To Hell with Culture

A burning of the books becomes at times a necessity.
Cyril Connolly

As the last chapter described, a group of exiles founded the Library of the Burned Books in Paris in time for the first anniversary of the Nazi book burnings. Their early efforts would later have a decisive impact on the wartime memorialization of the fires, when the indelible connection between fascism and book burning was drawn. But while their efforts were relevant to the political history of book burning, many contemporary writers, even those vehemently opposed to fascism, continued to express a distinct longing for a conflagration. Most agreed on the vulgarity of the National Socialist pageants, but for every international report which dwelt on their childish barbarity, there were several others that understood how such an act could signify a refreshed commitment to art or politics. This diversity has been elided in more recent history, replaced with a sanitized version which imagines that book burning was instantly recognized as the emblem of fascism, when in fact, the hackneyed eloquence and official dogma of the Nazi critics and writers had faint international echoes. By exploring the fiction and political rhetoric of the 1930s, this chapter shows that the distaste for book burning did not banish the nostalgia for a good bonfire.

AUTO-DA-FÉ

In 1934, William Saroyan published a short story called ‘A Cold Day’, in which the anonymous protagonist writes to a friend complaining about the numbing cold in his apartment. It is so cold, he writes, that he is unable to finish a story he is working on and in desperation he has even contemplated burning some of the books from his library in the bathtub, fondly imagining that their momentary warmth might thaw out the story in his head. Yet even though he is tormented by his inability to write, he can’t bring himself to burn the books,
not even a ponderous German-language anatomy nor, he announces with a note of incredulity, T.S. Arthur’s nineteenth-century temperance melodrama *Ten Nights in a Bar Room, and What I Saw There*, because ‘even this book was too good to burn’.¹

It is not surprising that this tale of renunciation was singled out in Guy Stern’s deservedly influential essay on the American response to the Nazi book burning as an emblem of the ‘remarkable and surprising appropriateness’ of the reaction in the United States.² Stern’s reading of the story is simple: ‘if you have any respect for the mere idea of books, what they stand for in life, if you believe in paper and print, you cannot burn any page of any book. Even if you are freezing. Even if you are trying to do a bit of writing yourself.’³ This is a cheering result, but it fails to account for the deep ambiguity in Saroyan’s story, which is essentially the tale of the narrator’s inability to write another, better story: ‘All day I have been in this room freezing, wanting to say something solid and clean about all of us who are alive. But it was so cold I couldn’t do it. All I could do was swing my arms and smoke cigarettes and feel rotten.’⁴

This sense of frozen inertia is reinforced by Saroyan’s use of almost identical opening (‘I want you to know that it is very cold in San Francisco today, and that I am freezing’) and closing lines (‘The most I can say now is that it is very cold in San Francisco today, and I am freezing’). The narrator cannot burn his books, but nor can he write the lost story. It is an impasse before it is a triumph, and it suggests that there is still an uneasy longing for the bonfire, especially in the freezing garrets of writers.

The interdependence between books, writing, and fire is even clearer in the most important contemporary novel to use the theme of book burning, Elias Canetti’s *Auto-da-fé* (1936). Canetti’s novel traces the downfall of the eminent Sinologist Peter Kien, whose orderly life and pristine library is fatally disrupted by his precipitate marriage to his housekeeper, a vulgarian in the epic style. Kien’s travail, and the novel itself, are structured to create a stifling sense of torpor, punctuated by acts of casual and unexpected violence such as the butchering of Fischerle, or Kien apparently amputating his own finger. Kien had been born, Canetti never tired of reiterating, when he witnessed the Viennese Palace of Justice burned to the ground in July 1927 after police opened fire on a protest march. Watching the building burn, Canetti became fascinated by a neatly dressed worker who moaned inconsolably. ‘The files are burning! All the files!’⁵ This obsessive figure became the catalyst for a character initially called ‘Brand’ (German for ‘conflagration’), and then changed again for a novel tentatively titled *Kant Catches Fire*. In 1931 Canetti sent out copies to influential writers, but Thomas Mann returned the draft claiming he lacked the strength to read it; Hermann Broch read the draft, but was dazed by its savagery, and wrote urgently to his friend ‘You’re terrifying. Do you want to