

## The Sources of Mythological Thinking of Elias Canetti

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**Abstract:** This study considers the sources of mythological thinking of the Austrian writer Elias Canetti and the peculiarities connected with the writer's mythopoetics and mythopoetic system. Such research methods as biographical, cultural and historical, comparative historical and mythological have been used in writing the research. In his works E. Canetti demonstrates the unity of the east and west cultures. The writer's address to the myths of antiquity, the Chinese culture, the Judaic-Christian tradition is connected first of all with his spiritual Odyssey, search of answers to the questions that disturb him and themes that interest him. The study of the sources of the author's mythological thinking allows to make conclusions of the reasons of his address to the myth and to understand the originality of the mythopoetic system created by him and in this way to consider the possible variants of manifestation of literary myths in the literary works by E. Canetti. On the basis of mythological sources of various peoples and cultures by means of their transformation Canetti creates a number of author's symbols and mythologems. Reviewing the classical myths, the literary artist originates his own understanding of a myth (an author's myth) that reflects in autobiography, literary works, notes and essays. The mythopoetic system developed by him allows to speak on mythological thinking of the author. The writer deliberately borrows plots and motifs from different cultures and mythologies, revises them, transforms and on this basis creates his own author's myth. The author's myth and author's system of mythologems form into a kind of mythopoetic system, the peculiarity of which enables to judge about mythological thinking of the Austrian writer.

**Key words:** Mythopoetics, mythological thinking, transformation, Orientalism, author's myth

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### INTRODUCTION

The literary heritage of the Austrian writer, a Nobel Prize laureate of 1981 Elias Canetti (1905-1994) is small but is notable for its having many genres, literary and style originality. Canetti is the author of the novel *Blindness* ("Die Blendung", 1935), the three dramatical pieces *Wedding* ("Hochzeit", 1931-1932) *The Vanity Comedy* ("Komodie der Eitelkeit", 1933-1934), *Limited Period of Time* ("Die Befristeten", 1952), the autobiographical trilogy *The Saved Language* ("Die gerettete Zunge", 1977) *With Torch in his Ear* ("Die Fackel im Ohr", 1980), "Winking" ("Das Augenspiel", 1985), the philosophical investigation "Crowds and Power" ("Masse und Macht", 1938-1960), several books, stories and essays. In the research of E. Canetti's works there are outlined the whole literary schools that are based on o such approaches as biographical, linguistic, socio-historical and mythopoetic approach that has been drawing a special interest recently. Actuality of the investigation of the mythopoetic aspect in modern literary study is explained first and foremost by mythologism being a characteristic phenomenon in the literature of XX century, it is a literary device and perception of the world behind it at the same time (Meletinsky, 2006). The authors begin to actively

address to antique mythology, literary heritage of the archaic peoples adopting motifs and plots from these sources for their works. The term "mythopoetics" according to the dissertation by Soldatkin, includes two aspects:

- Functioning of mythological images, plots, motifs, reminiscences in literary text, peculiarities of their transformations
- New mythologems being created by the writer, so called the author's mythologems (Soldatkina, 2011)

The aim of this study is to trace the sources of the mythological thinking of Elias Canetti to show the originality of mythopoetics in his works.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researcher of the study uses the traditional methods of research applied in both Russian and Foreign study of literature: biographical, cultural and historical, comparative historical and mythological.

The biographical method allows to use the biography of the author in order to trace back his creative

development, creative evolution to reveal motifs prompting to address to that or another subject to use those or the other devices in creating a work. This article represents an attempt of tracing back the sources of mythological thinking of E. Canetti on the basis of facts from his biography.

The cultural and historical method enables to analyze the works by E. Canetti in terms of cultural and historical context. Since, the work considers the use by the Austrian author of various plots and motifs borrowed from different cultures and mythologies, it is reasonable to apply the mythological method. The comparative historical method has been used to study and compare cultural and literary traditions of the Orient and the Occident that gives an opportunity for the author to make conclusion of the importance of the east culture and philosophy and to light the reason by which he addressed to the traditions of the east countries.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research makes it possible to study probable variants of manifestation of the fiction mythologism on the material of the literary works by Elias Canetti. The writer deliberately borrows the motifs and plots of different cultures and mythologies, reviews them, transforms, creating his author's myth on their basis. Creation of an author's myth and author's system of mythologems is formed into mythopoetic system, the originality of which allows to judge the mythological thinking of the Austrian writer.

**The problem scrutiny:** One of the characteristic features of the works by E. Canetti is the unity of east and west cultures. In German language literature there are quite a lot of examples indicating the spiritual synthesis of the West and the East. Many writers (G. Hesse, F. Kafka, J. Roth, B. Brecht and others) were inspired by the East. Despite the persistent interest of the scholars to the problem of unity of the oriental and western cultures in the works of West-European writers, it is still debatable.

As far as E. Canetti's works are concerned one can say that in the Russian study of literature the theme of Orientalism in the works of the Austrian writer is perspective as there are few works to be devoted to the investigation of the present problem. Here, one can list few works by Ye. M. Shastina: "The Chinese Discourse" by Elias Canetti (Shastina, 2008) and "The Reception of Chinese Culture in the Works by Elias Canetti" (Shastina, 2013a).

There are a small number of the works in the foreign study of literature. In the thesis by Chen Yun Canetti and Chinese Culture (Chen, 2003). It has been considered the problem of influence of the culture of Chinese on the writer and his works, the reasons of his address to the Chinese culture and philosophy.

The Japanese researcher Furuya Shinichi (Shinichi F.) in her report "Elias Canetti and Japan" ("Elias Canetti und Japan") broadens "oriental aspect" in Canetti's works, the perspective chosen by her allows to trace back the perception by the writer of the Japanese culture. The main emphasis is made on the interest of the Austrian author in Japan to be not restricted only by the reception of the classical Japanese literature his attention is compelled by the tragedy of Hiroshima that is reflected in the study "The Diary of doctor Hasi from Hiroshima". It is a matter of a real threat of atomic catastrophe. The author considers to be obliged to make people understand how dangerous this catastrophe is Canetti (1990a, b).

At London symposium in 1989 E. Oimms presented the report on the subject: "Canetti, Kraus and China" which also dealt with the importance for Canetti of the spiritual tradition of China and its influence on Canetti's works as well (Timms, 1991).

The Bible, the Chinese philosophy, the Greek mythology for the writer became a kind of the source to write the novel "Blindness", the book "Crowd and Power", dramas. For the Austrian writer familiar with the European and Oriental philosophy, culture and literature of many peoples, social anthropology, the address to myths became a basis of his searches.

**Canetti and China:** E. Canetti began to display to Oriental cultures in his early childhood. His interest in China is mentioned in autobiographical trilogy. So in the first volume "The Saved Language" ("Die gerettete Zunge") it is described an episode from his childhood when he was ten years. The writer remembers: "I noticed how little he (it is going of his grandfather) knew about things that I was interested in-when one day I told him about Marko Polo and China" (Canetti, 1992). A would-be writer began his acquaintance with China through the book "Marko Polo in China" where the traveler's memories of his life in China and the Orient are collected. The interest in diary notes was explained by the author by the call of the new, far, unknown: "A man omnivorously potters about past epochs and foreign cultures. Impressions you hunger after and which are prohibited at home at home, suddenly turn out to be something usual there where you are get carried away with reading" (Canetti, 1994). A special source of understanding other cultures became for him the diaries of traveling, the authors of which were the

representatives of those cultures. The book which he regularly reread was the book by Suan Tsan (a Chinese pilgrim who visited India in VII) and the book of the Arabian traveler Ibn Batoutah.

Later, taking up the topic “mass and power”, Canetti addresses to the culture of this country. In the second volume of the autobiographical trilogy “With Torch in His Ear. 1921-1931” (“Die Fackel im Ohr. 1921-1931”) he writes: Every which way I tried to approach to what I could call mass. I searched for it in every story in every culture. More and more I was carried away by history and philosophy of China” (Canetti, 1994). I became familiar with Chinese and Japanese names, I began to expertly orient myself among them as among the Greek names formerly in school years”. It was in 1928, not long before he began writing his novel “Blindness” (“Die Blendung”), in which he reflected the mythological images and motifs of the literary heritage of many peoples. Here one meets allusions of Bible heroes (Christ, Judas, Samson), heroes of the Greek mythology, various plots of the Chinese mythology, citations of prominent philosophers, images of Confucius, Buddha being the personages of the narration from time to time are introduced in literary texture of the works. These motifs can be marked as the measure of ethic valuables of characters in literary works. The main character, Sinologist Peter Kin, at every turn quotes Confucius and enters into conversations with him. In the text one meets allusions of plots from the Chinese mythology: the Kin’s wife Teresa is a tiger transformed into a woman (a spread motif of the Chinese mythology a tiger during hunting for people dresses up in a young girl’s clothes); as compared: George Kin lived as a prince of Gautama, before becoming Buddha. The mythologem of fire is one of the mass symbols and one of the four elements in the oriental mythology.

A special interest for E. Canetti was a classical Chinese philosophy and precisely Confucianism and Daoism that is reflected in the pages of his notes and essays. “I never part with “the teachers”. The Chinese knew about good more than the Greeks. The admirable ambition of the Greeks which we oblige to, deprived them of a simple sincerity in good. Besides, the traditions of the Chinese are determined by the mass of the human existence already in their early history” (Canetti, 1999).

Three great thinkers of China: Confucius, Lao-tse (the founder of Daoism) and the poet Chuang Tzu were of particular interest for Canetti.

Studying the problems of “mass”, the writer appeals to such tendencies as Confucianism and Buddhism. It is known for certain that the Chinese philosophy accentuates the spiritual values, ethics and morals. The fundamentals of the Chinese culture and conviction that

the spiritual life is more important than material benefits correspond to Canetti’s understanding of morality. The problems of morality and material benefits are aroused in the novel “Blindness” and drama “Wedding”, where the artist presents the world in a state of decay of spiritual values.

**Confucianism:** In the study, “Confucius in his “Discussions” Canetti reflected his being delighted with Confucius, his ideas and attitude to power, man, state, death. Confucius and his followers were interested first in the methods of ruling the state, regulation of relations between different social layers, principles of family life, ethical norms which a man should follow. These themes for Canetti were of special importance. “Interviews” by Confucius the book in which the basic principles of spiritual and aesthetic doctrine are presented in the form of conversations and utterances. As Canetti himself wrote: “Interviews” by Confucius is a finished spiritual portrait of a man, model. This is a whole-hearted person but this person is not simply a man. This man is a man caring for his perfectness and longing with its help for exerting influence on others. Every independent trait, there are a lot of them noted has a definite meaning” (Canetti, 1990a, b). “There is nowhere such conscious and systematic presentation of models as in Confucius”, he wrote in his book of notes “Nachträge aus Hampstead. Aufzeichnungen” (Canetti, 1999).

Traditionally the Chinese anthropology proceeds from an assumption that a man occupies a central position in everything. Only a man is able to give aid to all things existing in nature. The Chinese philosophical thought contains in its basis the principal value cues which were congenial to Canetti. The other no less important doctrine of Confucius for Canetti is patience and ability never to give up, not to never surrender in the struggle for realizing of own ideas. Canetti, like Confucius, was a fighter who never drew back from that he considered to be important and right (Chen, 2003). Canetti was especially impressed in Confucianism by man’s attitude to the power built on the principle of “power and fairness” (Trautwein, 1996). E. Canetti did not build a model state in none of his works as he aimed to show the vices and monstrosities of the society, foolishness of man’s acts and blame for anti humaneness.

The problems of power are considered and expounded by the author in his book “Crowd and Power (“Masse und Macht”). The theme of “power” did not remain ignored in the novel “Blindness” where the living pictures of which are Fisherle to dream of becoming a famous chess player and George Kin the brother of the main character, Peter Kin. Fisherle strives for being a

millionaire in order to reach fame that means for him to have power over people, he would handle them like chess pieces (Riedner and Canetti, 1994).

**The motif of death:** The interest displayed by Canetti in Confucianism is also explained by this doctrine treat such phenomenon as death that had interested Canetti for whole life. Search for answering the questions about death and immortality, the ways of overcoming mortality these all a formed into “religion” of sort (Angelova and Elias, 2005). “If there is something after as something was before then death itself loses its weight” (italics belongs to Canetti) (Canetti, 1990a, b), the thought which was for Canetti who did not want to accept death as such rather important as it did not deny death but did not affirm that there was nothing after it.

This in part explains a special attitude of the writer to mythology, literary heritage of many ancients. The motif of denying death is for Canetti an obsession the keynote of which permeates all his works. “My viewpoint is in unacceptance of death in that to resist it and try to drive it off from everywhere it is sneaking into as it exerts a very bad moral and social influence” (Canetti, 2012). Even the autobiographical trilogy by Elias Canetti can be treated as a kind of possibility to immortalize the names of departed and in this way to overcome death: “My departed for me are sacred and I do not want to see them in the circle of the unknown” (Canetti, 1992). Man dies but he must not die, no matter how it happens, history can give him immortality (Hanuschek and Elias, 2005). Understanding death as anthropological factor to be inevitable, Canetti appeals to literature as just literature is a world storehouse where inexhaustible spiritual heritage of the ancients have been collected preserved until present day.

One more important moment of Confucianism was the ancestors' cult. After having read “Interviews” he turns his eyes towards maxims about those who passed away: “one does not push out father from memory but dreams of his return and in some rites achieves such feeling. He continues to exist as a figure as an example” (Canetti, 1990a, b). Early departure of the writer's father played not the last part in formation of his attitude to death. The theme of death is one of the central motifs in the literary works of Canetti, it is a structure-forming element in his works. He at every turn resists it, denies it, seeks for possibility to overcome it, “death is punishment” (Schnell, 1986).

The years of life in Vienna (1924-1928a) were of particular importance for formation of the fiction world of the writer: his meeting Karl Kraus, a wife to be Wetsa, Fredl Waldinger, thanks to him Canetti opens the world of Buddhism. This Indian religious and philosophical doctrine impressed the Austrian writer with its ideas about revival after death but did not content with Buddhism to abandon too much, besides Buddhism did

not answer the question about death it avoided it. In Buddhism death is understood as such not existing and it is not fearful slow fading of life is an object in Buddhism and life is of no importance at all (Canetti, 1994). Canetti was not happy with such understanding of life and death a man who tried to show for all his life that life is of utmost importance and death of utmost evil. “The object of Buddhism is sinking into nirvana gradual decay of life which seemed to me death. Nirvana and death in Buddhism are equal, and life has a negative accent”. In this sense understanding by the Chinese of immortality was for Canetti near to his point of view: immortality for the Chinese is longevity. Here the matter is not in soul but in natural process of life as he wrote in the book “Notes. The Secret Heart of Hours” (Das Geheimherz der Uhr. Aufzeichnungen 1973-1985) (Canetti, 1990a, b).

While staying in Frankfurt Canetti visited theatre, one of the appreciated actor was Karl Eberth to whom Canetti was obliged for his “acquaintance” with antique Babylonian epos about Gilgamesh. Unacceptance of death, running through mythological heritage of early cultures, was a basis of this epos. Deep grief of Gilgamesh over departed friend Enkid, resistance mythical powers, non-acceptance of the injustice that the gods keep immortality for themselves only, disinclination to recognize death as a necessary factor, make him for Canetti a kindred spirit and his attitude to this myth as “Bible”. Thus, I, thanks to my liking for this artist (Karl Eberth), met Gilgamesh who determined all my life, faith, power, expectation (Canetti, 1994) “none of other works of literature has not determined my life as this four year epos which nobody knew for several centuries” (Canetti, 1982). The writer was interested in the problem of life and death always troubling humanity which are touched in this epos, the tragic understanding by a man of unfairness of parting with dear people, the world. K.P. Zepp shows that Gilgamesh loses in struggle for immortality, hereby he affirms the need of his object and Canetti goes even further: he resists death everywhere, he views the life of everybody.

As Shastina (2013b) affirms, Canetti is far from any religious institutionalism, his attitude to religion has purely personal character. He mythologizes death, death face-off becomes his author's mythology.

In G. Timmerman's view point, such notions as “transformation” “language” “hatred of death” (Todfeindschaft) appeared in “Notes” influenced exactly by Sumerian Akkadian epos about Gilgamesh.

**“Transformation”:** Among the Chinese classics Canetti singled out Chuang Tzu, under whose influence he began to write a work about Dao. But in Daoism he had never

found an answer to the question concerning the nature of “mass” he was interested in but he was faced with another important for him motif but not least transformation. The theme of transformation, creative metamorphoses is a dominant theme of Daoistic thought. “The motive of my passion for this original tendency in the Chinese philosophy (Daoism) was in that what meaning transformation meant in it”(Canetti, 1994).

“Daoism attracts me as it is “on casual terms” with transformation and approves it without sliding off to the position of Indian and European idealism. The dearest is to Daoism longevity and immortality in this life and those numerous faces it leads to are present. It is a religion of poets, even though they do not know about it” (Canetti, 1990a, b). And a poet is a keeper of transformations (Huterder Verwandlungen). Poets must possess the gift of transformation. It is a mysterious, next to uninvestigated process and the only way to find the road to another man.

The other mission of the poet as a keeper of transformations consists in perceiving and “absorbing” a literary heritage of the humanity, wherein an ideal of the poet is. “The rhymers erase the traces of the transformations, the poets openly manifest them”. Literary works is for the writer one of the possibilities to get the feel of different images (to transform), to experience many lives (roles) and so to resist death (Hornik, 2006).

“Transformation” takes a special place in the works of Canetti but a precise definition to this notion have not been given yet. In E.M. Shastina’s judgment, Canetti being “protean writer diligently demonstrated various forms of transformation during his long life from an unrecognized genius to the Nobel Prize laureate” (Shastina, 2014). It is known, the notion “proteanism” refers to the figure Proteus from ancient Greek mythology the god of the seas and swells, possessing the power to toke the shapes of various beings and substances. Besides, Proteus has theomancy that is hidden from everybody who makes nothing of grasping his true face. Thus, Canetti is “a keeper of transformations”.

In “transformation” there are psychology, sociology, the theory of cognition combined. Simultaneously together with transformation the writer uses the term “acoustic mask” which is treated as one of the stages of transformation. K.P. Zepp considers “transformation” in Canetti as a very ancient ability that helped him rising above animals.

Before World War Two Canetti being in Vienna, familiarized himself with the Japanese literature. Performances of the Japanese theatre of kabuki

(representing the synthesis of a song, dance, drama) in National Opera House of Vienna made a strong impression on him and first and foremost, it was the acoustic element. It exerted a particular influence on dramatic works of Canetti. On the example of Japanese theatre performance he interprets the principle of “acoustic mask”. “Acoustic mask” is a language material which is at disposal of a man, these are phrases and words that represent the style of a character. It is communication style that distinguishes one person from the others. And as a rule in drama “transformation” exhibits through the change of acoustic masks. It is transformation in Canetti’s judgment that defines the drama as such. In addition to the notion, “acoustic mask” the writer uses the term “the jump of masks” that means a character transition, a step on the road to communication between people, it is a sort of approach to people and also one of the stages to “transformation” that is in P. Angelova’s judgment, close to Indian doctrine of incarnation and antique metamorphoses. A Canetti man is open for transformations and incarnations in all their varieties, he is awaited (he can to be) by animals and gods (Angelova and Elias, 2005).

At the same time, Canetti familiarizes himself with the classic Japanese essay of maid of honour Say Shonagon, written in X century, “The Notes at the Head”. Canetti considered this essay the most perfect of the notes he had ever read. The Japanese investigator F. Shinichi thinks that this work is a kind of “prototype” of “the Notes” by Canetti, written in the similar fragmentary, aphoristic style. Hanuschek and Elias (2005) comes to a view that a decisive impulse for Canetti form in “The Notes” becomes his passion for the Chinese philosophy, especially for Confucius, Chuang Tzu and pre-Socratics.

**Antiquity:** The researcher of E. Canetti are characterized by very distinctive and variegated combination of mythological motifs borrowed from all kinds of sources, unity of the oriental philosophy with European traditions, including the roots from the European-Christian to Roman-Greek cultures.

The would-be writer familiarized with the Greek literature in his childhood. At the age of ten, he discovered the world of the Greek mythology in rendering by Gustav Schwab and Odysseus ousted all the images of the Greek characters he knew before.

The important works of antiquity which based on “a very mysterious aspect of human existence a gift of transformation” were for Canetti two cardinal books. 1. “Odyssey” by Homeros, narrating about human reincarnations (Odyssey), accompanied by incredible

adventures, attained its height in the history of his assuming the character of a beggar, the most worthless of the worthless that ever could be imagined, worked well here perfection of histrionical transformation was not reached and all the more, not excelled in none of the works of poets of later ages" (Canetti, 1990a, b). In the European literary tradition, "Odyssey" occupied for Canetti a special place. Hornik (2006), reasoning the myth originality in literary world of E. Canetti, argues that "Odyssey" was for the Austrian writer a special literary material but by no means not a myth. It is this literary material that is always reinterpreted and retold.

The later work "Metamorphoses" by Ovidius is a work "representing the collection of all mythological "high" transformations" to be known at that time. His attitude to this "the greatest gift" to be characteristic for a man only is expressed by the poet in his work "Vocation of a Poet": along with all elements of the myth transformation is that by means of which man has created himself. Through transformation he cognized the world, grew roots, through transformation he was privy to it and above all, he owed transformation his ability of sympathizing.

The theme of "transformation" is revealed in detail by the writer in his philosophical work "Crowd and Power". The elements of "transformation" are reflected in the pages of dramas by Canetti (1990a, b) and the novel "Blindness". Using the motif of metamorphosis in his work, the writer stresses that this ability, inherent in man, always accompanies him and is an integral trait of his character. In the diary notes, the writer confesses: "Enigma of transformation is gained its concentrated expression in drama. I have been interested in drama, since the age of ten when I first read Shakespeare and since the age of seventeen when I familiarized myself with Aristophane and the Greek tragedians and now I have been keeping records of all dramatic what I encounter, of all drams and myths if these myths are still authentic".

## CONCLUSION

Myth in its structure is a very polysemantic and variegated. Mythological subjects, retold a different way would help to understand better and render certain political, vital problems and social collisions. Myth for Canetti is not simply an allegory or metaphor, it is in its turn, a way of expressing the real and his attitude to reality. Having formulated his own approach to myths he creates his own mythopoetic model in the center of which there are the myth about unacceptance of death and the category of "transformation", the theme of "mass" and "power" and others.

Myth interpretation by E. Canetti is one of the complex tasks in mythopoetic research in the works of the writer; to understand a definition of myth as it was understood by Canetti himself it is possible in thorough study of his biography, works and sources of mythological thought of the writer.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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