



PROJECT MUSE®

The Art of Distances

Stan, Corina

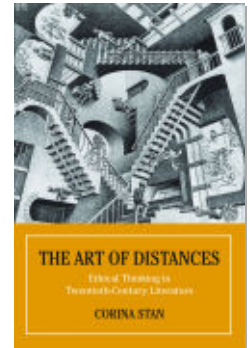
Published by Northwestern University Press

Stan, Corina.

The Art of Distances: Ethical Thinking in Twentieth-Century Literature.

1 ed. Northwestern University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/58133.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/58133>

[Access provided at 19 Jun 2023 17:34 GMT with no institutional affiliation]



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Chapter 2



The Inferno of Saviors

Notes in the Margin of Elias Canetti's Lifework

It is not until one is oneself an exile that one realizes to what significant extent the world has always been a world of banished people.

—Elias Canetti, *Neue Rundschau*, 1965

Morality is narrow if one knocks against it. The real morality has become one's skeletal structure.

—Canetti, 1980

In an intimate letter dated July 3, 1959—one of the four hundred found soaked in a Paris basement in 2003—Elias Canetti shared with his brother Georges the news that he had finally completed *Crowds and Power*, a vortex of a book that had absorbed not only thirty years of reading, research, and writing, but also, in symbolic form, the events with which its gestation was contemporary.¹ Understandably, the letter transpires a huge sigh of relief, exuding Canetti's sense of fulfillment; he declares himself "thoroughly satisfied," convinced that the book will have given meaning to his life and granted the recognition of posterity. Not only does he feel entitled to the Nobel Prize "either for literature or for peace," he also anticipates that his contemporaries will fail to understand, or in any case they will take a very long time to grasp his insights: "Of course I won't get it. But that doesn't matter: I *know* for myself that no one else has penetrated so deeply into the confusion of our century."²

The deeply ambivalent reception of the book confirmed his apprehensions, so his self-confident resignation turned into a felt need to write a companion to *Crowds and Power*: "I ought," he reflects in his diary, "to embed my ideas in their place of origin, to make them appear more natural. It is possible that by doing that, I would *give them a different accent*. I don't want to correct anything, but I want to retrieve *the life* that is part of the ideas, bring it in close and let it flow back into them."³ The autobiographical tomes

he set out to write—*The Tongue Set Free*, *The Torch in My Ear*, and *The Play of the Eyes*—remain thus in the shadow of his major book, a pedestal engraved with the words “How I Wrote *Crowds and Power*.”⁴ They are meant to enlighten (still) puzzled, or unconvinced readers, by giving the ideas “a different accent,” that is, by retrieving the life—his life, which is the life of his ideas. Tirelessly he traces the germ of his lifelong obsession back to his first experience of the crowd in Frankfurt in 1922, when at age seventeen he witnessed the workers’ demonstrations after the murder of Walter Rathenau; three years later we see him make formal plans for a book on crowds and begin to collect material. But the witness experience would not be the closest he would ever get to a crowd: on July 15, 1927, he joined the eruption of “leaderless” protests on the streets of Vienna, enthralled by the spectacle of the Palace of Justice burning. This experience, now an immersion, is going to be so memorable that it fills Canetti with the exorbitant confidence that he will never need to read anything on the French Revolution because he knew what the crowd—the experience of the crowd in history—meant: it was now all “in his bones.” Hence his perplexity that no one had *recognized* the phenomenon, no one had explained it *from within*, from the perspective of a participant whose consciousness is altered, who becomes joyfully oblivious of the usual fears, claims to distinction and individuality. Since there were more and more crowds in Central and Western Europe in the following years, especially brown-shirted marchers and Nazi mass rallies, by 1931 Canetti realized that it was not only crowds he had to understand, but also power. These are, it seems safe to assume, the significant landmarks of the “life” he had hoped to let flow back into his ideas, and that would illuminate the book called *Crowds and Power*.

Do they provide “a different accent”? Do they alter substantially our understanding of the *Lebenswerk*, as he still called his book on crowds in the posthumously published *Party in the Blitz*?⁵ Do they turn Canetti into a more sensible figure or a more compelling author, in the eyes of those who, reviewing *Crowds and Power*, dismissed him as a sorcerer (Jacques Cabau), a “grotesquely shambling figure,” “the most decayed limb one can possibly imagine of the great German intellectual tree” (Tom Nairn)? Do they deepen, provide unexpected dimensions to the fascination of those who were grateful to the “solitary man of genius” (Iris Murdoch), *Kulturphilosoph*, *Dichter*, and polymath “deported of our history” (George Steiner), for producing a “magnificent anthropological-political treatise,” “the only masterpiece of crowd theory” (John McClelland)? The deeply polarized reception of *Crowds and Power*, to this day a book hard to evaluate or even situate in Western culture, gives ample reasons for doubt. Granted, if we look for crowds and power in the autobiography, we begin to understand that the 1960 book is not just a random collection of idiosyncratic theories, not austere, sterile excogitations emerging from the solitude of a scholar’s room: his ideas have a historical background. But if that is all we see, it is hardly an existential or scholarly

justification for spending thirty years fine-tuning taxonomies of crowds and their symbolism over hundreds of pages, and especially there is no reason for the ruthless, unforgiving, raw *Weltanschauung* that Canetti presents us in the second half of the book, on “the entrails of power.” Are human organs made exclusively for violence?—is life just “an intestinal tract,” as a critic understood Canetti’s views? What makes him draw such a picture of life, and what does he hope to achieve by conveying it as such to others? Why did he say that with *Crowds and Power*, he felt he had “grabbed the century by the throat”?⁶ These questions demand a fresh reading of the autobiography, in search of other aspects that would shed light on the vision that Canetti canvassed in his magnum opus.

There is more than memories about crowds and scattered ideas about political power in the autobiography. In fact, power is not even so much present as political power, but rather as the forceful dynamic that permeates all social relations, the sphere of everyday sociality, especially as it is perceived by a rootless, footloose exile negotiating affecting experiences of displacement, miscommunication, and lack of recognition. Power is present in the distances that people create and maintain among themselves, which resonates with the inaugural axiom of *Crowds and Power*: all life, Canetti proclaims, is laid out in distances; and it is only to abolish distances that people congregate in crowds (*CP*, 18). Critics who have paused on this early moment in the book have suggested that Canetti refers here to the *principium individuationis*, the boundary-setting process of individuation accompanied by an (archaic) “fear of being touched” (Canetti’s words), that sets apart individuals in everyday life and that the crowd inexplicably makes them forget.⁷ Close reading of the autobiography, however, yields a more concrete, deeply personal, and historical meaning for this early moment in *Crowds and Power*: a veritable anatomy of social and interpersonal distances is insistently pursued, it becomes, one might say, the leitmotif of a life segmented by repeated displacements, exile, symbolic homelessness. “All life is laid out in distances” reads like an axiom, but the memoirs reveal it as a deeply personal conclusion. And this is no insignificant detail: in light of these disclosures, it becomes possible to identify a new, quite subtle scaffolding to *Crowds and Power*, and an overall underlying purpose that has so far been missed.

In this chapter I will argue that the memoirs inflect *Crowds and Power* with a moralistic “accent” vis-à-vis the perceived separateness of people and their hurtful involvements, which in Canetti’s view always involve power. A moralistic position is usually associated with Canetti’s persona, but not with the author of *Crowds and Power*. Yet by foregrounding this attitude, Canetti’s ultimate purpose will stand out as nothing less than a reformation of the social sphere. Whereas most of Canetti’s critics have situated him in the company of crowd theorists, political theorists, or theorists of totalitarianism, I will show how the memoirs highlight Canetti’s investment in a critique of modernity modeled on Freud. Few people failed to wonder at

Canetti's glaring omission of Freud's group psychology; and there are sufficient passages in the autobiography to illustrate that Canetti thought of Freud as his adversary. This perception, however, was more of a love-hate relationship, and in the end Canetti saw his adversarial stance as a youthful rebellion; moreover, he came to acknowledge Freud as a model. He also understood that after World War II, the stakes of any work on crowds were significantly higher than whatever might have motivated *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1920); Canetti's underlying concern echoes rather the interrogative ending—added by Freud in 1931—of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, regarding the fate of human civilization. To this ambivalent question, already sounding a pessimistic tone, Canetti's response is an unsettling *Weltanschauung*, and an even more disturbing, perhaps hopeless, call for change.

For this view to appear in all its clarity, a summary of the book and a quick overview of the reactions it elicited are necessary, followed by a brief excursus through the autobiography, with a focus on its two major themes: distances and crowds. This analysis will reveal more explicitly the moralistic attitude that Canetti did not drop after his first (and only) novel, *Auto-da-fé*; if anything, this attitude only seemed to acquire more gravity: as we shall see, Canetti the *Dichter* also took himself for a redeemer of sorts.

In the Wake of *Auto-da-fé*

Crowds and Power (*Summary*)

Like the novel *Auto-da-fé* before it, *Crowds and Power* is an overwhelming book.⁸ Not only is the scope of the investigation intimidating—Canetti combs all of the human cultures, East and West, and all realms of life, archaic and modern, in search of crowd phenomena and aspects of power—but the paratactic presentation excludes from the outset even the semblance of a rigorously conducted argument grounded in previous scholarship on the two subjects. “This work of a lifetime cannot be more easily summarized than *In Search of Lost Time*,” said Pierre Nora.⁹ Canetti's originality, moreover, manifests itself as defiance of the enshrined boundaries between various disciplines: one might see the book as an anthropology of crowds juxtaposed with a phenomenology and sociology of power, including ethnographic accounts that are richly symbolic and an implicit critique of historiography; style is in flux between the documentary, the scientific, the symbolic, and the apodictic, there being hardly a distinction noted between the factual, the interpretative, or the imaginary. The bibliography contains little that one would expect in a book about crowds and power—names like Michelet, Taine, Tarde, Le Bon, or Freud are conspicuously absent, as are his Canetti's contemporaries Durkheim or Foucault—but it includes an eclectic mix of titles that has reminded many readers of the library of the mad sinologist Peter Kien in *Auto-da-fé*.¹⁰

In the apt description of Hansjakob Werlen, *Crowds and Power* reads like an “ethnographic study and poetic speculation, chemical experiment and symbolic representation.”¹¹ That the overall structure of the book—crowds in the first part, power in the second—is deceptively simple is amply demonstrated by the radically divergent readings and interpretations that have been proposed by readers of various persuasions since its publication.

The early chapters, devoted to a rich typology of crowds and crowd symbolism, bespeak an attitude toward crowds that is eminently different from that of most of his predecessors in the long tradition of crowd theory. Canetti develops a new vocabulary to describe crowd phenomena, and suggests that the latter have a more significant explanatory value than previously imagined, not only for twentieth-century events but also for our understanding of modernity, history, and collective psychology. Before Canetti, culminating in Le Bon’s 1895 influential *Psychologie des foules*, the crowd had been perceived as atavistic, irrational, and disruptive, formed of the troublesome residues of a civilization that saw itself in evolutionary terms as superior to everything that preceded it, and threatened with regression by eruptions of violence that had to be kept in check.¹² Freud’s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1920), while not sharing the same dismissive attitude, theorizes crowd formation in terms of the defective ego of the participants who idealize the same person as the superego with which they identify: that Adorno enlisted Freudian psychology in his account of Nazism appositely carves out a space in which Canetti’s utter singularity as a crowd theorist shines forth. In his elaborate account, the crowd precedes the leader (if it ever has one); it has emotions and a mind—or at least an imaginary—of its own, and it constitutes a category that enjoys precellence over time and space: history is not a narrative of class struggles, but an aggregation of *open or closed, stagnating or rhythmic, slow or quick, baiting, flight, prohibition, reversal, feast, or double crowds*; moreover, all life, visible or invisible, is a matter of congregations, from the millions of spermatozoa competing for fulfillment in the egg, to the heaps of corpses of everyone who has ever lived, the spirits of various religions, the invisible worlds of bacilli revealed under the microscope lens. As in a Brueghel painting that Canetti admired in his youth, *The Triumph of Death*, no crowd is ever tired of life, that is, of its *increase*—that is, self-reproductive—principle; and there are always *crowd crystals*, groups likely to rekindle the fire of a crowd. Invested in crowd symbolism, Canetti believes in an imaginary that is essentially collective, a deep source of irrational impulses that also binds individuals as members of a community (tribe, nation, but also humanity at large); in this sense natural elements that are masses of smaller units—sand, forest, sea, rain, corn, stone heaps, wind, a treasure—are anthropomorphized and partake of this generalized crowd-dominated sensibility. He shows that there are, of course, specifically modern crowd phenomena, such as the increase of capitalist production (with its attending malfunctions: depression, inflation, etc.) or the drastic diminution

of populations through modern mass destruction; these provide, he claims, more accurate insight into virtually all the major events of the twentieth century, from the consequences of the Versailles treaty, inflation, the two world wars, the Holocaust, civil wars and revolutions, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the Cold War. Yet late modernity is not *explicitly* Canetti's object of interest, in the lengthy evocations of archaic rituals, religious and mythical beliefs;¹³ and part 2, concerned with a minute dissection of power in its cruellest forms, relies even less on examples that might concern directly Canetti's contemporaries.

An astonishing physiology of power in its real and symbolic incarnations, the short chapter "The Entrails of Power" captures both the raw act of seizing, incorporation and digestion of animals, and, through an expansion of this imaginary body to the whole of human experience, the circulation of power in society in the elaborate forms of commands (to which I will return) and in the invariable ways various rulers have dominated, throughout history, large crowds of individuals, ostentatiously displaying their power by spending prodigiously or sending countless subjects to their death. "The instant of survival," Canetti authoritatively states, "is the instant of power," and he guides his readers in the footsteps of African kings and the sultan of Delhi, finally through the delusional world of Schreber's paranoia;¹⁴ these ruler figures, Canetti shows, are all "survivors," real or imagined, of great heaps of corpses. If this panorama apparently culminates in the characterization of Hitler as a combination of Muhammad Tuglak, the megalomaniac sultan, and Schreber, Canetti is quick to deflect what might have been the climactic moment of the book in the much-delayed first mention of the name Hitler. To him, the Nazi *Führer* was only an accident of history, one of many a "survivor" in a field of animal corpses: this is because most people eat meat, and everyone, Canetti finds, entertains ridiculous dreams of revenge, of self-expansion, of domination, everyone experiences satisfaction while walking in a graveyard, the relieved contentment of having survived so many who are under one's feet.¹⁵ The stories of archaic violence turn out to be all moral parables: Canetti warns that no one should feel superior to barbarism after the horrors of the twentieth century. Given the availability of the nuclear bomb, "one man today has the possibility of surviving at a single stroke more human beings than could generations of his predecessors together" (CP, 468); the "survivor," warns Canetti again, has grown to such monstrous stature that a correct *Zeitdiagnose* necessarily has to focus on him: "Whether there is any way of dealing with the survivor . . . is the most important question today: one is tempted to say that it is the only one. The fragmentation and fluidity of modern life blind us to the simplicity and urgency of this one fundamental issue" (CP, 469). The rather perplexing ending of the book might have something of an apotropaic gesture: "If we would master power," says Canetti having just pointed to the dangers looming large in the Cold War and the bomb, "we must face

command openly and boldly, and search for means to deprive it of its sting” (*CP*, 470).

What exactly does that mean, and how is it to be done? The relevant insights are in two related sections, one on Canetti’s theory of command, the other on *Verwandlung* (metamorphosis, transformation), the latter mostly consisting of examples he hoped to expand on in a second volume, never completed. In Canetti’s rather dramatic account of social intercourse, any command—from those of parents to those of dictators—conceals a death threat; when carried out, each command leaves behind a sting. The stings of command accumulate and sediment in one’s body, are carried along, sometimes all of one’s life, only to be passed on to others.¹⁶ Being in a position to give commands creates an “anxiety of command,” an awareness of permanent danger from those who have had to carry them out; conversely, always carrying out commands turns one into a burdened individual. The only free person is the one who knew how to dodge commands;¹⁷ and one possible strategy is metamorphosis. It is here that Canetti’s book is at its most elusive because most symbolic, for the examples he gives are mythological (derived from anthropological accounts of the Bushmen), pathological (*delirium tremens*), or aesthetic (the actor, the writer). In Pierre Nora’s suggestive summary, “Les conduites de fuite, ces morts masquées que sont l’hystérie, la manie, la mélancolie” (These behaviors of flight, these masked deaths we call hysteria, mania, melancholia). Of help are other moments in Canetti’s writings where he tackles transformation: the book on Kafka, his essay on the writer, a “keeper of metamorphoses,” and, of course, the memoirs.¹⁸ Whether he talks about Gregor Samsa’s transformation into something smaller, or about a cripple’s ambition to master the Western philosophical discourse, thus turning himself from an object of pity into “a place where people go on pilgrimages,” or even about the various characters an actor is able to perform, Canetti is convinced that metamorphosis offers the way out of imposed identities, stagnation and rigidity, self-complacency, and ultimately perhaps even death, and that we have to take advantage of the large repository of metamorphoses contained in our culture (starting with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*) in order to change our lives.¹⁹ This plea for freedom, however, is not fully developed in *Crowds and Power*; it can only be inferred from his other writings.

Brief Reception History

The most fascinating and intriguing aspect of the reception of *Crowds and Power* is not that various readers could not agree on the meaning of the book—indeed, one could hardly expect a project of such magnitude and richness to yield a unified meaning—but that they failed to reach a consensus on whether it had any value or not. Its publication provoked reactions ranging between dismissive contempt, dismay, and hyperbolic praise. “How does one judge a large-scale theory of this sort?”: most reviewers asked this

question, often rhetorically, puzzled not only by the book's lack of engagement with previous crowd theories, but also by its withholding of a criterion of evaluation of its own. Iris Murdoch dismissed the idea that considerations of truth-value even had any pertinence: "Clearly, there is no point in just saying impatiently, well is it true or not?"²⁰ Yet many did ask the question of the truth of *Crowds and Power* in all earnestness, obviously relying on the assumption that this book, with its lengthy accounts of myths, legends, anthropological reports, musings on the workings of power in archaic times and in faraway regions that supposedly, and disquietingly, were relevant to their own mores and times, had to be a scientific work, not literature. George Steiner was the only one to caution his readers against such assumptions: "Dr. Canetti's book is literature. Emphatically."²¹

The early reviewers made various assumptions about Canetti's aims and the scholarly work on which he had passed implicit judgment. Murdoch began her article with a disclaimer, confessing she was not the polymath who should evaluate the work of "a mixture of historian, sociologist, psychologist, philosopher and poet."²² Similarly, Pierre Nora suggested that comprehending Canetti's theories required the competence of an academy of historians, sociologists, psychoanalysts, and philosophers.²³ "Whether or not we agree, we have here that rare sense of being 'let out' into an entirely new region of thought,"²⁴ Iris Murdoch said; but this *new region* irritated some critics, who felt in it like in the land of a mad prophet ("un sorcier," French critic Jacques Cabau called Canetti),²⁵ while it enthralled others with its ruthless imaginativeness and arrogant defiance of scholarly protocol and boundaries. Steiner placed it in the Germanic tradition of *Kulturphilosophie*, with its "unembarrassed striving after total vision," deriving from Hegel, Nietzsche, Burckhardt, Freud, and present in the writings of Kraus, Benjamin, Adorno, and Arendt; French historian Pierre Nora called Canetti a Tocqueville of the twentieth century, one who saw the need for new methods, adequate to the "new times, and new crowds"; French writer Roger Grenier was most starkly reminded of Nietzsche, while Veronica Wedgwood, the British historian who had facilitated the publication of *Auto-da-fé* in English, saw behind his "unvarnished and telling directness" the etchings of Goya.²⁶ To others, Canetti's claims were eccentric nonsense, with no bearing on contemporary life (Tom Nairn, Cabau), or just clichéd thinking inevitably generated by such catchphrases as "crowds" and "power" (Frenzel and Pross),²⁷ hardly addressing important problems since it made no use of Marxist categories like "labor" or "alienation," for instance in its theory of transformation (Ernst Fischer).²⁸

That Canetti's book was a spectacular failure for left-minded critics like Nairn or Fischer, while it appealed to historians like Nora and Wedgwood, as well as academics and writers like Murdoch or Grenier, is indicative of cultural and ideological anxieties that dominated the 1960s regarding the relevance of the human sciences to the rabble and disenchantment left behind by the wars, as well as to the new configurations of power and world order:

How to deal with the enormities of the recent past, which old categories had failed to prevent? How to avoid such catastrophes in the future, through ideological, scientific, and ethical vigilance, lucidity, and rigor? Nairn not only dismissed Canetti's work as nonsense but also diagnosed the praise bestowed on it as a symptom of decrepit liberalism and distrust of the common sense of English ideology. At the other end of the critical spectrum, Canetti's work appeared as promisingly bearing the seeds of new beginnings: Karl Rauch suggested that one could only do justice to Canetti's insights if they were going to constitute the groundwork for a team of researchers,²⁹ Wedgwood concluded that "the whole provides an astonishing and disturbing new perspective of the human scene," and interestingly, in light of recent scholarly developments, Steiner's last words were that *Crowds and Power* was "one of the necessary prefaces to a study of the inhuman."³⁰

How did the book and Canetti's reputation fare after these early reviews in the 1960s? If, as Blöcker claims, in the German-speaking countries *Masse und Macht* seemed already forgotten by 1963,³¹ the reissue of *Auto-da-fé* both in Germany and in other European countries as well as in America renewed opportunities to discuss Canetti's work as a whole, thus linking the book on crowds to the 1935 novel, whose popularity steadily increased. Hansjakob Werlen shows that even so, Canetti still remained a rather obscure figure in German literature, and that he found wider readership only with the publication of his autobiography. As is well known, in 1981 the Nobel Prize committee bestowed their accolade on him, thus fulfilling his own second-guessed expectation, yet Werlen points out that at the time of his death in 1994 "he was mostly known as an incisive chronicler of European—and specifically Austrian—culture of the period before the Second World War."³² Noting the recent plethora of books and articles on Canetti, he adds: "It is unclear whether today's renewed preoccupation with this author, who acquired a reputation for being very demanding, is merely a prolonged eulogy or the result of a widening of the influence of his writings."³³ In a 1996 issue of *Thesis Eleven* devoted to a reevaluation of Canetti's work, the introduction casts doubt on both of these possibilities, noting that the Nobel Prize award was not followed by Canetti's adequate recognition as a "seminal cultural-diagnostic thinker of our century," and singling out the pioneering study of J. S. McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob: From Plato to Canetti* (1989), for tackling the challenge of understanding the distinctive theoretical contribution of *Crowds and Power*.³⁴ McClelland explains that the "somewhat ponderously Leavisite title" of his contribution to the *Thesis Eleven* issue, "The Place of Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power* in the History of Western Social and Political Thought," is meant to highlight the problem of Canetti's *Crowds and Power*: that is, finding "its place in our cultural landscape."³⁵

An exhaustive review of the critical literature on *Crowds and Power* of the past twenty-five years could well be a book-length project and would require

much comparative work in several languages.³⁶ For my purposes here, it will suffice to point out that this work has focused on the relationship between Canetti's work with political theory, particularly the tradition of crowd theory and theories of totalitarianism. In McClelland's view, for instance, Canetti's insights into the diversity of crowds, of which the nasty ones were the single and generalized object of crowd theory in the tradition culminating with Le Bon, is invaluable for its implicit critique of this tradition, more specifically for its participation in the justification of the power and rule of a so-called elite.³⁷ McClelland thus attributes to Canetti the view that to generalize from the crowd horrors of history, as his predecessors did, is "a mindless exercise in elitist vituperation, the language of which has not changed much since the grumbling oligarchs in ancient Thebes."³⁸ In a reversal of perspective, Canetti sees the crowd as victims: number, he claims, is "the obvious point of contact between power and the crowd," "the conditions of modernity greatly increas[ing] the scope of power for leaders."³⁹ What falls out of McClelland's reading is Canetti's insistence that power permeates all spheres of social life, that it is not just the privilege of rulers. Interestingly, not even his emphasis on Canetti's sympathetic attitude toward the crowd as victims, if qualified by the realization that Canetti does not see the crowd as blameless (because it has a mind of its own), is in harmony with how others read Canetti's book: Hansjakob Werlen, for instance, sees *Crowds and Power* as displaying "a deep ideological caesura" between the positive validation of the crowd formation in part 1, and the later insight, in part 2, into the complicity between rulers and crowds, which "cannot overcome Canetti's early enthusiastic view of the crowd-state as a redemptive alternative to the fate of petrified individuality."⁴⁰ In other words, the unresolved ideological tension throughout the book between the redemptive state of the crowd and its complicity in power results for Werlen in an aporia by the end of the study, "when the author's call to resist power is countered by the book's proclamation of the inexorability of the crowd-state."⁴¹ Axel Honneth concurs, albeit with different arguments, with the view that Canetti's book is plagued by reductionism, incongruities, discontinuities, and illogical reasoning: "Among the many attempts undertaken since the middle of our century to explain retrospectively the emergence of totalitarianism, Canetti's *Crowds and Power* still assumes today an extreme and irritating position."⁴² It is then with thinkers such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Arendt that he sees Canetti (implicitly) conversing. A scientist "in no way identical with the writer," argues Honneth, Canetti "attempted to demonstrate *literally* what was intended in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* only in a metaphorical sense; namely, that the state of civilization in the 20th century can be analyzed appropriately only if it is construed as the perpetuation of the human being's archaic state of nature."⁴³ Running counter to Honneth's claims, George Steiner's words come to mind: "It is naïve to quarrel with metaphor," with Canetti's thinking "by leap of image."

If among the early readers of *Crowds and Power* there were a few who, like Steiner, heeded Canetti's self-presentation as a *Dichter*, one who had the right to metamorphosis and metaphor (as well as the right to show distrust, even contempt, for theories that claimed to explain everything away), more recent critics are much less willing to grant him the right to idiosyncratic thinking and writing. The least that many readers expected Canetti to illuminate explicitly was the presence of crowds in the major events during the decades immediately preceding the publication of the book. In this account, the book, in the reading of J. P. Stern, fails completely: "The Hitlerian experience as Canetti describes it does not provide a political paradigm" because it misses the opportunity to clarify the values belonging to the "traditionally legitimated German and European ethos" that led to the formation of Nazi crowds.⁴⁴ The list of questions *Crowds and Power* generates but does not address, according to some critics, shows that in 2000, when Stern's article was published, there was no more consensus on the value and meaning of the book than immediately after its publication. "Why is 'the crowd' as Canetti presents it *always evil*, potentially destructive, threatening death or suffering it?" Stern begins to recapitulate these questions. Yet this first one would surely stun McClelland, who sees in Canetti's rich typology of crowds (of which only some are evil) the book's strongest point. Stern continues:

What precisely is the relationship between all those many, often very lengthy episodes and myths he quotes from the papers and journals of anthropologists and explorers, on the one hand, and our modern Western experience, on the other? Are these episodes to serve as parallels to and illustrations of our conduct, or as accounts of its origins, or again as rudimentary prefigurations of it? Why is power seen always in its relationship to the crowd? Why is all power whatever seen as evil, concerned only with dealing death to others in order to ensure survival of the self? Why is survival always an outliving that entails the death of others? And what is the ontological status of Canetti's *Masse*—when does it cease to be an actual crowd and become a metaphor?⁴⁵

Adorno asked Canetti a version of this last question in a radio interview in 1962, but it is doubtful that he was satisfied with Canetti's response, mostly consisting of more examples, and of the claim that "the events of the last 50 years" were on his mind while he wrote the book.⁴⁶

If there is one thing that can be lifted from the morass of critical opinions, or, to use an image that Canetti was attached to, from the Babel tower of critics who seem to talk past one another, it is that he was right to fear his contemporaries' incomprehension or misunderstanding. Posterity asked difficult, important questions and reassessed his work in ways he probably

could not have anticipated. How did he defend himself, and what work does the autobiography do?

A “Different Accent”?

In discerning the “accent” that Canetti might have given his ideas in the autobiographical volumes, which is an emphasis on the crowd as the countermodel to a defective sociality characterized by “distances,” I will show that Canetti’s interest in power was not primarily political, but social. The crowd was important to him as a redemptive experience, as a reminder of how equal and connected people feel when they are a crowd, traversed by the same consciousness-altering energies. The magnitude and ambition of Canetti’s project are in my view comparable to those of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*; just as one does not take literally the latter’s mystifying genealogy of a morality of the slaves, which he counters with an aristocratic morality of the strong, because one understands all along that Nietzsche needs these hyperbolic accounts in order to lay the foundations of his project, which is nothing less than the abolition of institutions that perpetuate a herd mentality and the prefiguration of a free individual who would live his life in style, one should regard Canetti as the reformer of a social field permeated by a Nietzscheanism gone astray, where everyone wants to dominate everyone else, suffering from an inability and unwillingness to communicate. Where Nietzsche praised the “pathos of distances” inherent to every strong age, Canetti deplors the often-perceived fact that “all life . . . is laid out in distances.” Where Nietzsche wanted to hammer out the perceived herd mentality of his contemporaries, Canetti the exile moralizes the separateness of individuals in “a world of banished people.” Following the claim that it is only for the sake of the abolition of these distances that individuals desire the crowd, his book is filled with crowds to the brim, overflowing this casual-looking frame (of distances) with the nonchalance of a baroque trompe l’oeil, and obscuring it to a degree where its relevance is lost from view. It is possible to see the second discrete instance of “distance” in the second half of the book as the bridge between its two halves; here distance appears as the privilege of the ruler, but this is quickly qualified: first by the claim that everyone likes to give commands, from parents to dictators, and that the stings of command account, at least in part, for the distances of everyday life; and second, by Canetti’s emphasis on the mistaken exclusive focus of historiography on rulers to the detriment of those whose equally paranoid ambitions have not materialized.

To spell out the “accent” that I detect in light of the autobiography: power permeates not just all historical epochs as the privilege of omnipotent rulers, but also, in Canetti’s account, all spheres of social life. As we shall see in the following section where I will dwell on some relevant passages from his memoirs, the ideas of *Crowds and Power* are not only enriched and embodied—the conductor-as-ruler turns out to have a real model in the

larger-than-life Hermann Scherchen, whom Canetti knew closely, or the meat eater acquires a model in Veza Canetti's stepfather, a "figure from hell" who could only be appeased with a daily supply of meat, and so on—but the moralistic stance that I am highlighting here is contoured in all its complexity and ambiguities, from the formative years of his youth to the moment when Canetti and his wife fled Vienna for England in 1938. Significantly, this context gives greater prominence to his comments on the early novel *Auto-da-fé*, which already bore the mark of his conviction that the writer had to reform society. His retrospective contextualization of *Auto-da-fé* thus not only helps us understand the lifelong task that Canetti gave himself but is also instrumental in clarifying the relationship between his novel and the later work.

Die Blendung, or The End of Babel Tower

Originally named Kant and fated to end up burning in the midst of his precious library, Peter Kien, one of the main characters of *Die Blendung*, was the embodiment of Book-Man, the type of the isolated intellectual incapable of meaningful communication with his fellow human beings. He marries his housekeeper Therese because she dusts his beloved books really well,⁴⁷ but he is utterly incapable of understanding her materialistic ambitions, or the cruel selfishness, narrow-mindedness, and solipsism revealed to the reader by her repetitive monologues. Eventually she kicks him out of his own apartment and sets out to pawn his library with the help of the building concierge Pfaff, a brutal proto-Nazi who murdered his wife and daughter. Meanwhile, the disturbed sinologist is carrying an imaginary version of his library through the city, loading and unloading it daily from and back into his head, seconded by a hunchbacked Jew; Fischerle's own delusion is that he is a chess champion on his way to America, where his dreams of recognition will come true. To cut the five-hundred-page story short, Kien's dignified existence amidst his books is momentarily restored with the intervention of his brother Georg, a gynecologist turned psychiatrist—this is Canetti's ironic treatment of psychoanalysis—who takes some time off from his dubious work with the mentally deranged in Paris in order to diagnose Kien and send Therese and Pfaff away. However, the cunning of the mad Kien is far greater than his brother's professional acumen: left to his own devices, the sinologist inadvertently sets fire to the library and burns to death among his treasured books.

The later work encouraged some of Canetti's readers to understand the novel as foreshadowing the book on crowds: the voices that speak past one another in *Die Blendung*, the fortress-library in which Peter Kien addresses his twenty-five thousand books like the commander-in-chief of an army, the crowds vociferating in his confused mind, no less disturbingly than the curious assemblage of maniacs treated by Georg in his Paris clinic—all seemed to indicate that in the early 1930s, when Canetti wrote his novel, the ideas

that he would formulate more explicitly in *Crowds and Power* were already there in symbolic form.⁴⁸ William Donahue, however, cautions against such hasty interpretations: in *The End of Modernism: Elias Canetti's "Auto-da-fé,"* he cogently shows that one does an injustice to the novel's richness, complexity, specific agenda (which Donahue calls "analytic modernism"), and, most importantly, novelistic genre, when one allows *Crowds and Power* to guide one's reading of the novel.⁴⁹ Indeed, Canetti himself made it quite clear in his memoirs that, while his interest in crowds had been piqued in the early 1920s and persisted throughout his life, the novel was conceived as part of a very ambitious project, the *Human Comedy of Madmen*, which would include novels featuring protagonists driven each in one direction, such as Man of Truth, the Religious Fanatic, the Collector, the Spendthrift, the Enemy of Death, the Actor (who could only live in rapid metamorphoses), and Book Man.⁵⁰ As Donahue compellingly shows, *Die Blendung* is a novel concerned with "the diminution of the social sphere," in many ways reflecting the Vienna of its time. Crowds were surely on Canetti's mind when he wrote *Auto-da-fé*, but to mention that does not give us the whole picture. What is the relationship between Canetti's early novel and the magnum opus of 1960, between the disturbing vision of a world torn asunder that eventually consumes itself in a conflagration, and the imperative need, apparently, to redeem the crowd, compromised for everyone but Canetti by their acquiescence in fascism? The autobiography is helpful in determining this relationship.

In the passages that bridge *The Torch in My Ear* and *The Play of the Eyes*, Canetti dwells on his own malaise after he set fire to Kien's library, a symbolic and definitive condemnation of contemporary civilization. He links this malaise to a sense of doom he experienced in the early 1930s for which he held his contemporaries responsible. They "had taken the most extraordinary pains to be the kind of person who deserve their ruin. Every pair of interlocutors I listened to seemed to me as guilty as I had been when I kindled that fire" (*MEC*, 590). A testimony to the seriousness he accords to the fate of a fictional character, and thus to the place of literature in diagnosing the ills of the world, his words also point to the role he assumed in dealing with those problems. Deeply disturbed by the gravity of his implicit allegations, he recalls that his room had nothing soothing to offer either: he had covered the walls with reproductions of Grünewald's altarpiece, images of the crucifixion that had struck him in Kolmar as a synecdoche for suffering inflicted by fellow human beings.⁵¹ It was "a memory of the dreadful things that people do to one another" (*MEC*, 473) which mercilessly "penetrated [his] flesh and blood." This was a necessary experience, he admits, while he was writing his novel:

my prints seemed to be in the right place, they spurred me on in one and the same direction, a merciless goad. I *wanted* the suffering they

gave me, I got used to them, I never let them out of my sight, they became converted into something which, apparently, had nothing to do with them; for who would have been presumptuous or foolish enough to liken the sinologist's sufferings to those of Christ? And yet a kind of connection had established itself between the prints on my walls and the chapters of my book. I needed the pictures so badly that I would never have put anything else in their place. (MEC, 591)

The tribulations of the mad sinologist Peter Kien, a modern Christ figure, then, paint, in Herman Broch's words, "a picture of hell in this life." The dialogue that Canetti reproduced—whether the accent is on *re-* or on *pro-**duced* matters less—between Broch and himself in the autobiography serves to justify the indictment of humankind as part of his perceived role as a writer: "What repelled Broch was my zealous, dogmatic way of making the improvement of mankind dependent on chastisement and without hesitation appointing myself executor of this chastisement" (MEC, 603). Acknowledging the influence of Karl Kraus, since "a good part of his being had gone into mine, especially . . . his rage," Canetti goes as far as to take pride in Broch's questioning of his motives as worthy:

"What you have done in your novel and in *The Wedding* as well is to heighten fear. You rub people's noses in their wickedness, as though to punish them for it. I know your underlying purpose is to make them repent. You make me think of a Lenten sermon. But you don't threaten people with hell, you paint a picture of hell in this life. You don't picture it objectively, so as to give people a clearer consciousness of it; you picture it in such a way as to make people feel they are in it and scare them out of their wits. Is it the writer's function to bring more fear into the world? Is that a worthy intention?" (MEC, 615)

Asked more explicitly if he wanted to terrify people, Canetti confirmed, showing that a terrifying reality calls for extreme measures: "'Yes. Everything around us is terrifying. There is no longer a common language. No one understands anyone else. I believe no one *wants* to understand'" (MEC, 614). The "lovelessness" that Canetti imputes to his contemporaries will permeate the later work to an even larger degree.

In *Crowds and Power* Canetti remains concerned by the destruction that *Auto-da-fé* left behind, all the more so since Kien's *Brand* proved prophetic in the conflagration of World War II. Suggested by the recurrent emphasis on distances, the "diminution of the social sphere" is the original cause of modernity's most tragic episodes; the realm in which change is necessary in order to "master power" is the social. The autobiographical volumes give disquieting depth both to his apparently rhetorical notion of "distances" and

to his understanding of power: ultimately the crowd's importance lies in its capacity to correct, to offer a countermodel to the discontents of everyday sociality. Various measures of this "distance" proliferate, in Weimar Berlin, the Vienna of the 1930s, England during the Blitz and after, all pointing to Canetti's conviction that power, far from being the exclusive privilege of rulers and dictators, as history used to teach us, or what circulates in the resonance chambers of institutions (as Foucault would have it), permeates in fact the sphere of everyday interaction, indeed all interpersonal relations. It is *this* kind of power, Canetti argues, that can degenerate into the oppressive power of rulers, of a Hitler; a power that all help perpetuate by living the way they do, that they petrify in, and that they attempt to dissolve in the crowd.

The impetus that traverses Canetti's lifework, then, beyond redeeming the crowd in the wake of fascism, writing its fascinating memoirs and inventing a new vocabulary to describe its incarnations or symbolic avatars, is a renewed chastisement and entreatment to change. The silence that Canetti imposed on himself between the publication of *Die Blendung* in 1935 and that of *Crowds and Power* in 1960 was a time of intense reflection on the role of the writer, a time when mere fiction seemed innocuous in the face of world-scale disasters. But I disagree with Honneth's claim that the two books should be read differently because they were written by the novelist, and the writer, respectively: if anything, Canetti only hardened his conviction that the world had to be changed. This is a significant link between the two books. "What makes the author Canetti so 'demanding,'" says Werlen, "are not experimental narratives, complex language, or esoteric erudition but rather an uncompromising understanding of his art, an understanding that demands from the readers, like Rilke's 'Apollonian Torso,' that they change their lives."⁵² In a diary entry from 1975, Canetti muses on his role in the third person: "More and more often he catches himself thinking that there is no way to save humanity. // Is that an attempt to rid himself of responsibility?"⁵³ Five years later, the conviction that the moral imperative lies within him, as obvious as the reality of his repeated displacements and most likely determined by them, is affirmed with more assurance than ever: "Morality is narrow if one *knocks* against it. The real morality has become one's skeletal structure."⁵⁴ This is a statement that encapsulates *Crowds and Power*, contemplated in light of the autobiography: as one begins to suspect, the "real morality" comes from what he called the crowd *in his bones*.

Varieties of Distance, Redemptive Crowds

The peculiar ideation that materialized in the book *Crowds and Power* is retrospectively chronicled in Canetti's memoirs as a process of departure from Freud under the influence of an intense preoccupation with the perceived

separateness and antagonism of people in everyday life, from which he took asylum in the inspiring memory of crowd-immersion early in his youth. Canetti was most likely aware of the two strands concurrently running through his writings: the insistence with which he emphasizes the enduring influence certain experiences had on him can hardly be missed, making apparent his effort to “emplot” his life around these two major concerns.⁵⁵ “The thing that *impressed me most*,” the formulation of the first one runs, “the thing that *determined the rest of my life, even today*, was the incompatibility of all the things that broke in on me” (MEC, 527, my italics). A few pages later it becomes clear that these conflicting “things” are not just heterogeneous aspects of life experience, but the diversity and incompatibility of people: “*I felt*,” Canetti elaborates on his apprehension, “how pitiless life was: everything, racing by, nothing really dealing with anything else. It was obvious not only that no one understood anyone else, but also that no one *wanted to understand anyone else*” (MEC, 545, italics in the original). Yet the same claim to the enduring effects of an experience is made repeatedly with regard to the crowd experience, dating back to his immersion in a large mass of demonstrators in Vienna. This is the second, parallel strand, enunciated in the note with which Canetti prefaces the report of this encounter: “Something occurred that had the deepest influence on my subsequent life” (MEC, 484). He describes it as still present within him as he writes:

Fifty-three years have passed, and the agitation of that day is still in my bones. It was the closest thing to a revolution that I have physically experienced. Since then, I have known quite precisely that I would not have to read a single word about the storming of the Bastille. I became a part of the crowd, I fully dissolved in it, I did not feel the slightest resistance to what the crowd was doing. (MEC, 484–485)

The crowd, one understands, offers the overwhelming intimacy that social life is lacking and that he is craving; while the general disease among his contemporaries is a lack of communication, a certain social aphasia, Canetti remembers his identification with the crowd, and eventually, as we shall see, goes as far as to identify something like a private language with the crowd seeping into his writings.

Following these two strands in the autobiography is crucial for understanding the tension running through *Crowds and Power* between the “distances” permeated by power in everyday life and the liberating energies carried by crowds throughout human history. In this light, *Crowds and Power* appears as an intensely personal book, bearing to an astounding degree the stigma of an exile in the mid-twentieth century. The paradox that his writings court, however, is that while analyzing varieties of distance and their implicit transactions of power, he seems to be, by inclination and training, as much of a distance-builder as he would like to be a redeemer.

Power and Distances: The Making of a Moralist

A conscientious investigation of power must ignore success. We must look for its attributes and their perversions wherever they appear, and then compare them.

—Canetti, *Crowds and Power*

The portrait Canetti draws of himself is that of a young man particularly sensitive to the difficulties of living in a Babel Tower–like world: “What I grasped,” he tells us of the last six months spent in Frankfurt before he started university in Vienna, “was the separateness of opinions, the hard cores of convictions; it was a witches’ cauldron, steaming and bubbling, but all the ingredients floating in it had their specific smell and could be recognized” (*MEC*, 330). There is much to ponder in this passage, a brief reformulation of the ideas so powerfully expressed by his characters in *Die Blendung*, not least because it recalls the so-called method of “acoustic masks” Canetti developed in his early novel and the play *Comedy of Vanity*: it is based on exaggerating the ineradicable peculiarities of the characters’ idiolects, turning them into caricatures, hardening the core of opinions into convictions and thus enacting the extreme removal from the human community, the latter becoming increasingly centrifugal. Suggestively, the image of the witches’ cauldron bears a hint that wickedness was being concocted, that the world would be as if cast under an evil spell during which unthinkable things would happen for which no one would assume responsibility. The memoirs also intimate, however, that wickedness, distances, and power are as much in Canetti’s world as they are in the eyes of the beholder: the tremendous life-view of *Crowds and Power*, as we shall presently see, is to a large degree the outcome of the particular way of seeing and hearing he developed in his childhood and youth, through circumstances partly imposed, partly of his own making.

Adolescence is unsurprisingly remembered as a time of personal defiance, when he is accused, notably by his mother, of blinding himself to real experience. His retrospective defense is that he was blinding himself to the “imitative knowledge” of bourgeois morality, countering the pitiful clichés that were besetting the world around him with inspiring paintings like Samson’s blinding or Brueghel’s *The Triumph of Death*: these paintings were his blinders, repositories of wisdom to which he would return over and over again. Canetti, a self-made moralist? Well, not quite: on reading about his formative years, spent to a large degree reading intensely, one is struck by how vivid the presence of long-dead authors and ideas are to him, as if they had been his contemporaries and contributing actively to his self-cultivation.

Separation, miscommunication, distance are decidedly leitmotifs of the early years. In an episode whose humor does not escape the older narrator, the young Elias, frustrated by his mother’s refusal to let him go on a hiking

trip on grounds of their insufficient financial resources, generates a symbolic inflation by filling the pages of a notebook with the words “Money, money and money again,” only to be diagnosed by a family doctor with a “too obvious” Oedipus complex, hence magnanimously sent hiking with a friend as a way of getting some distance from the worshipped-hated parent. To be sure, this is exactly what he does in an angry outburst of resentment that he documents in his diary; reading it many years later, Canetti confesses his shock at such precocious violence. Incidentally, this is also the trip on which he reads more closely Freud’s *Group Psychology* and becomes vehemently determined to do away, once and for all, with the famous author’s supposedly misguided theories. In the insightful study *La folie Canetti*, psychoanalyst Roger Gentis articulates these two disavowals—of Matilde Canetti and of “father” Freud—as one major event of emancipation, cautioning, however, against giving too much importance to the Oedipal motif. Canetti, he believes, was well aware that his story yielded itself to psychoanalytic interpretations and therefore set some traps in anticipation so that he could mock his critics better: “Who wouldn’t recognize Freud,” Gentis asks rhetorically, referencing an episode involving the possibility of tonsil removal, “in the man at whom he is sticking his tongue out?”⁵⁶ What cannot be missed here, in the way Canetti evokes the “Money, money and money again” incident, is that his gesture of protest, symbolically expressed in the grammar of the later crowd project (*Crowds and Power* lists inflation among crowd phenomena), is misunderstood by the doctor and reduced to the most hated of clichés, the Oedipus complex.

Another imposing figure took over, “enslaving,” as Canetti puts it, the young Elias: the relentless critic of Viennese society Karl Kraus, editor of *Die Fackel* (*The Torch*) and author of *The Last Days of Mankind*.⁵⁷ Canetti remembers he missed none of the satirist’s public readings between 1924 and 1928.⁵⁸ A scuttling mind, Kraus is portrayed as “a master of accusing people with their own words.” He stands out as the towering figure of Canetti’s Viennese youth, who instilled in his impressionable apprentice an unforgiving critical attitude that he would carry as a burden throughout his life. Is this the cross of the future redeemer? The passage below suggests as much:

The reader must bear in mind the profound effect Karl Kraus’s perpetual accusations had had on me. They took possession of one and never let one go (to this day I detect wounds they left me with, not all of which have healed), they had the full force of *commands*. Since I accepted them in advance and never tried to evade them, I might have been better off if they had had the stringency of commands; then it would have been possible to carry them out and they would not have become *thorns* in my flesh. But as it was, Karl Kraus’s periods, as solidly built as fortresses, lay heavy and unwieldy on my chest, a

crippling burden that I carried around with me, and though I had thrown off a good part of it while slaving over my novel and later while my play was erupting, there was still a danger that my rebellion would fail and end in serious psychic enslavement. (MEC, 698)

In this assessment of Kraus's influence, Canetti makes a curious use of the theory of command he would expound in *Crowds and Power*. The burden he inherited—the thorns of Kraus's implicit command to see the world in a certain way—was partly thrown off while writing *Die Blendung*. Yet thorns, *Crowds and Power* teaches us, can only be passed on, never transformed into something socially acceptable.⁵⁹ In light of this theory, *Die Blendung* is meant to be an affecting novel, to enact a kind of revenge on a guilty mankind. As the passage above suggests, however, Canetti hardly managed to subtract himself from Kraus's powerful influence. One suspects that if the people Canetti met throughout his life were beset by distances and separateness, their affliction might have been as much a reality as the effect of the way Canetti listened to them, with at least one ear still scorched by the fire of Karl Kraus's *Fackel*.

The account of his trip to Weimar Berlin in 1928 is an opportunity to articulate the moral outlook on society that would bear his signature, shaped by Kraus and given a more humane turn following the encounter with the Russian writer Isaac Babel. Weimar Berlin offers itself as a spectacle of vanity. Canetti is quick to identify the two artistic representations of it that best unveil its core: George Grosz's collection of caricatures *Ecce Homo* and Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. Coming from Vienna, Canetti himself was to despise this society dominated by superficiality, a certain brand of American pragmatism, and greed:

I myself, after four years under Karl Kraus's influence, was filled with all his contempt and condemnation and acknowledging nothing that was determined by greed, selfishness, or frivolity. All objects to condemn were prescribed by Kraus. You were not even allowed to look at them; he had already taken care of that for you and made the decision. It was a sterilized intellectual life that we led in Vienna, a special kind of hygiene prohibiting any intermingling whatsoever. No sooner was something universal, no sooner had it gotten into the newspapers, than it was taboo and untouchable. (MEC, 502)

The society Canetti describes in this chapter is that of bohemian artists, many foreigners, who made a name for themselves in Berlin, an avant-garde that Peter Gay describes as formed by “outsiders as insiders”⁶⁰ and that he is introduced to as a young aspiring writer who so far can base his self-esteem only on the unfailing kindness with which Veza, his wife-to-be, received his poems back in Vienna. The Austrian capital now appears sterile and austere,

compared to the “hotbed of vice” that is Berlin: *Ecce Homo*, Canetti has to admit with George Grosz, whose drawings had struck him with their “strength and recklessness . . . , ruthlessness and dreadfulness. Since they were extreme, I regarded them as Truth. A truth that mediated, that weakened, that explained, that excused was no Truth for me. I knew that Grosz’s characters really existed” (MEC, 511). Later on he understands more precisely his feelings as “an odd mixture of horror and approval. These were dreadful creatures of Berlin’s night life that you saw here, but they were here because they were viewed as dreadful” (MEC, 513). *Viewed as*: the perspective, the framework, already matters a lot. Comically, the discovery that the graphic artist actually enjoyed as much as he despised the corrupted world he was sketching in his caricatures only brings Canetti’s disgust to new depths.⁶¹

Suggestively titled “An Invitation to Emptiness,” the chapter describes in great detail how the social promiscuity of avant-garde circles offends his sensibility: “Everything was equally close in Berlin, every kind of effect was permitted: no one was prohibited from making himself noticeable if he didn’t mind the strain” (MEC, 526). Having indulged the language of closeness, Canetti is quick to dismiss the appearance of intimacy as “feigned,” since “its goal was to surpass some other intimacy” (MEC, 527). Rather than the authenticity of human connections, what matters here is the authenticity and force of one’s striving to be acknowledged by others; his portrayal of the avant-garde artist is a rather comic version of Trilling’s aggressive, potentially murderous *authentics*, concerned, in Canetti’s view, only with achieving recognition:

Every individual who was something—and many people were something—struck away at the others with himself. It was questionable whether they understood him; he made them listen. It didn’t seem to bother him that others made people listen in a different way. He had validity as soon as he was heard. And now he had to continue striking away with himself to keep being supplanted in the ears of the public. (MEC, 527)

Even after acknowledging, with hindsight, that the period was artistically prolific, Canetti returns to the human cost of such agonistic effervescence, claiming that one could only endure “that harsh existence” only through association with a group or a clique.

Helmut Lethen’s *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany* is one of the most fascinating analyses of Weimar sociability, offering a compelling review of codes of conduct that proliferated after the First World War. It begins with Helmuth Plessner’s *Limits of Community*, and follows up with texts by Ernst Jünger, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin (in correspondence with Carl Schmitt), Werner Krauss, and Walter Serner.⁶² These authors have in common the rediscovery of Baltasar Gracián’s *Art of*

Worldly Wisdom (1647), which inspired critiques of the oppressive warmth of the traditional community (*Gemeinschaft*) and privileged a cool hygiene of calculated interpersonal distance. The “sincerity” paradigm, the critique went, was an ethic of tactlessness: it obscured aggressiveness and offered no reliable code of behavior among strangers. By contrast, society (*Gesellschaft*) can only exist through the preservation of space, indeterminacy, and pockets of mistrust—all regulated by codes of conduct that teach strategies of face-saving, diplomacy, and tact.⁶³ One must read these texts to understand Canetti’s evocation of Weimar Berlin as that of an outsider excluded from the unspoken rules of cool sociability. “Perhaps no one had the leisure to wonder where all this was leading to,” he muses, a hint of unintended irony coloring his regret that “no transparent life came about in this way” (*MEC*, 527). Ultimately, he remains critical of the way fame was inextricably bound up with aggressive self-assertion and obliteration of others: “By acknowledging as little as possible, by hitting out in all directions, you yourself became somebody. Anyone who didn’t know how to hit out in all directions was doomed and could simply hit the road: Berlin was nothing for him” (*MEC*, 528).

There are a few individuals who detach themselves from this background, and the way Canetti presents them is most often also a self-portrayal, revealing his critical inclinations: Wieland Hertzfelde, the owner of the Malik publishing house, for whom he worked on the Upton Sinclair project;⁶⁴ his brother John Heartfield, who “learned only from things that he regarded as attacks; and in order to experience something new, he had to see it as an attack” (*MEC*, 504); Bertolt Brecht, who stood for everything Canetti hated (“an Anglo-Saxon practicality of the American variety”: he “had written a poem about Steyr Automobiles and been given a car for it. For me, these were words from the devil’s own mouth” [*MEC*, 508]) and in whose presence his moralistic outlook becomes conspicuous even to himself: “Morality was one thing and matter was another, and when I dealt with this man, who cared only about matter, then nothing but morality counted for me” (*MEC*, 508). His distaste for the individual prevents him from expressing his admiration for the poet, whose *Manual of Piety* “shattered at one blow” his own hopes of becoming a writer. But most of all, his critical spirit is struck by Brecht’s success in capturing the essence of a self-complacent society in *The Threepenny Opera*. It was, Canetti says,

the most accurate expression of this Berlin. The people cheered for themselves: this was they and they liked themselves. First they fed their faces. Then they spoke of right and wrong. No one could have put it better about them. They took these words literally. Now it had been spoken, they felt as snug as a bug in a rug. Penalty had been abolished: the royal messenger rode in on a real horse. The shrill and naked self-complacency that this performance emanated can be believed only by the people who witnessed it. (*MEC*, 532)

Probably the most significant encounter in Berlin is with Isaac Babel, who seems to trigger a personal *Kehre* of sorts in Canetti the moralist. No wonder this meeting is narrated as an episode in his “school of hearing”: his apprenticeship with Babel comes as a corrective to the previous one, under Kraus, inflecting his tendency to absorb the world with a more humane purpose. “I learned something,” he confesses, “which may have seemed even more important after my lengthy apprenticeship with *Die Fackel*: I learned how wretched judging and condemning are as ends in themselves” (*MEC*, 536–537). As a remedy, Babel modeled for him an exemplary way of observing people, characterized by slowness, restraint, and muteness.

The moving portrait he makes of the Russian writer is probably equaled in tenderness only by his later characterization of Dr. Sonne, the poet Avraham ben Yitzhak, whom he would meet in Vienna. Babel is portrayed as both a kindred spirit and as a model, someone who brought to self-consciousness his own aims as a writer, his intention to turn to people with a very specific expectation—“I wanted people, including myself, to become *better*, and so I had to know absolutely everything about every single human being” (*MEC*, 537).

Just to what extent the experience of reckless self-assertion in Berlin affected the young Canetti appears more explicitly in the last chapter of *The Torch in My Ear*, where the forced name-feeding, as he now describes his encounter with Weimar artists, is set in contrast with the spectacle of unassuming ordinary people that he enjoys listening to in taverns late at night, anonymously: “I opposed this united affliction and harassment by names, I resisted it by means of every person who had no name, everyone who was poor in name” (*MEC*, 577).⁶⁵ It is easy to imagine Canetti unobtrusively listening to people in taverns, even turning to the wall or shutting his eyes in order to allow his ears get their fill of the “variety, and . . . the poverty, banality, the misuse of words”—more meaningful, however, than “the braggadocio and bumptiousness of writers” (*MEC*, 578). One readily recognizes interwoven here a set of themes that Canetti’s writings take up in various guises: language and its power (*Macht*), the world as a stage populated with acoustic masks conversing to the rhythm of speaking and replying, people’s unselfconscious inability to transcend their subjectivity and reach others through language. “Whether achieving their effect or not, the scenes recurred—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the purview of their calculation was so narrow that they were bound to appear unsuccessful to the listener, and hence futile and innocent” (*MEC*, 578). It matters, of course, that the listener should be Canetti, well initiated by Karl Kraus in the power of language; for it is this aspect that Canetti brings here to the fore, in the contrast between the deft, annihilating, rhetoric of the “shriek” in Berlin, and the derisory stakes of Everyman’s crude use of words. A hint of irony cannot be missed in Canetti’s self-congratulatory attentiveness “without disrespect” to these individuals’ speech, in the consolation he draws from their inoffensive chatter: “I liked

these people, even the most hateful among them, because they were not given the power of speech [weil ihnen die Macht der Rede nicht gegeben war]:⁶⁶ it is Canetti himself, schooled by Kraus, the “master of accusing people with their own words,” who deprives these people of power by describing them as such, and by the same token claiming the power of understanding as his exclusive privilege. Their portrayal looks very much like a caricature: “They made themselves ridiculous in words, they struggled with words. They gazed into a distorting mirror when they spoke; they demonstrated themselves in the distortion of words, which distortion had become their alleged likeness. They made themselves vulnerable when they courted understanding; they accused one another so unsuccessfully that insult sounded like praise and praise like insult” (MEC, 578). Canetti acknowledges that these people’s “powerlessness,” which reminds him of his own insignificance in Berlin, has a therapeutic effect:

It seized hold of me, I was thankful to it; I was unable to sate myself with it, and it was not the openly declared powerlessness with which others like to operate selfishly: it was the hidden, dyed-in-the-wool powerlessness of individuals who remained apart, who couldn’t get together, least of all in speech, which separated them instead of binding them. (MEC, 578, my italics)

Canetti never mentions any attempt to participate in the sociability of the tavern, in the “scenes that took shape in the ebb and flow,” remaining aside from them in order to dissect better their presumed separateness. Do they really remain apart, as Canetti sees them, night after night? One has reasons to doubt it: perhaps their community only gives off the impression of failed communication, while relying on a foundation of long-term familiarity, complicity, double-entendre, ambiguous interpellation that remains opaque to outsiders. Might Canetti remain oblivious to the private dynamic of communities he simply observes as an outsider, unsuspecting that his cultivated distance might actually preclude closeness? On reading the passage above, one sees the world transforming itself into a novel in front of Canetti’s eyes; and not just any novel, but one that is as disturbing as *Auto-da-fé*, where precisely the disconnect between the ways in which characters use language and how it echoes outside, how it is misunderstood by others, causes them to move in parallel worlds. However far from the Berlin cafés, Vienna’s taverns do not offer Canetti a more appealing model of human interaction: in one place as well as in the other, he is equally struck by the separateness of people, both when caused by their too-skilled use of language—penetrating like “a shriek”—and by their perceived deprivation of this “power.”

Canetti’s catalog of distances includes one most sophisticated sample: the British variety, described in *Party in the Blitz*. This late autobiographical volume, published posthumously, resembles in very few respects the

thoughtful, often poetic, previous tomes; rather than an autobiography, it reads like a collection of portraits: Herbert Read, Kathleen Raine, Aymer Maxwell, Lord David Stewart, Bertrand Russell, Franz Steiner, Enoch Powell, Veronica Wedgwood, T. S. Eliot, Iris Murdoch, Oscar Kokoschka, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and others. Canetti sketches them with hardly any concern for propriety, political correctness, or even objectivity, as an old man who can afford to be blunt and show no restraint in the making public of his antipathies. In place of a self-portrait, the early essay “No-one in England or the Silence of Contempt” casts light on the anonymity of exile, and on how the distances encoded and prescribed in British social norms prevent genuine human contact. Yet again, the claim to be “no-one,” or at best the object of silent contempt, might suggest some of the feelings that colored these evocations. “You could describe it,” Canetti says ironically about the typical English party, “as an advanced social training.” This time, his writing sounds like the bitter parody of a code of conduct:

You’re brought together into a small space, very close, but without touching. It looks as though there might be a curse, but there isn’t. Freedom consists in the distance from your opposite number, even if it’s only a hair’s breadth. You move smartly past others who are crowding in on you from all sides without brushing any of them. You remain untouched and pure. It would be accounted a fault, a stain, if you permitted yourself the least contact with anyone else. . . . The riddle of mystery and distance mustn’t shrivel, otherwise the party would collapse like a punctured balloon.⁶⁷

The party here is to be taken literally and metaphorically, for he identifies its main characteristic, distance, with a national trait. In “On the Nearness and Distance of the English,” he sets out on a brief ethnographic excursus that resonates with the beginning of *Crowds and Power*: “Distance is a principal gift of the English. They do not come too near. They may not, they cannot come too near. For their own protection, the person sheathes itself in ice. To the outside, everything is patted back. Inside, you’re left to freeze.”⁶⁸ This is the opposite of the agonistic mode of interaction in Berlin: while there everyone hits at everyone else with themselves, everything being permeable, unbearably close, in England everyone is shielded in ice, everything is distant. But in both cases, intimacy is missing. The ironic passages that follow mimic, by way of a multiplicity of impersonal pronouns and nouns, this absence: between “the person,” “he,” “you,” “anyone,” and “him,” between implicit questions and passive voices, an elaborate strategy of evasion is constructed:

Social life consists of futile efforts at proximity. These are as hesitant as *the person* making them is brave. *He* really is, because he knows how alone he truly is.

Basically, *you* shrink back from *anyone* new: you fear in *him* the worst, someone who will leap over the distance you set up. He may give every *appearance* of reserve, but *you* do not trust him, and keep him off with elaborate politeness: the silent, but searching question with which you investigate him, “How high? How low?” is as existentially important as it is implacable.

The urge to climb in society is always alive, it is fuelled by reverence for the very highest echelons, but tamed by the difficulty of approaching them, and, even if an approach has been successfully made, then by the difficulty of touching them. This is something only learned in closest proximity of others.⁶⁹

Canetti's social apprenticeship in England, where he lived for thirty years, obviously worked its way into the outlook on everyday interactions that permeates *Crowds and Power*: not only is “distance” the experience of the foreigner who is tolerated, yet never absorbed by the new community; society itself is structured in hierarchies that maintain (vertical) distances between individuals. From the volume as a whole one gathers that Canetti's side-long glances at the English, traversing these distances they seem so good at maintaining, bespeak a frustration that is the mirror image of the “being nobody” in Weimar Berlin: whereas there, as an unpublished author, he had felt threatened with annihilation by aggressive “names,” abroad again, he feels rendered invisible by the lack of recognition he would now feel entitled to, owing to the fame of his tremendous novel. *Party in the Blitz* is permeated with the frustration, and often the resentment, felt by the writer who cannot relate meaningfully, who cannot make sense of others, to others.⁷⁰ Or perhaps that picture is a distortion. Canetti, so deeply affected by the “witches’ cauldron of opinions,” the Babel Tower that is the human world with its diversity of idiolects, finds in England renewed opportunities for his talents of dissecting separateness and distances, of detecting the fine, invisible filigrees of power that traverse them. In contrast to the unselfconscious powerlessness of the tavern men in late-night Vienna, here power is tactfully dissolved in silence, all the more insidious because suspected to be present, as a strategy of maintaining distance. Or at least this is Canetti's interpretation of it:

It is taken for admirable modesty if very prominent persons mingle with others and succeed in distinguishing themselves so little that they remain unrecognized. They wear no masks, but nor do they introduce themselves. You can have a conversation with someone, without having a clue who he is. He can walk away from you, without having the least sense of obligation to you. Nothing has been promised, nothing transacted, it was an innocent exercise in espionage, that suppressed any thought of . . . The one mustn't sense how

deeply he is despised, and the other mustn't let on how much power he would have—anywhere but here.

Because, of course, power has accrued, but it has been distributed as well, and . . . its limits by being concealed in the midst of so many others.⁷¹

Again Canetti cultivates his outsider's stance—could he not take the initiative to introduce himself, even at the risk of advertising his foreignness?—and suspects the presence of power. In light of all these examples, the idiosyncratic language of *Crowds and Power* appears less surprising: to Canetti, the eternally displaced, the world presents itself under the guise of a conspiracy, as a play of masked characters who are either in retreat, because, self-sufficient, they care for no genuine human interaction, or else expected to reveal something unpleasant, something concealing a death threat, hence the apprehensive step back, the fear, the awe.

Canetti was struck by a similar aspect in Kafka's letters: "He says that fear and indifference combined make up his deepest feeling toward human beings."⁷² This insight would explain, Canetti believes, the uniqueness of Kafka's work, "in which emotions hardly appear. . . . If one thinks about it with a little courage, our world has indeed become one in which fear and indifference predominate. Expressing his own reality without indulgence, Kafka was the first to present the image of *this* world."⁷³ "Fear and indifference . . . *this* world": Kafka's and Canetti's. In these locales populated by variously separated people—Frankfurt, Vienna, Weimar Berlin, London—which turn out to be typical of the times (as the comment on Kafka suggests), Canetti often dwells on discrete instances of serious miscommunication, of people trying to wrench themselves free from under the influence of others because the others either aggress them with their forceful speech, or else fail to speak to them. A few examples, which must be accompanied by the acknowledgment that *this* world of Canetti's indeed weighs more and more heavily, should give us a sense of the full picture. I will not dwell on the deeply problematic relationship with the mother, whose admonitions Canetti perceived as imperious commands,⁷⁴ except to note that the autobiography reads like an elaborate farewell; unsurprisingly, *The Play of the Eyes* ends with her burial, which is supposed to seal their sundering. Whether this was the case remains an open question: his wife, Veza, who in a certain sense replaced her, was subsequently no less affected by Canetti's apparent efforts not to become excessively attached, perhaps even dependent on her; at one point he moves away from her apartment on Ferdinand Street—which was too close to where he lived—deciding that it was "best if distance was created, if the whole of Vienna lay between [them] . . . voices . . . voices" (*MEC*, 406). Another example of distance is equally striking: while he was working on his chemistry degree, which was "barely grazing the skin of [his] head," he was having daily conversations with a female friend about a foreign colleague.

One day this colleague committed suicide, for which, strangely, Canetti takes some responsibility: “Instead of toying with her, I should have talked her into loving him” (*MEC*, 442). Canetti, usually so reserved about love, reproaches himself for not having thought of it as an antidote to distance. A last example features his old friend Hans, who accompanies him on the liberating trip to the mountains after he is released from the maternal enclosure. The separation from Hans after a week together is one of the uncanniest moments in the memoirs: Canetti recalls the wordless look, presumably filled with hatred, that his friend cast on him one day with no apparent reason—indeed, the reader is taken completely by surprise here—and realized, he claims, that Hans, this longtime family friend, wanted to kill him. With no explanation they parted ways; a few hundred pages later we find out that Hans committed suicide. “Not until later,” Canetti adds without dispelling the mystery, “did I realize that his personal misfortune was to create the distances separating him from people he was close to. He was a distance builder; this was his talent, and he built distances so well that it was impossible for others and for him to leap across them” (*MEC*, 406). It is probably inconsequential whether these words are a reliable characterization of Hans; but it is at this point in the memoirs apparent that they apply to Canetti himself, the *Dichter*, a “distance builder”: at least some of the distances he so keenly maps in the memoirs are likely of his own—rhetorical—making. And what is the role that he assumes in this life performance? It is curious that Canetti noted in the book about his kindred spirit “the distance without which he—Kafka—could not write.”⁷⁵

Distances, *Crowds and Power* shows, are created by the stings of command. Yet in the autobiography, Canetti uses this image repeatedly with reference to himself: Karl Kraus’s words and rage poured into him, and he carried them along like thorns in his flesh; his mother filled him with anger and resentment, and he carried all these feelings with him, perhaps all his life; while writing *Auto-da-fé*, he describes his need for the suffering exuding from the crucifixion represented on the Isenheim prints, showing how it “entered his own flesh and blood.” Is this a clue? What is the crucifixion, that “memory of the dreadful things that people do to one another,” if not the image of a man with thorns in his flesh? “Who would have been so presumptuous or foolish enough to liken the sinologist’s sufferings to those of Christ?” Canetti asks rhetorically, but surely the preterition cannot be missed. And how can one not see that Canetti himself is filled to the brim with the distances—and the stings—of others, stung into the consciousness of a world torn asunder; and that something in the way of a redemption is not only needed, but impossible to avoid? One “cannot fall outside of the world,”⁷⁶ however often the stateless exile has to contend with the burden of his stings and take refuge elsewhere. But before this point can be pressed further, we need to look at Canetti in the midst of the crowd.

The Crowd: Vision and Private Language

“I had been *moved* by the crowd,” Canetti remembers in *The Torch in My Ear*:

It was an intoxication; you were lost, you forgot yourself; you felt tremendously remote 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*, and you made sure not to belittle or denigrate this experience. At the same time, however, you felt you had no control over yourself, you weren't free, something uncanny was happening to you, it was half delirium, half paralysis. How could all this happen together? What was it? (*MEC*, 364, my italics)

This crucial passage might well serve as an epigraph to any reading of *Crowds and Power*, since there is no clearer statement of the function of the crowd in Canetti's book: the equalizing immersion in a multitude of people is the moment of redemption, the glimmer of hope in a world beset with distances. The apocalyptic image returns in a later description of the crowd, which resonates with the echo of the trumpet of the Last Judgment mentioned in the passage above:

You felt the fire, its presence was overwhelming; even if you did not see it, you nevertheless had it in your mind, its attraction and the attraction exerted by the crowd were one and the same. . . . Your connection with others (an open or secret connection, depending on the place) remained in effect. And you were drawn back into the province of the fire—circuitously, since there was no other possible way. (*MEC*, 488)

This urgent redemptive function of the crowd experience, incomprehensibly missed by others—“you made sure not to belittle or denigrate this experience” is obviously a gesture toward his crowd-theorist predecessors—appears throughout the memoirs in frequent evocations bearing a tinge of the ineffable, the ungraspable, the sublime: “It was the physical attraction that I couldn't forget,” “as if this were what is known in physics as gravitation” (*MEC*, 353). For Canetti the *Dichter* such an overwhelming experience cannot be explained away once and for all with a theory; his interest is in mapping out, rather than restricting to a clear-cut explanation, the symbolism of the crowd, hence the images of fire, music, wave, rhythm, gravitation, resonant wind; all these are reiterations of the crowd symbols to which an entire chapter is dedicated in *Crowds and Power*: “You heard something everywhere: there was something rhythmic in the air, an evil music. You

could call it music; you felt elevated by it. I did not feel as if I were moving on my own legs. I felt as if I were in a resonant wind” (*MEC*, 487). And then Canetti multiplies the examples of crowds, his effort amounting to no less than a re-presentation of human experience—his book is like a Noah’s ark in which all manner of crowds have to be sampled, or like a large city in which ancient streets coexist with more recent ones: this is indeed reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s picture of language.⁷⁷ It is possible to situate Canetti in proximity of ordinary language philosophers who care about illustrations rather than definitions, showing thus that one does not need the precision of definitions when we have such a disquieting variety of examples: it is after all Canetti’s ambition to find and describe elements of crowd behavior in all the human civilizations as well as in all realms of human experience that makes the effort of understanding *Crowds and Power* so frustrating.⁷⁸ Just as Wittgenstein in the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations* is subtly hinting at mistaken ways of doing philosophy before him, in order to later show a better way, Canetti quietly brackets the work of his predecessors, aiming to offer an alternative way of dealing with crowds, a different way of thinking about human experience. The “method,” to the extent that there is one, is to build a new picture by way of many examples, to intimate various ways out, in his case transformation, sting removal, goodness (as we shall soon see), and so on; from the proliferation of examples of crowds ultimately transpires a Wittgensteinian question: “Do you see what I see?” What he offers is a new way of seeing, a new vision, rather than an explanation. Canetti is a kind of poet of the ordinary, who finds his elemental condition not in language, but in the crowd. For besides this “nostalgia for the particular”—the words belong to Iris Murdoch, but they apply to Canetti’s attachment to so many examples—there is also the insistence on the irreducibility of bodily experience as that which is absolutely reliable and exemplary. Canetti’s *recognition* of the crowd phenomenon is insistently expressed in terms of an overwhelming firsthand experience: “I returned over and over and watched; and even today, I sense how hard it is for me to tear myself away, since I have managed to achieve only the tiniest portion of my goal: to understand what a crowd is” (*MEC*, 490). From the first encounter with a crowd, the latter challenges him as something defying understanding, akin to the experience of the sublime: “The riddle wouldn’t stop haunting me; it has stuck to me for the better part of my life. And if I did ultimately hit upon a few things, I was still as puzzled as ever” (*MEC*, 353). By the time Canetti wrote his memoirs, his accomplishment seemed of less significance than what he had expressed in the letter to his brother on completion of the manuscript. “During the following year [after the manifestations he took part in on July 15, 1927, in Vienna] and then again and again later on, I tried to grasp the wave, but I have never succeeded. I could not succeed, for nothing is more mysterious and more incomprehensible than a crowd. Had I fully understood it, I would not have wrestled with the problem of a crowd for thirty years, trying to puzzle it out

and trying to depict it and reconstruct it as thoroughly as possible, like other human phenomena" (MEC, 488). To be sure, it is not a *picture* that holds him captive, to use here Wittgenstein's words, but something that Alain Badiou might call *fidelity to an event*: an experience to which he often returns, which has become part of himself, as if following a transubstantiation. "Fifty-three years have passed," he reflects in *The Torch in My Ear*, "and the agitation of that day is still *in my bones*" (MEC, 484, my italics). The original experience was one of complete identification: he had "fully dissolved in [the crowd]"; he had felt the crowd outside, but also within himself: "even today I sense how hard it is to *tear myself away*" (MEC, 490, my italics). This unforgettable immersion is Canetti's encounter with the ordinary, both within and outside himself, the experience of a porous body traversed by the crowd.

There is no doubt something paradoxical about the connection with Wittgenstein, since the people Canetti evokes do not find a community in language: as we have seen, he believes language keeps them apart. Is it that the events separating Wittgenstein and Canetti have compromised language irremediably? Is Karl Kraus's rage, his habit of using people's words against themselves, which have seeped into Canetti's way of seeing the world, too . . . deconstructionist?⁷⁹ In any case, Canetti seems to want to retrieve something that precedes even the commonality of language, a dimension of experience that is also present in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: something like the shared experience of living in a body, but which becomes with him a shared substance, transpiring in an *intoxication*, feeling like a *higher unity*. This is no metaphysical, sublime beyond; on the contrary, this is Canetti's version of the *ordinary*: it foregrounds the body as a pathway to human truth.

Language is not obliterated from the picture altogether; it appears in an unexpected guise as a medium of intimacy with the stentorian voice of a crowd, that he hears from his room cheering during a game played on a stadium nearby. "I could hear the crowd, and it alone, as though everything were taking place right near me," he remembers. He shares the excitement of the crowd, although he did not root for either side, both indifferent to him. "There were two crowds, that was all I knew; both equally excitable and speaking the same language" (MEC, 492). The proximity of this language is sufficient for him to identify fully with the emotions of the crowd, every single sound affecting him: "Reading through manuscripts of those days, I believe even today that I can discern every point at which such a sound was heard, as though it was marked by a secret notation" (MEC, 493). In a remarkable passage, Canetti intimates an aural space within which a communion with the various emotions of the crowd takes place, one whose perfection is impervious to the passage of time. Those "effects" have trickled into his writing as if in the form of "a secret notation," recalling the private language whose existence Wittgenstein contested.⁸⁰ One might not have a private language

of one's own, but as an "autobiographer of the crowd," Canetti also thought himself in possession of, or at least receptive to, its private language.⁸¹

What is the crowd to Canetti, then? If we allow the memoirs to shed light on *Crowds and Power*, it appears as a multitude of individuals who carry stings in their flesh. The stings of command usually create distances between them, but these distances disappear in the crowd. Redemption then is not the work of one individual, the Christ with his crown of thorns, but is enacted collectively, in a happening that would seem nothing short of miraculous if the metaphysical weren't precisely the ordinary: the ordinary raised at the level of a redemptive—that is, consciousness-altering, and "thunderous[ly]" unselfish—experience. Contemplating Canetti's world, Emil Cioran's picture of society from *Traité de décomposition* inevitably comes to mind: it is *an inferno of saviors*.

Having said this, we need to emphasize that with Canetti, we should always speak of the crowd in the plural. Canetti looks at crowds in history, ultimately intimating a human community that transcends the historical. The importance of this point can be best illuminated by highlighting this ideal character of community in the thought of other thinkers, such as Franz Rosenzweig and Giorgio Agamben. In *The Star of Redemption* (1921), Rosenzweig contrasts the community of religion with that of politics. Two features are significant in a discussion of *Crowds and Power*: the shared equality at the heart of the community, and its eternal, transcendental character. For Rosenzweig, the community of equals emerges from the silent listening to the reading of the Text, the affirmation of shared bodily equality in the communal eating, and the bow (to God) as a form of greeting. Canetti would obviously not dispute the equality of the members, but he would be bothered by the vertical relation to God. This fundamental difference helps articulate a commonality, however: where Rosenzweig shows that the eternal God transcends the fate of the historical leader or state, thus making the community transhistorical, Canetti turns the crowd itself into a transhistorical category, by pointing to its omnipresence in human experience. One can speculate that a utopian dimension ensues: just as with Christianity, the nature of the present is a preparation for the redemptive community, the process of forming a universal society, the countless types of crowds in the 1960 tome and the memories of crowd immersion recounted in the memoirs might harbor the image of a community that individuals must learn to belong to.⁸² This might bring into focus Agamben's "coming community," except that Canetti does not seem to be interested in the singularity of each individual member: as we have seen, it is precisely against the claims to singularity made by his contemporaries that he developed his hope in the redemptive potential of the crowd experience.⁸³

Two last questions remain to be addressed: What is missing from Canetti's world? And why is his outlook so bleak?

The Avoidance of Love

Once we understand that the “accent” Canetti gave his ideas by writing the memoirs is a moralistic one, his refusal to engage previous theories seems less surprising: Canetti’s aims were simply incommensurable with those of his predecessors.⁸⁴ Already at twenty he was determined to remove all “scribblings” about crowds, “to have the crowd before [him] as a pure, untouched mountain, which [he] would be the first to climb without prejudices.” A passage resonant with Karl Kraus’s biting sarcasm claims that previous theorists

closed themselves off against masses, crowds; they found them alien or seemed to fear them; and when they set about investigating them, they gestured: Keep ten feet away from me! A crowd seemed something leprous to them, it was like a disease. They were supposed to find the symptoms and describe them. It was crucial for them, when confronted with a crowd, to keep their heads, not be seduced by the crowd, not melt into it. (*MEC*, 407)

Not so with Canetti, who finds that the real disease is the power inherent to social life and that the antidote to it is the crowd: a shared experience of embodiment, a powerful reminder of the capacity to have common purposes, to be traversed forcefully by the same energies. Canetti elevates the ordinary to a transcendental reality and conveys this experience of the sublime as a powerful vision: hence the hyperbolic presentation of history as crowds, and of power as raw violence.⁸⁵ As a writer, Canetti’s intent is not to offer a rational explanation of historical events or new philosophical concepts to understand them; this would mean yielding to the lures of an Enlightenment rationality that failed to prevent them—indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer would say, that *led* to them. Rather, he pursues a visceral reaction in his readers, a desire for change.⁸⁶

The memoirs qualify the image of Canetti as an iconoclast with respect to previously held beliefs about the crowd, shedding new light on his relationship with Freud. First, he shows himself adamant about psychoanalysis, whose results “struck even the unschooled reader of twenty as dissatisfying and incongruent. . . . What I missed most in Freud’s discussion was *recognition* of the phenomenon” (*MEC*, 407, italics in the original).⁸⁷ The crowd phenomenon, he adds, renewing the effort to put distance between himself and Freud,

struck me as no less elementary than the libido or hunger. I didn’t set out to get rid of this phenomenon by tracing it back to special constellations of the libido. On the contrary, the point was to focus on it squarely, as something that had always existed, and that existed now more than ever, as a given phenomenon to be thoroughly investigated,

namely to be first experienced and then described. (*MEC*, 407–408, my italics)

It is hard to miss the epiphanic quality of Canetti's ideation about the crowd: he repeats that he was *struck*, later he speaks of an *illumination*, and in general the crowd experience is described in terms that harbor the etymological sense of enthusiasm (*enthusiasm*—immersion in, but also possession by the crowd). The crowd is elementary, the relationship with it is almost mystical, and its understanding cannot be mediated by the “special constellations of the libido” laid out by Freud. Clearly, Canetti stakes a lot on this difference. In a radio interview from 1962, Adorno invited Canetti to elaborate on his relationship with Freud, soliciting a form of acknowledgment that is absent from *Crowds and Power*. At first Canetti was succinct and reserved.⁸⁸ Prodded again by Adorno, he acknowledges that he was critical of Freud's reliance on the figure of the leader in theorizing the crowd, as well as on two models, the church and the army, that Canetti excludes from the category of “crowds” because they are hierarchical. There is much more than these aspects in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, and Freud's attentive readers are justified in suspecting Canetti of evasion. Their discomfort is alleviated, if also teased, by a passage in the memoirs that brings to light the beginning of a revised attitude toward Freud:

At the time, I was unaware of how much the manner of my enterprise owed to the fact that there was someone like Freud in Vienna, . . . I was sincerely, if naively, convinced that I was undertaking something different, something totally independent of me. It was clear to me that *I needed him as an adversary*. But the fact that *he served as a kind of model for me*—this was something that no one could have made me see at that time. (*MEC*, 387)

This rather puzzling passage—unique in its acknowledgment of Freud, since Canetti does not go on to explain his indebtedness, or how he understands the notion of “a model”—invites a renewed analysis of this relationship. How exactly is *Crowds and Power* modeled on Freud's work?

“Each detail exists in itself, memorable and discernible, and yet each one also forms a part of the tremendous wave, without which everything seems hollow and absurd. The thing to be grasped is the wave, not these details” (*MEC*, 488). This description echoes Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which begins with a discussion of the “oceanic feeling” brought to the author's attention by Romain Roland, a feeling that Freud confesses not being able to discover in himself.⁸⁹ However, he acknowledges that it probably occurs in other people, and wonders if it might be explained as the *fons et origo* of religions (his previous book was *The Future of an Illusion*, published in 1927). In Freud's account, the “oceanic feeling” is possibly a reminiscence

of an ego-feeling left behind through socialization. Some of Canetti's descriptions of the psychological sensations experienced in the crowd chime in with Freud's hypothesis: he speaks of "a total alteration of consciousness, . . . both drastic and dramatic," of "an intoxication, an intensification of possibilities for experience, an increase of the person, who leaves his confines, comes to other persons leaving their confines, and forms a higher unity with them" (*MEC*, 353). But this is in the memoirs, not in the 1960 book. Ostensibly there is nothing personal throughout *Crowds and Power*, no mention of Canetti's own immersion experience, so often invoked in his more explicitly intimate writing, yet we have seen just how amply the echo of the first pages reverberates throughout the memoirs.

The beginning of *Crowds and Power* is evocative of Freud's *Group Psychology* as well:

All life, so far as [man] knows it, is laid out in distances—the house in which he shuts himself and his property, the positions he holds, the rank he desires—all these serve to create distances, to confirm and extend them. Any free or large gesture of approach towards another human being is inhibited. Impulse and counter impulse ooze away in the desert. No man can get near another, nor reach his height. In every sphere of life, firmly established hierarchies prevent him touching anyone more exalted than himself, or descending, except in appearance, to anyone lower. In different societies the distances are differently balanced against each other, the stress in some lying on birth, in others on occupation or property. . . .

Only together can men free themselves from their burdens of distance; and this, precisely, is what happens in a crowd. (*CP*, 18)

Canetti accounts for the origin of crowd-formation in terms of a collective desire for equality, the effacing of all differences, of all social markers. Individuals becoming masses through an experience of discharge (*Entladung*) that creates a bond among them, is an idea familiar from Freud's *Group Psychology*, published "long before the danger of German fascism appeared to be acute," as Adorno pointed out. But while in Canetti's view, equality is the otherwise utopian desire that leads to the crowd, in Freud's account it is the effect of the identification with the leader as the idealized superego. Adorno's analysis of the Freudian model, which he saw as instrumental in explaining fascism, helps situate Canetti's ideas both with respect to his illustrious predecessor and to contemporary critical thinkers of totalitarianism:

in accordance with general psychoanalytic theory, Freud believes that the bond which integrates individuals into a mass, is of a libidinal nature. . . . [Freud explains] the coherence of the masses altogether in terms of the pleasure principle, that is to say, the actual or the vicarious

gratifications individuals obtain from surrendering to a mass. Hitler, by the way, was well aware of the libidinal source of mass formation through surrender when he attributed specifically female, passive features to the participants of his meetings, and thus also hinted at the role of unconscious homosexuality in mass psychology.⁹⁰

Nothing could be further removed from Canetti's conviction that the crowd is autonomous. A priori, Canetti has no use of the figure of the leader, central to Freudian group psychology: his equality is that of a freedom from distances, that is, from all hierarchies, not the equality of a collective dependence. Adorno's further comments on Freud shed even more light on essential differences from Canetti:

by making the leader his ideal [the individual] loves himself, as it were, but gets rid of the stains of frustration and discontent which mar his picture of his own empirical self. This pattern of identification through idealization, the caricature of true conscious solidarity, is, however, a collective one. It is effective in vast numbers of people with similar characterological dispositions and libidinal leanings. The fascist community of the people corresponds exactly to Freud's definition of a group as being "a number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego." The leader image, in turn, borrows as it were its primal father-like omnipotence from collective strength.⁹¹

Had Canetti read this, he might have nodded in agreement with Adorno's lucid characterization of identification in the Freudian scenario as a "caricature of true conscious solidarity." As the two passages from *Crowds and Power* quoted above suggest, for Canetti the crowd has precisely the appeal of a collective attempt to cancel out social distances, following a longing that turns out to be shared:

Man petrifies and darkens in the distances he has created. He drags at the burden of them, but cannot move. But how, alone, can he free himself? Whatever he does, and however determined he is, he will always find himself among others who thwart his efforts. So long as they hold fast to *their* distances, he can never come any nearer to them.

On the one hand, one might recall here Peter Kien and Therese in *Auto-da-fé*: Kien at first isolated in his library—Canetti describes it as a fortress-belt (*Festungsgürtel*)—and then married to Therese, whose rigid starched skirt discourages however all effort at proximity, "whatever he does, and however

determined he is”; she does come closer, not with her body but with her furniture, taking up more and more space in the apartment, so that he tries to avoid her by “turning into stone,” his body “petrified,” eyes closed. On the other hand, the pages in *Party in the Blitz* describing English parties single out Canetti himself as the one who tried to “come nearer to them,” while they were “hold[ing] fast to *their* distances.”

The picture of the one confronting the many precedes the vision of equality embodied in the crowd, with its joyful contradiction of social arrangements:

Only together can men free themselves from their burdens of distance, and this, precisely, is what happens in a crowd. During the discharge distinctions are thrown off and all feel equal. In that density, where there is scarcely any space between, and body presses against body, each man is as near the other as he is to himself; and an immense feeling of relief ensues. It is for the sake of this blessed moment, when no-one is greater or better than another, that people become a crowd. (CP, 18)

Since the memoirs fill these “distances” with echoes from Frankfurt, Vienna, England, suggesting that Canetti, a stateless person for most of his life, did not necessarily have one particular societal model in mind, it is possible to rewrite these autobiographical examples in more general terms: thus *distance* appears not just as the antidote to the archaic “fear of being touched” (which the title of the opening chapter gestures toward, and is what Canetti’s readers usually notice), but also as the dominant principle of the layout of social life in cultures based on orders of rank commonly accepted, like the English one, illustrative for Trilling of the sincerity paradigm, and the necessary attribute of the avant-garde striving for authenticity (tipping the scale toward narcissism during so-called postmodernism).⁹² To sum up, living with others burdens one with distances that affect one’s freedom. Freud however had said as much in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization. It was greatest before there was any civilization, though then, it is true, it had for the most part no value, since the individual was scarcely in a position to defend it.”⁹³ But he also reminds that relinquishing part of the original freedom is the price to be paid for security and equal treatment: “The development of civilization imposes restrictions on it, and justice demands that no one shall escape those restrictions.” Canetti, on the other hand, credits this process with nothing positive: the incontrovertible statement grounding his theory is that freedom is to be gained only in the experience of the crowd, where all distances are abolished.

This is how “distance” comes to be invested with different meanings by Freud and Canetti. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* quotes Schopenhauer’s story of the porcupines as a parable for the civilizing process: it is an illustration of how one learns to repress one’s irritation with the other

members of the group for the sake of a social, mutually beneficial, coexistence.⁹⁴ In Freud's account, no one can stand a too-intimate relationship with another because there is "a sediment of aversion and hostility, which only escapes perception as a result of repression" (he is anticipating here what he will later call the superego, absolutely central to civilization). What Nietzsche heralds as a "pathos of distances" appears in Freud in mutated form as a "narcissism of minor differences." The theory of the libido unfolds here, first in a discussion of narcissism, and then of identification: while narcissism "works for the preservation of the individual," identification helps to form libidinal bonds with other people. Freud understands narcissism as either ambivalence of feelings or as undisguised antipathy and aversion, a "readiness for hatred, an aggressiveness, the source of which is unknown, and to which one is tempted to ascribe an elementary character"; *but*, he continues, "when a group is formed the whole of this intolerance vanishes, temporarily or permanently, within the group."⁹⁵ Freud and Canetti are teasingly close here: what does Canetti accomplish by changing Freud's dialectic into one that so closely resembles it? In the memoirs he writes, "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. This couldn't have been a new idea; but it was new to me, for it struck me with tremendous force. Everything now happening in the world could, it seemed to me, be traced back to that struggle" (*MEC*, 387). Indeed, what Canetti calls "personality" can be easily understood in terms of Freudian narcissism and aggressiveness, and the crowd is a form of being with others, where all are equal, oblivious of their differences. He could not have disagreed when he read in *Group Psychology*: "So long as the group formation persists or so far as it extends, individuals in the group behave as though they were uniform, tolerate the peculiarities of its other members, equate themselves with them, and have no feeling of aversion toward them."⁹⁶

At this point, however, Canetti might have become impatient with Freud: "Such a limitation of narcissism can, according to our theoretical views, only be produced by one factor, a libidinal tie with other people. Love for oneself knows only one barrier—love for others, love for objects."⁹⁷ This last statement finds no referent in the universe of *Auto-da-fé*, in the world Canetti chronicles in his memoirs, or the *Weltanschauung* that permeates *Crowds and Power*. Where Freud speaks of Eros as the mysterious moving principle of civilization, Canetti cannot follow him; in fact, he goes as far as to disavow familiarity with psychoanalysis. There is no love, Canetti showed in 1931 already as he wrote *Auto-da-fé*, and civilization was a myth, as the "dreadful things that people [did] to one another" in the following years demonstrated: all was barbarism. Canetti's discomfort with Freud's theory of the instincts, predicated on the opposition between Eros and the death drive, between libidinal ties (sexual relationships and aim-inhibited affection or friendship) and instinctual aggressiveness which threatens civilization, has

not only a personal justification, but also a historical one. The implication is that, since Canetti rejects the whole of Freud's libidinal economy, he has to dispense with the superego, the internalization of authority; his is a world of self-perpetuating violence, populated by egoless vessels loaded with stings that are carried and passed on to others.⁹⁸ "A picture of hell in this life," one might be inclined to say, echoing Broch's dismay after reading *Auto-da-fé*, but obviously Canetti felt even more entitled to "rub people's noses in their wickedness" after the Second World War.

The implicit dialogue with Freud inevitably brings to the forefront *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In this book, finished in 1930 and slightly revised in 1931, Freud developed his dialectical view of human history, a permanent conflict between Eros and the death drive. Making a compelling case for aggressiveness as an instinct that threatens civilization, Freud describes it in great detail, with a rhetorical force that equals Canetti's descriptions of the "entrails of power." Critics who were appalled by the physiology of power detailed in *Crowds and Power* most likely did not have Freud's long ruminations about aggressiveness at hand:

The element of truth . . . which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*.⁹⁹ Who, in the face of all his experience of life and of history, will have the courage to dispute this assertion? . . . In circumstances that are favorable to it, when the mental counter-forces which ordinarily inhibit it are out of action, it also manifests itself spontaneously and reveals man as a savage beast to whom consideration towards its own kind is something alien. Anyone who calls to mind the atrocities committed during the racial migrations or the invasions of the Huns, or by the people known as Mongols under Jenghiz Khan and Tamerlane, or at the capture of Jerusalem by the pious Crusaders, or even, indeed, the horrors of the recent World War—anyone who calls these things to mind will have to bow humbly before the truth of this view.¹⁰⁰

Canetti not only bows to the "truth" of Freud's view, he goes to great lengths to illustrate it with examples of his own, such as the terrifying Muhammad Tuglak, the Sultan of Delhi, African kings, and mindless meat-eaters.

It is well known that, under the influence of the rise of Nazism, Freud added a quizzical last sentence to *Civilization and Its Discontents* in 1931; whereas the 1930 edition ended on a note of cautious hope—"And now it is to be expected that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers,' eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary [Death]"—a year later doubt looms large: "But who can foresee with what success and with what result?"¹⁰¹ That in the same year Canetti was already far more pessimistic is clear from the ending of *Auto-da-fé*: whereas Freud had only decided that there was something uncanny about culture (his original title was *Das Unbehagene in der Kultur*) and questioned its chances of survival in the face of looming disaster, Canetti set fire, symbolically, to its best intellectual accomplishments as if to suggest the irrelevance of *Kultur*. By the time Canetti wrote and finished *Crowds and Power*, the verdict had been given quite eloquently, permeating his *Weltanschauung* irremediably: what Freud called Eros might as well have never existed; to talk about civilization was a form of self-flattery. The section about African kings, for instance, begins with a warning that resonates with other postwar diagnoses:

Everything about these [African] Kings seems so strange and unfamiliar that one is at first tempted to dismiss them as exotic curiosities, or, if one lingers over accounts of them such as those which follow, to give way to a feeling of superiority. But one is well advised to show a little patience and humility and wait until one knows more about them. *It is not for a European of the 20th century to regard himself as above savagery.* His despots may use more effective means, but their ends often differ in nothing from those of these African Kings. (CP, 411)¹⁰²

In other words, where Freud saw history as a dialectic of Eros/civilization and the death-drive/aggressiveness, Canetti—in 1931 already, with his novel—depicts a world of lovelessness, mercilessly goaded by the "memory of the dreadful things people do to one another"; in the wake of World War II, he could only be hardened in this view of human nature. As we have seen, instead of scapegoating Hitler, Canetti opens up the vista of the whole of humankind as a crowd of "survivors": that is, of potential despotic rulers, who only isolate themselves because they have a desire to overpower others. Canetti renews the indictment of *Auto-da-fé*, this time by way of a critique of historiography which leads the way to an interpellation of his readers:

One should not allow oneself to be confused by the fact that, in a case such as Schreber's, the paranoiac never actually attained the monstrous position he hungered for. Others *have* attained it. Some of them have succeeded in covering the traces of their rise and keeping their perfected system secret. Others have been less fortunate or had

too little time. Here, as in other things, success depends entirely on accidents. The attempt to reconstruct these accidents under the illusion that they are governed by laws calls itself history. For every great name in history a hundred others might have been substituted. There is never any dearth of men who are both talented and wicked. Nor can we deny that we all eat and that each of us has grown strong on the bodies of innumerable animals. Here each of us is king in a field of corpses. (*CP*, 448)

This is a most disturbing image, which one could cite as yet another example of Canetti's hyperbolically graphic style. Yet such images are no rarity in the literature of the past century, in which the metaphor of war as a slaughterhouse is recurrent: from Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, with its crude imagery and "Menschen sind Schweine" leitmotif; Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*; the propaganda film *Der ewige Jude*; J. M. Coetzee's "The Lives of Animals" in *Elizabeth Costello*, and so on. In this last text, the parallel between the Holocaust and the animal industry is given a new turn when Elizabeth has the vision of being surrounded by objects made of Jewish skin: "I return one last time to the places of death all around us, the places of slaughter to which, in a huge communal effort, we close our hearts. Each day, a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched." Like Coetzee's character Costello, Canetti is disturbed by the recurrence of unethical practices and gestures, which he links to the fabric of our moral life: "A conscientious investigation of power must ignore success. We must look for its attributes and their perversions wherever they appear, and then compare them" (*CP*, 448). *Wherever they appear*: that is, at all levels of human experience, including, most importantly, in the realm of everyday social interaction.

Toward a Reassessment of *Crowds and Power*

This chapter's subtitle, "Notes in the Margin of Elias Canetti's Lifework," refers to my indirect approach to *Crowds and Power*, Canetti's *Lebenswerk*, by way of the memoirs, in which he provided "a different accent" to his ideas by highlighting his deeply moralistic persona. Emphasizing this aspect does not invalidate critical readings that establish links with other theories of crowds and totalitarianism, but it does set such questions and critiques on a different footing. If we understand Canetti's conviction that his role was to scourge his contemporaries with the means at the disposal of the *Dichter*, questions about the "truth-value" of his Weltanschauung have a different bearing on how we read him. His view of the world is bleak, and much is left out of the picture that might offer atonement. But as an exiled Jew writing in German, he clearly found that something was amiss in the 1940s and 1950s: a deep understanding and a sense of responsibility for what had

happened. His theory of command and the survivor suggests that he was not as much intrigued by the support of so many for Hitler the Führer, as he was disturbed that a Hitler, who could have been almost anyone, was the symptom of a defective sociality in need of radical transformation. His task was to show how the stings of command cause the suffering that shapes such an individual. Whereas Freud had identified two psychologies, of the ruled and of the idealized ruler, Canetti stated emphatically that there was only one: the psychology of human beings carrying thorns in their flesh.

It is ironic that while some critical thinkers dismissed his book for failing to explain Nazism, historians like Veronica Wedgwood or Pierre Nora praised the book for its insights in this regard. Moreover, Canetti's critique of historiography as the apotheosis of rulers and power-figures resonated with the "history from below" approach of the *Annales* school; unsurprisingly, *Crowds and Power* appealed to Pierre Nora, the leader of the "nouvelle histoire," who published the French translation in his new collection at Gallimard (*Bibliothèque des sciences humaines*, 1966), where texts by Raymond Aron, Georges Dumézil, and Michel Foucault were also to appear.

It only became possible in the 1980s to understand that Canetti's ideas about the rise of Nazism were by no means off the mark; indeed, that they were well ahead of his time. The influential *Sonderweg* thesis regarded German history from a deep historical perspective and highlighted its peculiarities: the lack of a bourgeois revolution, late unification, persistence of preindustrial, precapitalist traditions. As late as 1980, Jürgen Kocka reaffirmed, in his "Ursachen des Nationalsozialismus" ("Causes of National-Socialism"), the famous argument put forward by Ralf Dahrendorf in *Society and Democracy in Germany* (1965) about the specific backwardness of German political culture. Adapting Max Horkheimer's famous saying, Kocka decreed: "Whoever does not want to talk about pre-industrial, pre-capitalist and pre-bourgeois traditions should keep quiet about fascism."¹⁰³ The *Sonderweg* thesis was challenged by Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, in *Mythen deutscher Geschichtsschreibung*¹⁰⁴ and, it seems, definitively refuted in the expanded and revised English edition, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, where they demonstrate that the causes of National Socialism should be looked for in the crises immediately following World War I.¹⁰⁵ This is exactly the perspective Canetti adopts, albeit in the symbolic manner we can now recognize as the signature of *Crowds and Power*.

Canetti identifies two major causes of the rise and success of National Socialism: the Versailles Treaty and economic inflation. He begins with the German national symbol: the forest, which he explains as an image of the army. "The crowd symbol of the united German nation which formed after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 was, and remained, the army" (*CP*, 179). The Versailles Treaty negotiated at the end of World War I disbanded the German army and prohibited universal military service, thus depriving

the Germans of their “closed crowd.” This was the direct cause, Canetti demonstrates, of the adherence in such overwhelming numbers to National Socialism:

The activities they were denied, the exercises, the receiving and passing on of orders, became something which they had to procure for themselves at all costs. The prohibition on universal military service was the *birth* of National Socialism. Every closed crowd which is dissolved by force transforms itself into an open crowd to which it imparts all its own characteristics. The party came to the rescue of the army, and the party had no limits set to its recruitment from within the nation. Every single German—man, woman or child, soldier or civilian—could become a National Socialist. He was probably even more anxious to become one if he had not been a soldier before, because, by doing so, he achieved participation in activities hitherto denied him. (CP, 181)

It is no surprise, Canetti shows later, that Hitler used the slogan *The Diktat of Versailles* so successfully: “*Diktat* belongs to the sphere of command. A single alien *command*, a command coming from the enemy and therefore dubbed *diktat* had put an end to the whole virile activity of command amongst Germans themselves, that is within the army” (CP, 181–182). Inflation was the second determinant factor. The Germans perceived the devaluation of the mark as a diminution of their identity: millions became available to many overnight, yet they were valueless. Canetti shows that the Germans felt they had to inflict the same treatment on the Jews, who were the obvious choice since they were “on good terms with money when others did not know how to manage it”; their numbers were made to “increase” through excessive visibility (by singling them out, both in Germany and in the territories the Germans occupied for the expansion of the *Lebensraum*), and then reduced to worthlessness, through “a dynamic process of humiliation” (CP, 187). By tracing the causes of Nazism and the Holocaust to the context immediately following World War I, Canetti anticipated the elaborate analyses that Eley and Blackbourn were to put forward in the 1980s, even if these historians did not couch their explanations in the peculiar language and symbolism of the crowd.

However, Canetti considered the Nazi crowds only one episode in the multifarious history of crowd phenomena. In heralding the crowd’s equality and lack of distance among bodies, he was affirming a model that most of his contemporaries associated with the oppressive lack of distance imposed by totalitarian regimes, and that had spawned his own longing for space and freedom of movement, eventually leading him into his British exile. Hannah Arendt’s spatial metaphors in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* provide a suggestive contrast. She explains that while the First World War was already a

radicalizing and equalizing experience that brought about the “transvaluation of values” proclaimed by Nietzsche—the breakdown of classes and their transformation into masses¹⁰⁶—the experience of totalitarianism meant an oppressive radicalization of these tendencies, leading to the complete regimentation of everyday life and the reduction to the point of obliteration of personal space. In Arendt’s words, total terror

substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions. To abolish the fences of laws between men—as tyranny does—means to take away man’s liberties and destroy freedom as a living political reality; for the space between men as it is hedged in by laws, is the living space of freedom.¹⁰⁷

A few lines down, she elaborates:

By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them; compared to the condition within its iron band, even the desert of tyranny, insofar as it is still some kind of space, appears like a guarantee of freedom. Totalitarian government does not just curtail liberties or abolish essential freedoms; nor does it, at least to our limited knowledge, succeed in eradicating the love for freedom from the hearts of man. It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.¹⁰⁸

Admittedly, Canetti’s defining experiences of the crowd predate the Nazi period, but the book was written mostly after the flight from Vienna to England in 1938 and finished in 1959; which also means that he had little firsthand experience of life under a totalitarian regime. Clearly, then, while Nazism occupies a central place, and carries a heavy symbolic weight in the book, his ideas and concerns have a much larger scope. The imposed equality and the “band of iron” that squeezes individuals together in Arendt’s account of totalitarianism does not resonate with Canetti; it is by contrast of some significance that the metaphor of a surrounding, isolating band is present in *Auto-da-fé*: Peter Kien surrounds himself with his library like with a *Festungsguertel* (a fortress belt); this extreme isolation, characteristic of modern life more generally, is countered with the crowd experience, even if *some* crowds happened to have cheered the fateful leader of Germany.

Crowds and Power was ahead of its time not only with its account of the causes of Nazism, but also in the way it dealt with it after the fact. In the late 1950s when Canetti brought his book to a close, the Germans were not yet ready to “deal with the past”; they were still in denial, involved in

the economic miracle of rebuilding Germany. Family chronicles documenting the past and assuming responsibility for the acquiescence in the Nazi extermination of the Jews began to be published only in the 1960s, and Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's work *The Inability to Mourn*, grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis, appeared in 1967. Canetti's move, in the 1950s already, is to deflect attention from the demonized figure of Hitler and to diffuse responsibility among his European contemporaries, showing that to blame was ultimately the way people live. Conversely, the survivor is not only the Jew who, guilty for being alive, mourns his or her dead kin.¹⁰⁹ The way Canetti rewrites the figure of the survivor draws attention, rather, to the potential violence engendered by violence, driven by a desire for revenge.¹¹⁰ The *Dichter* has obviously made his point: the *hypocrite lecteur* is *semblable* to the banished Jew (Canetti was himself a Sephardic Jew), both victim and potential perpetrator. As part of the crowd of "survivors" pilloried by the author, they—the readers—must find ways of removing the stings of command and learn the lessons of metamorphosis.

But *how is command to be humanized?* This question, that many ponder on turning the last page of *Crowds and Power*, puzzled Iris Murdoch as well. Her review notes the absence of a psychology that would help us picture the humanization of command, which makes the book vulnerable to critiques coming from science and from morality. "How strictly is one to understand the imagery of the 'stings'? . . . Also, cannot the pain of stings be removed by love and compassion without any 'reversal'? How are we here to conceive the 'free' man?"¹¹¹ On the terms of *Crowds and Power*, love is not of this world, and it would be too comforting an idea to consider in a text that so keenly chastises its readers. Responding perhaps to Murdoch's remark that "no theory of human nature can place itself beyond the attack of purely moral concepts,"¹¹² Canetti's memoirs do offer goodness in the memorable, if elusive, figure of the poet Avraham ben Yitzhak, as an exemplary way to ward off the discontents of the world. However, the readers of the 1960 tome can only turn to Murdoch herself for a serious engagement with the question how to live with others in a more humane way. To Canetti's insistent reminders that the crowd, where bodies press against one another, symbolically annuls the distances of everyday life, she responds with a patient, finely wrought reflection on the difficult-to-achieve balance between distances outside, among members of the human community, and distances within oneself, often imponderable.

If Canetti and Murdoch seem worlds apart in their views on human nature, they are surprisingly close in the glimpses they give us into the rarefied realm of human delicacy. The auratic figure of Dr. Sonne, the quiet guest that Canetti would often spy on at the Café Museum in Vienna, and who later became a venerated intellectual companion, ideally marks the threshold between the wretched world canvassed by Canetti and the community of *délicatesse*

envisioned by Barthes and Murdoch: “For one thing, he was so utterly impersonal. He never talked about himself. He never made use of the first person. And he seldom addressed me directly. By speaking in the third person, he distanced himself from his surroundings” (*MEC*, 686).¹¹³ Implicitly acknowledging that the crowd is no viable model for everyday interaction, Canetti is touched by Dr. Sonne’s “respect for the dividing lines between individuals” (*MEC*, 689), and alert to his tactful discernment: “He spoke with the authority of one passing judgment, but managed, with a simple wave of the hand, to exclude his interlocutor from that judgment. In this there was something more than kindness, there was delicacy, and I am amazed to this day by this combination and extreme rigor” (*MEC*, 695). *Something more than kindness . . . delicacy*: to examine these virtues in more detail, we need to turn to the lectures of Roland Barthes in conversation with the philosophical and literary work of Iris Murdoch.