

This article investigates the link between developing “maturity,” in the Kantian sense of the term, and increasing linguistic competence as it is presented in Elias Canetti’s autobiography *Die Gerettete Zunge*.

Immanuel Kant’s essay, “What is Enlightenment?” begins with the statement “Enlightenment is the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority.”¹ In the essay, he clearly links the idea of Enlightenment with the development of “Mündigkeit.” This term, commonly translated as “maturity,” may also be linked, as it is in Kant’s essay, with the idea of developing an independent voice which expresses a critical reason of its own, rather than following the reasoning of another. Kant makes clear that the demand for critical reason requires linguistic competence, since this facilitates expression of one’s own words and creation of one’s own meanings. Peter Handke’s play *Kaspar*, acting as a critique of the Enlightenment, also shows how language as a social product may not only enable a speaking voice to come into existence, but also shape the potential expression of that voice, thereby negating any possibility of a completely independent voice.²

It may be argued that this problem is brought out most clearly for those whose linguistic competence is impeded through having to speak in a language which is not their first language. It is commonly accepted that learning foreign languages leads to an increase in “maturity,” since it is considered to enhance one’s ability to see the world from different points of view. Subjective assessments are put under greater scrutiny through an active “othering” of the self, produced by encountering the unfamiliar interpretive framework presented by the new language and culture. This “othering” of the self, while contributing to enhanced critical reason, may, however, simultaneously undermine the entire project of critical reason. In being presented with an alternative interpretive framework, the language learner comes to discover the inherent situatedness of the truth assumptions encoded in his/her first language. The enhanced critical reason developed through learning another language comes to question its own being and thus the very basis from which any search for absolute truth could be conducted. The following discussion examines Canetti’s own struggles with “Mündigkeit” as he develops linguistic competence in a range of languages.

In Canetti’s autobiography, struggles to acquire different forms of language, both written and spoken, are represented throughout the text. The approach taken here to interpreting the text involves a Lacanian analysis. Some of the points raised are also made by Waltraud Wietholter in his very detailed and enlightening analysis of the text; however, the parallels with the Oedipal situation are overwhelmingly

striking.³ Jacques Lacan's concepts of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic are very useful for tracing Canetti's development and his relationship to the languages that he speaks and writes. Lacan's idea of the symbolic realm, a realm entered into as a person grows into language, will be productively compared to the process of developing "Mündigkeit." It must be borne in mind here that the symbolic does not just refer to language, but also to culture.⁴ The symbolic is, however, to be understood as being structured like a language.

The development of Canetti into a "man of letters" will be examined in terms of how this evolution reflects changing relations to both his father and mother and how his own subjectivity and voice function in relation to them.⁵ An autobiography cannot be expected to represent the reality of a particular time exactly, not least because of gaps in memory and the fact that this autobiography is so well structured, with consistent themes running right through the text, suggests a high degree of literary construction. Wietholter implies that the text may not be "based on actual events,"⁶ but perhaps "presents what Freud called a fantasy projected backwards and understood to be a compromise, the expression of repressed elements and simultaneous defence against them."⁷

Before turning to an analysis of Canetti's autobiography in terms of Lacanian theory, it will be useful to outline Lacan's recasting of Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex. The place of unity in which the child starts out, unable to distinguish him/herself from others, is what Lacan calls the Real. There is no language in the Real, since the child exists in symbiotic unity with the world around him/herself,⁸ and language is necessarily predicated on lack, forever pointing to what is not there. It is only once the child has an awareness of disunity and desire for the other that a subject position within language becomes relevant. In Lacan's theory, the child only gains awareness of his/her own self as a distinct individual through a misrecognition—the child sees him/herself in a mirror and mistakes the image for his/her own self. This forms the stage called the Imaginary. It is a moment of both identification and alienation, since the child can only see his/herself through an external object which projects back his/her own image.⁹ The self is therefore founded on a misidentification with the "other" that the child sees in the mirror and the semblance of unity that this provides. Terry Eagleton suggests that the mirror situation can be read in terms of signifier (the child) and signified (the image of itself which is its meaning). In the realm of the Imaginary there is as yet no gap between signifier and signified—the one stands wholly and completely for the other.¹⁰ This pre-Oedipal stage is never quite overcome, but is modified as the child enters the symbolic realm.

The child enters this realm once s/he becomes aware of the father as a third party in his/her relationship with his/her mother. According to Freud's theory, in the child's desire to be with the mother and to be reunited with her in symbiotic unity, the child wishes to usurp the father's position and as a result fears castration by him. The child, on learning language, gains unconscious awareness of the fact that a sign only has meaning through its difference from other signs and that it also represents the

absence of the object indicated by the sign. Just as the child is learning this about language, s/he also gains awareness that familial relationships are structured in the same way. S/he must enter into a world of sexual difference and experience the lack of that which s/he most desires—union with the mother.

Lacan develops Freud's theory by indicating that the child cannot literally desire to adopt the father's position since this would entail incestuous relations with the mother. The father instead represents an unobtainable ideal also known as the Name-of-the-Father. It is the imposition of this law onto the unbridled sexual desires of the Real which forms the basis for culture and the symbolic. Similarly, the desire for the mother represents a desire for lost unity rather than an actual sexual desire for the mother. It is the phallus, then, which, according to Lacan, brings about the awareness of difference which is necessary for entry into the symbolic order:

the phallus is the object of the mother's desire and [the child's] own desire for the mother. In [Lacan's] recasting of Freud's description of the Oedipus complex, the subject's insertion into language and the symbolic is a form of castration which obliges the child to recognize that it cannot possess the phallus because it is not an attribute of an individual, but a symbol. It is the symbol of sexual difference in that there is no corresponding female symbol or signifier; both male and female subjects are constituted as male and female with reference to it.¹¹

To summarise, by disrupting the unity of mother and child, the father not only allows the child the possibility of its own identity through identifying with the father, but also enables the child to take up a subject position within language through awareness of absence (the absent mother). The father, as functioning principle of the symbolic order, threatens the child with lack, through castration. In order to avoid this, the child learns to repress his/her desire for the mother which is sublimated to the unconscious, thus effecting a split in the subject.

As already mentioned, Oedipal themes run through Canetti's text, but it is in the very first few paragraphs that we see the clearest links between language as representative of the symbolic order and the fear of castration. The young girl employed to look after Elias has been having liaisons with a young man which the couple wishes to keep secret. The man tells Elias to stick out his tongue, Elias obliges and the man threatens to cut it off with a knife. This scenario occurs on several consecutive days:

“Show me your tongue.” I stick out my tongue, he reaches into his pocket, pulls out a jackknife, opens it, and brings the blade all the way to my tongue. He says: “Now we'll cut off his tongue.” I don't dare pull back my tongue, he comes closer and closer, the blade will touch me any second. In the last moment, he pulls back the

knife, saying: “Not today, tomorrow.” He snaps the knife shut again and puts it back in his pocket.¹²

Here begins what appears an increasingly troubled relationship to the symbolic, which is exacerbated by the death of his father. From this point on, Elias’s relationship to his mother develops something of the pre-Oedipal/pre-linguistic closeness once lost by entry into language. Elias comes to take on his father’s role, literally taking his father’s position in bed beside his mother:

for a few months after his death, I slept in my father’s bed. It was dangerous leaving Mother alone ... I couldn’t console her, she was inconsolable. But when she got up and stationed herself at the window, I leapt up and stood next to her ... We did not speak, these scenes did not take place with words.¹³

Their intimacy is wordless—they are united as in the pre-linguistic symbiotic realm of the Real. This pre-linguistic intimacy is to be shattered by Elias’ birth into a new language, German.

Birth into German

Before his father’s death, German had been a language of intimacy between Elias’ parents, from which the children were excluded. It was the language in which they had fallen in love,¹⁴ and when speaking German they grew “very lively and merry.”¹⁵ Through not knowing German, Elias not only feels excluded from a certain intimacy with his mother, but also excluded from the adult world of his parents. He is kept “unmündig” by his lack of understanding in the German language: “I would listen with utter intensity and then ask them what this or that meant. They laughed, saying it was too early for me, those were things I would understand only later.”¹⁶ Because of his exclusion from German, the language develops an aura of magic, as if it were the key to uncovering the world’s mysteries. “I believed they were talking about wondrous things that could be spoken of only in that language ... I repeated to myself the sentences I had heard from them, in their precise intonation, like magic formulas.”¹⁷

Elias reveals a similar passionate desire to uncover as yet incomprehensible significations when he describes his feelings about being excluded from the joys of literacy. His passion is so intense that he is willing to commit murder to attain his goal. Again, we see anger at those older than himself being privy to “mysteries” of language, to which the young Elias does not yet have access. In this case, it is his cousin Laurica, with whom he has previously shared everything, who now has access to the “Buchstaben” which he cannot yet understand. From considering himself to be at least her equal, she now has superior status. Canetti describes Elias’s relationship with Laurica in the following terms:

I never let her feel that she was only a girl and a youngest child. Since my brother's birth, when I had started wearing pants, I had been keenly aware of my dignity as the eldest son. Perhaps that helped to make up for the age difference between us.¹⁸

Elias's annoyance at being excluded from the "adult" language of his parents, is reiterated in his desire to be considered at least as grown-up as his cousin or preferably more grown-up, superior to her, through being an "older brother" whereas she is just the youngest child, and a girl besides. When she goes to school and refuses to show him the letters in her schoolbooks, it is a threat to his position on the hierarchy of human knowledge and authority. If Laurica has access to knowledge that Elias does not, then he will be found lacking in point of "Mündigkeit," and this is unbearable to him:

she changed altogether towards me, letting me feel how small I was. Day after day, she let me beg for the notebooks; day after day, she refused to give them to me ... From afar, she held an open notebook out at me and shouted: "You're too little! You're too little! You can't read yet!" ... She lifted her arms with the notebooks far over her head, she was much bigger than I, and she put the notebooks up on the wall. I couldn't get at them, I was too little, I jumped and jumped and yelped, it was no use, she stood next to the wall, laughing scornfully.¹⁹

It is too much for Elias. He goes to fetch an axe and returns crying, "agora vo matar a Laurica! Agora vo matar a Laurica! 'Now I'm going to kill Laurica!'"²⁰ Fortunately, his grandfather races out of the house to prevent the dreadful act.

As in many other sections of the autobiography, in this scene access to language is intimately bound up with a desire to be responsible, mature and in control.²¹ As already shown, this may be related to a desire to take on his father's role and gain entry to the symbolic, through becoming a master of language and of culture. In a literal sense it is his father who initiates him into culture, and encourages him to develop his own mind and express his own voice from the age of six. Elias has just started school and his father brings him a copy of the *Arabian Nights*, saying that he should try to read it, and tell his father each night what he has read. He promises that Elias will receive another book on finishing the first. So it is through this symbolic exchange, the translation from the written to the spoken, that his father encourages a process of "Mündigkeit" and integration into the symbolic. This integration is heightened by the fact that the books chosen are the classic texts of Western culture, adapted for children. The books shape Elias's subjectivity within a very specific cultural heritage²²—they present to Elias a language with which he can interpret the world²³ and appear to offer a language with which he can form his own opinions. However, as suggested in the

Handke text, it is doubtful to what extent an individual voice, independent of the written/spoken texts through which it has been educated may come to exist at all. Despite the doubtful originality of his voice, for Elias the fact of his father listening to his opinion is very important, and he sees it as being given a special responsibility—he is the one to be listened to, rather than the one doing the listening; he is heard and approved of:

he never stopped immediately and never sent me away without first telling me a story that I hadn't heard before. "Think about it!" he said ... I felt solemn because I was supposed to think about something; he never neglected – sometimes days had passed – to ask me about it. He would then listen very carefully and finally approve of what I had said. Perhaps he really did approve of it, perhaps he was only trying to encourage me; the feeling I had when he told me to think about something can only be described as an early sense of responsibility.²⁴

Being given this opportunity to use his own reason, Elias senses that he must "dare to be wise" and develop his own "Mündigkeit."²⁵ A new sense of responsibility and maturity begins to separate Elias from his younger brothers. Since his conversations with his father began, he has grown tired of his younger siblings,²⁶ perhaps sensing that he is growing up, identifying more now with his father, in a process not unlike that described by Freud, in which the young boy must identify with the father in order to separate himself from the mother and develop as an individual.

This effect of developing "Mündigkeit," engendered by the conversations with his father, is heightened by the fact that his father requests that he talk to him about the books in English. It is as if with each new language learned, Elias is being initiated into another stage of childhood and the process of growing up. He has moved on from being an impulsive five-year-old crying out in Ladino that he is going to murder his cousin; he is now going on seven and learning to express his opinions on William Tell and Napoleon in English. His intimacy with his father is founded in English. The family has moved to England and Elias shares walks with his father beside the Mersey, his father also sharing his favourite English words with his eldest son: "he had told me the English word "meadow," and he asked me for it during every stroll. He felt it was an especially beautiful word; it has remained the most beautiful word in the English language for me."²⁷ We can see in this passage the level of identification with the father that Elias has already developed. One of the words which his father considered to be beautiful has developed superlative status in Elias's imagination and in representing lost intimacy with his father is now for him "the most beautiful word in the English language."

The importance for him of his father's words is made clear in Elias's memorisation of the address his father was teaching his brother just before the father

died. The words themselves are inconsequential, it is their symbolic importance as the words of his father, the last words he heard from his father, which gives them such a prized place in Elias's identity:

but he reappeared the very next morning and got my little brother to talk. "Georgie," he said; "Canetti," said the boy; "Two," said Father; "Three," said the boy; "Four," said Father; "Burton," said the boy; "Road," said Father; "West," said the boy; "Didsbury," said Father; "Manchester," said the boy; "England," said Father; and I, in the end, very loudly and superfluously, said "Europe." So our address was together again. There are no words that I have retained more sharply, they were my Father's last words.²⁸

So we see that of his two parents, before his father's death, Elias is more intimate with his father, and barely misses his mother when she leaves England to recover her health in Bad Reichenhall.²⁹ He feigns missing his mother for his father's sake. However, his relationship with his mother is to change a great deal after his father's death. This is the time of his birth into German. Through learning the language of his parents' intimacy he comes to fill the gap that his father's death left both for his mother and himself. He continues to speak in his father's place and finally occupies the position of responsibility and maturity that he aspired to when younger.³⁰ His emergence from childhood and into the world of responsibility entails a new language being drilled into him. This drilling begins with his mother's implication that the time for playing is over, as she insistently cries across the street to where he is being cared for by a neighbour:

"My son, you're playing, and your father is dead! You're playing, you're playing, and your father is dead! Your father is dead! Your father is dead! You're playing, your father is dead!" She yelled it out into the street, she kept yelling louder and louder, they yanked her back into the room by force, she resisted, I heard her shouting after I no longer saw her, I heard her shouting for a long time. Her shouts pushed Father's death into me, and it has never left me since.³¹

His mother's words drive the reality of his father's death into him. The father tongue is being replaced by the mother tongue; but this is not the language of dialogue that he experienced with his father, rather it is a language which drills itself into him and forces the creation of a new identity. This mother tongue begins by constructing versions of Elias's father's death, withholding information from him about an event which stands at the very centre of Elias's life.³² The mother plays a painful game as she constructs and deconstructs Elias's sense of himself, through the changing words

she uses to talk about his father's death: "she realized she was smashing me to bits when she told me anything new about my father's death. She was cruel and she liked doing it."³³ It is only after Canetti has produced the first great story of his own, his first book, that his mother finally tells him the truth as she herself saw it. The production of her definitive text about his father's death, in response to Canetti's own text, creates a dialogue within a relationship which, as will now be shown, has known little equality.

The deep-running tension³⁴ in his relationship to his mother produced by his father's death is not lessened by the fact that Elias had never been shy about showing preference for his father over his mother before his father's death.³⁵ In a Lacanian interpretation, the death of his father presents an opportunity for Elias to return to symbiotic unity with his mother, and/or an opportunity to usurp his father's position of intimacy with his mother. A regression to a pre-linguistic physical state is made possible, yet this does not remove the fact that both mother and son require someone to fulfil the roles previously held by the father.³⁶ In the beginning we see that mother and son express this through physical proximity—Elias sleeps in her bed and comforts her by putting his arm around her at night. In this way he regains pre-Oedipal closeness to his mother while simultaneously fulfilling his father's role. However, this form of closeness cannot suffice long-term. The mother requires the son more completely to occupy the father's place. In the few short weeks in Lausanne preceding their impending move to Vienna, she drills the German language into him. He is allowed no access to a German book, but must learn by repeating the German sentences after his mother, perfecting the pronunciation before being allowed the English translation. Elias is learning to speak without meaning, parroting abstract words and learning the language in a way that confirms his mother's position of authority over him. She uses the possibility of her scorn as a stick, whereas his father had used his approval as the carrot.³⁷ It is through these forceful methods that she implants a new mother tongue. What is now demanded of him, goes beyond the usual capability of any child, in the language of his parents' love, Elias is to become a man: "so, in a very short time, she forced me to achieve something beyond the strength of any child, and the fact that she succeeded determined the deeper nature of my German; it was a belated mother tongue, implanted in true pain."³⁸ It is the pain of his birth into the German language which binds Canetti both to the language and to his mother. "Without these two, basically one and the same, the further course of my life would have been senseless and incomprehensible."³⁹ Henceforth his life is given meaning through German and through his attachment to his mother; but does Elias have the opportunity to give his own meaning, to attach his own words, to his life?

Just as Elias takes on aspects of his father's role for his mother, she begins to do the same for Elias. She gives him books to read and asks for his opinions on them before she gives her own, trying not to influence him. Hearing Elias give his views revives his mother's memories of long evenings spent with his father discussing theatre. Elias is growing quickly into the adult that his mother requires:

the more intelligently I responded and the more I had to say, the more powerfully her old experiences surfaced in her. As soon as she began talking about one of those old enthusiasms, which had become the inmost substance of her life, I knew that it would go on for a long time; it was no longer important now for me to go to bed, she herself could no more part from me than I from her, she spoke to me as an adult.⁴⁰

Their relationship is perhaps a distortion of the original Oedipal story, since it is one both of equals in love as well as one of a mother's authority over her son. Yet, along the lines of the Oedipal myth, there is a sense in which the literary education Elias' mother gives him may be construed as a form of punishment by blinding, for Elias' "usurpation" of his father's role. In reading literature Elias grows more and more blinded to the world outside the texts he reads, so that he comes to interpret what he sees in his environment through literature, rather than giving his own eyes primacy of interpretation. In this case it is the written word which disturbs the development of an individual identity and search for meaning—page after page shielding his eyes from the glare of the world; leaving Elias in darkness.

One of Elias' greatest joys as a young boy is to play "Dichterquartett" with his friend, Hans.⁴¹ In this game, one boy completes a quotation just as the other begins to say it. These "other" words, part of the cultural heritage into which the boys are being schooled, are easily made into a game, since in using expressions created by others, the boys are not responsible for what they are saying. Elias's developing obsession with literature acts as a means of retreat into less responsible forms of language, being a realm where he can play with others' words and ideas.

Even in speech, outside of the authority of literature, it is difficult for Elias to develop his own voice. Once the family has moved to Switzerland, his mother deplores the Swiss German phrases that she hears her son using. They do not meet the standards of the Burgtheater, which she has instilled into him. For his mother, only languages with a literature are valid languages. Elias begins to practice Zurich German in secret

I practiced Zurich German for myself alone, against my mother's will, concealing from her the progress I was making. That, so far as language went, was my first independent move from her, and although still subjugated to her in all opinions and influences, I began feeling like a "man" in this one thing.⁴²

Despite the fact that this is Elias's first use of a language not taught to him by his mother, and in that sense is indeed a step towards "Mündigkeit," as suggested in *Kaspar*, the development of "Mündigkeit" is not so simple. Elias's "rebellion" is only

conducted in secret, and is more about a desire to conform to the society in which he now finds himself, than any celebration of individual difference or development of opinions independently of his mother. What makes his voice different from his mother's renders it the same as those of all the boys in his class and enables him quickly to overcome possible alienation and establish friendships.⁴³

The voices of others, whether written or spoken, continued to dominate his world view. His painful birth into German, and into German culture through his mother, is to be betrayed by an equally painful renunciation on his mother's part of all that she had previously stood for. After Elias cannot stop talking about hearing people in a village, who are living in difficult circumstances, speaking Old High German,⁴⁴ his mother realises that his blindness to the world has gone too far:

ever since you visited Lötschen Valley, your mind's been degenerating. You heard two words, and what were those words? "Come, little boy," or however they pronounce it there ... You came back from your excursion and spoke about Old High German for days on end. Old High German! Today! They may not even have enough to eat, but why should you care! You hear two words, you think they're Old High German because they remind you of something you read. That gets you more excited than what you see with your own eyes.⁴⁵

In a vehement attack on his literary leanings, she accuses him of existing only through books: "you're nothing as yet and you think you're everything you know from books or pictures. I should never have led you to books."⁴⁶

Canetti is later to satirise this "blindness" of existence in his novel *Die Blendung*.⁴⁷ Rather ironically, "[he] satirized bookishness by writing a book."⁴⁸ Sokel considers that Canetti demonstrates that his novel "had not only been a self-caricature and self-judgment but also a rebuttal of her accusation that led him to a victory over her."⁴⁹ Yet it is highly questionable whether the writing of the book in fact represents a victory over his mother. Firstly, he is continuing in the literary tradition she passed onto him and secondly, the fact of his writing the novel may be viewed as the culmination of their Oedipal relationship—Canetti produces for his mother her own child. She promptly claims the copyright for herself claiming that the book: "sei wie von ihr," "sei Fleisch von ihrem Fleisch, sie erkenne sich in [ihrem Sohn]," denn "so, genau so, hätte sie immer schreiben wollen."⁵⁰ Her own voice speaks through her son.⁵¹

If we take Canetti's father as representative of the position of authority within society, and subject position within the symbolic order, which Canetti was developing before his father's death, then we may consider that the loss of his father before maturity destabilises his relationship with language and unifies his voice with that of his mother, as if he was still one with her in the womb. Yet, as Wietholter makes clear, *Die Blendung* is also a highly original work. In writing, Canetti continually defends himself against his mother's influence, creating himself as his own authority and his own

piece of literature. Unlike Handke's Kaspar figure who cannot defend himself against the irrational potential of language, Canetti finds a way to make his own ordered meanings within the constraints of the literature with which he is familiar—using old words to create a new voice. His writing forms a constant struggle to rise to the challenge of “Mündigkeit.”

NOTES

¹Mary Gregor, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 17. In the original: Immanuel Kant, “Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus Seiner Selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit,” in *Was ist Aufklärung?* ed. Erhard Bahr (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1974), p. 9.

²Peter Handke, *Kaspar* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967). The main character, based on Kaspar Hauser, begins as a speechless adult, but is increasingly alienated from his environment and himself as an individual through having to make his perceptions and emotions fit the language into which he is educated.

³Richard H. Lawson, *Understanding Elias Canetti* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1991), p. 22, describes Canetti as a “vigorous anti-Freudian.” This does not prevent, as Lawson himself says, “the psychologically inclined reader from invoking it.” In order to be “anti-Freudian,” knowledge of Freud's theories is required, so that one cannot help wondering if Freud's discourse has “unconsciously” made its mark on the text. Even if this is not the case, the Oedipus Complex, taken metaphorically, does provide an interesting and productive framework for interpreting the text.

⁴David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 374.

⁵As representatives of the “social” and of authority.

⁶The German translation is “tatsächlich.”

⁷Waltraud Wietholter, “Sprechen-Lesen-Schreiben. Zur Funktion von Sprache und Schrift in Canettis Autobiographie,” in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* (DVLG) 64, no.1 (March 1990): 149-171. “Vielmehr darstellt, was Freud eine rückwärts projizierte Phantasie genannt und als Kompromißbildung, als Artikulation und gleichzeitige Abwehr verdrängter Elemente, begriffen hat.”

⁸Lacan assumes a particular symbiotic unity with the mother.

⁹Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), p. 143.

¹⁰This is comparable to the sixteenth-century discourse of resemblance described by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (NY: Routledge, 1970), p. 33: “to search for a meaning is to bring to light a resemblance. To search for the law governing signs is to discover the things that are alike.” Meaning is not deferred along a chain of signifiers but is complete in likeness.

¹¹Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary*, 296.

¹²All Canetti translations are taken from Joachim Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free: Remembrance of a European Childhood* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1979). See Elias Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge: Geschichte einer Jugend* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1979), p. 7. “Zeig die Zunge! Ich strecke die Zunge heraus ... Er klappt das Messer wieder zu und steckt es in seine Tasche.”

¹³Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 45. “Während einiger Monate nach seinem Tod schlief ich im Bett des Vaters ... Wir sprachen nicht, diese Szenen spielten sich nicht in Worten ab.”

¹⁴Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 32, “überaus lebhaft und lustig.”

¹⁶Ibid., p. 32, “ich hörte ihnen mit der größten Anspannung zu und fragte sie dann, was dies oder jenes bedeute. Sie lachten und sagten, es sei zu früh für mich, das seien Dinge, die ich erst später verstehen könne.”

¹⁷Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 32.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 38-39. “Sie veränderte sich ganz und gar zu mir und ließ mich meine Kleinheit fühlen ... Ich kam nicht hinauf, ich war zu klein, ich sprang und sprang und japste, es war umsonst, sie stand daneben und lachte höhnisch. ”

²⁰Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 30.

²¹The two do not always go hand in hand. In the silent scenes with his mother after his father’s death, he takes on a quiet responsibility for his mother’s well-being. See Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 38. “Towards evening, Mother and I dined at a small card table in the yellow salon ... I was seven, my Mother was twenty-seven. We had an earnest, civilized conversation, the house was very still, there was no noise as in the nursery, my mother said to me: ‘You are my big son,’ and she inspired me with the responsibility I felt for her at night.” See Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 46.

²²Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 40. “It would be easy to show that almost everything that I consisted of later on was already in these books, which I read from my father in the seventh year of my life.” See Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 49.

²³One key aspect of Canetti’s autobiography, as will be shown later, is the dubitable authority of literature as an interpretation for the world.

²⁴Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 66. “Er machte nicht gleich Schluß und schickte mich nie fort, ohne zum Abschied eine neue Geschichte zu erzählen, die ich noch nicht kannte ... das Gefühl, das ich hatte, wenn er mir auftrug, über etwas nachzudenken, kann ich nur als ein frühes Gefühl von Verantwortung bezeichnen.”

²⁵To whatever extent this is in fact possible.

²⁶Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 54. “Since I’d started reading the books that Father brought me, I found my brothers boring or a nuisance; and the fact that Mother took them from us and that I had Father all to myself was the greatest luck.” See Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 66.

²⁷Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 51. “Er hatte mir das Wort für Wiese gesagt, es lautete meadow, und fragte mich bei jedem Spaziergang danach. Er empfand dieses Wort als

- besonders schön, es ist für mich das schönste Wort der englischen Sprache geblieben.”
- ²⁸Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 68. “Doch schon am nächsten Morgen erschien er wieder und brachte den kleinen Bruder zum Sprechen ... Es gibt keine Worte, die ich mir besser gemerkt habe, es waren die letzten Worte meines Vaters. ”
- ²⁹Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 55. “After a couple of weeks, he asked me whether I would mind if Mother stayed away longer. If we were patient, he added, she would keep improving and would come home to us in full health. The first few times, I had pretended to miss her; I sensed that he expected me to.” See Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 67.
- ³⁰This, as in the Oedipal myth, can only occur at the cost of being blinded, as will be seen later.
- ³¹Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 69.
- ³²Ibid., pp. 70-71.
- ³³Ibid., p. 71.
- ³⁴Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 60. “There had been long, heavy struggles between us, and she had often been on the verge of disowning me forever.” See Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 73.
- ³⁵Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 61. “I had let her know in every way that I like Father better, and when I was asked the question that so cruelly embarrasses children: ‘Who do you like better, Father or Mother?’, I didn’t try to wriggle out of it by saying ‘both the same,’ I pointed, without fear or hesitation, at my father. ” See Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 75.
- ³⁶Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 70. “The dreadful cut into her life, when, at twenty-seven, she lost my father, was expressed most sensitively for her in the fact that their loving conversations in German were stopped. Her true marriage had taken place in that language.” See Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 86. “ihr Liebesgespräch auf deutsch mit ihm [war] verstummt ... In dieser Sprache hatte sich ihre eigentliche Ehe abgespielt.”
- ³⁷Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 67. “Disliking my accent, she made me repeat the sentence several times, until it struck her as tolerable. But this didn’t occur often, for she derided me for my accent, and since I couldn’t stand her derision for anything in the world, I made an effort and soon pronounced the sentence correctly.”
- ³⁸Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 86. “So zwang sie mich in kürzester Zeit zu einer Leistung, die über die Kräfte jedes Kindes ging, und daß es ihr gelang, hat die tiefere Natur meines Deutsch bestimmt, es war eine spät und unter wahrhaftigen Schmerzen eingepflanzte Muttersprache.”
- ³⁹Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 91. “Ohne diese beiden, die im Grunde ein und dasselbe waren, wäre der weitere Verlauf meines Lebens sinnlos und unbegreiflich.”
- ⁴⁰Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 97-98. “Je verständiger ich reagierte, je mehr ich zu sagen fand, um so kräftiger stiegen die alten Erlebnisse in ihr auf ... es war dann nicht mehr wichtig, daß ich schlafen ging, sie selber konnte sich so wenig von mir trennen wie ich von ihr, sie sprach dann zu mir wie zu einem erwachsenen Menschen.”

⁴¹Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 135-136.

⁴²Ibid., p. 162.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Neugroschel, *The Tongue Set Free*, 251. “‘*Chuom Buobilu!*’ (Come, boy) she said. What vowels those were! Instead of *Büebli*, which I was accustomed to hearing for ‘little boy,’ she said *Buobilu*, a rich dark structure of *u*, *o*, and *i*; I recalled the Old High German verses we read at school.” See Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 299.

⁴⁵Canetti, *Die Gerettete Zunge*, 315.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 311.

⁴⁷Lawson, *Understanding Elias Canetti*, 28. “*Die Blendung*, means the blinding, and it must be that of Kien [the protagonist], however metaphorical, to which it refers. What blinds—besides poring over scholarly books? ... Kien is literally inhuman in that he detests people, whom he imagines to be inferior to himself, and loves books, loves acquiring books, collecting books, reading books.”

⁴⁸Walter H. Sokel, “The Love Affair with the Mother Tongue: On the Relation Between Autobiography and Novel in Elias Canetti,” in *Germanic Review*, 78, no.1 (Winter 2003): 39-48

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Wietholter, “Sprechen-Lesen-Schreiben,” 149-171. “As if written by her, her own flesh and blood, she recognized herself in her son, since it was thus, precisely thus, that she had always wanted to write.”

⁵¹Wietholter, “Sprechen-Lesen-Schreiben,” 149-171. “Bis zu ihrem Tode blieb sie davon überzeugt, sie habe es dem Sohn nicht bloß eingegeben, sondern im Worsinne ‘diktirt’ [*Das Augenspiel*, 305] ”—until her death she remained convinced that she had not simply inspired her son to write the novel, but had literally dictated it to him.