Speaking the Dreadful

The Human Province, by Elias Canetti; translated from the German by Joachim Neugroschel, *New York: The Seabury Press, 1978. vi + 281 pp. $12.75.*

One does not settle back comfortably with a volume of Elias Canetti. He is the least belletristic of writers, and his style—stark, astringent, and direct—repels both the formalist and the connoisseur. We read Mr. Canetti with an excruciating sense that both we and our civilization are being judged. We may not want to hear these things about ourselves, about human nature, about the present historical hour, but, like Coleridge's wedding guest, we are riveted and mesmerized by a speaker who compels us to recognize the terrible authenticity of his vision.

Implicit in Canetti's works is the assumption that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the vocation of the writer no longer permits a preoccupation with "words as such." In austere and unambiguous language, Canetti bears witness to a world where "light is dethroned," "the last ... myths destroyed," and "the atomic bomb has become the measure of all things." Canetti's difficulty is not a consequence of his style (though one critic, Phillip Toynbee, protests that "blow after blow is directed at the reader's head with the bluntest possible of instruments")[1] but rather a result of the disquieting nature of his message—a message which we neglect to our own impoverishment and deny at our own peril. As Canetti observes:

> The public and private can no longer be separated, they overlap in ways that would never before have seemed possible. The enemies of mankind have rapidly gained power, coming very close to an ultimate goal of destroying the earth. It is impossible to ignore them and withdraw to the contemplation of only spiritual models that still have some meaning for us. These models have become rarer; many that may have sufficed for earlier times do not contain enough in themselves, comprise too little to still serve us today. Hence, it is all the more important to speak about those who have withstood our monstrous century.[2]

Canetti's message radiates from a nucleus of interrelated themes: the menace of mass psychology, the ambiguous nature of surviv-

al, the paranoia of power, the craven acceptance of our own and others' deaths. While these concerns pervade the entirety of his works, they find, perhaps, their most compendious expression in extracts from a private journal written between the years 1942 and 1972 and published under the title, *The Human Province.* These "meditations, epiphanies, and idle jottings" in *The Human Province* adumbrate those themes whose full significance emerges most forcibly in Canetti's principal works: the post-Kafkaesque novel, *Die Blendung* (1935); the ritual act of expiation for the crimes of this author's generation, *Crowds and Power* (1960); the drama of a society in which each person carries the year of his death inscribed on a chain around his neck, *The Deadlined* (1952); the haunting record of Canetti's visit to an impecunious Islamic village where the ubiquity of suffering and the struggle for survival wring his most eloquent pleas on behalf of stricken humanity, *The Travels of Marrakesh* (1967); the collection of essays, public addresses, and, in Canetti's words, "summing[s] up of the spiritual stations of my entire adult life," *The Conscience of Words* (1976); and the memories of the author's European childhood, *The Tongue Set Free* (1977).

Die Blendung (literally *The Blinding,* though it appears in English as *Auto-da-Fé*) initiates those themes to which Canetti returned obsessively in his subsequent career as a writer. Conceived against an historical backdrop the recollection of which is necessary to counter those critics who claim that this novel is merely a "case history . . . several case histories,"[3] "a portrait of mankind as a predatory and brutal race totally incapable of expressing any kind of love, warmth, or tenderness,"[4] *Die Blendung* is an allegorical commentary on the psychic, moral, and spiritual dissolution of Vienna on the eve of Hitler's Anschluss. The events which led to the burning of the Palace of Justice in July 1927—the periodic molestation of Jews and social democrats; the rise of anarchist groups such as the Front Fighters and Swastika Men; the indignation of the worker's party at the failure of an acquiescent government to prosecute acts of aggression by these groups; and, finally, the firing of shots by a nervous police force into a crowd of workers, students, and social democrats who retaliated by incinerating the Palace of Justice—all of these phenomena of mass psychology were witnessed by Canetti (at the time, a student of chemistry at the University of Vienna). Eighty-nine people were killed and the resultant anarchy initiated "a new epoch of slow descent" culminating in a "rising Fascism."[5]

In *Die Blendung* fire becomes for Canetti a principal symbol for crowd psychology and the atavistic yielding to the subterranean horrors and inner divisions of our own psyches. The novel's protagonist, Peter Kien, eventually destroys himself in a bonfire built from his own books, anticipating, as Dagmar Barnouw claims, "the 1933 burning of books, ordered by Goebbels."[6] And, indeed, fires, literally and symbolically, have plagued Canetti's career. Two excerpts from *The Human Province* testify to Canetti's sense of human outrage at the omnipresence of this destructive element. In 1943 he observes, "I cannot look at any more maps. The names of cities reek of burnt flesh"; and, in 1945, "wherever I sniff, all is heavy with the smell of extinguished fire." However one may criticize *Die Blendung* for the absence of any but "psychotic" and "pitifully deranged"[7] characters, we are obliged to grant it its significance as a diagnostic and prophetic indictment of a defunct civilization.

The degree to which human relationships have disintegrated in the modern age, the uprootedness, chaos, and loss of direction that have dissolved generational ties and violated the traditional rhythms of living are probed here to chilling effect. Each of these characters (who share the same address at a large and ramshackle Viennese rooming house) are isolated fragments of a single fractured ego: Kien, the obsessed sinologist, who lives surrounded by books in a room without windows; his housekeeper, Therese, a libidinous harpy, who seeks revenge against the inhuman detachment of her employer by trapping him into a perverse and destructive marriage; and, most sinister of all, the pathological sadist, Pfaff, an embodiment of pure id who has brutalized

his wife and daughter and protects Kien from the importunities of life and human relationships so that he may pursue his studies unmolested. In post-Freudian Vienna, super-ego, libido, and id no longer exist in healthy interdependence: they break apart, each asserting its superiority and in doing so bring ruin and irretrievable destruction.

No author has levelled a more devastating blow at that evil which is a consequence of the steady, obsessive, and unrelieved activity of the pure intellect cut off from the saving efficacy of life, human relationships, and spiritual community. As George Steiner has observed, *Auto-da-Fé* "is a classic study of the violence subtly but steadily present in abstract thought."[8] Though hailed by Raymond Williams as "the most important literary presentation of delusion within the last forty years,"[9] *Die Blendung* has not been without its critics. Some opine "that there is no character at all with whom we may identify."[10] That may well be true, but it underscores the pertinence of Canetti's comment from *The Human Province:* "The dissolution of the character in recent literature: the figures that our time would need are so monstrous that no one is daredevil enough to invent them." No one, perhaps, except Canetti. Individualism and collectivism, isolation and absorption—these are the polar alternatives experienced by the characters in *Die Blendung*. Community, mutuality, otherness have all disappeared.

It is precisely these aforementioned polarities that inform Canetti's vision in *Crowds and Power*. This work absorbed Canetti for twenty-five years, during which time "my best friends lost faith in me . . . it took too long, I couldn't blame them." Yet on the eve of its publication, Canetti could rightfully claim, "I have succeeded in grabbing this century by its throat." The hypotheses of *Crowds and Power* are multiform and complex; one cannot imagine this work appearing in any age other than our own or under any circumstances other than those endured by Canetti. (As George Steiner remarks, our awareness of Canetti's being the "sole survivor" of the numerous "Canettis of Adrianople"[11] is indispensable for our understanding of this work.)

For Canetti the most fundamental fear in the modern age is "the fear of being touched."[12] Touch is no longer an index of human contact, tenderness, or warmth, but rather a signal of aggression, an encroachment on our nakedness, a reminder of our vulnerability. In consequence, each person is driven to surround himself with walls, barriers, securities, to forestall "the clutch out of the darkness."[13] But this, of course, creates an intolerable burden and tension which is only released by immersion in crowds. "It is only in a crowd that man becomes free of this fear of being touched"[14]—a fear which frequently has its origins in a man's own unconscious aggressions and which may now be permitted to surface safely in the anonymity, cover, and protection which a crowd provides. In a collateral remark from *The Human Province,* Canetti thus observes: "The worst crowd one could think of is a crowd consisting solely of acquaintances." Uniformity and uniforms—the steppingstones of dictators—provide a delusory sense of impregnable power and eradicate the demands of individual conscience. Hence, the individual flees to a crowd to escape from the strain of his own exposure and through the heightened sense of strength produced by sheer numbers, willingly dies for the symbol of pure survival—dictator, demagogue, or general—whose unquestioned authority and ability to survive embody the ultimate triumph over "the clutch of darkness" (that is to say, the fear of death).

The most disturbing, profound, and controversial chapter of *Crowds and Power* deals with the question of survival. "Few readers can have finished the chapters on survival without some feeling of disgust,"[15] Canetti writes in the epilogue to this work. For Canetti survival is always survival over someone else. Despite the grief that we feel at the deaths of others, there is also, for Canetti, a suppressed sense of triumph in our having survived those persons.[16] A sense that our own life is enhanced and our own power increased by virtue of the contrast between their lifeless bodies and our breathing flesh is an indisputable though repressed component of our grief: "The illusion that a man is or would like to be the only one among corpses

is decisive for the psychology of both the paranoic and the extreme practitioner of power." The modern age has brought this feeling out of its hiding place—the paranoia of power, the desire to outlast, to achieve "onlyness," as a means of strengthening one's sense of invulnerability, are the chief motives behind the political atrocities of our times. Yet today "measured by our potentialities, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, and Hitler seem pitiful amateurs . . . one man today has the power of surviving at a single stroke more human beings than could generations of his predecessors together."[17]

Canetti pursues his thesis with exhaustless patience and assiduity: rummaging among tribal myths, primitive societies, mania-possessed minor officials, African kings, the memoirs of the obscure and the demented. Hitler is mentioned only once but his presence is all the more eloquent precisely because of Canetti's reticence. Two essays from *The Conscience of Words,* "Power and Survival" and "The Arch of Triumph," apply the ideas in *Crowds and Power* to the policies of the Third Reich. Here Hitler's proposed arch—a vainglorious monstrosity twice the size of Napoleon's monument—becomes the architectural embodiment and confirmation of Canetti's thesis. Hitler proposed that "everyone of our 1,800,000 casualties will be carved in granite." And, of course, at the top of the arch the most conspicuous name would be Hitler's.

The omnipresence of death finally becomes Canetti's most persistent preoccupation—a preoccupation which led to an attitude that is perhaps without parallel in Western literature: "The more intensely Canetti experienced death during the war, the more his hatred grew; he began to doubt the 'natural law' of death."[18] Death, war, history, and finally God himself—insofar as the deity has appointed death as a natural structure of being—become the objects of Canetti's incredulity, scorn, defiance, and derision. In these pronouncements, no less than in his examination of mass psychology, Canetti speaks with the voice of an Old Testament prophet—daring God to reveal his ways, to absolve himself from the earned denunciations of his people. One is reminded of Elie Weisel's account of three Rabbis in a concentration camp who put God on trial, proclaim his guilt, and dare any but Satan to deny the justness of their accusations—a paradox further enforced by the words of the principal Rabbi at the trial's conclusion: "We must now go and pray." Canetti's Hebraism is strongly in evidence here; he demands justice not in terms of abstract metaphysics but in the only terms which are humanly conceivable and will not quit until those terms are met.

Canetti's purpose here, as one critic observes, is "to set the largest, most *edifying* standards of despair."[19] This defiant dialogue with God may appear heterodox but its roots are biblical and fully characteristic of those Old Testament patriarchs and prophets whose passion for justice and moral intensity engage God himself in the most contumacious of arguments. Canetti's religious stance recalls the words of another radical theologian, Simone Weil: "Religion insofar as it is a sense of consolation is a hindrance to true faith; and in this sense atheism is a purification."[20]

A Sephardic Jew of Turkish descent who grew up in Bulgaria, was exiled to England, and writes in German, Canetti—in his pilgrimage, his Jewishness, his uprootedness—refuses to regard himself as a marginal member of a persecuted minority or an isolated instance of social discrimination, but as one whose destiny and fate are fully representative of homelessness, horror, and violated humanity, the strains of which wail all through "this monstrous century." "It is only in exile," writes Canetti, "that one realizes to what an important degree the world has always been a world of exiles." His Jewishness, therefore, is non-sectarian, universal, and transnational in its significance and implications. In 1944 Canetti observed: "The greatest intellectual temptation in my life, the only one I have to fight very hard against is: to be a total Jew. . . . But aren't the new dead everywhere, on all sides, in every nation? Should I harden myself against Russians because there are Jews, against the Chinese because they are far away, against the Germans because they are possessed by the devil? Can't I still belong to all of them,

as before, and nevertheless be a Jew?" With uncommon magnanimity Canetti, during the darkest days of the Third Reich, proclaims: "The language of my intellect will remain German—because I am Jewish. . . . I want to give back to their language what I owe it. I want to contribute to their having something that others can be grateful for."

In his hatred of war ("Oh for a stethoscope, a fine stethoscope to identify the generals in their wombs"); in his detestation of death ("conclude peace with everything, but never with death"); in his defiance of historical determinism ("I hate the respect of Historians for *Anything* merely because it happened"); in his power of self-identification with the mendicant and oppressed ("[The poet] should be able to become *anybody* and *everybody*, even the smallest, the most naive, the most powerless . . .")[21]; and finally, in his passion for the absolute ("I seek after all holinesses, and they break my heart for being past")—Canetti incarnates the indomitable vision of a people whose successive trials he seems to embody. In a word, Canetti radiates those qualities which the Catholic theologian, Jacques Maritain, discerns in the history of the Jewish people:

> If the world hates Jews, it is because the world clearly senses that they will always be outsiders in a supernatural sense, it is because the world detests their passion for the absolute and the unbearable stimulus which it inflicts. . . . [It is because] like an activating ferment injected into the mass, it gives the world no peace; it bars slumber; it teaches the world to be discontented and restless as long as the world has not God. . . . It was not because the Jews killed Christ but rather because they gave Christ to the world that Hitlerian anti-Semitism in its rage dragged the Jews along all the roads of Europe, through filth and blood, tore from their mothers children from thenceforth not even possessed of a name, undertook to dedicate an entire race to despair.[22]

It is scarcely surprising that Canetti should be the 1981 recipient of the Nobel Prize. His diatribes against war and death clearly reflect the contemporary European spirit and sound the note of "never again" with matchless urgency. His acceptance speech, delivered on December 10, 1981, is a consummate extract of his principal themes spoken with his customary moral strenuousness: "Today since Hiroshima, everyone knows what war is, and the fact that everyone knows is our only hope."[23] In a world, as Canetti reminds us, where motives of profit and material production have made war lucrative and where considerations of humanity are dismissed as misdirected indulgences, the ultimate standards of life, of art, of civilization have been eclipsed. "We have no standards anymore for anything," writes Canetti, "ever since human life is no longer the standard." Cynics may question the legitimacy of Canetti's claim to the Nobel Prize by citing its coincidence with the European Peace Movement; and, to be sure, much that we expect a great writer to comprehend is absent from Canetti's vision of the world: the rich and significant interplay of human relationships, the lyrical celebration of life, the laughter which reconciles us to our condition or the tragic vision which lifts us above it. But Canetti has written against a background of national uprootedness, physical deprivation, and spiritual crises. Inevitably, this has made its mark. The period of history which irretrievably silenced a novelist like E. M. Forster and drove Virginia Woolf to suicide pushed Canetti, in his own words, to "the wailing wall of humanity, and that is where I stand."

And yet we sense that this indefatigable opponent of war and death, whose corrosive aphorisms seem uttered between clenched teeth, is capable—were the times less intractable and modern history less recalcitrant—of the rich, spacious, comprehensive vision that we admire in the great novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As the first volume of his reminiscences abundantly illustrates, Canetti's capacity to achieve delicate insights into human relations and to speak in the lyrical voice of a psalmist as well as the truculent tones of a prophet is there to be developed. But the supervention of less savory truths has curtailed such an efflorescence: "The worst thing, always, is history and I must not

escape it; the fact that history has actually kept getting worse forces me to be its anatomist; I slice about in its rotting body and I am ashamed of the profession I have chosen." Still, like Socrates in his later years (and the comparison is not far-fetched), this indignant sage has earned the right and could develop the capacity to sing. Canetti's passion for universal longevity, for a rich and patriarchal maturity wherein to realize and articulate all those "important things" that are carried "for forty or fifty years," wins our partisanship to his crusade against death. In his unyielding campaign on behalf of humanity Canetti is a living witness to this injustice. May he continue to defy death, to rage against the dying of the light, and (in his own words) "to keep making room, on and on, and as long as I can do so, to merit my life."

Reviewed by STEPHEN I. GURNEY

[1]*Horizon* 85, vol. XV (January 1947), 73. [2]*The Conscience of Words,* trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. vii. [3]Anne Fremantle, *Commonweal,* April 4, 1947, p. 620. [4]Peter Russell, "The Vision of Man in Elias Canetti's *Die Blendung,*" *German Life and Letters,* 28 (1974–75), 29. [5]Charles A. Gulick, *Austria: From Habsburg to Hitler* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), I, 771. Readers interested in the socio-political background to Canetti's novel will find this work extremely serviceable, especially the last chapter of volume one, "The Turning Point." [6]"*Doubting Death:* On Elias Canetti's Drama *The Deadlined,*" *Mosaic* 7, no. ii (1974), 6. [7]Russell, p. 28. [8]*New Yorker,* 19 May, 1980, p. 150. [9]*Literatur und Kritik,* August 1966, p. 40. [10]Russell, p. 30. [11]*Op. cit.,* p. 150. [12]*Crowds and Power,* trans. Carol Steward (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 15. [13]*Ibid.* [14]*Ibid.* [15]*Ibid.,* p. 468. [16]Thus Canetti observes in *The Human Province:* "Guilt feelings towards my father: I'm now nine years older than he became." [17]*Crowds and Power,* p. 468. [18]"*Doubting Death,*" p. 9. [19]Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), p. 185. [20]*The Simone Weil Reader,* ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay Company, 1977), p. 417. [21]*The Conscience of Words,* p. 242. [22]Jacques Maritain, *A Maritain Reader,* ed. Donald and Idella Gallagher (Garden City: Image Books, 1966), pp. 310 and 321. [23]*The Minneapolis Tribune,* 11 December 1981, Sec. C, p. 11, Col. 1.