

# FRUITS OF THE FIRE



a historical and literary fantasy

by

Piers Burton-Page

Two elderly Austrian writers meet again in London,  
and relive a traumatic episode in Vienna during  
the Twenties. In a wave of political protest, on 15 July 1927  
nearly ninety people died and the Palace of Justice was  
set ablaze. The two men witnessed the mobs and the  
violence from opposite sides – and the scars have still not healed.

CAST

Elias Canetti

Heimito von Doderer

Gusti Hasterlik

Veza Canetti

Iris Murdoch

*A brief montage of riot sounds: running feet, cries of panic, sirens, horses' hooves, vehicles, gunshots. Flames, initially barely perceptible, grow to an inferno, swamping all else. Fade. Lights up.*

Gusti Hasterlik: I saw it all. The 15th of July was a Friday. The heat was intense, the sun blazing down from early morning. I remember coming out of my flat in the suburbs and being almost blinded by the glare. I remember walking to the tram stop to catch a tram into the centre of the city. It took a while before I realised everywhere was unnaturally quiet. There was a man already at the tram stop and he told me he'd been waiting nearly half an hour. It was very unusual. Then someone else went past and said we might be there all day. The electricity workers had gone on strike at 8 o'clock that morning to take part in a protest march. There'd been ugly scenes already, and the stand-off might turn nasty at any moment.

Doderer: I too was there, trying to understand. It went back to an episode at the start of the year. Over by the Hungarian border, at a nondescript place called Schattendorf. Clashes between left and right. One lot provoked the other and two people were killed: a member of the Republican Brigade, and a child.

Iris Murdoch: I wasn't there, I was in London. But I read their names in the paper. They were human beings after all, like you and me. The man was Matthias Csmarits, who'd already lost an eye in the First World War. The boy

was his nephew Pepi Grössing, who'd come with some of his friends to watch the marchers. Pepi was 8 years old.

Canetti: I followed the Schattendorf trial closely. There were three accused: right-wing vigilantes. The verdict was a shock: they were all acquitted. It was a jury trial. Everyone thought the jury had been rigged. In fact it was split. 7 for guilty, 5 for not guilty. But it needed a two-thirds majority. That's why the three men were acquitted and released. It had been very close. But the Vienna electricity workers were not to know that.

Veza Canetti: I too was in Vienna early that morning, and saw the protests on the streets. Provoked at least in part by an inflammatory leader in the *Workers' Paper*: I read it over breakfast. People swarmed in from the suburbs to join the marchers. By 9 o'clock there was a sizeable crowd outside the Parliament building. The policemen on duty were quite outnumbered. Reinforcements arrived. Mounted police, with drawn sabres. Someone clearly thought the revolution had started!

Canetti: I could see the Palace of Justice from the Parliament building. It was the next best target especially if you thought the judicial system was loaded against you. It was virtually unprotected and I watched people entering unimpeded. In the windows they held up portraits of the old Emperor they'd found still hanging in the offices – this was a Republic, remember. So then they began throwing out

files from the Land Registry: a lot of Austria was still feudal. And then dousing them in petrol, lighting them, and throwing them back in. The first signs of the fire that destroyed the Palace of Justice were seen at 12.28.

Doderer: I saw the fire start, and the armed police, and then the rioting. A police station and newspaper offices ransacked. And then, soon, the deaths. 89 of them, on the streets of the most civilised city in the world: my city. 90, if you count the boy who took six months to die. Hans Erwin Kiesler; a chemist's assistant. More than a thousand people were wounded.

Iris Murdoch: I read later that of the 89, only 4 were policemen. There wasn't a single firearm among the demonstrators. In all probability those four policemen were killed by their own side.

Doderer: "Friendly fire."

Canetti: Mildness was not the order of the day. When Schober the Chief of Police consulted the Chancellor, Seipel, about possible police intervention, he was instructed to be merciless. Seipel became known as the merciless priest.

Thousands of otherwise god-fearing Catholics would refuse to let their children be baptised as a result.

Veza Canetti: I noticed from where I was watching that some of the policemen were young men, recruits barely out of training school. Nothing in their training could have prepared them for clashes on this scale. Yet they were issued with carbines and live ammunition. At first they fired over the heads of the demonstrators. Then under pressure they fired into the ground at the feet of the crowd. The bullets shattered and inflicted terrible wounds. The demonstrators by contrast could only grasp at whatever came to hand, stones or the odd iron railing. They might as well have had pitchforks.

Gusti Hasterlik: I remember seeing the Mayor of Vienna, a mild-mannered and much-respected man by the name of Seitz, Karl Seitz, standing bare-headed on the back seat of an open car with his arms outstretched, imploring the demonstrators to let the Fire Brigade through. They wouldn't. They wanted to burn to the ground this justice that was no justice.

Iris Murdoch: I also remember reading, later, that the statue of Justice, or rather Iustitia, which stood on the landing of the entrance staircase, inside the Palace of Justice, was found amid the ensuing wreckage to have survived almost entirely unscathed.

*The same brief montage as at the start of riot sounds: running feet, cries of panic, sirens, horses' hooves, vehicles, gunshots. Flames, initially barely perceived, grow to an inferno, swamping all else.*

*Abrupt cut-off. Then, footsteps along a pavement, exterior door knock, door opened.*

Canetti: You!

Doderer: Why not?

Canetti: Why?!

Doderer: Too good an opportunity to miss. One last chance to see the world through different eyes. Your eyes. The eyes of Elias Canetti: which like his ears have never missed a trick in 70 years. The titles of your books say as much: *The Torch in my Ear*, *The Play of the Eyes*. Besides that – I'm dying, Canetti. We all come to it in the end; but my end is apparently a little bit closer than most. So my doctor tells me anyway. You think I want to settle old scores, no doubt. No. The reason is more banal: I have to do a reading.

Canetti: Here? In London?

Doderer: At the Austrian Institute! Presumably you're an occasional visitor. With your cosmopolitan background and your excellent qualifications as a wartime intellectual émigré, they can hardly keep you out. You could even come and hear me read. Bring Veza. Your wife, remember.

Canetti: I'm not entitled. This may surprise you but I've never held an Austrian passport, ever.

Doderer: I find that strange: Austria is after all a house for nomads.

Canetti: Whereas you Doderer are Austrian through and through, it's visible to the naked eye a mile off. You're so .... what is the word? Insular. For you, Austria is an island, adrift in the middle of Europe. That's what I'd say if I wanted to be kind. If I wanted to be unkind ....

Doderer: And Veza?

Canetti: I beg your pardon?

Doderer: Your wife. Veza Canetti. If she still is your wife.

Canetti: She's seeing the doctor. If you had warned us of your arrival.....

Doderer: What does it say in her passport?

Canetti: Austrian. She was born in Vienna. Like you, Doderer.

Doderer: Tarred with the same brush, then.

Canetti: What exactly are you going to read to this long-suffering audience of yours?

Doderer: 'Long-suffering' – how easily spiteful you are, Canetti. In that respect you've scarcely changed one iota. Solidarity amongst writers means nothing to you, does it? How many have you destroyed on your way up the ladder?

Canetti: I've read all your stuff, Doderer. I admire quite a lot of it and I'm glad to have this unexpected chance to tell you so. I don't *like* it at all, that's different. But technically, stylistically, it's excellent. The hand of a master craftsman is everywhere apparent, if I may say so. In fact I'm envious. I was never a natural novelist, my one and only masterpiece in the form practically killed me. I think more in abstract, in conceptual terms. Whereas you – stories pour out of you unstoppably. *Words* pour out of you unstoppably; which in my view is a criminal offence. What did you say you were reading?

Doderer: I didn't; I couldn't get a word in.

Canetti: *Touché!*

Doderer *mock pompous*: I shall be reading from my longest, largest, and most important novel: *The Demons*.

Canetti: Title with apologies to Dostoyevsky, no doubt.

Doderer: Precisely. I thought I would read them the penultimate chapter. Can you recall it?

Canetti: Of course I can; even though it's a thousand pages in. A chapter called 'The Fire.'

*pause*

Canetti *continuing*: Is that why you've come to see me?

Doderer: In a way, yes. 'The Fire': the climax of the book, the point where all the lines meet, history and politics and people's personal stories and life and death and love and hatred, all converge. Even fiction and reality. The Fire was a real one. As well you know. You saw it. You wrote about it, too. That Fire binds us together, whether we like it or not.

Canetti: The 15<sup>th</sup> of July, 1927. I've not exorcized it, even yet. I doubt if I ever shall.

Doderer: There we agree for once.

Canetti: Why do you think I live in London? We escaped from Vienna ten years later with our lives. It's my view – maybe I don't need to tell you of all people – that the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1927 is the seed of the Austrian catastrophe. Not just the Austrian catastrophe: the European catastrophe. The date *needs* ritual commemoration.

*Music*

Canetti: Think back, if you dare, over the years. Think back from Hampstead in 1963 to your own beloved city, in 1945. Did you love it then? Rubble everywhere, wrecked houses, derelict offices, abandoned tanks, unexploded bombs. Nothing working, power, heat, light, transport, endless queues for food, the black market, fear of reprisals, advancing Russians, Americans, British, French. Money: meaningless, if you had it – most didn't. You could easily stumble over a corpse. Rats in the cellars. Fear in the air, still. The lack of jobs. The lack of hope. In 1945, Vienna was scarcely breathing.

Doderer: 1945, and the end of Doderer's war. But which one? Understand this,

Canetti: I was in them both! A prisoner, in both! I was over 40 when Chamberlain finally overcame his endlessly fastidious reluctance and declared war on us. But still called up, 'summoned to the colours.' The Luftwaffe, in my case: but by now far too old to fly, which was probably a blessing not in disguise. Grounded, then; all over the place: even eventually in occupied France, Mont-de-Marsan, in the Landes: a very ancient and quiet and beautiful corner of old France, fascinating for a historian such as I was and underneath still am. It was never arduous and seldom dangerous. I had ample time to think. And write. But I was eventually made a prisoner of war, by the British. Very civilized they were too: marmalade at breakfast. I think they recognized a gentleman; underneath the Nazi uniform.

*Music: Radetzky March*

Canetti: Dare to go back, even further, from 1945 to March the 12<sup>th</sup>, 1938: a Saturday. The arrival of Hitler in Austria: his native country, I need hardly remind you. A country in chaos and deep confusion, split into many parts. And so in 1938 the whip hand is raised by of all people our own neighbours, in the name of discipline and control and authority and Might is Right. Fire as the symbol of Nazi power is visible spurting everywhere: from weaponry, on insignia, at the burning of books and bodies, in the ovens.... The Anschluss, which the Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg, though a hard-liner himself, attempted at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour to resist and who made a final broadcast to the nation with Nazi guns trained on his back. It chills the blood to hear it, even now.

FX: extract, Schuschnigg's final speech (in German): *fade after 'Ultimatum gestellt'*

Voice-over (in English): Germany has given the Austrian President an ultimatum: he must propose a candidate acceptable to them as Chancellor and form a new government in accordance with Germany's proposals, otherwise the entry of German troops into Austria cannot be excluded.

Extract in German, now audible again: *So verabschiede ich mich in dieser Stunde von dem österreichischen Volke mit einem deutschen Wort und einem Herzenswunsch: Gott schütze Österreich!"*

Doderer: 'God save Austria!' But He didn't; not for a long time. Nor had he, previously. Schuschnigg's predecessor, with a name that could have come straight from one of my novels, Engelbert Dollfuss, hardly a liberal either, more of a hardliner even than his successor, wedded to the idea of the authoritarian Catholic state. But that wasn't enough to save him either. Dollfuss was murdered by Austrian Nazis, in the Chancellor's own office, in 1934. After the shooting they would fetch neither doctor nor priest and he bled to his death. There are people who want to see him canonised for that but Dollfuss was no saint. He'd already turned Austria into a one-party state.

*Music – Horst Wessel Song*

Canetti: That song makes me want to vomit. It became a Nazi anthem.

Doderer: You've always claimed the moral high ground – but there were plenty of people with a far clearer eye than you for the consequences, the terrible future. They saw it all coming. You do not have a monopoly on outrage.

Canetti: Nor do you, Doderer. Perhaps, on our way back to 1927, we might also consider the figure of Heimito von Doderer, novelist, historian and military man, a little more closely. When Germany and Austria are so forcibly joined at the waist in 1938, you take advantage of the trans-border freedom to cross it. This is a man who doesn't just leave Austria to go and live in Munich, this is a man who has to choose one specific suburb of that city. Dachau. In 1938. When the camp

has already been in place for five years. When everybody outside knows what is going on behind Dachau's high walls and razor-wire – I mean, how could you keep it quiet? People were disappearing all the time, their friends knew, their families knew. In the compliant newspapers of the time they were branded as 'undesirable elements', 'antisocial characters' – such phrases were the beginning of the end for the German language, by the way.

DODERER: Which has yet to recover.

Canetti: And in Dachau, Doderer shuts his eyes and blocks up his ears and thinks he's "a writer." If that isn't living in sin, I don't know what is.

*Gusti Hasterlik has entered*

Gusti Hasterlik: There is worse than that.

Canetti: Who are you?

Gusti Hasterlik: His wife.

Doderer: My *first* wife. Gusti Hasterlik. Real name, Auguste. Thank you for this wholly unanticipated appearance, Gusti. We hadn't expected ghosts!

Gusti Hasterlik *ignoring him*: Yes. His first wife. We lived together as man and wife for all of two years. We met in the aftermath of the Fire so to speak, Doderer and I. Heimito *von* Doderer, incidentally. The von made him an aristocrat, though

rather a recent one. His father was boss of the Vienna waterworks. They had a town house and a country estate up in the hills. The name 'Heimito' came from the Spanish, Jaime. His mother liked it. So did I; unfortunately. I thought it sounded Jewish.

Canetti: Please explain yourself.

Gusti Hasterlik: I have Jewish blood. He does not. Far from it. Insofar as we believed anything at all, my family were Catholic; but our ancestors were more than Jewish enough for the Nuremberg Laws to apply. And for us to wear the yellow star.

Canetti: Frau Hasterlik, when did you first realise you were marrying an anti-Semite?

Gusti Hasterlik: I knew before we were married; he made no attempt at concealment. But he said it was absolutely not personal. 'Some of his best friends ....' and all that sort of thing. A phrase one often heard in Vienna at the time!

Canetti: Did it affect your relationship?

Gusti Hasterlik: The years before our marriage were turbulent to say the least: quarrels and reconciliations all the time. We were married in 1930. I should have known better. But I was young. It was over on day one. Although it took me another two years to realise it.

Canetti: And later?

Gusti Hasterlik: He joined the Nazis. In the Spring of 1933. When they were still legal in Austria. The party was banned just a few weeks later. That was typical of Heimito's luck. Or judgement. Or the lack of it.

Canetti: He joined the party on the rebound from you, would you say?

Gusti Hasterlik: He was a sympathizer all the time I knew him.

Canetti: It could have embarrassed him, once to have been married to a Jew?

Gusti Hasterlik: To say the least.

Canetti: When did he divorce you?

Gusti Hasterlik: Not immediately. Not until 1938. In hindsight I don't know why he waited so long. Or maybe I do: he was putting not just me but my entire family into his novels and needed us around.

Canetti: Divorced in 1938! Would you describe that as the act of a brave man? It looks more like utter moral cowardice. Saving his own skin. Knowingly condemning you to ....

Gusti Hasterlik: I was simply glad to have him right out of my life. I needed a divorce or at least my husband's permission to flee Austria. I was just in time. My father died in a camp: Theresienstadt.

Canetti: Have you spoken to Doderer since 1938?

Gusti Hasterlik: Do you think I would wish even to see him? That great swollen head is still full of poison and hot air. He hasn't changed: his books prove it. He re-wrote the first big one after the war, the one he's reading from here in London, to make it less obviously anti-Semitic; but you don't have to look very far to find the traces.

Canetti: What do you mean?

Gusti Hasterlik: I'm there in it still. Hardly disguised at all. The name is transparent. Siebenschein.

*pause*

Doderer: There are mitigating circumstances. My first and greatest misfortune was the year of my birth: 1896. Old enough to be conscripted at the start of World War 1. Young enough to be conscripted at the start of World War 2. Young enough in World War 1 to be fighting the Russians and to be taken to Siberia as a prisoner before the Russian Revolution, and to spend years doing nothing in captivity except dreaming up adolescent stories. When I finally got home I was already an adult but I became a student again. I was still living off my parents in my thirties. I was bisexual and married. I was not in control. Not in control of my life. My own life.

Gusti Hasterlik: Let alone anyone else's. Let alone mine.

*Gusti Hasterlik exits*

Doderer: By the day of the Fire I was 30 years old. Experienced, yes. A Russian prisoner-of-war camp sees to that. Mature? No. All of a sudden history was

staring me in the face and I had no idea how to react. How many conspiracy theories can you assemble against one particular date? The 15<sup>th</sup> of July if you believed the newspapers – an action which always seems to me a sign of weak-mindedness – the 15<sup>th</sup> of July was either a Jewish plot or a communist plot or a right-wing plot or a government plot or a combination of all four.

Canetti: You've forgotten the Catholics.

Doderer: It might also of course have been a newspaper plot: press barons are no new thing. The pro-government organ was the *Neue Freie Presse*: in my humble opinion, neither New nor Free.

Canetti: And not much of a newspaper in consequence. The *Reichspost* was just as biased and just as bad. In 1927 it fanned the flames of the Palace of Justice Fire shamelessly. It called the verdict in the Schattendorf Trial a 'just' one. That's why there were workers on the streets.

Doderer: The deaths were discussed in the Austrian Parliament, of course they were. The leaders of both sides had their speeches printed in large quantities. Seipel, the Chancellor. Otto Bauer, for the Social Democrats. There was a pamphlet war. What sickens me is that in all that rhetoric, all that paper, what got lost was precisely what mattered most: the human dimension, the 89 corpses. To

say nothing of those hundreds more who were seriously wounded, physically, and doubtless scarred mentally too: wounds that never heal.

Canetti: The speeches are more interesting than you suggest. There are references to Antigone, burying the dead, literally and metaphorically. The proper burial of the dead implies the respect of the living, left behind. The expiation of guilt, even if only the guilt of survival. Isn't there a profound human lesson there?

Doderer: If the leaders on both sides had to reach for classical analogies that quickly, it's no wonder they seemed out of touch!

Canetti: Only one man rose above the moral turpitude of those days. His name was Karl Kraus. The greatest crusading journalist the world has ever seen. And a poet too. Kraus put up posters all round the city condemning the chief of police and saying this was the only way to make him answerable to this crime against humanity. He wrote and sang and printed a satirical song against him too, about how he'd only been performing his highest duty.

*Song: Karl Kraus: Schoberlied*

*Veza Canetti enters during the song*

Veza Canetti: You two speak and argue as though you were the only eyewitnesses. You, and Karl Kraus maybe. I was there too. Is there any room for a dissenting opinion?

Doderer: That depends. Canetti prefers black and white: he needs to, he writes only short books. A real writer should be prepared to indulge in numerous shades of grey, but that takes many pages. Who are you?

Veza Canetti: My name is Veza Canetti.

Doderer *shocked at her real presence*: Frau Canetti! This is an honour and a pleasure.

Veza Canetti: Please don't call me Frau Canetti. I am not his property. Property is theft.

Doderer: Your husband probably claims he'd said that. But he didn't, he only thinks he did. I'm sorry we meet only at this late stage in our lives. Canetti kept you well hidden, even in 1927.

Veza Canetti: Elias couldn't bear the idea of competition. And still cannot. You see: I, too, write.

Doderer: You're a writer?

Veza Canetti: Yes. Besides that, I live here, this is my home.

Canetti: It seems to me there are too many pen-pushers in this room for comfort.

Veza Canetti: I had to use his name, my married name alas, since my first name was such a mouthful: Taubner-Calderón.

Doderer: Calderón? Spanish?

Veza Canetti: Another Sephardi Jew, yes. From that point of view at least, Elias and I were well matched.

Doderer: Were you present, you also, all those years ago in Vienna?

Veza Canetti: I saw things with greater clarity even than Canetti! But there was only room for one pair of eyes and they weren't mine. Let me tell you something about that great novel of his, *Auto-da-fé*. The one he boasts of as *the* fruit of the Fire. In April 1927 he'd moved out into the Vienna suburbs: near the zoo. His landlady allowed female visitors: but only one, me; provided I called myself his fiancée. From his window you could look directly over to the hill on which stood Vienna's main lunatic asylum, Steinhof. Make of that what you will: with

hindsight, I make a good deal! Before the Fire he'd sketched out plans to write *eight* different books simultaneously: he fancied himself as a kind of Austrian Balzac, with Vienna as the focus of a new 'human comedy.' If that's not actual madness, it's certainly ambitious; especially for someone who was a chemistry student at the time. After the 15<sup>th</sup> of July he began to focus on just one of his comedy's component parts. The novel's central character was going to be a man of books, a book-man, a book-*worm*; someone whose entire experience of life came through the printed word. A classic ivory-tower intellectual - the ivory tower being in this case our flat in Hietzing. *That* was one character Elias had no problem creating. The character's name was originally just B, for Bookman. That felt too anonymous; so he became Brand – as in branding, yes? In turn that came to seem a bit obvious, so then it was Kant: for the intellectual dilemmas the name offered. By 1931 he'd finished, at some cost to our engagement I may say. Then it took another four years to get it published. There were countless rejections. Thomas Mann sent back the manuscript unopened: you can imagine Elias's reaction. Finally it was accepted. And on the brink of publication, Hermann Broch persuaded Elias to change the name once more: calling him Kant would immediately tie him to the real Kant and make the book seem like a historical novel, even though we all knew it wasn't. So Kant became Kien, Peter Kien. And Canetti was in that room in Hietzing for six years, looking out for inspiration at the inmates of Steinhof.

Canetti: I changed the title too. In English it became *Auto-da-fé*: I've never approved. That has too many echoes of another historical event, the burning of heretics by the Spanish Inquisition. Heretics of course only in the eyes of the Inquisitors: nowadays, most victims are presumed innocent. All the same the book does end with a conflagration. Peter Kien is ignited by his own hand, in an auto-da-fé of 25,000 books.

Doderer *to Veza*: The burning of books, graphically described, and already in 1935. Had he always wanted to be a prophet?

Canetti *interrupting*: I wanted the honour of being me. And of being an *accurate* prophet too .... But they were burning books before then.

Doderer *still to Veza*: How long have you been married?

Veza Canetti: Almost 30 years.

Doderer: Has he always been faithful? Please forgive me, I'm trying to discover the real Canetti, if there is such a thing.

Veza Canetti: He has never been faithful. There were lovers even in the first year of our marriage.

Doderer: How did you spend the War? Did you stay in Vienna?

Veza Canetti: We came to England in 1938. We were unknown. We barely survived. I had bouts of depression, total despair.

Doderer: Presumably he helped you, as a writer?

Veza Canetti: I helped him! In return, he almost destroyed me. I felt like committing suicide: many times.

Doderer: Thank you Frau Canetti. (*Veza Canetti exits. Doderer now to Canetti*)

What you have done to that woman could easily be classed as a criminal offence. Basically, you've always lied, to her and to others about her. That's to say you turned her into a saint, you created a hagiography of her, that may indeed have had elements of the truth in it, but which Veza wouldn't have recognised or acknowledged and by which she was unquestionably embarrassed. You turned your wife into a figure of fiction. Why?

Canetti: For my own survival. Learning to survive is one of the lessons we all have to learn. Including you, Doderer. However, since you're apparently determined to examine my failings in so gracious and public a manner, perhaps I can return the compliment. Let us contemplate for a moment, and only for a moment, *your* literary career. In the light, this time, of the illuminating perspective

already supplied by your ex-wife. Your first wife. Or should that be your first ex-wife, I get confused? You were born, as you claim, from the 'crucible of war' – you were always one for the telling cliché. How many books, in all?

Doderer: A dozen. Maybe one or two more. It depends on your definition of a book. It's an elusive concept after all, even in your own case. Especially in your own case.

Canetti: Your readership outside German-speaking countries? Minimal, I'd suggest; not more than a handful of specialists.... and most of those with a pronounced tendency to masochism.

Doderer: The masochist says 'Hit me!' - and the true sadist denies him the pleasure. Which one is you?

Canetti: Touché! A neat double-bind: my compliments. But writing not one but two novels over a thousand pages long, as you've done, Doderer, is a form of sadism practised on your readers, and in turn requires those readers to be masochists. To finish a Doderer novel, all you need is patience: the patience of Job.

Doderer: One of my all-time favourite literary characters. I've always thought of him as an Austrian.

Canetti: Who?

Doderer: Job.

Canetti: You think of everything in terms of Austria; that's why your books don't sell anywhere else, that's why no one has heard of you: least of all here in England. You're nothing but a provincial, a local writer.

Doderer: "And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name."  
The local was good enough for him.

Canetti: Who wrote that?

Doderer: Shakespeare. You may have heard of him. My position is straightforward enough. The local, or the provincial as you seem to prefer to call it for purely pejorative effect, is a metaphor: I nearly said 'merely a metaphor.'

Canetti: Despite taking Vienna as the central metaphor for *The Demons* it took you 1000 pages to say – what? Precisely nothing. Despite making the Fire the climax of the whole thing; or trying to.

Doderer: *You* thought, eventually, you could force truth into aphorisms. But slogans lead only to catastrophe.

Canetti: You painted only the surface.

Doderer: And you confused your dreams with reality.

Canetti: My nightmare came true. I was honoured as a prophet.

Doderer: Not in your own country. Austria still hates you.

Canetti: My home is here in Hampstead. From Hampstead I can see the world. In Vienna you can see only – Vienna.

Doderer: A lie! Turks, Germans, Italians, Czechs, Poles, Hungarians .... look at the map. You're nothing but a Wandering Jew!

Canetti: Better than a stay-at-home Catholic fossil.

Doderer: I went East, to the Russian front, and came back. You went West, and stayed.

Canetti: It's you Doderer who's the provincial. Mine is the whole human province.

Doderer: Exile is the last refuge of the scoundrel.

Canetti: Patriotism is not enough.

Doderer: Patriotism is more than enough, it usually means war.

Canetti: I didn't run away from war.

Doderer: I thought you were a pacifist.

Canetti: Peace is not just a political expedient, peace is a moral imperative.

Doderer: The moral high ground again! That way lay Munich and the capitulation of the British Government over Czechoslovakia, a matter of mere months after the Anschluss.... We owe our lives, you & I included, to people prepared to kill.

Canetti: War is always evil.

Doderer: Until you have killed a man, Canetti, you cannot claim to understand the human mind or human history. You're no more than a holy innocent. A virgin.

Canetti: Being a historian has beguiled you and your true abode is the past. If you could, Doderer, you'd resurrect the entire Hapsburg Empire, serfs and all.

Doderer: How many supine Republics has Austria been through since the glory days of the Empire? How many of its governments have collapsed trembling at the knees?

Canetti: History on its own teaches nothing. You need imagination, insight, philosophy. Read Pascal. Read Montaigne. Read – Shakespeare!

Doderer: Read Dostoyevsky.

Canetti: The supreme pessimist.

Doderer: You – the incurable optimist!

*Iris Murdoch has entered*

Iris Murdoch: The novel has room for both!

Doderer: Only at the expense of intelligibility. Do you speak from experience?

Who are you? Another of Canetti's ghosts I suppose.

Iris Murdoch: You speak truer than you suppose. My name is Iris Murdoch.

Doderer: The real one, or are you someone else of the same name? No, don't answer that. Tell me instead: were you too a witness at the great Fire of Vienna?

Iris Murdoch: I know all about the events of that day. I wasn't there. But by the end of our affair, I'd come to feel almost like an eyewitness, yes.

Doderer: An alternative viewpoint would be most welcome. Have you come to offer us one?

Iris Murdoch: Like Canetti, I'm a writer. And a philosopher. And for a time – for too long a time, for three years in the Fifties – I was his lover.

Doderer: Is this true?

Canetti: Yes.

Iris Murdoch: One of the many. Hampstead's answer to Don Juan. More fool me.

Doderer: I'd be more inclined to equate Canetti with Casanova than with Don Giovanni. At least Casanova had a conscience.

Iris Murdoch: Canetti has no conscience. As I said, I'm a writer: I choose my words carefully. Canetti is a monster. He seduced me in cold blood, with his wife in the room next door, working. And then when he'd .... emptied himself into me .... he would revert to his obsessions, almost instantly. Crowds. Power. His books. That Fire. He put me in one of his last books, with no attempt at concealment, or discretion, let alone tenderness. *Party in the Blitz*: what a title.

Doderer: Even if ironic.

Iris Murdoch *ignoring him*: Shades of Nero fiddling while the city burns. More flames; more fire, you notice. The portrait of me in that book is quite the most bitter and cruel and foul-mouthed description of a former lover that it's possible to read. The lowest form of revenge.

Canetti: You were no saint. Our affair proved it. Even though you wanted to be one, thought you were one. But being high-minded and high-browed isn't the same as being a saint, after all.

Iris Murdoch: If you weren't going to be faithful, you could at least have been loyal.

Canetti: I'm glad you recognise they are two different things. Telling the truth about Iris Murdoch was a form of loyalty.

Doderer: I find that a disgusting argument.

Canetti: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

Doderer: That is an even more disgusting and sanctimonious argument.

Canetti: It is, however, relevant to Iris. She did exactly the same to me. Put me in one of her books. More than one, as it happens. The worst of them is actually dedicated to me. *The Flight from the Enchanter*. The Enchanter, that's me.

Except that my name in the book is, wait for it, Mischa Fox. (She is nothing if not obvious, our Iris.) And Iris's Mischa Fox tries at one point to destroy a newspaper run by suffragettes. I was tempted to sue for libel.

Iris Murdoch: Deep down, Elias, you always hated women.... Me. Veza. All the others.

Canetti: And you were the ice maiden. A chilling combination of schoolgirl and headmistress.

Iris Murdoch (*to Doderer*): He couldn't do fiction any more, he was burned out after his single novel. Useless! So he was working all the time on another book,

called *Crowds & Power*. It's about the psychology of mass movements. He called it a kind of 'anthropological poem.' Would you want to read it? It's unreadable.

Canetti: Psychology had not been invented in the Middle Ages. There were no tools to understand what a crowd is, how it works, the movement of its thought. Retrospectively, *I* applied it.

Doderer: Eat your heart out, Doctor Freud: you've allowed Canetti here to psychoanalyse history.

Canetti: I'm no Freudian, I'm fully conscious of my sub-conscious, thank you. I saw what happened on the streets of Vienna on that day in July 1927. The Fire foreshadowed everything that was to come: authoritarianism, civil war, the occupation, the Nazis, the bloodshed, the defeat.

Iris Murdoch: The great Canetti claims the gift of prophecy.

Canetti: Prophecy? Certainly. My book turned the prediction of mass behaviour from one of the black arts into a science.

Iris Murdoch: You fitted me in, Elias, when you needed a break from being a prophet. And the novel is not prophecy. Neither of you knows what the novel truly is. Neither of you understands the writer in relation to history. *She turns to*

*Doderer.* You may have studied history, Doderer, you may even call yourself a historian ... but for you, history is an inconvenience. Had you chosen to, you could have seen as deeply into the flames of 1927 as *he* did – and you too would have seen the books burning.

Doderer *mildly*: In a wider sense, I would say books do not burn.

Iris Murdoch *remorseless*: But you looked the other way. You're fearful of history - because your own history, your personal history, is so riddled with shame and disgrace. You've spent the years since 1945 trying to cover your tracks, in your life and in your books. But it shows; it shows. Where that man there is a monster of vaulting ambition and unquenched lust, every page *you* have written makes your brand of egotistical escapism more and more transparent. Your cowardice is revolting.

A plague on both your houses. Both of them.

*Iris Murdoch exits. There is a pause while her diatribe sinks in.*

Doderer: "Making love to Iris Murdoch was like filling a sack." How could you write that, Canetti?

Canetti: She was a whore like all the rest.

Doderer: I don't think you should use that term. 'Whore' is not polite.

Canetti: Be careful, Doderer; be very careful. There's a mote somewhat too close to your own roving eye. Do we have time for one last case? What about a certain Frau Zeemann?

Doderer: Is she here too? Help!

Canetti: Surely you can appreciate a historical footnote? Forgetting your Jewish first wife for a moment, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1955, less than three years after your *second* marriage has been solemnised according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church into which you'd been received only a dozen years earlier, in the middle of the War, you meet another lady. Dorothea Zeemann is as it happens a widow. You are 59 years old. Your conduct during the subsequent affair will cause such distress on all sides that history repeats itself – again! – and Dorothea eventually goes into print about it. The title of her memoir includes the word 'reptile.'

Doderer: It's more than time I was going. Thank you for this encounter, Canetti. I wasn't sure what to expect, I took a chance. I may as well admit now that I was

just a little frightened. At the last moment my courage almost failed me. I feel marginally stronger now. Strong enough to leave, anyway.

Canetti: You're certain that Canetti's bark is no worse than his bite? What a shame, I always hoped it was the other way around.

Doderer: On the contrary. But fortunately barking is all I can ascribe to you. So far.

Canetti: Be careful. My teeth are still within reach.

Doderer: Hampstead is not as dangerous as Vienna. That is however to say very little. Au revoir, Canetti. Or is it Adieu? I envy you British your ambiguity, even at the last.

Canetti: Who can tell? Goodbye, Doderer. Remember: the pen is mightier than the sword.

Doderer: Only if the sword is a blunt instrument or the warrior confused.

Goodbye, Canetti.

*Music. During it, Doderer exits*

*Zurich, a decade later.*

Canetti: I was outraged by what happened on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1927. But outrage was not enough. 1927 also radicalised me, politicised me. Not just me: us. A whole generation. It's the event to which I owe my whole existence as a writer. Therefore I had no particular wish to exorcise the memory of the Great Fire. Nevertheless I did, eventually. After Doderer died, of course; I couldn't allow him any more *Schadenfreude* than he'd already enjoyed. But die he did, three years after coming to Hampstead. Veza was already dead; she died within a month of his visit. I sometimes wonder if his picking away at her memory, in our Hampstead encounter, killed her; or at least, freed her to die.

We all know what happened to Iris: even I felt a twinge of compassion. Gusti survived the war in America, bitter with Doderer to the end. I ... won the Nobel Prize. And moved to Switzerland: neutral ground. But I went on flirting with Vienna for far too long. An end, of a sort, came only in 1979: at that citadel of spite, the Burgtheater. A revival of one of my plays there was hissed. There was a smell in the air that took me back almost half a century: a whiff of the jackboot, a palpable yearning suddenly manifest among the gold-encrusted Viennese ladies, Klimt look-alikes, all hankering after good old German order. A week in Vienna can corrupt you for the rest of your life. You know them, those ageing women in the Sacher or the Imperial: what is it they're lapping up along with their coffee and cakes? Memories! Memory is important; we must never forget. But

memory brings obligations in its wake. To bear responsibility for our actions; even – sometimes – for those of our forefathers. To reap the benefit of hindsight. To shun violence. To be prepared to compromise. To learn from our mistakes. Maybe even to put one's friend before one's country, if one has a country. We must never rewrite our personal histories to suit ourselves. The Austrian flag is of course red – white – and red. White, and red: milk, and blood, Doderer called them. Spill the one, it's no use crying. Spill the other, we should all weep, for no man is an island. Spill them both, red and white, and we are likely to live a long time with the consequences. Such are the Fruits of the Fire.

*Canetti exits. The sound of flames briefly swells, then fades. Lights down.*

E N D