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***Party in the Blitz: The English Years* by Elias Canetti, Translated by Michael Hoffmann. With an Afterword by Jeremy Adler. New York: New Directions. 249 pages. \$22.95.**

It is a fascinating paradox that the author of the classic study *Crowds and Power*, with its dispassionate examination of crowd formation, ranging from the rain dances of the Pueblo Indians and the pilgrimage to Mecca to the Nazi rallies of the 1930s, himself maintained, throughout his life, an ardent faith in the uniqueness of the individual. The autobiographical trilogy (*The Tongue Set Free*, *The Torch in my Ear*, *The Play of the Eyes*), for example, written by Canetti in his late seventies, gives us fascinating portraits of particular relatives and friends (including many of the leading writers of the day like Karl Kraus and Herman Broch), even as, to the disappointment of certain readers, Canetti here shies away from cultural and social generalization. The causes of the two World Wars, the dynamics of anti-Semitism, the relation of Fascism to Communism: these are not topics the reader will find discussed in Canetti's autobiography, although the impact of these events on his own life is dramatized at every turn.

The trilogy takes us from Canetti's childhood (he was born in 1905 to a well-off Sephardic Jewish merchant family in Rustschuk, a village in what was then an Eastern outpost of the Austro-Hungarian empire and is now Bulgaria) to the late thirties in Vienna, the once imperialist capital, now on the verge of being absorbed into greater Nazi Germany. *Party in the Blitz*, the fourth and posthumous volume of Canetti's autobiography, a book his German editors cobbled together from various drafts, still incomplete at the time of Canetti's death in 1994, carries on the earlier mode, although in

much more fragmented diary form. Its focus is on Canetti's "English" years: he arrived in London as a refugee in 1939 and remained there for the four decades. Writing in his mid-eighties about people and events closer to his present than those of the earlier volumes, Canetti is as engaged as he is deeply ambivalent.

*Party in the Blitz*, admirably translated by Michael Hofmann, begins and ends on a very pessimistic note: contemporary England is characterized as "a country now stuck in its deepest wretchedness, its best institutions, which once were models to the rest of the world, now in pieces," a "country going to the dogs, not through any foreign occupation and oppression, but by its own volition and choice." Again and again, Canetti mocks the English *Gefühlsimpotenz* (emotional impotence), as he experienced it at the countless parties he attended over the years—those *Nichtberührungsfeste* (no-touch festivities) characterized by the "distance" of those who "sheathe [themselves] in ice." Indeed, Canetti's raillery against the bloodless English, intellectually and sexually active but emotionally deficient, recalls the D. H. Lawrence of the World War I years, who writes his friend S. S. Koteliansky that he must leave an England, that "oppresses one's lungs," an England where "one cannot breathe."

But unlike Lawrence, Canetti, familiar as he was with the violence and chaos of Central Europe, admired and envied the discipline and order of his adopted country. Then, too, England was the place he had lived as a small boy, his father having removed his family to Manchester on a business venture with his maternal uncles—a decision that called down on his head the curse of Grandfather Canetti. The childhood English idyll, described so movingly in *The Tongue Set Free*, ended abruptly, after a mere two years, with his adored father's sudden death at age 31—a death that spelled expulsion from paradise for this high-strung child, whose favorite books were already *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Canetti's young

mother, with whom he was to have a deep but claustrophobic bond for the rest of her life, took him and his younger brothers to Vienna, but although Canetti regarded German as his mother tongue and lived in the German-speaking world (Austria, Germany, Switzerland) until the *Anschluss*, he was, like Wittgenstein, convinced that England was a better, juster nation than its Continental neighbors, a nation that in World War II, “gave the world the best of itself, the first resistance against the maniac who threatened to stop at nothing.” Indeed, whatever unkind things Canetti has to say about Britain, *The Party in the Blitz* is also a memorial to the courage and decency—if sometimes coupled with absurdity--of ordinary Englishmen in wartime.

Take, for example, Gordon Milburn, the stingy but kind-hearted retired vicar at whose country house in the New Forest the Canettis boarded during the worst months of the London Blitz, when their Hampstead house was considered inhabitable:

[Mr. Milburn’s] conscience was as inexhaustible as his feelings were atrophied and withered. Whilst in India, he had become interested in the Upanishads. . . but he had rapidly come up against what was in his nature: discriminations, separations, sharp distinctions. So the Upanishads could not quench his thirst for feeling either, and he gave up on them too, without however condemning or decrying them. What never failed to astonish me about him was the richness of the sects he had tried out. He pulled on each one like a jacket, and then took it off again, he didn’t throw any away, he kept them all, just as if they had been old clothes, I think that was the source of his avarice, the fact that he could never bear to part with any of the beliefs he had ever worn.

Mrs. Milburn, by contrast, is a blank slate, an innocent who believes war and evil don’t exist. Many comic misunderstandings take place, not the least involving the local prophetess Mrs. Slough as well as Mr. Milburn’s attempt to “understand” the poetry of Hölderlin, Canetti acting as his tutor. Then, too, the village boasts a street sweeper Canetti befriends, an expert on the Bible and the religious writings of George Fox.

Such pastoral interludes as the New Forest stay are remembered as largely happy, even as the parties which Canetti attended assiduously, all the while complaining that he loathed such affairs, were more problematic. At one level, Canetti enjoyed meeting famous artists, writers and intellectuals-- William Empson (though not his wife Hetta), Bertrand Russell, Herbert Read, the historian Veronica Wedgwood, and the Sinologist Arthur Waley. His openness to what might have been considered political enemies is surprising: he was, for example, a frequent guest of Diana Spearman, the "ex-wife of a Conservative Member of Parliament," where he met, among others, Enoch Powell, later known for his notorious racism. Canetti engages Powell in conversation about Dante and Nietzsche, and admires the young M.P.'s intellect even though "I don't know that I have ever encountered anyone quite so antithetical to everything I stand for."

In a brilliantly terse chapter, Canetti describes a party given during the Blitz by the "famously wealthy patron of the arts" Roland Penrose at his three-story mansion on Downshire Hill in Hampstead. As Canetti makes his way from the top floor to the basement, he realizes he is descending from the dancing-and-drinking circle to the orgy on the lowest floor, where sexual couplings are carried on quite openly against the sounds of bombs falling outside. But this is not all. "The door into the garden was ajar, men in firemen's helmets reached for buckets of sand, which they carried out very fast, with sweat on their faces. They heeded nothing they saw in the room, in their haste to protect the burning houses in the neighbourhood, they reached blindly for the sand-filled buckets." And yet it turns out that this fire brigade, so alien to the self-absorbed couples, "consisted of volunteers from the same street, including the odd young poet, whom I would never have recognized in his exertions." And now we read:

After about an hour, I left the house, I was neither frightened nor indignant, though I was embarrassed by the unflappable lovers beside the puffing firemen; but as the latter showed not the least surprise, merely plunging in and out again, they

didn't try to bust anything up; leaving the others undisturbed seemed to be at least as important to them as it did to the lovers that they remained entwined. On each side there was determination, I was amazed by the self-control of the English, who refused to be distracted by anything or anyone, then I was embarrassed by my own embarrassment, and thought I felt what English Puritanism really was, which I had always been frightened and in awe of.

Here the sense of privacy, of emotional non-contact Canetti decries elsewhere in the book is shown to have, after all, some value. Perhaps what Canetti calls "English Puritanism" made it possible for island culture to survive and even to prevail.

Such incidents, in any case, give the reader a superb sense of what day to day life was like during the Battle of Britain. People, as Canetti sees them, are known, not by their stated principles but by their behavior. It is in this context that we must understand the author's portrait of Iris Murdoch—a portrait, so Jeremy Adler tells us in his excellent Afterword, enraged many of Canetti's German reviewers as did his even more vicious representation of T. S. Eliot. True, the image of Eliot, whom Canetti barely knew, as "a libertine of the void, a foothill of Hegel, a desecrator of Dante . . . thin lipped, cold hearted, prematurely old," is too mean-spirited to be taken seriously: one senses that Eliot plays a purely symbolic role in the Canetti pantheon of artists and their avatars.

The Iris Murdoch chapter, on the other hand, is as memorable as it is devastating. The two writers meet through the poet and ethnologist Franz Steiner, Canetti's closest literary friend in England and Murdoch's fiancé, who was to die suddenly of a heart attack in his early forties. Sharing their grief, Canetti soon senses that Murdoch is using the occasion to make overtures to him:

She visited again in the course of that winter she was always talking about Steiner, and we kissed. I don't remember when exactly it happened, but it happened very soon, and it was the familiar pained face. . . .

But the extraordinary thing happened as soon as we had kissed. The couch I always slept on was to hand. Quickly, very quickly, Iris undressed, without me laying a finger on her, she had things on that didn't have anything remotely to do with love, it was all woollen and ungainly, but in no time it was in a heap on the floor, and she was under the blanket on the couch. There wasn't time to look at her things or herself. She lay unmoving and unchanged, I barely felt myself enter her, I didn't sense that she felt anything, perhaps I might felt something if she had resisted in some form. But that was as much out of the question as any pleasure. The only thing I noticed was that her eyes darkened, and that her reddish Flemish skin got a little redder.

No sooner was it finished, she was still lying flat on her back, than she became animated and started to talk. She was caught in a peculiar dream: she was in a cave with me, I was a pirate, I had snatched her away and dragged her back to my cave, where I had flung her down and ravished her. I sensed how happy she was with this pretty commonplace story. . . . (167-68)

However unfair and cruel this passage may seem so far as the 'real' Iris Murdoch is concerned, Canetti's is a profound portrait of a woman who practices what Lawrence called, with reference to his own character Hermione in *Women in Love*, "sex-in-the-head." It is neither Murdoch's aggressiveness nor her promiscuity that shocks her passive lover; rather, he is repulsed by her matter-of-factness, her intellectualizing of what should be a sensuous pleasure. Just so, he suggests, Murdoch's philosophical writings are parasitical, absorbing Wittgenstein or Heidegger or Hegel and drawing what she extracts into her own all-too-clever system. "Everything I despise about English life is in her," says Canetti. "You could imagine her speaking incessantly, as a tutor, and incessantly *listening*: in the pub, in bed, in conversation with her male and female lovers."

This could hardly be nastier—and after all, Canetti was obviously complicit-- but *Party in the Blitz* has to be understood in the context of the previous volumes of the author's memoirs. His "earliest memory," recorded in *The Tongue set Free*, is "dipped in red"—a reference to his young Bulgarian nanny's boyfriend, who teased the two-year old baby every

morning with a jackknife, threatening to cut off his tongue. This “red” memory is soon echoed by his mother’s stories of youthful sleigh rides, where wolves could be heard in the distance, presumably sticking out their “red tongues,” a world where a crowd of gypsies fills the Canetti house every Friday night, receiving food from their benefactors, and where the little boy picks up a workman’s axe and threatens to kill his slightly older, much loved cousin Laurica because she taunts him for not yet having learned how to read.

It is a world of violence and extreme emotional states, and the mature Canetti cannot ever suppress his essential “Eastern” temperament, however much he admires the West, and especially an England so antithetical to his own make-up. *Party in the Blitz* is thus much more than a set of incisive but unrelated portraits; it is the culmination of Canetti’s exile narrative—a narrative completed, hard as it is to believe, by an eighty-seven-year old man, still swinging that axe at his detractors. The “serenity of old age,” Canetti admits on his final page, is a quality “which I don’t possess, or only sometimes, all too rarely.”

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