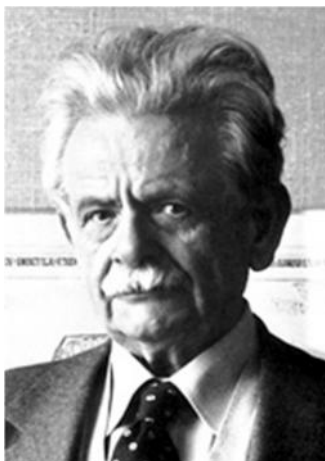


Nobel Prize in Literature 1981



Elias Canetti

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1981 was awarded to Elias Canetti *"for writings marked by a broad outlook, a wealth of ideas and artistic power"*.

Born in 1905, in the port of Rustschuk on the lower Danube, **Elias Canetti** belongs to a Sephardic family whose members, in 1492, were driven out of the town of Canete, situated between Cuenca and Valencia. For several hundred years, the family lived in Turkey, but in the course of time, settled in Bulgaria. In 1911, Elias Canetti went to England with his parents; after his father's sudden and premature death in 1913 - a catastrophe which has been of decisive importance to him - the family moved to Vienna. Between the years 1916 and 1924, Elias Canetti attended schools in Zürich and Frankfurt-am-Main. He then studied science in Vienna, the result being a doctorate in chemistry in 1929. Ever since then he has devoted himself exclusively to writing. In 1938 he went to France; sometime later, he moved over to London, which has remained his place of residence through the years.

When surveyed, Elias Canetti's literary work may seem split up, comprising as it does of so many genres. His oeuvre consists of a novel, three plays, several volumes of

notes and aphorisms, a profound examination of the origin, structures and effect of the mass movement, a travel book, portraits of authors, character studies, and memoirs; but these writings, pursued in such different directions, are held together by a most original and vigorously profiled personality.

The exiled and cosmopolitan author, Canetti has one native land, and that is the German language. He has never abandoned it, and he has often avowed his love of the highest manifestations of the classical German culture. He has warmly emphasized what Goethe, for instance, has meant to him as *medicina mentis*.

His foremost purely fictional achievement is the great novel, *Die Blendung*, (*Auto da Fé*) published in 1935 and praised then by Thomas Mann and Hermann Broch. But it can be said to have attained its full effect during the last decades: against the background of national socialism's brutal power politics, resulting in a world conflagration, the novel acquires a deepened perspective.

Die Blendung was part of an originally planned series of novels which was to take the shape of a "comédie humaine of the madmen". The book has such fantastic and demoniacal elements that associations to Russian 19th century writers like Gogol and Dostoievsky - to whom, by the way, Canetti himself has declared he owes a debt of gratitude - are apparent. The main scene of the macabre and grotesque events that the novel discloses is an apartment house in Vienna. It is an aspect of key importance when *Die Blendung* is regarded by several critics as a single fundamental metaphor for the threat exercised by the "mass man" within ourselves. Close at hand is the viewpoint from which the novel stands out as a study of a type of man who isolates himself in self-sufficient specialization - here, the sinologist Peter Kien surrounded by his many books - only to succumb helplessly in a world of ruthlessly harsh realities.

Die Blendung leads over to the big examination of the origin, composition and reaction patterns of the mass movements which Canetti, after decades of research and study, published with *Masse und Macht* (*Crowds and Power*, 1960). It is a magisterial work by a polyhistor who knows how to reveal an overwhelmingly large number of viewpoints

of men's behaviour as mass beings. By going in particular to the primitive peoples, their myths and fairytales, Canetti tries to pinpoint the character of the mass movements. In his field of research he introduces not only the actual masses but also the imaginary ones: the masses of "the spirits", "the angels" and "the devils", which are such important elements in many religions. He explores the nature and significance of the national mass symbols; with acumen he illustrates the psychological problems of commands and obedience. Like Gustave Le Bon, he sees the archaic components in the mass movements of the new age. In his basically ahistorical analysis, what he wants to expose and attack by scrutinizing the origin and nature of the mass is, in the end, the religion of power. According to Canetti, deep down behind every command, every exercise of power, is the threat of death. Survival itself becomes the nucleus of power. At the last, the mortal enemy is death itself: this is a principal theme, held to with an oddly pathetic strength, in Elias Canetti's literary works.

Apart from the intensive work on *Masse und Macht*, Canetti has written strongly concentrated, aphoristic notes, issued in several volumes. They usually emanate from concrete situations which can be regarded as metaphors for something generic. A satirical bite in the observations of people's behaviour, a loathing of wars and devastation, bitterness at the thought of life's brevity are characteristic features of the continuous notes. By virtue of his abundant wit and stylistic pithiness, Canetti stands out as one of the foremost aphorists of our time, a man who, in his phrasing of life's ironies, is sometimes reminiscent of great predecessors like La Bruyère and Lichtenberg.

The plays Canetti has written are all of a more or less absurd kind: *Hochzeit (Wedding)*, 1932, *Komödie der Eitelkeit (The Comedy of Vanity)*, 1950, *Die Befristeten (The Deadlined)*, 1956. In their portrayal of extreme situations, often depicting human vulgarity, these "acoustic masks", as Canetti calls the plays, are of decided interest.

With *Die Stimmen von Marrakesch (The Voices of Marrakesh)*, 1967, Canetti published a travel book which shows his keen eye for life in the poor outskirts of existence; with *Der Ohrenzeuge (Earwitness)*, 1974, he presented a collection of "characters" in the spirit of Theophrastus. Among his literary portrait studies, special mention can be made of

Der andere Prozess (Kafka's Other Trial) , 1969, in which, with intense involvement, he examines Kafka's complicated relationship to Felice Bauer. The study forms itself into a picture of a man whose life and work meant the relinquishing of power.

Finally, standing out as a peak in Elias Canetti's writings are his memoirs, so far in two large volumes: *Die gerettete Zunge (The Tongue Set Free)*, 1977, and *Die Fackel im Ohr (The Torch in the Ear)*, 1980. In these recollections of his childhood and youth, he reveals his vigorous epic power of description to its full extent. A great deal of the political and cultural life in Central Europe in the early 1900s - especially the form it took in Vienna - is reflected in the memoirs. The peculiar environments, the many remarkable human destinies with which Canetti was confronted, and his unique educational path - always aiming at universal knowledge - are seen here in a style and with a lucidity that have very few qualitative equivalents in the memoirs written in the German language this century.

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