

## Party im Blitz

*Die englischen Jahre*

*E. Canetti*

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Canetti goes to many a party. He does not like it. He is critical of the English, their aloofness, their class consciousness, and the frustration of never really getting to talk that matters, all those cocktail flurries. But most of all, one suspects, Canetti is frustrated at being treated as a nobody. No one really knows him, he has not published anything that the English have ever read (his 'Blendung' was to be translated a bit later into the war years).

Are those notes to be read at all? Canetti never published them, but kept on writing them until his death, and as such they form part of the writers 'Nachlass'. There is a problem of publishing extracts from the left over papers, because after all they are unfinished and tentative, and you never know whether the author would have approved of their publication in the first place. And also, even if he in principle would have, the final form would have been very different. As they now come out they provide a disjointed narrative, with lots of repetitions and non sequiturs. As a pendant to his autobiographical trilogy (apart from his novel I read in English twenty-five years ago, his autobiography is essentially what I know him through) it might be too light-weight. There is gossip, but preciously little of evocation of time and space. But maybe Canetti was so aloof from the surroundings that this is really not even an issue. The rationale for posthumous publishing is that Canetti would have wanted it. That it was the dead mans most fervent wish to survive his death, by having his writings project beyond it. Buttressed by such a conviction the editor can with a good conscience offer the dish to a titillated public.

Quite a number of people pass by. Some of them of little consequence, most of them either famous or glamorous. In short this is a book of gossip, and the reader turns its pages to savour those small trivial secrets, which we imagine provide a key to our social world, which some claim is the only one that really exist. So some of the disclosures are fascinating, others are tedious. What stick in my mind are his brief encounters with Bertrand Russell. The first time around it is at a small intimate tea-party, hosted by an older lady, who was the bosom friend of Russells first wife Alice, and who boasts that she could make Russell appear at every notice, no matter how short; so deep indeed is the guilt he feels at his treatment of his first wife. The Russell that appears strikes Canetti by his shortness of stature, and its erectness, as that of a fire poker. Russell is of course brilliant, speaking with exquisite articulation, and the author is reminded of the men of letters of the 18th century. But his refinement breakes down when he laughs. It is the laugh not of a human but of a goat, and turns the man into a satyr. It is a laugh that is hard to listen to, abrasive and loud, and what is worse, he does it often and extendedly. They say that a good laugh prolongs your life, maybe if so we have been treated to the secret of Russells longevity. Canetti has been joined by his homosexual aristocratic friend

the Baronet Aymer Maxwell, and the latter declines Russell a ride back. But so what. Russell the octogenarian disappears in the London fog with a spring to his step. Some time later Canetti encounters him again, this time at an official function. China has fallen and the returning ambassador gives a public lecture. Russell is there, after all he spent time in China and even wrote a book on the country. Afterwards he treats the former ambassador to a cross-questioning. Canetti happens to be within earshot. He is amazed, not to say stunned, by the rapid fire of Russells questions, their cleverness, their depths. The poor ambassador has to do his damnest to keep up. So much erudition being vollied back and forth, as if at a ping-pong table. Afterwards Russell turns around and spots a young and very beautiful woman. Beautiful as only the women of English aristocracy can be, Canetti muses wistfully. Russell does not muse, he picks up, and soon the two of them are gone. Russell is over eighty.

Russell is but a marginal figure in the social universe of Canetti, although a figure he exempts from the usual shortcomings of the English, in particular their snobbishness and aloofness. Russell had been very much alive at the tea-party, engaging in conversation going to the quick. Canetti is not so much interested in the philosopher, let alone the mathematician, as the men of letters and the men of paint or chisel. Kokoschka is one of the few fellow exiles he treats in his remembrances. Kokoschka feels deep guilt. He and Hitler applied both for a stipend to pursue art. Hitler was rejected, he was not. If the roles had been reversed would that not have meant that there would not have been a second world war? How can we tell? Had it been the case, we would never had had the occasion to put this particular question in the first place. Why this guilt? The need to feel important?

Iris Murdoch. Canetti writes in his capacity as a former lover. He is condescending. Murdoch as a philosopher the less said the better. Here there is little need not to agree with him. As a writer she is amusing, and once again I agree. The problem with her is that she never outgrew Oxford, this provided the bubble of her universe. This might be true, yet I cannot but observe, that we are all in bubbles of our makings, and you can do much worse in choosing other bubbles. When he met her, she was yet unpublished and in her early thirties, while he was fourteen years older. Was he taking advantage of her? Exploiting her willingness all too eagerly? Her face is not ugly he concedes, but he finds her feet too coarse in her sandals. He can really never forgive her, that she never found it worthwhile to dress up for him, while she did so once for his aristocratic buddy - Maxwell, putting on a transparent blouse, as if that man, the effete homosexual, would ever notice. The Irish Iris true to class, trying to ingratiate herself with one, who would have nothing but contempt for her. Canetti is suffering. Divided loyalties, but in the end he rejects her.

'Masse und Macht'. This is the work on which Canetti is engrossed all those years. The work that would make his reputation. Who ever reads it now, who ever takes it really seriously? But we all need the illusion of our life, a prop with which we boost our confidence and keep our sense of dignity. Canetti lacked neither. The picture on the cover reveals him as a teacher, or maybe more accurately as a 'Gelehrte'. Active until the end of his eighties, still blessed with a vigorous mane of hair. His ears loom large at the back of his head as they all do with the very old.