

## Elias Canetti's Biography as an Example of Mythopoesis

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**Abstract:** This article examines the biography of Austrian writer, Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti (1905-1994) as an example of mythopoesis. Special attention is given to bringing to light the terms “autobiographical myth” and “biographical myth”, as well as investigating the category of metamorphosis, which makes it possible to reconstruct the writer’s protean personality type and reveal a number of characteristics of his poetics. On the pages of autobiographical works, wherein most researchers of the writer’s oeuvre fully equate the author and the protagonist, Canetti mythologizes his own life. Based on autobiographical myth, biographical myth is born, which anchors in the readership’s mass consciousness facts in the writer’s life in the form they are presented by the author himself. The biographical myth that existed when Canetti was alive has now entered the demythologization stage. Calling upon new publications on Canetti, as well as the analysis of books by the Austrian writer never published before, enables the author of the article to examine his biography in a new light.

**Key words:** Myth • Mythopoesis • Remythologization • Demythologization • Biographical myth • Autobiographical myth • Metamorphosis

### INTRODUCTION

Canetti’s autobiographical works, particularly his intravital trilogy “The Saved Tongue” (“Die gerettete Zunge. Geschichte einer Jugend”) [1], “The Torch in My Ear” (“Die Fackel im Ohr. Lebensgeschichte. 1921-1931”) [3], “The Play of the Eyes” (“Das Augenspiel. Lebensgeschichte. 1931-1937”) [2], have been explored pretty well in foreign and national literary studies. Thus, for instance, F. Eigler examines, as the turning point in the study of the genre characteristics of Canetti’s autobiography, the interplay of the terms “subject” and “text”. In doing so, the researcher places primary emphasis on the possibility of human self-cognition and its reflection in the text. On one hand, F. Eigler considers Canetti a “conservative” writer who continued autobiography traditions in the spirit of J.W. Goethe and his life story “Poetry and Truth” (“Dichtung und Wahrheit”) and on the other comes to the conclusion that Canetti’s life story does differ from that of his predecessors, for it is about the “reconstruction of the genre” [4, 197]. Canetti’s “conservatism” is also commented on by M. Salzmann [5]. The exact approach whereby the artistic side of autobiography is taken into

account is observed with M. Bollacher. The scientist, based on the content of the first two books of the autobiographical trilogy, comes to the conclusion that the “organicity” of the artistic form of the autobiography is attributed to the fact that the teller concurrently covers both the present and the past. “The truth depicted” is the truth of a reminiscing person who uses the past for his own purposes [6, 246].

A. Doppler notes the artist’s originality as he believes that Canetti’s autobiographical text is not a life story in a customary sense, since the author does not seek to tell about a life lived-on the contrary, he creates reality through language form and that reality, in turn, is not a reflection or imitation but, rather, an expression of one’s own view of reality [7, 114]. Canetti creates on the pages of autobiographical texts his own model of life-as is the case with any work of artistic prose, he selects the material, combines and models it, stays away from clichés, reworks it, in a manner typical of him only. A.G. Steussloff points to an important characteristic of autobiography, which is manifested in the author’s aspiration to impart a symbolic character to the material and examine existential issues of human reality through one’s own example [8, 258-259].

Furthermore, literary critic M.Reich-Ranicki in his book "My Life" ("Mein Leben") notes that in Canetti's autobiographical trilogy there is "an inordinate amount of selfishness, vainglory and inflated self-appraisal" (Eigenliebe, Eitelkeit und das "Sichwichtignehmen", dies alles in ungewöhnlichem Grad) [9, 454].

Most researchers entirely equate the author and the protagonist of autobiographical works. Canetti's autobiographical texts are used by interpreters as a "substantial reservoir" for all sorts of motivations, so much needed in analyzing a literary work. We agree with O. Sill, who considers this approach a "fundamental delusion", since it is about the subjective form of narration [10, 30].

An interesting thought is put forth by S. Hanuschek, who believes that after the first book in the autobiographical trilogy, "The Saved Tongue" ("Die gerettete Zunge"), the reader learns little about the author-in essence, this is an "autobiography without the autobiographical subject" (eine Autobiographie ohne autobiographisches Subjekt) [11, 24].

**Methodology:** The methodological settings the author follows are based on the traditional historical-cultural approach towards literature, which combines the experience of classic literary studies, national and foreign. This, above all, is a biographical method, as well as methods of comparative-typological literary studies and linguo-stylistic analysis.

**Main Part:** The interest towards the personality of any major artist is "stirred up" with new facts in the biography, which, as a rule, wait for their hour to come. Canetti's centennial (1905-1994), celebrated in 2005, gave rise to a "new wave" of publications, both by Canetti and about him. In conjunction with the jubilee date, the "Hanser" publishing house released a complete collection of Canetti's works, which was complemented with the tenth volume containing the writer's public addresses [12].

In 2003, Canetti's first book from a series of "scandalous" books came out-"Party in the Blitz" ("Party im Blitz") [13]. At first, Canetti intended to write a life story in five volumes. The book, which came out after the author's death, is just partially a sequel to the "autobiographical project", since along with some similarities that can be traced across all the three books in Canetti's autobiography there are also substantial

differences, which bring up the issue of the originality of the way this work's artistic form is arranged. The compilers of the book did work on a number of disjointed fragments related to the English period of the writer's life-stenographic manuscripts, notes and the completed parts of the planned book. "The unmasking of the protagonist" takes place already in reading the reminiscences about Iris Murdoch. Canetti transfers his derogatory attitude towards a woman he was once close with onto the personality of the female writer on the whole. A piqued male self-esteem leads to hyperbolization of evil. It is apparent that in this case the reason behind evil is not the former love but how this evil is perceived by Canetti himself. A nurtured umbrage comes crashing down on the reader, leaving one virtually no choice, since Canetti is definitely not in good graces.

The details of the "English period" are also mentioned by John Bayley, a famous literary critic, a professor at Oxford University. The book called "Elegy for Iris" describes his London encounters with a nameless Austrian writer who for a certain period of time influenced Iris Murdoch, who later became his wife. Bayley calls him a "poet legend" (der Dichter von legendärem Ruf), a "sorcerer", a "monster", an "actor", who ignored his "pen fellows", perhaps convinced he was head and shoulders above any of them. "Die Abneigung gewann die Oberhand, wie jedesmal, wenn ich mir dem Monster-oder Magier-zusammentraf" [14, 158]. The repulsion he would arouse in communication rubbed along with a sort of charm and , therefore, he was always surrounded by admirers. It is apparent to a reader in the know that it is Canetti who is being talked about.

When it comes to the so called "last wave" "biographical literature", a special discussion is merited by a book that came out thanks to an invaluable find-the letters by Canetti and his wife Veza to the writer's younger brother Georg Canetti [15]. This book is an example of a magnificent epistolary bout between, above all, two people close to Canetti taking place against the backdrop of worldly troubles, constant material problems; besides, the correspondence is an important document for not only family drama but historic events of those times, when the Canettis had to leave Austria and spend long years in emigration (1933-1938; 1944-1948). In this trio, the leading part, of course, belongs to Veza Canetti. In her letters, subtle humor oftentimes neighbors on irony and sarcasm. The recipient of her letters is one of the few privy to the "worldly biography" of the writer.

The jubilee year also saw the release of the book "Notes for Marie-Louise" ("Aufzeichnungen für Marie-Louise"). In October 1942, Canetti prepared a manuscript version of the book as a birthday gift for Austrian artist Marie-Louise Motesiczky, with whom the author had a long relationship [16]. For many years, Motesiczky provided moral and material support to a man she had serious feelings for.

In 2011, one more book from a series of autobiographical works brought before the reader an "anatomy of love"-Canetti's correspondence with Marie-Louise Motesiczky [17]; along with the last book, the readers received another portion of details from the writer's life, quite bitter at that. It will not be a stretch to say that all the books related, in one way or another, to Canetti's biography, "work" against the author himself; Canetti himself, who throughout his life so meticulously guarded himself against all sorts of gossip and rumors, became a "cruel partner" for himself (der grausame Partner) [18].

The most significant in the "multiple-voice flow" of publications on Canetti released in the jubilee year is the book by S. Hanuschek called "Elias Canetti: A Biography" ("Elias Canetti. Biographie") [11], which demonstrates, above all, painstaking work with the writer's archive. On the pages of this tome (800 pages), the reader also meets the "other" Canetti, who does not quite always match the image of the "man of our century". S. Hanuschek does it with tact, avoiding being categorical in appraising the writer. His book, which he calls a "biography in documents" or "documentary biography" (Dokumentarbiographie), distances you from worldly problems and keeps you within the domain of scientific research [11, 25].

I. Surat, while reasoning on the phenomenon of Pushkin's biography, writes about various difficulties a biographer might run into and in the end comes to the conclusion that "biography is, above all, an investigation aimed at obtaining a new piece of knowledge, which cannot be attained through other research methods or intellectual efforts detached from factual material, from the event fabric of the protagonist's life" [19,182]. It follows from this that biography is not a literary or scientific genre. It is a special domain of humanitarian knowledge, a domain of study and creative work, the subject whereof is the "personal life of a person", in all its event fullness and inner depth and complexity-a life as a single entity, as an indissoluble diverse whole [19, 182].

The author of Canetti's biography, S. Hanuschek, bemoans the fact that in his biography there are many gaps, since he relied on just the part of the archive which he had access to while working on the book [11,25]. Canetti bequeathed that researchers should not tackle his biography for ten years following his death [11, 17].

Canetti's biography as a life story is far from being considered as a "biographical legend" or a "biographical myth", when the real biography of the artist is aestheticized, complemented with made-up facts or sometimes is altogether replaced with an "ideal biographical legend", turning into some kind of a novel. Biographical myth-making is there only when the artist's life acquires the status of artistic material, which should be arranged according to the laws of narrative genres in literature. The author's personality and destiny become no less and sometimes even more, interesting to the reader than those of his characters.

Canetti has the experience of turning an artist's biography into a myth-it is the book called "Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice" ("Der andere Prozeß. Kafkas Briefe an Felice") [20], one of the most detailed and poignant speculations on F. Kafka. The appearance of the book is formally associated with the fact that in 1967 they published Kafka's correspondence with his fiancée Felice Bauer-"letters of a five-year-long ordeal, a whole 750-page tome", as Canetti put it [20, 141]. In essence, this is an attempt to turn an artist's biography into a myth: the biography merges into the text and , vice versa, the text merges into the biography.

Canetti critics are well aware of the writer's "penchant" for myths. Myths always meant to Canetti more than words; they are more "engaging" because they are full of metamorphoses and because he was "weaned on myths" himself. Canetti belongs to the cohort of so called "mythologizing authors", who use myth not only as material for creating an artistic work but also a model for thinking. Mastering myth becomes for the writer a method for apprehending reality, for he construes "myth" as not just "old myth", descriptions of the customs, rituals and ceremonies of primitive peoples and vanished cultures, but historical communications on journeys, diaries, biographies, as well as descriptions from psychiatric practice.

As we know, biographical myth as an issue in literary studies neighbors on autobiographical myth, since both types of myth about a creative personality imply the participation of the author in the mythologization of one's

own destiny. Autobiographical myth is created by the artist oneself, offering the reader not the real story of one's life but its idealized version, which naturally envisages some fabrication on the part of the author.

It is apparent that the aestheticization of destiny directly correlates with autobiographical myth, with some sort of initial storyline model, which receives in the author's consciousness an ontological status and is viewed as a scheme of one's own destiny, which constantly correlates with all events in his life; this said, we do not rule out the possibility of emergence of diverse transformations in one's artistic creative work. Thus, biographical myth is much broader than autobiographical, for it is created in co-authorship and is an act of joint creative work by the artist and the readership.

Canetti creates his own myths, which are present in all his works as "haunting themes". Autobiography is not an exception. Canetti takes part in creating his own "autobiographical myth". The jubilee year saw the release of a monograph by P. Angelova [21], which is dedicated to Canetti's mythological thinking manifested at different levels, including the level of autobiographical texts. According to P. Angelova, the Canettian system of perception of the world is grounded in "metamorphosis myth" (Mythos von der Verwandlung), which is traced in all of the writer's works and his notes are not an exception [21,131]. A "mythoman" [22] in nature, he sincerely believed that "poor poets erase the traces of metamorphoses, while good ones openly demonstrate them" [23,262]. The basis of Canetti's author's mythology is thus the category of metamorphosis. Metamorphosis, transmutation, or transformation acts as a cross-cutting structural and conceptual principle in Canetti's oeuvre, which is masterfully embodied at all various levels. It is expedient to examine what meaning Canetti puts in this concept. In his view, a poet is the keeper of metamorphoses, the word "keeper" having a double meaning. Above all, he imbibes the literary legacy of mankind, so rich in metamorphoses. Canetti's "turning into" a writer takes on the nature of myth on autobiographical pages.

K.-P. Zepp believes that all of Canetti's works consist of myths; all of them together attest to the author's mythological mindset [24, S.42]. Canetti begins the story of his life from the chapter called "My Early Reminiscence" ("Meine früheste Erinnerung"); it is submerged in his memory in red ("in Rot getaucht"). It is about an episode that left an indelible, horrifying impression on the mind of a two-year-old. The secret lover

of a maid entrusted with taking care of the child repeatedly threatens him: if the boy gives them away, the man will cut his tongue off. The event is described through the eyes of a child scared of the knife and worried about the fact that the punishment is being postponed. The events take on a timeless nature. Biographical facts not just "come up" in memory but get reconstructed, for much becomes clear years later; in particular, ten years later the mother explains to the child the behavior and intentions of the man with a knife who frightened him so much. Canetti narrates, tells about but himself, but in doing so he assumes the stance of an inquiring observer of his own life.

A vivid example of the author's mythologization is the following excerpt from an autobiography: "Es wird mir schwerlich gelingen, von der Farbigkeit dieser frühen Jahre in Rustschuk, von seinen Passionen und Schrecken eine Vorstellung zu geben. Alles was ich später erlebt habe, war in Rustschuk schon einmal geschehen" [1, 14]. Needless to say, there appears a desire to decipher all "this", find a key to the puzzle, which in the end leads to the quest for the author's mythologemes. Canetti constructs autobiographical myth and makes the reader reconstruct and remythologize his own destiny, the destiny of an artist, using the author's mythologemes: "metamorphosis", "antagonism to death", "mass", "power", etc.

Being a protean writer, over the course of his long life Canetti relentlessly demonstrated various forms of metamorphosis-from an unrecognized genius to a Nobel Prize winner. As we know, the term "proteism" is traced to Proteus in the mythology of ancient Greece-the god of seas and swells possessing the ability for various metamorphoses, transformations-in other words, turning into something else; he is capable of assuming the look of various creatures and substances. Besides, Proteus is endowed with the gift of prophecy, which is hidden from everyone who is unable to catch his real visage [25]. The question as to whether Canetti's biography is myth or reality [26] belongs to the category of rhetorical questions, since, as S. Hanuschek rightfully points out, creating a biography of a protean artist involves huge risks, for it is extremely hard to grasp the gist of a personality that plays different roles and is held captive by metamorphoses ("Das Risiko einer Biographie ist bei einem proteischen Schriftsteller wie Elias Canetti besonders groß, wo ist er festzumachen, zwischen all den Rollen, den spielerisch eingenommenen Posen, den Verwandlungen und Lücken?") [11,15].

## CONCLUSION

Based on autobiographical myth, biographical myth is born, which anchors in readers' mass consciousness facts in the writer's life in the form they are presented by the author himself. Thus, the biographical myth that existed when Canetti was alive has now entered the stage of ruthless demythologization. The contradiction between "poetry and truth", which has not been resolved since the time of Goethe, is not resolved in the favor of the latter.

Inferences. The autobiographical myth created by Canetti on the pages of his autobiographical trilogy goes through a stage of reconsideration, substantiating the thought that the artist remains the "keeper of metamorphoses" in the "great time". Calling upon new publications on Canetti, as well as the analysis of books by the Austrian writer never published before allows one to consider his biography as an example of mythopoesis.

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