

---

## Genesis of the Novel

The official, not to say definitive, version of the genesis of Canetti's single novel is the subject of one of the last chapters of the second part of his autobiography, *Die Fackel im Ohr*, which was published for the first time in 1980. "Der Pavillon der Irren," the first section of "Die Frucht des Feuers: Wien 1929–1931," makes quite clear that in September 1929, when the author was just twenty-four, an epoch had officially come to an end. This was marked by the completion of the thesis in chemistry at the University of Vienna, entitled "Über die Darstellung des Tertiärbutylcarbinols," which Canetti had written to buy time, and which had meant nothing to him. It was also marked by his having achieved the distinction of earning his own living. He had been commissioned to translate into German from the American, works by Upton Sinclair, an author on whom he had already written an article entitled "Upton Sinclair wird 50 Jahre alt."<sup>1</sup> These translations were published as *Leidweg der Liebe* in 1930, *Das Geld schreibt: Eine Studie über die amerikanische Literatur* in 1930, and *Alkohol* in 1932. All were published by the left-wing publishing house in Berlin, Malik.<sup>2</sup> The translation work was also obviously nothing more than a mere pretext, and Canetti soon discovered that his heart was not in this kind of work either (FO, 293).<sup>3</sup> Work on *Die Blendung* thus began when Canetti was "free" for the first time, both imaginatively, in terms of the loss of the pressure of having to complete the doctorate, and financially, in terms of the income he now had. But it also began when Canetti was emotionally confused. The writing of *Die Blendung* is often linked up by critics with the background of the decisively disorientating impact a trip to Berlin had had on him, itself the subject of part four of *Die Fackel im Ohr*, called "Das Gedränge der Namen: Berlin 1928." This visit was marked by three encounters. Canetti was introduced to Brecht, Georg Grosz, and Isaak Babel. The encounter with Brecht, in a lively restaurant frequented by intellectuals, had been a humiliating one (FO, 253–54). It was an encounter with strictly utilitarian values as

these were embodied by a prominent bohemian, who was also an intellectual and an artist. This was a new experience for Canetti. It was at variance with his previous, relatively limited experience of the social side of intellectual life in Vienna, where Canetti had been under the spell of Karl Kraus, whose influence on Canetti as a young student and for quite some years after has been much discussed, both by the author and by critics.<sup>4</sup> What is important is that Kraus had not been bohemian in terms of life style and, in contrast to Brecht, had looked on the business of writing with the reverence and self-consciousness of the convert to a profession felt to be highly exalted. As an orator with a declamatory style of public debate, he had lectured to the young Canetti with considerable theatrical skills. His satirical style of writing was equally provocative. Whether as orator or writer, his persona was well within the tradition inaugurated in the nineteenth century by the Romantics, the belief in the separateness and otherness of the artist figure, whose mission, as a vessel of and for truth, was to propagate that truth to mankind. Brecht, living at large and motivated by largely pragmatic concerns, such as how to stage his plays and whom to employ to act in them, did not project any of the establishment self-consciousness of the artist with which Canetti was already familiar. Brecht thus offended Canetti's innocent reverence for an ideal he had already formulated of the artist as one who, in order to be able to create something worthwhile, *had to* preserve himself from what was clearly felt to be the threat of corruption posed by mixing with the masses. Brecht's identification with the masses, together with his refusal to detach himself from a wider social reality, did not strike a chord with Canetti.

Nevertheless, it was Brecht's generally loveless, impersonal, and exploitative vision that seemed to epitomize the inverse of Canetti's own idealistic feel for the good, the beautiful, and the true, for which values he imagined the artist was destined to fight, as if in a contest (FO, 255). This devastating assessment was complicated by respect, bordering on reverence, for Brecht's collection of poems *Die Hauspostille*. This was given the highest accolade when Canetti commented on the personal effects the poems had on him, in terms of their penetrating, charismatic mystique: "Es gab Dinge darunter, die mir durch Mark und Bein gingen" (FO, 256). As we know from his other literary criticism, this kind of an effect was generated by only a handful of writers, Büchner, Stendhal, and Kafka amongst them. Comparable to

the devastating effect Brecht had on Canetti personally in Berlin, was the effect of Georg Grosz, whom Canetti met in the artist's studio. This encounter was more successful in personal terms, for, whereas Brecht had demolished anything Canetti had ventured to say and dismissed it with contempt, Grosz was less aggressive and more sympathetic. Canetti left the studio with Grosz's series "Ecce-Homo," itself something of a compliment, which he looked at in private. It is interesting to note here that Grosz in his autobiography (published in 1955) does not mention these encounters with Canetti, although he does talk about his encounter with Brecht in Berlin, with Tatlin in the U.S.S.R., with Thomas Mann in New York, indeed his encounters with many other artist figures.<sup>5</sup> The same is incidentally true of Alma Mahler, who also makes no mention of Canetti in her memoirs, despite the fact the two clearly had, according to Canetti's account in his autobiography, quite a lot to do with one another.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the impact of Grosz's art on Canetti, just as literature in the case of Brecht's poems, was emphatic (FO, 264). What was devastating about the series was less the satirical force for which Grosz is historically feted, but the mysterious way in which Grosz was able to compel Canetti to assent to his vision, which is to say his capacity to convince observers of the "truth" of his creations. Canetti had mentioned the powerful emotional and intellectual impact of Brecht's poems without in any way being able to suggest, analytically, what it was about them that was capable of generating such an effect, and he does the same here in further comments on the "Ecce-Homo" series. The same apology for the power of art is made with respect to Grosz (FO, 264). We have, then, two fine examples of Canetti's capacity to be absolutely dazzled and blinded by art, and dazzled and blinded in a way that defies analysis. Canetti's comments on Brecht's poems and on Grosz's drawings refuse to acknowledge matters relating to content, except in the most perfunctory of ways, as if content were totally irrelevant, and as if imaginative impact were everything. This attitude is consistent with the general approach underlying Canetti's literary criticism, published in essay form as *Der andere Prozeß* (1969), or *Die gespaltene Zukunft* (1972), some of which appear in one volume now as *Das Gewissen der Worte* (1975). The casual reader of these essays cannot fail to notice that substance in literature is rarely taken seriously. In these essays, Canetti insists again and again on the *experiential* nature of contemplation of artistic objects, in particular on the capacity

of literature to devastate entirely. For him, interestingly, such effects seem to constitute proof of the intrinsic excellence or merit of the source of the effects. Respect for the intrinsic and objective merits of any given work of art is nothing compared to the subjective effects individual works of art are capable of having on the individual Elias Canetti, a view that will be important for this study's claims about the experiential nature of reading the novel *Die Blendung*.

The experiences of poetry, painting, writers, and artists in Berlin were mingled with equally complicated responses to the quality of sophisticated, urbanized life in Berlin generally. Canetti's friend Ibbv, who had introduced him into fashionable intellectual circles, was at ease with the chaos and intensity of life. Canetti was not. His idea was that life was a jungle, with each individual fighting for his own survival, where community and communication become redundant, because each man is on his own: "Es war jeder für sich . . ." (FO, 266). In contrast to the unqualified dismissal of Brecht the man and the straightforward approval of Grosz's capacity to take him seriously as an equal, Canetti goes on to endorse Isaak Babel the man unconditionally. His encounter with Babel in Berlin was significant, Canetti tells us, because he met someone who shared his world view. This meant Canetti's generally exalted view about literature and art and his particular views about individual authors. Babel loved Gogol and Stendhal, just as Canetti did. Their approval meant they were both united, in their joint refusal to beautify the world, and their own joint refusal to exploit it (FO, 273-74). As if to further defend this approval of Babel's seriousness, we are reminded, at the end of this section, of the acute existential significance of the encounter to Canetti, who records that Berlin would have eaten him alive if he had not met Babel (FO, 274).

Canetti's official account of the genesis of *Die Blendung* is one which makes an overt causal link between the general chaos of his imagination, produced by the wealth and variety of the impressions made on him by Berlin, and the production of the novel. The latter is the product of the former, inextricably linked with it. Part of the interest of the account lies in what is said, therefore, about the link between writing and survival, a link that is also vital in Canetti's work generally, particularly in the large section in *Masse und Macht*, entitled "Der Überlebende,"<sup>7</sup> but also in the essay "Macht und Überleben."<sup>8</sup> When Canetti insists on the chaotic dynamism of his imagination after Berlin,

emphasizing how it was overwhelmed by impressions made on it, he reminds us that writing *Die Blendung* was an attempt to come to terms with that chaos. *Die Blendung* was the means by which chaos could be grasped in a fully *plastic* way:

Die eigentliche Tendenz der Dinge war eine *zentrifugale*, sie strebten auseinander, mit größter Geschwindigkeit voneinander weg. Die Wirklichkeit war nicht im Zentrum, wo sie wie an Zügeln alles zusammenhielt, es gab nur noch viele Wirklichkeiten und sie waren außen. Sie waren weit voneinander entfernt, es bestand keine Verbindung zwischen ihnen, wer einen Ausgleich zwischen ihnen herzustellen versuchte, war ein Fälscher. Sehr weit außen, auf einem Kreise, beinahe am Rande der Welt standen wie harte Kristalle die neuen Wirklichkeiten, auf die ich zuing. Als Scheinwerfer waren sie nach innen auf unsere Welt zu richten, um diese mit ihnen abzuleuchten. (FO, 294)<sup>9</sup>

This formulation of the function and purpose of writing, partially unpoetic and highly abstract as it is, is not a classic one. It neither directly admits, nor directly denies, the ancient theory of mimesis, the idea that literature *imitates*, or *represents*, or *reproduces*, a given *social* reality, the idea that it must reproduce or be adequate to that given social reality, like a mirror, more often than not in terms of a referential or normative idea of truth and/or wisdom. Equally, however, the account neither directly admits nor denies the possibility of something other than mimesis in literature. Canetti depicts himself as a lone traveller, abandoned, so to speak, in a cosmos full of atoms in perpetual motion, and in a cosmos which has no center. The aggressive, dynamically mobile forces refuse to synthesize themselves into a single whole with a single, unifying meaning. A multiplicity of realities coexist instead, and each one is characterized by its *natural* capacity for autonomy and independence from any other reality, and from any larger whole. The internal dynamism of each individual reality is such, therefore, that there is internal resistance to synthesis. This idea about natural resistance to synthesis is clearly a matter Canetti seems to have established pragmatically, from observation. The dynamism of the cosmos is described as if it corresponded to a state of nature. This is then followed by an article of faith on Canetti's part, concerning the role of human artifice. Canetti moves into the dogmatic mode as he talks about a hypothetical individual. He is categorical

that, because there are no links at an internal level, between each of the coexisting realities, ("keine Verbindung," "keinen Ausgleich"), any human attempt to impose either analytic or synthetic links in terms of artifice has to be flatly condemned. Such a person is branded a falsifier, a "Fälscher."

Canetti's condemnation must be interpreted as a statement of respect for what he feels he has established as the truth about the power and energy of chaos: they exist and have to be respected. The nature of the universe is the power and energy of chaos. Canetti's condemnation of the human attempt to impose order on chaos through seeing and constructing links, through acts of culture, emerges as a first principle and single absolute. To impose order on power and energy would be to be unfaithful to the nature of power and dynamism itself. The act of *seeing* links is seen as a heretical act in terms of power and energy. It is a form of denial. In seeing links, power and energy are automatically neutralized, relativized, perhaps even trivialized or denied: and Canetti is, above all, determined to preserve chaos in its natural state. We need, here, to underline the significance of the terms of Canetti's single absolute. The significance concerns the way in which his single absolute doubles up, surreptitiously, as an astonishingly deep hatred of reason. *Canetti identifies reason, analytic or synthetic reason, as an enemy of chaos.*

This idea is, however, complicated by the fact that Canetti goes on to talk about illumination. Canetti uses the verb "ableuchten" and the imagery of spotlights. In what can this new idea of illumination consist, if reason has been ruled out of court from the very beginning? In the first instance, it appears to be difficult to answer this question. The multiple realities around Canetti, it is suggested, can simply be illuminated extravagantly, dramatically, and, above all, artificially. Canetti states that his novel will act as a spotlight. The multiple realities will be illuminated by his novel, they will be illuminated by a work of art, artifice itself, created by a single human being. Given the background examined above, in which Canetti rules out reason, *the multiple realities will be illuminated with a vision, which will do absolutely no violence to the nature of chaos itself*, for the vision will do nothing, at a substantial level, to harm or touch chaos.

This emphasis on vision raised by the idea of the novel as spotlight is, therefore, a violent statement about the power of art, as it is a violent statement about how art must not, need not, and should not, do any violence to what Canetti has decreed is

the state of nature, namely the chaos of boundless power and boundless energy. Canetti sees his novel as having the capacity to be as effective as artificial light, not natural light. The novel will be effective like a spotlight, and in being a spotlight, the novel will provide an *alternative* to chaos, in the form of a vision different to, and not dependent on, the extra-textual world of a chaos of multiple realities. The act of creation will have consequences, in that the created object will transform mere multiple realities, *but only on the novel's own terms*, for the novel itself will contain alternative realities, "neue Wirklichkeiten." The created artifact will be transformative, only in that the internal world of the novel will have the power to dazzle and blind, like a spotlight. It will have the power to dazzle and blind, in spite of the existence of chaos. Transformation here clearly does not mean to embellish or to improve upon the given in any shape or form: indeed, there seems to be as great a hatred of beauty as there is of reason. We can see in this how consistent Canetti's first principles are, if we remember now how he valued Isaak Babel's refusal to embellish upon the already given, a view about prose that remained something of a constant throughout Canetti's career (*PM*, 178).<sup>10</sup> Transformation in Canetti's terms means the intellectual act, whereby an absolutely alternative vision, an absolutely autonomous vision, is brought into being. Art is thus autonomous, independent of its human origins, as it is independent of the state of nature, whatever that might be: it is not involved in the business of beautifying or making more palatable the already given.

Yet implicit in the notion of the novel's being a spotlight is some kind of notion of coherence of effect. What will furnish the spotlight with the coherence necessary for vision, if Canetti has already ruled reason and order out of court? We still have no clue whatsoever, given that the above statements of principle about the need to respect the power of power and the corollary of a hatred of reason, offer nothing in terms of substance at the analytical or synthetic level. We merely know at this early stage that the new realities comprising the spotlight will have an orientation in terms of imaginative space. They will be directed at an extra-textual world of dynamically mobile realities, that chaos which is the apparent *modus vivendi* of both author (in Berlin) and, it is assumed, his implied reader. Since the novel-spotlight will illuminate the dynamically mobile realities extravagantly, dramatically, and artificially, as one would expect a spotlight to

do, it is possible to conclude here that this illumination will be a manifestation of the formidable power of the novel's own internal realities. We are not talking about content, but the mere brilliant effect of artificial and dazzling light, that created by the power of the human intelligence and creativity behind the creation itself and embodied in that creation. The vocabulary of light-associated words used in the context of the relationship of the novel to an extra-textual reality is, therefore, in a very deep sense, highly misleading. If abstracted from the context just outlined, where Canetti is categorical about the need to exclude synthetic or analytic form imposed on the raw material of chaos, the vocabulary of light-associated words actually raises the possibility of analytic or synthetic interpretation itself. We might be forgiven for assuming that Canetti is, through his central metaphor, when he uses the verb "ableuchten" with the noun "Scheinwerfer," talking about how he proposes to use his novel to throw *metaphorical* light on the world of senseless and meaningless chaos, such as the one he encountered in his social life in Berlin. At first sight, the vocabulary allows us to assume that *Die Blendung* is in a position to provide an *interpretation* of the data of chaos. The vocabulary raises the possibility that the novel will be able to achieve a kind of penetrating through to the *essence* of chaos as *social experience*: it suggests that chaos per se can be understood, that the truth about chaos can be established, in a world of essences beyond time and space.

Yet close analysis of the above passage shows that there is no sign of any kind of reciprocal relationship between the created novel and its extra-textual world. Canetti is rewriting the classic literary metaphor for classic artistic activities. He is not adhering to the convention, whereby the arts exist to throw light on life. He is absolutely defiant that he will not be interpreting a given extra-textual reality. Rather, his created work will be absolute in its refusal to give credit to any kind of given extra-textual reality. Its priority is with the principle of vision. *It will dictate the general terms that make the visionary stance possible. It will not recognize the extra-textual world, except as a hypothesis.* The novel will "merely" have the power of vision detached from particularity—the form of vision not contaminated by content—and the extra-textual reality will not be interpreted, it will be blinded by the power of art.

It is with the contrary view, however, that most critics of *Die Blendung* have worked. They have assumed that the novel's

prime interest is with an identifiable socio-political or socio-economic world. They have assumed that Canetti's contract is a mimetic one, in terms of an established social world, and they have consistently endorsed the novel in terms of Canetti's contribution to well-established discourses, of philosophy, psychology, psycho-pathology, cultural history, literary history, and so on. If we pause to examine the commentary on the genesis of the novel again, however, we encounter objections to the theory of mimesis that are absolutely irreconcilable with it. The mimetic theory of interpretative illumination at a synthetic or analytical level is, first and foremost, at variance with the categorical confidence expressed by Canetti that chaos should be respected: it is *not* to be interpreted either synthetically or analytically, but acknowledged to be there in terms of the imaginative orientation of the created novel. As a spotlight, however, even if aimed at a world of chaos acknowledged to exist, Canetti's priority is with the power of art to dazzle, to be brilliant, and to be these things on its own terms.

This argument, which is crucial for an understanding of the new parameters for interpretation of *Die Blendung* proposed by this book, is that the verb and the noun are used for purposes that have resonance only in terms of Nietzsche's well-known view that art is an intensely *metaphysical* activity in the first place, and one that only has status as a *metaphysical* supplement to life in the second. The passage concerning the genesis of the novel just examined is predicated on the Nietzschean assumption that chaos can not be understood, either analytically or synthetically. It is merely given, a cardinal truth that the Nietzschean type neither denies nor tampers with: s/he merely accepts it to be a self-evident truth, which cannot be proved by formal logic, because it is an emotional intuition from the realm of experience. Canetti abolishes the conventional idea of art as a mirror, reflecting back an image already "known" in some way, for he will not be concerned with the known of a readily discernible social world, but with the existence of chaos, with which he will not interfere at all. There will be no kind of *reciprocal* relationship between the work of art and a given, social reality, or a given metaphysical reality, that of the pure anonymity of chaos, power, and energy. Greater power, it is implied, will be concentrated in the individual work of art: it will be effective because of the power that is vision. We move from art as imitation or representation of life at one remove, to

art as a Nietzschean enactment of life itself, one that does not need to justify itself as a secondary source of life in any sense, as a reflection on something that has already been identified. Art is not dependent on anything outside itself, it is fully independent.

The significant point about the passage is both the supreme confidence that Canetti expresses in the artist as creator and in the effect the novel can generate, both as a *metaphysical* object within space and, by implication, as a temporal experience within the metaphysical or subjective life of a reader. Canetti does not discuss his novel as if it had either referential or paradigmatic value in terms of truth or wisdom that could be applied in any given *social* world. The terms of the discussion do not raise the possibility that the novel will revert the reader to the already known. On reflection, this metaphysical version is the only option open to an author interested in chaos and respectful of its dynamism as pure energy and capacity to resist the immobility that would be imposed upon it, were analytical or synthetic interpretations to be attempted. The respect for chaos seems to be the open, if tacit, admission of the author's preference for illumination *as dramatic effect only*. Canetti is not interested in the conventional notion of interpretative light being cast on a given subject matter. He is not interested in the idea of illumination as content, but as dramatic effect.

This theory is effectively confirmed by an examination of the second image of the passage, that of the crystal. When Canetti assumes "die neuen Wirklichkeiten" of his novel will have the power of illumination we associate with the spotlight, he defines these "neue Wirklichkeiten" later, where he equates them with pieces of hard crystal. In doing so, he equates the new realities of his novel with the quality of absolute non-mobility, a quality that is the inverse of the energy of perpetual mobility and chaos, the raw material of the world inhabited by both the author and his readers. In suggesting that the new realities in his novel will be like hard pieces of crystal, Canetti accepts that his novel will contain a plurality of realities on the one hand, and that an encounter with them by a reader will be comparable to an encounter with stability. Hard crystal is absolutely static, absolutely impermeable, and absolutely impenetrable. It allows of no traffic with the natural world and is defiant in its rejection of any kind of imposition of force from without.<sup>11</sup>

This seems to be problematic once again, only inasmuch as we have, still, no indication that *Die Blendung* desires to have any claim to a paradigm or to referentially applicable notions of behavioral patterns within a social universe. A reader's encounter with *Die Blendung* will be entirely unlike his encounter with chaos in an extra-textual reality, for the crystal image insists on shape, force, and strength. Canetti is implying here that the world of his novel will be the inverse of the chaos encountered in any given extra-textual world, for his novel is to be form itself, not formlessness. Here Canetti is clearly, albeit covertly, developing a theory of reading. Reading, it is implied by the metaphor of hardness and toughness raised by the idea of the crystal, will be an experience of the truth of the strength and power of human creativity in the face of the truth of chaos. The intervention of Canetti's creativity into chaos is seen as a first existential act, which produces form and clarity, or all those qualities we associate with the spotlight. This act, which results in the creation of the novel, is to be followed by the reader's experience of what creativity can do when it gives the formless form. Reading will be a reminder that as human beings we are creative in our capacity to resist the destructive aspects of chaos, or the absolute anonymity of chaos, by creating form. The whole novel depends on the existence of chaos. It is a response to chaos, yet it bears and carries the traces of what creativity can achieve, constructively, in spite of chaos. Reading will be an experience of the control of power and energy by form, which makes the idea of a blinding, dazzling spotlight feasible. Reading is not, therefore, about interpretation, but about the experience of what a creative alliance with chaos can reveal: namely that we are stronger than the purely destructive drive inherent in chaos because we can create its inverse, form.

In spite of the fact that Canetti's images talk about his novel as if it were an isolated object in the cosmos, utterly detached from any kind of reciprocal relationship with the extra-textual world, whether it be intellectual engagement with the abstract world of multiple realities or a personalized involvement with the human world of potential readers, the images stress, above all, the *experiential* involvement of the human imagination through the act of reading, and in the above, *existential* terms. The images, theatrical and material as they are, presuppose an audience of individuals, who are all characterized by a creative receptivity to plasticity, above all. We can say that the "vision" of

the novel has been reduced to the *effects*, at a creative level, a novel can have on a reader. The novel is not characterized by its causal and interpretative relationship with an extra-textual reality. It is characterized by its direct relationship with individual readers, whose social context, that of chaos, will not be reproduced in the novel, for in its place is form, in the sense of hardness and strength. In so doing, the novel simultaneously assumes, therefore, that all readers are creators, with instincts for plasticity, capable of resisting those destructive aspects of chaos lurking close at hand. The novel posits a particular kind of reader, a reader who is equal to the creative challenge of rising above chaos through the kind of creativity that endows formlessness with absolute form.

The argument, then, about Canetti's puzzling commentary on the genesis of *Die Blendung*, is that the above passage describes, above all, an experience of reading, nothing more. Specifically, the experience of reading will be an experience of an entirely different order to the experience with which the reader is familiar as s/he lives at large, as s/he lives when s/he is not reading. If the novel has the hardness of a crystal, reading it will be an encounter with absolute matter. Significantly, therefore, reading will bring to a halt, for the reader, albeit temporally, the perpetual motion of conflicting sets of realities which is his/her usual form of experience and existence. Reading will provide the reader with *respite* from chaos. In place of chaos, the reader will experience absolute form, the confidence of supreme plasticity. The reader will experience precisely that which ordinary existence at large denies him/her. The passage can be read, therefore, as a doctrinaire vote of confidence in the power of art per se, where power is not the capacity to create or improve upon a given social world, or upon the rational or imaginative skills of a given, articulate, reading public. Canetti will not be playing on the rational or imaginative skills of such a public, since he indicated at an early point that he hated reason, precisely because of its vested interest in imposing order on chaos, an action deemed heretical. Reason imposes order on chaos by building up a network of analytic or synthetic ideas. Reason is the enemy because it has a vested interest in mitigating the truth of chaos. Nowhere does Canetti proclaim any love for reason: on the contrary, he indicates with his reference to the "Fälscher" that he hates it. The above statements are, instead, an expression of confidence in the novelist's power to overwhelm the imagination of the reader,

to compel it to submission, to deny it its freedom of movement and independence of thought. This is a denial of the reader as thinker. Such a denial of what many feel to be the noble and ennobling faculties of people generally, is extreme, but it must be understood in terms of Canetti's adoration of plasticity or form. Canetti proposes that he will appeal to a reader's artistic instincts, to his/her sense of plasticity or form. He proclaims an absolute love of form, as he proclaims a love for the human capacity to create form. His reader is one, therefore, who, whilst not a reflective thinker, is, by contrast, a creator in a very particular, Nietzschean sense. His reader is one capable of plasticity, of endowing pure energy, power, and chaos with absolute form, absolute control, absolute mastery.

It appears, therefore, that the passage is more than an idiosyncratic comment on the two theories of mimesis proposed by Aristotle in his *Poetics* and Plato in *The Republic*, which have influenced both the history of philosophy and the history of literary criticism. One of these is the idea that the fabricated world of literature must not be looked at in isolation. There is the strictly *referential* idea of truth, where truth is that which has been created for the purposes of establishing a *correspondence* between words and the things they can properly be used to represent. What is important here for an understanding of Canetti's theory of the novel, is the way in which Plato assumes that truthful statements can be tested or verified as such by determining their "fit" with an outside reality. This is the correspondence theory of truth, a simple adequation between words and things, which has most recently come under attack from post-structuralism.

The other concept of mimesis, equally entrenched, can always be appealed to when language resists or evades such referential treatment. This is the Platonic doctrine of truth as a form of inward revelation, as a writing in the soul that makes itself visible to the mind in a state of receptive wisdom. Such knowledge, as Plato conceived it, would be more authentic than any truth attainable by a mere copying of external reality. Wisdom consists in seeing beyond the world of material objects and events, the world we inhabit whilst we are enslaved to the predominance of sensory perception. There is a higher reality of essences, "forms," or ideas that are locally embodied in the things we perceive but that can only be known, in their essential nature, through a process of inward seeking-after-truth. This is the con-

cept of truth as *aletheia*, as the moment of epiphany or inward "unveiling," vouchsafed to the soul through an exercise of reason transcending all forms of sensory perception. Conservative theories of literature from Aristotle and Plato onwards tend, under the influence of the two theories discussed above, to stress that literature is valid as an activity because of its concern with Truth, in the literal sense of representing what can be registered by the five senses, and in the metaphorical sense of the illumination we associate with wisdom. Literature both *imitates* or *represents* or *reproduces* a given, objective reality "out there" and proposes an illuminating vision of that given, objective reality. The vision will itself, therefore, always partially depend on the substance or data provided by that given, objective reality "out there" in which the author and his/her readers already have a place, but which an author is free to re-present, as befits his/her illuminating vision.

An analysis of the implications of the ideas contained in the above extract from Canetti's autobiography, shows just how strongly, albeit indirectly, Canetti refutes both of the above theories of mimesis. The whole passage points to the *dissolution* of the distinctions on which conservative theories of mimesis tend to be based, namely the distinctions between form and content. The crystal metaphor, in particular, is the vehicle for this radical idea, and is a material object that is brittle, ruthless, uncompromising, hard, and resistant to pressure from without and from within, because of its vicious, unyielding contours. It refracts light, of course, but without in any way indicating that the source of light comes from without: on the contrary, it seduces us into thinking that the light comes from within. As an object, it is capable of deceiving us, quite confidently, into the illusion that the origin and source of light is internal. In choosing the crystal idea and using it as he does in the section quoted above, Canetti's aim is to direct attention away from distinctions between form and content, toward a quality not often discussed in relation to literature, namely the quality of plasticity. This is understood as the nonverbal, intuitive sense communicated to a reader capable of "sensing" the formal control of chaos. Art objects are capable of denying the validity of the world outside their own parameters. They are capable of being so seductively powerful in themselves—like the artificial light of the glistening cluster of crystals, which makes the observer forget that it does owe something to natural light—as to make redundant any need

to refer to a world outside their own parameters.

Plasticity is a quality we associate more happily with the visual arts, with sculpture and architecture in particular. Canetti often proclaims his love of Breughel, Bosch, Grünewald, and Michaelangelo: but he has had a particularly close association with sculpture all through his life, with the Austrian, Wotruba, above all his "Zwillingsbruder," on whom he wrote a monograph published in 1955. He also had a close association with the sculptress Anna Mahler and the sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka, who illustrated a few of the scenes in *Die Blendung* and *Hochzeit*, but who is primarily known for his illustrations to *Masse und Macht*. When we mention the quality of plasticity in connection with specific works of sculpture or buildings, we can point to the components that are thought to contain the quality or those components that produce the effect of plasticity on a spectator. We can point, however, only if we believe that plasticity is an intrinsic quality of a created object. If plasticity is, by contrast, an effect, something resembling a feeling, stimulated by an object, but which is really only experienced within the imagination of the individual, it is clearly only partially intrinsic to the created object: it is as intrinsic to the living human subject whose senses have stimulated his/her imagination by a material object. Created objects can stimulate the potential for plasticity which lies latent.

Literary works have no obvious physical contours in the same way that sculptures or works of architecture do, yet, if we understand plasticity in terms of *effects*, there is actually absolutely no reason why literary works should not be capable of generating such responses in precisely the same way as works of sculpture and architecture do. What is important here, however, is not so much that Canetti subscribes to the idea that literary works can achieve a kind of intangible physicality at the level of effect on a reader's imagination. It is more that this stress precludes any sense of the necessity of sustaining any kind of distinction between the parameters of the created art object and the world to which that art object supposedly refers. For the metaphor does not allow for such a distinction: the metaphor insists on the absolute and utter independence of art from life in any shape or form. It is an end in itself. It is important, then, that we see Canetti as a radical theoretician of literature, precisely because the emphasis he wishes to put on the intersubjective encounter between the reader and the art object effectively

demotes the claims of the extra-textual world altogether. We are talking about a direct and startling encounter, whereby the novel dazzles a reader's imagination dramatically. Yet Canetti's fascination with the metaphysical effect on the reader's imagination of his novel is one that excludes the capacity of that imagination for critical reflection, or for that poetic moment described by Plato when the imagination, stimulated by a literary work, has the freedom to recognize something already known, but which lies dormant in the soul. The stress on devastating effects shows that Canetti is not interested in using the novel as a means of either furthering a questioning attitude to a given reality in the sense of appealing to a reader's intellect, reason, and imagination, where these can be harnessed to particular ends, or allowing the reader the freedom to enjoy a moment of poetic vision.

Canetti marks himself out as radical in his *cavalier* indifference to the more conventional ends of literature. For formal literary methods, commonly thought to constitute the art or skill of a literary writer, are usually deployed with the precise intention of furthering the cause of interpretation of the given. Effects created by individual literary works, in conservative theories of literature, are generally considered to consist in those well-thought-out analytical positions, implicit in presentation, that ultimately further the relationship of the reader to the world. They further the relationship positively or negatively depending on the author's attitude to that reality, and they do so because they rely on ideas, not words. Canetti's metaphors bespeak his absolute confidence in his own right to use his own imaginative, creative strength and power to overwhelm, compel, and exalt the imagination of the reader. On the one hand, he wishes to deny the value of the intellect as source of reflective consciousness and analytical truths, since he nowhere indicates that the thematic scope of his novel is likely to create social situations, such as conflict, likely to require analysis. The novel has its origins in chaos, yes, but Canetti has been categorical about the need to respect chaos and about the refusal to interpret that chaos. There is no creative engagement with chaos for the principle of respect for chaos precludes the possibility, from the outset, of Canetti's being in a position to examine conflict, or conflict that demands analysis.

On the other hand, Canetti positively celebrates the power of the imagination as something immeasurably creative and capable, above all, of plasticity, or the power of form. In so doing,

the metaphors give priority to the direct, unmediated, and intersubjective relationship of *power* between the created literary work and the individual imagination of each individual reader. Now, power, as one of Canetti's systematic preoccupations, is normally identified in his other works as a kind of moral, social, political, or cultural evil, which Canetti wants to criticize. Here, however, the metaphors are resolute in their refusal to let art *service* a given reality, for nowhere does Canetti stress the relationship between created art and the world in time and space "out there." Canetti is surreptitiously making an unusual claim, that art objects can upstage and silence those claims otherwise made on the imagination by something like a social world out there. Art objects are not there to *service* that given social world in any shape or form. They are absolutely pure of such a material aim. The intellect is not only to be silenced, it is not to be called upon, in any way, to further some kind of contract the reader already has with that social world. The rejection of the intellect is comprehensive, since value judgments are held responsible for the view, both that art *must* relate to an already existent world and does service that social world, and that that social world, *as it already is*, is actually worth something. Art that furthers the cause of endorsing the social world is clearly not acceptable. Thus the implicit, violent rejection of a kind of art that would, by appealing to the intellect and reason, merely end up refining, by intellectual and/or analytical means, *the already given*.

Art has to be severed from that world, because Canetti's agenda appears to be a metaphysical one, and not a socio-political one or even a social one. It can do this only if it appeals to different skills, non-rational ones, above all. What is given, in Canetti's terms, is the context of chaos, not the comparative stability and security of an ordered social existence. Canetti's metaphors about writing suggest that he will be writing in such a way as to appeal to a reader's capacity for strength, for power, and for endurance. Art objects should be taken on their own terms, as ends in themselves. They should be taken more seriously than any of the kinds of pressures already exerted on the imagination by the social world already inhabited by the creator and his readers. And they should be ends in themselves, precisely *to deny the social world with its vested interest in order, the inverse of both chaos on the one hand, and artistic form on the other*. They should attempt this for reasons entirely reminiscent of Nietzsche, namely to demonstrate that we are stronger than

that social world, and that we are stronger than a greater metaphysical threat, that of falling recklessly into an abyss of absolute chaos.

The issue latent in Canetti's apparently innocent description of the genesis of his novel is one of a high order of generality. The issue to address in life is how to survive, given the real existential threat of chaos. And the answer is not to become more of a thinker, to elevate the status of the already given by reflecting on it. It is not to settle into a space within a relatively stable and ordered social world. It is to become more of a creator in the generalized Nietzschean sense of that word. In becoming either a thinker or a support structure within a social order, the reader is obviously ensured a certain kind of security, but only as something of a passive contemplative within a framework of the already known, itself guaranteed by certain established ideas, of referential value. In becoming a creator, by contrast, the reader is instated as an individual, as a free agent of new imaginings in a dangerous world, where nothing is already known and where all things are possible. The former mode ensures survival with security, with the assistance of variations on the theme of reified, received ideas, whilst the latter mode challenges the individual to survive without security, to unleash and make plastic use of his own power as a creator. The task is to harness all one's creative energies to the goal of imaginative self-creation, to resist defining oneself in terms of the already given. Clearly, Canetti believes the creative capacity for survival on these new terms is latent in all human beings: certain works of art release this potential only by assuming both that it is already there and that it merely needs to be teased into existence (564).<sup>12</sup>

That the novel was to be exploited as a Nietzschean means of injecting plastic form, temporarily, into the ever-mobile, ever-dynamic world of chaos, and not as a means of penetrating through to an understanding of the essence of that chaos, is, however, only partly clear in the extract that follows the quoted section in the autobiography, where Canetti focuses on what the spotlights can achieve: "Sie waren das eigentliche Mittel der Erkenntnis: mit ihnen wäre das Chaos, von dem man erfüllt war, zu durchdringen. Gab es genug solcher Scheinwerfer, waren sie richtig erdacht, so ließe sich das Chaos *auseinandernehmen*. Es durfte nichts ausgelassen werden, man durfte nichts fallenlassen, alle üblichen Tricks der Harmonisierung verursachten Ekel" (FO, 295).<sup>13</sup> The spotlights are the means of knowledge, he

says, they are the means of penetrating the chaos. Despite the use of the philosophical word "Erkenntnis," which raises the idea inherent in epistemology, namely the issue of knowledge, of how we penetrate things and understand them, we have to reflect on the sense in which Canetti really means knowledge can be attained. One cannot argue from the above that Canetti's intention is to penetrate to the essence of chaos per se. Rather, it seems that his desire is to interrupt the reign of chaos by reducing some of the power of the dynamism of chaos: thus the word "auseinandernehmen." What emerges, later on, is an idea already briefly mentioned, namely the idea of the importance of the writer's respect for the original form of matter: "In Wirklichkeit hatte alles eine Richtung und alles nahm überhand, *Expansion* war eine Haupteigenschaft von Menschen und Dingen, um davon etwas zu fassen, mußte man die Dinge auseinandernehmen. Ein wenig war es so, als hätte man einen Urwald, in dem alles verschlungen durcheinanderwuchs, zu entwirren, jedes Gewächs vom anderen zu lösen, ohne es zu beschädigen oder zu zerstören, es in Spannung für sich zu besehen und weiterwachsen zu lassen, ohne es wieder aus dem Auge zu verlieren" (FO, 295).<sup>14</sup>

The startling quality about this passage concerns Canetti's respect for the original form of chaos, which takes precedence over, indeed excludes altogether, a notion of the possibility of penetrating to an analytical understanding of the essence or source of that chaos. In spite of the fact that he uses straightforward vocabulary like "entwirren," Canetti does not suggest that he will be able to make his material yield analytical clarity of the nature of chaos per se. The emphasis is, instead, on two different things altogether. On the one hand, the "temporary" separation of the strands making up the chaos, and on the other, the preservation of the original form of the chaos, for matter encountered is not to be radically realtered in any way, indeed it is not to be altered at all. This amounts to a rejection of analytical vision and an endorsement of the possibility of plasticity as the single means available to creative man in his quest to exert temporary control over chaos, by infusing it with his own, alternative visions. An alliance has to be made with energy.

It is interesting to note here the similarity between Canetti's premises and those of the Presocratic philosophers. Canetti's premises are Greek in origin, and philosophical in a particular way, for the above descriptions resemble the accounts given by the exponents of the school of Presocratic philosophy of the

composition of the universe. These first principles are, interestingly, also at the heart of Nietzsche's theories generally speaking, as Moroney has shown in his book: *Nietzsche's Dionysian Aristocratic Culture*.<sup>15</sup> Heraclitus,<sup>16</sup> known as the weeping philosopher, Democritus, the so-called laughing philosopher, and Epicurus all subscribed to the atomic theory that the universe was composed of a chaotic series of atoms, which had come together by chance.<sup>17</sup> Canetti does not make the connection himself in the above official accounts of the genesis of his novel, and he nowhere formally acknowledges that there is any kind of continuity between the first principles of the Presocratic philosophers and his own. It is partly the intention of this study to suggest in what subtle ways the Presocratic theories are mobilized and acted out in Canetti's *Die Blendung*. But before developing such a view about the Greek origins of his novel, it would be useful to record the extent of Canetti's own comments on the significance of Presocratic philosophers to his intellectual development, both at the time of writing the novel and elsewhere.

Canetti's intellectual notebooks are littered with references to Democritus and Heraclitus above all. The attraction to Democritus is philosophical, because of Democritus's sense that the world is composed of a mass of atoms. The attraction to Heraclitus is aesthetic: he is economical in his use of words and, like Stendhal, his thinking is bright.<sup>18</sup> In a discussion with Ruprecht Slavko Baur about *Die Blendung*, published in 1972, Canetti, in characteristic emotive form, stressed that he was merely *fascinated* by early Greek philosophy: "Ich glaube, daß mir außer der frühen griechischen Philosophie überhaupt keine Philosophie soviel bedeutet hat und noch bedeutet wie die chinesische."<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, he has said that he was working on the Presocratic philosophers when he wrote *Die Blendung*: "Ich vertiefte mich nun in die antiken Historiker, Thukydides ganz besonders, und in die Philosophie der Vorsokratiker," he says in his essay published in 1973, on the composition of the novel.<sup>20</sup> Another, more mysterious comment, from 1984, from *Das Geheimherz der Uhr*, makes a reference in the following terms: "Du führst dich so auf, als hätte es seit Vorsokratikern und Chinesen nichts gegeben."<sup>21</sup>

Canetti's account of the genesis of the characters of his novel is one that continues to show that he was working under the shadow of the Greek school of Presocratic philosophy. The account reads very much like an admission of the way in which human beings resemble atoms in the cosmos, and as such