Much of the debate about Veza Canetti has been conducted in ignorance of her actual life and in only partial knowledge of her work. In the wake of her first posthumous publications (1990s), feminist scholars speculated, sometimes groundlessly, that her husband Elias was to blame for her belated recognition. With the publication of Veza’s Letters to Georges (2006)

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1 Veza writes this note on a letter that Georges had written to her—his angriest indictment of brother Elias—returning it to him (Georges) for safekeeping. Veza and Elias Canetti, Briefe an Georges, eds. Karen Lauer and Kristian Wachinger (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2006), 184–85. The pagination of the Hanser hard cover edition and the Fischer paperback is the same. The endnotes and Namensregister are organized by the respective letter’s page number(s). Thus my reference to the letters will be by page number as well (rather than date of letter), unless the context of the discussion seems to require otherwise. For the ad hoc appendix I have prepared below to aid scholars I use page numbers only. On occasion I have added explanatory names/notes to quotations; all such insertions appearing with in square brackets are my own. Further citations of this work are given in the text. Veza Canetti typically referred to her husband simply as “Canetti,” even when writing to her brother-in-law Georges. I have retained this usage in my essay (and elsewhere), except when the context calls for clarification or considerations of style suggest an alternate, less repetitive locution. Canetti’s younger brother’s given name was the German Georg; this is the name Canetti used even after his brother officially changed it to “Georges” (after having become a naturalized French citizen). They had numerous nicknames and even codenames for each other. Veza is the source of most of these names, it appears.

2 This essay was spurred by an invitation to write a brief review of the Canettis’ collected letters for Modern Austrian Literature. Having realized the futility of doing even a modicum of justice to the complexity of these letters in such a restricted venue, I undertook this article, into which I have incorporated several paragraphs from that original review. I wish to thank the MAL book review editor, Joseph Moser.

3 The best account of this particular matter, as well as of Veza and her work in general, is Julian Preece’s The Rediscovered Writings of Veza Canetti: Out of the Shadows
Hanser; 2009 Fischer Taschenbuch), we now possess a major new addition to her oeuvre. It is tempting simply to apply the debate of the early 1990s to this new material. But that would be a mistake. These letters present a far more interesting challenge than merely pursuing the blame game. Rivalry, jealousy, resentment are all certainly at play in these missives, and some of it clearly in connection with Veza’s unfulfilled potential as an author and with her unrequited desire to see her plays produced in Germany and Austria during her lifetime. Yet in order to appreciate the breadth of these witty, allusive, highly literate, and sometimes manipulative letters, we will need to move beyond the question, Who kept her down? Or, if we cannot do so entirely, we will at least have to include Veza herself as one of the suspects.

Writes Veza: “Die Jaqueline . . . sagte plötzlich, ich soll ihr doch meine Lebensgeschichte erzählen, immer wird von Canetti gesprochen, nie von mir. Ich hab ihr dann weiter von Canetti erzählt” (317). The Canettis’ Briefe an Georges—discovered among the posthumous belongings of Canetti’s brother Georges in 2003—illustrate, but also poignantly illuminate, the persistent (self-) subordination of Veza Canetti to the poetic genius of her husband Elias. She was his scribe, secretary, literary agent, manager, life coach, personal assistant, lector, proofreader, translator, critic, research assistant, ghost writer, archivist, and advisor in romantic matters. Above all, she writes, she aspires to be his “mother.”

In this one-way correspondence with Georges (for this is essentially what this book entails), she comes to see herself as her husband’s biographer, too—or at least as the privileged source for that future work, but no less an author in her own right. Veza views her letters as a kind of literary testament—possibly her most significant. She instructs Georges to archive them carefully and copies out a few for herself. Her intention to control the posthumous image of Elias and herself is furthermore evident in her insistence that Georges destroy a couple of particularly unvarnished letters immediately after reading them. “Ich fühl mich dadurch freier,” she writes, “Dir einen Brief zu schreiben, den Du vernichten wirst” (285).

Twice more in the same letter she insists that Georges expunge said letter from the archive she is already building to the future honor of Canetti: “Diesen Brief wirst Du zereissen, und sofort” (286). On the other hand, there are so many of these requests that one wonders if her stated desire to protect the great poet’s posthumous image is not at some level balanced by a desire to punish him for hurtful behavior. “Die Nachwelt soll nicht erfahren, daß der Dichter Canetti auf so ein hölzernes Idol hereinfällt,” she writes in reference to one of his affairs (179). But then why provide so much incriminating evidence?

Thankfully, Georges honored only her request to save the letters, in part, one imagines, because of his occasional animus toward his brother. We may possess no greater profession of brotherly love in all of world literature than that of Elias to Georges: In 1948, after all manner of dispute, ill-health, material deprivation, and familial tension, Canetti writes: “Weisst Du, dass es sonst niemand auf der Welt gibt, dem ich schreiben könnte, ohne das Gefühl zu haben, dass es sinnlos und verlogen ist” (350), and he concludes this missive with the words: “Dein Bruder Elias (der sich über die Schönheit dieses Wortes ‘Bruder’ noch immer nicht fassen kann)” (353). But all of this devotion, which I take to be quite real, does not hinder Elias, and to a lesser extent Veza, from flooding Georges with requests for favors big and small. In the early years, they unabashedly beg him for money. And when Canetti needs help with the French translation of Die Blendung, he does not hesitate to prevail upon his younger brother, even when Georges is preoccupied with his own work or preparing to undergo yet another operation for his lifelong bronchial affliction.

What we learn from Canetti’s few responses to Georges is that Georges apparently did not hesitate to directly accuse his older brother of treating Veza badly, of bungling the long-lasting affair with Friedl Benedikt, and of faking literary expertise (with respect to Proust in particular) to the larger world. With these attacks, Georges hurt Canetti deeply. I think it is fair to assume that the latter destroyed Georges’ letters both to him and those written (sometimes secretly) to Veza, as they

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4 Veza carefully maintains an archive of reviews of Die Blendung. In a letter of 11 February 1947, she instructs Georges to return the reviews she has sent him so they can be properly archived.

5 See for example the letter in which Veza admits to Canetti that she is leaking some marital secrets to Georges, but assures him (as she relates this to Georges): “ich werd Dir alle diese Briefe wegnnehmen und sie verbrennen, denn ich will nicht, daß die Nachwelt erfährt, was für ein Narr er ist” (247).

6 Canetti needs to reassure Georges (3 May 1948) that he is not just “using” him: “Du musst nicht glauben, dass ich sie [die französische Übersetzung der Blendung] nur aus Nützlichkeitsgründen mit Dir durchnehme” (335).
undoubtedly contained sharply critical views of Canetti, ones Canetti himself hotly disputes in some of the responses to Georges that do survive. The thought of burning these letters (as much as the plan to preserve them carefully) is of course no less an indication of their perceived value.\(^7\)

Having to do almost entirely without Georges’ letters obscures our understanding of what the Fischer Verlag’s overzealous marketing department has dubbed a “love triangle.” We must perpetually surmise from the responses of the other two. Furthermore, there are unexplained gaps in the entire correspondence (from 18 May 1940 to 27 October, 1944; and from 1948-1959), not to mention an abrupt termination of Veza’s letters in 1959, well before her death in 1963. But thanks to Georges’ scrupulous record keeping, we nevertheless possess hundreds of letters starting from the Nazi period, beginning in 1933 (which of course in Austria means five more years of pre-Anschluss anxiety) as well as from the war and postwar periods of their refuge in England. They provide a fascinating self-portrait of Veza and a far richer, more nuanced understanding of Elias as well. These letters tell the story of a talented woman writer in exile who both longs for her own success and yet perpetually casts herself as helpmate to the two principal men in her life. In these pages we discover a more opinionated, politically astute, socially aware, impertinent, funnier, angrier and erudite Veza than we could ever have known from Canetti’s stylized and idealizing portrait of her in his widely-acclaimed autobiography. Here she speaks for herself.

It is emblematic of their relationship’s asymmetry, however, that the Fischer Taschenbuch edition chooses to give Elias the first byline on the cover of the book, even though the vast majority of these letters are Veza’s.\(^8\) It is indicative also, I think, of an ongoing quandary as to how to market her. Embarrassingly, the book is advertised thus: “Während

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\(^7\) One letter that is noticeably missing from this collection is a letter Canetti wrote to Georges that must have contained something very offensive, for it provokes Canetti to write a second letter that both apologizes for and justifies the first. “Du wirst grossmütig sein und mir den Brief zurückschicken, weil ich mich so sehr seiner schäme” (188). This half-request/half-command (indicative of his relationship with his younger brother, by the way) may well have been honored. And we needn’t assume that Canetti’s reason for retracting the letter are purely attributable to his concern for his posthumous image. I think it may in fact have had more to do with Canetti’s quasi-spiritual view of the poet: he needs to undo the force of the written word he has unleashed. Nor does he want his brother to relive the pain he has caused him by rereading said letter. There is real concern and love here, side-by-side more pragmatic concerns of self-promotion.

\(^8\) The Hanser hardcover edition gives Veza first billing, but—for what it is worth—she gets second place in the bio-blurbs on the inside jacket cover.
Canetti wechselnde Geliebte hat, verfällt Veza dem homosexuellen Georges – ein Dreiecksroman in Briefen” (back cover and front matter of Fischer edition). Yet it is nothing of the sort. Georges is apostrophized and of course referred to, but not directly present, except for a very few drafts of letters at the very beginning of the collection. (The fact that he would have saved drafts of letters is itself an indication of a bygone bourgeois letter writing culture.) The publication blurb awakens precisely the wrong expectations and, in the process, manages to objectify both Georges and Veza.

Who are the readers of Veza’s letters? The press does not appear to have an academic audience in mind. Though equipped with a serviceable “Namensregister,” the book lacks a proper index. So, if one wanted quickly to revisit the paramount role that Veza plays, for example, in the British edition of Die Blendung, one would be at a total loss, or dependent upon a memory as prodigious as the one Veza attributes to Canetti. Though the novel is a major topic throughout these letters, the primary source of Canetti’s gathering fame in postwar Britain, France and the United States, and a not insignificant source of income for both, we are offered no help in locating the myriad scattered references to Die Blendung, or Auto-da-fé, as it would become known in the Wedgewood English translation. Nor is there an iota of reference guidance for the book Canetti considered his real masterpiece, namely Masse und Macht (Crowds and Power, 1960)—of which Veza appears to have been virtually a co-author (and for which, we might note in passing, Canetti felt he deserved the Nobel Prize—possibly even for peace rather than literature!).

After the war, the British insisted that letters to France (and presumably elsewhere) be composed entirely in English in order, Veza assumes, to make the work of their censors easier. She abides by this injunction, the editors assure us; but they do not give us access to the original English language letters, offering instead their own very fine German translations. In the case of an author who views her correspondence as part of her literary legacy, however, it would have been particularly valuable to have the originals. Not to mention the myth of multilingualism surrounding the Canettis. How well did they actually know the “literary” languages of Europe? Much has been made of their translingual capacities and their choice to write in German. But to what extent was it really a choice? Was English ever a literary language for her?

Veza poignantly records the anguish of the author exiled from her native tongue: “Mir geht es miserabel mit Arbeit, das kann sich aber

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9 I have provided an ad hoc remedy with a provisional appendix to this article.
10 The one exception is a facsimile of the first two pages of the 21 September 1945 letter she writes to Georges, included in the end matter. From this it is clear that she writes a fluid English.
morgen schon bessern . . . das Deutsch läßt schon bei uns beiden nach, sogar bei dem Dichter [Canetti]” (317). At another point, she reports that she is losing control of her active French as well: she can read, but is no longer sure of verb endings. She is an endlessly interesting (and critical) informant on Canetti, as well, noting that his French is not good enough even to judge the quality of the French translation of Die Blendung. She comes to his aid linguistically in correcting the final English edition of Die Blendung, providing substantive changes to Veronica Wedgewood’s translation. Veza worked as a translator (best known, perhaps, for her translation of Graham Greene’s The Power and the Glory) and as a freelance lector for a number of British presses. All of which only further whets our appetite to examine her postwar letters in the original English.

Part of the problem in approaching Veza today is that she is very much a mixed figure and, it must be said, a child of her time. When her oeuvre first came to light in the late 1990s, it was, as we noted above, popular in some quarters simply to blame Canetti for her neglect and much-delayed recognition. The truth appears to be more complex. Surely, Veza is keenly aware of sexist conventions that limit her freedom as a woman, and she says at one point outright that she wishes she were a man (174). She expresses great relief and rejuvenation when Canetti is away, and she imagines herself divorced and liberated from him, standing on her own two feet financially as a lector and translator. In the midst of one of Canetti’s philandering escapades, she writes to Georges: “das einzige, was ich tun kann, ist, ihm die Scheidung anzubieten, was ich aus ganzem Herzen tu, weil ich nicht den Ehrgeiz hab. Nicht den Ehrgeiz, zu kochen,

11 Veza gives voice to the exile experience in a larger sense as well. Referring to Canetti she writes: “Sein Gefängnis ist er selbst, besonders seine Angst, die wir beide nie loswerden, seit Hitler” (287). Less than a month after the Anschluss (11 April 1938), she writes, in anticipation of their flight to England: “Welcher Schmerz wegzugehen und welche Angst hier zu bleiben” (110).
12 “. . . und lass mich wissen, in welcher Sprache ich antworten soll, gewiss nicht Französisch, ich kann die Endungen der Verben nicht mehr, und wieso kann er nicht engl. . . .?” (282).
13 Canetti confirms this in a letter to Georges, 5 March 1948: “Vor ein paar Tagen kamen endlich zwei Kapitel der Blendung in französischer Übersetzung. Zu meinem Erstaunen hab ich bemerkt, dass ich mir überhaupt kein Urteil über die Qualität der Übersetzung bilden kann. Mein Französisch ist völlig eingerostet, es ist Zeit, dass ich es wieder auffrische” (313). He then proceeds to instruct his younger brother to examine the translation thoroughly, in its entirety—and of course immediately (“genau,” “im Ganzen,” “gleich” [313]).
14 Veza’s intermittent work as a lector proved rewarding intellectually and was also a way to supplement her very modest income. See: 254, 257, 263, 277, 319.
15 Veza discusses the prospect of divorce in several letters: 265–66, 281, 348.
Strümpfe zu stopfen und Briefe zu schreiben. Entschuldigungsbriefe, weil er Briefe nicht geschrieben hat” (179). And yet, these letters are laced to a far greater degree with sentiments that contemporary readers may find problematic, to say the least. They brim with self-deprecatory remarks regarding her weight (e.g., 235, 243), premature aging and illness, depression, and even a self-diagnosed “hysteria” (155). When she published her first prose pieces in the Wiener Arbeiterzeitung, she did so under the pseudonym “Veza Magd,” in order to express, she says, her humble status. Starting in 1946, she employs a nickname in the letters that is similarly meant to express her subordination, if not downright self-degradation: “ich heiß nur Peggy, was hierzulande der allerbescheidenste und häßlichste Name ist, der nur für antiquierte Wirtschafterinnen, Renterinnen und dergleichen gebraucht wird . . .” (177). In one of her moments of impatience with Canetti, she says: “Er ist sein eigener Feind, alle anderen könnt‘ ich ermorden” (323). She is undoubtedly the “mother grizzly” when it comes to protecting her precious bear cub Elias. Yet, in many ways, Veza, too, appears to be her own worst enemy.

To be sure, much of this is presented within an atmosphere of self-irony. She denigrates herself in an exaggerated manner and thus controls, one might argue, her self-image. This constitutes a kind of literary preemptive strike. Certainly it is important to her to be the agent of her own disparagement, rather than to be seen as a victim of others.16 Thus when she refers to herself as an “old wrinkled witch” (eine alte Hexe . . . mit Runzeln [177]), or proclaims “ich bin nur eine dicke, faule spanische Jüdin” (201), we see not necessarily (or not only) a woman with an image problem, but also a writer who has made of herself a kind of literary character. In the passage quoted above in which she threatens divorce, for example, we see her playing with language (“weil ich nicht den Ehrgeiz habe”), using the phrase ironically in subsequent formulations. And she can become sovereign even over her own depression by writing about it humorously; she suggests the following reason she might give for delaying

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16 This can be seen in a letter to Canetti that is both very witty and angry. Veza insists on visiting Georges only when she can do so as a published author and recognized playwright, not wanting to appear to him as an old washed-up woman. The distinction between “worn out” (abgelebt) and “discarded” (abgelegt) is paramount to her in the following pun: “Und was zum Georg fahren anlangt – ich fahr erst, bis zwei Stücke von mir auf den Bühnen laufen und ein Roman zugleich erscheint denn ich will mein Bild bei Georg bewahren und nicht als abgelebte (nein, das ist ein ‘b,’ kein ‘g’?) Frau Canetti dort erscheinen . . .” (219). The context is (again) Canetti’s affair with Friedl Benedikt. Veza goes on to chide him for bragging to Georges about his efforts to get Veza’s plays produced in Vienna, because she does not want to be seen as someone in need of help.
a visit to her beloved Georges: “Wegen Lebensmündigkeit kann ich heute nicht kommen” (226).

Granting the validity of the “empowerment through writing” thesis, it is still somewhat bizarre (at least to this critic) to read of her insistent desire to “mother” these grown men—especially her husband. Already at the time of their marriage, a step Georges sees as “die größte Dummheit . . . die Du [Canetti] begehen kannst” (15), Canetti considers Veza essentially a mother: „eigentlich ist sie jetzt meine Mutter“ (18, his emphasis). And the feeling is mutual. “Er ist,” Veza coos to Georges, “eine unterentwickeltes bezauberndes geniales Kind” and “Du weißt wie abgöttisch gern ich ihn habe” (336, 338). As a mother, she reserves to herself exclusively the right to criticize him; and in those passages where she indulges this maternal privilege, we find some of the juiciest, most illuminating passages in the book.

Veza is delighted when Canetti receives an offer to hold three fairly lengthy and substantive lectures on Proust, Kafka, and Joyce, respectively. This she takes as a sign of his growing renown, and she welcomes the offer also as a source of much needed income. But she is from the outset worried that he will not prepare properly. He is lazy, unfocused, undisciplined (when it comes to his own work) and, she complains, forever wasting his time on love-interest and fellow author Friedl Benedikt. Veza fashions herself a matchmaker for Canetti, but when it comes to Friedl, she simply wants this woman out of her husband’s life altogether. This is a recurring theme in the letters and a deeply divisive issue for all three. Veza’s anger and jealousy vis-à-vis Friedl has less to do

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17 This is no passing remark. Excluded from any romantic relationship with either one, Veza takes on this maternal role rather early on in the correspondence (28). The marriage to Elias, which Georges originally opposed strongly, was from the beginning one of convenience—meant to protect her from being deported, as Elias says to Georges (18). On her conviction to mother the brothers see diverse letters in which this role appears alternately as a curse (155) and as a joyful act of self-sacrifice (213).

18 She is perhaps the indulgent, pampering mother he never had. Canetti recounts the very problematic relationship he had with his real mother, Mathilde Canetti, at some length in his three-part autobiography, Die gerettete Zunge: Geschichte einer Jugend; Die Fackel im Ohr; and Das Augenspiel (available in English translation as The Memoirs of Elias Canetti, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999). In these letters he is much more openly negative about his mother and very direct about the impossibility of living in her orbit; see for example 47, 52. Understanding Veza as mother-ersatz may explain Mathilde’s loathing of Veza not as a romantic competitor for her son’s love in the traditional Freudian sense, but precisely in the maternal role.

19 See for example 229, 250 (trying to set Canetti up with Veronica Wedgewood), 280, 317, 320.
with the latter’s long-term sexual relationship with Canetti, she says, than with Friedl’s success as a writer. Veza laments bitterly that Canetti wastes his valuable time editing Friedl’s work, when he really needs to complete *Masse und Macht* (191-92), of which thousands of brilliant manuscript pages are lying about crying out for his attention.

Two letters from April 1946 articulate powerfully core issues in the Canetti marriage. At the beginning of the month, Veza summarizes to Georges the history of the affair with Friedl, but characteristically takes responsibility for it herself: “Und laß Dir gesagt sein, die ganze Affäre war meine Schuld, wirklich” (190). She blames herself, but in a way that reinstates her total influence and claim upon Canetti. He remains her territory and her project, she seems really to be saying, to the point that it is difficult to know where in the end the border runs in this very odd symbiotic relationship. The problem is not Canetti’s romantic liaison, as we have noted, but Friedl’s incursion into Veza’s territory as author and authority figure in Canetti’s life. In a very candid comparative assessment of their respective work, Veza says of Friedl’s: “Es liegt weit unter dem, was ich inzwischen erreicht hab und was nicht veröffentlicht wurde, worüber er [Canetti] jetzt sehr beschämt ist und was er jetzt beheben wird, denn das steht in seiner Macht” (190, her emphasis).

Just a few weeks later, Canetti writes of Friedl’s published novels: “Es war das Werk eines wirklichen Dichters, was ich Veza nie sagen kann, denn es kränkt sie zu sehr; auch Du darfst es ihr nie sagen. Dieses wilde chaotische lächerliche Geschöpf [i.e. Friedl] hatte das Zeug zu einem Dichter in sich. Auch die beiden ersten Bücher waren begabt, wenn auch noch ganz unter meinem Einfluss” (193). Canetti—whose condescension toward women is elsewhere no less evident than in his letters to Georges—doesn’t hesitate, as we see, for one moment to take credit for Friedl’s success. Indeed in the passage just prior to the one quoted above he tells his brother about the great temptation he experienced in helping Friedl with her third novel. “Es ist gerade für den Werkbesessensten

20 Canetti’s misogyny has been an issue in scholarship at least since Kristie Foell’s study *Blind Reflections: Gender in Elias Canetti’s Die Blendung* (Riverside, California: Ariadne, 1994). For another treatment see my “‘Eigentlich bist du eine Frau. Du bestehst aus Sensationen’: Misogyny as Cultural Critique in Elias Canetti’s *Die Blendung*.” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift* 71.4 (December 1997): 668–700. In these letters one finds several breathtakingly misogynistic comments, as when he writes to Georges: “Frauen kann man nicht zählen [as proper correspondents], und auf alle Fälle schreibt man immer zu ihnen herunter” (Canetti’s emphasis, 350). Such remarks are usually to be found in a letter to Georges, as in the following one, where he criticizes Friedl for having taken revenge upon him in a typically “female” manner: “Sie hat sich auf eine sehr gemeine, weibliche Weise gerächt” (261).
herrlich,” he avers, “aus Nichts Etwas zu machen. Ich dachte, es ist mir gelungen . . .” (192–93, his emphasis). Canetti never really doubts his quasi-divine powers to create ex nihilo, and neither does Veza. Still, she would like him to reroute some of that precious creative energy both her way and toward his own work.

But what about those lectures he should be writing rather than squandering his time with Friedl? Growing exasperated, Veza divulges to Georges: “Von Kafka hat er etwas gelesen, von Joyce weniger, von Proust nichts” (28 March 1948, 322). Veza saves the day by reading extensively for him and preparing synopses, selecting excerpts, and writing outlines of the lectures. She may even have written the lectures, or rough drafts thereof; we know only that she intends to translate them into English for him when they are finally ready. As the deadline approaches, her anxiety rises, and she implores Georges to help push Canetti to complete this potentially quite lucrative project.21 She tells Georges now “er kennt vielleicht zehn Seiten Kafka und zwanzig Seiten Joyce, der Vortrag wird dennoch glänzend, was ich nur fürchte – das sind Hörer, ich fürchte die Fragen” (337). He will be found out, she fears, unmasked as a charlatan during the question and answer period. With regard to Proust, he is even less prepared; but he has covered that base by giving Veza volumes of Proust to read for him as a research assignment while he runs off to France with Friedl.

When Georges confronts him about this, it clearly touches a nerve. Canetti then throws himself into reading Proust (or says he does), claiming that he would never dream of holding such a lecture without having thoroughly read every word of the primary texts. And how could Georges have thought otherwise!? When this becomes an issue again, Veza tellingly takes her husband’s side, now assuring Georges that he has done his homework after all.22 Maybe he did. But two entries leave us wondering. First, one month later Veza is still complaining of Canetti’s lack of preparation, though this time it is Joyce he won’t read (355). More telling, I think, is his characteristically competitive remark about André Gide, who wrote a famous essay about Proust, Canetti reminds Veza,


22 But even here, when she seems to be changing her story to defend Canetti, she reveals how much of the preparatory work she has done: “Ich habe für ihn den ganzen Proust—nicht gelesen, sondern durchgearbeitet, mit Notizen Einfallen, etc.” (348). For additional passages relating to her “research assistant” work, see 300, 303, 314–15, 328, 332.
“obwohl er nur einen halben Band gelesen hat!” (356). If Gide can do it, so too can Canetti!

All of this can begin to sound like idle gossip. Yet I think it bears greater import both in humanizing the Canettis and in correcting the sometimes-idolizing vignettes that are served up in Canetti’s autobiography. In light of this correspondence, we know that his encounter with Kafka, which he narrates in the lecture/essay “Das erste Buch,” is also in need of some revision: he didn’t quite “discover” Kafka in one fell swoop, but rather over several decades. Additionally, it is helpful to know that no matter how highly Canetti thought of himself—how gifted, how destined he was for the Nobel Prize, how convinced he was of the posthumous value of his own work—he nevertheless harbored doubts, battled depression, suffered a breakdown, and had to work very hard to get noticed and published. Early on he pushes his extended family to buy up copies of Die Blendlung to buttress sales: “Bitte Georg, sorge dafür, dass all ‗Unsern,’ es dürfen sogar die schäbigsten Verwandten sein, bei allen Buchhandlungen in Paris nach dem Buch fragen und es auch kaufen” (45). He gives detailed thought as to how to market his book and is tireless in exploiting the laudatory letter he received from Thomas Mann about Die Blendlung (58). He and Veza carefully scheme to find the “right” reviewers of his novel and know how to make the most of every bit of publicity, rejoicing over even “stupid” reviews that nevertheless promote Canetti (213). They work hard to cultivate the right contacts in England, France, and the United States. Theirs is a story of extraordinary talent and hard work.

While the letters are full of pragmatic considerations, they also testify to some poignant literary interactions. Though Veza may be reading Proust for the “wrong” reasons, this opens her to one of the greatest literary experiences of her life to the point where she exclaims, “Ich lebe mehr im Proust als im Leben” (340). She is an authentically and deeply engaged reader, offering numerous aperçus on Proust throughout the letters. But the tragedy is that these remarks, like so many other observations made in passing, are never developed into substantive reflections. The letters always have a mixed and somewhat ad hoc agenda—circling typically around each party’s health, the next visit, the next letter, the difficulties of daily life in postwar Europe, and surviving financially. The mention of literature tends to be reported in fragments rather than richly evoked and seriously pursued. But even so, the following en passant reference to Kafka’s Brief an den Vater is arrestingly

23 Quoted in Veza’s letter to Georges of 26 July 1948.

24 Veza’s reading of Proust may be more meaningful to Proust scholars than I am able to ascertain. Her remarks on Proust can be found at 318, 331, 332, 335, 340, 341, 346, 348–49, 353.

As Sven Hanuschek points out in his magisterial 2005 biography of Elias Canetti, the letters are not by any means to be taken at face value. Canetti had real regard for Veza as a dramatist, but when he calls her “den geborenen Dramatiker” he seems also to mean that she is somewhat of a drama queen when it comes to her accounts of his extra-marital affairs. As he explains to Georges: “Alles wird ihr unter den Händen zu Szenen. Sie ist geladen mit dramatischen Vorwürfen” (193). Similarly, there can be no doubt of Veza’s profound love for Canetti. Yet when she insists that he is “die Güte selbst,” we have to be sure to read on so as to understand the complaint: “und es macht ihm garnichts, wenn in seiner Gutherzigkeit die Leute mich behelligen, er würd sie in meinem Bett schlafen lassen, so gut ist er” (320). It is all too easy to make premature judgments (as I have on more than one occasion) if one skims these letters uncritically, or if one simply assumes knowledge of the context. Veza can switch topics within the space of a single sentence; her allusions can be cryptic (at least to an outsider); and her sarcasm may contain a grain of truth. Not infrequently, she and Georges are communicating more or less in code so as to deceive Canetti. Moreover, she is capable of sentences that are simultaneously sincere and tongue-in-cheek. She sometimes complains about people not understanding her sense of humor, and she loves to test it out on Georges. These “documents” simply do not interpret themselves, though prolonged exposure to her voice does teach the reader what to look for.

But the skepticism that scholars need to bring to these letters should not obscure the remarkable love among these three people. Writing to Veza (“Mein Türkähen, mein allergeliebtestes Geschöpf”), Canetti articulates the following idyll: “Mein Traum, meine größte Hoffnung, meine Sehnsucht, meine Pflicht, und auch unser Glück wäre es, wenn wir Drei zusammen leben könnten. Die Idee von einem gemeinsamen Haus in Südfrankreich, wo er sich immer erholen kommen könnte, wo Du den englischen Winter vermeiden, wo ich arbeiten könnte, wo auch Du wieder

25 Sven Hanuschek, Elias Canetti: Eine Biographie (Munich: Hanser, 2005). Though the letters were not published until 2006, Hanuschek had already read them for his study. Though he does not deal with them in any detail there, he draws the right conclusion, I think, regarding Elias and Veza Canetti’s personal and literary relationship: Canetti did attempt to advance Veza’s career by, among other things, approaching theater directors to consider her work for production. He also, of course, benefited greatly from her life of service to him and his work.
Sachen für Dich arbeiten würdest . . . –diese Idee hat ihm [Georges] sehr gefallen” (334). This is not empty sentimentality; Canetti writes this in full knowledge of the tension and intrigue that also characterize their lives. Nevertheless, it would be hugely reductive, I think, to assume that this correspondence is fundamentally about manipulation and exploitation. Even Georges, who is by no means naïve about his elder brother’s egotism, does not doubt his brother’s altruism and vocation as a poet, a true Dichter. It is furthermore possible that our feminist indignation on behalf of Veza can to some extent occlude her self-presentation. My earlier designation of Veza’s maternal relationship to these men as “bizarre” is probably itself a barrier to properly grasping their love for one another. They did not live conventional lives; why should their love be?

There is a sentence in one of Canetti’s letters to Georges that captures both the megalomania of the poet and a brother’s profound love. During one of Georges many periods of serious illness, Canetti says, “Ich habe eine merkwürdige Sicherheit über Dich. Ich glaube, dass Du gesund werden wirst, weil ich Dich so sehr liebe und ich wäre Dir dankbar, wenn Du über einen scheinbar, aber nur scheinbar so naiven Satz nicht das Gesicht verziehst. –” (351). Canetti’s awareness of his brother’s probable smirk does not deter him from his self-conscious formulation. Though a secularist, Canetti always harbored a mystical view of the poet—and therefore of himself. In one of the Aufzeichnungen he famously says that a real poet would be able to confer immortality, and he means it. In an earlier letter to Georges he says—in all seriousness—“Es sticht mich, und das allein sticht mich wirklich, dass ich Dich nicht durch meine blosse Anwesenheit pumpergesund gemacht hast” (346). One is tempted to explain away this language as figurative and hyperbolic. But Canetti adhered to it rigorously, which explains, I think, his fascination with Büchner’s novella Lenz. He cannot raise his beloved brother Georges, who dies from tuberculosis in 1971, any more than Lenz could the dead girl of Fouday. But Canetti does what a poet can: he “recreates” his youth in the first volume of his autobiography, Die gerettete Zunge (1977) and dedicates it to his cherished baby brother. Georges—or Georg, as Canetti understandably preferred to call him even after his naturalization as a French citizen—was an authority figure who stood up to and for his older brother and called him to account repeatedly for his questionable behavior. Georges supported Canetti financially, intellectually, and emotionally in immeasurable ways, but he was never just a member of the Elias Canetti fan club.

Veza, for her part, was convinced that Elias was better fit for literature than for life. “Du schreibst das Leben,” she memorably writes, “aber wenn Du lebst verschreibst Du dich—” (330). He got women right, she says somewhat misogynistically, in his novel. But in life, he is naïve
about them, failing to grasp that some (read: Friedl Benedikt) are on the make, just as his literary figure, Therese, was scheming to marry Peter Kien. We might note in passing, however, that Veza was just as likely to reverse this reference in order to make her point about Elias: sometimes his naivety expresses itself in his failing to understand that real women are not like Therese, and sometimes it takes the form of his assuming that they are just like Therese.26 Either way, it was the great man who gets it spot on in art, but fumbles real life. More than any other role—including that of poet—Veza takes on the part of navigating the real world for her genius child/husband. Explaining the problem (one of many times) to Georges, she writes: “Denn meine Stimmung hängt leider von seiner Verfassung ab, der doch ein so grosses, ewiges Wunderkind ist. Er ist dabei so rein und lauter, dass er niemanden durchschaut, ausser er schreibt ein Buch. In der Phantasie kennt er die Welt, in der Welt ist er ganz Phantasie” (311). Her baby will be immortal, she believes (341), but for now he utterly lacks the requisite “Selbsterhaltungstrieb.” And to compensate for this deficit she dedicates her life—sometimes with exasperation, impatience, and anger, and sometimes in good humor and unabashed love.

Our challenge may be to appreciate the many hats Veza actually wore—rather than to judge whether these were imposed upon her, or freely chosen. For the truth probably lies even beyond her ken. The letters simply do not provide this answer, most likely because it was not a question that any of the letter-writers asked. They were, all three of them, children of their times, and they shared in the gender (not to mention anti-Jewish) stereotypes of their upbringing, even while they broke through some conventional notions of marriage and sexual orientation. These letters go a long way in documenting the high level of collaboration between Veza and Elias on work that ultimately went under his name only, and in this respect they do somewhat redress the heretofore uncredited nature of Veza’s contributions.

However, Veza and Elias also understood well that their respective writing was utterly different in nature, even incommensurate. The point for criticism should therefore not be to “upgrade” Veza vis-à-vis Elias, or even to restrict itself to the oeuvre of her mostly posthumous fiction. Rather, the lesson of these letters is to look beyond the fiction to see the many Vezas revealed in the correspondence: the perceptive observer of the blitz as well as postwar British society, the insightful student of the Holocaust and the Nuremberg Trials as the genocide came to light in the

26 See for example 242, where Veza says Canetti is insightful about women in Die Blendung and in Hochzeit, but just not in real life. See also 284, where Veza mocks Canetti as “der grosse ‘Frauenkenner.’”
immediate postwar years, the eloquent commentator on the life of the exiled intelligentsia, the refreshingly unapologetic Anglophile, and the great (if morbid) wit. At a family funeral, she told an in-law she hadn’t seen for thirty years that she hoped to see him again at her own funeral (276). He was appalled.
Working Appendix to Letters

The passages noted below are selective and meant to augment, not replicate the footnotes. The entries are by no means comprehensive.

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