2 “The truth is you’re a woman.
You live for sensations.”

Misogyny as Cultural Critique

When Canetti finds in Broch the necessary attributes of a great writer—he is original; he sums up his age; he opposes his age—he is delineating the standards to which he has pledged himself.
—Susan Sontag

You’re always polite, you woman, you’re like Eve . . . Take a rest from all this femininity! Maybe you’ll become human again.
—Peter Kien to his brother Georg

False Starts: Toward a New Critical Paradigm

Recently, critics have begun to worry about misogyny in *Auto-da-Fé*. Rather than view it as part of the overall parodic structure of the novel, however, they tend to submit their findings urgently, like investigative reporters who have just discovered corruption in city hall. Richard H. Lawson alerts us, for example, to “Canetti’s considerable misogyny,” and regrets that the novel contains “a series of misogynistic aphorisms that perhaps passed as amusing in the 1930s; for example: ‘Women are illiterates, unendurable and stupid, a perpetual disturbance.’” If Lawson seems willing to let us off with a general sort of warning, Jenna Ferrara is less forgiving. She indicts the narrator for “submerging” women’s voices, and Canetti himself for encoding in this fiction his own deep-seated hatred of women. Ultimately, she contends, the novel recommends Anna—the sexually abused daughter of the building superintendent—as an exemplum of female subservience. Most recently—and most spectacularly—Kristie Foell has suggested that “the unfortunate message” of at least one scene of the novel “is that women want to be raped
and [that they] make accusations of rape out of a sense of sexual frustration. Therese’s confused desires play into the myth that women deserve what they get, whether rape, poverty, or murder.”; similar pronouncements can be found throughout her recent monograph. If such critics have espoused disputable claims, they nevertheless deserve a good deal of credit for drawing our attention to a crucial and thus far rather neglected aspect of the novel.7

When confronted with this kind of ideological criticism—a sort of head-hunting expedition for pernicious stereotypes—one is necessarily reminded of Shoshana Felman’s pathbreaking corrective to psychoanalytic criticism, in which she reminded fellow critics (who were then churning out fairly predictable Freudian interpretations) that sex is not the answer, but the ongoing question.8 Perhaps the same should be said of ideological criticism at this juncture: locating insidious stereotyping is not itself the end of the pursuit. What is needed, rather, is careful analysis of the larger matrix of ideas and literary strategies within which these stereotypes appear. Only then could we ask whether (and how) the reader is encouraged to accept, reject, or question the prejudice in question.

Yet such attention to the larger constellation of literary strategies is precisely what one misses. Overlooking what is perhaps the hallmark of this modernist novel, the ironically porous narrator, these critics have instead posited the traditional narrator of literary realism in order to anchor their respective argument about the “novel’s misogyny.”9 While Canetti’s narrator employs the formal prerogatives of the traditional storyteller (third person, the tense of narration, gnomic utterances), the novel itself pulls the rug of reliability out from beneath him, discrediting his putative authority and independence. Throughout the novel the narrator embodies more the desire to speak universally, objectively, or in the voice of nineteenth-century Wissenschaft than any unquestioned ability to do so. Canetti’s mercurial narrator is repeatedly infiltrated by the novel’s cast of characters, and the reader quickly learns to suspect that the claims issued by the narrator typically emerge from quite vested interests. At best, the narrator of Auto-da-Fé is reliably unreliable, and thus a foundation incapable of supporting such weighty allegations of misogyny.10

It remains a riddle how a reader could be interpolated or sutured into (to borrow terms from structuralism) this allegedly nefarious text. The failure to demonstrate this proposition is crucial; for the broad experience of readers
indicates a continual “falling out” of the story rather than the experience of being comfortably buckled in. While Reich-Ranicki’s pronouncement of the novel as “indigestible” may ultimately seem unfair, he is certainly correct that the reader is in no way seduced into a state of unreflective stupor. In fact, the novel’s remarkable humor depends to a great extent on the reader’s epistemic sovereignty over the distorted and limited worlds each character takes to be utterly real, natural, and universally valid. Perhaps these latter-day muckrakers should give some credit to the novel itself, for it is a text that foregrounds and questions those misogynistic stereotypes, rather than one that insidiously deploys them as natural.

Before proceeding directly to this argument, however, let us briefly revisit the question: Why the hesitancy to grant this parodic possibility in the first place? Part of the accusatory posture taken by the critics mentioned above may be attributable to two additional and related—though up to this point inexplicit—factors of feminist criticism of the novel. First is the failure to deploy with historic specificity the term misogyny, despite the fact that the meaning of the word has evolved significantly from the beginning of the century to the present day. One need not assume, for example, that Canetti evolved into a model feminist as the term came to be defined from the 1970s onward, in order to grasp his critique of misogyny as it was pressed into service during the early decades of this century to solve the celebrated “crisis of the self.” The second factor that may have inhibited critics from seeing the novel’s misogyny as part and parcel of the text’s overall parodic structure is the premise of the Anglo-American approach to feminist literary criticism, which characterizes all the aforesaid studies. Such critics are forever trying to redeem the novel’s women, particularly Therese. With regard to Auto-da-Fé this is frankly a doomed enterprise. Any attempt to recover Therese’s supposed interiority is bound to be stymied by the hard fact that none of the characters is psychologically realistic. Stressing the novel’s overt artifice in this regard, Canetti once said to Hermann Broch: “These are figures, not real people.” Moreover, the novel cannot be made over to be fundamentally about women: in point of fact, it is a rich parody of men’s (particularly Peter and Georg Kien’s) distorted views of women and “the feminine,” and thus can never satisfy critics searching for a story centered on—or offering equal time to—female subjects. That would simply be a different novel.
Three Obsolete Women

If misogyny in *Auto-da-Fé* is neither some distasteful by-product of an otherwise great novel, nor merely the pernicious ideological vestige of a chauvinist author, one needs to confront the question with a new paradigm. Rather than the purveyor of retrograde thinking, *Auto-da-Fé* is in fact remarkably progressive. Not only because the self-conscious and pervasive deployment of misogyny takes critical aim at the contemporaneous clichés of gender—notably, as Pöder has shown, by citing and inverting Otto Weininger’s widely read *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character, 1903)—but also in its encoding of what is generally taken to be a fairly recent refinement in thinking on gender: the distinction between the social construction of gender roles and the biologically given status of sex. This disjunction of sex and gender is broadly evident in Therese’s insistence on her conjugal rights as well as her adamant refusal to accept Kien’s attempt to restrict her role to that of mother-librarian. The gender/sex distinction is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Kien’s absurd (yet telling) pronouncement that his brother Georg is, essentially, a woman.

This rupture, however much it may contribute to the dislodging of traditional gender strictures, should be seen primarily in light of the novel’s staging of the epistemological dilemma implied in the peculiarly male crisis of the self. The misogyny worthy of investigation consists therefore not in the fairly obvious derision of female figures, but in the novel’s gendered structuring of the epistemological exchange, in which “woman” or the “féminine” figures throughout as the thing to be known. For the philologist Peter Kien she is both the inscrutable text (waiting to be authoritatively decoded) and China; for the psychiatrist Georg she is the quintessence of insanity, passively and appreciatively awaiting his marvelous treatments. She is, respectively, mother and demimonde. But what she may never be, of course, is a cognitively coequal partner capable of her own crisis of subjectivity.

Looking at the novel’s misogyny in this way helps us to see the representation of woman not only as a synchronic, generalized critique of woefully sexist images, but also as a quite time-specific product of the historically conditioned crisis of subjectivity. Well before Hermann Bahr pronounced the self unsalvageable (“Das unrettbare Ich,” 1904), Austrian intellectuals had been debating the implications of what Judith Ryan has dubbed “The Vanishing Subject.” It was precisely this specter of an attenuated “empiri-
of "self," Steven Beller argues, that inspired Otto Weininger's infamous opus; and though the contemporary debate on the self was perhaps most explicitly conducted in academic circles, it also had unmistakable political ramifications in the form of collectivist and irrationalist movements of the early part of this century. Yet the more precise impulse behind Auto-da-Fé, which was begun in 1930, was not so much this ongoing anxiety about the self, but those questionable attempts (above all Weininger's) proposed to solve that crisis. The late modernist novel Auto-da-Fé can therefore be viewed most productively as an epiphenomenon of modernity, or as a kind of modernism once removed. Canetti's specific contribution, as we shall see in greater detail below, is not only to draw our attention to the gendered status of the subject, but more specifically to indict the canonical high German (and European) construction of culture for enshrining misogyny as both normal and normative. The only characters given enough psychological depth to sustain any kind of crisis of identity are, of course, Georg and Kien. And both attempt to use "woman" to manage their difficulties: to shore up a dissolving self (as in the case of Kien), or to trade in an obsolete self (Georg). "Woman" in the novel, let us be clear about this from the beginning, is largely the projection of desperate men. That these brothers can conduct their exploits under the dignified cover of high culture, however, broadens the novel's critique considerably.

First, it may be helpful to follow out the line of questioning implicit in the "image of woman" approach to feminist inquiry in order fully to appreciate the novel's critique of misogyny as a crutch to male identity. Where do the perverse images of woman originate? Certainly Kien is a quite fertile source for this kind of invective: indeed he literally reconstructs Therese as whore, reasoning that he had not fully understood her "true" profession until he recognizes her again in the person of the "Pensionistin" (Fischerle's prostitute, whose dependable patron has earned her this title), for Kien "a second Therese." Fischerle, Pfaff, and even the purportedly good brother Georg all contribute their own inventive brand of misogyny. Although a considerable quantity of woman hatred emanates from the male characters, it would be quite mistaken to overlook the fact that the novel's women are rather simplistic types well before the novel's men get their hands (or, in the case of Kien, their minds) on them. It is also true that the narrator is no affirmative action employer: Therese does not command nearly as many pages as Kien, nor is her verbal repertory any match for the master philologist. The same
could be said for Anna, the Fischerin, and the other female figures. Like the men, the women are comic types; unlike the men they are distinctly more limited in every imaginable way. Having noted the dual source of the novel’s images of woman does not, however, reinstate the charge of narratorial or authorial misogyny. Those female images, as yet unmarked by the efforts of male figures to appropriate and refunction them, represent the cultural clichés of the day: woman as mother, housekeeper, whore, damsel in distress (Anna), martyr (the Fischerin). All, ranging from the combative and self-assertive Therese to the self-abasing Fischerin, serve to fulfill male fantasies, male careers, and male pleasures.

Let us first cast a glance at the novel’s auxiliary female figures, Anna and the Fischerin. Both are holdover types from nineteenth-century culture, easily recognizable from popular literature and opera of the period. Canetti’s deployment of these figures proceeds in the spirit of “hyperbolic parody,” a term developed by Elisabeth Bronfen to describe the strategy of, for example, Margaret Atwood. This approach—particularly well exemplified by Canetti’s novel—attempts to overcome stereotypes not by avoiding them, but by giving them free berth to self-destruct. Obviously this method, which Bronfen calls “complicity as critique,” does not produce many good women in the sense of models for extraliterary women. Canetti’s portrayal of the absurdity of the female type is an assault on the cultural institutions that continue to purvey gendered straitjackets in the form of outmoded, sentimental female figures. In the figures of the Fischerin and Anna in particular, Canetti draws out the appeal and defining characteristic of the female martyr/victim: her utter expendability for male purposes.

The Fischerin, by all accounts a minor figure, suggests a tragic modification of the Papagena figure from Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute, 1791). In that famous opera, Papagena is the luscious prize for Papageno, the buffoon counterpart to the protagonist Tamino. While an acknowledged musical masterpiece, Die Zauberflöte as libretto operates on a comically simplistic gendered binary opposition between the evil—and ultimately vanquished—Queen of the Night and the patriarchal seat of all wisdom and light, Sarastro. Papageno proves himself worthy of his look-alike bride by enduring certain abstentions (albeit with considerable shortcomings) enforced by the sacred priesthood. Essential for the intertextual allusion, however, is the memorable and entertaining childishness of Papageno. Unlike his counterpart Tamino, Papageno never quite matures. His life proceeds
in an idyllic forest, and his work is nothing but play: he catches beautiful
birds for the queen-mother and receives in return his daily bread and wine.
If it is “delicious” (köstlich), as it always is when he behaves, he is content.
In the make-believe world of perpetual childhood, Papageno has but one
wish: a bride just like himself. The comic and fecund pairing of Papageno
with Papagena parallels the opera’s more serious coupling of Tamino with
Pamina. True to Northrup Frye’s conception of comedy, the opera ends in a
double marriage. This much at least Canetti could have expected of his read-
ership. The citation of Papagena in the figure of the Fischerin is not hard to
recognize: the female hunchbacked dwarf with a “Jewish” long nose is simul-
taneously an evocation of the Papagena disguised as hideous crone (i.e., be-
fore her metamorphosis into the bucolic blond beauty), and Fischerle’s exact
physical counterpart. The modification, however, is double: not only does
Canetti’s hag remain a hag, but more important there is the alteration im-
plicit in Fischerle’s antagonistic relationship to the Fischerin. In Mozart’s
opera, Papageno gets his girl for obeying, more or less, the advice of the old
woman (and, by extension, the guidelines of the priestly sect). He was, in
other words, rewarded for being a good boy. Canetti draws out this aspect
by making Fischerle perhaps even more a child than Papageno. Fischerle
has no use for his look-alike would-be lover for two reasons: First, and fore-
most, he is attached to the Pensionistin (the “Capitalist” in the Wedgwood
translation) as a boy to a mother. “For she loved him,” he claims (infiltrat-
ing the narrator’s voice), “he was her child.”

At the pivotal moment when
Fischerle might conceivably launch his voyage to America he is compelled
to return to say goodbye to “mother,” to spend one more comforting hour
in the cradle under her bed. “He’d have liked to creep under the bed once
more in farewell; that was the cradle of his future career . . . he’d found in it
a peace unknown in any café.” It is from this protected site that Fischerle
habitually experiences the Freudian primal scene (“Urszene”) between his
maternal Pensionistin and one or another of her paying customers.

The Fischerin’s rejection is foreordained by a second, related factor. Fisch-
erle represents a very self-consciously drawn caricature of the self-hating
Jew. As such, Fischerle cannot possibly accept his veritable mirror image as
spouse or lover. (His actual mirror image, one may recall, is only good for
producing eminent, but beatable and despicably “Jewish,” chess opponents.)
His fantasy woman, with the emphasis on fantasy, is a rich, tall, American
blond whose chief drawing card is her ability to finance Fischerle’s own as-
similation and acceptance in gentile society. Fischerle’s make-believe bride is thus an “Aryan” beauty into which this misshapen and all “too Jewish” looking crone cannot possibly metamorphose. No chance in this fantasy— which resonates, as we shall see below in chapter 4, with the rising tide of racial anti-Semitism—for the hunchbacked, filthy, Jewish newspaper peddler.

In playing on the Fischerin/Papagena connection, Canetti draws out the essential component of male projection in creating a female counterpart. The principle of complementarity that underlies binary gender classifications in Western thought (and explicitly evident in Weininger’s categories) is here pilloried as a merely apparent complementarity that is essentially a one-sided projection. Canetti cites and inverts the tradition of the “match made in heaven”—they meet in the pub “The Stars of Heaven” (*Zum idealen Himmel*)—by drawing the Fischerin as the object of abusive rejection, rather than as the comic resolution of plot. The Fischerin emerges as an outmoded female *type* who no longer serves to resolve the dramatic conflict, and thus elicits the humor of incongruity for those familiar with her cultural precursor(s). This is just one of Canetti’s many “ernste Scherze” (serious jokes) told over the heads of his own characters.

It is characteristic and telling that in order to elucidate the role of the Fischerin one must tell the story of Fischerle: that, in a nutshell, is the point. Canetti is drawing our attention to female figures who are little more (in the case of the Fischerin, *nothing* more) than the reflection of male characters, mere adjuncts to male development plots. The Fischerin is significant not only in what she invokes and fails to fulfill, but also in her additional role as martyr. For she stands by her man until death does them part, a sacrifice not remotely hinted at in the role of Papagena. This tragic turn results precisely from the identical outward appearance of Fischerle and the Fischerin. The event follows upon the encounter between Kien and the book-pawning team of Pfaff and Therese. Kien apprehends Therese, Pfaff restrains Kien, and the police are called in straight away. The crowd outside draws its own ever-changing conclusions, deciding ultimately that the dirty little man with the “Jew nose” (*Judennase*) is the guilty culprit deserving of vigilante-style justice. They proceed to beat him quite severely; he is saved only when the Fischerin shows up and is mistaken for Fischerle. She is murdered in his stead.

Critics accustomed to viewing the novel through the optics of *Crowds and Power* tend to see in this scene a criticism of crowd behavior, of the “Masse”
misogyny as cultural critique

Figure 2. Fischerle’s rejection of his look-alike Jewish paramour in favor of a tall, blue-eyed blond is echoed in the anti-Semitic caricature of the day, as in this circa-1935 cartoon from Kurt Plischke’s Der Jude als Rassenschänder. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives.

whose thirst for excitement and revenge is blind. True enough. But the critique is more complex: the death of the Fischerin is the death of the type, a revelation of the essential nonliving status of woman as a male look-alike projection. In fashioning the Fischerin, Canetti seeks to retire an obsolete cultural representation of woman, as well as explore its motivations. Yet this understanding of the Fischerin as a female character type clearly does not exhaust her meaning in the novel. In fact, focusing exclusively on the topic of misogyny can easily distract from the concrete anti-Jewish fervor, which so clearly contributes to her murder. Moreover, Fischerle’s rejection of this virtual mirror image because of her inescapably “Jewish” physical markers in favor of an imagined Aryan beauty suggests the pertinence of the Fischerin to our discussion of racial anti-Semitism below in chapter 4.

None of the novel’s figures evokes empathetic identification, with the temporary exception of Georg, as we have noted. But if the Fischerin elicits any reaction from the reader, it is probably foremost the feeling that she is pathetic. This much at least she has in common with the figure of Anna, the unfortunate daughter of the brutal Hausbesorger Benedikt Pfaff. To under-
Figure 3. Fischerle’s fantasy of American success includes a fancy chauffeured car, as in this 1935 cartoon, titled “The Martyr Abroad,” from the magazine Brennessel. These onlookers, however, are not the adoring crowds of Fischerle’s vain imagination, but resentful observers who immediately identify the prosperous man as a Jew (as Fischerle suspected would happen even in America), and suggest (in the German caption) that Jews who emigrate with such wealth could not have faced much hardship in Germany in the first place. Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz; photo courtesy United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives.
stand how in the figure of Anna Canetti is drawing on a mainstream of German literary tradition, it will be necessary first to review the folktale milieu that is clearly the inspiration for this daughter in distress. We turn, of course, to the Brothers Grimm, those intrepid folktale collectors and wordsmiths of the nineteenth century whose philological fervor was deeply rooted in the German nationalism of the day. As in the case of the Fischerin/Papagena, the citation is mixed but unmistakable.

Anna is a folktale figure who cannot become a fairy tale heroine: she is stuck in that realistic first part of the fairy tale marked by naturalistic exposition. In this case it is an account of brutal victimization at the hands of her own father. But her story fails to abide by that “fundamental law [of fairy tales] requiring the reversal of all conditions prevailing in its introductory paragraphs.” 18 Anna does indeed dream of a rescuing hero in the form of the local grocery boy, but the fictional world of *Auto-da-Fé* simply fails to respond to her romantic desires and fantasies of revenge: the grocery clerk botches the burglary and fails to deliver Pfaff’s head on a platter. The “fairy tale’s movement from victimization to retaliation” 19 therefore takes place only in the imagination of the beaten and beleaguered daughter.

Instead of rescue she suffers numerous beatings, rape, and pregnancy. Finally she is left by her father to die. Anna is, in a sense, the modern incarnation of “Allerleirauh” (Thousandfurs), but without any of the supernatural assistance accorded that heroine. Again, the reference is all but subtle. In the Grimms’ tale, “the father of young Thousandfurs (Allerleirauh) . . . promises his wife on her deathbed that he will remarry only if he finds a woman whose beauty equals that of his quickly fading spouse. When the king’s envoys return from a worldwide search for a second wife to announce that they have failed in their mission, the king’s eye lights on his daughter, and he is overcome by passion for her.” 20 Benedikt Pfaff of *Auto-da-Fé* is not so scrupulous: “Soon after this change his wife died, of overstrain . . . On the day after the funeral his honeymoon began. More undisturbed than before, he treated his daughter as he pleased.” 21

In *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, Maria Tatar explains the suppressed centrality of the incest theme in this genre: it is the obverse of the more frequently noted “jealous evil stepmother” motif. Since the relationship of the two tale types may not be widely understood, it is worth quoting her elucidation at length: “In tales depicting erotic persecution of a daughter by her father . . . mothers and stepdaughters tend to vanish from the central
arena of action. Yet the father’s desire for his daughter in the second tale type furnishes a powerful motive for a stepmother’s jealous rages and unnatural deeds in the first tale type. The two plots thereby conveniently dovetail to produce an intrigue that corresponds almost perfectly to the Oedipal fantasies of female children. In this way fairy tales are able to stage the Oedipal drama even as they disguise it by eliminating one of its two essential components.”

Whereas a tale such as “Allerleirauh” might permit us to speculate whether we are reading about a daughter’s “fantasy of an amorous father” as opposed to an actual “father’s perverse erotic attachment,” Canetti’s re-inscription of this fairy tale figure allows no doubt as to the origin of the desire and violence. The benefits to the child, which, as Bruno Bettelheim famously expounded them, result from psychologically working through the oedipal drama, are of absolutely no value if the fantasies and desires are all the father’s. Anna’s drama is relegated to the feckless fantasy of a nonexistent male savior. Pfaff’s is the real drama, and in this Anna has a mere supporting role.

As in the case of the Fischerin/Papagena, the cultural allusion becomes in the hands of Canetti a rather more complex alloy. If the male projection involved in the construction of the Fischerin was primarily visual, here it takes the form of a cruel verbal game. Anna must reinforce Pfaff’s self-image as “the good father” (der gute Vater) — in a chapter of the same name which Canetti remembers having performed at frequent public readings — by completing his sentences. It is a debased version of that type of polite Viennese conversation espoused by Altenwyl (of Hofmannsthal’s Der Schwierige), the purpose of which is “to provide your partner the key conversational prompt” (dem andern das Stichwort [zu] bringen):

“She gets her keep from . . .” “. . . her good father.”
“Other men do not want . . .” “. . . to have her.” . . .
“Now her father’s going to . . .” “. . . arrest her.”
“On father’s knee sits . . .” “. . . his obedient daughter.”
“Her father knows why he . . .” “. . . thrashes her.”
“My daughter isn’t ever . . .” “. . . hurt.”
“She’s got to learn what she . . .” “. . . owes to her father.”

This exercise is a form of verbal and semiotic extortion and serves to underscore Anna’s enforced role as reflector or function (in the mathematical sense) of her father’s ego. Like the fairy tales that harbor father-daughter
incest in their subtext (or in alternate versions), Anna herself is enlisted to cover over the father’s violence and remake him in the image of “the kind father.”

If Canetti’s point with respect to the Fischerin is to desentimentalize forever the submissive, self-sacrificing representation of woman, with regard to Anna it is to demonstrate the absurdity of the notion that a woman’s power and freedom is rooted primarily in imagination and fantasy. In both cases he draws our attention to clichéd cultural representations of women that served—until, perhaps, their refu nctioning in Auto-da-Fé—to disguise their source in male interests. Yet here, too, Canetti’s critique is multivalent. Anna belongs therefore not only to the discussion of female types and stereotypes, but also plays a central role in the novel’s rejection of Freudian notions that interiorize real, intersubjective violence—as I argue below in greater detail in chapter 5.

As in the cases of the Fischerin and Anna, let us consider Therese first as she is “given” to us by the narrator, apart from the misogynistic aspersions generously heaped upon her by Kien and Pfaff. For she is a type before she enters the plot—indeed she remains virtually unchanged throughout. She is a lower class, fairly obese, and imposing woman, who has spent her entire career as a domestic servant. She is in addition a social climber for whom marriage is the means of entering the respectable middle class; and, of course, she is a woman with an unabashed and largely unsatiated sexual appetite. She is drawn, on the surface at least, as the diametrical opposite of Kien. In her materiality, fleshliness, greed, and thick affiliation with commerce and money she represents the antithesis to her husband’s putative intellect, “Geist,” and overall aloofness to things of this world. Not surprisingly, this opposition is advanced ironically, consisting largely of Kien’s own manifest self-delusions.

Therese makes her debut as a fifty-six-year-old Wirtschafterin, a maid who cooks and cleans for the forty-year-old scholar. She makes her greatest impression, however, in providing fastidious care for Kien’s books. It is this which earns her the short-lived epithet, “a sublime spirit” (eine großartige Seele). Indeed, “her touching solicitude for The Trousers of Herr von Bredow” moves Kien to propose marriage: “With some ceremony she selected a suitable piece of paper and wrapped it around the book like a shawl round a baby . . . He knew how to handle a book better than he did.” The comparison of book to baby is apt: for this is pre-
cisesly the function Kien envisions for her—mother to his library. But if he
marries to gain a maternal figure to nurture his charges, he is very quickly
disabused of this notion. On his wedding night Kien finds to his dismay that
lurking within the apparently loyal, motherly domestic is a “monstrous”
sexual appetite. Up to this point Therese may be said to incorporate a good
many contemporary cultural clichés regarding women as, for example, cata-
logued by Weininger. Yet to those familiar with the German literary canon,
Therese evokes a more specific literary predecessor: she is the reincarnation
and revision of Lene from Gerhart Hauptmann’s widely read *Bahnwärter
Thiel* (Stationmaster Thiel, 1888).

Eric Downing has suggested that in reading the literature of the German
nineteenth century we look to the female figures for the encapsulation of the
respective aesthetic program. With regard to Hauptmann, it is clear that
Lene is advanced as the bearer of that “really real” realism, namely Natural-
ism. She provides a stark contrast not only to the ethereal first wife, Minna,
but also to the more sensitive and spiritual Thiel himself. True, the station-
master is no intellect; yet he is the village pedagogue and cultivates an in-
wardness totally alien to Lene. The dichotomy is therefore essentially the
same as in *Auto-da-Fé*. Until the brutal final scenes of Hauptmann’s novella,
at which point Thiel is in any case coded as insane (and thus not his former
self), Thiel represents the higher, spiritual values of the Romantic past, while
his robust and corpulent wife stands for the brutal violence of modern life. It
is surely no coincidence that Tobias’s death is due as much to the negligence
of Lene as to that harbinger of technical modernity, the locomotive.

It is of course also no coincidence that Thiel (like Kien) marries in order
to get a good mother and receives something quite undesirable into the
bargain: “Without realizing it, he had, however, accepted three things in
his wife: a harsh, tyrannical temper, truculence, and a brutal temperament.
After six months it was common knowledge who ruled the roost. One pitied
the stationmaster.” The sympathies of the villagers for Thiel, as opposed
to Lene, whom they brand a whore (“das Mensch”) and an animal (“So ein
Tier”), correspond to those of the implied reader. Thiel is the beloved com-
panion of the village children, their informal teacher and friend, while Lene
is the greedy wife who cannot sleep for her excitement about the potato patch
to be planted on the railroad right of way. In contrast to Thiel’s gentle in-
struction—given, not coincidentally, in a rich bucolic setting meant to con-
trast with the new industrial landscape—Lene’s pedagogy consists of cruel
corporeal punishment, the traces of which Thiel observes in the red markings on the face of his son Tobias. Lene, too, is the seat of sexuality, and as such she paralyzes poor Thiel. This sexual dependency seems to explain his visceral attachment to her even after he has witnessed her physical abuse of Tobias. All in all, one can safely argue that the novella advances Lene, the monstrous wife and representative of a “naturalistic” and brutal reality, quite without irony. But this only works as long as the other term in the gender binary—namely Thiel—is drawn with relative sympathy.

Canetti’s citation of Lene in the figure of Therese draws out the phony premise in such gender dichotomies. By making Kien (and others) equally monstrous, he lays bare the absurdity of heaping the evils (or “realities”) of the age at the feet of woman. Rereading Lene in light of Therese allows us to see how the former is set up to take the fall: like the Fischerin and Anna, Lene is doomed from the start. In her very construction—that is, as she enters the narrative—we find a crass distribution of character traits designed to put a female face on the stark realities of the day.

In *Auto-da-Fé* such a possibility is precluded from the start. Kien is no sympathetic or innocent figure, such as Thiel has often been construed to be. Therese’s sexuality is even more pronounced than Lene’s, but the simplistic model of sexual stimulus (= woman)/response (= man) is in *Auto-da-Fé* dramatically altered by an array of sexual proclivities and perversions: Pfaff’s brutal incest, Kien’s frigidity, Georg’s flagrant seduction of his patients, and so on. The citation of Lene in the figure of Therese serves to recall and explode a simplistic gendered economy of vices and virtues, though it is surely also true that this rejection of the Thiel/Lene model arises from the larger cast of characters, which will be explored in greater detail below. It is notable that a number of critics have only realized half of the intertextual potential: Therese’s entrance has sometimes unproblematically been hailed as the intrusion of the “world” into the realm of Kien’s rarefied intellect. Yet nothing could be more appalling to the arch anti-realist Canetti than the prospect of any one figure—male or female—representing adequately so much reality.

In arguing that Canetti is citing Hauptmann’s Lene in the figure of Therese, I am suggesting a rather specific allusion. Can Therese, then, still be said to represent a type? In so far as Lene herself is drawn as a nonindividual type, the answer is an emphatic yes. It is not merely that Lene is given no psychological depth and considerably less attention than Thiel, which qualifies her for the status of the typical rather than the individual. It is also the narra-
tor’s use of the ancient arachnid trope to designate her femininity. In fact, one of the principal images which for the reader aligns the ominous train with the brutal wife is that of the ensnaring, predatory spider. Lene’s pronounced physicality and sexuality spreads a “web of iron” over the trapped husband: “Her full, half-naked breasts heaved with excitement and threatened to burst her brassiere, and her gathered skirt made her broad hips appear even broader. This woman appeared to emanate a power—unconquerable, inescapable—to which Thiel felt unequal. Light as a fine spider’s web and yet firm as a net of iron, it surrounded him, binding, overwhelming, debilitating.”

The ensuing description of telegraph wires and poles as “the web of a gigantic spider” that runs along the train tracks only underscores the text’s juxtaposition of Lene and the train as ambivalent forces of modern life, both intimately involved in the demise of Tobias.

By partaking in the traditional allegorization of woman as spider (and the implied corollary of man as trapped victim in her web), the narrator of Hauptmann’s novella places Lene in a venerated tradition of misogynistic representation in German literature. The most obvious predecessor in the German canon would of course be Gotthelf’s *Die schwarze Spinne* (The Black Spider, 1842), a story Canetti read as a youth and recounts in some detail in his autobiography. Though there are surely notable differences in the realizations of the arachnid trope—Hauptmann makes Lene more the Naturalists’ stimulus of instinct than the Gotthelfian seducer to moral evil—all representations of this type suggest a crudely dichotomized distribution of character traits invariably unfavorable to the woman.

Like Lene, Therese is constructed as an unlikely, obese femme fatale. Therese’s physicality, for example her “gorgeous hips” (*prachtvolle Hüften*) noted by the furniture salesman Herr Grob, along with the voluminous blue skirt, receive repeated attention. Furthermore, her wedding night expectations, the relentless pursuit of Herr Grob, as well as her apparently willing acquiescence in Pfaff’s advances, all attest to an unabashed sexual appetite. But the type stops here, at least as far as the narrator is concerned. Kien, as we have already seen, is in no way portrayed as the passive victim of the woman’s web of intrigue. True, Therese is called a spider (as well as Medusa and a good many other things), but this is all Kien’s doing: “In the spider, the most cruel and ugly of all creatures, I see an embodiment of woman. Her web shimmers in the sunlight, poisonous and blue.” Whether we look, then, at the specific gender economy of Hauptmann’s novella or consider
Lene as a representative of a broader type, it seems rather clear that Canetti’s interest in the allusion is to subvert the traditional binary gender classification. For whereas it was the omniscient narrator of Hauptmann’s novella who advanced the arachnid link between Lene and the killer train, it is the very questionable Kien in Auto-da-Fé who pathetically employs his rhetorical skills to paint himself as the true victim of the “monstrous” housekeeper.

Therese distinguishes herself from the Fischerin and Anna in her ability to manipulate images and intervene on her own behalf. She rejects Kien’s intended role for her as the eternal mother, she makes a pass at Herr Grob, and she meets her match in Pfaff. It is not that she is better or worse than her more simply drawn sister types, but that, beyond the already circumscribed role given at the level of narrator, she is able to contest further reductions in her role that are assigned (or denied) her at the level of character. This act of contestation (modest though it is, since it still operates well within the mother/whore dichotomy) introduces to the novel the more nuanced notion of gender as an imputed, but by no means natural role. Therese’s achievement, if we can call it that, is to place the gender stereotype into question by reversing the expectations Kien harbored for her. Kien, too, seems to realize that “the feminine” need not refer to women per se. In a manner consonant with the parodistic cast of the novel as a whole, Kien untethers the concept of gender from its biological moorings. How else could he discover that his brother, deep down, is really a woman? The representation of the feminine—whether or not female figures are at issue—comprises an important strand of narrative in Auto-da-Fé.

Before turning to the novel’s treatment of this more elusive topic, let us take stock of the ground covered so far. In the Fischerin we saw how the notion of woman as preordained prize or crown for the male protagonist’s successful completion of a test of maturity (the Papagena function) is self-consciously inverted in Fischerle’s rejection of his female counterpart precisely because she is made to appear as his unacceptably Jewish double. In the figure of Anna we witnessed the shortcomings of romanticized illusions and passive fantasies in the face of actual abuse: no prince comes to the rescue of this incestuous ruler’s daughter. Finally, in Therese we are invited by allusion to the Lene-Thiel model to rethink the gendered binary distribution of vices, and to question the validity of explaining the brutal side of modernity as, essentially, female monstrosity. Which is another way of saying that Kien’s diagnosis of his own sense of exile in the modern world—
a predicament faced by so many other intellectuals of the Weimar era— is frankly untenable. Canetti suggests that none of these outworn literary topoi is adequate to capture the complexity of post–World War I society.

The Brothers Kien Discover “the Feminine”

The male characters’ own misogyny is detectable almost without analysis; the only hesitation one might provisionally have would be the attribution of any particular misogynistic observation to an unambiguous source, as we noted above in surveying the novel’s peculiar narrative situation. This obvious form of misogynistic representation and behavior—be it Kien’s “inspired” pseudosophical grounding of misogyny, Pfaff as incestuous father and wife-beater, Fischerle as pimp, or even Georg’s more insidious abuses—need not detain us here. For, to borrow Justice Potter Stewart’s dictum on pornography, we know it when we see it. What is perhaps less clear is that notions of the feminine constructed and employed by each of these figures are by no means limited to biological women. Such representations range from China, to the novel’s quixotic “gorilla man,” indeed, as we have seen, to the male protagonist(s) themselves. To understand the function of the feminine on this level—and to appreciate Canetti’s critical engagement with contemporaneous intellectual debates—it will be necessary to digress a bit and sketch in the “crisis of subjectivity” in fin-de-siècle Austria.

In “The New Psychologies,” the first chapter of The Vanishing Subject, Judith Ryan outlines the major figures in the pre- and non-Freudian psychological movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Franz Brentano, Ernst Mach, William James. The crisis of subjectivity that followed from the new “neoempiricist” views of the self—for example, from Mach’s conception of the self as “a bundle of sensations”—proved disconcerting, to say the least. Ryan explains: “As empiricist thought began increasingly to filter into the consciousness of the educated public, panic began to spread. If there was no such thing as the self, the basis for decisions and actions seemed to have been removed. If there was no real distinction between subject and object, the familiar structures of language seemed to have been eroded. Many contemporaries felt virtually paralyzed, unable either to act or to speak.” Ryan’s survey of psychologies covers the period from 1870 to 1930 (though for the literature under consideration she extends this period
to 1940); thus Canetti clearly comes in at the tail end of this movement. In his *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938*, Steven Beller concurs in the urgency of this Weimar-era debate, pointing out that this question occupied leading Jewish intellectuals such as Freud, Schnitzler, Broch, and others, who addressed this disconcerting rift between the “empirical” (Machian) disunified self and the “ethical” self presupposed by liberal political culture in a variety of crucial ways.\(^4\) Canetti’s contribution to this debate is manifold, but first and foremost was his realization that the crisis was not of subjectivity per se, but of male subjectivity. *Auto-da-Fé*, I will argue, thematizes the suspect conjunction of rabid misogyny with attempts to shore up the dissolving self.\(^4\) When one thinks of these two problems—the “vanishing self” along with misogyny—in the early twentieth century with special attention to the Austrian context, it becomes clear that Canetti was not, by far, the first to treat these two issues in tandem. His predecessor was of course the widely read Otto Weininger, whose immensely popular *Geschlecht und Character* was already beyond its thirtieth printing by the time Canetti sat down to write his novel.\(^4\) Intellectually and culturally, this is undoubtedly the novel’s great intertext, one with which Canetti and his friends were well acquainted. “What Weininger is essentially doing,” Beller explains, “is using sexual types to describe psychological states, a procedure that was deeply embedded in Western culture . . . [and] part of a tradition that reached its apogee in Jungian psychology.”\(^4\) Weininger’s legendary misogyny—“his obsessive identification of all that he fears with the feminine”\(^4\)—is integral to his attempt to salvage the self (as the genius, value legislating “Man”) and banish those traits associated with its dissolution to the category “Woman.”\(^4\) Whereas Weininger sought to salvage the “liberal” self—a self defined by reason and ethical thinking—by recourse to misogyny (as well, of course, as anti-Semitism), Canetti’s project is to expose this putative solution as highly problematic.

Viewing the feminine in this larger sense helps us to see the male characters—especially Kien and Georg—as having more in common than has usually been seen. Kien has been treated as the ascetic academic, who stands in contrast to his lecherous and hedonistic brother, Georg. Certainly the novel itself invites such a polarization on one level: Kien is represented as the self hermetically (that is to say academically) sealed off from the threatening stimuli of the outside world. Georg, in contrast, is the winsome man of the world, who willingly engages, even incorporates, the most aberrant of
human behavior in his work with the insane. This opposition, however, is undercut in a number of ways, but most obviously by the manner in which both make use of the feminine. Simply put: both brothers represent the self in crisis; only the method of self-rescue is superficially different. For Kien it is a radical elimination of the feminine, for Georg it is the radical incorporation of the very same—a strategy he thinks will work like a preventive inoculation against disease.

Kien's academic pursuits are not incidentally misogynistic, they are intrinsically so. Canetti's decision to make Kien a master philologist in the nineteenth century tradition frames the issue in terms of interpretation. Kien himself sees the matter of interpreting texts in a fairly simplistic, though no less self-contradictory, manner: all semiotic power emanates from the master interpreter who fixes for all time a heretofore incomplete or corrupt text. Let us not forget that this is the man who plans a final, and, needless to say, irrefutable, exegesis of the New Testament, in which he proposes to demonstrate that Jesus was at heart a bibliophile like Kien himself: “Since the philologist in him still lived, he decided to devote himself, when peaceful times should again bless the land, to a fundamentally new textual examination of the gospels . . . He felt himself equipped with enough knowledge to guide Christianity back to its true sources, and though he was not to be the first to pour the true words of the Savior out to humanity, . . . he might indeed hope, with sufficient inner conviction, that the interpretations he set down would be final.” Kien's interpretive audacity stands in stark inverse proportion to the credibility he arouses in the reader: because his claims to authority often refer to well known extrafictional texts (such as in this case the Bible) of which the reader has independent knowledge, Kien's pretension to definitive accuracy is immediately recognized as mere bombast. Yet as long as Kien's powers of interpretation are trained exclusively upon abstruse Oriental texts, and as long as no one can challenge his claim to the title of the “world's foremost sinologist,” he meets with little opposition. Like the “Philosophie der Blindheit” (philosophy of blindness) he concocts when confronted with Therese's intransigent bedroom set, Kien's intellectual conceptions are eclectic, inconsistent, and fundamentally self-serving. Though Kien's relationships with mere mortals are at best secondary to his intellectual pursuits, he clearly tries to employ the same process in reading people: a unilateral, authoritarian projection of himself onto the other. Though small-minded projection is widespread in the novel, one can safely
argue that for Kien woman is—or should be—the philologist’s text par excellence. The equation in fact reads both ways: it is both a matter of the feminization of the text and a textualization of woman.

If Kien is on the one hand full of overweening confidence in his interpretive aptitude (“Whatever he sets his hand to succeeds, submits to his proofs”), he is also plagued by lingering doubt. In fact, his overly confident assertions of demonstrable univocal textual meaning—as opposed to Saussurian multivalence—reveal an untenable epistemological desperation. Unconvincingly, but no less hilariously, Kien pronounces: “Knowledge has freed us from superstitions and beliefs. Knowledge makes use always of the same names, preferably Graeco-Latin, and indicates by these names actual things. Misunderstandings are impossible.” In addition to the humor this remark arouses amidst the plethora of patent misunderstandings, it bespeaks a pervasive epistemological anxiety.

Earlier yet Kien reveals a hairline crack in his self-image as master meaning-maker when, following the great dispute with Therese concerning the will, he finds himself stymied and capable only of incomprehensible drivel: “Time and again he had to force himself to reach for the Japanese manuscripts on his desk. When he got so far, he would touch them, and immediately, as if repelled, draw his hand back again. What is the meaning of them? . . . On the half-written sheet before him he had drawn, quite contrary to his habit, characters which had no meaning whatever.”

It is of course no coincidence that woman—here in the figure of the novel’s principal woman, Therese—represents the challenge to fixable, stable meaning, even while she represents the fantasy text that elicits the very prowess boasted by the philologist. Indeed these are two sides of the same coin. The exact same oppositional relationship—though here the tables are turned—is evident in the situation below where Kien is enjoying a temporary victory over Therese: “It was enough for him that she was silent. Poised between China and Japan, he paused to assure himself that this was the outcome of his clever diplomacy. . . . In these days he was fertile in happy conjectures. An unspeakably corrupt text he had rehabilitated within three hours. The right characters simply streamed from his pen . . . Word by word, older litanies came back to him and he forgot hers.” Therese is “an affront to scholarship,” therefore, not merely in the mundane sense of pestering the great scholar engaged in his lofty “mission of enlightenment” (aufklärende Mission) with petty material requests, though this is the way Kien perceives it much of the time. In
her nagging inscrutability, she represents, more importantly, the dark side of Wissenschaft, and as such she is a constant threat to Kien’s very raison d’être.

Kien has been attempting, with ever dwindling success, to read Therese since the beginning of the novel. Just before proposing marriage, Kien, thinking he is about to marry a maternal librarian, reflects: “She is the heaven-sent instrument for preserving my library . . . Had I constructed a human being according to my own designs, the result could not have been more apt for the purpose.”53 What he fails to see, however, is that he has all along been attempting to construct her according to his own design. Both the desire to render Therese a patently decipherable text and the inability to do so are evident in the scene where Kien lies in bed recovering from the sound beating Therese has just given him: “At that time she repeated herself over and over again; he learnt her words by heart and was thus, in the truest sense, her master . . . but Therese suddenly began to talk again. What she said was incomprehensible, and therefore held despotic sway over him. It could not be learnt by heart, and who could guess what would come next?”54

None of this dissuades Kien from his effort to textualize Therese: in fact his efforts to write her off, or out of the scene, form the central event of the novel. In what is deservedly the most celebrated chapter of the novel, “Private Property” (Privateigentum), Kien mounts his lengthy “Defense of Learning,” in which he hopes to prove “that Therese’s death was essential”—“daß Therese zugrunde gehen mußte.”55 His self-defense is selfless and noble, for his is really a “Verteidigung für die Wissenschaft”—that is, for science and truth against this female adversary. Therese, of course, is far from dead, and is all the while standing behind her would-be murderer. Although we will want, below, to consider precisely how and why scholarship itself demanded her death, what concerns us here is Kien’s characteristic conception of Therese—for him, now, a mere mirage—as a corrupt text awaiting his interpretive genius. The equation of woman with text, and the view of both as eminently conquerable, is evident throughout Kien’s thinking, but perhaps nowhere so obvious as in the following: “He would examine this mirage until he had convinced himself of what it really was. He had followed trails no less dangerous, imperfect texts, missing lines. He could not recall ever having failed. No problem he had undertaken had ever been left unsolved. Even this murder he must needs regard as a task accomplished. It took more than a hallucination to shatter Kien.”56
Kien’s failure to bring Therese under semiotic control is deeply implicated in his final suicide. Very near to his demise, Kien extols the virtues of books over people: “Books are dumb, they speak yet they are dumb, that is the wonder.” Therese proves less tractable than Oriental manuscripts: she talks back, thwarting the unilateral direction of meaning-making envisioned by Kien. The obstacle to the master-slave (philologist-text) model, which Therese poses in her unpredictable, incomprehensible, and therefore uncontrollable prattle is in fact very much like the rebellion of the books in the final conflagration scene. Those formerly docile, decodable ciphers mount a semiotic insurrection.

Here Kien’s world turns upside down. The passive recipient of meaning, the text, takes on a life of its own, wreaking vengeance on the once tyrannical and now quite mad master reader: “A letter detaches itself from the first line and hits him a blow on the ear. Letters are lead. It hurts. Strike him! Strike him! Another. And another. A footnote kicks him. More and more. He totters. Lines and whole pages come clattering on to him. They shake and beat him, they worry him, they toss him about among themselves. Blood... Help! Help! Georg!” Kien is ultimately undermined by the feminine, beaten now not by Therese but by the binary rigidity of an epistemological system that seeks to sort out the knower and the known along predictable gender lines, a system that in the case of Peter Kien self-destructs. A great library burns and it is a grand farewell not to a collection of irreplaceably rare books, but to a system of thought pregnant with its own destruction.

Focusing on the person of Kien—who is intentionally drawn rather sparsely—can distract us from the novel’s more profound critique of contemporary culture. In her most recent study, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany*, Maria Tatar remarks, “The profusion of images of Eve, Circe, Medusa, Judith, and Salome in art and literature around 1900 gives vivid testimony to an unprecedented dread of female sexuality and its homicidal power.” This concatenation brings to mind Kien’s own subsequent dredging of the mythological, literary, and philosophical canon meant to make his final case against Woman.

Kien’s great speech at the police station, the novel’s most hilarious scene, is of course delivered for a crime he never committed, but ardently wishes he had: the murder of Therese. He clearly presents it as a murder; but is it in any sense *Lustmord*? There can be no doubt that the aggression between Therese and Kien dates from the un consummated wedding night, when Kien, in re-
response to his bride’s sexual overtures, locks himself in the bathroom and sobs uncontrollably. Certainly Kien’s physical trouncing at the hands of this “phallic mother” (as Foell dubs her) comes as a direct response to his failure to follow up on the sexual advances Therese perceived him to have initiated. If the sexual source of this murderous aggression is not yet sufficiently evident, Canetti provides a gloss in the form of the protagonist’s flashback. Just as Kien’s wedding night anxieties come to a head, our world famous sinologist recalls in vivid detail a childhood visit to the beach during which his curiosity about the soft, slimy inside of a mussel drives him to utter distraction. His frenzied destruction of the sea shell (“die Muschel”) — when he cannot properly pry it open, he simply smashes it to smithereens — is as much an act of Lustmord as Döblin’s “Murder of a Buttercup” (Die Ermordung einer Butterblume, 1913) which Canetti may in fact have had in mind. At any rate, the incident gains significance in the novel in so far as it is elevated to a chapter title in Book 1. Canetti is clearly capitalizing upon popularized Freudian ideas in this passage; but as we shall see below in chapter 6, this tongue-in-cheek borrowing does not imply an endorsement of Freud.

Kien’s strikingly learned justification of this imagined murder provides an ironic case study of the phenomenon Tatar finds so striking in Weimar-era culture: not so much the historical cases of Lustmord themselves (numerous enough, to be sure), but the wider, post–World War I cultural tendency to reduce complex sociohistorical causality to archaic misogynistic myth. In Auto-da-Fé we catch Kien in the act: the rumors of Therese’s death have been not only greatly exaggerated, but fabricated before our very eyes. Kien’s feeble attempts to coopt victim status, simultaneously to suppress the female victim, and to obscure the fact of his own agency — all traits Tatar identifies as seminal aspects of the Lustmord phenomenon — are the target of the novel’s critical humor. Clearly we are not in danger of falling under the ideological sway of a man who claims, almost in the same breath, (1) to have murdered Therese in self-defense, (2) that Therese actually killed herself in a grotesque act of autocannibalism, and (3) that it was finally scholarship itself which required her death — all, of course, while Therese is physically pushing herself on her confessed murderer.

If Kien’s frustrated Lustmord is rooted in a crisis of male subjectivity, which, according to Tatar, intensified dramatically in the post–World War I era, he finds plenty of cultural fodder for his hatred in the books he reads and collects. In the end of his great defense, Kien credits his library with
Therese’s murder. Similarly, Pfaff seeks to dismiss Kien’s ranter by explaining to the detectives that “things like that are in books.” 63 And both are, in a sense, quite right.

As if to bear out the veracity of Pfaff’s claim, Kien mounts in the novel’s penultimate chapter, not coincidentally entitled “Warywise Odysseus” (Listenreicher Odysseus), a veritable tour de force, ostensibly for the benefit of his brother Georg, proving the rich cultural pedigree of misogyny. Beginning with Confucius, Buddha, and Homer, Kien wends his way through the great books taking (and mistaking) misogyny wherever he can find it. At one point during this woman-hating harangue, the overconfident psychiatrist thinks he has found the key to Kien’s disquisition: “Georg here saw himself as an important part of the mechanism which another person had set in motion for the maintenance of his threatened self-respect.” 64 While Georg correctly perceives Kien’s “threatened sense of self” as a key precondition for this cultured exhibition of misogyny, this is probably no longer the insight we need. What strikes the reader at this point is not Kien’s quirky perversion of texts, but the large-scale cultural availability of misogynist narratives. Unlike modernist novels such as Döblin’s Berlin Alexanderplatz, which employ misogynist myth to exculpate the Lustmörder (sexual murderers), 65 Auto-da-Fé foregrounds the cultural excess of such myth and showcases the protagonist’s efforts at self-exoneration in the pathetic and desperate figure of Peter Kien, that impotent would-be Lustmörder. “What kind of man would not have murdered such a woman?” he asks, rhetorically. 66 As Kien brings his cultured tirade to a close, Georg observes correctly, in a statement that exceeds his own comprehension, that “the [cultural] material was more ample than his hatred.” 67

Madness, as Foucault has taught us, may be more a suspect catchall designation that expands and contracts to meet the interests of those in power than some eternal, objectively determined classification. Defining madness can be deployed polemically to marginalize those who would threaten the semiotic and social order. This is precisely the way in which the narrator casts Kien’s diagnosis of Therese’s madness: “He felt at his best when he could relegate her to the one category where there was room for everything which he was unable, for all his education and understanding, to explain. Of lunatics he had a crude and simple idea; he defined them as those who do the most contradictory things yet have the same word for all. Accord-
To this definition Therese was—in contradiction to himself—decidedly mad.” The conjunction of women and madness has, of course, its own well-worn tradition in European literature, as Gilbert and Gubar have long since shown. This novel’s specific feminization of mental illness is carefully laid out, particularly with regard to the gynecologist-psychiatrist Georg Kien. An important thread running throughout this narrativization of madness is the markedly “feminine” threat to stable semiotics, that is, the menace posed by “those who do the most contradictory things yet have the same word for all.”

In his rigid insistence on “the accepted terminology” of “official psychiatry” and in his conviction that the insane are only good insofar as they can be used to corroborate the existing scientific system, Georg’s predecessor at the Paris insane asylum comes very close to Kien himself: “He took it for his real work in life, to use the vast material at his disposal to support the accepted terminology . . . He clung to the infallibility of the system and hated doubters. Human beings, especially nerve cases and criminals, were nothing to him . . . They provided experiences which authorities could use to build up the science. He himself was an authority.” This egotistical director elaborates a definition of madness as ludicrous as Kien’s philosophy of blindness. Like Kien’s own rather suspect pseudosophy, the predecessor’s psychiatric principles are unmistakably rooted in a conflict with “real” women: “Madness, he said with great emphasis, and looked at his wife with penetrating and accusing gaze (she blushed), madness is the disease which attacks those very people who think only of themselves. Mental disease is the punishment of egoism . . . He had nothing else to say to his wife. She was thirty years younger than he and cast a glow over the evening of his life. His first wife had run away before he could shut her up—as he had done with the second—in his own institute; she was an incurable egoist. His third, against whom he had nothing save his own jealousy, loved Georg Kien.” Just as the quack philologist locates the disruption of meaning in woman, so too this self-important psychiatrist finds madness to consist of excessive female egoism, for which his ex-wives provide the prime examples.

Although Georg would have us believe he is the great alternative to his predecessor’s rigidity and arrogance, we come to understand (as we realize the extent to which Georg has commandeered the narrator’s voice) how fundamentally similar they really are. Not unlike his predecessor (and not unlike his elder brother) Georg sees himself as a savior figure; that his method
odds differ is not really the point. He casts himself (by means of the infiltrated narrator’s voice) first as an inverted Moses figure, then as Yahweh himself: “He did them [the insane] the service, and led them back into Egypt. The ways he had found to do so were no less wonderful than those of the Lord when he set free his people.” Reminiscent of Kien’s cooption of the narrator to express his worldwide eminence among sinologists and philologists is Georg’s claim to his own fame, deceptively ensconced in authorial narration: “His colleagues admired and envied him . . . They hastened to break off little fragments of his fame, by proclaiming indebtedness to him and applying his methods to the most different cases. He was bound to get the Nobel Prize.”

Georg’s immense ego and putative fame rest no less than his brother’s on the exploitation of the feminine. But whereas Kien felt compelled to exclude it in order to protect the purity of his precepts and the integrity of his much vaunted Charakter, Georg’s manipulation takes the form of radical cooptation. This was true from his earliest days as a gynecologist when he exploited his good looks to attract female patients. In his “own” words, he was “surrounded and spoilt by innumerable women, all ready to serve him; he lived like Prince Gautama before he became Buddha.” What shall concern us presently is precisely this conversion experience in which he apparently learns to forego the pleasures of real women, only to take on the mantle of malleable femininity.

Though he claims to have parted ways with women at age twenty-eight, we should not understand this as total abstention. It is true, however, that Georg’s infatuation with the so-called gorilla man (the insane brother of the rich banker) coincides precisely with his attempt to fend off voluptuous female sexuality in the person of the banker’s wife. This eroticly neglected spouse lures Georg to the upper chambers of her mansion in order to seduce him by means of a sexually suggestive painting, which, in deference to appearances, had been relegated to the gorilla man’s garret quarters. But this strategy fails: the extensive overtures of “Madame”—the banker’s wife—prove fruitless against the charm of the gorilla man: the man who has, in Georg’s eyes, successfully appropriated the feminine while remaining male. For Georg it is love at first sight: “If only the gorilla would speak again! Before this single wish all his thoughts of time-wasting, duties, women, success had vanished, as if from the day of his birth he had only been seeking for that man, or that gorilla, who possessed his own language.”
In a study of quite different texts (namely, horror films), Carol Clover has shown that the typical story of male development, deeply entrenched in the Western tradition, is marked by an appropriation of culturally defined feminine traits. Thus, whereas a woman exhibiting male attributes would more likely be seen as aberrant (and thus incite horror), it is entirely possible for a male hero — while retaining a fundamentally masculine identity — to exhibit development in his character by becoming somewhat feminized. The developmental arc of one male character (in Auto-da-Fé: Georg) can be made to look more reasonable, Clover demonstrates, by contrasting it with a more radically gender-mixed character (here, the gorilla man). In portraying Georg’s great conversion, this pivotal growth experience made possible by the incorporation of the feminine, Canetti is lampooning this very tradition. But to understand this parody better, we must first ask what precisely this gorilla man represents.

Part of the humor, of course, is the apparent incongruity of images. We are invited to see this bestial man evincing a considerable sexual appetite (recall his ever-present “scantily dressed” Parisian “secretary” on call to tend to his every whim) as somehow essentially feminine. But in his primitiveness, animality, and predilection for hedonistic pleasures, he is a quite precise realization of Weininger’s fears regarding the “surrender of the ‘masculine’ bastions of logic and ethics to the ‘feminine’ realm of feelings and sexual desire, which he saw occurring all around him in turn-of-the-century, ‘modernist’ Europe.” Indeed, one could not ask for a clearer illustration of a forfeiture of logic and intersubjective rationality than the gorilla man’s solipsistic “system” of language.

Georg falls not for the sexualized, macho ape-man, but for his allegedly revolutionary and whimsical system of language, in which the signifiers no longer match up with the signifieds. In fact, the gorilla man’s linguistic innovations, viewed in their entirety, can accurately be seen as a caricature of Saussurian insights on the relationship of langue to parole. Since the experience of the gorilla man is what causes Georg not only to reconsider his previous promiscuity, but also to privilege madness over sanity, it will be worth examining the gorilla man’s enterprise in some detail. This is the linguistic marvel that so captivates Georg, not to mention many critics of the novel:

Each syllable which he uttered corresponded to a special gesture. The words for objects seemed to change. He meant the picture a hundred
times and called it each time something different; the names seemed to depend on the gesture with which he demonstrated them... Objects... had no special names. They were called according to the mood in which they floated. Their faces altered for the gorilla, who lived a wild, tense, stormy life. His life communicated itself to them, they had an active part in it. He had peopled two rooms with a whole world. He created what he wanted, and after the six days of creation, on the seventh took up his abode therein. Instead of resting, he gave his creation speech.79

The free-floating signifiers notwithstanding, the gorilla man is essentially a Peter Kien in a monkey suit. The gorilla’s language production, a grand spoof on the neoempiricist theories of the day (as we will see in greater detail below in chapter 3), has two essential qualities: (1) it is apparently capricious, fluid, and spontaneous, but (2) anchored in the consciousness of the (ever-changing) gorilla man himself. The gorilla’s speech is indeed an act of free creation over which he himself exercises sole domain. The fluidity and lack of clear definition between self and other that characterizes this language is in fact a parodistic evocation of Weininger’s infamous shibboleth of “Weiblichkeit,” or femininity, namely the so-called “Henide.”80 It may be a tautology to unveil the gorilla man’s language system as pure nonsense; yet insofar as Georg himself—who has been seen by a number of critics as the novel’s only sane character, even as the voice of Canetti himself—makes so much of it, we, too, need to be very clear about it.

For Georg this is a crucial experience: he publishes a formal “thesis on the speech of this madman”81 and alters the entire course of his life from this point on. Georg’s enthusiasm for the gorilla man’s language is fundamentally analogous to the peculiar brand of empathetic psychiatry he practices: he treats his patients by taking on their manias, by playing a role in their psychodrama, by becoming a pure function of their needs. He plays the Fischerin to their Fischerle, the Anna to their Pfaff, and, quite literally, the “Jeanne” to their Jean.82 In short, in both the narrower and metaphorical senses, he plays the role of woman. Yet just as the gorilla’s language capriciously shifts in meaning according to his mood or passion but never spins out of his control, so, too, is Georg covertly always in charge. He plays, but never really becomes, the “Weib” Peter accuses him of having become.83 The malleable mask he dons merely serves to camouflage a rather unified, ego-dominated, “male” self.
His therapy amounts to playacting, as his elder brother repeatedly charges. “Kings he addressed reverently as Your Majesty . . . He became their sole confidant . . . He advised them . . . as though their wishes were his own, cautiously keeping their aims and their beliefs before his eyes . . . never authoritative in his dealings with men . . . Was he not after all their chief minister, their prophet or their apostle, occasionally even their chamberlain?”

Careful to appear submissive and humble to men, and to fulfill their delusional wishes, Georg clearly occupies a feminine role in the treatment of his patients. In one of the novel’s most memorable images Georg envisions himself as “a walking wax tablet” (eines spazierende Wachstafel), which expresses precisely his self-conception as passive receptacle rather than domineering determiner of meaning. On the surface this would indeed seem to be quite the opposite of his elder brother’s self-image; indeed, it tellingly coincides with the philologist’s conception of the ideal, masterable, text.

Georg’s principal undoing in the reader’s eyes is his bungling of the treatment of his own brother. Like the renowned philologist who fails accurately to read Therese, the famous psychiatrist unravels before our eyes as he makes one idiotic diagnosis after another. Despite (or perhaps because of) his vaunted ability to assume the manias of others, he cannot really see much beyond himself. When he arrives on the scene and hears Therese’s tale about Kien having murdered a previous wife, he refers the crisis back to himself. In the blink of an eye, he shifts our focus from the ailing brother to the specter of a disgraced, internationally renowned therapist:

Georg the brother of a sexual murderer [eines Lustmörders]. Headlines in all the papers . . . His retirement from the direction of the institute. Indiscretion. Divorce. His assistants to succeed him. The patients . . . They love him, they need him, he cannot leave them. Resignation is impossible. Peter’s affairs must be seen to . . . He was all for Chinese characters, Georg for human beings. Peter must be put in a home . . . It is evident that he is not responsible for his actions. Under no circumstances will Georg retire from the direction of the institute.

In passages such as these it becomes clear that Georg’s careful learning of the language of the insane is not essentially different from Kien’s motive in memorizing Therese’s every utterance. The effect of emphasizing that “He was all for Chinese characters, Georg for human beings” simply encourages us in our reading of these two phenomena, Oriental texts and the insane, as
parallel instances of the feminine, though of course Georg means to suggest the much greater importance of his endeavor. Yet it is clear enough that both brothers seek control and confirmation of their own preeminence and genius by exploiting the interpretive potential of their speciously feminized objects of inquiry. This essential identity of the two brothers is evident once more in Georg’s “yearning for a place where he too was no less absolute master than his brother in the library.”

To sustain this illusion of absolute sovereignty both employ the very clichéd, contemporary conceptions of the feminine that achieved such widespread notoriety during the interwar period. Peter Kien, in a vain effort to shore up an obsolete, positivistic epistemology, tries desperately to textualize his woman, to make her the unmistakable object in the subject-object binary, and thereby to assuage his own anxieties via “culture.” When she fails to comply, when the threat of incomprehensibility persists, his system collapses and he goes mad. Georg attempts to coopt the feminine as a type of madness and malleability that claims to subvert an ossified, conservative political culture. His endeavor, no less than his brother’s, is principally one of interpretation and meaning-making. But the subversive, countercultural, and antibourgeois stance that Georg’s conversion experience initially seems to signify is ultimately exposed for its rootedness in a profound egocentrism. Like Kien’s, Georg’s use of the feminine proves to be a profoundly unsuccessful way of defining himself. In the end Kien immolates himself and Georg departs, ignorant of his own disgrace.

This analysis raises new questions about canonical readings of Auto-da-Fé. Until the seventies it was not uncommon to find Georg interpreted as the novel’s only identification figure, even as the author’s raisonner, an idea Foell resurrects in her recent study of 1994. One of the principal reasons for siding with Georg is of course his relative congeniality toward the greedy, self-centered, and brutal cast of characters. More important to interpreters such as Walter H. Sokel, however, was the alleged correspondence between Georg’s reflections on crowds and Canetti’s own theory on this topic as elaborated at great length in Crowds and Power. Though more recent evaluations of Georg have taken him down a peg, uncovering him for the charlatan he is, none has penetrated to the principal point of identity between the brothers Kien: the exploitation of the feminine to resolve a male ego crisis.

The reading I have developed here might also dampen the kind of enthusiasm, which, for example, Russell Berman expresses in The Rise of the
misogyny as cultural critique

Modern German Novel (1986), where he adduces Auto-da-Fé as an instance of “charismatic modernism.” This interpretation hinges on a rather sanguine reading of Georg, who is portrayed as the key exponent of the novel’s “utopian character.” Berman’s perspective on Georg and the novel as a whole seems to be rooted in a strain of literary theory that sees—if only implicitly—a source of social liberation in both the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Freud as he was read in the late sixties, and beyond. The liberation of the signifier from the signified as well as a belief in the emancipatory potential of unrepressed libidinal energies have indeed served to inspire the literary theory of leftist critics as diverse as Foucault, Cixous, Barthes, and some members of the Frankfurt School. Saussurian linguistics, it would seem, has helped deconstruct the naturalness not only of language, but that of larger social and gender arrangements as well.

This linguistic/psychoanalytic infusion into criticism, notwithstanding the many lasting contributions it has made and continues to inspire, may be precisely what has blinded us for so many years to Canetti’s parody in the figure of Georg. Neither Georg’s enthusiasm for a language that is nothing more than a child’s, nor his espousal of fighting insanity with insanity, can really be taken seriously today. His authoritarian occupation of “feminine” madness is hardly a harbinger of the new charismatic community—unless we really want to emulate the gorilla man’s semiotic whimsy, to which, let us not forget, his sex-slave secretary must subordinate her every desire. Indeed, without the overwhelming context of emancipatory literary and cultural theory that values the marginal, oppositional forces thought to stand “outside the law” (and which Berman felt were present in Georg), it is quite difficult to imagine how one could have been so enthralled with Georg. Canetti’s parody of Georg’s appropriation of the feminine (first in the seduction of his gynecological patients, then in his adoption of the language of the insane) also gives us reason to reevaluate Georg’s ruminations on the crowd. Sokel may be quite right to emphasize some thematic parallels with Crowds and Power, but with one important caveat: for the ethnologist/sociologist Canetti, “die Masse” (meaning “mass” or “crowd”) is a fundamental category of social analysis applicable to all human beings. For Georg, it is clearly—and therefore speciously—feminized.

The best evidence of this may be Georg’s conviction that his own course of self-feminization has inured him to the dangers of an unannounced eruption of the feminine: “Countless people go mad because the mass in them is par-
particularly strongly developed and can get no satisfaction . . . Once he had lived for his private tastes, his ambition and women; now his one desire was perpetually to lose himself. In this activity he came nearer to the thoughts and wishes of the mass, than did those other isolated individuals around whom he lived."92 Georg never gives up either his own rather firmly developed sense of individuation nor his lascivious appetites. His newfound love of the crowd is just another instance of erotically charged playacting. Below in chapter 5, within a discussion of the novel’s response to the contemporary Freud mania, we will observe how Georg’s muddled ideas about societal ontogeny form a pointed and humorous target of satire. More immediately, we will see how both Georg and Kien wrap themselves in the respectable garb of Weimar-era philosophy, a process that in the end only demeans the larger cultural project to which both pay such effusive lip service.