De mens is het verwandlungsdier: Elias Canetti over verwandlung, massa en meer
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Summary

Man is the transformation animal.

Elias Canetti about transformation, masses and more

‘Perhaps all thoughts until today have revolved around one that still waits to be thought’. Canetti, Human Province

Elias Canetti (born in Ruse 1905; British citizen from 1952; † Zürich 1994) was born in Bulgaria to a Sephardic Jewish merchant’s family as the oldest son of Jacques Canetti (1882-1912) and Mathilde Arditti (1885-1937). He was known within a limited circle for the novel Die Blendung [Auto da Fé] (1935) and the essay-like publication Masse und Macht [Crowds and Power] (1960). The author became more widely known following the publication of the first part of his autobiographical trilogy, Die gerettete Zunge [The Tongue set Free] (1977). His three plays did not gain recognition until long after they had been written. He also published a collection of essays, a travel book, character sketches and more than 6000 Aufzeichnungen [Notes], which were published in several collections.

Canetti was extremely ambitious. This is expressed, among others, in a letter he wrote in 1956 in which he stated that the work he was undertaking was rigorous and valuable, that it contained his whole life and that in centuries to come people would (continue to) study it in depth. And yet, doubts and fear overcame him with the same intensity.

In 1981 Canetti was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, having already received several other (literary) awards. His Werke in ten volumes were published in the period 1992-2005, and amounted to more than 4000 pages. After this a further three publications with notes, three volumes of letters, a memoir of his years in England, and an extensive biography of his life were published posthumously. In the archive in Zürich, where his literary inheritance is kept, there are many as yet unpublished texts. The complete material, including letters and diaries, will not be made available to the public until 2024.

This study of Canetti’s life and work is a literature study focussing on a few central themes: crowds, transformation, Chinese texts and philosophy. These subjects are approached from a historical-philosophical perspective. The emphasis will not be on the analysis, comparison and interpretation of literary texts by or about Canetti, which is the usual approach. Instead, in line with Canetti’s own way of working, this study will reflect on how the texts can be used and can advance our understanding by offering more insight into the many facets of social life. Canetti as a source, therefore, and even more so as a signpost: application rather than interpretation.

Canetti opens his retrospective, deterministic-tinted autobiography with a description of his happy childhood years in the Bulgarian village of Ruse on the river Danube. In 1911, to escape from the demands of grandfather Canetti, his parents moved with their three sons to Manchester. His father died there unexpectedly when Elias was just seven years old and this loss marked his life and thinking from then on. His mother, who now played a determinative role in his upbringing, moved with her children via Geneva to Vienna and later to Zürich. Considering life too easy for Elias there, his mother sent him to Frankfurt – a city where inflation was hitting hard – to learn about real life. He completed his secondary education there. In 1924 he moved to Vienna to study and gained a Ph.D. in chemistry. In the late 1930s he escaped to London via Paris where his wife Veza joined him. He continued to live in England – and to write unfailingly in German – but also bought a simple residence in Zürich. When his second wife Hera died in 1988, he disposed of his London residence and lived with his daughter Johanna (born 1972) in Zürich until he died. He was buried in the graveyard Fluntern as an honorary citizen in 1994.
Canetti’s work covers several central themes including crowds, power, death and transformation, as well as myths, science and religion, humanism and respect for animals. All of these subjects – and many more besides – are thoroughly approached, considered and judged – or, as in some cases, judgment is postponed. It is thinking aloud with a moral undertone: an intellectualized search. This is particularly true of Notes, which were originally just texts expressing his thought processes while writing Crowds and Power.

Following the opening chapter about Canetti’s life and work, this study discusses the phenomenon crowds in three chapters. The first deals with what was thought about crowds in ancient times, so the ideas of the classical thinkers; the second what Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao thought about crowds; and the third about the scientific discipline of crowd research, which developed from the end of the nineteenth century until 1960, when Crowds and Power was published. An overview is included of about one hundred scholars who occupied themselves with the phenomenon crowds in that period. Similarities or influences are sought. Canetti professed to approach the subject of crowds (and power) in a different way to his predecessors. Dissatisfied with their results, he credited none of them with any great influence. He wanted to analyze and consider subjects independently from the beginning, while at the same time constantly examining those who had bequeathed the western cultures and the founding fathers of the eastern cultures. With his deep roots in culture, history and social structures, he endeavoured to find original lines of approach: more neutral, more biological, more bestial, less systematic, strongly inductive; considerations about the reversal of man’s inborn primeval fear of being touched, about the mass in the individual and about the mass as a place of refuge from commands. Insights that are often not clear from others’ interpretations of the past are coloured while that same past is the breeding ground for Canetti’s own thinking. It is an intellectual struggle similar to that of his predecessor Nietzsche, although Nietzsche was intent on turning all the values of the western Christian culture upside down and Canetti does not go as far as that, even though he asks the same questions and doubts the same foundations of society. Furthermore, Canetti’s work and convictions are coloured by the central theme of the eternal struggle against death (in that death maintains the power system), which is only considered indirectly here. Nietzsche, on the other hand, accepts death as a logical phenomenon, a mere banality. After all, as far as Nietzsche was concerned, life was something that should be celebrated in Dionysian style whereas celebration – unlike life itself – has no place in Canetti’s Apollinian work.

Crowds, as discussed in the first few chapters, appear to have many forms of expression, which arose from historical circumstances. The thinkers who did concern themselves with the term did so unambiguously and as such usually condemned it. Canetti paints a picture of different kinds of crowds that should not be condemned at all, if only because they are an objective, historic fact, and a driving force in and of history. His convictions are therefore similar to those of Marx.

A generally accepted turning point in the ideas about the role, function and composition of crowds is about 1800, after the French Revolution. A new era began with different, more confident crowds; in fact an era of the crowds. Canetti, like other researchers and historians, sees this as a point of departure, although the examples of crowds he refers to in Crowds and Power are from all ages and cultures.

Karl Marx’s views in particular are examined more closely in this study. Not only because Canetti was asked several times why he did not mention Marx at all in his work, but more importantly because of the historical role that Marx ascribed to crowds (but hardly developed). He was one of the first in history to recognize the essential importance and the power of a crowd, although in his theories and concepts they often take the form of a class. It is not surprising that Canetti, whether it was by his own power of thought or not, rubs up against Marx’s convictions, considering they both valued the historical importance of crowds.
Before Marx there had been a few philosophers who had not been entirely dismissive of crowds, but they were exceptions. At the end of the nineteenth century the first scientific-oriented studies of crowds were carried out. Three particular representatives from different countries and movements are considered here: the Italian Sighele, the Frenchman Le Bon, and the Englishman Trotter. They represent the judicial-criminological, the psychological-sociological and the biological-evolutionary principles, respectively. Canetti appears to have been influenced mostly by Trotter, considering the great importance both attach to group, or in this case, crowd behaviour and bonding and the evolutionary origin of it: it is a striking characteristic of man (with many consequences), a by nature social animal who yet so wants to be an individual, particularly in the West.

Transformation \[Verwandlung\] is a central theme of Canetti’s work – one which he adopted early on and continued to interpret and apply until late in his life. It could be called the central theme, particularly because the other themes are often derived from transformation. It is the core of humanity rolled up in one word, and defined here in a broad sense as: the ability and form in which human sympathy is expressed, and the deed or situation that follow from that sympathy. This study researches the various components of transformation, how it has developed and which – social – applications and use the term can have. Transformation is a characteristic that affected man’s evolutionary process from early on. As a kind of self-propelling process, it made social-cultural evolution possible. Whereas evolution was principally an unconscious or blind process, transformation was – and still is – a fairly conscious and self-stimulating process. It is teleological rather than biological evolution. Learning is just as essential for cultural evolution as selection is for natural evolution. Animals repeatedly surprise us with what they are able to do and know, and yet transformation only occurs in animals to a very small degree: an invention or other complex cultural expression will never arise from an animal.

Others have studied individual aspects of Canetti’s total concept of transformation. Each of the aspects is a building block or characteristic of transformation, and is treated as such here: domestication, theory of mind, mimicry, imitation, mimesis and mimetic desire, mirror neurons, oxytocin, empathy and personified cognition. Together, but not exclusively, they comprise transformation, that fundamental characteristic of humanity. Research is a never-ending process: answers to questions posed just raise new questions. However, on the basis of current understanding an attempt has been made to unravel the concept, to make it useful and applicable. It is hoped that the term transformation could develop into a self-replicating meme, a cultural gene with its own explanatory value for social-cultural phenomena. Crowds and Power clearly endorses this: explanations for individual human behaviour and human behaviour in a crowd as well as for the carryings-on of rulers can often be derived from ideas about transformation. Even though absolute rulers often experience paranoia and the fear that it is linked to it, they no longer need to transform because everyone else will adapt to them; the ruler’s ability to empathize is minimal. The individual in the crowd will of course adapt and submit to the one body, as it were, that has a permanent urge to increase, and is inclined to allow the situation to exist for as long as possible: his individual fears dissipate and he feels protected, even against a command, as he can immediately pass this on to the crowd so depriving the command of its sting.

Chinese thinking is dealt with because Kien, the main character in the novel Auto da Fé, refers to it regularly – although he follows his own interpretations – and because in the Notes Canetti included notes about Chinese reasoning that he had made over a fifty year period. The late, but positive Chinese reception of Auto da Fé, translated as Mí Măng, is discussed. It is clear that Kien’s thinking is in fact the opposite of what the Chinese philosophers, to whom he refers, meant. This is in line with the intention of the novel: each character has his own logic and although he assumes self-interest he promotes it as common interest. This discloses the
meaning and the purpose of the novel: an indictment against the blinding of not only individuals but also society as a whole, and so not just against the unnamed city of Vienna where the story takes place (inspired by Canetti’s experiences in Berlin).

Canetti’s notes about Chinese thinking contain general comments that consider the ideas as if from a helicopter – in a detached and reflective way. They have not been updated but are assessed for their general human values, formulated as succinctly as possible, in the same way as the ancient Chinese themselves would have done. The historical background and the ideas of the ancient Chinese are developed here on the basis of the classical works: among others, Confucius’ golden mean and his views on government and families; Lao Tse’s more anarchistic-tinted ideas; the complementary rivalry between the two lines of teaching, and of course what was thought about crowds in earlier and ancient times. The development in thinking seems to run parallel with that of the western world, with a change in the axial age – as if crowds or people in groups became less important after that period.

It is not strange that the various teachings did not correspond with reality, as life and teaching often do not tally; the result is called history.

Engrossing himself in ancient China appears to have been a kind of transformation for Canetti personally: an intellectual flight from his own time and culture and an intensive mental relocation to another. The way of thinking that is not influenced by the western Enlightenment certainly provides perspective and insight, but also legitimises the risk of noncommittal, intellectual exercises. It can be compared to a person who moves to the country and leaves his conscience at home: there is nothing against this, but it does not achieve anything except abstract answers to the current problems. It is Chinese thinking as a plaster rather than as a panacea.

Canetti is not usually classified as a philosopher. However, on the basis of general philosophical ideas and in particular those of Schopenhauer, this study argues that he is a philosopher. If he is seen as such, there is more chance that other philosophers will delve into his work, comment on it and promote the search for truth. If we classify Canetti as a philosopher, then his work bears most resemblance to phenomenology and consequently existentialism: schools of thought that are elaborated on and explained here. Canetti cannot, however, be stamped an existentialist, he was just occupied with the same questions, and tried to find his own answers to them, naturally in his adapted context.

To conclude, there is, in his own words (Human Province (1943), p. 140) the possible shattering thought that: “there may be nothing to know, and error comes only because we try to know it.”

[Translation: Angela Wolswinkel]

*) Human Province, p. 140: ‘Perhaps all thoughts until today have revolved around one that still waits to be thought’.
+ 48: ‘A shattering thought: there may be nothing to know, and error comes only because we try to know it’.

“ 71: ‘Ein niederschmetternder Gedanke: daß es vielleicht überhaupt nichts zu wissen gibt; daß alles Falsche nur entsteht, weil man es wissen will’.