Vanity* in 1935. The play pictures a society that has been paralyzed by mass-hysteria after all mirrors and photographs are prohibited; vanity, and perhaps personality itself, demands its reflection in images. At the intermission, Joyce approached Canetti and said sourly, “I shave with a straight razor and no mirror,” and left without uttering another word.

Nor does Robert Musil emerge in particularly flattering colors. Musil was clearly one of Canetti’s literary heroes; of his great, unfinished novel, *The Man Without Qualities* (the first volume of which was published in 1930), Canetti remarks that it is “endless in two senses, immortal as well as unfinished.” In his estimation, “among those who passed as writers in Vienna, or perhaps the whole German-speaking world, there was none of his rank.” Musil himself, however, was not so generous. He casually disparaged the work of Broch—whom he hardly considered a writer at all—Joyce, and others. And though he went out of his way to congratulate Canetti on his success with *Auto-da-Fé*, he quickly retreated when Canetti responded by mentioning that he’d just received a long letter from Thomas Mann praising his book. “Did you?” Musil replied, and withdrew coldly. “With that,” Canetti observes, “I was dismissed. Dismissed forever.” (Apparently Musil did not like having his praise adulterated by company, even by the likes of Thomas Mann.) He was, writes Canetti, “touchier in his self-esteem than anyone else I have known.”

Canetti’s most disturbing portrait is undoubtedly of the composer’s widow, Alma Mahler, who was then married to the writer Franz Werfel. Canetti was for a short time romantically involved with her daughter, Anna, a sculptress, who introduced him to the predatory old woman. She received him in her garden, surrounded by her “trophies,” to which she directed his attention one by one. There was, for example, the vitrine in which Mahler’s Tenth Symphony, left unfinished at the time of his death, lay open to the pages where he had forlornly indited “Almshi, beloved Almshi” to her; then there was the portrait of her as Lucrezia Borgia, painted by her unhappy lover, Oskar Kokoschka. Finally, there was her living trophy, another daughter, a stunning young girl of about sixteen. “Beautiful, isn’t she?” Alma Mahler asked, when the girl presented herself before them.

“This is my daughter Manon. By Gropius. In a class by herself.... Like father, like daughter. Did you ever see Gropius? A big handsome man. The true Aryan type. The only man who was racially suited to me. All the others who fell in love with me were little Jews. Like Mahler. The fact is, I go for both kinds.”

It is only fair that Alma Mahler, so proud of her conquests, should herself have been transformed
into a trophy of sorts. According to Canetti, Kokoschka, when he was teaching at Dresden, had had a life-size doll fabricated to look like Alma Mahler; he carried the doll with him everywhere—even to café’s, where it was served coffee. Rumor had it that he put it to bed with him at night.

At the center of The Play of the Eyes is Canetti’s description of the enigmatic Dr. Sonne. Canetti had noticed him for months in a café they both frequented. He sat quietly in the corner, reading his newspapers. What initially drew Canetti’s attention to him was his uncanny resemblance to Karl Kraus; though the very idea seems contradictory, he was like nothing so much as a silent Karl Kraus. As it happened, Dr. Sonne was a well-known figure in Viennese intellectual circles. It was Broch who finally introduced Canetti to him. And it would seem that Dr. Sonne’s resemblance to Kraus was more than fortuitous, for in time he usurped Kraus’s place as Canetti’s mentor and idol. In what may be regarded as Canetti’s highest register of praise, he tells us that “Dr. Sonne spoke as Musil wrote.”

It is revealing that what Canetti should particularly admire about Dr. Sonne was his “ice-cold clarity” and “utterly impersonal” approach to ideas and, indeed, to life itself. “I have never listened to anyone so intently,” Canetti writes. “I forgot that the speaker was a human being.” For Canetti, Dr. Sonne seemed to embody the ideal of impersonal intellectual purity that he himself aspired to. Dr. Sonne was never seen reading a book, yet he nonetheless displayed a detailed knowledge of the most esoteric matters. He seemed to have no ambitions beyond truth itself: no axes to grind, no personal agenda to fulfill; his moral authority and self-possession were complete. It came as something of a disappointment, then—even, perhaps, a disillusionment—when Canetti discovered that Dr. Sonne had once actually done something. For it turned out that in his ’teens Dr. Sonne had published important poems in Hebrew under the name Abraham ben Yitzhak, poems that have been credited with inaugurating modernist poetry in the language and have earned him a respected place in the canon of that literature. But after all, this was a discreet undertaking, and one, moreover, that Dr. Sonne had soon abandoned, so Canetti was willing to forgive him the momentary lapse into action.

Echoing throughout Canetti’s memoirs is the theme that he himself identifies as his central preoccupation: the rebellion against death. In fact, it is a theme that Canetti invokes rather more than deals with concretely. The truth is, it would require considerable hermeneutical ingenuity to discover it as a theme of any consequence in his literary work. Yet “the rebellion against death” can do much to infuse one’s statements with an air of noble gravity, and so Canetti is only too happy to adopt it as a kind of motto for his work: “I have spent the best part of my life figuring out the wiles of man as he appears in historical civilizations,” Canetti observes at the beginning of The Tongue Set Free. “There is almost nothing bad that I couldn’t say about humans and humankind. And yet my pride in them is so great that there is only one thing I really hate: their enemy, death.” Canetti’s response to the fact of death—the only fact,” as he sometimes puts it—is a tragic stance of rebellion against an ineluctable fate. The overriding question for every
Canetti never worked out his thoughts on death in any systematic fashion. His basic message would seem to be the unexceptionable admonition not to go gentle into that good night. Yet he also uses the rejection of death as the starting point for other, often more questionable, sorts of statements. At one point, for example, his insistence that the individual take a stand against death leads him to the pious declaration that “I care about the life of every human being and not just that of my neighbor.” And in one of his essays, he goes beyond the posture of stoically resisting death to tell us that “So long as death exists, no beauty is beautiful, no goodness is good.” We must of course be grateful that Canetti cares about the lives of all of us, even if the word “cares” is rendered practically empty in this context. But as for the relation between death and beauty and death and goodness—well, here I think we must question Canetti’s dictum. For it seems at least equally plausible that beauty and goodness can emerge as compelling forces in our lives only against the background of mortality; in this sense, death, as Wallace Stevens put it, is the mother of beauty. Things matter to us precisely because neither we nor they last forever. Now, I do not doubt that Canetti’s meditations on death betray a core of genuine pathos. But in the end I’m afraid that they amount to little more than a collection of sentimental exhortations; their chief function would seem to be to perpetuate the atmosphere of intellectual melodrama within which Canetti prefers to operate. Indeed, they would hardly be worth scrutiny, except that Canetti insists on placing them at the very center of his thought.

If the rebellion against death is Canetti’s underlying “philosophical” preoccupation, the phenomenon of the crowd has proven to be the theme that has most absorbed his attention over the years. In the winter of 1924-25, he had the “illumination” about the nature of crowds that, he writes, was to determine the rest of his life. Here again, we must make allowances for Canetti’s rhetoric: the version of his intellectual development disseminated in these memoirs is too neat, too novelistic, too full of determining “illuminations” and single-minded passions to be credited without reservation. But there is no doubt that in the phenomenon of the crowd Canetti believed he had found a key to perennial mysteries. As he put it in The Torch in My Ear, “I realized that there is such a thing as a crowd instinct which is always in conflict with the personality instinct, and that the struggle between the two of them can explain the course of human history.”

Canetti’s first conscious experience of a crowd was in 1922, when he witnessed a mass demonstration protesting the assassination of Walter Rathenau, the German-Jewish industrialist and statesman. In the crowd, he discovered “a total alteration of consciousness” that is both “drastic and enigmatic.” As he describes it, in fact, this first encounter with a crowd was little short of the kind of experience one finds recounted in certain species of mystical literature. It was an intoxication; you were lost, you forgot yourself, you felt tremendously remote and yet fulfilled; whatever you felt, you didn’t feel it for yourself; it was the most selfless thing you knew; and since
selfishness was shown, talked, and threatened on all sides, you needed, this experience of thunderous unselfishness like the blast of the trumpet at the Last Judgment .... How could all this happen together? What was it?

After such an experience—which Canetti came to call “the discharge” in *Crowds and Power*—it is not surprising that the phenomenon of the crowd should become “the enigma of enigmas” for him. “In the crowd,” he wrote, “the individual feels that he is transcending the limits of his own person.” The problem is, however, that this intimation of transcendence “is based on an illusion”: after the crowd disperses, as it must, the individual is catapulted back to himself, as alone and isolated as ever.

What crystallized Canetti’s preliminary reflections on the phenomenon of the crowd was a second, and far more dramatic, experience on July 15, 1927, the day that Canetti describes as “the most critical day of my life after my father’s death.” In response to a headline in a government newspaper proudly announcing the acquittal of the men being held for the recent murder of several workers in Burgenland, an angry mob spontaneously formed from all over Vienna. And just as spontaneously, it marched to the Palace of Justice and set it afire. Canetti himself was swept along with the crowd. The entire experience engraved itself deeply into his imagination. A man standing on the sidelines lamenting loudly “The files are burning! The files are burning!” when the Palace of Justice was burning down and the police were firing into the crowd became a prototype for the character of the pyromaniacal Book Man, Professor Kien. And the spectacle of the crowd exploding into violence provided him with some of the central insights of *Crowds and Power*—the crowd’s spontaneous formation, its lack of a recognizable leader, its culmination in destruction by fire: all these are aspects of the crowd that Canetti dwells upon at length in his book.

A text of nearly five hundred, closely printed pages, *Crowds and Power* is a study *sui generis*. It is part ethnological study, part contribution to mass psychology, and part exercise in comparative religion. But above all it is an exposition of one man’s personal philosophy, his vision of the world. Only as such can we understand how the struggle between the so-called “crowd instinct” and the “personality instinct” can be proposed to “explain the course of human history.” The book belongs to that voluminous literature in which intellectuals have attempted to come to terms with the intractably unintellectual phenomenon of mass society. From Max Weber to Hannah Arendt, intellectuals in this century have been fascinated by the spectacle of mass society—its expression in modern democracies and its perversion in totalitarianism; Hermann Broch, to take someone from Canetti’s orbit, devoted most of his energies from the mid-Thirties until his death in 1951 to a study of mass psychology. Canetti’s contribution attempts to provide us not with a scholarly reflection on mass society but with what we might call a poetics of the crowd, and this, perhaps, is one reason he did not bother to supply *Crowds and Power* with an index.

Nevertheless, the book is the product of remarkable—if somewhat idiosyncratic—erudition. It is divided into twelve sections with scores of short chapters dealing with everything from “The Domestication of Crowds in World Religions” to “The Rain Dances of the Pueblo Indians,” from
reflections on “The Psychology of Eating” to “Human Postures and Their Relation to Power.” Like many such works, it abounds in categories—there are open crowds and closed crowds, “flight” crowds and “slow” crowds, even, Canetti tells us, crowds that are invisible. One must also mention that the book is written with a masterful and beguiling clarity; nor is there any doubt that it contains many revealing, even brilliant, observations on the psychology of crowds, the nature of power, and the way they have interacted across cultures and millennia; indeed, simply as a testimony against the infatuation with power—an infatuation that our century has suffered from greatly—Crowds and Power must be counted among the most eloquent and compelling of documents.

Yet for all this, the book is deeply flawed. It proceeds not by argument but by assertion. Thus, it opens with the statement: “There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown.” An arresting proposition. But is it true? Unfortunately, this is a question seldom broached in these pages. In The Torch in My Ear, Canetti remarks that he scrupulously avoided “abstract philosophy” in his reading and meditations on the phenomenon of the crowd, hoping thereby to avoid the distance from lived experience that philosophy typically demands. But by avoiding the strictures that philosophical analysis presupposes, Canetti has not made his book more compelling, only less rigorous. Because it lacks any consistent argument, Crowds and Power threatens to disintegrate into a collection of observations, of aperçus, some telling, some banal, some simply false.[6]

On the other hand, if Crowds and Power is weakened by a paucity of argument, it is rendered practically surreal by Canetti’s elevation of his main idea into a universal explanatory principle. He often writes as if all human behavior, and even abstract moral principles, are best interpreted as species of “crowd behavior.” Of a man listening to a sermon, for example, Canetti writes that “he would have felt astonished or even indignant had it been explained to him that the large number of listeners present gave him more satisfaction than the sermon itself”—but, pace Canetti, who could blame him? Similarly, we learn that the real significance of the Sermon on the Mount was that it was “directed against the confinement of the crowd which wants to feel the sensation of its own growth again,” and that “All demands for justice and all theories of equality ultimately derive their energy from the actual experience of equality familiar to anyone who has been part of a crowd.” Such passages give weight to Susan Sontag’s observation that much of the book “is really a rationalist’s discourse about religion.”[7] And with the application of his ideas about crowds to areas beyond conscious human endeavor, Canetti’s “rationalism” steps beyond the questionable into the realm of the fantastic. Thus he adduces the action of sperm swimming toward an egg as an example of the behavior of an “invisible crowd.” “It is unnecessary to point out that a crowd of spermatozoa cannot be the same as a crowd of people,” he concedes later in the book. But then goes on to insist that “there is undoubtedly an analogy between the two phenomena, and perhaps more than an analogy.” Yet what more than an analogy can there be? The truth is, that in his eagerness to “explain the course of human history,” Canetti is all too willing to distort the phenomena he treats in order to make them fit his pre-ordained schema.
In his essay on Hermann Broch in *The Conscience of Words*, Canetti tells us that in order to be truly representative of his time, a writer must possess three qualities: he must be original, he must sum up his time, and he must stand against his time. There can be no doubt that Canetti presents us with an original sensibility; nor need we question whether he stands against his time sufficiently: his work has always stood resolutely against the forces of commercialization and glib popularity. But can Canetti really be said to sum up his time? His work, especially the plays and *Auto-da-Fé*, are certainly symptomatic of their time. But in the end we must admit that they lack that scope and representativeness that make, say, *The Man Without Qualities* or even Hermann Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers* artistic epitomes that seem to crystallize an age without being bound to it. Indeed, in attempting to place these volumes of Canetti’s memoirs within his oeuvre, it is difficult not to conclude that his real masterpiece was not his life’s work but his life, not the story of Professor Kien or the nature of crowds but his own story, the story of becoming Elias Canetti. It is for the account they give us of this absorbing story that they will be read long after *Auto-da-Fé* and *Crowds and Power* become historical curiosities.

1. Dates are of first publication in German. *Auto-da-Fé—Die Blendung*, “The Blinding,” in German—was translated by C.V. Wedgwood and first appeared here in 1947 under the title *The Tower of Babel*. It was reissued, to greater notice, under its present title in 1963, when *Crowds and Power* first appeared in English in a translation by Carol Stewart. Both volumes are currently published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Go back to the text.


3. *The Wedding* (1932) and *Comedy of Vanity* (1933-34). Canetti’s other major play, *Life Terms*, was written in 1952. All three are acerbic social satires, distinguished mostly for their polemic and attempts to plumb character and personality by exploring what Canetti dubbed a person’s “acoustic mask,” his distinctive use and habits of language. For a useful overview of Canetti’s plays, see the essay by Klaus Volker that introduces *Comedy of Vanity and Life Terms*, translated by Gitta Honegger (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1983). Go back to the text.

4. The suggestion of fire is of course also preserved by the ecclesiastical title given to the book in English—*Auto-da-Fé*, Portuguese for “act of the faith,” that is, the public announcement or execution of sentences imposed by the Inquisition, especially the burning of heretics at the stake. Go back to the text.


6. This failing of *Crowds and Power* appears much exacerbated in the volume of Canetti’s “jottings” collected in *The Human Province*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), where a handful of striking observations are buried in the midst of opaque aphorisms like “Voices that bewilder heaven,” “All days referring to days that will never come,” and “Thoughts like detritus. Thoughts like lava. Thoughts like rain.” Go back to the text.
