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German Studies Association

Blind Reflections: Gender in Elias Canetti's 'Die Blendung' by Kristie A. Foell

Review by: Hans-Jakob Werlen

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Auschwitz—no one familiar with this Celan could possibly conclude a book on Celan with an affirmation of his belief in rationality and pacifism. Is this the Celan who indicted God for “an end to the giving of names” and whose self-laceration drove him to commit suicide in 1970?

In general, the Samuels book will be of much more interest and use to general readers relatively unfamiliar with Celan’s poetry than it will be to Celan scholars. The monograph is to be complimented for its seven-page bibliography, and it is especially to be praised for its having a useful index. Finally, the book is handsomely bound.

NICHOLAS J. MEYERHOFER, *Northern Arizona University*

Kristie A. Foell. *Blind Reflections: Gender in Elias Canetti’s ‘Die Blendung.’* Ariadne Press, 1994. Pp. viii, 241. Cloth \$33.50.

Foell’s book is the second recent study on Elias Canetti’s modernist novel *Die Blendung* (*Auto-da-Fé*) published by Ariadne Press. Even though different aspects of Canetti’s oeuvre have lately received excellent critical attention (e.g., Friederike Eigler’s *Das autobiographische Werk von Elias Canetti*), there still is a great need for full-length investigations into his literary and anthropological works. Foell’s project, an analysis of how Canetti’s novel *Die Blendung* represents women in the context of early twentieth-century Viennese theories of gender, promises a rich field of investigation. Unfortunately, the study does not fulfill this promise. Given the novel’s explicit and virulent misogyny and the well known acrimony towards women of writers such as Otto Weininger and Karl Kraus, one wonders how a study intent on revealing the misogynous character of women’s representation in *Die Blendung* can avoid the danger of performing a tautological task? Such a study would have to show how Canetti’s own views on gender, as influenced by contemporary thought and personal background, factor in the literary representation of gender in the novel. The book does not do this.

Foell’s inquiry attempts several simultaneous tasks. She intends to show that Canetti’s novel “depends on deep-seated misogynies for its narrative impact” and “how it presents the male protagonist’s evolving view of women, how the novel comments on his views, and how Canetti has addressed issues of gender and representation in his other writings” (dust jacket text). Such an investigation requires an extensive examination of the novel’s narrative strategies, but Foell also wants to verify her textual findings by comparing them to such authors of early twentieth-century Viennese gender-theory as Weininger, and, to a lesser degree, Kraus and Freud. It is these comparisons (especially to Weininger) that yield some of the more interesting results in this otherwise disappointing study. The endeavor to show that Canetti’s novel depends on misogyny for its narrative impact is less

successful, resulting in a chaotic conflation of diegetic levels and a failed attempt to account for the “subjectivity” of its main protagonists.

Foell expresses great irritation with the “coy treatment of gender issues” (vi) by Canetti. She is right to refuse the author’s attempt to “dictate the terms of a discussion of his work” (vii), yet while Foell intends to analyze gender representation in *Die Blendung* despite the discouraging efforts of its author, she unexplainably agrees that Canetti successfully thwarted a Freudian analysis of himself. Frequently, as when she comments on Canetti’s account of the death of his father, Foell insists that such descriptions “would be obviously open to Freudian interpretation had Canetti not so strongly denied any Oedipal sentiment,” as if his conscious denial would eliminate the possibility of an oedipal configuration. What are the consequences of his mother’s taboo on sexuality and why does Canetti describe his courtship almost exclusively in intellectual terms? These questions should have been explored, especially since Foell establishes a strong connection between male sexuality and linguistic prowess and wonders “whether Canetti is even aware of the significance of his word choice” (8).

While Foell refuses to give a Freudian reading of Canetti himself, she makes ample use of Freudian theory to establish the repressed homosexuality of the novel’s main character, the sinologist Peter Kien. Here, Foell’s knack for connecting Freudian concepts with close readings of the novel leads to some new and challenging insights, especially in the last chapter of the book. The section entitled “Therese as Weiningerian Woman,” which parallels text-examples of Canetti’s novel with passages from Weininger’s *Geschlecht und Charakter* to demonstrate how much Canetti was indebted to Weininger’s notions of “W(oman),” yields several convincing connections. Still, Foell intends to remove Canetti from too close an association with Weininger and misogyny, and the rather helpless statement “If Canetti’s presentation of women in *Die Blendung* is not quite misogynistic, it is also far from feminist” (162) is indicative of her struggle to do so. One strategy Foell uses is to validate any deviation from the pathological misogyny of Weininger in the novel as positive.

Foell’s unsuccessful attempt to read Therese, the main female character of *Die Blendung*, in a psychologically nuanced and realistic way, is the weakest part of the study. Already Canetti’s satirical, even grotesque deformation of all his protagonists should have prevented Foell from doing so. Foell repeatedly agrees that both Kien and Therese are “composite” literary constructs, yet that does not deter her from looking for psychological *vraisemblance* in Canetti’s protagonists. Kien becomes a “person” with specific motives and, maybe due to Foell’s professed sympathy with the figure of Therese, she depicts her as a wronged victim with at least rudimentary emancipatory potential. Foell argues for “a certain amount of subjectivity” (58) for Therese, which would make her more of an equal to Kien. She accuses readers of siding with Kien and of being “ready to accept her (Therese) as a stereotype of feminine negativity” (58). Unfortunately, the attempt

to show Therese as a more complicated “character” is not confirmed by the text which renders her one-dimensionally negative. Foell’s inclusion of Therese in the line of “great literary adulteresses, Emma, Anna, and Effi” (138) is totally misguided and Foell herself is not comfortable with this equation. Still, she accuses (male) readers of falling prey to the novel’s misogynist representation of Therese. Such a faulty reception by readers is, according to Foell, “symptomatic of our misogynistic culture” (164). This last statement is typical for Foell’s penchant for generalizations: interpreting passages of Canetti’s novel as ubiquitous societal shortcomings. Many of Foell’s more hyperbolic speculations suddenly turn a rarely read modernist novel into one of the most dangerous sources for misogyny. Discussing the account from the *Daily Mirror* of the Yorkshire Ripper, whom she connects to Kien, Foell remarks: “This is the predominant thinking into whose hand *Die Blendung* can play, particularly if it is not read carefully” (188).

A more successful way of inquiry for Foell’s project of gender in *Die Blendung* would have been to find the sociohistorical and personal reasons for Canetti’s depictions, but exactly such contextualization is missing. By moving the argument to the level of fictional constructs (Peter Kien, Therese), Foell’s insistence on “subjectivity,” “realism,” and “psychology” leads to too many contradictions and self-cancellations in her findings.

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Günther Schulz. *Wiederaufbau in Deutschland: Die Wohnungsbaupolitik in der Bundesrepublik von 1945 bis 1957*. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1994. Pp. 405. Cloth DM 68,—.

A revision of his *Habilitationsschrift*, Günther Schulz explores a key aspect of postwar reconstruction: *Wohnungsbaupolitik*. All political groups recognized the social and political implications of Germany’s housing shortage. West German *Wohnungsbaupolitik* evolved through three phases: first, a conceptual phase coinciding with the occupation period until 1949; second, parliamentary discussions leading to the first *Wohnungsbaugesetz* in 1950; and, finally, political tacking between *Eigenheim-* und *Mietwohnungsbau* into 1956. These policies effectively resolved postwar housing problems by 1957.

Schulz’s study is consistent with most observations about the problems of reconstruction. The dimensions of Germany’s postwar housing shortage limited practical solutions while encouraging discussion of more ideal solutions. Christian Democrats and Christian Socialists (CDU/CSU) favored the singlefamily dwelling with a garden, Social Democrats (SPD) preferred lower priced communally oriented rented dwellings, and the Free Democrats (FDP) wanted the matter to resolve itself within a free market economy. A more centrist position, CDU/CSU