

The secret life of Elias Canetti.

Dreams of Disappearance

BY EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

On a trip to Morocco, Elias Canetti was attracted again and again to the great square in the middle of Marrakesh. It was not the bustle of haggling merchants or the sights of starving camels that drew his attention, but a small brown bundle huddling on the ground—a bundle “consisting not even of a voice but of a single sound.” The bundle produced a drawn out buzzing “e-e-e-e-e-e-e” that just went on and on, audible beneath all the cries of the square.

Canetti saw neither the mouth that produced this sound, nor any part of the face, nor the body, just a hooded cloak and a shapeless mass. He did not know whether the creature was tall or short, whether it was carried to its begging place in the square or walked there on its own, whether it had arms with which to pick up the coins tossed on the ground. Canetti felt helpless before it, not because of imagined horrors of deformity, but because he felt there was something sacred about the bundle, which he called the “unseen”; he could not unveil or approach it. He imagined that the unremitting vowel sound was Allah’s name called out by a tongueless mouth. And what he felt, most peculiarly, was pride: “I was proud of the bundle because it was alive.” It persisted, reappeared, never silent, producing its diligent mournful cry.

Canetti is a peculiar writer, not least because it is possible to imagine him seeking that bundle not just in Marrakesh but wherever his wanderings took him. He is the traveler determinedly selecting the “unseen” and the “tongueless” from the voices surrounding him in the marketplace, picking out the crippled call from the badgering, begging voices. This gives him a peculiar perspective, a view of the world that elevates the eccentric and denigrates the familiar, that despises those who would make their way through the world on ordinary terms and honors those who are hobbled by it but pursue within themselves an unseen, unheard quest.

Canetti peoples his books with such figures: an aging Sinologist who disdains humanity and lives only for the

sake of his 25,000-book library, a paraplegic philosopher who reads by turning pages with his tongue, a disturbed widow who in a nightly ritual solemnly licks the back of photos of her late husband, a five-year-old boy who chases his young cousin with an ax intending to kill her because she won’t show him her school notebooks. Only the first of these is a fictional creation. The others

The Secret Heart of the Clock: Notes, Aphorisms, Fragments 1973-1985

by Elias Canetti
translated by Joel Agee
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 151 pp., \$19.95)

The Tongue Set Free: Remembrance of a European Childhood
by Elias Canetti

translated Joachim Neugroschel
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
268 pp., \$9.95 paper)

The Torch in My Ear
by Elias Canetti
translated by Joachim Neugroschel
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
384 pp., \$16.50, \$9.95 paper)

The Play of the Eyes
by Elias Canetti
translated by Ralph Manheim
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
320 pp., \$17.95, \$9.95 paper)

The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit
by Elias Canetti
translated by J. A. Underwood
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
104 pp., \$6.95 paper)

are characters in his memoirs. The last was Canetti himself.

It is hard to know what to make of him, in fact, so exotic are his visions, so eccentric is his vision. In 1981 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, but anyone coming upon *The Secret Heart of the Clock*, his most recent book in English, would have a difficult time imagining why. It is the sort of book that is meant to bring the reader closer to the writer—a collection of notes and aphorisms and fragments confided to notebooks between 1973 and 1985. They range from images that must have just come to mind (“the sieve of his self-confidence” is the entire text

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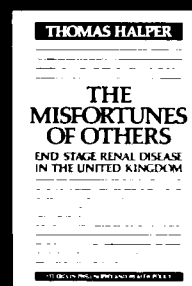
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of one) to hypothetical imaginings of lands and worlds in which our natural order is overturned and strange events become the rule ("a country where the language is changed every ten years," or "the land without brothers: no one has more than one child," or "a land where people burst with a little pop"). In these jottings, merely the evocation of these strangely premised universes is supposed to suffice for illumination.

Yet there are also more revealing hints of something more personal. "My melancholy is never free of anger," he writes. "Among writers I am one who rages." Or, "Only in fear am I completely myself." And in 1980, at the age of 75, "The very last thing in my life that still makes an impression on me: animals." Rage, fear, resentment, and misanthropic sentiments seem to accompany a sort of abstract "adoration of humanity." "One who reveres the worst—man—believes in its transformation," Canetti asserts; and we begin to wonder what this worst is, and what are the grounds for the adoration and the transformation that Canetti lays out in the writings of his career.

The life and the career are relatively uncomplicated, except for their restless movement. Canetti was born in 1905 in Ruschuk, Bulgaria, to a family of Sephardic Jewish merchants. He spoke Ladino, German, Bulgarian, and English before he was seven. (He was writing Latin poetry by the time he was 14.) His family moved to Manchester when he was eight, where his father died suddenly. Canetti's education was a sampling of Europe's best: schools in England, Vienna, and Zurich, including a doctorate in chemistry from the University of Vienna in 1929. Six years later, his novel, *Auto-da-Fé*, was published in German (as *Die Blendung*). By then he had set out on what he called his "life work," which took nearly three decades, and was published in English in 1962 as *Crowds and Power*. There were also plays, essays, the account of the visit to Marrakesh; and in 1977 Canetti began publishing his memoirs, three volumes of which have appeared in English so far.

But this life of adopted countries and languages and ambitions yielded sentiments that were anything but simple. As Susan Sontag has written, Canetti's life was "rich in displacements"; and so he cultivated a manner of displacement and detachment. He admired such 20th-century German writers as Musil and Kafka, and he seemed to imitate the allusive baroque quality of the first and the psychological paralysis of the second. But the youthful *Auto-da-Fé* also resists

such comparisons. Canetti saw it as one of a series of books about modern types, about perverse figures who reacted to the world's horrors with obsessive peculiarity. He envisioned a Religious Fanatic, a Collector, an Actor, an Enemy of Death.

He got only as far as this novel, about a Book Man. Its main character, Kien, knows little about the world other than what is described by his scholarly texts. His universe is gradually taken over by a thuggish, illiterate cleaning woman with a starched skirt, who knows as little about her charge as he does about her. He is abused, imprisoned, and even tortured by her, all the while spinning absurd interpretations about the world created around him: a modern Don Quixote, beaten by the windmill. It is impossible to read this novel without horror, but no sympathy is permitted. Kien is actually something less than human, a bundle of bones and muscle whose delusions about the powers of language and learning have turned him into a pathetic organism who can live only in a cage bounded by his books; his final act is to set fire to his prized library, and to himself. The grotesques and brutes and cripples of this novel could hardly be imagined mourning at this pyre of Western civilization; they practically inspire its flames.

After years of rejections, the novel was published in 1935, sponsored by the philistine owner of a newspaper in Strasbourg who refused to read it. The patron thought, correctly, that he would have found it repellent; he sponsored it, incorrectly, because he imagined the book's horrors would serve as a cautionary warning against the dangers of our century. But Canetti does not exactly caution against the bleak universe of his novel. He is immersed in it, he is a believer in its apocalyptic tone, in its universal scorn; he calls its brutal account "graffiti on the walls of a new Pompeii." "Kant Catches Fire" was Canetti's original title. Kant, who was devoted to the universal characteristics of thought, is destroyed: nothing is shared, everything said is misunderstood, there are no a priori, no categorical imperatives.

Canetti may have viewed this sort of creaturely nihilism as the only authentic response to a crazed universe. But this recurrent (and by now tiresome) trope of our century haunts Canetti's other major book as well. *Crowds and Power* has the same insistence on a single theme that gives *Auto-da-Fé* its exhausting grip, though here the theme is unlimited by time or circumstance. All of human enterprise is seen as a manifestation of the drive to form crowds. The book ranges

over the customs of primitive cultures, the metaphorical significance of rain and sand, the nature of tyranny. It is obsessed with the acts of primitive man—cannibalism, massacres, savagery—but it is clear that the obsession derives from the contemporary world: "It is not for a European of the 20th century to regard himself as above savagery." The formation of crowds becomes the primary fact of history; the imperial urge to increase one's numbers is the prime mover of peoples, the fundamental cause of battles, a biological need that is both an intoxication and a refuge. The book is as exhausting and distressing as the novel. With it, Canetti thought he was "grabbing this century by the throat."

Judging from some of the notebook entries in *The Secret Heart of the Clock*, Canetti is anxious, several decades later, to reinterpret his ideas, to give their peculiarity a better ground. That is one reason for his memoirs: "I ought 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." He wants to present what he calls "the tradition of a life," thus connecting the grand abstractions of *Crowds and Power* and the relentless obsessions of *Auto-da-Fé* with his own experience.

This attempt, it turns out, is extraordinarily revealing. Canetti would like to see himself as he sees that bundle—as a prideful, persistent, diligent presence, attempting to reach some discontented accommodation with the wayward world. He would also like to find some way of negotiating what he calls "the fluid boundary between individuals and types," between the ways in which concrete persons relate to the abstract and representative figures he so habitually imagines. The three volumes of memoirs published so far in English—*The Tongue Set Free*, *The Torch in My Ear*, and *The Play of the Eyes*—are accounts of the growth of the artist as a young man, learning to speak and hear and see. These tales, which barely bring the author to the age of 30, prepare the way for the production of his own more abstract cries in his novel, plays, criticism, and sociological analysis. They are an extraordinary literary achievement, more supple and suggestive than any of the works that gave Canetti the reputation he is recollecting.

The narratives of the earlier volumes are the most novelistic. They recall a youth speckled with relatives of gargantuan talent and elephantine pride,

and a mother at once brilliant and hysterical, determining Canetti's displacements from country after country, drilling him in the German "mother" tongue in which he still writes. She reads him Strindberg nightly before he is in his teens, and promises him that she will never remarry; ridicules any hint of sentimentality that appears in her son, and leaves in him a dark, consuming hatred mixed with debt and worship.

But though the first volume is the most extraordinary in its shape and achievement, it is the third volume that is the most suggestive about Canetti's intellectual project. In *The Play of the Eyes*, Canetti begins to move within the marketplace of writers, artists, and ideas of the early 1930s in Vienna, finding in the midst of an age he has called "swift, menacing, and rich," the extreme, the exaggerated, the grotesque. Even if, at the time of many of these memories, *Auto-da-Fé* was still unpublished, and his plays—*The Wedding* and *Comedy of Vanities*—were still unstaged, Canetti was gaining a reputation for dramatic readings of these works at the homes of patrons, where, in the close-knit intellectual society of Vienna, he soon enough met the major literary figures of the time and the place. The performer recounts what he faced as he read: the great German novelist Hermann Broch flirting with Alma Mahler's beautiful daughter Anna instead of paying attention, Franz Werfel rudely interrupting his reading with scathing insults, James Joyce cryptically tossing a "wretched comment" at the expectant author. Canetti finds the universal rejection bracing, strengthening him for his life work: "It is defeats of such catastrophic proportions that keep a writer alive."

These memoirs are also an act of possession, a settling of old scores. There is, for example, a portrait of Heinrich Scherchen, the conductor who championed contemporary music during the early decades of the century. Canetti notes Scherchen's recurrent approach to building power: finding novelty, courting fashion, seducing key figures into his circle. He flatters Canetti with praise, then asks him conspiratorially to deliver a letter to Anna Mahler. But Canetti—strong-willed and strong-headed—soon becomes a rival for Anna's affections, and enmity with Scherchen follows. The very account becomes Canetti's delayed revenge. Canetti writes of the conductor: "At last I had before my eyes a perfect specimen of something I was determined to understand and portray: a dictator." Then he tells of the dictator at work. At a banquet Scherchen proclaims he will read everybody's palm. The 28-year-old

author listens to the conductor's manipulative predictions for each of the guests; but a particularly cruel verdict is passed on Canetti's own hand. The 81-year-old memoirist writes, with a wry sense of vengeance against his nemesis: "I alone was doomed to die before my thirtieth birthday."

The memoirist seems to stalk through his own recollections, with a kind of animal determination, like a lion following its prey. Nearly everything is recounted with a primitive, simple clarity. And no slight is left unsighted. *The Play of the Eyes* seems to be about the play of power in the human animal. Every person in this memoir in some sense engages in a contest with the author, dominating him or being dominated by him. Canetti did indeed take an ax and attempt to murder his cousin for not showing him her notebooks. His literary assaults are more calculated, worked out with the care of a caricaturist, early self and late self in expert collusion.

The caricature comes in the exaggeration of a single feature of a person, the focus on a part of the physiognomy or personality. Thus Werfel, who slighted Canetti with both his literary judgment and his manners, becomes a rancid physical elaboration of his paunch. He "overflowed with sentiment, his fat belly gurgled with love and feeling, one expected to find little puddles on the floor around him and was almost disappointed to find it dry." The aging Alma Mahler is desiccated, grotesque, a mere appendage to the "trophies" of love and triumph she had collected about her and displayed to Canetti's horror. Hermann Broch is embodied in his "breath"—the respiration that Canetti finds in the man's posture and presence as well as in the movements of his prose and atmospheric style. The technique of caricature is present even in the titles of each volume of these memoirs that name parts of the sensing body. It is, I think, the way Canetti sees: individuals turn into representatives of types, their particularities becoming, as in the shrieking bundle or the churning crowd, exhausted by a single peculiarity.

The eyes of this third volume are themselves caricatures, revealing, commanding, demanding. They belong first to Anna, Alma Mahler's daughter with whom Canetti falls in love only to be suddenly and unpredictably cut off. Anna's "play of the eyes" is dangerous, seductive and enchanting; her eyes fix him, glittering, like a deep lake or pool. So powerful are they that her blunt and sudden rejection of Canetti has something "sublime" about it, as if such behavior

were the natural right of a beautiful animal. "A woman endowed with such eyes," Canetti is told at one point by a friend, "couldn't help herself, she was a slave to the needs of her eyes, not as victim but as huntress."

The play of the eyes is also something that is far from private. It is a visible play that is meant to get the response of another. It is the play of the public life, the play of reputation and interaction and power. When Canetti is in the midst of a reading and sees Broch and Anna engaged in the "play of the eyes," or when he himself stares down Werfel and his "jutting right eye" at a concert, these are life and death games being played with these agents of power.

So potent are they that blindness becomes at once a great fear and a great relief. In *Auto-da-Fé* Kien feigns blindness to escape the power of his starched-skirted temptress and keeper Therese. And the original German title of the novel—*The Blinding*—is one that suggests Kien's escape, his punishment, and his revenge, all at once, in a world in which sight is delusion. The blinding in *The Play of the Eyes* occurs figuratively, with the death of Canetti's mother, with whom he struggled so bitterly in earlier volumes. "She lay there, emaciated," Canetti

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writes, "reduced to pale skin, with deep black holes instead of eyes." But it is also clear, during the ineffably moving pages of this recollection, that the author himself cannot escape the vision of his mother's eyes: "Her breathing grew weaker, but the power of her eyes grew stronger." They are the eyes that taught him about power. In their power to seduce, to intoxicate, to capture, to expand, they display an individualized version of the power of crowds: they are the crowd-organs of the human face.

Canetti's "tradition of a life" soon enough connects with the ideas of his work. The memoirs display the workings of power in the individual. *Crowds and Power*, a book more often praised than read, explores it in large groups. It is easy to imagine such a preoccupation developing on the eve of the Second World War, which was to have, as Canetti writes in *The Play of the Eyes*, the "proud and gluttonous appetite of a biblical Assyrian war." Clearly the crowds of Hitler are the

ones that haunt Canetti's excavations into the primitive past.

Canetti was not, of course, alone in his choice of subject. Freud's ghost hovers over this text, his study of group psychology gnawed to pieces without ever being mentioned; and the study of massification was the preoccupation also of Ortega y Gasset and the Frankfurt School. But Canetti's approach was eclectic, stubbornly idiosyncratic. He expends his most brilliant energies establishing a sort of typological catalog of crowds: closed crowds and open crowds, slow crowds and fast crowds, feast crowds and flight crowds. There are crowds that have a quickly attainable goal, crowds created by a threat, crowds created in a closed space. But the primary urge of all crowds is to expand, to dissolve the individual in its mass. "The crowd always wants to grow."

Each type of crowd goes about its project in a different way, generating phenomena ranging from religious movements (a slow-moving crowd, closed to the uninitiated, heading toward its ever distant goal) to war (involving double and opposing crowds dependent on each other for their goals and existence). Under Canetti's gaze, the crowd becomes an organism, a beast that crouches under the phenomena of world history. The result is a sort of mystical primitivism. Everything has its roots not only in a primal crowd instinct, but in the life of primitive man. The voices and the passions of primitive man come to be the dominant voices and passions of all culture's life.

Unlike, say, Max Weber, who catalogued types of religious and social behavior with a complicated understanding of, and respect for, rational life and the material world, Canetti's universe is strangely shrunken, like some cannibal's trophy head. The primitive becomes the measure of all phenomena; and our heritage in animal life becomes the explanation of all power and evil. Canetti weaves haunting images, but he means them to be explanations. The eating and the chewing of food become the model for power's workings, the grid of man's teeth the model for the prison, and so on. Even the diagnoses of modern psychology are "explained" as if they were episodes in the life of a hunter-gatherer: "hysteria" is described as a preparation for flight, "mania" as a desire to capture one's prey. Crowds, he writes, are so much more nakedly visible today because they are freed from the bounds of traditional religion and displayed in their "biological state." It is a state of unquenchable appetite and insurmountable waste. "How should there be val-

ue," Canetti asks, "in a life that resembles an intestinal tract?"

It is no wonder that Canetti has had so little influence with his theories, or that *Crowds and Power* loses its impact (and its organization) after its themes are stated. There is no place to take them. Canetti's findings are more evocative than instructive: one isn't clear by the end how totalitarianism developed, or how crowd instincts can be modified, or how civilization develops, or why positing an instinct for crowds is any more revealing than positing (with Freud) an instinct for death. By the time Canetti concludes his book with a discussion of the paranoid personality of Schreber (a case made famous by Freud), the implied equivalence between Schreber and Hitler is banal and unrevealing.

For all its acknowledgment of the ugly sides of human life, Canetti's analysis is oddly naive. The impulse for crowds is so universal that it is trivial. Canetti even finds the powers of the crowd in swarms of microscopic spermatozoa: "200 million of these animalcules set out together on their way," he solemnly proclaims. "They all have the same goal and, except for one, they all perish on the way." And when Canetti does turn practical in his analysis—as in his survey of the political scene at the end of the 1950s—he again reduces historical complexities to typology. He comments, for example, that the "modern frenzy for increase" in economic production is eliminating the old notion of war between double crowds. As a result, he suggests, sport can replace war as a "crowd phenomenon" on a "world-wide scale." But until the Olympics pacify man's animal nature, social life becomes almost completely a matter of nature's law. Canetti is a primitive determinist.

But the memoirs also show another side, a sort of aesthetic faith that is as pervasive as nature's evil workings, and is peculiarly unmoving. That faith is in the role of the writer as a fighter against power. In Canetti's vision, power detests the possibilities of imagination, for power "is sufficient unto itself and wills only itself." Imagination's ability to create other worlds, other situations, other beings, is a freedom that is a threat. Canetti calls this writerly power "transformation" or "metamorphosis"—against which "a ruler wages continuous warfare." The writer's calling is to be "the keeper of metamorphosis," who can undo, through voice and word, the grip of power and the crowd by first eluding it, and then transforming it. "Of all man's gifts transformation is the best . . . after all the crimes he has committed it is

Scarlet Lake

Derain, after his wife's suicide, awoke in the Alps in a small hotel.

The grass was crazy with bees—and how the fish were jumping on the lake! He gazed over it for hours, smoking his blunt meerschaum with the amber stem.

A spider plant hung its satellites around his head. Embers hissed in the stove. In the eggshell demitasse the coffee grounds swirled like ocean sediment, glinting with lights.

He watched the fat cook amble up through the pines clutching a pair of ducks the porter had ambushed at dawn. Their bright green feathers were streaked with mud. Blood speckled their bills. When a storm swept in from the west—from France—the rain slanting down hard across the mountains, only the surface of the lake remained undisturbed, placid; very slowly it turned a deep red.

NICHOLAS CHRISTOPHER

his justification and crowning glory."

This displays a rather Romantic faith in the power of the imagination. Indeed, there are indications that Canetti attaches a magical power to transformation itself; it is in some sense redemptive, an alternative to a Nature (and a Society) red in tooth and claw. He sees metamorphosis as a literal transformation of a world, a force that has nearly physical impact. The eyes play with power, but redemption comes with the setting free of the tongue, the writer's tool.

This theme is never argued, it is only asserted with the calmness of unquestioned faith. It is also why at the heart of *The Play of the Eyes*, with its tales of domination and submission, there is also a dissenting quest, a search for a truly good man who neither courts power nor submits to it, an articulate version of that helpless bundle in Marrakesh. Here Canetti's idealism reaches full bloom. He claims to find such a man in a person named Dr. Sonne. Sonne looks like Karl Kraus, the Viennese writer to whom Canetti was almost religiously devoted for a time. But unlike Kraus, his tool is not satire or citation or scorn, but a refined, kind intellect. The effusive Canetti tells us nothing about the man's life or his past; there are no details, not even Sonne's true name. He simply asserts that Sonne possessed encyclopedic knowledge and wisdom. It is enough that Canetti calls him the "angel Gabriel," a "supreme authority" whose name—the Sun—is the "source and . . . end of all life."

But if Canetti tells us nothing about him, it is because ideal goodness for Canetti is a sort of nothingness, an abstention from all power play, even from the attempt to survive. When Canetti discovers that Sonne actually once wrote some Hebrew poetry, it is a mark against him. Only in non-activity, in withdrawal, could Sonne, the writer who doesn't write, attain sainthood. Canetti intimately understands Kafka and his urge for withdrawal from the world; Sonne is Canetti's Samsa. The writer is at his best when he has practiced metamorphosis, and turned himself into an insect or cripple, like the paralyzed philosopher in *The Torch in the Ear* who can only read his books by using his tongue to turn the pages. The cripple, the isolate, the solitary dreamer: there is Canetti's answer to a life he compares to passage through an intestinal tract. Would that wailing bundle in Marrakesh ever sully itself with power?

This leaves Canetti with very few choices. For, as these memoirs show again and again, the very act of living involves an incessant play with power.

What is the writer to do, then, in his withdrawal from the world? The only choice is to reject life as it really is, ordinary life, with all its struggles and its pre-occupations, to say no to it, again and again. This rejection can mean arguing that life is indeed little more than an intestinal tract, a realm of biological waste and stifled impulse, treating the figures who move through it as caricatures, as exaggerated and distorted versions of what was once called "human." This Canetti often does, mixing his disdain with a cold propriety. One does not read Canetti for his empathy for the inner life of others; he is too preoccupied with caricature and type, too busy schematically outlining the person's relationship to himself and to the "play of the eyes." One of his books, *Earwitness*, is nothing more than a collection of 50 caricatures.

But the rejection of life can also mean idealizing humanity in the abstract while despairing of it in the particular, disdaining all that is specific for the sake of something indefinite and ideal. This is Canetti's other impulse. Educated as a Sephardic Jew, he declares, for example, that though he was an avid learner of languages, a collector of myths, a student of ancient religions, he deliberately avoided getting acquainted with the Hebrew Bible. "It would have narrowed me down to learn more about things that were so close to my origins, though I had preserved a keen interest in every other religion."

So Canetti declares himself a sort of universalist. He must keep the world out of focus long enough to escape his own will to power. Compassion exists only globally and generally: "I care about the life of every human being," he boasts in *The Torch in My Ear*, "and not just that of my neighbor." But he loves the idea of man too much not to despise the particular. There is an oddly inhuman quality to Canetti's humanism. His compassion even extends to the inanimate. He speaks of the great pity he has for drops of water: they are irrevocably separated from the ocean, their home.

According to such a view of life, living itself is a sign of something like sin, not Original but Intrinsic. The very act of living is a sign that one has succumbed to temptation. "Survival," Canetti has said, "is at the core of everything that we . . . call power." For Canetti, the survivor survives because he stands over other corpses. Canetti's survivor is not the figure that any student of World War II, of Canetti's war, might imagine: a man or woman who managed, by chance or character or strength or faith, to avoid being plowed under by murderous machinery let loose. He is, rather, the manager

of such machinery, his survival a sign of complicity. "Few readers," Canetti writes, "can have finished the chapters on the survivor without some feeling of disgust. But it was my intention to hunt him out in all his hiding-places and show him for what he is and always has been. He has been glorified as a hero and obeyed as a ruler, but fundamentally he is always the same. . . . The survivor is mankind's worst evil, its curse and perhaps its doom." The survivor commands, he rules, he kills.

Here Canetti's humanism becomes really frightening, his primitivism, his idealism, his disgust at the particular seem to echo precisely the sentiments of his enemies during the last war. His description is, again, caricature. Is survival simply the key fact? Are there not different kinds of survivors? Are all who survived the war really guilty? Was there no value in resistance? Would their death have been philosophically preferable? And what happened to Canetti's own Bulgarian family during the war? Such distinctions would distract Canetti from his attempts at caricature and condemnation.

And if survival itself becomes a curse, what is left? "Hitherto the only answer to man's passionate desire for survival has been a creative solitude which earns immortality for itself; and this, by definition, can be the solution only for a few." This is his own alibi: immortality through writing and withdrawal. But this is hardly a solution to the problems Canetti has constructed for himself. The memoirs prove it. They are written in the fray, uneasy and unforgiving. Indeed, in *The Secret Heart of the Clock*, Canetti begins to recognize that he is the survivor he has so forthrightly condemned. He notes "the guilt of surviving, which you have always felt." It is the guilt of life and particularity, the guilt that suffuses his memoirs and gives them their crisp brilliance. Expunging that guilt is nothing less than suicide. "It would be beautiful to disappear," Canetti says in another aphorism, "nowhere to be found." There should be no mark left, not even of absence: "It would be beautiful to be the only one to know that you have disappeared."

So Canetti's writings are torn by paradox. His own recollections are tales of domination and submission, of power and play. And yet he dreams again and again of escape, of disappearance, of the elimination of all particularity, of absorption into universality, of an oblivion that grants him a peculiar immortality. But is not this dream of dissolution also a yearning for a crowd? A crowd of words, not a crowd of men; but still Canetti

wishes to submerge himself.

"Why should it be important what you thought?" Canetti asks himself in *The Secret Heart of the Clock*. It is a rare moment in Canetti's work, when the author is not a guilty survivor, a universal visionary, a grand theoretician, a seeker of revenge, when he is, simply, a man. "Since you have not achieved anything, anything at all, it can just as well disappear." This is an uncharacteristic retreat, the writer submitting to death because he believes, at least for a moment, that his work will not survive. The despair passes quickly,

but there is another entry, more provocative and more revelatory, in the journals for 1985, the year in which Canetti turned 80:

The whole enormous apparatus you have erected serves no purpose. It doesn't save anyone. It gives a false appearance of strength, no more than a boast, and is from beginning to end as helpless as any other scheme.

The truth is that you have not yet found out what would be the right and valid and humanly useful attitude. You haven't gone beyond saying no.

Too Late the Liberal

BY J. M. COETZEE

Save the Beloved Country by Alan Paton

(Scribner's, 336 pp., \$22.50)

Alan Paton is best known as the author of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, a book that has probably opened the eyes of more readers to the woes of South Africa than any other. *Cry, the Beloved Country* was not only Paton's first novel, but his first book. It appeared in 1948, when he was already in his middle years. It became a best seller and brought him financial independence and fame. But in retrospect that fame now seems a mixed blessing. An obscure public servant, Paton was turned, not wholly unwillingly, into a sage and oracle, the guide for editors and interviewers in search of wisdom on South Africa. It was a role in which he remained trapped for much of the rest of his life. The effects can be seen not only in the increasingly ex cathedra tone of his pronouncements, and in his tendency to think, speak, and write in brief, easy-to-chew paragraphs, but in his failure to break new ground and to develop as a writer.

Paton was born in 1903 in the province of Natal, the only province of South Africa in which people of British descent form the majority of the white population. After a decade as a high school teacher, he took over the principalship of Diepkloof Reformatory for African juvenile delinquents, where he enjoyed a remarkable career as a reformer. He transformed what had been a prison into a school, doing away with forced labor and introducing vocational education, relaxing surveillance, abol-

ishing corporal punishment, and delegating day-to-day administration to the boys themselves. When Paton took leave from Diepkloof in 1946, it was with the intention of studying penology abroad before returning to a career in the prison service. But in Sweden something unplanned happened. Under the influence of what he later called "a powerful emotion," he began to write a story based on his Diepkloof experiences. Three months later *Cry, the Beloved Country* was completed.

In the remaining 40 years of his life, Paton wrote a great deal: two more novels (*Too Late the Phalarope*, in 1953, and *Ah but your Land is Beautiful*, in 1981, the second an embarrassingly poor piece of work), stories, memoirs, biographies, a two-volume autobiography, and a sizable body of journalism. But he remained a one-book man. His other fiction, in particular, is vitiated by a sentimentality that *Cry, the Beloved Country* escapes only by the sheer power of its sentiment. Like Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*, it gives the impression of having been written at the dictation of an overmastering daimon. In both cases the writers spent the rest of their lives fruitlessly trying to recover that first fine rapture.

Not all readers of *Cry, the Beloved Country* may remember where the strange title comes from. Here is the relevant passage: "Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply. . . . For fear will rob him of

all if he gives too much." Though the novel overtly takes up a confident liberal stance, calling for greater idealism and commitment to Christian and democratic values, the experience it deals with beneath the surface is, as Paton's best critic, Tony Morphet, has argued, more troubling. The "powerful emotion" out of which the novel emerged was fear for himself and his humanity, fear for the future of South Africa and her people. Fear was the emotion that had held Paton in its grip in those hotel rooms in Sweden and England and the United States where he wrote the book; and the book, with its anxious ending, cannot be said to have settled his fear.

Back in South Africa, Paton did not confine himself to writing. His most practical and most immediately effective act was to found, in 1953, the Liberal Party, a non-racial political party that survived, in the face of continual official harassment, for 13 years, until it was legislated out of existence. Though he was a deeply committed Christian, Paton confesses that the "deepest fellowship of [his] life" was felt not in the Church but in the Liberal Party.

Liberalism, to him, was not only a political philosophy, but a creed embracing "a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism, and a love of freedom." In view of the forces of intolerant sectarianism, racism, and nationalism that it faced, this was, as Morphet rightly names it, "a politics of innocence." Though it never commanded the allegiance of more than a small minority of the white electorate, it did keep alive a certain spark of non-racial idealism as the fortress of apartheid began to be erected on all sides.

After the forced dissolution of the Liberal Party, Paton became a more lonely figure on the South African scene. He shared the common and perhaps blessed inability of liberals to sympathize with, or indeed even to understand, how deep sectional passions can run. He had always feared and disliked Afrikaner nationalism, and one senses in him scant welcome for the rising tide of black nationalism. He continued to hope, with less and less conviction, that fellow citizens of British descent would emerge from their slumber and exert themselves on behalf of such old-fashioned British values as respect for the rule of law (something, by and large, they have never done).

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