Sascha Bru

**Canetti, Elias (1905–1994)**

Elias Canetti, 1981 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, spent the first half of his life travelling, often surrounded by violence. The second half of his life went to (autobiographical) writing that used his travel experiences as material. His debut, *Die Blendung* (1935, literally “the glare” but published in an English translation as *Auto-da-Fé* in 1946), is a widely celebrated, late modernist novel. His book-length essay *Masse und Macht* (Crowds and Power, 1960) today still is often cited in discussions about crowd psychology.

Born in a family of Sephardic Jews in Ruse, a city on the Danube in Bulgaria, Canetti moved to Britain, and, after the death of his father in 1912, to Lausanne and then to Vienna. When he arrived there at the age of seven, Canetti already spoke four languages: Ladino or Judeo-Spanish (his mother tongue), Bulgarian, English and some French. After further moving to Zurich and Frankfurt, he returned to Vienna to gain a degree in chemistry (1929), but at that point already it had become abundantly clear that philosophy and literature were his real passions. Witnessing the growing threat of Nazism in Austria, which in 1938 eventually led to the *Anschluss* of Austria to Germany, he moved back to Britain, where he settled until the 1970s, and then to Zürich, where he eventually died.

Today, Canetti is widely known for his autobiographical writings, which often recount the first half of his life, such as *Die Gerettete Zunge* (The Tongue Set Free, 1979), *Die Fackel im Ohr* (The Torch in My Ear, 1980) and *Das Augenspiel* (The Play of the Eyes, 1985). Valuable documents to anyone interested in Europe’s instable culture during the heydays of modernism, these autobiographical writings evince one of the main themes in Canetti’s work: a fundamental disagreement with individuals who tend to universalize or impose their own, narrow views on the diversity of views and possibilities of mankind, Nazi rule of course being a notable instance of such practice.

*Auto-da-Fé*, Canetti’s first publication, can also be read as an illustration of this basic theme. The novel recounts the misadventure of one Herr Doktor Peter Kien, a middle-aged philologist and Sinologist, who in an almost obsessive-compulsive fashion tries to avoid contamination through human interaction. Living as much as possible in his library, whose books form his real companions, Kien’s fear of others ultimately leads to his downfall, as his housekeeper-turned-spouse forces him out of his apartment, psychoanalysis fails and a blacksmith pushes him further into the depths of society.

If *Auto-da-Fé* is a novel about a character who lives in fear of the rich diversity and potential of others, *Crowds and Power*, deals with what happens when fear of others becomes its opposite: fear of isolation. This study looks at “paranoiac despots” who desire to rule the mob and at the mechanics of power at work whenever masses or “packs” of people obey their rule in a variety of cultures and periods. Notable for its unscholarly style, this book is often read as Canetti’s attempt to work through Central and Eastern Europe’s fate in the first half of the twentieth century as he lived and experienced it in person.

**References and Further Reading**

*Auto-da-Fé* (1935)

*Crowds and Power* (1960)

*The Voices of Marrakesh* (1968)

*Kafka’s Other Trial: The Letters to Felice* (1969)

*The Human Province* (1972)

*The Tongue Set Free* (1977)

*The Torch in My Ear* (1980)

*The Play of the Eyes* (1985)

*Party in the Blitz: The English Years* (posthumously, 2003)

Donahue, W. C. (2001), *The End of Modernism: Elias Canetti’s* Auto-da-Fé, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Lawson, R. (1991), *Understanding Elias Canetti*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Lorenz, D. (2009), *A Companion to the Works of Elias Canetti*, London: Camden House.

**Paratextual Material**

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**Audio:**

Canetti in 1965 reading a text on Kafka that would later appear *The Human Province* (in German): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oKL_QKYvac>

Canetti on what it takes to be a good writer in a 1965 radio-interview (in German): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUaS7G17Zi0>

**Visual:**

Photo of Canetti: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elias_Canetti_2.jpg>

