



"I have challenged death with my books" - Modern classic Elias Canetti -
laureate of the Nobel Prize for literature

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Abstract

Elias Canetti, one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, constitutes, in the opinion of critics, a very interesting phenomenon in the history of world literature. He delivered, without stopping, different genres: a novel, a sociological-philosophical work, a volume of sociological-literary essays, a collection of aphorisms, plays, a travel book, an autobiographical trilogy and several volumes of notes. As a *sui generis* writer, a cosmopolitan with a very broad culture, Canetti is described as a complex author in 20th century European literature. Convinced that an intellectual must do his duty to remove the mask of death everywhere, the writer, Canetti writes, must become "the dog of his own time", and adds: "The writer must express his opposition out loud; he must use the scalpel to cut, analyze and extract the excretion." One thought prevailed over all his other thoughts: the thought of death. He wanted to eradicate death from the face of the earth; he wanted no one to die anymore. He did not accept death, while everyone else accepted it. Regarding this, Canetti writes: "The boldest thing in life is to hate death. Death must be hated, you must hate everyone's death as you hate your own death, you can agree with everything, but never with death."

Keywords: german; contemporary; literature; culture; death; ideology; autobiography

1. Introduction

Main objectives of the paper is to acquaint the reader with the life and biography of the Nobel laureate in modern classical literature. To acquaint the reader with a European writer who was born in Bulgaria, migrated to England, and was educated in Switzerland, Germany and Austria. To acquaint the reader with the most famous works of Elias Canetti - with a writer who throughout his life challenged the phenomenon of death and to give a brief overview of its echo in Europe as well as in Albania and Kosovo.

Elias Canetti was born in 1905 in Ruschuk, Bulgaria, the present-day Russian city downstream of the Danube, to a family of ancient Spanish-Jewish descent. In 1911, his parents, along with their three children, moved to Manchester, England, and in 1913, after the untimely death of Canetti's father, the family eventually moved to Vienna and then to Zurich, Switzerland. In the Austrian capital, Canetti completed his studies in 1929 at the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and later received the title of Doctor of Philosophy. In 1938 he left Austria and lived and worked as a freelance writer in London and

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Zurich, where he died in 1994. As a novelist, playwright, essayist and sociologist, he was honored with high awards in various European countries and awarded with honorary titles by several European universities. Elias Canetti, whom critics have called a “living classic” and one of the “greatest humanists” of the twentieth century, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1981.

2. Methodology

During the drafting of this paper we have applied the following methods: The method of researching bibliographic sources, then the method of literary analysis, the method of comparative literature and the chronological method.

Canetti's cultural horizon

Elias Canetti, one of the greatest writers of the 20th century, constitutes, in the opinion of critics, a very interesting phenomenon in the history of world literature. The son of a Spanish Jewish family, he was born in Ruschuk, Bulgaria, in 1905, a city of people of diverse backgrounds and cultures, with as many as eight languages being spoken in a day! (Canetti 2014). Here Canetti began communicating with others in Spanish Hebrew and Bulgarian. In 1911, when Canetti was a 6-year-old child, his family moved to Manchester, England, where little Elias became acquainted with English, which later became one of his major languages. In 1913, after the tragic and untimely death of his father, his mother, along with her three sons, moved to Vienna, and at that time she decided to teach Canetti German, her favorite language, which she had constantly spoken with her husband. Her decision began to exert a great influence on the boy. German lessons were helping him in his rapid intellectual development. German later became the language of his literary work and was at the same time the most intimate language for Canetti.

He often says that this was his real mother tongue. German had been the secret language of his parents, the language of their love, youth and happy student times in Vienna. It was this language that served Canetti's parents to express their feelings, to have long discussions about theater, the art of their dreams. This language became very important to Canetti and played a first-hand role in his life. His long tenure, especially in the schools of Zurich and Frankfurt, strengthened his connection with the German language, enriching with lexical nuances the knowledge he had acquired about the language and expanding his cultural horizon (Müller, 1998). His immense cultural horizon begins to stand out more and more. To explain the connections he would later make with the cultural heritage of the past, he would need encyclopedic knowledge that could hardly be found so concentrated in a single person. For his university studies he returned to Vienna, graduated in 1929 at the Faculty of Chemistry, received the title of Doctor of Philosophy, and in the meantime he was determined to continue his path in the field of literature.

With his life and works, Canetti embodies, more than anyone else, Central Europe, for as much as even personifying it. He delivered, without stopping, different genres: a novel, a sociological-philosophical work, a volume of sociological-literary essays, a collection of aphorisms, plays, a travel book, an autobiographical trilogy and several volumes of notes. Canetti lived in major European capitals without ever joining any ideology, program or political movement. As a *sui generis* writer, a cosmopolitan with a very broad culture, Canetti is described as a complex author in 20th century European literature. As one of the most original and persuasive voices of this century, he is amazing with the courage he shows to reveal to the reader even the most animalistic instincts of the human being, its most secret and unspoken desires, and its most insane fixations.

Canetti's autobiography - memories from his life

His autobiography, divided into three volumes (*"The Tongue Set Free"*, *"The Torch in My Ear"* and *"The Play of the Eyes"*), is a concise and exciting work, written as if it were a formation novel. The events described in the first volume come from the happy time of childhood, an idyllic world that had not yet known of the world wars. Ever since it was first published in 1977, this autobiographical trilogy had been hailed as a "classical contemporary work", as one of those literary works that have been assured a long life and that deeply excite any reader. With a clear, interesting style that touches to the smallest detail, Canetti treats here memories from his life, thus giving us that unique story that is for every person the most secret and most enigmatic, the story of his own life. In compiling this autobiography, which, as the foreign press points out, constitutes a mosaic of powerful and very interesting episodes, described in poetic language full of warmth and light, Canetti used the following creed: "Cowardly, truly cowardly, the one who is afraid of his own memories!" (Canetti, 2004.). In this regard, he writes: "Unlike many other people, who are particularly subject to the temptation of a rhetorical psychology, I am convinced that memory should not be tortured, paralyzed and squeezed, nor should we try to make it appealing by using glamorous bait; I bow before the memory, I bow before the memory of every man, I want to leave this memory untouched, as it belongs to the man who fights to live free, and does not hide his disgust towards those who have the guts to submit to the memory of a man a series of surgical interventions, until they finally make it resemble the memories of all other people. Let them operate on the nose, lips, ears, skin and hair as they please, ...let them touch, cut, smooth and flatten whatever they want, but never give up on the memory." (Canetti, 2005).

The so-called "school of human cognition" engages Canetti for life in a relentless fight against death, against which he is a savage persecutor, determined to fight tirelessly against. Convinced that an intellectual must do his duty to remove the mask of death everywhere, the writer, Canetti writes, must become "the dog of his own time", and adds: "The writer must express his opposition out loud; he must use the scalpel to cut, analyze and extract the excretion." On the day he completed his major sociological-philosophical action *"Crowds and Power"*, Elias Canetti writes: "Now I can tell that I managed to capture the face of my century." (Canetti, 2005).

At the beginning of the first volume of the autobiographical trilogy he writes: "I have spent the best part of my life exposing the bad sides of man, as presented to us in the historical course of civilizations. I have analyzed power and decomposed all its constituent elements with the same ruthless clarity that characterized my mother when analyzing the processes that took place within her family. There are few bad sides, both in man and humanity that I might have not noticed. And yet, the pride I feel for man and for humanity continues to be so great that I really only hate one thing: their enemy, death." (Canetti, 1985)

"Crowds and Power" as a shocking analysis and a diagnosis of the delirium of the 20th century

"Crowds and Power", Canetti's most important work, which will engage its author for 35 years, is a truly special world work, a work that compels the reader to immerse himself in it completely haunted. The author replaces the abstract concept with well-sifted figure, with symbol, with the unity between the thought and the issue it deals with. This work is an open book, what penetrates it awaits fire, water, wheat, gazelles, the Sultan of Delhi, the Mayor of Schroeber, the Shiites on the feast of Muharram, the exalted throne of the Byzantine Emperor, the conductor of the orchestra, Post-Versailles Treaty of Germany, the Holy Fire of Jerusalem, the antipathy of powerful people for the survivors, the rain dance of the Pueblo Indians, Catholicism and the crowds, the core of the parliamentary system, the entrails of power, negativity and schizophrenia, power and paranoia (Canetti, 2005). The work *"Crowds and Power"* has been considered by critics as a shocking analysis and a diagnosis of the delirium of the 20th century, as a unique, extraordinary study of an essayist who

is also a writer. This work had been the goal of Canetti's life, for which he gave up his career, with the inspiration of an intellectual, so rare nowadays, as intellectuals, as critics point out, have unfortunately turned into pseudo-intellectuals, willing to make any compromise for the sake of money and glory. "*Crowds and Power*" is a synthesis of a very broad and elaborate information, extracted from disciplines of the most diverse among them, psychiatry and anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis, history and sociology, with the aim of unmasking the process that makes the crowds manipulate and rule, and to emphasize the need to fight against power, against its most insidious and secretive forms, present everywhere, in all human relations.

Elias Canetti is not only the genius author of "*Crowds and Power*" and the great witness of his autobiography, but he is, above all, the author of one of the most important novels of the 20th century, a gigantic and shocking book on the folly of this century.

"*The Blinding*" – as an alarming novel

In 1935, at the age of 30, he published one of the greatest works of his century, the novel "*The Blinding*", a novel in the full sense of the word, unquestionably unique in modern European literature, both in style and in the characters, with a thematic unity prominent in the entirety of this work, a shocking and prophetic novel, "stubborn and majestic", as Thomas Mann defined it, an alarming novel, but also a shining example of the unbearable psychic suffering of the man of contemporary culture, who, aware of his fragility, fears life and is locked inside walls that cannot withstand the shocks of stupidity and chaos that rule over reality and that annihilate it. As the critics point out, with the novel "*The Blinding*" alone, Canetti could have become one of the most special and greatest writers of world literature.

Regarding the origin of this novel, Canetti writes in the essay entitled "My first book: *The Blinding*" as follows:

"One day I started to think that the world should no longer be described as it did in the early novels, that is, starting from, as it were, the point of view of a writer, the world was *disintegrated*, and only if one had the courage to show it in its disintegration, it was still possible to give it a genuine idea. Though, this did not mean that he had to write a chaotic book, where nothing could be understood anymore; these individualities had to be described with all their extremisms, putting them next to each other with the unique characteristics of each. Among the characters in question were a religious fanatic, a visionary technician who lived only on cosmic space projects, a collector, a man obsessed with truth, a scatterbrained, an enemy of death, and finally a man of books in the full sense of the word. If I ask myself today where I got the rigor of my working method, the thought leads me to extremely heterogeneous influences. I had just finished the eighth chapter of '*The Blinding*', the chapter entitled '*Death*', when I came across Kafka's '*Metamorphosis*'. This was the luckiest thing that could have happened to me at that moment. There I found, in the highest perfection, the exact opposite of literary irresponsibility, which I hated so much, and there I found the rigor that I longed for with all my heart. In that book something had already been achieved that I wanted to find with my own strength. I bowed before this model, which is the purest of all models, knowing full well that it was unattainable, but nevertheless it gave me strength." (Canetti 1985). After the publication of the novel "*The Blinding*" at the end of 1935 in Vienna, the world-famous German writer Thomas Mann, the Nobel Laureate, in a letter sent on this occasion to the young author wrote: "I am deeply impressed by the richness of this novel, the amazing fantasy, its artistic courage, its deep sadness and proud curiosity." (Mann 1998). In the fate of the main character of the novel, the critics saw "a powerful metaphor on the collapse of civilized Europe" (Durzak, 1970).

Canetti can agree with everything, but never with death

One thought prevailed over all his other thoughts: the thought of death. He wanted to eradicate death from the face of the earth; he wanted no one to die anymore. He did not accept death, while everyone else accepted it. Regarding this, Canetti writes: “The boldest thing in life is to hate death. Death must be hated, you must hate everyone’s death as you hate your own death, you can agree with everything, but never with death.” He strived to achieve immortality for all people: a concrete, serious, accepted goal, which he aimed at with all his might. In his essay entitled “*The Mission of the Writer*”, which is included in his work “*The Conscience of Words*”, Canetti writes the following: “It is not the writer’s job to leave humanity at the mercy of death. The writer, who fears no man, will be shocked to learn that death has an increasing power over many people. Even if it seemed to everyone to be a futile undertaking, he would rise up against such a phenomenon and would not give up in any way. It will be his pride to oppose the barbarians of nothingness, who are becoming more and more numerous in literature, and to fight them better by other means than by their own means. The writer will live according to a law that is his own, but that is not cut according to his measure. This law says: Do not push anyone towards nothingness, not even what he would like himself. Seek nothing in order to find a way out of it, and show this way out to everyone. To endure sorrow and despair to learn how others are saved from them, but not by despising the happiness that belongs to human beings, even though they are disfigured and torn between them.”

A very important place in the literary creativity of Elias Canetti is given to his notes, published in different volumes, which together exceed one thousand pages. In the preface to his first volume with notes, he writes, among other things: “Man, and this is his greatest fate, is diverse, is a thousand times more diverse, and he can only live for a while as if he were not as such. In those moments when he sees himself as a slave to his purpose, only one thing can help him: he must give in to the variety of tendencies he has and thus randomly mark everything that comes to his mind. These should float in such a way as to come from nowhere and lead to nowhere, in most cases being short, quick, often lightning fast, unverified, unrestrained, without ambition and without any purpose. The one who writes and who usually holds the reins tightly becomes for a moment an obedient toy of unexpected ideas. He writes down things he would never have imagined in himself, things that contradict his history, his convictions, his own ethics, his shame, his pride and his truth, which he usually defends with perseverance. The pressure with which all this starts, finally leaves him, and it may happen that he, so suddenly, feels easy and, with a kind of happiness, throws on paper the most outspoken things. What he throws on paper like that, and that is so much, is best to set aside without paying attention. If he really manages to do so for many years, it means that he maintains the belief in spontaneity, which is the necessary oxygen for this kind of notes, because, if he loses spontaneity once, then these notes are no longer valid for anything, and he can do nothing but remain in his proper work. Much later, when everything already seems to have been written by someone else, the notes may contain things that may once have seemed absurd, but suddenly make sense to others. And, since he himself is now one of these others, he can select without any special effort the one thing that suits him.”

But his published notes are meanwhile just the tip of an iceberg, the gigantic part of which, about ten times more than that, is in the archives of the Zurich Central Library, in 150 boxes containing his literary heritage: diaries, letters and notes of any kind, made only partially available to scholars. In one of his volumes of notes, published while he was still alive, Canetti writes: “I am disgusted when I think that others will go and dig into my life.” In his will he noted that 20 of these boxes, certainly the “most scorching” boxes, could only be opened 30 years after his death. So, many secrets of the writer will remain sealed until 2024, secrets that will help keep alive the interest on the author, because the notes, published or not, include his finest and most critical thoughts.

Opinions from the Albanian critic on Canetti's literary creativity Translation and publications in Albanian

In a long article entitled “*A contemporary Nobel Prize-winning writer is added to our library*”, written by Prof. Dr. Shefik Osmani, Director of the National Institute of Pedagogical Studies, published in the newspaper “*Mësuesi*” (“*The Teacher*”), a central outlet of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Albania, the following is stated, among others: “The autobiographical trilogy of the contemporary Nobel laureate Elias Canetti is the 32-year chronology of a European writer, who in three volumes of more than 1200 pages has recorded the entire deeds of his life: all the ages and historical eras lived before, during and after the First World War, the cities he saw, the museums he visited, the cafes he frequented, the archives he used. He has written about his classmates and primary school teachers, about his now world-famous colleagues, about his family nucleus, where his mother, Matilda, is depicted as smart, knowledgeable and determined. His living space is packed with books, knowledge, culture and art. The languages he spoke so fluently, the sounds of music that enlivened him, as well as the conversations he made, expanded his circle of friends, and the books he published made him dear to all.” (Osmani, 2006).

This article by Prof. Dr. Shefik Osmani was later published in full and with the same title in the well-known newspaper “*Koha Ditore*” of the Republic of Kosovo, with these editorial subheadings: “Translation, an example to follow”, “*Autobiography, impression and memory*” and “*Characters, worship and love*” (Osmani, 2007).

Regarding the translation of the autobiographical trilogy of the Nobel Laureate Elias Canetti into Albanian, an editorial was published in the “New Books” section on the independent Albanian newspaper “*ABC*”. (Editorial ABC, 2006).

Recently, the publishing house “SANTORI” has presented the Albanian reader a special work of the prominent Austrian writer Elias Canetti: “*The Conscience of Words*”, a collection of sociological-literary essays, the German original of which was published for the first time in 1975.

In this volume’s preface, the author states that it summarizes, according to the chronology, the essays he wrote in the years 1962-1974, with the exception of the lecture on the famous Austrian writer Hermann Broch, held in Vienna in 1936, on the occasion of his 50th birthday. Elaborating briefly on the content of this volume, Canetti writes, among other things: “At first glance, it may seem a bit strange to find here all together figures such as Kafka and Confucius, Bühner, Tolstoy, Karl Kraus, and Hitler, catastrophes of the greatest magnitude, such as the Hiroshima catastrophe, and literary observations about the way diaries are written or about the origin of a novel. Though, it was the placement of these figures next to each other that mattered to me, because they just seemingly do not match.”

The volume “*The Conscience of Words*” closes with the lecture “*The Writer’s Mission*”, which summarizes its entire content. In this regard, Canetti notes: “In this lecture, held in Munich, Bavaria, I tried to say something about this issue. As I was writing it, it seemed to me as something self-contained, but when I finished it, I was convinced that its place should be at the closing of this volume, as an embodiment of my hope that others will reach and fulfill its requirements, better than me.” In his lecture “*The Writer’s Mission*” Canetti writes as follows: “So, the writer would be - it is likely that we made this discovery a little too fast - a man who gives words a very special meaning, wandering among them with the same pleasure, perhaps even with more pleasure than what it is between people, and, giving in to both words and people, but still with greater confidence in words, but nevertheless with greater confidence after the words, he is able to pull these out of their seats, and then let them sit down with even more courage, asking them, touching them with his hands, fondling them, scratching them, carving them, coloring them, and is even able, after all his intimate insolence, to cringe again out

of respect for them. Even, as it often happens, when he behaves with the word as a wrongdoer, even then he is still a wrongdoer out of love.” (Canetti, 2005).

“If the word writer,” Canetti continues, “had become a bogeyman for many people, it was because they associated it with a false imagination and a lack of seriousness, with a kind of avoidance of one who does not want to make a living incredibly difficult for himself. The attitude of those writers who continued to deliver the most refined and varied aesthetic whims just on the eve of one of the darkest periods in human history was certainly not very appropriate to inspire respect, that period which they were unable to comprehend even as it plagued them; their false belief, the erroneous assessment of reality, which they tried to treat with contempt and deny any connection with it, their deep alienation from everything that was really happening, all of these were not things that could be understood in the language used by them, though meanwhile one can very well understand the fact that those eyes that looked more persistently and more accurately, turned aside terrified in the face of such great blindness.” (Canetti, 2007).

In his essay “*The Conscience of Words*” Canetti deals in detail with the great importance of keeping diaries for the true writer. Among other things, regarding the issue he writes: “It would be difficult for me to move forward in the work I do with the greatest desire if I did not keep a diary from time to time. Not that I use these notes, they are never the raw material for the work I am doing. But someone who knows the power of his impressions, a man who feels every detail of every day as if it were his only day, so this man really lives with genuine exaggerations, and something like this cannot be said otherwise, while in the meantime he does not fight this tendency of his own, because for him the prominence, accuracy and concreteness of all those things that matter constitute a life; such a man would burst or, in other words, be torn to pieces if he did not *calm down* by writing a diary. He who really wants to know everything will learn best by utilizing his own experience. He who really wants to know everything will learn best by utilizing his own experience. But he should not spare himself, less he should treat himself as if he were someone else, with no less, but even greater severity.” (Canetti, 2015).

As a novelist, playwright, essayist and sociologist, Elias Canetti, who would be 116 years old this year and who has been resting for 27 years in Zurich, Switzerland, next to another great figure of world literature, James Joyce, has been honored with high awards in various countries and has been awarded honorary titles by several universities. This outstanding cosmopolitan writer, whom critics have called a “living classic” and one of the greatest humanists of the twentieth century, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1981. Regarding this high award, the motivation of the Swedish Academy states: “For his works, characterized by a broad perspective, a great wealth of ideas and high artistic level.”

Conclusion

In this paper, compared to others, (Naim Kryeziu & Naser Mrasori, 2021) we focus on the most important aspects of the life and creative activity of the world-famous Austrian writer Elias Canetti, the Nobel Laureate in Literature, including the echo of his greatest works in Albania.

A special place, which has become the cause for the title of the work being dealt with, we have dedicated to a thought that in this polyhedral writer prevailed over all other thoughts: the thought of death, which he wanted to eradicate from the face of the earth, wishing no one to die anymore. The so-called “school of human cognition” engages Canetti for life in a relentless fight against death, as a savage persecutor, determined to fight tirelessly against. The idea of death is encountered, more or less, in all his creativity, but in full, after the death of the writer, as given by a group of authors in the work “Elias Canetti - The Book of Death”.

In this paper we have treated in more detail the three major works of the author that have been translated into Albanian during the early years of this century.

His autobiography, divided into three volumes (*“The Tongue Set Free”*, *“The Torch in My Ear”* and *“The Play of the Eyes”*), is a condensed and exciting work, written as if it were a formation novel. In compiling this autobiography, which, as the foreign press writes, constitutes a mosaic of powerful and very interesting episodes, described in a poetic language full of warmth and light, Canetti used as a creed: “A cowardly, truly a coward, one who is afraid of his own memories.”

His work *“Crowds and Power”*, in two volumes, is Canetti’s most important work, a really special world work, which forces the reader to delve into it completely haunted. *“Crowds and power”* is a synthesis of a very broad and elaborate information, derived from disciplines of the most diverse among them, from psychiatry and anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis, history and sociology, with the aim of unmasking the process that makes the crowds manipulate and rule, and to emphasize the need to fight against power, against its most insidious and secret forms, present everywhere, in all the human relations.

Canetti’s third major work, translated into Albanian and treated in this paper, is *“The Conscience of Words”*, a collection of sociological-literary essays. This work includes, in chronological order, the essays that the author wrote in the years 1962-1974, with the exception of the lecture on the famous Austrian writer Hermann Broch held in Vienna in 1936, on the occasion of his 50th birthday. In this volume the reader finds figures such as Kafka and Confucius, Büchner, Tolstoy, Karl Krauss, and Hitler, catastrophes of the greatest magnitude, such as the Hiroshima catastrophe, and literary observations of how diaries or fairy tales of a novel are written.

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