

Books

Canetti's Passion for Immortality



Elias Canetti — La Pasión por la Inmortalidad — the Passion for Immortality, Francisco Blanco Figueroa, Editorial Katún, México, 1986.

Francisco Blanco Figueroa, currently the Editorial Coordinator of the magazine *Universidad de México* (University of Mexico), and author of *Obra literaria I y II* (Literary Work), as well as of a book on John Locke, recently published a book on Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti and his work, in Editorial Katún.

The book deals with Canetti's childhood and youth, and then goes on to discuss aspects of his major works: *Act of Faith*, published in 1935, *Masses and Power*, *Kafka's Other Trial*, *Voices From Marrakesh*, *The Province of Man* and finally, *Theater*. The author's free-flowing, direct style serves to bring out the substance of each of these works by the prize-winning Bulgarian writer.

We find here information on crucial events in the early years of Canetti's life that somehow

shaped the world view of this author whose philosophical insight has gained international recognition. His father died when he was seven years old, and the child developed a life-time love-passion-jealousy relationship with his mother which was often strained. From the time he was very young, this child who wanted knowledge above anything else developed a disproportionate passion for books. The character in *Act of Faith* who sets fire to his library and sacrifices himself with it, somehow symbolizes Canetti's love for the written word to the point of paroxysm.

In *Masses and Power* Canetti takes an outright stand against power, outlining the issue and describing the powerful in such a way that they may be cornered and questioned. Susan Sontag expressed her point of view on the matter in her article "On Elias Canetti": "Trying to understand power from the point of view of the mass instead of using concepts such as *class* or *nation*, is to insist on a non-historical understanding of the issue. Hegel and Marx are omitted, not because Canetti's self-confidence is such that he decided not to mention the usual names, but because the implications of Canetti's approach are distinctively anti-Hegelian and anti-Marxist."

For his part, Canetti explains that, "(...) What I wanted was to take into account everything that could lead me to new lines of thought. (...) I purposefully did not quote these two authors (Freud and Marx) because I wanted to study the most urgent phenomena of our time without applying previously existing concepts." He adds that, "I would give anything to be free of the habit of seeing the world from a historic viewpoint..." The scientist-philosopher protests against death-ridden history and against death. Thus, it can be said of Canetti that he is a conservative in the literal sense of the term. As Blanco Figueroa indicates, he rejects death.

In *Kafka's Other Trial*, Canetti analyzes Kafka's letters to his sweetheart Felice, as no other literary work had such a profound emotional impact on the Nobel Prize-winner. Surprised by the intimacy of those letters that openly dealt with an extraordinary spiritual experience, Canetti found in Kafka a rejection of power from the point of view of the individual, using self-destruction as a means of rejection.

Canetti deals with his impressions

of a trip he made to Morocco in 1954 in *Voices From Marrakesh*, and one of his obsessions is with blindness. In his article "The Cry of the Blind" he explains the deep impression those invalids made on him. Blanco Figueroa quotes this article extensively, capturing the elegantly precise tone, kind and sometimes pitiful, in which Canetti expresses unfamiliarity, interest and even discomfort at the sight of the Moroccan blind.

The Province of Man is based on a selection of notes taken by Canetti between 1942 and 1972. Written in a bold literary style, as Blanco Figueroa notes, these notebooks allowed the author to keep his sanity as he worked on *Masses and Power*. The texts Canetti selected for this book are an invitation into his realm of thought. Among the issues he deals with are death, writing, God and power.

The Wedding is a crushing play, to use Blanco Figueroa's term, which unmasks the conventionality and falsehood of family life and shows how a wedding really responds to the interest of joining two families for reasons of social status, economic convenience, etc. *The Consciousness of Words* reproduces Canetti's speech on Hermann Broch in which he speaks of the writer and his role. Canetti considers the true writer to be a vassal of his times even if he has to go against current values.

In *ELIAS CANETTI, Passion For Immortality*, Blanco Figueroa helps the beginner discover the Bulgarian writer in an accessible manner, using numerous well-selected quotes of the works he is reviewing. Death is the central issue picked up in Blanco Figueroa's reading of Canetti, whom he tries to understand in his passion for immortality and his hatred of death.

Blanco Figueroa concludes that, "Canetti's passion is for immortality. He struggles against death through literature without losing sight of the fact that death's greatest ally is power, the study of which has taken up a great part of his life. Canetti's work is not yet complete. He is still alive and in search of final victory. The immortality that comes from literature is the greatest assurance that death has been defeated."

The virtues of Blanco Figueroa's work, oddly enough, at times constitute a weakness. The book is useful both to beginners and to those previously caught up by

odds and ends

Canetti, but although structuring the analysis around the concept of death is valuable, we often had the feeling that greater analysis of the passages quoted would have been enriching, which is not to say the author should have written a philosophical essay.

Blanco Figueroa's purpose was to stimulate interest in Canetti's work, and this he does beautifully. Essays are easily discouraging for many readers and don't necessarily awaken their interest in directly approaching the work the essay deals with. If Mr. Blanco sought to shed light on the Nobel's work by providing a guiding thread to its understanding, he managed to do so. But we are left hungering for greater interpretation and analysis. Although his sober style is definitely a virtue, by the end of the book we somehow feel we've read a succession of excellent quotes that require more in-depth analysis. This review reflects the situation: we deal more with Canetti's writing than with Blanco Figueroa's essay on it.

Despite certain limitations, *Passion* is an agreeable book, easily and quickly read, that can stir up interest in the works of the prize-winning Bulgarian author, even though it does lack the depth and wealth that Canetti should ideally generate in an essayist. ★

Pantxika Cazaux she saw the dead eating and other