The End of Modernism

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4 The Hunchback of “Heaven”
Anti-Semitism and the Failure of Humanism

It was of course the Prater, which gave rise as well to that monstrous figure Siegfried Fischerle from Auto-da-Fé . . . yes, that horribly doomed attempt at assimilation under extreme conditions.
— Gerald Stieg

Bildung, Assimilation, and the “Crisis of Values”

Canetti’s Jewish figures are frankly hideous: filthy, rank, hunchbacked, underclass dwarfs intent upon cheating a blue blood gentile out of a family inheritance. Auto-da-Fé’s principal Jew is of course Siegfried Fischerle, the pimp from a lowbrow Viennese pub called The Stars of Heaven (Zum idealen Himmel), who strikes up a conversation with Peter Kien in the hope of drumming up business for his prostitute wife, die Pensionistin. Needless to say, Fischerle fails in his effort to entice Kien, who after all could not bring himself to sleep with Therese on their wedding night. In a manner perfected by Canetti (both in the novel and the contemporaneous drama Hochzeit), Kien and Fischerle converse at length without ever really understanding who the other is. Failing to grasp the true occupation of either Fischerle or his wife, Kien concludes that the persecuted little man desperately aspires to the attainment of that highest of German cultural goods, Bildung, only to be thwarted at every turn by his fleshly and greedy wife. In diagnosing Fischerle’s ills as a lack of proper cultivation, Kien touches upon one of the most salient cultural debates of the interwar period. If Fischerle proves impervious to Kien’s Bildung-remedy, it is because, as the very embodiment of virtually every contemporary anti-Semitic stereotype, he is by definition forbidden that universal avenue of human ascent held out by this Enlightenment ideal.
In no time at all, Fischerle metamorphoses in the mind of the protagonist into a junior Kien, and the Pensionistin into another Therese. This disfigured little man becomes the professor’s protégé on terms that are thus by now quite familiar. Accordingly, as the suffering husband of this duo, Fischerle is assigned the role of the Faustian spirit hindered in his lofty pursuits by his venal and concupiscent “wife”:

He [Kien] knew nothing of the rituals of the place, but one thing he recognized clearly—this stainless spirit in a wretched body had struggled for twenty years to lift itself out of the mire of its surroundings . . . Therese [die Pensionistin], no less determined, dragged him for ever back into the slime . . . He has clutched at one tiny corner of the world of the spirit and clings to it like a drowning man. Chess is his library . . . Kien pictured to himself the battle this down-trodden man fought for his own flat. He takes a book home to read it secretly, she tears it in pieces and scatters it to the winds. She forces him to let her use his home for her unspeakable purposes. Possibly she pays a servant, a spy, to keep the house clear of books when she is out. Books are forbidden, her own way of life is permitted . . . She flings open the door and with her clumsy foot kicks over the chessboard. Mr. Fischerle weeps like a little child. He had just reached the most interesting part of his book. He picks up the letters scattered all over the floor and turns his face away so she shall not rejoice over his tears. He is a little hero. He has character.²

Kien’s efforts at recreating Fischerle in his own self-image are transparent. As in the case of Therese—who reworks the mocking laughter of the furniture store employees into dubious praise—we are witness here to an imperfect projection still in process. Determined to see Fischerle as a pure spirit and seeker of truth (that is, as a neoplatonist academic like himself), Kien superimposes the image of a book on the chessboard so that when “Therese” brutishly overturns it, Fischerle scrambles to collect “scattered letters” (die herumliegenden Buchstaben) as he would so many chess pieces. It would be a great mistake to dismiss this passage as merely the distorting projection of one figure upon another, though of course this is once again the case. In misreading Fischerle as hungry for humanistic Bildung, Kien engages a specific controversy about humanism’s prospects as a source for German normative values after the great defeat in World World I. Fischerle, as we shall
see, incarnates the failure of this humanism to translate its values into social policy.

As background to this calamity, I will paint in a few broad strokes a complex story that has been told much more extensively elsewhere. Though the German “crisis of values”—the deep sense of cultural anxiety occasioned by the rift between the natural and social sciences on the one hand and the humanities (“Humanenwissenschaften”) on the other—dates back to the last decades of the nineteenth century, it occupied the post–World War I imagination with particular intensity. Following Winckelmann in the Enlightenment, German intellectuals had widely turned to Greece as the font of normative cultural values. To what extent could this Schillerian model of aesthetic education continue to function as a cultural stabilizer in postwar Germany? Was it possible to turn to classical philology for the cultural moorings that were so necessary in these turbulent times? Commenting on the situation in post-1918 Germany, intellectual historian Suzanne Marchand observes:

Never before had the gap between scholarly research and the cultivation of the individual seemed so wide; never before had the Humboldtian aim of reconciling the interests of both within the German system of higher education seemed so implausible . . . During and particularly after the war, this critique of scholarship for its own sake found a large and increasingly diverse circle of advocates . . . Critics charged the scholarly community of the 1920s with abdicating its role in establishing social values and building character. The scapegoating of “specialists” for the “soullessness” of modern German culture went hand in hand with the conviction that “pure intellectualism” would destroy social unity—as well as the integrity of the human character.

During the interwar period, there were a number of attempts to address this crisis, ranging from the amorphous vitalist movement advocating “Lebensphilosophie” (life philosophy) to the more sophisticated efforts of philosophers aimed at reinstating Kantian philosophy as an anchor for cultural cohesion and meaning.

Alluding to Goethe’s Faust, and no doubt wishing to see himself as a Faustian spirit striving for truth amid Weimar decadence, Kien dubs Fischerle his “Famulus.” In order to grasp the meaning of this would-be spiritual (“geistig”) apprenticeship, we must first understand more clearly what Kien,
anti-semitism and the failure of humanism

as a self-styled idealist academic in the throes of the interwar crisis of values, stands for. As we noted in the previous chapter, brother Georg is the novel’s preeminent carrier of neoempiricist sentiments, Kien his idealist counterpart. But just as we differentiated above between actual empiricist philosophers and psychologists (such as William James and Franz Brentano) and their more questionable epigones, so, too, ought we to differentiate here. Kien’s appropriation of idealist notions is, as we have noted above, a desperate attempt to hold on to something solid at a time of monumental social, political, and intellectual upheaval.

The academic group with which Kien might more precisely be identified, however, is suggested by his specialty as master philologist. For it was classical philology, according to Marchand, that came under fire in the interwar period for what reformers decried as its elitism and irrelevance to the modern world. Marchand observes:

“Philology” had become a metaphor for the numbing drudgery, authoritarian discipline, pedantic obscurantism, while classical language training remained, for the bulk of the professoriate, the sine qua non of both Bildung and humanistic Wissenschaft. This combination of declining social status and the increasing sense that the Gymnasium alone held back a culture-destroying flood of superficiality, decadence, and utilitarianism prepared the backdrop for a kind of classicist morality play, in which philologists were sacrificed on the altar of modern materialism.7

It is easy to imagine Kien in this latter role of sacrificial lamb, particularly since he so willingly portrays himself and his scholarship as valiantly and inveterately opposed to mass commercial society. This is, after all, how he ends up standing guard before the Theresianum in an attempt to intercept anyone attempting to pawn books. Before one too precipitously exempts Kien from this context because of his primary interest in sinology, it should be noted that Kien is also a classical and biblical philologist, as his grandiose plan to write the final exegesis of the New Testament illustrates. Indeed Kien’s specialty as an Orientalist may above all signify the very “pedantic obscurantism” Marchand notes above.

Today it may seem curious indeed to suggest that one would turn to the humanities for a consensus on cultural and social values. We are in our own time—and perhaps particularly in France and the United States—more accustomed to viewing these disciplines as a theater of contention rather than
a wellspring of cohesive and binding norms. Yet in what is perhaps the last great attempt at a German cultural synthesis, the so-called “Third Humanism” of the interwar period, Werner Jäger attempted precisely this: to anchor postwar politics (broadly conceived) in what he held to be the secure foundations of classical philology. The goal, as Marchand explains, was to “rejoin Wissenschaft to Bildung, historical research to the generation of values, and modern ‘rootless’ Germans to the serene and morally superior Greeks; a new German Golden Age, a Third Humanism, might commence in the shadow of military defeat and political chaos.”

While Kien’s practice of desiccating scholarship represents exactly that which Jäger wanted to overcome, Kien also registers those very scientific challenges with which Jäger’s ambitious program was ill equipped to contend. Kien’s consciousness of the “millions of atoms” racing around in what in the good old days appeared to be a quite stable piece of text signifies, as we noted above, a scientific modernity of which the protagonist is only dimly aware. Pausing long enough only to express his anxieties, the old-fashioned philologist reminds the reader how utterly incongruous modern science had become for the traditional scholar. Refracted through Kien’s partial understanding and palpable trepidation are some of the most revolutionary breakthroughs of the early twentieth-century science: the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. In this context, Kien’s embrace of a pseudo neo-Kantianism — to the extent even that he mimics the daily habits of Immanuel Kant — and his unconvincing espousal of neoidealistic principles clearly signifies a questionable retreat, rather than a new cultural synthesis. Ultimately, Jäger’s vaunted Third Humanism, which set out to salvage Kien’s discipline and place it at the center of the new German republic as the “provider of cultural norms,” foundered on its inability to contest vulgar, exclusionary definitions of Germanness; failed, in other words, in roughly the same way Kien would.

It is against this background that Kien’s offer to elevate the handicapped Jew via high culture needs to be seen. If Fischerle’s wife transmogrifies in Kien’s jaundiced eyes into “a second Therese,” it is nevertheless true that Fischerle himself becomes for the reader a kind of second Therese insofar as he is destined to fulfill the role Kien had once assigned to his bride: junior librarian. For Therese, too, Kien had once held out the hope that, illiterate as she was, the sheer proximity to such a magnificent library and, of course, to himself, might raise her to a higher level of humanity. Yet because she is
a woman, Kien is never so sanguine about Therese’s prospects for Bildung as he is about Fischerle’s.

From the very beginning, Kien worries about his ability to keep up his end of the Bildung-bargain: “He feared coming into collision with the little fellow’s thirst for education. He might reproach him, with apparent justification, for letting his books lie fallow. How was he to defend himself?”\(^1\)

Shortly thereafter, the narrator—infiltrated again by Kien—worries that “through daily contact with so vast a quantity of learning the little man’s hunger for it would grow greater and greater; suddenly he would be caught secreting a book and trying to read it . . . He would have to be prepared for it orally.”\(^1\)

These practical matters of proper pedagogy notwithstanding, Kien never doubts the equation of Bildung with humanity: “If it were possible to infuse these [like-minded creatures] with a little education, a little humanity, this would certainly be an achievement.”\(^1\)

Of course this bias cuts both ways: those with little or no learning (such as Therese) are by the same standard judged to be subhuman.

When Fischerle feigns deep concern for his employer’s Kopfbibliothek—the phantom counterpart to the library Kien was forced by Therese to vacate—the self-styled “Privatgelehrter” (a term meaning “private intellectual” without an official academic post, but ironically emblematic of the protagonist’s noted asocial “inwardness”) can only assume that the dwarf’s education is proceeding just as he had expected. In fact, he seems to acquire cultivation virtually by osmosis: “Under the pressure of the books, which he did not even read, the dwarf was changing before his very eyes. Kien’s old theory was receiving notable confirmation.”\(^1\)

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. The entire novel is structured by the comic principle of incongruity, and this is no exception: Fischerle is merely playing along with Kien in order more systematically to rob him of the balance of his inheritance. Yet the fact that Fischerle fails to take seriously his own Bildung does not at all detract from the fact that Kien’s repeated and lofty claims regarding the transformatory power of learning—hypocritical though they may well be—define the sociocultural agenda for the reader. Though he lacks the self-awareness and sophistication of Schnitzler’s Professor Bernhardi (1912), Fischerle nevertheless serves to draw our attention to the conflict between the rising tide of racist nationalism on the one hand, and the cosmopolitan core of Kantian humanism that was being revived in various hues in order to shore up German identity after the First World
War, on the other. Comically unaware of this larger cultural nexus, Fischerle nevertheless poses the serious question about Jewish assimilation by means of German *Kultur*.

In the interwar period Jewish assimilation as well as the increasing opposition to it were burning issues. In 1922 Karl Kraus reissued his 1913 essay “*Er ist doch e Jud*,” in which the master satirist reiterated his faith in assimilation through *Bildung*. “He tried to deal with the claim that he was Jewish,” writes Steven Beller in *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938*, “by demonstrating that he possessed none of the supposedly Jewish qualities. The world of *Geist* in which he lived, he continued, had no room for race or racial characteristics. He did not even know what Jewish characteristics were. Nevertheless, he demonstrated to his own satisfaction that he had none . . . In other words Kraus was saying that the Jews who lived in the world of *Geist* could avoid the problem of ‘jüdische Eigenschaften’ . . . by not having any, for they were irrelevant in that world.”

But Kraus’s claim, especially by 1922, was more a desperate argument for the way he wished things were than a reflection of contemporaneous reality. Kraus’s “continuation and radicalization of the Enlightenment ideal of pure humanity,” no less than Kien’s own phony espousal of these ideals, point to a liberal tradition already long under siege by, for example, the open anti-Semitism of the Austrian Christian Socialists led by the notoriously anti-Semitic mayor of Vienna, Karl Lueger.

What people like Kraus, Theodor Gomperz, and Hermann Cohen (the latter in his role as one of the founders of the neo-Kantian school) were hoping to articulate in the post–World War I era was thus not merely a general response to the larger crisis of values, but, more particularly, a response to the challenge to their identity as German Jews. Their tenacious loyalty to the German philosophical tradition since Kant can in large part be explained, Beller argues, “because the tenets of German idealism contained the one vital prerequisite to assimilationist theory, the autonomy of the will.”

Indeed, for humanists of the *Aufklärung*, Jews offered a test case of the efficacy of *Bildung*: “The sheer radical nature of the transformation needed to create a human being from an oriental such as the Jew would be proof of education’s power in creating a purer human, the ‘new types of humanity’ which would form the rational society of the future.”
Fischerle as Mascot for Racial Anti-Semitism

This “society of the future,” however, bore little resemblance either to the Weimar Republic or the First Austrian Republic. Indeed the rise of racial anti-Semitism, which had its roots in the later nineteenth century but achieved particular virulence in the post–World War I period, contested precisely that “one vital prerequisite to assimilationist theory, the autonomous will” of each human being. In Auto-da-Fé the diminished opportunity for assimilation is represented less in the plot—it is certainly not a matter of a Jew’s thwarted attempt to join German culture—but in the very characterization of the novel’s principal Jew, Siegfried Fischerle. Without a doubt Fischerle worries about being recognized and treated as a Jew, and he is in fact snubbed by a waiter in The Stars of Heaven because of his Jewishness. Yet, as in the case of Therese, it is vital to note that Fischerle enters the narration—that is, even before he becomes the object of prejudice and abuse at the level of plot—as a veritable stockpile of contemporaneous anti-Semitic stereotypes. Chief among these, as we shall see, are the physical attributes that mark him as a Jew. This is how we first encounter him:

Suddenly a vast hump appeared close to him and asked, could he sit there? Kien looked down fixedly. Where was the mouth out of which speech had issued? And already the owner of the hump, a dwarf, hopped up on to a chair . . . The tip of his strongly hooked nose lay in the depth of his chin. His mouth was as small as himself—only it wasn’t to be found. No forehead, no ears, no neck, no buttocks—the man consisted of a hump, an immense nose and two black, calm, sad eyes . . . Suddenly [Kien] heard a hoarse voice underneath the table: “How’s business?”

Needless to say, this description comprises a veritable catalogue of contemporary anti-Jewish clichés, the best known being the large-nosed Jew, which is reiterated tirelessly throughout Book 2 of the novel. This coarse and strident use of stereotypical characteristics seems to have cowed some critics, who appear more disposed to view Fischerle as just one more in a series of a self-absorbed characters unable to communicate meaningfully with his fellow human beings. Yet it would be a mistake to muffle the novel’s critique by generalizing Fischerle in this manner.

In her 1991 study Die Figurenkonstellation in Elias Canettis Auto-da-Fé, Jutta Paal has suggested that Fischerle’s Jewish identity need not detain us
at all: “Except for the ‘consumptive waiter’ no one at the Stars of Heaven is bothered by his heritage. Therefore it would be mistaken to attribute too much meaning to the religious persuasion of this figure.” Yet the manner in which Paal refers to Fischerle’s Jewishness is flawed from the very outset. For the kind of racial anti-Semitism this figure is made to represent has little to do with the euphemizing term “heritage” (Herkunft) and nothing to do with religion. Ironically, if Paal really means “religious confession” (Religionszugehörigkeit), her assertion would be correct; for Fischerle has no connection whatsoever to Judaism as religious faith. Instead, this phrase—and similar ones appear elsewhere in the criticism—functions merely as an evasive surrogate for the very Jewish identity that has become so problematic. Indeed, this eagerness to dismiss the issue overlooks Kien’s own initial aversion to Fischerle’s Jewishness. Shortly after the introductory passage on Fischerle, we read that Kien “considered the all-pervading nose of the manikin, it inspired him with mistrust.” A little later Fischerle intentionally drops the word “Jewish” while attempting to defraud Kien of some funds: “Fischerle made a minute pause in order to observe the effect of the word ‘Jewish’ on his companion. You never can tell. The world is crawling with anti-Semites. A Jew always has to be on guard against deadly enemies. Hump-backed dwarfs and others, who have nevertheless managed to rise to the rank of pimp, cannot be too careful. The swallowing did not escape him. He interpreted it as embarrassment, and from that moment decided that Kien must be a Jew, which he certainly was not.” Here Fischerle registers a street-smart awareness of pervasive anti-Semitism, even if this “sharp observer” (scharfer Beobachter) completely misconstrues Kien’s body language at the same time. As we already know, Kien is able to put aside the repugnance he feels in the company of Fischerle and see his own “pure spirit” reflected—albeit somewhat more dimly—in the disfigured dwarf. But if Paal is right in that the central figures do not themselves actively cast anti-Semitic aspersions upon Fischerle, this apparently does little to allay the Jew’s own acute awareness of widespread anti-Semitism. It occurs to him, for example, that it would be particularly inadvisable to draw attention to himself in a church: “He forgot he was in church. He was usually respectful and cautious in churches, for by his nose he was very obviously marked.” A little later Fischerle whisks Kien off a busy Viennese street into a church, and a similar fear recurs: “Fischerle was caught off his guard; in a church he felt uncertain of himself. He almost pushed Kien out again into the square . . . Let the
church collapse, he was not going to run into the arms of the police! Fischerle knew terrible stories of Jews buried in the wreckage of falling churches because they had no business to be there. His wife the Capitalist had told them to him because she was devout and wanted to convert him to her faith.”24 Yet it is not only this type of superstitious anti-Semitism registered by Fischerle himself, but also the patronizing philosemitism of the proprietress of “The Baboon” (Zum Pavian), which keeps our focus on the character’s “Jewishness” throughout.

The question that has been assiduously swept under the rug in the discussion of Auto-da-Fé is, Whose anti-Semitism is it? Just as we were required to confront the misogyny evident in the narrative construction of Therese, so, too, must we ask about the anti-Semitism inherent in Fischerle’s very characterization. Recall that his very first words are “How’s business?” (Wie gehn die Geschäfte?) Though he is far from singular in his avarice, he is the preeminent entrepreneur in the novel, and, of course, a swindler par excellence, not to mention a systematic exploiter of the gentile workers in the “Firma S. Fischer.” It seems only natural to him to refer to investment funds as “Jewish capital” (das jüdische Kapital), which he does repeatedly.25 Furthermore, though no one character is particularly attractive in this novel, Fischerle alone (with the necessary exception of his look-alike accomplice, die Fischerin) is consistently described as an animal, outfitted with simian arms (“lang wie die eines Gibbon”) and a croaking voice (“er krächzte”), who sniffs out (“wittert”) both money and danger and, like some trained circus animal, even gathers up cash with his tongue.26

The matter is perhaps complicated by the fact that the novel’s greatest anti-Semite is Fischerle himself. He sees Jews as essentially criminal, and when Kien tries to fire him, he retorts: “Grateful, aren’t you! You Jewish swine! . . . You can’t expect better from a Jew swine!”27 Still under the impression that Kien is himself a Jew, Fischerle reiterates the epithets he has presumably heard in abundance directed at himself. Above all, Fischerle is forever dressing down imaginary chess opponents who are none other than projections of his own “Jewish” self. After one such match—Fischerle is literally addressing his mirror image—he dispatches his opponent with these words: “At home in Europe we call this galloping chess! Go begging with that nose!”28

Are we entitled to dismiss all this by claiming, however incredibly, that Canetti was oblivious to contemporary anti-Semitism?29 An alternate,
Figure 4. "Der Kleine Cohn (Little Cohn): Fischerle's cultural prototype in a World War I-era postcard.
though equally insufficient, way of accounting for this discourse is to suggest that it is merely an expression of Canetti’s own Jewish self-loathing. These opposing explanations share a common strategy of subsuming the anti-Semitic discourse under debatable questions of biography, and thus distract us from Fischerle’s iconic role as the grotesque amalgam of almost every contemporaneous anti-Semitic stereotype. Looking back to the first half of the century, it is not hard at all to find anti-Jewish caricatures strikingly similar to Fischerle himself. Figure 4, for example, gives us “Der kleine Cohn” (Little Cohn), a Jewish dwarf whose physical deformity disqualifies him from military service. Sander Gilman observes that the “ill-formed ‘little Mr. Kohn’ [was] the eponymous Jew in German caricatures of the period,” a kind of anti-Semitic mascot of Wilhelmine culture.

The alleged Jewish physique exhibited in Little Mr. Cohn/Fischerle is not at all new in the long history of anti-Semitism; but racial—or better, corporeal—anti-Semitism was on the rise in the early part of the twentieth century and gains infamous prominence in Germany and Austria during the interwar period, a development clearly in evidence in the famous caricatures of the period. Though not every Jew is necessarily represented as quite so small as Der kleine Cohn, most are indeed stunted, bowed over, and egregiously malformed. Furthermore, a preponderance of contemporary anti-Semitic caricatures shows Jews to have notoriously bad posture, a trait that in Fischerle receives its hyperbolic expression in the form of the great hunchback. Using the language of philology, which as we noted was at this time charged in a particular way with propagating the very Enlightenment values that should have liberated Fischerle from his entrapment in anti-Semitic stereotypes, Kien rationalizes Fischerle’s imprisonment in a cursed genealogy. Referring here to the Capitalist’s persecution of poor Fischerle, Kien notes that “her destructive activity . . . was directed at the man opposite, whom nature by means of a dismal etymology had, at any rate already made a cripple.” Just prior to this episode, Kien tellingly remarks, in response to Fischerle’s curious explication of the term “Stipendium” as “Jewish capital”: “By their etymology shall ye know them.” It is worth noting that Kien has in fact reversed the enlightenment formula for assimilation: whereas once particularity was to be absorbed in universal human potential, here the philologist employs the tools of his trade to explain away the Jew’s physical abnormality. He speaks like a Jew, Kien reasons, so it makes sense
that he looks like the quintessential Jew; nature, sanctified by the nomenclature of high cultural Bildung, has made him thus. Clearly, the suggestion that etymology, that central trope of philology, could be used to rationalize and naturalize Fischerle’s fate as a Jewish cripple is deeply ironic in light of the central cultural mission attributed to philology during the Weimar era.

Hunched over, often bow-legged, frequently short, and almost universally supplied with a grotesque, oversize nose—these characteristics correspond to a tee with those assigned to Fischerle, and largely make up the physical charm he holds for the madam of The Baboon, the whorehouse cum cafe where Fischerle procures his bogus passport: “The landlady embraced Fischerle’s hump. She overwhelmed him with words of affection; she’d been longing to see him, longing for his queer little nose, his crooked little legs, she’d longed for his darling, darling chessboard.”

Neither the visual nor the narrative clichés are by any means coincidental; on the contrary, they reflect the specific doctrines of an increasingly widespread racial anti-Semitism. Gilman reports that physical degeneration was a scientifically accepted fact of Jewish life at this time; the only debated question was whether such deformity was attributable to genetics or to a baneful environment, such as the Jewish ghetto.

Within the fictional world of Auto-da-Fé it is therefore not surprising that the brawny Benedikt Pfaff rhetorically suggests that he is “becoming a Jew” just as he begins to fear that he is being perceived as a physical weakling. For, as Gilman notes, German medical handbooks from the first half of this century are rife with assertions about the innate feebleness of the Jewish body.

Siegfried

Canetti’s critique in Auto-da-Fé of corporeal anti-Semitism takes what is at this point in this study a familiar form: hyperbole. As in the case of traditional misogynistic stereotypes, Canetti records putatively Jewish physical attributes and explodes them by means of grotesque exaggeration: the poor posture becomes an outrageously prominent hunchback, the large nose becomes “this total nose” (diese ausschließliche Nase). But that is not all. Built into Fischerle’s characterization is another aspect of contemporaneous Jewish life, a trace of assimilationist striving of which Fischerle himself is hardly conscious: his name.
Before proceeding it may be helpful to recall that in Auto-da-Fé the characters do not develop in any Aristotelian sense: their possibilities—like those of musical instruments—are pregiven, and the plot is therefore a mere playing out of predictable (and often quite meager) potentialities. This is worth keeping in mind when reflecting on the significance of Fischerle’s first name: Siegfried. For this is not to be seen as revelatory of Fischerle’s inner striving—Canetti’s figures do not at any rate have any discernible inner life—but as a signifier of a social and cultural event that stands in parodic contrast to the actual career of Fischerle: namely, successful Jewish assimilation to German culture.

If Canetti meant merely to repeat the negative stereotypes, he might have given Fischerle one of the more common epithets from the abundant stock of anti-Semitic nomenclature: Israel, Jacob, or Itzig. But instead he chose “Siegfried,” the quintessentially Germanic name from that quintessentially Germanic epic, Das Nibelungenlied. What today may seem a quaint subtlety (or, indeed, a mere detail) was in fact a matter of no small import at the beginning of the century. During the Wilhelmine period, Ruth Gay reports, “Siegfried became one of the most popular names among Jewish boys,” a fact she explains as a direct expression of Jewish veneration of German culture: “To the German Jews Bildung represented a new kind of intellectual and emotional home after the physical confines of the ghetto and the closed scholarly world of Jewish learning.” Which illuminates, perhaps, why the infamous protagonist of Oskar Panizza’s Operated Jew (1893), Itzig Faitel Stern, crowns his grotesque series of efforts to remake himself into an “Aryan” look-alike with the new name “Siegfried Freudenstern.” Both as a magnet for virtually every anti-Semitic stereotype and in his determination to recreate himself physically, this Itzig/Siegfried is richly reminiscent of Canetti’s later Fischerle—a connection encouraged insofar as Panizza was championed in the Weimar period by both Kurt Tucholsky and Walter Benjamin.

Yet if the Jewish predilection for the Germanic name Siegfried once signified a confidence in German culture as a home for Jews—an assertion Panizza puts in question already at the turn of the century—this clearly no longer applies to Fischerle, who can envision a future for himself only by means of escape, not assimilation. Though he does not aspire to authentic Bildung, Fischerle’s name (as well, of course, as his association with Kien) invites us to remember a not-too-distant time when allegiance to German
culture provided an entré, a venue for shedding the particularist garb of Judaism. In a masterful stroke of naming, Canetti has captured the contradictions of post–World War I German culture: “Siegfried,” the signifier of successful assimilation, coupled with “Fischerle,” a designation of indelible ethnicity that simply could not be escaped.50

If Jews at this time were increasingly defined in terms of genetic and physical features, so, too, were Germans. The slouching, limping figure of “Israel” was, in the popular imagination, contrasted with the idealized “German” body of Siegfried. “Blond Siegfried types,” for example, became the physical—if secret—ideal of the Jewish foreign minister Walther Rathenau, even while he accepted “many features of the anti-Semites’ caricature of the Jew.”51 Indeed, in the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods there would have been an inescapable association with Richard Wagner’s immensely popular Siegfried, whose title figure did much to propagate the image of the nordic man as the quintessential German.52

Ernst Hanisch, who has investigated “The Political Influence and Appropriation of Wagner,” points out that during the First World War “Siegfried came to be identified with the essence of Germanness, the world war was seen as the Göttterdammerung of the West.”53 Hanisch goes on to explain that during the First World War, “inevitably, the famous sentence from Wagner’s German Art and German Politics is invoked, to the effect that to be German means to do something for its own sake, a sentiment that had acquired an almost sacrosanct status in nationalist circles. Siegfried, symbol of victory (Sieg) and peace (Fried), appears as the poetic exemplification of this thought, whereas Mime, the symbol of all that is un-German, of the enemy powers, is motivated only by considerations of egoistic utility and self-interest.”54 Shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, Wagner’s son-in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain identified Wilhelm II as the age’s new Siegfried, authorized to uproot all that is “un-German” and lead the battle against “the corroding poison of Judaism.” “Opposed to this diabolical race” Chamberlain wrote to the Kaiser, “stands Germany as divine champion: Siegfried versus the worm.”55 Given the widespread cultural resonances of Wagner’s opera in this period, it may be instructive to view the novel in this light.56

Fischerle’s physical description in itself suggests the connection, for while he may be named for the handsome and powerful hero (of both the Germanic saga and the Wagner operas), he is clearly drawn more to the specifi-
Figure 5. This rough draft for an anti-Semitic cartoon by Josef Plank counterposes a judge from Kien's social class with a stooped-over, malodorous Jew who could have been drawn from the pages of Auto-da-Fé. Similarly repulsed by Fischerle's filth and deformity, Kien nevertheless senses in this misshapen dwarf the hunger for transformative Kultur. Library of Congress; photo courtesy United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives.
Figure 6. “Diese ausschließliche Nase” (This total nose). Two of Fischerle’s cardinal attributes are reflected in this cartoon from the anti-Semitic Viennese magazine Kikeriki. These “Jewish” drones are marked most obviously by a grotesquely oversized nose, but are characterized no less by their parasitic practice (as the German caption instructs) of exploiting the worker bees—echoing Fischerle’s abuse of his gentile employees in the “Firma S. Fischer.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives.
Figure 7. This page from the 1936 anti-Semitic children’s book Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid, und keinem Jud bei seinem Eid provides a stark visual contrast between idealized “Aryan” masculinity and the putatively physically degenerate Jew. The accompanying poems teach schoolchildren the following lessons: “The German is a proud man, who can work and fight. Because he is so handsome and full of courage, the Jew bears him an ancient grudge. This is the Jew, one sees that immediately—the biggest scoundrel in all the land. He thinks he is the handsomest of all, and all the while is so ugly.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives.

ciations of the hideous dwarf Mime. Early on, the young Wagnerian Siegfried informs his surrogate father that he finds him physically repulsive:

I am repelled
by the sight of you;
I see that you’re evil
in all that you do.
I watch you stand, 
shuffle and nod, 
shrinking and slinking, 
with your eyelids blinking—
by your nodding neck
I’d like to catch you, 
and end your shrinking, 
and stop your blinking!
So deeply, Mime, I loathe you. . .
Everything to me
is dearer than you: birds in the branches
and fish in the brook—
all are dearer to me,
far more than you.57

Physical polarity, expressed in terms of “racial” physical attributes that contemporaneously defined Germans and Jews, is the crux of Siegfried’s break with Mime. The telltale signs are familiar to us from Canetti’s description of Fischerle: an awkward, almost animal gait combined with a grasping, probing visage. When the young hero recognizes the incongruity of his own “Aryan” beauty with the unpleasant appearance of his putative father, he begins to question his true parentage. He learns the truth while gazing at his own splendidly Germanic image reflected in the waters of a pond:

And there in the stream
I saw my face—
it wasn’t like yours,
not in the least,
no more than a toad
resembles a fish.
No fish had a toad for a father!58

Mime, clearly the toad (Kröte) in this dichotomy, is forced to admit that he is no blood relation: “You’re no kin to me.”59 Under great duress, he vouchsafes the story of his charge’s naming, suggesting a nominalist causality (or proleptic etymology) that issues forth in physical beauty:

The wish of your mother —
that’s what she told me:
as ‘Siegfried’ you would grow
strong and fair.\textsuperscript{60}

Moreover, Mime’s reputation—particularly in Wagnerian circles—as essentially greedy, materialistic, treacherous, and therefore “un-German” only strengthens the connection between him and Fischerle. Like Mime, Fischerle attempts to deceive and rob his master while he sleeps, but unlike his Wagnerian double, Fischerle contemplates murder only to dismiss it as an impossibility for a Jew. Marc Weiner goes further to argue that Wagner differentiates Siegfried from Mime—both tenors—by assigning them distinctive voices that connote, respectively, a healthy, manly Germanness and a degraded, effeminate Jewishness: “[Mime’s] elevated tessitura, contrasted with the lower vocal writing for Siegfried, gives him away to Wagner’s contemporary audience schooled in a culture that understood the Jewish voice to be high, nasal, and different.”\textsuperscript{61} Perhaps Mime (or, for that matter, Alberich) is not essentially an anti-Semitic figure in the sense that later audiences in different cultural settings would easily recognize. Yet, given the broader semiotic economy of the Weimar period, he is eminently amenable to this interpretation, and in fact functions in this manner as an intertext to Auto-da-Fé.\textsuperscript{62} The decisive factor in establishing this intertextual relationship may be the fate Mime and Fischerle share: both die by the sword because of their irrepressible venality: “If I fail to kill you,” Mime asks Siegfried, “how can I be sure of my treasure?”\textsuperscript{63} But Siegfried, of course, prevails. “Taste then my sword, / repulsive babbler!” he cries and afterwards “grabs Mime’s corpse, drags it to the knoll at the entrance to the cave, and throws it down inside.”\textsuperscript{64} Underscoring the higher principle at stake in this execution, Siegfried apostrophizes the now deceased Mime:

\begin{quote}
In the cavern there,  
lie with the hoard!  
You schemed so long  
and strove for gold;  
so now take your joy in that treasure! \textsuperscript{65}
\end{quote}

Fischerle meets his end somewhat less operatically: he is dismembered with a bread knife and then shoved under a bed. Yet the justification for murdering the disfigured dwarf is essentially the same: as retaliation for betraying his former employee for lucre. And, like Siegfried, this executioner turns (or
returns) to amorous pursuits, once this venal little antagonist is thus dispatched.

Wagner was still a favorite in the interwar period, particularly of Viennese Jews. Further, Fritz Lang’s Weimar-era filming of the Nibelung saga can only have circulated the story to even wider audiences. Lang’s 1924 *Siegfried* in fact underscores powerfully the iconic physical polarities described above. There is therefore little doubt that *Siegfried* would have echoed meaningfully within the fictional chambers of *Auto-da-Fé*. But in considering the specific meaning of this intertext, we should not forget that the novel’s irony—and,
thus, the critical vantage point—resides in the fact that Fischerle is neither Mime nor Siegfried, but both. Or, better, he is a *Mime who would be Siegfried*, a Jew who would like to be freed of his physical markers, but, within the strictures of corporeal racism, can only dream of such freedom. Bearing the name Siegfried thus incarnates one of the novel’s bitter ironies that reverberates with wider cultural significance.

All of this may elucidate the dilemma present in the very exposition of one *Siegfried Fischerle*, an ostensibly simple character in whom a complex unit of Weimar-era culture is encoded. If, on the one hand, Fischerle reflects the truth of what Peter Gay calls the greatly imperiled prospects for Jewish assimilation after the First World War, this dwarf also suggests by his very being that the intra-Jewish debates of the era were tragically quite moot. While no novel—let alone a modernist novel—can ever quantify the social and cultural issues it may engage, we are nevertheless left to wonder about the significance of those controversies between the assimilated Western Jews and the Orthodox Jews of the East, or the debates between the Zionists and the acculturated Austro-German Jews in the face of implacable racial anti-Semitism. For such anti-Semites, after all, a Jew was a Jew was a Jew. The cultural loyalties, political aspirations, or religious beliefs of the individual Jew mattered not at all.

Inescapably “Jewish”

Despite Canetti’s noted aversion to concepts of dramatic development, *Auto-da-Fé* does contain some narrative progression. In fact, of all the parallel plots that comprise the novel, Fischerle’s is perhaps the most traditionally linear. In addition to the constraints of his unavoidably “Jewish body,” Fischerle apparently also lacks the intelligence to qualify for Kien’s spurious *Bildung* program (he mistakes Plato, for example, for a wealthy mogul), and is therefore prevented on this count as well from aspiring to traditional assimilation. Instead, Fischerle fosters a fantasy of escape to America, which he plans to finance by methodically robbing Kien.

Because he has internalized the malicious physiognomic premises of the corporeal anti-Semites, Fischerle believes that freedom means freedom from his “Jewish” body. His self-hatred takes darkly comical turns, as when he beats himself for stealing Kien’s wallet, and expresses itself in a disarmingli
straightforward manner: “He had no articles of faith, or only one—that ‘Jew’ is a genus of criminal which carries its punishment with it.” Canetti offers up this bitter satire at a time when, by all accounts, real-world Jewish self-hatred had never before been so virulent. Certainly the phenomenon was of great enough significance to warrant a controversial study by Theodor Lessing, whose 1930 title *Der jüdische Selbsthass* (Jewish Self-Hatred) actually coined the term.

Characteristically, Canetti takes a complex social phenomenon and reduces it to its core absurdity. For Fischerle this means the pursuit of two somewhat inconsistent, though oddly compatible, goals: removing the physical markers of Jewishness from his body, and fleeing to a country where his Jewishness will not count so much against him. America is the place where Fischerle sets his fantasy about striking it rich both by winning big at chess and by marrying a blond heiress, a sort of Horatio Alger myth minus the work ethic. But Fischerle worries, in one of the earlier installments of this reiterated fantasy, about being treated as an outsider even in this land of outsiders. In imagining his own American success story, he finds it necessary to confront anti-Jewish stereotypes: “Let them say Jews are cowards. The reporters ask him who he is. Not a soul knows him. He doesn’t look like an American. There are Jews everywhere. But where does this Jew come from, who’s rolled in triumph over Capablanca?” America nevertheless holds out the offer of better times; it is a place, Fischerle imagines, where hotels offer clean sheets even to Jews, and where a big, beautiful, blue-eyed Mae West–type blond can fall for a little guy with an extraordinarily long nose: “‘Darling!’ said the millionairess and pinched it, she loved long noses, she couldn’t stand short ones.” This dream bride seems in fact to be an idealized version of the philosemitic proprietress of the pub The Baboon, who expresses a similar weakness for Fischerle’s “special” nose.

These fantasies aside, Fischerle is greatly concerned that his body will give him away. Early on he considers surgery to repair his back, but has no way to finance it. Georg actually first enters the narrative in this connection: Fischerle determines that Kien’s brother will certainly be able to perform this long-awaited operation and thereby alleviate him of his Jewish appearance. He knows for certain that the removal of his hunchback, either by surgical or sartorial means, will require more money than he has, and therefore ardently pursues his scheme to bilk Kien of his remaining net worth. This plot segment offers Canetti the opportunity to heap every remaining anti-
Jewish stereotype on the already hunched back of this little man. Fischerle becomes the exploitative businessman who makes a huge profit while his gentile employees remain impoverished. It can be no coincidence that just as Fischerle announces the formation of the “Firma Siegfried Fischer,” explicit references to the First World War and its aftermath begin to appear in the novel: the “blind” beggar, we learn, spent three long years at the front, and, as a result, cannot bear the stench of carbon to this day; Fischerle maintains that Kien went mad in the war and still retains an army-issue revolver; and the same employee who will later murder Fischerle turns out to have a war injury that curiously affects his memory.  

Sandwiched between two books that play primarily within interior space, Book 2 alone provides a more sustained opening to the social setting. It may therefore be advisable to pay some attention to the social environment metonymically signified by these references. First of all, the war and its aftermath saw a marked increase in anti-Semitism, as Jonny Moser explains: “With the agitation against the Jewish war refugees commenced the renewed attack on the entire community of Austrian Jews . . . The Jews were represented as racketeers, black marketers, war profiteers and shirkers.” As the Jewish entrepreneur, Fischerle incorporates each of these charges in some way. His physical disfigurement obviously disqualifies him from military service and thus has garnered him the status of shirker during the Great War even before the action of the novel commences. As an exploiter of handicapped war veterans and a dealer in fraudulent goods (recall that he sells the same packet of cheap paperbacks to Kien over and over, representing them in each case as something quite different), he incarnates the cliché of the dishonest Jewish businessman. Of course the postwar era brought with it a plethora of more general social ills and anxieties, many of which can be observed in the scene where the great crowd gathers outside the Theresianum just after Kien catches Pfaff and Therese in the act of pawning his great private library. 

Some readers have no doubt assumed that Fischerle’s concern for his appearance may have nothing more to it than this: as a known thief, he fears being recognized by the police on account of his trademark hunchback. But the novel belies this innocent assumption. There is a distinct danger, it appears, in looking “too Jewish,” especially when a Viennese crowd, roiled by rumors of a great crime, and already suffering the shortages of a lagging, inflation-ridden postwar economy, is looking for a scapegoat. When Fischerle first sees the crowd he is emboldened by the prospects for pick-
pocketing, thus confirming his own image of Jews as essentially criminal: “Among such a mass of people a mass of money might be made.” Yet in very short order he becomes the object himself of this agitated crowd’s ire: “Fischerle heard the reproaches heaped upon him... A dwarf would get twenty years. Capital punishment ought to be re-introduced. Cripples ought to be exterminated. All criminals are cripples. No, all cripples are criminals... Why can’t he earn an honest penny. Taking bread out of people’s mouths. What’s he want with pearls, a cripple like him, and that Jew nose ought to be cut off.” In unmistakable terms, the invective of what has become a wrathful lynch mob culminates in corporeal anti-Semitism. The indirect speech of the German gives perhaps a better impression of the way the novel hosts what is at first a richly confused polyphony of voices and gradually galvanizes them into a homogenous anti-Semitic choir—giving rise, ultimately, to the antithesis of Bakhtin’s progressive notion of heteroglossia.

Fischerle escapes their rage, when, just in the nick of time, the Fishwife—Fischerle’s female double—appears elsewhere in the crowd. Owing to their uncanny physical resemblance, the Fishwife takes the blows intended for the other little Jew: “The crowd falls upon her... The Fishwife falls to the ground. She lies on her belly and keeps quite still. They mess her up terribly... No doubt about the genuineness of the hump. The crowd breaks over it... Then she loses consciousness.”

Reflecting on “the role which the Jews play in the cultural world of Christianity as the ultimate object of projection,” Sander Gilman remarks: “The Jew, caught up in such a system of representation, has but little choice: his essence, which incorporates the horrors projected on to him and which is embodied (quite literally [sic]) in his physical being, must try, on one level or another, to become invisible.” This is precisely what Fischerle attempts to do. In what amounts to a caricature of the old formula for assimilation, “wealth and cultivation” (Besitz und Bildung), Fischerle seeks a doctoral title to accompany his newly acquired wealth, in the conviction that this will gain him, if not invisibility, then at least some respect in the eyes of the police. In the following we notice how Fischerle clings to the illusion that culture—here metonymically represented by the revered German Doktorwürde—can mitigate his physical “Jewishness”: “All the same, he was afraid. He couldn’t help his shape. Now if only he were called Dr. Fischer instead of plain Fischer the police would respect him at once.” Although the men of the underworld pub try to convince Fischerle that such a Doktortitel would do little
good for someone so misshapen as he, Fischerle vehemently disagrees, and launches into a drunken, ludicrous tale about a tiny doctor even more disfigured than he. Fischerle prevails on this point, procures the passport, and proceeds to the tailor, where he orders a suit that will render his hunchback invisible. “His new suit fitted him like the most splendid of combinations. Whatever trace was left of his hump disappeared under the coat.”

Fischerle’s efforts to eradicate his Jewishness by sartorial subterfuge reverberate in the anti-Semitic caricature of the day, placing him squarely within the tradition of the ridiculed Jewish parvenu.

While waiting for his wonder suit—a kind of “Tarnkappe” for his deformed torso—to be properly fitted, Fischerle attempts to learn the language of his future home, “Amerikanisch.” Practicing loudly in the park, Fischerle arouses the attention of a number of passersby. Because he believes already to have dispensed with the hunchback—“his hump was on its last legs”—Fischerle hopes, but cannot really convince himself, that the attention he receives is just innocent curiosity. These self-taught language lessons are intended to put the final touch on a physical transformation of which he does not himself seem fully confident. Still, his hope is to jettison his all-too-revealing Jewish-Viennese dialect by acquiring English. When evening comes, a group of menacing youths approaches Fischerle, and he immediately assumes the worst: “A few boys herded themselves together and waited until the last grown-up had gone. Suddenly they surrounded Fischerle’s bench and burst into an English chorus. They yelled ‘Yes’ but they meant ‘Jew’ [the German — Ja/Jude — is alliterative and makes the aural confusion more plausible]. Before he decided on his journey, Fischerle had feared boys like the plague...[but now] he was neither a Jew nor a cripple, he was a fine fellow and knew all about wigwams.”

Fischerle survives the harassment, and returns to pick up his new set of clothes. Fully decked out in a garish outfit—a black and white checked suit, bright blue coat, and canary yellow shoes—he becomes a walking parody of the Jewish parvenu. The tailor gazes proudly down upon his own sartorial miracle, the very “image of a well-bred dwarf,” but attributes this transformation, ultimately, not to his craft, but to humanist culture. It is the tailor, oddly enough, who reminds us one last time of the emancipatory promises of German culture. In good idealist fashion (and with an irony meant only for the reader), he sonorously opines that it is not the body, in the final analysis, that has the last word: “the education of the heart is all.”
Figure 9. Jewish “Metamorphosis.” Though Fischerle believes that his ingenious tailor has removed all vestiges of his Jewishness, he of course remains physically marked—just like the figure in the cartoon above—as a Jew.
Affecting a German accented with American intonation, Fischerle manages to convince a train ticket salesman that he is indeed an American businessman. Appearing, he hopes, as “a smartly dressed person, rejuvenated and well born,” Fischerle delights in his great “success” in deceiving the train official into believing that he is a highly desirable foreigner, rather than one of the great unwashed, that mass of Galician Jews that flooded the Austrian capital during and after the First World War: “From this Fischerle assumed rightly and with pride that he was no longer recognizable.”

All of which does him precious little good, however. For when he returns home to recover an address book in which he will carefully inscribe his new title and place of residence (“Doktor Fischer, New York”), Fischerle’s new set of clothes and newly acquired English fail to conceal his identity from a vengeful former employee. His longstanding desire to have his hunchback removed is finally granted, but certainly not in the manner he had hoped. Fischerle becomes the “Operated Jew” of the late Weimar period, whose doomed assimilationist efforts cannot even get him over the border: “A fist shatters his skull.—The blind man hurled him to the ground and fetched from the table in the corner of the little room a bread knife. With this he slit his coat and suit to shreds and cut off Fischerle’s hump. He panted over the laborious work, the knife was too blunt for him and he wouldn’t strike a light . . . He wrapped the hump in the strips of the coat, spat on it once or twice and left the parcel where it was. The corpse he shoved under the bed.”

He is thus murdered as unceremoniously and as brutally as was the Fischerin—the only figures explicitly slain within the action of the novel, and both Jews.

Long after Fischerle makes his bloody exit from the novel, his voice re-emerges, if only momentarily, by way of a telegram he had earlier sent to Georg. Fischerle settles upon this plan because he thinks Georg might be able to surgically remove his hunchback, and is therefore keen on luring him under false pretenses to Vienna. He composes a succinct cable in Kien’s name, indicating that he urgently requires the professional assistance of his younger brother. The words Fischerle carefully selects betray the very Jewishness he so assiduously shuns. When Georg rips open the telegram and reads aloud the words, “Bin total meschugge. Dein Bruder” (“Am completely crackers. Your brother”), the Yiddish word “meschugge” strikes him—correctly, as it happens—as totally uncharacteristic of his learned philologist brother. But for us it serves as one last reminder that Fischerle, de-
spite his recently acquired *Bildung*, language lessons, and new set of clothes, remains tragically and inescapably Jewish in an environment increasingly hostile to Jews.

It is true that Canetti felt some discomfort about Fischerle in the wake of the Holocaust. Might he have contributed to the very anti-Semitism he sought to document? Could the novel’s depiction of Fischerle as a repugnant, self-hating Jew have played into the hands of those who implemented or sought to justify the mass killings of Jews? Or might this book have simply entertained and titillated anti-Semites? That Nazi officials chose to ban the novel rather than exploit it for propaganda purposes would suggest that it did not lend itself very easily to such a use. But Canetti was of course aware of the wide range of responses evoked by art, particularly modernist art, and knew that his readers might draw conclusions from the novel that differed markedly from his own intentions. He later wrote that he dreaded running into people who had just read *Auto-da-Fé*, because they inevitably tended to locate the wretchedness of the novel in the author himself. Not coincidentally, I believe, Canetti puts his defense of Fischerle into the mouth of the revered Hebraist Isaiah Sonne, who justifies this potentially offensive characterization in this way: “People will bristle at Fischerle because he is a Jew, and will reproach the author with the charge that this figure can be misread as if in support of the odious sentiments of the times. Yet this figure is true, as true as the narrow-minded, rustic housekeeper [Therese] or the abusive building superintendent [Pfaff]. When the catastrophe is over, all charges of this kind will fall away from the figures and they will stand revealed as that which led to the catastrophe.” This is the important passage that precedes Canetti’s more frequently cited line regarding his regret about Fischerle: “I mention only this one detail because later, with the progress of events, I often felt discomfort regarding Fischerle; and then I always sought refuge in this early justification.”

This defense is interesting not because it comes from Sonne—that we may never be able to corroborate—but because it contains an awareness on the part of Canetti of the essential instability of parody. If Canetti really did suffer pangs of conscience, however, I suspect that it was due not only to the potential misunderstandings that his book might inspire, but because he really does target Jews, at least in part, as complicit by way of Jewish self-hatred. Complicit, however, in the rising tide of racial anti-Semitism of the early 1930s—not in the organized destruction of European Jews that com-
menced in the early 1940s. This distinction might well be lost in the post-Holocaust era and thus give rise to the author’s quite understandable “uneasiness” (Unbehagen).

Yet we should not permit this to obscure the novel’s broader frame of reference. Kien’s betrayal of Fischerle, which he grounds in philological humanism, commences almost from the moment they meet. It is then that we witness Kien distorting the idealist Schillerian sentiment, “It is the spirit which builds itself a body,” into a justification for Fischerle’s deformed “Jewish” body rather than employing it as a motto of liberation from such irrational prejudice. In other words, Sonne’s contention, that Fischerle, along with this gallery of despicable figures, indicts not the author but the times from which he drew them, does in the end ring true. Specifically, his insightful formulation concerning these characters as “that which led to the catastrophe” seems apropos of Fischerle. Canetti may still be right to worry that even serious humor about grotesque attempts at assimilation will be rejected by some readers as simply in poor taste. Yet the larger perspective, which demands that we see Fischerle not only as an icon of racial anti-Semitism, but more specifically as a product of a bankrupt, socially irrelevant humanism, raises this handicapped Jew to a tragic sign of the times.

While Fischerle is, I think, best understood in terms of this larger problematic, he remains a locus of multivalent tension. When Nicola Riedner, one of the few critics intimately familiar with the novel’s anti-Semitic discourse, argues that we should view Fischerle as punished for an overweening assimilation drive, she founders on numerous counts, not the least of which is her curious imposition of a rational choice model to the virtual exclusion of the very complex matrix of social and political forces she herself has documented. Yet her argument powerfully communicates the distinctly distasteful degree of excess in this figure. Though our post-Holocaust vantage point has much to do with it—one cannot simply bracket out the historical fact that Eastern European Jews were murdered at much higher rates than German Jews—Canetti’s practice of grotesque caricature perhaps exceeds his own narrative intentions. In discussing the novel’s attitude toward misogyny (chapter 2), we noted Canetti’s use of hyperbolic parody, a technique that risks a measure of complicity as critique. The same holds true here. It would, however, be an unfortunate mistake to permit this observation to obscure the fact that in the end it is indeed Fischerle, and not the voluble and self-pitying Kien, as some early critics would have it, who becomes the
novel’s real victim of modernity’s crisis of values. Yet it would be equally mis-
taken to overlook the way in which Siegfried Fischerle outstrips his didactic
function and continues to haunt the novel long after he is murdered.

Up to this point in this study we have seen how Canetti has left a trail—per-
haps something more like an elaborate web of trails—linking this novel to
broader social and intellectual concerns. The next chapter will be concerned
less with positive traces of intertextuality than with a palpable but curiously
obscured presence, namely that of Sigmund Freud. For readers of the 1930s,
Freud hardly needed to be evoked. Among later critics who fell under the au-
thor’s own anti-Freudian spell, Freud seems unaccountably absent. In either
case, the novel’s relationship to Freud and popularized Freudianism cries
out for elucidation.