Neither Adorno nor Lukács

Canetti’s Analytic Modernism

A Productive Error

James McFarlane concludes his investigation into “The Mind of Modernism” with a panegyric to that veritable bible of the movement, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which is said to embody a “peculiarly Modernist kind of vision.” In this account, which focuses almost exclusively on intellectual history, literary modernism emerges as much more than an effect, or register, of the demise of traditional culture and the rise of the modern sciences. On the contrary, McFarlane’s modernism is a central galvanizing agent of signal cultural importance—high modernism, in other words. Though he pays lip-service to less lofty constructions, McFarlane ultimately comes down squarely on the side of modernism as bearer of cultural coherence rather than mere barometer of fragmentation: “The defining thing in the Modernist mode is not so much that things fall *apart* but that they fall *together* . . . In Modernism, the centre is seen exerting not a centrifugal but a centripetal force; and the consequence is not disintegration but (as it were) superintegration.”

This rather sanguine view, which ascribes an enormous synthesizing task to the modernist poet, was bound to find verification in *The Waste Land*, if only because this very reading of modernism is largely derived from Eliot himself. Less self-evident, however, is McFarlane’s curious effort to fit *Auto-da-Fé*—which he supposes to be “an unexpected commentary” on Eliot—into this high modernist schema. Though ultimately rather forced, this conjunction of Eliot with Canetti is fortunate in that it provides the opportunity to consider *Auto-da-Fé* within postwar discussions of American and European modernism, adding a context to Canetti’s novel that not only has thus far been lacking in the critical literature, but one that illuminates the novel’s distinctive traits particularly effectively. In resurrecting the so-called pre-theoretical literary landscape of the novel’s rediscovery in the early 1960s, we will come to see how *Auto-da-Fé* rather strenuously defies the affiliation
McFarlane so casually asserts. Sharing neither Adorno’s marked sympathy for the epistemologically humbled modernist subject, nor meeting Lukács’s demand for realistic depiction of an “objective totality,” Canetti’s novel fell between the chairs of the regnant literary paradigms and was thus destined to remain an outsider and a kind of curiosity until new views of modernism (and postmodernism) came into play.

Though this study has thus far profited precisely from these newer and more capacious orientations toward modernism, we now consciously step backward in time, a conceit that will help us appreciate *Auto-da-Fé* against the backdrop of the more familiar lights of high modernism. Since a discussion of the full range of modernist novels would be impossible—or amount to another book altogether—I will content myself instead with an ideal construct such as McFarlane himself provides. In leaping from the deeply conservative Eliot to the leftists Adorno and Lukács (with whom I am primarily concerned) we risk losing, one might object, high modernism’s vast apolitical middle ground. Yet, given Adorno’s propensity for cooptation by New Criticism, this need not be the case, as I argue below. Furthermore, by focusing on the modernist “epistemological shift” as the philosophical touchstone of modernism, as Randall Stevenson proposes, we may indeed find ourselves in a position to capture a considerable number of high modernist works within a single conceptual framework. Additionally, though the texts customarily gathered under this rubric present a rich and apparently contradictory cluster of stances toward modernity, they are unified, as Jameson argues, by their attempt to “manage” modernity, a strategy that includes constructing alternate aesthetic worlds, and one that certainly unites thinkers as different as Eliot and Adorno. Lukács’s self-imposed admonition, which he intones at the outset of his influential essay “The Ideology of Modernism,” applies no less to this undertaking: “Of course, dogmas of this kind are only really viable in philosophical abstraction, and then only with a measure of sophistry.” In moving toward a new appreciation of the relationship of *Auto-da-Fé* to its modernist cousins, we will periodically cast a glance back on the foregoing study. In the end, we will see how *Auto-da-Fé* mounts a remarkable protest from within, announcing, as it were, an end to high modernism and the exigency of its own social and analytic agenda.

Before prematurely extricating *Auto-da-Fé* from McFarlane’s clutches, let us first endeavor to understand his argument better. Canetti’s protagonist seems so appealing because he appears to ratify modernism’s investment
in a fragmented and diffuse subjectivity that is actually enhanced by the superficial defect of blindness. Eliot (and then McFarlane) makes a virtue of these weaknesses in claiming that the blind Tiresias actually enjoys a very privileged kind of vision and, owing to his fluid boundaries and lack of distinct self-definition, a unique ability to unite all the disparate characters of this poem.8 Taking his cue rather directly from Eliot, McFarlane views Tiresias’s apparent liabilities as characteristically modernist assets: “His seeing blindness derives from a very Modernist logic, a logic which is then embodied in the structure of the poem as a whole.”9 It is crucial to note that the model proposed here contains a foregone conclusion: epistemological impairment—represented here above all as blindness—is from the outset to be seen as an ultimate bonus. And this, in turn, implies a perpetuation of the traditional model in which culture continues to assimilate the fragments of experience into a meaningful whole. We are to read with Tiresias, Eliot states in no uncertain terms: “What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem.”10

It is not at all surprising that this emphasis on “seeing blindness” would call to mind Canetti’s Peter Kien. “The hero of this novel, a professor of Oriental studies, also discovers for himself by chance the full visionary power of blindness (or at least of controlled ‘defective’ vision) as a cosmic principle.”11 McFarlane’s scarcely contained enthusiasm for Kien is evident in his remark that “Canetti’s hero recognizes . . . an active principle at work: in his kind of seeing-blindness he discovers a way of relating or linking things that would otherwise seem not in the least to relate to each other.”12 Like Tiresias, Kien exhibits the ability—precisely by means of an apparent perceptual deficiency—to unify dauntingly disparate phenomena. And, as with Tiresias, we are clearly meant to read with Canetti’s professor. “Blindness becomes the means wherewith to come to terms with life,” opines McFarlane, “permitting a wholly new philosophy of contingency. Canetti’s hero decides that ‘blindness is a weapon against time and space, and our existence a unique monstrous blindness.’”13 A final ingredient to “this peculiarly Modernist kind of vision,”14 and one that will be of crucial significance in our discussion of Adorno, below, is that of pain. The insights to be gleaned do not come without this price; Kien’s “visionary blindness,” we read, “like the blindness of eyes filled with tears or pain . . . yields much more reliable testimony about the real meaning of life than does the report of witnesses enjoying conventional good sight.”15 This in a nutshell comprises the
high modernist recipe for ultimate recuperation of a disintegrating culture: a handicapped protagonist whose own fluid or fractured self and visionary blindness equips him, not without a measure of pain, to embrace (if not unite) a host of superficially discordant and incompatible phenomena. And it is this paradigm into which McFarlane rather forcibly inserts Kien.

Here one might object that this older view of modernism has already been superseded; that the newer views advocated, for example, by Bathrick and Huyssen in their Modernity and the Text already provide a more capacious framework that could easily accommodate the likes of Auto-da-Fé. This is admittedly true, and in fact informs the methodology of all the preceding investigations of this study. Yet while the fairly recent expansion of the term modernism, already fairly imprecise, by the way, in its more traditional usage, is undeniably more inclusive of a wider range of texts (and of a more diverse array of stances toward modernity), a degree of clarity may have been sacrificed in the process.

In an illuminating essay, “The Knower and the Artificer,” intellectual historian David Hollinger acknowledges that modernism has of late been stretched in so many directions that it threatens to become an almost useless term, but nevertheless concedes the appeal of maintaining it. “The advantages are manifest: one retains a claim to the most commanding, most talismanic word in the critical study of twentieth-century intellectual life.” Yet to do so does not mean that we reduce all constituent elements to some common denominator. Indeed, Hollinger is most concerned to retrieve that “cognitivist” aspect of modernism that both rivals and completes the more familiar figure of the “artificer” — a term he borrows from Joyce’s iconic Stephen Dedalus — featured in the corpus of canonical literary modernism. As Hollinger rightly observes, “The Knower,” while not entirely absent, “is less honored within the modernist literary canon.” It will be my argument, below, that Auto-da-Fé presents the supreme exemplar of this minority tradition within the corpus of German modernist prose.

Hollinger’s strategy of highlighting the cognitivist strain of modernist thought — which captures Canetti’s undertaking extraordinarily well — is what most interests me in this context: he argues that we can best make sense of these divergent strands not by mingling the categories of the knower and the artificer, but by maintaining the traditional distinctions. Ultimately, Hollinger will underscore the interconnection of these two categories — he shows, for example, how both are present in certain key modernist novels.
But his provisional strategy of segregation is quite fruitful and worthy of emulation here. Thus, in attending to McFarlane’s and Eliot’s confidence in the paradoxical prowess of the modernist protagonist (i.e., Hollinger’s artificer), I do not seek to resurrect traditional conceptions for their own sake—or only because they happen to have been applied to Canetti—but also to reap a share of the conceptual clarity that will result from viewing *Auto-da-Fé* as an example of that minority cognitivist discourse that both constituted and rivaled canonical literary modernism.

Now, in his enthusiasm for what Lambert Zuidervaart would later dub the “deprivileged” modernist subject, McFarlane fails to inform us that Kien is not really blind, but is just pretending to be so. Furthermore, this blindness is not in any sense imposed by the modern world (whatever that would mean), but represents a scheme that issues from a quite integrated and devious consciousness. Moreover, Kien’s pseudosophatical method of expunging reality is, as we have seen above, problematic not only because it deprives ontological status to his fellow human beings (such as his nagging wife), which is in itself questionable, but because by losing sight of people in this manner he is actually overlooking a very real menace to his own well-being. Furthermore, if one were really seeking a true counterpart to Tiresias, particularly with regard to his capacity to host the most disparate of figures, one would more likely turn to Kien’s equally problematic brother Georg—the psychic host par excellence, as we have had occasion to observe in the preceding chapter.

This affiliation of Kien with Tiresias, and thus of Canetti with Eliot, must be seen as part of a larger cultural dynamic that granted legitimacy to serious literature insofar as it participated in the developing modernist aesthetic. Indeed, the postwar era was an important period of canon formation for German modernism, as the additions of Franz Kafka (whose star rose dramatically in the 1950s) and Rainer Maria Rilke (whose only novel was first given its modernist imprimatur in the 1960s) clearly attest. Indeed, Canetti’s novel reemerged into public consciousness just as *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) was being ushered into the modernist pantheon. Why, to put it simply, was Canetti left out?

Clearly, *Auto-da-Fé* could only be shoehorned into the Elotian conception of high modernism with considerable effort. Both Kien and Georg contest the very fragmented subjectivity that high modernism enshrines; mythology serves in *Auto-da-Fé* not to counteract the chaos of history (as Eliot
famously stated), but is itself the target of unrelenting parody; and, finally, the novel does not depict the loss of historical and social moorings as inevitable characteristics of the modern age that are somehow redressed by the ability of the precious individual to unite an increasingly disorienting world within himself. All of this—and this is quite substantial—is at odds with central strains of high modernism. But to demonstrate this, we need to move somewhat beyond Eliot and McFarlane to consider at least two of the major players in the construction of postwar modernism: Theodor W. Adorno and his principal aesthetic adversary, Georg Lukács.

Adorno and the Modernist Love Affair with the Fragmented Self

The influence of Adorno on definitions of modernity and modernist art in the postwar period can hardly be overestimated, particularly in light of his influential study (with Max Horkheimer) *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1947) and the subsequent *Noten zur Literatur* (Notes to Literature, 1958–74). Indeed, in his *After the Great Divide* (1986), Andreas Huyssen baptizes Adorno the “high priest of modernism,” “the theorist par excellence of the Great Divide, that presumably necessary and insurmountable barrier separating high art from popular culture.” Adorno’s theory of modernism, which so powerfully maintained that divide, was motivated, Huyssen explains, by the “political impulse . . . to save the dignity and autonomy of the art work from the totalitarian pressures of fascist mass spectacles, socialist realism, and an ever more degraded commercial mass culture in the West.” This exclusionary gesture in turn “found its theoretically more limited expression in the New Criticism.” The link to New Criticism—dominant in America and England at this time—is significant because it demonstrates how Adorno’s endorsement of modernism’s “strategy of exclusion”—itself a politically motivated aesthetic—could be absorbed into a thoroughly apolitical approach to literature. Frederic Jameson’s assessment of Adorno’s “proposal to see the classical stage of high modernism itself as the very prototype of the most ‘genuinely’ political art” as an ultimately “anti-political revival of the ideology of modernism” can help us to grasp the unholy alliance between Adorno and the New Critics regarding the high modernist canon. Yet, even if Adorno may inadvertently have pro-
vided theoretical cover to traditionalist proponents of high modernism, we should not for our own part underestimate the distance separating Adorno’s position, which ascribes a crucial contestatory power to modernist art, from Eliot’s essentially compensatory view, which imagines a protagonist somehow capable of reconciling modernity’s contradictions. To linger over this distinction, however, will not advance our understanding of *Auto-da-Fé*, above all, perhaps, because this very point of contrast became muddled in critical practice.²³ Let us therefore bridge the abyss between Adorno and Eliot, thereby recapitulating a New Critical practice, in order to see how that which is common to both the traditionalist and the Marxist, namely their sympathetic portrayal of the modernist protagonist, stands in stark and structural contrast to Canetti’s treatment of Peter Kien.

Given his much-discussed indictment of instrumental reason in the *Dialectic*, the effective exclusion of *Auto-da-Fé* from membership among those lofty works that “enjoy what is today the only form of respectable fame” (Adorno’s words in praise, here, of Beckett) is virtually foreordained.²⁴ For Canetti’s novel is nothing if not analytic—mercilessly and unrelentingly “penetrating” as, for example, Erich Fried has observed.²⁵ In his widely read essay “Commitment” (“Engagement,” 1965), Adorno argues—against Sartre and Brecht—that truly engaged literature has little to do with thematic political commitment and everything to do with modernist formal experimentation, that “avant-garde abstraction which provokes the indignation of philistines.”²⁶ Adorno thus opposes modernist “autonomous” art to the well-meaning but often self-defeating category of “committed” art. His influential critique of traditional *littérature engagée* as moralizing, manipulative, and as the purveyor of unacknowledged consolation—perhaps above all in its capacity to aestheticize suffering— is widely known and has become part of our critical repertoire, as Lawrence Langer’s work on Holocaust literature well attests.²⁷ Turning the traditional notion of engaged literature on its head, Adorno argues: “It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads.”²⁸ The real virtue of those “very features defamed as formalism,” we are told, is that they do not bespeak any political or social program—or much of anything, for that matter: “[Autonomous works of art] are knowledge as non-conceptual objects. This is the source of their nobility. It is not something of which they have to persuade men, because it has been given into their hands.”²⁹ Lest this sound all too reminis-
cent of idealist aesthetics (one is reminded, for example, of Schiller’s concept “naive poetry”), Adorno emphatically asserts that any formal contestation of empirical reality is dialectically related to that very empirical reality.  

Adorno’s interest in art that presents “knowledge as non-conceptual objects” follows directly from his (and Horkheimer’s) critique of instrumental reason in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, their monumental effort to link the Enlightenment to that apogee of modernity (as they argue): the Holocaust. Art that holds out the promise of contesting commodification would have to do so, therefore, in a manner that eschews any heavy-handed teleological or manipulative component. This is why Adorno, in preparing for the discussion of his favorite modernists, Kafka and Beckett, hastens to remind us that “the *avant-garde* abstraction which provokes the indignation of philistines . . . *has nothing in common with conceptual or logical abstraction,*” that kind of instrumentalizing, nature-exploiting abstraction, in other words, which is the real culprit in the *Dialectic*.  

Indeed, the nobility of Adorno’s non-conceptual objects and their simple givenness reside in their (apparent) lack of tendentious purpose, lending them an aura of the naturalness—and thus the Schillerian reminiscence.

Adorno’s argument usually achieves clearer contours when applied to actual literature. It may therefore be worthwhile to turn briefly to his discussion of Beckett for an illustration of what was dearest to him in modernist prose:

Beckett’s works . . . enjoy what today is the only form of respectable fame: everyone shudders at them, and yet no-one can persuade himself that these eccentric plays and novels are not about what everyone knows but no one will admit . . . They deal with a highly concrete historical reality: the abdication of the subject. Beckett’s *Ecce Homo* is what human beings have become. As though with eyes drained of tears, they stare silently out of his sentences . . . However, the minimal promise of happiness [these works] contain, which refuses to be traded for comfort, cannot be had for a price less than total dislocation, to the point of worldlessness. 

Let us set aside the rather dubious claim regarding a critical consensus on the content of Beckett’s works (“what everyone knows but no one will admit”), and focus instead on Adorno’s discernment of the core concern of Beckett’s oeuvre: the loss of the traditional will-dominated unified subject. For here Adorno—in good modernist company, by the way—is asserting a
kind of mimesis; not the rich mimetic referentiality of nineteenth-century social realism, to be sure, but a rather definite homology between modernist protagonist and the real, extraliterary beings: “Beckett’s *Ecce Homo* is what human beings have become.” For Adorno, evidence of what we would today call a decentered subject is a truth (“a highly concrete historical reality”) that manifests itself in modernist abstraction, a reality conveyed almost exclusively at the level of discourse rather than mere plot. Imbricated within this conception of modernism is Adorno’s valorization of silence (“they stare silently out of his sentences”) as well as his embrace of “dislocation” and “worldlessness” as the appropriate consequence of recognizing oneself in the text’s “abdicated subject.” Later in this same essay, Adorno returns to the topic of modernism’s eloquent silence: “Yet paradoxically in the same [post–World War II] epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics.”

“Wordless” here is, of course, Adorno’s shorthand for a lack not of actual words but an absence of thematic social engagement. Resistance to empirical reality (whatever this would mean in practice) must issue forth from this “nonconceptual” silence. Adorno’s modernist program resulted in his rather improbable championing of the reclusive aesthete Stephan George over the century’s most accomplished committed artist, Bertolt Brecht.

Canetti, no less than Adorno, is concerned in *Auto-da-Fé* to resist the forces of cultural affirmation, as I have argued throughout this study. But whereas for Adorno this consists of “avoid[ing] popularization and adaptation to the market,” that is, remaining at all costs on the proper side of that great divide, Canetti identifies and targets certain very specific trends within interwar culture—many of which haunt us still—and mercilessly parodies them. This literary strategy of “search and destroy” immediately suggests the fundamental distinction of Canetti’s modernist prose: it is, in contrast to Adorno’s veneration of the “nonconceptual object,” decidedly conceptual, thematic, even argumentative. In fact, it would seem to enshrine all the hubristic evils of instrumental reason.

While this is surely somewhat of an exaggeration, it nevertheless serves to spotlight the epistemological grid that obtains within the novel and that operates between text and reader. Perhaps the clearest indicator of this novel’s epistemetic distinction among its modernists cousins is its peculiar wit, an often wicked humor that, as I reiterate throughout this study, operates
over the heads of the benighted figures. This readerly sovereignty, however, is perceived to violate the modernist contract: the magisterial rationalist perspective is held to be an obsolete holdover from a discredited Enlightenment optimism; the comedic premise that social failings can be reliably isolated and corrected merely by identifying them, a kind of embarrassing naivete. And finally, the epic purview underwritten by a firmly interlocking epistemological narrative structure may appear to resurrect the quaint world of literary realism that was so widely repudiated by the modernists.

Canetti’s analytic modernism cannot, however, be properly appraised by rhetoric that harbors its own foregone conclusion, such as the supposition that the presence of any analytical structure represents 
\textit{eo ipso} a disreputable kind of ideological regression. For this assumption can blind us to the real innovation of \textit{Auto-da-Fé}, which is to seduce readers into a state of epistemological security only later (with the arrival of Georg) to confront them with its radical insufficiency. In other words, analysis itself serves to critique traditional modes of analysis. The very readers who believe themselves superior to the erroneous constructions of characters given to relentlessly projecting themselves onto others are structurally drawn into precisely the same kind of error, and thus are fully implicated in the target of parody. In fact, as we have seen above in chapter 1, Canetti questions the fundamental premise of an epistemology based on identification: our need to affiliate ourselves with the beautiful (in the case of \textit{Auto-da-Fé}, this is of course the handsome, erotically charged Georg) is hardly a reliable basis for making judgments about the world. In falling for Georg, as first-time readers of the novel typically do (and as a number of early critics of the novel did), we are knocked off our epistemological high horses.

Yet even the ability to make such confident distinctions between correct and misguided judgments implies an epistemological crow’s nest that contrasts starkly with the tentative, radically contingent percipient subject of high modernism—a subject, after all, who cannot typically distinguish confidently between self and world, let alone make normative judgments about the latter. This is an important distinction, and one that will allow Canetti unique latitude, but it should not be exaggerated. Canetti’s appropriation of realism’s “panoptic” narrative structures is, ultimately, an analytic parody of realism—a burlesque, so to speak, that hardly recreates the confident, grand societal vistas of the great realists Fontane, Zola, or of his own favor-
ite, Balzac. The reader of *Auto-da-Fé* is sovereign, to be sure, but often over a Lichtenstein of literary reality. Like the protagonist Peter Kien, we know quite a lot about precious little.

Or do we? A closer analysis, undertaken in greater detail above in chapter 1, reveals that even this epistemological security is largely a chimera. Not only does the knowledgeable narrator turn out to be a sham, little more than an opportunity for the characters to masquerade their own bias as objective truth. More radically—and this has yet to be fully appreciated in the critical literature on the novel—the facts we possess often remain nothing more than uncontested (or uncontestable) claims of very biased players. How can we ever really know if Peter Kien is in fact a world-renowned sinologist, or if his brother Georg actually stands a chance of winning the Nobel prize for his innovations in the treatment of psychotic patients? The *ex post facto* discovery of ubiquitous self-interest and pervasive perspectivism parading as omniscience should leave us feeling epistemologically impaired. What provides the temporary illusion of epistemological security, on the other hand, is the fact that the narrative is constructed of extremely limited and mutually exclusive units. Each of the figural worlds remains utterly distinct, without the slightest overlap—a fact which thus far has been taken only as a symbol of the isolation of the individual in the modern world. Perhaps *Auto-da-Fé* can also be read to support this existential lament, but this highly artificial demarcation of rival belief worlds certainly serves another function as well. For it comprises the very precondition of our vaunted epistemological privilege. In this pared-down and schematized universe, unmasking a character’s delusions and projections of self onto others is child’s play. But is it our world?

*Auto-da-Fé* offers itself as a highly stylized model, not as a readily inhabitable simulacrum. In pointing to the world outside itself—to various cultural attitudes, beliefs, and practices of the interwar period—it simultaneously raises questions about the status and applicability of the very analysis it employs. The epistemological structure that underwrites the novel’s humor becomes in the course of this monumental narrative also the object of the inquiry, a dialectical refinement that has not yet been fully appreciated. In the end, then, our epistemological sovereignty is somewhat of a pyrrhic victory. Like the infamous burrow in Kafka’s short story of the same title, the narrative world of *Auto-da-Fé* begins to resemble an environment both terribly familiar and yet virtually impossible.
Certainly this analytic mode seemed foreign to classical high modernism, which viewed its more obviously skeptical model of epistemology as the product of numerous social upheavals—as, in other words, the child of modernity itself. Bradbury and McFarlane cite, for example, Strindberg’s famous remark on the figures in his Miss Julie to demonstrate the point: “Since they are modern characters, living in an age of transition more urgently hysterical at any rate than the age that preceded it, I have drawn them as split and vacillating.” They proceed to generalize this relationship to all of modernism: “This is much the sort of comment that might have been made by any Modernist writer between the 1880s and the 1930s; and, in its consonance between fragmentation, discontinuity, and the modern age of transition, it is itself modern.”

35 Even Hermann Broch, who probably came closest to Canetti in diagnosing a cultural crisis—one thinks of the famous essay “Zerfall der Werte” (Disintegration of Values) that first appeared within the fictional context of Die Schlafwandler— took pains to portray his characters as psychograms of a disintegrating communal culture. Lukács noted this same, consonant relationship between what he called the erosion of the “outer world” or “reality” on the one hand and this new conception of “personality” on the other: “Attenuation of reality and dissolution of personality are thus interdependent: the stronger the one, the stronger the other.”

36 In contrast to Lukács, however, one finds among the modernists an implicit sympathy for the protagonists’ fragmented consciousness as a consequence or expression of modernity itself. This is not to exclude the possibility of critique or protest encoded in such a figure, but one senses nonetheless, particularly in the postwar critical embrace of this fractured consciousness, a consensus on the necessity of this state of affairs—these men (it is typically a male protagonist) have no choice in the matter; they are products and victims of a fragmented age. Adorno’s enthusiasm for Beckett, as we noted, certainly contains this same kind of empathetic identification: “everyone shudders . . . [for this] is what human beings have become.” This shudder of recognition reaches an apogee at that moment when Adorno reads himself into the actual position of the protagonist of Kafka’s “In der Strafkolonie” (In the Penal Colony), who, it should be noted, actually loses consciousness in the process of his nightmarish torture: “Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about . . . He over whom Kafka’s wheels have passed”—for Adorno, a badge of honor—“has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with
the judgment that the way of the world is bad.” Apart from any particular attitude we may bear toward these protagonists, we are in most cases structurally constrained to read with them, which is to say that in order to make sense of the narrative we must assume their perspective. The consonance that we are told obtains between the fragmentation of modernity and the fragmented modernist protagonist replicates itself in this way at the level of text and reader.

But reading with these fellows is not always an easy task. For, whether it be Musil’s Törléß, Rilke’s Malte, or even Döblin’s Franz Biberkopf, we are typically confronted with a protagonist who suffers from a certain diminished epistemological prowess; like Tiresias, they all are marked by compromised vision of some sort. One need only recall, for example, the establishing scene in Berlin Alexanderplatz, in which Biberkopf perceives the walls of a Berlin tenement courtyard to be falling in on him, though, of course, they are not. Perhaps these subjects have not fully abdicated, yet neither are they the realist heroes of yesteryear. This modern, fluid self, which Ernst Mach famously dubbed an “ideelle denkökonomische, keine reelle Einheit” (a thought construct, not a real unity) is simply less capable of knowing itself (or selves), the world, and of drawing a credible line of demarcation between the two. Indeed, this deprived modernist protagonist becomes the walking proof of the obsolete, or at least artificial, nature of these very subject-object distinctions. The typical protagonist of Expressionist drama presents, as Peter Szondi has shown, a parallel case in which the social world is refracted through an individual’s consciousness and thereby subjected to notable distortion. The debate—if there was one—as to whether this “seeing blindness” really represents a higher wisdom or rather a dangerous subjectivist misrepresentation becomes lost in the larger portrayal of this kind of handicapped perception as natural, even quintessentially modern. Biberkopf may be right about the menacing quality of the German metropolis. But in viewing himself as victim from the outset, is he not also perhaps laying the groundwork for exonerating himself of all responsibility for his own actions?

These questions, which are important to Canetti, tend to recede in the presence of these figures, because they are themselves merely the avatar of (and sometime antidote to) a larger-order social fragmentation. As Bradbury and McFarlane would have it, modernism “is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional norms of causality . . . The assumption that the age demands a certain kind of art, and that
Modernism is the art that it demands, has been fervently held by those who see in the modern human condition a crisis of reality, an apocalypse of cultural community.” In short, whether the modernist psyche reveals a rich inwardness or a tortured incoherence, whether we are to celebrate or condemn the world that drove the self both inward and apart, this fragmented mental state is not a free choice, but a given—Adorno’s “highly concrete historical reality.”

But what if this were not the whole truth? What if the celebrated crisis of subjectivity were, in part, hype, fad, or, worse yet, a kind of malleable persona through which one could exploit others—a feint, in other words, that served to conceal power? Furthermore, what if it were not a question of a homogenized generic self, but a gendered self, whose efforts at maintaining self-control, so to speak, revealed rich patterns of cultural misogyny? All of this, as I have argued above in chapter 2, is in fact strongly suggested by Auto-da-Fé. To modernism as it was constructed at the point of the novel’s reemergence, and the time of Adorno’s first American publications on aesthetics and politics, such would have been heresy. For this modernism was, as we have seen, largely predicated upon the sympathetic, or consonant, depiction of the fragmented self. Auto-da-Fé breaks modernism’s empathetic spell over the reader and questions the political and social implications of a fragmented protagonist by, first of all, placing the notion of a universal, ungendered self into serious doubt.

To notice that Auto-da-Fé renders this hallmark of literary modernism in a markedly different manner is not to suggest that it necessarily refutes the consonant/sympathetic portrayal of consciousness in, say, Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. For this is not a matter of a simple binary, but rather of a cluster of possible positions. Yet coming at the end of a tradition that had tended to venerate the modernist protagonist, often rendering social reality only as refracted in this figure’s own fragmented consciousness, Canetti was indeed intent on placing the phenomenon in a more critical light. Specifically, Canetti challenges the (often only implicit) consensus that the modernist protagonist is the inexorable end product of a world come unhinged, a victim of vanishing nineteenth-century certainties. Auto-da-Fé challenges Lukács’s formula—if we may speak anachronistically—by suggesting that the loss of the communal may in part be attributable to the “inward turning” not only of modernist literature, but of a whole host of cultural currents in the Weimar era.
The strong epistemological structure of the narrative is of course hardly conducive to a sympathetic portrayal of the crisis of subjectivity: the reader is positioned outside and above, not with, the characters undergoing a crisis of subjectivity. The analytic cast of the novel thus asks us to think about this phenomenon, rather than read ourselves into it, a prospect that will yield insight if only we will allow the novel this liberty. In other words, we do not shudder in self-recognition (as Adorno did in the presence of Beckett and Kafka); we laugh at what we wish to see as distinct from ourselves. After all, overidentification, misidentification, and self-projection are the sins of the characters we recognize because we have as readers (at least until the introduction of Georg) been held at arm’s length. The novel’s analytic framework requires us to read Kien, not to read with Kien, as McFarlane would have us do in good high modernist fashion. Auto-da-Fé, does not, in other words, foster the modernist “vision avec,” but rather a stylized “vision par derriere,” to borrow a pair of terms used by Hans Binder in his analysis of Kafka. If, in the end, we are deprived of the pleasures of identification, we are richly compensated with an aesthetic pleasure that is uncharacteristic of the high modernist mind-set: humor.

Canetti’s problematization of identification brings into focus the way in which high modernism had distanced itself from this commonplace manner of reading. In a pathbreaking essay on the television miniseries “Holocaust” (1978), Andreas Huyssen points to one of modernism’s signal deficiencies: it fails to offer the opportunity for readers to identify. “What I am proposing,” Huyssen explains, “is that certain products of the culture industry and their popular success point to shortcomings in avantgardist or experimental modes of representation.” While holding fast to modernism’s “truth content,” Huyssen faults these works for failing to meet “the socio-psychological need for identification with the Jews as victims.” What Huyssen identifies in his discussion of “Holocaust” can indeed be generalized (as his own book title suggests) to a much larger problematic: high art may have something to learn from lower—or more populist—forms of entertainment. Long disdaining identification as an obsolete if not vulgar relationship to the text, modernism made a virtue out of more cerebral modes of reception, though it was not, as we have noted, fully conscious of the implications of this practice. Owing fidelity variously to Brechtian “Verfremdung” (alienation) or to Adorno’s belief in the powers of modernist form, traditional readerly identification with individual characters was rather forcefully shunned.
should not distract us from the way in which these works already fulfilled an identification function, if only for a certain clientele. Clearly Adorno saw himself (or his self) reflected in the fractured protagonists of Kafka and Beckett, even if many other readers never would experience this same degree of self-recognition. Because high modernism was touted as the only authentic response to modernity, and thus implicitly a natural or universal aesthetic, we may have overlooked the particular identification function operant in these avantgardist and experimental works. *Auto-da-Fé*, on the other hand, simply does not permit this kind of illicit identificatory pleasure, which elsewhere could of course take place without readers fully realizing that they are reading themselves into the respective modernist novel. In *Auto-da-Fé* the topic and practice are simply too prominently foregrounded for this to occur. Identification remains for Canetti a problem: both within the fictional world of the novel and at the level of reader and text, identification emerges as a vehicle for approaching *and* utterly distorting reality. There is no such thing here as sacred, Tiresian vision; identification as a hermeneutic principle is both necessary, and necessarily disfiguring. The novel in fact thrives on the insoluble tension between our ongoing need to identify on the one hand, and the inherent fallacy of this gesture, when raised to the level of epistemological criterion, on the other. *Auto-da-Fé* both appeases and thwarts this basic readerly urge, and in doing so flushes out into the open a foundational modernist aporia.

Canetti clearly did not draw the same conclusion for aesthetics as so many others did. On the contrary, he knew (as did Brecht) that analytic prose holds forth the possibility of a truly critical stance, including one that would take aim at the very framework that enables that analysis. Furthermore, Canetti believed that the subjectivist turn was something of a hoax, attributable in part to a culture of self-indulgence and solipsism that should be exposed, if not opposed. Motivated, as we have seen, by a deep concern about the diminution of the public sphere as a consequence of inflated notions of subjectivity, *Auto-da-Fé* suggests the philosophical impossibility of conceiving of a fragmented self from the perspective of an equally fragmented consciousness. In “Self-Indulgent Philosophies of the Weimar Period” (chapter 3), I develop this thesis in some detail; but the conclusion may be restated here. Any time we imagine an inchoate self, we automatically do so from a position of a relatively more unified psyche: how else could we even recognize this phenomenon, let alone make meaningful compari-
sons with other notions of subjectivity? Rilke, in other words, is not Malte (or not only Malte) — even if on bad days he may have felt just like his psychically split protagonist — else he could not have written the novel. Similarly, if an age of economic and cultural dislocation had produced readers precisely and exclusively as fragmented as Malte, they could never recognize him as such. Likewise, Adorno, despite his shudder of self-recognition in the face of true modernist art, is not exclusively to be equated with Kafka’s exotically punished protagonist. When he is not under the wheels of Kafka’s prose, he is (or was) an undeniably self-actuated theorist, quite capable of deploying a formidably analytic self.

Problematic as Auto-da-Fé demonstrates it to be, the analytic self cannot be checked at the door when one enters the realm of fiction. It is always there, Canetti seems to be suggesting, so perhaps it is best that we acknowledge it. What Canetti suggests by means of his unmistakably dissonant treatment of fragmented subjectivity, therefore, is not the inherent invalidity of the modernists’ consonant or sympathetic rendering, but the essential bad faith in concealing the philosophically necessary discrepancy between the fragmented modernist protagonist and the necessarily less fragmented consciousness of author and reader. As a result of this kind of strong narrative, we are impelled to ask whether a charge that has often been laid at the feet of literary realism, namely the concealment of ideology and the implication of its naturalness, may be just as apposite of high modernism.

Certainly Adorno himself can be faulted, as Frederic Jameson has suggested, for failing to recognize the irreducible role of the “transcendental subject” in his own Critical Theory. Given Adorno’s noted emphasis on our “unfreedom” in the face of the “administered universe,” there seems to be in fact little role for the analytic self in political society. Freedom, agency, and the old Cartesian self that underlies both are simply comforting illusions, Adorno maintains. One could in fact argue that Adorno simply displaced reflective agency from individuals to modernist autonomous art. The Kantian autonomy of the individual becomes, with the requisite materialist alterations, the defining and redemptive characteristic of art. Certainly Adorno is more sanguine about the prospects of modern art than he is about the individual’s capacity to change society. At the only point in the essay when he expresses explicit concern for social justice, Adorno links its attainment to modernist form rather than to traditional political activism. “The Mind of Modernism,” to use McFarlane’s terminology, seems for Adorno
to have mysteriously wandered into the modernist art object itself. Mindful that this critical subjectivity does not simply vanish into thin air, *Auto-da-Fé* poses the question about this mind’s whereabouts, so to speak, once it has abdicated.\(^{53}\)

One need not have been a leftist, politically astute Jewish intellectual in the final Weimar years — though the young Canetti was of course all of these things — to notice that these very same modern times had produced a whole array of other selves that had little in common with the modernist predilection for genuine fragmentation and dissolution. This is the context within which we must judge Georg’s fascination with the gorilla man, a laughable figure meant to lampoon that ostensibly antibourgeois movement known as vitalism and loosely tied to Nietzsche. As I elaborate in chapter 3, Georg’s enthusiastic conversion to this kind of primitivism harbors deeply reactionary and authoritarian tendencies. First, this apparently emancipatory persona is at root antisocial: his sense of reality consists of a highly protean bubble of consciousness that follows him around like an invalid’s oxygen tent. Underlying this putatively liberating mode of consciousness is, as we have seen, the radical subordination of ontology not to epistemology per se, but to this single percipient individual’s whim.

Georg’s appropriation of this mind-set is, however, the most memorable critique in this context. He sits at the knees of the gorilla man in order to learn how to acquire not only his unique language — which is ultimately no language at all — but precisely his mode of consciousness, the radical malleability of which is thought by its very nature to contest the rigidities of bourgeois society. Georg’s career, however, tells a different story. Underneath the facade of a vulnerable, permeable consciousness lurks a self every bit as hard-nosed and self-serving as his brother Peter. Georg presents the image of an intellectual’s insidious retreat from an evermore daunting social reality under the cover of a pseudopolitical and specious antibourgeois ideology. Thirty years after Canetti wrote *Auto-da-Fé*, Lukács brought a similar, devastating charge against those enamored of the “dissolution of personality,” which he attributed to a desire to dissociate oneself from political responsibility. Lukács termed this investment in fragmented subjectivity the “doctrine of the eternal incognito” because it provided an alibi to those men such as Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, and Gottfried Benn who participated in Nazism and later wished to believe that at a deeper level of selfhood they had in fact remained opponents. It was precisely the frag-
mented conception of the self to which they appealed in their self-defense. Canetti could not of course have imagined the precise usefulness of Georg’s infatuation to Nazi authorities, but the potential dangers are already clearly present in the novel.

This is a distinctive contribution. More than any other novel from within the movement, *Auto-da-Fé* contests the unlimited glorification of fragmented subjectivity, particularly when it becomes the arbiter of social reality. By means of a negative dialectic, the novel suggests that there is a limit, or endpoint, beyond which the veneration of individual consciousness—or, more accurately, an individual's consciousness—cannot proceed. It is not a simple matter of upholding some positive notion of the social that must, at all costs, be defended against the onslaughter of rampant subjectivity. Rather, *Auto-da-Fé* seems concerned to remind us that modernity has not eradicated the problem of power—and certainly not by means of retreat into a figure’s rich psyche. More precisely, the novel suggests that power lurks in the very definition and deployment of fragmented consciousness. After reading *Auto-da-Fé*, one can never again take unreflective comfort in the inward turning of the novel; for we must always now ask ourselves whether the highly nuanced, layered consciousness we encounter may ultimately disguise authoritarian desires, or, by virtue of its manifest vulnerability, invite those of others. Otto Weininger sensed the widening gap between the traditional, will-dominated, “ethical” self and the modern, fragmented, “empirical” self. He wondered how such weakened empirical specimens (which he notoriously saw exemplified in women and Jews) could possibly survive with any dignity and meaning in the modern, materialistic world. Though infamous today for his misogyny and anti-Semitism, Weininger may deserve to be remembered also, as Steven Beller argues, for articulating the civic crisis posed by the rise of the empirical self. Certainly Canetti acknowledged the huge influence Weininger had on him and his entire generation. That impact is clearly felt in the novel, which asks, as we have seen, how this very modern self comports with notions of communal culture and civic responsibility. In the end, *Auto-da-Fé* forces us to bid farewell to the high modernist naturalization of the impaired self as the unexamined avatar of the modern age.

More the novel does not do. Both the use of radically reduced characters (with the partial exception of Georg) and the deployment of characters who construct artificially distinct and mutually exclusive worlds-units, instead of the radically more complex and overlapping portrayal of consciousness
typical of Joyce or Woolf, suggest rather clearly that Canetti’s critique is not meant directly to contest the rich and sophisticated minds we encounter in the fiction of the great masters of modernism, many of whom, as we know from his autobiography, he seems to have respected deeply. As we saw in chapter 5, Canetti explicitly renounced psychological realism over the protests of Broch; and one cannot help feeling that Canetti sensed the danger of undermining social critique by providing compellingly nuanced figures whose psychological appeal might serve to “explain” a set of practices we are meant to place in question. As we saw in 5 Auto-da-Fé is, at any rate, simply incommensurate with such novels. Yet it may well serve as a necessary corrective, a function that is, as I hope is clear by now, directly ascribable to the author’s choice of an epistemologically strong narrative structure.

Before concluding this topic altogether, it may be helpful to observe that our interest in the epistemological criterion of literary modernism has its own history. To be sure, the phenomenon of fragmented subjectivity is readily observable in the contemporary texts, both fictional and critical. Indeed, the Austrian critic Hermann Bahr used the term “Nervenkunst” (neuralgic art) to promote the trend that Anglo-American readers know, thanks to Henry James, as the “inward turning of the novel.” Bahr advocated the application of the Naturalist technique, which in the work of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Hauptmann had so impressively captured social conditions, to the interior life of the mind. While this inward turn necessarily tended to valorize subjectivity, one does not notice among contemporary modernists the same degree of skepticism that later critics would bring to the discussion of modernism. Indeed, if one looks to the modernist practitioners themselves, one notes not a radical doubt, but a surprising confidence in their effort to portray the modern world. Different tools, foci, methods, conventions—all of these would, of course, be required. But the modernists were less despairing of their ability to produce a compelling literary perspective on modernity than committed to breaking with obsolete realist literary conventions. While any kind of summary statement runs the risk of oversimplification, it may be fair to say that the modernists themselves—as we saw in Eliot, above—viewed fragmented subjectivity as paradoxically enabling, not necessarily crippling. Certainly the New Critical love of paradox would sustain this potential to see loss as gain.

The investment in a radically decentered self became entrenched, it seems, with the ascent not only of Derrida and his disciples, but also of Lacan
and Foucault on the critical horizon during the 1970s and 1980s. Their almost exclusive focus on literary modernism—and one could easily expand this list to include, for example, Kristeva’s interest in modernist poetry as the privileged locus of the “semiotic” and Barthes’s exaltation of the modernist “writerly” text—can in part be explained by the fact that such works offered prooftexts for a cluster of theories that similarly conceived of the self as essentially deprivileged, that is, as an overdetermined site complexly constructed by impersonal forces rather than an autonomous, self-legislating subject. Modernism’s vaunted “epistemological shift” (Stevenson) thus received a powerful boost by the canonization of these critical paradigms, such that the retrospective construction of modernism became significantly more skeptical about the modernist protagonist’s epistemological prowess than the original authors themselves may have been. Approaching Auto-da-Fé through the prism of such theories of course made it even less likely that the novel would be admitted to the properly modernist (read: epistemologically skeptical) canon. In the case of Auto-da-Fé, this point may explain the curious fact that early reviewers of the thirties and forties clearly and repeatedly recognized the novel as modern, experimental, and anti-realist. Yet later critics of the seventies and eighties, influenced perhaps unwittingly by the centrality of subjectivity and epistemology in literary theory, were more ambivalent: Darby, whose study situates the novel within “disintegrative” anti-realist narrative strategies characteristic of modernism, is ultimately bewildered by the presence of a firm narrative structure. He delivers his verdict—which convicts the novel of harboring precisely the epistemologically strong narrative framework identified above—as if it had befallen him to unmask a beloved imposter. Likewise, Dieter Liewerscheidt, operating on the premise that only consonant modernism is valid modernism, acts as if he has discovered a cryptorealistic novel masquerading as modernist, emblazoning his great discovery in the title of his article: “A Contradiction in the Conceptualization of the Novel.”

Lukács and the Loss of the Social

In dramatizing fragmented consciousness not as the modern condition per se, but as something contingent and partial, Canetti approaches the substance of one of Georg Lukács’s fundamental criticisms of modernism,
namely that it universalizes and transcendentualizes subjective human experience. Writing of the modernist treatment of time, Lukács observes: “The uncritical approach of modernist writers—and of some modern philosophers—reveals itself in their conviction that this subjective experience constitutes reality as such. That is why this treatment of time can be used by the realistic writer to characterize certain figures in his novels, although in a modernist work it may be used to describe reality itself... We arrive, therefore, at an important distinction: the modernist writer identifies what is necessarily a subjective experience with reality as such, thus giving a distorted picture of reality as a whole (Virginia Woolf is an extreme example of this). The realist, with his critical detachment, places what is a significant, specifically modern experience in a wider context, giving it only the emphasis it deserves as a part of a greater, objective whole.”

If Georg’s gorilla-fervor represents a particular instance of reactionary modernism—as I have proposed—rather than some quintessential expression of the modern age, then Canetti’s critique does come very close to Lukács’s protest against the uncritical exaltation of subjectivity over the intersubjective social whole. But as the passage above demonstrates, this similarity is itself only partial: for Lukács’s touchstone of “critical realism” is, as he notes repeatedly, the literary representation of that “wider context,” “a greater, objective whole.” And precisely this is missing from *Auto-da-Fé*.

Though Canetti’s novel lacks this *sine qua non* of Lukácsian critical realism, a common spirit of critique nevertheless inhabits the work of both. Lukács never tired of decrying, most memorably perhaps in his signature essay “The Ideology of Modernism,” “the negation of outward reality,” “the rejection of narrative objectivity,” and the “attenuation of actuality,” all lamentable characteristics he located in the work of the recognized modernists Joyce, Musil, Gide, and, of course, Kafka. Again and again, Lukács warned about mistaking a historical symptom (such as the individual’s radical isolation) for a “natural” and therefore unalterable aspect of reality. In singling out Heidegger’s concept of “thrownness-into-being” (*Geworfenheit ins Dasein*), Lukács furthermore opposes what he sees as the ruse of employing the “dignity” of philosophy in order to underwrite an essentially asocial worldview. “This implies,” Lukács argues, “that man is constitutionally unable to establish relationships with things or persons outside himself.”

McFarlane’s rhapsodic endorsement of Kien’s philosophy of blindness would seem to be a case in point.
Auto-da-Fé is thus solidly in line with this kind of critique, though of course it is not Heidegger, but philosophies popular during the Weimar period such as neoempiricism and neo-Kantianism, that form the principal target of the novel’s parody of philosophy, as I have elaborated in chapter 3. Still, perhaps we need to ask how the novel can share the Lukácsian concern for the diminution, or outright abandonment, of the social without providing that putatively necessary corrective of “narrative objectivity.” The answer derives from the dissonant narration described above. Rather than emanating from largely sympathetic consciousness—sympathetic in terms of epistemological stance rather than particular content—the text of Auto-da-Fé derives from figures from whom readers immediately feel distanced. In short, we witness and deplore the reduction of the social as a highly suspect function of their subjectivity; we watch as characters alternately illuminate and darken the social world according to a characteristic obsession, and—given the highly stylized epistemological privilege we enjoy—we recognize and condemn their mistakes. Thus, in contrast to Lukács’s requisite wider context, the critical stance of Auto-da-Fé proceeds from the virtual absence—or at least the suspiciously ephemeral and malleable quality—of the social order.

At this point one might object that wringing critique from dearth of depiction is a very convenient interpretive gambit, and, furthermore, one that could just as easily apply to that body of consonant modernism that I have thus far sought to keep at some distance from Auto-da-Fé. The key difference, however, is that Canetti’s novel foregrounds the figural process of reducing, refunctioning, and excluding the social. Just as Lukács arraigns Heidegger for lending a dubious respectability to modernism, the novel apprehends Kien in the very act of devising a curiously self-serving philosophy to authorize his exclusion of the larger world. I have already made brief reference to Georg’s similarly suspect appropriation of the then-popular philosophical movement known as neoempiricism, which, despite superficial differences, he deploys to similarly solipsistic ends. But this is just one side of perception; in order to make the point, Canetti shows in some of the funniest passages of the novel how objects of perception—real places and cultural objects known to the reader independently of the text—are gradually denied, occluded, or remade in the image of the mad perceiver.

The largest of these cultural données is Vienna itself, which is both eerily present and absent in Auto-da-Fé. In fact, it is its occasional presence and
unexpected reappearance that makes us feel the pervasive absence more acutely. Regarding the modernists’ use of municipal settings, Lukács maintains that “Joyce uses Dublin, Kafka and Musil the Hapsburg Monarchy, as the locus of their masterpieces. But the locus they lovingly depict is little more than a backdrop: it is not basic to their artistic intention.” The Vienna of Auto-da-Fé is no mere backdrop in this sense. The evocation of the Austrian capital, particularly of two great institutions of the old dual monarchy, serves not to host but to contest the subjectivist proclivities of the figures. That architectural and cultural anchor of old Vienna, the Cathedral of St. Stephen, fails to ground or even orient the subjectivist fantasies of Peter Kien, who pauses at the landmark statue of Christ (the famous “Toothache Christ”) only to see himself in this sculpture. Therese indulges similar subjectivist inclinations during her visit to the Cathedral: in the gilded painting of the Last Supper displayed over one of the side altars she is only able to see a “reflection” of her own small and venal world. This is clearly not the “seeing blindness” that McFarlane claimed for the novel; this is rank distortion.

The glimpses we get of Vienna, though admittedly few and far between, provide us that which the figures utterly lack: a point of reference by which to gauge the partisan projections of the self-absorbed figures. The novel’s much more extended focus on the “Theresianum,” a thinly veiled reference to the real-world Viennese state-run auction house cum pawn shop known as the “Dorotheum,” draws our attention not only to the particular economic crises of the Weimar years, but also to the way in which traditional culture was then subordinated in as yet unprecedented ways to the demands of naked commerce. The book-eating ogre whom Fischerle conjures in order to motivate Kien to ransom books is really just the humorous literalization of the Dorotheum’s standard practice of commodifying and consuming art of all kinds. Though the novel’s staging of this interwar crisis of values happens to overlap in part with Kien’s own anxieties about disappearing cultural certainties, the evocation of the Theresianum fails to fully ratify the protagonist’s nostalgia. In fact, both aspects of Vienna depicted in the novel—both the cathedral and the cathedral of commerce—serve to define rather than resolve widespread cultural anxieties characteristic of, but not limited to, the Austrian First Republic. Though this evocation of Vienna would seem too scant to fulfill Lukács’s prescription for social critique, we nevertheless garner precisely this critical vantage point from this modest municipal depiction.
Lukács memorably accused modernism not only of neglecting the wider social context, but also of the “rejection of history,” citing Gottfried Benn’s *Static Poems* as an exemplary realization of the subjectivist tendency that Henri Bergson is said to have sanctioned philosophically. This concern for a lack of authentic historical consciousness resonates also within *Auto-da-Fé,* but with this caveat: whereas Lukács is concerned with the outright “denial of history,” Canetti is more concerned with its perversion as a device for avoiding the anxieties of modernity. As we noted earlier, this kind of spurious “historicism” makes its appearance in the novel not in the form of modern art (as Lukács held), but in the Weimar-era pulp fiction that has somehow found a place in Kien’s august private library and is passed on to Therese as the fare appropriate to the barely literate. Canetti employs the then-wildly popular novel by Willibald Alexis, *The Trousers of Mr. Bredow,* which as we noted was published in school editions for courses on German history during the interwar period, to suggest the suspiciously historical appeal of this literature. Despite the historical veneer, this is sheer escapism, as we saw above in chapter 1, and is therefore rightly juxtaposed with Georg Kien’s addiction to erotic French novels. As in the matter of the requisite “wider social context,” the critique here proceeds by way of negation—or, more precisely, by double negation: the novel rejects the characters’ own dubious rejection of history.

The role of myth in *Auto-da-Fé* should be at least briefly mentioned in this context, for it is the integrating power of myth in high modernism that is typically opposed to the centrifugal force of history. Modernism’s alleged denial of history, to which Lukács draws our attention, often went hand in hand with an embrace of myth. The classic expression of this doctrine is found in Eliot, who famously perceived in Joyce’s *Ulysses* a certain “mythological method” credited as an effective means “of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.” This stabilizing or reconciling function, even if only as an aesthetic effect, has no counterpart in *Auto-da-Fé.* Though myth (differently conceived) would later assume great importance for Canetti in a positive sense, in the novel it serves primarily as grist for a stinging indictment of the “orientalist” construction of misogynistic high culture. Surely Kien’s misogynist *tour de force* near the end of the novel, which draws so richly upon the mythological reserves of Western culture, reveals a cultural canon in crisis. The novel’s unrelenting analytical modern-
ism creates in the end a mass of deeply disturbing negations without promise of resolution. Canetti himself claims to have been left profoundly unnerved by the cultural wreckage *Auto-da-Fé* left in its wake.\(^6\) Things finally do not fall together; they fall apart. The novel concludes in a state that is a far call from McFarlane’s notion of “superintegration.”

Underlying Lukács’s entire critique of modernism is the assumption that we are insidiously positioned to side with the protagonist. Deprived of any independent perspective we would derive from a proper sociohistorical context, we are sucked into his subjective reality—subordinated, as it were, to his “unifying vision.” Even if we don’t particularly like the modernist hero, we run the risk, Lukács warns, of mistaking his particular fate as universal, ineluctable, and therefore unalterable. Lukács, in other words, concurs not only that high modernism is tantamount to what we have above termed consonant modernism, but argues that very point from additional angles.\(^6\) Yet then, as now, *Auto-da-Fé*’s markedly dissonant posture complicates this dichotomy, for while it clearly does not qualify as an exemplar of Lukácsian critical realism, neither does it exhibit the ideological dangers against which Lukács so tirelessly inveighed. As we have had numerous occasions to observe thus far, the figures in the novel are schematically drawn, not psychologically nuanced approximations of real people, a point Canetti later underscored, though it is of course easily enough observed in the novel itself. These figures, hardly the subjectivist sirens of Lukács’s antimodernist imagination, are instead quite consciously stylized vehicles for a whole array of social and cultural practices employed in doomed—and perhaps therefore humorous—ways to cope with the experience of modernity. When the novel’s reclusive protagonist seeks to wall himself off from a threatening tide of humanity, ensconcing himself as the master researcher in a caricature of positivist inquiry, we see him as the expression of particular social and intellectual anxieties—not, as Lukács feared, as the timeless epitome of the human condition. Therefore it is precisely *without* directly depicting “the common life, the strife and togetherness of other human beings,” that we come to see the “solitariness” of Kien and company as “a specific social fate, not a universal *condition humaine*.”\(^6\)

The fact that Canetti’s novel shares so much of the spirit of Lukács’s classic critique of modernism cannot, according to the prevailing ideas of the time, have encouraged postwar readers to consider *Auto-da-Fé* as authentically modernist. Given the fact that it ultimately confirms neither Adorno’s
positive nor Lukács’s negative construction of literary modernism, the novel was virtually destined for emargination as long as these and similar views held sway. Yet as helpful as this context can be in situating Auto-da-Fé within what may be a more familiar literary-historical landscape, it may prove refreshing to note in conclusion the artificiality of this gambit. Not once in all of his writings does Canetti refer to modernism in the sense that we have been using it in this chapter. Canetti undoubtedly counted himself among those modern artists, who, as Ezra Pound put it, sought to “make it new,” but he was just as likely to affiliate himself with modern music and sculpture as with literature. He relates feeling quite at home as a guest at Hermann Scherchen’s symposium on modern music in Strassbourg in 1933, “because I had written ‘Kant Catches Fire’ [the manuscript title of Auto-da-Fé] and ‘Wedding’ and was conscious of the fact that with that I, like the composers in attendance, had done something new.” Indeed, Canetti contemplated writing the libretto for one of Scherchen’s modernist compositions. In recounting Fritz Wotruba’s approving reaction to the figures of Auto-da-Fé, Canetti furthermore invites a comparison between his own literary figures and the hard, uncompromising figures fashioned by this modernist sculptor. Canetti felt an intense artistic “brotherhood” (his term) with Wotruba, about whom he later wrote a monograph, and saw his own literary accomplishment reflected in the musical innovations of his friend, Alban Berg. In other words, when Canetti conceived of modernism, his purview was hardly limited to literature alone.

This is not to suggest that Canetti was unfamiliar with the peculiarly literary avant garde of the 1930s. On the contrary, he reports: “During the last four or five years of independent Austria . . . one could hear a trinity of names, which was held high by the avant garde: Musil, Joyce and Broch, or Joyce, Musil and Broch.” All of whom, of course, were known to him well beyond mere hearsay. Joyce attended one of Canetti’s salon readings (though he left at intermission because he was apparently put off by the Viennese dialect), while both Musil and Broch were Canetti’s close friends. Nevertheless, Canetti dwelt less on what these (and other) modernists had in common with regard to technique, theme, or ideology, than with their shared goal of venturing something new and aesthetically challenging. In the end, this was Canetti’s litmus test for respectable modern art: does it pander to conventional taste, and merely titillate, or does it risk “making it difficult,” thereby resisting the allure of commercial success? The “odd trinity”
absonderliche Trinität) of modernists mentioned above was bound together, at least for Canetti, not by some explicit aesthetic program or ideological doctrine, but merely by their desire to negate the literary status quo. “They belonged — this I never doubted — to a very small group of people who with literature made it difficult for themselves, who did not write for popularity or vulgar success. At that time this may have been more important for me than their work.”71 Authors like Stefan Zweig and Franz Werfel, on the other hand, were relegated to the category of the “mundane literature of those years” precisely for trimming their literary sails to market success. Canetti applied the same standard to modern music, as when he excoriated the Viennese public’s “obduracy” in rejecting the experimental compositions of Alban Berg and Anton Webern.72

Canetti’s broad, multimedia conception of modernism, which incidentally shares Adorno’s own rigorous opposition to aesthetic commodification, provides a helpful reorientation, I think, as we conclude this discussion. Unbeholden to any of the high priests of modernism, Canetti continued to tread his own, sovereign path. At a time when modernism was in its heyday, Canetti penned an essay tellingly titled “Realismus und Neue Wirklichkeit” (Realism and New Reality), a piece that appears intent on scrambling the conventional wisdom. Indeed, in one of the very few places where he trains his attention explicitly on modern literature, Canetti pointedly eschews the language of literary modernism, advocating instead a brand of “new realism” that must rise to the challenge of our daunting “new reality.” While it is undoubtedly instructive to contrast his novel, particularly its distinctive analytic structure, with better known high modernist schemas, we might finally permit Auto-da-Fé its own free berth. In these final pages, then, let us permit Canetti’s own achievement — rather than the aesthetic criteria of others — to frame a concluding discussion of the author’s subsequent oeuvre.

The End of Modernism and a New Beginning

The Nazi book burning and ban on “degenerate art” could not have come at a worse time for Canetti. Yet while these developments surely thwarted the reception of Auto-da-Fé in the German-speaking world, they do not fully explain the novel’s marginal relationship to the high modernist canon in the postwar years. After all, Auto-da-Fé had been published in both Britain and
the United States to critical acclaim and had even garnered a major literary award in France before the end of the 1940s. Though never as widely read as, say, Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* (The Magic Mountain), it was certainly known to the cultural elite. We are forced therefore to face the conclusion that *Auto-da-Fé*’s status as a literary “Sonderling” (Auer) has less to do with world history, accident, or neglect than with the fact that it was effectively, though perhaps not consciously, excluded from the high modernist canon—and, of course, with the fact that it is indeed a very different kind of book.

As we have seen, these differences go well beyond the mere surface vagaries of mood, atmosphere, and style. It has been the frankly anachronistic task of this final chapter to transplant ourselves into the period when high modernism reigned supreme in order to work out consciously the ways in which *Auto-da-Fé* found itself at loggerheads with central, though not always explicit, tenets of this movement. Canetti was a modernist who loved Kafka and Musil, but also Balzac and Heinrich Mann (more than Thomas, by the way). If we chafe at McFarlane’s belated and awkward attempt to bring Canetti into the modernist fold, we do so because of a profound sense of misalignment: Kien is simply no Tiresias. Indeed, whether we look to the standards of a traditionalist such as Eliot or to those of the Western Marxist Adorno, we see that *Auto-da-Fé* remains, at a fundamental level, delightfully different. The recent efforts to rewrite modernism as a broad set of cultural responses to the economic ruptures of modernity threaten to obscure the fact that the old elitist canon of great modernist masters was indeed held together by an identifiable and sometimes problematic core of qualities that happen to enshrine much of what *Auto-da-Fé* avidly contests. There were, in other words, good (or at least substantive) reasons for keeping Canetti’s novel at arm’s length. The inclusive, democratizing gesture of the new modernist paradigm should not, whatever other salubrious results it may have brought about, be used to conceal important conceptual differences. As beneficiaries of this modernist perestroika, for example, we can now think of both Rilke and Canetti as suitably modernist, but we would only conflate these rather different novels at our own peril. Though today we might be inclined to read Rilke’s *Malte* as a comment on the anomie of the modern metropolis, as critics have recently urged, what we most assuredly cannot do is read *Auto-da-Fé* as the celebration of the isolated, precious aesthete. In clashing with essential criteria of high modernism, Canetti earned his place
on the sidelines. As a kind of rebel-participant, *Auto-da-Fé* self-consciously set a limit to the modernism of its day.

Yet this discussion, helpful as it may be in defining distinguishing features both of Canetti’s prose and of high modernism’s assumptions, threatens to become somewhat antiquarian. Surely it is an act of academic fancy to imagine *Auto-da-Fé* sitting in judgment on its modernist contemporaries—a kind of intellectual revenge fantasy, perhaps. This would be as misguided as it is fruitless. Though *Auto-da-Fé* can be said to articulate and foreshadow the very arguments that would later bring down the canon of the isolated great masters, this says nothing of the ongoing relevance of that characteristic feature of Canetti’s prose that we have considered in some depth here, namely its markedly analytic quality.

Certainly this is a feature that characterizes all his later work. Canetti unabashedly employed fiction as well as nonfiction to investigate a world he felt to be both increasingly menacing and yet unfailingly awe-inspiring. His three allegedly absurdist plays (*Wedding*, *Comedy of Vanities*, and *The Numbered*) contain generous quantities of hyperbole and the grotesque, yet retain at bottom a recognizable social-critical agenda—and were for this very reason held by some critics to be insufficiently absurd.74 The three-volume autobiography, the most successful of all Canetti’s writings, was published to critical and popular acclaim. Yet, here too, critics lamented the fact that the narrator failed to engage in sufficient quantities of epistemological self-flagellation. He should have indulged in ritualistic expressions of his inability to narrate, they opine; or, at least, he might have foregrounded the incommensurability of the narrating and narrated selves. But here, as in the novel, Canetti thwarted readers’ expectations.75

Canetti’s captivating memoir of his visit to North Africa, *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch* (*The Voices of Marrakesh*, 1968) illustrates the paradox of this analytic prose particularly well. Canetti imparts a series of memorable aperçus into the lives of Arabs and Jews (his visit in the spring of 1954 preceded the Algerian Civil War of 1954–62) without renouncing his status as an outside observer. Ignorant of the native languages—but not of the colonial French—Canetti folds this linguistic handicap into the stories he tells; it becomes the self-conscious precondition of the experiences he relates and the pictures he paints. This frank acknowledgment of his own limited subject position stands not in the tradition of that high modernist, quasi-mystical
“Tiresian seeing-blindness,” but instead demonstrates in an exemplary and timely manner the necessarily dual thrust of any multicultural undertaking: the irrepressible quest to know the other combined with the humility incumbent upon any foreign observer. These two factors, present also in *Auto-da-Fé*, produce remarkable glimpses into the lives of the native peoples. Their voices are recorded in the ears of the European intellectual, but are never fully translated. Canetti’s very title, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, draws our attention to that which the author can never fully comprehend. Though realized in fascinatingly different ways, Canetti’s analytic prose always contains the two elements we have observed throughout this study of *Auto-da-Fé*: a probing gesture toward discovery and an attendant reflection on the difficulty (and sometime futility) of that very undertaking.

With the conclusion of *Auto-da-Fé* Canetti himself was at a dead end. The social sphere he saw threatened by subjectivist fads and philosophies was something representable only indirectly in fiction and by means of negation because it existed for the author principally as unrealized potential. Canetti spent the next thirty-plus years pursuing a positive foundation that would justify his hope for the future of the human community in the face of the demonstrated barbarism of the two world wars. It was not something the young novelist factually knew, but something he fervently sought. Except for those few plays, the best of which, *Hochzeit* (Wedding, 1932), was contemporaneous with the novel and shared its fundamental critique of a radically diminished social sphere, *Auto-da-Fé* represents virtually the beginning and end of Canetti’s fictional output.

Canetti’s second “life’s work,” *Crowds and Power*, can appropriately be seen as an outgrowth of the novel in this larger sense. Not, of course, as a mere extension or repetition of the concerns we have thus far discussed, but as a response to the larger challenges posed in the novel. Indeed, the armchair anthropologist who narrates *Crowds and Power* represents a veritable “Anti-Kien” in that his insatiable hunger for the myths and legends of Asia, Africa, and the Americas exemplifies a constructive option to the euro-centric, misogynistic, and “orientalist” perversions of his fictional predecessor. This new kind of mythological method that characterizes the pages of *Crowds and Power*—not Eliot’s high modernist version—seeks to avoid the subjectivist dangers exhibited by both the Kien brothers by drawing upon the voices of the many, including emphatically those of the non-European
peoples, past and present. If this can be seen as Canetti’s effort to redeem reason and redefine “culture,” it is a markedly literary and poetic undertaking as well. For this anthropological study—if we can after all call it that—not only eschews the accustomed scholarly apparatus in favor of masterful and riveting storytelling, but invokes the sovereignty of the poet in springing—sometimes capriciously and bemusingly—from insight to insight. As the novel is uncharacteristically analytical, this cross-cultural and interdisciplinary inquiry into the nature of masses and the sources of power is imbued with unexpected inflections of the poetic. And while *Crowds and Power* in a sense rebuffs the novel’s protagonist, it also reprises him: this study’s ambition, erudition, and, yes, bombast evoke nothing if not the ghost of Peter Kien.

*Crowds and Power* ventures this answer to the question posed in the novel—an incomplete answer, to be sure (Canetti had planned a second volume), but one that is based on a dauntingly expansive survey of world mythology, folklore, and anthropological reports: We are by nature social, and this is a fundamental characteristic, not an epiphenomenon of drive-sublimation, as Freud would have it. Furthermore, we possess the primal ability to evolve toward higher forms. In naming this most optimistic of qualities, Canetti borrowed a term from his beloved Kafka, “*Verwandlung,*” thereby characteristically encoding a warning even at his most sanguine moment: the potential for human metamorphosis can go either way. Canetti’s postulation of the transformative power recorded in myth comes only after hundreds of pages documenting patterns of atrocity and barbarism. It offers, finally, a whiff of optimism, a modicum of hope that contrasts starkly with—and responds to—the novel’s dark and unpromising ending. In this way, then, Canetti’s personal departure from literary modernism set the course for a creative new beginning.
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