

# *Language in Exile: Elias Canetti's* The Tongue Set Free

MARJORIE PERLOFF

---

My earliest memory is dipped in red. I come out of a door on the arm of a maid, the floor in front of me is red, and to the left a staircase goes down, equally red. Across from us, at the same height, a door opens and a smiling man steps forth, walking toward me in a friendly way. He steps right up close to me, halts, and says: "Show me your tongue." I stick out my tongue, he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a jackknife, opens it and brings the blade all the way to my tongue. He says: "Now we'll cut off his tongue." I don't dare pull back my tongue, he comes closer and closer, the blade will touch me any second. In the last moment, he pulls back the knife, saying, "Not today, tomorrow." He snaps the knife shut again and puts it back in his pocket. Every morning, we step out of the door and into the red hallway, the door opens, and the smiling man appears. I know what he's going to say and I wait for the command to show my tongue. I know he's going to cut it off, and I get more and more scared each time. That's how the day starts, and it happens very often.

—Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free*,  
translated by Joachim Neugroschl (1979)

THE FIRST VOLUME of Elias Canetti's autobiography opens with this traumatic memory. For years, Canetti evidently kept the story to himself: only much later did he learn what had happened. In the summer of 1907, when he was two, his family was vacationing in Carlsbad in upper Bohemia. The guesthouse had red walls and red carpets. His nanny, a girl of fourteen, took him out early every morning; she had an assignation in town with her boyfriend, who evidently taunted the toddler with the knife trick. When Canetti's parents finally found out what was going on, they sent the girl back to Bulgaria.

The fear of having the tongue cut out gives Canetti his title: *Die Gerettete Zunge* literally means the *rescued* tongue. The terrifying memory points directly to the vexed relationship between author and what was his mother's tongue, German. As a child in the Danube port city of Rustchuk on the Bulgarian-Rumanian border, Canetti spoke the language of his Sephardic Jewish community, the Spanish dialect called Ladino. With the servants, peasants, and townspeople, he spoke Bulgarian. But his parents—educated in Vienna and devotees of Austrian high culture, especially the plays performed at the *Burgtheater*, where they had hoped to be actors—spoke German to one another. It was their secret language, the language of love. How the young Elias acquires this forbidden language and comes to make it his own is the story of *The Tongue Set Free*. The two subsequent volumes of Canetti's memoirs—*The Torch in My Ear* (*Die Fackel im Ohr*) and *The Play of the Eyes* (*Das Augenspiel*)—thicken the plot by dramatizing how the adopted mother tongue is shaken by the echoes of forgotten languages, indeed, how multilingualism complicates—and often undermines—identity. Written late in life, Canetti's three-volume memoir, which takes us from his birth in 1905 to 1937, the year before the Nazi *Anschluss*, provides an arresting narrative of growing up in the shadow of the dissolving Central European empire in the age of the World Wars.

The Habsburg Empire, let's recall, vanished literally overnight. Before 1914, Austria-Hungary was a multiethnic and polyglot entity covering 240,000 square miles; its fifty million inhabitants included what are now Hungarians, Czechs, Slovenes, Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, and Rumanians, as well as the Poles of Galicia, the Russians of the Western Ukraine, and the Italians of the Southern Tyrol and Trieste. Four years later, when World War I ended and the Dual Monarchy was dissolved, Vienna became the capital of a small and fragile republic that had only six million inhabitants and a territory of 32,000 miles—a nation the shape of a tadpole, whose eastern head (Vienna) sat uneasily on a body whose tail was in the western Vorarlberg mountains. Indeed, the First Republic, born in 1918, was made up of the area that remained after the bulk of the empire had been

parceled out to create new nations or add to existing ones. As the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau remarked, “L’Autriche, c’est ce qui reste.”

The Vienna where Canetti was to grow up was no longer the elegant fin-de-siècle city of Arthur Schnitzler and Gustav Klimt. Indeed, the Austro-Modernism of the interwar years was largely the creation of writers from the empire’s former border provinces: Joseph Roth came from Brody in distant Galicia, Gregor von Rezzori and Paul Celan from Czernowitz, in what is now the Ukraine, Canetti from a Bulgarian town on the Rumanian border, where, as in Czernowitz, German was the language of the educated classes. Many of these Austro-Modernists were Jewish; many were to become exiles. Their literary ethos, in any case, is curiously distinct from that of the Weimar Republic. In the “research laboratory for world destruction,” as Karl Kraus, born in the Czech town of Jičín near the Polish border, called Austria in his monumental antiwar play *The Last Days of Mankind* (1922), the trauma of war followed by the sudden and radical dissolution of the Habsburg Empire created a deeply skeptical and resolutely individualistic modernism—one much less ideologically charged than its counterpart in Germany. Neither the intellectually rigorous and revolutionary Marxism of Weimar writers like Bertolt Brecht, nor, on the right, Heidegger’s post-transcendental philosophy centering on the disclosure of “Being-in-the-World,” seems to have had much appeal to the ironic, satiric, darkly humorous, erotic—and often slightly mystical—world of postempire Austria, a nation that in many ways looked east rather than west. As Robert Musil, who had grown up in Brno (then Brünn) in Czechoslovakia, puts it in chapter 4 of *The Man without Qualities* in defining what he called “a sense of possibility”:

Whoever has [this sense] does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise....The consequences of so creative

a disposition can be remarkable, and may, regrettably, often make what people admire seem wrong, and what is taboo permissible, or also make both a matter of indifference. Such possibilists (*Möglichkeitsmenschen*) are said to inhabit a more delicate medium, a hazy medium of mist, fantasy, daydreams, and the subjunctive mood. Children who show this tendency are dealt with firmly and warned that such persons are cranks, dreamers, weaklings, know-it-alls, or troublemakers.

Dreamers and troublemakers. The terrifying “red” memory with which *The Tongue Set Free* opens is as curious a cultural marker as it is a psychological one. From the first, Canetti characterizes his childhood as a unique mixture of savagery and sophistication. On the one hand, physical violence seems to be part of daily life; on the other, the Rustchuk community is both cultured and linguistically adept: “on any one day you could hear seven or eight languages”:

Aside from the Bulgarians, who often came from the countryside, there were many Turks, who lived in their own neighborhood, and next to it was the neighborhood of the Sephardim, the Spanish Jews—our neighborhood. There were Greeks, Albanians, Armenians, Gypsies. From the opposite side of the Danube came Rumanians: my wet nurse, whom I no longer remember, was Rumanian. There were Russians here and there.

Such linguistic and ethnic diversity, notes the critic Claudio Magris, himself a native of the long-contested, now Italian city of Trieste, is at the heart of Austro-Hungarian identity in the late years of the Habsburg monarchy—“a plurality of heterogeneous components and irreconcilable contradictions.” “Habsburg identity,” observes Magris, in “The Many People that Make Up a Writer: Canetti and Cacania,” “is paradigmatic of the lost or fractured identity of the modern individual”:

In imperial Austria-Hungary, whose anthem was sung in so many languages, one could define oneself only by subtraction or negation....[The Austrian did not] identify with the individual

nationalities grouped together under the Dual Monarchy: rather, he was the ribbon that tied the bundle together, the invisible element that was common to them all and identical with none. The Austrian existed in the abstract idea of unity, in a nonmaterial or *hinternational* dimension.

It is such *hinternationality*—a contradictory mix of the global and the local—that Robert Musil characterizes in *The Man without Qualities*, in referring to the Austro-Hungarian empire as *Kakania*. The epithet refers to the label of *kaiserlich und königlich* (imperial and royal), abbreviated as “k & k,” but *Kakania* also puns on *kakos*, Greek for “bad” and its derivatives like *kaka* (German equivalent of our English “doo-doo” or “poo-poo”). Canetti’s Vienna, writes Magris, “almost always unnamed, or grotesquely symbolized, which so often constitutes the backdrop for [Musil’s] magnificent and distorted representation of reality, is first and foremost the place where the true and the false are mixed.”

Indeed, the inability to define one’s “real” identity is at the heart of Canetti’s autobiography. On first reading, the memoir seems largely straightforward, accessible, and perhaps excessively anecdotal, filled as are the second and third volumes with character sketches of leading authors, artists, and public figures of the time. But the casual organization belies the autobiography’s consistent exploration, less of Canetti’s own psychological development—he studiously avoids introspection—than of the decisive role geography has played in his life. This is especially true in *The Tongue Set Free*.

Canetti’s Rustchuk has a long and exotic history: a Roman outpost, it was occupied in 1388 by the Turks and became, by the 1500s, a trade center on a par with Venice and Genoa. Canetti’s ancestors, who had migrated to Adrianopolis (now Edirne) after the Spanish expulsion of the Sephardic Jews in 1492, founded prosperous businesses. Even after the city passed into Russian hands in the Balkan War of 1877–78 and became part of the newly constituted Bulgaria, Rustchuk remained a multiethnic site. At the time of Canetti’s birth in 1905, it had four Christian Orthodox churches, five mosques,

and three synagogues: the Bulgarian kings of Canetti's day came from the German nobility, one of his great uncles was the Consul of Austria-Hungary, and the city, with its coffee houses and elegant buildings designed by visiting Viennese architects, was known as "Little Vienna."

Prior to World War II, Bulgaria was home to 48,000 Jews. The War—when this Danube satellite of the Habsburg Empire declared its Nazi allegiance—was to change all that. By 1965 only 5,100 Jews still lived in Bulgaria: the world Canetti grew up in had virtually disappeared. But for him, as we soon learn, it had collapsed much earlier.

### *"An Unquenchable Yearning for Letters"*

"If I say that Rustchuk is in Bulgaria, then I am giving an inadequate picture of it," the narrator tells us in the first chapter of *The Tongue Set Free*, "for people of the most varied background lived there." As Canetti portrays it, the town has a fairy-tale quality: Canetti recalls that "the rest of the world was known as 'Europe,' and if someone sailed up the Danube to Vienna, people said he was going to Europe. Europe began where the Turkish Empire had once ended." The other side of the Danube, directly across from Rustchuk, was Rumania: when the river froze over, the narrator's mother told him, well-off Bulgarians were driven in sleighs across the ice to Rumania. Once, she recalled, "wolves came down from the mountains and ravenously pounced on the horses in front of the sleighs. The coachman tried to drive them away with his whip, but it was useless." Finally, two hunters shot them, but "My mother had been terribly afraid; she described the red tongues of the wolves, which had come so close that she still dreamt about them in later years."

Red tongues: another memory "dipped in red." One night, during the Feast of Purim, the little boy "was awakened by a giant wolf leaning over [his] bed":

A long red tongue dangled from his mouth and he snarled fearfully. I screamed as loud as I could: "A wolf! A wolf!" No one heard me, no one came. I shrieked and yelled louder and louder

and cried. Then a hand slipped out, grabbed the wolf's ears, and pulled his head down. My father was behind it, laughing. I kept shouting: "A wolf! A wolf!" I wanted my father to drive it away. He showed me the wolf mask in his hand. I didn't believe him, he kept saying: "Don't you see? It was me, that was no real wolf." But I wouldn't calm down, I kept sobbing and crying.

In the age of Freud (*The Interpretation of Dreams* had been published in 1900), one would think Father Canetti would have known better than to play such tricks on his young son, but, when it came to child psychology, the Rustchuk sensibility seems to have been more "Turkish" than Austrian, the irony being that the father's action was prompted precisely by nostalgia for Vienna; having wanted to become an actor at the *Burgtheater*, "he was mercilessly thrust into his father's business. The town did have an amateur theater, where he performed with Mother, but what was it measured by his earlier dreams in Vienna? He was truly unleashed, said Mother, during the Purim festival." Young Canetti, in any case, suffered for months from what the adult author remembers as "wolf panic."

Childhood is thus viewed as a violent swing between barbarism and civilization: the fear of red tongues—his own as well as wolf tongues, and then of the tongue-like comet, said by the local peasants to presage the end of the world—haunts his early years. Red is also the color of the rags worn by the Gypsies, who, according to local custom, file through the houses of the affluent members of the Sephardic community every Friday night, collecting their gift of food from the Sabbath table. Again, the narrator recalls being terrified: "Sacks dangled from many of their shoulders, and I couldn't look at those sacks without imagining that they contained stolen children." Watching the Gypsies eat, he is "amazed at how friendly they were to their children, not at all like nasty child-snatchers. But that changed nothing in my terror of them."

Fear and violence: when little Elias's great playmate, his cousin Laurica, four years older than he, starts school and learns to read and write, the five-year-old boy is madly jealous. Laurica taunts him with the pages of her notebooks, whose "letters of the alphabet in blue

ink fascinated me more than anything I had ever laid eyes on.” She keeps teasing him, waving the notebooks in the air and withholding them, until, one day, he can’t stand it. Grabbing an axe he finds in the kitchen yard, he chants, “Agora vo matar a Laurica” (Now I’m going to kill Laurica). And he is about to strike when her screams are heard by his relatives, and he is stopped and severely punished.

This story is further complicated by the reference to the axe as belonging to “the Armenian.” An earlier chapter bears the title “The Armenian’s Axe”: the man in question is employed to chop wood for the family. Young Elias listens to his “sad” songs—sad, according to the narrator’s mother, because the Armenian had to flee Istanbul, where the Turks had wanted to kill him and he had lost his entire family. “He had watched from a hiding place when they had killed his sister. Then he had fled to Bulgaria, and my father had felt sorry for him and taken him into the house.” Canetti recalls that although he barely exchanged a few words with the tall dark man, somehow he “developed a deep love for him.” And the putative attack on Laurica only enhances that feeling: “No one recognized the connection between my murderous goal and the fate of the Armenian. I loved him, his sad songs and words. I loved the axe with which he chopped wood.”

Why? Perhaps because the presence of the nameless Armenian anticipates Canetti’s own exile, his need to make his way among strangers from whom, as we later learn, he, like the Armenian, will maintain his distance. Laurica, in any case, soon takes her revenge, although she claims it to be entirely an accident. At the Canetti home, caldrons of water, brought from the Danube, are placed on the terrace, where they are boiled for purification. Playing tag, Elias and Laurica run between the vats: she gives him a shove and he falls into the boiling water. The boy is scalded all over his body and almost dies: “For many weeks I lay abed in awful pains.”

Indeed, childhood is remembered largely for its violence and physical pain. Why then does the narrator call Rustchuk “a marvelous city for a child”? Perhaps because the writer’s closely knit family unit, with its colorful rituals and eccentric behavior—Grandmother

Canetti spent her days reading novels while lounging “on her Turkish divan, smoking and drinking strong coffee”—placed such strong emphasis on learning and culture, beginning with the acquisition of languages. And language takes on a special importance precisely because the mature Canetti can remember the events of his past only in another language:

The events of those years are present to my mind in all their strength and freshness (I've fed on them for over sixty years), but the vast majority are tied to words that I did not know at that time. It seems natural to me to write them down now, I don't have the feeling that I am changing or warping anything. It is not like the literary translation of a book from one language to another, it is a language that happened of its own accord in my unconscious, and since I ordinarily avoid this word like the plague, a word that has become meaningless from overuse, I apologize for employing it in this one and only case.

This is a very curious passage. Canetti's animosity toward Freud was well known. Although in his role as memoirist he loved to dissect the psychosocial makeup of others, he seems to have had an aversion to self-analysis and introspection. Freud's emphasis on “individual processes” rather than group formations struck the Canetti of *Crowds and Power* (1962) as misplaced. But one could also argue—precisely from a Freudian perspective—that Canetti fears his own demons. As Claudio Magris observes, “[his] autobiography, which seems to be saying everything, hides an absence, a kind of black hole that seems to be swallowing up the essential truth of this life.... Behind the friendly gentleman evolving his extremely polite form in order to protect his own reserve, there is another, the abnormal and impossible other.” That other cannot be acknowledged: if, after all, the language one spoke as a child is lost, then perhaps so is the affect that went with it.

And here the question of the “mother tongue” (*Muttersprache*) comes to the fore. German—Viennese German—is first introduced as the “happy” private language of Canetti's parents:

They were very much in love at that time and had their own language, which I didn't understand; they spoke German, the language of their happy schooldays in Vienna. Most of all, they talked about the *Burgtheater*; before ever meeting, they had seen the same plays and the same actors there and they never exhausted their memories of it. Later I found out that they had fallen in love during such conversations, and while neither had managed to make their dream of the theater come true—both had passionately wanted to act—they did succeed in getting married despite a great deal of opposition.

The reference is to the maternal (Arditti) family's sense of superiority: one of the oldest and most prosperous Sephardic families in Bulgaria, the Arditti considered Grandfather Canetti an "upstart from Adrianopolis." The escape hatch from this Sephardic rivalry is the German language. For the young Canetti, the sound of German is quickly associated with imagination and pleasure. "I believed they were talking about wondrous things that could be spoken only in that language. After begging and begging to no avail, I ran away angrily into another room, which was seldom used, and I repeated to myself the sentences I had heard from them, in their precise intonation, like magic formulas."

The boy is enchanted, not only by the name *Wien* (Vienna), but even by the Viennese newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*, which arrives at his family's house every day:

It was a grand moment when [Father] slowly unfolded it. As soon as he began reading it, he no longer had an eye for me. I knew he wouldn't answer anything no matter what.... I tried to find out what it was that fascinated him in the newspaper, at first I thought it was the smell; and when I was alone and nobody saw me, I would climb up on the chair, and greedily smell the newsprint. But then I noticed he was moving his head along the page, and I imitated that behind his back.... Once a visitor who had entered the room called to him; he turned around and caught me performing my imaginary reading motions. He then spoke to me even before focusing on the visitor and explained

that the important thing was the letters, many tiny letters, on which he knocked his finger. Soon I would learn them myself, he said, arousing within me an *unquenchable yearning for letters* (*eine unstillbare Sehnsucht nach Buchstaben*). (my italics)

Thus the actual letters of the German alphabet become attached to the mysterious city of dreams, Vienna: "I knew it took four days to get there on the Danube. They [his parents] often spoke of relatives who went to Vienna to consult famous physicians. The names of the great specialists of those days were the very first celebrities that I heard about as a child. When I came to Vienna subsequently, I was amazed that all these names—Lorenz, Schlesinger, Schnitzler, Neumann, Hajek, Halban—really existed as people." And so the magic of Vienna is reinforced; the city is seen in Edenic terms as the place where people speak a special language of great wonder and beauty. All the more confusing, then, that when the boy's parents decide to move away from Rustchuk to take advantage of a business opportunity and to get away from the tyranny of Grandfather Canetti, who has volubly cursed his son's decision, they go not to glamorous Vienna—that move came later and was hardly glamorous—but to Manchester, whose language, while hardly secret, is entirely unfamiliar.

### *The Pain of Birth*

English, the language six-year-old Canetti and his two younger brothers are now taught with great dispatch, is associated in his mind with *order*. The teachers at his new elementary school, the governess Miss Bray, the daily routine: all are quite different from "life in Rustchuk [which] had been loud and fierce, and rich in painful accidents." The young Canetti, himself given to wild behavior, does not quite fit into the English scene. Falling in love with a little girl named Mary Handsome, or rather with her cheeks that look like round red apples, he pursues her, longing to kiss those red cheeks. When Mary's mother complains, the teacher, a Miss Lancashire, tells the boy's parents that "She had never witnessed such a fierce passion in her school, she was a bit confused and wondered if it might have

something to do with ‘Oriental’ children maturing much earlier than British children.” “Oriental,” surely a code word for Jewish here, calls to mind everything Eastern, foreign, dark, and slightly alien in the Canetti background vis-à-vis the English. At the same time, Canetti loves *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver’s Travels*, weeps for the *Titanic*, struck by an iceberg in the middle of the night, and thrills to stories about Captain Scott’s South Pole expedition.

The tension between cultures, and between past and present, is epitomized by the boy’s repeated recitation, at the behest of his father, of the family’s home address, “234 Burton Road, West Didsbury, Manchester, England,” to which Canetti insists on adding the final word “Europe.” “Geography,” he recalls, “had become very important to me, and my knowledge of it was increased in two ways; I received a jigsaw puzzle: the multicolored map of Europe, pasted on wood, was cut up into the individual countries. You tossed all the pieces into a heap and then put Europe together again lightning-fast. Thus every country had its own shape, with which my fingers grew familiar, and one day I surprised my father by saying: ‘I can do it blindfolded!’”

These conversations are conducted in English, and Canetti might eventually have passed for an English schoolboy, had it not been that, one morning, his adored father, aged thirty-one, suddenly dropped dead of a heart attack. His twenty-seven-year-old mother, who had just returned from a stay at a health spa near Salzburg, had, so she confessed to her husband the night before he died, conducted a chaste romance with her physician. The death of his adored father turns out to be the watershed of Canetti’s life: when, after the mourning period, his mother decides to move the family to Vienna, the secret language—German—now becomes his, but under duress, not choice.

It happens, ironically, in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, where the bereaved young widow has taken her children for the summer, en route to their new life in Vienna. There, Canetti’s mother abruptly decides her eldest son, who is eight years old, must learn German in anticipation of his Viennese schooldays. The

excruciatingly painful German lessons are paradigmatic of the role Canetti is soon forced to assume:

We sat at the big table in the dining room, I on the narrower side, with a view of the lake and the sails. [Mother] sat around the corner to my left and held the textbook in such a way that I couldn't look in. She always kept it far from me. "You don't need it," she said, "you can't understand it yet anyway." But despite this explanation, I felt she was withholding the book like a secret. She read a German sentence to me and had me repeat it. Disliking my accent, she made me repeat the sentence several times, until it struck her as tolerable. But this didn't occur often, for she derided me for my accent, and since I couldn't stand her derision for anything in the world, I made an effort and soon pronounced the sentence correctly. Only then did she tell me what the sentence meant in English. But this she never repeated. I had to note it instantly and for all time. Then she quickly went on to the next sentence and followed the same procedure.

The acquisition process is terribly painful. Learning sentences by heart and translating their content without ever *seeing* them in writing turns out to be almost impossible. Confronted by his mother's daily mockery—Madame Canetti (as she now likes to be called) pronounces her son an idiot—he is finally saved by Miss Bray, the English governess, who knows no foreign language whatever and is quite satisfied that there are English speakers around the world. Miss Bray prevails upon Madame Canetti to let her son look at the book, and suddenly everything changes. The unfamiliar Gothic script opens up: in seeing the words *in writing* the boy can follow the lesson. And soon he is speaking German quite fluently.

It is a major turning point, not as a preparation for school in Vienna but because German is his mother's language, the language of her lost love. "She herself had a profound need to use German with me, it was the language of her intimacy.... Her true marriage had taken place in that language." For Canetti himself, "it was a belated mother tongue, implanted in true pain" (es war eine spät und unter wahrhaftigen Schmerzen eingepflanzte Muttersprache):

The pain was not all, it was promptly followed by a period of happiness, and that tied me indissolubly to that language. It must have fed my propensity for writing at an early moment, for I had the book from her in order to learn how to write, and the sudden change for the better actually began with learning how to write Gothic letters.

She [Mother] certainly did not tolerate my giving up the other languages; education, for her, was the literature of all the languages she knew, but the language of our love—and what a love it was!—became German.

And even more explicitly a few pages further: “In Lausanne, where I heard French all around me, picking it up casually and without dramatic complications, I was reborn under my mother’s influence to the German language, and the spasm of that birth (*dem Krampf dieser Geburt*) produced the passion tying me to both, the language and my mother.”

Such “rebirth” comes at a price. For a variety of reasons, the author’s suffocating relationship with his mother will deteriorate until they are wholly estranged. As for the German language, it is important to note what this “mother tongue” is and isn’t. Learning German at eight from his Ladino-speaking mother, who herself learned the language as a schoolgirl in Vienna, Canetti is isolating himself from his Bulgarian Sephardic childhood on the one hand, and the orderly English future his father had planned for him on the other. Doubly exiled from his “fatherland,” he remains an outsider, never quite part of the scene.

This is especially true when, in the late 1920s, Canetti spends a few weeks in Berlin. In *The Torch in My Ear*, he recounts his meetings with George Grosz and Berthold Brecht, both of whom he came to dislike for their Marxist preoccupation with material conditions. *The Threepenny Opera*, whose premiere he attended in August 1928, strikes him as “coldly calculated”:

It was 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 . . . .Penalty had been abolished: the royal messenger rode in on a real horse. The shrill and naked self-complacence that this performance emanated can be believed only by the people who witnessed it.

If it is the task of satire to lash people for the injustice that they devise and commit, for their evils, which turn into predators and multiply, then, on the contrary this play glorified all the things that people usually conceal in shame: however, the thing that was most cogently and most effectively scorned was pity.

This is a curious misunderstanding of the great Brecht-Kurt Weill opera, which blames, not citizens themselves, but a cruel economic system for the mendacity and fraud by which human beings survive. The drama hardly “glorifies” the behavior of the Peachums and their friends. But from Canetti’s perspective, Weimar Berlin, as personified in the hilarious but cruel *Threepenny Opera*, lacks heart; it subordinates all ideals to political necessity. The only writer with whom he feels at home is Isaac Babel, whom he considers a fellow *learner*. “When all the pretexts crumbled, I was left with the excuse of *expectation*. I wanted people, including myself, to become better.”

*I wanted people, including myself, to become better*: here Canetti echoes Wittgenstein, who frequently declared in his diary that his aim was to become a different—by which he meant better—person. Canetti’s German is not that of the Berlin of the Weimar Republic; the doctrinaire Marxism of a Brecht cannot, in his eyes, match the highly individual and mercurial vision of a Karl Kraus. Closed systems are the enemy: language, after all, whether spoken or written, is subject to surprising openings.

Canetti, as the language and literature scholar Daniel Heller-Roazen posits in his *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (2008), is the “exemplary case” of those writers “who don’t have a single mother tongue, who even before they study a foreign language, have already begun to lose the one they once learned ‘without any rules.’” And Heller-Roazen refers us to the chapter in Canetti’s *Play of the Eyes* called “Hudba.” Shortly before his mother’s death in June

1937, Canetti visits Prague for the first time. Despite the large number of Czechs in Vienna, he doesn't know a word of the language. Strolling the streets and overhearing conversations, he decides that Czech must be a "combative language, because all the words were strongly accented on the first syllable." One of those words—and it gives Canetti his chapter title—is *hudba*, meaning "music":

All the other European languages I knew of had the same word for it: "music," a beautiful, resonant word—when you pronounced it in German you felt you were leaping into the air. When you accented it more on the first syllable [as in English], it didn't seem quite so active, it hovered awhile in midair before taking off. I was almost as attached to this word as to a tangible object, but as time went on, I began to feel uneasy about its being used for every kind of music, especially as I became better acquainted with modern music.

*Hudba*, he decides, is the perfect word for Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, or for the likes of Bartók and Janáček. And, absorbed in his pleasure at this and other Czech inflections, he recognizes that "Possibly the force with which Czech words hit me might be traced back to my childhood memories of Bulgarian. But those memories had vanished, I had completely forgotten Bulgarian, and how much of a forgotten language stays with us I have no way of knowing....I absorbed Slavic sounds as parts of a language which touched me in some inexplicable way."

"What," asks Heller-Roazen, "did Canetti hear in the *hudba* of the Czech language?" Obviously, it was not—or not merely—the idiom of the inhabitants of Prague, since, as he makes clear, he could understand close to nothing of the tongue at all. But it would be equally inadequate to conclude that the writer simply perceived in it Bulgarian. Even had Canetti retained his knowledge of the Balkan language, despite his repeated statements to the contrary, he could hardly have discovered it again within Czech. The typological affinities between the southern Slavic and the western Slavic tongues do not suffice for one to assert that each can be found within the other.

It would be more precise to maintain that in Prague, Canetti heard not a language but an echo: the sound within one tongue of another that had been forgotten. The music of Czech, as Canetti perceived it, summoned the one childhood tongue that was not bound to his mother, which not only preceded the German he learned from her in Lausanne but also was independent of the Ladino in which she spoke to him before his father's death. No tongue, in other words, is truly a "mother tongue." The effect of hearing these foreign words, writes Canetti, "was not at all comparable to that of music, for one feels *threatened* by words one does not understand, one turns them over in one's mind in an attempt to blunt them, but they are repeated and in repetition become more menacing than ever."

Surely it is no coincidence that the calling into question of the mother tongue is juxtaposed with the account of Madame Canetti's cruel death from cancer in 1937. *The Play of the Eyes* ends with that death, which foreshadows the death of Austria itself the following year (12 March 1938, the *Anschluss*). Canetti now has to flee Vienna. In London, where he and his wife Veza settle, he will, ironically, be speaking the English he learned in Manchester three decades earlier.

### *Words at War*

From the Ladino and Slavic sounds of childhood to the English of grammar school days, the French of Swiss hotels, and the acquired German "mother tongue": the clash of languages was to make Canetti wary of principles, of affiliation and membership, whether in a political party, a religious group, or a nation. If pressed, he would identify himself, quite simply, as a *European*. But what did that really mean? The World Wars, painful as they were for those who readily defined themselves as French or English or German, were especially traumatic for a writer like Canetti who, at home in so many languages, had, in his actual life, no *Heimat*.

Consider part 3 of *The Tongue Set Free*, called "Vienna 1913–16." Within that framework (in 1916 Madame Canetti moved her sons to Zurich), which oddly counters the usual chronology of

the war period (1914–18), the Great War seems almost a distraction; it exists largely on the periphery of the young Canetti's consciousness. In the summer of 1914, the family is staying in a spa outside Vienna:

We spent a good chunk of the day in the health-resort park, where Mother took us. The spa band played in a round kiosk at the center of the park. The band leader, a thin man, was named Konrath; we boys nicknamed him "carrot," using the English word. I still spoke English with my little brothers; they were three and five years old. Their German was somewhat shaky; Miss Bray had only returned to England a few months ago. It would have been unnatural restraint to speak anything but English among ourselves, and we were known in the park as the little English boys.

On the day that Germany declares war on Russia (1 August), the band launches, not into its usual repertoire, like Johann Strauss's "Radetzky March," which gave Joseph Roth the title for his great novel, but into the Austrian Imperial Anthem. A crowd gathers and sings "Gott erhalte, Gott beschütze unsern Kaiser, unser Land," followed by the German anthem, "Heil dir in Siegerkranz" ("Hail to Thee in Victor's Laurels"). The nine-year-old Canetti recognizes the latter as the same tune as "God Save the King," and starts, perversely, to sing it in English "at the top of my lungs." His little brothers follow suit.

Suddenly, I saw faces warped with rage all about me and arms and hands hitting at me.... Everyone was beating away at us in utter confusion. But the thing that made a much deeper impact on me was the hate-twisted faces... this first experience with a hostile crowd was all the more indelible. As a result, for the rest of the war, in Vienna until 1916 and then in Zurich, I favored the British. But I learned my lesson from the punches. So long as I stayed in Vienna, I made sure not to let anyone perceive anything of my attitude. English words outside the house were now

severely prohibited for us. I observed the taboo and kept on reading my English books all the more fervently.

I am reminded here of the scene in Karl Kraus's *Last Days of Mankind* in which the Café Westminster is patriotically renamed Westmünster, and all its signage changed accordingly. Indeed, the schoolboy soon has to learn the hate sentences that Kraus reproduces in act 1, scene 1, with reference to a picture postcard sent from the Front: "Jeder Stoss ein Franzos!" "Jeder Tritt ein Britt!" "Jeder Schuß ein Russ!" Fanny, the Canetti's Czech maid, resents the denigration of the Russians as does Canetti's mother, who reminds her son that her best friend in Rustchuk, Olga, had been a Russian. The net effect of the conflicting signals received is to make Canetti increasingly aloof from his surroundings. In 1915, when the family visits Rustchuk for the first time since their move to Manchester, he perceives his hometown as an exotic Eastern town, romantically quaint but also irritating in its provincialisms. At this stage there is no nostalgia.

Back in Vienna, "the effects of war could be felt in everyday life." Canetti avoids all larger political commentary, but there is a telling incident that uncannily prefigures what will happen to Jews like himself. On the way home from school, Canetti and his friend Max Schiebl, the son of an Austrian general, are approaching the *Franzensbrücke*, the railroad bridge that spans the Danube canal:

A train was standing there, it was stuffed with people staring down at us, mutely, but questioningly. "Those are Galician—," Schiebl said, holding back the word "Jews" and replacing it with "refugees." Leopoldstadt was full of Galician Jews who had fled the Russians. Their black kaftans, their earlocks, and their special hats made them stand out conspicuously. Now they were in Vienna, where could they go. They had to eat too, and things didn't look so good for food in Vienna.

I had never seen so many of them penned together in railroad cars. All the time we kept staring, it never moved from the spot. "Like cattle," I said, "that's how they're squeezed together, and there are also cattle cars."

“Well, there are so many of them,” said Schiebl, tempering his disgust at them for my sake; he would never have uttered anything that could offend me. But I stood transfixed, and he, standing with me, felt my horror. No one waved at us, no one called, they knew how unwelcome they were and they expected no word of welcome. They were all men and a lot were old and bearded. “You know,” said Schiebl, “our soldiers are sent to the war in such freight cars. War is war, my father says.” Those were the only words of his father’s that he ever quoted to me, and I realized he was doing it to wrench me out of my terror. But it didn’t help, I stared and stared and nothing happened. I wanted the train to start moving, the most horrible thing of all was that the train still stood on the bridge.

“Aren’t you coming?” said Schiebl.

This seemingly minor anecdote is paradigmatic of Canetti’s oblique commentary on World War I—a war that not only exploded the geographical and cultural parameters of his childhood, but also laid the groundwork for the war to come. It was in the latter years of World War I that Jews from the Eastern Front, fleeing the Russian enemy, escaped to Vienna: the growing presence of these “aliens” was one of the factors that, after the war, accelerated the virulent anti-Semitism that brought the Nazis to power. Note that Schiebl, the general’s son, characteristically has contempt for these strangers with their earlocks and caftans—strangers who speak an unfamiliar foreign language. Young Canetti’s own vision is more surreal: he sees the people crowded into the cars as so much cattle. No one speaks: the Galicians seem to be as alien to the Jewish Canetti as to his friend, but somehow he senses an (unwanted) affinity to them. For Schiebl, the cattle cars are just the freight cars used in war to dispatch soldiers; there is nothing so unusual about them. But for the young Canetti, the image is unbearable. The boy cannot know, of course, that twenty-five years later those cattle cars will be transporting Jews just like himself, not to Vienna but away from it. But intuitively he senses the terror. And the Canetti who writes about it knows exactly what happened.

*The Tongue Set Free* contains no battle dispatches, no accounts of fighting in the trenches, and little political discussion of the causes of war, the failures of government, and so on. And yet this one incident, relayed in all its terror, is a searing indictment of the war, which displaced the citizens of what had been a peaceful empire, forcing the growing number of Eastern Jews, who were at home in rural Galicia, to seek asylum and food in a city that despised them. It is the migration from the dreaded East that sets the stage for the conflicts of the 1920s—conflicts that were to culminate in the triumph of that leading native son, Adolph Hitler. Here and elsewhere throughout the three-volume autobiography that ends on the eve of World War II, Canetti presents events concretely and graphically, but doesn't draw any sort of moral. Indeed, in the next chapter he moves on to the seemingly unrelated characterization of his mother's friend Alice Asriel.

### *“A Decelerated Crowing”*

“Go in fear of abstractions!” Ezra Pound's battle cry in his early Imagist manifestos could serve as epigraph to Canetti's memoirs. Concrete and often stark, the events and incidents put before us in these pages don't always add up. With rare exceptions, the reader is not told what to think, and the clues can be quite contradictory. Consider, for example, the ambivalence Canetti displays toward his own place, as a Jew from the distant provinces of the empire, in the social fabric of Vienna.

In the Rustchuk world, the rich Sephardic Jewish families were well positioned in society and experienced little anti-Semitism. And even in England, despite his teacher's veiled allusion to Orientals, young Canetti knew little discrimination. Indeed, anti-Semitism, in remission, so to speak, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, takes on a new life with the outbreak of war with Serbia (August 1914), although it was hardly a Jew who assassinated the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Young Canetti regularly walks home from school with a gangly and awkward boy named Paul Kornfeld. The classroom teacher, Herr Tegel, seeing the boys together, says disapprovingly

to Canetti, “You walk with him? You are offending your teacher.” Kornfeld explains to Canetti that their schoolmates are harassing both of them because they are Jews, but when Canetti tells his mother about the incident, she brushes it off with the words, “That was meant for Kornfeld. Not for you.” From our standpoint today, this remark is shocking in its insensitivity, its lack of solidarity. But Canetti doesn’t seem to find it especially strange. “For her,” he explains, “we were something better, namely, Sephardim.” It would take years for Canetti to learn that in the eyes of the Nazis, the ranking of Jews would be seen as entirely meaningless.

The issue is dropped, but when, in 1919, Canetti is in school in Zurich, he can no longer avoid the daily attacks aimed at himself and the other Jewish boy in his class, Färber. “I was so amazed that at first I couldn’t believe it. Until now, no one had ever insulted me.” Taking up the cause, Canetti gathers together the seventeen Jewish students at the school and organizes a petition to the administration, complaining of their treatment and demanding that it stop. At first nothing happens but in due course, the insults and taunts stop, evidently on orders from the headmaster, and the other boys start being friendly again. But it is a brief respite.

In Canetti’s account of his return to Vienna in 1924 to study chemistry at the university, the Jewish question is, at first, curiously set aside. Karl Kraus, Canetti’s new idol, whose inspired lectures are the talk of the town, has been, like so many Viennese Jews, largely assimilated. Born into a large wealthy Jewish family in Moravia, he was baptized a Catholic in 1911 but left the Church a decade later because of his anger at its nonresistance to the war. Given his own cruel attacks on various Jewish publishers, writers, and political figures, he was—and continues to be—accused of Jewish self-hatred.

Canetti avoids the issue: he wants, rather, to have us see that in the heyday of Red Vienna, the famed editor of *Die Fackel* was a glorious presence:

Kraus hated war, I was told, and during the Great War, he had managed to print many antiwar pieces in *Die Fackel*, despite the

censors. He had exposed corruption, fought against graft....It was a miracle he hadn't landed in prison. He had written an eight-hundred-page play, *The Last Days of Mankind*, containing everything that had happened in the war. When he read aloud from it, you were simply flabbergasted. No one stirred in the auditorium, you didn't dare breathe. He read all parts himself, profiteers and generals, the scoundrels and the poor wretches who were the victims of the war—they all sounded as genuine as if they were standing in front of you. Anyone who had heard Kraus didn't want to go to the theater again, the theater was so boring compared with him: he was a whole theater by himself, but better, and this wonder of the world, this monster, this genius bore the highly ordinary name of Karl Kraus.

The cult of genius, of intellect, of the Great Man, trumps any issue of religious identification or solidarity. When he finally hears Kraus lecture, Canetti is especially enchanted by his voice, "which had something unnaturally vibrating about it like a decelerated crowing (*ein verlangsamtes Krähen*)."

As for the rhetoric itself, Canetti remarks elsewhere that it depends on two devices: "literalness and horror"—the literalness of quotation in *The Last Days of Mankind* that measures the horror of the Great War. Kraus's oratory is now juxtaposed to the equally vehement oratory that Canetti encounters on his "final Danube voyage" back to Bulgaria in the summer of 1924. Here, in what is by now a distant world, composed as it is of his remaining relatives (most of whom have moved from Rustchuk to the capital, Sofia), Canetti meets his cousin Bernhard Arditti, who has become an ardent Zionist and is urging the family to emigrate to Palestine. "They weren't badly off in Bulgaria," the autobiographer remarks. "There were no persecutions of Jews, no ghettos, nor was there any oppressive poverty." But the call of the Promised Land is powerful, and Arditti castigates his fellow Sephardic Jews for their snobbery, their reluctance to ally with those other Jews (Ashkenazis) whom they considered inferior.

He spoke Ladino to them and scourged them for their arrogance, which was based on this language. I was amazed to discover that it was possible to use *this language, which I regarded as a stunted language for children and the kitchen*; it was possible to speak about universal matters, to fill people with such passion that they earnestly considered dropping everything, leaving a country which took them seriously and respected them, in which they were certainly well off—in order to move to an unknown land that had been promised them thousands of years ago, but didn't belong to them at this point. (my italics)

Note that Arditti's blueprint for the Zionist future and Kraus's apocalyptic vision of Viennese decadence and collapse are not unrelated, although the young Canetti doesn't see the link at the time. In 1924 Kraus was at the height of his fame; he was certainly "taken seriously and respected." But the corruption and mendacity he exposed did culminate, less than ten years later, in the expulsion of the Jews from Vienna to one "unknown land" or another. Perhaps Cousin Bernhard had it right.

Canetti himself, however, has opted for the world of the "mother tongue": "When I told [my cousin] I wanted to write in German and no other language, he shook his head: 'What for? Learn Hebrew! That's our language. Do you believe there's a more beautiful language?'" It is an alternative Canetti never so much as considered. He is, after all, a citizen of Europe, a child of the Empire, an Austrian, a German-speaking intellectual and artist. It was, he writes, not a "propitious time for Old Austria. The monarchy, having crumbled, was discredited....The dismemberment of Austria, the amazing survival of Vienna—*now an oversized capital—as a 'hydrocephalic' head*, was on everyone's mind. But by no means did [young people] relinquish the intellectual claim that is part of a metropolis" (my italics). The cult of Mahler, for example, was at its height; and, as for issues of religion and politics, "Except for everything ordained by Karl Kraus, nothing was definite."

These intellectually stimulating days were not to last. The turning point in *The Torch in My Ear* comes on 15 July 1927 with the

setting on fire, by a well-disciplined “army” of workers, of the Palace of Justice in Vienna. The workers were demonstrators for the Socialist party; their attackers were members of the local *Frontkämpfer*, right-wing veterans of World War I. “The police were ordered to shoot: there were ninety deaths.” Canetti’s sympathy is entirely with the workers, and yet the event—“the closest thing to a revolution that I have physically experienced”—does not politicize him; rather, it gives him his first real taste of what it means to be part of a crowd—“a modern crowd that had formed *without a leader*.” Here is the germ of *Crowds and Power*, Canetti’s magnum opus that ranges from the rain dances of the Pueblo Indians to the Nazi spectacles of the 1930s. He is especially interested in the First World War when, in his view, “the whole German people became one open crowd”:

Those first August days of 1914 were also the days in which National Socialism was begotten. Hitler himself is our authority for this. He later described how, at the outbreak of war, he fell on his knees and thanked God. It was his decisive experience, the one moment at which he himself honestly became part of a crowd....But Hitler would never have achieved his purpose had not the Treaty of Versailles disbanded the German army. The prohibition on universal military service robbed the Germans of their most essential closed crowd....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.

This controversial statement is of course retroactive: at the time, as Canetti recalls it in *The Torch in My Ear*, he was happy to ignore events in Germany, enjoying, as he was, his increasing role in Viennese literary and art circles.

In *The Play of the Eyes*, he alludes only briefly to Hitler’s coming to power in 1933—“Everything that happened from then on

seemed sinister and of evil omen”—but most of this volume is taken up with discussions of Canetti’s own writing (especially his play *The Wedding*), his relationships with Musil, Broch, Anna Mahler, and Alban Berg, his romance with his wife-to-be, Veza, and so on. The rise of anti-Semitism is barely at issue. At the end of this, the third volume of Canetti’s memoir, *Anschluss* and World War II are still in the future.

Here again is that black hole Claudio Magris speaks of. Like Kien, the antihero of his great novel *Auto-da-Fé*, the Canetti of the memoirs “perfects his own blindness in order not to have to perceive the myriad aggressions of things.” What we have, in other words, is an autobiography that does everything in its power to avoid being *auto-biography*.

Canetti always prided himself on knowing how to *hear*, to listen to the words of others and mimic their speech patterns: from Karl Kraus he learned “that one can do anything with other people’s words.” “This kind of hearing was impossible *unless you excluded your own feelings*....The important thing was the pure, unadulterated shape: none of these acoustic masks (as I subsequently named them) could blend with the others.” It’s not that one doesn’t have feelings (Canetti’s own were especially complicated, given the Oedipal relationship to his mother and stormy love affairs with a series of women), but they are, finally, so Canetti felt, much less important than the *words* that can never quite capture the essence of those feelings—words that create their own world.

### “Word Attacks”

In a 1969 address titled “Word Attacks” at the Bavarian Academy of the Fine Arts, Canetti begins with the disclaimer, “I am only a guest in the German language, which I learned at the age of eight....I cannot even regard it as a credit that I held on to German when I came to England over thirty years ago [as an exile from the Nazis] and decided to remain. For continuing to write in German there was as much a matter of course as breathing and walking. I could not have done otherwise, another possibility was never

even considered.” But the writer’s relation to that language—in this case, German—becomes much more self-conscious. “One compared more, especially in the most everyday phrases, in which the differences were conspicuous and palpable.” Thus the core language becomes “more private and more intimate....Among all these people who speak their daily things in English, one has a secret language for oneself, which serves no outer purposes anymore...to which one clings more and more obstinately, the way people may cling to a faith that is taboo in their greater environment.” It is, Canetti insists, “the words themselves that do not let one go....The peculiar strength and energy of words can be felt most strongly when one is often forced to replace them with others.” In his early years of exile in England during World War II, Canetti recalls, he “filled page after page with German words...isolated words, never yielding any sense...Very often they were nouns, but not exclusively; there were also verbs and adjectives among them.”

All the more odd that Canetti’s syntactic structures and tropes are so readily translatable. In composing my own essay here, designed for an Anglophone audience, I have rarely felt the need to supply the German original for a particular citation in parentheses. For the fact is that Canetti was not a poet; he was not even, except perhaps in *Auto-Da-Fé*, a remarkable stylist. Compare for example, the opening of “Geburt des Bruders” to its English equivalent in “My Brother’s Birth”:

In der frühesten Zeit, als ich noch in einem hohen Kinderstuhl steckte, kam es mir sehr weit bis zum Boden vor...

At a very early time, when I was still in a highchair, the floor seemed very far away...

To my ear, this charming representation of infant fear is equally effective in both languages. The words are not ambiguous, the syntax uncomplicated.

What, then, of those “word attacks” Canetti talks of in his Academy speech? Perhaps the answer is that Canetti’s is the language of

the always already translated. Familiar as he was with so many different languages and not wholly at home in any one of them, not even his “mother tongue,” he intuitively looked for words and syntactic constructions that would “go” in the other language. In the exile, both mental and physical, that was his lifelong fate—an exile that, however unconsciously, undermined the likelihood of real intimacy with his peers, whether Austrian, German, English, French, Bulgarian, and Rumanian, or with his fellow Jews—Canetti was, so to speak, writing in translation. From his origins in the provincial towns of the lower Danube to his residence in the capitals of Europe, his cosmopolitanism, astonishing in its energy and erudition, almost covers his tracks.

Yet there is also a curious absence. Despite the striking incidents recounted, the dramatic events described, and the dialogues with others carefully cited, we never really come to know the author. The quirks of others are carefully noted, but never his own. It is as if the ability to weave in and out of so many languages, coupled with the loss of any place that could be called “home” (Canetti spent his last years in the ultimate “international” refuge, Switzerland), resulted in a loss of identity that no clever character sketches or descriptions of place could recover. “The tongue set free” thus becomes, less the emblem of one particular individual than of a cultural condition. Such “identity theft,” we should note, is the very antithesis of Rimbaud’s “Je est un *autre*.” Whereas Rimbaud (and Baudelaire before him) cultivated the Other (*le voyant*) as strenuously as possible so as to transcend the everyday, ordinary self that, in Yeats’s words, “speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table,” Canetti took himself to be chronicling, quite simply, *how it was*.

But how was it? Canetti’s Austro-Modernist writing—a writing seemingly less radical than, say, its French counterpart, adhering, as it does, to straightforward narrative rather than to collage and fragmentation—is, in its own way, profoundly unsettling. He is the supreme ironist, plotting out, step by step, a world in which the ardent humanism its chronicler professes—his passion for art, the intellectual life, and for Great Men—no longer makes sense. As

Canetti had responded when, on his first trip to Prague, the very sound of the Czech language, with its familiar Slavic echoes, overwhelmed his consciousness, "One feels *threatened* by words one does not understand, one turns them over in one's mind in an attempt to blunt them, but they are repeated and in repetition become more menacing than ever."